

Harry Potter

Easier to Be

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Easier to Be

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Summary: Two strangers. One, a reluctant and lonely hero trying to find a purpose in life. The other, a young woman who wants to find herself and come to terms with her haunted past. What will happen when these two get to know each other? Will they help each other?

Chapter 1: Serendipity

The soreness in his side hadn't gone away, even though the healers said it would. Harry rotated his arm against the stiffness and growled to the empty flat when it caught. It had been a completely chance curse that made it through his shield; the trainee had been lucky. The look on the kid's face, however, when he realized he'd struck Harry Potter... that was the only thing that had stopped Harry from retaliating. Harry shook his head, still seeing the wide, panicked eyes looking down at him, hearing the breathless apology.

Three bruised ribs. That's what this last assignment had got him.

He definitely felt older than his twenty-one years today. And the empty flat when he'd come home hadn't improved his mood. The bare walls seemed to close in on him, even as they expanded to be more than he could handle. That made no sense, he told himself. Yet it did.

It was just another of his moods, he decided. His eyes rested on his large entertainment unit and he pondered watching a movie. There were several action flicks that he had been interested in seeing. And maybe some take-out...

An hour later, Harry sat low in his sofa, his feet propped on the coffee table in front of him, his box of Chinese take-out resting in his lap as he pushed buttons on his remote control.

The movie wasn't bad, he supposed, but it did little to ease the restlessness in his system. Maybe a late night walk would help, he decided. It was becoming rather a habit of his, these midnight walks around London. It probably wasn't the safest idea, but Harry could handle himself in a fight. He'd proved that time and time again over his whole life.

Bundled up against the frigid January air, Harry navigated the streets around his flat, widening his usual route and finally ending up at a coffee house that was open all night. It was becoming as much routine as Harry had, ending up here. But in the middle of the night, it was quiet, and he could sit near the window and watch the dark streets, and wonder why on earth he was in England at all.

He ordered a cup of strong coffee, foregoing any sugar and savoring the bitter taste of the hot liquid on his tongue. It had been six months since he'd moved to London on nothing more than a whim. Even he couldn't explain his reasons to himself, let alone to his family. Sirius had been the most vocally opposed to the move, while Remus had just looked thoughtfully at Harry and nodded his acceptance.

Something in England just seemed to... call to him. When he'd first decided to come back after being gone for eighteen years, he'd convinced himself that it was to connect to his heritage, to learn more about where he'd come from. He didn't necessarily count the months he'd been in England for the war—it hadn't felt like he'd been anywhere, really, other than hell. His days and nights had blended together into a running battle to destroy Horcruxes and stop Death Eaters.

The loneliness wasn't something that he'd considered. It helped that his job with the International Confederation of Wizards kept him busy at least three weeks out of the month. Every job they offered, Harry took.

Returning back to his London flat always put him in a funk, though. He'd only been there two months the first time he'd packed his bags and stood staring at the deserted flat, trying to convince himself that he really should leave. He missed the Portkey back to the United States, sitting on his sofa, staring at his bags.

Last month had been the closest he'd come to actually leaving. Harry had gone back to the U.S. and spent a few days at Sirius' house on the Oregon Coast, convinced that he should just stay there, But sitting there in the U.S. made him feel a bit like a quitter; like a coward for taking the easy way out of something, even when he wasn't quite sure what it was. At the end of a few days of moping, Harry had packed his bags and returned to London.

Harry watched a couple walk down the street, holding hands and snuggling into each other for warmth. They walked the length of the block and disappeared around the corner. Harry sighed and rubbed his sore ribs.

Damn, he was in a maudlin mood. He hated feeling like this. It wasn't even a relationship that he craved, really. No doubt, he missed sex, but it was somebody, anybody, to talk to that he needed the most. It didn't even need to be in a romantic way. Hell, it was probably better if it wasn't. Harry's luck on that front had never been all that impressive.

"Refill?"

Harry snapped out of his musing and stared at the young woman who stood in front of his table, the only occupied one in the deserted place, holding up a pot of rich black coffee.

"I probably shouldn't," Harry shook his head, quirking a small smile. "I'll never sleep as it is."

She nodded, but caught his eye, something flashing in her look.

Harry shifted uncomfortably, feeling like he was being tested in some way. "I'll see you later," he hastily said, gathering up his heavy wool coat and swinging it over his shoulders, wincing as his ribs protested.

"Yeah," she mumbled, a disappointed look on her face.

On his way out the door, Harry stopped in the small entry to pull on a knit hat—snow had begun to fall again. His eyes lifted to the notice board on one wall. Colorful papers advertising all sorts of services and needs were stuck to the wall. A conversation with Remus during his visit to the States came back to him.

"You might try finding a flatmate," his mentor had suggested when Harry had let it slip how quiet the flat was—eerily so at times. Harry had scoffed at the idea, pushing right past it and almost forgetting it completely.

"A flatmate," he said softly now, running his finger along a wrinkled advertisement for a young woman to childmind.

The thought intrigued him the whole way back to the flat. He walked slowly, watching large snowflakes dance through the air, some to melt on the roads and sidewalks, some to pile up on

benches and lamp posts.

The sound of his key echoed through the deserted rooms, making it sound hollow on the inside. Harry sighed and hung up his coat, brushing the collected moisture drops from the heavy fabric. His eyes settled on the closed laptop sitting on his counter.

The bright blue light from the screen made him squint and he rubbed his tired eyes, wincing at the dryness of them. Ever since he'd had laser surgery to correct his vision, his eyes seemed to be dry all the time.

His fingers clicked over the keys, his mind a million miles away as words and phrases formed in front of him on the screen.

When he'd finally printed the paper, he held it in front of him and read it to himself. Shrugging, he decided that he'd think about it tomorrow. He could always change his mind. Who knew, maybe he'd get someone interesting to reply to it. Anything would liven up this place, he thought as he set the paper on the counter and closed the laptop.

Harry didn't bother to turn on any lights as he made his way down the hall, undressed in his bedroom and crawled in between the cold sheets, rolling so that he was on the side that wasn't bruised.

Outside, a lone siren wailed in the distance, the bright lights flashing through Harry's window and lighting up the room. He watched them fade and closed his eyes on the silence.

* * *

Twenty year-old Ginevra Weasley blew the thick clump of red hair that had fallen in her face away from her eyes. The wind that gusted in and out of the doorway fluttered the papers and advertisements tacked to the board that she was searching. Once again, they lifted and shifted in their spots as a group of people, bundled up against the cold outside, walked past her.

Ginny sighed in frustration. She hadn't been looking for anything specific on the board, just something that would catch her eye and maybe give her a little something to think about while she sat and sipped her daily cup of tea with lemon.

There were advertisements for the latest weight loss craze, flyers showing pets up for sale, a handwritten note on a napkin begging for someone to call if they located a lost textbook, brightly lettered slips showing job openings and sales for the small shops that surrounded the busy coffee house.

Ginny let her eyes slide over the same old things and sighed to herself again. She fingered a photograph of a lost tabby cat and smiled at the offer for a young woman to childmind. Another person entered and the papers ruffled again as the man held the door open for his companion to enter. A single notice, typewritten on pale blue paper, lost its battle with the wind and fluttered to the floor, getting stuck just under the edge of Ginny's shoe and soaking up a bit of the muddy water that had been tracked in.

"Hmm," Ginny muttered to herself as she picked up the paper and looked for the place it had come

from. “A flatmate,” she mused as she searched in vain for the spot it had fallen from. There were no blank spots on the wall where the paper had come from. She shrugged and vowed to tack it up after her tea and once she inquired inside about a tack or pin to hold it up.

She forgot all about the blue paper sticking out of her pocket a few seconds later when Rebecca, a friend from work, bustled in the door and the two sat at a table and gossiped about the two store managers, who were rumored to be having a hot-and-heavy affair.

Apparating home to the Burrow, Ginny dragged her feet walking in the back door. She knew her mother would be waiting, probably with a list of chores longer than her arm.

It was Saturday, and the whole family would be coming early tomorrow morning for the Traditional Weasley Sunday Brunch. Honestly, they all called it that. Ginny rolled her eyes. All of her brothers would be there, even Charlie, who was recovering from another nasty burn and had agreed to come home to recuperate. She knew he would be gone the moment the Healer pronounced him well enough. Ginny had seen the secret, panicked looks the Dragon Tamer wore whenever their mother mentioned marriage or children to him.

Thinking about it made her chuckle. Maybe she could exploit that weakness and turn it around so that the focus of the meal wouldn't be on Ginny's lack of a life.

“You're home late,” her mother observed, less than casually, as she pointed her wand at the bricks in the fireplace, systematically removing soot from their worn faces.

“Sorry, Mum,” Ginny rolled her eyes, biting her tongue before she said something that would cause another argument. Instead, she removed her scarf and hung her coat on the peg by the back door. “Is there anything I can do to help?” She grit her teeth and hoped that if she actually volunteered to do some chores, maybe her mother wouldn't bury her alive in them.

And it worked, because her mother's eyes went wide and she stared open-mouthed at her daughter. “Oh... well, then you can just clean the bathrooms then.”

Squashing the rise of frustration, Ginny nodded. “Sure, I can do that.” Quickly gathering the cleaning supplies she would need, Ginny hurried out of the kitchen. Maybe if she dawdled long enough on the two bathrooms in the house, her mother would forget about adding to her list. It was silly and childish, Ginny knew, and it would never work—because it hadn't ever worked on Molly Weasley—but she couldn't help but try again.

Slipping into the living room and heading for the bathroom on the first floor, Ginny had to chuckle at the sight of her father. Fred and George had presented him with a plush, Muggle recliner for his birthday this past year and it quickly became the most important piece of furniture in the house. To Ginny, her father's enthusiastic, and even childlike, reaction to the gift was enough to help her covertly fight against her mother's attempts to displace the ‘unsightly, strange beast’ from the living room. Just last week she had come upon the chair tucked in the back of an extra bedroom at the Burrow, draped with an old bedsheet. Ginny had levitated it back down the stairs and applied a permanent sticking charm to the feet on the bottom.

It was a silly little war to have, but one that both of her parents secretly enjoyed.

"You look comfortable," she called to her father now, as he perched in his chair, legs lifted high and the Daily Prophet spread all around his lap.

"Evening, Ginny," he greeted her with a large grin. "Have a good day today?"

"I did," she nodded, shifting the bucket of cleaning supplies to her hip. "The silliest old man came into the store today. He was looking for a book on Auto Repair." The way her father's face lit up when she shared these stories from working in the Muggle world made Ginny try to find one small thing to remember to tell him every evening. She finished the story and her father chuckled.

"One of these days I need to come back in and see you there."

"I'd love to have you," Ginny laughed. His last visit, with her mother in tow, hadn't turned out well as he'd been so enamored by the size and selection of the Muggle book store that he'd accidentally tipped over a huge display of travel books. It was one of the funniest things that Ginny could remember.

"Well, I'm off to clean the bathrooms," she informed him, indicating the bucket in her arms.

He raised an eyebrow at her, but chuckled. "Don't give her too much argument."

"I won't," Ginny soothed. A stab of guilt shot through her as she thought of the distance that existed between mother and daughter. It hadn't always been this way. There was a time when the Weasley women were inseparable—standing up against all those boys, you needed an ally, Ginny knew.

'Nothing I can do about it now,' she sighed to herself.

Cleaning the bathrooms took much less time than Ginny had hoped. In less than half an hour, she was back in the kitchen.

"Help me with this bread dough?" her mother asked, using the back of her hand to push a piece of hair out of her face, inadvertently wiping flour over the side of her face.

"Sure," Ginny shrugged. The bread could be kneaded by magic, but her mother always preferred to do it by hand, claiming that it just tasted better that way.

"It'll be so good to have everyone together again."

"It will," Ginny said. Surprisingly, her animosity toward her mother had been somewhat exorcised by casting cleaning charms. For now she was content to be in the warmth of the kitchen, smelling the wonderful smells and letting the comfort of home sink in.

"George is bringing a date," her mother observed, much too causally. And the moment of contentment was broken.

"Hmm," Ginny murmured, willing her irritation to stay hidden. She channeled it into the pile of pliant white dough in front of her, punching it down and rolling it completely before beginning the process again.

“And, of course, Ron is bringing Hermione.”

Ginny couldn't help but smile at the thought. Who would have ever thought that her shy, bookish friend would have found her match in Ginny's older brother, the Quidditch-obsessed prat, Ron. And now they were engaged to be married.

“You're welcome to bring a date as well, Ginny, dear.”

The motion of her hand faltered and the punch she laid into the dough had more force than she wanted, sending up a small cloud of flour from the countertop.

“Or if there's someone else special,” her mother continued, oblivious to the shameless murdering of bread that was happening beside her.

“There's no one special, Mum,” Ginny bit out through her teeth.

“Oh,” she sighed. “Well, I just wondered if you'd had a chance to talk to Michael lately. I ran into him the other day in Diagon Alley and he asked after you.” A coy smile appeared on her face and Ginny rolled the dough harder still.

“Michael and I are over, Mum, you know that.”

“I know,” she sighed dramatically, sweeping up her own dough and plopping the perfect form into a greased loaf pan. Ginny looked down at her own pathetic lump, grimacing at the indentations and misshapen form. “But I had always hoped that you may just need time...”

It was always the same argument, or close to it anyway. If it wasn't about her dumping Michael, it was about her career choices—or lack of, the way her mother saw it.

Molly Weasley was a very headstrong woman who had definite ideas about what she wanted for her only daughter to do in life. Unfortunately, Ginny's ideas were much different.

She had not taken any of the Ministry positions that were offered to her once her N.E.W.T. scores had been received. The offer of a position at Healer's School went unheeded and unanswered.

“It's time for you to make a decision about your life, young lady,” Molly always scolded. But the only time that Ginny had mentioned that she might want to play Quidditch, Molly had fussed and flailed and nearly hyperventilated until Ginny left to her room to avoid the scene altogether.

She wasn't completely sure Professional Quidditch was what she wanted to do anyhow. It was a decent idea, though, and her friends assured her that they thought she would make it. But her family was another story. Even Charlie, who had had the shot at a professional career himself, showed reservations.

Maybe it was the fact that Ginny had broken things off with her long time boyfriend that Molly objected to most of all. The Weasley matriarch had been humming the Wedding March for months before Ginny finally called it quits with Michael. Molly had cried more than Ginny had afterwards.

“He just isn't what I want,” Ginny had explained to her family—her entire family—at dinner the night

she had told Michael she wouldn't marry him and she didn't want to see him again.

"What is it you want, firefly?" Bill asked.

Ginny had looked at his scarred face and smiled. "I'm not sure, but I'll let you know when I find it."

"I just worry about you, Ginny," her mother said now, coming over to look at her work. "Oh, Ginny, what have you managed to do to that poor bread?"

Ginny threw up her hands, bits of dough and flour raining down. "I don't know. I can't do this. I have a... bread block, or something. Mine never turns out well."

Her mother glared at the offending lump before vanishing it completely and huffing as she pulled out the ingredients to begin again.

Without another word, Ginny cleaned her hands and pulled her coat and scarf from the peg. "I'll be back later," she mumbled before disappearing out the door.

The cold night air on her face as she raced her broom around the orchard felt refreshing and helped to calm her anger. A dark shadow floated out from her bedroom window and drifted along, standing out against the overcast sky. It was her owl, Armstrong, the very first thing she'd bought with her first paycheck. Her mother had called the purchase silly as Ginny didn't have many people to correspond with at all. But Ginny loved the small barn owl all the same. Besides, he kept Pig in line with a sharp rap on the head when the excitable owl needed one. That, alone, was reason enough to keep him in Ginny's mind.

"Why can't she let me live my own life?" she demanded to the night air. Even as the question escaped, the answer floated forward in her mind, making her cheeks flush.

"She doesn't trust me."

It was a simple statement, but one that Ginny believed completely. And maybe it was a bit harsh, but for six years it had been the same thing.

Her fingers on the broom handle were white, both from her tight grip and the frigid January air. Slowing her flight, Ginny hovered near the ground, the toes of her shoes skimming the snowy ground. She shivered and tucked her hands into the pockets of her coat, crumpling something inside when she did.

Scowling, Ginny tugged the paper out and lay it on her knee, pressing the wrinkled corners and brushing off a bit of the dry mud that obscured the writing a bit, making it smear toward the edge of the paper.

"Wanted: clean and responsible person to share a three bedroom flat in downtown London." Ginny read the words in a mumble and glanced up at the black night sky, stars twinkling high above her. She'd try to remember to repost it the next time she went in to the coffee shop, otherwise, this individual would never find a flatmate.

The next morning Ginny tried to sleep in. But the sounds of her family downstairs were enough to raise the dead, she determined, wincing when someone ran up the stairs, two at a time, thumping loudly the whole way.

“Fred,” she mumbled into her pillow, folding it over her head to try and grasp the last precious few moments of sleep. A knock at the door forced them away however.

“Come in, Hermione,” Ginny called from the bed. It had to be Hermione—her brothers never knocked, and her mother was far more forceful when she pounded on the wood to get Ginny out of bed.

“Are you hiding,” Hermione peeked her head around the door, “or just being lazy?”

“Both,” Ginny sighed, staring up at the ceiling.

Hermione chuckled and came into the room fully, glancing around at the haphazard piles of organization that were Ginny’s standard attempt at cleaning her bedroom. “Oh, come on, it’s not that bad.”

“No offense, Hermione, but you’re not family.”

“You’re so dramatic, Ginny,” Hermione rolled her eyes and sat down on the edge of the bed, carefully avoiding the teetering stack of school books that Ginny still hadn’t found a home for since her graduation from Hogwarts. Armstrong, in his perch by the window, fluttered his dark brown feathers in annoyance and turned his back on the two women. He, apparently, was not a morning person either, Hermione noted.

“You know how they treat me,” Ginny sighed, slowly pulling herself up to lean on Hermione. “Like I’m still fourteen and they’ve just found out...” her voice broke and she huffed out the rest of her breath in frustration.

“Ginny—”

“No,” she pushed away from the bed, and away from Hermione’s look, full of pity. She didn’t want to deal with this right now. The guilt and hurt welled up in her, making her throat thick. “I’m just being... difficult today. I’ll be fine.”

“You know if you ever want to talk about it—”

“I know, Hermione,” Ginny said, sitting at her vanity and lifting a brush to her tangled hair. She caught Hermione’s eyes in the mirror and smiled gratefully. “You know I will.”

Hermione studied her for a long minute before shrugging and coming behind her, taking over brushing Ginny’s hair.

“Ron and I finally set a date,” she smiled widely.

Ginny grinned. “When?”

“May thirtieth,” Hermione said, giggling just a bit.

Ginny sighed, happy to have something safe to talk about, rather than the dark shadows of the past. “That’s perfect,” she agreed. “Tell me everything you have planned.”

“Well...”

The two women giggled and gossiped like school girls while Ginny got ready for the day—taking entirely too long. Ron’s head, peeking in the room, finally broke them from their planning.

“Ron,” Hermione scolded, “you should have knocked. What if your sister had been changing?”

Ron smirked, brushing shaggy red fringe out of his eyes. “Gin knows that we don’t knock...”

Hermione huffed, crossing her arms in front of her and standing in front of a fully dressed Ginny.

“She’s still entitled to privacy, Ronald Weasley.”

“It’s alright,” Ginny soothed. “I’m ready to go down and face the horde.”

Ron laughed and clapped her on the shoulder as he wrapped an arm around Hermione’s waist. “You’d better be ready. Mum said she won’t hold things for you any longer.”

“Let’s just get this over with,” Ginny grumbled, her earlier feelings of happiness fading quickly as she trudged her way downstairs.

Complete bedlam reigned in the kitchen, dishes of eggs and breakfast meats levitated over the table, and ten different conversations were going on at once.

‘You can do this,’ she steeled herself and took her usual spot in between her father and Fred.

“Morning, everyone,” she said, pasting a fake smile on her face. Her brothers and their significant others returned the greeting and continued with their chatter.

Over it all was Molly Weasley’s gentle scolding and directions to keep the food rotating around so that everyone could serve themselves.

“How’s the job, Ginny?” Bill asked from his spot opposite her.

Ginny’s head shot up from her where she was filling her plate and studied her oldest brother. “It’s good,” she said cautiously. Honestly, none of them really understood about her desire to work in a Muggle bookstore—or in the Muggle world at all. She knew they were all humoring her until she figured out what she wanted to do in life.

“Still thinking about Quidditch?” he asked after helping himself to the fried eggs.

“Maybe,” she shrugged, ignoring her mother’s low growl at the question. “The Harpies are having open tryouts in the Spring. I thought about trying then.”

Bill nodded, but she could see he was thinking deeply about the idea.

“The Law Enforcement Office is looking for a file clerk,” Percy said hesitantly. He looked at her for

a minute before looking back down at his food.

Ginny fought the urge to roll her eyes and shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t think that really suits, Perce, but thanks anyway.” Her relationship with Percy had never been great, so his suggestion surprised her. But the stuffy Ministry just wasn’t the place for a witch like Ginny.

“We might need someone in a few weeks,” Fred offered half-heartedly. Ginny shook her head, knowing that they really couldn’t afford adding anyone right now. Their first shop had just opened this summer, and, while it was a smash success, costs of starting up were still high.

“I have no desire to spend the day with rabbit ears or spouting tropical feathers,” Ginny answered dryly.

Fred perked up, snapping his fingers at George. “Are you writing this down? Those are great ideas, Gin-Gin.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “If you do use them, I get half.”

Her words fell on deaf ears as the twins were lost in a haze of whispered words and quill scratching.

“Way to go, half-pint,” Charlie laughed. “You could always come back with me to the Reserve—”

“She’ll do no such thing,” her mother huffed from the far side of the table, her mouth dropping agape at Charlie’s suggestion.

“That’s okay,” Ginny said to him, ignoring her mother’s outburst, “I don’t think I can keep up with dragons.”

“If you’re so set on Quidditch,” Ron said after he swallowed his bite, “why don’t you apply at the Department of Magical Sports and Games.”

Ginny was impressed at his increased table manners, but stifled a laugh. She nudged Hermione’s foot under the table. “Thanks, Ron, I’ll think about it,” she lied. Once again, sitting in an office all day didn’t sound right either.

Bill cleared his throat, staring at the piece of toast he was systematically destroying on his plate. “I’m leaving for Egypt again.”

Ginny watched him continue to pick at his breakfast while their parents—rather their mother—grilled him on every reason he might be leaving. In a way, Ginny envied him, being free enough to travel when he wanted; not tied down to any one place. She understood his reasons, though, and did not envy him for them at all. Bill and Charlie had seen too much during the war and neither had fully recovered, in Ginny’s opinion.

Not that she could call herself fully recovered either.

Once, in the middle of her mother’s tears over his imminent departure, Bill caught Ginny’s eye and winked at her. She silently thanked him for sacrificing himself so that the focus shifted from her. He was good about that.

“Don’t let them push you around,” he whispered to her later as they sat in the living room, bent over the worn chessboard. “Take your time, when you find the right thing, you’ll know it.”

Ginny looked up from her move, her finger not leaving the piece. Bill’s scarred face was painted with shadows from the sun streaming in the windows.

“You as well,” she said softly, turning her focus back to her move.

“Is there a reason that you like being out there?” he asked a few minutes later.

Ginny didn’t have to think hard to understand his question. All of the odd jobs she had taken over the past years had been in the Muggle world, much to her father’s pleasure and her mother’s chagrin. There was the three months she worked in the Italian restaurant, the excruciating six months as a day nanny, the eight months in a bakery and various other jobs. Her current position in a large retail book store seemed the most promising because it allowed her great variety in what she did.

“I don’t know,” she said. It wasn’t that she didn’t want anything to do with the magical world; it was more that she wanted to experience more than was in her small tight-knit community before she settled down, if she ever did.

“Hermione and I were talking about Muggle University the other day.”

“Is that something that interests you?” he asked, surprise in his tone.

Ginny sighed, looking away from the game and staring at the dust motes that swirled in the morning sunshine. “I don’t know. Ron thought the idea was funny.”

“But what do *you* think?” Bill asked, watching her intently.

“It’s something to think about,” she answered noncommittally. “I’m sure I’ll find something out there. For now, I’m content where I am. I get to meet new people and see new things.”

“Variety is a good thing,” Bill agreed, prodding his queen forward with his wand. “Checkmate.”

“Bugger,” Ginny growled quietly.

Her small twin bed just wasn’t comfortable that night as she stared at the cracked, faded ceiling and wondered what to do with her life. Down the hall, she could hear the twins mumbling and the clinking of what sounded like a ladle on the side of a cauldron-she decided that it was better that she not know what they were working on, especially since it might involve her participation if she showed any interest at all. Her parents had been more than a little nervous when the two had asked to stay for a few days, but ultimately, they couldn’t turn down their children.

The door down the way opened and light poured in under the gap at the bottom of her own door. Someone hurried by in the hallway quickly enough to make a breeze come in through the cracks. Ginny watched as the pale blue paper she had found again this evening and placed on her desk fluttered to the floor.

“A flatmate...” Ginny thought, for the first time in her life, that maybe leaving the Burrow to live elsewhere might be the answer.

She thought back to the ad. The price for rent was a bit more than she should probably pay, but it wasn't out of her means. Ginny had saved most of the money she'd made from every job she'd worked and had a healthy sum piling up in a Gringotts vault. Her living expenses would be meager, she knew. She could make do without many extras.

Hurried footsteps back up the stairs and down the hall again made the paper skid toward her along the bare hardwood floors. Ginny watched with interest as the paper stopped moving. She could just make out the dark letters, but not read what they said.

“*Lumos*,” she muttered and her wand tip brightened. “*Accio*.” Another spell brought the paper into her hand and Ginny read the ad again. Maybe this was the answer for her right now. Maybe she needed to get out on her own and experience life without a family member looking over her shoulder.

She'd have to talk to Hermione about it tomorrow. She darkened her wand, placed the paper on the small, unsteady bedside table and lay back down into her bed, pulling the homemade quilt up to her shoulders. A small smile played on her lips as she nodded off to sleep.

* * *

As it turned out, it took two days for Hermione to squeeze enough time in her schedule between work at the Ministry and wedding planning for Ginny. ‘After all, Ginny, there are only six months to get this *whole* wedding planned!’

They met at a new restaurant in Diagon Alley not too far down from her brothers' new store. Once the waiter had delivered their lunch, Ginny took a deep breath.

“I was thinking of moving out,” she blurted, wincing at how abrupt it sounded. Hermione stared at her, pausing in chewing her mouthful. She slowly swallowed and wiped her mouth with a napkin, as she scrutinized Ginny. “Well?” Ginny asked, her hand darting forward in nervousness to finger the salt dispenser.

“Moving out of the Burrow.” It was more a statement than a question, and Ginny watched the different expressions cross her friend's face. “That's a large step.”

“I'm ready for it,” Ginny assured her. “I just... I can't do this anymore, Hermione. I need...”

“You need to find out who you are.” Hermione nodded. Sympathy, but not pity, filled her face.

Grimacing just a bit at the cliché, Ginny nodded. “I guess so. More like I need the space to make sure who I think I am is who I *really* am.”

Hermione looked at her again, thoughtfully cataloging everything. “I'm sorry it's been so hard for you.”

“Don't apologize, Hermione,” Ginny flushed, glancing around, worrying who could overhear their

conversation. It had only been six years, after all. Bringing all that up again would just make a mess. "You know how I feel about it."

"Still," Hermione continued, "it isn't right how they treat you. I've spoken to Ron about it—"

"Ron?" Ginny scowled down at her soup, fighting the feeling that her appetite had just disappeared completely.

"I know," Hermione placated, holding her hands up in front of her before dropping them and sighing. "You were fourteen, Ginny..."

"What do you think about me moving out?" Ginny rode over the top of her, pushing the uncomfortable panic back down to where it lived, deep beneath the surface.

Hermione hesitated, biting her lip in the way she did when she was deliberating research or practical experiments. Seven years of friendship meant that Ginny knew the look well. "I think it's a great idea," she concluded, letting a genuinely enthusiastic smile creep up on her. "And it's very character building to support yourself. But can you really afford a flat on your own?"

Feeling a bit guilty, but not letting it show, Ginny smiled. "I was thinking about getting a flatmate, or maybe finding someone who needed one."

"That's an idea," Hermione conceded as she picked at her bread. "I could check at the Ministry and see if anyone's heard anything."

"I was thinking I'd look... outside Diagon Alley, actually," Ginny said as she nudged her soup bowl back and forth in front of her. Finally, she took a small taste and savored the rich flavor. Maybe her appetite had returned after all.

Hermione smiled and shook her head. "You and the Muggle world."

"What?" Ginny questioned with a smile. She and Hermione had had this conversation many times. "I just think... I don't know. It's like we only live in this small little corner of the world and there, just beyond is this whole huge place that we hardly know anything about."

Hermione laughed. "I agree with you, Ginny. In fact, I wish Ron were more open to doing things the Muggle way or traveling more or... well anything beyond what he's always known. I mean, the closest he's really come to anything different is when I force him to go to my parent's house, or the time he tried to be friends with Dean Thomas when the two of you were dating."

"Don't remind me," Ginny scrunched up her nose. "Besides, I've always felt this... pull when I think about the Muggle world." She threw up her hands in frustration. "I can't explain it. I've tried a thousand times to understand it myself. It's just like... I feel that there's something out there for me and I need to discover it for myself."

"You always were the most adventurous Weasley," Hermione shook her head.

"Hardly," Ginny snorted, glancing around the room again. "Bill and Charlie traveled all over in the war, Fred and George do who knows what in that shop of theirs, hell, even Ron has an exciting job

with his Quidditch. I'm just little Ginny Weasley."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Little Ginny Weasley? Record holder for the most detentions at Hogwarts, winner of the prize for most detentions ever given by Professor Snape; you are the twin's sister in every way."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Ginny giggled. "I had to do something, school would have been dead boring if I'd only studied and read books." Her challenging look made Hermione blush a bit. "School was for snogging as many boys as I could, blowing up a few potions and escaping the castle any way possible."

"Well, I'm certainly glad you achieved all your goals in life," Hermione said dryly.

"It's not like anyone ever let me do anything helpful," Ginny grumbled. The past welled up inside her and she struggled to control it. There was a very good reason that everyone wanted to wrap her in cotton wool and only take her out on special occasions. But they never spoke of it. Protect Ginny—that's what they all did—even though she fought against it constantly.

Hermione reached out and placed a warm hand over Ginny's cold one. "We all felt a bit useless, didn't we? Stuck in that castle while your brothers went off to war. I'm just glad it's over and everyone came back alive."

Ginny nodded absently, her mind picturing each of her families' faces one by one. "We were very lucky." She winced as she thought of Bill's scarred face and the fact that they'd almost lost him.

Hermione must have felt the past brush close again too, as she shook the memories out of her head a bit and returned to their earlier topic. "When are you going to break the news to your parents?"

"Not until I decide for sure," Ginny said. She hesitated before producing the smudged paper and passing it over to Hermione.

The brunette read through it and raised her eyes to meet Ginny's. "You *ihave/i* thought this through."

Ginny smiled and nodded. "I have. It was actually an accident that I ended up with that paper, but it is what got me thinking about it."

"This was written by a man," Hermione stated.

"How can you tell?" Ginny asked as she snatched the ad and read it again. The thought hadn't occurred to her and it sent her plans into a spin.

"I can't for sure. It's just a feeling I get. The sentence structure—the way it's written is fairly formal. I'd say you're looking at an educated, younger man. It is possible that it could be a woman, but she'd probably be very formal and stiff."

Ginny bit the inside of her lip for a moment before shrugging. "It hadn't even entered my mind that it might be a man. I guess I just got this picture in my head and... Well, I'm not sure what to do now."

“Would it really matter?” Hermione asked, rebelliously. A small smile graced her lips and Ginny almost laughed. “I mean, it’s just sharing a flat.”

“It’s not me that would have a problem with it,” Ginny protested.

Hermione nodded and sipped at her ice water. “You’re right. I think you’d have six rather large problems.”

“Eight,” Ginny confirmed with a heavy sigh. “I don’t see Mum or Dad being too accepting of it.”

“Well, just keep looking around,” Hermione suggested. “There’s bound to be someone out there looking for a flatmate.”

Ginny nodded hesitatingly and glanced down at the blue paper again. “I think I’ll call on this one anyway. It wouldn’t hurt to meet him, would it?”

“Not at all,” Hermione protested. “And you may find it’s just what you need.”

Ginny returned the rather mischievous smile of her future sister-in-law, grateful that someone in the family understood her rebellious spirit a bit.

“Let me know how it turns out.”

* * *

Harry was just about to take a bite of his food when his cell phone buzzed and sang in his pocket. Sighing and looking down at the rapidly cooling sausage, wrapped in thick bread and currently leaking grease through the flimsy paper and onto his jeans, he fumbled for the phone.

“Hello?”

Very few people had this number and Harry wondered who would be calling him in the middle of the day.

“Hello,” a pleasant, female voice answered and then hesitated. “I found your ad about a flatmate.” She hesitated again and Harry opened his mouth to respond. “Are you still looking for someone?”

His lunch lay forgotten in his lap. Harry’s eyes scanned the park in front of him. It was a warm enough day in the middle of January for him to escape his flat and walk the streets, searching for something to keep his free time from driving him insane.

“Yeah,” he answered, almost without thinking. ‘A woman?’ his brain protested, but his mouth wasn’t listening. “Yeah, I’m still looking.”

“Oh,” she said, sounding as if she were as shocked at the answer as he was. “Well, I’m interested.” He found himself smiling at her nervousness; it echoed his own perfectly.

“I never really thought you’d be... well,” she continued.

“A guy,” Harry smiled.

"Yeah," she chuckled, relief flooding her voice. "I just got this picture in my head and... well, it doesn't really matter. I mean... it doesn't."

"Okay," Harry agreed, amused at her flustered speech. Taking a deep breath, he continued, "Well, the flat is in London, obviously. Three bedrooms, with one loo. There's a washing machine and clothes dryer." He felt extremely stupid for carrying on like this, but his brain wasn't in control of his mouth it seemed and he felt himself feeling more comfortable with the idea of a flatmate as he rambled on.

"It sounds good," she agreed. "I wonder... is there a time—"

"We can meet," Harry nodded, interrupting her. "Sure. Um..."

"I'm at work now," she continued. "But I have tomorrow off... if you're available."

"Sure, yeah," Harry blurted, feeling his cheeks heat at his own enthusiasm. "Tomorrow would be good."

He knew the address of the coffee shop she gave well—it was the one he visited almost every night, and where he'd posted the advertisement.

"I'll be there," he agreed.

"Okay," she agreed. They sat for several seconds in awkward silence before both of them said 'goodbye' at the same time. They chuckled and then ended the call.

Mechanically, Harry slid his phone back into the pocket of his coat and stared down at his grease-stained pants. He picked a bit at the bread surrounding the sausage, nibbling at it.

Harry wasn't sure what made him tack the notice to the board at the coffee house at all. He'd taken it with him one night, drank his coffee and avoided the openly flirtatious looks of the woman serving him. On his way out that night, he'd paused at the notices, his eyes taking all of them in.

The paper crinkled in his coat pocket and he pulled it out, glancing at it and then back at the board. What would happen if he just tacked it up there? Nothing, really, he assured himself. Someone might call, but he could easily turn them down. He could say it was rented, or he'd changed his mind...

So he wasn't committing to anything by simply putting up the advertisement. Yet, somehow, it felt like a big commitment, putting himself out there like this.

Harry had never been particularly close to anyone besides Sirius and Remus. Training as a soldier didn't allow much time for friends, girlfriends or anything like it. Allowing someone into his very closed life would be a huge step.

'You can always say no,' he told himself. A picture of what waited for him at home entered his mind—empty flat, silent as the grave—and he took a deep breath. Finding an unoccupied push pin, Harry put the notice up on the board.

That had been almost a month ago, Harry mused as he took a slow bite of his lunch and chewed thoughtfully. He'd completely forgotten all about it until now. And no one else had called.

He could still tell her no, he assured himself once more. He would be polite and meet with her. In all the time he'd spent pondering putting the flyer up, the thought that a woman might answer it hadn't entered his mind. It was completely logical, though, given that he hadn't specified that he was male, or that he was expecting a male flatmate.

Then again, what did it really matter? The chances of this person being interested enough, and the two of them getting along well enough for Harry to allow her to move in were probably next to nothing.

So, he decided with a casual shrug to himself, he'd give it a try.

Chapter 2: Clicking

Ginny straightened her thigh length coat one more time as she walked toward the coffee house and then cursed herself for fidgeting so much. She was only meeting the man, for heaven's sakes, not dating him.

The phone conversation she'd had with him had been pleasant enough. He'd seemed surprised by the thought of a female flatmate as well, and then had laughed and moved on with the conversation as if he'd completely accepted the possibility without another thought.

What surprised her most was the completely American accent even though he used terms like 'flatmate', and 'loo' and things of that sort. She didn't mention anything to him then, hoping not to offend him completely. In fact, Ginny thought it was rather funny in a quirky sort of way. There was a story there, she was sure, and maybe she'd get to discover it for herself.

The warmth of the small shop welcomed her and she glanced around, searching the darker edges of the room for where he might be. She found him several tables away near the window and he met her gaze and smiled in return.

Her first impression was that he was rather good looking. Almond shaped eyes were his the most striking feature; they were a muddy hazel color. Black hair that was cut short and precise. A thin face with angular cheek bones and a straight nose. The rich color of his face suggested that he spent regular time outdoors as well. His shoulders were broad, but not out of proportion to his trim hips.

Ginny fought the urge to blush when he stood from his seat and interrupted her appreciation of him.

"Ginny Weasley." She stuck out her hand and shook the thin one held in front of her, noticing that it was soft, yet callused in some places.

"Harry Parker," he replied and Ginny was immediately interested in his unique accent. He gestured to the other seat at the table and even helped her to remove her coat and drape it along the back of the chair. They sat and Ginny cleared her throat feeling her cheeks heat again as he studied her.

"Forgive me," he chuckled. "I didn't expect..."

"What?" Ginny asked, smiling at his lopsided smile in return.

"You're very pretty," Harry complimented, and then motioned to the waitress across the room that they were ready to order.

"Thank you," Ginny gave in to the blush and cursed herself silently for it. It wasn't often that she received a compliment like that. Feeling even more flustered as his eyes returned to her, Ginny decided that humor might be the best defense against her blushing tendencies. "You're not absolutely horrible to look at yourself."

Harry's rich laugh filled the area around their table and Ginny relaxed a bit. "I'm hoping that was a compliment."

"You should take it as one," she nodded.

"Well, I guess that answers my question about you having a sense of humor," Harry said.

"What'll it be, ducky?" Ginny looked up to find the waitress waiting with her pad of paper.

"Oh, just a tea for me, please. A bit of lemon also, if you have it."

"Another coffee," Harry gestured toward the cup. "One cream, two sugars."

"I'll be right back," she nodded and left the two alone. Ginny noticed the appreciative look that the older woman gave Harry as she walked away. She wondered if that happened often to him.

"So," Harry started again. His hands fidgeted on the table in front of her, tracing the edges of a small napkin. "Tell me about yourself," he shrugged one shoulder, his eyes meeting hers again.

Ginny raised an eyebrow at him and smiled. "What, exactly do you want to know?"

"Anything," Harry shrugged. "Like why you're looking for a flatmate?"

Ginny thought about this for a moment before deciding on how much to reveal to him. "Well, that's a rather involved question. I guess I have to tell you a bit more about myself to even answer it.

"See, I'm the youngest of seven," she paused as Harry whistled low and shook his head. "It gets better," she continued with a small smile, "the others are all boys."

"I think I'm beginning to get the picture," he said with another lopsided smile.

"I went to a boarding school for seven years and graduated when I was seventeen," she continued. "Since then I've lived at home. Everyone wants to see me get on with my life, find a career, or a husband or whatever. Everyone knows everything about me and everything about my business, or thinks they know anyway." Her cheeks heated again as the words came spilling out of her. Quickly she turned her attention to running the tip of her finger in the scarred wood of the table top between them.

Harry laughed at her slightly disgruntled expression and drained the rest of his coffee. "Now the story comes out. A husband, huh? Is that what you want?"

It was Ginny's turn to laugh as Harry studied her. "Don't worry, this isn't an audition." He seemed to sag a bit in relief and pretended to wipe the sweat from his brow. It made Ginny smile wider. "I don't want a husband—not now, anyway. I just want a bit of space for myself. Freedom to do what I want without having to report every movement to my mother, father or, heaven forbid, one of my brothers.

"What about you," she asked, giving him a grin, "why are you looking for a flatmate?"

Harry met her eyes for a moment and Ginny felt the need to look away as his gaze was so penetrating. The waitress broke the moment by arriving with their drinks.

"I don't know," he admitted once she had gone. "I guess it's more just to have someone else

around, if that makes any sense. The money really isn't an issue. But, I'm here alone in this country and don't really know anyone."

"You're lonely," she suggested simply. "I can understand that."

"I guess so," he shrugged. His face flushed and she wondered if there was more to the story. Harry Parker definitely seemed intriguing. "Anyway, it was an idea that a friend had and, I don't know, it just seemed like it might work." He trailed off and sipped his coffee, glancing out the window. Ginny, sensing something a bit off, backed away from the question.

"Tell me about the flat." She leaned forward, ignoring the tea in front of her as Harry's face relaxed and his easy, crooked smile returned.

"It's a three bedroom, second floor flat above a warehouse. The warehouse is used for storage only so there's very little noise. The neighborhood is nice. There's this little park just down the way where I sometimes go to read or walk. There's a fairly small kitchen and living room area. I use the smallest bedroom for my workout room, but you'd have your own room. A single loo," his nose scrunched a bit. "So we'd have to share that."

Ginny waved a hand showing that it didn't concern her. "I'm used to sharing. With that many people living in one house, free bathroom time wasn't easy to come by growing up."

Harry stared at her in awe. "I still can't believe there were nine of you in one house."

Ginny shrugged. "It's an older, small house and we really didn't have much money when we were younger. But we were happy." And it was true. What the Burrow lacked in roominess and modern amenities, it made up for in charm and love.

"Anyway," he continued after nodding. "It's rather spacious from what I hear about the flats in London."

"And what did you have in mind for the perfect flatmate?" she asked with a smile as she added the lemon to her tea and stirred.

Harry smiled at her, quiet as he considered his answer. "Someone rather neat. I'm not a slob, but I don't really fancy doing housework all day long. Someone quiet. I'm not into parties and such, really. If you can cook, that would be great. I'm alright with a few dishes, pasta and the like, but I'm always open to new things. My work takes me out of the country quite a bit, so I'm not always there either."

"Sounds reasonable," Ginny conceded. "I'm not overly neat by nature, but I think I could confine any mess to my room." She raised an eyebrow as Harry grinned down into his coffee. "I don't have that many friends so I can pretty much guarantee no parties. I do alright in the kitchen," she silently praised Hermione's coaching on using Muggle appliances. "My mother is an excellent cook and, despite myself, I must have inherited a bit from her."

"Sounds alright so far," he nodded. "Where do you work?"

"The large bookstore just down the street actually," Ginny nodded her head toward the window and

Harry glanced up, even though the view didn't take in the bookstore. "So the location is fine."

"And your family? They live in London as well?"

"Two of my brothers do," she nodded. "My parents and two brothers live in Devon, while the other two brothers live abroad." Harry nodded.

"What about you? Is your family around here?" Ginny immediately felt bad as a visible sadness seemed to settle on him for a moment.

"I don't have any family," Harry admitted as he ran his fingers around the rim of his coffee cup. "I was born here in England, but was raised by my Godfather in the United States after my parents died."

"I'm sorry," Ginny said quietly to the table.

"It's alright," he protested and smiled tightly. "I actually do have an aunt and a cousin somewhere over here," he shrugged. "But I haven't thought about them in forever."

"What about pets?" Ginny asked, hoping to change the atmosphere back to the lighter one of before.

"Pets?" he questioned and Ginny laughed.

"Yeah. I only ask because I have a bird. If that's a problem though, I might be able to persuade my parents to keep him for a while. Although I'd rather have him with me." The thought of leaving Armstrong, the only thing she was really responsible for in her life, didn't sit well with Ginny. Although, chances were she'd probably get Hermione to take care of him before her mother would. No doubt Harry would have something surprising to say if she actually admitted to having an owl for a pet—even though she sometimes wondered if the strong-willed Armstrong thought of her as *his* pet.

Harry seemed to think about it for a moment before shrugging. "I don't really mind a bird," he said. "As long as you keep it in your room."

"Of course," Ginny nodded.

"It isn't one of those loud talking ones, is it?" he asked with a strange look on his face.

Ginny laughed again. "No, he's very quiet, hardly ever makes a sound actually. Anything else?" Ginny asked.

"Uhm, I can't really think of anything..." he said. "There's no garage for your car, but there are several parking spots in the back of the building."

"That's fine," Ginny said. "I don't have a car anyway."

"Okay." The two lapsed into silence for a bit and then their eyes met, causing them both to smile.

"I think this might actually work," Harry said finally, a hint of awe in his voice.

"I think it might, too," Ginny smiled back at him. Ginny took a deep breath, feeling the unease of years slipping away. She was really going to do this. As crazy as it seemed, this felt so... right—a decision made deep inside of her that just... clicked. For someone so used to avoiding large, life changing decisions, this one came with much more clarity than she expected.

Now she just had to figure out how she was going to hide the fact that she was a witch.

* * *

Harry turned the key in the lock, sneaking a look back at Ginny, who was studying the narrow stairwell that they'd just climbed.

He was sorely tempted to do a quick banishing spell, sending everything that didn't belong back to his bedroom, but the risk was too great. If Ginny saw... well he'd not only be out a possible flatmate, but she'd probably call the men in the white coats to take him away.

"It's not really clean," he excused, wincing at his thoughtlessness at not at least picking up his things before leaving today. Then again, when he'd left to go to the coffee house, Harry had low expectations for the meeting. Since her call, he'd talked himself out of, and then right back into, going at all.

Common courtesy won and Harry decided to at least meet with her.

And he had literally been blown away. This woman was... amazing. She was likeable and funny and... something... He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it was there. And it drew him toward her like no one he had ever met before.

"I'm sure I'll get over it," she said as she edged past him as he held the door for her. He smiled and shook his head as they came in, blinking at the darkness of the interior in contrast to the bright sun outside.

Harry glanced up at her, wondering what she thought as she wandered away, her fingers trailing along the back of his plush, leather sofa. She looked back over her shoulder, a slow smile spreading on her face.

"It's nice," she said. "Roomy." They both chuckled as she spun in a circle, her arms held out wide.

He chuckled, tugging at his scarf and undoing the buttons on his coat. "I'll show you around."

Her smirk stayed in place as she followed after him. "Living room—"

"Obviously," she laughed.

Harry felt a bit stupid, but her sense of humor put him more at ease. "And the kitchen," he pointed to the small area that held the sink, stove and refrigerator.

"Loo," Ginny commented when they came to the next door.

"Bedroom, smart ass," Harry quipped, raising an eyebrow in challenge. Her laugh echoed through the narrow hallway. "Yours, if you survive the tour."

She laughed again and nudged past him to see the empty room. Once inside, she spun around again. "I can live with it," she said with a firm nod.

Harry couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm. Strange—it felt as if the decision for her to move in here was already made. In fact, it even seemed a bit odd that her things weren't already there, claiming the room as her own.

"My room is over there," he pointed at his door, quickly reaching out to close his door. He hadn't made the bed this morning and there were several clumps of dirty laundry living on the floor. Ginny must have seen some of it as she gave him a knowing look and rolled her eyes. "The loo at the end and the other bedroom, where I keep my weights."

"Hmm," she nodded. Breezing past him, she inspected the rooms and then met him in the kitchen, leaning her hip against the small round table there. "I think I could make something of the place."

Harry snorted out a laugh. "I'll get a key made then."

And as quick as that, the decision was made.

"I think I can be ready to move in next week," Ginny said. She seemed happy with the decision—content would be the word Harry thought would describe it best. But that seemed a bit silly, since he really didn't even know her. "You sure your girlfriend won't mind you having a girl for a flatmate?"

Her question, full of teasing, caught him off guard and Harry shook his head wryly. "No girlfriend."

"Ah," she nodded. "Your boyfriend then."

He grimaced, but shook his head at her teasing. "Thanks, I like girls just fine. What about your boyfriend... or, you know, girlfriend?"

Ginny laughed merrily and shook her head. "None of either. And, you know, just for reference, I'm rather partial to blokes myself."

"Good to know," Harry nodded, his face feeling like it might crack. He hadn't smiled this much since he'd moved six months ago.

"Alright," Ginny said with a firm nod. "I'll let you know when I'll move in. It'll probably be next week, like I said."

"That should be fine." A vague shadow pressed in on Harry's mind and he winced. "I, er... I may be gone next week, actually. I have a business meeting coming up."

"What is it, exactly, that you do?" Ginny asked. Her tone was casual enough, but Harry's heart rate sped up. He hated lying to people, but it was part of who he was right now. Harry Parker was a whole persona worked up between Harry, Sirius and Remus years ago. It seemed almost more real now than who he was underneath the glammers and the false names.

"I work for the government," he suggested casually. "I, er, help with security consulting."

“Oh,” Ginny nodded and seemed to brush off the information while securing her coat front. “Well, either way...”

“I’ll call you if it’s going to be an issue,” Harry shrugged.

“Sure,” she said, finally wrapping her scarf around her neck. “I need to get going.”

“Okay,” Harry nodded, ruffling the back of his hair. “Well, I guess I’ll see you here when I get back.”

She nodded. “You will.”

“I’ll get the key made this afternoon. Are you working?”

“I am,” she nodded, glancing at her watch. “In fact, I’m going to be late.”

Harry motioned her toward the door, opening it. “I’ll drop it by this afternoon to you.”

“Sounds perfect,” she agreed.

Harry watched her walk down the stairs and then followed her with his eyes down the sidewalk. The January air chilled him and he realized he’d been standing outside with no coat on for at least five minutes, watching Ginny walk away. Cursing his own silliness, Harry went back inside.

* * *

Ginny felt on top of the world as she returned home from work that evening. She hadn’t stopped smiling all day and had been forced to make some excuse to Rebecca, lest her friend keep up the teasing about Ginny’s suspected love life.

Not even the thought of going home to a full Burrow could dampen her spirits, although that might change when she actually got there.

Bill had decided that he was going back to Egypt, much to her mother’s dismay, and tonight was his farewell dinner. Ginny wasn’t sure if she planned on telling everyone of her impending move now, or waiting until later. She supposed it all depended on the mood of the family.

The kitchen windows shown like fire in the fading light of evening as Ginny walked from the Apparation point. There was certainly enough noise and laughter going on, because it was seeping through the closed windows and doors, settling on the small covered porch.

Ginny sighed, accepting that as a good sign and entered the house. A rousing game of Exploding Snap was in progress, although it seemed as if Fred and George may have sabotaged the cards as feathers flew out of them every time someone laid a card down.

“Oh, you’ve finally made it, have you?” her mother called, levitating a plate full of food toward her. Even her mother’s unintentionally biting remark couldn’t dampen Ginny’s mood tonight, she decided.

“Thanks, Mum,” she cheered, holding up a forkful of potatoes before she voraciously dug into the

food. Rebecca had wanted to chat all through their lunch break, so Ginny was starving.

“Mind you don’t eat the fork and plate,” Ron teased, coming up behind her and settling his crossed arms on her head. Ginny struggled in annoyance, trying to get away from him.

“Mind I don’t stab you with my fork,” she growled with a smile.

“What’s with you?” he asked, dodging her playful jab with the utensil. “You’re never this happy.”

“Am so,” she quipped back with a fake pout. “I just don’t ever show it to you. Why waste a good mood on a git?”

“Very nice,” Ron growled. He tousled her hair, laughing when she tried to dodge out of reach of his long arms.

Ginny finally escaped him, leaning on the back of Bill’s chair as he tossed his last card into the pile. The resulting explosion sent up a small mushroom cloud of black smoke, which they all waved away.

“Ron’s right, Ginny,” Bill grinned. “You’re happier than normal.”

Ginny glared at him, silently cursing his yet-to-be-conceived children (that she knew of, anyway) and willing him not to bring too much attention to her. Nothing good ever came of it. Why, oh why, couldn’t they just let her be happy in peace?

“I’m just happy to see you leave,” she drawled, sticking her tongue out at him.

Her mother scolded her, but Ginny only chuckled. Bill rolled his eyes and reached for the new cards that Fred had dealt him. But he kept sneaking looks at her when he thought she wasn’t watching. It unnerved Ginny slightly, and she wondered whether he was still trying to figure out her mood, or whether he wanted something from her.

Seeking refuge from her nosy brothers, Ginny found Hermione talking with Angelina, George’s girlfriend. They were huddled around a thick magazine and Ginny grimaced, recognizing it immediately. The bookstore stocked dozens of these same glossy photo-covered magazines for planning the perfect wedding.

“What are we planning tonight?” she asked, plastering a smile on her face.

“Flowers,” Hermione smiled happily. “Ron and I have decided to go with lots of wonderful spring blooms.”

Angelina complimented her on the choice and Ginny drifted off, watching her brothers continue the game amid boisterous claims of cheating and card tampering.

“Ginny?”

“Sorry,” she swung back around, aware that both women were looking at her.

“Honestly,” Hermione huffed. “I asked what color you thought you’d like to wear. As Maid of Honor, I’d like your help in planning this.”

A wave of guilt washed over Ginny and she set her empty plate aside, leaning onto the sideboard where Hermione's magazine rested. She was right; Ginny hadn't really been a part of any of the planning. The fact that planning something like this wedding made Ginny want to vomit shouldn't matter at all. Hermione had asked her to stand as Maid of Honor, and Ginny had agreed. She certainly could spare fifteen minutes with her best friend, even if it meant talking about things as revolting as flowers and lace and wedding cake.

"You honestly want my opinion?" she asked. "I thought it was up to the bride and groom."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "If I left it up to Ron, we'd all be dressed in orange."

Ginny couldn't help but snort out a laugh at that. It was completely true.

"Well, did you have any colors in mind?"

"Possibly pale yellow, or pink, or lavender," Hermione shrugged, pulling out a small sample of each color of fabric.

"Hmm," Ginny contemplated them. "I don't mind the yellow, hate the pink, love the lavender."

They discussed colors and corresponding flowers for another few minutes before Ginny felt the need to walk away to save her sanity. Hermione seemed satisfied with her input, so Ginny drifted back to the table. The game had ended with Fred winning the entire pile of shiny bronze knuts. He was smugly counting them on one side of the table, shielding his pile every so often when Ron or George would try to levitate stray coins from his clutches.

Ginny chuckled, watching the play. It had always been the same, although when they were younger, they'd played with peanuts and Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans instead of money. None of them had been able to scrounge more than a few knuts at any point in time.

"I see Fred's kept up his winning streak," Ginny commented, reaching over to steal a chocolate frog from the small pile of sweets near Bill's elbow.

"Yeah," he agreed, watching as she unwrapped the chocolate. "Who'd you get?"

Ginny glanced down at the card, unconcerned. She'd given away her entire collection on the day she'd left Hogwarts, much to Ron's dismay. Some first year Gryffindor boy had been gifted the whole set.

"Harry Potter," she shrugged, tucking the card in the back pocket of her jeans. "I had about twenty of those," she mused, biting off the head of the squirming frog and enjoying the warmth as the chocolate melted against her tongue.

"Didn't you have a crush on him?" Bill teased.

Ginny smirked, nudging him with her elbow. "Yeah, when I was five." She drifted off, thinking about Harry Parker, her new flatmate. Hmm, interesting how similar the names were. But that was just silly. There was no way that Harry Potter would ever be posing as a Muggle in London, of all places, and searching for a flatmate. He was a celebrity, for Merlin's sake, and spent his life

fighting crime all over the world. Besides, the two looked nothing alike.

“Hmm,” Bill raised his eyebrows and she batted him over the head.

“When do you leave?”

“Early,” he grunted out, glancing at the clock, which pointed at ‘still too early for bed’.

“Good riddance,” Ginny teased, brushing her hands along his shoulders. The oldest and youngest siblings got along well, using humor to deflect any tension in the family. It was something that they’d relied a lot on over the years.

After the war, however, it had taken Bill a lot longer to find that humor again. But Ginny could relate to being in the shadows. She was often there herself.

“Admit it, you’ll miss me,” he quipped, winking at her.

“Maybe,” she shrugged, finishing off her chocolate. “You do always have chocolate around.”

Bill laughed. “What’re you going to do without me here?” he asked, jokingly.

Ginny sobered, thinking of exactly what she was going to do. The need to tell someone had been growing inside of her all evening, until now, standing here with Bill, it strained to burst out of her. She glanced around before looking back at him.

“I have some plans,” she said mysteriously.

“Plans?” he wagged his eyebrows. “What kind of plans?”

Ginny smiled and leaned toward him a bit. “Escape plans.”

Her joke, however, didn’t make him smile. Instead, a very serious look settled on his scared face and he contemplated her for a moment. “And what are you escaping?”

She sighed heavily. “This,” Ginny nodded toward the other side of the kitchen where her mother was scolding Ron for nicking biscuits and Fred, George and Percy were bickering over something.

“Moving out, are you?” Bill said, one side of his mouth quirking in a smile that looked more like a grimace.

“Yeah,” she nodded. They were both quiet, watching the room before he nudged her.

“You’re serious?”

“Yeah,” she confirmed. “I found a flat today.”

Bill whistled low. “Mum’s going to go ‘round the twist when she hears that.”

Ginny shrugged, feeling a bit reckless. What did it matter what her mother thought? It was her life. “You’re the one who told me to go after what I wanted, Bill.”

“And is this what you want? To move out.”

Ginny sighed, rubbing her forehead. Bill’s last comment caught the attention of everyone in the room and her mother bustled over.

“Who’s moving out? Ginny, what is he talking about?”

The overwhelming pressure of being the center of the room pressed in on her and Ginny shot a panicked glance around the room. Everyone was watching; everyone was waiting for her answer.

“He’s talking about me moving out,” Ginny said, her voice quavering at the start. “I’ve been thinking about it for a bit. I found a flat today.”

Chaos erupted around her as her mother wailed and her brothers protested for various reasons.

Ginny stood motionless, letting it all wash over her. Instead of convincing her otherwise, their arguments and excuses only steeled her resolve. Above it all, Ginny found Hermione’s eyes and gave a solid nod to her questioning glance. Hermione smiled softly and nodded her understanding.

‘Might as well go for broke,’ Ginny told herself, ‘they’ll find out sooner or later.’ She cleared her throat, purposely drawing the attention she’d been avoiding for the last six years.

“The flat is in London. Muggle London. And...” she ploughed on, over the top of her mother’s mutterings, “I have a flatmate. His name is Harry Parker.”

Dead silence filled the room as the words sunk in.

“How could you be so stupid?” Ron snapped, coming up to stand in front of her, towering over as he looked down. “You have no idea what you’re doing.”

“I’m not five years old, Ron,” Ginny hissed back through clenched teeth. “I’m a fully grown witch and I have every right to make my own decisions in life.”

Ron scoffed loudly, crossing his arms across his wide chest. “Yeah, we all know how your decisions turn out.”

Ginny flinched back, the words striking her as soundly as a blow.

“Ron,” Hermione warned, coming up to grasp his bicep and pull him away.

“No,” he dismissed her, “we can pretend all we want, but it doesn’t make it go away. The last time she made a decision this bad you almost got killed, Hermione, and Penelope died.”

Several gasps were heard around the room and Ginny looked down at her shoes, rage and guilt filling her until she couldn’t take it anymore. The back door shut and Ginny glanced around, not surprised to see that it was Percy who had left.

“How dare you use that against me,” she whispered. Her voice was low, but it stilled every movement in the room. She defiantly raised her chin up and glared at him. “I was fourteen, for Merlin’s sake.

Ron swallowed harshly. “Ginny, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Oh, you meant every word of it,” she bit out, her eyes traveling the room. “You’ve always thought I couldn’t handle myself. Well I’ve got news for you all—I’m stronger than I look. I fought the bastard off for almost a year. And I won! *I won!*”

“I can’t bring Penny back, and I can’t give Hermione back those months she was petrified. But I’d give everything I had if I could.”

Feeling the tight control she had on her emotions slipping, Ginny spun on her heel and ran up the stairs, slamming her bedroom door behind her.

* * *

How dare he say that to me, Ginny hissed to herself as she grabbed for odd items, shoving them hastily in a cardboard box. Her hand shook with rage and embarrassment as she packed clothing and books and photographs—all in the same box.

“This always happens,” she muttered to Armstrong as he eyed her warily from his perch. “They always bring this up.” His head tipped to the side and she swore he was agreeing with her.

She knew that wasn’t fair. They didn’t always say it out loud, but Ginny knew the thought was always there, swirling under the surface when they looked at her. She knew they thought it. Everyone thought it.

They don’t trust me.

And for a long time, Ginny had to admit, she didn’t trust herself. It had taken a lot of introspection and time for her to get over that mistrust and to begin to be Ginny Weasley again. In fact, she was fairly sure she had only made the best progress since she had left Hogwarts.

There at the castle, around every corner was a memory, or someone watching her. *How could you get over something when no one would let you forget it?*

Ginny tortured herself enough about it. There wasn’t a day she didn’t walk into the Great Hall and wince at not seeing Penelope there, seated next to Madam Pomfrey, whom she had been studying with, or see Hermione cuddled into Ron’s side, and not feel guilt for attacking her friend.

She shook away those memories, intent on packing all of her things tonight. Surely Harry wouldn’t object to her crashing on his sofa tonight. She’d worry about the bed and the larger furniture when she could think coherently.

Item after item disappeared into the box until it was too full to close. Ginny levitated it to the floor near the door and took another off the pile she’d banished here from the back room of the book store when no one was looking.

Violently tugging the drawers in her bureau open, she shoved handful after handful of clothing into the cardboard, her anger slowly diminishing into tears as she worked. One more box joined the first on the floor before Ginny collapsed onto her bed, tears trailing down her cheeks.

Ginny was shaking violently when she woke, staring up at the high ceilings of the hospital wing. Her head pounded and she wondered, momentarily, if she'd had a bad broom accident before she remembered what had actually happened.

Shame and revulsion mixed in her stomach, churning and threatening to make her vomit. Penelope's soft face, dead and lifeless staring up at her...

"Miss Weasley," Professor Dumbledore spoke from her side, startling her. She flinched away from his touch, scrambling up to curl next to the top of the bed.

"It's my fault," she managed to get out, not meeting his eyes, but staring at the long, thin and wrinkled hand that he still held out to her. "I... I k-killed Penny."

"No," the Professor said, his tone soft and soothing. "You must not blame yourself, Miss Weasley. The blame lies entirely with Tom Riddle."

Ginny shuddered at the name of the boy she had thought was her friend. Tom. It resonated inside her emptiness, careening off her insides and going on forever.

"How could I be so stupid?" she asked, voicing the question that had been replaying in her mind since the moment she realized what was happening to her. "I knew."

"Older and wiser wizards and witches have been fooled by Tom Riddle, Miss Weasley. The fact that you fought him for almost an entire year is a testament to your strength."

She shook her head, repeating her words. "I knew." Taking a chance, she glanced up at him, seeing only acceptance and understanding in his blue eyes. "I knew he was controlling me, hurting people."

Even though she didn't want to, her eyes found Hermione, stiff and still in her bed across the hospital wing, just as she had been for months. Across from her was Penny—dear sweet Penelope Clearwater, who was training to be a Healer and had come to Hogwarts to work with Madam Pomfrey. Her brother, Percy, sat at the foot of the bed, his back toward Ginny, while Penny's parents sat next to her, sobbing into each other's shoulders.

Guilt rose with bile in her mouth, and Ginny scrambled for the small bowl on her nightstand, vomiting into it. The Professor conjured a small glass of water and Ginny drank it greedily, trying to get the sour taste out of her mouth.

"Miss Weasley, may I tell you a story?"

She nodded jerkily, staring down at her hands folded on top of the blankets and resting in her lap. Anything was better than seeing Percy refuse to look at her, or Penny's closed eyes, or Hermione's stiff body.

"There were once two young boys who were the best of friends. They went everywhere together, and had such grand plans for their future. They were young and full of life—but very naïve about the world around them."

Ginny listened, drawn in by the soft tone of the Headmaster's voice, but not sure why he was telling her the story.

"Their ambitions were grand and they planned to change the world. But one boy's plans were darker than the other's. And the second boy started to rethink their goals. He kept his doubts to himself, afraid to disappoint his friend.

"Soon the doubts began to grow until the second boy knew that the first was headed for ruin. But still he kept quiet. He didn't fight like he should have, Ginny."

The quaver in his voice made Ginny focus more intently on what he was trying to tell her.

"It wasn't until someone very dear to the second boy was harmed that he was able to finally fight back against the evil that the first boy was planning."

"But he fought," Ginny whispered, completely drawn in now.

"Yes, he did," the Professor smiled sadly and shook his head. "But by that time, it was too late."

Ginny's eyes darted back over to Hermione's bed before looking down at her hands again.

"The first boy continued in his plans—evil, horrid plans, Ginny. And only the second boy could stop him."

"Did he?"

"Yes," the Professor nodded. "Eventually. It took years, but the first boy was stopped. The other just wasn't strong enough to speak up when he should have."

Ginny nodded, not sure if she understood what he intended for her to know from the story.

"Ginny, you were strong enough to fight Tom from the time that Miss Granger was petrified..."

"I tried," Ginny said, speaking shamefully down to her hands. "I thought I could control it. When I realized what he was doing... I was scared. And Tom... he was so strong. I know now... I never could have controlled it. He promised that he wouldn't hurt anyone else. But he was so strong... and now... Penny..." A sob welled up in her throat as she thought of the quiet, smart girl—her brother's girlfriend.

The Headmaster reached out and placed his hand on top of Ginny's. She was surprised at the strength of his grip as he took her fingers in his. "No one can ever understand completely what you've gone through, Ginny. You wouldn't have been able to control him. Tom Riddle was a very evil man, Ginny. Once you were under his control, there was no going back. But you must not allow him to win. You fought his possession; something no other living being has been able to say, Ginny. And you were able to bring the diary to me. I destroyed it, freeing you from Tom's grasp."

She continued to cry silently, sniffing and rubbing her cheeks with the scratchy sleeves of the hospital pyjamas. "Am I going to be expelled?" she asked in a low voice.

He smiled, his lips quirking up on one side more than the other, and shook his head. "No, Miss

Weasley. There will always be a place at Hogwarts for you. However, the Ministry will be holding a hearing to inquire into Miss Clearwater's death."

Ginny winced, pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around them. "Will I go to Azkaban?" Her voice cracked in the middle of the question and she suddenly felt four years old, instead of fourteen.

"No, Ginny," he soothed. "I will not allow that to happen to you."

"What if you can't stop it?" she asked, biting her lip and wiping her runny nose on the sleeve again.

"Miss Weasley, I make this promise to you," his crystal blue eyes met hers, and Ginny felt like he could see right into her, "I will do everything in my power to make sure that doesn't happen to you."

She nodded jerkily, feeling as if she could do no less.

The memory faded as Ginny wiped her tears and stared at the pile of boxes she had finished packing. Her anger and frustration with her family had ebbed away with each piece she placed in the boxes.

"It's not fair," she told the room again before sighing heavily. Armstrong hooted softly, adding his agreement. The rightness of her decision to move out settled in again as she saw the pale blue paper of Harry's ad peeking out from under the mess on her vanity.

Starting over again, where no one knew her past, where it couldn't stare her in the face every minute of every day and question her judgment—that sounded perfect.

* * *

Hermione took a deep breath and held it as she knocked softly on Ginny's door. Faded pink flowers painted on the door peeked out from where Ginny had tried to paint over them the summer after... well, *that* summer.

"I know you don't want to see anyone right now," she spoke softly to the door, knowing that Ginny could hear her, "but I'll only stay a minute."

The door handle clicked and Hermione reached down to open it, slowly pushing it inward to reveal Ginny, placing things sedately into cardboard boxes.

"You're packing already?" she asked, surprised.

"There's a lot to pack," Ginny lied. Hermione heard the thick emotion in her voice and guessed that she'd been crying, even though Ginny would never admit that to her. Ginny never admitted showing what she perceived as weakness, even when it was plainly on her face.

"I would imagine so," Hermione conceded, knowing it would be useless to argue with Ginny right now. Ron, she could argue with forever; but not Ginny.

Her stomach rolled at the thought of Ron, outside right now banging around in his father's shed. She'd go back to him in just a bit and see if he'd cooled down long enough to talk to her.

"He's sorry, you know," she said as she sank to the end of the bed, absently picking up a shirt from the pile next to her and folding it.

Ginny hesitated, her handful of clothing hovering over the box before she set it inside slowly. "It obviously needed to be said."

"No," Hermione shook her head and reached for another shirt. "It shouldn't have been said. He regrets it, I know he does." She caught Ginny's eyes for a minute, startled at how puffy and red they were.

"And everyone else?" Ginny asked, an edge to her tone that made Hermione wince. "Does everyone else regret it being said also? Because they were all thinking the same thing, Hermione. I see it in their faces every minute of every day. They don't trust me. To them I'm still some little girl who fell prey to that damned diary and got my brother's girlfriend killed and another one petrified."

"I wasn't Ron's girlfriend at the time," Hermione noted absently. Ginny didn't act like she'd even heard it.

"They watch me constantly; every thing I do, every word I say," Ginny said, sinking down to the bed, the box between them. "I always have to measure my words before I say them, just to make sure I don't tell them something that will make them second guess everything. So I've stopped telling them anything at all. I can't even tell them about my Muggle friends because Ron will want to know all their names and addresses so he can check them out. Or Percy will ask what books I'm reading, just in case I stumble across another enchanted diary filled with some bit of Voldemort. He can barely stand to look at me, Hermione."

Hermione winced, hating that Ginny was exaggerating—and yet not. Her family did hover, and that was a hard thing to accept.

"They're angry with themselves," Hermione said as she forced her hands to continue folding. "They feel like they let you down and they don't know how to make up for it."

Ginny snorted and violently rolled a pair of trousers into a ball, stuffing it in the box. "Ruining what remains of my life is not the way to make up for it."

Hermione sighed, closed her eyes and thought about how to explain it to Ginny. "I felt like I failed you too, Ginny," she admitted in a quiet voice.

"How—"

"You were one of my only friends," Hermione continued, glancing to the side to see Ginny's puzzled face staring at her in disbelief. "And I knew something was wrong that year. I knew you weren't... right. But I couldn't help fast enough. I didn't see the right signs."

"I kept them hidden," Ginny whispered down to her hands. "I was very, very good at it. Tom made sure of that."

"Yes, you were," Hermione admitted. "And I think that's why Ron feels this all so deeply still. You two were so close growing up, and then he went off to Hogwarts and met new friends, and had great adventures. And he left his little sister behind."

Ginny stiffened visibly and slowed her hands, actually folding clothing instead of rolling and stuffing.

"He, of all your brothers, should have seen that you weren't right. And he feels guilty that he was too busy running around with Dean and Seamus, and kissing Lavender and Parvati to see."

"It's not his fault," Ginny said softly. She placed the last of the pile in the box and stood, sealing the cardboard with her wand and levitating it to the growing pile on the other side of the room. Hermione stood and retrieved another box, opened the last drawer on the bureau and began to unload it. If Ginny was determined to go, Hermione would stand by her friend.

"It's not his fault," Ginny repeated. "It was mine. I'm comfortable with the blame now. I've grown up enough to know the mistakes I've made, and I've taken full credit for them and accepted the consequences."

"Ron told me how you went to Penelope's parents."

Ginny's movements stilled and Hermione looked up to find her staring off into space. "That was almost as hard as telling Dumbledore," she said softly. "I could feel Tom fighting inside me as I stumbled to his office. I turned back at least ten times, but I knew inside me that I had to keep going. No one else could get hurt because of me. No one else could die," she finished with a tortured whisper.

Hermione wanted to close the distance between them to hug the younger woman, but she hesitated. Ginny wasn't much for showing or receiving affection. Throwing up her hands, she chanced it, wrapping her arms around Ginny's shoulders for a rather stiff hug.

"I'm sorry."

"You've told me before, Ginny," she excused, awed that she could feel Ginny crying into her blouse.

"I know."

"And I'll tell you the same thing now as I did then. I was alright. I wasn't hurt. And I know who is really to blame. Everything could have been so much worse, Ginny, if you hadn't been so strong." Her voice broke and Hermione held tighter when Ginny tried to pull away. "Imagine that monster set loose on the whole school. *You* prevented that, Ginny."

Hermione finally let her go when Ginny snorted. "Why won't *they* see that?" Ginny asked, glancing at the back of her door. Her heart twisted at the young and vulnerable looking Ginny that showed through the rough and tumble exterior of the wonderful woman in front of her.

"They know it," Hermione excused. "But you're leaving. And they're afraid that you're going to go and... not know that they know."

“They’re going about it all wrong.”

“They are,” Hermione nodded. She reached out to scoop up the perfectly folded clothing in the drawer and deposited it in the empty box, almost filling it completely. “But they don’t know any other way.”

“But you understand why I have to go?” Ginny asked.

“I don’t think you *have* to,” Hermione shrugged. “But I think it’s a good idea still. You’ll all get some perspective with being apart. They’ll learn to let go a bit more and you’ll learn not to analyze every comment they make, searching for ways they don’t trust you.”

Ginny nodded thoughtfully. “It’s not like I’m moving across the world,” she rolled her eyes.

Hermione smiled and shook her head. “It doesn’t matter where it is.”

“And I’m not going to forget to come over or never have dinner here. You lot are here more than not. I have this horrible suspicion that when I leave I’ll actually realize how much this broken down place is home.”

Hermione smiled at the admission, knowing that Ginny truly did understand. The Burrow would always be home to the Weasleys—no matter what. Ginny knew that, she just didn’t want to admit it.

“Tell me about your flatmate,” Hermione said with a smile. “You seemed to decide rather quickly.”

Ginny smiled and shrugged. “There’s not a lot to tell. He’s a nice bloke.”

“Young? Old? Come on, Ginny, give me some details to work with.”

Ginny laughed and the two fell into a rhythm of packing, and gossiping, and being good friends again.

Chapter 3: Finding Wings

Harry Apparated to the wooded area behind his Godfather's house, startling several birds who flew off, screeching their warnings. The pale light of evening was stretching into the trees, half-lighting them into shadow. It felt like just yesterday that he'd been here, yet years ago at the same time. Had it only been a few weeks ago at Christmas time?

He glanced up at the heavy, snow-spotted canopy of pine boughs above him and shook his head. He should have known it would be raining here too. Harry tugged the hood of his jacket up, hunching his shoulders against the cold drizzle that fell from the sky.

His boots were muddy and his toes frozen by the time he reached the back porch of the small blue house.

"Didn't expect you," Sirius said as he sipped from a bottle of beer. Harry guessed that Sirius had seen him struggling through the muddy slush.

"Yeah," Harry answered lamely as he walked in stocking-clad feet over to the stove, flicking on the burner and holding his cold hands over the open flame until he could feel the tips of them again.

"Coming or going?" Sirius asked as Harry finally sat down next to him. He summoned a dark green bottle from the fridge and it skidded to a halt in front of Harry, who ran his fingers up and down it, rather than opening it.

"Going," Harry shrugged. "Japan."

Sirius nodded thoughtfully. "You haven't been there in awhile."

Harry rolled the bottle around the table a bit and shrugged again. "Last year," he agreed with a yawn. Apparating through two different government offices, and filling out the paperwork required always made him tired.

"You staying here tonight?" Sirius asked.

"If I can," Harry nodded, finally opening the bottle and taking a long drink from the liquid inside.

Sirius laughed, a harsh barking sound. "When have you ever needed an invitation, cub?"

"Never," Harry shared a smile with his godfather. They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes before Harry sighed. "I took Remus' advice," he mumbled out, hating that it took so much to open himself up to someone he should have been so close to. But there were some things that Harry didn't like to share with anyone—not even Sirius.

Sirius hadn't been happy when Harry decided to move to England—in fact he'd been fairly set against the idea, warning Harry against what he thought was living in the past. As the months went by and Harry felt himself seeing more and more of Sirius' point of view—the nights when the loneliness was at its worst, and when he questioned his own judgment for dragging himself half-way across the world on a whim—he wondered if his Godfather had been right.

And how could he admit that he may have made a mistake?

He glanced up to see Sirius studying him closely and flushed under the heavy grey eyes. "And what particular piece of advice was that?" Sirius finally asked.

"Erm... looking for a flatmate," Harry said, trying to keep his voice casual. "You know, someone to share expenses with, someone to be there when I'm not."

A strange triumphant look crossed Sirius' face for a second and Harry wondered if his Godfather simply wanted to be right about Harry being lonely. But Sirius schooled the look and nodded. "Any luck?"

Harry swallowed thickly, wondering how much to admit. "Erm... yeah," he said with a casual shrug. "One person."

Sirius nodded noncommittally and drained the last of his drink. "Well, I hope things work out. I know it's a lot quieter around here when Moony's not here. Sometimes it's enough to drive me 'round the twist. You know... you could always move back here," he suggested, a sly smile on his face.

Harry wasn't sure what to make of that comment. Logically, he knew that Sirius got lonely. He had no family left, not around here anyway, and Moony was his only real friend. During Harry's younger years there were women in and out of the house periodically, but never anyone regularly and Harry rarely met them past an embarrassed 'hello' in the mornings at the breakfast table.

And Sirius hadn't been happy about Harry moving back to England. He'd argued that it was just asking for his name and photo to be in the papers constantly.

"When does he move in?" Sirius asked, standing and noisily scooting his chair across the linoleum floor.

Harry took a deep breath, not wanting to lie, but knowing he couldn't really tell the truth, either. Sirius would never let him live it down if he knew about Ginny...

"While I'm gone, I think," he admitted, trying to keep his voice casual. "Needed to get packed and stuff."

"Good," Sirius said causally as he tidied the kitchen. "Hopefully he's decent at cooking, because, frankly, Cub, you're rubbish at it."

Harry squawked indignantly. "I am not! I do just fine, thank you."

"How many times did you eat out last week?" Sirius quipped, laughing over his shoulder.

"How many times did you?" Harry demanded back with a laugh.

"That's not fair," Sirius protested, pulling his wand and shooting a stinging spell at Harry, who batted it away with a mild shield. He'd drawn his wand out of habit, a purely instinctual movement born of living with two Marauders for most of his life. "We both know I can't cook worth anything."

It's a good thing Moony was around all those years or we would have both lived off of pizza delivery.

Harry laughed, shooting off his own attack. "Twice," he admitted after they traded spells for a few minutes. "I ate out twice."

Sirius' laughed slowed and he shrugged. "That's not so bad then."

"Yeah," Harry nodded, sighing and rubbing the back of his hair. "Besides, Ginny says she can cook a few things. Maybe with hers and mine together we can survive." He yawned again and picked up his beer to finish it off, only realizing what he'd said once it was empty.

Swearing silently, he glanced over to see Sirius staring at him, his arms crossed across his chest and his hip leaning against the counter.

"I'm going to head up," Harry nodded toward the other room where the staircase was. He banished his empty bottle to the recycling bin and turned to go.

"Mind explaining that, Cub?"

Harry froze mid-step and swore violently to himself. "Explain what?" he asked, praying that Sirius would just let the comment slide by.

"Did you just... I could have sworn I heard you say 'she'."

Wincing, Harry shrugged and turned around. "Don't make a big deal of this," he half-pleaded, half-scolded.

A feral grin spread across Sirius' face, white teeth showing. Harry sighed, knowing there was no way he'd let it go.

"You dog," Sirius growled with a grin. "I guess your Godfather actually did rub off on you after all."

"Shut up," Harry growled back, rolling his eyes. Not wanting to have this conversation, he walked out of the room. Unfortunately, Sirius followed him.

"When you said flatmate, I didn't think you actually meant *girlfriend*," he said. Harry sighed in frustration and determinedly made his way to the stairs, intent on taking a long hot shower and stretching out in the bed in his childhood room.

"She's not my girlfriend," Harry said tiredly. "She really is just a flatmate."

"Friends with benefits then," Sirius wagged his eyebrows.

Harry stopped half-way up the stairs and turned, his shoulders sinking just a little. He could feel his face heat, but was determined to defend both his and Ginny's honor. She was definitely attractive, he had to admit, but he hadn't thought about her in that way—not really, anyway. Alright, there was that one time... but he was just lonely.

"Sirius, do you ever think of anything besides sex?"

His godfather looked offended and then scratched the back of his head. "Sure. I think about food."

Harry rolled his eyes but chuckled all the same. "I only just met her. She's sleeping in the extra bedroom. We're sharing a kitchen, and a living room—"

"And a loo," Sirius pointed out. "There's tons you can do in the loo! This one time—"

"Sirius!" Harry roared, placing his hands over his ears and grimacing. "There's really nothing going on. We're friends only—we just met, for heaven's sake."

Sirius looked like he might continue, a wide grin still on his face, but then he backed away, hands held in front of him. "Alright, Cub, don't get all worked up. I was just kidding."

Harry stared at him a minute longer, making sure he wasn't going to continue. He sighed and turned to continue back up to relax.

"Do I need to give you a refresher course on 'the talk', Harry?"

"You just can't let it go, can you?" Harry growled, stomping up the stairs, shaking his head the whole way. He knew better than to believe that Sirius would ever let something like that slide.

* * *

Sirius slowly opened the door, lifting the handle just a bit so the old hinge wouldn't creak loudly and wake Harry. His wand was held ready—just in case. But no alarm sounded, no lights flashed, no poof of smoke... Harry hadn't set a ward.

Strangely pleased that Harry was relaxed enough to not set them, Sirius stood at the doorway, leaning his shoulder against the wood and looking into the room. The low light from the hallway fell across Harry's face, making it possible for Sirius to see all of his features, accented in heavy shadows.

Harry slept soundly tonight, something Sirius knew didn't happen often. There were too many horrors in his past to allow for peaceful rest. Sirius understood that feeling all too well.

"Why did you ever trust me?" he whispered to the silence of the room. Flashes of old faces—faces he'd not seen in more than twenty years came to him and twisted his heart. "James," he whispered in a tortured voice, stepping inside the room and sinking into the chair in the corner.

Sirius knew he had failed as a Godfather. Harry had always been loved, but not protected as he should have been. There were those two years he spent at the Dursley home before Dumbledore's guard had sent up the alarm about possible abuse. Sirius shuddered at the thought.

The night Dumbledore had come to his flat, standing like a gleaming white statue of some Greek god—Zeus or someone like that, Sirius thought—and had asked Sirius to take custody of Harry... That night had changed everything.

Sirius had gone from being a broken down, drunken wreck of a man—to being a father, or at least a father-figure. That was twice that Dumbledore had saved Sirius' life; the first when he'd stopped

Sirius from going after the traitorous rat, Pettigrew.

Sirius was adamant that Harry never call him 'dad' while growing up. It felt, to him, like an insult to James' memory. Yet, he couldn't have loved Harry more if he'd been his actual father.

And he knew Remus felt the same.

Sirius and Remus had talked long and hard about moving back to England for Harry's education. It had been so quiet for so many years.

And they had chosen right. The visit to England had been a disaster. They'd spoken to Harry about the prophecy and made plans for him to enroll in Hogwarts. And then that damned Quirrell had attacked, trying to kill both Harry and Sirius. Poor Harry—just eleven years old and already seeing how evil the world could be. That made the decision straight away for Sirius. Harry would not be at Hogwarts where he and Remus couldn't protect him. He would go to Northwoods, where he'd be home every night.

His education was the best Sirius and Remus could give him—general studies during the day, and private instruction in the evenings and on weekends. It did little to give Harry a social life, but he was prepared to face his destiny—something Harry had understood and been preparing for since they'd talked about the prophecy.

Everything had all come crashing down when Harry was sixteen, though.

The worst day of his life. Sirius could easily say that day beat out Halloween of 1981 for many reasons.

The floo call had come directly from the Headmasters office at Northwoods. Harry had disappeared between classes and hadn't been found anywhere.

Sirius shuddered even now just thinking about how icy his blood had run in that moment. The words were still etched into his mind, engraved upon his brain. 'Mr. Parker is missing.'

Staring into the dark would get nothing accomplished, Sirius knew, and he roughly ran his hand over his face, thinking he'd better get to bed. Harry would be up before dawn to begin his journey again, and Sirius really wanted to be able to say goodbye to his Godson.

As he stood, Harry rolled over in bed, turning away from Sirius, the criss-cross of ragged, white scars looking like a net cast over the tight skin of his back. The visible reminder was too much for Sirius and he ground his teeth together harshly, turning to leave the room.

Sleep simply wouldn't come as Sirius lay in bed, though. The mattress just wasn't comfortable and his mind wouldn't let him leave the past.

He finally drifted off with vague unsettling images of how Harry had actually received those scars drifting through his mind.

The room was dark and Harry could feel the coldness pressing in on him. The cement floor felt like the inside of a freezer and Harry was surprised there wasn't a layer of ice on it. He rubbed his hands along his aching arms and then winced when it pulled the remains of his white uniform shirt across the wounds on his back—well, it had been white at one time.

Focus on something else, he told himself. A week in this horrid place had certainly taught him that concentrating on the injuries only made them hurt more.

Surely someone knew where he was—someone had to be out there looking for him. They would have told someone that he was gone... but Harry just couldn't be sure.

It was his own stupidity that had brought him here and Harry knew he would pay with his life now. He'd been dumb enough to believe the vision, and what the note had said to him, and worse, to chase off after Sirius.

'We have your Godfather, kid,' he repeated to himself over and over.

Harry had fallen for the trap, and now he was in deep trouble. Don't think about it, he reminded himself. Focus on the training and know that somewhere, someone was looking for him.

The sound of the heavy metal door scraping along the cement floor sent chills down his back and he hunched further into the damp, coldness of the wall, curling around himself to protect his body and head.

"Cheer up, boy," the man sneered, "I've come to make sure you've enjoyed our hospitality so far." An evil, cackling laugh bounced off the walls and drove into his ears, making Harry's empty stomach turn.

Harry awoke with a scream as the nightmare changed into something even worse. He thrashed on the bed, trying to free himself from the tangle of sheets and blankets.

The door creaked open, bright light spilling from the hallway. Harry spun, crouching behind the bed, his wand aimed over the top of it.

"You alright, Cub?"

Harry swore and dropped to both of his knees, adrenaline rushing out of him as his heart continued to race.

"Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry said shakily, rolling over to sit on his bottom, the cold hardwood causing him to shiver and reminding him of the cement in his dream—yet it wasn't a dream. He harshly rubbed his face and let his wand clatter away from him, rolling on the floor.

The creak of the bed next to him meant that Sirius had sat on the edge.

"Want to talk about it?" The hesitancy in his voice betrayed him and Harry shook his head. Neither of them wanted to talk about it—ever.

“The battle?” Sirius pressed on and Harry swore.

“I said no,” he growled, pushing himself up from the floor and searching through his bag for a t-shirt to slip over his head. “You don’t want that, and neither do I.” Finding a shirt finally, Harry yanked it over his head. What he wanted more than anything was to crawl back into bed and hunch himself around his knees, pushing the memories further and further away from him. But years of experience in trying just that testified that it wouldn’t happen.

“No, I don’t like thinking about it,” Sirius admitted with a sigh. Harry glanced over and noticed the dark circles under his eyes, and the deepening wrinkles that showed now more than ever before. “But I will, if it will help you.”

“It never helps,” Harry sighed, sinking down onto the bed next to his Godfather. The scars on his back prickled as the scene flashed in front of him again and Harry absently reached back to scratch at them.

“Mine was about when you were taken,” Sirius said quietly, his scratchy voice cutting through the silence of the room. “How frantic I was, trying to find you... how it was my fault.”

Harry swore softly again and shifted in his spot. “It was mine—”

“No,” Sirius denied. “I was too arrogant. Things had been too good for too long. I just didn’t think it would touch us here.”

This was such an uncomfortable subject for them both and Harry fought himself against changing the subject—or telling Sirius to forget it altogether. It was old news. “You can’t have known,” he finally gave in. “I don’t... I don’t blame you, Sirius.”

“I know,” his Godfather answered. “I carry enough of my own blame, believe me.”

The two turned their heads at the same time, eyes meeting and understanding passing between them.

“It’s almost five,” Harry observed after glancing at his watch.

“Fifteen minutes?” Sirius asked.

Harry’s spirits immediately lifted. The old routine of spending a few hours in heavy training sounded like just what he needed to banish the old memories and replace them with the burn of well-used muscles.

“Ten,” Harry confirmed with a nod.

A slow smile stretched across Sirius’ face and he stood. “Harry, you know you can always come here.”

The randomness of the comment shook Harry for a minute. He’d been thinking about how satisfying a real, bruising workout could be. But the extreme sentiment behind the words struck him deeply.

“I know,” he said softly, searching Sirius’ grey eyes until he was sure his Godfather understood that

he did know.

* * *

Ginny fidgeted at the door to her father's shed. It was cracked open and she could hear him whistling inside—always a good sign—so she took a deep breath and nudged it open with her shoulder.

“Morning, Dad,” she greeted, even though it was almost noon.

Her father turned away from where he was hunched over his work bench and Ginny had to giggle. He was wearing some kind of contraption on his head that consisted of a light and... some sort of glasses that magnified his eyes to be at least three times larger than they normally were.

“You like them?” he grinned, waggling his eyebrows, which made Ginny clutch the door from laughing harder. “It’s amazing what these Muggles come up with. George found these for me somewhere and brought them by last week.”

“They’re lovely,” Ginny complimented, biting the inside of her lip to keep her laughter inside. “You could just use a magnification spell, you know.”

He turned back to what he was fiddling with on the bench. “Where would be the fun in that? Besides, your mother doesn’t like all these Muggle things lying about, so she hardly ever comes in here.”

A light went on in Ginny’s head and she moved closer to him until their shoulders rested side by side. “Is that why you have this shed?” she asked softly. “To get away from Mum?”

Arthur clicked off the light and sighed as he slipped the strange hat off of his head with a sigh. “Don’t get me wrong, Ginny, I love your mother more than anything. But now that I’m home more...” He trailed off and his eyes glanced over to the door. Ginny nodded, thinking that she might understand.

“She’s like a mother hen,” he sighed. “Always pecking around everywhere, making sure things are just how she wants them.”

Ginny grinned at the picture and nodded. That’s exactly how she saw her mother as well.

Her father turned to her, a more stern look on his face. “That doesn’t mean, young lady, that you can avoid her like you’ve been doing for the past week.”

Ginny felt her cheeks flush and a desire to yell back at her father swirled in her belly. But she could never really yell at him. And he was right. She just didn’t want to admit it.

“I know,” she finally conceded, sinking down into a worn chair that wobbled precariously on what remained of its four original legs. “She just gets me so angry.”

Her father sighed and set down his project—a jumbled mess of wires that made absolutely no sense to Ginny—to turn in his seat.

"You two are more alike than either of you will ever admit." He laughed when he saw how scrunched up Ginny's face had become. "That was a compliment, believe it or not."

Ginny sighed heavily, feeling more and more tired as the day went on. She hadn't had a full night's sleep for almost a week now—ever since she and Ron had argued.

"You're not angry with me?" she asked. The entire speech she'd worked on for hours in her bedroom about how she needed the chance to spread her wings and see if she could fly on her own, how she wasn't leaving their lives, just moving on with her own, flew right out the window with that question—the question that made her sound like she was ten again and asking for her father's forgiveness for stealing her brothers' brooms.

"I'm not mad, Ginny," he said. She looked at him and could tell he was telling the truth. He rarely lied to his family, and if he did in the past, it had always been justified in some enormous way.

"Disappointed?" she ventured, turning away. Her foot involuntarily kicked out and nudged a ragged box full of useless light switches—a gift from Ron and Hermione when they'd remodeled Ron's flat a few months ago.

"Sad, actually," he admitted, giving her a lopsided smile. She hated that smile. It was the one he'd used when he'd snuck back into the hospital wing at Hogwarts in her fourth year. "I know you're not really leaving us," he sighed, nudging the same box with his own foot. "But you are growing up. And you leaving the house like this is just making us both realize that we're done raising our children."

Ginny felt a knife twist in her heart. This was why she'd avoided talking to anyone more than a few words this week. She knew they'd turn on the guilt and she'd be forced to feel every inch of it pressing down on her. She hated feeling this way.

"I do agree that it's time, though," he said softly, glance up at her. Ginny opened her mouth to respond, but closed it when the words didn't come out. This wasn't what she'd expected at all.

"You... you really mean that?"

He sighed and rubbed his hand over his head, inadvertently smearing black grease over the mostly bald surface. Ginny looked back down at her shoes and bit her lip.

"I don't approve of *how* you're doing it, Ginny, even if I understand the desire to be on your own."

Her heart fell back to the bottom of her stomach and she nodded. "The Muggle thing?"

Surprisingly, he chuckled. "You know that doesn't bother me."

"The male thing," she nodded.

His shoulders rose and fell several times as emotions played across his face. "I just don't want you to make a mistake that you can't recover from, Ginny-girl."

Defensiveness roared to life inside her, but Ginny tamped it down. Of all of her family, her father had been the one who had treated her like she could pick her life back up after the Diary incident.

The others seemed to think she was irrevocably damaged.

"This isn't a mistake," she defended softly. "And I'm not fourteen anymore."

"I know," he said, reaching out to brush his hand down the back of her head. She didn't even flinch, knowing his hands were grease-covered. She could just charm it out. The comfort he was conveying in the touch was what she needed.

"And even if it were," she continued. "It's my mistake to make, isn't it?"

He sighed, a tortured look on his face. "It should be."

A picture of her brothers all standing in front of her, faces angry and harsh, as they had been when she'd announced her intentions, floated to the front of her mind.

"It's hard to watch you get hurt, Ginny. We all love you, so much that we only want to see good things happen to you."

She nodded, blinking back the tears that had welled up, unbidden. "But sometimes you can't know the good if you haven't seen the bad," she said softly. They sat in silence for a few minutes, each pondering that statement.

"Your brothers..." her father finally spoke, "they don't see you like you want them to."

"They see me as fourteen still," she nodded.

"Or younger," he agreed.

"But how can I fix that if I don't take chances... if I don't grow myself?"

He seemed startled by her question and closed his mouth, swallowing his reply. "That's a very good question, Ginny."

"Percy still won't talk to me." Her admission startled even her. The depth of emotion that came with it almost overwhelmed her. Ginny hadn't allowed herself to think about Percy much over the years. Logically, she knew he treated her very different. He was less protective and more wary of her—as he had every right to be. She'd all but killed the girl he'd been in love with.

She shook her head, pushing those thoughts back to their place—under lock and key at the back of her mind.

"Percy has always been different."

Her father's hesitant words made her want to laugh. "Is that what you call it?"

"Ginny, he doesn't blame you... But, he can't help how much his heart hurts."

She nodded jerkily, understanding what he was telling her. "I know. And no one knows how much my heart hurts."

He reached out hesitatingly. Ginny wasn't much for physical affection from her family. She much preferred a good slug to the shoulder over a hug from her brothers any day... But this felt right—wrapping her arms around her father.

"You go out there and fly, my little bird," he whispered, his voice breaking in the middle.

Ginny's tears returned at his words. They were the same words he'd used when he had caught her flying around the orchard in the middle of the night on Charlie's broom.

"I'll try," she replied back, mirroring her own six-year old response from so long ago.

* * *

Ginny surveyed the empty room one last time before giving a final nod. There were only a few boxes left, pushed against one wall in the place where her bed had once sat; those boxes were staying, or being binned—Ginny didn't really care either way.

The faded pink floral wallpaper brought back mixed memories when Ginny looked at it now. She remembered helping her mother charm it onto the walls—well, she wasn't allowed to hold the wand, just the paper—when she had been seven. And here it was, thirteen years later, torn in some places, faded and dirty in others, but a testament to the fact that a girl had lived here.

Armstrong was already gone, told to find her in London later today. He too seemed relieved to get out of the Burrow. He must have been sensitive to the tension around the past week as he'd escaped to go hunting more times than usual.

"Got everything?" Hermione asked from behind her, peeking over Ginny's shoulder and into the bare room.

"I think so." Ginny shrugged and spun on her heel, anxious to get started on her newest adventure. Her mother had been up at the crack of dawn, banging pots and pans around the kitchen. Ginny could hear the voices of several of her brothers in the kitchen as well. She hunched her shoulders as she walked down the stairs, preparing herself for an all-out battle.

Fred and George sat at the table, shoveling food into their mouths as fast as they could. Her mother was dishing up two more plates of fried eggs and toast, and there was one empty plate at the table.

All movement in the room stopped when Ginny and Hermione entered. The awkwardness began to spread before Hermione pushed past Ginny gently and accepted a plate from her future Mother-in-Law.

"Thank you, this looks delicious. I didn't have time to eat today before I left to pick up Ron." Her face turned a delicate shade of pink and Ginny smirked inwardly, guessing that Hermione had probably stayed at Ron's last night. Ginny knew it happened more than they let on to her parents.

Ginny quietly accepted the other plate with a polite 'thank you' to her mother.

"You're really sure you want to do this?" Fred asked, peering at Ginny closely.

She glared at him over her bite of toast and eggs, and then ignored the question as she chewed slowly.

“Leave your sister alone, boys,” her mother scolded softly from where she was tending the hob.

Ginny nearly dropped her fork upon hearing her mother defend her. She glanced over to see Hermione smiling serenely into her morning tea. Maybe her father had been able to break through the Molly Weasley tough exterior. And maybe Ginny would never know why her mother was not arguing with her until the final second.

“Can we go already?” Ron demanded, sticking his head in the door. “Traffic in London is bound to be horrid. It’s going to take us three hours as it is.”

Ginny whipped around in her seat, an acidic reply on her lips, but Hermione cut her off.

“Ronald, remember why you wanted to come?”

Her brother’s ears darkened and he rubbed the back of his neck, looking down at his shoes. “Don’t see why we can’t just Apparate there,” he mumbled.

Ginny pushed the remainder of her food away. “That would be lovely, wouldn’t it? How about we just pop right in, give poor Harry a heart seizure, shall we?”

Fred and George snickered, but silenced at Ginny’s look. “You don’t have to come, Ron, honestly,” she sighed, reaching up to take her coat off the peg behind the door. “I didn’t ask for your help.”

Ron glanced at her, his cheeks darkening in color. “You didn’t have to,” he mumbled. “Ginny... I...” He trailed off and Ginny stood still, waiting for the words he should have spoken days ago. “You know I’m not good at this kind of thing,” he grimaced. She watched him shoot a look back over to Hermione, but didn’t take her eyes off of him.

“I’m sorry, alright,” he said abruptly. “What I said... I’m sorry.”

Ginny glared at him, knowing that was probably the best apology she was going to get out of him. Pulling back her fist, she wrapped her fingers tight and punched him hard in the shoulder before she turned, a satisfied smile spreading across her face. Ron, behind her, winced, clutching his bicep.

“I’m ready,” she proclaimed. Hermione hid a smile behind her teacup while Fred and George cheered. Her mother just shook her head disapprovingly.

When the twins stood up, Ginny scowled at them. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“We’re coming with,” Fred shrugged.

“Indeed,” George said. “We need to check out this Harry fellow, make sure he’s not up to no good.”

Ginny rolled her eyes and pressed her fingers to her temples. The headache that had been threatening for hours finally started to throb.

“Unfortunately,” she drawled, “Harry is away on business this week.”

“Convenient,” Fred growled.

“Lucky him,” Ginny quipped back. “I really don’t think we need your help... Hermione and I—”

“And Ron,” Hermione added with an unhelpful smile.

“And Ron,” Ginny conceded with an annoyed nod, “can manage just fine.”

“And miss Ronniekins first time driving?” George asked, an evil grin on his face. Ginny spun on her heel, eyes wide at Ron, who was still rubbing his arm.

“I think not,” Fred added, coming up to drape his arm over Ginny’s shoulders.

“*You’re* driving?” she demanded.

“I have my license,” Ron defended. “And it’s not my first time driving.” All three brothers trooped out the door while Ginny continued to stare at where Ron had been standing.

“He really isn’t bad,” Hermione said consolingly as she slid her arms into her own coat.

“Why are they doing this?” Ginny asked softly, mostly to herself, but Hermione must have heard.

“Because your mother asked them to,” Hermione said softly, nodding to where Ginny’s mother was using her wand to direct the dishes to wash themselves.

“She asked them—”

“Not to check on Harry,” Hermione defended quietly, “but to help *you*.”

Ginny’s throat closed at the thought. She nodded jerkily as Hermione gave her arm a squeeze. Ginny watched her leave out the door and an awkward silence settled between the last two people in the room.

“I may not approve, Ginny,” her mother said in a shaky voice, “but that doesn’t mean I don’t love you.”

“I know, Mum,” Ginny said softly. She struggled to force her feet across the room. Her mother sniffled when Ginny’s arms closed around her shoulders from behind.

“You’re not losing me,” Ginny whispered into her shoulder.

“I know,” her mother patted her arm. “There’s a hamper of food next to the door.”

Ginny couldn’t help the chuckle that rose through her tears. Leave it to Molly Weasley.

“Thank you, Mum.”

“Just don’t forget who you are, Ginny.”

“I won’t, I promise,” Ginny said softly as she willed herself to let go. The food hamper was heavy

enough that Ginny chose to levitate it out the door rather than carry it.

The door closed behind her and she looked back, feeling both exhilarated and sad.

* * *

Harry lay on the uncomfortable mattress in the hotel, turning this way and that to find the best spot to afford his sore body the most comfort. It was a nice hotel, really; one of the finest that the Japanese Ministry had ever placed him in while working with their Aurors.

Harry would have been fine staying at the Auror Headquarters like the recruits he was training, but they had already paid for the hotel.

Training today had gone well. Since his last visit, their Aurors were implementing his training regimens well. Harry had been impressed at how much work had been done. But there was still plenty to do. Their hand to hand combat skills were some of the finest he had ever witnessed, but they still struggled to combine using magic and martial arts together.

He'd actually had fun this afternoon, laughing with the instructors and helping to correct the thirty or so Aurors who were taking his training class. It amazed him how relaxed he actually was on this assignment. His job wasn't something he normally enjoyed, it just... was.

Harry rolled to his front, scrunching a pillow under his arms and propping himself up onto it, remembering how the day had ended.

He was used to being invited to have a drink after training classes. It happened often, but Harry rarely accepted. It just didn't seem... right to mingle pleasure with business. He always worried about his professional reputation as well. Harry Potter drew crowds and press at the worst of times, he'd discovered.

But this time Harry had answered yes before he could even weigh the consequences. Surely he could go out with a few guys and have a few drinks without causing problems.

The plan was going well, he thought, as the waitress seated them at a large round table in the back corner of the bar. Brett Myers, the tough American former Marine who helped run the Japanese Auror Corps, ordered a bottle of the finest whisky.

The six men were all laughing and having a wonderful time, trading stories of combat and life as a soldier.

Harry sat back in his chair, feeling the buzz from the alcohol settle into his blood a bit, but enjoying the atmosphere immensely. All of the men knew who he was, but it didn't seem to matter to them. Tonight he was just another soldier, like them.

He'd just accepted his third shot when the flash of a camera lit up the corner they were all sitting in. Harry's pulse raced and his throat tightened. He loosened the grip he had on his wand when Myers stood, placing his large bulk in-between Harry and the reporter. Two more flashes went off before Myers was able to eject the man. But the damage had been done.

"I'd better go," he said quietly, downing the liquid in front of him quickly and wincing as it burned his stomach. The others protested, but Harry sadly shook his head. "There will be ten others just like him here in five minutes. It's best..."

"Uwahh," Harry grunted as he flipped himself over on the bed, propping the pillow behind his head this time and reaching for the remote. But the only thing on the television was a game-show that seemed to have completely no point other than to humiliate the contestants as quickly as possible and an old American movie with horrid sound-dubbing over the top. He flicked it off again quickly, crossing his bare feet at the end of the bed and staring up at the dull pastel paintings on the walls.

Briefly, he wondered if Ginny had moved into the flat yet. He mentally counted backward, thinking that she had said today would probably be the day she was coming. A flash of an idea formed and he glanced at the clock—only eight hours difference. If it was one in the morning here... it would be five o'clock or so back in London.

Harry's hand hovered over the telephone before sighing and picking it up.

"London, please," he told the operator, and then gave her the number.

The phone rang several times before his own voice picked up. The machine, he nodded, scratching his head. Well, he'd just...

He was about to hang up when the machine beeped in his ear, leaving him listening to silence.

"Ginny. Hi. Erm, it's me... Harry. I just wanted to say... well," he winced at his own stammering and cleared his throat. "I hope you've moved in alright and that everything went well. Erm, help yourself to anything you find." He trailed off, trying to remember why this had been such a good idea a few minutes ago. "Well, if you're not there, then I'm going to be very embarrassed when I get home. And I've probably frightened you off completely with this message, and you'll move back out when you hear it." He laughed awkwardly, and rolled his eyes.

"Anyway," he continued. "I'll see you in a few days, I guess. Or, well, not, as the case may be. Bye."

Hanging up the phone, Harry rolled over in bed and firmly pulled the pillow down over his face, growling into it. Why did he always make such an idiot out of himself?

* * *

Ginny handed another box to George and grabbed one more out from Hermione's car before shutting the door and following the parade of brothers up the stairs to her new flat. She'd have preferred to use magic to move, but they were in the middle of Muggle London and she was moving into a Muggle flat with a Muggle flatmate. Using magic was probably not the best idea.

"So much for checking this bloke out," Ron muttered to himself as he eyed the flat and the fairly expensive furnishings. The twins were already studying the entertainment unit standing next to the large telly.

"He's fine, Ron," Ginny huffed as she hefted her box higher and nudged the one George had

abandoned along with her foot. "I told you that already."

"Yeah, but how do we know, dear sister," Fred asked as he glanced up and over the chocolate brown leather sofa.

"He might be after only one thing," George admitted while wiggling his eyebrows.

"I can take care of myself," Ginny called out from the hallway. Hermione, who was passing her, bent to retrieve the box Ginny had pushed in with her foot.

"Honestly," she mumbled, "you'd think they didn't know you were twenty."

Ginny shrugged and set the box down onto the small desk she'd found at a second hand store. Her furnishings, including her twin bed from the Burrow, looked rather out of place in the posh flat, but Ginny pushed that thought to the back of her head.

"Is that everything?" Hermione asked.

"I think so. We'll have to check the boot again to make sure, but I think we got everything."

"It seems that you and your parents have found a sort of peace over this move."

Ginny grimaced and sat on the edge of the bed. "Well, it hasn't been pretty. Mum's been ignoring me for a week. We walk on eggshells around each other. I really didn't have the energy to start another argument. But Dad's been good; he said he thought it was a good idea."

"Really?" Hermione spun from where she was emptying books onto a shelf.

"Well," Ginny sighed, "yeah, he's naturally not thrilled about Harry."

Hermione groaned in commiseration and brushed her hands together as she straightened the last load of books.

"That bit went over particularly well," Ginny said dryly. "I heard Mum start crying about me being a scarlet woman and flaunting myself all over England later that night when they'd gone to bed. She forgets how thin the walls are at the Burrow."

Hermione gasped. "She didn't!"

Ginny nodded. "She did. And Dad gets this look on his face... the one where his lips disappear."

"Oh, Ron hates that one," Hermione nodded as she joined Ginny in hanging up clothing in the wardrobe.

"Yeah," Ginny continued and then smiled a bit evilly. "So I just brought up the fact that you and Ron practically live together."

"Ginny!"

"What?" she asked innocently. "It's not as if it's a secret, no one ever brings it up is all. And you

know Mum would never call *you/i* a scarlet woman.”

“It’s completely different though,” Hermione protested as she gathered more clothing and placed it beside the last batch. Ginny had to smile to herself as Hermione color ordered the long dresses, jumpers and other blouses.

“That’s what Mum said. She said you two were engaged and that they really couldn’t protest as you were almost part of the family. And besides, you aren’t her daughter.”

“Boys will be boys?” Hermione asked with a knowing look.

“Something like that,” Ginny nodded as she tossed a load of underwear and socks haphazardly into a drawer. “So I countered with the fact that sharing a flat with Harry is completely a business relationship as it were. He’s hardly ever here anyway,” she offered.

“And they agreed?” Hermione asked as she closed the wardrobe door and leaned back against it.

“Not really,” Ginny shrugged. “I think they would have liked to meet him first, but his schedule is a bear to work around. I think it was more the fact that they knew I’d already made up my mind and was going to move no matter what.”

“So they just accepted it.”

“Sort of,” Ginny admitted and glanced around with a satisfied smile.

“It looks nice,” Hermione pronounced. “The whole flat is rather nice, isn’t it?”

Ginny nodded as the two women left the room. She pointed to a closed door down the hall. “That’s Harry’s room there. And this one,” she nodded to the open door they were passing, “is the extra room where Harry keeps his workout things.”

They glanced inside to see a room full of exercise equipment. Along one wall was a treadmill, a weight bench and various other items.

“Looks like someone has a bit of an obsession,” Hermione observed.

“There are worse things,” Ginny absently noted. “The loo’s just at the end of the hall and there are the laundry facilities in there too.” They entered the living room again where her brothers had settled haphazardly on the furniture and were using the remote control to change the channels on the telly. Ginny was half surprised that they even knew how to use it, but then again, Ron had been to Hermione’s parents regularly. Maybe Hermione’s father had given him lessons. The thought made Ginny smile a bit.

Hermione and Ginny exchanged a glance and rolled their eyes.

“What does this bloke do again?” Ron asked. “He must be rolling in the money.”

Ginny crossed the room quickly and pushed Ron’s feet off of the sofa, brushing at it and glaring at him.

"He works for the government," she answered. "I'm not exactly sure what he does, something about security, but he travels a fair bit, I know."

"Not much in the way of personal effects," George noted as he glanced around.

Ginny shrugged. "We both agreed that we'd keep all our personal things in our rooms." She glared at Ron who had straightened up and, from the look he wore, seemed to be contemplating searching Harry's room.

"Well," Fred proclaimed with a loud belch, "he's a bit of alright with us, Gin-Gin."

"Yeah," George chimed in as he lifted a dark green bottle, "any bloke that stocks his fridge with this is fine by us."

Ginny snorted. "You two have certainly changed your tune. And you owe me for that, prat," Ginny growled as she grabbed Ron's bottle and glanced at it. The label didn't mean much to her except that she knew it was a rather expensive type of beer.

"Sure," Fred grunted and drained the rest of his bottle. "Why get all worked up over someone who's not even around to see our performance?"

"Yeah, we'll come back when our treats can have maximum impact. You think he's got any crisps in there?" George asked with a raised eyebrow toward the kitchen.

"Out!" Ginny bellowed, although her look of amusement softened the harshness.

"Come on," Hermione intervened and pulled at Ron's arm. "Let's go get a pizza, my treat."

"Oh, you and Fred will love that, George," Ron assured his brothers.

"I think I'll stay here, actually," Ginny offered, helping Hermione push her brothers out the door. "I've got a few more things to do to get settled. Plus I have an early shift at the store tomorrow."

Hermione turned back around once Ron, Fred and George were clomping noisily down the stairs. "Are you sure, Ginny?"

"Yeah," she nodded, shivering in the blast of cold air that blew through the door. She stuffed her hands into the pockets on her jeans and smiled. "Thanks for your help today. I really appreciate everything you did."

Hermione leaned forward and gave her a quick hug. "You know my number. Call if you need anything."

"I will," Ginny assured her, shivering again as snowflakes began to drift down from the sky.

The flat was completely quiet when Ginny closed the door and she gave into the urge to dance on the spot, squealing like a little girl. She'd done it! She'd actually moved out on her own.

The giddy feeling accompanied her for the next few hours as she unloaded the food hamper into Harry's bare fridge and cupboards. She was slightly amused to see that he did, in fact, have a rather

large selection of crisps in the cupboards.

Once the kitchen was righted, she brought a small bag to the loo and placed a few of her items in the room—shampoo in the shower, toothbrush in the small cubby hidden behind the mirror.

Several times she found herself humming as she flitted about, doing small things—straightening a stack of books, watering the two plants that sat in the kitchen window. Harry was a surprisingly neat housekeeper, although perhaps he'd straightened up before he left, knowing she would be coming. Time would only tell if it was a habit or not. Ginny really didn't care either way; growing up with six slobby older brothers meant that Ginny was accustomed to stepping over wet piles of towels in the bathroom and around dirty socks left on the stairs.

Quickly running out of things to do, Ginny eyed the entertainment equipment warily. She was sure she could figure some way to turn it all on and find something interesting to watch—there were so many buttons to press! But she was a little nervous to get near it. What if she messed something up. She wondered if Harry's easy going nature would change if he had to reprogram the entire unit because she spun the dial wrong on something.

The phone ringing startled her and she glanced over at the counter where the sound was coming from. She pondered picking it up, but wasn't sure—what if it was something private for Harry? Besides, she decided, he had one of those machines that answered it anyway.

It startled her when Harry's voice called out from it. A slow smile spread over her face and she fought the urge to giggle at his message.

"Ginny. Hi. Erm, it's me... Harry. I just wanted to say... well," He trailed off and Ginny laughed out loud. He probably had no idea why he'd called in the first place.

"I hope you've moved in alright and that everything went well. Erm, help yourself to anything you find." Ginny grumbled at the reminder that her brothers had raided Harry's fridge. She'd be sure to replace it before he came home.

"Well, if you're not there, then I'm going to be very embarrassed when I get home. And I've probably frightened you off completely with this message, and you'll move back out when you hear it." He laughed awkwardly and so did Ginny. He sounded so... uncomfortable, yet in a funny and adorable way that she just couldn't help but be amused by it. Honestly, thinking that a silly phone message would be enough to send her packing.

"Anyway," he continued. "I'll see you in a few days, I guess. Or, well, not, as the case may be. Bye."

The red light on the machine blinked when Harry rang off and Ginny stared at it, tempted to push the play button so that she could laugh again.

She may just have to play up this little message when Harry got home. This could be a lot of fun, she decided with a wicked little smile.

Chapter 4: Merlin Knows

Harry stopped at the top of the stairs, struggling to get his keys out of his pocket while juggling his suitcase and trying to manage not to slide back down the icy stairs. It was a bother, not Apparating back into his flat, and having to carry around full-sized luggage when he got home. But pretenses must be kept. He had no doubt that Ginny would flee if he tried anything as stupid as showing up in the middle of the kitchen out of thin air. That is if she'd stayed past his horrid message on the answering machine.

It was past midnight and he was trying to be quiet, cursing softly as the key jammed in the lock and he had to jiggle it. His suitcase dropped on the doorstep, thudding loudly. Harry cursed again.

Once he had the door open, he breathed a small sigh of relief and dragged his luggage in with him. The flat was silent and dark and he contemplated, just for a moment, lighting his wand, but decided against that. If he had managed to wake Ginny, what would she think if she came out and saw him standing there, his wand in hand.

He blanched at the double meaning of that phrase. Honestly, he rolled his eyes. '... standing there, his wand in hand...' Why did his mind have to be so dirty all the time?

Another thing he'd have to watch around Ginny. Harry was sure *that* kind of humor wouldn't go over well.

He sighed when he noticed how still the flat was. Perhaps he hadn't woken her at all.

"Do you always make such a grand entrance?"

Harry grabbed his heart and only managed to just stop himself from pulling his wand on her. "You scared me," he managed.

Ginny was sitting, curled up in the far corner of the sofa—he hadn't even seen her there when he came in.

"Sorry," she said softly. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

Harry straightened and tugged his suitcase up next to the sofa. "Did I wake you?" he asked, peering into the darkness at her. He couldn't make out her face with the window behind her, letting in soft, low light from outside. She turned away from him and he could see her face in profile before she shook her head slowly.

"No, you didn't wake me."

Harry felt torn... did he stay and ask what was bothering her, because it was obvious *something* was, or did he go and let her have her privacy? He knew that he would prefer to be left alone, especially if someone he really didn't know started digging into his private business. Then again, he usually felt better when Sirius dragged something out of him.

"Is everything okay?" he managed, sinking down to sit as far from her as he could. She rubbed at

her face harshly and Harry winced. “Just tell me to shut up if—”

“It’s fine,” she said softly. “Silly even... I just... I had a nightmare.” She laughed wryly at herself and Harry smiled into the darkness. He was certainly no stranger to nightmares.

“Bad one?” he asked, adding a small chuckle onto the end to try and soothe her.

“A bit,” she shrugged.

Harry nodded, sitting further back into the sofa. The softness of the cushion felt good after Apparating half way across the globe, filling out paperwork at each checkpoint and waiting in endless lines.

“You look exhausted,” Ginny said with a small laugh of her own.

“Yeah,” Harry nodded, “travel takes it out of me.”

“I can imagine.”

“I’m surprised to find you here, actually,” Harry laughed, smiling at the thought of his message. Maybe if he got her laughing, even if it was at him, then she’d forget about her bad dream. “You either didn’t get my extremely lame phone message, or—”

Ginny laughed, shaking her head. “No, I got it. The evening I moved in.”

“Oh,” Harry nodded, nervously ruffling his hair.

She sighed. “I actually had this great comeback planned. But now I’ve gone and blown it all by sitting and crying in the dark.”

Harry sat up jerkily. She’d been... crying.

She must have seen the concern on his face, or interpreted his movement correctly, because she waived her hand impatiently. “I wrote this whole note to you, about how I just couldn’t live with such a nutter, and how I thought you should be committed and all.”

Not able to stop himself, Harry laughed. He was very impressed. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. He could tell she was smiling into the dark and he congratulated himself on keeping her demons at bay, at least for a few minutes.

“Where is it? I want to read it,” he demanded, rising from his spot. Ginny lunged forward and grabbed onto his arm.

“It’s really stupid,” she protested. “I just thought... if you found it there, sitting on the counter when you got home... and I was away at work or something... I thought it might be funny,” she finished.

“It would have been great,” Harry agreed. “Come on, you have to let me read it.”

"No," she giggled, finally letting go of his arm, but staying on her knees as she watched him search the counter for the note. "Besides, the joke is ruined now... I should have just stayed quiet."

Harry finally found the piece of paper with her neat handwriting. Reading it over, he had to laugh. "If I'd found this first," he grinned, "I would have agreed with you. Maybe I *would* have committed myself."

He reread the words again, chuckling at her sense of humor. She was hilarious and living with her was looking more and more like Harry would rarely spend a day without laughing.

"Harry?"

Her serious tone startled him and he put the letter down, watching as she stood in the darkness of the room, staring at him. "Yeah?"

"Thanks." Her soft word communicated more than she maybe meant to, but he understood.

"No problem," he mumbled as she passed him, going into her bedroom and closing the door behind her.

* * *

Harry grinned as he noticed the way his new flatmate trudged to the loo. This seemed to be a bit of a habit for her. While Harry was an early riser and faced the day gladly, Ginny liked to sleep in and woke up very slowly. It wasn't until after her shower that she showed a bit of life.

The past week had been fun with her around. Harry had been prepared for awkwardness, living with someone he didn't know well, but life settled into a basic routine between the two of them and he could honestly say he was on his way to making a great friend.

Ginny was very amusing and kept him smiling a lot of the time. She seemed to hit her stride in early afternoon and was almost hyper throughout the evening until she would literally crash at night. There had been a few times Harry had been forced to shake her shoulder to wake her. He'd started just laying a blanket over her on the sofa instead of trying to get her up.

There were a few things about her that made him scratch his head. She mumbled to herself a lot and often blushed if Harry was in hearing distance. So far he'd only caught a few words here or there but none of them made much sense. She was a fairly messy cooker, leaving dishes everywhere and sauces slopped on things, but Harry certainly couldn't fault her cleaning. The kitchen was always sparkling afterward.

So far, he'd not seen or heard anything about her bird, although that was what she'd promised. She was entitled to her own privacy and secrets. He just hoped that his own secrets stayed hidden.

Every morning, without fail, she would get up and stumble to the loo, then put a pot of water on to boil for her morning tea. Today, Harry thought he might just save her a step. If the water was ready when she got out of the shower... she wouldn't have to wait for it. He smiled, thinking it would be nice to do something for her.

“Morning,” he called out as Ginny exited the bathroom and brushed out her long red hair behind her.

“Good morning,” she returned and Harry was glad to see that her sour mood must have washed away in the water.

“Tea’s ready,” Harry motioned to the pot of boiling water on the stove as he sipped his cup of coffee.

She looked surprised, and then thoughtful. “Thank you, Harry.”

Harry felt his face heat as she smiled at him. Thankfully it didn’t seem that she was going to make a big deal out of it. And that suited him just fine.

She prepared the cup of tea exactly how she liked it, with lemon and honey, and settled in the chair across from him, eyeing the newspaper he was reading.

“Anything good?” she asked.

“Nope,” Harry smiled. “Absolute rubbish.”

Ginny grinned. “Rubbish?”

Harry quirked an eyebrow. “Yes, absolutely.”

“Do you know how funny it is to hear you call something ‘absolute rubbish’ in that horrible American accent?”

Harry pretended to be offended. “Horrible accent? At least I can be understood. You and your dropped H’s and missing consonants.”

Ginny laughed. They’d had this conversation before and he knew she enjoyed the banter as much as he did.

“Just wondering where you ever heard the word rubbish.”

Harry grinned and picked up his newspaper again. “My Godfather is British,” he explained. “And as much as he tried to absorb the American culture, several things slipped through. We still drank tea, even though I don’t much care for the weak, watery coffee substitute.” He ignored Ginny’s snorted protest. “We had a loo, several wardrobes, and ran by a ‘shhedule’.” His English pronunciation made Ginny laugh.

“Sounds like a horribly confusing childhood.”

“Indeed,” Harry confirmed with a smile and a nod. He folded the paper away and offered it to Ginny, who declined, as she did every morning. “So, what’s on the menu today, Miss Weasley?”

“Toast,” Ginny answered, holding up the bread she’d just pulled out of the toaster.

“That’s not what I meant,” Harry protested with a smirk.

"I know perfectly well what you meant, you prat," Ginny growled with a smile. She also seemed to enjoy calling him names, possibly thinking that he didn't know what they meant. He'd stopped himself several times in telling her that Sirius could out-curse anyone Harry had ever met.

"Actually, I've got to work for a few hours today," she sighed, leaning her hip against the kitchen counter and taking a bite of the toast that was now slathered in marmalade. "There's a new book release tomorrow and the shipment was late getting to us. I think the author is even coming to sign copies."

"Hmm," Harry sighed as he drained his coffee cup. "Anything for tonight?"

Ginny shook her head. "I planned on a quiet night, Merlin knows I'll need it after unloading books all day."

"What did you just say?" Harry sat up sharply.

"What?" Ginny's head snapped up and he could see she was trying to figure out what he meant.

"*Merlin knows?*" Harry repeated. "Where did you hear that?"

"Erm, I'm not sure where I heard it," she said, shaking her head. "I think one of my brothers used to say it."

Harry studied her for a minute before shrugging it off. Both Sirius and Remus used the phrase. He'd only ever heard it in the presence of witches and wizards. Although, maybe it was a British thing, he thought to himself.

He watched as Ginny busied herself picking up the remains of breakfast. She didn't seem ruffled by his question, so he let it go. Perhaps it was just something that her brothers *had* said and she'd picked up over the years.

"I was thinking about renting a video tonight," Harry suggested as he drained the rest of his coffee. "Interested?" He trailed off, cursing himself when she didn't answer. Of course she doesn't want to spend every minute with you, he told himself, she's only known you for a week.

"Maybe," Ginny smiled. "As long as it's not one of those horrible action films where everyone carries a gun and that big-chested woman runs about."

Harry laughed, relieved that she'd not thought too much of his invitation, after all it was only a movie. "Deal. In fact, why don't we go get one together after you get home. That way you can't blame me if you don't like it. Besides," he protested, "you watched the whole thing last time."

Ginny sniffed disdainfully. "Had to didn't I? Nothing better to do..." Harry laughed as she raised an eyebrow his direction.

She stayed in the kitchen as he moved to his workout room and began stretching. Since Ginny had moved in, Harry's midnight strolls had dropped out entirely. It was easier to go to sleep when he could hear the television playing low in the other room, or could hear Ginny humming some song in her bedroom.

Maybe it was simply having someone else there, he guessed. He stepped on the treadmill and punched the buttons to get up to a comfortable running speed.

Spending time with Ginny was so different than what Harry expected. Although, to be honest, he hadn't thought that she'd be around as much as she was. When he'd pictured living with someone else, he'd seen them passing in the hall, exchanging hellos and goodbyes as they came and went for work.

But he and Ginny had lapsed into a fairly comfortable friendship. It was strange, Harry thought, because he didn't really know how to be friends with a girl. He'd never really had a girl be a friend before. He'd dated a few girls, although nothing he would consider serious. He'd even had someone he could call a girlfriend during his school years, and then again right before he moved. But this wasn't like that at all. He didn't feel the same way about Ginny.

Ginny was... comfortable. It felt like Harry had known her for years, instead of only days. They enjoyed doing things together and seemed very compatible as friends.

A friend is a good thing, Harry told himself. You could use a friend.

* * *

Bugger, Ginny thought to herself when Harry finally left the kitchen. She knew there would come a day when something would slip and she'd embarrass herself in front of this Muggle. But she had been hoping to last longer than a week.

She could hear the sound of his treadmill in the other room, the heavy footfalls of him running along with it meant that she could safely pull out her wand and do the breakfast dishes.

It was really a bother to try and hide her magic, but it was well worth it to be living on her own.

Ginny was having a wonderful time living in London. The first full day Harry had been home, they'd gone on a walk around the neighborhood and he'd pointed out all sorts of places that had intrigued her. They'd spent hours roaming all over the place, laughing and talking. Ginny hadn't done that with a friend since her days in Hogsmeade, happily flitting from one storefront to another with various girlfriends.

She sighed deeply and moved to her bedroom. The upcoming shift at work was looking less and less appealing every minute she procrastinated at the flat. Ginny would much rather spend the day curled up in her blankets with a good book, or possibly watching a good movie on Harry's telly. But her share of the rent would be due soon enough, and Ginny knew she couldn't put it off any longer.

She glanced around her room, searching for her nametag and keys. There was a rather large pile of laundry in one corner of the room and Ginny made a note to herself to try and tackle the washing when Harry was occupied next. She was rather nervous to try using the machines with him around—just in case something happened and he ended up dying from laughing at her so hard. That would be just too much to take right now, not to mention explain.

"I'll talk to you later," she called out, sticking her head into Harry's workout room before she left. He was well into his run, sweat drenching his shirt as the treadmill climbed to a ridiculous angle.

“Yeah,” he huffed out, raising his hand slightly in parting.

Ginny laughed, shaking her head at his habits, and left the flat.

Hours later, Ginny leaned against a full bookshelf and admired the bright, new covers of the latest novel sure to hit the best-seller’s list. It had been a lot of work to get all these books shelved, and the corresponding displays assembled. However, Ginny was just glad she didn’t have to actually be on shift for the midnight release.

“Thanks for working so hard, Ginny,” the store manager said, glancing at his watch. “In fact, you’ve finished in record time. Take the rest of the day off.”

Ginny was delighted at the idea and debated going home to do the laundry, but the lure of running some errands in Diagon Alley sounded good as well. And, if she remembered right, Hermione should be off today. They could have lunch together and Ginny would still be home in time to spend the evening with Harry.

Hermione was delighted when Ginny showed up at the flat she shared with Ron, liberating her from an afternoon of cleaning. “I really shouldn’t,” she complained, but then a wicked smile spread across her face and she agreed to the day out with Ginny.

Lunch was a fast sandwich at the Leaky Cauldron, followed by a rather large ice cream at Fortescue’s. Ginny slowly gathered her potions supplies and other essentials as they browsed the shops.

“How are things with the flatmate?” Hermione asked as the two women picked through the second hand racks at Madam Malkin’s.

“Great,” Ginny said. She turned her back on the robes, knowing that she really didn’t need new ones anyway—not when she mostly wore Muggle clothing. “We get along really well. He’s very easy going.”

“That’s good,” Hermione nodded thoughtfully and added another robe to the small pile she was amassing. “You’ve certainly been spending all your time there; we haven’t seen you in more than a week.”

“I work too,” Ginny defended, brushing her hand along the robes. “It’s not like Harry and I spend all day together.”

“And has it been difficult to go without magic?” Hermione asked, lowering her voice as several witches came into the store.

“Not as hard as I thought, but I still use it when Harry’s not there. I do have to keep myself from slipping sometimes. Like this morning, I said something like ‘Merlin knows’, or something... anyway, Harry picked right up on that and I had to think fast to cover myself.”

Hermione gave her an amused look and paid for the robes. “Do you think you can pull it off?”

Ginny sighed, contemplating the question she’d been ignoring for the past few days. “When I first

moved in, I thought it would be easier, but Harry is around a lot more than I expected him to be.” She sighed and held the door open for Hermione as they walked out into the sunny, strangely warm day. “I’m just thankful they’ve relaxed all the restrictions about doing magic in front of Muggles.”

“Well,” Hermione reasoned as they walked slowly down the street, “the statutes were horribly out of date. And it’s getting harder and harder to hide magic as the generations become more and more used to integrating with Muggles.”

Ginny nodded, not fully paying attention, but people-watching instead. Hermione continued on, explaining the laws and why they weren’t enforced as strictly anymore. It was no surprise, however, when Hermione steered her toward Flourish and Blotts. Normally, Ginny would protest that she spent enough time in book stacks, but today it really didn’t matter where they went.

The laziness of the sun shining finally, and the prospect of a pleasant evening curled up on Harry’s sofa were enough to make Ginny content with doing whatever Hermione wanted to do.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Hermione gestured to the bookstore.

“Not at all,” Ginny shook her head. “You browse, I’ll read the papers.” Hermione shook her head and rolled her eyes. Ginny had always had a weakness for the Wizarding tabloids. It wasn’t as if she believed the things they printed—on the contrary, she thought they made excellent material to distract yourself with laughter.

A small chair near the newspaper and tabloid section looked very inviting and Ginny perched herself there, digging through the racks to find just the right issue to spend fifteen minutes with.

The Quibbler was always good for a laugh, Ginny decided, picking up the latest edition. She was delighted when Luna’s article about her expedition to the South Pole was on the front page. Surprisingly, it was a very coherent and well thought-out article and Ginny was surprised to learn something about the fire breathing pelicans that followed the Wizarding ships around.

“Urgh,” Hermione broke her from the conclusion on the article and Ginny looked up to find Hermione holding another magazine by the corner, her face scrunched in distaste at whatever was on the front. “Why don’t they ever leave people alone?” she asked, shaking her head.

“What is it?” Ginny stood, reaching for the article. Ginny herself had been the subject of quite a few spectacular articles after her fourth year in school, and she was never surprised at how far they would go to paste a sensational story on the front page.

The picture on the page showed a group of men in an obviously Oriental setting, sitting at a table and raising glasses in a toast. One person, with dark hair, was blurred, beyond recognition. A second photo showed a very large man standing and moving toward the photographer before it went blank.

“Harry Potter: His Wild Life Exposed. Potter, The Chosen One, age twenty-one, was seen just last week at a bar in downtown Tokyo, known for its outrageous night life and loose women...”

Ginny read the headline out loud and shook her head. “They can’t even leave the poor bloke alone long enough to have a drink with his mates.”

"The press is a double edged sword," Hermione agreed with a sad nod. "Although I do have to admire whoever taught him that charm to obscure his face in photographs. I've seen it in several photos of him."

"It is rather brilliant," Ginny nodded, tossing the magazine aside. "I feel bad for him, in a way," she said absently.

Hermione peered at her. "For Harry Potter?"

"Yeah," Ginny shrugged, reaching down to lift her shopping bags up. Hermione's arms were suspiciously empty, until Ginny realized she probably shrunk her purchases and placed them in her handbag. "It's got to be a lonely life, don't you think?"

"I suppose," Hermione said thoughtfully. "He travels all over the world."

"The travel would be nice," Ginny nodded, "But I just think it would be lonely. He can't have many real friends, you know. How would you know if they were really your friends or just wanted to be with you because you were rich, or famous, or powerful?"

"I see what you mean," Hermione said. "He's kept everything so private over the years; it's possible he's not lonely at all, Ginny. He may even have a girlfriend or a wife."

Ginny nodded, still thinking about how lonely that sort of existence sounded.

"So, when are you going to bring *your* Harry to the Burrow?" Hermione asked, a rather mischievous smile spreading on her face.

Ginny laughed. "You spend too much time with Ron, you know. How would that go over? 'Yes, Harry, those dishes are washing themselves. Why, haven't you ever seen that before?' " She raised her voice in a breathy imitation that had Hermione laughing. "I think he'd leave Britain for sure. Probably swim all the way back to America just to get away from all of us nutters."

When Ginny got back to the flat, Harry was just straining the water off a pot of pasta.

"We need to expand your repertoire, you know?" Ginny teased him, watching as he rinsed the food and divided it out onto two plates.

"You like my pasta," he scowled, focusing on the noodles sliding out of the strainer.

"Its fine," Ginny laughed. "But we've had it several times this week."

"You make dinner tomorrow then," he quipped, shaking a jar of marinara sauce before opening it and pouring it over the noodles.

"Agreed," Ginny nodded with a grimace at the food. "You could have at least warmed that up, you know."

Harry grinned, taking a huge bite from his plate and carrying it into the lounge. "Don't eat it then," he mumbled around his mouthful.

Ginny watched him go, a wry smile on her face. "You're horribly disgusting at times, you know."

"Am not," Harry called out. "And you were late so I chose the movie."

"Oh Merlin," Ginny mumbled to herself after retrieving her own plate. "How bad is it?" she asked, wincing at the rather violent scene on the telly.

"Horrible," Harry grinned. She had the strangest urge to reach out and wipe the small bit of tomato sauce that clung to the side of his lip. Chastising herself, and brushing away the thought that he looked adorable sitting cross-legged on the sofa, his dinner sitting in his lap, she perched herself next to him. "It's as violent as I could find."

"Wonderful," Ginny rolled her eyes, twirling her fork in the pasta and lifting a hefty bite to her own mouth. If Harry wasn't concerned with manners, neither was she. As she chewed, she snuck a glance at him and could see the corner of his mouth quirk up as he tried to focus on the screen.

"Oh, hey," he said, hurriedly, lifting his plate and digging into the pocket of his jeans. "I was doing the washing today and you left some things in the loo..."

Ginny's eyes went wide, trying to remember what she'd left in there.

"I hope you don't mind, but I tossed them in. It was just jeans and a dark shirt."

"Oh," she nodded. "Thanks. I've been meaning to do the laundry... just haven't gotten to it."

Harry scratched his head and gave her a smile that looked rather guilty. "Actually, I feel a bit bad... when I took everything out of the dryer, this fell out. I hope it wasn't anything important." He held up a round piece of stiff cardboard, the image washed almost completely away from it.

Ginny gasped, remembering shoving the Harry Potter chocolate frog card in her back pocket a few weeks before. It looked as if it had only just survived a few washings.

"I hope it wasn't important," Harry said again, handing it over.

"No," she shook her head, peering at him as her heart thumped. Thank heavens it was unreadable, she told herself as she inspected the card. "It isn't—not really. To tell the truth, I'd forgotten all about it."

"What is it?" Harry asked.

Ginny started, realizing she was going to have to come up with something very fast. "Oh, its... erm, like a... trading card of sorts," she said, her mind reeling as she searched for a believable excuse. "They come in a series of books," she explained, waiving the card around a bit in dismissal. "Sometimes they fall out of the packaging when we're putting them on the shelves."

He seemed to study her for a minute before shrugging and turning his attention back to his dinner and the movie, which was just starting.

Ginny swallowed harshly and lifted a meager bite, chewing it thoroughly. What would she have done if the card hadn't been too ruined to read? This whole thing was getting harder and harder.

"You're a liar," she nudged him when the movie started. It was a romantic comedy that she'd read a review of in the newspaper last week. Harry laughed but didn't respond.

"Are you going to be able to survive this?" she asked, nodding her head toward the telly.

"I'll live," he shrugged. "Besides, I could always go to sleep early."

"And snore the whole way through," Ginny quipped with a laugh.

Harry looked offended and nudged her back. "I do not snore."

"Oh, Parker," she chuckled. "Trust me, you snore."

* * *

Harry slowly placed the pile of clean laundry into his suitcase. Another assignment had come up and he was needed in South America to help reestablish an Auror force in a less than stable country.

The call had come in less than two hours ago, but Harry had been dragging his feet. The prospect of spending two or more weeks in a run down room, or even the Auror barracks themselves did nothing to appeal to him right now.

"Damn, I was supposed to take Ginny to that new club," he mumbled, glancing up when Hedwig tapped her beak at the window. He lifted the sash and let his bird in, startling when a smaller, dark brown barn owl fluttered in as well.

"You've made a friend," Harry said, shocked. Hedwig had never been one to allow other owls around. In the ten years she'd been with Harry, he'd never seen another owl this close to his familiar.

The other bird sized him up, turning his head this way and that before ruffling his feathers and hopping threateningly toward Harry.

He chuckled and backed away, his hands held up defensively. "She's your friend, mate," he protested.

Hedwig seemed almost bored by the display and settled on her perch, preening her feathers and then nuzzling her head in to nap. She ignored the male owl, who squawked and hopped up next to her, trying to cozy up to her side. Hedwig lazily raised her head and snapped her beak at him before turning her back on him.

"Good luck there, buddy," Harry chuckled and shook his head. He was surprised, however, when the male didn't leave, but stayed on the perch, settling in to his own nap.

The idea that Hedwig had a boyfriend was a bit unsettling to Harry. For years it had been she and him against the world. Even when he lived with Sirius and Remus, Hedwig had always been there for him. But now... she may have found something that even Harry didn't have. And it made him feel... left out.

Shrugging off the irrational jealousy, Harry turned back to his packing. Maybe he could drop by

Ginny's work before he left this afternoon. It seemed more than a bit rude to simply disappear with only a note.

Yeah, he decided with a nod. He'd drop by the bookstore to see her. No doubt she'd have some funny quip to lighten his mood before he left. She was always coming up with something humorous to say.

She was still a puzzle to him, a month after living together. There were things about her that just didn't add up. Days when they were the best of friends and then days when she would pull away, not saying much and wearing dark circles under her eyes. Harry had begun to suspect she had more nightmares than she let on.

And a few weeks ago when he'd tossed her jeans into his wash and the strange card had come out in the dryer. Harry could have sworn it was a chocolate frog card... but that would mean that Ginny was...

He shook his head at the thought. There was no way...

Once his packing was done, he scribbled a quick note reminding Ginny not to burn the flat down and chuckled. No doubt she'd call his cell and leave a nasty retort, or plan some prank that would have him covered in water the moment he walked in the door. He'd fallen for that twice—something he would never admit to Sirius or Remus.

* * *

The interior of the huge book store was fascinating, Arthur thought, as he stood in the center of the entryway and looked up at the tall ceilings and wide open spaces. Flourish & Blotts was known for its packed shelves, dark, musty corners and little room to move around. Although, perhaps that didn't matter as much, because using magic, one could simply widen the aisle with a flick of a wand.

The expected dusty smell of parchment and binding glue gave way, here, to coffee and leather. People bustled in and out of the doors, plastic bags stuffed full of books on all sorts of subjects. The hustle and bustle had nearly driven Molly insane on their first visit.

But Arthur thought it was brilliant.

And now that he had the full day off, and Molly was occupied trying to help at the rummage sale in the village... he had the entire day to spend here. Although he doubted that Ginny would allow him to hang around for hours, embarrassing her at her place of work.

Speaking of his little bird, Arthur smiled when she walked down an aisle, pushing a small trolley overflowing with books. She was concentrating hard on the shelves in front of her, searching for just the right spot to unload several of the tomes.

"Hello, Ginny-girl," he said softly as he approached her, spinning his hat through his fingers, the worn felt used to the movement.

"Dad!" she grinned, setting her books down as she threw her arms around him in a huge hug.

Arthur was startled by this—Ginny rarely initiated physical contact anymore—and patted her back awkwardly.

“How are you?” they both asked at the same time, chuckling and glancing around awkwardly at the few people who were on the next aisle.

“I’m good,” Ginny smiled. Arthur stared at her, feeling something well up inside him. She looked so much better than she had only weeks ago when she’d been living with them. He had been right; allowing her the freedom to spread her wings had done wonders for her.

“That’s good,” he nodded. “I’m sorry for surprising you like this—you won’t get in trouble will you?” he asked, glancing around once more.

“No,” she denied. “Just walk with me while I put these away and then we’ll find a nice cozy corner to catch up in.

He couldn’t help but smile at her enthusiasm, and feel it creep a bit into him.

“In fact, if you can occupy yourself for a few minutes, I may even be able to sneak away for lunch—my treat!—and we can really spend some time together.”

Any unease Arthur had felt this morning when making the decision to come to London to see his daughter slipped away. Ginny had always been a free spirit, but had valued her privacy more and more as the years went by. He blamed that damned diary for it all...

“I think I can manage that,” he chuckled, nodding toward the shelves. “Just point me in the direction of an airplane book.”

Ginny laughed and it caused a thrill to ripple through him; it had been a long time since he’d heard her be this open with anyone. Maybe this was how she was in the Muggle world: unfettered by the past and the questioning glances of everyone she met who may have read those damned speculative articles. Or maybe this new, exuberant Ginny was simply a result of her growing up.

“Dad,” she shook her head, “there’s a whole section on airplanes.”

“Is there?” he glanced around, wondering where it might be. His excitement over seeing Ginny doing so well again was almost eclipsed by his curiosity. Perhaps he’d even be able to discover how those ingenious Muggles made something that large stay up.”

“Come on,” she laughed, “I have to return a book near there anyway.”

He followed as she pushed the trolley around, occasionally sliding a book onto a shelf here or there.

“How is everyone?” she asked. Arthur could hear the hesitant tone in her voice but he wasn’t sure what it meant. Was she nervous about what he would say? Guilty because she had only dropped by home once for a few quick minutes? Or was there something else?

“Everyone is fine,” he nodded, keeping his tone as light as he could. “Your mother sends her love.”

Ginny glanced at him and he felt his face heat, cursing that she’d know exactly what that meant;

she'd certainly had enough experience reading her family in the past.

"Liar," she said, a sad smile on her face. "She doesn't know you're here."

Arthur sighed. "No, she doesn't. But she does love you, Ginny. I wish you could know how much."

"I do," she protested, stopping in the travel section to reshell a book about Italy. "I really do. And I love her as well. But... I just needed to be away. And it's been good—really good."

"You look happy," he conceded, a stab of regret shooting through him. "I'm sorry we made it so hard on you." He couldn't look at her then; couldn't see the confirmation on her face.

"It wasn't you," she shook her head. "While I was home, I just wouldn't let myself heal. There was always some excuse as to why I could hold onto the hurt. Now..." she sighed, slowing her step. "Now I *have* to deal with it and... I am."

"And the nightmares?" Arthur asked, lowering his voice.

"As bad as ever," she shrugged. "But, I'm learning to recover from them, rather than hiding them."

"And the, er... flatmate?" Arthur ventured. "What does he think of all of this?"

Ginny smiled slowly, one eyebrow raised at him. "Harry has been wonderful, Dad. I promise you, he's been nothing but a gentleman. He's..." she flushed herself and Arthur's belly tightened. Was there more there? "He's actually become my best friend, Dad," she continued softly. "We can talk about absolutely nothing and it just... feels comfortable."

"No problems then, with, erm..." he glanced around nervously, waiting for a couple to pass, discussing the idea of buying yet another cookbook. "Magic," he finished in a whisper.

"A few close calls," Ginny nodded, starting to push the trolley again. "But nothing to worry about. I think Harry simply thinks I'm rather odd."

Slowly, the unease Arthur felt about the unknown man started to slip out of focus. If his little girl was happy... who was he to question it?

"Here we are," Ginny motioned with a grand gesture to a large set of shelves, contained against the wall of the store.

"Cor," Arthur breathed, staring up at shelf after shelf of books on airplanes.

"Think you can manage for twenty minutes?" she asked, grinning at what must have been his gobsmacked appearance.

Feeling a bit bold, Arthur grinned. "Make it forty?"

Ginny laughed and was just about to make a comment when her focus shifted, a completely different look coming over her face. "Hang on, Dad, I'll be right back."

Arthur turned around to see her bound down an aisle and wrap her arms briefly around a man. The

two backed apart after the impromptu hug, both fidgeting in place. Arthur felt a brief thrill of dislike for this man—whoever he was. He brushed it aside, however; Ginny had the right to see who she wanted to see.

The man definitely seemed attentive to her as she asked him a question, and then responded softly. His deep voice carried more than Ginny's, but Arthur still couldn't make out what he was saying. However, Ginny looked disappointed. Perhaps, the rational side of Arthur reasoned, the man had needed to cancel a date. Or, another side of him argued, this cad was currently breaking his daughter's heart.

Arthur forced his eyes away, feeling horrible for judging the situation.

"Dad."

He turned back around, preparing himself to comfort his heartbroken little girl, only to see her smiling, tugging the man along by his hand. He looked extremely nervous, his hazel eyes darting back and forth between Arthur and Ginny.

"This is Harry, Dad," Ginny continued. "My flatmate. Harry, this is my dad, Arthur." She'd dropped his hand, much to Arthur's comfort, and stood looking between the two men.

"A pleasure to meet you, Sir," Harry stretched his hand forward, smiling in an uneven, hesitant way.

Arthur hesitated, but then remembered Ginny's words. 'He's my best friend.' He firmly gripped Harry's hand and shook it, feeling gratitude start to take the place of suspicion, just a bit.

"Ahem," he cleared his throat, feeling awkward now that the three of them were standing together.

"Harry's just dropped by to tell me that he's leaving for work again," Ginny supplied. "Which really is horrible timing because we were supposed to go clubbing tonight." She raised an eyebrow at Harry, who flushed slightly and gave her a rather guilty look. "This bloke could use a girlfriend."

"I said I'm sorry," Harry protested, rolling his eyes. "And I don't *want* a girlfriend." The last was said a bit desperately, and with a bit of a sigh. Arthur had no doubt this was a bit of a running joke between the two of them.

He took a moment to study the young man in front of him, wondering who he was and where he had come from. It was obvious, from his rather nasal tones, that he was a Yank. He was handsome, and well groomed. His dark hair was combed into a messy style that seemed all the rage with the young blokes about London these days.

"I know," Ginny sighed, reaching up to straighten the lapel on Harry's fine wool coat. "I just wish you had a normal job."

Harry chuckled and the sound was low, pulling Arthur's focus back to the couple completely. "Not much about me is normal, Ginny," Harry said, glancing at Arthur and then quickly away. There seemed to be something more there... but Arthur dismissed it; perhaps his suspicious mind was just

imagining things.

“Well, I was planning on inviting the two of you over for dinner this weekend,” Arthur fabricated; although the thought had been passed back and forth between he and Molly for a few weeks now. “But as you’re going to be gone... perhaps we’ll just settle for spending some time with our little girl.” He winked at Ginny who rolled her eyes.

“I’ll be missing out then,” Harry smiled. “I’d best get moving,” he said to Ginny. “My plane leaves in a few hours.”

Arthur’s ears perked up at hearing this, and Ginny just laughed.

“Uh oh, Harry, you’ve said the magic words...” she teased, poking her father in the ribs. He absently rubbed the spot, even as a thousand questions came to mind.

“Are you really flying on an airplane?” he asked, unable to help himself.

Harry shot a look to Ginny who just shrugged. “He’s a bit obsessed with the things, I’m afraid.”

A slow smile spread across Harry’s face. “Are you really? Have you ever flown?”

The immediate answer of ‘yes, you silly Muggle, I fly all the time,’ entered Arthur’s head and Ginny raised an eyebrow at him, warning him to behave.

“I’m afraid not,” he supplied instead. “But I’m particularly fascinated by the mechanics of it all.”

“Brilliant,” Harry nodded. “Somewhere around the flat I have a book about them, I’ll have to let you borrow it one day soon. I was fascinated with them myself as a boy.”

“Excellent,” Arthur beamed. He might get to like this young chap after all... Especially if the way that Ginny was smiling at them both now continued. Yes, Harry seemed to be an alright fellow.

Chapter 5: In Hot Water Now

It was good to be home again, Harry told himself as he dropped his bag at the door and sighed in relief. Two weeks in South America, in the hot, muggy climate were enough to send anyone in search of colder temperatures. The fact that it was snowing in London today helped, although Harry knew he'd be tired of it by tomorrow, when the roads were a slushy grey mess.

The flat was similar to when he'd left it—a cluttered jumble of his and Ginny's things, draped over surfaces and casually resting here and there. While he'd always been a tidy person, Harry's habits had slipped with Ginny in the flat. It just didn't seem that much of a bother to leave the newspaper on the table, or worry about his extra pair of trainers currently resting on one the side of the sofa. She didn't mind, and really, neither did he.

It was just... comfortable.

He nudged Ginny's book that rested on the back of the sofa and eyed the blanket and pillow laying there still. Maybe she'd had another nightmare. He felt a bit bad that he hadn't been there to distract her, the way he'd done in the past. But there was only so much a friend could do. And Harry was no stranger to nightmares either. Sometimes, you just had to... cope.

It looked as if the flat was empty and Harry sighed, looking forward to a nice hot shower. He dropped his bags in his bedroom, checked on Hedwig and smirked when he saw the untouched dead mouse at the bottom of her perch. Apparently her boyfriend was now bringing gifts. Although... that didn't bode well either, if she started accepting the gifts... well, Harry didn't like to really think about what might happen then.

Harry toed off his shoes and stepped on the toes of his socks to pull them off, unbuttoning his stuffy shirt, and leaving it on the end of his bed. It had been a long two weeks and he was very much looking forward to his wide, queen sized bed instead of the narrow cots in the Auror barracks. At least they'd had hot water—although when it was so hot and humid outside, showers weren't as refreshing as they should be.

He reached for the handle of the loo, only to jump back when it swung open. Ginny, wrapped only in a towel, her hair dripping wet, came out. She jumped and gave a small scream, clutching her towel to her.

"S-s-sorry," Harry stared at her, his eyes going wide. They stood there in the hallway for a moment before Harry looked away, turning his back to her so that she could scamper down the hallway to her bedroom. He couldn't stop himself, however, from peeking over his shoulder.

"I didn't expect you," she called out before she shut the door.

"Yeah," Harry swallowed thickly, trying to banish the view of her pale skin, still soft and moist from her shower, out of his head. "Sorry, I should have called."

"No, its fine," she called through the closed door. "I'll be out in a second."

Harry swallowed and nodded, cringing as his body started to respond to the images flashing in his

mind. He pressed his thumb and forefinger into the sockets of his eyes, willing himself to take deep breaths. His trousers continued to grow tight and he shook it off, replacing the image with reciting field exercises. He really couldn't do this... this was Ginny! Not some girl to be ogled and... and... aroused over. This was his friend.

It's normal, he convinced himself. Just a normal, natural male reaction to a beautiful woman who you are definitely attracted to. *NO!* He shook his head.

"I'm going to... just take a shower," he called out, praying she didn't hear the crack in his voice. Harry rolled his eyes at himself and entered the room, breathing in the hot, steamy air.

"Alright," Ginny's muffled voice called back.

He closed the door quickly, shaking his head and carefully removing his trousers and boxers. His body was finally calming down. But maybe a few minutes in the cold water would help.

Harry shook his head and growled at himself. 'You're just lonely and... horny,' he scolded himself. It had been a long time since he'd been with a woman. But one-night stands had no appeal to him at all anymore. And the allure of a relationship faded when he thought about the lies he'd have to tell any woman. No, it just wasn't meant to be.

The cascade of warm water on his hands helped him focus better. He'd certainly have to apologize to Ginny for staring; that much was evident. There was no excuse for acting like some uncontrollable teenage boy around her. Just because he was feeling a bit desperate didn't mean she had to be the one he responded to.

Even as the warm water washed away the stickiness of travel, Harry knew his thoughts were wrong. Ginny wasn't just any woman, walking along, that he'd admired. She was... wonderful.

He could still smell her flowery scent in the heavy air of the loo and it made him groan slightly. His body tingled again and he rested his forehead against the coolness of the tiles.

"Damnit," he growled, taking himself in hand.

Harry finished with a jerk and breathed deeply, feeling more than a bit disgusted with himself. Thinking of his flatmate while doing... *that*... was completely unacceptable. How could he possibly look her in the eye after this?

'It was a fluke,' he convinced himself as he finished his shower. 'You're just lonely and you've been away too long. Things will go back to normal again soon.'

"No more of that," he scolded himself.

* * *

Once the door closed, Ginny groaned quietly and laid her head back against the wood.

Harry had scared the life out of her, coming in like that when she didn't expect him home.

And, even worse, she hadn't even thought to bring her things into the loo with her, so she'd been

forced to prance around in front of him, almost completely naked. What he must think of her now.

She rolled her eyes at herself and struggled to slow her heart rate. It was obvious, by his open-mouthed stare, that she'd startled him too. And then she'd had the audacity to stare at his naked, well toned chest—her own mouth hanging open.

Harry had always struck her as a very attractive man. But he was her friend. She had no right to think of him that way.

"I'm going to... just take a shower," he called out, his voice muffled by the closed door. He sounded a bit shaken and Ginny scolded herself. 'Of course he's a bit shaken, you git, a naked woman just assaulted him in his own hallway.'

She sighed and slowly began to get dressed. The pipes in the walls groaned and the water started. Her movements to gather her clothing slowed as she imagined Harry getting into the shower.

"NO!" she scolded herself firmly, pressing her eyes closed against the slight tingle she felt low in her groin. "Harry is my friend. Harry is my friend," she repeated, forcing herself to dress.

She forced out a deep breath, feeling annoyed that she was even considering Harry in that way. Maybe she was lonelier than she thought. It had been a long time since Michael....

"No," she reinforced again. She wasn't going to go there. The best thing to do was to forget about it completely.

Ginny found that advice helpful a lot lately. The nightmares, which had subsided with the move into London, seemed to be coming back fiercely now. It seemed that something was triggering them, but Ginny had no idea what. She had thought that immersing herself in the Muggle world would banish all of this nonsense.

The pipes groaned again and Ginny rolled her eyes at herself. She'd been standing there in her bedroom, only wearing her jeans for far too long.

Quickly she pulled on her bra and t-shirt, pulled her hair back into a messy bun and made her way out to the kitchen. She at least owed Harry a decent meal after ogling him like she'd done.

* * *

Over the next two weeks, Ginny watched Harry closely, although she tried very hard not to make a big deal out of it.

He was just acting so strange, ducking his head when she talked to him, disappearing frequently into his room, and spending much less time with her. She hoped it hadn't been anything she'd said, or done. In the back of her mind, there was a nagging fear that because she'd stared at him in the hallway, Harry was seeing her differently. But surely he'd get over that quickly, wouldn't he? Ginny had been very careful not to spend an inordinate amount of time looking his way, or appreciating how good he actually looked.

Perhaps something had happened while Harry was away, something that had to do with his work

that was preoccupying him. Or, perhaps, he had met someone and was dating, without telling Ginny.

That thought didn't sit well and Ginny didn't want to take the time to examine why. 'It's just a crush,' she convinced herself. 'He has every right to date anyone he wants.'

All these thoughts spiraled in her head, driving Ginny crazy and distracting her from work.

"Where have you been these past days?" Rebecca asked as she sat across from Ginny in the break room at the bookstore. She gave a disgruntled look to her limp salad, but dug in with false enthusiasm. Rebecca was forever watching her weight, which seemed a bit silly to Ginny, who had never seen the other girl as all that heavy, really.

"I've been right here," Ginny protested, picking at her own lunch before pushing it away. "Haven't gone anywhere."

Rebecca just rolled her eyes. "You're here, but you're not. Your mind is a million miles away lately."

Ginny smiled, but didn't argue; it was absolutely true. "Can I... can I ask you a question?" she said, tentatively.

"Sure," Rebecca said, looking up from where she was moving her lettuce around.

Ginny hesitated, thinking of the right way to say this without having Rebecca ask too many personal questions. Ginny hated lying, but she hadn't been completely open with her friend. And Rebecca knew that—she'd already told Ginny that it was alright, she understood.

"Do you think that if you were friends with someone—really good friends—that it could possibly turn into something more? Hypothetically, of course."

Rebecca cocked her head to one side. "It depends," she said, thoughtfully chewing her next bite. "If you're trying to make a pass at me, I'll have to let you down easy—"

Ginny laughed, shaking her head. Rebecca's sense of humor was the main thing that attracted the two girls together.

"However, if you're talking about Mr. Gorgeous..." Ginny smiled again and rolled her eyes. Rebecca had seen Harry come into the store the day he had left for his last assignment for work and had been teasing Ginny ever since. "Then I say go for it."

"We're talking hypothetically," Ginny scolded. "A completely 'what if' situation, here."

"Oh," Rebecca grinned and winked. "Hypothetically, if a person as attractive as Mr. Gorgeous walked into my life, I'd be all over him, friend or no." Ginny had a feeling that's what Rebecca would say and she stared off, biting at her bottom lip.

"Are we talking about real feelings or just..."

"A crush," Ginny shrugged. "I think that's all it is, really."

“Hmm,” Rebecca narrowed her eyes. “Tell me what’s so special about Mr. Hypothetical, then. What makes you like him as a friend, and then as a crush.”

Ginny thought about that for a few minutes. What was it about Harry that was so appealing?

“He’s a good friend,” she started with a shrug.

“Uh huh,” Rebecca nodded. “And what makes him a good friend. Ginny, you’re going to have to give me something to work with. My mind reading powers just aren’t up to it today.”

Ginny glared at her friend, but Rebecca only returned it until they both started laughing.

“Alright,” Ginny conceded. “He listens to me prattle on about everything and nothing. And he’s really listening, not just nodding his head and tuning me out like my brothers have always done. It seems silly, because we rarely talk about anything too serious, but he’s just... fun.

“He doesn’t get mad when I play pranks on him, and he’ll turn it around on me the next time. He’s smart and funny...”

“And good looking,” Rebecca nodded.

Ginny felt her face heat, although she couldn’t deny it. Harry was extremely attractive. “He is,” she nodded, her fingernail tracing a pattern in the worn tabletop. “He’s got a great body.” Rebecca’s jaw dropped and Ginny had to laugh. “But he’s not conceited about it.”

“And,” Rebecca said, “he’s something different.”

Ginny realized she was right. Harry was very different from the boys she’d gone out with in school. Michael was very conceited and controlling in a way. And Dean, well, Dean had been very nice. He was a good bloke but he’d been a bit too... polite for Ginny. He was always walking on egg shells around her, making sure she was happy with the relationship, short as it was, and rarely telling her what he wanted or expected from her. Dean was happy to go wherever she went.

The balance for Ginny was never enough.

But Harry... he was very different. He was easy-going, yet he didn’t let her push him too far with her teasing or her pranks.

“You’re meant to be talking me out of this, you know,” Ginny growled, folding her arms onto the table and resting her forehead on them.

“And not talking you into it,” Rebecca nodded in sympathy. “Ginny, I don’t mean this to sound rude... but it’s already too late, you’re in way over your head.”

Ginny’s head snapped up and she stared at her friend, her mouth opening and closing. “You don’t... mean...”

“I think you’re falling in love with him,” Rebecca nodded knowingly. “I know that’s probably not what you want to hear.”

"No, it isn't," Ginny shook her head. She couldn't deny, though, that the words made her feel something deep inside. "This wasn't part of the plan."

"It rarely is," Rebecca sighed. "But you're lucky, Ginny. You've got a good bloke."

"Maybe," Ginny mumbled, pressing her fingers to her temples. A strange sort of headache was forming, making her stomach roll too.

"What are you going to do about it?" Rebecca asked, picking up her fork again and slowly lifting a bite of greens.

"Nothing," Ginny answered automatically, cringing at the idea of saying something to Harry, whom she really knew next to nothing about, and having him laugh at her, or worse, feel pity for her. "At least not yet."

"Wait and see?" Rebecca asked.

The decision sounded good right now, and Ginny nodded. There was nothing that said she had to act on these feelings right now.

"Maybe I'm just randy," Ginny observed casually, her eyes darting about the room to make sure no one else was listening. There were several younger men who worked at the bookstore that would, no doubt, offer to assist if they thought that was the case. "It's been a while."

Rebecca laughed. "Maybe so... but then you'd just be telling me how great his arse is, not about how well he listens to you."

Ginny's hopeful theory dissolved before her eyes and she shrugged. "He does have a great arse."

Rebecca grinned and nodded. "Maybe you should start seeing someone else, see if you feel the same then."

The thought made Ginny cringe just a bit. Both Michael and Dean, fun while they lasted, had been simply disasters in the relationship department. No, that wasn't the answer right now. Besides, as much as she teased Harry about him needing a girlfriend, the thought of him actually finding one made her feel all grouchy and out of sorts.

"Sadly, I don't think I'm interested," she sighed, glancing up at Rebecca, who was holding in a smile.

"Like I said," Rebecca said in a sing-song tone, "You're already in too deep."

Groaning, Ginny laid her head on the table and banged it lightly a few times. The truth was... Rebecca was right. And Ginny knew it.

* * *

Harry fidgeted across the street from the small storefront for almost half an hour, talking himself into, and right back out of his decision. He'd never done this before and it seemed so... desperate.

But these are desperate times, his mind reminded him, and Harry cringed at the cliché.

The past two weeks home with Ginny had been almost excruciating. Harry's imagination conjured up the most erotic images from the mundane, everyday life. And it was pushing him over the edge.

He glanced across the street to the darkened door, gathering his courage once more. It was either this or he was going to have to go to a pub and find some relief there. The thought of bringing someone home to the flat... it made him grimace. He couldn't do that.

So, he found himself here, standing in front of an adult shop, ducking his head and pulling his cap low over his face before opening the door.

The interior of the shop was dark, with just enough light to make out the various items on the shelf. A row of lingerie caught Harry's eye and he felt his cheeks heat. What he was looking for would most likely be against the back wall. And he was right.

Glossy magazines, covered with scantily clad women, and some wearing nothing at all, looked up at him from the pages. Harry was immensely glad that this was a Muggle shop. Sirius had once shown him Wizarding porn and it had almost made him choke to death when the witch displayed before him began to touch herself. The fact that most of his early sexual education had come from that very magazine was a thought that made his face heat again.

Surreptitiously, he glanced around, relieved that there was only one other man in the shop. He still felt very... perverted for seeking this place out. But if he could find something to replace the image of a dripping wet Ginny in his mind... he'd gladly push aside his conscience.

It was worse, wasn't it, his mind reasoned, to think of your best friend like that, than to look at some woman displayed in a magazine.

He swallowed thickly again and reached for the nearest one, wrinkling the cover in his sweaty hands as he marched up to the register, determined to not make such a big deal out of this. It was one little magazine. Not the end of the world.

"Is that all, love?" the woman behind the counter asked. Harry started and tugged his cap lower.

"Er... yeah." He tossed a few notes on the counter and tucked the magazine into the inside of his jacket, firmly wedging it under his arm.

The flat was quiet, thankfully, when he returned. Ginny would be gone all afternoon and into the evening. The bookstore was having a large clearance sale and she'd been grumbling about having to work it for days now.

"No time like the present," Harry mumbled to himself, discarding his coat on the sofa and moving into his bedroom. He stripped to his boxers and undershirt, breathing deeply and forcing himself to relax.

This whole thing seemed a big absurd and he almost laughed out loud at himself. "This is ridiculous," he mumbled. Hedwig, perched in the corner, ruffled her feathers at his intrusion of her nap.

“Er... Hedwig... I can’t do this with you here,” he admitted, his face heating with guilt. Wasn’t it bad enough that he was a complete pervert... now he had to kick his owl out of her home so that he could get on with the business of being a pervert?

He could have sworn she gave him a disdainful look as she hopped over to the window sill.

“Don’t be like that,” he rolled his eyes at her. “Just... just go and find your boyfriend.”

She spread her wings out wide, ignoring him as she sailed off out the window.

Harry watched until she disappeared around the side of a building, feeling increasingly guilty. He wasn’t so sure if he could do this right now after all.

“Maybe I’ll just have a kip,” he mumbled to the empty room, after he closed the window mostly. He drew the curtains, bathing the room in half-light.

Harry stretched out on his bed, balling a pillow behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. This was stupid, he knew. And once he convinced his brain that it wasn’t about Ginny—it was about any woman out there—then he’d be fine. He could go on with his life, working when the assignments came, spending time with his best friend without imagining her naked at every minute of the day.

Determination flooded him and Harry summoned the magazine, lighting his wand and placing it so that the light flooded the pages.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, opening to the middle. The woman before him, when he did look again, was very beautiful. She was blonde and splayed out erotically before him, her body completely flawless. Harry took deep breaths, letting his eyes grace her feminine curves and willing himself to react.

But it was Ginny his mind kept returning to.

“Bloody hell,” he moaned out, feeling like a complete failure. It didn’t matter what he did—Ginny stayed in his thoughts.

‘Does that mean something?’ he pondered. ‘Surely I can’t... like her... not like that. She’s my best friend.’

Harry sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and looking disgustedly down at the porn magazine. What a waste. It didn’t matter. He just couldn’t get the image of Ginny out of his head.

Feeling dejected and more than a bit depressed, Harry stuffed the magazine under his mattress and stumbled to the shower.

This obsession was going to be the death of him.

* * *

Harry sighed, struggling with the bags of groceries while trying to unlock the door to the flat. He was fairly sure Ginny would be at home tonight, and was unsure how to deal with that.

He'd been trying, very hard, over the last week since 'the incident' to convince himself that it didn't really matter. Yes, he found her attractive. Yes, he was aroused by the thought of her. But he could be an adult and deal with those thoughts.

It meant, of course, longer than normal showers lately, but at least he'd been able to talk to her without either passing out from lack of oxygen, or having to squirm in his seat to hide his obvious appreciation of her. 'It'll pass, it'll pass.' That was his motto these days.

At the same time, he missed his friend. His nightmares had come back with a vengeance this week—replacing the erotic dreams of his friend from the weeks before. And Harry wasn't sure which was worse right now. Although, if he were completely honest, at least with the sex dreams about Ginny he got some relief at the end.

He shook the thought from his head and entered the flat. Ginny was reading from a book, curled up in the corner of the sofa.

"I got some groceries," he mentioned, lifting the full bags and then feeling his face heat. 'Way to go, Captain Obvious,' he scolded himself.

"Good," Ginny grunted out, turning a page. "Because I drank your last beer."

Harry snorted and set the bags on the kitchen counter.

"And, if all you bought was pasta, I'm going to kick your arse."

He laughed again, then stared at the box of noodles he'd just lifted out of the bag. Surreptitiously, even though Ginny couldn't see, he slid it behind the other bags and out of sight. He'd hide it in the back of the cupboard later.

"We could order pizza," he called back.

"Bleeack," Ginny groaned back.

Harry chuckled, a sigh of relief sounding inside him. Maybe tonight would be better between them. Maybe he'd successfully banished his strangeness.

"Chinese?" he called out, depositing a batch of vegetables in the refrigerator.

"Harry—"

He jumped when Ginny spoke from right behind him, banging his head on the top.

"Ooo... sorry," Ginny said, reaching out and placing her hand over his as he clutched the back of his head.

"No," Harry pulled away from her. If she touched him, pressed herself to him in order to get a closer look at his head, Harry was afraid he'd pull her closer still and blow everything. "No," he said again, taking a deep breath and forcing himself to smile. "It's fine, really." He rubbed the small lump that was beginning to form, and forced himself to move across the small kitchen to put away more things.

Ginny stayed in the kitchen, leaning against the counter opposite to him. “No take away,” she insisted. “You’re going to learn to make Cornish Pasties.”

“Er...” Harry’s hopes of a painless evening vanished as the thoughts of spending it in the cramped kitchen, bumping into Ginny and trying to prove he wasn’t completely worthless at the domestic stuff intruded on his brain. Then again, he reasoned, it did actually sound kind of fun. And maybe he could just muscle his way past this... crush he had on her and get back to the place where they were best friends.

“Come on,” Ginny teased, grabbing his arm and tugging on it. “Say you’ll let me teach you to make something traditionally English.”

Harry’s heart pounded as he looked down at her. She was incredibly attractive—all cute and completely irresistible staring up at him. Her hair was held up in some kind of clip, leaving some pieces hanging out. The urge to move one of them away from her face was great, but he resisted.

“Alright,” he agreed, his voice more hoarse than he wanted it to be. She could get him to do just about anything right now.

She grinned, bouncing a bit on the balls of her feet. “Let me start gathering things, and you can just find a place to hide that box of pasta you didn’t plan on making tonight.”

Harry felt his face heat, but couldn’t stop himself from nudging her shoulder with his own.

“You didn’t happen to purchase a rutabaga in all of this, did you?” Ginny asked, her shapely behind sticking out of the fridge.

Harry grimaced and bit his tongue. “Why the hell would I buy one of those?” he demanded, forcing a laugh.

Ginny laughed along with him and shrugged it off. “We’ll just use a carrot instead.”

Twenty minutes later, Harry was stirring a mixture of beef cubes, potatoes, carrots and onions. Ginny was standing on her bare tiptoes, using all of her weight to press her hands into the pasty dough. He had to hide his smile when she brushed her hand along her face, leaving a trail of flour there.

“Alright, I think we’re ready,” she said, taking a handful of dough and forming it into a ball.

Harry quickly stood and brought his mixture to the counter, spooning a generous helping into the flat circle Ginny had just made.

They worked in relative silence, Ginny only commenting on Harry’s folding technique with a smirk when his pasty ended up leaking its filling everywhere.

“Oh, I almost forgot. The post came today when I got home,” Ginny commented casually as she tested the temperature of the cooker. “I had to sign for a letter for you.”

“Oh,” Harry nodded, not really knowing why she was bringing it up. And the sly little smile she wore

didn't help.

"Is your name... really Harrison?" she asked, a giggle snorting out of her at the end of it.

The denial was on the tip of his tongue, but Harry called it back. "What's wrong with Harrison?" he demanded, picking up a pinch of flour and tossing it into her face. Harrison Parker was the name Harry had grown up with, even though he knew it wasn't his real one. Sirius was the one who altered the documents, Remus told him once. The name was just the one he used in public, for school and such.

"Well... nothing, I guess," Ginny said, tossing her own bit of flour at him, "if you're eighty."

Harry abandoned his pasty and reached for a handful of flour, holding it over Ginny's head and pinning her against the counter.

"And what exactly is your name, Ginny?" he demanded. "Virginia? That's the name of a ninety-year old woman!"

Ginny squawked with irritation as Harry slowly dropped the flour, covering her red hair in powdery white. "Argh. Harry!"

Harry just laughed as she blew out a breath, sending up a puff of flour.

"Come on, tell me," he demanded. "Is it Virginia?"

Ginny narrowed her eyes at him, struggling to break away from where his strong legs had her pinned. "No, *Harrison*," she growled. Behind her, she scrambled to gather a handful of her own flour. Harry's efforts to stop her ended up putting him in closer contact than ever with her and the moment grew heated.

They both stopped struggling, frozen inches from each other.

'Kiss her,' Harry's mind demanded. He licked his lips and leaned forward just a bit, only to get a full face of flour. Ginny cackled in delight, breaking away from him finally and scooting across the kitchen.

Harry took a deep breath, grateful that her playful attitude had intervened and stopped him from making a complete fool out of himself.

"I can't believe you started a flour fight," Ginny teased.

Harry laughed awkwardly, trying to distract himself, and his body, from noticing just how extremely attractive she was. It wasn't working.

"Hey," Harry protested, just barely holding onto his self control. He blinked away the flour in his face and busied his shaking hands finishing the last pasty. "You started it, making fun of my name, *Virginia*."

"It's Ginevra, okay?" Ginny asked, moving to stand next to him. Her arm brushed his and Harry sucked in a breath. This wasn't helping... *When faced with an opponent of great size and numbers...*

Damnit, even reciting field manuals wasn't going to help this.

"I like it," he said honestly. "It... it fits you."

"No it doesn't," Ginny protested, scoffing at him and reaching for the flannel to clean up the mess they'd made. "It sounds so... old."

Harry swallowed thickly when she looked up at him. "It's lovely," he protested softly.

"Thanks," she smiled. The timer on the cooker sounded and Ginny slowly pulled away from him, her eyes searching his for... something. Harry wasn't sure what, but perhaps she'd been trying to decide if he was lying or not.

"I'm setting the timer for thirty minutes," she informed him. "When it goes off, put a bit of butter in each slice in the pasties and then put them back in for another thirty minutes." She looked at him over her shoulder and Harry forced himself to nod, rather than keep admiring her rear. "I'm going to go shower to get this muck out of my hair."

Harry nodded again, not trusting himself with saying anything more.

* * *

Ginny lay in bed that night, thinking over what had happened in the kitchen. For just the briefest moment, when Harry had her pressed against the counter... she'd had the strongest urge to just wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him.

Thank heavens she'd come to her senses before she'd really messed everything up. She'd needed the quick escape that the shower had offered her to be able to think again. But her thoughts hadn't been far from his body pressed against her, making all kinds of fantasies fill her brain.

"Good that we're being realistic, Ginevra," Ginny sneered in an acidic tone. She flopped over in the bed, punching her pillow into a ball and stuffing it under her head.

She pressed her eyes closed, willing the images to leave her mind. It was hard to do. Harry was just so damned sexy in her fantasies.

"Just go to sleep, Ginny," she mumbled into the dark room.

She wasn't sure how long she was actually asleep before something woke her. She sat up, clutching the wand she kept under her pillow, and listening—alert for the sound again.

Maybe it was just Harry, getting up to use the loo.

She jumped out of bed when the sound came again—a cry. And it was coming from Harry's room.

Ginny stowed her wand in the waistband of her pyjama pants, pulling her tank top over the handle to hide it. She silently moved out of her room and to Harry's door, tilting her head so that she could listen again.

"No!" he cried out, and the sound of thrashing.

Ginny bit her lip, wondering the best thing to do. It sounded like a bad nightmare to her. She hoped he wouldn't be embarrassed later, but it was her turn to comfort him, like he had done to her so many nights.

"Harry?" she called out, knocking firmly on the door. "Harry, wake up." She knocked again, before wincing, realizing her 'knocking' sounded a lot like 'pounding'.

"Just a minute," Harry's muffled voice called out.

Ginny nodded, moving across the hall and sliding down the wall, so that she was sitting on the floor. She could see him in her head—about as far from her fantasy earlier as possible—groggily pulling away from the nightmare, frantic to understand that he was home, in bed, rather than wherever his demons took him.

She shuddered against the coolness of the hallway. Her wand was digging into her hip and she adjusted it so that it was tucked under her arm, pressed against her bare skin under her shirt.

The opening door startled her and Harry shuffled out, his bare feet barely lifting along the floorboards.

"Are you alright, Gin?" he asked, his voice thick from sleep.

She couldn't help but chuckle, looking up at him as he squinted down at her. "I'm fine," she shrugged a shoulder. He nodded, moving to stand beside her and then sinking down so that his upper arm rubbed against hers.

Not sure how to bring it up, because she hated talking about her nightmares, Ginny fumbled for his hand, clasping it in her hand.

"I started having the dreams when I was fourteen," she whispered. Her words made him tense, but he kept her hand in his. "Having a vivid imagination is a curse."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, and Ginny swore to herself. She'd taken a huge chance opening up to him, but apparently, Harry didn't feel—

"I was almost sixteen when they came for me. That was..." his voice broke and he shook his head, swallowing thickly, "a bad year for me."

Ginny's heart pounded in her chest and something started to burn deep inside her, somewhere behind her heart.

"It's even worse when they have some reality mixed in."

He nodded and gave her hand a slight squeeze. "They come and go now," he admitted. "I haven't... they aren't always this bad."

"Yeah," she nodded, yawning and resting her head against his shoulder. He shifted in his spot a bit, but didn't move away from her.

He yawned widely, and then swiped at his eyes. They sat in silence, on the cold floorboards in their

hallway.

“Thanks,” he finally whispered. Ginny smiled and nodded her head against his arm.

“Anytime, Harry,” she answered honestly. His clean, bed-warm scent washed over her and Ginny breathed it in deep.

“We’re really fucked up, aren’t we?” Harry’s voice whispered. He reached up and rubbed his eyes. Ginny pulled back and looked at him, trying to see anything in the darkness of the hallway.

“Yeah,” she replied softly. “But at least we’re fucked up together.” She fought a grimace at how that sounded coming out, but Harry must have thought it was a great joke, because he chuckled and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, tugging her into his embrace. Ginny closed her eyes and let his warmth flood into her, accepting what comfort he gave, and trying to give a little back.

* * *

Harry was late getting up, and he was grouchy. The nightmare a few nights ago had shaken him badly, although he had to admit the time spent in the hallway with Ginny had made it well worth it. Sitting next to her, their hands intertwined while they talked quietly—it had been heaven. Until Harry had tried to go back to sleep. And then another type of nightmare had taken its place.

Harry had always been told he had a very vivid imagination. Right now, it was a curse rather than a blessing. Two nights of erotic-as-hell dreams were making him tired constantly, as well as making his privates a bit sensitive from all the... extra attention.

Ginny had knocked on his door this morning, explaining that she was going shopping. Harry had just grunted, something Ginny found incredibly funny as she had laughed, and rolled back over, burying his head under the pillow.

When he was sure she was gone, he crept out from his cave and lumbered across the hall to the bathroom. If he didn’t see her today, he didn’t have to think about her. Maybe he could make it through the whole shower without—

“Damnit,” he growled, staring at the lacy black bra hanging over the shower rod. He grimaced and reached for it to rip it down. His hand, however, hovered over it before his fingers traced the barely-there cup.

He draped the lingerie over Ginny’s towel on the rack and moved to open the shower. He could do this, he could blot out the image of that wonderfully lacy bra, encasing what he imagined to be the world’s most perfect breasts...

Harry stopped his motion, hovering on the side of the shower. Inside, on the floor was a matching set of underwear... a thong, by the lack of fabric, Harry realized, his heart jumping into his throat.

“Damnit! Damnit!”

So much for that resolution, he growled. Careful not to touch the fabric—he knew he couldn’t handle touching... *that*—Harry levitated it out to hang with the bra.

Today was going to be brutal again.

* * *

Ginny collapsed, completely exhausted, onto the sofa, bags scattering out of her arms and onto the floor. She glanced around, seeing that Harry's trainers that always sat at the end of the sofa were gone, and his coat wasn't hanging on its peg. She was alone in the flat.

Hermione and her mother, Kate, had dragged her all over Muggle London searching for just the perfect dress for the Maid Of Honor. After trying on no less than twenty different dresses in various pastel shades that made her feel very much like an egg at Easter, they had gone back to the first dress Ginny herself had chosen to model.

The pale lavender color set off her red hair nicely and the cut and softness of the fabric fit her like a glove. She cringed at the thought of the strappy sandals that they had found to match though. The heels were at least three inches and could not ever be comfortable. Reaching into the bag beside her, Ginny pulled out the box and cast aside the tissue paper to pull out one of the shoes.

"I could always charm them, I suppose," she mused out loud to the empty flat. "A nice cushioning spell and something to keep them from sinking into the ground. A few flicks of my wand will make them almost as comfortable as my house slippers." She couldn't help a girlish giggle at the thought of wearing blue fuzzy slippers with the elegant dress. The shoe dangled from her finger and she studied it.

And the lingerie... oh the wonderful lingerie that Kate had insisted needed to go under the dress. Ginny giggled as she tossed the shoes behind her and reached into the bag, removing the strapless white bra and lacy knickers. They were gorgeous, Ginny had to admit, and cost more than Ginny would spend on underthings in a year. She did have a very nice set of black lingerie, but she took very good care of it, hand washing it and letting it drip-dry.

Her fingers played along the edge of lace and she remembered how everything had felt when she was all dressed up. Ginny couldn't remember ever feeling prettier; even when she was thirteen and Neville had taken her to the Yule Ball. And this whole outfit was something she was certainly looking forward to being seen in. Perhaps she'd have to invite Harry...

"Bah," she protested, stuffing everything back in the bag and banishing it to her bedroom.

A loud "oof" sounded from the hallway and Ginny jumped to her feet, her wand held aloft.

"Bloody hell!" Harry cried. "I'm *summoning* her underwear now!"

Ginny inched forward, peeking into the hallway to see Harry lying spread eagle on the floor, covered in her dress and shoes, her knickers and bra in his hands.

She stared at him, and he looked up at her, his face flushing as he tossed the lace away from him.

"Erm..."

Chapter 6: Mating Rituals

“Bloody hell,” Ginny mused out loud as she stood in the hallway frozen. The realization of Harry’s words, along with the shock on his face when he looked at her, standing with her wand held aloft in front of her made her repeat it again.

“I,” Ginny cleared her throat. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...” She gestured to him and Harry scrambled up, gathering her things into a rough sort of ball, and holding it out to her. He wouldn’t quite meet her eyes until she had the whole bundle in her arms.

“Did you... did you just say you... *summoned*...”

Harry’s face darkened further, something that Ginny wasn’t sure was physically possible, and he scratched his head. “Er... yeah.” His eyes kept darting to her wand and she wasn’t sure whether to keep it where it was, or try and sneak it back behind her.

Harry studied her for a moment before shrugging one shoulder and shoving his hands deep in his pockets. “I think maybe we’d *both* better explain.”

Ginny’s mind raced to catch up with the situation. Harry slowly reached into his back pocket and pulled out a sleek, dark wand, holding it out in front of him.

No... That meant... he knew about magic... that he was...

The two continued to stare in silence before Harry sighed. “It seems as if we’ve both been hiding something,” he said softly.

“I,” Ginny started again and then shrugged. “I have anyway.” She took a deep breath. “I’m a witch, Harry.” She braced for his reaction and then glanced up at him to see a small smile on his face.

“Well, that’s a relief, Ginny, because I’m a wizard.”

Now that the truth was out there, Ginny could put together a few things she’d noticed that pointed directly to that fact, although she was sure he hid it better than she did. Finally, she smiled and then laughed.

“What are the odds?” she asked with a grin.

Harry ruffled the back of his hair and awkwardly shrugged. He bounced his wand against his leg, small sparks falling to the ground. “I was just thinking the same thing. And, I don’t think either of us hid it very well.”

Ginny just smiled. “It would have taken me awhile to guess with you.”

“Yes,” Harry admitted as he shifted in place. “Well, that was because I was raised surrounded by Techs, whereas, I would assume—”

“Techs?” Ginny asked, a confused expression on her face.

"I think you call them Muggles here," he explained. "In America, they are referred to as Techs, because they rely on technology instead of magic." Ginny nodded. "Your family is all magical then?" he asked.

Ginny smirked. "Pureblood as they come," she agreed. "Although we fought against You-Know-Who in the war." She started at the dark look that came over his features and then shrugged it off. Maybe he had lost someone close to him in the war.

"But my dad has this obsession with Muggles, and I guess it rubbed off a bit," she continued with a smile.

"A bit?" Harry asked with a raised eyebrow.

Ginny grinned sheepishly. She knew that many Muggle things fascinated her—his laptop and entertainment system particularly.

"And what would your family say if they knew you were living with a wizard, and not a muggle?"

Ginny returned his mischievous smile and shrugged. "I'm not sure it will make much of a difference. You're still a man. Dad's come to accept it alright, but Mum's still against the idea. The boys... well, I'm not sure it would matter who you were, even the Prince or something. They'll be against it no matter what."

"Well," Harry sighed, tucking his wand away and nodding toward the living room, indicating that she should follow him. "Now that we're both out in the open, as it were, life around here should be a little less awkward."

Ginny nodded in agreement, blinking as she followed him to the sofa. "I won't have to wait until you leave to use a cleaning spell anymore. And I can stop spraying cleaner around to convince you that I actually cleaned the bathroom."

Harry chuckled, relaxing back into the deep cushions. He lazily rolled his head her way. "And I can have Hedwig come to any window, and not just my bedroom," he said, oblivious to her strange look.

"Hedwig?"

He nodded and clicked his tongue loudly. A rustling from the other room startled her and a large snowy owl glided through the hallway and landed on Harry's outstretched arm, clicking her beak at him and ruffling her feathers.

Ginny just laughed in understanding. "She's beautiful, Harry," she complimented.

"Hedwig, meet Ginny. Ginny, this is Hedwig."

"Pleased to meet you," Ginny said as she rubbed the back of her finger along the soft white feathers on the bird's puffed out chest. "And now I have someone I want you to meet. Armstrong?"

The mottled dark brown owl that she'd tried so hard to keep hidden these past months fluttered onto her arm and Harry raised an eyebrow.

"*That's* your bird?" He seemed more than a little surprised and Ginny narrowed her eyes at him.

"Yeah." Ginny stroked Armstrong's back. "I've had him for a couple of years now. I bought him after I left school."

"I think your Armstrong is Hedwig's boyfriend. I've caught him bringing gifts to her lately. I didn't know where he'd come from."

His words struck her as funny and Ginny watched as the smaller owl preened himself in front of a disinterested Hedwig.

"Or at least he's trying to be."

They both laughed as Armstrong did a funny little dance and hopped over to Harry's shoulder, side stepping down his arm to get closer to Hedwig. The white owl didn't rebuff him, but considered him before quietly nipping at Harry's hand affectionately.

"Hogwarts?" Harry asked and Ginny glanced at him, confused for a moment, but then stunned that he would know where she went to school.

"How did you..."

"My Godfather and a friend went there," he explained hastily. "My parents as well. If I'd stayed in England I would have gone there also."

"That would have been interesting," Ginny said thoughtfully. "I wonder if we would have been friends." The thought was a strange one, but it also thrilled her. Maybe they would have been more than friends.

Harry shrugged a shoulder. "I don't know. I like to think so."

* * *

Harry lay in bed the next morning, his hands clasped behind his head as he stared at the ceiling. His dreams had returned to normal, innocuous run-of-the-mill dreams, thankfully.

Yesterday's revelations had both relieved Harry, and made things much more complicated. It wasn't until later in the day that things had really started to fall into place in his mind—and he nearly panicked.

Weasley.

Why in the hell hadn't he made the connection before? Of course Weasley couldn't be that common of a name. There had been two Weasley's in the army—perhaps two of Ginny's older brothers. Yet Harry had allowed himself to ignore circumstance and all the signs that he'd had. And now that he was in so deep... there was no way of backing out without seeming like a coward—scratch that—he'd *be* a coward if he backed out now.

Yet despite the threat to himself, the idea of the press knowing where he was and the public wanting to know more about him—Harry wanted to explore this... whatever it was, with Ginny.

And, even though it terrified him more than a bit, it also thrilled him. He was tired of darting in and out of shadows. And he'd been Harrison Parker for so long, that sometimes he forgot who he was. Then again, how the public perceived Harry Potter wasn't who he was either.

Harry supposed the truth lay somewhere in the middle—a truth very few people had ever seen. Ginny had probably seen more of the real Harry Potter, minus all the prophecy garbage, than anyone other than Sirius and Remus, perhaps.

One day, he promised himself, he would tell her everything.

Ginny was already up and moving when Harry came out of his bedroom. She grinned at him and levitated a plate of scrambled eggs and toast straight to him.

"Now I can wow you with my household spells. I assure you, I'm a much better cook when I use my wand." Her smiling face eased his concerns just a bit more, and Harry was able to eat.

"I was wondering," Ginny said, curling her legs up under her on the chair and casually stirring her tea. "Now that the secret is out... Have you ever been to Diagon Alley?"

Harry chewed his bite thoughtfully and shook his head. "I've gone once, but I didn't spend much time there." He didn't add that he'd been checking his glamour charms to see if anyone recognized him at all.

"Do you... maybe want to go with me this afternoon?" Ginny asked, her cheeks turning slightly pink.

The thought both thrilled and terrified him. "Yeah," he answered before his brain could analyze it all. If he was going to do this... *really do this*... he needed to learn to relax more. He was comfortable living as a Muggle, but that's not really what he was. Maybe it was time to let the aura slip, just a fraction. "It sounds... fun."

Hours later, and two ice cream sundaes, of which he'd eaten the majority of, Harry and Ginny were laughing and walking down Diagon Alley together. Ginny seemed almost giddy with excitement, pointing out this and that to him, as if Harry had never before seen barrels full of potions supplies, or walls full of owls waiting to be sent out with the post.

But he was happy to let her play tour guide and simply enjoy spending time with her. Her smile was infectious and Harry, once again, found himself wondering if he'd ever smiled so much in his life.

"Come on," she tugged at his arm. "I've saved the best for last." Harry eyed her warily, but allowed her to wrap her arm tightly through his and drag him off to wherever she wanted.

"Quality Quidditch Supplies," she said, grandly throwing her arm toward the storefront. Harry grinned. He loved Quidditch and had missed openly following the games when he'd been hiding his magical heritage from Ginny.

In fact, he'd actually played on his school team, as a Seeker—although they hadn't seen much playing time as it was such a small school.

"I was thinking about getting a new broom," he mused as he took her hand in his and began tugging

her forward.

“You fly?” she asked, both surprise and delight lighting her face.

“Of course, I fly, Gin,” he scoffed. “I’m the best flyer you’ll ever see.” He felt a bit arrogant saying that, but she laughed.

“Next to me,” she proclaimed, poking him in the side. “I could have played professionally, you know.”

Harry spun on his heel, his jaw dropping open. “Really?”

Ginny’s cheeks flushed and she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, glancing around the crowded store. “Yeah,” she shrugged. “I could have.”

“Why didn’t you?” Harry asked quietly. She chewed the side of her lip for a minute before shrugging one shoulder.

“I don’t know, really.”

He could tell she was lying—she always did that thing with her lip when she was—but he let it drop anyway. If she wanted to tell him, she would.

“Come on,” she urged him forward again, weaving in and out of the wizards intent on studying every bit of Quidditch gear on display.

Harry understood completely, he could spend hours here inspecting every stitch and every twig.

“This is the newest broom out,” Ginny nodded toward the large display against one wall of the store.

“The Firestorm,” Harry nodded in awe. “I read about it in Quidditch Weekly, but they were delayed in production and didn’t make it into—”

“Which Broomstick,” Ginny nodded, grinning enthusiastically. Something sparkled in her eye and Harry grinned, reaching for her hand again. His stomach did a funny sort of flip as she turned back to him, her eyes alight with some sort of fire.

“I had a Firebolt once,” Harry admitted, reaching out to stroke the perfectly shaped twigs of the broom. “It was destroyed... well, in an accident.” He flushed and glanced around the room, seeing the many witches and wizards. A small part of him wondered if they’d been alone, would he have told her that it had been destroyed in the war? That he’d been riding it and been shot out of the sky?

Perhaps, his pounding heart answered back.

Ginny’s eyes went wide. “You had a Firebolt? I always wanted to ride one of those.”

Harry glanced at her again, silently vowing to buy one of these brooms and let her ride it. Hell, he might even give it to her if she would smile at him like that again.

“I never replaced it,” he mused, forcing his eyes to admire the broom, instead of the witch. “Maybe one day I will.”

They stood in silence for a few minutes before Ginny tugged him further along the wall, pointing out various other brooms.

“This is what I have,” she said, letting go of his hand to pull a shiny new Cleansweep down off of the shelf. She admired it for a minute, running her hand lovingly up and down the shaft before handing it over to Harry.

Harry swallowed thickly, appreciating just how beautiful Ginny looked right now. Her hair was wind blown from the walk along the alley and her cheeks were pink. That might have been from the heat of the shop, or her excitement of talking about Quidditch. There was no doubt, her eyes really lit up when she talked about the sport.

He stared at her for a moment and then flushed, looking down at the broom. “It’s a good broom,” he nodded. “The twig alignment is right and it’s a fast model. You played Chaser?”

Ginny nodded. “I did.” Her eyes sparkled again and her fingers lifted to trace the broom handle once more.

Harry smiled and leaned forward, whispering into her ear. “If you love it that much, you should have played—no matter what anyone said.” The last part had been a guess, but her soft gasp confirmed it for him.

She opened her mouth to reply, but was cut off by a couple approaching them.

“Ginny?”

“Ron, Hermione!” Ginny greeted who Harry assumed was one of her brothers because of all the red hair—the next oldest, his brain kicked in at the last moment. “What are you doing here?”

Harry fidgeted in his place, reaching up to scratch the back of his neck as the redheaded man sized him up.

“I needed to pick up some books I ordered from Flourish and Blotts, and Ron wanted to check that the new Quidditch Regulations books had been distributed.”

Ginny nodded, leaning back into Harry, who cleared his throat.

“Oh, I’m sorry—”

“Ron Weasley.” Harry glanced down at the hand that was offered to him.

“Harry Parker,” he replied, gripping Ron’s hand firmly and smiling.

Hermione, Harry guessed this was Ron’s fiancé, he was pretty sure that’s what Ginny had mentioned, gasped, her hand covering her mouth.

“But... I thought...”

“Harry’s a wizard,” Ginny explained shooting him a glance that showed she was entirely too amused with shocking them.

“Oh,” Hermione said, deflating just a bit. “Wow... when did you—”

Ginny cleared her throat, glancing around them. “We kind of... accidentally found out after both trying to hide it for two months.”

Ron started to chuckle. “Of all the luck, Ginny...”

“I know,” Ginny said, giving a shy glance to Harry. “I have all the luck.”

Harry stomach flip-flopped and he looked away, afraid to blush in front of her brother. Who knew what Ron would do if he smelled fear... or worse, attraction...

“How about we get a drink at the Leaky?” Ron asked, motioning toward the door.

Harry breathed deeply, nodding. “That sounds like a great idea to me.” Ginny and Hermione agreed and the four left the store, walking casually to the Leaky Cauldron at the beginning of the Alley.

* * *

Ron watched as Harry, this man who was completely different than the evil, vile man whom he’d stayed awake at night picturing his sister living with, held the door for the two women. He wasn’t sure what to think having been blindsided by Ginny’s announcement that Harry was actually magical. This just didn’t figure into his plans at all.

“We only have a few minutes, actually,” Hermione protested. “We’ve got a meeting with the baker today.” Ron wanted to protest that the damned baker could just wait. If they let Ginny go, Ron might never get the chance to question this Harry character thoroughly. Ginny had kept him well hidden for two months.

“Ron and Hermione are getting married in May,” Ginny explained. “And poor Ron is being drug all over the country picking out flowers and fabric swatches.” She laughed and Ron grimaced. It was true, but he wasn’t dumb enough to admit that he hated it to Hermione.

“It’s not so bad,” he admitted. Harry caught his eye and smirked. Ron was taken aback that Harry seemed to be making a joke with him.

“So, Harry,” Hermione turned toward him, “what do you think of Diagon Alley? Is it anything like where you grew up? Ginny mentioned that it was in the States. Where at, exactly?” Ron barely bit back a laugh. No doubt Hermione’s mind was whirling, trying to figure Harry out even faster than he was. Although, he was willing to let things unfold and see if Harry tripped himself up. Hermione wouldn’t be content until all of his life was displayed on a table in front of her and she could analyze every last bit.

Ron was surprised at the glance that Harry shared with Ginny. It was apparent that Ginny had at least informed him of Hermione’s habits. “It’s wonderful, just like I imagined it was. Ginny’s been giving me the grand tour.”

Hermione took a breath again, probably to ask what kind of pants Harry preferred, and Ron took the chance to intervene. These questions were all well and good, but Ron needed the right information.

“So, Harry,” he asked, edging in between Harry and Ginny, bumping her closer to Hermione, “what is it that you do for a living? Ginny wasn’t really clear on that.”

“Er...” Harry glanced at Ginny once more before answering. “I work for the government, actually. I, er... I analyze security and consult on upgrades and defaults.”

Ron stared at him, trying to decipher exactly what that meant.

“How interesting,” Hermione broke in. “Do you specialize in Muggle security only, or is your focus Magical? I read an article once about how many governments are incorporating both—”

“That must pay well,” Ron rode over the top of her, wincing when she stepped on his foot.

Harry smiled, obviously not missing the byplay. “I usually work with both,” he nodded toward Hermione and then turned back to Ron. “And, yes, it pays well.”

Ginny laughed as they reached the gateway back to the Leaky Cauldron, pulling her wand and tapping them in sequence. “Let him breathe, you two,” she scolded. Ron flinched when she took Harry’s hand in hers to lead him into the pub.

Ron glared at their clasped hands and spun to look at Hermione, who wore an extremely amused look.

“Flatmates, my arse,” Ron hissed, pointing to where Ginny and Harry had disappeared.

“Oh, Ron,” Hermione soothed him, straightening his collar as she leaned up to kiss his cheek. “You and I held hands when we were friends, before we were dating.”

“Yeah,” Ron grumbled, “but I fancied you at the time.” He scowled at the pub entrance, hesitant to go in just in case they were kissing when he walked in.

“Come on, Ron,” Hermione took his hand. “Don’t push, please. If there is something there, let them figure it out on their own.”

“You think there is?” he asked, hating the whining tone that broke into his voice.

“I don’t know,” Hermione enunciated. “But you know what will happen if you push Ginny. She’ll retreat and it will take forever for her to trust you again.”

Ron thought about that and conceded that she had a point. Ginny had willingly shared something about her life and didn’t shuffle Harry off when he and Hermione had shown up.

“Alright,” he grumbled, following her inside.

Nothing was out of the ordinary inside, puzzling Ron again. Ginny sat next to Harry, sipping at a Butterbeer and laughing at something Harry had said. They seemed like... good mates. Ron sighed and ordered two Butterbeers from the passing waitress for he and Hermione.

“Harry and I were talking about going to a film next week,” Ginny offered. “The two of you should come along.”

“Really?” Hermione perked up. “That would be brilliant. We haven’t been out in ages.”

“We just went out last week,” Ron protested.

“I meant to a Muggle place,” Hermione patted his hand patronizingly and Ron shrugged. He wasn’t really comfortable in the Muggle world. He never knew how, exactly, to act or if something he did without thinking would expose the whole Wizarding world.

“That would be fun,” Harry nodded. “Maybe we could go out to dinner as well.”

Ginny grinned. “Ohh, we could take them to that little Greek place, the one that had that amazing Souvlaki.”

Harry returned her smile, facing her completely. “Or Wong’s,” he suggested.

Ginny groaned in appreciation. “I haven’t had Chinese forever.”

“It’s only been two weeks, Gin,” Harry protested.

Ron’s mouth went dry at the banter between the two of them. Hermione might not be able to see it yet, but there was definitely something there between them. He caught her eye and she reached under the table, patting his knee.

Ginny certainly seemed comfortable in Harry’s presence, maybe too comfortable. If Ron hadn’t heard Ginny’s denials, he would have sworn they were a couple.

“Excuse me,” Harry said, slipping out of his chair and nodding toward the small hallway that lead to the loo. “I’ll be right back.”

Harry was barely out of sight before Hermione pounced on Ginny. “He’s wonderful, Ginny,” she squealed quietly.

“He is,” Ginny agreed calmly, glancing at the hallway. “But the two of you have to promise me something.”

Ron took a drink of his Butterbeer, smirking. There was always a catch with Ginny.

“You have to promise not to tell anyone that Harry’s a wizard,” she said quietly. “I’m planning on taking him to the Burrow soon.”

“That’ll go over well,” Ron smirked. He would definitely have to find out when she was planning that so he could be there to watch.

“Ron,” Hermione scolded softly before turning back to Ginny. “I don’t really want to lie, Ginny.”

“I’m not asking you to,” Ginny shook her head. “Just... keep quiet for a while.”

“What’s in it for us?” Ron grinned. “Come on, Ginny, you remember how this game is played.”

His breath left him when a very feral smile spread across her face. “Oh, I remember alright. Keep quiet, Ron, or I’ll tell Mum about that tattoo you got when you and the twins went to France.”

Ron paled, gaping at her. “How the hell do you know about that?” he demanded in a low hiss.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Ginny grinned. She glanced over and her smile softened as Harry wove through the tables.

“Deal?” she smirked.

“He’ll play along,” Hermione assured her, over Ron’s sputtered protests. “Won’t you?”

Ron scowled, sitting back in the seat and crossing his arms.

“What did I miss?” Harry asked, taking in the variety of expressions. He seemed highly amused and it agitated Ron.

“Ginny’s evil,” he growled out. Maybe he could persuade Harry to be on his side. ‘Great,’ he thought, ‘he’s supposed to be the enemy, and now you’re trying to win his support.’

Harry laughed and nudged Ginny with his shoulder. “I think that’s one of her better traits.”

Or not.

Ron sighed, recognizing defeat when he saw it.

* * *

Ginny shifted in her seat, taking a breath and willing herself to just do it. Just fucking do it, as Harry was fond of saying.

Her mother was across the room, filling the awkward silence by fixing tea and small plates of biscuits.

“It’s nice that you’ve dropped by to see me.”

Ginny almost growled at the tone, but she let it wash over her, intent on her goal. “I know I haven’t been good about that,” she admitted, her fingertip tracing the years of grooves and scars in the wood. “And... I’m sorry.”

The words rankled. Ginny had never been very good at admitting she was wrong. Perhaps it was a trait left over from defending herself against six older brothers.

Her mother stopped all movement and looked back at her. “I haven’t given you much reason to want to come home, have I?”

Ginny’s jaw almost dropped on the table. Was that... an apology? From Molly Weasley?

“Erm... how are things?” Ginny recovered before she could say something to get herself back into trouble.

“Good,” her mother replied in a careful tone. “Hermione’s been over several times in the past few weeks, working on plans.”

Ginny instantly felt guilty. She’d been so swept up in the new flat, and Harry, that she’d completely neglected her duties as Maid-of-Honor, other than the one shopping trip.

“I’ll do better, Mum,” she promised.

Her mother’s look softened and Ginny knew she’d just won a few points. “It means a lot to her, Ginny, to have you help her. You know she doesn’t have that many friends.” The tea kettle whistled and Ginny helped her mother prepare two cups.

“I know.” Ginny took a small biscuit and nibbled at the edge of it. “I got carried away in being on my own, I guess. And I’ve let you all down. But... being away, it’s been good for me, Mum.

“Living on my own... it makes me realize that I can’t blame others for judging me. I felt as if everyone was always watching, waiting for me to do something stupid again.” She held up her hand when her mother tried to respond.

“That doesn’t mean that I think I’ve been treated fairly, but I know that I’ve blown things out of proportion over the years.”

“We have been a bit harsh, I’ll admit,” her mother said softly, running her finger around the edge of her cup. “But we only meant well. You have to understand that when we... found out what had happened... it nearly broke your father and I. And your brothers...” Tears crept up and Ginny reached out to squeeze her mother’s hand.

Today’s conversation was the most they’d ever really spoken about things in almost six years. Ginny felt as if things were finally going to fall into place.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Ginny protested. “I was old enough to be responsible for my choices.”

“But what happened to you, Ginny, should never have happened to a girl so young. The Wizengamot... and then the press...” More tears fell and Ginny shrugged a shoulder.

“It’s in the past, Mum. I still...” she hesitated, wondering how much to reveal. “I still have nightmares about it at times... but it’s getting better. And being on my own has helped that.”

Her mother was quiet for a minute. The emotions warred on her face: gratitude, guilt and disapproval, and, finally, some measure of acceptance. “I’m glad.”

Ginny let out a small breath of relief.

“And... how are things with... your flatmate?” Her mother’s tone was too casual for the question not to have been sitting on the tip of her tongue from the moment Ginny had walked in the door.

Ginny almost rolled her eyes, but looked down instead, fiddling with her cup. The urge to tell her

mother that Harry was a great shag was only just suppressed.

"It's great, actually," Ginny offered instead. "Harry's very easy to live with. He's relaxed and funny..."

"Your father thought highly of him," her mother sniffed, finishing up the last of her tea before helping herself to another scone. "Said he seemed like a good boy."

Ginny smiled, fondly remembering how easily Harry had been able to win over the Weasley patriarch with a few mentions of airplanes.

"I've actually been thinking about inviting him over for dinner... here," Ginny admitted, getting around the main reason for her visit today. "I thought I'd give him a little time to get used to me before I tossed him to the lions."

Surprisingly, her mother smiled, just a bit. "That might have been the best idea."

"Ron met him the other day," Ginny admitted. "I think he was rather impressed."

Out of the corner of her eye, Ginny thought that she saw her mother give a very shrewd look. Uh oh. Time to head that off fast.

"Harry has been a really great friend, Mum. And you know I can use all the friends I can get."

The subject seemed dropped when her mother began gathering up the tea. "I would love to have your friend over, Ginny, but I do worry... he's a *iMuggle*, /i dear. What on earth would he think of this place?"

Ginny chuckled, wondering whether she should admit Harry's Wizarding heritage or not. Deciding that watching her family squirm when she did bring Harry would be more fun, she closed her mouth.

"Harry's a very tolerant person, Mum. And I have faith in your ability to mask anything out of the ordinary." She chuckled at the slightly overwhelmed look settled on her mother's face.

"How about Sunday?" she asked, grinning.

"Er... alright, dear. I'm sure your father can help me prepare. Perhaps Hermione..."

Ginny patted her on the shoulder. "That's a great idea, Mum." She'd of course, have to get to Hermione first, so she didn't spill the beans, but that shouldn't take much persuading.

"We'll be here," Ginny grinned.

* * *

Ginny held the door open as Harry struggled inside with an armful of take away. They were both laughing hysterically at the impression Harry had just been doing of the man they'd bought the Chinese food from.

"You're so mean," she mock-glared at him.

"I am not," Harry laughed, moving into the kitchen to deposit their dinner. "Did he, or did he not have a piece of nylon covering his head?"

Picturing the strange man again, Ginny erupted into giggles again. It was the sort of thing you saw when going to the theater and seeing actors wear wigs. They'd been speculating the whole way home on what type of wig the man must have been trying on before they'd come into his shop. "Okay... that was funny," she admitted.

She stretched and yawned mightily. "I'm changing into something more comfortable."

"Sounds like a plan," Harry called from the kitchen. His mouth sounded full and she stuck her head in, glaring at him.

"Do *not* eat my orange chicken, you git."

Harry grinned guiltily and shoved the open box away. "Fine, I won't share my fried rice with you."

"Thanks," Ginny called as she moved into her bedroom, releasing her hair from the clip that held it up, "I'll stick with my chow mein."

Harry laughed and Ginny chuckled as she quickly located her track pants and tank top. Today had been fun. Harry had met her after work and they'd gone to the London Zoo—somewhere Ginny had never been before.

They walked for what seemed like miles, chatting about the animals and laughing at the antics of the monkeys. Harry had even talked her into taking a turn on the playground swings.

Being with Harry, she contemplated while she quickly changed, was just fun. He never cared much what they did, as long as they did something. Even walking down the street to the grocery store, or the evening they'd walked back to the bookstore and spent hours laughing, while trying to be quiet, at the books on the shelves.

"What the fuck!"

"Harry?" Ginny called out as she pulled her tank top over her head. Quickly, she darted across the hallway to his bedroom. She'd never been inside before, but she stood behind him in the doorway.

"What the hell are you doing!" Harry roared, taking a giant step forward, the wand in his hand sending sparks showering down to the floor.

A loud squawk sounded and Armstrong flew up from the floor in a mass of claws and wings, flapping right at Harry.

"Harry! Wait!" she screamed, clutching at his arm.

He spun at her after deflecting the owl twice. "He's attacking Hedwig!" he cried, his face pale and livid at the same time. Ginny stepped in front of him, pressing her hands to his chest to get him to back away, her mind whirling as she tried to figure out what was happening.

Armstrong settled on the owl perch, ruffling his feathers menacingly at Harry every few seconds.

Ginny had never seen him act that way.

"Tell me what's going on?" Ginny demanded. "What happened?"

Harry spun away from her, pacing in the room as he ran a hand through his hair, making it stand up on end.

"When I came in, I saw him on top of her... Hedwig's... she's down on the floor and your damned owl was hurting her. He was walking all over her body."

Realization began to set in, as Ginny took in the sight of Hedwig, perfectly fine, resting in a pile of Harry's clothing in the corner, underneath the owl perch.

She opened her mouth to explain what had happened, but a giggle burst forth instead.

"This isn't funny!" Harry roared, glaring at her. "I'm going to kill that owl."

Ginny put her hands up again, stopping him from moving toward Armstrong who beat his wings in a grand display.

"Harry, calm down!" she demanded. "Armstrong wasn't hurting her... they were... mating." She could feel her face heat at the idea. Harry stopped his forward progress, his jaw dropping as he alternately gaped at both her and Hedwig.

"Mating?"

"Yeah, Harry." Ginny bit her lip, trying not to laugh again. Harry was obviously agitated by the whole idea, best not to set him off again. "Haven't you ever seen that before?"

Harry ruffled his hair again, a sure sign he was uncomfortable. "No. Hedwig's never... well..."

Ginny sighed in relief as Harry calmed down. Thankfully, Armstrong seemed to be sensing that this wasn't the right time to continue his activities. Dumb owl, she rolled her eyes.

"Come on," she moved forward, trying to herd Harry out of the room before her luck failed and Armstrong became simply too randy to control himself.

"That was one of my good shirts," Harry moaned, looking down at Hedwig's 'nest'. The bird looked wholly unrepentant and Armstrong postured again before Ginny was able to push Harry out of the bedroom.

"I need a drink," Harry growled, swiftly moving around her and summoned a bottle of Firewhiskey.

Ginny gaped at him. "You've been holding out on me," she growled as Harry poured a generous shot. She snatched it right out from under the bottle and downed it, wincing at the burn.

"Bring that to the sofa," she commanded, taking another glass out of the cupboard.

Harry blinked at her, but followed, stopping only to remove his trainers and untuck his shirt.

“Damned owl,” he growled, flopping onto the leather next to Ginny and splashing whiskey into the glass she held aloft.

“It’s only natural, Harry. You should be happy for them,” she smiled, once again fighting the urge to laugh.

“It’s not natural... it’s... Hedwig.” He scowled at his own drink before taking a swallow.

Ginny peered at him, trying to sense where his irritation was coming from. Was he truly startled and worried for his owl? Or was there something else there?

“Let’s switch to wine,” Ginny suggested, eying Harry’s brooding mood. Somehow she guessed that Harry would be a dark and moody drunk. She quickly returned to the sofa with a dark bottle and poured herself a glass.

“How long has Hedwig been with you?”

Harry raised his hazel eyes to hers and then looked away. “Ten years,” he admitted. “She was a... a gift from my Godfather.”

“And she’s never—”

“No,” Harry shook his head, finishing his drink and then laying back against the sofa. “At least not that I know of. I guess I overreacted a bit.” Ginny raised an eyebrow at him and he rolled his eyes. “Okay, a lot. But, it just... shocked me, I guess.”

They both lapsed into silence and Ginny enjoyed the warm, comfortable feeling that settled between the two of them. This is how it should be, Ginny told herself, taking a sip from her wine. They sat in silence, each drinking their wine, for a long time. Ginny began to wonder if Harry had drifted off to sleep when he poured himself another glass. The Firewhiskey earlier, and now the wine, were giving her a pleasant buzz, softening the edges of her vision and making her feel happy and curious.

“Harry?”

“Yeah.” His voice was lazy and she glanced over to find him lying back, just as she was. She grinned at his profile.

“Are you... have you ever... *been* with a woman?” The question slipped out and Ginny’s eyes went wide, not really believing she’d actually asked it. But she couldn’t deny it had been in her mind for some time. ‘I’m drunker than I thought,’ she scolded herself.

Harry’s eyes opened and he looked at her thoughtfully, his gaze glassy and far away. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “A few.”

Ginny nodded, feeling relief, but also a bit of annoyance at the unknown women. Tonight, with the warmth in her belly, Ginny freely admitted that she fancied Harry. She just didn’t know how to proceed, really. If she admitted it, would he feel the same, or would he just laugh at her.

"How about you?" he asked. "Have you ever... with a guy, you know." His face turned red and Ginny giggled.

"Are you... blushing?"

"No," Harry defended, his cheeks darkening further, even as a smile tugged at his mouth.

"You are," Ginny laughed. "I made you blush."

"Whatever," Harry rolled his eyes. He nudged her shoulder and she pushed back, starting a kind of war over the sofa cushion until they ended up right next to each other, arms rubbing.

"I won!" Ginny crowed, throwing her hands up in victory.

"No way!" Harry laughed, giving her one final shove that sent her sprawling away from him.

"Cheater," Ginny growled. She laughed and then stopped, realizing how relaxed Harry was right now. As much fun as they'd had in the past few weeks, she'd never seen him this open with her, emotionally and about his past.

"I am," Harry nodded, wagging his eyebrows. "Winning is the most important thing, after all."

"I'm glad we agree." She settled back into her spot next to him, curling up into a comfortable position.

"You're avoiding the question," Harry growled, nudging her with his shoulder again.

Ginny stared at him, trying to remember if there had been a question. But Harry wasn't to be deterred. "You... and guys. Have you ever..."

"Had sex?" Ginny asked boldly, grinning at his small grimace. His nose was so cute, scrunched up like that. "If you can't even say it, Harry, then we're not going to talk about—"

"Sex!" Harry blurted out. "I can say it... Have you ever had sex?" He looked a bit like a petulant child, especially when he crossed his arms across his chest.

Ginny laughed and tugged at his hands, making him relax a bit. "I have," Ginny admitted. "While I was at school."

Harry nodded and sipped his wine. The issue seemed to die there and Ginny stared at him, perplexed. Did he want her to continue, or...

"I'm hungry," he observed out of the blue. She started as the take-away cartons hovered in. She hadn't even seen him draw his wand. But it was there in his hand.

Harry grinned, offering her two boxes and a fork. They sat cross-legged on the sofa, knees touching and eating straight out of the boxes.

"How old were you," Ginny asked, "when you first had sex?" She took a large bite of chow mein, sloppily sucking the noodles into her mouth and laughing when one swung up and touched her nose.

She moaned in satisfaction as the food hit her empty stomach. Chinese food had never tasted so good.

Harry sighed and picked at a piece of broccoli before shoving it in his mouth. "Sixteen," he admitted. "She was... this girl from school. I had a kind of crush on her and we started fooling around. One thing led to another." His cheeks flushed again and Ginny giggled at him.

"So... were you a sex-god your first time, or a normal fumbling teenage boy?"

He barked out a laugh, throwing his head back. "Are you kidding me? I had no clue what I was doing. I mean... Sir—er, Sam, that's my Godfather—he told me all about... well..."

"Everything," Ginny shrugged, loving this adorably vulnerable side of Harry. He looked so attractive right now, with his cheeks flushed and his stocking-clad feet folded under him.

"No," Harry shook his head, talking with his mouth full. "Not everything... but, enough to make me curious."

"And the girl?" Ginny asked, stabbing a carrot and stuffing it into her mouth before attacking the other carton in her lap. "I'll bet she was hot!"

"She was pretty," Harry admitted. He lowered his fork and Ginny looked up, her breath catching in her throat at the intense look he was giving her. "But I think you're prettier."

Her cheeks flamed and she smiled just a bit, before occupying herself with her chicken. 'What did he mean by that?' she asked herself. Could he really fancy her, or was he just drunk. She glanced over at the bottle of wine, realizing that they'd finished almost the whole thing. Well, that explained it.

She stuffed another bite of her orange chicken into her mouth and chewed, tasting less of it this time. "I was sixteen also. Michael was a year older. We'd dated for awhile first."

"Michelle was... It was fun," Harry said, a small, far away smile on his face. "But then, some things happened... in my life, and... I had to leave school."

"That must have hurt," Ginny noted, seeing the dark look on his face. It surprised her how quickly it came on, like a thunderstorm in late August, building black clouds in just seconds where the sun had shown before.

"Not because of her," Harry defended, softening a little. "I mean, she was great, but we were both young and... I knew it wasn't really going anywhere, you know."

"Yeah," Ginny nodded, thinking of her two relationships. Neither of them had meant as much as they should have.

"After... well, after school," Harry ruffled his hair and set his food on the floor, draining his wine and refilling the glass with what little was still in the bottle. "There was this one woman... We dated for a bit, but it just wasn't... enough."

Ginny pondered that for a minute, taking another small bite. "Witch?"

"Muggle," Harry shrugged, reaching over to steal a bite of her food with the fork he still held. "She... didn't really know who I was, you know. She was just someone to let me not think... about things. It was only a few weeks, really. And then I decided to come here."

"And since then?" Ginny asked. She stared down at her food, the hunger from before dying away quickly as the mood in-between them changed.

Harry shifted in his spot and set his fork down. "No one."

Ginny slid her two boxes down next to Harry's and curled up in the sofa, tucking her feet under her, and leaning on Harry's shoulder.

"Michael and I had been seeing each other for almost a year and we had a big fight. He was being an overprotective git and I didn't appreciate it. We'd been apart for a few weeks when I heard he'd been with another girl—an older girl who'd graduated already. She'd been seeing someone pretty steady while she was in school and I don't know what happened. She ended up marrying the other guy later. Anyway, one of my good friends claimed to have seen them in Hogsmeade, attached at the lips and more."

Harry grunted, but didn't speak, so Ginny continued. Her head began to spin a bit and she pressed her fingers to her eyes, blotting out the fuzzy room in front of her.

"I was furious inside, but felt I didn't have much right to say anything as I was the one who broke it off. Dean was..." she sighed. "I'm ashamed to admit that I used him. Shamelessly." She felt Harry stroke her shoulder in support and felt an overwhelming affection for him sparkle inside her.

"He didn't seem to mind," she said. "It was so strange; I'd made Michael wait so long to touch me. And there I was, in bed with Dean after only a few conversations and a few snogging sessions. I knew it wouldn't last and Dean knew it too. Ron had a fit one day after catching us coming out of the boys' dorm. He threatened to write to Mum and the boys, but I spilled his dirty little secret in the middle of the common room and he never said another word."

"What secret?" Harry asked with a chuckle.

Ginny lifted her head and gave him a saucy smile. "He and Hermione were doing it like rabbits all over the castle. Hermione pretends to be all prim and proper but I've seen what she keeps in her secret drawers." Harry chuckled and wrapped his arm around her as she nestled back in to his side. Ginny felt a bit dirty for airing that laundry, but she knew Harry wouldn't tell anyone, and it seemed that nothing could stay in her head tonight, it slipped right out of her mouth.

"Michael must have heard something because came back to me on his knees." She trailed off thoughtfully, scowling. "Mum thought we were going to get married."

"Why didn't you?" Harry asked. His hand started to play with her hair, lacing his fingers in and out of it gently. It felt incredible and Ginny squirmed, feeling the pleasant sensation awaken her desire for Harry. She was sure he didn't even realize he was touching her that way, let alone what it meant to her.

Ginny felt her face heat and she took a deep breath, trying to bury her restlessness. “He wasn’t the one.”

“Not good enough in bed?” Harry asked. Ginny glanced up at him, surprised that he’d made the joke.

“Not good enough all around,” she said quietly. She swallowed thickly, feeling her head start to spin again as Harry smiled down at her.

“And what about... lately?” he asked, something deep in his tone that she couldn’t quite decipher.

“Not since Michael,” Ginny admitted, shaking her head, looking into his eyes and wishing she had enough courage to tell him that she fancied him. Would it be so hard?

His eyes were glassy as he stared back and Ginny had to blink away the dizziness—she wasn’t sure if it was the intense look he was giving her, or the alcohol.

The silence stretched between them and Harry reached out, sliding a bit of her hair near her temple through his fingers. The desire she’d forced down earlier returned with a vengeance, making her pulse race and her breath become shallow.

“Harry...”

Ginny lifted up on her knees and boldly pressed her lips to his, feeling completely out of control of herself, yet wonderful all the same.

Harry’s mouth opened under hers and his arms came around her, clutching her to his chest. He tasted bitter from the wine and Ginny pressed herself to him.

“Mmmm,” she moaned when his tongue tasted her own. His hair was so soft, much softer than she’d imagined it would be in her fantasies, and her hands buried in it, gently massaging his scalp.

Harry’s hands were firm against her back, rubbing and touching and... wonderful. But somewhere deep in the back of her mind, Ginny realized she couldn’t do this. They were both drunk. They’d both just admitted they were lonely and starved for affection...

This was wrong.

She broke away first, staring at his cloudy eyes blinking back at her.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, feeling her face heat. Quickly, she stood up, stepping over their abandoned food and moved to her bedroom. Once the door closed behind her, Ginny pressed her back to it and slid down to sit on the floor, clutching her knees to her chest. Her lips still tingled and her body remembered the strong, yet tender way he had held her to him.

With any luck, Ginny thought, he won’t remember this in the morning. She’d just pretend it never happened, all the while replaying the event in her head as the most spectacular kiss she’d ever had.

Chapter 7: The Earth Spins

Harry allowed himself to sink deeper and deeper into the kiss, his head spinning. He wasn't quite sure if it was the wine... or the feel of Ginny pressed against him, the way she'd said his name in that breathy... melting kind of voice.

He knew he'd wake up any minute now to find himself in his bed alone with his arms wrapped around his pillow and a raging erection.

Ginny's fingers in his hair, the sharpness of her fingernails on his scalp, made him groan. This had to be real.

He'd never had a kiss anything like this—

And then it ended, just as he'd feared. Ginny pulled away from him, her face red and horrified. Harry couldn't do anything but watch her scramble out of the room. He stayed frozen on the sofa, his lips still tingling from her.

What the hell just happened?

'She was drunk, Potter,' he growled to himself. 'And you were talking about sex...'

Harry scowled at the wine bottle and food containers as he levitated them to the kitchen. So what if she came out and saw him moodily staring at her door, he decided. She'd been the one to initiate the kiss, to get him all worked up and then leave.

'She was drunk,' he reminded himself again, feeling a bit contrite. And so was he. What if... what if *he'd* been the one to actually encourage it? What if... *he'd* embarrassed her the way he'd given over so fully to the sensations?

That would certainly explain why she'd fled so quickly. Harry scowled at the food boxes in his hands and roughly set them into the fridge before walking to his room. He paused at Ginny's room, wondering if he should knock and make sure she was alright. What she might see when she opened the door, however, made him retract his hand from the knock. There he stood, his hair standing on end, his shirt rumpled and a permanent scowl on his face... what an idiot.

Harry shut his door quietly and pressed his fingers to his temples. The pleasant fuzziness caused by the alcohol and the kissing was wearing off, leaving only regret and loneliness in its wake.

The bed was cold when he climbed in, only wearing his boxers and t-shirt. His arms wrapped around the extra pillow, wishing it could be Ginny there instead.

* * *

Harry was making breakfast when Ginny turned off the water. She bit her lip and slowly dried off, not sure how to proceed. Should she pretend nothing happened? Or did she simply face it and deal with the consequences of her recklessness?

Maybe she could take her cue from Harry, she decided as she brushed through her hair. If Harry acted normal, she would act normal. If Harry was noticeably bothered, then she'd bring it up.

"Morning," she said, trying not to sound overly cheerful. "Thank you for the tea." There, in the same spot that it always was, was Ginny's cup of tea. It was prepared perfectly, as well. One slice of lemon on the side, no sugar or cream.

Harry caught her eye for a minute before nodding and turning back to the pan he was cooking eggs in.

"No problem," he mumbled.

Ginny sank down into the chair, knowing that she was going to have to say something, because everything was now different between them. She'd had a horrible mistake and possibly thrown away a friendship, over a drunken kiss, when she knew that Harry didn't feel the same. He was just lonely.

"Harry," she said, concentrating on running her finger around the rim of the cup. "I need to apologize for last night... I didn't mean to get so personal. And..."

"It's okay," Harry said softly, glancing back over his shoulder. He wore a strange look that Ginny couldn't define. "Don't worry about it."

"I don't want you to think..." She trailed off, not sure exactly what she wanted to say.

"You're my friend, Ginny," Harry said, as he slid a fried egg onto her plate. "I was out of line, and I don't want to jeopardize that friendship over one night and a bottle of wine. Maybe we should... just forget it happened." _

Ginny nodded, letting his words sink in. Why did he feel he was out of line?

"Harry, it was me who..."

"It's fine. We'd both had too much to drink," Harry protested. The tightness in his tone made her stop protesting.

Harry seemed as determined as she was to not make this a huge deal. "I think that would be a good idea," Ginny said, firmly. Her heart, however, ached deep inside her. "I, er... I have some hangover potion if you need it."

"Er... that might be a good idea," Harry nodded. He sat down across from her and she could see the dark circles under his eyes and the pale, pasty look of his skin.

"Harry..."

"I kind of... had another shot, or two," he admitted with a guilty shrug, "after you went to bed."

"Harry!" Ginny gaped at him. "Why? And how in the hell are you even conscious now?" Her head reeled, trying to figure out what this meant. Either he wanted to forget the night completely, or... she didn't know what. The thought hurt more than a bit.

"It was stupid," he admitted, scraping bits of egg around the plate but not really eating any.

"Yes, it was," Ginny demanded. Feeling bad for putting him in such a position, Ginny summoned the small bottle of potion from her bedroom. "Here, you need it more than I do."

"Thanks," Harry mumbled, quickly swallowing it, but not meeting her eyes.

"It's best if you sleep it off," she shrugged, playing with her own breakfast.

"Yeah," he admitted. "I might just do that." He stood, banished his plate to the sink and finally looked at her. "I..."

"Harry," Ginny shook her head and came over to him, slowly wrapping her arms around him. "I'm sorry. It was stupid, last night. And, I... I won't ever do that again, I promise you."

He stiffened underneath her as she forced the words out.

"We can forget about it completely," she shook her head, pulling back.

"Alright," he agreed, a slow smile stretching his face. Hesitatingly, he reached up and moved a lock of hair behind her ear. "What are you up to today?"

Ginny looked at him, mesmerized by his hazel eyes. There was something there—had been from the moment she first met him—that was just... different about his eyes. They had a cloudy, swirling quality about them that Ginny just couldn't pinpoint.

"Well, I have to work later, and I was supposed to have lunch with Hermione. But I think I'm going to cancel that and stay around here today."

"Why?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

"Because," she clenched her teeth and softly slugged him in the arm. "I need to stick around her and make sure my best friend doesn't make stupid decisions."

Harry's jaw dropped. "I'm... you're... best friend?"

Ginny wrapped her arms around him again, breathing his scent in deeply and cursing her weak heart. "You are," she admitted, pulling him into another embrace.

Harry held her there for a minute before placing a small kiss against her forehead. "You're my best friend too," he whispered.

Ginny grinned against his chest. "Good," she proclaimed as she pulled back. "Then you'll listen to me when I tell you to get your arse back to bed and sleep it off."

"Yes ma'am," Harry quipped, dodging her arm as it jerked out to grab him.

"Oi!" she called out down the hallway. "No more drinking alone, prat!"

Harry laughed from his bedroom. "Noted."

The bed just wasn't comfortable today, Harry decided. But he couldn't leave the bedroom yet. Ginny still hadn't left for work and every time he'd ventured out, even to use the loo, she'd barked him back inside, lecturing him about hangovers and stupid friends.

The word 'friend' caused mixed feelings in Harry. He'd never really allowed himself to have someone he considered a 'best friend'. Even in school he'd held everyone at arm's distance, afraid that someone might find out his secrets.

But Ginny... she was different. She was the first one he really *wanted* to tell everything to. The thought of her as his best friend created a warm place inside him where he wanted to spend more time exploring.

Then again... it was a double edged sword. Even though it was probably for the best that they forgot about last night completely, it still hurt. He'd replayed every word, every movement, in his head—that had prompted the two late night drinks, along with him finishing off all of the Chinese food well after midnight. Quite simply, Ginny had awoken feelings in him that he'd never fully examined before.

Yes, there was lust. She was an extremely attractive woman and Harry was lonely. But there was so much more to her than just her body.

Could he survive being only her friend? Her best friend?

Harry wasn't sure. But he did know that he was going to have to choose. Because there was simply no way he could be in lo—well, have these feelings for her while she went on with her life. He needed to decide what to do.

"I'm going to leave now," Ginny called from the other side of his door. "I know you're awake, Harry."

He chuckled from his bed. "Yeah, I am."

"Good, try not to die while I'm gone, yeah?" The sarcasm in her voice made him grin.

"I'll do my best."

"Good!" she called back before her voice softened. "Harry, don't do anything stupid, okay?"

Harry swallowed thickly, touched that his best friend was thinking about him like that. It felt... good. "Yeah, I won't."

Silence answered him and he wondered if she was gone already.

"Ginny?"

"Yeah."

"You... you be careful too."

She didn't say anything and Harry closed his eyes picturing her on the other side of the door, her hand splayed over the wood. "I will," she finally said and he could hear her footsteps in the hall, and then the 'pop' of her Apparation.

* * *

Ginny smiled as she realized where she was. Back at Hogwarts. The corridors she walked down were happily familiar with the alcoves and portraits, suits of armor and tapestries.

These were the halls of her young adulthood.

The fact that they were virtually deserted didn't register completely as Ginny walked slowly, her hand trailing along the worn stone in the walls.

The shadows in the hallways got longer as she continued, making Ginny wary. Soon, she was in the dungeons, despite the fact that she hadn't gone down any flights of stairs.

Dark eyes watched her from the corners and Ginny wrapped her arms around herself, picking up her pace to get to the Entrance Hall. She needed to see the sunlight again, to be able to breathe fresh air and escape this clawing, choking feeling.

Mrs. Norris darted out in front of her, making Ginny scream. She clutched at her heart as the cat skittered ahead of her, eyes wide with fright.

"Stupid cat," Ginny muttered, holding her hand out in front of her to block anything from coming at her.

The corner where she was supposed to turn came quickly and she almost ran to it, throwing herself around it, only to stop. The stairway upward wasn't there, only another corridor where a dripping sound was heard echoing along it. The pungent odor of rot made Ginny gag. She couldn't turn around, not with the eyes back there watching her.

She began to run. Perhaps she'd miscalculated how many turns she'd already made... it had to be soon. Her footsteps echoed loudly on the corridor, but she skidded to a stop when she realized where she was. This wasn't the dungeon—it was the corridor outside the Chamber... where everyone had been attacked.

Ginny spun around, stifling a scream when she saw Mrs. Norris, hanging by her tail from a wall sconce. Only she wasn't petrified; blood dripped steadily out of her body into an ever-widening pool on the floor.

"No," Ginny whispered. This wasn't what had happened... Mrs. Norris hadn't died...

She turned away from the sight, only to gag as Justin Finch-Fletchley's corpse lay in front of her on the floor. His face was bloodless, but he lay in a sticky black pool of something Ginny refused to let her mind acknowledge. Hermione lay farther along, Ron's crying form bent over her as she lay in death. Ginny slammed her eyes shut, swallowing back the bile in her throat.

This was a nightmare... it had to be. *Wake up, Ginny! Wake up!*

“It was you!”

Ginny shook her head, clamping her hands down over her ears as Percy’s voice echoed in the corridor.

“No, it wasn’t!” she denied. “It wasn’t me!”

“You killed her!” he accused again and she spun to defend herself. Everything was all out of proportion, however, and Percy, his arms wrapped around his dead girlfriend, seemed thirty feet tall, looming over her.

“How could you be so stupid, Ginny?” he yelled, his voice booming like thunder. “No one will love you now. I’ll tell everyone.”

“No,” Ginny shook her head again, sobs welling out of her. “No one died. No one died.”

“You’re a monster.” The last word echoed in Ginny’s ears and she screamed, looking up at the Wizengamot, clad in their regal plum-colored robes, all looking down at her. “And you know what we do to monsters...”

Ginny cried again, fighting against the chains that held her into the chair in the center of the courtroom.

“We give them to Harry Potter!” The Minister decreed, smiling brightly. His cheerfulness was completely out of place and Ginny spun around as the doors to the courtroom slammed open.

Blinding light flooded the room and she had to squint to see more than an outline of a man, silhouetted in the brightness.

“And here he is now!”

Cheers rang all around as Ginny continued to cry.

“No one died. No one died.” But she knew she was wrong. Everyone had died. And it *had* been all her fault.

Harry Potter took a step forward, but she still couldn’t see his face.

“Ginny.”

She turned away, not wanting to see another person, especially not someone as amazing and powerful as Harry Potter, looking at her.

“Ginny.”

“NO!” she cried out, lifting her arms to keep him from touching her.

His face came into focus as she battered against him. Only it wasn’t in her dream, and it wasn’t Harry Potter. It was Harry, her best friend.

And she was safe in her bed, in the darkness of night, with Harry wrapped around her.

"You're alright," he kept whispering, smoothing her hair away as he rocked her back and forth.

All of the fight left her as she allowed him to take her weight fully. She could feel her tears soaking into his t-shirt, but she was too tired to care anymore. It didn't matter, because she wasn't at Hogwarts, and she wasn't possessed, and only Penelope had died—not everyone.

"It's okay," Harry continued, tightening his arms around her. "I've got you. No one's going to hurt you, Ginny. I won't let them."

She forgot to be embarrassed as they huddled together on her twin sized bed in the dark. Harry's grip didn't relax, but he did tug her down with him, curling around her. Her tears dried as she analyzed the dream.

"I'm sorry," she finally said, still not having the strength to pull away from him.

"Don't," Harry said softly, snuggling his head against hers. "It's fine."

Ginny opened her mouth several times, not sure what she was going to tell him, but the overwhelming urge to say something was there. How could he understand? Would he treat her like her family did? Or, worse, treat her like it was all her fault?

Percy's leering face loomed over her and she shook her head to clear it away.

Harry's hand smoothed her hair as he held her. "Sometimes it helps to talk about it," he said softly. "You know you can tell me anything?"

Ginny's heart clenched and she swallowed thickly, trying to decide if she could handle it.

"When I was fourteen," she started, her voice shaky and low. "I found a diary in my school things. I should have known better... my dad always told us not to trust anything that could think for itself if you couldn't see where it kept its brain."

Harry snorted out a half-laugh, but hugged her tighter to him. Ginny took a deep breath and continued.

"At first, I thought I'd found this great friend. Hogwarts was... it was lonely. I had friends, but not any close ones, really. Ron was popular and everyone loved the twins..." She took a deep breath. The words, which she'd locked up inside her for so long, came tumbling out all over Harry.

"Everything I wrote into it soaked right in... and someone was writing back." Ginny stopped when Harry noticeably stiffened.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice heavy and low.

"At first it was fine. I just told Tom, that was his name," she admitted softly. "I told him about how lonely I was, how I wanted a good friend, a boyfriend," her face burned at the admission, but she kept going. "And how hard it was to be the youngest in a large family."

“He listened, even gave me suggestions to help me stand out. But then... things started to happen. I woke up one morning covered in chicken feathers, and I couldn’t remember why.” Ginny pressed her ear to the space above Harry’s heart, listening to the gentle ‘thump-thump’ there. “Another time my new robes were covered in red paint. I tried and tried to get the paint out. Finally, I balled them up and stuffed them in my trunk.

“And then,” her voice broke as she swallowed tears. “Large periods of time started to go by, and I had no way to explain where I was, or what I’d done.”

“Ginny...” Harry trailed off, clumsily wiping her wet cheeks. “You don’t have to go on...”

“No,” she protested. “I want to. I’ve never really told anyone before.” She glanced up at him, sucking in a breath at the tenderness in his face. “I... I want to tell you, if that’s alright.”

Harry nodded jerkily. “I’ll listen.”

Ginny searched his dark face for a moment, feeling a tremendous surge of affection for him. The gaze was intense and Ginny forced herself to look away, instead of making the same stupid mistake she’d made before.

“Students were being attacked,” she continued, burrowing into his chest again. “A boy named Justin, and, finally... Hermione.”

“Your brother’s girlfriend?” He asked, a strange tone to his voice.

“Yeah,” Ginny said. “Only they weren’t going out then. After Hermione was attacked... well—you’ve heard of a Basilisk?”

Harry shuddered underneath her and she nodded. “That’s what was happening. I... I was possessed. The diary... it allowed a portion of... Tom to possess me.”

Ginny looked up as Harry mumbled something under his breath, but she couldn’t make it out. It was almost a ‘hissing’ sound, but he waived her off.

“And... I was controlling the Basilisk, setting it loose on the school,” Ginny whispered, feeling the old shame and revulsion welling up. “After Justin... I started to figure out what was happening. But... I was ashamed, and scared. And, really, Tom just had too strong a hold on me by that time. I couldn’t stop,” she finished in a pained admission that was swallowed up in Harry’s embrace.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Harry soothed again, wrapping even tighter around her. “There’s no way you can control something like that. You did everything you could.”

“There’s more,” Ginny choked out, stifling her tears. “Hermione was attacked next. I tried so hard to get to Dumbledore. But I was too late... Penelope—my brother Percy’s girlfriend... she was killed.”

“Oh, Ginny,” Harry said, pressing his face into her hair. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry you had to go through that... if only... if only I’d been able to do something, to take that from you.”

Ginny shook her head. “You couldn’t have done anything, Harry. You were on another continent,

going to school—just a boy yourself.” He stiffened underneath her again and she used the sleeve of her pyjamas to wipe her face.

“And my family...” Ginny trailed off, thinking of Percy standing over her in her dream, the hatred etched on his face. “I think the worst part was how disappointed they were with me. And how they always question what I’m doing, because I might make a mistake like that again.”

“They don’t understand,” Harry growled, pulling away just a bit. Ginny was startled at how angry he’d become with just a few words. “They can’t ever really understand evil like that. No one can unless they’ve... had it touch them.”

Ginny nodded, narrowing her eyes at his face, which was turned away so she could only see his profile in the dim light.

“It’s gotten better,” Ginny shrugged. Panic shot through her. They were supposed to have dinner at the Burrow tomorrow. If Harry was angry with her family... he might not want to go, or he might be angry once he got there. This meeting was so important to Ginny—it just *had* to work out. She had to explain to him so that he didn’t get the wrong idea.

“And... they were right,” she continued carefully, “about some of it, anyway.”

“Ginny—”

“No,” she said, shaking her head and laying back down on him, forcing Harry to settle back into the pillows. “I made mistakes, Harry. And since then... I haven’t been as open with them as I should. I complain that they don’t trust me, but I really don’t allow them to. I don’t share with them what’s going on in my life, so they really can’t. I have this picture in my head of how they’re going to treat me with every decision I make... and sometimes I let that picture take over, despite how they really react to things.

“I’m not making much sense right now,” she said, shaking her head and yawning at the same time. Harry turned his head to look at her.

“No... I think you are. It’s like... what we expect people to say isn’t always what their reaction might be. But we condition ourselves to expect the worst, so that we’re not disappointed when it does happen.”

He glanced down at her, his finger lifting to trace her jawline. Ginny swallowed, fighting the urge to kiss him again.

“Yeah,” she finally agreed.

“Tell me about your family.”

* * *

Harry’s chest felt like it was on fire. It had been years since he’d been this angry. As Ginny quietly told him about her family, he lay with his arms wrapped around her, seething and almost beside himself with rage.

How could he have not known? It was Ginny, *his Ginny*, who had been the victim of the damned diary.

Fucking Voldemort!

Harry remembered distinctly Dumbledore contacting Sirius and explaining how he'd discovered that Voldemort was using Horcruxes to tie his soul here to earth. That a young girl had been possessed, but had been able to fight the diary for almost an entire year before Dumbledore had discovered it.

In all his youthful arrogance and haste to complete his destiny, Harry hadn't given much thought to the girl.

But it had been Ginny. Beautiful, wonderful, fun Ginny.

The thought made bile rise in his throat.

"Harry?"

"Sorry?" He shook himself, trying to figure out what she'd just said.

"I asked if you were nervous to meet them tomorrow?"

Even in the shadows, Harry could make out Ginny's dark eyes looking up at him, filled with so much trust and friendship.

"A bit," he shrugged and chuckled. At least he could be a bit honest with her. "They're your family... and you're my best friend." The words almost choked him to get out. There was no doubt that after tonight, especially, Harry was in big trouble.

He was in love with his best friend.

"They'll love you," Ginny shook her head with a tired smile. "You can be quite charming when you want to be Harry." She yawned again and Harry adjusted her so that she was more on the pillow than on top of him.

"Can I?" he asked, trying to lighten the mood. The realization of what he felt for her was overwhelming and he was struggling with what to do about it. Did he blurt it out? Did he lean down and kiss her; taking the chance that she might blast him through a wall? Or did he do what he wanted to: confess everything about his past and how connected they were, and then make love to her until neither could remember who they were and their haunted pasts?

"You can," Ginny agreed with another yawn.

It was all just becoming too much and Harry wasn't sure what to do. "Ginny?"

Her head lifted up and looked at him, a silly, exhausted grin on her face. "What?"

"Go to sleep," he finished softly, a bit disappointed at his lack of courage, but much more relieved.

Maybe it was the reality of the impending meeting with Ginny's family, or just the overwhelming

realization he'd just had, but Harry was starting to become terrified.

A relationship with Ginny—which was bound to be amazing if he could ever gather the courage to start it—meant a relationship with her whole family. And that meant that Harry's secrets weren't going to be able to stay hidden for long.

Because he didn't want this anymore. He didn't want to be Harry Potter one day and Harrison Parker the next. It was getting to a point when he didn't even really remember who he was anymore. In fact, he was only truly himself, save that one huge secret, with Ginny. And that felt... amazing.

His mind wandered, trying to decide what to do. Just today he'd received another assignment, only this time for almost four weeks. It was going to be very hard to be away, he knew. But maybe... maybe the time apart would be good for him. He just needed to convince himself, convince Ginny, and then start to banish the 'best friends' part of this relationship. He wasn't sure he could handle it if he came home to find she'd met someone else while he was away.

'Grow a pair, Harry,' he told himself as he slid out of bed and tucked the blankets in around Ginny better.

* * *

"I think you're more nervous than I am," Harry leaned down to whisper into Ginny's ear as they both walked down the lane that led to a very crooked house. It was strange, Harry observed, but yet it seemed to fit what he knew about the Weasleys from Ginny's murmured words last night and the few things he knew about them from the war.

Ginny laughed and wrapped her arm tighter through his. "Well, you've not met them yet... and they still don't know you're not a Muggle," she smiled mischievously.

"Ginny!" he protested and nudged her side a bit with his hip. "I would have thought you'd prepare them."

She shrugged and Harry couldn't help but grin at her innocent look, especially when he knew that she was anything but innocent.

"I think it'll be hilarious to see their faces when we tell them you're a wizard. I'm sure Mum's been frantic with trying to contain all the magical items in the house. She'll have lectured Fred and George to no end. Dad will be right chuffed, and the others will fall in line soon."

"Ron knows," Harry pointed out. "And Hermione."

Ginny cocked her head. "You have a lot to learn about blackmail, Harry." He snorted and she chuckled. "Growing up in this family it was a basic survival skill."

"You're horrible," Harry chided, but the smile he wore rebutted his comment.

"And you love me for it."

Ginny's flippant comment made him swallow hard and glance around uncomfortably. *Did she know? How could she possibly know?* Harry's realization last night, that he was indeed in love with Ginny, unsettled him. He was elated by the feeling, yet it still made him rather nauseated, too. "So, this is where you grew up," he said, casting about for anything to relieve this heavy, pressing feeling on his chest.

"It is," she said with a nod. "Over there is the pond where I learned to swim," she pointed. They stopped moving forward and stood, almost in the middle of the garden, surveying the land around them. "And just beyond those trees there... that's our Quidditch pitch. It's really just a clearing because Mum did a nut when Charlie suggested putting up rings. She's afraid the Muggles from the town are going to see and come running."

"And what's the little building there?" Harry asked with genuine interest. Anything about Ginny intrigued him. Plus, the questions helped divert him from feeling too nervous. He was about to meet her family; a daunting task in itself, but they were also a family that had been very active in the war. Thank Merlin her two oldest brothers, the two who had served in the military, weren't going to be there.

"That's Dad's shed. He has all sorts of things in there. I told you how he was a bit obsessed with Muggles?" She continued when he nodded, remembering the airplane discussion. "Well, he's got this horrid collection of old batteries and plugs—he's just fascinated with them. You remember how he was about the airplane thing."

Harry grinned at the thought, before letting a bit of his nervousness break through. "You think they'll be alright with me tonight? I'm not really looking forward to having to set a broken nose."

Ginny laughed and laid her head on his shoulder. "Dad'll be fine. He might be a bit disappointed that you're not a Muggle, because then he can't bury you in questions. But..."

"I did grow up in the Muggle world," Harry offered. "I might know more than you think."

"That's obvious," she rolled her eyes and stopped as they came to a door partially obscured with rusted out cauldrons and a heap of old boots. "You'll be fine, Harry. Just... don't eat anything the twins give you."

"Why does that not make me feel confident?" Harry asked as he followed her into the cozy kitchen. He took a deep breath, willing himself to portray the confidence of Sirius, while checking the attitude at the door. Maybe Remus would be a better role model for this situation...

* * *

Ginny was impressed with Harry's poise in meeting her family. He'd laughed good naturedly when her mother scrambled to keep the tea set from marching itself across the kitchen. It must have some residual magic left in it from being charmed so often to do its job.

"I'm so sorry," Ginny said, a playful little smile, eying her mother's bulged eyes and Harry's grin, "did I forget to tell you that Harry is magical?"

The entire table froze at this announcement and Harry shrugged a shoulder when they stared at

him.

"I'm a wizard," he said plainly, looking not the least bit unrepentant for his part of their little prank.

Finally, George and Fred started laughing, so much so that they tipped off of their chairs.

"That wasn't very polite, Ginny," her mother scolded.

"Your mother spent hours running around her removing charms and hiding things away," her father scolded, but the corners of his mouth twitched and Ginny couldn't hide her own laugh.

"That was pretty funny," Hermione added, her own laughter adding to Fred and George's.

"It was all in good fun, Mum," Ginny protested, still feeling the heat of her mother's gaze. "Besides, I happen to know you had Fred, George and Ron over here doing all kinds of work. They haven't done housework in forever."

"Oi!" Ron protested, tossing a piece of bread her way. Ginny snatched it out of the air and laid it on the edge of her plate.

"You should have been a Seeker," Harry complimented, his own easy smile stretching. Ginny watched him for a minute, wondering how he hid his nervousness, before she shrugged.

"I played Seeker a few times," she said.

"One whole year," Ron broke in. "She was bloody brilliant!"

"Ronald," their mother scolded his language, but Ron was undeterred.

"You've got him started now," Ginny muttered to Harry, who only chewed his bite and smirked.

"Did she tell you she played Chaser?" Ron asked and the various conversations started again.

Ginny sat back and let it all wash over her. She'd need to apologize to her parents, but it was all still funny, to her at least.

Harry handled both Ron's excited Quidditch questions and the twins' not so gentle probes about his life with ease and confidence. It seemed a different side of him and Ginny wondered just how layered Harry was.

Her mind drifted back to last night, when he'd held her after her nightmare. The whole thing made her stomach flutter and her breasts tingle in arousal. 'Here's not the time or place, Ginny,' she scolded herself. But it was hard, with the constant reminder sitting right next to her, the scent of his cologne washing over her with every breath. It didn't help that he looked mouthwateringly attractive tonight, in his white button-down shirt and black blazer, worn casually over jeans.

"And how exactly does your work go if you're a wizard?" her father asked from her other side. He'd leaned more onto the table to see Harry.

Harry wiped his mouth politely and thought about the question. "About the same, really. Although it has more to do with Magical Governments than not."

"You seem a bit young to be doing what you do," her father observed casually. Ginny could tell he was impressed with Harry's occupation—not that a job ever could impress Arthur Weasley much. But the fact that Harry held a position of such responsibility at such a young age spoke highly for him.

"I finished school early," Harry supplied. "And I was always a bit... er, obsessed with security." His eyes darted over to hers, but she wasn't sure what he was searching for. Perhaps it was only a way to take the focus off of himself.

"I'll bet you've run across some pretty interesting things out there," Fred said, a bit of a hungry look in his eye. Ginny narrowed her gaze at him, warning both he and George not to try anything.

"I've seen things that would make even your toes curl." Harry chuckled along with everyone else, but Ginny caught the hint of something darker in his tone. She shivered, thinking that there was probably more truth to his statement than not. Something he'd said last night jumped back to her. 'They can't ever really understand evil like that. No one can unless they've... had it touch them.'

It sounded so... personal when he said it like that; as if he'd had something so vile, so evil in his life. Ginny scowled down at her plate, thinking of what could have possibly touched him in that way. Voldemort was the only thing that made sense—and even that was far fetched, as Harry had grown up so far away. What were the odds that someone he'd loved had been killed or controlled by Voldemort?

"You haven't told us anything about your family, Harry," her mother asked politely, "or where you grew up."

"I was raised by my Godfather, actually, in the United States," Harry explained. "My parents were killed when I was young. They were British, actually. My Godfather thought it would be best if I were... away from the past," Harry said, his voice faltering just a bit.

Ginny reached under the table, placing her hand on his arm in support. She knew he didn't like talking about his family. It seemed a very painful subject.

She stifled a gasp as something deep inside her... clicked. *It couldn't be...*

"And what made you move back here, dear?"

Harry glanced at Ginny, perhaps feeling the tension in her. She tried to smile and wave off his concern. He narrowed his eyes a bit but then turned to answer her mother.

Ginny only half listened as she began putting clues into place. There wasn't enough there for a full picture, but it was enough to make her more than suspicious.

His parents had been killed when he was younger. He seemed especially sensitive about Voldemort and the war. He'd been raised by his Godfather, far away from England.

This wasn't Harrison Parker sitting next to her at her parents' dinner table. It was *Harry Potter!* And

she was in love with him.

Ginny jumped when a foot brushed her leg. She looked up, expecting to find one of the twins trying to catch her attention so that she could witness someone turn into some kind of animal. But it was Hermione who was giving her a piercing look.

She should have known. One look at her friend's face and Ginny knew Hermione suspected who Harry was as well.

'Later,' she mouthed, trying to settle herself again. This really wasn't something to allow anyone else to know. In fact, she scolded herself, she wasn't even positive. Harry had gone to great lengths to protect himself from being discovered. It wasn't her place to spill his secrets.

A thrill ran through her, the irony not lost at all. When she was little, Ginny's favorite storybook had been *The-Boy-Who-Lived*. She'd had a crush that was embarrassing to think about now—especially considering how much she actually knew about Harry. This wasn't the man of the fairy-tales and stories. He was real; so much so that it made her heart hitch when she glanced up to find his eyes piercing hers.

"Are you alright?" he whispered in the confusion and bustle of getting the table cleared.

"I'm fine," she lied, pasting on a smile and hurrying to help her mother levitate the table clean.

Harry narrowed his eyes but didn't press the issue. Instead, he helped clean the table as well, over her mother's protests, and then joined the men in the living room, giving Ginny a small bit of room to breathe.

Hermione kept shooting glances at her, although she didn't voice her questions as the three women tidied the kitchen.

"He's very attractive," her mother complimented with a slight blush to her cheeks. "And so very polite."

Ginny refrained from rolling her eyes, and smiled. "He is."

"And there hasn't been anything between the two of you?" she pushed. Ginny bit her tongue, her mind flashing with scenes: Harry holding her in her bed last night, the passionate, but drunken, kiss a few days before, and the extreme tension between them both. And that didn't even count the number of times she'd pleased herself, imagining Harry touching her.

Hermione giggled from across the room and Ginny schooled her features, cursing her heated cheeks.

"Not really, Mum," she lied.

"That's too bad," her mother said, fondly eyeing the door. "He's very charming."

Ginny smiled. "He is *very* charming," she agreed.

When the kitchen was restored once more, Ginny took a deep breath, trying to prepare herself to be around Harry again. What she suspected, along with how she really felt for him, swirled and

mixed deep in her stomach, confusing her head.

Harry was standing across the room, near the fireplace, smiling at something that Ron pointed out in an old photograph. She took a moment to study him in this foreign setting.

He was entirely too attractive, she decided, and entirely too at ease in a place he really shouldn't be. But that was Harry. He seemed to adapt to whatever situation he was placed in, either that or he was a terrific actor.

"You do realize who he is?" Hermione whispered from next to her, making Ginny jump.

Her cheeks flushed again, realizing how hungrily she'd been staring at Harry. She forced her eyes to turn away from him and to her best friend.

"I don't know anything for sure," she said calmly. "I... I just realized it tonight... now."

Hermione's glanced between Harry and Ginny, a strange look on her face. "And what are you going to do about it?"

Ginny glanced over, her breath leaving her as Harry laughed again, his whole face lighting up. "Nothing," she breathed. Because, suddenly, it didn't matter who he might be. He was *Harry*; and that was enough to make her love him.

"Please," she pleaded softly, turning back to Hermione, "Don't say anything—to anyone. I need..." she pressed her fingers to her temples, willing the instant headache that had appeared to leave. "I need some time."

Hermione didn't look convinced and Ginny recognized the inquisitive need-to-know rising inside her.

"Please, Hermione."

"Alright," Hermione agreed grudgingly.

Ginny peered at her friend, but knew that Hermione would never betray her. They both valued the friendship too much to let Hermione's tenaciousness get in the way.

"Thank you," Ginny said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"You'll let me know, then?" Hermione asked, sneaking a glance at Harry. Ginny couldn't help but chuckle at the predictability of her friend.

"He is..." Hermione trailed off, her eyes roving Harry and her cheeks blushing faintly, "quite attractive."

Ginny couldn't help the sigh that escaped as she glanced at Harry's bum, filling out his jeans perfectly. "You have no idea," she mumbled, making Hermione laugh. "I'd better go save him from the gits."

"Not a bad idea," Hermione agreed. "Let's meet for lunch this week."

Ginny nodded absently as she moved across the room to join her brothers and Harry.

"Hey, you," she greeted him, bumping his arm with her own. "They haven't turned you into an animal yet?"

Harry laughed. "Not yet. I'm actually getting rather offended." Ginny smirked. "Maybe they don't really like me," he whispered, still loud enough that the whole room heard him.

"I'm sure that's what it is," Ginny agreed with a grin. "Although I do think you got off lucky."

Harry chuckled.

"We'll get him next time," Fred promised.

"Yeah, Mum made us be on our best behavior," George added.

Ginny snorted. "You? You *have* a 'best behavior'?" They both fidgeted and Ginny grinned. "What does Mum have on you?"

Surprisingly, Ron blushed just as brightly as the other two. "We're not discussing it. So, Harry, when do you want to go to the pub?"

Ginny raised her eyebrows at Harry. He'd made plans with her brothers? Wow... she was speechless.

"Er... well, it'd have to be soon. I, er... I actually found out I have another assignment coming up."

Disappointment flooded Ginny, yet, the idea that she might have some time to figure out this mystery that surrounded Harry made her feel a bit better.

"How long?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

Harry drained the remains of his Butterbeer and vanished the bottle. "Up to four weeks, possibly."

Her heart clenched at the thought. It would give her plenty of time, but what would she do without him?

"I'm sorry," he apologized, looking directly at her with a tight expression. "I just found out about it yesterday, and I forgot to tell you." His cheeks went a bit pink and Ginny wondered if he was thinking about spending time in her bed last night. If he had been affected at all like she had, it was no wonder that he'd forgotten to tell her.

"Oh," Ginny said. "Well, then you'll just have to squeeze it in when you get back." The fact that Harry was actually seeking a chance to spend time with her brothers, apart from her, was a very endearing thing. It made Ginny's belly flutter a bit.

"I will," he agreed.

"It's getting late," Ginny said, trying to ignore the knowing smirks her brothers were giving her. "I'm going to head home. Did you want to stay, Harry?"

He looked confused for a minute before shaking his head. “No, I, er... I was up late last night. And I’ve got a full couple of days coming up. I think I’ll go home as well.”

Ron opened his mouth to retort and Ginny smashed her foot down on his, turning her heel in the spot.

“We’ll walk out together then,” Ginny said, glaring at the twins who held their hands up in innocence. She knew she’d pay for the little awkward scene between she and Harry—somehow they’d make her pay.

They said their goodbye’s to her family and bundled up to walk back to the Apparation point, quietly contemplating the night.

“Well?” Ginny asked as she took a chance and wound her arm through his.

Harry was quiet for a few steps, although he did reach up to take her hand in his, warming her fingers. “They’re great, Ginny.”

“Really?” she asked, relief flooding her.

“Yeah,” Harry said, a wide smile stretching on his face. “Of course, they were bound to be, they’re part of you...”

Ginny grinned, feeling incredibly foolish for fawning up at him. The irresistible urge came over her to kiss him; thankfully, she redirected it to land on his cheek instead.

Chapter 8: Obfuscation

Harry's departure this time hurt—it actually, physically hurt. Ginny stood in the living room, in her rumpled pyjama bottoms and tank top, chewing on her bottom lip as he shrunk down his bags silently.

“Guess I don't have to go through the ruse of carrying all that stuff around now,” he said, although his voice held less humor than she was used to. “You're going to be okay,” he said quietly.

And for just a minute, she wasn't sure whether he was talking to her, or talking to himself.

“Four weeks?” she asked, sighing at the thought of an empty flat.

“Yeah,” he answered quietly. “It might be less.” His shoulder moved up in a shrug, but died part way through.

Rolling her eyes at herself, Ginny moved forward and wrapped her arms around him, unprepared for how strongly he would embrace her back.

“I'll miss you,” she whispered. “Try to keep yourself safe, yeah?”

Harry tried for a chuckle, but it came out rather weak. “I'll try.”

They broke apart and stood there, each appraising the other. Ginny reached up and gently laid his collar down where it was bunched under his jacket.

And then he was gone.

She didn't cry until she was safely tucked back into her bed, curled around her blankets and remembering how he'd been here only days ago.

Since her realization—or maybe she should really call it a suspicion, since she had nothing concrete to go on yet—Ginny had been preoccupied with studying Harry. There were so many things that added up now, how had she not seen them before? Or maybe it was just that she hadn't let herself see things.

“I'm in love with Harry Potter,” she told the soundless room, a slow smile stretching across her face. “And I'm completely mental,” she followed with, rolling her eyes at herself.

There was no way she was going to be able to sleep now, she knew; which was a waste, seeing how it was only five in the morning. But there was no way, since her mind simply wouldn't shut off.

She rolled over, tucking her pillow under her head and trying to decide how she was going to fill four weeks.

It seemed like such a long time, looking at it from the very beginning. Ginny hadn't realized how isolated she was now from everyone else. She spoke to Rebecca often enough—they worked together almost every day—but they rarely did things outside of work anymore. And Rebecca

understood—or said she did at least. But Ginny hadn't seen any of her other friends for... well, it was probably months now.

The thought made a ball of guilt churn in her stomach and she vowed to make plans with Luna, and Neville... and everyone else, soon.

A small, pleased smile spread over her face. She could do this. Harry certainly wasn't her entire world. He was... her best friend—whom she happened to be in love with, but that wasn't the point.

Ginny needed to remind herself that life existed outside this flat; outside this little, almost perfect bubble that she'd allowed herself to build. Especially if what she suspected about Harry to be true. If he was... Harry Potter... then she would need the support of those who cared about her to even contemplate a relationship with him. The idea of it both terrified her, and sent her into a small fit of nervous giggles.

"Don't put the cart before the horse, Ginevra," she snorted out loud. She didn't really know if Harry thought of her as anything other than a friend. And he was the first to admit that he'd never had a close friend. Any strange signals he'd been sending might very well be just his confusion about how one acted around a close friend of the opposite sex.

Ginny flopped over to her stomach and stretched lazily, trying to decide the best way to attack this problem that was facing her. It was like a giant hippogriff in the room, now that she recognized it for what it might be.

She'd start with the press, she decided, when planning her investigation. A brief idea to search his room was discarded. That was just too... something, she told herself.

Although, she *had* promised to take care of Hedwig... and the four eggs that she and Harry had discovered just yesterday. That is if Armstrong would allow her to.

Her owl had transformed overnight into some demonic-plagued psychotic animal. He barely allowed Harry in the bedroom at all, let alone anywhere near Hedwig. Ginny was allowed a bit closer, and had even been able to inspect the eggs a bit; although she'd decided that didn't really count as Armstrong had been off hunting at the time.

Hedwig, however, sat regal and proud on her little eggs. She allowed Harry to rub her feathers and even nudge the eggs with his finger before she'd gently bit down on his finger to warn him.

Ginny could tell Harry had mixed feelings about the two owls and their new family—the least of which was a kind of revulsion that not only had he witnessed (several times!) their mating, but that they'd chosen to nest in the middle of his laundry pile.

She couldn't help but smile at the thought of the grimace that came over his face when he walked into the room.

Maybe she'd have a little talk with the two birds and get them to ease up on Harry from now on. Honestly, they had plenty of time to mate when he wasn't in the room, or just about to walk in. They didn't have to be exhibitionists, or shove it in his face.

But the idea of actually searching Harry's room was incredibly intrusive.

No. There were other ways, she decided.

Yawning widely, Ginny snuggled into bed. Perhaps she was tired enough to catch a few hours before work. As she drifted off, she allowed a delicious fantasy to take hold, causing a smile to warm her.

* * *

It had been two weeks. Two long, grueling, tiring, lonely weeks.

Before having Ginny move in with him, Harry hadn't really noticed time away from the flat. He didn't count the weeks, or the days... and definitely not the hours.

But now he did. And he wasn't convinced that was a good thing at all.

"You are preoccupied, my young friend."

Harry looked up from where he'd been staring at the table in front of him, not even seeing the documents that he was supposed to be reviewing.

"Just tired, I guess. Sorry," he apologized with a smile. The older man watched him closely and Harry shifted in his chair, blinking to focus on the papers again.

Darian Huntly was an American who had spent almost his entire career in South America, moving from country to country and trying to stabilize what existed of the magical governments. In fact, he'd been here so long, Harry wondered if he even thought of himself as American anymore. He spoke English with a heavy accent and his skin was just as dark as the natives.

This was the third time Harry had worked with him to begin recruiting Aurors and build a training program for them. They got on well because Huntly respected Harry's opinion, and didn't patronize the young man.

Harry sighed again, raising his eyes and rubbing at his forehead. His scar itched; probably the lack of glamour on it, he supposed. It had been so long since he'd actually removed the glamour on that particular scar that he'd almost forgotten to do so when he reported for his assignment.

"Come," Darian nodded with his head. "We could both use a break. There's a little cantina around the corner."

Harry contemplated saying 'no', but the idea of a break sounded very good, actually. A little something to eat, a little something to drink, and he'd be back at it—hopefully banishing distracting thoughts of Ginny until he could lie in the hotel bed and let them fully wash over him.

The cantina was small, but had a friendly atmosphere, Harry decided. There were only two other patrons; a man who was alone, staring out the window and ignoring his drink, and an older woman who talked in slow, rhythmic tones to the bartender.

Darian ordered for them both, as usual, and then sat back in his rickety chair. Harry rubbed his face roughly, the stubble from his unshaven skin scratching harshly in the quiet of the room.

"You are different this time," Darian observed, a lazy smile about his face. "And I can't quite figure out what it is."

Harry shrugged, leaning forward onto the table and readjusting the few items on it. "It's been a while. People change."

"Yes," Darian said thoughtfully. "But this is something else. I have never seen you lose focus so easily."

Bristling at the suggestion that he wasn't doing his job, Harry sat up sharply. But Darian held out his hand to calm him.

"You are young, Harry," he excused. "Distraction can sometimes be... a good thing. In fact, I think I enjoy you better this way. You can not always be so focused, so intense. You need... more out of life."

Harry flushed, his own thoughts of the past months echoing Darian's.

"If you remain too focused, you end up like me, Harry. Alone, in some foreign country where you have no family, no friends, no pretty lady to take your mind off of things." A knowing smile spread across his face when Harry looked away.

"Ahh, I wondered," Darian nodded. "You have found yourself a lady."

Harry shrugged one shoulder. "I might have," he admitted. Suddenly, despite the urge that telling anyone was foolish, here in a small, hot room in South America, with only the two of them who spoke any English, Darian seemed the perfect confidant. Harry knew he could trust the older man—he'd proven himself enough times.

"Might?" Darian asked, raising an eyebrow. When Harry opened his mouth to respond, Darian held up his finger and stood to collect their food and drink.

Harry sank back into his chair, wondering how much he was going to say to the old Auror. Would he even understand? Huntly had never before mentioned anything about being in any kind of relationship or even admiring a woman when he and Harry had worked together.

"Alright, continue," Darian said as he distributed the food and drink around.

"Er..." Harry scowled down at his food, which looked very appetizing, and tried to remember what he'd been about to say.

"You *might* have found a lady friend?" Darian asked, with a wink.

"Oh, yeah," Harry shrugged, picking up a small corn tortilla and using it to push black beans around his plate. "I... I've got this friend... and lately I've been, er, thinking about her, more and more."

Darian nodded thoughtfully chewing a few mouthfuls before commenting. "And this friend... what does she think of you?"

Harry swallowed his food and washed it down with the strong beer. "I... I'm not sure."

“And you want... what, exactly, from her?” Darian asked, cutting straight through everything.

Harry chewed his lip, pondering what it actually was he wanted. Ginny was his best friend, he knew that. But could they be more? Harry’s instincts were telling him that they could. And he wanted that. He wanted everything that came with ‘more’. But he had to prepare himself for that, because there was a lot that came with Ginny. She had family and friends, and a past that was almost as murky as his own.

“I want her,” Harry said simply. “I want...” the words cut off in his brain, leaving him floundering.

“Marriage?” Darian asked, a small smile on his face. “A family?”

Harry’s face heated in the already stifling afternoon. “Yeah,” he said breathlessly, the idea taking hold deep in him and shaking him to the core.

“Both are wonderful things,” Darian said, quietly. He moved his clean plate away from him and leaned heavily on the table.

“Before I came here, before I was what you see,” he held his arms out wide and smiled. “I was much like you, Harry. Perhaps I did not have the destiny, but I chose this life.”

Harry picked at his food, not tasting it anymore as his mind tried to follow Darian’s story.

“There was a girl. She was... the sun and moon to me.”

“What happened?” Harry asked, wondering if he really wanted to know. The idea of something happening to Ginny—it made him sick.

“This life wasn’t enough for her. There was always someone waiting around the corner, someone waiting to harm me, or, worse, someone wanting a picture of me.” He winked. “I was not always this ugly, Harry.”

Harry snorted and smiled crookedly. Darian wasn’t ugly... he was definitely battle worn, however.

“I was once very famous in America. My picture was everywhere—much like yours is some days. Your lady friend... she knows who you are?”

The desire to eat left Harry as he thought about the question. Ginny knew him inside and out, yet she didn’t know the one fact that could cause her to forget all the others. She didn’t grasp who he truly was.

“No,” Harry admitted. “She knows... me, just not... who I am.”

“Ahh,” Darian nodded thoughtfully. “You must decide, Harry. The life you propose for her, it is challenging enough without all of this,” he waved his hand around. “You have done much good in the world. Now you must decide if it is enough.”

Harry drifted off, staring out the window and watching a small group of dirty, barefoot boys kick a football around the middle of the street.

Would a life with Harry be enough for Ginny? Or would the press and demands be too much for her?

Ginny was tough, there was no doubt about it. Something deep inside Harry—sounding suspiciously like Ginny's voice—scolded him for even thinking she couldn't handle herself.

"Yeah," he muttered, half to himself. "That's what I need to decide."

* * *

Fred watched gleefully as Ginny walked by the front window of the store. They knew she was meeting Hermione for lunch today. Ron had tipped him and George off a few days ago and they'd been waiting for their chance to talk to their sister ever since.

They easily could have gone to her flat to do so, that was George's idea anyway. But Fred preferred a full-scale attack, on their turf.

"We'll be back," he told Verity, the new girl whom they'd hired to help with their booming business. George finished stocking the Snackboxes and brushed his hands on his trousers before falling in line with his twin.

Ginny wasn't hard to find; her red hair standing out like a beacon in the crowd. Or perhaps they were just practiced at searching for that particular color.

"Ginny, my love," Fred grinned as he slung an arm around her shoulder. She jumped, but then smiled at the both of them.

"What do you two want?" she asked, eyeing them suspiciously.

"Just a few moments of your time," George said as he leaned down to kiss her cheek.

"I'll come by later," Ginny protested, wrinkling her face up to back away from George, who kept trying to kiss her. "I'm already late for my meeting with Hermione. And if I don't help her with this wedding, the world just might stop spinning."

Fred chuckled as George finally caught Ginny, making the kiss extra noisy and sloppy.

"Urgh," Ginny said, wiping her cheek on the inside of her sleeve.

"Your meeting has been moved back an hour," Fred nodded knowingly.

"What?" Ginny said, narrowing her eyes at her brothers. Without warning, she flicked her wand out, holding it on the two of them.

"We may have—"

"Might," George added.

"Probably," Fred nodded.

"Alright, we did it," George shrugged.

“Did what, exactly?” Ginny glared.

“Wrote a letter to Hermione explaining that you were unavoidably detained and that you’d meet her to choose the perfect shade of neon pink to go with Ron’s hair, exactly,” Fred consulted the place on his wrist where a watch should have been, had he ever worn one, “one hour from now.”

Ginny set her jaw—never a good thing, Fred considered—and folded her arms defensively in front of her, her wand still gripped in her hand. “So I’m supposed to spend the next hour with you gits, nevermind that I might have had other plans that you’ve now ruined?”

“What plans?” Fred asked, smirking.

“Yeah, Harry’s out of the country,” George shrugged, looping his arm around his sister’s neck and tugging her back toward the shop.

“I do other things besides spending my time with Harry,” Ginny defended. The argument in her tone gave her away and Fred waggled his eyebrows.

“Really?”

Ginny averted her eyes, ducking out from under George’s arm. “So what is it you need? A new guinea pig for your experiments? Need me to strip down to my pants and rub paste all over my body so you can catalogue the results?”

Fred scrunched up his face. “Eww, Ginny!”

“Beautiful women do that for us anyway,” George waived her off.

“Only because you pay them,” she snorted. “Seriously, what’s this about?”

“Why must you always be so suspicious, little sister?” Fred asked, holding the door to the shop open. Ginny flinched at the loud airhorn sound that echoed. “You should hear the lion’s roar,” he waggled his eyebrows.

“I’m suspicious because it’s the two of you,” Ginny said, walking nonchalantly into the store and examining the products on the shelves.

Fred raised his eyebrow at his twin, who grinned and nodded. They moved forward, hooking their arms under Ginny’s and carrying her to the back room. She struggled, at first, and then allowed them to take her where they wanted her.

“Hand over your wand,” Fred demanded once they had her in the back room.

“No!” Ginny gripped it even tighter and backed away from them, taking a protective stance that made Fred swallow harshly. Ginny was no slouch in defending herself.

“Some things in here don’t take to well to wand fire,” George pointed out, nodding to the bubbling cauldrons against the back wall.

“And why would there be wand fire?” Ginny demanded, her face still defiant.

Fred sighed, knowing their questions could be received two ways. Ginny could get very, very angry, or she could laugh it off. Either way she'd be annoyed—but they could handle annoyance. Neither of them wanted to anger her, they just wanted some answers, and to make their opinion heard.

"Are you shagging Harry?" Fred blurted out, wincing at how harsh the abrupt question sounded.

Ginny's eyes narrowed. "What's it to you if I am?"

They'd known her long enough to know that wasn't necessarily an admission of guilt. She was almost as cagey as they were about not actually answering questions if she didn't want to.

"We like him," George shrugged, sinking down onto a stool and perching his feet on the rungs.

"We do," Fred nodded honestly. "We think he's a decent bloke."

"But there's more going on there, we can tell."

"I'm not shagging him." Ginny deflated onto a stool similar to George's, while Fred hopped up on the counter.

"But you want to be," George wagged his eyebrows.

"Harry and I are friends," Ginny bristled.

No denial, Fred noticed. That was as much as Ginny yelling that it was true. George picked up on it too, and smirked at Fred.

"You're dating," Fred denied. "Probably trying to keep it from everyone."

"Not that we blame you," George added. "You have to keep every advantage you have in this family."

"Agreed."

"We're not dating," Ginny shook her head. She was quickly growing agitated with their questions and Fred smirked. Either she'd break and start yelling, inadvertently spilling secrets, or she'd start hexing people. They'd take their chances.

"Yes, you are," Fred smirked. "You do everything together, spend all your time together."

"Are you seeing anyone else?" George asked. "Is he?"

"That's not any of your business," Ginny said, averting her eyes. Another evasion, Fred noticed.

"You don't even realize that's what you're doing, do you?" he guessed.

"Talk about thick," George muttered.

"We're not dating," Ginny replied, her voice quavering just a bit, as if she were trying to convince not only them, but herself as well.

“Just for the record,” George offered.

“We’d support you if you were,” Fred added. “Or... you know, if you ever do.”

Ginny opened her mouth to answer, but then closed it quickly. “Thanks,” she finally managed. “That means a lot.”

“And...” Fred continued, unable to stop himself, “if we get a new victim—er, brother-in-law out of the deal...”

“You’re a prat,” Ginny scowled at him.

George only laughed. “You’d better get running, Gin-Gin. You’re late!”

“You said you talked to Hermione!” Ginny fumed. “Damnit. I’m already in hot water with her.”

“We may have,” Fred shrugged.

“Or maybe we just thought about doing it,” George scratched his head. “It has been busy lately.

Ginny rolled her eyes at the both of them. “If she’s all worked up because I’ve made her wait another thirty minutes, I’m directing her over here.” One final glare and she disappeared out the back door.

“What do you think?” George asked as they both stared at the closed door.

“Arse over elbow,” Fred sighed. “She’s completely in love with him.”

“I concur,” George nodded seriously.

“How long till she realizes it?”

“That they’re actually dating?” George asked, turning to grimace into a small cauldron which was smoking behind him. “Or that she’s in love with him.”

“The first,” Fred shrugged. “She knows how she feels. She just doesn’t see the looks that Harry gives back.”

“Well, he’s gone for a month,” George muttered. “I’d give it... eight weeks.”

“Six,” Fred nodded. They stopped what they were doing and shook hands quickly, the usual bet of twenty galleons made.

Fred happily went back to stirring a cauldron that sputtered and hissed. He could definitely use another twenty galleons.

* * *

The tabloids had been suspiciously devoid of Harry Potter news lately, Ginny observed as she tried to gather anything that blurted the name and had the tell-tale fuzzy picture on it. She knew this

wouldn't give her an accurate view—but it was something while Hermione gathered news articles and books.

Ginny had very nearly required an Unbreakable Vow when asking Hermione for help, but settled for Hermione's adamant word that she wouldn't say a thing about what the two were doing. Surprisingly, Hermione had agreed to set aside her wedding planning for one weekend to help Ginny research.

"Planning a bit of reading?" the clerk at Flourish & Blotts asked, eying the stack of glossy tabloids Ginny had set on the counter.

"Er... going on a trip," Ginny lied.

"Ahh, a nice relaxing holiday," the man nodded. He looked to be only a few years older than Ginny herself. "You might be interested in a book," he shrugged, his eyes scanning the headlines and grimacing just a bit.

"These are easier to pack," Ginny glared at him just a bit.

"Sure," he nodded, a forced smile on his face. "That'll be... fifteen galleons."

Ginny swallowed hard at the amount, tugging open the small handbag that Hermione had charmed for her years ago.

"Thanks," the clerk called out as Ginny slid the magazines into her bag. She didn't respond, feeling the need to get back to the flat. Hermione should be coming soon.

Ginny was halfway through the first article, detailing Harry Potter's supposed 'favorite things', and halfway through her second piece of very greasy pizza when Hermione knocked.

"I hope you know how much trouble this was," Hermione huffed, unloading stacks of books and old, tattered newspapers onto the small dining room table.

"Don't pretend you're not thrilled to research this," Ginny grinned, lifting the tabloid and shaking it in Hermione's face.

"Ergh," Hermione grimaced. "I'll stick to these, thanks," she nodded to what she had gathered.

"Oh, come on," Ginny laughed. "You aren't interested to know that Harry's favorite color is black, and that he prefers silk boxers to cotton?"

Hermione looked horrified, and then slightly curious. "Does he?"

Ginny snickered. "No. Unless he's hiding the silky ones, he's an all-cotton kind of bloke. We take turns doing the washing." She shrugged and went back to her article. "They're kind of amusing in a completely fictional way."

"I still think I'll stick to these," Hermione said, moving to the kitchen to get a plate and napkin for her piece of pizza.

Ginny began reading again, gagging at what the article listed as Harry's idea of a romantic date. She was pretty sure he would laugh himself silly over the ideas, or perhaps they would make him want to vomit, like she felt now.

"Do you know there are only two pictures published of Harry? The first was when he was ten or so and was spotted here in Britain," Hermione explained, flicking her wand so that the newspapers began arranging themselves in chronological order. "The only reason the press even got that one was because he was with his Godfather, Sirius Black, and the photographer recognized him."

Ginny looked up from another article about Harry's newest girlfriend—supposedly a full Veela who was an actress in Hollywood—to see where Hermione was pointing. A slightly blurry black and white photograph of a young boy peeking out from behind a tall man stared up at her from a headline that read 'Harry Potter? Back in England for good?'

Ginny studied the pale, thin face of the boy who wore round, black glasses and had black hair that stuck up all over the place while Hermione read the article out loud.

"For years we've all wondered what has become of The-Boy-Who-Lived. Albus Dumbledore, spokesperson for the Potter Family, has only ever commented that young Harry is in capable hands and is well taken care of away from a world where he would be treated as a celebrity.

"But now, could this boy be just that hero that we've all craved knowing about? Sources say that young Potter was in Britain on holiday with his guardian, and Godfather, famed Auror, Sirius Black. Perhaps they were here to visit Hogwarts and prepare The-Boy-Who-Lived to return to his heritage."

Ginny sighed loudly, watching as the boy's curious eyes took in the camera, and then realizing what was happening, he ducked his face behind the man he was with. It was hard to tell if this might be her Harry from this picture. He was thin, but looked well taken care of. Harry was thin, although time and exercise could definitely explain the way his body had developed.

"The Wizarding world deserves to know where its hero has been living," Hermione continued reading. "Perhaps its time for Albus Dumbledore, or even Sirius Black himself, to step forward and let Potter out of their shadows. The Daily Prophet will be investigating this matter further."

Hermione finished with a small huff. "The nerve of people, thinking they have the right to know everything about someone, simply because something amazing happened to them."

Ginny smiled, flipping through the other newspapers. "Where is the other picture?"

"It's in this book," Hermione offered, holding up a thick volume, claiming to be the true story of what had really happened in the war against Voldemort. "Anything else with his picture is just a copy from this one, even his Chocolate Frog card. This is the original. It contains the only interview that Potter has ever given. Apparently there was one reporter who he trusted to get the facts straight. It was published in several newspapers all over the world. The reporter then went on to write this book about it—making educated guesses about what Potter didn't tell him. Although, from what I can tell, his 'guesses' fit everything of what the Order knew back then—or what I can get out of people."

Ginny stared at the book, trying to gather the courage to actually read the passages. Skimming the

silly gossip articles was one thing; Ginny could easily ignore everything they said—none of them were true, despite claiming to be from ‘reliable sources’. And none of them knew Harry like she knew him.

But the book—an actual interview with Harry Potter—was hard to comprehend. The tome was heavy in her hand, probably because what it contained might validate her suspicions, or completely shoot them down. The strange thing was, Ginny wasn’t sure which was better.

“I’ve read it,” Hermione informed her.

Ginny nodded, swallowing thickly. “And?”

Hermione sighed, studying her closely while she picked at the remains of her dinner. “*And*,” she continued slowly, “I want to hear your opinion of it, without tainting your view with my thoughts.”

Ginny grumbled at her and took the book back to the sofa, burrowing comfortably into the corner and sighing heavily as she stared at the cover.

“The Rise And Fall of the Dark Arts in Modern Times,” she read aloud. “Could he have made this any more dry and dull?”

“I thought it was very insightful,” Hermione protested from where she had spread out several newspapers and seemed to be taking notes.

Ginny grimaced. “At least tell me what chapter it’s in. I won’t be able to stay awake long enough to read this whole thing.”

Hermione looked particularly offended. “It really would be best for you to read it in the context of the whole thing—”

“Hermione,” Ginny warned, raising an eyebrow.

“Chapter eight,” she finally admitted with a tired sigh.

“Thank you.” Ginny paused in opening the book. What was she going to do if it was Harry?

“Ginny?” Hermione had moved closer, concern in her voice. “Are you too nervous to read it?”

“Maybe,” Ginny admitted. “What do I do if it is him?”

Hermione sank down onto the sofa, staring at the book. “Would it change anything?”

Ginny chewed her bottom lip, running her finger along the smooth edges of the pages. “Yes... and no.”

“You’re in love with him,” Hermione said after a minute.

Breath caught in her throat, Ginny nodded. “I am,” she whispered, laughing just a bit at how ridiculous it sounded.

“Would that change if he was Harry Potter?”

“No,” Ginny said right away. And that was the truth. She *knew* Harry. His fame might change a few things, but it wouldn’t affect how she felt about him. “No,” she said again.

A slow smile crept over Hermione’s face. “You know, you could just ask him.”

“He’ll tell me when he’s ready,” Ginny said, taking a deep breath and opening the book. “I just... I have to know.”

Hermione smiled knowingly, patting her on the knee. “I’ll let you read then.”

“Thanks,” Ginny said softly.

She flipped open to the eighth chapter, letting her eyes skim the surface until they found ‘Harry Potter’, almost halfway down the first page.

... Harry Potter gone for sixteen years of his life. Mr. Potter assures us that he was well taken care of. He was privately tutored by who he described as ‘some very brilliant people’. “I had the best in everything,” Mr. Potter continued. “My guardians loved me and prepared me for what my future held.”

The talk of his future began early, Mr. Potter explained. His guardians, the infamous Sirius Black among them, told him of the prophecy when he was at the tender age of eleven. “They worried about it being so early,” Potter said. His voice is quiet, his tone very guarded. Not what you would expect for an international celebrity. When I asked about his star status, Potter shrugged it off. “It’s not real, you know. It’s just... perception.”

That prophecy shaped Potter’s entire life. “It’s not only about never having my parents. It was about... knowing I had a job to do, and preparing myself to do it.”

The British Ministry helped, along with the Americans, in organizing a Wizarding army to counter the growing rise in Dark Arts. But it was all under the jurisdiction of the ICW (International Confederation of Wizards) that the real control was wielded.

“If they’d done this when Tom first started terrorizing people,” Potter explained with much emotion in his voice, speaking of the self-titled Voldemort, “people like my parents, who gave their lives fighting for what was right, wouldn’t have died in vain.”

Potter was just eighteen when he sat down to be interviewed by me—the one and only interview he gave about his life, to this date.

I asked him about the rumors that he had been fighting Death Eaters since he was young. He looked away, a pensive expression on his scarred face.

“I was young, yes,” he agreed. “And some of it I still can’t talk about.”

There’s no doubt that Potter carved out a place in the history books—with a sword, in

fact.

Eyewitness accounts of the Final Battle, which took place just kilometers away from Riddle's al ma mater, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Witchery, indicate Potter was present through much of the fighting, relying heavily on a large broadsword he was armed with, and his wand.

"Sword training was just a part of my preparation," Potter explained when I asked him about it. "I learned a lot of things that a teenage boy should never have to know."

When I finally asked him about what he remembered from the Battle, Potter carries on his usual silence.

He wasn't what I prepared myself for at all when getting ready for the interview. Harry Potter has every right to have a swagger in his step, arrogance in his tone. Who would deny him that right?

But he's as far opposite as I can imagine a person being. Humble, with an easy smile when we weren't talking about such serious things. He freely admitted to being rather obsessed with International Quidditch and, blushing, explained his early childhood fantasies of playing professionally.

But once the real subject came up, Potter's serious side came out.

"I hate thinking about those days. The Battle... it went on forever, it seemed." Potter didn't talk in specifics. "Much of it is classified," he admitted. "This wasn't just me, running all over Europe, killing people," he defended with a scowl that accented the rough edges of his face. "I was a soldier. A soldier in a war."

That war, in particular what came to be called the Final Battle, claimed the lives of more than a hundred witches and wizards, and dozens of Muggles.

"I didn't want to be a soldier," Potter admitted. "But it's what I needed to do."

What, in particular, was it that was Riddle's downfall? We've been asking ourselves that question ever since the man became the monster. As Potter stated, the ICW (International Confederation of Wizards) has deemed most all of the Final Battle classified. They have allowed a few facts out. I asked Potter the question and he answered right away.

"Tom... he forgot about the most powerful force in the world. Love."

And as trite as that answer was, I couldn't laugh, because Potter's conviction was so strong.

"Love is everything," he continued softly. "Tom couldn't kill me the first time, because of the love of my mother who sacrificed her life to stand in front of her infant son. And he didn't succeed after that because of love."

Albus Dumbledore, a mentor of Potter's, spoke to me about love as well when I was able to interview him. He confirmed Potter's theories. "Harry has the right idea of it."

Whatever happened on that battlefield, it changed this young man forever. He admitted to preferring to be alone now, rather than partaking of what the celebrity life would give him.

"I'm not much of a social person," he confessed. "I was a bit before. I enjoyed seeing friends and such."

It's a shame to see someone so young be tainted by the kind of evil that Harry Potter has been facing his whole life. One can't help but compare him to Riddle—the choices they made in life contrasting sharply. And we know where those choices landed Riddle.

But what about Harry Potter? What becomes of a hero after their destiny is fulfilled?

"I don't really know," Potter shrugged. He was only barely eighteen at the time of the interview, and only a few months removed from the battlefield. "I've had offers from the ICW." To be an International Auror, he later explained. "That interests me."

Whatever Potter does, it seems he succeeds in. The power and regal way he has about him is almost intoxicating to be around at times. But underneath is a young man who has suffered tragedy after tragedy. The real story in all of this is that he's come out on top, time and time again.

Ginny stopped reading, her eyes watering enough that she used the back of her sleeve to wipe them. The story went on, with the author speculating on what might have happened at the various battles. But that didn't matter, because there in the middle of the page was a photograph of Harry Potter—this time unblurred by any kind of charm.

The face was scarred—jagged cuts that caused shadows and harsh angles. Ginny let her eyes soak up the pensive face—the same face she'd seen in the darkness of a hallway, after a nightmare—minus the scars. It was the eyes, however, that convinced her completely.

Harry Potter's eyes were a bright green, almost unearthly in their color. Her Harry's eyes were hazel, yet they held the same intensity and hint of darkness that Potter's did. That wasn't something she'd ever seen in anyone else—other than her own eyes, looking back from the mirror.

She slid the book closed on her lap, staring off into space; into nothing, really. The evening she'd had her revelation at the Burrow, there had been something... different about Harry then. Yes, he'd seemed to really enjoy himself and got on with everyone very well. But there was something else, something Ginny wasn't seeing. She closed her eyes and thought back to that night, to seeing Harry sitting next to her, picking at his food while he answered her mother's questions about his family. And then he had *looked* at her... and there was something in his eyes, almost as if he was *willing* her to know the truth about him, without having to tell her himself.

"Well?"

Hermione's question startled her and she looked up, having forgotten her friend was there at all.

"It's him," Ginny said softly. The two stared at each other, an awkward silence descending between them.

"You're sure."

"Yeah," Ginny nodded, wiping her eyes one last time before standing, cradling the book to her chest. "Where did you get all of this?" she asked, glancing over the organized stacks of newspapers and books lying around.

"The newspapers are ones I copied from the archives," Hermione shrugged, letting her finger trail along them. "The books I bought from Flourish & Blotts."

Ginny nodded, slowly laying the book she held onto the pile. A slow burning idea took shape in her brain.

She pulled her wand slowly, hoping that Hermione was occupied enough not to notice.

"Hermione," she said softly. "I'm really sorry I have to do this..." Wide eyes met hers and she took a deep breath. "*Obliviate.*"

* * *

Completing an assignment always made Harry feel good. It felt like he'd done his little part to make one small corner of the world better. Of course, it rarely stayed that way, and there were times when he'd returned to the same country, the same area, year after year to straighten things out. And sometimes he just wished the world would take care of itself.

But then there were assignments like the one he'd just finished. Those were the ones that Harry thrived off of. The Auror program was now up and running, transformed from the two rough and tumble men who sometimes showed up for work, into a force, fifteen strong, following Harry's training regimen and committed to keeping their families, their neighbors, safe.

There were downsides to his work, however. And making appearances at ICW headquarters was one of the largest.

It had been months since Harry had needed to present himself before the Auror's Board. But it was time now.

He fidgeted in his dress uniform, trying not to allow his annoyance to show. 'Just get it over with,' he growled to himself. And then he could go home... to Ginny.

Harry still hadn't decided for sure what to do about Ginny. Darian seemed to have forgotten all about their conversation that day in the cantina. He hadn't mentioned it at all, until the day Harry left.

Tell her how you feel.

His parting words still echoed in Harry's head.

"Auror Potter. The committee will see you now."

Harry snapped to attention as the aide announced him into the room. The assembly room was filled to capacity and Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes.

“As you can see, Auror Potter,” the heavy-set Chairman motioned to the faces who were all staring at him, “we have some visitors today.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said clearly. He stood at strict attention, gathering his magic about him like a shield. Without it there, he felt naked; exposed for all the world. The glammers he wore daily as Harry Parker weren’t necessary when he wasn’t in disguise. He stood before the committee, bearing scars and marks as evidence of his life of service.

Several flashes of light went off and Harry growled inwardly. It didn’t matter. He still had the Obfuscation charm in place. The pictures would turn out blurry. That thought almost made a small smirk escape him. Nothing was better than completely ruining some reporter’s day.

“Interest has been shown in your training techniques, Potter,” the Chairman continued, adjusting his small glasses. Harry could see the lines where the arms pressed into his round face. “And several governments have sent representatives to look into adopting your program.”

Harry nodded smartly, unsure what the proper response for that comment would be. What he really wanted to say wouldn’t be well received by anyone.

“Let’s begin with your report, Auror, and then we’ll continue with any questions the observers might have.”

Harry took a deep breath and detailed the last few months of assignments, very aware of every pair of extra eyes on him as well as the flashbulbs popping.

The question and answer period was more than a little awkward as Harry grew very tired of standing and no one offered him a chair. His answers got shorter and shorter, and his tone grew more bored as they dragged on, covering the same old material.

Finally, the Chairman dismissed them all and Harry sprang for the doorway, intent on escaping both the stuffy offices and the confines of his dress uniform robes as quickly as possible.

However, it wasn’t meant to be. The visitors swarmed in front of him, pressing in tightly. Harry could feel a spike in his magic as his heart raced and adrenaline kicked in. Several people close to him backed away, strange looks on their faces—to Harry it seemed they were halfway between terrified and curious.

“Mr. Potter! Would you please remove the charm from yourself so we can get a picture?”

“Tell us a bit about your personal life, Harry!”

“Any love interests?”

“Where do you live, Mr. Potter?”

The press closed in even tighter, undaunted by Harry’s growing irritation or the space that got more

and more confining as they all pressed on toward the entrance.

“No comment,” Harry said plainly. It was his usual answer, even though in his head it translated to ‘leave me the hell alone’.

“Come on, lad. This way...” The Chairman, with huge white eyebrows that almost obscured his eyes behind his glasses, patted Harry heavily on the shoulder. “Mr. Potter has made his remarks for the day, folks. You’d best be moving along.”

Harry was grateful to the man, even as he continued to harbor resentment toward him. There had been no notification to the change in meeting sent to Harry, and he’d walked in completely off guard for the hours wasted today.

“You did well in there,” he complimented. “You have much more patience with that bunch than I would.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry agreed, instead of biting back like he wanted to do. It wasn’t necessarily this man’s fault—but he was a politician. And Harry didn’t do well with politicians—they tended to let their agendas overcome rational thought and manners.

“You’re originally from England, aren’t you?”

Harry scrunched up his forehead, wondering where the question was leading. “Yes, sir.”

“I have some people I’d like you to meet then.”

The words sunk into Harry’s stomach like a lead weight. Visions of tearing his formal uniform robes off and running screaming toward the doors flashed through his mind before he resigned himself to a few more minutes of stiff conversations and awkward handshakes.

“Gentlemen, this is Harry Potter,” the Chairman offered, waiving his large arm wide toward Harry in a grand gesture. “Potter, this is the Ministry delegation from England.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Harry bowed his head forward just a bit, forcing a grim smile at the three men.

“Duane Robards, Head of Magical Law Enforcement,” the Chairman continued to introduce. “Ludlow Willis, head of recruiting for the Academy.” Harry nodded to both men, forgetting their names immediately.

“And Percy Weasley, Special Assistant to the Minister of Magic.”

Harry very nearly swallowed his tongue as the thin young man smiled and held out his hand to be shaken.

“It’s truly an honor to meet you, Mr. Potter,” Percy greeted him. Harry shook his hand, a bit more limply than he normally would have done, but he was preoccupied. Staring at the red-headed man, who was still pumping his hand enthusiastically up and down, Harry could count the similarities to Ginny.

They had the same color hair—a darker shade than Ron or the twins. They both had a dimple in their left cheek when they smiled. And they both had deep brown eyes, although Percy's were hidden behind thin glasses.

"Or do you prefer being called Auror Potter?" Percy asked, slowing his hand down but not letting go yet.

"Harry. I, er, prefer Harry."

"Good," Percy said, finally dropping Harry's hand. "I've read all about you, of course. When they told us we might actually get to meet you..."

Harry didn't hear more than a light babble of his words, he was so busy mentally checking his Obfuscation charm and trying to keep his magic from spiking dangerously high and scaring the other men.

Vaguely, Harry remembered that this was the brother Ginny wasn't close with at all. This was the brother who had lost a girlfriend in that mess with the diary. He stamped down irritation and a fierce protectiveness that rose inside him on Ginny's behalf, all the while nodding and trying to keep a smile on.

He must have answered their questions correctly, because they all smiled and shook his hand genially before Harry felt he was finally allowed to leave.

"Again," Percy said, holding out his hand once more. "It's a real honor to meet you."

"You as well," Harry choked out. He ignored the handshake, more out of a growing sense of panic than anything. Percy hadn't been at the Burrow when Ginny took him there for dinner last month; in fact, this was the first time meeting him at all. What if he recognized something, what if he told Ginny, or her family, before Harry could talk to her? This wasn't how he wanted his secret revealed.

Tell her how you feel.

The words weren't as reassuring now, having just dealt with what it actually meant to be Harry Potter. The lift was deserted and Harry threw himself into it, tearing at his collar and opening it enough to breathe; huge gulping breaths that made his lungs burn.

Could he really do that to Ginny? Force her into a relationship that meant always being on display? Considering how much Harry himself hated that... he really didn't know if he could.

Chapter 9: Wishing, Hoping, Waiting

Since the confirmation of Ginny's suspicions about Harry, she'd been more preoccupied than ever. She really tried to focus on things, but little thoughts about Harry kept creeping in here and there. Right after Obliviating Hermione, something she still felt extremely guilty for, even if it *had* to be done, Ginny had banished all of the newspapers and books to her bedroom. She'd spent the last two weeks of Harry's absence reading them all, yet she still felt she knew nothing more of consequence about Harry. What she knew already was enough.

Her free time was spent mostly with Hermione, talking about the wedding, planning for the wedding, breathing for the wedding. It was only three weeks away and things were really starting to come together.

Ginny had managed to have one lunch with Luna, before she traipsed off to somewhere else in the world, and met Neville once for dinner. Neville had teased her a bit about being so aloof lately, but he seemed fine with it. They were good friends, yes, but Neville was Ron's best mate, so they still saw each other fairly regularly at family functions and with the wedding planning.

Her nightmares had mostly been absent these past few weeks, however she wasn't positive if the dreams that had replaced them were better or not. Vivid and erotic fantasies played out in her head almost nightly. Strangely, they were so unlike Ginny, that they were at times very comical. She just really wasn't the kind of girl to pine over a hero, become a damsel in distress, and then be saved by the shining knight in armor.

And the fact that Harry had taken the place of the fabled knight didn't help. He saved her from all manner of situations and wild beasts, only to sweep her off her feet and spirit her away to his castle, where they made love over and over.

After that first particular dream, Ginny had awoken slightly amused, slightly disgusted, and very aroused—which only served to further the disgust. Knowing that it wouldn't go away, Ginny quickly took care of things and then got ready for the day.

But now Harry was back any day now and Ginny was actually nervous about seeing him. Would she notice glaring differences in his behavior now that she knew? Most importantly, would she betray what she knew by stuttering and stammering around him like an eleven-year old girl with a crush?

Thoughts like that consumed her as she lay on the sofa, not even seeing the film that was playing on the telly. She clicked it off and lay there in the semi-dark, sorting her feelings.

Despite what she knew about Harry, she was still in love with him. Her stomach still fluttered when she thought about him, her heart still raced, and Merlin knew she had a definite physical attraction to him. But there was also his dry sense of humor, and the way he was gentle with her without being patronizing. He'd accepted her story about the diary with understanding and no judgment at all. In fact, he'd been fiercely protective of her in a very non-threatening way. A thrill of attraction coursed through her when she thought of that moment, and the way the room had bristled with power at the time. Perhaps that was one of the things that had tipped Ginny off about Harry's secret.

What to do about these feelings, however, was a whole different subject. Somehow, she didn't think Harry would be opposed to her starting something. But a niggling fear at the back of her mind warned that she didn't know Harry all that well. Would he see this as simply a fling, convenient because both of them were lonely? Or would he truly come to feel as she did, that they could have a viable, long term relationship here?

Ginny cursed the doubt and banished it back to where it had come from. That was the talk of a silly, fourteen year-old girl who had trusted in a diary. Those doubts weren't founded on reality at all.

Really, the only way for Ginny to know was to try. There were three weeks until Ron and Hermione's wedding. Ginny was determined that she was going to ask Harry to come as her date. In the meantime, she'd start paying better attention. Watching how he reacted around her, cataloging his expressions and his touches.

It felt a bit like stalking a predator, Ginny decided with an eye-rolling smile. Did she really know what she was getting into?

The distinctive 'pop' of some Apparating into the flat rang out and Ginny's heart thumped. She sat up on the sofa, tucking her arms around her legs to keep herself from jumping up and launching at Harry when he came into the room.

"Hi," he said when he strode purposefully down the hallway. Seeing her on the sofa, his whole determined expression changed into... something Ginny couldn't quite place. She thought maybe there was confusion in there, and perhaps a slip of his confidence.

"Hi," she answered back. "How was your trip?"

Harry sank down onto the sofa, close enough that Ginny couldn't resist leaning over and snuggling into his side. His warm scent filled her up and she sighed, feeling the butterfly movement low in her belly again.

"Tiring," Harry admitted, his arm coming around her. He felt stiff underneath her, though, like he wasn't sure he really wanted this embrace. But that only lasted until Ginny tucked her head under his chin. He gave himself over fully toward it, until both arms were wrapped around her and his face was resting on her head.

"Well, you're home now," Ginny said, closing her eyes. The urge to simply look up and tell him that she loved him was almost overwhelming, but she clamped onto it tightly. She needed to be sure first.

"I am," Harry agreed, his breathing slowing down some and his heart not hammering away. She wondered if Apparation always affected him that way. "I should go and check on Hedwig," Harry said softly, yet he made no move to leave her embrace and Ginny smiled.

"It should be any day now," she whispered. "I've been checking a couple of times a day. Nothing yet."

"Good," Harry grunted out softly. "I didn't want to miss it. Damn meetings ran long."

Ginny smiled into him. "At least you've been doing something that you enjoy. I've been planning someone else's wedding."

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, I'd still take the damn meetings."

She couldn't help but laugh at him. "It'll be over in three weeks. And then life can begin again." In her head, she vowed to know, either way, by then, what Harry's feelings were. She was tired of this dancing around a relationship. Fred and George's words to her about how she and Harry were dating, but just hadn't realized it, were an ever-present companion.

"I'm not sure I have the energy to go to bed," Harry said, sinking further back into the cushions.

"Then just sit here with me," Ginny said. "I'm being lazy tonight. We'll watch something on the telly."

"Yeah," Harry said, his voice already heavy with sleep.

Ginny used the remote control to turn on the telly, keeping the volume low. It really didn't matter what they watched as Harry's chest began to rise and fall regularly under her head, his soft puffs of breath fluttering her hair.

When he went completely lax under her, Ginny sat up, studying his face closely. He looked the same as ever and she wondered about the scars that she knew had to be there. It was probably glimmers, she decided, designed to hide the tell-tale signs of who he was.

"I love you, Harry Potter," she whispered, feeling brave for a second. Of course, now that he was asleep, Ginny could reveal her two biggest secrets.

* * *

A loud squawk woke him from a deep sleep and Harry scrambled around the bed, fumbling for his wand.

It was Armstrong, however, puffing his chest and beating his wings wildly before settling back down. Settling down being a relative term, however, because he still paced back and forth on the perch, his wide eyes looking down into the dark corner of the room.

Harry blinked away sleep and rubbed at his eyes, trying to focus in the darkness. He could hear Hedwig moving around, see her white shape. It didn't seem that she was on her nest, however, but hovering over it protectively.

"Lumos."

Harry's wand lit up the room and Armstrong protested. Harry ignored him, however, in favor of watching his owl. Her amber eyes met his and she twisted her head before looking back down at her eggs. One of them had a gaping hole in the side and Harry's jaw dropped.

"It's time," he said, scrambling to get off the bed, nearly falling as the sheet wrapped around his ankle. He groped for a t-shirt on the floor and pulled on the first thing he could find, quickly moving

across the hall and knocking gently on Ginny's door. He opened it when she groaned.

"Gin, wake up! It's time. The owls are hatching."

He felt a bit silly wearing a huge grin, but the idea that Hedwig was about to become a mother excited him, despite his original misgivings.

"Wha?" Ginny sat up in bed, blearily pawing at her face.

"The owls," Harry explained, feeling his face heat when he realized she was only wearing a small tanktop and pyjama pants that sat very low on her hips.

"Oh!" She scrambled to get out of bed and quickly lifted her long hair into a sloppy configuration on the back of her head, securing it with something from her nightstand.

"One was just about to hatch," Harry said, glancing back over his shoulder.

"Come on then," Ginny said, taking his hand and pulling him toward his own bedroom.

They awkwardly perched on the end of Harry's bed, close together and staring at the nest.

Hedwig gave a small noise of encouragement as the little owl chick managed to get another piece of the shell off of himself.

"She's going to be a good mother," Ginny said, snuggling up to Harry even further and tucking her legs underneath herself.

"Yeah," Harry noted absently. His low belly twitched in a familiar way and he cursed silently. Now was not the time for that. He focused back on the eggs in the nest, willing another one to start hatching.

"Thanks for waking me," Ginny said. "I've always wanted to see an owl hatch."

"No problem," Harry said, giving her hand a little squeeze.

They watched as the baby owl worked tirelessly for almost fifteen minutes before Hedwig climbed back up onto the nest, nuzzling the baby and removing the last bits of egg from its body.

"It's kind of ugly," Harry observed in a whispered voice, narrowing his eyes at the grey little thing.

"Give him time," Ginny scolded, yawning widely and wrapping her arms around his chest. "He'll look better when he's dry and fluffy. See, Hedwig will take care of him."

Sure enough, Hedwig was rubbing her feathers all over the owlet, while the little thing tried to gain his balance in the nest.

"You think another one will hatch?" Harry asked, eyeing the other eggs.

"We could keep watching," Ginny suggested, her breath on his neck making goosebumps appear.

His stomach fluttered again and Harry breathed deeply, willing himself to focus on anything but Ginny in his arms. His desire for her hadn't lessened at all since coming home from his assignment. But Harry was proud of himself for controlling it better. He didn't feel the ever constant arousal just waiting below the surface, and the desire to deal with it four times a day had, thankfully, died.

The yearning was still there, as strong as ever, but Harry was trying to figure out the emotions behind everything, instead of simply allowing his physical reaction to take over.

"Yeah, we can," he agreed.

One other egg hatched nearly thirty minutes later, but the others showed no sign of moving at all.

Harry watched the little owls totter around the nest as Armstrong inspected them himself. He didn't show the same affection that Hedwig had, but Harry thought he looked like a proud father, his chest filling up purposefully and his feathers ruffling at times.

"I think that's all we're going to get tonight," Harry said softly, looking down to where Ginny was heavy against his side. She didn't respond, though, and Harry shifted, realizing that she was asleep.

He grinned down at her. The best thing to do would be to carry her to her bed, he thought. But a rather salacious side of him asked why; she was here, asleep, in his bed. Why not let her stay here?

The thought caused another jolt, one that Harry didn't immediately clamp down on. What would it feel like to wake with Ginny in his arms?

It would be completely innocent, he knew. Just... two friends sharing a bed together after staying up too late.

Before he could change his mind, Harry darkened his wand and lifted Ginny into his arms, shifting her higher into the center of the bed. He crawled in next to her, sighing happily when she curled into his chest.

Thank heavens he was so tired, he decided. Because this position might actually kill him to hold all night.

* * *

Ginny awoke, feeling warm and happy. It took her a few minutes to realize she wasn't in her own bed, and that Harry's arm was draped over her waist as he spooned up behind her.

She stifled a giggle as his light snoring halted and then started again, his arm reflexively tightening around her.

Taking a few minutes to simply enjoy the feeling, Ginny relaxed back in his embrace. They fit together almost perfectly, she mused. Harry's knees were tucked behind her own, spooning them tightly, she realized with a start.

The urge to turn around and... well, basically molest him, came to mind fiercely and Ginny bit her lip stifling a guilty giggle.

But then reality struck, in the form of a frantic Armstrong flapping around the room.

"Damn bird," Harry growled, rolling away from her and groggily searching the ceiling for Ginny's owl.

"He's just excited," Ginny protested with a smile. She rolled in bed, very aware of the space that Harry had put between them.

"He scratched me!" Harry protested. Ginny slid forward on the bed, ignoring the pillow that Harry had shoved into his lap; his physical reaction to being so close to her was obvious. Across his bare forearm were three long, deep scratches.

"Oooo," she hissed, wincing at the gouges that were now starting to bleed. "Ruddy bird," she cursed Armstrong.

"I can heal it," Harry protested. He glared down at the bit of sheet that Ginny had pressed to the wound, beginning to redden with his blood. "But it was a rather rude way to wake up."

Ginny couldn't help the giggle that burst out, looking up at him. One side of his hair was standing completely up and there were creases from his pillowcase in his face. Some of them seemed deeper than the others and it occurred to her that perhaps the glamours that he was wearing were starting to fade and the scars she knew were there on his face were starting to show.

"What are you laughing at?" he demanded, a scowl painted on his face. However, he looked less like a man who could do serious damage to her and more like a child who'd been awoken from a too-short nap. "I'm bleeding!"

"You have bed-head," Ginny said, reaching up to brush her hand along his hair. He shivered underneath her hand and jerked away, clutching the pillow to his front.

"I, er...." His eyes were wild, looking between her and the door.

For a moment Ginny was confused and then she relaxed. Should she say something, tell him it was natural and that he needn't be embarrassed? Or would that mortify him even more than he was.

"Look!" she said, grasping for anything that could defuse the situation. "The other eggs hatched."

"Oh, yeah," Harry said, still clutching his pillow. "I'm, er... I'm going to use the loo."

Ginny turned, pretending to be intently studying the new owls. Harry left the room quickly and she scooted off the bed, wary of Armstrong as she approached the nest.

"That wasn't very nice, you know, attacking Harry like that. He wasn't doing anything to you."

Armstrong ruffled his feathers and hopped closer to the nest, hooting loudly.

"You're in a mood," Ginny commented, rubbing the remaining tiredness away from her face. "I would have thought you'd be happy."

The owl squawked again and Ginny shook her head at him. Hedwig shifted, letting her babies out

from under her farther. Ginny smiled at the fuzzy white down that they were covered in. Just like she'd promised Harry, they were much prettier today than when they'd come out of their eggs, all wet and thin.

One bird stayed where he was the whole time, blinking up at Ginny. She noticed he was much smaller than the other three as well. Hedwig reached down and nudged him with her beak, but he didn't move.

"Oh no," Ginny said with a sinking feeling. She glanced up at Armstrong. "Is that why you woke Harry? You wanted help?"

Armstrong turned his head and peered at her.

Ginny leaned closer, keeping an eye on both parents. "Poor little thing." She tried to think back to Care of Magical Creatures and remember if there was anything that Hagrid had said about nursing owlets. But nothing was coming.

Harry came back into the room, his hair wet from a fast shower. His cheeks were flushed and Ginny noticed, but she was more worried about the owl.

"I think one of them is sick, Harry," she said. He froze, the t-shirt he was pulling on, only allowing half of his face to show.

"What?" he asked, finishing and hurrying over the crouch next to her. He stayed on the other side of her, well away from Armstrong, which Ginny would have found very amusing if she wasn't so worried about the owl. "What's wrong?"

"He hasn't done more than shift about since I've been watching," Ginny said. "And he's much smaller than the others."

Harry ruffled his hair, his eyes never leaving the small bird. "Is there anything we can do?"

"I'm not sure," Ginny admitted. "I've been trying to remember Care of Magical Creatures and I don't remember much. I think I was too busy skiving off class."

Harry grunted and chewed the side of his cheek. "Maybe we could take him to the shop in Diagon Alley."

"I could write to Hagrid," Ginny mused quietly. "He knows everything about magical creatures."

Harry contemplated that for a minute. Ginny thought she might have seen a bit of recognition in his face for a second, but he covered it well.

"Let's do that then," he suggested. "And we'll keep an eye on him. If it gets bad... We just can't let him die," he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing twice.

"We won't," Ginny assured him, her hand rubbing the place where Armstrong had scratched him. It was healed now, although three faint pale lines still shown in his skin. Those would fade over time, Ginny knew.

She hurriedly scratched out a note to Hagrid and then set about convincing Armstrong that he should leave his family to get help. It wasn't an easy job, but she finally managed, and he soared out over the sky, pink with morning light.

"I'll go start breakfast," Harry offered. "Hedwig always liked bacon. I'll make her some."

Ginny could hear the concern in his voice and affection washed over her for this man. The way he'd held her last night wasn't far from her mind.

There was definitely something there between them. But Harry, for reasons she could certainly guess at, was trying his best to hold back.

"What am I going to do with him, Hedwig?" Ginny mused quietly when Harry had left the room. "I guess I'll just need to convince him that it's okay."

Hedwig didn't respond but nudged her babies around the nest once more. The three healthy ones settled down into the clothing Hedwig and Armstrong had stolen, and the new mother gently rested on top of them.

"Help is coming," Ginny assured her.

* * *

Harry wasn't really sure of this plan, but Ginny seemed confident that Hagrid could help. He slipped into the loo right before they were to Apparate to Scotland, and reinforced his glamours, adding a very mild Obfuscation charm as well. Hopefully none of them would be too confused by it to focus.

"You have your cloak?" she asked him when he returned to the bedroom. "It's still cold up there."

"Yeah," Harry nodded, glad she reminded him. He pulled it out of the wardrobe and tugged it on. Ginny was cradling the sick owl in a t-shirt of Harry's, all the while reassuring the parents that she would take very good care of their baby.

"We'll be back soon," Harry promised, resting his hand on the small of Ginny's back.

"Do you need the coordinates?" Ginny asked, peering up at him with a strange expression on her face.

Harry almost responded that he'd been there before, but he bit it back quickly. "I've been to Hogsmeade," he managed. "I can get that far on my own."

Ginny nodded slowly. "Just outside the gates then. Hagrid said he would be waiting."

Harry smiled tightly and watched Ginny Apparate away.

"There's no way she could know," he commented to himself right before Apparating as well.

He appeared about fifty meters away from Ginny and hurried to meet her. It was drizzling miserably and Ginny hunched her shoulders against the cold, cradling the owl to her even closer. Harry sucked in a breath at how amazing she looked, concern for this animal written all over her face, and a

fierce determination that she wasn't going to allow it to die.

"There ya are," a booming voice and the sounds of chains clattering broke Harry's thoughts and he helped to guide Ginny over the wet ground. Hagrid, still larger than life, greeted them with a wide smile behind his tangled beard.

Harry remembered Hagrid from the Order of the Phoenix, but they'd only met briefly. Sirius had kept Harry out of most of the meetings until the very end, where Harry had stepped out of the shadows. It was Hagrid who had finally found Harry, exhausted and injured, after he'd fought Riddle and won, and carried him back to Hogsmeade where Sirius had taken over his care.

"Hi, Hagrid," Ginny greeted with a tight smile. "Hagrid, this is my friend Harry Parker. Harry, this is Rubeus Hagrid."

"Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts," Hagrid smiled widely. "Pleased to mee' ya."

Harry's tense shoulders relaxed a bit and he tried not to wince when the half-giant crushed his hand in a handshake. It appeared his charm work was succeeding.

"You as well," Harry nodded.

"Now, le's see ta tha' owl." He hurried away toward a small shack apart from the castle, making Ginny and Harry almost run to keep up with his huge strides.

Harry kept his hand on Ginny's back, just in case. But, really, it was keeping him grounded as his eyes searched the castle. He'd been here several times, and it never lost its majesty.

The first was when he was just barely eleven and Sirius had told him about the Prophecy. They'd come to England and to Hogwarts to see Albus Dumbledore and to discuss Harry's future. The plan had been for Harry to return to Hogwarts for his education. But that all crumbled when Dumbledore discovered that one of his instructors had been possessed by a shade of Voldemort. Sirius had immediately changed his mind and Harry had been enrolled in the Northwoods Academy instead. It had turned out well in the end for Harry, but he sometimes dreamed of what it would have been like to have been here at Hogwarts.

Several other times he'd been here during the war. He didn't like to think about those times, though. They were too dark.

"Don' mind Fang," Hagrid warned gently as he swung the door to his house open wide. Ginny lifted the owl just a bit in her arms as the great boarhound immediately came up to them. "Lay down, ya dozzzy dog!" Hagrid commanded. Fang's tongue lolled out the side of his mouth happily, drool wetting a large patch of the floor. Harry grimaced and helped Ginny to step over it.

It was warm inside and Ginny immediately set the bundle of cloth on the table. "He hatched just last night," she informed Hagrid, uncovering the owl. The bird did look small and frail against all that fabric, Harry thought.

"A Snowy?" Hagrid asked, a bit shocked. He sank down opposite where Ginny sat and Harry slowly sat next to her, his eyes darting between the two of them.

"The mother is," Ginny nodded. "She's Harry's."

Hagrid smiled gently as his huge finger stroked the tiny bird gently. "Always did love Snowy Owls."

"Me too," Harry affirmed softly.

"Has he eaten anythin'?" Hagrid asked.

Ginny glanced at Harry and slid her hand into his under the table. "Not that we saw," she shook her head. "Hedwig might have fed him before we woke up."

Hagrid nodded, examining the bird despite his feeble wiggling protests. "I think he's just a bit on the small side. Armstrong isn't a large bird."

Ginny nodded. "You think he just takes after his father?" Harry smiled at the comment, wondering if this little owl would be as surly as Armstrong seemed to be.

"May be," Hagrid nodded. "I think he jus' needs a bit o' care. If yer owls are up ta it, they'll take good care o' him." He stood and lumbered to the side of the room, rustling around in one of the cupboards. Harry took a few moments to observe the room they were in. It was cozy, if a bit cluttered. Baskets, cauldrons and odd things hung from the rafters on the ceiling. A shimmering silvery chunk of what looked like Unicorn hairs hung just above the table.

Ginny must have been watching him because she gave his hand a squeeze. "Hagrid gathers those from the forest," she said in a low whisper. "They get caught in the bushes and trees when they unicorns walk by. He gives them to Ollivander to make wands with."

Harry nodded silently. He knew all about Ollivander. That's where he'd gotten his wand, Holly and Phoenix Feather, when he was eleven.

"'ere," Hagrid said, thrusting a bottle into Ginny's hand. "Give him some 'o this owl tonic a few times a day—just a drop or two, mind ya—and he should be doin' well in a few days. If he's still no' perked up, you take 'im to Eeylops and they'll be able ta do more'n I can."

"Thank you, Hagrid," Ginny said, genuine relief showing in her eyes. "I appreciate you letting us come today."

The giant smiled back, friendship warming his face and crinkling the edges of his eyes. "I enjoyed seein' ya again, Ginny. And meetin' yer friend."

"It was nice meeting you," Harry nodded, wincing again at the crushing handshake.

"Come on," Ginny said once she had the owl wrapped back in Harry's shirt. "Let's get this little one home."

They bundled back up, preparing to go back out in the weather, Hagrid bringing a tiny pink umbrella with him, which, strangely, he never used, Harry noticed.

They reached the gates, Harry squirming a bit from the surreptitious way that Hagrid had been watching them both as they walked, hand in hand. Ginny went through first, checking to make sure

the owl was secure in his wrap.

"She's a good girl," Hagrid said, trying to whisper to Harry. "Ya don' let her slip away, now, ya hear?"

Harry felt his cheeks heat, but smiled. "I'll do my best," he promised quietly.

Ginny took his hand once Hagrid had locked the gates again and he wondered if she had heard, because she looked up at him with a very thoughtful expression.

"Ready?" Harry asked, wrapping his arm around her, determined to dual Apparate them home.

"Always," Ginny said, her eyes not looking away from his.

Harry's chest tightened and his stomach flip-flopped. He faced her, wrapping his other arm around her and closed his eyes, focusing on the kitchen at the flat.

* * *

The tension in the flat over the past week was becoming almost tangible. It was almost a relief to Ginny when she had to go to work, even though she had to drag herself there and always counted the minutes until she was back again.

Something had definitely changed between her and Harry, but she couldn't quite tell where that left them. Harry was hard to figure out. He hid his feelings well on most days, but there were moments when she swore he was completely transparent.

The fact that he felt, or was beginning to feel, something more for her was apparent. But it was very clear that she was going to have to let him sort it all out in his mind first.

It also didn't help that he had her head reeling with how affectionate he'd been. It seemed he was always finding excuses to touch her; his hand almost constantly lingered on the small of her back when they were close, and they never sat on the sofa, or the edge of the bed without being nearly on top of each other.

Yet neither of them had actually acknowledged anything in words.

Ginny came home from work, exhausted and a bit shirty, to be honest. There had been a storybook reading in the children's section of the store and hordes of three and four year-olds had run amok through the entire building, leaving Ginny with a pounding headache.

Harry called out from his workout room when he heard her Apparate in. He'd been spending more and more time in there, Ginny noticed, listening to loud music and taxing his body to the limits. Ginny wondered if that was his way of relieving the tension that had been between them. It actually sounded like a half-way decent idea, she decided, considering that she was nearly going insane trying to ignore it all.

Ginny stood at the doorway, leaning her hip against it as she watched Harry use the weight machine. He sat with his bare back to her, pulling the bar down to his chest, his back muscles

rippling and flexing. He was all sweaty and Ginny guessed that he'd used the treadmill beforehand for probably a good long time. His shirt was in its usual spot, tossed into the corner of the room.

Her mouth went dry as she watched him move, repeating the same motion over and over. Her eyes lingered on a drip of sweat as it rolled down from his hairline, all the way down his back and soaked into the waistband of his shorts. Ginny had always thought that Harry had the best arse. It was tight and trim and fit his body proportions perfectly.

He moved again, sucking in a giant breath and Ginny's thighs quivered.

"You going to stand there all day?" Harry asked.

Ginny jumped and felt her cheeks heat. She hadn't even realized he knew she was there.

"Er... no, actually. I think I might join you." The suggestion was impulsive and she swore internally. Why had she said that? Working out wasn't going to do anything to relieve the ache low in her groin, or to avoid having constantly wet knickers.

Harry's movement stopped and he looked back over his shoulder. "Really?"

"Yeah," Ginny shrugged, ripping her eyes away from him and forcing herself to focus on the treadmill. "I haven't really had a good workout in months."

"Sounds like a good idea then," he smiled. His innocent look only served to feed the fire burning deep in her belly and Ginny barely bit back a whimper.

"I'll... just go change then," she mumbled, thinking it sounded more like a question.

"Sure," Harry said cheerfully, completely oblivious to her discomfort. But it didn't matter, because Ginny was already almost to her door.

The days had just been too much, Ginny convinced herself, as she lay on her bed, her eyes staring at the faint light that shown beneath the door. Harry's music was still playing in the workout room and she could hear the rhythmic 'thump-thump' of the weights being used.

Ginny sighed happily as a fantasy of the two of them together faded before her. She probably should get up and change into something that would allow her to work out, but at the moment it sounded like so much work.

"Gin?"

Harry's voice just outside her door startled her.

"Are you coming out?"

"Yeah," Ginny barked, hurrying across the room to gather her things from the wardrobe. "Sorry, just got, erm, distracted." She chuckled nervously at the truth.

"We're still going out tonight, aren't we?"

"Damn," she hissed, tugging on a pair of shorts and her sports bra. "I forgot about that." It had completely slipped her mind that they had agreed to meet Ron and Hermione at The Three Broomsticks. Ron insisted that all the wedding planning was making them all barmy and that they needed a pre-celebration celebration.

"We don't have to," Harry offered.

But the idea of not spending every minute of the next ten hours in constant contact with Harry, the memory of her fantasies about him always there at the front of her brain, sounded perfect. Having other people around would help ease the tension between them. And a drink sounded perfect right about now.

"No," Ginny called out, opening her door quickly while tugging her trainers on. "I want to go."

Harry was standing directly outside the door and she collided with him, her hands splaying across his chest, which was, thankfully, hidden in his t-shirt once more.

"Good," he said softly, looking down at her with a heavy look. He licked his lips and Ginny stared at his tongue as it disappeared. "It sounds like fun."

"Yeah," Ginny said, dragging herself away from him. "Now come and show me how to use this machine before I mess it all up."

* * *

Neville Longbottom sighed in contentment as he balanced his chair back against the wall at the Three Broomsticks. Tonight was a great idea. Hermione and Ron had been wearing themselves out with all the planning. They'd been having small spats lately that had been growing more and more heated. It was time for everyone to blow off a little steam.

He'd actually been the first one here tonight, doing his duties as Best Man to make sure Rosie didn't inadvertently run out of anything to drink. At least that's what he'd told Fred and George when they'd walked in with their dates. It seemed it was going to be one hell of a party, Neville observed.

Ron and Hermione were now out on the dance floor, making Neville wonder if Gred or Forge had charmed them together. He smiled thinking how happy they were. Seamus and Dean were standing off to one side, snickering about the couple who swayed side to side, kissing and smiling.

"How much have they had to drink?" Angelina asked, leaning across the table toward Neville, and nodding her head toward the dance floor.

"A pint each," he shrugged.

"The night is still young," Fred said, waggling his eyebrows at Katie. "Plenty of time for them to get soused and provide Neville here with more fuel for his toast."

Neville grimaced, thinking of how much he really wasn't looking forward to standing up in front of everyone next week and making some sort of speech. Just as he opened his mouth however, a loud

cheer sounded from the area near the door.

He didn't have to guess at who had entered, however when a rousing chorus of 'Weasley is our Queen' started, aided by Seamus and Dean who were holding up their pints and climbing onto their chairs.

Neville's face stretched into a smile as Ginny's laughing face was seen. She took a swipe at the two loud Gryffindors, laughing even louder as they tried to dodge her. The song died out a bit, however, when she reached behind her into the crowd. Neville's eyes went wide as her hand clasped into that of a man Neville thought looked vaguely familiar. But Neville was never very good with remembering people, so he shrugged it off.

He tried to remember if she had said she was dating someone when they'd met last week. She'd talked almost nonstop about her flatmate, but Neville had taken that at face value.

"Oi!" Fred stood up and waived at Ginny, who nodded toward him in acknowledgement. She was currently introducing the man with her to several people, Seamus and Dean among them.

"Ginny brought Harry," Ron observed aloud as he and Hermione joined the table.

"Oh, good," Hermione grinned, happily squeezing next to Neville.

"Are they dating?" Neville asked, confused as Ginny wrapped her arms around Demelza and Harry's hand rested against her back. They certainly looked like a couple to him.

"No," Hermione answered.

"Yes," both Fred and George cheered.

"I'm not sure," Ron said.

Neville looked around the room at the differing opinions and laughed. "Thanks for shedding some light on that."

"They are," Fred said, "But neither of them realizes it."

Neville cocked his head to the side, thinking about that. It kind of made sense, he supposed. Ginny could be stubborn about some things, and relationships were definitely one of those things.

It didn't really matter if they were or weren't officially together, Neville decided, when Ginny turned and smiled at the lot of them like she had just done. He hadn't seen her this happy in years. Any unease he felt about Harry Parker, whoever he was, was forgotten as they joined the group.

* * *

Ginny's friends, Harry decided, were completely and utterly insane. And it was brilliant. But not nearly as brilliant as dancing with Ginny like he was right now.

Neither of them was really drunk, but definitely feeling a pleasant buzz from the evening. Harry hadn't felt this uninhibited... ever, really.

Here, pressed against Ginny as they swayed back and forth to some unknown song, completely out of sync with everyone around them and the music itself, Harry took a deep breath, feeling like he was finally coming up for air after being underwater for years.

“Having a good time?” Ginny asked, pulling back from where she had been resting her head on his shoulder.

“Very much,” he answered, a bit of awe in his voice. “I wasn’t sure earlier... but I’m glad we came.”

“Me too,” she said, her hands warm on his back. “My family is nutters,” she said, watching over his shoulder. Harry spun her a bit so that he could see what she was looking at and had to laugh. Fred and George had slipped something to both Ron and Neville and there were now two very large canaries sitting at the table, surrounded by raucous laughter.

“They’re great,” Harry protested, feeling his face ache from smiling so much. He couldn’t help but think that Sirius and Remus would fit right in with this wild bunch. The thought made him a bit homesick for a minute, but the feeling lessened as Ginny moved back in closer.

Harry rested his face against her head, his eyes scanning the room, aware of the attention they were drawing, but, for the first time, not really caring. It wasn’t because of who he was this time; but rather who he was with. And Harry thought it was wonderful.

“Everyone is jealous, I think,” he couldn’t stop the comment from escaping and scowled inwardly at himself. How much did he really have to drink tonight?

“Of me, maybe,” Ginny pulled back again, grinning up at him. “You’re a catch, you know?” She winked and Harry snorted.

“Only you would think so,” Harry said, shaking his head.

Ginny laughed, throwing her head back. “You didn’t hear the talk in the loo,” she protested. “Apparently you have a delectable arse, Mr. Parker.”

Harry flushed and Ginny reached down and caressed his backside. He pulled away from her a bit as several wolf-whistles and cat-calls were heard. Judging from Ginny’s laughter, she thought it was the funniest thing she’d ever seen.

He moved in closer again, growling at her and then breaking into his own laugh. “I happen to think yours is the hottest in the room, you know,” he admitted, adding as much humor as he could to the truth so that she wouldn’t see it for what it actually was.

“And I’m not the only one,” he said, catching at least one man look away when Harry saw where their eyes were focused.

“Yeah, well,” Ginny said, chuckling, “they’ll all just have to wonder, because I’m busy dancing with you right now.”

A fierce protectiveness welled up inside Harry and he grinned down at her, thrilled that she seemed

to believe what she'd said.

"That bloke you introduced me to when we first got here," Harry began, his eyes catching the man watching them, "one of them that were singing?"

"Seamus?" Ginny asked.

"The other one," Harry grunted. "Dean?"

Ginny looked up, curious. "Yeah? What about him?"

"Is he... *the* Dean?"

Her eyebrows knit together for a moment and then she nodded. "Yeah. But he and I are fine, Harry. Honestly, we were both just... running on all hormones and..." she sighed. "We're friends now, just like it always should have been."

Harry considered that, the jealousy he was feeling tamping down just a bit. Honestly, he couldn't hold it against the man; Ginny was amazing. He knew that. And if the looks that Dean was giving the two of them across the dance floor were any indication, Dean knew it too.

"You're wonderful, do you know that?"

The question slipped out before he could even stop it and Ginny looked up at him, her dark eyes full of something bordering right on the edge of what he'd been feeling for her for months. But he couldn't be sure. His head was starting to spin a bit from the heat of the room and the alcohol.

"Harry?" Her question was hesitant, as if she'd been thinking about it all night and had just decided to ask it.

"Yeah?"

"Would you... would you be my date to the wedding?"

Harry stopped moving, swallowing thickly as he tried to process what she'd just asked.

"Er..."

"If you don't want to—"

"No! I do. I just..." Harry searched his mind, trying to decide what he really wanted. Was this moving too fast? Was she simply asking because she wanted to go as friends? Or because she wanted to change their relationship?

Ginny smiled then, a happy, too-bright smile that he knew wasn't completely real. "I mean, I don't know what your work schedule is going to be. Maybe something is coming up..."

Harry latched onto that excuse, a headache beginning to form as he lied to her. "Yeah, that's it. I'm not even sure I'm going to be here."

“But... if you can?”

“Then, yeah,” he nodded.

Ginny went back to dancing with him, but it wasn't nearly as enjoyable and Harry cursed himself. He should just stop this nonsense and tell her that he was going to be there. Tell her that he was in love with her and that he wanted to be her date to everything... forever. But he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Chapter 10: Enough For Now

"I'm a coward, Hedwig," Harry said pathetically. He lay face down on his bed, his beloved owl sitting on his shoulder, preening his hair every few minutes while she kept a wary eye on her four owlets stumbling around her nest. "I'm a fucking coward," he reiterated. "And I really don't deserve her."

Hedwig hooted softly and Harry raised his head, watching her babies. The little owl that Ginny had affectionately dubbed Rubeus, in honor of Hagrid, whose tonic had done wonders for the little bird, was doing well. He was still smaller than his brothers and sister, but that didn't seem to bother him at all. In fact, he was the most adventurous one, often venturing from the pile of clothing until Hedwig would herd him back to where he belonged. Harry always had to be careful when he got out of bed in the morning, lest he step on little Rubeus.

"There's just... so much involved in a relationship with Ginny," he protested. Hedwig always listened to him prattle on and Harry seemed to need it now more than ever. "I just... I need..." He trailed off, not even knowing what he wanted, really.

He sighed heavily and watched as Armstrong picked up an escapee Rubeus and deposited him back with his siblings.

Ginny hadn't said much about last night when they got home. She'd kissed him on the cheek and gone into her bedroom, shutting the door.

"I fucked up, didn't I girl?" he asked, turning to see that Hedwig was now gone from beside him. She fluttered back in, her wing grazing his head. In her talons was clutched an old scroll. Harry knew it was from Sirius, but it was months old.

"Thanks," he said, skeptically glancing at his owl. Maybe she was getting old and batty.

As if she heard his thoughts, Hedwig pecked him on the head.

"Ouch!" he rolled away from her, rubbing the spot irritably. "What the hell did you do that for?"

Hedwig picked up the scroll again and tossed it toward him. "That's months old, you git," he growled, still rubbing his head. He was surprised she hadn't drawn blood. When she nudged the scroll again, Harry snatched it up, glancing at it.

"It's from Sirius," he acknowledged, sinking down onto the bed again. His eyes traced the letters, not seeing the words, really. "Sirius..."

The realization of what Hedwig was trying to tell him sunk in and he felt like a horrible person.

"I'm sorry," he apologized quietly. "I... I didn't understand what you were meaning. Maybe I should go and talk to Sirius."

Hedwig ruffled her feathers, puffing her chest out.

“Yes, I know you were right,” he rolled his eyes. “And you’ll never let me live it down.”

She hopped over toward him and nuzzled his arm with her face. “Yeah, me too,” Harry agreed quietly.

“I do need to see Sirius,” he nodded. “But first I need to fix this with Ginny. I can’t leave it like it is right now...”

* * *

Ginny smiled as Angelina, Katie and Alicia arrayed themselves on Hermione and Ron’s sofa. Alicia was showing off the round bump of a belly that was now visible—the product of her recent marriage to Oliver Wood.

Hermione chuckled next to her and sipped at the bright pink concoction in the plastic cup that she held. “Thanks so much for hosting this, Ginny,” she said. They both turned to hear Luna and Demelza arguing good naturedly over the right mixture for the drinks.

“Sure, Hermione,” Ginny answered, happy to be able to do her Maid-of-Honor duties satisfactorily. “I’m only sorry that we couldn’t have it at my flat. Harry’s been in a mood lately, and I didn’t want to push my luck.” she added a bit darkly. Any progress that their relationship had been making this past week was virtually non-existent. They’d gone from being quite close to stumbling awkwardly around each other. Harry’s touches were few and far between. She hadn’t even brought up the idea of him being her date at the wedding again.

“Its fine,” Hermione patted her hand. “I don’t mind having the party here.” Ginny sighed, glad that Hermione approved. Lately, Hermione only clucked her tongue and shook her head where Ginny was concerned. And, she had to admit, she probably hadn’t lived up to Hermione’s expectations. She’d missed several planning meetings because of work, and had completely forgotten about having dinner with her and Ron last week, instead spending the evening with Harry watching a movie at the theater down the block.

“So when do we get to meet this mysterious man of yours, Ginny?” Pavarti Patil asked as she and her sister giggled from near the kitchen.

Ginny sighed. “He’s not mine.” No matter how much she denied it, no one ever seemed to believe her.

“He’s cute,” Demelza proclaimed. “And the way they were connected last week at the party—”

“Alright,” Ginny held up her hands. “That’s enough of that. We’re here tonight to celebrate Hermione, not speculate on my love life—or lack thereof.”

The party went on, with Hermione opening gifts and blushing at some of the things she’d been given. There were plenty of lacy, frilly things that were fun to laugh about. Angelina even grabbed a few of them and draped them over her front, modeling them with an exaggerated walk around the room.

Ginny slipped out as they continued laughing, moving into the kitchen to clean up a bit. Hermione

joined her a few minutes later.

"I've had a good time tonight, Ginny."

"Good," Ginny smiled. "That was rather the point, you know."

"You've been out of sorts today," Hermione commented as she nudged Ginny aside, making room for her to help wash the dishes. They filled the sink with soapy water and slowly started to hand-wash the serving spoons and plates.

"I have been," Ginny nodded. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring you down."

"You didn't," Hermione said. "I would hope that we've been friends long enough to know when you're not happy."

Ginny felt her face heat. "We have." She felt bad for thinking that Hermione should be so focused on her own wedding that she would ignore her best friend. "I haven't been that good a friend to you."

"You're fine," Hermione protested. "You've been there when I really needed you."

"Not enough," Ginny protested. "But that ends right now. I've officially taken the next two weeks off and I'm completely yours, morning, noon or night."

Hermione chuckled. "Hopefully I won't need you that much."

"I'll be there," Ginny promised, holding up her hand, covered in bubbles that dripped down to the floor.

"It's a deal," Hermione said. They went back to washing and were quiet for a few minutes. "Harry won't mind you being gone so often?"

Ginny bit her lip, not sure how much to share and how much she really even wanted to talk about this. She had been so sure that he was feeling the same way she was. The night at the pub had been wonderful, like they'd been on this spectacular broom ride together. And then she'd made a complete fool out of herself by asking him out on a date. And that's where the horrific, tremendous crash had happened.

"I don't think Harry's going to miss me at all," she admitted. "In fact, I think he's going to probably be out of town."

"What did I miss?" Hermione asked, her jaw loose in shock.

"Nothing," Ginny shrugged. "I just... I misread what he wanted and I made a bit of a fool of myself." She slid a dirty pan into the water and scrubbed at it vigorously. "He mentioned something about leaving for an assignment," Ginny lied. Harry had mentioned work the other night, but she had the impression that he was scrambling for any excuse to get out of going with her to the wedding.

Hermione glanced up, surprised. "You invited him to the wedding, didn't you?"

"I did," Ginny confirmed, trying to keep her voice level. "But his work is rather demanding. He said he'd back in time, if he could."

Hermione nodded. "And you're not happy with that."

The statement evoked more emotion that Ginny had hoped to betray. She sat heavily on a kitchen chair, her hands leaving great soapy, wet prints on her jeans. "It's stupid," she shook her head.

"It's not," Hermione said as he joined her, offering a flannel to dry off on. "You two have become pretty close lately."

Ginny nodded. "We have. He's my best friend, Hermione. I'm not supposed to be feeling these things for my best friend."

"No?" Hermione asked with a chuckle. "And what about Ron and I; we were friends before we started going out."

"It's not the same," Ginny protested. "At least you had an idea what Ron felt for you. Harry..." She sighed. "Sometimes I think he might... but then he pulls back and I get these strange signals from him, like he's not even sure what he wants at all."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "Has he ever given you any kind of clue as to how he feels?"

Ginny went silent for a minute before nodding. "He touches me all the time. Nothing sexual, you know, just... holding my hand and... putting his hand on my back," she said in a soft voice. "He's desperately affectionate at times. You saw that the other night at the pub. But then I went and messed it up. I had asked him to come to the wedding, as my date, and he got all flustered. I can't quite figure it out, Hermione. I mean he's usually comfortable with the family, isn't he? That's not why is it?"

"He seems to be," Hermione added in support. "Maybe he just doesn't like crowds, or he has some fear of weddings." They both chuckled at that.

"That could be," Ginny conceded. "He's usually a bit wary in crowds." She shrugged, knowing Harry's reasoning. But it wasn't anything she could betray to Hermione. Ginny really didn't want to have to Obliviate her again—it still ate away at her that she'd done it in the first place.

"What was it that made you think he might return your feelings?"

"It's a hundred little things," Ginny said and then groaned in frustration. "Like the other night at the pub. We were laughing and dancing and... having the best night. And then I ruined it by pushing. He got this scared rabbit look on his face, and we haven't talked about it since."

Hermione rubbed her back lightly. "Do you think you should?"

"Of course," Ginny shook her head. "But what if I make an even bigger fool of myself, Hermione?"

"Do you really want him to leave without resolving anything?"

Ginny shook her head. "No, of course not."

Hermione got a thoughtful look on her face. "Would it be better to wait until after he got home to sort this? Maybe you both just need some time to decide how you're feeling. How long would he be gone?"

"His last job was four weeks long," Ginny lamented. "I'm not sure I can wait that long. It feels like there's something there, just under the surface. Like a bubble just waiting to pop, but I can't find the right tool to burst it."

Hermione sighed and rubbed her back lightly again. "It will, Ginny. All of us can see something there. Ron's mentioned how wrapped up in each other you two seem to be. You don't do much with any of us lately."

Ginny attempted to protest, but she knew her friend was right.

"It's fine," Hermione reassured her. "I understand at least. I just hope that something will come of it."

"Me too, Hermione," Ginny said as she laid her head on her soon-to-be sister-in-law's shoulder. "Me too."

* * *

Harry was pacing in the flat when Ginny got home from Hermione's. It was late and she'd really expected him to be in his bedroom with the door closed, like he'd been for the past few days. The girls had stayed late, talking about all kinds of things.

"Oh," she started, seeing him up.

"Hi," he said, awkwardly shoving his hands in his jeans pockets. "Do you... do you have a minute?"

Ginny bit her lip, not sure if she was up to having this conversation right now. This is when he would sit her down and tell her that he was flattered, but that he really didn't feel anything but friendship for her.

"I could probably keep my eyes open for a few minutes," she smiled tightly.

"Good," he sighed. Surprising her, he reached for her hand, lacing their fingers together and tugging her toward the sofa. He sat first, pulling her down next to him.

Ginny stiffened as their thighs pressed together. She wasn't sure she could be this close to him when he did the whole 'we're just friends' speech. She might just break down into tears, which she certainly didn't want.

"I've been... really messed up this week," Harry said. Ginny opened her mouth to respond but he held his hand up. "Let me say it, please." She hesitated, but finally nodded. "And I don't want to leave with you thinking that it's your fault."

"You are leaving then," she said, looking down at their linked hands.

"Ginny, I'm coming back," he said, reaching up to lift her chin so that he could see her face. "I just

need to do a few things.”

“Okay,” she said, blinking away tears that made her horrified. No doubt he’d change his mind and be packing his bags for good as soon as he broomed her.

“Gin,” he said, leaning forward until their foreheads met. “Please be patient with me. I... I’ve never had someone like you in my life...”

His words were harsh against her ears, but not because of how he said them, but what they meant. How could she have forgotten who he was? Of course this was going to be hard for him. He had admitted to never having a real relationship, in love or friendship, before her.

Sometimes it was so easy to forget that he had this past that was larger than life—that shaped everything he did, even now, so many years later.

Ginny felt extremely selfish as she wiped at her tears. She’d turned this whole thing into something for her—how *she* felt, how he felt about *her*.

She’d completely discounted that he had feelings and insecurities just the same, if not tremendously bigger, than hers.

“I can wait,” she whispered, horrified when Harry reached up and brushed his hands along her face to remove tears. He wasn’t promising anything; that was very apparent. But his words gave her a bit more hope.

“Gin.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, trying to turn away from him. His hand on her chin stopped her, though. And then his lips were on hers, soft and not demanding at all. He moved them slowly and Ginny sighed.

There wasn’t much mistaking his intent now. Neither of them was drunk, neither of them was languishing in loneliness. This kiss was one that held a promise of something more in the future.

The kiss ended a few moments later, when Harry pulled away slowly and lifted her into his lap, laying them back against the sofa.

Ginny sighed, closing her eyes and drinking in Harry’s warmth and embrace. It wasn’t perfection... but it was something. And it gave her hope to hang on until he came back.

“I’m leaving early tomorrow,” Harry whispered as they cuddled together.

She nodded against him. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he said, pressing a kiss to her head. “Stay with me tonight?” he asked, his voice vulnerable and open. “Not... Just to sleep,” he said and she nodded before it was even out of his mouth.

“Okay.”

That night, lying in Harry’s bed, spooned up close to him, just as she had been the one other time

they'd shared a bed, Ginny smiled. It would be enough for now.

* * *

Harry hesitated for only a minute before pressing his finger to the small brass button. He could hear the peal inside and hoped that Sirius would be home. He really didn't want to spend the night in a hotel. He needed familiar tonight. Getting out of bed this morning, climbing out of Ginny's arms, had been one of the hardest things Harry had ever needed to do. But if he intended to go forward with this relationship, there were a few things he had to straighten out.

"Hey," Sirius' groggy face appeared in the crack of the door. He peered at Harry through narrowed eyes and slowly pulled the door open. The interior of the hall was dark, but even so, Harry could see the days-old stubble on the ruggedly handsome face of his godfather.

"Hey, yourself."

"I didn't expect you," Sirius grumbled. He closed the door behind Harry and ruffled his hair as he flipped his wand out to the side and the lamp on a side table cast a soft glow in the room.

"I didn't plan on coming," Harry confirmed as he glanced at the messy room. Piles of clothing were everywhere and a stack of dishes teetered precariously on a rather spindly table. "Having a rough time of it then?" he asked as he motioned toward the room.

Sirius had the good sense to look a bit ashamed. He hurriedly gathered the dishes in his arms and shrugged as he pushed past Harry.

"Full moon was two nights ago."

The statement itself was all Harry needed in explanation. Remus' injuries during the Final Battle four years ago had made his monthly transformations even rougher to handle. The fact that two days afterwards found Sirius still trying to recover meant that this month had been bad.

"Second moon this month," Sirius growled as Harry followed him into the kitchen where, surprisingly, it was rather clean.

"Moony's alright, then?" Harry asked. "Because I can stay somewhere else—"

Sirius waived him off as he flicked his wand and started the dishes washing. "You're always welcome here, you know. This is your home. Moony would have my hide if I turned you out."

"*Mangy* hide, Padfoot."

The rough voice made Harry turn to where his adopted uncle leaned against the doorjamb. His hair was wet, as if he'd just come from a shower, and combed back away from his face. That face was worn and haggard, but clean shaven. Harry thought he detected a few new scars in the mix, though.

"Good to see you, Harry," he nodded toward the young man. "Sirius didn't tell me you were coming."

"Because I didn't know," Sirius answered quickly, although he wore a slightly amused expression.

Harry shrugged and glanced around the kitchen, not wishing to meet their gazes. "I had a few extra days and I was in the area." He wasn't sure what was making him hold back in telling them about Ginny.

"How long can you stay?" Remus said as he took a seat at the table.

Harry shrugged. "I'm not really on a schedule per se. A few days." The wedding was in three days. Ginny had asked him to be there.

"How are things?" Sirius asked.

"Fine," Harry grunted out, startled from his thoughts. He told them the basics of his last assignment and the three talked about things that had happened in the last four or so months since Harry had visited last. He purposely didn't mention Ginny more than in passing, and neither man seemed to notice, really.

"And?" Sirius asked, a grin threatening to break out. Remus seemed amused too, which really rankled Harry. He hated it when they did this.

"What more do you want to hear?" Harry asked, pushing around his tea cup, which was still full. Remus always did that; poured him a cup of tea that he rarely drank. Although, he had to admit, Ginny made a very decent cup.

"Nothing," Sirius snapped. "Just wondering when you're going to get your head out of your arse and just ask for the help that you need."

Harry shrugged. "Who says I need help?"

Sirius snorted. "You're a horrid liar, Harry, don't even try it. You're even worse at keeping secrets."

Harry glared at him defiantly. "I keep plenty of secrets."

That seemed to take Sirius by surprise and he nodded solemnly. "That you do. Why are you here now, Harry?"

Harry stared toward the window and let his gaze wander toward the large wooded area behind the old farmhouse. "I just needed some time to think," he finally shrugged.

"The job?" Remus asked. "Is it becoming too much?" Sirius leaned against the counter and folded his arms over his chest.

Harry shrugged again. "A bit..." He liked his job, really, he did. But it was becoming more and more demanding. Plus having to keep up the façade of two different identities was wearing on him. And it couldn't go on forever.

"I've... we'll, I've met someone," Harry continued after a deep breath. There. He'd managed to say it.

The kitchen was silent and then Sirius turned determinedly and rummaged in the cupboards, placing

a brand new bottle of Firewhiskey on the table and three shot glasses.

“This isn’t the type of conversation to have over anything less than the best,” Sirius explained with a cheeky grin.

“Three?” Harry asked. “Remus never drinks.”

“I do,” Remus shrugged. “Just not as much as Padfoot.”

Sirius grinned. “Can’t leave out the Furry Godmother.”

Harry snorted and moved to look out the back window. When Harry had been eleven, Remus had moved in with them, tutoring Harry in various subjects. Sirius had once accused Remus of hovering like a mother and had commented that if he was Harry’s Godfather, that Remus was acting like a *Godmother*. Harry, having heard the entire conversation, had laughed and proclaimed him the ‘Furry Godmother’. Remus hated the title but did laugh occasionally when Sirius brought it up. Tonight was one of those nights.

Harry watched the two men pouring themselves, and Harry, a shot of amber liquid.

“Had to happen sometime,” Remus commented.

“You’ve had ‘the talk’, Harry,” Sirius teased.

Harry rolled his eyes. Leave it to Sirius to joke about the most important thing in his life. “That’s not... this is different. *She’s* different.”

Sirius blew out a breath and pretended to wipe his forehead. “Oh, it’s a girl. For a minute you had me worried, Harry. The way you said ‘I’ve met *someone*.’ ”

“Idiot,” Harry growled, downing the drink quickly.

Remus grinned at the exchange. “Tell us about her.”

Harry shrugged. What could he say about Ginny? “She’s... amazing.” He didn’t look up, but still could tell that the men exchanged a look. He knew he must have a sloppy grin on his face. “She’s... I don’t know.”

“Is she a witch?” Remus asked.

Harry nodded. “I didn’t think so when I first met her. She’s brilliant though. Really bright, you know, but it’s not really book smarts exactly, it’s more like she’s got loads of common sense.”

“Pretty?” Sirius grinned.

“No,” Harry shook his head, his face heating a bit. “Bloody gorgeous. She’s tiny, barely reaches my chin and she’s really small—petite, you know. But she’s got this energy about her... I don’t know, it’s like she’s this package of dynamite all rolled up tight, just waiting to explode.”

Remus and Sirius exchanged another look and Sirius poured more liquid into the glasses.

"It sounds like you're serious about her, Harry," Remus commented.

Harry thought about it for a moment before nodding, a somewhat puzzled look on his face. "I've never really thought about that before, you know. I mean, I'm only twenty-one. I really shouldn't be thinking about being married and having a family yet, right?"

"I'd say it's serious," Harry's godfather muttered, then shook his head. Harry furrowed his brow. Did Sirius not approve of him thinking this way?

"And you can see that with this girl?" Remus asked after kicking Sirius under the table.

Harry drifted off for a moment, staring at nothing before smiling again and nodding. He could definitely see himself waking up every morning to Ginny, seeing her belly grow big with his child and raising their children together; small children with bright red hair and maybe even green eyes.

"Yeah," he answered. "I can."

"What is it about her that makes you love her?"

Harry seemed startled by the question. Was it *really* love that he felt for Ginny? From what he knew about love, mostly from stories about his parents, Harry could now see that maybe it was the same thing. He'd told himself it was love, but having it repeated aloud by someone else, someone that knew him—that made it real.

"It's not one thing," he said softly, letting his fingers move the full glass around the table top for a moment. "It's a hundred different things. The way she is completely clueless about Muggle things, but loves them all the same. The way she attacks everything with this energy that is just... extraordinary. She makes me laugh. She and I can talk about anything, you know, and I feel comfortable with her.

"She's my best friend," he sighed. "But it's more than that. She's really beautiful, especially when she's angry and her face turns red and her hair... it looks like flames all around her head."

"A redhead?" Sirius smirked. "I should have figured."

Harry ignored the comment and continued. "Her family is... well, they're just great. They've really been great about us and—"

"You've met the family?" Sirius asked. He turned to Remus and let a stoic look come over his face. "It's more serious than we thought."

"We're not..." Harry flushed and looked away. "We're not dating or anything," he explained and then pushed his hands through his hair. "I want to, but... it's complicated.

"I catch her sometimes... looking at me. She used to look away and her cheeks would turn red. But now she just looks at me and if I look back she'll smile. And when I left..." Harry went quiet and lifted the glass to sip from it.

"Yes?" both men asked.

Harry could feel his face heat. "There's something there," he admitted, thinking of the way he felt with her in his arms. "And when I left..." He trailed off, reliving those moments on the sofa.

"Yes?" both men leaned forward.

"I kissed her." Harry shrugged. "Well, we were sitting on the sofa talking... and then we were there, face to face."

Sirius sighed. "Harry, I know you're not... well, you've had sex before," he finished bluntly. "Why all the fuss about a kiss?"

Harry growled in frustration and tugged at his hair. "Because it's not just a kiss... it's... I think about her all the time. I can't stop, and the thoughts... they're sexual and... it just didn't seem right at first. She's my best friend."

Sirius stood and paced a bit in the room. "I don't see what the problem is, Harry. Just grab the girl and snog the hell out of her, then take her to bed."

Remus tutted under his breath and shook his head. "Sirius, there is a reason you've stayed single all these years."

A raised eyebrow was all he got in answer. "And you—"

"Don't go there," Remus held up his hand and focused in again on Harry. "Harry if you really have these kinds of feelings for this girl, you need to tell her how you feel and be prepared for her reaction, no matter what it is."

Harry nodded and let his mind cover the possibilities. Could he really just blurt it out? *'Hey, I'm in love with you, and, by the way, I'm Harry bloody Potter.'*

"I'm guessing this is the flatmate?" Sirius asked, an eyebrow raised at Harry who flushed a bit.

"Yeah, it's Ginny."

Both Remus and Sirius exchanged a glance. "I wondered if it would happen," Remus admitted. "You mentioned her name in a letter once, and I know of the Weasleys."

Harry nodded. "Two of her brothers served in the army," he admitted. "I've not met them yet, and no one else suspects, I don't think."

"You'll have to come clean eventually, cub," Sirius shook his head. "Someone one day will recognize you and it will be all over."

Harry agreed reluctantly and sipped his drink again. "I know." The thought of telling Ginny made him queasy, but the idea of her family... it was just too much to contemplate.

"Does Ginny know?" Remus asked.

Harry raised his head and contemplated the question. Something about the way she watched him, the way she accepted what he said, and didn't question much, made him think she might have

figured it out on her own. "I think she might have an idea," he said softly. "She's never said anything to me, though."

"You need to tell her, cub, before it becomes any more serious than it is," Remus said and Harry nodded.

"I know, and I will. I just... I've never felt like this about anyone before and..."

"You're scared of what she might say," Sirius nodded.

"A bit," Harry conceded. "It's more of what her family will say, and what everyone else will say. Ginny... I don't know. I think she'll be alright with it, you know."

The two men studied him for a minute before Remus smiled. "She sounds like a keeper, Harry."

Harry couldn't help the smile that broke out on his face. He'd come here confused about his feelings and now it seemed rather clear to him. He wanted to be with Ginny.

"So," Sirius narrowed his eyes up at the ceiling as if going over what had been said the past hour, "why, exactly, are you here then?"

Harry felt his face flush a bit and hated to admit that his confusion over his feelings for Ginny had been covering up what he may have really been afraid of.

Remus cleared his throat. "Let me make a rather educated guess, cub. If I'm completely off base... then you can tell me." He waited as Harry shrugged one shoulder.

"First, you are nervous about what Ginny will say when you tell her the truth about who you are. And that's completely natural. The two of you seem to have built a strong friendship and you feel guilty about lying to her," he held up his hands as Harry took a breath to protest. "Even though you haven't actually lied, it's still a case of the sin of omission.

"Next, you're worried a bit about what it will mean to have a serious relationship with someone like Ginny. She's a family witch with strong ties in her community. The Weasley's were well known for their support of the Order during the War. It's rather surprising, and a bit of luck for you, that they haven't put it all together before now. Her family's acceptance or rejection of a relationship is important to her, and thus to you.

"Then you have the overall underlying fear that your identity will be made public and you will lose the anonymity you've been blessed to live in these past years. Being connected to a Weasley means being connected to the Order and Wizarding Britain. The press will eat it up and the two of you will have to fight for any time alone."

"Blimey," Sirius groaned, glaring at Remus, "I thought we were supporting the kid in this relationship idea! Now you've gone and pointed out everything negative about it."

Remus smiled at him and tried to give a reassuring look to Harry. "He's thought it through a million times already, Padfoot."

"I have," Harry agreed quietly. "It's a big risk for both of us."

"But the advantages outweigh the risks," Remus countered. "To have someone that you love strongly by your side through everything, to know that they are there just for you... it has to be the world's strongest emotion, Harry."

Harry nodded, letting the thoughts roll through his mind again. Ginny was perfect for him on so many levels. She didn't let him get away with brooding or keeping his emotions locked away. She'd been touched by the same kind of darkness that he had, and had fought back. She understood what that did to your soul.

He opened his mouth to tell them about Ginny's connection to the diary, but then changed his mind. That wasn't his secret to tell, he decided.

The three men sat quietly, sipping their drinks. The things Remus had listed perfectly were roaming around in Harry's mind, as they had been for days—months even. Would Ginny accept or reject him? Would the Weasley's approve of a relationship with The-Boy-Who-Lived? How would their lives all change when news of Harry in Britain reached the press?

"I'm supposed to be at her brother's wedding," Harry said softly, letting his gaze settle on the amber liquid in the bottle on the table. "She asked me to come... be her date."

"And what the bloody hell are you doing here then?" Sirius barked out.

Harry shrugged. "Being there... someone is bound to see me, recognize me. Her two brothers, Bill and Charlie, will be there. They both fought in the war. Dumbledore is officiating. The rest of the Order will be there, I'm sure."

"Protecting them or yourself, Harry?" Sirius asked with a determined look in his eye. Harry looked away.

"Both, I guess."

"When is the wedding, exactly?" Remus asked.

"Three days," Harry sighed.

"There's still time..."

Harry drained the last of his glass and set it back down into the circle of moisture on the table. "There is," he agreed. He was still unsure of what it would mean for him to show up there. He could just go and see Ginny, give his regards to the Bride and Groom, have a drink or two and then maybe confront Ginny at home...

"I... When I tell her," Harry said, his voice halting, "I want to tell her everything."

The two men were quiet.

"Everything?"

“Yeah,” Harry said. “She deserves to know, before we start anything, you know.”

“I think it’s a bit beyond started,” Sirius protested with a lopsided grin.

“I... I’m going to petition the ICW,” Harry decided firmly.

“You realize what that means for her?” Sirius asked, his tone losing all of the joking manner it normally had. “She’ll be under the same restraints to talk about anything that you are.”

“We could still talk together,” Harry shrugged. “You don’t think I should?”

“No,” Sirius shook his head, “I do, actually. I just think you need to consider how she would feel. Not only that, but your petition would be on record. The ICW would know that Harry Potter is involved in a serious relationship.”

“And we all know that knowledge like that doesn’t stay secret,” Remus added.

“It’s a risk I’ll have to take,” Harry shrugged. “I need to be honest with her. But... I’ll give her the opportunity to choose.”

The two men scowled thoughtfully. “That might work.”

“She needs to know,” Harry confirmed. “And...” he looked down at his hands, fidgeting a bit. “It might be selfish, but I *want* her to know. I... want to share everything with her.”

“That’s not selfish at all,” Remus protested.

“You *are* in love,” Sirius muttered, staring in awe at Harry.

Harry couldn’t help the grin that spread over his face. “I am.”

* * *

Obidiah Zelek was in his mid-sixties, but moved as if he were barely twenty. He had been made the Head of the International Auror Corps ten years before Harry joined and had worked hard to earn the respect of his forces.

Zelek had taken a personal interest in Harry during the war and had helped train Harry to be ready to face Riddle when it was time. Months after the Final Battle, Zelek had knocked on Sirius’ door and offered Harry a place with the ICW, which Harry had accepted immediately, mostly out of respect for the man.

“Potter!” he greeted Harry with a salute and then a crushing handshake.

“Sir,” Harry returned, pleased that his superior officer seemed to be in a good mood. That might help with what he was going to ask.

“Come into my office, son, let’s talk.”

Harry nodded and followed the man. Twenty minutes later, Harry tugged at his dress robes, cursing

the coarse wool they were made of. The bead of sweat rolling down Harry's back didn't help him relax. 'Why do they always overheat government buildings?' he wondered.

"Auror Potter," Zelek looked down at him over the small half circle glasses that perched low on his nose. "What you've asked... it's not our policy to allow just anyone to have top secret clearance, you know."

"I do, sir," Harry nodded back. "And I wouldn't be asking if this weren't... if I wasn't serious about this woman."

Thankfully, the Auror Commissioner had agreed to see Harry in private, rather than standing before the full Committee to make his request. Harry knew that it might eventually come to that, but for now, it was best to deal with this process a step at a time.

Harry could feel Zelek's eyes on him, but sat completely still.

"How serious?"

Harry's eyes met the piercing black ones of the man who had been his superior officer for years. "I plan on asking her to marry me, if she'll have me, sir." It wasn't a lie, Harry justified to himself. He could honestly see himself asking Ginny, if this all worked out between them.

Zelek remained silent, his hands coming up to stroke his dark beard and mustache. "And you'd tell her..."

"Everything that involves me directly, sir," Harry nodded. "It's the right thing."

The man nodded thoughtfully. "And she understands that she would be under the same restrictions that you are? That she wouldn't be able to tell anyone any details?"

"I would make that completely clear, sir."

Zelek sat back in his chair, his intense gaze not leaving Harry. "Does she know who you are, Harry?" His tone was softer this time, almost fatherly, and it took Harry by surprise.

"No, sir," Harry said, internally wincing. "She... she suspects. I haven't confirmed anything."

"I'm inclined to make you come back again, Potter, when you've told her who you are."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Zelek held up a huge black hand to silence him. "But I understand how that might hinder things from your end."

Wisely keeping his mouth shut, Harry nodded.

"So, I'm going to agree to your request—mostly because I've known you for years, Harry, and I highly doubt this woman is anything less than the best if she's managed to win your heart."

"Thank you, sir." Harry's heart swelled. This was easier than he'd expected.

"What is the young lady's name?" Zelek asked.

Harry took a deep breath. "Ginevra Weasley, sir."

"Weasley?" Zelek's eyebrow's rose and he let loose a slow whistle. "You really know how to complicate things, don't you Potter?"

"She's involved already, sir," Harry protested. "She was the girl with the diary Horcrux."

"I know who she is, Potter," Zelek nodded. "And who her family is." He stared at Harry for a minute longer before shaking his head slowly. "Does the family know?"

"I've met them," Harry acknowledged. "They don't know who I am, or if they do, they're not saying anything."

Zelek whipped his glasses off his face and stuck the arm piece in his mouth, spinning around in his chair to stare out the windows. "You understand that I can't authorize that many people for Top Secret Clearance?"

"I'm not asking for that, sir," Harry shook his head. "Only Ginny. She needs to know everything. She really deserves to know what she was mixed up in anyway. The others... well, what I *can* tell them, I will at my discretion. But I don't think it will be necessary."

Slowly turning around, Zelek sighed. "I won't lie to you, Harry. This woman being a Weasley complicates matters. Her being involved with the diary makes it damn near impossible. Do you know how close she came to being Obliviated by the ICW?"

Harry grimaced as bile rose in his throat. "I knew she was taken before the Wizengamot, but she was cleared of any wrongdoing. It was all found to lead back to Riddle."

Zelek nodded. "It was. But we debated for months wiping her memory clean of the event."

"That would have been a shame," Harry said softly. "It's shaped her into who she is today."

"I agree," Zelek said softly as he replaced his glasses. "Which is why I'm going to sign your request." Harry relaxed back into his chair. "And I'm not going to send this before the Committee. I'll catch hell for it, but I think you'll appreciate news of your impending marriage not being splashed all over the press before you even have the chance to talk to your beloved."

"I do appreciate that, sir," Harry said, feeling his face heat at the thought of Ginny reading about her engagement to Harry Potter. Talk about sinking the ship before it even touched water...

"Harry," Zelek said, looking directly at Harry after he'd scribbled his signature on the form, "Good luck. You both deserve this."

Harry's face stretched in a big smile. "Thank you, sir."

* * *

Ginny's concentration skills had never been great, she'd be the first to admit. But this was different. This was her brother's wedding. And she should bloody well be focused enough to hear him promise his life to her best girlfriend.

“... and do you, Hermione Granger...”

Her eyes wandered again, surreptitiously searching the guests for Harry’s messy head of hair. There were several dark patches in the sea of redheads, but none of them were Harry.

Sighing, she turned back, catching Neville’s eye. He smirked and raised an eyebrow at her distraction and she blushed. No doubt he’d take the mickey out of her for hours after this.

“... I now present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Weasley!”

Ginny smiled widely and clapped, pretending that she’d heard every word. Good thing they knew her enough to know that she wouldn’t have teared up—at least she didn’t have to pretend that.

“Nice,” Neville complimented when they linked arms and walked back down the aisle. “You’ve been drinking already, haven’t you?” He grinned at her and she felt an overwhelming urge to pinch his side.

“Shut it,” Ginny growled through her cheesy smile. The camera was flashing away and Ginny sincerely doubted that Hermione would approve of a photo of her Maid-of-Honor punching her Best Man. She’d bet galleons that Ron would laugh hard enough to fall on his arse, though. And it would be preserved for all posterity to see.

The thought made her truly smile and she grinned at Neville, who gave her a slightly nervous smile back.

“Seriously, Ginny,” Neville said once they’d made it back down the aisle. “You haven’t been yourself for days now.” He glanced around, trying to keep the conversation quiet, which Ginny appreciated. With all of her family around, she didn’t need them prying into her private life any more than they had already done.

She explained several days ago that Harry was away for work and probably wouldn’t make it back for the wedding. That should have been enough for everyone to keep their mouths shut. And it almost was. But she was beginning to suspect the Twins were going to crack soon under the pressure.

“I know,” she said, pressing her fingers to her temple. “I’m fine, really,” she protested. “Has it been that obvious?”

“Not really,” Neville protested, watching as Ron and Hermione posed for another photograph. “I just... I’ve been paying close attention.”

Ginny turned to him, studying him closely. “Why?”

“Because you’re my friend, Ginny,” he protested with a small smile. “And because... seeing you happy means a lot to me. And I’ve never seen you smile like you did the other night at the pub.”

Ginny bit her lip and turned away, hoping that her blush would be mistaken for the excitement of the day. “Yeah well...”

"And if it's Harry that makes you happy," he said after moving closer so that the horde of Weasleys who stood only feet away didn't hear him, "then go after him."

Ginny looked up at him and impulsively lifted on her toes to press a kiss to his cheek.

"You're a good bloke, Neville."

"Tell that to an available witch, yeah?" he chuckled, taking her hand in his as Colin motioned for them to join Ron and Hermione in taking more photographs.

Two hours later, and one very large glass of champagne, Ginny was happily mingling through the crowd. The cushioning charm on her shoes was holding up well enough that she'd even danced with Fred, George, Neville and Lee.

She'd been busy enough through dinner with her toast and managing to help Hermione with various other responsibilities that the dull ache from missing Harry was pushed down some.

But now that she was out here, trying to keep the smile on her face, it bubbled up inside her to the point of making her throat tighten.

"You look so amazing in that dress, Ginny!" Colin said, snapping another picture that Ginny grimaced at.

"Come off it, Colin," she protested. "You've wasted enough film on me. Can't you go find someone else to molest?"

Colin laughed. "I'd be only happy to," he protested. "But I'm on the job, don't forget."

"Then I give my permission, as Maid-of-Honor, that you, Colin Creevey, Photographer Extraordinaire may set that bloody contraption down long enough to get yourself some food and find a helpless young witch to woo."

He snorted out a laugh. "A witch to woo?"

"Yeah," Ginny grinned, bumping her shoulder against his. "Find a girl, chat her up, snog a bit... see how things go?"

"I'll work on that," he promised, moving off into the crowd.

"Ginny, darlin'!"

She rolled her eyes, searching for the best escape route when Seamus' arm wrapped around her waist. "Oh, none o' that, lass."

"Seamus," Ginny greeted, laughing at her friend. "I honestly don't have the patience for you tonight."

"Och," he grumbled clutching his chest with one hand and drinking what remained of his ale with the other. "You've wounded me... right in the heart."

“Save it,” Ginny chuckled. “I’m immune to what you think passes for charm.”

“Right,” he grinned, throwing a brotherly arm over her shoulder. “Remind me why you and I have never been a couple?”

“Because I won’t put up with your bollocks,” Ginny quipped right back.

“Ahhh,” he nodded, his smile widening. “Good. I thought it might be me looks. Then I remembered, you fancy dark haired blokes.”

Ginny shook her head at his antics. “That may be it.”

“Like that bloke the other night at the pub,” he continued. “You sure fancied him.”

Her face heated and she took a deep breath to respond when she noticed Seamus’ face had stilled and he was staring away from her.

“Speak o’ the devil.”

Ginny spun around, her heart climbing into her throat when she saw Harry there, giving his most charming smile to her mother.

“He came,” she whispered, Seamus forgotten completely as she wove in and out of guests to get to him.

Chapter 11: Alone In The Crowd

Harry slid out of the leather seat and straightened his dark grey, pinstriped suit pants. He was sure he'd stick out like a sore thumb at this event. English Wizard weddings, he had been told, were notorious for being highly traditional. Harry didn't consider robes practical or attractive in any fashion. Sirius had never worn them and Remus did only occasionally. Harry himself preferred an expensive suit as a more formal choice. Of course, technically he should be wearing his dress uniform; however that wasn't an option unless he wanted a huge red beacon to follow him around today, pointing out just who he was.

He smiled slightly as the crooked form of the Burrow, Ginny's family home, stuck up against the bright and slightly orange fading light. He wasn't surprised to find that his car was only the fourth parked there. There was a nice Peugeot alongside a more traditional Ford, and another generic type. Those must be Hermione's family.

He stood in the drive for a moment, gathering his courage. It wasn't hard when he considered the decision he'd made. Best to get on with it, he supposed, as he straightened his tie and buttoned his suit coat. He could feel the stiff envelope in the inside pocket brush against his chest. He patted it once, just to make sure, and began the short walk to where he could hear the celebration well under way.

The side gate was swung wide open and had been draped with white fabric of some sort and was gathered with groups of pale flowers. Knowing what Ron was like, Harry was surprised that the color orange hadn't been thrust into the wedding plans. Hermione must have bribed him. In fact, both times Harry had seen Ron in a casual setting he'd been sporting the bright orange of the Cannons. Hope springs eternal, Harry smiled.

There was soft music playing somewhere and Harry took a deep breath filling his lungs with sweet, cool air. There were several couples out on a wooden dance floor in the center of the yard. A light glow surrounded the area and Harry had to look twice to be sure, but he could swear there were clumps of fairies sharing their light. His eyes narrowed as he searched for Ginny amidst all the chatting and... formal robes. He shifted slightly and felt a bit better when he noticed Hermione dance by with her father, he guessed, dressed in a suit similar to Harry's.

"Harry!"

Harry turned to find Ginny's mother grinning up at him. She looked like she'd just been through a particularly rough battle, as her hair was only slightly curled still and the dark green robes she wore were a bit wrinkled. He smiled as she pulled him down and into a huge hug.

"Ginny said that you weren't going to be able to make it, dear. Of course, we were disappointed. We all wanted you here."

Harry returned the hug a bit awkwardly and pulled back to wink flirtatiously at her. "I caught the earliest portkey that I could. I had to see my best girl, didn't I?"

Mrs. Weasley beamed at him and turned to glance around the dance floor. "Ginny was just over

there a second ago..."

"What are you on about? I meant you, Mrs. W," Harry replied as he waggled his eyebrows. "Now come on, let's you and I sneak away, Arthur will never know."

Molly Weasley blushed several different shades while she grinned a rather guilty grin at him. "You cad," she teased as she reached up to pinch his cheek. "Why if I were a hundred years younger, Harry Parker, I might just take you up on that offer."

Harry grinned back at her, his nervous stomach settling a bit.

"Now, you'd better find Ginny. She was with a group of school friends just a second ago."

"I'll find her," Harry promised as Molly gave him a motherly pat on the arm. He nodded toward several groups of people who had turned to watch him go by, all the while cursing silently to himself. He hated going out in public, especially to the Wizarding public. Somewhere, someday—someone would recognize him and the quiet life he led would be shattered. He'd purposely not increased his Obfuscation charm today. It was there, but just not at high capacity. If someone really looked closely, they may be able to see through it.

"You came!" A screeching, lavender missile hit him in the chest and Harry grinned down at the form of Ginny Weasley returning his smile as she clung to him.

Harry leaned down and kissed her cheek, closing his eyes at the intoxicating flowery scent that enveloped him. The flowing pale purple dress fit her like a glove, leaving most of her shoulders bare, and draped down, almost touching the ground. Harry had to consciously keep his hands on her back as he held her, lest they explore on their own.

"I came," he confirmed. Ginny pulled back and began to straighten his suit and tie, a habit of hers that endeared her even more in his heart. "You asked and..."

"Harry," Ginny said as she pulled him to her again. "Thank you for coming. I know it must have been hard and probably got you in trouble with work to leave early."

Harry reached down and lifted her chin with a gentle finger. "You asked me to come," he stated. Their eyes met and for a moment the world around them disappeared. Harry felt the by-now familiar fluttering in his chest, only this time he knew what it meant, and this time he wanted nothing more than to do something about it.

"Come on," Ginny broke the moment as she took his hand in hers. "You haven't seen Ron and Hermione yet."

Harry tugged back on her hand and motioned toward a spot off of the main dance floor; Ginny seemed to understand and followed. Once they were away from the crowd, Harry pulled the envelope out of his pocket and held it out for Ginny to see.

"I've never been to a wedding, Gin." He shrugged and shifted back and forth, feeling incredibly unsure. "I wasn't sure what to get for them."

“Harry,” Ginny protested, “anything you give will be just fine. In fact, you didn’t have to give anything.” She glanced down at the envelope and raised an eyebrow, making her look remarkably like her twin brothers when they were up to something.

“Just a... well, it’s kind of a favor that someone owed me and...” He ruffled his hair out of frustration and Ginny handed the envelope back to him.

“It doesn’t matter,” she stated. “Let’s go find them and they can open it themselves.” She took his hand again and began pulling him toward the group again. Harry grinned to himself at how easy it was to follow her anywhere.

The Bride and Groom were at the center of a rather large group of people, and Harry smiled sheepishly as Ginny, quite a bit shorter than him, pulled him through the crowd, clearing a path the whole way.

“Look out, Maid-Of-Honor coming through!”

Harry couldn’t help but feel his heart swell a bit at the fiery woman in front of him. He heard the whispers around them, but ignored it as he continued to follow Ginny.

“You made it,” Ron thrust out a hand toward Harry. Harry shook it and then leaned in to kiss Hermione on the cheek.

“I heard this was the event of the season,” Harry teased, “wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

“Fashionably late again though, Parker.”

Harry turned to find Fred and George grinning at him.

“That time wasn’t my fault,” he protested as he poked Ginny in the side. She giggled and wiggled away from him before grabbing onto his arm. Harry took a deep breath and concentrated on the conversations at hand instead of the fact that Ginny fit exactly up against him, like she was made to be there.

“Aye,” Fred nodded.

“We’ve heard that one before,” George finished. He offered Harry a Butterbeer, but Harry waived it off with a thought that maybe later his stomach would be settled enough to enjoy a drink and some of Mrs. Weasley’s wonderful food.

“Congratulations, you two,” he said as he turned back to Ron and Hermione. “I’m sorry I couldn’t make it for the ceremony.” He discreetly offered the envelope and Hermione took it. She opened it and her eyes went wide.

“What is it?” Ron looked over her shoulder.

“You shouldn’t have, Harry.”

“Why not, Hermione?” Harry asked. “Besides, it really didn’t cost me anything. A friend owed me a favor and I don’t see a time when I’ll get to use it. A little bird told me you two weren’t taking a

honeymoon.” He glanced over at Ginny who beamed up at him.

“What is it, Hermione?” Fred asked.

“It’s...” Ron began and then shook his head. “It’s a trip to Greece.”

“Just let me know when you think you’ll be able to go and I’ll make all the arrangements,” Harry said softly. He glanced down to find Ginny staring at him with a peculiar expression. He wasn’t exactly sure what it meant, but it sent a warm wiggle all the way through him.

Hermione brushed away quick tears and reached up to give Harry a hug. “Thank you,” she whispered. “It means a lot.” Ron seemed speechless as he shook Harry’s hand and gaped like a goldfish.

“Come on,” Ginny tugged on his arm again and pulled him toward the dance floor. They didn’t make it far before a group of people stood in their way. They were friends of Ginny’s from school, and Harry shifted nervously as Ginny introduced him as her flatmate and best friend. Finally they were able to pull away, hands still linked.

“Hello, Ginny.”

Ginny stopped in her stride and glanced up at Harry before turning.

“Hello, Michael.”

Harry appraised the tall man in front of them. He was ruggedly handsome with dark hair, and finely pressed black robes. He felt a protective grumble in his chest as the man’s gaze drifted over Ginny from top to bottom. The name clicked for Harry and he realized this was Ginny’s ex-boyfriend—the one her family had expected she’d marry.

“I didn’t know you were coming,” Ginny stated flatly.

“I was friends with Ron too,” Michael protested. “You weren’t the only Weasley I knew.”

“Ron’s right over there,” Ginny pointed back toward where she and Harry had just come from, but didn’t break her gaze from the man.

“Can we talk, Ginny?”

Harry felt Ginny stiffen and he slid his hands up to rest on her shoulders, vowing to remain silent unless she gave him some clue she wanted him to speak. He could feel the adrenaline building inside as it did in battle situations. He knew he could do some serious damage to the man if needed, but he wasn’t prepared to deal with that right now.

“Actually, Michael, Harry and I were just going out to dance; maybe some other time.” She glanced up over her shoulder at Harry and smiled sweetly at him. Harry met Michael’s gaze for a moment, a silent warning sent, and then took Ginny’s hand to lead her out onto the dance floor.

Harry didn’t protest as she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed herself close to him, swaying to the music. They melted together and Harry sighed in contentment, feeling his heart start

a frantic rhythm.

"I love this suit, Harry," Ginny said softly as she rubbed her hand along the fabric of the lapel.

"This is the tie you picked out," Harry informed her, smiling down as she straightened the knot and fingered the dark blue silk.

"I noticed that," she said. Her fingers drifted along his collar and tickled the hair at the base of his neck, causing him to shiver. Ginny smiled and laid her cheek against his shoulder.

A heaviness, familiar and welcome, settled into his chest as he pressed her even closer to himself and lay his cheek against her head.

"Three days was too long, Gin," he said softly. "I don't like being away anymore."

Nervous about what she might say, Harry let her fingers, which continued to move the hair on his neck, lull him. His head moved lower and he pressed his face into the creamy, scented skin on her neck. His lips brushed the skin lightly, his breath warming the freckle in front of him.

"Harry," Ginny's voice brought him back and he moved to look at her. "How much have you had to drink tonight?"

Harry smiled at her and pulled her back to where they had been. "I've not had anything," he said and nuzzled the soft spot just below her ear, unable to hold back the growing arousal for her.

* * *

Ginny's head was reeling. She'd indeed felt more than an intense attraction between herself and Harry at times. Just like that building soap bubble that she had explained to Hermione; growing and swelling, on the verge of popping.

But tonight the attraction was like a magnetic pull between them. She'd seen him talking to her mother and couldn't hold herself back from moving toward him. And the glances they'd exchanged tonight seemed to have the weight of the world in them.

Harry nuzzled his nose against her neck again and she continued to play with his hair, losing herself in the fantasy that this was really happening, Harry was really returning the feelings that she'd been having since the moment they'd met. His lips placing a small kiss against her neck startled her.

"Harry, how much have you had to drink tonight?"

His answer didn't surprise her as he'd been with her practically the whole night, but it was one excuse that she could rule out that would cause him to behave this way. She let herself enjoy the attention he was paying her a bit more before her eyes met Michael's across the floor, a small bit of doubt rising up.

Ginny dropped her hand to Harry's shoulder and nudged his face up before narrowing her eyes at him.

“Are you doing this because of Michael, Harry? Because if you are it’s really cruel—”

His look of absolute bewilderment stopped her in her tracks. “Michael?”

Ginny opened her mouth and then closed it again. She’d obviously misjudged his intentions for a moment and was now making a fool of herself. “My ex-boyfriend, Michael,” she explained. “The one who stopped us a minute ago.”

The light seemed to turn on in Harry’s gaze and he immediately shook his head. “No, this has nothing to do with that jerk.” He sighed deeply and glanced away for a moment while he seemed to collect himself.

“I meant what I said, Gin. Three days is too long to be away from you. I’ve been having these... feelings, Gin. I didn’t really know what they meant, and when I did figure it out... they scared me, to be honest. But I went and talked to Sir—erm, my Godfather and he helped me to see...” He sighed again and met her gaze. “I’ve fallen in love with you, Ginny.” His voice was soft and if Ginny hadn’t been pressed right to him, she wasn’t sure if she’d have heard it.

“You’re... oh, my.”

His hazel eyes held hers and seemed to be searching for something as they stood completely still on the floor. Her heart thundered, trying to find the right words to answer him. He’d finally figured it out and the moment was more than a bit overwhelming.

“It’s alright,” Harry finally said, looking away. “If you don’t feel...” he sighed. “If I’ve misread—”

“Harry.” He turned back toward her and seemed surprised that she was only a breath away from his face. “Shut up and kiss me already.”

He grinned and pressed his lips to hers gently for a moment before the kiss became passionate, like the first kiss they’d ever shared so many weeks ago. His hand left her back to hold the side of her face softly. In the distance, quite far away, she thought she could hear people laughing and even some cheering. Nothing else mattered except the way Harry’s lips caressed hers and the way she could feel his heart beat in his chest and the fact that it matched her own.

* * *

“Who the hell is Harry Parker?”

Neville turned around at Michael’s harsh hiss and took a drink of his butterbeer before deciding how to answer. It was no secret that Neville had never approved of Ginny and Michael dating, and he wasn’t the only one.

“He’s Ginny’s flatmate.”

“Flatmate, my arse,” Michael grumbled. He grabbed Neville’s drink and gulped the rest of it as he glared at the couple dancing closely on the floor. “But who the hell is he?”

Neville shrugged. “Don’t really know. He’s American, at least that’s what he sounds like; although I

think I heard that he's a British citizen somehow. He's a good bloke, though."

"He works for the government," Dean Thomas added as he joined the two, offering a fresh butterbeer to Neville. Michael glared at Dean for a moment before turning his attention back to the dance floor.

"Which government?"

"Nobody really knows," Dean answered. "He's not too big into details. Although he's rather tight with the Weasleys, I hear." Two of the three men cringed when Harry and Ginny began kissing.

Neville chuckled. "Good for them," he cheered and raised his bottle in salute. He glanced over to find Michael scowling darkly. Dean had a pensive look on his face, but ended up smiling a bit. Silently, Neville wished the best for the new couple and hoped that, whoever Harry was, he was up to defending himself.

* * *

"So that's Harry, is it?" Katie Wood, rubbing her growing stomach, leaned toward Fred, who smirked and nodded. The group turned to watch where Ginny and Harry had begun dancing.

"That's him," Fred answered. "He's nice. Mum and Dad were really worried about Ginny moving out, especially since her flatmate was going to be a bloke. But then they met him and I think Mum was ready to add his name to the family clock that night."

George nodded. "Wedding bells were ringing in her ear, that's for sure. There's definitely something there—we can all see it, even though both of them deny it—"

"Hallo!" Fred's shocked word stopped conversation around him.

"Well," Alicia said with a satisfied smile as they watched the two kiss. "I guess that answers that question.

"Damn," George grumbled. "It's only been six weeks."

"I win!" Fred crowed, holding out his hand and wiggling his fingers toward George. "Pay up, Angelina and I could use a night out on the town."

Angelina grinned. "I don't really want to know why you've bet on your sister's love life. But I would like to know who taught that man to kiss," she gestured to where Harry and Ginny still hadn't come up for air. "I wonder if he gives lessons."

"Excuse me," Fred protested as he turned to glare at his girlfriend.

She laughed and ruffled his hair with affection. "Oh, you're a bit of alright, but that..." she nodded toward Harry and Ginny, who seemed to be going for some kind of record at holding their breath, were still pressed together. "That's a real man."

Alicia nodded. "He *is* a fine—"

“Oy!” George protested. “Give us a break.”

“They’ve not stopped yet,” Fred whined with a pained expression.

“You’d think Ginny’d know not to steal Ron and Hermione’s thunder today of all days,” George shook his head. They all stood watching the drama unfolding before them.

* * *

Arthur Weasley was enjoying the reception immensely. Now that most of the work was over and Molly had had a few glasses of elderberry wine, things were looking quite positive. He had all of his family around him; and that was saying something as they’d gone through a rough war with many of his sons active in the Order.

Now was the time to celebrate. He did a quick head count on his children, a habit from many years back, and found them all happily enjoying themselves. Bill and Charlie were sitting together drinking, which worried him a bit, as they had a tendency to get melancholy. But still, he’d keep an eye on it.

Fred and George were with their respective partners. Percy was speaking with his mother, a shy arm around a new girl that he had started seeing weeks ago, and had surprised the family by bringing to the wedding.

Ron and Hermione were still greeting their guests off to one side, looking radiant in their wedding finery, and sneaking loving looks at each other every few minutes.

And Ginny. His beautiful daughter, Ginny, was dancing with her flatmate, Harry.

It was no secret in the family that Arthur had not been comfortable with Ginny moving in with a man. Meeting Harry had allayed his fears a bit. The young man was very confident and motivated, without being brash or cocky. And seeing how happy Ginny was these days did more to please Arthur than anything. His little girl had always been happy, but the darkness of her school years, along with the constant fear for her family, had dimmed her light a bit.

Arthur hadn’t cared for Michael Corner from the moment they met the boy. He was the very picture of arrogance, and flaunted his sorting into Ravenclaw at every opportunity. And Arthur didn’t like the way that he spoke to Ginny. Several times at Platform 9 ¾ he had told Ginny that she didn’t know what she was talking about, and she should listen to him instead of opening her mouth and being proven a fool. No, Michael Corner wasn’t the one for his daughter.

When Ron had written home that she had started seeing Dean Thomas, Arthur’s outlook improved a bit. The boy was Muggleborn after all, which meant Arthur would have someone to answer more of his questions. He’d never really heard why he and Ginny had broken it off after only a few weeks. But then she was back together with Michael.

Molly had been sure that they would be married as soon as Ginny graduated. She’d even begun planning a small outdoor wedding, similar to the one that they were enjoying today. Arthur had secretly cheered his daughter when she’d come home and told them that Michael was no longer in her life. Molly had scolded him later, but Arthur knew he was right.

Ginny needed someone just as passionate about life as she was; someone who attacked things with the same zeal that the young woman held. She needed someone who was her equal, but could reign in her impulsive side, as well.

For a brief instant, he'd thought he saw something in the interaction she had with Harry that first time she'd brought him home. But Ginny assured them all that her relationship with Harry was purely platonic. And as much as Molly's hopes had risen as the two continued to draw closer and had become best friends, Arthur kept a wary eye on the situation. They just knew so little of Harry.

"Evening Arthur."

"Good evening, Albus. I hope you're enjoying yourself." The Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry had been an honored guest at the Wedding. He'd even consented to marry Ron and Hermione when Arthur and Molly had asked.

"I am indeed," Albus said as he held up a goblet of deep purple wine and took the open seat next to Arthur. "Molly has truly outdone herself on this celebration."

Arthur chuckled at his wife's exuberance when planning functions like this. Then again, it was the first wedding in their family; none of their other sons seemed even interested in settling down. "I will be sure to tell her for you."

"Yes," Albus sighed happily. "Your family is growing, Arthur."

The red-haired man puffed out his chest proudly and nodded. "Hermione is a wonderful girl. We're very proud to have her."

"And from the looks of things," Albus smiled slyly, "there could be a few more celebrations like this one on the horizon." He nodded to several couples he saw around the garden.

Arthur grinned and toasted the Headmaster. "We can only hope. Although a few of the boys are resisting Molly's efforts with full teeth and claws."

Albus chuckled. "Well, you're only young once."

"Indeed," Arthur agreed and the men lapsed into comfortable silence.

"I was surprised to see young Mr. Parker here tonight."

Arthur's head snapped to where Harry and Ginny were dancing closely on the floor. "You know Harry?"

"I do," Albus nodded. "I've known him for many years. And, I have to say, Arthur, I've never seen him so... at peace, as content with life as he looks tonight."

Arthur nodded, although he grimaced a bit as the couple kissed deeply.

"Well!" Albus exclaimed. "I'd have to say definitely that this is good news."

"Damn," Arthur mumbled under his breath. "I owe Molly a galleon."

Albus chuckled. "Betting on your children, Arthur? You two should be ashamed."

Arthur grinned sheepishly. "Well, Molly bet on them getting together in the first sixth months after meeting; I said one year, if it ever happened. Ginny can be particularly stubborn."

"Well, we men can't always be right, now can we?"

Arthur continued to watch as his daughter and Harry left the dance floor. "I just wish..."

"What is it my old friend?" Albus asked softly.

He shook his head. "We just know so little about him."

Albus smiled knowingly and patted Arthur's shoulder. "Trust me when I say that you'll not find a better man for your daughter in all the world." With that, he wandered away, leaving a fairly confused, yet somehow hopeful, father.

* * *

Bill Weasley took a long drink from his butterbeer and immediately wished it was something much stronger. He was thrilled for his youngest brother to be getting married. And Hermione was a wonderful girl, if a tad bit stiff for him. But Ron would soften her up a bit, Bill knew.

It was actually his youngest sibling that had almost his undivided attention tonight. Ginny was nothing short of gorgeous and it unnerved Bill. Every time he looked at her he still saw the dirty faced little scamp that would climb on his knee and ask him all about Hogwarts. Even though he knew she was old enough to be out on her own, living her own life, it was hard to process, especially since he'd been gone for so much of her life. First it had been Hogwarts; and every summer he returned she'd changed so much that it had taken him the entire two months to get to know her again.

Next were his adventures in Egypt. The dry desert air seemed to be calling his name after he graduated from Hogwarts, and he chased a whim and followed it. It had been one of the best decisions of his life and he would never regret it.

Bill had always been the one to take care of everyone else, being the oldest, and then Head Boy in his final year at Hogwarts. It was nice to only have to worry about himself for a change. And it didn't matter if he never ate breakfast, or wore clothes that hadn't seen a good wash in weeks. It gave him a sense of independence and fulfillment.

His adventures during the war were what his nightmares were made of. Both he and Charlie had heeded the call of the Order of the Phoenix and had enlisted in the Wizarding Military that had been organized by the ICW. Their mother had been beside herself for days, crying about her two oldest sons and the fate of her two beloved brothers who had been killed in Voldemort's first reign of power.

But Bill and Charlie were adamant. They were needed. And if the two of them fought for what the Weasleys treasured so, maybe their younger brothers and sister wouldn't have to live in a world plagued by such evil.

Bill came face to face with that evil during what was now called the Final Battle. He and Charlie were in a company of wizards, and some witches, charged with holding a position near an abandoned farm house. The house had been set up as a make-shift medical area and was extremely valuable to the Light. The battle was in full progress only a short distance away and it was Bill and Charlie's watch to patrol the edges of the hospital area.

Tales of the ferocity of Voldemort's forces had been circulating for years. Fenrir Greyback was at the center of many of the stories. The man, if he could even still be called that, was a werewolf. He was as bloodthirsty and ruthless as anyone who ever lived. It was said that he'd acquired a taste for blood and flesh even when not in his wolf form, and often attacked regardless of the phases of the moon.

It was this monster who cornered Bill and Charlie as they guarded their section of land. The man, who wore tattered rags covered in crimson-brown stains and had what appeared to be fresh blood all over his face and hands, lunged at Charlie first and dodged Bill's spells, parrying with a barrage of his own.

The three men fought valiantly and tirelessly for what seemed hours. Charlie had his chest slashed open by Greyback's claw-like fingernails and was struggling to stay in the fight. When Bill tripped on a rock, his short life had flashed before his eyes.

He didn't remember much of the attack, thankfully, as he must have passed out. He did remember the pain of waking, blood pooling in his eyes and seeing the monster poised over him. Greyback snarled happily, seeing his prey awake. He opened his mouth and howled an eerie, hollow sound before stilling and spinning to face the stand of trees behind him.

Bill didn't see the man running toward him. The only thing that processed was the sickening squelch as Greyback collapsed and his head rolled away from his body. Both Bill and Charlie stared at the gory sight and then their eyes traveled to their savior.

Standing before them was only a boy—no more than eighteen. He was panting and leaning heavily on a red-stained broadsword. His bright green eyes flashing even though he looked exhausted. No one spoke a word and finally, after catching his breath, the boy quipped a tired salute and staggered off, gaining speed until he was at a full run, disappearing into the forest.

"That wasn't..." Charlie mumbled in disbelief.

"I think it was," Bill confirmed, gasping around the pain he was in.

"Harry Potter," Charlie shook his head as well and then moved to help Bill and the two staggered into the Hospital tent.

Bill shuddered now just thinking of that day. He'd come so close to a horrific death and he owed everything to the young Harry Potter.

Potter had been a legend in the Wizarding community, but had disappeared shortly after his first defeat of Voldemort. Rumors flew for years that he was safely ensconced somewhere undisclosed. Some people said he was being raised in a secret wing at Hogwarts. Others said he was living in the United States, or Canada. Bill always felt that Dumbledore knew more than he let on about the boy,

but didn't have any proof.

He and Charlie had only ever spoken of that battle in hushed tones, and only after drowning in the memories in more than half a bottle of Firewhiskey. Bill's injuries had healed, leaving behind scars that criss-crossed his face. Charlie teased him that it made him more interesting to the women, but Bill still felt a bit of insecurity about it.

Neither man had ever been able to see Potter after that day; in fact, they'd never confirmed that it *ihad/i* been the boy who rescued them that day conclusively. Bill knew he owed the boy a life debt and felt somewhat awkward that he would be unable to repay it ever.

Potter was a very reclusive and reluctant hero, if anything. It was rumored that he traveled the world, working for the ICW in their International Auror forces, but the press had yet to catch him for more than a few seconds. Any photograph taken of him came out horribly blurred. Bill had to give the man credit, that charm was a beautiful piece of work.

"You look like someone replaced your Firewhiskey with pumpkin juice."

Bill looked up and into the jovial eyes of his younger brother.

"Butterbeer," he grunted out as Charlie settled next to him at the table. The highly freckled man nudged his shoulder and offered a darker bottle that made Bill grin. "Much better," he sighed as he drained a goodly amount of the Firewhiskey.

"She's amazing," Charlie muttered and Bill glanced up to see Ginny dance by laughing and twirling around with Neville Longbottom, Ron's best mate. "It's hard to see her so grown up, isn't it?"

"It is," Bill agreed, letting his eyes glaze over a bit but still watching the lavender dress dance through the crowd.

"Mum said she's doing well, though," Charlie said. "Better than she was last time we were here."

Bill grimaced a bit at the thought. It had been almost six months since he'd been home properly to see his family. After the war, both he and Charlie had fled back to their careers in refuge. They visited each other often, though, finding comfort in shared experiences.

"Met this man she's living with?" Bill grunted out as he scowled into the crowd.

"Nah," Charlie said. "Mum said something about him not being here because of business or something."

"But they're all right chuffed about him, aren't they?" Bill asked with a wry smile. "It's been Harry this and Harry that since we've been home."

"Yeah," Charlie nodded and took a drink of his own. "I talked to Dad about it and he said that they were worried at first about her living with a bloke, but that once they met him they decided that it was a good thing."

"What do you know about him?"

“Not much,” Charlie admitted. “He’s American, grew up there... works as some sort of security advisor or something.”

“Ron mentioned that he and Ginny have been spending a lot of time together. Says they’re best mates, but he won’t say much more.”

Charlie shrugged. “I don’t know. Mum says it’s perfectly innocent, but then she gets that look in her eye. You know the one...”

Bill snorted. “Yeah, I know the one. And ickle Ronnie didn’t help it by getting married first. You do realize she’ll be after us very shortly, don’t you?”

Charlie laughed and rolled his eyes. “Not me, I’m off in two days.”

“And I have another week here,” Bill grimaced. The two brothers continued to watch the crowd and sip at their drinks. Ginny’s voice carried above the crowd and their attention turned to where she was warmly greeting a dark haired man dressed in a fine suit.

“You don’t think...” Charlie started.

“Harry Parker?” Bill finished, an eyebrow raised in question. “Must be,” he confirmed as they watched the man and Ginny speak at the side of the dance floor before Ginny dragged him toward Ron and Hermione.

The two brothers exchanged a glance and then motioned for the twins to join them as they walked by.

“Is that—”

“Ginny’s flatmate,” George confirmed with a grin.

“He came,” Fred matched his brother’s look. “You two have to meet him. He’s great.”

Bill grunted noncommittally as the two men jauntily bounced off into the group where Ginny and Harry were speaking with Ron and Hermione. Neither brother said a word as they watched the couple begin to dance.

“He looks a bit familiar, doesn’t he?” Bill asked, rubbing his eyes. There was something wrong with Parker in a way, but Bill couldn’t put his finger on it. He blinked again, trying to decide what it was.

“Bill...” Charlie sat up abruptly and narrowed his eyes at where Ginny had just pulled the man into a rather demonstrative kiss.

“Bloody hell,” Bill groaned under his breath. “So much for platonic.”

“Bill,” Charlie started again. “I think...” He glanced over at his older brother and swallowed hard. “Look closely at him. Imagine the hair shorter, the shoulders less broad.”

Bill stared at the man, contemplating what the changes would be.

“Covered in dirt and mud...” Charlie continued, “and leaning—”

“On a sword,” Bill breathed out. What was wrong quickly became obvious. It was a charm of some sort on Parker... er, well Potter, that is. Bill had always been a bit gifted at spotting charms. He had always thought it was because of his Curse Breaker training, but perhaps, if Charlie could see through it to, it was really a talent. “It can’t be.”

“I think it is,” Charlie said softly, a strange sort of smile on his face. It was as if he was still deciding between a grimace and being happy for his sister.

“Where the hell...” Bill ruffled his long hair a bit. “Why’s he hiding? Why the fake name and all?”

Charlie contemplated for a minute before draining his drink and shrugging. “Bill, what have you been doing for the past four years?”

Taken aback at the abrupt change in subject, Bill tore his eyes away from where Harry and Ginny were still kissing, and glared at Charlie.

“What are you on about?”

“If you’re anything like me,” Charlie continued, staring off into the distance and letting his eyes cloud over, “you’ve been doing anything you can to try and forget that day. You’ve been trying to get on with your life.

“Remember when we were released from hospital and that reporter, Skeeter I think her name was, tried to get us to give her an ‘eyewitness account’ of the Final Battle?” Bill only nodded. “What did we do?”

“Hid like cowards,” Bill snorted. “Got drunk and then—”

“Left the country,” Charlie finished. He returned his gaze in time to see Harry gently tug Ginny toward the side of the house. They disappeared and Charlie sighed. “Imagine what it was like for him.”

Bill thought for a minute and then grimaced. “I guess so, but does he have to snog our baby sister?”

Charlie snorted out a laugh. “Apparently so.”

* * *

Ginny giggled as Harry pulled her through the long grass, and didn’t stop until they were out of sight of the festivities. He felt sixteen again as they ran together, forgetting that they were in formal clothing.

Once Harry did stop, he spun and breathlessly glanced behind them before grinning boyishly down at her and pulling her to him again. The last few minutes had been a blur—a wonderful swirl of emotions that left his heart pounding.

They exchanged rather shy smiles, while Harry’s thumb brushed over her swollen bottom lip. Unable to help himself, he leaned down kissed her again, this time not letting his passion overcome them,

but taking the time to explore a bit: tongues mating slowly and lips caressing.

"You don't know how long I've wanted to do that," Harry whispered as they broke apart and he laid his forehead against hers.

"Months," Ginny guessed. "That's how long I've been feeling this way." Harry's eyes snapped open and the two laughed lightly before kissing again.

"So you—"

"I'm in love with you," Ginny confirmed and laughed again at the relief that must be showing on his face. "Have been for months, I think. At first I thought it was just a crush..."

"Me too," Harry said. He pulled back a bit and let his eyes roam over her. She was so beautiful and he was in awe that she saw anything in him. He couldn't seem to stop himself from touching her: his fingers trailing along her jaw and cheeks, brushing wisps of hair away from her face.

"But it didn't go away," Ginny continued as she studied him openly now. "It just became... something else, something so much deeper."

"Yeah," Harry agreed and instantly felt a bit dumb for not being able to articulate his feelings. Ginny seemed to understand as she smiled sweetly at him and nodded.

"Yeah." She nestled herself against his chest and Harry sighed contentedly. He'd been with women before, but not in a relationship that felt this satisfying, this... He didn't even know the word for how happy and comfortable he felt right now. Instead, he hugged her even tighter to himself and rocked her a bit side to side.

"This feels so... right," Ginny said softly and Harry had to agree. That was the word he'd been looking for, yet it almost wasn't enough.

They stood together, enjoying the warm night air and the comfort in each others arms for quite a few minutes before Ginny pulled away. "We'd better get back, Harry. As much as I want to stay here the rest of the night and not share you with anyone... I have a feeling at least a few of my brothers might come looking for us if we disappeared completely."

Harry groaned and Ginny laughed at him. "You're the one who had to confess his undying love and kiss me in the middle of fifty people."

"Undying love?" Harry laughed. "I don't remember—"

"Hush," Ginny placed her finger on his lips and then quickly kissed him. "I'll remember it exactly how I want to."

Harry laughed again and marveled at this wonderful woman. "I guess if I'm about to be dodging brothers, I ought to ask you properly. Ginny, will you be my girlfriend?"

Ginny pretended to think for a minute before shrugging. "I guess so. But only if we understand that it's purely out of pity and—"

Harry gaped at her, and then grinned at her sense of humor. Leave it to Ginny to make light of a question he'd been trying to ask for months. He lunged down and placed his shoulder against her middle. She squealed loudly as Harry gathered her up over his shoulder and gave her a sound smack on the rump.

"I'll give you pity," he growled and began to carry her back to the party. Ginny thrashed and kicked as Harry held her even tighter, his arm trapping her thighs against his chest. Finally, she gave up and laughed along with him.

"Harry," she called out in a sing-song voice, but he just ignored her and walked on, back toward the reception. Really, he wanted nothing more than to take her home where they could talk properly, but that would be rude. This was a celebration for Ginny's family. "Harry, I mean it—put me down!" she warned again.

"I don't think so," Harry said. They were getting close enough that guests were starting to notice and point. "I think I like being the one in control."

Ginny growled loudly. Her family had gathered around and were cheering Harry on, making him feel a bit uncomfortable at the display. But he wasn't about to let her go yet; this was too much fun. "Fine," she called out with a decidedly evil tone. "I'll just enjoy the view then; you've got a great arse, Harry." With that she gave him a squeeze on both of his cheeks and Harry yelped, almost dropping her. The crowd around them roared with laughter.

They started to disperse as Harry swung her back over his shoulder and helped her to stand upright. Ginny straightened her dress and glared at him but couldn't keep up her supposed wrath as he placed a quick kiss on the end of her nose.

"You're truly evil, you know that?"

"Is that why you love me?" she called out as he started walking toward the party with Fred and George.

"One of the many reasons," he called out and Ginny turned around, winking at him before being swallowed up by a group of giggling women.

* * *

Ginny continued to watch as Harry laughed and joked with Fred, George, Ron and a few other men. They were gathered around a table that included far too many empty bottles and she suspected that quite a few of them would have tremendous hangovers the next day.

Someone sat next to her and Ginny jumped, seeing it was Percy. He usually went out of his way to avoid her, even though he was always cordial. No one could ever claim that Percy Weasley was unsociable.

"Ginevra."

"Percival," Ginny replied back in the same irritating tone. She knew he hated it when she called him that—it wasn't even his name. But it annoyed her when he called her by her full name, as if

she'd done something wrong and needed to be scolded constantly. He wrinkled his nose in distaste, but didn't comment.

"Where's Audrey?" she asked, glancing around to see where his date had disappeared to.

"I escorted her home already," Percy explained, not fully meeting her gaze. He never did anymore; it was like he was afraid she was still possessed and he might be susceptible if he looked directly at her. So he always focused just to left of her, or, on rare occasions, let his eyes pass over hers quickly. "It's getting late and I didn't think it was appropriate to keep her out so late.

"That's nice," Ginny replied blandly. Audrey sounded perfect for Percy if she allowed him to 'escort her home'.

The men's table erupted in raucous laughter across the way and Ginny grinned as Harry and Neville began making fun of Ron for something. Harry was fitting right in, and it made Ginny's chest swell. He really needed this. Briefly, a flash of concern shot through her; Harry hadn't mentioned anything about his identity. Ginny pushed it away—he'd talk about it when he was ready.

"Mr. Parker seems to fit right in," Percy observed, a strange expression on his face. Ginny thought for a moment he might be jealous, but she wasn't sure what.

"You could go over and join them, you know," she offered, taking a chance. "Harry won't bite. And neither will Ron or Neville. You're on your own with Fred and George, though."

Percy's lips tugged upward, just the smallest bit, into a shadow of a smile before it faded away into something more proper. Ginny was reminded of a much younger Percy, participating—not always by choice—in wild Weasley sibling antics. She missed that Percy.

"Mum and Dad have told me that Mr. Parker is a responsible young man."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Harry's a wonderful bloke," she agreed, a fond smile stretching her face. "And I'm in love with him."

Percy turned to her and actually met her gaze, his face troubled. "Don't you think it's a bit early for something that intense? Love takes years to grow. It's not something you can decide in the blink of an eye."

"And sometimes it is," Ginny protested, willing him to actually listen to her. "You don't need to worry for me. Harry is not controlling me in any way. He's a wonderful man, who loves me. You don't have to know everything about a person to love them, Percy," she ended softly. Ginny looked away, finding Harry watching her, a concerned look on his face. She forced a tight smile and he tilted his head, silently asking if she needed him.

Touched by the offer, she shook her head 'no'.

"I'm not sure it could work that way," Percy shook his head, turning back to watch his brothers. Ginny doubted he was actually seeing them, however, because his eyes were glazed behind his glasses. Perhaps he and Audrey were having problems. Or perhaps he was still thinking of Penelope and what they'd shared together.

But Ginny was tired of apologizing for that. She really couldn't do it anymore. If Percy never accepted the apology, or if he never forgave her for what had happened, then it was on his shoulders, not hers.

"I wish you luck, Ginevra," he said stiffly, rising from his chair. "I don't approve of your living situation; I've made that clear enough in the past."

"You have," Ginny nodded as she looked up at him, her irritation with him slipping away into only tiredness with the situation between them.

Percy nodded again. "I hope he doesn't hurt you." He opened his mouth to say something else, but must have decided against it, because he shook his head and walked away.

"He won't," Ginny called out defiantly.

The sky was darkening and Ginny sat in her chair, not wanting to move at all. She'd removed her shoes and they now hid underneath her chair. Friends came and went, saying their goodbyes and giving hugs and congratulations. The urge to walk across the garden and climb into Harry's lap was great. The idea had merit, she decided, thinking of how her brothers would wail and moan at the display.

"So," Hermione came up on one side of her, offering her own round of drinks, although it was only Butterbeer. "Feel the need to tell me anything?"

Ginny smirked into her bottle and took a drink, glancing back over to where Harry was staring at her. He looked about as tired of all of this as she was. "Not really."

Hermione waited patiently, for about three seconds, before huffing mightily. "Well, fine."

"Fine," Ginny said. Finally, she gave way with a round of soft laughter. "Alright, what do you want to know?"

Hermione eyed her incredulously. "What the rest of your family and friends are too childish to ask. Are you and Harry...?"

"Together?" Ginny asked. When Hermione nodded, she continued with a sigh. "Poor boy, he's hopelessly, arse-over-elbow, in love with me."

Hermione choked a bit on her drink and giggled, making Ginny smile.

"So, he's a good kisser then?"

Ginny couldn't help but glance over to where Harry and the boys were laughing. He caught her eye for a second and winked. She knew she probably wore a horribly sappy look on her face, but... "He's extraordinary, Hermione. Absolutely brilliant."

Hermione watched the exchange with a satisfied smile. "Poor boy indeed."

Chapter 12: Being Harry Potter

“Dance with me again.”

Harry’s words, whispered into her ear as his arms snaked around her middle, sent shivers down Ginny’s back.

She and Hermione had laughed for several minutes before drifting apart again. Ginny had mingled, her bare toes on the grass bringing goosebumps to her skin. Somewhere along the way, she’d managed to pick up another glass of champagne and was sipping at it now, content to watch the few guests that remained out on the dance floor swaying to the music.

“Love to,” she agreed, blindly thrusting her half-empty glass to whoever happened to be standing next to her.

“Thanks,” Ron replied dryly. Ginny smiled, but her eyes were on Harry as he led her onto the dance floor. The slow tones of the song were perfect for barely moving and Ginny melted into him, finally feeling happy again to be where she wanted to be.

They danced through three slow songs before they noticed that the band had stopped playing. Every song was just for them and the world existed only around them.

“Tired, love?” Ginny asked as Harry attempted to stifle a yawn. Her fingers rubbed the hair at the base of his neck, sending a satisfying shiver through his body.

He smiled at her sleepily and nodded. “Been up for about thirty hours or so.” He groaned softly when Ginny massaged his neck with her fingers and they continued to sway, not caring that there wasn’t any music.

“Let’s go home, Harry,” Ginny whispered into the skin of his neck. Suddenly, new life seemed to seep into him and he pulled back, looking into her eyes with a questioning look. She met his eyes, trying to explain to him without words what she wanted.

“Alright, sweetheart,” he said softly and caressed her cheek. “I don’t think I’m up to driving, though.”

Ginny shrugged. “We’ll leave the car here tonight and come back for it tomorrow.”

Harry agreed and took her hand to lead her off the floor. Most of the guests had left, leaving only a few family members and closest friends there.

“Mum, Dad,” Ginny said, pressing kisses to both of their cheeks. “Harry and I are heading home.”

“Oh,” her mother said, patting her horribly mussed hair and wobbling a bit on her feet. Ginny’s father grinned and slid his arm around her waist to keep her upright. “It was so good to see you here, Harry,” she said, leaning toward him a bit.

“I’m glad I could come,” Harry answered back, sharing an amused glance with Ginny.

"And you don't even need to apologize for snogging Ginny," her mother leaned in further, throwing her arms around Harry, ignoring Ginny's horrified look. "Because, and don't tell her I told you, but I think she fancies you," she finished,

Harry chuckled softly. "That's good to hear. And, don't tell her, but I rather fancy her myself."

Ginny rolled her eyes at their antics and almost choked to death when her mother gasped, throwing herself further into Harry's arms.

"Oh, Arthur, did you hear that? I'll be planning another wedding soon!"

"Er..." Harry's eyes grew wide over her mother's head and Ginny laughed right along with her father.

"Don't worry, Harry," he apologized, prizing his wife off of Harry, "she won't remember any of this tomorrow."

"O-okay," Harry stammered, his hand fumbling for Ginny's when her parents had finally walked away.

"We'll pick up the car later," Ginny called out. Her father raised his hand in acknowledgment.

"She'll be alright, won't she?" Harry asked, a somewhat worried look on his face.

"She'll be fine," Ginny shook her head with a laugh. She wrapped her arms around his back, looking up at him. "Where is your tie and coat?"

"No clue," Harry smiled, staring at her lips.

"We'll find them later then," Ginny said softly.

"Don't really care if we don't," Harry said, lifting a hand to brush a bit of hair off of her forehead. "You ready?"

"Yep," Ginny said, tightening her grip on him. "Can you make it with both of us?"

"Sure," Harry said confidently. He pulled her closely to him and kissed the top of her head as she nuzzled against his neck. The tight feel of Apparation squeezed them and soon they were in the entryway of their flat.

Harry seemed reluctant to let go of her, and backed them toward the sofa. They sat together and cuddled closely, mirroring the position they'd been in only a few days ago.

"Tonight was so perfect," Ginny said quietly.

"It was," Harry agreed. "I was so nervous," he smiled. "I wasn't sure what you'd say, or if you'd just slap me."

Ginny chuckled a bit and looked up at him, her hand coming up to run along his jaw line that was now showing more than a little five o'clock shadow. "You underestimate your charms, Harry."

Harry's eyes met hers and he felt a fierceness swell up in his chest. He couldn't imagine how he'd not known this was love that he felt. It seemed so obvious now; such an overwhelming force that could block out anything unpleasant—if they only clung to it. Bending his head down, he captured her lips in a passionate kiss.

Ginny shifted before pulling back from him and hiking her dress so that she could straddle his legs. They started to kiss again and the fervor built. Harry's lips traveled over her jaw and down her neck, kissing and caressing her fragrant skin as she pushed her fingers through his hair and tilted her head to give him more neck to explore. His mind started to shut down, any thought other than touching every inch of her fled.

She moaned his name when he licked the swell of her breasts and gave him a slight nudge upward. Harry lifted his face slowly, eyes glazed a bit. Ginny just smiled seductively and reached behind her to lower the zip on her dress.

"Let me," Harry whispered as his hands joined hers. She stood for a moment and the lavender dress that had looked so appealing all night fell away, forgotten, to the floor. Harry swallowed thickly and stared at her.

"Beautiful," he said breathlessly and reached for her, bringing her back onto the sofa with him. Ginny sat astride his lap and took his lips in a bruising kiss while his hands roamed over her back and then moved up to her breasts, which were spilling out of a strange sort of bra that Harry had never seen before.

Ginny fumbled with the buttons on his shirt and he impatiently broke away to remove it and pull his undershirt over his head with a growl. He continued with his ministrations as Ginny chuckled and ran her hands over his shoulders and back.

Harry felt himself quickly losing control and fought to stay aware of what he was doing. Ginny's skin was so soft and tasted so wonderful in his mouth. And now she'd removed the bra, leaving his hands free to explore.

There was so much he wanted—no needed—to tell her, and he hadn't meant for them to jump right into the physical side of their relationship so fast.

He knew, logically, that they would probably move rather quickly. They'd both had sexual relationships before and the reality was, their feelings about each other ran deeply enough that Harry wasn't worried about regrets. He was more than a little nervous, however, about the things that he needed to tell her still.

Ginny's small and warm hands on the button of his too-tight trousers made him rocket back to earth.

"Gin. Ginny. Sweetheart," Harry pulled his head away from her as her hands fought to continue. "We need to slow down."

He grinned to himself as she growled into his chest, but her hands did stop just short of completely

baring him. "Don't wanna slow down," she grumbled as she kissed his throat.

"I know, sweetheart," he laughed as he continued to breathe deeply to calm his body. She pulled back and gave him a very convincing pout and he laughed, pulling her to him and holding her there. "I love you," he said softly. She whispered the words back to him and he reached for his discarded shirt to drape over her shoulders. With another pout, she pushed her arms into the sleeves and clasped it closed in front of her. Harry was a bit disappointed, but it did help him start breathing better.

"There are a few things I need to tell you," he managed as she cuddled back into his embrace.

"Bad things or good things?" Ginny asked. Harry could tell she was trying to be playful, and that was one of the things he loved about her, but he couldn't bring himself to do more than smile wryly.

"Harry," she warned as she pulled back and studied his face, "you're scaring me now."

"I don't mean to," he protested and cupped her cheek gently in his hand. "There are just some things that you don't know... about my life... and about who I am. And I'm afraid to tell you."

"You don't have to be afraid," she said gently and placed her hands on his chest holding herself away from him and staring deep into his eyes. "I know you. I know who you are."

Harry shook his head in frustration, wishing that she really just knew, so he didn't have to voice the memories. "No, you don't. My life... it's complicated."

Ginny raised an eyebrow and tilted her head to the side a bit. "Is this because you're Harry Potter?" she asked softly and Harry was stunned speechless.

He'd always wondered if she knew, but now faced with the reality that she *idid*/i know who he was and she'd said she loved him, even with that knowledge... it immediately caused a tight sensation in his chest.

"How did you know?" he whispered.

Ginny smiled sweetly at him and rubbed his chest again. "I didn't know for sure, not until just right now. I've suspected for awhile. Hermione and I researched a bit," she admitted, with a shrug. "But don't worry, I Obliviated her." A sly smile spread across her face and Harry had to laugh.

"You're amazing, you know?" He searched her eyes and couldn't see anything to alarm him about what he'd admitted; just simple acceptance. He was surprised and any words he'd thought of saying at this moment left him completely.

"Will you show me?" she asked and brushed the fringe from his face.

Harry hesitated for a minute, thinking about what she was asking, before nodding and reaching for his wand on the small table next to the sofa. He broke the charms that he wore almost constantly, and once again felt the tingle of a scar on his forehead, and scar tissue on his chest, torso and back. His jaw squared, his cheeks hollowed out and he knew his eyes were their true green color. He looked down rather than at her, wondering what she would say. He certainly felt more appealing as

Harrison Parker than who he truly was.

Ginny didn't say anything but ran her fingers along his well-built frame, tracing each and every white stripe. He shivered just a bit when she reached his side, but still didn't do anything but watch her hands, still not able to meet her gaze.

Finally, she lifted his face gently with her fingers and stared into his eyes. It wasn't pity, but understanding and compassion present on her face. She leaned forward and pressed a feather-light kiss to his jaw line where a rugged scar traced all the way up to the edge of his ear. Harry closed his eyes and breathed incredibly shallow, goosebumps breaking out all over his body.

The feel of her touching him this way, kissing and caressing him so lovingly made him instantly more aroused than he'd ever felt in his life. Finally, after kissing each of his eyes and running a finger down the length of his nose with a small smile, Ginny asked him to open his eyes, her voice nothing more than a whisper.

She stared deeply into them and he was choked up a bit seeing tears gather in her chocolate brown eyes. Almost reverently, she placed her hands on each side of his face and pulled him down to press a lingering kiss to the scar on his forehead. Harry sharply breathed in at feeling something so loving and warm touch something that had only caused him pain and sorrow in the past. He thought maybe she was showing him that she loved him completely, scars and all.

When she pulled back, he opened his eyes to see her smiling though tears were trailing down her cheeks. She mouthed 'I love you' and he returned it before she took his hand in hers and slid it up and under his shirt to her right side, just under her arm. Harry was confused for a moment until he felt the thin ribbon of rippled skin. She had her own scar that she was sharing with him.

Harry gently touched the skin and breathed deeply as his fingers brushed the side of her breast. Finally, they embraced tightly and Harry rocked her back and forth, feeling sorrow for what she must have had to go through to get a wound so large. He tried to remember in all his briefings, if the 'diary girl' had been injured. Sucking in a deep breath, he realized that this must be another time, another incident.

Ginny began to shift on his lap and then tugged at him until they were both lying on their sides on the sofa, legs intertwined.

"In my fifth year at school," Ginny began in a whisper. Had they been any further apart than the few inches that they were, Harry wouldn't have heard her. "Death Eaters broke into the castle. One of the Slytherin students had arranged for them to get in. We suspect that they were trying to get to Dumbledore but we didn't let them go without a fight."

Harry closed his eyes, trying to focus on what she was saying and not let his own memories of battles intrude.

"There were five of us who fought that night. Hermione, Ron and I had been coming back from the library when we heard the commotion in the hallway above us. Neville and Luna, a Ravenclaw friend of mine, were on another floor and heard it as well. There were several Aurors in the castle and the Death Eaters were fighting with them, trying to get to the staircases to get to Dumbledore's office."

Harry caressed her cheek softly, marveling at how brave she was. He couldn't imagine how she must have felt, barely sixteen and fighting Death Eaters with little or no training. He had fought them almost his whole teenage years, but he'd been training most of his life for it. He shook his head sadly and focused in on her story again.

"We had to do something," she said and locked eyes with his, possibly searching for his approval. He nodded slowly, understanding her perfectly. "So we hid at the bottom of the stairs. Neville and Luna on one side, on Ron's suggestion, and then us on another. Hermione used Disillusionment Charms on us and we waited.

"It felt like hours, but it must have been only minutes later. The Aurors were chasing four Death Eaters, trading spells back and forth. They advanced down the first staircase and we had them. When our spells started hitting them, they broke off and hid on the stairs. That's when another group came from the opposite direction. We were pinned between the two groups." Harry wiped away a tear that escaped and leaned forward to kiss her gently. It frightened him how much she still shook while telling the story even so many years later. Then again, some of his memories were so vivid he didn't even let himself think about them too much.

"We were holding our own until one of them cornered Neville. She used the Cruciatus on him, Harry," her voice broke, followed by a choked sob. "It was the most horrible thing I've ever seen in my life. And I just stood there. I wanted to run to him and do something... make her stop, but I just... froze."

"I know, sweetheart," Harry soothed as he pulled her face into his neck and smoothed her hair down. "I've done the same thing." Ginny cried into his skin and then pulled back a minute later.

"I still don't know why he even talks to me now. I should have done something, Harry."

"No," he protested. "They would have done the same thing to you. And Neville knows... he knows what it's like, Gin."

Ginny nodded awkwardly and swiped furiously at her tears. "In the end, it didn't matter, I got hit anyway. I got in between Ron and the Death Eater he was fighting and I took a cutting curse down my side. They say I almost died, but I don't remember any of it."

Harry clasped his eyes shut and kissed her forehead. "Thank God," he whispered. They held each other for a minute before Ginny pulled back and kissed him gently again.

"I know you," she repeated once more in a low voice.

Harry only nodded and smiled gently. "I know you, too." They cuddled in again and were soon breathing deeply, both asleep.

* * *

"Will you show me?" she asked, hoping that he would trust her enough. He should, considering what they'd shared already, and the fact that she was mostly naked, sitting in his lap right now. But she would understand if he just couldn't.

Harry hesitated, and Ginny almost told him it was alright, that it really didn't matter. Finally, he nodded and removed the charms.

Ginny took a deep breath, preparing herself for the face she'd only seen once, in a photograph.

He was simply beautiful, she decided. His face was thinner than the one she was used to; his cheekbones more prominent. The brightness of his eyes entranced her and she stared at him, feeling her stomach flutter in attraction.

She silently counted his scars, tracing each one on his body, feeling the emotion roll inside her at the thought of each injury. But she wanted to acknowledge them all, because they were a part of who he was. There was an overwhelming urge to press her lips to each mark, helping it to heal just a bit more. But that could wait until later.

Harry's chest rose and fell heavily as she touched him, his heart beating visibly.

His face was next, as Ginny caressed a particularly nasty scar on his jaw. Her own arousal grew as she met his eyes, trying to convey to him just how in love she was. Unable to stop herself, she leaned forward and pressed her lips against the scar.

Ginny continued to touch him, nuzzling her nose against his face and trailing her lips along each feature, her breath making him shiver.

"Open your eyes, Harry," she asked, all the breath gone from her. The feeling between them was intense—more intimate than sex had ever been for her—and she couldn't imagine anything as erotic as what they were sharing right now. The thought made a lump in her throat that was hard to swallow past. Her eyes filled with tears and she gently pulled him down so that she could kiss his scar.

'I love you, Harry Potter,' she whispered to his forehead, accepting all of him completely.

"I love you," she tried to repeat, but her voice was gone. Harry's mouth moved in the same pattern.

I know you, her heart whispered to his as she took his hand in hers. She needed to show him that she was scarred too. He knew about the Chamber, but there were other things—darkness that had touched her life time and time again—and he needed to know that she understood him.

High up under her arm, just on the side of her breast, there was an ugly scar. It once ran down almost her whole torso. When Madam Pomfrey had been healing it up, Ginny had asked to keep that one small bit. It was a reminder of what people had sacrificed in the war. What she'd given up.

She held his hand to it, her body shivering at his gentle touch. His bright eyes clouded over and she knew that he understood.

I know you.

I know you, too.

Ginny awoke some time later, slightly confused. It was rather cold in the room and she groped for the blanket only to remember that she and Harry had fallen asleep on the sofa, and that they were seriously lacking in clothing.

When her eyes focused a bit, she had to smile at Harry who was nestled against her chest. The button down shirt she'd pulled on last night was gaping open a bit and his nose was pressed into one of her breasts. He seemed entirely happy to stay there however, if the content look on his face was anything to go by.

She blinked several times and lightly touched his shoulder, running her hand down his arm where it wrapped around her. Harry sighed and nuzzled even closer to her, mumbling something that might have been her name.

Ginny took a quiet minute to really study what she could see of his face. The scars on it were horrific, but not in a way that made him unattractive at all. Rather, her eyes were drawn to them, imagining the horrors that must have taken place for him to get them. They were like a permanent badge of honor that he carried everywhere with him; even if he hated it. But Ginny loved them; they were a part of him, how could she not?

Harry moved again, his hand tightening around her back as his face burrowed closer in. His breath on her skin caused her nipples to tighten and a low ache to begin between her legs. She could feel his arousal starting to grow, pushing against her leg gently.

With a smile, Ginny continued to rub his skin lightly and then let her hand move over his side and down to his stomach. When he didn't move, she continued, slowly slipping her fingers through the hair around his navel and downward. She almost had his trousers undone when he roused and opened his eyes.

"You're wicked," he mumbled and shifted up a bit higher so that he could kiss her.

"And you always stop me just when I get to the good part," she pouted and tugged at his trousers.

"That's the good part?" he asked sleepily up at her and she grinned.

"That's what I'm trying to decide, Mr. Potter."

Harry grinned at her use of his real name and brushed her hair back from her face. "Maybe I'll just have to let you get on with it then."

Ginny snorted in laughter and tickled his side a bit until he growled and lay completely on top of her. She smirked, liking the fact that he'd done exactly what she'd wanted all night. "That's more like it."

"You like that then?" Harry asked as he kissed her neck and began to move lower. When she moaned, he thrust his hips at her and she gasped at feeling him pressed intimately against her.

"Harry," she warned and returned the thrust. Instantly, Harry froze and pulled back to study her

face.

“Not on the sofa, sweetheart,” he sighed and then swiftly stood, lifting her up and onto her feet. She whimpered at the sudden loss of his heat but then jumped into his arms, catching him by surprise. She wrapped her legs around his waist and he groaned and stumbled toward the hallway, stopping twice to press her into the wall and ravish her neck and breasts.

Finally, they made it to his bedroom and Harry kicked the door closed after them.

* * *

Harry sighed in complete satisfaction, cuddling into Ginny's side even more. This is where he was supposed to be.

Across the room, Armstrong gave a low, mournful hoot and they both laughed.

“I forgot all about them,” Ginny said. “They got quite the show, didn't they?”

Irony made Harry scowl. “Serves them right,” he growled. “I don't even want to think of how many times I've walked in on them.”

Ginny rolled in his embrace, grinning up at him. “You weren't ever turned on by it?”

“Hell no,” Harry grumbled. “I was jealous. They were... going at it, night and day, while I suffered.”

“You should have just come and climbed in bed with me,” Ginny shrugged. “I wouldn't have complained, and I'll bet you would have forgotten all about those randy birds.”

Harry chuckled. “If I'd known that was an option, we would have put the birds to shame.”

“We'll have to work on that then,” Ginny said, kissing him once more before laying back down in his arms, her head on his shoulder.

Harry closed his eyes and breathed in deep, the smell of Ginny's body, his sweat, and the heady scent of sex on the air. The world outside this bed was forgotten; everything he needed to live was here, now.

* * *

Ginny woke to the smell of breakfast. Her stomach growled in appreciation but she was a bit disappointed. She'd had the best dream of making love to Harry and had wanted to recreate it when she woke, only to find herself all alone. Well, the birds were in the room also, staring with wide eyes when she looked over the side of the bed at them.

“Sorry,” she shrugged unrepentantly at them as she hurriedly slipped Harry's dress shirt from yesterday back on. He'd vanished her knickers last night, but she probably wouldn't have put them on anyway.

“Morning,” she said as she entered the kitchen. Harry looked adorable, she decided, in his pyjama pants, bare feet, cooking apron, and perpetual bedhead.

"Morning," he smiled back over his shoulder a bit shyly. "I was trying to surprise you with breakfast in bed."

Immediately, she noticed that Harry's glammers were back in place. That disappointed her a bit, but she understood his need for them. They were a sort of protection from rejection. If she didn't truly see him, she couldn't reject him for who he was. She silently vowed to convince him that it didn't matter what he looked like, she loved him anyway.

Ginny laughed as she slid her hands around his waist, laying her head on his back. "Should I go climb back in and pretend to be asleep?"

Harry chuckled. "No. You can help me get it ready, and then we'll eat together."

"Sounds like a plan," Ginny said, pressing a kiss to his back and going to put the bread in the toaster.

"Do you have anything you need to do today?" Harry asked. His question was a bit too forced to be casual and Ginny glanced back to find him concentrating pointedly on frying the eggs in the pan.

"I have loads to do," Ginny sighed, a slow plan forming in her mind. "I'm sorry if you had something else planned..."

Harry's head picked up and his eyes darkened a bit. "Oh, well... don't let me keep you."

"I think I have time for breakfast," Ginny smirked.

"Okay." Harry levitated the pan over to the counter and the eggs slid onto plates that already had cut fruit and bacon on them.

"You... you could help me, I suppose," Ginny offered, buttering the toast and then bringing it to the plates.

"Yeah?" Harry asked, a curious look on his face.

"Yeah," Ginny nodded, wiping her hands on the front of his apron and then reaching around to untie it. "These are some things I think you might be interested in."

Harry's breathing hitched audibly when Ginny lifted the fabric over his chest and licked his nipple.

"You see, I was planning to spend all day shagging," Ginny said mischievously. "If you're not interested... I just might be forced to find another Harry Potter out there that could meet my needs."

Harry growled, lifting her up onto the counter, right next to their breakfast plates, before capturing her lips in a bruising kiss.

"No one else," he whispered possessively, moving down her jaw to her neck. Ginny lifted her hair out of the way and squirmed a bit in place. The counter was cold on her bare bottom. She grinned, wrapping her legs around his waist. The apron got tangled between them as they kissed.

“There’s just one rule,” Ginny protested.

“Rule?” Harry asked, pulling back from kissing her neck.

“Yeah,” Ginny said, arching into him. “No glamours while we make love.” She knew she was pushing him a bit, but she needed to be able to see him—all of who he truly was—when they were intimate.

Harry thought about that for a minute before he nodded. “Okay.” His eyes didn’t quite meet hers so she reached down, lifting his chin. She needed him to understand...

“I love all of you, Harry,” she said quietly. “Every scar, every hair, every imperfectly perfect bit of flesh. You’re mine. And I don’t want you to ever hide that from me.”

“Ginny,” he protested, pulling away a bit. She could see the doubt in his face, but reached for him, pulling him flush with her.

“Do you love me, Harry?” she whispered huskily into his face.

“Yes,” he answered back instantly, with no hesitation.

“Do you trust me?”

He hesitated more on this question and Ginny’s heart thumped loudly between them. His eyes met hers, searching deep. The unnaturalness of the muddy hazel coloring now made perfect sense to Ginny; Harry had always hid his natural green eyes under glamours. “Yes,” he finally answered.

“Then share that with me,” she pleaded. “Share it all with me.” Their breath mingled and Harry rested his forehead against her cheek.

He braced his arms on either side of her hips, tugging her until she was fully into his arms. “I want to,” he whispered fiercely. “But I’m afraid.”

Ginny swallowed thickly, wrapping around him completely. “I’m not leaving you, Harry.”

“You have so much power to hurt me,” he admitted into the skin of her neck. “You could break me in two so easily.”

“But I won’t,” Ginny countered right back. “You’re everything to me, Harry. Everything.”

“I... There are things I need to tell you,” he said softly. “Horrible things. I... Ginny I’ve killed people... I—”

“It was war, love,” Ginny protested. “You were forced to do horrible things. I don’t judge you for that.” He didn’t answer and she blinked up at the ceiling trying to find the right words.

“When I told you about the diary,” she said, rubbing her hands up and down his back, “did you blame me?”

Harry jerked back from her, fury etched on his face. “Hell no,” he growled. “It wasn’t your fault. Someone else put you in that position.”

“Even though Penelope died?”

He opened his mouth to reply, but it died in his throat.

“It *is* the same thing,” she protested his silent words.

“I... I want to tell you everything, Gin,” he said, his hands cupping her face. “But... some of it is classified.”

Ginny placed her finger on his lips. “Then don’t tell me. Harry, nothing you say to me would change how I feel for you. Actually,” she amended, kissing him softly at his worried look. “It might make me love you even more.”

Harry leaned in and kissed her softly, pressing their foreheads together.

“We’re having breakfast in bed,” Ginny informed him, looking up into his stubble-laden face.

Harry chuckled. “Do I have to be dressed?” Ginny hopped off the counter, pondering his question.

“Not necessarily,” she shrugged. “You won’t need those glamours for at least twenty-four hours, Harry Potter,” she promised, earning a stunned look from him as she gathered their plates and walked down the hallway.

“I may have to hold you to that,” he said softly, following her, his hands tickling the skin on her bare hips.

“You can guarantee it,” she winked back over her shoulder.

* * *

They were cuddled in his bed—their bed, Harry corrected himself with a smile—after making love once more. Neither of them could seem to get enough of the other and Harry wondered if it would always be like this. Would he always desire her like he did right now? Would she always say his name like she needed him?

Harry certainly hoped so.

“Knut for your thoughts,” Ginny said as she wound their fingers together, her deep eyes studying his.

“Not sure they’re worth that much,” he half-smiled.

“I’m sure they are,” Ginny said, turning her head to kiss his neck.

“I... I want to tell you, Gin, about my life.” The words were a struggle and Harry wondered if he could even get through it now that he’d committed.

Ginny shifted in his arms, looking up at him. “You don’t have to.”

Harry slid his fingers out of hers and traced each of them gently. “I know,” he nodded, staring at

their fingers as they played together. "I want to."

"Okay," Ginny said. Harry looked down to see that she was watching their fingers as well. His eyes traveled down the rest of her body, only partially covered by the sheet and he took a deep breath.

"Maybe we'd better get dressed for this," he mumbled, his eyes not leaving the pale skin above her breasts, where her freckles started to fade.

"Too distracting," Ginny grinned as she lowered the sheet, purposely exposing herself.

Harry sucked in a breath and closed his eyes. "Yeah."

"Spoil sport," she said, lifting up to kiss him before climbing off the bed and sliding into her tank-top and pyjama pants. They'd spent all day either undressed or only in their pyjamas and it felt wonderful, Harry thought. Ginny tossed him a t-shirt and boxers from his drawer and he hurriedly put them on.

"This sounds serious," Ginny said as she climbed back onto the bed, tucking her legs up underneath her.

"It is," Harry said, sitting up to lean against the headboard. "I... I told you that some of this is top secret."

"Yeah," she nodded. "I understand if you—"

Harry shook his head, scratching his head in frustration. "I'm not explaining myself well," he grumbled. He leaned over and reached into the bedside table, removing the scroll sealed with the ICW official wax seal.

"Those of us who were really involved in the war... we had to make a vow not to reveal what we knew unless we had permission to do so," he explained, glancing up to see that Ginny was nodding.

"Getting permission..." he sighed. "It's next to impossible. They don't grant it very often." He fingered the wax seal. "I... Just before I came to the wedding... I went to the ICW and... requested permission to tell you."

He could hear her breath sucked in, but didn't know what that meant without looking at her.

"Harry... I don't know what to say." He looked up to find her staring at the wall opposite them, a blank expression on her face. "I... I want to know, if it would help you," she said, looking over at him. "But part of me doesn't want to know."

Harry nodded knowingly. "It's a burden. They offered to Obliviate people," he admitted. "A few people actually did that—they lost all those memories and had them replaced with simple bystander ones. I... I couldn't do that," he finished in a whisper, pained at the knowledge that he carried. "It felt a bit like a betrayal to my parents, and to all those who died."

Ginny crawled into his embrace, pressing her back to his chest and wrapping his arms around her. "It wouldn't have been, Harry. They would have understood, I'm sure."

He could see their faces before his closed eyes as he pressed into Ginny's body. "You don't have to," he reiterated.

"But you want me to," Ginny said quietly.

"I... I want this to work between us, Gin. And I'm not sure it can until you know."

"Then I'll do it," she said fiercely. Determination radiated off of her and Harry tightened his arms, taking comfort from her simply being there, willing to sit in his embrace to do this. It would make it easier to tell.

"You'd be under the same binding vow," he said. "Before I can say anything, you have to read the form and sign it. Your magic will seal the agreement."

"I can't tell anything?"

"Some," Harry shrugged. His fingers found hers and wound around them again, the scroll still clutched in his other hand. "You could tell people who I am and a bit about the war, but no details."

"I wouldn't tell anyone any of that," Ginny shook her head. "Not unless you wanted me to."

"Not even your family, Gin."

"It doesn't matter," Ginny said again, her voice strong. "I would never betray you like that."

"I know," he cuddled her just a bit. "But it's still up to you." Tentatively, he handed the scroll to her, knowing it was like passing her the weight of the world. What he needed to tell her would possibly change how she saw the world, and he felt horrible for doing that to her. But, all the same, it was a relief to be able to share it with someone who would understand him, someone who wouldn't judge him.

Ginny stared at the scroll for a moment before taking a deep breath and sliding her finger under the wax, breaking the seal.

"I just have to sign it?" she asked after she read the words. Harry knew they said basically what he'd just told her. He remembered from when he'd read his own.

"Yeah," he nodded. "The charm on the parchment does the rest."

Ginny nodded absently and slid to the edge of the bed, rummaging in his drawer for a quill, but only coming up with ball-point pens.

"Sorry," he shrugged one shoulder. "I hate quills. The pen will work just fine."

She nodded and signed her name with a flourish, before sighing heavily. Harry swore he could see the weight of the vow she'd just made settle on her shoulders. Her eyes carried a kind of darkness that he'd only seen in them after her nightmares and he hated himself for putting it there.

"I'm sorry," he whispered automatically when she climbed back into his arms.

“Just hold me while you tell me.”

“I will,” he agreed, pressing kisses to her shoulder and neck. “I’ll never let you go.”

She nodded and they slid down in the bed together, spooning amidst the nest of blankets.

“You probably know the basic story of when my parents were killed,” Harry started, the words coming haltingly out of his mouth. It felt like pushing years of furniture away in a dusty old attic to find one piece that was never really used, but that you were forced to take out every once in awhile and dust off. Harry wasn’t sure if that’s just how his mind worked at hiding the information, or whether that was the vow itself.

“Tom killed your parents and then he tried to kill you, but it didn’t work.”

Harry nodded against her back. “My mother sacrificed herself for me. She died right in front of me.” Ginny gasped at that and rolled in his arms, pulling him into her embrace. “When she did... her love for me sealed a protection on me. When Riddle tried to kill me, his curse backfired on him. But it didn’t kill him. I’ll explain that in a minute.”

Ginny’s fingers buried in his hair, gently rubbing. Harry closed his eyes and tried to allow the comfort from the simple gesture to flow down through him.

“Before I was born, there was a prophecy given,” Harry continued. “The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not. And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.”

The words rolled off his tongue more easily now. He’d repeated that damned prophecy over and over in his head for hours at a time sometimes. Sometimes he felt as if it was etched in his very soul.

“My parents were in hiding when he found us. They were betrayed by a man they thought was their friend.” Harry’s heart gave a painful lurch at that thought, but he pushed it away. There were more painful parts of this coming up. Ginny already had tears in her eyes and looked like she wanted nothing more than to run away, or kiss him and force him to forget it all. And he would, in her arms.

“Albus Dumbledore came that night. He brought me out of the ruins and took me to my Aunt’s house. She was a Muggle, but she hated magic. I don’t remember a whole lot about that time, but I stayed there for two years.” Harry lied about not remembering much, but it really didn’t matter what he remembered. It was horrible, and knowing it wouldn’t do anything but anger Ginny. “But then my Godfather came for me. He’d made some deal with Albus. I’m not even sure what it all entailed, but we left the country. Sirius—and Remus, who was another of my father’s best friends—took me to America.

“They were wonderful to me. I grew up knowing I was loved, hearing stories of my parents and learning about magic.

“When I was just barely eleven, they brought me back to England. We stayed at Hogwarts and I got ready to enroll there.” The memories seemed to rush at him all at once and Harry had a hard time organizing them to tell the story in order. But he knew that if Ginny were confused, she would say something.

“That’s when I heard the prophecy,” he whispered. “Albus, Sirius and I went to the Department of Mysteries. We took it and destroyed it so that no one could ever know. That was Sirius’ idea.” Harry could see the thin glass ball shattering in his mind, dropped purposely from his small hand.

“I was so happy to be coming to Hogwarts,” he admitted with a sad smile. “I’d heard about it since I could remember, and it sounded like this amazing adventure.”

Ginny surged forward and kissed him. “I wish you would have,” she whispered against his lips. “Maybe we would have been together.”

“Maybe,” he agreed with a smile. “But there was a problem. When we were ready to leave the castle, a man tried to attack us. He was the Dark Arts Professor, and he was possessed by Riddle. He... he tried to come after Sirius and me. Albus had to stop him. They battled for several minutes before the man tripped. He fell down several flights of stairs. Broke his neck.” Harry shuddered at the memory, watching it from behind his Godfather, eyes peeking out, wide with fright and shock. He could even still hear the sickening crunch of the body as it finally landed and stilled.

“Oh, Harry,” Ginny whispered, tears finally leaking out of her eyes and running down her cheeks.

“Sirius... he wouldn’t let me go to Hogwarts after that. He said I’d be better off where he could see me. Where he and Remus could teach me and protect me themselves. So we went back to the United States.

“I enrolled in Northwoods Academy. It’s in Oregon, just outside of Portland. Some students live there, like at Hogwarts, but others Apparate in every day. Over there you can get your license to Apparate when you’re fifteen.”

“Spoiled,” Ginny grumbled through her tears. “I was nearly eighteen when I got mine. Stupid Death Eaters.”

Harry chuckled at her defiance and rubbed his hands up and down her back. “It was a good education,” he shrugged. “And I had a few friends, but no one close. I... I was wearing glamours from the time I could remember, and using the Parker name. I couldn’t let anyone too close, you know.”

“I’m sorry you were so lonely,” Ginny said, kissing his chin and then his lips.

Harry shrugged again. “It’s water under the bridge now. But I do think I missed out on a lot not being at Hogwarts. I didn’t have you, for example.”

Ginny smiled brilliantly at him. “I would have been arse-over-elbow for you even then, I think.”

Harry chuckled and brushed his hand through her hair. “What about Michael and Dean?”

“Forget them,” she said, urgently kissing him. “I would have been with you.”

His heart pounded and he leaned forward, pressing his lips to hers. They kissed for several minutes before both pulling back. Now wasn't the time to lose themselves in each other.

“Can you go on?” Ginny asked, gently rubbing his chest. “Or do you need a break?”

“I'm fine,” he protested lightly.

Ginny studied him for a minute and seemed satisfied as she settled back down into his arms.

“I'm trying to remember where I was,” he chuckled, pulling his thoughts away from the woman in his arms, and the way she was warm against his side, the way her leg rested on top of his...

“Northwoods Academy,” Ginny reminded him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “So... I went to class in the day and came home each night where Sirius would teach me other things—mostly defensive magic and things that school boys aren't supposed to know. Remus stuck mostly to the traditional subjects,” he chuckled.

“What happened when you were sixteen, Harry?” Ginny asked, her voice low.

“How did you—”

“You mentioned that you had to leave school,” she said, lifting her head to look at him. “That night we drank the wine on the sofa. You said you had to leave.”

Harry furrowed his brow, wondering how she could remember anything besides the intense feeling between them and the kiss they had shared. He vaguely remembered telling Ginny about Michelle. That must have been what she was remembering.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “But things were starting to change the year before that. Sirius and Remus... they tried to keep the worst of it from me, but I could tell things were happening. They wanted to keep me in school as long as possible, to keep my identity hidden and to protect me. But... I knew it was only a matter of time. My training had increased and there were always new people around. I figured out they were with the ICW. Albus came several times that year.

“I started having these headaches,” Harry explained, remembering how debilitating the pain was. “Albus thought it was Riddle, that we were connected by this scar,” he motioned to his forehead. “I missed a lot of school that year,” he chuckled. “And when I was there... well, I wasn't acting like I should have been. I was skipping classes and... messing around.”

“With girls?” Ginny asked, a sly smile on her face.

“One,” Harry shrugged and then sighed. “I just... wanted to be normal, you know. I was tired of hiding who I was, and tired of hurting. When I was with her, it didn't matter. I was just...”

“A randy sixteen year-old boy getting his rocks off.” Ginny chuckled softly. She brushed her hand along his jawline, the sound of his stubble harsh against his own ears.

"Yeah," he admitted softly, feeling his cheeks heat. "But that ended fast," he sighed. "Something happened... I was supposed to be at school, but..." He grimaced. "I had this... vision. Riddle had Sirius... there were so many details that just... they just made sense, you know. It had to be true. And then I got this note..."

"So, being young and stupid, I went after him," Harry admitted. He stared past Ginny to the window that was barely letting in any light with the curtains drawn. "It was complete arrogance. I'd been training so much, that I thought I would be ready. And I couldn't just leave him there... Sirius is... he's like a father to me."

"Of course," Ginny murmured in sympathy.

"When I got to where they were holding him, or where I *thought* it was... it was a trap. Sirius wasn't there. Riddle wasn't even there; just his Death Eaters. Lucius Malfoy and a few others."

Ginny shuddered in his arms and he leaned down to lay his lips against her forehead. "They had me for two weeks." He closed his eyes as flashes of dark rooms, bright, flashing lights, men in black robes with masks, and pain, showed in his head. There wasn't much he could tell her about that time—it was just too painful, still, even five years later.

"I can only imagine what you went through, Harry," Ginny whispered, stroking his face and chest. "I..." She trailed off as more tears flowed from her and she buried her head in his neck, clutching at his t-shirt.

A few tears slipped down Harry's face as well but he wiped them away.

"The scars... on your back and chest..."

"Yeah," Harry whispered past the lump in his throat.

"How could they?" Ginny whispered viciously. "How could they hurt you like that? You were just a boy!"

Her protectiveness and anger on his behalf made his chest tighten. "I killed him," Harry said, his voice breaking. "Malfoy," he clarified when she looked up at him with red, swollen eyes.

"Albus and Sirius and Remus... they came after me. I could hear them fighting and I... he was in the room with me... I didn't mean to kill him, just... he kept standing in the way. And then... he was crumpled against the wall. I crushed his skull in..."

"It's over now," Ginny whispered, pressing her fingers to his lips. "It's over and he can't hurt you anymore."

"He gave you the diary, Gin," Harry said dully. "He was the one."

"I thought so," she confirmed, laying her head on his chest once more. "I didn't know for sure, but I figured it was him."

"I didn't know then... Albus had told us about a girl with the diary..."

Ginny looked up at him, a mix of revulsion and guilt on her face. “If I’d known what he did then, Gin, I would have done it for you,” Harry continued. “He hurt you.”

She shook her head, tears—this time probably of anger for the whole thing—fell down her face. “It’s over now.”

“You... you don’t know how much it meant to us—to me—that you found that diary, Gin.” She jerked her head up and glared at him, trying to discern his meaning. “They never told you what the diary was,” he said, meeting her gaze. “It wasn’t just some artifact for controlling the Basilisk, Ginny. It was a Horcrux.”

Ginny sat up, pulling away from him and Harry followed, scooting behind her and taking her hand in his. “I almost don’t want to know,” she whispered, shaking her head and staring into the dark room.

“A Horcrux is a piece of a soul,” Harry said. “It’s Dark, Dark magic. When you commit a murder, your soul tears,” he continued, staring off into the same black. “Someone making a Horcrux... they do it deliberately, encasing that bit of their soul into an object. Riddle... he did it seven times.”

“So... what possessed me,” Ginny said, her tone measured and even. “That was... Riddle’s soul?”

Harry bit his lip, looking at her. “Yeah.” She looked like she was going to be sick; her jaw squared tightly and he could hear her teeth grinding together. “And... if you hadn’t gone to Albus... we might not have found out about Riddle making Horcruxes until it was too late.”

Ginny glared at him and shook her hand to untangle it from his. “Are you saying that what I went through... Justin and Hermione and Penelope... that was a *good* thing?”

Harry’s jaw dropped as Ginny stood and fled the room before he could even answer. He followed her until she slammed the bathroom door in his face, the lock clicking into place.

“Gin? Ginny, that’s not what I meant at all. Please...” Harry knocked on the door and then pressed his forehead against it. “I didn’t mean...”

The sound of her vomiting into the toilet made him wince.

“Ginny, please, open the door,” he asked again. “Let me help you.”

She vomited again and he could hear her crying inside. The need to vanish the door completely was almost overwhelming; but Harry knew he’d be in even bigger trouble if he did.

“Just go away, Harry,” she said, her voice sounding so small inside the hollow room.

Harry stared at the wood in front of him, his heart breaking.

Chapter 13: Easier To Be

Ginny wiped her mouth on the towel that she had tugged from the bar. The taste of bile nearly made her vomit again, and she stood on shaky legs to rinse out her mouth. She cupped the water to her mouth from the tap and swished it around, refusing to look at herself in the mirror.

She'd definitely see her eyes nearly black with exhaustion, her skin pale and clammy like it had been *that year*. *The year that belonged to Tom*.

Harry was still outside. She could see the shadow he cast through the small space below the door. Why hadn't he gone? She didn't want to see him right now. She couldn't.

What he'd said... that it was a good thing... Ginny shuddered at the thought. She *knew* he hadn't meant it in the way it had come out. Harry wasn't cruel. But... he had been right.

If the diary was what he was telling her... a Horcrux... then what she had gone through, people being hurt and even killed... it was all for a higher purpose. The thought made Ginny want to vomit again.

She sank slowly to the floor, trying to take deep breaths to try and will away the panic. Her eyes never left Harry's shadow at the door, staring at it as he shifted his feet.

If it *was* Tom's soul... then she was tainted. Dirty and disgusting, and certainly beyond loving. And Harry knew what she was, she'd confessed it to him weeks ago. He'd known about the Horcrux then.

And he still loves you.

She closed her eyes tightly, pushing the thought away. But it wouldn't go.

As much as she wanted to protect Harry, from her darkness, from her stupidity, she still couldn't imagine not clinging to him. He was everything.

Ginny opened her eyes slowly, trying to decide what she should do. Running wasn't an option anymore. She'd done that for too many years. First with Michael and Dean, and then with the Muggle world—trying anything she could to pretend it hadn't happened and that it didn't matter.

But it did. It really mattered.

She looked back to the door and then stopped breathing. Harry's shadow was gone. He'd walked away.

She couldn't do this without him! Her heart thundered inside her chest and she crawled forward just a bit, blinking her eyes and hoping that it was just a trick of the light.

"Harry?" she breathed.

"I'm still here, Gin," he answered the question that she knew he couldn't have heard. "I'm not going anywhere." His voice was farther away, but still there.

The words were like a shot of courage straight into her heart and she sniffed loudly, wiping away the evidence of her tears.

Shakily, she stood and brushed her teeth, mentally clinging to the image of Harry standing outside the door, waiting for her.

When she was finished, she finally allowed her eyes to rise and look in the mirror. She was pale, but not the ghostly white that she'd been during Tom's year. And her eyes were red and puffy, but alive.

Slowly, she raised her hand and touched the three small bruises on her neck, collarbone and chest. Harry had left those marks there hours ago, when they'd made love.

And he still loves you.

Taking a deep breath, Ginny turned and silently twisted the lock in the doorknob. The hinges protested her opening them, like they always did.

Harry was there, sitting on the floor across from the door, his back against the wall and his knees up, elbows resting on them and head bowed.

He scrambled up when she took a step into the hall, hesitantly moving toward her. Tears filled her eyes and she moved into his embrace.

"I'm sorry," she said, over and over again, latching onto his shirt and soaking it with her wet cheeks.

"I was a Horcrux," Harry blurted out. "I... well, I was, and..."

Ginny wondered for a moment if time had stopped completely. The words echoed in what little space there was between them.

"You... what?"

"Riddle turned me into a Horcrux," Harry whispered harshly, "when he tried to kill me." His arms fell away from her. "I just... I don't want you to think you're unworthy or... tainted, or... anything other than..." He threw up his arms and Ginny stared at him, wondering what was going on in his mind. She was barely keeping all the thoughts straight in the cotton-filled interior of her own head.

"Other than what?" she asked, watching him as he stood restlessly in place.

Harry stared at her, his chest rising and falling rapidly and his nostrils flaring just a bit. In one huge step he gathered her up, pressing her to the wall, his hands cupping her face as he breathed against it.

"Other than amazing, and wonderful," his lips trailed along her skin, raising goosebumps as he went. Ginny gasped as he pressed kisses to the raw spots he had left earlier. "And beautiful... and breathtakingly sexy..."

He kissed her then, but it was soft, full of acceptance and more love than Ginny ever remembered

feeling in her life. She lifted on the tips of her toes, wrapping her arms around his neck and returning his emotion.

“Don’t ever think otherwise,” he said as they broke apart. “Because if you can love me...” His words failed him and Ginny pressed her forehead against his lips.

“I do love you,” she whispered.

“Good,” he answered.

They stood together in the hallway, each lost in their own thoughts as they held onto each other.

Harry’s admission began to sink in and Ginny felt her knees wobble. “Can we... can we sit down?” she asked. “I feel like I might fall.”

“Yeah,” Harry mumbled. “Bed or sofa?”

Ginny thought about it for a moment before nodding toward the bedroom. “Bed,” she whispered.

Harry nodded and lifted her into his arms, carrying her in to set on the mattress. Ginny slid under the duvet, exhaustion starting to creep in. It was all so much. And the vow seemed to make it all worse. It pressed down on her, making it hard to breathe. She’d never before in her life wanted to talk more about something, and yet, at the same time, she didn’t want to even think about it anymore.

The bed moved and Harry slid in, wrapping around her from behind.

“How... how did you survive?” Ginny asked, not wanting to hear the answer at all.

Harry was quiet for a long time. “He killed me,” he said finally. His tone was so... honest and blunt that it made Ginny want to laugh with incredulity. “During the battle... people were dying. People that had no business being there at all, let alone giving their lives...” He trailed off and Ginny rubbed his arms. She could hear the pain in his voice.

“Riddle... he was an arrogant bastard. He called out to me, told me he’d stop the fighting if I came to him.”

Tears leaked out of Ginny’s eyes and into the pillow below her as she listened to Harry’s quiet voice.

“I went,” he admitted. “How could I not?”

She closed her eyes, picturing him as he must have been then, exhausted and blood stained, walking into what he knew was a trap...

“I was with Albus when the call came. He told me about being a Horcrux. That Riddle had messed up.” Ginny shivered as Harry spoke the words into the skin on the back of her shoulder.

“I knew what the prophecy meant then; knew they’d all been protecting me from it for years—all my life, really. I... I had to die.” His voice broke on the last word and Ginny choked back a sob of

her own.

“You lived again.”

“I came back,” Harry clarified. “After he hit me with the Killing Curse... I got to see my parents, Gin. They were... as real as you and I are right now. My Mum... she hugged me. And my Dad—he told me how... proud—” Harry’s voice broke and he tried to pull away a bit.

Ginny sat up on her elbow and tugged him back, pillowing his head on her chest and simply holding him while he cried. The impact of what he was saying... It was no wonder the ICW had declared it all classified. Harry had survived the Killing Curse twice. It was more than a miracle. And to get to see his parents...

It wasn’t the most comfortable position, having him lie on her, but Ginny didn’t care. She’d hold him until she could no longer breathe if she needed to.

Finally, his breathing stilled and he shifted to pull away. “Don’t say you’re sorry,” she warned when he took a deep breath. “You held me when I cried. You stayed when I was being a prat.”

Harry stared at her, one corner of his mouth twitching just a bit in amusement. Slowly, he reached up and brushed his hands along her hair.

“What did I ever do to deserve you?” he asked.

“How did he die?” Ginny asked, ignoring his question.

Harry looked as if he’d rather not answer, but Ginny was determined. They’d made it this far together, they were going to finish this.

“His own killing curse backfired on him,” Harry said simply. “I... Have you ever read *Beedle the Bard*?”

Ginny sat up, her hand held against his chest as she gaped at him. How had she missed the jump from Voldemort to a children’s story book? “Yeah,” she said, shaking her head in confusion. “It was one of Ron’s favorites.”

“The Tale of the Three Brothers?” Harry asked.

“Babbity Rabbity,” Ginny clarified. “But I remember The Three Brothers.”

“The Hallows, Gin... they’re real.” Harry stared up at her as she processed that thought.

“No,” she shook her head, her brow furrowing. “No—”

“Yes,” Harry said. “I had the Cloak; it was a family heirloom. Riddle used the Stone as one of his Horcruxes. And the Wand...”

“The Elder Wand?” Ginny asked, things starting to fall into place. “You’re the master of the Elder Wand?”

Harry sat up, bringing Ginny with him. “How do you know about the Elder Wand?”

“I always just thought he was a complete nutter,” she mumbled as things became clearer.

“Who?”

“Xenophilius Lovegood,” Ginny explained, a bit of a smirk on her face. “He’s the father of a friend of mine, Luna. He was forever going on about the Hallows being real. I... I just never, ever thought...”

Harry scrubbed his face harshly. “It was real.”

Ginny nodded and then eyed him speculatively. “How did you manage that?” she asked. “Who did you disarm that was the master? Because you know that it’s usually been a death—”

“I didn’t kill anyone,” he protested, a dark look settling on his face. “Not then, anyway.”

Ginny nodded, rising up to her knees and draping on his back. She wrapped her arms around him and held on while he stared off.

“When Albus came to get me, when I was being held...” Ginny nodded against him, confirming that she was listening. “He got caught off guard. Lucius Malfoy’s son—”

“Draco?” Ginny pulled back, shocked at the revelation that Draco had been involved. He’d always been a prat and a bully at school, but she had never considered the possibility that he was actually a Death Eater. He’d been removed from school in... Ginny’s fifth year. She shook her head as another piece fell into place.

“Yeah,” Harry nodded. “I have no idea why he was there... but he disarmed Albus. He... he was going to kill him, Gin. I could see that same hatred in his eyes that Lucius had. So, I disarmed him.” He shrugged simply and Ginny moved around to climb into his lap.

“I didn’t know anything about the Elder Wand until just before the Final Battle. Albus gave it to me then. He explained how it had come to be mine, but how he’d kept it so that when it was time...”

“That’s a lot to take in,” Ginny said, sighing against his chest. Harry nodded, one hand rubbing her thigh and the other supporting her back.

“I disarmed Riddle,” Harry said. “At the same time he cast the curse... I don’t even know how it all worked, but... the curse rebounded. And all his Horcruxes were gone. Sirius, Remus and I had hunted them all down.

“Bit of an anticlimactic ending, if you ask me,” Harry chuckled dryly. “Killed by a disarming curse.”

“It doesn’t matter *how* it happened, Harry. Just that it did,” Ginny shrugged. She felt extremely drained—both emotionally and physically exhausted. And Harry didn’t look much better.

Her eyes traced his features, finally settling on the lightning shaped scar on his forehead. So much pain brought about by one man hell-bent on his own agenda. Absently, she brought her fingers up and traced it. Harry flinched under her touch, but then relaxed as she moved to straddle his lap.

“And now you know everything.”

She nodded, still thinking about Tom and Harry and her; the intricate parts they'd all played in a mad scheme gone absolutely wrong from the very beginning. How they had survived, and were now even capable of finding love in a world such as this was nothing short of a miracle.

“Are you hungry?” Harry asked, his green eyes fixed on hers. Ginny shook her head slowly. She traced his jawline with her fingers and then traced his lips, making him shudder.

“What do you want?”

Ginny smiled softly and leaned forward, brushing her lips across his. He seemed to get the idea quickly as he slid his hands under her tank top, finding bare skin.

“I want to celebrate,” she said finally, when she'd decided on the right words to use.

Harry pulled back, confused. “What are we celebrating?”

Ginny shrugged one shoulder and leaned forward to kiss his collarbone, and then the pulse point on his neck. “That we're alive,” she said. “That you're here, and I'm here... and somehow in this fucked up world, we found each other.”

Harry's hands gripped her hips tightly and she grinned against his ear.

“We *should* celebrate, Harry. I beat that bastard. You beat that bastard. He's not coming back this time. And you and I...” She trailed off, her face heating as the thought of them having a future flooded her. She wanted it more than anything, but she also didn't want to scare him by admitting that she saw them married with kids.

“You and I, what?” Harry asked.

“And you and I...” she continued in a determined tone. “We have each other.”

Harry grinned, leaning forward to kiss her fiercely. “We do,” he agreed before falling back on the bed and bringing her with him. “We have each other.”

* * *

Hermione Weasley. She couldn't get enough of saying that, over and over in her head. One of these days she might actually believe it. She could smell the bacon Ron was frying right down the hall in their flat. That was another thing... their flat; even though Ron had been staying more and more often, now it was something else that they shared completely.

A honeymoon would have been nice, she knew. But some things were more important. Both she and Ron desperately wanted to be in a house before they started a family. And even though that might be years down the road, she knew it was never too early to plan. Besides, they had the trip to Greece that Harry had given them.

Hermione smiled widely to herself when she thought about how much they would enjoy the trip in a few months. That thought led to another: that she really needed to write a suitable thank you letter

to Harry for the gift. She'd get right on that later today. It was very important not to delay these types of things...

"Hermione," Ron called from the kitchen and Hermione groaned and rolled over. She knew she was being horribly lazy, but that's what days like these were for. They'd been married for one whole day now, starting on their second. She didn't want to get up yet and face the fact that in a few short days their holiday would be over and she'd be due back at the Ministry.

"Breakfast," Ron called again and Hermione smiled as she gathered herself out of bed and put on a silky dressing gown that her mother had bought her as a wedding gift. Ron had already expressed his appreciation of the matching lingerie last night.

"Morning, love," she cooed as she entered the kitchen to find Ron finishing the fry-up and wearing nothing but his pajama bottoms. He gave her a smile over his shoulder.

"You've had an owl," he said as the last egg slid from the pan. "I put it over there on the counter. Oh, and Mum wants us to come and pick up our gifts today. I think she'd like us to open them there." He sounded a bit irritated and Hermione smiled. "Charlie's leaving early in the morning and I'm not sure how long Bill's going to stay."

"That's fine, Ron. Honestly, I don't mind seeing your family." She quietly gathered the letter that had come and sat in her favorite chair.

He set a plate of food down in front of her and licked his finger after it had slid into the marmalade on her toast. "I know, but I was kind of hoping we'd have the whole week to ourselves."

"We have to come out some time, Ron," she observed. The tea he'd made was perfect and she sipped it carefully as she slit open the letter.

"If it's the Ministry, tell them to sod off," he growled around a mouthful of bacon. She scowled at his language, but chose not to nag him right now.

"It's from Colin," she said quietly as she read on. "The photographs are done..."

"Brilliant," Ron crowed. "He's a fast little—"

"But there's an issue with some of them," Hermoine continued over the top of her husband.

"What is it?" Ron asked. He must have seen her confused face because he laid down his fork and reached for the letter.

"I'm not sure. He says it's on some of the candid shots he took later in the evening. He was trying to get Harry and Ginny on the dance floor but there's an issue with the print."

"Surely he got them," Ron said with a wry smile. "They were out there enough. I thought Michael was going to do his nut. He and Dean were scowling like someone had hexed them."

Hermione glanced up to see him grinning with glee. Ron had never kept it a secret that he didn't approve of Ginny's choice in boyfriends in the past. And although he'd remained casual friends with

both men, there was still an underlying current of animosity.

“Well, it was rather public,” Hermione said. “Not that I had, or have, a problem with Harry and Ginny being together.”

“Are they together?” Ron asked with a raised eyebrow. “I mean, I know what it looked like, but...”

Hermione nodded her head. “They’re together. I didn’t get a lot of details—”

“Thank Merlin for that,” Ron groaned and started eating again.

“But she did say that he told her he loved her.” Ron thought about that for a minute while Hermione watched in amusement. It was always rather funny to her to see how the Weasley boys treated their sister. Some, Bill and the twins, were quick to give her freedom and accept her as an adult. While Percy still treated her a bit like she was still a young girl. Both Ron and Charlie seemed to vary.

Still, Hermione was curious to see what Ron’s opinion on Ginny and Harry as a couple was. She knew he was very taken with Harry as a friend and there was something there between the two men that Hermione thought might turn into a deep friendship if they allowed it.

“And what did she tell him back?” Ron finally asked, and Hermione had to think back to remember what they’d been talking about.

“Well, she’s had feelings for him starting when they first moved in together.” Ron grunted noncommittally and Hermione continued. “I asked her the night of my hen party and she admitted that she fancied him. But I think it goes even deeper than that.”

Ron looked up and studied her for a minute before nodding once. “Maybe we can stop by Colin’s on the way to the Burrow. Have a look at his photo and see if you can do something to help him.”

Hermione knew that this sudden change of subject was a round-about way for Ron to say he was satisfied with the situation. If he’d had anything more to say, he would have said it.

* * *

The couple exited the floo into Creevey Photography and Ron called out, as there was no one in the front office.

“Wotcher, Ron. Hermione,” Dennis Creevey entered from the back room, covered in a fine black powder that only allowed white rings around his eyes. Ron laughed and Hermione elbowed him.

“Dennis!” she cried. “Are you alright?”

Dennis stopped dead for a minute, seemingly taking stock of all his body parts before grinning to reveal bright white teeth. “Never better. I’ll bet you’re here to pick up your photographs.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him but then shrugged and nodded. Apparently, they weren’t going to get any kind of explanation. She supposed it really shouldn’t surprise them much, having been around Fred and George as much as they had. And, the Creevey brothers had taken a particular

liking to the Weasley Twins even so far as to follow a bit in their footsteps at Hogwarts.

"We are," Hermione added helpfully. "Although Colin said there might be a problem with one of the prints."

Dennis nodded knowingly; distributing a fine layer of black particles around him that caused him to look a bit like a rain cloud was following him wherever he moved. "Yeah, it's the strangest thing. It's on several actually. The majority of the photograph is fine, in focus and all. But then there's some sort of haziness around one particular person, or group of people. Colin's been racking his brain trying to figure out what he did wrong. We even took the camera apart to see if there was a problem."

"Interesting," Hermione commented and glanced to where Ron was examining the various photographs on the wall. He seemed determined to stay as far away from Dennis as possible. For a moment she wondered why, and then saw his shoulders shaking a bit in laughter. Maybe it was a better idea for him to stay over there.

"He made me go to the library and check out every book on magical photography that I could find. We even flooded a few of the authors to see if they could help us. Come on back and I'll show you what I mean."

Hermione nodded primly and glared at Ron as he followed. Ron only shrugged his shoulders in innocence and moved to enter the back room.

"Ah, there are the newlyweds," Colin crowed from the desk where he sat glancing through a stack of photographs. "Well, tell me what you think." He quickly bounced to the long counter and waved his hand over the various prints that lay on it.

Hermione gasped when she saw herself looking back. The photographs were beautiful; more than she'd ever imagined. Everything from their wedding was captured there perfectly.

"These are... just..." Ron seemed as speechless as Hermione felt. They spent a few long minutes staring at themselves in various poses.

"Here's what I was talking about with the letter," Colin said as he lifted a print and handed it over to Hermione. "You see here how everything is in focus except the two people in the middle," she nodded and he continued, "I've tried everything I can think of to get this mess out of the way. You can't even see who these people are; even though I know it's Ginny and that bloke... Harry something, right?"

"I see," Hermione agreed as she brushed her fingers over the couple. Sure enough, it was the lavender dress that Ginny wore. And the couple continued to dance and hold each other close. "Is this when they kissed?" she asked.

"Just before," Colin said. "I turned around and saw them and thought it would make a great picture. I didn't even know Ginny was seeing anyone again."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "This looks like some kind of obstruction charm," she mused. "Do you have any others like this one?"

"Yeah," he said and slid another few toward her. One had a large group of people and the blur was on one side. The same lavender dress was at the bottom of it.

"I'm seeing a pattern," she said as she continued to flip through. However, there were several photographs of Ginny that were fine. Hermione flipped through until she found a group shot of all the young men around the table where they'd been drinking. Sure enough, a hazy blur covered the spot where Harry should have been sitting.

She raised her eyes slightly and found Colin staring at her. Ron and Dennis had moved off to the side and were admiring some of the other shots.

"I spoke to another friend of mine," Colin said softly. "He takes photos for the Daily Prophet. I didn't name names or anything, but he said that he's only heard of that charm being used on one person; and that person places it on himself." He raised his eyebrow at her and Hermione thought he knew exactly who he was talking about.

Hermione's eyes widened as realization settled on her. "That little..." she grumbled, guessing at what Ginny had done to her. She must have, Hermione decided. A memory charm. More than a bit annoyed, Hermione sighed. "Colin, I need you to promise you won't say anything to anyone. I need to speak to Ginny and see what she wants to do."

"I understand, Hermione. You can count on me." He glanced over to an oblivious Ron and Dennis who were laughing about something in one of the photos. "Still, it's a bit exciting, isn't it? I mean, who would have ever thought Ginny would end up with Harry Potter."

Hermione smiled slightly and glanced over to her husband as well. While she was angry that Ginny had deceived her and taken that memory from her, if only for a bit of time, in a way, she understood what had prompted Ginny to do so. Hermione would never have told anyone Harry's secrets, she knew, but that didn't mean she would have been able to act the same around him, knowing what she knew. Obviously, Ginny's intent had only been to delay Hermione's natural curiosity. The memory charm wasn't nearly strong enough if Hermione had broken through it on her own.

"Remember, not a word, Colin," she cautioned. "It might possibly be a coincidence. Harry Parker works for the government and maybe it's some sort of charm they use to keep their photos out of the press." She'd tried her best, but the skeptical look that Colin wore made her sigh. "Just promise me you won't print any more of these and you'll forget about it for a bit."

Colin nodded and glanced at Dennis. "What do I tell him?"

"He doesn't know?"

Colin smirked. "I love him and all, but Dennis isn't the most discreet person in the world. I told him I thought maybe something was wrong with the camera."

"Well, as long as you don't think it will cause a problem, I'd say stick to that story. Say it was something I was able to fix from something I'd read one time. Or you could tell him it's because Harry works for the government."

“He’ll buy that,” Colin said thoughtfully. “Alright. I would like to know what Ginny says... if you don’t mind.”

Hermione smiled tightly and began gathering the prints. “We’ll see. Thank you so much for all your hard work on these Colin. I promise to get them framed and on my wall right away.” Her voice raised a bit in volume as she tried to get Ron’s attention.

Ron took the hint and helped her to organize the photos, bid the brothers goodbye, and followed his wife out the door.

“Well?” he asked as they made it to the street.

Hermione glanced around and wrapped her arm tighter around the book of photographs. “We need to talk to Ginny. Right now!”

* * *

Ginny couldn’t believe the almost... smitten feelings she was having for Harry. She hadn’t felt this way ever. Even when Michael had first asked her out, her heart hadn’t raced like this and she didn’t break out in face-shattering grins and giggles (giggles!) every time she’d thought of him.

However, one full day together, the majority of it spent in bed, and she was reduced to a silly-little school girl. Harry didn’t seem to mind, or maybe even notice, as he too wore a wide grin and was more playful than she’d ever seen him.

After the things they had shared on their first full day together, Ginny felt like they’d both pushed everything—all the darkness in their lives—to the back of their minds. It wasn’t that they were ignoring it, really. But more that they’d gotten it into the open and they would deal with it as the issues arose, rather than rehashing it constantly.

They laid in bed together, in between various activities of course, and talked about everything under the sun. They’d even eaten there in the warmth of the blankets as Harry had brought trays of toast and tea in to them. Both of them decided that the threat of crumbs on the sheets wasn’t that much of a deterrent to spending more time together.

And it had been wonderful for their relationship. Ginny supposed she should be a bit wary of how fast they were moving. But as Harry pointed out only yesterday afternoon, they’d essentially been dating for the past four months, on a rather intense, albeit strange, schedule. Ginny swore when he mentioned it, remembering Fred and George’s insisting that she and Harry *were* dating. When she told Harry about it, he only chuckled and said that Sirius had pointed out the same thing to him.

Living with another person made you very aware of their tastes, habits and quirks. Plus, they’d spent every chance they could together as best friends. So it really didn’t feel as if they were rushing at all. In fact, there seemed to be a driving force in both of them to be as close as possible at all times.

That was a major factor in why they were so late in getting to the Burrow today. They’d meant to pick up Harry’s car yesterday, but they’d started their ‘talk’ and after that, one thing had led to another, and it kept happening, and it was so wonderful, and...

Maybe a small part inside of her was a little reluctant to share what had developed between them with anyone else. It wasn't that she was afraid of Harry pulling away; he'd dissolved that notion rather quickly and seemed to be rather attached to her. It was more that now she knew Harry's secrets, and she felt an almost obsessive compulsion to protect him.

She knew it was silly, a man like Harry Potter didn't need protection; at least not the physical kind anyway.

"They're not going to be upset, are they?" Harry asked as he pulled a fresh t-shirt over his head.

Ginny smirked at him. "No," she said. "In fact, if the car's still in one piece, and free from charms, I'll be surprised. We once owned this rusty old Ford Anglia..." Ginny trailed off into fond memories of the car. "Dad messed around with it a bit, and it could fit us all and even fly."

"What happened to it?" Harry asked as he sat on the edge of the bed to pull his socks on. She could feel his eyes on her as she dressed and took just a bit longer to pull her jeans on.

"Mum caught Fred and George coming back from some wild adventure with it, and forced Dad to get rid of it. Last I heard though," she grinned over her shoulder, "it was running loose in the Forbidden Forest on the outskirts of Hogwarts." Harry still hadn't pulled his socks on, so Ginny sighed and decided to let him concentrate. He still didn't move and she sat next to him, brushing the hair off of his forehead and glancing at the scar still visible there.

"What's wrong, love?"

Harry smiled sheepishly and pulled on a sock. "I'm just being stupid."

"You're nervous?"

He nodded. "I feel a bit like I'm meeting them all over for the first time again."

"That's understandable," Ginny said. "But we decided that you didn't have to tell anyone that you didn't want to, right?"

He nodded and finished putting his socks and shoes on. "I guess so. I still think it would be best to tell them all, but I'm not sure if I can. Obviously, we can't tell them everything..."

Ginny nodded her understanding and agreement. "We'll do it together then. And it doesn't have to be today. We can wait until you feel more comfortable or... whenever." She smiled and leaned over to give him a quick kiss. "Come on, no putting this off any longer. Are you going to wear your glamour charms?"

"I'd better," he said with a wry smile. "Don't want anyone fainting."

Ginny shook her head with a sad smile. Harry had agreed with her rule. But she hated to see him change how he really was. She understood it, yes; but accepting that it was the only way was harder.

That was one thing she'd have to work hard on; she loved Harry no matter what he looked like and

seeing his scars wouldn't change that. She supposed years of guarding himself against others had built that need to hide into him.

Together, they Apparated to the clearing at the Burrow. They held hands the whole way to the house and once they reached the porch, Harry pulled her close to him, as if unable to handle being separated for any longer. They kissed a few times before Ginny pulled back and led him in the back door.

"Hello, all," she said pleasantly.

* * *

The Burrow was still crowded when Ron and Hermione arrived. Bill and Charlie hadn't disappeared, surprisingly. The twins were visiting, or 'nicking lunch' as they called it. Arthur had taken the rest of the week off from work. Even Percy showed up just after Ron and Hermione.

"Where are Harry and Ginny?" Ron asked the room abroad.

"We haven't seen them since the wedding," Fred offered with a waggle of his eyebrows.

"But, Harry's car—"

"They left it here," George added. "You'd think they had more important things on their minds that night."

"Indeed, my handsome brother," Fred grinned.

Hermione rolled her eyes at the twins and turned to see various people's reactions to the concept of Harry and Ginny together. Seeing them kiss at the wedding was one thing, but Hermione wondered what the reaction would be when real life settled in and the two were still together.

Charlie wore a rather large smile. Arthur and Molly both seemed pleased, yet wore that parental mask of slight concern. Bill's face was rather unreadable, leading Hermione to think there might be more worry than acceptance.

"I'm sure they'll be along soon," Molly insisted. "I sent an owl earlier this morning inviting them to lunch."

"Hello, all."

Hermione turned as Ginny and Harry came in through the back door of the kitchen. They seemed extremely happy, she thought, judging by the smiles and the relaxed aura that seemed to surround them, although Harry's eyes darted about, possibly cataloguing the exits. Now that Hermione had some perspective on who the man was, some of his habits and quirks made so much more sense. The fact that he never sat with his back to a door, window, or fireplace, or that he seemed hyper-aware of where people were in the room. Crowds made him nervous. Everything added up to Hermione; like pieces of a puzzle falling into place.

"About time," Fred growled with a smile. "We were wondering if you two had eloped on us."

"Shove off, Forge," Ginny quipped back. Harry blushed spectacularly, but Ginny pulled him closer to her side. "Sorry we're late. Although it looks as if the newlyweds just arrived anyway." She raised an eyebrow at Hermione who just smiled back. Despite the fact that she was livid that Ginny hadn't trusted her, and had actually performed a memory charm on her, Hermione *could* actually understand it. They'd have to have a talk later.

"We dropped by Colin's to pick up the photographs," Hermione explained. Molly burst into raptures, and several of the men groaned as she pushed their plates away to clear a space. She patted the table enthusiastically and Hermione moved to lay out the photos with a small smile. Of course, she had removed the ones with the blurred images. She'd question Ginny a bit later when they could be alone.

"That's our cue, blokes," Charlie said as he stood. "Come on Harry, we've all survived enough of this wedding business." He gestured for the others to follow, which they did quickly, lest they be pulled in to the girlish frenzy they most likely associated with weddings.

"Cowards," Ginny growled. She winked at Harry, who gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and pulled out a chair at the table for her to sit. Several of her brothers coughed something that sounded similar to 'whipped', but Harry just grinned and began to follow them out.

Hermione watched the exchange with no little amusement. It seemed that Ginny's assessment that Harry was 'arse-over-elbow' in love with her was spot on. She'd never seen the man act this way in the few months that they'd known him. And, if he truly was who she suspected him to be, it was nothing short of a miracle. Harry Potter was rumored to be a very private and closed individual who had lived a very solitary, structured existence.

"Alright, spill," Angelina said as soon as the door dividing the kitchen and living areas had stopped swinging. Everyone spun to face Ginny and she reddened a bit. Hermione had to hold in a laugh as Ginny surveyed each face almost frantically, seemingly looking for an escape.

"There's not much to tell," she tried and the women protested. Even Molly seemed to be interested in the details. She'd conjured a tea tray and had begun serving the others.

"Bollocks," Angelina continued. She winced a bit as she looked at Molly who only smiled indulgently. No doubt the woman was excused because she spent so much time around Fred. "For months the both of you have been saying there's nothing to tell and then you two snog for all the world to see, disappear for days, and there's still nothing to tell?"

"Yeah," Alicia put in with a sly smile, "we all know better than that, Ginny."

"It would be lovely to hear how you and Harry got together, dear."

"Well," Ginny began as she sipped her tea, "I think you all saw how we got together."

"Yes," Hermione said, feeling completely justified in torturing her friend after what Ginny had done to her. "But it's the details we want. There had to be something before the wedding."

Ginny glared at her best friend, but a rather bright smile peeked out eventually. "As I told Hermione a few days ago, I've had feelings for Harry for a few months. I think they actually started

when we moved in together, although Harry is very hard to read, and I was never really sure where he stood.”

“Before he left this last time, we... well, I guess you could say we shared a bit of a moment. But then he had to leave and I wasn’t sure where we left off.”

“And then he came to the wedding,” Molly added dreamily.

Ginny nodded, wearing her own expression of satisfaction. “I’d asked him to, but he said he wasn’t sure if he could make it back in time. I really didn’t know what to expect.” All the women nodded and Ginny continued. “And then he was there, looking so... amazing in that suit.”

“He did look very nice,” Hermione agreed. “That suit must have been very expensive. It looked to be tailor made.”

“It was,” Ginny added absently. “And then when we were dancing he told me that he’d missed me, and it was too hard to be away anymore. At first I was confused. I wasn’t sure what he was trying to tell me. But then he said that he’d been confused by the feelings that he’d been having toward me and he went home, to his Godfather, and they talked and then he... well, he just knew.”

“Knew?” Angelina asked.

“That he was in love with me,” Ginny said simply as she looked down into her teacup. All the women sighed, and then burst into giggles at the cliché.

“It sounds wonderful,” Molly sighed. “But I do hope you’re being... careful, dear.”

“Relax, Mum,” Ginny said. “I’m not about to go getting myself pregnant. Harry and I agree on that much.”

“You’ve talked about it then?” Hermione asked, genuinely curious. She was surprised when Ginny blushed redder.

“We’ve talked about a lot.” She shrugged and turned back to her tea, obviously finished talking about the new relationship.

Hermione sat back to think about it, watching as Ginny talked and laughed with her family. For the past few years, Ginny had always been *there* when her family was around, but Hermione knew she hated to be the center of attention. In fact, she avoided it by telling them hardly anything about her life, and ducking out of rooms if necessary.

But this Ginny seemed... more confident, if nothing else. Definitely she was more relaxed than Hermione remembered ever seeing her. The last years at school, Ginny had carried the weight of being touched by darkness. She tried hard to hide it under a mask of fooling around with boys, and proving she was related to Fred and George. But Hermione had seen it, on occasion, breaking through, leaving Ginny looking small and vulnerable before she was able to make another joke and recover her façade.

This was the old Ginny back—the pre-diary Ginny—that should have always been here. And to

Hermione, it didn't matter anymore that it might be Harry Potter in the next room, she felt an overwhelming gratitude to him, whoever he was, because he'd eased Ginny's burden and allowed her to shine.

"What's the best thing about Harry?" she blurted out, interrupting the conversation that she hadn't been paying attention to.

Ginny looked stunned for a minute before becoming thoughtful. "He makes it easier to be me," she answered simply.

"That's good," Hermione said. The two friends looked at each other and more was passed than words could say. Hermione nodded once more, satisfied fully with that answer. "That's all I need to know." Strangely, she meant it.

* * *

Harry joined the Weasley men a bit reluctantly. He'd always felt quite welcome in their home and around the brothers, but his situation was entirely different now.

"Come on in, Harry. No need to be afraid, we promise not to bite," Arthur teased and he felt himself relax.

Ignorance seemed to be the attitude that prevailed for the next few minutes as the men mingled and talked about anything but women and relationships. Harry was in the middle of a conversation with Ron and George about the latest Quidditch standings when Charlie approached and held out his hand.

"I don't think we've been introduced," he said and Harry turned to face the man. "Charlie Weasley."

"Harry Parker," Harry said, although it was with trepidation. He really hated lying to people. Charlie locked eyes with him for a minute and Harry winced internally. He could have sworn the man could see through his charms, and it made a shiver run down his spine. Harry shook it off and tried his best to smile. "Nice to meet you."

"And you've not met the oldest either. Bill Weasley," Charlie said with an easy smile. He pointed over his shoulder to where Bill sat near the chess board. The man turned and Harry froze.

Flashbacks of Harry's time as a soldier, and the various battles he'd been through, were not uncommon. He'd had nightmares for years and even consented to Remus' suggestion of therapy just after the Final Battle, not that it had helped.

However, there were some scenes that sprung up undaunted and unwelcome at the worst times. Now was one of them. His heart rate skyrocketed and his breathing got shallow. He could feel sweat beads break out on his neck and down his back.

The man before him was half in shadows cast by the mid-day sun streaming through the windows. His face showed echoes of a vicious attack; pale pink scars ran across his face at angles.

Darkness swirled in Harry's vision, and flashes of a blood soaked man lying on the ground swam in front of him. He desperately glanced at Charlie to clear his vision and was met with a look that he'd seen once before, only until this exact moment he'd not remembered more than the barest details. The truth came crashing down heavily upon him now as his past pressed in on him. He'd seen these two men only once before.

Bill's gaze never veered and the severe look he wore didn't falter. Harry knew that he knew exactly who he was looking at. Somehow his glamours had failed. The two men stared at each other for what felt like hours before Bill nodded once and then looked away.

Harry was startled when a hand clasped on his shoulder and he spun immediately into a defensive position, a habit learned long ago.

"Steady there, Harry," Arthur said with a hesitant smile. "I was wondering if you'd give me a minute of your time." But Arthur wasn't staring at him the same way Bill had. He wasn't wearing a concerned, angry face because Harry had deceived them. Perhaps Harry's glamours hadn't failed after all, and Bill and Charlie—they must be able to see through them somehow. Remus had an uncanny ability to do the same thing.

Taking a deep breath to clear away visions of carnage, Harry nodded. "Sure, Mr. Weasley." He glanced once more at Bill and found himself being studied again. Arthur motioned toward the front doorway and Harry followed, ignoring the waggling eyebrows of the twins.

"Nothing to be worried about, Harry," Arthur assured him as he stepped outside and they began walking. "I like you, Harry."

Harry relaxed a bit and stuffed his hands in his jeans pockets with a forced chuckle. "I like you too, Mr. Weasley."

Arthur nodded. "I like the way you treat my daughter. You respect her; at least I hope you do."

Harry nodded firmly, and Arthur smiled. "Women are glorious things, Harry. And Weasley women are something else. There's a fire there that I'm sure you've seen."

"It's one of the first things that attracted me to Ginny, sir," Harry said truthfully. "I've never met anyone like her before." They continued on for a few steps while Harry gathered his courage. "I'm in love with her, sir."

Arthur seemed to ponder this for a moment before nodding. "I think I knew that, Harry. I think I could see a bit of that the first time I met you."

Harry chuckled a bit. "Wish someone would have clued me in to it," he said dryly.

"We men are always a bit thick when it comes to the witches we love, aren't we?"

Harry only nodded as they continued to walk. They'd reached the back clearing where Ginny had told him the family Quidditch matches always took place. Arthur gestured to a bench near the trees.

“I want you to know that Molly and I approve of this relationship between you and Ginny, Harry. We both feel that we can trust you.”

Harry felt a bit of a lump working in his throat and swallowed it down harshly. “That means a lot to me, sir.” They’d arrived at the bench and sat down facing the open space.

“I do have a few concerns, though. Nothing too big,” Arthur protested when Harry’s face dropped. “I guess they’re not completely concerns, more of just favours, you could say.”

Harry nodded and waited for the man to continue.

“Ginny is a very impetuous young woman, Harry. And while I don’t doubt the sincerity or depth of her feelings for you, I ask you to consider that she’s only just twenty years old. You yourself are only twenty-one, correct?”

“Yes, sir.” Actually, his twenty-second birthday was in coming up, but Harry felt that now wasn’t the time to bring that up.

“I guess what I’m trying to say, Harry, is that I would hope you and Ginny would take the time to build a strong relationship. Feelings, especially right at first, can tend to be overwhelming and the temptation to rush into things can be great.”

Harry fought the strange urge to laugh at this. This father/suitor talk had never happened to him before, and he was entirely grateful. He struggled to keep his features serious as the man continued.

“Now, I’m not completely thick, Harry. I know my daughter, and my sons for that matter, are not completely innocent. I can only pray that the choices they’ve made, in the people they’ve chosen to share themselves with, have been made with careful deliberation.”

“Sir,” Harry felt compelled to interrupt a bit here. “I can promise you that this is not a casual relationship for either Ginny or me. I know we’ve known each other for less than six months, but I believe that what we have is based on something extremely deep. I’ve never felt anything like what I feel for your daughter with anyone else, sir. We... we’re more alike than not.”

“I appreciate that, Harry.” Arthur stared off into the distance and then hunched forward a bit, his elbows resting on his knees. “Has Ginny told you about the diary?”

Harry nodded slowly, feeling the shift in the conversation. “She has.”

“After that,” Arthur said, his voice breaking just a bit, “she wasn’t really the same Ginny. She was... a bit broken for a time. It was a lot to deal with. Her relationships with her family, and Percy in particular, have suffered. She thinks we treat her like a child at times. And maybe we do, but she also doesn’t share much with us.”

“It’s hard,” Harry said, looking out into the trees, “to know *what* to share. Because you’re scared that someday, someone is going to look inside you and see that the darkness is still there, and that they can’t love you anymore.”

Arthur looked at him, his brow furrowed. "I..."

"I've had a bit of experience in this," Harry shrugged, trying to play down the moment.

"And how do they get past that?" Arthur asked softly. "How do they make you understand that they could never stop loving you?"

Harry looked at the man, seeing just how much his daughter's trials had affected him.

"They have to prove it," he said softly. "Every day they have to tell you that they don't judge you because of it. And they have to lift you up when you fall, dust you off, and set you back on the path you've chosen. Because it can't be what they choose for you, it has to be where you've chosen to go in life."

Arthur nodded slowly. "We can do that for her."

"Good," Harry answered honestly.

"Is that what Ginny does for you?" Arthur asked, his blue eyes clear and shiny.

Harry thought about that for a minute. "What I was living before, it was kind of a... pre-life. Who I was... it wasn't really me. I... I didn't have anyone to put me back on the path, and I kind of... rambled from one crisis to the next."

"And now you do."

"Ginny does that for me," he nodded. "She... she doesn't give up on me, even when I've given up on myself. I guess... I guess she just makes me want to be a better person, to be the person that I'm supposed to be."

"It sounds like you do that for each other."

Harry took a deep breath, feeling the need to be completely open and honest with this man. "Sir, one day I *will* ask your daughter to marry me. And... to be honest, I don't think it'll be too far in the future."

Arthur seemed to search his face for a moment before nodding. "I think I'll look forward to that day, Harry." The two men sat, slightly more settled in their understanding, and watched the birds soar around the clearing.

"Sir, I have a question."

"Yes, Harry?"

"Can I expect this little talk six more times?" Harry asked, half teasing and half completely serious.

Arthur laughed a bit and then faced him. "I'm sure the twins will combine theirs."

"Oh," Harry nodded and tilted his head in resignation. "Perfect."

Chapter 14: Truth And Consequences

Ginny moved off further into the kitchen as the wedding photos were finally revealed and the women began to 'oooh' and 'aaah' over them.

"Here's one I wanted to show you," Hermione said as she came up beside Ginny at the counter. Her voice was low and Ginny was instantly curious as to what she didn't want the others to see.

The photograph she handed Ginny was blurred in the center but Ginny gasped as she realized it was herself and Harry dancing, and probably kissing, in the center. Her eyes rose to Hermione's knowing ones slowly.

"Colin owled me earlier today and asked about a spell that would do this."

Ginny cleared her throat and looked back down at the photo. "And what did you tell him?"

"That I wasn't sure of a spell that would do that. As it turns out, he had his own suspicions. It seems that this is a charm that is rather popular with a certain celebrity. And then I remembered..."

Ginny cursed in a whispered voice and rubbed her forehead while glancing at the others in the room. She needn't have worried though; they were completely occupied with the wedding album. Finally, she sighed. This was not her secret to tell, it was Harry's and she'd respect his need to divulge it in his own time.

"You understand why I had to do it?" she asked, almost afraid to see her friend's face.

"I *understand* completely," Hermione said, annoyance tingeing her voice. "But you didn't have to do it like you did, Ginny. I wouldn't have said anything—"

"No," Ginny protested in a whisper, "but you would have acted different around him. It would have been too much of a temptation for you, Hermione. You would have been studying his every move and analyzing it."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but then froze. "It didn't work anyway," she grumbled. "Your charm broke this morning. I remember it all—the books, what we read, everything."

"Intent is everything in magic," Ginny shrugged, rubbing her forehead. "I guess I felt bad about doing it."

"Or maybe, since that was the first time you'd cast it..." Hermoine trailed off, seeing Ginny's obviously guilty expression. "Have you Obliviated me in the past?" she hissed.

Ginny shushed her and dragged her further away, where her mother couldn't perk up at the hushed conversation. They were already drawing the woman's narrowed eyes. "It wasn't you, okay? It was Ron. He... he walked in on me and Michael once." Ginny sighed and rubbed her forehead. "He wouldn't want to remember that anyway, trust me."

Hermione was still scowling, so Ginny held up the photograph. "I can have Harry fix this for you,"

she offered and turned the photo back to Hermione. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind a copy of it as well."

Hermione searched her face and Ginny darted her eyes back over to the others, hoping she would take the hint and be quiet.

"Then you know, for sure—"

"Hermione," Ginny protested and massaged her temple where a headache was beginning to form. "Just give him some time, alright?"

Hermione breathed out roughly and Ginny knew she understood. Harry would reveal his secrets, or some of them at least, in his own time.

"I hope you understand what you're getting into, Ginny," she cautioned, and Ginny smiled.

"I understand more than you think," Ginny assured her. Feeling the need to see Harry and to feel his arms wrapped around her again, Ginny left the kitchen and moved into the living room. She was immediately wary when only Bill and Charlie remained, hunched over the ancient chess board.

"Where's Harry?" she said, not caring that her tone was very accusatory. "If you let the twins have him I'll—"

"Calm down, snapdragon," Charlie chuckled. "Gred and Forge are upstairs probably torturing Ron and Percy by now. Dad took Harry out back."

Ginny paused at the thought, and wasn't sure whether or not to be worried for her boyfriend. Most people underestimated Arthur Weasley and he could be fiercely loyal when protecting his family. But Harry could definitely hold his own, she knew. She settled on feeling mildly annoyed that when she needed him, Harry was unavailable. It wasn't completely fair, but Hermione's pounce in the kitchen set her on edge.

"Come sit down, Ginny," Bill said and Ginny raised an eyebrow at his rather commanding tone. She and Bill had always got along well, and he'd mostly stayed out of her life as far as the major decisions she'd made.

"I'm not sure if I want to," she said back finally as she narrowed her eyes.

Charlie, ever the peacemaker, stood abruptly and offered his chair. "Here, Ginny, take my place. I'm getting trounced as it is." He moved off to the worn sofa, but not so far that he couldn't hear what would take place in the conversation. Ginny reluctantly settled into his place and eyed the pieces still left on the board. Maybe it was better to get this over with before Harry got back.

"So," Bill began, "you and Harry."

Ginny cleared her throat and made the first move. "Yes, me and Harry." She raised an eyebrow in challenge and Bill nodded, understanding that she wouldn't be easily swayed on the subject. This was just how things worked between the two siblings. A gesture or a single word often held more meaning than an entire conversation.

“Go ahead and tell me your opinion,” Ginny drawled as she watched him move his bishop into position, “because I know it’s about to burst out of you.”

Charlie snickered in the background but neither of them took notice.

“Do you really know him?” Bill finally asked and winced as Ginny viciously prodded her queen forward and decimated an entire strategy.

“Do you?” she countered back.

“I know more than you think I do.”

Ginny raised her eyes to his and held his gaze for a moment. She felt a shiver as his face took on that stony look that he only wore when speaking about a few subjects.

“I never told you how I got these,” he pointed toward his face.

“Mum and Dad told us you’d been attacked during the Final Battle,” she shrugged. She knew it wasn’t a matter to take lightly, but the family had always refused to speak of it in more than generic terms.

Bill snorted. “They don’t even know the half of it.”

Ginny looked to Charlie for confirmation and found a strange and distant expression on his face.

“It was a man—”

“A monster,” Charlie growled, and Bill nodded.

“Fenrir Greyback.”

Ginny sucked in a breath at the name. She’d heard the stories, but knew that they were much tamer and censored than what must have really happened.

“He was well on his way to killing me,” Bill said quietly and prompted his rook forward.

“Too right,” Charlie said and rubbed his chest where he still bore razor thin scars. Ginny had seen them once when he’d come out of the shower and she’d accidentally walked in.

“And?” Ginny prompted.

“Someone saved me.”

“Saved us both, more like,” Charlie added. Bill eyed his brother, and then continued. Ginny sat back in her chair, not liking where this story was going.

“I didn’t recognize him at first,” Bill said with a wry smile. “He’s grown up a lot, filled out much more than he was back then. Charlie had to point it out to me. There’s something different with his face too—and the eyes.” Ginny swallowed thickly, glancing over to the doorway, hoping that Harry would come in and they could just leave. It was a mistake to come here so soon. “He’s wearing

glamours,” Bill said softly. “Charlie and I can see right through them. Even though it took me some time to figure it out.”

“You were a bit occupied at that time to really see him,” Charlie said and Bill nodded his acceptance.

“Agreed. It also didn’t help that he was covered in grime and blood when we first saw him. And plastered to your face the second time.”

Ginny grimaced, and her mind flashed back to the many scars that Harry bore all over his body. Perhaps some of them had happened then as well. Her chest felt tight as she listened to the barrage from her brothers. How should she do this? They weren’t going to accept anything less than the truth.

Bill cleared his throat and sat back in his chair, the chess game completely forgotten now. “I just want you to know what you’re getting into, Ginny. A relationship with this man is bound to be more complicated than you can ever imagine.”

Ginny looked down at her hands and then up again into her oldest brother’s eyes. “You think I’m a coward?”

“That’s not what he said,” Charlie protested. He sat back again when Ginny shot him a scathing look.

“I’m stronger than you think,” she said.

“I have no doubt of that.”

“And I don’t run when things get tough. I’m in love with him, Bill. That’s not going to change because some people think they know who he is.”

“Ginny,” Bill started but she cut him off.

“I *know* who he is, Bill, and it’s not who you think he is.” The slow burning fire that had started when Hermione had cornered her flared out of control now. “Sure, he might have been that person once upon a time, but right now he’s Harry. And Harry is more than a collection of scars. He’s more than the nightmare he was forced to face.”

“Ginny,” Charlie shook his head. “What he’s been through... that changes a man—”

“I know,” she cut over the top of him, nodding.

“I don’t think you do,” Bill said and sat back again as she stood.

“I do,” she affirmed in a steady voice. “I’ve seen those scars, touched every last one of them. And I’ve heard him tell me where they came from. Even you don’t know the half of it, Bill.”

Bill’s face turned red as he too stood, leaning on the table that held the chess board and towering over his sister. “He cut the man’s head clean off his body, Ginevra.”

“Good!” she shouted back. “Then the monster was gone forever.”

“Gin.” She turned her head as Harry placed his hands on her shoulders gently and stared at her brother. Bill backed up and ran his hand through his long hair in frustration.

Ginny’s heart raced, trying to explain this to him. How much had he heard? What would he think of her family now? “Harry, I—”

“It’s alright, sweetheart,” he answered softly. He glanced at her, a gentle, and slightly resigned expression on his face. It instantly changed, however when he looked back at Bill.

The man swore quietly and then met Harry’s eye. “I don’t...” he sighed. “I never said thank you.”

“You didn’t have to,” Harry said. His voice was tight, and Ginny simply wanted to wrap her arms around him and go back two hours. She could change her mind about coming then, and write her mother a note saying they weren’t leaving their flat. Ever. “I understood.”

If it would protect Harry...

Bill continued, his eyes not really meeting Harry’s, or Ginny’s. “Yeah, but I don’t want you to think I was ungrateful.”

“Believe me, I understand,” Harry continued. His grip on her shoulders was tight, but Ginny bit her lip instead of betraying that to him. She understood that he was trying to stay in control. “Possibly more than anyone else. It was... personal with Greyback,” he said softly. He glanced down at Ginny again and she understood. Greyback had hurt Harry before.

The two men stood staring at each other, and Ginny had to suck in a breath as a swell of magic filled the air. Not sure who started the battle of wills first, Ginny just withstood it, trying to decipher the ebbs and flows of it.

She’d always known that Bill was a strong wizard, his many accomplishments pointed to that. And the Weasley’s were known as being rather powerful magicians. However, the power radiating off of Harry made her weak in the knees. Maybe it was because she was so close to him, touching him actually; but it felt like a wave in the ocean, swelling and building, feeding upon itself until it crested over her in one humongous crash.

At the same time, she knew he would never harm her. His hands were soft and comfortable on her shoulders, and she could feel his solid presence against her back. Somewhere in the room she heard the shocked gasps of both Charlie and her father, but they didn’t matter. The magic now surrounding her was intoxicating. Arousing, even.

Finally, Bill seemed to be spent and sunk down into his chair, breaking the contest of wills. The magic hung in the air for a minute before receding and Ginny nestled back into Harry’s chest as he kissed her temple and squeezed her shoulders a bit.

“I think it’s time,” he said softly.

“I’ll gather everyone,” she whispered and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Ron Weasley wasn't quite as thick as most people thought he was. He knew there was more to Harry Parker than the man let on. Had known it from the moment he'd first spoken to the man. There was something about the way Harry carried himself, the quiet strength he projected, that drew people in, even when Harry himself showed his discomfort with that fact.

He'd heard most of what Hermione and Colin had been talking about, even if he hadn't figured out exactly what it meant. He had a feeling that Dennis had distracted him at precisely the wrong moment.

But now Ginny was asking everyone to come into the living room, and there was something strange going on between them and Bill and Charlie. The two older men seemed almost wary of the couple.

"Maybe they really did elope," George teased.

"And they're just now getting around to tell us," Fred finished. Both of their girlfriends hushed them.

Ron smirked as the twins continued, ignoring the shocked gasps of their significant others.

"Ten galleons she's pregnant."

George thought about that. "Thirty," he whispered back. "I already lost twenty to you earlier on a dumb bet. I need to make my money back."

"Deal." Fred held out his hand and George shook it. Ron shook his head. How those two could bet on everything was a mystery to him. He'd once witnessed a bet where George had won two galleons because Fred had woken up on his right side, rather than on his left. It didn't make any sense to Ron; but then again, maybe it wasn't supposed to.

Hermione seemed very curious, but also a little worried, and that confused Ron even further. He was a bit agitated that there were a pile of presents upstairs just waiting to be opened; however, only something like this, which involved his family and seemed so serious, would keep him from his usual fervor over the gifts.

"What's this all about?" he whispered to his new wife and she only shook her head, gesturing him toward one end of the sofa. Molly and Arthur had taken the other end. Fred, George and the girls had the floor across from them, and Bill and Charlie were at the far end of the room sitting near the chess board. Percy had brought a chair from the kitchen and was sitting not too far away, his eyes darting around the room.

Ron glanced around and found Ginny and Harry standing near the staircase, arms wrapped around each other, although wearing rather severe faces. Ginny was whispering something to Harry that Ron couldn't hear and Harry was nodding slowly. Finally, she smiled at him and laid her hand along his cheek. And while he didn't smile back, he acknowledged her with a quick kiss on the lips and took her hand to lead her to the love seat.

"I'm sorry Ron and Hermione," Ginny started. "We don't want to ruin your day."

Ron opened his mouth to protest, but Hermione cut him off. "It's no bother, really. We only want to help." Ginny nodded absently and turned to Harry who looked a bit green. He cleared his throat twice and then began, his voice very low.

"My name isn't Harrison Parker." Ron furrowed his brow, now completely confused. "It's... Harry Potter." Harry had raised his eyes and searched their faces before glancing at Ginny who wore a smile brighter than if he'd just won the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup single-handedly.

"Bloody hell," Ron finally breathed out. It was a testament to how shocked everyone was when he wasn't rebuked by either his mother or his wife.

"How—" Arthur began and then shook his head, obviously not being able to find the words.

"Maybe you should show them, love?" Ginny said softly, and she and Harry had some sort of staring war, or battle of wills or something. "Not all of it," she amended when his gaze became rather harsh, "just the one?"

Harry slumped a bit and pulled out his wand. Ron knew it was silly, but even he flinched. Harry rolled his eyes and flicked his wand; instantly his face changed. And although they seemed like small changes, Ron could instantly see a difference that would be noticeable. Ron felt like he was seeing a completely different man.

Harry's eyes were no longer a muddy hazel, but bright emerald green. His cheek bones were more angular and his jaw square. The black hair stayed, but just under the fringe a pale pink scar rippled; a similar one ran across his jaw line and disappeared on the side near his ear.

"Ginny," Molly said softly, "Did you know about this?" Ron couldn't tell if she approved or not. He was still too stunned to make sense of it all.

Ginny only nodded with a smile as she squeezed Harry's hand that was clasped in hers.

"It's not that I wanted to lie to you," Harry said. "I just... it's ingrained, I think, to protect myself. If the press ever found out that I've been living here, let alone that I have someone in my life..." He glanced at Ginny to find her smiling at him.

"But Harry Potter has been spotted all over the world," Percy protested. "I myself met him just a few months ago at the International Confederation of Wizards Offices. I'm sure I would have recognized you. You... you're not him," Percy proclaimed. "I would have known." Ginny bristled and Ron winced. There was little love lost between she and Percy. Then again, Ron could never understand why Percy treated Ginny the way he did. Logically, he knew why... but she was *family*...

"Would you?" Harry asked with a wry smile. "Harry Potter has... a presence, I'm told. People can tell when he enters a room."

"It's true," Percy said. Ron was surprised when both Charlie and Bill nodded their agreement. "You feel drawn to him. You can feel his magic radiating off of him. And yet... you almost don't feel worthy to be in his presence. But he's not rude or condescending when he speaks to you." He shook his head, seeming to be searching for the words. "You don't feel like that to me."

Harry only nodded and glanced at Ginny before closing his eyes. Ron had to take a deep breath as a ripple of energy filled the room. He glanced around at his family to see them all in the same state as he; except Bill and Ginny who seemed to be having opposite reactions. Bill was looking away, out the window, a dark look on his face. And Ginny was staring at Harry with something akin to adoration and... open lust. Ron had to shake his head, and hope he never saw that look on her face again.

But it was Harry who drew his complete attention when he finally gazed on him. He looked so... different. His face and stature were the same but there was something that drew his eye and made him feel... respect and a bit of humility. The area around him felt warmer and lighter somehow. He could see that if this man walked into a crowded room, everyone *would* know it. Yet all the same, there was an aura of inapproachability there as well.

"Now do you see?" Ginny asked. "It's not about who he is, but the way he presents himself." She looked straight at Percy who could only nod and swallow. But Ron knew that look on his brother's face. He still wasn't completely convinced, he just didn't have the right ammunition to fight yet.

Harry closed his eyes again and the warmth and light in the room faded a bit. He slumped back against the sofa and looked sheepishly at Ginny.

"How do you *do* that?" Hermione asked and Ron almost snorted. Leave it to his Hermione.

Harry considered for a moment before answering. "It's my magic," he said simply. "It's in the way I carry it—all out front, so to speak. I use it as a bit of a shield, I guess you could say.

"Harry Potter is a legend, unfortunately. After the Final Battle," he said with a pained expression, "I couldn't go anywhere, couldn't do anything in the Wizarding world without running in to someone who wanted to know everything. People were disappointed when they met me, and I wasn't all that they thought I should be."

"You have a right to live your life, Harry, without the fear of everyone judging you," Arthur said softly.

"Exactly," Harry said. "That's why I began using my magic in that way. But I couldn't always do it. It's tiring and frustrating to have to use it when I only need a few things from the market. So I use the glamour charms and use a different name. I have since I was little, actually," he admitted. "My Godfather always placed them on me."

The truth seemed to sink in a bit when Harry stopped and the silence settled.

"Where've you been all these years?" George asked.

Harry looked down at his feet and Ron narrowed his eyes. There was a deeper story there he knew; but now wasn't the time.

"When my parents were killed, I was placed with my Aunt and Uncle here in England. I lived there for a bit before... it was decided that it wasn't the best place for me." He never varied his gaze from his shoes, and Ginny moved to rub his back a bit. "I was able to go and live with my Godfather then."

"In America?" Molly asked and Harry nodded.

"Albus Dumbledore had made the arrangements. I was trained and protected by the ICW. Their agents were never far away."

"By Merlin," Arthur groaned softly. "You must not have had any childhood at all."

Harry gave him a half smile and shrugged. "I did better than you think; at least once I was with my Godfather. He's a bit like a giant kid himself so..."

"So you trained?" Fred asked. "For all those years?"

Harry nodded. "I had to. There was a prophecy given before I was born. I was the one who needed to defeat Voldemort." Ron was rather proud that only a few of his family members flinched at the name; the years did a lot to heal.

"Those of us in the Order knew a bit about this," Arthur explained. "Albus had hinted that you were safe and being taken care of. It wasn't until he disappeared that one year that any of us even considered that you were involved in the fighting, Harry."

That whole sentence made no sense to Ron, who glanced around to see that most of his family was in the same situation as he was. Ginny wiped away a stray tear, and Harry reached up to stroke her face, although his features were even darker than before.

"We'd secretly been fighting for years," Harry confirmed in a rather dead voice. "With this scar," he jabbed toward his forehead where the lightning shaped pink flesh sat, "Voldemort and I were connected on some level. I could feel his emotions sometimes, when they were very strong. He was able to send me images and visions. When I was sixteen, he sent me a vision in which he'd captured my Godfather. I was stupid and impetuous and I went to rescue him. I was captured by Death Eaters.

"That's why Albus was gone," he continued when no one moved. "He was trying to find me and rescue me. In the end, it was one of his spies that led them to where I was being kept."

"How long?" Molly asked through the rush of tears that toured down her cheeks.

"How long was I with them?" Harry asked, only just glancing at her before staring off at the opposite wall. "Two weeks," he answered softly.

The room burst out in frantic whispering and Ron watched as Ginny pulled Harry closer to her, stroking his face and whispering something to him. He shook his head several times and then closed his eyes as the two leaned their foreheads together. Harry seemed to be drawing strength from Ron's little sister.

It was in that moment that Ron decided that he believed Harry one hundred percent, and he was convinced that Harry and Ginny were meant to be together. How else could two people, touched so personally by Voldemort, come together?

It didn't matter what obstacles they had to face in order to stay together, Ron would stand in front

of them and deflect whatever he needed to. He would fight whomever he needed so that they had everything they needed. One glance at the rest of his family and he knew they felt similar. Only Bill seemed to be the one fighting this feeling. He still stared darkly out the window. And Percy... his dark expression was focused more on Ginny.

Harry and Ginny finally broke apart and Ron could hear Ginny tell him that he didn't need to go on. He shook his head and seemed to steel himself before clearing his throat. "I survived. And when I got back, I trained even harder and longer than before. I never even finished school," he admitted with a shrug. "There was just too much going on."

Ron's father stood slowly and held out his hand in front of the man on the sofa. Harry stared up at him in confusion before standing also and tentatively placing his hand in the man's before him.

"I've never been able to tell you how much I appreciate all that you sacrificed for my family."

Harry opened and closed his mouth several times, looking like he wanted nothing more than to deflect the praise, before finally nodding jerkily. Ginny chuckled at the exchange, tears falling out of her eyes. Hermione and Molly seemed to be joining her in teary laughter. Ron followed his father in shaking Harry's hand; it just seemed the right thing to do.

Surprisingly, it was Bill who showed the most emotion. He was the third to greet Harry, and even though his scarred face was very severe, Ron was stunned to see his cheeks wet. The tall man gathered Harry into a fierce hug, stunning Harry, who held completely still, panic on his face.

"Without you... Thank you."

"He knows, Bill," Ginny said softly, joining the hug and rubbing both Harry and Bill on the back. Harry seemed to relax, or maybe he just understood that he wasn't getting out of this.

Ron was confused at the exchange. Bill had always been rather controlled in his emotions, and this display was highly unusual, especially considering how stoic he'd been these past four years. Ron glanced over at Charlie and the jovial man only grinned wider and touched his face where the largest of Bill's scars was. That's when Ron understood.

Somehow, Harry had been the one responsible for saving Bill. The descriptions of the attack and the injuries Bill had sustained had been very glossed over, and the youngest of the Weasleys hadn't really known much at all. They knew Bill had been hurt in the Final Battle, and that he'd been attacked by a werewolf, although still in human form. Charlie had said that someone had stopped the attack and killed the werewolf, but had never said who it was.

Both Molly and Arthur must have seen Charlie's motion and understood as well, as they both wrapped their arms around the three in the center. It was an emotional few moments, until both George and Fred broke the tension by wailing and clasping each other in a back-slapping hug. They continued to 'cry' on each other's shoulders and the large embrace at the center of the room broke apart with chuckles.

"Well," Charlie clapped his hands together enthusiastically, and grinned while turning to Ron and Hermione. "Don't you two have a pile of presents waiting upstairs?"

Ron grinned at the tactic to take the focus off of Harry and nodded gratefully. "Let's get to it," he agreed. Hermione dabbed at the corners of her eyes with a tissue and chuckled at his enthusiasm.

"We'll help bring them down," Fred cheered as he and George bounded toward the stairs.

"Don't you two touch a single present in that pile!" Molly threatened as she bustled after them, still wiping her own eyes with her apron.

Percy storming out of the room, kicked the kitchen door open in front of him, shocking everyone.

Ginny stood, her jaw locking into a strong, square position that never bode well for the recipient of the look. She was through the kitchen door before anyone else could move.

Harry followed right after, giving a strange sort of look over his shoulder.

Ron glanced around the room. "You don't think she'd actually kill him?" His joke wasn't well received. Even the twins twitched.

Bill stood and moved forward. "This has been coming on for years," he mumbled. He only made it just before the door before bouncing back, as if he'd run into some sort of wall.

"Bloody hell," he said, wiping his bleeding nose on his sleeve. "He warded it."

Ron jumped to his feet, unable to believe what his brother was saying. Sure enough, just under a foot from the door was a solid wall of energy.

"Why would he ward it?" Fred asked, holding his hands out to the energy and watching as they were repelled time and time again.

"Maybe this is a good thing," Ron shrugged. He looked back over at Hermione who was biting her bottom lip, in both thought and worry.

"Can you get the ward down, Bill?"

Ron looked at his father, worry etched all over his face, as the man stared at his oldest son. But who was he more concerned for? Ginny could take care of herself, and Percy was no slouch. Harry was the one who tipped the scales, he guessed. If he sided with her and punished Percy... then it would be over quickly. If he was there to hold Ginny back... Damn, the house might just disintegrate in the process.

"I can try," Bill shrugged, wiping blood one more time before their mother hurried over and healed his nose.

"Do what you can, Bill," she said quietly. She glanced at the door, a worried look on her face. The voices behind the door were getting loud now, and they could catch a bit of the argument—enough to convince Ron that things may just erupt fully soon.

Bill nodded and dropped to his knees, pulling out his wand and quietly chanting something that Ron didn't recognize.

Over it all, Ginny's voice rose and they all flinched.

"I DID NOT KILL PENELOPE!"

Ron groaned and ruffled his hair. This wasn't going to end well, he thought. But maybe that's what they needed—a knock-down, all out brawl to get these feelings out in the open and dealt with; holding them in obviously accomplished nothing, as the last six years had proved.

* * *

Harry was so caught up in trying to deal with everything that he was feeling that he hadn't even seen Percy leave. But Ginny pulling out of his grasp and darting after her older brother certainly made an impression.

For a moment, he considered letting them go at it. Ginny could hold her own. However, in the heat of the moment, he feared she might do something she would regret later. So Harry went after them.

The decision to ward the room wasn't even a conscious one. He and Sirius had argued enough during his teen years; full out yelling and even scuffling involved. And Remus would usually try to step in and be the reasonable head. But that was rather counterproductive, Harry thought. He and Sirius had needed to get the emotions out—they were both passionate people—to step in between that was like asking to be cursed. And once everything was said, things were always better between them. Hours later, the argument would be mostly forgotten.

Harry didn't think Ginny would appreciate her family trying to hold her back, or to protect her. They'd been doing that far too long, in Harry's opinion. They couldn't even see the strong, amazing woman that she was, really.

"You don't need to protect him, Harry," Ginny said, a bit scathingly, as he entered the kitchen, "I'm not going to kill him."

Harry smiled softly at her and nodded. "I know. I won't step in unless it's needed. I promise."

She looked slightly mollified and turned to face Percy, who was across the room from them, pacing like a caged tiger.

"You have something to say, I know you do," Ginny challenged.

Percy's eyes darted to Harry, who leaned back against the wall. He didn't have his wand drawn, but Harry could see his fingers twitch near it.

"Don't let me stop you," Harry shrugged. He knew this whole situation needed to be resolved. Six years of holding in anger and hard feelings had nearly ruined Ginny's relationship with her older brother. And it was time to get it all out. He knew it twisted Ginny's gut every time someone mentioned Percy.

Percy's jaw squared very similar to Ginny's and Harry had to force himself not to laugh at their similarities.

"You don't even know what you're getting into, Ginevra."

"Oh, really, Percival?" Ginny quipped back. "They why don't you explain it to me? You're good at that—judging situations you know nothing about and then spouting your knowledge all over the place."

Harry winced at that, knowing he must have missed something. He'd purposely not read any of the intelligence surrounding the Diary Horcrux after learning that it was Ginny involved. Maybe he should have.

Percy flinched as well. "You know I had no choice," he lowered his voice. "I *had* to tell what I knew. When the Wizengamot asks you to testify... you do it!"

"Against your own sister?" Ginny roared, hurt filling her voice. Harry had to force himself not to go to her, to gather her in his arms and offer comfort.

The pieces were falling into place slowly and Harry's stomach churned. Percy had given evidence—whatever it was—against Ginny in her trial. That was harsh. Harry wondered how they'd even made it these six years without having a blow up.

"You were acting strange, Penelope told me in her letters. And that time when I saw you, after coming to see Penny... you were covered in blood and feathers, Ginny."

Harry almost stepped forward when Ginny's face turned red. "And yet you didn't help me then. You just sent me on my way." Her voice was dull and dead, making Harry gag on the bile that rose in his throat. "And I struggled for months more. *Months*, Percy.

"You should have gone to Professor Dumbledore sooner," Percy bit out, leaning forward onto the table that separated the siblings. "You should have known! You shouldn't have been so stupid as to believe that you could control it."

"You're right," Ginny nodded, mirroring his pose. "But I know now I wasn't strong enough. I couldn't fight against—" Her words died out and she seemed to struggle for a moment before Harry realized what was going on.

"You can't fight it, Gin," he said softly. "The vow is too strong."

She glared at him, but Harry knew it was just her frustration at trying to explain why she would have had no hope at defeating part of Riddle's soul that had taken hold of her.

Percy narrowed his eyes at the both of them, backing away just a bit.

"You shouldn't be in this relationship, Ginny," he said slowly, obviously trying to calm himself.

"Why not?" Ginny yelled. "Harry and I are in love! You have no right to say whom I can—"

"You're not worthy of him!" Percy yelled back. His own jaw dropped at the words, and Ginny rocked back as if she'd been physically struck.

A fire erupted deep inside Harry and he stepped forward, the binds on his magic slipping just a bit.

"That was uncalled for," he said, glaring at Percy.

"It's true," Percy defended, obviously determined to say what he thought needed saying. "She's dark. She allowed that diary to turn her into... some sort of monster. She's responsible for everything that happened. She's responsible for Penny—"

"I DID NOT KILL PENELOPE!" Ginny's shout bordered on hysterical and Harry's hands went into his hair, tugging at it as he tried to control his magic.

"Shut the fuck up, Percy!" he demanded. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Then tell me!" Percy yelled, stepping bravely forward into Harry's face. "Tell me why she deserves to be with... with... *you!* You're..."

"Ginny is not dark," Harry shook his head, staring at Percy and seeing a pitiful man who had held onto hate and pain for too long.

"I wouldn't change things if I could," Ginny said strongly.

Harry looked over at her and reached out, twining their hands together. One look in her eyes and he knew she was telling the truth. She finally understood what her sacrifice had done for him. If she had given in completely to the strength of the Horcrux, they may have never known about them. Harry wouldn't have been able to defeat Voldemort, and he would have died.

"I'm sorry about Penelope," Ginny continued carefully. "More than you'll ever know. But what happened to me... it made me who I am today. I'm not dark." She glanced at Harry, a blazing look on her face. "And I'm more than worthy to be Harry's partner."

Harry wanted to kiss her then. Love and lust mixed in his belly, making him tingle all over.

"If you want to know what really happened, and not just your own view of it," Harry said, swinging back around to Percy, "then you can petition the ICW for clearance—not that you'll get it."

Percy opened his mouth to reply, but Harry let his magic fully loose, feeling satisfied when Percy gasped and stepped back.

"Ginny is everything to me. She's my equal in everything, Percy. We chose each other, and I don't give a damn whether you approve or not." Ginny's grip tightened on his hand and Harry felt the energy draining out of him as he tried to reign in his power slowly.

"Next time you hold a grudge for six years," Ginny said, her tone even and completely in control, "make sure you have your facts straight. I didn't kill Penny—Tom Riddle did that."

She stepped forward into Harry's embrace and wrapped her arms around his chest. "Let's go home," she said softly. Harry looked down at her, reaching up to rest his hand against her hot, red cheek, and nodded.

He met Percy's eye before they Apparated. The man was shocked—it almost looked as if they had petrified him, he stood so still.

“Ginny—”

“Later,” Harry shook his head, warning the man off. Now wasn’t the time to push either of them. Percy looked torn, but then nodded jerkily.

“I’ll... I’ll tell Mum you went home.”

Ginny didn’t answer, but burrowed further into Harry’s chest. Harry nodded once and closed his eyes, taking them through the wards at the Burrow and into their home.

* * *

When Ginny finally opened her eyes, they were sitting on the sofa, and she was draped across Harry’s lap. She wasn’t crying, surprisingly, but the torrent of emotions today really drained her.

“Are you okay, Gin?” Harry asked, his hand smoothing her hair down her back.

She sniffed and nodded. “Are you?”

Harry chuckled softly and kissed her head. “I’m fine.”

“Did you really come in there to save me? Or Percy?” Ginny pulled back so that she could see his face. Somewhere along the line, the glamours had gone back on. That disappointed Ginny, but she understood.

“I knew you wouldn’t kill him,” Harry shook his head. “I just didn’t want you to say something that you might regret later.”

“I’m not sure I would have regretted anything,” Ginny said sadly. “Although... I do feel a bit better. Does that make me a horrible person?”

“No,” Harry smiled. “It makes you human.”

Ginny nodded against his chest and they sat quietly for a few minutes. “I’m sorry if that was hard,” Ginny said. “I’m proud of you for telling them.”

Harry sighed and rubbed his face harshly. “I’m not even sure how I feel about it,” he admitted. “They’ll see me so differently now,” he added, regret echoing in his words.

“For a bit,” Ginny nodded. “But they’re all good people, Harry.”

“I know,” he said, leaning down to kiss her gently. “Are you hungry?” he asked, nuzzling her face with his own.

Ginny thought about it before chuckling. “Yeah, I am.” He looked the tiniest bit disappointed and Ginny quickly kissed him again. “There’s that little deli down the street,” she suggested.

“Sounds perfect,” Harry agreed with a slow smile.

They walked hand in hand down the street, with Ginny pulling him aside several times in the short

distance to steal a kiss or two. They sat close together at their table and ate off of each other's plates, both studiously avoiding the topic of her family.

Truth be told, Ginny was fairly proud of her family. For the most part, they'd accepted Harry completely, and without reservation. Bill's hesitancy was understandable, if a bit too intense, Ginny thought. After all, he and Charlie had seen a side of Harry that she didn't ever want to see. But it wasn't as if Harry had chosen that life; it had been thrust on him and he'd had to deal with it the best he could.

Everyone else had proved their love for her, and their loyal nature, by not peppering questions at Harry, or overwhelming him with too much emotion. The Weasley's could be an emotional lot, Merlin knew.

Percy... well, Percy had his own issues. For the past six years, Ginny had walked on egg shells around him, trying not to upset or anger him. But that was over, Ginny decided. If she wanted him to treat her like an adult, she had to start acting like one. And facing her fears head on was the first step.

"You've been quiet tonight," she observed as they walked home. Harry had stopped joking playfully with her, and even though he held her hand, he seemed miles away.

"Sorry," he shrugged. "I didn't mean to be."

"Its fine," Ginny protested, wrapping into his side as they climbed the long steps up to their flat. "You're entitled to some time to think. I just don't want you to brood," she said.

Harry smiled at her, looking as if he wanted to protest that he wasn't brooding.

"Talk to me, Harry," she whispered as they stood on the top step. "You know you can."

Once they entered the flat, however, the stress from the day settled on his features again and he sank into the sofa and kicked off his shoes. Ginny watched him as she tidied the room, determined to give him some space.

He was truly amazing, she thought as her heart fluttered just a bit. He had faced so much in his young life and still come out to be this loving and wonderful man. She paused in gathering up a few discarded clothes as Harry used his wand to remove the glamour charms. That was her cue and she dropped the laundry on a nearby chair and went to him.

He opened his arms, welcoming her as she straddled his lap and nestled in close.

"I love you so much, Harry."

His response was to kiss her temple and rub her back gently. She could feel the uncertainty and anguish of his past radiating off him, and vowed to dispel it immediately. He could never think that she doubted him; she simply wouldn't allow it.

Ginny pulled back and stared into those startling green eyes. Gently, she moved forward and kissed him, not allowing him to deepen the touch. He groaned a bit as she lightly stroked his face with her fingers, letting her lips follow. Ever so slowly, she traced each feature of his face, lavishing him

with much more attention than she had ever given him before. His hands held onto her waist and hips in a tight grip. It almost hurt, but not enough to make her stop; besides, she knew Harry didn't have control over that right now. His breathing was shallow and she could feel his heart racing as she finally claimed his lips in a deep, soulful kiss.

"Let me make love to you," she whispered. He searched her face, and then nodded jerkily.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you," he answered and they shifted to cuddle together.

Harry's heartbeat against her ear lulled Ginny. The emotions of the day were just too much, and she sighed deeply, feeling as if she was just on the edge of sleep.

Her eyes fluttered open when Harry's hand moved, his fingers barely touching her back.

"Gin?"

"Mmhm," she'd murmured, while pressing a kiss to the center of his chest.

"Would you come with me to meet Sirius? And Remus." His soft question took her by surprise and made her wake up more fully.

"Your Godfather?" she asked as she shifted atop him and rested her head on her folded arms. Harry's eyes had been closed, but he opened them and searched her face before nodding.

Ginny considered what he was asking for a minute. He'd taken a huge chance by opening up to her family today, and now he was offering a bit of himself in return. Harry's life before moving back to England was very much a mystery to her, and he was giving her an opportunity to meet, for all intents and purposes, his family.

"When do you want to leave?" she asked with a huge smile.

Harry grinned and reached down to pull her up into a loving, yet playful kiss. "Right now," he answered and Ginny giggled.

"I'd love to, Harry, but I think I'm a little underdressed."

Harry's rich laugh made her heart ache in a happy way. He rolled her over and pinned her down to the mattress, kissing and nipping at her neck and face.

"Alright," he finally drawled. "We'll talk about it in the morning. Right now I have a better idea." He growled as he attached himself to the pulse point on her neck, and Ginny squealed, wrapping her leg around his hip, using the other to leverage them over again. She wasn't about to give up any ground in this relationship.

Chapter 15: Fitting Right In

Arthur visibly felt the ward go down, whether from Bill's efforts, or because Harry had released it, he wasn't sure. Either way, it was down, and Arthur was the first one through the door.

Percy was seated at the table in the empty kitchen, his face covered by his palms.

"They left," he said quietly.

Arthur sighed deeply, relieved that there wasn't any visible damage to the house, nor to Percy himself.

"Er..." The rest of the family had followed him in and Arthur gritted his teeth, knowing that this should have been done years ago. Putting it off and hoping that ignoring the past would make it go away obviously hadn't worked.

"Boys!" he barked, making them all flinch. "To the shed, now!"

He took pride in the fact that every one of them, even Bill, who was over thirty years old, still paled when they were ordered to the shed. It wasn't like Arthur ever beat his children while they were growing up—but all of their 'man-to-man' talks had taken place in that rickety old shed. Serious business took place within those walls.

Arthur didn't wait for them to follow him, but struck out across the garden, determination filling him more with each step.

The boys filed in behind him, leaning against his work bench or perching on various surfaces, while Arthur tried to decide where he wanted to begin speaking. His sons needed a bit of perspective on things, he thought.

"We're all here," Percy announced softly.

"Do you know why your mother and I joined the Order of the Phoenix?" Arthur asked, his back still to his children as he fiddled with various things on the shelf. No one answered—but he'd expected that.

"Ron was still a baby when the Potters were murdered," he said, grimacing at the memory. "Ginny was just a few months old. For years we hadn't let you boys play outside even. Trips to Diagon Alley were rare treats. There was just so much uncertainty in the world. We were terrified to send you to Hogwarts," he said, looking at Bill. "We just weren't certain we could believe you were safe all the time."

"I remember," Bill said gruffly.

"I was working late that night," Arthur continued, swallowing the emotion that made his throat tight. "The news came into the Ministry, and... all hell broke loose." He turned and leaned against the counter, taking his glasses off his face and rubbing his face harshly. "People were... people were actually celebrating. The Ministry all but gave up trying to stop it. There were fireworks and

parties...

“But somewhere in all of that, those people drinking and celebrating forgot that a family had been devastated. A brave young mother and father were slaughtered for protecting their family. And their child was left all alone.”

Arthur looked at his boys, all fine, young strapping lads. “When I finally made it home, your mother was sitting in her rocking chair. Ginny was in her cradle next to the chair. And... I just cried,” he admitted. “I sat at your mother’s feet and we cried together.”

Admitting that didn’t seem like weakness, really, as it might have for some men. “When Albus contacted us, fourteen years later, and asked us to join the Order. Your mother and I sat in the same place, in the same position, and cried again.

“Your sister... it almost broke me when Albus flooded us that year. I never told anyone, but I went to Hogwarts every night she was in the hospital wing. And I just... sat there. Holding her hand while she slept, rocking her when she had a nightmare.”

He looked up, fixing his gaze particularly on Percy, who looked like he might be sick. “I’m so sorry that Penelope... that you never got the chance to have what your mother and I did. Nothing can ever bring her back, or make you feel whole again after her loss. But you need to stop carrying this anger in your heart, son.”

Surprisingly, Percy nodded. Arthur wondered what bits of the conversation between Harry, Ginny and Percy they had missed hearing. There were times when they hadn’t been able to make out the words from the other side of the door, and through the ward Harry had placed. They’d all jumped in shock at the notion that Ginny didn’t deserve Harry. The slow burn that had started in Arthur at those words roared to life now.

“Your sister... has one of the most pure hearts I’ve ever seen,” he choked out, his eyes still riveted on his third son as Percy looked away. “And Harry was right. She is his match in every way possible.”

“I’m scared for her,” Percy admitted in a low voice. “What if... what if something happens?”

“Then we’ll all be here to catch her if she falls,” Arthur stated instantly.

“We will,” Bill said, his voice rumbling from low inside him.

“Damn right,” Charlie cheered.

“I’ll be there to pick them both up,” Ron vowed softly.

“Count us in,” Fred and George said together after sharing a look.

Arthur’s chest swelled with pride for his boys. *These* were the men he had helped to raise.

“Harry makes Ginny happy like I’ve never seen before,” he said firmly, turning back to Percy. “And the fact that Harry Potter has chosen to be with your sister... I can’t think of anyone I’d trust with

her heart more.”

Slowly, his eyes suspiciously bright, Percy nodded. “I... I want Ginny to be happy.”

“Do you really think she’s responsible for what happened?” Ron pressed, looking down at Percy from where he sat on Arthur’s workbench. His tone wasn’t one of hostility, but honest curiosity and incredulity.

“No,” Percy said with a sigh. “I... I don’t. Not anymore. But there’s more to it. There has to be.” He shook his head, scowling down to the floor.

“There is,” Arthur assured him. Albus had told him and Molly a bit more about the diary, but what he’d told them wasn’t for spreading around. In fact, Arthur highly doubted even they knew all of what Ginny had gone through. Actually, he was a bit relieved at that. Maybe it was best not to know.

“Maybe... maybe it’s best not to know everything,” Ron shrugged, stealing Arthur’s words.

“Infinite knowledge,” Fred grimaced.

“Just gets you into trouble, mate,” George finished.

“I just... I want to know that Penny didn’t die in vain, I guess,” Percy said down to the dirt, which he swirled with his toes.

“She didn’t,” Bill defended. “It sounds horrible, but... her death made it possible for Ginny to... wake up. For her to break the diary’s control. I don’t know what the diary was, for sure, but I’ve seen some magic that would make your toes curl.” He shuddered and Arthur wished, just for a second, that he could take his son’s demons away. “It was senseless, yes, to lose Penny in that way. But... at the same time, we don’t know what part her death played in the whole scheme of things.”

“I wish it hadn’t happened,” Arthur interrupted, rubbing harshly at his face. “But you can’t blame your sister, Percy. Ginny was strong. She prevented a lot of deaths by fighting like she did.”

Percy nodded, but Arthur could tell he needed time to think things through. He had always been that way, even as a young child. While the other boys forgot their arguments and romped around together only minutes after getting their feelings hurt, Percy needed his space and time to process everything.

“Go home, Percy,” Arthur said. “Take some time to think things through.” Percy nodded, standing and moving toward the door.

“May I make a suggestion?” Arthur said, his brow furrowing at memory of Harry’s words to him that afternoon. “Don’t try and confront Ginny again like that. Harry seems like a patient man, but even the most docile man in the world will rise when you get his back up.”

Their eyes met across the dimly lit shed, and Arthur thought he saw understanding pass over Percy’s face.

“Harry is in love with your sister,” he said, a bit of pride touching his voice. “And she’s in love with him. They’re going to be together for a very long time, Percy. And I won’t allow this family to be split into two.”

“Neither will I,” Ron chimed in.

“We won’t put you back together when Harry’s through with you,” Fred said, gesturing to himself and George.

“Just... just think about it,” Bill suggested.

Percy nodded and walked out.

* * *

“Stop pacing, Padfoot,” Remus said from behind the newspaper he was reading. “They’ll be here soon.”

“I just wish Harry would have let me come and pick them up.”

Remus grinned to himself. As much as Sirius growled about Remus’ fussing, he himself was more of a worrier when it came to Harry. He lowered the paper to watch Sirius ruffle his hair in the way that James Potter used to do often.

“Wearing a hole in the floor won’t get them here any faster. And besides,” he smirked as Sirius turned to him, “the Americans don’t want you in their Ministry any more than the British do.”

A very rude hand gesture was shot across the room and it made Remus chuckle.

“What do you remember of the Weasleys, Moony?” Sirius asked as he flopped down onto the sofa. “I mean, I’d heard of them, but didn’t know much.”

Remus sighed and laid the paper that he feared he’d never finish reading down onto the small side table. “It’s a rather large family; seven children, all boys until Ginny. Molly stays at home, even now. She’s well known for her cooking and for helping neighbors in need. Arthur is in a rather low-level Ministry job, where apparently, he loves it. Something or other to do with Muggles. He had a higher position during the war, but chose to go back to his office when things settled down.

“The two oldest boys were in the Military, and were injured in the Final Battle, one of them severely.” He scowled, remembering the part of the letter that Albus had sent upon his inquiries. “Greyback got them both, and it was Harry, actually, that saved them.”

“How do you know all this?” Sirius glared at him with no little awe.

“Talent,” Remus quipped and then laughed at the returned look. “I wrote to Albus when Harry left last time.” He shrugged. “I was interested in what type this Ginny was.”

“And?”

Remus smiled at Sirius’ shirtiness. “According to Albus, there’s not a better young woman in the

world for our Harry.”

Sirius seemed to need to ponder this as he stood abruptly and peered out the windows. Finally he nodded and Remus knew it was safe to continue.

“The middle boy is in the Ministry as well, where I didn’t ask. The youngest is Harry’s age. There are a set of twins; Marauders if there ever were any.” Sirius grinned to the window, but Remus could see it still. “Albus said they very nearly came close to breaking yours and James’ records for detentions.”

Sirius chuckled and Remus decided to drop the guillotine. “But it was Ginny who eventually *did* break it.” That seemed to have rendered him speechless until he grimaced.

“Do you think Harry’s up to handling *her* then?”

Remus almost fell off of his chair laughing. Just the other day, when Harry had contacted them about his visit, Sirius had asked if Remus thought Ginny was up to handling Harry. Now it seemed as though she might actually have Sirius’ seal of approval.

“I think,” Remus said when he recovered, “that James and Lily would have definitely approved of their son’s choice.”

Sirius sunk heavily into the chair by the window. “You think its serious then?”

Remus sighed. “I think that this visit will be the telling point, for all of us, Paddy. Harry wouldn’t be bringing her here if he didn’t trust her completely. And, from what I can decipher from Albus’ thoughts, Ginny isn’t one to mess around with trivial relationships either. She was rather serious about one boy during school, but Albus said that in looking back, he could definitely see signs that she wasn’t content.”

“He seems to know a lot about her,” Sirius noted with a bit of a frown.

“He took a special interest in her,” Remus nodded. “There was a bit of a mess she was involved in when she was fourteen.” He hesitated for a minute, wondering what Sirius’ reaction would be, before continuing.

“You remember the diary?”

“The Horcrux?” Sirius asked with a dreaded tone.

“Right in one,” Remus continued. “That girl was Ginny. As far as we know, she fought the shade of Riddle while it possessed her for most of the year. Eventually, she gathered enough strength to bring it to Albus. It was Ginny’s brother’s girlfriend who was killed. She was interning as Pomfrey’s aide. Ginny survived all that and became quite the little scrapper I’m told.”

Sirius grunted and Remus could see the wheels in his head turning.

“And she’s a very powerful witch. She scored higher on her O.W.L.’s and N.E.W.T.’s than either you or James.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow in appreciation, but Remus knew that it impressed him less than her detention record.

“He also said that he’d very rarely met anyone with as much compassion and spirit as Ginny Weasley.”

Sirius dropped back into deep thought and Remus was glad to see that he’d stopped pacing and seemed to settle a bit. Maybe he should have mentioned that he’d checked into Ginny days ago.

“Ginny Potter. Has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?” he finally asked with a small, guilty grin and Remus couldn’t do anything but agree.

* * *

“Stop fidgeting.”

Harry laughed out loud as Ginny growled at him after stilling her hands away from the blouse she was wearing for the third time in less than two minutes.

“I seem to remember you being more than a bit nervous when you met my family,” she quipped back.

“Yeah,” Harry drawled as he wrapped an arm around her waist, “but you’re not meeting six older, and larger, brothers.”

“No, I’m just meeting the two men who had the most influence on you in your life,” she said softly. He could see that she was being serious, and kissed the end of her nose.

“They’ll love you, I promise.” She grimaced a bit and he caught her chin with his hand, lifting it up so that she would see his eyes. “I love you, and they will also.”

Ginny didn’t say anything, but went up on her tiptoes to kiss him quickly. Their number was called next and Ginny shouldered her small bag as they shuffled toward the port-key office.

After seeing how much Ginny had set out to pack, Harry had been very grateful for shrinking charms. When he complained, she protested that he’d planned so much for their trip that she had to be prepared for anything. Harry had countered that she could just buy anything she wanted and she glared at him.

His wealth, and her seeming lack of it, was one of the only sore spots in their relationship. It wasn’t that she was too proud to accept what he gave her, it was more the fact that she knew she could make it, financially at least, without him, and was determined to do so until she didn’t need to.

He smiled to himself when he thought of all their hints about their future together. He’d not said a word about marriage, and neither had she, but they both seemed to accept that it was in their future. Their near future, if Harry had anything to do with it.

“Ready, sweetheart?” he asked when he noticed she stiffened under his arms.

“I hate portkeys,” she mumbled into his chest and wrapped her arms around him. Harry chuckled

and nodded to the man to activate the deflated beach ball that they both touched.

Their landing in the United States wasn't horrible. They became a bit entangled, but Harry was able to keep them upright at least. He discarded the beach ball in a box by the door, and held the door open for Ginny. She seemed a bit more settled now that their trip was over but he could feel a tension from her, like a wave rolling off of her shoulders.

Harry had told Sirius that they would catch a cab instead of having him pick them up. Portkey offices were notorious for delays and he didn't want his Godfather waiting around the Portland Ministry offices impatiently. As it was, they'd had a few run-ins with the smaller local office as Harry was growing up and Sirius' presence in the building would surely cause no few complications. No, it was better that they arrived this way.

Ginny watched the scenery move past the windows as they traveled to the house where Harry had grown up. Her grip on his hand grew tighter and tighter as they drove. The trees were thick and wonderfully green and Harry rolled down the window to let the air in.

"Where are we exactly?"

"Oregon," he answered. "Not too far from the coast, actually. We used to go camping in those woods over there," he said as he pointed to an area on the side of a mountain. He took a deep breath of the sweet clean air and sighed. He'd always loved this area most and of all the places he'd traveled, the scent of pine and sea salt mixing meant home to him. They'd been safe here in the small communities up and down the Oregon coast; and that mattered when you lived life as he had, always watching who was around and knowing that you may have to uproot and disappear with little warning.

"So," Ginny turned to him. "Sirius was your father's best friend." Harry nodded as she recited what she knew. "Everyone thought he was their secret keeper, but that was really Peter." Harry nodded her on. "Peter was killed by Tom for betraying him during the Final Battle. Sirius was planning on going after Peter that Halloween night, but Dumbledore stopped him and sent him into hiding." Harry nodded again while giving the cab driver a quick look. The man was oblivious to the conversation thanks to a quick notice-me-not charm cast by Harry when they'd entered the car.

"Remus was their other friend. He came to live with the two of you shortly after you arrived. And he and Sirius..." She trailed off and Harry turned to find her a bit red in the cheeks. "They're... partners?" she asked. Harry opened his mouth to ask what she meant when a very different image of his life entered his mind and he grimaced. "Like life partners, right?"

She wasn't kidding, judging by her face and Harry's eyes bulged.

"Good lord, no," he exclaimed and laughter finally burst out of him. "They're only friends—both as straight as they come." He continued laughing, his sides beginning to ache. "But I am going to have to tease them about this."

Ginny's jaw dropped. "Don't you dare, Harry. It's *your* fault anyway," she huffed and pulled away from him to cross her arms indignantly. "You didn't exactly tell me much about them."

Harry continued to laugh and put his arms around her, pulling her into him when she scowled and

tried to pull away again. He pacified her by kissing her head and wrapping his arms tighter.

"You're right. But if you knew them, that would be the funniest joke ever. In fact, I'm going hang on to that and use it while we're here." Ginny groaned and laid her head in the crook of his shoulder.

"Are you trying to make me feel bad?" she asked with a pout and Harry smiled while kissing away the look.

"Just think what you would have done to me if I'd asked if, say Fred and George, were a couple."

"Ergh, Harry, that's just... sick and wrong."

"Same thing," he protested and Ginny shrugged. "Sirius and Remus are like brothers."

"Alright," she said as she poked him in the ribs and then kissed his neck. "Apparently I'm going to have to keep my mouth shut around here or sound like a fool."

"The fool I love," Harry murmured down to her and she poked him again.

"Here we are," the cab driver called out and Harry turned to see the pale blue house come into view. Even though he'd only been gone a few weeks, the house looked welcoming and exactly as home should be. And now that he was bringing Ginny here, things just felt... right.

"Come on, sweetheart. Sirius is probably climbing the walls by now. He never was very patient."

Ginny smiled and slid across the seat after Harry. She gathered her bag from the back of the car and watched as Harry paid the cab driver and turned, grinning to the house. He held out his hand and took her small one in his.

"So, this is where you grew up," Ginny said softly as she took in the area.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "My room's right up there," he pointed to the topmost window that was cracked open just a bit. "I used to do my Astronomy at nights sitting right up there on the ledge, or I'd climb out and sit on the roof, right over there."

"Did you miss not going to Hogwarts, do you think?" Ginny asked as they walked up to the door.

Harry shrugged. "Didn't know what I was missing, did I? But, I think I would have liked to have gone. I certainly missed out on a few things. Friends and all." He lifted a hand to caress her cheek. "You."

Ginny laughed. "Do you think we would have gotten together?"

Harry nodded decisively. "After I beat the stuffing out of that Corner fellow, yeah." Ginny laughed and Harry once again had the strong feeling of home. "I'd have been a fool not to have noticed you."

"The fool I love," Ginny echoed his words from earlier and Harry had to stop her. They stood on the doorstep and Harry leaned down to kiss her passionately.

“Alright, knock it off, you two, or I’ll have to turn the hose on you.”

Harry grinned against Ginny’s lips and pulled back laughing. “Like Moony did to you that one time you were going after Old Mrs.—”

“That’s enough of that cub!” Sirius growled as he pulled Harry in by the collar. Ginny just grinned and followed her boyfriend in. Harry and Sirius tussled for a moment before Remus broke them up and hugged Harry.

“You must be Ginny,” Sirius said as he held out his hand for Ginny and gave her his best rogue look.

Harry knew he was kidding, but growled nonetheless. “*My Ginny.*” Sirius grinned back, his black hair falling into his eyes. “Gin, this moral reprobate is the notorious Sirius Black.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow and then lifted Ginny’s hand to kiss it. “A pleasure, my lady.”

“Down boy,” Remus patted Sirius on the shoulder.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Weasley. Harry’s told us wonderful things about you.”

“Remus Lupin,” Harry motioned toward the man and Ginny gave him her best smile. Harry chuckled, watching Ginny charm the pants off of the two men. He knew they’d love her right away. Sirius stood next to Remus and threw an arm over his shoulder. This only set Harry off further as he remembered Ginny’s question in the car.

“Are you alright there cub?” Remus asked with a raised eyebrow. Harry had to catch his breath as Ginny had elbowed him in the ribs.

“I’m fine. Don’t mind me.”

“Why don’t the two of you put your bags upstairs,” Remus said as he shook his head. “We weren’t sure what you’d want in the way of rooms...” he trailed off and looked a bit uncomfortable. Sirius only grinned at Harry and wagged his eyebrows.

“Oh,” Ginny glanced at Harry and he saw a hint of mischief, “anything will do, as long as the bed’s big enough. I still have a lot to teach Harry here.”

The smile fell off of Harry’s face as he watched his girlfriend wander toward the stairs, swinging her denim clad hips the entire way. “This way, right?” She didn’t wait, but headed up the stairs.

Harry’s mouth went dry as she moved out of sight. He was right; Ginny fit right in immediately.

The three men stared after her before Sirius and Remus broke into laughter and clutched onto each other to keep upright.

“Merlin I love her,” Harry sighed as he passed the men. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he looked back with a wide grin. “Don’t let us keep you, we’ll probably be awhile.”

* * *

Dinner that night was a rowdy affair. Sirius had slipped away to the local market and come back with the most expensive steak he could find and a bottle of dark red wine made locally. They'd grilled the meat, along with the selection of fresh vegetables that Remus had insisted upon, outside and sat around the patio in the fading light. The crickets were chirping and the candles flickering as they finished their meal. Ginny couldn't remember having such fun unless they were at the Burrow with her family.

Sirius and Remus were hilarious. They regaled the couple with tales of James and Lily, Harry's parents, when they were at school. Then Sirius had begun on embarrassing stories of Harry when he was a teen. Harry had blushed spectacularly and Ginny thought it was the cutest thing she'd ever seen. She snuggled back into his arms, loving everything about the evening.

Ginny wasn't sure if she'd ever find any place as amazing as the Burrow. But she had to admit, this house—and these people in it—were every bit as wonderful as she could have imagined. Then again, how could they not be, having raised Harry to be who he was.

Her eyes were growing heavy and she allowed herself to fade a bit, drifting in the cool evening breeze, floating on the scents and sounds of the forest home. The three men continued to talk and laugh, and Ginny let it lull her until she was on the verge of sleep.

"Looks like she's about gone, Harry," Remus' voice said and Ginny's eyes snapped open.

Harry chuckled. "Come on love, let's get you to bed."

Ginny grinned sleepily and allowed him to jostle her into his arms. "Is that a promise, Mr. Potter?" Sirius and Remus laughed and Harry paused to spin around. She was fairly sure he gave them a rude gesture because they erupted again. Harry kissed her head and started into the house.

"Silencing charms, cub!" Sirius called out and another round of laughter began.

"Too much wine," Harry murmured as he set her down at the foot of the stairs. Ginny wasn't sure if he was talking about them or him. They finally made it to the bedroom and crawled into the clean sheets. Ginny hadn't even bothered with more than her night shirt as she was so exhausted and it was rather warm. Harry pulled her into his embrace and they listened to the breeze whistle past the window. Down below they could hear the two men talking.

"We're getting old, Moony."

A heavy sigh echoed. "*You* are, Padfoot." Remus snickered and they heard the sound of glass on glass. Ginny guessed that he'd finished up the last of the wine.

"He's so... grown up now." Sirius said and Ginny smiled into Harry's chest.

"Yeah," Remus agreed. "But I like Ginny."

"She seems to be perfect for him." Harry squeezed her closer to him and Ginny giggled.

"Sweet Merlin," Sirius groaned and Ginny froze, knowing that they were only one floor down and could probably hear her. "He's getting laid up there."

Harry snorted out a laugh and then clasped his hand over his mouth. Ginny couldn't help but giggle again.

"Lucky bastard," Remus said.

"We're not that old," Sirius said, almost in a desperate tone. "If he can get some action, so can we. Come on Moony, let's go down to the pub and pick up a few birds."

Ginny raised her head to look at Harry who was only grinning and shaking his head.

Remus was silent for a minute and then groaned. "I don't think I can walk straight. I'd be afraid of what I'd come home with."

"Then I'll choose for you," Sirius practically shouted.

Remus guffawed. "Like last time? No thank you. I think I'm just going to go to bed."

"Come on, Moony. We're not that old. If Harry can get a leg over, so can we."

"That's it," Harry finally growled and rolled on top of Ginny, taking her by surprise and making her squeak out. "Let's give them a little something to talk about." He attacked her neck and Ginny laughed even louder. "And no silencing charms," he mumbled as he moved lower and lifted her thin night dress. Ginny wasn't sure why she even came to bed clothed; eventually it ended up on the floor anyway.

Chapter 16: Home At Last

The week seemed to pass horribly fast. Harry had taken them to all his favorite spots up and down the coast. They hiked on Mt. Hood and swam in the ocean at Cannon Beach. They spent hours walking through the shops around Pioneer Courthouse Square where Ginny bought some beautiful things.

Harry took her to a Muggle place called Stumptown Coffee where she got a steamy Latte. The music was loud and the crowd a bit much, so they walked hand in hand down the street, simply enjoying being together.

Ginny's favorite day was the day they spent at the beach. They built sandcastles and splashed in the ocean. Harry brought out a camera and talked an older couple into taking a few photos of him and Ginny to send to her family.

Lunch was corn dogs and lemonade bought from a vendor on the side of the road. Then they napped in the shade of the beach umbrella before taking a walk, hand in hand, watching the tide erase their footsteps. That evening they'd built a bonfire in a deserted cove and made love right there on the sand. The sun had been gone for hours when they finally returned to Sirius' house.

"Where to tomorrow?" Sirius had quizzed them as they ate Chinese take out right out of the containers, sitting on various surfaces in the kitchen. Remus had been working teaching summer school lately and had been absent much of the week.

"I wanted to take her to Multnomah Falls or hiking in the Gorge," Harry said. "Or maybe we'll drive down to Northern California to see the Redwoods." Sirius nodded and Ginny shrugged. She didn't care what they did, as long as they spent the time together. It was hard to miss home when Harry kept her so busy. They hadn't been more than a few minutes out of each others company and it was good for their relationship. Ginny was surprised that she hadn't gotten annoyed by it yet. When Michael had been at his worst, demanding attention all the time, Ginny had pushed him away. All she wanted to do was pull Harry closer.

"We'll have to head back eventually," Harry said sadly. "I'll need to check on my next assignment and Ginny needs to get back to work."

Taking a few days off hadn't been much of a trial for Ginny. She'd simply threatened to quit, knowing that she could get another job without much fuss. Harry, however, had assignments coming up and couldn't get out of them with ease. She was surprised at the annoyance she heard in his voice.

Sirius must have heard it too as he studied his Godson thoughtfully. "Having trouble with the job?" he finally asked.

Harry shrugged and Ginny watched him closely. That was one area they'd not talked a lot about. "No. Not really. Things have been going well, it's just..." He shrugged again and tossed the empty container into the trash bin, licking his fork clean before tossing it into the sink. "I'm not sure I want to do it anymore."

Sirius nodded thoughtfully and Ginny busied herself with her noodles and pork lest Harry look to her for advice. It wasn't that she wouldn't give it; she had plenty of ideas for him. It was more that his life was changing so much lately that she didn't want him to look back in a few months and regret anything he'd done. She wanted him to make the right decisions because he felt they were right, not because it was what she wanted him to do.

Honestly, the idea of him continuing to do what he did made her nervous. Could their relationship handle that much time apart? Or would they slowly start to resent their jobs, and then each other. Eventually they were going to have to talk about this, she knew. Their future together was like this shining thing standing in front of them, but they had to be brave enough to walk forward together into it.

"I can understand that, cub," Sirius said as he finished chewing an eggroll. "You're young yet. Nothing to say you can't try on a few hats before you find the one that fits."

"I was thinking..."

"Yes," Sirius said as he pushed aside his food and looked intently at Harry.

Harry shuffled his feet a bit and shrugged again. "I love to fly. Maybe I could do something with that."

"Like Quidditch?" Sirius suggested. "I know you want to stay in England."

Harry nodded. "I do want to live there. I've always loved it here but..." he glanced at Ginny and she could feel her face turn red. The fact that he was willing to give up spending time with his family so that they could live closer to hers... it made her chest constrict. The idea of living on the other side of the world from them hurt, when she really examined the thought. There would be no dropping in for Sunday dinners or nicking biscuits out of her mother's hiding spots.

"Yeah, probably for the best," Sirius said and Ginny didn't have to look at him to see that he was smiling. She felt a bit out of place and wondered if she shouldn't excuse herself. Perhaps Harry would be more comfortable discussing this with just Sirius. But then again, she was truly curious as to what Harry was thinking. She glanced up and Harry gave her a wink, confirming that he did want her there.

"I don't want to play Quidditch," he said. "Don't get me wrong, I think it's the most brilliant sport in the world. But I don't really need the attention." Sirius snorted here and Harry chuckled.

"I was thinking more along the lines of teaching."

"Teaching?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "Teaching."

"Like being the Flying instructor at Hogwarts?" Sirius asked, a strange expression on his face.

Harry shrugged. "Don't they start flying earlier than that?"

Ginny glanced up to find Harry looking right at her. She finished what was in her mouth before raising an eyebrow at him.

“Not usually,” she said finally. “Most people wait until Hogwarts to learn. If they don’t go, I’m sure it’s just their friends and families who teach them.”

“Is it illegal for them to fly earlier?”

Ginny shook her head. “I don’t think so. I mean, I stole my brother’s brooms when I was six and taught myself how to fly.” Both men chuckled at this and Ginny grinned in pride. “Maybe it’s a safety thing.”

“Maybe,” Harry said. “But what if they could learn earlier. Think of the Quidditch teams you could have then.”

“Open up your own school,” Sirius suggested. “You’ve got the money.”

Harry paled slightly and shifted nervously, as if the idea was almost too big to wrap his head around. “A school? I don’t know. Who would send their kids to a school?”

“What about a summer camp?” Ginny suggested. “For all ages. Lots of kids had trouble with flying. Neville still can’t figure it out,” she said with a sly grin. “And lots of adults just don’t fly because they’re not comfortable with it. Mum hates it. Or you could have it be a school, but just do different sessions.”

Ginny smiled to herself when something sparked in Harry’s eye. She’d not seen him think about something this way ever.

“And I guarantee if you slap your name on it, people will send their kids,” Sirius said, earning him a grimace from Harry. He laughed and slapped his Godson’s back. “You’re going to have to get used to it eventually. This Harrison Parker bit isn’t going to last forever, you know.”

Harry sighed and nodded. “I know.” He glanced once more at Ginny before pushing off the counter and coming over to kiss her. “I’m going to take a walk. I’ll be back in a bit.”

Ginny smiled up at him and nodded. She started picking at her noodles again as the screen door slammed and Harry’s footsteps faded off.

She and Sirius sat in silence for a bit; the only sounds the rustling of their food containers and their chewing.

“You’re really good for him, you know,” Sirius finally said. “I’ve never seen him this happy.”

“I love him,” Ginny said simply because it seemed the only thing she could say.

Sirius grinned at her and took another huge bite. He scraped his fork along the bottom of the box and then tossed it to the growing pile of garbage.

“What was he like?” Ginny asked. She’d been dying to ask Sirius all week but wanted to do it when they were alone. Sirius looked out into the dark night before answering.

“As a child?” Ginny nodded. “I don’t know what he’s told you about where he was before I got him,” he sighed and Ginny shrugged.

“Not a lot. Just that he was at his Aunt and Uncle’s and that it wasn’t a good place for him.”

Sirius turned back around and Ginny was startled by the haunted expression in his eyes. “I should have come for him sooner,” he said in a hollow voice. “It was almost too late by the time I kept my promises to James and Lily. They were the worst sort of Muggles you can imagine. They hated magic. Lily and Petunia never got on, and if it hadn’t been for the blood magic when Lily died to save Harry...” he shrugged and waved it off as if it were an old cobweb.

“Three year olds are supposed to laugh. They’re supposed to be silly about everything, tipping over their own shoes and awkward about things. They’re supposed to cry when they get their feelings hurt, and they’re supposed to still rely on adults to do most of the work.”

Ginny felt a lump well in her throat and she stared out at the blackness of the night.

“Harry wasn’t anything like that. He was the most grown-up three year old I’d ever seen. I don’t even want to think about the things they did to him. He was...” he growled horribly and Ginny shivered. “He was really messed up. You know what I mean, really messed up.” Ginny nodded jerkily.

“It took me a long time to break through that shell of his. He didn’t crack more than a small smile at me for months. Didn’t laugh out loud for a year.” Ginny pushed her food away from her, her appetite now gone.

“How could they?” Ginny whispered vehemently. “He’s so wonderful, so amazing. How could they not see it?”

Sirius grimaced at her and placed his heavy hand on hers. “I don’t know. I guess their hatred just blinded them. But you and I got the best end of the deal, didn’t we?” Ginny smiled and nodded.

“He was a very angry and confused teen,” Sirius continued. “He had that ruddy connection with the mass-murderer and then that damned prophecy hanging over his head. Trying to balance who he was with who he needed to be outside these walls.” Ginny could see him, rambling about this house, a lanky teenage boy who didn’t know quite where he fit in the world. She’d seen enough of that at the Burrow with her brothers to know how it worked. The addition of the prophecy and Harry’s destiny made Ginny amazed that Harry had survived, let alone come out to be the strong man that he was.

“But he was funny,” he said with a smile. “There were times when he was sarcastic as hell. He’d snap back at me or Remus, and we’d just have to laugh.”

“He *is* funny,” Ginny agreed.

“And I’ve never seen such determination and strength. When we got him back after...” Sirius choked up a bit and had to stop. Ginny reached out and placed her hand on his arm, nodding her understanding.

"I was afraid it would break him," he said. "But it made him all the madder, and more determined than ever."

"And he did it," Ginny said thickly. Sirius nodded.

"We almost lost him that time, but he pulled through."

"What about girls?" Ginny asked with a smile, trying to lighten the mood. "What kind of girl did Harry fancy?"

Sirius smiled gratefully back. "I don't know. He didn't have much time for it growing up. And even if he did... well he didn't bring them home. We... er, talked, generally speaking, you know. But nothing specific."

"Nothing serious then?"

"Are you fishing, Miss Weasley?"

Ginny laughed. "Maybe."

Sirius studied her for a minute. "Nothing serious at all. I know there've been a few. But he really never brought anyone home. And I know he's never been in love before you."

Ginny smiled and felt her heart flutter again. She didn't move as Sirius stood up and began cleaning up the kitchen. Eventually, she wandered out to the edge of the property and sat in the wide hammock that stretched between two trees.

She let a few more tears fall for a lonely young Harry, who may have spent a lot of time right here. And then she allowed herself to daydream about what life might be like if she and Harry were to be married. She drifted off to sleep with visions of dark haired, brown eyed children being taught to fly by their parents.

She awoke when Harry's hand caressed her cheek.

"Are you cold out here?" he asked. She blinked herself more awake and glanced around. She'd fallen asleep in the hammock.

"What time is it?"

"Almost two," Harry admitted sheepishly.

"Where did you go?" Ginny whined a bit and pulled at his shirt until he gave in with a laugh and joined her on the hammock, causing it to swing perilously. "I missed you."

Harry laughed again and wrapped her in his arms. "I went for a walk in the woods," he said. "I used to do that a lot when I was younger. Try to figure things out where no one could bother me."

Ginny looked up at him. "Am I bothering you?"

"No," he protested and kissed her head. "Not at all. That's not what I meant. I guess I've just been

thinking a lot lately.”

She settled back against him and eased her hand under the edge of his t-shirt to where she could touch his bare side.

“Lots to think about,” she murmured.

“Mmhmm,” he agreed and she grinned when his fingers began playing with the buttons on her blouse. “What do you think about?” he asked and looked into her eyes.

“Mostly you,” she admitted with a blush. Harry grinned widely and threw a leg over her body.

“That’s good,” he said as he continued to let his hand work the buttons through the holes. “I think about you too.”

“I know,” she smiled as she nudged his hip. She could feel his arousal growing and for a second wondered how he planned on doing this. They were in the middle of Sirius’ back garden, in his hammock. He could look out the window and see them at any time.

Harry grinned as he finished the last button and pulled her shirt open. The whiteness of her bra stood out starkly against the night.

“Has this always been a fantasy of yours?” she giggled and Harry pressed his face against her cleavage.

“Always,” he agreed and shifted his weight onto her. Ginny grinned and found that the thought of being seen didn’t dissuade her as much as she’d always thought it would.

“Will this old thing hold?” she whispered into his ear as she ground her hips against him. Harry just groaned and rubbed back.

“Only one way to find out.”

The hammock did hold, and Harry transfigured their clothes into light blankets afterwards as they cuddled.

“So, what did you think?” Harry asked as he played with a long end of her hair.

Ginny grinned. “Of the sex, or...?”

Harry snorted. “No. Well, yeah, of course. I mean, if you want to tell me that is.”

Ginny giggled and moved to look up at him. “I think,” she drawled as she ran her fingers through the light dusting of hair on his chest, “that the next time we make love in a hammock, you get to be on the bottom. I think I have rope burns on my arse.”

Harry laughed loudly and Ginny tried to shush him by covering his mouth. This made the hammock rock mightily and they almost dumped out, causing Ginny to scream. This time it was Harry shushing her.

“Do you want me to kiss it better?” Harry offered with a predatory grin and Ginny slapped his chest and settled back down into his embrace. “You weren’t complaining when I—” the rest of his statement was muffled as Ginny moved most of her weight on top of him. “In fact,” he continued when she finally let up, “I rather remember you screaming something about me being—”

Ginny laughed slammed her hands over his mouth again. She grinned seductively and wiggled against him. “I wasn’t complaining, just pointing out the fact,” she said.

They stared at each other for a long minute before he stroked the hair off of her cheek. “What did you think about earlier tonight?” he asked as if the last few hours hadn’t happened.

“About the school idea?” He nodded and she sighed. “I think that if that’s what you really want to do, then you should give it a shot.” He studied her and then got a strange sheepish look on his face.

“I am interested in it... but only if you were there with me.”

Ginny smiled and ran her fingers over his chest. “Where else would I be?”

“No, Ginny,” he shifted and lifted his head on his elbow so that they see each other. He tangled their hands together and stared at them as they moved. “I meant I want you there with me, as my wife. Will you marry me, Gin?”

Time seemed to stop and all Ginny could feel was the gentle sway of the hammock, the feel of the breeze as it moved her hair against her face and Harry’s heartbeat against her shoulder.

“If it’s too soon,” he started and Ginny placed a finger against his lips.

“It’s strange... but it’s not too soon. I want to be with you, Harry, as your wife, as your friend, as your lover, as anything you want me to be.”

She thought she’d seen every look that Harry had, but this one beat them all as her favorite. She couldn’t describe it as anything more than pure, untouched love. Finally, it faded and he grinned widely, leaning down to kiss her softly. Then he cuddled back into her and closed his eyes.

Ginny was beside herself. She watched him fall asleep and became a tiny bit annoyed. He’d just proposed to her and she’d accepted; he should be screaming and dancing. They should wake Sirius and make him open a bottle of something to celebrate.

She wanted details; she wanted to know when he wanted to get married, where and how. She almost woke him as his breathing deepened.

Sighing heavily, she glanced up at his face. The reality of him peacefully sleeping (he’d never fully done that even when they’d worn each other out) as the sliver of moonlight played on his face hit her strongly. His mouth wore a contented smile. His brow was straight and not furrowed.

It was then that Ginny realized she’d missed something. Something had been gone and until this very instant she’d not even thought about it. Harry wasn’t wearing his glamour charms. He hadn’t worn them the entire week they’d been here.

Tears pooled in Ginny's eyes and she snuggled closer to him. Harry had the right idea. They didn't need to shout their engagement from the rooftops—yet. They didn't need to plan every detail—yet. Right now it was enough for Harry that she'd said yes. And it would be enough for Ginny that he'd asked in the first place.

* * *

Sirius stayed awake late the night before thinking about his Godson. Harry seemed to be getting his life in order and he owed it all to the spunky redhead that had captured his heart. His idea about the flying school was a good one and Sirius genuinely hoped that he would think about it further.

He loved that Harry smiled almost constantly now. He loved that the other day he'd heard him whistling while straightening up a room. He loved that almost every time he walked in on them, they were touching in some way; nothing too forward, but holding hands or leaning against each other.

Lily and James had been much the same way and Sirius was surprised at how much he missed it. Remus had stopped by just yesterday and the two had talked for hours while Ginny and Harry had been at the beach. It was Remus who pointed out the similarities with the couples and Sirius had to agree.

And Sirius couldn't be happier for his Godson. Ginny was a wonderful girl. She was very pretty in a girl-next-door kind of way. It made Sirius think for a minute that maybe he'd discounted all those girls like her in the past. He'd always gone for the flashy beauties; the exotic and stunning looks that turned his head. And look where it had got him. He was fairly shallow, and he knew it. Seeing Harry have something so real and wonderful made an ache settle in his chest.

He shrugged it off quickly and sipped at his cup of tea while glancing out the back door to the edge of the trees. A smirk broke out on his face at the sight in the hammock. He'd seen Ginny rocking out there last night and wasn't sure when Harry had joined her. He did remember cursing them both in the middle of the night and casting a silencing charm on his open window. He'd laid there in the dark, eyes shut tight, and tried not to be envious. It wasn't that he liked Ginny in that way. But he was alone, and Harry wasn't.

It was probably best if he pretended not to have seen anything anyway. Ginny blushed easily and it might upset Harry if he embarrassed her too much. Although there were times when she gave back as good as she got and that made Sirius smile. A woman with that much fire in her was good for Harry—it kept him on his toes.

He'd just slip away to the shower and forget that he could see a thin sliver of Harry's bare body showing out the side of the blankets and see Ginny's pale leg thrown over his hip. And completely and utterly forget the sight of the white bra dangling off the end of the ropes, barely touching the ground.

When he did return, he could hear their voices talking softly in the kitchen. He made sure to make enough noise so that they knew he was coming.

"Morning," he greeted them and rubbed his eyes pretending that he'd just woken up. He was sure Harry didn't buy it as he raised an eyebrow and then smirked.

"Morning," both Harry and Ginny said. They were wearing their rumpled clothes from the evening before and leaning against each other as they sipped cups of coffee and tea.

"Nice out last night, wasn't it?" Sirius couldn't help himself. They were sitting there so innocently.

Harry broke first, snorting into his coffee and then choking a bit on the sip he'd taken.

"Glorious night," Ginny returned and Sirius grinned. Oh, this was going to be fun; she was in a playful mood. He glanced to find that it was Harry who was red and Ginny who wore the satisfied smile today.

"I was surprised that old hammock held," he commented casually and Harry dropped his almost empty cup. Ginny just giggled.

"I was too," she said thoughtfully. "I thought for sure we'd end up on the ground."

Sirius watched her in appreciation. "I have to say that I think I'm jealous. I've always wanted to try out that old thing, see how much I can get it swinging."

Both Harry and Ginny laughed aloud. "Why haven't you?" Harry asked. "It's been there forever."

Sirius appreciated that for a minute before waggling his eyebrows at Ginny. "Maybe I just never found a hammock-kind-of-girl."

Ginny must have taken that as the compliment that it was because she grinned. "You're not a bad sort, Sirius. Someday you'll find that girl."

"Maybe I'll just steal you," he growled with a challenge at Harry who only mock-glared back.

"Hmm," Ginny considered and then shook her head sadly. "You're rather alright in the looks department, but nobody can beat Harry's fine, shapely arse."

Harry almost dropped his cup again when Ginny turned around and stared right at him. Sirius had to hold onto the table to keep from falling off the chair.

"What did I miss?" Remus said as he came up the walk. His eyes bounced back and forth between Harry's red face, Ginny's satisfied smirk and Sirius' lack of breathing. "Maybe I don't want to know. Especially since the last words I heard were something about Harry's arse."

That set Sirius off again and Harry walked toward Ginny, a predatory glare on his face. "I'll get you for that, you know."

"I look forward to it, Potter," she said as she feigned indifference and sauntered out of the room, glancing once back over her shoulder.

"Merlin, I love her," Harry sighed as he followed quickly.

Sirius grinned and shrugged at the confused look on Remus' face. "You had to be there, Moony," he mumbled.

Remus shrugged his acceptance and sat in a chair. "They're in a good mood this morning."

Sirius nodded. "They were up rather late."

"Bad, eh?" Remus grimaced and Sirius shrugged.

"It will definitely be quieter around here after they leave."

Remus nodded and sipped his tea. "Tested out the old hammock, did they?" he finally asked and smirked when Sirius' head whipped around. "I think they forgot something."

Sirius looked out through the screen on the door and snorted with laughter. There, hanging just as it had been earlier, was Ginny's bra.

* * *

Harry sat back on his hand and looked over to where Ginny sat on the blanket, her face turned toward the water, where she watched a few sailboats drift along the Columbia River. The wind rustled her flame-red hair and the sun shone just right—showing off the gold highlights in it.

He smiled contentedly and turned his face into the wind, a slight spray of moisture settling on his skin.

"This is what I had in mind, you know," he said quietly.

Ginny rolled over to look at him and he couldn't help but melt just a bit at the open admiration in her gaze. She looked so contented and... in love—everything he felt.

"What do you mean?"

"To propose to you," he explained. "I was going to do it today, instead of last night." He shook his head with a wry smile and pulled at a long piece of grass that was tickling his bare foot.

"It wasn't exactly romantic how I asked you, was it? I mean, I guess every girl out there dreams of how a boy will ask them to marry him. There should have been candles or flowers... or something." He tossed the grass in his hand and pushed his toes off the edge of the blanket so that they could touch the warm earth.

"It was very romantic," Ginny protested with a smile, leaning into him a bit. "Under the stars in the warm night air, after we'd just made love." She closed her eyes and sighed happily.

Harry smiled at her and reached over to brush a piece of hair out of her face. "It was alright then?"

Ginny sat up abruptly and swung her legs over his so that they were resting on his lap. Slowly, she leaned forward until her lips were just centimeters away from his. "It was perfect," she whispered and then brushed her lips on his. She allowed him a moment more together before pulling back and laying her hand along his cheek. "You're not ever this insecure about things," she said with a mild scowl. "Are you changing your mind?"

"Never," he said and kissed her firmly. "I just want things to be right for you. I don't want you to

feel pressured into marrying me or—”

“Harry,” Ginny said as she laid her finger on his lip. “I meant what I said. I want to be with you. I want to marry you.” She kept eye contact with him until he nodded and kissed her finger.

He fumbled in his pocket for a minute, at last pulling out a small navy blue box. He held it up to her. “I should have at least given you this,” he said, sheepishly. Ginny grinned at him and lunged for it like a kid at Christmas. Harry pulled it away with a laugh. They tussled for a minute, while tickling and laughing, until Ginny pushed Harry onto his back and straddled his waist while he held the box away from her.

“Give it here,” she demanded in a playful voice and Harry tried to wiggle out from under her. Before he could move far though, she leaned down and kissed him on the pulse point below his ear and he stilled, chills shuddering down his back.

“That’s not playing fair,” he protested, and he could feel Ginny grin against the skin on his neck. She continued to kiss and lick, and even blew hot air on the area. Harry felt himself melt.

“Got what I wanted,” she cheered as she pried the box out of his hand. Harry grinned up at her, completely content to be pinned beneath her. She smirked at him and then focused her attention on the box. Her mouth froze in an ‘O’ shape as she cracked it open and looked at the ring for the first time. She continued to stare at it and for a moment Harry was worried that she didn’t like it.

“Is it alright?” he asked as he gripped her hips and sat up, pulling her to him. “Not big enough?” he joked and Ginny shook her head, swallowing thickly and blinking away tears.

“It’s perfect,” she said in a choking voice. She almost protested when Harry took the box from her and took the ring out, slipping it on her finger. “Perfect, see?” she asked again and Harry had to agree.

It wasn’t an overly large ring; only three round diamonds equaling just under two carats. The setting was in platinum with the largest diamond in the center and one on either side of it.

“I thought about giving you my mother’s ring; Sirius had it and he gave it to me when I was younger.” He grimaced a bit. “But I thought maybe you and I should have something of our own. The three stones are said to represent the past, present and future,” Harry explained while they both studied the way the gems sparkled in the light. “I thought it was appropriate. If you want something differ-mmph.”

Harry stopped talking because Ginny had wrapped her arms around his head and kissed him deeply. They continued to kiss as he sank back to the ground and rolled so that they were side by side.

When they finally broke apart, Ginny cuddled in close to him and lifted her hand to stare at her ring.

“It’s not going anywhere,” Harry teased softly. The truth was he liked seeing the ring on her hand. It settled some primal need within him.

“No,” she agreed. “It’s not going anywhere.”

Bill watched from the doorway as Molly and Hermione fussed around Ginny, using their wands to curl her hair and attach small flowers here and there in the glorious tresses. Bill had always loved his sister's hair. The tomato red shade looked funny on a bloke, he thought, but it was amazing on Ginny.

The girls chatted nonstop until, finally, they both stepped back and Ginny stood, looking into the full-length mirror in the corner of the room.

His breath left him at seeing the entire vision. She was more than beautiful. The simple white dress glowed against her skin, making it shimmer in pearlescent glow. Briefly, he wondered if that was some spell witches used, but it really didn't matter. The dress she wore wasn't like normal wedding robes; it wasn't even what he'd seen in the advertisements for Muggle weddings. Instead, it a simple cut white linen that seemed to float along with her, leaving her shoulders bare save two thin straps. It curved along with her body and ended just above her bare feet.

"Oh, Ginny," Molly breathed as she dabbed at the corners of her eyes. Hermione sniffled too and Bill smiled. Ginny just studied herself and then finally nodded, a pleased expression settling on her face.

"Mum," Bill finally spoke. "It's time to get you two seated." He motioned behind himself and Molly nodded. "Fred and George will escort you both down the aisle."

"Where's Ron?" Hermione asked as she quickly fixed her makeup.

"With Harry, I think," Bill said.

Molly looked up from her fussing, a concerned look on his face. "Is Harry alright?"

Bill smirked. "Yeah, it's not him. Mr. Black... erm, Sirius... was hyperventilating. Last I saw him, he had his head between his knees and Harry and Ron were holding him up."

"You know," Ginny mused, "that truly doesn't surprise me."

"Ron was the same way," Hermione sighed. "I was surprised Neville didn't have to drag him up the aisle."

"He'll be fine," Molly assured. "At least it's not a reluctant groom."

He stepped back as the two women passed him, his mother patting his cheek fondly. Finally, when it was only himself and Ginny, Bill turned to his sister.

"Ginny, you look... beautiful."

Ginny's eyes met his in the mirror and she stilled her hands as they adjusted a curl. Their gazes locked for a minute before she began moving again, fixing a hair there, smoothing the dress here.

"Is everything about ready?" she asked and Bill was amazed at the calm tone of her voice. His experiences with weddings, and granted it hadn't been more than a handful, told him that the Bride

should be a nervous wreck right now.

“Just about,” he said. Stepping closer to her, he slipped his hand into hers and gently tugged so that she was facing him. “Are you sure about this, Ginny?” he asked softly. “Are you sure about him? Because I can take you home right now, you know. We can leave and you don’t have to do this today.”

“Bill,” she warned as her expression darkened.

“It’s just so fast, Ginny. I mean, I know I said I was alright with the whole engagement thing and... but it’s just so fast.” A thought popped into his head and he scowled at it. “You’re not pregnant, are you?”

Surprisingly, she smiled at him and shook her head. “No, Bill, I’m not pregnant.”

“Could you be?” he growled.

Ginny broke free of his hold and turned back to the mirror, straightening a gold chain that hung around her neck, sliding the tiny diamond pendant back and forth. “I don’t think that’s any of your business, Bill. But if you’re asking if I’ve slept with Harry, then the answer is yes.”

Bill grimaced at the mental picture and then shook it away. “He’s not forcing you to marry him, is he?”

Ginny sighed and turned back to him, straightening his robes a bit and brushing a bit of lint off one of the shoulders.

“Did you know that the Bat-Bogey hex can come out of any orifice?” She raised an eyebrow up at him as he swallowed harshly. “Ask me something that utterly prattish again and I’ll prove it to you.”

He sighed and felt his face heat just a tiny bit even as he nodded his understanding. “You do understand what life with him is going to bring?” Bill asked softly as visions of dodging press and other undesirable people flashed through his head.

“More than you think I do,” she said. “But you need to understand that I’ve never been one to choose what was easy over what was right, Bill. And being with Harry is right. That’s all that matters, Bill. Harry and I have each other—the world can go to rot.” She finished with a feisty smile that Bill had seen all too rarely over the years.

And it finally convinced him. She would be all right. She and Harry had each other and the rest of the world didn’t matter.

“Alright then,” he nodded. “Let’s get you married. You do know that Mum’s doing her nut right now?” He shook his head as a sly grin split Ginny’s features. “You two take the cake, don’t you? Eloping—yet not.”

“Why would we want anything normal, for Merlin’s sake?” she giggled as Bill opened the door for her and her father paced on the other side. He wasn’t alone, however. Percy stood with him, looking prim and proper in his dress robes.

“Can I talk to you, Ginny?” he asked.

Bill looked over at Ginny, who nodded slowly. “I’ll see you out there then,” he said softly. Bill kissed her cheek and moved out the door to take his place.

It should be interesting watching this ceremony, he thought with a wry smile. Ginny was never one to follow in another’s footsteps, but this surprise wedding was really something. The only people in attendance were the immediate Weasley family with their various partners, Neville Longbottom, Colin Creevey with his ever-flashing camera, Sirius Black and Remus Lupin.

They all stood in a semicircle around an archway in the middle of a beach in the Caribbean.

It was close to sunset and the sun cast a glorious golden-red light over everything and everyone. Bill took only a moment to glance at his family before Harry appeared, his arm held by Sirius. Although, Bill thought with a smirk, it seemed that Sirius was indeed leaning heavily on Harry. They stopped near the edge of the circle and took their places, Sirius directly to Harry’s right.

Harry looked good; incredibly relaxed just as Ginny was. He was wearing trousers and a tunic of the same color and fabric as Ginny’s. The material seemed much more sensible than the heavy robes Bill’s mother had insisted he wear. He should have followed Ginny’s example and ignored his mother’s insistent pleadings that robes were just the proper thing to wear. He smirked to himself when he noticed that Harry, and Sirius, were barefoot as well.

He’d definitely take that bit of advice, he thought as he struggled out of his shoes and reached down to pull off his socks. He sighed in relief as his toes settled into the cool sand. He pointedly ignored his mother’s glare and wagged his eyebrows as all of his brothers, tugged their own footwear off. Soon, there was a ripple of laughter as almost everyone was barefoot around the circle. That all stopped when he glanced up to see Harry’s face frozen in shock.

Ginny and her father had arrived.

* * *

Harry chuckled as Ron handed the paper bag to Sirius again. His Godfather began breathing heavy, inflating and deflating the brown sack.

“I would have thought he would be made of sterner stuff,” Ron mused, ignoring the glare that Sirius sent his way.

Harry laughed louder and raised an eyebrow at his Godfather. “He usually is. I don’t know what’s gotten into him today.”

“It’s not every day my Godson gets married,” Sirius growled, resting his elbows on his knees. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

Harry bristled at the question. “Are you sure we need to have this conversation again?” Sirius paled slightly and shook his head.

“I’m going to go find Moony,” he mumbled, standing with only a slight sway and moving from the

room.

"Would you mind having that conversation with me?" Ron asked hesitantly. "It's not that I doubt what you feel for my sister, just..."

Harry smirked. "When did you fall in love with Hermione?" he asked.

Ron blinked at him, probably not sure how the conversation got turned around onto him. Harry watched him play with his wedding band for a second, spinning it around his finger.

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Honestly, when we were younger, she was rather annoying. But then... she kind of grew on me. And after the thing with Ginny... well, I couldn't stop thinking about her."

Harry nodded, taking the chair that Sirius had left, right next to Ron. "Ginny makes me smile." Ron gave him a bit of a half smile and a nod. "Before her... I just sort of wandered through life, you know. I had no idea who I was, or who I wanted to be. But with Ginny... I feel like I woke up, to this amazing world that existed between she and I. She doesn't give up on me, even when I give up on myself."

"Yeah," Ron said softly. "The first time I saw you two together... I knew."

Harry chuckled. "I wish it had been that easy for me."

"It never is," Ron laughed. They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes before Ron cleared his throat.

"If things had been... different, do you think..." Harry looked at him thoughtfully, curious as to what was getting Ron flustered.

"Do you think we would have been friends?" he asked.

A slow smile spread over Harry's face. "I think we would have been best mates," he said softly. And it was true. Next to Ginny, Harry felt the most comfortable around Ron in her family. Gratitude for Ginny, and her family, washed over him. The holes that were in him from so long ago, were finally starting to heal.

A knock at the door startled them both as Remus poked his head in the door. "It's time, Harry."

Harry nodded, a grin stretching over his face. "Have you seen—"

"Sirius is currently stuck to a chair outside," Remus smirked. "Didn't want him wandering too far."

Ron laughed and Harry shook his head. "Probably a good idea."

"You ready?" Ron asked, slapping Harry on the back lightly.

"Yeah," Harry nodded enthusiastically. "I'm ready."

Percy looked extremely nervous, Ginny mused when she took his arm. He led her off to the side of the hallway, glancing back at their father, who watched them both closely.

“Before you do this, Ginny,” Percy started. “Before you marry Harry... I just wanted to tell you I was wrong.”

Ginny had been very calm all day, surprisingly. Marrying Harry was just so right. There wasn't anything to be nervous or worried about. The fact that they were doing everything precisely they way they wanted helped also.

But now, with Percy's words, Ginny felt eleven again, listening to her older brother's advice about going to Hogwarts. Her chest tightened with emotion.

“I never should have said Penny's death was your fault. And you and Harry... I've never seen anyone who should be together more than the two of you.”

“Thank you, Percy,” Ginny said softly. “I think of Penny every day,” she added, hoping that he would understand what she meant.

“So do I,” Percy nodded, blinking suspiciously bright eyes.

Ginny smiled softly. “Audrey's here with you.”

Percy's ears flamed bright red and Ginny grinned. “You love her,” she guessed.

He glanced around the hallway, as if waiting for his brothers to jump out and take the mickey out of him at any minute. “Shhhh,” he hissed. “I... I don't know. Maybe.”

“Percy, can I give you a bit of advice?”

His eyes met hers—the same brown eyes inherited from their mother—and he nodded.

“Just let yourself fall,” she whispered. “If she's the one, she'll catch you.”

She patted his arm slowly and moved to her father, who grinned.

“Ready pumpkin?” Arthur asked and Ginny nodded as she took his arm.

* * *

Arthur Weasley had to catch his breath when he saw his daughter for the very first time. She was pink and wrinkled and absolutely perfect, even if she was screaming at the top of her tiny lungs. Having a girl, finally, after he had lost hope of having anything but boys was... indescribable.

Ginny had always been feisty and headstrong. She'd refused to nurse for the longest time until Molly had almost given up, then the tiny girl with the bright red peach-fuzz hair had latched on and gulped hungrily: as if it had been her very own idea. When she was only eight months old, she'd stood on her stubby legs and taken her first few steps, earlier than any of her brothers had.

He'd known that she had snuck out at night ever since she'd been six, nicking her brother's brooms

to teach herself how to fly. Arthur himself had purposely made sure the locking spell on the old door had been rather weak. Molly would probably have his head if she ever found out that he left his wand in a place that Ginny would be able to reach it. Some things mothers just didn't understand.

Her fourth year at Hogwarts had almost broken Arthur's heart. Neglected and ignored by her older brothers, Ginny had turned to an enchanted diary. The defeated look that she wore slowly ebbed away in the years that followed, but it never fully left her.

The carefree smile and personality hadn't fully returned until a day earlier this year when Arthur had seen her at the bookstore and seen her smile at Harry.

Somewhere deep in his heart, Arthur had known then that her heart belonged to the other man, but it took seeing them together at Ron and Hermione's wedding for him to fully accept it.

And now, here he was at his daughter's wedding. And, once again, the scrappy fire-haired woman was doing things her way.

"You look... amazing, Pumpkin," he whispered using the old nickname that Ginny claimed she'd outgrown. But today she didn't protest, only smiled indulgently at him.

"Thank you, Daddy," she'd replied and it brought a tear to his eye to hear that title used again. They continued to walk, arm in arm, through the small bungalow and out onto the patio that led onto the beach.

"Are you sure about this, Gin?" he whispered, while searching her eyes. "I can take you home right now."

Ginny smiled and glanced to where her family stood around the wedding arch. Her eyes met Harry's for a moment and she then turned to her father.

"Do you see him down there?"

Arthur glanced to where Harry stood, hands clasped in front of him and having eyes only for Ginny.

"Yes."

"He *is* my home, Daddy," Ginny said softly. Arthur let her words sink into his heart a bit before nodding. He'd known that would be her answer, but felt he needed to ask all the same.

"Then let's take you home."

Ginny's warm smile bolstered his confidence and he led Ginny toward the arch. When she stood just inches away from her soon-to-be-husband, Arthur stood behind her and nodded once toward Sirius who returned the nod.

The official began the ceremony but Arthur didn't remember much except the vows and the looks exchanged by the couple.

Sirius' heart pounded as he watched his Godson, a man whom he couldn't love more if he had been an actual Black, complete a magical transaction that would bind him to another person.

The officiate asked if both families had consented to the match. Arthur had voiced his consent and Sirius had nodded jerkily. It was silly to be this worked up, he knew. But deep down, he couldn't help but feel horrible that it was him standing here and not Harry's real father. Sirius had felt that on many occasions in Harry's life, and he was sure there would be many more.

"Do you, Harry James Potter, take Ginevra Molly Weasley to be your wife?"

"Yes." Harry's voice was strong and confident and Sirius blinked back moisture to focus on the couple in front of him. "You are everything to me, Ginny. For so many years, I've been so alone. But then I met you and you changed all of that. You are my best friend, my cheerleader, my confidante, and my lover. I promise that I will love only you forever. I promise to take care of you and to let you take care of me. Thank you for changing my life. Thank you for... making it easier to be me."

Sirius' throat closed up and his chest hitched at Harry's heartfelt vows. Harry reached up and with a quick smile, wiped away a tear that had trickled down Ginny's cheek. She chuckled and leaned into his caress a bit.

"Do you, Ginevra Molly Weasley, take Harry James Potter to be your husband?"

"Yes." Ginny's answer was just as firm as Harry's although it held much more emotion. "Harry, you are the most amazing man. And it's not only what you've accomplished in your life; but how you've done it. You are compassionate and caring, loving and humble. You make me feel like I can do anything in the world as long as we stand together. You are my best friend, my hero, my partner, and my lover. I promise to always love only you. I promise to take care of you and to let you take care of me, even when I don't really want you to." A ripple of soft laughter echoed around them. "You are my everything, and I will do anything I can to give you as much love as I can."

The officiate held out his hand and Harry and Ginny reached forward their right hands, clasping them together tightly as the older man held onto them also.

"Harry and Ginny have made their intentions known."

Sirius saw both Harry and Ginny nod their agreement, without moving their eyes from each other.

"Their magic will complete the bond once I begin the spell," the official said, removing his wand and waving it in an intricate pattern. When he was finished, he smiled and nodded toward the couple.

"May I present, Mr. and Mrs. Harry James Potter."

The man's voice brought Sirius' focus around and fully back to the Bride and Groom. It seemed that they were in their own world: intertwined in each other's arms, kissing for all they were worth. The flowers that Ginny had carried out earlier had dropped to her feet, forgotten. Sirius smirked and cleared his throat several times, but the couple obliviously continued kissing. He and Arthur traded smiles and the Weasley brothers began clapping their approval.

It appeared the applause was all Harry needed to remember where they were; he pulled back, red faced and grinned down at his wife.

Sirius joined the clapping and laid his hand on Harry's shoulder. Harry turned to embrace him fully and Sirius had to swallow the lump in his throat. He held the man who'd once been the boy he knew, tightly to him and gave a few manly shoulder slaps before being released and then having his ribs crushed in as Ginny hugged him as well.

"Thank you for everything, Sirius," she'd said softly. Somehow he knew exactly what she meant, and it had nothing to do with helping to arrange the ceremony. They both glanced over as Harry shook Arthur's hand firmly and then chuckled as the man gave him a fierce hug as well.

Sirius could only nod.

* * *

Harry's head spun just a bit and he wasn't sure whether it was the glass of warm rum he'd been drinking a few minutes before or the fact that he was spinning on the dance floor. Although it could have easily been the feel of the redhead in his arms.

They were married now. He was hers and she was his.

Harry sighed deeply and cuddled his face into Ginny's neck as her fingers rhythmically stroked the back of his neck.

"I love you."

Her soft words echoed in his ears and he smiled before placing a kiss on the pulse point of her neck.

"I know," he answered equally soft. "And I can't quite figure out why."

Ginny sighed dramatically and he swore he could feel her smile. "Neither can I, but it'll come to me one of these days."

Harry snorted in laughter and pulled back to see a smile break out on her face.

"You know," he said thoughtfully as he traced a laugh line near the edge of her lip. "My face should really be cracking from all the smiling I've done today."

"I know," she grinned even wider, "me too."

They both sighed at the same time and laid their foreheads together. Harry finally pulled back a bit and glanced around to see that several other couples had joined them on the small wooden platform that acted as a dance floor. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had the sides of their faces pressed together, their eyes closed as they waltzed around to the strange music made by the steel drum band. Ron and Hermione were near the edge and both seemed a bit put out at each other. Harry only smirked, knowing that this was more than normal.

"I'm so tired," Ginny sighed as she laid her head against his shoulder. Suddenly, she seemed much heavier in his arms and Harry smiled down at her while caressing the slightly frazzled curls on her

head.

“Shall we call it a night?” he suggested softly. His eyes once again darted around to find that most of their guests, the few that there were, had moved off in several groups and appeared to be enjoying themselves. Cups of the sweet rum that had been provided seemed to be prevalent along with a few more colorful drinks. Harry smirked, thinking that there would be more than a fair share of hangover potions brewed tomorrow morning.

He raised an eyebrow at the group that included Sirius, Remus and the twins. Have to watch that, he thought to himself.

“I’m ready to go,” Ginny offered, still cuddled against him.

“Think we can slip away without anyone noticing?”

Ginny laughed lightly. “Not likely,” she said. “It’s not as if there’s a crowd to get lost in.”

“I could just Apparate us out of here,” Harry suggested softly.

Ginny’s head picked up and she seemed to be actually considering it. “Have you warded the cottage?”

Harry nodded. “You and I can get in, but no one else can.”

“Wise idea, Mr. Potter.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Potter.” Harry grinned cheekily down at her and was rewarded with a firm kiss on his lips.

“I love that, too,” she said once she’d broken the kiss. “Mrs. Potter.”

“Well, Mrs. Parker for a bit,” Harry raised one eyebrow. “At least until we get the courage to deal with the press.”

“Hmm,” Ginny answered. Harry glanced down to see a completely preoccupied look on her face. Her fingernails gently scratching the back of his neck raised the hairs on his arms. When she did look up at him, her eyes were darkening in that way that made his breath hitch.

“Let’s go,” he said softly. Ginny’s eyes crinkled in a smile and she nodded once before leaning forward to kiss him. And they disappeared.

Epilogue: One Little Paper

A muscle in her back twinged and Ginny grasped the counter, taking a deep breath and pressing her other hand into the spot where the baby had just kicked.

“Listen here, you little...”

She blew out a sharp breath and stood up straighter as the pain eased. Maybe cleaning the kitchen hadn't been the best idea today, after all. She shuffled toward the table, her worn house slippers scuffling on the wooden floor.

“This is a better view anyway,” Ginny said out loud to the empty room as she sank into the chair and watched out the large window.

It was a brilliant view. The whole clearing behind their house lay in front of her, the broom shed off to one side and a small copse of trees on the other side.

They knew the minute that they saw the property that this was the place for them. Harry had immediately flown out on his broom, mapping out the grounds and deciding the perfect place for them to have the training pitches and broom courses.

Ginny had been perfectly content in watching him fly while deciding exactly where their house would sit and what it would look like.

And now, four years later, here they were.

Potter Academy of Flight was a huge hit and every session was full. That might have to do with who was teaching, Ginny mused, watching as Harry's dark head rose above the small crowd of parents who stood watching their young children hover on training brooms.

This was Harry's favorite class of the day. And Ginny loved watching him with the kids. He was such a wonderful teacher; patient and kind, while not letting them get away with messing around too much.

And the delighted smile he wore almost constantly just confirmed that he'd chosen the perfect thing to do with his life.

Ginny caressed her belly gently, wincing when the baby shifted inside her, grinding on her pubic bone. “He's going to be such a wonderful Daddy,” she promised their son.

The first year of their marriage had been a whirlwind. They'd only been given a few weeks in quiet, newlywed bliss before the press caught the first rumor of Harry Potter being married. She and Harry gave their only interview on the day of their one month anniversary.

Things had gone a bit insane after that, but they eventually died down. Harry went on a few more assignments for the ICW before resigning. Ginny continued to work at the bookstore while they made plans for opening the flying school.

Ginny flew with Harry every day up until she found out that she was pregnant. It was bittersweet to have to stop flying herself, and only direct her students from the ground. But it was well worth it, Ginny mused as she rubbed her belly again.

And in a few short years, they'd be able to have their own son out there on his first broom, racing around the pitch. In fact, in a few years, the lessons would be overrun by little redheaded Weasleys.

The thought made Ginny grin. Fred and George had finally settled down with families of their own. Ron and Hermione's little girl, Rose, was just starting to toddle around on unsure legs.

Percy and Audrey were expecting their second child in a few months.

Even Bill had found someone. The last time they had all gotten together, he had brought a lovely French woman named Fleur with him. In fact, she'd been the French Tri-Wizard Champion during Ginny's third year at Hogwarts. They'd apparently met while working for Gringotts. Ginny wasn't positive about her, but if she made Bill happy, then that's all that mattered.

Charlie was still single, but he always said he preferred it that way. "Why spread myself so thin when there's so much 'Charlie love' to go around?" he always asked, usually earning him a smack to the back of the head from his mother.

Sirius and Remus had moved back to England two years ago. In fact, they lived just down the lane a bit. Sirius was at the school most days, helping where he could, but mostly getting in the way. He and the twins had become especially good friends and many days he helped at their store, refusing to be paid for any work he did.

Remus had been a lifesaver in getting the school started. He and Harry had stayed up many nights laying out all the financial planning and structure of the actual lessons. And now, to everyone's surprise, Remus was actually dating Sirius' cousin.

Tonks had stumbled into their lives, quite literally, by assignment from the Ministry. Despite being a highly ranked Auror, she often had problems staying on her broom. She signed up for adult lessons one day while Remus was helping in the office.

The next thing they knew, she was taking private lessons from Moony—something Harry and Sirius snickered about for months.

But Ginny thought it was sweet. Two unlikely people, brought together in a unique way.

"Just like your Daddy and me," Ginny rubbed her belly again.

The class outside broke up as parents began to collect their children and move off to the Apparation point, or the floo connection in the broom shed.

Ginny watched contentedly as Harry hovered, banishing the small practice brooms and other training materials back to where they belonged. Slowly, he climbed off of his own broom and made his way to the house.

His cheeks were pink from the crisp fall morning air when he stepped into the kitchen. “What are you doing down here?” he asked, beaming when he saw Ginny.

“Just watching,” she shrugged. She tried to stand, wanting to wrap her arms around him and smell the fresh air on his clothing, but it was just too much. Harry chuckled and moved forward quickly to help her.

“Stop laughing at me,” she scolded softly. “You’re the reason I look like a beached whale.”

“You do not,” Harry laughed as he kissed her head, his hand automatically going down to caress her belly—as it always did. “You’re beautiful.”

“Whatever,” she grumbled, wrapping her arms around him fully and letting him hold her up. He smelled wonderful, like brooms, and leather and fall leaves. The scent invigorated her and Ginny drank it in.

The baby moved again and Harry chuckled, rubbing at the spot.

“He missed you too,” Ginny said softly. “And he wants to fly.”

“He will,” Harry promised, kissing Ginny’s forehead. “He’s going to be the best flyer ever.”

“No doubt,” Ginny protested, looking up at him. “How could he be anything but?”

Harry laughed, a sound that Ginny could never get enough of. “Maybe he’ll be a Chaser, just like his Mummy.”

“Or a Seeker, just like his Daddy.” Ginny laughed when Harry beamed at her. “Or maybe we’ll both be surprised and he’ll be a Keeper, like his Uncle Ron.”

“I thought I was a ‘keeper’,” Harry joked, making Ginny groan.

“Only if you never make that joke again,” she laughed.

“You love my jokes,” he pouted, rocking them a bit side to side.

“I love you,” she protested. They kissed several times and then turned to look out the window together at the world, painted in bright fall colors outside.

Ginny sighed. “It’s all so wonderful.”

“Yes,” Harry mirrored her tone of awe, still rubbing her belly. “It is.”

Ginny nodded, her eyes wandering over to the fireplace where a framed piece of blue paper sat, right next to their wedding photographs and various family members waving from their frames.

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