

Harry Potter

Gravity

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Summary: Harry Potter's world is about to change forever. He may be the new star Seeker of the Appleby Arrows, but that won't help him when a force of nature like Ginny Weasley comes into his life.

Chapter 1: Orbiting

Gravity: The fundamental force of attraction that all objects with mass have for each other.

Harry Potter let his eyes scan the pitch in front of him, a swell of pleasure and anticipation building inside him.

Soon it would be him out on that pitch, racing in the cool air, letting the thrill of the chase take over until nothing existed outside of the green of the grass and the blue of the sky. The urge to find a broom and simply force his way into the practice right now was great, but Harry resisted. Emory Linford wanted it to be a surprise, and had gone to great lengths to keep Harry's name out of the spotlight. It probably wouldn't do to ruin all of that by being impetuous. Sirius always said it was his worst quality; not that Sirius really should be faulting anyone for what he was guilty of himself.

Harry pushed the thought aside and moved out of the bright sunlight, tugging his cap low over his face.

A shadow passed over him and he looked up as Bradley Willman, the Arrow's current Seeker, flew past, leaning forward to close his hand around the Snitch. Willman wasn't bad, but he did lack... something. Harry wasn't sure what he would call it, but Linford assured Harry that what Willman was missing, Harry had in spades.

Playing professional Quidditch.

Some mornings, when Harry lay in his bed, it still seemed like a far distant dream that belonged to someone else. Surely Harry would roll over and find himself in the shadowy interior of Sirius' house, still immersed in the hell of war, or hiding in some remote place, shivering from cold while he and Sirius hunted down Horcrux after Horcrux.

Don't think about that.

The war was long over, Harry reminded himself, and he forced his mind from the dark thoughts back to the present. Quidditch. Fulfilling a dream and actually playing.

It was going to be brilliant. The attention Harry was bound to draw was going to be intense and he knew the press would be all over him, but he was willing to risk it for at least one season out there on the pitch.

After all, he'd had a few years of solitude while he traveled the world and did his best to make a life of his own.

Linford came up to stand next to Harry and watched as Willman scoured the pitch for his target.

"Have you seen it yet?"

"Twice," Harry grunted. His lips twisted up in a smile and Linford grinned.

"I told you it would come naturally to you." Linford sounds smug, as if he planned this whole great revolution of Quidditch himself. But Harry supposed that was just the nature of the man. He was rather smug.

Harry gave a noncommittal sound. Flying—even Seeking—wasn't what Harry was nervous about, actually. *Those* were no problem. It was being part of a team and being in the spotlight once more that Harry wasn't looking forward to. Harry saw himself as more of a solitary figure. He had worked with Sirius, and even Dumbledore, during the war, but in the end it had been Harry who needed to finish it.

"The flat is completely furnished now, so you can move in anytime." Linford jumped, as if he'd just remembered that fact. Harry watched with amusement as he described the posh place in great detail, nearly falling all over himself in an effort to please Harry. Despite his frequent protests that he didn't want special treatment, Harry knew it would come. The London flat was the only thing Harry had asked, actually, and the team went above and beyond, it sounded like.

That was alright, Harry supposed. It was just a flat, after all; a place for him to be when he wasn't at the pitch. He'd check it out later today and see about adding the necessary wards.

"Thanks."

Harry's single word cut off Linford's praise about how centrally located the flat was, and he shifted nervously. "Practice is almost over."

"I'd better go, then," Harry said. It was a relief to stumble on any excuse to leave. Harry knew he was going to have to change tactics when it came time to actually join the team, but for now it was easier to cling to the reclusive, solitary existence he'd kept for so long.

Linford held out his hand for Harry to shake. "I'll owl in a couple of days. We want to line up the new team publicity photo and have you meet everyone. They're going to do a feature about us."

"Perfect." Harry forced a smile that came easier than he expected.

It's all a game. Wasn't that what Sirius had said when Harry first approached him with the idea of coming back to England and playing Quidditch. 'The whole thing is a game—play it that way and you'll be fine.'

Harry could play this game. He could be the Harry Potter everyone wanted him to be—charming and charismatic, with a bit of an edge. He'd be whoever he needed to be to survive.

"I'll be there," Harry promised and gave the green pitch one last look before turning to leave.

Rather than Apparate to Scotland, as he had planned, Harry found himself in London, at the flat Appleby had secured for him.

It was spacious and very posh—far different than anyplace Harry had ever been, but it really didn't matter. Harry could stay just about anywhere. The pantry was well stocked and there were even framed photographs on the mantel. Harry peered at them and was amused to see he recognized no one. They were simply generic wizarding models, waving gaily at him and grinning—wizards and

witches who he'd never met, set in frames to make the whole place feel warmer and welcoming, rather than sterile. Harry would take them down as soon as he moved his things in.

The view from the huge windows on one side of the flat, Harry couldn't complain about. It was magnificent and Harry pictured himself sitting right here every morning, sipping his breakfast tea and enjoying the sunrise.

He could live like this for a year—or maybe longer if things worked out.

The bedroom was nothing short of spectacular as well, with the huge bed all for him. Harry couldn't resist flopping back onto it and stretching against the soft duvet.

Yes, he could definitely get used to this.

Really, what he should try and do was coax Sirius down here, away from the house in Scotland, away from the shadows of the past and the pain he'd drown himself in every day. It would be hopeless, Harry knew. Sirius would never leave the house. He would never let himself exist away from the darkness of that world.

He would never allow himself to live without the ghosts of Remus, James, Lily, and even Peter Pettigrew haunting him.

Harry couldn't live like that anymore—stuck in the past—and so he'd left. Maybe it was selfish to disappear for years, but Sirius actually encouraged Harry to get out of Great Britain and see the world.

But now it was time for Harry to come back to where he belonged and truly start living.

Harry stared up at the pale magnolia ceiling and wondered if this was the right way to do it. Quidditch.

Again, the pleasant anticipation of playing filled him. Harry hadn't been excited about anything in years, it seemed.

Yes, this was the right way.

He stretched his arms behind his head and grinned. It felt like floating, really, to be here, not only in this flat, but in this position in life. The whole world was before him and Harry knew all he had to do was ask for something and it would appear.

Not that he would, but the idea that he *could* was interesting.

* * *

The brightness of the kitchen made Ginny squint when she walked in. It was late—mid-morning already, but Ginny didn't care; she didn't have to be anywhere today. It was one of the last days of her freedom before the Quidditch season started again and she was determined to savor every last moment before practice began again in earnest. Gwenog wasn't one for slacking off and letting them sleep in late.

As her eyes came into focus, she widened them at seeing Ron sitting there at her breakfast table. Tonks was rattling about in the kitchen and the smell of breakfast was in the air.

"What the hell are *you* doing here?" she demanded in greeting.

Ron chuckled and sat back in his seat. "Morning, sunshine. Ginny, no offence, but you look like shi—"

"Leave off," Ginny grumbled and bumped his chair as she slumped into her own. "I was up late last night."

"Do I want to know who—"

"Just out with friends," Ginny dismissed with a wave, "nothing serious." She hadn't been out on a proper date in ages, it seemed. That was perfectly fine with Ginny, however. Romance wasn't really something she went in for anyway. The life of a professional Quidditch player didn't leave a whole lot of time for building relationships anyway, and she was still young. There would be plenty of time to find someone later.

"Because Merlin forbid you actually find someone—"

Ginny gave a low growl toward her brother and poured a cup of tea from the kettle steaming in the middle of the table. Ron's words faded out and he grinned at his sister.

"Exactly why are you here?"

"Won a bet. Tonks has to make me breakfast." Ron gave a satisfied little shrug and looked toward the kitchen where a rather large clattering sound escaped.

Ginny snorted. "You *won* and you're eating whatever *Tonks* is cooking?"

"I heard that!" Tonks called from the kitchen. Her spiky pink-topped head stuck out of the doorway and she glared at both of them.

Tonks and Ron had been Auror partners for almost a year and Ginny found their relationship extremely amusing. There was rarely a dull moment when they were together, yet they complemented each other nicely and were one of the top teams that the Ministry had.

"Ta da!" Tonks emerged carrying a plate full of eggs and toast in her hand. She slid the plate across the table with a flourish and, surprisingly, it landed exactly where it should, rather than in Ron's lap.

"I figured I was safe with breakfast," Ron reasoned. "You can't burn breakfast, can you?"

Ginny peered at the eggs, flecked with far too many black specks to be pepper, and bit the inside of her cheek to keep the laughter in. Tonks saw the look and her cheeks flushed, but she shoved Ron's toast on top of his plate, distracting him from the evidence of her culinary failings.

"The paper came," she turned to Ginny, "and there's a whole bit on Appleby."

"Ooo, give it here!" Ginny's eyes widened. She'd been waiting for this article for weeks now. Emory Linford—the manager of the Arrows—had been making an ass of himself, like usual, going on about how he was going to transform the slumping Arrows into the team to beat this year. He had strutted around the matches last spring like a puffed up peacock, making all sorts of claims about putting together the best Quidditch team the league had ever seen.

He was mostly full of hot air, Ginny thought. A retired player who had been injured several years ago, Linford had managed to scrape together enough credentials to land himself in a management position. He'd even shown up to several of the Harpies' games trying to scout various players, but the Harpies were a solid team, unlikely to be drawn away from a partnership that had won them the League Cup two years running.

Tonks retrieved the newspaper and levitated it in front of Ginny. Across the front of the Quidditch section was Linford's grinning face.

Arrow's Aim To Shake Up Quidditch World
Linford's Masterful Creation Of A Champion

"Come on, read it aloud," Ron prompted as he picked a gritty bit of something out of his teeth and scowled down at his remaining eggs.

Ginny snorted, but Tonks cleared her throat. "Yeah, Gin, read it aloud." Rather than draw attention to Ron's breakfast, Ginny sighed and began to read.

Ever since leaving professional Quidditch after a career-ending injury, Emory Linford has been waiting for his chance. "I know Quidditch still needs what I have to offer," the Manager of the Appleby Arrows said when he was first asked to return to the management team.

"More like bought his way on," Ginny grumbled.

"You think?" Ron sat up and peered at her. "Money's not supposed to have anything to do with it, not after they reworked the regulations."

"Money's always had something to do with it," Ginny pointed out, "and always will. That's how things are run, Ron." She returned to reading, ignoring the tentative way Ron was picking at what he could salvage from his meal.

"Crafting a championship team is more an art than a business," Linford points out. "You have to love the sport you're playing, and value the players that have mastered it. It's all about relationships, really."

"He's right," Ron interrupted again.

"He is," Ginny agreed, "but it doesn't help that he's a pompous ass about it. This article paints him in a good light, but..." She trailed off and grimaced at the man's reputation.

That ideal team is one that Linford says he's finally created. "It's taken me years of scouting," Linford says with pride, "but I've found the perfect blend of players, the

strongest team that the League will ever see. We'll definitely be turning heads in a few weeks when we match up against the Wasps in the season opener."

If perfection was what Linford was aiming for, this reporter believes he may have found it. The team will be captained by Puddlemere United's former Keeper, Oliver Wood—

"Bloody bugging hell," Ginny hissed. "I can't believe he gave it to Wood!"

Ron whistled low. "Captain so young... blimey."

"No wonder he was able to lure Wood away from Puddlemere," Tonks pointed out. "That definitely tips the scales in his favor. Wood's really been coming into his own over the last two years. Puddlemere's no slouch."

Ginny blinked as she read the sentence again. She remembered Wood's zealous attitude about Quidditch from school and wondered how insane he would be now, with his own team again.

In fact, an almost complete overhaul of the entire program is taking place: new management, new players, and new strategies. Linford is determined to be at the top of the League this year. "We've culled the best from the teams and even brought in some new, fresh faces," Wood chimed into the interview. "Only the best will do for the Arrows!"

Linford is positively beaming when he continues to announce his carefully crafted team. Only one Chaser returns, in fact, amidst all new players for the Arrows. Damien Thickwhistle will keep his outside Chasing position while the other two spots have been awarded to Malakai Raff, from Falmouth, and Lorin Davies, a young player straight from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

"Davies is one of the most instinctual Chasers I've ever witnessed," Linford answers when the lad's age is brought into question. "It doesn't matter if he's fresh from school; he's one of the best players Quidditch will ever see."

"I don't remember him," Ron said with a scowl on his face.

"You wouldn't," Ginny dismissed, "he was younger than me, even. He would have only just finished this spring. And despite being with Falmouth, Raff is a decent bloke. He's got a bad reputation with women, but he never went in for all that rough play. I'd imagine this combination will work well."

"At least they've chucked Willman," Ron continued. "You flew circles around him last season, Gin."

Ginny grinned. Even though she'd been much more interested in a Chasing position, when the Harpies offered starting Seeker, Ginny hadn't been able to turn them down. And she'd grown into the position, despite her misgivings at first; she had played Seeker at Hogwarts, after all.

"I'm guessing Beaters will be those twins—what're their names?—from the Tornadoes?" Tonks asked. "Merkley?"

Ron gave a disgusted snort. "Not those two. They're horrid. I'd say Jacobus from the Wasps and

Fortes from the Cannons.”

“You’re both wrong,” Ginny chuckled and pointed at the print.

Beaters will be the most unlikely pair: Crispian Paxton, who used to play at Chaser for Montrose, and Newt Hammon, former Beater for the Catapults.”

“Cor,” Tonks breathed. “Hammon’s a legend, almost.”

Ginny had to admit that the man was an icon in the Quidditch world. Why he’d stuck it out with Caerphilly—a team that the Harpies repeatedly trounced—for so many years was a wonder.

“I’ve seen Paxton play—you know, Linford might be right about him being a better Beater than Chaser. He’s got deadly accurate aim so when you put a bat in his hand...” Ginny shuddered and tried not to picture a Bludger coming her way, sent from that massive arm Paxton had.

“Who’ve they got for Seeker?” Ron demanded, “because it has to be someone extraordinary to keep up with that team.”

“They should have recruited you,” Tonks nudged Ginny, who blushed.

“Thanks, but I would have turned him down. I’m perfectly happy right where I am, at the top of the League.”

Seeker is the final position that Linford filled. “You have to have someone who is head and shoulders above everyone else,” Linford pointed out. “You don’t just want a player in that position... you want a paramount athlete. You want someone who makes everyone sit up and take notice when they come out onto the pitch.”

The Seeker is the star of the team, in a way, and who better to draw the crowd’s eye than the iconic Harry Potter.

“Blimey,” Ron whispered. “Have they really got...” He jumped out of his seat and peered over Ginny’s shoulder to the photograph at the bottom of the article. Ginny blinked at it as well. Sure enough, directly in the center of the team photo was Harry Potter, grinning widely with his arms thrown over teammates’ shoulders.

“Can he even play?” Tonks asked as she studied the picture.

“I assume so,” Ginny breathed. She had to shake her head a bit to clear the fog and wrap her mind around the idea. “At least the stands will be full.”

“Just to get a look at him,” Ron nodded. “Wonder if he’s any good.”

“Finish reading it, Gin,” Tonks prompted.

Ginny cleared her throat and tore her eyes from the handsome face in the middle of the page, and the bright green eyes that seemed to be watching her.

“If you thought Quidditch was beautiful before,” Linford points out when asked about

Potter's experience, "then wait until you see Potter on a broom; it's like... poetry." Fancy flying might be entertaining, but only time will tell whether Potter will be able to stand up to the intense schedule and rigor that Wood intends his players to abide.

"I have no doubts about Harry's abilities," Wood assures. "I've seen him play. I've scrimmaged with him and he's going to fit into this team perfectly."

"We've got a real chance here," Linford says. He beams at his players as they line up for their first official team photograph. "In the next season you're going to see blue and silver up there at the top."

"The League better watch out," Potter growls with a winning grin, "because the Arrows are coming for them."

When asked if his return to England was prompted by an offer to play, or the other way around, Potter simply said that it was time for him to come home. Potter declined to comment further on his rather reclusive status over the past few years and simply told reporters, "Listen, everyone, I'm part of a team. I'm a team player and I'm looking forward to working with everyone to create a cohesive unit that wins games." (For more about Potter, see "A Hero Returns" on page 5.)

"We'll be at the top this time next year. The Harpies better get ready!" Paxton laughs as the team makes jokes about Holyhead's League Champions. It's all a bit like a group of best friends already. The players seem comfortable around each other and determined to make waves in the Quidditch world.

Ginny scowled and pushed the paper away from her. "The rest is just prattling on about how brilliant Linford is." She wasn't quite sure how she felt about the new team, actually. Some good competition would be nice, but Ginny had grown comfortable and confident in her skills as a Seeker. She had to admit to being a bit intrigued by the idea of going up against Harry Potter. He was a legend, after all. If Linford was any judge, his flying must be amazing. This year would definitely be interesting.

Tonks flipped to the article about Harry Potter on page five, but quickly dismissed it as a rehashing of all the old information with nothing new to spice it up. She finally turned back to the front. "There's an announcement for the opening Quidditch Banquet made at the bottom," Tonks said as she scanned the last of the article. "You have to admit they're a good looking lot. I can't even decide which one is better looking. I might have to be your date to the dinner so I can choose in person."

Ginny smirked. Leave it to Tonks to be interested in the whole team. Honestly, Ginny thought Potter was the best looking of the bunch. Then again, she'd seen all the others before and none of them were surrounded in nearly as much mystery as The Chosen One. Perhaps it was that which drew Ginny's eye. And the eyes. Something about those brilliant green eyes wouldn't let Ginny look away.

Her childhood crush had faded many years ago—really, Potter was nothing more than a mythical hero in a bedtime story and a mention in the newspaper during the war. She'd never met the man.

"Not likely," Ginny scoffed and forced herself to nudge Tonks' shoulder. "I think I can find a decent date, thank you very much."

"No doubt," Ron laughed. "The blokes are queuing up to be with you, Gin. You've got your own ruddy fanclub, after all."

Ginny grimaced at the thought of actually having to find someone to take. A bloke expected something when you asked him to an event like the opening banquet. If they didn't want sex, they wanted to parade you around like some trophy and crow about how they'd managed to land you. And *then* they wanted sex.

"I may just ask Neville to go with me," Ginny sighed. Neville was safe. He was a great friend and he never expected more than her friendship. When they went out together he was attentive without being annoying, and was up for almost anything Ginny wanted to do. There was a time, in fact, when Ginny had actually considered a real relationship with Neville, but there was simply no spark between them. They got on well enough—famously, in fact—but when she was with him, Ginny felt as if she were with another of her brothers.

"Neville's great," Ron grinned. He knew Neville was a safe choice, as well, and he wouldn't have to read about some bloke drooling all over his sister in the papers. Ginny had heard the moans and groans about her dating life enough from her brothers over the past few years. She didn't need to give them ammunition willingly.

"We'd better get in, Ron," Tonks sighed reluctantly. "Much as I'd rather lounge about the flat like others I know..." She gave Ginny a knowing grin and Ginny very nearly pulled her wand to hex the witch. "Some of us have to go out and keep the world safe."

Ron nodded slowly and pushed away from the table. "I think I'll go ahead of you. Meet you there." He playfully nudged Ginny with his foot and winked at her. "Let me know if you need my help finding a date, yeah? I know a few blokes that—"

"Get lost," Ginny growled. If she let Ron pick her dates, he'd have her seeing the dullest plonkers around, just to keep her virtue safe. "I won't mention to Tonks that you're planning on stopping by somewhere to get an edible breakfast."

"Oi!" Tonks bristled as Ron's ears turned red and he Apparated away.

"You know he's going to do it, Tonks," Ginny pointed out through her laughter. "What you gave him was hardly food, let alone enough for him to survive the morning on. Remember how much he used to pack away at each meal?"

"Maybe that was my point," Tonks sniffed disdainfully. "Maybe he'll stop making stupid bets that I'm always going to lose if he has to eat my cooking a time or two."

Ginny laughed loudly and snatched the last piece of toast off Tonks' plate. "I think I may actually go in today, see if my kit is all ready for next week." She tried hard to push down the nervous flutter in her stomach. Really, she shouldn't be anything but confident about the Harpies chances this year; they were like a well-oiled Quidditch machine, churning out victories and climbing to the top of the League on nothing but sheer hard work.

"Someone sounds nervous," Tonks pointed out.

Ginny stared down at the photograph in the paper once more, slightly amused at how the men jostled each other good naturedly and vied for the spotlight. It was a bit immature, but Ginny knew it was all in good fun, having seen the behavior with all her brothers growing up. And Harry Potter looked completely at home in the center, grinning and laughing when one of the other players got up to something.

Yes, this year was definitely going to be interesting.

Chapter 2: Changing Trajectory

"You can't possibly imagine how much I hate things like this," Harry told Oliver dryly.

Oliver only grinned and slapped him on the back. "You'd better get used to it, mate. Every year there is the opening banquet, the closing banquet, and a few fundraiser events in the middle. Plus, there's the celebration when we win."

Harry couldn't help but laugh at Oliver's confident tone. The list of banquets sounded excessive, but Harry supposed he could struggle through them.

"Think of it this way," Malakai said as he came up beside the two, his shiny black face surveying the crowded room, "free drinks and lots of beautiful women. It's like going shopping for what you want without having to put much effort into it." His eyes lit up as a group of women in low-cut dresses walked by. "Excuse me, gentlemen."

Both Harry and Oliver laughed as the Chaser joined the group of three women and somehow managed to get his long arms around all of them.

"The man is a machine, I'm telling you," Newt said as he joined Oliver and Harry. "A different woman every time I see him."

"He does have a bit of a reputation," Oliver admitted.

"What about you, Wood?" Newt prompted. "Anyone special or are they all special?" His wide smile was warm underneath his crooked nose; he'd told Harry about it being broken four times in his career. Newt was the oldest player on the Arrows and had sort of taken an older brother role for the men. He was the only team member who was married, but his wife hated the banquets so he usually came alone.

"No one right now," Oliver admitted. "I've been single about a year. I'm not really looking. I have too much going on right now to deal with a woman."

Harry and Newt chuckled. "What about you, Potter, looking for anyone in particular?"

Harry shrugged a shoulder and sipped at his drink. His eyes scanned the crowd milling about the large room. There were plenty of women that caught his eye—curvy hips, willowy legs, perfectly shaped breasts—but nothing that interested him enough to make him leave the sanctuary that the bar offered.

"Nothing in particular," he reasoned. "I'll know it if something does spark an interest."

"Just... just keep it a bit more private than Raff does, yeah?" Oliver cautioned. "You, of all people, don't really need more press, and I don't want your focus to be anywhere other than on the pitch this season."

Harry nodded even though Oliver's tone made him bristle. He could handle himself well enough. Oliver didn't need to worry about anything. And if he wanted to go out with a woman or two and

enjoy himself, well... he was young and it was his right.

"The lad doesn't need a mother, Wood," Newt cautioned. "Come on, we can go find someone else to bother and let Potter get on with his drink."

Harry relaxed a bit as Newt led Oliver off into the crowd. League players continued to stream in the door, bringing Quidditch groupies and women who were wearing far too much makeup and very little clothing. He watched them with mild amusement but no real attraction. Cheap tarts didn't do much for him, really. They were okay for a dance or two now and again, but were usually far too vapid for anything more. And heaven forbid if one of them got you to take them home; they'd never let go. No, he'd dealt with that too much in the past.

Lorin Davies, looking far too young to be even allowed in the door, came up to stand next to Harry. They were the youngest on the team and usually stuck together against the older, more experienced players.

"Are you even legal?" Harry grinned when Davies ordered a Firewhisky.

"Yes," Lorin pouted slightly and sipped at the drink. Harry was amused to see small tendrils of smoke leak out from his ears. The kid was a Quidditch phenom—born to be a Chaser. Several teams had scouted him as early as his sixth year at Hogwarts, but the Arrows had been Davies' first pick. He was still a bit skittish when it came to actual play, but it was something he'd work out. Harry supposed he shouldn't really judge the kid, anyway, since Harry hadn't even played in a full, official game yet either.

"I didn't expect..." Lorin swallowed another gulp of his drink and stared at a scantily clad woman who sauntered past. Her eyes traveled up and down Davies before settling on Harry. Harry gulped at the predatory look and decided he definitely wasn't interested in this one. Merlin, she'd eat him alive!

Thankfully, she must have smelled his panic because she gave him one last long look before taking all five feet of her legs away.

"Do they really just..." Lorin gestured to the woman and Harry snorted.

"You could go a bit wild, I'd imagine, with everything offered to you, lad. Like a kid in a candy shop."

Davies nodded jerkily and finished off his whisky with a shaking hand. "I guess I just never expected the women to be quite so forward. It wasn't like this at school."

"Yeah, well... you weren't famous then," Harry pointed out. "Listen, you know you don't have to buy into that lifestyle, don't you? The whole celebrity thing... it's not real, you know. It's just... perception."

Lorin looked relieved at Harry's words and Harry silently congratulated himself on saying something right. Usually he mucked up giving any sort of advice to anyone.

"If you want to date the women, do it. If you want to be the celebrity, then do it. But you don't

have to.”

“What about you?” Davies asked. “No one asked you if you wanted it.”

Harry grimaced but pushed away the annoyance at the mention of his fame. “No, but my situation is a bit different.” He gestured vaguely to the room. “This really isn’t me, you know. It’s sort of a...” He trailed off when his mind couldn’t settle on the word he wanted.

“A façade?” Lorin asked.

“That’s it, I suppose,” Harry nodded. “I do what I need to do, but my life is my own.”

Davies nodded thoughtfully. “I’m not really sure what I want, I suppose. I’ve never had to deal with things like this.”

“Then just have a bit of fun with it,” Harry suggested, “but keep in mind that celebrity is a double-edged sword. It offers you everything you could ever imagine, but judges you for it also. You remember that and you’ll be fine.”

“Thanks,” Davies said quietly. He ordered another whisky, and one for Harry, and then leaned against the bar. “I have to admit, some parts of it are... brilliant.”

Harry chuckled as the boy’s eyes traveled over the women in front of them. Another wave of players entered the room, but this group was different. They seemed to come in a group and stayed together for long minutes before breaking away. Harry recognized them as the Harpies, and was immediately intrigued by both their behavior and appearance. The women were tastefully clothed, although their dresses were stylishly cut. The faces were fresh and mostly free of makeup—something Harry admired.

“That’s them, isn’t it?” Davies asked with an awed tone to his voice. “Holyhead?”

“That’s them,” Harry agreed.

“I actually went to school with Ginny Weasley, you know,” Lorin said proudly. “I was a couple years behind her, so I doubt she remembers me, but I remember her. Most of the blokes had a thing for her at one time or another.”

Harry found the redhead in the group of women and watched her closely. She had a man with her and they held hands, but her attention was more on her friends than her companion. The man looked familiar, but Harry was having a hard time placing him.

“That’s Neville Longbottom with her,” Davies pointed out. “He’s an associate professor up at Hogwarts—teaches Herbology.”

Longbottom. Now Harry could place the tall, rugged-looking man. He’d been one of the leaders of Dumbledore’s Army, a renegade group that had resisted the Death Eaters taking over Hogwarts.

“Ginny was right there along with him in the war, you know.” Lorin’s face reddened when he realized who he was actually talking to. “Of course, you know all about that.”

"A bit," Harry said with a smile. "I was actually quite removed from parts of it."

Harry studied Weasley again with appreciation. She was quite lovely, actually, petite with the perfect build for a Seeker. Her body was feminine, but not overly curvy. Her simply cut black dress accented all the right places and Harry let his eyes be drawn to the pale, creamy skin at her neck, where her red curls bounced now and again.

His face heated when her eyes caught him staring, and he quickly looked away, only to return again when he was sure she was engaged in further conversation. She laughed and the sound carried across the crowded room. It brought a shiver to Harry's skin. She really was beautiful.

"Are they together?" Harry asked. He wasn't sure why he even cared, really. Weasley was a competitor, not some Quidditch follower who was apt to throw herself at him. Perhaps that's what intrigued him.

"No clue," Davies said with a shrug. "I don't think so, but I've heard they come to these sorts of things together some. I don't go in for all that gossip, really, but I have a sister and Ginny is her idol so I hear all about it."

Harry nodded absently and finished his drink. He debated ordering another one but didn't want to get completely pissed tonight. Instead, he leaned on the bar and snuck looks at Weasley and Longbottom as they wound through the guests, greeting people and milling about. At some point in time, the two separated and Harry found himself face to face with Ginny Weasley.

Her hand was held out to him in an offer to shake, but he just stared at the small, thin fingers.

"I decided it was high time you met me, Mr. Potter."

* * *

Ginny bit the side of her nail nervously and then scolded herself when she realized what she was doing. Neville was late. Then again, he often was. Thankfully, he'd been more than willing to be her date, even if it meant he was likely going to spend the evening trailing behind her, fetching drinks and fending off admirers. Ginny made a note to look into buying him some sort of exotic plant as a thank you.

When he finally rushed up, horribly disheveled but grinning, Ginny sighed in relief.

"You look... wow, Gin!" He eyed her new dress up and down with a salacious whistle that made her face heat and a laugh bubble up inside her. Why couldn't she feel something for this man? He was so incredible.

"Thank you for doing this, Neville," she said as she straightened his robes and gave his hair a playful tousle. "Why is it that you put up with me? I drag you to the most boring things year after year and count on you to show up at a minutes notice. Honestly, you should tell me no."

Neville chuckled and rolled his eyes. "It's not like I've got anything better to do, Ginny. I can sit home and grade papers any day. You're my friend and you need me."

"More than you know," Ginny sighed and leaned into him. Neville's arms wrapped around her and she felt a comfortable, familiar warmth in his embrace.

"Come on, let's go in." Neville prompted Ginny forward and said his hellos to her team. They were used to seeing him as her companion for events like this and treated him as a sort of adopted member most of the time. "This will be over soon and you can get on with what you do best."

Ginny slid her hand into Neville's. "You're far too sweet, you know. One of these days I'm going to have to find myself a real date to these because some girl will come along and win you away from me."

Neville scoffed at her words. "Until then, I'm hopelessly devoted to you Ms. Weasley."

The banquet seemed to be like all the others she'd attended over the years: the same teams posturing, the same shameless bints flaunting themselves for the players, the same stuffy team owners and managers standing along one wall, the same reporters snapping the same photographs. All in all it was horribly boring.

Neville held her hand and politely pretended to be interested in the passive aggressive conversations around them.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to him and he smiled patiently down at her.

"Gin, I know my role at these things well by now. I'm here to get your drinks, glare at any male who comes up to you uninvited, and nod politely to any and all conversation. One day I'll come up with a way for you to pay me back, until then I'll play my part."

Ginny's heart twisted at the loyalty of her friend and she knew she'd never be able to pay him back for all that he'd done for her. Luckily, this was Neville, and no matter how much he joked about it, he would never expect her to do anything for him.

She felt her face heat and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before turning back to listen to Gwenog and Oliver Wood verbally spar about the upcoming season. Her eyes wandered the room and she shivered when her gaze settled on Harry Potter, near the bar, watching her intently. He flushed and looked away quickly.

Ginny smiled to herself and checked to see if Neville was paying attention. He seemed to be in his own world, really, standing next to her with his glass of wine. No doubt he was doing lesson plans in his head, or mentally rearranging the greenhouses.

Several times over the next few minutes Ginny felt the weight of that green gaze on her. It made her extremely aware of every imperfection and she shifted nervously.

"Let's move around a bit," Ginny prompted and Neville jerked his attention back to her, smiling and nodding politely. As they wove through the crowd, Potter's eyes followed her and Ginny became completely neurotic about why he would be staring at her. More than likely he was simply sizing up the competition, but his staring was driving her around the twist.

"Someone has eyes for you." Neville's words made her start and Ginny felt her cheeks heat. He

grinned down at her and then took a sip of his wine before gesturing toward the bar when Potter and Davies were leaning. "Go over and talk to him. I'll make myself scarce."

"Oh, Nev, you don't need to—"

"It's alright," he said and kissed her cheek quickly. "After all, it's not every day Harry Potter looks at my friend that way."

"It's nothing," Ginny dismissed, "he's probably just trying to figure out how quickly he can knock me off my broom."

Neville chuckled and placed his hand on the small of her back, giving her a little nudge toward the bar. "Go on. You won't know until you talk to him."

Ginny glared at Neville, but he simply laughed and melted into the moving crowd. She took a deep breath and moved slowly across the room. Potter looked startled when she finally stood in front of him and she was pleased to see his face flush.

"I decided it was high time you met me, Mr. Potter."

Ginny held her hand out to him and he stared at it before moving his into it.

"Er... Harry Potter. And you're Ginny Weasley."

She chuckled softly and glanced over at Lorin Davies who smirked and nodded to her. "I noticed you watching me earlier," she said boldly. "And I'm not sure whether I have something stuck to my forehead, or if you're interest is purely of a professional nature. I've been flying since I was five, so knocking me off my broom will be a tough feat, if that was what you were plotting over here."

Potter actually chuckled and his shoulders relaxed somewhat. He shook her hand firmly and then let it slide from his. "Good to know," he said. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Ginny nodded and moved to stand next to him at the bar. "White zin, please," she told the bartender.

"I have to admit, I was sizing you up," Harry said when they got their drinks. "I've heard all about this kick-ass Seeker and wondered if I stood a chance against her."

"Ooo, you know, that wasn't a half-bad lie," Ginny complimented with a chuckle. "There may be hope for you yet."

Harry turned and leaned on the bar. Their shoulders rubbed slightly and Ginny had to admit he was even more attractive up close. His hair was messy and his glasses smudged around the edges. His robes were haphazardly thrown on but fit him exquisitely well. She could tell he put little thought into how he looked, and that was refreshing, especially in this business where appearances were everything to some blokes.

"I suppose I'll just have to watch you play to truly know," he said as he tipped his head toward her.

Ginny was surprised by how easily he flirted, and yet it wasn't dirty or condescending like some

players got. It was stimulating, actually, and horribly cute.

"I suppose you will. We are the team to beat, you know."

He laughed and Ginny smiled at how bright his eyes were behind his glasses. "I've heard that too. I think we may just give you a run for—"

"Harry, mate," Oliver Wood came up on Harry's left and slapped him on the shoulder with a forced chuckle, "I hope you're not sharing all our secrets with the *enemy*."

Ginny sneered at him and was disappointed when Harry laughed stiffly. "Of course not. I did make that Unbreakable Vow, after all." Ginny sighed when the rest of Harry's team crowded in around her. If she hadn't grown up with Fred and George and their intimidation tactics, the huddle might have worked.

The snarky way they all laughed made Ginny grit her teeth.

"Can't have those Harpies charming their way into your trousers, Harry," Malakai warned.

"At least they sent over their tastiest offering," Paxton said as he reached out to run the back of his finger down her shoulder. Ginny shrugged it away and glared at all of them.

"Potter wasn't doing anything wrong," she explained. "I was just doing my best to convince him that he should stop hanging around second raters like you. Sadly, he's a lost cause." She glared at Harry who guffawed with the rest of the Neanderthals surrounding her.

"Since he can't seem to take a hint," she sniffed, "I'll just leave him to you."

"Watch your back, Weasley," Potter called out as Ginny started to walk away. "You're standing between me and the target, and I don't like to take second place."

The steel in his voice would have excited her at any other time—Ginny always relished a well-fought competition—but his friends surrounding him, egging him into acting like a complete ass took any fun out of the situation. What had happened to him? Where did the charming, flirtatious Harry Potter disappear too?

"I suppose you'll just have to get used to staring at my ass then, Potter, because I don't know how to lose."

Potter grinned at her challenge and took a step forward, invading her personal space. Her heart thundered and she wondered if he was going to kiss her for a moment before he took a deep breath in through his nose.

"Smells like second place to me," he whispered.

Ginny felt her face heat and she glared at him. "You're an ass, Potter," she hissed and turned on her heel. The laughter of the entire Arrows team followed her across the room. She was furious by the time she found Neville and tears burned at the back of her eyes.

Honestly, why she'd let him get to her was a mystery. She'd verbally sparred with far more

intimidating, educated men than Harry Potter and come out on top. Why had he been able to rattle her so easily?

She knew the answer and was ashamed of it at the same time. For a few brief moments, she'd been taken in by him. She'd actually fancied Harry Potter and been attracted to him as a real person, not as some storybook hero.

"Come on," Neville said as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "I'm sort of tired anyway. Let's get you home."

"I'm not coming to the next one of these," Ginny promised both Neville and herself. "And I'm going to bury Potter when we play them."

Neville chuckled and led her from the crowded room. "That'll teach him."

She was still fuming when they arrived at her flat and Neville watched with an infuriating grin on his face.

"I should have hexed him," Ginny hissed as she paced back and forth. "I really should have pulled my wand and given him a reminder of just who I am."

Neville laughed, although he tried to hold it in. "Ginny, as much as I agree that he was being a bit of a prat—"

Ginny interrupted with a spluttered comment, but Neville continued to talk over her.

"You have to remember who *he* is. I honestly don't think he's like that all the time. He'd been drinking and his mates were all around—"

"Do *not* make excuses for that git!" Ginny demanded. "He was being a pompous—"

"—and we men have a tendency to lose our heads when a beautiful woman starts flirting with us," Neville finished.

Ginny's tirade against Harry Potter filtered out and she felt her face heat at Neville's praise. Why couldn't she feel that same stomach-fluttering feeling with Neville that she had simply standing next to Harry Potter?

"Do you really think I'm beautiful?" she asked as she moved closer to him.

Neville furrowed his brow. "Of course I do," he said. "I've told you that loads of times, Ginny."

She melted into his arms and hugged him tightly, all the while wishing she felt more than familiar friendship. "Why do I always have to pick the worst men?" she asked softly. "Why can't I fall for someone wonderful like you, Nev?"

He didn't answer, but simply held her tightly.

Ginny let out a shaky breath and lifted her face to look at him. Taking a chance, she pressed her lips to his. Neville's hand came up and cupped her cheek gently, and he followed her in the kiss.

While it was nice, it did nothing to strike a spark inside her and Ginny knew it was wrong.

"I'm sorry," she apologized the moment they broke apart. "I just... sometimes I wish I felt something more than friendship between us, you know?"

"I know," he sighed. "You and I work well together. But the truth is, Ginny, I just don't feel that way about you."

A slow smile spread across her face and Ginny sighed. "I know. I suppose we're just relegated to being friends. You'll never know how terrific I am in bed and I'll never get to see if you blush all over when I say things like that."

Neville's face was very red and he chuckled while shaking his head at her. "You're one of a kind, Ginny Weasley, and you're going to find someone someday who truly sees that."

Ginny rested her head against his chest and let herself relax. She didn't need anyone, really, not in a romantic sense, anyway. There were plenty of people in her life that filled the void of loneliness—friends, teammates, and family. Besides, she was just starting into another season and she really needed to keep her mind focused on the game. And on beating Harry Potter to the Snitch at all costs.

Chapter 3: Acceleration

The Arrows' first game of the season was on, arguably, the most perfect Saturday afternoon for a Quidditch game ever. The sky was a brilliant blue and the sun was high, radiating warmth through the September afternoon. In one brief vindictive moment, Ginny wished it was raining—horrible thunderstorms full of lightning that would strike all of the Arrows' players and straighten them out a bit.

She pushed the nasty thought away from her and tugged the edges of her hat down over her hair. It wouldn't do to be recognized and singled out, not when she'd gone to such great lengths to purchase a ticket and sit amongst the general public for the game.

Ginny didn't want to be in one of the press stands or, heaven forbid, the seats reserved for special visitors. She wanted to watch the game objectively and look for strengths and weaknesses in the Arrows' play. More importantly, she wanted to watch Potter's performance and see if he was all that the press was saying he was. Purely on a professional level, of course.

The fact that she couldn't stop thinking about his eyes or the crooked way he smiled had absolutely nothing to do with it.

The crowd cheered loudly when the Arrows took to the air, their pale blue robes flapping in the light breeze. Ginny glanced around the box she was in, perfectly happy that no one had recognized her or suspected her of being anyone other than who she seemed to be—a Quidditch fan come out to revel in a well-fought game.

Potter shot into the air and hovered opposite the Wasps' Seeker, Tibby Leighton. The two men squared off and paused as the balls were released.

Ginny felt the exhilaration that came as the Golden Snitch buzzed into the blue sky and disappeared from sight. The announcer began calling out the plays as the game began, and Ginny relaxed back into her seat to observe.

The two Seekers were hardly evenly matched. Potter did indeed have an elegant grace in the way he flew that made Ginny think he'd been flying since he was very young. She knew his father had played Quidditch when he was at Hogwarts, so perhaps it was simply innate in the younger Potter.

Leighton was always rather skittish about Seeking, Ginny thought. The few times they'd played each other, Ginny had easily found the Snitch and ended the game almost before it had begun. He seemed inclined to follow the same pattern today and Ginny knew that if Potter was worth anything as a Seeker, the game wouldn't last long.

Her focus turned towards the Chasers and she watched as they pulled off a perfect play to score. She didn't cheer as the crowd around her did, but gave a respectful nod. Thickwhistle, Raff, and Davies were working well together. The Wasps' Beaters were struggling to keep up with the fast pace of the game. That wouldn't be an issue for the Harpies, but Ginny made note to tell Gwenog and Cam how Thickwhistle seemed to be the weaker link in the trio.

"Ginny Weasley."

Ginny startled and her eyes went wide when a man stepped in front of her. He grinned down at her and Ginny was relieved to see the face of Dennis Creevey. She grimaced and prayed that no one had heard her name.

"Hush, Dennis," she scolded. "You're going to get me discovered."

He chuckled and sank into the open seat next to her. "Don't worry, everyone's watching the game."

It did seem as if Ginny's secret was safe for the moment, anyway. The entire box was watching an intense back and forth between Paxton and Hammon that was keeping the Wasps' Chasers dodging and weaving to stay out of the Bludgers' paths.

"What are you doing huddled down here, watching with the rest of us common people?" Dennis asked with a chuckle.

"Seeking a bit of anonymity, actually," Ginny mused. She kept one eye on the Seekers as they both searched for the elusive Snitch.

"Ah," Dennis nodded thoughtfully, "sizing up the competition, are you?"

Ginny chuckled. "Possibly," she admitted. "There are much fewer distractions than if I was in a regular box."

He nodded thoughtfully. "It seems forever since I've seen you," he smiled. "Lorin got me a ticket today, although I would have been here anyway. We were mates back at Hogwarts." He grinned with pride as Davies flew by, the Quaffle tucked under his arm.

"I'd forgotten you were both in the same year," Ginny said. "Hang on, what do you mean you'd have been here anyway?"

Dennis' cheeks flushed and he lifted a small, rectangular badge. A press pass. Ginny's eyes widened. "Yeah?"

He shrugged sheepishly. "I just got on with the Daily Prophet, actually. Don't worry, though, I'm not going to ask you for an interview."

Ginny chuckled and pretended to wipe the sweat from her brow.

"At least not right now," Dennis amended with a cheeky grin.

They laughed and turned back to the game just as Potter and Leighton both swerved into a steep dive, neck and neck, plummeting out of the air toward the pitch.

"Oh ho!" Dennis breathed. "They've seen the Snitch."

Ginny peered ahead of the two players, who were elbowing each other back and forth viciously, but couldn't see the glinting ball. She studied Potter's intense concentration and realized what was truly happening.

"It's a feint," she breathed, a modicum of respect to her voice. Leighton had never been one for

feinting, so it must have been prompted by Potter. Leighton was the first to pull up, veering off far too early. Potter held the dive for a moment longer, dragging a deep gasp from the entire crowd. Just before he ploughed into the pitch, he pulled up sharply on his broom and grinned viciously at Leighton.

“Cor, that was something, wasn’t it?” Dennis stared with wide eyes.

Ginny felt her heart beat in her throat and, for the first time since meeting him, wondered how a match between herself and Potter would turn out.

“Are you nervous about playing them?” Dennis asked. He must have asked it twice, or more times, because he eyed Ginny strangely when she jerked up to look at him.

“What? No, not at all,” she recovered. Her face heated and she watched Potter circle the pitch one more time. The satisfied smirk he wore every time he passed Leighton made Ginny scowl. Really, he was just as arrogant as the rest of the Arrows.

“No,” Ginny repeated. “In fact, I think the Harpies won’t have a problem with them at all.” An idea blossomed in her head, a way to get back at Potter, and the rest of the Neanderthals, for their behavior at the Opening Banquet.

If Dennis knew what was blooming in her mind, his face would have held a much less amused expression right now.

“How would you like to have an exclusive interview from me, Dennis?”

His eyes lit up and Ginny swore she could see the wheels in his head racing. “Er... sure, I suppose. Why me?”

“Because I suddenly feel like talking,” Ginny said. “And because the Arrows have had their fair share of press around here. It’s time someone told the world what they’re really about.”

* * *

Harry leaned against the weathered wooden slats just to the inside of the porch and watched as the dull grey waves crashed on the shore. The whole hillside seemed to shudder under the onslaught of the storm and Harry shivered as the wind picked up once more.

Despite the violence of the scene, it was horribly picturesque. This whole area fit Sirius’ personality perfectly, from the craggy cliffs that started just a hundred meters from the cottage, the tumble-down rock fence that partitioned the property from those around it, the salty brine of the ocean air, and the twisted thorny briars that existed in the heavy woods. It was all beautifully primitive and horribly tortured.

Just like Sirius in a lot of ways.

“You don’t have to check on me, you know.” Sirius was standing in front of the large window that looked out over the ocean when Harry finally entered the house. He didn’t turn to look, but continued to watch the rain lash at the glass.

"I know how to feed myself, clean up, and I occasionally bathe." When he finally looked at Harry, there was a hint of mischief in his eyes. He slowly lifted a steaming cup of coffee and sipped at it.

"I know," Harry said as he shrugged. "But it's been a few weeks and I figured someone needed to make sure you were alive still."

Sirius gave a dry snort and turned back to the window. "Hagrid was up just the other day."

Harry's mouth shut with an audible clap and he couldn't think what he'd been meaning to say. It was good that Hagrid came about now and again. Ever since Remus...

Nope. Not going there today.

"Good," Harry grunted out. "Now you can have two minders."

Sirius shook his head slowly and moved further into the dark interior of the house, winding through the narrow halls into the small, but cozy kitchen. There were so many memories in this house, Harry thought, both good and bad. This is where he'd grown up from the time that Sirius had taken him from Privet Drive, until they'd been discovered by Dumbledore.

"I don't need a minder," Sirius grumbled, "any more than you do."

Harry had to concede the point; they were both grown men, fully capable of doing whatever they wanted with their lives, but that still didn't mean he didn't worry about the man who was the closest thing he could imagine to a father.

"Maybe if you didn't sit up here all the time, brooding," Harry pointed out, "I wouldn't have to come up here to make sure you haven't died."

Sirius glared at Harry over the rim of his cup. "You'd know if I died; I'd haunt you."

Harry snorted. "That would mean you'd have to come and visit me."

"I could now," Sirius pointed out. There was a spark in his eye that Harry hadn't seen there in a long time and he wondered what the old man was up to that put it there.

"You don't even know where my flat is," Harry said with a roll of his eyes.

"Do so," Sirius pouted. He stood violently from his chair and it protested, scraping along the tile floor loudly. "London." He began rummaging around in the icebox, and tossing various items onto the counter.

"Bravo!" Harry laughed. "That would only take you a few years to search."

Sirius' head lifted and he gave a rare grin. "It's a shame you got your father's sense of humor, you know. I'm sure James is loving the irony that he can still be a pain in my arse from beyond the grave."

"Someone has to take the hard jobs," Harry sighed in a long-suffering sort of way.

"Why are you here?" Sirius demanded. Harry wasn't offended by his brusque tone; he knew Sirius loved when he came to visit. "Just come to annoy an old man?"

"Well," Harry drawled, "that's really just a side benefit, I suppose."

"Cheeky little blighter," Sirius mumbled as he began slapping sandwiches together. With a start, Harry realized it was probably well past noon. He'd been in the habit of sleeping late on days after games, when Wood didn't schedule practices, and hadn't even realized what time it was before he Apparated to Scotland.

"Listened to the game yesterday," Sirius grunted out as Harry joined him and they worked side by side. "Good game."

"Thanks," Harry smiled. "I was nervous, but once we were up there... I don't know, I sort of felt... at home, I suppose. That sounds strange, but—"

"Not at all," Sirius cut in. "You were always brilliant on a broom. James and I used to tell Lils that we knew you'd go pro one day. It was your father's dream, you know."

Harry nodded. He'd heard the stories more times than he thought he could ever count growing up. "Anyway, the Wasps were all over the place, horribly chaotic, but it was fun."

"Good. Hagrid and I talked about coming down one time, maybe catching a game."

"That would be brilliant!" Harry crowed. "Let me know when and I'll get you tickets—top box."

Sirius shifted uncomfortably, but did nod. Harry knew Sirius hated being out in public even more than Harry did. But Harry had forced himself to ignore that particular hesitancy and was actually enjoying himself more than he thought possible.

"Perks of the job, I suppose," Sirius said after he sat down at the table with his sandwich. "Free tickets anytime you want."

"There are others." Harry sat across from him with his own meal. "The flat is decent, and they did let me be in London, rather than renting some frumpy little cottage in Appleby."

Something hit the window outside and startled them both. "Probably the post," Sirius grunted. "Get an owl treat from the cupboard, will you? The good ones. This feather-duster deserves something decent if he managed to make it all the way up here in this weather."

Harry chuckled as his godfather let a rather bedraggled looking owl in through the window. It dropped a soggy *Daily Prophet* onto the table and gratefully accepted the few treats that Harry offered.

"Anything decent in here?" Sirius asked as he sat once more and opened the paper.

"No clue," Harry said with a shrug. "Didn't read it today."

"Probably an overview of the game," Sirius pointed out through a mouthful of sandwich.

"I don't need an overview," Harry chuckled. "I was there."

Sirius mumbled something and buried himself in one of the stories. Harry finished his sandwich and moved to make himself another while Sirius kept reading.

"Anything decent?"

"Same old Ministry drivel," Sirius answered back. Harry heard him rustling the paper and muttering about politics.

"Oi, there's a bit about the game."

A smile came to Harry's face as he remembered yesterday's game. His stomach had been a whole mess of knots right before the team had flown out. Thankfully, he hadn't been as nervous as Davies, who had thrown up three times before climbing on his broom. But once Harry was in the air, hearing the roar of the crowd and feeling the exhilaration of play, all his nerves disappeared and the sheer enjoyment of the game took over. Only on the pitch had he ever felt this way—like he knew what he was born to do, and it had nothing to do with a ruddy prophecy, or war, or vanquishing a Dark Lord. Up in the air he was only Harry.

"Do you know Ginny Weasley?"

"Wha...?" Harry startled from his daydream and blinked at Sirius, who had gone back to reading. "Weasley?"

"Yeah. Wonder if she's Arthur and Molly's youngest," Sirius mused. "Seems to me they had a daughter."

"Yeah, I've met her, why?" Harry said. "She plays for the Harpies. Fiery little thing. They didn't have a game yesterday. I think they play sometime this week."

Sirius kept reading and whistled long and low before grinning up at Harry. "What did you do to her?"

Harry's jaw dropped and he glared at his godfather. "Me?"

"Well, you, or just the Arrows in general." Sirius actually chuckled and Harry dove for the paper. "She loathes you, kiddo. If I had to guess, I'd say it's far beyond simply hating you."

Harry growled and snatched the article while Sirius continued to snicker. The words jumbled together and Harry had to blink away his annoyance and building anger to even make out what they said.

"... chauvinistic, pompous, haughty... I like all those adjectives, you know," Sirius laughed. "I think she may have your number, Harry, my boy."

"That ruddy... *witch!*" Harry hissed. Weasley had been thorough whenever she'd given this damn interview, and had viciously ripped apart the Arrows play, as well as the team themselves. She called them immature toerags of the highest order. Her worst comments, however, had been for Harry himself, who she called an amateur player and predicted that he wouldn't last an entire

season.

"I can't believe she did this. She's nothing more than a pampered princess, spoiled rotten to the core... talentless, big-mouthed, red-headed, temper-driven..." Dozens of other names ran through his head, and Harry tossed the paper away from him, seeing red. "How *dare* she say..." He was so angry that the words weren't coming to him correctly and that he couldn't even seem to express himself.

And Sirius... Sirius just sat there with that infernal, infuriating grin on his face. His arms were crossed over his chest and his scraggly, chin-length hair framing his thin face.

"She certainly played you well," he mused.

Harry glared at him and fought the urge to set the scattered newspaper on fire. "She can't think she's going to get away with that," he finally spluttered. "That's... that's slanderous and... and... and libel!"

Sirius shrugged. "Not necessarily so," he said. "It was published in the opinion section and she didn't say anything that wasn't necessarily true, from her point of view."

"I am not a pompous git!" Harry erupted. "I've only ever talked to her once! Once, Sirius, and she thinks she has the number of the whole team." Harry snatched the offending bit of paper from the floor and glared at the picture of Ginny Weasley in her Harpies uniform. Really, she was quite pretty, but that made Harry all the more furious with her.

"I ought to march down there and—"

"And nothing," Sirius cut in. "You'd only make things worse. Besides, all is fair in love and war, you know."

Harry's jaw dropped and he crumpled the paper in his hand. "This is *not* love, I assure you. She's nothing more than a spoiled tart who believes she's entitled to anything she wants because she's a witch who happens to play Quidditch."

"The Harpies hold the League Cup," Sirius pointed out. "Besides, she's just accomplished what she set out to do."

Harry dropped the crumpled paper on the table and blinked at his godfather. "What?"

"She riled you up. And I'm sure your team is reacting similar to you. It was a risky move on her part, and it could have gone either way. You have to admire her spunk for taking the chance."

"Sirius, what the *hell* are you talking about?" Harry demanded.

He shrugged nonchalantly and summoned the wasted newspaper to him. "What she said was border line, and she had to know it would make you angry. That could have two outcomes, really: either you'd be so worked up that you'd play horribly, or you'd be so determined to prove her wrong that you'll do anything you can to win. Like I said, it's a risky move. She's betting on you being so undone over this article that you'll fall apart. I admire her for it."

Harry blinked as he contemplated that. When you looked at it like that, the things she said had a brilliant undertone to them, but Harry still thought she was an ass for doing it. It was playing dirty when the Arrows hadn't done anything to deserve it. Yes, they'd been a bit confident—perhaps arrogantly so—at the Banquet when he met Weasley, but that was all for show, really. The blokes were great, hardly conceited at all.

“So what do I do?” Harry asked. “I can't just ignore something like this.”

Sirius gave him a look that Harry couldn't quite place and then sighed. “Well, that's up to you, isn't it? You *can* be a bit arrogant, Harry, but at least you come by it honestly. James could be a right prat when he wanted to be, but underneath all of that he was the best friend a bloke could ever have.” Sirius sank into his chair and sipped at his now-cold coffee. His expression was wistful and dark. “It wasn't that he thought he was entitled, really, more that he was expected to perform and had always succeeded in everything he tried, so he really didn't know how to fail. It made for a few uneasy years while he tried to figure out how to court your mother, that's for sure, but he eventually figured it out.”

“Do you think I'm arrogant?” Harry's mind was blank at the suggestion. He'd never seen himself that way and it was a shock to imagine that he could be.

“In a way,” Sirius admitted. When Harry spluttered, he held up his hand. “You could be so much worse, Harry. Honestly, I think it comes more from your youth and the fact that I wasn't really the best person to raise you. It's not like I could teach you about being social with others and what was appropriate. Hell, even I'm not sure of things like that.” He rubbed his face harshly and Harry saw the weight of all the years press on him—the black shadows of Azkaban, the regrets of a lifetime, the pain of loss. He looked so much older than he really should.

“And when it's important, you're not conceited at all,” Sirius pointed out. “Only you can decide how you deal with this.”

Harry sat heavily in his chair and he stared at the defiant grin that was just barely visible on the crumpled paper. Weasley's face shifted until her eye was looking right at him... and then the photograph winked.

Cheeky little bint!

Harry glared at it again and nearly growled at the way his stomach rolled uncomfortably. He didn't need this shit! He'd given the Wizarding world everything and hadn't asked for much in return. All he wanted to do was live his life, play a little Quidditch, and have some fun.

“Besides,” Sirius smirked, “things like this are like a time-honored tradition of Quidditch. You should have seen the things your father and I did to the Slytherin team while we were in school.”

“You never played Quidditch,” Harry pointed out.

“Didn't mean I couldn't be included in all the fun,” Sirius quipped back.

The kitchen was quiet—only the rain outside sounding in the whole house—and Harry contemplated why Weasley would take a chance like she had.

"So... if it's a time-honored tradition..."

Sirius' grinned slyly. "She *did* cast the first stone..."

* * *

Ginny shuffled down the hall in her worn carpet slippers—they were once fluffy pink rabbits that screamed in agony when she stepped, but Fred and George's charm had worn off years ago. One day they were going to wear out and she'd have to buy a new pair and force her brothers to charm them again. Her slippers had been the talk of Gryffindor tower when she'd been in school.

"It's alive!" Tonks called as Ginny entered the kitchen. Ginny snorted and slumped into one of the mismatched chairs at the dining room table. "I wondered if you were going to emerge from your cave today at all."

"Be nice," Ginny commanded. "I don't have to be anywhere today and I'm determined to enjoy every minute of my Gwenog-free day."

"Here here!" Tonks toasted with her glass of pumpkin juice. "You earned it. The game yesterday was brilliant. Mind you, I only got to listen to bits and pieces of it when Ron and I snuck into Kingsley's office, but what I wouldn't have given to be there."

A slow smile spread over Ginny's face and she leaned forward, resting her crossed arms on the table and her chin on her arms. "It was brilliant."

"Biggest points spread in the past eight years was what they were saying on the wireless," Tonks complimented. "I wish I could have seen the look on McCallum's face." She grinned widely and stared off into the kitchen.

"I honestly thought he was going to cry when I came up with the Snitch in my hand," Ginny sighed in happiness. The Tornados hadn't had a chance yesterday against the Harpies, who were playing tighter than they'd ever played. Warnock, Kipp and Acree were at the top of their game, and Gwenog had been thrilled with their victory.

"I wonder if the Prophet will have a picture of his face," Tonks laughed. "He always was a prick."

"Especially when you dated him," Ginny agreed.

Tonks made a face. "You know my taste in men is highly suspicious."

Ginny chuckled. "You're not allowed to pick your dates anymore," she reminded her, "we had a pact."

Giggling, Tonks lifted her hand in a promise. "I remember. I have tonight off, see if you can dig me up a date, why don't you?"

"I can't even find my own," Ginny commiserated. "I'll probably end up staying home tonight reading a book."

"We should go out," Tonks suggested as she quickly banished her dishes to the sink and pulled on

her Auror robes. "Have a girls' night out."

Ginny grimaced. "That means I'll have to get dressed today."

"You *could* go like that, you know. I wouldn't mind."

Ginny laughed and stretched out her feet. The bunny slippers gave a pitiful moan. "This'll attract the men like nothing else."

"You never know," Tonks laughed. "Oi, I meant to ask you... what did Gwenog say about the interview?" She wagged her eyebrows salaciously and Ginny laughed.

"It's all a part of the game," Ginny dismissed. "They sling mud, we sling it back. Normally, she doesn't go in for all of that, but the Arrows have been in the press a bit too much right now and Linford is asking for it. There's no love lost between Gwenog and him, believe me."

"It's all anyone can talk about at the Ministry, you know. The Harpies-Arrows match is going to be completely sold out if you both keep winning."

"It might be a good matchup," Ginny conceded. "Despite what I said in the article, Potter's not bad." She felt her face heat and busied herself with gathering something for breakfast. "He's actually..." She trailed off as she pictured him on his broom, swooping into a perfect feint. He was definitely attractive, even though his smug personality almost ruined it.

Tonks narrowed her eyes and Ginny forced it all away from her. "The chances of them actually being decent aren't that great, you know. They're a new team, still working the bugs out."

"Sure," Tonks agreed. "Anyway, let's plan on meeting at the Leaky this evening. I'll try to steal a few minutes today and pop into Hermione's office to see if she can come with us. Anyone else you want to invite?"

"I might owl a few of the girls on the team," Ginny agreed absently. "We don't have practice until late tomorrow, so they'll be up for a bit of fun." She took a large bite of Wizard Puffs and crunched them in satisfaction.

"Sounds perfect." Tonks grinned. "No men tonight, only us girls. Alright, I'm off for today."

"See you then," Ginny mumbled through her cereal.

Tonks grimaced at the state of the kitchen and then turned a pleading glance to Ginny. "It's your turn."

"'s not," Ginny protested. "I did it two days ago."

"Nope, you forgot after that nasty practice Gwenog had."

Ginny sighed when she realized Tonks was right. Gwenog had been a monster that day, and made them run stairs up to the top of every single box in the stadium before doing flying drills until late.

"Fine," she grumbled. "Honestly, I'll never know how only the two of us make this much mess."

Tonks laughed. "I was fully capable of it on my own, believe me."

Ginny glared down at her breakfast as Tonks Apparated away. After finishing her food, she cast a few spells to get the dishes washing themselves while she wandered the flat, picking things up here and there. Really, it wasn't nearly as messy as it usually was.

It only took sixty more minutes to make the flat respectably organized and Ginny finally gave it a satisfied nod. That would hold for a few more days, at least.

"Five more hours to kill," she sighed as she looked at the clock. "Haven't been to the Burrow in a while."

The decision was made without much thought. If Ginny went too long between visits to her childhood home, her mother would send an owl. After the first owl, Molly Weasley's head would appear in her fireplace. If, heaven forbid, Ginny still didn't present herself at the Burrow, there would be a knock at the door. A Molly Weasley visit was never a good thing; it usually meant that there would be a lecture on proper housekeeping and an inspection of the food pantry that never turned out well.

It was better to make an appearance and remove suspicion—not that Ginny was doing anything wrong, but her mother often gave her the look that said she wasn't above reproach.

Ginny Apparated to the clearing behind the Burrow and let her eyes trace the crooked shape of the building against the blue sky. Quirky though it was, it was home, and just the sight of it filled Ginny's whole body with warmth. She walked slowly toward it, savoring the late summer smell of the grass and the woods just past the makeshift Quidditch pitch. This was where she'd learned to fly, nicking her brothers' brooms late at night, starting when she was six. This was where Charlie had first let her toss the Quaffle back and forth with him, and where he'd let her practice throwing apples up to him so he could catch them.

This humble pitch had shaped who Ginny Weasley was and it would forever be a part of her life.

"Hello Mum!" Ginny called when she came around the side of the house and saw her mother hanging clean linens on the line to dry in the light breeze.

"Ginny!" Her mother's face brightened and Ginny knew she'd made the right decision to come. Despite her rather intense style of mothering, Ginny knew that Molly Weasley loved her children more than anything. She wanted only what was best for them and expected nothing less than their success.

"I had the day off and thought I'd stop by for a visit." Ginny ran her hand along the clean white sheet and secured the clip her mother lifted to the line. "Maybe help out a bit around here."

Molly gave her a scrutinizing look, but then smiled. "Dodging your own chores at home, are you?"

Ginny chuckled. "Nothing too major," she admitted. "I tidied up this morning."

"Well, come on then," Molly held out her hand after securing the last bit of laundry to the line. "We'll make us a cup of tea and have a chat. You can tell me everything you've been doing—the

things that aren't reported in the papers."

Ginny laughed and allowed her mother to lead her into the house.

It was hours later when Ginny glanced up at the clock and realized just how much time she'd spent talking with her mother and simply enjoying being home. "I have to run, Mum. I didn't realize how late it was. I'm meeting some friends at the Leaky tonight."

Molly's face fell slightly, but she recovered well. "Oh, I was hoping that you'd stay for dinner. Your father hasn't seen you in weeks."

"I'll come by again soon," Ginny promised as she pressed a kiss to her mother's cheek. "I may even stay over and you can make me breakfast."

"We'd like that," her mother said as she fussed with the end of Ginny's hair. "You're so grown up..."

"Mum," Ginny scolded softly. "It had to happen sometime, you know."

"I know. It just happened so quickly, with all of you children."

Ginny hugged her and held it for a long minute. "But now you've got a grandchild, and you always say that's better than having kids."

Her mother chuckled and released Ginny. "I do say that. You could find yourself a nice young man, you know, and help add to the numbers."

"Not a chance," Ginny scoffed. "I'm having entirely too much fun right now. A bloke would just ruin that." She laughed at the stern look her mother gave and knew it was time to escape. "If I promise to keep my eyes open, will that be enough right now?"

Molly sighed dramatically. "You're such a beautiful girl, Ginny, and you could have any young man you set your sights on."

"I honestly just haven't found anyone I've even consider, Mum," Ginny admitted. "But when I do, I promise I'll do my best not to muck it up."

"Good enough," her mother compromised. "You're still young yet."

"Exactly." Ginny gave her one last hug and a promise to visit again soon before she Apparated to her flat.

Tonks had definitely been through here; her robes were draped on the back of the sofa and her shoes were tossed in the hallway.

Ginny didn't take time to shower, but splashed a bit of water on her face and brushed through her hair before putting on a decent set of jeans and t-shirt. She pulled her robes on over them, knowing that Tonks often dragged them out into Muggle London if the Leaky was too quiet.

She was just about to Apparate out when the *Daily Prophet* caught her eye. It was set on the

kitchen table and opened to the sports section. There, in full color and all his smug glory, was Harry Potter's smiling face.

Potter Responds To Critics

'Put Your Game Where Your Mouth Is,' He Demands

Ginny felt a weight drop in her stomach and her hand shook as she lifted the paper. Surely he hadn't...

Recent comments about the Quidditch aspirations of The Chosen One have brought the fight out in Harry Potter. Having ire like his turned toward you isn't something anyone wants to deal with. Harry Potter isn't just the Boy-Who-Lived and the Man-Who-Conquered; he's now a proven Quidditch player. With one solid victory under his belt and more in his sights, Harry Potter is nothing if not determined to prove he's in this to win it.

Apparently, he would.

Ginny groped for the chair behind her as she continued to read the article. While her interview had been edgy, Potter's easily crossed the line into being deeply personal. He named her directly for the mudslinging and called her several questionable names. She'd been called worse, of course, in her life, but it was all so much more painful knowing that he actually sounded like he believed the things he'd said.

"... seen her play and she's honestly nothing special," Ginny read out loud to the empty flat. "When has he seen me play?" she demanded. He must have come to the game yesterday. Ginny had been so focused on winning that she hadn't even considered he might come to her game as she had gone to his.

"The Harpies have this unique perspective on the game of Quidditch," Potter continues. "They believe they're entitled to win simply because they're the only all-witch team in the League. We all know that women can play Quidditch—that's not in question here—but the arrogance that they display is unparalleled. Jones and the management of the Harpies recruit only players who conform to their standard of thinking. And Weasley fits that mold better than anyone I've ever met. She's conceited and a spotty player at best. Take a look at her Hogwarts Quidditch record and you'll see—she never even wanted to play at Seeker, but went out for a Chaser position."

Potter's comments are true in regards to Ginny Weasley's career aspirations. She did, indeed, try out for a position as Chaser with Holyhead before being offered the Seeker spot. As for her performance at school, Gryffindor captured the Quidditch Cup in Weasley's fifth year, but did not repeat that victory the last three years of her schooling.

"That's because the bloody Death Eaters had taken over the school!" Ginny screamed to the empty flat. "Of course we didn't win! We were barely allowed to play!"

When asked about Weasley's recent interview and her views on the Arrows, and Potter particularly, Harry had plenty to say.

"I'll bet he did," Ginny grumbled. "Egotistical bastard."

"Mudslinging might be an old tradition in Quidditch, but her words were uncalled for. Ginny Weasley is nothing but a spoiled, pampered princess who needs to be taught how to truly play the game." When I asked if Harry was the one to give that lesson, he grinned widely. "I'd like nothing better."

She thrust the paper away from her and glared at the words. Whoever said words didn't hurt hadn't had their name drug through the mud in such a public fashion.

Ginny took a few deep breaths to clear away the hurt and anger before focusing on the interior of the Leaky Cauldron. She was surprised she didn't splinch herself, considering how upset she was. No, upset wasn't the word—livid. Yes, that was what she was feeling.

The Leaky was busy tonight and Ginny had to force her way past several full tables to search the room for her friends. Before she found them, however, a loud eruption of laughter drew her attention. The pale face and messy mop of black hair she'd last seen in the newspaper just minutes before swam into her vision. Ginny felt the air suck out of her lungs and fire burned all through her.

The room blurred and she focused only on Harry Potter's face as he laughed with his teammates and lifted his pint in celebration.

Vaguely, Ginny heard someone calling her name, but all she could feel was the pounding in her veins and the anger that Potter had made this fight between them completely personal. This wasn't about Quidditch anymore.

He didn't even notice her approach the table and didn't look her way until she'd snatched a pint of ale off the table and thrown the liquid into his face.

"You're an asshole of the highest order, Harry Potter!"

Chapter 4: Collision Course

“Let me be the first to buy you a pint, mate!” Crispian Paxton clapped Harry on the back and Harry grinned. Today had been fun. Wood had finally relaxed in drilling his training routines into their heads and bodies—well, Harry supposed *relaxed* was a relative term—and they’d played a pick-up game against the reserve team. The stress-free atmosphere was a chance to remember why he enjoyed the game so much.

And now they were all at The Leaky Cauldron, enjoying a pint together and laughing like berks.

“I’m telling you,” Malakai boasted, “we’re going to blow the Cannons away this week. It’s almost insulting that they make us play them, you know.”

“Don’t underestimate anyone,” Oliver warned. He wasn’t drinking anything but Butterbeer tonight, but at least he’d eased up enough to come with the blokes. “When we start to think we’re unbeatable, someone will come along to prove us wrong.”

A round of laughter answered him, even though Harry knew he was right.

“Heard anything about that interview?” Davies leaned into Harry’s shoulder and asked quietly.

Harry’s eyebrows rose as he remembered that it should be published today or possibly tomorrow. “Not yet. I’m sure it’ll stir up a mess.”

Lorin looked slightly uncomfortable. “You’re playing with fire, you know.”

Paxton overheard the conversation and snorted. “Weasley? She’s all talk—nothing but a puppet for Jones.”

“You’re wrong,” Davies boldly answered back. He usually didn’t challenge Paxton, who had a big mouth and an even bigger opinion on everything. “She was one of the leaders of the Resistance, you know. You should have seen her in school—she was... amazing.”

“Fancy her, do you?” Damien laughed.

Lorin’s face heated but he shook his head. “No, not really. I just have more respect for her than to question her skills. She was Gryffindor Captain for two years, you know; that has to say something about her.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He had no idea which way the interview was actually going to play out. The reporter—one that Harry wasn’t familiar with—had asked fairly leading questions and Harry realized that his answers could easily be tilted several ways. Then there were other answers that he *knew* were horrible. He wasn’t sorry about giving the interview, but until he saw how things played out, he wasn’t sure how much havoc he was going to cause. And he didn’t like to tarnish the reputation of someone who’d actually fought in the same war he had. Something about that felt cowardly.

He pushed the thought away and listened as Newt told a dirty joke that got the other men laughing.

Harry smiled, but he'd heard the joke years ago; it was one of Sirius' favorites. He opened his mouth to tell a different one when he got a face full of ale. Harry spluttered and jerked back as Ginny Weasley, looking more livid and radiant than he'd ever seen her, threw the pint onto the table.

"You're an asshole of the highest order, Harry Potter!"

There was stunned silence in the pub and Harry simply blinked at her. She shook all over and Harry couldn't help but notice that her hair shined like fire in the light of the room. Her eyes were alive with fury as she stared at him.

"I can't believe you would be so cowardly and low as to say those things. Merlin, you don't even know me!"

Her fists clenched and Harry used his sleeve to wipe the wet from his face. "Ginny, I—"

"Do *not* even speak to me, Potter. You're not worthy to even be in my presence, let alone think you can explain your behavior away."

His eyes returned to her hand, which now held her wand in a fist that was white she was gripping the wood so tightly. He stood and his teammates backed away from the confrontation.

"Weasley, be reasonable—"

Ginny's eyes didn't leave Harry, but she snarled at Wood. "I am *not* speaking to you, Oliver, so I suggest you keep your mouth shut. How dare you..." Her words faded out and Harry realized she had turned on him again.

Harry's face burned in embarrassment and frustration. Apparently the article had come out and it was bad; probably much worse than he'd meant it to be, but that didn't excuse Weasley from barging in her and airing this in public.

"I dare, Weasley, because you started it," he answered back as he stepped around the table toward her. "You said—"

"I didn't make it personal," she countered, moving close and poking him violently in the chest.

Low whistles and cheers erupted around them and Harry clenched his teeth. Ginny seemed to realize they were in the middle of a crowded pub and her eyes darted around.

"Maybe the two of you should take this outside," Newt said awkwardly.

Harry growled low in his throat and reached to take Ginny's arm. His hand wrapped all the way around her bicep and he was surprised to feel how brittle she seemed. He knew she wasn't weak—she had to be strong to play Quidditch—but she was so much smaller than he was. For the first time since he'd met her, Ginny Weasley actually looked fragile.

She didn't fight him, but she did pull her arm out of his grip as they marched toward the entrance to Diagon Alley. A witch with bright purple hair stepped forward with a stern face, but something

Weasley mumbled to her made her step back. Harry was sure he'd seen her before, but he shook away the thought as Ginny marched out the door.

When they were out in the back alley, she didn't open the entrance to the Alley, but spun on her heel to face him.

"I can't believe you would do something this low... this slimy. You would have been in Slytherin if you'd gone to Hogwarts, you know."

Harry huffed loudly and crossed his arms across his chest, mostly to keep himself from pulling his wand and jinxing her. "And what you said was better? You implied that I couldn't hack it as—"

"Implied!" Ginny pointed out. Her eyes were blazing and Harry felt his stomach twitter uncomfortably. "Everything I said was vague and indirect. You, though..." She broke off in an ironic little laugh that held no humor.

"Are you finished?" Harry sighed. The damage was obviously done and even though he felt bad for giving into his anger, there was nothing he could do to make it right. There was no magic potion to erase the things he'd said and fix the way Weasley was looking at him right now, as if she was completely disappointed in who he was. It made his skin crawl uncomfortably. Harry just wanted to go home. He wanted to escape her penetrating stare and the way her body shook just inches from him in the small space. "I'm leaving."

He pulled his wand and Apparated. Ginny's hand darted out at the last moment and wrapped around his arm. Harry jerked to a stop and reached out automatically to steady her as they arrived into the living room of his flat.

"What the hell! You can't just..."

Ginny made a strangled sound and Harry's eyes went wide, praying that he hadn't splinched her on the way here. He was livid that she'd Side-Along Apparated with him into his home.

"Are you..."

"Fine!" she demanded. She stood on shaky legs and moved away from him, as if his hand on her skin burned.

"I can't believe you grabbed me. You could have splinched!"

"I didn't," Ginny assured him. "And I wasn't finished yelling at you." The fire in her faded somewhat and she gave a curious look around her at the dark flat before focusing on him once more. "Where are we?"

"London," Harry grunted out. How had Ginny managed to make it through the wards alive, let alone in one piece? Harry didn't even know you could Side-Along Apparate that way. Perhaps he should contact Sirius and—

"This is where you live." It was more of a statement than a question and Harry peered at her. He adjusted his glasses and scratched his head.

“Er... yeah, I suppose.”

Ginny opened her mouth, probably to ask another question, but then shook it away. “Why did you do it?”

Back to the interview. Harry sighed as he considered the answers to that question. “Because you started it,” he said simply. “What you said made me angry.”

Ginny moved away from him and stared off into the flat. Her arms crossed in front of her and Harry could see her fingers wrap around her arms as she held herself. For a brief moment he thought she might be crying, but was too afraid to look. The idea that he’d really, truly hurt her made him sick to his stomach.

“It was... I was angry,” he said again.

“You don’t know how hard I worked,” Ginny said. Her voice wasn’t shaky, though, just tired. “You have no idea what it’s like to give everything you have to—”

Harry snorted and shook his head. “Shut up, Ginny. I’ve given everything to everyone.”

She startled and looked at him, a slightly broken look on her face. “That was... callous of me. I shouldn’t have—”

“Save it,” Harry snapped. He took a step toward her, intending to escort her to the door so she could leave, but Ginny didn’t move. She held her ground and Harry could feel the heat of her bare skin on his arms. The warmth startled him and he stared down at her.

“Quidditch is all I have,” she said softly. “It’s what defines me and challenges me.”

His stomach flipped and Harry let out a shaky breath. It was exactly how he described himself and the idea shook him.

“I have to play,” she whispered once more.

He was close enough to count the freckles on her face, but took one more step toward her, ignoring the voice that screamed in his head that this was going to make more trouble than he really wanted to deal with.

Ginny retreated until her back was pressed against the wall, but she looked just as determined and fiery as before. She wasn’t intimidated by him in the least, and Harry felt a satisfaction deep inside him at that.

“You’re an arrogant prat.”

“And you’re a bitch,” Harry answered back with a smirk. His eyes darted to her lips and he unconsciously licked his—hers were perfectly red and wet from where her tongue moistened them moments before. Before he thought about it more, Harry lowered his mouth to hers. Ginny’s head knocked against the wall, but she didn’t fight the kiss. She made a low, keening sound in the back of her throat and one hand twisted into his t-shirt, anchoring him to her.

They devoured each other and Harry felt a white-hot flash of lust and excitement shoot through him. It left him panting and needing more.

All propriety was tossed aside as Harry pushed her shoulders back into the wall and pinned her with his body. There was no way she wasn't aware of his arousal, pressing into her low belly, but Ginny wasn't resisting. Instead, she was giving as good as she took, kissing him in a way that made Harry's head spin and his knees quiver.

Boldly, Harry slid his hand down to her breast and cupped the weight. Harry smiled into the kiss.

"You hate me," Ginny mumbled when they broke apart, both gasping for air.

"I was angry," Harry clarified. The tension between them made sense for a brief moment and Harry realized what he'd been feeling every time he thought of Ginny Weasley. Yes, she knew how to push him faster and farther than anyone he'd ever met, but there was an underlying attraction there that he couldn't deny.

She kissed him this time, demanding his attention and lifting her body against him. "You hate me," Harry returned her observation, but Ginny didn't answer him in words. She lifted her knee and wrapped her leg around his, giving a clear indication of what she wanted.

"I want to hate you..." she whispered. The words weren't convincing, though, not with the way she responded, her body arching into his touch.

Despite the idea that he needed to push away, Harry knew he couldn't right now. Kissing Ginny was like fighting with her: it was exhilarating and thrilling in a way Harry hadn't ever known.

How had they gone from arguing and hating each other to doing this in only a few moments? Harry had no idea how it happened, but it felt right so he dismissed any concern.

They lost each other in the moment, a flurry of hands and mouths, sighs and moans of satisfaction.

The room seemed to spin and Harry had to rest his head on her shoulder to keep from tipping them both to the floor. Slowly, Ginny lowered her legs from around him and steadied herself by holding onto his shoulders. Harry lifted his face and couldn't help but chuckle.

She looked shocked for a moment before laughing herself. She righted his glasses, which had become skewed in the middle of things. Harry continued to chuckle and took a deep breath, willing the hazy post-sex fog to clear from his mind so they could analyze what had just happened between them.

"Didn't expect that," Ginny mused. She was horribly mussed, but looked happy about it. Harry brushed the back of his finger along one of the love bites he'd left peppered across her skin. He didn't know what to say, honestly. Something like this hadn't happened before so how should he respond? Of course, he'd been with women, quite a few, actually, but it was never like this.

Ginny Weasley was an enigma, one that Harry wasn't sure he had the energy to figure out.

She bit her lip and glanced down at their rumpled clothing. Harry still wore his shirt, but it was

horribly wrinkled. His trousers and pants were around his ankles. Ginny's one foot was still tangled in her jeans, and her bright green lacy knickers were caught on her calf.

The sight of their debauchery made Harry grin. He lowered slowly and helped her step out of the tangle. Deliberately, and trying not to think too much about it, he removed her shoes, socks and jeans. He gave the knickers a quick fondle before setting them aside.

Ginny was staring at him in confusion as he rose again and removed his shirt, pulling it so swiftly over his head that his glasses caught. She bit her lip again and Harry leaned forward to kiss her once more, unable to help himself. Merlin, he wanted her again. And again. And as many times as she'd have him right now.

Everything about this screamed that he was wrong, that he should stop and not do this again, but there was something right about it too. And Ginny wasn't protesting. In fact, she was driving him insane with the wicked way she was leading him forward. The coy little smile she wore when he wasn't kissing it off her mouth was enough consent for Harry.

* * *

Harry was brilliant, Ginny decided, no matter that he was still a prat. A million reasons she should stop him ran through her head, but she couldn't bring herself to ignore the one reason to stay right here—she wanted to be here.

When he smirked at her Ginny's whole body fluttered in attraction. This was the Harry Potter she'd first met at the Banquet. This was the Harry Potter she'd hoped was being smothered by all that bravado, hurtful words, and false superiority.

She finally collapsed onto the mattress. Harry followed her down, but was careful not to put his full weight on her.

Holy shit, was all that she could think. She'd just had sex—twice!—with Harry Potter. And while they'd sort of tried to kill each other, it was amazing. She was drained, both physically and mentally, and far too tired to deal with any of what this might mean between them.

Soft puffs of breath came on her shoulder and Ginny turned her head to look at Harry. He was asleep. She watched him for a long time, simply letting her mind wander wherever it went.

He was horribly handsome—especially rumped the way he was, and free from care. The weight of just who he was—beyond the Quidditch and celebrity aspect, even—settled on her and Ginny fought the urge to panic and bolt right home. This was *Harry Potter* and even though this probably wouldn't change anything between them—he would still be an Arrow, she would still be a Harpy—she almost wanted it to.

With courage she wasn't sure was completely smart, Ginny decided she wasn't going to scuttle off tonight. She wasn't going to disappear into the darkness and pretend that this night had never happened. Come what may, she was going to stay.

She removed Harry's glasses and set them on the nightstand and turned the lamp off. Harry was sprawled in the middle of the bed, far from the pillows, but Ginny managed to tug the sheet and

blanket free from under his legs and pull it over both of them.

Her body tingled all over when she lay beside him and snuggled right up to his warm side. Eventually he shifted and his hand rested on her hip. Ginny closed her eyes and let herself drift, capturing every touch, every caress in her dreams. And despite the fact that she knew it was horribly pathetic, she couldn't help but be a bit smitten with him. He was quite brilliant when he wanted to be, and when he shut up long enough.

* * *

It was still mostly dark when Harry woke. The clock on the bedside table said it was just before five. Ginny was still here and Harry was surprised. It's not like he'd expected her to vanish in the night, but he wasn't sure he knew why she'd stayed. And he wasn't sure how, exactly, to figure it out.

Last night, while amazingly fun and mind-blowing, was simply going to complicate things horribly between them. Then again, Ginny seemed rather level headed. Perhaps it wouldn't change anything between them. Honestly, Harry couldn't decide which situation he wanted. Complicated was just... too much right now. He was just settling into this new life and he didn't need a relationship mucking things up. The idea of regular sex was thrilling, mostly because Harry was tired of one night stands and falling into bed with stupid women who should know better.

Then again, what had he just done with Ginny? Calling it meaningless, though, didn't feel right and Harry grimaced at the thought.

Ginny mumbled something incoherent and Harry propped himself up to look down at her. She was really quite lovely, when her mouth wasn't open and spouting nonsense. The pale porcelain of her skin intrigued him, as did the splattering of freckles that decorated it. There was something pure about her—Ginny Weasley was an honest, true woman and possibly the first one he'd met. She'd flirted with him when they first met, but not shamelessly, and not in an off-putting way. She hadn't come on to him and she was quite open in her disdain for how he'd acted. It was refreshing to meet someone who didn't worship him simply because he had a famous name, also. Her actions weren't anything near hero worship.

Was that what attracted him to her? She saw past the bullshit that crowded his life and knew he could be a different person?

Bah! It was all rubbish anyway, Harry decided. Weasley knew nothing about him. She'd only read what was in the papers and in the history books. No one really knew him.

'She understands about Quidditch and what it means to accomplish something on your own,' an inner voice pointed out. 'She knows what it's like to deal with fame and the press.'

Harry untangled himself from her gently, praying she wouldn't wake. If this was her flat, Harry would have left. He would have felt like a bastard after doing it, but he would have left. The urge to simply Apparate away somewhere he could hide until he was sure she was gone was great. Harry didn't like waking up with women. He avoided it at all costs. It had happened once and he didn't like the consequences, so he made a solid rule that he didn't stay over. And no woman had ever been in *his* bed. Ginny was the first.

He wandered the flat after pulling on a pair of boxers. Ginny's clothing had been gathered and set onto a chair in the living room. He stared at her knickers for a long time, wondering how this was going to change things between them.

Was he allowed to have sex with her? Wood had once called her the enemy and implied that even speaking with her was against the rules, but perhaps that was simply his over zealous need to control everything. Was it really a rule? He racked his brain but couldn't remember reading anything about it in the League Handbook that was in his locker in Appleby.

Beyond Quidditch, the complications from their liaison were astounding. Really, they didn't even know each other, and they'd already had sex. Would Ginny want a relationship now? Would she want him to date her, bring her flowers, and see only her exclusively? Not that the last one mattered, Harry thought; he wasn't interested in seeing anyone right now.

And how was Harry going to handle it if she did want more than one night from him? He had never had a relationship that lasted beyond a few nights of shagging. The idea was foreign and slightly terrifying. It made his heart race uncomfortably and his stomach feel funny.

The first rays of the morning sun brightened the room and Harry stood in front of one of the large windows in the posh flat, watching as the orange-pink light bathed the city one chunk at a time.

A relationship would be far too complicated, he decided. Life was better how he lived it right now—on his own, doing what he wanted when he wanted. Bringing another strong willed person into it would simply muck things up.

And there was his past to consider, also. Ginny probably knew far more of the truth than he wanted her to—her parents had been members of the Order of the Phoenix, after all, and she'd been involved since she was eleven. The idea of anyone being touched by Voldemort's vile darkness made Harry shudder. At least Ginny had survived it—rescued by Dumbledore—and had put it behind her. She was successful and looking at her now, Harry would never have guessed what was in her past had he not known.

Another reason to avoid being with Ginny. Their pasts were far too complicated and dark to be with anyone properly. Merlin, he couldn't even imagine himself with a wife, living in some cottage in the country, being content while a handful of children flocked around. His stomach gave a violent twist at the thought and Harry felt his face heat when the word 'liar' entered his head. Perhaps one day his feelings would change, but he was still so young. A family wasn't in the cards for him anyway, probably. He was more like Sirius—better off alone, drifting though life and doing things his own way.

He didn't even hear Ginny come into the room and startled when her arms wrapped around him from behind and her face pressed against his back. He swore silently and fought the urge to jump away from her.

"Coffee or tea?" she asked.

"Er..." Harry tried to focus on how he was going to deal with this and the way her embrace made him feel. He couldn't make any real decisions right now. "Tea," he finally blurted. A sense of relief flooded him when she moved away and began rummaging in the kitchen, searching his cupboards for

things. He could tell her exactly where to find everything, but there was a rather cruel satisfaction that she had to search. She shouldn't be too familiar with him, because she wasn't going to stay and this wasn't going to happen again.

He watched her from the corner of his eye as she moved about the kitchen. She was wearing her shirt from yesterday and her knickers, but nothing else. She seemed happy, although she wasn't bursting with bubbly joy like some of the women he'd slept with in the past. Perhaps she wasn't mentally picking out wedding dresses and naming their future children as Harry had feared. Aside from her quick embrace this morning, she hadn't really acknowledged him at all.

His eyes traced her shapely legs and followed the enticing curve of her bum as she made tea and toast. His groin stirred and Harry pushed away from the window, moving toward the bedroom.

"You *are* a complete bastard," he hissed to himself as he tugged jeans and a t-shirt on. If he went back out there now and saw the way her breasts moved freely in her shirt he was going to want to be with her again. That couldn't happen. Morning light had brought sanity and Harry knew this had to end right now. For both of their sakes' this had to end.

Ginny was sitting on a chair that she'd turned to stare out over London when he came back in. Her legs were tucked under and her shirt was pulled over her knees, making her seem incredibly tiny as she curled in the seat.

Harry opened his mouth but closed it again when he couldn't grasp something to say. He poured himself a cup of tea, took the toast she'd buttered, and sat at the table near her, where he could watch her.

"This place doesn't suit you," she mused and gave him a quick glance. Her hair was a messy tangle from bed still, but Harry liked seeing how it shined in the morning light. It reminded him of fire—wild and untamed—and it fit her perfectly, he decided.

"How so?" he asked as he pulled a piece of toast apart and munched on it.

Ginny made a face and shrugged a shoulder. The movement made her t-shirt rise along her legs and Harry's eyes feasted on her bottom, decorated by the emerald green lace of her knickers. His body stirred again, so he forced himself to look at her feet. The sight of her tiny toes, decorated with bright red polish, didn't help. How the hell could *toes* be a turn on?

"It just feels a bit stiff, you know, like someone else picked all of this out and you just... appeared here one day. Do you even know the people in those photos?" She gestured toward the mantel and Harry scowled. He'd forgotten to take the strange photographs down and replace them. It just hadn't really mattered.

Harry's hand, which was lifting his cup of tea, hovered before he took a deliberately slow sip. How had she guessed that? "Er... the team arranged it, actually. I didn't want to be in Appleby and didn't have a flat already..."

She nodded in understanding and went back to quietly eating her toast.

Harry was surprised at how awkward this situation wasn't. Ginny wasn't fawning over him; she

hadn't even brought up the fact that they'd spent the night together. Harry was actually impressed at how normal she was acting. Then again, he didn't know her well. Perhaps this *was* normal.

"You can't honestly picture me in some little homey cottage up there, full of rag-tag furniture and charm." Harry forced out a small laugh and Ginny peered at him curiously. He couldn't quite make out what her expression meant and busied himself with his tea. "That's not me at all."

"Hmm," Ginny mused in agreement. "I'm not sure where I see you, actually." They were quiet again and Harry struggled for something to talk about. It didn't seem right to just sit in silence, or to walk away from her.

"You have practice today?"

He latched onto her question. Quidditch!

"Yeah, in about twenty minutes. You?"

"This afternoon," she nodded. "Gwenog wants us to run drills. I'm not looking forward to it."

"Your win against Tutshill was impressive," Harry blurted. He'd been in the audience, but wasn't sure if he should admit it. She bit her lip and looked like she was going to respond, but refrained. Slowly, she unfolded from the chair and took her dishes to the sink where she charmed them to begin washing. Where the hell had she kept her wand? Visions of it tucked into the waistband of her knickers danced through his head and Harry swallowed past a thick throat.

Her cheeks were red as she moved into the living room and gathered her things before disappearing into the bathroom.

"Smooth," he complimented himself. "She's right; you're an ass, Harry." He knocked his fist against his forehead several times and stared down at the remains of his breakfast. He hadn't even tasted the few bites he'd managed to eat and they were churning in his belly. He needed to think of some way to fix this, to dismiss any future action by either of them simply because they'd had one incredible night together, and make sure she understood he wasn't interested in something permanent. All without looking like a callous bastard, preferably.

Nothing came to mind and Ginny was back too soon, looking around the flat awkwardly. She was dressed now and had tied her hair up in some sort of configuration behind her head. It made her neck look long and sleek, and exposed the dark mark where her shoulder began. Harry cleared his throat as a vision of her moving beneath him flashed in his mind.

Say something! Say something now before she Disapparates!

Harry jerked out of his seat and took a step toward her. "I... I didn't mean for it to get so personal." He'd meant the article, but the way the color drained out of Ginny's cheeks, he thought maybe she'd misunderstood. "I just..."

"It's okay," she said in a quiet, controlled voice. "These things happen."

"Ginny, I..."

"It's really okay." She smiled brightly and took a step backward as he advanced. "I need to go. Er... thanks for last night. It was... fun." As she raised her wand and turned to leave, the smile disappeared completely and Harry winced at the look of loathing that replaced it.

He yelled into the flat when she was no longer there. Why did he have to ruin everything? Why couldn't he have simply given her a quick kiss on the cheek and let her go without bringing up their mutual animosity.

He forced himself to get ready for practice, going through the motions of washing up and putting his shoes on. All through it, though, he kept thinking of things he should have said to her, ways he could have made things better. If she hadn't hated him before, she certainly did now.

Just another experience relegated to the failure pile, Harry decided when he was finally ready to leave the flat. He gave it one last look and stared at the place where they'd first had sex. It seemed to almost glow in his mind and he wondered how he was going to ever think of anything else when he walked past the spot.

The Arrows' pitch materialized around him and Harry walked forward, determined to put last night behind him. There was no reason to dwell on things.

Newt and Damien were in the locker room when Harry entered. They seemed surprised and peered closely at him, probably looking for whatever spell damage Ginny might have inflicted on him. He *had* left the pub last night rather abruptly.

"All right, Potter?" Newt asked when Harry stood staring at his locker for far too long.

"All right," he answered and jerked into a flurry of motion, changing into his practice kit and ignoring the smirks that Malakai and Crispan gave him when they entered. Lorin gave a searching look that Harry scowled at, and then turned away quickly. The back of his neck heated and Harry thought Davies would probably think twice about asking any questions.

"Good to see you survived," Wood mumbled. Harry was about to retort when Emory Linford walked in with a stern look on his face.

Malakai swore softly and sat heavily on one of the benches. Harry kept moving, slowly strapping his shin and arm guards on.

"No more interviews," Emory said firmly. "Nothing will be said to any member of the press—not even a 'no comment'—unless it comes from my office. As of now there is a strict gag order on everything you say. Keep your mouth shut and your minds on the game and the game only."

Harry felt his face heat and concentrated on making a perfect knot in the leather laces of his left shin guard.

"Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir," they all answered stiffly.

Linford nodded jerkily and turned on his heel to leave. Several glares were thrown at Harry but no

one said anything to him. Lorin gave a sympathetic slap to Harry's shoulder before he left for the pitch. Finally, Harry and Oliver were the only two left in the room.

"Are you and Ginny Weasley an item?"

Harry spluttered. "No," he answered honestly. "She loathes me and I..." He bit down on his next words, and then shook them away. He couldn't say he hated her—not at all, anymore—but he couldn't decide what he felt for her, really.

Oliver's expression was tight, as if he didn't believe Harry fully. "And last night, the whole argument..."

"Ended out in the alley," Harry said firmly. "We sorted it out and went our separate ways. It was stupid of me to open my mouth and it won't happen again."

Oliver's eyes narrowed and Harry wondered if he could tell it was a lie. Things might be over now, but he and Ginny most certainly hadn't gone their separate ways last night. Finally, Oliver nodded once.

"Good. It's not a good idea to date other players. I know it happens, and there's no rule against it, but..."

"I've got it, Oliver!" Harry snapped. "I told you there was nothing going on." He snatched his Firebolt from the locker and slammed it shut, rattling the whole row of them.

Chapter 5: Arcing

Ginny stared at herself in the mirror and traced the outline of the livid bruise on her side with her eyes. A cracked rib, the trainer had said. In a way, the pain from it was welcome. It gave Ginny a diversion from feeling completely empty. Although Merlin knew she didn't need another distraction right now. Obviously the one she was dealing with was more than enough.

She reached into the cupboard above the sink and pulled out a container of bruise paste. It was thick and smelled horrible, but it had always done the job in the past. It had even erased the love bites still on her skin from...

Nope. Not thinking about *that*.

It was a vow she'd made after coming home the other night and facing Tonks' knowing stare over the breakfast table. Luckily, her friend knew better than to press for details. There had been plenty of times when Tonks wandered back in with pink cheeks and the same clothing from the night before. Ginny always held her tongue.

The paste would probably go on easier if she had help, but Ginny refused to tell anyone that she'd been barmy enough to daydream during practice and got hit with the Quaffle as a result. It wouldn't matter that the daydream was of herself beating Harry to the Snitch, and then beating him repeatedly about the head with her broom.

Stupid man.

After waking in his bed, Ginny had been disappointed that he hadn't even wanted to talk about what happened between them, but then those infuriating words fell from his lips. Honestly, it was worse than simply ignoring her.

I didn't mean for it to get so personal.

How much more personal could it get than having sex with someone? Of course he hadn't meant for it to happen, neither had she, but it *had*, and ignoring it wouldn't make it disappear.

Normally, Ginny would have been able to push it aside and focus on what was most important to her, but something about their parting rankled Ginny. She didn't want an apology, or even any promise from him—Merlin knew she couldn't handle a relationship right now—but... something would have been nice. Anything but what he'd said.

Gwenog and Rue Gallardo, the manager of the Harpies, had been adamant that all contact with the press was over. Ginny felt her face heat when they'd lectured about the way a Harpy should behave in public, but then forced it away. It's not like Ginny was planning on talking to the press ever again. She was determined to keep her mouth shut no matter what, especially on the subject of Harry Potter and his arrogant ass.

Tremendous, athletic, shapely, but self-important ass.

Ginny rubbed the bruise paste into the sore spot as far as she could and flicked the lights in the

bathroom off. She pulled on her t-shirt and slid her feet into her slippers. The flat was quiet tonight, thankfully. Tonks had a date with... someone. Ginny couldn't hope to keep up with her flatmate's love life. Tonks had never been particular who she went out with.

She flicked on the wireless, turned it low, and took the book Hermione had given her months ago off the shelf. One glass of wine, a comfy, worn quilt taken from the Burrow when she moved out, and the corner of the sofa sounded like a perfect evening.

Even though the story started slow, Ginny forced herself to focus on the words—stringing the letters together until the word made sense in her mind and the sentences formed. The wine wasn't really helping in that regard, even though it made her relax slightly. She was finally into the story when the floo flared green and Ron stepped through. Ginny rolled her eyes at his rudeness, but didn't argue with him. It was a lost cause, honestly, trying to get him to understand that one should really ask to be let through before just appearing.

"Tonks was right," he said as he stared at her, "you're hiding out in here."

"Am not," Ginny growled. She swirled the last bit of wine in her glass and finished it off with a smack of her lips. "I was enjoying a nice, quiet evening at home until one of my prat brothers appeared."

Ron smirked and plopped on the end of the sofa, nudging Ginny's feet out of the way. "She said you haven't been out at all, except for practice. Damn, Ginny, no one cares about that ruddy article, you know. Everyone who knows you knows that Potter was just—"

"Do *not* talk to me about him," Ginny seethed.

Ron rolled his eyes and lifted her feet into his lap. His fingers dug into the arches and Ginny gasped at how painful, yet amazing, it felt. It had been a long time since he'd done this—years.

"I know you, Ginny," he said quietly. "You're brooding about it, no matter what you tell everyone. Something like that... you can't stop thinking about it. You and I are more alike than either of us likes to admit." His fingers continued to work on her foot and Ginny let her head rest against the back of the sofa.

"Not much I can do about it," she protested. "The damage has been done." Thankfully, Ron didn't seem to notice how jaded her tone was. Either that or he attributed it to Ginny truly caring what the damned interview had said.

"Remember when we were at Hogwarts my last year?" he said. His eyes met hers and a thousand horrid moments passed in their minds. "And we were trying to get the map back from Snape?" She nodded jerkily. Fred and George had given Ginny the Marauder's Map right before they left Hogwarts and damned Snape had confiscated it during the Death Eater's reign of terror. The DA needed that map to keep the students out of trouble and keep an eye on the Carrows. Ginny led the quest to retrieve it from the Headmaster's Quarters.

"And you told me that anything was possible if you had enough nerve?" Ron smirked and Ginny chuckled. It was a favorite saying of hers. "I thought maybe you could use a reminder of that." Ron shrugged awkwardly and switched feet. His thumbs dug in deeply and Ginny groaned.

"I've never met anyone with more nerve than you, Ginny, and that includes Fred and George. They're flashy, sure, but you've always been the strongest of all of us. You don't ever let anything keep you down for long."

Ginny's throat grew thick and she launched herself at her brother, wrapping him in a tight hug. "Thanks, Ron."

"S'okay," he mumbled and she knew his ears were bright red. "We all need a reminder now and then, yeah?"

Ginny laughed and pulled away. "I suppose I just lost sight of that for a bit."

"The press is... they can be horrid," Ron said. "But you're Ginny Weasley." He said it with such awe to his voice that it made Ginny's heart swell.

"I am," she agreed. "And I'm not going to let those wankers bother me anymore."

"Good." He smiled. "I know Potter said—"

Ginny growled at the name again and stood. She moved about restlessly, but then snatched her wineglass off the table for something to do. "I hate that prat." It wasn't true, but she wished it was. If she hated him she could dismiss him completely. If he meant absolutely nothing to her she could pretend he wasn't out there laughing at how she'd behaved and probably telling his mates how wanton she was.

"Want me to do something about it?" Ron offered. He wandered into the kitchen and watched her wash the glass by hand.

"No!" Ginny said firmly. "He's not worth my time and he's certainly not worth your effort. Besides, he's not allowed to talk to the press anymore. None of us is."

Ron nodded distractedly. "He shouldn't have said it."

"It's over," Ginny said. "It doesn't matter anyway. He's just an attention seeking prat."

"Want to come over to our place?" Ron offered.

"Do I want to come over to your flat and listen to Hermione go on and on about Magical Law, hear you prattle on about the Cannons—who we're going to flay alive when we meet them next month, by the way—and then listen to the two of you bicker about nothing and everything until I want nothing more than to poke my eardrums out so I don't have to hear it anymore?" A slow grin spread across her face. "Yeah, I do."

Ron chuckled and slung his arm over her shoulders. "Are you going to wear the rabbits?" He made a rather disgusted face at her choice in footwear and Ginny lifted her foot, wiggling the slipper.

"What's wrong with Flopsy and Mopsy?" she demanded.

"Too many things to name," Ron said with a grin. "That's what you need for Christmas. I'll get Hermione to find some decent ones for you."

"Says the person whose wardrobe is full of garish orange," Ginny scoffed. "And if you get me new slippers, I'll simply have Gred and Forge charm them again."

"You're braver than I am," he laughed as they prepared to floo to his flat.

* * *

Practice with the team had fallen back into a good routine—completely focused on what they were supposed to be doing rather than distracted by things that meant nothing. It had been almost a week since Harry's article had come out and there were no more reporters hanging around the stadium, waiting to pounce on any of the players. The new regulations regarding no press contact helped.

Harry had expected something else to happen regarding the complicated relationship with Ginny, but was pleasantly surprised when nothing was said by anyone. There was no contact at all, in fact. Finally, things felt like they were on an even keel once more.

As Harry came off the pitch, he almost ran into Oliver, who was speaking with a tall redheaded man. The man turned when Oliver nodded Harry's direction and Harry swore softly.

With that color of hair, generous sprinkling of freckles, and the same shaped eyes, this had to be one of Ginny's many brothers. Perhaps his relief over the whole situation had come too soon. Red's eyes traced Harry up and down before he turned and shook Oliver's hand with a friendly familiarity. Oliver gave a sympathetic look to Harry and turned to walk away. Harry made a mental note to slip Paxton a few extra galleons and have him aim a Bludger at Wood next practice.

"Hi." Harry decided that the best approach would be to confront the man and at least try to get a word or two in before he got a fist to the face. "I'm Harry Potter. Can I help you with something?"

"Ron Weasley," the man nodded. "I'm—"

"Ginny's brother," Harry nodded. "I suppose you're here to defend her honor, or something."

Weasley smirked and shrugged a shoulder. "Something like that, I suppose."

Harry sighed and ruffled his hair as he shifted his broom down from his shoulder. "I should have kept my mouth shut and I apologized for what I said in the article. It was never supposed to turn out like that."

Ron studied Harry for a minute before nodding. "She's my sister, you know, and I... I don't like seeing her hurt."

The idea that he'd truly hurt her burned in the back of Harry's mind. It made him feel like a particularly small person. "Did she send you?"

Ron snorted and his eyes widened. "Are you taking the mickey? She'd use a castration hex on me if she found out I was here."

Harry couldn't help but chuckle at the admission. That sounded like the Ginny Weasley he'd met.

"I don't plan on her ever finding out," Ron assured him with a lopsided grin. "I just wanted to tell you that she has five brothers. We're not going to stand by and let you say those types of things again, I don't care who you are."

Strangely, the threat made Harry respect the tall man. "I understand," he agreed. "I don't have any plans to speak to the press any time soon."

Ron fixed him with a particularly penetrating gaze and Harry fought the urge to flinch. "I don't want her hurt in other ways, either."

Harry's jaw locked and he wondered just how much between them Ginny had spilled to her family.

"I don't want details—Merlin, please don't give them to me!—but I'm not stupid, you know. I know Ginny doesn't get that worked up over nothing. I've only seen her that mad twice and since I don't see a dark mark on your arm..." He trailed off and pretended to glance at Harry's arm to search for a mark. Harry offered it up freely, proving there was no offending link to a Dark Lord.

"It's over, I promise," Harry vowed. His face heated and he refused to meet Ron's gaze, which the man seemed to actually appreciate as his ears and cheeks blazed.

"Good."

They stood awkwardly for a long minute before Ron swore and rubbed his face. "You want to go get a pint?"

The offer startled Harry, but it amused him as well. "Er... isn't this the part where you hit me, or break my legs, or something?"

Ron snorted and seemed to consider it for a moment before he shrugged the suggestion away. "I could probably take you, but I'm not in the mood to explain any bruises to my fiancée."

"Fair enough," Harry nodded. "I don't particularly want to deal with Wood if I showed up with any broken limbs either."

Ron laughed. "He sounds just as barmy as he was when we were in school together."

"You have no idea," Harry sighed. "Sometimes I think all he lives for is Quidditch. He eats it, sleeps it, and lives it."

"It's sad, really." Ron grinned as they both stared at the entrance to the locker room where Wood had disappeared. "Meet you at the Leaky Cauldron?"

"Give me twenty minutes," Harry agreed. He felt a bit silly, meeting Ginny's brother like this, but he seemed like a decent bloke. At least he had a sense of humor about him. Unless it was some sort of trap to lure him somewhere where all of her brothers could hex his bits off and feed them to him. The thought made Harry falter as he watched Ron walk away, but he dismissed it. If that was the case, Harry would take his lumps and deal with it. He'd make sure his wand was pulled, just in case, when he walked in, though.

For the first time in a long time, Ginny felt like herself. She ignored the stares of the people in the lifts at the Ministry and continued on about her business. She was playing better than ever and was completely focused on her career, rather than ridiculous gits who weren't worth her time.

Extra practice time and concentrated effort were paying off well. The Harpies had decimated Puddlemere and Ballycastle after sitting out one week. Falmouth was next on their play list and Ginny was actually looking forward to the brutal game to test her. If she could hold it together against the Falcons, she'd be one step closer to being ready to face the Arrows when they met.

After a quick stop to see her father in his office, Ginny continued down the halls to the MLE offices, keeping an eye open for her flamboyant flatmate the whole while. When Tonks cornered Ginny the other day and accused her of using Quidditch to hide from her friends, Ginny had argued that she was just focused on her career. Time away from the situation, however, allowed Ginny to admit that maybe she was hiding.

This little trip to the Ministry, just before Tonks was supposed to get off today, was a surprise for her friend, a peace offering of sorts between them. Ginny knew she didn't have to apologize—her friendship with the older Auror had never been that way. When one of them was wrong, the other called them on it and life went on.

Tomorrow, Ginny would go to the Burrow and begin repairing things with her family, whom she hadn't really seen much at all over the past few weeks. It was kind of scary how far Ginny had fallen in such a short time, and there was only one person to blame for all of it. But she wasn't going to think about him today. Today was for laughing and being a girl again with her friend.

Tonks and Ron were in their office, which was suspiciously crowded with Aurors who were all laughing and talking. Over it all the wireless played and the announcer's voice called out the current Arrows-Kestrals match. Ginny watched with narrowed eyes as Ron cheered Potter on toward the Snitch. An explosion of cheering enveloped her when the prat actually caught it and the game ended.

"Did you hear that?" Ron shouted to Tonks. He was grinning like mad and his hair was all ruffled, as if he'd run his hands through it repeatedly. "I thought Kilbourne actually had him there for a minute, but Harry always comes out on top."

The noise died down quickly when one of the Aurors noticed Ginny standing in the door and made a hasty exit, mumbling excuses that made little sense. A stampede took place and Ginny was left standing in the room with only Ron, whose ears were starting to turn red, and Tonks, who looked extremely guilty.

Ginny contemplated pulling her wand and jinxing both of them for cheering the git on, but decided against it.

"With this win the Arrows pull neck and neck with the Harpies for the League Cup." The wireless continued to echo loudly through the room. "It's anyone's game, really, since both teams seem bent on capturing the trophy for themselves—"

Ron flicked his wand and the voice died out. "Er, hi, Ginny. We were just..." He floundered for something to say and Ginny sighed. She forced away her annoyance with him and decided she was far too tired to deal with this anymore.

"Good game?" she asked. Ron blinked at her and Tonks hid a smile.

"Er... yeah. Arrows won."

"I gathered," Ginny nodded. She put a weak smile on her face, but it became more genuine when Ron's shoulders relaxed. Ron was nothing if not loyal. He may have listened to the game, but it was Ginny's posters up all over the room, Ginny's smiling face there on the wall. Even Ron's beloved Chudley memorabilia had been relegated to a box when Ginny made the Harpies a few years ago. It meant the world to Ginny. Ron was still an avid Chudley fan, but he concentrated on rooting for the Harpies now. It meant the world to Ginny.

"Fancy seeing you here," Tonks finally spoke.

Ginny felt her face heat when she thought of their argument the other day. "Yeah, I... I figured I've been spending too much time at practice, neglecting my friends and family. Maybe... maybe someone wants to join me wandering Diagon Alley for a bit?"

Tonks smiled warmly and began to magic her files into a cabinet across from her desk. "I think I can manage that."

"You're... not angry?" Ron pressed.

"Because you listened to a game?" Ginny scoffed. Inside, she was still slightly annoyed, but it wasn't enough to really bother with. After all, Ron knew that Potter had opened his big mouth and spouted off nonsense, but he didn't know about all that had passed between Harry and Ginny. It wasn't fair to judge him for listening to a Quidditch game, no matter if it was the enemy playing. "Hardly. Besides, the Arrows don't stand a chance against us."

Ron snorted and Tonks grinned. "There's that fighting spirit," she cheered.

"He's not all bad, you know," Ron defended. "Potter, I mean. You just... you just don't know him."

Ginny blinked and her eyes narrowed at Ron's stammering. "And you do?"

Tonks moved forward quickly. "I'm all ready to go. Oi, I can't wait to get into that new shop—what's it called again?—and do some serious shopping damage. I haven't wasted a paycheck for months now."

Ginny ignored her friend and stared at her brother. "Well, you know..." he mumbled. "He and I sort of met and... we're friends now."

Fire flared up inside Ginny and she ground her teeth together. "I see."

"It's not like it's that big of deal, you know, he's a great bloke. I think the two of you just really got off on the wrong foot. And the reporters didn't help, you know. They always twist things around

until you can't even remember if you actually said the things, and what they print isn't anywhere near what you meant to have come out." Ron went on and on and Ginny could tell this was something he'd thought about for some time.

While she'd been dealing with being thrown over like some discarded tart, Harry had been infiltrating behind enemy lines.

"You have no idea what happened between the two of us, Ron," Ginny said. Her tone was controlled and dangerous, and it made Ron flinch. "And if you want your friendship intact, I'd keep it that way."

Ron took a hesitant step forward. "Don't be like this, Ginny. I'm still your brother, you know. And I can be friends with who I want to be friends with."

"Of course you can," Ginny said quickly. Her jaw hurt from how tightly she was clenching it, and her body shook with anger. "Just be careful who you give that friendship to."

"I always am," Ron said quietly. There was a bit of challenge in his words and Ginny stared him down; he was the first to look away.

"I don't want to see him. I don't want to hear about how brilliant he is. I don't want to have you defend him to me. I don't want anything to do with Harry bleeding Potter. Do I make myself clear?"

Ron opened his mouth to begin an argument, but Tonks stepped between them. "Crystal," she nodded. "Come on, I have galleons burning a hole in my pocket. Let's get on with our shopping. Diagon Alley will never know what hit them. We'll be poverty stricken by sundown—of course, we'll look fabulous, so we won't care, but still..."

Ginny allowed Tonks to usher her from the room. "Do I want to know how long that's been going on?" Ginny asked when they stepped into the empty lift.

Tonks grimaced. "You've been sort of out of it for weeks now, you know. And Ron's sort of... smitten, although that's not the right word. The friendship thing is sort of new and it's all he can talk about. They ran into each other somewhere and started talking..." She looked slightly flustered and waved her hand dramatically. "Oh, it'll all blow over soon anyway. You know how Ron is when he gets something new."

Ginny nodded, although she didn't feel the relief that Tonks apparently thought she should. Potter was sneaky. She'd underestimated how conniving he was and allowed him a small bit of ground. It wouldn't happen again.

"For all Ron really knows, there was simply an exchange of nasty words between the two of you," Tonks pointed out. "You haven't been exactly honest with anyone about what happened."

Ginny snorted. "Like I would share that with anybody."

Tonks scowled. "I didn't ask you when you came home that night—I probably should have... Did he *hurt* you Ginny? I mean—"

"He didn't rape me, Tonks!" Ginny was horrified at the suggestion. "It wasn't anything like that. We just... we had sex and then he dismissed me the next morning as if it meant nothing, like I was old rubbish that he was slightly fond of, but had kept around far too long."

Tonks hissed a particularly violent swear word and her shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry, Ginny. I just assumed you were ashamed of being with him—that the whole thing had been completely mutual and..."

"I consented," Ginny admitted. It made her feel weak that her body still craved his touch, and that she thought of Harry Potter far more than was particularly healthy for her to do. "And I would have been fine with parting ways if he hadn't been such an arrogant prig about it, you know."

"I know exactly what you mean," Tonks agreed and gave Ginny a quick one-armed squeeze just before the lift doors opened.

"It reminded me..." Ginny trailed off and walked a few steps in silence. "It reminded me of Tom." An image of the old diary came to her mind and caused goosebumps to rise on the back of her neck. "He was horribly charming and said all the right things too, you know. I was weak then, and I was weak this time with Potter."

Tonks took a breath, but let it escape without speaking. Really, what could she say? It had happened years and years ago—another lifetime—and Ginny had worked hard to put it behind her. There were days that passed where she forgot to remember it had even happened.

"And now he's nothing more than the enemy," Ginny said firmly. "It was a mistake that I'm not going to dwell on. I've wasted far too much time on him as it is."

"Agreed," Tonks said cheerfully. She looped her arm through Ginny's and they walked toward the Apparition point. "Now, I know you have this horrid reaction when I speak about clothing—don't give me that look, you know I have some sort of condition that makes me worry about you like you're one of my voodoo dolls that need to be dressed up—but what are you wearing to your Christmas dinner thingy?"

Ginny grimaced when she thought about it. The invitation—more like a demand letter—for the League Charity Christmas Banquet had come this past week and Ginny had shoved it away under a pile of old magazines.

"Nothing," Ginny growled.

"Interesting statement you'll make," Tonks chuckled. "That ought to turn a few heads."

Despite her dark mood, Ginny couldn't help but smile. Tonks had a way of cutting through the bullshit in a situation and making her feel alright. It was a true gift.

"You know I always hate these things."

"I do," Tonks agreed. "But this is your chance to really shine, you know. He's going to be there—it's mandatory—so it's your chance to show off a little, flaunt what you have, get yourself a hot date who can't keep his hands off you, show some tastefully displayed skin, and prove that Potter should

have done anything he could to keep you in his bed.”

It sounded horribly childish to act that way, and yet... She should do it, not so she could show off in front of Potter, but so she could prove to herself that he wasn't worth worrying about. It was time to really, fully move on from what she'd become since allowing herself to be weakened by a man who had shamelessly used her.

“We'll look for something today,” Ginny decided. “And I'll get a real date—and tell Neville he can have the night off.”

Tonks grinned giddily and rubbed her hands together. The whole situation made Ginny snort with laughter.

“Looking at you, no one would ever guess you're such a *girl*.”

Tonks narrowed her eyes and fingered her wand in its holster. “Spread that around, Weasley and I'll hex you in your sleep.”

* * *

“Tell me about Ginny Weasley.”

Sirius' question made Harry swallow his Firewhisky abruptly and he had to cough to be able to breathe again. “What?”

“You heard me,” Sirius answered casually. “You haven't mentioned her since the day you were up at my place and read that article.”

“Why would I?” Harry demanded. “She's just another player.”

Sirius peered at him and sipped his expensive whisky slowly. “Really?”

Harry scowled and tried to keep the irritation out of his voice. He hadn't thought about Ginny—not really, anyway—for at least a few days. Dreams didn't count, he'd decided weeks and weeks ago. It wasn't as if he could control when she appeared in his nighttime fantasies, partially clothed and making those soft keening sounds she'd made that night...

“Yeah, she's just another player.” Sirius grinned widely.

“I haven't seen her or talked to her in months,” Harry admitted honestly. “It wasn't really anything between us—just a few harsh words and then it was over.”

“But you shagged her.”

Sirius timed his statement perfectly so that Harry had just tipped his drink up again. “Dammit,” Harry growled, “that's expensive whisky, Sirius!”

“Stop trying to breathe it then.” Sirius shrugged unrepentantly and grinned. “I figured there was more to it than what you told me. You were never very good at keeping secrets from me, you know.”

Harry knew Sirius was right, but he didn't want to think about Ginny Weasley right now. He'd finally managed to find a wonderful place in his life. He had two new friends in Ron and Hermione—there was something about spending time with them that made Harry feel like he'd known them forever—and the team was nothing short of fabulous. Things were good.

"You did sleep with her, didn't you?"

Harry rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses and grimaced. "One night," he admitted quietly. Thankfully, Sirius valued his seclusion and cast a privacy charm when they first entered the Three Broomsticks.

"And?" Sirius prompted. "Nothing since then?"

"It was a mistake, Sirius." Harry glared at his godfather. "She and I don't even know each other, really. It was... impulsive and stupid, and it's not going to happen again."

Sirius rocked back in his chair until it balanced on two legs. "At least she's a pretty bird. You could have done worse."

Harry took a drink and wondered if tonight was a mistake. He'd been looking forward to spending a bit of time with Sirius, but he didn't want to talk about Ginny. He didn't want to think about what she'd been doing since the morning she left his flat—he hadn't seen her face to face since then.

"It happens, you know," Sirius sighed. "You've gone through it before. Seen anyone since then?"

Harry gave a half shrug. "Not really. There are always the groupies, but I'm not really interested in them."

"Why not?" Sirius asked, a look of surprise on his face. "You're young and single. If this thing with Weasley really didn't mean anything—"

"It didn't," Harry jumped in. His stomach rolled uncomfortably at the idea, but that might just be the whisky.

"—then what's the harm?" Sirius finished.

"The harm is," Harry started, "that these women all want a piece of the Boy-Who-Lived. I sleep with one of them and they'll expect something—a commitment, a relationship, something. I'm not in that place, you know. I don't want those types of things, especially not from one of them. They're all... tarts, really. Or worse, at times."

Sirius peered at him and nodded thoughtfully. "What you want is something that does mean something."

"Maybe," Harry answered evasively. "But I'm busy with Quidditch right now and I don't really have time to put into something. Plus, I never really know who they want to be with, you know. Are they with *me*, or do they just want to shag Harry Potter?"

"It's a dilemma," Sirius nodded. "You're going to that Christmas thing, aren't you?"

Harry gave a half shrug. He was, but he hated the idea. Linford made it quite clear that the Arrows were all to be there, in dress robes and wearing huge smiles.

“Have a date already?”

Harry ruffled his hair. He didn't. Malakai offered to set Harry up with someone he knew and Harry was most likely going to take him up on the offer. There wasn't a lot of time for meeting decent women out there anyway. It was one night, a couple of hours that he would have to pose for pictures with some bird on his arm, and then it would be over.

“I'll find someone.”

“You and Ginny would make a fine looking couple,” Sirius said. “Then at least you'd know you could get a leg over.”

Harry sucked down the rest of his drink. A burning frustration welled up in him and Harry had to swallow several times to keep it down. “She's not... it wasn't like that, Sirius. Ginny's not some slag, you know, it was just...” He bit down on his tongue rather than continue and Sirius smiled slyly.

“Just what?”

“Just one of those things,” Harry finished lamely.

“She seems pretty fiery,” Sirius observed. “Hagrid was telling me about when she was in school and all the things she used to get up to.”

“I know about the Resistance,” Harry informed Sirius. “Ginny's brother, Ron, is sort of one of my mates. He came to see me after the thing with Ginny and we got to talking...”

“Wait a minute.” Sirius let his chair slam back onto the floor. “Are you saying that the brother of the girl you shagged is one of your mates now, and you met when he came to warn you away from her?”

“Strange, I know,” Harry said with an ironic smile. “He's really great, you know—his fiancée too. I think if I'd gone to Hogwarts we might have been friends.”

“That must make for awkward situations,” Sirius mused. “You go to their place and have to deal with a one night stand showing up.”

“So far things have been fine,” Harry protested. “I mean, Ron knows Ginny and I argued, and he might know that we slept together, but he hasn't said anything. And I haven't seen or spoken to Ginny since then.”

“You think you will?”

“Why all this interest in my sex life suddenly?” Harry demanded. “You've never poked your nose into it before now. Are you planning on tracking down all the witches I've shagged and getting a full background?”

Sirius scowled at him and finally sighed. “Maybe I just realize that I'm not the best role model of

how a healthy man behaves. Maybe I want to see you make something more of your life than what you've accomplished in the past."

"There's nothing wrong with my life," Harry countered. "I'm happy, Sirius. I have friends and I have a good job, which I love."

Sirius held out his hands in surrender. "I know. I'm proud of you, Harry, you know that. I just... I second guess myself every minute of every day about how I raised you. You turned out so much better than I could have ever hoped, considering... But I want more for you. I want you to have what I never had, what your father found in your mother."

Harry swallowed thickly and stared off into the mostly deserted pub. "I'm not sure that's in my future, Sirius. A wife and family..."

"Because you've always discounted it," Sirius pointed out. "You see yourself more as my son than James Potter's son. And while I appreciate that, kiddo, it's not who you are."

Harry felt the truth of that statement all the way to his bones, but he stubbornly pushed it away. It was easier to pretend he didn't need relationships to make his life complete than to admit he was lonely. His friendship with Ron and Hermione definitely threw the lack of attachments into sharp relief.

Everything he had was expendable, replaceable. He lived in a flat that held no real memories. Except his new friendship with Ron and Hermione, Harry's acquaintances weren't relationships he couldn't build with anyone else. Harry's life was completely temporary, as it had always been.

"I want you to find someone that makes you happy, Harry, someone that you can be attached to and give something back of yourself. And I have to admit when Hagrid was talking about the Weasley girl, I pictured the two of you together. I thought she'd make a good match for you."

"She isn't... she doesn't feel for me that way," Harry dismissed. "And I don't really know what I feel for her. I'm only twenty-two, you know."

Sirius shrugged nonchalantly and glanced over at the bar. It wasn't the first time Harry had seen him do it tonight, but there was no one there except the barmaid, Madam Rosemerta.

"I really don't need complicated right now," Harry sighed. "Maybe... maybe after this season is over, after we've won the League Cup, I can think about meeting someone."

"If you beat the Harpies," Sirius pointed out with a wicked grin.

Harry growled low. "We're going to beat them."

"Sure, sure," Sirius nodded.

* * *

It was two weeks until the Charity Banquet and Ginny still hadn't found a date. Tonks waited patiently each morning for an update, and left for work grumbling about how much Ginny could

drag her heels. Hermione even offered to find someone in her department to go with Ginny.

She didn't want a pity date. She didn't want to go with just anyone, but the banquet was looming closer and closer and Ginny knew she was going to have to really focus on finding someone. Even Neville was busy now, so Ginny's normal escape route was exhausted. She supposed she could contact one of the blokes who had been in the DA. Seamus was still single the last time she heard, although the idea of dancing closely with the grabby Irishman did nothing for her. Seamus had a reputation for wandering hands and Ginny wasn't at all attracted to him. Even Dean, whom Ginny had dated briefly back in school, was seeing someone seriously.

"I'm telling you, you should meet my brother," Slaine Kipp, the Harpies' star Chaser teased from across the room. Slaine had been going on and on about her brother Kendal since Ginny had joined the team. Supposedly he was some sort of Healer who was always traveling the world, curing disease and saving hundreds with his heroic medical miracles. The way Slaine went on, the man was more myth than reality.

"He's going to be in town right before Christmas and he's single!" She said that last word in a sing-song voice and nudged Ginny's arm before dancing out of the room.

"And probably uglier than a hippogriff's behind," Cam Mitchem snorted quietly.

"He wasn't bad when we were in school," Laurene Acree mused. "Then again, he was only eleven when I left, and a bit on the scrawny side. Ravenclaw, if I remember right."

Ginny snorted as she pictured a skinny boffin with thick glasses and his face stuck in a textbook. Maybe she could just go alone, stay for a few minutes and then go home where she could curl up with a cup of hot cocoa. Tonks would roll her eyes at Ginny's attitude and claim it was a waste of a perfectly wonderful set of dress robes, but Ginny could survive another lecture.

"I have a cousin," Caprice offered. All the Harpies in the locker room groaned at her normal offering and threw various bits of clothing at the giggling woman. Caprice's cousin was well into his forties and often showed up to the Harpies games. He was the very definition of creepy with the way he watched the players.

"I'll figure something out," Ginny assured them all. Rather than shower, Ginny gathered her things into her arms and decided to shower at home. Her kit needed a good cleaning anyway. She bundled everything in her arms and walked toward the Apparition point, pondering just who she might be able to contact for a date. Several names came to mind and even though Ginny hadn't spoken to any of them since leaving school, she might just send out an owl or two. No doubt Potter would show up with some shapely slapper who he'd make a berk of himself with before taking her home to shag repeatedly.

Ginny grimaced at the idea and forced it away. No matter what had happened between them, the picture of Harry sleeping with someone else—even though it was most likely happening—made her feel queasy.

"Ruddy git," she growled. Her shoulder caught on the corner of the hallway and the clothing she had bundled in her arms went flying, scattering everywhere. Ginny swore loudly and bent to gather it all up, but someone beat her to it. A masculine hand lifted her jumper and lacy bra, offering it to

Ginny with a deep chuckle.

Ginny's eyes went wide and she looked up into a set of bright blue eyes, framed by black eyelashes.

"Not necessarily the way I choose to meet women, by returning their undergarments." He laughed again and Ginny felt her heart flutter. He was very good looking: tall and thin, with pitch black hair and pale skin. His cheekbones were high, his nose straight, and his jaw shadowy with black stubble.

"Kendal Kipp. And you're Ginny Weasley. Slaine's told me all about you."

Ginny stared at his hand for a moment before she shifted her things awkwardly in her embrace, forcing her knickers and bra deeper into the pile. Why, oh why did she have to act like a complete nutter in these situations? Finally coming to her senses, Ginny shook his hand.

"Sorry, I obviously took a Bludger to the head today and completely forgot how to act normal."

He grinned widely and laughed that wonderful low laugh again. "I could probably fix that for you."

Something clicked in Ginny's mind and she realized this was Slaine's boffin brother, miraculous healer extraordinaire.

"Erm, I'm not sure where Slaine is, actually," Ginny recovered. "I think she might have left earlier."

Kendal grinned again and Ginny truly thought that his smile might just be the cure to all those diseases he'd been alleviating around the world. "Lucky me; I get to run into you, then." He was a shameless flirt, but Ginny found herself laughing all the same.

"Lucky you, indeed," she challenged back. "I've not even showered today! And after four hours of practice..."

"I didn't even notice," Kendal lied.

"I need to, erm..." Ginny gestured toward the Apparition point. If she didn't escape now she was going to find herself doing something horribly embarrassing, like flinging her knickers at him in her clumsiness.

"Maybe we can plan to bump into each other again, perhaps after you've showered, although that's not necessarily mandatory."

His cheekiness made her smile and Ginny felt her stomach flutter pleasantly. "Possibly."

"It was nice to meet you, Ginny Weasley."

"Kendal Kipp," she said his name, as if committing it to memory, and felt her face heat.

He watched her with those bright eyes until Ginny forced herself to walk away. She wasn't sure how she managed to Apparate without scattering pieces of herself all over England, but she did.

When the flat appeared around her, Ginny sighed loudly and flopped back onto the sofa, discarding

her laundry everywhere. With a giddy giggle, Ginny shook her head.

"If he owls, I'm going to ask him to the Banquet," she promised herself. "Maybe he'll be able to cure me of being an absolute nutter."

Chapter 6: Wobble

It seemed like ages ago that he'd been in this same ballroom, leaning one elbow against the bar and sipping a glass of Firewhisky. The decorations were different this time—fairies dotting the evergreen boughs and mistletoe floating around the room, chasing couples into more secluded corners where reporters were hidden, no doubt. The moratorium on interviews was driving the press insane and the stalking had risen to all-time levels. Harry was more than ready to hex the next person who stuck a camera in his face.

The room was full of players and their dates—this was strictly a couple's only event. Honestly, Harry was glad that the invitations were limited. It helped with keeping some of the slaggier elements away. Then again perhaps it was just as bad, he mused as he watched a couple dance by and saw the skimpy dress the woman was wearing. And his date was no exception. After waiting until the last possible minute, Harry had finally given in to Malakai's offer of a 'good looking bird' to decorate his arm. And Romilda was pretty, even if there didn't seem to be much between her ears. She acted inordinately pleased to be the date of Harry Potter and used his full name whenever possible.

"A few more hours," he mumbled to himself. The bartender overheard him and smirked before filling his glass once more.

"I can't believe you're here with Romilda Vane." Harry turned and looked at Davies, who was shaking his head at the attire of the woman—her deep purple dress was just on the far side of tacky, and low cut enough that they left very little to the imagination. Harry was less than amused. Honestly, her pretty face was definitely ruined by the way she flaunted her body and her attitude.

"What's wrong with her?" Harry asked.

Lorin stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Nothing," he finally said. "Just watch your drink. She had a reputation at school for mucking around with love potions."

Harry grimaced and peered at his drink despite the fact that it hadn't left his hand since the bartender had poured it. "Seriously?"

Davies shrugged a shoulder. "Just a rumor, I suppose, but you never know."

Harry finished off his drink and nudged the glass away from him suspiciously. "Do me a favor, if I start going off, stun me?"

Davies snorted and clapped Harry on the shoulder. "Only if you don't hex my ass for it tomorrow."

"I'm sure I'll thank you," Harry assured him.

A flurry of activity near the door drew Harry's attention and his jaw dropped when a new couple appeared. Lorin whistled low and Harry swore.

Ginny Weasley, on the arm of a man who looked like some sort of male model, glided into the room. Her dress was stunning—deep midnight blue with silver snowflakes that drifted from the top before

settling into a pale band of white near the floor. It was tastefully cut, giving only a hint of cleavage and hugging her small body perfectly. For one weak moment, Harry envied that dress. Too well he remembered what was under it—the pale vanilla curves and raspberry nipples that made his mouth water just thinking about them. An irrational urge to storm over and pummel her date until he stopped touching her arose in Harry, but he forced it away.

“Merlin, will you look at her?” Romilda melted into Harry’s side and glared at Ginny across the ballroom. Malakai and his curvy, blond date—Harry couldn’t seem to remember her name—were gaping as well. “There aren’t even grass stains on her dress.”

The blonde snickered loudly. “Wonder what possessions her family had to sell off to buy her that dress, let alone a date!”

The two women tittered loudly and Harry felt sick to his stomach. “She makes a decent wage,” he pointed out. “As one of the top Seekers she’s well compensated.” It felt right to be defending Ginny, even though an hour ago she’d been nothing more than the enemy.

“Female Quidditch players are just so...” Romilda made a disgusted face and then turned it into a simpering smile up at Harry. “Come and dance with me, sweetie.”

Harry clenched his jaw and promised himself to get some of Ron’s brothers’ Invisible Itching Powder From Hades and put it into Malakai’s athletic supporter as payback for saddling him with this woman. He allowed himself to be led to the dance floor and tried not to be too annoyed when Romilda plastered herself to his front and forced them to sway. Merlin, she even led while they were dancing. Harry was far too disinterested to care much.

Each time they would revolve, Harry would search the room for Ginny. She was extremely beautiful and Harry found himself wishing he hadn’t been such an idiot about everything between them. What if he’d been the one allowed to be her escort tonight? What if it was him she smiled *that* smile up at and laughed in a way that made the hair on his neck stand up?

Harry forced his eyes from her and glared unseeingly at the room around him. He swayed back and forth and refused to allow himself to name the feeling deep inside him as jealousy.

When Ginny and her date stepped onto the dance floor, Harry finally stopped moving. Romilda seemed put out and huffed her annoyance with him. “I’m going to get myself a drink,” she mumbled.

“You do that,” Harry answered vaguely as he watched Ginny glide perfectly around the floor. Her red hair was done in loose curls that danced about her shoulders and down the middle of her back. He remembered how it tangled in his hands, looking like fire in his grip, and the ruffled, attractive way it had fallen about her shoulders when she was sitting in his kitchen.

He swore silently and spun away from the floor, bumping into several couples as he moved away, forcing one foot in front of the other. Dammit! He was past this. Why did she have to show up and look so deliciously perfect? And why did her date—whoever the wanker was—have to be so attendant and make her grin at him that way. She’d had a similar smile for Harry the moment he lowered his head to...

Enough! Torturing himself wasn't going to do. Romilda returned to his side, offering a glass of bubbly champagne. Harry didn't think twice about it before he took a huge mouthful. Lorin's words from earlier slammed back into his mind and he let the liquid flow back into the glass. A bit dribbled down his chin and Romilda gave him a horrified look.

"Er... something off about that," he excused as he wiped his mouth and set the glass down on a deserted table. "Not really a champagne sort of bloke, I suppose."

She looked disgruntled and Harry began to sweat, wondering if a particularly strong love potion could affect him without being swallowed.

"Are we going to dance anymore?" Romilda demanded, crossing her arms in front of her in a pout.

"Not right now," Harry dismissed. Ginny and the wanker were floating around the floor, waltzing flawlessly. Ginny looked only at her date and Harry chastised himself for being an envious git. She wasn't *his*. He had no claim on her at all.

Harry turned to the person standing next to him. "He's gay, isn't he?" he nodded his head to the tall, dark man spinning Ginny around. "Please tell me he's gay. No straight man dances that way."

Damien choked on his drink and glared at Harry. "What the hell are you asking me for? Do I look gay?"

Harry blinked and stammered a denial. He hadn't meant to imply anything at all; he was simply seeking confirmation of what he hoped was true.

"Er..."

"Not that anything's wrong with it, you know," Damien scowled. "I'm just not."

"I just meant... er..." Harry gave up and stormed away, headed toward the bar. He ordered another Firewhiskey and retreated to the darker edges of the room where he could watch Ginny and sulk in peace. Maybe Romilda would think he left and she'd go away. Harry couldn't deal with her tasteless personality right now.

Really, he shouldn't be feeling like this at all. Ginny wasn't his. She was free to date whatever prat she wanted.

He caught sight of the couple again as they came off the floor, hand in hand, and accepted glasses of champagne from a passing server. They sipped at them and Harry looked away, pondering whether it was too early to leave yet. The charity part of the evening hadn't even begun yet. Maybe he could pretend to be sick.

When he looked back, Harry knew he wouldn't have to pretend. The git was kissing Ginny and she melted against him, wrapping her arms around his neck and giving herself over to the embrace.

Harry swore and closed his eyes. As much as his dreams of her had plagued him, this was infinitely worse. At least in his fantasies, Ginny was kissing him, giving herself to him. Now this vision would be locked in his head. He felt small and rejected.

"Harry."

Romilda appeared at his side, smiling sloppily up at him. She wound her hand in the lapel of his robes and pointed upward where a sprig of mistletoe hovered above them. She went up onto her toes and pressed against him just as flashes popped all around them. Harry didn't fight her when she kissed him. He even held her close and kissed her back until she went limp in his arms.

And it was completely dissatisfying.

* * *

Ginny leaned back against the door, finally relaxing. Her smile wouldn't stop and Tonks laughed at the expression on her face.

"That good?" Tonks joked. She spun around on the sofa and leaned on the back of it, eager to hear every detail.

"No," Ginny said through her grin. "I charmed my face to stay this way."

Tonks blinked in confusion. "Er... seriously?"

The smile slipped completely from her and she grimaced. "I wish. Then maybe my cheeks wouldn't feel like they need to crack."

"Er..."

"I know you liked him," Ginny sighed and pushed off the door. She kicked her heels off in the middle of the floor and ignored her dress as she flopped into one of their secondhand chairs. "But I'm seriously going to hex Kendall Kipp if I have to see him again."

Tonks sighed and wiggled down into her seat, watching Ginny intently.

"He's too perfect, you know? Everything was so stiff and formal... I felt like I was a prize krup in a show. It was horribly romantic and what every little girl dreams of..."

"But?"

"But I'm not every little girl, apparently," Ginny sighed. "I don't need waltzing and champagne and kisses under the mistletoe." She scowled and clamped her jaw closed rather than admit that if Kendall had been more commanding, more take-charge, she might have been interested. Harry had been very commanding when they were together. There was a presence about Harry Potter that made it hard for Ginny to even breathe when they were close. Harry's face came into her mind, but Ginny didn't let it stay.

"Merlin, help me out of this dress before my breasts pop out on their own and make a break for freedom!" She struggled out of the seat and tried to reach for the zipper. Tonks laughed and helped her pull it down.

"So if he owls?" Tonks asked.

Ginny clutched the dress to her so she didn't flash her friend, but stood in the hallway and sighed. "He won't. We sort of reached an understanding at the end of the night. There's no spark there between us, let alone a fire."

Tonks nodded in sympathy. "Was Potter there?"

Ginny grimaced. "He showed up with Romilda Vane, if you can believe it." She shuddered. "I didn't see them more than a few minutes, actually."

"Urgh." Tonks pretended to gag. "Well, hopefully he saw you and was green with jealousy. He'd have to be if he saw you next to the slag he brought."

Ginny sighed and smiled gratefully. She was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to curl up in her favorite pajamas and sleep for a week.

"Get your frumpy clothes on and I'll comb the muck out of your hair," Tonks offered with a knowing smile. "And you can tell me all the highlights. I have to live vicariously through you, and I hope you appreciate that. I never get to date gorgeous, dull healers and dance around at the ball like Cinderella."

"You didn't miss out," Ginny assured her as she shuffled down the hall. At least the dress she and Tonks had picked out was fabulous. More than one eye had turned her way tonight and Ginny's cheeks had been warm much of the evening. She tried very hard not to pay attention to Harry, or where he was in the room, but it was difficult. She had to admit, he looked very dapper in his black dress robes. If only he hadn't debased himself by appearing with Romilda on his arm. Then again, maybe they deserved each other.

* * *

Harry paced around the room once more while Hermione and Ron watched, mildly amused. He'd been annoyed when he showed up and the disgruntled feeling hadn't left him, even with all their chatting. He wanted to *do* something... hit something, possibly. It had been like this for days now, ever since the stupid banquet.

He winced at the very thought of that moment and made another circuit of their living room, barely seeing photographs on the mantel, pictures on the walls, or his friends' bemused faces.

Oh, the press had been horrible. *Love Is In The Air! Quidditch Pauses Play To Make Way For Romance!* Just the headline made Harry feel sick to his stomach. And the two huge photographs underneath were hideous—Ginny with her face pressed to Mr. Perfect, and Romilda attempting to stick her tongue down Harry's throat.

"Can we just... go do something?" Harry snapped. He felt bad at the tone of his demand, but neither Ron nor Hermione seemed bothered by it. "I just feel cooped up lately. I think it's the weather."

"Sure," Ron said. "I'm positive that's it."

They'd both been acting a bit odd since the morning after the ball when Harry appeared, clutching the bloody *Daily Prophet* in his hand and demanding to know if Ginny was seeing the plonker. Not

that he cared, really. She was free to see whomever she chose, right?

"Let's go into London," Hermione offered. "I still have a few last minute gifts I want to pick out and the walking will do us good. London is a great diversion."

"Brilliant," Harry said. Of course, he would have agreed to just about anything to get out right now.

Diagon Alley was filled with people bustling from shop to shop, bundled up in their winter cloaks, scarves and hats. It looked like a scene that should be on some postcard, but it did offer enough diversity that Harry could distract his thoughts well.

Hermione kept up a lively chatter and Ron would add things here and there. Harry usually only grunted in return, or gave monosyllabic answers, but they didn't seem to mind.

"Are you finished, Harry?"

Harry jerked his attention away from the wizard across the street who was pushing a baby pram full of various odds and ends, but no child. "Er..."

"With your shopping," Hermione clarified.

"Oh, yeah." He nodded jerkily. Really, who did he have to shop for? Sirius owned everything he wanted, or he'd simply go out and buy it himself. Harry bought him a bottle of Firewhisky every year rather than try to think of something fitting. He'd found a rare, out of print edition of some Muggle book for Hermione—he noticed several by the same author on the bookshelves at their home when he'd visited—and he'd gotten a selection of signed Quidditch memorabilia for Ron. Fairly simple, but that's the way Harry liked it.

They stopped near a bench so that Hermione could adjust her bags of gifts and Harry looked around once more.

"What're you doing for Christmas?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged a shoulder. "Nothing special. I'll probably end up in Scotland with Sirius."

"You should come to the Burrow Christmas day." Ron's face immediately brightened at his suggestion, as if he were picturing it in his mind. "Mum always makes loads of food and everyone will be there."

Harry grimaced. Yeah, everyone, including your sister, he wanted to say. "Er... I'm not sure that's the best idea. Having witnesses around when Ginny and I hex each other into oblivion isn't my idea of a happy holiday."

Hermione snorted and Ron rolled his eyes. "That's not going to happen."

Harry muttered under his breath and tried not to picture himself being stunned and strung up by all of Ron's family for looking at Ginny crossly.

"Oh, honestly," Hermione huffed. "The two of you just need to get over this. I'm sorry to be blunt like this—"

"No you're not," Ron scoffed, "you love being blunt."

"—but everyone can see you have feelings for Ginny," Hermione finished over the top of Ron.

"Feelings?" Harry demanded with a scowl. "What are you—"

"Otherwise you wouldn't care so much that she's seeing someone else—which, by the way, she isn't." Hermione crossed her arms and glared at both Ron and Harry.

"How do you know?" Ron stole the question right from Harry's mouth.

"She may be your sister, Ronald, but she's also one of my friends. I asked her." A satisfied little shrug accompanied the remark.

Harry felt a weight lift off his shoulders and wanted to question Hermione more about what Ginny may have said, but he'd obviously been transparent enough for both of them to figure out that he felt something for Ginny, misguided though it may be. It wouldn't do to get either of them harping on him about it.

"Good," Ron nodded firmly. "Now that's out of the way, you can come for Christmas dinner."

"You don't think Ginny will be angry?" Harry asked. Truthfully, the idea of meeting the rest of the Weasleys intrigued Harry. He'd already met the twins and loved their quirky senses of humor and the way nothing was ever serious with them.

"Probably." Ron shrugged as if it meant nothing to him. "But she'll live. We've all brought friends home through the years. Tonks—Ginny's best friend—is almost one of the family."

"She's also your partner, Ron," Hermione pointed out. "And she was in the Order with your parents."

That's where Harry had seen her before. He'd wondered why he recognized the woman at the Leaky Cauldron. Then again, if he remembered right, she was constantly changing her appearance. He was fairly sure she was related to Sirius in some way, although he wasn't big on family connections.

"Yeah. Say you'll come. Mum will be over the moon."

Ron's cajoling, along with Hermione's wide smile broke the final barriers in Harry's mind and he gave in with a small nod.

"Alright, I'll come, but if Ginny's upset I'll—"

"You don't have to stay," Hermione finished for him. They stood smiling at each other for a minute before laughing softly.

It felt good to be included in their holiday plans this way—it was something that had never happened to Harry, actually. He and Sirius usually sat by the fire and drank until they fell asleep. Exchanging gifts was rather anticlimactic as neither of them went in for big productions.

"Er... should I bring something... gifts or..."

"Not at all," Hermione said as she gathered her shopping bags into her arms once more.

"You could bring that cheese again," Ron burst out. "That was brilliant!"

Harry felt his face heat at the memory. "You know that was sort of a joke, yeah?" The first time he'd been invited to their home, Harry had brought a box of Velveeta processed cheese and a bottle of expensive wine.

"It tasted good!" Ron protested.

"Ronald," Hermione scolded. "You don't have to bring anything, Harry. Just come."

"What?" Ron defended. "You liked it too, and you know Dad would love it."

Harry snorted and slapped his friend on the back as they began to weave their way toward the Leaky Cauldron.

"Fred and George would love it too. The only one who wouldn't care is Ginny, and she probably wouldn't notice if you bought her a new Firebolt."

"Why would I do that?" Harry asked. "She already has one."

They both gave him odd looks that dissolved into knowing smiles. Harry knew his cheeks were red, but blamed it on the cold winter air.

* * *

The song on the wireless was one of her mother's favorites; she listened to it time after time every single Christmas. Ginny could remember being a very young child, hiding underneath the kitchen table while her mother moved efficiently about, making pies, boiling vegetables, basting roasting meat, and hearing Celestina Warbeck warble on about enchanted mistletoe and kissing before the evergreen tree.

And despite her loathing of the song itself, Ginny found herself humming along, purely out of nostalgia.

"I'm so glad you came over today to help," her mother smiled as they worked side by side. Ginny was carving up apples for a tart and her mother was kneading the dough for the crust. The morning had ticked away on the clock, minute by minute, as they created a feast for the family.

"I am too," Ginny smiled.

"Two more days to get everything done," her mother sighed tiredly. "But now we have the cooking mostly under control."

"And I'll be here tomorrow to help you finish it up," Ginny promised. "In fact, I was actually thinking of staying over tomorrow night, if that's alright?"

"Of course!" Her mother beamed and charmed the rolling pin to smooth the tart crust perfectly. "Your father and I don't get to see enough of any of our children now that they're out on their own."

Of course, now that the grandchildren are starting to come..."

Ginny's head snapped up. "Are Bill and Fleur coming from France?"

"Bill owed last week and said they were going to do their best. Little Victoire had an ear infection and Fleur wasn't feeling the best. Secretly, I'm hoping that she's expecting again."

Ginny gave a pleased little smile. Bill held a particularly soft spot in Ginny's heart, as did his precocious little daughter. Fleur was okay too, Ginny supposed, now that they'd all gotten used to seeing the couple together.

"Too bad Charlie can't escape for a few days," Ginny sighed.

"Oh, that reminds me," her mother said as she levitated the crust into a pan. "Bring something nice to wear; Ron is bringing a guest to dinner."

Ginny's knife skidded across the piece of apple she was chopping and came dangerously close to slicing her finger off. "Er..."

"Imagine," her mother gushed, "Harry Potter eating at my table. He was always the most polite boy, you know, the few times we met him."

Ginny bit the inside of her lip and chopped the apple with a viciousness that left nothing but a sticky mess on the counter. Of course Harry Potter was coming to Christmas dinner. Of course he'd wormed his way into her family through Ron and was planning on a full infiltration.

"Ginny, dear, what on earth have you done to the apples?" Her mother snatched the knife from her hands and Ginny watched as the pieces of fruit went perfectly into the tart crust. Spices and sugar sprinkled over them with only a few flicks of her mother's wand and the whole thing went into the oven.

"I know the two of you had that little spat in the fall, but that's well over now. I raised you all to be civilized, and you can certainly welcome him to our family home hospitably." The stern look Ginny received after the statement assured her that protesting wasn't going to do any good.

"Of course, please be a dear and tell Tonks she's more than welcome to come, as well. All of my children's friends are welcome here."

"She's going to her parents'," Ginny grumbled, horribly jealous of her flatmate right now. If only Gwenog hadn't given the whole team three weeks off before they started preparing for their next round of games; Ginny wouldn't get far by pretending she needed to practice, not on Christmas day, at any rate.

"I need to get home," she mumbled as she stared vaguely out the foggy kitchen windows. "If I'm going to stay tomorrow I need to prepare a few things."

"Of course you do, dear," her mother answered cheerfully. "What type of tart do you think Harry prefers?" she asked absently.

Ginny bit her tongue rather than answer with what came to mind. Surely a lightening fast *scourgify* would follow any reply Ginny had to offer.

"Do you think lemon or treacle? Perhaps I'll do one of both. The poor boy probably never had a decent meal growing up. I've met Sirius Black and he didn't strike me as the type to bake."

"Perhaps they had a house elf, mum," Ginny pointed out. Bitterness welled up inside her and she couldn't help but continue. "Perhaps Harry had all the *itarts*/i he could handle over the years." It felt good to finally let the sour statement out, but her mother's confused glance was definitely the clue to depart before she understood what Ginny was implying.

Her flat was empty when Ginny arrived and she stared at the slightly disheveled place, not really seeing any of it.

"I can't *believe* him!" she hissed and gave the sofa a nudge with her hip. It felt so good that she did it again, making the old furniture scrape along the floor. "Of course he's going to ruin Christmas. Perhaps we should invite him for New Years as well. *That* holiday has entirely too much potential. And while we're at it, perhaps Harry bleeding Potter should just move in!"

A stack of old magazines were her next victims. They went flying and scattered wonderfully over the hardwood.

It was so satisfyingly physical that Ginny searched for anything to throw. She snatched one of the squidgy pillows off the sofa and whacked it repeatedly against everything in sight. The seams finally gave way and bits of white fluff fell about the room, making it look like an indoor snow storm. Once only the shell of the pillow was left, Ginny seized the other one on the sofa and did the same.

Her breath came in short gasps as she terrorized the flat, breaking glass, tossing books from the shelves and tearing apart anything that stood still long enough. Every nasty swear word she'd overheard while growing up with her brothers slipped from Ginny's mouth. Months of frustration and annoyance built into a fit of epic proportions. Yes, it was immature and horribly juvenile, but by the end of it all, Ginny felt so much better about life.

She sat in the middle of her mess, pleased at how much destruction she'd managed without compromising the integrity of the walls. Everything could be repaired with a few spells, but it was the principle of the thing, anyway.

"What the hell!" Tonks screeched when she Apparated in. Her wand came up instantly. "Were we *robbed*? Are you injured?"

Ginny felt her face heat as she surveyed the damage. "Er... no, sorry. This was all me."

Tonks glared at her for a minute, still clutching her wand in case she needed to stun Ginny. "Do I want to know? I'm betting it has something to do with—"

"Don't say it!" Ginny snapped. She stood slowly and brushed bits of fluff from her jeans and finally pulled her wand. "The Git is coming for Christmas dinner."

Tonks' eyebrows raised and she whistled low. "Er..."

"I'm going to chop him into tiny pieces," Ginny said gleefully as the idea popped into her head, "and scatter them over the Arrows' pitch."

"I hope you're not planning on me being your alibi," Tonks snorted. "There's a bit of a conflict of interest there, I'd say."

"Oh, don't worry; I'm sure it will be considered justifiable homicide by the end of the meal." Ginny dismissed it with a vague wave of her wand. The destroyed pillows mended themselves, summoning fluff from everywhere.

"Alright," Tonks nodded jerkily. She pulled her cloak off and hung it on a hook near the door. "I'm going to take a bath."

"You're not going to help me clean up?" Ginny demanded.

"Did I act like a three year old?" Tonks scoffed. "I think not. You made the mess, you clean it up. And do try to keep the diabolically evil plots to a minimum; I might be required to testify against you and I'd hate to repeat some of the things I'm sure are in your head."

Ginny rolled her eyes and righted the books back onto their shelves. Cleaning up was never as satisfying as destroying things.

Chapter 7: Laws of Attraction

Gravity: the acceleration of a body in freefall

It was almost noon and Ginny had somehow managed to remain in her pajamas and slippers all day. Her mother was going to have a heart attack the next time she walked by and found Ginny lounging on the sofa, reading through a battered copy of *Quidditch Through The Ages* and doing nothing to make herself look presentable. Even her hair was ratted and piled in a messy knot on top of her head.

She might not be able to completely defy her mother's wishes by being outright rude to Potter, but she certainly wasn't going to give him the impression that he was something special.

"Going to stay right there all day, Ginny?" Bill asked with a smirk. He bounced Victoire on his knee and the little girl giggled madly.

"Sure," Ginny answered lazily. "It's not like I have to dress up. No one special is coming today, are they?"

Fred and George snorted from across the room. "You wait until he gets here, Bill. There'll be fireworks for sure," George mused.

"Yeah, neither of them seems to be able to resist taking shots at each other."

Ginny gave them both a dry glare. "That is categorically untrue. It's been months since I even spoke to the prat."

"The press is eating it up," George told Bill. "It's turned into this huge rivalry between the Harpies and the Arrows. You should see the betting pool. I'm tempted to—"

"You'll do nothing of the sort," their mother hissed from the doorway. "I would have thought your little lesson about gambling back in sixth year would have taught you something, young man." Both George and Fred flushed and turned back to their chess game.

Ginny snorted. Unfortunately, it drew the attention of her mother. "As for you, young lady, I don't care what your feelings for Harry Potter are; I raised you to be a polite, honorable lady, and you're acting like a spoiled little ruffian. Now, march right upstairs and make yourself presentable. I don't care if you're twenty years old, Ginevra, I'll use a paddling hex if I need to."

"I'm twenty-one, Mum," Ginny grumbled, even as she stood. There was no arguing when Molly Weasley spoke her mind. She would only be pushed so far and Ginny had obviously found the mark today.

"I'm keeping the slippers on!" Ginny called back as she stomped up the stairs. While she dressed, Ginny decided that being furious was exhausting. And perhaps it was allowing Harry Potter too much control over her life. She wasn't normally a raving nutter, after all.

Maybe a different approach was needed today while he was here. If she pretended she didn't know

him at all things might go easier. Then she wouldn't have to think about the way his mouth felt pressed against hers, or the way he rolled his hips against her when they kissed, or the way his hair flopped artfully over his forehead when he was concentrating completely on one thing.

She felt all flushed by the time she was ready to make an appearance downstairs—clad in her brand new pale green Weasley jumper and most comfortable jeans. She'd even managed to tame her hair into something respectable. But the slippers remained.

"Don't think about that," she warned herself and walked down the steps. The general commotion that enveloped the Burrow most times was doubled and Ginny sighed, realizing that *he* must be here. She took a deep breath and willed herself to be strong. After all, she was a beautiful, successful woman—with only mild tendencies toward violence and homicidal acts. And those were always provoked.

"Here she is now."

Ginny flinched when her mother cheerfully drew all the attention in the room to Ginny's entrance. She pasted a smile on her face and stared at Harry, who seemed inordinately amused at her choice of footwear.

"Hello, Ginny."

"Harry." Ginny nodded in his direction and then moved over to gather Victoire into her arms. She could feel his eyes follow her, but vowed not to care. He was most likely simply making up jokes to tell later at her expense.

"Come on, my little love," she cooed to the little girl. "Let's go play with your new toys."

Victoire was more than happy to have Ginny play with her, and kept up a string of happy little girl babble that made it possible for Ginny to ignore the conversations going on across the room.

Everyone was positively giddy over Harry and the prat was eating it up. He was even pretending to blush and stammer at all the attention. What a git!

Ginny played baby dolls with her niece until her bum grew tired of sitting on the floor, and she'd dressed the poor doll no less than twelve times. Victoire squirmed in her lap and gasped, her little eyes going wide.

"Potty, Auntie Gin!"

Fleur sighed from the sofa, where she'd been observing the play and moved to stand. Molly's suspicions that Fleur was expecting had proven true—sometimes Ginny thought her mother was simply too scary for words.

"I'll take her," Ginny offered. It would give her a chance to escape the room and splash a bit of water on her face. "It's really no trouble at all."

She raced the little girl up the steps, losing horribly as Victoire cackled with glee. Once in the bathroom, Ginny helped Victoire pull her tights down and get settled. She glanced at herself in the

mirror and pinched her cheeks slightly to get some color into her face. Not that it would matter.

"All dumn!" Victoire informed her.

Ginny took her time helping the little girl get cleaned up, but eventually was forced to open the door. If only she could persuade Vic to demand they play upstairs. No doubt her mother still had some of Ginny's old toys stashed away in the attic somewhere. Granted, the dolls were a bit worse for wear, but Ginny had never been one for dressing them up pretty and playing tea party. *Her* dolls were rough and tumble Quidditch players who hexed their older brothers and had the manners of trolls—much like their owner, Ginny's mother had pointed out on several occasions.

"I hungee, Auntie Gin!" Victoire announced when they reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Me too, Mum!" Ron complained. "And Harry's probably wasting away. We told him not to eat anything before he came."

Harry's eyes went wide and he elbowed Ron, but just smiled when Molly turned to him.

"Well, of course we can eat now that everyone is here." She led the way into the kitchen, arm linked with Harry's.

"Looks like you've been replaced," Ginny needled her father when he slid his arm over her shoulder.

"It's nothing more than a crush that will fade over time," he assured her with a chuckle. "These famous blokes never stick around for long and my Molly always comes back."

Thankfully, everyone seemed to want to sit near Harry, so that left Ginny plenty of space to be as far from him as she could. Despite Fleur's protests that Victoire should really sit with her Maman and Papa, Ginny defiantly set the little girl up next to her Auntie Gin and gave her the first pick of whatever she wanted on the table. Victoire grinned like a little princess being waited upon and happily played up her part.

"We haven't heard about you in years, Harry, dear, and then you show up out of the blue, wanting to play Quidditch. What were you up to?"

"Mum!" Ron protested through a mouth full of potatoes. "Maybe Harry doesn't want to talk about what he was doing!"

Ginny glanced at Harry to see his face was bright red. He adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat.

"I assure you it's nothing interesting. After the war I just needed some time away from it all."

"Perfectly understandable," Arthur assured him. "We all needed time to adjust." There was an awkward moment of silence as everyone remembered Percy and the many others they had lost in the war against Voldemort.

"Mostly I traveled," Harry supplied. "Went new places, met new people."

"It sounds wonderful," Hermione supplied. "Tell them about the Orient and the—"

She continued on, but Ginny let the words drown in her mind rather than listen. She picked at her dinner as Harry told a story and pondered how fast her mother would hex her if she tried to escape.

Laughter echoed and Ginny allowed herself to look at Harry. He was smiling widely and seemed to be completely enjoying himself. What a prat! He was even wearing...

Wait...Minute.

He was wearing a handmade Molly Weasley jumper!

When the *hell* did that happen?

It must have been when Ginny was upstairs in the bathroom with Victoire because he most certainly had not been wearing it when he first arrived. The navy blue cabling stretched perfectly over his chest and made him look rather... delicious, actually.

Harry caught her eye and she glared at him.

The git's plan was working. He was winning over her entire family one by one. Ron and Hermione were already a lost cause—they'd been bewitched by him months ago. Fred and George were obviously taken with him simply because he'd made them laugh. Even Bill seemed to have some sort of respect for him, as they were talking quietly now.

Ginny slumped in her seat and looked down at Victoire who was playing with her carrots, making some sort of structure out of them on her plate. "You're probably going to love him too," she whispered.

"Look!" Vic crowed and clapped her hands at her edible tower.

"Don't play with your food, sweetheart," Bill scolded softly.

"You shouldn't play with it, kiddo," Ginny affirmed quietly. "Food is for throwing... at Harry."

Victoire's eyes went wide, but she grinned evilly. Ginny gave a firm nod in Harry's direction. "He likes roast beef and potatoes in his hair."

Her niece's eyebrow rose slowly, as if contemplating this and then she giggled.

"Oi, what are you telling her down there?" Ron asked.

Ginny gave an innocent little shrug of her shoulders. "Just imparting a bit of girl wisdom to my only niece."

"Don't believe a word she says, Vic," Fred chimed in.

"Ginny's a known troublemaker," George agreed.

"Am not," Ginny grumbled and went back to playing with her potatoes, pushing them back and

forth across her plate.

"Somehow I believe that story."

Ginny glared at Harry when he spoke up, but didn't respond.

"Oh, you have no idea, Harry," Bill chuckled. "Ginny was worse than all of us combined. Her first word was a swear word."

"Was not," Ginny growled.

"It was too!" George piped up.

"It was bugger," Fred grinned.

"No doubt aimed at one of you two," Ginny pointed out.

"Please do not say such vile things in front of mon babee!" Fleur gasped and reached across the table to try and cover Victoire's ears.

"What was her first magic?" Harry asked. He was enjoying this far too much and Ginny scowled at him, mentally carving him into tiny pieces. The whole room turned to look at Molly, whose smile grew rather large.

"She used to magically remove her clothing so she could run about starkers."

The room fell apart in laughter and Ginny silently wished them all painful bouts of indigestion.

"Wanna sit with Hawwy!" Victoire announced. She scrambled off the seat and rushed around the table to climb onto Harry's lap. He shot a panicked look at everyone, but helped her get settled. It wasn't as if she'd given him much choice in the matter. Ginny smirked and prayed Victoire remembered about the roast beef and potatoes.

"Who do you play next?" Hermione asked Ginny.

"Portree," she said.

"We beat them soundly," Harry piped up. "I imagine they'll only give you a bit of a challenge."

Ginny scoffed. "I could beat Edweena Hallberg in my sleep. I saw the Snitch forty minutes before you did in that game, Potter."

He was startled by her answer. "You were there?"

She shrugged and tried to play it off. "I go to all sorts of games. Portree doesn't stand a chance. Their Chasers are decent, but Graddy, their Keeper, couldn't block the Quaffle if it was a hippogriff. He used to play for Chudley," she finished with a nasty grin toward Ron who scowled.

"When did you first fly?" Harry asked. "At Hogwarts?"

Ginny narrowed her eyes at him and tried to figure out what he was trying to accomplish. To her it seemed like nothing but a game of one-upmanship and she ground her teeth together.

"I first flew when I was five. When I was six, I started sneaking out, breaking into the broom shed and taking out each of my brothers' brooms in turn." She grinned widely when all four of them protested loudly. Her mother scowled even though her father looked rather proud of her.

Harry chuckled. "Touché, you managed earlier than I did."

"I was Quidditch Captain for two years at Hogwarts," Ginny continued. "Prefect in my final year."

"The Arrows signed me with no tryout," Harry challenged.

"I'm the youngest Harpy in a century," Ginny countered. "Most Valuable League Player last year."

Fred and George cheered loudly and the tension in the room mounted as Harry and Ginny glared at each other. There were so many things that couldn't be compared, though, because it would be like shoving his past in his face. No matter how much Ginny didn't like Potter, she couldn't ever be that cruel.

"Frankly, I question Linford's judgment in signing you," Ginny sighed. "After all, you've shown definite improvement, but I worry about your *stamina*. The few times I've seen you in action have been a bit... sad, to be honest. I figured a young, virile man like yourself would have better *staying power*. I've definitely seen better in my time."

It was a cheap, dirty dig and completely untrue, but Harry's face flushed bright red and he spluttered for something to retort. Just as he settled on something, Victoire smashed her food-filled hands into Harry's hair. She giggled loudly and the whole room erupted in laughter and gasps.

Mashed potatoes slid down Harry's forehead and plopped onto his glasses.

"Mon dieu!" Fleur flailed and snatched her daughter from Harry's arms.

Ginny held onto the table to keep from tipping over. Her stomach hurt with how hard she was laughing. Her mother was fretting, handing Harry serviette after serviette.

Bill leaned around Hermione and peered at Ginny, who gave an innocent look. "What?" She made a silent promise to get her niece something special very soon.

"I'll just..." Harry gestured to the other room and excused himself.

When he was gone, everyone rounded on Ginny, who was still giggling. The memory of Harry's face decorated with potatoes would probably be enough to fuel a perfect Patronus.

"Honestly," her mother huffed. "I thought I raised a daughter, not a heathen."

"Oh, don't pretend he wasn't asking for it."

"What was that all about?" her father asked. "The two of you—"

Hermione cleared her throat loudly and everyone turned to see Harry standing in the doorway. His hair was all wet and there were great water spots on his new jumper.

"Ahem." Her mother stood and began levitating dishes off the table. "Why don't we just... retire to the other room? Once Ginny helps me clear all of this away we'll have pudding."

Ginny grumbled but stood and loudly gathered dishes. Why was she being punished when Harry had started it all?

"That was a cheap shot about my stamina." She startled when Harry moved behind her, carrying his own plate and flatware. She shrugged a shoulder and tried not to notice how wonderful he smelled. "I don't remember hearing you complain."

He smirked and Ginny growled. She slammed her plate down on the counter and spun on her heel.

"Maybe you weren't listening close enough!" she snapped.

Harry leaned closer. "I think I was listening close enough when you were screaming my name and begging for more."

Ginny let out a cry and dove toward him. Bill's arms wrapped around her and dragged her from the room while her mother wailed loudly.

"Let me go, Bill," she warned him as he carried her into the living room, tossed over his shoulder. "Just let me get one good shot in!"

Bill chuckled and slapped her on the bum, but didn't show any sign of letting her back down. "No chance of that, firefly. If I put you down, you're going to do physical damage and we're going to have to rush Mum to St. Mungo's when she has a fit."

Ginny sighed and slumped against him, letting her hands dangle down toward the floor. "But you agree that he'd deserve it!"

He laughed again. "I have no idea, actually. Whatever he said to you really set you off. Care to tell me about it? Maybe the boys and I need to have a talk with him."

Ginny contemplated it, but just sighed. Her head was pounding from the blood draining down into it. "Put me down, please."

* * *

Harry knew he'd gone too far, but, like usual, his brain turned on after he'd already opened his mouth. He watched Bill drag Ginny from the room and winced when she screamed again.

"I'm so sorry, Harry!"

Mrs. Weasley was fussing about him. Her eyes were watery and he was afraid she was going to start crying.

"I have no idea what got into her. She's usually so... civilized."

Fred, George and Ron all snorted but sobered when their mother glared at them.

"It's alright, Mrs. Weasley," he sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "It was my fault actually. She and I seem to bring out the worst in each other at times. I shouldn't have said what I did."

She looked closely at him and then turned to glare up at the ceiling. "It's still no excuse for her to act like a wild animal."

He snorted, but let it die as Ginny's face, framed with wild hair and blazing look entered his mind. She was gorgeous, even with murder in her eyes and Harry was far too turned on than should be allowed, considering the circumstances.

"Why don't we move out into the living room," Arthur offered stiffly.

"Come on, Harry, I'll play you in chess."

Harry really didn't want to play Ron—he'd already proven that Ron could beat him soundly every single time—but he also didn't want to leave yet. The insane urge to see Ginny again, and possibly apologize for his behavior, was difficult to ignore.

"Sure," he nodded.

"I thought she was going to kill you, mate," Ron chuckled softly while they set up the game. "I suppose I just assumed all of that nonsense before was sort of... hyped by the press. I didn't realize she actually hated you."

Harry thought about that with raised eyebrows but couldn't respond. He didn't particularly want to admit why she hated him or why he felt the need to make her angry repeatedly. The fighting eased the tension, honestly. If Harry wasn't picking a fight with her, he was afraid he might just pull her close to him and do something neither of them wanted right now. It had already happened once and Harry had a feeling that it might again if either of them let their guard down again.

"Are you actually going to play this time?" Ron sighed. "It's sort of insulting that you're not even paying attention most of the time, you know."

Harry smirked and moved his first pawn forward.

Bill returned about twenty minutes later, but Ginny stayed upstairs. Harry found his mind wandering far from the chess game and could tell Ron was getting frustrated with his lack of enthusiasm. He'd already glared at Harry for bouncing his knee up and down nervously.

"We'll have pudding in the kitchen now."

Mrs. Weasley looked frazzled and Harry felt bad. This whole day had turned into one huge disaster. Parts of it were brilliant, but he hated that Ginny was so upset she was now hiding away upstairs. She should be down here enjoying the holiday with her family, not secreted away from him, or plotting his murder.

"Come on," Ron urged. "Mum's been baking for three days. There's enough pudding to rival the

Hogwarts kitchens.”

Harry trudged after and stood in the kitchen doorway, watching the jovial atmosphere. This house, and its inhabitants—with the exception of the one who wanted him to die a painful death—were the warmest, most wonderful thing that Harry could remember. Growing up with Sirius, Harry had known he was loved, but the warm, welcoming family he was witnessing right now only illuminated what he’d missed by not having siblings and parents. Sirius had done his best, but he would never have been able to provide this.

“If you can’t find something you like in all of this, there’s definitely something wrong with you,” Bill teased.

Harry smiled and moved into the room. He helped himself to a generous portion of treacle tart and sighed in delight when the sweet pudding melted against his tongue.

“Amazing,” he complimented. “Best tart I’ve ever had.”

Mrs. Weasley blushed and giggled. “I did wonder. Ginny said something about you having plenty of tarts in the past.”

Ron snorted and began choking on his bite of food. Hermione thumped him soundly on the back. Harry gaped before clapping his mouth shut. Is that what she really thought? That Harry was some sort of playboy who slept with any woman who walked by?

His pudding lost a bit of appeal, but Harry still ate it.

Ginny slipped into the room and he watched her closely, trying to pretend he was interested in what Fred and George were telling him about their latest line of products. Her cheeks were red, but her eyes were clear—good, she hadn’t been crying. In fact, the regal way she held herself earned a bit of respect from Harry. Just by looking at her, he never would have been able to tell she’d been so upset before.

Little Victoire climbed on her Auntie Gin’s lap and proceeded to charm most of Ginny’s pudding from her with smiles and sticky kisses on the cheek. Despite himself, Harry couldn’t help but smile at the scene. Ginny was obviously wonderful with children. The little girl was absolutely taken with her aunt.

“Ginny’s her godmother,” Hermione pointed out quietly. Harry pretended to be confused by what she meant, but Hermione wasn’t about to believe him. “Victoire idolizes Ginny. I have no doubt she’ll grow up to be just like her.”

“That’s a good thing,” Harry said with a smile. “Ginny is... she’s fiery.”

Hermione nodded and studied him. “She’s been through a lot. Similar to you, I suppose.”

Harry cleared his throat and picked at a piece of crust on his plate. “I know,” he admitted.

“She’s really not as tough as she seems, you know.”

"Could have fooled me," Harry sighed.

"Just keep that in mind." Hermione patted him on the arm and moved away.

The evening continued on but Harry never got the chance to speak to Ginny alone. She stayed well away from him and spent most of her time with Victoire, probably teaching the little girl how to knee boys in the bits, Harry mused.

In the end, Harry gave it up as a bad job when Ginny disappeared upstairs with Victoire. "I'm going to go home," he told Ron and Hermione. "I really appreciate the invitation. I er... I had a good time."

Ron chuckled and smirked at Harry. "Sure. I'm sure you live for holidays when one of your hosts is hell-bent on castrating you."

Harry winced, but laughed all the same. Hermione gave him a quick hug and everyone else shook his hand and invited him back anytime.

Before he left, Harry made a point to seek out Mrs. Weasley in the kitchen. Fleur excused herself when he came in, and Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciate you inviting me here."

Her eyes watered and she gathered him into a hug that surprised Harry. He patted her awkwardly on the back.

"You're very welcome, Harry. I remember meeting you for the first time—you looked so young and in serious need of a decent hug."

Harry snorted and scuffed his foot on the worn floor tiles. "You're probably right. Those were some dark years."

"And for someone so young to go through what you had to..." She trailed off, perhaps realizing how uncomfortable Harry was.

"The jumper is..." Harry ran his hand over the soft wool in appreciation. "It's the best gift I've ever been given."

"Oh, go on with you," Molly chided, but Harry could tell she was pleased.

"I'm being serious. No one has ever made something like this for me. I can't ever tell you how much it means to me."

"You know you're welcome here anytime." Mrs. Weasley fussed with a piece of yarn that was out of line with the others and straightened the garment on his shoulders. "And I'm sorry for—"

"Don't apologize," Harry shushed her. "I was... I was an ass to her and..." He shook his head. "At times the connection between my brain and my mouth isn't nearly as clear as it should be."

"I suppose we all have those times," she sighed. "But it doesn't excuse the fact that she tried to

attack you. I'll have a talk with her."

"Maybe..." Harry's words dried up and he shook his head. "I think it's probably me that owes her an apology. I'll try to get that done soon."

They said their goodbyes and Harry gathered his cloak. He pulled it on and stepped out onto the back porch. The air was crisp and burned his lungs when he sucked in a deep breath. The walk to the Apparition point helped clear his head and Harry mused that despite Ginny's behavior—or just possibly *because* of it—he'd had a great time. Just before he Apparated away, Ginny burst through the back door and ran toward him.

* * *

Victoire was surprisingly easy to put to sleep tonight. Once Ginny got her into her pyjamas and the rest of the bedtime routine was followed, to the letter, Vic's little eyes were heavy and drooping.

"Jus' one mowe," she pleaded in a slurred voice when Ginny finished reading her a tale about a princess who was locked in a tower.

"We need to seriously get you some better books, little love," Ginny mused as she glared down at the overly-dramatic princess on the cover. "Some where the princesses rescue themselves and don't swoon when the handsome prince walks by. I promise I'll work on that."

Ginny felt exhausted too as she watched the little girl fall asleep in the same bed Ginny had used when she was small. Although they looked nothing alike—Victoire had pale strawberry blonde hair that was always flawless and her eyes were the same blue as Bill's—Ginny couldn't help but picture herself in Vic's place.

"You're pretty amazing, did you know that?" she whispered to the sleeping girl as she kissed her forehead.

Slowly, Ginny wandered back downstairs and was surprised at how quiet it actually was. Ron and Hermione were ignoring the chess board between them and, despite the arguments of the pieces glaring up at them, were holding hands in the middle of the game. Her father was lying back in his chair. He had the paper spread in front of him, but Ginny guessed that he was already dozing behind the shield. Bill and Fleur were talking quietly on the sofa, soft tones of French reached her ears but she ignored them. Fred and George were nowhere to be seen, and that never bode well.

"Where is everyone?" Ginny asked.

"Harry went home," Ron answered dryly. He looked mad and Ginny sighed.

"I meant Fred and George, actually," she admitted with chagrin. She'd actually forgotten—albeit for just a brief moment—that Harry might still be here.

"They left already," Bill informed her.

"I'm going to go too," Ginny decided. "I'll... I'll see everyone later."

"We're leaving the day after tomorrow," Bill said. "Don't forget to say goodbye."

"I'll come over tomorrow," she assured him with a nod.

Ron looked as if he were going to say something but stilled when Hermione squeezed his hand. "Not tonight, Ron," she whispered. He nodded jerkily at her and mumbled a quick goodbye to Ginny.

Her cloak was in the kitchen, so Ginny moved to retrieve it. When she got to the doorway, however, she saw Harry still inside with her mother.

His words startled Ginny and she scowled as she listened closer. He sounded truly sincere when he thanked her for Christmas dinner and for the jumper.

The whole conversation confused Ginny, actually. Reconciling Harry's soft words with the arrogant man she knew was almost impossible. Then again, there were times—few and far between—when Harry had been wonderful to be around. The first time they met, before his mates surrounded him, and when they'd had sex. Harry was... almost charming those times. Of course, he always had to open his mouth and ruin things.

Her mother's words about his past jolted Ginny and she had to hold onto the door frame to keep from either running away or saying something. At times, she honestly forgot just *who* Harry was. It didn't excuse his prattish behavior, but it possibly explained a small bit of it. He'd gone through so much in his life and was virtually alone during all of it. He had no young friends growing up and little chance at real happiness.

Ginny's face heated when she thought about all that she'd had and taken for granted. She had parents who supported her no matter what, and brothers who teased her mercilessly, but taught her to protect herself and fight for what she wanted. She had a good education and the chance to spread her wings and really discover who she was.

Harry had been given none of that.

And yet, underneath all the bravado and show he put on, she could still see he was a decent man. Maybe at times you had to look really deep, but Ginny could see it shine through occasionally.

"I think it's probably me that owes her an apology. I'll try to get that done soon."

Her heart raced. She wanted to hear that apology, and probably offer one of her own. The sound of the back door closing startled her and she moved quickly into the kitchen.

"Mum, I'm leaving," she said quickly and snatched her cloak off the hook. Her mother blinked owlishly and nodded jerkily. "I'll be back tomorrow, but there's something I need to do first."

"You're not going to kill him, are you?" she demanded.

Ginny smirked and shook her head. "Just apologize."

"Good." Her mother nodded once. "You'll come back tomorrow and we'll discuss how you were raised then."

Ginny ignored the slight and dashed out the door. Harry was standing at the Apparition point and she knew that if he left, she might not be able to talk to him. She wasn't sure she could find the courage to show up at his flat on her own.

"Wait!"

He lifted his wand but didn't turn in his step. Instead, he stared at her with wide eyes.

"Come to finish the job, have you?" he asked.

Ginny's lungs burned and she sucked the cold night air into them. "Did you mean what you said back there—to Mum about Christmas and the jumper?" she clarified when he gave her a confused look.

"Er... yeah, I suppose." He shuffled nervously and Ginny closed the space between them until she was close enough to touch him if she wanted.

"You can't say things like that and not really mean them," she challenged.

Harry locked his jaw, but then let his annoyance slip away. It was like watching a cloak fall away from him and Ginny was surprised at the difference it made. His face looked more tired, but sincere. "I meant every word I said to her."

"I'm sorry," Ginny whispered as she fumbled for his hand. It felt important to touch him right now, to make sure he understood how honest she was being. "Tonight was... all my fault. I thought you were trying to win my family over—infiltrate enemy lines and all that."

Harry chuckled and looked down at their hands. "I wish I was that smart. I just wanted..." He didn't finish his words and Ginny could tell whatever emotion he was feeling right now was right near the surface, swirling and confusing him with the intensity.

And because she couldn't think of anything more to say, Ginny kissed him. Harry seemed shocked for a moment, but then freed his hand and cupped both sides of her face, drawing her even closer.

The kiss was just like she remembered—passionate and consuming; it pulled her into a fire that she wasn't sure she ever wanted to escape from. Her body responded automatically, rolling against him.

The idea that they could get this carried away, just meters away from the Burrow, finally brought some clarity and Ginny pulled away. Thankfully, Harry looked just as startled, and dazed, and pleased as she felt.

"Hang on," she whispered and wrapped her arms around his back. She closed her eyes and Apparated them to her flat.

Harry was staring at her when she looked up, an intense, blazing look on his face. They both knew what they were here for, even if admitting it was more than Ginny could do right now.

"Did you really used to take your clothes off so you could run around naked?"

She snorted at his question. "I suppose I did; I don't remember, but they all *love* to take the mickey about it."

"I'd like to see that," he whispered as he leaned closer and pressed his lips to her cheek. "I'd like to see that very much." She shivered as he traced her jaw back toward her ear. This was the charming Harry that thrilled her down to her core. How could he be so different at times?

"Did they really give you Seeker without a trial?"

Her disgruntled question startled them both and Harry pulled back with a smirk. "I suppose they did. I wasn't happy about it at the time—Linford *had* seen me fly—but I really wanted to play."

Ginny scowled at him, but let the annoyance fade. Did it really matter how he'd been given the spot? He was damned good—not that she'd admit that to his face.

He resumed kissing her and nudged them toward the sofa. "So... right here?" he asked with a hint of smugness.

"No," Ginny said and pushed him away. "No, not... not here." Her face heated and she slid her hand down his arm, twining their fingers together. She led him down the narrow hallway to her cluttered bedroom.

"This seems strange," she mused when Harry tugged at her jumper. "We go from wanting to kill each other to shagging with almost no notice."

He paused and looked lost for words. "They're a lot the same between you and me, I think."

He had a point, Ginny decided "I just can't seem to help it with you," she said aloud and then bit her tongue. That probably wasn't the best thing to admit. Harry already knew he had a power over her, why admit just how much he affected her.

"Wait!" She jerked up just as he leaned to kiss her again.

Harry looked annoyed and growled his answer to her.

"I can't... did you sleep with Romilda?"

Harry pulled back and glared at her. "Does it matter?"

Ginny wanted to say no, but she nodded instead. "I don't want to be just another name on your list of—"

He pushed away and paced back and forth in the tiny room. He was furious, but Ginny couldn't decide why—besides the obvious fact that she'd just ruined the moment.

"No," he finally admitted. "I didn't want to. I couldn't... haven't... with anyone—not since you."

The admission was choked and Ginny felt a thrill ripple through her. It didn't mean anything, really, because the morning sun would change everything between them, as it had last time. But it *did* mean something.

Ginny had no claim on Harry Potter. He wasn't hers just as she wasn't his. Except in this moment.

She sat up and watched him glare at her. "I'm not asking for a commitment—you know that. I don't want anything more than right now from you. I know you won't floo call in the morning, or owl. I know that. This is what it is... it's right now, it's us."

He watched her for a long, awkward moment before he nodded.

"Did you sleep with the wanker who took you to the banquet?"

She didn't answer, but growled when he stopped kissing her.

"Did you?"

"Does it matter?" She threw his words back in his face. Something about the way he was watching her made Ginny think that he'd timed this little argument perfectly. He wanted to put them on familiar ground once more. Or, perhaps, he simply liked to argue with her.

His hold was possessive, and his kiss bruising against her mouth.

"No," she finally admitted. "I didn't sleep with him."

"I *knew* he was a poofter." He grinned in satisfaction and Ginny pinched his side hard.

"He was not," she explained.

"He'd have to be not to want to be with you," Harry explained. "You're effing beautiful, Ginny. You're like... a goddess or something."

Ginny snorted and pressed kisses to his face. His words sounded sincere and it made her falter, but she pulled him closer rather than dwell on it. There would be time later; right now she just wanted this moment...

* * *

They studied each other for some time after, smiling and giving little caresses.

"Can you see me at all?" Ginny whispered. Harry's glasses had been discarded in the middle of their activities.

"Yep," Harry responded. He lifted off her and lay beside her, arms and legs sprawled. "I can't even think straight," he mumbled.

"Don't then," Ginny said as she pulled the duvet over both of them and curled into his side. "Thinking just gets you in trouble."

Harry snorted, but held her close. Ginny was surprised. She'd expected him to jump right up after he finished and disappear.

He was quiet so long she wondered if he'd fallen asleep. "Are you and I all right?" he asked finally.

She thought about it and nodded her head on his shoulder. "We're okay, so long as you don't dismiss

me like some sort of slag in the morning, or pretend none of this happened.”

Harry pressed a kiss to her head and sighed. “It probably shouldn’t have happened, but I can’t say I didn’t want it. And you’re not a tart, or a slag, or anything else other than brilliant.”

Ginny smiled and yawned. Her eyelids were heavy and she let them close for just a minute.

Chapter 8: Unsteady Balance

Harry woke in the dull light of morning. It had to be around five, because the sun wasn't up yet, but he'd at least slept for a few hours. Things were still complicated between him and Ginny—they weren't really supposed to be seeing each other at all—but he felt better about it than he had before. Ginny wasn't asking for promises that Harry couldn't give. She didn't expect anything but to be in the moment when the moment arrived. And that was alright with him; in fact, it worked perfectly for their situation.

He was wrapped around her, just like the last time they'd slept together. This time, however, Harry didn't feel the need to leave immediately. He certainly wanted to avoid a breakfast table scene like last time, but he also didn't feel right about simply leaving Ginny to wake on her own.

"s'it morning?"

Ginny must have felt him stir, because she stretched, arching back into him. Harry's body responded immediately, and he pressed his face in the crook of her neck.

"It's early," he explained. Ginny's fingers wound into his hair and held him against her.

"You're leaving, aren't you?" she asked. Her voice was still raspy from sleep and Harry smiled slightly.

"Soon," he mused. The sleepy scent of her skin—like soap and clean linen—intoxicated him and he wanted nothing more than to be with her again.

"It's okay, you know," she answered softly. "No promises."

They slowly curled together and Harry held her for another few minutes before he kissed her. "I'll try to owl."

She smiled sleepily. "No you won't."

Harry chuckled and slid out of bed. He pulled on his boxers and jeans and tucked his shoes under his arm. "I will," he promised as he put his glasses on.

She smiled at him from the bed and cuddled even further into the blankets as her eyes closed. Harry watched her for a long minute before leaving the room.

He knew she had a flatmate, so he would have to be quiet while he gathered his jumper and cloak. The flat was dark, but Harry found his things without much trouble. He froze as a creak in the floorboards alerted him to another presence. His wand was out a moment later and he spun.

The tip of another wand pressed against his neck.

"What the hell are *you* doing here?"

Harry's heart pounded in his chest and he let his wand drop a fraction of an inch. "Tonks! You

scared the life out of me.”

Tonks didn't flinch and she didn't lower her wand. “I asked you what you're doing here.”

Harry swallowed and he glanced back down the hallway. “Ginny and I—”

Tonks swore and turned away from him. “I know all about your past with Ginny, Potter. And I've always liked you, kid, but you better not be mucking around with her.”

“I'm not,” he insisted. “We're...” He didn't know exactly what they were, truthfully. It wasn't a real relationship.

“Friends with benefits,” Tonks supplied.

“That's too simplistic,” Harry defended. “But I suppose that would be the closest thing.”

Her eyes were shiny in the low light, but her gaze was penetrating. “If you hurt her I won't care who you are, you know.”

“I'm not planning on it,” Harry whispered harshly. He yanked his t-shirt over his head and slid his feet into his shoes.

She snorted and his head snapped up, trying to see the humor in the situation. “The two of you... I can't believe I'm actually going to say this, but... I think you could be good together.”

Harry grimaced and turned away, searching the end of the sofa for his cloak. “It's not serious.”

“Yes it is,” Tonks said firmly. “And next time you're here, use a silencing charm for Merlin's sake.” She walked away, disappearing down the dark hallway, leaving Harry spluttering in the living room.

* * *

Harry *did* send an owl and it pleased Ginny. She certainly wasn't giddy about it, especially not when she read his messy scrawl on the paper.

Don't expect this to happen often. I'm pants at writing. Don't think this new nicer me will allow you to win when we finally match up.

And that was it. Ginny snorted when it arrived and tossed it into the rubbish bin. She still hadn't responded, but Quidditch season had started up not long after the holidays were over. Gwenog seemed to think that she needed to push them higher, stronger for every sweet that may have passed over their lips during the break. Ginny returned to the flat exhausted most nights and fell into bed.

She was sure Harry was suffering from the same obsessive-compulsive tendencies from Oliver, so she didn't feel the need to bother him with some trivial little note.

When his second letter came, four weeks after the first, Ginny decided some response was necessary. After all, they were trying not to hate each other. Granted, the resolve hadn't been tested because they hadn't been in any sort of contact.

I think Sirius is seeing someone. He's being cagey about things. By the way, not that you need the ego boost, but he simply adores you. He's quite convinced that you'll return his affection the minute you meet him. I'm hoping said meeting never takes place.

He didn't sign his notes, but that was fine. No one else had such horrible handwriting, and no one else really wrote Ginny. Occasionally Bill's owl would turn up with a drawing from Victoire, or a short story about what on earth his daughter had gotten up to this time. Charlie was far too involved in his life to do more than send a quick note to her mother, every so often, just to prove he hadn't been roasted alive by one of his barmy dragons.

Ginny stared at a blank piece of parchment for far too long than was healthy as she tried to think of what to tell Harry. Obviously, she was going to take the mickey about his godfather—he was clearly asking for it—but just how to go about it was a mystery.

The floo flared and Ron climbed out. He banged his head on the bricks and swore as he rubbed the painful spot.

Ginny sat back in her chair and watched the arrival in amusement. Ron kicked the side of the fireplace and then hopped around clutching his toes.

"Are you about finished?"

He glared at her. "You should move," he growled. "That fireplace is too small."

"I happen to love my flat, thanks," Ginny said as she leaned back over her parchment. "What's the reason for this little visit?"

Ron slumped into a chair across from her and peered at the blank letter. When he saw that there was nothing there, he tossed a folded *Witch Weekly* in front of her.

"What's this?" she goggled at a photograph of herself in the center.

"That's what I want to know," he sighed. "They've done an expose on your love life. There's not a wizard out there that they haven't linked you to."

Ginny snorted and scanned the article. "They've even listed Ludo Bagman here! He's got to be... seventy!" The disgust she felt gave way to amusement. "They haven't listed Harry here," she chuckled.

"Should they?" Ron growled.

"Of course not," Ginny answered nonchalantly. "He and I are not having a relationship."

Ron mumbled something that Ginny didn't take the time to figure out. "What are you doing?"

"Writing a letter," Ginny answered, and turned her attention back to trying to decide what to write.

"To who?" Ron leaned over to watch.

"Ludo Bagman," Ginny said dryly.

"You're not very funny, you know."

Ginny sighed. "I'm writing to Harry."

Ron sat back and rubbed his face. "Death threats?"

She snorted. "You'd think, wouldn't you? Actually, we're doing our best to remain... civil."

"Amazing," Ron murmured.

"He wrote me about his godfather and I'm trying to think of a way to wind him up about it."

"Sirius?" Ron asked. "He's coming to Harry's next game, you know. Harry's right chuffed. It'll be the first time he's really seen Harry play."

A wicked idea entered Ginny's mind and she tilted her head. "You don't say."

"Yeah," Ron said obliviously. "Harry normally gives his complimentary ticket to me, but he needed it for Sirius tomorrow."

Ginny pushed the letter away from her. There was no need to write now that she was going to be seeing Harry tomorrow. This was definitely going to be interesting.

* * *

After an exhausting and exhilarating game, Harry was ready to go out with Sirius and just relax. They'd talked about getting a bite to eat and a few pints after the game today and Harry was looking forward to it.

As he exited the locker room and said goodbye to his teammates, Harry smiled. He wondered what Sirius was going to say about his play. It had taken the old codger long enough to drag himself down from Scotland to finally see a game, but Harry was glad he did.

Sirius was leaning against the fence that surrounded the pitch, watching the excited group of reporters, groupies and family who waited for the players, a dark look on his face. He brightened immediately when Harry walked up.

"Brilliant game!" He clapped Harry on the back. "I thought Gougon had you there toward the end."

"Of course not," Harry scoffed and nudged Sirius. "I'd seen the Snitch a long time before, but Oliver wanted the points as high as we could get them. Today's win should put us over the Harpies in the ratings."

Sirius chuckled. "Ready to go?"

"Definitely. I could use a pint." Harry sighed in contentment.

"Oh, I've invited a friend along, hope you don't mind," Sirius added nonchalantly.

Harry peered at his godfather and wondered if he was finally going to tell Harry the truth about where he kept disappearing to and why he was so distracted all the time. It would be good to meet Sirius' new—

The thought slipped away as a grinning Ginny Weasley sidled up to them. Sirius wore an equally disturbing grin and rested his arm comfortably on Ginny's shoulders.

"Great game, Harry," she greeted him.

Realization began to set in and Harry ground his teeth together. She'd completely played him! Amusement and respect mingled with his annoyance, making Harry struggle for the appropriate response.

"Ginny and I spent the entire game chatting," Sirius informed him. "I think it was the most enjoyable few hours I've ever spent."

"Ooo," Ginny giggled, "keep your arm about my shoulders. I want to see Mum's head spin around when the press reports us as a couple." She grinned wickedly and Harry rolled his eyes.

Sirius seemed thoroughly amused and leaned down to whisper something in her ear, making Ginny giggle again.

"I suppose I don't have a choice in this little arrangement?" Harry asked.

"Of course not," Sirius quipped. "Although I must say, Harry, if you don't marry this angel the first minute you can I'm going to disown you and leave my vast fortune to Draco Malfoy."

Harry glared darkly as Ginny burst into laughter.

"I hope you're proud of yourself now." Harry pretended to glower at her and crossed his arms over his chest. "He really doesn't need any encouragement to act like a prat, you know."

"That explains why you act like one, then; you come by it naturally," Ginny answered innocently. That set Sirius off and he howled with laughter.

Harry threw his arms in the air and surrendered. Inside, he was amused at her antics and the way she'd spun the situation for her own good. Ginny was pretty amazing, and quite funny when she wanted to be.

As they began walking away, Harry couldn't help but reach out and give Ginny a pinch on her rear. She gasped and then narrowed her gaze at him. Harry had a feeling she was going to make him pay for being so cheeky, but maybe he'd enjoy the punishment.

Dinner was a wild affair. They occupied a booth at the Three Broomsticks—Sirius' new favorite haunt—and hid behind privacy spells. Ginny and Sirius flirted shamelessly, and Sirius proposed to her a handful of times. She pretended to contemplate it each time before making some outrageous claim: she would marry him only if he gave up all other women, shaved his head bald, and changed his name to Igor. Somehow, Sirius found something to object to in each of her demands and, pouting, called the whole relationship off.

It was silly, but as the night went on and the whisky flowed, Harry found himself laughing more and annoyed less. He lounged back in the booth they occupied and watched the whole thing play out, thinking that it had been quite some time since he'd had so much fun, even if he was the butt of many of their jokes.

Sirius finally excused himself to the loo and Harry stared intently at Ginny. "You're quite good, you know."

She grinned widely. "I am."

He snorted. "I meant the whole thing with Sirius today. I'm not sure how you found out he was coming, but I have to give you credit for completely catching me off guard."

"You know you would have done the same thing," she challenged. "In fact, you did at Christmas. Imagine my surprise when Mum announced that I had to act properly because *you* were coming!"

Harry laughed. "Please tell me *that* wasn't your display of proper behavior!"

Ginny glared at him and kicked his shin under the table, but her anger was short lived and melted away into a smile. "Of course not, but I can't seem to control myself when it comes to you." There was something that sparked just below the surface of his skin and made Harry's whole body tingle. That was definitely flirting—honest flirting, rather than the showy stuff she'd been doing with Sirius. And it sounded like an invitation to Harry.

"That's a good thing," Harry mused. Her eyes flashed at him and Harry felt heat began to spread through his body.

"By the way, you were wondering who Sirius is seeing?" Her answer was cut off, however, when Sirius returned to their booth.

"I've made a decision," he crowed loudly. Thankfully, the privacy wards they'd erected were still holding, so no one noticed Sirius' behavior. "I think, Ginny dear, if you won't consent to marrying me that you'll just have to have Harry."

Ginny snorted and Harry's jaw dropped.

"I know he has commitment issues—don't we all," Sirius continued. "But he's a good lad when he wants to be. He's paper trained, at least."

Ginny was now practically rolling out of her seat, she was laughing so hard.

"I've got it!" Sirius pounded his fist on the table. "We both know he's an honorable chap. All you have to do is get pregnant! One slip of the wrist next time you, er..." He gestured vaguely with his hand. "And he'll marry you in an instant!"

He sounded horribly confident of his plan and Harry growled and slammed his drink onto the table, sloshing it everywhere. He knew from Ginny's smile that she was completely enjoying this, but he'd had about enough of Sirius' nonsense.

"I think it's time for us to leave," he sighed. "You've obviously had too many drinks tonight."

Ginny let her eyes slide up and down Harry, igniting the fire inside him even more. "He's pretty good in bed, I have to admit, but I'm still not convinced I want to keep him."

Harry deflated at her words and Sirius stared with wide eyes at her before giggling like a little girl. "Pretty good?" he guffawed. "I think I'm ashamed of you, kiddo. She should be raving about your skills, screaming about how much pleasure—"

"Enough!" Harry growled. "I'm Apparating you home," he told Sirius firmly. "And you," he pointed in Ginny's direction, "I'll be back for you. Don't leave." He couldn't help but laugh at her innocent look as she made the sign of an X over her chest, promising to remain where she was.

"Come on, old man." Harry Apparated Sirius to his house, even though he had no doubts his godfather would have made it home just fine. "I hope you enjoyed yourself tonight," he grumbled as he watched Sirius collapse on his sofa.

Sirius grinned. "I love her, Harry. She's brilliant. She's the one for you, you know. Imagine how much fun you'd have."

"We're *not* getting married. We're not even dating, just..."

"Just shagging," Sirius nodded thoughtfully.

"And you tried to muck it all up talking about marriage and babies tonight!" Harry shuddered at the thought. He was only twenty-two, for Merlin's sake, he didn't need to mess his mind up by thinking about all of that.

"You should do it," Sirius answered soberly. "You should marry her."

"I don't love her," Harry countered. His stomach rolled unpleasantly and Harry pushed the feeling away.

Sirius grinned. "Yes, you do. You just don't realize it yet. Ginny Weasley is brilliant. She can kick your arse at Quidditch, she's funnier than you'll ever be, she's bloody gorgeous with a body that never stops—"

Harry cleared his throat loudly and tugged at the collar of his jumper.

"—she's the same as you, Harry. She knows all about darkness and war and loss. She understands."

"I'm going to leave now!" Harry announced. This conversation was getting far too maudlin for his liking.

"I want grandkids, Harry," Sirius demanded as he leaned up on his elbow. "I'm getting old."

"You are not," Harry dismissed.

"Padfoot is," Sirius pointed out. "He drools everywhere, and he has loose gums. I won't even tell you how many times I have to wee when I'm him."

"Please don't," Harry answered dryly.

Sirius trailed off and gave Harry a somber look. "Life is more than you've allowed yourself, Harry."

"You're one to talk," Harry pointed out.

"I'm the bad example in your past," Sirius excused. "Don't live a life like mine—solitary and alone, buried in the rubbish of what's gone before."

"I'm leaving," Harry repeated again.

"She's waiting for you," Sirius answered.

Harry thought he meant more than the obvious with that comment, but he forced it out of his mind as he Apparated back to Hogsmeade.

Ginny was still at the pub, leaning on the bar and chatting with Madam Rosemerta when Harry entered. He watched her with Sirius' words swirling in his brain. Did Ginny really expect a commitment out of him? Was he even the type of bloke that believed in marriage and family and all of that?

She'd said no commitments, no promises, so maybe she was the same as him, but what if she was lying. Or not really lying, but just saying what Harry wanted her to say so she could be with him.

The feeling made him uncomfortable and he didn't really want to examine it. Why couldn't things stay as they were? Harry was happy with his relationship with Ginny. She was a tremendous lover—wild and untamed—and she didn't seem to expect much from him. There was no emotional tie between them to muck things up. It was perfect.

"You waited." He smiled as he leaned on the bar next to her.

"You expected me to leave?" Ginny laughed.

Harry shrugged a shoulder and wondered if he'd noticed how beautiful she was before—truly noticed. Her eyes shined when she smiled and there was a part of her nose that crinkled, bunching the freckles there.

"You didn't have to," he pointed out, even though he was pleased that she had waited.

She sighed happily. "Tonight was fun."

"It was," Harry agreed. "You've given Sirius a whole new range to explore when torturing me. Cheers." He added the last bit dryly.

Ginny beamed at him and the earlier desire for her flamed back into life. "I aim to please."

He leaned in closer to her, acutely aware of the few people in the pub. If one of them was a reporter, their names would be splashed all over the papers, linked together forever. Oliver would have a fit. "You should really be punished for being cheeky today."

Her eyes darkened as she studied him. "Some things are worth the punishment."

Harry swallowed and his eyes glanced around the room. No one was paying attention to them at all. "I should take you now... drag you to the loo and have my way with you."

The look she gave him set his whole body alight. "You wouldn't!" The words should have held shock and terror, but Harry knew Ginny was fully on board with what he was proposing.

"Tempt me," he challenged back, knowing he was fully into the idea now.

"In public?" she gasped. "I'm shocked at your behavior, Harry Potter. You're not proper at all!"

He snorted at her mock disgust and reached between them to caress her thigh. "You'd enjoy it."

"I would," she finally admitted. "Probably far too much."

"Plus," Harry drawled, "I still have to pay you back for that horrid comment about me being 'pretty good' in bed. I'm brilliant, and you know it."

Ginny's eyes flashed and she returned his touch, reaching around to the growing bulge in his trousers. "I can't really remember. It's been far too long."

The teasing was too much. Harry snatched her hand away from him and pulled her into the dark hallway where the entrance to the loo was. He put his hand on the door to push it open, but hesitated.

"I don't want a public show tonight," he said as he pulled her close. He pressed his face into the soft skin of her neck and let his teeth graze there. "Hold on."

Ginny's arms were wrapped around him like a vice as he Apparated them to his flat. They arrived in the living room and Harry pulled away, snapping on a lamp before backing into a chair. Ginny stood in the middle of the room, staring intently at him.

"You owe me, witch," he said with a grin.

One eyebrow raised and he could tell he'd struck a sensitive chord. She would get all worked up now: her face would flush and he could watch it spread down her neck to her chest. "I owe you?"

"See? You can be agreeable when you want," Harry quipped. He sat back in the chair, lounging lazily. "I want a show."

Ginny growled, but he could tell she was amused. Her jaw wasn't clenched and he could definitely see interest in her eyes.

"What sort of show?" she demanded as she crossed her arms in front of her.

He casually summoned a butterbeer from the kitchen and took a long pull from it. "You're a creative witch. Figure it out." She pulled her wand and for a moment he thought she was going to hex him, but she flicked it at the stereo in the corner. The music changed rapidly until she found something she liked. Her wand was tossed to the sofa and she reached up to turn off the lamp Harry

had turned on before. It was mostly dark, but the moonlight from the large windows painted gloriously blue shadows everywhere.

He made a grunt in protest but Ginny put her finger to his lips. "If we do this, we do it my way, Harry. I'm sure your imagination is plenty good enough."

He didn't point out that with the moon and the lights of London showing on her he could nearly see as much as daylight. She seemed more comfortable this way, so Harry was perfectly happy.

"I promise I'm not good at this," she said softly. There was a hint of vulnerability to her voice and Harry was intrigued. It wasn't often that Ginny Weasley admitted she had a flaw.

"You'll manage," he informed her and took a drink. Far from quenching his thirst, the sweet liquid simply made him want to taste Ginny's skin again.

The music continued to play as Ginny toed off her shoes. She gave a small smirk as her hips began to sway to the rhythm. Harry swore softly and slumped in the chair. She was actually doing it! He'd never expected her to submit to what he'd cheekily suggested. Surely she'd hex him any minute.

She seemed to freeze for a moment before shifting awkwardly. "I'm pants at this," she sighed.

"Not at all," Harry whispered. His hands found her hips and he leaned forward to kiss her. "Definitely not pants at all."

Chapter 9: Freefall

Gravity: seriousness or importance.

For the next six weeks, everything was wonderful. Ginny and Harry were together much of the time, hanging out, laughing, arguing, and having loads of sex. The sex was mind-blowing and amazing, just as it always was between them.

And things were good. There was no pressure to do something silly like actually begin dating, or declare romantic feelings aloud. It was great just how it was.

But, like all great things, something had to happen to bring it to an end.

Ginny scowled at her wardrobe and tried to decide what she was in the mood to wear tonight. It wasn't anything special, just some friends getting together to have a pint and laugh. Ginny's mood over the past few days had been anything but jovial, however.

Harry was being a prat again. No, *prat* was far too mild a word. He was back to being a bastard, and Ginny hated it. She missed the carefree, teasing side of him and the way he could just look at her and she knew he was thinking about them being together. She missed the way spending time with him, arguing with him, having sex with him, bled off the frustration of the increasingly difficult playing schedule.

Both of their teams were ramping up their games, playing tighter and better than ever as the season came to a head. And without Harry there to help reduce the pressure, Ginny felt like a cooker that had been left on far too long. One day soon, she was going to explode.

If only she hadn't gone to Diagon Alley that day. If only Harry hadn't wandered by and that damned reporter hadn't snapped the candid picture of them grinning at each other.

Quidditch's New Golden Couple

All it took was one headline and Harry scarpered back to his old, grumpy ways. He hadn't owed her, he hadn't shown up after his game last week, he hadn't even come when they were planning to meet Ron and Hermione for dinner in Hogsmeade. He told Ron he was just busy with practice, but Ginny knew he was hiding.

The ironic thing was they hadn't even been out together when the picture was taken. Ginny had actually been out to lunch with Neville—you could see his shoulder and part of his hand in the published photograph, even—and Harry had happened upon them. He sat down for no more than two minutes to chat.

And that's all it took to ruin everything.

"You're taking forever!"

Ginny rolled her eyes at Neville's impatient whining. Honestly, he hated waiting for her, even though he swore up and down that it didn't bother him when she took too long getting ready.

She yanked a plain shirt from the wardrobe and tugged it on, not caring if it looked decent at all. Really, it wasn't like she was trying to impress anyone. She was going out with friends—and none of them happened to be named Harry Potter.

"Keep your hair on!" she yelled back. Neville chuckled in the living room.

"Everyone's going to think we forgot about them."

Ginny huffed and stepped into the bathroom. She twisted her hair up off her neck and secured it with a clip, but didn't even give her appearance more than a passing glance.

"You're always late," Ginny pointed out. "Why is it bothering you so much tonight?"

Neville's face flushed and he shrugged a shoulder. "I just... want to see everyone, I suppose."

Ginny gave him a knowing look and plopped down next to him to put her shoes on. "It has nothing to do with the looks Hannah Abbott was giving us last week when we were at the Leaky?"

"Absolutely nothing," Neville confirmed, although not convincingly at all.

"You *fancy* her," Ginny teased and bumped his shoulder.

"Maybe," he shrugged once more with a smirk on his face. "What about you and the Quidditch God."

Ginny rolled her eyes and snorted. "He's anything but, let me assure you." Neville must have sensed the frustration in her voice because he tugged her closer to him and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Ginny allowed one minute of being weak and accepted the comfort he gave. Horrifying tears of frustration even gathered in her eyes. She never cried! And especially not over something that meant nothing.

"I honestly don't know," she said quietly. And though it made no sense to say that aloud, it was all she could muster to explain things. Somehow, though, Neville understood. He always did.

"He'll come around, Gin. Things are just... rough right now. I'm sure his team is giving him hell over it and he's dealing with how he feels about the idea that the two of you might be seeing each other. It's a lot to process."

"We're not seeing each other," Ginny insisted and swiped at her eyes. "It's nothing more than... sex, really."

Neville gave her a look that made Ginny scowl. "It's more than that, whether you admit it aloud or not. At least don't lie to yourself, Ginny."

She considered that and bit her bottom lip. It was more than that, she knew, but admitting it meant she had to deal with it. Harry certainly wasn't in any shape to cope with anything. He'd rather pretend he felt nothing for her than to say that perhaps there was emotion behind what they were doing.

"You know its okay to let yourself fall, don't you?" Neville whispered softly. "Harry isn't Tom. He's

not going to use you and throw you aside—even though it seems like he might be trying to do that right now. He’s a good bloke, and everyone that sees the two of you together can see there are real feelings there.”

“We just have to survive them,” Ginny mused. Her tears were gone now, replaced with the familiar frustration of not knowing what was going on in Harry’s head.

“Or go ahead and off each other,” Neville chuckled. “Now, come on, we were fashionably late before. Now we’re just horribly rude.”

“I’m always rude,” Ginny pointed out. “I like being rude; it makes life so much more fun.”

“Maybe you’ll be surprised and Harry will turn up tonight. I know Ron was going to try and get him to come.”

“Not bloody likely,” Ginny said as she pulled her cloak on. “And if he does show up, I’m not going to be able to hold back.”

Neville grinned. “That’ll make for an interesting headline tomorrow—Quidditch Romance In Ruins—Ginny Weasley Incarcerated For Disemboweling Rival Player!”

Ginny snorted at Neville’s imagined headline. “World A Much Better Place,” she finished off with the byline.

* * *

“You’re really not coming?” Harry glared at Ron and Ron backed away with his hands in front of him. “Fine. But I think you’re being a git about this whole thing. Both of you have dealt with loads of press, why should this article be any different?”

Harry spluttered for a minute, trying to find the way to explain things to his mate. “It... it just *is*, alright?”

Ron peered at him and Harry spun on his heel and buried his head in the fridge, rummaging for something to make himself feel better.

“It only really matters if it’s true, and the two of you don’t want anyone to know,” Ron pointed out. “You have been spending a lot of time—”

“Shut it, Ron,” Harry pleaded. He slammed the fridge door and swore when it bounced open again. “We’re not dating, we’re not in love, or engaged, or secretly married. We’re nothing, okay?”

Ron flushed and locked his jaw at Harry’s outburst. Harry felt sick, not because his friend was angry, but because he’d just reduced everything with Ginny to one word—nothing—and it was a complete and total lie.

“I hope that’s truly not what it is because I happen to know you’ve slept with her—probably more times that I want to even think about. My sister isn’t some slag you can shag and ditch, you know.”

“I know,” Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes under his glasses. “It’s not like that, I promise. We... It’s

more than that, okay. Ginny's... she's amazing and I..." He snapped his mouth closed and shook his head. He honestly had no idea what he felt for her. It was friendship, but different; you didn't have horribly erotic dreams almost every night about your friend. You didn't get off in the shower every morning to memories of your friend. It was more than just simply being friends. And it was more than lust, too.

"You need to figure out what you feel," Ron said. Despite the way his fists clenched at his side and the way Harry thought he wanted to rip Harry's bits off and shove them somewhere, Ron seemed almost calm about the whole thing. "She's not a toy to play with."

"Are you going to give her this same little speech?" Harry replied, his tone acidic.

"She's not being an ass," Ron quipped back. "She's not hiding in her flat, ignoring her friends and pretending that the world is crashing down."

Harry's face heated and he crossed his arms over his chest.

"If you don't want to be with my sister, fine," Ron huffed. "Then go out with some other woman. Go shag someone else's sister. But if you want to be with her, you better get your head on straight. Ginny doesn't suffer fools gladly, and you know I won't stand in her way if she decides to tear you apart. You're being a prat to everyone, and I think you could stand to be taken down a few notches. I may even sell tickets." He slapped his hand down hard on the counter.

"Still not coming?"

Harry glowered and refused to answer.

Ron Apparated out without another word.

Harry stared at the space where his friend had been and pouted. It was horribly childish, but he felt like doing it right now. He wanted to beat the knowing scowl off Oliver's face, yell at Ron until he stopped speaking words that were so very true, and hex Sirius until he stopped marching around with that 'I-told-you-so' grin.

His life was falling apart, and the best thing he had going, besides Quidditch, was now in jeopardy because some busy body reporter had happened by at precisely the wrong moment.

Maybe it was a good thing that the article appeared. Everything with Ginny was just getting so... complicated. Every time he was with her there was this influx of emotion—even when they were only spending time together, rather than having sex. Harry thought about her all the time.

He wished he could say he was distracted during play—it would be handy excuse to tell Ginny they needed to spend more time apart. The truth was Harry was playing better than ever. His focus was sharp and the times on his drills were impressive. And he knew Ginny was putting up record numbers as well.

Harry wandered from the kitchen into the living room and flopped heavily into his favorite chair. The room was lit with a soft golden light as the sun went down. He needed to make a decision about this whole mess soon. His friends were all gathering at the Quiet Witch right now, drinking and

laughing while he was shut away in his flat.

Ron didn't need to tell Harry that they were all getting tired of his brooding. If he didn't go tonight, Harry was sure his mates would give him up for a lost cause. And Ginny... there was no telling what she'd do to him. He gave a bemused smile to the orange-gold room and closed his eyes.

There was no real reason for Harry *not* to be with Ginny, other than the fact that Oliver had screamed until his face was purple the day the article came out, and the whole confusing mess of emotion that Harry felt when he thought about her.

And it scared Harry down to his core.

How the hell was he supposed to know what love was, or if that was even what he felt for Ginny? He knew he liked being around her, that he didn't mind when she was in a mood, and that he felt a bit lost when they went several days without speaking. There was definitely attraction between them, and they were very physically compatible.

But was that love?

He just didn't know.

The crack of someone Apparating startled him and he grimaced. "I told you I'm not coming, Ron."

No one answered and Harry snapped his eyes open. It wasn't Ron standing there, but Ginny.

Damn. Wrong Weasley.

She looked livid. The orange light from the sunset set her hair alight, framing her face with fire, and Harry stared at it, entranced for a moment. Or perhaps he just chose to look there rather than see the disappointment on her face.

"Why are you here?" he demanded. "I'm not really in the mood for—"

"I'm certainly not here for sex," she snapped in a quiet, dangerous voice.

"You're not going to yell?" he challenged.

She was still, only her eyes moving as she took in his unshaven, slovenly appearance.

"I'm trying to decide exactly what you need to hear," she finally said. "I'm not going to coddle you, Potter. Kick you in the ass, perhaps, but not coddle."

Rather than respond, Harry locked his jaw and forced his eyes away from her.

"Is this how it's going to be?" she finally demanded. "Things get tough and you scarper? If so, I suppose it's good to know now."

She sighed and tossed her arms into the air. Harry felt like shit. He didn't want Ginny mad at him. He wanted things the way they used to be—minus the confusion over his feelings. Then again, having Ginny mad at him *was* sort of the way it used to be, before they were really friends anyway.

That didn't sit well with him and Harry knew he didn't want to leave things this way.

"I'm only going to say this once, Harry, and then the rest is up to you. You're my friend, and I don't really give a care what the papers say, or what Oliver bloody Wood thinks of our friendship—or anyone else for that matter.

"What you really need to do is get your head out of your ass, stop being a gigantic prick and grow up!"

She'd graduated to yelling now and Harry looked back up at her. She was really glorious, he decided, when she towered over him and appeared larger than life. Her temper more than made up for her diminutive size.

"You know what, maybe I'm finished with this whole thing," she snapped. Harry's heart hammered in his chest and he wanted to protest, but the words wouldn't escape his mouth. "I stand by my friends when they're down," she continued, "but I damn well expect the same in return."

She looked tired when she met his gaze, as if all the fight was now drained out of her. "Do whatever you want, Harry. When you come to your senses and stop acting like a child, come find me. I may still be around, if I live that long."

She kicked his shin a moment before Apparating out.

Harry hissed in pain and rubbed the offended limb while he cursed her name.

Who the hell did she think she was, anyway? He wasn't some child she could scream at until they decided to behave. He was Harry Fucking Potter! She'd essentially called him a coward and the very idea made him seethe.

She had no clue! It was so easy for her to judge him when she had no idea what was going on inside his head.

The urge to follow her to the pub and make her understand was great. But everyone would be there, so they couldn't have it out. Maybe he should just Apparate there and take her—force her to come back here with him and stay until she either understood him, or killed him.

He didn't stop to think before he Apparated outside The Quiet Witch. The pub was packed and loud. Through the window, Harry could see his teammates on one side of the room, Ginny's on the other. Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and a handful of others had settled themselves somewhere between the two groups. Ginny was currently with her team, laughing and drinking from a frothy pint.

Second thoughts came as he stood there in the cold March wind. The pub sign creaked above him and he looked up at it—the witch there carried her severed head under one arm and wore an inviting smile. Apparently the barman who owned the place was under the impression that the only way to shut a witch up was to behead her. Currently, Harry shared the same opinion.

He sighed loudly and replayed Ginny's words in his mind, just to raise his ire. If he was going to do this, he had to be angry. He had to be willing to tear Ginny away from all of this.

His determination faded slightly when he stepped into the overly warm pub. His team called out to him, cheering him over. Ron and Hermione both raised eyebrows at him, seemingly impressed that he'd actually shown up. Harry didn't want to admit that it wasn't Ron's words, but Ginny's, that had spurred him into action. Ron would give him that exasperated look.

Ginny glanced at him but didn't betray any emotion before turning back to her teammates.

Harry wound his way through the crowd toward the bar. Newt pulled him into the group and refused to let him buy his own pint. Harry smiled and forced his shoulders to relax some. Maybe he could do this—pretend everything was good, smile and laugh with his mates, and then get Ginny alone later.

They talked about the upcoming game—vilifying Montrose in the process—until Harry thought his head was going to explode. Through it all, he could feel Oliver's heavy gaze darting between Harry and Ginny, trying to catch any hint that there was something between them that could be squashed.

Finally, when Harry couldn't stand it anymore, he walked away with no warning. There was an open seat at Ron's table and Harry slid into it.

"You look like shit," Ron said. A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth and he dodged Hermione's slap at his shoulder.

Harry snorted and rubbed his stubbled jaw. "Er... thanks, I suppose."

"Anytime," Ron chuckled. "I've never been anything but honest with you."

"I know," Harry said. He really did appreciate Ron's friendship, even if it cost him a bit of dignity at times. "You all have."

"We don't blame you, Harry," Hermione sighed.

"Yes we do!" Ron glared at her. "If I was being a prat, you'd all call me on it. Harry's no different. He doesn't deserve special treatment simply because he's a prat more often."

Something swelled inside Harry and burst. He laughed and held up his drink toward Ron. "Cheers." This was exactly what he'd always wanted—to be treated like anyone else, to earn his way in life because of what he accomplished, rather than what his name was.

Ginny's laughter floated over the crowd and Harry turned to look for her.

"Things alright between you two?" Ron grunted.

Harry grimaced. "Not... not really."

Ron nodded thoughtfully. "You know, Ginny's a lot like Mum. If you let her get into her stride, she'll run right over the top of you, but if you cut her off first..."

"I wouldn't necessarily agree with that," Neville suggested. He'd been quiet ever since Harry joined the table. The two men had met on several occasions and Harry liked the quiet Hogwarts Professor, but Harry could tell Neville wasn't sure about him. "She gets angry, but what she really wants is for you to listen to her. Really listen."

Harry nodded jerkily. How could he listen to her if she never spoke to him again? The idea wasn't something he'd thought obsessively about, but now that it was there, Harry felt panic press in his chest. What if he did completely muck this up and lost everything he had with her? What if she went from being his friend to never speaking to him again?

"We'll... we'll work it out," he promised the entire table. "But it has to be between us."

"I agree," Hermione said firmly. "Everyone sticking their noses in won't help at all."

Ron goggled at his fiancée. "Who are you and what have you done with Hermione Granger?"

They all laughed when Hermione blushed. "I know I normally would try to help, but in this situation it's really none of anyone's business but theirs what happens in their relationship. Or friendship, or whatever it is."

"Enough," Ron sighed. "We're not here to talk about love, or other deep shit." Hermione scoffed at his denunciation, but Ron just smirked. "We're here tonight to get pissed and forget about it all."

"Here, here!" Harry held up his pint in agreement.

"I'm going to get us something decent to drink," Ron said after he finished his drink.

Hermione fretted about what he might come back with, but didn't protest.

When Ron returned, he was carrying a bottle of golden Firewhisky. Harry didn't protest the first shot Ron poured, or even the second. His head took on a pleasantly fuzzy quality and he forgot to care if he stared at Ginny across the room. It didn't matter that her looks toward him increased through the evening. It also didn't matter that Oliver was somewhere in the room, most likely devising new barmy plays in his drunken state.

"I'm taking this one home," Ron finally slurred and nudged Hermione's head on his shoulder. She'd been ranting about changes to House Elf Law when her head suddenly drooped and a huge snore burst out of her. Neville wandered off with some other friends, leaving just Ron and Harry sitting at the table.

"'kay, mate," Harry sighed happily. "Thanks for... you know."

Ron smirked and lifted Hermione into his arms. "Anytime. Just fix it, Harry, whatever the outcome. Personally, I think you're barmy for having anything to do with her. She may be my sister, but she's still a nutter."

Harry chuckled and waved goodbye as Ron walked out of the pub. There was a bit more whisky in the bottom of the bottle and Harry tipped it up to empty into his glass. Instead of joining another group, Harry sat and stared at Ginny. She knew he was there, watching, because her cheeks flushed and her glassy eyes met his often.

He needed to fix this, just like Ron said. He and Ginny needed to go back to being friends, and he needed to forget all this emotion shit. All it did was muck things up.

“Harry!” Oliver slid into the seat next to him, leaning entirely too close for Harry’s liking. “You sure there’s nothing going—”

“Oliver.” Harry’s voice carried and people turned, but he didn’t care anymore. He was tired of this Quidditch-obsessed bastard trying to rule his life. “On the pitch, you can command me to do anything you want. You want me to fly faster, dive steeper, wear my kit on inside-out, I will. You’re Captain, after all.” Oliver grinned and looked mollified.

“But we’re not on the pitch,” Harry pointed out. “You don’t own me. And until you do, stay the hell out of my life and my face.”

Cheering surrounded them and Oliver blinked in confusion. Harry tossed back the rest of his drink and stood to find Ginny. They needed to talk.

* * *

Harry woke with his nose pressed to the soft skin of a shoulder. His arms were wrapped around Ginny’s middle and his body was pressed all along hers.

In the past, Harry avoided waking next to women. Nothing pretty ever came of it. Waking next to Ginny was different, although it held a weight that Harry wasn’t sure he wanted to deal with just yet. So he didn’t. Instead, he stared down at the freckles on her shoulder and allowed himself one moment to fully relax where he was.

In a way, it was nice to wake here. Being with Ginny, although horribly complicated, stirred something inside Harry that screamed for him to be with her when they were apart. He suspected that she knew him far better than anyone ever should; far better than he’d ever expected to allow anyone to know him.

A shadow of guilt crept into his mind. Was he simply using Ginny because she made him feel good temporarily? Perhaps. It wasn’t entirely intentional, really, so Harry didn’t think he was horrible for doing it. Ginny was always a willing participant in their activities, so that lessened his culpability. But it didn’t make the word ‘bastard’ disappear from his mind.

Harry scrunched his face against the hurt of the word and pulled away from Ginny. She rolled when he removed his arms and stretched, arching her entire body against the white sheets. Harry stared at her as he lay on the cold side of the bed.

Ginny yawned loudly and rolled toward him. Her eyes blinked repeatedly as she tried to focus them on him. The small smile that bloomed on her face quickly disappeared when she saw him huddled away from her.

“Harry?”

“This was a mistake,” he whispered. They hadn’t even talked last night before having sex on every surface possible.

Ginny’s jaw clenched and her eyes lit with fury. Harry knew she was just about to start screaming at him and storm away. Maybe that’s what his goal had been when the words had slipped from his

mouth. He wasn't sure, actually.

But Ginny didn't yell. Instead, she steeled her jaw and rolled onto her back to stare up at the ceiling. "What about the other times? Were those mistakes also?"

The answer came to his mind immediately, but Harry wasn't sure he could admit it. "The first was..." It was necessary, his mind finished. It was two people who needed each other at the moment, and who'd found a connection with another person in the swirling mass of humanity surrounding them.

"It shouldn't have happened," Harry lied, eventually. He forced himself to move even further from her penetrating gaze, and sat up, pulling the sheet to cover his lap. "And the second was..." Sheer desperation, his mind supplied. Harry growled at the words and ran his hand through his hair before snatching his glasses off the bedside table.

The memory of every time they'd had sex shuddered through him like the peal of a bell, clear and harsh, while still beautiful.

"It was just *us*," Ginny finished bitterly. Harry felt the bed shift and knew she sat up, but she didn't move off the mattress, or attempt to get dressed. He could see her at the side of his vision, with her back pressed to the headboard and the sheet tucked under her arms. "Because that's all we're worth—a shag and a goodbye."

"Ginny—"

"Don't, Harry," Ginny warned and Harry's words slipped away. He made the mistake of looking at her and his heart clenched. This was why he avoided the goodbyes. They were never good. They were always messy and emotional. Leaving was just better. But he couldn't bring himself to walk away right now. Something inside forced him to stay right here. In fact, that something was currently demanding he reach for her and apologize for being a huge prat. Harry ignored it; he was good about that.

"I don't think it was a mistake," Ginny countered. She looked at him and Harry was surprised to see tears brimming in her eyes. Ginny never cried. In the months that they'd known each other, even with the horrible things they'd said and done to each other, Ginny hadn't ever cried, at least not in front of him. Thankfully, the tears didn't fall; Harry knew he couldn't handle a crying woman right now, not when he was so close to the edge emotionally anyway.

"I don't think any of them were a mistake," Ginny went on. "I think that we both need each other, no matter how much we try to deny it. There's something there between us that we can't disagree with, hard as we try. The question is: are we willing to fight for it?" Her tears disappeared and her jaw set in that determined way. Her eyes blazed into him and any denial Harry had melted from his mouth.

"Because I want to." Her whispered words shuddered through him and brought goosebumps to his body. It was the closest another person had ever come to telling him they loved him. And it was the first time Ginny admitted that she felt something more than just friendship and lust. A part deep inside him wanted to fight for them as a couple, as well. It struggled up through layers and layers of self-doubt, of the pain of the past, and the loathing he had for all he'd been through.

"What do you see when you look at me?" Ginny slid closer to him and there was nowhere for Harry to retreat. He was sitting on the edge of the bed and would have to get up to move away from her. And he didn't want to move. The warmth her body radiated called to him and forced him to sit, rigid in his spot, and pray she would lay her warm hand on his arm, or brush her lips across his shoulder.

"I... I don't..." Harry trailed off and shook his head as he stared across the bedroom. A whole host of words came to mind to describe just what he thought of Ginny, but Harry refused to say them. He couldn't wear his heart on his sleeve that way; it would only get him hurt. And he already couldn't breathe when she was this close, even though he wanted her so much closer.

This feeling was different than desiring her. Harry didn't want sex right now; he wanted Ginny to wrap her arms around him like she'd done after waking up that first morning together. He wanted the influx of emotion that came with being truly held by someone he actually trusted and felt something for.

"When I look at you," Ginny started in a voice that was so quiet he had to latch onto it to be sure she'd spoken at all. "When I look at you, I see questions about you that go deeper than you'll allow even yourself to examine. I see courage, despite fear. I see a past that is dark with shadows that creep in when you're alone."

Harry flinched and wanted to leave. He had to get out of here right now, before she laid him bare. It hurt too much to think how well she knew him. He hadn't hidden himself at all from her, no matter how hard he'd tried. She was seeing it all.

"I see a burning need to discover who you are, rather than be someone who everyone thinks you are."

Ginny's words were becoming stronger and bolder, and even though Harry felt the desire to flee, he couldn't make his body respond to it. In a way, it felt as if he'd grown roots to his spot on the bed and was fixed there, never to move again. A clawing, terrifying feeling of emotion welled up inside him and Harry's eyes burned. He wouldn't allow tears to form, though.

"I see doubts at every decision, struggle with every choice, and yet a fierce determination to succeed at all costs." Ginny looked at him and Harry couldn't define the expression she wore. She moved closer until her heat enveloped him.

"I see someone who needs another person in their life; another person who knows them better than they know themselves, and who can put up with all the shit that comes with being them.

"Someone who has had to deal with far too much in their lives and just needs..." Ginny trailed off and swung her leg over his lap, straddling him. The sheet lay bunched between their bodies, but Harry could feel the heat at every point their skin met. It made him shiver. "Just needs someone."

Ginny leaned over him until their faces were only inches apart. "I see myself, Harry, when I look at you."

Harry's mouth was dry and his mind was reeling. A dozen responses flew though and he couldn't seem to grasp any of them. His first instinct was to deny how alike they were, but he knew he

couldn't lie to Ginny—not convincingly, at least. They *were* too much alike.

"And this isn't a mistake," Ginny said firmly before she kissed him. The touch was light and much softer than Harry had ever kissed her, yet there was just as much emotion in this simple touch.

"Ginny, I..." The two sides of him—one that said he was far too broken to believe in loving anyone, and the other that screamed at him that it was too late for that now—jostled in his mind until one finally surrendered completely. "You... it's you."

Harry kissed her back and Ginny melted against him. Even though his words sounded stupid in his ears, Ginny understood them. She always understood him.

"Tell me it's not a mistake," she commanded and struggled to move the sheet from them both.

Harry growled in impatience and flipped them so that Ginny was on her back. He hovered over her, staring down at her through smudged glasses. "It never was," he admitted. It felt as if the words had taken forever to emerge, crawling all the way from his toes.

Ginny smiled slowly—a radiant grin that helped to thaw Harry's hesitancy. It wasn't gone completely, but right now any doubts were easy to overlook. Ginny arched against him and Harry managed to pull the sheet completely out from between them.

"And we're really going to try to do this—to be a real couple?" Ginny prompted as she pressed open-mouth kisses to his collarbone and neck.

Panic shot through him and he stiffened. "Ginny, I... I'm not sure I can—"

"Harry, shut up," she said. "Stop falling back to excuses that are rubbish. You and I are better than this. We're more than just two people who shag when the tension gets to be too much. I want more, Harry; I deserve more. And so do you."

Harry swallowed his automatic response and lay against her, resting all of his weight on her body. Her warm floral scent washed over him as he pressed his face to the smooth skin of her neck. Ginny's arms came around his shoulders and held him tightly.

And for the very first time, Harry allowed himself to be really held. This wasn't about sex. It wasn't about losing himself in the moment so that he didn't have to think about what came next.

This was about being with someone who truly accepted him and who wanted him—scars and all. This was about him accepting that he *needed* Ginny in his life. She was the one who allowed him to be just... Harry.

The weight of that decision almost drowned him, but Harry clung to Ginny, holding on with everything he had. The brief thought that he was probably crushing her entered his mind, but she didn't fight it. Instead, she held him and kissed the top of his head repeatedly.

"How did we end up this way?" he asked. He didn't expect an answer and Ginny didn't give one. "I didn't... didn't plan on feeling like this."

Harry's eyes burned and he knew if he let go, he'd end up in tears.

When Harry felt he finally had control of his emotions and confusion, he lifted his head and looked down to see the most amazing look on Ginny's face. Her hands framed his face and she kissed him time and time again, holding her lips against his cheeks, chin, nose, eyes, and forehead.

She looked so... happy.

Harry wasn't sure about this whole *relationship* thing—he was sure he'd be rubbish at it—but seeing how she looked right now made him want to try, for her. Despite how angry they could make each other, how bad it hurt when one of them made cutting comments or deliberately did something to set the other off, they *worked* together.

Harry kissed her, savoring the slow pace they'd set between them. Kissing Ginny this way was a whole different experience. Before, their kisses had always been like their arguing—hot and biting, almost painful—but this way of kissing was... acceptance and slow, exquisite torture. He wasn't sure which was better. Maybe they both were good, just at different times.

"Please tell me we're going to do this." Her whispered words were more pleading than Harry had ever heard escape her mouth, and he nodded without giving it any further thought.

If he ignored the doubts, forgot that they really weren't supposed to be together, pushed his past aside, the answer was easy to see. They belonged together.

"We're going to do this," he choked out. "We're going to... be us."

Chapter 10: Compass Points

'Us' wasn't a word that Harry was used to saying. It had a weight to it that Harry hadn't expected. Then again, that might be simply because he and Ginny were keeping their relationship a secret. And, really, not all that much had changed between them. They still did everyday things together—going to a film, eating a meal—and they still had sex quite regularly—although Ginny stayed over often. There was just more emotion allowed now.

It was the emotion part that still threw Harry at times. Ginny wasn't necessarily overly demonstrative, thank Merlin, but there were times that he caught her looking at him and the heaviness of her expression made something press in on his chest. It wasn't a completely comfortable feeling, but Harry had no way to define it.

The first time Ginny told him she loved him truly accentuated the differences between them. They'd been lying in bed—a lazy Sunday morning. The sun warmed the room until it was almost stifling, but neither of them felt the need to move. They lay entwined, their bodies sweaty from moving together.

"Is it horrible that I simply want to stay here all day long?" Ginny sighed quietly.

Harry smirked at her. "I don't think so. It's tempting."

Her hand traced over his chest and Harry's fingers slid along her arm, raising goosebumps.

"We don't have anywhere to go," she offered. If she was trying to convince him, she needn't bother. Harry was completely content to be a lazy git today.

Eventually, Ginny sat up on one elbow and studied his face.

"What?" Harry shifted uncomfortably. *That* look was on her face again, the one that made his stomach roll and his chest tighten.

"I want to tell you something," she finally whispered.

His whole body tensed as he imagined what it could be. It was something horribly dramatic, most likely, because her words were hesitant and forced. Maybe she'd decided this whole thing was too much work, or she was pregnant, or... or... His mind fizzled at that thought. He wasn't ready to be a father! He couldn't handle that sort of commitment.

Rather than continue, Ginny pulled away and climbed out of the bed. She stalked into the bathroom and he could hear her muttering.

It must have been bad if she couldn't just come right out and tell him. The faucet in the bathtub turned on and Harry heard her start the shower.

And he still had no idea what she'd wanted to tell him. Harry swore violently and beat his fist on the bed. How could she do that to him! Here he was, imagining the worst possible scenarios, and she was showering.

Livid with her, Harry stormed into the bathroom and pulled the curtain back. Water from the shower splashed on the floor, pooling around his feet, but Harry ignored it.

“What the hell?” he demanded. “You can’t just tell a bloke ‘I’ve got something to tell you’ and then leave!”

Ginny glared at him. She was completely wet; her long hair hung limp against her shoulders and her face was wet. “I left because you got that panicked look on your face, and I couldn’t tell you while you looked at me like that.”

“Of course I panicked!” Harry shouted back. “You say that and my mind imagines the worst possible things that could follow. I know I haven’t been good at all this relationship stuff—I’m pants at dealing with everything. I’m not ready to be a father right now... I’m barely ready to live on my own, let alone take care of another—”

Ginny looked horrified. “I’m not pregnant!”

Harry gaped at her. The answer to that question came as a wave of relief, and yet if that wasn’t the secret she needed to tell...

“You’re ruining the floor,” she observed.

“It’s my floor,” he argued. He looked down at his wet shins and feet and then sighed. With trepidation, he stepped into the shower and pulled the curtain closed behind him. Ginny’s eyes went wide and she backed further into the spray of water.

“Tell me,” he whispered. “Just... if it’s over between us... just tell me.”

“You’re a prat,” she said with a shake of her head.

“I know,” he sighed.

Ginny’s jaw locked and she mentally debated for a minute—Harry swore he could almost see the wheels turning in her head—before letting out a shaky breath.

“I’m in love with you.”

It certainly wasn’t what he expected and Harry gaped at her. Love? As in... love?

“See? I knew I shouldn’t have said anything.” Ginny threw her hands up in the air and turned to bury her face in the shower spray. “Great timing, Ginny,” she grumbled.

“Is that... really what you wanted to say?”

“Yes,” she answered back. Her voice broke and he thought she might be crying. His chest constricted even tighter as the word ‘love’ pounded in his ears, along with his heartbeat. His hand reached out, hovering just above the skin on her back. But he didn’t touch her; he watched the water run in rivulets from her hair, bringing soapy clumps of bubbles with them as she scrubbed shampoo in.

"You don't have to answer back," she finally said. "I knew you wouldn't."

"I..."

"I mucked everything up by telling you, but I don't want it to ruin everything, Harry. I know you don't—"

"I don't know anything about love," he admitted. How could he know? His parents had loved him, probably. Sirius said they did and told him stories meant to show it. Sirius loved him, probably, but he wasn't one to show physical affection or say the words. Besides, that was different to this type of love.

This was the let's-get-married-and-have-babies love and Harry had no idea how to even define that.

"You know," Ginny challenged back after a long silence. For the first time since the argument started, Ginny touched him. Her hand rested on his side just above his hip. "You know," she whispered, "but I won't make you say it."

He wanted her to tell him how he knew, what signs to look for. It was easier if Ginny just explained what love was.

Harry gave in and pulled her body to him. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," she said as she pressed a kiss to his collarbone. "I forced the issue when I knew better. I just wanted to be honest with you. You... you should know how I feel."

He nodded jerkily. "I don't... I'm not sure how to respond to that, or if I even understand what it means."

"You're putting too much thought into this," Ginny protested. She tugged him into the water with her and began to wash him as he stood still.

"Does it... does it mean you want to get m-married, or something?"

Ginny chuckled and soaped his chest. "No, it doesn't. I mean, one day we might be at that point, but it's a long ways off, so you can begin breathing again."

He looked down at her and nodded. A small portion of the weight on his chest lifted.

"And you can rule out the possibility of kids anytime before that." Ginny kept talking. Her words, along with the swirling, soft caress of her hands on his body helped the tension slip away. "I'm at the height of my career and I'm not inclined to start popping out little Potters left and right.

"My saying the words doesn't obligate you to return the feelings. Love isn't about sex—although that's a part of it. You can have sex without being in love." She glanced up at him through her wet lashes and Harry felt his heart jolt.

"Love is about accepting the other person, even when they're a bastard and make you feel like the lowest thing on earth."

“Ginny—”

“Not finished,” she snapped. He wasn’t sure whether she meant she wasn’t finished with speaking, or with washing him. He shut up, either way.

“Love is about knowing that even though they’ve made you feel that way, they really didn’t mean to.

“It’s about knowing that when the day is shit and all you want to do is collapse into bed, the other person will be there to remove your shoes and tuck you in, or listen to you swear about what a psychotic demon your Captain is, and maybe even make you your favorite thing to eat.

“Love is... desire and acceptance,” Ginny whispered.

The casual way she talked about all of this made Harry feel strange. He wondered how she could just say these kinds of things.

Still unsure about everything, Harry pulled her to him. They kissed softly and held to each other in the spray of the shower. Harry rested his face against her neck.

“I want to say it,” he whispered, “is that good enough.”

Her answer was slow in coming. “It is.”

* * *

At times it seemed too easy for Ginny to transition from what they’d had—an entirely casual friendship between two people who felt intense fire between them—to being a couple. Maybe Ginny was right and Harry was over thinking everything. Every gesture she made, every touch she gave he had to analyze—what did it mean when she walked past and her fingers traced his shoulder? How was he supposed to answer when they were together and she told him that she loved him? All of it meant something to her. It meant something to Harry as well, but he just didn’t know how to deal with it.

In his desperation, Harry had only one person to turn to.

“How... how do you know about love?”

Ron’s eyes bulged and he choked on his swallow of tea. “Shit, Harry! You can’t just... It’s not even eight yet,” he grumbled and scrubbed at the wet spots on his uniform robes.

Harry shifted nervously in his seat. His fingers traced the rim of his tea cup, chasing a drop of moisture around the edge. Poor Ron had been ambushed when Harry invited him over this morning. But he was the only one Harry could conceivably imagine talking to about this. Sirius had never been in love—he’d admitted as much when Harry brought it up in casual conversation. Ron and Hermione were engaged, surely that meant they were in love.

“I just... How did you know that’s what you were feeling when you met Hermione?”

Ron stopped scrubbing and brushed his hands along his robes before looking at Harry seriously.

"Is this about Ginny?"

Harry felt his cheeks heat and turned his head to look out the window. "She... she loves me."

"And?" Ron asked. He wore an infuriating grin that Harry hated. "Did you tell her—"

Harry pushed away from the table and stood to pace in the kitchen. "I couldn't tell her. I... I've never said it, never felt it, actually."

Ron was quiet for a long time and Harry wished he'd say something: yell at Harry for mucking with Ginny's feelings, tell Harry he was pathetic, laugh... anything but stare.

"Thinking about how you grew up it really doesn't surprise me. It's not like you had parents to..." Ron grimaced and trailed off.

"Exactly," Harry nodded. "Sirius is... he's worthless about this. It's so simple for him because it's not his life."

"What'd he tell you?" Ron grunted.

Harry let out a deep sigh and forced his fists into his pockets. "To get my head out of my ass and beg her to marry me."

Ron hid a chuckle behind his hand and tried to turn it into a cough. "Well, that's one way to approach it, I suppose."

"I have no idea what I'm feeling, Ron," Harry said in frustration. "Half the time I'm fine, then other times I feel a bit sick, and I can't seem to think straight. Anything I want to say to her comes out so mucked up that it makes no sense."

"I'm going to have to do something here, Harry," Ron said. Harry turned to look at his friend, who was pressing his thumb and forefinger into his closed eyes. "I'm going to have to get some honest answers from you... and try to pretend it's not my sister you're banging." The admission sounded painful, possibly for both of them if Harry didn't answer the questions correctly.

"A-alright," Harry answered hesitantly.

"Pretend it's not Ginny, pretend it's not Ginny." Ron chanted low and finally snapped his eyes open.

"When you're together... you know..." He gestured vaguely and Harry nodded his understanding.

"What's the most important part?"

"You mean like..." Harry tried to follow the extremely personal question. Just as Ron was trying to forget Harry was with Ginny, Harry was trying not to think about the fact that he was asking *her* brother for advice.

Ron huffed in impatience. "Like is it only about getting your end away, or are you—"

"No," Harry answered automatically. "I mean, yeah that's great, but..." He flushed and swallowed thickly. "Sometimes it's because I'm randy, and others because she drives me bloody well barmy and if we don't release the tension we're going to hex each other. And... and then others it's because I want to share something with her, give her something that neither of us has ever gotten somewhere else. Mostly I just... I just want her to be happy, you know. And whatever I get out of it, well that's just extra, yeah?"

Ron's expression faded from one of pain to acceptance, and finally into a smile. "You just answered your own question, mate."

"I did?" Harry gaped. "How... What?"

"You want to know if you're really in love with Ginny, or if you're just comfortable together, or just friends who shag." He waited and Harry nodded jerkily. "But the most important thing to you is seeing Ginny happy. You're both far too stubborn and thick to be with anyone else, so you're perfect for each other."

Realization was slow to dawn on Harry. "That's... that's what love is?"

"Most of it, yeah," Ron admitted. "Think about how cut up you were when that article came out and the two of you were fighting. What did you want most?"

Harry sat on the edge of one of a chair and leaned onto his elbows. "To make things right between us again. And to see her again."

"Do you think about other girls?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. Haven't for months now, actually. I mean, they're pretty and all, but Ginny's..." His face flushed and he rubbed his jaw. "They're not her."

Ron's smile grew. "What about the future? Can you see having one with Ginny?"

Harry was slow to answer. "Kids and all?"

"Eventually," Ron shrugged. "I mean more of... a year away... three years from now. That sort of thing."

Eyes closed, Harry had to say he could easily see Ginny and him still together. No one else knew him the way she did. No one put him in his place the way she did, while still driving him mad.

In a year maybe Oliver would stop being such a hard-ass and Harry and Ginny wouldn't have to hide their relationship. She could... she could move in here and Harry could wake up to her every morning.

Three years. It was too far to think about right now, but Harry knew he wanted to see it.

"Yeah," he whispered. "I... I want that with her."

Ron sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "You better tell her soon. Ginny's never been the patient type."

Harry's chest pressed in and he struggled to take a deep breath. "Does that mean..."

His best friend leaned forward and stared at him like he was a three-headed hippogriff. "You're arse over tit in love with her, mate."

A mixture of relief and nausea washed over Harry. "I... I am?"

Ron sighed and rubbed his face. "Do I need to write it down for you to understand?"

"Blow me," Harry breathed. "Does it always feel like this?"

"Like you might see your breakfast again?" Ron asked with a snort. "Sort of. I remember the first time I realized that it was really love."

"Heavy?" Harry asked.

"I vomited all over the dorm room," Ron answered dryly.

Harry took a deep, shuddering breath. "So I should just... tell her?"

Ron shrugged. "You could do something romantic, I suppose, but Ginny's never really been into—"

"Romantic?" Harry asked. When he thought of that words his mind filled with odd pictures—flowers, violins playing in the background, champagne and slow dancing. It was so foreign that Harry had to shake his head to clear it away.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Ron shook his head. "Just... just tell her. Ginny will appreciate that it's coming honestly."

"Tell her." Harry rubbed his face and considered all the different ways it could come out. Nothing inspiring occurred to him and he sighed deeply. "I'll figure it out."

"Next time, please wait until at least after five to talk to me about this shit," Ron grumbled. "Then I won't feel bad about drinking while we do it. Now I have to go find Hermione and have her Obliviate me."

Harry snorted at Ron's theatrics. "Thanks, Ron."

Ron stared at him for a minute before grinning. "You're mental, you know that."

"Yeah," Harry agreed completely. "I know."

* * *

Holyhead didn't just win the game, they annihilated the Wasps. Leighton had fallen for her feints time after time and had actually ploughed himself on the last one—a full on Wronski Feint.

Ginny had never actually completed one before in a game, but she knew it was already one of her favorite maneuvers. This one was far from perfect, but with work she'd make it just as graceful as Harry's was. And now that she knew the intricacies of the move, there was no way Harry could

make her fall for it when they played each other.

The game was set to be nothing but spectacular. With today's win, Holyhead pushed past Appleby in the standings, but the Arrows had yet to play this week. Their match against the Kestrals would secure or lose their spot in the game for the Cup. And even though Ginny loved Harry and admired his playing there was no way she was going to let him beat her in Quidditch.

"Coming to the pub tonight?" Caprice asked as they walked back to the locker room.

"Not sure," Ginny shrugged. She couldn't seem to wipe the smile from her face and felt horribly giddy about the whole situation. "I may have a family thing later." It was a lie—she'd seen her family just the other day—but Ginny used them as an excuse a lot of the time so no one would suspect she was seeing Harry.

She took her time getting to the changing room, slowly undoing the laces on her arm guards as she walked. Perhaps she and Harry would have to do something extra fun tonight, something to celebrate just how brilliant she was. The idea made her smirk and she relished bringing it up with him. Their rivalry, while fierce and quite nasty when they first met, was much friendlier now, although it was still there, churning under the surface. It just usually drove them in a different direction that it first had.

Ginny was just about to open the door when a set of arms wrapped around her from behind. She hadn't even seen anybody there.

"Shhh!"

Harry's whisper against her ear made her shiver. He was invisible! Realization set in and Ginny relaxed in his hold. He'd been threatening to use his Invisibility Cloak for weeks now, although his suggestions for its use had been far less innocent than sneaking to and from some location.

"You did the feint," he said. Ginny could feel his heartbeat against her back—it was erratic and thundering. "You... it was gorgeous, Gin." There was a husky quality to his voice that Ginny recognized immediately.

"I'm certainly not going to let you pull that on me when we play."

He chuckled low in his throat. "I'm taking you to my place." The words were barely out of his mouth before he Apparated them.

"Merlin, Ginny," he groaned and tugged the cloak off, "I haven't ever had a hard-on watching Quidditch before."

Ginny grinned and moved closer to him. "You liked it?"

"It was brilliant," he assured her. His mouth frantically traced her neck and jawline before kissing her. The intensity of his touch stole her breath. He was nearly out of control, like the first time they had sex.

He backed them into the sofa and pushed Ginny so that she was lying on her back. "I'd have more

been impressed if it wasn't Leighton you beat, though." His face widened in a smile and Ginny knew he was winding her up.

"Prat," Ginny chided. This was going to be fun.

"I recognized what you were doing far before anyone else did," Harry said softly. He bunched her uniform jumper up and placed kisses on her stomach, lifting the wool as he moved.

"I can't wait until we play," Ginny mused. Harry lifted his face and grinned at her. His glasses were horribly smudged and crooked. She slipped them off and set them on the table next to the sofa. "It's going to be a nasty, rough game."

"You like it rough," Harry pointed out. He removed her shoes and tossed her shin guards off to the side.

They were just really getting into it when the sound of the floo activating made all activity cease.

"Harry? You here?"

Harry swore and froze. He sat up and glared over the back of the sofa.

"Davies! Did you ever hear of getting permission before you—"

Ginny couldn't see Davies, but she heard his gasp and knew he realized that Harry was up to something. Her bra, dangling on the back of the sofa most likely clued him in.

"I'm so sorry!" Lorin stammered. "I didn't... Wood called a meeting and..."

Harry growled loudly and rubbed at his face. "I'll be there—"

"I didn't see anything, I promise!" Davies sounded panicked and she heard the rush of a handful of floo powder go back into the fireplace. "I'll just... Wait... Harry? Is that... That's a Harpies uniform."

Ginny swore and wrapped her arm over her bare breasts.

"That's... that's Weasley's uniform!"

Chapter 11: Surrender

The interruption caused a particularly nasty swear word to escape Harry's lips. Why did Davies have to come through right now? And why did Wood have to call some stupid meeting? Of course, Lorin was far too observant to actually just leave without pointing out that he knew exactly what Harry was doing right now.

Or wasn't doing, apparently.

He looked down at Ginny, whose eyes were wide. She was completely frozen.

"Lorin... don't..." Harry sat up fully and ran his hands through his already messy hair.

"Is it Ginny?" Davies demanded. The green fire behind him died out as the floo powder burned away. "You know—"

"Yes," Harry admitted reluctantly. There wasn't anything to be gained by denying it now; Ginny's uniform jumper, showing off the number seven in Harpy colors, was tossed over the back of his sofa—along with her bra. "But Lorin, you can't say anything."

Davies' jaw locked and he stared at Harry. Eventually, his eyes darted away and he shifted uncomfortably. "You have to come to the meeting," he said softly.

Harry wanted to stand, but he was a mess. He adjusted his pants and jeans, regretfully doing them up. Ginny's hand groped on the back of the sofa for her jumper, but came up with his shirt instead. She quickly pulled it on.

"Lorin," he said softly again. "This isn't just... You can't say anything about Ginny and me." He said it firmly enough that the young Chaser's head snapped back around.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why do you get to break the rules?"

"Because it's not a rule," Ginny said as she sat up. Her hair was coming out of its plait and she tried to fix it, running her hands over the weave and tucking bits back in. "It's just Wood's control issues."

Her hands were shaking and Harry knew she was angry—not at him, but at the situation. They'd been interrupted and the tension was still between them, just unreleased.

Davies' face flushed and he backed a step away when he looked at Ginny. He looked so young and vulnerable right now that Harry felt sorry for the kid. But he needed Lorin's assurance that he was going to keep his mouth shut, at least for another couple of weeks. Once the season was over...

"They're going to wonder where I am," Lorin said. He glanced nervously at the fireplace.

Harry stood and moved to face him. As he passed the sofa, he nudged Ginny's bra over the other edge. Davies looked relieved not to have to see it anymore. "I need you to promise me, Lorin. Ginny and I... we're together."

“How long?”

“Awhile,” Harry admitted. “Wood would throw a wobbly, and I’m not going to deal with that right now. And the press...” He trailed off as visions of the headlines made him shudder. It wasn’t going to be pretty, but at least if they waited until the off season, he and Ginny could get away for a bit, or hide here in the flat until it was all over.

Davies glanced at Ginny and gave a small shrug.

“That’s not good enough, Davies,” Harry said firmly. “Your word.”

“I.. I won’t tell.” The words were drawn reluctantly from his mouth and he wouldn’t meet Harry’s gaze. Harry felt bad about bullying the kid, but he wasn’t asking for much, just a few weeks of silence. “I need to go. You... you have to come.”

Harry nodded reluctantly and watched Lorin scramble to throw floo powder in the grate.

“Do you trust that he’ll keep his word?” Ginny asked. He turned to see her leaning on the back of the sofa.

Harry grimaced. He should have done more to convince Davies. “We’ll see, I suppose.”

“You have a meeting,” she sighed. “Go.”

Something about leaving made Harry’s stomach roll uncomfortably. And it wasn’t just because they’d been interrupted, and because Ginny looked delicious in his shirt. Harry didn’t want to scuttle off to some barmy meeting called by Wood so he could yell at them all evening and make them repeat plays from the handbook. He wanted to be here with Ginny, celebrating her win and simply being in her presence.

“Go,” she urged.

“I don’t want to,” he answered defiantly. Mostly it was just to see how she would respond. Harry knew he had to go—he’d signed a contract to play for Appleby and part of that was making himself available when they called.

Ginny gave him a smile, but it faded into an exasperated look as she stood and began to gather her things. “You have to go, we both know that.”

“I don’t want to,” he repeated, softer this time. He’d planned on telling her his feelings tonight, maybe after they made love a few times. “I want to be here with you.”

She shifted her Quidditch kit in her arms and finally let it drop as Harry took a step closer to her. The tension between them mounted again and Harry felt the familiar prickling on his skin. It was exciting and energizing. Her flowery scent enveloped him and Harry had to touch her.

“I need my shirt.” He smirked when she grasped the cloth defiantly. “I’ll look a bit funny if I wear yours.”

She snorted and slowly lifted the shirt off. Harry ignored it when she offered it to him and wrapped

his arms around her.

"You need to go," she said, with much less conviction this time. Harry ignored her words and kissed her as his hands traced every bit of skin above her waist. Finally, Ginny huffed impatiently and pushed him away.

"Harry, they're going to come through again, and you can't bully everyone into keeping it quiet. Plus, it'll probably be Wood who shows up—"

Harry scowled. "I'm going!"

"It's not like I want you to leave," Ginny answered back quickly. "I'm furious that we were interrupted, but... but it's Quidditch."

Harry's throat grew thick and the annoyance he felt at leaving her grew tremendously. "Quidditch is important," he answered, "but I love you."

Ginny blinked and Harry wondered if he'd said the words out loud. He swallowed twice and considered saying them again, just in case. A slow, wide smile spread over her face.

"You..."

"I do," he assured her with a nod. "I didn't mean for it to come out like this... I wanted something more... romantic."

Ginny snorted and pulled him into a hug. "Romantic? Merlin, Harry, I don't think you have a romantic bone in your body."

He wanted to protest, but she felt so good here, warm against him. And she was right.

"I'll be here when you get back," she whispered.

"It might be late," Harry warned. "I have no idea—"

"I'll be here," she said firmly.

Harry studied her eyes and pressed his lips to hers. "I love you." He whispered it one more time before he forced himself away. Saying it was much easier this time and Harry felt like he might burst inside. Why had it been so hard to say it before? Why had he been so blind to what he felt for this amazing woman for so long?

"Go," Ginny prompted. She handed him his shirt and Harry pulled it over his head, snatched his glasses and took a handful of floo powder.

"I'm not nearly finished with you," he warned her.

She grinned. "I'll be waiting."

The noise of the crowd penetrated everything. It pulsed in Ginny's veins as much as her blood did. The changing room was silent—no one dared say a word.

This was it. This was the moment they'd worked so hard to achieve. The Arrows were across the field, in their changing room, probably anticipating this game as much as the Harpies were. While the Harpies had scored more points this season than the Arrows, earning the top spot, the Arrows were just a handful of points from taking the spot themselves, and this was the final game of the season.

Gwenog finally stood and let her eyes take them all in. "We've earned this. No matter what happens out there on the field, I know how hard you've all worked."

"Don't try to sugar coat it," Cam warned with a threatening wave of her bat.

"Yeah," Tamsin agreed, "if you tell us we're all winners inside and that you're proud of us no matter how we play, I'm going to throw up." They all chuckled.

"Fine," Gwenog sighed with a shrug. "We've been here before—they haven't. They're a bunch of second rate, little-talent *men* who are nothing but lucky."

Ginny smirked at the reverse discrimination. No doubt, though, across the pitch Oliver was giving his team a similar pep-talk, just skewed in the other direction.

"They barely squeaked by Falmouth last week," Gwenog continued, "and we beat the Falcons soundly. We can do this. Hartzell, you watch those Chasers—Raff and Davies are solid. Thickwhistle is shakier, but he's good on the outside hoop." Tamsin nodded firmly and pulled her gloves on tightly.

"You three," she said to the Harpies' Chasers, "take control early and watch for the Bludgers. Hammon and Paxton are bound to play a little dirty today."

"A little?" Slaine scoffed. "They're going to be ruthless."

Gwenog nodded. "Probably, but you three are fast, and you have some tricks up your sleeves. Use them. Use everything you have."

She turned to Ginny, who swallowed thickly. Ginny had one job and going up against Harry wasn't going to make it any easier.

"You have the hardest job," Gwenog admitted. "I don't envy you facing Potter, but you've earned this spot, Ginny. He's good, but he hasn't played under these conditions before."

Ginny nodded. Her stomach rolled uncomfortably. She and Harry hadn't discussed the game at all, actually. A few weeks ago, when it was confirmed that both their teams would be playing for the Cup, even the teasing died out. Each was intently focused on what they needed to do. It was intense and awkward and Ginny couldn't wait until this was all past them.

"If I know Wood," Gwenog said wryly, "he'll instruct Potter to do anything he can to get the Snitch. They'll be out for blood, Ginny, but I've seen you fly and you're a match for him in every way."

Ginny's face heated as she considered those words; they meant something far different on this side of them, but she agreed in all respects.

"Let's go," Gwenog finally said. They all clutched their brooms and walked toward the pitch.

"I'm always fine until this point," Caprice grumbled and pressed a hand to her stomach. "Then when I'm in the air..."

Ginny nodded knowingly. "Quidditch takes over." It was the same for her. Just before her very first game as a Harpy, Ginny'd lost her breakfast twice, but it hadn't happened since then. She was more nervous now than any other game, but that was mostly because Harry was a good opponent and she truly wanted to beat him to the Snitch.

As they flew out, Ginny's heart pounded in her chest. One whole half of the stadium was wearing dark green and gold—Harpy colors. She found her family quickly, packed into a single box and cheering loudly for her. They were all wearing Ginny's colors as well—even Ron, whom Ginny expected to be completely torn in loyalty between her and Harry. Charlie and Bill had come, and little Victoire was sitting on Uncle Charlie's shoulders, waving a Harpies pennant and grinning as Ginny zoomed by.

The announcer roared her name and Ginny gave a wave to the crowd, ignoring the booing of the fans clad in light-blue-and-silver. For a team full of new players, the Arrows had a respectable fan base and Ginny was impressed at the numbers they put in the boxes. Then again, a lot of Quidditch fans were waiting for the Harpies to fall on their faces. Ginny wasn't about to oblige that wish today. If they managed to lose, Ginny knew they weren't going down easy and she was going to fight Harry for every inch up here today.

The Arrows appeared, amidst cheers from their fans, and Ginny kept a close eye on Harry. He looked brilliant on his broom, comfortable and perfectly ready for competition. His jaw was locked and his expression one of complete focus. If Ginny hadn't seen it before, it might have intimidated her. It was much easier to relax when she remembered it was the same expression he wore sometimes when he kissed her, or when they were—

She shook the thought away. Now was not the time or place to visualize Harry naked. It would only be a distraction. Although, perhaps it could work both ways, she decided with a wicked little smile. If she was distracted by a simple thought, a suggestive little word mentioned by Ginny might throw Harry off. It was playing dirty, but all was fair in love and war. Quidditch was a little of both.

They lined up in their positions, squaring off and Ginny gave Harry a wink. His eyebrow rose in challenge and a small smirk painted his face.

"This is Quidditch, lads," Oliver called to his players, "chivalry has nothing to do with it. Knock them off their brooms if you have to!"

The Arrows cheered and Harry gave a chuckle. Ginny rolled her eyes and watched as Gwenog bristled.

"Let's teach these little boys how the game is played—with style, with grace, and with Holyhead's name on the Cup!"

The referee's whistle sounded and the balls were released. Ginny fixed her eyes on the Snitch, just as Harry did. They watched it rise and disappear into the stadium as the war below them began in earnest.

"All right?" Harry asked when they rose to a higher level, overlooking the whole pitch. They flew side by side for a moment and it was nice—Ginny made a note to suggest they go flying, simply for fun, soon.

"All right," Ginny answered. "Haven't thrown up yet?"

Harry chuckled and shook his head. "Davies did—three times, but that's normal. We win with higher points when he does."

Ginny snorted. She wheeled her broom around when the crowd cheered—Laurene dove beneath Oliver at his post and hooked the ball through the hoop.

"First blood," Ginny grinned.

Harry bristled. "We'll allow that one."

She laughed and swerved closer to him. "What're you going to give me when we win? I'll deserve a nice massage, I think."

Harry's expression didn't change from the smirk, but his eyes widened behind his flying goggles. "I get the same if we win."

Ginny contemplated it for a minute, either way was a win in that regard, she supposed. "Deal."

With that, they flew off in separate directions, scanning the pitch for their prize.

"Have a nice chat, Weasley?"

Cam grinned as she cracked her bat into a high Bludger and sent it toward Thickwhistle.

"Just making a little side wager," Ginny shrugged and let her eyes scan the base of the stands.

"I hope you get something nice out of it."

"Keep on those Bludgers and I might," Ginny encouraged.

Cam flew after another one that was headed toward Tamsin near the Harpy hoops and Ginny smirked.

Harry was covering the pitch in a grid pattern, flying in straight lines, just like he always did. It was a good technique, but not one the Harpies employed. Ginny always spent the first few minutes of a match hovering almost in one spot before she set off in a series of patterned swoops and flight paths. If she happened to interrupt Harry's grid, so be it.

The game was close—the Arrows were only behind by one goal and all of the players looked exhausted already. Merlin help them if the match ran more than a day, they'd all be asleep on their

brooms.

“Oi Weasley! Find the Snitch already!”

Ginny laughed at Slaine’s slurred words when she streamed by, Quaffle tucked under her arm. Raff and Thickwhistle were right on her tail.

Harry made an exasperated grunt when Ginny flew just in front of him, making him swerve off his search pattern. Ginny laughed as she darted forward on her broom, laying flat and gaining speed.

Harry knew it was a feint, though, and didn’t immediately follow. The crowd cheered loudly, thinking she’d seen the Snitch and was going to beat Potter to it. She could hear Harry following, the distinct whistle of his Firebolt just off to her left. He might not believe she’d seen the Snitch, but he couldn’t chance that the feint just might be real.

She broke off the dive well before the floor and swerved under Wood at the Arrow hoops. Oliver growled something to Harry but Ginny didn’t listen. She shot into the air and resumed her flight path, stealing those few free seconds to scan without Harry near.

The Snitch was elusive today, though, and she hadn’t seen the shiny glint of gold since it was released.

Laurene scored again, but Ginny didn’t turn to watch the celebration.

“I’m going to hex his bits off.” Harry grumbled as he hovered next to her.

“Wood?”

His face was red and Ginny was sure whatever Oliver had said wasn’t something she wanted to hear right now. It was high time Gwenog and Cam took him out of the game.

“He told me to quit watching your ass and fly.”

Ginny laughed. “Were you watching my ass, Harry?”

His locked jaw gave her the answer she wanted. He had been staring at her from behind.

“You know I’ll let you do more than watch it when we win,” Ginny said with a saucy wink.

“Witch,” Harry grumbled. He flew off and Ginny laughed.

* * *

Harry stared as Ginny moved away from him and returned to her random searching. Of course he’d been watching her rear while they were making that last turn. Ginny hadn’t seen the Snitch and neither had Harry—this one was a particularly tricky little bugger—so there was no harm in following Ginny through the dive, her behind right there in front of him. He was becoming far too transparent when it came to Ginny. This game needed to end soon so that they could get everything out in the open. Oliver would be livid, but Harry was tired of the deception.

The Harpies' Chasers were setting up another scoring run when Paxton performed a risky Bludger Backbeat, sending the iron ball screaming toward the witches from his far side.

Harry winced as it cracked Laurene Acree in the shoulder. He heard the break of her bone from twenty feet away. Raff snatched the Quaffle from Slaine Kipp and raced toward the Harpies' goal. Acree righted her broom, with Warnock's assistance and Jones flew over to look at her arm.

Tamsin Hartzell defended the first shot against her hoops successfully, but Davies managed to get the ball back and slipped it through the outside ring.

Acree brushed off her teams' concern and guided her broom toward the sidelines. The Harpies were down to only two Chasers now.

Jones growled something at Ginny—most likely telling her to find the Snitch and end this before things got worse—and Ginny set her jaw in determination.

Over the next hour, the loss of their highest scorer proved to throw off the Harpies' momentum. The Arrows pulled the score even once more and then increased their lead. Warnock and Kipp flew harder and faster than Harry had ever seen, using risky plays that worked well at times, and failed spectacularly at others.

All in all, the game was the most intense Harry had ever played.

Hammon flew by Harry and wiped at his brow. "All right?"

Harry grunted in response. His eyes darted back and forth over the pitch. Suddenly, a bright hint of gold caught his attention. The Snitch. But Ginny had seen it at the exact moment Harry had. She was across the pitch from him and they were both going to have to go full out to catch it.

Ginny was closer, and Harry knew she wasn't going to give up easily. He weighed his choices in the blink of an eye, and made a decision. She would understand, because she'd do that same thing.

"Send it at Weasley, Hammon!"

Newt caught his eye and grimaced. He knew it wasn't right, but it also wasn't against the rules.

"Done."

Harry shot off toward the Snitch and prayed Ginny would one day forgive him. Hopefully, she'd pull off before it could hit her. Even as he thought that, he knew she wouldn't, because Harry wouldn't leave the hunt if the Bludger was coming for him.

The crack of the bat echoed behind him and the iron ball whizzed past Harry's head, ruffling his hair. He lay down along his broom, racing it toward the Snitch.

Ginny continued coming at him—if she wasn't hit by the Bludger, she was going to run into Harry with tremendous force.

The crowd was on their feet screaming and watching the drama unfold.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," Harry whispered as the Bludger headed straight for her. He knew she saw the impact coming, because she squared her shoulder against the collision, but she didn't break off pursuit of the Snitch. She had to catch it or the Harpies were going to lose the game.

Harry reached forward and felt the brush of wings against his fingertips. He scrambled to catch the cagey little ball and gritted his teeth. The Bludger would hit any second now, and he was still going to collide with Ginny, because she hadn't moved.

Just as his fist was going to close around the ball, it disappeared. A horrendous crack sounded in his ears and Harry watched Ginny—almost in slow motion—fall. She'd spun out of the way of the Bludger, making it harder for her to catch the Snitch, but allowing the Bludger to hit her broom, rather than her. And she'd still managed to catch the Snitch.

Harry's dipped his broom into a dive and grabbed Ginny's wrist. He felt her arm slide and pop, but he held on as tightly as he could. Sure enough, gripped tightly in her fist was the Snitch. The game was over.

"I've got you," he promised her.

Ginny's eyes were wide and a grimace of pain was on her face, but she gave him a solid nod.

"I won't let you fall." Harry slowly started to lower as the crowd cheered and screamed.

The Harpies' players rushed around the two Seekers and Harry finally let go when Jones got Ginny astride the back of her broom.

"Thanks, Potter." Jones gave him a solid nod before the green and gold clad team left in a group.

The Harpies had won the League Cup.

Harry felt drained and his heart thundered in his chest. He knew Ginny would be alright; her shoulder was most likely out of the socket, but that could be mended easily enough by their team trainer. But it was the look on her face the instant that her hand closed around the Snitch—triumph and terror mixed—and the sound of the Bludger smashing her broom to pieces that haunted Harry. He didn't feel guilty for having Hammon hit that Bludger, because they'd both said all was fair in Quidditch, and he had no doubts that Ginny would have done the same. It was just how they were.

But there was that momentary jolt in his heart that she might be badly hurt, or worse, and he couldn't lose her now.

He floated to the pitch and gripped his broom tightly. Oliver and the other Arrows players were converging into one area while the Harpies celebrated in a tight circle. Ginny was fine and he could see her hand in the air, still clutching the Snitch. Even Laurene—arm wrapped tightly to her chest—was in the huddle.

Oliver was speaking, but Harry forgot to listen. All he could concentrate on was Ginny's smiling face and the look of triumph on her face.

She'd done it. She'd won the game for her team. Harry knew it wasn't just a victory over him that

she'd accomplished—he didn't take the loss too hard because it had been a brilliantly fought game on both sides. The Harpies deserved the win because they'd simply outplayed the Arrows.

Their eyes caught across the pitch and Harry let his broom fall to the floor. He needed to touch her, kiss her and make sure she wasn't angry with him. He needed to celebrate with her, because she'd played brilliantly.

"Potter! Potter, where the hell are you going?"

Harry ignored Oliver's voice as he strode across the pitch. The cheering of the crowd was even drowned out as Harry stared intently at his target. He pulled his goggles up onto his forehead and Ginny slowly came into focus as he walked toward her.

Once he was close enough, Harry reached for her. The Harpies stepped aside and watched with wide eyes as Harry's hands cupped her cheeks and pulled her close.

"You did it!" he said, awe in his voice. "You won!"

Ginny grinned up at him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Harry lowered his mouth to hers, ignoring the shocked gasps and flashes of light going off all around them.

Their secret was out now—everyone in the world would know by tomorrow when the papers published the hundreds of photos being taken—but neither of them cared. Harry poured everything he had into the kiss. He wanted to celebrate this amazing woman in his arms and relish her win, even though it meant defeat for him.

That didn't matter anymore.

"You did it," he repeated again when they pulled apart. Ginny's eyes were bright and crinkled at the corners as she laughed gaily. "Is your arm alright?" Harry's whole stomach twisted when he remembered the way her shoulder joint slid and popped when he grabbed her.

"Its fine," Ginny insisted and rotated it to demonstrate. "The Healer fixed me right up."

"I shouldn't have done it," Harry sighed. "The Bludger..."

Ginny smiled and shook her head at him. "Yes, you should have, Harry. I would have done the same thing... this is *Quidditch*, and I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

Her fiery answer was nothing short of what Harry expected. "I love you," he blurted. Flashes burst around them once more. "I'm so in love with you."

"I love you too, Harry," Ginny answered back as she jumped into his arms. They kissed again and a few people around them started clapping. The sound radiated outward, but Harry couldn't be bothered with all of that—Ginny was kissing him.

Somewhere from the haze of humanity surrounding them, Oliver's voice rang out. Harry reluctantly pulled back from Ginny and blinked at his Captain.

"How long has this been going on?" Oliver's face was red and he glared at both Harry and Ginny.

"Oh, lighten up," Jones snapped. She nudged Oliver's arm, but he just huffed in annoyance.

"Doesn't matter," Harry said firmly. "The season's over now."

"There's no rule against players from opposing teams dating," Cam Mitchem pointed out. She was grinning widely at Ginny—as were most of the Harpies.

Oliver bristled. "You told me there was nothing going on," he accused. "You lied to me!"

Harry clutched Ginny's hand in his and ground his teeth together. "We weren't together then," he pointed out.

"How do you know this wasn't their first kiss?" Slaine Kipp asked from beside Ginny. "It might have been."

They all knew it was a lie, but Oliver couldn't dispute the idea. Harry's eyes darted to Davies, who looked rather uncomfortable, but he wasn't going to spill his secret right now. His small shake of the head at Harry confirmed that.

"I ought to—"

"What?" Harry challenged when Oliver grumbled a threat. "You want to dismiss me from the team? Fine." He squeezed Ginny's hand tightly in his and relished the warmth of her next to him.

"He only signed a contract for one season, Wood," Ginny pointed out. "There are a lot of other teams that will gladly show interest if Harry were to announce he wasn't returning to Appleby."

Harry grinned down at her. He wasn't going to let her go for anything, no matter what the repercussions from Wood might be. She was everything.

Oliver's face paled and he spluttered as the Arrows protested around him. The crowd that had gathered around them watched back and forth with attentiveness.

"Let's not get hasty," Wood finally sighed. "I didn't say that you were going to be dismissed, or even punished."

"You can't find fault with my play, either," Harry pointed out. "I've been flying better than ever lately."

Wood grimaced and Harry knew he'd won another point. Wood respected good, focused play. "You didn't miss the Snitch today because—"

"Because it was Ginny?" Harry scoffed at the idea. "No, of course not. She outplayed me, fairly. She's a damn good Seeker, Wood—best in the League. The Harpies earned this win."

A loud cheer erupted around them and Ginny pressed her lips to Harry's cheek. He felt his face flush and realized that everything he was saying was going to be spread all over the news tomorrow... but it didn't matter anymore.

"My private life and who I see don't have any bearing on my play, as I've proven."

Harry could see Wood's jaw grinding as he tried to think of something he could say to refute it. Finally, the fight drained out of him. "It had to be a Harpy, didn't it?" he mumbled.

Ginny snorted and Gwenog slapped Oliver on the shoulder hard enough to make the burly Keeper take a step forward.

"Nope," Harry denied. He turned and looked at Ginny. "It had to be *her*."

Chapter 12: Force Of Nature

The Burrow was teeming with people. Everywhere he looked there was another face, smiling and laughing. It was a sort of organized chaos that was enjoyable, yet draining at the same time.

Little Victoire—even more precocious this Christmas—was fixed to his side, raising more questions than any veteran reporter could ever imagine asking. She'd latched on to Harry the moment he and Ginny arrived. Harry was wary at first and eyed the little girl in the angelic dress before sinking down to her level.

"No potatoes this year?"

Victoire giggled behind her hand and shook her head quickly. "Maman made me promise."

"Then I suppose you can sit next to me," Harry conceded. Fleur, who was rocking a small pink bundle in her arms gave a firm, pleased nod. Harry smiled up at Ginny who was wearing a look that was completely out of place here, surrounded by her family. He swallowed thickly and forced his eyes away. It wouldn't do to be distracted among Ginny's many brothers and have them drag him out back for a plunge in the snow.

Sirius appeared and handed Harry a cup of elderberry wine, courtesy of Madam Rosemerta.

"Where's your other half?" Harry peered around the room, as if a woman like Rosemerta could be hidden in all of this.

Sirius gave a casual shrug. "Family or something. We're not joined at the hip, you know."

"No," Harry snorted, "just at the—"

"Careful," Fred mumbled as he walked by and snatched Victoire from Harry's feet, "little ears pick up a lot."

"You only know that because you taught her to swear last time they were here," Harry quipped back."

Fred laughed. "Come on, little one, Uncle Fred will teach you some Spanish this year. You look like you could use a bit of culture." He swept away with a giggling Victoire.

"No wonder Ginny's corrupt," Sirius muttered.

Harry laughed. "To hear them tell it, they were all perfectly innocent until Ginny came along. She corrupted *them*."

Sirius' grin was wide and he looked rather proud. "Too right, that's the only way to go. Corruption by a strong willed woman." He held out his glass and Harry tapped his against it.

"You didn't answer my question about—"

"It's not the same as you and Ginny," Sirius quickly answered. "Rosie and I... it's just casual."

"You've been together longer than me and Gin," Harry pointed out.

"Don't go getting any ideas, kiddo," Sirius warned. "Unlike you, I have no designs on a future with anyone. Rosie and I are just..."

"Having sex," Harry pointed out.

Sirius bristled slightly and peered around, perhaps looking for Molly who would set a pinching hex on both of them for talking like this in company. "Not just," he protested, "but... yeah. We're both too old and set in our ways for it to be anything but."

Harry found Ginny again, talking with Neville across the room. Her hand was on his chest and she was laughing at something he said. Neither protectiveness nor jealousy stirred in Harry like the first time he'd seen them together; Harry understood their relationship wasn't anything more than a friendship born of war and trust. And Neville was a good bloke, in a way Harry wasn't surprised that the two had gravitated together and clung to each other during those dark years.

"Speaking of commitment," Sirius said softly, "have you..."

Harry's whole body tensed and he shook his head. "Not yet," he lied. "When it's right."

Ginny looked up, as if sensing his gaze, and gave a quick wink.

Sirius gave a disgruntled sound and finished the rest of his wine. "What're you waiting for?"

"Nothing, just..." Harry trailed off and looked around. No one had overheard their conversation and Harry wanted to keep it that way. There was no telling what Molly would do if she thought for one minute that—

"Hiding over here, are you?"

Ron appeared just in the nick of time and Harry sighed with relief. Ron's knack for interrupting finally came in useful.

"Not hiding," Harry protested, "just staying out of the path of all of this."

Ron's eyebrows rose as he surveyed the living room that seemed about to burst with people. "It's a bit much, I have to admit."

"When you start adding all the in-laws, I can only imagine," Sirius murmured.

"And other bits and pieces," Ron nodded to Sirius who chuckled. "Mum lets in all sorts of strays at the holidays."

Harry grinned and added his name to that list, although one day he might not be simply a stray. His hand played with the hem of his new jumper, one he wore with pride. The one Molly had given him last year was nearly worn out from use.

"Getting nervous?"

Ron's ears turned red at Sirius' prodding and he half nodded, half shrugged. "A bit."

"I'm not a huge fan of marriage," Sirius says, "but I think you'll manage just fine."

Harry snorted. "There's glowing praise." Ron grinned at him.

"Do me a favor, Sirius, and go point that out to Hermione, would you?"

Sirius flushed and he stammered something unintelligible, but didn't move from Harry's side. Harry knew Hermione would take offence at Sirius' attitude and probably sit him down for a lecture on the statistics of happy people to married ones, as well as any other obscure detail she'd read about concerning marriage. He wouldn't wish that on anyone, not even Sirius at his most snarky.

"This holiday is a bit different from last," Ron pointed out and nudged Harry's arm.

Harry grinned. "It is. I'm not quivering, waiting for Ginny to hex me at any minute."

"One misplaced word will take care of that for you," Sirius pointed out.

"That was fun, I have to admit," Harry said.

Ron made a strange face. "Are you some sort of nutter? How on earth can you think my sister going off her nut and attacking you is fun?"

Harry felt heat rise up his face and bit his bottom lip. "It was a turn on," he finally admitted with a self-deprecating shrug.

"Ergh, Harry!" Ron grimaced and glared at him. "I thought we promised never to talk about my sister and sex at the same time."

"You can't blame me," Harry protested. "I'm absolutely gone over her and the whole world knows it."

"Who would have thought it," Sirius said with a sad shake of his head. "Done in by a redhead. You know I lost money to Hagrid over this whole thing?"

Harry gaped at his godfather. "You were betting on me?"

"Of course," Sirius said with a look that said he'd have been crazy if he didn't bet on it. "I didn't know Ginny back then, though, or I never would have let Hagrid sucker me like that."

Harry snorted. Hagrid was not known for his shrewd deals, then again, he'd known Ginny well from Hogwarts.

"You did tame her well," Ron pointed out.

Harry's eyes bulged. "Why the hell would I want to tame her?" he demanded. He found Ginny still talking to Neville, who looked to be choking to death over something she'd said.

Ron looked lost for words and just stared at Harry with his mouth open. "I..."

"I don't want anything of the sort," Harry continued. His whole insides fluttered when he saw Ginny weaving her way toward them, her eyes sparkling with amusement and a look that was only for him. "You're lucky Ginny didn't hear you say that, Ron, she'd hex you for sure."

"Didn't hear him say *what?*"

Ron's gulp was audible as Ginny joined their group. She grinned, realizing that Harry pitched Ron under the bus for his own amusement.

Harry was thrilled when Ron's eyes darted about, searching for a way to escape, but found no way out of the mock glare his sister was giving him.

"Well, Ron?"

* * *

The heat in the kitchen was stifling and Ginny had to escape, at all costs. That and her mother had begun grilling her about what was to come next in her and Harry's relationship. Ginny blamed it all on Ron and Hermione, who were set to marry in six weeks, and George and Angelina who announced their engagement just last night.

You couldn't trust brothers.

The living room was just as warm, but here Ginny could mill about and not get stuck in some serious conversation.

Victoire came up and demonstrated how her dress twirled, showed off the sparkly new shoes that her mother had bought specially for the occasion and babbled on about how excited she was to take part in Ron and Hermione's wedding. She and Ginny sat on the stairs for a long time and watched the family interact.

"Maybe you'll have a wedding one day," Victoire pronounced as she gave a wistful sigh in Harry's direction.

Ginny snorted and rolled her eyes. Back to talk of weddings again.

"Maybe," Ginny said doubtfully. She caught Harry's eye across the room and wondered what Sirius was saying to make Harry's face scrunch up that way. "Although you don't have to be married to be happy, you know."

Victoire made a sound in the back of her throat that made Ginny laugh. Sometimes this little girl was far too grown up for her own good. She sounded just like Ginny's mother. "But you like Harry, don't you, Auntie Gin?"

"Of course I like him," Ginny protested.

"And you're going to be with him for a long time?"

"Merlin, you're precocious," Ginny sighed. "Who taught you to talk, anyway?"

Victoire gave a giggle and stood before disappearing into the room.

"Mum's been corrupting her," Ginny grumbled to herself. She'd have to remember to tell Harry about this little conversation and see what he thought about it. Everyone was in on the conspiracy to get Harry and Ginny married off as soon as possible. They'd only been officially together since May, as far as the world was concerned, what was the rush?

Technically, Ginny supposed, they'd been together a year now, if you counted their rather interesting beginning to a relationship. Last Christmas had certainly been entertaining. This year paled in comparison, mostly because Ginny wasn't planning on clawing Harry's eyeballs out and he wasn't provoking her to madness. Although the night was still young.

"You know, Ginny..." Neville leaned his hip against the banister and looked down at her. He didn't finish his thought, but Ginny was used to that.

Ginny stood and wrapped her arms around him, giving him a tight squeeze. "No, I don't know, Neville."

He chuckled at their familiar banter and looked down at her. "You look really happy."

Ginny's skin prickled with joy and she nodded. "I am happy."

They were both quiet for a minute and Neville slipped his hand into hers. "Remember the night of the banquet when you kissed me?"

Her cheeks heated but she nodded. Was that only just over a year ago? It felt like forever—ages since she'd had that silly notion that she could make her feelings for Neville be something that they weren't.

"And I told you that you'd find the right one sometime?"

"I remember," Ginny said.

Neville chewed the inside of his lip for a moment and looked over at Harry. "I think you did it, Gin."

Ginny flushed with pleasure and her whole body tingled. She wondered if she should whisper her secret to Neville, but resisted. Not now. Not yet.

"I think I may have too, Nev."

He looked pleased, and just a little sad. Ginny studied his face for a minute before asking about the expression.

"I don't know," he admitted. "I suppose I just feel... the smallest bit jealous. I always wanted to put that look on your face. Even though it wasn't going to happen between us, I wanted it to."

Ginny realized what he was talking about and gave him another hug. "I know. But you get the same sappy, dumb-struck look when I see you with Hannah, you know."

Neville chuckled. "I suppose I do. We're growing up, Ginny."

"Had to happen sometime, I suppose," Ginny sighed dramatically. They stood leaning together for a long minute.

"You *are* happy, though?"

Ginny couldn't stop herself from smiling and feared she looked horribly lovesick and sappy. She traced Harry's body with her eyes and marveled at how delicious a simple set of jeans and a homemade jumper could make him. Then again, he could be wearing something truly hideous and Ginny would still know what was underneath it was mouthwatering.

"Deliriously," Ginny finally answered.

"Good," Neville said firmly. "Because I was afraid I was going to have to take Potter aside, give him a few tips for the bedroom, you know."

Ginny gaped at Neville. He *never* made sex jokes! She was the one who was always trying to see how red she could make him.

"I think you can save your breath," Ginny laughed. "I assure you we're perfectly fine in that department."

Neville looked relieved that the joke was over, yet pleased that he'd managed to throw her off balance.

"I can't believe you just said that," Ginny giggled.

His cheeks flushed immediately and he gave a lopsided grin. "I've been practicing."

"There may be hope for you yet, Longbottom." Ginny kissed his cheek and nudged him away from the stairs. "You better go and find your witch, Nev, before I find her first and make sure you're doing things right in the old love chamber."

He nearly choked on his tongue and Ginny was pleased once more. She'd put them back on equal footing.

He was still staring with wide eyes as Ginny walked away to find Harry. She needed to brag to him about how she nearly killed Neville tonight. And he'd get a kick out of the way Neville actually joked about giving Harry sex pointers. Not that Harry needed them; definitely not.

Harry was wearing a predatory look as she approached and Ginny wondered exactly what was going through his mind.

"You're lucky Ginny didn't hear you say that, Ron, she'd hex you for sure."

Ginny's eyebrow rose as she considered just what was going on over here. Ron had obviously said something out of place—no surprise there—but Harry had willingly offered him up on a platter. That amused Ginny. "Didn't hear him say *what?*"

Harry grinned and Sirius laughed when Ron attempted to find a way out of the situation.

"Well Ron?" Harry prompted and nudged his friend's arm.

"Er..."

"Ron was just congratulating Harry on taming you." Sirius slid his arm around Ginny's shoulder.

Ginny's eyes narrowed and she glared at her brother. "*Taming* me? As if I'm some wild beast that needs harnessing and... and *manners!* 'Just throw a saddle on her, smack her ass with a whip a few times and she'll behave like a good little hippogriff'? I cannot believe you, Ronald Weasley!"

Amusement gave way to annoyance as it really settled on Ginny what Ron meant by his comment.

"Not that I don't like a few of those ideas, in a much different setting, of course," Harry protested, "I told him I wouldn't want to tame you."

"No," Sirius pointed out, "what you said was 'why the hell would I want to do that'." He looked completely delighted at Ginny's frustration and Ginny made a mental note to hex him later. She was pleased with Harry's response—she'd reward him later, but she'd be the one smacking his ass, not the other way around—but Ron still needed to be dealt with.

"Perhaps I ought to warn Hermione," Ginny said after Ron stammered something about not meaning it in that way. "Obviously someone needs to warn her about what you expect in a wife."

Ron paled. His skin went completely white and he gaped at his sister. "You wouldn't."

Ginny's hand shot out and she grabbed his ear and gave it a twist faster than he could respond. "Take it back, then."

Both Harry and Sirius erupted with laughter and the whole room turned to take in the scene. Ginny tightened her grip and ignored Ron's pleas to let him go.

"Take it back," she commanded once more. Being the youngest and the only girl had its advantages at times.

"Ginevra!"

Her mother's gasp from behind them was the only thing that saved Ron's ear from being stretched beyond recognition.

"He needs to apologize, Mum," Ginny replied calmly, "and then I'll let him loose."

"You'll release him right now, young lady. Honestly, I thought we'd put all this heathen behavior behind us."

Harry was still laughing as Ron whined out something that passed for an apology. Ginny released Ron and moved toward Harry, ignoring those around them.

"You really think I don't need to be tamed?"

Harry's laughter faded instantly and he shook his head. "Not at all. That would take all the fun out

of everything.”

Ginny smirked at him and pressed her body to his. Somewhere in the background she could hear her mother wailing about her wanton daughter, but Ginny didn't care. She kissed Harry with everything she was worth.

Catcalls and whistles surrounded them, but Ginny dismissed them as well. Harry's kiss was just as passionate, just as demanding as hers was. It was like walking in a desert for miles and miles and then finally finding a glorious spring of fresh water.

“Although I don't mind if we try that hippogriff idea,” Harry whispered when they finally broke apart.

Ginny snorted and clung tighter to him. “Persuade me.”

* * *

Ginny lay next to him, but he could tell she wasn't asleep yet. Her breathing wasn't low and even enough. Her back rose and fell too quickly, even though she looked dead to the world.

“You didn't tell them tonight.”

Harry's whispered words broke the stillness of their bedroom. His fingers traced the smooth skin of her back, down her spine to the moist drops of sweat resting just above her bum.

“Did you want to?” Her face was still pressed to the mattress and it made her words sound funny. Harry smiled into the darkness and leaned over to kiss her shoulder. His hand found her breast and he gave it a light caress. She responded by shifting so that she was facing him and linked their fingers, playfully running them back and forth across each other.

“I don't know, honestly,” Harry answered. “I really didn't plan any of this.”

Ginny smiled and moved into his side. “I sort of guessed that, you know.”

She was getting far too much amusement out of his fumbling around. Harry pinched her bum lightly and she wrapped her leg through his. “What gave it away?”

The laughter that answered him wasn't encouraging. “I rather think shouting and begging me to marry you while we're in the middle of hot sex wasn't something you planned extensively.”

Put that way, Harry couldn't help but laugh also. “How do you know?” he demanded. If he had an ounce of energy left, he'd roll her over and pin her onto the bed to show her who was in charge. “Maybe I did.”

“I know *you*,” Ginny protested. She punctuated her statement by pressing a kiss to his chest. “And as much as I love you, you couldn't plan a romantic moment to save your life.”

“I might be able to,” Harry pouted. He scowled up at the ceiling, even though he knew she was right. Romance wasn't something that he had any clue about. Good thing Ginny wasn't the type of witch who wanted to be swept off her feet with flowers and chocolate and such. “Kissing you in

front of hundreds of people last May was romantic."

Ginny contemplated that and rested her folded arms on his chest. "Was it? After you'd just sent that Bludger at me?"

"Oi! You said—"

She laughed and pressed her fingers over his lips. "I know. I'm taking the piss, Harry. You know how I feel about all that romantic rubbish. Don't waste money on flowers and fancy dinners, I'd rather just have you and me, a box of take away, and sex on the sofa."

"I knew I kept you around for a reason," Harry proclaimed. He kissed her forehead and buried his hands in her hair.

"The same reason that I told you I'd marry you," Ginny acknowledged.

A bubble of happiness burst inside Harry's chest and he grinned up at her. "We're really going to get married."

"Eventually, yes," she said. "But I still say you only did it so I'd have to put the name 'Potter' on my Harpies uniform."

A huge laugh rolled up from Harry's toes and he pulled her into his embrace. "You've figured me out then." They kissed and caressed for a minute before cuddling down into the bed.

"Do you know what I thought about the first morning we woke up together here?"

Ginny murmured something but Harry just stared up at the ceiling and wound a length of her hair through his fingers.

"I was terrified."

"Me too," Ginny admitted. "And so very confused."

"It seems longer than a year ago, doesn't it?"

"Sometimes, yeah."

Harry sighed. "I was trying to figure out how to escape, actually. I just didn't want to have to sit there with some pleasant smile on my face while you planned our wedding and named our children and our cat."

Ginny laughed. "Merlin, did you have the wrong end of things or what?"

He grinned. "Back then I thought the worst thing in the world would be to be tied down, stuck in some little cottage with a wife and children running everywhere—the mythical dream, you know. But I realized—not sure when it happened, actually—that it wasn't nearly the torture I imagined it could be."

Ginny rolled her eyes and kissed his cheek. "It was all the sex," she confirmed. "You're helpless

when I flash my tits and toss my knickers at your head.”

“That does help,” Harry sighed happily. “I mean it, Gin,” he protested. She stopped her teasing when she heard how serious he was. “I never told anyone how much I really wanted a family. All those years alone...”

“Oh, Harry.” She kissed him lightly. “I’ll let you in on a little secret... you’re completely transparent to me.”

“I know,” he grumbled. “A family with you—one in the far future, please!—is what I want. I even want the damned cottage and cat.”

“Gravity finally caught up with you, didn’t it?”

Her teasing tone was undermined by the emotion in her voice.

“Gravity is a bitch,” Harry said softly. “But I think I can forgive her because I fell for you.”

“I fell pretty hard too, you know.”

“Good thing I’m a perfect match for you.”

“And so modest,” Ginny quipped. She let her teeth graze over his ear lightly and Harry shivered.

“I’ve always been a bit arrogant,” Harry admitted. “Character fault, I suppose.”

“Don’t tell anyone,” Ginny whispered, “but I think it’s dead sexy.”

“You do?” Harry was genuinely surprised. He knew Ginny found him attractive, and loved him, but to think that she’d been attracted by his gittish qualities...

“Not when you were being an ass,” Ginny clarified. She straddled his hips and leaned down to bump their noses together, “but when you were honest and open, and truly you. That sort of arrogance I can handle.”

“So I’m a decent bloke, then?”

She pretended to think about it. “You *are* pretty good in bed; I suppose, since you are house trained, I’ll plan on keeping you around for a bit.”

“Witch,” Harry growled.

“Of course, Harry,” Ginny protested innocently. “You wouldn’t want me any other way.”

Harry captured her lips with his. “Mrs. Potter.”

She laughed against him. “Not yet, prat.”

“Soon, though.”

"Eventually," Ginny conceded. It was enough for Harry.

"Turns out I'm romantic after all," he said softly as he pulled her down into his embrace.

"It'll be our little secret."

Epilogue: Equilibrium

He looked down at the bundle in his arms, his face a mixture of panic and awe.

"Well?" Ginny prompted. "What do you think, *Daddy?*"

Harry looked up at her and she could see tears swimming in his eyes. "It's... wow, just... A girl. I... I wanted a little girl."

Ginny was exhausted, but there was such euphoria coursing through her veins that she knew she couldn't rest right now. And nothing would make her miss this moment right here. "Our daughter." Even though they'd spent months and months preparing for this baby, actually holding her in their arms and *knowing* that they'd created this together was overwhelming.

"She's perfect," Harry mused. "I feel... strange."

"How so?" Ginny shifted in the bed and studied his face.

"Like..." He trailed off and shook his head, possibly searching for the right words to describe what was going on inside him. "Like the first time I kissed you," he started. "I knew I was in big trouble."

Ginny chuckled and laid her fingers on his.

"And there was something inside me that changed in that moment. I didn't understand it then, but... but I think it was love."

She'd never heard him talk so eloquently about his feelings—Harry could be a fairly stoic bloke when he wanted to—and it made her love him even more.

"And it almost doesn't make sense, because I've only known her for two minutes, but it's the same."

He looked shocked and entirely pleased.

"She looks like you," he pointed out. "Same chin and nose."

"Same hair," Ginny agreed with a wry smile. She reached over and ran her hands over the short red fuzz that covered the baby's head. "Poor girl."

"At least she hasn't got mine," Harry pointed out with a smirk. "And I love your hair, Gin."

* * *

"Very true." Ginny sighed and let her body relax into the mattress. The euphoria of giving birth was finally starting to wane into bone-deep tiredness. She hadn't felt this exhausted since her days with the Harpies, when she'd play Quidditch for hours and hours. Of course, she was younger then, as well, and her body didn't cope with being hard at work for more than twenty-four hours without rest.

The baby whined and squirmed in Harry's arms and his eyes went wide as she screwed up her face and let out a cry that was far too big to belong to such a little thing.

"She has your temper, too." Harry grinned. "She's going to be feisty."

"She'll have to be," Ginny said. She yawned and her eyelids grew heavy. Harry shifted the baby around and she settled in his hold. Ginny could hear her smacking her lips lightly and knew she was going to have to feed the little monkey soon, but she'd wait just a few minutes more.

"I'm going to get her a tiny little set of Arrows robes."

Harry's words made Ginny's eyes snap open. "You are *not*! That's *my* daughter you're trying to corrupt there, Harry. She'll be a Harpy before she's ever an Arrow. I don't care if you do still play for those—"

Her husband's grin made Ginny realize he was simply winding her up, and her ire melted away. Even now the Quidditch rivalry in the Potter household was still alive and well.

"We'll let her choose, then, when she's old enough."

Ginny narrowed her eyes at him. She was going to have to work extra hard on this baby to make sure Harry didn't influence her like he did to others in the family. Now that Ginny was no longer playing professionally, the loyalty in the various Weasley houses had shifted over to the Arrows—Harry was still the star of Appleby's team, after all. And while Ginny loved Harry and respected his playing ability, no one could ever convince her to wear a light blue and silver shirt when she went to the games. It just wasn't in her to wear those colors.

Harry chuckled lightly and wiggled his finger into the baby's grip. "I think she's going to be a Seeker, Gin," he said softly. "She's got a grip."

Now that the need to defend her child from Harry's questionable influences had faded, Ginny was drifting back to sleep. "She'll be whatever she wants to be."

Harry was quiet for a moment and then Ginny felt his lips on her forehead. "Yes, she will. Thank you, Ginny, for giving me everything. I... I never knew I wanted all of this."

A great wave of love and contentment washed over her and Ginny fumbled to wind their fingers together.

"I feel like there is a... a bubble inside me. It just keeps growing and growing, and I'm terrified that one day it might burst. But it hasn't happened yet."

His words were soft and spoken against the skin of her temple. Ginny knew exactly what he meant, though. All of this—love, marriage, children—wasn't something Ginny had planned on, but she couldn't imagine her life without it now. And when you added little Lily to the mix...

"Go take her to meet her brothers." She wiggled her fingers inside Harry's grip and looked up at him through bleary eyes. "Where are they?"

"Sirius," Harry answered. That one word held so much weight.

"Oh, Merlin," Ginny sighed. "He's the worst influence." She couldn't help but smile, though. Sirius was horribly incorrigible about the children, but there was no way to blame him, not after all he'd been through.

"At least they're staying with your parents for awhile. Sirius just shows up every day. Your poor mother has three to watch, rather than two."

Ginny chuckled. Sirius lived for Jamie and Al. He spoiled them horribly and let them get away with far too much, but the boys adored him. Al had a particularly soft spot for his Grandfather, who could turn into a horribly behaved dog and play with the eighteen-month-old for hours on end.

"Good thing she doesn't mind," Ginny sighed. "Go get them, Harry, I want to see my boys."

Harry settled Lily in her arm and Ginny inhaled the soft scent that only came along with a new baby. It was like breathing life into your veins.

When Harry returned carrying Jamie and Al, both boys were wearing bright orange t-shirts.

"Holy—"

"Ron stopped by," Harry interrupted before Ginny could finish her comment. "I'll change them after they see their new sister."

Ginny glared at the offending shirts, but then dismissed the complaint when she saw the glowing faces of her sons. They looked so much like their father, especially when their faces were all lined up like they were now. Jamie had some definite Weasley blood in him, but Al was all Potter.

"Look boys, this is Lily—your sister."

"Bebee!" Al crowed loudly and clapped his hands. He dived out of Harry's grip and clambered onto the bed, jostling Ginny and Lily.

"Careful, little love," Ginny soothed him. "Remember to use soft hands."

Al gave a firm nod and leaned over to see his sister. His face brightened into a huge smile and he reached out to run a finger along the back of Lily's hand.

"Bebee?"

"Lily," Ginny corrected gently. "Her name is Lily."

"Lelee."

"Close enough," Harry said. Jamie looked a bit more trepid to see his sister and clung to Harry tightly. Finally, curiosity got the better of him and he leaned over to peer at her face. Jamie never took change well. When they'd explained there was a new baby coming to their house, Jamie had firmly insisted that a dog, like Grandpa Sirius, would be better.

"Are you okay, Mummy?"

Ginny smiled at her son's hesitant question. "Just tired, love. Lily took a long time getting here. I'll be fine after a little nap."

Jamie contemplated that and turned his attention back to his new sister. "Can we play with her yet?"

"Not yet," Harry chuckled. "She's still little. Remember when Al was little?"

Jamie screwed up his face and shrugged. "She's okay, I guess."

That was glowing praise from the oldest Potter and Ginny snorted softly. Jamie would come around. By the time Lily was toddling around, knocking his block towers over and tearing apart his chocolate frog cards, Jamie would think she was nothing but an annoyance.

"Bebee, Mummy!" Al clapped again and then buried his face in his mother's side. Ginny ruffled his soft, black hair and wished she could hold all three of her children properly.

Harry caught her eye and mouthed 'thank you' to her. She knew how much the children meant to him. Harry's idea of what his life should be had changed dramatically over the years since they'd met, but Ginny knew he was deliriously happy with how things had turned out for them. And Ginny was, as well. She couldn't ask for anything more than what was right here in this room.

"Come on, you little Bludgers." Harry scooped Al into his arms and stood. "Let's let the girls rest for a bit. We'll go throw the ball for Padfoot."

"Pafoo!" Al crowed. "Ball for Pafoo!"

Harry chuckled and turned to give his wife and daughter one final look. "You'll be—"

"We'll be fine," Ginny assured them. "Mum will be up in a few minutes, I'm sure. I can't believe she's waited this long as it is."

"I think she just wanted to give us some time," Harry said. "I'll send her up."

Ginny yawned and nodded. The soft sound of the door closing made the baby stir in her arms, but Lily didn't wake.

"It's just you and me, kiddo," Ginny murmured into the soft, fuzzy hair. "It's going to be tough with all those boys around, but if we stick together we'll manage to keep all the nasty Arrow's stuff from your room, and keep you from being horribly corrupted."

The baby shifted again, wrinkling her little face up into a grimace before settling. Ginny closed her eyes and let herself think far into the future—she would be the one to teach Lily how to fly. She'd instruct her in the fine tradition of nicking her brothers' brooms and out-flying them. And maybe, one day, they'd have another Harpies player in the family. Deep down, Ginny knew Harry would like nothing more. He liked his witches fiery and fierce—he'd proven that by falling for Ginny and actually having the nerve to marry her.

"You and me," Ginny whispered to the baby once more.