

Harry Potter

Knotted

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Chapter 1

Once Upon a Time... That's How It Always Starts

Once upon a time, in a small rural village in the southern part of England, there lived a large family—of all boys. The mother and father—while being absolutely crazy for continuing to produce said boys—wanted nothing more in the world than a daughter.

And, as luck would have it, their wish was granted, on child number seven.

The bright-eyed, ginger-haired girl was welcomed into the family with open arms and a fair bit of celebrating, so I'm told. There were fireworks and a feast for friends and neighbors to welcome the youngest into a well-loved clan.

The baby, whom they named Ginevra Molly, grew and grew, despite the odd things slipped to her by her mischievous older twin brothers, and was a wonderfully charming toddler before anyone knew it. Her father enjoyed letting her ride on his shoulders and would slip her sweets anytime her very-observant mother wasn't watching. Her mother doted on the little girl and would brush her red hair every night and tell her stories about their world. Her brothers treated her like a princess, and waited on her hand and foot.

Ginevra wasn't an ordinary baby, however; she was magical. And while her abilities weren't unusual—her entire family were witches and wizards—little Ginevra's skills had been discovered at an unusually early age. She delighted in making her toys float around the room, in sending sparks flying from her father's wand when he left it sitting on a low surface, and in making her brother Ron squeal when she magically made spiders appear at random. There wasn't a child in all the land that was happier...

* * *

Bringing all five of her youngest children into town with her wasn't the most feasible idea, but with Bill and Charlie at the Fawcett's helping with a garden gnome infestation, leaving poor Percy at home with the twins wasn't the best idea.

So Molly had packed up the youngest Weasleys, with stern warnings to the eager four year-old twins, and marched into Ottery St. Catchpole. The little Muggle pushchair that Arthur had fixed up to carry both Ginevra and Ronald worked well, although Molly still wished she could just levitate it over the ruts in the road. Percy kept himself between the twins, their hands clutched firmly in his, and they followed behind Molly.

"Mum, can we get a treat?" Fred asked.

"If you're all good boys," Molly said, "then perhaps I can make you a tart for pudding tonight. We'll look for some good apples at the grocers. Would you like to help me pick some out?"

A quick glance over her shoulder and Molly chuckled at the disgruntled look on the twins' faces. No doubt they wanted some of the little sweets in jars that decorated the shop windows colorfully. But

there would be no sugary treats this trip. With Bill about to go back to Hogwarts for his second year, money was tight. It would be enough of a splurge to get some apples, but the ones in the orchard weren't quite ripe enough for a tart. Arthur wouldn't mind a cheaper cut of meat in favor of a little indulgence; he was always good that way.

"That would be lovely, Mother," Percy said. He beamed at her and Molly patted his head of red curls. He was always such a good boy, although a bit rigid when it came to some things. At times Molly wished he'd play more like the others, but Percy was often content by himself, reading a book. Maybe that came from being stuck in the middle of a large family; time alone was a treasure.

Ginevra squirmed in her seat and gave a loud squawk when Ron pulled at her dress, and then her hair. Little Ronnie didn't mean any harm, but he'd never really gotten used to having a little sister. They were so often lumped together when Molly was busy with the large family, and Ronnie was forever doing anything he could to gain some attention—then again, he was only two.

"Ronnie, if you're a good boy, there will be a treat later..." Ron's little face lit up, showing off his array of white teeth and he went back to playing with his teddy bear.

Little Ginevra returned to watching out the front of the pushchair, her little hands clasped eagerly on the padded bar. She so loved taking rides in the pushchair—her cheeks would flush as her eyes feasted on the world around her, taking it all in. She was definitely an eager child.

Molly had waited so long for a little girl. It was only after giving up trying after Ronnie was born that their miracle had come along. She'd been willing to give up when the morning sickness started up again, indicating another addition to their family. And Ginevra had made her place firmly, squalling into the world on a beautiful August day, just over a year ago.

"Morning, Molly!" Serina Lovegood, a thin witch with large blue eyes, said as she passed. Strapped to her back, wrapped in shockingly tight bindings was a child with the same eyes. Molly knew the baby—a little girl named Luna—was quite happy though. The Lovegoods were odd, even for Wizarding standards, but very lovely people.

"Morning, Serina. Luna sure looks like she's growing. Before long you won't be able to put her in that... er... that..." Molly struggled for the name of the thing that the baby was strapped to. Mr. Lovegood had explained it to Arthur one time, but it didn't make much sense to Molly—why on earth would you strap a child to a board and carry them around like a rucksack?

"Yes, she is getting quite heavy. Xenophilius had to put a lightening charm on the whole contraption just the other day, but Luna just loves her cradle board. We believe it allows her to fully develop her mind so that she can be in tune to not only her surroundings, but the mystical that envelops us all."

Molly blinked, trying to make sense of the whole thing. Thankfully, Georgie and Percy got into a bit of a tiff, making a response slip quickly from her mind. Serina and Luna went on their way down the path and Molly brushed the dirt off Percy's knees and scolded Georgie for kicking his older brother.

The village wasn't too busy, thankfully, but the grocer did give a rather alarmed look when Molly trooped all of her children in the door. She wanted to promise him that all would be well, but she didn't like to deceive people, and one never knew what the most mischievous of her children might

get up to.

"Morning, Mr. Arnoldson," she greeted with a wide smile. "I hope you have a good bunch of apples in, this lot have been clamoring for an apple tart."

"Have not," Freddie grumbled. "We wanted sweets!"

The man paled and adjusted his glasses before clearing his throat. "New cases just came in. They've just been unloaded. Perhaps... perhaps young Porter here can give you a hand?" He motioned toward a spotty-faced youth who was leaning against the counter.

"Nonsense," Molly said quickly. "We'll be just fine. Gives us a chance to practice our counting skills." She turned the pushchair down the aisle, children trailing along, and out of his concerned gaze.

Her children might not be *perfect* but they certainly weren't barbarians! Well, not all of the time at any rate. Fred and George were just spirited. They'd grow out of it in time.

The trip was going well; Molly had each of their little arms full of various odds and ends they needed, while asking them to read labels, count produce, and rhyme things on the shelves. The boys seemed to be enjoying themselves. Ronnie had fallen asleep and little Ginevra was clapping happily when Molly would turn the corners and proclaim the next aisle contained some wonderful treasure for them to gather up and take home to their father.

After one particular aisle, where Fred and George had proclaimed they *needed* to have the latest sugary breakfast cereal or they might *die*, Molly noticed an older woman watching them fondly. She had seen the same woman on several aisles, and near the produce section, always watching closely. Molly gave her a small smile and moved the children to one side to allow her to pass.

"Children are such lovely things," she murmured fondly, eyes lingering on little Ginevra. "You have just the one girl?"

Molly smiled. "We were lucky this last time."

"A truly beautiful baby." The woman bowed her head and with one last lingering glance, moved off down the aisle.

'What a strange—'

Molly's thoughts were interrupted when Fred and George began tussling over the bag of onions, causing them to spill out all over the floor. Percy dove after a stray one, bumping the pushchair, which woke Ron violently. The shopping trip descended from there.

By the time Molly had them all home, she was frazzled. Her hair was in disarray and she wanted nothing more than to sink down into a chair and have a nice, quiet cup of tea. Percy offered to watch Ron while she put Ginevra down for her afternoon nap. Fred and George were sent to their room to play quietly—something that rarely happened, but Molly had gotten used to the noise; if it was quiet, she had a harder time knowing what they were up to.

The cup of tea only lasted ten minutes before Bill and Charlie came home, covered in mud, talking about how much fun they'd had. The muddy mess had taken longer to clean up than it should have, as Ronnie had toddled into the kitchen and thrown himself into the slippery, slimy puddles with vigor.

By the time five o'clock rolled around, Molly was more than ready for her husband to come home. She realized with a jolt that she'd completely forgotten about poor little Ginevra. The monitoring charm hadn't gone off, which was odd because the baby rarely slept for more than an hour in the afternoon, but perhaps she was about to enter another growth spurt and her body needed more rest.

Bill and Charlie began helping prepare the evening meal while Molly slipped upstairs to wake her little girl. Ginevra was going to be up all night if she slept a moment longer.

"Time to wake up, my little love," sang Molly as she opened the door. She expected to see Ginevra's bright little face peek over the side of her cot and the happy squeal that would accompany it.

But there was no happy cry, no impish little face.

Molly moved quickly over, worried that Ginevra might still be asleep. The cot was empty, however. The pink fuzzy blanket that she always cuddled with was there, crumpled at the foot of the bed, but there was no baby.

Frantically looking around the room, Molly began to search. Perhaps Ginevra had climbed out of her bed and was playing a trick on her mother. There was no giggling little girl hiding in any corner of the room. Molly questioned Percy, who was passing by in the hallway, and he began searching as well.

It was only when Molly went back into Ginevra's room—the room she only took her naps in, as she still spent nights in her parent's room—that she saw the window was open slightly. It had been a warm day outside, but Molly couldn't remember if she'd left the window open or not.

Little Ginevra was gone, and the only clue was the window, the thin curtains flowing in the breeze.

Molly stared at them, entranced, until something in her chest broke loose and a wail erupted from her. She crumpled to the floor and began to heave great sobs.

It wasn't until hours later, when Arthur had mobilized the few Wizarding families to search, and had even spoken to the local Muggle constable, that Molly remembered the odd woman from the grocer and how fascinated she seemed to be with Ginevra. But there was only a vague impression in her mind—an aged face, eyes of a non-descript color, a hazy idea of what she might have worn—to convey.

Days marched on, second by agonizing second, and turned into weeks.

Molly became increasingly frantic when one of her children was out of her sight. Bill was furious when she forbade him to return to Hogwarts; he didn't speak to her for nearly three days straight. Minerva McGonagall had visited, concerned for her young student's whereabouts, but Molly

remained firm: None of her children would be going anywhere. Molly herself would be responsible for their education.

Arthur seemed reluctant to be so severe, but in the end he let Molly have her way. He was just as heartbroken without his precious little princess as Molly was.

The entire family went into a state of mourning, and the frequent smiles and almost constant laughter in the crooked little home gave way to dark looks and quiet whispers. The boys were no longer allowed to play outside without one of their parents within arms reach, and the joy of the entire Weasley family faded until it was only a memory.

Every year, on Ginevra's birthday, they would light off magical fireworks, filling the night sky with sparks of all colors that hung in the black heavens like stars, and finally faded out as the sun rose in the east.

Every year, the family watched the horizon, waiting for some news of their lost sister, their missing child, and every year, as the sun forced the sparks to die away, their hope faded with the glimmers.

Chapter 2

Dragons and Aurors and Pygmy Puffs and Kitchen Implements and Some Other Stuff That Would Fit In Hermione's Beaded Bag

Ginny watched out the window and sighed as the sun sank lower and lower. She really should be doing something productive, like making dinner for her mother who would be home any minute now, or even attending to her studies. But even looking at the kitchen or the stack of books at her desk in the corner of her room made her squirm in displeasure.

It was always the same: the same routine every morning when she woke—cook and clean, get ready for the day, begin her studies, make lunch and do some chore around the small house she shared with her mother, perhaps a bit more studying or reading a book, and then make dinner. In the evenings, she would make the delicate little glass flowers that her mother sold in the market while her mother brushed her hair and sang songs.

There was little variation to her schedule and the drudgery of it all was wearing her thin.

Arnold scuffled along the shiny windowsill where Ginny sat every day during her stolen moments, and nudged her hand. He hated when she got all melancholy and sighed deeply.

"I know, Arnold. I wish we could get out of here, too." She whispered the words, feeling the betrayal of the statement deep down inside her. She was here, kept hidden in this perfect little valley for her own safety. How many times had she listened to her mother go on and on about how unsafe the world was? How scary and threatening the ogres, trolls, and hags were? And how any of them would capture her and try everything they could to steal her specialness away from her?

Arnold rubbed against her fingers once more and Ginny absently rubbed his long purple fur back and forth, smiling at the little tittering sounds he made.

"One day it'll be safe enough to go somewhere," she whispered. "One day we'll be able to explore all these hills around us, to splash in the stream, and to see the place where the sun meets the earth."

She didn't speak aloud her fondest dream, but Arnold probably knew already. He'd certainly heard her talk about the sparkles in the night sky long enough.

One day she'd see those, too, and not just as they blew into the skies and disappeared as the sun rose. Ginny wanted to see where they came from, to see what they were.

The warm summer breeze fluttered her long hair and Ginny pulled it away from her face. She loved the color, although the way it hung down her back, was rather annoying. But her mother wouldn't consent to cutting more than just a little bit every year, to keep it healthy. She loved spending hours brushing it every night until it shined. And while Ginny adored the sentiment in the action, it rankled that she couldn't make her own decisions at times.

"Your hair is your source of power," her mother chided. "It's what gives you your abilities—cutting it off would be wasting your talents," she always said. Ginny knew the words by heart. She wasn't sure if they were true or not, but her mother was only looking out for her daughter, after all, so Ginny put up with the mild annoyance of always having to dig her hair out of her work, pulling long strands from her cooking when it would get in the way, and constantly getting it pulled when she shut a door too quickly.

Ginny sighed as the shadows of the trees surrounding their cottage home stretched across the bright green field. The flowers in the meadow curled their petals closed and the birds quieted down in their nests for a long night's rest.

Exactly on schedule, Ginny's mother appeared, walking up the narrow, worn path that led from the thick forest. Ginny hopped up from her seat and darted across the house. She skidded into the kitchen and began banging pots and pans around. Her mother would be disappointed there wasn't food prepared, but if Ginny *helped* things along, it wouldn't take too long.

"How was your day, mother?" she greeted cheerfully when the stooped woman entered and refastened the array of locks—clicking and latching and securing, until they were all safely sheltered away.

Her mother turned a weary face and quick eyes scanned the empty dinner table. "Exhausting," she said with a heavy sigh.

Ginny frowned, but continued to stir the white sauce in the pan before her. She stared hard at the chicken and the water began to bubble a little faster.

"You have no idea what it's like out there, Ginny." The basket that her mother carried each day to sell Ginny's flowers at the market dropped to the floor and the woman slumped into a chair. Ginny eyed the weary look, and the dark circles that made her look so very old. "Trekking to the village each day, *slaving* away to be able to provide for you..."

A spasm of guilt rocketed through Ginny as she finished preparing the meal. She shouldn't be wasting her time daydreaming about visiting far away places when her mother was working so hard to give her a safe place away from the horror of the outside world.

"Perhaps if you let me go one day," Ginny ventured in a quiet voice. "You could take a break, mother, and I could—"

The old woman leapt to her feet and grasped Ginny's shoulders tightly, giving them a small shake. "You mustn't say things like that, Ginny! I've told you what it's like... how dreadful... how terrifying... You *must* stay here in this home, where you will be protected from the vilest of creatures who only want to do you harm."

Although she knew her mother was right, Ginny still felt her hopes dashed to pieces. "Yes. I... I know, mother," she said quietly. "You're right."

"Of course I am." Her mother pulled back and narrowed her eyes at Ginny. "The world is a horrible place. Out there they will only use you for your special powers, they will only crush you like the delicate little flower you are. I swore to protect you when you came to me, and I've always kept

that promise, haven't I?"

Ginny stared down at her hands, methodically finishing off the work. "Yes."

"And in return, you promised to stay here, and to help your poor old mother."

"Yes," Ginny agreed once more. "Dinner is ready."

Her mother huffed and snatched the plate. "About time. You need to make more flowers today. I'm almost sold out."

Ginny ate the food, barely tasting a thing, as her mother reiterated all the vile, horrific things that happened to beautiful young girls out in the world beyond their valley. There were no songs as she brushed Ginny's long hair and Ginny held up her hand and began tracing her fingers along imaginary lines, sculpting intricate, delicate flowers out of thin air. The first few creations were as dull as Ginny felt inside and she winced when her mother tugged especially firm with the brush.

"Try again, Ginny."

After letting out a shaky breath, Ginny closed her eyes and imagined the spring buds on the trees that surrounded their cottage. Her fingers tingled and she felt the magic course through her as she concentrated. When she opened her eyes, she could almost see the flower she wanted to create. The magic flowed from her fingertips as she created, tracing each line and watching as it glowed briefly in the air before glass flowed like water from the stroke, building each petal. The glow made her happy, and it reminded her of the lights in the sky: the lights that would appear in only a few days, on the night of her twentieth birthday.

* * *

"This is ridiculous," Harry muttered to himself as he leered out between buildings, watching the ebb and flow of the surprising crowd in Diagon Alley. He shifted in the robes that felt too heavy, too large, even though they fit his altered form just right. The mirror in his pocket vibrated and he could practically hear Hermione scolding him for wasting time—they only had a small window of opportunity. One hour.

For a moment, he was startled when the ugly, squashed nose, paunchy cheeks, and dark eyes of Roldophus LeStrange stared back from the reflective surface of the mirror, but then Hermione's familiar face was staring back at him.

"Quit hesitating!" she said. "This was *your* plan, after all."

Harry bristled, but then let the irritation roll away. "I know," he sighed. "I'm going. I just feel very exposed. I wish..." He trailed off, knowing there was no other way to get the cup; they'd talked circles around the issue for far too long lately.

"You're feeling that way—"

"Because I'm Undesirable Number One," Harry said blandly. "Because every Death Eater in the country is hunting me, and if they're not, every Auror is."

Hermione's forehead creased in concern. "But you're in disguise. You'll be fine. Polyjuice only lasts so long, remember."

"I'm going." He said it forcefully and shoved the mirror back into his pocket. This was their only viable shot at retrieving the Horcrux safely kept in Gringotts. How often did they expect to stumble on a drunk Rodolphus staggering down the street in Hogsmeade? There was no way they were going to get anywhere near Bellatrix to snatch a bit of hair. Harry would never allow Hermione to go through that again. Or Neville.

Simply put, it was their only option right now.

But that didn't mean Harry was entirely comfortable breaking into Gringotts on his own. It would be better to have one of his friends with him, at least. Hermione was out; she was still recovering from the horrors of Malfoy Manor. Harry shuddered just thinking about what his friend had gone through. It was the stuff of his nightmares—not that his dreams had ever been pleasant. And they needed Neville stationed in Diagon Alley as a lookout, complete with escape plan if things went horribly wrong.

Their only option lay before Harry. He took a deep breath and stepped into the alley.

"Now or never," he muttered and tried to look fierce and imposing so that no one would approach him. Not that it would be an issue, Harry decided, Lestrangle was a nasty man with a habit of going days without washing, it seemed. Harry gagged at the smell wafting from the disgusting robes he wore.

Neville was leaning against the outside wall of the empty Fortescue's, trying to look casual when Harry passed. The stolen Auror robes he wore were too short and Harry could see the scuffed, battered shoes beneath the hem.

With a small smirk, Neville inclined his head and Harry let his eyes scan the area, settling on the exact thing Neville had been pointing out: a wanted poster for Shadow Phoenix.

The likeness to Harry's true looks was sketchy at best—the hairline was far too high, eyes too widely spaced, and the nose was all wrong. It looked like Harry and that ugly pug Pansy Parkinson had mated and this was their unfortunate offspring.

Harry's stomach heaved—both at that thought and the fact that his distorted face was plastered all over Diagon Alley. But it had been like that for a long time.

Harry peered at the poster in disgust, and read the bottom portion—a reward of one hundred galleons was being offered for information leading to his live capture.

That was just insulting!

He'd been a thorn in the side of both the Ministry and Voldemort for long enough that a measly one hundred galleons was ridiculous. Surely it should have been closer to a thousand?

If breaking into the Ministry of Magic had only garnered a hundred, Harry wondered what today's little escapade would net. If he was successful, that is.

With one last glance at Neville, who smirked and touched his finger to his eyebrow in salute, Harry walked up the steps of Gringotts, pointedly ignoring the warning to all thieves posted right there at the doors.

* * *

Ron Weasley was not a happy man. He should be, he supposed, considering how hard he'd worked to achieve his place as an Auror Trainee, and was finally wearing the robes. The Academy hadn't been thrilled with his lack of official academic record when he'd applied, but Ron couldn't help that his parents had been too troubled to ship him and his brothers off to Hogwarts for a *proper* education. And his marks on the admittance exams were certainly high enough.

Maybe it was the fact that he was working for *this* administration that unsettled him. While the Ministry wasn't in the clutches of You-Know-Who just yet, there were many who felt it was only a matter of time. But so far, Pius Thickenesse was holding strong.

It could also be that questionable sausage he'd nicked from Fred's plate that morning, Ron decided as he clutched his rumbling stomach.

But his unrest was more than likely a product of the fact that it was his day on the rotation to patrol Diagon Alley. Normally, he loved to come to London to see the shops displaying bright, colorful things, to slip into Quality Quidditch Supply and see if Nimbus had released a new model, or even to spend a few minutes chatting with Fred and George at their shop.

But patrolling was a whole different matter. Patrolling meant walking up and down the alley, seeing everything but contemplating little, and waiting for his senior partner, Dawlish, to correct some minor flaw such as how his steps were far too loping, or that his robes didn't swish authoritatively enough. Of all the partners for him to draw, Ron *had* to get Dawlish. Even intimidating Kingsley Shacklebolt would have been better than *Dawlish*.

The alley was quiet, but surprisingly busy. Witches and Wizards came and went, tucking their purchases into folds in their robes and hurrying on with suspicious glances at everyone.

War, Ron supposed, made everyone wary.

As Ron passed the abandoned ice cream parlor and prepared to make his turn at Gringotts, he noticed the intense look of the Auror tucked next to the brick wall. His robes were training robes—Ron could see the black band around the arm, just like his own—and they were far too short for the bloke, revealing shoes that were even more tattered than the pair Ron currently wore. But Ron didn't recognize his face.

The trainee's eyes widened at Ron's interest, and darted toward the front of the bank, but he didn't move from his post. Ron wondered if this was some sort of training exercise for the trainee—surveillance. Well, he'd certainly blown that! Then again, considering Ron didn't recognize him, the Auror could be anyone.

A flash of worry shot through Ron. What if *he* was the one under surveillance by a senior Auror in disguise?

Ron was just about to ask Dawlish when a commotion at the doors of Gringotts drew all attention that way.

A massive dragon burst through the front of the bank, sending brick and wood flying everywhere. It reared back and roared, sending a weak plume of fire toward the sky. Its feet trampled the stairs as it blundered about, clanking broken chains behind.

Ron swore and stared up at the massive beast. Briefly, he wondered how Charlie ever survived being around these monsters day in and day out—much to their parent's disdain. The Auror who had been leaning against the side of the book store was now standing at Ron's side, gaping with huge eyes at the dragon.

People screamed and Dawlish drew his wand, like an idiot. Honestly, a couple of Aurors sending stunners wasn't going to help the situation; Ron knew it would only enrage the animal further. He'd listened to Charlie's stories enough to know that it would take at least a dozen of them to begin making a difference.

The Goblins poured from the hole in their bank, shaking some strange metal instruments that clanked loudly. The dragon only roared in response and trampled a cart full of medallions meant to ward off dementors and infiri.

Dawlish sent the first jet of red light, but that only made the dragon turn its disgustingly opaque eyes toward them as it swung violently around, nearly squashing the wizard who was trying to salvage any of his wonky trinkets to keep dark magic away. Barmy prat!

"Er... maybe we don't want to..." Ron clutched his partner's robes and stumbled backwards, out of the path of the massive scaled foot that was clomping down, the shackles swinging dangerously behind. Dawlish jerked away, glared at Ron and sent another stunner.

"Ass," Ron hissed and banished the swinging chain away from a group of witches huddled at the entrance to Knockturn Alley. They'd taken up refuge against the buildings when the dragon broke out.

Dawlish continued chasing after the dragon as it lumbered away from the Goblins making a racket with their metal instruments. Pops of apparition sounded all around the Alley as Aurors and Ministry wizards appeared, wands drawn. The whole place was bedlam and Ron watched helplessly as the dragon fought to get to an open place where it could fly away.

Ron turned back to survey the damage to the bank and narrowed his eyes as a figure draped in huge black robes slinked from the hole and slipped along the edge of the building.

If the wizard hadn't turned to check where the dragon was, Ron never would have seen his face. He looked only somewhat like his posters—whoever had drawn them did a piss poor job, that's for sure—and if he hadn't just emerged from the ruined bank covertly clutching a satchel, Ron might not have put the clues together to figure out who he was.

Shadow Phoenix!

Ron swore and dove after him, only to be tripped by the other trainee Auror, who then smirked and

dove after Phoenix into the shadows between buildings. There was no way that Ron was going to allow another Auror to bring in the Ministry's most wanted criminal. Well... other than You-Know-Who, that was.

Shadow Phoenix was a slippery thief who had been terrorizing the Wizarding world for years. No one knew just where he'd come from, only that he had a way of getting into and out of the most difficult situations possible without being caught. Oh, there were plenty of Aurors who told stories about *almost* catching the Phoenix. Ron wanted to be the one with the only *true* story.

"Dawlish!" Ron yelled back over his shoulder. "It's the Phoenix!"

The dragon roared loudly and flapped its wings, sending wizards flying backwards before erupting off into the sky over London.

Good luck trying to explain *that* to the Muggles, Ron thought as he ducked after Phoenix and the other Auror.

Maybe his luck was changing. Imagine the accolades and praise he'd receive if *he*, Ron Weasley, were the one to drag Shadow Phoenix back to the Ministry!

The darkness of the shadows didn't help in tracking the two men, but Ron doggedly pursued them, weaving in and out of old storage bins, going deeper and deeper into a part of the Alley Ron never imagined existed. He supposed perhaps it eventually led out into Muggle London, but he wasn't exactly sure how that would work. Wasn't the only way to get into Diagon Alley through the Leaky Cauldron?

He should have paid more attention when Percy lectured about things of that nature. Then again, that would have taken away from his daily kip. Percy wasn't the most exciting instructor, even if he claimed to know most everything there was to know.

Ron caught sight of the Auror pursuing the Phoenix closely—only an arms length away—and followed. He lost sight of them when they dove back between two shops. However, Ron knew he had the advantage now as they were nearing his brothers' shop—George had once tossed a pot of orange paint out an upper window and Ron could see the splatters down the brick in the back of a building coming up. Perhaps if he could force Phoenix into a corner, he could bind him and activate his Ministry Portkey. The parades and fireworks could begin at sundown!

When he came around a corner that was sure to be blocked by crates—Fred often complained about them cluttering up the space next to Number 93—Ron was shocked to find the Auror had already caught Phoenix. Only he wasn't securing the criminal at all; he was grinning and looking into the leather satchel that Phoenix was holding out, a similar smile painted Phoenix's face.

"You're under arrest!" Ron burst in and shot a spell that the Phoenix deflected with a lightening-fast shield.

They dove to opposite sides of the corridor behind the clutter and both shot spells at Ron, which he barely deflected. Ron's head spun. The trainee wasn't an Auror at all, he was helping Shadow Phoenix! An accomplice!

“Shadow!” the man yelled and dived below the level of crates that Ron shattered with a stunning spell. “Come on!”

Phoenix ducked a spell that flew from over Ron’s head. Dawlish had entered the battle, backing Ron up.

“Just... just go!” Phoenix told him after sending an unknown blue light Ron’s way.

“... will kill me if I show up without you!”

“Go Mandrake!” Phoenix shouted once more and exploded the side of the building above the Aurors, showering them with dust and small bits of debris. “I’ll meet you at the place!”

The man dressed like a trainee—who on earth would name their child Mandrake, anyway!—gave a concerned look before he screwed up his face and Apparated away.

“Come on, blokes!” Phoenix called out from where he was pinned down behind a dwindling stack of wooden boxes. “No harm done, right? You can just... look the other way, yeah?”

Dawlish stood straight up and Ron rolled his eyes at the man’s stupidity. Phoenix may not aim to kill, but he wasn’t above doing a little damage if it was necessary to escape. “Under the authority of the Ministry of Magic—”

The criminal peeked out, staring incredulously and gaping at the Aurors. Ron bit back his own amusement and tried to focus. He was going to stun Phoenix the moment he could, Dawlish be damned.

With a resigned, loud sigh, Phoenix began swirling his wand in a tight circle. The debris and dust in the passageway began to swirl. It was unlike any spell or storm Ron had ever seen and he stood transfixed as the miniature tornado took shape and began to obscure his vision. He shielded his eyes as Dawlish—still standing upright like a fool—took the brunt of the wind.

The Phoenix laughed and quipped a jaunty salute before he stood up fully, the satchel draped over his shoulder. Ron knew he was preparing to Apparate and dove toward him, just managing to get a hand around his ankle as they disappeared together.

Chapter 3

That's Potter. Double Oh Potter to You, Sir

Neville appeared in the empty room they used to Apparate into and bent over, resting his hands on his knees to catch his breath. The dust in the room always made his nose itch when he returned to the dingy Grimmauld Place.

He swore violently, although quietly, and tried to wipe the image of Harry's fierce battle face out of his mind. He hated leaving Harry that way. It left him feeling hollow inside, like he was a coward. And even though it was probably the right thing to do—Hermione certainly wouldn't be able to break *both* of them out of Ministry custody if they got pinched—it still made Neville feel horrible.

And to top it all off, he'd gone and left the Horcrux with Harry, at the very least, Neville should have snatched it and brought it with them.

The diary, the ring, the locket, the cup, Nagini, something of Ravenclaw's or Gryffindor's. The diary, the ring, the locket, the cup, Nagini, something of Ravenclaw's or Gryffindor's. The diary, the ring...

It had become their mantra over the past few years. Three Horcruxes were now destroyed and Harry had one more in his clutches.

Hermione burst through the door, took one look at Neville, still clutching his knees, and her triumphant smile melted away.

"Is he...?"

"Should be fine," Neville said. "Left him back in Diagon Alley... fight with Aurors... he told me to go..."

Hermione set her jaw and Neville could practically hear her teeth grinding. They'd both tried valiantly to deal with Harry's 'saving people complex' that Hermione had accused him of having years ago. It was true—Harry was nothing but a true hero, inside and out—but that didn't make it any easier to live with when you were the one he sacrificed for.

"I'm sure he's fine," said Hermione, although it didn't sound completely convincing. "He's gotten out of worse scrapes before." They both winced, thinking of the things Harry had narrowly escaped in the past.

"He leads a charmed life, right?"

The joke wasn't nearly as funny without Harry saying the line and Neville only felt worse.

"Come on." Hermione tugged on the sleeve of his robes, pulling him toward the hallway. "Kreacher made supper. If we don't sit down and eat it, he'll start to cry again."

Neville followed blindly, but the darkness of the house—even though it was the middle of the

afternoon—had never felt so suffocating. Perhaps it was the way Harry had been cornered when Neville Apparated out, or just the fact that the Aurors had been bearing down on them fiercely, but Neville felt a ball of fear deep in his belly. Would Harry really escape this time?

They sat at the table after explaining to Kreacher that Harry would be coming home late, and picked at the food. It tasted just fine, Neville thought, but it was impossible to eat when he was so worried.

If only they could try and contact Harry...

But that was the number one rule of these missions—do not, under any circumstances, try to initiate contact if you didn't know where the other person was. If Harry had been snatched by the Ministry, he was probably doing his best to either talk his way out of the situation, or biding his time until he could escape. If one of them used their mirrors and it was a particularly tricky situation...

No, it was better to wait.

"Oh! Did he get the—"

Neville perked up and nudged his plate of barely eaten food away. "Yeah, he did. The cup, just like we thought it might be. Some sort of nasty curse on it, though. Every time he touched it, it would burn his hands. You'll need to heal them when he gets back."

Hermione scowled, but gave a firm nod. "Tell me every detail."

He sighed and launched into the story, trying to remember everything. Hermione always wanted completely thorough reports of their missions—every detail they could recall—just so she could fathom what they were up against next. It was something that tended to irritate Neville, and without Harry here to make jokes he found himself becoming more and more annoyed.

Hermione was great, don't get him wrong, and they'd all be dead without her quick thinking and detailed research, but Neville didn't think he would handle being with her constantly. Harry was the needed buffer in the friendship; and Harry had confided in Neville that while he adored Hermione, he would smother her in her sleep at times if Neville wasn't there to take the edge off. Somehow, the friendship worked.

"I'm worried about Gran," he mused darkly at the end of his tail. "So far we've been lucky and no one has connected us with Harry, really. I'm sure if they paid any attention to what went on at Hogwarts they'd have figured it out by now..."

"Only if they were really looking," Hermione assured him. "And I'm sure your Gran is fine."

"The Aurors saw me," said Neville. "I should have been wearing charms. I should have... done something different. I just didn't think... Harry was always the one in danger, breaking into Gringotts pretending to be someone else."

Hermione chewed her lip thoughtfully but then sighed. "He was successful, so the plan worked, ultimately, even if the execution was a little..."

Neville supplied the missing word. "Half-assed."

She looked as if she wanted to scold him for his language, but the words died on her lips. It seemed silly to scold a twenty-one year old man for swearing, especially considering they were hiding in a secret hideaway, waging a clandestine war against an evil dark lord bent on mayhem, murder, and devastation.

"Your Gran will be fine." She patted his hand awkwardly and then used her wand to begin cleaning up dinner. Kreacher appeared immediately and the two argued quietly over House Elf duties. Hermione lost, as she always did.

Neville leaned back in his chair and let his mind wander over their operation. He'd told Hermione everything he could remember, down to the penetrating blue eyes of the Auror who had kept up with him and Harry as they dashed around Diagon Alley.

Some lookout he'd been. He didn't even have time to warn Harry that the Aurors were at the base of the Gringotts steps before the dragon had broken out. He'd been just as bewildered and shocked as anyone in the Alley. The dragon was certainly not in any of Hermione's detailed schemes for a stealthy entrance and exit from the Alley. Neville had to admit, though... Harry had style.

If only Neville had been able to be the lookout he was supposed to be and give a shouted warning. Harry might have Apparated right from the steps, rather than waiting. And then everything would be perfect.

Harry's words still echoed in his ears. *Go Mandrake!*

It made him a bit sick to his stomach, especially at the idea that had he *acted* like a Mandrake and screamed his warning, Harry would have gotten away completely.

It was Hermione's idea that they all have code names when they went on missions. It had been a late night and one of the fondest conversations Neville could ever remember with his friends.

Not long after Professor Dumbledore had been murdered by the traitorous Severus Snape—slime sucking snake!—Harry had declared his intention to leave Hogwarts and finish hunting for the downfall of Vol-Voldemort. (Neville still had issues with saying the name.) Hermione was going, of course, and Neville had stood up, chest to chest with Harry and dared him to tell Neville to stay behind.

Neville Longbottom wasn't known for his bravery, but he certainly wasn't going to let his best mate traipse off through the country alone. He didn't care how long it took them, or how much they had to sacrifice, Neville would be there with Harry every step of the way.

Weeks later, they'd secreted themselves away in Grimmauld Place and began planning their assault on Britain.

"I think we should have code names," Hermione said. "It's not practical at all to be running about, shouting each other's names. Not if we want to stay hidden."

Harry perked up from where he was lounging on the sofa, head hanging over the side. "Like..."

superhero names?"

Neville chuckled and took a bite of the thick sandwich Kreacher had made for him when they'd arrived. "Do we get powers to go along with them?"

Hermione had glared at both boys, which only made them laugh harder. It was well past midnight and they were all getting a bit silly. "No. Like something practical, that we can remember easily."

Harry sat up and scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Well, since Voldemort is already taken..."

Hermione threw a book at his head.

He caught it and tossed it to the sofa. "What about..."

"Yours should be commanding," Hermione rode right over the top of him. "Something... imposing, that will be solid and firm."

"And will strike fear into the hearts of the bad guys," Neville said with a smirk.

Harry scrunched his face in thought. "Darth Vader is out. I can't do the voice, and all that heavy breathing... urgh!"

Neville inhaled part of his sandwich but managed to cough it back up.

"Are you going to be serious, at all?" Hermione demanded.

"Why?" Harry asked. "You're serious enough for all of us."

She frowned, but Neville could see the corners of her mouth twitching upward. Harry wasn't normally this funny, his humor tended to be much darker and self-deprecating, but he had his moments. He was on a roll tonight.

"I have it! We'll call you Shadow Phoenix."

The boys exchanged a glance before breaking out in laughter. "It sounds like a barmy character on one of Gran's daytime wireless programs," said Neville.

"No," Harry said once he could breathe again. "Not that."

Hermione glared and straightened her robes primly. "It's perfect, you know. You want to be secretive—stay in the shadows, but you're also fighting for the light, thus the phoenix."

It was better than some of the things she could have come up with—she was the one who had come up with S.P.E.W., after all—but Neville sincerely hoped they could talk her out of this idea completely.

"And what will we call you?" asked Harry. "Encyclopedia?"

"Miss Librarian," Neville said with a smirk. "Since you spent so much time in there at Hogwarts. I thought Madam Pince would have to throw you out fifth year."

"She did!" Harry roared and Hermione's cheeks flushed.

"She did not!"

"Yes, she did," Harry said. "The week before O.W.L.S., did you or did you not get asked to leave so she could close the doors?"

Hermione's blush darkened and Neville snorted in amusement. "I lost track of time! It wasn't my fault!"

"Whatever," Harry said, biting his lip to keep in the laughter. "You're a miscreant, Hermione, admit it."

"It's sad, really." Neville shook his head pathetically.

"A shame," agreed Harry. "What would everyone at the library say? Your study group... bunch of rule abiding Ravenclaws?"

Hermione's face was getting redder, but she was also starting to crack. "I am not a miscreant. And that study group was available for everyone, not just Ravenclaws."

"Troublemaker," Neville chided.

Harry picked up on his line. "Firebrand."

"Okay, that's enough." Hermione shook her head, but she was fully smiling now and looked rather proud of their accusations. Somewhere deep down inside, she was thrilled when the boys dragged her along on their adventures. "We're sticking with Shadow Phoenix for you, Harry."

"No, we are not," he grumbled under his breath, but Hermione continued.

"Now, we need one for Neville."

The amusement from the situation fled as Neville stared wide-eyed at Hermione. It certainly wasn't funny now that she'd set her sights on him, although Harry now had a rather evil smile on his face.

"Erm, no, we really don't. You can call me... something not secret at all."

"Herbology Boy," Harry burst out. "You can be Shadow Phoenix's sidekick."

Neville glared at him.

"Not your best suggestion, Harry," Hermione said, "but I like the idea of using plants, since you're so fond of them, Neville." She summoned a book from her stack and opened it right up.

"Mimulus Mibletonia!" she crowed and Harry exploded in laughter.

"Er... too long," Neville said. "I thought it had to be something we'd remember?"

"I like that," said Hermione with a grin. "You're the only one we know who ever had one. They didn't even have one in the greenhouses."

Neville stared down at his sandwich with very little appetite left. "Why can't it be something cool, like Harry's?"

"Mine is not cool," Harry protested hotly. "It makes me sound like some sort of... ruffian, or a gigilo, or something."

"Something deadly," Neville said, ignoring Harry's grumbling. "Like... Nightshade or Devil's Snare?"

Harry nudged him. "Cactus boy."

"Bird boy," Neville quipped back.

They started to playfully shove each other and Hermione just rolled her eyes. "Perhaps something else..."

"Just make sure you don't spray me with stink sap, Cactus Boy."

Neville hit Harry in the arm. "It would serve you right."

"That can be your super power."

"Staphylea," Hermione read straight from her book, "more commonly known as bladdernut, responds well to clipping and is not only ornamental but—"

The boys stopped wrestling and stared at her.

"Bladderbutt?" Harry asked incredulously. "Did she just say..."

Neville shook his head. "Er..."

Hermione was getting far too much pleasure out of this and sighed dramatically. "Fine. What about choke cherry?"

Harry slugged him in the shoulder. "You wanted deadly, mate."

Each time Hermione called out a name (shagbark hickory, glory vine, honeysuckle, cockscomb, spike gayfeather) Harry would make some acidic comment that would leave him rolling on the floor ('shagging? Neville?', 'I don't want to know why they call your vine Glory, mate,' 'Take your honey somewhere else to suckle,' 'Gayfeather? Something you need to tell us?') until everything was one big dirty joke.

Hermione raised her eyes over the top of the book, looking right at him. "Abyssinian shrivel fig?"

"No," Neville said. "Just no."

Harry, the traitor, was laughing so hard he could barely breathe.

Neville summoned the book from Hermione, shut it firmly, and stuffed it under his backside. "We'll find something, but it won't be any of those."

They'd never really settled on a codename for Neville, mostly because there were far too many plant names that could be twisted, and both he and Harry had wickedly dirty minds at times. They stuck to calling him plant names, but the variety depended on his task for the mission.

Mandrake had been today's designation because he was to send up a loud cry if there was trouble. Which he had failed to do.

"Don't think too much about it, Neville," Hermione said sympathetically. "I'm sure he's fine."

Neville stared at the mirror sitting on the table and prayed she was right.

* * *

The worst part about side-along apparition was the draining feeling that it had. Harry could manage just fine with himself, Hermione and even Neville, but it was tiring; Hermione could take all three of them as well, but Neville... he had always hated apparition and rarely was the one to initiate more than his own travel.

And taking someone unwillingly only made it all the worse. Harry appeared in the bedroom at Grimmauld Place for less than a second, only enough to take a breath and leap once more, taking the persistent Auror wrapped around his leg with him.

They landed in a heap somewhere not far from Hogsmeade. Harry groaned and forced himself to stand. The Auror was so disoriented that he lost his grip on Harry's ankle and swayed on his knees.

"Still planning on arresting me?" Harry asked cheekily.

The Auror shook his head, not to indicate his refusal, but to clear the fuzz from two different apparitions from his mind.

Harry sighed and made sure the strap to the satchel was secure on his shoulder before trotting off. He didn't feel as if he had the determination or deliberation to Apparate anywhere right now. It was best if he put as much distance between him and the Auror as possible.

"Wait! Where did you take me?"

Harry snorted and picked up his pace. As if he'd answer the barmy ass!

Harry's mild amusement turned into laughter as he ran, dodging into the heavy trees, although only skirting the edge of the main forest without diving in. He certainly didn't need to begin any more fights today and the Centaurs were itching for a brawl the last time he'd ventured into the Forest.

If he lost the Auror quickly enough and caught his breath, he could Apparate back to London. At the very least, he needed to use the mirror to let Hermione and Neville know he was fine, in case they decided to do something stupid like storm the Ministry. Again.

He wouldn't put it past them.

The fondness for his two friends drove him forward, but the Auror was doggedly pursuing. Every so often, a spell would shoot at him and Harry would be forced to dodge or shield. Honestly, he was growing more and more annoyed with the wizard was each time Harry had to outmaneuver him.

Giving it up, and deciding that he would just have to drive deeper into the forest, Harry veered off the game trail he was on, trying not to make too much noise. A wall of vegetation rose up fifteen feet high and Harry dove into it, sure he was going to come out worse for wear with scratches over every part of his body. The hiding place worked as the Auror—a lanky, redheaded bloke with a long nose—moved right past him.

Harry grinned triumphantly and mentally patted himself on the back. “Another win for Shadow Phoenix.”

He was just about to pull his mirror to talk to his friends when the Auror doubled back. Harry swore and held his breath while wiggling silently back into the brambles. They scratched his exposed skin and pulled at the huge robes he wore. Eventually, he became so entangled he had to abandon the robes completely. Thankfully, he’d worn a pair of tattered jeans and an old shirt of Dudley’s underneath, so he wasn’t completely naked.

As he pulled his arm free and grasped the leather strap of the satchel, it, too, became trapped by the thorny bushes. He gave a mighty tug and fell backwards, heels over head through the hedge and down a small embankment.

“Dammit!” Harry hissed as he quickly checked in with all his body parts to make sure they had come with him on the little trip. The Auror must have heard his ungraceful escape, as the bushes started rattling and he hissed in pain.

Harry gathered his wand and the satchel before hobbling further into the trees. His knee had twisted slightly on the landing and Harry knew he’d be easy to catch if he couldn’t get away fast enough. His arm brushed the worn leather of the bag and he cried out in pain. Somewhere along the way in his escape, the bag had become torn and the silver of the cup shined through. Whatever curse had been placed on it caused a mean welt to rise where Harry had touched it. His hands were still stinging from having to grab the damned thing in the vault raid!

What he really needed was a place to stash the Horcrux until he could come back for it. If he could lead the Auror away and then circle back...

As he contemplated the best place to store it (up a tree, in a dug-out embankment, under a rock) he continued walking, wincing every time he needed to place weight on his left leg. His knee was going to swell tonight if he didn’t get off it. Hermione would be able to soothe the pain, but only if he could escape.

Before he knew it, Harry found himself in a much less dense part of the forest. He’d never been on this side of the village or Hogwarts before, so he honestly had no clue what to expect. But the picturesque little valley shocked him.

It was brilliantly green, with a small creek running alongside a ramshackle tiny cottage. The whole place was beautiful, but looked completely abandoned. The garden was overrun with weeds and the paint on the shutters was chipped and decades old.

It was the perfect place to stash the Horcrux and then lead the Auror far away from, Harry decided. He could easily Apparate back later in the evening, or even tomorrow if needed, once his knee had healed. The cup would be just as safe here as anywhere else.

With an apprehensive look back at the darker trees, Harry made his way across the open area, right up to the door. He tried the handle, but it was locked. One of the windows was open and Harry clenched his teeth against the pain in his leg and climbed inside.

The cottage hardly looked abandoned from the inside and he took a deep breath, surveying the small table, the neatly organized kitchen, the frying pan coming toward his face...

Chapter 4

When Dealing With Ogres It's Best to Have Your Wits About You

Ginny stared down at the crumpled form on the floor. Her eyes went wide as she backed away from it slowly.

What was this? Why was it climbing in her window? Had the ogres finally come to drag her away to be their slave?

She cowered in fear, the frying pan still poised to lash out if the monster woke, but it didn't move at all. Its longish hair (or was that fur?) covered the face and Ginny was sure it concealed its hideously sharp teeth, glowing red eyes, and horrible bad breath. It certainly smelled bad enough from where she stood.

When it still didn't move after she counted to five hundred twice, Ginny took a small step in its direction. Arnold peeked out from behind her foot and bravely scuttled forward until he was close enough to brush against the ogre's hand. He did so, then gave a shrill squeak and ran back to safety.

"Did I... kill it?" Ginny whispered loudly. Just as she braved one more step forward, the monster groaned and lifted its hand. It sat up abruptly and Ginny swung out wildly with the pan, clanging it on the back of the head.

The ogre collapsed on the floor once more, completely out this time.

Her heart thundered inside her body, but she felt strangely pleased that she'd battled an ogre and won. But that thought brought another... What if there were more of them?

Ginny quickly slammed the shutters closed and locked the window. She checked all the other windows and blocked the door by pushing the table in front of it. The ogre still didn't move. She stared at it for a long time, trying to decide what to do with it, but eventually her eyes settled on the small cupboard under the stairs. It was the perfect place to stuff it until she could figure out what to do; she didn't think she could really *kill* it, not unless it was trying to harm her. But she also didn't want to look at its ugly face when it finally woke up.

The ogre was much heavier than she expected, and oddly wearing boots, but Ginny managed to tug and heave it across the floor. Shoving it into the cupboard was much harder, and Ginny found herself frustrated when its gangly legs and arms would flop out heedless of her effort. With a huff of frustration, she closed her eyes and wished it into the cramped space. She wasn't sure how it managed to fit, but the little door finally closed with a satisfying click. Ginny pushed several pieces of furniture in front of it and stared at it, pan held high.

As she calmed down, she noticed a leather satchel underneath the window, along with an odd bit of stick. It certainly wasn't hers, so it must belong to the ogre. Cautiously, she picked the bag up and glanced inside. A silver cup lay in the bottom, and Ginny stared at it curiously. With a shaking hand, she reached in to touch the side where a picture of a strange animal was carved into it.

The instant her finger pressed to the metal, a shock coursed through her arm and she screamed, dropping the bag. Her fingertip was bright red, as if she'd touched a flame.

"It's a weapon of some sort," she muttered, warning Arnold to stay away from it. After sucking on the tip of her finger, Ginny used a broom to push the satchel and the stick into a corner where she threw a blanket over them. She'd deal with it later.

Her finger still throbbed, so she sat and concentrated on the burn until her fingertips tingled and the color began to fade from red, to pink, to her natural coloring. The pain eased, as well.

As the shadows began to shift on the floor, Ginny realized her mother would be home soon. She couldn't let her mother know about the ogre. It would only make her more paranoid and then Ginny would be locked away forever!

"What do you think, Arnold?"

The purple ball of fluff squeaked and raced around her feet. Ginny wasn't sure what Arnold was saying, exactly, but she was pretty sure he agreed with her.

"If we tell her, she'll never let us travel to see the lights."

She either needed to keep the ogre locked up forever—which might be hard to do considering it smelled awful—or she would have to deal with it on her own. When she explained her plan to Arnold, he did an excited little dance and then scurried to a safe place.

Ginny moved the furniture away from the door and prepared her pan before opening the door.

The ogre's bright red, puffy hand flopped out onto the floor and it groaned.

Ginny clutched the pan so tightly that her fingers ached, and she inched forward before wishing it out of the cramped space. It sprawled haphazardly on the ground and then slowly lifted into a chair that she'd placed in the middle of the room. Thick ropes and chains wrapped around the monster at Ginny's bidding. Once it was securely fastened, Ginny finally looked at its face.

The scary, razor-sharp teeth she expected weren't evident, but perhaps they were just hidden behind its... rather appealing looking lips.

Ginny shook herself and peered at its face. The ogre wasn't nearly as ugly as she expected it to be. In fact, its face was rather pleasant. A pair of broken glasses hung off one ear, and there was a vivid scar that appeared under the dark, shaggy hair.

If this was what an ogre looked like, Ginny could see how they were as dangerous as her mother had told her about.

"Wake up, Ogre!" Her voice cracked and was hesitant, but grew firmer when she repeated it.

The monster stirred, shaking its head from side to side and growling menacingly.

"... bloody hell... damned Auror..."

She had no idea what it was saying, but she steadied her pan and hid in the shadows of the room.

"What do you want?" she asked. "How did you find me?"

The monster struggled against the restraints and peered at her, squinting its eyes.

"Where am I? Where's my wand?"

Ginny startled when it spoke in a gravelly, low voice. "I'm asking the questions here!" she said bravely. "What do you want with me?"

There was only labored breathing for a minute before the ogre groaned. "Listen, I don't know who you are, but I think there's been some mistake here. I'm not here to hurt you. I'm not here to do anything but escape from the Ministry. If you'll get me my bag, I'll be out of your hair in no time."

Ginny narrowed her eyes at him. Her mother's words of warning had never included something about how persuasive ogres could be.

She stepped from the shadows, still holding her pan high.

"You didn't come to find me?"

The ogre's eyes—as brilliantly green as the summer grass in the meadow—focused on her as she moved closer. They widened and he stared.

"Er... no. I didn't. I needed a place to hide and didn't think anyone lived here."

"And you're not here to drag me back to your cave to be your servant?"

The ogre laughed, but that only made Ginny confused. It didn't seem threatening at all, but maybe the danger lay in the way it was trying to cajole her into listening. "No," it said. "I promise. If I can just get my bag and my wand, I'll leave you alone, I promise."

"The weapon in your bag... how do you use it?"

"Weapon?"

"It burned me," Ginny continued over it, convinced that its powers were its words. "Do you... throw it at people to subdue them?"

The ogre paled and froze. "You... you *touched* it?" Its bright eyes peered at her hands, possibly looking for a sign of weakness.

She glared at it and took a deep breath. She needed to hurry. "I know you're an ogre—"

"A what? I am *not*." It scowled and rattled the chains once more. "I've been called a lot of things in my time, but definitely not an ogre."

Ginny let her pan lower slightly. She was sure it couldn't be trusted, but it seemed genuinely hurt that she'd called it an ogre. Perhaps she was wrong? Maybe it was a hag or some other sort of

creature.

The rattle of the locks on the door startled her and she gaped at it and then the ogre. "Oh no... she's home!" Ginny darted forward and winced as she raised the pan. "I'm terribly sorry about this, ogre, but it's for your own good."

"No—"

The clang of the pan made her wince, but there was no choice. She had to hide the monster before her mother finished opening the door. Hurriedly, she waved her hand over the restraints and forced the ogre into the cupboard under the stairs just as the key turned in the last lock. The door opened, but Ginny hadn't removed the table from in front of it.

"Ginny?"

"Coming, Mother!" she called and stuffed the ogre's escaping foot into the cupboard and locked the door.

"What on earth are you doing? What's blocking the door?"

"Sorry, Mother," Ginny said as she moved the table and tried to catch her breath. "I was... er... sweeping the floor."

Her mother gave a disgruntled look and surveyed the darkened room before huffing. "No dinner ready yet?"

Ginny groaned internally. She'd forgotten all about dinner what with the ogre battle and all...

"I erm... I'm sorry?" she said. "I... forgot. I got busy reading and then needed to do the floors..."

Her mother sighed heavily and set her basket down on the table. "I'll never understand how you can be so ungrateful. After all I do for you."

Ginny bit back her guilt and tried not to let her eyes stray to the cupboard too often as she hurried to prepare their meal. "I'll have it ready in no time. I was thinking, Mother, do you know what tomorrow is?"

The old woman made a sound in the back of her throat but Ginny wasn't sure what it meant.

"It's my birthday," Ginny continued. If she kept her tone bright and cheerful, perhaps her mother would actually listen to her request. "And I was thinking... perhaps you could take me to see the lights in the sky? The ones that are only on my birthday?"

Her mother started and glared at her. "They're just stars, Ginny."

Ginny bit her lip. "No, these ones are different. They appear at sunset and last all night, twinkling in the sky before fading with the dawn. But they're not like the stars."

"We've talked about this before," her mother said. "You know what awaits you in the outside world."

Ginny fought the urge to roll her eyes and she bit her tongue to stop herself from informing her mother that she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. After all, if she could stand up against a smooth talking, attractive ogre, what more could bother her?

"You can see the lights perfectly well from the window."

The words were so very final and sparked a fire deep inside Ginny. She *wanted* to see the lights. She *wanted* to see the outside world. And more than anything, Ginny *wanted* to prove that she could take care of herself.

"You're right," she said meekly.

Her mother, who had been swelling up for an argument, peered at her.

"You are," Ginny said. "I... I know you are. Sometimes I just get... Never mind about the lights, Mother. What I really want for my birthday is..." She cast about for an excuse to get her mother out of the house. If she could only achieve a little freedom, she'd be able to find the lights on her own.

Arnold nuzzled her bare toes and Ginny glanced at him.

"A friend for Arnold!" She bent and snatched the startled little puff of fur from the floor, holding him out to her mother. "He's so very lonely, you know."

Her mother scrunched her face in distaste and shied away from the animal. "Do you know how long it took me to get him for you and how expensive he was?"

"I do," Ginny said and pretended to be contrite while stroking Arnold. "I just... I thought since I couldn't see the lights, and it *is* my birthday..."

There were times, mostly when she had been younger, that Ginny could remember her mother being terribly affectionate. She would brush her hair, and listen to Ginny sing songs, and even allow her to bake cookies to sell in the village. Through the years, the gentle touches had become less often and the chore list had grown longer, but she still remembered the almost fond looks her mother wore. She knew she was a burden to an aging old woman, but Ginny didn't want to be stifled all her life.

Her mother sighed dramatically. "I suppose I can travel to get you another pet, but it will mean you going without for some time."

Ginny beamed and nodded vigorously. It wouldn't matter if she had to give up luxuries like sweets and books and art supplies if she were allowed to escape for just a few hours, at least.

"It's a long trip and I'll need to get started right away," her mother warned.

"I'll gather your things." Ginny tried not to let the guilt of her lies overwhelm her. It was better to ask for forgiveness than permission, she'd learned over the years. Besides, a plan was forming in her head that might just allow her to see the lights and be back before her mother was even aware she was gone.

The only thing he had to show for his tracking was a body completely covered in scratches and the shredded, disgustingly filthy cloak that had been buried in the briars.

The Phoenix was gone, disappeared into thin air, once more.

Ron was furious, both at himself for letting the damned crook get away, and at Dawlish for not responding to the calls for backup Ron had sent periodically through the pursuit. His fist tightened down on the cloak and he looked around, making mental note of the forest so that he could return here and bring an entire squadron of Aurors with him. Shadow Phoenix had seemed to know right where he was Apparating to—perhaps his hideout was somewhere around here.

At the very least, it was a viable lead for them to check out, rather than sitting around the Ministry, doing nothing.

An uneasy feeling settled in the back of Ron's mind, but he forced it to stay put, compartmentalized it for the time being. Dawlish wasn't going to be a picnic to deal with, but he'd survived worse. After all, Ron thought to himself, he'd grown up fighting with five older brothers—how much more intimidating could one man be?

Hours later, as he wearily watched an enraged Auror pace back and forth, Ron would have given anything to go back in time and simply go home, rather than reporting to the Ministry. Dawlish hadn't been happy to see him. Ron was fairly positive the Senior Auror's disposition wasn't helped with having an ice pack charmed to stick to his forehead. Once, when Dawlish had been yelling about the Auror Conduct Manual, Section 43, Paragraph... whatever, the pack had slipped and let Ron catch a glimpse of the nasty purple knot that welled. He'd had to bite his lip to keep from breaking out in laughter, which would have made the situation so much worse.

Word around the Ministry was that Dawlish though he'd recognized the bloke with the Phoenix as Neville Longbottom, a pureblood Wizard who had gone to Hogwarts and was about the same age as Ron. Ron had never met the wizard, or his family, but Dawlish was determined to track him down. He'd gone to Longbottom's home only to find his elderly grandmother all alone. The witch had claimed no knowledge of her grandson's whereabouts and demanded that the Auror leave. When Dawlish insisted on inspecting the home and brandished his badge, the old lady had smashed a vase over his head and fled to parts unknown.

Whispers of the "battle" were rippling up and down the halls, growing wilder with each retelling. Just before Ron had been hauled into the Senior Auror's office, he'd heard a brand new thread to the tale: apparently Augusta Longbottom had been harboring a whole house full of criminals and had given a war-cry whoop before she'd pulled a sword on Dawlish. The Auror was lucky to have survived.

Ron made a note to tell that particular version of the story to his father. No one enjoyed a good embellished tale like Arthur Weasley.

He tuned back into his partner, wondering if the man could turn any redder. "... traipsing around the countryside with no backup..." Ron *wanted* to point out that Dawlish was guilty of the same thing, and *he'd* only gone up against an old witch—formidable as she was; Ron had been after the

slippery Phoenix and had come out with only some scratches and a pounding headache from the forced apparition. He held his tongue instead.

"... a week's suspension ought to teach you a thing or two about following orders." Dawlish's vitriol ended and he glared at Ron, a satisfied smirk on his face. "Without pay, of course."

Ron seethed inside. More than ever before, he wanted to lay into this pompous windbag of a man and tell him what he really thought of the Senior Auror, but Ron only nodded instead. Nothing he could say right now would make the situation any better.

"Nothing to say, Weasley?"

Ron stood and straightened his rumpled, dirty robes. He clenched his jaw tightly. "Not to you," he said before walking out.

Dawlish erupted, but Ron didn't acknowledge his tirade. If Ron was already on suspension, then he didn't need to be at the Ministry a minute longer. What he really needed was to get to a place where he didn't have to hold back, where he could say what he really thought and not have to justify any of it.

He wanted to go home, to the Burrow.

The squeeze of Apparating didn't dull his anger; it only built as he stormed toward his father's shed. Growing up, this was where their father had brought the boys when they needed to work out their frustrations. Either that, or he told them to degnome the garden. Ron flung a couple of the potato-like creatures on his stalk toward the battered wood structure, and it did help, especially when he pictured Dawlish's face on the little buggers as they flew through the air, squealing in protest.

It was still early, so his father wasn't home from the Ministry yet, but Ron expected to see him any minute. No doubt the word of Ron's punishment was spreading through the hallways like wildfire.

Ron blasted a few piles of rubbish that sat in the corner, sending parts and pieces of random Muggle items flying all over the shed. It was satisfying to feel the pull of his magic and he mentally added the image of Shadow Phoenix to the piles before he shot more and more spells their way.

"Thought you might be in here."

Ron was sweating by the time his father appeared, Ministry robes undone at the collar and worry etched on his face.

"No one even listened to me!" Ron roared. He shouldn't be yelling at his father—Merlin help him if his *mother* heard him—but he had the feeling his father understood more than anyone. Everyone underestimated Arthur Weasley, the easy-going, Muggle-loving buffoon, and his sons hadn't had the easiest time settling at the Ministry.

But there was no one Ron respected more than his father; most of the lessons he'd needed to be taught were learned in quiet moments with the man, working side by side, talking quietly, or simply watching how Arthur reacted to circumstances beyond his control.

"How close did you get to The Phoenix?"

There was no doubt in his question, no wondering whether Ron had actually done what he'd said he did.

Ron smiled and shook his head. "Close enough to know that the posters are way off on what he looks like."

Arthur nodded his head slowly. "You know, sometimes I wonder... What if we've all misjudged the wizard?" He came in and used a spell to move Ron's mess back into a pile against the wall.

Ron scowled. "What do you mean? He's a *thief!*"

"Oh, I know," his father said with a nod of his head. He sank down onto a wobbly stool and let his shoulder sag. "But... what if his motivations are pure?"

Ron shook his head. "Wrong is wrong. You taught me that."

His father made a sound of low agreement, but it didn't sound convincing, and he stared off into the back of the shed.

Ron knew this look; he'd certainly seen it enough over the years. His father was deep in thought, questioning profound beliefs. Ron could remember many times worrying when his father would slip off into these silences. Often, it was regarding the war that was slowly engulfing the Wizarding world, but usually, his father would have these silences when he was thinking about Ginevra.

It was almost time again. Ron was startled to realize that even though he'd marked the date off on his calendar this morning, and knew what was coming, he hadn't thought about it all day. His sister's birthday was tomorrow. She'd be twenty this year.

The thought was like a spell cast over the shed, bringing a heavy silence that stole his breath away. Even though he didn't remember much about his sister, he *did* remember how empty their home felt in his early childhood, and he *did* remember her absence.

"Maybe I taught you too well," said his father in a low voice. "Sometimes... well, we have to choose our own roads, don't we?"

Ron wasn't sure how to answer, or if he was even supposed to, so he simply nodded. Let his father interpret that. Shadow Phoenix was no good, Ron knew that for sure, and he had to be stopped.

"Your mother won't be happy with us."

"I'm hungry."

His father laughed and clapped Ron on the shoulder. "Let's get in there, then." They walked together and were soon standing in the bright, overly-warm kitchen. Ron's mother scolded and fussed about the state of Ron's robes as she flung her wooden spoon around, sending drops of sauce flying about.

Ron sat in his usual seat and took it all in. The chaos of his childhood home was the best thing in his

life, he decided. His parents and family were always the things he could count on to be there, even if sometimes they annoyed him like nothing else. His older brothers tricked him into eating odd things, rubbed their knuckles on his head, lectured, and gave loads of unsolicited advice, but they were always there for him.

The news of his suspension was already a topic of discussion, but Ron felt less angry than resigned about it. He wasn't happy about missing pay or about the reprimand that would appear in his file, but the time off was welcome. It would give him time to...

The thought appeared in his head like a Lumos spell. If Dawlish wouldn't listen to him about Shadow Phoenix, and by extension no one above him would listen, then Ron would just track the Phoenix on his own.

"... if only one of you would bring home a girl now and again!"

Ron's fork froze in mid-air and he traded helpless glances with both Fred and George. Percy seemed to shrink away from their mother's scolding and began scooping food furiously into his mouth.

"Why, even *Bill* has managed to find someone, although she's so very... *French*, and rather, well..." The Weasley Matriarch trailed off and Ron saw her worried expression.

"Fleur's not so bad," he defended quietly. "I mean... she seems to really like him..."

Fred and George picked up on his somewhat flustered state and began taking the piss. Percy asked their father a question about the Ministry, and their mother set off on her desire to have grandchildren one day.

Ron smiled and shook his head. His family would never change.

He looked up to the mantel above the fireplace, crowded with photographs of them all through the years. There was one that was usually kept toward the back, brought out very seldom. It was *all* of them grouped around a beaming, fire-headed toddler.

Ron wondered where his sister would have fit into this family if she'd not been taken so many years ago. Would she be like Fred and George, carefree and careless? Would she be confident and cocky like Bill and Charlie? Would she be like Percy, all about books and knowledge? Or would she be more like Ron, unsure where she fit into the family sometimes but knowing that they were a part of who she really was?

More than anything, he wished that he could discover the answer to that question.

Chapter 5

Late Night Conversations From Under The Stairs. Again.

Harry woke with his knee pressed into his chest and his shoulder rammed up against a hard piece of wood. Wherever he was, it was dark with only a small source of light—too small to illuminate anything—emanating from somewhere close to his right foot.

He slowly took stock and tried to piece together what had happened to him. On the positive side, his knee didn't throb nearly as much as it had when he'd twisted it earlier. The tenderness when he probed it was nothing compared to the pounding in his head. He felt like he'd been hit with... well, a frying pan, to be honest.

The situation came back to him in chunks, flashes of time that he tried to piece together while rearranging his body as much as he could.

The redhead was going to pay for this, he vowed. Somehow, he'd make her regret both the injuries to his head and stuffing him in...

Oh, damn. He was in a closet under the stairs. Again.

He sighed dramatically to himself and then jumped in fright when the mirror vibrated.

Neville and Hermione were under strict orders not to contact him for anything! He cursed silently and tried to wiggle it out of his pocket. The fact that they were even *trying* now was a testament to their concern. That or they'd been captured by Death Eaters and this whole operation was falling apart around him.

He hadn't *seen* a dark mark on Red's arm, and she didn't necessarily act like a witch, even. Perhaps she was simply a Muggle who was startled by him crawling into her window, startled enough to smash his face in with a pan.

"Shadow!"

Hermione's incessant whispering annoyed Harry, but he finally managed to free the mirror. He couldn't see her in it, but replied in an equally low voice.

"I'm here."

A muffled squeal answered and Harry imagined Hermione clapping a hand over her mouth to hold in her relief that he wasn't dead.

"*Where are you?*"

Harry considered that question. It would be flippant to answer with the truth, honestly, and would probably make Hermione's already frazzled nerves unravel further. 'Well, funny you should ask that, you see I'm folded into a cupboard under the stairs once more, in a crooked little cottage, having been stuffed here by a mad skillet-wielding Muggle after I broke into her home to hide the

Horcrux, which I did to avoid being captured by the most tenacious Auror ever known to wizard-kind.'

She'd be proud of him for using the word *tenacious*, no doubt.

"Erm, I'm sort of... in a tight situation," he mumbled. *Literally*. "I, er... may need a bit of time to figure things out before I get back to you."

"Do you need help? I can send Mandrake out, or come myself."

Harry almost laughed at the idea of Neville facing off with Red and her steely gaze. If Harry was an ogre, he wondered what she'd assume Neville—who was more stocky and broader than Harry—was.

Hermione would hold her own, but for some reason, Harry wanted to take care of this particular thorn in his side without assistance. If only he could get his hands on his wand... Red would rue the day she ever lifted that pan!

Besides, Harry honestly had no idea where he was; he'd traipsed through the trees and hadn't been tracking his position well enough to explain it to her.

"No, no," he said finally. "I'll just... I'll figure it out."

Neville grabbed the mirror and Harry heard his sigh of relief. "There you are, mate. I... I thought I'd gotten you captured."

Harry forced out a small chuckle, since they couldn't see him smile. "No worries. Just a small setback. I'm just... dealing with an issue and then I'll be back."

Fact: the Muggle had the Horcrux. She'd even been burned by touching it, which made Harry feel horribly guilty, but there wasn't much he could do about it from his cramped position in the cupboard.

Fact: he needed to figure out a way to convince her that he meant her no harm, that he would gladly be on his way if she would give him the satchel and his wand back, and that he respected her cookware brandishing skills enough to never set foot in her part of the forest again.

But he had no idea how to do that.

"Alright Shadow?" Neville asked, concern filling his voice. "You're awfully quiet."

Harry bit his lip. "Necessity. I'm er... I'm sort of in a tangle here. There's this mad Muggle, you see..." Honesty was always the best policy, he decided. Or, partial honesty at least.

Hermione snatched the mirror back—Harry heard Neville yelp in protest. "Why didn't you say something?"

"She's not a threat," Harry said, glossing over the image of the pan coming at his face. "Just... just an annoyance. She ended up with my bag... and my wand."

Hermione huffed and he heard her muttering something to Neville, but he couldn't make out the

words.

"You'll just have to get them back."

He refrained from rolling his eyes, just in case she really could see him. "Well, yeah. Any suggestions would be helpful at this point. I'd prefer not to use brute force, but I'm not ruling it out completely."

Red might be determined, but she was still a tiny little thing. Harry had no doubt he could stuff *her* in the cupboard if she ever let go of her weapon. The idea had merit, he decided as he tried to massage the cramp out of his thigh.

"Well," Hermione sighed, "there are several approaches. You could try reasoning with her."

Harry, again, pictured the pan coming toward him. "Hmm, not so good on the reasoning thing."

"Okay, what about tricking her into giving it to you?" asked Hermione. "You're not the best liar, I know—"

"Oi!"

Hermione continued on, as if Harry hadn't said a thing, "—but I'm sure you can manage to think of something."

Harry sighed and gingerly touched the bridge of his nose, testing to see if it was broken or simply damaged. "I can try," he agreed.

"Or... well, there is another option." Hermione sounded hesitant, and there was a slightly odd tone to her voice.

"Yes, Professor?" Harry could picture the smirk on her face when he used her code name. Behind her back, he and Neville often called Hermione 'The Brain', but they would never let her know that. Harry was fond of all his parts right where they were, thank you very much, folded as they may be at the moment.

"You could try to charm her into giving you what you want."

Harry stared into the darkness of the cupboard blankly, his mind whirling. *Charm?* He honestly had no idea what she was talking about.

"Er..."

"Oh, come now, Shadow, you can be very charming when you want to be."

He felt his face heat but still had no clue how he would even go about getting Red to give him his things using... *charm*.

"What do you do when you want me or Neville to do something for you?" Hermione asked. She sounded a tad bit exasperated with him, but Harry couldn't help it. He was rubbish with girls. It's not like he'd had years of experience dating at Hogwarts. Okay, he had *none* at all. His one kiss

under the mistletoe with Cho and the disastrous date had sent him scurrying back to the shadows where he'd remained free from romantic entanglements. Plus, there was a war going on. Dating opportunities were a little thin on the ground.

"I'm not going to *beat* her, Hermione," he sighed. "I just... I'm trying to think about how to approach it."

"Is she pretty?"

Harry grew flustered by her question and even more embarrassed when he heard Neville chuckling in the background.

"She's... erm..." He thought back to the slip of a girl with the flaming hair and fiery spirit. Yes, he could admit she was pleasant to look at, with her bright brown eyes, curious expression, perfectly pink lips, smooth skin...

Hermione prompted him. "Yes?"

"She's... yeah, I'd say so."

"And you're a handsome man, Harry." His cheeks grew warm. "Don't you think so, Mandrake?"

The picture of Neville fleeing as he called out, "Do *not* drag me into this, Professor!" made Harry smile.

"You're always telling us to use our assets, Shadow. Just... woo her a bit and talk her into giving you what you want."

Something about her statement made Harry feel funny. It didn't seem right... "But... isn't that sort of underhanded?"

Hermione huffed, but Harry could tell she wasn't really annoyed with him, just the situation. "You're not *seducing* her, Shadow!" Harry nearly choked at the thought. "You're just... using your assets to the best of your abilities. Now, get out there and get on with it so you can get back here and eat. You haven't eaten for more than eight hours."

The shift in the conversation made Harry's head spin. One second she was talking about seduction, the other she was mothering him.

"Fine," he grumbled. He could hear Red talking to someone just on the other side of the door, now that he was listening for her, but he couldn't make out exactly what she was saying. "I'll talk to you later."

Harry stuffed the mirror back in his pocket and tried to imagine how on earth he was going to get himself out of this situation: both the being-stuffed-in-a-cupboard one and the girl-has-the-Horcrux one. Neither seemed promising at the moment.

Chapter 6

Charming Your Way Out of Sticky Situations or When Spellotape Goes Horribly, Horribly Wrong

Once her mother was gone, Ginny waited another agonizing ten minutes before approaching the cupboard door. It was likely the ogre was still knocked out, as she hadn't heard him moving around. Luckily. She didn't even like to think what her mother would have done if she'd discovered the smelly beast. She certainly wouldn't be proud of Ginny for handling the situation on her own.

Now Ginny was stuck with it, though, and had to make a decision. The ogre was a smooth talker, that's for sure, but could she trust it to give her the information she needed?

Only one way to find out.

With her frying pan held high, Ginny swung the cupboard door open. The ogre tumbled out, all long legs and flailing arms, onto the wooden floor. It groaned and rubbed its head miserably.

"Please don't hit me again."

Ginny tightened her grip on the pan and held it aloft. "I won't if you answer my questions."

"Just calm down, Red," the ogre said and scooted away from her. It huddled against the wall, eyes flashing dangerously.

Ginny narrowed her eyes at the mention of her red hair. Ever since she could remember, her mother had told her that her hair was a signifier of her powers. Ginny didn't like that the ogre had noticed her hair, or that it had commented on it.

"My *name* is Ginny."

Its eyes crinkled at the corners just slightly and it held up its hands in surrender. "Fine. Ginny. Look, I'm not here to hurt you. I was running through the forest—"

"Running from what? I thought all ogres loved to fight?"

The ogre sighed and slowly inched up until it was standing, looking down on her. "I'm not an ogre. I promise."

Ginny lifted the pan and the monster flinched. "Ogres lie. That's what my mother taught me."

"I'm *not* an ogre. I'm not a beast, a monster, a giant... or anything but a... just a man."

"You smell horrible," Ginny pointed out. "Ogres smell."

The monster was losing patience, she could tell, but he took a slow breath in and slid its feet forward until it was standing right in front of her. "That's because I was running from an Auror."

Ginny scowled at its deliberate movements. The green eyes were quite striking, and especially piercing when this close. "What's an Auror?"

It sighed and ruffled the fur on its head, wincing and probing tenderly at the place Ginny had hit it. "A vile animal," it said, "that hunts down men like me and captures them to drag back to its evil lair."

Ginny's arm lowered a fraction of an inch and she gaped at this... man. She still wasn't sure all of this wasn't a trick, but he'd had plenty of time to grab her, throw her over his shoulder, and carry her away to his cave. He hadn't done so yet, so maybe he was telling the truth.

"It sounds horrible," she whispered.

The man looked at her for a minute before moving a fraction of an inch closer. "You have no idea. It's barbaric. Aurors are the worst sort of monster out there."

"Do you..." Ginny glanced over at the closed window, wondering if the Auror was still outside waiting for its prey. "Is it still out there?"

The man seemed startled by her question and then shook his head. "No. I'll bet its gone home now. Aurors are mean, but they're not particularly smart, you see. I'm pretty sure we're safe now."

He sounded so sure that Ginny felt herself relax. Despite his smell, and the way he'd barged into her home, there was something about this man that Ginny liked.

"Do you know where the lights in the sky come from?"

The question startled him and he stared at her. "The stars?"

"No. The lights. They come every year on the same day—tomorrow, in fact—and fill the sky with sparkles that hang in the heavens."

"Oh! The fireworks! I'd completely forgotten about those." He chuckled and Ginny wondered what was so funny. "Er... I'm not sure, exactly."

Ginny's heart sank and she lowered herself onto one of the kitchen chairs. "Oh. I was hoping..." She shook the thought away and stared down at her feet. Maybe she should just tell the man to leave. He was probably safe from the nasty Auror outside, and he obviously hadn't come trying to steal her away.

"I have your bag. I'll give it to you and you can go."

He looked grateful, but he didn't attempt to leave. "Why do you want to know about the lights?"

Ginny looked up and saw that his question was genuine. "All my life I've been waiting until I could see them. And not just from my window, but up close. I want to lie in the grass and watch them twinkle in the sky above me, but my mother would never let me. It probably sounds stupid, but I thought if you knew where they were, you could take me there."

"Look, Red—er... *Ginny*, I'm not sure where they come from, but... I might be able to find out for

you—”

Ginny jumped out of her chair and threw herself at him, squealing happily. “Then you can take me there!”

The man looked startled and patted her back rather firmly, stealing her breath. “Oh, er... I’m not sure that’s... You see, I have somewhere I need to be... Erm... when I said I could—”

“We’ll make a deal,” Ginny said as she pulled back. “You take me to the lights, and I’ll give you your bag back.” It was the perfect solution! He certainly wanted that odd burning cup and stick enough to persist in asking for them. And Ginny knew it was easier to get what she wanted by withholding something he wanted.

“Now listen here—”

“I’ve hidden it, you know,” she lied. “You’ll never find it.”

The man looked irritated and rather intimidating, but Ginny held her ground. He was going to take her to the lights.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I won’t be a bother at all,” she promised. “Just take me to see the lights tomorrow night and I’ll give you the bag back. I promise.”

The man looked up at the ceiling and rubbed his eyes harshly while muttering something about ‘charm’.

“Why me?” he asked. “Why not ask your mother?”

“She would never take me,” Ginny dismissed. “It’ll have to be you. You can protect me from all the ogres, monsters, and Aurors out there while we search for the lights.”

“This is insane!” He stomped around the kitchen, muttering odd things and huffing each time he caught sight of Ginny, but she was pleased; the longer he spent here, the more he was actually considering accepting her deal.

“It’s the perfect solution,” Ginny said. “We both get what we want.”

“You don’t even know me,” he said. “I could be... I could be an *ogre* just like you thought, only I’m a tricky ogre.”

She took in a slow breath and considered his words. “I’ve decided to trust you.”

They looked at each other for a long minute before the man sighed and his shoulders sank. “Not your best decision.”

“I’ll bring my pan, don’t worry. If you get out of hand—”

He scowled. “Fine. And bring my bag. We’ll need it where we’re going.”

"But you don't even know where the lights are," she pointed out.

He looked more annoyed. "I can figure it out." He pulled a small piece of mirror from his pocket and put it in front of his mouth. "Dealing with the *situation*, Professor. Need the gen on where I can find the fireworks in the sky that will happen tomorrow night."

Ginny peered closely at the mirror. It was a professor? What sort of mischief was this?

"Oh, Shadow, er... well, I'm not positive," the mirror answered in a feminine voice.

"If you had to *guess*?" the man huffed. Apparently the mirror made him even tetchier.

"South," it answered. "Devon, perhaps. I think I've heard about a family down there that—"

The mirror wasn't done talking when the man shoved it deep into his pocket. "Well? You heard the Professor, Red. Let's get going."

* * *

"... where is this... Devon? Are you familiar with it? Is it a town or perhaps a quant little village where the inhabitants celebrate some grand..."

The girl hadn't shut up. Not once since they started on this little impromptu adventure. Harry could feel the energy leeching out of his body as they walked. He had to figure a way out of this situation. He could feel the mirror in his pocket vibrating—no doubt Hermione trying to give him the rest of her lecture, or just tell him off for being rude—but there was no way to take the mirror out again without alerting Red to it. She'd already seemed fascinated the first time he was forced to use it.

If only he could trick her into setting that ruddy bag down, he could snatch it, pull his wand, and Apparate away. She'd be furious, but she'd eventually get over it. Harry didn't owe her anything, anyway, other than maybe a few reciprocal whacks to the head. The idea made him slightly uncomfortable, like cheating, but he hadn't really agreed to her deal. Plus, he was under duress, and that should nullify everything, shouldn't it?

"... my mother always told me how beautiful my hair was... perhaps I should keep it hidden? What do you think? Do you have a name? I feel bad for calling you 'man' in my head, when you probably do have a name. Although, I did tell you my name was Ginny and you continue to call me 'red'. Quite rude, if you ask me."

Harry straightened his crooked glasses and bit his lip to keep from exploding in frustration with the chatty girl. "It's Shadow," he said slowly. "Shadow Phoenix."

His words, the first he'd spoken other than giving her directions through the forest, seemed to startle her, but soon she was smiling.

"Shadow Phoenix. I like that. Is it long now to Devon, Shadow Phoenix? I only ask because my mother will be gone until the day after tomorrow, and I'd like to be back before she returns. She will not be happy when she realizes that I've gone."

Seeing a small window of opportunity, Harry fell into line with her on the forest path. "Perhaps you should return then, Ginny. I wouldn't want you to feel horribly guilty for having disobeyed the mother that's been taking care of you for your entire life."

The horrified look on her face made Harry feel both triumphant and bad at the same time.

She stopped walking and peered at him with those big brown doe-eyes. "You think I should go back, Shadow Phoenix?"

Harry ignored the way his heart thudded in his chest. He *needed* to do this. He had to get back to Grimmauld Place with the Horcrux before the Aurors captured him, or he was discovered by Death Eaters. Red would simply have to learn to live with the disappointment of watching the fireworks from her window.

"I can only say that I'd be worried sick if I was your mother and arrived back home after traveling so far and the house was empty."

Some of her prattling must have soaked into his brain because Harry was able to use things from her words to build the argument against this insane idea. There was no way for them to get from Scotland all the way to Devon without being seen or captured. And since Harry couldn't get to his wand to Apparate away, he was stuck until she handed over the bag. There was absolutely no way he could take a Muggle all the way to Devon right now. Nor did he want to.

Ginny locked her jaw at his words and pulled the hood up on her robe to cover her spectacularly red hair. "No. I'm going." The blazing look she wore made Harry think twice about tricking her. That and she still had a firm grip on her frying pan under the folds of her cloak. Harry had a healthy respect for that particular piece of cookery; his head still ached and his ears rang from the last hit.

"I've been locked away too long in that cottage." She threw her head back and gave a little laugh, spinning in place. "And it's far too gorgeous out here to go back now. Besides, maybe we'll make it back before mother comes home."

Something in her words struck a chord with Harry. "What do you mean locked away?" His memories of being secreted away in the cupboard under the stairs while growing up were too fresh to simply let it go.

Ginny shrugged a shoulder and began walking. "It was for my own protection. I understand that. I'm... I'm special, my mother said, and people in the world—"

"Like ogres and trolls," Harry said with a nod as the picture started to become clear to him. This beautiful, vibrant young woman was locked away, fed lies about the world that lay beyond the clearing the cottage existed in, and lived in solitude for her whole life. The very idea made Harry's blood boil.

She smiled shyly and gave a little laugh. "I can't go back now."

"No," Harry agreed softly. "Come on. It's getting late and we need to find a place to stay. While the world out here isn't nearly as bad as you've been told, there are still things we need to be careful of."

Harry helped her secure her cloak tighter, tucking her hair behind her. She looked shyly up at him and Harry's stomach fluttered with attraction. He cleared his throat and looked away. This couldn't be happening!

"We're almost to the village. It'll be tricky getting in, but I might know where we'll be safe. In fact, it'd be much easier if you'd give me my... er... that stick that's in the bag."

Ginny scowled and clutched the bag tighter to her side under the cloak. "That's not what we agreed..."

"I know," Harry sighed. "But it's important. It'll get us... inside the place we need to go."

She seemed to think about that before her eyes lit up. "Oh, it's like a key?"

"Exactly," Harry said. "A key." There was no way he was going to traipse into Hogsmeade—which was crawling with Death Eaters and Snatchers—without his wand at the ready. Muggle or no, Harry needed to protect Ginny.

"Careful," he cautioned when she began to rummage around in the bag. "The cup... it's... ummm..."

"I wrapped it up," Ginny said practically and held his wand out to him. "Here's your key."

It was much easier to breathe with his wand in his hand, Harry decided. He felt so much less exposed and vulnerable. "Let's go. Make sure to keep your head down—don't look at anyone!—and don't say a word."

Her eyes widened fearfully. "Is the village full of trolls and ogres?"

"And Aurors," Harry said with a nod. He held out his hand and tried to ignore how soft, yet firm her fingers were as they slid into his grasp. "But you can trust me—I'll protect you."

Her smile was dazzling and Harry had to force his eyes away from her. She wasn't only beautiful, Harry decided, but feisty and fearless. It was something he'd never taken the time to admire in anyone else. Granted, he'd only ever been around Hermione and Cho—and that was only a few times—during school, so Harry didn't really know what to expect of girls.

They skirted the outside edges of Hogsmeade, sticking to the shadows and alleyways as much as possible. Twice they were nearly stopped by suspicious, cloaked characters, but Harry's quick, hidden distraction spells worked wonders. Thankfully, Harry couldn't feel the cold dread inspired by the dementors; either there weren't any close, or Voldemort had them off wreaking havoc elsewhere.

"Here it is." Harry slipped into the Hog's Head Tavern, Ginny's trembling hand held tightly in his. "Remember, let me do the talking."

The tavern was filled with darkly hooded figures, sipping drinks from filthy glasses and watching Harry's every move. And yet, it wasn't any different from the other times Harry had been in, he was just less intimidated by it. Aberforth, the bartender, didn't allow known Death Eaters to hang around in his pub, although anyone else was welcome. No doubt one of these people was an

undercover Auror. Harry kept his head down and pulled a reluctant Ginny through the crowd.

"You must be a bloomin' idiot," Aberforth hissed when he saw who was beneath the hood of the cloak Harry had snatched off a laundry line on the edge of town.

"Sanctuary," was all that Harry whispered and Aberforth ground his teeth noisily. Harry knew that if the bartender hadn't made specific promises to his brother, Harry would be out of luck. Aberforth had no love for Voldemort or the Ministry, but he also didn't take kindly to Professor Dumbledore's ideals. He also thought Harry was a fool for not fleeing England when he had the chance, and told him that every time they met.

Ginny dutifully kept her face down the entire time they were in the main part of the pub, and didn't make a sound. Harry could feel her trembling though, and pictured her other hand wrapped so tightly around her pan that the handle deformed.

What the *hell* was he doing dragging a Muggle into this place?

"You can stay here tonight," Aberforth grunted and indicated a rickety door. "You need to be gone before daybreak. They patrol the streets starting at seven."

"We will," Harry promised. He ignored the way Aberforth stared at Ginny and pulled her into the dusty, cramped room that only offered a single narrow bed.

Once the door was closed and a silent locking spell set, Harry allowed a nervous chuckle. "Made it safe."

Ginny was staring at him with wide, tear-filled eyes. Her whole body shook. "Is that... Are they all..."

"Mostly men and women," Harry said, skirting around the truth a bit. "A few hags and warlocks..."

"Any ogres?" Her voice was barely a whisper and Harry felt bad. He was exposing her to such a dangerous world simply by being with him.

"Only the bartender," he said gruffly. "I'm teasing. He's... just grumpy. No ogres. No trolls. No monsters of any kind."

Ginny watched him carefully. "Aurors?"

"None," he lied. "None at all." She wasn't going to be able to sleep if she was up all night clutching that pan, and neither would Harry.

She let out a deep sigh and finally looked around the room.

"It's not much," Harry said, "but it's safe."

Ginny nodded wearily and pulled her hood down, exposing the fiery mane of red hair that shown coppery in the dim candlelight. He'd never seen hair that bright and it intrigued him how vivid and alive it seemed.

"There's only one bed." She startled and seemed to just notice it.

"Oh, er... you go ahead," Harry said. He gave a doubtful look at the dirty floorboards and wondered how quickly she'd fall asleep; perhaps he could conjure something a bit more comfy, or transfigure the old chair into something to keep him off the ground, at least. "I'll be... I'll be fine."

She hesitated. "We could share."

Harry nearly choked at the idea. *Share?* Share a bed with a girl who was extremely attractive?

A warm, growly sort of feeling—like a monster trapped in his chest—grew inside Harry, but he forced it down. Now was *not* the time to be dealing with that sort of thing.

"Er... the floor is fine." His voice broke and Harry cursed himself. He was twenty-one, for Merlin's sake, not fourteen.

Ginny nodded and climbed onto the bed. She didn't use the covers, but pulled her cloak over her, huddling around the satchel in case Harry snatched it during the night.

"Good night, Shadow Phoenix."

Harry watched her eyes droop closed almost instantly. "Good night, Ginny," he whispered. He sat in the chair until Ginny's breathing became regular and deep, and then pulled his mirror out.

"All clear Professor, but don't yell, please."

He didn't have to wait long before Hermione's livid face appeared. Her eyes were wide and her nostrils were flared.

"Where on earth—"

"Hogsmeade," Harry said tiredly. "It's a very, very long story."

Hermione's anger melted into concern. "Hogsmeade is crawling with Death Eaters and Aurors, Shadow!"

Harry slumped further into the seat and watched Ginny as she slept. "I know. We were careful." He winced as he realized his slip and knew that he was going to have to come clean. Neville might have missed a comment like that, but not Hermione.

"Repeat that."

"I'm here with the girl. Her name is Ginny," said Harry carefully. "She's... she needs my help, Hermione." He didn't even know when he'd fully made the decision that he was going to take Ginny to see the fireworks, but now he knew that's what he had to do. He couldn't explain it, but it was the right thing, no matter what the consequences.

"What does this have to do with the fireworks?"

Harry bit his lip as he imagined the best way to tell Hermione: full disclosure or not? He wasn't

great at lying and Hermione could usually see through him anyway.

"Er... well, she needs to see the fireworks."

"That makes no sense, Harry. Why would a Muggle care about the fireworks that she can see from her window anyway? I did some checking and they do originate in Devon. Apparently it's some sort of tradition. On August eleventh every year, one particular Wizarding family lights them off to commemorate the birth of the youngest child."

"That's a bit... extravagant, even for Wizards," Harry mused.

"Yes," Hermione agreed, "but it's more in mourning, really, as the child—the only daughter in the family of boys—was kidnapped nineteen years ago. I suppose it's sort of a symbol that the family hasn't forgotten her... and maybe in welcome if she is ever discovered. The *Daily Prophet* did a whole article on it a few years ago."

"Interesting." Harry thought about that for a minute before shrugging. "I honestly don't know why Ginny wants to see them, Hermione, but... I just feel that it's the right thing to do. I can't explain it."

"Well, you did say she was attractive..."

Harry felt his cheeks heat and nearly put the mirror away. Yes, Ginny was attractive, but that had nothing to do with why he was helping her. Okay, it was partly to do with that—but only a tiny bit. Mostly, he just identified with the fact that she'd been shut away, kept from everything that could help her be a wonderful, vibrant young woman. And despite it all, she was still amazing.

"That's not it," said Harry. "I really can't explain it."

Hermione looked like she was going to argue, but Neville took the mirror from her, cutting off the coming tirade.

"If you feel that's the right thing to do, Shadow, we'll support it. Let us know if you need anything else."

"Will do."

The mirror went dark and Harry sat in the flickering light of the candle. It was going to be a long couple of days. Maybe he needed to confide in Ginny that he was magical and make everything so much easier on both of them.

Maybe.

Chapter 7

Cast Iron, Please? Thank You Very Much

Diagon Alley was always quiet early in the morning. The rising of the sun seemed to wake it inch by inch: doors would unlock, shutters would fold back, and the daily business would commence.

But early—very early—it was almost as if everything was frozen in time. Ron let his eyes rove over it, remembering the first time he'd seen it and truly registered just how magical it all was. He was seven, and his mother had brought him—and only him—with her to get some things the family needed.

They rarely went out during those years, and never as a large group. Occasionally, his mother might take one of them as a special treat, and that morning she'd decided it was Ron's turn. Something about that particular trip triggered something deep inside Ron. Everything seemed more real, more magical, and more tangible. He fell in love with the place right then, and the fondness didn't wane through the years. Even now, fifteen years later, he still loved to spend time in Diagon Alley, even if it was only watching the crowds.

Unless he was patrolling of course, but that was a whole other idea.

"No worries about that today," he mumbled to himself and set out toward Fred and George's shop, hoping his brothers would be up and moving. There were lights on in the upstairs windows, so Ron was hopeful. He'd learned his lesson last year about Apparating directly into the brand new shop. Fred and George might be funny, but they were deadly serious about security; only Ron's quick instincts had saved him from bodily harm when he'd tripped a few of their hexes.

The door wasn't unlocked, but he could see George shuffling down the aisle in his uniform—and house slippers—directing brightly wrapped products onto the shelves. Ron rapped his knuckle against the window and George pretended to think about it before unlocking the door.

"Just in time," he said with a tired smile. "I could use another pair of hands. Fred seems to be having a hard time getting going this morning."

"I heard that, you git!" Fred called from the back room.

George smirked. "I meant for you to hear it, prat!"

Ron refrained from rolling his eyes. He was used to the banter, but they both must be tired as the creative name calling just wasn't on yet.

"Ronniekins came to help!" George said as he tossed a box of Tongue-Twister Toffees up in the air and banished it to the top shelf with a flourish of his wand.

"Did not!" Ron called back. "I'm just dropping by before I head back to Hogsmeade."

In all honesty, Ron wasn't sure why he'd come to Diagon Alley anyway. He supposed it was mostly out of habit that he felt compelled to check on everyone as often as he could—they'd all developed

the compulsion over the years. It was ingrained from a very early age, ever since Ginevra had been taken right from her cot. Even though Bill was married, he still checked in with his parents once a day, and his brothers several times a week. Charlie was less worried about such things, but he wrote often. The rest of them fell along the scale at varying degrees of protectiveness—Ron and Percy, surprisingly, were the most vigilant, Fred and George, the most casual about it all.

“Thought you were on suspension,” said George as he moved down the aisle. Fred wandered out and handed Ron an armful of boxes. Ron scowled at them, but then began placing them. Might as well be helpful, he supposed.

“I am, but that doesn’t mean I can’t go for a *walk* in Hogsmeade, you know.”

“Or the forest around it,” Fred said with a smirk.

“And if you happen to find a stray phoenix...”

Ron smirked and gave a firm nod. He was looking forward to seeing Dawlish’s face when he, Ron Weasley, was the one to drag Shadow Phoenix into the Ministry. All the rest of the muckity-mucks at the Ministry would be green with envy.

Fred sat on the edge of the counter and yawned widely. “You really think his hideout is around there?”

“He seemed to know the place pretty well,” said Ron. “And he disappeared the moment he was out of my sight—no sound of Apparition.”

“He might be just that good,” George pointed out as he leaned on the counter. The three brothers were quiet for a minute, contemplating.

“Dad says...” Ron trailed off, scowling down at his shoes. He still wasn’t sure what the whole conversation about motivations had been about, but he couldn’t stop thinking about it. “Dad says that maybe the Phoenix is a decent bloke just... just caught up in some sort of mess.”

Both Fred and George scowled. “He’s talented, I’ll give him that,” Fred said.

George added, “With some serious spell knowledge, but I have no idea what he’s about. Definitely a mystery, that one.”

“Yeah.” Ron nodded and they went silent, all contemplating. Besides the official file on Shadow Phoenix at the Ministry—which was painfully thin and sketchy—there wasn’t much known about the thief, other than he’d just appeared one day out of the blue. There was no indication as to who he really was, where he’d come from, or what he meant by breaking into places all over England and stealing odd things. Most of it was all rumor and innuendo, anyway.

The funniest thing Ron had read in the file was the adamant statement from one barmy witch in Kent who swore up and down The Phoenix had stolen eggs from her chicken coop and that he looked remarkably like Harry Potter. The other theories were just as loony—*He’s Dumbledore, in disguise! He’s really a group of people running an underground ring of secret thieves! He really doesn’t exist at all!* Ron had heard it all.

“Does Mum know where you’re off to?”

Ron shifted under Fred’s knowing gaze. “Er... no. She thinks I’m coming here to help you, so don’t blow my alibi, yeah?”

George grinned widely. “What’s in it for us?”

“Yeah,” Fred asked. “Risking the wrath of Mum is like...” He shuddered dramatically and Ron sighed. He was going to end up paying for this little favor for awhile. He hated owing the twins; they never forgot, either.

George stroked his chin in thought. “We could use a good bottle of Firewhisky, you know.”

“Or someone to test the new... ahem... You know the one I’m talking about.” Fred and George shared a laugh and Ron winced. He’d been an unwilling test subject many times over his growing up years, and even offered when he needed a few galleons now and again, but the prospects weren’t good when they went all secretive like that. It didn’t bode well for his health or appearance.

“I have an autographed Chudley poster,” Ron offered with a sigh. He really didn’t want to give that up, but he was willing if they’d cover for him with their mother for the rest of the week.

“Why would we want that?” Fred asked. He scrunched his nose up in distaste. “Now, if you were talking about the Harpies...” He waggled his eyebrows salaciously.

“Well, I don’t have that,” said Ron helplessly. “Just... just do it, alright?”

His brothers exchanged a long look with each other before nodding. “Fine. But she’ll wonder why you take so many loo breaks when I can’t produce you at the floo...”

Ron nearly cheered with triumph. They were going to do it and he hadn’t needed to promise blood, money, or his first born child! Well, that is, *if* he ever had a child... er... or even dated a girl properly...

George clapped him on the shoulder. “You can split the reward with us.”

Ron opened his mouth to argue, but closed it with a snap. That wasn’t too much to ask, he decided. After all, the Twins had helped him pay for the Academy and given him quite a bit over the years.

“Fine. I’ll check in with you later.”

An hour later, Ron was exhausted, both mentally and physically. He’d traipsed all through the woods surrounding Hogsmeade and hadn’t been able to find any sort of evidence that The Phoenix was in the area. Magical signatures were faint and probably residual from the all-Wizarding village not far away. The wall of briars was impenetrable and Ron decided it was probably a dead end anyway.

He scuffed his shoe in the dirt as he trudged back to Hogsmeade. Time to begin poking around the town, although he highly doubted someone like Shadow Phoenix would slip through unnoticed. The place was always crawling with unsavory characters—so much so that the gates of Hogwarts, the

Wizarding school that sat majestically to the north, were closed and sealed most of the year. The school governors had voted to keep the school running, although Ron knew there were very few students that actually attended; less than half what their numbers should have been.

Hogsmeade was fascinating, but in a much different way than Diagon Alley. Perhaps it was because Ron hadn't ever been to the town until he was an Auror Trainee, and by that time the more shadowy elements of society had taken hold, but it seemed... less, somehow. Some of the storefronts were boarded up permanently, while other merchants doggedly held onto the small trickle of business that remained.

An Auror patrol passed him as he walked, but Ron knew they were nothing but Trainees. The riff-raff that traversed these streets didn't take well to Aurors policing them; it was best to have a visible, yet silent presence.

In one shop window, the early morning sun caught something sparkly and Ron stopped to look at the delicate glass flower that sat on a shelf. It was really beautiful, intricately crafted and so very thin. It was probably more than he could ever spend, but the idea of buying something like that for his mother for Christmas popped into his mind. She loved beautiful things like that, even though his father complained that they had far too many trinkets cluttering every surface of the living room—lopsided ashtrays sculpted from clay by hurried little fingers, picture frames made from dried noodles and sticking charms, small carved dragons that Charlie made in his spare time... the house was full of gifts from her children. But the flower was different. He'd seen something similar when he was very young and was visiting relatives. He couldn't quite remember the story about it, but he thought someone had told him his grandmother made them.

Ron was just about to Apparate back to Diagon Alley when he thought about talking to the barkeeper at the Hog's Head Tavern. "The Goat" was what the Aurors called the gruff old man. Ron wasn't sure the significance of the name, but everyone knew who they meant when one of them would mention talking to The Goat.

He hated Aurors, but he hated Death Eaters even more, Ron knew. Occasionally, one of them would be able to talk him into letting a bit of information slip that would lead to the arrest of a suspicious individual. At any rate, the Hog's Head was certainly a place where someone like Shadow Phoenix might drift into now and again. The Goat might just part with some tidbit if Ron questioned him and was lucky.

The Tavern was empty of patrons when Ron walked in, but the stench from the night before hung like a fog over the dark room. And always the slight scent of barnyard animals.

"Whadd'ya want?" The penetrating gaze of the barkeep—one bright blue eye narrowed more than the other under his bushy eyebrows—made Ron swallow hard. "Can't ya see we're closed?"

"I just... just needed some information."

The old man crossed his arms over his chest and grunted. Not a good sign. Perhaps it was a bit early to begin throwing questions around. If it weren't just after sunrise, Ron might actually consider buying a drink and warming the old man up with some idle talk.

"Information. Yer an Auror, then."

Ron shifted in place and bit his lip. Officially, he couldn't be here. "Er... yeah."

The barkeep grunted again, looking even less willing to accommodate than before, if that were possible. "Don't serve Aurors. Try the Three Broomsticks. Rosmerta seems to be partial to yer lot."

Ron let out a slow breath and took a step forward. He was just about to point out that Madam Rosmerta might serve Aurors, but she also kept her mouth shut about everyone and everything. There would be nothing for Ron to learn from her.

The clamor of feet on the stairs stalled the question in his mouth. He turned to see two people descending quickly, draped in dark robes, with the hoods pulled low over their faces. One was leading the other by the hand.

They froze when Ron came into view and there was enough hesitation in the stance, and jolt of recognition, along with a squeak from the second person—a woman, Ron registered—that it put him on alert. He pulled his wand, more out of habit than actual alarm. After all, what could he do against three people?

"Go!"

The cloaked figures darted toward the door as the barkeeper roared at them. Ron caught a glimpse of the woman as they sped past him—pale skin, bright, frightened eyes. He dove toward them, intent on stopping them from leaving, but the man spun and thrust his wand into the flesh at the base of Ron's neck.

No one said a word and the silence was heavy with tension. Ron could feel the tremble of the hand holding the wand and knew that if he made the wrong move, it would take nothing at all to end his life. The man was deadly serious about escaping. The decision was easy, and Ron let his wand slip from his fingers to clatter on the floor, his eyes pressed closed.

"Get out of here before you get us all killed, you fool!"

The pressure of the wand point disappeared and Ron cracked his eyes open and then dove for the woman. If he pulled hard enough on her cloak, he could at least get a look at who she was. His hand grasped the back of her shroud tightly, winding in the fabric.

"Shadow Phoenix!"

Her shout stunned Ron and he wasn't sure whether she was accusing *him* of being the villain, or if it was a plea for help.

"Ginny! It's an Auror!"

The roar confused him and Ron blinked, eyes going wide as a large pan crashed against his temple.

* * *

Her heart raced in her chest, threatening to climb right out her throat and run away without her. The whole adventure had been thrilling. Even waking up this morning in a strange place with the

handsome Shadow Phoenix slumped in the chair across from her bed had been... exciting.

Never in her wildest dreams did Ginny think she'd be racing all over the countryside, escaping from horrible monsters and Aurors, seeing wonderful places, and meeting interesting people.

She'd been terrified when the Auror—who looked suspiciously like a man when he was slumped on the dirty floor of the tavern—had grabbed her cloak. Her grip in Shadow Phoenix's hand had begun to slip, but he'd held fast, protecting her just as he'd promised he would. Instinct had won, and she swung her pan at the monster's head, bashing it. She hadn't *meant* to kill it; just get it to release her.

But it was likely dead, since it wasn't moaning, or even moving. Shadow Phoenix bent over the body and nudged it several times.

"Is it... Did I kill it?" Ginny asked, half horrified, half proud. Once again, she was proving that she could take care of herself. Well, almost, anyway.

"No. Just knocked out."

The intimidating, gruff man from the night before kicked the Auror with the toe of his boot and sighed loudly. "Yer gonna get me killed one of these days, kid."

"That was close," Shadow Phoenix said. "It's the same Auror from yesterday."

Ginny began to shake as she stared at the monster's face. He looked so... normal, almost as if he were asleep, except for the large red knot that was swelling on the side of his head.

"We need to go." She pulled at Shadow's cloak frantically. While the morning had started out exciting, it was quickly escalating into terrifying. Aurors and ogres around every corner. Who knew what else they'd face before they reached their destination. Ginny *had* to see the lights now that she'd started out. There would be no going back now, not without reaching the end of their journey.

"Just... just let me decide what to do with him."

"Leave him," the old man barked. "He's not hurting anyone here. Maybe I can convince him he had a few too many and spent the night on my floor."

Shadow laughed but shook his head at the same time. "No, this one's persistent. I need... I need to deal with him."

Ginny scowled and tugged once more. "We need to go... the lights..."

"Aren't until evening," Shadow argued. "We have plenty of time."

She let go of his cloak and crossed her arms, glaring at the back of his head. "If you don't take me, I won't give you the—"

"Ahem!" Shadow hissed at her and then cut his eyes toward the old man. Apparently, the odd magical cup was important enough that the man wasn't supposed to know about it. Ginny filed that

information away, just in case she needed to *persuade* Shadow a bit more.

"I made my promise, and I intend to keep it," he said firmly. "But we need to take care of this... Auror, or he'll be tracking us all over Britain. It's best to deal with the issue and then go."

The earnestness of his words and the way his eyes shone beneath the hood of his cloak made Ginny feel better. She didn't like delaying—who knew how long it would take them to find the place with the lights—but she trusted Shadow.

"Just get on with it before more of them show up. It's bad for business, all these Aurors wandering around." the old man grumbled and walked away.

Ginny's heart pounded in her chest. More of them? Shadow didn't seem worried, though, and pulled the key he had out once more.

"Do you trust me?"

She started when she realized he was asking her. "Oh, er..." Even though she really didn't know him, she did trust him. There was little reason in it, other than she felt safe when she was with him. "Yes. I do."

He flashed a quick smile. "Close your eyes."

Ginny hesitated only a moment, gave a quick glance at the sprawled Auror and did as Shadow asked. A bright flash made her jump, but she kept her eyes closed tightly, clutching her pan.

Shadow's warm hand on hers helped her relax. "Okay. We'll go now."

"Did you kill it?" She peered around his arm—he was now standing in front of her, blocking the view of the monster.

He laughed softly. "No. I just made it easier to deal with." He twisted slightly and she saw the Auror bound with ropes, still knocked out. "Now I just have to figure out what to do with him. I *should* leave him like this... suspend him from a tree somewhere or something." Noticing something, he stooped and picked up the key that the Auror had been holding.

Ginny stared at the end of it that stuck out of Shadow's pocket. Odd. Apparently everyone had these strange keys...

"At the very least, we need to get him out of here," Shadow said with a sigh. He ruffled his hair and stared down at the monster. "One Auror will attract more."

"Can't Apparate," the old man said from the far end of the bar where he was sitting and watching intently. "Floo works."

Ginny narrowed her eyes and tried to figure out what he'd just said. It sounded like another language and she had no idea what it meant. Shadow seemed to understand, however, and gave a nod.

"We can take him out of the village and figure something out there." He looked at her thoughtfully.

"And we could probably stand to get some food, as well. We didn't eat last night."

It wasn't until he mentioned it that Ginny realized how hungry she was. "I could make us something," she said eagerly and raised her pan. She meant it only half-jokingly, but Shadow seemed to find it incredibly funny.

"That *is* quite the handy item to carry around. As long as I'm not on the wrong end of it, I can truly appreciate it."

She giggled and felt her cheeks heat. The old man grunted noisily.

"Well don't look at me. Firewhisky I got; food... nothing you want to eat. This isn't the Three Broomsticks, ya know."

"Thanks, Aberforth. I owe you one."

"More than one."

Shadow smiled and nodded. "Fine. More than one. We'll square up after this is all over, yeah?"

He turned back to Ginny and gave her an earnest look. "Remember that you trust me?"

She eyed him carefully. She might trust him, but that didn't mean she could dismiss her curious nature completely. "Yes?"

"I'm going to do a few things that might make you worry," he said quietly, "but I promise I'll explain everything very soon. Just... just know that I'm going to do everything I can to protect you."

"Okay," said Ginny. Her voice shook and she felt like she might be sick, but she did trust him.

With the special key in hand, Shadow pointed it at the Auror and it began to float. Ginny gasped and clung to Shadow's arm, but he only smiled at her.

"Trust, remember?"

She nodded, but was still staring at the roped up Auror. She wasn't sure what to say, or if her voice would even work to say anything.

The grumpy old man stepped forward, pulling his own key out. "I suppose you want some sort of diversion?"

"I'd appreciate it."

They stared at each other for a few minutes and then the man began muttering under his breath before moving to the front door of the tavern. "I'll try to draw everyone's attention up here. Give me thirty seconds, then head out the back. And try to be smart about it, will ya?"

Shadow looked at him for a long minute and Ginny could tell he was thinking hard about something. "He never promised you I was smart."

The man laughed. It was a loud, abrasive sound. "No, he never did. The girl—not this one, though—she was the brains of your little outfit."

Shadow laughed also and Ginny wondered who they were talking about. Who was the girl? An irrational stab of jealousy welled up inside her. She had no claim on Shadow Phoenix, but she couldn't help feeling that way.

"Get ready."

Shadow made the Auror float behind him and turned back to look at Ginny, who still hadn't moved. Slowly, his hand lifted and reached for hers. With a shaky breath, she slid her fingers against his.

"Pull your hood up," he whispered and gave a wink. "Wouldn't want someone to see that hair, would we?"

Ginny made sure her hair was tucked deep in the cloak and pulled the hood low in front. Her cheeks flamed when he looked at her like that, and her stomach did a funny little twisting thing. She wasn't sure what it meant, but she knew she liked it when he touched her, and when his green eyes got all intense.

Some sort of commotion interrupted their staring and Shadow tugged her out the door, the Auror bobbing along behind them. Once he made sure they weren't being watched, they darted into the safety of the trees and kept walking.

"Once we get far enough away we'll think about food."

She nodded and tightened her grip on the satchel slung over her shoulder. Shadow's cup was inside, wrapped in a cloak to keep it from burning her, and a few things she'd hastily shoved inside before they'd left the clearing. It wasn't much, but she'd stuffed a few eggs, some pieces of cheese, and the remains of a loaf of bread. Last night had been so exciting and fast-paced that she'd completely forgotten about the food. But, she decided, it was enough and she could make a small feast for the two of them if he could manage to start a fire.

When she told him, Shadow laughed and squeezed her hand tightly. She was pleased that he seemed so happy over something so small.

Chapter 8

Starling Revelations Always Make Me Queasy

Harry let his eyes close as the meal Ginny had prepared melted against his tongue. He'd certainly gone hungry before, but he could honestly say this was one of the best meals he'd ever had. Even though it couldn't beat the grandeur of a Hogwarts feast, Harry had a feeling it was the company that made all the difference.

Ginny had moved efficiently around the fire he'd made, sneaking looks at him whenever she thought she could get away with it. Harry saw them, but he didn't draw attention, mostly because he wasn't sure what they meant.

Was she nervous about his magic usage? She'd *said* she trusted him, but just yesterday she'd attacked him with her frying pan thinking he was an ogre. He was going to have to explain things to her soon, he had a feeling. Especially if the Auror—who he had dubbed Red Number Two in his mind—woke up. So far so good. He was still trussed up, lying on the ground behind the log where Harry and Ginny sat to eat their meal, right out of the frying pan.

"You... you made that Auror float."

He sighed when she finally spoke and wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve. "Er... yeah. I suppose I owe you an explanation."

A strange look settled on her face and she chewed the corner of her lip. "Not... not if you don't want to," she said quietly.

"I do," he burst out and then felt his face heat. Why did it have to be so hard to talk to her? At times they spoke comfortably and others Harry felt as if his chest might explode with the need for... for something he couldn't yet define. "I just... I just need to find the right way to tell you."

"Okay." She was quiet, picking at the last bits of egg and cheese in the pan before tearing a piece of bread off.

His mind whirled with the words that he needed to say, but none of them seemed right. It was all so complicated, and yet simple at the same time. He was magical, she was not. But what would her reaction be when he told her? She obviously knew there was something different about him, but he didn't want her to be scared of him.

"I'm... There's..." But his mind simply wouldn't latch onto anything concrete, not when Ginny was looking at him with those big brown eyes, her head tilted slightly as she waited.

"Those books you told me about, the ones your mother read you about ogres and monsters?"

She gave a cautious nod. "Yes."

"Was there ever any... magic in them? For example, did the good guys sometimes do things that were amazing or seemed impossible?"

Her brow furrowed in thought and then a strange look came over her face. To Harry, it almost looked like guilt. "Yes," she whispered.

"I'm like that," he said. "Magical. I can do things... like... here, watch this." He pulled his wand and made the pan levitate between them. "Or... like this." A shower of red and gold sparks erupted from the end of his wand. Harry smiled and summoned a rock into his hand before banishing it across the small campfire. When he turned back around, Ginny wasn't smiling and watching with excitement. Instead, she had shifted away from him and was staring with wide eyes.

"Hey, I didn't... I didn't mean to frighten you. I won't hurt you, Ginny."

"I know." She seemed so small right then, so pale and frightened. "I know that."

They were both quiet and Harry cursed himself. Obviously, he'd done it all wrong. Hermione had told him to be charming, but Harry had no idea what he was doing. Ginny sat on the far edge of the log, her head hung down, vivid hair creating a curtain that hid her face from him.

"I... I won't do it if it makes you uncomfortable," he promised. He'd been hoping they could Apparate to Devon, rather than trying to find some other way to travel so far. The Knight Bus was out—Death Eaters were watching it carefully—and he wasn't sure if he could convince Ginny to fly all that way. But if she was reacting badly to this little show, she'd definitely balk at his attempts to take her anyway.

"And I'll take you home if you want."

She jerked up and stared with wide eyes. "NO! I mean... I'm not scared, really I'm not."

Harry watched her, trying to make sense of it all. She *seemed* scared, but that strange look he could only describe as guilt made him worry.

"I... I can do things," she finally whispered, so low that Harry had to think about what she'd said before he realized the meaning. "I... not like that. I've never seen that. But... some things."

His interest was piqued. Could she really be...?

With a shaking breath, Ginny held out her hand toward the crackling fire. Nothing happened as Harry's eyes darted between her hand and the flames. She growled and forced her hand out harder, making it shake in the process. The flames stayed where they were, unaffected.

Ginny swore under her breath and it made Harry smile, although he tried to hide it. She had a fiery temper at times, that was for sure.

Giving up, Ginny glanced around until she saw something she wanted. With a fierce scowl, she glared at a particular rock; it didn't move, or change color, or do anything that Harry hoped it would.

"Oh, why won't it work?"

"Ginny..."

“NO! I can do things. I’m not just making this up. I really can!”

He nodded and swallowed the rest of his words. His chest felt tight and Harry realized that it was hope he was feeling. What if Ginny was really magical, just that she’d been hidden away all these years and truly didn’t understand her talent? Well, it would certainly make things easier... and yet more complicated at the same time.

She huffed in frustration and then grabbed the satchel that sat at her feet. With a wary look at Harry, she thrust her hand inside and cried out. It took far too long for Harry to decide what on earth she was doing. By the time his brain connected what she was touching, Ginny’s hand was raw with red, angry blisters forming on the skin.

Harry dove and yanked the bag from her, discarding it on the dirt. “Ginny! Why did you—”

She was shaking and her face was tight from the pain, but there was also a satisfaction there that puzzled Harry. “I can make this work. I’ve done it before. It works best when I... when I need something.”

The blisters continued to form and they both stared at her hand. Ginny closed her eyes and rocked back and forth, concentrating. As Harry watched, the redness began to fade and the blisters got smaller and smaller until the pockets of fluid disappeared into the skin completely. The area was still pink—resembling a sunburn—when Ginny finally gasped in a deep breath.

“I did it!”

Harry was shocked. Even though he’d hoped she would be magical, the evidence that she was stole his breath away. “You... you’re like me.”

She shook her head and her cheeks bloomed pink. “No. I can’t do things like that. I just...”

“You’re a witch!” Harry laughed out loud and then nearly rolled off the log at the dirty look she gave him. “No, like... well, I suppose you’d think of it as a good witch. I’m a wizard. There are loads of people like us. It’s nothing to be ashamed over... in fact, it means you’re... special.”

Ginny’s eyes went wide and she flushed, spinning to stare into the fire, instead of looking at Harry. He wasn’t quite sure what her blush meant—Was she embarrassed? Was she worried? Did she... did she *like* him? Harry’s heart pounded in his chest at that thought.

With a quick glance back at the Auror to make sure he was still stunned, Harry slid closer to Ginny. “My name isn’t Shadow Phoenix,” he said quietly.

She looked at him, shocked. “But you said—”

It was his turn to have hot cheeks. “Er... yeah. It’s... sort of a name I use from time to time... when the Aurors, or other people are looking for me.”

Her brow was furrowed as she tried to decipher his meaning. “You’re still the good guy, though... like in the stories.”

He laughed softly. "I like to think so. At least, I'm trying to be."

She nodded and looked back at the fire, deep in thought.

"My name is Harry."

Ginny tested it on her tongue and Harry felt a surge of pleasure at hearing her say it. "I think I like that better. Shadow Phoenix—"

"Is ridiculous," Harry said with a smirk. "Believe me, I didn't pick it."

"Did... did the girl? The smart one."

Harry sensed something in her tone, but he didn't know what it meant. "Er... yeah."

Ginny nodded and seemed to dismiss it completely. "I like Harry."

The unease between them seemed to drift away, and then return as Harry thought about what he wanted to ask her. "Have you always lived in the cottage with just your mother? And what did she tell you about your magic? You don't have to answer if you don't want to. It's really none of my business."

She didn't answer for a long minute but then turned to look at him. "As long as I can remember," she said. "I used to dream about a place with other people—lots of loud people—but I haven't had that dream in a very long time. I think it was a happy dream, though." Her forehead creased and Harry fought the urge to press his finger to the wrinkle and make it go away. He wanted her to smile again, to hear her laugh and see her eyes sparkle.

"My mother told me that I was special," she said, her voice much quieter. "She said my abilities—the things I can do—are because of my hair." She tugged at a lock of it and glanced at Harry. "That I had to be protected. That's why she... That's why I stay where I stay."

Harry took a chance and reached out for her hand. She stiffened, but finally relaxed and let him wind their fingers together.

"You *are* special, Ginny, but you shouldn't be locked away. No one deserves that. And your hair isn't the source of your magic—it's just a part of who you are."

"But... people will try to hurt me, try to use me."

Harry sighed. "Maybe," he agreed, "but you're strong. There are bad things in the world, frightening things, and people the might want to hurt you, but there are also wonderful things. Magic is... it can be used for so many wonderful things, Ginny. If you could only see... The lights, the ones we're going to see... those are magic."

Her face lit up at the mention and Harry's insides burst into happiness. "Are they... can *you* make them?"

"Well, I suppose I could, if I knew the right spell," said Harry, "but I think these are different. They're... done in a special way. I think... I think you'll really like seeing them up close."

Ginny squeezed his hand tightly and nodded. "I can't wait."

"And... and I can show you more magic. I can teach you. I'm not great at it, mind you, but I know a few things."

The pink returned to her cheeks and Ginny smiled shyly. "I'd like that."

Harry pointed his wand at the fire and a jet of water came out, extinguishing the flames. Ginny startled, but a huge smile stretched her face. "I want to learn that one!"

He laughed heartily. "In time. I think you might do well with a wand."

"A wand?"

Harry held up his wand and her mouth formed a perfect 'O'. "I thought that was a key. You said it opened doors."

"I did. And it does—most doors, anyway. But it's also the thing that focuses my magic. Here... see what you can do." He held the wand out to her and Ginny lifted a trembling hand to take it. "It might not work well," he cautioned. "The wand chooses the wizard, so they say. But give it a wave and see what you can do."

Ginny lifted his wand reverently and her eyes widened. She felt something; Harry could see it in the way her whole countenance shone. With a furtive glance at him, she whipped her hand to the side and a huge bang sounded—a small sapling not far away exploded and Harry jumped off the log.

"Er... wow!"

Ginny's chest was heaving, but she looked incredibly pleased. Before she could try it again, though, Harry snatched the wand. "Let's just... try that later." The power in that single spell had shocked him. The control she had over her magic was amazing. Harry could do some things wandlessly, make some things come to him, levitate others if he was concentrating hard enough, but he'd never exploded something before. Ginny was powerful, that was for sure, despite her tiny size.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," she said with a small smile.

Harry stuffed his wand in his pocket after charming her pan clean and chuckled. "No, you... you didn't. We just need to get going."

Ginny seemed mollified, but she still looked eager to try magic again. Harry had a feeling she might be a handful when she was trained up properly, although he still couldn't wait to see what she would do.

"Harry?"

He pulled on his cloak and turned to Ginny, who was holding the Horcrux carefully with the wadded up cloth.

"What is this?"

The urge to snatch it out of her hand was great, but Harry also didn't want to alarm her. He didn't want something so evil, so vile to touch her.

"It's... it's a piece of bad magic," he said carefully, "created by a very, very bad wizard. I'm... Well, a group of friends and I are doing our best to make sure he's defeated. Sometimes that means we have to search all over for these cursed objects so we can destroy them."

She studied the cup and then him, before wrapping it up and stuffing it deep in the satchel. "So you *are* the good guy."

He laughed and shrugged a shoulder. "I suppose so. Harry Potter, out to save the world."

"Harry Potter?" The voice wasn't the one he expected and they both looked over to see the redheaded Auror staring at them both with wide eyes. "Are you *really*?"

Harry swore violently and pulled his wand, even though the man was still bound with ropes. He'd heard everything, most likely. Short of wiping his memory—and Harry was pants at memory charms—there was nothing Harry could do.

"We have to take him somewhere," he said through gritted teeth. It went against everything he believed, but Harry didn't think he had any options. The Auror knew his name, knew about the Horcrux, and who knew what else. Harry needed help to deal with this situation.

He swore again and leaned over the Auror, who paled considerably. "The Phoenix lives at 12 Grimmauld Place. *Stupefy!*" The man jerked and then was still. Harry turned and looked at Ginny, worried she might be scared now.

But she wasn't looking at him with fear, but amazement and something that made his chest roar.

"I'm taking you to my home," he said. "Just... just for a little bit. There are others that can help us. And then I'll take you to the lights, just as I promised."

She swallowed and watched him come closer, a blazing look on her face. "I trust you, Harry Potter." The words made chills run down his back, and his heart raced when she held the satchel out to him. "You need this. I'm sorry I took it. I didn't realize..."

Harry wanted to kiss her then, wanted to press his lips to hers until any doubt was gone. They looked at each other for a long minute before Harry took a shaky breath and told her the address of Headquarters. He didn't kiss her, but he did pull her close, wrapping his arm around her waist and summoning the stunned Auror to his side.

"Hold on."

* * *

Neville loved Hermione, he really did—not in a *romantic* way, of course—but in an I-only-realized-you-had-breasts-a-few-years-ago sort of way. She was a good mate, and had gotten them out of more scrapes than he could even remember. But if he had to spend another day cooped up with only her and Kreacher for company, he was going to go barmy.

There were only so many hours he could spend in the library at Grimmauld Place, and only so many hours he could hide away in his dark, depressing bedroom. Hermione had always been nice to Neville, even back when he was a pudgy, forgetful boy who was constantly losing his toad, but he'd never felt her equal. Harry had always been there to make the triangular friendship work; he was the buffer that Neville and Hermione needed to be on an equal plane.

Without him here, it felt odd. Stilted. As if neither of them could make a decision without hearing his opinion, without knowing what he wanted to do next. Neville supposed that was the right way to go about things, since Harry *was* the Chosen One, after all, but it still made him feel rather useless.

And Hermione wasn't fairing much better, it seemed. She'd even thrown a book early this morning when Harry still didn't contact them. Neville had expected her to rush right over to *Curses and Counter Curses for the Advanced* and lovingly stroke it, murmuring words of apology to the innocent tome, but she just growled and stared into the distance.

"Maybe we should..." Neville trailed off and realized he had no idea what to do next. Of course, they had a plan (how could they not when *Hermione* was with them) but the next step depended on destroying the cup first.

"It's useless without him, isn't it?" Hermione said, a hint of an ironic smile gracing her lips. "I mean, it's not like he's the only thing that keeps us going but..." She bit her lip as her words faded.

Neville felt a laugh bubble up inside him and let it spill out into the kitchen. The cold tea in his cup rippled when his hands shook with amusement.

"We're pathetic," he said.

Hermione smiled and then began to laugh with him as well. "We are, aren't we? You'd think two perfectly capable adults could occupy themselves while we wait for Harry to figure things out."

The picture of Harry muddling through while *charming* that innocent Muggle girl made Neville snort. "We'll be here forever!" he wailed dramatically.

"Remember that mess with Cho?" asked Hermione in an incredulous, but guilty whisper. "I thought I'd have to talk him through every single minute."

Neville had never seen what Harry saw in the girl, but he couldn't fault Harry for looking. Cho was pretty, but there hadn't been a whole lot going on other than that. And Harry had come to his senses not too long after the fiasco had begun.

"He was young, you can't really fault him for that," said Neville. "We all did foolish things."

Like kissing Hannah Abbott before you disappeared, his subconscious chided. He pushed the thought away and tried to remember something funny to think about. When all of this was over, he'd allow himself to think of any sort of future.

"Oh, I blame him completely," Hermione scoffed. "He was a fool for her."

"He was fourteen," said Neville. "If I remember right, you were busy mooning over Viktor Krum at

the time." Hermione's cheeks flushed and she pursed her lips in annoyance. Neville added a point to his mental tally; it wasn't often that he could make her have that expression. "Talk about your failed relationships!"

Hermione's eyes narrowed dangerously. "There was nothing wrong with Viktor."

"Other than he was pigeon-toed, flat-footed, could barely say your name—"

Hermione rolled her eyes, but laughed. "Fine. It was... it was awful. Oh! You! You just had to go and bring that up." Even her neck was flaming red now and Neville congratulated himself on not only flustering her, but occupying them both with something that was more pleasant than dwelling on the reasons that Harry wasn't back yet.

"You're just lucky Harry keeps all your secrets, you know."

Neville nearly choked. "Secrets? I don't have secrets!"

Hermione gave him a knowing look and opened her mouth, but snapped it closed when the crack of someone Apparating into the house was heard. They both instantly drew their wands.

He moved first, standing in front of Hermione when Harry's messy head of hair peeked down the staircase. It wasn't as if he didn't trust that Hermione could take care of herself, more that if someone was about to be cursed, he'd rather it be him; at least Hermione might know the countercurse to get him up and walking again.

Harry's wand was raised also, and he didn't venture further into the kitchen. An uneasy silence crept into the room.

"Verify," he said quietly.

Hermione sighed behind him, but Neville knew her wand wouldn't lower yet. Only Harry would ask them to confirm their identities that way. "What's the fifth principal exception to Gamp's Laws of Elemental Transfiguration?"

Harry's face eased into a smile. "That's easy. I don't even have to answer it. It's *definitely* you, Hermione."

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms as Neville laughed and lowered his wand. "You *need* to answer it, Harry!"

"How do you know I'm Harry?"

She glared, but Neville could see the muscles in her jaw clenching, holding back a smile. "Fine. Ask your question."

"What did you do to your schedule in second year?"

Neville snorted and turned to look at Hermione, wondering how she was going to get out of this. Teasing her about Lockhart had been their principle point of fun for many years.

Hermione cleared her throat primly and tucked her wand into the pocket of her jeans. "If you don't have to answer, neither do I."

"Come on, Hermione, didn't you decorate it with something? What was it?"

Neville couldn't hold it back any longer and began laughing. Harry hopped down the last few steps, followed by a rather meek looking face, shrouded in a black cloak. Her eyes were wide, taking the entire place in. Hermione hadn't noticed the guest in her attempts to get away from Harry's teasing.

"It was hearts, wasn't it?" Harry asked with a laugh. "Dancing all around old Gilderoy's name?"

"Stop it, Harry!" Hermione swiped at his chest, but her amusement and relief at seeing him was winning out over her annoyance. She eventually threw herself at him, clasping him in a hug that made his face go pale. "Don't you do that to me again, Harry Potter, or I swear I'll..."

Harry returned the embrace quickly and poked his finger into her side playfully. "You'll what?"

Neville turned away from the byplay to look at the young woman Harry had brought with him. This must be the Muggle girl, although how Harry had gotten her through the wards was still a question. She looked both terrified and highly annoyed. Her arms were wrapped around her middle, as if to protect herself from some harm that might come to her.

"Hi. I'm Neville." He held his hand out to her, but the girl only stared at it before looking at Harry once more.

"Oh! I'm sorry. This is Ginny. Ginny, these are the friends I was telling you about. Neville and Hermione." He moved closer to her side and only then did Ginny seem to relax, but it was marginal.

She shook Neville's hand but didn't move to shake Hermione's. "Nice to meet you," she mumbled. Neville saw something clutched in her hand, hidden in the folds of her cloak, but he didn't have time to investigate further.

Hermione seemed annoyed and Neville swore he could hear her jaw popping with how hard she was grinding her teeth. "Harry, could I please *speak* with you? Alone?"

The tension in the room shot up like a Dr. Filibuster's Fabulous Wet-Start No-Heat Firework and they all exchanged looks before Harry cleared his throat and steered Ginny closer to Neville. "I'll, er... I'll be right back."

He clapped Neville on the shoulder and leaned in close. "She's a witch."

Neville gaped after his friend. That certainly wasn't a very nice thing to...! Oh. Ohhhh! He turned back to the young woman and eyed her worried expression with new interest.

He laughed nervously and pulled out a chair at the table. "I'll bet you could use a cup of tea."

Ginny watched the heated whispers between Harry and Hermione, but nodded absently to Neville. "Thank you," she said.

He busied himself preparing her a cup and tried not to hear how obvious Hermione was being about her disapproval of Harry bringing someone into Headquarters. She wasn't *meaning* to be rude, but Neville couldn't really blame Ginny for being red faced.

"Can I take your cloak?" he asked after setting the tea in front of her. "Or your... er..." The item she'd been clutching was a frying pan. "Pan?" It was now resting on the table, quite close to her hand. He had no idea the significance, but he wasn't about to ask right now.

Ginny eyed him suspiciously before lowering the hood. "No thank you." Her bright red hair caught his attention immediately. It was long and shone brilliantly in the light from the fireplace and candles. She was very pretty, he decided, even when she was scowling into her cup.

"If you'd like sugar..."

"No, thank you," said Ginny again. Her eyes cut over to Hermione and Harry. It seemed that Harry was winning the hushed argument and Hermione wasn't happy about it.

Neville frantically tried to think of something to say that might distract Ginny. He had a hunch that she wasn't only irritated with being treated so poorly by Hermione. He'd seen that look on a number of faces through his years of friendship with Harry Potter. Sighing girls in the hallways often wore it after Harry would turn them down, or not even see them at all. He felt bad that her first meeting with them was going so poorly.

"So... you're a witch."

Ginny tore her eyes away from Harry and forced a smile on her face. "I suppose I am, although I don't care for the term. I had no idea I could do... magic until Harry told me that's what it was I was doing."

The idea was fascinating and boggled Neville's mind. "Do you... do you have a wand?"

Her brow furrowed for a moment and she sipped at her tea. "No. Harry let me use his this morning and I blew up a tree, but... I've never used one before."

He broke out in a loud laugh that startled Ginny and made both Harry and Hermione turn to look at him. "I'm sorry, you... you blew up a tree?"

Ginny's lips curved into a small, genuine smile. "Just a small one."

"Brilliant." He leaned back in his chair and relaxed. This one was a firecracker. Harry was certainly adamantly defending her against all of Hermione's arguments.

The laughter seemed to be the punctuation mark at the end of whatever Harry was saying, because he turned and stepped back across the kitchen, taking a seat next to Ginny.

"It was," Harry agreed with a grin and a sideways glance at Ginny. "Splintered it to pieces. I'd hate to see what you do when you get really worked up."

Ginny smiled, but it faded slightly when Hermione primly took a seat across from her. "You'll have

to excuse me, Ginny, but I had to make sure Harry took all the proper precautions when bringing you here. This is the only place we're safe and as none of us has ever met you before, we can't be too careful."

Neville wanted to ask Hermione what she was on about, but Harry glared at her. If Harry trusted Ginny enough to let her in on their secrets, then that was good enough for Neville. It wasn't until Neville realized how close Harry was sitting to Ginny that the scene started to make sense.

Hermione was jealous. Oh, she didn't fancy Harry, not at all, in fact, but she was used to being the voice of reason in his life. If there was a large decision to be made, Harry usually came to Hermione to discuss it, but he'd brought Ginny into their lives without even consulting Hermione, and he had defended her successfully against what Neville was sure were quite valid arguments. Hermione could feel the balance shift in the relationship and she never took well to change.

"I understand completely," Ginny said, her gaze fierce. Neville fought the urge to cheer her on. "After all, I don't know who you are either."

Harry was biting his lip just as much as Neville was, it seemed, but he looked extremely proud of Ginny for talking back.

"I er... I do have someone else with me," Harry said cautiously.

Hermione threw her hands up in exasperation. "Why not invite the whole Ministry—"

"Leave off, Hermione," Neville cautioned. They exchanged a look that promised swift retribution for his words later, but he'd worry then.

Harry winced. "No, this one she has my permission to be hacked off over. He's... he's an Auror."

The stunned silence in the room made Neville unsure whether he wanted to laugh or scream.

"An Auror?" Hermione asked hoarsely. "You brought an *Auror* here?"

Harry scowled at her. "There were *extenuating circumstances*, Hermione. I couldn't just leave him lying out in the forest when he'd heard me talk about Hor... er... I mean, the *item* I had with me, or heard me use my name."

"Well, he wouldn't have heard any of that if you'd stuck to the plan like we discussed."

They glared at each other and Neville cleared his throat, trying to decide the best way to intervene, or the best place to hide if they really got arguing.

Ginny turned to Harry. "She's supposed to be the smart one, right? That's what you told the man at the tavern."

Harry's anger fizzled and he stared at Ginny quizzically. "Er..."

Ginny turned to look at Hermione, a smirk of triumph on her face. "I'd think if she *was* so smart, she'd realize that bringing the Auror here was the best thing to do, considering he has knowledge that you don't want to share. Isn't this the best place for him?"

Harry laughed and leaned in, pressing his lips to Ginny's cheek. Neville was shocked at the familiar gesture, but also amused that Ginny had so abruptly and successfully made Hermione gape like a fish.

"She's right, you know."

"Oh, you would side with her!" Hermione pushed her chair away after glaring at Neville and stomped out of the room.

"I don't think she likes me," said Ginny. She sounded partially pleased, but a little contrite, as well.

"She'll get over it," said Harry. He was regarding Ginny with a look that Neville had never seen on Harry's face, not even when he'd been watching Cho Chang back in fifth year. There was definitely something between the pair that Neville wasn't catching completely, some shared moment or conversation that put them leaps and bounds beyond him at the moment.

"So, er... you mentioned fireworks last night?"

Harry smiled and so did Ginny. "I'm taking her, just as soon as we get the Auror secured. I... I'm sorry about that. I didn't have much time to decide and—"

"We're all right," said Neville firmly. "I know how it is. You can't always take the time to think everything through at every angle like Hermione's used to. Sometimes you have to leap before you look."

They shared a small chuckle and drifted off into awkward silence. Neville wasn't sure what to make of the change, even if he supported Harry. Where did Ginny fit into all of this? Was she going to join the fight or go back to where she'd come from?

Hermione stalked back into the room. "I've secured the Auror," she said tightly. "We'll make sure his memory is charmed correctly while you go see the celebration tonight."

Both Harry and Neville knew how much it was costing Hermione to give in to something she didn't believe in. Harry stood, letting Ginny's hand slide out of his. (Neville hadn't known *that* was going on beneath the table top!)

"Thank you, Hermione."

Ginny looked torn between her earlier impression of Hermione and the kind thing that she was doing. "Thank you."

Hermione's face softened and she chewed the side of her lip before smiling. "Be careful, please."

Harry grinned. "Always."

She gave him a look that Neville interpreted as 'sure, you're always careful—look what you brought home this time', but finally shook her head in exasperation. "Don't ignore your mirror! If that Auror wakes up and causes trouble—"

Harry's eyebrow rose slowly. "I know you're perfectly capable of handling an Auror by yourself,

Hermione." Neville tried not to laugh at Harry's attempted flattery. Maybe he did have more charm than Neville had ever suspected, it just came out differently than people expected. "And I trust Neville to back you up."

"Thanks, mate," Neville said dryly. He almost made a comment about the under the table hand holding, but Ginny already looked as if she'd had enough stress for the time being. Her face was paler than when they'd arrived.

"Harry... can you show me the restroom, please?"

Harry jerked to her side as she stood and he ignored the way Neville coughed pointedly as he helped her out of the room.

Hermione sighed loudly when they were alone. "What do you think is going—"

"Leave them alone, Hermione," said Neville. He stared at the door, remembering the secretive touches, concerned looks, and intensity shared. "He seems... happy."

Her mouth dropped open. "You think he... You can't be serious!"

Neville didn't know how to answer, but he supposed the truth was always a good course of action. "I think *Harry* is."

Chapter 9

Falling in Love at a Coffee Shop, Only With a Little Less Coffee Shop and a Lot More Creepy Old Magical Mansion

Harry leaned against the wall in the hallway after Ginny had nearly barricaded herself in the bathroom. He had no idea what she was thinking, but he had a feeling she might be crying in there.

The confrontation with Hermione was never going to be pretty, and Harry had taken a huge risk by bringing not only Ginny, but the Auror into headquarters. And Hermione had some valid points, but Harry didn't think it worth arguing over, and certainly not right in front of Ginny.

The mysterious redhead certainly had him tied in knots, but Harry found that he couldn't feel bad about that. Yes, the timing for developing feelings might not be the best, but it wasn't like he could go back in time and change things. Besides, it was probably just a little crush anyway. Despite Hermione's harsh words, Harry knew it wasn't just Harry's 'saving people thing' that drew him to Ginny—there was definitely something more there.

She was beautiful and fiery, and could defend herself quite well, even if she doubted it at times. And he knew she was a strong person, but there was a vulnerability about her sometimes when she looked at him that made him want to gather her in his arms and protect her from anything that might harm her. More than anything, Harry wanted to have the chance to know her, to spend time with her, and maybe see if what he was feeling was more than just a silly little crush.

He ducked into his bedroom and changed clothing before freshening up a little. At least he'd been able to wash his face and brush his teeth this morning before they'd left Hogsmeade. The dusty mirror in his bedroom called out 'you could really use a haircut, scruffy' before he ducked out and returned to his vigil in the hallway.

Ginny emerged from the bathroom with red-rimmed eyes and a sheepish expression. Harry almost asked about it, but then decided if she wanted to talk about it, she would.

"Are you hungry or—"

"No." She definitely didn't want to return to the kitchen and Harry couldn't blame her. While Neville had been warm and accepting, Hermione's cold reception hadn't earned her a new friend. "I mean... I will if you..."

"I'm fine," Harry said with a tight smile. He slid his hand into hers and led her to the sitting room. "Why don't we take some time to just... relax? We have time before the show this evening—it'll take us only a few minutes to get there."

When Harry sat, Ginny moved to stand near the Black Family Tapestry, although he didn't think she was seeing it at all. Her arms wrapped around herself and she seemed incredibly small.

"I don't like that... that thing you did when you brought us here."

Harry smiled. "Apparition. Me either. It's dead useful, though, when you need to get somewhere in a hurry. And it does help when you get used to it."

She gave him a skeptical look over her shoulder. "And I don't like it here. This place... it's not good. It feels like someone is always watching me."

Kreacher had done wonders with the place compared to when they'd first come to stay here, but Harry knew what Ginny meant. There was still a dark feel to the whole house, even without the memories the walls harbored.

"I don't plan to live here forever, you know," said Harry, surprising himself. It wasn't often that he allowed thoughts of the future to take hold. "But it shelters us for now, keeps us safe."

Ginny nodded, but he could tell she wasn't truly listening. Her defensive posture bothered him and he stood, moving closer. The burning desire to make her more comfortable or to at least ease her fears was growing. He didn't like seeing her like this, didn't like knowing she'd cried over something.

"Everything will be all right, you know."

Her large brown eyes turned up to him, full of doubt and worry. "I didn't mean to make things harder for you. With your friends, I mean. If you want to take me home..."

"Ginny." Harry rested his hand on her shoulder and she melted against him, shaking. The simple action made him feel horribly powerful and vulnerable at the same time.

"You didn't ruin anything. I'm sorry that you felt... threatened, or intimidated. I didn't mean for things to turn out that way at all and I... I should have thought more about what I was doing before I did it. I'm impetuous and it gets me in a lot of trouble sometimes." He smiled when the corner of her lip twitched.

"I'm one of your impetuous decisions?"

Harry's chest roared with the expression she gave him, mischievous and amused. "Absolutely," he whispered as he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers.

The kiss was soft and mostly innocent. Ginny seemed shocked, but unsure where to put her hands, unsure how to move. And, if he wasn't mistaken, she didn't breathe.

He smiled when he pulled back and saw the stunned look on her face. "But sometimes my impulsive decisions turn out to be the best ones," he said and slid his hands up to cup her face. The next kiss was more heated and Ginny relaxed into it, breathing through her nose and even making a sound deep in her throat when Harry tilted his head. Her hands wound into his robes and Harry forgot anything but the feel of her against him.

He had no idea how long they stood there, kissing and caressing, staring into each others eyes, but Ginny finally sucked in a shuddering breath.

"Your friends!" she whispered. "They could... We shouldn't... The girl." Her cheeks flushed and she

looked away.

Harry wasn't sure what she meant until the clues all fell into place in his mind. "Hermione? She and I aren't... We've never... Why don't we sit down?"

Ginny allowed him to steer her to the sofa, but she sat further away from him than he'd like and didn't take his hand. There was a steely expression on her face, as if she were about to weigh some large choice.

"Hermione and Neville are my family, Ginny," he said carefully. "My parents died when I was very young and I grew up... Well, it wasn't a good place for me. I met Hermione and Neville when I went to school and Hermione became, for all intents and purposes, an older sister. She mothered me horrible, annoyed the hell out of me many times, made sure I was eating enough, that my marks were what they should be, and did her best to keep me out of trouble. We're close, but not... not in the way you think."

Ginny chewed her lip thoughtfully. "She seemed so... so relieved to see you."

Harry rubbed his eyes under his glasses and tried to decide how much to tell her; Ginny already knew far more than she should, considering he'd just met her, but there was just something about her that called to him. Harry found himself wanting to tell her everything.

"It's sort of a hazard of the things we're forced to do," he said. Ginny's forehead creased, but she seemed to be truly listening. "Remember how we talked about the things we're trying to do to stop the evil man?" She nodded. "Well, they're sometimes dangerous, and we've come to rely on each other. I suppose we've all become very close."

"And now you've brought me here."

The simple statement said a lot. Harry shook his head and chuckled at the same time. He fumbled for her hand, mostly to reassure her that he didn't regret his choice, even though the consequences had yet to be fully known.

Ginny's arrival in his life—complete with frying pan—had certainly changed a lot of things. He was still the Chosen One, still destined to face Voldemort, still embattled in a secret war of espionage and shadows. And yet... And yet now there was this shining ray of hope seated next to him, with her innocent wide eyes and eager expression. Without meaning to, Harry felt himself actually considering what might lay beyond the task at hand.

"I brought you here," he said slowly.

Ginny laid her head against his shoulder and they sat together in comfortable silence. Harry's mind whirled. There was so much to consider. He needed to get the cup to Hermione so they could decide how to destroy it. And there were still two more Horcruxes to find before he could face Voldemort. The war had dragged on entirely too long and Harry was anxious to get it over with. A pinprick of terrifying fear drove into his heart at that thought, but like always, he forced it away.

Just one more day, he promised himself. One more day with Ginny and he would throw himself back into who he was supposed to be. He didn't know how Ginny would fit into his life still, but he only

wanted a chance to find out.

"I should check on the Auror," he whispered eventually.

Ginny was lax against him and he wondered if she'd fallen asleep, but she started at his words. "Do you think it's safe to leave it here?"

He smiled at her innocent question and felt bad for how he'd misled her somewhat concerning the nature of an Auror.

"Er... well, you see, I sort of... overstated how dangerous an Auror is." Ginny shifted to look at him, her expression suspicious. "He's definitely dangerous, but he's not an ogre or a troll. He's... he's a wizard, like you or me, but just... more intent on capturing me than the average bloke walking down the street." He wasn't explaining this well and the confusion on Ginny's face was evident. "I suppose you could say he's in charge of making sure people follow rules, but I don't exactly follow rules."

Her eyes lit up fiercely. "But... but you're the good guy!"

Harry laughed. "Well, yeah, to some people I am, but not everyone understands. I told you that I have to work in secret—that's why I use the code name, sneak around everywhere, and hide in dark places. It's not like I can announce to the world what I'm doing. The bad man..." he almost said the name but stopped himself just in time, "he would kill everyone if he knew what I was doing."

The blazing look returned to her face and Harry felt his insides twist pleasantly. "I understand. And I know there are things you can't tell me—that's all right."

A wave of affection for this brave young woman overcame Harry and he leaned forward to kiss her before resting their foreheads together.

"Is it enough that I want to?"

She smiled impishly. "For now."

Harry felt happier than he could ever remember being. He wound their hands tightly together. "Come on. Let's go check on that Auror, yeah?"

The man had been levitated onto a bed in one of the never used bedrooms and secured tightly to the frame.

"He looks..." Harry trailed off, worried that he felt so much concern for the man. Honestly, the Auror probably wasn't a bad person, it was just that he wanted to drag Harry into the Ministry, which was horribly corrupt. He was young and rather impulsive, and he'd certainly seen much less death and destruction than Harry.

"He looks like me," Ginny whispered and clung to his hand. "His hair, anyway."

Harry didn't think it was the same color, but he might be biased. The Auror's hair was cut short and Ginny's flowed freely all the way down her back in gentle waves. But there was something about

the chin that puzzled Harry. Could it be almost the same shape as Ginny's?

He looked back and forth between them before sloughing off the concern. "Nah, just a coincidence," he said. "There are probably loads of people out there with red hair."

Ginny didn't look completely convinced, though. "My mother... she said my hair was the source of my... magic—although she didn't call it that. She doesn't really call it anything, but she seems pleased when I use it. Maybe... could it be the source of his power too?"

Harry fought the urge to growl when Ginny mentioned her mother. Harry had never met the woman, but he didn't like the way she kept Ginny locked away.

"It's not in your hair," he said. "Look at mine, after all. What do you do with your magic?" he asked.

"Make things, mostly," Ginny said. She turned away from the Auror and looked at Harry. "I make glass flowers for her to sell in the village, and I also take care of things at the house—cooking, cleaning, washing, mending..." Her face flushed. "You don't want to hear about that."

"I do," Harry said. "I want to know everything about you."

"But... but my life is so *boring* compared to yours."

Harry laughed. "Do you know how many times a day I wish for a boring life? I would love to have to worry about getting my clothing clean or what to make for dinner."

She looked pleased. "I suppose I can understand that. You've done so much—you went to school to learn magic, you fight against evil, you—"

"You make me sound like some sort of super hero," Harry said with a wry laugh. "I assure you it's not glorious at all."

"No, but it is right."

He wondered how she knew, how she instinctively understood that every morning when he opened his eyes, he had to tell himself that what he, Hermione, and Neville were doing was right. And every time he had to make a hard decision, he thought about Dumbledore's words: choosing what is right over what is easy. And that's what it all came down to in the end.

"Can you show me the flowers you make?"

Ginny's face flushed and she immediately shook her head, but he could tell she wanted to show him. "I couldn't... I mean..."

"Please? I really want to see."

Ginny thought about it for a minute before sitting on the single chair in the room. She held her hand in front of her, cupping her fingers slightly.

"It might not work," she said quietly. "Sometimes... if I'm distracted..."

"That's okay," said Harry. "Just try. If there's anything I can do to help..."

Ginny eyed him for a moment before smiling. "Just hold still." She didn't look down at her hand while the other lifted and began to trace a delicate shape in the air, but kept her eyes on him.

Harry watched, mystified, as light began to build, ebbing and flowing from Ginny's fingertips, and creating the most beautiful rose petals he could ever imagine. They looked to be made from pure light.

"Sometimes I make different ones," Ginny whispered. "Tulips, or daffodils, irises... or other flowers. Roses are the hardest to get right."

Harry wanted to argue that it didn't look difficult at all, but he could see the concentration on her face and the way her brow furrowed.

"It's... lovely."

She flushed and looked down at the flower, working on the delicate edges and infusing light through each petal. The glow they took on amazed Harry: buttery yellow at the base and blending up to a crimson red at the tip. It looked like a glowing fire enveloped each petal.

When she was finished—nearly fifteen minutes after beginning—the most beautiful flower Harry had ever seen lay in her palm. The glass was so thin that he was afraid it would shatter from the slightest touch, but the color was so vibrant and perfect.

Ginny held it up for him to take and Harry did so, gingerly. He examined it carefully before setting it on the table next to the door.

While the object *was* beautiful, Harry couldn't help but think the artist was infinitely more amazing and exquisite. Watching her work had ignited a fire inside him that he didn't want to ever go out.

He kissed her and Ginny clung to him. "You are so very, very amazing," he whispered to her. They lost themselves in each other and were both breathless when he pulled back.

"I need... I need a few minutes with Neville and Hermione before we go," he said, his lips pressed against the soft, fragrant skin of her forehead. "I know they didn't make the best first impression—"

"Part of that was my fault," Ginny said. "I... I didn't like the idea of you and her together."

It was the first indication—besides her reaction when they kissed—that Ginny had given him that she was just as interested in him as he was in her. It made his whole world explode in happiness.

"We're not together, and we won't ever be together, I promise you."

Her smile widened and Harry pressed his lips to the end of her nose. He'd never been close to a girl before—not romantically, at least—and while the thought of how to touch her, how to hold her hand, how to kiss her, made his nerves flare up when he thought about it, once he actually did touch Ginny, Harry felt as if he knew exactly what to do. There were few second guesses and worried thoughts when she melted against his hand and gave herself over so fully to his kisses.

"Come on. I'm sure they're waiting for us."

Neville was sitting at the kitchen table when they walked in, food spread around him in an arc. "Kreacher," was all he said and Harry grinned.

"Let's eat before we go," Harry said. Ginny gave a quick glance around the room, possibly looking for Hermione, who wasn't there, before she sat and helped herself to the wide array of food.

Harry caught Neville's eye and waited for an explanation of where Hermione was. "Thought it was best if she went to lie down. She didn't sleep well last night."

A stab of guilt and concern shot through Harry, but it was something he would have to fix when he returned from Devon. And sometimes Hermione just needed time to get used to an idea before she fully accepted it.

"So... off to Devon," Neville said in between bites. "What's so special about the fireworks?"

Harry looked to Ginny to answer. It was her dream to see them, not his.

"I don't know," she said with a small laugh. "I just... Ever since I was a little girl I would watch them out my window until they faded from the sky completely. Something about them... called to me, if that makes sense. I never got tired while watching them and I never missed a single year. Plus, they always come on my birthday, so..."

Harry stared at her wide-eyed. "You didn't tell me it was your birthday."

Ginny shrugged a shoulder and picked at her food. "It's not a big deal. I'm getting what I wanted anyway, aren't I?"

He nodded absently while his mind whirled. He wanted to get her something special, something to remember today always. An idea began to form and he thought he might know the perfect thing.

He tuned back in when Neville was asking about her wandless magic. "... I've never heard of anyone being able to do that."

Ginny looked pleased, but also a little reluctant to talk about it. "I just do what I can. I mean, I suppose I never thought about it. I do want to learn what you know."

"Hermione would love to show you," Neville said with a hesitant smile. "I know she comes across rather... as a know-it-all, but she's brilliant, really."

Harry appreciated Neville's loyalty, but he had a feeling Ginny might not want to deal with Hermione's strong personality anytime—

"I think I'd like that."

He was shocked to hear how sincere she seemed and grinned at her. "She really is brilliant. She got us both through school when we'd likely have just barely passed on our own. She might enjoy the challenge, although you might surprise her, too."

He and Neville exchanged a look. Hermione was likely to get flustered by Ginny's ease with using her magic wandlessly—something Hermione had never been able to master in all her attempts—and Ginny wasn't the type to back down when challenged. It would be interesting to see.

They finished lunch and Ginny set about cleaning things up. Harry watched her move effortlessly around the kitchen, smoothly levitating plates of food off the table and humming the whole while.

"So..."

Harry flushed when Neville stared at him, one eyebrow raised and head tilted toward Ginny. "Shut it," he hissed quietly. He could take some good natured teasing as well as anybody, but he didn't want to make Ginny feel uncomfortable when this thing between them was still so new.

"I think she's great," said Neville. He held his hands up in surrender, but Harry knew there would be more teasing later. Epic teasing, no doubt. Neither of them was the type to let something like this skate by without comment. If the tables were turned, Harry wouldn't lose time before making Neville choke on his tongue.

"We'll probably be back tomorrow morning. She'll want to stay and see them until they fade." He purposely did not look at his friend while saying this. It was too good an opportunity for Neville to pass up, however.

"You er... have everything you need?"

Harry shot a glare at him, praying Ginny didn't hear and read too much into the words. He certainly wasn't thinking about her like that... Okay. Fine. He'd thought about it, but that didn't mean he expected anything more than a little kissing to happen tonight. And he wanted to hold her in his arms while they talked about everything. But that would be plenty.

"We'll manage. And when I get back we'll deal with the cup."

Neville gave a nod. "Hermione already has a theory about the next place. She thinks it might be in Hogwarts."

Harry contemplated that while he watched Ginny. She was arguing with Kreacher over doing the dishes, and losing spectacularly, but her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkled with amusement.

"It's an idea, although that still leaves a lot of ground to cover."

"We've been lucky so far," said Neville. "I thought we were done for this last time when Dawlish saw me."

Harry whipped around. "Are you sure he saw you?"

"Positive. He went to Gran's looking for me." A sly smile spread over Neville's face. "But Gran wouldn't give him anything and she smashed a vase over his head."

Harry wanted to laugh, but the idea of Neville's grandmother being in danger made him worry.

"She's gone into hiding, but said not to worry about her. She's a tough old bird and she'll make it through."

"You're sure?"

Neville laughed. "I offered to go check on her. You should have heard the string of words out of her mouth—I didn't know she even *knew* some of those! She told me what I was doing was more important than anything," his cheeks flushed, but he looked pleased, "and that if I sacrificed that for tucking an old lady into bed, I was a fool of the highest order."

Harry laughed. "I suppose she's right."

"She'll be fine," Neville said. "I have faith in her ability to take care of herself. Besides, we're getting near the end anyway, yeah?"

Harry let out a sigh and rubbed his face, pushing his glasses up onto his forehead. "I hope so. It's been far too long. Too many years spent blundering around in the dark with people getting killed."

Neville's forehead creased. "It is. I can feel it."

Harry wasn't sure if Neville was just being supportive or whether there was more to his feeling, but it felt good to have his encouragement either way. Ginny was watching them from across the room as she stood helplessly out of Kreacher's way. Harry met her gaze and they exchanged smiles.

"You'd better get going. Hermione gave me this map to give to you." Neville slid a folded paper into Harry's hand. "She really does want you to have a good time, Harry."

"Tell her... tell her thanks."

"Got your cloak?" he asked Ginny. She took it off the back of one of the chairs and draped it around her. "And your pan?" he added with a grin.

"I have to know," Neville said. "What's with the pan?"

"Don't underestimate the power of a good whack upside the head with a skillet," Harry said with a laugh. Ginny's cheeks flamed and she quickly slid the pan beneath the folds of her cloak.

Neville braced himself on the table, he was laughing so hard.

"I know!" Harry said. "Frying pans, who knew?"

Chapter 10

A Rose By Any Other Name Wouldn't Be a Rose At All Now Would It?

The field that stretched behind the Burrow, wrapping three sides of the property, was such a bright shade of green that it almost hurt Molly's eyes to stare at it too long. The rain that had been so oppressing and consuming in the Spring had obviously been worth something.

And the day was so very bright and warm—a far cry from the misty, cloying days that only seemed to remind her of the war that was sure to erupt openly at any time.

It had been like this once before, back when the children had been very little: the same breath-squeezing feeling of *something* about to burst forth at any minute. Molly could only liken it to a soap bubble—growing and growing, so large that the impending burst might just destroy everything around them.

But there were still days that she woke wondering if it was all some sort of strange, horrifying, bewildering dream. There were very few signs of war, even though she wasn't naive enough as some witches and wizards to believe the Death Eaters and You-Know-Who would never come out of hiding. And for those few moments, Molly clung to the warmth and comfort of her family.

They would be at the Burrow later today, once she began preparing a late lunch they would straggle in, sometimes bringing friends with them, other times arriving alone with forlorn expressions.

It wasn't a day of celebration—not at all—but sometimes it helped to think of it like that. Over the years, they'd tried to approach August eleventh in many different ways; they'd tried wallowing in grief over the loss of little Ginevra, they'd tried treating it as a funeral, they'd tried acting casual and only arriving moments before the fireworks started, and they'd tried to treat it as a jovial family event complete with feasts and laughter.

Molly wasn't sure which approach worked the best; they all ripped at her heart when she allowed herself to think of the reason they'd started the tradition in the first place.

It was the year after Ginevra was taken, and Molly had locked herself away in her bedroom on the week of her baby girl's birthday. Arthur had been wonderful with the boys—taking care of them all on his own and doing his best to keep up with their antics while Molly staggered under her grief. And once the Burrow was quiet with everyone tucked into their beds and windows charmed secure, he would come and take her into his arms. Some nights he would cry with her, others he would simply hold her, rocking her side to side, and let her fall apart. Only once did he suggest that they try for another baby, but that had made Molly cry even harder; there would be no more Weasley babies for her, she couldn't bear the thought of trying to replace Ginevra.

Arthur started the fireworks as a way to vent his own frustration and fears. It amused the boys and gave them something to look forward to all year. Molly watched from her bedroom window that first year, wondering how on earth lighting up the sky with magical fireworks was a way to grieve until

Arthur came back in, smelling of gunpowder and wearing a satisfied smile. And she understood.

"It's my way of telling Ginevra that we haven't forgotten about her and as long as she sees the sparks in the sky... we'll always want her home."

The next year, Molly still watched from the window, but she opened the pane of glass and let the children sit in the garden, huddled together, to watch the lights. In the ensuing years, the show had grown from a few Catherine wheels to a performance that took hours and hours to prepare. And with every single spark that Molly saw dancing in the sky she sent up with a wish that wherever her daughter was—still alive and simply 'lost', as her hand on the clock pointed to, or gone on to the next world—little Ginevra would know that the love of her family was still there.

Percy was the first to arrive in the morning—he'd taken the day off at the Ministry, even—to help set up. Molly suspected that he desired a good home-cooked breakfast, as well. He'd insisted on moving out to his own flat immediately after taking the job at the Ministry, but he often straggled back in just as her other children did, craving the warmth of the family kitchen.

Ron had insisted that the twins needed help today and since he was on suspension from the Aurors—something that *still* made Molly's blood boil when she thought about it—but she knew they'd close the doors to their shop and begin appearing once lunch was set out.

Arthur had gone to meet Charlie at the Portkey office, and Bill and Fleur would straggle in as the day went on.

Molly closed her eyes as tears began to well there. Twenty years ago today she'd welcomed the last of her children—a squalling, red-faced little girl—into her heart. And no matter the circumstance or distance, a part of her heart would always be lost until the missing member of her family walked in that back door.

"Mum?"

Molly swiped at the tears that had leaked out and tried to turn away from Percy's concerned gaze. She scattered another handful of feed for the chickens.

"Bright out here today," she said in a choked voice. "We should bring the tables outside for lunch."

He'd seen her crying, but Percy was good about not pushing for her to explain. He understood perfectly. They all did.

"Bill, Charlie and I can take care of that," said Percy firmly. "It's a brilliant idea. We don't see the sun much these days..." He trailed off and shifted awkwardly.

The return of the soap bubble, Molly reminded herself wryly.

"Fred and George have promised a spectacular show," she said, forcing a smile. "And you know Ron will be right in the middle of it."

Percy frowned, his forehead wrinkling in concern. "I worry about him, Mother."

Molly sighed as her thoughts turned to her youngest son. Ron was so very... lost. He'd thrown himself into Auror training with fervor, but anyone who truly knew him could see the vacant expression that overtook his features at times. It was almost as if he'd joined the Ministry simply to have something to do, not out of a deep seated obligation to do good or to help others. And while he was good at his job, she knew he wasn't truly happy. The boy needed direction that was for sure.

"He'll manage," she said, even though she wasn't sure if she believed it or not. Ron was a searcher. He was always *looking* for something—something to fulfill him, something to occupy him, some place where he truly fit.

She only hoped that he would stumble upon it one day. Or perhaps something would come along to knock some sense into the boy.

"Well, he's certainly become the talk of the Ministry," Percy said with a shake of his head and a wry smile. "And while I don't approve of Ron breaking the rules by going off alone, it is quite amusing to see Dawlish walking around sporting a knot on his head."

Molly bit her lip rather than laugh at the unfortunate soul. Arthur's stories of the overzealous Auror were enough to wish for a small bit of comeuppance for the man.

"I can't imagine why the healers didn't do something to charm away the swelling."

"Sometimes," Molly said carefully, "we learn more from the lumps we take. Perhaps they thought he could use a reminder."

Percy bit his lip as well and they shared an amused glance before linking arms and walking toward the back porch.

"I take it as a lesson to never underestimate the power of a witch," Percy said. "Who knew that an eighty year old witch could best an Auror with nothing more than a crystal vase and a well-aimed banishing charm?"

Molly chuckled softly. "You'd do well to remember that if you ever find a young lady to bring home."

Percy's cheeks flamed and he cleared his throat. "It *is* a nice day outside today, don't you think?"

* * *

Hermione stared at the empty kitchen and then forced herself to gather up the books, maps, notes, and various other parchments scattered across the table. Distraction wasn't working today, not with Harry off traipsing around the countryside and Neville pulling away, lost in his own mind at the moment.

Grimmauld Place wasn't the best place to be when thoughts turned dark. Despite Kreacher's best efforts—and it *was* a remarkable transformation, honestly—the entire place still had a drab quality about it that clung to every surface, seemed to ooze from the very walls.

Years of being Harry's friend meant a lot of time lost in contemplation, a lot of time spent planning

and re-planning, and days wasted with worry.

She loved him, that was for sure, but there was a quality about Harry Potter that drove Hermione nearly insane. His nobility drove her barmy, and he was self-sacrificing to a fault most times. But it was the way he refused to communicate that really pushed her toward the edge of sanity.

Harry didn't talk much about anything. They all knew the steps that had to be taken—only the snake and one more Horcrux left—but it had been an excruciating few years to get to this point.

If only Professor Dumbledore had been able to impart more wisdom before he was killed in their seventh year at Hogwarts—but he'd only begun to suspect Horcruxes a few years before and discovered the truth not long before he'd been killed by invading Death Eaters, and that traitor, Severus Snape.

Even thinking about the man made Hermione's insides curl in hatred. At first she'd been torn where his allegiances were—was he Dumbledore's man, as many in the Order hoped, or was he playing them all for fools? Harry's dark glares and whispered threats had finally begun to sway Hermione to believe that Severus Snape was Slytherin to the core—only out for what benefited him the most. It was likely they'd never truly know where his loyalty lay.

Two more.

It had become a mantra with the three of them, counting down the number of Horcruxes to go until.... Well, until it was *over*.

She clamped her eyes closed and forced the terrifying thought out of her mind. All stories had to have a climax, all confrontations had to have a final fight, all lives must...

NO!

She would not think about that now. Hermione had promised Harry on that pitch black night that she wouldn't dwell on it, and would never, ever tell Neville what they suspected. It was something Harry couldn't even bring himself to face. She saw the weight of what they suspected—that Harry himself might be a Horcrux—every single day on his face, and knew that despite their promise, he thought of it often.

Just thinking of Harry having to face Voldemort made Hermione's chest feel as if a hippogriff had sat on her. She knew Harry would willingly, bravely walk into the confrontation, head held high, but she also knew he was terrified of doing it.

For now, it was still unspoken between them, a whisper of a possibility that they would *never* voice. It pulled at them—mostly at Harry—while they worked, and at times Hermione worried that Harry was losing focus.

Like this little excursion with the girl, Ginny.

Hermione pondered the girl as she absently put the books into place on shelves.

Ginny was an enigma. She had certainly turned Harry's head, that was for sure, but Hermione

couldn't quite grasp why he was spending time on something so... frivolous. Harry had never been one to lose himself in flirtatious glances, batting eyelashes, promised kisses. Yes, he'd had a very brief dalliance with Cho Chang when he was young, but he hadn't even mentioned another girl since her.

Until this morning when he'd turned up with the vibrant, wide-eyed girl, their hands clasped and that *look* in his eye... And Hermione had known he was gone. His mind was thoroughly entrenched in this new idea, this new occupation.

No matter how she hissed at him that he was wasting time, that people were *dying*, for Merlin's sake, Harry wouldn't be swayed away from the idea of taking Ginny to see the fireworks. He scoffed at Hermione's idea that this might all be some Death Eater trick to lure Harry to his demise, and assured her that Ginny was perfectly innocent and that he would be back to the Horcrux hunt tomorrow.

It was the passion with which he spoke, the fire that shone in his eyes that finally convinced Hermione to stop arguing with him. And she'd been completely shocked at the familiarity between Harry and Ginny when they interacted, the soft touches and intense looks.

If she hadn't known better, she would say Harry was falling in love. But Harry didn't fall in love. He didn't even know what love was!

And Neville was no help at all! His whispered, "I trust Harry, Hermione," had broken her argument completely. And she'd excused herself to gather fresh supplies for Harry's journey.

She put the last book on the shelf and rested her head against it. There was nothing to do until Harry came back. He insisted they wait to destroy the Horcrux, and they honestly had no idea where the next one was located. The snake would have to be the last to go, they all knew. Voldemort was keeping Nagini close to him at all times.

A small bell sounded and Hermione snapped to attention. The Auror was waking up. The charm she'd placed on the room was alerting her to his movements. Quickly, she gathered a tray—avoiding Kreacher's glares and hissed mutterings about how she didn't trust him to do his job—and hurried up the stairs.

The Auror was enraged when she opened the door. His livid screams and swearing which had been suppressed by the silencing charm hit her full-force when she stepped inside. They traded glares and Hermione studied his rattled appearance: hair matted to his head with sweat, fists clenched furiously against the ropes binding him to the bed.

"You let me out of here or so help me I'll..."

She was unimpressed with his string of threats and vulgar obscenities. Harry could be quite creative with his language at times and she'd heard far worse, although some of the originality the Auror was displaying amused her.

"If you'd prefer, I could leave you alone," Hermione said daintily and turned to go, taking the tray laden with food with her. His words died, although he was still huffing and struggling against the bindings. Hermione smiled to herself and spun on her heel. "I knew you could be reasonable."

"Let me out," he said through clenched teeth.

"Not going to happen. Sorry." She smiled sweetly at him, pleased that it made his face turn even redder. She certainly wasn't about to untie him, not when he was so out of control. Perhaps if he calmed down some she might let him have use of one hand so that he could feed himself. Otherwise, she'd summon Kreacher up and ask him if he could feed the man, bite by bite.

"And give me back my wand!"

Hermione actually snorted at his demand and summoned the single chair before sitting slowly on it. "You would get much further if you were pleasant, you know."

The Auror swore and slammed his head back onto the bed before glaring up at the ceiling.

"Give me back my wand... *please*," he tried again, gritting his teeth so firmly that she could hear his jaw pop.

Hermione let one eyebrow rise in amusement and shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

"I'm an Auror, ya know," he spluttered. "What you're doing is illegal!"

She wanted to point out that holding him here against his will was illegal whether or not he was an Auror, but she didn't think semantics would get her far with this one. "I'm sure we'll release you in time. But for now..." She trailed off, mostly because she wasn't sure how much to say to him. He already knew too much. Probably the best thing to do was to wipe his memory and drop him in the middle of Diagon Alley, but Harry had said to keep him here.

The man was still fuming, but he had stopped making the bed shake with his struggling. Instead, he looked exhausted, and the side of his face was puffy and swollen where Ginny had hit him with the frying pan.

"Are you in pain?" Hermione asked. "I can heal your face for you. And if you're calm, we can discuss untying one of your hands so you can eat."

He glared at her, his eyes cataloguing everything about her. Hermione felt her face heat; she hadn't even thought of taking precautions and charming her appearance. It wouldn't matter anyway, not when she did the memory charm.

"My face is fine," he spat. "But I am hungry."

She knew she had won a point when his second words were said with a longing glance at the tray, and Hermione congratulated herself on gathering such a large array of food. The Auror was big—tall with wide shoulders—and she thought he'd likely have an appetite more like Neville's than Harry's. Harry rarely ate enough.

Cautiously, Hermione lifted her wand and cast a healing spell. The swelling began to reduce, but the bruising beneath it was still there. There was no charm to ease it away, and the only thing she'd ever discovered that worked was Bruise Paste from that silly joke shop in Diagon Alley. Sadly, they were fresh out of it and making a trip expressly for that purpose wasn't feasible right now. She'd

just have to take that into account when she gave him a new memory—the bruise would have to be explained.

The Auror scrunched up his face a time or two, experimenting to see if it still bothered him, but he seemed pleased, or at least content that she hadn't made it worse.

"Promise me you won't try anything," Hermione said, focusing a steely gaze on him.

"Yeah," he drawled, "like you'd believe anything I say. Probably some Death Eater in disguise..."

She gasped and lurched away from him. "I am *not!*" She yanked back the sleeve on her robes and shoved her bare forearm into his view, proving there was no dark mark. "You can't charm over them, you know."

"I know, but you could be using Polyjuice," he pointed out smugly. "Betcha didn't think of that one!"

Hermione took a breath to begin arguing, but snapped her mouth shut. Really, it was ridiculous to fight with him, especially when he was strapped so pathetically to the bed. His words were his only weapon, and he seemed well equipped to use them.

"Then I suppose you'll just have to take the chance that I *am* a Death Eater and I've poisoned the food just so I can get enjoyment out of watching you either starve to death or slowly die in front of me."

All smugness left his face and he stared at her. His stomach rumbled and Hermione knew she'd won. He might be wary of her, but she didn't think he actually believed she was a Death Eater.

After untying his left hand and listening to him grumble about how hard it would be to eat with his off hand, she sat back and studied him.

She didn't know his name and hadn't seen him at Hogwarts. It was likely he was older, although she certainly didn't remember anyone with such vivid hair in the years before her. He was either quite young looking for his actual age, or he'd been schooled elsewhere.

"You didn't go to Hogwarts."

He stopped stuffing his second sandwich in his mouth and gaped at her. "Is that a question?" he mumbled through chicken and ham.

She winced and averted her eyes from his bad eating habits (living with two men should have prepared her, she supposed, but she'd been able to cull most of the worst of Harry and Neville's habits from them) and watched a point above his head.

"Not necessarily. I just don't remember you."

He grunted and finished off his bite. "Didn't go."

Hermione thought he sounded slightly bitter. "Durmstrang? Beauxbatons?"

He was quiet, trying to figure out a way to spoon the soup into his mouth gracefully. Finally, he tossed the spoon aside and lifted the whole bowl to his face.

"Neither."

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. "You're making this difficult, you know."

He smirked and finished off the broth. "I'm sorry. I thought this was a kidnapping, not a dating service. Unless this is some kind of sick, twisted interrogation technique?"

The urge to hex him grew and Hermione's fingers tightened on the wand tucked into her arms.

"I'm just trying to place you," she said. "Trying to decide which side you belong to."

"The good side," he said firmly.

"That depends on your perception, I'm afraid," said Hermione. "Everyone believes in their own causes, don't they?"

"And which cause do you believe in?" he asked as he swiped the back of his hand against his mouth and relaxed back onto the mattress. "You and Harry Potter." He said Harry's name with disgust and it made Hermione wince. "Or should I say Shadow Phoenix!"

"You don't know a thing," whispered Hermione.

"He disgusts me, you know," the Auror said. "Sneaking around, stealing whatever he wants... He's supposed to be some sort of hero, you know. My Mum read us stories when we were little, told us how brave and strong he was... He's nothing but a *thief!*"

Hermione slid to the front of the chair, her teeth clenched. "You have *no* idea what you're saying. Harry is the bravest... the most loyal... He's doing *everything* while the Ministry does *nothing*. Bunch of blind fools! They blunder around, pretending to be in control when all the while Death Eaters are pulling the strings. You want to know who the Minister is? It's certainly not Pius Thicknesse! It's You-Know-Who!"

Her passion either shocked him or her words had given him something to think about. He stared at her with wide eyes and she could practically see the wheels turning in his mind.

"No... no... we would.... We would know..."

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms again. "Would you? You're content, just like every other witch and wizard in Britain, to pretend you don't see the signs. Dumbledore dying wasn't enough for you? You have to have someone shove it in your face before you truly believe that you're working for the *wrong side!*" Her whole body shook as she stood in front of him. A nagging thought that she'd gone too far this time entered her mind, but the stricken look on his face indicated she was actually getting through to him.

"I didn't... There's..." His words drained away as quickly as his energy, and he sagged against the restraints. "I didn't know."

She really should obliviate him now, take the memory of this whole entire day away and replace it with something mundane. The energy to do it, however, was too great. Hermione slumped into her chair and covered her face with her hands.

"I shouldn't have said anything. Harry will be... he'll be so angry."

The Auror was quiet for a long time, mulling things over. "Why all the secrecy?" he asked finally. "If the Ministry is... If it's really You-Know—"

"It is," Hermione said firmly. "Most likely, they're using the *Imperius* curse, but I don't know that for sure. And we have to stay in the shadows to keep safe. Professor Dumbledore came out openly against You-Know-Who and was murdered for it. Until we're ready, we have to stay hidden."

"Are you his girlfriend?" The Auror asked. "Harry Potter's I mean, not... not You-Know-Who's."

The way his face flushed at his inadvertent implication that she could be the girlfriend of Voldemort made her smile. "No," she said firmly. "Just a very old friend."

The Auror's blue eyes met hers and he looked as if he wanted to ask more, but shook it away. Hermione wondered what it might have been. "So... there are more of you? Fighting?"

"More like resisting currently," Hermione corrected. "But, yes. There are a group of us working toward his downfall."

"I want to join." His fervent words, so strong and immediate took Hermione aback. "No, I mean it. All this time..." He blew out an exasperated breath and shook his head against the bed. "He killed my mother's brothers, you know. In the first war. And I thought I was fighting against him, but if what you say is true," he looked at her for confirmation before continuing, "then I've only been helping him. I won't do that any longer."

A thrill shot through Hermione, but she knew better than to release him immediately. This was something she needed to speak with Harry about.

"I'll think about it," she said quietly. "Tomorrow, after Harry gets back—"

"I can't wait that long!" The Auror tensed and lifted his whole body off the bed in one swift jerk. "I have somewhere to be tonight! Somewhere important!"

Hermione shook her head swiftly. "Nothing will happen before I can talk to Harry."

"You don't understand—"

"Whatever it is will have to wait," Hermione said. She stood and summoned the food tray to her. "You're not going anywhere—"

"My family!" he roared. "I *have* to be there." If he hadn't been so adamant, so passionate—even more than when she'd first come in and he'd demanded to be released—Hermione might not have turned around.

He took a shaky breath and pleaded with her. "It's a tradition. Every year we have to light off the

fireworks. If I'm not there—"

Hermione gasped and leaned heavily on the small table near the doorway. "Are you... What is your name?"

He seemed to weight telling her before he sighed. "Ron Weasley. My family is from Devon. We light the—"

"You light the fireworks off every year to commemorate the birth of your sister," she repeated what she'd read in the article *The Daily Prophet* had run several years ago. "Of course! I should have made the connection!" Now she could see the resemblance to the old photograph, even though years had passed since it had been taken. "I've read all about you, of course, how your sister was taken and how your parents wouldn't allow their other children to go anywhere, and how stricken you all were by the tragedy. It wasn't a very well written article, if you don't mind me saying, and I always wondered what had happened over the years..."

Ron gaped at her with his mouth open. Hermione realized she was rambling and trailed off.

"Er... yeah. That's us," he said and slumped back down. "I have to be there."

Hermione was torn. She needed to talk to Harry about this before she just let him go. If he was just tricking her... She didn't think he was, but it wouldn't be the first time she'd been persuaded by an emotional argument.

"I do understand," she promised. "And I'll... I'll do everything I can to make sure you're there before they light off."

His jaw clenched and he looked as if he might argue, but then nodded and looked away. His eyes glossed over, however, and he looked a million miles away.

"I just need to speak with Harry first."

But he didn't answer, instead, he was staring at the delicate glass rose that Hermione had noticed when she'd come in. Neville had told her about Ginny's ability to create the flowers after Harry and Ginny had left.

"Where did you get that flower?"

"I... Harry's... *friend* made it." Hermione couldn't bring herself to call Ginny Harry's girlfriend, even though she felt that was the title that fit best. It was far too early for labels, anyway.

Ron looked puzzled. "My grandmother used to make them," he said absently, still entranced by the brilliant color of the petals. "I don't remember her—she died before I was born—but my Great Aunt Muriel has a whole shelf full of them. I've never seen another one like it. I've seen other flowers, but not the roses..."

Hermione set the tray down and lifted the glass flower, in awe at how perfect it was. "Harry told Neville that Ginny made it from thin air, without a wand even. I've never even heard of that before."

Ron's face paled completely; as if all the blood had drained completely from his face. "That... that shouldn't be possible."

"It's incredible," Hermione agreed. A spark of inspiration lit off inside her brain and she gasped, clutching the flower so tightly in her hand that one of the petals fell off and shattered on the floor at her feet. "No... no, it can't be..."

Chapter 11

Pyrotechnic Moments and Pilfered Memories... That Sounds Like a Song!

Ginny clung to Harry, her eyes squeezed tightly against the uncomfortable press of... whatever it was he'd called it again. Apparition? Appretiction? She shook the thought away with the slightly dizzy feeling traveling that way made her experience.

"All right?" Harry asked, barely a mumble in her ear. Every inch of her skin prickled in shiver and thrill. She couldn't do more than nod her answer; he was too close.

Ever since their kisses at Harry's house, Ginny felt herself spinning out of control. It was a pleasant, consuming feeling, and she felt positively high from just the feel of his hand in hers. And yet there was so much going on in her head that she wasn't sure how to cope with any of it, really.

The world outside her cottage wasn't the terrifying place it had always been painted in her mother's stories. Yes, there were still bad men who did horrible things, but there were good, strong heroes who fought against evil.

She was magical and it wasn't something she needed to be ashamed of, or secret away from the world in fear of them stealing her abilities. There were wonderful, amazing things that she could learn if she were taught.

Ginny felt a little like one of the girls in the faded storybooks she'd read all her life, the ones who discovered the world and fell in love all in the space of four pages. To be honest, she wasn't quite sure if what she felt for Harry was love—how was one supposed to *know*, anyway?—but she was willing to explore it some more. She only knew that no one had ever believed in her the way Harry did. Her mother, it seemed, only wanted to protect Ginny and hold her back, while Harry was intent on giving her opportunities and showing her everything he could. The opposition of those two sentiments nearly overwhelmed her in their differences.

"Let's walk for just a bit," said Harry. He pointed up toward a luscious green hill that would give them a spectacular view of the whole area. "That'll be the best place."

The warm summer day thrilled Ginny and she felt like skipping, twirling around in the wavy grasses until she was too dizzy to stand any longer. With a girlish giggle and a tug on Harry's hand, she took off at a run, weaving a crooked path toward their goal. Harry watched with amusement and even laughed when she spun around and around and finally tipped over.

Ginny lay staring up at the brilliant blue sky and let the sweet smell of the summer grass intoxicate her.

"Is the whole world like this?" she asked when Harry's shadow fell over her.

He was quiet for a minute before shaking her head. "Sadly, no. It's beautiful here, though. There are some scary places, but some lovely ones, as well."

She wanted him to promise to take her to them all, that he would hold her hand while they visited together and tell her all about everything, but Ginny somehow thought that it was too much to ask Harry to make those sorts of promises. It wasn't fair to ask, anyway, not when she knew just a small portion of what he was up against. Her experiences might be limited—having only read about evil from fairytales—but she could see the heavy burden that lay on his shoulders, the dark shadows that framed his eyes. He was already giving her so much by bringing her here.

She rolled over to lie on her stomach, scrunching her nose and laughing when a piece of long grass tickled her face.

“Have you ever had a crown of flowers, Harry?”

He laughed and sank down next to her, shedding his heavy robes and stuffing them into the rucksack that he'd brought with them. Ginny wanted to ask what was in it—she knew his friend Hermione had packed some things she thought were necessary, but Harry had shoved something deep into it and smirked at her right before doing that squeezing-travel-thing.

“Can't say I ever have,” he mused and turned his face up toward the sun, closing his eyes. He looked very young, Ginny thought, in the bright sunlight, and hardly like a hero at all.

“Well, the first thing you need to do is to find just the right flower...” Ginny chattered away while she gathered long stems of flowers and grass, dumping them all in his waiting lap. He seemed content just to listen, and kept a watchful eye on her, an amused smile twisting his lips. As she worked, she instructed him thoroughly on just the right way to coil and weave the strands, making sure the flowers were evenly spaced and would hold tightly together. When she was finished, she presented Harry with a vibrant crown of flowers and placed it on his head.

He laughed loudly and tried to force it onto her head, but she insisted he keep wearing it. Together, they gathered the makings for a second and Ginny helped him weave this one himself, patiently coaxing his fingers to tuck ends in and secure flowers. He held it up in triumph when it was finished and went to place it on Ginny's head, but it fell apart and littered her shoulders and lap with parts and pieces.

Harry leaned in, still laughing, and kissed her. Ginny's nose tickled with the strong scent of grass and she clasped the front of his shirt, desperately holding him to her for just a second more. Their time together seemed to be ticking away and Ginny wanted to freeze the moment forever and live in it, just right in this moment where everything was perfect.

“Here, it looks much better on you, I'm sure.” Harry placed her crown onto her head, tucking bits of her hair behind her ears before kissing her cheek. “Yep. Perfection. Now you're the princess.”

The irony of his words wasn't lost on Ginny. She did feel a bit like the fairytale princess, rescued from a cottage by a dashing young prince. A part of her tried to quell the thought; she'd never pictured herself as the type to need rescuing—she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself, she thought. But maybe life, like stories, didn't always end the way the characters planned.

Harry pulled her hand. “Come on. Let's get to the top and see what we see.”

It was still hours before the sun would set, but they sat together, talking about all sorts of things.

Ginny knew her face was sunburned and more horrible freckles would probably appear very soon, but she didn't care. All she cared about was the stories she told Harry about Arnold—whom she'd been so sorry to leave behind during this little adventure—and every aspect of her boring life back in the cottage. She'd never had anyone to talk to who could honestly speak back, and found herself rambling about everything. Harry didn't seem to mind at all and haltingly began to tell her about his life, as well. There was much he couldn't share, she knew, but he was trying.

The bridge of his nose was pink and the hair at the edges of his forehead was moist from the heat when they finally noticed the brilliant orange and pink sunset on the horizon.

"Not long now," he whispered and moved closer, sliding into her side, where she felt he might have always been made to fit.

"I know." She sighed her answer and looked at him, rather than the nightfall. A burst of anticipation and dread filled her. She'd waited so long to see the fire in the sky, so long to be *here*, that the thrill of actually being here was almost overwhelming. And, it felt strange to admit, but there was a part of her that almost didn't want the day to end. The fear that Harry might be gone from her life in the morning was too much to deal with.

The first explosion of color and sound made them both jump and laugh. A brilliant blast of pink and gold filled the night sky, larger than she'd ever imagined it could be. It obscured even the stars and faint moon. Her whole body hummed with excitement and she shuddered against Harry as another explosion fired from not far away, shot up into the sky, and painted the landscape in shimmering green.

They watched in silence, only gasps of pleasure and awe escaping at the most vibrant fireworks.

Finally, Ginny turned to Harry, seeing the sparks that hovered in the sky reflecting in the lenses of his glasses.

"Harry?"

He turned his face and studied her, a crease between his eyebrows. "Yeah?"

Ginny felt herself melt. Cliché or not, she thought maybe what she felt for him was the first stirrings of love. "Thank you," she whispered and pressed her lips quickly to his cheek.

Harry looked back at the newest fireworks and then leaned into her, nudging her back so that she was lying in the soft, cold grass. "Happy birthday, Ginny," he said and covered her lips with his own.

Her arms wove around him and time lost meaning. The fireworks continued to thunder above them, but Ginny let her eyes slipped closed. She could still see the lights and even discern some of the colors, but they didn't seem to matter much anymore, not when Harry held her so tightly and made her shiver with his kisses.

"I have a surprise for you," he whispered when they finally broke apart. He seemed almost giddy. Ginny didn't sit up, but watched as he scrambled for his rucksack and pulled out a cylindrical item that she didn't recognize. He looked a little nervous, but handed it to her along with his wand as

she sat up.

Ginny stared at him and then at the two things. "I don't..."

"I wanted you to have your own fireworks," he said with a shrug. "I'll teach you the spell."

A tremble of joy shot through her whole body as she realized what he had given her: a chance to not only make fireworks of her own, but to use magic in the way it was intended.

Her hand grew sweaty as she clasped Harry's wand; it thrummed in her palm and she was thrilled with the power she felt. "Let's do it!"

"The incantation is '*Incendio*,'" Harry instructed. If it had been light enough to see, and his cheeks weren't already burnt from the sun, Ginny thought he might be blushing. His hand closed over hers on the wand and he showed her the wand movement. After practicing it several times and repeating the odd phrase, Ginny felt confident enough to try.

The end of the fuse lit on the first try and Ginny gasped out a laugh, scooting backward on her bottom away from the rocket. Harry knelt at her side and they watched with fixed eyes as it shot off the ground, spun in tight circles into the air and burst with a huge plume of fire and sparks directly over their heads. The reddest light Ginny could ever remember bathed them and they froze as their sparks mingled with the others.

"Best day ever," Ginny told him as they leaned closer and closer together.

* * *

The sense of urgency radiated through him, but his head was so fuzzy that Apparating wasn't an easy feat.

If only Ron could remember where he'd spent most of the day... The way his head pounded made him wonder if he hadn't just slipped off to a pub somewhere and drowned his sorrows in a few dozen pints or so. He didn't *feel* drunk, but then again, Ron couldn't explain why his head felt as if someone had stuffed it with cotton.

Vaguely, he could remember someone with hair, lots of bushy, brown hair, and two very pretty doe-eyes, sandwiched in between the early morning meeting with his brothers and Apparating to the Burrow, but that was about it.

"Where *have* you been?"

His mother's screech cut right through him and Ron winced. It was just now growing dark and he'd somehow missed the whole day with his family.

"Er... Sorry?"

The gimlet glare she fixed on him—complete with hands on hips and wand sending out little puffs of smoke as it was clenched tightly in her fist—let him know he was in deep trouble.

"Your brothers have been here for *hours*! And don't think I can't tell they were covering for you all

day, young man!”

Ron’s mind spun and he pressed his hand to his forehead, as he walked toward her. ‘Think of anything, fool!’ he scolded himself. If he let her get into her stride there’d be no stopping her.

“Put your hair back on, Mum,” George said as he sidled up to her and leaned his elbow on her shoulder.

“It’s clear that he’s rather... ruffled,” said Fred, biting back a knowing smirk. The rest of the family was circling now, like vultures waiting for a kill. Ron glared at them and winced when the side of his face flashed in pain. He probed gently at it and found it wasn’t too damaged, just a bit of bruising on his cheekbone. When he tried to remember where he’d gotten it, however, his mind was just as blank as before.

Charlie was the one to distract her with, “Maybe he’s got a secret girlfriend.”

Ron could have simultaneously kissed him and kicked him. While his brother’s suggestion had derailed their mother’s attack, it had just focused her in an entirely different direction.

“He is a bit dazed,” Bill pointed out. He came closer and sniffed at Ron, who swayed out of his way as much as he could. “Doesn’t reek of alcohol, though.”

“I should hope *not*,” his mother huffed. “If she’s any sort of respectable girl, though, you should have brought her with you.”

“Mum!” Ron roared. His ears were burning with embarrassment and he still couldn’t figure out where he’d been for the past few hours. “There’s no girl!”

His brothers erupted in further laughter and only quieted down when their father came over and guided his wife away.

“Come on, Ronnie,” Fred said and slung an arm around his shoulders, “tell us who she is.”

“An older woman, I’m betting,” said Bill. “That’s why it’s a secret.”

Percy made a disapproving look, but Ron could see the corners of his lips lifting slightly. “He’s entitled to his secrets, although if it *is* someone scandalous, Ronald I would hope you’d have the decency to—”

“There’s no one!” Ron growled. He shoved Fred’s arm off him and nudged George out of the way, tripping over Charlie’s outstretched foot, only catching himself before he went sprawling.

Bill cuffed him over the head. “No need to get all shirty. When you show up late to a family event, ruffled and looking as glassy-eyed as you are, we’re entitled to take the piss. It’s in the Weasley Family Code Book. Page thirty-seven. Look it up.”

They all guffawed mightily and Ron tamped down his annoyance. He really should expect no less from his brothers, and they were right about the teasing being a mutual thing. If it were any of them that had shown up late, he’d be right with the others in pointing it out.

“Did you and *Fleur* show up on time?” he shot back. Just last year the newlyweds had gotten carried away and missed lunch completely.

Bill smirked proudly and puffed out his chest. “You don’t want to go there, little brother. I promise.”

Ron’s ears heated again. No, he didn’t want to think about Bill and Fleur getting distracted. Not at all. He liked Fleur and all, but... Just no.

They all began walking in the direction of the field, which had been laid out with all manner of explosive material. It must have taken his family hours to set up, Ron realized, a faint bit of guilt settling in. He should have been here to help. “We’ll wring it out of you yet,” George mumbled and elbowed Ron before trotting off to help their father get started on the fireworks.

Ron opened his mouth to deny that there was a witch involved, when the image of those beautiful brown eyes flashed into his mind. The flutter in his stomach stole his words away and he just shoved his hands deep into his robes and took his place to begin the show.

Every time a rocket would shoot off into the sky, all their faces would turn and watch until the sparks drifted away on the light breeze. Ron didn’t know the charm that was used to make the lights linger until dawn, but it was a brilliant one. The familiar smell of gunpowder and fire was welcome as they counted down another year.

Off in the distance, not too far away, a bright red rocket answered their volley.

“That was close!” Bill shouted from his station across the field.

“Stoatshead, I’d say,” Charlie said, a grin on his face.

It wasn’t unusual to see the occasional flash of firework from somewhere on the horizon. Occasionally, some Muggle would send up a round of rather weak sparklers to flash in the sky; they always died out quickly and were far less impressive than the ones Fred and George had developed over the years.

“Magical,” their father said in awe. “Maybe the Lovegoods?”

“Or the Diggorys,” Ron said. Cedric Diggory was an Auror a few years ahead of Ron and genuinely a nice bloke. All the magical families around Ottery St. Catchpole knew why the fireworks appeared every August eleventh, but they rarely joined in on the observance.

The last fireworks went up in a spectacular volley that made Ron’s head spin and his ears ring.

“There you go, Ginevra,” he whispered to his long-lost sister. “Maybe this year they’ll guide you home.”

* * *

The morning was warm, but the light dew on the ground seeped into his clothes. His left side was completely asleep where Ginny was using his shoulder as a pillow. She felt him stir, and curled

closer to his warmth, but didn't wake. Harry froze until her breathing settled into a regular, deep pattern and then cracked one eye open. It was still early—the hazy light of morning sun was just peeking over the horizon, painting a bright strip of red-pink there. The taste of gunpowder and smoke was in the air still and Harry could smell it heavily in Ginny's hair. He lightly tucked his cloak under her chin more and held his lips against her temple.

Despite sleeping on the ground, and honestly only managing a few hours at most, Harry couldn't remember a time when he felt more rested. Maybe it was silly to think that it was Ginny making him feel this way, but he thought it might just be. She was so very full of life, so curious and just... alive! Exuberance and energy seeped from every pore when she was interested in something, which seemed to be nearly every single moment of the day. Her smile made his stomach flip in a way that he recognized, and he knew that kissing her gave him the best feeling in the world.

More than anything, he knew that if there were people like Ginny in the world, he would do everything he could to defeat Voldemort if only to give her a chance at life.

It wasn't often that he let his mind wander to the suspicion that he might be a Horcrux himself. The very idea made him sick inside. But as the war dragged on and they achieved their goals, mentally marking Horcruxes off, Harry could almost feel the noose around his neck tighten.

Was it selfish to allow himself to feel something for Ginny when he might not be around tomorrow or the day after that? Maybe it was, but Harry wasn't above thinking he was a little selfish.

What he really needed was to talk to Hermione and Neville so that they could begin preparing for the next Horcrux. 'Two more to go,' he told himself and closed his eyes against Ginny's hair. 'Two more to go and then I can allow myself to *think* of what comes next.'

Last night had been the most wonderful of Harry's life. He and Ginny had watched the fireworks until their eyelids were heavy and the sparks drifted, winking out with the coming morning. They'd kissed and held hands, touching softly, whispering words back and forth. There were no promises made—somehow, Harry thought Ginny might understand that he wasn't in a position to promise anything—and no talk of the future, but that didn't matter. Ginny was... she was completely and utterly amazing, and she made him forget, if only for a few hours, that he was the Chosen One, destined to kill or be killed. She made him *want* to fight harder, fight stronger, fight longer.

"I love you, Ginny," he whispered, barely letting the breath escape his lips. It was insane to even think it, let alone tell her, but Harry felt a bit barmy this morning. He felt out of control in the best way possible, and declaring it, even if he couldn't say it to her waking face, was what he needed to do at the moment. If he did die soon, at least he'd said it, at least he'd told one person in the living world how he felt about them.

The mirror in his pocket vibrated and Harry sighed. Hermione had been insistent last night that he talk to her about the Auror, and Harry had finally just told her to do whatever she felt best before he'd gone back to spending time with Ginny.

'One night,' he'd told Hermione. 'Just give me one night. Please.' She was worried—he could see it in her face—and he knew he was going to pay for this little distraction, no matter how wonderful it was.

Ginny sighed when he shifted her off his arm and rolled away from her. He pulled the mirror out and took several steps away, stretching his sore back and feeling the satisfying cracks all the way down his spine.

“Morning, Professor.”

He was probably grinning like a fool, but Harry couldn’t help it.

“I do *not* want to know what put that smile on your face.”

It was Neville, grinning into his mirror. Harry chuckled softly and moved further away so that he wouldn’t wake Ginny.

“Nothing happened,” said Harry. His sunburned cheeks heated thinking of all that had happened—Ginny’s small hands pressed against his chest, the feel of her body pressing against his, the urgent little sounds she made when he kissed her deeply—but he was essentially telling the truth. Other than a fairly serious snogging session, Harry had made sure to keep their activities as pure as possible. Now wasn’t the time to get carried away.

Neville laughed. “Sure, sure. Listen, I know you probably don’t want to be interrupted, but...”

Harry rubbed his eyes under his glasses and nodded. “But Hermione’s going to have a fit if I don’t get back there.”

“Actually...” Neville trailed off and gave an odd look. “Hermione’s sort of... preoccupied. She’s... well, she’s working on something.”

Harry perked up. “Another item?” Yesterday they’d talked about possibly going to Hogwarts—it would be a risky trip as the Death Eaters had a strangle-hold on the Wizarding school, but if that’s where Hermione believed the next Horcrux was, there was nothing for it.

“Er... no. Something, something else.”

Neville was rarely this cagey and Harry narrowed his eyes at his old friend. “Spill.”

“Well... promise you won’t get upset?”

“No deal.” Harry scowled. “If I have the right to be mad, I’ll damned well get mad.”

Neville’s cheek twitched—something that only happened when he was fairly nervous about something. Harry’d seen it happen year after year right before tests, or when Malfoy would whip out his wand and shove it in pudgy, but loyal, Neville’s face.

“It’s about Ginny,” he said in a whisper.

Harry felt a spider of fear take hold in his heart and quickly weave a web of terror. “Ginny?”

“We think... we think we found out who she is,” said Neville. His thumb slipped into his mouth and he gnawed on the edge of his fingernail before realizing what he was doing and making a disgusted face.

“What do you mean—”

“She doesn’t live with her mother, Harry. Hermione’s convinced that she’s... well, that she was taken, when she was little, and that her real family has no idea where she’s been all these years. That she was kidnapped.”

Harry’s head reeled and he glanced back over his shoulder to Ginny, who was still sleeping peacefully, wrapped around the cloak he’d balled up next to her. “Are you...”

“She’s the missing Weasley girl, Harry,” Neville said carefully. “Hermione’s been up all night reading all about it. That Auror... he was her brother, Harry. Didn’t you notice they looked alike?”

Harry felt his knees shudder, but they didn’t give out. He honestly hadn’t noticed until Ginny had said something, but that didn’t mean much in his eyes. People could look similar to each other without being related, couldn’t they? Besides, many wizarding families were interrelated anyway. Sirius had showed him on the old tapestry at Grimmauld Place that the Blacks were even related to the Weasleys and the Potters, as well.

“Are you...” He wasn’t sure what to ask. They were either deadly serious or Neville had gotten dangerously good at taking the piss.

“The Professor wanted to wait to tell you until she had definite evidence, but I thought it would be better coming from me.” He gave a sheepish smile and Harry nodded woodenly. He was right; Hermione was pants at breaking bad news, or shocking news. She always hemmed and hawed, and dragged out every bit of empirical evidence she could find to prove her point. Neville was direct and blunt, but not unfeeling. It was better this way.

“I don’t... She’s...”

“She’s almost home,” Neville said. “No wonder she’s always wanted to see the lights... somehow she *knew*.”

Harry rubbed his forehead as thoughts crowded in his head—too many thoughts: he could bring her home to her real family, she might be furious with him, she might jump into his arms and kiss him, she might swing her pan at his head again, she might... she might disappear into her own life and fade out of his completely...

The last thought was the worst. Harry knew he’d take being clobbered with the pan again any day if only he got to see her right before and right after.

“I have to tell her.” He stared in the direction of where the fireworks had come, on the far side of the town. The sun was beginning to paint the tops of the roofs now, waking the world around him. “I have to take her there.”

Neville chewed the inside of his lip. “It’s a gamble. They might figure out who you are—Ginny knows more than she really should.”

Harry sighed. “I can’t obliviate her. I won’t.”

"The Professor did it to that Auror," Neville said with no little amusement. Harry thought he sounded proud of their friend, too. "You should have seen his eyes cross!"

"It's a risk we'll have to take," Harry said, more to himself than Neville. They were so very close to the end. "I'll wake her and tell her what we suspect, and we'll decide from there. She might not even want to deal with this right now."

Neville looked doubtful, but gave a faithful nod. "It's possible."

Harry thought about it for a moment, not sure how he was even going to approach telling her. "I... I'll let you know. Give me some time to talk to her and we'll go from there."

"Will do," Neville said firmly. "In the meantime, I'll keep The Professor from tearing the whole of London up searching for answers."

Harry felt numb as he said goodbye and tucked the mirror away. He turned to look at Ginny. She looked so peaceful sleeping in the dewy grass, the remnants of her flower crown strewn about—she'd pulled it apart piece by piece last night as they sat talking.

The truth was the last thing that Harry decided he could give her. His only chance at making a promise that he could keep.

He began moving forward, but the bright flash of a spell off to his left drew his attention. It was far too late to block it, and his wand was in his robes, which Ginny was using as a blanket.

Chapter 12

Oh What a Tangled Web We Weave When We... Wait, What Were We Doing?

The sun was fully up when Ginny woke, stretching and yawning in the warm morning air. She looked around, wondering where Harry had gotten off to. The grass next to her was tamped down from where his body had laid all night, cuddled up close to her, but Harry wasn't there any longer. In fact, when Ginny looked around, she couldn't see him anywhere. His rucksack was next to her, his cloak still draped over her, and his wand tucked under the edge of her body.

"Harry?"

Ginny stood slowly and turned in a circle, surveying the brilliant green all around here. Harry was gone. Disappointed, Ginny sank back down and rubbed the sleep away from her eyes.

"He's gone off to the village to get us food, that's all," she murmured to herself. Little fissures of doubt crept in, but Ginny tried her best to force them out by remembering how wonderful the night before had been—not only the fireworks, which had been spectacular, but the way that she and Harry had kissed and clung to each other until the first gray rays of dawn streaked across the sky. It was the best memory Ginny had.

"He'll be right back."

She busied herself with running her fingers through her long hair, combing out the bits of grass and flowers that had lodged in the tangled tresses. As the memories kept playing in her head, Ginny smiled and hummed an unknown tune.

The rustle of grass behind her made her turn, a laugh escaping. "Can't sneak up on me, Har—"

It wasn't Harry's lanky frame that stood there, but the shorter, stooped body of her mother.

"Mother!" Ginny stood quickly and gaped at her mother. "How did you..."

The severe look on her mother's face made guilt flood into Ginny's heart. She'd lied to her mother, and even though she wouldn't trade the last few days for anything in the world, the hurt she'd caused her mother made her sick. "I hope you're happy now, Ginny."

Ginny looked down at her feet, shuffling them. If only Harry were here, they could explain why they'd run away.

"I asked you if I could see the lights," said Ginny in a small voice. "You knew I wanted to go." She wouldn't apologize, no matter how much the guilt pressed down on her. If her mother tried to lock her away for a hundred years it was worth it.

"Are you finished?" The coldness in her mother's voice made Ginny shudder. "Finished being made a fool of by that evil man?"

"Harry's not—"

"He's gone, Ginny," she sneered. "Left you here after taking what he wanted from you."

Ginny's face burned and she self-consciously tugged at her rumpled clothing. "It's not like *that*, Mother! Harry would never—"

"Isn't he? You know him so well, do you?" Her mother's hand slid around Ginny's arm and yanked hard, making Ginny gasp in pain. "I tried to tell you this would happen, but you never listen to me, you headstrong, willful girl."

Ginny tore her arm away, fire charging under her skin. "He's *not* like that, mother. He's good, and kind, and... and wonderful."

"And conveniently absent," she said smugly. "I'm sure last night in your arms meant the world to him; so much so that he scarpered off at first light."

There was nothing Ginny could say to refute that, however, since Harry *wasn't* here. The earlier doubt swept through her with a vengeance and left Ginny feeling empty.

"I... He's just gone to get food, or to... to..." She gestured helplessly at his bag and cloak. "He wouldn't go far without his things."

But her mother's dark scowl made Ginny's stomach turn over violently. "It's time to go home, Ginny, where you belong."

"No! I belong out here. I'm *magical*, Mother! There's a reason I can do what I do—"

"I always told you that you were special, Ginny, but that was because I didn't want to hurt your feelings. You're not special; you're strange. You do things no one can explain."

"Harry can!" Ginny said. She swept his rucksack and wand into her arms, tucking the magical stick away to hide it from her mother. "He does the same things!"

"Tricks!" her mother scoffed and pulled on Ginny's arm once more. "The vilest of all things is to trick a young, innocent girl into giving up a part of herself. He used you, Ginny. He made you think you were something special when all he wanted was to take everything he could from you. But he's gone now, gone on to his real life and left you behind."

Tears filled Ginny's eyes and she tried to argue, but the small bit of fear was growing, blossoming into something that swept away all her hopes and dreams.

"Come home, Ginny. Come home where you can take care of your aging, ailing old mother and do the right thing. If you come home now, I could possibly bring myself to forgive you for leaving me all alone. Oh, the fear and pain I had when I discovered you were gone, Ginny! I wept all night! And to discover that you *lied* to me...!"

"It wasn't like that," Ginny mumbled through her tears. "I wanted to go and Harry... Harry brought me. It was a gift, for my birthday."

“And was it *his* birthday as well? What did you give *him*?” The words sounded so dirty, so vulgar when said like that.

Indignation rose up in Ginny and she yanked her arm away. “I did nothing wrong!”

“Other than lying, running away, leaving me to think that my daughter...” Her mother broke down, clutching her chest and crying loudly. “I was so very, very worried.”

More tears fell down Ginny’s cheeks. As much as she wanted to see Harry again, she knew she needed to get her mother home. She could think of a way to contact Harry—possibly by going to that odd pub once more; the old man there seemed to know Harry well enough. Once she had time to think about everything that had happened, Ginny would be better equipped to decide what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. Living shut away in the cottage in the glen wasn’t an option any longer, not when she’d seen the wonderful world outside the trees.

“Come along, Mother. I’ll take you home,” she said quietly. She wasn’t sure how they would get there, but if they could make it to the pub, Ginny could lead them through the trees and home once more.

And then, after she had made it up to her mother, she could think about contacting Harry once again. ‘If he hasn’t walked away for good,’ her traitorous heart murmured.

“Just... just use that wand that I know you’ve got hidden in your cloak,” her mother huffed and puffed, still clutching her chest. “When we get to the road... raise it in the air... a way will appear to take us home...”

* * *

Harry’s head pounded, but he could tell he was upright, his arms painfully secured behind him in the chair he was strapped into. He blinked blearily at the tabletop—no glasses, his mind registered—and tried to remember what had gone on. The last thing he remembered was talking to Neville and looking at...

Ginny!

He growled loudly and struggled against the restraints, making his shoulders and wrists ache painfully.

“Knock it off or I’ll bash yer head in!” Someone behind him cuffed him hard and Harry’s forehead smacked into the table. He arched backward and nearly tipped the chair completely over when a flash of light coming from his left caught him, levitating him back upright.

“Wouldn’t want you to knock yourself out before we get answers to our questions, would we?”

Harry’s blood ran cold as he processed the voice; he knew it, had heard it for seven years while at school.

“Malfoy,” he growled and peered through squinting eyes at the white-blond ferret. “Should have known it was you. Only a Slytherin like you would attack someone from behind like that. Where’s

Ginny?"

Malfoy sneered and sat himself on the corner of the table, dangling one leg off and leaning forward onto his elbow. "Your little girlfriend, Potter? Don't worry, we're taking really good... *care* of her."

Harry lunged with all his weight toward Malfoy, but some spell was now keeping him in place. He managed to knock the table and Malfoy nearly lost his balance, but that was all.

"You'd better not harm a single hair on her head, Malfoy, or you'll pay."

Malfoy laughed hollowly and shook his head. "Empty threat, Potter, or should I say... Shadow Phoenix."

Harry continued to glare at the blurry form while rage rippled through his body. The spells holding his arms were beginning to loosen—he could feel the way they tingled and hummed against his skin. If he could use wandless magic to get them to release, Harry might be able to attack Malfoy, overpower the one other guard in the room and escape. He assumed they were in the Ministry somewhere—probably deep in the bowels of the Auror division—and not in Voldemort's lair; it was far too bright in here to belong to a Death Eater hideout. Downright cheery in comparison to the places Harry had been with Voldemort in the past.

"Did you think a silly name like that would protect you?"

Harry sneered right back at Malfoy. "I was going to use Gutless Ferret, but it was already taken."

The guard behind him snickered—Harry guessed it was either Crabbe or Goyle as Malfoy was rarely seen without his sycophantic sidekicks—and Malfoy huffed indignantly.

"Big words, Potter, considering you're under my control now."

"Not for long," Harry snapped. "I'm sure you're under strict orders to report to your spineless Dark Lord the minute you capture me."

Harry couldn't see well enough to make out Malfoy's expression, but he guessed his words had unnerved the Junior Death Eater had as he slid off the table and slapped his palm down on the surface.

"There's plenty of time for that, once you've answered a few of my questions."

"Pathetic lackey," Harry hissed. "Doing *his* dirty work while he sits back and leeches all the rewards. I'll bet he's living off the spoils of his followers, sucking their vaults dry and reaping all the best of everything."

Malfoy flinched and Harry congratulated himself on scoring a small, petty point. He continued to work his hands against the ropes, feeling them loosen bit by bit.

"You'll pay for that!" Malfoy said. His wand shot out and pressed into the side of Harry's cheek, but Harry didn't flinch. He stared up at his old enemy and pushed even further.

"He's a half blood, you know. What a hypocrite."

“Shut up.”

“I’ll bet he never told you that. He wants you all to follow like mechanical little slaves.” Malfoy’s cool was cracking as he yelled at Harry to be quiet, but Harry kept pushing. “First it’s Muggles and Muggle-born’s, then it’ll be Half-Bloods and Blood Traitors... How long until he decides he doesn’t want to share power with anybody, Draco? A year? Two?”

Sparks shot from Draco’s wand, which hung at his side, but the bravado from before was dried up.

“You know he’ll turn on you. He turns on everyone. He’ll kill you all one by one, slowly, painfully...”

Draco spun on his heel and slammed the door to the interrogation room open before ordering Crabbe out behind him.

“I’m still in charge here, Potter, and you’ll sit and rot in this room until I say different!”

The door sealed shut with a squelch and Harry let his shoulders drop. He concentrated all his energy and felt the binding on his wrists fall away. His arms ached horribly and his head still pounded, but at least he would be prepared when Malfoy came back in here next time. And he thought he might have bought himself a little more time. Malfoy hadn’t once threatened to turn him over the Voldemort and hadn’t pressed his finger to the horrific dark mark etched into his forearm.

Now all Harry needed to do was set a trap for the ferret, escape and rescue Ginny, and get them both out of the Ministry alive.

* * *

“Are you sure about this?” Neville looked doubtfully at the rickety house at the end of the dusty, dry lane. “I mean... Harry’s going to be furious if we—”

“Something’s wrong, Neville,” Hermione whispered. “Harry hasn’t answered his mirror all day and his cloak was up on that hill. His *cloak*, Neville. He wouldn’t have left that behind.”

They’d had this conversation already, several times, and Neville could find no reasonable explanation to refute it. Something felt off, but he couldn’t put his finger on just what it was. Their hope was that by coming to the Weasley home, they might find that Harry was caught up in the joyous return of Ginny to her family and had simply forgotten to check in.

It wasn’t likely at all, but Neville clung to that faintest of hopes.

“And you’re sure that Ginny is really...” Neville trailed off and gestured to the house. “I can’t imagine how they’ll react if you’re wrong.”

Hermione gave him an annoyed look that nearly made him cower backwards. “I’m *right*.”

“But you could be wrong, I mean... theoretically,” Neville prodded. “It has happened before.” He nudged her arm and tried for a small smile. Hermione gave a hesitant nod and he knew she was grateful for his attempt to lighten the tension, even if his effort wasn’t nearly as funny as Harry’s would be in the same situation.

"I'm right," Hermione said again forcefully. "All the pieces fit. She even looks like Ron Weasley if you study the photos enough."

Neville shrugged one shoulder and took a step forward, leading the way. If they were wrong, they were likely to get hexed to London and back, but if they were right... Well, they'd deal with that if it happened.

As they came closer to the house, the hair on the back of Neville's neck stood up. "Wards," he warned. "Powerful ones."

They both stopped and exchanged nervous looks. "Oh, I wish Harry were here!" said Hermione as she stomped her foot in frustration. "He's the best with wards."

Neville cast a few spells and his eyes widened as the wall of spells shimmered before him. He whistled low and peered at the varying colors. "We're not getting through these today. I doubt even Harry could get through these on his own. I think... I think we're stuck."

Hermione glared at him, but Neville knew she was just furious with the situation and felt helpless. "Then how do we contact them? Owl?"

Neville considered that. "I suppose I could Apparate to Diagon Alley and send an owl..."

"And hope not to be seen," said Hermione severely.

"You're right," Neville said. "Stupid idea."

Ever since their little escapade the other day, Diagon Alley had been crawling with Aurors and Death Eaters alike. The entrenched members of the Order of the Phoenix had sent word just yesterday that stepping foot in the alley was suicidal for any of them.

"What about a Patronus message?" Neville asked thoughtfully. "We know they can get through barriers."

"Or you could just ask someone who has been there dozens of times."

The dreamy voice of Luna Lovegood startled them both. She was standing right behind them—how the hell she'd managed to come up and not make a single sound frightened Neville, quite frankly—staring at the colors of the wards, swirling with the remnants of Neville's detection spell.

"Luna! Where did you come from?" Hermione gaped at the dotty girl and shook her head. Neville wondered if she was distracted by the wreath of Salivating Snapdragons that Luna wore like a crown on top of her head, or if some other detail of Luna's odd being had drawn her attention.

"I doubt you're standing here to discuss the purpose of life—where we've come from, what it all means—but I'd be happy to plan another day to enlighten you, Hermione," Luna said with a sincere, innocent smile. "In the meantime, you look like you could use some assistance."

Hermione sighed in frustration and Neville turned his head to hide his smile. Luna Lovegood had always flummoxed the logical Gryffindor, much to the delight of both Harry and Neville.

"Have you been to the Weasleys' house before, Luna?" Hermione asked. "We only ask because we have an important message to deliver to them and it *must* get to them as soon as possible."

"Oh." Luna nodded thoughtfully and tilted her head to the side. "It's been some time since I visited, but I'm sure the wards would let me through. I used to play over here as a small child until Ronald decided he was far too mature to play my favorite games." She sighed forlornly. "He used to make the best Crumple-Horned Snorkack for me to ride on."

Neville snorted and then bit his lip. "Er... yeah, I'll bet he did."

Even Hermione seemed amused at the thought of the tall, grouchy Auror crawling around on all fours while Luna Lovegood sat astride his back. She smiled. "Would you mind delivering a message for us? Or perhaps asking them to lower the wards to allow us inside? We should really speak to them face to face about this."

"I'd be happy to take your message," Luna said serenely. "I'm sure they'll invite us all to tea. Then we can all discuss existentialism together. It will be lovely."

Without another word, Luna skipped off, passing through the wards without a backward glance. Neville let out a shaky breath and untwisted the fingers he had been crossing before shoving them deep in his pockets. He wasn't necessarily superstitious about things like that, but it didn't hurt to cover all the bases when possible, especially where Luna was concerned.

"This will be faster than an owl," said Hermione. There was a slight bit of doubt in her tone, however. "As long as she doesn't get distracted on the way there, or forget that we're standing out here."

Neville tried to laugh, but had to admit it was a real possibility. Luna had always been trustworthy in the past, but she was just so flighty...

Less than ten minutes later, Ron Weasley strode out of the Burrow with Luna prancing along next to him, talking animatedly. His wand was drawn and Neville's eyes widened before he sucked in a breath through his teeth.

"Here we go," he mumbled.

"Maybe I should have been a little less firm with my memory charm," said Hermione when she saw how severe his expression was.

"And here we are, Ronald. These are the people I was telling you about. They're my friends from Hogwarts," Luna said. She beamed at them through the shimmering wall of magic and Ron grunted as he studied first Neville and then Hermione. Something triggered in his expression, however, and he gaped at Hermione.

"You..."

"I'm so very sorry," Hermione said. Her cheeks were flushed and Neville nearly laughed at her contrite expression. She really *did* fancy the redhead. He rocked forward on his toes and then back on his heels, completely delighted to have proof of something he could take the mickey about. Wait

until he told Harry...

"... I was forced to use a memory charm."

Ron glared at Hermione and then thrust his hand through the ward. "Take my hand. You'll pass right through if you hold on tight."

Hermione went first and Neville smirked when she clutched Ron's hand tight enough to make the skin white.

Once Neville was through, Ron folded his arms and glared at them both. "I'm trusting you because Luna trusts you, but if you make one wrong move..."

"Point made," Neville said.

Hermione was wringing her hands, no doubt rehearsing how she was going to tell Ron's family about their missing sister. She shifted her weight back and forth and Neville placed a hand on her shoulder.

"We have information about your sister," he said. It might be blunt, but he didn't figure they'd get more than a few words before Ron's Auror instincts took over and they would be in trouble.

"I'd like to remove the memory block," Hermione said. She moved toward her wand and Ron flinched, raising his quickly. "Please. This will all make so much more sense if I do."

"I'm not stupid!" Ron roared. "You're not holding a wand on me."

"Would you be more comfortable if I did it, Ronald?" Luna offered. Neville thought her credibility might be better if she wasn't twirling dreamily in small circles, her hair flying out behind her, her Snapdragon crown snarling menacingly.

"It's really best if the caster removes it—" Hermione said. Neville elbowed her and tilted his head toward Luna.

"What's it going to hurt?" he asked quietly. "If it doesn't work, you can take a bash at it. He seems to trust Luna."

Both Hermione and Ron grunted at the same time, their cheeks flushing.

"I do trust Luna," Ron said. "She'd never hurt anyone."

Neville's mind flashed with a memory from Hogwarts—Luna blasting Goyle across the corridor when they'd caught him torturing some first years.

Luna laid her hand on Ron's arm and peered up at him. "I promise I'll be gentle, Ronald."

Ron's expression shifted slightly, but he nodded and only flinched slightly when the spell hit him. Slowly, like the sun rising in the morning, understanding began to dawn on his face and he slouched dangerously to one side.

He pointed at Hermione. "You...! And... and *you!* And... Harry Potter!" He paled and swayed wildly. Luna gave a little giggle and propped him up before winking at Neville.

"I think that did the trick."

"My sister!" Ron clutched his head and bent to rest his hands on his knees. "She's....she's alive."

"She's with Harry," Hermione said gently. The unspoken rest of that statement rattled through Neville's mind.

Wherever Harry is...

* * *

The tension in the room was thicker than one of his mother's treacle tarts, Ron thought. Luna's spell was enough to sweep most of the fogginess from Ron's mind and the images that seeped through made much more sense than any story he'd been telling himself to explain an entire missing day, but it didn't make him feel any better about any of it.

Shadow Phoenix was Harry Potter, who was actually fighting for the light, against a Ministry who was infiltrated deeply with You-Know-Who's servants, and his sister—his *sister!*—was alive.

George was on one side of their mother, his arm draped protectively around her shoulders as she cried into Fred's side. Bill and Charlie were both prowling the edges of the room glaring at the whole proceedings, although Ron knew they weren't angry with Hermione or Neville, just feeling helpless.

"We have to go get her," his father whispered, his voice breaking in the middle. "Our baby..."

"As soon as we are able to locate Harry," said Hermione, "we'll gladly help you." She snuck a glance at Ron, who felt his cheeks heat. There was something about this witch with the bushy hair that made Ron's stomach flip pleasantly. He thought he remembered most of their interactions from the day before, but there was a chance that she'd layered the memory spells on thick and he was really missing *weeks* rather than hours. Her companion—Neville Longbottom, of all people—looked shifty, but Ron supposed it might be the overwhelming number of large, redheaded, highly agitated men in the room.

And then there was Luna, who was seated at the table, sipping a cup of tea and smacking her lips in satisfaction after every swallow. She'd added enough sugar to the liquid that Ron imagined it was nothing but sweet sludge now.

"Tell us again," Charlie demanded, leaning closer to Neville, who swallowed and looked nervously at Hermione.

Hermione cleared her throat once more and rehashed the story from the beginning—Harry's arrival at Grimmauld Place with Ginny. Ron knew she was leaving out specific details but tried not to let it bother him too much. He believed she was right with all of his soul and if Harry Potter was working for the down fall of You-Know-Who, then some things were necessary to hold back.

"We have to go find her," Ron's mother spluttered through her tears. There was an edge to her voice though, and Ron was reminded of all the times she'd protected them fervently as children.

"Find them both," corrected Neville. He looked worried and Ron could understand the concern. If the Death Eaters ever got hold of Harry Potter... He shuddered at the thought.

"She was with Harry this morning—"

The fireplace flared green and Percy came tumbling out, stealing all the attention from Hermione's words. His face was smudged with soot and his glasses were crooked, but he didn't even bother fixing them.

"They've captured Shadow Phoenix!" He grinned, but the enthusiasm waned when he saw how still everyone was.

Neville swore softly and pushed back from the table. He and Hermione stuck their heads together but Ron couldn't make out their frantic whispers.

"What?" Percy asked, finally straightening his glasses. "This is good news. The Ministry is finally doing something—"

"Completely effing wrong," Bill hissed and threw his hands up in the air.

Ron clapped Percy on the shoulder, dislodging a small cloud of soot, and tried to explain. Percy was the only one they hadn't been able to reach this morning when Neville, Luna, and Hermione had appeared at the Burrow. His secretary had said he was in a meeting with the Minister and was not to be disturbed. They'd left a message for him to come home immediately.

"Perce..." Ron said. "Shadow Phoenix is really Harry Potter. He's been fighting against You-Know-Who, and..."

"And he knows where your sister is," their father said quietly. He looked horribly pale and older than Ron remembered ever seeing him.

Percy—prim and always proper Percy—swore.

"It's true," Fred said.

"What should we do?" Fleur asked. She had a hand pressed to her mouth, as if she might just lose anything she'd managed to eat that day.

"Nothing for it," George muttered. Ron caught his eye, then looked over to Fred, who turned to glance at Bill and Charlie.

Neville spoke for them all. "We go in and break him out."

Luna giggled and clapped her hands enthusiastically, making Ron smile. "Oh, this is wonderful! I'll bet Daddy would love to come along!"

"It's not going to be easy," Ron's father murmured. "If the Ministry is as infiltrated as you say it

is..." He looked to Hermione for confirmation and she nodded solemnly. "Well, we're in for a fight."

"There are others who will fight alongside us," said Hermione. She and Neville exchanged another look and Ron felt a bubble of jealousy build inside him. He wanted to have the kind of relationship where so much was conveyed in just a look. "We'll contact them. If Harry's been taken..." Her voice broke and Neville put an arm around her shoulders.

"If they have Harry," Neville said, "it's likely they've got Ginny, as well."

They all turned to look at Percy. "I don't know," he said. "I overheard Selwynn telling the Minister about Phoenix, but he didn't mention any others."

"It's still our best lead," said Ron. "We go in after him."

Chapter 13

What I Wouldn't Give For a Frying Pan Right About Now

The changes in the Ministry began subtly, but Molly could feel the rolling tide coming, just like during the last war. The few times she visited Arthur at the Ministry, she'd felt the change, the growing distrust as people closed their doors quickly, peered out of small office windows, and shushed their conversations in the hallways. Arthur didn't speak much about it at home, but she saw the tight smiles and worry lines that etched deeper as the days marched on.

War was inevitable, but she hadn't expected her entire family would be embroiled in it with such little notice. Or at all.

Her heart raced as she looked around at her children, fierce, determined expressions on their faces. Others had joined them, hurriedly brought up to speed by Hermione and Neville.

Another thing that flabbergasted Molly: there were *children* fighting this war! It didn't matter that both Bill and Ron had pointed out that everyone present was over the age of majority, they still all seemed so young. And yet here they were—an army of faithful few willing to risk their lives to save Harry Potter.

"... wish we didn't have to flush ourselves in," Ron grumbled. "It's humiliating, it is."

"We'll meet you in the atrium," Hermione said. Molly saw her hand clasp Ron's arm tightly and wondered just how much had passed between the two. She made a note to corner her son when all of this was over.

"Meet you in there, Mollywobbles," Arthur whispered and pressed his lips lingeringly to her temple. "Stick with Bill and Charlie. You'll be fine." His smile was weak and she hated that he was going in through the loo entry rather than through the phone box.

"Come along, now, next few get in." Remus Lupin, who Molly had met once in passing when he was just out of Hogwarts, was herding the would-be rebellion into the booth, making sure they pressed the code. A dark skinned Auror with a stern face was watching the proceedings, diverting Muggle and Magical alike from the alley until everyone got through.

"Mum." Charlie prodded her shoulder and Molly stepped into the booth with him and a wiry, tall boy with black skin.

"Dean Thomas," he said nervously and gave a half smile. Charlie shook his hand and Molly clasped it tightly in hers for a minute, fighting back the urge to ask if his mother knew where he was today.

Their nametags had 'subverting authority' on them when they came out, which Charlie thought was funny and Dean laughed at also.

When they exited into the atrium, it was bustling with activity. Molly clutched Charlie's robes, but pulled her wand and tucked it away at her side. The invaders were grouped to look as casual as

possible—Ron and several Aurors were near the floo exits, seemingly studying a report that Percy had handed them. Arthur was speaking with Bill and Remus Lupin. Hagrid and several other Hogwarts professors were here under the guise of petitioning the board of governors for something needed at the school, and other people milled about, pretending they had business. Molly didn't recognize them all, but she knew that several of them—including Neville and Hermione—were in heavy disguise.

An Irish boy with scars on his face sidled up to Dean and began speaking in a low voice. "They've got him in the MLE, rumor has it."

"Rumor?" Charlie hissed. "We'd better be going on a lot more than that."

"Relax," the boy said with a wide, easy smile. "We've got a spy embedded who is reliable."

"As long as he knows what he's looking for," Charlie grumbled.

The boy grinned even wider and exchanged a smirk with Dean. "She should recognize Harry. Nearly sucked his face off when he was fifteen, didn't she?" He clapped Charlie on the shoulder with a chuckle and went off to spread the news.

"How are we to get there?" Molly whispered. "There's too many of us."

"Only some are going," Remus Lupin said as he moved behind them. "Fred and George are working on the diversion now. You'll stay here."

Molly went up onto her toes but couldn't see her most devious children in the mix.

"Any minute now," Remus whispered as he glanced at his watch.

A loud commotion erupted down the long, narrow hallway and the legitimate Ministry employees coming and going ran to see what was happening.

Everything happened in a blur and Molly wasn't quite sure where she should be. Ron and the other Aurors tossed something into the floo openings and explosions sounded, rocking the atrium. Everyone crouched to the ground as bedlam broke loose. Molly's heart climbed into her throat and she clutched Charlie's robes, her wand held ready for an attack.

Hagrid had become a shield for the group of fighters heading down the hallway, his bulk giving them shelter as they ducked spells and fired off their own.

The entire atrium lit up with the firefight as Death Eaters and Ministry workers alike poured out of doorways and Molly found herself battling back to back with Charlie, who was doing quite well.

She stunned a burly man who she recognized as having once worked in the Department of Sports and Games and he dropped heavily in front of her. "Keep it up, Mrs. W!" Dean yelled from across the room, his grin wide.

Molly felt a stab of pride in both herself and her family as they fought. Another explosion rocked the Ministry and Molly caught a glimpse of the tattered group of rebels barreling back down the hallway,

led by Harry Potter. He was bleeding at his temple and nose, and covered in fine white powdery dust, but the look on his face was the most ferocious, unwavering look she'd ever seen anyone wear. Her heart raced as he blasted a group of Death Eaters out of his way and yelled for everyone to flee. Ginevra wasn't with him.

Bill clutched her arm and dragged her to the one working floo that was glowing green. "Mum! Mum, we have to go!"

"Ginevra!" she whimpered. His face was tight and stern, but he gave a little shake of his head. "They never got her. Harry said... She's still out there."

Molly wanted nothing more than to grasp Harry Potter's robes and demand to know every single thing about her daughter, but she knew now wasn't the time. He was holding off the last of the attackers, Ron and Neville Longbottom flanking him, his spells blazing.

"We'll find her," Bill promised as he pushed Molly into the floo and she disappeared.

* * *

Harry's eyes burned, but he hoped that he'd given Malfoy a small taste of the fight raging within him. The moment that the blonde ferret had opened the door, Harry struck. He might not have his wand, but he still had his fists, and years of defending himself against Dudley's attacks had taught Harry a thing or two about brawling.

Malfoy had gotten in a few lucky shots, but Harry's fury had overpowered him in the end and Draco Malfoy now lay unconscious at Harry's feet, trickling blood from his broken nose and lip. Harry snatched Draco's wand and bound the Death Eater tightly, lashing him to the chair where Harry had once been tied and spitting blood out onto the floor.

Either no one had known Draco was coming to get Harry, or something else was going on. The hallway was empty when Harry peeked out into it. Just as he was about to duck out, a group of workers ran past and an explosion sounded.

"... under attack..."

"... it's You-Know-Who..."

"... open reveloution..."

Now that he really listened, Harry could hear the distant rumble of something and his heart pounded in his chest. Was this a good or a bad thing? The Ministry was under attack. Surely it was good, as Voldemort already had his thumb on the Ministry and likely wouldn't be blowing it up to fully take over. This would be the Order making a move, or perhaps coming to rescue him.

Harry needed to get to Ginny. He needed to find her and get her out of here before she got hurt.

He closed the door and woke Malfoy.

"Tell me where she is," he said as he pressed the tip of the hawthorn wand deep into Malfoy's neck.

The man squirmed and turned his head away, panting heavily.

"... don't know... didn't take her... left her there..."

Harry didn't let up and wished for a moment he had some veritaserum to further question Malfoy. The floor shook and the sounds of fighting grew closer.

"You're pathetic," Harry said after staring at the quivering Malfoy for a moment. He might have said more, but when Harry really thought about it there wasn't anything he had to say. He stunned him instead, satisfied when Malfoy's head lolled to the side.

"Harry!"

Hagrid's bellow shook the walls and Harry wrenched the door open, joy bursting out of him. If Hagrid was here, Harry knew it was safe to emerge. The giant grasped him by the shirt and hauled him up for a bone-bruising hug just before Hermione threw her arms around him. Neville clapped him on the shoulder as well and others called out their greetings amidst fighting off attacks.

The redheaded Auror that Harry had been dodging for days now stood in front of him, a pained expression on his dirt-smudged face. "My sister?"

Harry reached out and clasped his arm. They both ducked slightly as Hermione blasted another assailant away. Part of the ceiling collapsed onto Hagrid's shoulder, but he just braced his hands above them all, holding up the remnants.

"I know," Harry said. "She's not here." He wasn't sure if trusting Malfoy was the best thing, but he really didn't think the Slytherin was lying. Not this time.

Seamus and another redheaded man jogged back to the group. "We checked them all, no one else is here." He gestured back to the other rooms along the corridor.

"I don't think Ginevra is here, Ronald," the redhead said. He fixed his glasses, which were lopsided and smudged. The urge to smirk at him was great: he was covered in cuts and bruises, filthy from head to toe and his hair was singed on one side, but he was worried about his glasses and straightened his tie almost compulsively.

"Let's go," Hermione said. Harry heard the tension in her voice and felt her clutch his shirt, tugging him back down the hallway. "The others..."

Harry led the way, catching small bits of information from Neville when they weren't fighting.

"... the Order's all here..."

"I can't believe you broke into the Ministry for me," Harry said, thoroughly amused.

"Had to," Hermione said as she downed another man.

"Couldn't very well leave ye on yeh own, now could we?" Seamus asked.

"... get yourself killed," Neville panted. "Then where would we be?"

Harry's insides swelled and he knew if he needed to, he could probably cast a Patronus large enough to quell the entire Dementor population.

"I'm in love with your sister, by the way," Harry said when Ron came up on his side. "Just thought you might want to know."

Ron stared at him and nearly tripped over his own feet before laughing loudly. There wasn't time to answer, however, as they burst into the atrium and joined the battle. Remus, Tonks and Kingsley were herding the small army out through the floo and Harry spun to give them cover, joined by both Neville and Ron. Hermione looked torn, but Harry jerked his head at her and she knew he meant for her to leave.

A short redheaded man thrust something into Harry's hand. "Set that off right after you come through." He gave a jaunty salute and then disappeared out the floo. Harry clasped his hand around the small cylinder and told both Ron and Neville to get out. Ron looked torn, but nodded and followed Neville.

Harry touched his wand to the top of the cylinder once he was in the floo. The suction spun him around and around, and he felt a blast of heat and pressure before he was tossed onto the floor of a kitchen he'd never been in before.

"Well, Potter?"

Harry burst out laughing when he heard that voice. He had no idea where he was, but just hearing those words in that voice... he felt like he was home again.

"Afternoon, Professor." He grinned up at a disheveled Minerva McGonagall, whose thin lips were twitching at the corners.

"Are you just going to lay there forever, Potter?" Her smile became full as she leaned over him, one eyebrow rising slowly.

He closed his eyes and pressed his fingers into the sockets, rubbing lightly. So much had happened in such a short time and his brain was just now processing it.

"You reckon he's knocked himself barmy?"

Harry choked out a laugh at Seamus' question and the incredulous laughter just kept coming. Several other snickers were heard and Harry could hear Neville chuckling in the background.

When he finally composed himself, he took Dean's offered hand and stood. The faces surrounding him were slightly blurry and he blinked, trying to focus.

"Hermione's just gone through to get your other pair, mate," said Neville. "She'll be back any—"

"I have them!" She weaved her way through the crowded kitchen and slid Harry's glasses onto his face. Her smiling, although exasperated, face came into focus.

"The situations you get yourself into, Harry." Before he could take a breath, her arms were tight

around his shoulders. "Haven't I told you and told you not to do that to me?"

"Stop mothering him, Hermione," said Dean.

She huffed and pulled back. "Well, someone needs to."

Harry cleared his throat and looked at all the faces surrounding him. They were tattered and filthy, bruised and even bleeding, but everyone seemed to be standing upright at least.

"All right?" he asked hoarsely. All these people had come to rescue him, had broken into the Ministry of Magic and risked their lives to get him out safe. Thank you would never be enough. The bubble of gratitude and debt grew inside his chest and he blew out a shaky breath.

People murmured their responses and nodded.

"What about you, Harry?" Hagrid asked, his brow furrowed. "Yer lookin' a bit worse for wear."

"I'll be fine," Harry dismissed.

"You always say that," grumbled Hermione.

"And he's usually right," said Neville with a smirk.

"Mum can fix him right up," the redheaded man that had given him the firework grinned. Harry blinked and adjusted his glasses when he realized there was two of him.

"She knows more healing charms than most Healers," the twin next to him said with a nod.

Their mother, the plump woman who was blushing, Harry assumed, nudged them both to be quiet. This had to be Ginny's mother, Harry decided. They had the same eyes. He felt his insides twist when he thought of Ginny. She was out in the world alone, possibly captured by Death Eaters or someone equally as dangerous.

"Do you know where my daughter is?" A balding man with a kind, but worried face took half a step forward, blue eyes locking with Harry's.

"I don't," Harry said, "but I want to find her just as much as you do." Even though he'd admitted his feelings for Ginny to Ron, Harry didn't think now was the time to announce them to her entire family, let alone the rest of the Order.

Hermione stepped forward and cleared her throat. "Then we'll need a plan." Neville pushed Harry down into a kitchen chair and he was grateful, the adrenaline from before was beginning to seep away, leaving only bone-weary tiredness in its place.

Ginny's mother approached him silently and dabbed at his forehead and nose with a cloth. She looked so very tired and Harry could see that she was barely holding her emotions in check as she worked. He didn't trust his words not to send her over the edge, so he just smiled softly and let her go about her work.

Members of the Order listened to Hermione's instructions and began to leave, tending to their

assignments. The flurry of activity seemed to surprise the redheaded family and they backed as a unit into one corner, watching with wide eyes. Remus spread a map over the table and began hashing out possible repercussions of today's Ministry attack with the Aurors.

"What... what is this?" One of the shorter redheads asked. Harry noticed how muscular he was and saw the scarring on his arms and hands.

"This is the Order of the Phoenix," Harry answered him quietly. "We've been fighting Vol—"

"Harry!"

Harry bit his tongue and swallowed the rest of the word. Everyone stared with wide eyes at his almost-slip. "Sorry. You-Know-Who. We've been fighting You-Know-Who for many years."

Ron stepped forward, glancing back at his family with a hesitant smile. "This is my family," he told Harry. "And we'd like to join you."

They all nodded fervently, even though their mother and father both wore tight expressions. Introductions were made, but Harry didn't pay much attention to the names and such right now. Instead, he focused on the silent woman healing his cuts and mending small tears in his clothing. Gently, he raised his hand and rested it on hers, stilling her almost frantic work.

"She has your eyes," he said.

A single tear escaped and dripped down her face, landing on their joined hands. "Thank you."

He wasn't sure whether he should say more, tell her everything he knew about Ginny, or if that would just be too painful for them both right now.

"Harry!"

Seamus came skidding into the kitchen, crashing into Neville and nearly knocking them both over. "Aberforth! He just told me he saw the girl you were with yesterday!"

"Why the hell didn't he contact me?" Harry roared. "He knows he's supposed to—"

"Like you are easy to track down, mate," Neville said with a dry laugh. "And you know he hates you."

Neville had a point, but Aberforth had pledged his support to the Order, not to Harry. And this was important to the Order, even if Harry benefited.

"Yeah, but the old goat loves me," said Seamus.

"That's because you spent more time in his pub seventh year than you did in school." Dean grinned, but it faltered when he realized Professor McGonagall was standing within hearing range, her nostrils flared and eyes bulged. Both Dean and Seamus quelled slightly.

"Er, anyway..." Seamus turned back to Harry. "Said she was with an older woman who sells things in the village. They were walking through and Abe caught a glimpse of that red hair. She looked right

at him, he said, before she followed the old woman into the woods.”

Harry jumped out of the chair. “I know where she is!”

Chapter 14

Rescuing a Princess Who Can Kick Your Butt Isn't As Easy As It Sounds

The cottage had always seemed confining for Ginny, but now the walls closed in on her and made it hard to breath. The quelling looks from her mother didn't help either. Ginny knew that her little excursion would cost her dearly, possibly for the rest of her life. She'd lost her mother's trust completely and now she'd lost trust in Harry.

That hurt more than anything.

Her mother hadn't stopped lecturing the whole time they traveled back to the glen until Ginny was in tears. Not even Arnold could cheer her up with his excited gallivanting about when she stepped foot into the cottage. She went about her chores mechanically, feeling nothing. Arnold soon quieted when he realized she would pet him, but not interact more than that. And she resigned herself that being magical meant nothing when she didn't have anyone to share it with.

"It's a good thing, for your sake, young lady, that I remembered your obsession for those silly lights in the sky," her mother huffed as Ginny set about making a meal. "If I hadn't rescued you, heaven only knows what might become of you. Mother knows best, after all."

"Yes, Mother," Ginny answered mechanically and shut the tirade out of her head. It was easier to simply agree and not argue, especially not when her head was so muddled.

As the sky began to darken, Ginny watched from her bed, arms curled around her knees. There would be no lights in the sky this night and the girlish fantasy of chasing after them was gone forever.

She lay back and stared at the grey ceiling, letting her memories of the last few days play through her head, confusion and anger building inside her. There were so many wonderful things beyond the glen—magic and friends, beautiful things that she still wanted to explore. But the idea of being hurt again scared her. What if she put faith in someone like Harry again and had all her hopes dashed once more?

In her mind, she could hear his words, just as he'd said them only days ago: *You are special, Ginny, but you shouldn't be locked away. No one deserves that.*

And no matter how hurt she was, Ginny knew he was right. She didn't want to live her life locked away in the cottage in the glen, living in fear and guilt.

Before she could fully form a plan, she was up, moving around her small bedroom, stuffing things into Harry's rucksack. Arnold perked up from his perch on her pillow.

"We're leaving, Arnold," she whispered. "I don't know where we'll go yet, but... but I can't stay here any longer."

She drew Harry's wand and listened at the door, wondering if her mother was lying in wait just outside to try and force her to stay. She'd already locked the door from the outside: punishment, she said, for Ginny's betrayal.

If only she could remember that magic that Harry had used to make the Auror go to sleep. "Stupidify?" she whispered to herself, her brow creasing in concentration. "Stupification. Stupif... Oh! Why can't I remember it?"

"Ginny?" Her mother's voice startled Ginny and red sparks shot out of the wand, making her jump back. Arnold squeaked and ducked further into her pocket. "What are you doing?"

Ginny lifted the wand, hoping that her magic would work even if she couldn't remember the right word to say. The lock on the door clicked and it creaked open.

"What are you doing?" her mother repeated as her eyes frantically scanned the room.

"I'm leaving." Ginny stood up straight and slipped Harry's rucksack onto her shoulders. "I... I don't want to be here any longer, Mother."

There were times when Ginny could remember seeing her mother angry—like when Ginny hadn't gotten all of the chores done before her mother had gotten home, or when she would go on and on about the world outside the glen—but she had never been truly frightened of the woman until now. And yet, there was something inside Ginny that knew she couldn't and wouldn't back down.

"Oh no, you're not." Her mother reached for her hand, trying to wrestle the wand from her. Sparks showered over them both as they struggled for control. "I brought you here and I'm not going to let you go! I gave you everything I had!"

"You made me your slave," Ginny bit out, realizing it was true. "You... you made me use my magic to make things and then made me feel guilty for asking for anything. You... you can't do magic, can you?"

The old woman backed away at Ginny's growing anger, holding up her hands pleadingly. "I brought you here to save you from the cruel world out there, Ginny. I brought you here where you could be someone special, not just one of many, lost in the shuffle."

Something sparked inside Ginny and she narrowed her eyes, advancing on her mother. "What do you mean you *brought* me here? You said I was born here."

The woman's expression faltered. "I just meant that..."

Ginny's head hurt and she pressed her hand to her temple as images came flooding in: bright lights, loud laughter, happy faces surrounding her, and over all, the feeling of happiness.

"What is this?" she asked as she sank to her knees.

"It was for your own good," her mother said. "If I'd left you there, you would have been lost. Too many children in that family, and all magical. I was alone, left all alone with no way to take care of myself. I did it for you."

Ginny's head pounded and she closed her eyes against the pain. "No, you did it for you," she said. "All for you."

"You're right. I did. And I gave my last galleon to have your past charmed away from you. It would have caused you nothing but pain and misery. Here you were needed, you were special." In Ginny's moment of weakness, her mother darted forward and snatched Harry's wand from her fingers before locking her in the room once more.

Ginny stared at the dark floorboards, only seeing the disjointed things in her mind. They were hazy, like old memories seen through a screen of smoke.

"I don't understand," she whispered. The pain lessened, leaving a dull ache behind and Ginny curled up, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. Could they really be memories? And if they were, how were they so different from the colder, more rigid memories she had of her childhood here in the cottage?

And just like that, Ginny understood. She *could* have two different sets of memories. She *could* if she was really two different people. Or, better yet, had been someone else at one time.

Anger exploded through her veins like fire and she stared at the locked door. Without her uttering a word, it flew open, blasting off the hinges.

"Give me back my wand!"

* * *

Harry stared at the thicket of thorny vines. "It's just beyond here."

Ron grumbled behind him. "But I've been just beyond here and I swear there was nothing but more forest."

Hermione stepped forward thoughtfully, tilting her head to the side. "Maybe... it's magical."

Harry smirked at Ron's huffed, "You think?"

"No," Hermione said with a shake of her head and far more patience than she would have given either him or Neville. "I mean, what if the vines are magical in and of themselves? What if it's like the Room of Requirement, Harry?"

Luna clapped her hands excitedly and Harry nodded in thought. "I suppose you might be right."

"Can you remember what you were thinking when you first went in?" Hermione asked.

Ron was grumbling even louder and the rest of his family and the Order stood a few paces back, watching the exchange with a mixture of expressions. Getting them all here had been a chore, but Harry had finally managed to relay the coordinates with enough surety that they'd arrived, more or less, at the same spot when Apparating.

"I'm pretty sure I was only thinking about some place safe to hide," Harry said. He rubbed the back of his neck in contemplation, but couldn't recall his exact thoughts, just the general mindset. He'd

been carrying the Horcrux and needed, more than anything, to find an escape from Ron.

"We could use a safe place, mate," Seamus said as he and Dean came hurrying back into the group. "There are Death Eaters and Aurors all over the village. Anti-Apparition alarms setting off all over the place. Aberforth is running interference, but they'll be tromping through the woods after us any time now."

Hermione nudged Harry and he gave a nod. "No time to think it through then."

Neville clapped him on the shoulder. "It'll be like most of our adventures then. The less time you have to think, the less time you have to worry."

"Some of us will stay here, Potter," McGonagall said, her jaw set firmly. "We'll provide the cover you need and maybe lead them away to keep you safe."

"Thanks Professor," Harry said. She and the other Hogwarts teachers, along with many of the older Order members set off into the forest. The Weasleys remained and Harry felt oddly touched. They hadn't demanded proof of anything he'd told them yet, and they were willing to jump after him blindly.

His chest tightened and he had to make one last attempt to get them to stay behind. He could go in alone and no one else would have to get hurt. "Maybe it's best if—"

Molly Weasley stepped forward until she was standing right in front of him, looking up at him with her jaw set and eyes blazing. "That is my daughter in there, Harry Potter."

It was the same look Ginny had worn when he suggested she go back to the cottage and it made Harry feel both terrified and more alive than ever before. "I know," he said softly. "Let's go bring her home."

Just as he was about to step into the vines, blinding pain engulfed him and he dropped to the forest floor, clutching his scar. Visions of the Horcrux hiding places flashed in his mind and an overwhelming panic that was not his own filled him until his very bones ached.

"He knows," he whispered to Hermione, who was bent over him. "He knows about the—"

Hermione clamped her hand over his mouth to silence him and Harry could feel Neville and Ron lift him until he was sitting.

"What is it, Harry?" Ron asked.

Harry clamped his teeth shut against the pain, catching one last glimpse of the Hogwarts castle as he forced Voldemort out of his mind.

"It's at Hogwarts," he whispered fervently to Hermione. "Hogwarts. I know where..."

She looked into his eyes and Harry knew she understood. "What do you want to do, Harry?"

It was the last one they needed before they could put an end to the war. Well, that and the snake, but Voldemort was keeping Nagini extremely close to him. Now that he knew Harry had been

destroying Horcruxes, Nagini would be watched even closer.

Harry sucked in a shaky breath, ignoring the horrified looks of the others in the clearing, and shook away the panic. It wasn't his and Harry wasn't about to indulge in it right now. He had a job to do. Or, rather, he had several jobs to do, but the first was to get Ginny out of that twisted cottage and back to her family, then he could concentrate on ridding the world of Voldemort.

"We go in," he told Hermione when she looked at him questioningly. "Hogwarts will hold it's own until then."

"I'll let them know." She shot off a Patronus message, making the Weasleys jump in fright. The twins seemed to appreciate the spell if their echoes of 'wicked' were to be trusted.

Harry stood on shaky legs and cleared his mind. "I need a safe place to hide," he told the brambles and dove in, protecting his face as much as he could from the clawing thorns. The rag-tag army followed him one by one. When they were all through—scratched, bleeding, torn, but victorious, Harry moved forward into the night.

"This is it," he said when they came upon the picturesque glen. Even at night it was beautiful, but Harry couldn't help but feel a sinister shadow to the place.

No one spoke a word as they crept toward the cottage. There were only faint lights on in the windows. Seamus, Dean, and George signaled that they would approach from the rear, while Bill, Fred, Charlie, and Neville took another side. Harry wordlessly split the remaining rescue team in two and they surrounded the cottage.

Just as they approached a loud bang rattled the shutters and a blinding light escaped the cracks.

"Give me my wand!"

Harry forgot all stealthy tactics and threw his shoulder against the heavy door. "Ginny! Ginny, I'm coming!"

He heard her call his name, even as the cottage rocked with a battering of spells from all sides.

"Oh, stand back, Harry! You'll never get in that way!" Hermione pushed him out of the way and exploded the door into a million tiny fragments with a satisfied smirk.

"Brilliant," Ron praised and nudged her arm.

Harry charged into the cottage, frantically looking for Ginny. He found her struggling with an old woman, jets of light shooting from the wand they were fighting over. He ducked one and it struck Ron in the shoulder, spinning him around in a circle and slamming him into a wall. As the cottage flooded with attackers—climbing in the windows and pouring in the doorway—Harry tried to find a way to get to Ginny without being hit.

"You took me!" Ginny yelled.

The old woman grunted as she struggled to gain control of the wand. "I needed you. I needed your

magic!"

It was chaos in the cramped room and Harry darted behind furniture as Ginny's wild magic blasted it apart. Things started to click in Harry's mind: the old lady was a Squib. She wanted Ginny for her magical ability and had locked her away for all these years, keeping her as nothing more than a slave.

"You're not my mother!" Ginny screamed as the kitchen table exploded. Harry dived behind the sofa and crawled on the floor, trying to see if he could get a stunning spell in quick enough to hit the old woman and not Ginny, but they were still struggling.

"I protected you! I gave you a home! I made you special!"

"That's my daughter, you bitch!" Molly darted into the fray, swinging Ginny's cast iron frying pan high above her head. It came down with a ringing clang on top of the other woman and she crumpled to a heap. Harry barely beat her to Ginny, but he managed to gather her up into his arms before her family swallowed them both.

"I'm here, Ginny," he whispered to her, holding her so tightly he was afraid he might break her in two. "I'm here."

Their eyes met and Harry could see the questions there, the doubt and fear, along with the stubbornness he'd come to know existed continually beneath her surface.

"Took you long enough," was all she said.

Harry laughed and set her down as everyone began talking all at once, explaining who they were, what they'd gone through and how much they had missed her. Harry felt her slip out of his arms and slowly backed away, watching as she took her place in the Weasley family.

"You did well, Harry," Neville said and clapped him on the shoulder.

Now that it was over, Harry felt drained. He let his shoulders slump and rubbed his face. "Thanks."

"Take a few minutes before we need to move on," Hermione said. She and Neville linked hands and took a step or two back, watching the chaotic interaction between Ginny and her family. Harry thought she looked horribly overwhelmed, but there was an incredulous smile on her face as Molly inspected her closely, her brothers all tried to tell her every story she'd missed all at once and her father kept pulling her to him.

Harry laughed and shook his head. She'd been so lonely for so long, but now it looked as if she might never have a moment's peace.

Just as the thought entered his head, a sharp, stabbing pain erupted in his back. He looked down to see the shiny silver tip of a kitchen knife sticking out his stomach.

"Harry!" Ginny's voice called to him down a long tunnel and he looked up, trying to find her, but then had to look down at his hands that were now covered in blood.

Well, that didn't belong...

The floor rose up to meet him swiftly.

* * *

All of the people around her were making Ginny's head spin, but she couldn't stop the bubble of laughter and joy that erupted from her. She could see little bits and pieces of herself in each of them—the same eyes in the woman who said she was Ginny's real mother, the same jawline as the twins who were talking loudly, both at her and at each other, the same nose as the muscular man with all the freckles, the same smile as many of them.

She tried to breathe, but it was hard when so many of them crowded in, throwing their arms around her and touching her face and hair. And Harry—the one she wanted to hold the most—was slipping away. He was smiling and seemed happy, but Ginny hadn't been able to talk to him before she was gathered into the arms of her family.

"Harry." She reached out her hand for him, but the distance between them was too much right now.

He'd come for her. He looked horrible—pale with bruises and cuts on his face—but no matter what he'd been through, he'd come for her. Ginny felt bad for ever doubting him, but she'd deal with that later. Right now, all she wanted was to kiss him and prove to him that his faith in her wasn't in vain. And as much as she appreciated the swarm of people around her and their insistence on telling her things that honestly made no sense at all, the only thing Ginny wanted in that moment was Harry.

Her mother—the real one—placed her hands on either side of Ginny's face, turning her gaze away from Harry gently.

"Oh, my baby girl!" Tears were pouring down her face and Ginny felt the disconnect she was feeling start to melt away. Her own tears welled to the surface and she threw her arms around the woman, squeezing her tightly.

Over her shoulder, Ginny watched—almost in slow motion—as the woman she'd always *thought* was her mother rose up behind Harry. He lurched forward just as Ginny screamed his name, and looked up at her before falling to the floor.

A barrage of lights hit Ginny's mother—erm... the woman she'd always *thought* was her mother—and she flew back against the wall, wrapped tightly in ropes, head flopping to the side.

Ginny screamed once more and ploughed through bodies to get to Harry. She elbowed Neville out of the way and threw herself at Harry's broken body as it laid, blood seeping onto the floors she'd scrubbed earlier that day.

"Harry, no!" she whimpered and brushed her hand along his face.

He coughed and tugged feebly at the knife in his back.

"Oh, Harry." She caressed his face and his eyes met hers.

"Love you," he whispered. "Red."

Ginny felt the earlier fire rage in her body again and she pushed Hermione out of the way, ignoring the outraged shout that the witch gave, before pressing her hands down onto the wound.

"Pull the knife," she told Hermione.

"We shouldn't," huffed Hermione. "We need to secure the bleeding and make sure we don't do any more damage—"

Ginny looked up at Hermione and wondered if they would have been friends if they'd met under any other circumstances. They might one day be friends, but right now Ginny wanted nothing more than for Hermione to leave.

"Pull the knife," she said once more, clenching her teeth as the fire built under her skin, making her arms tingle. Light pulsed around her fingers and Neville stepped forward to remove the knife before pulling Hermione away.

The entire room seemed to fade away as Ginny poured everything she had into Harry. Her fingers were covered in blood, but as she did magic, the bleeding started to slow. In the background, she could hear the awed whispers of her family and Harry's friends, but Ginny only looked down at Harry.

"Don't leave me again," she told him. "I'm sorry I didn't have more faith, but... but I *believe* in you, Harry. I believe in us."

Harry's eyes fluttered open and closed, but he relaxed under her hands more and more. When the bleeding had stopped, his hands braced on her arms and he stared at her, eyes blazing with a look that Ginny felt all the way to her core.

"I love you, Ginny," he said again.

Ginny smiled at him, but she was feeling so very tired. As the flames inside her began to flicker out, she leaned her forehead down to Harry's chest. "I love you, Harry," she whispered as darkness claimed her.

* * *

Ron had never had one of those moments where time stopped, or slowed down enough that he felt as if he were wading through treacle. He'd always wondered what one would feel like, and if he'd recognize it when he finally did.

Oddly enough, when it did come, Ron was completely shocked at how fast his mind actually worked while in it. Time might have stopped, but his brain kept right on running at full speed as they stormed the cottage where his sister was.

'I should really kiss that Hermione, you know,' he thought when she blasted the door apart.

'Who the hell was inside blasting spells left and right?' he wondered when they stormed inside.

'Why am I looking up at the ceiling and why does my shoulder feel like it's on fire?' he thought in the next blink. When Hermione loomed over him, his brain catalogued how soft her lips looked and what she might possibly do to him if he pulled her down and kissed her in the middle of a battle.

It might have taken an entire hour, or it might have only been a second or two, but one blink they were outside and the next they were inside, surrounding the woman who was his sister.

Time returned to normal speed as he fought his way toward her with his brothers, all of them trying to catch her attention. Ron wanted to say how sorry he was that he hadn't recognized her before when they'd been at that strange dark house in London, and ask her where she'd learned some of that spell work. He wanted to take her hand in his and make sure she was real and this wasn't some elaborate dream he was having.

He didn't even see the old woman attack Harry and didn't realize what was happening until Ginny elbowed him in the gut and stomped on his foot in her haste to escape the Weasley throng. When it connected in his mind what had happened, Ron raised his wand and immediately banished the woman away from Harry.

Time slowed again as Ginny put her hands on Harry and Ron nearly had to shield his eyes at the glow that poured out of her.

"Raw magic," Hermione whispered. She clutched Ron's sleeve and held to him tightly, just as transfixed as Ron was at the scene playing out before them.

"She's... she's *healing* him," Bill muttered and Ron realized he was right. Ginny might not have been trained in magic like the rest of them, but she was more powerful than any of her brothers, it was obvious.

Ron didn't realize he was holding his breath or that he'd wrapped his arms around Hermione, until Harry gasped a deep breath and opened his eyes fully. Ginny slumped to Harry's chest and Ron's parents flew to her side. Their mother cradled Ginny while their father checked Harry over.

"They really do love each other," Hermione whispered.

And even though Harry had said so as they ran through the Ministry, Ron hadn't taken the time to ponder what it really meant. Now, though, he thought he might understand.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's... it's pretty amazing."

Hermione looked up at him and Ron sucked in a breath at her warm brown eyes. Without putting much thought into it, he lowered his head and pressed his lips to hers.

The kiss was short, but Ron felt his ears heating. Then again, that might be because they were surrounded by his whole family and his brothers were likely to take the piss for the rest of his life.

"Oi!" Harry said weakly from his place on the floor. "Now? Really?" He was smiling, though, and Ron felt that maybe he might be happy for Ron, or at least for Hermione.

"Sorry," Ron muttered, even though he didn't really feel sorry for any of it. "Sometimes you just have to go with your gut."

His brothers laughed and Hermione buried her face in his robes. He could feel her shoulders shaking in laughter though, so he figured he wasn't in too much trouble with her.

His parents were over near the old lady, and Ron could just make out what they were saying as his father bound the woman head to toe in ropes.

"... it's *her* Arthur, I'm sure of it. She spoke to me that day at the grocers. She was so taken with little Ginevra..."

"... don't recognize her, but I think she's a Squib. She needed Ginny for her magic. We'll make sure she's taken care of, Molly..."

Charlie and the twins were watching the situation closely, speaking quietly, and the feral smiles on their faces made Ron glad he wasn't on the end of the looks.

Harry gathered Ginny to him. She was awake now, but looked too pale, Ron thought. She wobbled as Harry guided her to the sofa and they sat together, speaking in low whispers.

Any other time, Ron would have wanted to know what they were saying, but he figured they deserved a few moments to themselves after all that they'd been through.

"So..."

Hermione looked up at him, one eyebrow rising slowly. "So," she answered back, her cheeks flushing pink.

* * *

"I wish you didn't have to go."

She was killing him. Honestly killing him.

Harry clung to Ginny and breathed in the scent of her, memorizing it. He knew what waited at Hogwarts, knew the path that fate had set him on so many years ago, but it wasn't easy walking away knowing that he would likely not return to Ginny.

He'd spent so many years trying to decide what Professor Dumbledore had meant when he told him that love was the answer to everything. Love, in so many different ways, *was* the answer Harry decided as he looked around the cramped cottage. He was surrounded by it.

His best friends were here and he knew they'd do anything they could for him. He'd made some wonderful new friends that had already followed him into the darkness and come out victorious. And now he had the love of Ginny, the other half of his soul.

"I wish that too," he whispered into her hair. "But I need to."

And when he pulled back, he knew that she did understand. He didn't have to explain the danger he

was facing, or the insecurity that gripped his heart. She understood because she felt it just as poignantly as he did.

"I'll be waiting for you, Harry, when you get back." She wasn't crying, although he could tell from the waver in her voice that tears weren't too far from the surface. "You still have to teach me so much."

He laughed and held his forehead against hers. He wanted to tell her so many things, but the words just wouldn't come.

"Harry?"

He sighed when Hermione's voice broke into the little bubble of perfection that had been created.

"We really need to go, mate," said Neville.

"I know." Harry kissed Ginny, uncaring of how many eyes were watching. He forced himself away from her, forced his eyes to find her father's. "Take care of her."

The man stepped forward and gathered Ginny to him before thrusting his hand into Harry's. "I will, I promise you."

Harry clamped his lips around the promise he wanted to make because it wasn't his yet to give. He couldn't give her forever because it wasn't in his power right now.

"We're ready, Harry," Dean said quietly. He was surrounded by fervent faces and Harry felt his heart drop down into his stomach. He'd rather they all stayed right here where they could be protected, but it was far past the time for his demands to be met. It was time.

The Weasley brothers joined the group headed to Hogwarts and Harry watched as Ron surreptitiously slipped Ginny's frying pan into the folds of his robes.

"What?" he asked innocently when he caught Harry's widened eyes. "I'm definitely getting one of these."

A laugh erupted from both Neville and Harry and they exchanged a look. "Yeah, who knew?" Harry said.

With one last look back over his shoulder at Ginny, Harry turned and walked out of the cottage, preparing himself to Apparate to Hogwarts, where his fate awaited.

Chapter 15

Once Upon a Time... Because It Always Ends With That, Too

"... and then the evil man said—"

"You're going to scare them!"

Harry glanced up at the doorway to the kitchen and smirked. "Am not!" he called back before turning to finish his story. "He said, 'give up now and I'll let your friends go unharmed.' "

"Honestly, Harry!"

He looked up to see his wife leaning heavily against the back of the sofa, one hand braced on her back and the other cradling her swollen belly.

"Why can't you tell them nice little stories that don't make them run into our bed in the middle of the night?"

Harry laughed and looked down at his two sons who were staring up at him with wide, eager eyes. "You're not scared at all, are you boys?"

Ginny quirked an eyebrow at him knowingly and Harry grinned at her. "They have a whole book of nice, calm fairytales that you could use as bedtime stories, you know. That's why we bought it."

"Those are boring," James said with a disgusted look on his face. "Princesses and girly stuff." He pretended to gag and Harry laughed. Al nodded his head solemnly and Harry ruffled his dark hair.

"Yeah, Mum," Harry said. "Boys need stories about manly things like... like..."

"Dragons!" James said as he shot to his feet and bounced along the length of the sofa.

"Kidd-itch!" Al squealed as he joined his brother.

Harry cheered them on but quelled slightly at the stern look on his wife's face. "Ahem, er... boys, we need to settle down now. Maybe Mummy is right. We could look through the book and see if there's a quiet, slightly exciting story in there."

They grumbled and groaned, but settled down when Harry summoned the book to him and set about turning the pages, searching for just the right story. He let James take over as he moved to stand behind Ginny, rubbing her back and nuzzling his face in the skin on her neck.

"You look tired, love," he whispered.

"You try carrying around this Hungarian Horntail in here," she patted her belly, "and then tell me you don't feel exhausted at the end of the day." She grumbled but leaned back into his digging thumbs and Harry knew she wasn't irritated at him.

"These are all boring," James whined and pushed the book to the side. He turned around on the sofa and kneeled so that he was watching his parents. "Can you tell us the one where you and Uncle Ron and Uncle Fred and Uncle George and Grandma and Grandpa," he took a breath here, "and Aunt Hermione and Aunt Luna and Neville and Seamus and..." His little face screwed up as he tried to remember who else he should list. Finally, he gave it up with a shrug of his shoulders. "And ever'one else saved Mummy from the bad Squib lady?"

Ginny stiffened in his arms, but didn't say anything. He knew she didn't like to talk about the things that had gone on in the past too much, but they'd always tried to be honest with the boys. He kissed her neck and rubbed her belly lightly.

"I might be able to manage that one, but only if you run up and get in your beds first."

The boys whooped in delight and scrambled off the sofa, dragging stuffed toys and favorite blankets with them down the hallway.

"I might want a story too, Shadow," Ginny said as she leaned back into him. "One where we have a House Elf to wait on me hand and foot all day."

Harry chuckled and kissed her lightly. "Why would you need a House Elf when you have me, Red?"

She rolled her eyes and nudged him lightly in the direction of the boys' bedroom. "Go. I'll be in bed and if you're lucky I'll let you rub my feet when you finally get them settled down."

He laughed and gave her one last parting kiss. "I look forward to it, Mrs. Potter." He gave her a quick wink and hurried down the hall, wondering if he could skip a few parts of the story so that he could make it faster, all the while knowing that James would point out every single detail he left out. He had to know everything, from the first time the Squib had seen Ginny as a baby until she had saved Harry's life in that little cottage in the glen.

His little monsters were all tucked in, eagerly awaiting their bedtime story when he entered the room. An overwhelming feeling of happiness washed over him as he climbed onto the end of James' bed. So many years he'd wanted this right here—his very own family—and now he had every single one of his dreams: a loving wife, wonderful friends, extended family in the Weasleys whom he couldn't love more if he tried, and children that he adored.

Yes, life was perfect.

"Once upon a time, in a small rural village in the southern part of England, there lived a large family—of all boys. The mother and father—while being absolutely crazy for continuing to produce said boys—wanted nothing more in the world than a daughter..."

And they lived happily ever after. For the most part.