Harry Potter

Learning to Fly

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Learning to Fly

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Prologue

(takes place at the beginning of Harry's 6th year)

Harry sighed deeply and leaned back in the thick, tall grass of the orchard at the Burrow. It had been a good summer, despite the beginning. Losing Sirius was… well, Harry wasn't sure there were words for what he felt. Numb was probably the most accurate word he could think of. But two weeks of feeling that way had put Harry in a unique position. He was determined that moving forward was his only option. Nothing would be gained, and certainly Sirius' memory would never be honored by living in the past; caught up in 'what if'. Professor Dumbledore's arrival at the end of his second week at the Dursley's had been Harry's Liberation Day. He'd fought the urge to shout for joy when the aged Headmaster informed him that he would be going to the Burrow for the duration of the holiday.

Days spent lounging in the sun, splashing in the pond and playing two-a-side Quidditch with Ron, Hermione and Ginny had done a lot to heal Harry's wounded heart. Mrs. Weasley had been vigilant about filling his plate time after time and, for once, Harry was returning to Hogwarts without the pale, skinny look that he usually had.

Ron and Hermione had finished their flying earlier, with Hermione complaining that they'd gone over the allotted time for Quidditch and now needed to balance it with more revising. Harry laughed at the two as they left the pitch bickering like an old married couple. Ginny said she wanted to fly a bit longer and Harry offered to stay with her, choosing to rest in the cool grass and watch once she began to fly.

The warm, rich smell of the earth filled his senses and he had to squint to see Ginny in the air at all. Earlier, Harry had been amused by the makeshift hoop they'd constructed from an old apple bucket.

"It looks like a basketball hoop," he commented.

Harry forced himself not to laugh as Ron stood staring at the contraption, head cocked to the side.

"You're nutters," Ron said shaking his head and moving off toward his broom. "Whatever basketball is…" The held back laugh broke out as Ron continued to mutter, even as he mounted his broom and inspected the hoop from the air.

Ginny was thrilled to have a goal to shoot at. She'd spoken much of the time he'd been there about trying out for the team, even hinting playfully that she shouldn't have to try out as Harry, named Captain already, had seen her play loads of times. Harry retaliated with his own teasing and the two had kept up the joke for most of their games.

Ginny's shadow crossed his eyes and Harry blinked as she zoomed past and shot the Quaffle perfectly into the hoop.

"Weasley scores again!"

Harry laughed at her cheer and watched her set up another run after retrieving the ball. She was really amazing, he mused. She made Quidditch look like a dance, like it was the most natural thing in the world. And it wasn't only her athleticism that made him take notice. Ginny was extremely funny. She had a similar sense of humor to the Twins and lived to torment Ron. When they were together, Harry rarely found himself out of things to talk about with her; they shared so much in common.

Realization began to set in as he watched her make a failed attempt at shifting the ball behind her to her other side. Her jaw was set stubbornly and she swooped to catch the ball before it hit the ground. She was quite attractive, he thought, with her hair looking like so much fire streaming behind.

A once familiar swooping sensation settled in his stomach and he quickly looked away.

He was falling for Ginny Weasley.

Three days after his epiphany found Harry still in turmoil over what to do. They'd all return to Hogwarts in two days. Ginny had said on the train ride home last term that she'd chosen Dean Thomas. Harry wasn't quite sure what that meant. Were Ginny and Dean dating? He'd not seen much evidence if so; no visits and no owls out of place. But then again, Ginny could be rather secretive. Did he chance alienating her by approaching her?

He'd spent the whole next day after recognizing his feelings watching her closely. They'd spent much of the day together and she seemed interested in his presence. Or it appeared that way. She'd joked and laughed with him, even sharing an eye-roll or two when Ron and Hermione argued. Harry took it as a positive sign.

The next day, Harry had tried an experiment. He'd purposefully stayed away from Ginny, while trying to make it seem that he was just occupied, not ignoring her. Ginny was still her jovial self, although she did disappear for the afternoon into her bedroom.

By the end of that day, Harry was fairly certain that he needed to do something to act on his feelings. The desperation of not seeing Ginny, of not hearing her laugh at one of his lame jokes and not flying together, had worn his temper thin and he'd snapped several times at Hermione who'd been badgering him about his revision habits.

The third day he'd allowed himself to be in Ginny's company again, pretending as if nothing had happened the day before. And, despite a few odd glances from both Ginny and Hermione at his behavior, Harry tried to make it as normal a day as they'd had in the past.

It was Ron who finally cornered him and demanded to know why he was acting so funny.

"What's with you, mate?" he'd demanded. "You've been acting odd… even for you."

Harry's mind raced, trying to decide how much to admit to. Should he tell Ron the truth, that he was beginning to fancy Ginny, or should he deny everything and work it out all on his own?

"Did Ginny do something to you?" Ron asked, his eyebrows raised. "Did she say something to upset you? Because if she did—"

“She didn’t do anything, Ron,” Harry defended. “It’s not her.”

“Well, then why in the name of Merlin’s mangy pants are you hiding from her? And don’t deny it. Hermione said you spent all of yesterday ducking in and out of rooms every time Ginny came in.”

Harry kept a small smile to himself. Maybe Ron wasn’t the one he should be worried about.

“I… I just—” Harry ruffled his hair. He weighed his options quickly. “It’s me,” he finally admitted. “When I’m around Ginny… I just get these… feelings.”

Ron seemed puzzled for a moment, his face screwed up in concentration. “Feelings? Like what? It may be something that Gred and Forge have cooked up. Do you feel nauseous?”

Harry sighed and flopped back on his bed. “Sort of.”

“Harry, you’ve been around long enough to know not to trust anything—”

“They didn’t do anything, Ron,” Harry said softly. “It’s Ginny. When I’m around her… my stomach feels funny. And… I…” He sighed heavily and stared past Ron at a fading orange wall. “I think I fancy her, Ron.”

He didn’t take a chance to look at his best friend, nervous as to what the reaction would be.

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Harry replied in a quiet voice that may have not even reached the other side of the room. “So, I’ve been trying to figure it out.”

“And what do you figure?”

Harry flushed slightly as he finally looked up and saw the look Ron was giving him. Harry didn’t completely understand it. Ron was usually a very easy person to read because he showed his emotions very prominently. But his expression made Harry a bit wary. There seemed to be a bit of amusement, although it was small, and a cross between bewilderment and something much darker.

“I don’t know,” Harry supplied.

Ron nodded thoughtfully, then stood and left without another word, leaving Harry alone again, staring at orange walls. He still wasn’t sure what he should do.

He finally decided, after watching Ginny torment Fred and George all the way through lunch, to talk to her that day or maybe the next morning. With that decision, Harry’s heart felt lighter, although his stomach felt jittery and ill-at-ease, especially when he noticed Ron watching him.

A slightly punch-drunk feeling of euphoria surrounded Harry like a warm bubble throughout dinner. The Twins were in fine shape, teasing Ron and Hermione all through the meal. Even Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had smiled and only scolded their sons slightly. Ginny had been in the middle of the whole scene, ignoring the looks that haughty Fleur had been sending her way all evening.

The normality of the situation ought to have tipped Harry off, as nothing in his life could ever be

called normal, but he chose to ignore any warning signs, letting the warmth of friends and family lull him into a pleasant mood.

Hermione and Ginny struck up a conversation near the end of dinner and were still giggling and talking quietly at the far end of the table. Mrs. Weasley asked Harry and George to do the clean up and they had joked through it. The kitchen was empty when they finally finished and Harry was a bit disappointed, thinking that he'd possibly lost a chance at talking to Ginny.

"Harry, the boys are outside, why don't you come out also?" George asked. Harry felt an instant tightening in his stomach. Rarely did all of the four Weasley boys meet together.

"What's up?" Harry asked, even as he followed George outside and through the yard where the gnomes were sneaking back in through the low fence.

"Nothing," George shrugged, casually stuffing his hands in his trouser pockets. "Just thought we'd get away from all the female company for a bit."

Harry watched him closely as they walked toward Mr. Weasley's shed. George's smile seemed just a bit forced and his shoulders just a bit too tense for this to be a casual thing.

Perplexed, Harry followed and then stopped dead upon coming to the group sitting on chairs on the far side of the shed.

"Let me conjure you one, Harry," Bill offered, swirling his wand until a straight-backed wooden chair stood before him.

Harry's eyes darted to where Ron was leaning back in his own chair against the rough wooden wall. Ron's blue eyes met his for an instant before he flushed and quickly looked away.

"Have a seat," Bill offered and Harry scanned their faces once again before allowing himself to sink down onto the chair.

"What's going on?" he asked again. The quietness of the night pressed into his ears. Even the frogs that lived near the pond had stopped their croaking. Bill cleared his throat.

"Harry, we all like you." Fred and George both nodded fervently and Harry felt a nervous knot well up in his chest. "Mum thinks of you as one of her own."

Harry stayed silent as he waited for the man to say what he obviously needed to say.

Bill sighed heavily and let his chair rest on all four legs before rubbing the back of his neck. "We've all seen the way you've been looking at Ginny this summer."

The tightness intensified in Harry's chest and he rocked forward on the balls of his feet a bit, preparing to flee should they move to do him bodily harm. He was ready to deny it when Ron finally looked at him and he knew he'd been caught.

"And?" he finally choked out.

"And," Bill sighed, "we don't like it."

Harry wasn't prepared for this. In his musings of himself and Ginny dating, he'd never even considered that her family wouldn't approve. He'd always assumed that nothing would make them happier. His stomach rolled uncomfortably and he looked away off into the darkness of the trees.

"We think you'd do better to find someone else," Bill continued. "Ginny's gotten over you, moved on. She'll only get hurt if she's with you, Harry."

Moisture gathered at the back of Harry's eyes and he blinked hard to keep it away, instead letting burning anger and betrayal fill him. He stood abruptly, pushing his hands through his hair. These were supposed to be his friends, his family.

"That's how you all feel?" he managed to croak out. He lifted his eyes to see their responses.

Bill nodded firmly. "It is."

Fred nodded jerkily and George only looked away, his fingers fidgeting with the edge of his shirt. Ron didn't meet Harry's eyes for the longest time and Harry stood staring at his closest friend.

"Ron?"

"I think…" Ron's voice broke and he tipped forward in his chair, slamming it back to earth. "I think it's for the best." His eyes were dark and unreadable when he finally met Harry's gaze.

Betrayal rose up like bile in Harry's throat and he nodded jerkily, only managing to keep a handle on his anger. He stood there a moment longer before the reality of the situation hit him like a Bludger. His shoulders slumped and he crammed his fists into his jean pockets. They were right. He was Harry Potter, for Merlin's sake. Ginny would be better off without him. She would be in danger if they were together.

Without taking his eyes off his feet, Harry nodded jerkily. "Fine," he whispered, before stalking off into the night.

Chapter 1

six years later

"Ginny?"

"Ginny!"

The young woman being summoned looked up. She'd been kissing her boyfriend rather thoroughly, and shook her head to clear the haze a bit.

"Ignore it," came the growled response from the young man she was with. His lips sought hers again, settling a bit south of her mouth.

Ginny shook her head and laughed, pulling away from Dean and gently, but firmly, pushing his shoulders back into the sofa and climbing off of his lap.

"I can't," she said as she ran a hand over her hair, trying to fix any damage his hands may have done in the last twenty minutes. "You know that; it may be the hospital."

Dean sighed in resignation and flopped dramatically onto the soft, second-hand cushions. He watched as she straightened her blouse and smiled proudly at how far he'd been able to get in such a short time.

Ginny ignored his smirk and moved to the far side of the small room, kneeling down near the fire grate and peering into the glowing embers. She held her hair back and gave a strong blow into the coals to ignite them again, filling the room with warm light.

"There you are."

The face of a rather exasperated Hermione came into focus and Ginny grinned at her sister-in-law.

"Sorry, I let the fire die down," she shrugged. "Is everything alright?"

Ginny's heart clenched when she saw the concern on Hermione's face. Hermione and Ron had been trying for several years to start a family and finally they were four months pregnant. Hermione was on partial bed rest and Ginny was worried that it was a problem with the baby.

"We're fine," Hermione sighed. "It's Harry…"

Relief flooded Ginny and she sat back on her heels a bit. It wasn't the pregnancy; it was Harry.

Hermione was usually worried about Harry; tonight was nothing new. Ginny had taken a dozen or more calls over the years with Hermione lamenting about how thin Harry was, how depressed he seemed, how he worked too hard and never did anything with them anymore. Ginny shook her head thinking how harsh she sounded. That wasn't fair. They i*all/i* worried about Harry. He had pulled away from them over the years until he wasn't much more than an acquaintance anymore. Hermione just tended to worry a bit more than everyone else.

"… I think he's really sick this time, Ginny."

Ginny swallowed and nodded, prompting Hermione to continue. Over the years, Ginny had built an emotional wall around her heart where Harry was concerned to protect herself. She was half-afraid to open the door to any feelings about Harry at all.

"I'm serious, Ginny. He just got back from an assignment two days ago, and he looked worse than ever when he flooed to let us know he was back and had the next few days off. He was supposed to meet me for lunch today and he never came. So I flooed over to his house just a bit ago and he was passed out on the couch."

"Hermione-" Ginny started, rubbing her forehead and narrowing her eyes.

"He was burning up, Ginny."

That one sentence captured Ginny's full attention and 'healer Ginny' was in full response mode. "How high was the fever?"

"I was about to check when he started shaking and mumbling," Hermione said through the tears pooling in her eyes. "I've never seen him like that, Ginny. It scared me. His skin had almost a green tinge to it."

Ginny gasped and rocked forward again. Severe fever, tremors, nightmares and green skin pallor were the most noticeable symptoms of Dragon Fever. "Did you touch him, Hermione? That sounds like he may have-"

"Dragon Fever," Hermione nodded. "I've read about it. And I did wipe the sweat from his brow before I realized what he may have."

Ginny nodded. Dragon Fever was almost always fatal to infants and harmful to pregnant women. "Hermione go straight to St. Mungo's and let them know you've been exposed. I'll floo over to Harry's and check him over."

"Won't you…"

"No," Ginny shook her head. "I had it when I was eight, so I'm immune."

Hermione nodded jerkily and swiped at her tears that had finally begun falling.

"He'll be alright, Hermione. And I'm sure you weren't there long enough to be infected."

"Only about ten minutes while I looked for him, and then a few more before I flooed home immediately."

Ginny nodded distractedly. If Harry really did have Dragon Fever, he'd be in for a rough time. "Get going, Hermione. I'll floo you at home as soon as I know what I'm going to do."

The connection went out and Ginny rubbed harshly at her face.

"Ginny?"

She turned to face Dean again and sighed. “Dean, Harry’s-”

“Sick,” he finished with a nod. “Yeah, I heard. Why not send someone from St. Mungo’s over to get him?” he shrugged. Ginny rolled her eyes. Dean had always had this theory, ever since he and Ginny had dated the first time during their Hogwarts years, that Harry had been harboring some secret crush on Ginny. Ginny always discharged that immediately. The second time they’d started dating Dean was relieved that Harry wasn’t around much, but anytime Harry was there, visiting at the Burrow or when they ran into him in public, Dean was quick to assert his possession of Ginny; a fact that did nothing to endear him to his girlfriend.

“Only a few of us can get into Harry’s,” she explained patiently. “And besides, he’s my friend and I’m a Healer, Dean. I’m not going to leave his care to just anyone.”

“He’d be fine at St. Mungo’s,” Dean protested.

“Yeah,” Ginny scoffed, dusting off the knees of her jeans as she straightened from the floor. “Until someone let it slip to the press that he was there. He’d never get a moment’s peace.”

“Why you, Ginny?” Dean demanded. “Floo your Mum, she thinks of him as one of her own, doesn’t she?”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed at Dean’s desperate demands. “Bill and Fleur went on holiday and left the kids with Mum and Dad, for your information. And I’m the only one in the family who’s had Dragon Fever so I’m the only one, besides Mum, who can take care of him.”

Dean’s eyes narrowed. “You still have a thing for him, don’t you?”

Tightness in Ginny’s throat threatened to take away her voice but she let her anger rush past it. “That’s enough, Dean. Harry is my friend. And when my friends are sick, I take care of them, like I’m trained to do.” Ginny knew that if Dean knew what she truly felt for Harry, he’d be out the door and never look back. She didn’t just have a ‘thing’ for Harry. She’d fallen in love with him steadily over the years, only to have nothing returned.

It was extremely painful to love someone who would not love her back, but she worked past it. She’d made a life for herself, gone to Healers’ school and graduated at the top of her class. She had her own flat and she paid her own bills. And she was damn proud of her self for doing it.

She’d dated men too. Lots of men. Dwelling on the characteristics that were lacking in them, which seemed abundant in Harry, wouldn’t get her far.

“It’s time for you to go, Dean,” she stated as she crossed her arms over her chest and nodded toward the door, clearly dismissing him.

“You’re not serious,” Dean scoffed. “I’m not leaving you and Potter alone together.”

Ginny barked out a laugh. “And I suppose you’ve had Dragon Fever then?” His bravado dropped a bit and she knew she’d won. “So you won’t mind the excruciating fevers, blackouts, vomiting, tremors and then cold chills that you get? You won’t mind hallucinating for days on end and not being able to do anything about it?” She didn’t wait for a response from him but reached forward and patted

his cheek patronizingly. “Alright then, you just make yourself at home here and I’ll bring Harry right over. I’ll just tuck you in together, shall I?”

“Ginny,” Dean whined. “Isn’t there anybody else?”

“No, Dean, there isn’t. Now, go home and I’ll send word later.”

His shoulders slumped and he shuffled toward the door. “I’ll come over tomorrow.”

Ginny shook her head. “We’ll be quarantined by then.”

“Completely?” Dean asked, a defeated look about him.

Ginny nodded. “Until the fever breaks and Harry’s back on his feet.”

“How long?”

Ginny shrugged. “It depends on the strain he’s been infected with. I’ve never seen it last more than three weeks, though.”

“Three… Damnit, Ginny! You’re supposed to come with me to the Business Awareness Dinner at the Ministry next week. I’ve worked hard to get this company started and make it a success. Now I’m finally being recognized and you were supposed to be there, on my arm.” Ginny fought back the urge to hex him at his selfishness and shrugged her shoulders in response. Dean had worked hard to start his own advertising company and it, along with his many hand-drawn pictures, were becoming quite popular in the Wizarding publications.

“And what about work, Ginny?”

“I don’t know, Dean,” she finally exploded. “I’ll make it work somehow.”

“Ginny, I’m giving you one last chance…”

“Go, Dean.”

They stared at each other for a few minutes before Dean threw his hands up in defeat and slammed the door behind him. Ginny screamed at the top of her lungs in frustration and then kicked the edge of the sofa, hopping around while holding her toe afterwards.

“… stubborn… bloody… git…” she muttered as she began gathering her things to floo over to Harry’s.

* * *

The inside of Grimmauld Place was just as dusty and dark as the first time Ginny had seen it and she had to clench her teeth against the smell of rotting wood that permeated the air around her as she stepped out of the floo. With a start, she realized it had been almost three years since she’d been there.

An oppressive feeling of decay surrounded her and she fought against the depression that surely must live in these walls. i*How can Harry stand to live here*/i she asked herself. No wonder he spent

so much time working and taking every available assignment outside of England.

She steeled herself for a moment before moving forward into the drawing room where Hermione had indicated she'd found Harry. Only when she got there, the room was empty. There was a rumpled blanket on the end of the sofa and a mess on the floor that looked as if Harry had been sick there.

Ginny rubbed her forehead, swished her wand to clean it up and continued down the hall, looking in each room for him before finding him in a heap at the base of the stairs. A small pool of blood, still warm, dripped down the first step where Harry's forehead had hit it.

"Bloody hell, Harry," Ginny breathed out as she took in his extremely thin, slightly green state. Immediately, she conjured a flannel and pressed it to the cut just above his eyebrow to stem the flow of blood. His glasses hung crooked on his face, one lens cracked and pressing into his cheek harshly. Ginny swept them off and placed them in her pocket.

She could tell instantly that his body temperature was quite high. There were sweat rings on the faded t-shirt he wore and her hand burned just by touching his cheek. He stirred when she used her wand to quickly seal the cut and Ginny watched him for a moment while taking his pulse and muttering to herself.

A creaking behind her made her spin and hold up her wand in defense. But no one materialized out of the darkness and she shivered at the feeling of being watched. She was sure that Harry was completely alone, but readied herself for an attack anyway.

"Let's get you out of this hell hole," she murmured and prepared an emergency portkey to take him directly to her flat. Just before it activated, Harry's eyes snapped open and stared right at her.

"Shh," Ginny soothed, placing her hand on the side of his cheek. "I'm here to take care of you, Harry. It's alright; we'll be somewhere safe in just a minute."

He didn't say anything but his eyes glazed over and a more content look settled in them before he closed them again, slipping back into unconsciousness. The portkey activated and the two were whisked through space.

* * *

Hours later Ginny finally allowed herself to recline against the sofa. Harry was now stabilized and sleeping in her bed, his temperature down to a manageable one hundred and three degrees. He'd opened his eyes once more while she'd been removing his clothing and banishing them to a rubbish can that she'd placed a strong bio-containment shield on. The glazed look was still there but he did seem to calm down when Ginny leaned over and explained to him that she was helping and he would be able to sleep soon. She'd prepared nutritional potions and a mild blood replenishment solution directly by his bedside, afraid to leave him alone for too long. She needed to monitor him to see what stage of the illness he was in.

Dragon Fever went through various stages, she knew, and some of them required constant supervision. She remembered the delirium of the raging fevers, and then the bone chilling cold and shivering that brought on horrible hallucinations and nightmares. And finally the weakness of body

and mind as the illness started to fade. She'd been bed-bound for two weeks through it all and could only stare out the window at the bleak January sky. For an eight-year-old it had been torture. She didn't even have the noise of the boys tromping through the house to distract her. Ron was the only one home at the time and her mother had quickly shipped him and Arthur off to stay at Aunt Muriel's.

The sound of her floo activating made Ginny snap out of her musings. Rather than kneeling beside it, Ginny sat wearily in front of it and waited for the connection to firm.

"Ginny?"

"I'm here, Ron." Her brother's face solidified in the flames and he smiled tiredly. "Is Hermione alright?"

He nodded. "They're keeping her overnight so they can monitor the baby and make sure she doesn't show any signs."

Ginny relaxed visibly and rubbed the back of her neck. "Good."

"How is Harry?" Ron asked.

"He's…" Ginny shrugged. "I won't lie to you, Ron. This is the worst case I've ever seen. It's a good thing Hermione found him when she did."

"He's…" she could see his Adam's apple bob when he swallowed thickly. "You don't think he'll…"

"I think," Ginny interrupted, "that he'll be fine. But we're in for a long few weeks."

Ron sighed. "And you're sure it's Dragon Fever?" There was something there in his tone that made Ginny narrow her eyes at him.

"Yes, Ron. What else would it be? Are you suggesting something different?"

He shrugged and looked away for a minute before shaking his head. "I'm not suggesting anything. It's just… there've been rumors… in the department."

"Rumors?" Ginny pressed.

Ron definitely looked uncomfortable now and he shifted uneasily. "It's probably nothing, just average locker room talk, you know. Don't think on it."

Ginny sighed and pushed it further back in her mind to deal with later. "Listen, Ron. I'm going to need some help to deal with this."

"Ginny, I can't-"

She rode over the top of his panicked protests. "I don't mean you should be here," she snapped irritably. "I i*mean/i*, this place already looks like a war zone. And I sure as hell wasn't going to take care of him in that decrepit old house he lives in. Sweet Merlin, Ron, when was the last time you've been over there? Do you know the filth and squalor he's living in?"

Ron's face darkened and even through the flickering fire, Ginny could tell he was embarrassed. "Harry and I…" he cleared his throat. "We really haven't seen that much of each other lately."

"And why the hell not?" Ginny demanded. "We're all he has left, Ron."

"It's not like I haven't tried, Ginny," Ron ground out. "The bloke is like a closed fist. He doesn't tell anyone anything. We barely get a goodbye out of him and he's off for another six months trekking through the jungle, or three months where he's chasing some criminal all over the Orient. And even when he's here, he's doing double shifts as an instructor at the Academy."

Ginny sighed. She'd heard all this before, for the past four years actually. "I'll bet that gets a little awkward then." Ron had joined the Auror Academy just a year and a half ago after spending several years helping George to stabilize Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes after Fred's death in the Final Battle. Harry was well on his way to being a top Auror by then.

"You have no idea," Ron mumbled. "Bloke treats me like any other recruit when we're in class."

"That's as it should be, Ron."

"I know," his hand ran through his hair in frustration. "I know. It's just… a bit of recognition that he knows me would be nice." He sighed again and shook his head. "What can I do to help?"

Ginny knew better than to push her brother on this subject. Harry's failure to communicate and his growing estrangement from the Weasley family was a sore subject with all of them.

"I'm going to need food and some potions ingredients. Get a quill and write this down, please." He nodded and they made the list together.

"I'm also going to need some new clothing for Harry; a few light t-shirts, boxers and some lightweight pajama pants," Ginny said softly as they finished the other list.

"I can get them from his-"

"Ron," Ginny interrupted, "they need to be brand new. And promise me that you won't set foot in that house. It's completely contaminated. In fact, I'm going to do my best to convince Harry never to go back there again." She shook her head and shivered in disgust at the thought of him being back in that place.

"I'll get some things," he said finally.

"You can have them charge it to my Gringotts' account, Ron," Ginny said and then waited for the protest.

"Ginny-"

"Ron," she preempted, "I've got the money. You and Hermione are barely making it on your salary now that you're in training. Hermione's only working a few days a week."

"We're doing just fine," Ron protested, and even in the flames Ginny could see his ears darkening in embarrassment and anger.

“I know,” she held up her hands in protest. “But I’ve got the money. I live alone, Ron, with few expenses.”

“You’re still paying for Healer’s school.”

“Yes,” she conceded, “but I get paid really well, Ron. Oh, it’s all a moot point anyway; you know Harry will insist on paying me back as soon as he can.”

This seemed to mollify her brother a bit and he nodded jerkily.

“I’m going to set up two times a day that people can contact me through the floo only. It’s not safe for anyone to come and an owl will only risk contamination. Tell Mum to call at ten in the morning and Hermione can call at eight each evening. If I need anything, I’ll be waiting. If I don’t answer then I’m too busy.”

Ron nodded in understanding. “I’m sorry, Ginny-”

“It’s alright, Ron. And it’s not your fault.” She sighed. “I also need a pensieve, Ron.” His shock at her request was understandable.

“You understand how difficult that’s going to be?”

“I do,” she nodded. “But unless Harry miraculously becomes coherent again, I’m going to have to remove some of his memories and sift through them. I have to know how he was infected, Ron. If it’s a viral or a bacterial infection I’m working with, the treatments differ.”

Ron blanched a bit. “He’s never going to forgive you for that, you know.”

“I don’t have a choice,” she snapped and then rubbed away the ache that was settling in her temples. “You think I want to go rummaging around in his brain, seeing things I’ve no right, or desire, to see?” She’d been debating this treatment since she’d brought Harry to her flat and had decided that, no matter how invasive it was, it needed to be done.

“Just get your hands on one and I’ll do the apologizing. I have been trained to do this, Ron, you know.”

“I know,” he nodded solemnly. “I’m just not sure where I’m going to get one. Harry has one, I know.”

“Ron,” she sighed, “you can’t go into that house. Besides, I sealed the floo from there just after I portkeyed him here and got him stabilized.”

“Good idea,” Ron mumbled. “I’ll figure something out. How do you want me to get you the supplies?”

“Just bring them in a box and leave them by the front door. I’ll expand the contamination ward after you’re gone and collect them.”

Ron stared at her for a moment before nodding woodenly. “I… I’m sorry, Ginny, that this happened…” he held up his hand for her to stop speaking. “But all the same, I’m glad it is you

taking care of him. You're the best, Gin, and I appreciate it."

Ginny allowed herself to smile finally, washing in the affection that Ron rarely showed. "Thanks. I'll talk to you later."

"Take good care of him, and yourself."

"I will." The connection was broken.

Chapter 2

Harry's eyes cracked open and the pale room swam in his hazy vision. His stomach rolled and he slammed his eyes shut again. He wasn't sure where he was or how long he'd been there. He supposed he should be worried about that. His Auror training had engrained in him the need to be constantly vigilant, but the blissful oblivion of sleep welcomed him with such open arms that he was reluctant to overcome it.

His dreams had varied. Ginny wove her way in and out with a regularity that was frightening if he allowed himself to think about it. He'd worked hard to put that past him; even though he knew it was rather a lost cause.

The ones not featuring Ginny were frighteningly accurate reminders of his time hunting for Horcruxes, the Battle at Little Hangleton, the Department of Mysteries or any other number of missions he'd been on as an Auror. Sometimes they were a mish-mash of events spiraling around each other and making no sense other than to terrify him.

The room was hot and Harry struggled against the strangle of blankets surrounding his legs and waist. The weakness of his limbs was frustrating and he growled against it, knowing that it was almost futile to move. The effort wore him out even more and he drifted back into darkness.

His next awareness was that it was much hotter and that the bedding was wet from his sweat. He groaned and attempted to shift away from the stickiness only to find that he was weaker than before. His eyes fluttered open as he heard someone speaking to him. The room was quite dark and the sounds muffled. The brightness from a wand-tip made him squint and made it even harder to make out the shape.

Just before he let the darkness take over, he saw a glimpse of red framing a pale face.

"Em-leee," he sighed and drifted away.

* * *

The South American climate was oppressively hot and the humidity made Harry's clothing stick to him the moment that he put it on in the morning. Around his flat he'd taken to wearing only boxers, and sometimes nothing at all. However, that wouldn't do now that he was on duty.

He'd only been here six weeks and had already proved to his superiors that he was a man of action that more than knew how to handle himself in a crisis. He'd been reassigned as a result and was now awaiting that change.

The narrow street was crowded and Harry mumbled a few greetings in rough Portuguese as the men he passed everyday in the small markets and open air cafes called out to him. He kicked a half-deflated football back to a pack of dirty-faced, dark skinned boys that should be in some school somewhere, and watched as they scuffled in an abandoned lot between two crumbling buildings. On another day he would have joined the boys and allowed himself a laugh or two at their teasing him of his rudimentary athleticism. But today he had an appointment.

The Apparition point was only two blocks away from his flat and he was early so he took his time watching the locals go about their business. The relaxed atmosphere was very soothing and Harry, not for the first time, considered moving here permanently. It wasn't as if there was much at home to miss, he thought bitterly. He'd have to see how this new assignment played out before he decided anything for sure.

Harry had been a bit frustrated when the change had come. He'd been making good progress on the case of a missing Wizarding official when he'd been pulled and assigned to the Healer detail. Healers from all over the world volunteered their time to come to underprivileged countries and treat the sick and injured. This particular country wasn't known for the safety of even the White Cross groups. Sometimes they would be attacked and all their supplies stolen before they could treat a single person.

The new group was due in ten minutes and Harry settled himself in a rickety chair near the side of the dirt stained building. If he leaned back just a bit, he'd be in the shade, or at least his face would be. Six weeks here in the southern hemisphere had darkened his skin considerably, but the blackness of his hair often got to be too much if he didn't stay out of the direct sun.

Although looking relaxed, Harry was, in fact, quite alert. This new group of Healers was from America and Britain and he knew they were bringing a large shipment of medical potions with them; potions that would bring thousands of galleons on the black market if they ever found their way there.

He glanced at his watch from behind dark tinted glasses and saw that the portkey should be arriving at any moment. The large crack that he expected was only thirty seconds late and he was impressed. International Portkey Offices were known for running behind.

A portly man with a pale, balding head was already wiping the sweat from his brow as he began calling out to the fifteen or so Healers in various state of dishevel. Baggage was lying everywhere and Harry smirked as he watched the pale faces search for their belongings.

A tall, thin woman with graying hair pulled into a rather severe looking ponytail caught his eye and Harry reluctantly stood with a slow casualness that did not come naturally to him. He supposed he picked it up, or at least imitated it, due to the similar movement of the locals.

"Mr. Potter?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed, holding out his hand for the woman to shake. "And you're Healer McKitron?"

"Please, call me Sharon." Her firm handshake reminded Harry of Professor McGonagall. She seemed to be studying him for a moment before nodding concisely. "Just give us a minute or two to get our things together and then we'll be ready to move along."

Harry nodded absently, taking in the disarray around him. "We're in no hurry and it's only a few blocks or so to your hotel."

"Very good," the woman answered and went about her business ordering the people around, echoing the portly man.

The Healers seemed to be young in general, a few years older than Harry was, at most. There were a few older faces mixed in as well. Most were quite overdressed for the climate and were fanning themselves; some had even removed outer shirts.

He smiled to himself as a young man and woman struggled with a set of new, and rather expensive looking, luggage. Harry watched the man attempt to gather it all under one arm and the woman protest. He smiled seeing the shiny wedding bands on their fingers. The woman's protests seemed to be winning out, either that or the luggage was simply too much for one person as the man let his new wife take two bags. Harry ducked his head to hide a chuckle.

The next second his breath was taken away when the couple moved on and he saw the petite woman who had stood behind them. Her back was to him, but he'd know those curves anywhere. He'd dreamed about them for years. Her vibrant red hair was pulled back in some sort of plait, although small bits were sticking to her wet neck and the sides of her face. He'd not even thought too much about the fact that some of the Healers were British. He'd never counted on seeing i*her/i* here.

He felt as if he'd been hit in the solar plexus. The stifling heat became more unbearable than ever as he heard her laugh at something another woman was saying to her. His steps toward her were wooden and hardly noticed until he stood right behind her.

"Ginny?" he whispered. She didn't turn so he said it louder.

The redhead turned and Harry's knees wobbled. Crystal blue eyes looked him up and down.

It wasn't her. It wasn't Ginny.

"Emily Watson." Harry stared dumbly at the hand she held out in front of her before shaking his head and grasping it gently.

"I'm sorry; I thought you were someone else."

"You mean there's someone else out there cursed with this hair?" she laughed and her friend giggled alongside her.

Harry felt his face darken in embarrassment. "Harry Potter," he stammered out. The surprise was evident on her face, but Harry thought she covered it well.

"Pleased to meet you." The American accent was obvious and Harry thought he detected a bit of southern twang to it as well.

* * *

Ginny watched Harry toss and turn in the bed before wiping his forehead with a cool cloth again. His fever had spiked dangerously high and Ginny had been minutes away from flooing for an emergency transport to St. Mungo's when it broke finally. The bed sheets were soaked with sweat and pulled nearly from the bed itself with all of Harry's movement.

She prayed he would stabilize soon so that she could do the memory extraction. Finding out the way

Harry had been infected was the only way that Ginny could reasonably treat the illness. Dragon Fever was usually transmitted by a virus, passed through general contact.

However, bacterial Dragon Fever was a much harder disease to cure. Usually this was contracted through direct contact with bodily fluids. Even sweat carried a small amount of the disease. And some people were even carriers for the virus while never fully contracting it themselves. Possibly on his last mission Harry had come into contact with it. Ginny would never know for sure until she could get a look through his memories. And that couldn't happen without Harry being a bit more coherent.

He sighed deeply and seemed to settle a bit and Ginny rolled her aching shoulders. Three days of caring for Harry on her own were wearing her out.

She wiped his brow again and was startled when piercing green eyes stared up at her, unfocused as they were.

"Harry," she whispered and smiled slightly as he squinted toward her. She knew that putting his glasses back on him would only make him dizzier, so she refrained. He blinked several times and smiled lazily up at her. Ginny fought the urge to giggle at the silly look on his face. She knew he was still delirious, but the fact that he was even acknowledging her at all was a good thing.

"Harry, I need you to help me." He didn't respond, and she didn't expect him to. Quickly she moved the small pensieve toward the side of the bed and picked up her wand. "I need you to remember when you started to get sick. Can you do that for me?"

Another sloppy smile through half-lidded eyes was all she got. She rolled her eyes internally and prayed that he wasn't dreaming about whoever 'Em-lee' was again. His call out for her earlier had shaken Ginny quite a bit, although she'd known Harry had seen other witches in the past. Ron had made sure to inform the whole family that Harry had been seeing several witches and had a reputation, although Ginny didn't believe much of it. Anything Rita Skeeter wrote could be discounted immediately as mostly lies.

"Think of right before you got sick, a day or two," Ginny gently prodded. "I'm going to look at your memories to find out how you got sick. Alright?"

Harry's eyes closed lazily but his breathing didn't deepen. Ginny prayed that he'd forgive her one day and placed her wand tip to his temple, slowly drawing out strand after strand of silvery liquid. The thoughts pooled and swirled in the stone basin. She removed half a dozen memories, hoping that Harry was alert enough to direct her to the ones she needed most and that she wouldn't have to see too much personal information.

He seemed to slip into a comfortable sleep when she finished and Ginny sighed, watching hazy faces swirl in the liquid.

"Bugger," she swore. Deciding that she'd be braver after a shower, Ginny quickly moved the full pensieve to the kitchen table and quietly made her way to the small loo.

She put off looking through the memories until she'd made a fresh batch of vegetable soup and a loaf of bread. She knew she was being a coward, but it couldn't be helped. Seeing parts of Harry's

life weren't going to be easy. He'd never had an easy life and she was almost terrified of what she'd see. Maybe she could just breeze through the memories if they weren't the one's she needed. At least she wouldn't have to feel Harry's emotions about the contents of the pensieve. She remembered another Healer Trainee in school having a bad reaction to pensieve training as she'd had mild empathic abilities.

Once her food was eaten and the kitchen organized, Ginny checked on Harry once more and set a monitoring spell that would alert her if his vital signs changed drastically. She couldn't put it off any longer.

She settled at the table with a quill and parchment and took a deep breath before leaning her face into the liquid.

Ginny fell into a dark room landing on a soft and lumpy surface. She glanced around and immediately relaxed when she realized she was in a bed in Gryffindor Tower. The smell of teenage boys heavily permeated the air and Ginny grimaced against it; sweat and dirty socks.

At least she was somewhere familiar, although the memory would be useless as Harry hadn't gotten sick that far back. Curiosity held her there as she heard the other boys moving around her. With a start, she realized that she was in Harry's bed and he must be the lumpy shape curled up at the other end. The hangings near the top of the bed were cracked open just a bit, letting a small sliver of light enter the dark, musty interior. Harry shifted toward the noise and his face became more visible as the light lay across his cheek. One bright eye shone green in the dark.

"What's with Potter lately?"

Ginny recognized Seamus' quiet words and wondered what was happening.

"Don't know." Dean was the one who answered.

"I don't think he's spoken to anyone in two weeks."

"Not even Granger or Weasley," Dean agreed. "It's strange. You think they had some sort of argument or something?" The answer was incoherent.

"So, how far have you got with Ginny?" Seamus' salacious tone made Ginny's anger bubble.

She winced as she watched the emotional wall that Harry had become famous for settle over his features. He shifted away from the light but not before she noticed the shiny trail of a tear down his cheek.

The memory swirled around her and she now found herself standing in a bright training facility near Harry. Kingsley Shacklebolt paced up and down in front of them, his bright red Auror robes perfectly pressed and cleaned.

"You've managed what only two other Auror candidates in the history of the Academy have done, Potter," he stated in his deep voice.

Ginny glanced at Harry and was surprised to see no emotion whatsoever on his features. He was

standing at perfect attention, his eyes focused on some distant point across the room.

“Harry.”

Kingsley’s voice softened and Harry’s attention snapped to his superior officer. “Only Alastor Moody and Frank Longbottom finished early. And you nearly beat Frank’s record.” Harry nodded woodenly and Ginny stared at him slack jawed. She’d known Harry had finished training early, but she’d had no idea i*how/i* quickly.

“We should plan some sort of ceremony-”

“No!” Harry’s voice bit out harshly, stunning both Kingsley and Ginny. Harry flushed at his own tone and looked down toward his highly polished boots. “Sir, I don’t want any recognition. I don’t deserve any.”

Kingsley smirked and shook his head. “I don’t agree, Harry. You’ve worked harder than anyone here, harder than anyone expected you to. Some of your superior officers had bets going on when you’d collapse from exhaustion. But you never did.” He shook his head in amazement and continued to size up the boy in front of him. Ginny assumed that Harry was no more than nineteen at this time.

“Please, sir,” Harry asked softly. “Don’t say anything to anybody. I’d like continue on with my assignments if I could. I’ll graduate with my class, sir.”

Kingsley seemed to study him for a minute before shrugging and nodding at the same time. “I’m assigning Tonks as your senior partner. You’ll work with her for twelve months or until she tells me you’re alright on your own. Her assignments will be your assignments, you’ll communicate through her.”

Harry nodded, even as an uncomfortable expression settled on his face. Ginny had always wondered what had happened between Harry and Tonks. In her sixth year—the year that Harry, Hermione and Ron had disappeared and Voldemort had taken over the Ministry—Tonks and Remus Lupin had eloped. A month or so later Tonks had admitted to Ginny at Bill’s wedding that she was pregnant. Remus had seemed a little upset about it, but by Christmastime, when Ginny had visited, he seemed to be settling into the idea of fatherhood. Tonks had told Ginny that Remus wanted to name Harry as Godfather and Ginny thought it was a great idea.

Harry had pulled away from almost everyone, even though he, Ron and Hermione were still out together hunting down Voldemort. Having a Godson would be good for him.

And that was the last she’d heard of it. Remus had died in the Final Battle and Tonks had almost died, being injured enough to require extensive medical treatment at St. Mungo’s and months of rehabilitation at home. Their son, Teddy Lupin, had been moved in with Tonks’ mother Andromeda, and the recovering Auror had soon followed.

Ginny had asked, months later, about a ceremony for Harry and Teddy but Tonks paled and shook her head. Hermione quickly whispered something about Harry not accepting the title and that it wasn’t a good subject.

She didn't have more time to ponder this before the memories swirled again and she was staring into a lowly lit room; one she'd never been in before. The heat was stifling and she could immediately feel the moisture in the air. Instantly she colored when she heard the sounds in the room. Two people were on the bed clutching at each other tightly as they moved together. The bed sighed and groaned along with the couple.

As her eyes adjusted, she could see the paleness of flesh, the white of bedsheets wrapped around bodies, one black covered head and one head covered in hair extremely like her own.

Ginny slammed her eyes shut and placed her hands over her ears as she pushed against the memory with all her might. The pulling sensation began and Ginny relaxed, only to be startled by the sound of Harry's name being shouted by the woman.

The next memory arrived with Ginny still trying to understand what she'd seen and heard. The woman in bed with Harry had been a redhead as well. She pushed it to the back of her mind, refusing to acknowledge it, as she watched an infuriated Tonks pace in front of Harry, who stood at rigid attention, despite the deep slash across his eyebrow and the blood dripping down his face.

"… you're reckless, Potter, and you endangered the entire mission with your attitude. I don't give a damn if your gut told you it was the right thing to do. You're going to get us both killed one of these days." She seemed to deflate a bit as she rubbed harshly at her face.

"What's going on, Harry?" she asked in a softer tone. Ginny noticed that Harry's emotional wall slammed up and the magical tension in the air sizzled. Tonks shivered. "You're wound tighter than anyone I've ever seen. You're in here hours before work and hours afterwards. Ron and Hermione have to get updates on what you're doing through me. You've not been to a Weasley dinner in months and to add insult to injury, you've not come to see Teddy in even longer."

Harry's eyes darkened. "You're the one who told me I was unfit," he growled and Ginny saw a flash of anger that she momentarily wished he'd let go. At least he would be showing some emotion. Tonks seemed to be wishing the same thing, but she reined her expression in.

"I was upset," she said in a quiet voice. "And I'd reconsidered until they assigned us together. But you're even worse now, Harry. Teddy's lost one parent," Ginny heard her swallow harshly and blink suspiciously bright eyes before clearing her throat. "I won't let you take me away from him because you're hell-bent on proving something to the entire world."

The magic in the air crackled again before Harry looked down at his shoes and nodded stiffly.

"I'm giving you one week, Potter," Tonks snapped, her authoritative voice back in control, "and if you've not settled down I'm placing you on probation."

Harry nodded once again and flinched when Tonks placed a hand on his shoulder. Ginny was shocked at his aversion to the touch.

"Slow down, Harry. You don't have anything to prove and life is too precious to be lost on something like tonight."

Harry jerked his shoulder free from her hand and glared at the woman who was his same height.

“For you,” he bit out. “You’ve got someon—something to live for.”

Ginny let a sob escape her throat at the hopelessness in his voice. The two women watched as Harry stormed out of the room, the door slamming behind him.

The kitchen at the Burrow materialized around her and Ginny sighed at the familiarity. Surely this would be a happy memory. She remembered overhearing Harry tell Ron that most of his happiest memories were at the Burrow.

Her mother was working at the cooker and laughing as her father attempted to steal a piece of roast beef off of the carving platter. Bill and Fleur were seated at the table, cuddled together as Bill patted her very round belly. Charlie and Percy were introducing both of their dates to each other and Ginny instantly recognized the occasion. This was five or six months ago at most. George and Angelina had announced their engagement that night at dinner. Everyone had been there and it had been a wonderful night.

Ginny relaxed, knowing that this was indeed a happy memory. This was also the first time she’d brought Dean to dinner after they’d gotten back together. She determined that she’d be sure to watch Harry’s reaction to everything that night. Looking back in her own memory, Harry’s attendance was rather vague, but she admitted to herself that she had been preoccupied.

Harry was sitting next to an animated Ron and Hermione. Ginny moved to an area where she would be out of the way and still be able to see Harry’s face. The trio was settled at the table in their usual places and chatting amiably with Bill and Fleur; at least Ron and Hermione did. Harry, Ginny noticed, only answered when spoken to and he seemed rather down, always keeping his answers short and in a quiet voice.

Her own arrival, with Dean in tow, drew her attention and she chided herself, swinging her head back to Harry only to be puzzled by his expression. His face contorted for a brief instant, full of pain and despair, before he schooled his features and swallowed thickly. Ginny felt her knees tremble as he stood to shake Dean’s hand and kiss her cheek in greeting.

She’d never seen that look on his face. She could have sworn, for just a moment, that Harry had feelings for her.

Her attention was now solely focused on Harry as the evening progressed. He became more and more reluctant to participate in any conversation, his eyes always darting to where she sat with Dean, completely oblivious to the situation. The way she hung all over Dean, laughing and joking, constantly leaning into his touch made her ill because of the visible effect it was having on Harry. How could she have not noticed this then?

At the end of the meal, George and Angelina announced their engagement and Harry had smiled sadly, his eyes traveling up and down the various couples in the room. It was in that instant that Ginny realized something; Harry had been the only single one there that night. Everyone, even stuffy Percy and reluctant Charlie, had been in serious relationships. The heavy burden of loneliness sank his shoulders even further and he moved to the back of the room while the Weasleys offered their congratulations and well wishes.

With teary eyes, Ginny watched Harry as he watched those whom he’d always felt were as close as

family. Absolute despair seemed to settle on his shoulders and he looked much older than his twenty-one years. One last look of longing shot at Ginny, who was embracing Dean, and Harry silently popped out of existence.

Ginny sobbed as she remembered thinking later in the evening about Harry being absent. She'd brushed it off, blaming Harry's eccentric tendencies, and had not mentioned anything to Ron or Hermione.

The rotting scent of Grimmauld Place filled her nostrils and she swallowed her tears and gagged slightly. The hallway she stood in was completely silent and Ginny wondered where this memory would take her. She was startled by pounding on the door downstairs. This was Harry's memory, so surely he would be here somewhere. The pounding continued and Ginny went in search of Harry to find out why he was too preoccupied to answer the door. She prayed he wasn't with a woman like in the earlier memory.

Deciding that upstairs would probably be her best bet because that's where the memory had taken her, she ignored the pounding downstairs and ducked into the room Ron and Harry had shared years ago.

Dust assaulted her nose and she had to brush away cobwebs to even get into the room. Certainly he wasn't in here. She backed out and moved on. The room she'd shared with Hermione was just as deserted and she climbed the stairs to the next level, coughing and brushing away more cobwebs.

The door at the end of the hallway was ajar and she vaguely remembered it being Sirius' room. A tarnished name plate on the wall next to the doorway confirmed it. She fingered it and ducked into the darkness.

A tangy, warm scent assailed her senses and she fumbled around in the dark, trying to identify it. She'd smelled it before, on several occasions, she knew, but couldn't quite place it now. It reminded her of a hospital and she was worried that Harry was in the bed sick. She stepped over a pile of clothing on the floor, recognizing the same jumper that Harry had worn in the earlier memory of the Burrow. Vaguely, she wondered if this was that same night, or another one completely.

She stepped closer to the darkened bed, peering at the figure she could now see outlined there.

Harry lay on his back with his arms next to his body and no blanket over him. He seemed to be asleep and was clad only in boxer shorts. Ginny could see the thinness about him, his ribs easily defined in the dark shadows of the room. But something appeared to be wrong with the bed. The quilt, one she thought she recognized as an old, worn one from the attic of the Burrow, was strangely dark. The patterns seemed to blend into a blackness which Harry laid in the center of.

As she leaned over closer to him, the truth hit her like a Bludger to the stomach. It was blood. Harry was lying in a pool of his own blood. That was the scent she should have recognized instantly. It had clung to her clothes after the Final Battle and assailed her during her rotations in the Trauma Ward of St. Mungo's.

She screamed and clutched at him, only to remember that she wasn't really there, after all. This was only a memory. The pounding intensified but she couldn't tell if it was in her head or still

downstairs. Her knees finally gave out and Ginny collapsed to the dusty floor, her eyes never leaving the ever-widening circle of black that drained out of Harry.

“Sweet Merlin!”

She spun around as Kingsley Shacklebolt burst through the door.

“Harry,” he moaned and instantly dove to the boy’s side. “Oh, kid…”

Ginny watched, hand clutched to her mouth, as Kingsley’s wand lit up. She lost her battle and vomited next to herself when Kingsley raised Harry’s arm and she was able to see the self-inflicted eight inch gash in his forearm. Her eyes drifted down to the side of the bed and Harry’s wand poked out from the edge under the bed, just under the shadows.

“No! NO!” Kingsley shouted. His wand made fast work of healing the wounds and then knelt on the blood-soaked bed in his formal robes, clutching Harry’s lifeless body to him and crying, rocking back and forth. “Don’t let go, kid, don’t let them win. Fight, Harry! Damn you, FIGHT!”

A second later, a silvery lynx erupted from the tip of his wand and disappeared out of the room.

Ginny pushed with all her might to exit, praying that she could leave the pensieve altogether. That last memory was more than she could take.

Chapter 3

Fate had never been kind to Ginny Weasley. One more memory remained in the pensieve and pulled her in, even as she tried to resist with all her might.

The Great Hall at Hogwarts swirled around her and she took a moment to gather herself, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and using her sleeve to wipe away tears.

Realization of when this memory took place hit her hard. This was the day after the Final Battle. She could see the group of redheads in the far corner, all huddled around the still form of Fred. Emotion threatened to overwhelm her. This was one of her most hated memories.

She began to drift toward the Weasleys, passing a grieving Dennis Creevey along the way as he sat at Colin's feet. She shook as she saw Hagrid sitting next to Remus Lupin's still body. Tonks had still been fighting for her life in the Hospital Wing. Groups of students huddled together, some crying, some staring off into space.

Professor McGonagall, white as a sheet and never looking older, moved from group to group patting shoulders and squeezing hands.

Ginny had never seen this memory from this side before. Her own focus had been on the tight circle that was her family and her gaze hadn't wandered far from her dead brother. She hadn't even had the energy to worry much about where Harry had been at that point; assuming he'd had more important things to do.

She found him eventually, sitting completely alone at a table near the corner. He was staring at the Weasleys and she could see the heartbreak that he felt. There were tear tracks down his filthy face as he watched the family grieve. Luna came up and spoke with him, soft words of comfort and friendship. Once she'd left with a shoulder squeeze on the way behind him, Harry returned his focus to the redheads in the corner.

There were only Ginny, her mother and father left now, and a completely defeated George staring at his lifeless twin.

Strangely, despite all of the despair around him, Harry wore a more at ease look on his face than she remembered seeing in a long time. It wasn't that he was happy; Ginny supposed it was more the relief of it being over. Seventeen years of living on the run from Voldemort had come to an end.

She was startled when Charlie slipped into the seat next to Harry. The two glanced at each other silently before looking back into the corner.

"You did it."

"Yeah," Harry said quietly.

Charlie only nodded and then searched Harry's profile for a moment. Ginny was confused as to what he could possibly have to say to Harry. Did he blame Harry for Fred's death? Was he planning on thanking Harry for vanquishing Voldemort?

“Now you can get on with your life.”

“Yeah.” Harry nodded once and looked down at the table before raising his eyes and following her figure as she walked out of the Great Hall. Ginny remembered needing a breath of fresh air to clear her head.

“You remember what the boys and I talked to you about two years ago?”

Harry seemed as startled as Ginny was by the turn of conversation, but he stared at Charlie and his eyes went dull, making him look nothing short of exhausted. Nodding jerkily he cleared his throat. “I remember.”

“It still applies.” Charlie’s tone was stern and unyielding, and Ginny felt herself rise in anger, even though she wasn’t sure what he was speaking about exactly. “She’s not the one for you.” All the air collapsed from her lungs as his meaning became evident.

“I remember,” Harry said. Any relief she’d seen on his face earlier was gone and weariness had settled on his handsome features, accenting the gauntness of his face.

“You may have gotten rid of You-Know-Who, but you’re still a wanted man,” Charlie continued in a low voice. Harry seemed to have stopped listening as he stared at a distant wall. Ginny knew that he was still hearing though. “Every Death Eater not killed today is going to be hunting you. Ron tells me that you’re planning on entering Auror training.” Harry glanced over at him again and nodded once without saying a thing.

Charlie was silent for a moment before pointing toward Remus’ dead body where Andromeda Tonks was now seated stiffly holding a very young Teddy Lupin. “Is that what you want for Ginny? To have her sit next to your dead body, possibly raising your kid all alone?”

“You bastard,” Ginny growled and lunged for her brother, forgetting that she couldn’t do anything to him in a memory.

“She deserves better than that,” Charlie bit out. Ginny allowed her anger to swell into despair as she realized what had been going on all this time. “Do you respect her enough to let her have that?”

Harry’s voice was choked as he replied and she was sure, even without seeing his half-hidden face, that he was crying. “I love her enough to let her go.” His whispered admission seemed to startle Charlie and they sat in silence for a minute.

“Then we have that in common.”

“Your message was clear, Charlie,” Harry growled out, harshly wiping his face. “You can relay that to everyone. I understand. I’ve always understood.” With a violent shove against the table, Harry’s chair scooted backward and he stood abruptly before bolting out the door. Ginny watched him go, completely helpless to stop him as the memory swirled to black.

When she opened her eyes, Ginny laid her head on the cold wood of the kitchen table and cried. She cried for Harry and all the loneliness and pain he’d gone through. She cried for the betrayal of her brothers; the men who’d laughed with Harry, slapped him on the back and called him their

brother. She cried for all the years she'd spent in meaningless relationships searching for something that she'd instinctively known Harry could offer all along.

He was in love with her at one point in time, and it sounded like it had been for some time. Did he still feel that way? If his memories from the Burrow were any indication, he may still have feelings for her.

"Oh, Harry," she sighed as she wiped her eyes. The room was completely dark as she stood and slowly moved into the bedroom. Harry lay motionless on the bed, too much like the memory at Grimmauld Place for her comfort, although she knew he was still alright; the vital statistics spell had not warned her of any danger.

She perched herself on the edge of the bed and reached for his arm. His hand was limp in hers and still very warm. She held it for a moment and gathered the courage to turn his wrist over. There, on the inside of his forearm was a very faint white scar about eight inches long. She wondered how he kept it hidden for so long and then chastised herself. Of course he'd been able to keep it hidden. He was a top Auror was he not? Concealment spells were probably a specialty of his.

He rolled onto his side in the bed and Ginny edged onto it next to him, wrapping an arm over his waist and resting it on his chest. His heart beat a heavy rhythm there. She nestled into his back and let her tears fall again until there weren't any left.

She awoke when Harry started shivering violently under her arm. Apparently he'd moved onto the next stage of the disease: the chills. She could hear his teeth chatter even though his body still raged with fever. Her grip tightened on him and she curled protectively around his body and pulled a quilt over them both, remembering how her mother had done the same thing for her when she was small.

"It's all right, Harry. I'm here. Ginny's here to take care of you," she clarified, remembering him call her Emily the day before. She hoped, a bit spitefully, that whoever this Emily was, she wasn't still in Harry's life. She had no way to judge how long ago the memory had been because she hadn't seen Harry clearly enough in it—thank Merlin. She knew it was silly to be jealous of a faceless woman, but still it rose in her chest unheeded.

* * *

Harry pushed the wide brimmed hat back off of his face and used a handkerchief to mop the sweat off of his face. He stepped off of the trail the group had been walking, allowing others to pass in front of him. They lumbered along the thickly overgrown path, carrying the medical supplies in heavy packs strapped to their backs.

They'd been in Belem for two weeks after the group had arrived, gathering more supplies, training and studying the maps of where the Healers were assigned to go. Harry had been pleased that there had only been minor petty thefts of some potion ingredients and medical supplies so far. Probably, it was younger boys of the city, either needing the supplies or looking to make a few real's from selling what they'd nicked.

Harry's eyes darted up and down the trail, watching the thick vegetation. Out in the thick forests surrounding the Amazon, they were wide open to attack and it made Harry nervous. Sharon

McKitron peered at him closely as she passed and nodded her acceptance of his mild paranoia. The two had had several conversations about the safety of the White Cross group and she was satisfied that Harry had the same goals as she did regarding the Healers in her charge.

“Don’t let her push you around, Harry.”

Harry flushed and shrugged as Emily came to stand next to him, drinking deeply from her water bottle. Ever since their arrival in Brazil, Harry had been avoiding the American Healer. He’d tried not to be obvious about it, burying himself in meticulously planning their routes of travel and the details of the security for the group.

But Emily Watson wasn’t anything but determined, it seemed. She sought him out at meal times, sitting at his table and cheerfully attempting to engage him in conversation about everything and anything.

It unnerved Harry, and reminded him of Ginny even more. Seeking him out and, seemingly oblivious to his discomfort, including him in what ever she was doing was something that Ginny had tried time and time again at Hogwarts and after.

“She doesn’t intimidate me,” Harry defended, giving the trail one last glance before falling in behind the last of the Healers. Emily matched him stride for stride, despite being several inches shorter than he was.

“Sure,” she drawled, bringing a smile to his face with her teasing. She’d discovered, a few days before, that the way through his tough Auror exterior was through a sense of humor and she’d been relentless ever since.

However uncomfortable he felt around her, Harry had to admit that she was very attractive in a completely careless way. She didn’t have to try hard to gain his attention, drawing his eyes the moment that she stepped into a room. And she wasn’t as overly annoying as Harry insisted to himself that he found her. In fact, her persistence and determination only added to his growing attraction.

“She actually reminds me of a professor I had back in school,” he shrugged, glancing at her long enough to feel guilty. “Only with a bit more bedside manner.”

Emily chuckled, tucking her hands into the straps of her backpack, trudging effortlessly alongside him. “That had to have been some woman then.”

“She was,” Harry nodded firmly. “Minerva McGonagall. She was especially hard on young boys who ran late getting to her class.”

The two slipped into silence as the group continued their way back into the primitive jungle home of a small group of natives.

Harry kept sneaking small glances at Emily when he thought she wasn’t looking, on the pretense of studying the area around them. Her white t-shirt clung to her frame, the oppressive heat and humidity making the hair surrounding her face curl into dark shapes against her pale skin.

She caught him watching her twice and her cheeks flamed. The gesture that he'd seen so often on Ginny tightened his chest and he began glaring down at his feet. Why did he feel as if he were betraying Ginny in some way by thinking about how pretty Emily was? It wasn't as if Ginny had any clue that Harry had feelings for her.

"So, this must be some woman."

Her comment took him completely off guard and he tripped over a thick root that stuck up in the path.

"What?" he finally asked after spluttering for a minute.

"The woman you're thinking about."

Harry's jaw dropped at her audacity. She was like Ginny in so many ways, that it was haunting. Ginny had always been able to read his emotions and tell exactly what he'd been thinking of, thus Harry stayed away from her as much as possible.

Emily giggled and bumped his shoulder with hers, causing Harry to shake his head and grin.

"How do you know it's a woman?"

"You don't strike me as the type to play for the other team."

The smile slid right off of his face as her meaning became clear. "That wasn't funny."

"Yes, it was," she assured him. "There are only a few things that make a man look like you do right now, Harry."

Harry shifted his backpack uncomfortably and stared ahead at the trail.

"A woman was my guess."

He chanced a glance over at her to find her smugly smiling ahead.

"Is she the one you thought I was?"

"Damn, woman," he cursed, picking up his stride when she laughed at his stricken face.

"I knew it!" she crowed triumphantly. "Girlfriend?" She took another drink of her water, wiping her mouth along her arm as he glared at her. "No. Ex-girlfriend?"

Harry shook his head, quickly loosing interest in this game. It had become entirely too personal, too quickly. What had started out as playful banter was now something quite different if the tone of Emily's questions could be believed.

"Ah," she nodded and caught up with him.

"What?" he demanded.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

He was caught off guard by her contrite face and closed his mouth with a snap. “No, its… its fine,” he said, his eyes darting once again up and down the path.

“No, it’s not,” Emily protested, laying her hand along his bicep. Despite the heat, Harry shivered at her touch. “I was out of line, there, Harry. And if I hurt you, I’m sorry.”

Her blue eyes held his for a minute before he nodded jerkily. They continued on, keeping pace as the Healers struggled along the trail.

“Whoever she was,” Emily continued in a soft voice, “I can tell she meant a lot to you.”

Harry could only nod and force the uninvited images of Ginny back into their dark corner in his mind.

“Did she die?”

Harry rolled his eyes at Emily’s persistence but jerked his head in the negative. “No. She… it just wasn’t meant to be.”

The piercing look she gave him shook Harry as he felt the walls he wore all the time give just a bit.

* * *

The shivering continued off and on for two days, along with nightmares. Ginny was exhausted. She’d only taken small breaks to run to the loo or to drink down some of the cold soup she’d made days ago. Her arms ached from holding Harry and running her fingers through his hair to calm him. Her back ached from rocking him hour upon hour as he shook violently. She’d cried more times than she cared to think about and had broken down yesterday morning when her mother had floo called. Molly had even threatened to come over herself, but Ginny had insisted that she was just letting out all her emotions and that she would be fine.

Finally, Harry’s nightmares had ceased and he slipped into a deep sleep, unencumbered by anything more than a mild fever. Ginny was still unsure as to what type of infection Harry had, but her trips into the few memories she’d extracted had been so unpleasant she wasn’t sure she wanted to try again.

She chanced slipping away to take a shower and enjoyed it more than she had in a long time. Harry was still sleeping peacefully when she checked on him so she planned on cleaning up the flat a bit and making a more hearty meal.

She half expected her mother to floo at ten o’clock but a much deeper voice called out for her instead.

“Mr. Shacklebolt!”

To say that she was surprised to see the Head of the Auror Department would be an understatement. Ron had informed her that he’d gone himself to see Harry’s boss and explained the

situation, but Ginny wasn't expecting to see him in her fireplace.

"Miss Weasley," he nodded with a pleasant smile on his dark face. "I hope I'm not being too forward in flooing you. I spoke with your father yesterday afternoon and he told me about the scheduled contact times."

"Not at all," Ginny shook her head.

"How is Harry doing?" She was rather surprised at the warmth in his voice, but then again, remembering how he'd held a dying Harry to his chest, she shouldn't have been.

"He's recovering," she said cautiously. "I'm not sure how much Ron told you."

"Just that you suspected Dragon Fever and that you were quarantining him there at your flat." He looked a bit sheepishly at her. "We have had an Auror patrol securing the area several times a day."

Ginny opened her mouth and then shut it when she realized that there wasn't anything to reply to. Of course, the Aurors would want to take care of one of their own.

"Arthur assured me that you were the best person to take care of Harry." The man seemed to think about something for a minute. "May I call you Ginny?"

She nodded and waited for the man to continue.

"I was very concerned when I heard you weren't taking him to St. Mungo's," Kingsley said. "I even offered to send over our own Auror Matron, but your brother assured me that Harry was well off. I would hope, Ginny, that if you ever needed anything, you wouldn't hesitate to contact me directly." He smiled and Ginny could see a hint of sadness there.

"Harry is not just another Auror to me, Ginny. He's become a friend. And while I'm not sure he sees me in exactly the same way, I wish he would. We're a lot alike, he and I. We both have no family left; we live alone and were put into positions of authority at young ages. I worry about Harry, probably more than he knows."

"I think he knows, Mr. Shacklebolt-"

"Kingsley, please," the man insisted.

Ginny felt her face flush a bit but nodded. It was strange to call this man, who had once been the Minister of Magic, even if only temporarily, by his first name. "Kingsley. He speaks very highly of you, in what he does tell us of his work. Harry is difficult to get to know; he has been his entire life. I'm just starting to understand some of the forces that surround him that cause him to be the way he is," she said thoughtfully and then sighed heavily. "Anyway, I hope to have him back up and on his feet in the next few weeks. He'll be out of immediate danger in the next day or so but he'll still be weak."

"I understand," Kingsley nodded. "Again, please let me know if there is anything that I can do to help."

A thought popped into her mind just before the connection closed. “Mr. Shack—I’m sorry, Kingsley,” she said with a blush. “I’m not sure how much you can tell me about Harry’s last mission. I don’t need details; however, I’ve been trying to decipher if the illness is viral or bacterial and have been unsuccessful. If I was able to know where Harry contracted it, or even better how it was contracted, I’d be able to treat him more thoroughly.”

“You’ve tried pensieve therapy?”

Ginny was a bit startled that he knew about using a pensieve in that way. “I have, but haven’t been able to locate the information I need. Due to our… friendship… I don’t feel it’s my right to sift through his memories and thoughts any further than I’ve already had to do.”

“I understand,” Kingsley said with an accepting smile. “I can’t give you much,” he sighed. “But I can tell you that he was based in Taiwan, mostly in Taipei City… although he did travel around the country a bit. Before that he was in Canada for two months, but I’m not sure if the incubation period for the disease lasts that long.”

Ginny nodded and rubbed her forehead. “That may be enough to get him thinking along the right lines so that I can prompt the memory.”

“He’s been to Taiwan several times,” Kingsley said. “He knows the area well and sometimes acts as an Ambassador for us there.”

“Thank you,” Ginny said. “I’ll give it a try.”

“Good luck.”

Ginny steeled herself and went into the bedroom where Harry slept peacefully. She hated to wake him, and wasn’t even sure if he would even wake right now. Gently she shook his shoulder.

“Harry. Harry I need you to wake up for a minute.” He grunted something unintelligible and rolled toward her a bit. A few more tries and his eyes fluttered open a bit.

“Harry, I need you to remember Taiwan. I need to know where you got sick.”

Another grunt came as his eyes slipped closed. Ginny seized her chance and prayed that the memory would be enough. The silvery liquid fell gracefully into the now empty stone basin and Ginny carried it out to the sofa, preferring to be more comfortable while she viewed this memory.

She took a deep breath and delved into the liquid.

* * *

A very foreign city materialized around her. The overwhelming smell was of fish and salt air, along with pungent spices she associated with the Chinese Restaurant down the street from her flat. There were hundreds of people around her, pressing into the street and seemingly oblivious to the small little automobiles, scooters and bicycles zipping their way through the pedestrians.

She spotted Harry right away. His pale skin stood out brightly against the darker skinned Asians

around him. He was dressed simply in jeans and a brown leather jacket, not his Auror robes, so she assumed he was not working. She followed closely behind as he meandered through the crowded street. He turned off of the street and down a darker alleyway, checking over his shoulder several times. Ginny followed, grateful that he couldn't see her.

One more turn and Harry ducked into a dark corner, knocking on a door that looked almost ready to collapse in on itself. Ginny glanced up at the tilting building and took in its many cracked windows and dingy façade. A very pretty young woman answered the door and Harry jabbered away in perfect Chinese to her. It startled Ginny to hear him speak another language so fluently.

The woman giggled with her hand over her mouth and tilted her head, bowing a bit as Harry entered. Ginny closed her eyes tightly and mentally threatened to strangle Harry in his sleep if this was a brothel. She vowed to forcefully exit the moment he met up with his… scarlet woman, or whatever they called them over here.

Her fears were laid to rest, however, when she followed Harry in and he was besieged by tiny bodies and laughter. Children. Almost twenty of them surrounded him, pulling at his clothes and chatting at him as he hugged and tried to touch them all. Harry laughed a merry, full-throated laugh as the children managed to pull him down to the floor. Ginny watched in amazement as he tickled them and made them all squeal. Suddenly, they all had small brightly wrapped things in their hands and Ginny understood that Harry's pockets had been full of small bits of some sort of candy that was now being passed around.

She was startled as an older woman, possibly the age of her own mother, with an aging oriental face, clapped her hands loudly and called out to the children.

"Zú gòu le! Zú gòu le!"

The children continued laughing even as they pulled away from Harry and moved on about the room chewing on their treasures. Ginny saw that although the place was shabby, it was clean. Several children resumed playing some game that involved singing and clapping, others moved to a low table where they were working on writing something, still others moved to another area where the young woman that had answered the door began instructing them out of a book. It sounded to Ginny as if she were teaching them a rough form of English.

"Nǐ hǎo," Harry bowed politely to the old woman who returned the greeting formally and then reached forward to pat Harry's cheek lovingly.

"It has been many months," she said in broken English.

"It has," Harry sighed. "I'm sorry for that. I was in South America for some time, and then busy in Canada, and then England."

"The children miss you," she stated, her eyes sweeping the room and catching some of them listening to her. The guilty ones giggled and returned to their work.

"I miss them," Harry said with a sad smile. "You are looking thinner than the last time, Pó Pó."

"They give us less every time," she nodded sagely. "The children, they go hungry once a week."

Ginny was finally beginning to understand. These were orphans and this kindly old woman ran a home to take care of them. She wondered how Harry had stumbled upon this place.

“But we manage,” she finally sighed. “They all want to speak English like you, Harry.”

Harry smiled sadly. “Do you need more books? I will arrange everything that I can. How are they doing with their magic?”

“It is slow,” the woman admitted. “They are never taught early enough. I do what I can, but I am only one woman.”

Harry nodded. “I will send more books as soon as I get home.”

“You are a good man, Harry,” the woman patted Harry’s cheek again. “Come,” she motioned for him to follow her, “the bing le are waiting.” Harry seemed to understand her and followed her through a paper-thin curtain and up a rickety flight of stairs to a long, narrow room. There were a few low candles burning that barely lit the room. Narrow beds crowded close together all over the room. Harry and the old woman made their way through the maze and toward an area near the back that seemed to be sectioned off by the same thin curtains that had covered the stairs.

Ginny saw Harry swallow thickly before pasting a smile on his face and ducking low to enter. She slid in beside him and gasped at the sight of four children lying in two beds together. They were extremely gaunt and sweaty, as if suffering from illness. Harry sank down onto one of the beds and a small girl, no more than two years old, with a beautiful round face and dark eyes, almost black, climbed up into his arms. Harry cuddled her close and the girl kissed his cheek sloppily before slipped her two middle fingers into her mouth and laying her head on Harry’s shoulder. Tears came to Ginny’s eyes as she watched Harry rock the little girl back and forth. He finally slid back on the bed and leaned against one wall of the room. A boy, Ginny guessed him to be five or so, curled up next to Harry’s legs and lay his head on Harry’s lap. Gently, Harry stroked his hair and smiled down into the dark, watery eyes. A teenage girl picked up another young boy and they leaned into Harry’s side.

“Yī xiǎo shi,” the woman said and Harry repeated it with a smile. She left and Ginny melted down onto the opposite bed watching the man she’d been in love with for so many years speak gently with the children. He listened to their soft words and responded in kind, caressing each head and patting shoulders, wiping away tears as he went.

“Gù shì,” the little boy on Harry’s lap said with a small grin.

“Gù shì,” the other one agreed and Harry pretended to roll his eyes and tease the children.

“Please,” the teenage girl asked in heavily accented English and Harry softened instantly.

“Alright,” he nodded. The children snuggled in even closer and looked up at him with adoring eyes. “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away…” The children giggled and Harry laughed along with them before reciting a story that Ginny vaguely remembered Dean telling her about. If she remembered correctly, it was a Muggle movie that had been a bit of an obsession with some fans. She wondered if these children even understood a single word that Harry said, but they seemed enthralled as he spoke.

Ginny felt herself being drawn in by the scene, and if she hadn't already been, she would have fallen completely in love with him all over again. She stayed for the entire time Harry was with the children. He spoke in a soft voice and finally let it fade out when all of the children were asleep.

The woman returned an hour later and helped Harry to place the children in bed and cover them with thin, torn blankets. Harry seemed reluctant to leave and Ginny had to say she agreed. The children had been charming, even in their illness.

"Lóng shāo?" Harry asked and the old woman sighed and nodded sadly.

"Yes, and without the proper potions and supplies, they will waste away to nothing before long. You've been exposed, as we all have."

Harry shrugged. "I've had the Auror Potions."

"It is not always enough." She sighed again as they made their way out of the room and down the stairs. The children were no longer in sight as Ginny followed them to the front door. The woman presented Harry his jacket with a slight bow and Harry returned it, bowing low, before she gave him a hug. He reached into his pocket and withdrew his wallet, emptying it of every colorful bit of paper he had and pressed it into her hand. It must have been a lot of money as the woman's jaw dropped and she tried to give it back.

Harry only shook his head. "It's not much, in fact it's not nearly enough. I'll do what I can to get you the supplies you need."

The woman seemed touched and blinked away watery eyes. She nodded jerkily as Harry opened the door and disappeared out into the dark alleyway.

Ginny felt the memory fade and she wiped away her own tears as she sat back on the sofa. She'd always thought she'd known Harry fairly well. The previous memories had confused her as well as made her feel emotions on a level that she wasn't sure she was ready to accept. But, deep down, she knew he was a wonderful man, and the memory she'd just witnessed proved it beyond a shadow of a doubt. He'd gone to see the sick orphans, knowing that he was exposing himself to catching their illness, just to give them a bit of comfort.

And now Ginny knew. Harry had touched all of the children many times and the little girl had kissed his cheek. The odds were that Harry had bacterial Dragon Fever. That made his treatment much easier. She would begin an antibiotic potion immediately and maybe that would help Harry get over his illness sooner.

Once the potion was prepared, she helped him swallow it and then climbed into bed next to him and cuddled up close.

"I love you, Harry," she whispered into his shoulder as he slept. She prayed that one day she'd be able to tell him when he wasn't sleeping.

Translations

Zú gòu le: enough

Nǐ hǎo: hello

Pó Pó: a familiar name for Grandmother

bing le: sick or ill

Yī xiǎo shi: one hour

Gù shì: story

Lóng shāo: dragon fever

Chapter 4

As nice as Harry's dream of his time with Emily had been, this one was even better, even though he knew this one was only that—a dream and not a memory. He closed his eyes tighter and willed it to become clearer to him.

Ginny was there, lying next to him in bed. Their bed. In their house. They were together and Harry finally had everything he'd always wanted. He remembered her saying that she loved him last night. It must have been right before they'd both drifted off to sleep, or perhaps just after they'd made love.

Deep inside, he knew that they'd be starting their own family soon, adding to the wonderful life they'd built together so far. He lifted heavy eyelids and smiled comfortably against the vision in his eyes.

Her hair was rumpled with sleep and one arm was lifted over her head and draped along the pillow. The pale yellow tank top she'd worn to bed last night was pulled over one shoulder leaving a swath of pale freckled skin that his eyes feasted on.

His smile widened when she grumbled in her sleep and her other arm searched him out, only calming when her fingers brushed the warmth of his arm. Suddenly, he couldn't take it anymore, he had to touch her.

She seemed surprised when Harry's lips pressed down on her own but didn't squirm for more than a second before opening her mouth further and threading her hands through his hair.

"Ginny," he moaned into the skin on her neck and felt her arch under the weight he was placing on her. That expanse of skin he'd studied earlier beckoned him and he licked and sucked against it leaving Ginny shuddering underneath him.

She tugged at his hair and he returned his lips to hers, his eyes closing at the heaven that she was helping him fall into. His hand found the edge of the tank top and slipped underneath searching for the next place he needed to touch. She moaned into his mouth as he teased her skin with his fingers.

Harry grinned into the kiss and moaned her name again as she rolled against him, causing him to ache with arousal.

And then, as suddenly as it started, she was gone and Harry was left alone in the bed. He blinked his eyes several times against the now bright light and stifling heat of the room.

It had been a dream. A wonderful, horribly erotic dream that left him aching for more. He sighed dejectedly and gave himself a moment to inspect his surroundings. Pale magnolia walls surrounded him. Across the room was a riot of color but he'd have to find his glasses to decipher what was over there.

He found them on the small bedside table along with a framed photograph of the Weasley family waving out at him. He scratched his head and glanced up to find the women of the Holyhead

Harpies all eying him from their poster plastered on the wall above a cluttered desk. He reddened and then glanced down to find himself only clad in boxers and a t-shirt. He grabbed a pillow and placed it in his lap to hide the evidence of his arousal and tried to ignore the knowing smirks that the women in the poster were giving him.

Holyhead Harpies… that meant he was at Ginny's place. He flushed with the thought of his dream and wracked his brain to try and come up with the reason he would be here, in Ginny's bed, wearing clothing that was not his own.

The room was scattered with some clues. Discarded potions bottles and a partially full cauldron sat on the desk. Two empty, but dirty, bowls sat on the floor near the chair. A stack of medical books lay on the desk; one had a piece of parchment sticking out and Harry let it fall open to see where Ginny had marked it.

"… the only known treatments for Dragon Fever are…" Harry read aloud and instantly felt his face heat. Dragon Fever. He'd been infected with it in Taiwan and brought it home with him.

Why hadn't he been sent to St. Mungo's? And why was he here at Ginny's flat at all? He knew Ginny was a brilliant healer, but he was still confused. He rubbed his face gently and let the book close.

The insistent pressure on his bladder, evident now that his blood flow issues were back to normal, made him chance a trip across the hall to the small loo. After returning, he quickly donned a thick white terrycloth dressing gown that he found hanging on the back of the door and slowly made his way out to the living area of the flat. He'd only been there once, truly, but he remembered the layout just the same.

Ginny was kneeling facing the fireplace and had a very angry look on her face. Harry glanced into the flames and saw the angry face of Dean Thomas saying something. The lack of sound made no sense to him until he took one more step into the room and passed through what must have been a silencing ward of some sort.

"… and to top it all off, you've now lost your job at St. Mungo's."

Harry rocked back at that statement. Ginny had been taking care of him and was now jobless because of it. Guilt weighed heavily on him and he turned to leave the private conversation only to be stopped by Ginny's reply. Slowly, listening to the words, he turned back around.

"Dean, thank you for your concern for my job, but you don't have to worry about it. I didn't ask you to check on anything for me."

"You haven't asked anything of me in two weeks," Dean grumbled and Ginny's shoulders sagged. Harry had been waiting for the usual Ginny explosion but was surprised when it didn't come.

"You're right, Dean. I understood from our last conversation that I wouldn't be asking anything more of you."

"You… you're breaking up with me."

Ginny sighed again and Harry could see her cheeks flame, whether in restrained anger or

frustration, he wasn't sure. "I already did. Don't you remember when you gave me that one last chance, Dean? Well I took the chance: my chance to end something that wasn't working anyway. You and I both know that. It didn't work back then and it sure as hell wasn't working now."

"Ginny…"

"Don't make this harder, Dean."

Harry watched from the shadows as resignation settled on Dean's features.

"I hope things work out like you want them to, Ginny. And, damnit, I hope Potter knows what he's got, because he's a damned fool if he doesn't."

"Dean, don't—" Ginny protested.

"Don't what, Ginny? Don't say aloud what the rest of us know? Everyone except Harry knows, Ginny, and I can't fathom why he's thick enough not to. You're in love with him. You've been in love with him for years. That's why your relationships never work out, why you won't let anyone close enough to break down that wall you've built around your heart; the one that has Harry Potter stamped all over it."

"Dean-"

"Deny it!" Dean said and Harry was surprised at his mild tone. He would have thought Dean would have been furious right now.

"I…"

"You can't," he continued. "You can't deny it because you know it's true."

"It is." Ginny's whispered admission startled Harry and he leaned heavily against a small table near the edge of the room, knocking over a potted plant and causing it to go skidding along the floorboards. Ginny jumped at the sound and they both watched it move until it rolled to a stop next to the sofa. Slowly their eyes met and Ginny's face burst into the darkest blush he'd seen in years.

"I need to go, Dean."

The connection shut down instantly and Ginny disappeared, fled to the kitchen where Harry heard her break down completely. Harry's jaw dropped open as he realized she was wearing a pale yellow tank top.

* * *

Ginny cursed the tears that flowed down her face. She'd cried more these past two weeks than she had in years. Then she cursed Dean and his big mouth. And then Harry and his timing. And then she cursed again because the prat was still standing there and hadn't even come in to see if she was alright. Harry had never done well with crying women.

Somehow she knew he was still out there. She'd heard him shuffle around and assumed, from the soft groan of the sofa, that he'd needed to sit. She was surprised that he was even up and moving

around, truthfully.

She'd been a nervous wreck all morning anyway—jumpy and touchy. And she was confused as hell. She'd woken to Harry's insistent kiss and given in almost immediately to his passion. The feel of his lips finally on hers and the weight of his body pressing her down into the bed had been intoxicating. She could feel his desire and the things he was doing to her body made her want to continue. She almost laughed aloud in relief when he murmured her name against her skin.

But then it had all come crashing down on her. Harry was delirious. It didn't matter if he'd said her name because he wasn't in control of himself right then. She could let him continue and enjoy his touch, but then she'd be the guilty one. *She'd* be the one taking advantage of i*him.*/i And that would lead them nowhere.

She'd pushed against him gently to roll him over and then had fled the room, similar to what she'd done a minute ago. Ginny had lain on the sofa, curled up in a ball and trying to sort through her feelings when Dean had flooed. And then everything had changed. The world had tipped on its side and now she didn't know where she stood. The secret that she'd hidden for so long was now out there and Harry hadn't reacted at all.

Seconds turned into minutes, which might have turned into hours. Ginny wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and then shakily stood. The flat was only so big and they'd have to either work their way around this or forget it happened altogether. She'd vowed that she'd never mention their brief moments in bed earlier; admitting that it had happened would solve nothing.

She busied herself making tea and a hastily thrown together a mix of food she thought Harry could stomach; toast and some scrambled eggs.

He was sitting on the sofa in her dressing gown, staring at the low fire when she carried the tray through.

"I'll bet you're hungry," she said, praying that her voice sounded normal and not shaky.

Harry broke his stare and smiled gratefully at her. "Starved," he said, his voice cracking horribly from being dry for so long. Ginny smiled at him and set the tray down, taking a seat as far from him on the sofa as she could, and tucking her legs up under her as she watched him fix his tea and swallow it in almost one gulp. They sat in relative silence as Harry devoured the toast and eggs and looked pitifully at the plate. Ginny chuckled aloud and went to quickly fix him more.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly when she returned. "I'm usually not this ill mannered. It just feels like I haven't eaten for-"

"Two weeks?" Ginny interrupted with a knowing smile.

Harry halted the fork halfway between the plate and his open mouth and stared at her. "Two weeks?" he whispered, letting the food sink back to its origin.

Ginny watched him as he shifted uncomfortably on the seat and looked away, his face darkening in blush. "Two weeks," she confirmed. "I've been using nutritional potions but…" she trailed off and he nodded distractedly.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, pushing the plate away from him.

“It’s alright,” Ginny said. “They’re just eggs.”

Harry shook his head and wouldn’t meet her gaze. “Not the eggs. I’m sorry that you got pulled into all of this, taking care of me after I made a stupid mistake. And now you’re paying for it with your job… and… and with Dean.”

“Harry,” Ginny said softly and waited for him to look at her, “I made the choice to bring you here. I made the choice to do this—to take care of you on my own. And I didn’t lose anything that was worth saving anyway.”

“But your job…” Harry protested and Ginny smiled and shook her head at his nobility.

“There are others out there. And the hours were murder.” He didn’t look convinced and she smiled as she gathered his used dishes and stacked her own on the tray. “Seriously, twelve hour shifts, five and six days a week? Who needs that?”

Harry snorted out a laugh. It was a rant Mrs. Weasley used often against him about the Auror’s hours he kept. Finally, after searching her face for a minute, he nodded in understanding.

“How are you feeling, anyway?” Ginny asked. “I’m surprised you’re out of bed at all, let alone eating and walking around.”

Harry blushed again and it almost made Ginny laugh. “Had to use the loo.”

“Ahh,” she nodded in understanding. “I guess I forgot to use the dissipating spell this morning. Sorry.”

If possible, he darkened further and Ginny did laugh this time. “How did you imagine the last few weeks have gone?”

“Well…” Harry spluttered and then glared at her.

Ginny grinned evilly. “It’s been the best two weeks of my life, really. The sponge baths have really been the highlight, let me tell you.”

“Y-you…” he gestured to himself and then rolled his eyes as Ginny burst into a new round of giggles. Finally he huffed and tossed a small pillow at her. Ginny caught it and clutched it to her chest.

“You’re really too easy to get, Harry,” she sighed. Harry only nodded sulkily and refused to look at her.

“Sponge baths?” he asked softly, his voice betraying his embarrassment.

“Twice a week,” Ginny with a waggle of her eyebrows. She immediately regretted her teasing when his features darkened and the heavy mantel of guilt settled back on him like a stifling blanket.

“Ginny-”

“Harry, I’m teasing you. It comes with the job.”

“But, you didn’t have to.”

“I did, Harry,” she insisted and moved over closer to him, laying her hand on his shoulder where, surprisingly, he didn’t shift in discomfort. “I was taking care of a sick friend. I would have done anything.”

Harry glanced up at her and froze at how close they actually were; closer than they’d purposely been in years. He opened and closed his mouth several times before seemingly resigning himself that he didn’t have the words.

“Thank you would be enough,” Ginny said softly and Harry’s mouth quirked and he rolled his eyes.

“Thank you.” She was startled when his hand came up and brushed her cheek gently. It was a move that was completely uncharacteristic for Harry. It unsettled her and made them both very aware of the subject they’d been avoiding.

“So I guess we better talk, huh?”

“I suppose,” she sighed, still staring into his bright green eyes. “If we must,” she smiled and looked away.

“Ginny…” He seemed at a loss to say anything and Ginny sighed, knowing that she would be the braver of the two on this subject.

“Harry, you heard what Dean said.”

“It was true?” he asked softly, looking down as his hands fidgeted in his lap. “You have… feelings… for me?”

Ginny sighed heavily and rolled her eyes. Only Harry Potter, obviously denser than most bricks, would ask her that after what he’d just over heard. “No, Harry, I don’t have ‘feelings’ for you.” His head snapped up just like she’d imagined it doing. “I’m in love with you. And I have been for a long time.”

Harry seemed confused by this and nodded jerkily, staring off into the fire again.

“Harry, I need to tell you something else.” She continued when he didn’t react. “I might as well get this over with now. Because once you hear this… well, it won’t really matter how I feel about you because you’ll probably never forgive me and…” She trailed off after realizing she was rambling a bit.

A deep breath later and she closed her eyes. “One of the ways we’ve been trained to deal with illnesses that are unknown to us is to use memory extraction. We use a pensieve to review the memories after prompting the patient to remember how or when they got ill.” Her voice seemed to be getting smaller and smaller each sentence as Harry continued to stare away from her. “I needed to know how you got sick…”

He turned a horrified face toward her. “You… went through my…” The anger she’d anticipated was now there and for the first time, she wondered if this was the best thing to tell him.

“I had to know, Harry. It makes a difference in how we treat the illness.”

He stared at her, a hard and unforgiving look on his face before he seemed to deflate. “And you found what you needed?” he whispered.

“I think so,” she said. “The orphanage in Taiwan?”

Harry glared at her again and stood, moving to lean against the fireplace mantel. “No one knows about that place,” he said simply.

“I can’t say anything to anyone about any of what I saw, Harry. It’s called Healer-Patient privilege.”

“I know,” he nodded and then rubbed harshly over his face. “I’m assuming you saw other… memories.” She didn’t answer but he took that in the affirmative it seemed. “I guess you’ll be needing me to explain…”

“Harry,” she interrupted and came to stand beside him. This time he did flinch when she touched him and she pulled back, hurt at his change of attitude. “There’s nothing I *need* you to explain. The things I saw were private and I had no right to see them. I’m sorry, but I can’t say that I wouldn’t do it again. If you’d seen how miserable you were, Harry…” She could feel tears forming again and furiously blinked them away.

She moved away from him and wrapped her arms around her middle, finally settling on the sofa and curling into herself. She had hoped that upon his waking, she’d be able to confront him about his memories and they would finally put the past behind them and be together and have the happy fairy-tale ending that she’d always dreamed about.

She could feel his eyes on her, but ignored them, pretending that she was alone in her misery. The sofa sank on the far end and she knew he’d sat down again. Once again, the silence seemed endless as they sat, almost ignoring each other.

“What other things did you see?”

His question made her wince and she knew she’d have to be delicate around most of the things. But she wouldn’t lie to him.

“One in Gryffindor Tower,” she said softly, laying her head on the side of the sofa. “It was toward the beginning of your sixth year. It was just you overhearing a conversation between Seamus and Dean.”

Harry sighed. “That was…”

“A bad year for you, I know,” Ginny whispered.

“One of the worst,” he confirmed.

“You’d made so much progress that summer and we really thought you’d be alright. And then you

pulled so far away from anyone." Thinking that she'd said too much, Ginny glanced over to find a grimly amused look on his face.

"I thought so too," he started. "But then things went to hell and I… didn't feel like I had anyone."

Ginny sat up straighter and frowned at him. "Harry we all would have been there for you." She continued at his look of disbelief. "Ron and Hermione-"

"Were too busy arguing and snogging everyone in sight," he growled and then ran his hand through his hair.

Ginny opened her mouth to protest but an amused snort escaped instead. "Alright, you're right. But, Harry, I-"

"Was with Dean," he said simply. "And it was your O.W.L. year." She could tell he was holding something back and was sure it was the fact that her brothers had scared him away from her.

"I still would have dropped it all if you'd asked, Harry," she said softly. "I would have given you everything."

Their eyes met for a minute before he smiled wryly. "Another good reason not to do it then."

She sighed, feeling that she ought to explain her behavior now that he knew she'd loved him for so long. "Harry, Dean and I… Dean was someone I could be with to make me not think about you. The relationship, if you can call it that, was over before it began. And that's not to say that I feel I used him. I honestly liked him and I felt I did try with everything I had at the time. But we both knew, deep down, that it just wasn't going to work." He nodded in understanding but Ginny wasn't sure if he really did know.

"The next memory was of you and Kingsley talking after you'd finished Auror training," she continued when he didn't speak. "I didn't realize you'd moved through it that fast."

Harry smiled, somewhat genuinely, although Ginny could tell it wasn't a happy memory. "It wasn't hard when you put in eighteen to twenty hour days, seven days a week."

"Why would you work so hard?" she asked.

The look he gave her chilled her to the bone. "I had nothing else, Ginny. I came home to an empty house every night. Everyone else was moving on, going back to their lives. But I had nothing to go back to."

"And Ron and Hermione were a bit preoccupied," Ginny conceded. Harry smiled wryly and nodded. "And I was back at Hogwarts."

"And dating some Ravenclaw bloke. Ron mentioned how happy you were."

"Matt Hammond," she confirmed. "Another poor Ravenclaw relegated to the failed relationships pile. And *happy* is a relative term, Harry. I was hiding just as much as you were. Got thirteen N.E.W.T.'s." She smiled proudly at his astonished look. "And I immediately enrolled in Healer's

school after I graduated."

"I never really saw you as a Healer," Harry interjected. "Surprised the hell out of me when I heard, actually."

"You and me both," she chuckled. "I don't know," she shrugged. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"You don't like it?"

"No, I do," she protested. "But, I guess I just saw myself with a bit more action and a little less i*re/i*action, you know?" He nodded knowingly and she knew he understood. They were very much alike. "Actually, I'd always seen myself doing something else."

"What?"

She glanced at his curious face and shook her head. "No, it's stupid."

"No, tell me, please?"

After seeing that his interest was genuine she shrugged. "I always thought I might have a shot at playing Quidditch."

"Professionally?"

"Yeah. I told you it was stupid-"

"But it's not, Ginny," he protested. "You're a brilliant flyer. I always thought I'd see you up there one day, playing for the Harpies."

She laughed and then stilled as a thought occurred to her. What would her life be like if she and Harry had had the chance to be together? Was she getting a glimpse of that now? Harry would have supported her choice to play Quidditch instead of shooting it down like her family and friends had. He would have stood by her side while she made her dreams come true.

"Well, there's always two-a-side Quidditch at the Burrow, yeah?" she asked with a sad smile. She recognized the regret in his expression and knew that he'd sacrificed dreams as well.

"Was that all you saw?"

The next memories were very painful, for both of them and Ginny was reluctant to bring them up. She wished she could just leave two of them out completely, possibly three.

"I know that can't have been all, Ginny," Harry said softly. "Just… just tell me and I'll try to explain them."

"You don't have-"

"I do," he interrupted. "For both of us, I think."

She sighed and rubbed her face. “There was one with Tonks. I think you’d just come back from a bad mission and she was yelling at you.”

Harry sighed in frustration and shifted guiltily. “That doesn’t narrow it down much. She yelled a fair bit; and she had every reason to.”

Ginny nodded sadly. “What happened between the two of you?” she asked. “You seemed to get along so well for so long and then…” she raised her hands in surrender. “I’d heard she’d asked you to be Teddy’s godfather.”

Harry shook his head. “Remus wanted it,” he said softly. “I think Tonks went along with it at first, before…” He shrugged helplessly. “Afterwards, I was so messed up. I went to see them and Tonks could see it. She…” He swallowed thickly. “She accused me of being too much like Sirius; restless and reckless. She said that she wouldn’t put Teddy through what Sirius had put me through. She… she asked Ron and Hermione to stand up instead.”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed in growing annoyance at her youngest brother and his wife. Neither he nor Hermione had ever said anything about it. In fact, they’d deliberately misled her. “That must have hurt very much,” she said softly.

“They were better choices,” he shrugged. “They were both stable. They had good jobs and were… grown up. While I was training for one of the most dangerous jobs there is.”

“That doesn’t excuse it, Harry. Sirius loved you. He did the best he could with what he’d been given. Don’t you think things would have been different if he’d had the chance to raise you?”

He seemed to ignore the question. “She was right, Ginny. I can’t even seem to visit Teddy regularly without seeing what a failure I am.”

“You still see him?”

“As often as I can,” he shrugged. “It’s hard though. Tonks doesn’t approve of all the choices I’ve made and I think she thinks I’ll corrupt him or something. I send him things, toys and little things from when I go abroad. I try to write him letters–tell him places I’ve seen and things I’ve done.”

“I’m sure he appreciates that.”

Harry shrugged. “I’m not sure it makes a difference. Besides, he’s got Ron and Hermione.”

Ginny wondered if it was best to tell him what was going on. “Harry, I didn’t even know Ron and Hermione were his godparents. They’ve never told anyone, as far as I know. Or maybe they’ve just not told me,” she said slightly under her breath. “How can they be the best thing for him if they’re never around? You write to him, you think about him.”

“All the time,” he answered softly.

“Tonks made the wrong choice, Harry.”

“Thanks,” he said quietly after a few minutes. “What other ones?”

Ginny shifted uncomfortably. “Harry, you don’t owe me any explanations for anything-”

“Emily,” he confirmed dryly. “You saw me with Emily.”

“I saw you with someone,” she said. “A woman with red hair.”

Harry sighed and removed his glasses to rub his eyes harshly. “Emily,” he confirmed.

“Harry, you and I were never together. You can’t think that you were… unfaithful…” she trailed off, not wanting to push him too far when she wasn’t sure what his motivations had actually been.

“No,” he protested. “I mean, yes, I did feel that way, a bit. But…” he sighed and replaced his glasses. “Emily was an American Healer. I’d been in Brazil for a few weeks and was assigned to escort and protect the convoys of Healers that would come into the country.”

“Ron told me, rubbed it in my face really, that you were living with someone, Harry. You don’t have to expl-”

“I do, Ginny!” he snapped and then deflated. “I’m sorry. But I feel that I do need to explain. What you saw, and I’m assuming it was rather…”

“Intimate,” Ginny confirmed with a red face.

“Merlin,” he moaned and laid his head back on the sofa, closing his eyes. “We started talking one day and…”

“One thing led to another,” she nodded in understanding.

Harry glanced at her and the sadness in his face shocked her. She instantly wondered if Emily had died while he’d been protecting her. The guilt he seemed to be wallowing in was almost palpable.

“She was married, Ginny.”

Chapter 5

“Married?” Ginny asked in shock.

Harry nodded in misery. “Married. Well, separated, really… but married all the same.”

Ginny took a moment and let her breath come back again. Of all the things she’d imagined Harry capable of doing, being an adulterer wasn’t one of them. “And you knew?”

“I knew,” he nodded. “It was a bad marriage. They’d married too young and she realized that she didn’t love him. He’d cheated on her several times—not that it’s an excuse.” He shook his head and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, covering his face. “We talked and talked… and then ended up…”

“As lovers,” Ginny supplied. She could see how a compassionate Harry, so used to solving other’s problems, would be easily drawn into a relationship like that one must have been.

“We both knew it wouldn’t last, that it was wrong. But, I think, we were just both so lonely. For me she was… my Dean,” he said, glancing over at her and then realizing what he said, he held up his hands. “That didn’t come out exactly how I meant it.”

Ginny smiled sadly. “I think I understand. While you were with Emily you didn’t have to think about…” she trailed off, unable to say it.

“You,” he whispered. “I didn’t have to think about the fact that it wasn’t you I was with.”

All of the air sucked out of her lungs and Ginny curled even further into herself. Harry watched her for a minute before rising off the couch and pacing a bit.

“It ended well, I guess. She knew about you and told me to come home and talk to you. And she went home to her husband.”

“And you were alright with that?”

Harry shrugged. “No, yes… I don’t know. I didn’t love her. Is that horrible?”

“No,” Ginny said in a small voice. “I imagine she gave you the comfort that you needed.”

“At the time,” he confirmed. “And I was ready to move on. I thought I was strong enough to come home and make the changes in my life that I wanted.”

“And I think that’s where the next memory comes in,” Ginny said.

“Sweet Merlin,” Harry moaned. “How many did you see?”

“Too many apparently,” Ginny smiled sadly.

“Which one?”

“At the Burrow, the night of George and Angelina’s engagement dinner.”

Harry sighed and sat heavily on the sofa, and then growled at the dressing gown that had twisted around him. He stood and began to pull at it before freezing and glancing at her guiltily.

“You won’t offend me, Harry. It’s too hot to wear something that heavy.”

He seemed to weigh his options before taking the gown off and draping it over the back of the couch. He settled again on the sofa, careful that he didn’t touch her.

“I’d just come back from Brazil,” he started to explain. “Emily and I’d parted on good terms; each of us knew that we needed to be at home. I’d finally decided… I was going to talk to you.”

“And then I brought Dean to dinner,” Ginny said regretfully. “We’d run into each other in Diagon Alley and, well… he’d asked for another chance. Ron had told me you were living with someone in another country.”

“Damn,” Harry mumbled. “I didn’t think it could hurt so much seeing you with someone else. I guess maybe it was just him-if you were seeing *him* again, maybe it was serious and I’d never get the chance to tell you… well…”

Ginny nodded. “I didn’t see it then, but I could see it clearly on your face in the memory. I’m sorry I was so heartless, Harry.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” he shook his head morosely. “You didn’t know—couldn’t have known.”

“But I should have,” she growled softly. “If I’d opened my eyes I would have seen it.”

“And what would you have done?”

“Something, anything. I don’t know, Harry, but maybe it would have prevented what happened next.”

Harry flinched and pulled his feet up onto the couch, curling his arms around his knees. “Nothing could have prevented that. It was my decision, Ginny. It’d been coming on for years.”

Ginny slid over closer to him and rubbed his back, continuing even though she could see he wasn’t comfortable. Eventually he stilled and seemed to accept her comfort. “Does anybody else know?”

Harry shook his head. “Tonks knows. Kingsley found me.”

“I saw that.”

Harry winced and then reached up to slide a shaking finger along her jaw. “I’m sorry you had to see that.” His voice trembled. “No one should ever have to see something like that.”

“I hated it,” she confirmed with a nod. “Still do. But I think I needed to see it, Harry. I had a part in that, no matter what you say. I’m partially responsible.” Harry seemed to study her for a minute before letting his hand slip away.

“How did Kingsley know?”

“He has a clock, similar to your mum’s. I think he might have actually taken the idea from her. It shows the location of every Auror and their status. Mine was on Mortal Peril. It took him awhile to find me I guess.”

Ginny nodded her understanding. “There was a lot of blood.” Gently she reached down and took his arm, tracing her fingertip along the white scar. Harry tried to pull it away but she held fast.

“They pulled me off of active duty and put me into a hospital in Canada,” he explained. “I spent two months there.”

“It helped?”

Harry chuckled. “I don’t want to off myself anymore if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I hope not.” She glared at his dark humor. But that was Harry.

“But I have a lot of scars,” he mumbled and Ginny knew he wasn’t talking only about the marks on his body. “A lot of those, no one can heal.”

Ginny nodded thoughtfully. “But we can live with scars, sometimes,” she said softly.

“Can we?” Harry asked, raising his eyes from where they were watching her fingers rest on his arm.

“Yeah, we can, Harry. Scars can be overlooked; they can fade and be forgotten with time. Sure, we still feel them, and occasionally they still hurt; but with help we can move past the fact that we have them.”

“Maybe,” he whispered and sat back into the cushions further, letting his legs slide off onto the floor. “Was that the last one?”

“I wanted it to be,” Ginny sighed. “But I got an older one then.” She raised her eyes and found him watching her. “I think this one may have been the most painful.”

Harry’s jaw squared and his emotional wall slammed up, something he’d not done the whole time they’d been together. “I don’t have many that would be more painful than trying to commit suicide, Ginny.”

She nodded. “Just after the Final Battle,” she started in a whisper, laying her head on his stiff shoulder. “Charlie spoke to you in the Great Hall.”

He didn’t move or breathe for what seemed like hours and then finally shifted a bit. “And now you know.”

Ginny nodded against his shoulder. “Now I know.”

“And you’re not angry?”

“At them? Furious doesn’t even begin to describe how I feel. At you?” She sighed. “No, Harry, I

don't blame you. I can wish you'd made other choices at the time all I want, but that doesn't change the fact that you thought you were doing what was right. I can wonder what would have happened if you'd come to see me, or if one of my spineless brothers had grown a conscience, but it won't change the pain that we've both been through these past years."

"I agreed with them, then and now. If I'd been with you then…" He shook his head, at a loss for words it seemed.

"Then we'd maybe have both had a few good memories to carry us through the bad times. The truth is," she rode over his next words, "that neither of us can say what would have happened because someone else took that chance away from us. They had no right to do that to either of us."

Harry studied her for a minute before shaking his head. "You're taking this much better than I thought you would."

Ginny smiled. "Trust me, I'm seething inside. Once the quarantine of this flat is over, they better all watch out. And, I'm still trying to think up a punishment that's fitting enough for what they did to both of us."

"This is why I never said anything," Harry mumbled as he looked away. "I never want to come between you and your brothers, Ginny."

"You didn't, Harry. All five of them made their choices and now they'll have to live with the consequences."

"Percy wasn't—"

"He's guilty by association," she shook her head. "He's a male Weasley and they're not exactly high on my list right now."

"Ginny, maybe it's best if—" Harry abruptly stopped when Ginny grabbed his chin and swung it around to face her.

"Status quo is not acceptable to me, Harry. Are you happy with it?" She waited for him to answer but continued when he only looked at her with pleading eyes. "Are you? Because it damn well doesn't look like it to me, Harry. You're miserable, I'm miserable. They don't have the right to make either of us feel like that." Her emotions were out of check now and the tears that had been dried for hours now came back and spilled down her face.

"They're supposed to be my *family*, Harry. They're supposed to be yours. And they have no right to do this to us. Your best friend—Harry, he betrayed you. How could you stand up for him at his wedding? How could you even speak to him again?"

Harry's arms came hesitantly around her shoulders and he lifted her onto his lap and held her close. She could have sworn from the movements of his chest that he was crying as well.

"No, I'm not happy," Harry finally whispered into her hair. Ginny pulled back and placed her hands on his face, feeling rough stubble through the wetness on his cheeks.

“And I’m not happy, Harry.” She leaned forward and pressed her forehead against his, letting their noses touch. “I want to try, Harry. I want to be happy and I think we can do it together.”

His eyes opened slowly and he seemed incredibly uncertain. “Ginny, I—”

“We’re owed it, Harry.” She pulled back, but didn’t take her hands away from his face. “We owe it to ourselves to give it a try. I love you, Harry. I’ve pushed it away for so many years and I don’t want to anymore. I want you to know. I want everyone to know.”

He hesitated and she finally let her hands drop to his chest. “Why won’t you try, Harry?”

“It’s not that,” he shifted her off of his lap and stood, running his hands through his hair and making it stand on end. “It’s… Don’t you understand?” he whispered painfully. “They’re all I’ve got. If I do this, if I’m with you… then I’ll lose them. They’ll never forgive me.”

Ginny growled and knelt on the edge of the sofa, grabbing his waist and pulling him so that she could lay her head on his chest. “You never had them, Harry! They betrayed you, they betrayed me.”

He still seemed unsure, so Ginny moved off of the couch and pushed him back into it, straddling his lap before he could protest.

“Damnit, Harry, you have *me*,” she whispered before pressing her lips to his. She poured as much emotion as she could into the kiss and finally, just as she was about to give up, he responded. His hands gripped her hips hard and pulled her to him. He tilted his head and pried her mouth open with his tongue. She opened herself up and gave him everything; clutching at his shoulders and pulling at his hair as they let the passion overtake them.

“Oh, Ginny,” he moaned when they finally broke apart and his lips slid along her jaw and down the column of her throat.

“Now do you see,” she whispered into his ear as she held him to her. “We could have so much together.” He nodded jerkily against her but it wasn’t enough. She pulled his face away and pressed their foreheads together again. “Say it, Harry,” she demanded. “Tell me how you feel about me.”

“I… I l-love you, Gin,” he spluttered and seemed to take courage from it because he said it again, more forcefully this time.

“About damn time, Potter,” Ginny said as she pressed her lips to his again.

“We need to take this slow, Ginny,” Harry protested when she’d finally let him up for air. “I won’t make that mistake with you.”

Ginny nodded, even though she didn’t agree that it would be a mistake, and pulled back, cuddling onto his lap. “We’ve got time,” she said and Harry nodded and wrapped his arms around her tightly.

“We do,” he agreed. “How are we going to do this?”

Ginny studied his face, letting her finger trace his features and loving the shiver that it caused now

and then.

“We’re going to take our time, getting to know each other again. We were friends once, Harry.”

“Friends,” he agreed. “I don’t want to just be your friend, Gin.”

“I know,” she said. “And that’s not what I meant. But we’re together here for at least another week. You’ve got to build your strength up again. We can take that time and build a good foundation.”

“Okay.”

“And it’ll take us that long to plan our revenge on the prats.”

“Ginny—”

“Harry, here is your first lesson in having a long term girlfriend. Just say ‘yes, dear’.”

Harry chuckled. “But I don’t want—”

Ginny nodded that she understood and place a finger on his lips. “I’m not going to kill them, just maim and torture.” He still looked skeptical and she raised an eyebrow. “The son of a Marauder is going to pass up the chance to prank someone who deserves it like no other.”

“If we’re talking about pranking, alright,” he said. “But if we’re talking about doing something that will tear your family apart… then I don’t agree.”

“I know, and I agree. But they’ve made their bed, Harry, now they have to lie in it.”

* * *

Through the next week Harry and Ginny spent a few awkward moments together, but they seemed to get the hang of living with each other down by the end of the seven days. Harry was still sleeping much of the time and Ginny caught up on her sleep as well as her housework and a few other projects she’d been putting off due to working too much.

Their first night after coming to an understanding was the most awkward. Ginny had intended to sleep on the sofa but Harry had insisted that he would as it was her bed after all. In the end, they’d both ended up in the bed and, once they had swallowed their awkwardness, cuddled together. That ended the anxiety over that detail.

The loo had been the next thing. With it being such a small flat they were in quite intimate contact often. Fairly soon though, it became something to amuse them and Ginny was thrilled to see a teasing spirit enter Harry again as he would step directly into her path at times and force her to either wait for him to move or to push her way around him.

And as nervous as he’d seemed with their relationship at first, he seemed intent on making things work. One evening, as they sat pondering over a chess game, Ginny told him all about Healer’s school and he relayed what he could about his most interesting assignments. They’d stayed up until almost three in the morning, the game forgotten, while they held hands on top of the board. The

pieces had long since stopped trying to interrupt and had fallen asleep where they stood.

They'd shared as much of the kitchen duty as they could and Ginny found out that Harry wasn't a half bad cook. His breakfast was rather good and while his list of dinner standards needed expanding, he wasn't horrible.

The two times Ginny had set up for people to floo call she and Harry had tried to be as normal as possible. They'd both agreed to keep their budding relationship to themselves for the time being.

At the end of the week, Ginny had pronounced Harry free of Dragon Fever and they had both lifted the quarantine charms on the flat. The breeze from the now-open windows helped to freshen the rooms and clear out the musty, sick smell of two people confined for three weeks together. Ginny had expressed her concern over Harry's returning to Grimmauld Place and he had agreed to find a different flat. But nothing they'd looked at had suited him and he'd ended up staying with her anyway. Secretly, Ginny was thrilled and a bit suspicious that Harry had grown so attached to having her around that he was reluctant to leave her at all.

As soon as word that Harry was well again spread, Molly insisted that they come to dinner at the Burrow. Harry had, at first, refused but then had relented when Ginny had promised they wouldn't stay long and that he could leave if he felt uncomfortable.

The Friday evening dinner was quickly approaching and Harry was extremely nervous. He'd been so happy the past week and his time with Ginny had been the turning point in his life, he thought. They'd still not told anyone that they were together, although he had a sneaking suspicion that Hermione knew something; there was a rather suspicious look on her face every time he talked with her.

That afternoon Ginny had shooed him from the flat claiming that she had some work to do and that he wasn't to show back up until it was time to get ready for the evening. He'd laughed at her and then sobered when he'd realized how serious she was. But she wouldn't budge and tell him a thing of what she had planned, and that worried him a bit.

He'd written a simple letter earlier in the week to Teddy and Tonks explaining about his illness and that he'd try to see them soon, if that would be alright. The truth was that Harry missed Teddy fiercely. The young boy had been somewhat of a fixture in Harry's life for the past few months; ever since he'd returned from Canada. He was grateful that Tonks had given him another chance at being with her son, despite the fact that, as his Senior Advisor, she'd known all about his suicide attempt and the time spent in rehabilitation.

He decided that a visit to Kingsley would probably be in order so he Apparated to the Ministry. The department head met him with a friendly handshake and a wide smile.

"Good to have you back, Harry."

"Good to be back, Kingsley," Harry nodded and took the offered seat across from the man he admired so much.

"I trust that Miss Weasley has given you a clean bill of health, seeing that you are here today."

“Yes,” Harry replied. “She said I’m not contagious anymore and that now I’ll be completely immune.”

Kingsley smiled wryly. “I’ve always believed the immunization potions were a bit dodgy, if the truth be had.”

“It was my fault, sir,” Harry adopted a more formal tone. “I knowingly exposed myself to the illness. I was confident that I wouldn’t get infected and—”

“Harry,” Kingsley put up his hand to stop the young Auror’s explanations. “I don’t blame you. Things happen in life that we can’t always predict. If you were in a situation where you were exposed, I trust you to know that what you were doing there was justified. I’m not your father, Harry; I’m your boss and your friend.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, genuinely a bit surprised at the man. Kingsley was always a bit of an enigma to Harry. He’d been the man Harry had looked up to all through his training and had been an example of how to succeed when you’d lost everything, causing Harry to put him on a pedestal of sorts. When he’d awoken in the hospital the night of his failed suicide attempt, it had been Kingsley’s drawn and tired face that had greeted him. The man had even visited twice and wrote regular notes while Harry was in Canada; something no one else could say. Although Harry was still a bit puzzled and wary of allowing the friendship to develop into anything deeper; his experiences with friends were not the best.

“I’ve been thinking, Harry,” Kingsley said as they sat together in his plush office with a window that showed a warm summer day outside, “that maybe we’ll have you start out at the Academy only for a while and then work you back into active duty.”

Harry considered this and, knowing how he still sometimes got winded, nodded his understanding. “That might be a good idea until I’m fully back on my feet.”

“Alright then,” Kingsley agreed. “You let me know when you’ll be up to teaching and we’ll get those classes scheduled again.” He studied Harry’s face for a minute, making Harry squirm a bit. “Harry,” he sighed, “I’m not sure what’s different about you, but it’s like you’re more… relaxed than I’ve ever seen you.”

Harry felt his face heat. He knew exactly what the difference was but was unsure whether or not to share it with Kingsley. “I’ve just made a few changes,” he finally shrugged and mumbled.

Kingsley smiled a rather knowing smile which reminded Harry of Hermione and nodded. “Well, whatever it is, keep it up, alright?”

“I’ll do my best,” Harry acknowledged and tried to keep his face from smiling too widely.

Chapter 6

Harry knocked on the door with the pristine black paint and waited for someone to answer. He steeled himself for the visual double-take he always had to do when Andromeda Tonks opened the door. She looked so similar to Bellatrix Lestrange that it was almost hard to be in her presence, despite the fact that she didn't act anything like her psychopathic sister. Although, Harry could definitely see the regal Black nature in the way she carried herself.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Potter."

Harry forced himself to smile and nodded to the older woman. "Good day, Mrs. Tonks."

She opened the door wide for him to enter and nodded toward a cramped sitting room that was a jumble of wizarding furniture with various muggle household staples. "Nymphadora and Teddy are out in the back garden. They're expecting you."

"Thank you," Harry murmured as he made his way through the house and to a rather overgrown back area where Tonks was pushing her son on a tree swing she must have conjured herself.

"Uncle Harry!" Teddy Lupin's hair flashed from bright blue to pitch black upon seeing Harry leaning against a smaller tree on the edge of the garden.

"Wotcher, Harry," Tonks greeted with a smile and a wave.

"'lo," Harry returned the greeting and ambled over to the two, hands buried deep in his pockets.

"We were just about to have a picnic," Tonks pointed toward a large patch of shade where a blanket had been hastily spread out and a basket sat unopened. "Care to join us?"

Harry felt the old familiar habit to refuse anything that might allow someone else close to him but stamped it down. "I'd like that," he nodded and smiled wryly at Tonks' surprised face.

"Yeah!" Teddy cheered and jumped out of the swing at the height of its arc. Tonks gasped as he hit the ground and tucked his arms in to roll on the soft grass and then, without so much as a pause, he was up and skipping toward the picnic.

Harry chuckled at the awe on Tonks' face. "He didn't get that from you," he teased and ducked away as she swatted at his arm.

"No, he's all Remus when it comes to that," she shrugged. They slowly wandered over to where Teddy was unloading the basket and was already munching on the chocolate biscuits that his grandmother had packed. "How have you been, Harry? Kingsley told me about the Dragon Fever. We got your note."

Harry shrugged. "I'm feeling much better now."

"Wouldn't have to do with a certain red headed Weasley now would it? The one who looks good in a dress?" Tonks had guessed at his feelings for Ginny early in their partnership, but Harry had

convinced her to keep quiet.

“Maybe,” he shrugged and turned away so that she couldn’t see his cheeks redden. “Whatcha got there, kiddo?” he asked Teddy as they reached the blanket and knelt down to join the enthusiastic child.

“Nuthin’,” was the reply. “Nana only packed stuff that’s good for us.” He sighed in absolute disappointment, making Harry grin. He glanced up to find Tonks trying to hide a smile behind her hand.

“What about those biscuits you just devoured?” she asked as she ruffled his black hair.

“Yeah,” Teddy conceded, “but she put cel-ree and carrots and apples. She knows I don’t like that stuff.”

Harry had to look away at the thoroughly disgusted look on the small, heart-shaped face.

“Well,” Tonks answered as she began to rummage in the basket herself, “we have to eat our veg or we don’t grow up big and strong like Uncle Harry here. In fact, it looks like Harry’s been having *extra* helpings of veg. See how strong and healthy he looks?” She smirked at Harry, who gaped at her, while Teddy seemed to study him with scrutiny.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Teddy admitted and then grinned widely. “He’s not as scrawny as he used to look.”

“Scrawny?” Harry protested and tossed a piece of celery at the boy who tipped over from giggling so hard.

“I agree, Teddy,” Tonks grinned. “He’s certainly looking like someone’s been taking care of him. Look at his arms, they used to be like two little twigs—”

“Oi!” Harry squawked. “Enough already!” He couldn’t help but laugh though as the reality of the afternoon settled on him. He was actually happy, sitting here laughing and joking with friends.

They continued to laugh and chat all through lunch and Teddy even managed a few bites of vegetables before scampering off to play with the toy broom Harry had bought for his first birthday. Tonks had tried to refuse the gift at the time but Harry had pled for her to give it to the young boy, telling her that Sirius had given Harry his first broom and even though Harry wasn’t Teddy’s Godfather, well… it just seemed right. She’d finally relented and let the boy have the broom. It was his favorite toy.

“So how bad was Dragon Fever?” Tonks asked as she lay on her stomach, head propped up on her hands and watching her son hover two feet off the ground and zoom around the garden.

“It wasn’t pleasant,” Harry said as he picked at the remains of a chicken sandwich he’d eaten earlier. “But I really don’t remember a whole lot of it. What I do remember is rather jumbled and fuzzy. I’m sure Ginny will have some stories to tell in the next little bit about how nutters Harry Potter is.”

Tonks smiled and contemplated him for a minute. “Well, we all knew that.”

Harry snorted and nodded wryly. “That I do agree with.”

“Can I ask where you got the Fever from?” she asked with a smirk. “It wasn’t from some house of ill-repute was it?” She broke out in gales of laughter at Harry’s incredulous look. “There was this one Auror… came home with the worst case of wizard’s itch…” She laughed even harder as Harry blushed and shook his head.

“That’s not… no!” he shook his head. “You know I don’t go in for that kind of thing.”

Tonks sobered and nodded. “Then where did you get it?”

Harry chewed on his bottom lip for a moment in deep thought. The only other person who knew about him visiting the orphanage was Ginny and Harry wasn’t sure he wanted anyone else to know. But, Tonks had been there for the beginning of the story so he supposed she ought to know a bit more.

“You remember that kid we picked up in Taipei?”

Tonks studied his profile for a moment before nodding. “Johnny?” she asked.

Harry nodded. It had been two years ago on a routine assignment to stop an illegal potions smuggling operation. It was one of Harry’s last assignments with a partner and Tonks had let him take the lead in investigating the information that had taken them half way around the world. The day they’d finally found the smuggler’s hideout they’d arrested five wizards including one fourteen year-old boy who had rudimentary magical skills at best. The boy didn’t even have a wand but was using small bursts of emotionally based magic. Harry had been moved by the young runaway’s story of life on the streets and had stayed an extra week by himself in Taiwan to testify at the boy’s trial and his sentence was greatly reduced.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Johnny.” Obviously, that hadn’t been the boy’s name but it was the only one he would answer to, having ‘earned’ it on the streets of Taipei because he spoke passable English. “I went back to see him a few months after he was put in prison.” Harry ruffled the back of his hair and glanced over to see that he had Tonks’ undivided attention. “He was really bad off, Tonks. And it wasn’t the prison; they were taking care of him alright. I finally got to talk to him alone and he told me that everything he earned on the street, stealing or doing various odd jobs, he gave to his sister.”

Tonks sat up and regarded him. “Why didn’t he tell anyone he had a sister?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. I think he kept it quiet out of habit. If anyone knew about her they might try and get her to join him on the street.” Tonks nodded at his theory and Harry continued. “He told me he was worried about her because the orphanage she was in didn’t get much money and the last time he’d seen her she was sick.”

“Damn,” Tonks mumbled and glanced up to find Teddy tossing small gnomes from the back garden and over the fence toward the pond. “No wonder the kid fought so hard when we tried to bring him in.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, absently rubbing his arm where the young boy had bitten him. “Anyway, I promised to go and check on her before I left.”

Tonks narrowed her eyes. “Harry, that was over a year ago. I know you didn’t get Dragon Fever then.”

“Are you going to let me finish?” Harry asked with a raised eyebrow. Tonks rolled her eyes but nodded.

“I followed Johnny’s instructions and found the place.” He sighed and reached forward the pull at a piece of tall grass. “It was bad, Tonks. There’s only one old lady looking after all these kids in a run down place. They don’t get much money from the government and since she takes in kids with magic, the local churches won’t help. They don’t believe in magic over there… think it’s against the natural order or some such nonsense.”

“Damn,” Tonks swore again softly then shook her head. “What about the little girl?”

Harry looked off into the distance, his eyes glazing over a bit. “She died two months before. She was only eight.”

Tonks sighed and shook her head. “You can’t blame yourself for that, Harry. We had no idea—”

“I don’t,” he shook his head. “I wish Johnny would have said something and then we could have done something… I don’t know what, but something.” He tossed the now shredded piece of grass away from himself. “I couldn’t let that happen to someone else,” he shook his head. “Every time I have a bit of free time I go over there and take supplies. Pó Pó—that’s what they call the old woman, it means grandmother—she’s all they have. I gave her some books with basic magic skills in them. There’s a young girl, Sun, who lives there and helps out as well. They’ve been teaching the kids English too. I went a few weeks ago and there were four kids that had Dragon Fever. I thought I’d be alright; I’ve had the Ministry’s Immunization potions.”

“Harry…” Tonks began but then trailed off as if she didn’t know what to say. She looked at him and studied his profile for a minute. Harry wanted to squirm away from her gaze but forced himself to watch Teddy as he was chased by a couple of irate gnomes. Her movement a minute later startled him and he watched as she marched toward the house, utterly perplexed as to what she was doing. She was back in less than two minutes and sat down next to him.

“It’s not much, but it’s what I have to spare.” Harry was confused until he looked down to see her holding a handful of gold galleons.

“Tonks… no, I can’t! That money is for you and Teddy.”

Tonks tried to place it in his hand again and he dodged it. “Take it, you stubborn git. I make more than you, and Teddy and I are fine.”

“Tonks,” Harry protested and gestured toward Teddy who had gained interest in his broom again and was laughing as he chased what appeared to be the same two gnomes. “I can’t take that knowing you could buy something for Teddy.”

“Harry,” Tonks sighed and dropped her hand, staring at the gold coins. “Teddy is the reason you have to take it. Look at him! He’s happy. He’s healthy. He’s got more toys, thanks to you and my mother, than he’ll ever be able to play with. He may be missing one parent, but he’s got me… and that’s quite enough to be getting on with.” She chuckled as Teddy plucked one of the gnomes and zoomed over to the fence to toss it over.

“Those kids don’t have any of that,” she sighed and reached forward, taking his slack hand in hers and pushing the coins into it. “If you don’t take it, every time I look at him I’ll think of what I could have done without so that they can have potions and schoolbooks and food and stuff.”

“Take it!” she ordered as Harry hesitated one last time. He finally nodded in understanding and slipped the coins into his pocket.

“Tonks, don’t… well, don’t tell anyone, yeah?” He could feel his face heat and he looked away, fidgeting with a new piece of grass.

Tonks sighed dramatically. “Why do you try so hard to hide what a decent bloke you can be, Harry?” She finally shrugged and nodded her acceptance. “So tell me about you and Miss Healer. Any news there?”

Harry’s face heated even more and he tossed the grass in her direction.

“Ah ha!” she crowed. “You’re too easy to read, Potter. You pulled the old Nightingale Syndrome on her didn’t you?”

“What?” Harry spluttered.

“She’s the Healer, you’re the patient… she falls for you while you’re on your deathbed and then confesses her undying love… and the two of you live happily ever after. I’m a sucker for romantic stories.”

Harry spluttered again but he couldn’t dispute the fact that part of what she’d said was completely true.

“So, managed to get into her knickers yet?” Tonks asked in a low voice as she leaned toward him.

“Tonks!” he growled. “Don’t you think about anything else?”

“Have to live vicariously, love,” she shrugged and then laughed as she rolled her eyes. “You still haven’t answered the question.”

“Which one was that?” Harry asked as he ruffled his hair.

“Either… both,” she shrugged.

“Ginny and I are together,” he said quietly. He had to laugh when Tonks crowed loudly and collapsed against his side in giggles.

“I knew it would happen one day. Her family’s over the moon, yeah?”

“I wish it were that easy,” Harry sighed. “We haven’t told anyone yet.”

Tonks sensed the seriousness of the moment and sat up again. “Things will work out, Harry.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I’m always right, dontcha know?” she slugged his shoulder gently and called out for Teddy to come back to them. “You coming back to work soon?”

Harry nodded and braced himself as Teddy hit his knees at a running hug. “Instructing for now only. I’m not on active duty yet.”

“Well, get it back together,” Tonks grinned. “I’m tired of picking up the slack. And this little man misses his Thursdays with Uncle Harry.”

Harry laughed as he swung the skinny boy up on his shoulders and they walked back to the house.

* * *

Harry was more than a little nervous at their upcoming dinner at the Burrow. When Ginny backed out of the fireplace after arranging the details with her mother, Harry was pacing.

“Harry,” she scolded him, took his hand and led him to the sofa where she perched on his lap. “This is not something you should be worried about. I told Mum that we had something we needed to talk to her and Dad about. No one else will be there.

A bit of weight lifted off of his shoulders at that, but he was still worried. “Gin, what are they going to say?”

She only smiled at him lovingly and kissed the end of his nose. “They’re going to say that it’s about time. They love you, Harry. Probably more than me,” she said with a teasing poke to his side. “I’m sure there’s no one they’d like better to be with me.”

Harry nodded absently and let his fingers trail through her hair, a habit that he’d picked up in their short time together. She’d teased him about it at first until he’d explained that he’d always had a fascination for her hair and had always wondered what it would feel like.

“And if they don’t agree, then… well, sod them,” Ginny teased and kissed him tenderly. “Harry, the decision has been made. I’ve got you and I’m not going to let you go now. I’ve waited too long.”

Harry tugged her to him tighter, pulling her into an embrace.

“I don’t think I’m comfortable telling them everything, Gin,” he mumbled into her shoulder.

Ginny was quiet for a minute before nodding. “Alright, how about we only tell them some of it? I’ll take your hand and you can squeeze twice if you’re uncomfortable.”

Harry grunted, “What am I, five?” She chuckled at his pouting and he ruffled his hair. “Okay. I’m still not sure about this though.”

“Point made.

“And your brothers?”

“You let me deal with them.” Her mysterious tone made him nervous and he shifted under her.

“What?” she asked as she pulled back and then smirked. “You know I’m the best one for the job. You’d be too soft on them.”

Harry only shook his head and rested his forehead against hers.

* * *

Harry cursed silently as his hand knocked into his glass once again. Two such spills had already happened in his nervous state. Thankfully, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, who had already scolded him to call them Molly and Arthur, either didn’t notice or were pretending well.

“Relax,” Ginny mouthed to him and Harry took a deep breath, willing his heart rate to slow down to a manageable rate. He nodded once to her and took another bite of the shepherd’s pie that Mrs. Wea—erm, Molly had made for their dinner.

“This is delicious,” he offered, heating under the beaming smile that she gave him.

“Well, you two,” Arthur cleared his throat, “you said that you had something to say to us.”

Harry shot a panicked glance over at Ginny who only winked at him.

“We do.” He was relieved that she was taking the lead in this. It wasn’t that he was ashamed to be with Ginny; not at all. But the approval of her family meant so much to her—and, if he were honest, to him as well—that this i*had/i* to work out.

“We wanted you to be the first in the family to know that Harry and I have started dating.” Ginny’s hand found his under the table and she wound their fingers together. Harry beamed at her while she reflected it back to him.

He glanced up hesitatingly at her parents and was relieved to see that they too were smiling widely. In fact, he thought he could see tears in Molly’s eyes.

“Ah,” Arthur nodded. “We had suspected as much.”

“You’re… you’re not… mad?” Harry surprised himself in voicing the question that had been worrying him since he and Ginny had decided to come together.

They both looked a little confused and Harry wanted to turn back the moment and rethink his words.

“Why would we be, Harry?” Molly asked, tilting her head to the side. Harry had the uncomfortable feeling that she was seeing more than he had been ready to admit.

“Nothing, really,” he stammered. “It’s just… I have a dangerous job.” It sounded lame even to him.

His stomach rolled. He'd hoped that they could gloss over the past and not make it a huge issue. His eyes met Ginny's and he nodded, assuring her he was alright.

If he held on to her hand, Harry thought, just maybe he could convince himself, as he attempted on a regular basis now, that this wasn't a dream that was about to come to an end. Arthur and Molly seemed like they were happy. But he could easily be mistaken. It wouldn't be the first time he'd misread a situation.

Inside his head, Harry secretly voiced the fear that his heart had held for years. What if they agreed with their sons? What if they didn't really want him around as much as he wanted to be around? It would devastate him.

If he never showed them who he was inside—this vulnerable, needy being who craved love and affection—then they could never reject him fully. Then Harry could go on telling himself that it was alright, because they really didn't know him for who he was. Before, when he didn't allow himself to be close to them, Harry could pretend that they were just oblivious to his pain. But to open himself up—to put himself on the line wholly—well, it would mean that they were rejecting who he truly was, if they i*did/i* reject him.

But with Ginny's hand in his now, just maybe he was brave enough to try. Ginny nodded and gave him a wide smile before turning to her parents.

"Harry and I have been in love with each other for a long time… years, really."

Molly opened her mouth, presumably to ask, but Arthur placed his hand gently on her arm, stilling her.

"But I convinced myself that it wasn't safe to be with her," Harry said, quietly taking the blame of the situation on himself. Ginny's eyes sparked a bit but he only looked intently at her.

"But we're together now," she affirmed with a nod.

"Well, we couldn't be happier," Arthur stood and Harry quickly followed. They shook hands firmly and Harry felt as if his heart would burst. It wasn't the same type of relief that he'd felt when he and Ginny had decided to date, but it was close.

"Oh, my little girl," Molly sobbed into Ginny's shoulder and she grinned at Harry over her mother's ferocious hug.

He felt as if his face might crack from the smile he wore. And it almost did when Ginny had caught his eye and winked, mouthing 'told you so' to him behind her mother's back.

* * *

Lying in bed together, Ginny ran her hands gently through Harry's hair.

"I told you, didn't I?"

Harry sighed. "You did." It was hard to keep the amusement out of his voice because he could tell

that Ginny was trying to goad him.

“And they love you, just like I told you.”

Deciding to turn it around on her, Harry said, “I noticed that you didn’t tell them we were living together.”

Ginny laughed and tugged gently at his hair, making him protest. “Yeah, that would have gone over really well, let me tell you.”

Harry pulled his head away from her hands and shifted so that he was looking down on her, resting on his elbow. “They probably would have thrown me out.” His fingers found her hair and he buried them deep in the coppery strands, gently massaging her scalp.

“Not likely,” Ginny shook her head with a laugh. “I think they’d be more inclined to toss me out on my backside, actually.”

Harry barked out a laugh and leaned down to kiss her. “You exaggerate.”

“You’re right. We just would have received Dad’s patented glare of disappointment, and Mum’s two hour speech on how a proper lady acts.”

“Merlin forbid,” Harry whispered as he leaned further over her and pressed his lips against hers.

“I’ve been on the end of both, Harry. Trust me when I tell you that it’s not a good place to be.”

“I trust you,” Harry laughed as he kissed her again. “But, like you said, they love me.”

“They do,” Ginny affirmed. “And it’s a good thing, because I love you too.”

* * *

To say that Ginny was nervous would be an understatement. Telling her parents that she and Harry were together had never really concerned her as much as it had Harry. They’d always loved Harry and always harbored a deep hurt in their hearts when, as the years went by, Harry had pulled further and further away.

But it seemed that all was forgiven, even forgotten, now that Harry was with Ginny. And that was fine with her. The few days since their dinner at the Burrow had seen a little more weight of burden slip off of Harry’s shoulders. He smiled just a bit more, brooded just a bit less. He made her breakfast in bed, and did silly little things around the flat to make her smile.

But there was still the issue of her brothers to deal with. And Ginny, despite the bravery and strength she showed to Harry, was extremely hurt by their betrayal. As much as she wanted to tear into them for what they had done to Harry, part of her held back. She knew their intent had been to keep her from harm; but the damage they’d done in the process—not only to herself and Harry, but to so many people—well, that was all but unforgivable.

The anger was there, definitely, and would serve her well in dealing with them. But how to go about it was quite another question. Dozens of plans and scenarios had been considered and then

discarded. She really didn't want to maim, as she had told Harry. But the Weasley brothers needed to know what they had done and what the consequences of their decisions had been.

In the end, she needed help to finish her plans and to even pull it all off. And the Burrow was the perfect place to go. After all, Fred and George hadn't gotten their mischievousness from nowhere.

Ginny deliberately waited until later in the day to Apparate, knowing that her father would be well ensconced at work and her mother would be sitting down to a cup of tea. The perfect time, if there was one, to bring up the tender subject.

"How are things with Harry, dear?" Molly asked as she fixed a second cup of tea for her daughter.

Ginny graciously accepted both it and a fresh baked scone. "Things are wonderful, Mum. He's just… he's an amazing man."

Molly smiled indulgently and sipped her own tea. "I'm really not surprised that the two of you are finally together. I am shocked that it took so long, however. I've known that you fancied him for years. I must say, if Harry has fancied you for as long as you said, then he sure hid it well."

Maybe bringing the subject up wouldn't be as difficult as Ginny had imagined.

"Well, you know Harry, Mum. Once he made up his mind that it would be dangerous to let me know how he felt, there was no changing it."

Molly nodded knowingly. "He is a stubborn man, sometimes, isn't he? He's always been that way, though. I think it comes from growing up as he did, with no one to depend on."

"I'm sure it is," Ginny affirmed, adding a bit more sugar to her tea. "But, he definitely had help coming to that opinion." She raised her face and watched her mother go through a range of emotions.

First seemed to be confusion over what Ginny meant, then a flash of inspiration followed by a narrowing of the eyes as suspicion and anger rose.

"Which one?" Her tone was low and dangerous. Only once had Ginny heard the murderous undertones that now laced her mother's voice. Hearing it now directed toward her brothers, which Ginny knew her mother was asking about, instead of some Death Eater, made a shiver shoot down her spine.

"Mum?"

"Which of my sons convinced Harry that he was too dangerous to be around?"

Ginny answered quickly, feeling a bit like a six-year-old girl tattling on her brothers. "All of them."

Molly's mouth opened and closed as her face turned a darkening shade of red. "They… how… ALL?" The teacups on the table rattled and Ginny quickly took hers in hand to stop it from spilling.

"Mum," she reached out and stilled her mother's own shaking hands. "I know you're angry, but I really need your help in knowing how I should deal with this." As she suspected, her plea for help

appealed directly to her mother's instincts and the cups stilled as Molly settled in to help. There was no doubt that she was still very angry; her cheeks were still flushed and her dark eyes sparked.

Calmly, Ginny told her mother all that she had pried out of Harry from the first ambush, to Charlie's exact words in the Great Hall. Eerily, Molly got quieter and quieter as the story went on, making Ginny fearful of becoming an only child in the near future.

"I always wondered what had happened to Harry that summer," she admitted in a small voice, shaking her head sadly. "He seemed to be doing so well. And then… it just changed. I thought he must have had some row with Ron because they weren't speaking when we took you all to the Hogwarts Express."

Ginny nodded. "Harry didn't speak to him for weeks. At the time, I thought they must have rowed, too."

"It's no wonder that Harry felt distanced from our family."

"He did," Ginny agreed and then smiled. "But he's on his way back now, Mum."

Molly nodded, a thoughtful look on her face. "He is, isn't he? But there's still the issue of your brothers."

"There is," Ginny agreed. "Harry is so worried that our dating is going to tear this family apart. But I assured him that I didn't want to kill them—"

"You may not," Molly huffed, "but that doesn't mean I—"

"Mum!" Ginny rolled her eyes. "Please try and see this from Harry's point of view. He loves this family, despite what those gits forced him to believe all those years ago. And you being so angry at them isn't going to do anything except make Harry feel guilty." She raised her eyebrows at her mother, willing her to understand.

Molly huffed for a moment before her shoulders sank in resignation.

"I understand your anger. Believe me, if we hadn't been quarantined at the time I found out, nothing would have held me back from letting them know what I thought of them." Ginny sighed. "But hexing them up one side and down the other wouldn't accomplish what I want."

"What is it that you want, Ginny?" Molly suddenly appeared older, as if the weight of her son's choices had aged her greatly. And Ginny supposed it had. To hear that a man whom she loved like a seventh son was pushed away by her other children must break her hear.

"I want them to understand what they did to Harry and me. I want them to feel a bit of the betrayal that they forced on him. And I want them to understand that I was then, and am now, capable of making my own decisions and taking care of myself."

Determination took over her mother's look and she nodded firmly. "I agree."

"Now, this is what I was thinking…" Ginny continued, a sly smile appearing.

Chapter 7

Ginny glanced around at the Weasley brothers. They were all seated at the table at the Burrow, each looking a bit wary and possibly a bit guilty. *Hmm, have to look into that,* Ginny thought. She set a handful of frosty bottles of butterbeer on the table and smiled as they all took one gratefully.

She'd worked hours on the letters of invitation she'd written to all of her remaining brothers. The wording had to be perfect and not give any clues as to what she really wanted to talk to them about.

When each of them had shown up at the Burrow, they'd been surprised to see each other. Ginny's letters had been individually addressed and had indicated that she needed a bit of advice and would like to talk to them.

"What's this all about, Ginner-Pinner?" Charlie asked with a smile. "I thought you wanted to talk to me about your career? That's what your letter said, anyway."

"Mine, too," Bill added.

"As did mine," Percy put in. Both George and Ron nodded as they studied their sister.

Ginny smiled and shook her head. "No, actually it said I wanted to discuss my future."

"Thinking of making a career change, little one?" Bill asked.

"No," Ginny replied mysteriously and settled in the chair her father usually sat in at the head of the table. "Actually, I've met someone."

"Is that what this is about?" Ron scoffed. "We all know you're dating Dean."

"Hush, Ron," Percy piped up and leaned forward. "It sounds like you're serious, Ginny."

"I am," she nodded. "And I thought with each of you being married, or in committed relationships," she glanced up at them innocently, "that you might be able to give me a bit of advice."

They all exchanged looks and Bill leaned it toward her a bit. "About what, little one?"

"Well, for instance, how long did it take until you knew Fleur was the one?" she asked, her face the picture of innocent curiosity. "And how did you know for sure? Was it just a feeling?"

The rest seemed content on letting Bill answer. Ginny knew by their fidgeting that none of them was particularly comfortable with the thought of their sister being serious about a man. They knew she dated quite a bit, and probably guessed that she wasn't as innocent as she had once been, but they'd rarely said much more than if they approved of the bloke or not, at least to her face, she was finding out. She wondered how many boys they'd warned off in the past, or if Harry was the only one. Well, it really didn't matter now.

"For me it was how I felt about her. When I looked at her, I couldn't imagine myself without her in

my life. I didn't even want to look at other women."

George snorted. "Like you would—dating a bloody Veela." Bill glared at him and continued.

"I'd say you have to know the bloke quite a while, though."

"And know if the young man can provide for you," Percy put in with assenting nods from his brothers. "Is his job secure; can he look after a family?"

"How does he treat you?" Ron put in. "He's got to treat you like a princess, Ginny."

Ginny allowed a soft look to come over her face as she thought about all the things Harry did for her. He definitely had a good job with plenty of security. And he treated her like a queen. Her brothers surely wouldn't be giving her this advice, though, if they knew who she was picturing when they asked their questions.

"He does have a good job," she nodded. "And he's very kind and an amazing man."

"Does he come from a good family?" Charlie asked. "After all, when you get married, you become a part of his family too."

Ginny nodded her understanding. "I've not met his parents, but everyone speaks very highly of them."

"How does he make you feel?" George asked. "Because all of this other stuff is wonderful, but if he doesn't make your heart want to burst out of your rib cage… I say keep looking."

"He does," Ginny confirmed. "When we're together I'm not even aware of anything else happening in the world. And it doesn't matter if we're sharing dinner or playing chess or whatever… I just always want to be with him."

"Well," Bill ruffled the back of his hair. "As much as I hate the thought, I think you may have found yourself a keeper, Gin. Have you brought him home to meet Mum and Dad? And do they know how serious you are?"

Ginny nodded. "Mum and Dad love him," she shrugged simply.

"Sure," Ron piped up. "Dean's been here a few times. He's a good bloke, with a good head on his shoulders. I never saw what you see in him, obviously, but… to each their own, right?" He held up his butterbeer bottle and they all toasted and finished the liquid.

"I'm glad you approve," Ginny said as she stood and gathered the empty bottles. "Because it would break my heart to know that you didn't trust me enough to make my own choices about my life." She had to fight down a smile as Bill shifted in his seat a bit. Charlie scratched the back of his neck and narrowed his eyes at the window. Ron dropped his gaze and ran his fingernail over the edge of the table. Percy and George must have felt she was up to something as they exchanged anxious glances.

"Sure we do, Ginny," Bill said as he cleared his throat. He seemed increasingly squirmy in his chair

and abruptly tried to stand up only to realize he was stuck to his seat, which was stuck to the ground. “What the—”

“Ginny?” Charlie said as he too tried to move but couldn’t do more than rock forward a bit in his chair.

“This your idea of a joke?” Ron snapped out. “You’ve had your laugh, now let us out.”

Ginny stood and pulled her wand out, crossing her arms and adopting a classic Molly Weasley pose.

“So you think I should go ahead with this relationship?” she asked again and almost laughed at the utterly perplexed looks her brothers were giving her now.

“Ginny, we already told you—”

“I’m glad,” she interrupted and then smirked. “Harry will be so pleased to know that you now approve of him dating your ickle sister.”

Pandemonium was the only word she could think of to describe their reactions. They hopped in their seats, growled at her and even swore. The guilt hung in the air thick and Ginny met each one of their gazes.

“Harry?” Ron squeaked. “What happened to Dean? I thought—”

“That’s the problem, Ron, you *didn’t* think,” Ginny bit out. “You bastards nearly ruined everything.” She narrowed her eyes at each of them and then raised an eyebrow as Percy broke first.

“We were only trying to help.”

The others groaned and she could have sworn Bill tried his best to kick Percy under the table.

“Do tell,” Ginny said, tapping her wand on her arm.

Percy swallowed thickly and glanced around at his brothers who were all glaring at him.

“Percy, shut your mouth,” Charlie snapped. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Percy met her gaze again and slumped in his seat. “We told Harry that he needed to stay away from you.” The others groaned loudly and began to yell at him until Ginny silenced them all with quick spells.

“Continue,” Ginny said icily.

Percy swallowed and looked down at his hands. “Ron said that he began noticing Harry watching you after his fifth year. And then Harry even admitted to him that he fancied you. I wasn’t there at the time, obviously, but the others decided that it was best if Harry set his sights somewhere else. They told him that you would be safer if he stayed away, that you’d gotten over him anyway.”

“I see,” Ginny said, narrowing her eyes at her now-silent brothers who wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“And what about after the Final Battle?” Ron perked up at this, narrowing his eyes at her.

Percy slumped even further until his nose almost touched the table. “Charlie said that Harry would try again,” he said in a soft voice, almost so that Ginny had to lean over to hear him. “He and Bill said that it was still too dangerous and that he needed to be reminded.”

Ginny sighed and rubbed her temples, feeling an immense headache coming on. “How did he react?” she asked. Ron shifted around, his chair scraping on the floor. Ginny glared at his red face and bulging eyes. No doubt he wanted a chance to defend himself.

“He…” Percy glanced up at Charlie who was violently red and shaking with anger. “Charlie said he agreed and said that he loved you enough to stay away.”

“And that didn’t set off some alarm in your teensy, tiny little brains?” Ginny roared. “You bastards! You absolute prats! The boy told you he LOVED me!” she spat in Charlie’s face and red sparks flew out of her wand, making Charlie wince as they hit the skin on his arms and face.

“He loved me!” she cried again, feeling the slim hold she had on her magic waver. “And you all knew that I loved him.” Ron shook his head violently, but Ginny ignored him.

Percy finally looked up and met her eyes. She could see the guilt and sorrow there. “You knew how I felt,” she whispered. “And you let him walk away from me. And we’ve both been living in hell ever since then.”

“Ginny,” Percy sighed. “We thought—”

“I know,” she held up her hands in protest. “No doubt you thought you were doing the right thing.”

She swung around and glared at Bill before pointing her wand at his head. His eyes snapped closed as he waited for the worst. “You have one chance to explain yourself, Bill,” she hissed and Bill cracked open one eye.

“I…” he huffed out a breath through his nose. “We did the right thing,” he defended, his eyes never leaving hers. “He would have only hurt you, Ginny. You would have been miserable being with him. And worse, you would have been a prime target for Death Eaters.”

“You knew how I felt about him?” Ginny asked in a surprisingly calm voice.

Bill shifted and jerked his head a bit.

“What was that?” Ginny cupped a hand around her ear. “I couldn’t hear that.”

“I knew you still had a crush on him.”

“News flash for you, Bill! I was in love with him. L-O-V-E, head over arse in love with the boy.”

He opened his mouth to respond when aloud ‘eeaww’ came out instead. He tried again and then reached his hand up as grey-brown ears sprouted out of his head, taking the place of his own ears.

“Sweet mother of Merlin,” Percy moaned and laid his head on the table. It looked as though George

was pleased with the results as he grinned and gave Ginny a huge 'thumbs-up'.

Another sharp 'eeaww' and Bill reached around to grab a tail that had shot out of his pants with the sound of a ripping seam.

Ginny gave a satisfied nod and turned to her next oldest brother. Charlie looked as if he was in pain as he watched his oldest brother complete the transformation into a donkey wearing a Weird Sister's t-shirt and leather pants that now sported a hole in the back.

"And you… how could you! You almost broke him completely, you know. Right after he'd done the most amazing thing you stomped all over his heart and told him that he wasn't worthy of me." Ginny flashed her wand at him and he winced, clutching his throat.

"Ginny, we—"

"Charlie," she put up her hands. "I've heard enough from you. I'm not in enough control to talk to you anymore."

"Now that's not fair! I have a right—eeeawww!"

"You have the right to, what, Charlie?" Ginny asked, a satisfied smirk on her face as Charlie underwent the same transformations as his oldest brother had. "You have the right to decide who I can love and who can love me? You have the right to make decisions that affect two people so deeply that they spend more than six years living in constant pain?

"Nobody has that right, Charlie." She watched until the last change had taken place and then nodded in satisfaction before spinning back to face the remaining three. George was laughing silently at the sight, his shoulders shaking up and down. Ron looked decidedly green and Ginny wondered if he'd lose his dinner before the end of the night.

"Percy."

The tall redhead raised his head and met her eyes before nodding and sitting tall in his seat. "I deserve it, Ginny," he said. She almost felt sorry for him, but the magic was already in effect as two ears sprouted. He winced as a tail shot out from his pressed trousers. But that was the furthest his changes went.

"You!" Ginny removed George's silencing spell and he sobered instantly. "I know that it's not fair, but you're taking the brunt for Fred as well." George opened his mouth to protest but nodded resignedly instead.

"Did Harry put you up to this?" he asked meekly.

"No," Ginny answered simply. "In fact, I'm sure he'd be horrified to know what I'm doing. He's out with Kingsley and Neville tonight. And before you go blaming, Harry," she drawled with a glance at the three who had already changed, "he didn't tell me any of this. I found out accidentally; it really doesn't matter how I did. And, I'll have you know; when Harry and I decided to date he was terrified that it was going to ruin our family. That's how much he loves me, and how much he thinks of all of you—Merlin knows why. He's been willing to be absolutely miserable so that you all would

be happy." She turned back to George. "Have anything to say?"

"Brilliant," he breathed as his face began to stretch and his ears grew longer.

"And now you…" Ginny moved to stand in front of Ron whose eyes were wider than dinner plates now. "Actually, I don't think I can handle talking to you right now. I'd be afraid I'd do permanent damage. Instead, I'll just tell you what I think of you.

"You are the biggest coward in the world, Ronald Weasley. You should never have been sorted into Gryffindor. No… you're a Slytherin through and through," she drawled as he winced. He began to change and to swell so that his head was twice its normal size and wobbled on his neck. "And I wouldn't blame Harry if he never spoke to you again; I know it's very tempting to me right now. You know, Ron, that look really suits you, after all, you are the biggest jackass of them all for betraying your best friend."

Once all of her brothers had finished changing Ginny moved to where they could all see her.

"Now don't go thinking your punishment is over yet," she smirked at their panicked, donkey faces. "You can come in now," she called out and the brothers all swung their long faces toward the door where four very angry women marched in winding up extendable ears, followed by a furious Molly and Arthur Weasley.

"They're all yours ladies, do anything you want to them, just as long as I have nothing to do with it," Ginny said. She made her way over to her mother and father and kissed each of their cheeks. "Thanks for having me, it's been lovely," she quipped with a sugary smile.

Molly caressed her cheek gently. "Give Harry our love, Ginny. And don't worry about this lot," she glared at each of her sons who seemed to shrink under her gaze, "we'll make sure they stay out of your way for a bit."

"I will, Mum," she said and gave her father a hug before pulling her wand and Apparating away.

* * *

"Silencio," Ron whispered, as he sneaked in through the front door of the small house he and Hermione shared. It wouldn't do for him to wake Hermione in the middle of the night. He was just grateful that she hadn't been at the Burrow.

His head throbbed from the after-effects of the potion Ginny had slipped him, and his neck was sore from having to hold up his swollen head for so long. But even worse—his ears still rang from his mother's rant.

After leaving the Burrow, Ron had walked through the silent streets of Ottery St. Catchpole, trying to gather his thoughts and wrap his mind around the picture of Harry and Ginny together.

He just really couldn't see it happening. Ginny had moved on. She'd dated bloke after bloke during her last years at Hogwarts and after. Wouldn't she have said something if she was so unhappy?

Ron really hadn't taken into account that either of their feelings had run so deep. Surely it couldn't

have been love, at least not on Harry's part; he'd just started noticing her, after all. And Ginny had been over Harry for months; Hermione had told Harry that herself.

So the thought that they'd both been miserable for the last six years truly hadn't entered his mind until Ginny had so abruptly shoved it in his face. And Charlie had never told him what Harry had said after the Final Battle. He knew Harry hadn't been really happy, but he'd always assumed that it was just how Harry was.

Things hadn't been good between them at the beginning of their sixth year. Harry refused to speak more than a few words to him in the first weeks of school. Ron always assumed that he was sulking over the developing crush on Ginny. But sometime around Christmas things started to even out between the two friends. Harry's obsession with Draco Malfoy had nearly driven his friends insane, but at least Harry was talking to Ron again.

And when the mess with Lavender and Hermione had occurred, Harry had sat, patiently listening while Ron had spilled his heart. Granted, Harry's claims that he was rubbish with girls were most likely true. And it really hadn't mattered anyway because Ron had muddled his way through just like he always had. And he had Hermione now.

And with any luck, he could diffuse the situation before Hermione found out about his past decisions and made him suffer even more.

The house was dark as he made his way inside; Hermione must have already gone to bed. Ron sighed in relief and made his way slowly toward their bedroom.

"Don't even think about sleeping in this bed, Ronald Weasley."

Damn.

Ron froze in the dark hallway, listening for any other sound that might prepare him for what he was going to find. Hermione's voice was calm, even though he couldn't see her face in the blackness of the room. It didn't sound like she was angry, despite her words. Perhaps she was merely annoyed.

"I'm sorry I'm late, love," he tried. Blaming it on his brothers sounded like as good an excuse as any. In a way, they had been involved, so it wasn't like he was lying compl—

"And don't give me some excuse thinking you can get yourself out of trouble."

Ah. He recognized the tone now. It was the voice she used when she was beyond angry. In their three years of marriage, Ron had assumed he knew all her moods. There was annoyed, frustrated, angry… and then, the calm, deadly quiet infuriation.

Ron nudged the door open with his toe, leaning his head inside the room even further. He could see Hermione, propped in the direct center of their bed. The only illumination in the room was a single candle that made long shadows dance on the wall. He smiled sheepishly and took a breath to explain.

"Ginny sent me a letter today."

All the air forcefully expelled itself from Ron's lungs. He pressed his eyes closed and internally muttered every offensive word he could think. Leave it to his ickle sister to tattle on him to his wife.

Hermione shifted in the bed, not really looking at him, although it was rather hard to tell in the low light.

"And your mother flooed."

Ron's heart sank further. He wished she would just yell, as his mother had. It was much scarier when Hermione was like this. The yelling, he could handle. It was this disappointed, furious silence that Ron didn't know how to deal with.

"I was going to insist that you go to the Burrow for awhile," Hermione continued. "But your mother is worried about the baby."

"Hermione—"

"I'm not finished, yet, Ronald."

Ron's mouth snapped shut audibly and he stood completely still.

"I considered going to my parent's house, but I don't want to have to make the commute because I can't Apparate."

His mind reeling, Ron stared down at the slightly worn carpet. How could one decision, made so many years ago—and one that only had the best of intentions—lead him to where he was today?

"So, I would suggest you make yourself comfortable on the sofa."

"What!" Now this really was going too far. It was his house, after all! He had every right to be in his own bed, regardless of the trouble that his sister had stirred up today.

"Don't you take that tone with me, Ronald Weasley." Hermione's narrowed eyes shown in the darkness. "Until you get it all straight in that thick head of yours, you'll stay there on the sofa."

Silently steaming, Ron opened his mouth to retort but only got hit in the face when Hermione banished a stack of blankets and pillows toward him.

"And…"

Ron rolled his eyes. There was more?

"You'll be spending your spare time at the Burrow. Your mother has chores for you."

Before he could reply, the bedroom door nudged him out into the hallway before closing completely.

Ron stared at the grain of the wood, his mind racing. Ginny had played every last card she'd had tonight, and they had all been winners.

* * *

When Harry returned to his and Ginny's flat he was in a pleasant mood. The last three hours spent having a pint or two with Kingsley and Neville at a Muggle pub and playing darts had helped him relax quite a bit.

"Hi, love," he called out as he came into the kitchen. His progress, however, stopped dead when he saw Ginny in denim shorts and a t-shirt, her hair pulled back and twisted into a knot at the base of her neck, her wand holding it all together. The front of her clothing was splattered with water and she had a rather intense grip on the cleaning sponge in her hand.

"Erm… Did I do something wrong, Ginny?"

She glanced up from the sparkling clean kitchen and sighed while pushing an errant chunk of hair out of her eyes.

"No, you didn't do anything, Harry."

He raised a skeptical eyebrow at her and watched as she began scrubbing the countertop again. Several weeks of living together allowed him to know that she was currently steaming mad under all that work. Ginny didn't like to clean much, but when she did it was usually to work off emotional stress or anger.

"Are you sure?" he asked, very wary of the answer. If he had made her angry, then the best way to get out of it was to face it and accept her wrath.

"It's not you," she finally sighed, tossing the sponge into the sink and wiping her hands on a tea towel. "It's those prats who *used* to be related to me."

Fear ripped through him. He'd been suspicious when Ginny had pushed him to accept the invitation to get a drink. She'd promised him, however that she was going to go to the Burrow and spend some time with her parents. Had something happened with her brothers? Had they found out about his and Ginny's relationship and created more problems?

Ginny's arms wrapping around his chest shook him from his worries. "Don't worry about it, Harry," she chided him.

"What happened?"

"Nothing, really," she assured him even as she pushed him slowly backwards toward the sofa in the living room. "You worry too much." Her soft kisses, pressed against his jawline and cheeks, did nothing to ease his concern.

"Ginny," he scolded, trying to be firm. "What happened?" He drew back from her, but not enough to pull completely away.

She sighed and gave him one last shove with her body, making him sit on the sofa and then cuddling into his side. "I just confronted them tonight."

Harry shifted his head away from her fingers which were teasing the back of his neck. “And?”

Ginny sighed again. “Harry, you should know by now that they’re no match for me.”

Groaning loudly, Harry laid his head on the back of the sofa and grimaced up at the ceiling. “Permanent damage?”

Her pleased little giggle did nothing to calm his nerves. “Ginny,” he groaned. She swatted him lovingly and nuzzled her face into his neck.

“Oh, don’t be so worried,” she huffed gently. “I don’t know why you’re sticking up for those gits anyway.”

“I’m not… it’s just…” Harry stammered, unsure how to put into words what he was feeling. He simply did not want to rip the Weasley family apart over a decision that he had made.

Ginny reached up and took his face in her hands, placing several soft kisses on his lips as she spoke. “They deserved everything they got, Harry.”

He continued to scowl darkly, visions of maimed redheads dragging their broken bodies around the Burrow flashing through his head.

“Besides, I only slipped something in their drinks.”

Harry wasn’t sure whether to wince or to laugh at her no-nonsense admission.

“Erm…”

“Just a little potion I found in a book that Fred and George never realized was missing from their bedroom. I nicked it when I was twelve.” The vision of her sneaking around the Burrow late at night was more than Harry could handle and he chuckled.

“Do I even want to know what it did?”

Ginny grinned up at him, her eyes showing none of the anger from before, but full of twinkling mischief. “Well, I started by writing them all letters, asking for some advice. I didn’t tell them that I was inviting them all, though.” Harry narrowed his eyes at her when she giggled again. “Then I gave them all Butterbeer. They asked why there were there and I told them I needed some advice… because I had met someone.”

Harry grimaced and was about to open his mouth when her finger pressed against his lips and she continued. “They started asking me questions about how I felt about this special someone, and how he felt about me.”

“What did you say?” Harry asked; his voice was hoarse.

Ginny just shook her head at him sadly and began kissing him again.

“That he’s amazing.” Kiss “That I love him.” Kiss “That he loves me.” Kiss, kiss.

The corner of Harry's mouth quirked up, despite the growing well of dread festering in his stomach. He quickly glanced over at the fireplace, wondering when he could expect a hoard of furious Weasleys to come storming through it.

"And?"

"And," Ginny continued, "they all agreed that maybe I'd found the right one." Harry's throat tightened and he was fairly sure it wasn't because of the small circles her fingers were trailing on his chest.

The twinkling was back as she grinned up at him. "And then I said I was glad that they felt that way, and that you would be so pleased." His face scrunched, pondering the outburst that must have happened.

"Naturally, they were surprised that I had been talking about you the whole time," Ginny continued, laughing as she playfully forced Harry to focus on her again. "So then I told them that I knew what they had done."

"And they just… stood there?" Harry choked out in disbelief.

Ginny quirked her head, her finger tapping her chin thoughtfully. "Did I forget to mention that I had applied sticking charms to all the chairs?"

Harry grabbed her sides, making her squeal as his fingers tickled her ribs relentlessly. "Yes! You forgot to mention that!"

"Alright! Alright," she panted, straddling his thighs and pushing his hands away from her sides. "So then I silenced them all and yelled as the potion began to set in," Ginny giggled.

Harry winced. "How bad?"

"Nothing that won't wear off in a few hours," she protested. "I just made them see what they were acting like."

Harry raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to continue.

"They were being jackasses, Harry."

"You… you—"

"Turned them into donkeys," she nodded proudly.

"Merlin, Gin," he groaned and rested his head on her shoulder. Seconds later, however, he was giggling right along with her. Soon they were both collapsed in a heap of limbs on the sofa, laughing deeply.

Harry couldn't deny that what they had done was… horrible. But he still felt bad being the cause of so much strife between them and their sister. His laughter died out as he thought about the ramifications of the situation they were now in. Yes, he was happier than he could ever remember being, but he'd surely lost his best friend, not to mention the only men he'd ever been able to

claim as brothers.

“Harry, I know that look,” Ginny scolded as she smoothed the worry lines away from his face. “None of this is your fault.”

“It is,” he protested. “They were just trying to protect you, Gin. I can’t fault them for that.”

“But not at the cost of hurting both of us,” she protested, leaning up on her elbow so that she was looming over him. “No one has that right, Harry. That’s not what families do.”

“But—”

“And,” she continued, her voice drowning out his complaints. “If I ever catch you listening to some… prat again, instead of following what you know to be right… I’ll let you know what it feels like to spend the day as a donkey.” She ended with a sharp poke to his chest that Harry winced from and then rubbed.

A fierce wave of love and desire washed over him at her defensive words. It didn’t matter that she’d just threatened him—she’d done all of this, possibly alienating her brothers forever, for him. No one, save his mother, had ever sacrificed so much for him and it made his chest feel tight.

Ginny squeaked when he pulled her roughly to him and claimed her lips in an ardent kiss.

“I love you, you know that?” he whispered as he held her to him. “And I always will.”

* * *

Diagon Alley was bustling with early afternoon shoppers and Harry pulled his hat down further over his face as he allowed Ginny to drag him along past the windows.

“Are you sure he said he wanted to do this here?” he mumbled to Ginny as they came within sight of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes.

“Yes,” Ginny confirmed with a wink. “George’s note said here.”

Harry shifted the collar of his shirt uncomfortably and nodded. “And what did it say exactly?”

“Harry,” Ginny scolded playfully, pulling him forward while she spun to walk backward in front of him. “You worry too much. It said that he had something he wanted us to sign.”

“About the business?”

Ginny sighed again, rolling her eyes and swinging back around as they reached the storefront. The loud sound of a foghorn spilled out into the Alley as she pushed open the door.

“Morning, Verity,” Ginny greeted the young woman who was stocking Puking Pastilles in a barrel near the counter.

“Good Morning, Ginny. Morning, Mr. Potter.”

“Call him Harry, Verity,” Ginny scolded with a grin. “Otherwise his cheeks get all pink.” She giggled as she reached up to pinch Harry’s warm cheeks. If they hadn’t been glowing before, they certainly were now.

Verity giggled as well, making Harry shift about. “George is in his office. He’s expecting you.”

“Thanks,” Harry nodded, giving Ginny a small push against her back to get her to move forward. He was grateful when Verity turned back to her work. “Let’s get this over with,” he mumbled, dread welling up in him.

“Harry, relax,” Ginny said as she stopped walking and spun to wrap her arms around his neck. “George didn’t ask us down here to hex you.” He must not have looked convinced, because she sighed heavily and pressed her lips against his. “I promise you.”

“You can’t be sure,” Harry shook his head, feeling his reluctance give way when faced with her certainty. “Maybe he needs us to sign that we won’t sue him when he begins testing new products on us.”

“You’re such a pessimist,” Ginny growled, spinning away from him and opening the door without knocking.

George startled in his chair, banging his knees against the desk as they entered. “Ginny! I could have been naked, you know.” he called out, grinning as he stood.

“Yeah, well, the shock would have worn off eventually,” Ginny responded dryly. She sank into a comfortable leather chair. Harry stood in the doorway, awkwardly watching the sibling banter. Ginny gave him a pointed look and he swallowed past the nervousness in his throat before taking an identical chair next to her.

It had only been a few days since the infamous donkey incident and Harry wasn’t sure what hard feelings lingered.

George summoned a single file, which landed in the middle of his strangely clean desk, and perched his hands on it in very Percy-like fashion.

“Harry. Ginny,” he started, “my partner and I have been talking…”

“I’m sorry,” Harry interrupted, “partner?” He glanced at Ginny who wore a confused expression as well.

“Yeah,” George continued, pointing back over their shoulders to the opposite side of the room. “My partner.”

Harry spun in his seat and his eyes widened as he took in the life-sized portrait of Fred. He’d never been in the private offices of the shop before, so he hadn’t been prepared to see the happy face of a man long gone. His eyes darted over to Ginny, worrying about her reaction to the painting. She was studying it, but didn’t seem especially shaken. Harry assumed that she must have seen it before; it was something he needed to remember to ask her about later.

“We had them done the year before…” George trailed off, his eyes still on his twin. “Never bothered to have them animated.” His eyes tore away and he smiled wryly at Harry. “Would have been worth the galleons… although I probably would never get him to shut up.”

“George—”

“Its fine,” he waived off Ginny’s concerned look. “Really.” He cleared his throat and returned to the disconcerting formal tone of voice.

“I wanted to do something to make you understand how sorry I am that we ever took part in that… stupid… thing.” George finished lamely, grimacing at the words, but shook it off by flipping open the file in front of him.

“Since you already own one third of the shop—”

Harry held out his hand to protest. He’d never wanted either Fred or George to be beholden to him for their store. The money he’d given him hadn’t been earned and Harry wanted nothing to do with owning or running a store.

“—I’ve decided, after consulting my partner, that this is a better idea.”

The parchments were presented to Harry with a flourish and he blinked several times to focus on the writing. His eyes scanned it once, then twice before he tossed it back on the desk.

“I won’t sign that.” Harry locked gazes with George, who didn’t flinch. ‘This has to be some sort of joke,’ his mind kept telling him over and over.

Ginny sat up abruptly, grabbing for the paperwork. “Bloody hell, George,” she hissed. “You… you’re…”

“I’m offering ownership of my soul,” George nodded steadily, his intense stare never wavering, “if I ever do anything as dim-witted as that again.”

The meaning was not lost on Harry, but he shook his head again. There was no way he would sign something like that. To him it looked like a legal—and probably magically—binding contract.

“I won’t sign it.”

“Harry,” Ginny said softly, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“I won’t,” Harry protested, turning to face her.

“I know,” she affirmed gently. “I think it’s the gesture, more than anything.”

Harry glared at the parchment again. “That’s real, Ginny.”

“It is,” George confirmed.

Ginny huffed impatiently. “George, you can’t expect us to—”

“I do,” George stood and paced back and forth. “I expect you both to sign that damned paper. It’s all I have left,” he shook his head sadly. His blue eyes shone clear. “Sorry won’t ever be enough, don’t you see. I’d offer you my first born, but Angelina would kill me.” He smiled grimly and held his hands out in offering.

Harry stood; a grim look on his face. “It wasn’t your idea,” he shook his head, thinking back to the way that George had squirmed in his seat out behind his father’s shed.

“I still participated,” George said.

Ginny joined Harry, laying her hand on his arm. “George, we can’t accept this.”

“It’s all I’ve got,” George shrugged. He jumped when Harry held out his hand. Blinking at it several times, he accepted the handshake.

“We’re fine, you and I,” Harry assured him. He glanced over to find Ginny grinning at him. In the next moment, she’d wrapped her arms around George’s neck and was whispering into his ear.

Harry watched and felt a bit lighter. He was still stunned at George’s actions. But somehow, what he’d done made perfect sense knowing who he was. Not that Harry was going to accept some… prattish idea like that.

He reached behind him and pulled the contract off of the desk, holding it in his hand.

“If I’d have known this was here,” Ginny gestured to the portrait of Fred over George’s shoulder, “I’d have made Hermione find a spell to make him look like a jackass too.”

George threw his head back in laughter and clapped his sister on the back. “That would have been brilliant.”

Harry smirked to himself before removing his wand and quietly setting the papers on fire.

Both George and Ginny stared at the flames dancing over the words and curling the edges black.

“You know,” George said once the entire thing was ash, “I wanted to talk to you about that potion. That was quite the work of art, you know, odorless and tasteless…”

“Talk to Mum,” Ginny shrugged. “It was her idea. I found the potion in a book, Mum did the rest.”

Both George and Harry gaped at Ginny’s shrug of innocence. “Mum?”

Ginny guffawed. “You had to get it from somewhere, don’t you think?”

George closed his mouth with a snap, a thoughtful expression on his face. “You know, Ginniekins, I think you may be right.”

* * *

Bill and Charlie sat on the back step of the Burrow, each shucking the husks off the ears of corn and staring out into the distance. Time away from their respective families had given them a lot to think

about.

The moment they'd come walking back into the Burrow after being kicked out of their respective homes, hang-dog expressions adorning their features, they'd known their childhood home would not be the refuge they sought.

The formidable Molly Weasley had never been one to mess with; both Bill and Charlie had known this from an early age. Her performance at the Final Battle, defending her children like a mother bear, had only solidified that opinion.

"… my own children…" Her muttering was only decipherable here and there as she pointed them toward the table, indicating that they were to begin chopping vegetables with the utensils now laying there.

The men exchanged a glance before dropping their belongings in a pile by the floor and settling into a chore they'd done years before.

"… no respect at all… And don't you two think that your wives are letting you off easy…"

Charlie rolled his eyes at Bill and grabbed another carrot. Neither man wanted to point out to their obviously irate mother that it was past nine in the evening. Supper had been over for hours. Living past the preparation of whatever meal they were assisting with seemed the more prudent choice.

"… yes…" Molly had chuckled then, but the sound only made Bill's small paring knife skip across the surface of his own carrot. There was very little humor in that laugh. "… give them something to do…"

"… how on earth poor Harry survived…" They flinched when she swung violently around, her wooden spoon held out as a weapon in front of her. "The both of you would do well to remember what that boy did for all of us!"

"Mum—"

"Don't you sass me, young man." Bill held up his hands at his mother's accusation. Her spoon flipped again, thick beef gravy slopping around the kitchen.

"He *died* for us all!"

"We know, Mum," Charlie said, setting down his knife and vegetables.

"Then… *how could you!*"

Both Bill and Charlie sat, slumped in their seats, refusing to meet her gaze. After a moment of silence, she straightened up and turned back to the cooker. "I'll have a list of chores for you in the morning."

"Chores?" Charlie mumbled, his eyebrows disappearing into his hairline. Once again, prudence dictated that they not point out that neither of them had lived at the Burrow for many years.

"Yes, chores, Charles," their mother snapped. "If you're going to be here, you're going to be

useful."

"I agree."

They both spun in their seats to find a very drawn expression on their father's face as he entered the kitchen. The disappointed look on his face—the one they had always tried to avoid while growing up—was enough to completely cow both men.

"I'll have a few things to add to that list as well, Molly."

"Very well, Arthur."

"The stew smells wonderful."

"Thank you," Molly responded, smiling over her shoulder at her husband. The smile slipped completely away, however, when George and Percy both stumbled in the back door.

"Good, you can all help." She nodded firmly and turned back to her meal preparation. Her sons still caught the occasional muttering.

"Here," Bill conjured another two knives and pushed a cutting board full of celery toward his younger brothers. Neither said anything as they fell into the work silently.

Now that the chicken coop, shed and Burrow were freshly painted, the back fence mended, the flower beds pristine, and the back pond tidied, they'd started on the inside chores.

"Think we'll ever be able to go home?" Charlie tossed another hand full of corn husks toward the rubbish pile.

"Don't know," Bill shrugged. "George moved back to his house."

"That's because he hasn't been married as long as you have, and Katarina and I've been together long enough that she knows not to let me back in yet."

Bill shrugged. "George says it's because he apologized to Harry."

"Percy, too," Charlie sighed, "Although I think because he wasn't directly involved, Ginny was more lenient. You saw how he didn't change all the way."

"Maybe," Bill sighed as he grabbed another ear of corn. "You think we did the right thing?"

"I don't know. At the time I was convinced that it was."

Bill nodded thoughtfully. "I did, too." They both lapsed into silence and stayed that way even after the corn had been completely cleaned. The sun was setting and lit up the sky with a pink-orange that was brilliant to behold. The brothers stared at it over the orchard and then glanced down when they heard someone laughing from near the pond.

Coming up over the small rise was Harry with Ginny riding on his back. The two were laughing and Ginny was squirming as Harry tickled the leg that was braced under his arm.

“I’ve never seen him smile like that,” Charlie observed. Bill grunted and they continued to watch the couple who had stopped and were now watching the sunset themselves, completely oblivious to their audience. Ginny was cuddled into Harry’s side and his arms were wrapped around her as they watched the light show in silence.

Bill’s heart clenched as he watched Harry look down at Ginny and turn her chin around so that he could kiss her gently. He recognized the besotted look on Harry’s face because he saw it every day in the mirror when he thought about Fleur.

“We were wrong, Charlie,” he managed to say in a rather choked voice.

“Yeah,” Charlie nodded next to him. “She seems happy.”

“Delirious,” Bill clarified. They exchanged a look and began to gather up the corn, both surprised that their mother hadn’t come out to inquire about its location earlier. They then made themselves scarce, afraid of furthering their sister’s wrath.

Chapter 8

“You look so much better, Harry.”

Harry glanced down at the woman walking next to him, her arm wrapped through his, as they wandered through the park.

“Was I that horrible before?” he asked with a chuckle.

Hermione steered him toward a bench near a small pond and rolled her eyes at him.

“You know want I mean.”

He nodded and surreptitiously cast a cushioning charm on the wrought iron bench, tucking his wand under his arm in the process.

“Nicely done,” Hermione congratulated him as she settled her awkward frame on the seat. She seemed to be judging his charm by squirming her behind there before pronouncing it adequate with a firm nod.

Harry couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face. Repairing his relationship with Hermione had seemed to be the easiest thing to do, although Harry still felt himself holding back—out of habit he supposed.

“I didn’t know; you have to believe that.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose up into his hairline. “Wow, you really get right to it,” he chuckled.

She narrowed her eyes at his taking the mickey out of her but shrugged. “That’s why we’re here, isn’t it? So you could ask me why I let Ron get away with this for so many years.”

Harry chewed on the inside of his lip for a moment, letting his eyes skim the surface of the still water in front of them. “I never thought you did, really.”

“Then why didn’t you say something to me, Harry,” she pleaded, turning to face him a bit.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. Sheepishly he met her gaze. “Probably because I thought they had a point.”

“Harry, you never would have hurt Ginny,” Hermione shook her head. “I know that.”

“Not intentionally,” he agreed. “Never on purpose. But I would have, Hermione. I would have had to leave her behind when we hunted Horcruxes. And how would she have felt seeing Hagrid carry me out of the forest like that?”

“I imagine that it hurt even worse, knowing that she’d never have the chance to tell you what she felt.” Hermione smiled sadly at him and reached for his hand.

“I hadn’t thought of it like that,” Harry said, feeling a bit stupid.

“They were wrong, Harry,” Hermione affirmed solidly.

He nodded jerkily. Ginny was slowly making headway with him by beating that phrase into his thick skull.

“Did she really turn them into donkeys?” Harry asked, a small smirk breaking through.

“I wasn’t there,” Hermione said with a pout. “Angelina took photographs, though.” She giggled like a naughty child and Harry shook his head at her.

“I think you’re enjoying this too much,” he chided.

“You’re not enjoying it enough,” she scolded and then sobered. “Actually, I’m not enjoying it at all.” She turned her head to look out over the water and Harry wondered if she was crying. “My husband is a prat. An insensitive prat and I don’t know how he looked at himself in the mirror every day.”

Harry nodded jerkily. His feelings about Ron were still very jumbled. He understood why the Weasley boys had been apprehensive about him starting a relationship with Ginny. But the confusion came from the massive feeling of betrayal pressing on his chest. He’d pushed it aside for so many years, accepting that it was just a part of his relationship with Ron and the other Weasleys, that it had become normal to feel like he couldn’t breathe.

“But don’t give up on him, Harry,” Hermione pleaded, turning tear-filled eyes to him. “I almost did once. I was so close… when he left us that time. I was so angry.” Harry nodded and smiled sadly, reaching forward to wipe away the tears that now made tracks down her face. “But I didn’t give up… and he came back.”

“He’ll come back, Harry, I promise.”

Harry felt his own tears welling and cursed his rampant emotions, which seemed liable to erupt at any moment. The Mind Healer in Canada had explained that not releasing any emotions for so many years didn’t mean that they went away. He’d encouraged Harry to express them in any way that the moment called for—yelling, crying, or breaking down completely. But years of pushing everything behind walls was a hard habit to overcome.

“Will he?” he choked out. “Will it be enough?”

Hermione squeezed his hand tightly and shrugged. “That’s what you’ll have to decide, Harry. But he will come around.”

“He hasn’t yet,” Harry shook his head, managing to get his voice back to normal.

“I know,” Hermione sighed and swiped at her tears. “He’s always been thick, Harry. But if he doesn’t soon, I’ll… well, I’ll set some birds on him again.”

Harry snorted out a laugh.

“I just wanted you to know…” she trailed off and Harry looked over at her. “What you and Ginny

have together now… it's good, Harry."

"How can you tell?" he asked through a smile that he couldn't have stopped if he'd tried. "You've barely been around us."

Hermione studied him for a minute before leaning toward him, throwing her arms around his shoulders and pulling him into a huge hug. "Because I can see it in you, Harry. You're so different now."

He *felt* different. Every morning when he woke up, all he had to do was turn his head to find a reason to get up and start another day. He had someone waiting for him at the end of a long day at work—someone who was there just for him.

"Being with Ginny," Harry shook his head, searching for the right words. "It's like coming up for air, after so many years of trying to breathe underwater." He smiled sheepishly, feeling like he'd just said something extremely stupid.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so happy for you," Hermione burst into tears again and Harry awkwardly patted her back. They sat together, quietly for a few minutes, staring out at the placid water while Hermione continued to sniffle.

"Do you think this will all ever go away?" Harry asked. "Will we ever be… normal?"

Hermione snorted and laughed into his shoulder. "Would you even know normal?"

Harry chuckled and shook his head. "Probably not."

"It will," Hermione assured him eventually. "One day we'll be old and wrinkled—not me and Ginny of course, only you and Ron—and we'll be sitting on your front porch watching our grandchildren playing and laughing about all of this."

Harry laughed outright at the image and wished, with all his heart, that it would come true.

* * *

Ron's back ached from sleeping on the couch. He hadn't been banished to the Burrow, as his brothers had, simply for the fact that his mother felt sorry for Hermione and was worried about the pregnancy.

So it was the couch for him until he wised up and apologized to Harry. Hearing his mistakes rehashed by Ginny and his mother was horrible, but Hermione's calmly furious state had really tilted Ron's world.

Each brother had folded, leaving him the lone hold out. George, it was rumored, had promised ownership of his soul to both Harry and Ginny if they thought it would help them forgive him any faster.

Percy had stuttered and stammered until Ginny had finally given in and hugged him. Harry had shaken his hand stiffly and shrugged off any further apology. And, in truth, Percy hadn't been in on

the first round of the 'Weasley Huddle', as Ginny had aptly named it. But he'd hesitantly agreed with Charlie after the Final Battle and, as Hermione had at once pointed out, his greatest sin had been in his silence.

Both Bill and Charlie had attempted an apology which Harry had nodded his acceptance to, but Ginny had rebuffed. She told them both that it would take more than just words to clear their guilty consciences. But Ron knew that eventually Ginny would come around. Mostly, he assumed, it was the fact that Bill and Charlie had been the ring leaders and both had known that Ginny fancied Harry for so long that made her so mad.

Ron couldn't say exactly why he hesitated to add his apology. Those around him had their own theories. Hermione said that he must really be as dense as the floorboards that he'd been dropped on by the midwife that had delivered him. She'd recently taken up muttering under her breath and when Ron asked her about it, she said that she was praying that their child got her brains.

Ron had dutifully presented himself at the Burrow the day after Ginny's lesson in humility. His mother had begun yelling, and then abruptly stopped to smack him upside the head, and then began yelling again. In all his years, Ron couldn't ever remember his mother hitting him. Finally, running out of steam, she had thrown up her hands and screamed to the ceiling before marching outside to violently remove the wash from the line.

His father had opened his mouth to say something and then had shut it again and only let that disappointed look settle on his face. He'd then told Ron to come and see him when he'd come to his senses and apologized to his sister and Harry.

Ron knew, now, that he'd been wrong all those years ago. But it had seemed like the best idea at the time. Harry just had so many responsibilities and so much death surrounding him. Ron had truly been scared for his sister to become involved in all of that. He'd seen the hollow look that Cho Chang had worn after losing Cedric, even when she'd tried to take up with Harry for those few months in fifth year. Ron hadn't wanted that for his sister.

The long nights on the rickety couch that barely fit his frame, made for a bit of introspection on Ron's part. Harry's sullenness, which had reared its head in their fifth year, seemed to just be a part of his personality. The fact that Ron hated it really didn't matter—he put up with it because Harry was his best mate.

And there were times over the past few years that he'd thought things were going well for his best friend. Harry was a top Auror for the Ministry. He'd been at the pinnacle of his class in all of his training, receiving numerous commendations for it. His job allowed him to travel all over the world and paid very well. Harry was pulling in the galleons hand over fist. He had written once or twice from Brazil, mentioning that he was living with a woman.

Had it all been a mask, as Ginny had said? A story invented to hide the pain that Harry had been living in all these years?

There'd been rumors running in the Auror department that something had happened to Harry. Ron had tried to pry information out of first Tonks and then Kingsley, but neither of them would budge. Then one afternoon he and a few other Trainees had been joking around in the locker room and one

of them had remarked on the rumor that one of their instructors had tried to do himself in and was now on leave. Ron's throat had closed up and panic had set in.

Sure enough, Harry had been missing from their usual afternoon class. Ron's fears were allayed when Kingsley himself took over and squashed the rumors, saying that Harry had been called away on an urgent top secret assignment.

And now it had been almost a month since he'd spoken with either Harry or his sister. Harry had returned to teaching at the Academy, although his status for missions was still non-active, officially. And Ginny had been hired on as an Assistant Matron for the Auror Squad. He'd even seen them in the hall coming and going to work. Harry, at least, would look at him and often times nod in his direction, while Ginny pretended he didn't exist altogether. Those times hurt.

Monday classes at the Academy meant Physical Fitness and Advanced Concealment and Charms. Ron liked Mondays. He could hold his own in both classes and the instructors were fair and firm. Best of all, he didn't have to see anyone from his family on Mondays. Hermione had been up and gone by the time he'd rolled off of the sofa, kneading a knot in his stiff back.

His Concealment Class today was being taught by none other than Tonks. After learning the charms to change his eye and hair color to blend in with almost any crowd, Ron went up to say hello.

"Wotcher, Ron," she greeted him with a happy smile. "You did alright today, yeah?"

"'Lo, Tonks," Ron said. "I did alright, I suppose."

"We haven't seen you and Hermione in awhile." She seemed to be commenting causally, but he could hear the bit of edge in her voice. Ron knew she wished he'd take a more active role in his Godson's life and it made him feel guilty. It wasn't that he didn't want to, but more that it wasn't the first thing he thought about every day.

"I know, and I'm sorry for not visiting lately. It's just that with training and Hermione and the pregnancy and all…"

"I understand," she answered, but he could still see a trace of sadness on her face.

"Why don't I owl you after I talk to Hermione and we'll set up a time to have you and Teddy for dinner?"

"That would be nice. Any night should be fine. Oh! Except for Thursday."

"What's Thursday?" Ron teased with a waggling eyebrow. "Got a hot date?"

Tonks' smile slipped a bit and Ron felt bad for mentioning anything. "No. Thursdays are the days Harry comes over. He watches Teddy while I get to have a little 'me time'. And Saturday afternoons," she added as an afterthought, "Neville usually comes by then."

Ron's mouth almost dropped open. Harry visited every week? And Tonks trusted him to watch Ron's four-year-old Godson while she left the house? Neville?

“I think Harry’s taking him to the zoo this week.”

“Does he…” Ron shrugged, not sure what to ask. “Does he do things like that often with Teddy?”

“Not always,” Tonks shrugged. “Most times they just stay in and Harry tells him stories about places he’s been, or reads him books. Teddy’s got quite the collection now. Lately Ginny’s been coming with him. They took him to a Quidditch game last week. That’s all he talked about for two days afterwards,” she chuckled and shrugged her shoulders.

Ron nodded hastily and searched for some way to change the subject. “Well, I’ll let you know when we can arrange dinner.”

Tonks stopped collecting her things and gave him a thoughtful look. “That would be good.”

“Hey, wait up,” Ron called out, stopping her before she left. “I thought you didn’t want Harry around Teddy. You said he was too reckless.”

“He was,” Tonks shrugged. “But that didn’t make him stop trying. Teddy’s got a shoebox bursting full of letters that Harry sends when he’s out on assignment and more toys than a kid his age should have. I guess he was trying to make up for not being able to be there all the time. And now…” she sighed. “Harry was really messed up, Ron. I mean, really, *thoroughly* messed up. But he’s better now. He’s figuring out his life.” She gave him a piercing look. “And we both know who we can thank for that, don’t we? Get your head out of your arse soon, Ron, or neither one will ever speak to you again.”

* * *

Two days later, Ron was an emotional mess. He hadn’t been able to stop thinking about Harry and Ginny and Teddy and Tonks, and it was enough to send him to St. Mungo’s for some sort of treatment; Obliviation if necessary.

Harry taught class in his usual proficient manner, but Ron noticed him joking around with the Trainees, which was highly unusual. Harry even smiled a time or two and blushed (blushed!) when one of them teased him that he must have gotten laid because he was a much nicer person now.

The Trainees couldn’t stop talking about what an amazing Healer Ginny was. Everyone around him commented on her skill, which Ron had always been proud of, and what a positive personality she had. One Trainee had even laughed and said it was fun to see the Healer now. Ron puzzled over this. The Ginny he remembered from the past few years had been rather surly most of the time and had a different boyfriend almost constantly, losing interest quickly.

His afternoon class, Magical and Muggle Surveillance was being taught by Harry. Ron stayed near the back of the group, observing the way his friend interacted with others. He was stunned to see a bit of the boy he’d once known at Hogwarts in the first several years. Harry’s face had filled out and had a much less gaunt appearance. The dark purple smudges that had become commonplace below his eyes no longer existed, replaced with a rested and healthy look. The eyes seemed a bit greener and definitely had more life in them than Ron had seen in years.

Reality began to set in during that two hours and Ron sank down into his chair further, letting his

mind wander back over the past few years. Had he really been the cause of that much damage to his best mate and his sister? It had only been a bit of a passing crush, hadn't it? And even after the Battle—well, Charlie had never told him that Harry had said he loved Ginny.

Waking from his thoughts, Ron realized he was the only one still in the room, save Harry, who was cleaning up the items he'd brought to demonstrate. Ron had no doubt that Harry knew he was there and was silently waiting for any move from his once-best friend. Deciding that he'd finally had enough, Ron made his way slowly to the front of the classroom.

"Learn something today?"

He was startled when Harry spoke first. He shrugged noncommittally and ruffled the back of his hair.

"Usually do," he grunted out and shifted the parchment that should have been full of notes but was suspiciously empty.

"Hermione's not rubbed off on you yet?" Harry smirked looking down at the parchment.

Ron could feel his ears redden just a bit and he nodded jerkily. "You'd think so, wouldn't you?" He added in a rather dry chuckle that, to him, sounded extremely forced. "Listen," he cleared his throat and prayed that the right words would find him. "About this whole… thing…"

Harry stopped his movement and stood still, although his eyes slid to the side and went rather out of focus as he looked across the room.

"I guess I was rather out of line-"

"Have you talked to Ginny?" Harry interrupted and Ron could see the intensity in his gaze as he turned to look directly at Ron.

"Er, well, that first night…"

Harry nodded. "Talk to her. Once you've cleared things up with her then you and I will talk." With that, he shrank the things he'd been gathering, placed them into a small bag and then exited the room leaving a gobsmacked Ron in his wake.

Ron couldn't remember a time where Harry had ever demanded an apology for anything. Even during that horrible time in fourth year when Ron believed his best friend had cheated him out of a chance to compete in the Tri-Wizard Tournament, Harry had brushed off the entire few months after only a few words. And then again on the Horcrux hunt when Ron had disappeared for weeks; he and Harry had just come to some sort of silent understanding and not another word had been said.

Hermione's words that Harry was a saint echoed over and over in his head. Ron was starting to believe that maybe she had the right idea.

His mind whirled as his feet carried him away from the classroom. He wandered the halls of the Ministry for what seemed like hours and was surprised when he finally stopped at a closed door.

Grimacing, he realized it was the Auror infirmary: where Ginny would be.

Slowly, he pushed open the door to find an empty room with three hard backed chairs and an empty desk.

Without thinking, Ron breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe he wouldn't have to do this today… maybe-

"I'll be right with you. And don't bleed on the rug, I just cleaned it."

Ginny's voice called out from the other room, startling Ron. He could hear her now, laughing and scolding someone for some stupid action. He sat stiffly in one of the chairs and waited, trying to come up with what he could possibly say to explain himself.

He looked up when an Auror Trainee—Jenkins he was rather sure was the bloke's name—came out massaging his forearm which was splinted neatly.

"Hey," the man greeted him. Ron only grunted in acknowledgement. "You look a little green, mate," Jenkins laughed. "I hope whatever it is isn't catching."

"Nah," Ginny drawled, leaning against the doorjamb, folding her arms in front of her in a very defensive posture, "Prat-itis only runs in families, excessively in the males."

Jenkins sensed the tension in the room and scampered out the door with an eyebrow raised in commiseration toward Ron.

"Are you injured?"

Ron turned back around, wincing at the aggression on Ginny's face. "No."

"Is someone else?"

"No."

"Then why are you here, Ron," she sighed, seeming to deflate into the chair behind the rather cluttered desk. "Because I'm not sure I'm really in the mood to deal with you right now."

"I talked to Harry." He was surprised to hear his own voice and opened his mouth to explain that statement, but closed it as he saw her expression change. The old, haunted, tired look had returned.

"And what did he say?"

Ron sighed. "He told me to talk to you first," he mumbled and then glanced at her again. She looked thoughtful for a moment before shrugging. "Look, Ginny, I guess… I'm sorry."

"You guess?"

Her acidic tone made him rethink what had escaped his mouth and he shook his head. "I *am* sorry, but I only wanted to keep you safe." Her jaw set squarely and Ron was struck at how much she resembled the twins in that moment. A daunting thought that was, especially with her history of

taking care of herself. “I just… I really didn’t think about how it would affect Harry much because I didn’t think it was anything more than a crush. And then later—well, I didn’t know about what he told Charlie.”

“But you knew how I felt,” she said in a low voice. The hurt in her voice made him instantly realize just how much her heart had broken over the years, thinking that Harry would never return her feelings.

He shrugged. “I figured you’d gotten over it. That’s what you told Hermione.”

“I never did,” she explained and swiped at her face. Ron was taken aback by her tears; there were only a few times in his life he’d ever seen her vulnerable enough to cry. “And you know what’s worse, Harry never got over your betrayal either. He pretended it didn’t affect him as much as it did, but he was miserable, Ron.” She looked down at her hands and rubbed them together. “He told me about your first year, Ron… the Mirror of Erised.”

Ron grimaced.

“How could you do that to him? How could you look your best mate in the face and take away the only thing he’d ever wanted for himself?” The tears were gone now as her anger built and Ron settled back, figuring it was best just to let her get it out. “He was doing so well that summer, I really thought he’d make it, you know. And then we got back to school and he was completely… lifeless. He didn’t talk to you for weeks, Ron. Wasn’t that enough of a hint that something was wrong? For years you stood by and did nothing while he wasted away. And I can’t believe you had the nerve to ask him to stand up for you at your wedding.”

“He tried to refuse,” Ron mumbled. “I… I talked him into it.”

“Do you blame him?” she shouted. “Ron, you, and our family, offered the only thing Harry needed most in the world—unconditional love. You treated him like a brother, made him feel at home at the Burrow and then you changed it all. You and the other prats put conditions on that love. Ron,” she sighed, “everyone always puts conditions on what they allow Harry to have.” Her tone changed as she stood, arms held out wide. “You’re allowed a career, as long as the public approves. You’re allowed an education, but, oh don’t forget that you’ve got to survive it and kill a madman in the process. You can fall in love, as long as it’s not with my sister.”

“Don’t you see how much that hurt him?” She waited for his response and Ron shrugged. He did see, now, how it had been taken, but that truly wasn’t how he’d meant it.

“Do you know I had the hardest time convincing Harry that we should be together? He still fought it for everything he was worth. Do you know why?” She continued, not waiting for his response, “Because he was afraid of losing what little you allowed him to have. The meager bit of friendship you offered over the years was all he had and he clung to it like a lifeline; only it was choking him, Ron. You broke his spirit, and I’m thoroughly surprised that he even survived the Final Battle.”

“I didn’t mean for it to happen that way,” Ron protested softly. “I only wanted you to be safe.”

“And do you think Harry would have allowed something to happen to me, Ron? You know how noble he is, he’d have broken it off himself before anything happened.”

“See,” Ron protested, “if he’d have broken it off, then I did you a favor.” He knew it was beside the point, but winning any portion of an argument with his sister was rare.

Ginny’s shoulders sank and Ron smirked to himself that just maybe he’d convinced her. “You still don’t understand,” she shook her head. “I’d have done it anyway—we’d have at least had that year together. Do you know what I would have given to have memories like that, instead of the ones I made myself? Do you think I wanted to date all those gits, Ron? Do you think I wanted to be alone all these years?”

She stood abruptly and moved into the seat next to him. “Ron, I wish I could believe that you truly didn’t understand, that you were really that thick; but I don’t. It’s taken you the longest to come to us. And maybe I think that’s best, because your betrayal outweighed the lot of them. You were Harry’s best friend and, once, you were mine. And you ruined that, Ron. You’ll never have that back again. Harry and I may, one day, forgive you, but you’ll never be allowed inside his heart again like you once were.”

“He hasn’t told you much about his life these past years, has he?” Ron shook his head glumly. “And that’s the reason. He pulled away because he knew he couldn’t handle getting his heart broken again.”

“He was doing alright,” Ron protested. “He’s got a great career and he’s had relationships, loads of them. He even wrote me that he was living with someone last year.”

Ginny nodded. “He did tell you that. And he’s had one ‘relationship’, Ron. And even it didn’t last more than a few months, if you can even call it a relationship. There have been others that he’s dated, but no one past a few times. And as for his career; yes, he’s an excellent Auror. He works hard because there is nothing else in his life, or at least there wasn’t much. He doesn’t tell you about the most important things in his life, Ron, because he feels you’ll betray him again and somehow take that away.”

She sighed and leaned back. “But he’s happy now; *we’re* happy. He’s hesitant to let any of you back inside those walls he’s built in case you hurt him again.”

“I won’t,” Ron protested in a weak voice. “This last month has been hell. I miss my best mate. I miss my wife. I miss you. And I know it was wrong. I’ll take whatever he will offer, Ginny.”

“It won’t be much,” she said as she leaned her head on his shoulder. “And this doesn’t mean I’ve forgiven you, Ronald Weasley. I think it’ll take years to earn that back, if you ever do. And a bit of advice…”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t push too fast, too hard. Harry will come to you when he’s ready. The best you can do is to be around when he does come.”

Ron nodded woodenly. “I can do that. Can I at least tell him I talked to you?”

She considered him for a minute before shrugging. “Tell him, but that doesn’t mean you’ll get anything more than a sentence or two in return.” They sat together in silence for a minute. “Do you

approve of the two of us now, Ron?"

Ron fidgeted for a moment. It wasn't that he disapproved, exactly. It was more that he'd convinced himself that he'd been right for years and now that they were together he was feeling that old instinctive nudge to protect her. But then again, he could see the change in both of them and it was a good thing. "I'll have to get used to the idea," he said quietly. "But I see the way you are together, and I like the way Harry smiles now."

Ginny nodded and yawned widely before stretching and standing up. "Better get used to it quickly, Ron, we're not going to be apart anytime soon."

Ron snorted. "You've never been in a relationship longer than a few months."

"Ron," Ginny shook her head. "None of those blokes were Harry." The realization of what she'd said hit him like a Bludger to the head and the immense load of the task he had ahead of him—rebuilding trust with two different people, not to mention his wife and parents—began to weigh down on him.

"You're already living together, aren't you?" he asked, fighting the natural grimace that threatened to appear.

Ginny nodded distractedly as she gathered her things and tidied the office. "Have been for two months."

"You're shagging him?" Ron groaned and then blanched as she whipped out her wand on him.

"You need to learn a bit of control, Ronald Weasley. It is comments like that that will never allow you back into our lives. It's none of your business what Harry and I get up to. We're consenting adults of age. If I want to shag him three times a day I will, understand?"

Ron nodded jerkily and his face reddened as he realized his mouth had gotten him in trouble again. Suddenly, he felt his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth and rolled his eyes as Ginny swept out of the room, leaving him in the empty infirmary.

* * *

Harry sipped at the glass of Firewhiskey that Hermione had poured him. Funnily enough, he hadn't even asked for anything to drink when he arrived at their small, but attractive, house.

"You may need this," she said, pushing the glass into his hand.

"That bad?" he chuckled dryly and then scolded himself. His promise to Ginny to try and work things out with her family echoed in his mind.

Hermione grimaced, bracing her hands on her back. "I hope not," she said with a tired shake of her head. "I hope that Ron is as honest as he should be with you, Harry. You don't deserve anything less."

"But you're not counting on it," he nodded, understanding her frustration. Ron wasn't known for the depth of his emotion.

“I am,” she nodded affirmatively. “He’s—well, I won’t go into it. It’s his place to explain his actions, not mine. Just know,” she sighed and reached across to hold his hand. “Just know that whatever comes of this tonight, we both love you, Harry. You know how I feel about what happened in the past. If I could change it, I would.”

Harry nodded stiffly. Tears were already welling in her eyes and he didn’t want to make her more emotional than she already was. “I know, Hermione. Don’t doubt that I love you… ever, alright?”

Hermione pressed a fierce kiss to his brow. “And I love you. Now, tell me what it’s like to teach?”

Harry laughed at the eagerness in her face and tried to dredge up his funniest stories to entertain her while they waited for Ron to come home from training.

Ron’s letter, with all of its smudges and crossed out lines, had arrived early in the morning before Harry had left for his first class. Ginny had read the letter, but refused to comment before kissing him goodbye and giving him a wink.

She knew something.

All day at work, Harry contemplated the letter. Should he brush off the request for a meeting? Or did he really want to fix things, if they could, between him and Ron. The answer came to him quickly; of course he wanted his best mate back. However impossible it seemed, Harry craved the closeness that they had once shared.

During dinner with Ginny, Harry asked her to wait up for him while he met with Ron. She had agreed readily and all but pushed him out the door.

“I’ve always wanted to teach,” Hermione groaned, a hungry look on her face.

“You’d be brilliant at it, Hermione,” Harry confirmed. “I can see you now, lecturing poor ickle first years about the importance of being on time to class.” He laughed at the indignant look on her face.

“I couldn’t do worse than Professor McGonagall did to you and Ron that first day,” she huffed, pretending to be shocked, but enjoying herself completely.

Harry laughed. “That was brilliant.”

“It was wicked.” Ron’s voice made them both swing around in their chairs. He stood with his Auror robes open, rough jeans underneath. “Watching her turn from that cat into the stiff old Professor.”

Hermione cleared her throat meaningfully and Harry took another sip from his drink.

“I’m going to go upstairs.” She gave Harry’s shoulder a squeeze and then moved to kiss Ron’s cheek. Harry heard her whispered, ‘don’t mess this up,’ before she told Ron there was leftover food in the icebox.

“You hungry?” Ron grunted out as he dipped his head in to see what was left.

The warm feeling in the kitchen followed Hermione out the door and the cold awkwardness that

Harry had come to expect in his relationship with Ron settled in the room.

“Ginny made me something already,” he said softly. Praying that Ron would gather his courage soon, Harry watched him prepare a sandwich quickly.

“Good,” Ron said. “Mum said she was a good cook.”

“She is.” Harry smiled proudly. Ginny’s face entered his mind and he took a calming breath. He could do this.

“So, I got your letter,” he said, and rolled his eyes at the stupidity of the comment. Obviously he’d gotten the letter, or he wouldn’t be here right now.

“Yeah,” Ron took a moment to swallow the bite of food and then stared at the rest of the food on his plate as if it were disgusting him. Slowly, he pushed it away. “I just thought… maybe we should talk.”

Harry nodded, letting his fingers slide down the sides of his glass and watching the moisture pool on the table.

“Did… did George really promise you ownership of his soul?”

Ron’s question, as well as the hesitant tone—as if he were weighing the cost of the action and chances that he may be required to do the same—were enough to make Harry grin.

“Yeah, he did.”

Ron swallowed heavily again. “Wow.”

They sat in silence for a minute or two, the uneasiness of the room pressing in on both of them. Harry took a deep breath, feeling as if he should say something.

“Why did you do it?” he asked, his voice cracking like he was fifteen again.

Ron’s blue eyes met his and Harry could almost see the wheels turning. He’d know if Ron lied… and if he lied, well that would be the end of it. Promise to Ginny or no, Harry knew that this was the moment for everything to be laid out between them.

Ron shrugged a shoulder. “Honestly, I don’t know.”

Any hope that Harry had dropped to the bottom of his stomach, churning Ginny’s shepherd’s pie with the Firewhiskey, threatening to make them both reappear.

He nodded stiffly and tossed back the rest of the liquid in the glass. “Fine,” he said stiffly and rose to leave. If that was the best Ron could do…

* * *

Ron watched, his throat closing tightly, as Harry reached for the doorknob on the back door. He had blown it. Completely and utterly bulloxed up his chance at repairing this relationship.

“I was wrong,” he called out. “Dead wrong.”

Harry stood at the door, his back to Ron. But he didn’t make any further motion to leave.

“I see that now. I ruined everything, Harry. For you and for Ginny.” Ron’s voice broke and he cursed himself. All day long he’d rehearsed what he wanted to say… it was to protect Ginny… he hadn’t known… A million other excuses flew out of his head as he watched Harry’s shoulders sag through eyes beginning to flood with tears.

Slowly, Harry glanced back over his shoulder. Ron forced himself to stand still and show Harry how much this was costing him—how much he wanted this to be over.

“You don’t know how many times over the years I made promises to myself to be there for you… to never let you down, to be at your back.” His voice cracked again and the tears now spilled down his face. He wanted nothing more than to swipe angrily at them. He was a man, for Merlin’s sake, and men didn’t cry!

“And I broke that promise,” he whispered harshly. “I took that trust that you gave me and I… I shoved it right back in your face.”

Harry stood, stoically staring at him. But he hadn’t left yet and Ron allowed a sparkle of hope to grow again. Maybe if he kept talking, kept explaining, Harry would stay… and then he could keep talking and things would get better.

“You know how much you hurt me?”

Ron nodded, finally giving in to the urge to wipe his wet cheeks. “I do. Ginny… Ginny told me.”

“And you never saw it for yourself?” Harry phrased his question to the wall. He had moved away from the door, however and that gave Ron the strength to answer.

“I didn’t allow myself to see it,” he said plainly. “I didn’t want it to be true, so I didn’t let it.”

“And Ginny?”

A fist closed around Ron’s heart. “I know,” he nodded. “I thought I was saving her from being hurt… or killed.”

Harry turned fierce eyes on him, eyes that blazed with green fire. “I would have died for her. I *did* die for her.”

The truth of Harry’s proclamation hit Ron hard. He did. Harry had died for her. And for Ron himself. And for Hermione. For everyone.

“I know.”

Harry nodded jerkily, looking once more at the wall. “I’m in love with your sister, Ron.” The plainness of his words spoke volumes to Ron. This Harry, the one Ron had only started seeing now that when he and Ginny were together, was a whole different man than who he had imagined his best friend to be.

But this man was a stronger, better man.

“I know,” Ron confirmed, willing Harry to look at him so that he could know that Ron knew. “And she loves you.”

The blazing green eyes were back and Harry’s lip quirked up just a bit. “I know.”

“And… and that’s a good thing, Harry.” Ron stumbled over the admission… not because he didn’t believe it, but because he wanted to will Harry to believe it.

“It is.” Harry nodded and his shoulders relaxed a fraction. “Are you okay with that?”

“You’re asking my opinion?” Ron was shocked.

“Not really.”

He couldn’t help but snort a laugh at Harry’s no-nonsense reply. *This*… this man right here was the one with the power to defeat a Dark Lord. The fact that Harry had even survived the Final Battle as broken as he had been rattled in Ron’s brain.

“Not that it matters, but I approve, Harry,” Ron said softly, shuffling his feet a bit.

“Good. Because I’d hate to see what Ginny would do to you if you didn’t.”

The tension released further as Ron chuckled. Those few hours he’d spent as a donkey still brought nightmares.

“No, I wouldn’t want to see.” He shook his head before meeting Harry’s eyes. “So… you and I… are we, are we okay?”

Harry seemed to consider before shrugging a shoulder. “We’re better than we were.”

Strangely, that seemed to be enough for Ron right now. “Okay,” he agreed.

Chapter 9

Harry sighed in contentment and snuggled closer to Ginny, his breathing finally calming to almost normal.

“Happy?”

“Mmhmm,” he murmured into her ear and smiled as she shuddered at his breath. He could feel a rash of goose pimples break out on her skin all over. “You wore me out,” he added and she giggled.

“I try to oblige.”

“You did.” He wrapped his arms further around her and placed his hands on her warm abdomen. They cuddled in silence in the darkness of the flat that they shared and enjoyed being in each other’s presence. Harry’s mind drifted and his thumb absently brushed her tight belly.

“Knut for your thoughts,” she whispered as she placed a hand over his to still the movement.

“They’re worth more than that,” he said with a lazy smile. Ginny shifted in his embrace until they were facing each other and lay her head on his shoulder.

“I’m sure they are.”

“I was just thinking about how much I love you,” he said, a little sheepishly. It had been four months that they’d been together and even now he still had a hard time saying it out loud. He did it because it made Ginny so happy, but it was hard to say after not saying it for the whole of his life. In fact, he’d never said it to anyone before. He was always careful in the past not to use those words; he wasn’t a hypocrite and couldn’t bring himself to say what he truly didn’t feel.

“Mmm, love you too,” Ginny said as she kissed his chin.

“And how much you mean to me. I feel like a whole different person these past few months.”

“That’s because you are, Harry,” she explained. “You’ve stopped being the Harry that everyone else wanted and become the Harry that you are, that you were born to be.”

He nodded silently. They’d had this conversation before, but he felt that it needed to be said often. She’d changed his life so much.

“It’s been like a dream.”

“It has, but one that doesn’t end, love,” she said as she gently rubbed his chest. “And in a few days we’ll move out of here and into our house.”

Harry couldn’t help but smile at the thought. Even though he’d moved into Ginny’s small flat with her and they’d lived here ever since they’d started seeing each other, Harry had still felt that it was really Ginny’s flat still. But that had all changed when they’d decided to buy a house together. He was fairly sure her parents didn’t completely approve of them living together without being married

first; and he knew all of her brother's views on the subject, having heard them muttered under their breath every time the subject was mentioned. However, Ginny nipped that practice in the bud by threatening to spike their food with potion again. Hermione offered to help and the practice of mumbling had quickly stopped.

Buying the house was a large step for both Harry and Ginny. It was the largest commitment that Harry had ever made to another human and he was thrilled that Ginny felt the same way.

And he knew, eventually, he would feel comfortable enough to propose to her. He wanted to be married, especially if they decided to have children one day. He wanted so much to share that with Ginny. And buying this house seemed to be a way to prepare for that future together.

"Our house. I like the sound of that," he smiled and tilted his head to kiss her temple.

"It's going to be wonderful," Ginny said. "No more getting stuck in the hallway as we pass. No more sharing one tiny loo with one tiny shower stall." She grinned up at him. "Think of what we can do in a full sized shower."

Harry chuckled. "I don't think we do all that bad right now."

Ginny snorted out a laugh. "Except for that time that you lost your balance—"

"Don't remind me." He covered her mouth quickly, making her laugh even harder. "I think I may still have a bruise on my arse. You try explaining that one in the locker room."

Ginny propped up on one elbow and grinned down at him. "I think it would be rather easy: just say it was a complication that occurred while you were shagging the most gorgeous redhead on the planet."

Harry laughed and grabbed her sides to tickle her. They laughed and played for a minute before Harry pinned Ginny down and then reached down to kiss her. The moment turned passionate and they were lost in each other again.

* * *

"Where does this one go, Gin?" Harry called out from behind a large box that he was balancing through the doorway to the kitchen. Ginny looked up from where she was sorting out the cutlery and tilted her head to the side trying to remember what she'd put in that particular box. She shrugged when she realized she couldn't remember.

"Just put it—"

"In the extra bedroom downstairs," Harry finished and then flashed a smile around the corner at her. "Like the twelve others you didn't label."

"Don't blame me," Ginny protested. "You're the one that insisted we pack that night after we'd finished the bottle of wine. You're lucky we got anything packed at all."

Harry reappeared after delivering the box and brushed his hands on his worn jeans. "If I remember

right, we found a rather good use for the full boxes that night." He waggled his eyebrows and lifted her up onto the counter as she squeaked at him.

"Hmm," Ginny mused as she ruffled his hair and rested her elbows on his shoulders. "I can't seem to remember. Maybe you'll have to remind me later tonight." She leaned down to kiss him, wiping the pleased look off his face. Their kissing got carried away as Harry began to untuck her t-shirt and Ginny wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him closer to her. Harry's hand had just found what he wanted when a knock at the back door broke them apart.

"Are you expecting anyone?" Harry asked as he tried to straighten his hair. "I thought we weren't telling anyone we were moving today?"

Ginny smiled guiltily. "I tried not to tell anyone, but it may have slipped."

Harry swatted her behind as she slid off the counter, and then moved to open the door. He was startled to see Ron and a very pregnant Hermione standing there with a sizeable cake held out in offering.

The apology Ron had made had gone a long way to constructing a new friendship between the two men. However, there was still an awkwardness that would probably take years to dissipate.

"We heard you might be moving in today," Ron announced to his shoes, and then raised a hopeful look at Harry.

"Er, yeah, come on in." Harry held the door open and then shrugged at Ginny, who was smiling serenely and still working on the cutlery. "Hermione, don't take this the wrong way… but are you sure you should be here?

"I'll be fine, Harry, as long as you have a chair for me to sit in. I don't trust Ron's conjuring enough not to dump me on my behind." She patted Ron's rather pink cheeks and Harry had to hide a smile. "I promise not to lift a finger. I'll just direct you two boys to do it all."

"Mental," Ron mumbled as he quickly kissed Ginny's cheek and placed the cake on the counter where Ginny had been sitting moments before. Harry smiled at the affection Ron had been lavishing upon Ginny lately. He wasn't sure what had prompted it, but after his apology, Ron had taken extra care to be very attentive to his sister; and it pleased Harry to no end. In fact, all of her brothers treated her like a princess and he liked to tease her that she played it up a bit much.

"Chair, Harry," Hermione scolded and Harry's attention snapped back to the present.

"Right," he nodded and winked at Ginny as she sniggered. He made a production of searching for one and then conjured a fluffy chintz monstrosity in the corner where Hermione could rule over the house for the day.

"Show off," Ron had murmured, but his cheeky grin took all of the bite out of the comment.

"Much better," Hermione sighed as she sank down into it and then stuffed a pillow behind her back. "Would it be too much trouble to ask for a foot rest as well, Harry? I'd try it on my own, but my magic's been a bit out of whack lately?"

“A bit?” Ron snorted. “Yesterday she wanted a bit of ice for her pumpkin juice—”

“Ron,” Hermione said in a sweet tone that had a definite underlying connotation, “finish that thought and I’ll hex you.”

“Right.”

Harry finally laughed out loud at the paleness of Ron’s face. He quickly conjured a matching ottoman for the chair and then a piping hot tea set.

“Anything else, your majesty?” he asked as he bowed low. Ron and Ginny both laughed as Hermione gave him a rather pleased look.

“You know, Ginny, I think we’ll have him trained up nicely by the time you’re ready to have a baby.”

Harry’s mouth suddenly went dry and he opened and closed it stupidly several times before standing completely still. Ron looked like he wasn’t sure if he should laugh or not.

“Oh, Harry, the look on your face,” Ginny laughed as she came up and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Don’t worry, love, that’s a few years away, I think.”

“Yeah,” he said, finally finding his voice again, and giving her a quick kiss. “I hope so. I’ve just gotten you all to myself.” Ginny went up on her tiptoes to kiss him again but stopped when Ron cleared his throat.

“So, the others should be here anytime.”

“Others?” Ginny asked.

“Yeah,” Ron said, rubbing the back of his neck. “The family, you know. You’re moving and need some help. That’s what families do, right?” He shot a hopeful glance at Harry who finally let a smile spread across his face.

“Right.”

* * *

Harry sighed in contentment as he watched Ginny’s family, who’d come to help them move in, laugh and talk around the thick butcher block table that Ginny had insisted they needed on their trip to the furniture store. It was good to see them all together again, talking and laughing like nothing had ever happened—like no harsh words had ever been spoken and no bad feelings remained.

“It’s been a long day,” Tonks sighed as she leaned against the counter next to him and glanced over as George stood to demonstrate something that required him to clutch at his throat and wave frantically around.

“Not sure I even want to know,” she mumbled and shook her head.

“Me either,” Harry agreed with a wry smile.

“How come you’re not over there?” she asked, giving his shoulder a nudge. “Things are alright aren’t they?”

As if sensing the question from across the room, Ginny turned and gave him an inquiring look. He smiled tiredly at her and winked, making her shoulders relax. She raised an eyebrow at him and tilted her head toward her side of the room. He understood but tilted his head back toward the side where Tonks was now leaning her head against his shoulder and yawning widely. Ginny smiled and nodded once before returning her attention to where Percy seemed to be defending himself from something someone had said, although he did have a smile about it.

“Things are good,” Harry said and then realized he believed it too. Things might not be perfect, and he doubted they ever would be. There would always be the memory of moments that should have never happened; and those would always hold a bit of him back. But things had gone better lately than he’d ever been able to hope for.

“Did you ever see yourself here?” she asked in a soft voice and Harry shook his head before he even realized it.

“Not really,” he shrugged. “There were times when I hoped… dreamed it would happen.”

She nodded in understanding and they both looked back over to see Bill telling a story that had his wife blushing bright pink. “Do you think about it still?” she asked and Harry sighed.

“Every day,” he answered, knowing exactly what she was talking about. “But it’s different now, you know. Before, when I thought about it… I wondered what it would have been like if I’d succeeded. What would the funeral have been like, who would have given a damn. Now… I don’t know,” he ruffled the back of his hair and sighed. “Now I think about how damn selfish I was and how grateful I am that Kingsley was there. That you both were,” he said and gave her a small, but heartfelt, smile.

“And you don’t see yourself doing it again?”

“No,” he answered decisively. “I’m a different person now than I was then. I’d hit the absolute bottom; even after thinking I’d been sitting there for months… years even. But now I have Ginny. And she makes it alright to wake up in the morning and to think about allowing myself to have a future.”

“And what if that were taken away?” Tonks asked with a serious expression.

Harry shrugged. “I’m sure I’d lose my mind… again. But, I can’t dwell on things like that. That’s why I got so low in the first place; I lived in a pit of misery and self-loathing. I can’t go back there.”

“I understand,” she said and he knew she did. “I like the house,” Tonks said after a minute of watching the ruckus become louder and erupt in an explosion of laughter. “I think it’s perfect for the two of you.”

“We think so too,” Harry added and glanced down at her dull brown hair. He knew when she was at

her most tired Tonks' control of her abilities slipped and she looked her natural self. "Did you take Teddy home?"

"Nah," Tonks shuddered out around another yawn. "He's passed out in the extra room you have upstairs.

Harry nodded. "The one with all the Quidditch banners and things?" He smiled when she nodded against his arm. "You do know that's his anyway, don't you?"

Tonks lifted her head from his shoulder and searched his face before smiling helplessly and shaking her head. "You're hopeless."

"Ginny and I agreed," he defended. "It's Teddy's room for as long as he needs it. He'll always have a place here. We've got plenty of rooms as it is."

"Thank you," she said softly and then punched him hard in his upper arm. "I'm sure he'll need it with a mother like me. Just imagine what he'll be like as a teen."

Harry grinned. "Are you more worried about his father coming out in him, or his mother?"

Tonks groaned. "A bit of both, I guess."

"That's a good thing," Harry said gently and Tonks studied his face before nodding her agreement. "You should conjure a bed in one of the other rooms," he suggested. "You're too tired to Apparate; you'll splinch yourself for sure."

"That's just what you and Ginny need," Tonks snorted. "Houseguests when you have a brand new house. No, I'll just be taking Teddy home before he sees something that's liable to scar him for life."

Harry grinned and nudged her back. "What makes you think Gin and I haven't christened all of these rooms already?"

Tonks jaw dropped in amazement before she cracked up in laughter, literally falling on the floor and drawing everyone's attention.

"She's sleep deprived," Harry explained and shook his head as his friend continued to laugh.

* * *

Harry sat in front of the fireplace, comfortable in his large chair. The quietness of the evening was a bit strange. He'd been so used to Ginny being around, and even Teddy and Tonks who visited more often now that they were all moved into the house, that it seemed odd for everything to be still.

The fire crackled merrily, despite the melancholy mood Harry seemed to be in. It was almost Christmas—his and Ginny's first Christmas together as a couple—and he wasn't quite sure what to make of it. Ever since Hogwarts, he'd tried to make excuses or take assignments so that he wouldn't be around during the holidays.

Christmas just seemed like such a hard time of the year. In the past, he'd gone to the Burrow or to

Tonks' mother's home. And, yes, he'd enjoyed himself to a point. But watching the joy and comfort in everyone's eyes, watching them light up at being together, made his own loneliness seem so much more profound. For a time, for those few hours that he was entertained, Harry could pretend that he really belonged wherever he was. The problem came when he had to return home afterwards.

Last year he'd just gotten to Brazil and it was easy to lose himself in the revelry of a foreign city. Watching others celebrate a holiday in which he couldn't take part hadn't been as hard as seeing people he knew and loved celebrate while he watched from the window.

But this year would be different. He was with Ginny now; an irrevocable part of her life. He knew that her parents loved him and welcomed him as a member of their family. But he still felt uncomfortable being with her brothers. He still felt their eyes on him from time to time. No one had said anything further about his and Ginny's relationship, but he wasn't sure if that was because they finally approved of him, or because Ginny had threatened them with some horrid transfiguration.

Charlie, who had been most vocal in his opposition about Harry and Ginny living together, had even spent an uncomfortable evening a few weeks back with his head swollen into a donkey. Hermione had commented that he resembled and out of proportion piñata, spurring Ron and George to threaten to break him open. Harry had chuckled along with everyone, but his stomach had been rolling.

He never wanted to be the cause of strife in the family, and it didn't sit well with him when it happened.

But he would endure anything to make Ginny happy. Spending the holidays with her family would be a task he would willingly endure to see her smile.

Her note to him that evening had indicated that she was going Christmas shopping with Tonks and that he should fend for himself in the kitchen.

Ignoring his grumbling stomach, Harry had settled into his favorite chair, staring at the fireplace instead.

* * *

Ginny found him there hours later, still wearing his rumpled Auror robes and nursing a small glass of Firewhiskey.

"You look like you had a hard day, love," she laughed as she plopped heavily onto his lap. Her shopping bags scattered at his feet, discarded wherever they landed. She narrowed her eyes at him and wondered how much he'd actually had to drink when he stared glassy-eyed up at her.

"You're so lovely," he said plainly, brushing the backs of his fingers along her cheek.

"Harry, how much have you had to drink?" she chided with a chuckle. She knew he didn't drink often, but he was just acting so… odd.

“Only that one,” he protested, not taking his eyes from hers.

“Is everything alright?” She brushed the fringe back from his forehead and laid her cheek there, attempting to feel if he had a fever.

“It’s fine. I was just thinking.”

Ginny narrowed her eyes and shook her head. “Brooding, more like.”

Harry smiled and shrugged. “Maybe.”

Ginny cuddled into him, forcing his arms around her and nuzzling her snow-chilled body into his warmth. “You’re not supposed to brood, it’s almost the holidays.”

Harry didn’t answer, but played with the edges of her hair where it tickled his hand.

“I know the holidays haven’t really been good for you in the past,” Ginny said softly. “But this year will be different.”

She could feel his chest tighten underneath her face and knew that she had guessed right about what he was thinking. “It will, I promise you. This year we have each other.”

“We do,” he affirmed.

Ginny pulled back, confused by the controlled tone of his answer. “Harry, you’d tell me if something were bothering you, wouldn’t you?”

His eyes darted away but returned when she took a firm, yet gentle, grip on his chin.

“Harry,” she warned.

“It’s nothing, really.” He shrugged and Ginny knew that it really was something. Her eyebrow rose and she tightened her hold on his face. “Really, Ginny. I was just thinking about Christmas with your family.”

“And, you’re nervous.”

His eyes met hers and the rawness made her heart clench. “Harry,” she sighed, “there’s nothing more I can say to you to try and convince you. You know I love you. Mom and Dad love you. Everyone has apologized.” He opened his mouth to say something and she kissed him instead. “I know that an apology doesn’t erase all the years of hurt. But just understand something… if everyone hated you, Harry, if no one approved of our relationship… I would still love you. And if that meant that I never saw them again, I would gladly do that to be with you.”

“I would never ask you to do that,” Harry protested, emotion running over in his voice. He crushed her to his chest tightly and buried his face in her hair.

“I know,” she soothed. “I know you wouldn’t, Harry.” They clung to each other, Ginny soothing him by running her hands through his hair.

“I’ve been very selfish, haven’t I?” she asked as tears filled her eyes.

“What?” he demanded, pulling back to look her in the eye. “No, Ginny—”

“I have,” she nodded, holding his face in her hands tenderly. “I’ve been so caught up in all this holiday stuff… the tree and the gifts and the puddings. I haven’t taken time to think about how you’ve been feeling in all of this. I just,” she shook her head, desperate to make him understand, “this has just been the first year that I’ve been so happy, been really able to enjoy being in the season. And you’ve been dragging along behind, haven’t you?”

“Its fine,” Harry protested, leaning forward to kiss her quickly. “I want you to be happy.”

“I want us i*both*/i to be happy, Harry,” Ginny assured him. “We need to spend some time together this Christmas, don’t we?”

Ginny had to laugh as Harry tried to hold in a smile. “That would be nice.” He seemed to get an idea as his face brightened. “We could go somewhere… somewhere warm… like a holiday.”

The idea, for a moment, sounded wonderful. But then a vision of her mother’s crestfallen face entered her mind. “Harry, I love the idea, but…”

“But your family,” he finished with a knowing smile.

Ginny bit the inside of her lip, trying to think of a way to make her family happy while still spending as much time with Harry as possible. He just looked so defeated that it made her ache.

“What about,” she started, trailing her fingers along his collarbone under the edges of his robes, “if we spent Christmas here, but left the next day. Then we’d have spent our time here, but be able to get away too.”

Harry seemed to consider it before the corner of his mouth quirked up a bit. “That may work.”

“We’d have family time, but not too much.” She leaned her forehead against his, loving the intimacy that they could now share.

“Where would you want to go?” he whispered. “Anywhere you want to… I’ve been almost everywhere.”

“Hmm, I don’t know.” Ginny did know where she wanted to go, but she was a bit nervous to ask. Really, anywhere would be wonderful. She’d only ever been to Egypt and Romania. Somewhere tropical with a lovely beach would be amazing.

“You do know,” he teased her, digging his fingers gently into her sides and making her squirm.

“Harry,” she protested, trying to pull away from him.

“Where?” he demanded playfully.

Ginny paused, weighing the option of just coming straight out and asking. Would he be angry? Would he refuse to take her?

“Just tell me, Gin,” he prodded gently.

“Promise you won’t get mad,” she pleaded quietly.

Harry narrowed his eyes at her, pulling back to look at her completely. “Would you take me to Taiwan?”

Whatever she’d expected, it wasn’t the look of absolute shock on his face. His mouth opened and closed several times before he simply blinked at her.

She shrugged. “I just thought that maybe we could take some supplies. And maybe… I could do something, as a Healer, you know.”

An intense look spread across his face and Ginny was taken aback. She looked away, disappointed that she hadn’t just kept her mouth shut. Of course he wouldn’t want to take her to the orphanage. If he’d had his way, no one would ever know about that.

“Ginny,” he said gruffly, waiting until she met his gaze. “You…” He swallowed and she watched his Adam’s apple bob several times and quiver in his throat. She squeaked loudly when he pulled her to him tightly, his arms crushing her face into his neck.

“I love you,” he whispered fiercely. “I can’t… thank you.”

And then she understood. He was happy that she had asked. He was going to open up a part of his life that no one else had ever seen and share it with her.

“Really?” she asked, her voice breaking as she pulled back from him, her eyes searching his face. “You’ll take me.”

The tender smile that melted his face made her shudder. “Yes, I’ll take you there.”

* * *

“Taiwan?”

Ginny nodded enthusiastically as she helped her mother lay out the food for Christmas dinner. Hermione had been in the kitchen up until Ron had come in to nick some food and found her trying to help. He’d ushered her out quickly, scolding her from getting up off of the comfortable sofa.

That left Ginny and her mother alone for the first time during the evening and Ginny had taken the opportunity to tell her about the trip she and Harry would be leaving on in the morning.

“What’s in Taiwan?” her mother asked curiously. “And why do you have to go half way across the globe during Christmas? You should be here with your family.”

“Mum,” Ginny rolled her eyes. “We’re with the whole lot of you right now. Harry and I just want to get away for a bit. Without the stress of work and…” she trailed off, not wanting to admit that the family was a stress all in its own. “We just need this time together.”

Molly immediately softened upon seeing her face. “How is Harry dealing with all of this?” she asked

perceptively. Sinking down into the chair next to her daughter, she pushed aside a large platter of ham and took Ginny's hand in hers.

"He's coping," Ginny shrugged. "I think it's still a bit overwhelming for him. He still feels—"

"Like an outsider looking in?" Molly guessed with a knowing look. She sighed heavily and Ginny took a moment to really look at her mother. The woman seemed to have aged in the past five minutes. "I would give anything I could to go back in time and change things for that boy." Ginny nodded jerkily, hoping to keep her emotions in check. She really didn't want to start crying tonight. There was a houseful of people that she really didn't want seeing her with red rimmed eyes. Her brothers would possibly jump to the wrong conclusions, although she would gladly demonstrate her vast repertoire of hexes on them to disavow that thought. And Harry… well, Harry might possibly go into protective mode, thinking that one of her brothers had said something to upset her. And that wouldn't do either.

Her mother dabbed the corners of her eyes with her apron. "But I'd have to start from the very beginning, wouldn't I?" she chuckled through her tears.

"You would," Ginny agreed with her own laugh. "And he'd never think he was worthy."

"Well, we'll just have to keep trying to convince him otherwise, won't we?"

Ginny chuckled again. "I tell him all the time, Mum." She shook her head. "I didn't know I could love someone so much, you know. I mean, I've loved him for so long, but… it's different now."

"It is," Molly nodded. "That's one reason that your father and I haven't said much about the two of you living together, even though the both of you know we don't condone that in normal circumstances."

"I understand," Ginny nodded. And she did. Her parents had turned a blind eye to their living arrangements from the very beginning. They'd suggested other solutions, but hadn't been disapproving when Ginny had firmly told them how it was going to be.

"We can tell that the both of you are committed."

"We are, Mum," Ginny confirmed with a smile.

"And, I'm hoping," Molly said with a sly smile, "that Harry will gather the nerve to propose soon."

Ginny rolled her eyes, but she did laugh also. "Mum, even if he never does… Well, if he doesn't, maybe *I* will," she huffed. "But I don't want you to worry about me. No matter what, I'm in love with Harry. And he's in love with me. We're together, and I can't see that going away—ever."

Molly studied her face, eyes that were identical to what Ginny saw in the mirror every morning, staring back at her. "I do believe that, Ginny. He's a wonderful man. And you've made him so happy. I just want him to feel like we've accepted him and we're not going to allow him to be held at arms length anymore."

"He knows, Mum," Ginny confirmed softly. "It's still going to take some time for him to process all

the changes in his life. He was so isolated for so long. And now he's… well, he's working on being a part of the family. But he's struggling with it. I won't lie and say it's been easy. Even now, when I think of what those gits did to him… it just gets me all worked up again."

"I know, Ginny-love," Molly soothed. Ginny could see the fire spark in her mother's eyes and knew she had an ally. "I agree completely. They did more damage to the two of you—to all of us, really—then they'll ever know."

Ginny nodded, her eyes filling with tears. "It won't ever be the same—won't ever be what it should have been."

"I know."

"And that hurts," she continued. "Harry still holds people at arm's length."

"He lets you in."

"Only because I won't let him shut me out," Ginny shook her head.

"And he lets Teddy in, and Tonks."

"A bit," Ginny agreed. "He's closer to Hermione also."

"But I can't blame him for holding anyone else away," Molly shook her head. "Even your father and me, to an extent—although, I admit, it does hurt." She nodded when Ginny shook her head to protest. "I understand; really I do. We could see Harry slipping away, we talked about it often enough. But we didn't try hard enough to find out why. I didn't fight hard enough for him, Ginny." She broke out in a loud sob and Ginny moved to pull her mother into her arms. "And I'll never forgive myself."

"He forgives you, Mum," Ginny assured as they held each other and cried. "He knows how much you love him."

"I hope so," Molly said after she had calmed herself. "I only want to love him."

"I know," Ginny said as she helped wipe her mother's tears away. "He's so easy to love, isn't he?"

Molly chuckled and stood, bustling back to the counter to gather more food. "He is."

* * *

Harry sipped from his cup of eggnog and watched the room warily. No one had been anything but completely cordial, but Harry was still uneasy. This was the first real gathering that the Weasley family had had in several months, certainly since he and Ginny had become a real couple. There had been dinners and various other events, but none where everyone was together.

He was grateful that Tonks had brought Teddy as that had given him a much needed distraction when he and Ginny had first gotten to the Burrow. Having the boy climb up on his lap and show him the new book of jokes that Uncle George had given him for Christmas was a way for Harry to slip into the background of the chaos, where he was much more comfortable.

Arthur had greeted him with a warm smile and a handshake. They'd talked comfortably about things at the Ministry and he'd even asked Harry about some of the repairs on the new house. They'd spent a comfortable twenty minutes that Harry was very appreciative of. The relationship between Harry and Ginny's parents had never been especially close, as Harry had pushed everyone away for so many years. However, he could tell they were making great strides to include him and make him feel as if there had never been anything other than acceptance and love between everyone.

His connections with the Weasley brothers, however, continued to be a source of discomfort. Harry could handle George, because nothing was ever serious between the two. And it was easier to make a joke and laugh it off than to acknowledge that George had hurt Harry.

Bill and Charlie both seemed happy ignoring that there had ever been anything wrong. It was easier to do because Harry had never been particularly close to either man. That didn't make it any easier, however, to see Ginny's face when she watched the brothers that she'd always looked up to most. Harry could see that the relations between them had changed forever in that one decision and it made him mourn that choice a bit more. Ginny should be allowed to have her two oldest brothers as her idols still.

Percy, strangely, seemed to be the only one who tackled the problem head on. He was always one of the first to welcome Harry, shaking his hand and exchanging pleasantries. Ginny said it was because he had always felt a bit of the outcast in the family that he went out of his way to make Harry feel welcome. Harry wondered if the guilt of his own estrangement, and perhaps firsthand knowledge of life without his family, drove Percy to be more remorseful for his part in the plot. Either way, Harry was grateful that someone treated him like a normal person—someone who had once been a friend and just happened to be in love with their little sister.

"Hey."

Harry turned to find Ron standing at his side, his own cup of eggnog in his hand.

"Hey," Harry greeted him. He wasn't quite sure what to say to Ron. Yes, they'd gotten all of their issues out on the table, but the shadow of their haunted past darkened the new friendship. Harry had decided that it was best just to accept what Ron had to offer, one day at a time and make his judgments as he went along. Ginny, upon hearing his plan, had agreed wholeheartedly.

"Hermione said that you and Ginny were leaving tomorrow."

Harry nodded, his eyes focusing back on the twinkling fairy lights of the tree. "Yeah, I'm going to take her to Taiwan."

He could feel Ron's eyes on him before the tall redhead nodded. "Sort of like a late Christmas present?"

"Yeah," Harry shrugged. He and Ginny had agreed that they didn't want anyone to know about the Orphanage or the true reason for their trip. Tonks, of course, knew, but she'd promised to keep her lips sealed. "I've been over there a few times. It's beautiful this time of year."

"Ginny always did like to travel."

Harry smiled and took a sip. “I think she’ll like it over there.”

“She will,” Ron affirmed. His soft tone made Harry look at him directly. If anyone would have been opposed to the trip, Harry was sure it would have been Ron. But he seemed to approve.

“The both of you deserve to get away for a bit. I wish I could take Hermione away for a bit before the baby comes.” They both glanced over to where Fleur and Hermione were perched on the sofa. Hermione must have sensed their eyes, because she looked up and smiled at the both of them.

Harry was struck at how pretty she actually was right now. Yes, her face had swollen a bit more as the pregnancy advanced, but there was a healthy look to her. Maybe it was that she seemed so much more content with her life than Harry ever remembered her being before. Whatever it was, it was very attractive on her.

“Can she travel?” Harry asked, genuinely curious. He’d never really been around anyone pregnant before.

Ron shook his head. “She’s not supposed to, really.”

Harry pondered that for a moment. “Maybe the two of you could slip away for a night or two. Somewhere close.”

“I’ve thought about it,” Ron nodded. “I don’t know, we’ll have to see what the Healer says on her next check-up. Maybe I’ll owl him to ask.”

Harry was pleased that Ron seemed to be taking good care of his wife. If anyone deserved to be taken care of, it was Hermione. She’d been their rock during school—getting them out of more sticky situations than Harry cared to remember.

“When do you leave?” Ron asked.

“Tomorrow,” Harry said. The relaxed feel of the conversation made him happier than he’d been in a long time. Maybe he could do this. “Be gone for a couple of days.”

“Don’t come back before the New Year,” Ron shook his head with a small smile. “Take your time. It’s not like the world needs saving right now, is it?”

Harry chuckled at the joke and shrugged. “Maybe we will stay a bit longer.”

They both watched as Teddy ran by, his hair flashing bright colors. He gave a quick wave and darted into the dark corner of the hallway just beyond them, covering his mouth to keep the giggles in.

George entered the room next, his face flushed red… with bright green spots.

“Erm…” Ron stared at his older brother, his eyes darting to where he could see the draperies in the corner giggling.

“You two haven’t seen Teddy, have you?” George asked.

“What—”

“Not at all,” Harry lied spectacularly, hoping that he could keep a straight face. He glanced over at Ron who was still staring at his brother, a completely bewildered look on his face.

“Damn,” George swore. “Little runt nicked my wand.”

Harry grinned down into his cup and shook his head. “He may have headed outside. You know how much he likes to hide in that big oak next to the pond.”

George’s face lit up and he nodded firmly. “Thanks. I’ll check out there.” Harry watched the man go before winking at the corner and casually strolling over there.

Teddy peeked his head out of the floral draperies and grinned up. “Thanks, Uncle Harry.”

Harry only cleared his throat and held out his hand, a stern look on his face.

“Ah,” Teddy grumbled and dejectedly pulled the wand out of his back pocket. He slapped it down onto Harry’s hand and glanced up.

Harry fought the urge to laugh. “What have I told you about stealing wands?”

Teddy shuffled his feet as Ron joined the pair. “Not to do it,” he mumbled down to the floor.

“And?” Harry demanded in a harsh tone.

Teddy grinned and giggled. “And if I do, not to get caught.”

Harry couldn’t hold the laugh in any longer and it burst out of him. Ron stared open mouthed at the two, and then broke into his own laughter.

“Bloody brilliant.” He ruffled Teddy’s hair and gave the boy a small swat on the behind, not enough to hurt, but enough to tell him he was being dismissed.

“Grandma Molly has ginger biscuits in the kitchen, and Uncle George is outside for the moment,” Harry winked.

The boy flashed a mischievous smile and disappeared, his footsteps echoing up the stairs.

“You’re corrupting that child.”

Ginny’s voice broke the laughter up as she joined them from the kitchen. She wrapped her arms around Harry’s chest, laying her head on his shoulder.

“Am not,” Harry defended through another laugh. The redness around her eyes hadn’t gone unnoticed, by either himself or Ron, it seemed.

“Everything alright, Gin?” Ron asked.

Ginny looked up at the both of then and nodded.

“Everything’s just great,” she said softly. And for the first time in a long time, Harry agreed with

her.

Chapter 10

Harry had spent their first two days in Taipei tracking down the boy called Johnny. Finally, he'd been found in another prison. His original sentence completed, Johnny had been incarcerated for some other minor offence. After convincing Ginny that she wouldn't want to see the prison, Harry had gone alone to speak to the boy. He'd come back to their room rather down about the entire situation and Ginny had held him for hours.

That evening he had taken Ginny through the highly crowded Shilin Night Market. The spices and odors were even stronger in person, Ginny observed. She clung to his arm as he pushed his way through the massive crowds, all speaking in different dialects. Harry explained that in Taiwan, and especially in the largest city, the people spoke English, Mandarin, Taiwanese and Hakka. He did a mild translation spell on her so that she could understand some of what was said, and it helped.

But the sight of so many people, ebbing and flowing through the market was almost overwhelming. Harry's dark mood seemed to slip away as he observed the people coming and going about their business.

He bought strange food for her to try at the market as well; some sort of pork sausage wrapped in a rice sausage and then grilled. She enjoyed the different taste of the food, but especially liked the spicy peanut candy that Harry had bought later.

"This is so different from South America," Harry observed as they stood in an out of the way place and watched the crowds milling.

"More people?" Ginny asked, licking the thick soy sauce from her sausage off of her fingers.

Harry nodded, his eyes never leaving the street in front of them. "Yeah, although the bigger cities over there are pretty crowded. But the way they live over there is so different. Everything is so much slower. People take the time to sit and talk, rather than eating as they go and always running somewhere."

Ginny wrapped her arm through his again and grinned up at him. "Well, you'll just have to take me there too."

He had smiled down at her, pecking her on the lips before pointing to another area he wanted to show her.

* * *

Today the street seemed even more crowded, if that were possible, as the citizens of the city bustled their way to work, school and various other places. Ginny clung to Harry's arm as they strode down the side of the road. She clasped a hand over her mouth to keep in a scream when a young man on a motorized scooter nearly ran into them. Harry had jabbered at him in Chinese, but it did no good as the man sped away.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Harry asked as they made the first turn into a side street. "It can be a bit overwhelming at first. If you need to leave, just let me know and we'll go, alright?"

She gave him a grateful look but steeled herself for the worst. She was a Healer, after all, and she'd dealt with quite a bit through the years.

"I'll be fine. I want to do this, Harry."

"I know," he nodded and wrapped his arm tighter around her shoulders. They continued walking until the dilapidated old building stood in front of them. Harry took her hand and used his other to rap gently on the ancient wooden door. The same young woman from Harry's memory peered out from a thin slit in the door. She opened it widely when she realized who was standing there.

"Nǐ hǎo," Harry greeted and Ginny stumbled through the words, each bowing respectfully. The woman bowed in return and gestured for them to come further into the room.

Ginny had expected to be besieged with children but the room was empty of little people. She looked up expectantly at Harry who shrugged. "It's a nice day outside," he speculated, "maybe they are in the back lot."

Harry asked the young woman something and she nodded her head and offered them a seat at one of the small, faded sofas in the room. They sat and she gracefully exited the room.

"She's gone to get Pó Pó," Harry explained. Ginny used the time to examine the room they were in closer. Along the far wall were stacks of textbooks; while they looked a bit old to Ginny, she could see that they were still in good shape. The children treated them well. And the room was clean; no layer of dust could be found anywhere. The furniture was well used but in good repair.

"Harry," the old woman greeted him and he stood as she entered. She gave him a quick embrace and then turned to Ginny. "You have brought someone."

"This is Ginny," Harry answered proudly as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, "my girlfriend."

The old woman studied her for a moment, her dark eyes seemingly peering into her soul, before nodding. "She is much more than that." She quickly embraced Ginny and then gestured for them to sit down.

"How are you doing, Pó Pó ?" Harry asked gently once they had all taken their seats.

She sighed and gave an ancient smile. "We manage. There is not enough money, not enough food for little bellies and more come to me every month. But, it is a warm day today and there are clouds in a blue sky." Ginny could see the weary press of responsibility weighing heavy on those frail shoulders.

Harry nodded in understanding and squeezed Ginny's hand a bit. "We've brought some things for you." He quickly handed over a stack of bills that was far larger than the last time they had come. Both he and Ginny had contributed generously and had changed Tonks' money as well, to help out. "And Ginny is a Healer, Pó Pó. She's brought potions and medicines for those who are sick."

The woman's façade cracked for just a moment and she blinked away tears. "There are no words I can say…"

“We understand,” Harry said softly. “Perhaps we could see to the sick first, before the others see me here and never let me off the ground.” Ginny smiled remembering how the children in Harry’s memory had swarmed him.

The stalwart face was back and she nodded. “Lai,” she motioned toward the back curtain and Harry stood to follow her up, holding Ginny’s hand again tightly. They made their way upstairs to the divided area she’d seen in Harry’s memories and Ginny was surprised to see five different children there. She looked to Harry who had walled off his emotions once again. Ginny supposed that was the only way he could deal with the overwhelming feelings.

He spoke quietly to the old woman and then nodded sadly. “Three of the other children died soon after I left,” he said. “The fourth, one of the boys, is alive, although the high fevers left him with some problems.”

Ginny took a deep breath and composed herself before nodding and putting on what she called her ‘Healer’s face’. “Translate for me, Harry? I need them to lie down so that I can assess them. I’m going to use my wand and I don’t want to scare them.”

Harry nodded and spoke softly to the children who smiled through sleepy, sickly eyes at him and did as he asked. Once they were settled again, he nodded toward Ginny and sat on the edge of the first bed to translate and help as needed.

She was able to completely cure three of the children with doses of Pepper-up potion. The other two she mixed up vials of potions for what they would need in the coming days. She also asked the children, through Harry, to stand outside the area for a moment and she cast several of the strongest anti-bacterial and cleaning spells that she could, as well as erecting a quarantining ward around the thinly divided room.

“That should hold for a few months,” she said as she wiped her brow and sank onto one of the other beds. “Now, let’s clean up these others so that it’s less likely one of the other children will get sick.”

“Teach me the spell, Gin,” Harry asked quietly. “I want to be able to help.” She smiled and lay her head on his shoulder, nodding.

Pó Pó had several repairs that she asked Harry to help her complete on the outside structure of the building and he had gladly gone with her, leaving Ginny to finish with the last of the children.

She had quickly picked up on a few of the phrases to get the children to do what she wanted them to do, but the children would giggle when she would say something wrong. Ginny was a good sport about it all and would tickle and tease them right back.

* * *

When Harry was finished shoring up the back porch and making repairs to several windows, he entered the upstairs rooms to find Ginny seated on the floor, while several of the young girls stroked a brush through her long hair. They seemed fascinated with the color, and Harry couldn’t blame them. He had always loved Ginny’s hair.

She gave Harry a quick wink and went back to the children's book she had been reading to the other faces surrounding her. Harry sank down onto the end of one of the small beds and continued watching.

When Ginny had originally asked him to bring her here, he had been unsure. The orphanage was a part of himself that he didn't like to share with others. Tonks knew about it, of course, but she had never been here or seen Harry when he was here. But the idea of holding this part of himself back from Ginny didn't sit well with him and he knew that he wanted to share it with her. The fact that she could have gone anywhere in the world, and that she had chosen to come with him to such an important place only strengthened his love for her.

Two young boys approached him, giggling and holding out a small package to him. Harry peered down at it curiously to find a pack of Exploding Snap cards. He raised a suspicious eyebrow at Ginny who only smirked mischievously at him.

Harry agreed to teach the boys how to play the game, moving to a corner of the room where they wouldn't interrupt Ginny's story.

Twenty minutes later, and two small sores on his fingers, Harry gave up, tossing his cards into the air as they made a loud sound. The two boys had swelled to such a crowd that he'd needed to add another pack of cards to fit everyone into the game. The children groaned and moaned when Pó Pó appeared, clapping her hands and telling them that it was time for them to return to their studies.

He looked around for Ginny and spotted Sun, the young woman who helped Pó Pó, waving him forward into another sleeping area. She held her finger up to her lips with a silent giggle and pointed Harry to where Ginny stood.

Harry's breath caught as he saw her standing, a small baby in her arms, rocking the child back and forth as she sang a low lullaby.

"She is very young," Sun commented. Harry understood that she was speaking about the baby. And she was small; Harry guessed only a few weeks old.

"She's magical?" Harry asked. He hadn't heard of infants showing magical ability, but maybe it was possible. And this orphanage usually got the children discarded because of magical ability.

"We not know," Sun continued. "Her mother… very young, fifteen years." Harry winced. "Mother had magic."

He nodded in understanding. The young mother had been magical, thus it was assumed that the baby girl would probably be magical as well.

"And the mother? Is she here?"

"She die." Sun's soft phrase, said so straight forwardly, made Harry sigh. To accept the death of someone so young, so easily, showed how much this young woman had seen in life. It was a very sad situation indeed.

"Thank you," Harry nodded to her, continuing to watch as Ginny rocked the little girl, her cheek

resting on the black hair of the baby. She glanced up and blushed when she saw that Harry had been watching her.

Sun bowed low and left the young couple alone.

“Is she sick?” Harry asked, wrapping his arm around Ginny and brushing his fingers over the cheek of the baby. The little body shuddered in a deep breath and relaxed even further in Ginny’s arms.

“No,” Ginny whispered. “She’s a bit malnourished, but she’s healthy.”

“Sun told me that her mother died.”

Ginny nodded. “Pó Pó said she was only four weeks old.”

“She’s beautiful,” Harry agreed, his voice catching in his throat.

Harry had never seen himself as the fatherly type. It had never really entered his mind, or he’d pushed any thoughts away before he’d come together with Ginny. In fact, the thought of another, tiny person depending on him solely for everything they needed had always terrified him a bit.

But seeing Ginny here, with the baby sleeping on her shoulder, a contented, although exhausted, smile on her face—everything seemed to click into place for him.

“She is,” Ginny agreed. Their eyes met and he was startled to see hers fill with tears. “Thank you for bringing me here, Harry.”

He couldn’t respond for the lump in his throat. Instead, he nodded jerkily and leaned forward, placing a kiss on her forehead and wrapping his arms around her tighter. They held the baby together, rocking side to side.

* * *

“You were amazing today,” Harry said as they got ready for bed that night. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“It’s not hard, Harry,” Ginny said as she pulled back the thin duvet on the hotel bed and climbed in, settling toward the center. Harry shook his head and climbed in after her.

“It’s still amazing. You gave twenty six children thorough exams, set up quarantining wards, cast more sanitizing charms than I’ve ever seen, and still had enough energy to play with the children afterwards.” He shifted so that she could cuddle into his side further.

“I just did what I needed to do,” she protested after a large yawn. “I’m a Healer, Harry; helping people feel better is what I do best.”

Harry’s hand absently played with her hair as he shook his head. “No, you make the illnesses go away because you’re a Healer. You make people feel better because you’re Ginny.”

When she laughed at him, he rolled and put his weight gently on her. The seriousness of his expression made her stop struggling.

“You make me feel better all the time,” he said softly, his eyes tracing the features of her face. He placed a soft kiss on her lips and then pulled back. “Marry me?” His excited words seemed to startle him as much as her, and they both smiled.

“Harry!”

“I’m serious,” he nodded. “Please, Ginny, let’s get married. I want to be with you forever.”

Tears gathered in her eyes as she nodded, too emotional for words. “I will,” she finally whispered and then pulled him down for a kiss.

“Wait,” he mumbled out a minute later and pulled away from her, scrambling out of the bed and digging through the pile of clothing he’d left on the floor. Finally he came back and Ginny sat up to see what he had. Hesitantly, he held out a small red velvet box. “I bought this last week, but wasn’t sure when I was going to do it.”

Ginny grinned and opened the box to find a beautiful silver ring with three round diamonds.

“If you don’t like it—” His words stopped when she glared at him and slipped the ring on her finger.

“It’s perfect,” she said as she stared at the brilliant light it seemed to give off. Harry pulled her to him and they kissed again.

“You’re perfect for me,” he whispered against her lips.

* * *

Ginny giggled at her parents dumbstruck expressions. She could feel Harry shift nervously next to her and reached her right hand down to lay against his thigh, attempting to push confidence into her touch.

Her engagement ring sparkled in the soft light of the Burrow’s kitchen, helped along when she wiggled her fingers.

“It’s gorgeous,” Hermione crowed, grabbing her hand and studying the ring closely.

“It’s absolutely lovely, Harry,” Molly agreed, holding the handkerchief her husband had offered over her mouth, tears disappearing into the years-soft cloth.

“Congratulations.”

Ginny grinned even wider as her father stood, shaking Harry’s hand and pulling him into a hug. Harry stiffly complied, although she was thrilled when he gave himself over fully to the gesture.

“Wow, just… wow,” Ron mumbled, his eyes darting back and forth between the ring and Harry.

“Have the two of you set a date?” Hermione continued enthusiastically.

“We haven’t even really talked about it,” Ginny shook her head, melting into Harry’s side as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“I… I wasn’t exactly planning to ask her,” Harry mumbled quietly, a shy smile on his face.

“Oh, but it was perfect,” Ginny protested, meeting his eyes and getting lost in the sea of green. Their last few days in Taiwan had been absolute perfection. Ginny had floated on a cloud of absolute happiness as they saw various sights. Inevitably, they would end each day at the Orphanage, doing everything they could to help with the children. Both Ginny and Harry had rocked the baby, whom Pó Pó refused to name yet, to sleep each night.

Leaving had been very emotional for both of them. But their memories of the children and the wonderful things they had done together would tide them over until the next time they visited.

“Well, tell us about it,” her father prompted.

Molly bumped the table in her haste to stand up. “Oh! Not yet, let me get some champagne. I think we may have some left from Bill’s wedding.”

“Sit down, Mum,” Ron commanded softly. “I’ll get it.” Her brother went about gathering the things for a toast and Ginny glanced at Harry.

She hadn’t even thought of what they were going to tell her family, other than the basic fact that they were getting married. Would Harry want to reveal details of their trip?

She decided to let Harry take the lead on this. She was perfectly happy keeping what they told everyone vague enough to protect his secrets—which she realized, with a pleased smile, were her secrets now, too.

Harry studied her face for a moment before taking her hand in his, brushing his fingers along the ring. “I’ve been to Taiwan a few times in an official capacity.” He spoke softly and toward her fingers, which he continued to play with. Ginny stared at this man that she loved with all of her being as he took a huge chance and bared his soul to her family.

“There’s an Orphanage there, deep in the city, where they take in magical children. Over there,” he shrugged, glancing up at her family, his cheeks coloring a bit, “being magical… it’s not acceptable.”

“Oh dear.”

Ginny heard her mother’s gasp but didn’t take her eyes from Harry. “We spent some time there,” Harry continued, “fixing things, taking care of the children. Ginny healed them.” His eyes turned toward her and he raised his hand, brushing his fingers along her jaw in an intimate gesture. “When I saw her there, covered in sweat and dirt… she was the most beautiful thing in the world. And I just knew.”

In the background she heard both her mother and Hermione sigh. Not caring who was in the room, Ginny leaned forward and kissed him. Surprisingly, Harry didn’t pull back, but allowed her to deepen the kiss.

“And he asked,” Ginny said, resting her forehead against his, “and I said yes.”

Her mother sniffled and Ginny grinned as Hermione broke out in tears.

“To the happy couple,” Ron held up a glass of champagne, a genuine smile on his face.

Ginny stared up at him and then over at Harry, wondering how her fiancé would respond.

Harry stared intensely at the man before nodding and raising his own glass.

Relief and joy swelled in Ginny’s chest as the three couples toasted, clinking their glasses together.

* * *

Hours later, and a bit drunker, Ginny went in search of Ron. Harry was comfortably ensconced on the sofa in between Hermione and Molly, who seemed determined to pry every detail of the Orphanage out of him. Ginny winked at him and wandered toward the kitchen, sure her older brother would be helping himself to more food. It i*had*/i been over an hour since they’d finished dinner.

But the kitchen was empty. Through the back window, however, Ginny caught a flash of red. She gathered her cloak from the hook by the back door and closed it quietly behind her. The chill of the January night caught her off guard and her breath clouded in front of her.

“Did Hermione send you to find me?” Ron chuckled from where he stood, his back bowed as he leaned his elbows on the railing of the narrow back porch.

“Nope,” Ginny shook her head and moved to stand next to him, cuddling into his side a bit to share warmth. They’d done this a lot when they were younger. Two kids trying to find a bit of peace in a rambunctious household.

Ron glanced at her and then returned his gaze out to the field beyond the house.

“I’m happy for you, Ginny,” he said quietly after a few minutes.

“I wondered,” she replied.

“I am,” he nodded. She could see the truth of his answer in his eyes. There was a time, when they were much younger, that Ginny had been able to tell, just by a glance, if he had been lying to her. That had been lost over the years, pushed behind their commitments to friends and silly other things they allowed to get between them. But she could see it there now, shining as brightly as ever.

“Thank you.”

He nodded. “It feels a bit rushed, but… I think it’s the right thing.”

Ginny smiled contentedly and laid her head on his shoulder. “It is, Ron. And it’s not too soon. If anything, it took too long.”

He chuckled and they returned to staring out at the stars.

Chapter 11

The halls in the Ministry were almost deserted by the time Harry was finished with the paperwork for his classes. Although he still was not on active duty, Harry was around the Ministry quite often. Some of the other instructors had given up their offices, choosing to share a central area at the Auror Training Facility. But Harry liked to keep abreast of what was going on in the department—the cases that were being worked, the comings and goings of the Aurors and the gossip. He felt it helped him to better know what was happening with his students and current topics he could integrate into his classes.

It also helped that there was a gorgeous redhead in the office just down from his—and he wasn't thinking about Ron.

He smiled thinking that Ginny would probably already be gone, but decided to check the infirmary anyway. Peeking inside, he noted that everything was in its place and Ginny's cloak was no longer on the rack near the desk. He would have ducked out completely had he not heard the small sound from the back room.

Pulling his wand more out of habit than concern, Harry stealthily entered to check who was moving around back there. Possibly, just as Ginny was about to leave, an injured Auror had come in requiring assistance.

But it was Ginny, completely alone, that Harry found. She was slumped in a chair near the dark corner, her head cradled in her hands and sniffling.

In an instant, Harry was kneeling before her, searching for the cause of her tears.

"Ginny, love, what is it?"

Her puffy eyes avoided his as she shook her head and swiped angrily at the offending tears.

"Nothing." She forced out a smile that faded before it had even finished forming. "Just a… a rough day."

Knowing there was more to the situation, Harry gathered her up and settled her in his lap. "Gin, it's more than that. For two weeks, I've watched you grow more and more quiet—ever since we got back, actually." Ginny didn't respond but burrowed further into his arms. A horrid thought nudged his mind and he bit his lip in contemplation. "I rushed things, didn't I?" he asked in a pained voice.

Ginny pulled back, staring at him in complete confusion.

"With the engagement," he finished lamely, reaching up to stroke her hair gently.

"No!" she exclaimed. A small shadow crossed her features though. "Unless you feel like it was too soon."

"No," he protested, forcing himself to smile. "I don't feel that at all."

“Neither do I,” she blurted out, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling in tight again. “I’m ready for this, Harry, ready to be married to you.”

Confusion filled him, making his mind race to find a reason for her tears. “Did someone say something to you?” She shook her head against him.

“I know,” she started, shifting so that he was cradling her with her head on his chest. “I know I’ve been distant. And I don’t mean to be…”

“Was it something I did, or said, Gin?”

“No,” she shook her head again. “It’s completely me. I just… it’s silly, really. But I just can’t stop thinking about the orphanage.”

“The orphanage?” he confirmed, his mind speeding to catch what she might be trying to say.

She nodded. “The baby, Harry.”

A vision of Ginny, her hair glowing in the faint light of the dimly lit sleeping room in Taipei filled his mind. The soft way she rocked and sang to the baby in her arms had been one of the most amazing things Harry had ever seen. It had struck him with the force of a physical blow.

“The baby.”

How could he have not known that his loving, giving Ginny would be heartbroken over the thought of that small life all alone on the other side of the world? Surely he’d thought of the children since they’d been back. Ginny had made it a point to take handfuls of photographs of Harry with the children. The pictures of the waving, smiling children were framed all over their bedroom. His favorite, however, had been Ginny standing in front of the smudged window, the baby girl on her shoulder, half-lit and half in shadow.

Ginny nodded against him. “I think about her all the time, Harry. She has no one. Sun and Pó Pó don’t have time to hold her and rock her to sleep and love her.”

Flashes of memory, time as a young child shut in a dark cupboard, never having anyone to kiss his knee when he fell down, no goodnight hugs and kisses, flashed through Harry’s mind, making him wince.

“Ginny—” Harry stopped, not sure what he wanted to ask, but feeling that he knew what he *should* ask.

“I want to go get her, Harry.”

Ginny’s soft admission didn’t startle him. Deep down it sparked something he hadn’t been consciously aware of considering. At that moment, he knew it was foregone conclusion that that small little girl had wrapped them both around her tiny fingers from the moment they’d first held her.

The impracticalities of the decision, all the arguments of why they couldn’t have *that* child,

disappeared in the face of her determination.

“Okay,” was the only word he could find to voice.

Ginny pulled back, staring at him like some potion’s experiment gone wrong. “What?”

Harry couldn’t help the grin from stretching his face. “Let’s go get our little girl.”

“Do you… do you mean it?” Harry had to laugh at how young Ginny looked right then, as if she were asking for a biscuit after being told that she couldn’t have one, and then receiving one anyway.

“I do,” Harry nodded, burying his hands into her hair. “I think I’ve known for a while now that we’d both want her.” He started when Ginny burst into tears again, clutching him tightly. He could feel her tears through his robes; but knowing that these were tears of relief and joy, it didn’t worry him so much.

“Could we really?” Ginny asked, pulling back again once she’d calmed down.

Harry nodded, wiping her face dry with his fingertips.

“This is… this is…” She trailed off, shaking her head.

“It’s going to be a lot of work,” Harry added. “But well worth it.”

Ginny’s look of disbelief and shock turned to a brilliant smile that lit up the room. “But it’s going to be worth it.” A giggle escaped her and she flung her arms around his chest, squeezing him in a hug worthy of a daughter of Molly Weasley. “We’re going to have a daughter!”

Harry chuckled. “We are.” They sat in the ever darkening room together, each lost in their own thoughts of the child they wanted and dreams for the future.

“It’s not going to be easy, Gin. The paperwork alone…”

Ginny turned a worried face up to him. “You think there might be issues? Could they really deny us the chance to adopt her?”

Harry shrugged, not really sure. It just seemed like an extremely daunting task. “There may be,” he admitted and then smiled reassuringly. “But we’re doing the right thing. And we’re not going to stop until we bring her home.” Ginny’s expression softened until it mirrored the image in his mind of her holding the baby. He’d do anything, he vowed, to make that look stay on her face forever.

Ginny bit the inside of her lip, a habit that Harry had always found endearing. “Do you think we’ll need to move the wedding up?”

Harry considered her question thoughtfully. Molly had instantly latched onto the idea of a late Spring wedding once he and Ginny had announced their engagement. Truthfully, to Harry, it really didn’t matter when or how they got married.

“I don’t suppose it could hurt,” he shrugged. “Is it going to cause problems with what your mother has planned?”

Ginny thought about it before shrugging herself and smiling. “It might, until we tell her that she’s going to be getting a granddaughter.”

Harry chuckled. If anything could soften the blow, a new baby in the family might do it. “Yes, but it’s not coming the conventional way, is it?”

“When have you and I ever done anything conventional, Harry?” Ginny snorted. “Besides, I don’t really want to say anything about the baby until we have to.”

“Probably a good idea,” Harry agreed.

Ginny jumped off of his lap, a renewed energy about her that Harry hadn’t seen in weeks. “Merlin, Harry, we have so much to do. We need to get a nursery set up. I want to paint the walls in a soft, buttery yellow. And there are clothes to buy and—”

“Gin,” Harry held up his hands in protest, but couldn’t help the smile that broke out. “Slow down. We have time.”

“No, Harry we don’t,” she shook her head, “when we were over there, she was a month old, Harry. Now she’s six weeks. Imagine if we have to wait longer. We need to get her. Now!”

“Ginny,” Harry grimaced, “this is going to take time. The paperwork and the logistics of adopting a child… it could take months.”

“We don’t have months, Harry!” Ginny’s face dropped and she began pacing.

“We don’t have much choice, Ginny.”

She swung around on him. “You’re just giving up on this?”

Harry’s jaw dropped open in shock. “No, I’m not giving up, Ginny. We’re going to do everything we can to get her. But we need to be realistic going into this. I just don’t want you to get your hopes up and then have them crushed if something delays the process.” He sighed and pulled her to him, gathering her face into his hands and looking deeply into her eyes. “I promise you, Gin, I will do anything—move heaven and earth if needs be—to get her here with us.”

Ginny’s chocolate eyes searched his before nodding.

“We could just go and get her, you know.” Ginny’s defiant declaration made him laugh.

“You think someone might notice?”

“Pó Pó would let us take her.”

“I know,” he said softly. “Pó Pó would give us every one of those children without a question if we asked.” He sobered and placed a kiss on her forehead. “Let’s try it the official way first, love. Then, if things don’t work out… well,” he let his smile slip into something bordering feral, “then I’ll grease as many palms as I can, obliviate a few people and we’ll get a daughter anyway.”

Ginny laughed and pecked him on the lips. “I knew I loved you for a reason.”

“You mean other than my ruggedly handsome face and spectacular body?” Harry’s smirk disappeared when Ginny snorted.

“Nah, I love you for your connections. Let’s go and see if Kingsley is still around.”

Harry laughed as Ginny bounced out of the room. Well, they had to start somewhere, he guessed. The former Minister of Magic ought to do it.

* * *

Kingsley’s reaction was more guarded than they had hoped for.

“No, you misunderstand me,” he protested, pushing his empty plate away from himself and patting his stomach.

Ginny watched him closely; ready to defend their request for his help in adopting the little girl they were both already calling their daughter. Harry reached for her hand, giving it a quick squeeze and winking at her. She couldn’t understand how he could be so calm. She supposed it was the Auror in him.

“I think the idea has merit,” Kingsley continued. “In fact, I think it’s rather spectacular.”

“What I meant,” he sighed, “was that you may have some real issues in getting the baby out of Taiwan. Their government hasn’t been very cooperative in the past regarding the adoption of magical children.”

“Why not?” Ginny demanded. “You’d think that they would want them out of their country, the way they treat them. It’s shameful.”

Kingsley grinned and exchanged a smile with Harry. Ginny huffed and sat back in her chair. She knew they were teasing her about her temper, which they’d both likened to her mother, and her fierce stance on this issue. But she couldn’t help it. Every time she thought about that little girl, lying over there with no one to love her… Well it was just too much to bear. There were so many similarities to how Harry grew up that it was scary. Even though Sun and Pó Pó did their best to provide for the needs of all the children; a baby that young needed constant care.

“I agree, Ginny.”

“I think I understand,” Harry nodded. “They see the children as… a defect.”

Ginny squeaked a bit at his word choice, but kept her mouth shut as he squeezed her hand again.

“They don’t want to deal with them,” Harry continued, “but allowing an outsider to see them, let alone adopt one, would be to acknowledge that they’ve got the problem in the first place.”

“Exactly,” Kingsley nodded. “Not to mention the fact that it’s never been done before, that I can tell. There have been foreign adoptions, sure, but not from Taiwan—at least not of magical children.”

An idea jumped forward in Ginny’s mind. “But we don’t even know that she’s magical.” Kingsley

frowned in concentration while Harry's face brightened.

"That's true, King. The mother was magical, but the baby is too young for them to tell yet."

"Hmm. It's something to think about," he nodded.

"So, is it even possible?" Ginny asked, her heart beating rapidly. *Please say yes!*

"I'm not saying it's out of the question," Kingsley shrugged. "But it's going to take a fair bit of work."

"This is important to us, King." Harry's soft voice in the warm kitchen of their home buoyed up Ginny's hope.

"I know it is, Harry," Kingsley smiled at both of them. Since Harry's bout with Dragon Fever, he and Kingsley had become close friends. He was a regular at their home for dinner and often met with them in social settings.

Ginny stood, her emotions threatening to boil over and erupt into tears. Merlin, she couldn't do that again. The past few weeks had been an emotional rollercoaster. She had been so happy when they had first returned to England. Their engagement had been met with only the happiest congratulations from her family. She could still see a bit of reserve in both Bill and Charlie's demeanors; but it was an improvement of a thousand times, she thought.

She moved efficiently about the kitchen, banishing dirty dishes and levitating the thick chocolate cake toward the table.

As days went by after coming home, though, her happiness seemed to slip away. She found herself crying at odd times and having periods of insomnia. Immediately wary, Ginny had taken a pregnancy test and found it negative. She had to admit to being a bit relieved. But when the sadness persisted, she was puzzled.

It wasn't until she'd picked up the photographs of their trip from the developer that she'd been able to pinpoint the problem. Seeing the baby again, in living color and movement, had forced her to face what she had just been too slow in acknowledging.

"This looks delicious, Ginny," Kingsley complimented as she served him a huge slab of cake.

"Thank you. Mum said it was your favorite."

"Ah," he nodded, taking a huge bite and rolling his eyes in appreciation. "This is heavenly. Harry, you've gotten lucky, my boy."

Harry chuckled and patted his own stomach. "Don't I know it." Ginny grinned at his compliment of her cooking. He was exaggerating, of course. He was as fit as ever; in fact these days he'd put on enough weight to finally look filled out and healthy. Although he did have a bit of a sweet tooth that Ginny would probably need to curb in the future.

They ate their cake exchanging pleasant conversation, but not mentioning the baby again. As Ginny

levitated the remains of the pudding away, Kingsley sat forward in his chair, a serious look on his face.

“Another thing you have to consider, Harry, is your past health history.”

Ginny flinched at the comment, but Harry only nodded stoically. She knew he’d been internally brooding about this ever since they’d decided to try for the adoption.

“It’s not that I haven’t thought about it, King.” He sighed and ruffled his hair in annoyance. “They’d have every right to question my mental health.”

“Well, the records are sealed,” Kingsley pondered allowed. “But the chances of someone getting the information in our Ministry are high. I don’t have to tell you the problems it could cause for you if it got out into the public that—”

“Yeah,” Harry nodded, annoyance darkening his features. “I don’t even want to think about what the press would do with that information.”

Ginny could see his discomfort from across the room. Deciding that the dishes could wait, she moved around behind him, wrapping her arms around his neck and laying her chin on top of his head. He gratefully took the comfort that she offered and rested his hands on her arms.

“I know how much the two of you want this,” Kingsley said earnestly. “I can promise you that I will do everything I can to make this happen for you.”

“We appreciate it, Kingsley,” Ginny said with a wide smile. “We really do.”

The large black man stood. “Well, don’t thank me yet. I’m not even sure I have enough connections to pull this off for you.”

Harry stood as well and shook his friend’s hand. “All the same, thank you for listening to us and for giving it a try.”

“Had to, didn’t I?” His grin lit up the kitchen. “I’m not one to turn down a Weasley’s cooking.” Ginny felt her face heat at his compliment. “Oh,” he turned just before he exited out the back door. “The two of you might consider getting married before—”

“We’d thought of that,” Harry nodded.

“Good,” Kingsley nodded.

“Would you…” Harry shifted uncomfortably for a moment. “Would you consider doing the ceremony for us?”

Ginny’s surprise must have shown on her face for Kingsley chuckled, a rich deep laugh that rolled about the small room.

“I’d be honored. Just let me know the date.”

Harry grinned and nodded. “It’ll probably be sooner than later.”

* * *

“Morning, Mum,” Ginny cheered as she entered the back door of the Burrow.

“Ginny! What a surprise. I wasn’t expecting to see you today.” Molly Weasley, famous in Wizarding Britain for her feasts, was just cleaning up another impressive spread. The fact that there seemed to have been far too much for only two people obviously hadn’t crossed her mind.

The grin that had been on Ginny’s face for several days faltered just a bit. This conversation was not going to be an easy one. Best work into it a bit.

“I know,” she said, perching on the edge of a chair at the table and snatching a piece of left over hot buttered toast from the center of the table. “Harry had an early class today and I didn’t have to work.”

“That’s lovely,” Molly cheered, “maybe you and I can get some wedding planning done.”

Ginny internally winced. Apparently working into it would not work. “That’s what I had in mind, actually.”

“Oh, how wonderful.” Molly’s grin broadened. “I’m so excited to plan another wedding. I haven’t been able to plan one since Fleur. Hermione’s mother, the poor dear, felt so left out that I just handed it right over to her.”

Ginny bit her lip to keep from smirking. She remembered how her mother had ‘handed’ the wedding plans over. The two women had always gotten along well, but the wedding put a polite strain on everything. There were quite a few times when Molly came home seething with anger about the exclusion of some magical tradition while the more muggle things took center stage. Arthur would calm and sooth, all the while grinning at the chance to wear Muggle suits, or have a Muggle wedding cake.

“I do want you to help me plan,” Ginny assured her, watching as the final plate of food vanished into the cold larder, a preservation charm topping it before it disappeared.

“Now, then,” Molly plunked down into the seat next to her and summoned a large sheath of parchment. Ginny’s eyes widened at all the work that had already gone into the plans. Her eyes skimmed the writing, hoping that most everything could be transferred to a closer date.

“I spoke with the man who sets up those brilliant tents, like the one we used for Bill and Fleur…” Awed by the vibrancy her mother was showing, Ginny could only nod along. “… and he’s available the third weekend in May, rather than the last weekend. I know we had talked about the last weekend, but I knew that you and Harry wouldn’t mind moving the date up…”

Seizing her chance, Ginny interrupted. “Not at all. In fact… Mum how much of this is done already?” She ran her hands over the parchments, appreciating all of the work her mother had put into making this day special for her daughter, and for Harry.

Molly startled for a minute, perhaps thinking. “Well, a bit of it. I’ve reserved the tent and the musicians… made inquiries at Madam Malkin’s”

“That’s fine,” Ginny nodded. “We were wondering…” She hesitated, hoping that she wasn’t going to ruin everything her mother had planned. It was all… lovely, it really was. But the bulk of it didn’t suit Harry and Ginny at all. “Keep those things reserved,” she nodded.

Her mother’s eyes narrowed a bit and Ginny gulped.

“What exactly are you trying to tell me, young lady?”

She sighed. “We wanted to ask you about moving the date forward.” Ginny kept her gaze steady as Molly focused her intense gaze.

“But why would you want to keep the tent reserved then?”

“Mostly for the press,” Ginny admitted truthfully. It had been something both Harry and Ginny had been dreading. So far, they had been able to avoid being the center of attention in all of the news. But the press was starting to get suspicious at the numerous sightings of them together. Plans being made for a large wedding were sure to knit all the pieces together and there would be a special edition Witch Weekly printed in the blink of an eye.

“Harry and I really don’t want this to be some… media driven frenzy.”

Molly bit the corner of her lip, just as Ginny always did when she was thinking about something, before nodding solemnly. “I can see how you would like to avoid that. But surely someone will catch on when we have to separate dates.”

“They would,” Ginny agreed. “If we planned something as large as all of this.” Her fingers gently caressed the parchment again. “Mum, I’m grateful for what you’re doing for us here. Harry and I both know the time you’ve put into this—”

“I’m doing it for you both,” Molly protested, forlornly staring down at all her work.

“We know,” Ginny assured her with a gentle pat to the hand. “But this big wedding… you know it doesn’t suit either of us. Something much smaller… here at the Burrow, is more what we had in mind.”

She hoped that her soothing tone, laced with a hint of pleading would do most of the work. It seemed to be working as her mother considered.

“Alright, I agree that I’ve gone a bit crazy. But I just so wanted to show you and Harry how much we love you both. And how happy your father and I are that the two of you are choosing to spend your lives together.”

“We know, Mum.” Ginny leaned forward and embraced her mother fully, eliciting a squeak of surprise from the woman. “I’m so grateful that you’ve been so accepting of Harry.”

“We love him,” she protested and Ginny squeezed tighter.

“He knows,” Ginny nodded as they pulled apart. “He’s just not very good at showing it. But neither of us need this… elaborate wedding to prove it, Mum.”

Molly nodded, her hands going back to the parchments. “I promise to make things smaller then.”

“Okay.” Ginny knew that she’d gained some ground. She felt a bit bad at using Harry as leverage, but being the youngest Weasley and the only girl taught her how to use an advantage when it came your way.

“I suppose that many of these things don’t really need to be there.”

“Exactly.”

“Well,” Molly smiled and nodded, making up her mind fully. “When do you want to move the date?”

Ginny bit her lip and braced her hands on the edge of her chair. “Two weeks.”

Molly blinked and then smiled widely. “Oh, well then, two weeks closer is no problem at all, Ginny. Why did you make such a fuss? Two weeks is nothing—”

“Mum,” Ginny sighed. “I meant… we want to get married in two weeks. From now.”

Molly spluttered and stammered, half formed words coming out of her mouth before she simply slumped, staring at all of her work. “Ginny, dear, I just don’t see—”

“We have our reasons, Mum,” Ginny protested gently.

“But… but I can’t pull together something this… a wedding in two weeks.”

“Sure you can,” Ginny grinned. “Besides, we really only wanted it to be family, Mum.”

“Well that’s a lot of family, Ginevra,” Molly scolded. Her cheeks were flushing in a familiar way and Ginny knew the yelling was about to start.

“Only my brothers and a few close friends, Mum,” Ginny stated firmly. “Kingsley’s already agreed to marry us.”

Molly’s jaw set and Ginny could see her gripping the edge of the table for restraint. The fact that she was trying to control her temper made Ginny realize how much she had actually been able to appeal to her mother’s heart.

“Mum.” Ginny reached across the table, taking her mother’s hand gently. “This is something that is very important to us. Harry and I want to be married now. We don’t want to wait four more months to have some extravagant event where we don’t know half the people invited.”

“If this is about the size—”

“It’s not really,” Ginny explained. “We just need—and want—to be married now.” She felt her face heat under the intense gaze of her mother before, strangely, she nodded.

“I… I think I understand.”

The shock must have shown on Ginny’s face as her mother smiled and reached out to caress her

cheek. “I was very much like that with your father. Our wedding date couldn’t come soon enough. However, he and I weren’t in the same situation that you and Harry are.” Her cheeks flushed a bit and Ginny knew that was her mother’s way of saying, once again, that she didn’t approve of them living together. Most likely, it was her regret of what Harry had been through, and the soft spot she’d always had for him, that made her overlook the fact most of the time.

Ginny opened her mouth and then closed it again, not exactly sure what to say. She’d come today prepared to fight for what she wanted. But the relatively easily won battle left her off kilter.

“And I can’t blame the two of you for wanting to avoid the press.” Her eyes took on a piercing quality and Ginny stared right back. “Unless there’s something more you’d like to tell me?”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “I’m not pregnant, Mum.” Molly’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not. We do have a specific reason to want to move the date up,” she admitted. “But we’re not ready to talk about it just yet. Please trust me, Mum.”

Molly stared at her for another moment before looking away and nodding jerkily. “Alright, Ginny. I’ll have you know the only reason I’m giving in so easily is because I have no doubt that the two of you would just disappear one day and come back married. Your father wants to walk you down the aisle and I want to be there when you and Harry are married.”

“We don’t want to elope, Mum,” Ginny protested.

“But you would.” Molly’s raised eyebrows made Ginny flush. Her mother really did know her children well.

“We would,” she nodded.

Molly’s scanning gaze centered on her again. “And you promise I’m not getting a new grandchild out of this?”

Ginny bit the inside of her cheek and forced herself to chuckle. “I promise I’m not pregnant, Mum.”

Chapter 12

Harry leaned heavily on the rail of the porch that wrapped around one long side of the house he and Ginny shared. He loved this porch. For him, it had been one of the deciding factors in the sale of the home. Ginny had been enamored with the large kitchen and dining room, no doubt mentally filling it with little redheaded, green-eyed children.

The porch was where Harry spent a lot of his time, thinking things through, planning lessons for the Academy, and being extremely grateful, in a strange way, that he'd contracted Dragon Fever all those months ago. The illness had been the catalyst for him and Ginny getting together, which, in turn, had turned Harry's life into something completely unrecognizable and wonderful.

He started when the door behind him opened and closed. Ron slouched his tall frame down to mirror Harry's position on the rail.

"Tomorrow's the big day."

Harry couldn't stop the grin that spread over his face. "It is."

"Everything seems to have come together fast." Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Ron shake his head in amazement. "I didn't think it could happen so fast. Hermione spent months planning our wedding."

Harry smirked. "Yeah, but we've not invited half the Wizarding World."

"Agreed," Ron nodded as his own smile broadened. "Nervous?" He turned, looking straight at his friend.

"No," Harry replied truthfully. "At least not for the ceremony." He glanced away, fidgeting with the buttons on his heavy cloak. "To tell you the truth… I've been waiting for you, or one of your brothers, to say something."

"About the marriage?" Ron's eyebrows rose and he looked somewhat confused.

Harry shrugged and stared back out at the trees that edged the property. "The timing, mostly."

Ron nodded in understanding. "It is a bit rushed, but if you and Ginny are happy."

Searching Ron's face, Harry found that he really believed him. "We are."

"Then we shouldn't have anything to say against it, should we?" Ron asked, a small smile splitting his face. "Some of us have learned that lesson."

Harry chuckled, wondering if Ginny had threatened some version of retribution if any of her family said anything against the marriage.

"But what do you *really* think?" Harry asked after they had both stopped laughing.

Ron studied his friend before shrugging. "I say that you must have your reasons. Just because I'm

curious doesn't mean it's any of my business, though."

Harry opened his mouth, a welling need growing to tell Ron about the baby. But just as quickly, he closed it. Ron had taken a big step by not prying into his and Ginny's lives by demanding an answer. If he said it was enough… then it was enough.

Just as quickly, another idea formed in his head.

"Ron, I was wondering," Harry cleared his throat. "I know that Ginny and I said we weren't having attendants, but…" He trailed off and ruffled his hair, trying to find the right words to convey what he wanted to say to his oldest friend. "Would you stand up for me tomorrow?"

The shock on Ron's face was evident. He stuttered and stammered for a moment before nodding dumbly. "Yeah, yeah I would, Harry."

Harry grinned and reached out to slap him on the back. "You look a bit surprised."

"I am," Ron blurted out. "I just thought… Well, I never thought you'd ask me, to be honest."

Harry nodded, feeling the emotions swirl between them. Ron's support of the wedding, despite his curiosity, meant the world to Harry.

"I should have asked weeks ago." Harry shook his head softly. "I guess I thought I could do this on my own. But it would mean everything to me to have you there for me, Ron."

He laughed as Ron spun on his heel and swiped angrily at his eyes.

"Don't laugh," he growled, turning his red eyes back on Harry. But the sight of his friend, eyes reddened by tears made Harry laugh even harder.

"I think its Hermione's hormones," Ron protested. "She's got so many that it just spills over onto me."

"Sure," Harry said, struggling to keep a straight face. "Whatever you say."

"Oi!" Ron yelled as Harry started into another round of laughter. "I said, shut it, you!"

"Come on," Harry said, clapping Ron on the shoulder once more, "we'd better get in there. Ginny wants to get an early start on charming the clearing."

* * *

Ron stared up at the branches above his head, awed at the charms that kept the cold and snow out and the warmth in.

Ginny and his mother had truly chosen a beautiful place for the ceremony. The middle of the orchard at the Burrow would never have been Ron's choice for a wedding in the first week of February. But, he had to admit, it was very romantic.

Dozens of candles floated above, making the snow on the ground sparkle like diamonds. While tiny

little snow fairies perched on snow-covered branches all around, giving an ethereal glow to the whole area.

“You did a good job,” he nodded to Bill who had just finished the charms for heating the area, while preserving the snow.

“Thanks,” Bill said, wiping his brow. “I had to search high and low for these charms.”

Ron smirked. “You should have just asked Hermione, I’m sure she’s got a book about them somewhere.

Bill chuckled. “I’ll remember that next time.” He sighed and glanced around, surveying all the work that had gone into the simple ceremony. “As long as Ginny is happy.”

“She will be,” Ron confirmed. “I think it’s more than she hoped for, in fact.”

His oldest brother turned and studied him for a minute. “I heard you’re standing up for Harry.”

“I am,” Ron affirmed, feeling the need to puff out his chest in pride. Harry’s request last evening had completely taken Ron by surprise and made him finally feel like they might be on the way to what their old friendship might have been.

“I was surprised he asked you.”

“I was too,” Ron offered. “But I’m happy to do it.”

Bill nodded, crossing his arms over his chest. “You don’t think it’s too soon?”

Ron peered at him before shaking his head. “No, I don’t. Not anymore.”

Scowling, Bill turned to face him. “Is Ginny pregnant?” he asked bluntly.

Ron fought the anger that rose within him. Sighing he took a deep breath. “Bill, I truly don’t know, but it doesn’t really matter, does it? They’re happy. Ginny bounces around everywhere like she did when she was a kid. Harry—Bill, I never thought Harry *could* smile that much. I didn’t think he knew how. She’s brought that out in him. He’s a better person, and she is too. And, frankly, I don’t really care if Ginny’s pregnant or not. In fact, if it makes them happy, they can shag up one side of the Burrow and down the next.” Ron grimaced as his brain caught up with his mouth and shook his head.

“You don’t actually—”

“I didn’t say I wanted to *see* it,” he clarified, “or even *think* about it, for Merlin’s sake. But the point is, Bill,” Ron turned to the only brother that rivaled him for height, “that I made a mistake years ago. And it cost me the best friend I’ve ever had. I won’t do it again.” He wasn’t sure if he’d gotten through to Bill, or if it even mattered, but Ron was satisfied. Besides, it was time for him to return to the Burrow and help his best mate get ready to marry his little sister.

* * *

Ginny felt as if she and Harry were the only ones present, in their own little private section of the

orchard. The sparkling, snow covered trees, the crisp coolness of the air, and even the small gathering of family and closest friends surrounding them faded into nothingness as she stared into his green eyes.

He stood less than two feet away from her, their hands clasped between them as they faced each other on the small raised dais. Kingsley was speaking in the background, and vaguely, Ginny hoped that she wasn't missing out on her wedding vows completely.

But the overwhelming feeling that this was the most right thing she had ever done swept her away. Harry's eyes confirmed that he felt the same way. Ginny studied his face closely, memorizing the small lines and angles: the deep emerald of his eyes, flecked with gold now and then, the way one eyebrow sat just a fraction higher than the other, the small dimple that formed just above the right side of his lip when he smiled.

"The Bride and Groom have prepared their own vows to exchange this evening."

Kingsley's rich voice invaded their perfect world and Ginny felt her face heat as she smiled. Harry chuckled, as did those around them, before he sobered. His hand slipped from hers and came up to cup her cheek tenderly.

"Ginny, you are everything to me," he whispered. The softness in his voice made her shiver. "You gave me the world when you gave me your heart. And I don't think I can ever pay you back, but I'm going to keep trying, every day of my life." As if he couldn't resist any further, Harry leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers.

He smiled sheepishly when someone in the crowd cleared their throat. Taking Ginny's left hand in both of his, he slid a thin platinum band onto her ring finger.

"I give you this ring, Ginny, as a token of my love for you. I promise to be yours for all the days of our lives; to love you, to worship you, to honor you and to uphold you."

Two small tears escaped and made trails down her cheeks. She sniffled through a smile and wiped one cheek dry with her fingers while Harry wiped away the other tear.

"Harry," she started, clearing her voice to be understood better. "I've loved you for a long time. I've never stopped and I'm not about to now." She gave him a mischievous grin and he chuckled. "I want to be with you forever; to build a family and a home together." His gaze intensified at her mention of family, and Ginny knew that the vision of a full future together fulfilled dreams that Harry had always had. His eyes watered a bit and Ginny smiled up at him.

Ginny fumbled a moment with his ring, grinning as Harry helped her slip the band onto his finger. "I give you this ring, Harry, as a token of my undying love for you. Of my commitment to be yours all the days of our lives: to love you and comfort you. To honor and worship you."

Her heart pounded in her chest, not out of nervousness for the promises she had just made, but out of anticipation for their life together.

"There is nothing so magical as a marriage bond formed in love," Kingsley said softly. "The promises Harry and Ginny have made today, before each other and these witnesses are a sign of that bond. I

add my magic tonight as a seal and a witness on this marriage. May it be blessed with laughter and love."

Ginny allowed herself to glance at Kingsley and saw his wide smile. Gesturing to the couple, Kingsley moved to the side saying, "I am pleased to present, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Potter."

Hearing the title she'd dreamed about for years, Ginny giggled with excitement and wrapped her arms around Harry's neck. He crushed her to him, his lips finding hers and kissing her intensely.

It felt like home.

* * *

His face was going to crack. It was as simple as that. Harry wasn't sure if he could possibly smile any more.

The day had been nothing short of perfect in his mind. He'd made the right choice in asking Ron to stand up for him at the ceremony. His friend seemed to be suffering from the same sore-jaw predicament that Harry was in. He hadn't seen Ron smile that wide in a long time either.

"It was a beautiful ceremony, Harry."

"Thanks, Neville," Harry cheered as he took the offered warm butterbeer and stood watching the small group of people milling about the expanded living room of the Burrow. At Ginny's insistence, no extraordinary decorating had been done inside. Although Harry could see that someone had bewitched the ceiling to look like the starry night outside. "Ginny will want to thank you for helping us to get those flowers."

Neville shrugged the suggestion off and sipped at his own drink. "It was really no problem. The two of you have been my friends for a long time. Seeing you together…" He trailed off and Harry focused his full attention on the man. "It's just right, you know."

Harry's chest swelled a bit in pride. "I know."

"It's about time, too," Neville grinned into his glass. "If you hadn't made a move…"

Was Neville implying what he thought…? Harry's jaw dropped. "Nev?"

Neville's laughter shook Harry from his stupor. "I just couldn't stand seeing her with Dean." Harry continued to stare and blink at his friend. Neville had never shown anything but friendliness toward their fellow Gryffindor. "Don't get me wrong," he continued, "Dean's a nice enough bloke. But Ginny… well, she's something special." His cheeks flamed when he finished and he stared down into his drink, perhaps waiting for Harry to pound him into the floor.

Instead, Harry laughed. "You don't need to convince me, Neville." The two men shared a chuckle.

Neville finally cleared his throat and Harry turned toward him, waiting for him to speak.

"So, I've been seeing someone, erm, sort of. And I was thinking that maybe later, after the two of you get home, we could, you know, go out together… or something. If you think you'll be up for it."

Harry couldn't stop the smile that spread across his face at his friend's stammered words. "Didn't you date Luna?"

Neville smiled, a bit sadly. "For a bit, but it didn't last long."

"I'm sorry—" Harry started.

"No," Neville shook his head and actually laughed a bit. "To be frank, she scares the shite out of me. I never know when she's going to spout something that's going to get me killed. This one time we were in this pub and she starts going off about how many miniscule animals she sees running around… thought the owner was going to beat me before I dragged her out." They shared a laugh. "Besides, she's a good friend and I really didn't want to ruin that. We never… well, it never went too far, you know."

Harry chuckled again and nodded his head. "Yeah, I can see that. Luna's great for a few laughs and she'll always be there to support you, but I never felt anything either."

"Didn't you take her to Slughorn's party?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded and smiled fondly. "She was a riot. And the best part is that she didn't care because she knew I wasn't laughing at her, you know, just at the situation and the reaction she was getting from others around us."

"I know," Neville nodded. "And she's happy now. She and Xeno travel all over the place writing the most… incredible stuff."

"Yeah, I've read a few of them. She and Ginny keep in touch regularly. She sent a bouquet of dried wheat when she heard about the wedding." He shook his head wryly. "She wrote something about… fertility or something on the card. Ginny insisted that we had to keep it, but it's in one of the extra rooms. She says sometimes Luna's things turn out to be true and Ginny doesn't want to chance it. I don't know. But Luna seems happy."

Neville nodded and they lapsed into silence.

"So, do I know her?" Harry asked and studied his friend's profile for a minute.

"Yeah, you do," he said and scratched his head. "It's Hannah Abbott."

Harry's eyebrows rose and he nodded thoughtfully. "I remember her from school. I never really knew her beyond the DA, but I remember she was nice."

"She and I talked a few times during school. We ran into each other a few months ago at the Leaky Cauldron and…" He shrugged and Harry could see his cheeks turn red.

"Yeah," Harry smiled. " '*And'* seems to happen, doesn't it?"

"Not usually to me," Neville sighed. "But this is different. I don't even know how to describe it to you, but…"

"I know, Nev," Harry said and laid a heavy hand on his friend's shoulder. His eyes darted across the

room where Ginny was laughing at something Lee Jordan was saying. “Believe me, I know.”

Neville nodded. “So, just send an owl when you get all this settled. Hannah’s asked how you’re doing. She enjoyed the DA too.”

“Tell her hello from both of us,” Harry said. He was about to say more when Ron and George came up on either side of he and Neville.

“Did he tell you where he was taking her?” George leaned over and pretended to whisper into Neville’s ear.

“Yeah,” Ron said as he casually bumped Harry’s shoulder with his, “because the git won’t tell us.”

“Not like you’ve asked,” Harry commented dryly. The three men chuckled and Harry was glad to feel the warmth and sincerity. He’d been so nervous that the Weasleys, especially Ginny’s brothers, would stand up and object to the wedding. He knew he should be well past that stage now, but he couldn’t help it. He supposed it might always be his response to question what their reactions to his intentions toward Ginny would be, although with Ron it seemed to be better.

“We didn’t think you’d want to scar us for life, my new brother, telling us all about your honeymoon,” George laughed.

George’s joke, made to lighten the moment, caused Harry’s throat to tighten. He wasn’t sure why it made him uncomfortable to be thought of as a member of the Weasley family—maybe simply because he’d never thought it could happen.

His eyes sought Ginny’s across the room and took comfort from the loving look she shot him.

“Excuse me,” he mumbled, nodding to the three men as he made his way to meet Ginny near the edge of the room.

“I missed you,” she said as the wound themselves together.

Harry chuckled. “I’ve not left the room.”

“I know,” she nodded and laid her head on his chest. “But still…”

“Yeah,” he agreed. Her flowery scent washed over him and he breathed the calming fragrance in deeply.

“You looked a bit uncomfortable over there,” Ginny observed as she pulled back, looking deep into his eyes.

Harry shrugged. “Not really. They were just teasing me about the honeymoon.”

“Did you tell them where we’re going?” She asked, straightening the lapels of his dress robes. Harry’s heart swelled at the familiar affection that she was showing him. It was a habit that she had, grooming him, when they were discussing something that made one or both of them uncomfortable, and it endeared her to him.

“No.” He shook his head and glanced down when she stilled. “Did you want everyone to know?”

The edge of her lip disappeared as she chewed on it thoughtfully and then raised bright brown eyes up to him.

“I was thinking about telling everyone about the baby.” Her nervousness was evident, but Harry wasn’t sure if it was the thought of getting his opinion or having her family accept their decision.

“If that’s what you want,” he nodded, gently brushing the side of her face with his finger. For some reason, telling her family that they were adopting a child didn’t seem as daunting a task as the wedding had been. Maybe it just seemed easier because he was there, in Ginny’s arms, and she made anything seem possible.

“Do you mean it?” she asked, hope blooming all over her face.

“I do,” he nodded. “They’re going to find out soon anyway. But I just…” His words were cut off when Ginny’s finger pressed over his lips.

“Everything’s going to work out, Harry, I know it will.” She smiled warmly and his heart melted. “I know you’re still worried about this, Harry—that things might not work out, that something will stand in our way.” She sighed and he marveled at how well she knew him. “But I know this is going to work out.”

“You never took divination,” Harry teased her and she rolled her eyes at him.

“Just have a little faith, Harry.”

“I do,” he confirmed, leaning down to kiss her gently. “I have faith in us.”

“Then everything will be fine.”

Harry laid his forehead against hers, their noses bumping lightly. “Let’s tell them.”

Ginny’s face stretched in a grin and she almost bounced in his grip. Her excitement rippled through him and he laughed as she called everyone in the room to attention.

“Everyone! Harry and I have an announcement.”

Harry held fast to her hand, swallowing the need to check for disappointment in the redheads of the room. He would have had to have been blind and deaf not to notice their speculative looks and murmurs all day. Charlie and Bill especially had been eying the couple all day—no doubt staring at Ginny’s stomach, waiting for a baby to pop out at any moment.

“Are you ready to leave now, dear?” Molly stood from where she’d been fussing over a tired looking Hermione.

Ginny glanced at Harry and shook her head. “Soon, but not just yet. We just wanted to tell everyone… we’re adopting a baby girl from Taiwan.” She giggled and Harry grinned down at her infectious attitude. “We’re going to be parents.”

Complete silence met their news.

“Wow,” Ron murmured, staring in awe at the couple. “Just… wow.”

“What?” Molly stammered her hand flying up to her mouth.

Neville was the first to move, striding across the room to congratulate them. He hugged Ginny to him and pumped Harry’s hand in a vigorous handshake.

“I think it’s great!” he cheered.

His actions broke the awkwardness and Hermione struggled to her feet to hug Ginny with a girly squeal. Ron joined his wife and clapped Harry on the back heartily. Most of the room followed, and the couple was swamped with questions about the adoption and the baby.

“Are you sure this is what you want, Ginny?” Molly asked as she hugged her daughter tightly, tears pouring down her face. “A child is such a responsibility.”

“We’re sure, Mum,” Ginny nodded, taking Harry’s hand in hers again.

Tonks and Teddy both hugged Harry in congratulations, although Teddy looked a bit disgruntled.

“What’s the matter, little man?” Harry asked as he picked the boy up into his arms.

“Well… nothin’, I guess.”

Harry glanced over to see Tonks shrug her shoulder.

“Come on, kiddo,” Harry coaxed. “I can see that something’s been bothering you.”

Teddy hesitated, looking as if he were going to deny it again, but moved his small shoulder up and down instead. “You’re married to Ginny now,” he said in a small voice. “And you’re gonna have your own kid.”

“That’s right,” Harry said, searching the boy’s face for some clue.

Teddy leaned his forehead against Harry’s chest, burrowing in his arms further. “You’re gonna be too busy for me.”

Harry’s heart twisted at the small words and he cupped the back of Teddy’s head, closing the boy into his embrace. “I’ll never be too busy for you, little man. No matter what.”

Tonks came up behind them and patted the boy’s back. “You know Uncle Harry won’t forget about you, Teddy.”

The small shoulder shrugged again. “And just think… now you’ve got Ginny to look after you as well.”

“Yeah,” Teddy mumbled, not entirely convinced.

Harry scowled, trying to find the right words to express what he wanted to say. He saw that Ginny was now hugging her father tightly, her cheeks shiny with happy tears.

“Teddy,” he started in a low voice. “I once thought that if I gave someone my heart—if I told them that I loved them, that all my love would be theirs. It would all be gone.”

Teddy pulled back a bit and cocked his head to the side, his hair slowly changing from its traditional blue to grey to black.

“But I was wrong,” Harry continued. “When you give love away, there’s always more there hiding behind it, to share with someone else. Just because I love Ginny, doesn’t mean I don’t love you anymore. And just because we’re going to have a new baby doesn’t mean I’m going to forget you, Teddy.”

Teddy nodded and sniffed loudly, using the back of his hand to wipe his nose and eyes.

“Does that make sense to you?”

“I guess so.”

“You love your Grandmum, don’t you?” Tonks asked, still rubbing his back. She smiled when Teddy nodded. “Does loving her mean you love your Uncle Harry any less?”

“No.”

“That’s how it works,” Harry confirmed.

Teddy still didn’t seem convinced.

“Listen, when we get back, maybe Ginny and I can find a Quidditch game to take you to, alright?”

“Will you buy me some choc’lit frogs? Like last time?”

Harry chuckled at the scowl on Tonks’ face. “All you want, little man, all you want.” He hugged the small boy to him and winked at Ginny as she raised her eyebrow at them.

* * *

“So…”

Harry turned and watched as Ron walked toward him, his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his heavy winter cloak. He came up next to Harry, who was removing the charms on the clearing where the ceremony had taken place.

“Is the baby at the orphanage you told us about?”

At Ron’s quiet question, Harry nodded. “Yeah.”

Ron nodded and removed his own wand, helping to undo the preservation charms on the bushes lower to the ground.

“I think it’s a good idea.”

The spell Harry was working on froze in his mouth and he lowered his wand. He peered at Ron, their breath frosting in front of them.

“You do?”

“Yeah,” Ron smiled. “I think you’ll be a great dad, Harry. You’re already better with Teddy than I’ll ever be.” His face darkened a bit and Harry wondered if he had regrets about being Teddy’s Godfather after all. “I’ve been trying harder lately, though.”

Harry nodded. “I’m scared.” He felt fifteen again, sharing something this important with Ron without having to weigh how much it would cost him.

Ron chuckled. “Yeah. Me too.” Harry nodded his head, knowing that they must be sharing a few of the same anxieties. Hermione was only a few weeks away from her due date. Then again, Ron had been given months to get used to the idea of being a father. Harry had only known for a few weeks.

“I thought you’d be mad,” Harry admitted, removing another charm and watching the snow settle back to its original state.

Ron stopped his own movement and turned to look at him. “Harry, I told Bill this earlier today… and I guess it’s about time that I told you. I made a mistake a long time ago. I put my own need to have my sister be protected before your needs. I told you, and Ginny, how to live your lives. I won’t ever do that again, Harry.” His honest face made Harry consider that Ron truly believed what he was saying.

“I appreciate that, Ron,” Harry said softly. “It means a lot to me.”

“No problem, mate,” Ron grinned, and then returned to removing charms from the orchard. They worked in silence until the clearing was left as it had always been.

“Hey, Harry?” As they walked back toward the almost dark house, Ron spoke up.

“Yeah?”

“Hermione and I were wondering… and you don’t have to say yes, you know.”

Harry chuckled. “Ron… just ask me.”

“Yeah,” Ron said, ruffling his hair in nervousness. “Well, we were talking about Godparents for the baby…”

Harry had a feeling he knew what the question was going to be, but he waited for Ron to voice it, unsure of his feelings about it.

“Would you and Ginny… well…”

“Ron.”

“Would you and Ginny be the Godparents?”

Harry contemplated for a minute, slowing his steps. “Can you answer me a question?”

Ron glanced at him apprehensively. “Sure.”

Stopping completely just outside the rectangle of light made by the kitchen window of the Burrow, Harry turned to face him completely. “Are you doing this to make up for before?”

“I wish I could have those years back,” Ron said softly. “But I can’t.” His earnest blue eyes met Harry’s, bright and clear in the dark. “When Hermione and I were talking about it, there was only one choice, Harry.”

Harry considered that, shivering as the cold of the night seeped into his cloak. “I need to talk to Ginny about it.”

“That’s fine. Really. No problem.” Ron looked more than pleased that Harry was even considering it and clapped his friend on the shoulder as they entered the house.

Chapter 13

Taipai City wasn't as intimidating the second time, Ginny decided. It was just as exotic, but she felt a bit more comfortable following Harry through the crowds.

Only taking two days to celebrate their own marriage at home, the Potters accepted the first Portkey to the Orient. Their desire to see and hold the baby was overwhelming. Kingsley promised that he was working on the paperwork and that he felt it would be fine for them to make arrangements with Pó Pó to visit the little girl.

"We really need to think of a name for her," Harry said as they made the final turn down the dirty alleyway that led to the orphanage. Ginny giddily watched as Harry's smile showed up more and more readily as the hours clicked away. Having a family wasn't a dream that Harry had allowed himself in a long time. And now that it was on its way, it seemed he could hardly contain his excitement.

"We do," Ginny confirmed, grasping his hand even tighter. "We should talk to Pó Pó about it."

"That's a good idea," Harry complimented, pulling her into his arms and spinning her around before kissing her soundly. Ginny clutched at him, deepening the kiss as they swayed side to side. They only broke apart when loud giggles and snickers interrupted them.

Laughter escaped Harry as they spun around, seeing the children from the orphanage spill out the door and down the rickety steps.

"Harry! Harry!" they all cheered as the swarmed the couple. Harry lifted one boy to his back, thin arms and legs wrapping around him like a monkey. Two more children were in his arms and two were clinging to his legs, sitting on his shoes, as he moaned and groaned theatrically under the load. Ginny giggled at his playfulness and swung two little girls up into her own arms. They herded the rest of the children back up into the building as Pó Pó and Sun hid their laughter behind hands.

"Nǐ hǎo," Harry greeted in a hoarse voice, his throat constricted by wiggly arms.

"Nǐ hǎo," Ginny echoed him. The two women bowed low and quickly ushered the children back to their studies. Reluctantly, the children being carried released their holds and scampered about after Sun.

"You have come back," Pó Pó nodded. "I know you will come back."

Harry grinned at Ginny and took her hand in his. "We want to talk to you about adopting the baby."

"Yes," Pó Pó nodded. "I see that, the first time you see her." She motioned to the stairs. "Lai, Lai." Hands clasped tightly together, they followed her up, to where the baby would be. "She sleeps," Pó Pó informed them, her shaking aged finger held up to her lips.

Ginny's heart pounded in her throat. She could feel Harry shaking as well. The stairway felt as if it stretched forever as they climbed, shoulder to shoulder. Harry's breathing was harsh and shallow. She forced a nervous smile on her face and squeezed his sweaty palm.

The upstairs was just as they'd left it a month ago; small beds covered in paper thin blankets, dingy windows letting in too little light. Ginny reminded herself to recast the quarantine wards, as well as the sanitary charms on the area before they left.

She knew that leaving now, after holding their hopefully-soon-to-be daughter might rip her heart out. But the urge to hold the baby, to feel soft breath tickle the skin of her neck and have her tiny body cuddle into Ginny, was almost overwhelming.

Pó Pó held her hand toward the little cot in the corner where they could just make out the small baby, her back rising and falling as she slept, swaddled tightly in her thin blanket.

"She's grown so much," Ginny gasped. Harry moved aside to allow Ginny to enter the room first. She hurried over to the cot, reaching her hand inside to brush the baby-fine thatch of black hair. "Oh, Harry, she doesn't even look the same."

"I know, Gin," Harry whispered, coming up behind his wife and settling his hands on her shoulders. "Hold her," he urged softly. Ginny held her breath for a moment while she lifted the tiny body into her arms. The baby started, but then settled back into the embrace, taking a large shuddering sigh.

Harry quickly conjured a rocking chair and helped Ginny to sit. She loosened the blanket a bit, enough to see the baby's tiny hands.

"Do you want to hold her?"

"In a minute, love," he confirmed, sinking to his knees next to them and laying his head on Ginny's shoulder.

"You must choose a strong name," Pó Pó said from the corner of the room. Ginny looked up, having forgotten the woman was even still in the room. She and Harry exchanged a look.

"We don't know how to choose, Pó Pó," Harry said softly, his finger lightly tracing the baby's forehead.

"Close your eyes," she commanded. "What do you feel?"

"I feel… peace," Harry said, his eyes lifting to take in Ginny and the baby. "Like everything in my life is coming together."

"Peaceful clarity," Pó Pó nodded. "Anming."

Ginny's heart thudded in her chest as she stared down at the baby. "Anming Potter," she whispered. "I like it."

Harry nodded. "Anming. Peaceful clarity." They shared a look, the weight of naming their daughter settling on them. Ginny reached down and let Anming's tiny hand wrap around her fingers. Harry placed a kiss on her forehead as Pó Pó slipped out of the room, leaving the small family.

* * *

Holding his daughter had to be the best feeling in the world, next to holding Ginny, Harry decided.

He perched Anming on his knee, holding her head a bit with one hand. Sun had told them the day before, when he and Ginny had conjured a thick blanket and lay on the floor, trying to get the baby to respond, that babies in orphanages usually developed slower. She said she believed it had much to do with having too many bodies to take care of and not enough time to cuddle and love the little ones.

And Harry had to agree a bit. Just in the week since they'd been here in Taiwan, Anming was showing definite signs of improved health. Harry and Ginny were lavishing attention on the infant.

But the week was fading, Harry knew, and they would soon need to go back to England, leaving Anming behind once again.

"I'm not sure I can do it," Ginny said from behind him, startling him just a bit. He knew what she was talking about, without even having to ask.

"I know," he whispered hoarsely, emotion choking his voice. His finger, looking so enormous against Ahming's face, brushed her cheek softly and she shifted in his arms, making a soft cooing sound. Her dark eyes studied him intensely, and Harry stared right back.

"Do you think she knows who I am?" Harry asked quietly. He felt Ginny come up behind him and put her arm around his shoulder as she sat on the arm of the chair.

"I don't know," she answered. "But I want to believe she knows who we are, that we love her and are fighting for her."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, smiling as Anming's tiny pink tongue darted out and twisted on her lips. She squirmed a bit and yawned widely. Ginny reached for her blanket to swaddle her tightly.

"Someone's getting tired," Ginny observed with a smile. "Too much play time with Daddy."

Her words, as she gathered the little girl into the blanket, shook Harry to his core. Hearing himself called 'Daddy' awoke something deep inside him; something that he couldn't even put a name to, really. Like down in the hollow of his body, some ancient song had been released, something that only he could hear.

"She's going to be ours," he affirmed in an awed whisper.

Ginny finished wrapping the baby and held her out to Harry once again. "She already is, Harry."

* * *

Harry needed to concentrate just to keep his attention focused on the class in front of him. Magical and Muggle Surveillance had never seemed as useless as it did right now. He knew that Ginny was having the same issues as he was. The night they'd finally returned from their honeymoon in Taiwan, they'd stayed up almost around the clock, arranging the nursery.

Ginny chose a buttery pale yellow for the walls and Harry had hung white wainscoting around the entire room. They'd talked and laughed and cried through the whole project.

Visions of bringing their daughter home swam through his mind as he assigned the next chapters for reading to his students.

"You alright, mate?" Ron asked as the rest of the trainees filed out of the doorway.

"Yeah," Harry replied, ruffling his hair a bit. "Just… just distracted." He flicked his wand and the classroom righted itself once again, desks lining up perfectly, and floors clean and pristine once more. "Oh, hey, how's Hermione doing?"

"Any day now," Ron answered proudly. His hand retrieved a flat stone the size of his palm from his pants pocket. "I just wait for it to grow warmer and then I'll Apparate out."

Harry grinned and nodded. "Leave it to Hermione to think of something like that."

"Yeah," Ron chuckled. "So… things are good?" His raised eyebrow and shrewd look made Harry smile sheepishly.

"They are," Harry nodded. "I… we're just both distracted, you know. All we can think about is bringing her home."

"Have you heard anything else?"

"No," Harry answered with a frustrated huff of breath. "It's all down to paperwork now. I'm hoping that we hear something soon. Ginny's going to go barmy if not."

Ron grinned and clapped Harry on the shoulder as they walked out of the room. "Looks like she's not the only one."

Harry chuckled and shook his head. "No, she's not. I just… I just want her home, with us," he said quietly to Ron.

Ron nodded. "It's where she belongs."

* * *

Back in his office two hours later, Harry had lost himself in his lesson plans for the next week. Thankfully, he'd been able to concentrate after looking in on Ginny. In her free time, she'd been magically scrubbing her offices. It made him grin, thinking about how she cleaned when she was angry or frustrated. She'd always been a bit like that, he remembered. Fortunately, she hadn't had to resort much to that in their relationship.

He looked up when there was a soft knock on his door. Expecting one of his trainees, Harry called out for them to enter while he organized his files.

It was Kingsley, however, who entered. Harry stood up abruptly, knocking painfully into his desk.

"Sit down, Harry," Kingsley chuckled, his rich bass voice filling the room, although it cut off more abruptly than usual.

Harry watched his friend closely, noting the tenseness in the shoulders and the stiff way he held

himself. These were the traits that Kingsley had carried in his few short years as Minister. He'd confided in Harry one time that he could never take the job forever… it just wasn't in the man to constantly be worried about every detail. He'd been more than happy to have Tiberius Ogden take over once the major remodeling of the Ministry had been completed.

"You're wearing that look again, King," Harry sighed as he sank down into his seat, pushing the files into a neat pile to give his hands something to do. "The one that I've always hated."

Kingsley forced out a smile as he took the chair opposite Harry's desk.

"Just tell me straight," Harry suggested, bracing his hands on the edges of his desk, his fingernails scraping into the wood. "It's better that way."

"Harry—" Kingsley started softly. "It's about the adoption."

Harry's heart hammered in his chest, threatening to break out of his ribs. His throat closed tightly and he nodded jerkily. He had known to expect this. Things rarely worked out right for him. But Ginny's own enthusiasm and determination had overridden his pessimistic tendencies.

"They're not going to let us have her, are they?" The harsh, croaking question startled even him.

Kingsley sighed. "It's not that bad, yet."

Harry groaned and jerked his glasses off of his face, digging his thumbs into his eyes. "Yet?"

"They've not denied it outright," Kingsley held out his hands in a placating manner and shifted in his seat.

"But you expect them to," Harry nodded, replacing his glasses. The hopes and dreams he'd had for Anming, for himself and Ginny as her parents, began to shrivel under Kingsley's appraising gaze.

"I don't really know what to expect, Harry," he admitted. "It's all down to the paperwork now. Everything was looking really good for a bit…"

"What happened?" Harry asked as he loosened the collar on his robes, feeling as if they were choking him.

Kingsley sighed again and rubbed his face harshly with his hands. "I thought that the papers would go through this week and you'd be free to go and pick up the baby."

"But—"

"But," Kingsley nodded while continuing, "I got a memo today telling me to stop pushing it through. They found something in the files, Harry; something I was hoping they could avoid seeing."

A weight caused by shame settled on Harry's chest and he swallowed thickly, guessing at what they had found. Bile rose into his mouth and Harry forced it back down without choking.

"They found your medical files, Harry."

Harry nodded jerkily. “And,” his voice broke and he had to clear his throat to start again. “And what did they find?”

“The notes that I put in there,” Kingsley nodded. “It doesn’t mention the suicide, Harry.” Harry let out a small grateful sigh and nodded. “But it does say that you suffered from severe depression that required treatment.”

“And they’re digging,” Harry nodded knowingly. Kingsley nodded, his hands steepled in front of his face. “And it won’t take much until they find it.”

“Harry, I’m… I’m sorry.”

The emotions in that single statement confirmed Harry’s complete loss of hope. The small picture that Harry carried in his wallet, of his family—Ginny, himself and Anming—seemed to burn in his pocket. Regret for past decisions, stupid choices made in the heat of the moment, filled him like some molten, slow moving substance. Like those shows of volcanoes he’d seen on the telly—where the lava slowly ate everything in sight, leaving nothing but blackness and ash behind.

“There’s nothing I can do?” he whispered harshly. “Nothing I can say, no one I can talk to?”

Kingsley shrugged. “If I knew, Harry, I would gladly tell you what to say, and who to say it to.”

“I…” Harry trailed off, feeling the stinging of tears at the back of his eyes. His past was going to haunt him forever. And now it was hurting Ginny and Anming. “I don’t even know what to say.” He shook his head, blinking quickly and cursing his emotions.

“Look, Harry,” Kingsley leaned forward on the desk, spreading his large hands over the surface of the wood. “I’ll do everything I can. I’ll make any statement I need to make. You and Ginny don’t deserve this.”

Harry nodded once. “Can they get a statement from the hospital?” he asked. “The Healer said I was fine to be returned to active duty—that should count for something, shouldn’t it?”

“I would hope so,” Kingsley nodded.

Getting up from his desk in one harsh movement, Harry disregarded the chair as it tipped over backward, a loud crash resounding.

“Can’t they… can’t they just let me be happy?” he bit out to the magical window, showing a meadow bathed in the low light of beginning evening. “I just want to be happy. I just want,” he swallowed harshly again. “I just want to make Ginny happy.”

“I know, Harry,” Kingsley said. Harry could hear him shift in his seat, but didn’t turn around.

“I gave them everything,” Harry continued in a low voice. He’d never voiced his feelings regarding his sacrifice for the Wizarding world—he hated even thinking about it. But those emotions were swirling now, bringing up the betrayal and coldness he had felt for so many years. “I walked into that forest, and I died. But everyone forgets that.”

“Not all of us.”

Harry turned his head so that he could barely see Kingsley. He nodded, knowing that his friend was telling the truth.

“And it’s not like I want much, you know,” Harry shrugged. “I don’t want recognition for that. I just… I just want to live my life. I just want my family, King.”

He ruffled his hair again, digging his fingers into his scalp until it hurt. “Why is it that any idiot can have a child? They don’t do IQ tests, or make you fill out endless pages of questions when anyone gets pregnant.”

“I know, Harry, it’s not fair.”

“Then why are they trying to take this from us?” Harry voiced, the agony in his heart seeping out into his words. “We’re doing the right thing. King… if you could see these kids, the way they live over there.”

Kingsley’s eyes bore into Harry, but he could feel the sympathy and understanding pouring off of his friend and boss.

“You know what I saw in the paper this morning?” He continued on, not expecting an answer from the man. “Draco Malfoy and his wife had a kid. A son.”

He sighed, his finger tracing the edge of the window. “No one looked into his medical history. No one even looked at the damn dark mark burned into his skin. And he got to have a kid.” Harry’s despair was quickly turning into anger; bitter anger that left his stomach churning and his head pounding. “All we’re trying to do is to give Anming everything. She has nothing. We’re not raising the next generation of racist Death Eaters.” He knew that he was overreacting, and that Malfoy wasn’t a Death Eater—no matter what he had branded on his arm. But right now it didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was that someone was trying to stop Harry from achieving what he wanted most in his life.

“Harry,” Kingsley said soothingly. “I don’t think it’s as bad as that. I do understand that you’re angry and frustrated. But… please don’t give up yet. I promise you that I’m going to follow this through. I’m going to do what I have to do to help you bring Anming home—where she belongs.”

Harry turned, biting down hard on the inside of his cheek. He didn’t want to break down in front of his friend—even though he knew Kingsley would understand.

“Now, go home. Talk to Ginny,” Kingsley suggested. “I’ll be in touch as soon as I know anything; you have my word on that.”

“Okay,” Harry mumbled. Slowly, as he shook the tension out of his arms, he began to feel the anger ebb away. But a hollowness took its place—and he immediately wished the righteous anger was back.

Instead, he just felt tired. Old and tired.

He didn't even bother to finish organizing his office before setting the wards and leaving the Ministry. He knew that Ginny would be home and supper would be on the table when he got there. But having to face her, having to tell her that mistakes he had made so long ago in his life were affecting them now, wasn't something he was looking forward to. He knew she wouldn't be angry at him. No, she would understand that things were far beyond his control. Ginny was like that.

Harry Apparated to the small clearing that was near the back of the house that he and Ginny were slowly making into their home. The lights in the kitchen were on, casting rectangles of warmth onto the snowy ground below. He could see Ginny's shadow in the glow as she walked back and forth, probably adding the finishing touches to another wonderful meal.

His eyes wandered up to the second level of the house, where two dark windows stood; the room that would be Anming's, if they were able to bring her home. Sadness enveloped him when he thought of having to leave her in that orphanage. His little daughter—she should be allowed to have everything in the world. And, yet, Harry might not be able to provide that for her. And it was nobody's fault but his own.

Trudging through the snow, Harry approached the back door to the house. The brightness of the kitchen made him squint as he entered.

* * *

"Hello, love," Ginny greeted Harry cheerfully with a wide smile and a hug. She immediately pulled back, though when Harry only reciprocated slightly. She knew something had happened—something large—when she saw his drawn face and the tension around his eyes.

"Harry—"

"I'm fine, Gin," he waved off her concern, brushing the backs of his fingers along her cheek.

"Are you sure?" Ginny asked, feeling even more worried at his affection. He looked as if he was completely resigned to whatever was bothering him. And that usually did not bode well. "Because we're having company for dinner—"

"Damn," he whispered, squinting toward the formal dining room where he had obviously, just heard laughter.

"You forgot," Ginny confirmed with a small smile. "No matter. It's just Ron and Hermione, and Neville."

Harry groaned and pulled her into him tightly. "I don't know if I can do this tonight, Gin."

Her mind racing, Ginny allowed him to hold her as she wove her fingers through his hair.

"What is it, Harry?" She pulled back and looked deeply into his eyes. There was tiredness in them and a dull look—something she'd not seen for months.

"It's…" Harry shook his head, staring off above her head. He seemed to be weighing the way to tell her something. "Kingsley came to see me," he finally said, a heavy sigh escaping.

Ginny's mouth went dry and her hands slipped down to his shoulders, clutching at his heavy winter cloak. A visit from Kingsley and the look on Harry's face could only mean one thing…

"The baby?" she whispered.

Harry's face twisted into some tortured expression. "I'm so sorry, Gin. I just… it's going to be so much harder now. And they might not even let us…"

Tears raced down her cheeks as she pulled into him, burying her face in his chest. She could feel Harry shake underneath her, even as his arms wrapped around her—clinging to her as tightly as she was clinging to him.

"They're questioning my mental stability," Harry mumbled softly into her hair as he placed a kiss on the crown of her head. "They… they know about Canada."

"Oh, Harry," she cried into the front of his robes.

"Ginny—"

They both turned, swiping angrily at tears, as Neville and Ron entered the kitchen.

"Oh, erm… nevermind." Neville backed up toward the doorway, but missed and ended up hitting his shoulder along the jam.

"Is… is everything alright?" Ron asked, taking a step toward the couple.

Ginny used the edge of her apron to wipe her eyes quickly and tried to paste on a smile. "It's fine. I think… I think we may have to cancel tonight…"

"Oh," Ron's face fell as she continued.

"Something's… something's come up." Ginny glanced over to find Harry leaning on the edge of the kitchen sink, his back to them.

"Everything… erm, is there anything we can do?"

"No," Harry shook his head, turning around. "Just…" He shrugged a shoulder and then started as the timer on the magical oven went off.

"I'll just remove the roast," Ginny said as she edged around Harry and mechanically took the food out of the oven.

"Gin—"

"Its fine, Ron," she stated to the pot of meat and vegetables. "We just…"

"Ginny." She turned at Harry's question, searching his face, which still looked utterly defeated. "You've gone to all this work… let's just sit and have dinner."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

“No,” Ron shook his head at the same time.

Neville seemed a bit trapped, his eyes darting between the other three in the room.

“Is there anything I can do to help, Ginny?” Hermione asked as she carefully walked into the room. She stopped, however at feeling the tension in the room. “What’s going on?”

Ginny was just about to answer that they needed to cancel when Harry stepped forward and grabbed the roasting pan.

“Nothing,” he said in a falsely cheerful voice. “Everything’s fine. Let’s get this on the table. It smells delicious, Gin.” He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “We’ll talk about it later,” he whispered, catching her eye and winking.

Ginny stood frozen, watching as Harry carried the food past Hermione and into the dining room.

“Gin—” Ron started again.

“It’ll be fine, Ron. Just… just something at the Ministry.” Determined to follow Harry’s lead, Ginny took a deep breath and reached out to lead her brother and Neville into the room. “Come on, don’t let it get cold.”

Dinner was stiff and very uncomfortable. Small talk was all that the five could manage. Once the latest Quidditch matches had been dissected and Neville had told all about accepting the position of teaching Herbology at Hogwarts, an awkward silence fell on the room.

“So… any news about the adoption?” Ron asked, clearly searching for some topic to bring up.

Ginny flinched and looked over at Harry, who was pushing around the last of his roasted potatoes and carrots on his plate.

“It’s been delayed,” he said in a quiet, dull voice.

“Oh,” Ron mumbled, clearly seeing that the subject wasn’t one that Harry wanted to discuss.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Hermione asked, leaning forward to rest her elbows on the table in front of her. Ginny recognized the concern in her friend’s voice and was heartened by it. “It wasn’t something we said, was it? When they came to interview us?”

“Yeah, mate,” Ron shifted nervously in his chair. “We told them what a great job the two of you do with Teddy and all.”

“Thank you, Ron,” Ginny said, sincerely meaning it. She knew that the Ministry social workers had been to see most of her family. From what Harry had hinted, however, it wasn’t something anyone had said. No one in her family knew about Harry’s suicide attempt, or his stay in the Canadian hospital.

Harry smiled tightly and gave them both a grateful nod. “No, it’s… it’s nothing you can help with. But we appreciate the offer.” He pushed the remainder of his food away from him and reached for Ginny’s hand under the table. She winced when he grasped it so hard, but understood that he was

searching for anything to hold onto right now.

“Are you sure, Harry?” Hermione peered at him closely. Ginny felt him twitch as he shook his head.

“I’m sure everything will be fine,” Ginny insisted. “Does anybody want cake?”

“Here,” Neville said, standing quickly to help gather the plates. “I’ll help.” He looked grateful to have something to do, so Ginny didn’t protest his assistance.

She could still hear Hermione asking Harry questions as she hurriedly deposited the dishes into the sink.

Neville’s gentle touch on her shoulder made her gasp as a sob welled in her throat. “It’ll be okay, Ginny,” he said softly as he hugged her. She and Neville had become close friends during the time when the Trio had been off hunting Horcruxes. Neville and Luna had been the only friends that Ginny had been able to rely on completely. And Neville had stepped in more than once to take punishment from the Carrows’ that Ginny had earned. “Whatever it is, we can all get through it.”

She didn’t trust herself to answer, so Ginny only nodded into his shoulder.

“Come on,” Neville said, taking Ginny’s hand in a friendly gesture. “Let’s get that cake back in there before Hermione asks him what color his knickers are.”

Ginny snorted out a laugh and nodded, quickly wiping her tears while Neville levitated both the cake and a stack of small plates in front of him.

“Ginny, this cake looks absolutely amazing,” Neville cheered as the entered the dining room again.

Ginny winced as Harry looked pleadingly up to her. He appeared rather wild right now, with his robes undone and his hair standing up all over. She knew his hands had been in it—it was such a nervous habit of his.

“Here, Ginny, you sit down, I’ll dish it up,” Neville said cheerfully. Ginny silently said a little prayer of gratitude for Neville as he continued to chatter on, asking her about the recipe and venting his amazement that Harry didn’t weigh over twenty stone due to Ginny’s cooking.

“She is amazing,” Harry agreed in a soft voice, as he squeezed her hand lightly.

“This is even better than Mum’s, Gin,” Ron complimented—at least that’s what Ginny thought he said through his mouthful of chocolate cake.

“You lie,” Ginny teased as she took her own bite.

Ron valiantly stepped up the teasing and the two siblings bantered back and forth, sometimes joined by Neville as they ate their cake. Harry seemed to be forcing small bites down his throat as he became more and more reserved. Hermione, however, was the one who was worrying Ginny. She hadn’t said much while eating the pudding, and stared intently at Harry as if he were a puzzle she was trying to figure out.

“Are you sure—”

“Hermione!” Harry snapped, pushing the half-eaten cake away from him. “I already told you there wasn’t anything you could do to help.”

“I know, Harry, I just—”

“You won’t let it go,” Harry shook his head. “Look, it’s nothing you can help with. It’s… it’s something that I have to deal with.” He ruffled his hair again and flinched when Ginny placed her hand on his shoulder. “Something that *Ginny and I* have to deal with.”

“I understand, Harry, I really do,” Hermione protested. “But I just think that you push everyone away too much. If there was something that we could do—”

“There’s not,” Harry shook his head decisively. “Hermione, its something to do with my past, okay?”

Ginny could see how much the small admission had hurt Harry to let out. His shoulders tensed and he rolled his neck as if it were bothering him.

“Harry—”

Ron’s voice broke into the middle of the heated discussion and Harry looked a bit relieved that he might be able to escape Hermione’s pointed questions.

“We just want you to trust us,” Hermione said, sniffling a bit. Ginny winced as Harry shifted in his chair. His eyes met hers and she could tell he was weighing telling them the truth or not.

Neville cleared his throat, clearly following more than they had realized. “If you’d like me to go—”

“No,” Harry said quietly as he shook his head. “You have every right to be here too, Nev.”

“Harry,” Hermione broke in again, “nothing in your past should keep the two of you from adopting…” She stopped protesting and her face opened in realization. “There’s something we don’t know, isn’t there?”

Ginny’s breath caught in her throat. She wanted so much to save Harry from this moment; to sweep in and save him from the shame and embarrassment that she knew he felt. She wanted to be *his* hero, just as he’d been hers so many times.

“Harry,” she said very softly, taking his hand in hers again, “you don’t have to say anything.”

For a moment he looked as if he might be relieved, but the more familiar fierce determination took over as he looked at her. “I think I do, Gin,” he said so softly that Ginny wondered if she’d just imagined it. “But thank you.” Carefully, he leaned his forehead against hers and they shared a quiet moment, not caring that there were three other people in the room.

Harry sighed and pulled back from her, keeping his hand in hers—Ginny could feel it trembling.

“Last year,” he started, looking down at the table, “I was treated for depression. I left for two months to a hospital in Canada.”

“I thought…” Ron shook his head and furrowed his brow. “Kingsley said it was an assignment.”

“He was covering for me,” Harry said simply, his eyes meeting his friend’s.

“Then the rumors…”

“I’m sure some of them were true,” Harry nodded. Slowly, he extricated his hand from Ginny’s and began to roll up the cuffs on the sleeves of his shirt. Once both forearms were completely bare, he hesitatingly laid them down on the tabletop. The pale white scars were there… long and jagged. “I *wanted* to die.”

“Sweet Merlin,” Ron hissed, blinking his eyes furiously.

Hermione, however, had the most violent reaction. Her hands slapped palm down on the wood, making a harsh sound that made them all jump. “No! No! This is not happening…” She got up quicker than Ginny imagined was possible in her state, and walked out the door into the living room. They could hear her break down, crying loudly.

“I’ll go.” Ron stood quickly, his face still a mask of shock and confusion.

Harry quickly replaced his sleeves over the scars, his face reddening.

“They don’t understand,” Neville said quietly. Ginny’s head jerked up, having forgotten in Hermione’s outburst that Neville had even been in the room.

Harry and Neville locked gazes and Ginny knew there was much more understanding between them than either one had ever admitted.

“They’ve always had each other—or someone else,” Neville continued after looking off toward the darkness of the night outside. “They’ve never been alone.”

Ginny knew, a bit, that empty feeling of loneliness. However, she’d always had people she could go to. There was always her family and close friends. And while she’d felt thin pangs of being alone, it was nothing compared to what these two men with her had experienced. Flashes of her own imagination overcame her—growing up as the only child in a strict household consisting of an overbearing grandmother who just didn’t understand, the dark inside of a cupboard when you knew there were people on the other side who didn’t want you, the scary task of going to Hogwarts when you knew no one else, the hollowness of holidays spent with someone else’s family.

“Well, neither of you are alone now,” Ginny sniffled, throwing her arms around Harry’s neck. She searched for Neville’s eyes across the table and he smiled, nodding his thanks for her acceptance and friendship.

Hermione’s crying could still be heard from the other room, as well as Ron’s quiet soothing words.

It was Neville who broke the silence. “Harry, I just want you to know that I understand. And… I don’t… well, I don’t know what more to say.”

“That’s enough,” Harry whispered. Ginny knew that it was for him. Neville’s quiet acceptance had

always meant the world to Harry, even when he was too young to understand it.

Neville stood and nodded to Ginny. “I think I’m going to go home now.”

“Tell Hannah that we’re sorry that she couldn’t come tonight,” Ginny said as she hurried to hug their friend. “You do know that you’re not alone, don’t you?” she whispered against him as he held her.

“I do,” he nodded, brushing her cheek with his fingers. His eyes then lifted to find Harry. “Harry, I’ll be available if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Neville.”

“I mean it, Harry,” he reiterated. “Even if I have to go over there and get her for you.” The sly smile he wore looked entirely out of place on Neville’s still-round face.

Harry chuckled and came forward to shake Neville’s hand firmly.

“I don’t doubt that you’d do it.”

“I would.” The two men shared another deep look and it made Ginny tear up. “No one deserves to grow up in a place like that. Everyone needs family.”

“They do,” Harry affirmed, gathering Ginny back into his side and placing a kiss on her head.

Ginny melted into his embrace, the fear that they were losing Anming finally seeping deep into her heart. She heard the door close firmly as Neville left for the evening, but didn’t turn away from her husband.

“I’m so sorry, love,” Harry whispered and Ginny nodded against him, feeling a bit numb.

“It’s not your fault.”

“It is if they keep her from us because of a stupid—”

“Harry,” she scolded and he stopped speaking, wrapping his arms tighter around her. They’d had this conversation before. And he still couldn’t grasp why she’d forgiven him for everything in his past.

And Ginny couldn’t even explain it completely. When she looked at him, she couldn’t help the love and understanding that filled her. There was nothing she could do but forgive him when she loved him so deeply, and saw the love that he gave in return.

“We’ll get through this,” Ginny said with strength that she didn’t remember having. She pulled back and used her fingers to wipe at the tears on his face and her own. “We’re not going to let some paper-pusher at the Ministry say that we can’t have our daughter.”

Harry smiled sadly down at her and kissed the tip of her nose. “Do you know how much I love you?” he asked.

Ginny laughed through watery eyes. “I think I do, Mr. Potter.”

“Good, Mrs. Potter.”

“Ahem.”

They both turned when Ron entered the room.

“Is she going to be alright?” Harry asked, deep regret weighing his voice down.

Ron shrugged. “She’s pretty upset.”

“I’m sorry—”

“You don’t need to be,” Ron stopped him. Ginny watched as he fidgeted in his place, looking anywhere but at Harry. “I think it’s me who is most sorry.”

Harry pulled back a bit from Ginny and stood still, tension filling the room. Ginny kept a tight hold on his hand, however and stared at her brother.

“We’ve had this conversation before, Ron,” Harry said gently. Ginny knew it was his way of telling Ron that he didn’t need another apology. But Ron looked determined to say what he so obviously wanted to say.

“I know. But… I think I need to say it again.”

Harry weighed the options, his face traveling through several emotions before nodding jerkily.

Ron sighed and rubbed the back of his neck harshly. “I think I needed to see this—to know how bad it got.” He glanced up to find both Harry and Ginny watching him. “I had a part in that. And… I’ve known it was bad. Both of you told me it was.”

Ron rested his hands on the back of a chair and leaned much of his weight on it. To Ginny, it looked as if he needed it to hold him up. The magnitude of the revelation tonight had not completely hit Ginny, as she’d seen the scene first hand through Harry’s memories. But his two best friends—well, three when you counted Neville—had been completely unprepared for something like this to be laid in front of them.

“And, while I’ll never understand that feeling—I never want to.”

“I hope you never do,” Harry said with a wry smile.

“Yeah,” Ron nodded and then looked directly at Harry. “I want you to know that you’ll never be in that place again. I’m never going to do things to send you there.” Harry nodded jerkily. “And… I think what the Ministry is doing is bollocks.”

Ginny couldn’t help but laugh at this and Harry pulled her into his side, shaking his head in amusement as well.

“If I ever find the… *weenie* that’s doing this, Harry…”

For the first time that night, Harry laughed a full and open laugh. Ginny shook her head at the antics between the two men as Ron continued to vilify some unknown Ministry worker, promising all sorts of bodily injury.

The moment passed, however, and Harry glanced back over Ron's shoulder to the living room.

"I guess I'd better go talk to her, yeah?"

Ron chewed his bottom lip for a minute before shrugging. "Probably."

"Yeah," Harry sighed. His shoulders set and he leaned down to press a quick kiss to Ginny's lips. "If I don't come back…"

Ginny took a mock swing at his stomach and he dodged out of the way.

"Good luck," Ron raised an eyebrow.

Harry hesitated and grimaced, staring into the other room. "Thanks… I think."

Chapter 14

Harry took a deep breath as he shuffled into the living room. Hermione was sitting in his favorite chair by the sofa, a framed photograph in her hands.

“I was so happy that day.” Her words startled him because she hadn’t seemed aware he was in the room.

Harry placed his hands on the back of the chair and looked down to see what picture she was looking at.

“Ron looked so handsome,” she continued, “in those navy blue robes.”

“At least they weren’t maroon,” Harry joked, the corner of his mouth twitching up slightly. The photograph was of Ron and Hermione’s wedding day. Harry and Ginny stood on either side of the beaming couple.

“No, they weren’t,” Hermione conceded quietly. Her finger traced down the front of Ron’s robes and then she laid it on Harry in the photograph. He was smiling, but not nearly as widely as everyone else in the picture.

“How long had you been considering it?”

Harry sighed at her question and sat down in the chair next to hers. “I’m not sure it was a fully conscious decision,” he shrugged. “But I’d known I wasn’t happy for… a long time.”

“You should have come to me, Harry.” The hurt in her voice was evident. It wavered and cracked in the middle.

“I *should* have done a lot of things, Hermione,” Harry protested softly. “There were any number of people who I should have gone to. Help I should have gotten. But the fact is—I didn’t.”

Hermione raised her head and looked at him, tears slowly leaking out and dripping down her face. “What happened? I mean… why—”

“Why didn’t I succeed?” Harry asked. He continued when she nodded. “Kingsley found me. He arranged for me to get help at a hospital in Canada. I was there for two months.”

Hermione nodded and traced her fingers over the photograph once more. “And Ginny knows all of this.”

Harry nodded. “She does. She’s even forgiven me for being stupid.”

“Why didn’t you trust me, Harry?” Her tortured question made Harry realize what was at the heart of what he had supposed was anger. It wasn’t really anger at all, but hurt.

“I don’t know, Hermione,” he answered truthfully. He knew that answer wouldn’t appease her so he sat forward, leaning his elbows on his knees. “I know that’s not what you want to hear. I don’t

have all the answers, Hermione."

She studied his face. "You thought I knew, about Ron and the others didn't you?"

Harry looked over at the fireplace, chewing his bottom lip. "I think that might have been a part of it."

"How could you, Harry?" Hermione cried. "How could you think I would have betrayed you like that?"

Harry met her gaze levelly. "How could Ron have betrayed me like that?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond and then closed it again as she shook her head. "I never would have, Harry."

He nodded. "I wanted to believe that, Hermione. But I wasn't exactly in the best place to believe anything then."

"But… for so many years you pulled away from us, Harry." These feelings had been bottled up for years, Harry could tell. Tonight's revelations had just been the one to pull the cork on them. "Do you know how many nights I lay there, trying to figure out what I'd done wrong? Or cried myself to sleep thinking that we were losing you? And I could never figure out why."

"You never said anything."

"I did, Harry," she shook her head. "You just never listened."

"I guess not," Harry said in a small voice. She probably had said a million things to him over the years, but he had never really listened. "I always knew you cared for me, though."

"Not enough, obviously," she bit out, her tears drying fast as the earlier anger returned. "If you could do something like that."

"Hermione," Harry protested, shifting in his chair. He hated talking about his feelings and probably would never be comfortable with it. He searched his memory, trying to dredge up those sessions with the mind healer so many months ago.

"Making that choice… to try and end everything…" He saw her flinch but pushed forward, needing to say this. "To try and make it so I didn't feel the pain anymore—it wasn't something I thought about extensively. It was just a decision; and once I'd made it, I felt so… light and free. Like it wouldn't matter anymore. I wouldn't have to see everyone else happy and know that I couldn't have that."

She shifted uncomfortably, and Harry continued. "I can't go back and undo that choice, Hermione." He looked down at his hands and swallowed thickly. "And I don't think I would, even if I could."

Hermione looked horrified, her jaw dropping wide. "Harry, what are yo—"

"I wouldn't," Harry declared, unrepentantly, "because, as painful as it was, it made me who I am today. I might not have Ginny. And I might not have you and Ron. Even with the problems that I have, Hermione, I like the person that I'm changing into."

Hermione stared at him, processing his words. She finally looked away into the fire. “I don’t know what to say to that, Harry.”

“Hermione Weasley—speechless,” Harry chuckled and shook his head. “It’s a rare thing when I can accomplish that.”

“Don’t, Harry,” Hermione warned.

Harry sighed and ruffled his hair. “What do you want me to say, Hermione?”

“I want you to not joke about things, Harry. I want you to see how much this has hurt me.”

“Hermione,” Harry shook his head. “Do you think I don’t know? Do you think I can’t see it right now on your face? I didn’t do it to hurt you, Hermione. Believe me, my intentions were purely selfish.”

“And now?”

Harry smiled at her direct question. “Now… I have something to live for.” He glanced back over his shoulder to the dining room where Ginny was. “And I’m not that person anymore.”

Hermione stared at him and then sighed heavily, her gaze returning to the portrait of the four of them together. “I can understand that,” she admitted in a very small voice.

Harry slid to the edge of his seat, so that he could see the photograph too. “It’s in the past, Hermione. And I know it hurts you, to think of me like that. But things are better.”

She continued to look at the happy moment captured forever in the frame. “You and I—we’re different.” Somehow, her cryptic words made sense to him. Hermione’s fingers brushed over Ron and then Ginny. “They’ve always had people who understood. I have my parents, but they don’t really know…”

“I know,” Harry nodded, coming to sit on the arm of her chair.

“But you and I always had each other.” She sniffled and wiped at her tears with the back of her hand. “And tonight… when you told us all that… It hit me how close I came to losing my brother.”

Her whispered words made Harry’s heart ache and swell all at the same time. Gently, he pulled her head to his chest, holding her there.

“I’m sorry, Hermione.”

“I know,” she said in a muffled voice. Abandoning the picture in her lap, her arms wrapped around his waist and squeezed. “I know you are. But I just don’t even want to think about a world where you’re not around, Harry; where I can’t come to see you when I have a problem, or just need someone to talk to.” Harry only placed a kiss on her head. There was nothing more he could say—and it really felt as if he didn’t *need* to say anything more.

“Ah, look, Gin,” Ron’s teasing, yet hesitant voice came from the side door and Harry looked up, “they’ve made up.”

Harry felt a swell of gratitude for the siblings as they came into the room, Ron's arm draped lazily over his sister's shoulders. Hermione pulled away from Harry and moved to bury herself in Ron's arms, while Ginny burrowed into Harry's embrace.

She looked up at him, her eyes asking the question silently.

"We're alright," he whispered. She nodded and nuzzled his neck.

Ron and Harry locked gazes over their wives' heads. The blue eyes of his best friend rolled as Hermione sniffled again, and Harry hid his smile down into Ginny's hair.

"Let's get you home, love," Ron said finally, shifting Hermione. "With any luck, all this excitement will start your labor."

Harry winced as Hermione landed a well placed jab to Ron's ribs. "Are you saying that you want me in pain, Ron?"

"Erm, well… no, just…"

"Same old Ron," Ginny shook her head in amusement.

"Let's hope he never changes enough that we don't recognize him," Harry mused as he watched his two best friends bicker.

* * *

"Psst!"

Harry glanced into the dark shadows of the seldom used corridor in the Ministry and narrowed his eyes.

"Psst!"

He grinned when Tonks' bubblegum pink hair stuck out from a doorway. Casting a glance around to make sure no one was watching, Harry ducked inside. He really had no clue why she was being so secretive, but she seemed to want privacy, so…

"Sprung a leak, have you?" he grinned when they were completely alone.

Tonks plopped herself onto an empty desk, her standard, worn combat boots swinging back and forth as they didn't quite reach the floor.

"Nah, just always wanted to do that. Duck into a dark corner and pretend I've got some secret mission to fulfill."

Harry laughed out loud. "Well, now you have fulfilled that wish."

"Yeah," she grinned back and then sighed. "One more thing to add to my checklist."

"Did you really want to talk to me?" Harry asked as he sat next to her. His feet, however, reached

the floor and he resisted the silly urge to swing them like Tonks was still doing. “Or would you have been fine with whispering to any bloke walking down the hallway.”

Tonks laughed. “I actually needed to talk to you. I tracked you down here all the way from records.”

“Ah,” Harry nodded. “And you didn’t give yourself away?”

Her face lit up spectacularly and she scratched her head. “Well, I did crash into Davis as he was coming out of the Law Division.”

Harry shook his head in amazement. “That’s what that commotion was. I thought he’d just been careless and walked into the door.” The man had been reading from a stack of parchment when Harry had passed him. Moments later, he had been flat on his back in the corridor, papers fluttering to rest next to him.

“Nah,” she shook her head. “That’s alright, those Ravenclaw types need to be shook up once in awhile.”

“Well, I guess if it helps you practice your stealth techniques.”

“I did want to talk to you,” Tonks sobered a bit, peering at him closely. A year ago, Harry mused, he would have shifted about under her appraising gaze, or bolted from the room. But now, it didn’t bother him as much. “Have you talked to Ron lately?”

The question shook Harry completely. “Not… not today,” he shook his head. “We spoke two days ago. Actually, I’ve been waiting for him to floo me—hang on, is this about Hermione? Did she have the baby?”

“No, no,” Tonks soothed, pressing her hand down onto Harry’s arm. “It’s not about that. Besides, don’t you think they’d tell you? They asked you to be Godfather, didn’t they?”

Harry nodded distractedly. “Yeah, they did.”

“Then they’ll floo,” she reasoned with a head bob. “Besides, it’s not about the baby.”

“It’s not?”

“No,” she shook her head. “Ron’s… well, he’s been acting all… shifty.”

Now he was more confused than ever. “Shifty?”

“Yeah, and not just because he’s in Stealth and Tracking, if you know what I mean.”

“I have no idea what you mean, Dora,” Harry admitted. Visions of Ron ducking in and out of corridors, much as Tonks herself had just done, flashed across his brain.

“He and the other Weasley brothers met at George’s shop two days ago,” Tonks informed him. “I couldn’t make it but Neville talked to me about the meeting last night.”

“Neville?” Harry’s mind raced trying to put together Tonks’ puzzle. Why on earth would Neville and the Weasleys be meeting at George’s shop? He quickly shook away any feelings of foreboding—Ron had promised, after all.

Tonks sighed and rubbed her forehead. “Harry, you need to talk to Ron.”

“Dora, I still don’t understand—”

“He’s trying to figure out a way for you to get Anming.”

The pieces started to fall into place for Harry and he stared at his feet as Tonks kept talking.

“He’s been doing a bit of investigating of his own, you might say; even cornered Kingsley in his office—not that King admitted anything. Harry, I think he’s really serious. I’m afraid he’s going to get himself caught up in something that he won’t be able to get out of.”

“What do you mean?”

Tonks sighed. “No offence to you Gryffindors—but you don’t always think things completely through, do you?” she asked with a smirk. “He’s impetuous and impulsive—add to that he’s a Weasley, hot tempered and rash at times.”

“Oh Merlin,” Harry moaned, pressing his fingers into his temples.

“I just thought you might like to know that he’s planning something. Neville said they talked about one of the Weasleys adopting her if you couldn’t, and then just giving her to you.”

“Yeah, that would go over well with the Ministry,” Harry rolled his eyes.

Tonks chuckled and then let it die as they both contemplated the consequences of any action by a set of rash Gryffindors.

“It rather makes you warm inside, though, doesn’t it?” she asked in a soft voice.

Harry couldn’t help the laugh that escaped. He’d just been thinking the same thing. There was no way he would ever allow it to happen, of course. But the thought that they were all willing to do something so… bold and unlawful, was heartening.

“It does,” he agreed. He sighed and slipped off the edge of the desk. “I’ll talk to him, Dora. Thanks for the warning.”

She gave him a quick, sisterly hug and nudged his shoulder with hers. “Never said I didn’t feel the same way, you know.”

Harry grinned and wrapped his arm around her shoulders as they stepped out of their clandestine meeting spot. “Well, hold that thought, alright? Let’s see where the official route goes, yeah?”

Tonks sighed and nodded. “Alright, but you know us Aurors—not a patient bone in our body.”

“Are you sure you were a Hufflepuff?” Harry snorted.

* * *

A hand over his face woke him from a sound sleep.

“Harry?” Ginny groped again for him, patting his cheek gently.

“Mmmph.”

“Harry, wake up.”

Harry shifted in bed, reaching out to find his wife, who was currently annoying him a bit. “Wha’s it?”

“It’s Hermione,” Ginny whispered, tugging at the covers and extricating herself from their bed. “Ron sent his Patronus. She’s at the hospital.”

The word ‘hospital’ did it and Harry sat straight up in bed. “Alright,” he said, glancing at the clock to see that it was two o’clock in the morning. “Why do babies never come at a decent hour?”

Ginny chuckled at his complaining and he could hear her fumbling for her clothes. “When would you have them come?”

“How about nine?” he quipped back, struggling to get his legs the right way in his jeans.

“That would be nice,” Ginny sighed. “Victoire came at midnight, and Domnique was at three in the morning.”

“Well,” Harry reasoned as he pulled on a jumper and then had to twist it around to get it on right, “I guess they’re right on then.”

Ginny chuckled and wrapped her arms around his middle. “Maybe ours will come at a decent hour.”

“No they won’t,” Harry chuckled.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Harry held her arms around him as they descended the stairs together, picking up cloaks and necessary items along the way. “Come on then, Mrs. Godmother Potter,” he teased, holding his arm out for her. “I’ll Apparate you there and you can nap on my shoulder while we wait.”

“It’s a deal, Mr. Godfather Potter.”

The waiting room at St. Mungo’s looked like a lesson in redecorating—Weasley style. George was draped over one entire sofa snoring away loudly, his wife, Angelina, shooting him dark glares. Percy and Charlie were staring at a chess board in the corner, although it looked as though neither had made a move in some time.

“Oh, you’re here.”

Harry found himself and Ginny in a vicious embrace.

“Were we the last to know about this?” Ginny asked, looking around her mother’s enthusiastic hug.

“Oh, Ron made us promise not to contact you until Hermione was further along. He said that you both needed your sleep.”

“Nice bloke that,” Bill mumbled as he walked in blearily stirring a cup of coffee. “The rest of us have been here for hours.”

Harry scowled, wondering why Ron had been so adamant about them not being there.

“Think nothing of it, dears,” Molly patted them both on the cheeks. “He just said that Harry had an early class tomorrow.”

“More like he knew Ginny’s temper at being awoken,” Harry chuckled and then dodged his wife’s playful swing.”

“Nice one, Harry,” Charlie laughed.

“She always was a bear in the mornings,” Bill added with a thoughtful expression.

“Keep it up and I’ll show you a bear,” Ginny growled.

“Yeah,” Harry nodded, winding his arms around his wife’s torso, “but you’re *my* bear.”

Ginny leaned up to kiss him and her brothers all made gagging and retching sounds.

“Any word yet?” Ginny asked after making a large production of kissing him.

Molly only smiled indulgently at the two and shook her head. “Not for at least thirty minutes. Your father was taking some food into Ron, though. Poor boy hasn’t eaten since earlier today.”

“Yeah,” Charlie laughed, “it must be, what, two, three hours?”

“Charlie,” Percy scolded and then smiled, “it’s been at least four.”

Harry chuckled and then perched himself onto a sofa, pulling Ginny next to him so that they were cuddled together. The others in the room drifted back to their various pursuits.

“Harry?”

“Yeah?”

Ginny waited for a moment, her fingers playing with the cable knitting on his jumper. “If we can’t get Anming…” Her quiet voice trailed off and she nuzzled into his chest.

Harry felt the tension in her shoulders and began to knead them gently. “If…”

She pulled back, her face a mixture of apprehension and excitement. “If something happens… and we can’t get her. Harry… I want to have a baby.”

The sentence seemed like one of those moments that ought to throw Harry completely. But, once again, he marveled that she could know his heart so well. Her brown eyes were sparkling up at him, entirely honest and open. Gently, he brushed a chunk of hair off of her face and tucked it behind her ear.

"Is that what you want?"

"I—I think so," she nodded. Harry glanced around and noticed Mrs. Weasley watching them closely. No doubt she'd be screaming and breaking their ribs with hugs if she knew what they were actually discussing.

"And what if we do get Anming?"

Ginny chewed her lip thoughtfully and shrugged a shoulder. "If we do get her… then I'll let you know. But I don't think I want to wait too long."

Visions of red headed toddlers and black haired babies filled Harry's mind and he leaned down to press a chaste kiss to her lips. His fingers drifted across the flat plane of her stomach, careful to hide the movement behind his body. It wouldn't do to have someone see and suspect something already. The image of Ginny growing large with his child struck something deep inside Harry and he leaned over to kiss her again. "Sounds perfect, love."

"Oi! You two can't even knock it off long enough to congratulate me, can you?"

The entire room spun to see Ron standing in the doorway, a bundle of blankets in his arms.

"Oh, my," Molly bustled toward him, reaching for the baby instantly.

"I'm fine, by the way," Ron mumbled, his face betraying his amusement at having his child snatched out of his arms. "Hermione's great." He looked completely rumpled and out of sorts with his hair standing up on one side. But the ear to ear grin he wore told Harry enough.

Ginny joined Molly and the other women huddled around Molly, oohing and aahing over the rather red faced infant.

Harry joined Ron and offered his hand. Ron shook it gladly and clapped him on the back.

"So…"

"Yeah," Ron nodded, his eyes darting to the baby. "It's a girl."

Harry couldn't help but grin himself, feeling a bit foolish; as if his face would stretch and distort permanently from smiling so much. "That's great."

"Yeah," Ron nodded again.

"Hermione's doing alright?"

Ron shrugged. "I don't remember being so scared," he shook his head. "Maybe at Malfoy Manor." Echoes of Hermione's screams rattled in Harry's head and he winced.

“But… everything’s good?”

“Oh, yeah,” Ron nodded jerkily, his eyes misting. “It was just… intense.”

Harry could only imagine. He shook his head, not quite knowing what to say. “You’re a dad,” was all he managed as he saw Ginny take the tiny baby into her arms. She seemed so much smaller than Anming was, swaddled tightly in the blankets.

“I know,” Ron answered in a stunned voice. “But… you’re a Godfather.”

Despite being asked by Ron, and accepting—the truth of the situation hadn’t really settled on Harry until that moment. There was another name listed under his responsibilities. And, yet, it felt so much different than wanting Anming or even talking with Ginny about having a baby. Different—but good.

Words seemed excessive at this point as Harry watched the baby being passed from arm to arm. Ron stood next to him, shoulder to shoulder like they should have always been. And Ginny joined them, squeezing in between her brother and husband and holding them both tight.

* * *

Ginny stepped back and examined her handiwork. The white lace curtains looked perfect next to the butter yellow walls and the pristine white furniture that she and Harry had spent hours assembling. Despite hearing no word about the progress on the adoption, they had both agreed to keep assembling the nursery. Ginny had even gone out and purchased a huge amount of clothing. Bright spring dresses and cool summer robes now hung on their tiny hangers right alongside fuzzy, warm pajamas.

At first, Ginny had been hesitant to shop for anything baby at all, fearing the press spotting her and there being a huge front page spread about their impending parenthood. However, now that she and Harry were Godparents to Ron and Hermione’s two week old daughter, Rose, Ginny had the perfect excuse. Harry had even joined her on one trip, filling their bags with miniature Quidditch robes and a small broom. They had both been silent about the purchase, but smiled secretly, each hoping to see a happy little girl zooming around their back garden next year.

“I think we’re about done,” she muttered to herself, taking stock of the pristine nursery, filled with every need a child could have—and every want, come to that.

She traced her hand lovingly over the pale green duvet in the cot, smiling at the pink rosebuds embroidered on the fabric. Surely any child would be happy here.

The doorbell sounded from below and Ginny picked up the basket her curtains had been carried up in and hummed the newest Weird Sisters song as she made her way to the front door. Strange, she thought, most everyone they knew used the back door into the kitchen—just as had happened in the Burrow.

“Percy!”

To say that Ginny was surprised to see her older brother was an understatement. As far as she

knew, he should be at his office in the Ministry right now, not standing on her doorstep, with his hands shoved deep in his pockets.

“Hello, Ginny.”

“Come in, please.” She moved aside and let him into the living room. “Everything is alright, isn’t it, Perce?”

His head jerked back toward her after surveying the room. She narrowed her eyes at him, trying to figure out why he would be coming to see her. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to see her brother, but that his visit was highly unusual.

“Everything’s fine, Ginny,” he nodded, smiling in his formal way. “I had some time off today and wanted to come and see you.”

“Oh,” Ginny nodded. She knew there was more behind his visit, but he would never admit it standing in the middle of her living room. “Well, come on with me then. It’s just about tea time and I’ll make us up something.”

“That would be nice, thank you.”

Percy followed her into the kitchen, seemingly cataloguing everything in each room. Ginny wondered what he was looking for as she filled the teapot and lit a bluebell flame underneath it.

“You’ve really made this into a home, Ginny,” Percy complimented in a soft voice as he took a seat at the heavy wooden table and smiled a more relaxed smile.

“Thank you,” Ginny smiled. “I try.”

“And how are things at work?” Percy asked, sending Ginny’s mind reeling once again, tracking down anything she could think of that would send him here to see her.

“Things are good. I really love my job.”

“I was surprised to find that you weren’t there today,” Percy said as he watched her pour the tea into a fine china cup. “I stopped by there to talk to you and the Matron told me you had the day off.”

Ginny nodded as she set a plate of fresh scones on the table and poured her own tea. “There are three of us in the office now,” she explained. “That way we can still have time off and there is someone on call if there’s an emergency.”

“Very efficient,” Percy nodded, sipping at his tea.

“Now,” Ginny said, settling down across the table from him, “why don’t you get to the point.”

He looked stunned—either from the tone of her no nonsense statement or from her perceptiveness, Ginny wasn’t sure. “Point?”

“Of course,” she nodded, becoming slightly amused at his flustered state. “You obviously have

something important to say. Especially if you tried to find me at the Ministry and then came all the way out here."

Percy took another sip of his tea, a thoughtful expression on his face. "I'd forgotten how keen you are, Ginny."

Ginny chuckled. Only Percy could make that compliment sound like a bad thing. "It's one of my better qualities," she agreed. Leaning forward onto the table, she rested her head on her hands. "Get on with it."

His eyes met hers and the dark shadow there scared her a bit. "How are you and Harry doing?"

"We're fine," she said in a steady voice, fixing him with a penetrating gaze. "Brilliant, actually."

"Good," he nodded. His fingers played absently with the tea set in front of him: tracing the rim, fiddling with the spoon, sliding the saucer back and forth on the table. "I—oh, bollocks, Ginny." His face dropped until it almost touched the table.

The swearing, something she'd never heard spill out of his mouth before, shook Ginny. She stared at him, willing him to gather his courage to tell her what was bothering him.

"I came—I'm here to talk to you about the adoption," he admitted in a hushed voice, his eyes focused on the wood.

Ginny opened her mouth to respond but snapped it shut. What on earth would—oh. Percy's department was International Cooperation. Before now, Ginny hadn't even considered that he might be involved in the approval of adoptions. However, thinking about it made sense, since they were adopting from Taiwan.

"What about it?" she finally asked, her voice cracking in the middle.

"Ginny," Percy sighed, "I'm not sure how much of Harry's past—"

"Harry and I have no secrets from each other, Percy," Ginny assured him, now seeing why he was here. She wasn't if she should be angry that Percy was involved in the delay, or… well, she wasn't sure what to feel.

Percy studied her, possibly searching for the truth in those words. "You know about his… well—"

"I know about the depression, yes," she nodded, keeping her face as impassive as she could.

"Ginny, the notes in his medical files are fairly complete. Reading what I did, I had no choice but to dig deeper."

"Percy, let me explain something to you." Ginny sat forward in her seat, clearing her throat and thinking about the most delicate way to put things so that he would understand. "Before Harry and I even considered dating, he and I discussed all of this. I went into the relationship, and the marriage, with my eyes wide open."

"But you can understand why I am concerned."

“I can,” she nodded, “but that doesn’t make your opinion justified.” He opened his mouth to protest, but Ginny held up her hand. “Let me finish please.” Percy nodded and Ginny took a deep breath.

“If you were truly worried about this, Percy, why didn’t you deny the adoption straight away?”

“I… I—I don’t know.”

“Yes you do,” Ginny assured him. “It is shocking, isn’t it? To think of Harry that vulnerable. He’s always been so strong, so independent. And to see something like that—a weakness so large—is a huge alarm. But Harry is fine, Percy.

“He and I have worked so hard to get to where we are. And I think you know that. I think you see the difference in him and that’s why you hesitate to deny us this. He spent months at that hospital in Canada, Percy, and then months afterwards straightening out his life. And things are good now. *We’re* good.”

Percy stared down at his now lukewarm tea, his fingers tracing the gold bands around the edge of the cup. “How can you be sure? I can’t honestly approve this adoption until I can be sure he’s not going to have another… episode.”

Ginny smiled, despite the seriousness of the situation. “Not everything is black and white, Percy. Surely you should know that by now. We can’t ever really know what the future holds for us. And I can’t promise you that there won’t ever be a time where Harry, or myself even, won’t deal with depression, or any other illness, again. But we’re better together, Percy. We’re stronger together.”

She met his gaze steadily. “You can see that when you see us together.”

Percy raised his head and met her gaze, staring intently at her. “I see how much he’s changed.”

“For the better,” Ginny assured him and he nodded.

“For the better,” Percy agreed.

“Then what else is holding you back?”

“I just… I don’t want to see you stuck with this baby, Ginny. What if something does happen? What if Harry changes his mind, leaves again and you’re left here with her, alone.”

His concern, misguided though it was, touched Ginny. “Percy, can I ask you a question?”

His eyes narrowed and he shrugged. “Yes.”

“Do you always have to be told you’re being a prat, or do you sometimes figure it out for yourself?” Her question stunned him, she could tell by the look on his face.

“That’s not… Ginny!”

“Well,” she shrugged innocently. “I’m just doing what needs to be done.” Sighing, Ginny reached across the table and took his hand in hers. “Percy, you’re being a total and complete prat.” She

grinned as his ears glowed brilliantly red. “I love you for the sentiment behind it, but if you ever question Harry’s sanity, or my judgment, again, I’ll finish what I started all those months ago and leave you a jackass.”

He spluttered and stammered even as she stood and held him to her in a hug.

“Now… about my daughter…”

* * *

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Ginny kept saying over and over. Harry only smiled at her and held open the door in the Ministry.

“It is,” he assured her for what seemed the hundredth time. “She’s ours.” He stared in awe down at the little girl wrapped in his wife’s arms. Ginny hadn’t let Anming out of her arms much since they’d picked her up at the orphanage.

Pó Pó had happily handed her over and stood on the top step, her hand held high in farewell. “Yi lou shuan feng!” she called to them as they walked slowly out of the dark alleyway.

The reality of having a daughter—of actually, physically being able to call her theirs—was slowly washing over Harry. The first night they’d had her in the hotel in Taipei City, they’d been too awed and humbled to do anything but sleep completely wrapped up together—all three of them on the bed.

“She is,” Ginny said simply. The sleeping baby sighed against her and Ginny brushed her thick black hair. “It’s funny that it stands up like yours,” she mused, nudging Harry as they walked through the corridors to the Apparition point.

Harry chuckled. “For her sake, I pray that it settles down.”

“It will,” Ginny assured him, placing a kiss on their daughter’s head. Witches and wizards were ducking in and out of the offices that they walked by, each staring at the small family.

Harry knew that the newspapers would be full of the story by tonight. Upon Kingsley’s suggestion, Harry and Ginny had prepared a press release announcing the adoption of their daughter. He wasn’t thrilled about being the center of attention again, but his friend’s words made sense. It would be best to acknowledge Anming than to have the press make wide sweeping guesses.

They were almost to the Atrium when Kingsley’s booming voice stopped them.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there when the portkey came in,” he shook his head. “I meant to be, but I got caught up.”

“Its fine,” Harry shook his hand and grinned, for what seemed like the millionth time, as Ginny turned Anming in her arms to show Kingsley.

“She’s precious,” Kingsley said, his large finger brushing her face. “You’d better watch out, Harry, she’s going to be a heartbreaker.” He winked at them and Harry felt his chest swell.

“Just like her mother.” Ginny beamed at him as he kissed her temple.

Harry took Kingsley’s hand in his and gave it a firm handshake, his throat tightening. “King, I can’t ever say how much we appreciate what you did to help us.”

Kingsley’s rich laugh echoed through the room, drawing the attention of those who weren’t already staring. “It wasn’t much, believe me.”

“I don’t even want to know how many arms you twisted,” Harry shook his head.

“Well,” Kingsley smiled, “I really just called in some favors and made some promises.”

“It had to have been more than that,” Ginny added. “Things would have taken years if you hadn’t stepped in.”

Kingsley shifted a bit. If it were physically possible, Harry knew the man would be blushing. “They could hardly deny me what I asked with the press breathing down their necks. I’m sure many children will be able to find happy and healthy homes because you were willing to set aside your prejudices.” He shook his head softly and then touched Anming’s face again.

“What they were doing was wrong,” Harry stated with a shake of his head. “These kids deserve everything in the world.”

“They do,” Kingsley agreed with a nod. “You’re off to the Burrow, then?” he asked.

Harry nodded. “Molly and Arthur wanted to have a celebration of sorts.”

Kingsley nodded. “She owled me earlier. Please give her my apologies, but I’m going to have to be later than I thought.”

“We will,” Ginny assured him. Anming began to squirm in her arms, making little disgruntled sounds and screwing up her face. “Someone’s getting hungry,” Ginny sighed. “We’d better get going, Harry.”

“I’ll see you shortly,” Kingsley nodded as they prepared to Apparate out. “I wouldn’t want to miss a Molly Weasley feast.”

Harry chuckled. “No, no one wants to miss that.”

The Burrow was lit up like a Christmas tree when they Apparated to the clearing behind it. Despite their desire to introduce their daughter to the rest of the family, Ginny had thought it was best to feed Anming at their home. She also wanted to dress her in a special traditional Chinese robe that they had found in a small shop in Taipei City.

The jade green dress was gorgeous on the little girl, Harry had to admit. Ginny had insisted that he be the one to present Anming to the family—a thought that touched Harry deeply. He still wasn’t completely sure what the Weasleys thought of having a new granddaughter, especially receiving her in the way they were. But it really didn’t matter, he decided, because this was his daughter. His and Ginny’s. And nothing was *ever* going to change that.

It didn't matter that she had started out life in a foreign country, born of parents that she would never meet. She was a Potter now.

Harry had gone from being the lone Potter—the only one left in his family—to having a wife and a daughter. And, with any luck, in a few years he and Ginny would increase that number again. His vision in the Mirror of Erised back when he was eleven had never brought him the satisfaction and wonder that the real thing had given him.

Dumbledore had been right. Dreams were wonderful things, but the thrill—the best part—was living and working to make those dreams come true.

"Hello!" Ginny called out as the entered the deserted kitchen at the Burrow. Warm and wonderful smells filled Harry's senses as he stepped inside and uncovered Anming from the blanket he'd been using to protect her from the harsh spring wet and wind outside.

"Smells good," he mused, laying the blanket over the back of a chair and shifting Anming so that she could see the Burrow for the first time.

Her dark eyes blinked at the light and she squirmed her legs a bit.

"This is your Grandmum and Granddad Weasley's house," Harry said softly into her ear. He turned her to give her a full view, even though he knew she really couldn't make out the details of the room. "This is the table where you'll have a hundred meals."

"Wonderful meals," Ginny agreed, kissing first Anming's cheek and then Harry's. "Come on, I think everyone is in the living room.

Harry smiled and turned Anming so that she was cradled forward facing in his arms. "Let's go, Anming," he prompted, following Ginny's happy exit from the room.

The living room was full of people who seemed to be waiting just for them.

"Oh, she's lovely, Harry," Molly cooed, holding out her arms to take her new granddaughter. She cradled the little girl quickly to her and even chuckled when Anming's fingers—which were starting to get chubby after Ginny's generous formula feedings—wrapped tightly in her hair.

"She's beautiful," Arthur agreed, allowing the baby to grab his finger and pull it to her mouth.

"Hey, Harry?"

Harry turned as Bill came up beside him. The two hadn't spoken much since the apology he had tried to make and Ginny had rebuffed. Ron had mentioned that Bill thought the wedding was a bit rushed. However, Harry found that he really didn't care as much as he had in the past. Yes, it would be wonderful if all of the Weasley's accepted him. And, if he were truthful, Harry really wanted that. But, it wasn't the necessity it had always seemed so long ago.

"Yes."

Bill, who had always seemed to Harry to be so self assured and confident, shuffled his feet and

glanced at his newest niece.

“How do you say hello?”

Harry nodded his understanding and noticed most of the family listening in. “It’s pronounced ‘nee how’.”

“Nee how,” Bill said thoughtfully, before holding out his hand for Harry to shake. “Congratulations, Harry.”

Shocked, Harry shook his hand and smiled as everyone turned back to the newest Potter, greeting her in Chinese and laughing as she grinned her toothless, wide cheeked smile.

“Come on, Harry,” Ron cheered, waving Harry over to where it looked like they were all gathering. Ginny had taken Anming in her arms again and was waving for him to join them.

Seeing Kingsley standing at the other end of the living room holding up a camera, Harry finally got the idea. He grinned and went to join the others, helping Victoire into her father’s arms.

Harry wrapped his arm around Ginny and brushed Anming’s face with his finger. The rest of the Weasleys gathered in and smiled up at the camera.

“Hold on,” Harry held up his hand, glancing around at the others in the room. Tonks and Teddy were making faces at them all from the sofa and Neville was perched on a stool near the corner. After shooting an apprehensive look to Ginny, who seemed to know what he wanted because she winked at him, Harry stepped out and faced his family. “We need everyone in here,” he said softly, gesturing behind him. “They’re… well, they’re all family to me.”

Slow smiles spread across everyone’s faces and they nodded, waved the others in and cheered.

“Kingsley, you too,” Harry confirmed.

“Harry,” the man shook his head, “who’ll take the picture?”

Harry grinned at the man and pulled his wand. “Are you a wizard or not?” Conjuring a stand for the camera, he chuckled as Kingsley set a timing charm on it and shuffled to the very back of the group.

“Everyone in?” Arthur called. People jostled side to side, making more room as the others joined in.

Harry moved back in next to his wife, who wrapped her arm around his waist and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “That was very nice.”

“They’re family,” he shrugged. Ron, who was next to him, nudged him in the ribs, probably having overheard their conversation. Harry smiled at him, holding Hermione in one arm and Rose in the other.

“They are,” Ginny confirmed, looking down to make sure Anming was happy.

Harry grinned as the flash on the camera went off. He knew there was no way everyone had been facing the right way… it was next to impossible.

Author's Note:

Pó Pó's final words to Harry and Ginny, literally translated are, "Along the way may you travel with the wind". It means, "Good luck—may all things go smooth/your way."

Chapter 15

He loved late mornings. He had always liked sleeping in and spending a lazy day not doing much of anything. Some days were just meant for staying in your pajamas and reading books rather than running about every which way. Not that it happened much in life. But that's what made mornings like this one even better, in Harry's opinion.

Slipping out of bed without waking Ginny was a feat. Harry managed it with only one stubbed toe while he slid his arms into his t-shirt. He glanced one last time at Ginny's rumpled head hidden in a nest of blankets before quietly closing the door.

He crept along the hallway, careful not to wake Anming and Teddy, who had spent the night. Unable to resist, Harry peeked his head into his daughter's room and grinned at the dark head resting on the pillow. It looked as if Anming had gotten up, either in the middle of the night or early this morning. A mess of storybooks was spread all around her on the bed. Her favorite one, the story that Harry had to read almost every night before bed, lay in her hands, slack against them as she slept. Harry shook his head, wondering if she'd actually gotten out of bed to get them, or just summoned them to her. It seemed to be one of her favorite things to do lately; now that she'd figured out she could make things come to her, small toys and snacks were forever floating around the house.

The soft morning light warmed the pale yellow room and Harry could see a mishmash of toys, books, clothing and treasures strewn across the floor. No doubt Ginny would insist the room be cleaned later. But Harry never minded the mess.

The small broom he and Ginny had bought for her, seemingly years ago, was resting in a corner of the room, just below a shelf Harry had assembled to hold all of the souvenirs they had brought back to England on their many trips to Taiwan. He and Ginny wanted to preserve bits of Amning's culture for her and used Chinese around her when they could. They had framed photographs of Taiwan all over her bedroom. Even though she was a Potter, they wanted her to understand that she had been chosen to be a special part of their family. They hadn't been to the orphanage for quite some time, but Harry was excited to plan a trip soon. Maybe Teddy would be able to come along this time.

Speaking of Teddy… Harry could hear sounds down in the kitchen. It sounded like Teddy was attempting to make breakfast. Harry hurried down the stairs, finding the boy pulling out his idea of a good breakfast.

"What are you planning, there, Teddy?"

The seven-year-old boy turned and smiled, bobbling his armful of flour, eggs and chocolate.

"I wanted to make my famous chocolate scones," he beamed.

Harry smiled and snatched an egg as it slipped out of Teddy's full arms. "How about we do a traditional fry up today, little man? We can try for some chocolate biscuits later today, yeah?"

Teddy looked a bit disappointed, but shrugged it off. "Okay," he sighed. "Uncle Ron likes it when I make breakfast. Aunt Hermione says she likes it too, but she usually hides her scones or gives them

to Uncle Ron."

"I'm sure he does," Harry ruffled Teddy's hair and concentrated on removing the bacon, eggs and other ingredients for a traditional English breakfast. "Come on, you can help me with the toast. Together, they set about cooking.

"Uncle Harry?"

"Yes, Teddy?" he asked as he turned away from the stove, careful not to bump the pan of frying bacon.

"Is this how to butter the toast?" He held up a slice of bread, covered edge to edge in thick globs of butter.

"That's a bit much," Harry admitted, wrinkling his nose. "But you've got the right idea."

"Okay," Teddy shrugged and grabbed another slice off the stack. Harry watched as he carefully dipped the knife into the butter and concentrated on spreading it over the toast. The pink tip of his tongue poked out of the side of his mouth in focus, making Harry smile.

Teddy was a regular visitor at the Potter home and he was growing up fast. Too fast, Harry thought. But it was nice to see little flashes of maturity that pointed to the young man that he was going to grow into. Teddy was a sincere child, even if he was a bit intense at times. Harry saw so much of Remus in him that it was bittersweet.

Tonks had her hands full raising the boy as a single mother. But, in Harry's opinion, she was doing a wonderful job.

"That bacon sure smells good," Teddy called out as he held up his next piece of toast for Harry to inspect.

Harry flipped over a rasher before it could burn and chuckled. Teddy's attention had paid off and the toast looked perfect to him.

"That's great, Ted. You're now the official toast maker in the Potter house."

The boy beamed and turned back to his chore, pulling another piece in front of him.

"Bá Bá!"

The cheerful voice made Harry turn as his daughter hit the back of his legs.

"Morning, my little pumpkin," Harry turned to greet Anming, swinging the giggling little girl up into his arms. She clasped her chubby arms around his neck, squeezing him tight.

"Did you sleep well, princess?" Harry asked.

"I'm hungry," the barely three-year-old pronounced.

"Are you?" Harry asked, tickling her belly and laughing as she squirmed in his arms. Teddy giggled

right along with them. “Well, then we’d better feed you.”

“I can get her some toast, Harry,” Teddy offered, holding up a slice that was, once again, meticulously buttered.

“What do you think, Anming? Would you like some of Teddy’s world famous toast?”

Anming nodded her head vigorously and climbed out of Harry’s arms and into her seat at the table.

Harry pulled the last rasher of bacon out of the pan and ended the flame charm under the pan. He smiled as Anming watched Teddy work hard to cut her toast into good sized squares and sprinkle cinnamon and sugar on them.

The past three years had flown by for Harry. Nothing showed this more than his daughter’s face. She’d been so thin and tiny when they’d first seen her in the orphanage. Within months of bringing her home to England, she had developed the healthy round cheeks that most babies were born with. But now, Harry could see that she was starting to lose the baby appearance. Her face and body were slimming and she was turning into a beautiful child. Her black eyes did Harry in every time.

“Where’s Mummy?” Anming asked, as if she had just noticed that Ginny wasn’t in the room.

“Mummy’s having a lie in today,” Harry informed her. “But Teddy and I were going to make a tray of breakfast to take up to her. You can help if you like.”

Anming’s face, now smeared with buttery remnants of her first piece of toast, lit up. “Can I make the flower?”

Harry laughed. “Mummy doesn’t want to eat flowers, love.”

“No, Daddy, there’s gotta be a flower, to be pretty for Mummy.”

She was so matter of fact about her pronouncement that it made Harry laugh. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to find a flower then, won’t we?”

“There were some out by the meadow,” Teddy added helpfully, but then looked skeptically out of the window where it was gloomy and snowy. “But they’re dead now.”

“Well,” Harry knelt down next to the children, ruffling the hair on each head gently, “I’ll bet I can come up with something.” He pulled his wand from the waistband of his pajama trousers and conjured a sunny yellow rose.

“Pretty!” Anming clapped her hands.

Teddy stared at the flower. Harry laughed and patted him on the back.

“Why don’t you two eat and then we’ll take the tray up to Mummy.”

“Okay,” Teddy agreed, climbing back onto his chair and pulling a piece of his hard work toward his plate.

“Would you like help to dish up your food?” Harry asked. “Or can you do it yourself?”

Teddy glanced skeptically at the pile of scrambled eggs and Harry laughed. “You better do it, Uncle Harry.”

“Alright,” he agreed and spooned eggs onto Teddy’s plate. Once the children were eating, Harry sat down and poured himself a cup of tea. He marveled at their happy little conversations and interactions.

Anming was a brilliant little girl who loved Teddy as if he were her own brother. She was forever following him around, teasing in a loving way, and simply adoring the older boy.

Teddy seemed resigned to the attention, even though he did confide in Harry that he tired of it sometimes. Harry hugged the boy and told him that it was okay to feel that way.

“Are you ready?” he asked as they finished up the food.

“Yes!” Anming cheered, pushing her plate away from her and struggling to get out of her seat.

“Come here, you little scamp,” Harry called, “before Mummy sees breakfast all over your face.”

She scrunched up her face cutely, waiting for him to use the flannel to wash it.

“Can I carry the flower, Bá Bá?”

Anming’s sweet little question, asked with wide and hopeful eyes, melted Harry’s heart.

“Sure you can, love,” Harry squatted down next to her and kissed her forehead. “You can carry it the whole way up there.”

Teddy beamed when Harry handed him the plate of toast. “You make sure to let Ginny know you made it just for her.”

“I will, Uncle Harry,” he beamed.

“Well, come on then,” Harry said, carrying the rest of the breakfast and following the two children upstairs.

“Mummy!”

Any hope of a quiet, surprise entrance was dashed as Anming burst through the door. Harry rolled his eyes and prayed that Ginny hadn’t been sleeping. He shrugged as he entered the room to see that she was indeed awake and sitting up in bed, cradling three day-old James to her.

“… and Daddy let me carry the flower…”

Ginny winked at him, and accepted the rose from her daughter. “It’s lovely, princess.”

“And I made the toast, Aunt Ginny,” Teddy beamed.

“Your world famous toast?” Ginny gasped. Harry struggled not to laugh out loud at her enthusiasm. Teddy blushed as Ginny kissed him also.

“Can I hold baby James?” Anming asked, wiggling her bottom onto Harry’s pillow and holding out her hands.

“Maybe if Daddy helps,” Ginny said, turning her beautiful face toward Harry.

“I think I can manage that,” he smiled, setting his tray of food down on a bedside table and squeezing into the crowded bed. He lifted Anming onto his lap and helped her get situated while Ginny lifted the baby into her arms.

“I love baby James,” Anming said, leaning down to sloppily kiss the baby’s forehead.

“So do I,” Harry said softly, reaching out to take his wife’s hand. She smiled up at him and leaned her head on his shoulder. Laying her flower on her bedside table, she took Teddy’s hand in hers.

“We all do.”

Harry sighed in contentment and looked over at the yellow flower, resting next to a framed family photo. Harry smiled remembering that day, the moment perfectly captured in the magical snapshot:

Both Anming and Rose were crying and their mothers were trying to hush them while their fathers laughed. George and Percy were elbowing each other. Bill and Fleur were struggling to keep Victoire and Domnique in the frame at all. Molly was looking back over her shoulder and trying to give advice to all the mothers. Charlie and Katarina were bickering about something. Teddy and Tonks were on the far side, each pulling faces in a contest to see who could make theirs the silliest, while Kingsley and Neville laughed at the craziness of it all.

Harry looked down at his own growing family. It had been awhile since they’d all attempted a Weasley family photograph. Maybe it was time to try again.