

Consequences of the Heart 1: Alternating Scenery

Chapter One: Alternating Scenery

The Forbidden Forest

"OK," said Harry irritably, rounding on her. "First of all, 'we' aren't doing anything if you're including yourself in that, and second of all, Ron's the only one with a broomstick that isn't being guarded by a security troll, so —"

"I've got a broom!" said Ginny. (Order of the Phoenix, U.S. edition, page 761)

"Yeah, but you're not coming," said Harry angrily.

"Excuse me, but I care what happens to Sirius as much as you do!" said Ginny, her jaw set so that her resemblance to Fred and George was suddenly striking.

"You're too —" Harry began.

"I'm three years older than you were when you fought You-Know-Who over the Philosopher's Stone," she said fiercely, "and it's because of me that Malfoy's stuck back in Umbridge's office with giant flying bogies attacking him —"

"Yeah, but —"

"We were all in the DA together," said Ginny, her anger now bubbling over. "It was all supposed to be about fighting You-Know-Who, wasn't it? And this is the first chance we've had to do something real - or was that all just a game or something?"

"No — of course it wasn't -" said Harry impatiently, trying to hold his own temper in check.

"Then we should come too," said Ginny as if the matter had been decided.

"Well, you're not," retorted Harry, gripping his wand more tightly in his hand. Hermione and Ron were trading worried looks and Luna suddenly found Neville's swollen eye interesting. "You're the last person from the DA I'd ask to have come with us."

Ginny recoiled as if she had been slapped. "Is that how it is, then?" she asked in a deadly calm voice, her own wand inching higher.

"Yeah," said Harry, not backing down an iota, "it is."

Just as Harry was squaring his shoulders in an attempt to send Ginny packing, Ron walked between them, facing his sister, Hermione mirroring him as she took Harry's hand.

"That's enough fighting, you two," said Ron.

"We've got to focus on Sirius right now," offered Hermione anxiously and this logic finally broke through to Harry's brain.

"You're right," Harry said. "I'm — I don't know what came over me."

"Let's just get on with it, then," said Ginny, obviously still nursing her anger.

"Well it doesn't matter, anyway," said Harry through gritted teeth, "because we still don't know how to get there —"

The Hospital Wing

"Harry's heart began to race. He had not told Ron, Hermione or anyone else what the prophecy had contained. Neville had told them it had smashed while Harry was pulling him up the steps in the Death Room and Harry had not yet corrected this impression. He was not ready to see their expressions when he told them that he must be either murderer or victim, there was no other way..."

"It is a pity it broke," said Hermione quietly, shaking her head.

"Yeah, it is," said Ron. "Still, at least You-Know-Who never found out what was in it either - where are you going?" he added, looking both surprised and disappointed as Harry stood up.

"Er - Hagrid's," said Harry. "You know, he just got back and I promised I'd go down and see him and tell him how you two are."

"Oh, all right then," said Ron grumpily, looking out of the dormitory window at the patch of bright blue sky beyond. "Wish we could come."

"Say hello to him for us!" called Hermione, as Harry proceeded down the ward. "And ask him what's happening about... about his little friend!" Harry gave a wave of his hand to show he had heard and understood as he left the dormitory. (Order of the Phoenix, U.S. edition, page 839)

Taking a deep breath, he paused outside the hospital wing for just a moment before plowing on. A voice broke his concentration and he turned back to see Ginny Weasley straining on her injured ankle to catch up to him, leaving the infirmary door open.

"Wait up, Harry," she said with a grimace.

Despite his urge to ignore her and continue towards the Entrance Hall, he turned around and waited.

"You've got some nerve, you know," she said, still huffing from her effort to walk the short distance from Hermione's bed.

"What are you on about, now?" he asked, entirely too weary to tolerate much from anyone just then.

Ginny snapped her arm behind her, pointing at the open door. "Walking away from them right when they needed to talk with you?" she said, fire dancing in her brown eyes.

He sighed and wiped a hand languidly over his tired face. "I can't face them right now, Ginny," he paused, staring at his now shaking hands between them. "It's not the right time, yet."

Her hands grabbed fistfuls of the robes at his shoulders and captured his eyes. "Harry.... They need you.... Now." Harry had never seen her so serious. Not since the night her father had been nearly killed –

Guilt welled up inside him and stung like a thousand angry hornets. Sensing that his feelings were about to spill over, he jerked his robes free and backed away. "I can't..." he said, then turned and ran down the corridor, ignoring Ginny's yells and desperately trying to school his emotions.

The Duel

"Well, Potter, Malfoy, I think you ought to be outside on a glorious day like this," Professor McGonagall continued briskly. (Order of the Phoenix, U.S. edition, page 853)

Not entirely sure he had heard correctly, Harry continued to goggle at his Head of House as she walked towards the staff rooms, trailed by Snape who looked extremely put out. Just as she turned the corner, a shock of fiery red hair appeared in his view.

"I'm not finished with you, Potter," yelled Ginny as she shoved him against the hard stone wall. Her face was flushed and beads of sweat were dotting her forehead. She must have hobbled all the way from the Hospital Wing.

His encounter with Malfoy still lingering on the edge of his memory and the hurt from Sirius' loss still pulsing in his heart, Harry felt his control slipping. "Ginny..." he said feebly. "Don't..."

"Oh ho!" called Malfoy, slinking back from the shadows now that the teachers had retreated. "Can't even keep the ladies happy, can you Potty?"

"Didn't you just get your arse handed to you?" said Ginny, turning to survey the blonde boy.

"Tsk, ts, Weaselette," he said with a sneer. "You could do better than scar-head, you know?"

"Leave it alone," said Harry, still gripping his wand and trying to push Ginny out of the way. As much as he wanted to hex her just then, he'd rather get Malfoy *first*. "I'll handle her by myself."

Ginny's head whipped around, sending her hair flying into Harry's eyes. "*Handle* me, will you?" she said, brandishing her own wand and backing away. "We'll see about that, you arrogant... pig-headed... Nargle farmer!" It seemed that she had to search for just the right insults as she brought her wand up to point at Harry's chest.

"I've had enough of you, Ginny," said Harry his anger returning in waves. "Leave me alone before I do something we'll both regret."

"If I can handle ferret-face," she said motioning with her head towards Malfoy, "then I can handle the likes of you."

"Fine," said Harry through clenched teeth. "Fine!"

Malfoy wisely retreated just in time for Ginny to let loose with a series of ill-aimed curses. Harry dodged them easily, but that only seemed to infuriate her more.

"Argh!" she screeched, lunging for him.

Red light flashed from his wand, sending her sprawling to his right, diving behind a stone column. He heard her cry out in pain, probably from her ankle, but he didn't care. He wanted her to hurt. She had no *right* to treat him like this. No one had the right to force him to do *anything*.

Malfoy was dancing with glee behind one of the wooden benches, obviously enamored with the thought of the two of them bumping each other off. More curses flew over Harry's head and several students shrieked as they came into the entryway, scurrying outside as soon as they saw Harry and Ginny's fight.

Ginny recovered from her fall, her wand sending a blue light over her foot and the two of them started to duel in earnest. Harry's wand was a blur and his brow creased in concentration as he deflected her curses and sent his own at the determined redhead. Somewhere in the back of Harry's mind, he regretted teaching her in the D.A.

"At it again, Potter?" a sneering voice sounded over Ginny's shoulder. Snape had appeared once more in the entrance hall, wand in hand. Having

heard the voice as well, Ginny whipped around and shot an Impediment jinx at the Potions Master, exactly at the same time that Harry fired an identical beam of blue light. Under the influence of the combined spells, Snape flew back down the corridor and hit the ground hard, much harder than normal. He slid along the polished stone floor until he hit a suit of armor, sending it crashing down on top of him.

Harry and Ginny locked eyes, simultaneously impressed and scared at the idea of having hexed a teacher. Then at once, their wands again worked furiously, sending more and more hexes at each other. Harry's anger was ebbing as his respect for Ginny's dueling abilities increased. Deciding that it was time to end it, though, he sent her dodging to the left with a well aimed *Stupefy*, intending to hit her with another stunner as she dived.

"See here!" said McGonagall, limping down the stairway, cane flailing in front of her. "What on earth is going on?"

The momentary distraction almost cost Harry; he noticed just in time that Ginny was making a complicated motion with her wand from her position on the floor. Harry ducked at the last moment and saw Malfoy's face contort with terror as he was hit with the sickly yellow light. Great green bats flew out of his nose and began attacking him, chasing his shrieking form down the hall.

"Stop this at once, Miss Weasley! Mr. Potter!"

Ignoring McGonagall, Harry got off another *Stupefy* just as Ginny let loose with a full body bind. This time, both curses hit their targets. Ginny slumped to the floor in a heap as Harry's arms and legs snapped together, sending him falling painfully down to the floor and knocking his head on the unforgiving marble.

Consequences

"... never in all my years," came McGonagall's ethereal voice, penetrating the thick fog in Harry's brain. "Two students dueling in the middle of the Entrance Hall."

"Well, it's a good thing no one was seriously injured," said the voice of Madame Pomfrey.

The familiar sound of feet shuffling on tiled floor told him where he was. *Back in here again*, Harry mused. Then the image of Ginny Weasley's crumpled body appeared in his mind and the reason for his presence in the infirmary was brought back with such clarity that he jerked himself fully awake.

Now sitting up, he instantly regretted the action as the back of his head throbbed painfully. Feeling around tenderly with a finger, he found a large knot where it had hit the floor of the Entrance Hall. Looking over to the bed next to him, he found Ginny Weasley looking at him with a blank expression. Her sheets were pulled low over her as she sat in the bed. Her robes were hanging on the headboard behind her, and so Harry found himself staring at her plain white blouse, rumpled and creased from wear.

They stared at each other for a moment longer before McGonagall appeared between them. "I'm glad to see you've woken up, Mr. Potter," she said in a stern voice—one that Harry had heard all too often.

Attempting to lighten the mood, Harry smiled weakly at her and inched back to lean against his pillows.

"You couldn't have found a different way to vent your anger, could you?" she said scathingly, her lips pursed into a thin line. "You had to goad Mr. Malfoy and *then* attack Miss Weasley."

"She –" he started but was cut off.

"Don't interrupt until I've finished," McGonagall warned. Harry's head started pounding even harder as her words bore into them. "I had just got you off the hook with Professor Snape, and when I came back, I've found you'd hexed him. *Why?*"

Harry noticed out of the corner of his eye that Ginny's head was hanging limply on her neck, her long red hair forming a protective curtain around her as McGonagall continued her tirade. "More than anyone," she said with a hint of softness. "I understand that you've been through a lot in the last few months, but that's no excuse for purposefully dueling with another student!"

She muttered something under her breath that sounded like "Just like his parents," but he couldn't be certain.

"And you, Miss Weasley," she said, turning to the girl next to Harry. "From what I'm told, you were the one to first attack Mr. Potter." Ginny seemed to deflate even further under the furious gaze of their Head of House. "Is that correct?"

"Yes, Professor," Ginny said with a croak, nervously folding and re-folding the sheets in front of her as she worked to clear her throat.

"I see," McGonagall said, looking over her tortoise-shell spectacles at the two of them. "I'll need to consult with the Headmaster, but I can assure you that there will be a suitable punishment meted out regardless of the upcoming holidays."

Shooting a final withering stare at the two teens, McGonagall made to leave, and Harry blurted, "Professor?"

"What is it, Mr. Potter?" she said with a labored sigh.

"Could I," he began, pointing to his aching bump "– have something for my head?"

"No," McGonagall said curtly. "Consider it a reminder for embarrassing your House and your classmates with that abysmal display." Without waiting for another retort, she hobbled out of the infirmary on her cane and closed the door with a deep clunk, sending yet more waves of pain throughout Harry's skull.

Harry groaned and sunk back into his pillows, accidentally hitting his bruise on the headboard. "OW!" he yelled furiously, punching his mattress in a fruitless attempt to bleed off his anger. "Sodding bed!"

Ginny let out a stifled giggle and he leveled his gaze at her. "What's so funny, Ginny?" he asked, miserably clutching his head.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said with a sad smile on her face. "Really."

"Look," said Harry with wave of his hand. "Let's talk about this later, all right? My head hurts too bad to talk."

Ginny sighed and snuggled down into her own blankets. "Fine," she said resignedly. "Try to get some sleep."

Harry fought through the throbbing in his head, trying to figure out the puzzle that was Ginny Weasley. Deciding that he had been through enough already, and dreading the punishment that was to come, he gave in to his exhaustion and slept.

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When he had finally regained consciousness two hours later, his head was still throbbing, but not as sharply as before. Ginny was not in her bed and the matron had given him her leave to depart, with the admonishment to avoid any more duels with students or Death Eaters. Harry's first impulse was to go back to Gryffindor Tower, but decided that he really should check in with Hagrid as he had intended to do before his encounter with Ginny.

Taking a deep breath, he walked down the nearly empty corridor and at long last into the fading light of the day.

The Hogwarts Express

"You're well out of it, mate," said Ron forcefully. "I mean, she's quite good-looking and all that, but you want someone a bit more cheerful."

"She's probably cheerful enough with someone else," said Harry, shrugging.

"Who's she with now, anyway?" Ron asked Hermione, but it was Ginny who answered.

"Michael Corner," she said.

"Michael – but –" said Ron, craning around in his seat to stare at her. "But you were going out with him!"

"Not any more," said Ginny resolutely. "He didn't like Gryffindor beating Ravenclaw at Quidditch, and got really sulky, so I ditched him and he ran off to comfort Cho instead." She scratched her nose absently with the end of her quill, turned The Quibbler upside down and began marking her answers. Ron looked highly delighted.

"Well, I always thought he was a bit of an idiot," he said, prodding his queen forwards towards Harry's quivering castle. "Good for you. Just choose someone – better – next time."

He cast Harry an oddly furtive look as he said it.

"Well, I've chosen Dean Thomas, would you say he's better?" asked Ginny vaguely.

"WHAT?" shouted Ron, upending the chessboard: Crookshanks went plunging after the pieces and Hedwig and Pigwidgeon twittered and hooted angrily from overhead. (Order of the Phoenix, U.S. edition, page 866)

Harry kept to himself until term ended and during the ride back to London, only taking part in conversation when he had to. The incident with Malfoy and his goons as he had come back from the loo had been a high point, as he watched members of the D.A. hex, curse, and jinx the Slytherins into a quivering mass of jelly.

Back in his compartment, he could tell Ron and Hermione were concerned with what had happened between him and Ginny, but neither of them were willing to broach the subject. Harry and Ginny hadn't really seen each other since their latest stay in the hospital wing and consequently, hadn't found time to do anything to resolve what had happened between them.

For her part, Ginny had acted as if the entire thing hadn't occurred and it was this fact that kept Harry's temper close to the surface. It wasn't that she'd brushed him off; it was more the thought that she could simply turn off her emotions as if they were nothing more than an annoyance. Was he really so far beneath her notice?

As the train slowed, Harry's thoughts returned to the promised punishment that McGonagall had mentioned. She hadn't brought it up again since he'd left the hospital wing and Harry briefly thought that he might be off the hook. One look at Ginny however, told him that the issue was far from being resolved, and he knew that his Transfiguration Professor was worth her word, if nothing else.

With a resigned sigh, he stepped off the Express, and with his trunk dragging awkwardly behind him, he walked slowly away from the only people he loved.

Consequences of the Heart 2: Assignments and Requirements

Chapter Two: Assignments and Requirements

Life at Privet Drive was as miserable as ever. This year however, it wasn't because his uncle and aunt had been treating him like a poorly trained dog, which was the same as they had since he was a toddler; instead, it was the impending sense of doom that had been hanging over him since Professor McGonagall had levied her threat against him three days ago.

True to her word, an owl arrived that evening, just as Harry was starting on his homework.

Unable to ignore the large Tawny owl that was used for official school deliveries – especially when it hopped onto his Potions essay, scattering inky footprints over his diagram of the effects of an improperly brewed wart removal potion – Harry said, “All right, I'll take the ruddy letter.” With a laboured sigh, he took the scroll from the owl's outstretched foot and unrolled it and then the impatient bird gave him a baleful hoot and flew out his window.

Mr. Harry Potter,

As I do not wish to harp on about the circumstances for which you are receiving this letter, I think it would be best to get straight to the point. You are to be transported to the Burrow every morning at nine o'clock by Portkey, where you will be assigned a task by Mr. or Mrs. Weasley. Miss Weasley will be on hand to assist you in ways that have yet to be determined. I have it on good authority that both of you will be kept busy throughout the summer and that the list of tasks compiled by Mrs. Weasley is quite extensive.

You are to act civilly around Miss Weasley and will speak to her with respect and kindness at all times. On Saturday evenings, she will be studying with you at your aunt and uncle's house. You should have plenty of time to complete your homework assignments during this period.

Please keep in mind that if you do not fulfil your obligations this summer, or if it is reported to me that you have been less than pleasant towards Miss Weasley, I will be forced to suspend you from classes in the fall.

Hoping you are well,

Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster,

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

At first, Harry didn't think that the punishment would be too unbearable. But when he read the part about being 'civil' towards Ginny, he nearly tore the parchment in half. How could he be expected to even *be* around her, let alone act like she was some kind of friend?

Finally succumbing to his rage, he viciously crumpled the paper into a tight ball and threw it against the wall, hardly noticing as it bounced off the small dresser and proceeded to smack him in the face. His foul mood only amplified by the now-mussed Potions essay, Harry flung himself onto his bed and managed a small smile at the thought of hexing Ginny's hair to fall out, leaving her head bald and smooth.

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Ginny was miserable. The journey home from King's Cross by Floo was uneventful, as she had now completed it four years in a row. Ron didn't even trip over himself as he said goodbye to Hermione. Fred and George had yet to tease her for hexing Harry and they weren't going to be at Grimmauld Place. No, the problem was what had been waiting for her when she had taken all her things upstairs.

Her mother had Apparated to her room ahead of her, and as soon as Ginny had closed the door to her bedroom, her Mum had launched into what amounted to an in-person Howler.

“Ginevra Molly Weasley!” she had started. It never boded well for Ginny when her mother used her full name. Resolving to let her mother get it over with, she sat down heavily on her bed and gazed expressionlessly at the towering inferno before her.

“I am sorely disappointed in your behaviour.” Her mum was brandishing two opened letters in her hand, waving them madly as she ranted. “First I receive an owl that tells me you've gone missing at the Ministry, chasing after Death Eaters.” She wielded the letter in her right hand. “*Death Eaters!*”

“Then, another owl comes, *the same day*, telling me you've not only been in a duel with a student, but that you've landed yourself in the hospital wing.” The parchment and envelope in her mum's left hand were now flitting around in front of her as she used them to punctuate her speech. “But it doesn't end there, does it? No, it doesn't... because the student you've been duelling with is, Merlin help me, *Harry Potter!*”

Ginny folded her hands on her skirt and waited, knowing that the worst of it was over and that any minute now, her mother was going to come over to the bed and sweep her up in a big hug.

For now, though, her mum continued to stare at Ginny accusingly, arms propped on her hips. "Why, Ginny? Why couldn't you have just left him be?"

Suddenly confused, Ginny dropped her stony exterior and looked askance at her mum. "What do you mean?"

Her mother sat on the bed next to her, but did not open her arms as Ginny had expected. "He's lost so much, Ginny," she said with a sad expression. "The only father figure he's had in his life since he was an infant was taken from him the day before and you did nothing but rub his nose in it."

Unbidden, tears sprang into Ginny's eyes. She hadn't cried since her first year and it was terribly difficult for her to accept her tears now. Her throat burned with pent up emotion as she fought down the wetness pooling in her eyes, desperately trying to keep her composure. "I..." she started, but had to stop when her voice cracked. With an effort, she regained control. "I guess I didn't think he'd be that bad off." Her words fell flat and sounded cheap and stupid, even to her own ears.

"Well, let's hope that whatever Dumbledore has planned for you this summer will help you to think a little more often about other people's feelings, young lady." With that, her mother stood and crossed the room, arms still folded across her chest. She left the room and closed the door behind her.

It took a full minute before unbearable sadness burst through her dam of control. Tears leaked through her tightly closed lids and she fell onto her bed, sobbing into her pillow until she fell into a fitful sleep.

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The next morning, Ginny heard the unmistakable sound of Professor McGonagall's voice floating up from the kitchen. Still feeling miserable about her situation, Ginny didn't want to risk facing her still-brooding mother and her school Head of House.

Instead she waited, pulling her covers over her head and trying to manage to suffocate herself with her own foul morning breath. It certainly seemed preferable to being at odds with her mother for the summer. To distract her from the misery that awaited her that day, she conjured up a vision of Harry being pummeled by Draco Malfoy and his goons, Crabbe and Goyle.

At last, she heard the distinctive *pop* of the Floo grate, and McGonagall's thick Scottish accent ceased. Pushing the bedclothes off her face, she had to squint to block out the bright sunshine streaming through her windows. With a scowl at the cheery rays, she pulled on her dressing gown and made her way to the bathroom.

When she arrived downstairs, her stomach growling madly from missing dinner the previous evening, she tried to slip into a chair at the table unnoticed, but Ron was there and brainlessly called out a happy greeting through a mouth full of eggs.

"Morn'in Gin'iff!"

She offered a weak wave and started to pull food onto her plate with her fork, intent on eating and leaving for her room as soon as possible. Unwillingly, however, her eyes caught her mother's stare, and she shrunk back in her chair at the calculated smugness she saw there. Knowing that a punishment whose consequences far outstripped the crime she had committed was now whirling around in her mother's brain, she doubled the speed with which she ate, rivalling Ron's usual gusto.

Just as she had scraped off the last crumbs on her plate, her mother's hand rested on her shoulder and the other produced a folded letter, which she held in front of Ginny's face. "Read this, then we'll talk about what it says in the living room."

Her brother shot them both an odd look but kept his mouth closed for once. Ginny held the parchment with some trepidation, certain that the key to a summer of misery lay within its folds. Her mother Banished the dirty dishes and set them washing while Ginny continued to stare at the letter, vainly hoping that it would read itself and save her the trouble.

Finally mustering her courage, she gave Ron a look of annoyance, split the seal with a finger and opened the letter.

Miss Ginevra Weasley,

Subsequent to your wilful and belligerent attack on Mr. Potter, Professor Dumbledore has authorized me to plan and administer your punishment prior to your return to Hogwarts in the fall. Failure to fulfil each of the obligations listed below will result in your suspension from school and possible dismissal from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Mr. Potter will be assigned to perform several tasks involving manual labour on the property surrounding your home throughout the summer. As part of your punishment, you will be required to assist Harry in his tasks by ensuring the following:

- 1) He must have adequate drinking water available. If there is ever a time that potable water is not present, you will be required to serve one day's detention with Professor Snape on the Saturday and/or Sunday following the day that such infraction(s) have occurred.*
- 2) You will ensure that all his medical needs are taken care of. The Improper Use of Magic Office has agreed to cease monitoring all common medical charms at The Burrow for the duration of the summer. You would do well to brush up on them before he arrives tomorrow morning.*
- 3) At midday and at the end of each day, you are to prepare a meal for him. These meals must provide him with as much food as he can eat, to be determined by Mr. Potter. You are to eat your meals with him.*
- 4) Finally, you are to engage in combined study sessions with him on Saturday evenings, where you will complete your summer homework assignments. These will take place at Privet Drive and will be supervised by a member of the Order.*

Once again, I must remind you of the seriousness of your actions and the necessity to make them right. If you cannot or will not meet these requirements, please inform your parents of your intention to withdraw from studies at Hogwarts and arrange for alternate education at another facility.

Best wishes,

Professor Minerva McGonagall
Deputy Headmistress,
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

A cold fury welled up inside of Ginny as she continued to read the letter over and over, sure that it was a joke, sure that the dark green ink would twist and turn into a giant "GOTCHA!" But McGonagall's tightly curled letters continued to stare mockingly up at her and she felt her blood boil.

Ginny stomped into the living room, where she knew her mother was waiting for her, crumpling the parchment in her tight fist. She stopped short when she saw her mother *and* father waiting patiently in the loveseat by the fireplace.

"Dad?" she asked dumbstruck. Her father *never* stayed home from work, even when he was deathly ill. He was famous for it. "What are you doing here?"

Arthur Weasley stood to his full height, which was now just a head taller than his daughter, and straightened his robes. "I'm here to ensure that you stop making rash decisions, young lady."

Ginny took a step backwards. Her dad was always the lenient one, always quick to forgive and to smooth things over with her mother. Looking up at his face, she saw no lenience and no intention of letting her get off with a slapped hand. It was then that she knew she was doomed to suffer the cruel fate of waiting on Harry Potter hand and foot, but she still couldn't make herself accept it. Not yet.

"It's not *fair*, Daddy!" Ginny insisted in a whiny voice that she hadn't used since she was ten. "You can't make me *do* this! I'm waiting on that *brat* hand and foot!"

"I think it's perfectly fitting, considering the horrible things you've done," said her mum as she walked up to Arthur's side, slipping her arm underneath his.

"Horrible things I've done?" Ginny asked incredulously. "I got into a *fight* with Harry, I didn't bloody *kill* him!" Her voice was all over the scale and Ginny knew that when she started emphasizing words randomly throughout her sentences, it was a sign she was close to hysterics. This was especially evident because she couldn't keep the image of her strangling the Boy-Who-Seriously-Pissed-Her-Off out of her mind.

"Your mother and I have spoken with both Professor McGonagall and Headmaster Dumbledore and feel that the punishment is suitable." He paused as Ginny started to take deep gulping breaths, sending her head spinning with the buzz of too much oxygen. "You will submit to their requests, or we will be forced to send you to Beauxbatons in the fall."

It was too much; the lack of oxygen from her hyperventilation and the stress of what she was hearing her parents say combined to overwhelm her system. Dumbstruck, Ginny's knees buckled and she fell to the floor, blacking out just before her head hit the side of the sofa.

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The next morning dawned bright and clear, exactly the opposite of Harry's mood. Pushing off his sheet and blanket so that they formed a crumpled pile at the end of his bed, he sat up and rotated his body, placing his feet on the floor. The sounds of his uncle came from the first floor: a thump from the downstairs loo, followed by the swishing of the toilet, but there was no accompanying rush of water from the sink. *Blech*, thought Harry. *I pity the poor bloke that has to shake his hand this morning.*

With an uncomfortable pressure in his bladder, urged on by the running water below, Harry left his room and wandered across the hall to the upstairs loo, intent on relieving himself *and* washing his hands.

Finished with his morning duties, he dressed and walked downstairs. Remus Lupin was sitting on the settee next to the television in his Aunt Petunia's living room. Pleasantly shocked by his former professor's presence, he didn't think twice about hugging the now-standing werewolf.

"What're you doing here?" he queried. He sent his aunt a sidelong glance as she not-so-subtly eavesdropped on them while pretending to dust the bookshelf. He knew that it didn't need dusting because she had made him clean it the day he returned from Hogwarts.

Remus smiled, and it warmed Harry's heart a little, knowing that if Remus could smile, then perhaps the gloom that had been hanging around Harry since he had left Dumbledore's office wasn't so impenetrable either. "As I'm sure you've already figured out," said Remus, holding Harry at arms length to look at him properly, "you aren't going to go to The Burrow unescorted."

"Right," said Harry wearily, but before he said anything else, Remus gave him a stern look.

"I'm not going to mince words with you, Harry. You've messed up in a big way and I'm not certain there's anything you can do to repair your friendship with Ginny."

The reminder of his summer punishment sent his fleeting good spirits spiralling to the ground. "I know," he said, hanging his head dejectedly. "I'm not exactly looking forward to this, you know."

"Well, at least I'll be able to keep a proper eye on you," Remus said with the twinkle in his eye returning.

"You aren't going to show up here *every* morning, are you?" said Harry, looking at his aunt again. She had been dusting the same shelf for the entirety of their conversation and her wrist was hardly moving the feather duster in her hand as she continued to listen. "Some *people* wouldn't take to that idea very well."

Aunt Petunia finally dropped all pretence; leaving the duster on the well-cleaned shelf, she walked primly over to stand next to Harry, wiping her

apron on her head with stiff strokes. "If you think we're going to let you..." She trailed off, eying Remus cautiously, then continued. "Your kind just show up whenever you want, you've got another think coming."

"Now, Petunia," said Remus diplomatically, opening his palms in a gesture that was intended to show good will. Petunia immediately backed into the settee and was awkwardly forced to sit. "You won't let an old friend come over to visit?"

Her face turned an unnatural shade of puce and having spent the last fifteen years memorizing her expressions, Harry knew that she was biting back a particularly snippy remark. "You," she enunciated carefully, "are not a friend. No matter how close you were to my sister."

Remus' face fell a smidgeon and he sighed. "Yes, well...I had hoped that the incident at Lily and James' wedding would count for something in my favour."

Something flashed on Petunia's face and she stood abruptly. Not looking Remus in the eye, she said, "Only you. No others." Then, with a speed Harry hadn't ever seen his aunt display, she swept from the room and into the kitchen.

Remus smirked at Harry and produced a barely intact handset from an ancient telephone from his robe pocket. "Are you ready then?" he asked, extending the hand with the faded green plastic device.

"I guess," said Harry in awe. "But you're *definitely* going to have to tell me what 'incident' you're talking about. Anything that can get Aunt Petunia to turn tail and run has got to be worth Galleons."

With a laugh that brought out the wrinkles around his eyes, Remus nodded and said, "Perhaps later...Right now, you've got a detention to carry out."

*

After her mother had revived her, Ginny continued to mope about the unfairness of their punishments and Molly finally confronted her about it in the living room that evening.

"You'd best wipe that frown off your face, young lady. Your choice was made when you decided to duel with Harry," said Ginny's mother patiently, setting down a load of clean clothes next to a pair of empty wicker baskets.

"If the punishment wasn't so completely unfair, I might be motivated to find the silver-lining in this cloud of despair hanging over me," Ginny shot back. The time she had spent unconscious from her fall had given her just the space she had needed to formulate her arguments.

Molly didn't even pause as she folded a pair of Ron's jeans and placed it in a basket with a mounting pile of his clothes. "It's done, Ginny, and there's nothing you or I can do about it."

Ginny racked her brain for something to counter with, but came up blank. "What if I...promise to serve a month's worth of detentions when I get back in September? With Snape?" she added desperately.

Her mother finished laying out Ginny's dresses, and then turned to look at her daughter. "Do you know what the original punishment was going to be?" she asked with a piercing stare. "Do you know what Professors Snape and McGonagall were agreed on doing to the both of you?"

Pinned by her mother's eyes, Ginny could only shake her head slowly from side to side.

"Harry was to have his lifetime Quidditch ban re-instated," she said drolly, "and you were to be expelled."

"WHAT?" yelled Ginny, shaken from her stupor. "How could they even *think* that that would be even remotely fair? *We both* hexed Snape..." Ginny paused, incredulous by what her mother was saying. "I can't *believe* that they'd expel me and let Harry back. Am I not good enough? Or is the bloody 'Boy-Who-Lived' too valuable to expel?"

For her part, Molly let her yell, and then when the storm subsided, said, "Actually, you're not too far from the truth. Harry is only safe when he's in two places...the Dursleys'," she said with a shudder of revulsion, "and Hogwarts. It's why he doesn't spend the entire summer here. You, on the other hand, are expendable."

Ginny's face lost its colour and she sat heavily in the chair opposite her mother.

"But we're obviously not going forward with that solution to your collective spectacular display of rule-breaking," said Molly calmly, as Ginny stared blankly at the brown carpet. "From what Dumbledore told me, Firenze suggested to him that for reasons only understandable to a Soothsaying Centaur, that plan of action would have an adverse impact on the battle against Voldemort."

Ginny gave her mother a quizzical look. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know," Molly said, finally finishing with the laundry and sitting down on the arm of the chair Ginny was sitting in. "I'm not sure if it has something to do with you being at Hogwarts or with Harry being able to play Quidditch, but I am sure that you're going to see this thing through to the end."

*

Ginny spent the rest of the day sulking, her mind wandering from the injustice of her ridiculously unfair punishment to the cause of all her troubles: Harry Potter. It wasn't that she hated him so much that she cursed the day he was born, but as time went by, her anger towards him increased to such a level that she could hardly think about anything else.

Sleep that night came late and her dreams were filled with visions of Harry suspended from the ceiling and covered in enraged Bowtruckles, or Harry pinned between a Chimaera and a Blast-ended-Screw at the bottom of a Doxie infested canyon, or Harry naked and covered in chocolate...

Ginny awoke with a start and looked blearily around at her shadow-shrouded room, trying to shake her head clear of that particular dream. She hadn't thought about Harry that way in two years, and she wasn't about to go soft on him when he had been the source of everything wrong in her life for the past two weeks.

After an hour of fruitless attempts at going back to sleep, Ginny hastily dressed for the day and made her way down to the kitchen, where her mother was already making breakfast.

"Good morning, Ginny," her mother said brightly. "Have a good sleep?"

Acting more like her brothers than the sort of prim and proper girl her mother had expected her to emulate, she grunted and sat wearily down at the table.

"Well, don't get snippy with me, young lady," her mum said, slipping a plate of food onto the table in front of her. "It's not my fault you've gotten into trouble."

Ginny had given up trying to argue with her about the miscarriage of justice, instead focusing her ire on Harry, who would be showing up that morning to start their first chore. With a wicked gleam in her eye, she concentrated on eating her breakfast.

"Oh, and Ginny, dear," said her mother with a cheery voice that grated on Ginny's nerves. "When you've finished with breakfast, go and fetch the paint and supplies in the living room. Take them out to the shed for Harry so he can get started on it right when he gets here."

"Sure thing, Mum," said Ginny with all the enthusiasm of a Crup about to have its tail chopped off.

Once finished with her eggs and toast, Ginny put her plate in the sink, wiped down the table and even served her brother a plate of food before finally deciding that it was time to move the painting supplies to the shed.

Soon enough, Ginny heard the muffled sounds of Harry's voice from The Burrow's garden.

"Right," said her mum, appearing from the depths of the pantry where she had been sorting through the tinned vegetables. "Let's get you and Harry going on that shed."

"Mum...if you don't mind," said Ginny with an exasperated sigh, "please don't talk about me and... *him* in the same sentence."

"Why not?"

Ginny rolled her eyes and tried not to sound too pathetic. "Just don't. It's not healthy."

Her mother looked thoroughly confused, but Ginny didn't want to elaborate that she'd likely hex the next person to lump them together in any fashion, her mum included.

Following her mother out the door, Ginny desperately tried to not look at Harry and as they closed in on the shed, she kept herself just one step behind her mother, using her large frame to hide behind.

"Hello, Remus," Molly said. Out of the corner of her eye, Ginny could see Harry shuffling nervously from one foot to the other as her former professor and her mum traded pleasantries.

"Before you get started, Harry," said Remus. "You and Ginny need to put these on." She looked unwillingly at his outstretched hands and saw two nondescript gold bracelets.

"I'm not wearing jewellery, Remus," said Harry a little testily. Ginny wasn't big on jewellery either and was about to protest as well, but if Harry didn't want to wear one, she was bound and determined to be as contrary to him as possible.

Without saying a word, she came around from her mother and grabbed one of the bracelets, putting it on neatly with one hand. It was slightly cool to the touch, despite it being almost forty degrees in the full sun. Its smooth gold surface reflected the white puffy clouds and she thought she might like a bracelet like this someday.

Remus chuckled, looking from Harry to Ginny. "Well, it looks like you two are already off to a good start this morning."

"Shove it, Remus," said Harry. Ginny gave the older wizard a baleful glare, but still said nothing.

Still holding his hand out, Remus looked pointedly at Harry without saying a word. Harry hesitated, then grabbed the bracelet and half-heartedly tried to put it on. Once he had snapped it on, a jolt of something shot through her wrist where her own bracelet was touching her skin and it started to heat up, just past warm, but not uncomfortably so. Harry winced at the same time and they both looked askance at the werewolf.

"I see you've already discovered one of the effects of the charms on these little beauties," he said with a wide grin. Ginny scratched at her wrist, moving the metal around in an effort to get to where the shock had left her skin tingling. "They have been charmed to accomplish several things, but the most important to you is that they reflect how the wearer of the other bracelet is feeling about you."

Silence filled the air and Harry and Ginny's eyes automatically locked onto each other. Harry squinted, a feral grin rising on his face. Ginny mirrored his smile and let the evil thoughts she had been entertaining come full force in her mind.

Harry's free hand was dancing over his bracelet and she could tell he wasn't enjoying the effects of her ill will. Soon however, her own wrist felt like it was on fire and her concentration slipped as she yelped in surprise.

"Now that you've effectively demonstrated your mutual loathing, let me tell you why we've chosen to use these." Remus folded his arms and sent Molly a knowing smirk, which she returned. "We've also placed a monitoring charm on them, so whatever negative feelings you're having for each other, we'll know about it. If your anger ever reaches a level where either one of you is burned, Professor Dumbledore will automatically suspend you from classes in September. Am I clear?"

Ginny and Harry sent disbelieving stares at both of the adults, but they reluctantly nodded.

"Thank you, Remus. You've been most helpful," Molly placed a hand in her apron pocket and produced her wand. "You can come check on Harry whenever you'd like, but I imagine he'll be finished around dark."

"Very well, Molly. Good luck," Remus said just before Apparating away with a muted *crack*.

Molly pointed her wand at the shed and muttered a spell, stripping the fading and peeled paint from the wood. "Harry, your first task is to repaint the shed. I've had Arthur purchase several gallons of paint and all the supplies you'll need, so I expect you to be finished before dinner." She put her wand away and made to walk back to The Burrow. "Oh, and Harry?" she said turning back to the two teens. "Two coats, please."

Harry nodded and watched as she walked away. Ginny waited, knowing that he wouldn't be able to tolerate the silence for much longer. Sure enough, after kicking the dirt around for a second, he shoved his hands in his pockets and said, "Listen, Ginny. I don't like this any more than you do, so let's just get this over with, all right?"

Then to her eternal shock, he held out his hand to her, bracelet dangling loosely on his wrist. She brought her hand up partway and hesitated, wondering what trick he might be trying to play, then decided that he couldn't do anything too drastic and grasped it firmly.

"Fine," she said, pulling her hand away after the requisite single pump. "You better get busy if you want to be done today. It took Bill and Charlie all day when they last did it ten years ago."

Harry looked her up and down, then said, "You're scrawny, but it looks like you can sling a brush well enough. Let's get going." He turned to walk into the shed, but when she didn't follow, turned back. "Well?"

"I'm not supposed to be helping you...directly," she said with a puzzled expression on her face.

"What?" said Harry, looking over her shoulder at The Burrow's closed door. "I thought..."

"Well, you thought wrong," said Ginny, shoving him towards the shed once again. "You get started. I've got to get something from the house."

Harry moved slowly through the door, then turned to look at her retreating form. She followed his motions out of the corner of her eye and felt a flash of something through the bracelet, but it was gone before she could figure out what it was.

*

Sodding handcuffs, Harry thought to himself as he turned back to the cans, brushes and rollers that were stacked in the corner of the shed. It was hot outside, but it was even hotter inside the dusty old shed, and his brow was already wet with perspiration. Deciding that if he had to do this by himself, Harry began mentally sorting through the things he would need to get started.

The paint was standard-quality exterior latex that looked to be the same shade of brown as Ginny's eyes. Harry started at the thought of Ginny's eyes: the ones that had been contorted in fury last week and had looked at him with disdain this morning. He shook off his musings and sorted the brushes from the rollers and pulled out one of the large drop cloths.

Walking outside with the large folded canvas, Harry spared a second to appreciate the fact that he wasn't at Privet Drive, and he wasn't doing chores for the Dursleys; though he was still working, it wasn't for people that hated his very existence, despite what was going on with Ginny at the moment.

On the other hand, the clouds were large and puffy, hanging low in the sky as a soft wind blew them eastward. Harry knew from past summers that these conditions were ripe for afternoon thunderstorms and that if one blew through tonight, his paint would be washed off the shed in a matter of minutes. If that happened, Harry would likely have to re-paint the entire thing again the next day. With a repressed shudder, Harry pushed that gloomy thought from his mind and returned to the task at hand.

Harry unfolded the drop cloth and set it on the ground around the south face of the shed, intent on painting it in the relative cool of the morning so he could paint in the shade of the north side when the afternoon sun made it unbearable to be anywhere else. It was a heavy canvas, mottled with several colours of paint, and he had to wonder what other projects it had seen over the years at The Burrow.

Finally finished with his preparations, Harry retrieved a can of paint, a roller, two brushes, and a tray. Lacking a standard screwdriver, Harry pried open the lid with a large washer he found on one of the shelves in the shed. By the time he had gotten the lid off, however, the washer was bent and his thumb sore.

The paint was fairly well mixed, but Harry used a brush to stir it even further. One of the lessons he had learned from painting for the Dursleys was that improperly mixed paint was the hardest to fix once it was on the wall. Harry poured enough to fill the tray to the right level and loosely replaced the lid on the can. He was just about to dip the brush he had used into the tray when he heard a noise from behind.

"I brought you some water..." said Ginny, holding out a plastic mug of water, complete with ice and a flexible straw. In her other hand was a covered pitcher filled, presumably, with more water and a pack over her shoulder.

"Thanks," Harry said, taking the glass grudgingly; he was still a bit peeved that she wasn't going to be painting as well. After draining half the glass in one gulp, he set it down on a nearby stump and dipped the brush, dragging it over the side of the tray to pull off the excess.

He started on the trim on the corner of the shed, pulling his brush over the newly stripped wood, careful to apply the paint evenly, lest it crack and peel when it dried. The wood seemed to soak up the paint, but he resisted the urge to lay on another coat right away, knowing that this layer would need to dry, or someone would be painting it again in less than a year.

As he continued to cover the trim, he heard pages rustling next to him and a soft humming sound. He looked over to where Ginny was now sitting underneath a small pear tree, reading in a book. A spark of anger shot through him as he tried to rationalize her laziness while he worked. Hadn't she broken the rules just as egregiously as he had?

Ginny looked up sharply at that point and said, "What's got you mad at me now?"

Staring blankly back at her, he wondered how she knew, then remembered the bracelets. Once again cursing them and Remus for his slavery, Harry tried to master his emotions, something that he was finding cause to do more and more recently.

"Nothing," he said and turned back to the paint tray, noticing that his own bracelet wasn't so much as twitching.

She didn't answer and soon the humming continued as he switched over to the roller, covering the wooden planks with practiced efficiency. Her voice was pleasant to his ears and it irked him when he caught himself humming along. Ginny must have noticed too, because she giggled and he noticed the metal of the bracelet turn cool. Even more disconcerting to him was when she quickly refilled his glass as soon as it was empty; returning to her book as soon as she had finished pouring.

The sun was almost at its peak, bringing some relief from its rays as he was now shadowed by the willow tree overhead. He had finished all the trim, using a ladder from the shed to reach the highest places and the south and west walls. Sweat was pouring off his head and his shirt stuck wetly to his chest and back.

He had gone through two pitchers of water and Ginny had refilled it both times without being asked. Just when he was about to question her about it, she closed her book, placed it in the pack at her feet and stood. "I'm going to be in the house for a little while. You should have enough water to last you until I come back." Hoisting her bag over her shoulder, she marched up the small dirt path leading to The Burrow, humming the same melodious tune, and disappeared behind the door.

*

As Ginny walked up to The Burrow, she ran through the words of the song that had been stuck in her head all morning, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. She entered the kitchen and found her mother working a ham with a long serrated knife, thin slices of the smoked meat falling in folds onto the cutting board.

"The bread and cheese are in the pantry," Molly said, tilting her head towards a pair of large wooden doors. "You know where the juice is and I've got the meat here."

Ginny nodded and walked to the pantry, pushing the doors apart, wincing as they caught on the stone floor, and a scraping noise clawed at her ears. The bread was a fresh sourdough she had made yesterday and as she hoisted it, she fingered the four rounds of cheese, deciding on the sharp cheddar rather than the jack.

Back at the counter, Ginny pulled out several slices of bread from the bag and placed them on the wooden surface, arranging them in three piles. She made to grab the meat her mother had cut, but was slapped away with a 'tut'. "This is for your brother and me. You'll have to cut what you need for you and Harry on your own."

Frowning, Ginny took the knife from her mother and began cutting the meat. Hers were much thicker than her mother's perfectly curled slices, as Ginny could never quite get the hang of how her mum was able to do it. After she had cut enough for three hearty sandwiches, she put the meat back in cold storage and threw away the bits that were too small to include in the meal.

After cutting the cheese into large chunks, she crumbled them onto one slice of bread in each pile and layered generous portions of meat on top of that, before topping it off with a couple of knife-fulls of mustard.

"Mum?" said Ginny, as she piled the sandwiches on a large plate.

Her mother looked up from where she was washing the utensils they had used in preparing lunch. Her eyebrow rose in question and Ginny continued, "How long did you fancy dad before he noticed you?"

Molly stopped rinsing the knives and set them in the sink before she turned off the tap and looked her daughter in the eye. "Does this have anything to do with Harry?"

"Mum," said Ginny exasperatedly, "just answer my question, please?"

With a slight chuckle, Molly relented, "Two years."

Ginny's mouth formed a small 'o' as she packed the sandwiches, flagons of juice and crisps into a large basket. "I didn't know that."

"Yes, well," her mother said primly, "you never asked, did you?"

Ginny sent her a sharp look and folded her arms across her chest.

"All right, little one," said Molly, a far-away look appearing on her face. "Arthur was cute and brave and utterly foolish, but I couldn't help but love him from the time I was thirteen." A moment passed in which Ginny imagined that her mother was reliving their courtship at Hogwarts. "He never paid any attention to me," Molly said suddenly, "so I languished in unrequited love until one day.... One day, your father had fallen rather nastily from his broom during practice and had to be taken to see the matron. Since I was the only one there not on the team, I helped him walk to the Hospital Wing."

"So what happened?" Ginny asked, strangely interested in the story.

"I had just about given up on him at that point, you see," her mum explained. "After the matron mended his injuries, I stayed by his bed for a while. But I didn't want to linger because I knew it would be easy for me to fall back into infatuation; I didn't want that, but when I finally mustered the nerve to leave, he grabbed my hand."

Molly's eyes teared up and she pulled a small hanky from her robes, dabbing at her eyes with it. "He was so sweet, Ginny," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "He took my hand and said, 'Molly Prewitt, will you go to Hogsmeade with me next weekend?'"

Ginny, expecting something romantic or even cheesy, struggled to find the sweetness in her dad's statement, but could only chalk it up to her mother's abnormally large sense of sentimentality. "Well, that's wonderful, but I'd best get these sandwiches to Harry before I find myself speaking French next term."

"Yes," said Molly dreamily. "Yes, I suppose you'd better."

"*Au revoir*," said Ginny with a chuckle, as she toted the heavy basket with both hands in front of her and pushed the garden door open with her foot. "Sweet," she muttered under her breath. "Harry had better come up with something better than that, if he expects me to..."

"What was that?" asked Harry, suddenly appearing in front of her, face dripping with sweat, hair glistening in the hot sun. Ginny realized that he hadn't actually appeared there; she had just somehow managed to not take notice that she was now next to the tree by the shed.

"Nothing," said Ginny hastily. "I was just talking to myself." Then, before Harry could press her further, she pulled a large blanket from the basket and spread it out between them. Setting the wicker container in the centre, she sat and motioned for Harry to join her. "Let's eat, Harry. I'm starved."

He sank to his bum, folding his legs underneath him, and took one of the serviettes from the stack Ginny had removed from the basket to wipe his face with. Ginny pulled out a flagon of pumpkin juice and filled two mugs to the brim. Harry took one and drank greedily from it, before sitting back against the trunk of the tree as Ginny had done most of the morning. He sat like that for a moment, eyes closed, and she could tell that for the first time in a long while, he was relaxed. Paint was covering his hands, shirt and there was even one spot in his hair, but he didn't seem to have noticed.

Abruptly pulling himself away from the tree, Harry drained the mug, wiped his mouth with a rolled-up sleeve and gestured at the basket. "Please tell me there's food in there."

Ginny started, realizing that she had been staring at him and cursing herself for it, hastily pulled out the plate of sandwiches and thrust it at him. He grabbed one and took an overly large bite before chewing thickly on it. Setting the plate down between them, she took a sandwich herself and bit into it, relishing the taste of sharp cheese and spicy mustard.

They sat there eating for a while, neither one talking until after Harry had eaten both of his sandwiches and drained almost all of the juice. As Ginny began to clean up the mess, Harry said, "You know, Ginny, I was pretty mad about this whole thing." She looked up at him as he gestured to the shed and caught her eye. "I still am to a certain extent."

Ginny set her jaw under his scrutiny and closed the lid on the basket without looking away from him. "It's not exactly a picnic for me, either, Harry."

"Well, it seems that you've got the easy part of the deal," he said under his breath, but loud enough for her to hear him clearly.

"Easy?" she said, feeling her ire rise just a bit.

"Yeah," he said evenly, looking back to the half-painted shed. "All you've done is fetch me water and make some sandwiches. That's hardly the same as what I've got to do."

Ginny simply stared at Harry, mouth agape, trying to find any way she could be misinterpreting what he was saying. When nothing came to mind, she snapped her mouth closed and opened it again to let loose the words that were pouring through her mind. "Of all the pig-headed, egotistical, arrogant things to say!"

"What?" protested Harry, turning back to look at her livid face. "Don't tell me you've actually been *doing* something besides reading and lounging under the tree?"

Unable to restrain herself, she jumped to her feet and roughly snatched the basket by its handle. "I'll have you know, Harry Potter," she said, seething, "that the universe doesn't revolve around your *gigantic* head and that I wasn't born to serve *you*."

She whirled on her feet and stomped up the path back to The Burrow, intent on hexing his name in the safety of her room.

Her mother was waiting for her however, hovering around the entrance to the garden. A faint clinking sound chimed in the background, like a small

set of bells. "What have you done now, Ginny?" asked her mother ardently.

She set the basket down on the ground by the now closed door. Ginny took a deep breath to steady her nerves and said, "Nothing. Why would you think that something was the matter?"

The clinking stopped and Mrs. Weasley pointed over her shoulder to something on the secretary. "Remus told you we would be monitoring the bracelets, so there's no use lying to me about it."

Stifling another curse at the wretched gold jewellery on her wrist, she glared at her mother and walked over to where she had been pointing. Ginny figured that she might as well know what magical object was snitching on her.

Underneath the small drawers of the top portion of the secretary sat a handsome wooden clock. Its main face seemed to resemble a standard Muggle clock, showing the correct time, one fourteen. Set below the large hands however, two smaller dials were inlaid into the face. On the left was a dial with an ornate script H, whose needle was pointing somewhere just to the right of the middle, towards the red-coloured section, but not touching that colour. The other dial had an equally ornate G embedded in it, its needle pointing about a third of the way from centre, just inside the border of the red colouring.

"So we're not allowed to fight at all?" asked Ginny, turning her attention back to her mother.

"No," said her mum sternly. "You're not."

Balling her fists, Ginny struggled to maintain an even tone in her voice. It wouldn't do Ginny any good to get her mother upset with her again. "That's asking an awful lot, don't you think?"

Molly walked over to the clock and pointed at Harry's neutral expression. "His hasn't so much as twitched since this morning. Why can he control his temper around you but you can't be with him for ten minutes without blowing your top?"

Still working hard to hold in her emotions, Ginny said, "It's just...easier to be mad at him."

Her mum dropped her stony exterior and put her hands on Ginny's shoulders. After a moment, she said, "Easier than what?"

Ginny squeezed her eyes shut tight, willing herself to not break down. "I...can't..."

"Sure you can, sweetheart." Her mother hadn't been sympathetic with her in almost four years and Ginny had a hard time accepting it now.

"It's..." She pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and sat heavily into it. "It's easier than liking him."

"Ah." Molly walked over to the table and sat opposite Ginny. "Is Harry that repulsive?"

"Well," she hesitated, considering the question carefully. "It's not that he's repulsive, so much as he's insufferable."

Her mother nodded and Ginny continued. "He's so *blind* to what's happening right in front of him. I mean, his two best friends have been snogging each other for a *year*, and he can't even wrap his little mind around it." Ginny slammed her fist down on the table to emphasize her point, yet her mother still didn't interrupt. "So how can I expect him to pay little ol' me any attention?"

Molly smiled and patted her hand. "Let's talk a little bit about that, shall we?"

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Harry sat back against the tree and pushed the hot bracelet around his wrist, trying to figure out what exactly had gone wrong. As far as he was concerned, Ginny was, for lack of a better word, unstable, and tended to lose control at the oddest moments. Wasn't it true that he had all the hard work and she hadn't had a lick of punishment except to torment him? What was wrong with pointing that out to her? She should feel lucky she didn't have to paint and do whatever else was in store for him over the summer.

Shrugging it off, Harry pushed himself up from the ground, stomach uncomfortably full, legs and arms stiff from the rest they'd enjoyed, and walked back to the shed. As he pulled out the painting supplies from the shed, his bracelet started to vibrate, slowly at first, but increasing in intensity until he could do nothing but stare at it. Fighting an odd urge to check on Ginny, he put his mind back to the task at hand and it eventually went away.

After an hour, he'd begun working on the second coat of paint and was starting to feel the effects of the shade from the pines on the West side of the garden. His water had been empty for a while now, and he was starting to think he wouldn't be seeing Ginny again that day when she appeared from around the corner of the shed.

"Hi," she said quietly, staring at his shoes. "I brought some more water for you."

She held a large pitcher in her hand, water droplets condensing on the cold glass near the ice-filled rim. "That looks great," he said, wiping the sweat on his forehead with an automatic motion. He vaguely registered that that part of his shirt was now quite dirty and wet.

He let her re-fill his mug and drained it in two large gulps. Holding it out for more, he noticed a small grin curving on her lips as she concentrated on pouring his water.

"Thanks," he said as he took a smaller drink this time.

"My pleasure," she said, now looking up at him through her eyelashes.

Harry stared dumbly at her for a moment, trying to figure out where the raging temper had gone and if this was in fact Ginny Weasley in front of him. "Listen," he said, breaking out of his reverie, "I need to apologize for what happened at lunch...." She opened her mouth to interrupt, but Harry ploughed on. "No... really. I don't know what it was that I did, but I'm sorry."

Her hand fell slowly to her side and her grin turned into a smile. "Thank you, Harry," she said demurely. "That's really sweet of you."

The moment lingered on for a few seconds and Harry could have sworn that the bracelet on his wrist had become quite cool, but brushed it off as a trick of the mind. He cleared his throat and motioned to the shed. "You want to sit...? I mean," he stammered awkwardly before finding a rhythm. "I could use someone to talk with while I paint."

She smiled again, but this time it was different and Harry was annoyed to discover that his heart had been beating quite loudly in his chest.

As Harry finished the second coat of trim and moved on to the south side of the shed, Ginny followed him with a chair she had purloined from inside the freshly painted building. Their conversation flowed from one topic to the next and Harry actually found himself liking his red-headed companion more than he'd thought possible since their encounter last week.

"So when Cho finally realized it was a feint, I was already halfway to the Snitch," Ginny said, finishing her version of the final match of last season. Her face was bright and happy with the relived memory and Harry found her mood contagious. So much so that he had hardly realized he was nearly finished painting.

Ginny left to fetch supper and Harry took a moment to appreciate the scenery before finishing his job. The sun had set, lighting the clouds above them with brilliant oranges and reds that illuminated the garden and surrounding environs with an eerie glow.

Pushing the roller over the last portion of the east wall with a tired but contented sigh, he stepped down from his ladder and surveyed his work. The new paint looked decidedly better and though his muscles ached and his eyes stung with sweat, he couldn't help but feel a surge of satisfaction at completing his task.

Ginny arrived with another basket of food and set it down when she noticed that Harry was all but finished, with only the cleaning-up left.

The paint was almost totally used; save for a single can that lay open at his feet. He cleaned the rollers and brushes with a nearby hosepipe while Ginny rolled up the drop cloths. Pushing the lid on the last paint can, Harry felt a sharp pain from his hand. Wincing, he looked at his skin and was surprised to notice a large blister forming along the curve of his palm and he traced it gingerly with a finger.

Noticing his distress, Ginny came over to him and pulled on his fingers until she could see what he was looking at. Sucking in a breath, she said, "That's a good one, Harry."

He leaned a shoulder on the now dry shed wall and watched as she pulled her wand from her robes and pointed it at his hand. "Um, Ginny?" he asked, trying to draw his hand away from hers. "Won't you..."

Not breaking eye contact with his hand, she pulled more firmly on it to prevent his escape. "Hold still, Harry," she said somewhat peevishly and poked at the blister with the tip of her wand.

"But what about the Improper Use of Magic Office?" he said, wincing as her wand hit a particularly sensitive spot.

Ginny ignored him and muttered a charm under her breath. A faint blue light issued from her wand, enveloping his hand and he felt the stinging sensation instantly melt away, replaced with a dull, soothing warmth. "They're not monitoring The Burrow," she said, finally looking up at him. There was a look akin to concern in her eyes and it struck Harry somewhat more than it should have.

"Why... not?" he asked simply.

Ginny released his hand slowly and took a step back, leaning against the shed in a mirror image of Harry. "Something to do with your being here, I'm sure," she said evasively.

With my being here? thought Harry. *Did Dumbledore convince old Madam Hopkirk to go easy on me this summer?*

"Well," Ginny said a moment later, bringing Harry from his thoughts. "I reckon we'd better eat and then get you home?"

They sat and ate in silence, Harry leaning against the shed, Ginny making sure his cup was never empty. When they had put their dishes away, Harry slowly stood and stretched his tired back.

"Remus will be here in a minute or two," she said smiling. "We'd better get inside." Ginny turned on her heel and walked quickly up the darkened path, the empty pitcher and mugs clinking slightly as she walked.

Nodding his head numbly, Harry picked up the basket and followed her, not quite certain what he should think about his first day working at The Burrow. He waited in the cool kitchen for Remus to show up with the Portkey, vaguely looking for Ginny, who was nowhere to be seen.

As his body relaxed, a great wave of exhaustion washed over him and he scarcely nodded to Remus when he Apparated in, touching the old phone receiver with a tired finger and straining to keep his eyes open as they were pulled to Little Whinging. He felt strong arms help him up the stairs and put him in bed and as Harry kicked off his shoes, he heard Remus whisper, "Good night," before Harry pulled a sheet over his dirty clothes and at long last, let sleep overcome him.

Consequences of the Heart 3: Weeding the Past

Chapter Three – Weeding the Past

The following morning, Harry awoke to the sensation of someone shaking his shoulder. Trying to ignore the interruption to his sleep, hoping that it would simply go away, Harry snuggled deeper into his pillow and three words involuntarily escaped his lips: “Not now, Ginny.”

The shaking stopped for a moment and Harry’s hazy brain briefly wondered if he had dreamt it. Then the shaking returned, but with more vehemence.

“Harry,” came a harsh voice. Had he been more rational, Harry might have detected the hint of a laugh behind the harshness. “Wake up.”

“Huh?” asked Harry, finally opening his eyes to see a blurry form hovering over him. “Whattimeissit?” He reached blindly for his glasses until he felt them shoved into his hands.

“It’s time to go to work, young man.”

Thrusting his spectacles into place, the face of Remus Lupin appeared in front of him. Harry sat up, but the muscles in his shoulders and arms protested at the motion. “Ow,” he said as he worked his fingers by opening and closing his hands. “That smarts.”

“As it should,” said Remus. “Now get up. You’ve got five minutes to shower and dress before we leave.”

“All right, all right,” said Harry as he stood shakily and shuffled towards the loo. “Could you get me some clothes to wear while you’re here?” he asked, half-heartedly pulling his dirty shirt over his head and throwing it at Remus’ feet. “These are about done for.”

Just before he disappeared into the loo, he saw Remus pushing his shirt with the toe of one shoe as the older man muttered, “I’ll say.”

*

After a hasty shower and bite of toast, Harry and Remus arrived in the Burrow’s garden with a small *pop*. Remus pocketed the Portkey and walked quickly up to the kitchen door while Harry looked around at the grounds, still rubbing his aching muscles. The sun was just cresting over the trees to the east and the slight breeze brought a welcome chill to Harry’s exposed arms. *Looks like rain*, thought Harry as he looked at the shed in the distance with a renewed air of accomplishment.

Just as Harry was beginning to wonder what the day would hold for him, the door opened again, but instead of Remus Lupin, it was Ginny who appeared in the doorway. She paused, taking in Harry’s stance as he rubbed his still damp hair, then walked purposefully towards him and took hold of his arm.

“Let’s go,” she said softly as she pulled him down the familiar path to the shed.

“Is there something the matter?” he asked as they opened the side door and walked inside. “You seem a little tense.”

The smell of drying paint mingled with dust and oil assaulted his nose. Ginny sat on a nearby, overturned bucket and sighed, putting her head in her hands. “It’s...nothing,” she said in a strained voice.

Harry smirked and touched his bracelet to check the temperature. It was neither cold nor hot, so he reckoned he was safe for a bit. Pulling himself onto a nearby workbench, he pushed the stray bits of wood, metal and tools off to the side and sat with his elbows on his knees, ignoring the twinges of pain in his shoulders and back. “If it was nothing, you wouldn’t be bothered by it,” he said sagely.

Ginny looked up at him with a start, then her face softened and she smiled. “Since when did you become sensitive?” she asked.

He shrugged and looked at the piles of broken appliances, motors, and electrical plugs that littered the shed’s interior. “It’s a recent addition,” he muttered, trying to sound casual.

Risking a glance at Ginny, he saw her smirking at him. “Ron’s being a git,” she said.

“Nothing new there,” said Harry smoothly.

“Yeah, but now he’s about ready to qualify for the national git team,” she retorted, standing up and walking over to a stack of phonograph records on the shelf next to Harry’s head. Fingering them lightly, she continued, “It’s about Dean. He thinks I’m going out with him and won’t let me have a minute’s peace over it.”

Ah," said Harry, trying to mask his face with neutrality. "So, you're not going to go with Dean then?" He held his breath.

Ginny gave him a quizzical glance, the curve of her lips never dwindling. "No, Harry. I only told Ron that to watch him squirm."

Harry exhaled with an exaggerated puff. "That's a relief."

"Sorry?" she asked and Harry noticed out of the corner of his eye that she had turned to face him, hands folded in front of her.

"Wha – Oh, never mind," said Harry quickly, pushing himself off the counter and walking towards the door. "What chore have I got on my list today, anyway?"

When Ginny didn't immediately say anything, Harry turned back around to meet her stare. The light coming through the open door grew and then alternated with the shadows of the passing clouds. "Ginny?"

"Weeds," said Ginny simply, not taking her eyes off Harry. Her scrutiny was just a little unnerving and Harry had to look anywhere but at her face. "You've got to weed the flower beds today."

"All right," said Harry, strangely relieved. "Do I need anything special? Tools, gloves...that sort of thing?"

Finally breaking eye contact, Ginny searched around for two buckets that contained several different-sized shovels, gloves and other gardening apparatus, and handed them to Harry. "Here."

Harry grabbed the handles and motioned with his head to the door. "Shall we?"

Nodding, Ginny walked out into the sunlight and led Harry to the largest bed on the property, scattering two Gnomes who seemed to be playing hide and seek. The flowers were in various states of bloom and the riot of colour both assaulted Harry's senses and cheered his weary mind. Bees buzzed heavily around them as they flew from the mums and begonias to the hyacinths and roses. Still, as beautiful as the garden was, Harry could sense that something was slightly amiss.

"Don't think Mum's gone all soft on you, Harry," Ginny said, wading carefully into a patch of innocent-looking border dressing. A creeping vine started to curl around her ankle, and she batted it away with her wand. "Some of the plants in here can take a finger off...or worse."

Harry cautiously followed her around the house until they were underneath the highest section, where Ron's room and the attic protruded out of the roof at an odd angle, casting a shadow around their feet. There were several large rose bushes here, climbing a dilapidated trellis. As Harry eyed the pinks and reds, one of the blooms sprang into the air and snatched an insect with a sharp *snap*.

"Biting rose bushes," explained Ginny. Then, pointing to the base of the plant, she said, "See those weeds and clumps of grass?"

Harry nodded, still firmly gripping the handles of the buckets.

"Start with those and then we'll move on to the mums over by the downspout."

Harry placed the buckets on a bare spot of ground and pulled on a large pair of severe-looking gloves. "I'm glad I wore jeans today," he said to himself in a low voice, before carefully approaching the roses, shovel in hand.

The roses seemed to be ignoring him, taking nips only at passing insects, so Harry turned his attention to the largest weed. He sank his small hand shovel into the soil just in front of the sprawling plant and levered the handle, bringing the whole weed up and out of the rich earth. Grabbing the top of the plant with his glove, he knocked the roots against the shovel's blade until the soil fell back into the hole he had created. Then, he tossed the weed in a shallow arc towards the bucket; it hit the rim and fell inside.

As Harry worked, he found a rhythm that allowed him to spend the least amount of time possible next to the roses. Soon the bucket was full and the sun had crept over the roof, blazing down upon them. Ginny took the bucket, humming the same tune as she had been yesterday and came back with it empty; where she had disposed of the weeds, Harry didn't know.

"Come here," she said, setting the bucket down beside him and pulling out her wand.

Harry straightened up and raised an eyebrow. "You're not going to hex me, are you?"

"Don't be stupid," she said with a roll of her eyes. "I'd never get away with it while I'm wearing this blasted bracelet. It's just a sunscreen charm. See?" With a faint glow radiating from its tip, Ginny's wand traced a pattern over her face and arms.

When Ginny didn't break out into boils, Harry nodded his head. "All right."

Ginny stepped over to him and muttered the incantation. A pleasantly cool breeze washed over his skin where her wand was pointed, and Harry thought it might be a good idea to learn the spell, if only to stay cool in the hot sun.

Ginny stopped after what seemed a long while, but she didn't move away immediately. "Thanks," said Harry quietly. "It was quite refreshing."

"You're welcome."

Once again, Harry's bracelet gave a particularly cold twinge and he wondered if it might be malfunctioning, or if Ginny's sunscreen charm was interacting with it somehow.

They stared at each other for a second longer before a large wasp buzzed between them. Ginny yelped and staggered backwards while Harry leaned back to give it room to fly away, knowing that trying to shoo it would only aggravate the normally aggressive insect. Catching her eye again, Harry felt the strange tension dissipate and they both broke out into giggles.

With the roses weeded and Harry blissfully bite-free, he moved over to the downspout and the much tamer-looking mums. Ginny followed, carrying the empty bucket, and Harry settled down to start pulling out the grass that was growing in between the clusters of pink and yellow flowers. Whatever tune Ginny had been humming was catchy, and Harry found himself humming along with her from time to time.

Suddenly, Ginny stood. "I'm going to go inside for a bit," she said, and backed away awkwardly. She tripped on a low shrub and threw out her hands in an attempt to catch her balance. "To make lunch," she added hastily before turning and walking back around the house to the kitchen.

Harry was puzzled by Ginny's strange behaviour, but was unable to dwell on it for too long. He set to work, pulling off a glove in order to get better leverage on the stubborn grass and weeds in the harder earth that dominated this section of the flowerbed.

*

A thousand thoughts and feelings were flooding Ginny's mind as she slowed her pace on her way back to the kitchen. Watching Harry work that morning had changed something in her. It was as if a giant hand held her heart and was squeezing it. Why hadn't she reacted this way before? What was it about Harry that made her feel this way? More importantly, what was she going to do about it?

As Ginny stepped into the cool kitchen, her mum was busy at the sink with a whole, boiled chicken, carving it up and setting the de-boned meat into a large wooden bowl. Ginny sat heavily on a stool by the cooker and let out a long sigh.

"Something on your mind, dear?" asked Molly as she shoved the bones, skin and fat into the waste bin under the sink.

Ginny sighed again, trying to find the words to explain her situation. Normally, her mum would be the last person she would talk about boys with. Hermione was much better for that kind of thing because she never criticized, never became overly emotional and usually had good advice. Her mum, however, had always disapproved of her choices in boys, and so Ginny had just stopped coming to her about boy-related issues.

Since yesterday, though, Ginny couldn't help but think that her mum had changed; when they had been talking about Harry, her mother had finally shown the concern and care that Ginny had always wanted and needed.

"It's nothing," said Ginny dramatically.

Molly arched a brow and set the knife to work at chopping the chicken into small squares, then cast a sanitizing charm on her hands. "As long as 'nothing' means 'Harry Potter', you can be sure that it won't stay 'nothing' for long."

Unable to help herself, Ginny smiled. "I supposed you're right..." Sliding off the stool, Ginny donned an apron and pulled out a jar of mayonnaise, some fresh celery and a selection of spices. As she set to work putting lunch together, she looked over to her mum and said, "It is about Harry, after all."

"Mmm," said her mum noncommittally, as the chicken flew from the cutting board into a small frying pan and began to sizzle.

With the mix ready in the bowl, Ginny only had to wait for the chicken to cook. She wiped her hands on her apron and put the ingredients away, taking her place back on the stool. As her mum continued to push the chicken around the pan with a spatula, Ginny's exasperation grew. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"Hmm?" Molly said, turning around to look at her daughter.

"I said, it *was* about Harry."

"Oh," said Molly as she scraped the chicken bits onto a towel covered plate. "Well, what did you want me to say?"

With a groan of frustration, Ginny popped her mother in the backside with a dishrag. "You're horrible! Stop teasing me and tell me what I'm going to do."

"Do?" Molly asked, putting the pan into the sink. With a flick of her wand, she set a brush washing it. "You don't have to *do* anything, except wait for him to come to you. When he's ready, that is."

"Mum..." said Ginny patiently, "I've been waiting for him for four years. I'm not sure if I can handle these...feelings any more."

Molly took off her apron, folded it into quarters and set it down on the counter in between the bowl and plate of chicken. "Ginny," she said, placing her hands on Ginny's shoulders. "Harry's having a rough time of it just now. You can't expect the boy to jump into your arms right away..."

"I suppose you're right," Ginny said with a glance at the clock on the mantle. It was tough to tell at this distance, but it seemed that both Harry and Ginny's hands were solidly in the blue section. "I miss Sirius too."

Her mother cupped her cheek and pulled Ginny's gaze up to meet her own. "He needs to heal before he can love. Be there for him through this and then see how things go, all right?"

Ginny nodded and wrapped her arms around her mother's neck. "Thank you, Mum. I really...needed that just now."

They held each other for a while and Ginny was reminded of how tender her mother could be.

"You get this salad finished and I'll get a pudding for you to take with you." They broke their embrace and looked at each other for a while, then finished lunch.

*

Turning the corner that was underneath the protruding attic, Ginny spotted Harry squatting in the mums, looking like he was about finished with the weeds. All at once, Harry let out an almighty screech and a loud curse word that would have had her mum howling in indignation. A Gnome flew through the air and Harry began to stomp and kick at the flowers until a gaggle of the little potato-headed creatures came bustling out, heading for the vegetable patch.

Rushing over to where he was still muttering expletives under his breath and sucking on his finger, Ginny set the basket down and put her hand on his shoulder. "Let me see it."

He eyed her for a second, anger still bubbling on his face, finger still jammed in his mouth, then pulled it out with a wet smack and shoved it at her. It was bleeding pretty heavily but Ginny had seen worse. "It's not bad," she said as she healed it quickly with her wand.

"Not bad?" he growled, fuming. "It hurt worse than when that git Lockhart removed all the bones in my arm!"

"Oh, stop being dramatic," she said with a chuckle, still holding his hand as she made sure the cut wasn't bleeding any more. "I've had much worse."

Harry jerked his hand from hers and stomped over to the downspout, giving it a look that would wither the stoutest of Professor Sprout's Mandrakes. He stood there, sulking, until Ginny started to giggle.

Whirling around, he set his steely glare on her and for some reason, that made her giggle all the more. "Stop...laughing!" said Harry in a huff.

And she did, instantly sobered by the serious tone in his voice. "There's no reason to get snippy," she said, fixing a neutral expression on her face.

"I wasn't overreacting," he temporized, folding his arms across his chest defensively. "It really did hurt."

Ginny resisted the urge to egg him on even more and settled for crossing her own arms in an attempt to show him how ludicrous he was being. They faced each other for a while until Ginny got an idea.

"This isn't about the Gnome, is it, Harry?"

The question seemed to calm him as his arms loosened across his chest and the hard expression on his face softened. "I don't know what you mean," he said evasively, staring at his shoes.

"Oh, really?" countered Ginny, putting her hands on her hips and thrusting out one foot for balance. "Then why didn't you react this way the last time a Gnome bit you?"

Harry faltered and he sat on the bare earth between the mums and hyacinths. "You were thinking about – about *him*, weren't you?" she pressed.

His head shot up and he pinned Ginny with his eyes. She sank slowly down to the ground just in front of where he was positioned, but she looked past him to where several bees were combing a set of hyacinths for nectar. Absently, she began twirling a piece of her flame-red hair. Harry didn't say anything but had stopped staring at her.

"It's all right to talk about it, you know?" she offered quietly.

"No," he said simply, shaking his head as he pulled at his hair, his gaze fixed on the ground between them.

"No what?" she asked.

"No, it's not all right to talk about it." Harry's voice had grown heavy and Ginny thought she could detect a quiver in it.

"Harry," she said soothingly, "I...I understand something of what you're going through."

He laughed – a hollow sort of sound that was devoid of all things normally associated with laughter. "What could you *possibly* understand about what I'm going through?"

Biting back the sharp retort that sprung into her mind, Ginny kept her voice even. "You're not the only one that misses him, Harry."

"Yeah, well you've got a mum and a dad and a *perfect* life, while I've lost everyone I've ever had that's important to me." His voice was hard now as he looked at her, and part of Ginny was glad for it; glad that he was letting his emotions come to the surface because it meant that they were connecting – although that thought scared her too.

"My life's not perfect, Harry...and you know it," she said, still struggling to keep a reign on her feelings. "No, it's not as hard as yours...and maybe I can't understand what it means to be you, but I *do* know what it's like to be without Sirius."

He made a disbelieving noise with his throat and stared at the dirt under his nails. Ginny let out a long breath and quietly said, "Did Hermione or Ron ever tell you what had happened at Grimmauld Place last summer, before you arrived?"

A look of confusion passed over Harry's face. "Well, I assumed you did a lot of cleaning and eavesdropping on Order meetings."

"Yeah," she said with a small smirk. "That too. But what we mostly did was get to know Sirius." Ginny suddenly remembered the basket and pulled it open, taking out the bowl of chicken salad. "Care for a bite?"

Harry nodded, and although he kept staring at his hands, Ginny took this as a good sign. As she began filling their plates, she continued speaking. "Not being part of your group for the previous three years, I still thought he was a mass murderer on the run from the Ministry." Harry chortled a little bit at that and Ginny handed him a plate of food. "So imagine my surprise when we show up at his house and he's there telling off Kreacher in the entryway? Mum had to immobilize me, as I was trying to take his head off with my bare hands." Feeling her cheeks grow warm at that memory and the one of Ron's subsequent teasing, Ginny poured them each a mug of juice and ploughed forward with the story. "Ron and Hermione took me upstairs and told me the whole story about your adventures in third year, how Sirius was innocent, and that *Scabbers* was really a Death Eater." Shivering involuntarily, Ginny noticed that Harry was no longer hunched over; he was staring at her hungrily as he chewed on his food.

"Well, naturally," she said as she resumed twirling the hair attached to her temple, "I was quite curious about him. I mean, escaped convict...your Godfather...and the twins seemed to worship the ground he walked on. So I cornered him one night and got him to tell me everything from his point of view." Ginny smiled, thinking of how proud he was of Harry for not killing Pettigrew, for winning the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and for bringing Cedric's body back after that horrible experience in the graveyard. "We sort of made it a tradition after that. I would make tea and scones and he would tell me all about being in the Canary Islands or in Brazil..."

"I didn't know about that," interrupted Harry after draining his mug and gesturing for more. "He never told me where he went with Buckbeak after we saved him..."

Ginny filled his mug and took a sip from her own. "He was so worried about you, Harry. He didn't want you to be thinking about him...he just wanted you to be happy."

Ginny watched Harry expectantly and when he didn't react, she continued. "Then when you showed up, he spent most of his time with you, or giving Snape and Dumbledore an earful about how they've been treating you badly, about how you shouldn't have to be locked up at the Dursleys' and a million other things." Ginny paused, and swallowing slowly, touched Harry's knee lightly with her hand. "He really loved you, Harry."

Ginny's bracelet gave a great lurch as Harry's head sank and he let out a series of sniffs. She absently rubbed at the slender gold around her wrist, giving Harry a curious look.

"I don't want to talk about this..." he trailed off, still sniffing and rubbing at his eyes with the shoulder of his shirt.

"You need to hear it anyway, Harry," said Ginny firmly.

"I'm not ready!" came his abrupt reply, startling Ginny and causing her to spill her juice.

She watched as the liquid pooled, then seeped into the dark earth. "...I understand, Harry," said Ginny softly. "Just know that I've got more to tell you, and when you're ready to hear it, I'll be waiting."

Ginny gathered their plates, mugs and napkins and put them back into the basket. She pushed off from the ground and patted the seat of her trousers to clean off the dust, then hefted their food into her arms. "When you've finished with the mums," said Ginny after clearing her throat, "move on to the front bed and work around the hedges there."

Harry nodded and Ginny walked solemnly back to the Burrow.

*

That evening, after a subdued dinner, Harry sat on the front porch, watching a large thunderstorm as it pelted the village of Ottery St. Catchpole and swept up the lane to the Burrow. Positioned as he was, on the bottom step, his back leaning against an old, wooden column, Harry was instantly soaked from head to toe by the sheets of warm rain. It felt good.

Lightning flashed and thunder boomed, but Harry didn't flinch as water streamed down his sodden hair and into his face. He thought about Sirius, about how much he missed him, and even though he hadn't known him half as well as he should have, Harry couldn't help but wonder what a difference having him now could have made in his life.

Another flash of lightning and crash of thunder masked the sound of the opening door, but the light from the entryway spilled onto the porch, broken with a long shadow. When it closed, Harry knew it was Remus.

"About done drowning yourself?" asked his escort to Privet Drive.

Harry didn't reply at first, but slowly stood and surveyed the sky as another flash lit up the distant clouds. He turned and nodded, grateful for the rain that mingled with and masked his tears.

*

The next day was Saturday, and Harry was able to sleep in later than he had the past two days. A beam of sunlight hit him in the eyes, waking him as thoroughly as a bucket of cold water on his face. Turning over to face the pale white wall, Harry blinked his eyes a few times as he tried to recall what was happening that day. Ginny was coming over at ten to study, then they were to break for lunch at noon, followed by more studying until dinner. Harry wondered briefly what they were going to eat, as Aunt Petunia wouldn't be too pleased if she would be expected to feed Harry *and* Ginny.

Crawling out of bed, he pulled his arms behind his back to loosen the tight muscles across his shoulders and chest. A few minutes of stretching was

now much less painful than it had been yesterday and Harry's body felt loads better for it.

After a hot shower, he walked downstairs to get some breakfast, ignoring the sneer his cousin was giving him. Uncle Vernon was sitting in the living room, rustling his paper noisily and muttering under his breath. Harry's aunt was just about to clear off the dishes when he sat down and it became a race to shovel food onto his plate before she took the bowls and plates of food to the sink; Harry was barely able to pinch the last rasher of bacon as the plate was whisked away.

He took his time eating, however, he wasn't excited by the prospect of waiting in the living room for Ginny to arrive while his uncle was still occupying the recliner.

Aunt Petunia didn't make matters easy, as she had finished washing every dish in the kitchen but the one he was eating from, having already taken his fork, knife, and even his juice glass when he set it down for a second. Finally crunching the last of his toast, Harry relinquished his plate to his aunt and dabbed at his lips with the small towel she had been using to wipe the table.

As he was getting up, his aunt made a hissing noise from where she was washing his plate and jerked her head as if she had developed a massive tic in her neck. He looked at her as if she were mad, then walked closer when she waved a foamy hand frantically at him.

"Remus said that the girl you attacked will be coming here today to study," she said in a whisper.

"Yeah," answered Harry warily.

"Vernon doesn't know," she said, slowly drawing out each syllable.

Harry raised his eyebrows and then shrugged, not understanding why she was telling him all this.

She rolled her eyes and jabbed her soap-covered finger towards the living room, where Uncle Vernon was now loudly lamenting a rise in petrol prices to no one in particular. "If he finds out that you've got a w – a wi –" she clenched her teeth, then in an even softer voice, said, "a witch...in your room...even I won't be able to calm him down."

Unruffled, Harry said, "So take him out for a drive or something."

"I can't," she said, finally putting the plate back in the sink. "We're to go to a Parish luncheon and he would get suspicious."

"So," said Harry, the wheels turning in his head, "am I to do something, then?"

"Just keep her in your room and stay quiet," she explained. "I'll take him out to the garden just before she gets here so you can get her upstairs before we get back."

Harry sized up his aunt and considered the situation carefully. Having his aunt run interference for him with his uncle would be helpful, as Harry was always looking for ways to avoid confrontations with him. Still, it was odd to be having such a civil conversation with his aunt, let alone be entering into some sort of truce with her.

"All right."

Before Harry could get in another word on the matter, she had wiped her hands on her lace apron and shoved Harry into the living room.

"Vernon, dear?" Her voice was a high-pitched warble that came across as irritating to Harry's ears.

"What is it, Petunia?" he asked with a sigh, then said, "Sodding Highway Agency has closed off the A3 at Guildford."

"I need your help with the apple tree in the back garden, dear," she said sweetly, ignoring his commentary on the A3.

Still holding the paper in front of his abnormally large face, he said distractedly, "Get the boy to do it."

"His minder is coming over in a few minutes, Vernon." Her voice had turned from sugar to venom in the blink of an eye. "I need you in the garden."

Vernon hastily and recklessly folded the paper, shoved it into a slot of the magazine rack and pushed himself heavily from the cushy recliner. "All right, all right," he said with a puff. "Let's look at the apple tree, then."

They walked over to the garden door and his uncle sent Harry a withering stare before the door was closed roughly behind them.

Not two minutes later, the bell rang on the front door and Remus was soon in the living room, followed closely by Ginny, her bag held tightly in her hand.

"Good morning, Harry," said Remus with a bracing hug. "Ginny's all set. We'll be sending you some food at lunch time, so expect a Floo call from her mum."

Harry looked at Ginny awkwardly for a minute before he realized that Remus was halfway out the door. "You kids have fun and remember...we're keeping an eye on things, so no rowing."

Still looking at each other, they waited for the door to shut, then Ginny let a smile slip onto her face. Harry grinned and took her bag, hefting it onto his shoulder with a groan. "Welcome to Number Four," he said with a mock bow.

Ginny giggled and slapped at his shoulder playfully. "Stop it," she said. "We're here to study, you know?"

Harry put on a serious face. "Quite right," he said, hooking a thumb into the strap of Ginny's heavy bag. It was quite a bit heavier than his normally was. "But I thought I was studying with Ginny today, not Hermione."

"Ha, ha," she said mockingly, and she made to take her bag back, but Harry dodged to the side.

A creak on the stairs spirited Harry into action and he shoved Ginny behind the sofa. She complained but Harry shushed her, just as Dudley lumbered down the stairs.

"Who you talking to?" he asked thickly, still wrapped in a dressing gown that would fit Hagrid with ease.

"No one," said Harry as Ginny kicked him in the leg. "Just practicing for a school play."

Dudley looked puzzled for a minute and said, "They have plays at that school you go to?"

"All the time," said Harry easily. "I'm in one of the best acting troupes." Another sharp kick from Ginny landed on his shin and he let out a howl which quickly turned into a shaky rendition of 'If I were a rich man', from *Fiddler on the Roof*, the only play Harry had ever seen.

Whether it was the off-key pitch caused by the pain in his leg or that Harry had convinced his cousin that he was in an acting troupe at Hogwarts, Harry didn't know, but Dudley shrugged, turned to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

As soon as he had his pig-like head behind the door, Harry reached down and grabbed Ginny by the shoulder, pulling her up to a standing position. Ignoring her glare, he took her hand and yanked her to the stairs.

"What's going on, Harry?" she asked in a harsh whisper. "Why did you hide me from your cousin like that?"

"Shh," Harry said as he crept up to the landing. Turning quickly in the hall, he pulled Ginny into his room and shut the door.

He turned back to see Ginny staring at him, arms folded across her chest, hips cocked to one side and eyes boring into his. "What on earth has gotten into you? Mum said Remus cleared everything with your relatives."

Harry let out a breath and sank heavily onto his bed. "He spoke with my aunt, but she didn't tell anyone else."

"I don't understand," she said, softening her stance a little.

Realizing that he was still carrying Ginny's bag, he lifted the strap off his shoulder and plopped it into his lap. It was pink and green, with little rainbows and butterflies on the upper half, and judging by the numerous tears and patches, it looked like it had been used for a number of years.

"Uncle Vernon hates magical people," he explained slowly. "He can't even stand it when owls deliver the post, so I don't think my aunt wanted to tell him about it, just to keep the peace." Looking up at her now, Harry saw that her arms had dropped to her side as she contemplated what he was saying, making her appear much less angry. "Dudley was just a side-effect," he finished. "I reckon that if Dudley knows, he'll tell his parents straight away, so we've got to be careful."

"As fun as being in your room is, Harry, I'm going to have to use the loo eventually."

Harry nodded his head. "Right. Aunt Petunia said that they would be leaving for a church something-or-other and so we can leave the room then and you can...well, use the loo."

Ginny considered this for a moment and said, "All right." She pulled a chair out from his desk and plopped down in it, folding her legs so that her dress concealed everything above her knees. "So...shall we get started, then?"

Harry pulled his eyes away from the freckles on her shins and nodded. "Yeah," he said, handing her bag over to her. "Yeah."

*

They worked on their Charms essays first and Harry was impressed with how advanced she was in the subject. She had even been able to demonstrate the wand movements for some of the things that Harry would be seeing in sixth year.

"Does Hermione know you're this smart?" he asked, amazed.

She giggled softly and said, "Of course she does.... But what she doesn't know is that I beat her Charms exam score for fourth year."

If it was possible for Harry to be any more impressed, he would have been. "You...you beat her score?"

A flash of red graced her cheeks and Harry felt a surge of satisfaction at causing that reaction in her. "It was an easy test, though," she hedged. "I bet the one you lot took was harder."

Harry continued to stare unabashedly at her and after a while, Ginny started to rifle through some of the parchment on his desk. "What's this?" she asked, holding up something that looked like it had been in an accident involving ink and a fan.

"Oh," said Harry, reaching out for it, "It's just my first attempt at Snape's essay."

She didn't relinquish it at once, but seemed to be trying to read in between the owlprints. "You're off to a good start, but flax seed oil is highly reactive to crushed Jarvey fang."

“Right,” he said, taking the incomplete essay from her and looking down at it. “Right.”

Ginny produced two fresh pieces of parchment and handed one over to Harry. “You’ll be starting over then?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, whose vocabulary seemed to have been reduced to monosyllabic words.

They had worked on their separate essays for another hour when they heard the downstairs door open, then close, and then the sounds of the Dursleys getting into their car before they drove off. Not long afterwards, the whumping sound of a Floo connection being activated reached their ears and Ginny said, “I’ll get lunch.”

As Ginny left, Harry got up and stretched, first his arms, then his legs. When he bent over to touch his toes, he heard the door creak open and Ginny let out a slow whistle. “I haven’t even eaten lunch and here you go giving me dessert.”

Heat crept up Harry’s face and he instantly straightened. “Sure, you think it’s good now, but what you don’t know is that I usually do this in the buff.”

Ginny’s mouth went slack and a glazed look passed over her face for a second before she shook her head clear. “You can’t tease me like that, Harry, unless you’re going to make good on it.”

The implications of what she was saying didn’t dawn on Harry for a second, but when they did, the heat in his cheeks spread to his chest and neck. “We’ll see about that.”

“You can bet on it, Mr. Potter,” she responded cheekily. “Would you like some lunch or shall I just eat it all myself?”

Harry lunged for the now-familiar basket and said, “You’d better give me some of that; I’m starved.”

Opting to not risk being caught in the kitchen, in case the Dursleys came home early, they sat on Harry’s bed cross-legged and ate their meat pies, chips, and pumpkin juice in relative silence.

Once the meal was put away, they leaned back against the wall and relaxed, stretching their legs until they dangled off the side of the bed.

“Who knew writing essays could make you so tired,” said Ginny after a minute of quiet rumination. “I wish we could take a nap. I’m just so tired after eating lunch…”

“Yeah,” said Harry, his eyes still closed as he fought off sleep himself. “That’d go over real well with your mum. She’s already looking for an excuse to hex me for what I did to you at school.”

“She doesn’t hate you, Harry. In fact, she’s more angry at me than at you.” Ginny’s foot was swaying slightly from side to side and bumped against Harry’s foot every other time. He didn’t move it away.

“Hmmp,” Harry said with mock concern. “Did she really lay into you?”

Harry felt the bed shaking a little and cracked an eye to look at Ginny. She was holding in a chuckle, but her body was jerking with the effort. “Oh, boy, did she ever,” she finally said through strained laughter.

“Not only did she tell me off,” Ginny continued, “but she threatened to send me to Beauxbatons if I didn’t accept my punishment.”

Something she said triggered a question Harry had been meaning to ask. “So how is it I’m the one doing all the work and you get the easy job? We did *both* hex Snape, you know?”

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh. “We did. But… I mean, think about it Harry.” Ginny pushed herself up with her hands and leaned forward. Harry kept a half-closed eye on her. “If it’s punishment you’re after, then I think I’ve got the worst end of it.”

“Really?” he asked, now coming fully awake again. “How do you reckon that?”

“Okay, put yourself in my shoes for a second,” she said as she pulled her legs under her body. “What’s the absolute worst thing you could have asked me right after our fight?”

Harry thought about it for a second. It would have been horrible for him to be around Ginny at all, and at first, it was. But the worst would be to have to be her slave – to serve her in every way in abject humility. Harry didn’t think he would have been able to stomach that and suddenly saw the situation in an entirely different light.

“How did you do it?” he asked her, still leaning against the wall, hands hooked together behind his head. “I would have gone barmy having to bring you lunch and stuff.”

She smiled, revealing straight, white teeth in between a pair of full, pink lips. “It wasn’t easy, but even my hatred for you couldn’t compare to not being at Hogwarts next year.”

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway made it to Harry’s room and was soon followed by Vernon’s loud booming voice and the click of the lock on the front door. They continued to look at each other for a moment when Harry was suddenly set upon by an indescribable sadness. He pulled himself forward and hung his head over the edge of the bed, his elbows propped on his knees and his head in his hands.

Ginny grabbed at her bracelet and said, “What’s the matter Harry? Did I say something wrong?”

Harry shook his head and with a quite voice, said, "You're just really lucky is all."

"Why am I lucky?" she asked, confused.

He laughed hollowly and said, "Because you've got parents who care enough about you to tell you off, to threaten you with Beauxbatons..."

Silence.

"Oh, Harry," she said, sliding up close enough to him to put her hand on his back. "I'm sorry...I..."

"No, Ginny, it's fine. I'm the one who should be apologizing." Her hand was warm where its rubbing slowly eased away the pain. "I'm sorry for being so thick about your punishment..." He trailed off, not sure what to say.

"Harry?" she asked gently, still rubbing his back, but now in a different spot; the relief was unbelievable.

"Yeah?" he said, unable to put more than a single word together.

"I..." she paused, took a breath, and continued, "I wanted to finish talking about Sirius. You know...from yesterday?"

Harry frowned, but although he wasn't sure that she could see it from this angle, he said nothing. She seemed to sense his reluctance to listen, but ploughed on regardless.

"You remember the night before your trial at the Ministry?" she asked tentatively, moving her hand yet again to work the muscles under his shoulder blade.

"Yes," he whispered. How could he forget?

"Everyone was so worried about you and the trial, even me...that we completely forgot that it was my birthday."

Her hand paused and Harry looked up to face her. "Really?" he asked with sincerity. "I didn't know that was your birthday."

"It's all right, Harry," she said, resuming her ministrations. "It's not usually a big deal anyway, but what I wanted to say was that Sirius didn't forget." Her hand stopped again and her fully opened palm pressed into his spine. "Everyone else did...Mum, Dad, the twins.... But after you went to bed, I went to sit in the drawing room and watch the fire die and he came in with two cupcakes, each with a candle in the middle."

Ginny's voice was getting heavy as she recounted her experience and Harry felt his own throat constrict with emotion. "He...he was like that, you know? Always remembering things like that. I tried to tell him I was too concerned about you to properly celebrate my birthday, but he insisted.

"So, I blew out the candles and just before I bit into the cupcake, it exploded in my face." Harry let out a snort and Ginny chuckled with him. "Then, as if nothing had happened, he cleaned away the cake and frosting with his wand and conjured two more."

After Ginny didn't say anything for a while, Harry risked looking up at her. Her eyes were watery and she blinked, sending a tear streaming down her face. "He was..." she said, her voice breaking. "He was a great friend."

Unable to restrain it any longer, Harry's own tears fell and he gave one great shuddering sigh in an attempt to regain his composure. Ginny's arms snaked around him and pulled his body into her chest, completely breaking his resolve.

Shaking with silent tears, like when he'd shared a bed with the spiders under the stairs, Harry let his emotions run their course. "I miss him, Ginny," he said fiercely, wiping roughly at his eyes under his glasses.

Ginny's lithe fingers pulled them off his face and softly, she said, "Me too, Harry." He felt her hand in his hair and she began to rock with him.

"If I'd listened to Hermione...or not listened to Kreacher, or learned stupid Occlumency from Snape..." The words were tumbling out now and Harry didn't care that Ginny was there to hear him. "I hate that...that *bitch* for murdering Sirius. I hate myself for not trusting Dumbledore and I hate Sirius for leaving me!"

Ginny didn't try to stop him and didn't interrupt. Harry raged and stormed some more, blaming himself, Dumbledore and even Snape that Sirius was gone. Through it all, Harry stayed locked in her arms, as if something about her embrace helped him to find the right words. Whatever it was, in the end, when he had finished lashing out at everyone he could think of, the empty space that had been inside his chest for the past week seemed to change, ever so slightly.

He found that he was no longer rocking, but half-lying on Ginny as she leaned against the wall. Wiping his eyes one final time, knowing that they were completely empty of tears, he slowly pulled himself off of Ginny and reached for his glasses.

"I'm sorry you had to hear that," he said sheepishly, not looking at her.

"Tosh," she said, as she straightened her dress. "You needed to get that out of your system."

Harry nodded half-heartedly and sat back against the wall next to her. "Sorry."

Ginny's hand hit his shoulder with a *thwap*. "Ow!" he said as he rubbed it gingerly. "What was that for?"

"Stop apologizing about everything," she said simply. "You aren't responsible for everyone, you know."

“I’m so –” He had been about to apologize again, but Ginny’s raised hand made him think better of it. “Thanks, Ginny.”

She smiled and this time, Harry realized that beauty was something that was *not* made or bought, but existed in the smile of a friend. “Any time, Harry.”

Harry and Ginny finished their Potions essays and read from their Transfiguration books to get ready for next Saturday. They Flooed back to the Burrow for dinner and Harry was back in his room before nine that night.

As Harry lay on his bed, staring up at the unlit bulb on his ceiling, his mind wandered over the events of the day. Everything about it made Harry happy and for the first time since he had been in the Department of Mysteries, the hollowness in his chest seemed to shrink a little and be replaced with a lightness of hope and a bright surge of joy. With his friends, Harry felt that there wasn’t anything he couldn’t accomplish, even if it meant facing Voldemort one more time.

Consequences of the Heart 4: Emotional Ties

Chapter 4 – Emotional Tie-ups

The next week, Harry spent his time pruning the twenty or so trees that dotted the front and back gardens. His favourite were the fruit trees, as he was forced to pick the ripening fruit before trimming the branches. Ginny took it upon herself to lug the baskets of fruit from the trees to the house, where Mrs. Weasley was busy tinning peach preserves and pear slices. The extra help was a nice change in the working dynamic, and to Harry, it indicated he had likely been forgiven for their end of term duelling debacle.

When Harry had confronted Ginny about her sudden change in behaviour, she had become evasive and secretive.

“Hand me those clippers, please,” asked Harry politely as he balanced on the rickety wooden ladder.

Ginny set her half-filled basket of apples down and handed him the long-handled pruning scissors with a smile.

He took the tool but did not immediately return to his task; instead, he gave the redheaded witch below him a calculating stare. “What’s with you, Ginny?”

“What do you mean?” she asked innocently enough.

Setting the pruners down on the top section of the ladder, he folded his arms and continued to stare at her. “When I first started working for your mum, you told me you couldn’t help me at all, and nowhere you are, pleasantly giving me a hand. How is that?”

Ginny smirked at him and picked up the basket again, slipping the handle into the crook of her elbow. “First of all, I said I wasn’t supposed to help you directly but McGonagall never said I couldn’t offer my services beyond what was in the letter. Second, nothing happened – exactly. I just...thought things would be better if I lent a hand here and there.”

Her eyes fell to her feet when she said this and her free hand fumbled nervously with the delicate gold bracelet on her wrist, making Harry almost certain that she was being evasive. A notoriously good actress, Ginny had the ability to bluff her way through almost any situation, and Harry couldn’t help but wonder why she would be dodging the subject now.

“Well, whatever...I—uh—I’m glad for the help.” Harry wanted to be conciliatory, but he couldn’t quite make it work, so he settled for half a compliment. His own bracelet was oddly cool, and this time, there was no charm or spell that could explain it away.

Ginny’s head rose slightly, just enough for Harry to see the demure look on her face as she said, “You’re welcome, Harry.” The bracelet’s odd behaviour left his mind and they finished picking apples together.

The day after the trees had been picked and trimmed was Saturday, and during their study session in his bedroom, Harry and Ginny finished their Transfiguration essays and began work on Herbology. She never mentioned his emotional outburst from the prior week, and for that Harry was grateful. Still, he couldn’t help but think that having her there was exactly what he had needed, and strange as it sounded to him, that moment seemed to be the turning point in their friendship.

Just as odd were the bracelets that they both wore. Harry wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer, but even he was starting to put things together. On the first day, when Remus and Molly had explained the function of the bracelets, they had only made it clear that the enchanted metal bands conveyed feelings of hatred. Over the past couple of weeks, Harry was starting to see a trend that suggested that the bracelets worked the opposite way as well. His bracelet seemed to get cold during times that Ginny was acting especially friendly. What Harry was to do with this knowledge, however, eluded him.

Harry and Ginny returned to the Burrow from Privet Drive that Saturday evening to have dinner, and they found Ron in a mood.

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The Floo trip from Mrs. Figg’s house had been bumpy and dirty, and once they had slid into the Burrows kitchen, Harry began trying, with little success, to wipe his glasses clean. Miraculously, Ginny didn’t seem to have a speck of soot on her; she had slid through the grate with the grace of an Olympic gymnast.

Ron came charging downstairs, distracted and dishevelled, ploughing into his sister without a second glance, and started rifling through the drawers of the secretary.

“Watch it,” snapped Ginny crossly.

Harry was still trying to get his glasses clean, but the soot on his shirt wasn't helping.

When he finally put them on his face, Ron had dumped out the contents of half the secretary and was in the process of sorting through the pile of quills, paper clips and other random objects. Ginny had him fixed with an evil glare, but he was oblivious to it.

"That was rude of you, Ron," said Harry. "You should probably apologize."

Ron finally gave up on the pile and started as he looked up at them, obviously surprised to see them there. "What are you on about, Harry?"

Getting more and more annoyed with his best friend, Harry took a step towards him and pointed at Ginny. "You about toppled her over and didn't so much as blink. Apologize."

"Take it easy, mate," said Ron, his hands stretched out in front of him. "It's just Ginny; she's used to it by now"

Shocked by Ron's callous treatment of his sister, Harry barely noticed when Ron moved into the kitchen proper and began searching through the drawers and cupboards "You have the manners of a Troll," he said, letting his voice rise a notch. "Apologize!" Ginny's hand suddenly squeezed his shoulder and she sent him a pleading look, as if she didn't want him to press the matter.

Ron turned to face Harry and looked as if he were staring at a complete stranger. "What's your problem, Harry? She'll get over it. She always does."

Still being restrained by Ginny, Harry was at a loss as to what he should do.

Ron snapped his fingers. "I know what's the matter," continued Ron when Harry didn't say anything. "You're still upset about your punishment this summer, right? Holding over some of your anger from last year too, I'd wager. Well, knock it off, Harry. I'm sorry Sirius was killed, but you can't go on like this. You need to let your grief go and move on."

Harry's face lost its colour when Ron mentioned his dead godfather's name. Had this happened two weeks prior, Harry would certainly have punched him where he stood, but he didn't. Ginny did instead, knocking Ron down with one punch.

"Howdare you!" she screeched as Ron held his eye protectively. "You inconsiderate, slimy little flobberworm! You've no idea what Harry's been through, what it's like to carry the load he's got on his shoulders!" Ginny was towering over her brother and Ron cowered under her mighty wrath. She reminded Harry strongly of Mrs. Weasley and it finally sunk in just how dangerous it was for him to have faced that same anger just two weeks ago.

"You hit me," Ron wailed. "I can't believe it!"

"Apologize," Harry and Ginny said simultaneously, sharing a wry glance before facing Ron together.

"I'm bloody sorry, all right!" Ron said miserably as he touched his face and winced. The area around his eye was puffing up like a balloon and he had to squint to look at them. "To both of you. I'm sorry for knocking you over, Ginny, and I'm sorry for yelling at you, Harry."

They looked around awkwardly for a moment as the tension in the room dissipated. Harry's breathing slowed and he stuck out his hand, the bracelet dangling from it not giving so much as a twitch. "All right, then."

Ron and Harry shook hands and Ron scuttled up the stairs to his room.

Beside him, Ginny let out a breath and sank onto the stool next to the kitchen counter. "Well, that was fun."

Harry considered his friend for a moment and said, "He just needs a good snog, is all."

Ginny snorted and nodded her head vigorously. "I can think of just the witch for the job, too."

"Oh," said Harry as his eyebrows shot up. "Someone we know? Prefect with brown hair?"

"You know," said Ginny as she stood and linked elbows with Harry, "I think she might be just the one."

*

The job assigned to him after that had been to re-build the fence around the garden. Pulling out the old posts turned out to be the most difficult part, as he wasn't allowed to use magic to Reductor them into splinters or levitate them out. Since he and Ginny were working together as a team, she had devised an ingenious method to pull them up involving a long iron pipe on a pivot and a large basket of rocks. The actual construction after that had been quite simple, if not easy.

With the fence done, the week after that had been spent re-paving the walk between the Burrow and the shed. It had taken longer than Harry initially thought it would, simply because the old bricks were wedged into the sand and grass so tightly that it took him three days just to pull them all out. Smoothing the path and adding more sand was simple by comparison, but Harry couldn't shake the feeling that something was odd about those old bricks.

When Ginny asked her mum about it, Molly confessed that there was a sticking charm placed on the bottoms, but that she had thought it had worn off by then. Since the bricks had mostly been removed by the time Harry had discovered this little secret, it simply didn't warrant a *Finite*

Incantatum to the rest of them, and Harry finished pulling out the stubborn bricks by hand.

It had rained off and on since that first thunderstorm three weeks ago, and whenever it wasn't raining and Harry had finished a little early for the day, he would grab Ron for a game of Quidditch in the back paddock while Ginny made dinner. They would alternate from Seeking against each other to Harry playing Chaser while Ron defended a transfigured hoop. Even with the first week being as horrible as it had been, and the back-breaking work he was being forced to do, Harry found himself enjoying his summer more than at any other time in his life. So much so that he cheerfully worked all day just for the chance to be with Ron and Ginny instead of at his aunt and uncle's house.

*

Arriving again just outside the Burrow at the beginning of his fourth week of work, Harry waited in the still morning air while Remus walked into the kitchen to announce their arrival. As Harry looked around at the various improvements he had made, satisfaction swelled in his chest and he couldn't help but feel proud of his accomplishments, regardless of the reasons he had come to labour for the Weasleys.

A large pile of lumber lay to one side of the shed in the distance, and Harry had a hard time imagining what it was he'd be doing that week. The fence had been re-built, the shed was in good condition, and the Burrow itself was so propped up with magic that Harry doubted he could do anything to improve upon it with regular Muggle construction. So what was the wood for? More importantly, as Harry had been working the past few days, the question of where the money had come from to pay for the new materials had been niggling in the back of his mind. Not wanting to bring up a touchy subject, Harry had deferred making reference to it until he could come up with a tactful way to do so. Still, he had to wonder if Mr. Weasley had come into some windfall at work, or if the twins' joke shop had met with an unforeseen success.

Ginny appeared in the doorway and walked towards Harry, letting the screen slam noisily behind her. "Morning, Harry," she said brightly, almost skipping as she closed the distance between them. "Have a good day off?"

"So-so," he said wistfully. "Dudley's still trying to get me to sing more *Fiddler* for him, but I've managed to hold him off for now."

Ginny's smile inflated Harry's heart and he realized how much he'd missed her company. He was more than a little cross with himself for feeling that way. "Well," she said, patting his hand lightly, before taking it in hers, "You'd better learn some more songs, or he might think you weren't being completely honest."

Harry guffawed and was joined by Ginny's tinkling laughter. She pulled on his hand, her mouth still turned up in delight, and Harry suddenly became acutely aware of the way her hand felt in his. The sensation was a strange blend of comfort, embarrassment, pleasure and nervousness, and he wondered why holding her hand now had such a profound effect on him, when he'd just have tried to grind her fingers together given the same chance a month ago. Adding to the confusion was the fact that his bracelet was now casting an odd glow.

They walked together down the clean brick path, as had been their ritual, and paused when they spotted a tall young man with red hair pulled into a short ponytail and with a fang dangling from one ear.

"Bill!" exclaimed Ginny, and she tore down the remainder of the path and jumped into her brother's arms. Harry found himself staring at his hand as he continued to ponder the odd feelings swirling through him. "I didn't know you were coming," she said excitedly.

"That's only because Charlie beat me at 'Rock, Paper, Scissors'," said Bill sardonically.

Ginny's countenance fell as she slid back to the ground. "You mean...you're not here just to see me?" Her lower lip jutted out spectacularly and started to quiver so convincingly that even Harry, who had intimate knowledge of her acting ability, was almost convinced she was genuinely sad.

Pausing for a second, Bill pulled a face and said evenly, "Of course your favourite brother is always up for a visit with you, midget." He ruffled her hair affectionately and she harrumphed, obviously put out that he hadn't been fooled. She seemed to accept the explanation, however, even though Harry noticed that she had never confirmed Bill's favourite brother status.

Turning to Harry as Ginny hooked her brother's arm with hers, Bill said, "You know what you're up against today?"

When Harry shook his head, Bill continued. "You," he said pointing to Harry's chest, "are going to be re-building the dock."

Harry choked, "What dock?"

"The one at the pond," interjected Ginny, as if he was supposed to have intimate knowledge with that particular body of water.

"What pond?" Harry persisted. "I've never seen a pond here."

Ginny gaped at him and Bill chuckled low in his chest, and then said, "Well, I can guarantee that your ignorance won't last out the morning."

Bill walked over to the large pile of lumber, then pulled out his wand and waved it in the air in front of the wood. The top stack levitated and began to trail behind him as he walked back up the path, motioning for Harry and Ginny to follow.

*

Harry followed Bill and Ginny around the outer edge of the Burrow's property line, listening to them banter back and forth about Bill's work with Gringotts, his dating experiences with Fleur and Ginny's prospects for the O.W.L.'s this year. When they walked through a small glade and crested a hill on the other side, a relatively large body of water appeared before them.

"Wow," said Harry reverently, admiring its seclusion and resisting the urge to jump in to enjoy the coolness of the water. He turned to Ginny as Bill continued down the foot path. "How come you've kept this a secret from me, Weasley?"

Ginny looked appropriately contrite. "Because it never came up?"

They continued to where a dilapidated wooden structure protruded into the water like a wrecked ship. Bill set the pile of new lumber down on the flat area near where the dock met with earth, then turned to survey the area.

"I'll need to pull out the old support beams after you remove the deck planking and cross ties," said Bill as he highlighted different sections with his wand as he spoke. "When you're done ripping out everything but the pilings, let me know and I'll come dig them out with magic. It's too much work for one person to do without it."

Harry nodded sheepishly, trying to wrap his mind around the enormity of the task in front of him, while not *looking* like he was intimidated by it. He must have been unsuccessful however, because Bill clapped him on the shoulder and said, "Stiff upper lip there, Harry. It's not as bad as it looks."

Then he pointed his wand in the general direction of the Burrow and said, "*Accio toolbelt!*" A moment passed and a crashing sound met their ears just before an impossibly-large leather belt with a hundred pouches filled with various metal and wooden instruments broke through the trees and flew to the spot where Bill stood.

"You should have everything you need here." He set the oddly-shaped belt down and before he left, said, "I'll be back after lunch to check on you. Right now, I've more important things to take care of."

"Bye, Bill," sang Ginny, giving him another hug. "Say 'hi' to Fleur for me before you start snogging; I'm sure you'll forget once you get started."

"Ha, ha," Bill answered with a fake laugh. "No snogging for me today," he said with an oddly-furtive glance at Harry. "Or for you either."

"What are you..." started Ginny as Harry spluttered incoherently beside her.

"Bye," said Bill, and he Apparated away with a loud *crack*.

Harry stared at the spot he had just occupied before Ginny turned to him and said, "So what's first?"

Strangely ruffled by Bill's comment, Harry shrugged and said, "I suppose pulling the planks off would make the most sense." He bent down and turned the heavy belt over until he found a couple of pry bars and hammers. Grabbing one of each, he took a breath and walked out onto the dodgy-looking dock to begin tearing off the ancient wood.

*

As the day wore on, and in the face of the scorching heat, Harry had removed his shirt in favour of letting the slight breeze cool his skin. Ginny had cast another sunscreen charm and promptly left for the Burrow, muttering something about a cold shower.

The rotting wood came off easy enough, but the rusty nails that vainly attempted to hold them to the cross beams required quite a lot of force to pull out. The pry bar was too large for the nails, but the claw-end of the hammer provided a perfect tool to remove the stubborn fasteners.

The work was dull and boring, but a mounting stack of old wood and a pile of bent and rusted nails testified to Harry's progress. The planks were off just after noon and Ginny was waiting for him with a basket of food, which they ate under a swaying birch tree.

Ginny had changed clothes, her dress replaced by a large baggy tee shirt with a wildly-coloured sash tied around her waist.

"What's with the new outfit?" questioned Harry as he polished off his plate of potato salad and dabbed at his mouth with a paper towel.

Ginny pulled at her shirt, and with a questioning look, she said, "This? I've got my bathing suit on underneath and was going to cool off in the pond for a bit after lunch."

"Didn't your mum ever tell you not to swim right after eating?" asked Harry cheekily.

She smiled warmly and packed away their plates. "Yeah, but Bill will be here in a bit and I wanted to interrogate him for a few minutes anyway, so I don't reckon I'll die of a stomach cramp today."

Reluctantly, Harry pushed himself off the blanket they had been sharing and walked slowly over to the dock, lingering in the shaded area for as long as possible. He had just begun to pull off the cross braces when Bill showed up, a grumpy look on his face, muttering under his breath.

"Everything all right?" asked Harry tentatively. Bill was an unknown quantity to Harry: someone who was to be looked up to for his achievements as Head Boy and job successes and to be feared as the oldest brother of the witch Harry had recently duelled into the hospital.

Bill snorted and started to rifle through his tool belt. "Nothing a nosey sister couldn't make worse," he said with some disdain.

Focusing again on his work, Harry pulled more and more supports off the structure until it resembled a precarious collection of large grey sticks. Bill waved his wand at the discarded wood until it had been completely banished; to where, Harry didn't know.

A loud splash caused Harry to stop midway through prying one of the cross beams and crane his neck to see what had caused it. His eyes caught a flash of red as Ginny's slim figure kicked along the surface of the water. Arriving at a large rock, she pulled herself onto it and proceeded to wring out her wet hair, gathering it into a makeshift ponytail. Her one-piece swimsuit was red and blue with a swipe of white across the front and Harry's face heated as she leaned back on the rock, unaware of his close inspection.

The prybar in Harry's hand slipped and fell. Just as it hit his foot, he had to step four or five had been working loose swung around and smacked him in the head. Harry howled indignantly, trying to grab his injured foot and head at the same time, even as Bill's accusing laughter rang in his ears.

"It's not all that funny, you know," said Harry, checking his forehead for blood with a tentative finger.

"Yes, it is," said Bill with a crooked smile. "It's especially funny because I saw what caused your lapse of brain power."

"I just dropped the prybar, Bill. It's not like I cut my hand off or something," Harry said, annoyed and embarrassed at being so clumsy.

"That you did." Bill's smug look was oddly unsettling and Harry couldn't help but feel annoyed by it. Then with a conspiratorial whisper, he continued, "Girls tend to be hazardous on the job site, you know, causing that sudden loss of blood to the brain when other things take over."

Again, Harry's face heated. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you do," Bill countered with another knowing chuckle. "Just remember that she's my baby sister and I won't have just anyone ogling her in her bathing suit."

"I wasn't ogling her," Harry protested hotly, sure that his voice had carried over to where Ginny was still sunning on the rock. Then as he picked up the prybar from the wet ground, he muttered quietly to himself, "She's not a baby – babe, yes, baby no...."

*

Once all the support structure was removed and the pilings were all that was left of the old dock, Bill took over. Harry sat off to the side, under the shade of the nearby trees, to watch an impressive display of magic. First, Bill cast a water-repulsion charm on the three sides of the wooden columns and evaporated the trapped portion with a drought spell. Once they were exposed, he Reduced them into a million tiny splinters and bored out new holes with a spell Harry had never heard of. Harry mixed cement and Bill levitated the new columns into place and then both pushed the mix into the holes.

"That should do it," said Bill as he rotated the last column to make sure it was secure in the still-wet concrete. "We'll let this set overnight and I'll cancel the repulsion charms in the morning once we've made certain it's secure."

With the sun setting on the horizon and his stomach grumbling, Harry slung the discarded shirt over his shoulder and followed Bill to the Burrow. Once inside, Harry leaned heavily against the doorframe while Bill went to put the tools away for the night.

Ginny appeared in front of Harry, wearing a plain white dress and matching cotton jumper. She wrinkled her nose and smirked. "You stink, Potter. Take these and go shower before we eat dinner." She shoved a pile of clean clothes at him that he recognized were from his chest of drawers on Privet Drive.

"When did you get these?" he asked with wide eyes. She didn't answer, however, and only smiled even more enigmatically before pushing him up the stairs.

"Get clean, and then we'll talk."

Perplexed but definitely ready to scour the dirt and sweat off his body, Harry trudged up the stairs until he came to the only bathroom in the house. With a curious glance at Ginny's partially-open door, he wondered again about the person that slept there, and then walked into the loo to start his shower.

*

Clean and dressed in a fresh set of clothes, Harry stepped lightly down the stairs and into the kitchen. Ginny was waiting by the sink with another basket of food on the counter, her legs crossed, one bouncing lightly on the other.

"You ready, then?" she asked patiently as she straightened up and took the basket with both hands.

"Lead the way," he said, motioning towards the door.

*

They walked back towards the pond and Ginny led them to a small picnic table under a large willow tree on the other side of the unfinished dock. Harry dusted off the leaves and dirt that had accumulated on the rough-hewn seats and Ginny took her seat with an appreciative smile.

"So what's for dinner tonight?" asked Harry eagerly. She could tell he was quite hungry and had grown to anticipate the different meals she had been preparing for them to eat each night.

"Beef Wellington, asparagus spears sautéed in garlic butter and a pound of fresh rolls," deadpanned Ginny as Harry goggled at her. She paused for a beat, then allowed the smile she had been holding back to turn her lips upward. "Just kidding, Harry. I can't cook things like that, yet."

"I wouldn't put it past you," he said, eyeing the basket as she played with the cord that kept it closed. "You're an amazing cook."

Knowing that her cheeks were tinged with pink, she opened the basket at last and pulled out two covered platters. "I wasn't kidding about the rolls, but the main dish is London Broil with a side of mixed vegetables from the garden."

Ginny uncovered the dish and was grateful to see him inhale deeply as the steam dissipated. Harry stabbed a roll with his fork and swallowed it in

two large bites. "Mmm," he said as he chased down the yeasty bread with a swig of chilled pumpkin juice.

They ate in relative silence, each content to enjoy the food Ginny had prepared. When the meal was finished and Harry had eaten his fill, Ginny began to clear the table. Harry's hand touched hers, and she started and looked up to see him staring back at her.

"I'll get it," he said simply. "You've helped me out these past few weeks, so I...uh, think I should help you too."

"Are you feeling all right?" she asked with mingled concern and disbelief.

"I'm fine," he said peevishly, but Ginny could tell there wasn't any force behind it. "Can't a bloke help clear the dishes every now and again?"

"Well, you haven't exactly been generous towards me lately," she explained, hoping that they could finally put their past behind them.

"I know," he said quietly. "I'm sorry about that. It hasn't been easy to forget what happened, though I've got the forgive part down pretty good."

He finished putting their plates and service dishes away and Ginny didn't press him further. Instead, she asked him a question she'd been meaning to ask for the last three weeks.

"Harry?" she ventured carefully. When he looked up at her, she continued, "What kind of girl would you be interested in...romantically?"

He put the last fork in the basket and closed it slowly. Ginny's bracelet cooled considerably and she jiggled her wrist to keep it from chilling too much of her skin.

"I don't know," he said finally, taking his seat again across from her. "I don't guess I'm really ready for a relationship right now."

Ginny's face fell a little and she picked at a spot of paint that had come loose on the table. "You...you don't?"

Harry suddenly became very interested in his hands and every now and then, pinched at something on them with the tips of his fingers. "Going out with Cho was an unmitigated disaster," he began. "You know, hindsight and all, it was stupid of me to believe that she could see me and not think of Cedric."

She wanted to reach across the table and strangle him until he told her everything he was feeling, but knew she would have to be patient with him. He was just a thick boy, after all.

"What about now?" Ginny prodded gently. "You both learned something from that, didn't you?"

Pausing with whatever he was doing with his hands, he looked up at her. "What possible interest could you have in this topic?"

Fighting back the flush that was threatening to paint her face, Ginny took a deep breath and tried to act as nonchalant as possible. "I care about you, Harry. I think it would be good if you had a girl in your life."

He nodded and resumed picking at his hands.

"*What* are you doing to your hands?" she asked, suddenly interested.

He froze instantly and guiltily shoved them under the table where she couldn't see them and refused to meet her eyes. With an impatient sigh, she stepped around to his side of the table and straddled the bench, her long, loose dress gathering below her knees. "Give them to me," she said, holding out her hands.

Reluctantly, he extracted them from under the table, and still avoiding her gaze, let her take them. "Harry," she gasped. "What happened?"

"It's nothing," he temporized. "I've had worse."

Harry's hands were dotted with scores of blisters and hundreds of splinters. His fingers were particularly bad, with blood seeping from little cracks in every joint. "Why didn't you come to me sooner?" she said, whipping out her wand from a pocket in her dress.

"I didn't want to bother you," he said as a familiar blue light caressed his fingers and palm. The splinters disappeared with miniscule pops and the cuts healed over. It took a few minutes for her to cover all the problem areas, but eventually, his hands were whole again.

"Thanks," he said sheepishly, staring at the bench between them.

"Harry," she said sternly, pushing his chin up with a finger. "Next time, come to me before it gets this bad, all right?"

He nodded hesitantly and folded his healed hands in his lap, taking a sudden interest in the table.

Ginny sighed and said, "You never did answer my question."

"Didn't I?" he said, the confidence returning to his voice.

"No," she said with a slight laugh. "What kind of girl is going to be the object of your affection next?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, nervously. "I'm not ready for another relationship, Gin."

"What do you mean?" she asked, both surprised and pleased at his use of her shortened name.

He ran a hand through his hair, leaving it messier than before. "Voldemort," he said simply. "Until Voldemort's dead, I can't...I can't risk being with anyone that way."

Gathering her courage, Ginny took his hand and said, "Listen, Harry. First of all, Tom shouldn't dictate how you live your life. Second," she said taking a breath, then continuing before Harry could mount a protest, "you've got to find someone that makes you happy. If you don't, this year will be worse than last year. You'll be moodier – if that's possible – angrier, and if you don't get in a good snog or two before the end, you'll be so stressed that Lord Stinky Britches will have no problem hexing you into next week."

Harry sat back against the trunk of the willow, gaping at her in surprise. "What d'you mean *moodier* and *angrier*?" he said once he had regained his composure. "I'm not moody *or* angry!" he snarled.

Ginny sent him a pitying stare and folded her arms primly across her chest. "Then what do you call what you're being right now?"

"I don't know," he yelled, jumping to his feet and pacing around in front of the picnic table, a hand rubbing impatiently at the back of his neck. Then more calmly, he said, "I'm no good at that kind of stuff, Ginny. Being raised by people who hated me and kept me in a cupboard didn't exactly prepare me for the complicated nature of relationships. I like things simple and direct, you know, with a bow tied on it to make sure I know it's for me. I – I just – I'm not good at talking to girls, and I can't figure out what they're on about most of the time. I just don't exactly have the skills to have a girl in my life right now."

"No," she agreed, "you don't. But you've got to do it anyway, or there won't be a Harry Potter left for any girl to snog when you *are* ready."

With that, she left him goggling after her again and walked with the basket back to the Burrow, all the while humming an old English tune.

*

That night, Harry spent most of his time thinking instead of sleeping, despite the fact that he was bone-tired. Ginny's words had struck a chord in him and he couldn't rationalize them to fit any scenario but the one she had given him. He needed to relax, to prepare himself for the inevitable conflict with Voldemort, and according to Ginny, the best way to do that was to find a snogging partner and a broom cupboard. *Yeah, right. Pigs will fly before that happens, Potter.*

The next morning didn't come with any flashes of insight or witty ways with which Harry could deflect Ginny's next enquiry into his love life. It was inevitable, really, that she would bring it up again, so Harry spent his efforts on trying to come up with a way to distract, confuse, or otherwise get her to stop being so bloody insightful.

Remus was as prompt as ever, knocking politely on the front door at eight forty-five. For some odd reason, his aunt insisted on answering it every morning and when she did, it was with the strangest looks at the werewolf.

"Getting along all right, Harry?" asked Remus as they began their regular morning banter.

"Just peachy, Uncle Moony," replied Harry, using the Marauder's nickname as both a term of endearment and as an attempt to rankle the normally unflappable wizard. "Tomorrow I'll be sixteen, one year closer to freedom," he said with a significant glance at his eavesdropping aunt.

"Yes," said Remus as he motioned them to sit on the settee. "About that... Mrs. Weasley has asked that we have a small get-together at the Burrow tomorrow in lieu of you working on the dock." He held up a hand as Harry opened his mouth to protest. "It is, of course, on the condition that you finish the dock today."

Harry was torn. On the one hand, he most certainly didn't want anyone making a big deal for his birthday. On the other hand, deliberately stalling his efforts to finish the dock today, admittedly a short time for such a large project, was completely out of the question. Harry simply didn't work that way.

"Fine," said Harry, suddenly coming up with a plan of his own. "I'll agree to your condition if you agree to mine."

Remus eyed Harry warily. "What have you got up your sleeve now?"

"First tell me how Mr. and Mrs. Weasley are paying for all the wood and things I've been using over the summer?" he asked cagily.

"Ah," Lupin said as he rubbed his slightly-whiskered chin with a thumb and forefinger. "I was wondering when you'd ask about that."

"Well, I'm not privy to their entire financial status, but I've got an idea what lumber, paint, and cement cost, and I know that they can't have won another lottery like they did three years ago."

"Indeed," said Remus, still sizing up his younger companion. "I'll tell you, but you can't tell anyone with red hair that you've heard it from me, all right?"

Harry nodded his head, grateful that he didn't have to push to get this information from Remus. He had a feeling that the pushing would come later.

"As of right now, they're securing store credit in both the Muggle and Magical worlds," Remus said without preamble. "They've also asked me to help them get loans to cover the costs until they can save enough to pay the balance."

Having suspected something like this, Harry was ready to move forward with his plan. "I have an idea," he said. "I've been on the receiving end too many times when it comes to the Weasleys; Molly's treated me like a seventh son, Arthur was brilliant with the trial and everything last year, the twins...well, let's just say they've never let anything bother them, Ron's been my best friend for ages, and Ginny..." He stopped suddenly as her face floated into his mind.

"Yes?" asked Remus, a bemused expression on his face. "What about Ginny?"

"She's...different. She's very special to me," he forced out.

His face twitching oddly, Lupin leaned forward in his chair and pinned Harry with his most controlled stare. "Is that right?" he said, lips still trembling. "Like the sister you never had or merely the girl that you've been dreaming about snogging for the past two weeks?"

"I have not!" said Harry hotly. "There's been no snogging in those dreams!" He was about to say more but he realized, too late, that he had revealed enough already and had to scramble to divert the conversation back to its original destination.

"Look, what I'm trying to say, is that I love the Weasleys. They've given me too much and I want to pay them back for their kindness."

Sitting back in his seat, Remus sobered and asked, "So what do you have in mind?"

"I want you to take money from my vault in Gringott's and pay the balance on their store credit accounts," he said with the most pleading look he could muster, "then make sure they don't get their loan."

Remus blew out a breath. "That's a tall order," he said as he resumed playing with his long whiskers. "I can probably pay the accounts off, but I'm not sure about the loan. They've gone through three Muggle banks already so I don't think my word will have much sway."

Harry's face fell. "Well, do whatever you can. I don't want them in debt just because I hexed their daughter."

Remus stood and checked the watch hanging from his robe pocket. "I will, Harry." Harry stood and prepared for their Portkey trip to the Burrow. "You know," Remus said, his hand pausing in mid-air with the lime green telephone receiver. "Sirius was right about you."

Harry gulped, unprepared for his godfather's name to be brought up so suddenly.

"You are an awful lot like James," Remus said with a twinkle in his eye. "I just can't seem to sort out what it is about Potter men and redheads..."

Before Harry had a chance to reply, the plastic phone touched his finger and Privet Drive spun away in a whirl of colours and a rush of wind.

*

When they landed next to the pear trees by the shed, Harry hit the ground and fell on his knees, giving his escort time to Apparate away without being lambasted for his previous comment. Grumbling about meddlesome adults, Harry walked to the Burrow's kitchen, and found Bill sitting at the table, reading from the *Prophet* and sipping on a cup of coffee.

"Morning, Harry," said Bill as he cradled the mug in his hand and folded the paper over with his fingers to look at the sports section.

"Hey, Bill," said Harry tentatively, wondering if he should sit down at the table, or wait down by the dock before getting started. "I'll just meet you down at the pond, then?"

"Sure, sure," Bill said, waving a hand absentmindedly in Harry's general direction.

Grateful to be outside again, Harry quickly made his way down the narrow path and heard the sound of someone singing in the distance. He couldn't make out the words, but he recognized both the tune and the voice. Ginny was singing the song she had been humming endlessly over the past few weeks. Excited to finally hear what it was that had occupied her mind for so long, Harry sprinted over the small rise, but just as he was about to break free of the trees, he stepped on a branch on the ground, sending a jarring *crack* into the air. Ginny instantly stopped singing and turned to see Harry fumble down the path.

Foiled in his attempt to eavesdrop, Harry walked the rest of the distance and sat next to Ginny in the dirt. "Whatcha singing?" he asked, still breathing heavily from his run.

Ginny glanced at Harry from the corner of her eye and smiled. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

In her hands was a stick that she was using to busily scratch out something in the wet earth. "You've been humming whatever that was for weeks," he said, still anxious to find out the tune's name.

Dropping the stick, she got to her feet and offered her hand to him. "Yes I have, Harry," she said enigmatically. "And before you ask," she continued as she pulled him up. "I'm not going to tell you what it's called just yet."

"W – why?" he said as she walked north, following the curve of the pond.

"Walk with me," she beckoned and Harry ran to catch up with her as they made their way around the shore.

Shooting him another inscrutable grin as he continued to try to figure out what was going on in her head, she said, "It's nothing salacious, just a little silly."

"Silly, eh?" he asked as he kicked a pebble into the water, sending a gaggle of water bugs scurrying away from the waves it generated. "So silly you can't tell me about it?"

Ginny let out a happy sigh. "I'll tell you, but not today. I've got to work some things out, remember?"

Comprehension dawning slowly, Harry nodded and they continued walking in silence. In the cool of the morning, with the activity of the birds at its peak, Harry was content just to be outside and grateful that he wasn't alone. Leaves crunched merrily under their feet and the tall grasses on the shore rustled in the wind, filling Harry's lungs and heart with a lightness that he couldn't explain but didn't ever want to end.

As they rounded the pond's far side and started to walk back towards the dock, they spotted Bill levitating more wood behind him, the tool belt held firmly in his other hand.

"Guess it's time to get busy," said Harry matter-of-factly, but he slowed his pace, causing Ginny to turn around and question him with her eyes.

"What is it?" she asked softly.

Shuffling his feet a little, he looked down to where her ankles appeared from underneath her dress. "Thanks for the walk... I – I really needed that."

Raising his eyes to meet hers, he saw an infectious grin splitting her face. "Come on, then," she said, jutting out her elbow. "The sooner we start, the quicker we can finish this project."

Linking his arm in hers, they set off for the dock, both happily humming the same tune and both ignorant of the glow emanating from their wrists.

*

Once Bill had verified that the cement had cured and that it was safe for Harry to attach the new support structure, Bill released the water repelling charm. Harry set to work with an eye towards finishing his work that day, suddenly motivated to celebrate his birthday with the Weasleys.

Ginny was there with him, handing him nails, tools and pieces of wood, seemingly as determined to help him finish as he was.

Harry nailed in as much of the cross bracing as he could while still staying on land, or on various parts of the dock's skeleton. When there was nothing left to nail from dry land, he pulled his trouser legs up as far as he could and waded out into the water, a bag of nails stuffed into a pocket and several more pinched between his teeth.

The last board was almost in place when Harry felt a sharp tug on his ankle, almost pulling him into the water. Dropping the nails from his mouth, he cried out, "What the...."

Another sharp tug convinced him that it wasn't going away and he kicked out with his other foot, connecting with whatever it was that had a hold of him, but also giving it a chance to pull his leg so that he toppled into the water.

Flailing madly in an attempt to right himself, Harry vaguely heard Ginny calling his name before he went under again. Harry held his breath and opened his eyes to see the blurry form of a Grindylow attached to his ankle, its thin, bony fingers surprisingly strong as it pulled him deeper into the water. Without a wand, Harry was at a loss, but kept kicking at it with his other foot, only making contact every other time.

Spots started to cloud his vision and the burning in his lungs threatened to overwhelm his sense to not breathe in the deepening water. Just as he was about to succumb, but still kicking weakly at the creature pulling him down, a hand appeared out of nowhere and pried the fingers loose from his ankle, a faint cracking sound filtering through the water. Another hand grabbed his arm and pulled upward with an almighty wrench. His head broke the surface and Harry took in a lungful of the sweet, refreshing air.

Harry wasn't quite sure how he made it to shore, but he opened his eyes and looked over to his rescuer and saw Ginny also gasping for breath as they lay in the sun, his shoes already pulled off of his feet. "Thanks," he managed to say as their breathing slowed.

"Not a problem," she answered back, propping herself up with her hands, wet dress clinging to her heaving front as if it had been vacuum-sealed. Harry's mouth went dry and he had to force his eyes up to hers. An evil grin crooked across her face and the gleam in her eye sent his heart beating rapidly just as it had begun to slow. The water on his face evaporated from the heat he knew was radiating off his cheeks and although she never said anything, he felt abnormally guilty for ogling her after she had just rescued him.

Someone cleared their throat menacingly from behind them and Harry whipped his head around to see Bill glaring at them. "What's going on here?" Bill asked, his eyes darting back and forth between them.

"A Grindylow attacked me when I was nailing up the supports on the end of the dock," explained Harry, trying to fight back the redness on his cheeks. Ginny wasn't helping matters as she continued to look at him like he was a piece of meat and she a feral lion.

"There haven't been Grindylows in the pond since I was twelve," said Bill suspiciously.

Ginny broke herself out of her reverie and looked up to Bill. "Then how do you explain these bites?" she asked, taking Harry's foot and jerking it toward her brother, nearly toppling Harry again. "I had to break the thing's fingers before it would let Harry go."

Still looking sceptical, Bill bent to examine the bites before pulling out his wand. "Well," he said, shooting an odd pink light from his wand into the water around the dock. "If there *was* anything in the water, that charm will keep them away until nightfall."

Without another word, he Apparated away, leaving Ginny still clutching Harry's foot and Harry still on the ground, trying not to roll back into the pond.

"Um, Ginny?" said Harry tentatively. When she turned to look at him, he said, "My foot?"

"Oh, right." Ginny sat down, offering Harry more leverage to sit up properly. She held his foot gently with one hand, setting it into her still damp lap and prodded around the wounds gently with her finger.

"Hold still," she said softly, removing her wand from her dress pocket to apply a healing charm. But Harry didn't see the glow that infused his ankle, or feel the warmth that seeped into his skin and muscles. All his attention was on the girl that had just risked her life for him, that was even now taking tender care of his wounds.

An odd flutter in his stomach caused him to take in a sharp breath.

Ginny stopped the healing charm. "Did I hurt you?" she asked concernedly and the flutter increased. He barely noticed as she pushed at the gold jewellery on her arm.

"N – no," he said quickly. "It feels fine." But Harry knew that he wasn't fine. The feeling in his stomach was something that he'd felt before and he knew exactly what it meant. When Ginny was done fixing his foot, he put his shoes back on and waded out to finish his job.

From the looks Ginny gave him for the remainder of the day, Harry knew she suspected something, but he wasn't about to tell her that he was becoming attracted to her. Lunch was quiet and the rest of the day went quickly as Harry threw himself into his work, desperately trying to ignore the burning in his heart every time he caught a glimpse of red or heard Ginny's soft voice.

For her part, Ginny didn't press him, and for that, he was grateful, but he knew that with their conversation about relationships yesterday, it was only a matter of time before things came to a head and would need to be resolved, one way or the other. Determined to put that day off for as long as possible, Harry finished his task and walked wearily back to the Burrow, glancing at the sinking sun as Ginny walked silently beside him.

*

Harry was right. His strange behaviour was not lost on Ginny, and as she watched him fly around the makeshift pitch with Ron after dinner that night, she desperately went over the events of the day to see if she had done or said something wrong that would have caused him to change so suddenly.

Her own feelings about Harry were so muddled that Ginny couldn't figure out where hers ended and his began. With a frustrated sigh, she leaned back on her blanket and watched the two boys zooming around the paddock in the waning light, focusing on her memory of Harry's wet face as she held his foot in her lap.

The picture of Harry's face changed. In its place flashed an image of Ron, diving for a Quaffle as his mouth formed words she could not decipher. At the exact same time, she heard Ron's voice, "What kind of throw was that, Harry?"

Shocked, Ginny's eyes sprung open, but the vision remained. Ron flew down to catch the red leather ball and back up to where Harry was hovering. Ginny could see Ron toss the ball to Harry, but Harry's arms did not move to catch it. Instead, the ball arced through the air and smacked Harry hard in the nose.

"Ahh," yelled Harry and Ginny simultaneously, Ginny reaching up with a hand to check her nose for blood.

"I'm sorry!" said Ron earnestly earnestly. "I thought you were paying attention. I'm sorry."

When she was satisfied it wasn't her that Ron had hit with the Quaffle, Ginny sat up and locked eyes with Harry. His face mirrored the shock and surprise that she felt and they continued to gape at each other. Ron was still apologizing to Harry when Ginny gathered her wits and her blanket and set off for the Burrow. She was confused and just a little frightened of the idea that she had quite possibly been channelling Harry's thoughts, and on top of sorting through her feelings for the black-haired boy, she needed to find out what in the world had just happened between them.

Consequences of the Heart 5: On the Cusp of Something Grand

Chapter Five – On the Cusp of Something Grand

Walking quickly into the Burrow's living room, Ginny deposited her blanket on the back of the cracked vinyl sofa and moved to the empty kitchen fireplace. She grabbed a handful of Floo powder and threw it into the grate, not letting a second pass before shouting, "Hermione Granger!" and sticking her head in the bright green flames that erupted.

As Ginny's head stretched and swirled through the Floo network, she tried to ignore the oddly detached feeling that she had never gotten used to. In an instant, the image of a tidy, carpeted room, warmly lit by several lamps, came into focus.

"Hermione!" she yelled, feeling a bit panicky. "Are you there, Hermione?"

Feet pounded on the stairs and a bushy-haired girl came into view, pulling at a dressing robe as if she had just put it on. "Ginny? What's wrong? Is anyone hurt?" Hermione was still panting from her quick descent from the upper floor.

"Nothing like that," Ginny said hastily. "I need you to come to the Burrow."

Hermione's face couldn't mask her surprise. "Now?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes," said Ginny as she nodded her head vigorously. "It's really important."

"Are you sure no one's hurt?"

Ginny shook her head quickly, worried that she hadn't thrown enough powder in for a longer call and that the Floo network would suck her head back to Ottery St. Catchpole. Hermione's lips stretched thin, but she nodded. "All right."

"You might as well spend the night," offered Ginny with a note of pleading in her voice. "It's Harry's birthday tomorrow, and we'll be starting things early."

Hermione stared at her friend for another moment, clearly weighing her options, before her pressed lips curved at the ends. "It sounds like we've got a lot to talk about," she said with a knowing smile. "Things going well with you and Harry, then?"

"Just hurry and grab your things," said an agitated Ginny. "We can talk when you get here."

"Fine, fine," Hermione said, edging back towards the stairs. "I'll see you in a minute then."

"I'll be waiting in my room. Just walk straight there and don't pay attention to anything Ron or Harry says."

Hermione crooked an eyebrow at the redhead and said, "What's the big deal –" but it was too late. Ginny's head was pulled back through the Grangers' grate and -- with a giant sucking sound -- popped back into the flameless fireplace in her own kitchen.

"Who were you talking to, dear?" asked her mother, startling Ginny.

"Mum!" she exclaimed, turning around and clutching at her chest. "It was -- it was Hermione. She's coming over," said Ginny as her heart-rate evened out.

"Oh?" asked her mother. "I don't seem to recall anything about her staying the night."

"Please, Mum?" begged Ginny, folding her hands together in front of her upturned face. "It's Harry's birthday tomorrow and we've got to...plan and...things before the party."

Molly continued to give Ginny a sceptical eye, but they were interrupted before she could reply. "What about a party?" came a voice from the open garden door. Harry was staring back at her, confusion and a little bit of fear etched into his face.

With a squeak that was all too reminiscent of the first time Harry had been in the Burrow, Ginny shot up the stairs and slammed her door shut.

Even though it seemed like an eternity, it was only a few minutes later that she heard a timid knock on her door.

"Come in, Hermione," she said quickly, absently biting on her nails as she sat on her bed.

The door creaked open and a clearly flustered Hermione walked in, holding a bag in one hand and Crookshanks in the other. She put the bag on the floor next to Ginny's overflowing desk and shut the door. Her bandy-legged familiar hopped down and made a bee-line for Ginny's legs.

"All right," said Hermione as she walked over to the bed and sat heavily next to her friend. Crookshanks was walking a lazy figure-eight around Ginny's feet, pushing his head along her calves and purring contentedly. "I had to pry myself away from Harry and Ron downstairs. So tell me...what's got you all wound up?"

"I don't know...exactly," Ginny answered with a sigh. Then looking her friend in the face, said, "What do you know about magical connections between two people?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "Well," she started hesitatingly, "there hasn't been a whole lot of research on the subject, but I've read a few books here and there." Ginny continued to chew on her fingernails, making sharp biting noises with each one. "And, uh, I wrote a paper summarizing the research on the area as an extra credit project for Professor Flitwick last term. Why do you ask?"

Her hands sinking slowly to her lap, Ginny sighed again. "Something happened in the paddock just now...with Harry."

Hermione didn't say anything, but pushed herself more fully onto the bed and grabbed a pillow to hug while Ginny continued.

"He and Ron were flying around, just tossing a Quaffle back and forth. I was lying on a blanket, not really paying attention to them, when I started to think about Harry..." she trailed off, not sure how much of her feelings she should divulge right away, but certain that Hermione knew exactly what was going on. "So I had his face in my mind and then it all of a sudden changed to what Harry was seeing."

For the second time in as many minutes, Hermione was clearly surprised. "Are you sure? Your mind could have just been extrapolating what your subconscious knew they were doing and projected it into your mind."

Ginny slowly shook her head. "No, Hermione. I'm sure this was real." She pulled herself onto the bed, mirroring her friend's position and hugged a pillow of her own. "I know it was real because as soon as it happened, Harry turned to look at me and...I mean...I just *knew*. And from the way he looked at me, I know that Harry knew, too. Harry got hit with the Quaffle when he was flying – I saw the ball come up to *my* face – I was certain that I'd bloodied *my* nose – but I hadn't of course, because I was on the ground and Harry was the one who was in the air, getting hit by the Quaffle."

Hermione adopted her thinking pose; head slightly bowed, brows furrowed, lips pursed and fingers tapping absently on her chin. "I don't know, Ginny," she said finally. "It doesn't sound like Dark Magic, but there's something odd about it. This hasn't happened before?"

"No," said Ginny, shaking her head and petting Crookshanks distractedly while he licked his paws.

Narrowing her eyes, Hermione leaned forward and quietly, said, "Did anything, you know...*happen* between you two today?"

"I..." began Ginny, then changed her mind. "No, nothing happened. Not like *that* anyway..."

When Hermione's piercing gaze didn't diminish, Ginny hedged. "Well, I mean...nothing physical has been going on and we haven't confessed our undying love for each other," she said with a half-hearted chuckle.

"But something did happen, didn't it?"

Ginny started to chew her nails again, then said, "If you count the pond incident, I suppose."

When it was clear that Ginny wasn't going to volunteer any information willingly, Hermione said with a huff, "Are you going to tell me or not? Honestly, you're just as infuriating as your brother."

Ginny smiled at that comment, knowing exactly what she meant. "Harry was attacked by a Grindylow when he was working on the dock at the pond."

"What pond?" interrupted Hermione.

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Ginny settled for another chuckle. "Where *have* you and Harry been? The one over the hill, that's been there since before the Burrow was built," she explained patiently.

"Never mind," Hermione said, waving a hand in the air dismissively. "What happened after he was attacked?"

"He fell in and didn't come up, so I assumed he needed help and dove in after him. When I saw him struggling for breath, I broke the little monster's fingers and pulled Harry out of the water." A distant look was fixed on Ginny's face as her mind took her back to the fear she had felt for Harry's life and to the fluttering in her stomach as they sat together on the shore.

"Earth to Ginny," came Hermione's voice as she waved a hand in front of Ginny's face, breaking into her reverie. "There's more to this story, isn't there?" she said with a smirk.

Knowing that her cheeks were tinged with pink, Ginny simply nodded her head.

"We can go over that in a minute. First, let's analyze what we've got so far...."

Ginny forced her feelings down, as she had for so many years, and focused on what Hermione was saying.

"You've had a visionary episode where you've seen through Harry's eyes and he's been aware of it. Immediately prior to this experience, you saved Harry's life, creating a Wizard's debt. Three years ago, Harry saved *your* life," she said, moving her hand through an imaginary list in the air. "Then there's the whole business with Voldemort's connection with Harry through his scar that gives him other kinds of visions to think about."

"Oh," said Ginny as a thought popped into her head. "You don't think that because we were both possessed by him that it could affect whatever it is that's happening, do you?"

"Hmm," said Hermione slowly. "That's a possibility, but I'd have to check that out before we can be sure. The fact that you have a Wizard's debt going in both directions is most curious. Many people think that one debt cancels the other, but Professor Vector once did an Arithmancical proof that showed that that's entirely wrong. A debt going in both directions *can* provide the basis for an Egretic bond."

"Egretic?" Ginny asked.

"It's a type of connection that's formed through unintentional magic," Hermione replied. "The bond that Harry shares with Voldemort is a form of an Egretic bond – once established, they are only broken by death."

They sat together for a few minutes, pondering Ginny's situation, until Hermione said, "Well, there's not much more we can do about it right now. That is, not unless you want me to Floo to Hogwarts and go to the library."

"No," chuckled Ginny, calmer now that her thoughts were out in the open, "that won't be necessary."

"All right. So what's *really* going on between you and Harry?" Hermione asked with a twinkle in her eye.

Vainly fighting the blush on her cheeks, Ginny shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not really sure," she said. "When the summer started, I'd have kicked him in the crotch as soon as I laid eyes on him. But now..."

Ginny trailed off, getting lost in her thoughts again. Harry had been different these past few weeks. It seemed that after they had been able to talk about Sirius, his countenance had been lighter, his mood happier. Harry was happy, and he wasn't shoving her to the sidelines of his life this summer. That part was nice, but she was afraid of being trapped in the web that surrounded his life, and she desperately wanted to remain in control of her life and emotions.

"But now?" prodded Hermione gently.

"Now...things are complicated," said Ginny reluctantly. "We're definitely over the whole duelling fiasco at school; that's not an issue, really. The problem is that we've been kind of forced to be there for each other and I think.... I think he's starting to see me for who I am now, not the silly little girl I used to be when we first met. We're friends – of that much I'm sure, but I don't know if it goes beyond that yet. I don't know if I *want* it to go beyond that just yet."

"Yeah, right," Hermione replied, giving her a stare that was broken by a smile that threatened to split her face open. "That's wonderful!" she cried, and then gathered Ginny in a warm hug, sending Crookshanks onto Ginny's abandoned pillow. "I told you to be patient with him and that everything would work out in the end."

"*Nothing's* happened yet," said Ginny warily. "I'm not getting my hopes up, either."

"No," said Hermione as they disengaged from their embrace. "That wouldn't be wise, but still...you've got to admit that there's been a marked improvement. You're not trying to do him bodily harm any more."

"Maybe you're right, Hermione," Ginny said with a smirk

"So let's talk about the party, then," Hermione said as they both straightened up on the bed. "What did you get Harry for his birthday?"

*

"Ow," said Harry thickly as he daubed a wet towel on his nose. It had a small circle of scarlet on its tip, evidence of the Quaffle's damage. Hermione had just retreated up the stairs, ignoring both Harry and Ron's attempts to ask her what she was doing there.

"Sorry," said Ron for the millionth time as they sat at the kitchen table. "I thought you were watching."

"It's fine," Harry said, pinching his nostrils closed to stem the blood flow. "I'b had worse."

It was the truth, but even if it hadn't been, Harry wasn't particularly concerned about his bloody nose. Instead, Harry continued to mull over in his mind what had caused him to basically blank out before the leather ball had done its damage. One moment, he was watching Ron dive for the Quaffle, and the next, his vision went blank and he had felt a flash of something...foreign. It was like the out-of-body experiences he'd shared with Nagini and Voldemort, and that was not at all comforting.

It was as if someone had turned on a dim lamp and he saw the darkening blue sky above him and the sensation of sitting up when he saw...himself, hovering on his broom. The disorientation of that experience was enough to keep him from figuring out what was happening, and then the Quaffle hit his face, stopping the vision. That was when he knew. It was Ginny's eyes he had been looking through and when he turned to see her, her shocked expression only confirmed what had happened. The part that had really scared him, was that his scar was cooler than normal and sent a jolt of...*something* through his forehead. It wasn't painful, or even itchy, but one thing Harry had learned over the years, was that nothing good had ever come from anything to do with the bolt of lightning that graced his forehead. This fell into the category of really weird.

"So what do you think?" asked Ron, who had been talking the whole time.

Harry struggled to remember the snippets of conversation that had made it to his head during his ruminations. "I'm sorry," offered Harry. "I must have zoned out a bit."

Ron didn't look put out by his friend's behaviour, however, and simply smiled instead. "No problem, Harry. You've had a lot to think about over the summer."

Harry grunted, still half-puzzling over his scar. Should he tell Dumbledore? What did Ginny have to do with his scar? Was Voldemort using Ginny somehow to plant visions in his head?

"Listen, Harry," started Ron again, bringing Harry's thoughts back to the Burrow's kitchen. "I've been meaning to ask you something for a year or so."

"Yeah?" said Harry, whose curiosity was suddenly piqued. "Fire away."

"Well...it's like this. I got a letter from Padma Patil last week that sort of reminded me about it." Ron shifted apprehensively in his chair and drained his mug with a shaky hand. "You see, she sort of wanted to ask me to ask you if you and Cho were still going out and if you weren't, which I told her you weren't by the way, would you consider dating Parvati?"

Harry's mouth dropped open and his brain ground to a halt. *Parvati?*

"I know it's a bit odd," Ron continued with the same frantic pace, "especially since it's coming through her sister and then through me, but I told her I'd ask, so...there you are."

"How long have you been writing to Padma?" asked Harry, who said the first thing that came to his mind.

A light pink stole across Ron's ears as he looked down at his empty mug, nervously rolling it between his hands. "Since last summer."

Harry's jaw sank towards the table for a second time. "How come you never told me?"

"It's not a big deal," answered Ron, seeming to regain his confidence. "I was horrible to her at the dance and I agonized over it until Ginny made me write her last summer. With all that was going on with the Order and you and everything, I just never brought it up."

Closing his mouth with a snap, Harry placed the towel down on the table. The bleeding had stopped, and he let a smile slip onto his face. "So is there...anything going on with her?"

The pink on Ron's ears had never dwindled, but now shot into a full-fledged blush, tracing its way across his cheeks and forehead. "No!" he fairly shouted. Then more quietly, "We're just friends. But she's told me that she sort of fancied me since the dance and flirts with me occasionally in her letters."

"Ron...I'm impressed," offered Harry, still grinning from ear to ear. Then he sobered and with the straightest face he could muster, said, "But what would Hermione think?"

"What's Hermione got to do with anything?" Ron asked after a moment's hesitation.

"Oh, nothing, I'm sure." Harry filled in quickly, but knew that his friend was caught. Harry has suspected for the past few months that Ron's friendship with Hermione was on the verge of something else, but couldn't be sure. Judging by his well-concealed friendship with Padma and his hesitance to address Hermione's feelings on the matter, Harry concluded that something was definitely going on and that intervention would likely be necessary to bring out Ron's feelings for their other friend.

"So you never answered my question, you know." Ron had once again mastered his emotions and was now pinning Harry with an appraising stare.

"About Parvati?" Harry asked, stalling for time. "I wasn't nearly as generous as you after the dance. Are you sure she doesn't hold that against me?"

Ron leaned in and with a cursory glance around the room, said, "From what her sister tells me, you could be infested with Nargles and she'd still want you."

Now it was Harry's turn to blush and he fidgeted with his collar while he tried to think of something to say to Ron. "Well...she's a pretty enough girl. But I reckon she's a lot like Cho.... pretty face, nice figure, but no common sense where it counts."

"Yeah," said Ron quietly. "Yeah, I think you're right. Padma's not like that of course..." Ron stopped himself mid-sentence, and caused another grin to split Harry's face. "So how about you? Who do you fancy, then?"

"Me?" said Harry as the smile fell from his face just as fast. "I don't fancy anyone anymore. I reckon Cho enlightened me to the fact that I'm just not ready for a relationship. I told your sister as much yesterday."

"You talked to Ginny about dating?" asked a surprised Ron.

"Yeah...but it's no big deal."

"Sure, sure," said Ron as they heard a clock in the living room chime nine times. "What I think you should do...is make a list."

Harry was instantly sceptical as he polished off his juice. "A list?"

"Yeah, a list," Ron said as he refilled his mug from the pitcher on the table. "You write down all the girls you think would possibly be interesting. Then we start taking some off until we're down to a few that you really like."

Ron," said Harry patiently. "What good is that going to do when I told you I wasn't ready for any kind of relationship?" While arguing this point, a niggling, dissenting voice in the back of his mind pointed out that he'd been harbouring just those types of thoughts about a certain Weasley, but he'd rather not admit his growing fascination with Ron's sister to anyone, particularly Ron.

"All I'm asking is that you think about it," said Ron as he drained his second glass and set it down heavily onto the table. "Think about the girls you think are cute and we'll have this conversation again, all right?"

"Fine," conceded Harry. "But don't think I'm not going to do the same favour for you..."

Ron blanched for a second, then gathered his and Harry's glasses and plopped them down into the sink. "Whatever. Mum said you're spending the night and that you've already got clothes in a bag upstairs."

"How about I kick your arse at Wizard's chess, then?" said Harry cheekily.

Ron's eyes narrowed as he leaned against the counter. "Consider yourself dead, Potter."

*

Early the next morning, the pungent odour of frying bacon and freshly baked scones carried up to the top level of the Burrow where Ron and Harry were sleeping. Ron was a man possessed; Harry watched him throw on yesterday's clothes, push a plastic comb through his hair and head out the door. "Breakfast!" he exclaimed in a one-word explanation for his haste.

Harry could only shake his head and watch his friend leave.

He was just pulling a clean shirt over his head when two heads appeared in the doorway.

"Happy Birthday!" Hermione and Ginny chorused. Harry squinted at them for a second before finding his glasses and shoving them on his face.

"Thanks, Hermione, Ginny," he said, nodding to each.

"That will never do," said Hermione as she walked into the room and swept him up in a hug. Ginny was right behind her and they eyed each other warily as Hermione continued her embrace. When the girl he considered his sister released him, Harry was faced with Ginny.

"Happy Birthday, Harry," she said sheepishly. Harry gave her a stiff one-armed embrace while Hermione looked on.

"Thanks, Ginny," said Harry, wondering how girls could smell so fresh and clean first thing in the morning. He resisted the urge to check his breath and made a mental note to head for the loo to brush his teeth, first thing.

Hermione grabbed his hand and pulled him out the door. Then, as if reading his mind, she said with a wrinkled nose, "Get your teeth brushed, then meet us downstairs for breakfast. You don't want to wash down a mouthful of germs with your food."

Ginny laughed into her hand and Harry walked down to the bathroom to comply.

By the time Harry made it to the kitchen table, Ron was already on his second plateful of food, according to Harry's calculations; Harry was intimately familiar with the amount of time it took his friend to eat. Hermione and Ginny were seated opposite him, and Harry chose the seat across from Ginny. Mrs. Weasley was busy sending loaded plates of food to the table even while she was cooking up more. There were rashers of bacon, baskets of scones, sliced apples and oranges, three different puddings, and a platter of sausages adorning the table, hardly leaving room for their plates.

Harry was midway through his meal when Hermione folded her paper towel and leaned over the nearly-empty basket of scones. "We need to talk about what happened between you and Ginny yesterday," she said in a whisper.

Mrs. Weasley walked over to the table as she was untying her apron. "I'm off to make a few stops in the village. Mind the dishes for me, Ginny?"

"Sure thing, Mum," she said brightly, and her mother was out the door, purse in hand.

Ron, who had swallowed his pudding, gave Harry an odd stare. "Something happened between you and Ginny?"

"You remember the thing with the Quaffle last night?" Harry said, wanting to get this over with as soon as possible.

"What's that got to do with Ginny?" Ron persisted.

"We swapped heads for about thirty seconds, Ron," interjected Ginny. "I could see what Harry saw and he was looking through my eyes."

Ron goggled at his sister, completely forgetting about his food. "You mean...you mean like with that snake that attacked dad last Christmas?"

"Yes, Ron, exactly like that," added Hermione.

Harry debated whether or not he should say anything to correct them when he felt a pressure on his foot. Looking up, he met Ginny's pleading gaze. "Funny you should mention that," he said, tearing his eyes from Ginny. "I felt something in my scar when it happened, but I don't think it was Voldemort."

Ron flinched at the name and Hermione sucked in a breath. "You don't think he could have been influencing you two, do you?" she asked seriously.

"I don't think so," Harry began. "I mean, my scar didn't exactly hurt or anything. At least, it didn't feel like it ever has when Voldemort was planting visions in my head before."

"Hmm," said Hermione sceptically. "You need to let Dumbledore know about this, Harry. It could be serious."

"I agree," piped in Ginny, still staring at Harry. "I don't like the implications of Tom being in either one of our heads."

Harry had been about to tell Hermione where she could stick her advice, as Dumbledore wasn't on Harry's list of favourite people right then, and he wasn't exactly thrilled with the prospect of talking to him about anything, much less Voldemort. But something in Ginny's eye made him think twice. "All right," Harry temporized. "I'll write him a letter after breakfast and see what he has to say."

"Better yet," continued Ginny. "You can tell him this afternoon in person. I heard Mum telling Bill that he would be here for your birthday."

"What?" asked Harry forcefully. "It's bad enough you all are even doing this party thing, but now Dumbledore's got to be here, too?"

"It's okay, Harry," said Ginny as she reached across a hand and touched it tentatively to Harry's arm. Something passed between them in a spark and they both flinched. But in that fraction of a second when they had been touching, a warm flood of peace had flowed into him, swallowing up his anger.

Hermione and Ron exchanged a glance, and Ron muttered under his breath, "You bloody well better sort out what's happening, because I'm not sure if I can take you two going wobbly every time you get near each other."

They all chuckled and even Hermione had a wry smile on her face despite Ron's colourful language.

"Fine," said Harry slowly. "I'll talk to Dumbledore when he comes to the party."

"Excellent!" announced Hermione. "Now let's finish breakfast so we can decorate!"

Unused to such an enthusiastic Hermione, Harry shovelled another helping of pudding into his mouth and tried to think of something civil to say to his Headmaster.

*

Harry had never had a birthday party, not really. The closest had been when he'd turned eleven and had his own cake delivered by Hagrid on that little storm-tossed island. This one more closely resembled what he would have imagined. There were decorations, a fabulous meal prepared by Molly Weasley, presents, ice cream (charmed to resist melting in the July heat) and cake. Harry had barely noticed this because he spent half his energy monitoring his consciousness for anything alien, and the other half trying to not break out into fits of giggles at how the Weasleys were trying to force him into close proximity with their daughter and sister.

When it came time for the birthday song, Harry made an effort to make eye contact with everyone that was there. The twins were modifying the words so that instead of Harry being a 'Jolly good fellow', he was now a 'Bowl of lime Jell-O' in honour of the Muggle confection that Hermione insisted be present ("jelly crystals are simply wonderful, but the Americans call it Jell-O for some odd reason"). Ron was making a show of standing as close to Hermione as possible without actually touching her. Bill and Fleur flanked them, both shooting each other odd glances during the course of the party.

As Harry locked eyes with Ginny, it happened again. He felt her feelings: sadness that this was his first proper birthday celebration, joy that she was there singing to him and a muddle of feelings towards – him. It was simply too much, too fast. Harry broke eye contact, and when he did, the surge of emotions ceased.

Luckily, the song had ended and the rest were all clapping as Harry blew out the candles on his cake and resolved to speak with Dumbledore as soon as he had the chance.

Presents were opened and piled into a corner. Dumbledore appeared in the garden with a muted *pop* and immediately began to mingle with the Weasleys, almost instantly enamoured with the green bowl of Jell-O.

Harry made a polite excuse to Fleur, and meandered through the crowd to where his headmaster was speaking with Remus and Mr. Weasley.

"Professor Dumbledore?" asked Harry when a break in the conversation allowed him. "Could I have a word?"

"Ah, Harry," said the elderly wizard with a gentle smile. "Birthday greetings are in order, are they not?"

"Thank you," said Harry as civilly as he could manage. "It's been a wonderful day."

Harry led Dumbledore to a somewhat secluded spot by the biting rose bushes and didn't waste a minute to let go of everything that had weighed on his mind since the end of June. "First, I need to apologize for my behaviour in your office and with Ginny the following day."

Silence lingered after Harry finished, and Dumbledore continued to stare at his younger companion. "And I too, am in need of apologizing to you, Harry. Had I known the outcome of my decisions regarding your care and treatment, I would have made them differently. Alas, time not allow such indulgences, so we are forced to deal with things as they are." The old wizard paused for a moment as a bee zoomed from the grasp of one of the rose bushes and past their heads in a lazy 'S' shape. "Harry, please forgive me. I've been responsible for so much of your pain and suffering of late."

Harry was caught up short. He had been ready to lash into Dumbledore, to continue raging against the injustices that he was only now realizing had

been heaped upon him because of what this man had thought were his best interests. Instead, under the steady gaze of those piercing blue eyes, Harry could not find the pool of anger that was so often simmering within him, and as he sorted through his feelings, he realized that he had arrived upon forgiveness in the truest sense of the word. Harry, feeling another flood of emotions, this time most definitely originating from within, took a step towards this man and wrapped his arms awkwardly around him.

"I forgive you," said Harry, voice thick with emotion. And to his everlasting surprise, he felt Dumbledore's arms reach around his own back to return the embrace.

"And I you."

Regaining his composure, Harry pulled back and said, "There's something else that I need to tell you, sir."

Dumbledore's eyebrow hitched slightly and Harry continued, "Something to do with my scar. I...uh, well, Ginny and I sort of had an experience yesterday and then something else happened this morning and again when we were singing."

Harry proceeded to tell his professor about the switched vision and impressions of emotion that had occurred since yesterday. He also related Hermione's suspicions and theories.

Dumbledore pondered his words for a second, and then said, "Wait here," before moving off through the crowd.

Returning with Ginny, Dumbledore made the smallest of circles with his wand. Harry noticed that while he could still hear the conversation on the other side of the garden, he couldn't make out any of the words. "So, you see what he sees, and you see what she sees? Is this correct?"

"Yes, sir," Ginny squeaked.

"Do you wish for this to continue?" Dumbledore asked.

"No!" Ginny said at the same time Harry was saying, "Yes."

They stared at each other. Dumbledore held his wand in front of Harry's face, moving it in a figure eight pattern, repeating the pattern in front of Ginny's face. Next he closed his eyes for a moment, opening them with a sigh. "Your friend is correct, this is a variety of Egretic bond. I can dampen the effect for a while, which will make it easier when you are in close proximity, but once you are back in school, you will need to work on controlling the phenomenon, and perhaps harnessing it for good purposes. I do understand that it is quite confusing to be riding two brooms at once when each is going in the opposite direction."

Harry and Ginny continued to look at each other, and Harry thought he could read the questions flitting across her face, mingled with the tension and concern. Finally, Harry nodded every so slightly and she let out a breath in relief. "Do what you can, Professor."

"Give me your hand, Ginny, now you Harry," Dumbledore said, placing their palms together. "This is going to hurt," he cautioned. He placed his hand over their now clasped hands, squeezing while tracing his wand along the outer edge of their fingers. It felt like alternating fire and ice, shooting up his arm. Looking at Ginny's face, he guessed that she was having a similar reaction. When Dumbledore released his grip on their hands he smiled. "You don't have to let go if you don't want to, but the Bond won't interfere with normal sensation and cognition - this is a temporary dampening which will only last one lunar cycle. Good evening to you both," he said before cancelling the privacy charm and moving back into the garden. Looking over his shoulder, he said, "Do try to enjoy your remaining holiday, Harry."

Glancing at their still joined hands, Harry had a sneaking suspicion that the Headmaster's admonition wouldn't be all that difficult to obey.

"Come on," said Ginny gently as she entwined her fingers in his as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "Let's make sure the twins haven't spiked the punch." Then with a tug on his hand, Harry let her lead him back into the crowd of people, a goofy smile fixed on his face.

*

The next day was Thursday, and with the dock completed, Harry briefly wondered if he would be able to spend the rest of his week as he had for his birthday. Upon arriving at the Burrow, however, the sight of several large plastic buckets told him otherwise.

Ginny was sitting on the bench by the garden door, one leg crossed over the other, bouncing in time to some song that seemed to only be in her head. Harry thought he could guess the tune, and the thought made him determined to wheedle the title out of her at some point.

"What's on tap for today?" he asked as he approached her.

She turned to look at him and a slow smile spread across her face. Her hair was pulled back into some kind of twist that let several tufts dangle across her neck, but otherwise left the bulk of her bright red hair up and generally contained. She was wearing another cotton summer dress, this one lilac, and it hung modestly around her lithe frame, exposing only her collar bone at the top and falling just below her knees. For some reason, though, she looked different to Harry, and he had to resist the urge to push his fingers through the hair at the base of her neck as she stood to greet him.

"Hi, Harry," she said demurely when they were close together. Harry's breathing hitched and a flash of panic raced through his body when she grabbed his hand again, but there were no alien thoughts or disorienting visions assaulting his mind.

With a shaky breath, he relaxed and gave her hand a squeeze, strangely comfortable with her hand being there. "What are the buckets for?" he asked, pointing to them with an extended finger.

"Mum's got us picking in the garden today," she said with a small laugh. "I reckon she's gone soft on you since yesterday, as she let slip that if we

don't finish today, we'll have to pick the rest tomorrow."

"I'm not going to slack off because it was my birthday, Ginny," said Harry with a shake of the head.

Ginny didn't say anything at first, but simply looked at him with a bemused expression. "I suppose I'll just have to distract you then."

"Why would you do that?" asked Harry sincerely. "If your mum wants me to pick vegetables and it can be done in a day, why should I stretch it to two?"

A pale, freckled hand covered a laugh before Ginny gave up trying and let her humour break loose. "Honestly, Harry! Are you that daft? Mum *wants* you to take two days. It's the whole reason she made mention of it in the first place."

Ginny was still laughing as Harry held her hand loosely, trying to sort out what she was saying. "You mean, I'm *supposed* to slack off?"

She shook her head in amused incredulity. "Mum's not a total dictator...well, sometimes she is," Ginny amended. "But your sodding sense of honour won't let you take it easy, I can see." Then she let out a dramatic sigh and finished, "Come on then. Let's get you working so we can find out what chore Mum's got on backup for tomorrow."

Ginny tugged on his hand and laced her arm through three of the buckets' handles. Harry pulled back as she stood again. "All right, all right," he said bending to take three buckets of his own. "I'll...*try* to take it easy today." Then gazing at her from the corner of his eye, said, "But only because I wouldn't want you to sweat about having to do more chores."

She guffawed and they made their way to the vegetable garden, hands clasped, buckets swinging freely on their arms in a jaunty rhythm.

*

Setting their buckets down at the end of a row of green beans, Ginny and Harry surveyed the scene before them. "Right," said Ginny, trying to remember what her mother had said she needed first. "Beans, then tomatoes."

Harry gave her a quizzical glance, and pointing to the seven long rows of trellises full of beans, said, "And you were *worried* that I might finish in just one day?"

"Well," Ginny said as she half-turned to look back at him, her hands resting on her hips. "It's not *that* hard to pick beans, you know."

Harry chuckled, and Ginny gave a silent cheer at having made him laugh, as she always did when this rare event occurred. "I've never done it before," he admitted, the smile slowly slipping off his face.

"That's all right, Harry," she soothed with mock pomposity, rubbing his bare forearm. "If you can tie your shoes properly, you can pick beans."

"Ha, ha," he said drolly and snatched up a bucket. "Fill the buckets?" he asked with a raised brow in her direction. She nodded and took a bucket herself as he moved to one side of the trellis and she to another.

They worked for a while in silence, each searching the vines for the largest beans before pinching them off and dropping them into their gradually filling buckets. Ginny could see his face peeking through the vines as they continued down the row and started on another set of plants. Harry seemed to be lost in thought, and as time went on, his pace gradually lessened.

"Something on your mind?" she asked quietly, shaking him from his reverie.

"Huh? Oh...just thinking," he responded after giving her a cursory glance.

Ginny grinned and resumed picking. "I could tell," she said, and he started to pick again as well. "Anything you want to share with me?"

He stopped picking again and looked up at her from his squatting position, sending her smile away like the morning's dew. "What is it?" she asked with a seriousness that surprised even her.

"Can you keep a secret?"

Ginny set her bucket down and came around to his side of the trellis. "Come on," she said, taking his hand again before leading him to the other end of the garden where a small tool shed stood. They sat on the cool grass on the shady side of the shed, their backs leaning against its wall, and Ginny pulled her legs underneath her.

Harry didn't speak for a minute, and although Ginny wanted to yank whatever it was out of him, she restrained herself, recognizing his need to go at his own pace.

"You, uh...remember what it was Voldemort was really after in Department of Mysteries?" he said, staring at a row of zucchini.

Momentarily shocked that he would be talking about the event that led to Sirius' death, she took a second to reply. "You mean, the prophecy?"

He nodded. "There was a reason he wanted it. A reason that he tricked me into believing that Sirius was being tortured there."

Ginny kept staring at him; even though Dumbledore had dampened their bond, she could feel the pain and anguish radiating off of him. Still, he did not show it.

I know what the prophesy says, Ginny.” Harry’s eyes met hers and a dull ache resonated in her brain, a sadness that wasn’t hers. Then words formed in the haze, echoing in her head as a pair of wide, goggling eyes appeared in her mind’s eye.

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...

Hot tears welled in Ginny’s eyes as the vision faded and the voice died. She haltingly shook her head and wiped at her face with the back of her hand. “No, Harry,” she whispered fearfully. “It doesn’t have to be you.”

Harry’s thumb reached up and paused, hovering over her cheek. Then he slowly wiped away her tears. “It’s funny,” he said with a sad smile. “But the prophecy could have referred to Neville, too.”

“Neville Longbottom?”

“Yeah.... Good old Neville.” Harry’s hand hadn’t left her face, even though her tears had long been dry. She sensed him try to move it away and she pressed her hand to his, forcing it to stay.

“I asked Dumbledore why he was so sure I was the one mentioned. Why it wasn’t Neville.” He sighed and Ginny could almost see the weight of the world settle onto his shoulders. Harry tapped at his scar, peeking through his fringe. “He marked me, Ginny, not Neville.”

She looked up at him in wonder. How could someone so caring, as good and wonderful as Harry Potter, be saddled with the task of defeating the darkest wizard in a century? What cruel twist of fate had intervened in the Potters’ lives to rip him from his parents and into the hands of those awful Muggles?

“I don’t know why it has to be me, or why he killed my parents,” he said, as if in answer to her unspoken questions, “but I know that I don’t want anyone else to die because I didn’t kill him first.”

He said it with such conviction, such passion, that Ginny had no problem believing that he would be the one to live while the other did *not* survive. “Harry,” she stated simply to focus his attention. Then gathering all her courage and strength, said, “You are going to beat Tom, and I’m going to be at your side when you do it.”

Harry started to shake his head, eyes wide, but Ginny cut him off. “You listen to me, Harry Potter,” she said as she jabbed a finger into his chest. “I’ve survived him once and I can do it again. What’s more, you can’t do this by yourself, and even if you tried, I wouldn’t let you!”

“Please, Ginny,” he said quietly. “Please don’t put yourself in danger for me.”

“And sit on my arse while you go into the jaws of hell?” she asked accusingly. “I don’t bloody well think so! You don’t get it, do you? This is personal on both ends – I want to see Tom dead, and I very much want to see you alive. I may have wanted to hex the skin off of you a few weeks ago, but that’s changed and I’ll be hanged if I’m not going to see this thing through with you, Harry. Two is better than one; it’s going to be with you and not without you.”

They stared at each other for a long while and another feeling made its way dully through their link. A calm peace as exquisite as the pain that had preceded it told her that he accepted her stubborn demand and would not fight her. Even better, she could sense relief that he wouldn’t be alone, and that he was even glad that she had forced her way into his life.

“Thanks,” he said simply.

“You’re welcome,” she replied with a warm smile. “Now let’s get back to work before Mum thinks we’ve skived off.”

Consequences of the Heart 6: Black is the Colour of My True Love's Hair

Chapter Six – Black is the Colour of My True Love's Hair

A week after picking beans in the Weasley's garden, Harry found himself once again groaning in his bed from the exertions of hard labour. Molly had been soft on him in the days following his birthday, but she'd more than made up for it with the assignment she'd given him after the weekend. He had been digging an irrigation ditch from the River Otter to the vegetable garden, and yesterday he had nearly passed out from the scorching heat of the sun. Ginny had saved him by keeping his water container full and by holding an umbrella over him while he worked. Still, his muscles ached in places he never dreamed of, and even though the ditch was complete, the prospect of doing anything that day was quite unappealing.

Harry was face-down on his bed, his head pressed into his pillow so that the downy innards were pushed outward on both sides of his head, making the portion between his face and the mattress effectively cushion-less.

A sharp knock on his door announced a visitor, and Harry blearily wondered why Uncle Moony didn't just walk in like he normally did. He turned over slightly, letting his arm dangle off the side of the bed so he could get a better look at the door, which was creaking open.

Without his glasses, Harry couldn't make out the finer details, but several things caused bells to go off in his head. Instead of a taller man-shaped blur, there was a shorter blur with long red hair.

"Ginny?" said Harry with a start, pushing off his mattress to sit up and then felt around for his glasses. When she came into focus, he asked, "What are you doing here?"

She stood in the doorway, her eyes staring unabashedly at Harry's chest and a faint red tinge gracing her cheeks.

"I...um, I came to get you," she said breathlessly. Last weekend, the cat had finally come out of the bag and the remaining Dursleys became aware of the fact that Ginny was studying with Harry. To Harry's great shock, Vernon merely grumbled about the fact that another freak was in his home, but made no further protest. Significant glances to Harry's aunt were only met with subtle shakes of the head and he pursued it no longer.

Dudley's reaction however, was completely expected, even if Ginny's solution to his reaction was a bit...violent. After a few not-so-subtle innuendos as to the kinds of things Harry and Ginny might be 'studying' in Harry's room, Ginny had lost her temper and had given the Junior Heavyweight Inter-School Boxing Champion of the Southeast a large shiner on his left eye. Needless to say, Ickle-Diddykins had given them a wide berth ever since.

Bringing his thoughts back to the present, Harry watched Ginny fidget by the open door. "Is there something wrong with Moony?" asked Harry with sudden concern.

Ginny smirked and bent to pick up a tee shirt off the floor, not breaking eye contact with Harry's torso. "Nothing *wrong*," she said as she flicked the shirt at him. "Put that on first, or I don't think I'll be able to have a coherent conversation with you."

Realizing that he hadn't put on a shirt after his shower last night, Harry cringed and pulled the shirt over his head obediently.

Once he was covered, Ginny shook her head slightly and her eyes finally found Harry's face. "After he dropped you off, he went back to headquarters like he normally does, but from what Charlie tells me, Tonks was waiting for him there."

Harry goggled at Ginny as he pulled on a clean pair of socks and pushed his hand through his hair. "Tonks?"

Ginny sat on the chair at Harry's desk while he proceeded to make his bed. "She's apparently been trying to get him to loosen up -- Charlie's words, not mine -- for quite some time and finally decided to try the direct approach."

"What are you saying?" Harry asked.

"Tonks thinks that Lupin would make a most excellent boyfriend," Ginny replied.

"But...but," Harry spluttered for a moment. "He's so *old*."

Ginny rolled her eyes and took Harry's hand when he finished with the bed. "At their age, the gap doesn't matter nearly as much as it does for us, Harry. He might be 'old', but he's not dead. One thing led to another, and he's nursing a werewolf-sized hangover right now."

Shaking the mental image of Tonks and Remus out of his head, Harry let Ginny drag him downstairs until they were in the kitchen. "We're alone for the morning. Remus said something about Petunia shopping and Dudley at a training match."

She pushed him into a seat at the table and without another word, began pulling out pots and pans to make breakfast. "I brought my own ingredients to make omelettes, so your aunt doesn't blow her top," she explained, holding her bag up as evidence. Then, turning to the stove, she

asked, "How do you light a Muggle stove, Harry?"

Standing once more, Harry walked up behind her and pointed to the knob protruding from the front of the fancy, built-in unit the Dursleys had installed three years ago. "Push that in and turn it anti-clockwise. You should hear a clicking sound. When it lights, keep turning it to the left until you get the right-sized flame."

So intent on explaining the process to Ginny, Harry hadn't realised that his arm was around her waist and his chin hovering a mere inch over her left shoulder. She turned to look at him when he finished speaking and they locked eyes. A brief surge of panic welled inside him and Harry had to wonder if it was entirely his own dread that he was feeling, because he felt a slow surge of other emotions: anticipation and longing.

The fear intensified and Harry took a step back, tearing his eyes from Ginny to look at the pan. His bracelet was ice-cold, but he made no move to touch it. "Give it a try," he said softly.

Ginny placed the bowl of beaten eggs on the counter and soon had a nice blue flame dancing on the hob. Harry continued to watch her as she diced up onions, peppers and mushrooms from a bag she had at her feet, and he appreciated for the first time how much alike they were.

Even discounting Hogwarts, Quidditch, and their mutual run-ins with Voldemort, they were remarkably pre-disposed to be able to relate to one another. Harry was an only child, living under the oppressive thumb of the Dursleys. Ginny, the only female Weasley in six generations, was constantly trying to break out of her brothers' shadows.

Harry's fame had branded him as someone unreachable to many people, and therefore, his friendships were few and far between. Ginny's experience with the Chamber in her first year sullied any chance she might have had to be 'normal'. As a result, her friendships tended to be one-sided, or at best, stemming from her association with Gryffindor or her brothers.

Harry continued to ruminate, as Ginny turned one omelette over and began working on the toast; on the flip-side, there were things about their personalities that exactly complimented each other. Ginny never let Harry go too long being a git before she pulled his head out of his arse for him, sometimes forcefully. She was bold, headstrong, and independent, and Harry found himself more and more willing to let her take charge of the part of his life that he didn't understand: the part that involved believing in himself and the future.

When Ginny turned from the stove, Harry had to blink; he hadn't realised that he had been thinking the whole time she'd been cooking. Breakfast appeared to be done. "Ready to eat?" asked Ginny, holding out two plates as she walked over to the table.

Harry nodded, pulled the pitcher of orange juice from the fridge and retrieved two cups from the dish rack, still lost in thought.

They sat opposite one another and eyed each other warily before Ginny grinned and said, "What? Have I got something on my nose?"

"No," said Harry with a smile of his own. "Just thinking."

"Well, thinking requires food as much as anything, so let's get eating before Mum Apparates over to find out what's taking us so long."

*

Upon arriving at the Burrow, Harry found Ron pulling on one of his school robes and shoving a piece of toast in his mouth.

"Off somewhere?" Harry asked his friend.

Once his robes were on straight, Ron pulled the bread from his mouth. "Fred and George need a hand at the shop," he explained. "Huge sale. All Hogwarts students get a thirty percent discount until September first."

Thinking about how uncomfortable it would be for The-Boy-Who-Lived to be stuck in a shop with hundreds of his peers milling about, Harry said, "Better you than me."

"Right. Well, I'm off." Then, poking his head upstairs, Ron yelled, "See you at dinner, Mum!"

Harry barely heard Mrs. Weasley's muffled reply when Ron threw a handful of Floo powder into the kitchen fireplace and yelled, "Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes!"

Rubbing his sore arms pitifully, Harry glanced at Ginny and said, "What have we got to do today? I hope it doesn't involve a shovel."

Ginny laughed at Harry's obvious distress and mournful expression. "Poor Harry," she soothed. "How about a job that requires you to lie down in the shade all day?"

Harry's ears perked up. "Really?"

"Yep," she confirmed, a twinkle in her eye that spoke of mischief.

Instantly sceptical, Harry grabbed her arm. "What's the catch? You wouldn't pull a bloke's leg, would you?"

Ginny just turned on a megawatt smile and patted his hand. "You'll see, Harry. You'll see."

They waited in the kitchen for a while and Harry was about to ask what they were waiting for when Mrs. Weasley came downstairs.

"Sorry for making you wait, dears," she said, dusting her apron off with one hand. In her other hand, she held a strange device that had a small net

on one side and a spray bottle on the other. "It took me longer than I thought to find the de-bumbler."

Harry raised an eyebrow and glanced at Ginny, who only smiled mysteriously back at him. "Um...what's a de-bumbler?" he asked.

"It's what you're to use when you get rid of the Glumbumbles under the house, dear," Molly explained patiently. "Didn't Ginny tell you?"

Ginny's smile faltered for a moment and Harry let a grin slip on his own face. "No, Mrs. Weasley," he started slowly. "She forgot to mention it; she said something about lying down in the shade all day, though."

"Ginny," said her mum sharply. "You shouldn't tease poor Harry. He's got enough to worry about without being used to exercise your sense of humour."

Harry ducked his head to hide his snicker while Ginny tried to turn her shock into remorse. "I'm sorry, Mum," she said and Molly nodded her head.

"Right, then. You'll need this," said Mrs. Weasley, handing the de-bumbler to Harry. "Ginny can show you how to use it, so off you go."

The two teens walked to the garden door and were outside before Harry let his first snicker loose.

"Poor Harry is it?" asked Ginny, who was clearly not amused. "I'll show you 'poor Harry'."

Before Harry could react, she had her fingers on his sides, right in the middle of his rib cage, and she began to wiggle them madly, sending him into fits of uncontrolled laughter. They fell in a heap on the ground as she continued to torture him. "St – Stop," he managed to force out through the giggles, but Ginny was having none of it. Instead, she moved to his stomach and Harry instinctively clenched his muscles, making the tickling sensations stronger.

Finally grabbing at her hands, he was able to keep her from tormenting him further, and opened his eyes. "You...are...so...dead," he gasped, still struggling to breathe properly.

"You deserved it," she said with a laugh, pushing his hands away and rolling towards the house. "It's not fair to play the 'mum' card and you know it."

Harry guffawed. "I'm sure you *never* used it with your brothers, right? Ickle Gin-Gin wouldn't stoop to manipulate her mother to deflect punishment, would she?"

Narrowing her eyes, Ginny asked, "Have Fred and George been telling stories about me again?"

With an angelic smile, Harry said, "Might have been them, but I wish I could have seen the look on your face when they got you with the water balloons on your eighth birthday."

"Argh!" she said with a pout. "I'll have them for lunch if they're brave enough to step foot in the Burrow again."

"You're cute when you're angry, did you know?" he asked cheekily as he pushed himself off the ground and grabbed the de-bumbler.

Harry didn't wait to hear an answer however, walking instead to the opening under the front steps that led to the crawl space and a hive of Glumbumbles that needed to be eradicated.

*

Despite the idea of being forced into close proximity with what turned out to be several hives of the furry insects, Harry found the work to go fairly easily. When lunchtime came, Harry had managed to get most of the hives out, using the sprayer to stun them and the net to scoop them up. Ginny assisted by taking the jars of stunned Glumbumbles into the shed, where the fluid they excreted could be harvested and sold to the Apothecary in town.

About an hour after lunch, Harry was down to the last few nests, when he heard a small *pop* and felt something sticky on his arm. Moving around under the house was a difficult proposition to say the least. With about a foot and a half of space between the floor joists and the gravelly ground, Harry had to scoot around on his back or chest to manoeuvre into position by each nest.

As he turned over to see what it was on his arm, he put his lit wand down in the gravel and froze momentarily in surprise. Harry couldn't move his left arm at all and the more he struggled, the harder the sticky substance became. Thinking quickly, he decided to use the net to pry his arm loose, but ended up with a bruise instead.

Deciding there was nothing else for it, he cupped his mouth with his free hand and pointed it at the small shaft of light at the other end of the Burrow. "Ginny!"

A moment later, something blocked the light and he heard her voice echo in the confines of the crawl space. "What is it, Harry?"

"I'm stuck," he said, no longer needing to yell. "There was something sticky down here and my arm seemed to find it."

"Hold on," said Ginny and she disappeared for a second before returning. "I'm coming in, just stay where you are."

Soon, another lit wand made its way towards him and Harry could make out her grunts as she shuffled and shimmied in the gravel. A cloud of dust preceded her and he tried to cough the metallic taste out of this mouth.

"What did you get yourself into now?" she asked sardonically.

Ginny's wand lay next to Harry's sending an ethereal glow around their heads. Harry didn't answer, but shrugged his shoulder, as the other one was still immobile.

Reaching behind him, Ginny extracted a small, faded, blue plastic bottle. "Gred and Forge's experimental ever-sticking solution," she said wistfully. "Do you know how old this is?"

Harry couldn't breathe. Ginny was very close to him now, lined up perfectly so that their eyes were level and Harry couldn't help but notice how pretty she looked with smudges of dirt on her cheeks and nose.

Something else popped, this time much louder than before and Ginny jumped, moving even closer to Harry with a small squeak. "Oh no," she groaned, mostly to herself. Then with a playful smirk that completely distracted Harry, she said, "I'm afraid I'm stuck too," she said and demonstrated her honesty by trying to jerk her right arm from underneath her. Ginny chewed on her lip for a second and an unbidden image of Harry chewing on her lip flew into his mind before he quashed it.

"Fred and George used to play under here when they were kids," Ginny said quietly, apparently aware of his discomfiture. "They had set traps down here to keep us out so they could do their experiments without Mum and Dad finding out."

Harry's breath came in short gasps as his heart raced. He was certain that Ginny's lips were quivering slightly and he had a mad desire to chew his arm off and crawl away as fast as he could manage with a missing limb to get away from her. "H – How do we get unstuck?" he asked shakily, his eyes darting back and forth in the dim light of their wands.

"Mum's in Diagon Alley, getting our school books. She should be gone for at least another hour," she murmured, her warm breath licking his lips. "We got our Hogwarts letters today, you know." It looked to Harry like she was just as nervous as he was, but the quivering in her lip wouldn't go away and it was driving him to distraction.

"R – Really?" Harry's voice broke and he made a show of clearing his throat. "Fancy that."

When she didn't respond, he looked into her eyes and the dull sensation that heralded a slow surge of emotions returned. Unlike this morning, retreat was not an option. Harry heard a groaning noise in his mind and something snapped, letting loose a torrent of feelings, desires, fears, and hopes. It overwhelmed him and Harry did the first thing that popped into his mind, the same thing that had been plaguing his dreams for weeks and had been pulling at his thoughts all day: he kissed her.

Using his free hand to pull Ginny's head even closer, Harry crushed his lips to hers as he closed his eyes. As the flood of feeling ebbed from their link, it was replaced with a softer sensation, as if he were floating in a warm river of scented bubbles or surrounded by thousands of comfortable pillows, and in the back of his mind, he could hear Ginny's unintelligible voice singing to him.

*

Ron Weasley tumbled out of the grate of his kitchen fireplace and immediately took off his soot covered robes and hung them on a peg behind the living room door. Famished, but also thirsty, he decided to satisfy the latter need first.

As he drained a cup of cool pumpkin juice, Ron set his mug down and let out a relieved breath. "Man, that's good," he said to himself. The house was strangely quiet and Ron wondered where everyone was.

He moved to the kitchen sink and debated opening a package of crisps when a loud klaxon-like alarm sounded. Suddenly fearful, thinking a Death Eater had breached the wards at the Burrow, Ron ran to the secretary where an old wooden clock sat, blaring a noise that reminded him of the alarm on the girls' dormitory in Gryffindor tower.

Looking at the clock face, he could see Harry and Ginny's pictures on the front, both smiling widely next to individual dials whose needles were pegged all the way to the blue side of their range. "Blimey," said Ron as the situation slowly sunk into his food-deprived brain. "I've got to do something."

Ron ran upstairs in search of the manual that the clock had come with, the alarm still blaring away. He had seen Bill slipping it into his mum's hands the night Bill brought it over and knew it must be in his parents' bedroom. One of the first things that Ron had learned as a child was that if his parents ever wanted to hide something from him, be it Christmas presents or anything else, they would always put it on top of their wardrobe.

When Ron stood on his tiptoes and reached a hand over the worn moulding, his fingers brushed a small book and he knew he had found it. Flipping through the pages quickly, he found what he was looking for.

This clock features a built-in, anti-snog alarm that is guaranteed to alert the person monitoring the couple if things get too steamy. Once the alarm is sounded, the bracelet units will begin to shrink until the wearers break their kiss and a locating charm will activate, directing the chaperone to within three feet of their location. Simply tap the clock with your wand and say, "Locatus".

Pulling his wand from his jean pocket, Ron tossed the book haphazardly back on top of the wardrobe and launched himself downstairs. Just as he turned the corner to the kitchen, his mother Apparated in with a muted *crack*.

"Oh, dear," she said immediately upon hearing the alarm. She dropped her bags of books onto the table and bustled over to the wailing clock.

Ron met her there and tapped it with his wand. "Locatus," he intoned.

"How did you know about that?" asked Molly, clearly surprised at his knowledge.

Just then, a fuzzy image appeared over the clock's face of a dimly lit space and as it sharpened, Ron could see Harry and Ginny clearly not mindful of the effects the bracelets were having on them because of their kiss.

"They're under the house," said Molly abruptly. "I'd go get them, but..."

"No problem, Mum," said Ron, puffing out his chest with pride. "I'll have them out of there in a cinch."

*

Ginny was flying. In all the dreams she had had about snogging Harry Potter, they had never been like this, especially they never included anything about a torrent of conflicting emotions waging war in her head. Had it not been for the fact that Harry was actually a very good kisser, she might not have been able to tolerate what was happening to them.

Then, without warning, Ginny was kissing herself.

"Eugh," they said together and broke the kiss. Her vision cleared at the same time, no longer looking through Harry's eyes, but the warring emotions stayed lodged in her brain, sending stabbing pains through her temples.

"What are you doing snogging in the crawl space?" came Ron's overly-loud voice from the entrance.

"We're not snogging, you git," lied Harry, answering for her. "We're stuck!"

"Stuck? But that's not..." Ron said, trailing off.

"We found some of Fred and George's sticking-solution prototypes, Ron," offered Ginny, just wanting to get out from the now-claustrophobic confines of the rafters.

"Oh," Ron said, still obviously confused about something. "I'll go get the solvent for it, then."

"You do that," muttered Ginny.

Harry was fidgeting and she could feel his raw emotions through the link. He was scared, uncertain about what had just happened and couldn't figure out how to talk to her about it.

"You remember last year when Madam Pince threw us out of the library?" Ginny asked suddenly.

Despite his obvious disconcertment, Harry grinned at the memory. "I can still feel the bruises."

"Do you remember what I said to you when you wanted to talk to Sirius but couldn't because of Umbridge?" Ginny wrinkled her nose as she said the name of their ex-professor.

Harry furrowed his brow in thought as though trying to remember the conversation. "Something about Fred and George?" he asked gamely.

"The thing about growing up with Fred and George, is that you think anything's possible if you've got enough nerve," said Ginny as she rubbed her temples with the thumb and forefinger of her free hand.

"Harry," she said to get his attention. "I really like you...more than a crush, but I'm really confused by everything and need some time to sort out my feelings for you." She offered him a warm smile as she continued, "Besides...this whole bond thing isn't making things easier between us."

"Yeah," he said sardonically. "It's hard enough to sort through my own feelings, but..."

"Now you've got my feelings to deal with, too," she finished for him.

Harry nodded sullenly and she knew that he could see where this was going and that it disappointed him.

"I'll be sure to let you know, okay?"

"Just make it obvious," he replied, staring at her tee shirt.

She glanced at Harry and found his eyebrows were scrunched together, as if he were angry. "And why would that be a problem?"

Harry sighed and shook his head. "People just assume I know what they're talking about, going on about things that are important but are as clear as mud to me. They use subtle phrasing and hidden meanings that I can't fathom and then expect me to just figure it out. They talk in some sort of secret code that was never taught. Whatever you do to let me know you're ready for a relationship, make it obvious."

Ginny's lips turned up at the corners of her mouth and she pushed the fringe on his forehead back with a finger. "What? Like tying a big red ribbon around my waist and a bow on my head so you know it's for you?"

Harry grinned as well and he said, "Something like that."

Letting out a breath, she gave him a quick peck on the cheek before Ron scurried into the crawl space, a plastic bottle not unlike the one on the end of the de-bumbler in his hand.

"Got it," he said when he came into view. "Hold on while I get this stuff off of you."

As they extracted themselves from under the house, Harry tried to implement some of the techniques he had learned from his Occlumency studies to block Ginny's mind from his. Much to his surprise, it actually dulled the effect of their connection and he was able to begin to sort through what had happened down there and what it implied for their friendship.

When they made it inside, they were met with the disapproving stare of Molly Weasley.

"Ron says that you two weren't snogging under the house," she started, pointing a finger at Harry, then Ginny. "But I've got it on good authority that you were. Care to explain it to me?"

Ron walked from behind them, something gold jingling in his hand. "These were down there too. It looks like they broke off somehow," said Ron as he handed the bracelets to his mum.

Harry squirmed as Molly moved into her "hell to pay" posture.

Molly cleared her throat. "Ron, go get cleaned up for supper while I talk with these two."

Ron looked like he was about to protest, but wisely shut his mouth and skulked off to his room while Harry absently rubbed the spot on his wrist the bracelet had recently occupied.

"Now," Mrs. Weasley continued once Ron was out of earshot. "I've already summoned Professor Dumbledore, but he's been detained. So who wants to start first?"

Ginny and Harry exchanged nervous glances and Harry could tell that she felt the same as him; it was all still fresh and new and they were too confused about everything to begin to explain things properly.

"We did kiss," said Ginny warily. "But it wasn't planned. It sort of just...happened."

With a raised eyebrow and arms still folded across her chest, Mrs. Weasley waited for them to continue.

"We were stuck in some of the twins' sticking solution," offered Harry. "I had just about finished with the Glumbumbles when I heard something pop."

"Then I went to help him get loose," interjected Ginny, "and I got stuck too."

Molly continued to eye the two teens approvingly before she asked, "How long were you two down there before you kissed?"

Thinking it was an odd question, Harry tried his best to answer, "I dunno.... About fifteen or twenty minutes?"

"Come on, Mum. It's not like we were doing anything scandalous," Ginny said nonchalantly.

"Yeah, there was nothing in the rules that said I couldn't kiss your daughter. I thought I was being quite civil at the time," he said with a smirk, regretting the flippant tone instantly as Molly's foot began to twitch.

"You know about the bond?" asked Harry quickly, when it became clear that Mrs. Weasley wasn't going to react well to his comment. "And the spell that Dumbledore cast to reduce the effects of the bond?"

Molly nodded, letting her breath out with a slow whoosh.

"It doesn't work very well, the dampening, I mean. It just sorta slows things down. If I'm too close to Ginny I start to pick up her thoughts and emotions – if things go too far, I start seeing things through her eyes. That's weird, trust me," Harry said.

"This morning at breakfast, I started feeling it again, so I backed away, but when I was stuck under the porch I couldn't retreat." Harry paused to take a breath before continuing. "Well, you know, when you can't retreat, there's only one thing to do. Go forward."

Molly was fidgeting with her dress and wouldn't look Harry or Ginny in the eye.

"I hope I wasn't being too forward," Harry offered in what he hoped was a meek voice.

"Of course not, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said suddenly. "That's not what I'm saying at all. It's just...I know what it's like to be young and in love." Both Harry and Ginny flushed red at this pronouncement. "Even though it was twenty-odd years ago," she said almost to herself. Then more forcefully, said, "Just be careful. Both of you."

"I won't jeopardize your daughter's virtue, Mrs. Weasley," said Harry sincerely, chancing a glance at Ginny. "Your approval means the world to me and whatever happens between Ginny and me, it won't be at the expense of the love you've given me over the years. I'm not looking for a quick, cheap thrill."

The sound of the Floo connection being activated caused Harry to turn towards the fireplace, but before he could see who was coming through the grate, Harry had two arms wrapped tightly around his neck. "I trust you, Harry," Molly said into his ear. "But I'm a mum; I'm still allowed to worry." Harry relaxed into her embrace and had to hold back a laugh when he realized that he was actually taller than her now.

"You called for me, Molly?" said Dumbledore from behind Harry.

Releasing Harry from her embrace, she nodded. "I'll let them tell you about it. I need to get dinner ready," Molly said before walking over to the sink to wash her hands and begin working on the evening's meal.

Motioning them into the living room, Dumbledore gave them a look that said he knew exactly what had happened and even suggested that he wasn't a bit surprised by it.

Harry let Ginny lead the way this time and plopped down on the sofa next to her, careful not to touch, lest they overload the link again.

Their Headmaster sat on a squashy bean bag across from them and said, "Molly tells me that something happened this afternoon between you. Would either of you care to elaborate?"

Harry found it oddly distracting to be speaking to his Professor as he sat on a very undignified piece of furniture; especially when he was doing so because Harry had just snogged Ginny Weasley under her house in the middle of the day.

"I always find it helpful to start at the beginning," Dumbledore said as he gazed patiently at the pair on the sofa.

Taking a deep, cleansing breath, Harry proceeded to tell Dumbledore everything that had happened, leaving out no detail. He told of how he had been assigned to clean out the Glumbumble nests with the de-bumbler ("a highly useful tool" remarked the elderly wizard) and became stuck in one of the twins' traps. Ginny filled in parts after this, when she had become involved, and when they got to the part where Harry had been about to kiss her, they stopped.

"And then..." said Harry as he trailed off. "Well, the charm you applied seemed to stop working and I couldn't think of anything else to do, so I..."

Ginny let out a sigh and said, "He kissed me, Professor. On the lips."

Once again, Harry saw Dumbledore's beard twitch ever-so-slightly. Harry cleared his throat, feeling oddly warm in the normally cool living room. "It seemed to help, though," Harry offered. "I mean, it, uh...seemed like Ginny's thoughts weren't nearly as strong as before we...uh, kissed. We did end up with crossed vision thing though, which helped us break things off."

Dumbledore looked thoughtful for a moment, stroking his beard with a hand as he continued to sit with his legs crossed in front of him. "How has your bond been since your experience?"

Harry thought back to when they finally were able to work their way out of the crawl space. "It was really hard to handle at first," he began. "But then I thought I'd try to use some of the Occlumency techniques Sna – Professor Snape taught me and...it hasn't been so bad since then. What I'm trying to say is that I can control it, but it seems to be growing stronger."

"And you, Miss Weasley?" Dumbledore asked, inclining his head in her direction.

Ginny cocked her head to the side in thought, inadvertently exposing her neck to Harry's view and his eyes became inexplicably drawn to it. "Harry!" she said after a moment, raising a hand to her neck.

"Sorry," he mumbled, looking down at his shoes.

"It's been fine for me, too, Headmaster," Ginny said coolly. "I can obviously still feel things from Harry, especially when we're close or touching, but nothing I can't handle."

"Hmm," said Dumbledore as he rose effortlessly from his position across from them. "All the same, I think it would be wise to re-institute the charm for the time being. The pain will be a bit more severe this time," he warned. They touched hands together as they had on Harry's birthday and once again felt the painful combinations of cold and hot shoot through them, this time leaving an ache that penetrated their bones.

"There," Dumbledore said when he had finished. "If you plan on kissing again in the near future, please consider the fact that you will have to forgo the protections of this dampening charm until it can be re-instituted, and that each time it is reapplied, it will be more painful. In the meantime, I recommend that you work on coming to terms with whatever feelings you may or may not have for one another. It's the only way to regulate the effects of an Egreitic bond."

"Thank you," said Harry sheepishly.

"Enjoy your evening," said Dumbledore. "I believe Molly is cooking lamb." Then, with two great strides, he was out of the living room and in the kitchen.

*

The rest of the night had been awkward for Harry, to say the least. On top of stopping short of declaring their mutual affection, Harry and Ginny had been discovered kissing by her mum and her brother, lectured by their Headmaster, and at the end of the day, they could hardly look each other in the eye without breaking into a full-fledged blushing match.

Friday was spent picking more beans and tomatoes from the garden, and since they had finished their homework the week before, there was no reason for Harry and Ginny to spend time in Little Whinging. That was all well and good, as far as Harry was concerned. He needed the time away from Ginny to sort out his feelings, as Dumbledore had suggested, more for his own sanity than anything else. So by the time Sunday came, and it was Ginny's birthday, Harry at least had some kind of a plan in mind.

Remus arrived Sunday mid-morning to escort Harry back to the Burrow, allowing number four's inhabitants a bit of a lie-in. Harry had attempted to tell Moony that Aunt Petunia never let anyone have a lie-in, but his arguments were rebuffed. This led Harry to secretly suspect that the lie-in was for

Moony, and not for Harry or the Dursleys.

"Doing well?" asked Harry as the werewolf arrived with a slight *pop*.

"As well as can be expected," Remus temporized. "How about you? I heard about your escapade under the Burrow with Miss Weasley, you know."

Harry fought a slight urge to blush, having come to terms with things over the last two days. "I'm sure you have. I heard a little bit about you as well, Uncle Moony."

Now it was Lupin's turn to restrain himself, and Harry could detect a faint pink on his impassive face. "Really? And what did you hear?"

There was a brightly wrapped package in Remus' left hand, a more circumspectly decorated one in his right and as he shifted nervously, their crinkling noise seemed magnified as Harry waited to drop the other shoe.

"Nothing about a shape-shifting Auror, I can assure you," deadpanned Harry.

Much to his credit, Moony only raised a single eyebrow in reply. "Indeed."

"I'm sure your intentions toward Miss Tonks are as wholesome and platonic as mine towards Ginny," finished Harry.

Remus' eyes flashed and he let out a feral growl. "You'd better act like a perfect gentleman, Harry, or there will be worse than werewolves after you." Then with a gentle smile, the wolf was gone and Remus extended the present in his left hand. "I believe you requested this?"

Harry gulped and took the gift with a shaky hand. "Thanks, Remus."

*

Ginny's birthday party was quite different than his own, but in some ways it was the same. There was a cake, presents and they all sang to her, but the biggest difference was the lack of guests. Only immediate family members, Harry, Tonks and Remus were present; the latter two obviously because of Harry.

Having planned on getting Ginny a gift ever since she had mentioned her impromptu party with Sirius last year, Harry had given Uncle Moony the job of acquiring a present for her. The trick came in picking something out that was both meaningful and simple. He didn't want to impose himself on her with jewellery, especially after what had recently happened between them.

Harry waited until the party was all but over, having hung back in the shadows for most of it, to give her his present. He was still trying to understand where he stood with Ginny. Part of him was in abject terror over the idea of being involved with her, both because of Voldemort and because of who she was. She had a vivacious personality, didn't tolerate him when he was being a prat, and what's more, he could easily visualize himself falling completely head-over-heels for her.

He was sitting on the bench outside the kitchen door when he felt her step out onto the porch. "Happy birthday," he said.

Ginny sat beside him and relaxed against the Burrow's wooden wall. "Thanks."

They sat together in companionable silence, each aware of the other through the dampened connection, but neither seemed willing to press the link for more information.

"I got you a present," Harry said, presenting the brightly-coloured parcel to her.

"I was starting to wonder," she said as she started to pull the cellotape off the ends. Her hands stilled, the package still unopened. "Harry." He looked up at her then and she continued. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't," he interrupted quickly. "Don't apologize for what happened between us. If it wasn't for you, I'd have gone barmy a long time ago."

She smiled. It was the kind of smile that told Harry her happiness was because of him, that as long as they were friends, nothing could threaten it. His eyes darted involuntarily to her lips and he forced the urge to kiss her out of his mind. *Not now*, he told himself.

"I was going to say that I'm sorry I didn't get you anything fancy for your birthday," Ginny said.

Feeling a bit stupid, Harry leaned forward and fixed his gaze onto the shed in the distance. "Oh."

Still feeling her eyes on him, Harry resisted the urge to run back into the Burrow and hide until it was time to go back to Privet Drive.

A sudden crinkling of paper told him that Ginny was once again attacking the present. "Oh, Harry," she said brightly. "How did you know?"

He chanced a glance and looked over to see her holding an iridescent stuffed unicorn. Its horn was bright white and its tail twitched realistically while she held it. "Bill may have mentioned what happened to your old one."

She gave the animal a giant squeeze and nuzzled it with her nose. "It's not the same now that I'm grown, but it's so nice to have Powder back."

Harry raised an eyebrow at her, but didn't comment on her choice of names.

Gathering the discarded wrapping paper from the ground, Ginny reached over and gave Harry a hug. As they broke away, she lingered for a second to plant a kiss on his cheek, sending a wave of thoughts and emotions into his mind that weren't his.

Then, she walked back into the Burrow, letting the door close silently behind her, and the buzzing in Harry's head stopped.

*

Harry walked back inside a while later, and when he entered the living room, he found Mrs. Weasley busy taking down the decorations from the party. "Harry, dear," she said, with a collection of magical streamers in one hand and a box in the other, "would you mind fetching Ginny for me? Dinner's about done and I've got to get these put away before I can set the table."

Not wanting to disappoint Mrs. Weasley, but also not willing to be alone with Ginny right away, Harry said, "I can set the table if you'd like."

Molly smiled and pushed the streamers into the box. "Never mind that, Harry. Just go fetch Ginny and we'll eat shortly."

Harry nodded and walked into the kitchen so he could ascend the stairs.

As he turned the corner and set foot on the landing, the buzzing returned and Harry heard strains of music coming from behind her door. It was the song, the tune that had haunted his thoughts for weeks. His fist was raised to knock on the partially open door, when Ginny started singing.

Black, black, black is the colour of my true love's hair

His lips are something rosy fair

The sweetest face and the gentlest hands

I love the ground whereon he stands

For Black is the colour of my true love's hair

His lips are something rosy fair

Has the sweetest face and the gentlest hands

I love the ground whereon he stands

I know my love and well he knows

I love the ground whereon he goes

And if in this life no more I see

My life shall surely leave me

Black, black, black is the colour of my true love's hair

His lips are something rosy fair

The sweetest face and the gentlest hands

I love the ground whereon he stands

I go to the Clyde for to mourn and weep

But satisfied I ne'er can sleep

I'll write him a letter, a few short lines

I'll suffer death ten thousand times

Black, black, black is the colour of my true love's hair

His lips are something rosy fair

The sweetest face and the gentlest hands

I love the ground whereon he stands

A winter's past and the leaves are green

The time has past that we have seen

But still I hope the time will come

When you and I will be as one

Black is the colour of my true love's hair

His lips are like some rosy fair

The purest eyes and the neatest hands

I love the ground whereon he stands

Harry's breathing hitched as he listened and his head became inundated with Ginny's thoughts and feelings, yet he couldn't bring himself to shut it off and his head nearly burst from the sheer magnitude of what was coming across the link. He felt her love resonating in the words of the song, her love for him. It felt so familiar to him that he had no trouble placing it; it was exactly how he felt for her. He couldn't open the door, not now. He wasn't ready.

Staggering backwards, Harry fumbled for the stairs and descended as fast as he could, the foggy connection growing dimmer the further he walked. Remus was in the kitchen, helped Molly set the table.

"Moony," Harry croaked, holding onto a chair to keep his knees from collapsing.

"Harry?" Remus asked, moving over to see what the matter was. "Is everything all right?"

All eyes moved towards him. Ron looked confused and scared, probably thinking Harry was having another vision from Voldemort. Tonks had her wand out and was looking between him and the door. Molly was looking over Harry's shoulder and the buzzing in his head returned.

"I need to go," Harry ground out as the buzzing got louder. He didn't have the strength to fight it off now, even if he wanted to. "Now."

Remus pulled out the phone receiver and thrust it at Harry. "Take this. We'll get you back to bed."

Harry grabbed the plastic with a shaky hand and heard Moony speak again. "Probably just needs some rest." Then the Portkey activated and Harry slipped from consciousness, Ginny's singing still ringing clearly in his head.

Consequences of the Heart 7: Dreams and Letters

Chapter Seven – Dreams and Letters

A large staircase appeared before Harry. It looked to be about ten yards from one side to the other. There was a brass handrail in the middle of the staircase that extended its entire length, but there were no railings on the sides. It simply dropped off on the edges.

Harry walked over to the end of the stairs and peered tentatively down the side. There was a huge drop-off, Harry estimated about fifty yards, and a raging river churned around jagged rocks at the bottom. Harry wasn't normally afraid of heights, but something about this chasm sent a chill of fear up his spine.

Looking back up the stairs, he felt compelled to see what was at the top, so he grabbed the railing. He felt a feeling of peace and confidence fill him, and he began climbing. The stairs stopped every now and then to reveal a small platform, and the ascent became easier for a moment. The railing was always there. The farther he travelled, the more urgent it seemed to reach whatever destination lay before him.

Almost without warning, a large, black cloud moved in and enveloped him. It was thick and moist, cutting off all light. A piercing cold crept into him, and he began to shudder. He folded his arms tightly against himself to keep in as much heat as possible, letting go of the railing to do so. As soon as his hand left the railing, the confidence and urgency he felt earlier left him and were replaced with despair and uncertainty.

The mist was so thick that he couldn't see anything around him. He groped desperately for the railing but quickly lost all sense of direction. In his misery, he called out for help, but the mist halted his cries almost before they left his mouth. Thinking he had heard something to his left, he stepped in that direction, but his foot missed and he fell. A jolt of panic gripped him and as he cleared the mist, he saw the jagged rocks below him. Harry screamed and tried to brace himself for the impact, but it never came.

Cold.

Biting, penetrating cold.

Harry had never been so cold in his life. The Dementors made him cold, but that was nothing by comparison.

His teeth were chattering and his body shook as Harry tried to gather his blankets close to his body.

He heard someone gasp and murmur something incomprehensible. Warmth enveloped his torso, and then spread to his legs and arms. The murmuring continued as the warmth moved over different parts of his body until his teeth unclenched and his muscles relaxed.

With a contented sigh, Harry fell back to sleep.

*

Light pricked painfully in Harry's eyes and as he blinked them open, he realized that it was morning already. The blurry edges of his world told him his glasses weren't on his face. Dim light spilled from his curtained window making it hurt his head to open his eyelids more than a fraction. Somewhere on the edge of his consciousness, the outline of a dream danced just outside of his grasp.

As Harry sat up, a wave of dizziness overcame him and he fell back onto his pillow.

"Harry! You're awake!" said an unknown person from the shadows. The voice was familiar, but his brain was just as fuzzy as his eyesight and he couldn't quite grasp who was speaking. Then things started to click into place. The party. The song. Ginny.

"What are you doing here?" he croaked out. His throat was abnormally dry, as if he'd slept with his mouth open all night.

"Shh," she said. "I'm going to Floo Mum. Don't try to move." Then with an indistinct rustling noise, she was gone.

Harry thought hard. Last night had been Ginny's birthday party. He had been sent to fetch her for dinner and heard her singing. Then his head hurt and as he lay in his bed, even the memory became painful. He tried to recall how he had returned to number four, but the details kept slipping from his mind like sand through his fingers.

Harry closed his eyes.

*

Voices. They seemed so far away, but he clung to them and felt himself being pulled upward.

"...just tired, Ginny. Dumbledore will be here in a little while anyway. Why don't you go back to the Burrow and try to get some sleep yourself?"

"But, Mum," came Ginny's voice and with it, a new torrent of feelings that weren't his. "He was freezing last night and the warming charm barely kept him from going into hypothermia." The feelings in his head should have been painful, but they weren't. But why should Ginny's voice hurt at all? he wondered.

Then he caught a vision of Molly, looking concernedly at someone to his left. But he knew it was Ginny's eyes he was seeing through.

Ginny sucked in a breath and Harry's eyes fluttered open. "He's awake now," Ginny said.

"You need to go, Ginny. Dumbledore said it might be dangerous to be here when he's not sleeping." Harry thought he saw a blurry version of Ginny twisting her hands together and felt her indecision.

"All right," she finally said. "But I need to know what's going on. I won't be shut out of his life again."

"Fine, fine," Mrs. Weasley said. "Now, off you go."

Harry tried to sit up again and found his head still opposed to the idea, but he managed to prop himself halfway onto the headboard before Mrs. Weasley clucked her tongue and helped straighten him out.

There was a flash of something in the back of his mind and then it was gone. Harry hadn't noticed it before, but as the sensation lifted, he realized that there had been a distinct buzzing noise in his head.

"You need to conserve your strength, Harry," Molly said as she felt his forehead with her cool palm. Then she muttered to herself, "Still warm."

"Mrs. Weasley?" he asked tentatively, still with a gravelly voice. "Water?"

"Of course, dear." She took a glass from a tray next to Harry's head and helped him take a sip. It was lukewarm and slightly stale, but Harry couldn't remember having ever enjoyed such a simple pleasure.

His throat soaked up the water so effectively that he barely had to swallow. "Did something happen? Why is Ginny so worried about me?"

Harry felt his glasses thrust into his hand and he hooked them around his ears.

"You've been asleep for five days, Harry," said Molly, concern evident in her voice.

"Five – What?"

"Dumbledore will be better able to explain things, but I think it has something to do with how you feel about Ginny." There was an odd twinkle in her eyes as she said this.

Harry blinked. "How I...feel?"

She patted him on the hand and stood. "He'll be here in a bit. Just try to relax until then and I'll send him up."

A few minutes later, Harry's head was still reeling, though it wasn't because his memories were foggy any more. Instead, dozens of questions kept shooting through his mind that didn't have answers; and as he waited, this lack of knowledge left him feeling frustrated.

The door squeaked open and a purple-robed wizard entered. "Hello, Harry," said Professor Dumbledore. "Well rested?"

"What's going on?" Harry blurted. "Why have I been sleeping for five days? What's this got to do with Ginny?"

Dumbledore raised a hand to stop the flood of questions. Peering at Harry over his half-moon spectacles, he said, "Do you remember our discussion on the bond you share with Miss Weasley?"

Harry nodded.

"And can you recall what I said about how the more...unpleasant side-effects of the bond could be overcome?"

"Something about my..." Harry said as understanding dawned on him, "my feelings?"

"In order to regulate the effects of the bond, you both had to come to terms with how you felt for one another; to accept them."

A familiar queasiness settled in Harry's stomach. "You don't mean that I – that I'm in love with Ginny?"

Dumbledore chuckled and sat back in the chair next to Harry's bed. "No, Harry. What I'm saying is that however you feel about Miss Weasley, and however she feels about you, those feelings must be understood and accepted before you can be in close proximity. Your recent coma tells me that you were faced with your feelings and you rejected them, at least temporarily."

Harry's mind was moving so fast, he couldn't think of a single thing to say.

"And if I'm not mistaken," the elderly wizard continued, "it was aggravated by the fact that Ginny has accepted her feelings for you, making the bond stable in one direction, but not in the other." Dumbledore cleared his throat and smoothed out his robes. "It would behoove you to come to terms with Miss Weasley and your feelings for her, whatever they may be. Otherwise, it will become increasingly difficult for you to be in the same room together...to play Quidditch, or anything else that requires a close proximity...."

"But what about the dampening charm?" Harry asked desperately. "Can't you – I don't know – make it so we can be around each other again?"

"No, Harry," Dumbledore said simply, rising to his feet. "I'm afraid that the bond is too unstable for me to interfere any longer. Any tampering could make the connection volatile, risking worse than a temporary coma for both of you."

Harry swallowed. "What do I have to do?"

Dumbledore leaned over and rested a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Face your feelings, Harry. Embrace them and discover another side of the most powerful force in the universe."

*

It was Saturday morning and Harry had been asleep for five days. Knowing this didn't comfort him any and neither did knowing that he had to 'face his feelings' for Ginny.

Harry pattered around the house, his strength coming back to him surprisingly fast. His uncle was on the settee, reading the paper as usual. Aunt Petunia was gossiping on the phone and Dudley was outside, presumably beating up ten-year-olds.

Wandering outside, Harry sat on the garden bench and propped his head in his hands. The sky was a clear, bright blue. It was mild for mid-August, a rainstorm having come through while Harry slept. He watched absently as birds twittered around the branches of an apple tree and he longed to be relieved of his impending decision.

A tiny owl swooped low through the apple tree, upsetting the finches and landed excitedly on the bench beside Harry. He tried to catch the small bird, but had to make several tries before Ron's owl was calm enough.

"Right, Pig," said Harry as the bird squirmed in his hand. "Hold still so I can get this letter."

Finally extracting the parchment, he let Pig free and unfolded it to reveal Ron's untidy handwriting.

Harry,

Mum said you'd finally woken up. She's been going nutters over here all week, but that's nothing compared to what Ginny's been like. I don't know what happened on her birthday, but you've got to do something about her. If you don't, she'll be in St. Mungo's for sure and she just might take us with her. I don't fancy having nonstop bat-bogeys just because you two can't stand each other or can't stand to be apart from each other. Take your pick. Me? I think Ginny's hormonal, but you wouldn't catch me saying that to her face.

Remember that talk we had a while ago? About the list? School's about to start, so you better get cracking. If we haven't got a good three or four names by then, your name is Mud, got it?

Ron

The list. Harry had forgotten about it, but now that he remembered, it seemed both utterly ridiculous and the perfect solution to his problem. He only needed to work out the details....

*

Harry finished the letter, folded it, stuffed it into an envelope along with the rest of the message, addressed it, and stared up at Hedwig. "Well, girl," he said as she alighted on the edge of the desk, a great weight settling in his stomach. "I reckon it's time to get this over with."

After giving her specific instructions, Harry watched his owl swoop silently through the window and off into the cool morning air.

*

Ron looked up from his Marvin the Mad Muggle comic to see Hedwig dive low around the kitchen and into the living room, alighting on the back of his chair. A letter fell from her beak and she immediately flew upstairs, wings beating madly as she manoeuvred through the tight spaces of the

house.

Opening the letter, Ron scanned it for a few minutes before his jaw dropped and the letter fell to the table in front of him, covering Marvin's oddly drawn head. A smile formed on his lips and he made to grab it up again, just to make sure he had read it right, but the fireplace in the kitchen roared to life and someone began to shout for him in the kitchen.

"Coming!" he called back, walking swiftly to the grate to see who it was.

*

"Ginny!" yelled Ron from downstairs. "I'm off to Mr. Smith's to help him fix his stove!"

Shaking her head, Ginny stroked Hedwig's feathers lightly, and said under her breath, "Why does he insist on shouting?"

She got up and placed Hedwig on the perch she had purchased with her left-over pocket money. Since Harry had been at the Burrow so much over the summer, she felt it best for the beautiful Snowy owl to have a place to rest while Harry worked.

Giving Hedwig a final scratch behind her head, she calmly walked downstairs and said, "You don't need to shout, Ron. I can hear you just fine."

"Right," he retorted as he put on his cloak and grabbed a handful of powder. "I'm off." He threw the granules into the flames, turning the dancing fire emerald green and stepped into the grate.

Thinking she'd like to read something relaxing to take her mind off of Harry, Ginny walked into the living room and sat in the large overstuffed recliner, eyes tracing the various magazines on the coffee table. Witch Weekly, Better Gnomes and Gardens, Marvin the Mad Muggle... "What's this?" asked Ginny out loud as she fingered a small red ribbon that sat on a piece of parchment.

Looking around to make sure Ron was indeed gone, she picked up the parchment and snuggled into her chair, ready for a good read.

Dear Ron,

Your letter couldn't have come at a more perfect time. Since Ginny's party, I've been thinking a lot about my girlfriend situation, and more specifically, the list. In an effort to narrow down the field, I've enclosed some of the attributes of a decent Potter girlfriend. Let me know what you think after you've read the whole thing. I don't want to waste my time with anyone that doesn't have all the desirable qualities.

Whatever girl I'm going to be serious with has to be a lot like my mother. I'm looking at a picture of my mum and dad when they were eighteen and I can see exactly why my dad fell for her. She was gorgeous, with her long red hair... I think I like red hair, so let's make sure the list of girls includes at least a few redheads. Also, she should be smart. I was reading through some of my mother's accomplishments at Hogwarts and it says she was the best Charms student in the school. Anyone who's that good at Charms, especially medical Charms, has got to be worth another look, right?

I've also been thinking a lot about my family. I know it's stupid for us to think about things like this, but I can't help but being attracted to a girl that wants to have a lot of kids. So when we write up that list, let's include girls who come from a big family.

My dream girl has to like me for who I am. Ever since the Ministry has backed Dumbledore on the whole You-Know-Who thing, I've been getting piles of letters from all kinds of girls. My girlfriend will have to like me for who I am and maybe even have some kind of connection or bond with me already. She's also got to be able to know what to do with me when I'm being moody. You know how hard-headed I can be...so let's try to figure out if there's anyone who can put me in my place when I'm being a git.

The only other thing that comes to mind when we're putting this list together is that the girl I want to be with has to know that anything is possible if you've got enough nerve. That she can never give up on me, even if I've ignored her for years or fancied other girls when the thing I've always wanted is to be with her.

Harry

P.S. Ginny...since I know you're likely to be reading this...if you're free, would you like to go with me to the first Hogsmeade weekend?

Her cheeks burned with a mixture of guilt and pleasure, and a small tear tugged on the corner of her eye. Ginny quickly re-read the letter, checking through the qualifications to make sure she matched. A sound from the kitchen caused her to jump as she was about halfway through the third pass, and she dropped the parchment back onto the table and on top of the ribbon, before standing up to face Ron.

Ginny concentrated on keeping her face neutral when her brother sauntered into the room, putting his cloak haphazardly onto the peg by the bookshelf. He walked over to where she was standing and immediately put up his guard.

"What's up with you?" he asked suspiciously. "Have you..."

"Ron, if you put any name other than mine on the top of that list, I'm going to make sure that you never, ever have children," she said in clipped tones. Then for good measure added, "You know I can do it, too."

"You have been reading it!" he said incredulously. "How did Harry know?"

"Ron," said Ginny sharply, bringing him out of his reverie, "the list?"

"Oh, right.... Let's see," said Ron, nodding his head, "Susan Bones – she's got kinda red hair, doesn't she? Not a really big family, but I hear she really likes kids, so that's a plus." He hadn't even smirked while saying it and that thought alone irked Ginny even more than the fact that he was already talking about other girls, despite her threat. "And she's really good at Charms, got an O on her O.W.L. in Charms, I'm sure."

Ginny made a choking noise but that was all she could manage, suddenly wishing she hadn't left her wand upstairs.

"Padma," continued Ron, oblivious to Ginny's mounting anger. "Now, she loves kids, really does, I heard her say so – she's great at Charms, too. I wonder how she'd feel about dying her hair – it would really look smashing with her complexion. She's even enquired about Harry's dating status."

Suddenly inspired, Ginny said, "Then put Granger's name on the list, Ron."

His smile faltered immediately. "What?"

"She's great at Charms – there's no one better," said Ginny, now fighting a smirk of her own. Ron was so easy to rile.

"But she hates kids – she's an only child," he said, back-peddalling to the bookcase.

Ginny advanced, pressing her advantage. "She's told me many times that she hated growing up as an only child and was going to ensure that she had a large enough family to make up for that. Go ahead," she said, pointing back to Harry's letter, "put her name down too."

"But Ginnnnnnnnnnnnny," whinged Ron with obvious agitation.

"Ron, don't make me hurt you."

"But the hair, the hair's all wrong," Ron protested. "Harry would never go for a girl without red hair."

But Ginny wasn't going to let him off that easy. "Sleekeasy makes a complete line of colouring products, Ron, get with the program." She paused, letting him chew on the idea of Hermione with straight red hair before pressing on. "Why don't you want your best mate to have the best girl?"

"Ginny, I'm not going to put Hermione's name down on this list!"

The change from whine to adamant refusal was entertaining to watch. Still, Ginny persisted. "Why not, Ron?"

Ron shifted nervously on his feet before saying, "I don't want them to be unhappy."

"I think that Harry could be quite happy with Hermione," she said, crossing her fingers behind her back. "She's really quite an accomplished witch, the brightest in her year. And that last growth spurt really left her with some major cleavage."

Ron's face reddened ever so slightly, but enough that Ginny could tell she was getting close to cornering him. "She doesn't have major cleavage – she's no bigger than a b-cup," Ron replied.

"And you know this how, Ron?" she asked with an eyebrow raised so high it disappeared into her hairline. When Ron had spluttered for a second, Ginny said, "Oh, yes, dig your way out of that one, Mr. Weasley."

*

A nervous worm was wriggling inside Harry's stomach as he waited for Hedwig to return with Ginny's reply (or Ron's for that matter). His cousin had come home an hour before and was playing a computer game in his room. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were at the cinema and Harry was on the sofa, alternating between staring at the open kitchen window and picking at a loose thread on one of the pillows.

Harry was surprised when the Floo connection in the Dursleys' living room flared to life and a red-haired witch stepped out, a red ribbon wrapped around her waist and a matching bow perched on top of her head.

Harry's mouth fell to the floor.

"Hello, Harry," she said in the most sultry voice he had ever heard.

So enraptured by Ginny's presence, he barely noticed the roaring in his ears. "Hel – Hello," he said weakly.

Ginny walked slowly and deliberately towards him. At last, she arrived and sat on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and placing a teasing kiss on his cheek.

Harry gave an involuntary shudder as she leaned down to his ear and whispered, "I'm ready. The answer to your question is yes."

The buzzing noise in his head was quite loud, but he somehow managed to hear her. "Y – Yes?" he stuttered.

“Yes, I’ll go with you to Hogsmeade.”

Harry’s mouth snapped shut and a grin crept onto his face. “Really?”

Her eyes fell to his lips and then rose tentatively to meet his gaze. “Did you honestly think I would say no?”

Not knowing what to say, Harry shook his head. A torrent of her emotions flooded their link and it was all he could do to focus on her and not the way she wiggled in his lap. He hadn’t the foggiest notion of what he should do, but he knew that finally, he was ready to do it.

Ginny’s arms detached from behind him and Harry groaned inwardly at the loss of contact. Then to his immense relief, she pushed his shoulders until he was flat against the back of the sofa and hesitantly lowered her face to his.

Once again, a war was being waged in Harry’s head as they kissed. A war between intense happiness and unrelenting pain as the dampening charm succumbed to the load. This time, however, the outcome was very different.

The dampening charm broke with an audible crack. Thereafter, the buzzing turned into a light humming, and gradually, as their lips continued to dance over each other, it became a soft, ethereal melody. It was Ginny’s song.

“Oi! Freak!” came a rude voice from the stairs. “I’m telling Dad you’re snogging that freaky tart on Mum’s sofa!”

They never broke their kiss, but as one, pushed with their minds at the source of the voice, their hands entirely too busy to reach for a wand. Dudley squealed and Harry heard a dull thud as the boy presumably hit the floor on the upper level. In fact, Ginny seemed intent on making sure Harry forgot all about it.

Some time later, Ginny pulled back and Harry found himself drawn up to her before she pushed him back to the sofa. “Harry,” she said breathlessly. “What just happened?”

“Well,” he said with a wry smirk. “I think they call it kissing.”

A whack with the back of her hand only made him wince, but his grin never faltered. “I mean the buzzing in my head, you git. It’s gone.”

Harry focused on his thoughts and noticed that not only was it gone, but that Ginny’s thoughts and emotions were absent, despite her insistence upon remaining in his lap.

“You’re right. I wonder....”

But instead of finishing his sentence, he jumped at the sound of a loud crack.

“There you are,” said Mrs. Weasley clutching her chest. “I’ve been looking for you for an hour. You’re brother said something about Harry sending him a letter, then you turn up missing....”

Ginny rotated herself slowly on Harry’s lap and stood to face her mother. “I’m fine, Mum. Harry just needed to talk and I Flooed over for a minute. I hadn’t realised we’d been talking for this long.”

Molly eyed her sceptically. “Talking.... I suppose this was holding your notes?” she asked, pointing to the ribbon and then to the bow that was dangling precariously on the top of her now-messy hair. A fit of giggles welled up inside Harry’s chest, but he forced them down.

Unfazed, Ginny smoothed her hair and removed the bow. “You would have had to have been there, Mum. You wouldn’t understand.”

Mrs. Weasley narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “I think you’d find I know exactly what it’s like to sneak over to my boyfriend’s house for a snog, Ginny.”

With a bright red face, Ginny untied the ribbon with a flourish. When Harry’s laughter broke free and he fell over on the sofa, Ginny stomped her foot indignantly. “It’s not funny, Harry. You just wait until I get you alone again.”

Even Molly had a smile on her face at that. “I’m going to pop back home,” she said to a still red-faced Ginny. “I’ll give you five minutes to Floo to the Burrow, and then I’ll expect a better explanation. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Mum,” said Ginny contritely.

“Oh, and Harry, dear?” Molly asked in a sugary sweet voice.

Harry straightened on the sofa. “Erm...yes?”

“We need to talk about some of the monetary arrangements you’ve made this summer.”

The colour drained from Harry’s face, but he managed to say, “Yes, Mrs. Weasley.”

Another crack sounded and they were alone again.

Ginny raised an eyebrow at Harry. "What was Mum talking about?"

"Nothing important," Harry said, trying to deflect her line of questioning. "What was that you said you were going to do to me when we're alone?"

Ginny sank back onto his lap; this time, straddling him with her legs. "This," she said and firmly planted her lips on his.

Just as things were starting to get interesting she jumped off of him, and with a saucy wink, walked back into the grate. "The Burrow!" she yelled and was gone.

*

The next two weeks were some of the most interesting and difficult of the summer. After Ginny had left, an owl arrived from Dumbledore informing him that he would no longer be required to do chores at the Burrow. There was no explanation for this sudden change and combined with the fact that all his homework was done, Harry no longer had an excuse to see Ginny. "Just when I want to see her," he had lamented.

Harry and Ginny traded owls, which helped, but he found it more and more frustrating to not be able to see her. Not to be able to touch her and make sure that it all hadn't been some kind of twisted fantasy.

When the Dursleys came home and saw their precious Duddikins knocked out on the upper landing, they immediately blamed Harry. When Dudley finally regained consciousness however, he remained surprisingly tight-lipped about his condition, and avoided Harry for the rest of the summer.

*

Platform nine-and-three-quarters was packed when Harry arrived, fifteen minutes before the train's scheduled departure. He slipped through the light crowd and, not seeing anyone he recognized, onto the train.

Selecting a compartment towards the back of the Express, Harry stowed his trunk in the overhead compartment along with Hedwig's cage before settling into his seat.

Numerous students filed by his door, peeking in to look at him and his scar while Harry did his best to ignore them. Just as the warning whistle sounded, the compartment door slid open and three students piled in.

"Harry!" said Hermione in a rush, and he was pulled onto his feet and into a crushing hug. When she drew back, she said, "We didn't see you on the platform and waited as long as we could."

"I'm fine," said Harry with a glance at Ginny. His stomach flipped and despite having just gotten an owl from her last night, he couldn't wait to talk to her, preferably alone.

"Hey, mate," Ron said as they swapped grins. Ron rolled his eyes at Hermione, who was busy checking Harry over, presumably to make sure he wasn't damaged in some way.

Ron pulled Hermione away from Harry and sat them down in the opposite seat, leaving Ginny and Harry standing.

"Hey," Harry said, suddenly finding it hard to breathe.

"Hi," she said tentatively and walked up to him, snaking an arm around his waist and resting her head on his shoulder. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too," he said into her hair as he tightened his embrace.

After a moment of shared silence, Ginny pressed something cold and hard into his hand. "Here. They've lost their magic, but I had Mum fix them for us."

It was the monitoring bracelets that they had worn over the holidays. Harry held it in his open hand and stared at the simple lines and worn edges. Ginny dangled her wrist in front of him to show that she had hers on already. Harry put his on as well.

They gave each other a small squeeze and sat down across from Ron and Hermione, who were now arguing over the new Head Boy.

"Roger Davies is an exceptional student, Ron." As she said this, the train gave a shuddering lurch and slowly built up speed as it left the station.

"But he's also an insufferable git," Ron explained, breaking the top off of a chocolate frog.

Hermione crossed her arms and flung her hair back across her shoulder. "Just because he's in Ravenclaw does not make him a git."

"He's a git because he's been out with five different girls a term since he was a second year."

Hermione faltered. "I haven't heard that about him. He seemed really nice in the owls he sent me...."

Ginny nudged Harry in the side and Harry raised an eyebrow.

"He's been sending you letters?" asked Ron. "Since when?"

"It was only a few and it was only this summer," Hermione said with a huff. "What does it matter to you?"

When Ron didn't answer, Harry chuckled to himself, Ginny leaned into him and he pulled her close with an arm.

When will they ever get a clue? Ginny asked.

Harry snorted. "I think they'll just go from arguing to snogging in one smooth motion."

"What was that?" asked Ron turning to look at him.

"What do you mean, 'snogging'?" Hermione said.

Harry tensed. "Ginny started it," he said weakly.

Pulling away from Harry, Ginny said, "I didn't say anything."

"Yes you..." Looking from one questioning face to another, Harry thought quickly and said, "Are you worried that Roger is trying to make Hermione his next conquest, Ron?"

Hermione and Ron turned their attention back to each other and Ginny whispered in Harry's ear, "You heard me say something?"

"Yeah," Harry said with a slight shiver from her breath. "I heard you ask when they were going to get a clue. Uh, you didn't say that?"

She shook her head. "No, but I was thinking it."

After considering this for a while, Harry shrugged his shoulders. "There's nothing coming across our link now, so I guess it was a fluke. Maybe we should ask Dumbledore?"

"Yeah, maybe," she answered as Ron and Hermione continued to bicker.

Soon, the gentle rocking of the train made Harry's eyes heavy and he let his head fall against Ginny's shoulder, surrendering to the soporific air that seemed to permeate the compartment.

*

Ginny was happy. Ron and Hermione had left for their Prefect's meeting and Harry was sleeping peacefully with his head in her lap, his legs stretched out on the seat they shared. She stared out the window and watched as the Scottish countryside sped past, absently twirling a lock of his hair with her finger.

A lot had happened over the summer, and Ginny decided that while hexing Harry hadn't been the best decision she had ever made, she could certainly live with the consequences.

The compartment door slid open and a blonde head appeared, familiar sneer plastered on his face, flanked by two hulking shadows.

"Isn't this cosy," Malfoy said with contempt. "Is this what your father had to stoop to doing to make ends meet? Renting out his daughter to the Boy-With-Too-Much-Money?"

"Go away, Malfoy," said Ginny, hardly giving him a second glance. Ginny had dealt with all kinds of attitudes before and knew that the best thing to do with an over-inflated sense of importance was to belittle it. "Your jokes are old and your maturity lacking. Didn't daddy teach you how to play nice?"

Malfoy scowled. "I wouldn't be so cocky if I were you, Weaselette. The Dark Lord knows about you and Potter, here." He leaned in towards her and Ginny narrowed her eyes. "He's not forgotten about your first year," he said with a whisper and then left with a swish of his robes.

"I haven't either," Ginny replied as her blood turned to ice. An image of a sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle appeared unbidden in her mind. His taunting face and fair promises resonated within her as the train continued to shake and roll on the tracks. She shuddered and banished the thought, pressing her hand on Harry's forehead. Peace filled her again and she let out a ragged breath.

*

Harry awoke with a start as the Express lurched into Hogsmeade station. He felt rested and happy, an odd occurrence for him. Lifting himself off of the bench, he realized that he had been using Ginny's lap as a pillow. Ron and Hermione had either never returned, or had left again while he'd slept.

Throwing his robes on over his jeans and tee shirt, he nudged Ginny's shoulder. "Time to wake up, Gin."

She stirred a little, but only managed to curl up in the corner of the seat before her breathing slowed once more.

Harry sat next to her and pulled her away from the window, taking her into his arms.

Her eyes blinked open and focused on Harry. "Are we there, yet?" she asked sleepily.

"Yes," he said with a smile. "Time to go to the castle and get fed."

Ginny yawned through a chuckle. "Boys and food."

They grabbed their trunks and Harry tapped them with his wand, lightening them considerably. "We're at school now," he explained. "No sense in lugging these around when we can use magic."

With his left arm around Ginny's shoulders, they walked out of the train and found Ron holding the door to a carriage. "Thought you'd never show," Ron said, pointing to the front of the carriage, which was rolling back and forth on its wheels. "Thestrals must be chomping at the bit to get going."

They piled in and found Neville and Luna already inside. "Hellooo, Harrayy," said Luna in a prolonged intonation, not taking her eyes from the latest edition of the Quibbler.

"Hi, Luna. Neville," Harry said as the carriage started to move. "You lot have good summers?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing," Neville said with a pointed look at Harry and Ginny's joined hands. "Last I saw you, wild Hippogriffs couldn't keep you in the same room."

Harry and Ginny shared a small smile. "He's seen the error of his ways and has paid his penalty," Ginny supplied.

With a muffled guffaw, Harry said, "Don't listen to her, Neville. Ginny's just upset because she couldn't resist my charms long enough to hex me again – Ow!"

"I don't need to hex you, dear," Ginny said with a satisfied smile. "I have lots more leverage over you now."

Harry rubbed his foot and tried to come up with a witty retort. When nothing came to mind he simply shrugged and leaned into her soft hair.

*

As the students walked into the castle, a pair of light-blue eyes watched impassively from the tower above. Dumbledore sighed contentedly and turned to regard the flame-red phoenix perched beside him. "They've completed the bonding."

The bird let out a low trilling note in response.

"Yes, they have been. However, I wonder if it would have been too late when they realized what it was they had together."

Fawkes kept his steady gaze on the Headmaster, not bothering to answer.

Dumbledore grinned, and then clasped his hands behind him. "I'd best make an appearance at the feast. Do try to stay out of trouble while I'm away."

The bird ruffled his feathers as if the very idea was absurd and unexpectedly launched into the air, cuffing the headmaster around the head.

"Very well," Dumbledore said with a smirk. "Have it your way."

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Consequences of the Heart

Epilogue - Parental Prognostications

Epilogue – Parental Prerogatives

June 15, 1996

Minerva McGonagall was an abnormally patient woman. Patient enough to have lived through seven years of the Marauders, six years of feuding between James Potter and Lily Evans, and six years, eight months of Fred and George Weasley. As she walked slowly up the stairs to the entrance of the Headmaster's office, she once again found her patience being tested.

"Good evening, Minerva," Dumbledore said pleasantly. He gestured at the occupants of his office and said, "As you can see, we're all present and accounted for."

Minerva nodded at Arthur and Molly Weasley, smiled at Remus Lupin, and glanced at Professor Snape, who wore a bandage on his head that made him look like a refugee from a crypt. It was the condition of Dumbledore's office that surprised her, however. All of his instruments were scattered about the floor in various stages of destruction. A table remained overturned to one side of the office, and Minerva had to walk carefully to avoid several large silver and glass shards that were strewn in her path.

"Indeed," said McGonagall neatly, crooking a questioning brow at her superior. When he shook his head a fraction, she knew that the time was not right to question him about it. "I trust we'll be able to sort through this mess quickly, then?" she said with intentional double-meaning.

"Headmaster," started Snape immediately, "the Potter boy has been able to get away with far too much in his time as a student. It's time he was taken down several pegs and shown that his disregard for the rules and blatant attack on a Hogwarts teacher will not be tolerated!"

"Yes, yes," Dumbledore said as he made a settling motion with his hand. "That is precisely the purpose of this conversation. I assure you that we will make appropriate recommendations for the punishment of Mr. Potter *and* Miss Weasley."

"But Albus," Minerva interjected, "as important as keeping order in the school is, we must take into account Harry's condition. He's just lost his godfather for heaven's sake; and with the return of You-Know-Who...."

Mr. Weasley cleared his throat meaningfully. "I want it known that we fully support punishing Ginny and that whatever we decide here, it will be enforced at home." Minerva eyed Arthur impassively as he spoke and could tell that it cost him dearly to be here – to have to face the results of his daughter's mis-behaviour. Molly was seething beside him and it surprised the Professor that she had not said anything yet.

Remus hadn't so much as blinked since Minerva had arrived. Secretly, she suspected that Sirius' loss would take a larger toll on him than anyone else.

Dumbledore nodded. "As Minerva mentioned, there are many factors to take into account, not the least of which is that Harry needs to be shown love and respect in the coming months. I fear I've been far too aloof with him in the past few years."

"There must be punishment," Snape said immediately, taking a deep breath he said, "I insist that Potter, a repeat offender and known rule breaker and troublemaker, be expelled, and that his accomplice be suspended for a year."

"And there will be punishment, Severus," Dumbledore answered. "Harry and Ginny will know that we will not tolerate their behaviour, but we must consider everything that is at stake, for the students, for the faculty, for the offenders, and for the good of the Wizarding world."

When no one spoke, the Headmaster continued. "Now, it appears that Harry is in need of someone to help him take a more reasoned approach to life. He needs a friend of a different sort: one that won't let him slip into depression or into rage. Anger and despair are the tools of Voldemort and will not allow Harry the opportunities he shall need to defeat the Dark Lord."

"But Albus," said Molly, finally adding to the discussion, "why does it have to be Harry?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled and Minerva let out a silent breath in relief. "That, Molly, is exactly the right question."

Without a word, he tapped his wand on the stone basin that was sitting to his right. Minerva hadn't noticed it before now, but as the familiar ghostly form of Sibyll Trelawney formed above the bowl, she wondered if it were wise for certain people to be privy to the entire contents of the prophesy.

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal...

The vision stopped abruptly and Sibyll's face froze in silent enunciation of the word 'but'.

"That," said Dumbledore as he dismissed the vision with a wave of his wand, "is part of a prophecy that was delivered to me over sixteen years ago by Sibyll Trelawny. Voldemort knows this much of the prophecy. The rest is now known by three people. Myself, Minerva, and as of yesterday, Harry Potter. You all know what it was we were guarding in the Department of Mysteries. If Voldemort were to realize that I could not defeat him...."

"But," started Molly Weasley as Dumbledore trailed off, "how do you know that 'the one' meant Harry? How can you be sure?"

Dumbledore lowered his head and gazed at her over his half-moon spectacles. "Because in all of magical Europe, there are two boys that matched the description given in the first sentence. Harry...and Neville Longbottom. However," he said as he raised his hand to ward off the question Minerva could see forming on Molly's lips, "the second sentence of the prophecy makes it clear that 'the one' can only be Harry. Voldemort marked him 'as his equal'."

Molly and Arthur deflated in their seats and Minerva felt their pain. Harry didn't deserve this fate, but she was determined to help him make it through this fight and live the life his parents would have wanted him to live.

"Since Harry is the one 'with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord,' we must make certain that he is prepared for that eventuality." Dumbledore motioned to Lupin, who stood and produced a piece of parchment.

"According to the Hogwarts charter and subsequent rulings by the Board of Governors," Remus began, "excluding expulsion, punishments for student behaviour at the end of term cannot linger into the following academic year. However, it appears that with parental consent, we can institute whatever corrective behaviour we see fit during the summer, as long as there is no lingering effect on their ability to study." Lupin looked up from the parchment and finished, "There is also a small loop-hole, in that any misbehaviour during a holiday punishment *can* be dealt with in a normal manner in the following term."

"So what you're saying," Snape ground out, "is that Potter and Weasley will get off scot-free unless their guardians agree to punish them?"

"What I'm saying, Severus," Remus said civilly, "is that we are limited in our options, but that we can and we will make sure that they are appropriately dealt with."

"I, for one, would be open to the idea of expelling Ginny," Molly said matter-of-factly. "It'd kill two birds with one stone. One, she'd be getting her comeuppance for hexing a teacher and attacking Harry. And two, it would put her in Beauxbatons, which would put my mind at ease, knowing she was away from the war."

"Unfortunately," Dumbledore offered with a sigh, "expulsion is not an option for either student. Harry, as you know, must remain here for his own safety and for the safety of us all. Ginny, it seems, is vital to the war effort in some way that I don't quite understand. Firenze made mention of that to me this morning, before Harry and Ginny had their unfortunate *encounter* with Professor Snape. He was quite explicit that it is of utmost importance that they both be here at Hogwarts for the foreseeable future. Although I'm not exactly sure what the rest of his advice means, we may be able to make something useful from a bad situation."

After a moment's pause, Minerva interjected, "What did you have in mind, Albus?"

"How well do you remember James and Lily?" the elderly wizard asked, leaning back into his chair. "How they bickered for years until they finally realized what was at the root of their fighting?"

Minerva let a small smile slip onto her face. "Yes, of course. But what has that to do with Harry?"

"Actually," Dumbledore said, "it has *nothing* to do with Harry. It has *everything* to do with Harry *and* Ginny."

"You don't think Harry *likes* Ginny, do you?" asked Molly with a flutter in her voice. "I mean, we all know how *she* used to fancy *him*, but that doesn't mean that any feelings are still active between them apart from enmity."

"Indeed." Dumbledore's beard sat strangely on his face, and Minerva was confident that underneath the long white hair was a large smile. "I'm not as capable with a crystal ball as some, but it doesn't take a Seer to know that your daughter has the necessary personal skills to help Harry deal with his recent heartache, and more importantly, to help him face Voldemort when the time comes. She has already demonstrated great strength in that area."

"Even if they never become romantically linked, Miss Weasley has everything to offer Harry by way of friendship and with her unyielding sense of determination; I imagine it won't take long for them to resolve their differences."

Even Minerva had her curiosity piqued. "So how do you get two students that currently despise the air the other breathes to resolve their differences and then go on to sort out how to defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

"It's quite simple," said Dumbledore, drawing out a blank piece of parchment. "But first, we will need some specialized equipment."

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To say that Remus Lupin was not happy was like saying that Fred and George Weasley liked to play pranks. In addition to seeing his last living best friend killed the previous day, he was now faced with acting as guardian for Sirius' godson, Harry Potter. The fact that said godson had just duelled with a student in the entrance hall and hexed Snape into the Hospital Wing didn't make things any easier.

Lupin waited for Dumbledore's office to clear out before he spoke. "Albus, I'm not convinced this is the best idea you've had."

Dumbledore rose from his chair and stepped over a pile of twisted metal before turning to stroke Fawkes' neck. The bird let out a contented warble and closed his eyes. "What's done is done, Remus, you have been approved as guardian. As uncertain as our course of action may be...we must let Harry be in control of his fate. We can only guide him, Remus."

Remus sighed. "It's just so hard to see him be afflicted with one thing after another.... How can one so young bear so much sorrow?"

Dumbledore place a gentle hand on Lupin's shoulder. "The same way we all deal with our burdens – with the help of many hands."

Thinking about his long lost friend, Harry's father, Remus allowed himself a smile. "What can we do to help him?"

"I will arrange for most things here. Harry needs to feel that he is in control of his life, so you need to keep your distance for a while. Be there if he asks questions, push him to succeed, but try to engender his trust by letting him initiate things with you."

It was just like the old wizard, Remus thought ruefully, to be so terribly burdened and yet be able to offer support to those around him. It was a lesson in how he should deal with Harry. "All right," he said finally. "Let's get things together and move forward. Who's picking up the monitoring bracelets?"

Gesturing at the door, Dumbledore nodded his head and said, "That would be Bill Weasley."

Standing in the frame, windblown and smiling, stood the eldest son of Arthur and Molly.

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September 1, 1996

"Well, I hope you're satisfied," said McGonagall as she followed Dumbledore into his office.

The feast was over, the students were off to their beds and the teachers were getting ready for tomorrow's lessons.

"Events could not have turned any further to our favour, Minerva." Albus climbed to a long, thin sofa and sank gingerly onto one of the cushions. "It's especially satisfying that Harry and Ginny have found each other at such a young age. I don't think Harry would have been able to adjust to his new situation without Miss Weasley's help."

"And the prophecy?" she asked tentatively.

Albus closed his eyes and relaxed. It was as if a great weight was being removed from his chest. "I'm sure Mr. Potter will tell those who are important to him what it says in time. Assuming Miss Weasley has not already found a way to open that door."

"Hmph," said the normally-stodgy Deputy Headmistress. McGonagall waved her hand over her tight bun and it released itself immediately, sending her dark grey locks down to her shoulders. "I'd like to think Mr. Potter would keep things a little closer to his chest. Voldemort isn't the type to give up easily. He's bound to know you've told Harry what it says."

Dumbledore sighed. "That is a problem for tomorrow, Minerva. Right now, I think we should have a nightcap and relinquish ourselves to the land of Morpheus."

"Hmph," Minerva repeated. "Are you still set on performing that spell on Harry? You know what a horrible drain it is on you. The last time you cast that charm, you nearly didn't wake. And that was..."

"Fifty years ago. Yes, I have not lost my recollection of that incident, nor my ability to calculate the passing of time, Minerva. Still, I may be forced to include Miss Weasley. The spell might break if Harry does not accept the transfer." He cracked his eyes open and pinned Minerva with all the seriousness he could muster. "And you know exactly what that means..."

Minerva sighed. "Yes, Albus. I know what that would mean. Still, do you think it wise to risk it, knowing that you might be the one to suffer that fate instead of Miss Weasley?"

"Care for a nightcap?" he said as he stood and walked over to a large wooden cabinet. It was his way of diverting the conversation, and Minerva knew that they were both deluding themselves in thinking that it would change things.

"Only one," she relented. "I have classes tomorrow."

Two glasses were appropriated and filled with an amber liquid. They raised their drinks and eyed each other for a moment.

"To the final defeat of Tom Riddle," intoned Dumbledore solemnly.

McGonagall waited a beat and said, "To Harry Potter."