

Consequences of the Mind 1: Beginnings

Chapter One – Beginnings

Ginny knew there was something wrong from the moment she awoke on the first morning of classes. Her blankets were twisted around her body and her face was hot and sweaty. Then, as she realized where she was, and that Hogwarts was still quite safe, Ginny allowed herself to relax. Her dream left her feeling unsettled, however. She carefully extracted herself from the comforter-cocoon wrapped around her legs and quietly padded over to the windowsill for a glass of water. She made an effort to be quiet, lest her roommates question her early-morning wakefulness.

Sipping the cool liquid, Ginny tried to rationalize her dream. Harry *hadn't* been taken by Voldemort again. He *was* safe in his bed in the boys' dormitories and *would be* at breakfast that morning. But the fear did not diminish.

It was a dream she had had a few times since her bond with Harry had solidified. The details changed from dream to dream, but they always involved Tom Riddle and ended with Harry being taken away from her while she looked on, powerless to stop.

With an inward sigh, Ginny set her glass down. She found her well-worn pink slippers, slipped on her too-small dressing gown and shuffled out of her room.

Arriving downstairs, Ginny immediately realized she had been wrong. Harry was *not* asleep in his bed; he was staring at the long-dead embers in the fireplace of the common room.

"Couldn't sleep?" she asked as she sank down on the cushion next to him. The faded red velvet was cold, and Ginny shivered, wishing the fire was lit.

Harry looked up and shook his head. "You?"

"Bad dreams. I've all but forgotten what they were about, though," she lied, not wanting to bother him with her silly fears. Then with another shiver, she mournfully turned to watch the dead fire as if it were still burning. "I'm cold."

Harry's responded exactly as she had expected, opening an arm in invitation. Ginny sat closer to Harry and leaned against his warm torso. When he had clamped his arm around her, she could feel his heat radiating through her gown and pyjamas. "How can one person be so warm?" she asked.

Ginny felt him shrug and hold her tighter, running his other hand through her hair. "Maybe it's because I just got out of bed?"

"Maybe," she murmured. "But I also just woke up and I can't keep an ounce of heat in me."

Pulling her toes underneath her legs, she cuddled even closer to Harry, trying to absorb every bit of the heat his body was producing. Of course, she would probably cuddle up to him regardless of how cold she was, but having an excuse made it that much better.

Ginny let out a contented sigh. "This is nice, Harry."

"Yeah," he said, now making lazy circles on her arm with his fingers. "It is."

"Are you scared of what people will think of us?" she asked. "Of what they'll think when they see us together?"

Harry snorted. "No. I'm actually more concerned how *you'll* be with all of this. I'm not exactly the safest..."

Ginny sat up with a start, breaking out of his grasp. "Harry Potter. Don't you *dare* finish that sentence. We've already had this conversation and you know damn well how I feel about it."

Wide eyes crinkled at their corners. Harry chuckled and pulled her back into his arms. "What I was *going* to say was, of all the boyfriends you could have, I'm the least safe for your *privacy*. If my fourth year is any indication, you'll be on the front page of the *Prophet* by the end of the week."

Ginny relaxed and mentally chided herself for jumping to conclusions. "I'm sorry, Harry. I thought you were going back into the pity-pit again. Can't be too careful about that, you know."

Harry chuckled again. "Right you are, Gin. Thanks for being there to pull me out, but I promise," he said as his eyes flashed in the dim light, "this year will be different."

He said it with such conviction that Ginny had no trouble believing him. She snaked her arms around him and gave him a squeeze. "You can bet on it, Harry."

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The Great Hall seemed livelier than it had at the feast the night before. Harry and Ginny walked into the Hall, their hands linked in a way that still made Harry feel inexplicably happy. As they were early, they had their pick of seats and chose the middle of the table, their backs to the Ravenclaws.

“Excellent,” said Ginny as they started to dish up their plates. “Blueberry scones and treacle pudding.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “You eat *that* for breakfast?”

The fork Ginny had been using to stab scones was suddenly in Harry’s face. “One word about my eating habits and you’ll be roasting on a spit.”

Instinctively slinking away, palms stretched out in submission, Harry said, “No need to get violent.”

Ginny dropped her arm and turned back to the task of piling food onto her plate. “You’re an idiot when it comes to girls, Harry. But I’m willing to cut you some slack if you’ll study.”

Harry swallowed. “I’m not *that* hopeless, am I?”

A spoonful of treacle hovered over her plate, Ginny’s arm froze in the motion of plopping it onto the already loaded ceramic dish. “Do you really expect me to answer that?”

Making his best goldfish impression, Harry floundered for a safe answer. When Ron and Hermione showed up a few minutes later, and he still hadn’t responded, he decided that he was better off letting it slide.

“You get the timetables?” Harry asked Ron as he sat down on the opposite bench.

“Nah,” said Ron, filling his own plate faster than Ginny had. “I figure Hermione can handle that one.”

Sitting next to Ron, Hermione glared at him and promptly hid her half-filled plate with an ostentatiously coloured book. “The timetables weren’t ready when I went to fetch them,” she said, her eyes never leaving her book. “Professor McGonagall will be handing them out in a moment.”

Sure enough, the head of Gryffindor was already walking down the table, giving small rectangular cards to the students.

“Not Divination,” exclaimed Ron after he swallowed a mouthful of eggs, with a morbid look at his own schedule. “First thing on a Monday, too.”

Hermione clucked her tongue. “You should have switched to Muggle Studies like I suggested, Ron. Then you wouldn’t be taking that...class today.”

“But I got an ‘O’ in Divination, Hermione. I *had* to sign up for it.”

When Hermione didn’t respond, Ginny piped in. “What have you got first, Harry?”

Instead of answering, he simply handed the card to her and sighed. Their O.W.L. results had arrived the day he and Ginny had first kissed under her house. Harry had been a bit distracted at the time and hadn’t given his letter another thought. After that day followed Ginny’s birthday and he had been in a coma for the rest of that week. It was only after he became stranded at number four, after he had told Ginny in a round-about way that he liked her, that he had had an opportunity to read the O.W.L. results.

“Potions?” Ginny said woefully. “Good luck with that.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, wondering how in the world he had scored an Outstanding in that particular subject. Defence and Care of Magical Creatures was one thing. Even the Excellent he had been awarded in Transfiguration wasn’t too much of a stretch. But Potions?

Harry looked up and caught Hermione’s eye. “Thanks, Hermione.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, beaming.

“Seriously, I wouldn’t have so much as passed the exam, let alone got an ‘O’, without your help. How Ron passed Divination on the other hand....”

“Oi!” Ron said with mock indignance. “Just because I’m good at something none of you are....”

Ginny threw a wadded-up paper towel at her brother. “Shut it, Ron. I’m happy you did so well in the dingbat’s class, but you don’t have to pretend to hate it. If you’re really good at it, then dive in with both feet. It’s the only way to do it.”

Harry and Ginny shared a private smirk. Jumping in with both feet had certainly worked for them.

“They’re doing it again, Hermione,” Ron said. “*Looking* at each other.”

“Is it a crime to look at my *boyfriend*, now?” Ginny asked, snuggling up to Harry. Inside, Harry gave a private cheer. It was the first time she had ever used that appellation and Harry decided that he could get used to it.

“I think it’s sweet,” Hermione interjected, not giving Ron a chance to respond. Then she shut her book with a snap and stuffed it into her bag. “We’re going to be late for Potions, Harry.”

Ron closed his mouth and sent Hermione an odd look.

Harry got up and gave Ginny's shoulder a squeeze. "See you at lunch, Gin. Good luck with Trelawney, Ron."

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The Potions classroom was on the bottom floor of the castle and was tucked away from every other student and teacher. It was dank, dark, and lifeless there, and Harry couldn't help but think of it as a prison.

The Potions Professor barged into the classroom just as Harry and Hermione found a seat together near the back. The other students quickly sat as well, and Harry was amused to note that the entire front row was devoid of students.

"As this is the N.E.W.T. level Potions class," Snape said as he whipped around to address them, "and seeing as how you would not be here without having shown extraordinary skill in the art of potions-making...." Snape's eye bore into Harry and Harry made every effort to not flinch. "I would hope that you will all display an equally extraordinary effort in your class this year."

Snape was as greasy as ever, both physically and in the manner with which he treated his students. Harry slunk down as far as he could in his chair before Hermione poked him in the side. "Pay attention," she whispered through the side of her mouth, her eyes never leaving Snape's face.

But Harry couldn't focus on Snape, or he would begin to recall all the times Snape had humiliated him, or all the unfair and mean-spirited things he had said to Harry. Instead, Harry looked about the room and realized just how exclusive a club he had joined.

Malfoy was still there, though his two companions Crabbe and Goyle were not. Neither was Pansy Parkinson. Instead, there was Blaise Zabini, the skinny, tow-headed boy that had lived in Draco's shadow for the past five years.

"Today we will be doing a simple potion that even those those of us who are here by pure luck should be able to brew." Snape once again cast a withering stare at Harry while Malfoy let out a small laugh. "Instructions on the board," he said with a stiff wave of his wand. "You have two hours."

Snape sat at his desk and immediately concentrated on the papers there. Harry began to unpack his potions' kit with Hermione. "My cauldron or yours?" Harry asked quietly.

"Yours," Hermione answered. "Mine's still not been cleaned properly since last term."

"Why not?" asked Harry. "You couldn't cast a simple cleaning spell?"

Unexpectedly, Hermione sniffed and ducked her head, using a trembling hand to wipe at her eyes. "What'd I say? I'm sorry," Harry said desperately, trying to figure out how a dirty cauldron would be cause for tears.

"It's fine," she said shakily. "I'm fine."

She finished unpacking her kit, placing her measuring spoons, ladle, chopping block, knife, pestle and mortar on the table. "Let's just get this potion brewed."

"Listen, Hermione," Harry said as he positioned his cauldron on the burner and lit it with his wand. "It's not fine. I know you well enough to know when something is bothering you. Is it something I said? I didn't mean to upset you, I..."

Hermione sighed and plastered a smile on her face. "When did you become sensitive?" she asked sardonically. "Ginny's been good for you, hasn't she?"

Unwillingly, Harry grinned at the thought of Ginny. "Yeah," he said. "I guess so."

"Look, Harry," Hermione continued as she began chopping thistle roots. "The last time I used my cauldron was for the Potions O.W.L. Things were so hectic with studying for the other exams that I didn't get to clean it properly. Then we went to the Ministry and...Sirius." The last word was said so quietly that he almost didn't hear it. A fresh wave of tears spilled down her cheeks and she ducked away again.

Harry's smile slipped off his face with that one word. How stupid was he to assume that he was the only one to feel Sirius' loss? Ginny had already pointed that out, but here was his best friend, grieving for Sirius just as he had been. The difference, he realised, was that she hadn't had the chance to talk things out like he had. "Hermione," he said placing his hand on hers. "I know exactly how you feel."

Hermione blinked rapidly and wiped at her eyes. "Really?" she asked. "You seemed to have worked it out with Ginny...so I assumed you were...healed."

"Really," he said, pulling into an awkward one-armed hug. "If you need to talk about it, I think I could help. I'll never stop missing him, but talking it out with someone seemed to help me deal with things better."

She wiped her eyes on his robe and pulled back. Snape was giving them an odd look and stood up. "Let's get working, Harry," Hermione said quickly. "We'll talk more later."

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The blood-replenishing potion was quite easy, and Harry took courage from the fact that Snape had only told Harry off once for talking to Hermione, and not at all for how he was brewing the potion.

At lunch, Harry found his seat next to Ginny and breathed in her pleasant smell to banish the musty ones from the dungeon.

Ron sat down beside Hermione a few minutes later. "Blimey, Harry," he said as he filled his plate. "Without you in class, Trelawney doesn't have anyone to kill off in her predictions. I don't think this year's going to be nearly as exciting as last year."

"With Umbridge gone, we can only hope that there will be less of that sort of excitement," Hermione offered.

"Well, Charms certainly wasn't exciting," Ginny said, blowing a loose piece of hair from her face. "Flitwick's got this mad notion that we need to know how to enchant Muggle objects."

"Muggle objects?" Hermione asked.

"Dad would be in heaven," remarked Ron, though the large wad of sandwich in his mouth made it tough to decipher.

"I thought you liked Charms," Harry said. "I mean, you beat Hermione's score! How could you not be excited about – OW!"

Ginny's heel was twisting into Harry's toes and when he finally jerked his foot free, he slammed it into one of the table legs. "OW!" he said again. "What'd you do that for?"

Instead of answering, however, Ginny simply pinned him with an evil glare. Harry looked at Hermione, who was gapping at Ginny.

"You beat my score?" she asked. "Which one? Why didn't you tell me?"

Ginny winced and looked slowly over the table. "I, uh – it was the end of year exam. Professor Flitwick told me when I was in the Hospital Wing and I totally forgot about it until..."

"She told me at the Burrow," Harry interjected.

"Yes," Ginny said through clenched teeth. "And you were supposed to keep it to yourself."

Harry winced and moved his feet away, bumping into Seamus next to him.

"Sorry," muttered Harry distractedly.

"S alright," Seamus replied, returning to his conversation with Dean.

"But that's wonderful!" gushed Hermione. "I'm so happy for you."

"You – you are?" Ginny asked. Even without the link being active at the moment, Harry could tell that Ginny had not expected that reaction. "I thought you'd be..."

"Jealous?" Hermione laughed. "Why would I be jealous about that? Now if you get eleven O.W.L.'s...then we might have to have a talk. But you should have told me, Ginny."

Ginny exhaled. "I know. I'm sorry for that, but it honestly didn't occur to me at the time."

Ron, who had been watching the exchange with mute fascination, gave Harry a significant look and said, "And I can guess what's been distracting her."

"Yeah, yeah," Harry said automatically, polishing off his juice. "Let's get to Transfiguration before McGonagall turns you into a Puffeskin."

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"Good morning, sixth years," greeted Professor McGonagall upon entering the room.

"Good morning, Professor McGonagall," chorused the class.

Harry shifted in his seat as he sat in between Hermione and Ron. He watched Hermione flip her book open to the first chapter and position her quill over a blank piece of parchment. "Welcome to N.E.W.T. level Transfiguration," McGonagall continued. "As some of you may be aware, the Ministry has instructed the school to screen all sixth year students for the potential to become Animagi."

A ripple of hushed conversation erupted in the normally silent classroom. Their professor seemed to have anticipated this and let the conversations run their course before continuing.

"The test is straightforward and will be administered to each person in turn. Do not be alarmed if you don't demonstrate ability at this time. While it is rare for a witch or wizard to develop the skill to become an Animagus after their seventeenth birthday, it has been known to happen.

"While I am administering the test, the rest of you will be outlining the first chapter in your books on the Animagus in preparation for human transfiguration later in the week."

McGonagall produced a clipboard and began reading down the list. "Abbot, Adams, Bones, Boot. Follow me."

Hermione looked crestfallen. "But I already outlined the first five chapters."

Ron sniggered into his hand while Harry opened his own book. "Then you wouldn't mind helping us understand it while we write ours, right?" asked Harry.

Shaking her head with a smirk, Hermione said, "I suppose."

Ron tapped a happy tattoo on his desk with his thumbs and said, "Let's get to work, then. Weasleys are always last anyway."

The reading went well and Hermione made sure it was quiet, too. After a few minutes, she was called to go with Justin Finch-Fetchly and Gregory Goyle and when she returned, looked devastated.

"It's all right, Hermione," soothed Ron. "You can't be expected to be good at *everything*."

Hermione only sniffed in response, plastering a wooden expression on her face. "It would have been nice to be a cat or something, but I suppose the training would have taken forever. I just can't devote that sort of time when we have N.E.W.T.'s coming up."

Harry caught a look of incredulity from Ron and was impressed that he didn't remind her that the N.E.W.T.'s weren't for another twenty months.

Soon, it was Harry's turn and he followed the Patil sisters to a small room at the back of the classroom, Parvati giving him odd, surreptitious glances as they walked.

Harry had never been in this room before and immediately noticed that the entire back wall was taken up with books. There were two sofas facing opposite each other and a small desk. Harry sat in between Padma and Parvati while they waited for Professor McGonagall. Parvati was entirely too close for comfort, but he found himself unable to move away, pinned on the other side by her twin. Parvati was brushing her hand along Harry's thigh, and smiling at him in a very distracting way.

Turning to a small cabinet with glass doors, McGonagall extracted three vials of a light green liquid. She cleared her throat and gave Parvati a significant look.

"Miss Patil," she said, nodding at Padma. "Drink this please, and tell me what you see." As Padma got up, Harry all but flew to the other side of the couch. He did his best to ignore Parvati's frown.

Padma reached out a shaky hand, and after a moment's hesitation, emptied the vial with a single swallow.

Her eyes shut and she threw out her hands as if she were afraid of falling. "I see..." she started. "I see something small and black. It looks like a bird." Padma fell to one knee and dropped the vial. "It's flying! It's a – a raven!"

Opening her eyes, a large grin on her face, she turned to look at McGonagall. "Does that mean...that I'm...?"

"Yes, Miss Patil, it means that should you pursue it, you have the ability to become an Animagus." McGonagall was scribbling something on her clipboard and then said, "You may have a seat."

Padma stood and taking note of the way Parvati had chased Harry to the seat she had formerly occupied, walked to the other sofa.

"Now you, Miss Patil," said McGonagall with a nod towards Parvati.

Harry let out a small breath of relief as Parvati stood to take the vial in McGonagall's hand. She drank the potion and closed her eyes. A few minutes passed without a sound from the Gryffindor girl.

"Miss Patil?" asked McGonagall, who was looking at her watch. "Can you tell me what you see, please?"

Parvati's face crumpled. "Nothing!" she shrieked. "I don't see anything. Please let me see something."

"That's quite all right, Miss Patil. Not all witches or wizards are able to see their Animagus form under the influence of this potion."

Parvati opened her eyes and a tear fell down her cheek. "But my sister could!"

"Indeed." McGonagall produced a handkerchief and handed it to Parvati. "There is nothing to be done about it, however. Have a seat and we'll finish with Mr. Potter."

Parvati dabbed at her eyes and sat next to her sister, who began to speak to her in hushed tones that sounded exotic and soothing to Harry.

"Mr. Potter?" prompted McGonagall.

Harry stood and walked over to the spot Parvati had been standing in. Looking at the vial, he vaguely wondered if his father had taken this test after already becoming an Animagus.

The potion was tasteless, but burned the back of his throat when he swallowed it. His eyes snapped shut and he was presented with a dark, misty environment. There was nothing in the vision and as the mists billowed around his mind's eye, Harry thought he would catch glimpses of a dog or a large cat, but nothing ever materialized.

"Nothing," Harry said finally, opening his eyes to see a flash of something on his professor's face.

"Very well," she said. "Let's get back to class, then."

The walk to Charms was short, so they found themselves outside the door, waiting for Professor Flitwick to let them in.

"Well, at least you weren't the only one that didn't see anything," Ron said to Hermione, who, despite her efforts to the contrary, was still visibly unhappy with the Animagus test.

"I don't want to talk about it, Ron," she said snappishly. "We've got loads better things to worry about besides rare magical talents that none of us have got."

"Padma saw something," Harry said. "She said she saw a raven."

Just then, Professor Flitwick arrived and opened the door. As Harry began to follow Ron and Hermione into the class, a hand touched his shoulder.

"Harry? Can I ask you something?"

Harry turned to see Parvati looking up at him with dark eyes. "Sure," Harry said nonchalantly, trying to appear as if nothing had happened in Transfiguration.

"I was – I was wondering if...Ron said anything to you about me this summer?"

Harry's head twitched a fraction in the motion to tell her no, he hadn't. Then, as a flash of a forgotten conversation appeared in his head, Parvati's actions during the Animagus test started to make sense. "Um...actually...yeah, he did."

Parvati smiled and started to rub circles on the hand Harry was holding his bag with. "So...what do you think? About you and me?"

Feeling cornered, Harry backed into the doorframe, but as Harry retreated, Parvati advanced. "I, uh.... Well, you see, it's just that..." His heart was beating loudly in his chest and Harry wondered why she was making him so flustered.

Parvati's put her free hand onto his shoulder as she leaned in to whisper in his ear, "I promise that I've got over the Yule Ball incident, Harry."

Finally finding his control, Harry took both of her hands in his, biting his lips together before he spoke. "I can't, Parvati. I'm seeing Ginny now and..."

"Ginny Weasley?" Parvati said with a sudden scowl. "What could you *possibly* see in her?"

Now it was Harry's turn to frown. "Listen here, Parvati, she's smart, funny, pretty, and a great kisser." Harry's cheeks coloured for a second when he realised what he was admitting, but he continued regardless. "I'll not have you say a bad thing about her."

Parvati looked stricken and pulled her hands free. Just as she was about to reply, Professor Flitwick appeared in the doorway. "Mr. Potter? Miss Patil? Class has started and we are all waiting on you. I do not wish to assign detention the first day of classes."

Parvati huffed and threw her hair back, and then with a cold glance at Harry, walked stiffly into the classroom. Harry followed and groaned as he realised that everyone in the classroom had heard their conversation.

"Relax, Harry," said Hermione as he sat down between them. "You handled yourself just fine."

Harry snorted and chanced a look at Ron. He was busy turning in his text to the first chapter. When Harry decided that Ron either didn't hear them, or was unconcerned about what he had heard, Ron leaned over and whispered, "We'll talk about your knowledge of Ginny's kissing prowess after class."

With a nod and a sigh, Harry flipped to the same page as Ron and tried to listen to Flitwick as he began to lecture on charming complex objects.

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Ginny packed her bag slowly as she rose from her last class of the day, Transfiguration. Her dorm mates had already left, twittering to each other about two Hufflepuff boys in their year.

"Miss Weasley? Take this as you leave, please." Professor McGonagall was busy packing away the mice they had been Transfiguring into budgerigars, but held out a slip of parchment in her hand.

Slinging her backpack on her shoulder, Ginny approached her professor and took the note. As she walked slowly out of the classroom, she broke the seal with her finger and read:

Miss Weasley,

Please report to the Headmaster's office after dinner.

Albus Dumbledore

Ginny frowned. Had she already broken some rule without realising it? Was there more punishment associated with her duel from last year?

Folding the letter into fourths, she stuffed it into her pocket and walked back to her room.

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When Ginny arrived at dinner, Harry told her that he had received an identical note. They decided to walk there together. The stone gargoyle opened automatically when they approached it. Harry's hand was in hers and she smiled when he gallantly helped her onto the steps, as if she would have trouble keeping her balance. Not wanting to bruise his ego just yet, she didn't say a word.

The door to Dumbledore's office was already open and as they stepped off the stairs, he waved them in.

Inside, Dumbledore was deep in conversation with the Head Boy and Girl, Roger Davies and Cho Chang.

Ginny led Harry over to a small loveseat in the corner of the office while Roger and Cho continued their conversation with the headmaster.

"The Prefects have agreed to keep regular patrols running throughout the year, but I don't see how that's going to help," Roger was saying. "If You-Know-Who were to break into Hogwarts, what good would a couple of students be?"

Cho seemed to be agitated, but didn't say anything.

"A pair of eyes, alerted to the situation, is all that may be required to pass along a warning to one of the teachers, Mr. Davies," Dumbledore explained. "While Voldemort is a powerful wizard, I think there exists at least one example in your own house of a student who can hold their own in a sticky situation."

"What about Hogsmeade visits?" asked Cho, who turned to see Harry and Ginny sitting on the sofa. Her eyes flicked to their intertwined hands. She turned quickly back to Dumbledore.

"They will continue on as before, but we must be prepared to change the schedule. Additional Aurors will be assigned as guards during the times we will allow students to visit."

The three of them sat in silence for a beat, then Dumbledore said, "If there's nothing else, I have another matter to take care of."

Roger stood stiffly and walked to the door, not sparing a glance at Harry or Ginny. Cho, however, stood and made a deliberate effort to stare at Ginny and then Harry in turn, as if she could not quite believe that they were there, before she shook her head and walked behind Roger.

Ginny was about to walk over to Dumbledore's desk when the elderly wizard stood and approached them. "Let us make this a little more casual, eh what?" he said.

Dumbledore sat in a small, cushioned chair across from them and produced two slips of parchment. "I called you here tonight to discuss a spell I'd like to perform with you both at the end of the week."

"What kind of spell?" asked Harry. "Does this have anything to do with our bond?"

"Indeed it does, Harry," said Dumbledore as he handed them both one of the parchments. "You'll find that I have already secured permission from your guardians and that in order to proceed, I only require your consent."

"You never said what kind of spell it was," Ginny pointed out. "And you didn't tell us how it relates to our bond."

With twinkling eyes, Dumbledore leaned forward and touched Ginny's hand. "My dear... I will answer all of your questions on Saturday. I am needed for a meeting with the Order in a short while and must make this visit brief. What I'd like you to do tonight is to think about what's coming. Think about how both of you will play a role in the war that is already marching on to an uncertain conclusion." He said this last bit with a significant glance at Harry.

"Oh," Harry said. "So is it some kind of protection spell, then?"

"In a manner of speaking, it is," Dumbledore answered. "But you needn't worry about the particulars just yet. What I *can* tell you is that if we cannot perform this spell together, Voldemort's hand will be strengthened considerably and both of you will be at great risk. Greater than at any time since his return.

Consequences of the Mind 2: Discussions

Chapter Two – Discussions

Their footsteps echoed off the empty stone walls of the seventh floor corridor as Harry and Ginny walked slowly towards Gryffindor Tower. Ginny let out a small contented sigh as their loosely entwined hands swung back and forth.

Ginny could tell by the furrow in his brow that Harry was deep in thought. "What do you think about Dumbledore's idea?" she asked hesitantly.

Looking at her with a slight start, as if he had just noticed she was there, Harry smiled. "A few things, actually; first of all, I don't exactly trust Dumbledore as much as I used to. He's kept too many things from me for too long and I have to wonder if this isn't one of those things."

Ginny stopped walking and tugged on his hand a little, so that he turned and faced her.

"Another thing is that I have to wonder how you fit into all of this," Harry continued when they had stopped. He brought a tentative hand up to her cheek and said, "Do you have a bond with Voldemort? If so, why hasn't he used it before?"

"I don't know, Harry," Ginny said, leaning into his hand.

Harry looked thoughtful and moved his hand to the back of her neck, meshing his fingers into her hair. "Do you have visions? Nightmares, that sort of thing?"

Ginny shook her head, shivering slightly and pushed him backwards towards the wall. "I do have nightmares, but they're always about the Chamber and – and what happened that year, nothing recent."

Harry's back nudged the stone wall as Ginny pressed into him. He responded by pulling her head into his chest and snaking his other hand around her waist. "Well, whatever your connection with him, I'm all for blocking it...especially if Voldemort is aware of it."

Ginny simply nodded, breathing in his scent and revelling in the fact that she could. A crooked smile lit up her face as something popped into her head.

"I heard what Parvati said to you today outside of Charms, Harry."

Harry tensed underneath her and he cleared his throat nervously. "I – Is that so? And what were you doing in the Charms corridor when I know very well that you had Herbology that period?"

Ginny's smile widened. He knew her schedule. Well, she *had* shown it to him, but she reckoned that he would forget it just like all her brothers had. "I was running a message to Professor Flitwick. Professor Sprout wanted to remind him to charm the greenhouses with heat- and moisture-retention charms."

There was a pause and Ginny concentrated on listening to Harry's heartbeat. It seemed much more rapid than normal.

"Oh," he said finally. "So, uh, I assume that you're not just making idle conversation."

Pushing off his chest reluctantly, Ginny looked up at him and captured his lips in a soft kiss.

"What was that for?" Harry asked as she drew back, his eyes still closed.

She pulled on his hand again, and they resumed their walk to Gryffindor Tower. "For being you," she said enigmatically. "What you said to Parvati was very sweet." Then her smile turned into a frown and she slowed her pace.

"What?" Harry asked. "What's the matter? I thought it was a good thing."

Staring at the floor, Ginny took even breaths. "It's not that, Harry. It's just...."

"What?" Harry repeated, taking her into his arms again. "Tell me what I've done."

Ginny laughed. "It's not you, silly boy. It's me." She looked up to him again and offered a watery smile. "You could have any girl in the castle and you picked me. Why?"

Harry's mouth hung open. "What do you mean 'Why'? Don't you remember the letter I wrote you? The one that spelled out exactly what I wanted in a girlfriend?"

"Well," Ginny said and then hesitated. "I mean.... I thought that you were just being clever...that you were trying to flatter me."

"No!" Harry said and placed his hands on her shoulders. "That's not it at *all* . I meant everything I said in that letter. I really *need* someone who won't take crap from me, who loves me for who I am and not for being the Boy-Who-Lived."

Ginny's gaze lowered to his chest, but he forced it back up with a finger. "Ginny... I love *you* . Parvati might be fun to look at, but I need more than eye-candy to make me happy."

"So you don't think I'm pretty?" she pouted. Ginny could tell that it took great effort for Harry to not roll his eyes as he bit the inside of his mouth. Ginny found his frustration oddly comforting.

"I said that it takes *more* than eye candy to make me happy, Gin. You're pretty, *and* funny, *and* clever, *and* as stubborn as a mule."

Now it was Ginny's turn to drop her jaw in shock. She made an incredulous sound in her throat and made to pull away when Harry's hand clamped down.

"That's a good thing, Ginny. You have to be stubborn to be involved with me. Otherwise, you'd go mad with all the foolish life-risking, people-saving adventures I get caught up in. Not to mention I might be dead next week."

Ginny's mouth snapped shut. "Don't start down that road, Harry. You know darn well that I'm going to do everything I can to help you kill Tom and keep you alive in the process."

Harry's eyes twinkled and his grin contorted his whole face. "That's exactly what I mean. Thanks for proving my case so convincingly." Then he took her by the hand and they resumed their walk.

Just outside the portrait of the Fat Lady, Ginny stopped and said, "Harry?"

"Yeah, Gin?"

"Thanks for that," she said, nodding her head down the corridor. "And...I love you, too."

Surprising her with another kiss, they lost themselves until they heard someone clearing their throat.

"If you're going to stand there all day kissing, you might as well let me know so I can go visiting. Otherwise, speak the password and be done with it."

When Harry pulled back, Ginny wiped at the lipstick left on his mouth with her robe-sleeve. "*Fumunculus*," she said and the portrait swung open.

"Sorry," mumbled Harry to the Fat Lady as they walked into the common room, not sounding a bit like he was.

*

The next day after classes, Harry was just sitting down to eat dinner when a hand grabbed his shoulder.

"Team meeting in the common room, eight o'clock." Katie Bell was looking down at him with a wry grin, her long brown hair pulled into its perpetual ponytail. "We've got to schedule tryouts and practices. You too, Weasley," she said to Ron across the table.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said with a mock salute.

Ron's mouth was so full of food, he couldn't say anything and settled for a vigorous head nod, instead.

Ginny giggled into her hand, but stopped when Katie said, "And I expect you'll be there for tryouts, Ginny?"

"Of course," Ginny replied with a glance at Harry. "But I'm afraid the Seeker position is taken." Hermione flipped open a book, clearly uninterested in the Quidditch talk.

"I've got a half-way decent Seeker," Katie said with an exaggerated smile. "What I need is a half-way decent Chaser! As soon as we book the pitch, I expect you'll have your boyfriend tell you when tryouts are."

Ginny nodded and Katie walked away, presumably to give the same speech to Jack Sloper and Andrew Kirke.

"Like I could keep you away," Harry remarked, earning him a playful shove from Ginny.

"Too right," she replied.

Ron finally managed to swallow his food and said, "Say. You two never told us what was up with your visit to Dumbledore's office last night."

"Yeah," agreed Hermione, closing her book and bringing her eyes up. "What gives?"

Harry looked at Ginny as if to say, *You want to tell them?*

Ginny nodded and they all leaned in closer. "It's like this. Dumbledore thinks that both Harry and I pose a risk to the war effort. That Voldemort – stop twitching, Ron – that Voldemort can still get into our heads. He reckons he can perform a spell that will make it so that we aren't as transparent to him, but if we do it, we'll be knocked out for a while."

Hermione and Ron looked at each other, then back at Harry and Ginny. "What do you mean, 'knocked out'," asked Ron. "What kind of spell does he want to cast?"

"He didn't say," answered Harry. "He said he'd explain on Saturday, but that he had to get permission from our guardians. Dumbledore also said that if we didn't have the spell performed, Voldemort would be stronger than he ever has."

There was a stiff silence as each person thought about Dumbledore's words. Unsurprisingly, it was Hermione who recovered first. "But, Harry. What is Dumbledore guarding against? What is it that you and Ginny know that V – Voldemort's so anxious to find out?"

Ginny's hand wrapped around Harry's and he said, "I think we'd better find the D.A. room before we take this any further."

*

A while later, in the Room of Requirement, after Harry had recited the prophecy, Hermione and Ron sat back on their sofa, jaws opened wide.

"So *that's* why Voldemort wanted it so badly last year," Hermione said, staring blankly at the wall behind Harry. "It wasn't a weapon after all."

"No," snorted Ron, "just information that tells him that Dumbledore can't kill him. I mean, imagine what You-Know-Who would do if he wasn't afraid of Dumbledore. He'd break down the gates of Hogwarts and come after Harry in a second."

"Exactly, Ron," Harry said. "That's why we've got to have this spell done, or Voldemort will figure out a way to take the prophecy from me or...from Ginny."

Ron sat up on the sofa and pinned Harry with his gaze. "But how come Ginny already knows about it? How come you didn't tell us first?" he said, rocking his extended thumb between him and Hermione.

Harry sighed. "I didn't exactly plan to leave you two out of the loop. It's one of the reasons I'm telling you now. Ginny and I have this bond that makes it hard to keep secrets from one another and besides...telling her was something I needed to do at the time - it was a rough summer in some ways."

Hermione smirked from her reclined position and before Ron could say anything else, clapped her hands and said, "Well. Now that that's all settled, Ron and I will make sure to take extra good notes for you to follow-up with when you get out of hospital."

"Bu – " Ron tried to say.

"*Right*, Ron?" Hermione persisted.

Ron's head dipped a little and he said, "Y – Yeah. Sure thing."

Hermione beamed and pushed her arm around Ron's shoulders. Harry wouldn't normally think anything of it except that Ron stiffened so suddenly at the contact that Hermione faltered and withdrew her hand.

"Listen," Ginny said, breaking the tension. "I've got loads of homework, so the sooner we can head back to the common room, the better."

"Sounds like a plan," Harry added quickly. Then, grabbing Ginny's hand, they stood and made a bee-line for the door.

As Harry stepped over the threshold, he looked over his shoulder and thought he caught a glimpse of a smile on Hermione's face.

*

Alone in the common room, well after midnight, Harry was slouched in a large armchair in his favourite corner, working on his Potions essay. It was nearly complete, lacking only a few references to *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* to solidify his argument.

Hermione and Ron were on patrol outside the castle and weren't due back until two in the morning. Ginny was asleep in her room and as he caught upon that thought, a smile crooked onto his face. He leaned forward, laid his essay on top of his books on the nearby table, and wiped the tip of his quill dry.

Leaning back into the cushy chair, Harry decided that a quick nap before Ron and Hermione returned would be all right. After all, he was almost done with his homework.

*

A wide staircase appeared before Harry and as he looked around him, he had a strange twinge of déjà vu. A powerful feeling overcame him and he grasped a long, smooth railing with his hand, compelling him to walk upward. As he climbed, a mist overcame him, cold and stifling. He resisted the urge to take his hand from the handrail to rub his frigid arms. After a moment of walking, the mist cleared and he was presented with a vision he had never before seen.

At the top of the stairs, a large field opened before him. The rail continued on towards a bright light, shining upwards into the sky. A river coursed through the grass, meandering slowly until it fell off the side of the stairs and into blackness.

Harry walked forward, and thinking that he didn't need to keep holding onto the rail, the destination being in plain sight, he let go.

Then without warning, the imaged blurred and twisted around him. Harry fell as the grassy field disappeared and he landed on hard stone floor.

Above him, Harry saw Ron flying on his broomstick, happy and free. Ron darted in and out of a stand of trees, wind whipping at his hair. Coming over the top of a hill, three men came into view, also on broomsticks. They started to chase Ron and Harry yelled silently for him to get away. The men changed into dragons and gained on Ron's slowing broomstick. A burst of flame caught the broom's tail and Ron dove for the ground.

Harry shouted, "Look out!" as another dragon swooped underneath him to intercept.

The dragon opened its large maw and swallowed Ron, broom and all. Then it turned towards Harry and repeated its motions, until Harry too was in the belly of the beast.

The vision changed again and Harry saw Hermione. She was walking alone along a beach, smiling in the sunlight. She dipped her feet in the retreating surf and then ran back to dry sand as a new wave approached. A scream echoed through Harry's mind and Hermione turned to see a small boy huddled by a clump of rocks.

She ran to the boy and kneeled down in the sand, stretching her hand out slowly to see if he was okay. As soon as she touched the shaking boy, he transformed into a werewolf. Hermione cried out and ran towards the surf once again. The werewolf was too quick and pounced on her, biting her on the neck. Her body slumped into the sand, now stained with her bright red blood.

Tears broke out in Harry's eyes and realized that he must be dreaming. He attempted to wake out of his trance but a giant fist of iron clamped over his mind when he tried to change the visions in his head. His whole skull throbbed with pain and the more he tried to resist, the more intense the pounding in his mind became.

A new vision played in his head, this time of Arthur and Molly Weasley. He could hardly stand to watch as they too met a grisly death. Then the twins, Dumbledore, Seamus, Neville, Luna, and finally, Ginny.

A sob erupted from his mouth as she sat in a swing outside the Burrow. Unable to break free from the vision, he was forced to observe as she ran towards Harry and called his name, a Giant pounding after her. The Giant swung its club and knocked her down, then smashed her with his foot.

Harry's heart broke as he continued to stare at the spot where her broken body lay and as it faded into a mist. He wiped at the tears in his eyes and found himself on the floor of a large stone room.

Water trickled down damp walls and pooled by a heavy wooden door. A rat scurried across his vision and he found he could move. This vision was different than the rest, it felt more real and he could even detect the dankness of the air he was breathing.

Footfalls echoed in the hall outside the door. Harry scrambled to his feet and the door opened. A dark hooded form hesitated in the frame, starting intently at the boy. "Hello, Mr. Potter," hissed the man. His eyes flashed red in the darkness and he continued, "I had wondered if my little spell was actually working, but then I felt you as you tried to pull away from me and I doubted no longer. Wormtail will be rewarded well for his success."

"Where am I?" asked Harry bravely, unwilling to give in to his fear. "How did I get here?"

"Patience, Harry, all in good time." Voldemort walked purposefully into the cell, stepping noisily through the puddle and right next to where Harry was standing.

Harry moved away unconsciously until his back met the cold stone wall. "This isn't real is it? It's just another vision."

"Oh, it's real enough, Harry. You see," he said taking out a long thin wand. "When I kill you here, it will kill your body wherever it lies - even at Hogwarts."

"But my scar..." he said absently rubbing his forehead. "It doesn't hurt."

"Of course not - your scar was the key to the spell, Harry. Without it, we wouldn't be here."

Blanching at the prospect of so easily falling into Voldemort's hands, Harry looked around quickly to see if there was any weapon he could use. He patted at his clothes, searching for his wand, but found nothing. The only other thing in the cell was the puddle of water.

"There's no one here to protect you now, boy and you will finally cease to be a thorn in my side." Voldemort's tongue flicked into the air and a smile cracked his scaly face. "I'm a patient wizard Harry, but even immortal beings need to see the fruits of their labour."

Strengthening his resolve, Harry straightened his back and thrust his chest out. "You're a coward, Tom Riddle; a coward who hides behind deceit and lies."

"Silence!" yelled the Dark Lord. "I am Lord Voldemort! And you will pay for your insolence." He pointed his wand at Harry and yelled, "*Crucio!*"

Waves of agony rolled over him; he screamed and fell to the floor, writhing on the slimy rocks.

The spell lifted and Harry looked up at his tormentor, breathing rapidly. "You see, Harry, you *are* subject to my power; this is where you will die."

A thought came to Harry and he said, "Where are we anyway? How - how did I get here?"

"Ah, curious are you? Well, I supposed it won't hurt to tell you before you die." Voldemort scratched his chin with a long bony finger. "Wormtail found a spell that would exploit our link." He bent down and stretched his hand towards Harry's head, tracing the lightning-bolt scar with his finger.

"Pity I didn't think of it sooner, but here we are." Voldemort stood once more and swept his hand around the room. "This room exists only in our minds, Harry. Linked together as they are, it only took a small spell to force you into it. I, of course, came voluntarily."

Harry was beginning to catch his breath and was using Voldemort's distraction to look for a way to escape. "There are only two ways out, Harry. Either I release you, or you die," Voldemort said with a chuckle, as if he was reading Harry's thoughts.

Harry thought quickly about what Voldemort had said. If he could somehow use their situation to his advantage, he could at least buy some time. Their eyes locked and Harry straightened up as his resolve returned. "Fine. Then kill me if you have to, but know that I won't be the only thorn in your side, Tom."

Anger flashed on Voldemort's face at the mention of his Muggle name. "You are the last of the obstacles keeping me from dominating the Wizarding world, Potter," he said, spitting Harry's surname. "Even that old fool you cling to for hope and power will be destroyed."

"What are you talking about?" Harry whispered desperately.

"Did you think I would remain idle while Dumbledore's irrelevant Order moved against me?" mocked Voldemort, pacing back and forth through the puddle by the door. "Don't you know what your dreams mean?"

Harry blanched. "Which dreams?" he asked, feeling less brave than he had a moment ago.

"Are you that daft?" Voldemort said with a chuckle. "I know about the Path of Light, Harry. I know that you have been chosen by the guardian and *that* is why I will destroy you first. There will be no Dumbledore to rescue you; no brother wand to block me. I will be rid of you *forever*." His eyes were glowing deep red and he brandished his wand yet again.

Voldemort walked to the centre of the cell and stood to his full height, glaring menacingly at Harry. "Now you will die."

Grasping desperately to his last ounce of wit, he raised his hand at the Dark Lord in sudden inspiration and yelled the banishing charm. With an indignant scream, Voldemort was thrown back into the wooden door, cracking it from top to bottom. Harry quickly pointed to the puddle on the floor and said, "*Accio!*" As the water flew towards his hand, he imagined it floating in front of him, shaping into a thin disc. Then, stretching his mind back to one of last year's Transfiguration lessons he changed the water into steel.

Now back on his feet, Voldemort was fuming in anger and immediately shot a purple spell at Harry. Harry grabbed the disc by its edges and moved it to intercept the spell. With a loud *gong* the light rebounded, carving out a hole in the ceiling. Harry was sent sprawling to the floor.

Recovering quickly, Harry sprang back to his feet and faced down the Dark Lord once more. Another spell, this one blue, hit the shield and reflected back to its caster. This time Harry stood his ground, but his hands vibrated painfully from the impact.

Voldemort sneered, flicking his wand ever so slightly, and the polished disc was wrenched from Harry's hands, flying to the back of the cell with a clatter. Now defenceless, Harry tried to keep his opponent off-guard by shooting as many spells he could think of, amazed that he was able to do wandless magic at all. But every spell was swatted away easily and soon Harry's breath came in short gasps as he struggled to stay on his feet.

"Very good, Mr. Potter. I never would have imagined that you could become such a worthy opponent." Another flick of the wand and Harry was paralyzed, only able to continue his laboured breathing and stare his tormentor in the face.

"To think that I once actually pictured you as a threat to me," said the dark wizard, seemingly to himself. "It's only a pity that no one will be here to witness this final moment of glory."

Harry continued to breathe rapidly, but he couldn't move, couldn't speak and there was no one to help him out of this trap. Then, as he was about to give into his despair, the room blurred and Voldemort was knocked off his feet.

"No!" he screamed. "This can't be possible!"

Again the room blurred, this time shaking with some unseen power and Voldemort disappeared with a loud *crack*. Then the room faded and Harry was pulled from the cell completely, landing on a hard marble floor. Then his world went dark.

*

Harry awoke a few moments later to the sound of quiet crying. He felt a gentle pressure on his forehead and when he blinked open his eyes, was relieved to see Ginny's face hovering near his.

"Ginny, wha – ?" asked Harry, but was cut-off by Ginny's excited cries.

"Oh, Harry!" Ginny began. "I was so worried. I thought – I thought that you'd been possessed or something."

Harry sat up and with Ginny's help, was able to rest against a nearby sofa. "Ow," he said, pressing his hand to his temple. If it wasn't for the seriousness of the situation, or the fact that Ginny looked positively petrified with fear, Harry would have made a joke. As it was, he could only pull her onto his lap and hold her close.

"Tom's not here. Only Harry, your Harry," he said, extending his arms in invitation.

Ginny hesitated for a second, then sat on his legs and buried her head onto his shoulder. Then without warning, she started pummeling his chest with her fists. "Don't. Ever. Do. That. Again," she said, and when her fury was spent, Harry gathered her into his arms once more.

"Shh," he soothed. He ran a hand around her back in oblong circles, but his comforting actions only seemed to make her cry harder.

When she finally pulled away from Harry, Ginny wiped at her eyes and said, "I want you to tell me everything. Tell me what Tom did to you and what you saw."

Harry was surprised by her sudden change, so he asked, "Why are you so worried about this? Did something happen while I was asleep?"

"Asleep?" she asked wonderingly. "If that was what you look like when you sleep, I'd hate to see a full-fledged possession. Harry..." Ginny placed her hand on his cheek. "You were thrashing around so badly, I thought you might hurt yourself. I had to pin you to the floor. You smacked me soundly before I could get you under control." She pushed her shoulder out of her dressing gown to show off a dull-grey circle forming in contrast to her smooth white flesh.

With a tentative finger, he rubbed at the mark. "I had no idea," he said. "I'm really sorry I hurt you."

"Forget about it," she said softly and shrugged her shoulder back under the white cotton of her gown. "Now tell me what happened."

So he did. He took her hand and told her about nodding off after finishing his Potions essay, the dream with the stairway and how it changed to show everyone he loved dying terrible deaths. When he got to the end of the vision with Voldemort, Harry paused.

"It was really strange, Ginny. One moment, my life was flashing before my eyes; I knew I was going to die. Then...this huge feeling of peace washed over me and Voldemort yelled out. It was like we both knew I was going to escape. The whole room shook and I was yanked out. The next thing I knew, I felt you kissing my scar."

Ginny smiled and gave his hand a squeeze. "I was kissing your whole face, actually. But when I got to your scar, you stopped thrashing. That was when you woke up."

Harry matched her smile. "We need to tell Dumbledore. He needs to know what Voldemort said and quite frankly, I need someone to explain it to me."

"You stay here," Ginny said. "I'll get your map and cloak."

Ginny got up and was about to leave when Harry finally spoke, having been too shocked to say anything. "Wait a minute. How do you know about those?"

"Oh," Ginny said and ducked her head. "I, uh...heard Ron and Hermione saying something about them."

"No, you didn't," Harry countered, shakily coming to his feet. "You were tapping into my thoughts, weren't you?"

Ginny didn't say anything, but pressed her lips together as she nodded her head.

"It's all right for now. We'd better get going. The map and cloak will come in handy. But we'll have to work on some ground rules for how we're going to use the link."

"Okay," she said meekly and shot up the stairs to the boys dormitories.

The trip under the cloak was slow as Harry had to stoop to keep their feet from peeking out from the bottom. It was just as well, though, for he wasn't up for anything faster than a steady plod after his experience with Voldemort. Ginny helped to stabilize him, while he read from the map.

"Filch is in the dungeons, by the Slytherin common room." Harry's eyes travelled over to the right where the ground floor was. "Snape's in the Charms corridor, heading towards the Hospital Wing."

They turned the last corner and walked slowly towards the statue of the gargoyle.

"Hang on," Harry said. "Our favourite pair of Prefects are headed this way, but..."

Harry stopped, staring at the place they had just left, wonder why in the world they would be coming out of there.

"But what, Harry?" Ginny asked in a whisper.

"Well, it's just that I could have sworn they were coming out of a broom closet. Why would they be in one of those?"

When Ginny didn't answer right away, Harry looked up to Ginny, whose eyes were dancing. "You really don't know?" she asked.

"Know what?" Harry said, straightening up under the cloak.

"What a boy and a girl do in broom closets," she explained. "Haven't you ever been in one with a girl before?"

"Ginny," Harry said patiently. "Assume for a moment that I'm completely stupid when it comes to girls."

"Right," Ginny said with a small giggle. "I forgot." She cleared her throat and said, "I'll have to show you when we're not on our way to tell Dumbledore about you being captured by Voldemort."

A wry grin split Harry's face and he said, "You're right of course. Besides, Ron and Hermione are almost here. Do we want to go up without them, or surprise them?"

"Um, Harry?" Ginny asked sweetly. "I don't think surprising them is an option any more."

Harry was about to respond when Ron's voice carried clearly down the hall. "I told you I heard voices, Hermione."

"Well, it's not like they're snogging in a broom closet, Ron," Hermione shot back as they approached Harry and Ginny's position.

"What I want to know is why my best friend is under an Invisibility Cloak with my sister outside the Headmaster's office in the middle of the night? Trying to corrupt Ginny, are you?"

Abandoning all pretence, Harry pulled the cloak off and rolled it into a ball. "We're going to see Dumbledore," Harry explained. "Voldemort attacked me a few minutes ago."

"Now?" Ron said with unnecessary force. "At Hogwarts?"

"Yeah. But I don't have time to explain it here. You'll just have to listen when I tell Dumbledore."

"Tell me what?" A voice came from the now open doorway.

"Professor Dumbledore!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Hello, Professor," said Harry as Ginny took his hand. "There's something I need to tell you."

*

When Harry and Ginny had finished their explanations, Dumbledore sat back in his chair and stared thoughtfully at one of the smoking silver instruments on the table between them.

"And you're sure he said 'Path of Light'?" the Headmaster asked, still staring at his desk.

"Yes, Professor," Harry confirmed. "I've never heard of it before." Then feeling bold, Harry added, "Have you?"

Dumbledore's eyes flicked to Harry, before he rose and walked over to an ancient bookshelf, stuffed with books, large and small. Harry had a feeling that the elderly wizard had read every single one of them and that the bushy-haired girl to his left would give just about everything she had to read them as well.

"There is an ancient legend that talks about a Path of Light," Dumbledore said, walking back to his chair with a thin and well-worn book in his hand. "The Path was said to lead to the last font of power in the world."

"A font of power?" Hermione asked, her curiosity clearly piqued. "Wasn't that what Merlin used to defeat Morgana?"

"Right you are, Miss Granger. Ten points to Gryffindor." With what seemed to be slight reluctance, he handed the book to Hermione and said, "You'll have to translate it, but this book has the entirety of the legend recorded in Merlin's own hand." Dumbledore bowed his head to look at Hermione over his glasses. "I trust you will be very careful with this book – its historical significance alone is staggering."

"Yes, Headmaster," Hermione said with awed reverence, stroking the book with a shaky hand.

Dumbledore turned to look at Harry. "I am, of course, very concerned with the idea that Voldemort can breach your mind and transport your inner being away from the castle, Harry. Whatever spell he is using is one that must cost him greatly. I do not foresee him attempting it again in the next few days."

"So what do I do when he *does* try it again?" Harry asked, earning a nod of assent from Ginny.

"Oh, I'm afraid that Voldemort won't get the chance to attack you that way again. You see, the spell that I will perform on Saturday will prevent *all* access to your mind, including whatever methods he may attempt to invoke in the future." The Headmaster chuckled for a moment and then with warm eyes, said, "Now off to bed with you. Your classes won't be any easier with only a few hours of sleep."

They rose in unison and walked towards the door. Harry turned back to look at Dumbledore and was rewarded with what Harry could only describe as the most melancholy expression he had ever seen. It was as if Dumbledore knew this would be one of the last times they would see each other.

Consequences of the Mind 3: Things Learned, Things Forgotten

Chapter Three – Things Learned and Things Forgotten

The rest of the week went by quickly. Tryouts for the open Gryffindor Quidditch team positions were held on Saturday morning, with practice scheduled for the following week. When Harry tried to tell Katie that he and Ginny might be unavailable because of the spell Dumbledore was going to cast on them, he found Ginny's foot pressed down hard on his own.

"Ow!" Harry exclaimed. "What was that for?"

Katie offered the two of them a quizzical glance and then turned to tell off their beaters, Kirke and Sloper, for hitting the Bludgers at Ron again. "Not at the Keeper, you nitwits. Your job is to *protect* him from getting hit."

As Katie flew off, presumably to show them the proper way to beat, Ginny turned to Harry and whispered, "Dumbledore said to keep the whole thing hush-hush. He's got a cover story and everything."

"How come I didn't know about it?" Harry asked. "No one said anything about a cover story."

Ginny rolled her eyes in a way that reminded him strongly of Hermione. "You were too busy looking at my neck, if I remember correctly. Honestly, you need to learn to control yourself around me, Harry."

Instantly contrite, Harry shrugged and said, "Sorry. I can't help it if you're dead sexy."

When a pleasant shade of crimson graced her cheeks, Harry smiled and kicked off to finish practicing.

*

Saturday morning, Harry raised a fist to knock on the Headmaster's door, but was cut off by Dumbledore's even voice, "Come in, Harry." It never ceased to amaze the younger wizard at how perceptive his professor was, especially when it concerned Harry.

Pushing the door open, Harry and Ginny entered the quiet office. Even though he had been here twice since term began, he couldn't help but notice that it was re-occupied with the various instruments and devices that he'd smashed last year. They whirred and clicked away, as if they had never laid in pieces, strewn recklessly about the floor. Harry sighed inwardly at the memory and hoped that he would never let his anger take control of him that way in the future.

"You wanted to see us, sir?" he asked nervously. Ginny held his hand loosely in hers and he led her to stand between Dumbledore's desk and two squashy armchairs.

Dumbledore waved his hand, motioning him to sit. "No need to be uneasy, Harry. The spell is relatively painless, even if it's extraordinarily complicated."

They sat in the proffered chair, and Harry began to pick at the hem of his robes. He could feel the older man's gaze on him and tried to master his nervousness.

Clearing his throat, Dumbledore said, "I've asked Miss Weasley here as well, because I assume she is also aware of the entire contents of the prophecy?"

Harry let his mouth hang open in his astonishment. "How did you – ?"

"Come on, Harry," said Ginny with a small chuckle. "Did you think I would have let you keep that secret to yourself for much longer? Had you kept it inside, it would have eaten you alive by the end of the holidays."

Harry shut his mouth and smiled. "I guess you're right, Gin. I never thought about it much." Ginny's hand reached across the small gap between their two chairs and her fingers laced with his, as if they had been made for that exact purpose.

"As we've discussed, Voldemort cannot be allowed to know what the prophecy contains." Dumbledore looked plaintively at the two students and continued, "Were he to know what it says at this stage of the war, it would create an undue burden on our efforts to keep him contained."

A clock chimed in an adjacent room and Dumbledore opened a jar on the edge of his desk with long, thin fingers. "Care for a lemon sherbet?" When they both shook their heads, he asked, "Do you have any questions before we begin?"

They shook their heads again, Harry feeling a sudden sense of dread deep inside his belly.

"Very well," Dumbledore said as he rose from his chair and walked to Fawkes's perch. "I have dismissed Professor Snape as your instructor for your Occlumency lessons." Harry's countenance immediately brightened. "Instead, I will oversee the instruction of both you and Miss Weasley, but I warn you, it will not be an easy road to travel on."

"Anything has to be easier than more time in Snape's office," muttered Harry.

"Professor Snape is the finest Potions master this school has ever seen, Harry. However, his...communication skills are sometimes clouded by his emotions." He stroked the Phoenix's head and neck, sending the beautiful bird into shivers of happiness. "What I propose could very well put both of you into a coma, Harry."

Harry did a double-take as the Headmaster walked back to his desk and sat down. "How could teaching us Occlumency send us into a coma?" he asked incredulously.

The aged wizard folded his hands and rested them on his desk. "Actually, I'm not sure if 'teaching' is an accurate way to describe what I have in mind.

"Miss Granger's research into Egretic bonds suggests that sometimes, the creation of a magical connection transfers power or skill from one wizard to another. This is why both of you can speak Parseltongue. It is also why you, Harry, can see into his head and he can plant visions into yours."

Harry chewed on this for a moment and asked, "So you think that Ginny might be vulnerable to Voldemort through me?"

"An astute observation, Harry," Dumbledore said as he leaned back into his chair. "But I'm afraid that simply isn't possible. Two Egretic bonds cannot channel each other. Especially when one bond was formed from love and the other from hate."

"So," said Ginny, who seemed to tense up as the line of conversation developed. "If Tom can't get to me through Harry, how do you think he can? I'm obviously the weak link in the chain here."

Dumbledore fixed his gaze on Ginny and allowed a smile to creep onto his eyes. "You are not weak by any estimation, Ginny." It was a subtle change, but Harry noticed Dumbledore's transition from the more formal use of her surname to the casual and more equalising use of her given name. "The issue lies with the fact that you have been marked by him, similar to Harry, and yet, there is no outward scar to remind you of it. I fear that you are as vulnerable to Voldemort's intrusions as Harry, only that he has not yet chosen to utilise it."

Harry looked to Ginny, still holding on tightly to each others' hands. Her face was set, but it looked paler than normal and he could tell a glimmer of fear lingered in the back of her mind. "So what do we have to do?" Harry asked, turning back to Dumbledore.

The Headmaster rose once more and walked over to the mantle. "You only have to follow my instructions. I will be withdrawing all my knowledge of Occlumency, including the shield that I built for myself against the Dark Lord. Then I will create two copies of it and after removing the bits of knowledge that dwell within you on the subject, implant the duplicates in your minds."

Harry's mind whirred as he tried to comprehend the implications of what the professor had proposed. Dumbledore threw a handful of Floo powder in the hearth and stuck his head in the fire. A moment later, Professor McGonagall entered from the staircase.

"I'm here, Albus," she called as she strode across the hard stone floor.

"So do you wish to proceed, Harry?" asked the Headmaster. "Ginny?"

Ginny's back straightened and she nodded. "I'm ready."

Shifting his weight and leaning on one of the chair's arms, Harry said, "What will happen when I have your memories of Occlumency inside my head?"

Turning more serious, he peered over his half-moon spectacles at Harry and said solemnly, "You will no longer be penetrated by the Dark Lord's thoughts and will cease to be transparent to his mind probes."

Remembering the horrible experience of being trapped by Voldemort inside his own mind, Harry quickly nodded. "Let's do it."

Dumbledore turned to his deputy and nodded. "Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley have agreed to undergo the process, Minerva. Please make the necessary preparations."

"Are you certain, Albus?" Her voice quivered slightly and Harry wondered at her concern.

"Wait a minute, Professor," he said, standing. "How will this affect you?"

Motioning him to follow, they walked into Dumbledore's private study, where McGonagall quickly conjured three camp beds. There was an enormous grandfather clock on one side of the room and on its face were almost a thousand small hands. Each one had a tiny picture of a student and they all pointed to things like "Studying", "Eating", and "Playing". There were even a few on "Sleeping" and "Detention".

"Performing magic this advanced is never easy, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Since I will be withdrawing a large portion of my knowledge and placing it in you and Ginny, it will tax my magical strength considerably." He stopped and took Harry's shoulders with both hands, staring him in the eye. "I will be unable to act as Headmaster for quite some time. Professor McGonagall will be the acting Headmistress while I am recovering."

"And us?" Harry asked simply, unable to contemplate Hogwarts without Dumbledore, even if it was for a few days. "What happens to the two of us?"

"You will be knocked out, likely for several days until your minds have had time to incorporate the new knowledge." Professors Snape, Flitwick, and Sprout appeared at the study entrance. "Ah, yes...I'm glad you've arrived. I will be handing over my responsibilities as Headmaster for an unknown number of weeks to Professor McGonagall. I wish for you to aid her in whatever way you can while I am away."

"Yes, Headmaster," they chorused and immediately left the office.

"Are you ready, then?" he asked Harry.

Harry hesitated for a moment, glancing from Dumbledore to McGonagall and squeezing Ginny's hand. "I'm ready."

Without waiting for anything else, Dumbledore positioned Harry and Ginny in front of their own camp beds, then walked in between them to stand in front of his own. He withdrew his wand and cast a spell in the air between them. A bright flash lit the room and slowly faded to reveal a spinning golden well. A flick of his wand connected Harry, then Ginny with the well and another linked Dumbledore.

The connection startled Harry at first and he felt a tingling sensation like a small electrical shock reach down to his toes. He forced the feeling out of his mind and concentrated on what Dumbledore was doing next.

Dumbledore was chanting slowly under his breath and the connection turned from a white light to gold and began to softly vibrate. The vibrations increased their rhythm and Harry noticed that they were in perfect sync with his Headmaster's wand movements. A globe of blinding light left Dumbledore's head and slowly made its way to the well, filling it with its bright contents. Another series of chants and Harry saw sweat bead on the elderly wizard's brow as the light in the well doubled and split in two, with one travelling down each of the beams touching Harry and Ginny's head, leaving the original light in the well.

When the bubble of light made contact with Harry's head, a million thoughts flooded into his mind. He heard Ginny shriek from the other side of Dumbledore and Harry reached out to her through their link, feeling her panic and worry. He managed to look towards her and caught a glimpse of a smile on Dumbledore's face as the world went dark.

*

Blinking his eyes open, Harry took a sudden, deep breath as a wave of disorientation washed over him. Dim, sterile light illuminated white walls and a familiar, chemically-clean smell assaulted his nose. The Hospital Wing.

He rolled over to see if he was in the same bed the matron always seemed to place him in and was surprised to see another bed close by, separated only by a small table. Perched on the bed, sitting up and reading a book, was Ginny.

Ginny turned to look at him and even with his unaided eyes, could recognize the smile that stretched across her face. "Hello, Harry," she said, somewhat stiffly.

"Hi," Harry replied, or tried to, as his throat was so dry that the words came out only as odd hisses and crackles. He swallowed, trying to get some saliva down to his parched throat, only to discover that his mouth was equally dry.

Ginny took pity on his state, however, and reached over to pour him a glass of water. "Drink this and don't try to talk," she said, handing the cup to him. "Your vocal cords will be a little sore for a while."

Harry propped himself up on an elbow and took the glass. The cool water soothed his throat and arid mouth. He could feel the liquid seep into his tissues as it worked its way down to his stomach.

Experimentally clearing his throat, Harry managed to make something that resembled his customary grumble and decided to try speaking again. "How long?" he asked in more comprehensible words, though it was still raspy. "Were we out?"

Placing a strip of parchment in the fold of her book, Ginny shut it and set the book on the table next to the pitcher. "Madam Pomfrey says a little over a week, but I can't get a straight answer out of her. Something's dodgy and I can't figure it out."

"How long," Harry repeated, but he had to clear his throat again. Something cracked towards the end of the sentence and his normal voice broke through. "How long have you been up?"

"For a few hours," Ginny said, returning to her book. "When did you grow a beard?"

Harry brought a hand to his face automatically and was surprised to feel a full, thick beard there. "I guess it grew while we were out," he said, but couldn't recall ever having to shave before.

"Hmm," she said noncommittally and flipped the page in her book.

"Is there something wrong, Ginny?" Harry asked. "You seem a little upset."

With a sigh, Ginny put her bookmark back and shut the book again. "Why do you think that would be? Hm? I haven't forgotten what happened last year, you know."

Harry gaped at her. "What are you talking about? I thought that was all in the past? We apologized, we worked out our problems and now everything's fine...right?"

Ginny narrowed her eyes. "What am I talking about? I think you should be asking yourself that question. It seems like Dumbledore's spell has made

you more stupid than usual. We didn't work anything out, Harry. You're a prat. I hate you and I will continue to hate you."

Stung by her words, Harry floundered for something to say, but was interrupted by the appearance of Madam Pomfrey. "Ah, good. You're awake," she said.

Ginny continued to give him a cold shoulder while Madame Pomfrey examined him. Strangely, Harry couldn't quite pin down *how* he knew that he loved Ginny, just that he did and that it hurt him immensely that she was pushing him away.

When the Matron finished diagnosing him, Harry spied a pair of round, wire-rimmed spectacles and idly wondered who had left them on his table.

*

A few hours later, Harry was shaved and trimmed -- thanks to the *Burburus* charm -- and Harry and Ginny were cleared to leave the Hospital Wing. As soon as they closed the door, Ginny sped up and accelerated away, her book bag thumping on her hip. Aside from her strange behaviour, Harry couldn't help but think that something else was different about Ginny; whatever it was, she was wearing the wrong blouse, that one was way too small.

Since it was a Sunday, Harry made his way to the Gryffindor common room, only to find Ginny having a heated conversation with her brother.

"What do you *mean*, he's my boyfriend?" she hollered.

"Will you just calm down, Ginny?" Ron said. Hermione took her hand and led her to a sofa by the fire.

There were several other students studying or playing games around the room, but most seemed intent on ignoring the kaffuffle.

Harry made his way over to where they were seated and plopped down on the cushion next to Ron. "Don't you remember anything about your summer, Ginny?" Ron continued. "You and Harry were nearly expelled. Dumbledore had Harry fixing up the Burrow all summer and had you keeping him fed and watered."

If Ron thought his explanations would be soothing, he was sorely mistaken. Ginny's eyes widened and a red flush overtook her cheeks that Harry recognized as anger, not embarrassment.

"What do you mean I was to keep him fed and watered? That stupid pillock isn't worth the time to tar and feather him!" A flash of anger flooded into Harry's head through their link and Harry countered it with a memory of their first kiss, under the Burrow.

Ginny grabbed her head, and squeezed her eyes shut. "What's happening to me? I don't *remember* that. POTTER! Get out of my head!"

"Ginny," Harry said in the calmest way he could. "We have a link between us -- an Egretic bond," he began.

"The devil you say! I have no link with you -- you're not my boyfriend and it will be a cold day in hell before I ever consider you worth a tinker's damn," she said vehemently.

Harry flinched. He didn't remember much himself, but he knew that he loved her, with all his heart, and to lose that would mean going over the edge. He took a deep breath, summoning what he *did* remember, pushing his feelings across the link: nearly drowning in the pond, the birthday party, their kiss beneath the porch, the letter and the ribbon and bows.

Ginny stood up, a shocked expression on her face. Covering her face with her hands, she ran up the stairs to the girls' dormitory, a choked sob escaping her lips as she ran.

Harry sighed, looking at Ron and Hermione. "Well, that went well, didn't it?" he said sarcastically. His heart was beginning to break. Whether or not she remembered, she certainly didn't feel the same towards him any more. He didn't realise that hot tears were streaming down his face. Ron looked with concern at Hermione. Hermione was the first to speak.

"Harry," she said, tentatively, putting her fingertips on his knee. "It will come back to her, I'm certain of it. I'm going to go talk to her," she said, rising from the couch.

"Come to bed mate, you look terrible," Ron said, clapping a hand on his shoulder as he moved towards the stairs.

"I guess I will," Harry said flatly. He knew that sleep, if it ever came, would not ease the pain that he and he alone was feeling just then. Whatever it was that he had with Ginny, it was gone.

*

Harry spent the entire night reliving the previous summer, trying to sort through what had happened between Ginny and himself, what they had together. He remembered clips and scenes from his summer assignments, snips and phrases of dialogue with Ginny, and even the occasional surge of emotion. But as the night wore on, he was able to piece things together enough to know that he wasn't going to be able to put their now aborted relationship behind him.

The next day flew by in a daze for Harry. He didn't pay any attention to Hermione, who tried to get him to catch up on his school work. He ignored Ron, who wanted him to go flying at the Quidditch pitch. He avoided meals and ended up walking around the grounds until he worked up a reasonable appetite, but even then, he used his knowledge of the kitchens and relationship with Dobby to get food instead of risking another bad encounter with Ginny in the very public setting of the Great Hall.

Harry's brow furrowed, as he reached out a hand to tickle a specific spot on a painting of a bowl of fruit. As the pear started laughing, Harry gave it a sour look, and then walked into the brightly lit entryway of the school kitchens. Dozens of house-elves were scurrying about, cleaning and putting away the dinner's dishes as they appeared with a steady stream of *pops* onto the tables. Harry walked towards the long tables that mirrored the four house tables above them and sat down next to where he knew Ginny would be seated.

Harry's hand automatically reached for the place where Ginny's hand would normally be and he let out a shaky breath. Then with a *pop*, a dirty plate, silverware and cup appeared in front of him. He instantly recognized the dark-red lipstick that was smeared on the goblet's rim, but was saved from a startled reply when a small elf appeared and deftly grabbed the dishes.

"Excuse me, young master," the elf squeaked and ran towards the sinks.

His shoulders slouched, Harry's head hit the table with a dull *thunk* and he closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, another elf was seated next to Harry. The multi-coloured tea-cosy and mismatched socks told Harry exactly which elf it was.

"Hello, Master Harry," Dobby said brightly. "Would sir like some after-dinner snacks?"

Harry raised his head and said, "Actually, Dobby, I haven't had a thing to eat yet and was wondering if I could have a sandwich or something. I don't want to be a bother."

Dobby's eyes grew large. "On, *no*, Master Harry. It's not a bother at all. We are happy to help the great Harry Potter."

Dobby scampered off and was lost in the midst of the busy elves. As the popping plates reduced in frequency, so did the bustling in the kitchen. A song of sorts broke out among the elves as they wound down their labours and Harry found the sound strangely soothing.

When Dobby returned, Harry discovered that he was much hungrier than when he had arrived.

"Eat, Master Harry," Dobby said, placing several plates of roast chicken, heaping bowls of mashed potatoes, a large platter of different fruits, and a tray of several kinds of pudding in front of him.

"Dobby, I couldn't possibly eat all of this," Harry protested. But when the diminutive elf's eyes started to water, Harry amended, "I'll give it my best, Dobby. Thanks for all of this."

"You is most welcome, Harry Potter, sir." The beaming smile that split Dobby's face was enough to brighten any mood. However, while Harry ate, he couldn't help but wonder if he would ever be whole again.

*

The next day, Harry woke extra early, knowing that Ron was a heavy sleeper, so that he could avoid awkward questions. Much to his dismay, however, Ron was already awake and was sitting in a chair right next to Harry's bed.

"Finally decided to wake up?" Ron asked, his face impassive, his arms folded tightly across his chest.

"Um," Harry managed before Ron pulled him out of bed and pushed him towards the loo. "Go get showered and dressed," Ron said, stuffing a bundle of clothes into Harry's hands. "Then you and I are going to have a little talk."

Harry swallowed. Hard. Then opened the door and got himself ready.

When Harry came out again, fully dressed and his pyjamas in a ball under his arm, Ron was waiting for him. Ron took the bundle from Harry and threw it onto his open bed. The rest of the boys in the dorm were still fast asleep and Harry silently wished for one of them to wake up so he could manage an excuse to slip out.

"Let's go," Ron said and with a firm grip on Harry's shoulder, guided him down the stairs to the common room.

It was just after dawn when Harry and Ron walked to the empty courtyard and sat on a bench.

"All right," Ron started. "Let's get to the point. You've got to quit moping around and do something about Ginny or you're going to flunk out of all of your classes and then we'll have a depressed, deranged quitter as our only hope for exterminating Lord Nutters."

Harry's felt his jaw muscles slacken. "What *are* you on about?"

"It's killing you. This thing with Ginny," Ron explained. "You need to either work it out with her or give it up. But you can't keep moping around like a lovesick idiot."

"But I *am* a lovesick idiot," Harry protested hotly. "And I *can't* just give it up. What we had was special – Ginny's everything to me."

As Harry buried his face in his hands, he could see Ron shaking his head. "You're mad. Ginny's not worth all that."

Harry's head shot up. "She is to me, Ron. I love her and now that that's gone it's like I can't breathe – like there isn't anything else that will make me happy again." Harry hung his head once more and quietly, said, "It's worse than Dementors – you don't know what it's like."

There was a long silence and Ron sighed. "I do know what it's like, Harry. I – I have a *thing* for Hermione."

Off to their right, Harry thought he heard something like a gasp, but the wind rustled leaves across the stone floor and he didn't hear anything again.

Slowly bringing his head back around, Harry gaped at his friend. "*What ?*"

"I'm mad for Hermione," Ron said unflinchingly. "Have been since fourth year, when she went with bloody Victor Krum."

Despite himself, Harry smiled. Another muffled gasp came from a spot closer than the last and was followed by urgent, but unintelligible, whispers. Harry whipped around and pointed his wand at an area of space between two stone pillars and shouted, "*Accio Cloak!*"

Ron's hand came up to deflect the spell, but it was too late. Harry's Invisibility Cloak soared over to his outstretched hand, revealing two girls clad in their pyjamas and dressing gowns, one with bushy brown hair, the other straight red.

Harry and Ginny locked eyes, while Hermione squealed like a pig and ran like a greyhound back towards Gryffindor Tower, Ron in hot pursuit.

"Wait, Hermione!" Ron yelled as they disappeared around a corner.

Harry put his wand away and took a tentative step closer to Ginny.

Ginny took a matching step back and her lip started to quiver. "You really feel that way?" she asked, her face a mask of indifference. She stood there, silent, impassive. He could feel the loathing pouring out of her, tinted with something unexpected, a whiff of fear.

"Yes," Harry said simply. "Every word." A tense moment passed as they continued to stare at each other, then Ginny nodded and walked away.

*

Breakfast was more than a little awkward, with Ginny sitting with two girls in her year and Hermione shooting daggers at Ron.

Once Harry had finished his porridge, he leaned over to Ron and whispered, "What's got Hermione all peeved? Does the fact that you like her have anything to do with it?"

Hermione's eyebrows rose as she looked over her Arithmancy book at them. Ron shook his head. "Later, mate," he said through clenched teeth.

Her eyes back on her book, Hermione resumed eating her own breakfast and Harry wondered if everyone in the castle had lost their marbles.

Having been absent from classes an entire week, Harry was morbidly behind in his studies, and despite his encounter with Ron, Harry just couldn't find it within himself to care.

McGonagall deducted five points when he improperly Transfigured Ron's arm into a wing. Flitwick actually assigned him detention when a shrinking charm they were trying on a trunk full of silverware backfired and the trunk exploded, sending the metal flatware flying everywhere. But the worst was at lunch, when Harry tripped over his own feet while staring at Ginny, landed headlong into a pack of Ravenclaws, and found his hands in contact with Cho's front as they both fell.

Unable to stammer out anything coherent, Harry bolted from the Hall, several students calling out taunts as he fled.

*

That evening, Harry found himself on a small hill overlooking the lake; it was the same hill he had come to at the end of June, when he had been mourning for Sirius.

The love that he had for Ginny, the surge of emotions that had poured new life into him was nothing but pain now. Harry could remember the excitement that had filled his mind when she had Floo'ed to Number Four, a ribbon fastened around her middle and a bow perched on her head. He could recall exactly how she tasted when they kissed on the Dursleys' sofa, how sweet it was to be the object of her affection. All of that was now replaced by a surge of pain. The pain pierced the echoed joy and contentment, and he wondered if he would ever be with Ginny like that again.

Harry bowed his head and closed his eyes, letting silent tears drop onto his lap.

He sensed someone walking up the hill and a moment later, that person sat downwind from him. Harry pinched his eyelids and wiped them as surreptitiously as he could, but did not look up. Perhaps if he ignored whoever it was, they would go away. Nothing could ease this pain, ever.

The intruder touched his hand. There was a small spark, causing them both to jump. Still, Harry did not open his eyes.

Again, contact was made and this time, something warm flooded his soul. He was so wrapped up in pain, however, that he was unable to understand what it meant. His magical core was cold still, but the invading warmth was persistent, unchanging, and powerful. He found himself clinging to the pain, as if it were the only thing keeping him sane.

Harry, came a voice in his mind. He recognized it, but refused to believe that she could be there. *Harry*, it repeated. *Open your eyes. Please.*

Unwillingly, Harry let his eyes open and found his hands tightly held by a pair of pale, freckled ones in his lap. She reached a hand up and rubbed at his cheek, wiping away the wetness.

"Please look at me, Harry," Ginny said softly. "I need you to see my face when I tell you this."

Seemingly of its own accord, his head raised and turned to where Ginny was sitting. The watery smile on her face further banished the pain he felt,

but he couldn't give in to the flicker of hope that lingered on the edge of mind.

"I'm sorry," Ginny said. "You didn't deserve to be treated so horribly, even last June when I had every reason to be mad at you."

Harry blinked, the hope grew past a flicker and into a sliver of light, but he still ignored it.

"I wish I could remember something, anything from last summer; I can't remember anything past the last week of the old term here at school," she continued.

"Do you love me?" Harry blurted. "I'm sorry, that's not fair – you don't remember a bloody thing," he said, looking back to his lap. He was silent for a moment, then looked up again. "I think there's a way for us to share what happened this summer. I've spent the entire night and most of today going over in my mind what happened between us and I think I can show you the highlights. That might jog your memory enough to let the rest filter in."

Ginny's smile faltered, but she did not release his hand. "I honestly don't know what I feel for you, Harry. It's all so confusing. One moment it's June and we're ready to kill each other and the next it's September, Hermione tells me we've had this bond happen and we're going out...." Ginny let out a shuddering breath. "The only thing I know for sure is that I hurt inside – I don't hate you anymore, Harry, I just hurt."

"If we try this, if you let me show you my memories, I think the pain will go away," Harry said, trying to not sound desperate. "Please?"

Their eyes locked and Harry felt their link open, widening as they each let their guard slip. Ginny's fear and pain mingled with his own. Deep underneath the layers of her complex emotions, Harry found something dormant and tried to reach out for it. Just before he was able to grasp it, his vision swam and a flood of memories assaulted his senses.

Harry was outside, painting the shed. Ginny was humming under the tree; a tune that he had forgotten existed, but now brought tears to his closed eyes. Ginny was swimming in the pond, her long legs splashing in the water. Harry was drowning, being pulled deeper by a Grindylow when Ginny broke its fingers and pulled him to shore. They were rolling around on the grass outside the Burrow, Ginny's hands a blur as she tickled him without mercy. Then they were picking beans in the garden outside the Burrow. When it came to the part where Harry showed her the prophecy, the here and now Ginny gasped. Something snapped loudly in their minds and they fell back into themselves.

"Harry!" Ginny said fearfully and flung herself into his arms. "I – am – so – sorry," she said with a sob. Harry held her tight and she continued, "I don't know what happened to me; I don't know why I forgot about us but I need you to forgive me, Harry. Please forgive me."

"Shh," Harry said, inhaling the pleasant scent of her hair and gently rocking them back and forth on the hill. "I'm sorry that you had to relive all of that anger. I'm sorry I was such a pill in the first place," he said.

"Oh, but Harry," she said, pulling away. "What if I never remembered? What if I hadn't let you show me those things? Our memories. It would have killed me, Harry, not knowing why I hurt so bad," she said before she began to sniffle again.

Harry just put his finger to her lips and pulled her back to him. "No 'what if's'. It's done. I'm your Harry. You're my Ginny."

Ginny pulled herself into Harry's lap and began to kiss his forehead, then his cheeks and earlobes. Harry started returning the favour, finding all his favourite places, winding his arms around her to keep them steady.

Ginny was still kissing his neck, but her urgency had been replaced with intensity. She kept mumbling, "I'm so sorry" in-between kisses, sending shivers of pleasure throughout his body.

Harry twisted her torso to get better access to her neck, pushing her hair to the other side of her shoulders. Ginny pulled back and muttered, "Sodding bra." She then proceeded to pull her arms into her robes and she struggled – doing what, Harry could only guess. She bit her lip in a very distracting way.

With a sigh, she popped one arm out and then the other, along with a powder-blue bra. "Much better," she said, dropping the lingerie on the ground beside them. "Now where were we?"

Things had gone past the 'interesting' stage and were now into the 'dangerous' phase. Harry couldn't contain his desire for Ginny and was intent on showing Ginny just how much he had missed her, how much he needed her. For her part, Ginny was just as anxious and soon had Harry pinned underneath her.

All of a sudden, a huge wave of water engulfed them and Ginny screeched in shock.

"Ahhh!" she yelled, jumping to her feet, her wand drawn in a flash. "Who did that?"

Harry righted himself and wiped water from his eyes. Retreating from the edge of the newly-disturbed lake was the Giant Squid, its tentacles slapping lazily in the waves.

Ginny sat down and dissolved into a fit of giggles. Soon, Harry joined her, frustrated, happy, and a bit frightened by the afternoon's events. "George used to tell me tales about the Squid extinguishing couples, and I always thought he was having me on," she said, giggling some more.

After their laughter petered out, Harry stood and offered Ginny his hand. She took it and performed a drying spell on both of them, tucking the bra into her pocket. They straightened each others' robes, unmussed their hair and gave each other a chaste kiss.

As they walked back towards the castle, hand in hand, Ginny asked, "Harry? What happened to your glasses?"

Harry thought for a second and said, "What glasses?"

With Ginny back at his side, Harry was able to dive into his lessons. Surprisingly, everything seemed to come to him like he had been doing it for years. Transfiguration was particularly easy, and McGonagall found herself praising Harry for his sudden surge of skill. Charms was also pleasantly effortless, but it was in Defence that Harry really shone.

The new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher was Matt McTierny. He was a solidly-built man, with thin, brown hair and an infectious smile. He favoured a balance between practical and theory in his lessons that made both the intellectual-types and the hands-on students happy. Much to the consternation of his students, he wore Muggle sunglasses all the time and he refused to take a side on the outcome of the war.

It had been a game of sorts of the past week for students to try to guess his past profession, as he was decidedly tight-lipped about it. In Harry's guarded estimation, Professor McTierny was the best instructor they'd had in the subject since Remus Lupin. Still, Harry did not open himself as fully or as quickly to the man as he had with his father's old friend, especially because he would not voice opposition to Voldemort.

"Good morning, class," McTierny chimed as he walked into the classroom.

"Good morning," the students said in reply.

Professor McTierny set a stack of books on his desk and stood in front of the class appraisingly. "As our last class dealt with the theory behind shield spells, today will be a practical lesson."

There were several moans, but they were quickly drowned out by an excited murmur that forced their professor to call for quiet.

"Now if you will all stand up, we'll clear the room and prepare for the lesson."

The students obliged him and with the wave of a wand, the chairs were pushed aside. Harry had a word flash into his head when McTierny performed the spell, *Depulso*. It was a modification of the banishing charm, his mind told him. Harry had been having this happen a lot lately – as different Professors would demonstrate spells or perform unrelated magic that Harry was unfamiliar with, the incantation would pop into his head along with a short explanation.

Shaking his head clear, Harry focused on his teacher.

"I will be pairing you off for you to test your shield spells. Remember to focus on the strength of the spell and not on the hex your opponent is casting. If you let your guard down for even a second, your shield will shatter."

Harry was paired with Parvati, much to his annoyance, while Hermione was with Neville and Ron with Seamus. The latter two pairings were a relief to everyone in the room, who could sense Hermione's foul mood with Ron. Had they been paired up, Harry doubted Ron would be able to withstand the anger-enhanced spells Hermione would sling at him.

The pairs faced each other along the length of the class and Professor McTierny raised his wand. "On my mark, the line on my left will cast a jinx, while the line on my right will defend against it."

The students nodded and readied their wands. A loud *BANG* from the professor's wand indicated they could begin and Harry instantly cast a stinging hex at Parvati. She deflected it, but just barely. The rules were that once the first spell was cast, they were to trade shielding and hexing until the final signal, usually twenty or thirty minutes, while McTierny walked around the classroom.

"Excellent shield, Miss Bones. That was a whopper of a hex, Mister MacMillan sent at you, though!"

"Fine display of dodging Mister Longbottom, but you should focus more on the shield charm. Miss Granger's tickling hex won't damage you too badly."

"Your wand movements are a little loose, Mister Malfoy. Try snapping your wrist a little more and I'll bet your shield will be able to hold off Miss Parkinson's curses better."

Harry had yet to have his shield fail, though Parvati may not have been trying as hard as she could have. Still, every other student had let at least one spell slip through their shields.

When class was over, Harry had just slipped his backpack on his shoulder, ready to see Ginny again at lunch.

"Mister Potter?" called Professor McTierny. "Might I have a word with you?"

With a longing glance at the door, Harry gave Ron and Hermione a disgruntled look, to which they both shrugged, before they left.

"Yes, Professor?" said Harry as he walked back to McTierny.

Harry's teacher was straightening papers on his desk and glancing at the door. "Have a seat, please. There's a small matter I wanted to discuss with you."

McTierny drew out his wand and Harry tensed, instantly on guard. But then in a manner strikingly similar to Dumbledore at Harry's birthday party, McTierny rotated his wand in a small circle and Harry sensed the noises coming from the hall blur.

"Dumbledore hired me to teach Defence, this much you know, but he also hired me to give you some specific instruction, related to certain recent

events.”

The way Professor McTierny looked at Harry left no room for doubt as to which events he was referring to. This man was to train Harry to fight Voldemort.

The older man nodded. “While I can’t teach you everything you will need to know, I *can* teach you certain...tricks I’ve picked up over the past few years – things that will help you avoid some of the more common traps that are out there.”

A vision of Sirius falling through the Veil appeared in Harry’s mind and he shook it away with a mental wave. Emboldened, Harry said, “When do I start?”

“How does tonight sound?”

“After dinner?” Harry shot back, eager to begin.

“Seven o’clock, here in the classroom.”

Harry smiled. “I’ll be there.”

Standing to leave, Harry turned and walked towards the door. He heard the *pop* of the privacy spell being cancelled and McTierny said, “Oh and Harry? Bring your other half with you as well. If I’ve got a proper bead on her, she’ll be more than a little upset if she’s left out.”

Harry turned and nodded, then left to find Ginny and a warm meal.

Consequences of the Mind 4: The Fall of the Lion

Chapter Four – The Fall of the Lion

Dumbledore was no longer at Hogwarts. In fact, as Ginny thought about it, he probably hadn't been at Hogwarts since the day the spell had been performed. Yet despite the absence of its Headmaster, the school seemed to operate as it always had – because, as Ginny had discovered, almost no one knew that he wasn't in the castle.

For those that did know about Dumbledore's absence, like Ginny's dorm mates, McGonagall had simply told them that Dumbledore was busy with his duties as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and would be returning in a month's time. Ginny knew that it would be longer than a month before Dumbledore would even be awake, let alone capable of returning to Hogwarts. How she knew, she couldn't explain, just as she couldn't explain her ability to perform every spell in Charms and Transfiguration the first time, every time.

Ginny was sitting on her bed, pulling a brush through her long, red hair as she continued to think about Dumbledore. Every bra she owned was in a pile next to her, and she had spent the last five minutes trying on all four of them. She reckoned that they were all at least a cup-size too small and she was completely at a loss to explain it. Her blouses were tight, too, but were easy enough to fix; a simple expansion charm would hold until she could get to Hogsmeade to purchase new ones. The bras, however, were a bit more complex in construction than a blouse: the expansion charms would either not hold as long, or would end up tearing the delicate material. Long term, she would have to simply buy new blouses and bras.

Placing her brush on the table by her bed, Ginny contemplated cleaning the knots of red hair from its bristles but instead grabbed a bra at random and put it on. Ginny looked reluctantly at herself in the mirror where she saw herself bulging in a very unattractive way. She could go without; she could fake it with a camisole, or put up with the indignity and discomfort of what – until recently – had been a fairly-decent bra. After walking back and forth before the mirror in a camisole, she concluded that although it, too, was stretched out farther than it should be, it would be better than an ill-fitting bra. She would just have to manage with that until this weekend, when they had their first Hogsmeade visit.

Thinking of Hogsmeade made Ginny think of Harry. Thinking of Harry inevitably lead to her thinking about their encounter at the lake and her less-than-virtuous behaviour. A soft blush rose on Ginny's cheeks as she applied a subdued red lipstick and she made it a point to avoid looking her reflected self in the eye.

Ginny had started wearing makeup last year, because Michael Corner had liked it. Now, she decided that she liked to see herself made-up and told herself that it had nothing to do with that insufferable git.

"Are you coming to dinner or what?" asked Ginny's dorm mate, Kate, from the doorway. "Stephie says your boyfriend is already waiting for you."

Stephanie was her other roommate. While they hadn't been the best of friends after Ginny's first year, they had grown into a companionable friendship since then. "I'll be right there, Kate. I'm just about ready," replied Ginny.

The newly expanded blouse hid the way her camisole flattened her chest, but she still felt self-conscious and more than a bit bound-down by her ill-fitting lingerie.

Stepping down the stairs to the common room, the sounds of two very unhappy people met her ears, clearly in the middle of a blazing row.

"I can't help it if you want to hide everything that's important to me, Hermione," Ron shouted. "But I'll be hanged if I'm going to do it any more. Harry's okay with it. Why can't we just move on?"

Hermione was standing less than a foot away from Ron, her chin tilted skyward, her fists clenched, her arms held stiffly at her side. "I'll tell you why we can't move on, Ron. Because for years you've treated me like your sister – and then when that changed we made a deal to not tell anyone about us and you broke that deal. How can I trust you any more?"

Ron made a frustrated growl and took a step towards Hermione, who didn't bat an eye. "The whole reason we were keeping it a secret in the first place was so that Harry wouldn't be upset, but I've talked to him about it already and he's *fine* with it. It's not like I took out an ad in the *Prophet* like I wanted to!" He took a slow breath and, more quietly, said, "Hermione, I've been mad for you for years, and I'm not going to hide it any more. I don't care what other people think and I want the world to know that you and I are together now."

Standing toe to toe like they were, Ginny thought that one of two things was going to happen. Either they would end up hexing each other (as she and Harry had done last term) or they would snog each other senseless then and there. Harry was sitting in an armchair off to the side and when Ron stopped talking, he gave Ginny a mischievous wink.

Taking the hint, Ginny nodded and took two steps to her left. She could tell that Hermione's anger was deflating and that Ron had finally not bollixed up what he now realized was the most important thing in his life. Another nod from Harry and she pushed out with her magic – a gentle nudge into Hermione's back.

A small flash of surprise echoed on Ron and Hermione's faces as they were pressed together, but within an instant they were too busy kissing to notice.

A great cheer erupted from the crowd of students gathered around their classmates. From somewhere near the portrait hole, Ginny heard Seamus yell, "It's about time. Can we go eat now?"

The students erupted into laughter and started to meander towards the exit. Hermione and Ron pulled apart, the latter glowing like the sun, the former chewing nervously on her lip.

"Oh, Ron," Ginny heard Hermione say. "I'm sorry – for everything."

Ron just hugged her again and they finished with a chaste kiss.

"All right, all right," Harry said, rising from the sofa. "That's enough of that. You can kiss all you want, but just keep it in the broom closets, eh?"

Ginny walked over to Harry and entwined her fingers in his, feeling the now familiar rush of emotions pass between them before the sensation faded. She had been more than happy to demonstrate the other function of broom closets to Harry once they were back together, her memories somewhat intact.

Ron turned and with one lanky arm around Hermione's small shoulders, beamed at Harry. "That went better than I expected. Let's get some grub before Seamus and Dean eat it all."

Laughing together in what seemed to be the first time they had in weeks, the four walked down to the Great Hall.

*

Walking down from the castle towards Hagrid's hut, Harry, Hermione, and Ron were discussing their previous lesson with the Care of Magical Creatures Professor.

"Bundimun secretion is one of the most important cleanser ingredients, Ron," Hermione said in a huffy tone.

Although she had made up with Ron, that didn't mean they wouldn't still argue.

"Yeah, but it'll eat your hand off before you get enough to do any good," Ron countered.

"Honestly," said Hermione, complete with trademark eye roll. "If you'd used your dragon-hide gloves like you were supposed to, you wouldn't have that burn."

Ron grumbled something incomprehensible while Harry chuckled behind the two of them. Hermione was fingering his bandage as they held hands and despite their argument, Ron was smiling.

The rest of their classmates were waiting for them outside the back paddock, including the Slytherins. Hagrid was fairly dancing with excitement as the class gathered around, making Harry think that either he had been given another dragon egg, or worse....

"Gather 'round, class," Hagrid said, waving his large hands at them. "'Ere you go. Thas th' ticket." He was wearing a uniform of sorts, which reminded Harry of Dudley's Smelting's school clothes. The jacket was just as hairy as the one he had worn for the Yule Ball in Harry's fourth year, but it reached almost to his feet, resembling a sort of trench coat. Hagrid's boots were polished and his trousers looked new, rather than the patched, tattered ones he usually wore.

"Righ' then. We've go' a special treat for yeh today. Gather yer bags and follow me up ter the forest."

Harry and Hermione shared a nervous glance, both wondering if Hagrid's little brother had anything to do with his excitability, not to mention how the Centaurs would react to a herd of students on the edge of the forest. At least, Harry hoped it was only the edge.

"Did you see what the oaf's wearing?" Harry overheard Malfoy saying to Pansy Parkinson as they walked behind the mass of students. "Looks like he's trying impress someone, but I can't think who it'd be. Nobody listens to a word he says, let alone *looks* at him."

Pansy let off a peal of twittering that sent shivers up Harry's spine and Hermione gave Harry a warning glance that clearly told him it wasn't worth it. For once, Harry was inclined to agree.

As the forest loomed closer, Harry's fears were soothed however, as he caught sight of a strange sort of beast tethered in a makeshift corral. Though by Harry's estimation, the creature could easily break the thin-looking chain or rip out the post to which it was tied.

It was half-eagle, like a Hippogriff, but the back-end wasn't a horse, it was more like a large cat, with huge hind paws that looked powerful and deadly. It made Harry think of the Sphinx from the Triwizard maze.

"A Griffin," Hermione said excitedly. "Those are really rare, aren't they?"

"And really boring," Malfoy said under his breath so that only a few students around them could hear.

The rest of the class made a wary approach but stayed a good ten feet from where the beast was tearing at a piece of raw meat on the ground.

"Very good, Hermione," Hagrid said. "Tha's a Golden Griffin, tha' is. Got this 'un from the Greek Ministry. Friend o' mine there owed me summat

and I called in the favour.”

The Griffin looked up just then and seemed to stare straight at Harry. It jumped to its feet and trotted over to where Harry stood, the closest of the gathered students, and bowed its head over the top fence railing.

Harry didn't know whether to run or be pleased at the attention.

“That's a bit odd,” Hagrid said as he walked over to the Griffin. “Did the same thing ter Ginny yesterday.”

Harry couldn't hide his surprise and was doubly so, when he saw Malfoy staring back at him with a look of triumph in his eyes.

*

After lunch, Harry and Hermione had a free period while Ron helped fill in a patrol slot for Roger Davies, who had broken his collar bone during a Quidditch practice the previous evening. Deciding they both needed to catch up on some homework, they headed to the Library.

At first, Harry had been focused on an Astronomy essay, but soon, his mind started to wander and he began to study ways to increase the power of a shield charm. In the last Defence class, Harry had been able to hold off almost all the hexes that had been thrown at him. All but the ones Professor McTierny had cast. Even his tickling jinx was able to get through Harry's shield. When Harry had asked about it, the mysterious wizard only answered that any spell, if it was powerful enough, could bypass a shield charm.

Leaving Hermione to her Arithmancy equations, he wandered over to the Defence section and grabbed several promising-looking books. On his way back, he was stopped by a hand on his arm. Looking up, he discovered that the hand belonged to Cho Chang.

“Oh. Hello, Cho,” said Harry, struggling to keep his books balanced in his arms.

“Hi, Harry,” Cho replied. Her eyes were glistening and blinking. “I was hoping I'd find you here. I need to talk to you, Harry,” she said, her fingertips making a lazy oval on the back of his arm. He caught a whiff of a spicy floral scent.

Harry chanced a glance over her shoulder and saw Hermione looking at them. “Well, I'm quite busy right now,” he explained, motioning to the books with his head. “Maybe we can talk sometime later?”

Cho looked down to her feet and nervously pulled at her robes, which had the effect of emphasizing what the robes normally concealed. “I really need to talk to you, Harry. You're the only one that could understand what I'm going through.”

Suddenly guilty, Harry took a step back and said, “All right, but I need to get back to studying, or Ginny will skin me for failing. Catch me later?” Then, without offering her a chance to reply, he stepped around her and made a bee-line for his seat.

Relieving his aching arms by setting his books on the table, Harry plopped into his seat and let out a long, slow breath.

Hermione arched a brow and tore her eyes from a complicated graph in her book. “You and Cho have a nice chat?”

Harry laughed. “If you could call it that. She seemed very anxious about something, but wouldn't tell me what it was.”

“Oh, she's anxious about something all right,” Hermione said with a smirk. “The rumour-mill has it that she's unhappy with Michael Corner and is looking for a replacement.”

“Since when?” Harry asked, flabbergasted. “I thought they were keen on each other.”

“Oh, they were. But apparently she's too weepy for him or he's still stuck on Ginny, depending on who you listen to.”

“So,” Harry said, “what's that got to do with me?”

Hermione chuckled, pulling out a fresh piece of parchment from her bag. “She wants you back, Harry. Because you're the only one that *really* listened to her,” she said in a dramatic, breathy voice. “At least, that's what Lavender Brown said.”

Harry wiped his face and shook his head. “That's the craziest thing I've ever heard. Why would she want to go out with me? Besides, I'm spoken for.”

“She reckons that if Michael puts on the charm, he can get Ginny away from you and the field will be clear.”

Hiding his head in his hand, Harry let out a loud guffaw that, even muffled as it was, caused several students to look at them. “Hermione, where are you getting this crazy codswallop?”

“Harry, who have I been rooming with for the past five years? The all-knowing eyes and ears of the Hogwarts' gossip and rumour mill.”

“Yeah, I guess so. You're not taking this crap *seriously*, are you?”

“Serious as a heart attack, Harry. You better watch yourself.”

“Yeah, right,” Harry replied. “I'm not worried about Ginny leaving me for Michael just like I'm not worried about Cho. That ship sailed, burned and sank with total loss of all hands, Hermione, and you, of all people, should know it.”

Hermione turned back to her Arithmancy and said, “I'm just reporting the news; I make no guarantees about its validity.”

Harry huffed and folded his arms across his chest, giving the closest book in the stack an appraising stare. "Well, if they want to play games, I think Ginny and I can arrange some play time into our schedule."

An hour later, Harry hadn't touched his Astronomy essay, but was waist-deep in the theory behind shield spells. From what little he had read, it seemed that there hadn't been much success in boosting the power of *Protego*.

"Hermione?" he asked quietly.

She looked up from her essay and said, "Yeah, Harry?"

"Do you think it's possible to increase the power of a spell?"

Hermione looked thoughtful and pushed a bit of her hair behind her ear. "Theoretically, you can increase the power of any spell, but it takes enormous magical energy to gain even a fractional increase. Witches and wizards who have innate magical strength can cast more powerful charms than others, but the spell is just the same."

"Then how can McTierny get a tickling jinx past my shield spell? If the spells are the same power for each person...."

"Like I said, Harry, theoretically, it shouldn't work that way. But for some people, the science of spellwork just doesn't apply."

Harry scratched his head, thinking about a future that held at least one confrontation with Voldemort. "There's got to be a way to deflect more powerful spells, Hermione. How can we increase the effectiveness of a shield charm?"

Propping an arm on the back of her chair, Hermione said, "Haven't you been listening? There's no way to do it. You'd have to build a whole new spell."

Harry's eyes went wide and he grabbed Hermione by the shoulders. "That's perfect!" he yelled, earning him a sharp glance from Madame Pince. He lowered his voice and continued, "What does it take to build a new shield spell?"

The hope in Harry's eyes evaporated when he saw the bleak expression on her face. "There's a whole division in the Ministry devoted to spell crafting, Harry. It'd take us years just to work out the calculations."

"Oh."

"But there might be a way we could merge two spells..." Hermione had a far-away look in her eyes as she began to scribble on her parchment and murmur under her breath. "...proportionately aggregated... collapsible power structures... but with indeterminate wave cycles..."

A bell rang somewhere in the distance and Hermione was brought back to the present. "Listen," she said as she quickly gathered her books and parchment together. "Let me think about this for a while and I'll get back to you."

Harry shoved his stack of books on a nearby return cart and shouldered his bag. "Thanks, Hermione. I'd be lost with all of this," he said, motioning to the recently carted books with a hand.

"It's my pleasure," she said with a nod. "Meet me in the common room after Quidditch practice. Bring Ron and Ginny, too. There's something you need to see."

Wondering what his friend could want to show him, Harry followed her out of the library and to Herbology.

*

A soft breeze floated around the Quidditch pitch as Ginny walked from the changing rooms to the kick-off point. Her used Comet Three Sixty balanced lightly between her fingertips as she walked. It was a hand-me-down from Bill, who never had time to fly with a desk job at Gringotts, London, but was one of the most stable brooms ever made. There was much to be said for stability when you were a Chaser.

The small thrill of being chosen to fill Angelina and Alicia's shoes on the team hadn't left her and Ginny had made it her mission to live up to their greatness to the best of her ability.

The other Chasers, Captain Katie Bell and third year Natalie McDonald, were also out on the pitch, talking strategy, if Ginny could guess by their hand motions. Return Beaters Jack Sloper and Andrew Kirke weren't the best, but they had come a long way since last year and were busy hitting a single Bludger as hard as they could at each other.

Ginny adjusted the sports bra she'd borrowed from Katie and straddled her broom, wondering where her brother and boyfriend were. She closed her eyes for a moment and let her senses carry over the pitch. Her mind's eye wandered into the changing rooms, a bright patch of energy announcing Harry's presence. She relished that warmth, relaxing the small knot of worry that always wound its way into her mind when he was late.

As Harry and Ron made their way into the stadium, Ginny felt Harry's energy change – from warm yellow, to yellow with streaks of cold blue shooting through it – the colour of fear.

"You ready, Ginny?" asked Katie as the older girl flew overhead, a Quaffle tucked under one arm.

Ginny opened her eyes and nodded. She kicked off to follow her Captain, but kept one eye on Harry.

Ron floated over to the goal posts and Katie started calling their first plays. Harry was still standing in the middle of the pitch, looking at his broom like he'd never seen it before.

"Porskoff ploy, followed by the Hawkshead," Katie said. "Let's do it."

Reluctantly, Ginny tore her eyes off Harry and focused on the plays. As Katie handed off the Quaffle to Natalie, Ginny positioned herself underneath for the pass, but couldn't shake a lingering sense of worry.

Fifteen minutes later, Katie finally noticed Harry's predicament.

"Potter!" she yelled from across the pitch. "This isn't Firebolt admiration day! Get on your broom and run some Seeker drills or I'll have you running laps until midnight. You got that?"

Harry looked up to Katie and Ginny's heart plummeted. Even from where they were, Ginny could see the wet tracks on his cheeks.

"Let me talk to him, Katie," Ginny said softly. "I think I know what the problem is."

Katie looked dubiously at her but nodded. "Make it quick. We've only got an hour of sunlight left and you can bet Slytherin won't be lazing about in their practices."

With Katie's permission, Ginny shot down to Harry and quickly took his hand in hers. "Let's walk, Harry."

Harry sniffed and let her lead, his head hung low as they made their way around the inside ring of stands.

"I can't fly, Ginny – I just don't remember how," he said after a few minutes. "I mean, I can see myself flying, playing Quidditch, winning games, catching the Snitch.... I just – can't seem to remember *how* to fly."

Harry stopped then and Ginny turned to look at him. "Harry," she said soothingly. Her hands were around his neck and she touched her cheek to his. "You forgot how to fly, it's no big deal."

"No big deal?" he yelled, yanking his head away from hers.

But Ginny didn't let him break away completely. "Yeah. It's no big deal, you piddle-headed lout that I'm madly in love with. *You* didn't forget about the most important thing in your life. When I was in the hospital, I was this far from hexing you again, starting the whole cycle over. *You* didn't lose everything we'd gained together over the summer." Harry relaxed as she spoke and eventually, their heads were touching again. "Listen, Harry," Ginny continued. "You're a brilliant flyer – I know this is rough, and that it will be tough to learn it all again, but the most stubborn witch in Gryffindor is going to help you. We're in this together, love."

A ghost of a smile appeared on Harry's mouth. Ginny kissed it, sucking his bottom lip with an exaggerated smacking sound. Unable to resist, Harry kissed her back until Ginny broke it off, mindful of their audience.

"We'll get through this, Harry, all right? Just don't give up."

Harry nodded his head and kissed her cheek. "I love you, Ginny." Then he straddled his broom and kicked off, rising shakily into the air.

Ginny followed suit, her heart heavy with joy and sadness, and reached out to Harry as he continued to struggle.

"Right," Katie said when she rejoined their formation. "One more go with the Hawkshead, then I want to try some of the new plays." Katie gave Harry a concerned glance as he lost control of his broom for a few seconds, then she threw the Quaffle at Natalie.

*

Despite Ginny's attempts to comfort him, Harry's mood grew steadily worse as their practice wound down. Thoroughly disgusted with himself, Harry didn't even wait for Ginny to change out of her Quidditch robes before charging off to his dormitory.

The solitude he sought was not to be found however, as Neville and Seamus were playing a loud game of Exploding Snap in the middle of the dormitory floor. They didn't even notice as Harry threw his robes halfway into his wardrobe and crawled into bed, pressing his pillow down over his ears.

Harry felt a distant ripple of anger but he shrugged it off, preferring instead to sink deeper into his covers. As Harry wondered what else he had forgotten since the spell, his pillow was viciously ripped from his hands and then smacked against his head with gusto.

"Harry James Potter, get out of that bed right now and stop your sulking."

Harry blinked and rolled over. Ginny Weasley was standing over him, her lips pressed together as if she were afraid something would sneak into her mouth. "What?" he asked, his calm voice in sharp contrast to her loud one.

"You know very well what," Ginny said, pulling the covers off of him and pulling on his arm until he was sitting. "Quit moping over the fact that you can't fly any more and get downstairs right now."

Harry's position on the bed presented a very pleasant view of Ginny and he found he couldn't seem to meet her eyes – something seemed very *different* about her, but he couldn't put his finger on what it was. "I can't help it, Ginny. Flying was everything to me – well, almost everything," he amended.

“Harry,” she said, with a hint of exasperation. “Look me in the eyes when you’re talking to me.” She put her finger beneath his chin and tilted his face upward slightly and he saw a smirk playing around her lips. “Honestly, at least these things can get your attention now. Along with every other boy in the school,” she lamented, cupping them with her hands in an exaggerated manner.

“I’ve always thought you were a looker, Ginny. They just seem – different now – and who’s been looking at you? The whole castle?”

“Relax, Harry,” Ginny said as she sat on his lap. Seamus and Neville were still playing loudly and Harry vaguely heard an explosion go off. “They can look all they want. If they try to touch, I’m more than capable of hexing them all into next week.”

Harry seemed only capable of nodding as he moved in for her lips. Suddenly, his predicament didn’t seem so bleak any more.

*

“You know,” Ginny said as they walked down to the common room some time later, “I kind of like you without glasses.”

“You keep saying that, but I don’t ever remem – ” but as he said it, Harry instantly realized that this was simply another thing that he had forgotten. Along with flying and who knows what else. Still feeling happy from Ginny’s successful attempts to stop him from moping, Harry said, “Well, at least I don’t *need* them any more. I imagine forgetting would be a whole lot worse if I couldn’t see on top of that.”

Ginny laughed and leaned into his shoulder as they made their way over to Ron and Hermione.

“You all right, mate?” Ron asked as he fingered the silver badge on his robe collar. “You seemed a little off at practice.”

Harry glanced at Ginny, who gave his hand a re-assuring squeeze. “Yeah. I’ll be all right.” Then turning to Hermione, he said, “So what’s this thing you wanted to show us, Hermione?”

Their bushy-haired friend seemed to brighten considerably at this. “Oh, it’s nothing much. Just a detailed account of what happened when Merlin performed the learning spell on his son.”

Harry goggled at her.

“The learning spell?” asked Ginny. “You mean the spell that Dumbledore used on us?”

“Exactly,” Hermione confirmed. “Well, not exactly...but close enough.” She took out an ancient-looking book, much older-looking than the book Dumbledore had given Hermione the day they had first been told about it.

“I found this in the Restricted Section. It’s by Merlin’s great-grandson and is an outline of an interview he had with his grandfather just before he passed away.”

“You mean it’s about Merlin’s...” started Ron.

“Son,” Hermione confirmed. “So we can tell exactly what he went through and what changes happened because of the spell.”

Harry cleared his throat in anticipation. “Well, what does it say? Does it talk about getting our memories back or anything?”

Hermione’s small faltered a little and she shook her head. “It doesn’t talk about how to overcome any of the side-effects, but it does talk about how to deal with them. Though you’ve already reversed Ginny’s memory loss, haven’t you?”

Ginny move her hand to Harry’s knee, her fingers lightly touching the inner part of this thigh. “So maybe we can find a way to undo some of the other effects as well,” Ginny offered.

“Maybe,” said Hermione, though she didn’t sound convinced. “I’ll just read some of the more applicable parts of the book and we can talk about it afterwards.”

When they all nodded their agreement, Hermione opened the book and started turning pages. “Let’s see... Here. It says that when the spell is performed, it affects the part of the brain that’s responsible for learning, hence the name. It also affects the pituitary gland and in this case, Merlin’s son grew six inches in the two weeks following the spell’s casting. He was eight years old at the time.”

Hermione paused and looked up to Harry. “That would explain the beard,” Harry said wryly.

“And my bras,” Ginny added. “I grew a cup size and couldn’t figure out why. Now I know.”

Ron’s face turned red, but Harry just grinned. “You better not be thinking about my sister’s...um, things, Harry. Or I’ll have to Obliviate those particular images out of your head.”

“What?” Harry asked with mock penitence. “Like you don’t think about Hermione’s things? She’s just as much of a sister to me as Ginny is to you. So unless you’re willing to stop lusting after her, I’m not going to stop, er...” Harry suddenly realized that the girls were both there when Ginny’s hand moved rather quickly up the inside of his leg. “...thinking about Ginny,” Harry finished with an oddly-strangled sound to his voice.

“Right, then,” Hermione said. “Now that you’ve thoroughly discussed our *things*, let’s get on with the book, shall we?”

“Yes,” said Ron at same time that Harry said, “Right.”

Good. Now, the next thing it talks about is memory loss, which we've already touched on. It seems that in the process of inserting knowledge into the brain through the learning centre, the spell will often displace some things at random from the mind. It seems that Merlin's son -- Godfrey was his name by the way -- lost all memory of how to walk. It took his parents two years to re-train him."

Harry stiffened and immediately felt Ginny's mind brush his. *Don't worry*, she said. *I'll get you back in the air faster than Ron can spell knickers*.

Contorting his face to hold in a snort, Harry earned a glare from Hermione before she pressed on. "It also says that some of the effects went away with time; that if the person the spell was cast on didn't practice the magic learned, it would be lost. Also, it seems that most of the forgotten memories came back within ten years."

"So if we have forgotten some things," Ginny said, "like Harry forgetting about his glasses, he'll eventually remember?"

Hermione nodded and opened her mouth to say something when Harry interrupted.

"Does that mean my eyes will go bad again?"

Hermione turned to answer him and was interrupted by Ron. "Is that why you couldn't fly to save your life this afternoon?"

"Ron, I'm --" Hermione said before Harry glared at Ron.

"It's not like I had a choice in what I could forget, you know," Harry answered, running over Hermione's reply.

"Harry --" Hermione tried again with similar success.

"We need you, Harry. The team's counting on you," said Ron.

"Ron --"

"I'm doing the best I can," Harry gritted out through clenched teeth.

"Will you two stop it!" Hermione finally yelled. Harry and Ron turned to look at Hermione as if she had lost her marbles. Ginny just giggled into her hand.

"No, Harry, it doesn't mean your eyes will go bad, but it does mean that you'll remember that you wear glasses." Hermione closed the book and slid it into her bag. "As for you, Ron.... I'll see *you* in the morning."

Hermione stalked off to the girls' dormitories and Ron sat back in his seat. "What's the matter with her?"

*

The first two training sessions with Professor McTierny were used to determine where Harry and Ginny were magically. McTierny had them go through all the spellwork they had learned and asked them several questions about how they understood certain spells to work. Much to Harry's relief, he didn't seem to be missing any major spells, though he did have trouble remembering the incantation for the full-body bind. By the end of their last lesson, Harry felt like he had been revising for exams for two weeks and could barely think straight. Ginny, however, was glad for the practice, claiming that it would be invaluable for her upcoming O.W.L.'s.

The next session was supposed to be a practical lesson and Harry was more than excited to learn something, rather than recite passages of text and basic wand movements.

Walking into the empty Defence classroom, Harry and Ginny waited at the end of the stairs that led up to the Professor's office. There were piles of Quaffles, feathers, and pillows on the floor. When Harry gave Ginny a questioning glance, she only shrugged.

"Right on time," McTierny said as he descended the stairs. His trademark sunglasses were fixed firmly on his face. "Ready to get started, then?"

"Yes, Professor," Ginny said.

"Excellent. Just stand in the middle of the room there and we'll get started."

Harry and Ginny faced each other by the Quaffle pile and waited.

McTierny walked over to a pile of feathers and selected two. He placed one each at Harry and Ginny's feet and stepped back.

"Now," the professor said, stretching out a hand towards the red leather balls. "Observe, and see if you can tell which spells I'm using."

A Quaffle levitated from the pile and then flew towards his hand. When it reached the tips of his fingers, the Quaffle stopped, as if he had caught it, but when it started to slowly rotate, Harry knew that he was controlling the Quaffle's motions with magic.

Staring at the now-spinning Quaffle, inches above McTierny's hand, Harry tried to remember everything he had learned about wandless magic. It was supposed to disappear in wizards after they hit puberty. There were a precious few who had been able to hone the ability after reaching adulthood, but there were less than a handful every generation. As odd as the man in front of him was, Harry vowed to never cross him. The level of mental control that levitation and object manipulation like this required *with* a wand was unbelievable. For McTierny to be doing this *without* a wand was simply staggering.

The leather ball then flew back to join its mates and McTierny lowered his hand. "So which spells did I use?" he asked.

Ginny's mouth dropped open. "You can do wandless magic?" she asked incredulously.

"Tsk, ts, Miss Weasley. That doesn't answer my question at all." He turned to Harry and said, "Mister Potter?"

"Um...right. Let's see...Levitation, Summoning, more Levitation, some kind of manipulation spell I've never seen, then a Banishing charm."

"Excellent," McTierny said. "Five points to Gryffindor. Now, let's have you try, shall we?"

"I'm sorry?" Ginny asked. "I don't think I can do that *with* my wand...." *Absolutely ludicrous*, Harry heard Ginny say in his mind.

"Wands prevent a wizard from utilizing his full potential. You will find that as you focus your minds appropriately, you can use your magic much more powerfully without yours."

This set Harry's mind whirring. "If magic can be performed more powerfully without a wand, why do we all use one?"

McTierny looked Harry in the eye and said, "Dumbledore was right, you do ask the right questions." But he didn't answer. Instead he held out his hand and said, "Your wands."

Harry passed it over reluctantly. McTierny slipped it into his pocket and took Ginny's next. "Close your eyes and picture a feather in your mind."

But Harry wasn't done asking questions. "I don't think I can do this. I mean, wouldn't I have been able to do this before?"

McTierny raised an eyebrow at his cheek and said, "When was the last time you performed wandless magic?"

"Well," Harry said, thinking back to last year. "I made my wand light up when I couldn't see it, during a Dementor attack."

"Exactly. This is no different; you just need the proper training. Now, the feather, if you please."

Still not satisfied, but wanting to get on with things, he closed his eyes and the image of a feather appeared in his mind. It was an exact replica of the one at his feet. "All right," Harry answered.

"Now tell your mind to make it float. You may find it easier to say the incantation in your head as you do this."

The feather was suspended in his mind, exactly the same as the one he had levitated in first year. It was about up to eye level and he wanted to lift it up to the ceiling but something stopped him.

"Don't get carried away now," came McTierny's voice.

Harry chanced a peek and saw in front of him a feather, hovering exactly as he pictured it. Ginny opened her eyes as well, squeaked, and the feathers floated soundlessly to the floor.

"There, that wasn't too hard." McTierny pointed his hand at the feathers and they zoomed into his palm. "Tell me, did either of you say the incantation?"

"No. I – I didn't," said Ginny. All of a sudden, she sat on the floor and put her head between her knees.

"Me neither," Harry said. He was still a bit surprised at his ability to levitate the feather. *Was it possible?* His head felt light and the classroom spun slightly as he tried to balance himself.

"Steady, lad," said McTierny as he held Harry's shoulder to keep him from toppling over. "You'll feel a bit lightheaded as you begin to utilize your natural abilities, but it should wear off with practice." Harry's world stopped spinning and the older wizard let go of his shoulder. "Is this the first time you've reacted like this to using wandless magic?"

Harry shook his head to clear the last vestiges of disorientation and said, "Not really."

"Interesting," he said without further articulation. "We'll work on summoning and banishing when you've gotten used to levitation, and then more complicated magic once you've mastered those."

With that, they began working in earnest and Harry regretted that he had ever looked forward to this.

*

Walking past the winged boars statues that marked the boundary of Hogwarts, Harry and Ginny paused, took deep breathes, then linked arms and sauntered into Hogsmeade village. Harry was nervous. It was his first official date with Ginny and he didn't want to muck things up. He wanted it to be perfect.

They stopped at a few shops and did some window shopping, Harry making mental notes of the things that gave her particularly good reactions. To his surprise, Ginny didn't care much for jewellery.

Ginny simply shook her bracelet loose from the sleeve of the jumper she was wearing – his jumper from fourth year, the one with the dragon emblazoned on it, and said, "This is all the finery I need, Harry." Then she paused and with a playful twinkle in her eyes, amended, "Well, this and maybe someday...a ring."

With a sappy grin on his own face, Harry felt something deep move inside of him and he thought that nothing could make him happier than to be the one to put a ring on her finger.

“So where are we off to next?” Harry asked. Remembering that Ginny wasn’t wearing at least one proper foundational garment, said, “You said you needed to pick up some clothes?”

“Right,” Ginny said, with a playful wiggle of her torso. “Need to get some new bras and blouses – maybe a camisole or two while I’m at it.”

When they arrived at Gladrag’s, Harry balked. “You, uh...don’t need me in there to help you or anything, do you?”

Ginny giggled. “I suppose Mum would skin you alive if I coaxed you into the changing stalls, wouldn’t she?” When Ginny saw Harry’s face burning, she prodded further. “You’d like that I bet, wouldn’t you?”

“What?” asked Harry, regaining some of his composure. “The bit about your mum skinning me? I’ll have to pass, thanks.”

With a soft backhand to Harry’s torso, Ginny planted her lips on his and lingered for a moment before backing away. “That will have to keep you satisfied until later,” she said, a little breathless. “You run off to Zonko’s or something. But *don’t* go to Quality Quidditch without me. You got that, Potter?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry said smartly. “Get you’re things and meet me at the Three Broomsticks in an hour. I’ll be with Ron and Hermione – *if* I can get them out of Flourish and Blott’s.”

Ginny walked into the store with another lingering glance at Harry and disappeared among the racks of clothes.

Harry sighed and turned around – right into a pack of sixth year boys.

“Watch it, Potter,” said Dean Thomas. “Too love struck with Ginny to see where you’re going?”

Harry ducked his head and shoved his hands into his pockets. “Hey guys.”

“Ho, ho,” Seamus said as he sidled up to Harry and slung a lazy arm over his shoulders. “It’s not love struck, Dean. I think the problem here is that he’s been whipped.”

Dean guffawed and Neville chuckled nervously, as if he couldn’t decide to side with Harry or their other dorm mates.

“Hey,” Harry protested good-naturedly. “I’ll have you know that I’m still perfectly capable of making my own decisions.”

“Yeah?” Dean asked, crooking a brow as Seamus steered Harry towards the Three Broomsticks.

“Yeah,” Harry confirmed. “Like I can hang out with you guys all I want.”

Seamus adjusted direction abruptly and steered him towards Quality Quidditch Supplies.

Harry gulped and started to resist. Dean slung another arm around Harry’s shoulders and helped Seamus as they half-drag, half-carried Harry towards the shop.

Exercising the reflexes that made Harry an all-star Seeker, he ducked underneath their arms and spun around on the gravel path to face them. “I, uh...just can’t go in there.”

Seamus looked at Neville, then to Dean, and back at Harry. “Yep. Whipped, I tell you.”

Neville finally broke down and let out an odd croaking laugh, while Dean and Seamus were hanging on to each other as if they would collapse from their extreme laughter.

Harry gave a nervous chuckle and said, “When you meet the right girl, you’ll appreciate being whipped, too.”

They didn’t even bother to reply, though Dean waved a hand in Harry’s direction as they walked into the Quidditch shop.

Harry walked straight to the bric-a-brac shop that he and Ginny had been to earlier – the one on the corner across from Madame Puddifoot’s.

There in the display case in the window of the shop was a silver and glass unicorn the size of a pack of cards. Its hooves, horn and mane were all touched with real silver, while the body was made of frosted crystal. Ginny had fallen in love with it and Harry was determined to get it for her.

Walking out of the shop with a slightly lighter coin purse and neatly wrapped box, Harry took a few jaunty steps toward the Three Broomsticks and was immediately set upon by a girl with straight black hair.

“Hello, Harry,” Cho said breathily. Her robes and blouse were both unbuttoned to show some skin as a sickly-sweet aroma resembling some kind of flower assaulted his nose. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Um, yeah,” Harry said as he extracted himself from her grip. “That’s great.”

She blocked his retreat and forced him down a vacant alley behind the tea shop. “You need to give me another chance, Harry,” she said, blinking wildly while running her fingers up his school tie.

Harry's back hit the wall and he almost fell over a rusted garbage skip propped next to the back door. "I don't think that's going to work, Cho. I'm with Ginny now and that's not going to change."

"Don't be that way, Harry. I know it can work if you'd just give me another chance," she said, her face changing from plaintive to hard as she took a step back from him. "Don't make me do this, Harry," she said as she pulled a wand from her bag.

For a brief second, Harry thought she might hex him. Instead, she pointed the wand at her neck and said, "*Sugere* ." She sucked in a breath as a deep purple welt appeared just under her jaw bone. Then much to Harry's wonder she reached up under her robes and skirt tugging until he heard fabric rip. Next she tore a section of her robes by the arm.

"If you tell me no again, I'll scream. Afterwards I'll tell everyone that you tried to force yourself on me. You'll be expelled and probably thrown into Azkaban." Her eyes bore into his and Harry found no beauty there, only pain. "I know it can work, Harry; don't make me do this," she pleaded.

"Why?" Harry asked. "Why are you doing this at all?"

Cho took another step towards him and with her chin outstretched, said, "I love you, Harry – I've always loved you. I made a huge mistake last year and I want you to try to love me back."

Harry searched her face, looking for any sense of deceit or some mark of compulsion making her do this against her will. Finding nothing, Harry set his jaw. "No, Cho. Love doesn't work like that. You can't make someone fall in love with you, and even if you could, you won't find what you're looking for with me."

Looking like she had been slapped, Cho recoiled into the opposite wall.

Harry took the opportunity to bolt out into the alley, only to be stopped by Cho's piercing scream.

"Help!" yelled Cho, stumbling out onto the main street, her robes torn worse than before. She waved a shaky finger at Harry and then broke into a sobbing, keening cry.

Harry bolted away, unsure of where he could find sanctuary, but certain that he could not stay in Hogsmeade any longer.

*

Harry had only seen Professor McGonagall angry a handful of times, but he had never seen sparks fly from her wand. Cho sat in a chair on the far side of McGonagall's desk, while Harry sat in another.

"Tell me what is going on this instant," she said heatedly. "I've heard from ten students that you," she pointed to Harry, "tried to sexually assault her." McGonagall's finger moved in Cho's direction.

"You first, Mister Potter."

Harry, despite knowing the truth, was instantly nervous. "Y-You see, Professor...it's like this. Cho cornered me in the alleyway and asked me to give her another chance..."

"Another chance at what?" McGonagall asked.

"Well, she said that she loved me and that she wanted me to love her back."

The Professor nodded and indicated that he should continue. "S-She got really mad when I refused her and gave herself that bruise with a spell. Then she ripped her robes and threatened to tell everyone I had tried to force myself on her if I refused her again."

"And?" McGonagall said after Harry paused.

"I told her I was in love with Ginny and that she needed to let me go. When I stepped out of the alley, she started screaming." Harry hung his head and threaded his fingers through his hair.

"Miss Chang?" McGonagall said. "Your wand please."

Harry looked up to see Cho hand her wand to McGonagall. The Professor touched the tip of her wand to it and said, "*Priori Incantatem* ."

A ghostly mist rose from her wand that formed the shape of a pair of wings. Next was a cushion, then a pair of blinking eyelashes, a blue shimmering spell that Harry didn't recognize, and on it went. After several minutes, Professor McGonagall seemed like she hadn't found what she was looking for and stopped the spell.

"A levitation charm, cushioning spell, glamours, transfiguration spells. No sucking spell, Mister Potter." McGonagall extended Cho's wand back to her and Harry caught a flash of triumph on the Head Girl's face.

Harry thought back to the alleyway. The wand in her hand, positioned to cast the spell on her neck was *black* . The one in McGonagall's hand was light *brown* . Harry straightened his back and extended his hand to Cho. "*Accio Spare Wand!*"

Out from under her robes, came a shiny black wand. Cho make a grab for it, but despite her efforts, it sped to Harry's hand.

McGonagall's eyes rose as she tracked the wand's progression, then she looked back to Cho. The Head Girl was breathing heavily, bent forward on her chair as she stared at the wand in Harry's hand.

Without a word to either student, McGonagall took the wand from Harry and performed the spell again. This time, the first spell to come out resembled a pair of lips, pinched together exactly like they would had they been sucking on something.

"Would you care to explain this, Miss Chang?" McGonagall said patiently. "You realize that these sort of false accusations are a grave matter and that the punishment will be most severe."

*

Walking back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry tried to rationalize Cho's behaviour and came up short every time. Why would she be so desperate to get him to like her? Wasn't it obvious that he was in love with Ginny?

Ginny. In all the turmoil since he had left Hogsmeade, Harry had completely forgotten about his date with Ginny. She was *not* going to be happy.

As soon as he opened the portrait, he saw Ginny waiting on the other side, her arms folded across her chest, her toe tapping impatiently, and a scowl fixed on her face.

"Forget something, Harry?" she asked, her eyes boring into him like a severing charm.

"I – I, um...." In the face of her wrath only two things could penetrate his thoughts: when she was angry, Ginny was awfully powerful and fantastically pretty. He simply lost his ability to string two words together.

Ginny stepped forward and Harry flinched. Her arms became uncrossed and she took a probing sniff with her nose. "What's that? You've been with Cho Chang?"

Harry backed up until his back hit the inside of the Fat Lady's portrait. "Uh, well....you see...."

Ginny let loose a string of words that Harry was certain he had never heard before, even from her older brothers. "I leave you for two seconds and that tart pounces on you, eh? Who does she think she is? And what have *you* got to say for yourself, Harry?"

Defeated, Harry walked forward and captured her in a hug. "I'm sorry," he mumbled into her shoulder. The sharp contrast between the light scent on Ginny's neck and the wretched perfume on Harry's robes was striking. It was like the difference between a whisper and a roaring freight train. There was no doubt which one he preferred.

Ginny took a shuddering breath and said, "Tell me what happened, Harry. Why didn't you meet me?"

Harry pulled away and said, "You mean you haven't heard? I thought everyone would have been told by now."

Shaking her head, Ginny led him to a secluded corner of the common room. "Tell me."

"No," Harry said as they sat. "I'd rather show you."

They joined hands and faced each other on the sofa. Harry closed his eyes and leaned forward, his forehead making contact with Ginny's halfway. Soon, his memories of that afternoon were flowing into Ginny's mind and Harry began to feel waves of conflicting emotions roiling off of her. Anger, sadness, compassion, and finally, joy – when the memory of Harry being cleared in McGonagall's office played back – all echoed in his mind.

"Harry," she said softly. "Why?"

"I don't know," Harry replied. "I really don't think she's got her priorities straight, though."

Ginny flung her arms around Harry's neck and planted a kiss on his cheek. "You wait here. I'm going to kill a certain Head Girl."

She stood, but Harry grabbed her hand. "Don't, Ginny. I've got a much better idea for dealing with Cho."

*

The next Saturday was much cooler than it had been for Hogsmeade weekend. A storm had blown through mid-week and cleared out the lingering bits of summer, making Harry long for more time with Ginny by the lake. Soon, it would be too cold for extended stints in the open and they would be relegated to the castle.

Ginny had been true to her word and had trained Harry how to fly again; although Harry was far from being where he was the year before, he knew that he had a fighting chance.

"You ready to wipe the pitch with Slytherin?" asked Katie Bell, walking down the Gryffindor table at lunch. Like Oliver Wood, she was making sure that her team was eating while taking nothing for herself.

"Aye, Captain!" they yelled back. It had become their custom after hearing that Katie had a weakness for literature; she especially loved *Moby Dick*.

"Eat up and meet in the changing rooms in one hour. We've got some last minute planning to do, then we're going to show Malfoy what it means to really fly." Katie slapped each member on the back and walked out of the Great Hall.

“Probably off to polish all our brooms,” Ron said with a shake of his head.

“Nah,” offered Ginny. “More likely she’s going to pace in front of the door to the pitch until we show up.”

Ginny had been right, for when the team filed into the changing rooms, Katie was suited-up and ready for the game. With one last pep talk, they filed out onto the pitch, a nervous bubble wringing Harry’s stomach.

When they kicked off and were preparing for Madame Hooch’s whistle, his worry increased, as Malfoy took no time to start his taunts.

“Forget how to fly Potter?” he asked when Harry’s broom rocked a little as they reached altitude. “Or did your fancy broom finally give up on trying to make you a decent flier?”

Harry grumbled and glanced at Ginny, who was shooting daggers at Malfoy. She was so distracted, that when the Quaffle was released, she completely missed her pass and Slytherin took possession.

“Your girlfriend’s no better than you, Potter,” laughed Malfoy as they started looking for the Snitch. “Then again, she’s been trailing along after you for so long, maybe she’s finally been able to do something other than try to get into your pants.”

Harry seethed inside, wanting nothing more than to punch Malfoy’s smug little face. But the fact that Harry had to focus so completely on his flying, just to stay on his broom, made it almost impossible to make any kind of reply. He could only afford to pay attention to the game commentary when he was going straight – and going straight during a match could be deadly.

A Bludger whizzed by Harry’s head and he ducked clumsily to avoid it, earning another round of chortling from the Slytherin Seeker.

“Slytherin scores!” yelled Gary Stebbins – who had taken the commentating spot when Lee Jordan left school the previous year – so loudly that even Harry heard him.

Harry took a shallow dive and concentrated to hear the score. “Thirty to ten, Gryffindor,” said Stebbins.

The match went on like that for another hour, while Harry’s flying skills gradually declined. Gryffindor’s lead increased as Ginny, Natalie, and Katie began to execute their plays with speed and precision. Even the Slytherin Beaters, who were far better than Jack and Andrew, couldn’t seem to touch the gold and red-clad girls.

When the score was 190 to 60, Harry spotted the Snitch. It was hovering just behind the lower-right Gryffindor goalpost. One thing that Harry hadn’t forgotten, was how to Seek and with his improved eyesight, he only needed to give himself enough of a lead to beat Malfoy to the Snitch. Harry knew that his flying was too poor for anything else to work – he just needed to get Malfoy looking the other way.

Diving as fast as he could manage without losing his broom, Harry took Malfoy on a feint, vaguely aware of the attention the two Slytherin Beaters his dive had garnered him. Spotting Ginny with the Quaffle, he edged towards her and sent his mind’s eye to her. He felt her determination and skill as she passed off to Katie.

Using his link to know when the Quaffle was going to be passed next, Harry took Malfoy right into its path and barely avoided colliding with a Bludger as every player on the pitch converged on one location.

Ginny seemed to realise what Harry was doing at the last moment and barrel-rolled out of his way just in time. The Quaffle hit Malfoy square in the nose and Harry pulled his broom around as best he could, making it arc slowly around until it was pointed in the general direction of the Gryffindor goals.

With Malfoy distracted by a bloody nose, Harry was free to carefully race towards the Snitch. Gratefully, he still saw a sparkle of gold in the afternoon sunlight as it flitted around the base of the post. Taking a chance, Harry looked back to see Malfoy gaining on him. When he looked forward again, he found his broom dipping down and had to overcompensate to avoid hitting the ground.

Harry urged his broom faster, his hands sweating profusely and his mind singly on the Snitch – which was now flushed from its cover and racing towards the opposite side of the pitch.

Malfoy made the turn quicker and, before Harry could blink, had caught the Snitch.

A great cheer rang out from the green section of the stands and both Harry and Malfoy stared unbelievably at the struggling ball in the latter’s hand.

Malfoy had beaten Harry for the first time since they had been at Hogwarts and Harry couldn’t bear the thought of it. He aimed his broom for the Forbidden Forest and took off, unaware of the stunned looks on his housemates’ faces.

Consequences of the Mind 5: Communication Breakdown

Chapter Five - Communication Breakdown

Harry couldn't see much as he blasted into the forest; tears were streaming too freely for him to see properly and he gritted his teeth in frustration. The look on Malfoy's face haunted him. The Slytherin's laughter rang mockingly in Harry's mind. Part of his conscious mind observed that had he been travelling this fast during the match, maybe he would have caught the Snitch. Then he wouldn't have to face the disappointed looks on his team-mates' faces. He couldn't face them – not now, especially Ron. Especially Ginny.

Once he was into the forest proper, Harry dove recklessly, branches lashing at his face and arms, leaving his robes in tatters. The pain in his limbs distracted him from the bitter taste of defeat, the flavour of ashes. He pushed the Firebolt faster, darting clumsily around trees, being slapped in the face and head by thin saplings and whippy pine boughs.

When Harry turned particularly sharply around an almost leafless oak, he just about slammed into another flier. Some part of his brain processed the image – it was Ginny. Harry pulled up short, a scarce few feet from colliding with the redhead, bouncing roughly off of the oak instead. Leaning up against the oak, he bowed his head in defeat – the beatings from the branches now only a dull memory in the face of his humiliation.

"Harry?" Ginny's gentle voice asked.

"No, Ginny," Harry replied shakily. "I can't face them now. I can't even face you."

Ginny hovered closer to him and reached out a hand. Harry didn't stop her from touching him, torn between his shame and his need for comfort.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," she murmured. "I don't know what it means to you to lose something like this, but I want to try. I want to help you."

Harry shrugged, unable to put what he felt into words.

Ginny sensed this, pulling Harry into a warm embrace, planting her lips on his forehead. A cask of emotions burst inside him and he lost control. Crying like he had once before in Ginny's arms, Harry didn't fight it. At least in the Forbidden Forest there would be no witnesses to this moment of weakness.

When the last of his tears had fallen, Ginny wiped his cheeks with her sleeve.

"Ow," Harry exclaimed, drawing a hand to where she had rubbed his face

"Oh, sorry," soothed Ginny. "I forgot about your cuts."

Remembering his careless flight through the trees, Harry chuckled. "Me, too." Then, looking at her for the first time since she had cornered him, Harry said, "Thanks for coming for me. Thanks for rescuing me – again."

Ginny laughed. "I've got to rescue you a bunch more times before we're even, Harry, so consider this a down payment."

Harry's smile waned and he looked forlornly towards the castle. "I can't go back, Ginny. I can't ever make up to the team for losing to Slytherin, to *Malfoy*."

"That's a load of tosh and you know it," Ginny said matter-of-factly. "You're allowed to lose from time to time, even to the albino ferret boy. Besides, you act as if this whole thing was your fault. You didn't have any say over which memories would be lost. You didn't get to pick losing the thing you were best at...."

"Hey, at least I didn't forget *the* most important thing – like someone else I know," Harry protested.

Harry's voice had grown soft and as they continued to hover there, he could tell that Ginny had grown bashful. "Am I?"

"Am I what?"

"The most important thing in your life?"

Harry nuzzled her behind the ear with his nose and whispered, "Yes. Definitely."

Ginny shivered and pulled back a fraction of an inch to stop him from blowing on her neck. "Good," she said, holding onto him for a moment before slapping him on the rump. "That means this whole flying thing shouldn't be such a downer. You've got a lot of good things going for you and I'm one

of them, right?"

Harry gave a small nod.

"Then suck it up and get back to the changing rooms." Ginny pointed to a particularly nasty gash in Harry's shoulder and said, "You'd better see Madame Pomfrey, too, because I think these cuts may be beyond what I can..."

Ginny stiffened and then let out a piercing scream, pointing over Harry's shoulder. There, standing among the pines and oaks, stood Hagrid's *little* brother, Grawp.

"Want Hagger," the giant bellowed and took a lumbering step towards them.

Acting on instinct alone, Harry pulled Ginny onto his Firebolt and forced it to climb rapidly. Ginny held onto her broom with one hand and held onto Harry's waist tightly with the other.

Harry turned sharply to the right and wove around the large trunks of several trees. Grawp's lumbering steps could be heard behind them and Harry accelerated, all too aware of Ginny's precarious grip on his middle and her broom tucked under her free arm.

They finally broke free of the trees, but Harry knew that Grawp's presence on the castle lawn wouldn't be well received and dove back into the forest, leading Grawp back to where they had found him. Shooting through a clearing, Harry made sure that the giant had made it to a meadow within the forest, and – with one hand holding onto Ginny – pulled up hard on his broom until they were rocketing skyward. In the back of his mind, Harry could hear Grawp still hollering for Hagrid, but when Harry looked back at the top of their climb, the giant hadn't left the clearing.

Ginny relaxed behind him as they descended slowly towards the Quidditch pitch. Ginny's bare hand pushed into Harry's robes and wrapped around his middle. *I know someone who just flew better than Dai Llewellen*, her voice sing-songed into his head.

Harry started and almost fell off his broom. "I did, didn't I?" he said to himself. "I don't know how, but I remembered how to fly just then!"

With a whoop of joy, Harry pushed the broomstick down towards the earth, kicking it into high-speed and rolling several times for good measure – with Ginny screaming behind him, "HARRY POTTER, DON'T YOU DARE PLOUGH US INTO THE GROUND! I'M TOO YOUNG TO – AIEEEEE!"

*

Harry's grin hadn't dimmed since the broom ride back to Hogwarts, even when Madame Pomfrey was cleaning his wounds. The normally stern matron was in an abnormal rush when he arrived, gathering different potions and supplies and stuffing them into a satchel.

"Going somewhere?" Harry asked when she had finished applying the last of his bandages.

"Never you mind, Mister Potter," Pomfrey said as she stuffed another jug of an unknown potion into her bag. It must have had an expansion charm on it because the jug was at least half again as big as the satchel.

Harry adjusted the gauze on his forehead with his uninjured arm, saying, "It looks like whoever you're visiting needs to be in St. Mungo's, with all the potions you're going to give them."

Madame Pomfrey snapped the lid on her bag shut and turned to face Harry. She gave him an appraising stare that sent shivers up his spine. "If you must know, I'm going to visit the Headmaster. He needs a daily regimen of replenishment potions to keep his strength up, as he can't feed himself."

"Oh," Harry said. A brief pang of guilt coursed through Harry as he realized that he hadn't considered Dumbledore at all since the spell, having been caught up in his own problems. "Is he... is he all right?"

"I can't be certain, of course, but he seems to be recovering nicely." Then with a rare smile, she helped Harry stand. "Now you best be off to your dormitory for a nap. Blood replenishment potions often cause drowsiness. Normally I'd keep you here overnight, but as I won't be here to make sure that you stay put, I'm going to have to discharge you to the dormitory and hope for the best."

Harry grinned and shuffled off to the door. He had almost closed it when he turned to look back at the matron, who was disappearing into a green wall of flame in the infirmary fireplace.

*

November 22, 1996

Dear Mum,

The first couple of months at Hogwarts have been very busy and full of surprises. I thought that nothing would be as odd as last year, what with me hexing Harry and Snape and all. You already know about the learning spell of course – you did sign the permission letter and all – but what you probably don't know is that after Harry and I were put under the spell, we were both in a coma for a while. When I woke up, I had forgotten all about last summer. Harry was very patient with me, and despite the fact that I nearly hexed him when he told me we were an item, he found a way to restore my memories. I don't know what I would have done if he hadn't. Being with Harry is the best thing that's ever happened to me, Mum. Don't tell him this, but I wouldn't trade him for anything, even with his moodiness.

Remember how bitterly I complained my third year that I was so meagrely developed? Well, while I was in that coma, my boobs grew a full cup-size. I tried all sorts of charms, but in the end, I had to replace all of my bras, my blouses and camisoles. When I went into Hogsmeade on the first weekend, I bought some replacements; I had to charge them to our family's account, so I hope that you don't get too upset with me. I only bought two of each, which is the bare minimum for school. If there's any way that we can swing it financially, I really need two more of everything, but I'll understand if we aren't able to.

The really big news is Cho Chang. She was selected as Head Girl this year. You may remember that and she and Harry had a tiny relationship last year. When I say tiny, I mean really insignificant. She kissed Harry once and they went on one date before she broke it off with Harry. She's a total nutcase, if you ask me. Well, she attacked Harry in Hogsmeade when I was buying bras (if I had had Harry in the changing room with me when I was being fitted, none of this would have happened – I might add). She told him she loved him and wanted him back, but Harry stood his ground and defended his relationship with me. Such a sweet boy. She ripped her robes and hexed herself with a hickey sucking charm, then tried to get people to think he'd tried to rape her! I told you she was mental.

When McGonagall sorted everything out, Harry was cleared of all charges (no big surprise there) and Cho lost her Head Girl badge. Tracy Davis, a Slytherin, was named Head Girl in her place. According to Hermione, Roger Davies, the Head Boy, is less than happy and has made Prefect's meetings shorter than ever. Ron's chuffed because he thinks he'll get more snogging in with shorter meetings. I told him I wouldn't tell you that of course, but he forgot to lend me his Herbology notes from last year, so...there you are.

On the athletic front, Harry's flying was affected by the learning spell and his dodgy flying cost us the game with Slytherin, but we've worked that out since then.

Well, that's all for now. I'm going to be really busy this year with O.W.L.'s and all, so don't expect the ultra-long weekly letter like last year.

According to Ron, I'll be so busy with revising come March, that I won't even have time to breathe. I think he's just sore that Hermione's going to be planning all of his time, spare and otherwise for the next two years. Hee hee.

With Love,

Ginny

*

When Ginny had finished with her letter, she folded it into thirds and sealed it into an envelope with a charm her brother Bill had taught her. Only the recipient or a skilled curse-breaker could unlock the letter now.

Her roommates were taking their turns in the shower, so Ginny took a moment to write her letters and make sure Harry had made it back to his room. When the familiar yellow light on the edge of her consciousness tracked its way into Gryffindor Tower, Ginny gave a sigh of relief.

"Whatcha thinking about?" asked Steph as she walked into the dorm, lazily drying her hair with her towel. Stephanie Carter was a brunette with simple, yet pleasant, features. Some would call her dour, but Ginny had always appreciated her sharp wit and dry sense of humour.

Steph walked over to her bed and perched herself on the edge, still watching Ginny for a reaction.

"Nothing," Ginny said in a weak attempt to deflect her questions. Ginny's summer had been the subject of conversation too often for her liking and so she had made it a point to avoid it whenever possible. She wasn't about to fill her in on the workings of an Egretic bond that allowed her to track the comings and goings of her boyfriend.

"You were thinking about Harry again, weren't you?" Steph finished drying her hair and stood in front of a full-length mirror to begin brushing the shoulder-length tresses out. "I can tell by the way you hold your shoulders. It's always the same when it's Harry in your head."

"He's special, Steph. I can't help it."

"Ah yes, true love," she said, making a sickening expression before she broke into a brief laugh. "Seriously, Ginny, you've changed since last year and frankly, Kate and I are a little worried about you."

Ginny pulled off her blouse and searched for her pyjamas among the wadded-up clothes in her wardrobe. "If you're thinking that this is first year all over again, don't. Harry isn't the same as Tom and you know it. He's good and lets me make decisions without feeling guilty and..."

Steph held out her hand, halting Ginny's protests. "I know, Ginny. Just...be careful, okay? Being in love is one thing, losing your identity is another thing altogether."

Ginny let out her breath. There were times she wanted to explain everything to her friends – the bond, the spell, everything...but something always held her back. She gave Steph a small smile and said, "I will."

"So what'd I miss?" asked Kate, who breezed in to sit on Ginny's bed. "You were talking about the raven-haired wonder again, weren't you? You know, there are a number of girls who would like the straight information on those lips."

Kate McCloud was as opposite of Steph as one could be. She was dead in the morning and perky at night, always the last one to end a conversation and the first to start it up again. Her grades were average, but her passion for animals was legendary, earning her special praise from Hagrid during Care of Magical Creatures.

"Yeah, and stop calling him that. He's sensitive to names like that," Ginny admonished.

"Oh, fiddle faddle," Kate replied. "I bet you've got loads of pet names for him, don't you?"

Letting only a slight blush creep onto her cheeks, Ginny finished dressing into her night clothes and sat back on her bed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Kate let out a high-pitched cackle and rolled her head back for extra effect. "He's a keeper, Ginny. Anyone that makes you blush, is worthy of your affection."

Ginny shared a look with Steph and said, "Actually, he's a Seeker, and yes, he is blush-worthy."

"Speaking of which," Steph interjected, "what are you going to do about the now-former Head Girl seeking Harry's affections?"

"Nothing," Ginny answered automatically, hoping it didn't come out too fast. "She's been revealed for what she is – a cheap tart who doesn't know when to quit."

"Uh, huh," Kate said. "So when are you going to prank her?"

Ginny levelled a stare at her friend. "And what makes you think I'm even *thinking* about such a thing? Honestly."

Steph sat on Ginny's other side and said, "If anyone deserves it, she does."

"It's the only way to get her to leave you alone, you know," Kate said.

Steph was nodding and Ginny had to whip her head back and forth between them as they spoke. "You've got to mark your territory – make it known that you're serious about Harry."

"Yes. Or Cho may get the impression that you don't care," Kate said.

Steph rolled her eyes. "We know that you do, of course."

"But Cho obviously doesn't," finished Kate.

"Listen," said Ginny as she stood to face them both at the same time. "Harry and I have the whole thing under control. You don't need to worry about it."

"Ooh," they chorused together.

"So it *is* a prank! A double-prank!" Kate cheered. "Do give us fair warning if it involves things that transform or explode, okay?"

Ginny looked between the two girls and shook her head. "You're both mental, you know that?"

"Yes, yes. Just tell us before you do it, all right? I really, really want pictures for my album," pleaded Steph.

Reluctantly, Ginny nodded. "All right. But no telling *anyone*. You got that? Or you'll be the next on the hit list."

*

Uncle Moony,

Greetings from the historic pranking grounds of the Marauders, past and present. I thought I'd give you fair warning that Ginny and I are cooking up some pranks worthy of your legacy. The reason for the pranks involves one former Head Girl, Cho Chang. Last year, she and I had an ill-fated, short-run relationship of sorts that ended on what I assumed to be amicable terms. According to her, she's still in love with me and wants me to ditch Ginny. Now, assuming that I'd even survive the experience of telling Ginny that I was going to leave her, why does Cho think I want to be back with her? Nothing ever worked in that relationship. Nothing. I tried to tell Cho that – that Ginny and I were serious and I wanted to keep it that way – but she was having none of that.

So on my first official outing with Ginny – the first Hogsmeade weekend, I left Ginny at Gladrags so she could buy some unmentionables and I went to pick up a gift for her. Cho found me just after I left the shop and cornered me in an alley behind Madame Puddifoots. She tried to force me to agree to leave Ginny and threatened to claim I'd raped her if I didn't. The stupid cow actually ripped her own knickers and robes and gave herself a hickey! I did the dumbest thing I could do in the situation and ran. When the dust settled, Cho lost her badge and I gained yet another reputation – that of a two-timing pervert. At least, that's what the majority of girls in Ravenclaw think. Stupid House loyalty. Ginny and I are doing well. We've had some rough patches, but working through them has brought us closer together. The biggest thing is that we've really become, well, closer lately. It's a little scary to be that involved with another person. I feel like my life is so out of control – especially when I'm around her. One second, we're just good friends, then we're snogging away and then all of a sudden, I can't control where my hands are and she's driving me completely insane with the noises she's making and... I guess that was too much information, wasn't it? I just need some advice, really. Are all relationships like this? Or does Ginny affect me this way because of our bond, or are the Ravenclaw girls correct and I am a depraved pervert... or what?

Sincerely Clueless,

Harry

*

Walking down the stairs to the Entrance Hall, Harry passed by a knot of Ravenclaw third-years, who all gave Harry looks colder than the late November breeze outside the castle. He did his best to ignore them and to not look at their table as he sat in his usual spot across from Ron and Hermione. Ginny usually slept in on Sunday morning, so this was now the unofficial time when the original trio would get together and talk.

"Pass the pepper, Harry?" Ron asked.

Harry handed it over and watched as his friend poured a few shakes on his scrambled eggs, not looking at Harry once. Glancing at Hermione, Harry raised an eyebrow in question, to which Hermione mouthed the word 'Quidditch'.

Forking a mouthful of his own eggs, Harry chewed and carefully considered Ron's mood. He swallowed and waited for Ron to spear a sausage with his fork. "You got something to say to me, Ron? About yesterday's game?"

Ron's sausage paused halfway to his mouth and then slowly lowered back to his plate. "Yeah, actually, I do. We were counting on you, Harry. Our Chasers really cleaned Slytherin's clock and all you had to do was keep Malfoy from catching the Snitch for a few more goals. But you let us all down – it's sort of hard to just let that go, you know?"

A fresh wave of anger started to boil inside of Harry, but he forced it down with a determined swallow. "Ron.... No one regrets yesterday more than me. I certainly didn't want Malfoy to catch the Snitch – you make it sound like I was just standing there with my hands in my pockets and let him have it! Do you know what really upsets me about your attitude? You of all people know *exactly* why I couldn't fly yesterday, and you still can't let it go. It's a game. A bloody brilliant game, but at the end of the day, no one dies, alright?"

Ron and Harry stared at each other over their cooling breakfast as Hermione wrung her hands in worry. Ron narrowed his eyes and nodded. "Fair enough," he said with a smile. "I can live with that, mate. But we've got to do something to take Malfoy down a couple of pegs. He's become even more unbearable than ever."

Harry's grin matched Ron's and they both knew it was over. "Besides," Harry said as he, too, speared a sausage. "Ginny and I worked out the block that took my flying away – well, with the help of Hagrid's little brother; I can fly just fine now."

Hermione started. "What? You got your memories back? How? When?"

Chewing on his sausage, Harry felt a warm sensation push on the edge of his consciousness. "Ginny's up," he said conversationally. "I'll let her tell you the story; I've got to finish that essay on Dittany for Herbology," he said, draining his pumpkin juice and pushing away from the table. "Hufflepuff's Seeker won't get the Snitch, Ron. I promise."

*

The next Tuesday, after classes, Harry and Ginny found themselves in the Defence classroom, fully engaged in dodging pillows sent wandlessly from their professor. The point of the exercise was for them to try to use their own wandless magic to banish the pillows back at McTierny, but more often than not, the pillows ended up hitting them in the head.

"Oof," said Harry as a silk, lace-edged one smacked him in the face. "*Depulso!*" he yelled at the pillow that was following it, his hand held out in its general direction – but the pillow continued in its arc, grazing Harry's shoulder.

Ginny was having only slightly better success. "*Depulso!*" she yelled, and the pillow that was aiming for her head deflected upwards slightly and bounced off the wall behind her.

The dizziness that had completely overwhelmed them during their first lesson was no longer there, but a distinct buzzing noise in their minds told them that they were still building up a tolerance for wandless magic.

"Come on, now," their professor said. "If these were boulders, you'd be dead by now."

McTierny sat down in one of the vacant desks that lined the classroom walls and propped his feet on another. Then, with a mock yawn, flicked another set of pillows at the pair.

Harry growled and set his jaw, imagining the pillow in his mind flying right into McTierny's face. A faint blue light infused his hand and in his head he said, "*Depulso!*" The pillow moved a fraction, but still hit Harry – this time in the chest. Looking down at it, Harry noticed a tabby cat was embroidered on the pillow's face and had to do a double-take when he noticed the outline of a pair of tortoise-shell spectacles around its eyes.

After another hour of work, Ginny had made enough progress to stop the pillow in mid-air, but still wasn't able to make it fly back towards their professor. Harry was making it change course, but momentum still carried the pillows in his general direction.

"Merlin, that's hard," Harry said as he sat heavily on the floor, Ginny taking a similar position beside him. "I don't think I've worked that hard at spellwork since the Triwizard Tournament."

Ginny ran the back of her hand across her sweaty brow and nodded. "Don't even think about sneaking up to my dorm tonight, Harry. I'm knackered."

McTierny's eyebrows rose above the dark frames of his glasses. Harry guffawed and poked her in the side, where he knew she was most ticklish.

"Ah!" Ginny squealed and rolled away from Harry. "I was only kidding, Harry."

"There's truth in all kidding," McTierny said with a smirk as he sat down next to them on the floor and pulled out his wand from a concealed pocket in his robes. He then conjured three goblets and an empty pitcher, which promptly filled itself with ice-cold pumpkin juice. Filling each one from the pitcher, he said, "Have a drink and let's review what we've learned tonight."

The pitcher re-filled itself and Harry reached out to take the nearest goblet, then offered it to Ginny. She took it with an acknowledging smile, her eyes twinkling and Harry took another for himself.

When they had all emptied at least one goblet-full, McTierny said, "So what was the hardest thing about tonight's lesson?"

Harry thought for a moment, but Ginny beat him to the punch. "Focusing enough magic into the spell to do any good."

"Good, good. But why was it hard?"

Again, Harry furrowed his brow in thought and something popped into his head. "Because it takes too much concentration to tell your magic what to

do.”

“Take ten points, Mr. Potter.” McTierny leaned back against the legs of a nearby desk and continued, “The most difficult part of wandless spellwork is being able to put enough magic into it. For each spell, there is a set amount of magic required to make it operable. Squibs have some magic in them, but not enough to do any of the spells we take for granted, like lighting a fire, or cleaning dishes. With wandless magic, you have to discipline your mind to control how the magic flows. Wands were invented to provide an artificial focus for people that couldn’t do it mentally – opening up magical potential to a great deal more wizards and witches.”

McTierny paused and Harry noticed that Ginny had pulled her hair down and was in the middle of bunching it back together. He watched her for a second before turning to the professor.

“So the question is, how do we learn to focus our magic enough to perform the spells?” asked Harry.

“Have you heard of a little game called chess?”

*

For the next few days, Harry and Ginny would finish their homework and play each other at chess. Harry was quickly discovering that Ginny was every bit as good at the game as her brother, but that the special rules McTierny had them using for the game made the playing field almost level.

“Check,” Ginny announced one evening. Ron and Hermione were off snogging under the pretence of Prefect duties, yet again, and had even asked Harry for use of his Invisibility Cloak – a service he was all too happy to oblige if he didn’t have to see their lips locked together.

Ginny’s rook was positioned along a line intersecting with Harry’s king. There were no pawns in this variety of Muggle chess (the magical pieces were confused by non-traditional setup) and Harry’s attack-centred strategy became advantageous. Ginny normally lured her opponents into a carefully disguised trap and, without the ability to sacrifice pawns, made it abnormally difficult to hold off a direct assault.

Following McTierny’s advice, Harry let his vision of the board slip and be replaced with a mental picture of it instead. One at a time, the pieces on the imaginary chess board moved in sequences as Harry played out various scenarios in his head. Once he got past the first few moves of each set, his grasp of possibilities started to lessen – but not before he discovered a defence.

Blinking his eyes open, he moved his remaining bishop down to the space in front of his king, blocking Ginny’s rook and threatening her own king. With one avenue protected, the king could only move from behind Ginny’s guarding knight and bishop to her left. In two moves, Harry would have his queen assaulting the white king directly.

“Your move, Gin,” Harry said automatically, still pondering the board as she leaned forward.

Her foot found his under the table and he looked up. “You’ve improved quite a bit, you know? Even with this horrible arrangement,” she said, pointing to the board.

Harry chuckled a little and ran his foot along the back of her leg, completely aware of the affect it was having on the redhead.

The portrait door opened and a familiar head appeared in the doorway. Remus Lupin.

“Remus!” Harry shouted and disengaged himself from the table and Ginny to greet him.

“How are you?” Remus asked as they embraced.

“Fine. What are you doing here?” Harry asked when they pulled apart. “I hope my letter wasn’t the reason, because...well, I just hope it wasn’t.”

“No, Harry,” Remus said with a nod as Ginny as she, too, hugged their former professor. “I’m actually here for something else and thought I would drop by to see you for a minute.” He turned back to Ginny and said, “Do you mind if I borrow your gentleman friend for a while? I promise to return him in good condition later tonight.”

Ginny smiled and gave Harry a peck on the cheek. “Sure thing, Remus. I would have just had to cream him at chess otherwise.”

Harry let out a bark of laughter and gave Ginny a playful shove on the shoulder. “You wish, Weasley. I was just about to crush you.”

Ginny shook her head and said, “That’s what you think. Have fun.”

Following Remus out of Gryffindor Tower, Harry could tell that the older wizard did not want to talk about anything just yet, so they fell into a companionable silence.

When they arrived at an empty classroom, Remus let Harry walk in first. As Harry settled into a chair by the teacher’s desk, Remus flicked his wand at the door and it sealed with a squelch. Another flick of his wand and Harry’s ear’s popped – the silencing spell using a difference in air pressure to ensure sound would stay in the room.

“Is what you have to say that important?” Harry asked, suddenly serious. “I had hoped a little advice on girls wouldn’t require complete privacy.”

Remus sat down in the chair at the teacher’s desk and Harry was reminded, yet again, that Remus had been a teacher – and a very good one at that. “Actually, I’ve come to get you caught up on where the Order is with Voldemort. Dumbledore made it clear that you were to be kept in the loop before he got himself knocked out by that ruddy spell. Then, if you’re still inclined, we can talk about you and Ginny.”

Harry nodded. "You don't approve of Dumbledore's spell? It's helped me loads as I haven't had a power-hungry maniac rummaging around my head since."

Remus sighed. "I'm sorry, Harry. Things have been difficult for the Order since Dumbledore's departure. And part of the reason I'm here is to tell you that the war isn't going all that well because of it."

"Oh," Harry said contritely. "I hadn't realised..."

"No," Remus interrupted. "I suppose you hadn't." He didn't say it with any trace of bitterness, but Harry couldn't help but feel guilty for it.

"Voldemort has become much more aggressive since the Ministry acknowledged his re-emergence," Remus continued, gaining Harry's full attention. "He's made a few direct attacks, but seems to be concentrating on recruiting new Death Eaters. The Order has focused on deflecting those efforts with mixed success, and for now, it seems to be working."

"So," Harry said, his mind whirring, "have the Death Eaters in Azkaban been set loose? I assume the Dementors have already gone to his side."

Remus set his wand on the desk in front of him and propped his elbows on either side of the nicked and dented piece of wood. "No, Azkaban is still secure, but there's no telling when Voldemort might break his followers out. The Dementors left Azkaban soon after the Ministry incident last June and are presumably working for Voldemort. I don't think we've seen the last of them. I don't want to think about the prospect of Voldemort's closest followers on the loose again. But the Ministry claims they can't spare more Aurors to guard prisoners when they have so many other things to worry about." Remus finished by pushing at a barely-noticeable moustache with his thumb and forefinger.

"So why doesn't the Order do something then?" Harry asked pointedly. "It seems like now that Voldemort's in the open, you should get more support from other wizards."

"It's true that the Order is no longer as clandestine as it once was, but it *is* an unofficial organization, and as such, cannot take direct action with Ministry-controlled departments or institutions. You have to remember, Harry, that making the Order any more visible than it is, invites even more direct assault from Voldemort's forces."

Grudgingly, Harry knew Remus had a point, but thought the whole idea of dividing the light side into 'official' and 'unofficial' camps wasn't the best way to fight a war. "So what's Voldemort's new angle? Last year, he wanted to prophecy, the year before, to get a body. What's he going after now?"

Remus looked at Harry for what seemed a long while, seeming to size Harry up, and then said, "We have no idea – and that's what has us most concerned about Dumbledore's state. We've never been certain what Voldemort has wanted to accomplish along the way to total domination of the Wizarding world, but we've at least had some hints. Now...there's just no indication – none at all. I read history, Harry, Muggle and Magical – this is too much like the phoney war phase of the Muggle World War Two – we found out that everything we'd been watching was a feint, and by the time we caught on to what was really happening, we'd lost about two years of momentum. We can't afford to get that far behind in *this* war. "

They sat together in silence as Harry tried to think of something to say. Voldemort was out there right now, moving towards some new evil and it chilled Harry to think that the Order of the Phoenix had no knowledge of how to counter him.

There is one thing – something that I remember from when Voldemort attacked me last – he said something about a path..." Harry paused, straining his mind back to the incident where he had almost been killed in his own mind.

"The Path of Light?" Remus asked.

"Yeah," Harry said and nodded in shock. "How did you know?"

"There are some in the Order who think it's a wild goose chase, but Dumbledore mentioned that in the last *official* Order meeting he attended."

"Do you know what it is, exactly?" Harry asked. "Dumbledore gave Hermione a book, but he didn't tell us much about it."

"Hmm," said Remus. "That *is* interesting, but I'm afraid the Order won't be pursuing that particular option until Dumbledore is well. But promise me something, Harry?"

"Anything."

"If Hermione is able to translate that book, send for me immediately if Dumbledore still isn't well."

Harry nodded. "Of course."

Remus leaned back into his chair and the twinkle returned to his eyes. "Unless you've got more questions about Voldemort, let's talk about your girl problems, shall we?"

*

Ginny trudged down the dark stairs toward Potions, her backpack heavier than at any time she could remember. Along with her normal load of parchment, ink, quills, Potions kit, and Potions text, Ginny was also carrying three reference books from the library on the medicinal uses of common herbs.

Steph was ahead of her, talking with Colin Creevey, while Kate was chattering away with Luna Lovegood about their recent essay. From what

Ginny could tell, however, it seemed like a one-sided conversation.

"I don't know why Professor Snape has had this fixation with medicinal potions all of a sudden," Kate was saying. "I mean, it's not like St. Mungo's is going to run out."

Luna made a vague gesture with her hand and focused her bulging eyes on Kate. "What if they have?"

Kate stopped walking and both Ginny and Luna turned to look at her. "That's just...silly," she said and continued on to their lesson.

Ginny could tell that Professor Snape was in a foul mood, but she didn't know why. She would have thought that having Malfoy catch the Snitch would have cheered him up some.

"Turn in your books to page three hundred and ninety-four," Snape said as Ginny took her seat by Luna. "You will read this chapter for fifteen minutes and we will then proceed to make the potion outlined at the end. Any questions can be asked when you have finished reading the chapter."

The sounds of pages being rustled filled the classroom and Ginny watched as Snape sat behind his desk. When he caught her eye, she focused on her book and began reading.

Adamo Captum

Captive Love

This potion will force the drinker to divulge anything requested by the first person of the opposite sex he or she sees. It creates a strong feeling of romantic love, powerful enough to overcome the subject's natural resistance to normal interrogation techniques. Application of this potion is protected by the International Treaty on Prisoner Treatment of 1465 and its administration is considered a war crime under this treaty.

Ginny continued to read, including the instructions on brewing the potion. It was remarkably simple, but she wondered why in the world Professor Snape was having them brew a love potion – regardless of the difficulty.

"Time's up," Snape announced. "You should have read the entire chapter by now and have a firm grasp on what it takes to brew this potion. If there are no questions...."

But Kate's hand was in the air before he could get past the second word of his last sentence.

"Miss McCloud," Snape said with a sneer. "What is it about this incredibly simple potion that you're pea-like mind can't grasp this time?"

"Well," she began sheepishly, "it's not that I don't understand *howto* brew it necessarily, it's that I thought we couldn't brew love potions in school."

Ginny found herself and many of the other students around her nodding, as Kate asked the very question on everyone's mind.

Snape's eyes narrowed and he swooped over to where Kate was sitting. "If I had wanted your opinion on the suitability of my lesson material, I would have had you filling out surveys." Snape reached out with his arms and grasped the edge of the desk as if it were keeping him from pouncing on her. "The *Adamo Captum* potion happens to employ several techniques that will be tested in your O.W.L. examination at the end of the year – unless you'd *like* to fail your exam?"

Kate swallowed loud enough for Ginny to hear and lowered her head. "N-No, Professor."

Snape whipped around and stalked to the front of the class. "You have one hour to complete the brewing of this potion. There will be no sharing cauldrons today." The class let out a collective moan that was much louder on the Slytherin side. "You will each demonstrate your abilities independently and I want the entire contents of each cauldron at the end of class. Consequently, you will have to leave your cauldrons with me until next class and will need to mark them with your names." He looked to the clock on the back of the class and said, "One hour."

As Ginny and Luna took out their cauldrons, they shared a glance and began to sort out their ingredients. "Don't you think this is odd?" Ginny asked with a whisper.

The Ravenclaw shrugged her shoulders and began chopping dandelion roots, obviously unwilling to engage her in conversation now that they were tasked with brewing a potion.

*

Harry found himself whistling as he walked to breakfast. Ron and Hermione were in front of him, holding hands and smiling. There was Quidditch practice in the evening and Harry was more than excited to show the rest of the team that he was back in form. Ginny had an early class that morning, so she was supposed to join them for breakfast, and Harry had her Christmas present already wrapped and safely tucked into his trunk. Things could scarcely be better.

The morning post brought the *Daily Prophet* for Hermione a letter for Ron from his mum and a visit from Hedwig for Harry.

"Hello, girl," Harry said as she held out her leg for him to take his letter, apparently not content to drop it on his lap like a common school owl. "Bring me some good news?"

Once the letter was free, he tipped his goblet down for her to sip from and offered a bacon rind as payment for her services.

The letter was from Remus and was as short as it was welcomed.

*Harry,
I'll be at school for the next few days to take care of some personal business. Let's meet and talk more about your 'problem'.
Remus*

Harry folded the parchment and slipped it into his pocket just as Ginny arrived and sat beside him. "Morning, luv," he said.

Ginny grumbled, but let him kiss her anyway. She seemed to brighten upon seeing Hedwig, however, and cheerfully gave her a scratch on her head. "Fancy meeting you here, pretty girl."

Harry caught Ron's eye and they both shook their heads. "Mental," Ron mouthed.

"And I like it," Harry said out loud.

"What is it you like?" Ginny asked, as Hedwig took flight.

"You," Harry said and Ron made a retching sound.

Ginny kicked Ron under the table and everyone but Ron started laughing.

Movement at the Head Table caught Harry's eye and he was pleased to see Remus taking a seat next to McGonagall. They spoke for a moment before a flash of fire appeared in front of the acting Headmistress and a letter fell on top of her plate.

Ginny's hand found Harry's back as she looked on with him.

McGonagall took the note and read it through once before she thrust it at Remus and stood. She nodded at Professors Flitwick, Snape, and Sprout before she walked swiftly out of the Great Hall. Remus glanced at Harry and then followed.

"What do you reckon?" Ron asked and Harry turned to see Hermione watching the scene with narrowed eyes.

"Something's happened," Hermione said. "Your scar hasn't been hurting or anything, has it?" she asked.

Harry found his scar automatically, testing it with the tips of his fingers. "No, I haven't felt anything since Dumbledore performed the spell."

"I suppose we'll just have to get our news like the rest of the students, then," Hermione said, holding up her still unopened *Daily Prophet*.

*

They didn't have to wait long. The morning's classes were cancelled that day and it left the students to speculate to themselves. Every rumour was as unlikely as the next and Harry eventually tuned out what they had to say. The insistence of their professors that afternoon that nothing had happened only stoked the fires of conjecture and by the end of the day, the Minister was sacked, Hagrid was the new Headmaster, and Voldemort had been named captain of Puddlemere United.

All rumours were put to rest, however, when the post arrived the next morning. In large bold print on the front of the *Daily Prophet* were the words:

Azkaban Seized by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named

Death Eaters and other criminals join forces with the Dark Lord as terror sweeps country.

Hermione had read the entire paper through three times before Harry had a chance to see it himself. When he had finished with the lead story, he wished he hadn't.

"Twenty Aurors killed," one third year said.

"They used over a hundred Dementors..." said another.

"And a Giant," remarked his friend.

With the commotion over the paper's announcement, classes had been cancelled again and the students shunted off to their houses.

"Blimey," Ron said as the four of them took seats in one of the corners. "Nobody saw this one coming."

"You got that right," Harry said. "Not even the Order."

Hermione, Ron and Ginny all looked at Harry and he could read the questions on their faces as if they had been tattooed on there. "Remus told me they had no idea what Voldemort was up to. Not exactly."

"I guess having Dumbledore out for the count doesn't help does it," remarked Ginny.

"No," Hermione added. "Neither does the fact that the Ministry is a complete disaster."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

Ron shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Well, my dad mentioned that since You-Know-Who's been in the open, the Ministry has done worse than nothing – like they did last year. They've been cutting back the Auror budget, not letting them hire new recruits.... They even tried to sack Madame Bones when she protested to the Wizengamot."

"But with Dumbledore gone," Hermione continued, "there has been less motivation to move against Fudge and he's taken the Ministry in a completely counterproductive direction."

Ginny was nonplussed, however. "Azkaban wasn't secure anyway," she said. "Tom can have it for all I care. We just need to figure out a way to keep him there."

"But all those dead Aurors," Harry said as he pushed his hands into his hair. "They all died because of Fudge's incompetence."

Ginny didn't respond and Harry stood, pacing between the sofa and chairs where his friends sat. "Maybe Ginny's right," he said at length. "Voldemort can keep Azkaban. I mean, how hard can it be to build another prison?"

"But Harry," Hermione said. "This is really significant. Voldemort's never taken possession of anything before. It means he's serious about taking over the Wizarding world this time." She looked around at Harry, Ginny, and Ron and said, "It means that he needs a place to gather his army – to get ready to attack the Ministry and the Order. One last push and no one will be able to stop him."

Harry looked at his friend and as he mulled over what she had said, something changed within him. Voldemort was serious about taking over the Wizarding world, so Harry had to be serious about stopping him.

Consequences of the Mind 6: Maidencombe Beach

Chapter Six – Maidencombe Beach

With the shock of Voldemort's capture of Azkaban, and the assumed bolster to his forces that the imprisoned Death Eaters there gave him, the mood at Hogwarts was grim. After two weeks without any more information on Voldemort or his followers, the panic that had gripped the school that day ebbed into a distant memory. By the time the first Saturday of December was upon them, it had all but left their minds.

The day had dawned tepid and clear, but there was the promise of a cold storm in the western sky. Harry and Ginny took leave of their classmates and walked hand-in-hand towards the Quidditch pitch, intent on enjoying the snowless grounds one last time and the peace that was sure to leave them once Voldemort made his next move.

Harry swung a picnic basket from his free arm and smiled at the simple pleasure of having Ginny next to him. As she leaned her head against his shoulder, they both sighed contentedly. Being with Ginny had been a balm for Harry. It wasn't so much that he needed her, as that he couldn't imagine life without her. She had become part of him somehow and Harry couldn't find a way to explain the abrupt change – he just knew his life was now inextricably entwined with hers.

Ginny led him up a small hill behind the pitch as several bumblebee-coloured players began to fly around the stadium. Their distant shouts could be heard clearly if they were facing Harry and Ginny. Ginny conjured a woollen blanket and spread it out on the ground.

"Pity the pitch was booked today," Harry said with a taint of humour in his voice.

Ginny smiled as they sat and took the basket from Harry. "Yes, pity. We'll just have to make do with this spot for our date, then," she explained, as if there were someone watching and they needed to know the cause of their plans changing.

Harry took the carafe of juice from Ginny and poured it into two large mugs. Ginny handed him a sandwich and they began to eat.

Soon, Ginny had her head on Harry's lap and Harry had his arm draped over Ginny's hip as they both watched the Quidditch players in the distance.

"Smith hasn't got his new Chasers trained yet," Ginny said distractedly.

Harry wiped some mustard from his lips and set down the last bite of his sandwich. "Their Seeker needs work, too. Eleanor something-or-other?"

"Eleanor Branstone," Ginny confirmed.

"She's got talent; and the right body-type for Seeking..."

"Been looking at her body closely, then?" Ginny asked cheekily.

"Only for the good of the team, mind you," Harry said with a grin. "But what I was going to say was that she's still inexperienced. See how she doesn't quite know what the Snitch is doing until it escapes?"

Ginny was squinting her eyes in the direction Harry was pointing. "How do you even see that tiny little thing all the way out here?"

Harry puffed out his chest. "Loads of training, natural talent, and – OOF!"

The back of Ginny's hand smacked into Harry's midsection and the wind whooshed out of his lungs. "– loads and loads of ego," Ginny finished for him.

Harry rubbed his stomach and then transferred his hand to Ginny's, continuing to rub in small circles.

"Mmm," she said as he traced along her rib-cage. "I'll keep you for now, though."

Ginny turned to face up, granting Harry better access to her middle, but Harry chose to move his hand up to her head, instead. She pouted for a second, but as he applied gentle pressure to her temples, her face melted into a drunken grin.

As he moved his fingers through her hair, Harry became fascinated with how soft it was, how many shades of red it contained, and the fact that Ginny became a pile of goo as he worked his way across her scalp.

Gently transitioning from massage to smoothing her hair, Harry watched Ginny's eyes until they fluttered open. "That was very nice, Harry. I didn't realise how much stress I was carrying until you released it all."

"Funny how that works, isn't it?" Harry asked. "Always glad to be of service, Miss Weasley."

Ginny bit her lip and then sat up, curling her arms around Harry's neck. "It's a service I'm glad to return, Mr. Potter," she said softly. Harry slid his hands under her head and pulled her closer until their lips met.

One of the few downsides of their bond was the fact that kissing required more and more restraint. The pleasure seemed magnified, though Harry mused later that maybe Ginny was just getting astronomically better at that particular activity. Still, when they were together, their minds and hearts completely open to each other, there seemed to be an unrestrained feeling of joy that connected them. It grew stronger and stronger the more they lingered and when they broke apart, panting, eyes glazed, hearts racing, it was all Harry could do to not abandon restraint altogether.

"You're always such a deep thinker, Harry," Ginny whispered. "Does kissing me always evoke such contemplation?"

Harry trailed small kisses along her nose and around her lips. "Yes," he answered. "Everything about you makes me think." Kiss. "Makes me want to be better." Kiss. "Makes me want to be the best – for you."

Ginny blinked away a tear and grasped Harry into a strangling embrace. "Oh, Harry," she said tremulously. "I love to hear you say things like that."

Then she was laughing, and Harry was wiping her tears away. They held each other for a while longer and the afternoon started to slip away. As Hufflepuff left the pitch, the sun dipped low on the horizon.

Reluctantly, Harry pulled Ginny onto her feet and they made their way back to the castle, both whistling the same song.

*

That evening, Harry noticed Hermione casting him odd looks as she sat amongst a pile of books and parchment. They had all completed their homework earlier that day as a way to convince Hermione to participate in their chess games. Now that she had been thoroughly trounced by both boys, her quill was zooming over her parchment as she leafed through one of the four open books in front of her and every so often, she would catch Harry's eye. It was a calculating look, as if Harry was the subject of an impending prank that required months of planning and research, and it unsettled him.

Ron's bishop was brutalising his rook, and the action caught Harry's attention again. Ginny was sitting on the sofa next to him, reading his copy of *Seekers and Chasers: Who's really more important?* A few third years were agonising over their Potions assignment, and Crookshanks was batting at a few dust bunnies that Ginny had enchanted into mice for him.

Hermione finished a long complex equation, or at least that's what it looked like from across the table when Harry glanced up. She checked her calculations, throwing the quill to the table. "Yes!" Hermione yelled, pumping her fists into the air as she broke the peace of the common room. All heads turned to watch her as she stood abruptly, clutching a piece of parchment. She stalked over to where Harry, Ron, and Ginny sat, and brandished it like a prize. "It *can* be done and I know how to do it!"

Ron was the first to speak. "Know how to do what? Suck You-Know-Who into an unbreakable Butterbeer bottle?"

"No," she said, sending him a scathing look, "although that's not an altogether bad idea, Ron." Then she turned to Harry and that calculating look returned. She sat down on the sofa's arm next to him and said in a hushed tone, "Remember that project you were working on in the library? The one I said I'd take a look at?"

Harry didn't at first, but his encounter with Cho in the library jogged the other memory back into his mind. "Yeah..."

She looked around suspiciously, and then grabbed his hand. "Let's go find somewhere a little more *private* ." She tugged on Harry's arm until he was standing and Harry followed helplessly with Ron and Ginny in tow.

"*Where* are we going?" Ginny asked, suddenly tuning into the conversation.

"Hermione's got a bug in her ear about something," Ron answered. "Something about a Harry project."

Roger Davies walked by just then, with Cho skulking behind him. She didn't make eye-contact with anyone in their group, but stared determinedly at the ground as they passed. A distinct coldness could be felt amongst the four of them, and it only passed when Cho and Roger had turned the corner.

Ginny's hand found Harry's and he let go of Hermione's. "Did I ever tell you why she wasn't expelled?" Ginny asked quietly.

Harry shook his head. "No... you didn't."

"Well," she began, "I heard Professor McGonagall talking to Snape in the dungeons yesterday. Snape was demanding that she be expelled for her actions, and added that you should be as well, Harry – for encouraging her behaviour, I think he said..."

"I did not," Harry retorted hotly. "I *never* encouraged her to..."

"I know," Ginny re-assured him, "but you know how Snape is..."

"Yeah," Harry muttered in agreement.

"Anyway, McGonagall said that she couldn't expel Cho because she'd been under outside influence and wasn't accountable for her actions. The only reason she lost Head Girl was because she had demonstrated poor judgment in being controlled in the first place."

Controlled?" asked Ron. "You mean like *Imperious*?"

"I don't know," Ginny answered. "Luna bumped into me then, and they stopped talking."

Harry noticed that they had just passed the portrait of Barnabas the Barmy, and Hermione was pacing back and forth in front of a bare stretch of wall. They followed Hermione into the Room of Requirement, chatting about the implications of Ginny's news and sat on the same squashy pillows that had lined the floor at their first D.A. meeting.

"Right," Hermione said, grabbing their attention. "Harry? Do you want to tell them what you were looking for in the library?"

"Uh..." Harry answered uncertainly. "Sure. Well, it was Professor McTierny that got me onto it in the first place. I was a little tired of getting hexed in class, even though I had been casting perfect Shield Charms. Then, he said something that made me wonder – what if we could increase the power of a shield spell, so that it could reflect more powerful spells?" He looked at each person in the room, as they anxiously waited for him to finish. "What if we could cast a spell that would even block Unforgivables?"

"Naturally," Hermione said, taking over from Harry, "I told him that it wasn't possible to increase the power of spells. In our very first Arithmancy class, we were taught that each spell draws a certain amount of magical essence from the caster of the spell. We even measured the magic with a magimeter. Professor Vector had each student cast a levitation spell and every single person used the same amount of magic to do it, even if the feather didn't float."

"So," Ginny said, "the thing that makes one wizard greater than the other isn't the power of the spells he can cast, but the power of the wizard himself?"

"Exactly. Each witch or wizard has a set amount of magic that he or she can use that slowly recharges itself when a spell is cast," explained Hermione.

Harry thought back to when he had been practising the Patronus Charm with Lupin. He had been so wiped out after casting it over and over again that he was certain he'd used a lot of his magical energy. "So," he ventured, "what would happen if someone used all of their energy?"

Hermione paused for a second, looking down at her notes. "As you get closer and closer to zero, the caster becomes weaker and weaker, making it more difficult to cast even small spells. The problem, though, is not running out of magic, but in finding a way to cast a protective spell that is more powerful, draws more of the caster's magic, and can therefore deflect more advanced spells." She shifted on her pillow and spread the parchment on the floor so that all of them could see it. "I explained to Harry that while inventing a new spell is a way to solve this problem, it'd take months just to sort out the calculations, and that's if we had the whole Department of Mysteries at our disposal."

The parchment was filled with diagrams, charts, and moving pictures of spell-casting witches. The one at the bottom had a circle appearing around her after mouthing a spell. "So what *is* the solution?" Harry asked.

A smile turned Hermione's lips upward. "We use two existing spells that compliment each other, and by so doing, create a hybrid spell that will do what we want."

"So we *are* creating a new spell?" Ron asked, scratching his head at the indecipherable scribble on the parchment.

"Technically, I guess we are," she conceded. "But not in the traditional way. Spell weaving is hardly ever done because the results can be... unpredictable."

Ginny's head shot up and Ron looked at his girlfriend like she'd grown two heads. "Spell weaving?" he asked.

"What do you mean, 'unpredictable'?" Ginny asked at the same time.

Hermione's smile faltered. "Well, if even one of the calculations is off, you could blow up your wand, or... the spell could combine into something really dangerous."

"Like... what?" Harry prompted.

"It's impossible to say." She used her wand to manipulate the numbers on the parchment. The diagram casting the spell changed, and instead of a bubble appearing around her, the paper caught on fire. "We have to experiment until we get it right."

Harry felt the colour drain out of his face. "Oh."

"We'll just have to be careful," Hermione said primly. She took the now lightly-charred parchment and abruptly stood. "Who wants to go first?"

*

Casting hybrid spells had been a lot harder than Hermione let on. They weren't in any danger from errant calculations, as they couldn't even get a wisp of smoke from their wands in the Room of Requirement. Still, at the end of the day, Harry had felt something stir within him as Hermione continued to play with the numbers and suggest alternate wand movements. Harry wasn't anywhere near casting an ultra-powerful shield spell, but he knew that he was getting close.

The week before Christmas featured the last Quidditch match of the term and would see Gryffindor up against Hufflepuff. Katie had been drilling them like a witch possessed in the days leading up to the match, making time seem to float from one weekend to the next. Before Harry knew it, it was Saturday – the day of his first appearance on the pitch since his disastrous performance against Malfoy. Even though his flying skills were better than ever, he couldn't shake the feeling of dread that encompassed him before the match.

"You ready, Harry?" Ginny asked from beside him at breakfast.

Harry shrugged, trying to give the impression that nothing was wrong. "As ready as I'll ever be."

Ginny put her fork down and swallowed the bite of kipper in her mouth. She discreetly placed her fingers on his arm and activated their link. *You're not fooling me, Harry. I know you're anxious about the match.*

Harry sighed out loud. *I'm sorry. I know everything will turn out all right, I just can't help being a little nervous.*

He caught a glimpse of a smile from her and heard her reply. *Good. No wallowing in anything remotely negative. Quidditch is supposed to be fun and I'm going to make sure you enjoy it.*

Maybe it was the saucy wink she gave him, or the memories of kissing by the pitch while Hufflepuff was practicing, but he suddenly lost every bit of the anxiety that had been weighing him down that morning.

"Good," Ginny said out loud.

"What's good?" Ron asked from across the table.

Ginny waved her hand in the air. "Nothing. Get back to your toast before the plates disappear."

Ron made to grab his last piece when the plates shimmered and blinked out of site. "Damn," Ron muttered.

"Ronald!" scolded Hermione next to him.

His ears pink, Ron bent his head towards the table, as if bringing his mouth closer to it would restore his toast. "Sorry."

Hermione huffed and made a show of crossing her arms.

Harry caught Ginny's eye and they shared a smile before standing. "Well...off to the changing rooms, then?" asked Harry.

Ron stood and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Yeah, all right."

His stress managed, Harry walked happily out onto the cold grounds with a smile. It was going to be a good game.

*

Harry's fears were unfounded, as the new Hufflepuff Seeker was even more uncoordinated in a real game. Eleanor Branstone was a raw flier and was likely a Muggleborn, if his read on her flying was accurate. Still, she was quick, and was almost able to keep up with him on her Cleansweep Seven.

"Gryffindor Scores! Two hundred to eighty as Weasley takes the Quaffle."

Harry tore his eyes away from their search for the Snitch to watch his girlfriend weave in and out of the opposing Chasers. She passed to Katie, who drew the attention of two yellow-clad Chasers and immediately dropped it behind her and into the waiting hands of Natalie McDonald. The smaller girl shot up and over the defence, while Ginny positioned herself in front of the goals. The Hufflepuff Keeper flew towards Natalie, who cocked her hand back to throw. At the last second, she changed her aim and passed over the Keeper, directly at Ginny. The sound of a gong and another ten points for Gryffindor was the result. When Harry looked back to see where Eleanor had gone to, his breath caught. She was in a flat dive for the Pitch, and his eyes immediately saw what she was after. The Snitch was hovering in the centre, just above the grass.

With a burst of speed, he flattened himself on his broom and shot towards the Snitch in a straight line. The Snitch must have sensed the attention of both Seekers and zigged towards the stands. Harry mentally calculated the new trajectory of his prey and aimed his broom at a spot where the stands met the ground. Sparing a second to eye his opponent, he realised that the Snitch's manoeuvre put Harry closer to it, erasing Eleanor's lead.

The Snitch shot left and brought the advantage back to Hufflepuff and caused the two Seekers to meet even as they pushed their brooms faster. Harry watched the Snitch, waiting for it to twitch a little. It dodged right, causing Eleanor to veer in that direction, but Harry knew better. He flipped his Firebolt up and over his opponent in a half-barrel roll just as the Snitch reversed its turn and flew right into Harry's waiting hand.

The crowds erupted in a deafening roar.

*

On the way back to the castle, with his victory fresh in his mind and his friends surrounding him, Harry ran into the last person he expected.

"So," sneered a familiar voice. "Think a little success against the worst team in ten years is going to win you the cup, eh, Potter?" He spat the last word for extra effect.

Harry's smile vanished as the blonde boy pushed his way to stand toe to toe with him.

"Give it a rest, Malfoy," Ginny remarked. "Go polish your Prefect's badge or something."

At least I have a badge," he drawled.

The mood cooled considerably then and Harry decided he'd had enough.

"I think it's time for you to leave, Malfoy."

"I don't think so," he said defiantly, and whipped out his wand.

Harry tensed, but didn't back down.

"If you only knew half of the things I did about this place."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "That would be a very small amount, wouldn't it?"

"Your Muggle-loving Dumbledore has done it again. Hired another defence professor that's..." Malfoy would have continued to speak, but a yellow light hit his face and his lips disappeared. His mouth had been sealed shut, apparently on a permanent basis.

"That's enough from you, little Malfoy." The new voice belonged to their Defence Instructor. He flicked his wand again, and Malfoy was thrown away from Harry and into Crabbe, knocking them both to the ground.

"Professor!" Hermione yelled. "You're not supposed to hex students!"

But McTierny paid her no attention, walking over to where a wide-eyed Malfoy struggled to get to his feet.

"Oh, let him curse Malfoy all he wants," Ron said with a smirk. "At least we won't be serving detention for it."

Hermione didn't reply, but looked on anxiously while McTierny took points from Slytherin. It wasn't until Professor McGonagall arrived that Malfoy's lips were unsealed and the teachers stomped back into the castle with him in tow.

"Well," Harry said as they followed. "That's an elegant way to shut Malfoy up."

Ginny nodded beside him. "We're going to have to ask McTierny about that spell."

*

The next evening after dinner, Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Ginny were about to leave the Great Hall when Professor McGonagall approached them.

"Would you four please follow me?"

Harry shrugged when his three companions all gave him quizzical glances. "I didn't do anything," he whispered as he followed McGonagall's swift pace down the hall.

They were silent during the short trip and found themselves at the entrance to Dumbledore's office.

"Fudge Flies," she intoned and the Gargoyle sprang open.

Harry thought back to the last time he was in this office and the effects of the spell that he and Ginny had endured since. Then he remembered Professor Dumbledore's circumstances and wondered if he had improved at all.

They seated themselves and waited while the acting Headmistress straightened parchment on the desk and cleared her throat.

"I understand you are scheduled to head to the Burrow for the Christmas Holidays. Is that correct?"

As they nodded their heads, Harry wondered with a sickening feeling if McGonagall was going to cancel their plans. Harry should have known they wouldn't let him leave the protection of Hogwarts, especially with Dumbledore out of commission.

"I'm afraid your plans will have to change," she announced, and Ron groaned beside him. "You've been requested to spend a week at the Order's new headquarters where Professor Dumbledore has asked to speak with you." She levelled her gaze at Harry just then and the smallest of smiles appeared on the elderly woman's face.

"You mean..." began Ginny.

"We get to see Dumbledore?" Harry finished.

"That means he's awake!" declared Hermione.

"Professor Dumbledore," McGonagall corrected, "is still very weak, but yes, he's awake and as stubborn as ever."

This last comment evoked a smirk from Hermione, who traded a knowing glance with Ginny. Harry was completely baffled by this, but too distracted by the prospect of visiting with Dumbledore to think any more about it.

"When do we leave?" he asked.

*

It turned out that Mrs. Weasley had been notified about their plans because she was already at the new Headquarters preparing for their arrival. Arthur, Lupin, and the twins were all to be at Headquarters for the break. Harry was actually looking forward to the holidays and was grateful that it wasn't going to be in Grimmauld Place.

With their bags packed and ready, they met McGonagall in Dumbledore's office the night they were scheduled to leave. The other students that weren't staying at the castle had already left on the Express, lending to the impression that the four of them were staying as well.

McGonagall held a slip of paper with two words on it, letting each person read it before they grabbed a handful of Floo powder and disappeared into the emerald flames.

When it was Harry's turn, he read the words on the paper, *Maidencombe Beach* and watched McGonagall crumple and toss it into the fire. Harry took some powder, threw it and with a shout, stepped into the hearth.

Sliding out the other end, Harry was caught by Ginny before he toppled onto his backside. "Thanks," he muttered and was rewarded with a bright smile.

McGonagall popped through the grate and brushed at a stray bit of soot on her robes.

They were in a large room that had doors on either wall. At one end was the hearth they had Flooed into and the other held a large oak door flanked by two leaden windows. The entire building seemed to be made of wood.

The ceiling was held up by massive, rough columns that connected with slightly smaller beams at the top. McGonagall walked towards one of the doors on the right. Harry left his bag near the hearth and followed.

The door revealed a set of stout, but very worn wooden stairs. They walked up and turned one hundred and eighty degrees to face an identical set. At the top of those stairs was another wooden door, exactly like the one they'd entered that opened to a hallway that wrapped around the entire upper story. In the middle were rooms that looked like they'd never been opened before.

McGonagall turned right and led them to a door with no knob or handle and that had a small oval portrait of a wizard snoozing in its frame.

"Wake up, Paracelsus," she said reprovingly.

The wizard stirred and smiled brightly. "Minerva! How wonderful to see you again." He looked around and caught sight of Ginny. "And you've brought *visitors*."

"Yes, yes. We need to get in, please. Professor Dumbledore is expecting them."

The man, apparently named Paracelsus, huffed and put his hands on his hips. "Very well," he said with a sigh. "You know what to do."

McGonagall did, it seemed, because she placed her hand on the door, just above the spot where Harry would have put the handle. The whole door glowed for a moment and then it clicked open.

"In you get," she said, pushing the door open wider, and motioning with her other hand.

Harry gave her a questioning look, to which she replied, "I've a matter that I need to attend to. The door will let you out when you've finished."

Reluctantly, Harry stepped inside, followed closely by Ginny, Ron and Hermione. They turned a corner and sitting on his bed, as if there wasn't a thing the matter with him, was Professor Dumbledore.

"Hello, Harry," he said softly. "I'm so very glad you could make it."

Consequences of the Mind 7: Christmas on the Coast

Chapter Seven – Christmas on the Coast

Harry blinked and stared dumbly at Dumbledore before he was nudged in the back. “Oh, er... hi, Professor,” he managed.

“Come in, come in,” Dumbledore said with a wave of his hands. “Have a seat.” There was a brief glow from behind them and four chairs appeared.

Harry sat between Ginny and Ron and kept his eyes fixed on the foot of one of the nightstands.

“When did you wake up?” Hermione asked stiffly.

“Not long ago. Perhaps three days,” Dumbledore answered.

There was a sudden *pop* and burst of bright orange flames announcing Fawkes’s entrance. He swooped around the room once before settling on Dumbledore’s bed, trilling softly. The bright red Phoenix circled on the sheets next to his master and delicately sat in the impression he had made.

“Fawkes was here not ten seconds after I became conscious,” Dumbledore explained, reaching a hand to stroke the bird’s feathers. “Amazing intuition, this one has.”

There was a moment of silence that lengthened until it became awkward. Harry still refused to look up at Dumbledore, guilt riding his conscience because of his Headmaster’s state. If he would have known about the effects of the Learning Spell, he’d never have let Dumbledore go through with it.

“Perhaps I could have a moment alone with Harry?” Dumbledore asked the others, interrupting Harry’s thoughts.

Ginny, Hermione, and Ron stood immediately and walked towards the door. Ginny lingered until she caught his eye, giving him a wink, her eyes glistening in the light of the lamps on the wall. Then, he was alone with Dumbledore.

“Harry,” the older wizard began, “you are no doubt feeling a little guilty about my condition...”

Harry’s face heated slightly even as he nodded his confirmation. “Remus told me that the Order hasn’t been able to do much without you. If it wasn’t for me....”

“Now, Harry,” Dumbledore interrupted. “Look at me.”

Reluctantly, Harry raised his head.

“You must know that I chose to perform this spell as surely as you did. The only difference is that I *knew* what the consequences were and I did it anyway.”

Harry pulled an unpleasant face. “That doesn’t make it any better for the Aurors that were killed when Azkaban fell.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Indeed, it does not. But I believe that Voldemort would have attacked the prison, or some other target, regardless of my state. The blame for those deaths lies firmly with Voldemort, Harry. Neither of us can accept that burden because *he* chose – and continues to choose – the path of darkness. In opposing him, we accept only the chance that we may fail and the inevitable destruction of good and right that would follow.”

Unable to find a way to counter Dumbledore’s arguments, Harry crossed his arms and sank back into the chair. “I can’t help but feel responsible. *You* know I’m the one. How can I *not* feel that way, knowing I have to stop him, to – kill him?”

Fawkes nipped at the sheets just then, pulling them away from Dumbledore just a bit. “That is the very question that has plagued all who fight the darkness. And yet, we cannot let guilt consume us, or we will be unable to deal with the challenges ahead.”

Breaking eye contact, Harry let his head fall into his hands.

“There are many who love you, who would give their lives to ensure your success.”

Harry’s head shot up and he opened his mouth to protest, but Dumbledore’s hand stopped him. “And it is not your place to choose whether or when they will make that sacrifice, Harry. As admirable as it is that you care for them enough to want them to live, you need to grant them the freedom to make their own choices as they grant you the freedom to make your own. For years you have resented being treated as a child, now you have the highest of adult responsibilities thrust upon you.”

The bitterness of the truths Harry was hearing burned in his throat. He swallowed, but the flavour lingered. He thought about Ron and Hermione – how they'd been through so much together and were still by his side. Ginny's face popped into his head next and with a sudden lurch in his stomach he knew that she would sacrifice herself for him in an instant. He wouldn't be able to live if something happened to her.

"What can I... What can I do?" Harry asked desperately. "How can I stop Voldemort before he kills again?"

Dumbledore blinked slowly and a wisp of sadness crossed his face. "We cannot stop him yet, Harry. *You* cannot stop him without first learning the depths of your potential. You must be prepared, Harry. The Learning Spell was necessary because it will give us the time we will need to obtain such preparation before Voldemort becomes too strong for either of us to defeat him."

Harry stared at the rough wooden floor and the intricately woven rug by the bed. The rug's pattern showed miniature Phoenixes flying around a stone basin filled with golden water. Fawkes trilled again, sending a jolt of courage through him.

"Harry," said Dumbledore slowly, as Fawkes nipped at his sheets once more. "It may be of little comfort, but I promise to prepare you for your trial the best I can."

They locked gazes for a moment before the older wizard's eyes drooped, and the light in them was concealed by heavy lids and his head fell to one side. It was a long moment before Harry realized that Dumbledore was asleep, his chest slowly moving up and down. Fawkes trilled softly one more time and buried his beak under his wing, leaning into Dumbledore's slumbering body.

Harry took his cue, and stood. As he closed the door softly behind him, he decided that no matter what happened, Voldemort was not going to destroy the happiness his parents, godfather, and countless thousands had fought to keep. If Harry was the only one that could defeat him, then defeat him he would.

*

At the foot of the stairs, Harry informed McGonagall that Dumbledore was asleep and that Fawkes was with him. This seemed to please his professor, who began to search through her robe pocket.

She removed a folded slip of parchment and thrust it at Harry. "This was written by the Headmaster last night. It is for you."

Harry took the paper and unfolded it, reading through the single paragraph once before Ginny approached him. "What is it?"

"He wants me to take a walk on the beach," Harry confessed. Though it seemed odd to his ears, Professor Dumbledore's words were specific. *I often find a brisk walk on the shore to be both liberating and invigorating.*

"What a splendid idea," McGonagall announced with a slim smile on her face. "Better be off, then." Then turning to Ginny, she said, "I expect you'll want to accompany Mr. Potter?"

"Er."

"Splendid. I'll let your mother know where you are. Be back by dark."

Professor McGonagall then turned on her heel and walked back upstairs, leaving Harry and Ginny at the foot of the stairs with Ron and Hermione looking on the whole scene with a slightly bemused expression.

Harry shoved the parchment into his pocket and walked to where Hermione and Ron were sitting. "What was that all about?" he asked.

"I dunno," Ron replied. "But it looks like you're supposed to take a walk with Ginny on the beach."

"But doesn't it seem odd?" Ginny asked next. She was busy pulling her hair back into a ponytail, a motion Harry found distracting for some reason.

Hermione stood and pulled Ron to his feet. "Whatever the reason is, it'd obviously safe, or Dumbledore and McGonagall wouldn't have insisted on it. We're going, too," she announced.

"But Hermione," Ron whinged, "she didn't say anything about *us* going."

"No," she conceded, "but she didn't say we *couldn't* go, either."

Ron seemed to know he wasn't going to win and didn't press the issue. Harry decided that he'd settle the matter, anyway. "Look," he began, "it doesn't matter. Ginny and I will walk ahead and you guys can keep an eye out for us. I'd rather be safe than sorry."

Ginny and Hermione blinked. "Harry?" Ginny asked. "Are you feeling well?"

"What are you on about?" he asked with a huff.

Hermione smiled and chimed in. "It's just that you're normally too willing to leave your friends behind and now you're *asking* for our help?"

Harry's face heated slightly. "I'm not *quite* asking, just acquiescing. I can't stay stupid forever, can I?"

Linking her arm through Harry's, Ginny reached up and kissed his cheek. "Definitely not."

*

The mid-afternoon sun was veiled by a thin layer of clouds that dulled the already brown and grey landscape. Gulls circled high overhead and a stiff breeze blew in off the English Channel with vigour. It wasn't long before Ginny was shivering.

Harry put an arm around her, but the benefit must have been minimal. "Dumbledore was right about one thing," he quipped. "A walk on the beach in December *is* quite invigorating."

His smile died quickly however, in the face of Ginny's unamused expression. "It's bloody *cold* out here, Harry."

"Too bad we can't cast a warming charm, eh?"

Ginny snuggled in closer to Harry, making it hard for him to walk properly, so he stopped. The wind was blowing in the wrong direction to hear what Ron and Hermione were talking about, but he was sure the topic was the same.

Harry took Ginny fully into a hug that sheltered her more effectively from the biting wind. Over her wind-whipped hair, he let his eyes trace across the base of the cliffs that dominated this area of the beach. Great clumps of sharp grass dotted the place where rock met sand. There were numerous nests in the crags of the cliffs where the gulls perched on and off again. Near the base of one particularly large cliff that bowed outward towards the sea, sat a pile of rubble that didn't seem to come from any of the cliffs above. Upon further inspection, Harry decided that the granite rocks in the rubble weren't even the same type as the sandstone the cliffs were made from.

"Harry? Why are we out here again?" Ginny's muffled question brought his mind back to her.

"Um," he started, still looking at the pile of rocks. "I'm not exactly sure, but I think I may have found the answer."

He pointed and Ginny followed his finger. "Those rocks? I don't see how Dumbledore wanted us to come out here in the freezing cold to look at a bunch of rocks."

Ignoring her questioning look that clearly implied she'd much rather be inside by the fireplace with a cup of hot chocolate, Harry grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the cliff base. "Come on. Let's have a look, all right? If there's nothing there, we'll go back inside."

Shoving her hands into her armpits and holding her arms tightly across her chest, she gave a violent shiver and followed. "Fine, but you are so going to owe me a foot massage when we get back."

*

The rocks turned out to be boulders, roughly the size of Hagrid's hut. Harry couldn't imagine anything bringing these here besides an army of giants. Leaving Ginny sheltered between two of the huge stones, Harry climbed on some of the smaller rubble and onto one of them.

"What is it?" Ron cried as he and Hermione ran towards them. "What do you see?"

"Nothing," Harry replied with a shrug. "This just looked odd to me, so I thought I'd take a look."

Hermione joined Ginny in the rock crevice, and inspected the boulders more closely. "These *are* a little off." She didn't seem remotely phased by the cold wind, however, and Ginny was eyeing her suspiciously.

Ron began to climb towards where Harry was still perched, while the latter looked for anything amiss and still keep his balance in the face of the wind. Harry hopped down to a slightly smaller boulder and found that one of them gave an odd sort of shimmer. He withdrew his wand and approached the boulder. When he prodded it with his wand, it shimmered even more violently and disappeared altogether. Behind it, lay a deep, dark cave.

"Hey!" he yelled towards the girls. "I've found something!"

Ron clambered down next to Harry and let out a slow whistle. "Blimey. I wonder if this is what Dumbledore wanted us to find?"

"Dunno," Harry conceded. "There's only one way to find out, isn't there?"

Hermione and Ginny slid down the same rock face Ron had used and were soon at the cave entrance.

"So what are we waiting for?" Hermione asked and promptly lit her wand. "Let's go."

Ron caught Harry's eye and shrugged his shoulders. Harry did the same and followed their friend inside, Ginny trailing behind.

*

The cave was narrow, but ran deep underground. They came across several detection charms that had fizzled out and a large pit that had once been cloaked with a Concealment Spell. For all intents and purposes, it appeared that someone wanted to hide something very badly, but the spells had stopped functioning long before.

"Hermione," Ginny said through gritted teeth. The younger girl was rubbing her arms briskly in the cool, but windless cave.

"Yes?" Hermione responded.

"How is it that I'm shivering like a little Crup after a stiff rain and you look like you're taking a stroll through London in May?"

Carefully, Hermione pointed her wand at Ginny and pronounced a simple warming charm. The heat was heavenly and Ginny shuddered in delight. "Being of age has its prerogatives."

"Thanks," Ginny replied wryly. "I'll try to remember that the next time I'm dying from hypothermia."

Harry snickered next to her and held his lit wand aloft, casting more light in the cave. "Come on, you two. If there's a point to all of this, we'd better find it before it gets dark."

They trudged further down the cave, avoiding a few rats and the bones of a medium-sized animal. A small trickle of water sprung from a rock and ran down the side of the cave floor, adding to the eeriness of the already-dank tunnel. Finally, the cave opened into a room the size of one of the girls' dormitories at Hogwarts. At the opposite end of the room stood a stone table with something round on its surface. Between the tunnel and table, there was a gaping chasm that seemed to absorb the light from their wands, it was so deep.

"Now what?" Ron asked, and then kicked a pebble into the pit. "It's too far to jump, and we don't have a broom handy."

"I don't know," Hermione answered. "Let me think about this for a minute."

She began to pace in front of them when something popped into Ginny's head – like the shadow of a memory – but it just didn't form fully in her mind. Then, it clicked.

I've got it, she said in her mind and was surprised when someone answered.

What is it?

Harry had approached her while she'd been thinking and was holding her hand.

She smiled and turned to face him. *Something... different. Follow my lead, Harry.*

He nodded and she walked towards the edge of the chasm. Standing there, Ginny noticed small engravings in the stone, worn smooth until they were almost indiscernible. Carefully, she traced her fingers over the nearest rune and shook her head when nothing happened. "Not that one," she said, mostly to herself.

Ron and Hermione had taken notice of her actions and were gathered behind her. "What's she doing?" Ron asked.

"I think she knows how to get across," Harry explained, saving Ginny from having to articulate the vaguest of impressions that even she had a difficult time understanding.

She moved from rune to rune, tracing them with her finger and trying to match the feeling each one gave her with the one she'd had in her 'vision'. The trouble was that the initial impression was fading with every passing second. She needn't have worried, however, for when her fingers touched a rune that resembled a hawk with a snake in its talons, there was a pulse of energy that connected her to the floor. A dull boom was heard in the distance and in the middle of the chasm appeared a narrow stone bridge that joined the two sides of the room. Ginny stood and placed her foot on the bridge, testing it to make sure she wasn't hallucinating, and then walked across the bridge to the other side.

"Brilliant," Ron muttered behind her.

"I think so," Harry agreed from behind Hermione who was trailing Ron. "You don't have a monopoly on brilliant witches, you know."

Ginny felt warm pleasure surge through her and was still glowing when they reached the other side.

Hermione took the lead again and approached the stone table. There were more runes on the wall behind the table and on the round object on its top. It was a basin, much like a Pensieve, except much larger and deeper.

"What do you reckon it is?" Harry asked, running his hand across the lip of the bowl.

Hermione pursed her lips. "I've heard of something described like this in that book Dumbledore gave me," she explained and then her eyebrows shot skyward. "I wonder if..." She shoved her hand in her pocket and produced a piece of parchment and a self-inking quill.

"That's my Hermione," Ron announced. "Never goes anywhere without a quill and parchment."

"And what would you do without me and my ever-present quill, Ron?" she shot back good-naturedly "You'd fail every subject and be doomed to a life of pranking."

His ears pink, Ron folded his arms and said, "I'll have you know that the twins are making loads of Galleons from their life of pranking."

"Ron, I love you as you are," Hermione soothed. "Now hush and point your wand at the font so I can see properly."

He grumbled, but complied with her request.

As Hermione began to sketch the runes on the basin, Ginny knelt to look at the table itself. Carved into its face was a large fountain with what looked like bolts of lightning extending out from the middle. Above the fountain was a winged creature that looked remarkable like a Griffon.

"Why did you call this a font, Hermione?" asked Harry after a moment.

Hermione shrugged and continued to scratch her thumb on the parchment. "If it's what I think it is, it's one of the fonts of power put in place before the wizarding world existed. Fonts are sources of raw magic. No one knows where they came from, but people have built monuments to the ones they've found to mark their place and to draw on the magic."

Ginny sensed she was going to continue and didn't interrupt. Hermione probably knew the story better than anyone.

"The origins of magical beings go back eons. The earliest legends attribute the first person with magical abilities, a witch mind you, to be a common Muggle that fell into one of these fonts. From her sprang forth every witch and wizard in existence."

Harry shook his head. "Hold on," he said with outstretched hands. "So you're saying that the entire wizarding world exists because someone fell into a bit of water?"

Hermione finished her sketches and blew on the paper to dry the ink. "No, Harry. *This* font was probably used up very recently. There were once hundreds of them spread throughout the world. According to legend there's only one left now. Once a font is used, it loses its power forever and transfers it into the person that takes it."

"How does someone take power from a font?" asked Ron.

"Easy. You can either drink the water, taking a bit at a time, or you can completely immerse yourself into it, taking all the power at once."

Ginny's mind was whirling. "So..." she began, "if someone like...say, Voldemort were to get his hands on the water...."

"He'd be unstoppable," Hermione finished for her. "But there are all sorts of magic to prevent dark wizards from tapping into the font."

"Like what?" Harry asked.

"Before Merlin, there wasn't much," she explained. "But we know that each font has a guardian. When Morgana became a Dark witch and threatened to destroy the world, Merlin tapped into one of the last three fonts, the one at Stonehenge, to be precise. Part of the bargain he made with the guardian of that font was that he would add protections to the last two fonts before he died – to ensure their safety from future Dark wizards. No one knows what those were, and no one has come across a font, that we know of, to find out just what those protections entail."

"Do you think this is one of the fonts that Merlin agreed to protect?"

Hermione held out her parchment and said, "That's what this is for. The runes describe the location of the other font. The only question is, is the font still active?"

Harry stood tall with a glint in his eye and said, "We need to talk to Dumbledore."

*

They had to wait until after breakfast the next day to see their Headmaster, as he had been asleep until then and Mrs. Weasley wouldn't allow them to pester him.

"He needs his rest," she had explained.

So the four teens ate their food at top speed and clamoured up the stairs to begin posing their questions to Dumbledore while Molly was busy with the breakfast dishes.

"Parselus," Harry called to the portrait on Dumbledore's door. "Is he awake?"

The painting bowed and nodded. "Madame Pomfrey has only just left."

"Great. Can we see him, please?"

Parselus seemed to consider it for a moment. "You must place your hand on the door and it will decide."

Harry balked at the strange request but complied nonetheless. A warm sensation spread into his hand as it made contact with the door. There was a glow and then a click of the lock before he removed his hand and entered.

Dumbledore was in much the same condition as he was the previous day, but he seemed much more alert. There were small stacks of parchment strewn across the bed and Fawkes was relegated to a perch in the corner. He trilled a hello to them as they entered.

"Ah," Dumbledore said brightly. "I had hoped you would visit with me this morning."

As before, he raised his hands and four chairs appeared behind them.

"I take it you found the cave, then?" he asked, looking peculiarly at Ginny.

They nodded, and Harry wondered just how much he knew had happened in the cave.

"Splendid. And the font?"

"It was there," Hermione answered, squirming in her seat with apparent apprehension to ask loads of questions. "But how did *you* find it? It was used recently, so who took the font's power? Do these runes lead to the other font?"

Dumbledore held up a patient hand and Hermione's questions stopped. "That particular font was used in 1943, two years before Grindelwald's final defeat. It was I that used the power of the font and learned that there was but one left in existence. For now, its location is safely obscure, but I doubt it will remain so forever."

"Voldemort," Harry whispered.

"Indeed, Harry," Dumbledore confirmed. "If Tom were to discover its location and overcome the defences, we would be utterly unable to defeat him."

"But what about the guardian?" Ginny asked next. "Wouldn't the guardian stop Tom from getting to the font?"

"It is very likely that he does not have sufficient power to overcome the guardian; that is true. However, I have learned that underestimating my opponents can be a costly mistake. We must be vigilant in our plans."

"What can we do?" Harry asked, suddenly aware that everything was going to come back to him somehow. "If the guardian can keep the font safe, why even bother with it?"

At this, Dumbledore levelled an unblinking gaze at Harry. "Because to every generation there is one born with the power to drain the font's power and defeat the darkness that threatens it. I was the one chosen to defeat Grindelwald, and you, Harry, are the one chosen to defeat Voldemort."

"You?" Harry asked slowly. There was something about the way he had mentioned being chosen that caused Harry to blink.

"Yes, Harry. You were not the only one born with a prophecy hanging over them."

Suddenly, it all made sense. The way Dumbledore had been protecting him from the knowledge of his destiny, the careful prodding and instruction, and the final confrontation they'd had in his office last year.

"But the guardian," Hermione blurted. "The book says the guardian is to keep *everyone* out of the font."

With a twitch in his beard, Dumbledore winked at Hermione and spoke. "That was written specifically to keep a rush of people, all thinking that *they* were the chosen one, from tempting their luck. The unspoken requirements also do not mention that the person allowed to take the font's power must have an active threat against him or her." He turned back to Harry. "We must discover the font's location and take its power before Voldemort does."

The room fell silent as each person quietly contemplated what they had discussed. Then, one by one, they all turned to look at Harry.

"I guess I'm in need of a dip, then?"

*

Christmas came the next day. Ginny was delighted with the figurine Harry had purchased for her and Hermione shrunk it to fit on the younger girl's necklace. Ron had been given an entire set of school clothes from Hermione, who was determined to break from her stereotype of always gifting books. Harry received a set of hand-knitted mittens and matching scarf that sang shrilly whenever anyone said "Harry Potter". Ginny hid giggling behind the sofa for a full five minutes before he realised it was from her. Even the magically moving Golden Snitch on the scarf didn't save her from a solid tickling that day. The best present of all, however, came when Dumbledore appeared in the room from his solitude upstairs.

"It seems I have been cleared by Madame Pomfrey... to get a little fresh air," he had said as he sat next to the fire. Then with a smile, he propped his sock-clad feet on the hearth and announced, "I will be going back to Hogwarts with you."

Consequences of the Mind 8: Dumbledore's Return

Chapter Eight – Dumbledore's Return

Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione arrived back at Hogwarts the evening before the new term was to start. It wasn't until the following morning, however, that the entire school learned one very important bit of information: Dumbledore was back. Whatever story the students might have believed – be it that he was on a top secret Ministry assignment or imprisoned in St. Mungo's for madness – that morning put everyone's fears to rest.

"I apologize for my extended absence," he began as several students looked longingly at their empty plates. "However, it was not without its benefits."

Ginny stepped lightly on Harry's foot under the table and smiled. He smiled back.

"Before I release you to the wonderful food you are accustomed to having and greatly need for the rigours of learning set before you, I would also like to announce a change in the end of year examination policy."

Everyone seemed to stir and the buzzing of excited whispers replaced the normal sounds of yawning and clinking silverware. Hermione seemed most distressed.

"Instead of the normal written exams for the first through fourth year and sixth year students, we will now be testing them in a more...practical manner. We will provide more details on the nature of these tests as the year progresses. Those in their O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. years will still be expected to take those examinations and will therefore be exempt from the new tests." He paused and, with a sweep of his arms, food appeared on their plates. "Tuck in."

The Great Hall exploded in a sea of conversations. Hermione was staring at Dumbledore, who was now spooning some porridge into a bowl, as if she were questioning his sanity. Ginny was eating as if nothing at all was different and Ron had half a piece of toast in his mouth.

"What do you think, Hermione?" Harry asked. "Something more *practical*?"

Ron swallowed noisily and leaned in towards Harry. "If you ask me, I think they're going to rubbish the whole essay thing and focus on actual knowledge of spells and things. 'Bout time, too."

Harry nodded and noticed that Hermione was still not fully focused on the conversation. "Could be; why do you think they'd do that? I mean, why change the way it's been done for centuries?"

Suddenly, Hermione's head whipped around and she opened her mouth to speak. "I'll tell you what it means," she said, looking at Ginny knowingly. "It means that Dumbledore's smarter than we've ever thought. It means that Dumbledore's Army is a lot closer to the truth than even Fudge thinks."

"You don't mean..." Ron began.

"That's exactly what I mean," Hermione confirmed. "He's going to focus on the practical use of spells and by so doing, have an entire army of students at his disposal."

Harry leaned back in his chair, his bacon untouched on his plate. "I don't think the Slytherins are going to be so embracing of this idea, Hermione. Malfoy and his lot, especially."

"Don't you remember what the Sorting Hat told us last year?" she asked with a raised brow.

"You mean that rubbish about inter-house cooperation?" Ron offered.

"Yes," Hermione countered. "And it's not rubbish – it's exactly what we're going to need or Voldemort just might win."

Harry picked up a piece of bacon and chewed on it while he thought about the implications of playing nice with the Slytherins. Some really weren't that bad, he reasoned. Others were just plain rotten.

"The trouble with Slytherins," Ginny added, as she spooned her own porridge, "is that you never know what side they're really on until it's too late."

Ron grunted. "Too right," he said.

But Harry shook his head. "I think Hermione, and the hat, are right. We're going to need the Slytherins' help and even if we have to include the ones that are junior Death Eaters, it'll be a necessary risk."

The warning bell sounded for first class and Harry scrambled to finish his breakfast. Ginny gave him a peck on the cheek before slinging her overloaded bag onto her shoulders and marching into the river of students.

Trailing behind Ron and Hermione, Harry barely saw Professor Flitwick before he pounced on Ron.

“If I may have a word, Mr. Weasley.”

The crush of bodies trying to exit the Hall before their classes began made it impossible to go anywhere, so Ron stayed put as realization dawned on his face. “Uh, oh,” he muttered.

“Indeed,” the tiny professor squeaked. “I certainly hope you have had a death in the family, for that is the only reason I can see for you not handing in the assigned essay on Enlargement Charms.”

Hermione gasped at this. “You didn’t turn in your essay? Why not, Ron?”

His face beet red, Ron stammered and shuffled on his feet until he managed to say rather sheepishly, “I forgot.”

“Well,” Professor Flitwick continued. “Forgetting is going to cost you your grade for that assignment and a night’s detention. I’ll be contacting your head of house this afternoon to make arrangements. Good day.”

As Flitwick left the Hall with surprising speed, Ron stood open-mouthed while Hermione pierced him with a hateful stare. “How could you? After all the help I gave you, and all the time we spent...” She seemed to fumble for words, as they both grew red-faced before she finally spat out, “*not studying!*”

“Look,” Ron tried to placate, “I’m sorry, I just....”

“Oh, forget it, Ron. Look,” Hermione said, re-adjusting her bag’s strap and letting out a weary breath, “let’s just move on.”

Ron looked thunderstruck, yet hopeful. “Really? You...you mean it?”

“Of course, I mean it.” They started walking again, and were almost the last ones out of the Hall when Hermione spun around and poked Ron in the chest. “But you do understand that there will be no more *not studying sessions* until *after* your essays are done, don’t you?”

Much to his credit, Ron nodded mutely and only smiled when Hermione’s back was turned and she was several paces ahead of them. He leaned in to whisper something when Harry backed away.

Harry held out his hands and shook his head. “I don’t want to know *what* the devil she’s talking about, all right, Ron? Keep the details of your private study sessions between the two of you and I won’t tell you what Ginny and I get up to. Deal?”

Ron’s ears perked up at this. “What d’ya mean what you and Ginny ‘get up to’?”

“Don’t ask the question, Ron, unless you’re ready to hear the answer,” Harry said teasingly and walked faster to catch up with Hermione. He could hear Ron grumbling all the way to Care of Magical Creatures.

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Later that evening, they met in the library to go over the runes that they’d found on the font at Maidencombe Beach. Hermione unrolled the original transcription and a longer, more tightly written one next to it that must have been the translation.

“So this,” she said, pointing to the first rune, “means power. According to the same markings in the book Dumbledore gave me, it refers to a certain kind of ‘sustaining’ power that all the fonts are supposed to hold.” She pointed back to the transcription. “These other runes refer to a castle, a village, and a lake.”

“Does that mean there’s a font near one of these?” asked Ron, who was still staring at where Hermione was pointing.

“Actually, it will be in a place that has all three of these,” she explained, now tracing her finger along a series of smaller runes that looked to Harry like something a two-year-old would scribble. “I already cross-referenced all the known castles in the U.K. with lakes and villages. Since just about every castle was built by a lake or river and most have villages or towns nearby, the list is pretty long.” She produced a rolled parchment that was at least as long as their last Potions essay.

“Blimey,” said Ron. “How are we supposed to check all of those?”

“We’re not,” Hermione answered. “After I compiled the list, I realised that the font would have to be near someplace magical.” She pointed her wand at the parchment and most of the names crossed themselves out and moved to the bottom of the list. “There’re only four castles that are associated with magical places.”

Harry squinted his eyes and read the list. “Borthwick, Porchester, Leeds, and....”

“Hogwarts,” Ginny finished.

“Borthwick,” Hermione continued, “is near Edinburgh – a highly magical community – and is near Roseborough Reservoir, site of the ancient Roseborough Lake. It’s about ten miles from Edinburgh, however, so it’s probably not the one we’re looking for.”

How d'you reckon that?" Ron asked.

Hermione produced another book and flipped it open to a marked page. "Fonts have to be relatively close to a magical device or place to do any good. Every known font had someplace magical built nearby to use the magic they provided – even if no one living there had any idea of the font's existence.

"Porchester and Leeds," Hermione continued, pushing the book on fonts aside and moving the list to the top of the stack, "are closer to their magical communities, but the lakes there are all man-made. That leaves us with only one," she finished, pointing to the name at the top of the list. "It makes perfect sense, really, as there has to be something here sustaining all the wards for so long. Only a font would be able to produce that amount of power over that length of time."

"The only question," Ginny offered, "it where do we start looking?"

Ron brightened up immediately. "I'll look in the Slytherins' rooms," he said, rubbing his hands together. "Even if we don't find the font, there's bound to be loads of illegal stuff there."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "We're not barging into anyone's rooms, Ron. It's highly unlikely that the font is *inside* the castle. Underneath maybe...."

Ginny shuddered beside Harry and he pressed his palm into her back. "No one's going back into the Chamber of Secrets, if that's what you're implying," he said.

"No... not that," Hermione replied. "I suppose we're going to have to do some more investigating before we look anywhere."

She scooped her books into a pile and began clearing off the table as Harry leaned back in his chair.

"Mister Weasley," came the prim voice of their head of house from behind Harry. "I'm here to arrange for your detention with Professor Flitwick."

Ron groaned and his head sank onto the table while Hermione clucked her tongue. "Serves you right," she muttered under her breath.

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As Ron walked off to detention, Harry plopped himself down on a pillow in the front of the Room of Requirement. They had decided to resume their work on increasing Harry's shield power and with Ron re-organising Flitwick's entire collection of spellbooks, they knew this would be the perfect time.

Ginny was browsing a set of books that had appeared along one of the walls of the room and Hermione carefully arranged her notes and books on the floor next to Harry.

"Right," Hermione announced, selecting the same charred paper they had been using since their first botched attempt at merging two spells. "Let's get on with these new equations."

After looking over the new wand movements on the parchment, Harry and Ginny faced each other from opposite ends of the room, their wands up in the classic duelling stance. He flicked his wrist and swung his arm around in the air as he said the incantation. There was a brief flutter of blue as the shield engaged, but it didn't last against Ginny's tickling jinx. The blue glow around Harry crackled and shattered, allowing the spell to hit Harry's middle. He doubled over and let out a series of laughs that echoed off the high ceiling in the room. Ginny ran quickly over to him, cast the counter spell on him, and helped him back to his feet.

"Sorry," she said with a grimace. "Better than a boil hex, though."

Still breathing heavily, Harry waved her off. "Don't... worry... about it," he managed. "Got to... practice with something."

Hermione was busy waving her wand over the parchment as Ginny rubbed Harry's back. The door to the room opened and Professor McTierny entered.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know the room was occupied. Is this a bad time?" he asked as he held the door open with one hand.

"No," Ginny answered. "We're just practicing a new spell."

McTierny let the door close and walked towards them. "Anything I can help with? It looks like Harry's gotten the worst of something."

"Yeah," Harry confirmed. "Ginny's almost as good as you are with her jinxes."

The professor paused for a second, presumably staring at him through his dark glasses. "So it's a shield spell, then?"

Harry nodded. "I was kind of tired of you breaking through mine every class," he said wryly.

"Better than getting caught with your trousers down, lad."

Harry snorted.

"So how is it that three students are attempting to create a new spell when it takes the Unspeakables months to do it?"

Hermione handed her parchment to McTierny. "Hmm," he said after a minute of reading. "That's pretty good work, actually. I never would have

thought to combine a power draining spell with *Protego*. That might actually work – if you don't drain all of your magic before the spell reaches the activation level."

"Well, Professor," Hermione said brightly, as if she'd just been asked to give a lecture on spell crafting to the Unspeakables. "I thought about that. It'd be crazy to cast this spell without some kind of limiters on its ability to drain magic from the person casting it." She pointed to two equations midway down the page. "That's why I inserted these here. The spell can only infuse a certain amount of magic into itself before it stops."

McTierny rubbed his chin and continued to consult the parchment. He jabbed the equations with his finger. "That's your problem right there. The spell you've designed need a certain amount of energy to activate. But with these inhibitors, it can't ever get there."

"But it did activate!" Hermione said excitedly. "We saw a blue glow around Harry when he said the incantation." Then more sheepishly, she said, "It just didn't stop Ginny's curse from hitting him."

Looking to Harry with a blank stare, Professor McTierny frowned every-so-slightly. "Is that so?" Pointing his wand at the parchment, McTierny erased the inhibitor equations and re-calculated the spell. "Try it again. Only this time, let me hex Harry."

The girls walked to the side of the room so they could see both Harry and McTierny. Harry began to perform the spell once more, slightly altering his wand movements to match those in the new diagram and the blue light crackled to life once more. This time, when McTierny's spell hit the blue light, it rebounded and nearly hit the professor before he dodged away. As soon as Harry cancelled the shield, however, he felt the room lurch and spin. His knees hit the floor and he heard Ginny calling his name before everything went black.

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January 10, 1997

Dear Mum,

Thanks for sending the extra unmentionables. Having to rotate between only two of each was driving me absolutely bonkers (not to mention what it was doing to Harry). I was thinking about going to Hogsmeade and just buying some more, but it seems that every time there's a visit scheduled, I've got something going on with Harry. Not that I'm complaining, mind you, but more on that later. Besides, I didn't think we could swing the extra expenses. I hope you didn't have to skimp on Ron's food budget for the summer holidays, because I don't want to give him another excuse to criticise my new developments. If I wasn't going out with Harry, I think he'd go mad and hex every boy that even looked at me, but he knows that I'm 'safe' on the arm of the Boy-Who-Lived. Oh, but I'm getting back to Harry again, aren't I?

O.W.L. year has been relatively quiet for me so far. There's been more homework and the teachers are generally more cranky than normal, but it's not anything like what Fred and George made it out to be. Of course, now that I've mentioned it, I'll be doomed to piles of work next week that'll take three years to complete.

Steph and Kate are on a mission to date Colin Creevey. Don't ask me what they see in him, but heaven help us all if he actually chooses one of them. The loser will be so distraught I might have to perform a Cheering Charm on her every hour just to make it through.

Hermione found out what the runes mean – the ones we found on Christmas holiday. The font is at Hogwarts somewhere. Or at least, it's near Hogwarts. The directions were fairly vague, and I'm certain that it was purposefully done that way. Ron's going spare not being able to look for it and Harry seems torn between putting it off for as long as possible and getting the whole mess over with. With all that's hanging over his head, it's no wonder that he sometimes doesn't know which direction to go in. I'm just glad I'm there to distract him from getting too caught up in the seriousness of life. And to be honest, he makes sure I'm sufficiently distracted, too.

Harry and I have come to an understanding about our relationship. We both know that we're still young and relatively inexperienced in matters of the heart. Still, we have come so far in the past few months that I can hardly remember not being with him. It's almost as if we're two halves of one person. Before we got together last year, I would have slit my own wrists before giving anyone that kind of control over me, but this just feels so right that I would die if it ended. Oh, Mum. What am I going to do if something happens to Harry? I'm really scared that if for some reason Harry dies taking down that monster... if I can't be with him ever again, that life wouldn't be worth living.

After re-reading that last paragraph, I must seem awfully pathetic. Aren't I pathetic? Don't mind me, though; I just needed to get that on paper. I'm really glad you're there for me to talk to.

The last thing I wanted to talk about was the spell that we're working on with Harry – you know that one we talked about over Christmas break? We've finally made a breakthrough. Professor McTierny came into one of our testing sessions and helped Hermione adjust the equations. It seems that the spell required more power than it could take from any normal witch or wizard. When the restrictions were lifted, it worked so well that McTierny's hex nearly hit him after it bounced off Harry's shield. After Harry woke up from having most of his magic drained, we told him it worked and that the next time he cast it, he didn't need to use so much magic to keep it running. Well, unless Bellatrix Lestrange was shooting Unforgiveables at him!

That's everything that's worth repeating. Give Dad a kiss for me.

All my love,

Ginny

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That evening, Harry was under strict orders to get plenty of sleep. Not wanting to face the wrath of an overprotective hospital matron, but too excited at having finally found a way to block more powerful unfriendly spells, he found he couldn't sleep at all. Ron still wasn't back from his detention, Hermione and Ginny were downstairs writing letters to their families, and Harry was stuck with a mind full of possibilities.

All too soon, however, Harry's body caught up with him and he was fast asleep.

He seemed to float out the window of his dormitory, down to the cold winter grass of the sweeping lawn in front of the castle. The lake was gleaming and winking in the moonlight. Without touching the ground, he was carried quickly through the gates of the school and down into the village. He was going so fast now that he couldn't tell where he was exactly, but he didn't think he'd left Hogsmeade. Soon, he was twisting and

spinning and altogether confused. Then, a door appeared and he was thrust through it.

The smell of flat Butterbeer and stale peanuts assaulted his nose, but it was entirely too dark to see. He felt drawn to one particular door and stumbled over an unseen chair. The door loomed closer, though he could not detect it. Finally, his hand closed around a cold metal knob and it turned. The door creaked open and he was presented with a shining light that caused him to recoil; it drowned out everything else.

Squinting with watery eyes, Harry struggled to behold the source of the light. As his vision adjusted to the penetrating brightness, he was able to detect an object in the midst of the glorious glow. The object grew less blurred until an outline appeared. There were four persons holding a platter high above their heads out of which came golden water.

Harry's eyes went wide and he struggled to see where he was. Was he still in Hogsmeade? Was he somewhere else entirely? Then, the force that took him there returned and he was moved back through the door and when it shut, he awoke.

Shrugging the sheets off his body, Harry pulled himself to his feet and immediately felt a wave of dizziness overtake him. He clung to his bedpost until the feeling retreated to a hazy buzz in the back of his head. He struggled with his dressing gown and took several shaky steps towards the stairs.

Ron was back and was sleepily staring at the fire while Hermione rubbed his feet. Ginny was already at the foot of the stairs, however. "Harry," she whispered. "You're supposed to be asleep. I felt you wake up, but there was something wrong about it, so I came over."

Harry smirked. "Yeah, well, if you'd just had my dream, you'd be awake, too."

Ginny took his arm and put it around her neck, sliding her other arm around his waist. "Well, let's get you downstairs so you can tell us all about it."

They arrived and Harry recounted his dream with all the detail he could remember.

"I'm sure it's in Hogsmeade," Harry said. "The font's there and it has to be at one of the pubs."

Ron stared tiredly at his friend and Hermione frowned. "But you said you weren't sure you didn't leave Hogsmeade," she said. "You could have been anywhere."

"I know what I said," Harry said, a little peevishly, feeling like they were tantalisingly close to getting to the font and beating Voldemort before he had a chance to find it. "What I'm saying *now*, is that I *know* I was still in Hogsmeade and that the font is at one of the pubs."

"Listen," Hermione said warily. "We can't just tear off into the village in the middle of the night, without telling the teachers, and you know what they'll say. Besides, you don't know which pub it's in, and frankly, I don't think Madam Rosmerta would appreciate us breaking into the Three Broomsticks to look for something you saw in a dream."

"We're wasting time," Harry said and made to stand. Ginny's hand clamped down on his shoulder, however, and in his weakened condition, made it impossible for him to get up. He glared at her, but she simply stared right back at him, the challenge was clear.

Ron cleared his throat, all traces of his earlier weariness wiped from his face. "What if... you know... the dreams came from... *him*."

Harry balled his fists. "I don't have those dreams anymore, Ron. Dumbledore fixed that for me," he said pointing to his head. "Remember?"

"Yeah," Ron answered, and sat forward in his chair. "But you should still be careful. You've kind of had a bad track record with dreams...."

Ron's right, Ginny said in his mind. *Listen to Hermione and Ron, even if it means we wait until tomorrow.* He turned to see her staring at him, a sad smile on her face. *You're in no condition to go haring off anywhere tonight, and I'm more than capable of hexing you if you try it.*

Ron and Hermione were looking at him, as if they knew Ginny was speaking to him. Under their combined scrutiny, Harry relented. "Fine," he said and relaxed on the sofa he was sharing with Ginny. "But first chance we get, we're going to the village to find out where this thing is."

Obviously relieved, his three friends sat back in their chairs and let out a combined breath. "I can live with that," Hermione said and promptly scooped up her books. "See you tomorrow."

Ron looked after her longingly and stood as well. "So much for that foot rub," he grumbled and walked towards the stairs.

Closing his eyes, Harry felt the tiredness return full force. Ginny's hand was in his hair and he felt himself drifting. When he awoke in his bed the next morning he realised he had no idea how he'd got there.