

The First Horcrux 1: Childish Things

Chapter One – Childish Things

A/N: This chapter was inspired by imadra_blue's Facing Forward. I've borrowed some elements from this story and played on others. She's simply a wonderful writer.

Life had dealt its fair share of rotten lemons to Hermione Granger. Being an only child hadn't been perfect, even with loving parents, because people love to inflict pain on the ones they're jealous of. Being abnormally intelligent (aside from allowing her unparalleled success in school) had cost her many friends, even after coming to Hogwarts. Living two lives, however, is what hurt her the most. One life with her parents and extended family as a Muggle and one in the magical world, where she felt increasingly more at home than in the one she grew up in. The two halves were growing apart and the required schizophrenia was unbearable. Her precious few Muggle friends could never seem to find the time to fit themselves into her schedule and her wizarding ones were all involved in the biggest war in a century. Now, she was, too.

It wasn't the fetid lemonade that she'd been forced to make time and time again that bothered her, though. Nor was it the lack of available sugar when she'd wanted to sweeten it just a little. It was the bitterness at realising that her best friend had been drinking unsweetened, rotting lemonade since he was a year old – and he didn't ever seem to mind.

Maybe he'd become accustomed to it. Maybe the hard knocks of life that seemed to keep slamming into him had deadened his sense of taste. Whatever the reason, Hermione, in her very isolated, private way, was only now beginning to understand what it was to be like Harry Potter. In understanding Harry Potter, Hermione had been given new resolve. Fresh from the bitter experience of misplaced doubt over the last school year and then having it result in Dumbledore's death, she vowed to never second-guess Harry again, no matter how illogical his hunches or how dangerous following them seemed to be. Harry was going to save them all, and Hermione was going to be by his side until the very end.

She threw items from her trunk into an open suitcase on the floor, things that wouldn't be needed any more. Going with Harry wherever he went and however long it would take to defeat Voldemort narrowed her needs to a select few items. Books, cauldrons, school robes, and gloves were all piled into the suitcase that should contain two weeks of clothes and essentials for her summer trip. Instead, she was going to leave them and her Muggle life behind forever.

Her eyes found themselves lingering on her bed and the single worn, stuffed bear that she'd had for as long as she could remember. Scooping it up, she hugged it to her seventeen-year-old body, burying her nose into its frayed head. How many times had she sought comfort in Pricilla? How many thunderstorms? How many imagined monsters under her bed? The stitches holding one of the legs was coming loose and an eye had popped off the year she went to Hogwarts, never to be seen again. Pushing the well of melancholy memories aside, she placed Pricilla back on her bed and prayed she'd be able to come back to her again, when the war was finally over. She had new sources of comfort in her life now and where she was going, Pricilla (and her parents for that matter) could not follow.

Turning from her bed, Hermione surveyed the essentials still in her trunk: the clothes, potions ingredients, and food that she'd nicked from her pantry the night before. With a swish of her wand, it all floated to a large blue duffle bag; with another wave, the now-filled bag shrunk to the size of a pack of Exploding Snap cards. She placed this in the pocket of her loose jeans and walked downstairs, mentally preparing herself for the fight ahead.

Her parents were sitting on the sofa, their bags packed in the entryway for their annual holiday trip; this year they were to go to Spain.

"Where're your things, Hermione?" her mother asked, noticing her empty hands. "The taxi will be here in a few minutes and we're pressed for time as it is."

Hermione walked carefully across the rug covering the Grangers' expensive stone floor and stood in front of her parents. She held her breath, dreading what she was about to say. Then, after some hesitation, she gathered her courage and said, "I'm not going with you."

Her father chuckled dismissively, as she knew he would – he never took her seriously when she needed him to. "What's this about? Of course you're going. You've had a whopper of a year at school and things are funny in England now. It'll do us all some good to get away for a bit."

The casual brush-off hadn't lulled her mother into believing that Hermione wasn't serious. She knew Hermione too well for that and could probably see the stern look in her daughter's eyes. "I'm going to help a friend kill an evil wizard and I probably won't be back for a long time." She squeezed the sweaty slip of vine wood in her hand and took a half-step back. "Take care of each other."

Her father stood, a haunted look on his face. Her mother's eyes were glistening but Hermione could also see acceptance in them.

"I love you," she said, and turned on the spot, disappearing with a small *pop*.

Hermione re-appeared in a small cubicle inside a woman's clothing shop in the heart of Little Whinging. It was dark inside the shop, as it had not yet opened. She peeked out of the stall and looked among the racks of clothing, at the till, and around the dressing rooms to make sure she was indeed alone. Satisfied, she walked swiftly to the door, charmed it open, and after locking it again, marched determinedly towards Magnolia Crescent.

She had never been to Harry's relatives' house and now that Hermione was standing outside of number four, she reflected that she probably wasn't missing much – just the companionship of her best friend. Given the way Harry compulsively downplayed his hardships, the indications of abuse she *did* know about were probably only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. It was going to be good for everyone to have him finally leave this miserable place forever.

That happy day wasn't going to be for another two weeks, however, but she and their other friend, Ron, had promised to spend however long he'd needed with him. Bill and Fleur's wedding was going to be on the twenty-eighth of July, and so that was when they were going to leave for the Burrow.

Hermione waited outside of number four for half an hour, turning over in her mind her parents' likely course of action after her hasty departure, before she gave up on Ron going in with her. Her dad would be on the phone with the local constable, while her mother made tea. Then, they'd likely contact Hogwarts, looking for Dumbledore, not knowing he was gone...

She snapped her mind shut and looked around the neighbourhood. Several neighbours had noticed her loitering, and if Harry's last letter had been accurate, it would be best if she didn't infuriate his aunt by attracting too much attention. She still didn't even know if Harry's relatives knew she was coming.

Two muffled notes from behind the door confirmed that the bell worked properly and Hermione nervously waited a discrete distance from the dark green door. There was a scrambling sound and then the metallic clunk of a deadbolt being thrown back. The door opened and she was pleased to see Harry's face poking out behind it.

She stepped forward, but caught herself when he pointed his wand at her. "Where's Ron?" he asked quietly, holding his wand low so as not to be seen by the neighbours.

"He wasn't here when I walked up," Hermione explained, noticing out of the corner of her eye the shade being pulled back from a window in number six. "Can I come in?"

Harry scrutinized her for a second before speaking. "What's your middle name?"

"Jane," she said immediately, cottoning on to his suspicious behaviour. "Which bottle let you through Snape's potions room before you got the Philosopher's Stone?"

She could tell he'd had to think about that one, but he eventually responded. "The smallest and you took the round bottle."

Hermione smiled. "Right. Can I come in now?"

He threw back the door and she strode into what she instantly decided was the most sterile house she'd ever been in. She crinkled her nose. "Not very welcoming, is it?" she asked.

"No, I reckon they'd rather scare most people away. 'Specially if they're normal like us." He seemed saddened by this line of thought so Hermione prodded the conversation in another direction.

"Are they here?"

He shook his head and started walking toward the stairs, motioning for her to follow. "No, they're off shopping or something. They'll be back before noon, though – Dudley's favourite show is on the telly then."

With a smirk, Hermione followed Harry to his room and was grateful to see the perfectly normal piles of dirty clothes, messy stacks of books and papers and the moving, waving pictures of she, Harry, and Ron on the wall next to Harry's bed. There was also a pleasant moment of surprise when she saw that Ginny's photograph had made it into his collection. The younger girl had confided in her before they left the Hogwarts Express just a few short days ago, and told her that he'd broken up with her. Hermione was concerned that Harry may have had the mistaken impression that Ginny would simply go away and that, instead of keeping her safe, Harry's actions might do just the opposite. If Harry wasn't distracted by missing Ginny, then Ginny would almost certainly insist on going with them. Either way, Harry's noble idea was doomed to failure.

"I hadn't thought about sleeping arrangements," Harry admitted as he pushed a large pile of dirty jeans, shirts, and boxers into his miniscule wardrobe. The single bed was almost too small for Harry's nearly six foot tall frame, let alone all three of them. Not that they would consider sharing a bed together, but the problem of adequate sleeping space wouldn't resolve itself.

Removing her wand from the back pocket of her jeans, Hermione motioned for Harry to stand back. "I've got just the thing," she said, waved her wand around the room and watched as the once postage stamp-sized space slowly expanded until it was four times its original size. Then, flicking her wand at two spots in the newly open area, she conjured two beds the same size as Harry's, complete with pillows and bedding. Hermione's was pink with a lace bed ruffle and Ron's was a garish orange that she was sure he'd appreciate. Then, considering that both of her friends had noticed she was a girl more than two years ago, she levitated her bed into the corner of the room and conjured a dividing wall for privacy.

When she was satisfied, she turned to see Harry's mouth hanging open. "That's bloody brilliant!" he said.

"Language, Harry," she scolded slightly, but her lips twitched in very pleased sort of way. "You didn't expect we'd be sleeping standing up, did you?"

"W – Well, no... I suppose not." He sat heavily on his bed, his face blank as he seemed to sink back into himself.

With a frown of her own, she took her tea box-sized bag from her front pocket, set it on the floor, and tapped it once with her wand. It immediately sprung back to its original size and she replaced her wand in her back pocket. She bent to unzip the bag, intent on grabbing a bite of breakfast now that she was settled in.

Harry snorted and she turned her head in his direction. "Don't let Moody catch you with your wand there," he said with a small smirk. "He'd lecture you about blasting your buttocks off."

Taking advantage of the opening he'd left her, she raised her brow in a shocked manner and said, "Been looking at my buttocks, have you?"

Harry's eyes shot to hers and he coughed into his hand, unsuccessfully hiding his grin. "Guilty as charged," he said and then glanced at Ginny's smiling photograph. "But I'm sure Ron'll do more of that when he gets here. He's got a keen eye for that sort of thing."

Hermione sighed, thinking about how long it had been since she'd caught Ron looking at any part of her besides her face. "Maybe. We haven't spoken much since the funeral."

With his own incredulous look, Harry turned back to face Hermione. "You two looked pretty cosy on the platform at King's Cross."

"The hug was nice," she confirmed, sitting on the floor as she continued to dig through her bag and gritted her teeth at the memory. "But I was expecting a little more from the red-haired git."

"No declarations of love?" Harry asked with mock seriousness.

"No, and I've been waiting for four bloody years to hear it!"

There was a brief silence in which Hermione pulled out a sugar-free piece of liquorice and took a bite.

"Has it really been four?" he asked, still staring at Ginny's photograph.

She swallowed her sweet and nodded. "Ever since he went into the forest, after I was Petrified." Harry's brows furrowed as he apparently tried to catch the significance. "Anyone as deathly afraid of spiders as Ron, who'd willingly go into a great big nest of oversized ones for me, well..." she trailed off. Something started to squeeze on her heart as she thought about all that Ron had done for her.

Harry's eyes glistened as Ginny's picture beamed back at him. The pressure on her heart increased. Her hunger suddenly left her and she put her half-eaten liquorice back into her bag. She folded her arms tightly around her chest and distractedly wondered where Ron was.

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Ron showed up just before noon, having Apparated to Mrs. Figg's, scaring her cats with his impromptu appearance, and received several long scratches as a result. After answering questions about their time in the Shrieking Shack in their third year, they let him enter. Hermione was already tutting and shaking her head at the scratches.

"It wasn't my bloody fault she lets those things run wild," Ron said bitterly after explaining his story on number four's front porch. Harry hastily ushered him inside.

"My relatives will be here any minute," Harry complained. "Get in before they see you bleeding all over the carpet."

Hermione observed this all from the staircase, noting with satisfaction that Ron was at least a little cowed by his experience with the cats. "Maybe that will teach you to announce yourself before you Apparate into someone's house, then?" she said with a continued tutting sound.

Ron's offended look returned immediately as Hermione healed his cuts with her wand. "You're *glad* I got mauled by a dozen rabid cats?"

"Well, if you'd thought for a second that it was okay to barge into someone's house, then you deserved what you got," she replied waspishly, taking care to overheat the sensitive skin behind his knee.

"Oi!" Ron exclaimed, pulling back his leg and rubbing it fiercely.

Harry was fidgeting by the now-closed door, a look of bemused anxiety on his face. "Can we take this argument upstairs, please? I'd like to at least *try* to act like I didn't just let a fully-qualified witch and wizard into my aunt's house."

Clamping his mouth shut, Ron glared at Hermione, and took the steps two at a time, while Harry waited for Hermione to follow. "If he'd only *act* like an adult, it'd be all right," she whispered to him over her shoulder as she, too, ascended the stairs. "But he just doesn't *think*."

"I'm not going to argue with you, but this *is* Ron we're talking about, here. Thinking before acting hasn't ever been his strong suit." There was a pause as they reached the landing. "Nor mine," he finished.

Hermione smirked and walked into Harry's room. Ron was standing inside, his jaw hanging open as Harry's had done that very morning.

"Blimey," he said, scratching his head. "I must have been half asleep the last time I was here. You always told us your room was tiny, Harry."

"Don't be stupid," Hermione said, moving past him to sit on her bed, her arms folded across her chest. "I expanded the room when I got here. You'd have seen the original configuration, had you been here on time."

Ron walked to his bed and tentatively touched the orange duvet. "Yeah," he said, suddenly serious. "I was late because Dad needed me to help him with something."

This got Hermione's attention so she tucked her knees close to her chest and rested her chin on them.

"The Order is leaving Grimmauld Place." He hesitated, casting Harry a careful glance. "Since.... Since Dumbledore died," he said, forging on despite the fact that Harry cringed at the name. "Well, they didn't think it'd be safe for them, with the Secret Keeper dead and all."

Hermione cringed as well, thinking that the Order would be hard pressed to find as capable a leader in the war against Voldemort as Dumbledore. Finding a new headquarters was almost moot.

"I reckon that's a good thing then," Harry said suddenly with a forced smile. "We're going to need a place to stay apart from the adults while we're out there. Grimmauld Place would be the last place they'd look for us." He made a vague gesture towards his window and the determined look returned to his face.

"But, Harry," Hermione said, suddenly confused. "With the Fidelius Charm broken, we won't be safe there either."

For the first time since Dumbledore's death, Harry smiled. Well, it wasn't a true smile, as his lips merely stopped curling downward, but Hermione wasn't going to be picky. He selected a book from his trunk and tossed it to her. "I want you to put the Fidelius Charm on Grimmauld Place again. You're going to be the Secret Keeper, too. The sooner you can perform the charm, the better."

Turning the book over in her hands, she read the title, *Advanced Concealment Charms*, and looked back to Harry. "Where did you get this?"

"From the library, just before we left on the train," explained Harry.

Hermione gaped at him. "But that's *stealing!*" she said, outraged.

Harry levelled his gaze at her and without blinking, said, "It won't be the worst thing we'll do before it's all said and done."

There was a deep, booming laugh from downstairs and the sound of the front door being closed loudly. The Dursleys were home. Harry let his eyes linger on Hermione for a moment as she fidgeted with the checkout card in the front cover of the book. He gave them a strained grimace and said, "I'd better go act like I care they're home."

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They performed the charm that evening, after Harry had nicked some roast lamb from the Dursleys' table to provide them a meagre dinner. The Fidelius Charm turned out to be not as difficult as Hermione had led herself to believe. One simply had to think about the address, or other permanent feature of the location being hidden, and then say the incantation. As soon as Grimmauld Place was hidden by a new Secret Keeper, Hermione was amused to note that neither Harry or Ron were able to think of the name of the street, or even to describe the inside of the house, though they could recall events that had happened there.

She scribbled the address on a piece of parchment and showed it to both of them before setting the paper on fire. It was as if a flood of memories had spilled into their minds.

"Whoa," Ron said as he shook his head. "That was the strangest thing I've ever felt."

Harry seemed to agree, as he was nodding slowly. "It's like I knew I'd been there, and I could even see Moody handing me the address the first time, but I couldn't even read what was on the parchment in my memory."

Hermione felt pleased. "It worked, then," she said. "So what are we going to do after we get to Godric's...?"

"Hermione," said Harry forcefully. "You're a great friend and a wonderful witch, but I'm not ready to talk about that just yet. I'm really tired; we'll talk tomorrow, okay?" He flipped the switch on the wall, extinguishing the lights in the room. She heard a rustle of clothes in the period where her eyes weren't adjusted to the darkness and by the time she could see anything, Harry was in bed, under his covers, turned on his side, facing away from her.

Ron said nothing, but moved to his own bed, throwing back his duvet. He began to unbutton his trousers when he froze and stared pointedly at her.

"Uh, sorry?" she murmured, and slowly backed around the divider separating her bed from the rest of the room, her cheeks warm as she tried to ignore the sounds of clothes hitting the floor around Ron's bed. It was a long time before she fell asleep. Try as she might, she couldn't control her racing thoughts. Staying at Privet Drive was going to be more complicated than she'd thought.

The First Horcrux 2: Saying Goodbye to the Past

Chapter Two – Saying Goodbye to the Past

Harry awoke the next morning to the sound of shrieking – terrified shrieking to be precise. He threw his covers off, grabbed his wand and blearily pointed it in the direction of the noise. It was seconds before his eyes were focused enough to see that the screaming blur was his aunt, and that both Ron and Hermione were already pointing their wands at her.

“Aunt Petunia,” Harry said as his heart rate began to decrease. “Aunt Petunia, it’s all right. They’re my friends. They’ve come to stay with me until I leave.”

But she either did not hear him, or the sight of a half-clothed Ron and a nightgown-clad Hermione, both pointing their wands at her, had sent her into hysterics. Uncle Vernon and Dudley were now in the doorway, staring into the room with wide-eyed horror.

“What is the meaning of this?” Uncle Vernon bellowed, pushing aside his wife and entering the room with a beefy finger already pointed ominously at Harry. “How *dare* you bring more of your kind into my house?”

Harry located his glasses and put them on. He did not budge when his uncle’s finger found Harry’s bare chest and began to jab as the older man continued to rant. It had been the same ever since Harry’d been a toddler.

“They’re with *me*,” Harry repeated when Uncle Vernon finally ran out of steam. Ron and Hermione looked warily at Harry’s relatives. “They’re staying here until I leave.”

“No they’re bloody well not!” Vernon yelled hotly. “I’ll not be supporting a bunch of lazy, good-for-nothing freaks in my house!”

Folding his arms across his chest, careful to keep his wand clear of his body in case sparks decided to fly out of its tip, Harry levelled a challenging gaze at his uncle. He thought of the one thing that would entice the man to allow Ron and Hermione to remain with him. “Actually, Uncle Vernon, there’s not a whole lot that you can do about it. They’re staying until I leave in a couple of weeks. Which’ll be the last time I ever darken your door.”

The thought that a time would come when Harry would leave permanently had never seemed to occur to Vernon and even as he opened his mouth to reply, a strange, glazed look overcame him. Harry knew that the age-old battle of giving in to any of Harry’s desires was in mortal struggle with the idea of being rid of him – this time, forever.

“Fine,” he said sternly, his finger popping up to poke into Harry’s chest once more. “But you’ll have to find your own food. I’m not feeding this lot. And *NO funny stuff*.”

Harry wasn’t about to argue the point when he’d clearly not even noticed the magical modifications to his bedroom. They’d do as much magic as they needed, the irrational bigotry of his relatives be damned.

His uncle backed out of the room, pushing a still terrified-looking Petunia and morbidly fascinated Dudley with him, and closed the door.

There was a silent moment while all three of them stared at the door. Then Ron lowered his wand and shook his head. “Wake up like that every day?” he quipped.

Harry gave a half-hearted smile. “Not recently; it’s actually been lots better since I stopped sleeping in the cupboard.”

There was a small, shocked gasp from Hermione, but she did not comment on Harry’s ill-treatment. It was just something they’d never really talked about.

Ron flopped back onto his bed, still bare-chested and heedless of Hermione’s stares. “Glad we can do magic, though. It’s nice to know that we can hex them if we need to.”

Harry silently agreed. He sat on his bed and bent over to search for a shirt among the pile against the wall. He had just put his head through the hole of the over-sized red t-shirt when he froze. “Hey,” he said with a start. “How *can* you do magic here?”

Ron turned his head to look at him, a strange smirk on his face. Hermione was still staring at him. “What d’ya mean? We’re of age. Why wouldn’t we be able to do magic?”

“No, not that,” explained Harry, pulling his shirt fully over his torso. “I mean, the Underage Magic office doesn’t know you’re here. All they know is that Enlargement Charms and Conjuring Spells have been cast. How come I haven’t got a letter expelling me from Hogwarts already?”

Ron looked confused for a second before he sat up. “Oh, *that*. Well, Dad said that they pulled ol’ Hopkirk from her post to staff the Office for the

Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects. The under-aged magic detectors are working just fine, but there's no one there to read the logs."

Hermione seemed to come out of her trance and nervously smoothed her nightgown. "By the time they get to them, you'll be of age, and we'll be able to testify that we were the ones doing the magic at any trial they'll want to hold. Besides," she finished with an encouraging smile, "you're going to defeat Voldemort; it's not like they're going to put you on trial first thing when you get back."

Harry didn't know why it was, but those particular words made him feel more light-hearted than he'd felt in days. It was not only re-assuring to know that his friends would be with him when he faced Voldemort, but that in the end, they were expecting him to win.

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The days leading up to Harry's departure were spent reading, playing chess with Ron, and avoiding the Dursleys at all costs. Uncle Vernon had not found the gumption to visit Harry's bedroom since the morning he'd discovered Ron and Hermione, and that suited Harry just fine. His Aunt Petunia, however, regularly walked past their door with the excuse that she was taking laundry downstairs, or cleaning the bathroom for the third time that week. Harry rather suspected she was worried that Hermione and Ron's presence would somehow corrupt Dudley, who would also lurk by their door from time to time.

Hermione had been exhibiting odd behaviour, too. While she did not stare at Ron as obviously as she'd done the first morning they'd spent together, Harry had caught her doing so when she thought no one was watching. Furthermore, he suspected that Ron was also aware of the extra attention because he always had a self-satisfied smirk on his face when she was nearby.

The day before Bill and Fleur's wedding, a package arrived from Mrs. Weasley. Pigwidgeon delivered it just before it dawn.

"Knock if off, you little feathery git," Ron chided as he attempted to catch the tiny owl. Pig was zooming around the ceiling, the package flopping back and forth from his leg. "Couldn't you have waited a little longer to deliver this?" Ron asked as he stopped lunging after him and opted instead for a Summoning Charm. Pig instantly shot to Ron's outstretched hand and hooted shrilly when Ron detached the package. "Six in the bloody... Hey," he said, testing the box for weight. "It's light. Too light."

Hermione snatched the box from Ron, placed it on the bed, and tapped it with her wand. "Your mum must have added a Featherweight Charm on it." Sure enough, when the charm was cancelled, the depression it made in Ron's duvet doubled. "It's been shrunk as well. Probably to make it so Pig could carry it." She tapped the box again and it sprung out so that it took up half of Ron's bed.

Ron tore off the wrapping and opened the package while Hermione took a note that had fallen to the bed. A fantastic smell filled the room. Eggs, toast, bacon, bangers, flagons of juice, and three mince pies were packed close together, along with a complete serving set for three people.

Hermione cleared her throat and began to read from the parchment.

Dear Ron,

I hope this is enough food for all of you. Mum was manic about making loads of food and was the one that charmed it while I wrote this note. Things are winding their way up for the wedding. Dad's in a right state. He's been asking for help from the Ministry to beef up security, but I don't think they're too keen to let anyone go seeing as how there's a war on. Bill invited some friends from work to the wedding that are handy with curses, but they're not Aurors. I just hope there won't be any goblins here. Mum would go mad before the wedding march was played. Take care. All of you.

Love,

Ginny

They stared at each other, each thinking the same thing: No Aurors at the wedding wasn't a good sign. A wedding like this would be sure to attract Voldemort's attention, especially with Harry as a guest.

Harry, determined to not dwell on such thoughts, picked up a fork and pointed it at Hermione. "I reckon Mrs. Weasley knows you're here."

With a slight blush, she took the fork from him. "As long as she hasn't told my parents..."

"Not much they can do about it," Ron said and then stuffed a whole, fat banger into his mouth. "Mmm. 'S good."

"Why not? Don't they have the right to know where she is?" asked Harry, who didn't like the idea of Hermione leaving her family without their consent. It was one thing to tell them directly that she wasn't going with them on holiday, but she'd left after concealing it for days.

"Because I'm of age," Hermione explained, portioning out eggs to all three plates, the use of which Ron seemed content to forgo as he fingered a piece of bacon, still chewing on his sausage. "Look, it was painful enough to go through with them; I don't want to rehash it with you two as well."

Harry held his tongue, also keen to not argue on one of the last worry-free days he'd be able to enjoy for the foreseeable future.

Ron finally swallowed his banger, and shoved a whole piece of bacon into his mouth, seemingly intent to ignore the subject completely.

When breakfast was finished, Hermione packed the dishes away and re-shrunk the box.

Hermione left to visit the loo while Ron and Harry began to pack. Ron enjoyed making Harry's clothes fly into his trunk, and then gleefully did the same with his own, though they hadn't been folded very well. Once everything was packed Harry remembered the old loose floorboard and began to feel along the floor in an effort to find it.

Give me a hand, Ron?" he asked, still on his knees, following the lines of the floor with his fingers.

"What'd you lose?" he replied, also sinking to the ground.

"I didn't lose anything," Harry explained. "Well, not technically, but I used to keep things in a loose floorboard – mostly sweets, but sometimes my homework. I just wanted to make sure I didn't forget anything." He moved his hand under his bed, but didn't feel the distinctive raised corner that told him that he'd found it, and moved to Ron's bed. "I guess when Hermione expanded the room, it got moved."

They'd searched for another few minutes when Ron found the board. "Got it," he said and wrenched it up from in between his and Hermione's bed. He lit his wand and flashed it into the dark space between the joists.

Harry and Ron peeked inside, and saw the torn corner of a pink cardboard box, (remnant of the cake Mrs. Weasley had sent him three years ago) an Acid Pop stick, and two army men. Harry scooped his hand inside the cubby and pulled everything out.

Sitting with his legs stretched over the open spot in the floor, Harry dropped the Acid Pop stick and the piece of pink cardboard into his lap. The remaining items still in his hand were the only toys he'd ever had as a child. Dudley had tossed an entire bucket of them over the stair railing and two had skidded under his cupboard door. He kept them in his pillowcase to prevent his aunt from finding and confiscating them and had probably placed them in the loose floorboard when he went to Hogwarts for the same reason.

Hermione walked in just then and stopped, giving them an odd look, drying her hair with a towel. "What's the matter?" she asked when Harry shoved the toys into his pocket and Ron quickly put the loose board back into place.

"Nothing," Harry and Ron chorused. "Just finished packing," added Harry.

She eyed them warily, but then walked to her bed and tossed her towel into her open duffel. "Good. You can be next in the shower, then, Ron."

"Nah," Ron said, standing up and shrugging at Harry, as if to say that he understood the importance of little green army men. "I'll shower when we get home."

Hermione wrinkled her nose, and tossed her dirty clothes in with her towel. Then she shrunk the bag, applied a Featherweight Charm, and slipped it in her pocket. "All set then?" she asked brightly.

"Yeah," Harry said, feeling the bulge of the toys in his pocket and deciding that he needed to take care of one more thing. "I'll be right back."

He walked downstairs, ignoring the look his aunt gave him as he walked through the kitchen. He stopped outside the familiar metal flap and lock-covered door that had been his home for ten years. Pushing back the catch, he opened the door and saw that his old mattress was still on the bottom of the cupboard, but had a pile of dusty boxes on top of it. The single light bulb that dangled from the stairs was encrusted with dust from disuse. Slowly, he removed the toy soldiers from his pocket, and placed them on the floor of the cupboard. As he did so, a strange feeling of melancholy overcame him. With a hitch in his breath, he took a final, sweeping survey of the diminutive space, and closed the door.

Turning to face his aunt, Harry tried to meet her eyes.

"You're leaving, then?" she asked with a glint of some unidentifiable emotion in her voice.

Feeling intensely awkward about having to face her, Harry shrugged. "I guess so."

There was a pause wherein Harry thought about running upstairs to avoid the whole situation. Then, without any warning whatsoever, a pair of bony arms were around his back, holding him stiffly in what he knew was probably the only hug she had ever given – certainly the only one she'd given to him.

"Take care of yourself," she said and pulled away before he could react. Avoiding his gaze, she wiped a finger under her eye and straightened her apron. Then, dust rag in hand, she walked out of the kitchen.

*

"All set?" Hermione asked with a warm and understanding smile when Harry returned upstairs. It was clear that Ron had explained about the army men in the floorboard.

Harry nodded, not able to trust his voice in front of her and Ron just then. He slipped his arms into both of theirs, ready for the impending side-along Apparition and waited for the horribly confining feeling to overtake him.

When he opened his eyes again, he was standing in the Burrow's front garden, shaded from the early morning sun by a large birch tree. Ron grabbed his lightened trunk and trudged off for the Burrow, only to be ambushed by his mother.

"Stay right there," Mrs. Weasley said, her wand noticeable as she held it by her side. She seemed to hesitate, as if looking for the best question to ask him. Then, her eyes lit up. "How many weeks were you grounded for accidentally turning Ginny's cat into a toad?"

Ron's red ears were easily visible from where Harry and Hermione were still standing, watching with a great deal of amusement.

"None!" Ron replied. "It was George that did that, not me!"

Mrs. Weasley nodded and gave her youngest son a warm smile. "In you get, then."

Harry and Hermione followed. "Thanks for the breakfast, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, with one eye on Hermione, who had the grace to blush.

"You're quite welcome, Harry," Mrs. Weasley responded, but just as they approached her, she took Hermione into a great hug. After a moment of surprise, Hermione returned the gesture. "We were so worried when your parents arrived last week looking for you. It was obvious where you'd gone, of course, because Ron was with Harry and you three are never far apart when there's mischief to be had."

Mrs. Weasley had a twinkle in her eye that reminded Harry so strongly of Dumbledore that he couldn't bear to look at her and turned to watch Hermione instead.

"Or is there another reason you went to live with two boys?" Mrs. Weasley continued. Hermione looked shocked, her face now fully scarlet, and all she could manage in reply was a disjointed stutter. Mrs. Weasley seemed to take great joy in this reaction, however, and gathered her into another large hug. "Just as I thought," she whispered. "He can't talk enough about you, either."

Then, Mrs. Weasley turned on her heel and walked back through the Burrow's front door, humming to herself as she went.

"What was that all about?" a still red-faced Hermione asked in a whisper, as if she suspected Fred and George to be lurking behind the bushes with their Extendable Ears out, poised to hear everything she was about to say. "I mean, it's not like I've ever admitted to anyone that I liked Ron. Why would she jump to that conclusion? I might like *you* that way for all she knows."

Harry simply smiled at her. "Hermione," he said with great satisfaction. "Mrs. Weasley didn't say anything about you liking Ron... but you just did." He turned and left Hermione spluttering to herself once more, his smile even wider on his face. He didn't understand the appeal in seeing Hermione deal with Mrs. Weasley's knowledge about her feelings for Ron, or the tacit acknowledgement that Ron reciprocated them at least a little bit, but he did know that Professor McGonagall had been right. It was good to see a little more love in the world.

At that exact moment, just as he had entered the Burrow, his smile evaporated. Ron was having a heated conversation with a shorter, angrier, and prettier Weasley at the foot of the stairs. When Harry entered, the conversation immediately halted and Harry's stomach lurched at seeing Ginny's blazing anger directed at him. They stared at each other for a long moment and he thought he detected a hint of sadness behind her eyes. Then, she shot up the stairs and they heard the distant sound of a slamming door.

Ron grimaced at Harry. "She's in a right state. I'd wait to talk to her if I were you."

Harry stared back at his friend, remembering with a pang of guilt that he'd completely put aside his relationship with Ginny. "Who says I'm going to say anything to her at all?"

The shocked look on Ron's face would have been comical in any other setting, but Harry's resolve was still in full force. As far as he was concerned, Ginny was just a happy memory that would have to wait until the end of the war to be enjoyed again.

*

Sleep came fitfully for Harry that night, as if his mind was rebelling against itself, protesting his decision to ignore Ginny. His conscience burned within him and he couldn't seem to get her angry face to stop reappearing every time he closed his eyes. Finally, when the dim light of pre-dawn broke into a full-fledged sunrise, Harry pushed his covers off and trudged down to the loo for a shower, his clothes and toiletries tucked in a small bag under his arm. The space under Ginny's door was dark, and he was grateful that she was still asleep.

An hour later, feeling guilty at using so much hot water, but remembering that the Burrow's magical supply of water never ran out, and deciding he'd sulked in the steamy cubicle long enough, Harry left the loo. He passed Ginny's now partially-opened door and concentrated on averting his gaze in order to not risk seeing even a glimpse of her. It didn't matter, however, as quiet, heated voices filtered around the door frame and pinned him to the floor.

"He's just as miserable as you," whispered Hermione fiercely, as if she needed to convince the other girl in the room that it was true. The other girl being Ginny, of course and her face flashed in his mind, momentarily causing Harry to miss what Ginny said in response.

"That's rubbish," said Hermione, an exasperated edge clear in her voice. "You don't know *how* he feels because you won't even talk to him."

"And you do?" Ginny said, her voice rising. "I suppose that means you've been having cosy little chats with him while you've been sleeping in his room." Harry certainly didn't miss the accusation in her tone and knew Hermione wouldn't either.

"How can you think that?" Hermione replied after a moment of silence, her voice softer, so that Harry found himself leaning in to hear. "Ron was there the whole time, and you *know* how I feel about him."

There was another long pause and Harry briefly thought he'd pushed his luck enough, that he ought to go back to Ron's room and forget about this whole conversation, but when Ginny spoke again, he knew he'd have to stay until the end.

"I'm sorry, Hermione..." There was the sound of something hard hitting the wall and then a creaking from what sounded like bedsprings. Ginny let out a breath. "I wish there was a solution. I wish he hadn't broken things off with me, but that's all in the past. I *understand* why he did it, but it doesn't make it any easier."

Feet shuffled close to the door and Harry jumped back, clutching his bag of dirty pyjamas and shaving supplies, ready to sprint up the stairs, but keen to hear the rest of the conversation.

"Just talk to him," Hermione said finally. There was a metallic click as her hand found the door knob and Harry shot up three steps, cocking his ear towards the almost-open door. If he made it look like he was just coming up the stairs, she wouldn't suspect anything....

"I'll think about it," Ginny answered resignedly and the door was jerked open. Harry was caught staring right at Hermione; all thoughts of deception flew from his mind. He jerked his eyes back up the stairs and walked quickly back to Ron's room. In that brief second, where he had seen Hermione's face, the unmistakable look of shock had changed ever-so-briefly into a maddening grin that made Harry curse himself for having been caught eavesdropping. If Hermione told Ginny that he'd been loitering outside her door.... Or even worse, if the older girl decided to confront him about it....

*

Breakfast was tense. Mrs. Weasley was oblivious to it, however, because she was so busy getting the food ready for the wedding brunch that she hardly even acknowledged them.

"Watch the quiche!" she shouted as it zoomed over to a table of mounting snacks, drinks, and delicious-looking foods that Harry could only begin to identify.

He didn't try very hard, however, as he was exerting all his effort in not making eye contact with Ginny, who happened to be directly across from him, a fact that made Harry give Hermione a very threatening look. Her vague smile confirmed that it had been planned and the only consolation he took was in seeing that Ginny was just as upset by the arrangements.

"Stop kicking me, Harry," she said angrily and snatched another piece of toast, biting into it without buttering it at all. She hated plain toast.

"It wasn't me," Harry replied to Ron, who looked abashed, his own feet shooting under his chair.

"Sorry," Ron muttered and shovelled porridge into his mouth as a plate of crescent rolls flew over their heads.

They ducked and Hermione gave a lingering sigh. "Why don't we go for a walk after breakfast?" she said, beaming annoyingly at them.

Harry glanced at the last half of properly-buttered toast on his plate and pushed it towards Ginny. "I'm going back to bed," he muttered and left the table, just as Mrs. Weasley dropped a large bowl full of cake batter, eliciting a string of words that Harry never imagined coming from the woman who had scolded Ron incessantly for his language.

Hermione also got up from the table to follow him and even though he used his long legs to take three steps at a time, she cornered him before he could find the safety of Ron's room.

"Harry," she said breathlessly, holding a stitch in her side. "Wait."

Reluctantly, he turned and folded his arms across his chest. "What?"

She took a few deep breaths before answering. "You need to talk to Ginny. This is getting ridiculous."

Harry shook his head. "I can't."

"Ginny doesn't understand," she said, finally straightening up to look him in the eye. "She says she does, but she can't. She doesn't know what we do." Her expression told him that what she really wanted was for him to tell her *everything* and that was something he just couldn't do. Not yet.

"Heck, *I* don't understand," replied Harry, as he leaned against the wall and stared at Ron's name above his doorframe.

Hermione stepped closer. "Then you need to figure it out because this isn't working."

"What's not working?" he replied thickly, hoping she'd get the hint and leave him alone.

"This! You and Ginny!" she said, stomping her foot and folding her arms in a mirror of him. "If you don't fix this, you'll be moody and distracted the whole time we're out looking for Horcruxes, which means that you're going to get yourself, or me, or Ron killed. Dumbledore was one of the most proficient wizards of all time, but destroying one Horcrux cost him his hand and the other would have cost him his life. Your solution isn't working Harry – you need to be at one hundred percent for this little escapade, which means that you need to work things out with Ginny."

Harry's mouth opened to reply, but nothing came out. He couldn't think of a thing to say to her that could express his combined frustration at her undeniable logic and his determination to leave Ginny – at least until the war was over. So he didn't answer at all. Ignoring her pleading eyes, he pursed his lips, took two steps into Ron's room and closed the door.

*

The wedding was a blur of white and gold-coloured women (all of whom Harry either didn't know or was actively avoiding), fantastic-looking food that he didn't touch, and frequent toasts that were half in French and half dedications to witches and wizards involved in the war that invariably made Harry think about Dumbledore. Bill's friends from Gringotts turned out to be human after all. A tall wizard with graceful features and slight build was accompanied by a witch with piercing blue eyes, long black hair, and who wore a smile wherever she went. They looked like brother and sister, but Harry's only spared a casual glance at them.

When the dancing was about to start, Harry pulled out his Invisibility Cloak from a pocket in his dress robes and sequestered himself behind a clump of young oak trees. From where he stood, he could see the dance floor and the knots of mingling guests. He didn't feel like enduring the stares and whispers from dozens of strangers. Safely under his cloak, he was free to relax and enjoy himself for the first time since he'd arrived at the Burrow.

He watched Remus and Tonks dancing slowly, a grin on both their faces. Hermione and Ron were turning slowly next to the punch bowl. Fleur and

Bill danced on a raised platform that was enchanted to hover above the entire garden. Fred and George were releasing fireworks in time with the music and Harry felt himself relax into the spindly trunk of a tree behind him. Then, his eyes caught a glimpse of gold and red.

Ginny was dancing with a blonde boy he didn't know, but had seen arrive with Fleur's family. A strange mix of burning jealousy, and placid indifference washed over him. He wanted to hex him for touching *his* Ginny but immediately remembered that she wasn't his at all. Not any more. As soon as that thought left, it was replaced with the notion that perhaps Ginny didn't *want* to be Harry's any more. Maybe she was *okay* with him ditching her. Even her last words to him when he broke their relationship off were indecipherable. He wanted to believe that when she said she'd never given up on him that she meant she wouldn't give up on him still; that she'd wait for him. The intervening weeks since had cast great clouds of doubt on his mind, however, and he found himself thinking she might just as easily have been telling him that she was done waiting. He clutched his head in his hands and groaned. Why did girls have to be so bloody complicated?

The music ended and Harry raised his head. His eyes seemed to find Ginny of their own accord and he let them, feeling a measure of immunity as he sat invisible, a safe distance away. A new, faster song started, and Ginny shook her head as her dance partner gestured back at the dance floor. *That's right, Ginny*, thought Harry. *You tell him to sod off*. A small smile curved on his lips as she turned her back on her would-be suitor and stalked over to where Fred and George were still setting off fireworks.

There was a large boom overhead and a shower of gold and silver sparks fell across the sky. Ginny turned her head up to watch the display and he stared at the white flesh of her neck, a place he was very familiar with. Heat pooled in his stomach and as the twins set off more rockets into the sky, her head fell slowly until her eyes locked onto his. Harry started. She did not blink, but smirked and *winked* in his direction. Frantically, he checked to make sure his cloak was firmly around him and when he decided that not even his feet were visible, he looked back to Ginny and saw that she was walking in his direction. Panicked, he jumped up and made a bee-line for the river.

Had his cloak somehow stopped working? No, because he'd narrowly avoided Fleur's sister, Gabrielle who, Ron had informed him, was keen on dancing with him that evening. She definitely would have said something if the cloak was malfunctioning. So how could Ginny have seen him? Was she suddenly channelling Dumbledore?

That particular thought chilled him as he climbed to the top of a bluff that overlooked the River Otter. Crumbled limestone covered in brambles gave way in a sheer drop to a set of jagged rocks jutting out from the placid water. He turned around when he heard a twig snap behind him. He couldn't see the wedding at all and readied his wand, just in case it wasn't Ginny that had managed to follow him.

To his relief and mounting frustration, however, it was Ginny. She sauntered out of the trees, her gold dress glittering in the evening light, her hair fastened in a jumble of red curls at the base of her neck with a matching gold ribbon.

He whipped his cloak off. "How did you see me?" he demanded, his anger evident even to him. If she noticed, however, she didn't mention it.

"You looked like you needed company."

Harry's mouth went dry. "I don't need to be kept company," he replied more calmly than before.

Ginny ignored this, however. "Yes you do," she said simply and stared at the tree-lined river. "It's beautiful here. I used to come here with Ron and throw stones into the river." She bent low, picked up a piece of the chipped rock, and then hurled it out into the water.

He looked at her, at the river, and then back at her again. "Yeah, it's beautiful here, but I'm not buying that 'keeping me company', business." He listened to the water gurgling around the rocks below, wondering where the anger he'd felt had suddenly disappeared to.

She turned to look at him again, rubbing her hands on her dress. "Hermione says we need to talk."

He nodded, definitely not willing to admit to having this information already.

"I think she's right." She was staring at him now, her expression unfathomable.

He blinked and looked to his feet. "You never told me how you can see through my cloak."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her cheeks redden. "I have a secret," she revealed with a flash of mischievousness returning to her voice. "I did more than just study for O.W.L.'s last year."

Intrigued, Harry chanced a peek at her face, which was glowing from the red of the setting sun and the pretty blush lingering on her face.

Then, with a twinkle in her eye and a sly grin, she disappeared. Harry jumped back, thinking that she'd turned herself invisible, but then he heard a mewing noise from his feet. There, curling around his ankles and rubbing her ginger head on his calves, was a tomato-coloured cat. She looked up at him with chocolate-brown eyes and pranced back to the spot she'd recently occupied. Then, with a slight *pop*, she re-appeared, her hair slightly askew, but looking very accomplished.

"I've been dying to show you that, but McGonagall made me swear not to tell anyone. Mum and Dad don't even know."

Harry simply gaped at her. "How...?"

"I know," Ginny agreed. "It was really difficult, especially because I wasn't particularly good at Transfiguration before."

"How...?" Harry repeated, wrestling with too many thoughts at once. He settled for the one he wanted to know the most. "How does being an Animagus make you able to see through my cloak?"

She cocked her head in a very feline way, regarding him with confusion. "Oh! That. I don't really know. I was practicing my transformations one day and saw Professor Moody patrolling Hogwarts castle in his cloak.... I saw this fuzzy outline around him and realised what was happening and.... I can see through cloaks. I reckon it's because cats can. Luna says it's something about how their eyes bend light differently than ours."

A memory of Mrs. Norris popped into his head, her lamp-like eyes gleaming at him as he slinked along in the Restricted Section of the library, followed by another of him stuck in a trick step with the golden egg wailing in the corridor at the bottom. Dozens of times he'd been approached by Filch's cat while wearing his dad's old Invisibility Cloak and he could have sworn she'd known exactly where he'd been.

Harry shook his head, slowly slipping his hand through his hair. "That's unbelievable."

Ginny frowned and hugged her arms to her chest, as if a chilly breeze had blown around them. "Stop avoiding me, Harry."

His head snapped up. "Wha – ?"

"Because it's getting really annoying; I understand if you can't handle having me as a girlfriend. Having to go haring after Voldemort is one thing..."

"What do you mean I can't handle you?" he asked indignantly, suddenly forgetting all about the surprise of finding her to be a clandestine Animagus.

"I can *handle* you ditching me, but I can't handle you acting like I don't exist." Harry made an odd choking noise, which she chose to ignore like she had his previous question. "Don't you think people will notice you avoiding me after all the snogging we did last year?"

She had advanced on him, and even though she was a full head shorter than him, Harry felt oddly frightened. Unconsciously leaning his torso backwards, he struggled to think of anything to say in return. It was extremely difficult to think properly seeing her still-flushed cheeks (though now they were red from the effort of telling him off), and with her hair coming even more undone as she pushed him toward the cliff. "Er – " he said ungracefully. She merely raised her eyebrows.

"Listen, Ginny," he said, finally gathering his courage. "I'm sorry for treating you so horribly. I really am, but I don't have a choice."

Jutting her chin higher, she stared defiantly back at him. "You always have a choice, Harry."

He wanted to have the strength to lie, to pretend like they'd never been together, but he just couldn't do it. She meant more to him than he could ever articulate, and even if he could, he'd be admitting a weakness that Voldemort would use against him without question. Carefully, he placed his hands on her shoulders, preparing himself to tell her that it was too much to ask him. Her expression softened and he felt a pang of regret course through him. Then, without any warning whatsoever, there was a massive explosion that threw Harry across the cliff face, and into a clump of bushes.

The first thing Harry did was jam his cloak back on, and feel grateful he hadn't dropped it. The second thing he did was look for Ginny. She was sprawled on the other side of the clearing, one arm hanging over the edge of a rock toward the river below. Three men in white masks and black cloaks emerged from the forest, two pointing their wands at Harry, and one pointing his at Ginny. Harry moved quietly away from the cliff face and around to the back of the attackers, who hadn't noticed his disappearance.

"Where'd Potter go?" said the tallest Death Eater, who was obviously the smartest of the lot. "He was right there!"

His companion was peering over the edge of the cliff, as if Harry might have plummeted to the bottom. "Check for footprints, he may have Disillusioned himself."

Harry aimed his wand at the man and cast a nonverbal Banishing Charm. It was a small spell, so as not to arouse suspicion, but the effect was predictable. The short man instantly lost his balance and fell head-long over the edge with a frightened yell.

"He's here!" cried the tall one and shot a Stunner into the air where his companion had just been.

The third Death Eater was now close to Ginny and had whirled around to see what was happening. Harry's Stunning Spell caught him in his face and he crumpled.

"Damn!" the remaining man shouted, shooting spells at random locations around the clearing.

Harry had been moving towards Ginny the whole time and was now right next to her. He crouched down, dodging a nasty blue jet of light, ready to flick his Invisibility Cloak over her when he froze. The Death Eater sprinted towards Ginny, pointing his wand at them. Harry momentarily thought the man could see through Invisibility Cloaks, too, and distractedly watched as the man levitated Ginny and walked toward the cliff.

"Come out, Potter, or I'll drop the girl into the river!"

Harry watched, stunned as Ginny floated over the cliff's edge and dangled helplessly by the Death Eater's wand. Palms sweating, Harry weighed his options. Ginny was starting to stir and would be awake soon. He knew he only had a narrow chance of saving Ginny without getting killed himself. Without thinking of anything but getting Ginny safely back onto the cliff, he tip-toed closer to where the man was standing, careful to avoid the sticks and leaves that cluttered the clearing.

"You've got five seconds and I'll drop her!" The man yelled and punctuated his words by flicking his wand so that Ginny bobbed precariously, causing her to blink her eyes a few times.

With the speed born of his stint as the youngest Hogwarts Seeker in a century, Harry wordlessly conjured a rock behind the man in mid-air that immediately fell to the ground with a dull thud. The Death Eater whirled around and, not wanting to risk a nonverbal spell, Harry shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*" The red light connected with the man's back, who shot into the air, his wand flying. Ginny, too, went flying, now fully awake and let

out a piercing scream. Harry extended his wand, and shouted the Summoning Charm. Ginny, who was now two feet below the lip of the cliff, zoomed upward until Harry was hit in the side by a dark mass, causing his wand arm to jerk upward.

Harry fell to the ground with a crunch and then kicked the man as hard as he could, and half-watched as Ginny's body arced slowly toward the cliff face, but her momentum wasn't enough. She hit the edge of the crumbled stone and scrambled to hold on to the shifting edge. Harry was hit in the stomach as the Death Eater renewed his attack. They rolled away from the cliff edge, Harry struggling to dodge the man's blows and luckily landed two punches on the man's face, sending his mask askew and revealing the crooked-toothed grin of McNair.

"Harry!" Ginny's voice echoed in the air behind him.

He landed another blow as McNair scrambled for Harry's wand, this time breaking his nose, and causing the man to howl. Finally able to break loose of his attacker, Harry got to his feet and ran toward the cliff. Ginny's hands were all that he could see of her and just before he reached the edge, he dived onto his stomach and grabbed her hand. "Got ya!" he cried. She slipped, holding tightly to his outstretched hand with both of hers. He slid forward a little on the unstable rock and gravel and heard angry voices in the forest. The Weasleys must have heard the fight and were coming to help. Either that, or they were being attacked by Death Eaters, too, and the voices were unfriendly.

"Over here!" McNair had obviously recognized the voices and was shouting at them. They were definitely unfriendly. Harry pushed a stab of panic aside and struggled to hold on to Ginny as they slid another inch towards the sharp rocks at the bottom of the cliff. "I've got Potter and his girl! Hurry!"

Harry's head was now over the side and he stared at Ginny's dangling body, her dress ripped and bloody, her hair whipping around her face in the early evening breeze. The voices were getting closer.

"Ginny," he whispered through gritted teeth. "Transform. You'll be lighter." McNair was walking again, but the shuffling gravel didn't tell Harry where he was going.

For the first time Harry could remember, Ginny looked scared. "What if it goes wrong and my hand slips?"

They slid again and there was a shout from the forest, much closer than before. "I've got you - trust me." His arms were shaking now, his shoulders dangling over the edge.

Ginny squeezed her eyes tight and shrunk in a flash, her red hair seeming to melt and cover her whole body in an instant. Then, he was staring into the eyes of a very frightened-looking cat, held by her front paws.

"Give up, Potter," snarled McNair from behind him.

Catching his breath, Harry spread his legs for extra support, set his elbows on the cliff edge and then with an almighty pull, threw Ginny in an arc over his head toward the voice. Ginny's scream as she flew through the air was a bonus. He turned onto his back to watch as she landed right on the man's bleeding nose and began to claw his eyes with a high-pitched screech. Harry jumped to his feet, stunned the man and snatched Ginny into his arms. He Summoned his cloak from the ground by one of the fallen Death Eaters and pulled it over his head. Then, with a flash of inspiration, he Obliviated McNair and skulked to one side of the clearing. As soon as the hem of his cloak made the tree line, four figures burst from the forest.

Harry did not look back, but after a few frightening seconds, heard a loud yell and then several shouts.

Exhausted and bleeding from his fight with McNair, Harry carried Ginny until they reached the clump of trees where he had hidden from the wedding. He stopped and leaned against one of the trees, cradling Ginny in his arms. In an instant, she transformed back into her human form and held him tight, shaking like a leaf in the wind. It was a long while before they went back to the Burrow.

The First Horcrux 3: The Mysterious Letter

Chapter Three – The Mysterious Letter

When Harry and Ginny managed to return to the Burrow, they found the garden completely destroyed. It looked as if a full-fledged battle had taken place; there were smoking holes in upturned tables and food splattered across the once pristine lawn. Oddly, there was no one to be seen. Where had the dozens of guests and wedding participants gone off to?

Movement in the kitchen window answered that question, as several red and white-blond heads bobbed in and out of view. Harry guided Ginny slowly toward the door, her eyes big with concern as she surveyed the scene. He kept his arm across her shoulders, as if they weren't still at odds. The reality was that they'd resolved nothing, although they'd been on the verge of something when they were attacked. Now, as Harry held the door open and watched her walk into a noisy mass of family and in-laws, he wondered exactly what was between them.

"Harry! Ginny!" cried Mrs. Weasley, gripping her handkerchief as she watched them walk inside. She pushed past her husband and Charlie, who were having a heated discussion about wards and embraced them both. "We were so worried. When we couldn't find you..." Her expression changed from relief to worry in an instant as her eyes fell on the cuts and scraps on their arms and faces. She traced a particularly long gash in Ginny's dress. "What on earth happened to you two?"

The rest of the assembled wedding guests had all stopped their individual conversations and were staring eagerly at them. Bill's friends from Gringotts were particularly curious; the woman with the long dark hair eyed Ginny as she nervously crossed her arms.

Harry began to fidget. "We were attacked, too."

Mrs. Weasley opened her mouth to ask for more information, when she was cut-off by Mr. Weasley. "What happened to your attackers?"

Ginny gave Harry a brief, pleading look, and Harry nodded. He recounted their walk to the bluff, and the subsequent attack, conveniently leaving out the reason they'd left the wedding and the fact that Ginny was an Animagus. When he'd finished, he became suddenly aware that he was still holding Ginny's hand and that several red-headed people in the room were also aware of that fact, each one wearing a knowing smile or whispering to one another. Hermione and Ron were sitting on the kitchen table and the former was beaming at them, while the latter's face was guarded and inscrutable.

"That proves they were after Harry," Charlie said at once, giving his father a significant look.

"It doesn't prove anything. Harry was invisible, so the Death Eaters probably followed Ginny, not Harry," reasoned Mr. Weasley. "One thing is clear, however. We need to Floo the guests away and *you* need to be off on your honeymoon." He said this last bit with a raised eyebrow at his eldest son, Bill. "I'll contact the rest of the Order to let them know what has happened and that no one was taken or... killed."

That seemed to unwind the knots of people in the various rooms of the Burrow and they began to Apparate and Floo themselves and their families away. Harry gave an inward sigh of relief that no one had been seriously injured or worse. He also felt Ginny relax next to him.

Mrs. Weasley had glistening eyes as she continued to survey their wounds. She gave Ginny another firm hug and wrung her hands together. "You two all right, then?" she asked and they both nodded. In reality Harry felt like Hogwarts castle had fallen on him, but not wanting to trouble her in the midst of so much chaos, he said nothing.

She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief and said, "Take care of each other. There's some first-aid supplies in the upstairs loo. I've got to sort out the rest of the family." She walked towards Charlie, whose arm was singed and still smoking, but turned around and gave them a beaming smile. "I always thought the two of you were well suited."

Harry gaped soundlessly at her. He wanted to tell her the truth; that he and Ginny had been a couple briefly at Hogwarts, but that they weren't together any more. Standing there, however, holding Ginny's hand and feeling the wonderful jolts of pleasure racing around his body as they entwined their fingers together made him reluctant to publicly acknowledge their split. Instead, he gave Mrs. Weasley a resigned smile and nodded his head. "We will."

"Good," she said, with a bright, watery smile and hurried to sort out to her son.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ginny give him a strange glance.

People continued to walk in and out of the kitchen as Harry and Ginny stood in the entryway to the garden. He didn't want to move, knowing that when he did, he wouldn't have a convenient excuse to hold her hand any more. She seemed reluctant to move as well, but he thought that could simply be because she was exhausted from their battle.

Then, in a manner that did not suggest fatigue, Ginny turned to smile very brightly at him. "Walk with me to the loo?" she asked suddenly and began

to pull on his hand. When he gave her a frightened look, she giggled. "I'm just going to mend some of these cuts, like Mum suggested. Yours look like they need some attention, too." She brushed his fringe back, as she'd done so many times in the past, to expose a throbbing gash on his forehead. He found himself wanting to find a quiet spot to be alone with her that didn't involve cuts and bruises. Pushing that feeling aside, he nodded – their hands still linked together – and followed her upstairs.

The bathroom was decidedly crowded with the two of them in the space between the wall and the sink. Ginny tended to his cuts first, untwisting a jar she found in the cupboard. She applied a brown, foul-smelling paste to his shoulder; his robes and shirt having been discarded the moment they arrived in the loo. Thankfully, Ginny had not taken off any of her clothes and they had left the door firmly open.

"Hold still," she said, as he squirmed away from her goo-laden finger. "Don't be a baby. It's doesn't hurt that bad."

Harry snorted and let her apply another layer of the noxious ointment to his cuts. "You say that, but you haven't let me put any on you."

She brought her eyes up to his and, as they flared in challenge, several flecks of gold sparkled in the bright lights of the bathroom. Then her eyes softened and the gold melted into the brown like caramel sinking into a vat of chocolate.

"What's on your mind?" she asked, her voice low, and dipped her finger into the jar of Aunt Annie's Cure-All Ointment. She had always known the right questions to ask him; the kind of questions that cut through his carefully constructed shell of indifference.

"Nothing," he answered automatically and shifted his gaze to her shoulder, where a bruise was forming underneath a nasty-looking scrape.

She moved a hand up to hold his fringe back and wiped her finger across his brow, making it throb worse than ever and causing tears to form in his eyes from the smell. It was all he could do to not step away from her. As bad as it was, the pain in his head only made the pain in his hand slightly less noticeable. Muggle duelling had a purpose, he supposed, but he much preferred using a wand.

It seemed to take an extra-long time to apply the ointment, but when she was done, he wiped his eyes and re-adjusted his glasses. Ginny turned on the tap and rinsed her fingers. "You'll have to get mum to heal your knuckles," she said and then held up the jar. "Now do me."

Taking the jar from her, Harry scooped out a large glob and spread it across her shoulder. She sucked in a breath and he could see the muscles in her neck tense as she gritted her teeth. The paste seemed to melt into her skin and the cut almost completely disappeared. He applied more until the cut was gone and the bruise had faded into a light brown patch under her pale skin.

When Ginny's cuts had all been attended to, and Harry's fingers washed clean of the ointment, she pinned him with a steely gaze and folded her arms across her chest, blocking his path to the landing outside the loo. "Now, you can either tell me the truth, or I can dig it out of you. I'm told that I'm very persuasive."

Despite himself, Harry smirked. "I know," he murmured and then ran a shaky hand through his hair. On the bluff, he'd been about to tell her why he'd left her at Dumbledore's funeral – about how Voldemort would use his feelings for her against him. Swallowing, he opened his mouth but he never got a chance to speak a word.

She was kissing him as he'd never been kissed before. She'd pushed him against the wall of the bathroom, standing on her toes to get as much leverage as possible. Her hands were in his hair, rubbing maddeningly wonderful circles at the base of his neck and all the while, she pressed her lips into his as if she was dying of thirst and he was a very tall, very cold bottle of water.

After what seemed like several hours, she pulled back, panting, the same steely look still on her face. "I know what's going on, Harry," she said softly. "You don't have to tell me, because I know." His hands were still around her waist and their faces were close together. "It'd be nice, though – once in a while – if you'd talk to me about it."

She stepped back, smoothing her tattered dress and he let his hands fall to his sides. They stared at each other; he wanted to tell her everything, but he couldn't risk Voldemort finding out. He didn't wonder if she would be able to handle it, but he did wonder if he'd be breaking his confidence with Dumbledore if he included Ginny.

"I..." he began, but she shook her head.

"It doesn't have to be now," she said, hugging him tightly, her voice filled with a tenderness he'd almost forgotten about. "When you're ready. I'm here – I've always been here."

He hugged her back and wondered about the complexities of promises made with dead people. It was a long time before they re-joined Ginny's family downstairs.

*

They heard from various family-members that the attack hadn't been a complete surprise, and that there *were* some Aurors on duty that evening. Fred and George had whispered to them that Dad simply downplayed the whole thing in case there was a security leak in the family. It didn't need to be said that the twins had meant Percy, who was still sticking with the Ministry despite all the evidence to the contrary.

It had taken Harry another three hours of deliberation before he made up his mind to talk with Hermione and Ron about what he was going to do once he left the Burrow. He'd decided to go to Godric's Hollow, that much was certain, but he was going to need a clearer understanding of the next few weeks, and ultimately, how he was going to defeat Voldemort before he could do much more than that. The problem wasn't the discussion itself, but with who was going to hear it.

When he got up to talk in the Burrow's magically Silenced and Sealed living room, he looked at each occupant before he began. Hermione and Ron sat on the sofa while Ginny sat opposite them on the floor. Harry paced nervously on the green shag carpet, still unsure if Ginny should be there, but determined to follow through with his decision.

Harry took a deep breath and nervously pushed his fringe back with a shaky hand. He caught Hermione's eye and she nodded. "Voldemort," he said with a tone of finality that elicited a twitch from Ron.

His eyes lingered on Ginny and she gave him a private, comforting smile. "I've told Ron and Hermione already, but it bears repeating. I'm the only one who can kill Voldemort. Dumbledore spent all of last year teaching me what it's going to take to do it and this year, I'm going to continue where he left off."

For the next half-hour, Harry recounted his visits with Dumbledore and the memories he'd visited with the now-dead Headmaster. He told them about Voldemort's parents, how the Gaunts were descendants of Salazar Slytherin and had two of his heirlooms – a ring and a locket. He told them about Hepzibah Smith; about Hufflepuff's cup and the locket that Voldemort's mother had sold to Burke. Then, he told them about Horcruxes; about how Voldemort's murders tore a piece his soul apart and then how he encased those bits in one of these objects to keep his soul bound to earth. When Voldemort was struck with his own Killing Curse, it deprived him of his body, but his soul lingered on. Finally, he ended by telling them that the ring was destroyed by Dumbledore and about their fateful trip to the cave that held the fake locket Horcrux.

Drawing the small locket from his pocket, he removed the folded parchment and re-read the letter to them.

"R.A.B.," Hermione said quietly, having apparently lapsed into another fit of contemplation upon re-hearing the entire story beginning to end.

That concentration was broken, however, when a strange Eagle Owl swooped into the room from the kitchen. It landed gracefully on the head of the chair closest to Harry and extended a claw. Harry untied what turned out to be a small leather book from the bird's leg as Hermione, Ron, and Ginny looked on. As soon as the package was released, the owl took flight, flapping all the way back into the kitchen, where it presumably left through an open window.

"Who's it from?" asked Ron, as he walked over to get a look at the book.

Harry turned it over in his hands, examining its cover for any sign of a letter or other identifying marks. "It's doesn't say. You reckon it's safe to open?"

Ron shrugged, and Hermione looked nervous. Ginny, without any hesitation, said, "Can you afford not to open it?"

He refolded the letter from R.A.B. and shoved it in his pocket and untied the worn leather cords that bound the book closed. As he opened it, a piece of parchment fell from the inside cover and was snatched in mid-air by Ron.

"Good catch," said Harry, who wasn't feeling up to reading much just then. "You may as well be the one to read it."

Ron nodded and unfolded the parchment. He cleared his throat and began reading.

Dear Harry,

If you are reading this letter, then I am with your parents on the other side, and you are now the sole guardian of the Black estate. Sadly, this doesn't mean as much as it would have normally. As a fugitive, I was unable to secure the legal means to change my will before now, so all you legally get is this diary, and whatever they can strip off my body. Sorry. I've instructed my executor to send this to you on the eve of your seventeenth birthday. Happy Birthday, Harry.

It is my legal right and desire that you should be given ownership of all the properties that belonged to me and the Black family. You would do well to get Grimmauld Place and all the money in the Black vault at Gringott's before my cousins descend on it like the snakes that they are. Merlin knows Narcissa doesn't need the money and it'd do the Order more good than her and her spoiled brat Draco.

Once again, I'm sorry things turned out the way they did. Perhaps this journal will help you to avoid the mistakes that I made and in so doing, you can have the life that your parents always wanted for you.

*With all my love,
Sirius*

He avoided Ginny's gaze and stared at the battered book in his hands. He couldn't see anything else, even when Ron handed the letter to Harry and sat next to Hermione. Ginny stood and took Harry's hand, bringing her lips close to his ear. "I'm here for you, if you need me."

Harry nodded and she stepped back. "I'll be all right," he said with a shy look. "I just need some time to take this in." Her eyes penetrated him, and he knew that she understood.

She took his hand and walked to the door, in plain view of the kitchen, which was empty save for the half-eaten wedding cake that Mrs. Weasley had managed to save from attack. "I know you will be. But do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Uh, sure?" he offered, confused by the sudden change in the conversation.

She pointed to the magical clock that had all of their faces, including Harry's, on the hands. All of them were pointing at the same spot on the clock, *Mortal Peril*. "Explain to me why Ron and Hermione are going with you but I'm not?" She dropped his hand and placed both hands on her hips. "Explain to me why you think I'm safer here when every single one of us is already in 'Mortal Peril'."

Harry's face fell. Not only had she pinpointed the exact reason why he didn't want her to come with them, but she'd effectively invalidated the very justification he'd conjured up to defend himself from this attack. "Listen, Ginny," he said quietly. "I know I can't keep you safe from everything. I know

this is war, and more than just about anybody else, I know that people die in war.” He stopped when her expression hardened, as if she knew that what he was about to say wasn’t what she wanted to hear. He hoped that she would see reason instead of the blind stubbornness that had reared its head in their brief relationship already. “I’m not going to ask you to stay behind, even though it’s the thing I want most of all. Ginny, I want you to stay safe.”

“What if I don’t care?” she asked, repeating what she’d asked at the funeral. “What if I don’t want to stay safe?”

“I need you to live, Ginny. For me.”

“If staying safe means being shunted away in a closet somewhere while you fling yourself headlong into the war, then I don’t want to *be* safe.” Her voice had risen as she spoke, but when she opened her mouth again, it wasn’t to yell at him. “I want to be with you. Even if it means one or both of us gets killed.”

Harry screwed his face up and tilted it toward the ceiling, as if imploring it to offer him some sort of advice. Looking back at Ginny, he said with the strongest of whispers, “I need something to come back for. I need you to stay safe so I have something worth fighting for.”

Her face relaxed and she rested her back against the door frame they were standing in. “I can’t guarantee I won’t die, Harry, but you can’t make that promise, either. How do you think I’m going to survive by myself knowing that your clock hand could slip to ‘Dead’ at any moment?”

“I... I can’t,” he admitted, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

The resolve returned to her face. “Then take me with you.”

His mouth opened and closed several times as she glared defiantly at him. “It’s not my choice to make,” he said at length, pushing this decision off to the only place he could think to push it. It was cheap and dirty, but it was the best he had. “If you were of age, I couldn’t keep you from coming with me, even if the idea scares me more than facing Voldemort.”

“Then I’m coming,” she said happily as if the matter were decided. She took his hand again and pulled him back into the living room.

Harry stared at her in open disbelief. He knew that saying anything against her would only invite more argument – something he definitely didn’t want – but her mother would be less than happy with her decision.

“Now that that’s settled,” Ginny continued, “let’s figure out what’s got Hermione’s knickers in a twist and get to bed. I’m knackered.”

They walked to where Ron and Hermione were still deep in conversation, sat on the floor together, and planned. They would leave for Godric’s Hollow on August first; the day after Harry’s seventeenth birthday and two weeks before the Hogwarts school governors were to make their decision regarding the fate of the school. Ginny had not spoken about her plans for the coming year in front of Ron and Hermione, but despite her admission to the contrary, Harry knew that she’d end up making the right choice. She’d been right; he did trust her.

*

That night, Harry sat in his bed and thought about the strange feeling that had surrounded him the past few days. He was at a crossroads. His childhood was all but behind him, but his days as an adult were not yet upon him. The future was uncertain, in that he didn’t know how long it would take to find every Horcrux and finally kill Voldemort. He didn’t even know *if* he’d be able to kill Voldemort, but the alternative was unthinkable. What was certain, however, was that Harry was going to leave in two days, and that once he left, he would be venturing into a new and decidedly more difficult part of his life. The thought only made him want Ginny’s company more than ever and he hated himself for it.

*

The next day, Harry spent the morning reading through Sirius’ journal, as he had been expressly forbidden from going downstairs.

“It’s your birthday, and we’re decorating,” Ginny had explained. “No peeking, or I’ll hex you.” Even though she’d said it with a smile, Harry had no doubt she’d follow through with that particular threat.

Sirius had apparently taken up journal writing as a bet with a girl in his year when he was fourteen. After a few sporadic entries, he started using it as a means to chronicle the Marauders’ pranks and other accomplishments, including very specific and sometimes grotesque descriptions of their becoming Animagis. After an hour of reading about his dad having his antlers appearing on his bum, Sirius being chased by the unicorns in the Forbidden Forest, and other morbidly fascinating exploits, he skipped to the last couple of entries. One in particular caught his interest.

August 12, 1995

Harry and his friends have been cleaning in Regulus’ old room. I was bit by a cursed snuff box, they tackled several nests of Doxys, and I got to relive some long-buried family history. What was most interesting, however, was the discovery of something that I’d never seen before. Some kind of locket was in Regulus’ room. He had dated a girl at Hogwarts for a short while, but she wouldn’t have given him a locket. It’s usually the bloke that buys the jewellery. I’ll have to poke around with it some more to see what spell is keeping it closed. Merlin knows I need some kind of challenge to keep me from going completely mad...

One thing leapt out at Harry from the pages and he didn’t read much past it. There was a locket at Grimmauld Place. A locket in Regulus Black’s room. R. B. Maybe even R. A. B. It was too close to be a coincidence and Harry suddenly knew that Godric’s Hollow would have to wait.

*

Ginny was just putting the finishing touches on Harry's cake when she heard a thunderous noise and saw a black blur on the stairs.

"Harry!" scolded Hermione, who was levitating a hand-painted 'Happy Birthday Harry' sign into place. "You can't come down yet!"

He was having none of it, however, and walked right into the middle of the kitchen, pushing past a bundle of floating balloons. "Is your mum here?" he asked Ginny.

"No," she replied, placing the frosting knife onto the counter next to the cake and wiping her hands on her apron. "She's off to fetch some last-minute things from the shop. You really shouldn't be here, you know? You're spoiling the whole surprise."

An earnest smile stole onto his lips and he held Ginny's shoulders. "I've found it. I know where the locket is."

Ron walked in from the cold pantry just then, his arms laden with a case of Butterbeer. "Oi! You can't be down here yet!"

"Shush, Ronald," Hermione said and quickly fastened the banner. "Go on, Harry. Tell us what you found out."

Harry sat on a bar stool and opened Sirius' journal to the right page. "I was just thumbing through his journal and happened to read an entry from when he was at Grimmauld Place."

Ginny had seen Harry this determinedly excited before, but it had been a long time and she was secretly pleased that he could still be drawn out from his shell despite the traumas of the past few weeks.

He read the entry and Hermione's eye instantly lit up. "I think you're right, Harry. I remember that locket. Sirius seemed really interested in it. But I don't remember what Regulus' middle name is, do you?"

"No," confirmed Harry. "But there's one way to find out."

Ron groaned. "Don't tell me we're going to put off the party. I'm starved."

"Oh, come off it," Hermione jibed. "This is really important. To think that one of Voldemort's Horcruxes has been at Grimmauld Place all this time."

Harry closed the journal and shoved it in his back pocket. There was a gleam in his eye when he next spoke. "Not for long. We're going to Floo there right now and get it."

"I'm going, too," Ginny said immediately. When Harry gave her a severe look, she added, "It's not like I haven't spent loads of time there already. It's perfectly safe. We'll just go, get the locket and come back. I'll even leave a note for Mum."

Ron reluctantly agreed. "Okay, but you know Mum'll worry herself mental if we don't come back quick."

"So we're agreed, then?" asked Harry, seeming to acquiesce on letting Ginny tag along.

She dashed off a quick note on a piece of butcher paper and set it on the table, where her mother couldn't possibly miss it. "I'll get the Floo powder," she said when she had finished and stopped when she approached the fire. Her brow furrowed together as she searched through her mind for a moment and then she gave up. "I can't... I can't remember the address."

Hermione smirked and withdrew a piece of parchment from her pocket. "We re-applied the Fidelius Charm." She handed it to Ginny, who looked at it for a second and then shrugged.

"Number Twelve Grimmauld Place," Ginny shouted and they all followed her into the fireplace, disappearing with a green flash.

The First Horcrux 4: Fully Qualified?

Chapter Four – Fully Qualified?

Harry skidded into the kitchen of number twelve, and was instantly repulsed by the stench of rotting meat.

“UGH!” groaned Ron behind him. “What *is* that smell?”

Ginny covered her mouth with a Gryffindor handkerchief she produced from her pocket and Hermione cast a spell that lit up the dim kitchen with a purple light. There was a sharp *crack* and the smell instantly vanished.

“Thanks, Hermione,” said Ron, who looked a little green around the gills.

“It’ll come back unless we find what’s causing it,” she replied, and looked like she wanted to poke through the pantry.

“We need to get the locket,” Harry said, trying to keep everyone on task. “We’ll check Regulus’ room first.”

“Got it,” Hermione declared, and with a swish of her wand, a plate of an unidentifiable substance was Scourgified and banished to the sink. She smiled at Harry’s impatient gaze and said, “*Now* we can look for the locket.”

Holding his wand in front of him, Harry carefully opened the kitchen door and stepped up to the landing. Mrs. Black was still in her portrait, but the mangy old curtains shrouding the life-sized tapestry were closed, and swayed with the rhythm of her breathing. He held up a finger to his lips as a reminder that they needed to be quiet and led them upstairs.

The room they had cleaned almost two years ago was on the second landing, across from the room that Ginny and Hermione had slept in. It was dusty and the long drapes covering the front windows were *buzzing* again, but it was still much cleaner than when they’d seen it before. They fanned out and immediately started looking for the locket. Every drawer and door was opened. Snake-adorned jewellery, flasks of vile-looking potions, and boxes of papers were quickly searched and set aside.

It had only been about a half-hour by Harry’s reckoning when they heard an odd commotion from downstairs.

“What’s that?” Ron asked, as he closed the last drawer on a chest that kept magically shifting its contents from one drawer to another.

“Dunno,” Ginny replied and cocked an ear towards the open door.

Harry crept quickly into the doorway and was able to hear voices.

“... so glad someone fit to take ownership of our glorious estate has finally arrived. It’s been filled with blood-traitors and Mudbloods for far too long.” It was the voice of Mrs. Black, but Harry had never heard her do anything but scream, so it took a second to recognize it. But who was she talking to?

“Never mind with Aunt Ophiuchus, we’re here for more important matters.”

Harry had only heard the voice a few times in his life, but the pretentious tone of Lucius Malfoy was unmistakable.

“What are they doing here?” whispered Ron, who was also listening from the doorway.

“I’d like to know *how* they got here,” answered Harry in a low voice. “I thought the Fidelius Charm would keep everyone out.”

“And I thought Lucius Malfoy was still in Azkaban,” Ginny added as she stepped to Harry’s side.

There was the sound of many feet on the wooden stairs and Harry pushed everyone back into the room. “Quick! Put it all back!”

They struggled to put papers into drawers, clothes in wardrobes, and everything else into the closest nook or cranny, all the while listening to the Malfoys ascending the stairs.

“This place is a dump, Mother,” complained Draco as the footsteps momentarily halted. “I don’t see why we’re even bothering with it.”

“It’s much better than having the Ministry come calling unexpectedly at the manor,” she explained. “We’ll have the house-elves cleaning it by the day’s end.”

The footsteps resumed with a loud creak on a step Harry had trod many times. They were about halfway up. Draco murmured something, but Harry couldn’t make out what he’d said.

Finally, the last of the drawers were back in place and they scampered out of the room and onto the landing.

“Now what?” Hermione asked, her eyes riveted to the stairway.

“Up the stairs,” hissed Harry, and they shot as quietly as possible to the third landing. As soon as he got to the top, he turned and checked where they’d just come from. Draco’s white head appeared in his view and Harry shrunk back into the shadows.

“To the attic,” he whispered. “We’ll wait for them to do whatever they’re doing and then we can keep looking for the locket.”

“Maybe it’s in Sirius’ room?” Hermione offered.

Harry motioned for her to get moving and she led them to the last door on the top landing, where Sirius had kept Buckbeak. Ron looked a little unnerved, but determined, as he took the rear position, his wand at his side. Ginny followed Hermione into the room.

Listening to the now muffled conversation downstairs, they closed the door and waited.

How had the Malfoys simply walked into the house like that? The Fidelius Charm had kept his parents safe from Voldemort and only failed when Peter betrayed them directly. So why had Hermione’s spell only lasted for a few days this time? Harry was sure Hermione wouldn’t have told Draco or any of the Malfoys. She didn’t even have the opportunity, if she’d wanted to, as she’d been at Privet Drive and then the Burrow the entire time since.

“Harry?” Hermione asked suddenly, her whisper sounding harsh in the quiet dark of Mrs. Black’s old room. “You don’t suppose the Malfoys are looking for the same thing we are?”

Harry felt the blood drain from his face. “How would they know about it?” he asked desperately.

“You-Know-Who knows about it,” Ron answered. “The little git was high on being in his service all last year. Maybe he really was.”

“Voldemort wouldn’t trust *this* with anyone,” Harry reasoned, giving Ginny a nervous glance as he thought about the last time someone other than Voldemort was entrusted with a Horcrux. The loss of the diary must have exacted a heavy toll on Malfoy Sr. “If he was going to find one of his Horcruxes, he’d come looking himself. It’s a bit of his soul in that locket, not just a family heirloom.”

Three heads bobbed in the darkness and Harry was glad they agreed. But it still left unanswered the question of why they were here and how they got in.

Then Harry slapped his head as his first experience retrieving the locket with Dumbledore popped into his mind. “*Accio locket!*”

There was a pause as four pairs of eyes stared at each other. Harry’s wand was outstretched as he waited for something to happen.

“I’ll check up here, Mother,” came Draco’s voice. He was close – on the landing for sure – and the four teens started looking for cover. The distant mumble of Mrs. Malfoy’s reply was heard as they scrambled to find a place to hide.

Ron dove behind the bed, while Hermione crouched by the large chest of drawers. Harry was about to join Ron when he heard Ginny hiss from behind them.

“Get in here,” she whispered, her arms waving frantically from a half-open wardrobe door.

Harry moved to the door and motioned for Ron to follow. Hermione and Ron had barely squeezed inside when they heard the doorknob turn. Harry wrenched himself inside the cramped space and closed the door just as Draco entered the room.

“That was close,” Hermione said as she tried to untangle her feet from something on the floor. It was so dark in the wardrobe, that they couldn’t see each other’s faces.

“Move back a little, will you?” Ron said to Ginny.

“*I am*, you great lump,” she shot back in a barely stifled whisper.

“*SHH*,” Harry said to all of them.

Harry unconsciously took a step back from the wardrobe door, intending to make contact with Hermione. When he didn’t feel anything, he took another step back. Then another and another. He was about to turn around and ask what was going on when he heard the wardrobe door rattling.

“*Colloportus*,” Harry intoned instinctively. When the door squelched shut with a noise much louder than he remembered, he cringed, knowing that any wizard, even Malfoy, would know that someone had locked the door with a spell. Armed with that knowledge, he’d be able to open it with a simple *Alohomora*. Harry made a mental note to learn more advanced locking spells.

He took another step back and tripped over something rough and hard, landing in a pile of something that could only be described as... sandy. A faint light came from Harry’s right, illuminating the dark wardrobe. He didn’t have time to look around, however, as the door to the wardrobe was forcefully opened and a series of red spells flew over their heads. Had they not all be sprawled out on the floor, they would have all been stunned.

Aiming his wand where the Stunners had come from, he shouted, “*Expelliarmus!*” at the same time that Ron shouted, “*Stupefy!*” To their combined shock, nothing happened. Their wands hadn’t even let out a spark. “*Expelliarmus!*” Harry shouted again, but his wand simply pointed

Impotently into the dark.

More red spells came flying from the door opening, along with a few purple and yellow ones. It seemed like their shouts had only confirmed their presence and made Malfoy more determined to hex them.

"Move!" Harry grunted, as he pointed towards the light and began to crawl away. More spells slammed into the wall behind them, sending bits of rock onto the sand around them. Harry barely had the time to wonder why the wardrobe was lined with rock. As soon as they were out of the path of the spells, they stood and ran.

Bright yellow light blazed at them from a mid-afternoon sun and Harry blinked in confusion. "What's going on?" he said as he kept one squinting eye on where they'd run from. It looked like some sort of cave, framed by two large palm trees – like the ones he'd seen on the telly a few times when the Dursleys' didn't know he was watching. Only, this was all too real.

"I think that wardrobe must have been a bit more than a wardrobe," observed Ginny, who was also watching the cave closely.

Hermione opened her mouth to say something when Draco sauntered out of the cave. Harry's hand tightened around his wand, but he knew it'd be useless to yell a hex that wouldn't cast. Ron seemed to be thinking the same thing as they watched their nemesis of six years smile cockily at them, his own wand pointed at the sand.

"I thought I smelled a Mudblood," Malfoy finally said, snarling at Hermione.

"Watch your mouth, Malfoy," said a very angry Ron. "I can still shove this wand up your arse."

Ginny giggled but Harry could tell by there was something behind it other than humour. "Don't be silly, Ron. You'd never get it clean again." Ron smirked a little and took a step towards Malfoy. "Besides," Ginny continued, "it's not like any one of us couldn't handle him without a wand. He's nothing but a spoilt little brat."

Everyone chuckled, even Malfoy in his own twisted, mocking way. He didn't look a bit amused. "I bet you'd like that, wouldn't you Weaselette? Be a step up from 'handling' Potter."

Harry narrowed his eyes and shoved his wand in his back pocket. The leer on Malfoy's face was just too much to take. He took two striding steps and connected his fist with the Slytherin's face before the blonde teen could even react. Malfoy went sprawling into the sand and crawled away from Harry on his back. Harry's wrist hurt abominably, but it was worth it to see the trickle of blood trail down Malfoy's face.

Malfoy wiped his nose with his sleeve and gingerly felt his jaw. "Always have to act like a boor and do things the Muggle way, don't you, Potter?"

Ron approached from Malfoy's other side, looking like he wanted to mimic Harry and clean Malfoy's clock.

"Well," said Harry slowly, "seeing as how our wands don't work here and how you didn't have a problem with acting like a boor on the Express last year..." Harry had been waiting to get Malfoy back for that unpleasant experience for quite some time and was satisfied to see him scowl in reply.

"Honestly," said Hermione, who looked aghast at Harry. "Don't you think we'd better get back to Grimmauld Place?"

Thinking she was right, but not wanting to risk being seen by Malfoy Sr. or his wife, Harry decided they had to take Draco out of the picture. "First, we need to tie *him* to a tree. There's no sense in letting him get us in the back once we're inside."

They deliberated for a small moment and Ron went to find something to tie him up with.

Some strands of stringy bark were twisted together to form a makeshift rope and Malfoy was tied much too tightly to the large palm tree outside the cave. They left his arms at his sides at Ginny's suggestion, as they could tie the ropes tighter when his back was against the tree. Harry was doubly glad that the hemp was very rough.

"That's nice," Malfoy said with a glare as they made sure the ropes were secure. "Just going to leave me here to die? That's not very noble of you."

Harry considered this for a moment. "You're right. It isn't very noble of me, but it's the best I've got right now, so you'll just have to find a way to live with it."

Ginny was the only one reluctant to leave him immobilized in a strange place, and they had to convince her there was no other way. In the end, she agreed and they all trudged into the cave.

It took a couple of minutes for their eyes to adjust to the near-complete darkness in the cave but as soon as they could see, they began to retrace their steps. They each put their hands on the cave wall, Harry and Ginny on the left, Ron and Hermione on the right, and walked from the entrance, all the way back until they met in the darkest part of the cave.

"There's no opening," Hermione said with a bit of panic in her voice. "We've missed it. Let's go back, this time going over the wall you didn't feel the last time."

So they felt along the wall again, Ron and Hermione on one side, Harry and Ginny on the other. When they reached the cave entrance, Hermione was very quiet, staring hard at the sandy ground.

"Maybe the doorway seals itself?" Harry offered.

"Maybe the git did something to it," said Ron, who hadn't said it as a question.

"I'm going to keep looking," said Hermione, who had already begun feeling her way back into the cave, her face set resolutely and her shoulders back.

"Go with Hermione, Ron," said Harry. "Ginny and I will go ask Malfoy if there's something he wants to tell us."

Ron nodded and followed Hermione into the darkness.

"Know anything about how we got here?" Harry asked with feigned cordiality as they approached Malfoy.

He looked very unhappy. "If I did, I wouldn't tell *you*."

Harry restrained the urge to kick him in the face. "Maybe we'll come back for you if you tell us."

"Maybe I won't cry when the Dark Lord kills you."

Ginny took Harry's hand, apparently sensing his violent tendencies. "Forget it, he doesn't know anything."

Harry wasn't so sure, but he *was* certain that Draco wasn't going to tell them one way or the other.

Hermione and Ron emerged from the cave one last time, looking defeated. "Wherever the doorway went, it's not coming back anytime soon," reported Ron as he looked disdainfully at Draco. "He tell you anything useful?"

"Nah," Harry said with a grimace. "He's being a sore loser."

Draco made a rude gesture with his hands that made Harry regret tying him up so that they were visible.

"Come on," Hermione said. "There's bound to be something else on this island. Maybe there's another way back."

With one final look at a still sulky Malfoy, they trudged around the clump of trees that marked the entrance to the cave and towards a brilliant blue ocean.

"What if the wardrobe seals itself?" Ron asked as they walked across a stretch of sand that connected the cave to the ocean, eliciting a quizzical glance from Ginny. "I mean, what if it's only open for a certain amount of time, or it's on some kind of schedule?"

"I suppose," Hermione said, frowning her brow and staring blankly at the horizon. "If that's true, we'll have to go back and keep an eye on it."

From Harry's side, Ginny folded her arms and squinted over her shoulder. "I'm not keen on going near Draco any time soon. Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy are bound to find him missing and go looking for him. If the cave opens again..."

"Then it'll be four against three," interjected Harry. "Without magic, we'll still have the advantage."

Hermione looked sceptical and Ginny frowned at Harry's comment. "What if they bring back a load of Death Eaters? Or worse? I don't think it's safe to go back to that cave unless we absolutely have to."

Harry gave a begrudging nod of his head. The image of Fenrir Greyback came into his mind. There was no way the four of them could handle such a vicious and blood-thirsty opponent without magic.

"Well, there's one thing I know," Ron said and motioned towards the sun. "We're going to need to find a spot of shade, no matter who does or doesn't come through the cave."

"Yeah," said Harry as he turned their path around a large boulder and moved parallel to the beach. They'd need more than shelter if they couldn't get back to Grimmauld Place soon, food and water being at the top of that list. Glancing back at the black dot that represented the cave, Harry wondered just how bad off they were. What was worse, they didn't have magic to conjure water, food, shelter, or for protection. He shook his head and smiled ruefully at the sand as they walked. His first day being fully-qualified and he couldn't even do magic.

The First Horcrux 5: Black Island

Chapter Five – Black Island

They had followed the beach for about half-an-hour when it widened out into a large patch of widely spaced palm trees. To their left was the ocean, glistening in the sunlight and sending small waves lolling onto the shore in a tranquil rhythm. To their right, a large mountain sprung out of the tropical vegetation, ascending high into a bank of clouds that seemed to cling to its top. The cave that they'd come from seemed to be connected to the place where the mountain met the sea.

Harry led them roughly towards the middle of the palm trees. As she followed him, Hermione got the impression that he wanted them to have a better place to spot danger. She also guessed they would have the option of retreating in any direction if they needed to. It was hot and sticky in the sun, but the trees provided some shade. Hermione's brow was wet and her mouth dry. She hoped they'd be able to find some shelter and a source of water, or they would be in for a nasty, if short, stay on this island.

After a few minutes, the palm trees gave way to a clearing. The clearing wasn't completely empty, however, as a large hut rose out of the sand on thin wooden legs. Hermione and Ginny stayed back as Harry approached the hut cautiously, motioning for Ron to join him.

"It doesn't look lived in," Harry whispered, taking note of the open door and holey roof. "But without our wands, we can't take too many chances."

Ron nodded silently and together, they stepped inside. Hermione gave Ginny a quick look and they both nodded. They followed Ron and Harry inside.

Walking into the hut was uneventful. A crab scuttled across the wood-plank floor and snapped an angry claw at them as they shooed it away. The floor looked weather-worn and in a very bad state of disrepair. One section of the roof had caved in completely in the room on their right. Sand and dirt covered the floors and the simple furniture that was comprised of a pair of bunk beds and a wicker table and sofa. On the back wall, a single cupboard hung crookedly with its doors swinging open at odd angles revealing two wooden-handled tools of questionable value.

"Well, it's not much to look at is it?" Ginny asked, brushing past Harry to take a closer look at the caved-in roof. "You reckon someone actually lived here?"

Harry shrugged. "Who knows?"

Hermione bent down to take a look at a carving in one of the planks. It looked like a set of initials, but it was so faded that she couldn't make heads or tails of it.

"Hey. Look at this," said Ron from where he had been examining the wicker table and sofa. "It's a letter."

The faded envelope didn't look nearly as old as it should, considering the conditions of the hut. Ron broke the seal and extracted a single piece of parchment.

Welcome to Black Island. If you are looking for the thing I took from the Dark Lord, be you with Dumbledore or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, then I wish you luck. Your wands will do no good here, except at a certain place near the end. Beware, treasure-seeker, for there are many trips and traps ready to ensnare you, and only one way off the island. Find the treasure and destroy it, or you'll rot here forever. I've even been kind enough to provide you with a map, though you may not be able to trust it.

R. A. B.

"So it was a setup?" Hermione asked, as she sat gingerly on the sofa. Ron was still clutching the letter, seemingly unaware of her presence. "We were supposed to come here all along?"

Harry was staring at a spot on the floor by Ginny's foot. "If the locket is here, then how did it get from Grimmauld Place?"

Ginny shifted her foot and broke Harry's concentration. "Maybe the one we saw last year wasn't the real thing?"

"Another fake?" Ron said disbelievingly. "If this keeps up, how will we know when we've gotten the real one?"

Harry shook his head and leaned against the wall. It shifted slightly with his weight. "We'll know all right," he said, and Hermione knew he was thinking of Dumbledore's hand. "He'll have made it curse whoever opens it."

Something grabbed a hold of Hermione's hand just then and she looked down to see Ron's hand gripping it tightly. He was staring at a spot over Harry's head, his face grim, and the letter in his hand shaking. He had always done that – shown a brief glimmer of affection and then failed to let her acknowledge it. It was this one thing that kept their friendship static and, in a flash of realisation, she knew that it was up to her to change that. She opened her mouth to speak but Harry unknowingly interrupted.

"I don't like it," he said, drawing all eyes to him. "It's too convenient."

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Ron frowning. "I agree. This whole thing stinks and having Malfoy here just makes it worse. He's up to something."

"How can he be up to something?" Hermione asked, unable to resist the urge to give voice to her scepticism. "He discovered us by accident."

"Hermione," interjected Ginny. "It's true that he didn't know we were here until *after* he tried to open the wardrobe door. But he could have been trying to come here all along. We were just in the way."

"I don't know..." then her eyes caught something on the back of the parchment in Ron's hand. She reached out and carefully took the letter from Ron. "There's a map on the back."

Harry pushed off from the wall and was kneeling next to her in an instant. Ginny was right behind him.

"Look," said Harry, pointing to the bottom right corner of the map. "There's the cave we came from."

Ginny's hand moved over his. "And there's the hut."

Hermione, however, was looking at the top of the map, where a huge mountain dominated the page. In the middle, was the unmistakable depiction of a heart-shaped locket.

"Well, that's convenient," she remarked, catching Harry's eye. "You don't suppose it's a trap?"

Harry smirked. "If it isn't guarded ten ways to Sunday, I'll be heartily disappointed."

Ginny's wry smirk was enough to elicit a matching grimace from Hermione. "Sounds like our adventure got started a little early."

"Are we going to go for it, then?" Ginny asked, her eyes bright with the excitement of a challenge.

Ron shifted beside Hermione, removing his hand but brushing his leg on hers. As soon as they made contact, she felt him stiffen. Ignoring him for the time being, she adopted her best bossy tone and said, "We're going to need water and shelter. The island looks small enough that we can make it to the mountain in two or three days, which means we'll also need something to eat."

"I saw some coconuts on a few of the palm trees," Ginny said as she stood and took the tools from the crooked cupboard. Harry rose as well, his eyes following her.

"The sooner we get started, the sooner we can get back to Grimmauld Place," said Harry, and Hermione couldn't help but notice that he didn't say 'home'. For them, going back home was something they wouldn't be able to think about for a long time.

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Being great at Quidditch, it turned out, didn't help at all with one's tree-climbing ability. Harry huffed dejectedly and sat on a clump of dried seaweed as Ron expertly climbed the nearest coconut palm. Harry's hands were rubbed raw from trying to hold onto the scratchy trunk, having only made it halfway before losing his grip and falling to the soft sand below. Ginny shook her head and bit her tongue as she approached.

"Foiled by a palm tree, eh, Potter?" she quipped and sat next to him on a smaller patch of seaweed.

"Shut it, Weasley," he said playfully and surveyed his mangled hands.

"Ooh, so it's 'Weasley' now, is it?" she retorted and prised one of his hands from his view. She sucked in a breath and gave a mockingly stern look at it. "Yep, you're doomed to die from those wounds."

Harry pulled his hand away and clasped them together so she couldn't see, wincing as his sweat made it into some of the deeper scratches. "If you haven't got any Aunt Annie's Ointment," he said with a sly grin, "there's nothing to be done for it."

Ginny cocked her head, rising to the challenge just as he thought she would. "Nothing to be done? Magical creams or not, I think I can find something to do to sooth Mr. Potter's hands." She gently pulled his hands apart and brought a finger to her lips. Harry didn't protest as her lips applied their special medicine to every inch of his hands.

"Success!" yelled Ron as three coconuts fell from the tree and landed a scant foot from where Harry and Ginny sat.

"Oi! Watch where you drop those things!" Harry yelled up to Ron with mock anger.

Three more dropped onto the sand, close enough to Harry that sand sprayed his feet. Ron slid down the trunk like a monkey and then pushed off, landing next to the coconuts. "If you weren't such a pansy, you could have been helping me."

"Har, har," said Harry, who was more than a little distracted by Ginny's continued ministrations. "You have to be good for *something*. It might as well be the bloke that fetches coconuts."

Ron resorted to kicking sand at Harry as a reply, which garnered a very cross look from Ginny, who'd been puckering up for Harry's other hand.

"Can we *please* act like civilized adults?" Hermione pleaded as she scooped up two of the coconuts. "Does anyone know how to open a coconut?"

With a cocky smirk, Ron took a sideways step and threw an arm around Hermione's shoulder. With his other hand, he took one of the coconuts and made a throwing motion. "I've got it! We'll just chuck them at Malfoy's head until one or the other cracks."

Hermione frowned as everyone else chuckled. She took one of the tools from Ginny and twirled it in her hand. "No, but when we do get one open, we'll have to take one back to him. Prejudiced little ferret or not, we can't let him die."

Ron looked like he was about to protest, but Harry stood and took the other coconut. "She's right, Ron. We can't let him die." His eyes grew cold then, as he remembered the night on the Astronomy Tower, when Malfoy hadn't killed Dumbledore, despite having all the opportunity to do so. "He's annoying, but he's no killer."

"How about two of us stay here and take a look at the map, while the others check on Malfoy?" suggested Hermione. "That way, we'll be right ready to leave when we come back."

Ron bent low and grabbed another coconut from the ground. "Me and Hermione'll go see to the git."

Harry hefted the nut in his hand and contemplated just how he was supposed to get inside one of them. "Sounds like it's all settled, then. See you in a bit?"

"Cheers," said Ron as he led Hermione off towards the cave.

Harry watched them walk away until Hermione reached out and grabbed Ron's hand. Ron didn't seem anxious to let go and Harry allowed himself to smile.

"Bout time," said Ginny as she, too slipped her hand into Harry's. When Harry flinched, Ginny pulled back her hand. "Oh, sorry." Then she wrapped her arm around his waist.

With a sigh, Harry adjusted his grip on the coconut that he still held and surveyed the ground. He spotted a relatively large rock and, with great reluctance, pulled away from Ginny. "Help me get these open?"

She nodded and handed over the tool. "It's all yours, Harry."

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Hermione spent a long while staring at their lengthening shadows as she and Ron walked away from Harry and Ginny. With one hand, she held a rough coconut to her chest and with the other, she held Ron's slightly less-rough hand. The silence between them lingered as they retraced their steps toward the cave that brought them to the island. She felt sand creeping into her trainers and between her sockless toes and heard the distant groaning of the waves as they struck the beach. But all of her senses seemed dimmed compared to the feeling in her chest. When Ron took her hand, it somehow made it impossible to take the initiative, as if by doing so, he'd made it his *duty* to talk first. So, she gave an inward sigh and tried not to shiver as he rubbed the flesh of her hand between his thumb and forefinger.

They walked on for what seemed like hours, but the presence of their shadows on the sand told Hermione it had only been a few minutes. When she heard him clear his throat, she dropped her coconut from fright.

"Sorry," she said as she stopped walking to pick it up. She righted herself and looked expectantly at him. Ron was fidgeting with his t-shirt and looking at his toes. The frayed bottoms of his trousers ended a full six inches from his trainers and she let her eyes linger on the broad swath of freckles that stopped above his ankles. Instead of resuming their walk, Hermione stared at him, seeing the emotions warring on his shadowed face and waited for him to say what he obviously wanted to say.

"You know..." he began and then cleared his throat again. Still, she didn't interrupt.

"About... Lavender."

Unable to help herself, Hermione's eyes grew big and she felt a bubble of anger form in the pit of her stomach. How in the world did he think she wanted to talk about *her*?

His eyes darted to her face and her brain froze. She'd only seen him look this serious a handful of times and having that fierce gaze fixed on her made the bubble inside her pop. "I didn't... there was nothing between us."

Still stunned that they were talking about Lavender at all, she almost missed the contrite tone in his voice.

"I mean... we snogged." She snorted. "A lot." She crossed her arms and the bubble materialized once more. "But it wasn't the same."

Her brow furrowed, she pushed a stray piece of hair behind her ear. "The same as what?"

He sighed. "I'm getting there," he replied and shoved his hands into his pockets. "This isn't easy, you know."

"Ron?" she said with a frustrated laugh. "What are you..." but his finger was on her lips and she forgot what she was about to ask.

"Just listen? Okay?" he asked sincerely and she couldn't do anything but nod. He pushed a hand roughly through his hair and stared at the darkening sky. She stared at his eyes.

I'm trying to tell you that Lavender was an excuse. It wasn't serious because I never really liked her."

A breeze blew between them and she had to push more hair behind her ear, but she never stopped looking at him.

"After Ginny said that you'd snogged Krum, I just lost it. I went completely mental and Lavender was the first girl that seemed interested in me, so I..."

He looked at her again and she frowned. He took a step forward and put his hands on her shoulders. "It didn't matter. It *doesn't* matter because that's over now and we're together, right?"

What did he mean 'we're together'? Technically, they were together on the island and together under the same sky and together in the war against Voldemort. But is that all he meant? Her head swam with a thousand questions that she couldn't utter. It would only make him stop and she needed him to keep going; wherever this was leading, she needed it to continue.

She nodded.

He let out a breath and his head dipped down so that she couldn't see his eyes any more. The air seemed thick with anticipation, but she couldn't quite grasp what was about to happen. Then, he looked up and with a smirk, he opened his mouth. "I'm glad you feel that way, because it'll make what I'm about to do a lot easier."

He ducked his head again, but instead of looking at the sand, he zeroed in on her lips. Before she could react, his lips were on hers and her eyes went wide. At first, Hermione was analysing the way his kiss felt, the effect of the saliva on their lips, and the peculiar way Ron's eyes were shut as she watched him. Then, as if a switch flipped in her mind, all of her rational, logical, and well-planned thoughts fell away. All that remained was her and Ron kissing on a tropical island as the sun slipped slowly behind the horizon.

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Cracking open coconuts with crude instruments was not a task lightly undertaken. Ginny watched Harry without containing her amusement as he completely obliterated one of the tropical nuts. At first, he was gentle, sloughing off the outer layers of green material with the rusty blade of the hatchet. Then, as he realised that the nut itself was harder than the outside, he hacked at it with all his might. Several chops later, the nut shattered, splashing the precious milk across the sand.

Unable to help it, Ginny sank onto the ground and held her side as she laughed at Harry's almost hopeless struggle.

"You're not helping," Harry said, as he inspected the shards, his shirt sticking to his chest with sweat.

Wiping a tear of mirth from her eye, Ginny propped an elbow on the sand and made a seesaw motion with her hands. "Maybe you should try something in between the two extremes?"

Harry gave her a withering glare. "I think I figured out that much." He licked at one of the larger pieces, dragging his tongue across the white flesh of the exposed insides. "Not too bad," he said and flung the piece aside.

Taking another nut, he worked on exposing the hard centre. Once all the nuts were exposed, he took a slow swing at the nut and was pleased to hear a gentle cracking sound. Unlike the last experience, the nut stayed mostly intact. Ginny crawled over to Harry and helped hold the coconut while he jammed his fingernails into the cracks and pulled. It took a few tries, but soon, the hard outer shell was free.

He looked inside and wrinkled his nose. "All that work for this?"

Ginny pulled it closer and inspected the inside. There was what looked to be about two or three ounces of a semi-translucent liquid in the centre. Not waiting for Harry to take the nut back, she tipped the rim into her mouth and swished the liquid around with her tongue. It was a mouthful, but not much more.

She smacked her lips and looked up at Harry. "Not great, but better than a stick in the eye. Now get me another one."

Giggling at the look on his face, Ginny scooted away from the rock and listened to him grumble to himself. Even with the grumbling, he did as she asked and it made her see just how different he was from her brothers. That simple act of humility was a sharp contrast to the reaction she expected. It was one of the things that she loved most about Harry and as she watched him sweat for their drinks, a warmth filled her chest that had nothing to do with the setting tropical sun.

She held one of the nuts after it was opened while he worked on the other one, his eyes a fixture of concentration as his arms worked a hole in the top. He got better with each one, she noted. When the last one was finished, he sat heavily on the sand and wiped his shirt sleeve across his brow.

"Done," he said, taking deep breaths through his mouth.

"Drink it up," Ginny said, and motioned to the one still in his hands.

He held the hole over his mouth and the liquid gurgled into it. He swallowed and let out a loud relief-laden breath. "You're right," he said and set the discarded nut onto the sand next to his foot. "It wasn't that great, but at least I'm not so thirsty." His eyes found hers and she held out the other one.

"You can have this one, too."

He pushed it away. "Nah, I said I'm not thirsty."

Ginny wrinkled her nose, her lips curving ever-so-slightly at the edges. "You're a bad liar, Harry. Take it before I dump it on your thick head."

He did and downed the milk in one gulp. The nut clunked into the other one on the ground as he set it down. "Happy?" he asked with a smirk of his own.

She sat next to him and laid her head on his shoulder. "I am now." Despite the heat, it was very comfortable.

They looked at the setting sun for a while and Ginny wondered how Ron and Hermione were getting along. "You reckon Ron had to use Malfoy's head to get his coconut open?"

Harry snorted. "He'd deserve it. The git." He stood suddenly and stared up at the gentle rise towards the mountain.

Ginny joined him and snaked her arm around his waist, pulling herself into him. A breeze blew the palm trees above them, sending a salty scent across the sand.

He took her hand and pulled on it. "Let's check out the area a bit. I don't want there to be any surprises when Ron and Hermione get back."

They walked up the slope until the palm trees began to be joined by shrubs and other plants. The sand began to give way to grass, with patches appearing at random intervals. Soon, they were on the outskirts of what could only be described as a jungle.

Ginny looked back and could barely see the outline of the hut as the sun set beyond the horizon.

"What's that?" Harry asked and let go of her hand. He bent low over a bush and pulled out a handful of small, green fruit. "I wonder if they're edible?"

Ginny shrugged and Harry bit into it. A sliver of green juice traced down his jaw as he chewed. "Wow! That's really good." He handed one to Ginny. "Loads better than coconut milk, anyway."

She did and was amazed at the flavour. More importantly, she was grateful for the juice. She devoured the fruit and picked some more. With a little trial and error, they were able to tell the ripe fruit from the not-so-ripe.

"Let's get a bunch and we can share with Ron and Hermione when they come back," Ginny said, and made a pouch with the extra material of her shirt. Harry did the same and they began to gather fruit from the surrounding bushes. It was several minutes later when Ginny had the nasty feeling that someone was watching them.

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Hermione melted into Ron and deepened the kiss. Ron's hand found its way into her hair and she moaned in reply. She clung to him like a sweaty shirt, and she felt his arms tighten around her.

When they finally broke apart, she let her head rest against his shoulder. "Oh, Ron," was all she could manage to say. So many thoughts and emotions were flying around her head that she couldn't come up with anything more articulate.

"I... I fancy you," he said and she felt the rumble in his chest more than heard it.

She squeezed him tightly and nuzzled her nose in the place where the sound came from. His scent permeated her senses and she sighed again. "I've waited to hear you say that for so long, Ron."

He kissed the top of her head and used his arm to turn her away from the setting sun. "We better keep moving. Harry and Ginny'll be looking for us if we take too long."

"Mmm," was Hermione's only response as her legs robotically moved with Ron's.

They walked together like that until they crested the final hill. The sun shone directly into the cave and highlighted everything in their view. It took Hermione a full five seconds to recognize that something was out of place.

"Where's Malfoy?" Ron said as she pulled her head from his chest.

Without any verbal agreement, they began to run toward the tree where he had been bound. When they arrived, breathing hard and kneeling in the sand in front of the palm tree, Ron grabbed the broken cords and cursed.

Hermione touched the tree, where the cords had bound the younger Malfoy and saw, very clearly in the direct sunlight, a single well-defined cut in the trunk. "Someone cut him loose."

Ron looked up sharply at her. "Malfoy Sr.?"

"I doubt it," she replied and then became more thoughtful. The sand was a hopeless mess of footprints that could have been anyone's. It was impossible to tell who might have freed the younger boy. "Whoever it was, Draco's loose and he's not alone."

They stood and Ron looked around the horizon until his eyes landed on hers. "We need to get back to Harry and Ginny. Now."

They dropped their coconuts and ran pell-mell back the way they came. If there were Death Eaters on the island, Hermione didn't fancy their chances together, much less separated like they were. She only hoped they could get there before someone else did.

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Harry?" Ginny asked casually, as she straightened from a bush from which she'd just picked a very ripe fruit.

Harry turned to look at her and when their eyes met, he nodded slightly. "I feel it, too." His eyes narrowed and darted through the bushes and trees that surrounded them. Ginny suddenly felt very vulnerable in the close confines of the jungle. "Let's go."

With one hand holding her fruit-laden shirt, she took Harry's hand with the other one and they walked slowly, but directly, out into more open ground. The sun had set, and the twilight sky gave them just enough light to see where the hut stood a good five hundred yards away.

Ginny resisted the urge to look over her shoulder as their pace increased. A knot of anxiety wormed around her middle and she started to breath in and out of her mouth in an effort to control the sensation.

When they reached the trees the coconuts had come from, Harry pulled on her hand and she looked behind her. "Harry!" she cried just as a spear flew over their heads and landed in the trunk of one of the trees. There was a cacophony of shouts from the jungle and she caught a glimpse of several dark-skinned men emerging from the trees and heading straight for them.

They took off running at full speed, Ginny following Harry's lead as they dodged in and out of trees, the sound of arrows whistling in the air around them. A hundred yards from the hut, they were joined by Ron and Hermione.

"Found some friends?" Ron said between puffs as they tried to keep up with Harry's pace.

"Just a few," Harry replied, as an arrow grazed his arm.

Their feet started to make splashing sounds as they hit water – the purpose of the hut's stilts became clear as they shot through the oncoming tide. Ducking around the hut's structure, they flew up the stairs and closed the door.

Harry and Ginny crouched on the floor of one of the rooms, while Ron and Hermione lay supine at the foot of the wicker sofa. The only sound that they heard was the laboured breathing from four pairs of oxygen-deprived lungs. Ginny looked down at her shirt and realised that she'd kept it tight to her belly and that all of the fruit was miraculously still there.

Harry must have realised the same thing, as he let his shirt fall open and the fruit spilled on the floor in front of them. Ginny followed suit and they listened intently for sounds outside the hut. Her eyes fixed on the front doors; she anticipated the splashing sound of footsteps in the ocean around the hut, or the sound of arrows and spears piercing its thin walls. Yet as their breathing slowed and their nerves calmed, nothing came.

Ginny reached out her hand and touched Harry's arm. "Are you all right?" she whispered.

He shrugged. "It stopped bleeding. It'll be fine."

The dim light made it hard to tell for sure, but she thought he wasn't telling the whole truth. Still, she fingered the blood-covered hole in his shirt and wondered why no one had come into the hut. Surely, the spear-chucking natives had seen them go into the building.

Despite her fear, despite everything that had happened to them that day, Ginny found herself yawning and snuggling into Harry, as he sat on the floor against the bunk bed. The threats of the natives, the fact that they were stranded on some unknown island and couldn't do magic, and the oddly satisfied look that Hermione had on her face as they'd been running away from the spears and arrows all began to fade into the back of her mind. Soon, only the sound of breaking waves could be heard and she slipped slowly asleep.

The First Horcrux 6: Lightning People

Chapter Six – Lightning People

Ginny's eyelids fluttered closed and in the waxing moonlight Harry saw her chest rise and fall with the deepening rhythm of sleep. His apprehension about their attackers did not diminish, but as she slept in his arms a powerfully protective feeling for this girl surged within him. Despite the potential dangers that surrounded them, she had placed her care firmly and literally in his hands and the realisation of this fact sent Harry's senses reeling.

He placed a gentle kiss on her forehead, where a crinkle of worry had appeared, and she snuggled closer to him, resting her head in the crook of his arm.

Ron's face appeared from around the corner of one of the walls. He did not tease Harry or make any gesture of disapproval, but simply nodded as if to say, "If she trusts you, then I guess I do." They both stared at Ginny for a moment and they silently agreed that no one was going to hurt either of the two girls while they still had breath.

"You reckon we should stay up in shifts?" Ron whispered as his eyes found one of the larger holes in the wall.

Harry considered this for a moment. "Yeah," he said after thinking about how long a day everyone had had and how curious it was that they hadn't been run through with spears yet. He gave a half-shrug, careful not to disturb Ginny. "You take the first one?"

Ron nodded. "I'll wake you up in a few hours." Then, with a significant glance at his sister, he crawled silently back to the wicker sofa and out of sight.

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Harry opened his eyes and in a moment of disorientation briefly wondered where he was. The blurry wooden floor in front of him was lit from the sun streaming through a hole in one of the walls and it wasn't until he tried to replace his glasses that he remembered the events of last night. His arms didn't move and he realised it was because Ginny was laying with her back to him and had his arms pinned in hers. She was snoring softly, and aside from the sound of the waves, it was the only thing he heard. With a start, he also remembered that he was supposed to relieve Ron on watch after a couple of hours.

"Ginny," he whispered and shook her gently with his still-pinned hands. "Wake up, Ginny."

She stirred and then stiffened, as she seemed to be going through the same realisations, and then relaxed, resting her head against his collar bone. "Where's Ron and Hermione?" she said softly. She turned in his arms and her eyes met his.

"They should be in the next room. Let's go check on them."

She nodded and they disentangled themselves from each other. "Do you think the people who attacked us are still there?"

He answered her with a shrug and they crawled quietly into the main 'room' of the hut. Hermione and Ron were wrapped in each other's arms at the foot of the wicker sofa, covered in a dirty and tattered blanket. Harry looked askance at Ginny and she returned his look with a small smile. "I guess they worked something out last night," she said.

They crawled over to the sleeping teens and Ginny began to shake her brother's shoulder. "Wake up, Ron."

He grunted but instead of waking up, only clung to Hermione more tightly. Ginny smirked for a second and then leaned down and cupped her hand over his ear and gave a stifled cry, "Spiders!"

The effect was immediate. Ron shot up, nearly smashing his head into Ginny, but she had been expecting this and moved quickly back next to Harry. Hermione, however, was not as fortunate. She gave a small squeak as Ron dumped her unceremoniously onto the floor of the hut and began to brush at imaginary arachnids on his shirt. "Wha – where – Get 'em off me!" As soon as his panic subsided, he noticed that there weren't any spiders on him and his arms stilled. "Nice," he said to Ginny, who was turning red from holding in her laughter.

"I'll say," Hermione said grumpily from her position on the floor. "It's nice to know that my boyfriend is ready to dump me at the first sign of a spider."

Ron paled and stared down at Hermione. "No, that's not..."

Hermione giggled. "Oh relax, Ron, and help me up." She held up her hands and he pulled her to a sitting position. Harry glanced at Ginny and, as they locked eyes, he knew she was just as surprised by Hermione's statement as he was. Something *did* happen last night and all Harry could think was, *finally*.

After brushing the sand off their clothes, they ate a meagre breakfast of the fruit they'd taken the previous evening and then drank the last of the coconut milk to wash it down.

With a quick swipe of his shirt sleeve across his mouth, Ron stood and walked to the window. He turned to Harry and nodded. "Still there."

Ginny's had found the small of Harry's back. The simple gesture emboldened Harry. "We can't stay in here forever," he said getting a worried nod from Hermione. "And if they really wanted us dead, a flimsy bamboo door wouldn't keep them from it."

Ron jabbed his thumb at the window. "What? Are you saying that we just walk out there and give ourselves up?"

"Yeah," Harry replied and got slowly to his feet. "That's about the size of it."

Hermione seemed to now know what to think, but stood even as she wrung the edge of her shirt.

Ron shrugged. "All right, then."

They walked to the door and slowly swung it open.

In a flash, a dozen spears were pointed in Harry's face. One of the men indicated with his spear that he should step down onto the dry sand. It appeared that they either didn't speak English, or they didn't care to speak at all. Harry walked tentatively down the three stairs, his friends following close behind. The spear-wielding men immediately surrounded them.

"Wait," Hermione pleaded. "We didn't do anything wrong."

They did not respond, but began to herd them back toward the jungle, prodding them with the butt-end of their weapons when they lagged.

"Who are you?" Hermione persisted, ignoring a pointed look from Ron that told her to leave it alone. "Where are you taking us? We need to get..." but Ginny stepped on her foot and she stumbled. When Hermione looked up at Ginny, the younger girl hissed a warning and Hermione seemed to get the hint.

When they crossed into the trees, the path forced their captors to form a single file. They seemed to anticipate this, however, and two men took hold of each prisoner, one in back and one in front, their spears pointed at them in a constant reminder that they were to follow without incident.

It was a long walk through the jungle, and the thick trees obscured their vision of the coastline so that Harry soon had no hope of knowing what direction they were going or where they had come from.

After an indeterminable length of time, the trees thinned and opened into a large clearing. As they passed from the jungle to the clearing, Harry heard a distinctive buzzing sound, but brushed it off as a strange jungle animal.

The clearing was wide and round, with jungle completely walling in the space before them. Only the trail behind them and a similar opening on the opposite side of the clearing seemed to allow passage into or out of this space. The clearing itself was filled with structures that looked primitive upon first glance, but Harry noticed that underneath the thatched roofs there appeared to be metal flashing and rain gutters. Behind the bamboo walls were the unmistakable presence of cement footings and as his captors led him through the maze of houses, he saw what could only be a television aerial attached to a chimney.

He turned to catch Hermione's eye, but was shoved in the back by the nearest guard.

Soon, they were guided to the largest building in the clearing. It was built upon a small rise, but was itself a multi-story structure, and didn't even pretend to be made of native materials. It was brick and stucco, with magnificently-crafted wood timbers supporting a tile roof. Four of the guards broke away from the main group and approached the open front doors, where two men stood at attention. After a short conversation that Harry couldn't hear, the door guards nodded and Harry and company were pushed up the brick steps and through the superbly-carved doors.

The first thing Harry noticed upon entering the building was that it was unnaturally cool. After spending the last day and night in tropical heat, it was like walking into a refrigerator. They walked down a dim hall and into a wide, brightly lit room whose edges were lined with potted plants and sizeable tapestries, and was dominated on the opposite wall from them with a finely-gilded throne. Suspended over the throne was a large sculpted representation of a lightning bolt.

They were unexpectedly forced to their knees and Ginny gave a startled grunt beside him. Harry watched as four guards pointed spears at them while four more pulled their hands behind their backs and tied them together. Ron muttered something that Harry couldn't hear, but that made Hermione smile.

As soon as they were tied, the guards retreated to the entrance. A tall, fit man appeared from somewhere behind the throne. He wore a crown that consisted of long green leaves alternating with bright red feathers. The man regarded each of them as he sat in his throne and despite being bound and held captive, Harry felt inexplicably calm in his presence.

The king, for that was how Harry thought of him, motioned to one of the guards and they engaged in a long, whispered conversation. They pointed their fingers at Harry as they spoke, drawing worried glances from Hermione and Ginny. The king smacked his fist into his palm and the guard's head dipped low in obeisance. Whatever it was they were talking about had obviously been decided.

The guards took Harry by the arms and force-marched him to the king. A heavy hand pushed him to his knees once again and the guard on his left pulled back Harry's head. Harry braced himself, ready to react if either guard showed signs of violence. The guard on his right placed his hand palm down on Harry's forehead and moved it up, pushing the messy fringe away to reveal the scar he'd carried from the time he'd been a toddler.

There was a murmur from the guard and the king came forward to inspect Harry, a light in his eyes. He touched Harry's scar, almost reverently, and then did something unexpected. He spoke in English.

"Who are you?" was the heavily-accented question. "Why have you come here?"

Harry swallowed and the guards released his head. "I – I'm Harry. Harry Potter."

The king's eye widened and then he slunk back to his throne, falling heavily onto the golden seat. "Release them," he said with the wave of a hand.

"Your highness," exclaimed the nearest guard. "They have eaten the fruit, they *must* be punished."

"No!" the king replied with equal ferocity. "He is the *one* and his companions are exempt from the punishment."

There was a moment where the guard pressed his lips together and then reluctantly nodded. "As you wish, your majesty."

There was a swishing sound and Harry's arms fell loose, the cords that held them in place cut in one stroke by the nearest guard. Three other swishes and he knew that Hermione, Ron, and Ginny were similarly free.

Harry gathered his courage as the guards retreated. "Why do you have a picture of my scar above your throne?"

The king looked at Harry for a long moment before he answered. "That question requires much explanation. Perhaps you and your friends would like something to eat first?"

Catching Ginny's eye, Harry shrugged and the four of them followed the king. He led them through a small door behind the throne, presumably the door he had entered from, and into a long, straight hallway that had doors spaced evenly on the right and left. Harry counted the doors as they walked and when he got to twelve, they turned left, into a lavishly decorated dining room.

"Please sit down," the king offered graciously and indicated the side of a large table that held four seats and four place settings. He walked to the other side, where a larger, more comfortable looking chair awaited him.

Harry sat first, followed by Ron and the girls. A fat, roasted pig lay in the centre of the table, complete with a large red apple stuffed into its mouth. Something told Harry that he should wait before taking any of the offered food.

"Now, I think it is proper that we become introduced," the king said graciously. "I am King Parihaka of the Lightning People." He looked expectantly at the four teens and Harry was the first to speak.

"I am Harry Potter of... er, England."

King Parihaka turned to look at Ginny, seated to Harry's right. "I'm Ginny Weasley, also of England."

"Ron Weasley, Ginny's brother," said Ron with pink ears.

When King Parihaka's eyes landed on the last person at the table, she coughed into her hand and said clearly, "Hermione Granger. London, England."

"Very good," Parihaka said cheerfully. "As to your question about our symbology, let us eat while we converse."

Harry was slightly taken aback by his seemingly educated demeanour, but still felt as though he could be trusted. But all questions were swept from his mind as the king clapped his hands and ten servants appeared, five with plates of vegetables, fruits, and other side dishes, while the others began to carve the enormous pig into thin slices. Soon, they were all pleasantly full and the questions returned.

"King Parihaka?" asked Hermione timidly. "What did you mean by calling Harry, 'the one'?"

Parihaka took a drink from his goblet and eyed her carefully. "Many years ago, our people came to this island searching for a refuge from the great evil that has swept this world. Despite our efforts to remain separate, evil has found us here. Fifty years ago, we were attacked by an unknown tribe on a neighbouring island."

A light seemed to go on in Hermione's eyes. "That was who attacked us yesterday!"

"Indeed they were," Parihaka nodded. "We fought them off and my guards surrounded your dwelling until this morning. The dark tribe has not always been successful enough to operate unhindered on our territory. That is, until eighteen years ago. That was when we learned of the power of lightning."

Harry shifted in his seat and his hand reflexively pushed down the hair covering his scar.

"A man came from your country," he continued, looking pointedly at Hermione, "professing to be able to bring us an advantage over our adversaries. He brought us the lightning and devices that use its power and he told us of a prophecy concerning the other power of the lightning." King Parihaka stared meaningfully at Harry and then continued. "For a time, we were victorious against the dark tribe. Soon, however, we discovered that this man also brought an unspeakable evil with him and placed it in the belly of the volcano. Since that time, our battles have gone poorly, there has been little lightning, and the rain has withheld itself from our crops."

There was only one thing that could have been brought to the island that could be described as 'unspeakable evil'. Harry felt Ginny's leg press up against his and he offered a smile in response. "King Parihaka," he said, catching the older man's eyes. "We know what this evil is and we are here

to destroy it. Can you help us find it?"

Parihaka looked warily at the four teens and then leaned back in his chair. "What makes you think you can destroy it? We have sent many strong warriors into the volcano for this purpose and none have returned. A boy and his children-friends are no match for so great a power – no matter what a prophecy says."

Harry squirmed uncomfortably under his scrutiny. He really didn't know why he thought he could destroy the Horcruxes when it only took two to kill the greatest wizard that ever lived. He only knew that he had to try because if he didn't, all the people he loved would suffer under the cruel hand of the most powerful Dark Lord in a century.

"I don't know if we can destroy it, King Parihaka, but I know that we must try."

The old king nodded slowly. "I can see that you speak the truth, young Harry Potter. I will assist you in this task, but first, I will show you our little village and then you will rest."

He clapped his hands and the servants returned, clearing away the table with swift efficiency. Then, the king stood and motioned for them to follow him.

They toured the rest of the palace first, including his surprisingly modest suite of personal rooms. They were led outside where he showed them the ring of trees in which the village was contained. He pushed into the trees and carefully used a long stick to move aside the dangling leaves of a drooping tree. As the light was able to penetrate the dense foliage, Harry saw a familiar sight. A tall chain-link fence rose up to the top of the tree line, separated from the vibrant jungle by more than six feet on either side of it. He was confused as to why this was important enough for the king to show this to them.

"Wait," Parihaka said, as if reading Harry's mind. Then, he picked up another branch and hurled it at the fence. Before the limb had a chance to touch the metal links, a blinding flash lit up the jungle and the buzz of an electrical charge echoed back into the village. The limb was gone, but in the light of the sun, Harry thought he saw a small pile of ash on the floor of the jungle.

"This keeps our enemies from attacking the village directly," the king explained as he dropped his arm and the jungle covered the fence once more. He began to walk toward the village and they followed. "The dark tribe first attacked us shortly after the fence was installed. It was a nasty surprise for them and they lost many men. We were not attacked for ten months after that and they have never taken the village."

"How *do* they attack you then?" asked Ron, speaking for the first time since lunch.

Parihaka smirked. "We cannot live within the village exclusively. Our crops and herds must be tended to and they frequently attack those places. Most of my men are tasked with guarding them from attack."

"Why don't you install a fence around the crops and herds?" asked Ginny.

"You saw how the jungle does not grow near the fence. Living things do not like the buzz of electricity. Our crops do not grow and our herds do not get fat if they are contained in such a fence."

Hermione frowned at this answer, but she did not continue questioning him.

"There's one more thing I need to show you, and then you will be taken to your rooms."

Still thinking about the fence, they walked toward an insignificant-looking building in the middle of the village. Harry stole a glance behind him and saw that Hermione and Ron were in a deep, whispered conversation. She was pointing to several towers arrayed among the houses that Harry hadn't noticed before. Behind them, he noticed the four guards that were their palace escorts lurking as the king continued to lead them on.

"This," Parihaka said with a smile, "is our great secret. It is the source of our power."

He produced a key from inside his belt and inserted it into a padlock. It clicked open and they were soon inside a dim, very small, but clean room. Just as the door closed, Harry noticed the four guards surround the small hut as if to keep any unwanted visitors from entering.

Parihaka pressed a small button in the wall and Harry felt his stomach drop to his toes as the room they were in seemed to fall away from their feet. After a few disorienting minutes, the lift stopped and the wall that held the button opened. Parihaka led them through a few twisty hallways until they faced another blank wall. The king manipulated several levers and knobs and, as with the previous wall, it opened to reveal something behind it. This time, however, they were presented with a much different view.

A gaping, brightly-lit cavern stretched in front of them as far as they could see. Row upon row of tall metal cylinders dominated the huge expanse. Each cylinder had a pair of wires running to it from the one beside it and another pair travelling to the one on the opposite side. Along the top of the cavern, giant cables the size of a Basilisk snaked their way out of sight and connected with the smaller wires that led from the cylinders. Hermione gasped beside him.

"I can't believe it," she said as Parihaka smiled at them. "I've heard of using capacitors to store large amounts of electricity before, but this..." She trailed off in awe, her fingers twitching as she pointed at the sight before them. "This is unbelievable."

"It is what is required when attempting to harness the power of the gods," explained the king.

Harry could tell his friend was bursting to ask a million questions, but only one came out.

"How?" she said, her eyes still wide in disbelief. "How could one person bring all of this here?"

King Parihaka smiled. "It took many months. This cavern was opened centuries ago when the mountain still spit fire. Now, we use it to store the fire of a different sort." Then the king's smile faded. He pointed to a set of analogue dial gages attached to a panel in front of him. "There is very little power left. We have not had good lightning since the rainy season and it will be gone soon." His head drooped a little as he said this. "If the power fails, there will be nothing to stop the dark tribe from overcoming our defences. Their forces have grown too strong to defeat without the power of the lightning."

Harry thought of the fence and knew exactly what he was referring to.

Ron was staring past the rows of capacitors. "We're going to do it, King Parihaka. We're going to destroy the Hor... er, evil," he said as Hermione surreptitiously pressed her heel into Ron's toe. "Then you'll be able to defend yourself from the dark tribe."

Hermione, Harry, and Ginny nodded in agreement.

"I hope you are correct," answered the king. "Tomorrow, you will leave with my guards and attempt to ascend the mountain. For now, we must rest."

*

Later that evening, Ginny sat on her bed in one of the rooms off the main hall of the palace. She and Hermione had stayed up late discussing the machinations of Regulus Black and why he had placed the locket here, of all places. They were left with many more questions than answers, but Ginny was confident that they would work themselves out as their time on the island progressed. What bothered her most was how Hermione seemed to be pre-occupied with something she wasn't ready to share with anyone. Judging by the way the older girl kept staring out their window at the lightning rods dotting the village skyline, Ginny knew that the puzzle had something to do with the strange marriage of Muggle technology and primitive culture on Black Island. Ginny would have to wait for the answer to that question, however, as she felt sleep creep into her mind and claim her.