

## **The Master of Life After the Battle**

### **Chapter One – After the Battle**

Harry awoke from his slumber twenty-two hours later. Sunlight was just beginning to penetrate the windows of Gryffindor tower, painting golden reds and deep purples along the wall over the door leading down to the common room. Dust motes floated lazily in the beams of light. Muffled bird song floated up from the trees on the grounds. It was all so peaceful; a sharp contrast to the tumult of the final battle and uncertainty of finding and destroying the final Horcruxes.

His thoughts shifted to his friends and how, in the end, he needed them. A lot. He remembered how they had insisted on accompanying him when he began his final quest and how he had tried to dissuade him. He thought about the intervening months on the run, tracking down the loose ends of Voldemort's life, and finding the Deathly Hallows. He remembered everyone that had fought and bled and died. Then he thought of Ginny.

He thought of how hard it was to say goodbye to her at Dumbledore's funeral, seeing her from under his Invisibility Cloak during the battle, and how when that rush of green light came at him from Voldemort, it was her face that carried him into the next life. And it was the thought of her along with the need to destroy Voldemort that brought him back again.

A steady rumbling from the bed next to him broke his reverie and he knew that he had one more mountain to climb – one more battle to fight. He groaned in pain as he slowly brought himself to a sitting position. Every muscle and joint fought against him. He wished he could just lie in bed for the next week, but some things could no longer wait.

He showered and dressed in school robes that had been placed at the foot of his bed by someone, probably Kreacher. Then, he descended the stairs.

She was already there, waiting for him. The common room was empty except for her. She faced the cold fireplace and stared unseeing into the black and gray ashes. Harry approached, grasping at what he might say to her, wishing he could say anything that would soothe the ache he had caused her. He just wanted to hold her again.

"Hi," he said lamely. She must have showered, too, because her hair was slightly damp at the tips and she smelled strongly of the same unidentified flower that always reminded him of her.

She turned to look at him, focusing on his eyes as if she didn't really believe he was there. "Harry."

There was pain in her voice, but something else, too. Harry opened his mouth. "I left you. I'm sorry."

She blinked and the corners of her mouth turned down. "It hurts," was all she managed to reply.

"I know. I'm sorry."

Her head tilted down and she sniffed. "I understand why you did it, Harry, but it still hurts."

"I needed something to come back to... someone to make me want to live."

Her head snapped back up. "You were dead. I saw Hagrid carrying you..." She seemed on the verge of tears and Harry started to panic. "It ripped my heart out and all I could think was I wanted to die and be with you."

His nerves calmed. She wanted to die for him and that meant she still felt something for him. "But I wasn't dead," he replied. "I came back and you're the reason why."

She smiled – just a little – and the tension broke like a thin bubble. She threw her arms around him and clung to him as if to make sure he wouldn't leave. Harry enveloped her and inhaled, never wanting to be apart from her again. He was home.

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Some time later, Ron and Hermione emerged from their respective dormitories. It took Ron less than ten seconds to prod them about breakfast and Harry and Ginny reluctantly agreed. Harry wasn't ready to face anyone outside of his friends now that he was sure to be even more famous for defeating Voldemort for the last time. Hermione gave him an encouraging look, smiled at his proximity to Ginny and followed Ron out the portrait hole.

The Great Hall must have been cleared of debris and the wounded while Harry slept because the old house tables were back in their usual places. Teachers, Aurors, and Mediwitches were coming and going from the head table, taking handfuls of minutes each to eat and chat with their neighbours before bustling off to some other task. It seemed that Hogwarts wasn't just the epicentre for the end of the war; it was also the hub of the

rebuilding effort. Students were there, too, eating from platters of breakfast in the centres of each table, but Harry noticed something odd about them.

Dennis Creevey was sitting by Terry Boot at the Ravenclaw table, each with plates full of food. Susan Bones and Eleanor Branstone were chatting with Astoria Greengrass at the Slytherin table and the younger witch let out a light-hearted laugh at something the others said. The Sorting Hat finally got what it wanted – house rivalry was impotent in the face of the sheer joy of winning the war. Of course, it didn't hurt that most of the Slytherins that were associated with Death Eaters were out of the castle.

Ron nudged Harry and pointed to a clump of red heads near the back of the Gryffindor table. Harry instantly sobered upon seeing that they were all there – all but Fred – and followed Ron up the nearest aisle.

“Harry!” It was Neville. He leapt to his feet and gave Harry a swift hug, slapping him on the back as he did. “You did it, Harry. You did it.” He was beaming and Harry couldn't help return the smile.

“Thanks, Neville.” He turned and the din conversation had disappeared. Everyone was staring at him. Then, as if they had been waiting for a signal, everyone began to clap. They stood together and applauded. Some whooped and some screamed that they loved him. He felt his face flush and made to duck behind Ron's larger frame, but was stopped by Ginny, who held his hand tightly.

“Let them,” she mouthed and he nodded, feeling very hot.

Ginny led him to her family and pulled him next to her at the very end of the bench. The clapping subsided and the conversation resumed at its normal volume.

“Lo, Harry,” said George with a half-hearted wave. “We were just talking about the funeral.”

Ginny rubbed her fingers over his knuckles and he shivered, wondering how he could go from hot to feeling a chill in so short a time.

“When do you...?” Harry trailed off and when Molly gave him a small smile, he cleared his throat and began again. “When will it be? I wouldn't miss being there. Fred was...”

“Fred knew what he was doing,” Arthur filled in when Harry's voice faded again. “His death is still fresh and will be for some months, but we've got to keep focused on the positive.” It was very much like Arthur to steer things in a more optimistic direction.

“There's going to be a mass for everyone that died during the final battle,” said a new voice that Harry recognized as belonging to Angelina Johnson. She was sitting next to George. “But we're going to have our own service for Fred at the Burrow.”

There was a disturbance in the hall outside the large oak doors. Everyone turned to see what it was, but they could only make out a knot of people and the distant sound of giggles.

George sniffed, bringing everyone's attention back to the table. “We'll bury him in the Weasley plot in St. Catchpole.” He looked to Arthur for confirmation, even though it wasn't a question.

Arthur nodded. “There's room enough for the whole family,” he said and added significantly, “when the time comes.”

Harry felt useless as they continued to work out the details of laying to rest their son, brother, and friend. He caught Hermione's watery gaze and knew she felt the same. After working so long and so single-mindedly, it was going to be very hard to pick up the pieces of their lives and just *live* again. He felt Ginny shift next to him and realised with a start that unlike George, he wasn't going to be alone as he resumed his life. Then noticing the way Angelina was staring at the elder twin, perhaps George wouldn't always be alone.

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On Saturday, the mass was held at Hogwarts. Unlike the funeral held for Dumbeldore, there were more people gathered than could be reasonably accommodated, so stands were erected in an arc in the space between the castle and the lake. Fifty-three caskets lay across a red carpet in the middle of the semi-circle, but Harry knew that a few of them were empty – they never found some of the bodies. The coffins were flanked by a raised platform where Kingsley Shacklebolt and Minerva McGonagall sat. They were joined by a handful of witches and wizards Harry presumed were family members from those who had died.

Everyone was in black and some of the witches wore black veils over their faces. One of the rows, about a third of the way up from ground level was entirely occupied by the Weasleys. Harry sat next to Ron and Ginny in the middle of their row and stared at the gleaming brown and gold coffins. Tonks and Lupin were among them.

As the proceedings began, Harry tuned the words out. He remembered learning about Boggarts and Patronuses from Remus in his third year and how to use happy memories to fight of their evil influences. Other memories flashed through his mind – Quidditch, and detention and Sirius. Then there was purple hair, tripping over umbrella stands, and being saved from his own stupidity on the Hogwarts Express.

Someone else was speaking, but Harry couldn't quite make out the words through his memories. He reckoned that was okay though, as it was his own private way of saying goodbye.

Ginny's cheeks were wet, but she wasn't crying. Her tears seemed to just slip slowly onto her lap as if the pain they all felt inside somehow became too much and poured out her eyes. Ron was sitting with his elbows on his knees staring blankly at his shoes. His fingers were in his hair, gripping it hard and Harry knew how he felt. He would probably be sitting the same way, but the pain was lifting away and the relief of it was paralyzing. He wished it would last forever, because that's how long it would take for it all to leave. Remus, Tonks, Fred, Dobby, Moody, Hedwig, Dumbledore,

Sirius...

He caught something that McGonagall was saying. Later, when he would think back on this moment, he wouldn't remember which words she used, but he would remember knowing that they had died to uncover the world from a blanket of darkness and that it was Harry's and everyone's duty to remember their sacrifice by living in the light.

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The Burrow was as dilapidated as ever when Harry Apparated in front of it two days after the mass. Bill, Charlie, and Percy were arranging chairs in the back paddock and every time Bill and Charlie levitated another one out of the stack, they would clash them together in a mock duel that reminded Harry of the day before the Quidditch World Cup Finals.

"Hi, Harry," said Ginny as she appeared in front of him, her dress covered by a flour-smattered apron that looked like it may have had a dragon underneath the white.

He moved to hug her but Ginny put her hands on his chest. "Don't. You'll get all floury."

There was a sound of smashing wood and Percy's scolding voice carried across the garden.

Harry's eyes darted to her front and he smirked. "It's worth it." His hands found her hips and he pulled himself closer. She gave in and in a few minutes he was much happier and very floury.

"Come on," she said, pulling Harry into the front door of the Burrow. "You can help me make the cakes."

"But I've never made a cake before," he protested, but followed anyway.

That didn't seem to faze Ginny, as she found a larger apron, this one featured a moving, stern-looking witch with the words, "What part of 'It's Not Ready Yet' don't you understand?" emblazoned on the top. It was obviously Mrs. Weasley's and the witch on the front reminded Harry of her as she crossed her arms and gave an impatient tap with her foot.

"It's easy," explained Ginny. "You just follow the recipe."

That was easy, because the recipe was floating above the bowl at eye level.

Harry watched her measure out some more flour and mix in the other dry ingredients. He didn't mind being designated to fetch eggs and milk, but when that cake was sent to the oven, Ginny pushed him toward the counter.

"Now it's your turn."

"But..." Harry tried again, but the stern look in her eyes caused his protest to die out. "All right."

She smiled. "Good. Now do just what the recipe calls for. I won't let you mess it up."

Harry sent her a lopsided smile and went to work. She was right; it was easier than he thought it would be. It was only a matter of minutes before he was scraping batter into another cake pan.

"That was the last one," she said proudly and shucked her apron.

"You've got flour on your nose." He pointed to the tip where a dot of white adorned it.

She brushed it off with the back of her hand and took a step forward. Her hands snaked around his back and began to untie his apron.

Harry's breath grew more shallow. "Where's your mum?"

His apron landed on hers near in a heap next to the counter. "In the garden, roasting the chickens."

Her arms resumed their position and she laid her cheek against his shoulder. He found his arms moving to hold her close, wishing her lips were more accessible.

She sniffed and he felt her chest hitch.

"What's wrong?" he asked, trying not to sound alarmed.

She squeezed him and let out a sigh. "I miss him."

Fred. Harry understood. Of all the losses, this one would take the longest to heal from. "What can I do?"

She pulled away and looked up into his eyes. Her eyelashes were moist but there were no tears. "Just hold me."

So he did.

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The funeral was solemn, with Arthur presiding over the service. Everyone was asked to share one experience they'd had with Fred while he was

alive. Harry told about the time he'd given Fred his Triwizard winnings and looked at Molly guiltily until he noticed the pride shining in her eyes. Ginny shared an experience she'd had when she was eight and Fred had charmed a Harry Potter doll to say things like "I love you, Ginny" and "Will you marry me?" In the end, Fred became the first recipient of her Bat-bogey Hex.

Harry was blushing almost as much as Ginny as she told it, but as she sat down and Ron began to speak, he could almost see a weight lift off her shoulders. She was smiling in a way that told him her heart was less encumbered than it had been. Fred wasn't being mourned any more. He was being remembered and the subtle change helped everyone on the path to healing.

When everyone was done speaking, George stood and pointed his wand at a large box in the centre of the garden. "For Fred!" The box sprung open and a dozen fireworks shot into the sky, exploding with bright colours that danced and fell around them like fairy dust. The show lasted for the better part of an hour as they all sat back and celebrated Fred's life.

After the fireworks, they ate outside under the twinkling stars. Harry was squashed between Ron and Ginny and across from Bill and Charlie. Hermione sat next to Ron. Harry was trying hard not to touch Ginny more than was necessary and it seemed that Ginny was having just as hard of a time, so it took Harry a second to realise that Ron and Hermione were having a heated conversation.

"I can't wait any more," said Hermione. "They've been there too long already. The longer their memory stays modified, the harder it will be to undo it."

Other Weasleys were turning to watch the spectacle. "Hermione," replied Ron. "It's not that I don't want you to go, it's that I don't want you to go alone."

Hermione seemed to battle something inside her and she took a measured breath. "Ron, they can't see you yet. Not until I remove their fake memories."

"I'll eat lunch at a pub while you find them. I don't have to be there when you..." He made a swishing motion with his hands. "Whatever it is."

Harry repressed a smirk.

"It's not that simple," Hermione replied. She lowered her voice. "Besides, I'd rather take some time with them. I need..." Her voice cracked. "Oh, Ron, I just need to explain things to them. I need time..."

Ron's mouth clamped shut. "Fine," he ground out. "Go see your parents. Bring them back and then I'll meet them."

Hermione's shoulders slumped. "Thank you."

Harry pushed around his mashed potatoes and the rest of the family resumed their conversations. He caught Ginny's eye and she shrugged. He looked around the table and noticed that Molly had a particular gleam in her eye as she stared at her youngest son.

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The next day, a crowd of loud, demanding, and very pushy witches and wizards carried a bespectacled wizard to a dais in the centre of Diagon Alley. Harry had just popped into The Leaky Cauldron to visit with Ron and George about letting a new flat when he was pulled unceremoniously from the bar and carried bodily through the magical brick wall that separated Muggle and Magical London. Ron and George shrugged helplessly as they watched Harry disappear around the corner.

The air crackled with boisterous energy and Harry realised that it was futile to try to escape – there as simply too many of them and they didn't want to hurt him. From the shouting wizards carrying him, it seemed they wanted him to make a speech. Voldemort had been defeated, the funerals were over, and the entire Wizarding world was celebrating. They had their hero and they wouldn't take 'no' as an answer to their ravenous demand to see and hear the one who they thought had brought it all about.

As Harry was forced onto the makeshift wooden platform and had the Sonorous Spell cast on his vocal cords, he decided then and there that he would never be made into a public spectacle again. Too many years of having his life made bare to casual scrutiny had taken its toll. Not even years of duelling dark wizards had prepared him for this.

The crowd's incoherent noise solidified into a chant of, "Harry, Harry, Harry, Harry...." He didn't know what to say and wished more than since he was cornered by Dudley's gang in primary school that he could just disappear.

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"Mister Potter!"

Harry was walking quickly away from the crowd after delivering his speech, ignoring everyone in the hopes that by not making eye contact, he would be left alone. He just wanted to get back to Ginny.

"Potter!"

The voice sounded familiar, but the dull roar of the now diminishing crowd made it hard to tell exactly who it was. Harry turned the corner at Flourish and Blott's and made a bee-line for The Leaky Cauldron.

"Harry!"

He turned, purely out of habit and saw through the corner of his eye a wand being raised. Reacting on instinct, Harry fired a spell at the man before

he had even turned fully around. By the time he recognized who it was, Kingsley Shacklebolt was teetering on his frozen legs.

"Sorry," Harry said and quickly undid the Petrification Spell. "I didn't realise it was you."

Kingsley smiled and waved off his apology. "Don't worry about it. You have a second?"

"I –"

"Good. There's something I want to discuss with you."

Harry had visions of being cornered by previous Ministers of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour and his predecessor, Cornelius Fudge. He decided that his list of things to avoid now included politicians as well as Death Eaters and large crowds.

Kingsley steered him into the Wizarding pub and with a nod at Tom, they walked into a private room near the back.

"Sit, sit," said Kingsley kindly.

Harry warily obliged.

"As you may be aware, I've been asked to be Minister while Thicknesse is being evaluated for the effects of the Imperius Curse."

Harry nodded.

"The appointment is temporary," he said, placing his hands on the back of the chair opposite Harry.

"How temporary?"

"It might be less than two weeks. There's already talk from some of the department heads about forming a coalition to get someone else in the top spot."

"What's the hurry?" Harry asked, confused. "It's only been a few days, why are they so keen to give you the sack?"

Kingsley chuckled. "I won't be getting the sack, as I don't formally have the job. I'll go back to heading the D.M.L.E." He pulled the chair out and sat down, wiping a large hand over his shiny head. "The person they're trying to get to replace me isn't too far from the previous administration."

"You mean. . ." Harry said, feeling his blood start to boil. All that effort and they were going to be back at square one?

"Oh, there won't be any questioning of blood status or any of that rot," explained Kingsley. "But if my information is correct, the International Statute for Secrecy will look like a wet napkin compared with what they have planned."

"They want to isolate us even more?"

"Yes. You-Know-Who –"

"Say the name," said Harry forcefully. "He's dead, you know."

There was another deep chuckle from Kingsley. "Old habit, sorry. Voldemort's ideas struck a chord with a lot of people and –"

"Please don't tell me there are witches and wizards who actually *liked* being rounded up for questioning about their family history?"

"No, but the people who were doing the questioning liked the power they had and are looking for new ways to exploit it."

"I thought we chucked them all out?"

"I'm working on that, but I can't do much in two weeks, especially because they are so well funded."

Harry's eyebrows rose. He'd heard of someone greasing the Ministry skids with Galleons before. "Malfoy?"

"Probably. That's actually one of the reasons I asked you here." He folded his hands and leaned back, regarding Harry with a studied gaze. "Draco's going on trial for accessory to Albus Dumbledore's murder."

Harry rocked back in his chair, his mouth hanging open. "But it was Snape. . ."

"Because of Voldemort's taking of the Ministry, there was never a trial."

He couldn't believe it. "Draco didn't cast the Killing Curse, and he certainly didn't push him off the tower. . ."

"But he did disarm him, as you said yourself, and that makes him accessory."

"Well I won't pretend that he doesn't deserve to be punished for that, or for the stupid ways he tried to kill Dumbledore before then. He almost killed Ron. . . and Katie Bell."

Shacklebolt nodded. "And he's been charged for those incidents as well. As you can guess, your testimony will be incredibly valuable in each case."

Harry didn't know what to say. On the one hand, Malfoy had been a rival for almost the entire time they'd been at school and some of the things he'd done had been downright criminal. On the other hand, Malfoy didn't follow the rest of the Slytherins to Voldemort's side and even helped him when he was captive to Bellatrix Lestrange.

"You may not have a choice in the matter. If the Wizengamot decides your testimony is necessary, you'll have to appear or be put into Azkaban for contempt."

Harry snorted and jerked his thumb at the wall. "I'd like to see you try it. That lot out there would tear Azkaban down brick by brick to get me out." He shook his head. "They're completely mental."

Kingsley chuckled and seemed to be considering something.

Harry cleared his throat. "You said that was only one of the things you came to see me about."

"Yeah. Listen. . ." He folded his hands on the table. "I'd like you to consider applying for the Auror Academy this year."

It had been a spur of the moment decision for Harry back in fifth year, to tell McGonagall that's what he'd wanted to be. Now, he wasn't so sure. Hadn't he had enough trouble in his life without dealing with Dark Wizards on a day to day basis? "I haven't taken my N.E.W.T.'s and I haven't even finished seventh year at Hogwarts."

Kingsley retrieved a folded piece of parchment from his robe pocket and passed it to Harry.

It had the seal of the Hogwarts School Governors on it. He broke the seal and read the page. A low whistle echoed in the room as he got to the bottom. "It says I've been awarded N.E.W.T.'s in Defence, Transfiguration, and Charms." He re-read a section quickly and quoted, "For my role in defeating the darkest wizard in a century'."

"Nice touch, eh?"

Harry's brow furrowed. "But what about Potions? Don't I need a N.E.W.T. in Potions too?"

Kingsley pulled something else out of his robe and plunked it down on the table.

"*Able Avery's Advanced Potions: Pass Your N.E.W.T. in Two Weeks*," read Harry. "That's ludicrous; I can't take the Potions exam in two weeks! I don't even know if I want to *be* an Auror any more."

"The Wizarding world needs you, Potter. You did pretty well back there, getting the jump on me with that Petrificus Totalis, and you did everyone a favour by getting rid of Voldemort, but we still need you."

Harry weighed his options. "I just don't know. It seems like I deserve a break after all that." He remembered what Dumbledore wanted to do when he left Hogwarts but couldn't because his mother died. "How about I get back to you on this?" He shrunk the book, pocked it with the letter and stood to leave.

Kingsley stood as well, scraping his chair on the wooden floor in the process. "The Ministry may not make it without good people like you inside."

"What can I do as a trainee Auror, anyway?"

It seemed like Kingsley had no answer to that, and stuck out his hand instead. "I'll see you in a couple of days in Courtroom ten."

"Goodbye," said Harry and he turned and left.

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The trial was as tense and demanding as Harry had expected it to be. Malfoy glowered and sulked the whole time, even when Harry took the witness stand and testified in his behalf. When the verdict was handed down and Malfoy was pronounced guilty of attempted murder of Ron, Katie, and Dumbledore, Harry held his breath for the worst. When they passed sentence and Malfoy was remanded to the custody of his mother for a two year house arrest, a fraction of surprise broke his recalcitrant façade, before being immediately replaced with disbelief. There were shouted accusations of corruption from many in the gallery, but Harry knew that no money had been exchanged for votes this time. Kingsley had met with each member of the Wizengamot to personally ensure a fair trial.

Malfoy's wand was handed to Kingsley to be locked up until its owner was free again. Malfoy himself was escorted to a processing cell where he'd be magically tagged and marked as a prisoner and where, Harry was sure, his mother was already waiting for him.

His eyes scanned the courtroom as the assembled witches and wizards began to file out into the hallway or gossip in knots along the carved benches. Along the back row stood the Weasleys. Fiery red hair dotted the top of each of them and his eyes snapped to the shortest of the lot. Across the courtroom, Ginny smiled and Harry knew what he'd be doing for the rest of the day, assuming no interference from fans, foes, or ministry workers with idealistic motivations.

## The Master of Life Mobbed and Muggled

### Chapter Two – Mobbed and Muggled

One month later, a wadded-up *Daily Prophet* sailed across a dimly-lit flat Harry shared with George and Ron and banked off the lip of an overflowing trash bin.

“Bugger,” swore Harry as he stared at the discarded paper. He hadn’t been known to swear as much as Ron, but his friend’s habit was becoming infectious with the turn his life had taken.

You’d think defeating the darkest wizard in a century would lift a guy’s spirits.

“Great bugging, bugger!” said Harry more forcefully. He slunk into his dilapidated sofa as far as he could manage and moaning in surrender, let his head loll back onto the stiff cushion. The paper hadn’t been any comfort because, like every *Prophet* he’d read that week, it didn’t hold the answer to his most current dilemma.

Since the Ministry had been recaptured and a Minister appointed, the *Prophet* had been reporting the proper news. Accounts of the dead and their families filled the front page alongside bits and snatches of how Harry had spent the past year. The second and third page stories were about the other heroes of the Battle of Hogwarts, a different two or three each day. Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, the teachers and other students were given varying degrees of attention; yet even knowing the whole story, Harry couldn’t begin to understand how anyone else would from just these clippings.

But it was still Harry Potter everyone clamoured to see and read about. He couldn’t count the number of keys to various Wizarding cities across the world he’d received. Every time he went out to eat he caused a minor riot. So, he followed Hermione’s advice and put himself out of sight by holing up in his new flat.

Harry pointed his wand at the wall and said, “*Reveleo*.” The wall shimmered and became transparent. The walk in front of the flat was jammed with reporters and photographers.

He couldn’t even go outside to fetch the paper and he knew it was just as bad around the Burrow, at Hogwarts, and at Privet Drive. He allowed himself a rare smile at the disruption *that* would cause the Dursleys.

Being cooped up in a flat presented an entirely new problem, however. Ron and George were able to come and go as they pleased, although George spent far too much time at the still-closed Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes. Harry now faced the worst curse imaginable – the curse of idleness. He’d had lots of practice being stuck for long, boring summers at the Dursley’s. But now that he was of age and should be able to live a normal life, it chafed in a way that was slowly driving him batty.

His life wasn’t *completely* idle. He still had his friends, and he still had Ginny.

Thinking of Ginny brought a smile to his face as he thought of the past few weeks of euphoric re-uniting with her away from the crowds of camera-toting reporters and hoards of owls bearing more good wishes than he could hope to read. Then, at the thought of Ginny, his eyes shot to the rust-spotted clock on the wall. He smacked his forehead and sat rigidly in the sofa as he realised his girlfriend had been waiting for him at a pub in Oxford for the past ten minutes.

“Bugger!” he yelled once more, jumped to his feet, and ran to the hall mirror. He quickly tried to tame his hair with a Combing Charm and was met with the same level of success that he’d always had. Giving up on his hair, he made sure he was otherwise presentable and popped out of the flat.

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“Hello, lovely,” said a tall, handsome man with an earring dangling from his nose. “Waiting for someone to escort you in?”

Ginny smirked at the man, obviously a Muggle, who just as obviously thought she was unattached. “No thanks,” she replied and continued to search for the man that was *supposed* to be chatting her up. “I’m taken with someone less...” She wrinkled her nose. “Holey.”

The unsavoury Muggle must have gotten the hint because when Ginny’s eyes swept back to the crowded sidewalk in front of the pub, he was missing. Harry, however, wasn’t missing and was, in fact, nervously scanning the crowd for her.

“There you are,” she said as she sidled up to him. “Getting caught up on your beauty rest?”

He replied with a sour look. “More like getting caught up in my current misery.”

Ginny frowned. “It’s only been a month, Harry. Give it some time.” She took his hand and wound it around her arm. “Let’s distract ourselves with Ron and Hermione’s bickering contest.”

Harry groaned. "Again?"

"I'm not out here because I like being chatted up by random Muggles..."

His face darkened. "Who's been...?"

"Forget about it," she said, cutting him off. "I handled it just fine. Now, how about you buy me a drink?"

"Alright then," he replied with a small smile, his face clear of all traces of jealousy.

Ginny gave a tiny sigh and followed him inside.

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The pub was jammed with Muggles talking loudly on their cell phones, sharing pints of dark, bitter beer, and laughing at boisterous and sometimes rude jokes. This was why they chose this particular pub. Hermione wisely suggested that they meet somewhere that Harry wouldn't attract a crowd. It had only taken four hours from the time Voldemort's fractured soul had finally been banished forever that Harry was mobbed by well-wishers and it wasn't long after that that a few straggling Death-Eater wannabes had tried to attack him. Much to everyone's annoyance, they'd been keeping Harry out of the public eye ever since.

Harry followed Ginny to a table in the back near the loos where Ron and Hermione were still bickering. Ron noticed them first, only because he was interrupted by the arrival of their food. The waitress rolled her eyes sympathetically at Ginny as she left.

"Oi," Ron said even as he took a huge bite of sandwich. "'Bout time you made it 'ere." He swallowed and gestured at the four plates. "We took the liberty of ordering you something."

Harry took the spot next to Ron and Ginny slid in next to Hermione. "Ron didn't think you'd be able to tear yourself away from your riveting afternoon of self-pity," said the brunette witch as she pinched a crisp with her fingers and popped it into her mouth.

Ginny elbowed her friend. "He wasn't..."

"I was wallowing in self-pity, Ginny," Harry interrupted. "But I'd rather be here, anyway."

"No wallowin' today," Ron said between unchewed bits of sandwich.

"Here, here," said Ginny with a smile. Then she leaned forward and with a meaningful look, whispered, "or ever."

Harry nodded, but did not reply. Ginny sighed again and dug into her fish and chips.

"When are you going to fetch your parents?" he asked Hermione.

She smiled. "Soon. It's hard to believe that it's almost been a year, but I hope they understand why I did it."

"How long are you going to stay with them?" asked Ginny.

She pushed her finger around the neck of her bottle. "I don't know." She gave Ron a wary look. "A couple of weeks. They'll need some time for adjustment and I need to consider what I'm going to do about school."

Ron groaned. "You're not going *back* are you?"

Hermione stiffened. "Why not? McGonagall said the school will be open in September and none of us took seventh year."

"But Hermione," Ron whinged. "We all got four N.E.W.T.s and you can take the rest of the tests without another day at Hogwarts."

Harry remembered the book Kingsley had given him and wondered again what he should do about his offer.

Hermione seemed to relent. "I don't know what I want to *do* with my education. I mean... what should I *be*?"

They all seemed to consider this. The truth was, no one had thought much about being employed. It still felt like summer holidays and frankly, Harry didn't want to think about anything but somewhere with a beach. And perhaps Ginny in a bathing suit.

"What about the Ministry?" offered Ron. Harry distracted his thoughts of Ginny in a bathing suit by noticing that for the first time since he'd known him, Ron had forgotten to eat while talking to Hermione.

"I'm not sure if the Ministry is right for me," she said to Ron, who was leaned back into his seat.

Ron snorted. "You mean you're not sure the Ministry is *ready* for you."

Hermione's cheeks had a spot of pink on them and Ginny nodded at her brother's compliment.

"Then again," he said, putting his elbows back on the table. "With all the trouble the Ministry's been having, it could use someone with all your big ideas."



The faint pink blossomed into red. "You're very sweet, Ron, but I don't think I'm inclined to stick my neck under that particular guillotine. After what happened to your father..."

Harry repressed a shudder at what the Ministry had done to him. After twenty years of service, Arthur had been sacked for "failing to perform at standards", which they all knew was Ministry doublespeak for "we don't like you". The truth was the new Minister was very tolerant of mixed blood, but had no tolerance for Muggles at all.

Stanley Crackshot was comfortable with the idea that the International Decree for Secrecy should be rigidly enforced and had even tried to eliminate all the offices having anything to do with Muggles, but the Wizengamot stood firm against such obviously short-sighted action. Frustrated with his agenda being road blocked, he went about sacking anyone in the Ministry that showed even a remote interest in the Muggle world. Arthur stood out like a sore thumb and on the day he assumed power, Crackshot sent Arthur packing.

"I still can't believe he was elected," said Ron. "After all Kingsley did to rebuild, I thought he'd be a shoe in."

"Well," offered Harry. "He told me there were a lot of people still in the Ministry that didn't agree with his ideas on openness with Muggles."

"And," added Ginny. "A lot of people thought he was too soft on Draco Malfoy."

Hermione's eyes were narrowed and the barely-sipped beer in front of her looked as if it would evaporate with the stare she was giving it. "I'll tell you one thing," she said sternly. "I won't stand idly by and let Crackshot ruin the last two hundred years of reforms the magical world has made regarding Muggles. I may not be able to do it from the inside just yet, but that doesn't mean I can't do something."

There would be no dissuading Hermione and Harry wasn't planning on trying. If anything, he would help her in every way he could. Injustice was something the Harry did not tolerate very well and injustice against his family was the worst kind of all.

\*

Two days later, Ginny found herself baking bread in the Burrow's cosy kitchen when she heard a *pop* from the living room. A cursory glance at the family clock noted that hers was the only hand at "home", but that another, more recently added hand was pointing to "safe".

"Hi, Ginny," Harry said exasperatedly.

She wiped her hands on her apron and flipped it onto the counter next to the rising dough. "Hello, Harry." Reaching up on her toes to kiss him, Ginny noticed his wrinkled forehead. "What brings you here? Didn't you say you were going to be on the casting range?"

Harry's eyes shifted around the kitchen. "Yeah," he replied. "Technically I'm not allowed inside, but Kingsley lets me on so I don't feel so useless."

"And?" Ginny asked, sensing that there was more to the story than that.

"And... I've been taking some duelling lessons from him during his off hours." He gave her a lopsided smile. "I think he's trying to get me interested so I join up."

Ginny took a step forward. "Remind me again why you don't want to fight Dark Wizards any more."

Harry snorted and closed the distance between them. "The same reason I'm going to be returning the Elder Wand to Dumbledore's grave. I've had enough trouble in my life without going to look for it." He brushed a tuft of her hair behind her ear. "Now I just need to figure out what I *do* want to do with my life."

Her lips turned down at the corners. "There's bound to be something else out there for you, Harry. Maybe something not connected with Dark Wizards?"

He seemed to contemplate this. "Like what?"

She offered him her brightest smile. "Like me."

His eyes darkened and focused on her. "I can live with that."

One searing kiss later, Ginny had forgotten all about the bread.

It had started out as a joke, but grew into an unspoken promise. When they were talking in the Common Room after the battle, Harry told her that he'd almost attacked Bellatrix Lestrange instead of Voldemort during the last battle. He told her that seeing that green light so close to her had nearly caused him to lose control. He said that she'd better never die because he didn't know if he could handle one more death in his life. She'd been certain at the time that he was going to say he loved her, but in the silence that followed, she answered instead. "I can live with that," she said, and they'd said it to each other as sort of an unspoken replacement for 'I love you' ever since.

The kissing continued and Ginny slowly pushed Harry into the living room. It didn't take long before they found themselves kissing on the sofa and it was only the sound of the kitchen timer that finally broke them apart.

Ginny smoothed her hair and stood on wobbly legs. "I'd better go... need to... put the bread in the oven."

Harry nodded, still pressed into the side of the sofa, where she'd pinned him. "I can live with that," he said quietly.

She hurried into the kitchen where she punched down the dough and formed it into loaves. Then, she used her wand to speed up the second rising

process. Mum insisted that the traditional method was better, but Ginny didn't have the patience for it and settled for one traditional rising instead of two. By the time she had the oven door closed, Harry was pouring two glasses of pumpkin juice.

Ginny forced herself to not look disappointed at being kept from returning to their previous activities.

"There's something else on your mind, isn't there?" she asked.

"What, you don't think I like it when you attack me with your lips?"

Ginny put her hands on her hips and tapped her foot.

He drained his glass and placed the empty container in the sink. "I was wondering if you'd come to Gringotts with me," he said without looking at her, fumbling with something in his pocket.

"Of course," she replied. "Need someone to fend off your fan club?" she added with a smile.

He gave a hollow chuckle and shook his head. Then, he pulled the thing from his pocket and handed it to her. "It's not the getting there that I need you for."

It was a letter. The green and silver seal of Gringotts Bank stared back at her. She read through it swiftly. "It's a request to sort through your property and the... Oh!"

Her eyes went wide as the vaults and their approximated contents were listed in the letter. "Harry, you're rich!"

That seemed to be the wrong thing to say, because he snatched the letter back and grumbled something to himself.

"Harry, I said I'd go with you, but what is it that's got you so...." she trailed off, letting her thoughts race forward for a second. "That was your parent's vault on the bottom, wasn't it?"

He nodded, staring at the crumpled parchment in his hands.

It wasn't that he wanted her help counting galleons or keeping an inventory – Gringotts would have all of that – the idea of facing his parents past, *his* past was emotional and Ginny knew that emotions weren't Harry's strong suit.

She took his hand and nuzzled her cheek on his shoulder. "I don't care about the money, Harry. The amount was shocking, but..."

"I don't care about any of it," he said hotly but didn't shrug her off. "I'd give it all away if it would bring just one of them back."

Ginny turned him around and pulled him close. "I know," she said. His breath was warm on the top of her head.

"I just wanted some company. There may be something in there I don't understand... something from the wizarding world I'm not familiar with."

She touched a finger to his lips. "I'm not going to leave you."

Harry kissed her forehead and took her by the hand. "I can live with that."

\*

Gringotts was still the same towering, impressive bank that Harry remembered from his first trip to Diagon Alley seven years ago, but now it seemed dark and scarred, like one of the security dragons at the bottom of the vaults.

All patrons of the bank now had to pass through a waterfall that left them, dry, but Harry knew it would remove any concealing spells, including Polyjuice Potion and Invisibility Cloaks.

Harry showed his letter to one of the goblin clerks and was ushered to the vault entrances where they met a guide. The goblin appraised Harry with a wary look and procured a set of Clankers before leading them to a cart that sent them spiralling downward. Ginny gave a tiny shriek as they took a hairpin turn at a frightening speed, clutching his arm for the rest of the trip. Before the cart slowed, however, Harry noticed that they were very close to the Lestrangle vault and the sound of laboured breathing filtered through the heavy, stale air.

As they turned a corner, they were met with not one, but three dragons. Two of the dragons were behind metal cages and the third was tied in the same manner as the one they'd stolen the last time Harry had ventured into the bowels of Gringott's. Their goblin guide manipulated the Clankers and as they produced the sound of hammers on anvils, the tied dragon retreated enough to allow them passage to the vault behind.

"I will not accompany you to the vaults," the goblin announced.

"What about the vault door?" asked Harry.

"New security procedures have been implemented so that only the blood of the account holder or one of their designees can open the vault door."

Harry nodded. It made a certain sense. Since Harry had used the Imperius Curse on a goblin to get them into the Lestrangle's vault, ensuring that the account holder alone would be the one to open it was wise.

Standing in front of the giant door, Harry raised his hand to the surface and pressed it against the metal keyhole. There were a series of clicks and it began to lift. Harry was silently glad it did not require real blood to enter and was able to recognize that he was indeed a Potter by touch alone.

Ginny took his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze as they walked across the threshold.

The difference between the Lestrangle vault and the Potter vault could not be more pronounced. Instead of wall to wall treasure, this vault held its valuables on tables and in cabinets and curios. Jewel-gilded swords, polished suits of armour, dusty tapestries, and large, delicate vases were tastefully placed in the dimly lit vault as if it were a living room rather than a hole hundreds of feet below London.

There were stacks and stacks of chests toward the back that Harry was sure held Galleons, but they seemed to have been put there as an afterthought, as if they were only there because they had no other place to put them.

"It's beautiful," whispered Ginny as the door slid shut behind them plunging them into darkness.

Harry waved his wand at the wall sconces and bright yellow flames appeared.

"Much better," said Ginny, who moved off to examine one of the tapestries.

Harry was drawn to an ornate bookshelf, covered with books of all sizes, covering a range of subjects sure to make Hermione drool. He touched each one, wondering if his parents had placed them here themselves, and noticed that they were free of dust and cobwebs due, no doubt, from charms cast when Harry was an infant.

The centre shelf contained books that all held one common theme: Potter. There were books on Potters from , Potters who owned land across mainland Europe and North America, and even a thick, leather-bound tome on the origin of the name. In the middle, and wedged between "*A Modern Anthology of Famous Potters*" and "*A Potter's guide to Herbology*", there was a green and gold book without a name. It seemed wholly unremarkable, but Harry was drawn to it. He pulled it from the shelf.

Behind it, tucked perfectly in the space between the other books lay an open velvet box. Inside the box, glittering in the soft firelight of the wall sconces, lay a spectacular diamond and ruby ring.

"Hey, Harry." Ginny's voice was low, but seemed to come from far away. "What do you make of this?"

Harry snatched the box, closed it with a snap and shoved it into his pocket. He carried the book over to where Ginny was staring at something on the wall.

She was standing in front of a row of framed photographs. Harry looked at them in the flickering light. "Are they... tombstones?"

Ginny nodded her head. "I guess your mum was into family history." She pointed to the corner of a small picture featuring the tombstone of John Jacob Potter, who, according to the caption on the frame, was a distant cousin. "There, what do you see?"

Following her finger, Harry focused on a blurred shape on a grave marker in the row behind John Potter's. A ball of cold steel seemed to materialize in his stomach. It was hard to make out for sure, but Harry was almost certain that the symbol of the Deathly Hallows was engraved on that headstone and that headstone was somewhere near a member of his family.

Ginny seemed to sense his disquiet. She took the photo from the wall. "We'll keep this for later. Why don't we look at the swords?" she asked brightly.

Harry shook his head, wondering if the Deathly Hallows were going to haunt him even if he gave up the Elder Wand. He felt the weight of it in his pocket and squeezed his Holly wand with his free hand. "No, I've got to do something I should have done a month ago."

\*

Harry and Ginny Apparated back to Harry's flat to retrieve his Invisibility Cloak, the only Hallow he planned on keeping. They popped into the doorway and out of habit, checked the other side with the Reveleo spell. Still packed with camera-toting wizards. They froze when they heard the sound of what only could be described as a plunger being removed from a blocked sink.

"Really, Ron. You need to work on your technique," said an exasperated-sounding Hermione.

Harry saw Ginny out of the corner of his eye, barely repressing her mirth with her hand clamped firmly on her mouth.

"I'd be a lot better if you'd let me practice more," was Ron's reply.

As determined as Harry was to get his Cloak and get rid of the cursed wand, the topic of his best friends' conversation held him captive.

There was a shuffle of shoes and the creak of the old sofa in the living room. "I'd be open to the idea Ron, but your idea of practicing is to smother me with your mouth."

Ginny was now bent over, silently shaking with laughter. Harry snapped out of his stupor and with a silent incantation, Summoned his Cloak.

It zipped around the corner and fell into his hand, but not without alerting the occupants of the adjoining room.

"Harry? Is that you?" called Hermione.

Reluctantly, Harry and a still smiling Ginny stepped into view. "We were just leaving," he said quickly. "You just keep on doing what you were doing." For some reason, he couldn't look Ron or Hermione in the eye.

"Never mind that," Hermione replied. "There's something I wanted to show you... Oh, what's that you've got there?"

"Er," said Harry, just remembering that there was a book in his hand.

Hermione stepped closer and took it from Harry. "There's no title," she said and opened the cover, flipping through the pages.

Harry chanced a glance at Ron and saw that he was determinedly looking at the floor, his face a bright red. Ginny cleared her throat and caught Ron's attention enough to give him a knowing look, which was immediately met with a glare. Ron's red went from an embarrassed pink to a hot annoyance that Ginny tempered with a laugh.

"I'll be spying on you two next," said Ron, letting the colour drain from his face.

"This is fascinating," said Hermione, drawing Harry's attention back to the book. "It's all about your family."

Remembering that Potter had been emblazoned on everything in the same bookshelf this one had come from, Harry cleared his throat. "I had a feeling it might."

"No," Hermione clarified, "I mean it's about *your* family. Biographies, anecdotal stories, and pictures." She held out the open book to him. "Look for yourself."

Harry peered at the page and began to recognize names. At the far left was a single name, "Harry James Potter" with his birthday listed underneath it. To the right of his name was his mother and father's name with birth and death dates listed. Across the fold, were names he had never heard of. There were pictures by each name. "I have grandparents," Harry said quietly. "My grandfather was Harold and my grandmother was Gwinnifred..."

"Longbottom?" said Ron in surprise. "You and Neville could be cousins!"

Harry smiled as he thought of all the people that could be family. For so long, he'd imagined that someone, somewhere would come to claim him from the Dursley's, now that he was of age and didn't need rescuing, the desire was somewhat less desperate, but replaced by an ache for the same timeless connection that bound Ginny and Ron, or Sirius and Tonks.

"I almost forgot," said Hermione, who let Harry have the book back, and retrieved a newspaper. "Today's *Prophet* has something you might be interested in."

Groaning, Harry took the paper and settled on the sofa.

Above the fold was the article on Luna. He scanned it until he reached the middle and began to read out loud.

*Lovegood, who has an unusual interest in mythical creatures announced plans to accompany her father on a quest to search for the legendary Deathly Hallows. 'The defeat of You-Know-Who has renewed his interest,' she is quoted as saying. Even now, speculation has been swirling about the role that the unbeatable wand played in You-Know-Who's defeat. You can bet that Xenophilius and his daughter won't be the only ones interested in pursuing that particular legend.*

Harry flapped the paper down in disgust.

"I knew it would eventually get out, but... so soon?" said Hermione.

"It's not as if *you* have anything to worry about, Harry," said Ron. "I means it's the bloody *Elder Wand*."

"Don't you remember its history, Ron?" asked Ginny, who fingered the prophet as if searching for an answer to this latest problem. "Death has followed every owner."

Harry stood abruptly. "Not any more. I'm going to stop the cycle and give the wand back to Dumbledore."

"Oh, Harry," cried a distressed Hermione. "Don't you realise? It doesn't matter if you don't have it. Once people know who last had the wand, they won't care if you ground it into powder. They'll hunt you down until you're dead."

Ginny's face turned pale and she sent a pleading look in Harry's direction.

"I can handle that without the Elder Wand if I have to," said Harry, "but I'm not going to keep it a minute longer than I have to."

Ron who had been quietly staring at the wall during the exchange stood also. "We'll come with you."

\*

Harry had never seen Hogwarts in the full of summer. It was breathtaking, with the dark green leaves of the trees contrasting the deep blue sky above. The sun was setting on the western horizon, but the shadows of twilight hadn't yet encroached on the grounds. He led his three friends past the entrance gate and followed the path toward Dumbledore's tomb. When they cleared a small hill next to a copse of oak and birch trees, he stopped.

"What in Merlin's name are they all doing here?" said Ron.

It was the last thing Harry expected. Scores of witches and wizards were standing in line to see the late Headmaster's grave. Scores more were milling around on the grass or were setting up small shrines of flowers and pictures.

Ginny grabbed Harry's hand and jerked him behind the nearest oak. "I don't think you want to be recognized here." Ron and Hermione nodded in agreement.

"Can you tell what they're pictures of?" asked Ron pointing to the knots of people on either side of the lane.

"I think they're people Voldemort killed," replied Harry with a sudden realisation. "They don't have a place to mourn their loved ones, so they chose Dumbledore's tomb."

Hermione sniffed. "They need a monument or something. It isn't right."

"No it isn't," came a gruff voice behind them and they all whirled around to see half a dozen wands pointed at them. "You've finally decided to show yourself, eh Potter?"

## The Master of Life Desperate Times...

### Chapter Three – Desperate Times...

Harry's hand inched toward his pocket.

"Don't even think about it," said the menacing wizard who assumed a dueller's stance. He nodded his head toward his companions and they each began to flick their wands.

Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione let their feet fall out from under them and the trees behind them exploded from the combined impact of six spells. Harry's hands reached for both wands and he was surprised when Ginny had already sent a Bat-bogey hex at the leader. Ron and Hermione took position behind the shattered trunks and fired volleys at the more exposed attackers. With the Elder Wand casting all manner of jinxes and hexes, and Harry's holly wand deflecting everything sent his way, it was a short duel. Eventually, every one of their assailants were immobilized.

Harry turned immediately to Ginny. "Are you all right? Did you get hurt?"

She brushed off his concern with a wave of her hand. "Who are these idiots?"

"Who knows," he said, but Ron was pointing down the hill. "No time, we should leave."

The crowds by the tomb were attracted by the noise and lights of the short battle and Harry knew it was time to go. "Come on," he said.

"Wait!" said Hermione, and she cast a Memory Charm on each groaning wizard. "It's better for everyone if they forget we ever met."

"Good thinking," said Ron. "Now let's go!"

They sprinted back down the path and as soon as they were on the other side of the gate, Ron and Hermione Apparated away. Harry held out his arm for Ginny and she hooked her elbow in his. Harry thought about the Burrow and took Ginny with him through the suffocating pipe of Apparition.

\*

"Oh good, you're just in time for dinner. I'm glad I made extra."

Harry and Ginny appeared next to Ron and Hermione just as Molly bustled through the entryway with a handful of napkins fresh from the wash. Harry noted with a smile that she was wearing an apron with a familiar stern witch across the front. They watched her leave and Ron immediately began to whisper.

"Harry, you've got to do something about that wand. Who knows how many nutters there are out there looking for the chance to do you in."

"Well I can't exactly post an advertisement in the *Prophet* telling would-be assassins that I'm putting the wand in Dumbledore's tomb so you might as well bugger off."

"Shhh," said Hermione in response to Harry's rising voice. "We'll think of something. Let's just focus on..."

"Dinner's ready," chimed Molly from the kitchen.

Ron smiled and rubbed his hands together. "I love Mum."

Harry and Hermione shared a reluctant grin and followed Ron to the dinner table.

Arthur was working on something in the tool shed, so it was just the five of them. Molly tried to engage them in small talk, but no one was up for it. By the time she'd finished eating she threw her hands in the air. "I don't know what's got into you lot, but if you can't do me the favour of being good company at the table, you can very well clean it off."

She threw her napkin down and went back to the kitchen.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry noticed that Ginny had hardly touched her food. He bumped her with his elbow. "What's up with you?"

Ginny shrugged.

"Come on," Harry urged. "Talk to me."

She put her fork on her plate and met his gaze. "When is it going to end, Harry? When are you going to have peace in your life?"

For a moment, he thought she was going to say 'our lives' and found himself disappointed when she didn't. "I wish I knew."

Hermione patted Ginny's hand but looked just as worried.

Ron snapped his fingers. "I've got it!" He pointed to Harry. "What if we pull another 'Polyjuice Harry' operation to put them off the trail?"

Harry blanched. Though the situation was far less dire this time, he wasn't keen on repeating the results of their last removal of Harry from Privet Drive.

"No, hear me out," Ron said on looking at Harry's expression. "You need to head out of the country for a while. Maybe a year or so. While you're gone – just for the first month or two mind you – we pose as you and are seen around. That way, no one knows you've left but us, and we get some time to work out how to throw them off the scent."

Harry was nodding during Ron's explanation, but he also noticed Ginny get stiffer and stiffer next to him. "That might work," he offered and turned to Ginny.

"There's only one way I'm going to go along with this," she said, her eyes blazing. "I'm going with you."

Harry grinned, briefly imagining he and Ginny touring the beaches of which led to visions of Ginny in a bathing suit whereupon his brain properly jammed. A half-drooled "yeah," was all he managed.

"Mum won't like it," Ron suggested. Harry's grin faded.

It occurred to him how much Ginny's family needed her and how selfish it was to want to take her away from them. A quiet part of his brain reminded him of the ring he'd found in Gringott's and how the diamonds and rubies would look especially well on Ginny's left ring finger. It was still in his pocket...

Ginny jutted her chin in the air. "She doesn't have a say, does she?" She grabbed Harry's hand and stood. "Let's go tell her. The sooner, the better."

"Ginny," simpered Hermione. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

"Sure it is," said the younger girl as she practically drug Harry into the living room, where they heard Molly folding laundry.

"Did you clean off the table?" Molly asked upon seeing them.

"In a minute, Mum," replied Ginny. "We've got something to tell you."

Molly flicked her wand and the rest of the towels folded themselves and settled into a neat stack on the end of the sofa. She sat next to them and waited for Ginny to continue.

Ginny cleared her throat. "Harry and I are going to have a gap year."

"A what?" Molly's face turned a pinch redder, telling Harry that she knew precisely what a gap year was.

"A gap year," repeated Ginny. "It's when you take a year off before you decide what job to take. We're going to."

Harry turned to look at her. "We are?"

Ginny patted his hand. "Yes, we are. You wanted to see where your family is buried and I'm coming with you to keep you company."

"You will do no such thing," said a suddenly stern Molly. "It's highly improper for a young witch and wizard to go gallivanting across the world together."

"Mum," plead Ginny. "We won't be gallivanting or anything like that. We're just taking a break. Together."

"I won't have it," her mum said firmly. "Haven't we raised you better than that? And what about your education? Aren't you going to finish Hogwarts?"

Ginny folded her arms across her chest and huffed. "Harry's not going back and I don't think I will either. We already have four N.E.W.T.s"

Molly seemed to soften. "I could support the idea if you were chaperoned, or..." She seemed to hesitate, a twinkle in her eye. "If you were married... Of course I couldn't say anything about it if you were married."

Ginny's eyes grew wide and a flush crept up her neck. For some strange reason, Hermione was grinning so wide Harry thought she might split her face open. Ron looked as if he needed someone to shove a beazor in his mouth.

Harry cleared his throat and scratched his head. An idea was forming in his mind. He wished he had time to sort it all out, especially because he hadn't had time to talk with Ginny about it, but time was of the essence and since she seemed determined to go with him...

He steeled himself, took a deep breath and dropped down on one knee. "Ginny?" She turned to him in utter shock. Her mouth was working but no sound came out. Molly and Hermione both took in sharp breaths.

"I know we haven't exactly talked about this, and I haven't really even *thought* about this, but sometimes you just have to *do* something and this is what I want to do." He paused. Her eyes were glistening and as he searched her face, he found his answer. "I want you to come with me, Ginny and there's never going to be any one else, so we might as well..." He stopped himself before he ruined the moment by saying something stupid. "Marry me?" He pulled out the ring and opened the box.

Her mouth had closed and she blinked a single tear out of her eye. Harry watched it roll down her cheek. She replied with the tiniest of whispers. "Yes." Then she tackled him with a hug and rained kisses on his face. Molly was shrieking with happiness. Ron was whooping and Hermione was dancing.

"What's all the commotion about?" It was Arthur.

Ginny pulled back from Harry, clutching the box and radiating happiness. In the fifteen seconds of planning he'd had, Harry forgot a step.

"Oh, *Arthur*," gushed Molly, but Harry stood and held out a hand to stop her.

"Mr. Weasley," he began. "I've got a question for you. Would you mind stepping outside for a minute?"

The older man's eyes swept from his still beaming wife to his deliriously happy daughter and a twinkle of understanding lit up his face. "Certainly, my boy. Lead the way."

\*

The night was still warm when they walked into the garden. White clouds were floating in front of the stars and fingernail moon like ethereal ghosts. A frog was calling from the pond and was answered by a chorus from the river.

Harry fumbled with his wand in his pocket for a while as they walked together. Arthur seemed to have unending patience because despite the fact that he was missing dinner and the answer to the uproar in his house wasn't forthcoming he let Harry have time to think.

They approached a group of weather-worn garden chairs. Harry stopped and traced his finger on the silvery wood. "Mr. Weasley?" began Harry tentatively.

"Call me Arthur, Harry." The older man sat slowly into one of the chairs, groaning a little as he did so. "I'd like to think of you as a son, if you'd allow me the privilege. You've certainly earned a place in the hearts of my family."

Harry nodded, feeling a lump of happiness form in his throat. He felt the same way about every one of the Weasleys. It took him a minute to find his voice again. "I can't think of a happier thought."

To his surprise, Arthur chuckled. "Oh I daresay you *can* think of something happier than an old wizard like me."

It was true. Ginny meant everything to him, and he was discovering new ways of feeling it every day he spent with her. "I want to marry Ginny, Arthur, and I'd like to have your approval."

Arthur grew more serious. "I see." He sat and stared contemplatively at one of the low passing clouds. "Do you feel the two of you are old enough to be making this decision? Have you had enough time together?"

With another nod, Harry sat in the chair opposite Arthur. "I don't know if there's a certain age where the world starts making sense, but I'm starting to realise that Ginny isn't going to have anyone else very easily. She's determined, and patient, and... wonderful."

Heat blossomed on his face as he remembered who he was speaking to.

"That she is, Harry." He paused. "How do you feel about her?"

Harry pulled at his collar, feeling very warm despite the cool breeze. He thought about kissing her and how she made him squirm with anticipation whenever they were apart. He remembered going a year without her and how he had obsessed with watching her dot on the Marauder's Map. Then he asked himself how he'd feel if something ever happened to her. A fierce wave of raw emotion surfaced from within him and he knew.

He locked eyes with Arthur. "I love her."

The older man smiled. "I had no doubt." The smile slowly faded and Arthur began to pepper him with rapid-fire questions. "Now... have you given and thought to where you are going to live? Do you have somewhere picked out? Have you talked about finances together? You should have a budget and stick to it, regardless of your income. Are you prepared to think about having kids? Take it from me... family planning is extremely important to iron out before marriage."

Harry's head swam. He hadn't thought about any of those things. To be honest, he hadn't thought past what he was going to have for breakfast and he told Arthur as much.

He laughed. "Well, I daresay there'll be time to consider such things. You have all the time in the world."

Ironically, Harry felt just the opposite. Just when he should have all the time in the world, he was being forced to make decisions that he shouldn't have to worry about for years. Still, when he thought of the future, Ginny was always the one by his side, in his house, and raising his children. "It'll always be Ginny for me. I'm going to marry her."

Arthur leaned forward in his chair and pinned Harry with his eyes. "You will and you'll be happy. You have my blessing and more."



They stood and embraced; a father who wasn't losing his daughter, and the son he was gaining in law, if not already in heart.

\*

Ginny was waiting for them on the steps. She stood on her tiptoes and gave her father a fierce hug.

"He'll do right by you," Arthur said. He kissed his daughter on her forehead and went inside.

The door closed and Ginny stepped up to Harry, her face inscrutable. Before he could react, she had made a fist and punched him solidly in the midsection. He doubled over and felt the wind forced out of his lungs. Her hands were on his shoulders pulling his torso upright.

"What'd you..?" Harry began, but he couldn't finish because Ginny's lips were on his. She was kissing him ardently and the pain in his midsection was soon a distant throb.

Her lips twitched.

"I'll give you this once, Ginny," he said with sudden sternness. "I've been a punching bag before, and I won't have it from anyone else. Not even you."

She pulled him into another hug. "I'm sorry. I love you so much, Harry. But you've got to give a girl some kind of sign. But you're right; I'll never do that again."

He took a steadying breath and released her.

"It just caught me off guard. I wasn't expecting it at *all*."

"I know... It kind of caught me off guard, too." He looked down at her hands and caught a glimpse of sparkle in the starlight. He touched it tenderly. "I just found that today. If I would have had a chance, I probably would have waited to give it to you after a couple of years. I don't even know who it belonged to."

Ginny kissed him again. "Maybe it's for the best you asked now. Mum probably thinks I'm a scarlet woman as it is, what with you, Dean and Michael in the space of two years." She giggled. "Oh, Harry. You do know how to make a witch happy."

Now it was Harry's turn to kiss her. They stood there kissing under the canopy of clouds and stars and forgot about Elder Wands and trips to . There was a flash and then the door banged open.

"What was..?" But Harry's question was cut off.

A very grouchy Ginny pointed her wand at the shadow in the doorway. "What do you want, Ron?"

He shuffled a little on his feet. "Mum's getting twitchy. Something about chiffon and Aunt Muriel's tiara. You'd better get in here before she's got us wearing pink and orange."

With a low growl that turned into a sigh, Ginny pocketed her wand and gave Harry a quick peck. "Come on, Harry. We're going to endure Mum's wedding fever together."

Ron didn't move, however. "There's one more thing." He shoved his hands in his pockets and seemed to find it hard to look them in the eye. "I was sort of planning to ask Hermione... Well, I've been planning it since the battle, actually and since you two are ploughing ahead..."

"Oh just spit it out, Ron," said Ginny.

He took his hands out of his pockets and in his left was a velvet box. "I'm going to ask Hermione to marry me, but I wanted us to get married with you. A double wedding. What do you think?"

Harry grinned. "Yeah, mate. That sounds good to me." He turned to Ginny.

She seemed to consider her older brother. "If she says yes... But we're probably going to get married soon so we can get off to ."

"How soon?" his voice cracked.

"The sooner the better." She walked past him and whispered a "good luck" on the way to her mother.

This caused Ron to gulp and he nervously put the ring back into his pocket.

Harry moved into the doorway and as he passed Ron, he clapped him on the shoulder. "A bit of advice... You might want to talk about marriage with her before you propose. You know... ask her what she thinks of the idea. Just get her talking; you know how she is." He thought about Ginny and rubbed his belly. "Trust me; it'll be less painful that way."

"Right."

"Oh, and one more thing..." said Harry. "You'll be my best man, right?"

"Yeah," said Ron, still dazed. "Of course."

The door closed, leaving Ron to his thoughts as Harry faced his future mother-in-law.

\*

"Mum," said Ginny with a little whinge the next morning. "We don't want a big wedding. Just our family."

"It'll be at the Burrow," Molly replied. It wasn't a question.

"Of course." Ginny rubbed her eyes. "Where else would it be?"

Harry watched the byplay between mother and daughter and took a sip from his mug. He ended up kipping in Ron's room for the night, mostly because he didn't want to leave Ginny at all, but also because they'd stayed up past midnight pouring over every detail.

Molly flipped over the bacon and pulled the scones out from the oven. "Very well," she said with an exaggerated sigh, as if she'd conceded something large. "We'll just have family, but you'd better get those invitations out if the wedding will be in two weeks."

"Yes, Mum."

"You know there'll be all kinds of suspicion with a rushed wedding like this. Witch weekly will have their tongues wagging about you getting pregnant or something." Molly abruptly stopped slicing apples and stared hard at her daughter. "You *aren't* pregnant, are you?"

Ginny groaned and Harry suddenly felt the six inches between them was suddenly too close. "No, Mum. I'm not pregnant. Harry and I haven't even talked about..."

"Well don't you think that's something you should discuss?" The slicing resumed, but at a much greater speed.

"Mum," Ginny protested. "We've been engaged for a whole ten hours. It's not like we've been putting it off."

Molly seemed to be soothed by this and the apples were better off for it.

Soon, Arthur was at the table and breakfast was underway. Harry was just glad for the distraction of having something to eat.

"We'll all have to get fitted for robes, of course," continued Molly with her mental checklist.

"Can't we just use the ones from Bill and Fleur's wedding?" asked Ginny.

"Certainly not," her mum replied. "I envisioned a more green and gold motif for your wedding. And besides, you can't wear a bridesmaid dress to your own wedding."

Harry swallowed his scone. "I thought she looked good in it."

Ginny smiled lovingly at him.

"Well," Molly continued. "It'll need to be white anyway." She looked askance at Ginny. "Right, dear?"

"Yes, Mum." Ginny threw up her hands. "I'm pure and virginal. I haven't been shagging every boy that's come my way. Why can't you believe that I saved myself for Harry?"

At that Ginny gave Harry an exasperated smile and fled upstairs.

Molly sighed and seemed to come to a realisation as she stared after her daughter. "I'll go tend to her," she said as Arthur began to stand. "It's my fault and I'll be the one to mend it."

She excused herself and Harry busied himself with stabbing an apple piece onto his fork.

"Sleep well then, Harry?" asked Arthur.

"So, so," he replied and began to chew his fruit.

"What do you have planned for today?"

Harry shrugged. "It depends on Ginny, I guess."

Arthur chuckled. "You'll find that your life will revolve more and more around her and less and less around yourself. Ah, the post."

Two owls, a nondescript brown and a salt and pepper one that had strangely familiar yellow eyes alighted on the table. Arthur untied the letters and *Daily Prophet* as Harry repressed a pang of longing for his own fallen owl. There was a clink of a knut in the pouch of the brown owl and they both departed.

Harry's thoughts drifted back to Ginny as Arthur hummed and sorted the mail. He wondered what it was going to be like living with her all the time. Would they fight like Ron and Hermione? Would they get tired of each other like Ginny had with Dean? Would they lose their attraction like Harry had with Cho?

There was the sound of the paper being unrolled. "Blimey!" said Arthur.

"What is it?" asked Harry.

Arthur didn't respond at first, but just stared at the front page. Slowly, he turned it over to face Harry.

It was a picture of Harry and Ginny kissing outside the Burrow. There was a white circle on Ginny's moving hand, outlining the ring and a caption that read, "Boy Who Lived Engaged to Former Ministry Official's Daughter."

Harry took the paper and flipped the page to the article.

*Not even two months since Harry Potter defeat You-Know-Who in a spectacular and controversial duel at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, reports have swirled around his closeness to one Ginevra Weasley, daughter of former head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office. These rumours have newlife nowthat they have been spotted sharing a kiss and the not yet seventeen-year-old is wearing what is clearly an engagement ring.*

He skimmed the rest of the article, but it was just a rehash of what he already knew. A thousand thoughts raced through Harry's mind and all of them pointed to a very unhappy Molly and Ginny.

Arthur caught his eye. "Should we..?" asked Harry, but the older man just shook his head.

"They'll find out one way or another."

Harry let his breath out. "I guess it's a good thing we're leaving, then."

\*

Ginny was glad the *Prophet* article didn't upset her mum as much as Harry had anticipated. In fact, she seemed strangely pleased that they were caught kissing on camera. Ginny read through the article and then tossed the whole thing aside. "Rubbish," was her only comment and then she moved on to a stack of Muggle bridal magazines that Hermione brought over during lunch. Ron accompanied her and was nervously twitching with the box in his pocket. Every now and then, Hermione would look over a magazine at him and frown. Ginny just wished Ron would pluck up the courage and ask her.

Harry was acting strangely, too. While she and Hermione poured over dress designs and giggled while taking silly Muggle courtship quizzes, he was busy writing something on a piece of parchment. Whenever she would catch him glancing at her, he would smile and turn bright red. There was definitely something dodgy there and she would have to wheedle it out of him later.

At three, Molly came into the living room and threw cloaks at everyone. "We're off to get fitted for robes."

"Muuuum," complained Ron. "I don't want to get another set of robes. Can't we just..." But Molly cut him off.

"No arguing, Ron." She tossed his cloak at his head. "Now get off your backside and get to Diagon Alley."

Ron grumbled a bit more, but complied.

They apparated into the alley behind the Leaky Cauldron and were immediately pressed into the gateway that separated the Magical and Muggle worlds by a large crowd. Harry pulled Ginny close and tried to duck his head behind Ron's shoulder. Ginny strained on her tiptoes to see over the heads in front of them, all of which were pointed toward the entrance of the pub. Finally, the witch in front of them shifted and she caught sight of what everyone was staring at. In front of the crowd a mostly bald man with flowing brown robes and a handlebar moustache stood on a small platform.

He waved his wand. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he began and the noise died down. "Thank you for attending this momentous event. Today marks the first of many measures which will grant our world greater security and peace. By sealing the doors to the Muggle world permanently, not only will we prevent further contamination of our culture and heritage from their divisive influence, but we will preserve a tradition steeped in a greater understanding of life and prosperity."

Ginny wrinkled her nose. "What a pompous arse," she said and got a scolding from her mother for it.

"That's the Minister of Magic," she whispered harshly. Several witches and wizards around them stole glances and then turned their attention to Crackshot.

He turned on the platform, waved his wand at the Leaky Cauldron and with an incantation Ginny didn't recognize, sealed the doors closed and produced a large, magical brick wall that completely covered the structure.

Flash bulbs went off and Harry subconsciously pulled his head down again. Luckily, the cameras were all pointed at Crackshot, who looked remarkably pleased at having further divided the Wizarding world from Muggles. Beside Ginny, Hermione was shaking with anger.

Crackshot stepped from the platform and began to talk to the gaggle of reporters that hovered around him. Molly tapped the bricks with her wand and soon, the crowd was pushing them forward and into Diagon Alley.

"What was that all about?" asked Ron as they made their way toward Madam Malkins.

"It's about anti-Muggle bigotry," replied Hermione through gritted teeth. "He's using the war to advance his shortsighted, narrow-minded, *backwards* view that Magical people are somehow better than Muggles because of their magic."

Ron eyed her warily. "Been thinking about it much?"

"I think about everything a lot, Ron," she said. "Right now, I want to think about Ginny's wedding dress." She pulled Ginny from Harry and followed Molly into the robe shop.

Time seemed to speed up as dress after dress was tried on and modeled. Harry and Ron seemed to be fitted in no time and were stalking around the front of the store, but Ginny couldn't see them. She had been shunted off to a special dressing room Madam Malkin reserved for brides-to-be.

"Hold still, Ginny," her mother said and pushed her shoulders around to catch the latest dress from every angle. "No," she said at length. "Not enough lace."

Ginny fingered the eyelet strips that adorned her front. "Mum, I *hate* lace."

Molly made a tsing noise and shook her head. The dress came off and Madam Malkin appeared with another one. Luckily for Ginny, this one, which featured an enormous petticoat, was dismissed before she even had to put it on.

"Let me help select a few," Molly said and followed the matron out of the dressing room.

Ginny blew out her breath and collapsed on a cushiony settee. "I wish this were over with," she moaned. "I just want to go home and be with Harry."

Hermione smiled. "You've only been gone from him for a couple of hours."

"Only?" Ginny asked, staring at herself in the mirror across from where she was slumped against the side of the chair. "It seems like forever."

"It won't be," Hermione replied, feeling the satin of one of the 'maybe' dresses that hung on a rod next to her. "In a way, I'm very jealous of you, Ginny."

Ginny caught her friend's eye in the mirror. "Why in the world would you be jealous of me?" She sat up straighter and offered her bare shoulders to her reflection. "I'm pale, spotted, and... plain. You've no reason to be jealous of that."

Hermione sighed. "You're in love," she pointed out. "And Harry's in love with you."

"Yeah," Ginny gushed. "But so are you."

The older girl shrugged. "I am."

"With my brother." Ginny made a face and they both giggled.

"Don't underestimate the power of freckles," Hermione said wisely and then sighed. "You're lucky your man knows how to be decisive."

Ginny turned to look at the real Hermione. "Is that what this is all about?"

Hermione looked sheepish but nodded.

"Oh, Hermione, don't give up yet." Ginny pulled her into an embrace. "Ron's thick and stupid in the head when it comes to love – that you know – but he's also very much in love with you."

Ginny had to laugh at the pitifully hopeful smile Hermione offered her. "Yes, Hermione, he *does* love you. You just have to be patient." Then to herself, Ginny thought, "I just hope he doesn't wait too much longer..."

The door to the dressing room opened and Molly appear brandishing another dress. "*This*," she said with a gleam in her eye, "is the one."

## The Master of Life Nothing Hidden

### Chapter Four – Nothing Hidden

Ron, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny Apparated back to the Burrow a week before the wedding, after a trip to the Department of Magical Transportation. They had been there to secure portkeys and apply for the necessary visas for travel abroad. Hermione still hadn't been convinced that Ron should accompany her on her trip to Australia, but couldn't say anything against him applying for a travel visa all the same. Despite his protests, Harry could see her side of things. If he had to put his Aunt and Uncle into hiding by modifying their memories, he'd want to have as few people there to witness their realisation as possible.

"Who knew there was so much paperwork just to get a portkey?" Ron said as he flopped unceremoniously onto the sofa.

"It's no wonder, really," replied Hermione. "If you think about it, there's bound to be at least four government agencies working in both countries to make international travel safe."

"Spare us," said Ron, who busied himself with the latest *Quidditch Monthly*.

Hermione huffed and plopped into a recliner near the dormant fireplace.

"I'm excited," said Ginny as she reached for the books she'd bought from the travel kiosk in the Atrium. "We'll get to see so many places we've never been." She promptly sat on the far edge of the sofa and cracked open the first book from the stack.

Harry sat between her and a still sulky Ron as Finbar Quigly of the Ballycastle Bats zoomed across the front of his magazine.

"Hermione?" asked Harry.

"Hm?" she replied, her eyes focused on Ron.

"How's the Polyjuice coming along?" He secretly hoped that it would be a flop so no one had to get ambushed for him while he was out of the country, but knew that Hermione was more than capable.

"It's fine," she replied, still looking at Ron, who was repressing a laugh at the comic strip featured in the back of every *Monthly*. "I'll be adding the fluxweed and knotgrass tonight."

Ginny flipped a page. "Look, Harry." She pointed to the top, where there was a caption underneath a charming urban skyline. "They say that Victoria is the most British city in all of Canada. Isn't that where that picture was taken of your grandfather's grave?"

Harry nodded, looking at the entry. There were pictures of famous landmarks, including the Parliament Building, Hatley Castle, and Fisgard Lighthouse.

She turned the page again. "Ooh. Look at all those flowers!"

There were thousands of flowers waving in the breeze, with colours from every part of the rainbow. "They're spectacular."

Ginny was positively dancing on the sofa. "It's going to be a perfect honeymoon."

A tawny owl flew through the opening in the fireplace and landed on the arm of Hermione's recliner. Before she was able to remove the letter, a pack of owls followed the first and began to clamour for her attention. One by one, she patiently removed each letter and dismissed the carrier.

"Hermione?" asked Ron tentatively. "What's with all the owls?"

"In a minute," she replied and began to read through each letter. They all watched as she made two stacks. She scowled as she set one down on the now larger stack and grimaced at another one that went to the shorter stack.

Finally, she was finished. "Well?" asked Ginny.

She grinned. "I've got a job."

"Really?" asked Harry who was very shocked to hear Hermione was taking a job without completing her education. "What about Hogwarts?"

"I'll take the N.E.W.T.s through independent study and re-apply for the job I really want in a year."

Ron scratched his head. "What do you mean the one you really want? Why not just wait to start working until after the N.E.W.T.s?"

"Because what needs to be done *now* won't wait until *then* ." She scooped up both stacks of letters and tucked all but one into her robes.

"So what are you going to be?" Ginny asked.

Hermione brandished the lone letter in her hand. "You're looking at the newest file clerk for the Department of Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

"A file clerk?" said Ron disparagingly. "You can do better than..."

"Of course I can," she said, cutting him off. "That's not the point."

A light went off in Harry's head. He understood. "You want to spy on Crackshot."

"Well not at first," Hermione demurred. "It's doubtful I'll get anywhere near him initially, but being in the Ministry at all is better than not." A gleam shone in her eyes. "Besides, I've got a good working knowledge of where everything is and how it operates. It won't take much to get the information I need."

Harry didn't doubt that in the least. He only wished he could help her in some way. Kingsley was a better Minister by far and he'd do almost anything to get him reinstated. For the hundredth time, he wondered if becoming an Auror would be a good choice.

"When do you start?" asked Ron. There was something painful in his voice.

"I'm going to ask to start after I get back from Australia. Two weeks after Harry and Ginny's wedding."

Ron nodded and returned to looking at his magazine.

"What's the matter, Ron?" Hermione asked gently.

"Nothing," he said and folded the *Monthly* in half.

"I've been watching you all evening," she replied. "There's definitely something wrong. Tell me?"

Ron looked up, his face set. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

"All right, you asked for it." He set down the magazine and sat up straight. "Everyone is moving on with their lives – getting married, getting jobs, and the summer isn't even half done. Why are you in such a rush? The war's over! Why can't we just enjoy some time off?"

Guilt tore at Harry's stomach. He had been so caught up in the Elder Wand, Ginny, and what was happening in his own life that he didn't realise that Ron was feeling left out.

"You're being ridiculous, Ron," Hermione countered. "There's an idiot heading the Ministry."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Ron said under his breath.

Hermione crossed her arms. "Something needs to be done and why not me?"

Ron stood. "Because *I* need you."

She didn't seem to know what to say to that. "I...I...", she stammered.

"I know you need your parents and I know you need to be involved in what's going on at the Ministry, but what about what I need? Have you considered anyone else in your plans?"

"It's not like that, Ron," Hermione pled. "I'm not trying to exclude you."

Ron dropped his magazine on the sofa. "I guess you don't *have* to try." And he walked upstairs.

\*

"Ginny?" asked Harry that night outside her bedroom. "Can I come in?"

There was a sound of rustling fabric and the muffled click of a door being closed. "Sure, Harry. Just leave the door open or Mum will have kittens."

Harry turned the knob and tentatively pushed the door open, balancing a heavy package in his other hand. It was only the second time he'd been in her room, and he approached her with a very different pang of apprehension.

"What's on your mind my husband to be?" She smiled and it warmed his heart a little.

He put the package on her bed and sat beside it. "I need to show you something. Some things that happened to me and some things I did that I'm not particularly proud of." He made a motion for her to sit and she took the spot on the other side of the package.

What is it?" she asked, a note of concern in her voice.

Pulling the string that held the paper, he revealed a large rune-covered stone basin.

"A pensieve?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed. "I picked it up in Diagon Alley while you were getting fitted for your dress."

Her eyes darted to her closet door. "Oh."

He met her questioning gaze and gestured at the empty pensieve. "I need to show you some memories. I didn't have a pretty life and you're about to be a part of it, so you need to know."

"You don't have to..." she began, the beginnings of a frown forming on her lips.

"I do," he said. "I have to because marriage is supposed to be forever. I can't help but believe that my parents had more than a couple of years together and I want that, too."

Ginny's hand found his. "Of course they did. I'm sure they're together right now and are proud of what you've done."

Fighting the urge to pull his hand away from her in shame, he looked at the pensieve. "*I'm* not proud of some of those things." He dragged his eyes to her face again. "You need to know who you're marrying, Ginny. You need to know so you don't wake up one day in ten years and realise what you've gotten into."

She smiled reassuringly and reached out to touch his cheek. "What I'm getting into? Harry, I know you. I know what kind of man it takes to destroy evil and come away untainted." He grimaced. "No, Harry. I mean it. You're *good*. Bloody stupid and noble sometimes, but you're good and handsome and *mine*."

She said this last bit so ferociously, that it startled him. He searched her face and the doubt began to thaw. "Thank you, Ginny, but I still need to show you what happened. I know we've talked about the Horcruxes and the Deathly Hallows, but there's really no better way than to show you. Will you let me?"

She gave a single nod.

They put the pensieve on the floor and knelt in front of it. Harry took his wand and pulled eight silvery memories out of his temple and plopped them in the basin. He stirred them until the right one was showing and took Ginny's hand. "This first one is probably going to be a little disturbing. Well... they're all disturbing in a way, but this one is of you in the Chamber."

She shuddered and then said with determination, "I'm ready, Harry."

He squeezed her hand and they leaned their faces into the misty liquid.

The Chamber of Secrets opened tall and dim before them. It took a minute for their eyes to adjust and when they did, they saw a younger Harry staring up at the old stone statue of Salazar Slytherin.

"Ginny!" A skinny, twelve-year-old, ragged-looking Harry ran across the dusty floor and dropped to his knees in front of a girl with bright red hair. They followed and Ginny's hand clamped down on his arm like a vice.

"Ginny - don't be dead - please don't be dead -" The younger Harry flung his wand aside, grabbed Ginny's shoulders, and turned her over.

"Ginny, please wake up," Harry muttered desperately, shaking her.

And then, they saw him slinking out of the shadows. Tom Riddle was there, his eyes fixed on the Harry and Ginny on the Chamber floor.

"She won't wake," he said.

The younger Harry jumped and spun around on his knees.

"Tom - Tom Riddle?"

Riddle nodded.

"What d'you mean, she won't wake?" Harry said desperately. "She's not - she's not -?"

Older Harry guided Ginny behind Tom to look at their younger selves. Ginny's hand hadn't relinquished its hold on him. She was beginning to tremble.

"She's still alive," said Riddle. "But only just."

"Are you a ghost?" Harry asked.

"A memory," said Riddle quietly. "Preserved in a diary for fifty years."

He pointed toward the floor near the statue's giant toes. It was the diary.

Older Ginny pointed her mouth to Harry's ear. "That was a Horcrux?"

Harry nodded and noticed that she hadn't taken her eyes off the memory of Tom Riddle as he grew more and more defined. "It had... a bit of *him* in it, then?"

Harry nodded again. "That's how he was able to possess you."

Ginny's hand loosened on Harry's arm and they returned to watching the scene unfold before them.

The younger Harry lowered Ginny back onto the floor.

"Look," said Harry, losing patience, "I don't think you get it. We're in the Chamber of Secrets. We can talk later -"

"We're going to talk now," said Riddle, smiling broadly, and he pocketed Harry's wand.

"How did Ginny get like this?" he asked slowly.

"Well, that's an interesting question," said Riddle pleasantly and older Harry was struck with the way Riddle was able to turn on and off the charm. "And quite a long story. I suppose the real reason Ginny Weasley's like this is because she opened her heart and spilled all her secrets to an invisible stranger."

"What are you talking about?" said Harry.

"The diary," said Riddle. "My diary. Little Ginny's been writing in it for months and months, telling me all her pitiful worries and woes - how her brothers tease her, how she had to come to school with second-hand robes and books, how..." Riddle's eyes glinted. "how she didn't think famous, good, great Harry Potter would ever like her ... ."

Ginny snuggled close to Harry and her trembling eased.

"It's very boring, having to listen to the silly little troubles of an eleven year-old girl," he went on. "But I was patient. I wrote back. I was sympathetic, I was kind. Ginny simply loved me. *No one's ever understood me like you, Tom .... I'm so glad I've got this diary to confide in .... It's like having a friend I can carry around in my pocket ...*

Riddle laughed, and Harry found himself mirroring his younger memory by shivering at the sound of it.

"If I say it myself, Harry, I've always been able to charm the people I needed. So Ginny poured out her soul to me, and her soul happened to be exactly what I wanted.... I grew stronger and stronger on a diet of her deepest fears, her darkest secrets. I grew powerful, far more powerful than little Miss Weasley. Powerful enough to start feeding Miss Weasley a few of my secrets, to start pouring a little of my soul back into her..."

"What d'you mean?" said Harry.

"Haven't you guessed yet, Harry Potter?" said Riddle softly. "Ginny Weasley opened the Chamber of Secrets. She strangled the school roosters and daubed threatening messages on the walls. She set the Serpent of Slytherin on four Mudbloods, and the Squib's cat."

"No," Harry whispered.

"Yes," said Riddle, calmly. "Of course, she didn't know what she was doing at first. It was very amusing. I wish you could have seen her new diary entries ... far more interesting, they became...."

"*Dear Tom ,*" he recited, "*I think I'm losing my memory. There are rooster feathers all over my robes and I don't know how they got there. Dear Tom, I can't remember what I did on the night of Halloween, but a cat was attacked and I've got paint all down my front. Dear Tom, Percy keeps telling me I'm pale and I'm not myself. I think he suspects me... There was another attack today and I don't know where I was. Tom, what am I going to do? I think I'm going mad... I think I'm the one attacking everyone, Tom!*"

Even now, Harry wanted to attack Tom for saying those things about Ginny. He was struck with the notion that even if his romantic feelings hadn't existed for her back then, he realised that this experience in the Chamber had opened something up inside him that eventually became the love that he felt for her now. They were forming a bond in the memory that was playing out before them.

Riddle and Harry's memory of himself were still talking.

"I have many questions for you, Harry Potter."

"Like what?" Harry spat.

"Well," said Riddle, smiling pleasantly, "how is it that you, a skinny boy with no extraordinary magical talent - managed to defeat the greatest wizard of all time? How did you escape with nothing but a scar, while Lord Voldemort's powers were destroyed?"

"Why do you care how I escaped?" said Harry slowly. "Voldemort was after your time....."

"Voldemort," said Riddle softly, "is my past, present, and future, Harry Potter...."

He pulled Harry's wand from his pocket and began to trace it through the air, writing three shimmering words:



TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE

Then he waved the wand once, and the letters of his name rearranged themselves:

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

Ginny was staring at Tom with a blank look, now. Her eyes were fixed and determined. As he prattled on about reviling his Muggle heritage, Ginny spat at him. "You're a coward, Tom Riddle! You got what you deserved and I hope you never ever forget what you've done!"

Harry pulled her close and let her bury her face in his shoulder. She shuddered and then they heard music. It was Fawkes. He appeared in a ball of flame and then swooped down to Harry's shoulders, dropping the sorting hat at his feet.

"That -" said Riddle, eyeing what Fawkes dropped on the ground, "that's the old school Sorting Hat."

Riddle began to laugh again. Harry and Ginny cringed at hearing it. "This is what Dumbledore sends his defender! A songbird and an old hat! Do you feel brave, Harry Potter? Do you feel safe now?"

Harry could see his younger self straighten his back and ready himself for Riddle's attack.

Then, Voldemort began to talk more about Muggles and Slytherin's noble work and finally, he turned to the statue to command the basilisk.

Then he heard Riddle's hissing voice, and he couldn't understand it. It was just hissing and it was exactly what Harry hoped it would be.

"I can't speak Parseltongue," he said to Ginny. "When Voldemort killed me, he killed the bit he left inside me and now I can't speak Parseltongue!"

Ginny smiled up at him and they both turned to watch Harry fight the basilisk.

"I can't believe you actually killed that thing. It's huge!" she said as younger Harry tripped and fell.

Then Fawkes was there, diving and attacking the huge serpent's eyes.

"NO!" they heard Riddle screaming. "LEAVE THE BIRD! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU. YOU CAN STILL SMELL HIM. KILL HIM!"

The snake's tail whipped across the floor and swept the Sorting Hat into Harry's hands. They watched him jam it on his head and he staggered and pulled Gryffindor's sword out of its opening.

"Just like Neville!" Ginny said.

"KILL THE BOY! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU. SNIFF -- SMELL HIM."

The basilisk lunged and missed and older Harry found himself trying to dodge for his memory. Then, the snake struck and was stabbed fatally with the sword. It teetered and fell to one side and the younger Harry pulled a fang from his arm.

Fawkes was crying on Harry's wound and Riddle was taunting him. Then, Riddle realised what was happening.

"Get away, bird," said Riddle's voice suddenly. "Get away from him - I said, get away --"

Riddle pointed Harry's wand at Fawkes; there was a bang like a gun, and Fawkes took flight again.

"Phoenix tears. - ." said Riddle quietly, staring at Harry's arm. "Of course ... healing powers ... I forgot..." He looked into Harry's face. "But it makes no difference. In fact, I prefer it this way. Just you and me, Harry Potter ... you and me...." He raised the wand. Then, Fawkes dropped the diary into Harry's lap.

For a split second, both Harry and Riddle, wand still raised, stared at it. Then, Harry seized the basilisk fang on the floor next to him and plunged it straight into the heart of the book.

There was a long, dreadful, piercing scream, much louder and longer than older Harry remembered. The diary seemed to pump ink out like a wounded artery. Then, the memory of Riddle was destroyed and the diary fell to the ground.

There was a faint moan from the end of the Chamber. Ginny was stirring. As Harry hurried toward her, she sat up. Her bemused eyes travelled from the huge form of the dead basilisk, over Harry, in his blood-soaked robes, then to the diary. She drew a great, shuddering gasp and tears began to pour down her face.

"Harry -- oh, Harry -- I tried to tell you at b-breakfast, but I c-couldn't say it in front of Percy -- it was me, Harry -- but I -- I s-swear I ddidnt mean to -- R-Riddle made me, he t-took me over -- and - how did you kill that -- that thing? W-where's Riddle? The last thing I remember is him coming out of the diary --"

The memory grew dark and they felt themselves pulled back into the present.

Ginny wasn't trembling anymore, but she rubbed her hands up and down her bare arms as if fighting off a chill. "Why did you show that to me?" she asked.

"I wanted you to know..." he sat and leaned his back into her bed, letting his long legs stretch past the pensieve. "I'm not a real hero," he began,

trying to match words to the swirling feelings in his chest. "I get some things right, but I always have help, and when I don't... Well, you're lucky, that's all. You're lucky that I didn't get eaten by that great snake, or missed the sorting hat when Fawkes swept it into my hands..."

Ginny's eyes were moist. "Do you really think I don't count every day since then as a blessing? You saved me from more than Voldemort that day, Harry. Did you know?"

"I did?" said Harry, confused.

"On the way back to Dumbledore's office, all I could think about was how awful you thought I must be and how disappointed my parents were going to be when they found out." She took his hand. "But you didn't tell them I'd been the one. You told them everything but that and I never thanked you for it."

She drew closer and held him. "Thank you," she whispered and kissed him.

They pulled apart after a moment. "You are a very good hero, Harry Potter, and I'm proud to have been saved by you." She giggled and kissed him again. He felt his heart lighten and allowed a smile to form on his face.

"Remind me to save you from deadly snakes and dark lords more often."

She shifted on the floor and pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "Then the next year, I didn't see you much because I thought you hated me."

He opened his mouth to contradict her, but she held up a hand. "Then at the Quidditch World Cup, I watched you and realised that you didn't hate me. I asked Hermione to find out, and she said you didn't hate anyone besides Voldemort, so I started to look after you again." She pushed a lock of hair from her forehead and tucked it behind her ear. "Then *Ron* tried to get us to go to the ball together and the look you gave me... It was like you'd never even considered it before... never considered that I was a girl apart from Ron's little sister." She said this last bit in an undertone.

Not knowing where she was going with this, he let her continue. "That's when I told Hermione I'd given up on you."

"But I didn't know!" he protested.

"Of course you didn't," she said patiently. "That was the problem. But it didn't last. You came around eventually."

He smiled. "I'm so glad I did."

She kissed him again and gestured back to the pensieve. "You said there were more memories?"

"Yeah." He took a deep breath and let it out. "If you don't want to see them tonight, I understand completely..."

"No," she said firmly. "You need me to see them, so I will."

He kissed her on her crown. "Okay. This one is the night Voldemort came back."

She shivered. "I'm ready."

He swirled the memories one more time and then they plunged downward.

They were in the graveyard in Little Hangleton. Cedric lay dead on the ground and Harry was being tied up to the headstone of Tom Riddle Sr.

"You!" the younger Harry gasped.

Nagini was twisting around the graveyard. The cauldron was bubbling over the fire and once again, Ginny drew close to Harry, but this time, it was Harry's nightmare they were reliving and he was very glad for her comforting presence.

"Hurry!" It was Voldemort's high-pitched voice coming from the bundle of robes. Harry shivered.

"It is ready, master."

"Now ..." said the cold voice.

Wormtail pulled open the robes on the ground, revealing what was inside them, and Harry and Ginny both recoiled in horror.

It was like a hideously deformed child, but no child had a face like this thing did – flat and snakelike with gleaming red eyes.

Wormtail took the thing and hefted it into the cauldron. He raised his wand, closed his eyes, and spoke to the night.

"Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!"

The ground at younger Harry's feet cracked open and a fine trickle of dust rose into the air and fell softly into the cauldron.

Wormtail whimpered. He removed a knife from his robes.

"Flesh - of the servant - w-willingly given - you will - revive - your master."

He gripped the dagger very tightly in his left hand and swung it upward.

There was a plop and a scream as Wormtail completed his sacrifice for Voldemort's return.

"B-blood of the enemy ... forcibly taken ... you will... resurrect your foe."

As with his memory-self, Harry could do nothing to prevent it from happening again. Wormtail punctured his arm and took the blood that would course through Voldemort's veins.

It was added to the cauldron and after a long moment, his head lifted up from the haze, followed by his body.

"Robe me," said the high, cold voice.

Harry's mind was spinning as Voldemort examined his new body. He hadn't realised what reliving this memory would do to him. It was worse than all the nightmares he'd had of this day since then. Yet, as Voldemort summoned his Death Eaters in the memory, Harry felt as he had at the memorial service. Something was being removed – extracted from him that made him feel lighter.

"Listen to me, reliving family history..." Voldemort said quietly, "why, I am growing quite sentimental.... But look, Harry! My true family returns...."

Between the graves, behind the yew tree, and in every shadowy space, the Death Eaters were apparating in. They formed a silent circle, which enclosed the grave, Harry, Voldemort, and Wormtail.

"Welcome, Death Eaters," said Voldemort quietly. "Thirteen years... thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday, we are still united under the Dark Mark, then! Or are we?"

He put back his terrible face and sniffed, his slit-like nostrils widening. "I smell guilt," he said. "There is a stench or guilt upon the air." A second shiver ran around the circle, as though each member of it longed, but did not dare to step back from him. "I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact - such prompt appearances! and I ask myself ... why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of their master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?"

No one spoke.

"And I answer myself," whispered Voldemort, "they must have believed me broken, they thought I was gone. They slipped back among my enemies, and they pleaded innocence, and ignorance, and bewitchment... ."

"And then I ask myself, but how could they have believed I would not rise again?"

"They, who knew the steps I took, long ago, to guard myself against mortal death? They, who had seen proofs of the immensity of my power in the times when I was mightier than any wizard living?"

"And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort... perhaps they now pay allegiance to another ... perhaps that champion of commoners, of Mudbloods and Muggles, Albus Dumbledore?"

Those in the circle muttered in disquiet.

"It is a disappointment to me... I confess myself disappointed...."

One of the men suddenly flung himself forward, breaking the circle. He collapsed at Voldemort's feet.

"Master!" he shrieked, "Master, forgive me! Forgive us all!"

Voldemort began to laugh. He raised his wand.

*"Crucio!"*

The Death Eater on the ground shrieked and screamed.

Voldemort raised his wand. The tortured Death Eater lay flat upon the ground, gasping.

"Get up, Avery," said Voldemort softly. "Stand up. You ask for forgiveness? I do not forgive. I do not forget. Thirteen long years ... I want thirteen years' repayment before I forgive you. Wormtail here has paid some of his debt already, have you not, Wormtail?"

Voldemort spoke about how merciful he was and then restored Wormtail's hand with a gleaming silver one.

"My Lord," Wormtail whispered. "Master... it is beautiful... thank you... thank you. ..."

He scrambled forward on his knees and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes.

"May your loyalty never waver again, Wormtail," said Voldemort.

"No, my Lord... never, my Lord..."

Wormtail stood up and took his place in the circle. Voldemort now approached the man on Wormtail's right.

"Lucius, my slippery friend," he whispered, stopping before him. "I am told that you have not renounced the old ways, though to the world you present

a respectable face.

"You are still ready to take the lead in a spot of Muggle-torture, I believe? Yet you never tried to find me, Lucius... . Your exploits at the Quidditch World Cup were fun, I daresay... but might not your energies have been better directed toward finding and aiding your master?"

"My Lord, I was constantly on the alert," came Lucius Malfoy's voice swiftly from beneath the hood. "Had there been any sign from you, any whisper of your whereabouts, I would have been at your side immediately, nothing could have prevented me -"

"And yet you ran from my Mark, when a faithful Death Eater sent it into the sky last summer?" said Voldemort lazily, and Mr. Malfoy stopped talking abruptly. "Yes, I know all about that, Lucius.... You have disappointed me.... I expect more faithful service in the future."

"Of course, my Lord, of course.... You are merciful, thank you...."

Voldemort then addressed the rest of the missing and present Death Eaters before Lucius could no longer be silent.

"Master, we crave to know ... we beg you to tell us ... how you have achieved this... this miracle... how you managed to return to us...."

"Ah, what a story it is, Lucius," said Voldemort. "And it begins - and ends - with my young friend here."

He walked lazily over to stand next to Harry, so that the eyes of the whole circle were upon the two of them. Nagini continued to circle.

"You know, of course, that they have called this boy my downfall?" Voldemort said softly, his red eyes upon Harry. "You all know that on the night I lost my powers and my body, I tried to kill him. His mother died in the attempt to save him - and unwittingly provided him with a protection I admit I had not foreseen.... I could not touch the boy."

Voldemort raised one of his long white fingers and put it very close to Harry's cheek.

"His mother left upon him the traces other sacrifice.... This is old magic, I should have remembered it, I was foolish to overlook it... but no matter. I can touch him now."

Voldemort laughed softly in his ear, then took the finger away and continued addressing the Death Eaters.

"I miscalculated, my friends, I admit it. My curse was deflected by the woman's foolish sacrifice, and it rebounded upon myself. Aaah ... pain beyond pain, my friends; nothing could have prepared me for it. I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost... but still, I was alive. What I was, even I do not know... I, who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know my goal - to conquer death. And now, I was tested, and it appeared that one or more of my experiments had worked ... for I had not been killed, though the curse should have done it."

He continued to speak, telling them of his attempt to get the Philosopher's Stone; about his time in Albania, Bertha Jorkins, and his plan to rig the Triwizard Tournament to get Harry.

"But how to get at Harry Potter?" Voldemort asked his assembled servants. "Use my one faithful Death Eater, stationed at Hogwarts, to ensure that the boy's name was entered into the Goblet of Fire. Use my Death Eater to ensure that the boy won the tournament - that he touched the Triwizard Cup first - the cup which my Death Eater had turned into a Portkey, which would bring him here, beyond the reach of Dumbledore's help and protection, and into my waiting arms. And here he is ... the boy you all believed had been my downfall. ..."

Voldemort moved slowly forward and turned to face Harry. He raised his wand.

"*Crucio!*"

Harry winced as his younger self writhed in pain, screaming into the night. Ginny's face was wet with tears. The Death Eaters were laughing.

"You see, I think, how foolish it was to suppose that this boy could ever have been stronger than me," said Voldemort. "But I want there to be no mistake in anybody's mind. Harry Potter escaped me by a lucky chance. And I am now going to prove my power by killing him, here and now, in front of you all, when there is no Dumbledore to help him, and no mother to die for him. I will give him his chance. He will be allowed to fight, and you will be left in no doubt which of us is the stronger. Just a little longer, Nagini," he whispered, and the snake glided away through the grass to where the Death Eaters stood watching.

"Now untie him, Wormtail, and give him back his wand."

With one swipe, Wormtail cut through the bonds tying Harry to the gravestone. He handed a weakened Harry his wand and went back to the circle.

"You have been taught how to duel. Harry Potter?" said Voldemort softly.

"We bow to each other. Harry," said Voldemort, bending a little, but keeping his eyes on Harry. "Come, the niceties must be observed.... Dumbledore would like you to show manners.... Bow to death, Harry...."

The Death Eaters were laughing again. Voldemort's lipless mouth was smiling.

Harry did not bow.

"I said, bow," Voldemort said, raising his wand - and Harry saw himself being bent forward, grunting in the effort to stop it. The Death Eaters laughed harder than ever.

"Very good," said Voldemort softly, and he raised his wand letting the teenager Harry straighten himself. "And now you face me, like a man... straightbacked and proud, the way your father died...."

"And now - we duel."

Voldemort raised his wand and hit Harry again with the Cruciatus Curse. And then it stopped. Ginny was shaking now.

"A little break," said Voldemort, "a little pause ... That hurt, didn't it. Harry? You don't want me to do that again, do you?"

Harry did not answer.

"I asked you whether you want me to do that again," said Voldemort softly. "Answer me! *Imperio!*"

The blissful wash of nothingness reflected on Harry's face, and then his brow furrowed and his head shook just a little. It wasn't until Voldemort twisted his wand that Harry yelled out.

"I WON'T!"

"You won't?" said Voldemort quietly, and the Death Eaters were not laughing now. "You won't say no? Harry, obedience is a virtue I need to teach you before you die.... Perhaps another little dose of pain?"

Voldemort raised his wand, but this time Harry dodged and rolled behind the marble headstone of Voldemort's father as the spell impacted on its surface.

"We are not playing hide-and-seek, Harry," said Voldemort's soft, cold voice as the Death Eaters laughed again. "You cannot hide from me. Does this mean you are tired of our duel? Does this mean that you would prefer me to finish it now, Harry? Come out, Harry ... come out and play, then ... it will be quick ... it might even be painless ... I would not know... I have never died... ."

Harry stood up and with nerves of raw steel, faced his enemy.

As Harry shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*" Voldemort cried, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

The cage of light enveloped them. Voldemort looked frightened. Next to Harry, Ginny gasped as if she hadn't expected that. Indeed, Harry remembered that nothing had prepared him for what was happening in the memory.

"Do nothing!" Voldemort shrieked to the Death Eaters.

They fought the connection between the wands and then the younger Harry pushed his beam into Voldemort's wand. Phoenix song echoed through the graveyard and as before, the older Harry felt his heart lighten.

The shadows of Cedric, Frank, Bertha, and his parents appeared. Harry took a step forward, he wanted to see their faces again...

"When the connection is broken," his mother was saying. "We will linger for only moments ... but we will give you time... you must get to the Portkey, it will return you to Hogwarts ... do you understand, Harry?"

"Yes," the Harry fighting Voldemort gasped.

"Harry...", whispered the figure of Cedric, "take my body back, will you? Take my body back to my parents..."

"I will," said Harry, his face screwed up with the effort of holding the wand.

"Do it now," whispered his father's voice, "be ready to run ... do it now. ..."

"NOW!" Harry yelled.

He ran through the graves.

"Stun him!" Voldemort screamed.

Harry dodged the spells and reached his wand over the gravestone he'd taken shelter behind.

"*Impedimenta!*" he bellowed. McNair fell.

Harry leapt up and ran, diving at the place where Cedric lay. He stretched out his hand to grab Cedric's arm...

"Stand aside! I will kill him! He is mine!" shrieked Voldemort. Harry's hand had closed on Cedric's wrist.

"*Accio!*" Harry yelled, pointing his wand at the Triwizard Cup. It flew into the air and soared toward him. Harry caught it by the handle -

They heard Voldemort's scream of fury and the memory dimmed. They were pulled up and back into Ginny's room.

Harry fell back onto Ginny's bed and she sat beside him. "Oh, Harry," she said, her voice trembling. "You were only fourteen. How did you do it? How did you turn out to be so good?"

He shook his head. "I'm not good," he said and despite the feeling that he wasn't worth her attention, he let her hold him.

"Yes you are," she said, suddenly fierce. "You're the best man I know and I won't hear of anyone saying anything different, even from you."

It wasn't easy to hear things like that. He felt so tainted. It made what he was about to show her even harder. "You don't know everything yet. There's more I need to show you."

She sat up and cradled his face with her hands. "There's nothing you've done that could stop me from being with you, Harry."

He reached his hands up and brought hers to his lap. "Don't say that yet. Wait until after..."

She nodded.

"That memory was just a preview. Voldemort used all three Unforgiveables on me that night, so I know what each one feels like, personally."

Ginny swallowed, but didn't say anything.

They knelt again and stared into the swirling clouds of memories. Harry brought three to the surface and blew out a breath. "Ready?"

"Yes."

Once more, they took their journey into Harry's past.

The veil of the death chamber loomed before them. Harry and Ginny looked down from the top step and saw fifteen-year-old Harry being held firmly by Lupin. Neville was standing next to him apologising for the smashed prophesy. Kingsley and Bellatrix were duelling....

There was a loud bang and a yell from behind the dais. Kingsley hit the ground, yelling in pain. Bellatrix Lestrange turned and ran. Dumbledore whipped around and fired a spell at her but she deflected it.

"Harry - no!" cried Lupin, but Harry had already ripped his arm from Lupin's slackened grip.

"SHE KILLED SIRIUS!" bellowed Harry. "SHE KILLED HIM! I'LL KILL HER!"

Younger Harry scrambled after her and older Harry and Ginny followed behind. When they got to the spinning room of doors, they were gasping.

"You're a fast runner," Ginny said, holding a stitch in her side.

Harry stared at his former self. "I was motivated."

They sprinted behind Harry, through the brain room, where they didn't slip and slide as his memory did. They saw Ron, Hermione, and Ginny on the floor and they were suddenly at the lift, barely making it inside before the doors closed.

They burst from the lift and Bellatrix fired a spell that sent younger Harry sprawling behind the Fountain.

"Come out, come out, little Harry!" she called in her mock baby voice. "What did you come after me for, then? I thought you were here to avenge my dear cousin!"

"I am!" shouted Harry.

"Aaaaaah ... did you love him, little baby Potter?"

Harry flung himself out from behind the fountain and bellowed, "*Crucio!*"

Bellatrix screamed: the spell had knocked her down, but she did not writhe in agony - she was already back on her feet and no longer laughing. Harry dodged behind the golden fountain again. Her counter-spell hit the head of the wizard in the fountain, which was blown off and landed twenty feet away.

"Never used an Unforgivable Curse before, have you, boy?" she yelled. She had abandoned her baby voice now. "You need to mean them, Potter! You need to really want to cause pain - to enjoy it - righteous anger won't hurt me for long - I'll show you how it is done, shall I? I'll give you a lesson -"

Harry was edging around the fountain on the other side when she screamed, "*Crucio!*" and he was forced to duck down again as the centaur's arm, holding its bow, spun off and landed with a crash a short distance from the golden wizard's head.

"Potter, you cannot win against me!" she cried.

She was moving into a better position.

"I was and am the Dark Lord's most loyal servant. I learned the Dark Arts from him, and I know spells of such power that you, pathetic little boy, can never hope to compete..."

"*Stupefy!*" yelled Harry. Her response was a blur.

"*Protego!*"

Now the elf's ear went spinning across the floor.

"Potter, I'm going to give you one chance!" shouted Bellatrix. "Give me the prophecy - roll it out towards me now - and I may spare your life!"

"Well, you're going to have to kill me, because it's gone!" Harry roared and they saw him clutch his forehead. "And he knows!" said Harry, with a mad laugh that didn't suit him. "Your dear old mate Voldemort knows it's gone! He's not going to be happy with you, is he?"

"What? What do you mean?" she cried fearfully.

"The prophecy smashed when I was trying to get Neville up the steps! What do you think Voldemort'll say about that, then?"

"LIAR!" she shrieked, but they could tell she was truly frightened. "YOU'VE GOT IT, POTTER, AND YOU WILL GIVE IT TO ME! *Accio prophecy! ACCIO PROPHECY!*"

Harry laughed again. He waved his empty hand from behind the one-eared goblin and withdrew it quickly as she sent another jet of green light flying at him.

"Nothing there!" he shouted. "Nothing to summon! It smashed and nobody heard what it said, tell your boss that!"

"No!" she screamed. "It isn't true, you're lying! MASTER, I TRIED, I TRIED - DO NOT PUNISH ME - "

"Don't waste your breath!" yelled Harry, and from their vantage point, Harry and Ginny saw a dark figure sweep into the Atrium. "He can't hear you from here!"

"Can't I, Potter?" said Voldemort.

"So, you smashed my prophecy?" said Voldemort softly. "No, Bella, he is not lying... I see the truth looking at me from within his worthless mind... months of preparation, months of effort... and my Death Eaters have let Harry Potter thwart me again ..."

"Master, I am sorry I knew not, I was fighting the Animagus Black!" sobbed Bellatrix, flinging herself down at Voldemort's feet as he paced slowly nearer. "Master, you should know..."

"Be quiet, Bella," said Voldemort dangerously. "I shall deal with you in a moment. Do you think I have entered the Ministry of Magic to hear your snivelling apologies?"

"But Master - he is here - he is below..."

Voldemort ignored her.

"I have nothing more to say to you, Potter," he said quietly. "You have irked me too often, for too long. *AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

Unconsciously, Harry was sure, Ginny had gripped his arm again and was squeezing it tight.

But her fears were not realised as the headless golden statue of the wizard in the fountain had leaped from its place and landed on the floor between Harry and Voldemort. The spell merely glanced off its chest.

"What - ?" cried Voldemort, looking for what had caused the statue to move. And then he breathed, "Dumbledore!"

And he was there; standing in front of the golden gates.

They duelled and Harry was again impressed with the speed and intelligence of it. Not once did they utter the incantation of a spell. Even now, Harry didn't think he could battle Voldemort like Dumbledore was doing now. And yet, he had been the one to defeat him, while Dumbledore had been killed by Snape and a potion.

They watched as they used stone, flame, and metal to attack and defend. Fawkes appeared and died for his master. Then Voldemort was entombed in water and seemed to flee.

"MASTER!" screamed Bellatrix.

Younger Harry made to leave, but was quelled by Dumbledore's, "Stay where you are, Harry!"

Then the memory Harry screamed so loudly that the real Harry and Ginny covered their ears. He was writhing on the floor in a way that told them the pain he was experiencing was infinitely worse than the torture curse.

"Kill me now, Dumbledore..." said Voldemort through Harry.

The older wizard didn't flinch.

"If death is nothing, Dumbledore, kill the boy..."

Then the Harry on the floor was released and slumped into a relaxed heap.

Dumbledore moved to him and the memory faded.

Back in Ginny's bedroom, Harry eyed his fiancée warily. She moved to look out her window at the moonlit orchard. He wondered what she was thinking. What would she think of his using an Unforgiveable? Would she feel as he had, upset and devastated?

After a few minutes of silence, she spoke.

"What did you want me to see in that memory?" she asked. "Was it Tom or Bellatrix?"

"Bellatrix," he answered.

She was quiet again and Harry's heart seemed to swell with anxiety.

"Why did Tom stop possessing you?" Her voice was soft and contemplative. It gave him reason to hope.

"It was when I thought about Sirius."

"Hm," she said and turned around. "And what about Sirius were you thinking?"

He reached back into the memory. "I guess... Well, I was thinking that if I had to die, at least I would be with him."

Her face froze, and then her eyes shone. "Then I stand by what I said earlier. You *are* good. If you weren't good, you wouldn't have had trouble cursing that woman." Then in an undertone she added, "Merlin knows she deserved it." Then louder, "And being good was precisely why Voldemort couldn't stand to be inside you for very long."

There was a muffled hoot from the trees outside and a cloud slipped past the moon. Harry swallowed. "You don't...? You're not...?"

She approached him and took his hand. "No, Harry, I don't, and I'm not."

"There's more, but it's too late to see the rest, so I'll just tell you."

He blew out a breath. "When we were hunting down the horcruxes, we broke into Gringott's and the Ministry." She nodded, remembering that he'd already told her part of that story. "I used the Imperious Curse on a goblin and a Death Eater."

"It was war, Harry," said Ginny reassuringly. "You did what you had to do."

"But I didn't like it," he protested. "I don't like that I used those curses so easily."

Ginny turned his head with her palm so that he was looking at her. "That's why I know you won't ever use them again and why I'm still planning on wearing my dress next week."

He stared at her in wonder and finally, after it dawned on him that she wasn't ever going to leave him, he said, "I can live with that."



## The Master of Life Martha Maybeck

### Chapter Five – Martha Maybeck

Three days before the wedding, Ginny bounded down the stairs and into the living room. Ron was tucked into a corner with the same copy of *Quidditch Monthly* he'd been holding onto for the past week. Hermione had several books and papers strewn on the floor in front of her. They both cast nervous looks at each other before recognizing Ginny's presence.

Ginny narrowed her eyes at them. "What's it going to take, *Ron*?" she said with emphasis and a significant look to Hermione so he got the point.

Ron just turned white and choked on whatever he was going to say.

She sat by Hermione. "What have you been up to?" she asked brightly, ignoring her brother, who was still fighting with the urge to both speak and stay quiet.

The older girl pushed a worn leather book toward the middle of the floor. "I'm getting ready for work at the Ministry. They have an orientation Wednesday afternoon and I want to be prepared."

"That looks fascinating," replied Ginny unconvincingly. "Either of you seen Harry?"

Ron cleared his throat a few times, but ended up pointing toward the kitchen.

"You might want to wait a tick," Hermione suggested knowingly. "He was flooing someone and I think it had to do with the wedding."

Her interest piqued, Ginny couldn't resist tiptoeing out of the living room.

Harry was indeed in the kitchen and he had his head in the fireplace. She decided to wait for him to make his floo call and sat on one of the kitchen chairs.

It was mid-morning and the breakfast dishes were cleaned and put away. Mum would have them out back working on the vegetable garden this afternoon if they lingered, so she was going to have to think of something for her and Harry to do for lunch outside the Burrow. With reporters stirred up about their impending nuptials, it was even more difficult to get anything done.

Looking at Harry bent over in the fireplace (who on earth could he be floo calling for so long?) reminded her that he needed a distraction, of which several promising possibilities came to mind. Ever since he had shown her his memories, she hadn't been able to shake off the feeling that he'd never feel good enough to deserve any happiness. It's what drove him to work hard for things, but it's also what sent his mood spiralling toward depression and anger. It was going to be Ginny's job as his wife to help him be normal, even if he didn't have the foggiest notion what being normal meant.

Harry finally pulled his head from the fire and it went out with a green flicker. "Sorry," he said when he noticed her at the table. His face was flushed. "Did you need to use the floo?" He folded a piece of parchment and nervously stuffed it into his back pocket.

She smirked at him. "No, but if you need to make another call, I don't mind watching your backside for you."

He smiled back and the red left his face. "Ha, ha."

Then it came to her. It was his handsome face, she decided, that tended to bring on fits of inspiration. The dreamy green eyes... "What are you up to for the next hour or so?" she asked.

He eyed her warily. "Nothing. Why?"

She stood and took him by the arm. "Because you and I are going to visit someone."

\*

It was still a month before she could take her Apparition test, but Ginny didn't want to risk Harry splinching them because he didn't how to get to their destination. So she gambled that the Ministry wouldn't be able to tell that she'd been the one to Apparate them to Westmeston

They appeared at the end of a lane, where four houses faced a small cul-de-sac.

"Where are we?" asked Harry as he tried to find a familiar landmark. "Who do I know out in the country?"

A woman appeared in the doorway of the nearest house carrying a three month-old baby. There was a flash of recognition on Harry's face. "Teddy?"

They followed the lane that led from the road and up the small stairs.

"Harry," said Andromeda graciously. "What a welcome surprise." She turned to Ginny. "I was just looking at your wedding invitation. Congratulations." She beamed at them and gestured with her free hand. "Please come in."

The entry gave way to a large sitting room filled with pictures and scenes from exotic locations. Warm sunlight spilled across a wooden floor with a large braided rug in the middle. The room was framed with comfortable leather sofas and chairs. On the opposite side of the windows, stood a handsome brick fireplace. Harry sucked in a breath. Above the mantle, two large portraits hung, one containing a familiar shock of bubblegum pink hair and in the other, the warm smile and bright brown eyes of her husband looked serenely down at them.

"I keep them here for Teddy, so he can know who his parents were," explained Andromeda, who put her grandson in a wooden cradle by one of the sofas. To Ginny's relief, they weren't enchanted paintings; she didn't know how Harry would have handled that. "I was just going to visit the market."

Ginny hesitated. "We can come back."

"Nonsense," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "But perhaps you can watch Teddy for me? He's a good baby and shouldn't need feeding until I return."

Harry caught her eye and smiled. "That'd be great," he said turning back to Andromeda.

"If you have any problems, floo 'The Enchanted Tomato'."

They nodded and watched her disappear with a small 'pop'. Ginny immediately rushed over to Teddy.

"He's so cute," she singsonged and scooped him up. "And so light. Harry," she said, offering him the baby. "Do you want to hold him?"

Harry stared at the infant in wonder. Ginny handed the small bundle over and looked at her future husband with unashamed happiness. He caught her eye and grinned.

"He's great," Harry said. "I'm his godfather."

Harry seemed to be stricken with happiness and it made Ginny smile wider. "You look good holding a baby," she said.

"Yeah?" he replied, offering Teddy back to her. "Let's see how you look."

She shook her head. "I want to savour this moment a little more. Besides, I'm not the godmother yet."

They settled into the sofa and watched Teddy's face as he slept. "Have you thought about having kids?" Ginny asked. Teddy made a sucking motion with his lips, as if dreaming of a bottle of warm milk.

She felt Harry's eyes on her as she pretended to tuck Teddy's blanket around his heart-shaped face.

"Ever since I can remember," he said softly.

She met his gaze. "Do you still want to have them?"

"Only with you."

Ginny couldn't help it. She leaned across and kissed him tenderly. Harry's hands were busy, so she did all the touching, but he didn't seem to mind. They broke apart when they heard the baby hiccough.

Looking down, they saw Remus' eyes staring at them.

"Poor thing," Ginny cooed and rubbed her fingers across a chubby cheek. "You'll be scarred for life watching your godfather snog like that." He smiled and began to squirm.

Harry chuckled and spoke to Teddy. "Yeah, but remember that it was your future godmother that attacked *me* with her lips."

"Hey," she said and smacked him lightly on the shoulder. "I couldn't help it."

She felt her face turn warm at the admission, but ploughed on. "You look right holding a baby."

Teddy squirmed some more and reached out a hand, grabbing a hold of Ginny's dangling hair.

"Ow," she said and prised his hand off. "You'll have to grow your own hair, Mr. Teddy. I need mine."

He giggled as she put her finger on his middle and wiggled it around.

Harry planted Teddy in her lap and stood. "You watch him for a minute. I'm going to go find his toys!"

She giggled along with Teddy as Harry strode off on his mission. By the time Harry returned, Ginny had him on his back on the braided rug. He was

trying to eat his toes but only managed to get one of the big ones in his mouth.

"Here," Harry said, kneeling down and dropping a load of brightly-coloured plastic shapes onto the floor. He dug through the pile and extracted a soft ring with keys on it. Teddy reached out his fist and took the ring, immediately shaking it in the air. His big toe was forgotten and the ring was shoved into his mouth instead, over-large keys splayed out over his face.

Ginny laughed again. "You're going to be a good dad, Harry."

He beamed at her and rummaged through the toys for the next one.

It was good to see Harry so happy, Ginny reflected. She knew Harry's happiness came from family or the approximation of one that had been given him when he first met Ron. She was about to start a new family with him and if she inherited anything besides her hair from her mother, then she was a baby factory in waiting. It was scary contemplating starting a family so young, but Ginny knew they were both mature enough to handle the responsibility. The only variable was timing.

Harry had other needs, too. He was fiercely dedicated to his friends and to fighting evil. It was somewhat of a shock to her that he wasn't going to go straight into the Auror Academy from Hogwarts like he'd planned. Still, with the pressure of reporters and stalking wizards aiming for a crack at the most powerful wand in history, she could understand his hesitancy to be in such a publicly visible role. Ginny knew that his greatest weakness was his lack of self confidence, especially when it came to relationships and this reflected in big changes in his life. She would just have to help him along.

"You know," Ginny said. "I think you should take some time tomorrow... for yourself."

"Huh?" said Harry, clearly confused by the change in the conversation.

"It's just..." She bit her lip. "We've been so focused on wedding things lately and you seem so relaxed with Teddy... I just think a day off would do you some good."

Harry sat, leaving Teddy to shake the keys some more. "I can't just leave you to do everything by yourself..."

"Harry," said Ginny firmly. "I can handle Mum, and whatever she's going to throw at us tonight." She moved onto the floor and leaned into him. "I'll be fine. You need this."

He looked down and fingered the stuffed dragon he had chosen as Teddy's next toy. "I have wanted to do some more spell practice at the Auror's casting range..."

"Then you should do it," she said with a note of finality.

Andromeda returned just as Teddy began to get tired again and whisked him away for a nappy change. Harry returned the toys and they said their goodbyes.

"We'll write to you while we're on our Honeymoon," promised Harry.

"I look forward to it. Please come back and see Teddy whenever you can."

"We will," Ginny said and Apparated them back to The Burrow.

\*

The Auror Headquarters was housed in a sprawling facility located within the second floor of the Ministry. It was one of three parts of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and boasted its own canteen, communications division, and even had a laundry. The most popular part of the Headquarters for Britain's Dark Wizard catchers, however, was the casting range.

The head of the D.M.L.E., and former temporary Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt ran a tight ship which inspired confidence and allowed him to stay clear of most high-level interference from the Ministry. It also provided him the opportunity to give Harry some much needed time to continue his magical education and, in Harry's opinion, to try to convince him to join the Aurors.

"Back for more wand work, Harry?" asked Kingsley as he signed a form and sent it to a tottering pile on the corner of his desk.

"If that's still okay," replied Harry. "I wanted to work on my nonverbal spells."

Kingsley tapped his wand on a small pad in the middle of the desk. "How about I train with you today?"

Harry started. He knew the ministry was still reeling from Crackshot's reforms and the D.M.L.E. was waist-deep in investigating and prosecuting criminals from the war. "Uh... sure. If you're not too busy."

The bald wizard smiled and stood. "I just cleared my schedule for an hour. Even the crusty old head of the department has to get some time in at the range every month and I've been wanting to see your abilities first hand."

"I'm nothing special," Harry said, watching Kingsley curiously.

"Let's see if you're right."

The casting range was at the end of a tunnel that ran from the Auror Headquarters down and to the right of the Ministry proper. It was insulated from every other office by at least five hundred feet of solid rock. Upon entering through a check desk, the tunnel opened up into a wide area illuminated by an artificial ceiling enchanted in a similar way as the Great Hall at Hogwarts. Currently, it was mimicking a sunny day with high, thin clouds.

In the middle of the range, sat three large fields. On each field, Harry could see groups of Aurors or trainee Aurors being drilled on obstacle courses or in mock combat. Along the sides were various-sized rooms for individual or small group training. It was to one of these that Kingsley led Harry.

The room was one of the small group training rooms, styled after a Japanese dojo. A padded floor dominated the interior, with square wooden pillars supporting a high panelled roof. Rice paper windows filtered only a little light, but obscured anyone from seeing inside.

They changed into thin, cotton training robes and met in the middle of the dojo.

"Instead of working on nonverbal spells, how about we try something different today?" asked Kingsley.

"Sure," replied Harry, still uncertain about the man's motivations. "I'm always up for something new."

"Good," he said with a wide smile. "What I want you to do is to think outside the normal, Hogwarts-style of duelling. As you know, fighting Dark Wizards means fighting the unexpected and the use of the Unforgivables. Since you can't block those curses or other, just as foul spells, Aurors need to be able to... be creative."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "What exactly do you mean by 'creative'?"

"Well, if I were to cast a Killing Curse at you right now, what would you do?"

"Stun you or dodge or something," Harry replied.

Kingsley nodded. "Exactly. But if you are fighting two or more wizards, it gets a little more complicated because they'll be working together and it won't take long before you dodge into another spell."

Harry was beginning to understand. He'd bested six wizards the other day with the help of Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, but he'd also used raw firepower from two wands and they hadn't bothered with any of the Unforgiveables. And if he'd been alone... "So by being creative, you think I'll stand a better chance against multiple attackers?"

Kingsley nodded again. "I understand that you had a certain penchant for rule-breaking at school. I want you to apply that to the rules of duelling. Some rules can be bent, others... can be broken."

"All right."

They faced off on opposite sides of the dojo. Harry left the Elder Wand in his regular robes and wondered idly if losing in a sparring match would transfer its allegiance to his opponent. He somehow doubted that.

"Begin!" Kingsley yelled and began to shoot spells rapid-fire.

At first, Harry ducked and dodged as he normally would, but Kingsley was very fast and would anticipate his manoeuvring with a second or sometimes third spell. Harry was lucky the first few times and was able to get a shield spell up before being jinxed. Then he started to counterattack.

Harry had good natural speed from his Quidditch experience and his many brushes with life-and-death situations. He also had the innate ability to make split-second decisions. With all of that on his side, Kingsley was still the better opponent and Harry found himself flying backwards and skidding to a stop on the rough padding of the floor.

"You need to open your mind," Kingsley explained as Harry stood to face him again. "Stop thinking about the way a duel normally operates. It's not always about offensive spells and shields or dodging. Use your magic in new ways that give you an advantage over your opponent. Use the environment against them. Anything can be a weapon; anything can help you in a fight."

Harry considered this and looked at the wood and paper of the dojo, wondering how in the world he would be able to use that to his advantage. "Okay." Then he had a crazy thought.

"Again."

Harry pointed his wand slightly downward, toward the floor between himself and Kingsley. When the older man began his attack, Harry shot a light Banishing Hex and was forced backwards. He twisted in midair and performed a stronger version of the same spell on one of the wood posts that lined the walls of the dojo and was propelled forward toward Kingsley. He shot hex after hex at Kingsley as he flew toward him, forcing the bald wizard to dive out of the way and landed with a roll that launched Harry unsteadily back onto his feet.

"*Stupefy!*" yelled Kingsley and Harry realised he was facing the wrong way.

Trying to think outside the box, Harry Apparated to a spot behind the pillar he'd just banished himself from. He turned and shot a Reductor Curse at the side of the pillar and sent a thousand splinters of wood at Kingsley's back with another Banishing Hex.

Surprised, the Auror was forced to dodge again, but came up firing three hexes in quick succession. Harry flattened himself to the ground and covered his head as the pillar exploded, showering bits of wood everywhere and puncturing the paper windows.

“Good!” Kingsley said, straightening up. “Adaption is your weakness,” he said with a wave of his finger, “is not your technique.”

Harry caught his breath and stood, nodding before resuming his attack.

Everything was fair game as Harry opened his mind to different possibilities. Kingsley began to use more advanced techniques as Harry’s improvisation increased. Soon, there were transfigured bits of wood, and conjured but dented bits of metal littering the dojo. Smoking holes in the floor and ceiling and missing chunks of wall bore testament to the fact that each was apt at avoiding attacks in new and interesting ways.

Harry lunged himself sideways to avoid a carefully aimed Stinging Hex and yelped as it caught his foot. Ignoring the pain, he pulled a paper window from the wall with a swift “*Accio!*” and as it flew toward him, transfigured it into a block of solid stone and banished it toward Kingsley.

The stone exploded in a shower of rock and dust and Harry used the visual distraction to Disillusion himself and mend the sting.

There was a sucking noise and the dust was siphoned into Kingsley’s wand. Harry banished a nearby dented, metal shield toward him and knowing that it would be deflected, sent a series of Stunning Spells after it. Kingsley blocked every one and hit Harry with a *Finite Incantatum*, which dropped the Disillusionment Charm.

“Stop trying to curse me and curse me!” he yelled.

Harry grunted and gave up all pretence. Spells were shot with snakelike speed, each man hexing and deflecting even as they spiralled closer to one another. Harry dully noticed that as he concentrated on the fight, he verbalized less and less spells, making them even faster. The air was buzzing and rippling with magic and the walls of the dojo continued to fly into splinters and puffs of fiery smoke. Harry’s hair tingled when a Stunning Spell shot over his head and he could smell that it had been singed. Kingsley’s earring was blasted off with one of three different hexes that Harry could not identify even though he’d been the one to cast each of them.

Kingsley bent low and swept his wand in a wide arc that caused Harry to jump and he did a mid-air cartwheel. The older wizard punched the air along the arc as he flew with more hexes that Harry knocked down with his wand.

Then Harry used the first nonverbal spell he learned. Flicking his wand over his head, Kingsley shot into the air as if suspended from his ankle by an invisible hand.

“*Expelliarmus!*” bellowed Kingsley and Harry rebounded it with a strong “*Protego!*” but dropped Kingsley in the process.

Harry pounced on him as he fell, yelling “*Stupefy!*” The red beam of light struck him before he hit the ground and the head of the D. M. L. E. lay silent on the floor. Taking deep breaths, Harry took the Auror’s wand and then revived him.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” said Harry as he examined the slim strip of willow. “You want me to be an Auror.”

Kingsley stood and brushed off his robes, wincing slightly as he extended his hand. “I’m trying to get you to free your mind.” Harry handed his wand back. “We need a lot of help in to get the Ministry back on track, and you would be very valuable in that effort, but it won’t do anyone any good if you join the Aurors unwillingly.”

Harry imagined what it would be like to be a part of a department that was headed by Kingsley. It would be hard, dangerous work but that was nothing new to Harry. Thinking of Ginny and their impending marriage, Harry shook his head. “I’ll tell you what,” he said, smoothing his hair back. “Let me talk to Ginny on our honeymoon. If she agrees, then when we get back, I’ll put in my application.”

“How long with that be?”

Harry smiled, thinking how nice it was going to be to escape from the unwelcomed limelight of fame. “Dunno. It depends on the weather.”

\*

While Harry was meeting Kingsley at the Ministry, Ginny was eating lunch with Ron and Hermione. George was there during a break from getting the shop ready for a grand re-opening.

“It’ll be open the week before book lists go out,” George said, nicking a crisp from Ron’s plate.

“Watch it,” said Ron and swiped at his brother’s hand but he was too quick.

George grinned. “You should come work for me,” he said and popped the crisp in his mouth. “I’ll be the mastermind and you can be in charge of sales.”

Ron seemed to consider this and when Hermione opened her mouth to speak, Ginny cut her off. “That’s a great idea. Ron’s been itching for something to do.”

“I have?” he asked sceptically. “Since when?”

George slapped him on the back and stood. “It doesn’t matter if you’ve secretly been harbouring a love for sailing the seven seas with your teddy bear... Careful!”

Ron took a half-hearted swing at his brother, but missed when George hopped back a step. Ginny could see the wheels turning in his mind and he stared at Hermione for a long second. “Yeah, all right.”

George smiled. "Well that's settled, then. I'm going to break the news to Verity. She's been angling for the position, but she's better suited for other tasks."

"When can I start?"

"I need to make a trip to one of our suppliers tomorrow. Fancy going to Bristol?"

Ron grinned and George *pop* ped back to Diagon Alley.

"Excellent," he said and finished his sandwich with a flourish.

"I'm so happy for you," said Hermione and Ginny got the impression that she wasn't quite sincere. "You'll be great for George."

Ron banished the plates to the sink. "He looked happy enough."

"You probably helped that," said Ginny knowingly. "He's still sad about Fred – probably will be for the rest of his life."

There was a pause as Fred's memory washed through them. "Yeah," replied Ron. "I reckon if I'd been as close to Fred as George was, I might not ever get over it."

The girls nodded, feeling sombre and there was a knock at the door.

Molly bustled into the kitchen. "Ginny, Hermione, that'll be Cousin Martha. Be a love and help her inside. Ron, you fetch her bags and show her to Bill's room."

Ginny had forgotten, but was secretly glad because with family here, her mum wouldn't ask her to weed the garden in the hot July sun.

The witch at the door was Aunt Muriel's cousin from Warrington, Martha Maybeck. Ginny recognized her name through the years as one of the people her mum often wrote letters to. She couldn't remember meeting her, but on the mantle in the living room, there was a picture of their family with Martha from when Ginny was a baby.

Along with the rest of the Weasley and Prewitt family, Martha had been invited to the wedding, but was one of the few that had asked to sleep over at the Burrow the night before. Since she had a hard time travelling by floo and hated Apparating, she'd arrived early by Knight Bus.

"Thank you, Ronald," Martha said when he'd taken her bag and heaved it upstairs. She looked to be the same age as Professor McGonagall but was a head shorter and wore her long grey hair in a French braid along her back. "Molly," she said and shuffled inside. They gave each other a quick embrace. "It's been too long."

"Yes it has," Molly replied. "With the war and all..." She left the rest unspoken but Ginny could tell by the look in Martha's eye that she understood.

Martha turned to Hermione. "And who is this?"

"I'm Hermione Granger," she replied and held out her hand, which Martha took with both of hers.

"Ah yes. I remember from the *Prophet*." She pressed her lips together. "They say you fancy Ronald." Hermione blushed. "I wonder if you're as bright as you look."

Molly huffed and Hermione began to giggle. Ginny decided she was going to like Martha quite a lot.

She turned to look at Ginny. "Hello, Ginevra," she said slowly, staring at her up and down appraisingly. Ginny felt suddenly underdressed in her Weird Sisters t-shirt and ripped jeans.

"It's just Ginny," she replied and like Hermione, held out a hand.

Martha took it and gave a solid squeeze, then pulled her into a hug. Ginny was surprised by the gesture, as she didn't really know her. "I've changed your nappies a time or two," she said as if reading her mind. "There was one particular time, when Molly and Arthur visited Ireland for their anniversary..."

Ron thundered down the stairs. "Wasn't that the time when Fred turned Percy into a rat?"

Martha smiled. "Yes it was. He never wanted to me to bring my cat Raspberry back after that."

Now it was Ginny's turn to giggle.

"I'm famished," Martha declared. "You wouldn't happen to have tea ready, would you?"

It was just past two, but Molly never turned down a chance to feed someone. "It'll be ready in a trice. Come into the kitchen and we can catch up."

They demolished a plate of cucumber sandwiches and two pots of tea while Martha and Molly caught up. Ginny began to feel more and more comfortable with her as the afternoon wore on.

"So tell me, Ginny," Martha said while Molly banished the tea service to the kitchen and set it to wash. "I understand you're heading out of the country for your honeymoon."

She seemed very well informed, thought Ginny, but then she remembered that her mother had been sending weekly letters to Martha for almost twenty years. "Yes," she replied. "We're going to Canada."

Martha smiled reminiscently. "I used to live in Canada. Do you mind me asking which part?"

Ginny looked warily at her mother and brother. "I... er..."

"Don't be shy, dear. I'm sure your family will keep it to themselves." Martha turned to each person in the room and they responded with a nod. "There, you see?"

"Victoria," she admitted after some deliberation.

"Ah," Martha said knowingly. "That's the spot, isn't it?"

Ginny didn't know, having never been there, but she nodded all the same.

"It's the most beautiful city in the world, if you ask me, and I've been to quite a few of them."

"Martha used to work for the Ministry in the Department of International Magical Cooperation," Molly informed them. "She was an ambassador."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Martha. "That's all very boring to young folks like these, however."

"I think it's fascinating," said Hermione. "What countries did you visit?"

Martha chuckled. "Almost all of them at one time or another. I started out in the Far East, in Hong Kong, the seat of the British Wizarding Consulate to Asia. From there, I went to Sao Paulo, then Cairo, and finally, to Victoria. Each of those cities hosts a Consulate to their respective areas and the witches and wizards are assigned to work with the different Magical Governments there."

Hermione was growing more and more interested and Ginny could see her hand twitching for a quill and piece of parchment. "How come they don't teach this at school?" she lamented.

"Probably too boring," offered Martha.

"Nothing's more boring than Binns," said Ron and they all laughed.

"Back to Victoria," said Martha. "When you get there, you'll have to visit the Butchart Gardens."

"I've read about those!" said Hermione unsurprisingly. "They're supposed to be enchanted."

"Indeed they are, and by none other than Thomas McCafferty, the head gardener for more than forty years." There was a wistful note in her voice and Ginny knew that there was a story there.

"Who's that?" asked a confused Ron. Ginny was glad, because she wanted to know as well.

Martha fiddled with her handbag and pulled out a photo. "He is one of my best friends." She passed the photo to Ginny. It was a colour photo, but it had been dimmed a little at the edges by time. The witch in the picture was young and beautiful, had long black hair and crystal blue eyes. The man beside her was a head taller, thin-framed, and wore a ridiculous-looking moustache. They were embracing beneath a large, painted wooden structure that reminded Ginny of the orient.

"This was taken in 1937," explained Martha. "Just before I left to come back to England – before Grindelwald began his campaign in earnest."

There was a shudder that ran between the two older witches. "That was the last time I saw Thomas."

"So how do you know he's still the head gardener?" queried Ginny.

"Oh, we still trade owls from time to time. He's getting along in years, just like me, but his wand is still sharp and the flowers are as beautiful as ever."

"Why didn't you go back, after..." asked Hermione, again voicing the exact question Ginny wanted an answer to.

"After Grindelwald was defeated?" asked Martha in return. "Well, that's a long story that I won't bore you with right now. Suffice it to say, it wasn't meant to be." She took the photo back from Ginny and placed it carefully into her purse. She couldn't be certain, but Ginny was almost positive she saw a mist of wetness in her cousin's eyes.

The clock struck three. "I'd better get dinner on," said Ginny. "Harry'll be back soon, and he's always hungry after a couple of hours with Kingsley."

Martha and Molly retired to the living room to continue their visit and Ron and Hermione stole out to the garden, leaving Ginny to herself while she prepared dinner.

It was strange to Ginny that Martha wouldn't go back to Thomas after the war. They definitely looked like more than friends in that photo, and Ginny knew as much as anyone what it felt like to be separated from love during a war. There was a story there and she felt strangely compelled to find out what it was.

She kneaded the dough by hand, mentally calculating the days before her seventeenth birthday when she could use her magic more openly. Then

she remembered that when she was married, in two short days, she would be considered of age anyway. Setting the dough on the counter, she brushed off her hands and went into the cold pantry to find some meat and vegetables. As she passed the family clock, she noticed a pile of papers stacked on the small table underneath. The top one had the familiar banner of Madam Malkin's Robe Shop emblazoned along the head and she stopped. Her eyes glanced down to the bottom of the paper and she gasped.

Picking up the stack, she rifled through the bills and her eyes grew wider with each one. Between the caterers, the band, the robes, and half a dozen other things, her parents were paying over two thousand Galleons for her wedding. Arthur was still out of work, which meant there was no income. How were they able to afford it all?

Narrowing her eyes, Ginny knew that she would have to make sure her wedding didn't cost her parents a single knut. There was only one way that was going to happen, and if she knew her husband-to-be, he would agree in a heartbeat.



## The Master of Life All Is White

### Chapter Six – All is White

With Harry's approval, Ginny wrote to Gringott's that evening and the money was transferred to the various bill collectors the next day. Harry had agreed whole-heartedly that they shouldn't inconvenience their parents when things were so tight financially. Now Ginny just needed her mum to fail to notice that her bills were paid before they left for Canada and the only repercussions would be a howler. Exploding letters were easier to handle than exploding mothers.

The morning of the wedding was busy for everyone. Harry packed at his flat, while Ginny sat in her room, knowing that it was the last time she'd see it as a single witch. Everything was changing, and it was happening a lot faster than she'd anticipated. Her eyes roamed over the vanity, over the ribbons hanging from the finials, the Weird Sisters posters, the photos of her, Hermione, and Luna at Hogwarts pinched into the mirror's frame – all the memories of a life that was ending in the wake of a new life about to begin.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Ginny wistfully.

Hermione entered, stepped over a pile of clothes in the middle of the floor, and sat carefully on her bed.

"You're here early," said Ginny as she moved to the padded chair in front of the vanity and began to brush out the tangles in her hair.

"Couldn't sleep," she admitted. "I'll be in Australia by the end of the day and tomorrow, with any luck, my parents will know who I am."

Ginny paused and looked at her friend through the mirror, who was staring at the floor. "Are you still going to ask Ron to stay behind?"

Hermione twisted a lock of hair in her fingers. "Yes. Besides, he has his job to think about."

Ginny continued brushing, wondering why her brother was being such a prat about Hermione. He'd been so much better since they'd been hunting for Horcruxes, but now he was being ridiculous.

"He'll come around eventually."

With a sigh, Hermione flopped back on the rumpled bedcovers. "Will he?" she asked. "How long *is* 'eventually' anyway?"

Ginny couldn't help the giggle that escaped her lips. "Who are you asking that to?" Then her smile relaxed. Something about the way Hermione was avoiding her eyes made Ginny wary.

Hermione giggled too, but it sounded different, almost giddy. "I guess you're right. We've both been hopeless with our love lives haven't we?"

"Quite hopeless," Ginny agreed, wanting to prod Hermione for information. "But look at where all that pining got me." She pointed to the open closet door and the bright white dress that dangled brightly from its hanger. "Mum was right; it's perfect."

Hermione rolled off the bed, still not glancing at Ginny and stood in front of the dress. "I wasn't sure at first, but you really fill it out nicely. Harry's going to go into shock when he sees you in it. It must be something about brides-to-be, because you were absolutely radiant when you tried it on."

Smiling at the thought of a drooling, barely coherent Harry, Ginny finished brushing her hair and called Hermione over to the vanity. "Pull out your wand, Hermione and work some magic on my hair. I want to be radiant all day long and while you're at it, you can tell me what's *really* going on with you and my brother."

Hermione seemed speechless and she finally met Ginny's gaze. It was all there in her watery eyes, and Ginny knew why she'd been reticent about telling her.

They spent the next hour being silly and girly, and the tension of impending marriage seemed to lessen. Even the shock of Hermione's news only seemed to add to her excitement. It was going to be a glorious day.

\*

Harry sat with his back to the wall of his room, staring at a large pile of random things in the middle of the floor. Like his fiancée, Harry was packing for his last day in England for who knew how long. Harry wasn't as excited about the process as he was about the result. It was just like leaving Number Four, he realised, but the feelings twisting inside of him were different – there was more anticipation and less of a pinch on his heart. He just didn't believe he'd had so much *stuff*.

His feet dangling off the side of his bed, Harry visually inspected the pile. Old textbooks, dirty trainers, bits of broken quills and ripped parchment, robes that were three sizes too small, and a pile of holey socks. With a distant ache, he wondered if Dobby would have wanted them.

Shaking himself out of his reverie, he banged open his mostly-empty trunk, vanished the trash left inside and began to magic everything into it. He was leaving it all here, he decided. All his books, crumpled essays, clothes, everything. He was going to leave The Burrow with only the clothes on his back, and the wands in his pocket. They would just have to go shopping in Victoria when they portkeyed to the place Harry had prepared for them. With a smirk of satisfaction at planning at least the first couple of nights of their honeymoon, Harry finished tidying his room.

Ron poked his head in the door. "You got a minute?"

"Sure. Just packing," replied Harry, vanishing another pile of trash that was hiding in the closet.

"I was just wondering," he said, pulling his hand across the back of his neck. "Do you think that maybe you and Ginny... might be going a little fast?"

Harry stopped just as he was about to levitate his trunk into the freshly clean closet. "Why do you say that?" he asked.

Ron held his hands up between them. "I'm not trying to say it's wrong. I was just thinking about me and Hermione and I don't know if we're ready...."

Harry sat on his bed again. "That's a bunch of rubbish. The way I see it, this is the first time in my whole life that I get to make my own decision about something. There's nothing forcing me to marry Ginny, and nothing that says I have to wait. It's *my* decision and that's pretty refreshing."

Ron hesitated. "Don't take this the wrong way, because I want you to marry Ginny, but... why her?"

Harry smiled. "You tell me something, Ron. When you look at your life in ten years, who do you see wearing your wedding ring and answering to Mrs. Ronald Bilius Weasley?"

Now it was Ron's turn to smile. "That's obvious."

"Of course it is," said Harry. "For me, it's Ginny. So if we're going to get married anyway, then what's the point in waiting? I'm of age and for whatever mental reason, she wants to marry me, so why not now?"

Ron seemed to consider this. "Yeah," he said after a moment. "Yeah, I reckon you're right." He turned and slowly walked out the door, muttering to himself until the *crack* of Apparition told Harry that he'd left.

Satisfied, Harry stood and sent the bulging trunk to the closet with the flick of his wand. He followed Ron out the door and as he began to close it, he turned back to look at the room one more time. It hadn't been his room for very long, but it was a powerful feeling to know that after today, he wouldn't ever be alone again. After today, he was going to be a new man.

Facing forward again, Harry slowly pulled on the knob until he heard the click of the latch. Then, he walked away.

\*

At one o'clock that afternoon, the Wedding party had a quick lunch of sliced meats and cheeses, with some pumpkin juice to wash it down before they separated to their appointed duties. Arthur and Molly were responsible for overseeing the guests and the food respectively. Arthur marshalled Bill, Charlie, George, Percy, and Lee Jordan as ushers to conduct guests to their seats much as Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred and George had done at Bill's wedding the year before. Even though the actual date of the wedding had been kept vague to the public, they were under strict orders to allow invitees only.

Molly visited with the head caterer to make sure they didn't need anything extra. As Harry and Ginny headed inside to change she caught her mother staring at her in askance, having paused in the middle of her conversation with the caterers. With a pained expression, Ginny murmured to Harry, "We'll be getting an earful from her at the reception."

"Don't worry about it," said Harry and turned her chin with his finger. "I can't wait to see you later." He felt something heavy settle in his stomach and gave her a quick kiss before she was pulled along to her room by an anxious Hermione.

Inside Ron's bedroom, Harry shoved a finger into the collar of his robes, feeling claustrophobic. "Do I have to go out there now? Can't I wait until the music starts like Ginny?"

Ron gave him a lopsided grin. "Nervous?"

"A little," Harry conceded, brushing his hands needlessly down the front of his new robes. Maybe it was his nerves, but something about Ron was different. It was if the old, self-assured Ron was back and Harry was glad. "Why do I have to mingle anyway? Isn't that what the reception is for?"

"It's etiquette or something stupid like that," Ron answered. "You're supposed to greet the 'important' guests. Mum's got this wedding stuff nailed down, Harry. I wouldn't cross her."

"No," Harry agreed, "I wouldn't cross your mother, either." He frowned at his hair one last time and turned around, making sure he had the ball-point pen that was his Portkey to Victoria. "Let's get this over with, then."

\*

The sun seemed hotter than it had been an hour ago, when Harry had left to change. The same white tent stood over rows of golden chairs, but the poles were covered in green and gold streamers tied in bows at the tops in place of the flowers. The carpet was red, instead of purple, and the

balloons over the small platform where they would be married were slightly transparent and filled with confetti.

"Oi, Harry!" It was Neville. Harry and Ron walked over to where he was chatting with three familiar faces. Harry made a point to stand so he could see who was Apparating into the arrival area.

"Hey, Neville," said Harry, scanning the people that had already arrived. Hagrid was at the hors d'oeuvre table eating an entire platter and Andromeda was holding Teddy, chatting with a witch Harry didn't recognize. "Glad you could make it. Was your Gran able to come?"

He pointed to a knot of witches on the other side of the tent, among whom was his grandmother, Molly's cousin Martha, and Professor McGonagall.

"Hiya, Harry," said Seamus who was holding a sweating bottle of butterbeer. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." Harry and Seamus had been at odds in the past over Voldemort, but all was forgotten in light of the end of the war. Harry noticed that his other hand was entwined with Lavender Brown's.

Ron shuffled nervously next to him. "Hi Lavender," said Harry. "Good to see you."

"Thanks, Harry," she said, sneaking a look at Ron. "You look great."

Harry didn't know what to say and felt his smile freeze on his face.

"Go on and tell him," said Dean from the other side of Lavender.

Seamus grinned. "I thought I'd be the first, but you beat me to it."

Harry's smile dimmed a bit. "I don't understand...."

"I proposed to Lavender outside the Great Hall right after you killed You-Know-Who." He beamed. "We're going to have a spring wedding next year."

"Congratulations," offered Harry and Ron seemed to relax beside him. "That's wonderful. You'll make a great couple."

"I think so," said Lavender as she rubbed Seamus' shoulder.

Seamus leaned in a little to Harry and with a conspiratorial whisper, said, "Let me know how it goes today... If you need any pointers..."

Harry's face went beet red. "No!" he shouted and everyone began to laugh. Dean pulled a Galleon out of his pocket and slapped it into Seamus' waiting hand.

"Good one!" said Neville, and Harry's embarrassment faded.

More and more people were arriving. Weasley relatives that Harry couldn't put a name to, but recognized from Bill's wedding were ushered to their seats. More of Ginny and Harry's Hogwarts classmates appeared, some on the arms of their parents since, like Ginny, they were still underage. One of them was Luna and her father, Xenophilius.

Harry walked over to greet her. "Hi, Luna."

"You look much better than your picture in the paper," she observed.

"Er, thanks," replied Harry. He turned to Luna's father, who was scanning the crowd. An odd combination of thoughts went through Harry's mind. On the one hand, Luna's father had tried to turn Harry, Ron, and Hermione into the Death Eaters. On the other hand, he was only trying to protect his daughter. "How are you, Mr. Lovegood?"

The older man seemed to only notice Harry's presence just then. "Ah, Harry Potter," he said with wide, slightly crossed eyes. Harry couldn't figure out which one to look at. "I'm so very glad to meet you again. Perhaps if the chance presents itself, we can have a chat later?"

"Sure," said Harry, who wasn't the slightest bit anxious to visit with him. If what the *Prophet* reported about his continued interest in the Deathly Hallows was correct, Harry would have to be careful about anything he said to him.

A car arrived, sending dust into the air by the front of the Burrow. At first, Harry didn't know who would come by Muggle transportation when he suddenly remembered who he had sent invitations to. It was a spur of the moment decision, thinking that they wouldn't come anyway, but wanting to extend the offer nonetheless.

Two figures descended the walk from The Burrow and onto the grass of the paddock. One was a very round man with blonde hair and the beginnings of a moustache. The other was a woman, shockingly thin, but just as tall as her companion.

"Is that...?" said Ron, just now seeing the new arrivals.

Harry took a step forward. "Dudley?"

The seventeen-year-old extended a hand. "Congrats, Harry."

Hardly able to reconcile the disparity of seeing Dudley at the Weasley's house, Harry gaped like a goldfish. "You came!"

Mum didn't want me to," he admitted without reference to Harry's continued incredulosity. Harry finally took the offered hand. "But I reckoned if you were getting married, then the Voldie-thingy was dead and... well, I just wanted to see you one more time."

Harry scratched his head, wondering if things could get any stranger. "Thanks."

Dudley motioned to the girl beside him. "This is my girlfriend, Veronica."

"Hi," she said with a little curtsy.

"Er," said Harry when he saw several platters of food floating behind Dudley directed by one of the waiters. "Does she know about...?" asked Harry quickly, deliberating about using the 'M' word.

"Yeah, I told her," explained Dudley. "She thought I was mental, but..."

"Yeah," repeated Harry. "It's great that you're here. I mean it," he added for emphasis to try to make up for his less than enthusiastic welcome. "Things are different in Wizarding weddings." He stole a glance at Veronica. "You may see some things that are a little... unusual."

"There you are, Harry, dear," said Molly, who had come from the house in a bustle. "It's time for you to head to the front of the tent. Arthur's just gone to fetch Ginny."

Harry felt a rush of adrenaline dump into his veins as the reality of what was about to take place just seemed to occur to him. Everyone else seemed to dim out of his vision. "Okay," he said as calmly as he could manage and began to move slowly to the opening of the tent. "See you later," he called back to Dudley with a half-wave, who was then escorted with Veronica to their seats.

Molly bustled off to give more instructions to the band and they started to unpack their instruments. Harry walked into the tent, Ron at his side.

The red-carpeted aisle was lined with flowers and there were several witches and wizards chatting across it to each other. When Harry and Ron walked between them, they quieted. The guests stood up, waiting for the bride along with the groom and his best man and the silence was oppressive. The tufty-haired wizard was there, eyeing Harry with a practiced smile on his face. A large, heavy bee buzzed under the canopy and landed on one of the balloons. Then, the music began to play.

Everyone turned their heads to see Arthur and Ginny walking up the aisle. Enchanted faeries held her train aloft as Hermione and Luna walked slightly behind and to the side. Each girl was carrying a small bouquet of white roses. They were halfway up the aisle, the strains of music growing louder, when Harry looked into Ginny's wide, teary eyes.

"Hi," she said breathlessly, as if she had never walked so far in her life.

"Hi," he repeated, unable to think of anything more articulate in the face of such beauty.

Arthur released his daughter and stepped to the side next to Ron. There was a rustling of robes as the guests took their seats.

The wizard officiating the ceremony gestured for them to kneel at the altar. Harry took the left side and Ginny the right, so that they were staring at each other, gently holding hands across the lace covered fabric. Mirrors popped behind their heads, and as Harry continued to stare at Ginny, he saw reflections of the mirror behind his own head repeated on into infinity. It was like staring into the future – into eternity and it was Ginny's face he saw in its depths.

"Do you, Harry James, take Ginevra Molly...?"

Harry said 'yes' when he was supposed to and heard Ginny's reply when she was asked the same question, but he never took his eyes off her. She stared back in a way that made the happiness in Harry expand so much he thought he would burst with the fullness of it. He barely heard the rest of the vows, thinking that there would be plenty of time later to view it in his pensieve.

"...then I now pronounce you bonded for life and all eternity."

There was a rush of magic and golden stars swirled around them, descending until they rested on their heads in a crown and then melted away.

The mirrors disappeared and Ron let out a 'whoop', leading the applause with Hermione, Molly, and Arthur. The balloons burst with muted *pops* and scattered magical confetti that floated silver and pearls out into the air, surrounding them so that everything seemed to glitter and twinkle.

"Ladies, and Gentlemen," said the officiator. "Please rise for Mr. and Mrs. Harry Potter!"

There was a groan of chairs and with the wave of a wand, the chairs vanished, appearing, Harry knew, outside the tent where waiters were already poised to serve dinner. The tent was opened and a fresh, late afternoon breeze rolled inside and across the now cleared dance floor.

Harry and Ginny stood and he took his new wife by the hand into the middle of the crowd. "I'm a terrible dancer," he whispered as they embraced. The band, situated where the entrance to the tent used to be began to play a waltz.

"Just hold me, Harry, and move to the music. No one cares if you can dance."

So he did. Soon, everyone else began to dance and Harry was pleased to see Hermione and Ron twirling around together around one of the silver posts. He never wanted to let Ginny go.

Hours later, after everyone had eaten dinner, and Harry and Ginny had hugged and chatted with everyone that wished them well on their marriage, they were seated under a canopy of stars, the Wizarding band playing light classical music in the background. Arthur stood at the centre table and tapped a fork to his glass, signalling the noisy hum of conversation to ebb.

"Ahem," he said with a significant nod to Ron and Hermione, who were having a heated conversation that now carried across the paddock. They bustled to the table and sat without another word, though Harry thought Hermione would like to have a few more with Ron. "I'd like to propose a toast to my new son-in-law, and my daughter." He raised a glass of red, elf-made wine. "To Harry and Ginny Potter. May they have many happy years of marriage together."

"And have a great many children!" said a pink-cheeked Molly from beside him.

"Here, here!" said the crowd and they sipped their drinks.

Neville raised his glass next, but Harry was distracted by a commotion to his left.

Hermione was whispering fiercely at Ron again. "We need to, Ron; they're leaving straight after the reception."

Harry didn't hear what Ron said, because he was facing away from him, but he saw Hermione set her jaw.

"Here, here!" they party chorused again, as Neville finished his toast and Harry absently sipped his wine.

Hermione leaned across Ron. "Harry, do you mind if I make an announcement?"

"You'd better," said Ginny with a knowing smile. "I don't think Ron'll make it through the night if you don't."

Ron muttered something that Harry didn't catch. Hermione stood.

"Excuse me," she said and tapped her glass again. "I have something to tell you."

Several witches and wizards turned to look at Hermione. "Actually, Ron and I have an announcement to make."

"You better stand with her," said Ginny to Ron. Harry furrowed his brow in confusion until he realised with a smile what was happening.

Ron stood. "Er...", he said with obvious reluctance. "Hermione and I are engaged."

There was a pause and then Molly positively squealed with happiness. George was the first one to congratulate him with a slap on the back and a whispered, "didn't think you had it in you."

In the midst of this new torrent of congratulations, Harry glanced at his watch and noticed that it was getting late. The portkey would activate soon. "Ginny," said Harry softly and when she turned around, he felt her beauty take his breath again. "We... need to get ready to leave. The Portkey..." but he didn't finish the sentence as there was a large commotion from the clearing that was the designated Apparition point.

"Let me through!" said a familiar, reedy voice. It was the Minister of Magic.

"Oi," said Ron, who rushed forward with his wand outstretched. "What do you think you're doing? This is an invitation-only wedding!"

"Stand aside," said a wand-brandishing Dawlish, the former Auror that was now on Crackshot's personal security detail. "Make way for the Minister!"

Harry frowned and heard Ginny growl like an angry lioness next to him. Hermione was running toward Ron, who was now in a shoving match with the other bodyguard. "Geroff!" shouted Ron. "This is private property!"

Crackshot made a beeline for Harry, his moustache stiff and rigid, defying gravity as it stuck out inches on either side of his nose. "I'll have a word with Mr. Potter, if you please," he said to Arthur dismissively as the older man attempted to head the Minister off. He strode right up to Harry. Ginny tensed beside him.

The Minister pulled out a paper from his robes and held it in front of him as if to read it, but never took his eyes from Harry. "By order of the Minister of Magic, you, Harry James Potter, are to surrender the wand known as the Wand of Destiny, The Elder Wand, or the Deathstick to the Department of Mysteries for analysis. Signed, Stanley Crackshot, etc., etc."

"No way!" yelled Ron, who had wrestled his way closer to the Minister.

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so."

"You don't have a choice," said Crackshot. "This order gives me the authority to take you in for questioning and confiscate everything on your person."

Harry narrowed his eyes and shifted his stance, his left hand firmly on the wand in question, ready to defend himself if necessary.

"That's rubbish," said Hermione, who stood next to Ron. "You can't force Harry to turn over property unless you have a proper warrant signed by the Wizengamot. Your authority doesn't include the right to confiscate anything without it."

Crackshot appraised Hermione shrewdly. "As the Minister, young lady, I have the power to detain anyone for any reason." He turned back to Harry.

"Come now," he said with a significant glance at Ginny and held out his hand. "You don't want to spend your wedding night in Azkaban."

Ginny pulled out her wand in a flash, but Harry stopped her. "Don't, Ginny. We don't want to threaten the Minister, even if we think he's a pompous waste of space."

She relaxed, but kept her wand ready. Harry took her other hand. "You heard Ron, Minister," said Harry slowly. "This is private property. Get out."

"Dawlish!" yelled Crackshot. "Arrest Mr. Potter for contempt of a Ministry order."

There was a bang and a flash of light and the wizard Ron had been wrestling was thrown twenty feet into a row of roses. Dawlish pointed his wand at Harry, who didn't move except to squeeze Ginny's hand and grasp the ball-point pen along with the Elder Wand. "Goodbye, Minister," said Harry and he felt a hook pull at his navel, carrying him and his new wife away from The Burrow and across half the world.

## The Master of Life The Isabella Swan

### Chapter Seven – The Isabella Swan

Harry and Ginny appeared under a large oak tree in a park in the city of Esquimalt, just west of Victoria. Harry looked around in the mid-day sun to get his bearings and spotted the back of a familiar building. The sounds of waves and high flying gulls carried on a cool Pacific breeze. Beside him, Ginny shivered.

“You okay?” he asked, brushing his hands along the smooth fabric covering her shoulders.

She nodded and turned her face into his chest, wrapping her arms around his middle. He took a deep breath, inhaling her floral scent that made him giddy with happiness.

“I’m not going to hold back the next time I see Crackshot,” she said.

Harry laughed. “Then let’s make sure you don’t see him for a while.”

She sighed. “I just didn’t want our wedding day to end like that.”

He held her out at arms length and looked into her eyes. “Our day isn’t over yet. It’s noon here.”

She smiled and took his hand. “So what do you have planned?”

“Come on,” he said. “Our accommodations are over here.”

Ginny looked around and let him lead her through the park and onto a paved lane. There were no obvious hotels in their view and she immediately picked up on that. “Where are we staying?”

He shrugged. “Over here,” he said with a vague gesture.

The lane turned into a series of worn wooden planks that became a boat dock. Where the dock came to a ‘T’, there was a short, thin man holding a clipboard.

“We’re going on a boat?” asked Ginny with a sudden smile.

Again, Harry shrugged, wanting to maintain the suspense as long as possible.

“Ah,” said the man as they approached. “You must be...?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Tonks,” said Harry, using the false name Hermione had suggested. They would begin their stay in Canada as Henry and Jean Tonks to throw off suspicion to any would-be pursuers.

“Yes,” the man said, checking his clipboard and then marked off a spot on the sheet with a pen. “Any luggage?”

Harry shook his head. “None.”

Ginny shifted on her feet. “We do have some actually,” she said, her free hand holding a familiar-looking handbag that Harry hadn’t noticed before. “Will there be space in our... room?” She looked at Harry queringly as she said this last bit.

“You are in the Nigel Hawthorn suite as requested,” the man said as if dishonouring their reservations would be an insult. “There are two closets that will provide ample storage. If more is needed, we can have your things stored in the vault under the captain’s chamber.”

“We *are* going on a boat,” Ginny said excitedly. There was a tuft of wind that filled their nostrils with salty sea air. Harry was just as anxious, and pleased that so far, she approved.

“This way, then.”

They followed the man to the very end of the dock, past rows of small yachts and cabin cruisers to a ramp that ended at a majestic white sail boat. It stood in the water like a large, floating bird, its masts poking into the sky like huge, raised feathers. Harry counted over twelve portholes on the side, representing some of the cabins on the sailing yacht.

Their escort unhooked a felt chain from the post at the base of the ramp just as a burly black man in a dark navy uniform stepped off the ship.

“Welcome to the *Isabella Swan*,” said the captain in a deep, booming voice.

Harry took his outstretched hand. "Thanks. I'm Henry and this is my wife, Jean."

A flash of disbelief adorned the captain's face and then he smiled. "Come aboard. You're the first to arrive for tonight's cruise, so you'll have the run of the ship for a couple of hours. We set sail at dusk and put down anchor in port at dawn."

Ginny squealed with happiness. "I've always wanted to sail on a boat."

They followed the captain onto the first level below deck. "This is the dining lounge." The room took up half of the level, curving inward toward the front of the boat where a grand piano was situated. The back of the room held a large bar and several small tables. "All meals are served here unless you request it sent to your room." Another glance and another disbelieving look from the captain. "But you probably aren't very hungry.... Let me show you where your room is."

He led them down a flight of narrow stairs and onto the berthing deck. "The Hawthorn suite is at the end of the hall. Here are your keys, Mr. Potter," he said staring at Harry closely.

Harry took the keys before he realised what he'd said. "I'm not..."

"Oh, come now," the captain said. "I'm no fool, and you're not very good at concealing yourself. But you don't have to worry about me." He chuckled. "I'm Kingsley's cousin Rex. Rex August."

"He never mentioned...."

"Well he wouldn't, seeing as how he just found out about your destination last night. Got a floo call from him this morning and *that* cost him a pretty sickle I can tell you."

Harry twiddled the key in his hand. "So you won't give us away?"

The crow's feet by his eyes crinkled as he smiled. "I think you'll find that Canadian wizards are less enamoured with you than the British ones."

Harry stared blankly back, unable to fathom the freedom that presented itself from the very idea. There were wizards that didn't worship him. "Thanks, Captain August."

"Any time, Harry," the captain said with a wink. "Enjoy your honeymoon."

The captain leapt up the stairs as if they had springs hidden under the narrow treads and they were alone.

"Shall we?" inquired Harry with a quiver in his voice, his palms sweating.

"We shall," said Ginny and they walked to the end of the hall. Their room took up the entire rear of the ship on this level. Harry worked the lock and swung the door open.

"I believe there's a tradition about crossing a threshold or something," said Harry and Ginny took a step back.

"Don't you dare," she said but the last syllable ended in a squeak because Harry scooped her up in his arms and strode through the door. He let her down as she glared daggers at him, but the smile in her eyes lessened the effect.

He closed the door and made a show of looking around the suite. It was larger than it appeared from the other side of the door and Harry realised was probably enchanted. The entryway had two sofas and a Muggle television mounted to one of the walls. A large doorway revealed a kitchen that sat opposite two rooms. "So... what you reckon there is to do on this boat? Seems like we should have brought a game or two with us."

"Play games?" asked Ginny, taking a step closer, her frustration at being manhandled through the door melting away. "What like Exploding Snap or Gobstones?"

Harry faced her and mirrored her movement. "Something like that."

"You've really planned this out, haven't you?" she asked, her soft brown eyes searching his.

"Yeah, I have." He dropped all pretence. His entire world had narrowed down to the witch in front of him. "Ever since you said yes, I've been waiting and wondering."

Ginny's hands were pulling his face down. "No more wondering. Unbutton my dress, Harry. We won't be playing Gobstones tonight."

\*

Ginny awoke hours later as relaxed as she ever remembered feeling. Her legs were entwined with Harry's, and his arm was draped across her middle. She felt his breath pleasantly tickling the hairs in the small of her neck where his face was nuzzled. She sighed in deep contentment. The boat was rocking slightly, causing the orange sunlight from the porthole to bob across the wall. The distant sounds of seagulls filtered through the walls of the sloop.

All of those sensations, however, were nothing compared to the almost aching joy that filled her soul. Her lifelong dream of being married to Harry had become real and after all the pain they'd been through, it was satisfying to know that at least this one dream had come true. Her remaining hope was that Harry felt the same blissful happiness she felt.



There was a tap on the porthole window and Ginny pulled her body lightly but reluctantly from Harry's grasp. She took a nightgown from the trunk next to the sofa and pulled it over her head. The tap at the window grew more insistent.

The brass catch on the porthole released easily and as soon as the window was opened, a bright orange bird slipped inside. She turned to see it alight on the footboard of their bed and had a minor shock when she recognized it as a phoenix. "Fawkes!" she cried, but then she looked more closely. It was a phoenix, but the bird in front of them was younger-looking, slightly smaller, and the pattern on his chest was blue, not gold. "Oh," said Ginny, slowly approaching the bird. "You're not Fawkes are you?"

There was a piece of parchment attached to his leg. She quickly undid the note and read it.

*Harry,*

*Sorry I couldn't get this to you before Crackshot crashed your party. Congratulations on marrying Ginny! You don't know how happy it made me to see the two of you walk up the aisle together. Just like your mum and dad. They'd be proud.*

*I raised this little fella while I was on the run from the Death Eaters this spring. His name is Aiden, and before you ask, I bought the egg from a little Chinese wizard I met on my travels. He likes to eat fish.*

*Take care,*

*Hagrid*

"Aiden?" asked Ginny, trying the name with her mouth. He trilled in response sending chills up her spine.

Seeing Aiden reminded her of their wedding presents. She opened Hermione's borrowed beaded bag and carefully searched it with her lit wand. "Aha," she said to Aiden and pulled out a tall, rectangular package. The wrapping paper was banished and the box opened to reveal a large bird cage. "Someone knew we were going to get a bird," she murmured and placed it on a table by the bathroom door.

"Want to see your new home, Aiden?"

The phoenix spread its wings and with a chirrup, glided over to the table and hopped in to the cage. He turned around the inside, which easily accommodated his large body and, apparently finding it satisfactory, placed his beak under his wing and fell asleep.

Being near the bathroom reminded Ginny that she needed to freshen up. It was getting close to dinner and they had skipped lunch altogether. The time change had also played havoc with them, as her body assumed it was close to two in the morning.

When Ginny returned to their bed, Harry was sitting up, staring at her with a disarming smile. Then he noticed Aiden inside his cage. "What's that?"

"That's Aiden," she explained and slid back under the sheets to snuggle up to him. "He's a wedding present from Hagrid."

Harry looked back to Aiden. "He's beautiful. Where did Hagrid get him?"

Ginny handed the letter to Harry.

"Wow," he said when he'd finished reading. "I didn't think you could buy them at all. I wonder where he came from."

"I dunno, but I imagine from somewhere in the orient," said Ginny and her stomach gave a growl. "But it's almost dinner time and I'm starving."

Harry waggled his eyebrows, rolled on top of her and pinned her wrists above her head. "Are you sure you don't want to just order dinner in?"

Ginny moved her knees and quick as a whip, had reversed their position. "Yes, I'm sure." Then at Harry's crestfallen expression, she kissed him and said, "Maybe we can come back here for dessert."

Properly motivated, they dressed into semi-formal clothes that Ginny had packed for both of them and were in the dining lounge just as the sun was setting on the Western horizon.

The piano was being worked by a brunette witch in flowing blue-sequined robes, sending out soft melodies that perfectly matched Ginny's mood. There were windows around the entire deck, so that they could see the orange and red splashed western horizon and the dark green trees and houses on the east.

They followed the maître d' to their table, which was situated next to one of the floor to ceiling windows. "Your waiter will be with you shortly," he said before excusing himself with a stiff bow.

There were several other couples on the deck, but all of them looked older and much wealthier than Ginny felt. She turned to Harry, who was staring unabashedly at her. "How much did this cost?"

He took her hand. "Does it matter?" he asked.

Part of Ginny didn't want to know – the part of her that loved surprises and mystery. Another part, however, the one that was raised by the most frugal of witches wanted to know because it must have cost an exorbitant amount of Galleons. "Of course it doesn't matter," she replied, squeezing his hand. Then in a mock serious tone she said, "I still want to know."

"Well, there's a reason why we're only staying on the boat for a night," he said evasively.

Ginny wanted to press for more details, but their waiter arrived. "Good evening Monsieur and Madam Tonks," he said with a flourish. "The appetiser will be served momentarily. Your choices are marinated gulf shrimp with Spanish paprika and toasted Marcona almonds or a wild mushroom

strudel with truffle whipped goat cheese.”

Ginny mouthed “wow” to Harry. “They both sound good,” she said out loud. “You pick, Har – I mean Henry.” She blushed at her slip.

He searched her face and then turned to the waiter. “One of each, please.”

“Excellent choice, sir,” he said placing a copy of the local Wizarding paper on the table and walked away at top speed to the kitchen. Ginny had a feeling that he would have said the same thing no matter what combination they preferred.

There was a shout from the deck and somewhere a bell started to chime. Ropes were being thrown onto the dock and they almost missed the vibration of the main engine as it fired to life somewhere below their feet. Soon, they had slipped into Victoria Harbour and were breaking the white-capped peaks of the Juan de Fuca Straight. Out the eastern windows, they saw the shadow of a large sail being drawn up the main mast and as they gained speed, the engine noise died away.

There was a green salad and cream of fennel soup offered after the appetizer. As before, they chose one of each and shared.

“Harry,” whispered Ginny as she cleansed her palate with a spoonful of raspberry sherbet. “There’s a man staring at us.” He put the paper down and turned to look. “He’s the one with the big hat, smoking the cigar.”

“I’m not too worried,” said Harry, carefully folding the paper into thirds.

“What?” asked Ginny. “You should be very worried. We should have been in disguise. If someone recognizes us....”

“They won’t recognize us unless they’re British,” Harry said calmly and pushed the paper toward Ginny. “Take a look. It’s on page twelve.”

Ginny flipped open the paper to the correct page and began to read aloud. “British Ministry officials have informed the Canadian Minister that a Dark Wizard was recently killed in their country by a youth not yet finished with formal schooling. The Dark Wizard in question, whose name we were unable to ascertain at press time, had been accused of murdering several Muggle and Magical persons over the past few years. The youth responsible for his death is being hailed as a local hero, and intends to become a Dark Wizard catcher professionally.”

Ginny turned the page, looking for rest of the article, but was surprised to find that there wasn’t any more. “That’s it?” she asked, quickly rereading it.

“Pretty nice, eh?” he said, reaching his hands behind his head and sliding down in his seat, a look of deep satisfaction on his face. “I’m finally somewhere people won’t trip over themselves every time I walk out the door.”

“But,” said Ginny, still trying to adjust to the abruptness of the reporting. “But you did so much for *everyone*, not just for Britons. How can they just gloss over it like day old soup?”

“It’s fine,” said Harry, reaching out a hand to her. “I really don’t mind.”

Ginny pressed her lips together. “I’m not going to let this happen.” She turned the paper over to see who was responsible for this travesty of journalism.

“Don’t,” said Harry, slipping the paper out of her hands.

“Give me that back,” Ginny said sternly.

“What do you want them to do?” he asked, an amused smile on his face. “Erect a statue of me in the middle of town?”

Ginny’s lip twitched and her outrage drained out her toes. “No, I suppose not.”

“Then let’s just enjoy being anonymous for once,” he said. Ginny was about to murmur something about how Harry Potter would never stay anonymous for long no matter how ignorant people chose to be when their waiter arrived again.

They ate the main course as the Juan de Fuca gave way to open ocean; Ginny selected the seared scallops, brandade and lobster croquette while Harry had roasted rack of lamb with white beans and smoked paprika, on a bed of Swiss chard. The man in the hat didn’t stare at them the whole time, but Ginny caught him looking once or twice. He was sitting with a pretty witch that had obviously used too many Glamour Charms in her life. Her face was stretched unnaturally to hide the wrinkles and her makeup was over the top – the kind her mother used to point out on ‘scarlet women’.

Lamps were lit as the last glimmer of purple twilight dimmed in the distance. The piano was joined by a violin and flute. When they finished eating, Ginny was stuffed to the gills, but pleasantly so.

“Would Madam and Monsieur care to select a dessert?” asked their waiter after clearing off their table with a flick on his wand. “We have an elegant white and dark chocolate mousse cake or a very refreshing citrus cheesecake.”

Ginny felt her stomach and groaned at the thought of putting anything more in it. “I’m so full.”

“How about one cheesecake with two forks,” Harry said and the waiter tapped the table with his wand. A single plate appeared between them with a slice of lime green cheesecake.

“Please contact me if you have any other needs.”

As the waiter departed, the man who had been staring at them stood and began to walk in their direction. Ginny nudged Harry’s foot with her own.

Here he comes," whispered Ginny, shoving a piece of cheesecake in her mouth.

"Howdy. I'm Joss Woodall and this is my wife, Candi." The man in the big hat extended his hand and Harry stood to shake it.

"Hello, I'm Henry Tonks." Harry motioned to Ginny. "This is my wife, Jean."

"Hello," Ginny said, also standing to shake their hands.

"I'm sorry for interrupting your meal," Joss continued as Harry and Ginny sat back down. "But I couldn't help notice that you were a fairly young couple. And I had to meet anyone as young as you are and can afford this little pleasure cruise."

Ginny was dizzy with trying to work through the man's heavy American southern accent.

"So I have to ask what you do for a living? Or maybe you have old money...."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Er, well if you mean I inherited it, then yes, my dad and my godfather passed away a few years ago."

Joss stuck his thumbs behind his large steel belt buckle. "Well I'm right sorry to hear that. It sounds like you've lost a lot more than money can buy." He sounded oddly sincere as he said this and looking at his wife, who silently observed the scene, Ginny wondered if that was borne of experience or something else. "You like Quidditch, Henry?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, a twinkle returning to his eye. "I love it."

"Then I got something for you." He pulled something out of his coat pocket. "Here's two tickets to the next Vancouver Vandards game. They're playing the Haileybury Hammers."

"Where's the pitch?" asked Harry.

"They play at the Westwood Plateau Pitch in Vancouver. The pitch is hidden in the woods north of a country club, so you'll have to Apparate in."

Ginny's eyes lit up. A Quidditch game was a perfect way to spend time with Harry. "Thanks, Mr. Woodall."

"No thanks necessary, Missus Tonks – and it's just Joss." He handed the tickets and another card to Harry. "That's my cell number if you need anything else."

"Er..," said Harry. They didn't have a way to phone anyone as far as Ginny knew.

"Don't have a phone?" asked Joss, recognising the hesitancy on his face. "Just send me an owl, then. Working in the Muggle world as much as I do, a phone is as indispensable as a wand to you and me." He shook Harry's hand one more time and tipped his hat to Ginny. "Be seeing you around."

As the Woodall's left, Harry stared at the tickets pinched between his fingers. "That was weird."

"Sure, but free tickets!" Ginny squealed. "Ron says the Hammers are the best team in Canada. Half their team made it to the national team last year."

Ginny gushed all the way back to their room until the door was closed and her focus shifted back to Harry. They'd only had one dessert and Ginny was determined to make good on her promise of a second, more private one.

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The open ocean was much choppier than the protected waters of the strait and even their large boat began to feel the effects of it. So it was with a grateful smile that Ginny accepted Harry's offer of an Anti-Motion Sickness Charm. They strolled along the top deck to walk off their dinner, enjoying the clear, star-filled skies and cool wind blowing off the ocean. It was getting close to ten o'clock local time and Ginny was feeling very sleepy, but they hadn't opened their wedding presents yet and Harry insisted that they go through them all before they went to sleep.

They sat on their bed, boxes and packages strewn out from the beaded bag before them. Ginny's parents had purchased them a set of silverware, which Ginny recognized as being Goblin-made from the Gobbledegook inscription under each piece.

"How on earth did they afford this?" Ginny said despairingly.

Harry looked concerned as well. "There's a note on the back of the box."

*You should have let us pay for the wedding. Enjoy your honeymoon! – Mum and Dad*

"Typical," said Ginny. "My mum is so stubborn."

"It's no surprise where you get it, then," said Harry cheekily, which earned him a glare. There was a second where she considered threatening him with banishment to the sofa, but she would suffer just as much as he would, so she held her tongue.

Dishes, towels, and other practical home making implements were revealed as they whittled away the packages and sent them back, unwrapped into the beaded bag. "Oooh," said Ginny as she ripped open a book-sized one from Hermione.

"Who would have guessed Hermione would give us a book for our wedding," said Harry sardonically.

"But Harry," said Ginny, reading the accompanying note. "This is really useful. Find me a quill."

He did as instructed, searching through the bag for the writing set Percy had given them. "So what is it?" he asked.

"It's a replicating journal. Hermione enchanted it herself, so it should be safe." It was made of fine leather and featured an engraved stag on the front. Ginny hesitated for a split second, and then scratched a short note onto the top of the first blank page.

*Hermione, we got your present (finally) and are safe somewhere far from home. Are you all right? –Ginny*

They waited as the ink dried onto the page. Thankfully, the page didn't absorb the words as Riddle's diary. Instead, the new words appeared below the first in a different colour ink and a drawn stag at the top of the page – matching the one on the front – began to gallop, indicating someone was writing on the other end.

*Ginny! We've been so worried. Everyone at the wedding is fine, but there's been some developments. Crackshot's not going to let up on you. He's posted a ten thousand Galleon reward for Harry's capture.*

Harry frowned. "Figures. We need to work out how we're going to throw people off the trail permanently."

*Do you think there's a chance wizards in other countries would go looking for us?*

Hermione's next words were appearing quickly under Ginny's.

*There's more. We left for Australia straight away to find my parents. Yes, Ron is with me, since he didn't think it would be safe for me to go alone now that we're accomplices to your disappearance. It isn't very likely that they'd put a bounty on us, but...*

There was a pause and Ginny thought maybe something happened with the spell, but the stag was still running. Then, more words appeared.

*Oh, all right, Ron! Ron insists that I tell you that the only reason I let him come was because of his brilliant idea that we masquerade as Harry with the Polyjuice Potion in Australia. We did it this morning and it didn't take the full hour before we were attacked by Australian hit-wizards. I distracted them and Apparated us back to our hotel so Ron could change back. The Australian Ministry is definitely helping search for you, Harry.*

Harry wiped a hand across his face. "What are we going to do?"

More words were appearing.

*We're going to go find my parents today and then we'll stage one more 'appearance' before we leave for England. Please stay safe. Update us through the journal when you can.*

*We will.*

*Oh! There's one more thing. Have you ever heard the name "Mclsenrod"?*

Harry shook his head and Ginny shrugged.

*Neither of us has.*

*Well, I'll have to do some research on it. When you left, Crackshot let it slip that he was looking for information on someone with that name. He made it sound like this person has something to do with the Elder Wand. Got to go! Take care!*

The ink stopped flowing, and they could tell Hermione had left, as the dancing stag stilled.

"I can't believe it," said Ginny after she shut the journal and stashed it on the nightstand. "Crackpot," she said, deliberately mispronouncing his name, "is going to get a rude awakening when we go home."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Once we figure out what to do about the Elder Wand, we can work on him."

Ginny turned to him. "Who do you think this 'Mclsenron' person is?"

"Dunno," he said. "But right now, we need to focus on us."

Ginny Vanished the paper wrappings and empty boxes. "How can you be so carefree?" she asked, her anxiety building. "The entire Wizarding world could be after you and you just want to relax?"

His hands found her shoulders and began to work the tension out of her muscles. "Mmmm," she said as she relaxed into his ministrations.

"I plan," he said, using the heel of his hand to move up and down the sides of her spine, "to have a proper honeymoon. People like Crackshot have taken away my childhood. They're not going to take my adulthood away, too."

Ginny was powerless to disagree. All she could do was murmur a "whatever you say, dear," before she was fast asleep.

## The Master of Life The Haileybury Hammers

### Chapter Eight – The Haileybury Hammers

Wizarding Canada must not have gotten the word about Harry's wanted status because the Canadian version of the Knight Bus carried them without incident to their new flat the following morning. The Wizarding Wireless that was blaring the local news said much about sailing and gardening conditions, but nothing about Harry or the large reward offered for his capture. Aiden had been covered inside his cage because Phoenixes, Harry was learning, weren't remotely as common as owls and travelling with one was an open invitation to invite questions. Even with Harry's cloak hiding him, the little bird had managed to attract attention, chirruping and clicking his beak on the cage during their trip.

"I'm just glad that bloke on the bus didn't ask too many questions," said Ginny as she unlocked their flat's door. "He was a little too observant, if you ask me."

Harry snickered. "You're just saying that because you forgot to put on your wedding ring and he started to chat you up."

Ginny whirled on him. "Don't be so smug, Mr. Potter or next time, I might just decide to flirt back."

Her smiling eyes reduced the effectiveness of her attack and Harry responded by sweeping her off her feet and kissing her solidly on the mouth. "You're only allowed to flirt with me, Mrs. Potter."

"Hmm," she said, still smiling. "I like the sound of that."

He walked them through the door and promptly dumped her on the sofa.

She squealed. "This carrying me across the threshold thing is getting to be a habit."

"I can live with that," he said softly and pulled her gently to her feet.

Their flat was a furnished, one level unit that sat in the Wizarding section of Saanich. Simple furniture adorned the modest, but roomy interior. It even came with dishes, silverware, and its own wireless. Through the sliding glass door, they could see a garden the size of their old Transfiguration classroom, abutting a tree-lined Quidditch Pitch. Harry's hand itched to grab his Firebolt (which was still in England) and take a turn with Ginny.

They processed their wedding presents as a way to settle in. Those that were useful were unpacked and installed in the narrow kitchen or wardrobe-like toilet. The rest were stowed in the beaded bag with their formal robes and Ginny's wedding dress. The last one was poorly wrapped, as if the person who'd wrapped it hadn't ever given a present before.

The note on the package said it was from Dudley, so she passed it to Harry to read and placed the present on her lap. Ginny tapped the paper with her wand and it fell away, revealing a photo album. She thought how nice it would be to have a place to start documenting their new family. It was a surprise, therefore, when she opened the cover and saw that it was already filled with photos – moving photos – of Harry.

Harry sat slowly next to Ginny and stared at his parents as they brought him home from St. Mungos, gave him his first bath, and changed his nappies.

"Harry," said Ginny tenderly. "You were so adorable!" She pointed to one where he was on his dad's back as James hopped around the living room. Baby Harry's face was alight with excitement.

"I can't believe it," said Harry, awestruck at the thoughtfulness of this gift. He reached out to touch another photo, when Harry was closer to the age when he lost his parents. "This is amazing. I think I remember this one." The picture showed Harry with a toy broomstick. He would shakily mount it and the broom would start to move before Harry would step off, totter on one foot and fall on his nappy-covered bottom. Behind him, Lily wordlessly telling James off for giving a broomstick to such a young child. The sequence ended with Harry zooming out of the frame, his face split with a gleeful smile.

"I wonder where Dudley got this?"

"What did the note say?" she asked, flipping the page again.

Harry opened it and read.

*Harry and Ginny,*

*Thank you again for inviting me to your wedding. I'm not sure what to say after all that happened between us, but I hope that things can be different from nowon. I found this in mum's room one day when I was looking for where she kept my birthday presents. It scared me to see moving photos, so I forgot about it until you left for the last time. It's not much of a present, but it's got to be better than the bottle tops and*

*used tissues they used to give you.  
Take Care,  
Dudley*

"Didn't he used to beat you up?" Ginny asked, perplexed.

"That's the thing," explained Harry. "I'm still not sure what's changed. Before I left Privet Drive for the last time, he treated me decently for the first time ever. Then he showed up to our wedding and now this...."

Harry stared unseeing at the wall for a few minutes as Ginny finished perusing the album. There were some blackmail worthy pictures in there to be sure – especially the one of naked Harry running away from a nappy-wielding Lily. Other things needed to be attended to first.

"So how are we going to get rid of that cursed wand?" asked Ginny snapping Harry out of his reverie.

"The best place to start," Harry replied, leaning back on the sofa as Ginny Banished the album to their room, "is at the beginning. We already know from Beedle the Bard where the Deathly Hallows came from and we also know that most people were killed for having it. We need to know exactly how each wizard obtained the wand to see if someone has been in our situation before."

"What?" Ginny asked with a cocked head. "You think someone else out there was afflicted with your nobility and actually didn't *want* the Elder Wand?" Harry smirked and Ginny propped her legs on his lap, stretching the full length of her body across the sofa. "Anyway... apart from you and Voldemort, I don't know anyone that's ever had it."

"Well," said Harry, as he prised off her shoes and began to tenderly massage the muscles of her feet. "Voldemort had it, but he never really *possessed* it." He explained how the wand is loyal to a wizard until that person is beaten in battle, or otherwise has it forcefully taken from him. Ginny shut her eyes and tried not to focus too much on how wonderful his hands felt on her feet. "So it was Draco that was master of the wand. Before him, it was Dumbledore...."

"Malfoy beat Dumbledore?" asked Ginny incredulously, jerking her head up to stare at him.

Harry hesitated, idling his fingers. "I never showed you that memory?"

Ginny shook her head and wiggled her toes to pull his attention back to what he'd been doing so admirably.

"Dumbledore was nearly dead when Malfoy disarmed him," said Harry and Ginny was rewarded when he moved his hands to her calves and shins. "He meant Snape to get it, and that's why Voldemort killed him. The point is that Dumbledore got it from Grindelwald, who got it from Gregorovitch. Before that... who knows?"

"Well," said Ginny after a minute of feeling all the stress from her muscles drain through his magical hands. "I don't know anyone that can help us with wand lore other than Ollivander or Xenio Lovegood. But I do know that there's somewhere right here in Victoria that has seen one of the Hallows."

"Yeah," said Harry catching on. "My grandfather's grave."

There was a silent stretch while Harry moved from her lower legs to her thighs, kneading and rubbing her muscles in a delicious manner. "Come on," he said as she opened her mouth to let out an exultant breath. "We can't laze the morning away."

"Why not?" Ginny pouted. "Aren't you the one that said we should have a proper honeymoon?"

Harry replied by pushing her legs onto the floor. Ginny wasn't expecting that and half slid off the sofa. "You're no fun," she said, sticking out her bottom lip and stared wide-eyed at him for effect. Harry closed his eyes and waved his arms.

"That's completely unfair. You can only use that expression when it's really important," he said.

"Fine," relented Ginny. "But on our way back, we need to get some groceries, or we'll be eating out for every meal."

"What's so bad about that?" Harry asked as he stood and held out a hand.

"I don't know about you," Ginny said, allowing herself to be pulled up. "But I might like to have breakfast in bed from time to time."

With a smile on his face, Harry apparated them away from their flat.

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The book containing Harry's family history indicated that there were Muggle records of at least some of his family in Victoria so they decided to check there for information on where he would be buried. After an initial search, they found themselves at the British Columbia Archives. The blocky construction and straight lines of the twenty-seven year old building sharply contrasted with the much older and more elegant Parliament Building and Empress Hotel nearby. Still, it was functional and efficient and they were quickly immersed in their search.

They spent the bulk of their morning searching through old newspapers and rolls of microfilmed court records but were unsuccessful. Then, when they were about to leave for lunch, Ginny spotted something behind the information desk.

"Harry," she said, pointing to a small door they hadn't noticed before. Atop the arched entry were the words "Magical Records Division."

"You don't suppose...", said Harry as he read the sign out loud, but Ginny was already tugging his hand.

It was just like the entry to the Leaky Cauldron. Invisible to Muggles, but magical people could see it clearly.

The witch at the front amicably led them through a door to the brightly lit research desk. An older couple was there, flipping through old newspaper clippings with their wands. On either side of the desk stood several bins that said "Retrieval" on them.

"Just tap your wand to the retrieval box and state the name of what you are looking for. All relevant records will appear inside."

She left them to it and Ginny instantly retrieved all records containing the name Peverell. Harry took a bin and tapped his wand on it. "Potter." The bin shook and hummed and then a large stack of newspapers, court records, marriage licenses, and death certificates appeared, tottering ominously before Harry divided it into other bins.

They took their bins to a side table where there was more room to sort through the papers. It was long, boring work. Harry found out that one of his father's great uncles was a star Quidditch player at the turn of the century, and Ginny discovered that the first Peverells in British Columbia were Bastion and Wilma who lived and died in an estate by Butchart Gardens without ever having any children.

It was past two o'clock before they had finished sorting and they weren't any nearer to discovering any connection to the Deathly Hallows or in finding Harry's grandfather's grave than before.

Ginny restacked her papers and dropped them in the bin before tapping her wand to it and sending the records back to their place in the archives. "Bugger," she said.

Stacking his own papers in a bin, Harry nodded. "It wasn't completely wasted," he said, thinking about all the tidbits of information he now had to put with the faces from his family history book. "Still, I don't reckon we'll find much more in here. Let's get something to eat."

"Hold on," said Ginny who, looking pensive, tapped her wand one more time to the bin. "Mclsenrod," she said and it shuddered as the search began. A single piece of paper appeared above it and settled into the bottom. Ginny picked it up and scanned the page.

"Harry," she said, her hand starting to tremble. "This is big."

A picture of Mclsenrod dominated the top third of the page, captioned by a short description. It was a wanted poster.

"He killed his cousin and fled the country," said Harry, who was quickly reading to catch up. "But who was his cousin?"

Ginny pointed down to the bottom of the poster. "Charlotte Peverell."

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Harry still didn't have any clothes, other than the few Ginny brought for him. They ate a quick lunch at a local café and then spent way too much money on a trunk full of Muggle clothes for both of them, including a set of jumpers for Ginny, who hadn't adjusted to the mild climate. They also sent Aiden to Hermione with an order for robes from Madam Malkin's since the wizards in Canada seemed to prefer Muggle clothes altogether. The note informed Hermione that she should keep Aiden until the robes were delivered and then send the lot back with Harry's Phoenix. That had the dual effect of speeding their delivery and disguising the purchase if the Ministry tried to track them to Harry's whereabouts. As Dumbledore demonstrated in Harry's fifth year, Phoenix travel was completely untraceable.

After shopping, they took a Muggle bus to Butchart Gardens since Ginny had been keen on seeing the gardens from before the wedding. She was especially keen on seeing Thomas McCafferty and unravelling the mystery of her cousin's relationship with him.

On the way over, Harry searched his book for Charlotte. "Here she is," he said and Ginny leaned in close to read the entry.

"She was married to Henry Abbott Swift, and their daughter, Darlene was your grandfather's mother." Ginny compared the dates of her death with the Darlene's birth. "Your great-grandmother was only ten when Mclsenrod killed her mother."

Harry narrowed his eyebrows. "Which means he's probably long dead. You can bet it wasn't a normal family disagreement," he said and Ginny knew that both death and being an orphan was a part of Harry's heritage. "If Crackshot's interested in him, then you have to know there's something else to it."

"We'll let Hermione know what we've found tonight and see if she's been able to start gathering information on him at the Ministry." She took his hand and the bus slowed in front of their destination. "Right now, I want to see these famed flowers firsthand."

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*Butchart Gardens borrows its name from the family that owned the land and created the fifty-five acres of lush, precisely maintained, themed arrangements. At the turn of the century, Jennie Butchart, wife of businessman Robert Butchart asked her husband if she could use the remains of a cement quarry near their home for a Japanese garden. Her success led her to create more gardens, which took nearly two decades to complete. It has been in the family ever since and sees more than a million visitors every year and is a Canadian National Treasure.*

Ginny looked up from the pamphlet she was reading. "Let's see the Japanese garden first," she said to Harry, who was trying to figure out the map posted just inside the gate. She walked over to him and pointed a finger at a small patch next to a building. "There."

Harry scratched his head. "How about you lead?"

Smirking, Ginny took his hand and they strode down the sunlit path together.

A thousand different colours and scents assaulted their senses. Bees hummed as they merrily dipped and bobbed between giant swaths of blossoms. Dozens of tourists were snapping away at the pristine grounds with cameras in the hope of capturing some of the magic that was there, for indeed, it was magical.

They turned a corner and entered the Japanese garden. Oak and Maple trees with leaves that shook in the breeze sprung out of neatly trimmed grass and carefully raked gravel. The path wound around mounds of flowers and carved itself into small hills of shrubs and next to sparkling fountains. A large wooden pagoda stood on the far end of the open garden. Ginny stopped. "This is it," she said, taking in the whole scene. "I've seen this before."

"This isn't like the books you bought," Harry said, slowly turning around to digest the whole scene. "It's spectacular."

Ginny shook her head and stepped off the path to get a different perspective, ignoring the sign that said 'Stay On the Path'. "No, I mean I've seen this in a picture. Cousin Martha and that bloke she was with... They were in a picture taken right here."

"Yeah," said Harry. "I remember that, but the trees looked a lot smaller and..."

Behind them, someone cleared their throat. "Please mind the grass." A man emerged from behind a heaping mass of red and purple hydrangeas. "The fence is there for a reason."

Ginny started and ran back to Harry, jumping over the low wooden fence. "Sorry," she said apologetically.

"You aren't the first to try to sneak off for a little romantic interlude," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"I wasn't..."

"Newlyweds, am I right?" he said with a nod at the ring on her hand.

"Well yes, but..."

"I've seen it all before."

"We weren't trying to sneak off," said Ginny, gesturing at the pagoda. "I was just trying to see if this is where my cousin had her picture taken."

The old man stepped onto the path gingerly. "Your cousin, eh?" he said sceptically. "Likely story."

"No, really," said Ginny, oddly determined to explain the truth. "She was here in the thirties and had her picture taken with the head gardener."

The man's countenance changed completely. Instead of patent disbelief, a hungry look washed across his features. "How do you know about that?"

"I told you," Ginny said slowly. "My cousin Martha knew the head gardener and..." but she was cut off.

"Martha?" he asked tremulously. He took a shaky step forward and reached out a hand to Ginny. "You know Martha Maybeck?"

"Yes," Ginny said again. "She's my cousin. Well," she amended, "she's my mother's cousin."

The old man seemed to grow younger from merely mentioning Martha's name. "You'll be a Prewitt, then?" he asked, returning his gaze to Ginny.

"No, I'm a Weasley, Potter now," she corrected with a small blush, "but my mum was a Prewitt."

"Gideon and Fabian?"

"Her brothers."

"Ah," he said as if that explained everything. "Well, come one, then," he said and bid them follow. "It's tea time and I've got a load of work to do around the Ross Fountain before the fireworks."

Confused, but highly curious, they followed. "You are Thomas McCafferty, aren't you?" Ginny asked as they wound around a giant weeping birch and spotted a small building nestled in a copse of juniper trees by the side of a hill.

"Yes, I'm Thomas."

The postage-stamp cottage was confining, but very efficient. Ginny could tell that Thomas lived there, and wondered if he ever left the gardens. He used his wand to boil the water and put together some sandwiches. Soon, Harry and Ginny were tucked onto a small bench across a tiny table from Thomas.

"Weasley, eh?" he said pouring the tea into three porcelain cups. "Any relation to Septimus?"

"He's my granddad," she explained, spooning in two teaspoons of sugar and stirring. "Did you know him?"

"Aye," he said, a hint of the Scottish highlands leaking into his voice. "He was my best mate before he married Cedrella Black."



Ginny looked at Thomas, shocked. "Grandmum was a Black?" she asked. "I never knew she was related to...."

"Bartemus Crouch Sr., actually," interjected Thomas. "He was her nephew. There were three main lines of Blacks when your grandmum married Septimus. The line through Sirius, which after two generations merged with the line through Cygnus when Orion and Walburga married."

"Sirius's parents!" said Harry, who was lapping up every scrap of information on the Black family.

"That's how he got the name," Thomas confirmed. "From both his parents' great-grandfather. Then there was Arcturus' descendants. Your grandmother was one of his children."

Ginny's head was swimming. "You mentioned that granddad *was* your best mate. What happened?"

Thomas took a sip of his tea, his expression unchanged. "It was during the time when Grindelwald was gaining strength. He and I were in a secret organisation, along with Martha and several others, dedicated to stopping him."

"The Order of the Phoenix?" asked Harry.

"No, that was Dumbledore's club, formed to combat Voldemort decades later. Ours was less... glamorous." He took a bite of sandwich and stared out the windows for a moment. "We never challenged Grindelwald directly, but we were able to slow him down a little.

"There was a battle with his chief lieutenant, Rinspar Yaxley. Your grandfather and I were sent to flush him out of his hideout and Martha and another witch were to call in reinforcements. Well, he got the drop on us and before we knew it, Grindelwald was there. Even with four against two, they were able to injure one of us and escape."

Ginny and Harry sat, eyes fixed on Thomas, their sandwiches forgotten. "Who was injured? What happened?"

He sighed. "It was the witch that came with Martha. She died that night."

"Who was it?" Ginny asked softly sensing the worst.

"She was my sister." He stood and walked to the window. "Your grandfather was fixated with Grindelwald's wand. He duelled him single-handedly while the three of us took on Yaxley. When Yaxley was stunned, we turned to help Septimus, but he waved us off. That's when Grindelwald cursed my sister."

There was silence in the little kitchen, broken only by the slow tick-tock of an unseen clock. "So," began Harry tentatively, "your sister would have survived if Septimus wouldn't have stopped you from helping?"

Thomas gave a dry laugh. "I don't know for sure, but she shouldn't have been there in the first place." Thomas turned to face them. "I tried to tell him that she wasn't old enough to be fighting in the war, that we could have used another witch, but he was adamant. She's gone, he was our leader, and he has to take responsibility for it."

"But why?" asked Ginny but she was cut off.

"Listen to me," he said sardonically. "I haven't spoken to anyone about this in thirty years and here I am talking to you like...." He took a deep breath and blew it out, forcing a smile back on his face. "Now, how about I show you around the place?"

With a shared look of concern, they wolfed down their sandwiches and followed him outside. He was a good tour guide, showing them one breathtaking scene to another. They devoured the unbelievable gardens, asking questions about how magic was used to grow and preserve them, and despite an almost overwhelming urge to do so, never once brought up Ginny's grandfather again. The sun sank below the tree tops and lights twinkled along the paths and in the trees so that the flowers took on an almost otherworldly beauty.

They were at the entrance again, when Thomas locked eyes with Harry. "You fought in this last war, didn't you?"

"I...yes," Harry admitted.

"I can see it in your eyes, son," he said. Then after a few seconds, he straightened up. "While you're in Victoria, you should visit the Tall Ships Festival out in the harbour. They have boat races, ship tours, a mock battle, and from what I remember, there's a very romantic spot from the docks where you can watch it all." His waved them goodbye with a twinkle in his eye and popped back to his cottage.

\*

By the time the weekend arrived, they found themselves outside the Westwood Plateau Pitch, waiting along with hundreds of other Quidditch fans to see the Hammers play against the Vanguard's. Their strange encounter with Thomas was still swirling in Harry's head. He understood more than anyone how difficult it was to endanger someone needlessly. It's the primary reason he'd broken up with Ginny at Dumbledore's funeral. Still, Harry couldn't help but think Thomas McCafferty's story had something important to do with the Elder Wand.

"This is so exciting!" squealed Ginny. "Did you bring the Omnioculars? Ron won't believe it unless we show him."

Harry smiled at his wife and tapped the pocket of his robes. He had indeed brought the Omnioculars and his Invisibility Cloak. Touring Muggle-operated sites was one thing, attending a wizard-only event that was certain to boast thousands of attendees was asking for trouble. So he had transfigured his hair brown, replaced his glasses with more modern frames, and covered his scar with Muggle make-up he borrowed from Ginny.

The stadium was different than the one at Hogwarts that Harry was used to. Instead of large towers spread at intervals for fans to watch the action

level with the players, the walls of the stadium were raised so that spectators were stacked on top of one another like boxes in a warehouse.

Their box was near the top, next to the announcer. As soon as they were inside, Harry locked the door and returned his hair to normal. "It itches," he explained to Ginny and they sat down.

The Vanguard was warming up and he immediately zoomed in on their Seeker through the Omnioculars. The small witch was zooming through a set of conjured pylons in mid-air. She ran her broom through its paces and at the end, performed a Wronski-Feint and banished the pylons. She looked very good.

"My turn," said Ginny and she took the Omnioculars to spy on the Chasers.

It was a cool night with a solid grey ceiling of clouds over the city. Ginny wore gloves and a scarf, while Harry had only his cloak.

"Ooh," said Ginny as two of the Chasers collided with each other. "They could use some work on their Parkin's Pincer." She gestured to the heap of robes and brooms where the Vanguard captain was zooming towards. "If they can't even perform it in practice, I hope they don't try it in the game."

Harry didn't really know what the Pincer was, but it looked like all the Chasers tried to bodily attack the other team's chaser, which was played by the luckily uninjured Vanguard Keeper.

The Vanguard left the pitch and the Hammers took to the air. Applause rose from the stadium to meet them. They traded Omnioculars again and focused in on the Chasers and Seeker. When they were done, Harry leaned over to Ginny. "What do you think?"

"Hammers, no question," she said. "Their Chasers will eat the Vanguard alive, and their Keeper blocked all but one of their warm-up shots."

"No way. If the Snitch is out before they score a hundred points, the Vanguard Seeker will end the game."

Ginny laughed. "How many times have you seen the Snitch in the first fifteen minutes? Because that's how long it'll be before the Hammers have scored one hundred and fifty points."

Harry appraised his wife. "Wanna bet on it?"

"What do I get when you lose?" she asked saucily.

"Hmm," he said, considering the stakes. Even though they were in a private box, he leaned in and whispered in her ear.

She blushed to the roots of her hair but stuck out a hand. "You're on!"

The Announcer worked his way through the rosters of each team and even though the Vanguard was the home team, the Hammers got the most applause.

"And the Quaffle is out!" he yelled and the game began.

The Vanguard Chasers were as horrible as Ginny predicted, but they held the Hammers to a hundred points for the first hour, mainly due to some spectacular saves by their Keeper. They were even able to score twenty points on their own, making it only an eight point lead. The Hammers' Beaters were relentless however, and it wasn't long before one of the Vanguard Chasers was hit full on in the stomach.

"And that'll be the end of the game for Wimberly," said the announcer. "The reserve Chaser is fresh out of school and sure to be intimidated by the fearsome bats of Broadmoor and Bently."

Ginny growled. "I'd be intimidated to if my first appearance on a professional pitch was introduced like that."

"I thought you had a vested interest in seeing the Hammers win," Harry said with a waggle of his eyebrows.

Ginny smirked demurely. "The way I see it, no matter who win the bet, I'm the winner."

Harry never wanted to Snitch to get caught so badly in his life.

"You know," he said after the new Chaser was done warming up and the game resumed. "Have you ever thought about playing professionally?"

Ginny half turned toward him, keeping one eye on the game. "You mean Quidditch?"

The crowd rose in their boxes, and began to cheer. The Vanguard Seeker was diving straight down, breaking up a Hawkshead Attack from the Hammers, their Seeker trailing behind. Harry's trained eyes darted along the grass and stadium walls. "She's feinting," he said and the crowd let out a groan when the Hammer' Seeker ploughed into the sod.

The Vanguard Beaters took the opportunity to hit both Bludgers at the defending Keeper. The Vanguard scored and the Hammers' Beaters were very unhappy about it. They cracked the Bludgers at the opposing Beaters repeatedly until they were in an all out Bludger-hitting war. The Chasers were free to score unabated and the Hammers lead fell to sixty. One of the Vanguard's Beaters panicked and shot a Beater toward the stands, right at Harry and Ginny.

"Look out!" Harry yelled and Banished the Bludger with his wand, just as Broadmoor (or was it Bently) zoomed over to hit it back.

The man growled menacingly at Harry and when Harry looked at him, he felt his blood run cold. A familiar gruff face stared back in shock at Harry, obviously recognizing him. Broadmoor narrowed his eyes. He looked like he was ready to leap off his broom and attack Harry with his bat in front of

a thousand onlookers.

"That'll be a bumping foul charged against the Vanguards, but what's this?" The announcer stuck his head out of his box and turned to look at who Broadmoor was leering at. "Get back on the Pitch, Broadmoor... Oh! It seems we have a celebrity among us, folks!"

Harry quickly pulled out his Cloak, but it slipped to the floor of his box. It was the last thing he expected and he wrestled with the silvery material to get it on, but the Announcer was speaking again.

"Our very own Joss Woodhall!"

"Huh?" asked Harry, thoroughly confused. Broadmoor finally flew off as the game resumed, but he kept turning his head toward Harry.

Woodhall stood in the box next to them and waved to the crowd. A thousand flashes from a thousand cameras glittered toward them.

Harry grabbed Ginny's arm. "Come on," he said and slipped on his Cloak. He unlocked the door to their box and they were in the hallway. He was frustrated, however, because it seemed that everyone had the same idea, and were jostling to meet Joss, who was busy signing autographs as the queue got longer and longer.

Sending a mild Stinging Hex at the wizard in front of him, Harry was able to slip through the line and onto the stairs, Ginny trailing behind.

"Excuse me," she said, sounding very embarrassed.

It wasn't until they were well clear of the stadium that Harry pulled off his Cloak.

"Harry," said an exasperated Ginny. "Why did we leave? They didn't even recognize you. It was Woodhall they were excited about."

He shoved the Cloak back into his robe pocket. "It wasn't that. Didn't you recognize *him*?"

"Who?" asked Ginny.

"Broadmoor," explained Harry, who turned back to the stadium as a roar echoed from the crowd. "He was the one who attacked us at Hogwarts. He was the one who was after the Elder Wand!"

Ginny's face went white. "But Hermione Obliviated him," she said quickly. "He doesn't remember attacking us at all."

He wasn't so sure and judging by the way Broadmoor stared at Harry, it seemed like their lives were about to get a whole lot more complicated.

"He recognized me," Harry finally replied, "and that's enough."

Harry took Ginny's hand and they Apparated back to their flat.

## The Master of Life Dead End

### Chapter Nine – Dead End

The Weird Sisters woke Harry from his slumber the next morning. He'd been dreaming about the Department of Mysteries for the first time since his fifth year at Hogwarts. Instead of many themed rooms, there was a single large, dark room. It had on display every one of the things that was puzzling Harry. A moving portrait of Mclsenrod that matched the wanted poster they'd seen hung on a floating nail. His own wanted poster was next, with the reward now ten *million* galleons. Crackshot's confident face was splashed across an open, levitating *Daily Prophet* next to it, the caption reading "Minister Captures Potter, Rewards Self With Elder Wand". The last and most discomfoting was a portrait of Draco Malfoy. He leaned his sneering face out of the frame, down to Harry and opened his mouth as if to say something. That was when the music blared from the kitchen, banishing the dream.

Harry shook his thoughts clear and groped for his wand to turn off the wireless. With a pang of regret, he realised it was still in his jean pocket from the night before. His regret was short-lived, however, as the lump of red hair obscuring his vision began to lightly snore on his chest.

He brushed his hands along her pale arms until he reached the curve of her freckled shoulders. It never ceased to amaze him how beautiful she was. The snoring stopped, but her breathing was still deep. His fingers felt along the base of her neck until they were buried in her tousled hair. He gently massaged her scalp until he heard her answering moan rumble in his chest. She squirmed a little and then rolled over, taking the covers with her. She was not a morning person and so was obviously conflicted between accepting the attention and going back to sleep. She must have been extra tired to choose sleep, Harry mused.

Careful not to disturb her further lest he receive more than a stern look in return, Harry slipped out of the bed and put on his dressing gown. The wireless was still blaring, so he quickly closed the door between their room and the kitchen and began working on breakfast. Years of living with the Dursleys as their personal slave had made cooking this meal second nature for him. It wasn't long before the small flat was filled with the smell of pan-seared ham, toast, and fried eggs. He was setting the table when the music was traded for the morning news.

"Good morning, Victoria! Rockin' Johnny Cornellis here with your forecast and sports update."

Harry shook the orange juice and poured two glasses.

"It's a balmy fifty-two degrees at the harbour, but Charmaine the weather muse predicts a high of seventy-five. And a breeze out of the south picking up later in the day. If her predictions hold, those patchy clouds hovering over the island will turn into rain later tonight."

Good day to check out the Tall Ships Festival, he reflected. Probably best in the morning, though.

"The Tall Ships Festival begins today. Tickets can be purchased at the Info Centre on Wharf Street. Ship boarding times are ten a.m. to five p.m. There will be a mock gun battle on Friday, so you won't want to miss it."

That did sound fun. Harry tried to imaging what it would have been like to be on the *Swan* with guns blasting around them. He didn't fancy their chances.

"Last night's Quidditch match ended in a shocking defeat for favourite Haileybury who lost to our own Vanguard's two-hundred sixty to a hundred and ninety. This sets up another match between the rivals on Friday morning for the regional playoffs. The winner will go on to face the victor of the Eastern Canadian region for the national title."

Ginny appeared, rumped and adorable. Harry clicked off the wireless and met her in the doorway with a hug. "Morning, sleepyhead," he said and kissed her crown. She replied with a yawn, which she unsuccessfully stifled with the back of her hand.

"Mornin'," she said and sniffed appreciatively at the set table. "Breakfast?"

"Just for you," he said and led her to her seat. She plopped down and pushed her hair behind her ears.

By the time they were done eating, Ginny was much more alert, but that could have had something to do with the mug of tea she was cradling in her hands. All of a sudden, her eyes grew large.

"Harry!" she said, setting her mug down. "It's your birthday!"

He froze for a second, doing some mental arithmetic in his head. "Oh yeah...."

"I got you a present!" she said and was gone in a flurry of pink cotton.

Before Harry was finished with his tea, she was back, a small something wrapped with green paper in her hand.

He smiled as he took it. "You didn't have to get anything," he said, but excitedly tore the paper off.

"Of course I did," she said simply. "It's your first birthday since we've been married. I wasn't likely to forget."

Harry was suddenly aware that her birthday was in eleven days and that he had yet to get anything for her. "Well I think you're the best present a bloke could ask for."

Her cheeks turned a faint pink. "So open it already!"

The lid was pulled back and inside, Harry found a picture frame, fitted with a photo of him and Ginny dressed in their wedding finery. "How did you get this so fast?" he asked, reaching out to touch her photographic counterpart.

"I made arrangements with the photographers and Mum slipped it in the bag when we were dancing. I had already bought the frame."

He pulled her onto his lap and they shared a kiss. "Thank you," he said. She wiggled free and moved back to her own seat, picking up her still warm mug.

"You tell Hermione and Ron about last night?" she asked, savouring a long sip of her tea.

Harry looked up, tearing his eyes away from the photo as she Banished the dishes to their small sink. "Which part of last night should I be telling them about?" he asked with a smirk.

She was properly shocked and, her wand still in hand gave it a speedy flick, sending a sofa cushion flying at him. He caught it and set it sailing right back where it came from. "I haven't written a thing since we first arrived," he said without missing a beat.

Ginny finished her tea in a single swallow. "I'll do it," she said and Summoned the journal and a quill. "My handwriting is much more legible than yours."

Harry watched her as she began to scratch the details of their close call last night. "I'm not as bad as Ron," he replied. Her eyes traced Hermione's reply and she smiled, ignoring his comment.

"They want to send Aiden to us now, is that all right?" she asked, looking up at him, a twinkle in her eye. "They say there's a birthday present coming along with him."

Suddenly, Harry had an idea. "Do you mind if they come along, too?" He knew that having their friends visit on their honeymoon wasn't exactly the most romantic overture, but Harry needed to get their input on things that even the replicating journal couldn't properly convey.

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "As long as they don't spend the night...."

Harry laughed. "Here?" he said, gesturing to their tiny flat. "I don't think they'd sleep very much if they did."

"All right," replied Ginny, who was already writing to Hermione. "I told them to give us a minute to clean up." She put down the quill and hurried to the loo. Harry followed, and when they returned to the kitchen dressed for the day, a bright ball of flame appeared in the middle of the living room.

Aiden glided around their heads carrying packages that were much too large to be borne by any normal bird and dropped them in Harry and Ginny's room. He re-emerged and found his cage, happily settling on his perch to watch the humans.

"Hermione," squealed Ginny and they were quickly hugging and giggling. They sat on the sofa and the girl talk commenced immediately.

Ron rolled his eyes and slapped Harry on the back. "They're mental," he said. "Happy birthday, by the way."

"Thanks," said Harry, who retrieved a salmon filet from the refrigerator and slid it onto Aiden's cage. The red and blue bird immediately began to snap it up. "Been busy cavorting around the world as Harry Potter?"

Ron sat at the kitchen table and Harry followed suit. "I don't envy you in the slightest," Ron said and poured some tea in a fresh cup. "The authorities are easy enough to avoid." He glanced sideways at Hermione, who was laughing at something Ginny said. "It's the witches that want to steal you away from Ginny. They're almost unstoppable."

Harry smirked knowingly, "You didn't... Not with Hermione with you..."

"No!" he said vehemently. "I wouldn't do *that*. Besides, that's not the point. The point is you better be careful when you come home. Ginny'll be hexing girls left and right if she catches wind of it."

Harry nodded. "Luckily, no one seems to know me here."

"Yeah? Must be nice," Ron replied. Aiden was warbling softly as he finished off the filet. "Where is here, anyway?"

"Canada," said Harry. "But I have a feeling our honeymoon is about to get cut short."

Ron didn't reply to this, as Harry called Ginny and Hermione over to the table.

"Happy birthday, Harry," Hermione said and gave him a firm hug.

"Thanks," he said and they all found a chair. "We may have to cut our honeymoon short." Ginny made a face as she picked at a piece of bacon. "With the incident with Broadmoor last night, I'm guessing we'll have wizards from our D.M.L.E. showing up to search for us very soon."

"We could make Harry appear in another country," Ron suggested. "I've always wanted to go to New Zealand."

Harry shook his head. "It needs to stop. Crackshot's taken this too far and I'm going to run any more."

Ginny was chewing hatefully on her bacon while the wheels were turning in Hermione's head. Hermione opened her mouth to speak. "To get Crackshot off your back, it's going to take nothing short of handing over the Elder Wand."

Harry snorted. "Not likely."

Hermione's lips pursed. "Quite. He's completely obsessed with it. Take this Mclsenrod character..."

"Oh yeah," said Harry. "We found a wanted poster with him on it. He killed my great-great grandmother."

"No he didn't," contradicted Hermione and she produced a book from her bag. After turning to the correct page, she handed it to Harry. "Polemon Mclsenrod was a wandmaker from Scotland, who toured the world to document international wand lore. He was friends with Gregorovitch's grandfather, Vasili."

In the book, there was a picture of Mclsenrod with a man that very much resembled the Gregorovitch Harry had seen in his visions, each displaying a box of wands with pride, as if they were their firstborn children.

Hermione continued. "Mclsenrod heard about a wand that was very unique and went to Canada to find it. I'm guessing your great-great grandmother had the Elder Wand, but it isn't clear in the book. When Vasili found out, he used Mclsenrod to meet her. After gaining her trust, he poisoned her and took the wand, framing his friend for the murder in the process."

Harry looked down at Vasili in the book and felt his anger flare. "Why didn't they lock him away if they knew he'd set Mclsenrod up?"

"It was too late," said Ron, who had obviously been helping Hermione research. "By the time they found out about the double-cross, Mclsenrod had been sent through the veil and Vasili was making Elder Wand ripoffs in Russia."

Harry closed the book and stood, pacing around the small coffee table in the living room. A dozen possibilities were swirling through his mind and as he considered each one, a picture began to develop. "We've been looking at it all wrong," he said and stopped pacing. "I don't have to surrender the wand to Crackshot, I just have to lose it to someone else. Then all the attention will move to that person and I'll be free."

"But who would want that?" asked Ron, who Harry assumed would have jumped at the chance to take the wand from him. "As nice as it would be to have an unbeatable wand, I don't fancy my chances duelling every witch or wizard who wants to take it from me."

"Exactly," said Harry, feeling more of his plan slipping into place. "That's the beauty of it. I don't actually have to give it up." He turned to Hermione. "How much Polyjuice do we have left?"

Her eyes went wide as she caught where Harry was going. "Enough for four more doses, but Harry... You still have to give the wand to someone for it to look real. They could lose it in a non-magical way and..."

Harry waved off her concern. "That won't be a problem," he said and called Aiden to him. "There's a certain wand maker that owes me a favour and if I'm right, he wouldn't miss a chance at seeing the Elder Wand firsthand."

"Ollivander?" asked Ron.

"Right in one," said Harry. Aiden was preening his feathers feeling remarkably light on his shoulder. "We'll need to contact a few other people for support as well..."

"Harry," said Ginny, who until this moment hadn't taken part of the conversation. "Our honeymoon isn't over."

He balked at the smouldering look on her face. "Ginny," he said defensively. "It's not like I planned on being seen at the Quidditch match last night."

"I don't care about bloody Crackshot or the stupid Elder Wand. That can all wait until we've had our time together."

Harry looked around for support, but Ron was busy staring at the ceiling and Hermione was fiddling with *Historical Wandmakers and their Remarkable Stories*. "Okay. We can probably fudge a few days. That will give us time to finish our honeymoon and contact some allies." Her eyes seemed to soften a little. "What else would you like to do?"

Ginny relaxed her shoulders. "I just want to be with you. That's the most important thing, but since you asked..." She smiled. "The Tall Ships Festival is the only thing left on my list."

"You have a list?" asked Ron, who was rewarded with a smack on the arm from his sister.

"Ooh," replied Hermione. "That's supposed to be very interesting. They have an article in the *Prophet* every year with pictures of the winning boats and everything."

Harry's eyebrows curved upward. "The *Prophet* covers this?" he asked, interested.

“Definitely,” said Hermione. “They have a special edition on it as half the boats come from Wizards and half of those come from Britain.”

Harry smiled as the final pieces of his plan fell into place. “Interesting, indeed, Hermione.”

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The plan was good enough that when he explained it to Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, they all agreed that it could work. It called for Harry and Ginny to attend the Quidditch semi-final match between the Hammers and the Vanguard. Joss Woodall was happy to provide them with tickets and they found themselves in the same box next to the announcer. Although Harry brought his Invisibility Cloak with him, he didn't bother using it to enter the stadium, nor did he resort to Transfiguring his hair and glasses as he did the last time. They were supposed to be seen.

It was an afternoon match, which meant that as long as the match went quickly, they would have plenty of time to head over to the festival afterwards.

Ginny's demand to finish their honeymoon had affected Harry greatly. He realised she wasn't being petulant, but was demonstrating her wisdom. They would only ever get one honeymoon and she wanted to make the most of it despite their circumstances. This made him more determined to spend their remaining time with her. Since part of Harry's plan involved Ginny, he spent a couple of hours a day leading up to the semi-final match teaching her some of the things he learned from Kingsley. By the time Friday was upon them, he had a new appreciation for her reputation as such a powerful witch.

The teams were taking turns warming up and when the Hammers took the pitch, it didn't take Broadmoor very long to spot Harry. He spent a few minutes in the air, half-heartedly practicing with a Bludger before he slumped over his broom and was carried off by his teammates.

“There's been a change in the line up,” said the announcer once the crowd realised that he was missing. “Broadmoor has taken ill and will be replaced with the reserve Beater, Henningly.”

The Hammers' half of the crowd booed while the rest cheered.

“Taken ill, my foot,” said Ginny, who was focusing her Omniculars on the doorway that led to the Hammers locker room.

“I have a feeling he'll be as healthy as an ox by the time the game is over,” Harry said with a smirk.

Without one of their starting Beaters, the Hammers fell by an even larger margin. The Vanguard were celebrating their victory mid-pitch when Harry and Ginny left their box and began to walk to the designated Apparition point. As he expected, six wizards began to trail them as they exited the stadium.

Harry knew they wouldn't risk an attack with hundreds of other witches and wizards around, so they took their time, acting oblivious to their trailers. When they left the wards, the pops of departing wizards masked a spell Harry sent behind him, temporarily disabling Broadmoor. The five other pursuers yelled and began to run at Harry and Ginny, who, smirking and waving at them, Disapparated.

Harry appeared in a deserted alley just off Wharf Street. He knew that they would trace his Apparition and not Ginny's, so the plan called for them splitting up. Harry pulled out his Invisibility Cloak and walked quickly out of the alley and across the street, hiding behind a large wooden sign. The time he had bought himself in disabling Broadmoor paid off as the hem of his cloak had just settled when several pops like children's firecrackers announced the presence of wizards in the alley.

“Split up,” yelled Broadmoor in his gruff voice. “Two each down the street. Bobbin's with me. Potter can't have gone far.”

They did as they were told and as the sound of their footsteps diminished, Broadmoor raised his wand. “*Homenum Revelo*,” he intoned, pointing his wand back down the alleyway. He and the man named Bobbin made a methodical circle of magic to expose Harry's presence.

It was only a matter of time before they found his magical signature. Harry pointed his wand at Bobbin and waited for the perfect moment. “*Somnus*,” he whispered and Bobbin collapsed in a heap from the most powerful sleeping spell known. Not even Ennervate would wake him.

Harry had to duck when Broadmoor's counterattack blasted a hole in the sign he'd been hiding behind. He rolled on the pavement and fired off two quick Stunning Spells, his Cloak falling to his feet. Broadmoor dove out of the way and Harry was able to grab his Cloak and run down the street toward the docks.

A powerful Shield Charm repelled all of Broadmoor's hexes. Harry was sure that the man wouldn't use an Unforgivable just yet. Breathing heavy and grateful more than ever for the time he spent working at the casting range with Kingsley, Harry turned onto the rough wooden planks that led out over the water.

“Go!” Harry yelled, and turned just as a red bolt of light missed him and caught the side of a fishing trawler on fire. An engine roared to life and as he thundered down the dock, a familiar white boat began to leave the quay. He slowed just a little to time his jump and with a tiny backward glance at Broadmoor, Harry pointed his wand down and nonverbally propelled himself over the lengthening gap of seawater. He sailed in the air and rolled to a crouch on the waiting deck of the accelerating Isabella Swan.

Broadmoor cursed and sent two more Stunners at Harry for good measure, but Harry easily deflected them. Behind him, the four other men that had been pursuing Harry turned the corner of the dock and motioned for Broadmoor to follow.

“All in one piece?” asked Captain August, who was directing his boat out of the harbour at the highest speed that wouldn't attract notice from the marine patrol. In the distance, Harry heard the dull thunder of canon fire.

“So far, so good,” he said. “Everything ready here?”

August nodded and twiddled his wand so the boat made a slight turn to the west. "Let's just hope your friends take the bait."

There was a low growl from behind them as another boat began to slip from its moorings. A smaller, but fast looking ship was turning to pursue the Swan. "Bingo," said August. On the deck of the smaller boat, Broadmoor was urging his men on. They began to gain on them.

"Gun it," said Harry.

The Swan lurched as the engines roared to their full capacity and Harry had to grab hold of a rope to keep from losing his balance. They cleared the harbour and August began to unfurl the sails. Out in the Strait, a large mock gun battle was being waged. Hundreds of puffs of smoke floated through the air from cannons being fired in simulated anger.

The sun was sitting low on the horizon, not far from sinking beneath the waves; this caused the wind to pick up on most days and today was no exception. As the sails snapped taught, the Swan leaned over and soon pushed her past the top speed of the engines. The sound of the motors died away and Harry looked back to see Broadmoor's ship impossibly gaining.

"Keep going into the heart of the battle," said Harry and August grunted as he did the work of ten men, adjusting sail and rudder in complicated movements that made Harry glad he'd picked the Swan for the scene of his escape.

The boats of the festival were scattered around the Strait. Those with guns fired volley after volley of gunpowder to the delight of the spectators on the boats in the periphery. The Swan, along with her smaller pursuer barrelled directly into the middle of this scene, instantly gaining notice from the wizards in attendance. The Muggles only saw the splashing of the waves as the Swan's hull cut the water.

Sweat beading on his forehead, August pulled the Swan around a large three-masted sailing barque, who wasn't firing guns, but was full of waving witches and wizards. Harry waved back.

Suddenly, an angry purple light shot across the gap between the Swan and her pursuer. It missed them, but impacted the ocean in front of the ship, spraying them with water.

"Warning shot?" asked August, who was gaining fast on a brig, who was cheerily firing her four guns into the fading sunlight.

"That's my guess," replied Harry. They were close enough that Harry could see their lips moving as they spoke. "We've got about five minutes. Are you ready?"

August gave a quick nod and swivelled the mast and rudder, causing the Swan to lean the opposite direction and turn hard to port. Broadmoor, in his smaller ship began to cut the corner.

"Make that two minutes."

Harry jumped down from the wheelhouse and onto the main deck. Another blast of light, this one yellow streaked at him and he batted it away. The booms from the canons were deafening.

August made one more last ditch effort to thwart Broadmoor's pursuit by ducking around a smaller sailing ship that was closer to the Swan's size. To Harry's happy surprise, there were a cadre of robe-clad reporters on board, who began to snap photos of Harry as he deflected more and more spells. Soon, the boat Broadmoor was manning was even with the Swan and August turned his ship into a circle around the schooner.

Using the angle provided by their turn, Harry Levitated one of Broadmoor's men off his feet and dropped him into the white wake of their ship. It cost him, however as he was forced to deflect three Stunning Spells that sent him sprawling into the base of the main mast. He jumped up and was caught again with a set of spells that he was barely able to repel in time. Now on the defensive, Harry pulled out the Elder Wand and began to weave shields and hexes in a combination that kept the odds equal. More flashes erupted from the ship they continued to circle.

Broadmoor made a motion with his wand and their boat began to close the gap. Harry used the momentary distraction to Banish one of his men a hundred feet off the deck and into the ocean. Three men down, three to go.

Focusing on Broadmoor, Harry stepped around the deck of the Swan, dodging and weaving through a hail of red, blue, and purple lights. Finally, one of his spells found its mark and cut a gash in Broadmoor's arm. The man yelled and jabbed his wand at their ship. It lurched sideways and crashed into the Swan in a cacophony of splintered wood and crushed glass, sending Harry sprawling backwards and down the set of stairs that led to the dining deck.

His back on fire, Harry propped himself on his elbows and stared into a set of equally green eyes. "Go!" he whispered and his lookalike rushed up the stairs to rejoin the battle, dressed in the exact same robes and holey jeans, and armed with two identical wands to the ones Harry was still gripping. As soon as his doppelganger was gone, a pair of soft hands pulled Harry to a nearby sofa.

"Harry," said Ginny sternly. "Always have to be the hero, don't you?" The spells and shouts were much closer by Harry's estimation, meaning that Broadmoor and his cronies had been able to board the Swan after Harry fell. Their ship was almost stopped now, still crunching into the ruined side of Broadmoor's stolen boat.

He gasped when Ginny probed his back. "Not so hard," he hissed.

"Baby," she said with a grin and administered several healing spells. "Better?"

He moved his arms experimentally and sat on the sofa. "Much. Did Hermione get off okay?"

She nodded. "She's on the Rejoice with the reporters from the *Prophet*, deflecting stray curses." There was another cry above their heads. "How



much longer until Kingsley lets one of them win?"

"He'll wait until two of them are disabled and let the last one disarm him," explained Harry. "That way, the whole world will think I've lost the Elder Wand, and you and I can go back to our nice quiet life."

She gave him a perplexed look. "I don't know about quiet, but it will be nice to have things settle down to a manageable level."

He relaxed and felt her hands checking the rest of his body for injuries. "Are you sure this is what you want to do for the rest of your life?" she asked.

"What?" he replied with his own question as another wizard cried out above them. "Fight Dark wizards?" He thought of his promise to Kingsley. "Would that be okay with you?"

Ginny's hand cupped his cheek and pulled it softly until he was staring into her warm brown eyes. "I don't care what you do with your life, as long as you're happy." He leaned in for a kiss.

"Well, well, well," said a familiar drawling voice, pulling Harry and Ginny apart. "You shouldn't let your guard down, Potter. Only a pair of pathetic Gryffindors would be foolish enough to snog in the middle of a battle."

Harry's mouth dropped open as he automatically took up a defensive stance in front of Ginny. Rising the stairs from the berthing compartments, flanked by Broadmoor and August, a smirk of absolute confidence on his face, was Draco Malfoy.

## The Master of Life Deceptions

### Chapter Ten – Deceptions

“Traitor!” yelled Ginny with fire in her voice. Malfoy continued to smirk, shifting his gaze to her which made Harry clench his wands tighter. August twiddled his own wand, his eyes wary, but he didn’t respond to Ginny’s accusation. Broadmoor limped behind them onto the deck.

“The explosives are set,” said August to Malfoy. “As soon as you give the word, I’ll set them off.”

Malfoy caught Broadmoor’s eye, which was black and blue. “Did your man beat Potter’s clone?”

Broadmoor nodded his head toward the steps leading to the open deck.

There was the sound of someone struggling down the stairs with a heavy burden. One of Broadmoor’s goons was pulling a Stunned Kingsley-as-Harry behind him, and not very carefully – Kingsley’s head made a hollow thud on each step.

“Toss him in the corner, Gordman,” said Broadmoor. “And make sure he doesn’t move while we deal with Potter.”

The man named Gordman complied and levitated Kingsley to the corner of the deck on Harry’s right, his beady eyes watching the drama unfold.

August, Broadmoor, and Malfoy formed a small semi-circle oriented on Harry and Ginny, their wands drawn, but still pointed at the ground. “What do you want, Malfoy?” said Harry slowly, hoping Kingsley wasn’t concussed from his rough treatment.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he replied. “I’m here to reclaim my wand.”

“You never had it in the first place,” said Harry as Ginny shifted behind him, widening her stance just as he’d shown her. “Just because you disarmed Dumbledore doesn’t mean it was ever yours.”

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed. “You took my wand from me in my own house,” he said in a loud, accusatory voice. “That wand is locked up at the Ministry and so I demand that you make it right – with interest.” His cocky smirk was sickening.

“The Ministry had every right to lock up your wand and there’s no way I’m going to give you something that doesn’t belong to you and that you haven’t earned.”

“That’s right,” spat Malfoy. “I *haven’t* earned it... yet. But it doesn’t matter, does it? The house arrest was a sham,” he said with a smooth smile. “I was having a pint with my friends by the end of the day and that blood traitor Shacklebolt got the sack for it.”

“What?” cried Harry and Ginny together. Malfoy confessing involvement in Kingsley’s removal as Minister had taken them by surprise.

“You heard me, Potter. What’s more, Crackshot’s been my inside man at the Ministry ever since.” He laughed at their shocked faces. “I began running the show right after that pathetic excuse for a trial and I’ve used every resource the Ministry has to catch you and put you in Azkaban in my place.”

“No!” yelled Harry, but he believed every word. It was exactly like Malfoy to manipulate, coerce, and intimidate until he got his way. Something burned in Harry’s mouth. Memories of Narcissa bending low over him, fear etched on her face, the trembling in her voice. “I testified for you! I got you a lighter sentence!”

Malfoy shrugged and the nonchalance galvanized Harry, forcing the anger into resolve. “It really didn’t matter in the end. Pure blood and deep pockets matter more than your brand of morals, Potter.”

“What about your mother?” said Harry, more in a bid to keep Malfoy talking and buy time to think of a way out of this mess than anything else. There were three on Malfoy’s side if Harry didn’t count Gordman, who had been instructed to watch Kingsley. Ginny was powerful, but Harry hesitated to have her take an active role in any wandplay. “She wouldn’t risk you heading to Azkaban. How did you convince her to let you run this charade?”

Draco smirked again and raised his wand. “What mummy doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”

“Don’t,” said Ginny, picking up on Harry’s play for distraction. “Don’t do this Draco. You can’t beat Harry and everything will come crashing down on your head again. Can you really afford to risk that?”

A sneer replaced the smirk as Malfoy focused on Ginny. “There is no risk,” he said evenly, but Harry could tell Draco didn’t quite believe it. It was as if he had bluffed so long, he started to believe the lies himself. “I’ve thought through all the possibilities. You’re trapped on this sinking ship, which will explode, taking you with it. The reporters will think it was an accident and report your death and I will have the Deathstick.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. Draco wasn't going to walk away from this one. "Over my dead body."

Malfoy chuckled. "That's the idea." He nodded once, sharply and Goldman pointed his wand at Kingsley. "Surrender or I'll kill the Muggle-lover."

"It doesn't work that way, Malfoy," said Harry. "You have to beat me in a duel to get the wand's allegiance. Voldemort tried it like that and it didn't work out so well for him in the end."

The skin between Draco's brows pinched together. If he hadn't been in mortal danger, Harry would have laughed at the effort Malfoy made to think the situation through. As it was, Harry was struggling with the urge to tuck Ginny away in a conjured steel box until the coming fight was over. He knew that he'd be in heaps of trouble with his wife if he took away her agency, so he focused on how best to use her skills against their opponents.

Malfoy raised his left hand in the classic dueller's stance. "So be it," he said finally and the fight began.

Harry should have known that Malfoy wouldn't fight fair. As soon as he spoke, both of his goons shot spells at Harry, while Malfoy waited to see if Harry would be disarmed.

Harry deflected the Stunners easily and pulled up a section of wooden decking in front of him with his Holly wand, revealing one of the smaller suites below. As it was levitating, he used the Elder Wand to transfigure it into something that resembled six inch thick steel deck plating from a World War Two battleship. This took him less than a second.

Several spells collided with the impromptu shield, including a flash of sickly green. Holding the steel in midair, Harry nodded at Ginny, who reached for his Invisibility Cloak and disappeared underneath its silky material.

The wizard watching over the still unconscious Kingsley hadn't moved, but kept his vigilant eyes on the fight. The Polyjuice was wearing off Kingsley, and Harry's features began to broaden and grow darker, his hair disappearing into the blackening scalp.

Broadmoor and August moved to flank Harry while Draco continued to pound spell after spell into his shield. Still levitating the shield with the Elder Wand, he used his Holly wand to shoot a Stunning Spell at August, who was forced to dive out of the way. The sea-captain fired several hexes from a protected place behind one of the pillars that supported the upper deck. The flashes of magic went wide at first, but Harry was forced to deflect the last one. The captain's low profile made it difficult for Harry to find his target and holding the plating meant he was unable to dodge.

Broadmoor was able to get off three hexes at Harry which were mysteriously deflected and then realisation dawned on Broadmoor's face. He Summoned the Invisibility Cloak. It tried to leave Ginny, but didn't quite make it. Her feet appeared, however and it gave Broadmoor all the advantage he needed.

Harry's concentration was torn between deflecting the continued assault from August, holding up the shield that kept Malfoy at bay, and sending the occasional hex at Broadmoor to give Ginny a fighting chance. She had learned a lot in the few days he'd been able to train her, but she just wasn't as aggressive as the burly beater. The only way he was able to pay attention to all three tasks was to drop the floating metal in front of him for a split second and shoot a spell at Broadmoor before grabbing it again with his magic – all while fending off and attacking August. Harry never felt his head more split since the time Voldemort possessed him.

Just as Harry had dropped the shield to beat Broadmoor back again, it was suddenly wrenched from his grip in a crackle of magic that revealed a very angry Malfoy. It sailed over the blonde's head and crashed down the wooden steps, leaving rough gouges in the polished mahogany. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ginny dive away from a purple spell shot from Broadmoor.

Free of his shield, Harry was able to duck and roll toward August as another Killing Curse flew from Draco's wand. It screamed over the grand piano in the front of the dining deck and exploded out the bow of the ship. Harry struck at Malfoy from his crouched position, but his aim was thrown off by a curse from August. It was good enough, however, to cause Malfoy to dive awkwardly out of the way and gave Harry a clear shot at the traitorous captain. August was no match for Harry armed as he was with two wands and August's shield gave way in an instant. The next second, he was slumped on the floor.

Something hot sizzled over Harry's head, sending his hair standing on end and he instinctually rolled to his right again. When he popped up he was facing the opposite direction, watching Broadmoor pummel Ginny's shield. It finally gave way and Broadmoor reached his arm up opening his mouth to scream a spell.

"AVADA – "In the time it took him to raise his wand and say the first word of the spell, Ginny's wand wrenched skyward and with it, Broadmoor's leg. It only took her a second to disarm and stun him.

Harry didn't have time to celebrate Ginny's escape from death because Draco was back on his feet, slinging green light at him, his eyes wild. "Die Potter!"

Refusing to dive around the exploding and burning deck of the ship lest one of his spells go astray and strike Ginny or Kingsley, Harry began a new tactic. With both wands, he pulled the piano from under the smoking hole that used to be the bow of the ship and hurled it at Malfoy. It exploded in another flash of green, but the momentum of the heavy instrument urged some of the pieces on toward Malfoy, who was forced to dive out of the way again. Harry took his chance and began to magically assault Malfoy with tables, chairs, vases, and anything else that would distract him.

Malfoy shot down a table with a vicious stab of his wand, but was hit in the shoulder by a metal chair. He staggered, but was able to banish another table and explode a heavy oak-framed painting.

Seeing that Malfoy was now on the defensive, Harry decided to press his advantage. He bit his lip and tensed his muscles, calling upon his magic as he stretched his arms wide. Every loose object in the room rose on his command and when Malfoy's eyes widened, Harry flung his arms down, pointing them at Malfoy's heart. The blonde shrieked and a thousand bits of metal, wood, and glass converged on him until he was completely

buried in rubble.

Shaken and exhausted, Harry sank to his knees. Ginny scrambled to her feet and breathing deeply, made her way to Harry. "I'm okay," he said even as his head swam. "Ron," he called to the man who was watching over Kingsley, "Ennervate him and let's get out of here."

Ron removed the Transfigurations Harry put on him to disguise his face and revived Kingsley. "Blimey, Harry. You don't know how hard it was for me to not curse Broadmoor. And Malfoy!"

Harry nodded, letting Ginny pull him to his feet. "That's one of the reasons I had you promise to wait. If we'd been captured, we would have needed someone on the inside."

Kingsley shook his head clear from his post-stun fog. "That and you were making sure I didn't get pegged with a stray curse." He walked slowly toward Harry and looked around at the ruined interior of the boat. He let out a low whistle. "I guess things didn't exactly go according to plan."

"Malfoy showed up," Ginny explained and pointed to the giant pile of rubbish.

Kingsley growled. "That little ferret!" Ron and Harry exchanged a grin. "He's supposed to be on house arrest." He pointed to the pile with his wand and cleared it off, revealing an unconscious Malfoy. "You've just earned a one-way ticket to Azkaban," said Kingsley with a sad shake of his head. "Some people never learn."

"He seemed to think our esteemed Minister is in his pocket," said Ron.

Kingsley's eyebrows rose. "Is that so?"

Ron nodded. "I'll go give the all clear to Hermione and she can help us get back to shore."

He hadn't taken two steps when Harry saw a movement out of the corner of his eye. August was awake and was reaching for his wand. Ginny was still supporting Harry and so he couldn't bring his wand to bear fast enough. Instead of sending a hex at him, however, August caught his cousin's eye and twisted his wand hard. Kingsley mouthed the word 'No'. There was a hissing sound from deep within the bowels of the ship and Harry's stomach clenched with dread.

He didn't even think about it, his hands just moved of their own accord. Kingsley, Ron, Ginny, and even Malfoy and August were Summoned simultaneously, rushing toward a point in the middle of the deck. As soon as they collided together, Harry brought his wands up. The floor curled up around them and connected in a solid seam, then turned into a shiny silver metal ball. Harry pointed his wand at his feet and began to run for the stairs, a Banishing Hex on his lips. He reached the steps and when the sky opened above him, he shouted, "*Depulso!*" Then the world exploded.

He felt his back straighten from the shockwave and barely registered the heat of the explosion before something thick and icy compressed his chest and face. He wanted to gasp from the shock of it, but knew that would be the end. Instead, he kicked hard and his head broke the surface of the strangely calm water around the burning boat. He shoved his wands in his pockets, and with every ounce of energy he had, he pulled a piece of wood from the debris of the Swan under his arms and floated. In the last of the light spilling over the western horizon, Harry was able to pick out the figure of a bushy-haired girl diving from the deck of the Rejoice into the heaving seas before his world went black.

\*

One moment, Ginny was supporting Harry, who obviously had spent a lot of magic on the duel with Malfoy, Broadmoor, and August; the next moment, she was being wrenched from him and smashed together with everyone else in the room. Her head swam from the impact of all the bodies and before she could do or say anything, the floor was curving skyward and the light disappeared. A second later, there was a thunderous GONG and she was thrown into the side of the metal sphere.

When Ginny opened her eyes, there was light again – and noise, but something was wrong about it all. Kingsley and Ron were hovering over her and something icy was lapping at her side. She groaned.

"Get up, Ginny," said Ron. "We can't carry everyone."

It took her a second to understand what he meant. The icy liquid was seawater that had leaked into the sphere. The light was coming from a gaping hole in the side, where something heavy had ripped into it and where water was starting to pour in. Because it was round, the sphere was rolling with the waves and the hole dipped and bobbed into the water. It was only a matter of time before the hole didn't bob back above the water line and the sphere would fill with water.

Malfoy and August were still unconscious at the bottom of the orb.

"We'll have to swim for it," said Kingsley. "Bubblehead Charms."

"Wait," screeched Ginny, her eyes darting from face to face. "Where's Harry?"

"He was outside the sphere when the ship exploded," said Ron in a high-pitched voice.

Ginny paled.

"We need to get out of here," said Kingsley firmly. "Now." He pointed his wand at his head and a large, clear bubble appeared. He grabbed Malfoy's arm and put a bubble on him as well. Then, with Malfoy in tow, he leapt through the hole, which dipped into the sea, flooding their feet with more freezing water before it lurched skyward again.

"Come on," said Ron. "I'll take August. You go first."

She nodded mutely and pointed her wand at her head, dimly amazed that she still held it after the explosion. Ron placed a bubble on himself and then his prisoner. Ginny waited for the hole to bob back level so she could jump out. As she move her feet, the sphere rolled quickly and the hole sank into the water. She dove where she thought the hole was in the rush of frigid water, but was shot back into the sphere. Soaking wet and shivering, she focused on the gurgling water, almost losing her footing on the slippery metal as she waited for the hole to right itself. The water was rising fast.

"It's too strong," she yelled through her bubble and Ron nodded in reply. He pointed his wand at the wall where he thought the horizon was and blasted another hole. This was the wrong thing to do, as the air now had a place to escape, causing a geyser of water to further flood the sphere.

"GO!" he yelled, and Ginny didn't hesitate. She dove out the newly-formed jagged opening and involuntarily gasped as her body hit the water. She surfaced immediately and turned to make sure Ron made it.

The sphere was sinking rapidly and the new break was almost level with the waves.

"Come on Ron," said Ginny softly as she tread water, her muscles aching in the cold.

Kingsley gave a cry from behind her and she wrenched her eyes across the waves. Malfoy was loose and Kingsley was giving chase. The blonde shot a spell at the older man and resumed swimming toward the nearest boat. Then a heart-wrenchingly familiar black blob of hair caught Ginny's eye. She was torn. Ron was still in the sphere, which was now slipping beneath the waves, but Harry.... He was too far away. Then she heard Hermione cry and saw her dive from the deck of the Rejoice. Hermione would have to take care of Harry, because she was closer to Ron and he was in peril.

Gritting her teeth, she dove under the waves and swam as fast as her jeans and t-shirt would allow. The sphere was dark in the green water, but she could see well enough. "*Reducto!*" she yelled, jabbing her wand forward and the top half of the sphere blew off.

She waited a beat and then exhaled as a murky shock of red hair pulled clear of the falling metal ball. Ron was still struggling to pull August back to the surface, who was now awake, his eyes wide and white in the dark water. The captain pointed his wand at Ron, who was looking skyward, oblivious. Ginny shouted, but he couldn't hear through the twenty feet of water.

Her wand was up in an instant and she said the first spell on her lips, the same spell she'd just used. "*Reducto!*" As soon as the blast of red left her wand and shimmered through the water, she cringed. It hit August in the arm, severing it completely off from his body and out of Ron's grip. August's face froze in pain and he sank deeper. Ron broke the surface and Ginny swam towards him.

Ron conjured a large oak table and heaved himself on top. Ginny reached the table, its legs submerged and scrambled on.

Ron cancelled their bubbles. "What happened to August?"

Ginny squeezed her eyes shut. "He was about to hex you!" she shouted. "I couldn't let him... I didn't think..." She collapsed on the table in a heap, her arms wrapped around her middle to control the sobs that threatened to break through her clenched lips. All her mind could see was the shock on August's face as he floated down into the black heart of the ocean.

Warm hands held Ginny's shoulders. "It wasn't your fault," said Ron soothingly. "You couldn't have known. It wasn't your fault."

"But I said the hex. The wrong hex," she said quietly – it hurt to speak. "I – I killed him."

Ron didn't say anything else. She heard him conjure something and then the staccato of rhythmic splashing and Ron's muted grunts as he paddled them toward the Rejoice.

\*

Muffled voices woke Harry the next day. His eyes were slow to open and when they did, he cringed against the bright white light. The clean smell of hospital linens and a sickeningly-familiar antiseptic scent assaulted his nose. Together with the sharp echo of heels on stone, he knew precisely where he was.

"Awake, are we?" said the clipped voice of Madam Pomfrey.

Harry grunted in response, shifting his weight so he could prop himself on the headboard of his bed. Aiden was there, eyeing his master carefully from his cage by Harry's headboard. That answered the question on how Harry wound up in the Hogwarts hospital.

The matron ran her wand across his body and murmured to herself. "Almost fully mended."

"Does that mean I can go?" he asked automatically. He still felt like he'd been run over by a pack of rampaging hippogriffs, but experience taught him to beg for the earliest possible release.

She eyed him appraisingly. "I think not. You'd be better off with a couple of meals in you before you're ready to take on the world again." She smirked at him. "But I think a visitor or two wouldn't be out of the question."

She walked away and there was a long, laboured squeak as a heavy door was slowly opened. "He's over there," said Madam Pomfrey. "Not too long, mind you, he still needs his rest."

There was an echo of several shuffling feet across the hospital and a pair of bright, brown eyes peeked around the corner of his privacy screen.

Harry smiled automatically, a swell of affection inflating his chest. "Hi," he said and she launched herself at him.

Her arms wrapped around his neck and her hair cascaded around his shoulders. Despite the oppressive cleanness of the Hospital Wing, he felt home. He pushed his arms around her back and pulled her onto the bed next to him. Ron, Hermione, and Kingsley hovered at the foot of his bed, smiles in their eyes and on their faces. Ginny's shoulders were shaking.

"Ginny?" he asked tenderly. "What's the matter? I'm fine. Madam Pomfrey said I could go after a couple of meals."

She shook her head against his shoulder and sniffed into his pillow. His questioning glance at Ron was met with an unspoken 'wait'. He nodded as she continued to silently cry.

"I need to speak with the Headmistress for a tick," said Kingsley in his low, deep voice and he disappeared behind the screen. Ron and Hermione took the seats on the other side of Harry's bed while Ginny's breathing evened out.

She pulled away, sitting in the space Harry made for her on the bed. She sniffed and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I'm sorry," she said with a watery smile. "I hate crying. It gives me an awful headache."

Harry didn't know what to say, so he was glad when she continued. "Captain August is dead," she said.

"Oh," replied Harry. "But that's not a huge loss is it? He was a traitor after all."

Ginny grimaced. "Kingsley thinks he was under the Imperius Curse," she explained, her eyes dropped to her fidgeting hands. "I killed him."

Whatever Harry was expecting her to say, that wasn't it. "You... you killed him?"

She nodded and Harry looked to Ron and Hermione for confirmation. Both heads nodded slightly, their faces blank. Harry knew from their expressions that they'd already talked to Ginny about this. He turned back to Ginny. "How?"

Ginny pulled a tissue from the box on the table next to Harry's head. "Ron was pulling him out of the water and he woke up. He was pointing his wand at Ron and Ron didn't know – he didn't see and I yelled, but the water was in the way, and then, and then... I..." Her eyes found Harry's again and he saw the terror in them despite the fact that the danger had passed. Something else terrified her and he was beginning to understand what it was. "I sent a Blasting Hex at him, Harry. I didn't even think about what hex it was, I just... did it."

Harry closed his mouth and regarded her for a second. Her eyes fell to her hands again, where she was picking apart the tissue. Harry swallowed. "You didn't do anything wrong, Ginny." She looked up at him for a second and gave a single hollow laugh. "I mean it," he said, using his finger to force her chin up. He looked into her eyes and willed her to believe him. "August died because he was under the influence of an evil wizard. You wouldn't have killed him if he wasn't threatening your brother and Ron probably would be the one dead if you *hadn't* acted the way you did."

Ginny looked at him as if she was struggling to believe him. "Ginny," he said more softly. "If you had done nothing, and August would have hurt or killed Ron, how would you feel right now?"

Her eyes tensed. "Awful," she whispered. "I wouldn't be able to forgive myself."

Harry nodded. She understood, but he knew she needed to hear one more thing. "When Voldemort killed Cedric, I blamed myself for the entire summer. When I found out I had to kill Voldemort or be killed, I couldn't stand the thought of being a murderer." He took her hand. "Now, Voldemort is gone by his own choosing, even if it was caused by me. It was him or me. With August, it was him or Ron, and I won't ever fault you for protecting your family."

She smiled again, this one reached her eyes and she collapsed against him. "Thank you," she whispered and shuddered in relief.

He held her close and kissed her crown. "You're still my Ginny."

She laughed and when she sat back up, all traces of guilt were wiped away.

"Told you," said Hermione, a grin on her face as well.

"There's more to the story," said Ron. "After Ginny and I started toward the Rejoice, Kingsley and Malfoy began to fight in the water."

"Oh no," said Harry and then he relaxed a little. Kingsley was obviously all right as he'd just been in front of Harry. "What happened?"

"Well, Hermione was carrying you onto the ship..."

"Thanks," said Harry. "I owe you for that."

"More than one," said Hermione with a smirk. "And I'll expect payment soon."

Harry and Ginny laughed.

"As I was saying," said Ron with exaggerated irritation. "While she was lugging your sorry carcass into the Rejoice, Kingsley was duelling with Malfoy."

"There was flotsam everywhere," interjected Hermione.

Yeah, loads and loads of it floating everywhere,” confirmed Ron. “Well, Malfoy’s shooting flame spells at Kingsley, who just levitated water to quench it. I mean... How thick can you get? Shooting flames at someone in the middle of the ocean?”

Ginny and Harry shared a smirk.

“Get the point, Ron,” goaded Hermione. “Or I can tell the story.”

“Keep your knickers on,” replied Ron. “I’m getting there. Like I said, Malfoy’s shooting flames at Kingsley, who isn’t even being touched by them when Malfoy goes bonkers. He’s cussin’ up a storm and then he lets out this *huge* wall of flame, just like Crabbe did in the Room of Requirement.”

“Fiendfyre, Ron,” supplied Hermione.

“Yeah. Anyway, this wall of fire comes shooting at Kingsley, who just ducks underwater, but like with Crabbe, the fire is totally out of control. Hermione blasted it away from the Rejoice, but not before it caught every bit of debris floating in the water on fire.”

He paused, as if he was thinking back on what happened. “We don’t really know what happened, but there must have been something explosive left over from what August rigged on the Swan. There was another explosion. It knocked Ginny and I back into the water and Kingsley was already under, so he wasn’t hurt.”

There was another pause and he traded a look with Ginny and Hermione. “He didn’t make it,” said Hermione quietly. “Malfoy’s dead.”

Harry felt his mouth fall open. “Malfoy? He died?”

“They found his body a few minutes later.”

Harry didn’t know what to think. He certainly didn’t hold any good feelings in his heart for the slimy Slytherin, but deep down, Harry thought Malfoy might have come out of it all right in the end. If only he hadn’t been involved with the Elder Wand. It seemed that even in trying to get rid of the wand; even when it wasn’t being used directly, it still had the power to kill.

“What about the reporters?” asked Harry quickly, fighting away the swirl of depression that their conversation had brought around them. “Did they buy our deception?”

Ron’s large answering smile was all Harry needed to put his mind at ease. He plopped a copy of the morning’s *Daily Prophet*. “Hook, line, and sinker,” said Ron.

The title read, “Harry Potter Loses Elder Wand to Unknown Wizard in Fierce Duel.”

Harry scanned the article. “Gordman Skullduggery? What kind of name is that?”

Ginny stifled a giggle and Hermione gave her fiancé a whack on the shoulder. “What?” asked Ron. “That’s a perfectly good name that doesn’t exist anywhere in the world, so when more of these idiots go looking to take the wand from someone, that someone will be permanently missing.” He caught Harry’s eye. “You’re off the hook, mate. Free as an owl, so to speak.”

Footsteps marked the approach of Kingsley again. “Do you have a moment, Harry?” he asked when he poked his bald head around the partition.

“Sure,” he said, not feeling remotely tired any more. The weight of the Elder Wand was finally off him. It felt like he could breathe again after months of suffocating underneath its burden.

“First of all, congratulations on a successful operation.” His eyes were twinkling. “I hope this means that you’re still considering full time service in my department.”

Harry looked to Ginny, who was smiling. “It’s up to you, Harry,” she said. “I’ll support you no matter what you choose to do.” She kissed the tip of his nose.

“Yeah, all right,” he said to Kingsley at length. “I’ll help however I can.”

Kingsley nodded his head and grinned. “That’s my boy. Now... as relieved as we all are that Malfoy is out of the picture, we have to focus on the rest of the mess he left behind.”

“Crackshot,” said Hermione with a snarl.

“Exactly,” confirmed Kingsley. “He’s still the rightful Minister and has a lot of support from the, shall we say... more wealthy and less morally gifted segment of our society.”

“You mean he takes bribes and is shoving his own personal agenda down our throats?” asked Harry, a distinct distaste for corrupt politicians edging into his tone.

“That’s one way of putting it,” said Kingsley. “We need to be careful about exposing him. It would do no good to march into the *Prophet* and tell them he’s been paid off by a dead Malfoy. We have to be deliberate.”

Harry nodded. “It sounds like you already have a plan.”

Kingsley smiled. “Don’t I always?”





## **The Master of Life The Grinder**

### **Chapter Eleven – The Grinder**

Madam Pomfrey allowed Harry to leave the Hospital Wing the next day and he was faced with an immediate and pressing problem – he had no place to live. After a quick stop at his Gringott's vault to deposit the Elder Wand, they deliberated on where they would stay. Ginny was adamant that they not live with her parents, pointing out that she had a hard enough time convincing them that she was no longer a baby and was ready for marriage. So instead of intruding on Arthur and Molly's hospitality, Harry and Ginny headed for the only house that Harry owned – Grimmauld Place.

It was with a great deal of reluctance that Harry walked up the crumbling concrete path in a rundown section of Muggle London. He pushed open the rusty iron gate that only those who had been told the Fidelius-protected secret could see. In one hand, he held his magically lightened trunk and in the other, his Holly wand. Standing on the stoop, he stared remorsefully at the cracked and faded paint on the door. A thousand unpleasant memories paraded in front of his eyes and he suddenly felt nauseated. This was no place to begin a marriage. The dark magic and dark thoughts that had dwelt here for so long and seemed to have permeated every surface of every room were overwhelming. How could he expect anyone to be happy here?

Ginny squeezed his arm. "It'll be okay, Harry. We've both stayed here before and we know what to expect. Besides, I'm up for the challenge of redecorating if you are." Her voice was light and its pleasantness calmed his nerves.

He wasn't as sure as Ginny, but the thought that they would be working together on something gave him the resolve he needed. He tapped the doorknob with his wand and the door creaked open.

As he stepped across the threshold, he was stunned. The portrait of Walburga Black was gone. In its place, a small table stood against the wall supporting a heavy blue vase bulging with fresh chrysanthemums. The black and silver wallpaper had been replaced with a cream-coloured texture and the floor looked like it had been stripped of its ancient black finish and re-stained to show off the natural grain of the oak beneath. Even the air smelled brighter.

"Wow," was all that Ginny could say as she, too stared open-mouthed at the completely renovated interior. She set her trunk down and turned in a wide circle to see everything.

"Does Master and Missus like what Kreacher has done with his home?" The surly house elf's gravelly voice was oddly out of place with their new, more pleasant surroundings.

"It's fantastic," said a very impressed Harry. "You did this all by yourself?"

"The other Weasley and his mate helped me choose the colours, but I did all the work, Master." He puffed himself up proudly and Harry could tell by the gleam in his eye that it was as much for what he'd done to the house as it was that he hadn't called Hermione a Mudblood in Harry's presence.

Ginny smirked. "Ron and Hermione, eh? We'll have to think of something very big for their wedding present. This is too much."

Harry nodded in agreement. They must have spent almost all of their free time over the past two weeks here and a good sum of money. Filing that away for later, he turned to his elf. "We'd like to live here for a while, Kreacher. Do you mind having some company?"

Kreacher bowed low, so that his squashed nose touched the floor. "It will be an honour to serve the Potter family, Master."

"Harry," said Ginny, who was excitedly taking out the beaded bag. "Kreacher and I are going to put away our things in the kitchen. Be a love and unpack our trunks?" She gave him a sweet smile and practically skipped to the kitchen, Kreacher in tow.

Shaking his head at his wife's giddiness, Harry levitated the trunks up the stairs and into the master bedroom. Gone were the Troll legs, the elf-heads, and all semblance of the Black family in the décor. The windows were cleaned, allowing a surfeit of light to fill the rooms. Every detail had been changed, down to the furniture, which had been reupholstered, refinished, and where necessary, replaced. Ron and Hermione were definitely going to have to answer for their expenses.

The master bedroom, which (as far as Harry knew) hadn't been touched by anyone since the Order moved in three years ago, was as bright and cheery as the rest of the house. Its large footprint was tastefully filled with a king-sized poster bed, two high boy chests, and a large, matching wardrobe which sat in a nook that overlooked the courtyard. There were two reading chairs and a small table by another window that opened up to an obviously enhanced vista of London.

Harry unpacked their clothes with his wand and shrank their trunks to fit under the bed. Satisfied, he met Ginny downstairs.

"All done?" she asked as she bustled around the basement kitchen, placing dishes, silverware, and other cooking implements in the precise spot she wanted them. "When I've finished here, can you show me the bedroom?"

"Oh," said Kreacher. "Would Missus like Kreacher to show you the rest of the house? The bedroom was the place that Kreacher worked the hardest. Mean, nasty curses in there," he finished under his breath.

Ginny's pink cheeks could have been from the effort of organizing, but Harry knew by the way she was looking at him from the corner of her eyes that she preferred a very private tour of the bedroom.

Harry cleared his throat a little. "That won't be necessary, Kreacher. Mrs. Potter looks a little tired from unpacking and might need a lie-down."

Ginny's confirming smirk sent a little thrill running up his spine. Kreacher seemed a bit put out, however.

"Don't worry, Kreacher," soothed Ginny with a grateful look at Harry. "We'll take the grand tour as soon as we've... rested."

Her cheeks were much redder now, as she levitated the cooking pots to their places on the hooks dangling over the stove and Harry found himself finishing the unpacking with her at top speed.

\*

After their tour of the bedroom, they spent the rest of the morning following Kreacher through the rest of the house. Harry had to be at the Auror Training Centre after lunch for his orientation, so they allowed Kreacher to take as much time as he wanted to detail everything that was new and different. By the time they sat down for lunch, Harry was feeling much better about their choice to stay in Grimmauld Place.

"We need to give it a new name," said Ginny, who had magicked a plate of sandwiches to the scrubbed wooden table. "Grimmauld Place just sounds so dreary. It certainly fit the old décor, but now... it needs a more cheerful name, don't you think?"

"Potter's Haven?" offered Harry, who considered it very much a refuge from the storm of reporters and other people that would be certain to seek his family out no matter what the fate of the Elder Wand.

"Hmm," said Ginny, tapping her finger to her lips. "That's definitely the right direction. How about Potter's Palace?" she said with a twinkle in her eye.

"No chance," Harry deadpanned, making a sick face that wasn't wholly fabricated and they both laughed.

"Okay," said Ginny, sitting back in her chair, her eyes serious. "The Hermitage."

Harry mock scowled. "Are you calling me a hermit?"

Ginny's eyes softened the unintentional jab. "Not exactly. I was thinking more of the museum in Russia."

"Oh," said Harry, but he didn't really know what to think about their home being named after a museum.

She must have sensed the hesitation in his voice. "It's because there are no more Blacks left, unless you count Draco's mum. So we could maybe make a room dedicated to the memory of them – the good ones at any rate."

Harry warmed to the idea immediately. "Yeah. Although I think you secretly like the idea of staying locked up at home."

"It all depends on who's locked in with me."

\*

The entrance to the Auror Headquarters loomed in front of Harry as he approached it. For some odd reason it was much more intimidating to be there because he was now one of them. He was an Auror and this was where he would go every weekday to *work*. It was a very alien concept, considering the only examples of full time employment he'd had were from his uncle's job at Grunnings, the teachers at Hogwarts, and various other Ministry positions. It was such an adult thing to do that Harry found his heart was racing and his forehead sweaty just from checking in with the receptionist.

She processed his vitals and generated a badge that had a magically rotating picture of his head and a sample of his blood for identification purposes. She explained that the badge would automatically allow him entrance into the Ministry and into Headquarters whenever he needed.

"Chief Auror Shacklebolt will collect you in a few minutes," the raven-haired witch said and pointed at an empty room filled with stiff looking armchairs. "You can wait there."

He didn't wait long before the smiling eyes of Kingsley greeted him. "It's good to see you, Harry," he said with an air of familiarity. Harry tried to reconcile that with the fact that he was now his superior. That notion was dispelled instantly, however, when Kingsley barked an order.

"Attention Auror Potter!"

Harry snapped his feet together and his fisted hands shot to the sides of his thighs. He kept his eyes on a neutral part of the wall – exactly like he'd been trained to do.

"Very good," remarked Kingsley – now Head Auror Shacklebolt, remembered Harry. "From now on, you will be part of a team. This team is composed of individuals who depend on each other for their lives." Kingsley circled him, eyes appraising his stance. "The most important thing an Auror can do is not to be the best spell caster, not be the fastest, or the most powerful. The most important thing you can do to preserve the lives of

your teammates and the citizens that you are sworn to protect is to *followorders* .”

Harry was recording everything in his mind, not knowing how much he'd be asked to regurgitate later on.

“Orders save lives. Repeat that.”

“Order save lives!” yelled Harry.

“Good,” said Kingsley. “At ease.”

Harry relaxed, widening his stance and letting his arms come together behind his back.

“There,” said Kingsley. “That was the standard speech that every recruit gets.” His eyes were crinkled at the corners, indicating that something was amusing. “Now I can collect on that bet with Arthur and you can get your butt over to the training grounds to pass the last test.”

Kingsley sucked in his breath and in the loudest voice he'd heard the man use, yelled, “DISMISSED!”

Harry fairly ran from Kingsley through the corridor and down the tunnel to the expansive room where Kingsley had let him train.

When he entered, the sky was the same bright blue with a spate of fluffy clouds drifting peacefully in an imagined breeze. The dojo he and Kingsley had destroyed together stood rebuilt among the other small training rooms along the side. In the field, an entirely new set of small structures caught his attention.

Rolling metal balls, a six-inch beam stretching across a vat of boiling tar, and a half-dozen enchanted duelling dummies were just a few of the things Harry saw arrayed on the field. It was an obstacle course. At one end, a few wizards and witches stood looking tense, but determined. At the other, a gaggle of mediwitches hovered around the men and women emerging from the end of the course covered in burns, slashes of black tar, and minor cuts and bruises.

As he looked, several Aurors were engaged in various stages of the course. One was battling with a Dementor that seemed somehow constrained to a designated square of grass. Another was being attacked by random jets of flame in the middle of the course, his robes singed and smoking.

“Are you Auror candidate Potter?” said a new voice from behind him.

Harry whirled around and met a pair of steel grey eyes. His thin silver hair was closely cropped to his head. He wore the orange robes of a master Auror and his serious face instilled discipline if not intimidation. “Yes, sir,” replied Harry briskly.

“Very well,” he said, appraising him in much the same manner as Kingsley had. “Every Auror has to complete an annual *review*.” He smirked. “A sort of benchmark that qualifies us for duty. If you don't pass, you don't see the field, understand?”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry again, wondering what passing meant. Did he just have to survive, or was walking away under his own power required?

“Good. Report to the witch at the entrance to the course and she'll assign you a slot. Once you begin, you can't exit until you complete it or you forfeit.”

Harry gulped and there was a shriek as the man battling the fire was hit in the legs, his robes erupting with flames.

The blonde witch was waiting for him at the entrance. She smiled brightly at him as if he was there to book a reservation for a holiday cruise. “Wand please,” she said and held out her hand. Harry handed it over and she placed it in the same sort of balance that was at the entrance of the Ministry Atrium. Instead of a slip of paper sliding out, it hummed and buzzed until a puff of smoke blew out the bottom.

“Place your wand hand in the smoke, please,” the witch said.

Harry did as he was told and the smoke solidified into a number.

The witch's eyebrows rose. “Fifty-six it is then.” She handed his wand back and stared unabashedly at him as he walked toward the entrance. “Wait for the signal.”

He began to fidget. It was like the Triwizard tournament all over again, except this time, he had a lot less information about what was expected. All he knew was that he had to get to the end of the course and there was a lot of magic trying to stop him.

Somewhere a bell tolled and Harry took that as his signal. He stepped through the archway, his wand out, his eyes scanning left to right and back again. For the first twenty metres there was nothing, then without warning a hole opened up in front of him. At first Harry backpedalled, but the hole just grew larger, swallowing turf and rocks. At the far end of the hole stood his next objective, the steel beam over the boiling tar. Knowing that waiting would only make it more difficult, Harry pointed his wand at himself and muttered a Featherweight Charm and then directed his wand at the ground before propelling himself through the air.

The Featherweight Charm was too much and Harry was sent thirty metres above the hole, which had stopped growing as soon as he left the ground. He cancelled the charm and his trajectory instantly levelled out as he nosed back toward the ground. Just before he hit, he said another Banishing Hex and it counteracted the majority of his speed, but he still had to duck and roll to avoid breaking his ankles.

After catching his breath, Harry stood and approached the start of the next obstacle. Stepping onto the beam, Harry wrinkled his nose at the smell of the bubbling tar. He did *not* want to fall into that mess. The steel was polished smooth so that his trainers slipped slightly as he walked. Knowing that it wouldn't be simple enough to have to walk across unmolested, Harry lifted each foot in turn and cast a light Sticking Charm on the soles of his

trainers. Satisfied that they held better, he set off.

Harry's instincts were right. He wasn't a metre down the beam, when tar shot out of the vat in a sticky stream that just missed his head. Harry ducked unsteadily and was instantly grateful for his grip-enhanced shoes. He sprang forward, dodging another one, and now that he knew what to expect, deflected the spurts of black goo. As he progressed slowly down the beam, the jets grew more and more intense and he longed for the Elder Wand so he could cast simultaneous Banishing Hexes. Without it, he was barely able to keep up with them and he spent less and less time checking his footing.

Three came at him at once. He was able to deflect one, then another, but the third caught him on the shoulder as he dove forward to dodge it. The force of the tar twisted his body so he landed awkwardly on his right shoulder forcing his hand open and his wand fell down into the tar. Harry watched horror-struck as it impaled itself in the viscous tar and floated tip-down amid the bubbling muck.

He reached down with his left arm, hanging precariously on the smooth steel of the beam, heedless of the continued assault from the spurts of tar. It was no use, his wand was still several inches below his outstretched fingers and if he lowered himself any more, he was certain of being pitched into the tar himself. But at the rate the tar was assaulting him, being covered in tar was inevitable if he didn't get his wand back.

He stretched his fingers toward his wand, reaching with his body and his mind. "Come on," he grunted. "*Accio!*" he yelled and to his utter amazement, the wand moved, rising up from the tar almost wholly before sinking back to its former depth. "*ACCIO!*" he bellowed, narrowing his focus even more, bending his whole will to retrieving his wand and... it shot into his hand.

Not hesitating a moment, Harry righted himself and shoved hard on the beam, pulling his feet under him as he rose. He was halfway across the pit and abandoning all attempts to deflect the tar, he ran pell-mell toward the end of the pit. Leaping off the end of the beam, he rolled in the grass and came to a stop on his back.

Breathing hard, Harry spelled most of the tar from his robes. He contemplated his predicament and wondered for a brief second if being an Auror was worth the punishment of The Grinder. All it took to cement his resolve was the smirking face of Stanley Crackshot hovering tauntingly in his dreams.

After catching his breath, Harry got back to his feet and surveyed his surroundings. The field opened up again and Harry was wary of another hole or something more sinister appearing in the middle of the clearing. He stepped tentatively forward and stopped when he heard a clicking noise.

Out of nowhere, two dozen duelling dummies appeared and without pause or fanfare, began to fling simulated spells at Harry. He knew from experience with them at the beginning of his training with Kingsley that he would be rated on how many and which type of curses hit him – not to mention the highly distracting sting each spell left when it made contact.

With so many attackers, Harry immediately erected a shield between him and the dummies and pumped a lot of power into it. The jets of light rebounded off his shield and took out a sizeable chunk of his assailants. He used the chaos to pick off a few more as he ran around their right flank. The dummies were anything but dumb, Harry observed, as they regrouped and used their numbers to divide his attention. He decided to try a new tactic.

Harry used his wand as a scoop – while his failing shield held the dummies at bay – to dig a trench in the green grass. He heaped the extra soil around the lip of the trench and transfigured it into steel, diving into the dugout just as his shield flickered and died.

The dummies adjusted again, dividing themselves into two groups; one on each side of the trench to catch him in their crossfire. Harry used his vantage point to pick off dummies one at a time as they manoeuvred, but there were too many of them and as he spent more and more time defending himself, he wondered if he was being timed as well.

Using Kingsley's advice to think differently, Harry reached his wand over the steel lip of the trench, braced it with his other hand and fired a stream of pure magic. He swept his arm around in a quick circle, obliterating every dummy the stream contacted. When it was over, Harry dizzily fell into the ditch and took several steadying breaths.

After a minute, his heart rate slowed and his vision stopped swirling. Harry smirked to himself as Madam Pomfrey's voice echoed in his head. "Don't overdo it these next few days, young man or you'll be back here with a case of magical exhaustion." Harry forced himself to his feet and crawled out of the trench. He only took a few steps before he was faced with a field of giant rolling balls. Each ball was the size of Hagrid and from the way the ground vibrated under his feet, Harry guessed they were quite heavy. On the other side of the field, stood the exit – it was the last obstacle.

He took his time watching the balls for a pattern. They seemed to move randomly, but after a minute, one or two rows would line up and Harry could see all the way to the exit. He approached the field and crouched in a ready stance, balancing his weight on the balls of his feet. Just when they began to align, Harry sprang forward and bellowed a Banishing Hex behind him that propelled him forward.

Gravity pulled him down to the ground, but he was going so fast to land on his feet, so he tucked into a ball and rolled head over bum until he finally stopped in the dead centre of the giant balls. They continued to shift until the exit was again obscured. One of the balls came close to Harry's side and before it could make contact, Harry leapt into the air with another magically enhanced jump that sent him sailing over the ball in front of him. As he reached the apex of his jump, a burst of flame shot at him from nowhere and he barely had time to deflect it before he was heading back down to the grass in the middle of three converging balls.

He jumped again, but with more interest in escaping entombment as a pile of goo between three large metal spheres than with a clear destination in mind. Again as he topped the ball in front of him, flames erupted from three different angles and he had to create a hasty shield to keep from being burned alive. He was so focused on the fire and the spheres that he didn't see where his trajectory was taking him. He landed in a heap, and heard his ankle twist with a painful snap. Gritting his teeth in pain, Harry stood on his good foot. A sphere was coming right at him. He began to hop to one side, but the sphere seemed to match his movements. He didn't have time to dodge and his ruined ankle prevented him from jumping again.

"*Reducto!*" he yelled and the sphere exploded into a million pieces that scattered across the field behind it. Another sphere turned his direction. "*Reducto!*" he bellowed again and it was reduced to rubble. Every sphere that turned toward him was obliterated until there was so much debris that the spheres couldn't come any closer. He Summoned one of the larger pieces and transfigured it into a crutch.

As Harry hobbled out through the exit, the Master Auror that directed the Grinder and Kingsley were waiting for him. Kingsley had a gleam in his eye. "Well, done, Harry Potter," he said. "Well done indeed."

Grimacing, Harry nodded, worried about only one thing. "Does that mean I passed?"

Kingsley's smile only grew larger. "You passed with the highest score since Alastor Moody."

Some of the other Aurors were looking over at him muttering things that Harry only heard bits and snatches of. "Fifty-six," said one witch that looked to be as old Lupin and had a patch over one eye. "I heard Kingsley only rated a thirty-two," said the wizard next to her.

Harry felt his good leg start to wobble. "Can I...?"

Kingsley snapped his fingers and one of the mediwitches was immediately at his side. "Take care of Mr. Potter. When he's recovered, have him meet me in my office."

"Yes, sir!" she said and conjured a cot for Harry to lie in.

As she ran her wand over Harry's leg, he watched Kingsley walk away, wondering why he had to be the stand out yet again. Would he every just be able to be normal?

\*

Ginny was finishing dinner when someone Apparated onto the stoop. She placed the pan of Yorkshire Pudding and Roast Pork on a trivet by the oven and walked to the kitchen door. "Is that you Harry?" she called.

There was an answering grumble and the door closed. Harry appeared dishevelled and worried at the top of the stairs and winced as he slowly walked down, favouring his left leg. When he made it to the door, he grimaced. "Honey, I'm home."

Ginny narrowed her eyes. "What happened to you?"

Harry ignored her and sniffed hopefully over her shoulder. "Dinner ready?"

"In a minute," she said and poked him in the shoulder. "Tell me what happened first."

Harry shrugged. "I had to qualify before they'd let me take an assignment."

She pursed her lips and tapped her foot. "And?"

"And... they call it 'The Grinder'."

His stomach growled and Ginny's desire to get every detail out of him lost to her need to feed him. "Come on to the table," she said, taking his hand. "But I want you to tell me everything that happened."

She led him slowly to his seat at the head of the small table. "Kreacher's a bit put out that I made dinner tonight, but he doesn't know how to cook your favourites yet." She levitated the pudding and pork together with the trivet until it landed on the scrubbed wood by Harry's plate. Milk and water pitchers were next and finally, a bowl of boiled peas and a loaf of fresh bread.

Harry huffed. "I'm used to elf food," he said and took a bite of pudding directly from the dish. His eyes rolled back in pleasure as he chewed. "But I prefer your cooking by far," he said after swallowing.

Ginny allowed herself a smile. "Thank you." She scooped him more pudding onto his plate and added a slice of pork, peas, and some bread. He dug in with gusto and Ginny contented herself to watch as she served herself.

It wasn't until he had started on his second plate that she spoke again. "Is that tar in your hair?" she asked, fingering something hard a black hanging from his messy locks.

"Probably," he said and took a long drink of milk. He sat back in his chair, looking much happier than when he sat down. "Kingsley had me take a test, sort of an obstacle course that everyone has to do each year. It's something they do to make sure we're all fit to be Aurors."

Ginny chewed her pork slowly, not liking where this was headed, but nodded for him to continue.

"The course reacts to each person differently based on your magical power. They measure your wand and wand hand and assign the difficulty level of the test to match you."

"Oh," said Ginny, suddenly understanding where Harry was taking the conversation. "Let me guess... they didn't go easy on you because you're a new recruit."

Harry laughed sardonically. "No they didn't." He began to push his peas around his plate. "I don't want to go through it blow by blow with you tonight

— you can see it in the Pensieve later if you want though. Let's just say that I made a scene yet again." He speared several peas viciously with his fork.

Ginny put her hand on his thigh and gave it a squeeze.

He ate his peas and sighed, dropping his fork on his plate with a clatter. "It'd be nice to be normal once in a while."

Ginny made a face. "Where's the fun in that?" she asked and slapped his thigh. "Everyone wishes they were Harry Potter." Now it was his turn to make a face. "But it's not for the reasons you think. They want to be you because you have so much potential." He looked up with hopeful eyes. "They do! They see you and think, 'I could do anything if I was like him'."

He made a rude noise with his lips. "They don't know anything. They can't understand the expectations everyone places on me. I can't do anything *because* I'm Harry bleeding Potter."

Ginny frowned. This wasn't going like she planned and Harry was spiralling more and more into the well worn circles of depression and anxiety. Quietly, she Banished the plates to the sink and the leftovers to the cold cupboard. She took his hand and stood. "Come on," she said with a smile. "I want to talk about something with you."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Yeah? What about?" He let her lift him from the table and up the stairs. His limp worried her, but she put it out of her mind for now. She had half a mind to send a howler to Kingsley in the morning.

"Well," she said when they were in the living room and seated on a very comfortable love seat. "Since all the redecorating is done here, I was wondering if we might take on a different project together."

Harry's eyes rose, a small twinkle rekindled in them. He urged her on with a look.

"Well," she began hesitantly. She didn't know how he would react to her request because he was very sensitive about his fame and his family and this involved both. "I was wondering if you'd take me to Godric's Hollow tonight."

The twinkle vanished and his eyes became guarded. "What for?"

She cleared her throat nervously. "I was thinking that it would be good to... rebuild your old house."

His eyes fell to their entwined hands. She hated when he closed her out like this. As complex as it was to sort out his emotions on a normal day, she always found his eyes communicated far more than his voice or anything else.

"It's a monument, you know," he said thickly. "They made a plaque that rises out of the ground and everything."

Ginny kissed his knuckles. "Please?"

His eyes finally found hers and she was shocked at their depth. It was as if the whole universe had been swallowed up in the blackness of his pupils. "I don't even know if it can be rebuilt. That kind of spell might leave permanent damage."

For the first time in her life, Ginny glanced up at his scar, knowing exactly what he meant. Her resolve settled. "There's only one way to find out."

## The Master of Life A Kiss of Polyjuice

### Chapter Twelve – A Kiss of Polyjuice

A month passed after Harry suffered through The Grinder in which he took to his assignment from Kingsley with fervour. His job was to tail Dawlish and find out as much about him and his dealings for Crackshot as he could. The theory was that as Minister, Crackshot was virtually inaccessible from internal investigations. So they chose to focus on every single person that Crackshot spoke to, visited, or had correspondence with. Dawlish was at the top of that list.

The former Auror proved to be an elusive target, having been trained in the art of stealth and counter-detection, and Harry found himself working overtime to trail him. Harry's tracking troubles were due, in part, because Harry was still a novice Auror. As part of Kingsley's assignment, Harry had been assigned a more senior Auror to oversee the operation and to get Harry up to speed on proper pursuit techniques. The problem was that his senior Auror was almost never available, having three other assignments of her own.

Harry scrubbed his hair in frustration as he sat under his Invisibility Cloak in a secluded corner of the Leaky Cauldron. Dawlish was sitting at a table with two men Harry didn't recognize but that wouldn't look out of place in a line-up of former Death Eaters. He couldn't hear what they were saying no matter which of the dozen standard Auror listening spells he tried. They might as well have been using Muffliato for all the good his eavesdropping was doing.

So Harry watched their lips. He wasn't very skilled at lip reading yet, but he had taken a page out of Hermione's book and bought a Muggle book on the subject. He caught every other word, but it was enough to figure out that he had been duped. The man in front of him wasn't Dawlish, but a double in Polyjuice. The real Dawlish was somewhere in Knockturn Alley.

Swearing under his breath, Harry carefully stepped out of the bar and Apparated to Diagon Alley.

\*

Hermione hated her job in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. It wasn't only because she was working for the very people she wanted to organize a coup against, or because the very name of her department disgraced her every time she had to write it on one of the dozen daily memos she sent. It was mostly because she was no closer to discovering how Stanley Crackshot was still in power. Everyone in her department, no matter their view on Muggles or blood status, were universal in their dislike for the new minister and as far as she could tell, things were no better for Crackshot in the Wizarding world at large.

So why was he still able to keep his office?

Shaking her head in frustration for the tenth time that morning, Hermione stacked ten sorted file folders in her out box and watched them disappear. The clock on her desk said *Time for Tea*, so she pulled her purse from the lower-right drawer and stood.

"Headed to lunch, dear?" asked the nearly retired witch in the cubicle next to her. She was old, but sharp-eyed and had an equally sharp mind to match. Hermione hadn't been able to take nearly the amount of notes with her co-worker hovering next to and sometimes on top of Hermione's desk.

"Yes, Mildred," Hermione replied. "Did you want me to get something from the canteen for you?"

The elderly witch slowly stood and began to rifle around in her purse. "One of those croissant sandwiches would hit the spot." She extended her hand and dropped two sickles and a knut into Hermione's palm. "Ham, not turkey."

Hermione smiled and put the money in the hip pocket of her dress. "See you in a bit."

The cubicles of her department were spread across the Ministry's fourth floor. Intermingled with the cubicles were offices occupied by the various Office heads. Hermione passed Cuthbert Mockridge's office, her boss in the Goblin Liaison Office, on her way to the lift. Luckily, he was already out, which saved Hermione the pain of having to detail every memo and every file she'd worked on that day. Mockridge was the worst micro-manager she'd every seen and it gave her even more motivation to be shod of the place.

The canteen was on level one, directly off the lift so employees didn't have an opportunity to wander to the back where the Minister's offices were located. Hermione queued in the sandwich line with a dozen other witches twice her age and a warlock whose robes were smoking heavily. With a quick wave of her wand, the smoke stopped and the witch closest to her muttered a 'thank you'.

Hermione selected a chicken salad croissant for herself and bagged Mildred's ham one. After she paid, she walked to the most secluded corner of the canteen and sat in one of the stiff wooden chairs leftover from the last renovation to this level back in 1846. She didn't even have the wherewithal to transfigure it into a more comfortable one.

Picking at her sandwich, Hermione watched the witches and wizards flow in and out of the maitre d's, and wondered what Ron was doing just then. He was working at the shop with George, getting it ready for the rush of students that were sure to descend on Diagon Alley in less than a week. Thinking about Ron led her to think about their engagement and all the things they had to sort out before the wedding. There were lists and even a list of lists in her notebook at home.

Home.

Things were changing again. Her home and her parents once again would face the brunt of the changes. She thought of how much she loved her mum and dad and how awful she'd felt when she saw them in Australia for the first time. They'd been so scared and when they didn't recognize her, she thought the world had ended. It was foolish at the time, but Hermione had a very good reason for not thinking straight.

\*

When Hermione modified her parents' memories, she'd done it to keep them safe. She made them think that their life long ambition was to move to Australia. She'd been careful to make it reversible but only by her, and she placed a Tracking Charm on them just in case they were difficult to find. That turned out to be a very good idea because when the war was over, she realized that impressing them to move to Australia was too vague of an option for people as intelligent as her parents. She should have given them a city, or even a specific *home* as a prompting because getting to Melbourne was long and difficult even *with* magic.

Apparating across a thousand miles of open country was not for the faint of heart but that was the choice that Hermione and Ron found themselves faced with as they made their way through customs. They left Harry and Ginny's wedding as soon as the newly-married couple's Portkey activated and Crackshot departed with his entourage of wedding-crashers. Ron insisted once again on coming with Hermione and they soon found themselves with their own Portkey to Perth, the only International Portkey Entry Port in Australia.

"What's the problem with Apparating to Melbourne again?" asked Ron for the tenth time.

Hermione muttered to herself and grabbed a map of Western and South Australia. Floo powder was banned in Australia and Portkeys were almost impossible to get because of local ministry regulations, which left Apparating, or brooms.

Shuddering at the thought of travelling a thousand miles on broomstick, Hermione scanned the maps she'd acquired as they walked out of the entry port and onto the streets of Perth. Luckily, the maps were enchanted with submaps of all the towns in the area. The problem with using maps for Apparating was that if you'd never been to a place you could easily appear inside a building, or tree, or street light. Add to that the problem that the further you Apparated, the greater the risk of splinching. Hermione was rapidly wondering if simply buying a plane ticket would be the best bet.

Ignoring Ron's whinging hunger pains, she decided on a simple plan. They would take small hops, less than two hundred miles each, and plan on appearing in open fields or parks to avoid buildings.

"Come on," she said to Ron, who was drooling in front of a vending machine filled with snack cakes and crisps. "We can eat when we get to our hotel."

"But Hermione," he said, deliberately dragging his feet so that she had to pull very hard to get him to move at all. "You can't expect a bloke to pop around the countryside with a light head. Who knows where I'll end up? My nose might catch a whiff of fish and chips and it'd end up in a pub while the rest of me splinches into a fountain."

Hermione rolled her eyes and stamped her foot. "You can't smell while you're Apparating and your moaning is keeping me from my parents." Hot tears inexplicably sprang into her eyes and she scrubbed at them with the heels of her palm. "This is exactly why I didn't want you to come with me."

Ron's demeanor changed instantly. "Hermione," he said soothingly, reaching out a hand that she swatted away. "I'm sorry. I know this is hard for you, I guess I just don't know what to say."

The tears stopped and she searched Ron's face. He was always so impossible to read, even though he generally only had two emotions – randy or hungry. It was his eyes that always did it. "It's all right, Ron," she said, relenting. "I'm just so anxious to see them. What if they're upset with me for erasing their memories? What if they *like* it in Australia and don't want to come back home? They could react badly to the counter charm and lose *all* their memories." She wanted to say more; she had so many unexpressed fears they were literally bursting out of her, but Ron was hugging her and as always, her brain seized when he did things like that.

"Oh, Ron," she said and held on tightly as if the world was about to fall out from under their feet.

"Shh," he said softly. "We won't know until we get there, right? And we won't get there if we're splinched because we're thinking of all the bad things that could go wrong."

It was ironic that Ron would use *logic* to calm Hermione, and she had to chuckle a little to herself at the thought. "I love you," she said and gave him another fierce hug and then a small kiss on the lips.

"Are you all right, then?" he asked.

She nodded and began to look at her map of Western Australia, summoning her indomitable will to succeed. "We'll go to Kalgoorlie first, and then to Eucla..." She looked up and Ron was trying to force a knut into the coin slot of the vending machine. "Ron!" she said, scandalized. "You can't use wizard money to pay for Muggle things!"

He pounded a little on the glass in frustration and a crisp bag that was dangling precariously from a previous misvend fell to the slot at the bottom. "Excellent," Ron said and shoved his hand through the metal door, looking exultant as he began to demolish the crisps.



Hermione looked around to make sure no one was watching. "I can't believe you," she said, but the boyish grin on his face wiped away her anger. "Let's just get out of here."

They hopped from town to town for the next hour, only avoiding being splinched by a tree in Adelaide because Ron had accidentally bumped Hermione as she Apparated them. They finally arrived at their hotel in Melbourne, exhausted and nursing matching headaches. Ron immediately surveyed the attached restaurant while Hermione checked them in. They were simply too tired to look for Hermione's parents immediately and resolved to take up the search first thing in the morning.

\*

Back in the Ministry canteen, Hermione frowned at the memory. Perhaps she should have soldiered on and began her search then. Maybe it would have prevented what happened when they did finally meet up with them. Then again, she would have been in an even worse state and Merlin knew what would have happened *then*.

\*

The morning after Hermione and Ron arrived in Melbourne, they set off on foot to find her parents. The Tracking Charm showed Wendell and Monica Wilkins were currently in their dental practice three miles southeast of the hotel. Having spent an hour the evening before pouring over the city's bus system while eating dinner, Hermione was able to get them to within two blocks of 'Wilkins' Dentistry'.

As they approached, Hermione led Ron through a maze of cars before crossing the street. Having impatiently skipped breakfast, she wasn't surprised that Ron began enthralled with a café that abutted the dental practice, its marquee merrily advertising eggs, sausage, black pudding, fried potatoes, and grilled tomatoes. It was no wonder Ron didn't see the speeding bus approach them.

"RON!" Hermione yelled, and careful to conceal her wand between her purse and her hip, Summoned him out of the way.

He flew three feet before crashing to the pavement between two parked cars. "Blimey," he said, rubbing his shoulder where he'd hit the curb. "Sodding crazy Aussies."

Hermione tutted as she tended his bruised shoulder. "We'll have plenty of time for food when we restore my parent's memories, now come on."

She trotted off at a brisk pace, weaving through the morning's pedestrians. The clinic was part of a brick-front four story building. As they approached, something flashed in Hermione's peripheral vision and she stopped, causing Ron to crash into her. "Watch it," she scolded, but turned her attention to where she saw the flash.

"Barking," muttered Ron.

"Did you see that?" she asked, ignoring Ron's complaints.

"I saw the back of your head when you stopped walking," he said snarkily.

"No," she replied impatiently. "Something flashed." She waved her hand vaguely toward a small park. "Over there."

As she looked more closely, she noticed two strangely dressed men sitting on one of the park benches. The park was packed with women pushing prams, and children giggling excitedly in the chilly winter sunlight, but the two men sat stonily, staring across the street at the very building they were about to enter.

Hermione sucked in a breath. "Keep walking," she said. "Act naturally."

"Easy for you to say," said Ron with a sardonic grin. "I'm not the one sprinting down the walk one minute and then stopping in the middle of it the next."

"Hush," she said sourly. "There's something fishy about those two men – No, don't look! Anyway, I think they're wizards by their dress."

They walked past the brick building and Hermione kept tabs on the men while continued down the walk. One of them took out his wand and twirled it in a semi-circle, producing another flash of light. The Muggles around them didn't seem to notice. As soon as an alley opened to their right they ducked in.

"They're definitely wizards," she said mostly to herself. "I wonder what they're doing here, though. That spell looked exactly like the one I've been using to track my parents...." She trailed off as a horrible thought crossed her mind. "Oh, no," she said with dread.

Ron, who had been patient up to this point, but increasingly frustrated with his fiancée, folded his arms across his chest. "What in the name of Merlin's saggy Y fronts are you talking about?"

"Those men are wizards from the Australian Ministry and they've detected my Tracking Charm."

There was a small stretch of silence and then Ron opened his mouth. "So what do we do about it? Why can't we just walk in, cancel the Memory Charms on your parents and then Apparate them back to the hotel?"

"Because," said Hermione, with a gleam in her eye, "they'll be monitoring the building for magic already. As soon as we walk in, they'll swoop in and... My parents don't need any more drama in their lives."

Ron huffed and leaned his back against the dirty cinder block wall. "So what's your plan?"

She was shuffling inside her newly renovated purse, wondering if Ginny was enjoying her old beaded bag. A flask of murky green potion was extracted. "You're taking this and distracting them while I fetch Mum and Dad."

Ron's face turned serious. He took the flask.

"We promised Harry that he'd be seen abroad, and this is abroad as it gets," she explained.

"All right," agreed Ron. "I'll meet you back at the hotel in an hour." He downed a mouthful of the nauseating potion and handed the flask back to Hermione.

She watched as he shrank three inches, his hair turned jet black and grew to an unmanageable length, and his eyes turned bright green. With her wand, she shrank his clothes so that they fit properly and then, in a fit of compulsion, she grabbed his head and latched on to his lips.

Ron reacted as she'd expected and after a minute, she broke away.

"What was that for?" Ron asked in Harry's voice. It sent a strange thrill through her.

She hesitated, a blush creeping along her cheeks. "I just... I just wanted to see what kissing Harry was like."

Ron as Harry's face contorted into a comically ugly picture of revulsion and surprise. "Why?" he said hotly.

Hermione's discomfort was extreme. She didn't know how to describe her school-girl fantasy that almost every female at Hogwarts had entertained at one moment or another – at least not in a way that was easily explainable to Ron – so she went with the simple answer. "Why does it matter as long as it was you that I was kissing?"

Ron stared at her inscrutably until he pinched his lips together. "We'll talk about this later. Right now, I've got some wizards to ruffle."

With that, he strode out onto the street and sprinted across it, heading straight for the park.

Hermione watched as the wizards' eyes popped out of their heads. Ron waved and jogged past. It took a full thirty seconds before the stakeout of her parents broke up in a flurry of robes and hurried conversation. One of them called out to Ron, who turned his head to look, and then sprinted between two buses and disappeared down another alley with the wizards in pursuit.

Not wanting to waste a second, Hermione darted back onto the sidewalk and into her parents' dental office.

There were three people waiting in the lobby. A young, heavysset man was cradling his jaw as he sat in both halves of a small loveseat under the window. Two women were chatting idly on a pair of straight-backed chairs as they perused a tatty-looking magazine stack.

"Do you have an appointment?" asked the middle-aged receptionist. "The Wilkins' are booked for the entire morning, but we have an opening this afternoon if you're in an emergency."

This part was easy. Ignoring the glances from the three patients, she approached the desk. "Um, I just need to use the loo. Would that be possible?"

The woman seemed a bit put out, but she pointed Hermione in the right direction. Once inside, she Disillusioned herself and counted to thirty before she flushed the toilet. Slowly cracking open the door, she tip-toed out, careful to make a little noise as possible. She dithered for just a second on the best way to get through the door without being noticed before the man holding his jaw was summoned in by the hygienist. Using the opening, she rushed in behind them, barely avoiding the swinging door.

She followed the sound of the drill. Two rooms from the lobby on the left her mother was drilling a young woman's tooth. She looked to be about Hermione's age, but Hermione's thoughts and eyes went immediately to her mother. She hadn't changed a bit. The determined glint in her eye that Hermione had inherited; the soft lines of her cheeks and nose that were mostly hidden behind the surgeon's mask... It was all she could do to wait for her mother to finish with this patient. Then, kicking herself mentally, Hermione realised that her father must be the one scheduled for the portly bloke and would be in his office getting ready.

She was down the hall in a flash and found her father sitting behind a computer, laboriously typing patient notes with his index fingers. Slowly, Hermione closed the door and when it clicked shut her father's eyes came up. Hermione cancelled her Disillusionment Charm at the same time.

Her father jumped. "Who are you and how did you get in here?"

"Da... er... Dr. Wilkins? My name is Hermione Granger."

As she said this, her father seemed to slump in his chair. It was one of the key words that Hermione was to give to his parents to unlock their memories. "Say my name, please."

"Hermione Granger?" he asked, but his face tightened and the rest of his question was lost.

"I'm here to take you home. I'm your daughter."

"No," he said in protest, but didn't get out of his chair. "I don't have a daughter. We tried for years, but couldn't..."

"It's all right, daddy," she said softly. "You just can't remember. I can help you, if you'd like."

He looked at her strangely, as if his memories were fighting to surface. "Remember?"

She nodded. "You need to repeat what I'm going to say and it'll all come back to you."

He seemed to fight with the idea before his head nodded a fraction. "Okay."

"Say, 'My name is Daniel Thompson Granger'."

"My name is Daniel Thompson Granger." His face tensed again, but this time a flicker of recognition flashed in his eyes.

"I live in London, England with my wife Elizabeth Margret Granger."

He hesitated for a second, but with a thicker, stronger voice, said, "I live in London, England with my wife Elizabeth Margret Granger."

"We have a daughter named, Hermione Jane Granger, a witch."

"We have a daughter named, Hermione Jane Granger, a witch." A tear fell down his cheek as his eyes went wide. "Oh, Hermione!" He leapt from his chair and crushed her to him. "You're back and I *remember!*"

She hugged him fiercely and cried. "Yes, daddy, I'm back."

"You won? Is he... Is he gone?"

"Yes, Harry did it and Voldemort is dead."

He gave a whoop and punched the air in a way that made Hermione giggle despite her still leaking eyes. "We need to tell your mother. She doesn't know yet, does she?"

Hermione shook her head. "She still thinks she's Monica Wilkins and she's taking care of a root canal if I read her face right."

"Ah," her dad said. "We'll have to do something about these patients." He picked up the phone. "Let me ring up one of our friends while you take care of your mother. It seems the weather in Melbourne doesn't suit us a bit and someone will have to take over our surgery."

With a large smile, Hermione stepped back into the hallway and strode confidently toward her mother's surgery room.

\*

The filtered light of the canteen changed, announcing that lunch was over. Hermione joined the straggling witches and wizards as they flocked to the lifts, pouring over the details of her relived memory. It wasn't often that she allowed herself to visit the past like that. Between her impending marriage with Ron, her new job, and her undercover surveillance of Crackshot she had so few opportunities to simply relax that she attributed the whole episode to a defensive reaction from her brain.

Back on the fourth floor, Hermione noticed that her boss was back and that there was a large stack of papers waiting for her in her 'in' box. She handed the ham croissant sandwich to Mildred and sat heavily in her chair. It was going to be another boring afternoon.

Obnoxiously loud voices carried down the floor from her boss' office. There were two wizards from the Administrative section of the Minister's office and a witch she didn't recognize. Curious about their visit, she made it a point to move quietly in order to hear what they were saying. It was too bad Mildred was humming as she ate her sandwich.

Not wanting to waste time, Hermione efficiently loaded her quill with ink, hovered it over a pad of note parchment, and placed the new stack of unbound papers to the side. She dutifully outlined the topic and purpose of the report. The title was *Daily Departmental Outlays Versus Incomes*.

Ugh. She hated finances.

It wasn't long, however, before she realized that this was no ordinary finance report. Normally, she would receive a heavily redacted version, with only the bottom line and little intervening commentary. This particular report showed every single thing her department spent money on for the past quarter and it even had a comparison sheet that tallied all departments with a grand total. This was obviously not meant for an entry-level file clerk to see.

Making a hasty decision, Hermione used her wand to create a quick duplicate of the entire report and shrunk the copy so that it fit in her purse. As she poured over the figures from the original more closely, she quickly became aware of something else – the numbers didn't add up.

She flipped back to the first page, which she had only skimmed before and gave it another read. Sure enough, at the bottom of the first paragraph, the person who drafted the report had seen it as well.

*The Ministry Auditing Department should make these discrepancies their top priority.*

Then there was another bit in the closing paragraph.

*No Department should be allowed to practice such shoddy accounting and still receive such huge sums.*

Hermione flipped the page and was about to dive in to the supporting charts when she heard her boss' loud voice boom across the cubicles. Very quickly, she placed the report back in her inbox, smoothing out the top page, and then pulled out an older memo that she'd finished revising and

placed it on her desk.

"Miss Granger," said Mockridge with a sniff of disdain. "I've come to understand that a report managed to make it to your desk by mistake." His eyes wandered across the papers, quills, and parchment on her desk until they froze on her inbox. "Ah, there it is." He reached a stubby hand over her shoulder and snatched up the report. "There's a good girl," he said condescendingly and proceeded to ignore her.

Hermione watched him return to his office and loudly proclaim that the report had been found.

"Git," muttered Hermione under her breath.

Hours later, when the clock on her desk began to buzz and read *You're late for dinner*, Hermione grabbed her purse and raced to the exit, ignoring the curious glance of her co-worker. She had to find Harry immediately.

\*

In the spacious but slightly untidy office that housed the Head of the Auror Department, Harry sat across Kingsley Shacklebolt in a small, stiff chair, and explained how he had lost Dawlish yet again. Because he was one of only a handful of people that knew about the Auror's investigation into the Minister, Kingsley allowed Harry free access to him as long as it was mission related.

"I can't believe he rolled you," said Kingsley with a half-smile on his face. "Dawlish isn't exactly known for his brains. He's more the type of guy we'd call in when we needed some muscle. Planning and counter intelligence just wasn't his forte."

"Yeah, well," said Harry dejectedly. "By the time I got to Knockturn Alley, he was gone and there was a wall of goons waiting for me." He rubbed his shoulder subconsciously. "I barely made it in one piece. I don't think they were expecting *me*."

Kingsley smirked as a light flashed above their heads. "Now that he knows he's being trailed, he'll be more predictable, if not more insidious." He mashed a button on his desk with the pad of his thumb. "Send her in, Grizelda."

The door opened and Harry's trainer stepped in, closing the door behind her.

Tabitha Shanks was a slender, middle-aged witch about his parent's age. She'd seen enough of Voldemort's first reign of terror to know she wanted to do something about it and ended up apprenticing with Mad-Eye just before he retired. Now, she was training the wizard who'd stopped Voldemort twice.

"Sorry," she said immediately, even before taking her seat. "I was off with Knight taking care of another junior Death Eater in Brighton."

Kingsley waved her off. "With all the budget problems we've been having and the resistance Crackshot has to adding more Aurors, I'm afraid we're just going to have to scrape by." He gestured to Harry. "Potter was just telling me Dawlish is wise to our operation. I want you to train Potter on some more advanced tracking techniques. Stick with the non-magical stuff – it's something Dawlish'll be expecting."

Shanks nodded her head and winked at Harry.

"That reminds me," Kingsley said, turning to Harry, "you wanted to tell me something else?"

"Yeah," said Harry and pulled out a stack of papers. "Hermione stumbled onto this and thought it would be beneficial to the investigation." He slapped it onto Kingsley's desk. "Apparently, there's a hole in the Ministry where a whole ton of Galleons is going and nothing's coming out."

Kingsley flipped through the top few pages of the report and the two pages of notes Hermione penned in summary. "Interesting," he said with a broad grin. "I think we just found out where our new Auror budget's been going." He looked up, pinning them with his dark, serious eyes. "Now it's up to you two to find out what secret project our esteemed Minister has been cooking up."