

Carpe Diem



Imogen
(elenarda@elenarda.com)

2003
First published on Elenarda.com

Harry's fifth year

Part One of the *Carpe Diem Series*

Spoilers The first four canon books and the schoolbooks (*Fantastic Beasts* and *Quidditch Through the Ages*)

Summary Why does Harry have Ginny under the Imperius Curse, and what dangers does Voldemort pose for them this time?

Disclaimer This story is based on characters and situations created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Rain-coast Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended.

Disclaimer This piece of fanfiction is based on the Harry Potter stories by J.K. Rowling. In the true tradition of fan-fiction, the plots are mine, but most characters and settings are borrowed from the real author.

Typesetting This book has been typeset using L^AT_EX and the Bookman font family.

— CHAPTER ONE —

The Burrow

The owls winged their way back and forth all summer long. Harry was even more restless than usual, confined within Privet Drive and doing his best to keep out of the way of the Dursleys. Not even his birthday had lifted his spirits, even though his friends had risen magnificently to the occasion; for the fact remained that Voldemort had risen and was at large in the world again. This thought made Harry anxious for news of the wizarding world, depending on the owls to reassure him that those he knew were safe and well.

A soft hooting made him lift his head from his new Quidditch book, and he threw it aside and scrambled to open the window. A snowy white owl flew gracefully in to the room, a piece of parchment attached to her leg.

“Hi Hedwig,” Harry murmured, stroking her feathers and relieving her of her message. “It’s good to see you back.” Hedwig fluttered over to her cage and began gulping gratefully at the water as Harry unrolled the parchment. A note from Ron, and judging by the state of the handwriting it had either been written in a bit of a hurry, or whilst hanging upside down from a broomstick. Harry grinned at this mental image of his friend and read:

Dear Harry,

Good to hear from you. It sounds awful in Privet Drive again but it’s probably not as bad as it is here. Dad is working all hours at the Ministry, and so for that matter is Percy. He loves it though - you know what he’s like. Mum’s been in touch with Dumbledore again and he reckons it’ll be safe for you to come to us for the last week of the holiday. What do you reckon? I’ll tell you about the other stuff then.

Let me know

Ron.

Harry’s heart gave a great leap as he scribbled an equally hasty reply back to Ron. The Dursleys he was certain would be only too grateful to get rid of their nephew and he could think of nothing better to calm the restlessness in his mind than a week with the Weasleys. As Hedwig soared out again into the darkening sky, Harry felt that things were looking up for a change.

* * * * *

Harry stepped into the fire place and closed his eyes, feeling the now familiar warm breath of air around him. The whirling, tumbling, falling filled all of his senses and seemed to last an eternity. Finally when he opened his eyes again, it was to face the warm and welcoming environment of The Burrow’s small kitchen, Ron sitting at the table eating toast and his mother cooking at the opposite end of the room.

Instantly he was aware that something was wrong, terribly wrong. The faces of Ron and his mother were strained and white, dark shadows under their eyes belying a lack of sleep. Harry paused. Usually The Burrow was a hive of activity, filled with noise, laughter and even the occasional explosion from the vicinity of Fred and George’s room. Today it was silent, the only noise was the regular ticking of the clock which in the stillness seemed to reverberate around the room. Harry continued to hesitate on the hearth, uncertain of what to do, when suddenly Mrs Weasley turned and caught sight of him.

This was the first bit of fanfiction I ever wrote and started off a sock stealing craze! Disclaimer for this and all subsequent chapters: none of this really belongs to me. Characters, settings and most other devices are cheerfully lifted from other people. A few words might be mine...maybe. The hot buttered toast certainly is! Thank you JKR for providing all these hours of fun with such marvellous characters.

"Oh Harry, dear!" she exclaimed a little breathlessly. "How lovely to see you." She hurried over to hug and kiss him as she always did, and Harry relaxed in the warmth of the embrace. It had been embarrassing to start with, but now he was used to her treating him like just another one of her many children, and he felt reassured by it.

Cup of tea in hand Harry sat down at the table and cast a puzzled glance at Ron that he swiftly deflected by a shake of his head. Mrs Weasley sighed heavily, flicked her wand casually at the large basket of wet laundry, which floated in the air and then followed her obediently into the garden to dry.

"What is it Ron?" Harry prompted urgently. "What on earth's happened? Where is everyone?" The panic was beginning to rise in his stomach. Surely, surely Voldemort couldn't have...

Ron looked at him directly and spoke in a low whisper.

"Everyone's fine. Well, basically fine. We're worried about Ginny though."

"Ginny?"

"Yeah. Ever since You-Know-Who has been back she's been having nightmares. Bad ones. You know, about what he did to her back in our second year with the Chamber of Secrets and stuff. You'll hear it soon enough; she wakes up screaming the place down. She's sleeping now. Just as well really because she had a bad night last night. Mum's at her wits ends with it." Ron rubbed his face roughly with his hands, his toast now lying unfinished and forgotten on the table. "I just don't know what to do," he confessed desperately to Harry. "She's my little sister, and I should be doing something."

Harry could remember vividly that time in their second year when he had gone into the Chamber of Secrets after Ginny, and come face to face with Tom Riddle. Suppressing a shudder, he realised what must be going on in Ginny's mind. If Voldemort could do that to her as no more than a past memory in his diary, just think what he could make her do now that he was back to full strength. No wonder she was having nightmares.

"Y'know," muttered Ron thoughtfully, "maybe it would help her to hear about what happened again. Not the nightmare, but what *really* happened in there. I was stuck with that git Lockhart in the tunnel, but you," he looked anxiously at Harry, "you were in there with her. Maybe you could talk to her or something?" A high piercing scream broke across Ron's train of thought and made Harry's heart pound against his ribs. The screaming continued, wild and uncontrolled and terrified. Mrs Weasley fled through the kitchen towards the stairwell and her only daughter, looking even more strained than ever. Slowly the shrieks subsided into sobbing and then the house was still once more.

"It'll be OK now," Ron reassured his friend who was looking shaken by the experience. "Mum's really good at sorting her out. I just wish...well, y'know."

Harry nodded. He understood.

"If you think it'll help, I could talk to her," he began hesitantly. He knew he wasn't very good at that sort of thing, but Ron was right, once you'd heard Ginny so terrified you had to try and do something. Anything.

Leaning against the kitchen door, Mrs Weasley closed her eyes and took a steadying breath. Then, with effort, she moved across the room and poured milk into a mug, tapping it with her wand to bring it to the boil. Ron hurried over and put his arm round his mother, hugging her tightly, and told her about his idea. Mrs Weasley smiled weakly,

"Harry, if you're sure you could talk about it..." her voice faded away, cracked with emotion. "Please." Her eyes were bright and shining with unshed tears, but there was a hope contained within them which gave Harry the courage he needed. He pointed towards the mug of milk.

"For Ginny?" A nod. "First door on the left at the top of the stairs?" Another nod. Harry left the kitchen to the sound of Mrs Weasley breaking down and quietly sobbing as he headed into the hallway.

Standing in the cool darkness outside Ginny's room Harry was regretting his offer. What on earth was he going to say to her? He felt totally inadequate for this, but knew he owed it to all of them to try. It couldn't be worse than that Hungarian Horntail—could it? Stiffening his resolve, he knocked gently at her door, heard a muffled "C'me in," took a deep breath and stepped over the threshold.

"It's me Ginny. Your mum sent this up."

Ginny was sitting on her bed looking even worse than the rest of her family. She was almost translucent as her skin was so pale. The sunlight streaming through her window made thousands of shades of red and copper dance through her hair, the only bit of her which seemed to have any life left at all. Her brown eyes, so often full of fun, looked listlessly at Harry, and then travelled to the cup he held in his hand.

"More hot milk?" she asked gloomily.

Harry grinned at her.

"Yeah. You getting a lot of hot milk then?"

Ginny pulled a face. "You have no idea! I hate the stuff too. I reckon mum must think it's good for nightmares." She stopped suddenly, and looked at Harry as if she'd just realised that he was there. "Harry!"

"It's OK—your mum suggested I came up," Harry said quickly, suddenly realising that he was, in actual fact, in Ginny's bedroom.

"It's not that. Did you hear...did you hear me before?" she asked awkwardly. Harry nodded slowly and watched a dull red flush cover Ginny's face.

"Ginny..." he began, not knowing where his sentence was going to lead, but he stopped as he saw silent tears begin to stream down her cheeks, forming rivers and then tributaries. "Ginny, stop it. It's not your fault! None of this is your fault."

It took a while for Ginny to regain control, and the silently shuddering sobs continued. Harry sat on the end of her bed talking gently to her all the while until finally he whispered,

"Ginny, I want to help. Tell me how."

Ginny smiled weakly at him.

"Oh it's just my old nightmare," she said shakily. "It's nothing."

"Ginny, this isn't nothing. Look at you. I've never seen you like this before, not even..." his voice trailed off. He didn't know if it was wise to mention the Chamber of Secrets or if that would provoke another outburst of sobbing. There was silence between them for a while.

"Harry," she paused, and then continued quickly before she changed her mind. "How can you go through so much, with Cedric's death and everything else that's happened to you, and not have nightmares?"

Harry smiled wryly at this. Ginny had spotted something which he had been careful to conceal, even from Ron and Hermione. He did have nightmares, he frequently had Voldemort haunting his dreams and he relived the horror of the deaths of his parents and Cedric over and over again in his mind. Like Ginny his dreams had been worse since the Triwizard tournament ended. He looked at her carefully, and saw her watching him, a hunted look still present in her eyes. He knew he could trust her, but this was so difficult for him to talk about. He was meant to be here helping her, and somehow he was about to lay his own soul bare instead. He looked steadily into her eyes, those deep brown pools, liquid almost to the touch.

"I do have them Ginny," he said quietly. "I've had them for a long time. And I think I understand why you're having them too." He held his breath and waited.

Ginny reached for his hand and held it in hers.

"I know."

They had reached some sort of understanding, an unspoken connection, a calmness.

"Harry, you know what really frightens me? If HE could control me just like that by magic in his diary, he can do the same again but using the real him this time. It'll be even worse. How do I fight that? Last time I could have killed people...my brothers...even you! What do I do?" The terror in Ginny's voice was clear. "It's that Imperius Curse I've heard Dad talking about. I'm dreaming he uses it on me and I do all sorts of awful things again."

"You can learn to fight the Imperius Curse you know," Harry reassured her. "I learnt to last year. Nearly fractured my kneecaps in the process, mind you!" He winced at the memory. "Maybe we could get permission to try it out? I'm not like Hermione but I could try and help. If you want me to?"

Ginny's face broke into a small smile.

"You mean it? You'd really help?"

"Well, it's a curse so we'd need permission to use it, but I reckon Dumbledore'll understand. It's got to stop the nightmares if you do. Anyway," his face twitched mischievously into a real grin, "I can use it to make you kiss the ground I walk on."

Ginny giggled.

"In your dreams, Harry Potter."

Hogwarts Again

Rays of sunlight scattered across the room, idly caressing the contents of the place with golden fingers. Harry lay awake watching the gentle beams play around this tower room he had grown to love. This was home, like no other place had ever been to him in his life, and he felt contentment surge through his veins as he lay, sunk deeply into the warmth of his bed. His mind drifted carelessly over memories of the past few days.

“Now I want you boys to look after Ginny,” Mrs Weasley had said, fixing her three sons and Harry with a beady stare. “You know I’m going to worry about her, and I want you to promise me to send regular owls so I know you’re all alive and not in too much trouble.” That last comment was clearly directed at Fred and George, who even though they were now almost 18 and in their final year at school, had writhed uncomfortably under their mother’s gaze. Harry smiled sleepily at the thought. It was nice to be included as one of the family he reflected, and it was even better that Ginny’s nightmares seemed to be fading. Maybe working on the Imperius curse would get rid of them altogether.

He shifted onto his side, looking in the direction of Ron’s bed, but the curtains were closed around him. Ron and Hermione seemed to have come to an unspoken decision not to talk about Krum, but there was still a certain tension between them. Harry hoped it would sort itself out soon. The two of them had bickered their way through the last 4 years of school, but it did make things awkward sometimes when he got sandwiched in the middle of one of their rows. Having said that, it was unusual for one of their arguments to last so long. Even when Ron had accused Crookshanks of eating Scabbers they had sorted out their differences faster than this. Harry shrugged to himself. “Best not get involved,” he reflected silently.

* * * * *

The Great Hall was alive, ringing with the noise and clatter of hundreds of students catching up with news from across the summer. The enchanted ceiling was a clear blue with wispy cotton-wool clouds drifting idly across it, the perfect day for...

“Quidditch practise,” announced George loudly as Harry sat down at the table and helped himself to toast. “Tonight. Need to find a new keeper and sort out who’s going to be captain this year. Got to get an early start on training if we’re to get up to speed fast enough.”

“Yeah,” agreed Fred emphatically. “Can’t have those Slytherins beating us. Slimy lot!”

There was a murmur of consensus around the Gryffindor table and taking advantage of the lull in conversation, Lee Jordan began telling a joke he’d heard over the summer about a banshee and a vampire, causing much hilarity in those around him.

“You know, Harry,” said Ron thoughtfully, sitting down opposite his friend. “I might just try out for the Keeper on the team. What do you think?”

“Great idea,” said Harry enthusiastically through a mouthful of hot buttered toast. “Which broom have you got here?”

“Comet 360.” Ron pulled a disparaging face, “It’s Percy’s. Still, it’s good enough to get round the goal posts at a fair turn of speed and better than my Shooting Star. Most things are though. Wonder what Percy’ll say when he discovers I’ve ‘borrowed’ it.” Showing complete unconcern about his brother’s feelings he poured himself an orange juice and looked around. “Hermione and Ginny are going to be late if they don’t get a move on.”

It seemed that Ginny and Hermione *were* going to be late as Ron and Harry had got round to consulting their timetables before they finally arrived.

“Oh no!” Harry groaned.

"That's nice!" teased Hermione. "I'd have thought you'd have been happier to see us than that."

"Double Divination," came Ron's appalled tones. "First lesson back as well."

Hermione snorted scornfully. Her opinions of Professor Trelawney obviously hadn't changed over the holiday.

"Wonder how I'll be dying today," said Harry in mock horror. "Rampaging hinkypunks?"

They were laughing at the ridiculous idea of being trampled to death by such tiny creatures, when Ron suddenly turned to Hermione.

"Where have you two been anyway?"

"Needed to see Professor McGonagall," she replied airily, wearing an enigmatic smile and deliberately refusing to elaborate further. Ron raised an eyebrow.

"And are you going to tell us why?" he enquired.

Hermione didn't answer.

"Going to be late for Arithmancy," she said, grabbing some toast in her hand and grinning at him cheerfully. "See you all later." And with that, she was gone.

"What was all that about?" asked Ron, perplexed.

"Oh Ron! Use your eyes for a change," laughed Ginny. "It's obvious!"

The three of them strolled back into the entrance hall, which was basking in the mellow shafts of light from the fine September morning. They were just about to separate up the fine marble staircase for lessons when Ginny looked at Harry, flushed pink and suddenly blurted out,

"I asked Professor McGonagall about working on deflecting the Imperius curse."

"And?"

Ginny nodded.

"She said it was fine, and we should use the Transfiguration classroom near her office so she can keep an eye on us. It was easier than I expected. To be honest, I thought she was going to say no."

"Well, there's Quidditch practise tonight, but there shouldn't be a lot of homework..."

"Unless we're late for Divination," warned Ron, heading rapidly up the stairs towards North Tower.

"After Quidditch then," said Ginny, in a more determined voice than Harry had ever heard her use before. "I want to do this."

* * * * *

The day passed quickly, the sickly sweet heady fumes of Divination gave way to the slumber of History of Magic, which in turn became the study of Transfiguration. Professor McGonagall had been demonstrating changing mice into toadstools, and as the class filed out at the end of her lesson, she said crisply,

"Potter, a word please."

Harry exchanged glances with Ron and Hermione. He was certain he knew what this was going to be about and his heart sank. He saw them both looking at him sympathetically as they left the room. Harry slowly approached Professor McGonagall's desk and waited.

"Potter, Miss Weasley came to me this morning, with a rather unusual request regarding the Imperius curse. I've spoken with the headmaster about it, and given the circumstances and events last term, we agree it is wise for her, and for her peace of mind, to learn to throw off the curse if she can." She looked at him sternly through her glasses. "What I was wondering was, have you considered the implications of putting such an unforgivable curse on someone? After all, you will have complete control over her, for a time."

Harry squirmed uncomfortably inside.

"I don't want to control Ginny," he said awkwardly. "I want to do something help her. If you'd heard those nightmares of hers in the summer..." He fidgeted with his bag. "Really Professor, I promised Mrs Weasley I'd look out for her. You know I'd not hurt her."

He lifted his head and looked straight at Professor McGonagall as he said this and was relieved to see her stern face relaxing into a small smile.

"Very well Potter. Just be careful."

* * * * *

The Gryffindor Quidditch team had gathered together in the changing rooms after practise. The sun was sinking low over the horizon, and stars were beginning to blink themselves awake and twinkle gently through the spectrum of violet hues that made the evening sky. Even without Wood, and

a whole year of no matches, their play had been good, and Harry felt the exhilaration of the wind swooping past him, doing the thing he loved most in the world. The team had made two unanimous decisions that had both surprised and delighted Harry; the first was that Ron was to be their new Keeper. Harry suspected it was a combination of long arms, and uncannily accurate guesswork of where the Quaffle was going that had made his friend so good in the position. The second decision had made him go bright red, to the very roots of his hair.

"Oh there's no question," said Angelina. "Harry should captain the team. He's a fantastic Seeker, and the rest of us have all got our NEWTs coming up this year. We just won't have the time. It makes sense for him to take over now anyway, because he's going to lose most of us in the summer and it'll give him experience to get the new Gryffindor team off the ground next year."

There was absolute agreement, and consequently Harry was walking back to the castle with Ron, Firebolt over his shoulder, feeling the happiest he had in a long time.

Ron shot him a furtive glance as they climbed the steps into the entrance hall.

"Harry, are you seriously going to use the Imperius curse on Ginny?"

"I'm going to have to," he replied hesitantly. Seeing the concern on Ron's face he swiftly added, "Better me than Voldemort."

Ron flinched at the sound of the name.

"I suppose. Just...don't ask her to do anything she'd hate. I know I tease her and stuff but...she's still my little sister." Suddenly Ron's furrowed brow cleared and he nudged Harry. "Hey you be careful. Spending time alone with her might cause the Harry Potter fan club to start up again."

Harry groaned, and trudged up the stairs towards the Transfiguration classroom and a waiting Ginny.

The Transfiguration Classroom

Ginny was already there, perched on one of the classroom desks and deeply engrossed in a heavy leather-bound tome, which she'd balanced on her knees. Her long red hair had obviously been annoying her again, Harry reflected. It had been rolled into a knot at the back of her head, and what looked like her wand was skewered through it in a vain attempt to keep it off her face. Bits of hair stuck out at all angles in a very Ginnyish fashion and the whole thing looked in perilous danger of collapse at any second. Candlelight shimmered from the sockets on the walls, catching glints of titian and ochre in her hair as she moved to turn the page. She read on, blissfully unaware of her audience.

Harry blinked. "It's just Ginny," he reminded himself. "Ron's little sister." But the change in her was undeniable. She'd become more...something. More confident? More beautiful? He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it was there, whatever it was. His eyes moved from her hair to studying the concentration on her face, scanning her version of the Weasley freckles which were only just visible in the half-light of the room, waiting, waiting for her to see him and smile. Harry's insides quivered, and his eyes widened as he dismissed the thought before it had even really occurred to him. "Just Ginny," he repeated to himself.

"Hi Ginny," he called, slightly louder than he had intended to. She jumped and her precarious hairstyle collapsed completely, causing torrents of russet red to cascade down her shoulders.

"Harry!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "Sorry, I was miles away. Got a book about the curse from the library and I was reading up on it a bit." She put the volume on the desk, and got to her feet looking at Harry's stunned expression. "What's up? I've not turned my hair blue again have I? I know I shouldn't use my wand instead of a hair grip, but it's just so handy sometimes. I always said I'd stop after I set fire to it a couple of years back, but old habits are hard to break." She shrugged and gave an apologetic half smile. "Sorry, I'm rambling. It's nerves."

Harry laughed.

"Me too," he said, holding out his hand, which she could see was trembling slightly. "I can't say I'm looking forward to this, Ginny, but there is one good thing. I just dropped in to see McGonagall to let her know we were here and she lent me a mouse from today's Transfiguration lesson to practise on. So if I get it wrong first time, at least it's not on you."

Ginny retrieved her wand from under the desk, and made her way across the classroom to where Harry stood with the glass tank containing a small white mouse scurrying around. She stared at it in fascination.

"You know, I've never seen this done before. Moody must have thought we were too young."

"I'm not promising I can do it," replied Harry apprehensively. "Surprisingly enough, I've never done an unforgivable curse before."

He rolled back the sleeves of his robes, and looked at Ginny. They nodded gently together, and Harry pointed his wand at the creature, who scuttled back into a corner of the case trying to escape.

"Imperio!" he cried. A flash of light shot out from his wand, and to Harry's amazement the mouse raised itself onto hind paws and began to pirouette gracefully across the floor of its tank. Harry removed his wand, and just as suddenly as it had started the enchantment stopped and the mouse dropped back onto all four paws again.

Ginny gulped.

"We don't have to do this. Let's just go back to the common room and play chess or something," Harry said, looking at her stricken face. He made to pick up the mouse and his Firebolt.

"No!" said Ginny firmly, holding onto his arm. "I need to. Tell me what it feels like when the curse gets put on you."

Harry explained how he himself had felt; the light floating feeling inside his head, the total release

from the pains and aches of his own body, and the way it would have been so easy to accept the suggestion and do as he had been told.

"What you've got to do it think your way through it. Your own mind is in the back of there somewhere and once you can hear what you think you can break the curse," he reassured her. "It took me a while to get it right though, and Ron still hasn't managed it, so don't expect too much at once."

"Do it!" Ginny muttered through clenched teeth. "Same as the mouse."

Harry looked at her with renewed respect. She stood in the middle of the classroom, completely determined, but he could see her trembling with fear. He suddenly found his mouth dry and swallowed, lifted his wand, saw her close her eyes and...

"I can't do it, Ginny," he croaked, shaking his head. "I can't."

"Please," she whispered. "I trust you."

Barely able to bring himself to look at her, he aimed again with his wand and took a deep shuddering breath.

"Imperio."

A few minutes later the pair were sitting at a desk in the classroom discussing the curse.

"Well at least I know what it feels like. Harry, don't look so traumatised about it. I'm fine!" Ginny exclaimed.

"What was I thinking of?" he mused out loud. "I could have hurt you."

"You will keep on helping me, won't you? I'd rather trust you with this than anyone. There's no telling what Fred and George would do to me if they had the chance to curse me!" She giggled slightly, and Harry managed a weak smile back at her. "Oh Harry, I'm fine!"

Suddenly and completely unexpectedly she hugged him; a gesture he had seen her use so many times with her various brothers, and which made his stomach fill with butterflies.

"Thanks Ginny," he stammered, blushing furiously. "I'd better get the mouse back."

They walked slowly together back to the common room, discussing how to proceed with the curse breaking, when Harry suddenly remembered something.

"What was Hermione hiding this morning at breakfast? I've hardly seen her since. She's up to something."

Ginny grinned, her brown eyes twinkling at him,

"Oh that would be telling!"

They climbed through the portrait hole and the first sight that greeted their eyes was Ron and Hermione having a blazing and quite spectacular row.

The Common Room

“Hermione will you stop being so flaming superior all the time and actually listen?” Ron raged at her. His face was scarlet and he was clenching his fists at his side in sheer frustration.

“Listen? Me listen? Oh that’s a good one coming from you!” Hermione retorted bitterly.

Ron snorted derisively.

“When was the last time you bothered to listen to me? To think about me and my feelings?” she yelled at him.

“That’s right! I forgot. It’s me, me, me all the time!” Ron snapped.

“Ha!” Hermione was gradually turning as red as Ron, but she advanced towards him, glaring at him furiously, crowds of new first years scattering out of her path like frightened sheep. “And tell me just how *you* would feel if *I’d* been reading letters sent privately to *you*? ...Well?”

There was a dangerous pause. Harry and Ginny exchanged worried looks.

“Oh so now it’s my fault you leave your love letters in books you lend to me for my homework?” Ron replied tartly. “Honestly, Hermione! I couldn’t avoid seeing it.”

“Seeing it is not the same as reading it,” she hissed.

“Well it’s certainly explained a lot,” stormed Ron. “Like why you didn’t visit this summer. Oh no, we’re not good enough for you now that you can go swanning off with the likes of Viktor Krum.”

“I *knew* you’d behave like this,” she fumed. “Why do you think I didn’t tell you?”

Ron grew even redder.

“I’ll tell you one thing Ron Weasley,” she continued in a threatening voice of deadly calm. “You might not have noticed I’m now a prefect, and you might not listen to a word I say, but hear this:” She jabbed him hard in the chest with her finger to emphasise every syllable she spoke, “If you ever, ever, **ever** read my letters again, I promise you I will find a curse so bad you’ll wish you’d never been born.”

With that she snatched up her book, turned on her heel and stalked off towards the dormitory stairwell.

The common room breathed a sigh of relief, and Ron stood watching her, mouth gaping like a goldfish.

“Nice one Ron,” came the amused voice of Fred Weasley from over by the fireplace.

“Oh shut up!” he yelled and flopped down into a nearby chair, burying his head in his hands.

“He never learns,” muttered Ginny under her breath, and Harry, in all honesty, had to agree with her.

* * * * *

The days and weeks flew past, and the early warmth of autumn retreated to the advances of the chill dampness of October mists. Harry had never been busier at school; when he wasn’t in lessons or doing homework, he was out on the Quidditch field, or planning match strategies for the Gryffindor team. His reluctant perseverance with the Imperius curse was surprisingly starting to pay off. Once or twice Ginny had managed to throw off the curse entirely, and her hopes were high for the future. The only real problem was, Harry’s headaches had started again.

Rubbing his scar fretfully, Harry thought enviously of the rest of Gryffindor who were obviously still in bed enjoying untroubled dreams this Saturday morning. He gazed at the dancing flames in the common room fire, then closed his eyes, trying to recall every detail of the dream which had prompted this latest attack of pain. It was somewhere he’d never been before; soaring over a forest, down, down to a ramshackle stone cottage which appeared to be totally deserted. The windows had long since been boarded over, and mossy fingers clung onto every surface of the place in an attempt

to claim dominion. Weeds tangled together, stretching and competing for what little light there was, grasping at his ankles as he had moved forward to peer between a gap in the rotten planking. A faint flickering light illuminated the dank interior, and a tall shadowy shape, which made Harry's scar begin to burn on his forehead.

"We must kill him soon," came the oddly high-pitched hiss which Harry recognised all too well. "Harry Potter has lived too long already. He must not stand in my way."

"But my Lord," came the stuttering, wheezing voice which had betrayed Harry's own parents, "you know how difficult it is to get hold of the boy."

"Have faith Wormtail. It is taken care of." A peal of mirthless and cruel laughter filled the air.

"Yes my Lord," came a new voice, which Harry was certain he recognised. "It has been done."

Harry's eyes snapped open to see Ron peering anxiously down at him.

"Are you OK?"

"Yeah. It's just another headache. Couldn't sleep," Harry replied vaguely, his mind still concentrated on the voice in his dream. Who did that voice belong to?

"It's not You Know Who again is it?" Ron asked cautiously. Harry had been reticent to speak of Voldemort since the third task in the Triwizard Tournament the previous year, and the little he had told his friend about the horrors he had experienced witnessing Voldemort's rebirth and Cedric Diggory's murder made Ron approach the subject more delicately than usual.

Harry began to pace restlessly around the room, rubbing his scar distractedly.

"He's after me again," he said quietly after a long pause. "I saw it in my dream. He's got it all planned out and someone I know is going to help him."

Ron looked aghast at this news and stammered,

"But who? Who do we know who would do something like that?"

Harry shrugged, his thoughts were racing. He knew that it was only a matter of time before Voldemort caught up with him, and it was sheer good luck that he had survived so long already. Would this ever stop, or was this going to be it?

"Still," Ron persisted, "he can't hurt you while you're here can he? I mean, Dumbledore's around and everything. Hermione'll tell you about all the enchantments there are to stop people getting into the castle." He mimicked her voice, "I read it in 'Hogwarts, A History'."

Harry smiled wryly at this reference to Hermione's favourite book. As far as they knew, she was the only person to have ever waded through the thing from cover to cover.

"It didn't stop him last year though," he answered thoughtfully. "Portkeys obviously work, even inside Hogwarts." He shook his head as if to clear his thoughts and glanced out of the window and across the grounds which were still shrouded in the early morning mist. "He's out there somewhere."

With effort, Harry shifted his attention back to Ron, sank into the armchair opposite him and continued in a low, yet urgent tone.

"Ron, *why* is he after me? I mean, it can't just be because he didn't kill me when I was a baby. There has to be something more to it than that. I've been thinking; there has to be a real reason why he wanted to kill me and my dad. You know, he always said my mum needn't have died—the only reason she did was to protect me. There has to be something more to it."

"How about writing to Sirius? He's bound to know," Ron suggested practically. Then he continued in a bracing tone, "Let's go out for a bit of Quidditch practise; it looks like you need something to take your mind off things."

"Yeah," said Harry, beginning to sound more like his normal self. "It's a Hogsmeade weekend today as well. Perfect timing for a trip to Honeyduke's."

As the rest of Gryffindor slowly came alive again to the hustle and bustle of Saturday morning in the common room, two figures could be seen distantly on the Quidditch pitch, soaring together through the crisp morning air.

* * * * *

Harry, Ron and Hermione strolled through the main street of Hogsmeade, companionably munching on chocolate frogs and hunting for a birthday present for Ginny.

"You should have been better organised, Ron," said Hermione severely. "I bought one for her back in August in Diagon Alley."

"Oh plenty of time," replied Ron airily "Her birthday's not until the end of the month." Hermione laughed.

"That is so typical of you Ron Weasley. You've only got three days to get her one. Oooh! What about something from there?" She stopped and pointed to a small shop on the left hand side of the

street. "I treated myself to a gorgeous necklace from there last year to wear with my dress robes for the ball." She caught Ron's eye and flushed, but continued undeterred. "They're not too expensive, and I'm sure Ginny will find an occasion to wear something like that later this year." Her eyes twinkled with unshared information.

"Not another ball," moaned Ron. "The last one was torture enough!"

"You'll find out soon enough," Hermione grinned. "Now, how about this birthday present?"

They had only just begun to look through the window when they heard a familiar drawling voice behind them. Draco Malfoy, flanked as ever by his Neanderthal cronies Crabbe and Goyle.

"Surely you're not thinking of buying anything here, Weasley?" his clipped accent drilled the insult home. He laughed loftily, "It'll cost more gold than you and your brothers have put together."

Ron turned scarlet and would have dived at Malfoy if Hermione and Harry had not grabbed hold of the back of his robes and hung on tight.

"At least I've got people I care about to buy presents for," Ron retorted angrily, but Malfoy's sneer became even more malicious.

"You mean you and that filthy Mudblood have finally started a relationship? Well, well! My congratulations Weasley. No money and no breeding should be a match made in heaven."

Before Harry had a chance to intervene, Ron wrenched himself free and landed full force on Malfoy, knocking him clean off his feet and onto the ground. Punches flew before the pair were finally separated, Malfoy's nose was geysering blood everywhere, and a nasty cut was oozing above Ron's eye.

"You'll pay for this," Malfoy spluttered as he was led away down the street by the other Slytherins.

"Serves him right," muttered Ron darkly. "Hope I've cracked his ribs. That would be worth a detention any day."

"Ron! You shouldn't have! He's not worth it," Hermione exclaimed. "Let me look at your eye."

Ron grimaced but stooped obediently to let Hermione examine the gash with gentle fingers.

"It's nothing," he asserted. "I'm not having him insulting you. Hermi...Ouch!" He flinched.

"Sorry!" She smiled at him, "I think I can fix this. I've been reading up on basic magical medicine recently. You never know when it's going to come in handy."

"Go on then," said Ron through gritted teeth. "I suppose as it's you I'm not likely to come out as a three headed mutant at the end of the day."

"That's what you think," she teased, and pointed her wand at the cut. "*Integro*."

Harry stood watching this exchange, a realisation suddenly dawning on him. Now it made sense: Ron's irrational behaviour about Krum, flying off the handle because Malfoy had insulted Hermione, the ridiculous fights, and the tenderness with which she was currently treating him. He smiled inwardly. It made perfect sense.

"Harry?" Hermione's amused voice cut across his thoughts. "Are you coming in or are you going to stand outside all day?"

The perfect present for Ginny was quickly found. A delicate silver chain with a tiny star-like drop which twinkled and gleamed magically in the palm of Ron's hand.

"It's too much," Ron said glumly, pulling a face.

"How about we buy it for her between us?" offered Harry slowly, knowing money was a sore point. Ron regarded him suspiciously. "Well, I feel guilty," he explained hastily. "I've been putting curses on the poor girl all term. She deserves something nice after that!"

"Yeah, I guess so," Ron laughed. "She's going to love this."

Leaving Ron with his money bag at the counter, Harry wandered across to where Hermione was idly browsing the shelves.

"How long have you been feeling like this about Ron?" he muttered in an undertone.

She glanced swiftly at him and blushed.

"You noticed then?" she murmured. "It is *so* difficult. I wish I knew what was going on."

"Hermione, this is *Ron* we're talking about," Harry whispered, smiling at her. "You're going to need to club him round the head with something heavy and *make* him see what's staring him in the face. If you leave him to his own devices he'll never notice how he feels."

"I know. That's exactly what Ginny said. But then there's the Viktor complication," Hermione looked worried and glanced across the shop at Ron. "Listen, I'll talk to you later. He's coming over."

The dusk was washing over them as they passed through the gateway on the way back to school and that was when it happened. A searing pain scorched through Harry's scar, so severely and so unexpectedly that he cried out as he clutched his hand to his forehead. Blinded by the ferocity of the attack, he stumbled, aware only of the pulsating agony in his head. The hammering blows

of white hot pain rained down inside his skull, and he was falling; falling deeper and deeper into darkness.

The Hospital Wing

A cacophony of noises blared like a badly tuned radio through his mind, loudly, then fading to almost nothing. As Harry's senses began to focus more clearly he identified a sniffing noise not far from his left ear. The heaviness of his body was exaggerated by the dull throbbing persisting in his head. Slowly he forced his eyelids open, wincing as he encountered the early morning light pervading through the hospital wing.

"He'll be fine, Hermione," he heard Ron's voice reassuring and comforting. "He's been through worse than this before."

"I know," Hermione responded shakily. "It's just..."

Despite his best efforts, Harry's eyes closed again and he fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

When he awoke once more, the room was dark and silent. Blurred shapes surrounded him, and he felt rather shaky as if he was just recovering from a bad bout of 'flu. He reached for his glasses, and then saw to his surprise that despite the stillness of the room he was not alone. Hermione and Ron were still stationed by his bedside, and looked suspiciously as if they'd been there all night. Hermione was asleep, her head nestled into Ron's shoulder. The area around her eyes was still red from where she had been crying and Ron's arm was wrapped protectively around her. He looked white and drained, his eyes staring vacantly into space.

"Ron," Harry whispered. Ron jumped then looked quickly at him, a nervous grin spreading over his face.

"Harry! You had us worried there! How are you feeling?"

His sudden action had disturbed Hermione who gave a little moan, pushed her hair out of her eyes and blinked sleepily.

"Wha-?" she croaked. Then realising her proximity to Ron, she sprang apart from him as if she had been scalded. Flushing slightly, she perched on the end of Harry's bed, took his hand in hers and said emotionally, "Oh, Harry!"

Harry squeezed her fingers and gave her a lopsided grin.

"You're not going to get rid of me that easily, you know."

For a second she looked as if she was going to burst into tears all over again, but she swiftly wiped her eyes on her robes when Madam Pomfrey bustled into the room to check on her patient.

"Good, you're awake now," she said briskly. "I just want to check you over and you're certainly going to be staying in here for the next couple of days." Harry grimaced. "You'll do as you're told young man and no arguments! And as for you two," she turned to Ron and Hermione and added kindly, "he'll still be here in the morning. Go and get some sleep yourselves. You look exhausted."

They knew it was no use arguing, and with one last glance back at Harry, who was being obscured by the hospital screen, they headed back to Gryffindor Tower.

Harry felt considerably better the following day and argued vociferously about having to be confined in the hospital wing rather than going to his lessons, but Madam Pomfrey refused to be swayed on the subject. Shortly before lunchtime he had a surprise visit from the headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, who regarded Harry through his twinkling blue eyes.

"It seems Voldemort is gaining more power, Harry," he said seriously, pressing the tips of his fingers together. He leaned forward, "I need to know everything you can tell me."

Harry talked about his dream and his headaches, but the fear he had in his heart remained unspoken. If the pains in his scar were now sufficiently severe to make him lose consciousness, then how could he ever fight against Voldemort again? He had a strong suspicion that Dumbledore could read his mind, because when he got up to leave he patted Harry gently on his shoulder.

"Try not to worry, boy," he said. "Everything will be all right."

Harry was just puzzling over this strange comment when the hospital door burst open. A small figure with a whirlwind of red hair came darting into the room, eyes alight with laughter.

"Thought you could do with some company," she whispered mischievously. Then she continued in a louder tone, "Madam Pomfrey? Madam Pomfrey? I'm really sorry to bother you, but I've got a burn on my arm from a blast-ended skrewt, and Hagrid thought you'd better look at it." Ginny's face radiated wounded angelic innocence. "It really hurts," she added pathetically, and Harry had to struggle to keep himself from laughing out loud as he saw her lower lip trembling slightly. Madam Pomfrey tutted and set about applying the orange burn cream to a small singe on Ginny's forearm.

"It's not too bad," she comforted Ginny. "Should be fine in an hour or so. I'm sick of telling the headmaster we shouldn't allow those brutes in school. Now dear, sit down for a while and I'll come back and check on you later." As she headed back into her office, Ginny settled herself in a chair next to Harry and grinned at him wickedly.

"I'm impressed," admitted Harry, laughing at her audacity.

"Well you do learn certain defence mechanisms when you've got six older brothers," she chuckled. "That innocent expression comes in handy sometimes, I can tell you!" She looked at Harry, some anxiety now showing in her eyes. "So how are you? The way Ron described it, I was half expecting to see you at death's door!"

"It was just my scar hurting, that's all, Ginny. I'm absolutely fine now."

"Isn't there anything anyone can do about it?" she asked curiously. "Surely there's a charm or something that might work."

"Well it's not exactly a common ailment," Harry began, but she interrupted him.

"Have you asked Dumbledore? I'm sure he'd know."

"Well, not exactly, but..."

"Harry!" she impersonated her mother's fussing voice with uncanny accuracy. "You really should take more care of yourself. Best to be on the safe side."

Harry lay back on his pillows and laughed.

"You know Gin," he said after a pause, "it's so nice to just be able to chat with you like this. I'm glad you're not hiding round corners from me anymore."

Ginny went pink.

"And no blushing either," Harry continued, teasing her gently. "I'm not having that Harry Potter fan club starting off again."

Ginny threw a pillow at him and giggled.

"You had to bring that up, didn't you? Well I can honestly tell you I shall cast my heart around for a more deserving soul who values the finer points of singing Valentine's greetings. Maybe I could start up a Neville Longbottom appreciation society, or something?"

The pair of them exchanged glances and hooted with laughter.

Ron and Hermione finally made it up to the hospital wing after classes to find Harry and Ginny absorbed in arguing about the finer points of Quidditch, and team tactics for the coming match with Ravenclaw. Harry had conjured up diagrams in the air and was demonstrating the Wimborne Wave manoeuvre for the chasers.

"It'll never work, Harry," insisted Ginny watching the magical diagram carefully, her brow furrowed in concentration. "Look, all the other team have to do is keep a player low down to intercept the Quaffle. See?" She waved her wand and showed him.

"Hi there!" Hermione called cheerfully. "You're looking a lot better today, Harry." Ron, meanwhile, was frowning at his little sister.

"What are you doing in here Ginny?" he asked.

"Accident with a blast-ended skrewt," she said, smiling apologetically at him. "Madam Pomfrey's fixed my arm now though." She glanced at her watch. "I'd better get going. I've got this afternoon's work to catch up on now as well as half a mountain of homework to do. See you all later." She grinned at Harry and Hermione, tousled her brother's hair and headed rapidly out of the door before Ron could catch her to gain his revenge.

Ron came back to his chair trying desperately to flatten his hair back down after Ginny's attack, an expression of outrage on his face.

"Here let me," Hermione laughed at him, and reached over to smooth a particularly hedgehog-like part near the crown of his head. As she touched him, he looked into her eyes, holding her gaze. They both reddened, Ron looked away, and Hermione quickly dropped her hand back into her lap.

"I had a letter from Viktor this morning," she said awkwardly in the silence that followed. Harry glanced at her in surprise. They both knew how Ron reacted to even the sound of Krum's name, and voluntarily bringing up the subject seemed to be nothing short of suicidal. "He agrees it's best

if we don't write any more."

Ron visibly appeared to be wrestling with a wide range of emotions, and Harry was not in the slightest bit surprised when he suddenly got to his feet.

"Harry, I'm sorry. I've got to go and sort some stuff out," he shook his head, deeply perplexed. "You're out of here tomorrow?"

"Yeah," replied Harry. "With a bit of luck I'll be down for breakfast."

"Right then. Yes. Good," he muttered distractedly and disappeared from sight into the corridor.

Hermione followed him not long afterwards, leaving Harry alone to get on with the homework she had brought for him. One piece was a potions essay for Professor Snape, and Harry knew well enough that this essay would have to be done as Snape would like nothing better than to have an excuse to give him detention or take ten points from Gryffindor. He was just opening his textbook to read over what he'd missed that day when the door creaked open yet again and Ginny poked her head round, looking as if she'd run the full length of the school.

"Harry, I've just seen Dumbledore," she gasped for breath, holding a stitch in her side. "There is a charm that might help. He's given me a book."

Harry's hopes rose as he saw the slim volume clutched in her hand.

"What is it Ginny? Which charm?"

"I can't tell you," she looked frustrated. "It depends on absolute trust to work."

Halloween

Early Halloween morning saw the grounds transformed by a sudden frost. The trees of the Forbidden Forest stood out starkly against the paleness of the sky, their branches gently dusted as if with finest talcum powder. Large grey footprints had been trampled into the sea of white grass, heading in the direction of Hagrid's cabin, indicating that Hagrid was already up and about, occupied with his game-keeping duties before the teaching day began.

Harry leaned against the window sill of the hospital wing, staring out at the sparkling scene before him, but saw none of it. His thoughts were very firmly fixed on a certain conversation the previous night.

"It has to be based on absolute trust."

The words rang around in his head. Absolute trust. He knew that Ginny had that sort of faith in him, nothing else would have ever persuaded her to let him do the Imperius curse on her; but did he feel the same way? This was the fifth year he had been aware of her existence, but it was only recently that he had begun to get to know her as someone beyond the label of 'Ron's little sister', as a person in her own right. He smiled to himself at the very thought of her; seeing her hair cascading around her face, hearing her vivacious laughter, and remembering her sheer determination on her face when he had cast that curse on her. And then there were her eyes...Harry half-blushed in spite of himself. He recalled the anxiety he had seen in them yesterday, and his heart melted. Ginny could never hurt him no more than he could ever hurt her; there was no question about that. Absolute trust? He nodded slowly to himself. Yes, he could do that.

Breakfast that morning was a slightly more riotous affair than usual with the Weasley clan. Thankful to escape from the hospital wing, Harry had slid into a seat opposite Ron and was halfway through his morning porridge before he realised the reason. It was Ginny's birthday. Fred and George were sitting either side of her, grinning wickedly at each other and winking over her head. A large, elaborately gift wrapped box sat in front of her on the table. She regarded them and the parcel suspiciously.

"Last year it exploded and nearly burnt my eyebrows off," she reminded them severely. "What are you planning on doing to me this year?"

Fred and George shifted slightly uncomfortably on their chairs.

"Would we do anything like that to our little sister?" asked George, attempting to sound hurt by the very suggestion.

"Yes," laughed Ginny. "You do it every year. *You* open it." She pushed the box over to Fred.

"Ah, yes. Well, maybe we need to rethink this," said Fred, looking nervously over at his twin. He turned to Ginny, "How about some nice canary creams instead?"

Not waiting for an answer from her, they edged away from the table with the present and had just made it into the entrance hall when a terrific blast echoed around the room, followed by a yelp of pain and what was unmistakably George's voice yelling,

"*I told you to keep that thing shut! Now we'll have to look up the counter-charm to get your ears back to normal size. Come on! Library. Now!*"

The entirety of the Gryffindor table collapsed into fits of laughter.

"Near miss there, Ginny," chuckled Ron as the room gradually settled back down to eating. "Here, this is from me and Harry." He pushed the narrow parcel down the table to her, and Harry felt unexpectedly nervous as he watched her unwrapping it. What if she didn't like it? He needn't have worried, as her face lit up as she saw the necklace shimmering gently against the deep midnight velvet of the box.

"Ohhh!" she gasped. "It's beautiful. It's perfect to go with my new dress robes Bill and Charlie sent me. Oh, thank you both!" Harry sat, watching her glow with pleasure as she looked at

the trinket again, touching it gently with her fingers as if she couldn't believe it was really there. Suddenly she got to her feet, wrapped her arms around Ron's neck and hugged him.

"Thank you," she said simply, planting a kiss on the top of his head. "It's the nicest thing you've ever bought me."

"Gerroff," muttered Ron, looking embarrassed but sounding rather pleased about it at the same time. "Anyway, it's only half from me." Ginny smiled at Harry,

"Thank you," she said softly, her deep brown eyes melting slowly into his.

* * * * *

Hermione didn't turn up for breakfast that morning, and the first time Harry and Ron saw her was when she appeared only just in time for the lesson before lunch; History of Magic with Professor Binns. She was unusually subdued and spoke little. Looking pale and tired, she scribbled notes feverishly on Urd the Norn, as the rest of the class slumbered gently in the warmth of the room, lulled by the soothing drone of their teacher's voice.

"What's up with her?" muttered Ron to Harry at the end of the lesson, nodding across to where Hermione was packing her bag. Harry shrugged and they hurried to catch up with her outside the classroom.

"Hermione?" Ron said tentatively.

"What?" she snapped, whirling round to face him. Seeing the concern on his face, her anger faded and her voice suddenly cracked, tears flooding her eyes. "Just leave me alone Ron. Please? I can't take much more of this." She turned and fled up the corridor, books hugged tightly to her chest and headed up a staircase to the third floor.

"Go after her," Harry urged. Ron ran his hands through his hair in bewilderment, then after a moment's indecision, appeared to make up his mind. Grabbing his bag up off the floor, he swung it over his shoulder and sprinted after her, a look of determination on his face.

Harry chuckled to himself, and made his way down to the Great Hall for a solitary lunch. The room was half empty as it was still early, and as he glanced around his eyes focused on Ginny, sitting higher up the Gryffindor table talking animatedly to Neville, her red hair swirling around excitedly as she laughed with him. Harry found himself pushing his mashed potato around his plate hoping sincerely that Ginny *hadn't* started a Neville Longbottom Appreciation Society. His insides churned. He tried to reason with himself - it was ridiculous to be feeling like this about Ginny; but it was no use.

Throwing his fork down in exasperation, he collected his things together and headed out of the room, with the intention of going up to the owlery to send a message to Sirius. He knew it was likely to be deserted, as most people sent their messages in the early morning or evening, and a bit of privacy was just what he needed. Hedwig would be glad of the trip to wherever Sirius was hiding at the moment, and as Harry silently closed the heavy oak door to the owl loft behind him, he felt immensely grateful to be alone.

Moving behind the massive stone pillars in the owlery, Harry settled himself down, getting out quill and parchment to write his letter. Suddenly the sound of his own name broke through the silence and startled him.

"But what about Harry?"

It was Ron. Harry closed his eyes and groaned silently to himself. That was all he needed, to have walked into another of Ron and Hermione's arguments, and he was too far from the door to escape without being seen.

"Ron, he knows already," Hermione sounded amused. "It was just you being painfully stupid about it."

"What? Let's get this straight," Ron spluttered. "You know, Ginny knows, Harry knows...don't tell me; half of Gryffindor know how I feel about you?"

"Do you care?" she asked him curiously. "Anyway, if Harry had worked it out Ginny was bound to. Just look at the time the two of them spend together now. You saw how close they were in the hospital wing yesterday."

Harry hugged his knees towards him and buried his rapidly reddening face in them, wishing fervently he was somewhere else, but there was no escape.

"No way!" Ron's voice rang round the room emphatically. "Ginny might have had a crush on him once, but Harry's got more sense."

"But Ron," Hermione persisted.

"Look," Ron interrupted testily. "There is no way I'll let my little sister go out with Harry Potter. If she does get close to him it'll put her in danger with You-Know-Who again, and I'm not having

that.”

There was silence, and Harry glanced desperately at the door again. Maybe...

“So what do we do now?” asked Hermione cautiously. “About us, I mean.”

“I know I’ve been a bit slow on the uptake, Hermione, and I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you, but I’ve never felt this way for anyone before,” he murmured to her.

“Well, you got there in the end,” said Hermione’s voice softly, in a tone Harry had never heard her use before.

“I was just so jealous of Krum,” Ron continued thoughtfully, reproaching himself.

“Shh! Forget it,” came her reply, gently reassuring him. “It’s all over now.”

“Hermione?”

“Yes?”

“If you’re sure you can put up with me, I want to make this work,” Ron’s voice had become as tender as Hermione’s.

Harry edged carefully round the pillar, and could now see them wrapped in each other’s arms. They were completely absorbed and as he backed away towards the door and freedom, he saw them sharing their very first kiss.

Sliding through the doorway, and closing it silently behind him, Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He took flight down the corridor, charged around the corner and crashed into someone, sending them sprawling to the floor. It was Ginny Weasley.

The Charm

“Lumos,” Harry muttered, peering at his watch through the darkness. It was four in the morning, and a familiar throbbing pain was beating through his scar. Wondering what Voldemort was up to, he rolled onto his side and shut his eyes again trying to block out the ache and go back to sleep, but it was useless. Disappearances were becoming almost commonplace, regularly reported in “The Daily Prophet,” and Harry’s scar was now bothering him more than it had ever done before as Voldemort’s hold grew stronger. “But why now?” groaned Harry to himself. “It’s the Quidditch match in a few hours time.”

The past few days had been amongst the most difficult of those he had endured at Hogwarts. Since the embarrassment of colliding with Ginny Weasley in the corridor he had been trying to avoid her wherever possible. He knew that Ron was right; he couldn’t put Ginny in danger with Voldemort just because of his feelings for her. Voldemort would have no hesitation in using those close to Harry to get at him, and after what had happened to Cedric, he couldn’t run the risk. He shivered suddenly. He *had* to keep away from Ginny, for her own good.

The pain was increasing in intensity and he slid out of bed, into his dressing gown and headed downstairs to the common room so he didn’t disturb the others. The Gryffindor Keeper at least, about to play in his first match for the house, needed an undisturbed night. Harry knew from experience that Ron would have enough to contend with in nervousness without being up for half the night as well. He padded down the stairs in bare feet, relieved to see the fire still burning in the hearth, casting flickering shadows around the room. Sinking into a chair right beside the flames, he rubbed his forehead. A sudden stabbing scorched through his head, making his eye socket feel as if it were about to explode. He gasped out loud. A previously unnoticed shadowy figure at the other side of the room moved cautiously towards him and into the light.

“Harry?”

The familiar flowing red hair was highlighted in a myriad of colours by the dancing flames of the fire, casting auburn shadows in its depths. Ginny stood hesitantly regarding him, clearly uncertain of what to do. He longed to reach out and touch her, but a fresh wave of pain overwhelmed him, driving the thought from his mind. As it subsided, he became aware of her kneeling beside him, hand on his shoulder, looking up at him with frightened eyes, full of concern.

“Harry?” she repeated, voice quivering.

“It’s OK Ginny,” he mumbled. “Just go to bed.”

“No,” she said stubbornly. “I’m not leaving you like this.”

“Go to bed,” he repeated, sounding exasperated this time. “It’s just my scar, nothing new.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said softly. “Harry, there’s still that charm if you want to try it.”

“No,” he insisted. “I’m fine.”

She looked at him sceptically.

“If this is ‘fine’ I’d hate to see you on a bad day. I don’t know what I’ve done to upset you, but I want to help. Really I do.” There was silence. Harry clutched his scar more tightly as a surge of agony shot through his head then faded. “Harry,” she said seriously, “you can’t face Voldemort like this. He’ll kill you.”

In shock he lifted his head to look at her. She had called Voldemort by name, something he’d never heard her do before. She was paler than usual, fear stamped across her features, but a hint of what he recognised clearly as Weasley determination lurking in the background.

“Ginny, I don’t want you in danger because of me,” he blurted out suddenly. “If anything happened to you...” his voice trailed away.

“And I don’t want *you* in danger because of something I could have done but didn’t,” she pointed out gently. She looked at him steadily, reassuring him with her gaze. “We need to do this together,

Harry. He'll never defeat trust because he doesn't understand it. Together we're stronger."

Harry breathed deeply, trying to think clearly through the pain. Her eyes, searching his, thawed the hardness of his heart.

"Try the charm," he said finally. "I trust you."

Settling herself carefully on the arm of his chair, she opened the ancient volume that Dumbledore had given her and scanned through the spell once more. Her lips were almost white with dread, hands shaking as she turned the page. Laying the book carefully aside, she scrutinised his face, swallowed and said,

"I'm not sure if this is going to hurt or not, but you're going to have to keep still."

"It can't hurt much more than it does already," said Harry lightly, trying to reassure her. "Harry," she said anxiously. "You need to really concentrate on me if this is going to work properly. We only get one shot at this."

Harry nodded slightly to show he understood and closed his eyes, focusing his entire mind on Ginny, forcing the stabbing pains aside.

He felt her hands, cool and calming against the agony in his forehead, brushing his hair aside, sending a shiver of pleasure down his spine. A trembling finger traced his scar from the very beginning in his hair line, zigzagging down to the very tip, where it remained. Her wand connected with the other end of the scar and he heard the voice of the person he cared so much about cry out,

"Coniungo"

A warm, gentle sensation fluttered down his scar, spreading a soft glow through it, almost like sunshine on a summer's day. The feeling spread out, radiating through his head, pulsating softly deeper and deeper, driving the pain gradually away. Harry relaxed, thinking still of Ginny and feeling her close beside him. Just as steadily the charm began to fade away, leaving his head miraculously clear. The agony which had been tormenting him just a few moments ago seemed to have gone completely. He sensed Ginny moving beside him, noticed her slightly uneven breathing pleasantly drifting across his brow and a tingling touch as the very scar itself was brushed with a kiss.

Harry's eyes drifted open, smiling at her. She had turned beetroot red in sheer embarrassment and was holding her hand over her mouth in horror.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that last bit," she gulped. He grinned at her.

"Yes you should. It was very nice!" he admitted. Trying to ease her discomfort he laughed, "I'm just thankful Ron doesn't do that after he's been trying spells out on me. Anyway, your charm seems to have worked."

"It has?" she sounded startled.

"Yeah, no pain at all now. I don't suppose you can tell me what it was you did?"

"I could..." she sounded hesitant. "Now that we've done the charm I can show you, but I'm not sure what you're going to make of it."

She reached for the old and battered book, and held it in her hands, frowning slightly and clearly thinking carefully.

"It's one of a pair of charms," she began cautiously. "Both charms are ancient, I mean really ancient, from almost the beginning of time. They were designed to form a bond that links two people together and protect one or the other from harm." She paused, then added quietly, "I think you need to look at the one we didn't use, Harry."

She flicked through the book until she found the page she was looking for, then passed it across to him, her eyes anxiously fixed on his face. Harry was perplexed. What had this other charm got to do with him? He glanced at the book, and his eyes widened. It was entitled "*Commendare Mori*", and as he read and reread the page, he understood. He stared back at her in stunned disbelief.

"This is what my mum did for me?" he croaked, feeling dangerously close to tears. "This was how I survived all those years ago? She did this charm knowing it was the only way to keep me alive. She knew Voldemort was coming for them and he couldn't kill me if she died for me instead."

Ginny slid down next to him and held him in her arms, trying to comfort him. He rested his forehead against hers, eyes closed and struggling to regain control.

At last he looked at her, panic rising in his stomach.

"Ginny," he whispered. "Tell me about the charm you've just done."

He was relieved to see her smile.

"Nothing as drastic as that, I promise you," she said, pushing her hair out of her eyes and shaking her head. "What our charm has done is created some sort of bond between us, so that when Voldemort gets near you, you don't need to deal with the pain in your scar as well. I'm happy to take some or all of it if it'll save you." Her face was deadly serious and Harry knew she meant

every word she'd just said.

As her hand fell back into her lap, something caught Harry's attention. He gave a little exclamation of surprise and caught hold of her left hand. Faintly in the firelight he could make out a ghostly mirror image of his own scar, running from the heel of Ginny's hand and across the inside of her wrist. She bit her lip.

"Ginny?"

"I knew it was going to happen," she admitted, pulling a face at him. "It's part of that bond I was telling you about. You've got rid of the ache in your scar, and I get a bit of a twinge in my wrist. Honestly Harry, it's fine. It's nothing like as severe as when you had it. The charm seems to lessen the pain somehow, and it's not even my wand hand, so it's not a problem," she finished defensively.

Harry was still staring at her wrist, hardly believing what he was seeing. Slowly he stretched out a finger and traced the image, zigzagging across her arm. Very gently he bent forward and kissed it, blushing almost as red as Ginny had earlier. She understood why he did it and was grateful.

"Thank you," he said gently.

Dawn was finally upon them, and murky rays of light lethargically began to creep their way into the common room. Ginny had her wand pointed at Harry and was struggling to keep a straight face.

"Let's get this straight," she reiterated in amusement. "You *want* me to put a spell on you to hurt you? All my dreams have come true at once!"

"Well, we've got to see if this works," Harry teased. "You never know you might have made a mistake somewhere and hurting me will turn you into a Cornish pixie or something." He winked at her, "I dare say that might be an improvement."

"Right then," she said with relish, and hit him with the tickling jinx. As he doubled over in laughter, Harry focused his mind totally on Ginny as the book had instructed, and felt a warmth in his scar as the charm did its work. She clutched her wrist briefly, in surprise rather than out of unpleasantness, and grinned over at him.

"Hmmm," Harry reflected thoughtfully, then an idea occurred to him. "Ginny, do you think it works the other way round?"

"Well there's no reason why it shouldn't," she replied, scanning through the pages for information. "What are you thinking?"

"Ginny," he said, his excitement mounting. "If it does work in reverse, you might be able to use it to deflect the Imperius curse on to me."

"Try it," she said firmly, eyes intent on him, desperate to find out more. "Oh Harry..." She didn't need to continue the sentence for him to understand. He knew how important this was. His heart beating quickly, he cast the curse on her, willing her to resist it. He saw her face screwed up in concentration, jaw clenched tightly shut. Out of nowhere he felt a dull, distant throb in his head, almost like the echo of being underwater. He watched Ginny; wondering, hoping. After a moment, instead of doing what he had commanded her to do, she opened her eyes wide, gazing at him in astonishment.

"It worked," she whispered, and both faces broke into identical grins of delight.

Tiredness forgotten, they sat together and talked, as the common room around them grew ever lighter. Harry found himself confiding in her about some of his fears, and his recent dreams about Voldemort's desire for his death.

"We're both living on borrowed time," she said seriously. "If it hadn't been for you he'd have killed me three years ago. I wanted to do this charm to protect you, like you saved me."

"I don't know what to say," he looked almost shyly at her. "What have I done to deserve you?" His eyes rested on her wrist again. The image of the lightning scar across her pale skin brought him back to reality rather suddenly. "I don't know what your brothers are going to say either," he groaned, realising that no one was going to overlook this particular charm for very long. Ron was certainly going to have a lot to say about it.

"Don't worry, I'll sort them out if they notice," she said, eyes glittering wickedly in anticipation. "I reckon my watch'll cover most of it, and you know how observant Ron is at the best of times." She laughed. "Mum already knows. I wrote to her about it a few days ago and got an owl back last night telling me to be careful but she understood why I wanted to do it. She's more worried about Dad and Percy right now though. There've been a lot of strange things happening at the Ministry." She shifted restlessly in her chair. "That's the real reason why I couldn't sleep last night," she explained.

"Ginny, people will be down soon," said Harry, checking his watch and getting to his feet. "If you give me a few minutes to get sorted with my Quidditch stuff, I think we need to send her an owl to let her know we're both OK. You can use Hedwig if you want."

She stood up too, smiling at him, and he pulled her close for a hug.

“Thank you,” he whispered in her ear, feeling a real closeness with her. They understood each other, more than his words could express. As they separated, turning towards the stairwell, Harry froze. Ron stood there grimly, and judging by his expression, was absolutely furious.

Quarrels and Quidditch

Harry rapidly cast his mind back over the past few minutes of conversation, wondering what Ron had overheard. He had certainly seen him with his arms around his sister, and that was problematic enough, but had he found out about the charm as well? At that moment he barely understood the implications of the spell himself, and was totally in awe about what Ginny had done for him. However, he dreaded to think what Ron would have to say about him deliberately using his little sister to help him in his fight against Lord Voldemort.

Ron advanced on the two of them, red with rage to the very tips of his ears. The quietness made the room crackle with tension, but still the stifling, oppressive silence continued. Harry suddenly realised that it was imperative for him to stay calm, whatever happened. Ron's temper, he knew, was explosive at the best of times; he had witnessed that often enough in his rows with Hermione, but then there was also Ginny to contend with. He had never seen it himself, but he had heard all six of her brothers on the subject of Ginny's volatile outbursts. She rarely showed any indication of temper, but when she did it was spectacular enough to quash any of her siblings, and grind them firmly into dust.

"Ron, it's not what it looks like," Harry broke the silence, unable to bear it any longer. "Come on, we're playing Quidditch against Ravenclaw in a couple of hours."

"And here was me worrying about you," Ron said bitterly. "I guessed you were down here again because of your scar pains. It seems I was wrong."

"Well you didn't want me to wake the whole dormitory up because of a few aches and pains, did you?" Harry said, attempting to sound light-hearted. "I thought you needed to get a good night's sleep before the match."

"Oh yes," he laughed derisively. "I can see how it would have been *very* awkward to have me around. You're meant to be my friend, Harry. Why can't you leave her alone?"

"And what has that got to do with you, Ron Weasley?" a furious voice demanded an answer. Harry glanced in surprise to where Ginny was standing her ground. Her eyes were flashing dangerously with real passion, and she wore a look on her face, which was enough to make the bravest man quake in his shoes before her wrath.

"Everything," Ron yelled at her. "You're my little sister."

"Little am I?" she reiterated forcibly. "Since when does your eleven month advantage give you the right tell me what I can and can't do? You can stop thinking of me as 'little' right now because there is absolutely no way I'm going to put up with it. I'm fifteen, the same as you. Next time you're treating me like an imbecile, try to bear in mind that I'm only three months younger than your best friend here."

"I'm meant to be looking out for you; protecting you," he shouted at her. "Not that I get a lot of thanks for it."

"I don't need looking after," she hissed angrily. "Believe it or not, Ron, I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions, and understanding what's going on around me. Not like some people I could mention. I mean, how long did it take you to realise how you felt about Hermione?" She glared at him.

"Oh yes, and you did really well with that enchanted diary," he retorted, stung by her comment. "Really understood what was going on there, Ginny. I'm trying to stop you making the same mistake and ending up in You Know Who's power again."

Ginny went white, her dark eyes glittering venomously as she stared at her brother. The silent hostility that followed was even worse than the shouting, as the pair of them faced each other down, fury blazing. Harry found himself glancing anxiously at Ron, hoping that he'd realised how much he'd hurt Ginny by that last comment, but knowing that any intervention from him would only

inflare the situation. He fingered his wand nervously and waited.

"I know the risks, just like you do," she said at last in an oddly tight voice. "We both agree on one thing; a friendship with Harry is worth far more than fear of Voldemort."

Ron blanched at the sound of Voldemort's name; horrified to hear his little sister using it he gaped at her. Ginny took advantage of knocking him off balance and launched back into full attack with renewed vigour.

"Ron, you're just being ridiculous," she yelled suddenly at him, shattering the stillness. "You spend months not noticing Hermione right under your nose, then you get all over-protective with me over something that hasn't even happened. Harry would never see me hurt and if you'd bothered to think about it for a single second you'd know that."

"Oh I'm sure it's been very cosy practising that Imperius Curse every Thursday," he snapped back "Just the two of you." The unspoken implication was clear.

"Nothing like *that* is going on," she screamed at him in frustration. "Harry has been helping me, as a friend. It was your idea in the first place, remember?"

"Ginny, friendship is one thing, but this..." Ron's anger seemed to be fading a little as he struggled to find the words he wanted to say. "I saw you both, just now..."

"What did you see?" she demanded, shaking her head in disbelief and sending her fiery hair flying. "A hug? What's so wrong with that? You get them often enough."

"That's different," he argued half-heartedly. "I'm your brother."

"Harry's practically family, you say so yourself," she cried, gesticulating wildly to where Harry still remained rooted to the spot.

There was another pause, during which Ron's shoulders visibly relaxed, and Harry breathed again. He saw Ginny's eyes soften as she looked at her brother, knowing that the argument had been won.

"Ron," she said firmly, persisting to make sure he understood. "I need to live my life my way, and that includes *any* decisions I make about Harry, or anyone else for that matter."

"I just don't want anything to happen to you," he said carefully, not wanting to provoke another eruption of her rage. "It was awful last time Ginny, you have no idea."

She hugged him impulsively, taking care to keep her left wrist out of his sight. That was clearly a battle to be fought another day.

"I'll be fine," she reassured him. She grinned across at Harry, some mischief dancing in her eyes, then looked back at her brother with a far more innocent expression. "Ron, I was about to send a letter to Mum, but Errol collapsed again when he got here last night. Harry's offered to lend me Hedwig. Do you think it would be compromising my virtue to borrow his owl, or should I use Pigwidgeon instead?"

Ron's face cracked unexpectedly into a grin.

"I get the point," he laughed. "Ginny, you choose whichever owl you want. I promise not to say anything." He looked over at Harry, reddening slightly. "Sorry I overreacted like that. Stupid of me really."

"Probably Quidditch nerves," he replied, thankful that Ron was still talking to him, for now at least. "Speaking of which, we'd better get moving. Ravenclaw aren't going to wait all day."

* * * * *

By the time Harry and Ron had got outside it had begun to drizzle, and a damp mist clung low over the grounds. As they hurried down to the pitch, the November wind whipped viciously around them, chilling them to their very bones. They spoke little. Ron was quiet after his outburst earlier that morning, and Harry was concentrating on the game ahead. This was the first match he was playing in as captain and was determined to make it a Gryffindor victory, even if he was playing as Cho Chang's opposite number. Harry's stomach gave a slight lurch as he thought of the pretty Ravenclaw seeker, but it was not the sensation of butterflies he remembered from last year, it was a feeling of dread. He had avoided Cho almost entirely this year. He knew it was cowardly, but even seeing her reminded him of Cedric, and deep down he still blamed himself for what had happened.

The others were already in the changing rooms when they arrived, calmly chatting about the forthcoming match. Fred and George's faces lit up in identical grins of mischief as they spotted their younger brother who was now looking almost green with trepidation.

"Have a piece of chocolate?" Fred offered, his mouth twitching in anticipation. Ron, having learnt by bitter experience never to accept anything edible from his twin brothers, regarded the offering in suspicion.

"It's only a bit of chocolate," George added swiftly. "We wouldn't do anything nasty to our baby

brother, would we?"

"I can understand why Ginny finds it so annoying now," muttered Ron to Harry out of the corner of his mouth. "I'll never do it to her again." Harry snorted with laughter.

"Leave him alone," came Angelina's amused voice from the corner. "You were worse than this on your first match. I remember..."

"Ah, yes!" interrupted Fred quickly. "Well we don't want to go into ancient history, do we? What's the plan for today, Harry?"

"Same as practise," said Harry firmly. "We flew really well yesterday, and if we can keep that up Ravenclaw haven't got a hope."

They trooped out onto the pitch, drizzle still falling on them, and faced the other team. Cho looked across at him. She was thinner than she had been and very subdued.

"How have you been?" he asked her quietly.

"Not bad. You?" she responded with a small smile.

"Keeping busy. You know how it is," Harry explained. She nodded, understanding perfectly that to be occupied left no time to brood over what could now never be changed. His eyes left her to scan the crowd, and he felt his heart pound suddenly inside him when he caught sight of what was unmistakably Ginny Weasley's hair, bright and vibrant against the dullness of the day. He tore his attention away from her and focused back on the match. Madam Hooch stood with the whistle in her mouth, as the team captains shook hands, then she blew a sharp blast, they kicked off and rose sharply into the air.

Soaring above the game, Harry's eyes scanned the pitch for the golden snitch, knowing it was not going to be easy to spot in the murkiness of the morning. Cho was on his tail, following him, but Harry knew he could shake her off. Pushing forward into a sharp dive, he felt the exhilaration of the wind soaring through his hair, blowing away the dullness he had felt though lack of sleep, and making him feel alive. The Firebolt turned as if following his very thoughts, as he continued to search the area for the snitch, listening all the while to Lee Jordan's commentary.

"Spinnet passes to Bell. Nice swerve there around Davis, the Ravenclaw keeper. Easy does it. Watch out for that bludger, Katie! Good, she takes aim, and yes! Cleanly through the hoop. 20-0 to Gryffindor."

Harry smiled to himself as the crowd went wild. He shot up above Cho and sped off, constantly seeking the tiny winged ball in the mist. A bludger whistled past his own ear as he rounded the Gryffindor goalposts.

"All right there?" he yelled over at Ron.

"Better now we're up here," he shouted back, grinning but not daring to take his eyes off the game.

It was now beginning to rain, gently at first, but then increasing in intensity, soaking through his Quidditch robes and making him shiver in the sharpness of the wind. Eyes constantly surveying for the slightest sign of the snitch he heard Lee Jordan's magically magnified voice shouting excitedly about the goal Ron had just saved.

Suddenly Harry caught sight of a glimmer of gold, not far off the ground directly below him and noticed that Cho had seen it too and was far closer than he was. Forcing his broom into a near-vertical descent he plummeted down, causing gasps of alarm from those watching the match. Faster and faster he descended, eyes trained on the snitch beneath him, arm outstretched. His fingers closed around it, but for once he was slightly too late to straighten his broom fully, and hit the ground awkwardly with a dull thud. There was an ominous cracking of bone in his ankle, but they had won. Harry lay back on the sodden ground where he had landed, rain splashing down on his face. He grinned widely. They had won.

* * * * *

"Not you again," said Madam Pomfrey severely, as Harry hobbled into the hospital wing supported by Ron. "What have you been doing this time?"

"Quidditch," explained Harry, gritting his teeth in pain by this time. "Ankle."

"Sit down," she said in an exasperated tone, but smiled at him. "Honestly, I don't know what I'm going to do with you. I can't seem to keep you out of here." She examined his ankle carefully as he dripped mud all over the floor. "Yes, it's a nasty break, that one. Right then, let's get it fixed." Rolling up her sleeves, she cast the spell, and Harry instantly felt the damage repair. "Stay there until I come back," she insisted. "Give it a few minutes before you walk on it." And with that, she headed off into her office.

"Some capture that was," laughed Ron. "You should have seen the Ravenclaw's faces. They were convinced Cho was going to get it."

"Yeah." Harry's face lit up with enthusiasm. "I wasn't planning on such a dramatic exit, but it was well worth it; had to get the snitch somehow. Sounded like you had a good game as well."

They dissected every move of the short match between them, showing real excitement about their victory before Ron glanced sideways at Harry, a more serious expression on his face.

"What?" Harry asked, feeling slightly unnerved.

"I still feel bad about yelling at you this morning," admitted Ron. "I don't know what got into me."

"Forget it," said Harry grinning. "Ginny didn't kill you, so no harm done."

"She's got a real Weasley temper, no denying it" he laughed. "Just as well she's got her brothers to keep her in line."

"Ron, you couldn't keep Ginny in line if you wanted to!" Harry chuckled. "I learned this morning to never ever get on the wrong side of your sister. It's just not worth it!"

Ron regarded his friend thoughtfully, his brow slightly furrowed.

"Harry?"

"Yes?"

"What do you feel about Ginny? I mean, *really* feel for her?"

Harry caught his breath. There was no anger in Ron's tone, just curiosity, but his feelings for Ginny were so complicated it was difficult to articulate just how much she actually mattered to him.

"Ron, it's not an issue," he said carefully. "I don't want Voldemort to hurt her any more than you do. I promise you, we told the truth this morning; there really is nothing more to it than what you see."

"I believe you," Ron reassured him hastily. "It's not that. I was just wondering...If You Know Who wasn't around, then what would you do?"

"But he is, and there's no point thinking otherwise," Harry insisted, wondering why Ron was suddenly being so perceptive. Perhaps it was Hermione's influence?

"But what if?" Ron persisted. Harry sighed heavily and looked at him.

"I don't know," he said finally, knowing he had to be honest. "She means a lot to me, you know that. Without Voldemort to threaten her?" he smiled wistfully. "Yes, I'd want more than just a friendship if she'd have me, but as things currently stand I daren't even think about it. I want her to be safe."

Sunday Afternoon

Harry and Ron clambered through the portrait hole after a particularly energetic Quidditch training session, howling with laughter about Fred and George's newly invented game of bludger tennis.

"Absolutely lethal," chuckled Ron. "How long do you reckon before one of them loses an eye?"

Harry's gaze had fallen on a table in the corner of the common room, almost obscured from view. Sitting at it and talking intently behind a stack of precariously balanced books were Hermione and Ginny. He felt the familiar warm glow deep inside him, but was slightly unsettled when he saw Ginny suddenly look up and fix him with a pleading stare. He could only just make out why. She was fumbling with her watch strap, desperately trying to refasten it before Ron spotted what she had so far managed to conceal.

"D'you reckon they could manage it with both Bludgers?" Harry asked quickly, playing for more time.

"I wouldn't put it past them," Ron continued laughing. "And did you see the expression on Madam Hooch's face when she saw what they were up to?"

"Couldn't miss it!" Harry grinned. "I wonder if she's still got them out there? Should be able to see from here." He peered intently through the window and Ron followed suit, squinting down at the distant Quidditch pitch, but there was nothing to be seen.

Turning back into the room, Harry was relieved to see that the panic in the corner seemed to be over. For a fleeting second he thought he must have imagined it, as Hermione sat alone, poring over a piece of homework, quill in hand, but then his attention was caught by a flurry of red hair and black robes vanishing swiftly in the direction of the girls' staircase. Ron caught sight of Hermione too, and grinned.

"She's working too hard," he muttered to Harry, blushing slightly. "Time for a bit of a distraction, I think."

He crept over to where she was sitting, and stealthily reached around her chair to tickle her. Hermione uttered a small squeak of surprise and looked up at him, smiling in greeting.

"Good Quidditch practise?" she asked him as he leaned over to kiss her forehead. "Ron! Not in here!" she whispered in a horrified undertone. "I'm *supposed* to be setting a good example as a prefect. What would Professor McGonagall say?"

"I'm not proposing to kiss her," Ron laughed, sitting down on the arm of her chair. "Anyway, I'm not a prefect, so why don't I set you a bad example?" and he leaned across and kissed her again.

Hermione turned pink, her expression a comical mixture of horror and pleasure, and Harry could only smile at the scene as he sprawled luxuriously across a nearby sofa. It was still strange seeing them together like this, and they were very much getting used to the boundaries of their new relationship too. He was genuinely pleased for them, but it was so easy for them. When he thought about what could have been with Ginny, he felt a strong urge to get up and kick something. Hard.

It was almost tearing him apart these days, he wanted to be with her so badly. There was no need for them to spend time together on the Imperius Curse now; Professor McGonagall had been delighted when they had shown her Ginny's achievements in combating the curse, awarding twenty points for Gryffindor. Since then, Harry had felt like there was something missing; an unpleasant hollowness gnawing away inside him.

He watched Ron and Hermione's antics. Ron had been surprisingly calm when he had confessed to harbouring feelings for his little sister, but he had never mentioned it after they left the hospital wing. He couldn't help but wonder if his reaction would be the same when he learned about the charm Ginny had performed.

"Ron," Hermione was saying in exasperation. "I've got to finish this bit of Astronomy first, *then* I'll have a break. Just go and get changed or something. It won't take long if you leave me alone."

"Fair enough," he said, getting to his feet. "Are you coming Harry, or do you want me to take your broom up?"

"Astronomy," Harry said, emitting a low groan and sitting up reluctantly. "I've forgotten to pick that book up from the library. It's a massive piece of homework as well. Do you reckon Madam Pince'll be there now, Hermione?"

"Probably," replied Hermione briskly. "I'll come down with you actually and see if she's got the Arithmancy book I ordered." She looked questioningly at Ron.

"It's Sunday. I am going nowhere near that library," Ron stated flatly, picking up Harry's Firebolt and heading for the stairs. "I'll see you two later."

Hermione and Harry wandered slowly down the portrait-lined corridor in the direction of the library, listening to the wind whistling against the castle walls. Some figures were nodding sleepily in their frames, others were away visiting friends in their far distant pictures elsewhere in the castle. None of them took the slightest notice as the two students strolled past.

"Ginny told me," Hermione said quietly, shooting him a sideways look.

"I guessed as much," Harry replied, blushing slightly. He hesitated, but knew Hermione would be completely honest with him. "What do you think?"

"The charm is incredibly complicated, Harry," she said thoughtfully. "It says a lot about your feelings for each other that you got the charm working in the first place. It's very advanced magic, you know, and wouldn't have happened at all without a strong emotional bond to start with."

"Ah!" said Harry, reddening further, as they rounded a corner and passed through a tapestry-concealed doorway.

"I know it's none of my business," Hermione continued, looking at him with a flicker of concern crossing her face, "but something's bothering you. Is it Ginny?"

"Sort of," Harry replied, squirming a bit. "It's a lot of things really, Hermione. How do you think Ron's going to react to all this? He wasn't too happy when he thought there was something going on between me and Ginny."

"Well there is something going on, isn't there," Hermione smiled knowingly at him. "He'll get used to it, Harry. Don't worry."

"It's not Ron. I know he never stays mad for long," Harry admitted.

"Then what?" she asked as they reached the end of the corridor and entered the quietness of the library.

The oak-panelled library was completely deserted, candles flickering in their sconces along the walls cast eerie shadows through the dullness of the day. Magic crackled through the books in the restricted section, some volumes struggling to escape the confines of their cases, others appearing ominously bloodstained. Hermione perched on a table and gave Harry a searching stare, which reminded him instantly of Professor McGonagall, and raised an eyebrow.

"Voldemort," he replied simply to her question.

"What?" she gasped.

"It's like Ron said," Harry explained despondently. "All I'll do is put Ginny in danger. He could use her to get to me. You know how he works, Hermione." To his amazement Hermione grinned at him.

"Is that all?" she laughed. "Are you a wizard, or what?"

He looked at her in bewilderment, as she stood up, grabbed him by the hand and pulled him into a stack of books on the opposite side of the library.

"What?" he spluttered, lacking comprehension, but realisation slowly dawned on him when he saw where she was pointing.

"Protection spells. Of course!" he breathed, hope surging through his heart, and an idiotic grin spreading across his face. "You're a genius, Hermione! I could kiss you!" He paused and laughed. "I'd better not though, I think Ron's going to be angry enough with what I'm planning."

"Well, we'd better get looking for the right one," Hermione said, passing him an enormous book and rolling up her sleeves, eyes twinkling at him. "I reckon we've got an hour or two before we're missed upstairs."

* * * * *

Ginny was frowning intently at her palm, and consulting her copy of "Unfogging the Future" as she struggled to do her Divination homework. Her hair was knotted at the nape of her neck again, wand driven securely through it. She tilted her head sideways as she examined her hand, firelight glinting against the coppery hues in her hair, and sighed heavily.

"Should have listened to me and done something else," Ron said cheerfully to her, measuring his

History of Magic essay. "Bother! Still five inches short!"

"Tea leaves were easier," she said disconsolately, "even if most clumps did look like sleeping unicorns."

"You can do my palm instead if you want," offered Harry, looking up from his Astronomy chart and grinning at her. "As long as I'm dying some sort of horrible death she'll believe you. You'll probably get good marks for it."

Hermione snorted.

"Professor Trelawney is an old fraud," she said, not even bothering to look up from the massive volume she was reading.

Harry sneaked a look at Ginny's wrist and could see the very tip of the scar peeping out from beneath her watch. The other end was well concealed beneath her robes. The lightening bolt image across her skin fascinated him; something of his had now become part of her. An unbreakable bond joining them together.

Looking up he smiled as he saw her screwing up her face in concentration, trying to fathom what the lines on her hand meant, and happened to notice a faint wisp of smoke drifting from the back of her head.

"Ginny," he said in alarm. "I think your hair's on fire again."

She gasped in horror, pulling her wand away swiftly, sending cascades of dark red hair crashing tempestuously around her. Without even pausing to think, Harry reached over, to make sure smouldering remains were put out before any further injury was caused. Her hair was soft against his fingers, smooth and luxurious, caressing his hands as he searched for the damage.

"It's not too bad," he said at last, removing a few fragments of singed hair. "There's a few short bits round where your wand tip was, but I don't think it'll show."

"Thanks," came her muffled voice from beneath her hair. Harry ran his fingers gently through it again, enjoying the sensation of being able to touch her. Then he caught Ron's eye and rapidly let go. She lifted her head and shook her hair out of her face, feeling for the damage herself "It was a lot worse last time," she said with relief. "Thanks Harry."

Harry buried his reddening face in his astronomy chart and tried to concentrate on plotting the planets, his heart beating erratically all the while. Ginny seemed to be having equal difficulty in concentrating, as she finally flung her copy of "Unfogging the Future" down on the table and got to her feet.

"I don't know about 'Unfogging the Future'" she exclaimed in exasperation, "but my brain certainly needs to be unfogged. I'm going for a walk. Anyone want to come?"

"Yeah," said Harry, looking blankly back at his piece of parchment. "You know, I could swear that Venus is in the wrong half of the sky. A walk sounds good." He looked over at Ron and Hermione, but Hermione shook her head.

"Goblin rebellion of 1246," she explained. "Got to get this done today, but I'll help you with your astronomy later, if you want." Ron just grinned at him, and Harry had a sneaking suspicion that Hermione's knowledge of that particular Goblin Rebellion would be no further forward when they returned.

It was cold outside; the sort of coldness that cuts mercilessly, chilling to the core. The wind swirled around them in the doorway, blowing Ginny's hair into an uncontrollable tornado around her head. She pinned it down with her hands and stuffed it unceremoniously into her cloak hood, pulling it tighter around her ears. She looked at him, excitement in her eyes.

"I love it when it's like this," she said, little wisps of hair already reaching for freedom in the stormy wind. "Where shall we go?"

"How about Hagrid's? He's usually good for a cup of tea, but I'd advise against the rock cakes," he grinned.

He felt her hand sliding gently into his, and held on tightly as they stepped into the wildness of the afternoon. Heads bowed against the relentless pummeling of the wind, they skirted the shelter of the castle and then across the exposed lawns to Hagrid's cabin, cloaks tugging as the gale whipped round them.

Hagrid's cabin on the edge of the forest was warm and inviting after the ferocity of the wind outside. Hagrid beamed in delight to see them, and soon had his gigantic teapot steaming on the table and a plate of his home-made scones beside it. Fang, the enormous boar hound was affectionately slobbering all over Ginny, trying desperately to sit on her knee. Harry smiled to himself. He knew just how Fang felt.

"Yer jus' like yer brother Charlie," Hagrid chuckled, watching Fang wriggle with pleasure as she scratched him behind his ear. "Good with animals. How's he doin' with them dragons?" He passed

her a mug of tea, and Fang settled his chin on her lap staring up at her with adoring eyes.

"He's fine," she smiled back at Hagrid. "I got an owl from him last week. He said he might even be home for Christmas this year. I'd love to see him, but mum and dad seem to think we're all safer staying here at Hogwarts."

"I 'spect they're right," muttered Hagrid darkly. "Awful things goin' on out there these days."

"What sort of things?" Harry prompted, curious to know more. Hagrid had never told them what he had spent the summer doing on Dumbledore's orders, and apart from reports in *The Daily Prophet* they were strangely cut off from what was happening outside the school grounds.

"Dumbledore's workin' on it," Hagrid said evasively from beneath his black beetled brows. "Great man, Dumbledore."

Hagrid poured more tea into his bucket-sized cup, offered the scones round and changed the subject.

"Where're Ron and Hermione?"

"Well, the official reason they're not here is that they're writing essays," Harry said, trying to keep the laughter out of his voice.

"But the real reason," Ginny added, eyes alight with fun, "is that a certain brother of mine is doing his level best to distract a particular Gryffindor prefect from her work. Now they've got us out the way, I would guess that they'll be spending a very pleasant afternoon. Together."

Harry and Ginny exchanged glances and burst out laughing.

"Ah, well. I was wonderin' when that was goin' to 'appen," Hagrid grinned at them through his bushy beard. "It's bin long enough comin'."

Darkness had fallen when they finally left Hagrid's hut after a very pleasant afternoon, Fang howling in protest at being separated from Ginny. The storm was worsening, rain now beating mercilessly down upon them as they struggled through the elements back to the castle. They staggered breathlessly into the empty entrance hall, water streaming from their cloaks, as wet as if they had just been swimming. Harry, seeing Ginny's dishevelled appearance, burst out laughing.

"Nice look," he teased, lifting a sodden strand of her hair.

"You're one to talk," she laughed, looking up at him. "You should see what you look like."

Their eyes suddenly fused together, and Harry felt a peculiar pounding in his chest, his breathing shallow and unsteady. He reached out for her, and pulling her gently into his arms, looking all the while into the liquid brown of her eyes.

"Ginny," he murmured softly.

A voice echoed up a corridor and could be heard distinctly in the entrance hall, making Harry shiver and look away from her.

"What is it?" she asked, holding him closely.

"That voice," he said hoarsely. "It's the one from my dream Ginny." He forced himself into action. He had to find out who that voice belonged to. "Come on!"

Grabbing hold of Ginny's hand, he ran down the corridor after the sound, down dark underground passageways illuminated by torches flaming on the walls, following the reverberating tones. Twisting and turning round the stone corridors they continued, until finally they head a door slamming ahead of them. Creeping silently up to the wooden door, they peered through the half-light at the brass nameplate.

"No," breathed Harry. "How can it be him?"

Plans and Potions

Hearts beating quickly, Harry and Ginny backed away silently from the doorway before they were noticed and crept as swiftly as they could out of the underground tunnels beneath the castle. Once they had reached the entrance hall again, Harry broke into a run, up the marble staircase and along corridors towards the Gryffindor common room, Ginny following swiftly at his heels.

“Skulduggery,” he panted breathlessly at the fat lady, who was sitting in her frame gossiping with her friend Vi.

“All right, all right,” she grumbled at him. “What’s the hurry anyway?” But she swung aside to admit them to the relatively empty common room.

Scrambling through the portrait hole, Harry cast his eyes around, desperately searching for Ron and Hermione but they were nowhere to be seen. Suddenly he felt Ginny’s hand on his arm, tugging him gently in the direction of the corner of the common room where they had been sitting earlier that afternoon. Sure enough, Ron and Hermione were curled up together in a large squashy armchair, which had been artfully angled so its occupants were invisible to the rest of the room. They were completely absorbed in each other. Goblin rebellions lay forgotten as they kissed.

“Ahem!” Ginny cleared her throat dramatically, and Ron and Hermione instantly sprang as far apart as they could within the confines of an armchair, both of them blushing furiously.

“Ginny!” Ron spluttered, going even redder when he saw it was his little sister grinning down at them. “Haven’t you ever heard of privacy?”

“Yeah. Like when you just barge into my bedroom without knocking,” she retorted. Harry could see another Weasley argument brewing and intervened. He sat down in the armchair directly opposite where Hermione was trying to disentangle herself from Ron and ran his fingers through his already untidy, slightly damp hair.

“Sorry,” he said, looking across at them, “but this is really important.”

“So was this,” muttered Ron darkly, glowering at him.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve worked out who that voice in my dreams belongs to. I heard him just now when we were in the entrance hall,” Harry explained.

He heard a sharp intake of breath from Hermione. She had finally extricated herself and her robes from Ron and sank in the chair next to Harry looking at him anxiously.

“Who is it?” she asked him urgently, leaning towards him. “It really is someone at Hogwarts then?”

“Come on! Tell us!” Ron added eagerly, embarrassment fading quickly from his face and his freckles reappearing.

“You’re not going to believe this,” Harry said slowly, hands still travelling distractedly through his hair.

“Harry!” Ron exclaimed in exasperation. “Just tell us!”

“Snape,” he said quietly.

Their reactions were just as he would have predicted.

“Oh Harry,” Hermione sighed, the expectation in her face falling. “We’ve thought it was him before, but it never has been. Just think about it for a minute. In the first year we were convinced it was him after the Philosopher’s Stone, and it was Quirrell all the time.”

“I know,” said Harry, “but...”

“And Dumbledore trusts him,” she added before Harry had a chance to add any more. “You know he was sent out on that special mission, whatever that was, at the end of last year. It can’t be him, Harry. It just can’t.”

“He was a Death Eater once, Hermione,” Ron reminded her. At this Ginny, who had been gazing

idly at Harry, switched her attention immediately across to her brother.

"He was what?" she demanded, completely stunned by this information. "Snape? A Death Eater? How do you know?"

"Yeah. He has the Dark Mark burned onto his arm and everything," Ron explained, enjoying the expression of horror on his little sister's face.

"Ron!" Hermione gave him a withering look. "Seriously Harry, if it was Snape, how could you not recognise his voice before now? I mean, we have potions with him twice a week."

"I know," Harry admitted, considering the matter carefully. "I think it's because when I heard him just now his voice was echoing in the underground passageways, and that's what it sounded like in my dream. You know there's no echo in the potions dungeon."

"True," Hermione agreed, frowning a little. "What are we going to do about it, supposing you are right?"

"We can't take it to Dumbledore," Harry mulled the problem over. "Dumbledore trusts him. Didn't he say something about Snape taking a great personal risk in betraying Voldemort?"

"Yeah, really risky," Ron gave a hollow laugh. "Especially if he'd never changed sides in the first place."

"What's he going to do?" whispered Ginny, suddenly looking and sounding rather frightened. Harry reached across and squeezed her hand reassuringly.

"I don't know, Ginny," he said as calmly as he could. "At a guess I would say it's going to be a port key, or something like it. That was he can either get Voldemort into Hogwarts, or transport me somewhere else like he did last year."

"We have to find out what he's up to," interjected Hermione, sounding very determined. "I'm sure there has to be some sort of indication of what he's planning. What we really need is to be able to look round his office, dungeon and his private rooms, wherever they are."

"We're really going to be able to do that," Ron scoffed. "I'm sure Snape would love to hold the door open for us whilst we poke around through his stuff."

"We might be able to," Harry said, his excitement building. "There's my dad's invisibility cloak for a start, and there's the Marauder's Map. I got it back at the end of last term."

"We think we know where his rooms are," Ginny remarked unexpectedly. "We followed his voice tonight, and there was a door I've never seen before with his name on it. I didn't know you had an invisibility cloak, Harry," she added, a familiar impish twinkle dancing across her eyes. Harry grinned back at her, wondering what particular mischief she had in mind for the future. He reflected that it would be rather pleasant to be wandering about at night with Ginny Weasley close beside him under the invisibility cloak.

"So, we need to decide who is going to check out which bit," Hermione said sounding very business-like and bringing Harry's attention crashing back to the task in hand. "His personal rooms will take the longest to do, so it would make sense if two of us did that, leaving one to do his office and the other to check out the dungeon."

"Hang on," Ron interjected forcibly. "I don't want Ginny to get mixed up in all this."

"I already am mixed up in all this," Ginny began hotly, but Hermione caught her eye and swiftly took up her cause before she could continue.

"Why not, Ron?" she asked reasonably. "Snape doesn't know what we're looking for. The worst thing that'll happen to any of us if we're caught will be a detention." She smiled at him and added, "You know as well as we do that detentions are part of the Weasley genes."

"Except maybe in Percy's case," chuckled Ron. "I'm not sure what went wrong with him. Even Bill had more than his fair share of detentions." He looked over at his sister. "Oh all right then! Just you be careful Ginny; you know mum'll blame me if you get into trouble." He imitated his mother's voice: "You should set a better example for your little sister." Ginny giggled.

"Detention," Harry repeated thoughtfully. "Yes, that's the easiest way to get into the dungeon out of lesson time." He glanced at Ron. "You or me for that one?"

"Well it's in the Weasley blood," laughed Ron. "Leave it to me. Snape never allows you out of his sight anyway, Harry. He's more likely to let me get on with a punishment unsupervised."

"Could I do his office?" Ginny offered quietly. The others all looked at her in surprise. "Well, I've heard you all talking about him often enough," she explained. "He hates Harry with a deadly passion, calls Hermione an 'insufferable know-it-all', but he doesn't seem to mind me much for some reason. I could easily have a problem with an essay and need to see him about it. I'm pretty certain he wouldn't suspect anything, even if he did catch me in there."

"If you're sure," Harry said, looking at her with concern. "Take the map with you, Ginny. I'll show you how to use it and it'll tell you if Snape's on his way. It'll give you a chance to get things

back to normal and be sitting waiting with your essay when he arrives.”

“That leaves you and me to do his rooms,” Hermione said to Harry. “We’ll have the invisibility cloak at least, and it still covers two of us. I think we should do it when Ron is in detention. At least we’ll know where Snape is then.”

* * * * *

It was getting late when Harry finally looked up from his completed Astronomy homework, and threw down his quill in relief. Hermione was adding some finishing touches to her Goblin Rebellion essay, having spent much of the evening muttering about how it should have been finished hours ago. Ron had merely grinned cheekily at her, making her blush, and headed off to have a ferocious game of wizard chess with Seamus Finnegan at the other side of the common room. The storm outside had still not abated, and Harry could hear the wind pound against the windows, shaking them fiercely, making them tremble in their frames. A low distant rumble of thunder could be heard beyond the howls of the gale.

The fire burned brightly in the grate, diffusing warmth through the room. Harry’s gaze idly wandered around; Ron and Seamus were still engaged in combat with a remarkable number of chess pieces remaining on the board. At Seamus’ request a pawn moved forward, trembling in fear, and Ron’s bishop pounced at once, dragging the piece away. Ginny was a little further across the room chatting seriously to Colin Creevey. Harry saw her rub her face with her hands, look back up at Colin and then shake her head slowly, making her hair dance quite irresistibly around her face. He felt a very familiar unsettled sensation in the pit of his stomach as he watched her. He had almost kissed her earlier. He buried his own head in his hands at the thought. What on earth was he going to do?

As if reading his thoughts, Hermione suddenly reached in her bag and threw a book at him.

“Keep looking,” she whispered. “There’s got to be one in there somewhere. I’ve just got to measure this and then I’ll help.”

Harry began flicking through the volume Hermione had got from the library, reading about spells to shield vegetables from frost, charms to care for cats and potions to protect pets from peril. Hermione squeezed in beside him and began leafing through the pages at a slightly faster pace. Finally they hit a promising vein of spells, designed to protect loved ones from various trials and tribulations.

“This one,” she exclaimed tapping a page in the book and looking excitedly at him. “I think this’ll work. A bit complicated, but the polyjuice potion was worse. What do you think?”

Harry read the page carefully, his eyes widening.

“I take it you’re going to help me with it, Hermione,” he chuckled. “A bit complicated? I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Well, it involves making a potion as a basis for the spell. Most bits we’ve got,” she said thoughtfully, running her finger down the list, then pausing. “We need something of Ginny’s.”

Harry made an incoherent noise, and began rummaging frantically under the piles of books on the table, until his fingers closed on a small handful of singed red hair.

“Just the thing.” She continued to read through the spell and suddenly glanced up and grinned at him. “Oh you’re going to love this, Harry. We need some blood from the person who wants to protect her. I take it you’ll be a willing donor?”

“I suppose so,” Harry grimaced. Then an awful thought occurred to him. “You know, we’re going to have to do this in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom again. Nowhere else is deserted enough to brew a potion in secret.”

“What’s wrong with that?” asked Hermione in amazement. “I know Myrtle’s not the most stimulating of companions, but she does sort of let you get on with things.”

“She hasn’t been watching *you* in the bath,” muttered Harry grimly, as he thought of Myrtle’s unexpected appearance in the prefect’s bathroom last year. “Isn’t there anywhere else, Hermione?”

“Do you want to do this or not?” she asked him severely. “It’s a fast potion to do. We could start it one morning and it’ll be ready the same night. You’d only need to be in there a couple of times.”

Harry looked over at Ginny who was still talking away, smiling gently at Colin Creevey, and felt his stomach flip.

“Definitely,” he said firmly.

“Definitely what?” Ron appeared unexpectedly beside them, triumphant in victory, clutching his chessmen under his arm. He eyed the book in Hermione’s hands. “Don’t tell me you’re still doing homework?” he said incredulously, peering closer to see what she was up to.

“No,” she said slowly, staring meaningfully at Harry. Ron followed her gaze, and frowned in

bemusement.

"OK, what's going on?" he asked, settling himself down and putting his things on the table. "You two are up to something."

"It's a bit of a long story," said Harry, watching him uncertainly. Ron was his best friend, and he didn't want to argue with him if he could help it. However, he was very protective of his little sister and had made his opinions about any sort of relationship between Ginny and Harry patently clear; Harry pressed on regardless. "You know how we talked about Voldemort getting hold of Ginny again?" He paused again, thinking fast. Ron nodded, a frown furrowing deeply across his brow.

"Go on," he prompted.

"We've found a spell in this book which should help to protect her," Harry continued, feeling more and more awkward by the second. "I've not mentioned it to her yet. You know how she feels about people looking out for her."

"Yeah," Ron grinned sheepishly. Then much to Harry's surprise he added, "It's a good idea actually. I've been worried about her after her nightmares." He held out his hand and Hermione passed the volume across to him, pointing out the page containing the spell. He skimmed through it quickly, and nodded his approval.

"We could even do it tomorrow in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom," Hermione said with enthusiasm. "It looks like a really interesting spell. I've not done one quite like this before."

Suddenly she reached across and seized the book out of Ron's hands, pushing it quickly out of sight and into her school bag. The reason became apparent a few seconds later when a tornado of scarlet hair threw herself angrily into a nearby chair.

"Are you all right Ginny?" she asked tentatively, seeing the younger girl's expression.

"Just about," replied Ginny tensely. "Colin just asked me to go to the Christmas ball with him."

"He did what?" exploded Ron.

"Don't start," she replied heavily, glaring at him. "I told him I wouldn't, and I think he was a bit upset about it. Are you happy now?"

"Ginny!" Ron sounded hurt by her accusation.

"It's true though, isn't it?" she said miserably. "No matter who wanted to take me you would have had something to say about it."

"No," he said slowly. "What you said last time was right. You make your own decisions about your life." He shifted his gaze from his sister to Harry. "Why don't you ask her?" he suggested cautiously.

Harry's mind almost exploded with the impact of the last question. He would like nothing more than to take Ginny to the ball with him, and had resigned himself to going alone this year rather than asking someone else. It seemed nothing short of miraculous that Ron was actually suggesting he spend time with Ginny rather than opposing it. Just as suddenly a feeling of dread settled in his mind; Ron didn't know about the charm bond between them. They *had* to tell him.

"Ron, there's something else we've got to tell you first," he said, looking nervously across at Ginny. "You might have noticed I've not been suffering from pains in my scar for the past couple of weeks. There's a reason for that."

"Dumbledore suggested something to help him, and I wanted to do it," Ginny swiftly took over from Harry who was struggling to find the words. "You saw how bad it was, Ron. We couldn't leave him to face Voldemort like that. He'd have killed him."

Hermione placed her hand on Ron's arm but he shook it off brusquely.

"A charm," Ginny continued quietly, watching her brother's frozen expression. "It transfers the pain away from Harry to me, when and if he needs to. For some reason it seems to work the other way round as well. That's how I can overthrow the Imperius Curse."

Ron had gone a ghastly white colour.

"How does it work?" he whispered hoarsely. Ginny kept her eyes fixed on his face, and slowly undid her watch strap, revealing the ghostly mirror image of a lightning bolt scar, which Ron recognised instantly.

Without another word he turned his back and strode out of the room.

Moaning Myrtle's Bathroom

With a swift glance up and down the corridor to make sure it was deserted, Harry ignored the tattered 'Out of Order' sign, pushed open the door and slipped through, closing it rapidly behind him. Moaning Myrtle's bathroom was just as he remembered it: candles were almost guttered in their sockets along the walls, casting a dim glow of light that scarcely penetrated the murkiness of the room. The mirror hung there still, spotted with age, and the row of chipped stone sinks stretched out before him, bringing events he'd rather forget to the fore of his mind. One particular image clung to him: a small red-headed figure lying almost lifeless between the colossal grey stone feet of Salazar Slytherin's image.

Ginny.

He could picture her face so clearly, as white and as cold as marble, Voldemort steadily draining her life away for his own personal gain. Harry reflected with grim determination that whatever it took he wasn't going to let Voldemort get a chance to get near her ever again.

Hearing the unmistakable clunk of a cauldron being set down, he slid across the damp floor of the bathroom to the only stall with a closed door. He knocked softly.

"It's only me," he muttered, praying that Myrtle wouldn't hear him. Hermione's eyes twinkled merrily at him as she peered around the door, then moved aside to let him squeeze through. "Good job Ron's not here," he remarked, cramming himself up against the wall. "We'd never get all three of us in here now."

"Have you seen him?" Hermione asked, passing him a pestle and mortar containing unicorn horn and running her finger down the spell book.

"No," said Harry, and obediently began to grind it into a powder. "His curtains were shut last night when I went up, and he was either asleep or didn't want to talk to me. He'd gone this morning when I got up to come here," he added thoughtfully, pounding a bit harder, half-wishing he could do the same to his best friend sometimes. "Ron, voluntarily out of bed so early? It's hard enough getting him up at seven usually." He shook his head and continued to pulverise the contents of the bowl.

"Well, it's a lot to get his head round," Hermione said practically, measuring out midnight dew and tipping it into the cauldron. "It was bound to be a shock, Harry. It's an incredibly powerful bond, not just any old spell like this one. Seeing that scar on her wrist will have really bothered him."

"I suppose so," Harry replied, passing the ground unicorn horn across to Hermione, and pushing his round glasses back up his nose. "I got a bit of a shock myself when I first saw it. It's still a bit weird, but it's...well, it's sort of nice as well." He felt himself growing red when Hermione grinned as she gave him some daisy roots to chop. "I just wish it wasn't such an issue with him," he added, slicing savagely through the roots.

"Well, he's bound to be a bit protective of her," Hermione said reasonably, tipping some of the other ingredients into the cauldron, and peering closely at the mixture.

"A bit?" Harry spluttered incredulously, spilling some of his daisy roots on the floor.

"Just think about it from his point of view." She stooped to retrieve the fragments from the dampness beneath their feet, scattered them carefully on the surface of the potion and turned to face Harry, her arms folded. "Seriously Harry, just look at the way the Weasley family is; all those boys and then Ginny as the youngest. They've all been brought up to be protective of her, and you know as well as I do that Ron feels it more than the others. He's the closest to her in age, and before he came here they spent pretty much all their time together."

"It's not as if I'd ever hurt her," Harry replied, agreeing wholeheartedly with Hermione's interpretation of events. "Ron should know me better than that."

"The fact it's you makes it worse in some ways," Hermione said obliquely, turning back to the cauldron and prodding the contents with her wand. "He won't want to share you with Ginny." She lit one of her portable smokeless fires underneath the cauldron, and stepped back to watch the blue flames doing their work. "We'll need to come back up here and finish this off tonight," she said practically, tucking her bushy brown hair behind her ears. "We add the final ingredients just before the incantation."

A glugging, swirling noise could be heard distinctly, emanating from the furthest end of the bathroom and heralding the imminent arrival of Moaning Myrtle. As if with one mind, Harry and Hermione sprang into action, squeezing through the cubicle door and back into the main section of the dismal bathroom. Unfortunately they were too late to escape undetected. Water sloshed over the floor as the pearly white ghost floated out of her toilet cubicle, staring down at them with interest through her thick glasses.

"Oooh, it's you," she said with relish, looking at Harry. She bobbed up and down slightly as she floated above the washbasins. "I've not seen you since..." Her voice trailed away, but she smirked as she remembered the incident in the prefect's bathroom. Harry turned scarlet, and Myrtle absent-mindedly picked at one of her spots.

"So how are you, Myrtle?" asked Hermione, with a desperate glance at Harry, who was now making a peculiar choking noise.

"As if you care," Myrtle said tremulously, tears brimming in her silver eyes. "You never come to see me now."

"I'm sorry, Myrtle," Hermione said soothingly to the sobbing ghost. "Maybe we have been neglecting you a bit. How about we come back and see you later?"

"Oh yes. Come and see Myrtle when you've got nothing better to do," she wailed loudly.

"Shhh!" Hermione hissed, fearing they'd be discovered as Myrtle's cries became ever louder. Then an idea suddenly occurred to her. "Myrtle," she added sternly. "If you don't stop crying right now Harry could get found in here. He'll get into so much trouble and then he'll never be able to come back and visit you."

Myrtle's sobs ceased instantly like the flicking of a switch. As she regarded Harry with interest, he could feel his face growing even hotter with embarrassment.

"Thanks, Hermione," he muttered sarcastically beneath his breath. "Just what I needed: a lovesick ghost popping up in bathrooms to see me all over the castle. How am I going to explain that one to Ginny?"

"Myrtle, we'll have to go for breakfast," said Hermione, struggling to hide her laughter at Harry's outraged expression. "I promise we'll be back later today."

"Oh yes," wailed Myrtle once more. "Very sensitive that is, talking about food in front of me, when you know I can't...I can't..." With a final theatrical sob, she shot up into the air and swooped into the furthest cubicle. There was a splash which shot a spray of water over the bathroom floor, followed by the sounds of muffled weeping from the area of the s-bend.

* * * * *

The school day passed slowly and rather uncomfortably. Ron wasn't exactly ignoring Harry, but he wasn't talking to him either. In fact, he wasn't speaking much to anyone. It was fair to say that Ron was extremely preoccupied, to the extent where he even reduced tiny Professor Flitwick to anger by his lack of concentration and inept performance in Charms.

"It's not difficult, Weasley," Professor Flitwick squeaked furiously, handing him extra homework as the rest of the class filed out of the room. "You'll have to do better than that to pass your O.W.L.s this summer."

Ron's day did not improve as it went on, and the Transfiguration lesson before lunch was worst of all. Throughout the earlier part of the lesson Harry was acutely aware of Ron sitting across the table from him, frowning thoughtfully at the scar on Harry's forehead. It was obvious that his mind was mulling over the link between it and the copy on Ginny's wrist, rather than listening to what Professor McGonagall was saying. When the time came to transfigure their cushions into chairs, Ron waved his wand vaguely in the direction of his purple checked one and there was a small popping noise as it transformed.

"A handbag?" Professor McGonagall's voice echoed incredulously through the room as she saw the results of Ron's efforts. "A handbag, Weasley?" She lifted the offending article high into the air, so the rest of the class could see it, and a stifled snigger erupted from Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas as they caught sight of the rather fetching accessory, complete with ornate antique brass clasp. They bent quickly over their work again as they caught Professor McGonagall's eye. "And what did you think you were doing exactly?" she asked Ron sharply. Ron blushed furiously and

stared down at his feet, prodding a small hole in the carpet nervously with his toe.

"Some day he's having," Harry whispered to Hermione, who was now sitting comfortably in her newly-transfigured elegant leather armchair. He watched her conjure up a tiny table and a steaming cup of tea for herself. He had surprised himself by transforming his own navy blue cushion successfully, although, when he looked at it, even he had to admit that his attention had wandered off the task somewhat. To his horror and Hermione's amusement, it was not only the shape that had changed. Rather than blue, the chair had become a reddish hue not entirely dissimilar to that of Ginny Weasley's hair. Perhaps it was just as well Ron was too busy organising his detention to notice, because Harry had a horrible feeling that his absent-minded transfiguration could very well have been the final straw as far as his friend was concerned.

* * * * *

Two heads leaned towards each other talking earnestly, as they sat side by side on the steps that led from the Hogwarts front door down to the sloping lawns in front of the castle. Twilight was settling around them, swirls of ever deepening blues caressing the sky and gently stirring the stars from their slumber.

From the arched window halfway up the marble staircase Harry could only just make out their faces in the dusk. Both wore identical expressions of concern, and both were immediately identifiable even though the night was muting the vivid and distinctive colours of the Weasley hair. Ron put his arm around Ginny's shoulders and hugged her, before the pair of them stared out towards the Forbidden Forest and began to discuss things again.

"It's going to be all right." Harry heard Hermione's voice unexpectedly by his ear, as she too peered down to where Ron and Ginny were sitting. "I'm worried too, but at least they're talking about it now. Come on." She moved away from their vantage point, and Harry followed her up the stairs, walking in companionable silence to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom to complete the spell.

Much to Harry's relief, Myrtle appeared to be elsewhere in the castle as they hastily scuttled through the dimness of the bathroom and shut themselves in the cubicle. The cauldron was still simmering away, bubbles appearing at the surface; swelling, then popping gently and subsiding into the creamy liquid once more. New bubbles emerged as Hermione began adding the final ingredients, finishing with the strands of hair from the wand accident the previous day. She turned to Harry and raised her eyebrows.

"Over to you now," she said, slightly anxiously. "You are sure about this, aren't you? There's no guarantee it'll work, and even if it does it might only hold You-Know-Who off for a while."

"Completely sure," Harry replied, heart beating a little more unsteadily than usual as he fished the knife Sirius had given him out of his pocket. "Just tell me what I have to do."

Before Hermione had a chance to explain further, they heard the main bathroom door creak open and footsteps entered rapidly, with the click of the door closing behind them. Someone was out there, breathing heavily as if they had just been running. Harry and Hermione exchanged worried glances, and she moved to the cubicle door, silently pulling it open a crack so she could peer through it.

"Ron!" she exclaimed suddenly, seeing the figure on the other side and wrenching the door open fully. Ron stood there nervously watching them both, an expression of trepidation on his face.

"I...um..." he faltered, rubbing his chin with his hand. "Harry, I've..." He shook his head desperately.

"Ron, it's OK," Hermione hurried over to him and put her hand on his arm, trying to reassure him. "It was a shock for you, that's all."

Ron leaned against one of the sinks and ran his hands through his hair.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he said hopelessly, looking up at Hermione, then at Harry. "Ginny made it all sound so reasonable before." He shook his head again as if trying to clear it. "I know why she did it." He closed his eyes for a moment, then with a steadying breath he continued, gazing at Harry thoughtfully. "She was right, you know. That charm needed to be done. I'd have done it for you, and I reckon Hermione probably would've too. I just..."

"Just wish it wasn't Ginny who'd done it," Harry finished for him, smiling wistfully.

"Sort of," said Ron, sighing heavily.

"I think it worked *because* it was Ginny who did the charm," Hermione reminded them, looking carefully at Ron and then pressing the point a little further. "More than friendship is needed to make that particular charm so strong."

Ron looked steadily at them, calmer now.

"I know," he said quietly. "Harry, just keep looking after her, won't you?"

"It's going to be OK," Hermione repeated wrapping her arms around Ron.

"Yes," he said, looking more like himself as he hugged her back, burying his head into her hair. "Yes, I think it will be."

Harry's mind was in a whirl. It was as if his entire world had been turned upside down; his emotions felt like they had been removed from his body, beaten with a large stick and then re-assembled bruised and battered inside him. Yet somehow the pressures of the last few weeks had simply melted clean away making Harry want to yell with excitement as possibilities he had only dreamed about opened up before him.

"Oh the potion!" exclaimed Hermione, breaking free from Ron and heading rapidly back towards the cubicle and her cauldron. "We've got to finish it quickly. Come on Harry!"

"Wait," Ron said suddenly, and Harry froze in his tracks, heart plummeting like a stone. "Hermione, this spell's to protect Ginny, right?"

"Yes," Hermione responded looking faintly puzzled. "I showed it to you yesterday. Remember?"

"Well, would it make the spell any more powerful if *two* of us wanted to protect her?" he asked, grinning faintly over at Harry.

"Oh Ron," she said softly, beaming at him. She grabbed the book and scanned through the spell again. "Look!" she cried, pointing out a small passage, which they read eagerly.

"Right then," said Ron cheerfully. "Let's do it."

Harry had been right, there was no way all three of them could fit in such a small space these days, so Hermione was forced into the next door cubicle. She found that by standing on the toilet lid and balancing slightly precariously, she could just manage to peer over the partition and give them instructions. Harry opened two blades on Sirius' knife, and slowly sliced into his own left palm, causing blood to rush to the surface, seeping warmly through the aching wound. Ron followed suit, looking rather pale. Hands extended over the cauldron, their blood mingled with the potion, which began to erupt violently. Wands pointed, the incantation was proclaimed in unison.

"Ginny Weasley defendo in aeternitas."

A flash of light shot through the cauldron and the bubbling ceased.

Checkmate

“Harry,” she said, eyes alight with happiness, gazing deeply into his own. The sun shone warmly through the trees, their leaves casting a dappled pattern of sunshine and shadow across them as they stood closely together. Her hair sparkled in the light, hundreds of shades of copper and russet dancing so irresistibly. He could bear it no longer and reached out, sliding his hand into the silky thickness of it, feeling the back of her neck, warm and soft against his fingers as her face tilted up towards his, a smile playing across her lips. Gently, gently he bent his head to hers, felt her breath brushing across his lips as he slowly closed his eyes to kiss her.

His eyes flickered open to see, not Ginny, but the darkness of the fifth year boys’ dormitory with Neville snoring audibly through the stillness of the room.

“No,” he moaned to himself. “No, no, no. I don’t want to wake up.” He closed his eyes trying to recapture the dream, to hold Ginny again in his arms, but it was no use. It had vanished as elusively as summer mist.

It had been ten days since they had completed the spell in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom, but Harry had got no further in developing any sort of relationship with Ginny. It wasn’t because he didn’t want to; it was quite the opposite. Now that there were no real obstacles in his path, he seemed to have developed a bad case of nerves. His mind couldn’t focus on anything beyond her; this had started off with his chair changing colour in Transfiguration and had gradually got more embarrassing as the week went on, much to Ron’s amusement. By now just the sight of Ginny was enough to make him blush profusely, break things, and he was lucky if he managed to string two coherent words together to say to her. Harry simply couldn’t understand it. It made no sense. He had faced all sorts of horrors in his young life, but not even Voldemort had reduced him to pieces the way he was now. He rolled over onto his stomach and punched his pillow fiercely. “I will ask Ginny to the ball tomorrow,” he told himself firmly, then he felt his stomach give a traitorous queasy lurch at the very thought of it. “I will,” he insisted.

* * * * *

Breakfast found Harry sitting sleepily at the Gryffindor table, listening to Ron and Hermione talk. He yawned, and stretched over for a piece of toast, his insides suddenly somersaulting as Ginny entered the room and grinned at him. His eyes were glued to her. She’d done something different with her hair.

“What’s up Harry?” asked Hermione suddenly.

“What?” he jumped, blinking stupidly at her as if she’d just Apparated in front of him. “Nothing. I’m a bit tired, I suppose.”

“Yeah, you must be,” Ron burst out laughing. “You do realise you’re spreading porridge on your toast?”

Harry looked down at his breakfast and turned red. This sort of thing was happening more and more these days. What was Ginny doing to him? To make matters worse, she slid onto the bench beside him, brushing against him as she did so and making him quiver.

“Are you all right, Harry?” she asked him, a flicker of anxiety showing as she gazed at him. He felt his stomach melt into a puddle on the floor. Little wisps of hair had escaped from her plait, curling around her neck, and that little place just below her right ear he suddenly felt a strong desire to kiss. Her lips twitched into a smile as she spotted his porridge-on-toast and Harry felt his face growing even hotter.

“Yeah,” he said flatly, wrenching his mind away from Ginny and concentrating instead on the jug of orange juice directly in front of him. He successfully managed to pour himself a glass, and

thudded the jug back down on the table, trying desperately to ignore the fact that his juice was the exact same shade as one of the colours running through Ginny Weasley's hair. He would behave normally. He would.

"Double Divination this morning," Ron said glumly to Harry.

"Mmmm," Harry replied, his elbow sinking slowly into the butter dish.

Fred and George paused to talk to them on their way out of the Great Hall.

"Quidditch practise tonight, Harry?" Fred asked brightly.

"Um..?" Harry responded blankly looking up at him.

"Quidditch," repeated George slowly. "You know, that game we play on broomsticks. Putting balls through hoops and that sort of thing?" Getting no response from Harry, he looked quizzically over at Ron. "What's up with him?"

Ron snorted with laughter so much that he began to choke. Hermione obligingly banged him on the back, and eventually he drew breath, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Oh, it's got something to do with our little sister," he gasped, beginning to chuckle uncontrollably again. "You should have seen what he did to the teapot in Transfiguration yesterday." He put his head on the table and began to howl hysterically. Harry made a mental note to kill Ron as soon as he got the chance. It wasn't his fault his teapot had freckles.

"What?" Fred and George yelled in unison, as Harry turned puce and buried his head in his hands. "No way!"

"Leave him alone," he heard Ginny's voice say with a trace of amusement.

"Oh yeah? Don't want us upsetting your boyfriend then?" Fred teased, grinning at her and tugging her pigtail gently. "And is that what this new hairstyle is all about?"

"No, actually it's not, and Harry's just a friend anyway," she giggled, whilst Harry's heart sank. "I've got Care of Magical Creatures first thing this morning and Hagrid's got some salamanders for us. I thought one fire in my hair was more than enough this term, thank you very much, so I decided to tie it up."

"Yeah, right," George said disbelievingly, staring hard at Harry through narrowed eyes. "We'll see you at Quidditch later," he added meaningfully and strolled off with his twin.

"More toast anyone?" offered Ginny, smiling sweetly at Harry, her hand nudging against his. He swallowed.

"Erm, no," he managed to say, trying not to look at Ron who was still sniggering away. "Gotta go." He virtually leapt out of his seat and fled out of the room before anyone had a chance to say anything.

In the coolness of the hallway, he breathed deeply trying to pull himself back together and focus his mind on anything other than Ginny Weasley. He couldn't keep staring at her like a deer caught in car headlights, and Transfiguration lessons were becoming a joke. Ron's teasing was merciless and Harry wasn't sure if he didn't prefer the overprotective big brother version of his best friend better. Thinking about it honestly, he had to admit he was currently far more of an embarrassment for Ginny than she had been for him, even way back in the days of dwarves with singing Valentines. This couldn't go on. No. He'd have to do something about it; that was all. He'd ask her to the Christmas ball.

He turned as footsteps clattered into the hallway, and found his eyes instantly connected with a pair of soft brown ones, tinged with an expression of sheer amusement. Ron had almost certainly told her about the teapot.

"Harry, are you sure you're all right?" she asked him gently, stretching her hand up to feel his forehead. "You're all clammy and shivering," she remarked. "Maybe you should go to Madam Pomfrey?"

"I'm fine," he lied, feeling as if he was about to part company with the little breakfast he'd eaten at any second.

"You don't look it, but if you're sure..." She smiled at him and his heart tried to escape through his ribs. "By the way," she added, with a deadpan expression, as she turned to leave. "I'd clean your robe elbow quickly if I were you. Butter leaves a stain."

* * * * *

Harry survived the morning's lessons relatively unscathed and was just heading down for his lunch when Ron suddenly grabbed his arm and forcibly hauled him into an empty classroom on the right hand side of the third floor corridor. Hermione followed them, closing the door quietly.

"What's up?" Harry asked in bemusement at this strange behaviour. Ron leaned against one of the heavy wooden desks, folded his arms and grinned at Harry.

"I want to know what your intentions are towards my sister, honourable or otherwise," he chuckled, then on reflection pulled a face at Harry. "Actually, I'd rather *not* know about the dishonourable intentions, if you don't mind. It doesn't bear thinking about." He shuddered at the very concept.

"I told you months ago, Harry said slightly awkwardly. "If she was safe from Voldemort, then I'd...then I'd ask her if she wanted to go out with me."

"So why haven't you asked her to the Christmas ball?" Ron roared. "We've done the charm, and you're still not doing anything about it. The ball's tomorrow night and you're making the poor girl miserable."

"Me? Making Ginny miserable?" Harry echoed in surprise.

"At last! He's got it!" Ron sighed. "Yes, *you* are making *her* miserable. I don't know why you'd ever *want* Ginny as your girlfriend, to be perfectly honest. All she ever does is wind us all up, pinch our t-shirts and block up the shower drain with her hair..."

"Ron!" Hermione said warningly.

"Oh, all right," he grinned at her. "Still, if you're mad enough to want to Harry, you're going to have to do something about it."

"But I don't want to make her unhappy," Harry said, completely horrified at the idea.

"Harry," Hermione said gently. "Have you any idea how many people Ginny's turned down to escort her to the ball this year?" He shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. "She wants to go with you, I'm certain of it."

"Hermione," Harry objected. "You heard her at breakfast this morning. I'm just a friend as far as she's concerned."

"Don't be ridiculous," she retorted briskly. "Harry, just look at that scar on her wrist. If nothing else convinces you of how much she loves you, that should."

Hermione had a point, Harry thought ruefully to himself, as he glanced from her to Ron. Maybe, just maybe, asking Ginny to the ball wouldn't be quite so difficult to do after all.

"Harry," Ron said firmly. "Go and ask her now before you find another excuse not to. She'll be in the library looking for project books I'd reckon."

"Right then!" Harry spoke decisively, and strode towards the door, his heart in his mouth. "See you two later."

* * * * *

A few tiny groups of students were huddled around tables in the warmth of the library when Harry hurried in. No sign of flaming red hair was immediately visible, so he zigzagged up and down through the book lined rows, frantically trying to find her. Rounding a corner, he came to an abrupt halt as he almost fell over her. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor, head tilted sideways as she read the spines of the volumes in front of her.

"Hi there," she whispered as he crouched down beside her. "Are you feeling any better now?"

"Ginny," he said, keeping his voice as low as he could so Madam Pince didn't overhear them, and pressing on quickly before he ran away altogether. "The ball...are you? With anyone? Or...?" She struggled visibly to suppress a giggle at his eloquence.

"Do you want me to go to the ball with you, Harry?" she asked. He nodded mutely, seeming to have lost the power of speech for the moment. She regarded him carefully, and then grinned, twinkles of impish mischief playing in her eyes.

"I'll play you at chess for it," she remarked unexpectedly.

"Chess?" Harry echoed blankly.

"The game on a chequered board with little wooden pieces," she giggled, unable to bear it any longer. "You know the one, Harry. If you can beat me I'll go to the ball with you."

He looked at her curiously. Chess? On the one hand it was something he could focus his mind on, a problem to solve, and that could well help to prevent him from behaving like a startled sheep every time he saw her. On the other hand, he knew he wasn't a very good chess player. He had no idea of Ginny's talents in that area, but Ron was formidable at the game, and if she was even approaching Ron's level of expertise, he'd have no chance. Still, at least she hadn't refused him outright.

"You're on," he said, rising to the challenge and grinning at her, suddenly feeling a lot happier about everything.

* * * * *

Herbology was last lesson of the day. He, Ron and Hermione were grouped around a small potting

bench at the back of Greenhouse Five carefully removing the winter blossoms from Prussian Abriette shrubs.

"Ron," Harry said thoughtfully, as he snipped away at his shrub, collecting the miniscule lime green flowers into the tray at the centre of the table. "What's Ginny like at chess?"

"Pretty good actually," Ron commented, accidentally severing a large branch and looking at it in alarm. "What are you two up to anyway? She's asked to borrow my chessmen tonight."

"She's challenged me to a game," admitted Harry. "I can take her to the ball *if* I beat her."

"I don't fancy your chances," her brother remarked, grinning across at Harry. "She's beaten me before."

"Great," Harry said heavily. "So I'll make a complete prat of myself on the chessboard as well as everywhere else."

"Not necessarily," Ron said slowly, laying down his secateurs. "Ginny's got a tendency to follow the same game plan in chess, and if you know what you're doing you should be able to win. If you can manage to keep your mind on something other than snogging my little sister for five minutes, I could show you."

Harry reddened at the thought, and knocked into his plant, sending it crashing to the floor; shards of terracotta pot flying everywhere. Ron sniggered.

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed crossly as she bent to help Harry salvage what he could out of the debris. "At least he's finally got round to asking her. You should be pleased about that."

"What happened to the protective big brother routine anyway?" Harry teased, regaining a bit of his composure. "Shouldn't you be wanting to break my legs or something?"

"No," Ron retorted cheerfully. "I'll leave that to Fred and George. Besides, this is far more entertaining."

Harry laughed.

* * * * *

As soon as the lesson had finished, Harry and Ron abandoned Hermione and sprinted up to their dormitory, slamming the door behind them.

"We've not got long," Ron gasped for breath, and frantically began setting up the chess board on his bed. "We've got that Quidditch practise in a couple of hours and we have to eat as well. I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

Harry swiftly set out his own chessmen opposite Ron's and settled himself on the end of the bed, listening intently to Ron's advice.

"Like I said, Ginny usually plays in a certain way, so I'll show you her moves and work through what you need to do to unsettle her. OK?"

Harry nodded, pushed his glasses up his nose, his forehead wrinkled in concentration as he stared at the pieces.

"She always starts off moving this pawn to this square, and then from there she starts to implement to Kaznikov attack formation," Ron explained quickly. "Show him," he instructed his chessmen, who immediately leapt into action and began performing a set of complicated manoeuvres without complaint. "Now, this is what you need to do Harry." As Ron demonstrated the step-by-step defence against Ginny's typical game, Harry understood what he had to do, although he seriously doubted that his brain could focus for long enough when faced with Ginny herself. He watched and learned, marvelling at Ron's skill.

"I think I've got it," he said, looking steadily at Ron. "Then if I get the knight to move there," he pointed to a square with his wand and his piece obligingly hopped across. "She'd move her rook to that spot for my queen?" He looked at Ron, who nodded. "Which means that same knight can shuffle across that way, and it's checkmate and a date for the ball!" He grinned happily.

"Yeah," said Ron, laughing at him. "You owe me big time for this, Harry."

Harry looked down at the chess pieces, who stared innocently back.

"If any word of this gets out to Ginny," he said, shaking his finger sternly at them. "I will personally spellotape your mouths shut...permanently!"

The chess men whispered and giggled. Harry didn't trust them an inch.

* * * * *

It was late when the Gryffindor Quidditch team made it back to the common room after practise. It had been quite a gruelling session, implementing some new play for the forthcoming match against Slytherin. Harry was focusing on skill and speed to defeat the sheer brute strength of the

opposition. Fred and George hadn't been as bad as Harry had feared, although they were teasing him relentlessly about Ginny. Yells rebounded around the stadium.

"You do remember what the snitch looks like, Harry?"

"Keep hunting for the little gold ball, not our little sister."

"Hey, Harry! Look, there's Ginny."

Harry had continued flying, cringing with embarrassment, but relieved that at least Fred and George didn't really seem to object to the idea that he liked Ginny. Having said that, Harry reflected as his eyes scanned the common room, there did seem to be suspiciously more bludgers being whacked towards him than usual, and one had caught him before he's had a chance to swerve, causing a nasty graze from his elbow to his wrist.

The team dispersed across the room, and Harry wove his way across to the place where Ginny was curled up in a chair, completely absorbed in a book. Her hair had broken free from the constraints imposed upon it for the Care of Magical Creatures lesson, and was now glowing softly in the candlelight, slowly falling over her shoulders and framing her face. It was unusual to see Ginny so still, and he was entranced. Finally he found his voice.

"Anything good?" he asked casually, nodding at the volume in her hands. She looked up at him, and smiled.

"Yes," she said, her eyes lighting up with real enthusiasm. "It's some Muggle poetry. I'm doing a project on it for Muggle Studies, and it's wonderful. I think I might even owl some to dad; he'd be fascinated."

"Yeah he would," Harry grinned, knowing full well Mr Weasley would be so excited about anything Muggle from his daughter that he wouldn't be able to sleep for a week. He propped his Firebolt up in the corner and sank into the chair opposite Ginny. As he did so, Ginny caught sight of the blood oozing through his Quidditch robes.

"What happened?" she gasped.

"Oh, it's just a graze," Harry replied, lifting his sleeve and showing her. "It looks worse than it is. Fred was a bit enthusiastic with a bludger. Either that, or he was upset about what Ron said at breakfast this morning."

"Oh, was he now?" A dangerous note had crept into Ginny's voice as she surveyed the room for a particular brother.

"Forget it," he said swiftly, watching her glaring daggers at Fred's back. "It really is nothing. Now how about that game of chess?"

Reluctantly she put her book on the table, and swung her legs back down to the floor, sitting up straight and shaking her hair away from her face. Harry's stomach filled with what felt like insanely leaping Cornish pixies as he watched her; yet, for a second, he could have sworn he saw the merest trace of a twinkle of mischief in her eyes. Perhaps he had imagined it.

An atmosphere of tension was building up on the chessboard as the two opposing armies faced each other, preparing to do battle. Horses whinnied and champed at their bits, pawing nervously at the ground whilst their knights reined them in, trying to calm them. The lowly pawns whispered anxiously to one another, knowing they would be the first line of attack and the casualties amongst their numbers would be high. Harry's king paced restlessly around his square, hands clasped behind his back, casting his eye up and down his rows of troops at regular intervals and then surveying the enemy who stood in regimented rows of marble-white livery.

Ginny moved first. On her command, a totally terrified pawn edged his way two squares forward, and stood there, isolated and vulnerable in the middle of the battlefield. Harry knew what he had to do, and responded accordingly, his mind still surprisingly well focused on the game. More moves followed in rapid succession, and Harry was relieved to see Ginny playing exactly as her brother had predicted. He just needed to maintain his concentration, and all would be well.

As if reading his very thoughts, Ginny looked up from her manoeuvre, her warm brown eyes dissolving into his, making his heart pound erratically in his chest.

"Your move," she said softly, as the colour rushed into his face. His bishop was directed two diagonal squares to the left, and as Harry tried to catch his breath, he realised that he had made a mistake. Her ivory knight pounced with relish, dragging the black bishop viciously from the board and leaving him in a crumpled heap on the edge of the chequered battlefield.

Harry bent his head over the board, furious with himself and trying desperately to work out how he could salvage the situation. The black pieces turned their faces questioningly towards him; they knew they were now in mortal peril because of his blunder. He thoughtfully touched the pawn at the extreme right of the board. That looked promising. He was just about to make the move when he was startled by Ginny's hand brushing against his own as she reached across the table for her book of Muggle poems. He swallowed; concentration shattered once more, and moved another piece

instead. She smiled adoringly at him, making his insides disintegrate in sheer pleasure, and his brain completely oblivious to the chess move she'd just made.

He played on, thoughts elsewhere, and Ron's carefully prepared tactics completely forgotten. The pile of ebony bodies grew steadily, as her pieces began to dominate the field, jeering comments at the opposing army. As if transfixed, he gazed at her again, watching the titian tones of her hair glint in the candlelight, and then he noticed it. Almost imperceptibly, her mouth twitched in the corner as it always did when she was trying to suppress a giggle. Harry was certain of it. Ginny Weasley was undeniably up to something. Her eyes met his again, soulfully searching his heart, and as he tore his attention away from her and back to the game, he realised exactly what it was. He felt like bursting out in fits of laughter himself. She was deliberately making him go to pieces, and he had a sneaking suspicion she'd been doing it all week.

Harry thought quickly, feigning concentration and covering his mouth with his hand to hide his grin. Why not play her at her own game? Ginny had spent a large proportion of her first two years at Hogwarts blushing furiously and hiding from him, and if she felt the way Hermione thought she did, then there was a good chance he could reduce her to that again.

He directed his solitary remaining pawn forward, then lifted his eyes directly to hers, giving her a devilish grin. To Harry's delight, she turned crimson, and as he held her eyes captive, he became aware of the unsteadiness of her breathing. She moved her rook forward, hardly glancing at the board.

The tide had turned, and the snowy-white figures dwindled from the board. The common room gradually emptied for the night, but they took no notice and played on. Ginny's hand trembled as she directed her queen across the squares, and Harry's smile widened. His castle strode forward to capture her knight, who struggled valiantly for his lady, but was subdued and finally conquered. Her eyes looked tremulously into his as she whispered a final single pace for her king, knowing what was to come. A final charge from Harry's knight finished it all.

"Checkmate," he said softly.

— CHAPTER THIRTEEN —

Past, Present and Future

*"I have spread my dreams under your feet:
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams."*

—W.B.Yeats

Harry peered intently into the mirror on his bedside table and his reflection gazed thoughtfully back. At fifteen, he was becoming taller now, but with the same untidily tousled mop of jet-black hair that he had inherited from his father. Knowing it was useless, he tried to flatten it down, but it was wayward in nature, and sprang back defiantly to where it was before. Harry glowered at it. His hand smoothed the crown of his head again. He couldn't take Ginny to the ball looking as if he'd been dragged through a hedge backwards, could he? Just thinking about her caused an idiotic grin to spread across both face and reflection, his emerald eyes sparkling with pleasure. He still couldn't believe that he was actually taking her with him; still couldn't believe that she actually *wanted* to go with him; and definitely couldn't believe what she'd been doing to him for the past week. He laughed out loud. Only Ginny would have done that, and he loved her for it.

He fleetingly wondered if she would *ever* be ready in time. She'd been absorbed in her book of Muggle poems, sprawled comfortably in a common room chair with her sock-clad feet resting on a low table, when Ron had thrown a screwed up piece of parchment at her. Harry grinned happily at his reflection as he remembered the conversation.

"Are you wearing Bill's socks?" Ron stared accusingly at the distinctive tartan fabric covering her feet.

"Yes," she giggled, looking up from her book, and lobbing the parchment back at him. "Nice aren't they?" She wiggled her toes cheekily at her brother and was just about to return to her reading when Ron interrupted.

"Ginny, you do know Hermione went up two hours ago to get ready for the ball? We're due down there in less than an hour."

To Harry's absolute delight, Ginny had squeaked in horror, gabbled a red-faced apology to him, and before he had a chance to respond, Bill's socks had disappeared at warp speed up the girls' staircase.

He chuckled aloud again, and appraised himself in the mirror one final time. His hair was slightly tidier now, and he could just make out his scar on his forehead beneath it. He touched it briefly and puzzled over it for a moment. Voldemort had done so many evil and terrible deeds, and yet somehow that curse scar had now connected him with Ginny. How could something that had started out intending to kill him, have ended up with a bond that was so good? His reflection frowned back at him, green eyes clouding over, but he had no time to muse further as the door swung open.

"Are you ready?" Ron asked, twitching the cuffs of his new dress robes. "Look at this," he added, gesturing at his outfit and grinning at Harry. "Not a hint of lace *or* maroon in sight."

The pair of them strolled down to the busy common room. People were conversing exuberantly in little cliques, and some were even beginning to leave through the portrait hole heading for the Great Hall. Excitement filled the air, and the entire place was filled with happy chatter and laughter. Harry felt a surge of nervousness run through his veins, and panic clenched his stomach tightly, growing worse with every minute that passed.

"She'll be ages yet," Ron said sagely, as he looked at Harry's expression. "I don't know why you're getting so wound up anyway. It's only Ginny."

The room gradually began to empty as eight o' clock drew near, and even Ron became impatient, as neither Ginny nor Hermione had yet appeared. A set of footsteps were heard pattering quickly

down towards them, and floating robes of periwinkle-blue drifted into sight. Ron leapt to his feet, clearly about to yell at her for being so late, but he got as far as opening his mouth and stopped abruptly. She smiled softly at him, and instead he merely reached out his hand for hers.

"Nice robes," she said to Ron. Then she added mischievously, "I really miss that bit of lace though."

"I'm sure you do," he laughed, pulling her closer and kissing her forehead. "You look wonderful." She beamed up at him, eyes shining with happiness.

"Harry," Hermione said suddenly, switching her attention across to him. "I dropped in to see Ginny on the way down, and she said she's *nearly* ready. I'm not sure if she's in the best of moods though," she chuckled. "Her dormitory looks like a tornado's just crashed through it, and she's threatening to curse her hair for not doing as it's told."

"That's Ginny for you," Ron exclaimed cheerfully. "I told you that you were insane, Harry, but would you listen?"

"If you two want to head downstairs, that's fine," Harry said, glancing nervously at his watch and changing the subject. "I'm not sure if there's any point all of us being late."

"Will you be OK?" Hermione asked him anxiously. "The prefects should be down there already and Professor McGonagall won't be impressed if I'm much longer."

"I'll be fine," he reassured her. "We'll catch you up."

The common room was eerily silent after the others had left, and Harry nervously began to pace around, wondering if Ginny had changed her mind. He glanced at his watch for the fifth time in as many minutes, and resumed his restless wandering. He paused and watched the flames flickering in the fire, panic beginning to cast its shadows deep inside his heart.

"Harry," her voice was gentle behind him, and he swung round to face her. "I am so sorry you've had to wait so long."

Harry caught his breath. Ginny Weasley had always been a striking figure, no doubt due to the vibrancy of both hair and personality, but this was something else entirely. Gone was the little red-headed whirlwind wearing Bill's old socks, and in her place was an entirely different Ginny. An exquisitely beautiful young woman stood there; poised, elegant and smiling at *him*.

Harry gazed at her in wonder. Her hair had been tamed and tied up into a swirl at the back of her head, making her seem much older. It shone like burnished copper; tiny stars glistening in its fiery depths, pinning it securely in place. Robes of a deep forget-me-not hue were fitted elegantly down to her waist, falling full-skirted to the floor. The fabric shimmered softly in the firelight, as she paused, nervously watching him.

"You're worth waiting for," he murmured at last, gazing into her deep brown eyes. "I've never seen you look so beautiful." She flushed and glanced away, as he inwardly cringed at the cliché. "Ginny," he said seriously, gently cupping her face in his hand so she was looking at him again. "I mean it."

"Thank you," she said, blushing even more. Then she smiled apologetically at him, her brow furrowed. "Harry, I hate to ask, but do you think you could help me with this please?" She opened her hand, and Harry saw the fine silver chain he and Ron had given her for her birthday snaking across it, the star-like pendant twinkling against her palm. "I've tried and tried, but the clasp is just so tiny it's really fiddly to do," she admitted. "By the time I got round to even attempting to put it on, everyone else had gone and I didn't want to make us any later. Would you mind?"

"I'll try," Harry said hesitantly, picking up the necklace and examining the fastening carefully. Ginny turned her back to him, and he slid it gently round her neck, trembling slightly at this curiously intimate experience. He fumbled with the clasp, feeling the softness and warmth of her bare skin against his, and the tiny quivers she gave as his hands brushed against her neck, made his mouth feel suddenly very dry. The chain linked together, and Ginny's hand fluttered up to touch it at her throat. It nestled, twinkling gently in the hollow between her collarbones, the perfect finishing touch. She smiled shyly up at him.

"Shall we go then Mr Potter?" she laughed, seeking refuge in formality.

"Certainly, Miss Weasley," he grinned back, offering her his arm. She slid her hand through it, and together they headed off through the portrait hole.

* * * * *

The enchanted ceiling was overcast; a deep velvety midnight blue with ominously dark billowing clouds hanging heavy above them, eclipsing moon and stars almost entirely. The occupants of the room took no notice of the mood outside, as candlelight flickered softly though the darkness of the winter evening, casting warm glows on faces animated with laughter and excitement. Fireflies hummed and shone around the vast Christmas trees lining the very edges of the room; green

boughs stretching towards the sky itself, bedecked in magical splendour. Golden wisps of smoke trailed lazily over the scene, and bubbles hovered along the frosty boughs, bauble-like, ensnaring a shimmering rainbow within each sphere. The Great Hall was completely transformed in festive greenery, holly swathes hanging between the pillars, their red berries glittering like jewels in the muted light.

Harry and Ginny hurried across the room to a small round table where Ron was sitting, waving frantically at them. A few heads turned in their direction as they passed, and Harry fixed his eyes firmly on the floor in front of him, trying not to blush, but holding Ginny's hand more tightly.

"What took you so long?" Ron asked indignantly, as Harry and Ginny slid into their seats with relief, glad to sink into blissful obscurity once more.

"My fault," Ginny admitted ruefully. "Too much Muggle poetry and not enough time to get dressed." The tiny stars in her hair sparkled gently in the half-light of the chamber as she spoke, and Harry gazed at her, quite entranced.

"I can't believe you forgot," Ron teased her. "I mean, you've been dying to go out with Harry like this since you were ten. The momentous occasion finally arises, and you're reading a *book*?"

Ginny turned scarlet and Ron suddenly uttered a startled "Ouch!" Either his sister or his girlfriend had clearly kicked him hard under the table.

"No harm done," Hermione said soothingly to Ginny as Ron gingerly rubbed his shin. "To be honest, I'm surprised at how quick you were. It's taken me hours to get dressed."

"Well, I'm probably still wearing Bill's old socks under my robes," Ginny laughed, regaining a bit of her composure, but glancing anxiously at Harry. He grinned at her.

"You look gorgeous, Gin," he said, flushing a little as Ron stared at him. He reached for the parchment menu propped up in the centre of the table. "Hope the food's as good as it was last year. I'm starving."

The food was, indeed, sumptuous. The house elves had surpassed themselves with the feast they had prepared, and as dishes were quickly emptied, they vanished magically from the table and were replaced by new ones. By the time the Christmas pudding materialised, flames flickering fiercely, Harry found that he was actually enjoying himself. Ginny was recounting a comical story about one of her Defence Against the Dark Arts lessons where they'd been studying urisks. A couple of the creatures had escaped from the classroom at the end of the lesson and had spent the next few days haunting poor Colin Creevey and terrorising him every time he went near any dimly lit part of the castle.

"It took Professor McGonagall ages to work out why he kept checking over his shoulder every couple of minutes," Ginny chuckled. "I'm convinced she thought it was a nervous twitch."

The conversation moved on to the wyvern the fifth years were working on in Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid was delighted with his new pet as it was the closest thing to a dragon he was allowed to have within the Hogwarts grounds; Harry, Ron and Hermione were less than enthusiastic about a creature with foot-long talons and a vicious stinging barb at the end of its tail.

"It can't be all bad though," Ron laughed, as Dumbledore created the dance floor by waving his wand and sending the tables and chairs floating to the edges of the room. "He nearly got Malfoy with that jet of flame last week. It was a great shot."

There was a slight commotion as the band arrived, partly because *Witch and Wonder* were a new sensation on the music scene, but also because many of the sixth and seventh years remembered them from when they were at school. Their tightly fitted dragon-hide trousers caused quite a stir in the younger girls, and even Ginny and Hermione raised their eyebrows and exchanged smiles. The band members grinned widely at the hubbub in the hall, and with an amplified, "Hello Hogwarts!" began to play.

The floor was immediately filled with people dancing. Dumbledore waltzed past with Professor Sprout, his eyes twinkling merrily in the candlelight, and Harry could make out the entertaining sight of Draco Malfoy struggling to dance with Pansy Parkinson, but failing dismally as he tripped over yet another frounce on the hem of her canary yellow robes. Ron and Hermione vanished into the throng, but Fred Weasley paused briefly beside them on his way to the floor.

"Harry," he said seriously. "That's our little sister you're with. Hands on her *waist*. You got that? Nowhere else."

"Fred!" she exploded, but he had disappeared, and was spotted a few moments later dancing exuberantly with Angelina.

"I'm going to kill him," she muttered venomously, fumbling for her wand. "How do you reckon he'd look in Ron's dress robes from last year?"

"You wouldn't?" said Harry in some trepidation, knowing full well that she definitely would. "Ginny," he caught her hand in his before the damage was done. "It doesn't matter much anyway."

You know I can't dance." She stopped in her tracks and considered him thoughtfully.

"You've just never been shown how to," she said. "I was the guinea pig my brothers learned to dance with, and believe me, you can't be worse than Percy for standing on my toes; I can still feel the bruises now." Harry laughed at her anguished expression. "Come on, I'll teach you." She grabbed his hand and pulled him gently onto the dance floor.

Nervously he slid his arm around Ginny's waist, and gulped silently as he felt her body move in closely against his own, her hand resting lightly on his upper arm. She smiled up at him, making his pulse quicken.

"Just follow me, Harry. It's easy, I promise."

Revolving slowly, holding Ginny in his arms, Harry felt a surge of sheer pleasure thrilling through his veins. It felt so much like she belonged there, nestled in beside him, guiding him with the lightest of touches. The stars about her twinkled gently, as they turned, and he found himself gazing into her eyes and smiling, almost forgetting about what his feet were doing.

"That's it," she said reassuringly, caressing his arm with her left hand and sending tingles of delight up his spine. "You're doing better than Ron." She nodded her head in her brother's direction and grinned. "He still counts every step." Sure enough, Harry could see Ron's lips moving as he doggedly concentrated on putting his feet in the right place rather than on Hermione's toes.

One song blended into the next, as they danced on, growing ever closer and more oblivious to those around them. Ginny rested her head against Harry's shoulder and he held her tightly, never wanting to let her go.

"It's no good," he heard George's voice say mournfully. "They're not the regulation six inches apart." Ginny closed her eyes and groaned.

"You'd think our Quidditch captain would have a better grasp of distances than that," Fred responded equally sadly.

"If you ask me, he's got far too good a grasp on some things," George added. "Our little sister for example."

Ginny pulled away from Harry, her eyes flashing furiously at her twin brothers.

"Enough!" she snapped at them.

"But Gin," George said innocently. "We promised Mum we'd keep an eye on you."

"Fine," she retorted, staring at him angrily through narrowed eyes. "C'mon Harry."

"Where are you off to?" Fred asked, slightly anxiously, seeing his sister's livid expression.

"Oh, perhaps to have sex in the rose garden," she shrugged with nonchalance, then giggled wickedly at their totally horrified expressions. "Well, if you're so keen to keep an eye on us, it would be a shame to make your entire evening dull."

"Ginny!" George croaked, having finally found his voice. "You can't...you wouldn't..."

"Of course I wouldn't," she snapped. "Which is why I don't need two enormous oafs of brothers breathing down my neck. I'm perfectly safe with Harry, and you both know it. Now go away and leave us alone before I get *really* mad!"

As Fred and George slunk away, Ginny glanced apologetically at Harry, and moved restlessly towards the door.

"I've got to get out of here for a few minutes to calm down," she said, rubbing her face in frustration. "Do you want to come for a quick walk, or are you OK here for a while?"

"I'll come," said Harry immediately, reaching for her hand. She smiled up at him as he touched her, her expression relaxing once more.

"I'm sorry about saying that," she confessed, as they headed out of the main door, and down the steps onto the lawn, shivering in the sudden chill of the air. "They just really got my goat in there. I wish I were an only child sometimes."

"It doesn't matter," Harry reassured her, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her close for warmth. "I think you gave them a bit of a shock though."

"Yeah," she giggled and her eyes glistened mischievously. "They had no idea that I knew where the rose garden was." Harry snorted with laughter, his breath clouding the night air, and they crunched their way along the gravel path towards the lake end of the castle.

It seemed that Ginny was heading for a specific spot; a wooden bench, tucked neatly into a nook in the castle walls. Harry had never noticed it before, but it was particularly pleasant sitting there with her, sheltered from the wind, with the darkness of the lake glimmering gently before them when the moon broke through the clouds.

"Do you come here often?" he chuckled, unable to resist it.

"Quite a lot," she laughed, conjuring a small fire for some heat. "It's a great place to sit and think, because no one really knows you're here. I found it in my first year, when...y'know..." She

bit her lip and it tore at Harry's heart.

"Ginny," he said, brushing his hand gently against her cheek. "You're safe now. Now is what matters; live for the present and the future. We can't do anything to change the past, no matter how much we want to." He shifted restlessly in the seat, and gazed out over the darkness of the lake.

"Cedric," she whispered, and he knew she understood completely. She captured his hands in hers and tried to move him onto happier thoughts. "And what about the future, Harry?"

"That's something I'd like to share with you," he said slowly and honestly, his heart lurching with fear of rejection. "I can't imagine my future without you in it, but I'm also...I'm..." He broke off and with a deep breath, tried again, seeking strength from her hands, still warmly clasping his. "Ginny, I'm scared Voldemort will use you to get to me. We've done a protection spell to try and stop him, just in case. Please don't get mad with me; I did it because I want you to be safe. Then, what happens if we do start a relationship and he does manage to kill me? It could happen. You know it could. That'll really hurt you, and I don't know if I can do that. Look how Cho reacted after he murdered Cedric. I can't do that to *you*."

The words came tumbling out before he could stop them; a waterfall of cascading emotions, his innermost thoughts and fears exposed in fairly random order. He looked desperately at her.

"Oh Harry!" she exclaimed softly, her eyes filled with concern. "We should have talked long before now, shouldn't we?" She knelt on the bench, facing him, completely serious for once, her brow furrowed in thought. "Look into my eyes, Harry, and tell me what you see in there." He did as he was bid, searching the liquid brown pools of her eyes by the amber firelight, puzzled at first when he saw his own reflection peering back at him.

"It's me," he said, at last, not looking away from her for even a second.

"Exactly," she said, earnestly. "You're there; in my eyes, in my heart, in my skin," she gestured to the scar on her wrist. "It's like you're already part of me, Harry. I can't explain it, but it's there, and I wouldn't have it any other way."

"But Voldemort?" he croaked, stunned by the depth of her feelings and cast completely adrift in the unexpected tide of emotions that engulfed him.

"Harry," she said, holding his hand tightly. "I can't be any more protected than I am, and I have you to thank for it. I know how Voldemort works, never forget that." Her face suddenly went white and her eyes took on a haunted look, but Harry could see she was determined to continue. "I know how he manipulates people. He's done it to me. Taking over my mind, insinuating, forcing me to do things I didn't want to. You struggle and struggle against it, but once he's got his claws in, he never lets you go. There's no mercy. I know he'd have killed me when I'd stopped being useful to him."

"Gin-" but she held a finger to his lips to silence him.

"Harry," she continued gently, unshed tears shining in her eyes. "What I'm trying to say, is that I know what *could* happen, far better than anyone else. I *know* what he could do to me, and I'm prepared to take my chances with it. As for what he might do to you," she paused and shivered. "Who knows how long we've got; a week, a month, a year, a life time? We have to make the most of whatever time we've got, otherwise we'll only regret the things we could have done, but didn't."

The tears began to fall, silently, and Harry reached out, burying her in a hug. There was no need for words; they would have been totally inadequate anyway. He held her; his world in his arms. The tiny stars glistened still in her fiery hair, and for the first time in a long while, Harry felt at peace with himself.

"Sorry," she sniffled, brushing the tears away brusquely with her hand. "It's been one of those days."

"Do you really feel like that, Ginny?" he asked curiously. "About us, I mean." She nodded, gazing up at him with a wan smile. Her face was inches from his, as he caressed her cheek thoughtfully, wiping smudges of tears away and making her smile. She propped herself up a little to look at him, and he saw the familiar sparkle return to her eyes.

"Harry Potter, you could procrastinate for England," she giggled softly, and leaned across to kiss him.

Instinctively, Harry tightened his arms around Ginny; the sensation of her breath brushing lightly against his lips made him forget to breathe himself. A gentle, slightly tentative kiss sent tingling shock waves of electricity through him, making the hairs on the back of his neck prickle and stand on end. She pulled back a little from him, hand still touching his cheek, her eyes widening as she stared at him. He could feel her trembling.

"Wow!" he managed to say, trying to remember how to fill his lungs with air. He swallowed. Breath eventually came in ragged little bursts, very unsteadily.

"I'm not sure if we got that quite right," she murmured, voice quivering slightly. Her eyes twinkled. "Let me just try that again."

At length, Harry reluctantly freed his lips from hers, fireworks fading from his mind.

"We really should be getting back to the ball, otherwise Fred and George will think that I *have* abducted you into the rose garden," he teased.

"Mmmm. I suppose so," she agreed unwillingly, pulling a face at him. "It's going to take them a while to get used to this as it is." She nuzzled her face into the crook of his neck and smiled happily to herself. "It's going to take *me* some time to get used to it as well, come to that."

"Tell me about it," he chuckled gently. "Imagine the ribbing I'm in for. You're my best friend's little sister and I've been controlling you with the Imperius Curse for bits of this term. They're going to have hours of fun with that one. Can you imagine Fred and George on the topic?"

"Couldn't get a date the proper way, Harry, so you had to resort to brainwashing her!" she laughed.

"I suppose she'd have to be under some sort of enchantment, otherwise she'd never have gone anywhere near you," he added, his mirth at the idea erupting into fits of laughter.

Well, I suppose if you're going to be teased for it anyway..." Her speech trailed away, but her eyes danced rather seductively. He couldn't resist it.

"Kiss me." His voice suddenly seemed far huskier as he lowered his face towards hers. "I command you. Imperio."

Her arms entwined around him, but she slowly raised an eyebrow, stopping him millimetres away from his goal.

"Oh all right," he smiled. "Please."

* * * * *

Harry stood up from the bench to extinguish the fire. Ginny looked at him, suddenly serious, the starlight twinkling through the russet hues of her hair.

"Any regrets about this?" she asked, as he offered a hand to pull her to her feet.

"None," he said firmly. "I've never felt so sure of anything in my life."

Snowflakes were beginning to fall as they skirted the edge of the castle, the gravel path crunching and sliding under their feet. Ginny twirled around in her excitement, making Harry laugh as she stretched out her palms to catch some flakes as they drifted downwards.

"We'll have snow for Christmas," she said, eyes alight with happiness, as the whiteness of the weather began to whirl more heavily around her. "It's perfect." Harry caught her hand and pulled her swiftly into the dryness of the entrance hall, where they stood and watched the snowfall eddying wildly and burying the landscape completely.

Strains of music and laughter wafted from the Great Hall, and Ginny touched Harry's arm as she returned his smile. Before they had a chance to rejoin the party, the door swung open, and Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle strolled through. Malfoy caught sight of Harry, with Ginny close by his side, and his face broke into a highly superior sneer.

"My, my, Potter," he drawled loftily, his eyes raking arrogantly over the pair of them from head to toe. "How the mighty have fallen. Did you have trouble getting a date for the ball this year? Fancy having to come with..." He paused, looking rather as if he had a nasty smell under his nose and continued. "With *that*?"

Harry felt white hot anger blazing through him such as he had never known before. How *dare* Malfoy talk about Ginny like that. Her restraining hand on his back was the only thing preventing him from pulverising Malfoy through the wall and into the middle of next week.

"Jealous are you, Malfoy?" he growled through gritted teeth, fists clenched tightly at his sides. "I suppose you've had enough of Parkinson in that ridiculous yellow thing she calls dress robes. Well, I warn you. Stay away from Ginny. She's far too good for the likes of you."

Malfoy's sneer grew more pronounced as he realised he had hit a raw nerve, and his eyes glittered with malice as he headed in for the kill.

"Potter," he said silkily. "I wouldn't be seen dead anywhere near a Weasley."

"Just as well," Ginny interjected unexpectedly, her hand now caressing Harry's back to soothe him. She laughed, catching Malfoy totally off guard. "We wouldn't want you, Draco dear. Although I must admit that the vision of you dead is a rather appealing one."

"Well, what can I say?" Malfoy said coldly, looking at her in sheer disgust. "The two of you deserve each other."

"Yeah. We think so too." Harry grinned over at Ginny, his fury subsiding. "Now, if you don't mind, we've a ball we'd rather like to get back to."

"You think you're so clever, don't you, Potter?" Malfoy spat the words out as they walked past him. "Your time will come a lot sooner than you think. Just you wait."

The Great Hall was still full with blurs of colours dancing, or people perched around the tables at the perimeter of the room with gaggles of friends. Harry glanced around, and quickly spotted Ron and Hermione at the regular Gryffindor end of the room. Hermione had her elbow on the table and was propping her chin up on her hand, listening patiently, albeit with a slightly glazed expression, whilst Ron was gesticulating wildly about something. Harry glanced over at Ginny, suddenly realising with a delighted jolt of his stomach that she was no longer simply his friend. She was right, her brothers were going to find this new relationship very difficult to adjust to, but there was no turning back now. Not that he wanted to. He squeezed her hand gently, and she smiled, causing joy to bubble up within him.

They wove their way through the throngs of people and along the edge of the dance floor to rescue Hermione from what was almost certainly another rant about the Chudley Cannons' appalling performance in the Quidditch league so far this season.

"Hi there!" Hermione exclaimed in relief as she saw them approaching.

"Where have you two been?" asked Ron, eyeing them suspiciously, Chudley Cannons temporarily forgotten.

"You'd better ask Fred and George about that," Ginny said, mischievously glancing sideways at Harry, who felt himself grinning idiotically again. Ron got to his feet, frowning slightly at his little sister.

"Anyone want another butterbeer?" he asked.

There was a general mutter of consensus, so Harry left Ginny with Hermione and followed Ron to give him a hand with the drinks. Sneaking a look back at the two girls, he was well aware of what they were discussing so intently and blushed deeply.

"I'm not asking," Ron commented, seeing his friend's red face. He handed him the bottles and gathered some glasses together with a gentle clink. "I'd rather not know what you're getting up to with my little sister."

"Oh, I've been given very strict instructions by Fred and George," Harry laughed. He recited: "Hands on her waist, and nowhere else."

"Seriously?" Ron sounded completely incredulous. "Y'know, when they found out I was going out with Hermione, they spent ages recommending interesting places to put my hands. Not that you should do that with Ginny," he added hastily, as an afterthought. "No. Definitely not."

Harry blushed even more furiously at the thought, his elbow knocking an empty glass off the bar, sending it crashing to the floor and shattering noisily into smithereens.

"Reparo!" Ron spluttered, waving his wand at the mess and reassembling the goblet on the counter once more. "Excellent!" he exclaimed in delight, chuckling away. "I'm so glad you're still doing that, Harry."

Harry grinned sheepishly.

The remainder of the evening drifted by in a haze of happiness, and all too soon *Witch and Wonder* launched into their final melody as midnight approached.

"I think I could get used to this dancing business," Harry murmured in Ginny's ear. She smiled sleepily and snuggled her head into his shoulder as they slowly turned around the dance floor.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"What for?"

"A wonderful evening. And for being you."

Contentment such as he had never known flooded through him as he held her. There was something about Ginny that he couldn't explain away. Usually he shrank from any form of physical contact; after all, he had grown up with the Dursleys, and the thought of a hug from Aunt Petunia was almost laughable. He had become less embarrassed over the years by both Hermione and Mrs Weasley's affectionate gestures, but they still made him feel awkward sometimes. Yet here with Ginny, like this, it all felt so incredibly right. This closeness between them was weaving its own particular brand of magic and Harry was utterly enchanted by it.

Glancing down at her, he suddenly realised she was almost asleep on her feet.

"Come on then, Cinderella," he teased gently, leading her off the dance floor. "Let's get you back to the common room before the clock strikes midnight and you turn into a pumpkin."

"I don't want this to end," she murmured as he led her back up the staircase, her hand held firmly in his own. "It's been so wonderful, Harry. I'm half scared I'll wake up and find it's all been a dream."

"It's not, I promise," he smiled at her, understanding exactly what she meant.

They approached the portrait of the fat lady in the pink dress, the guardian of Gryffindor Tower, and to their entertainment, they saw that she was not alone. Emeric Ambrose, third headmaster of

Hogwarts, was wedged into the picture with her, his party hat crooked and his robes awry. The fat lady drained her goblet of mead, and giggled with him, looking rather red in the face.

“Ahem,” Harry interrupted politely, raising his eyebrows.

“Password?” the portrait asked, hiccuping gently and turning a far pinker shade than her dress.

“Mistletoe,” Harry and Ginny said in unison. As the portrait swung aside, they distinctly heard the masculine tones sounding from the frame:

“Ah, mistletoe, dear lady. May I?”

They clambered through into the half empty common room, giggling together.

“I’ll wait for you in the morning, if you want me to, Ginny,” he said quietly as they paused at the foot of the stairs. “How about we have breakfast together?”

“I’d like that,” she responded sleepily. “I really would. Goodnight then, Harry.” She smiled with pleasure, her brown eyes melting into his own, making Harry forget the existence of the rest of the world as he bent his head to kiss her. Nothing else mattered.

“Night, Gin,” he whispered, an irrepressible grin spreading across his features. She reached out and touched his cheek thoughtfully one last time, and Harry stared after her as she drifted dreamily up the girls’ staircase, watching her until she disappeared from sight completely.

— CHAPTER FOURTEEN —

Christmas

*“Laugh and be merry, remember, better the world with a song...
Laugh, for the time is brief, a thread the length of a span.”*

—John Masefield

Harry lay in blissful stupor; neither awake nor fully asleep. The warmth of his bed enveloped him, as he relished in the luxury of the morning, drifting hazily through wispy clouds of dreams. The image of Ginny vaguely flitted through his head, and he smiled drowsily to himself. Suddenly, without any warning whatsoever, a large squashy pillow whizzed through the air and hit him full in the face causing him to yell.

“Whassit?” he muttered foggily, propping himself onto his elbow and blinking in bewilderment at this rude awakening.

“Wake up you lazy git,” he heard Ron’s cheerful tones bouncing through the room, far, far too exuberantly for that hour of the morning.

“Ron,” he groaned, collapsing and burying his head back under the blankets. “Go `way. You’re never up at this time. Let me sleep.”

“Harry!” Ron’s voice sounded exasperated this time and his second missile impacted on Harry’s stomach. “If you weren’t up for half the night playing chess with Ginny, it wouldn’t be a problem. C’mon. Wakey wakey!”

Harry moaned wearily, but reached out a sleepy hand for his glasses. He knew Ron well enough to realise that he wasn’t going to give up without a fight, and besides, with Neville, Dean and Seamus gone for the holidays he had a lot more pillows to use as ammunition as well.

“What?” he said in irritation, yawning widely and stretching. “At the very least I hope it’s the castle burning down.”

“Look!” Ron grinned happily. “It’s Christmas! Presents!”

Sure enough, a small pile of brightly coloured packages straggled across the foot of Harry’s bed, so he hauled himself to a sitting position.

“I hate it when you’re cheerful in the mornings,” Harry remarked, smiling broadly at his friend. “Remind me to organise some Quidditch sessions at unbearably early hours next term.”

Ron took no notice as he was far too busy ploughing through the mound of gifts by his feet. He picked up an instantly recognisable lumpy parcel in both his hands and pulled a face at Harry.

“Maroon jumper?” Harry asked, smothering a grin.

“Could be,” he laughed, and ripped the wrapping away, to reveal the truth of the matter. “I don’t know why Mum gives me maroon; she knows I hate it. I mean, it must be bad, even Ginny won’t pinch it.” He sighed tragically, but perked up as he saw the sweets his mother had also included for him. “What did she send you, Harry?” He peered over and saw Harry opening a box of fudge and an emerald green sweater. “Ah!” said Ron, wisely. He mimicked his mother: “I thought it would bring out the colour of your eyes, Harry dear.” His voice was muffled suddenly as Harry’s pillow hit him forcibly in the face, knocking him sideways.

Shreds of wrapping paper soon lay strewn across the bed as Harry discovered the treasures that lay beneath; a book of Quidditch tactics from Hermione, and Ron had given him a large supply of chocolate frogs and Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans. There was a batch of homemade toffee from Hagrid, guaranteed to clamp his jaw together for hours on end, and even the Dursley’s had surpassed themselves by sending him a milk bottle top. Harry shook his head at this, and turned his attention to the final two presents.

Tearing through the bright purple covering of the small rectangular parcel, Harry stopped abruptly and stared down at the gift in surprise. A heavy wooden frame surrounded a certain wizard photograph that Colin Creevey had taken two nights earlier at the Christmas Ball. A grin spread across his face as he watched the figures in it. Ginny was smiling impishly up at his photographed self, standing on tiptoes to whisper in his ear. He saw his own expression change from curiosity to laughter as he hugged her tightly, both of their faces glowing with pleasure. She really did look beautiful in her dress robes, Harry reflected as he gazed at her, seeing her hair smoothed into that elegant knot studded with starlight as the tiny image moved excitedly around the photograph. All the same, he had to admit he had more of a penchant for the day-to-day wildness of her flowing red hair, cascading around her and reflecting her every mood.

A little parchment note fluttered out of the parcel, and Harry recognised Ginny's deceptively neat and precise script immediately as he picked it up.

*Harry,
Thanks for not minding the recent resurrection of your fan club!
Hope you like this photo as much as I do.
See you for breakfast?
Love,
Ginny*

He propped the photo up on his bedside cabinet, grinning still, and picked up the final parcel, which he reasoned must be from Sirius. It fitted neatly into the palm of his hand, extending along his outstretched fingers, but was so incredibly heavy he almost dropped it in surprise. Unwrapping it carefully, he saw it glinting in the weak rays of winter morning sunshine. It appeared to be some form of quartz-like rock, strata just visible through the opaqueness of its layers. One surface was entirely smooth, and shone like polished glass, and the rest was as jagged as if it had just been hewn out of the ground by dwarves.

"What's that?" Ron asked curiously, wandering across to Harry's bed for a closer look. Harry shook his head and shrugged.

"No idea," he said blankly. "It weighs an absolute ton though! Hang on! There's a letter with it." He unrolled the note and scanned through it quickly, his confusion fading a little. "It's from Sirius," he explained to Ron. "He's been hiding at Lupin's and they found this in some old school stuff belonging to my dad." He glanced back at the parchment from his Godfather, and read aloud. "We thought you'd like to have it, but you'll have to work out what it does for yourself. I would say try not to get up to too much mischief with it, but we did. So I'll just say, try not to get caught!"

He exchanged glances with Ron and they burst into laughter.

"Sounds promising," Ron said. "Come on. What are you waiting for? Let's get dressed and ask Hermione. She usually knows about stuff like this."

* * * * *

Ginny was toasting her toes beside the common room fire when Harry and Ron crashed into the otherwise empty room. She glanced up briefly from the parchment she was writing on and grinned across at the pair of them.

"Thanks for the presents," she said cheerfully. "Nice jumper, Ron. It really suits you." Her brother glared at her, balefully, and she giggled.

"Where's Hermione when we need her?" Ron asked, impatiently peering up the girls' stairwell. "Ginny, go and get her for us."

"And what did your last slave die of?" she retorted, dipping her quill back into the ink bottle. "Do it yourself. I'm busy."

Ron opened his mouth, to point out the obvious reason why he couldn't go and get Hermione, then he changed his mind. With a furtive glance to make sure no one was around, he disappeared into the shadows to find her.

"What are you up to?" Harry asked, dropping into the chair opposite her and enjoying the warmth of the fire beating against his legs.

"Waiting for the scream when Hermione finds Ron heading into her room," Ginny chuckled. "Actually, I'm writing a letter to everyone at home. Charlie's back there for Christmas as well, you know. Then I was planning on a spot of Fred and George baiting to pass the time between now and breakfast. They don't *really* know what's going on between us yet, so I reckon they'll be easy to wind up today." She nodded down at her socks, eyes twinkling wickedly, and when Harry saw her feet he burst out into laughter.

"Thanks for the present," he said at last. "I really liked it."

"I liked mine too," she said shyly, blushing slightly. "I wasn't expecting anything from you."

"I had to get Hermione to help me choose it," Harry confessed, thinking about the hair clip. "With a bit of luck it'll stop you setting your hair on fire again."

A loud shriek suddenly reverberated down the stairwell and around the common room, breaking through their conversation. A few seconds later, Ron hastily reappeared looking rather red in the face but extremely pleased with himself.

"She's on her way," he grinned, sighing and flopping down lazily in the chair beside Ginny. Then he sat up sharply and frowned at his sister's feet.

"Ginny," he said slowly. "Are you wearing *Harry's* socks?"

She regarded her feet thoughtfully, examining the distinctively mismatched socks; one bright red with a pattern of broomsticks on it, the other green with a design of snitches.

"You know, Ron," she said seriously. "I think I am."

Hermione darted into the common room looking even more flushed than Ron.

"What did you think you were doing?" she yelled furiously at him.

"We needed to talk to you," Ron replied, the anger rising in his own voice. "How else was I meant to get hold of you?"

"Has no one ever told you to knock on doors first?" she screamed.

"Oh yes," Ginny nodded vehemently in answer to this question. "Believe me, he's been told."

"Hermione," Ron raged, shooting a furious glare at his sister. "It's not like you were getting changed or anything. What's the problem?"

"What do you mean, what's the problem?" she exploded. "I never wander into your room like that!"

"Actually," said Harry slowly. "I seem to remember that you have. It was that time in the second year, wasn't it? I'm pretty sure you just barged in and woke us up."

"That was different," she snapped defensively, blushing a little more. "It was important, because the polyjuice potion was ready."

"Well, this is important," grinned Ron, his temper subsiding as he watched the conflicting emotions crossing Hermione's face. "We need your superior brain for this one."

"What is it then?" Hermione sighed heavily and sat down with the others. "Honestly, Ron. I could murder you sometimes."

Harry produced the present from Sirius and explained what little they knew of the stone. Both girls stared at it intently. Hermione shook her head.

"I've no idea," she said. "Stones are used for all sorts of magical purposes, but I'm sure it must be in one of the books around here somewhere. I'll have a look in the library after breakfast."

"Excellent," Ginny whispered softly to no one in particular, as she saw her twin brothers bound into the room. She bent her head over her parchment again. Her quill scratched quietly away, and Harry watched in amusement, marvelling at the completely deadpan expression on her face.

"Morning!" Fred said jovially. "Nice jumper, Ron."

"Shut up!" Ron retorted, grinning at Fred's bright yellow sweater. "I can see we're not going to lose you in the dark."

"Fair point," he laughed. Then he glanced round the room and continued his teasing. "George did all right though. The blue's not so bad...and I see Harry's got one to go with his eyes again."

"What did Mum give you this year, Gin?" George asked, seeing his sister entirely devoid of Weasley knitwear.

"Dad managed to get his hands on a book of Muggle poems through work," she said, casually propping her feet up on the low table in front of her. "They sent that for me. Lots of toffee and the usual sort of stuff." There was a pause and a sharp intake of breath from both twins, entirely in unison.

"Ginny!" Fred exclaimed in absolute horror.

"It's not...They can't be..." George stammered.

"They *are*," Ron interjected in a resigned tone.

"Are what?" Hermione asked, looking completely bewildered by the conversation.

"Ginny! You can't wear *Harry's* socks," Fred said in outrage, looking anxiously at his sister.

"Why ever not?" she responded innocently, her angelic expression making Harry squirm in his chair with silent laughter.

"Well, they're...they're *Harry's*" George explained.

"Yes," she said patiently. "And they're very nice socks. They're warm, and...woolly!" She caught

Harry's eye and he choked with laughter, swiftly turning it into a coughing fit.

"But, he's not your brother," Fred faltered, staring incredulously at her.

"I had realised that," Ginny said gravely, biting her lip.

"Look, Ginny," George tried again. "You can't go pinching just anyone's clothes. We only put up with it because it's you."

"I think that's why Harry does too," Ron added, beginning to chuckle himself. "He never lets me steal his socks."

"I should think not!" Harry spluttered.

"It's because he's not my *brother* that I've got his socks," Ginny said, finally dissolving into fits of giggles, despite her best efforts.

"What?" Fred yelled, realisation suddenly dawning on him. "You mean...? No!"

Ginny lay back in her chair, tears of laughter streaming down her face as she watched Fred and George wrestling with the concept of their little sister dating Harry Potter.

"Seriously, Gin?" George asked.

"Yes!" she gasped, wiping the tears from her eyes. "You'll have to get used to it, that's all."

"You can't go out with her, Harry," George said, making Harry's heart plummet suddenly. Then he added, "She'll drive you completely insane. You'll never have any clothes. Believe me, nothing is safe as far as Ginny is concerned."

"I'm not that bad," she objected vociferously.

"Oh yes you are," all three of her brothers asserted in unison.

"I think I can cope," Harry grinned, as Ginny beamed back at him. She wriggled her way onto the arm of his chair and reached for his hand.

"No!" Fred grimaced, averting his gaze dramatically and pretending to vomit. "Put him down! I can't cope with that before breakfast!"

* * * * *

The day passed quickly and in much good cheer. Harry was relieved to see that Fred and George weren't at all perturbed by Ginny's revelation, although there was a fair bit of teasing going on from both sides. The festivities of Christmas lunch flowed into a massive snowball fight on the lawns that afternoon. Ginny ran swiftly, hair flowing down her back in a wave of sunlight, through the powdery whiteness of the snow trying desperately to escape, but to no avail. Fred and George seized the opportunity to make her pay for her mischief that morning, and she eventually staggered breathlessly away from the barrage of bewitched snowballs that had been chasing her, dripping wet and very pink in the face, with her hair straggling all over the place.

As twilight settled gently around the six laughing figures, they trudged back into the castle and back to the Gryffindor common room, trailing puddles of water from their frozen feet behind them. Ginny sat on the floor by the fire, leaning against Harry's legs as she dried her sodden hair in the warmth of the hearth. Fred and George disappeared up to their dormitory to work on some new magical joke, they were referring to as 'Blasting Beetle Eyes.'

"Guaranteed to liven up Potions lessons," Fred explained with a wink.

Ron set up the chessboard, and Hermione curled into the chair beside him, to pit their wits against Harry and Ginny. A warm drowsiness flooded through them all after their out door exertions, and in combination with the happy sensation of being too full of Christmas pudding, they passed a very pleasant evening arguing about manoeuvres in the chess game.

"Checkmate," Ron said, at last, his bishop scurrying forward at his behest and seizing the crown from the vanquished white king.

"Time for bed," Hermione yawned sleepily. "I think it must be all the fresh air. I'll try the library again tomorrow, Harry. One of those books must have that stone in it. See you all in the morning." She leaned over and kissed Ron goodnight, before extracting herself from the chair they shared and heading up to her room.

"Sleep sounds good," Ron stretched wearily in his chair, and gathered his chessmen together. "You coming up, Harry?"

"In a few minutes." Harry grinned at Ginny, making her blush. Ron saw the glance, and chuckled softly, before disappearing up the stairs himself.

"So?" she said, smiling at him as he slid down onto the floor beside her.

"I've been dying to do this all day," he whispered, kissing her gently.

"Harry," she remarked quietly, sliding her arms around him. "I think I might know what that stone is."

"You do?" He pulled back and looked at her in complete astonishment.

"I *think* so," she chewed her lip. "When you showed it to us this morning, I thought I'd seen one before. I've been wondering about it all day, and I reckon I have. I must have been about eight, and Mum was pretty ill for a while, so Dad took Ron and me into work with him at the Ministry. Fred and George must've just come here, I suppose, because I can't remember them being there. Can you imagine the havoc they'd have caused let loose in the Ministry of Magic offices?" She giggled.

"Go on," he prompted, caressing her hair gently in his hand.

"Anyway," she continued, smiling softly at him. "I ended up in this tiny cupboard of an office belonging to someone in the next department along from Dad's. She was called Mrs Zladovitch, or something like that, and she was part of the Department of Magical Predictions. She had one, and I remember playing with it."

"Can you remember how it works?" Harry asked eagerly.

"Go and get it," she nodded at him, eyes alight with anticipation. "If it is what I think it is, you'll want your invisibility cloak as well."

Curiouser and Curiouser

*"If - and the thing is wildly possible - the charge of writing nonsense
were ever brought against the author.."*

-Lewis Carroll

Ginny sat in the hearth, firelight glinting and rebounding energetically off the coppery tones in her hair; her face cast into shadow as she stared down at the stone she held in her hands. One hand thoughtfully stroked the shimmering flat surface, utterly absorbed in memories but she glanced up when Harry dropped to his knees beside her.

"It is. I'm sure it is," she whispered, sounding quite amazed at her own discovery.

"What is it?" he responded, in a voice as quiet as her own. "Tell me, Ginny."

"An Hour Stone," she said softly, her deep brown eyes looking steadily into his own and filling him with warmth. "It lets you see a little way into the future, Harry."

"You haven't seen me in Divination," Harry laughed. "I've never yet seen anything other than swirly white mist in that crystal ball. My powers of invention are pretty good, though."

"Oh, this is different," she said, shaking her head and smiling a little. "This only gives us an hour ahead of where we are now, and it's restricted to place as well, which makes it a lot more accurate than usual divination. If we looked at it here, it'd show us what could be happening in an hour's time, right here in the common room."

"*Could?*" Harry asked.

"Yes," she grinned, eyes sparkling through the dimness of the room. "I think the mischief Sirius was referring to is the challenge of changing the future. Why stick with things the way they are? After all, we both know that we can't change the past, but the future isn't settled yet. It could be a lot of fun."

"So it'll only show you the future for the location you're in when you use it?" Harry asked, trying to clarify matters in his own mind.

"That's right," she said, nodding slowly. "If you used it in the Great Hall, you'd see the future there; if you used it in your room, you'd probably just get Ron snoring. And if you *ever* use it in my room, Mr Potter..." She paused, and the corner of her mouth twitched with mischief, the way Harry adored. "May I just remind you that due to my experiences with six older brothers, I have an extremely large repertoire of entertaining spells to use as revenge."

"I'll remember that," he chuckled, blushing slightly. "Show me how it works."

Ginny, scabbled quickly for her wand, and then shuffled away from the fire to be close beside Harry so he could see the stone too.

"*Praedictum*," she said clearly, tapping the polished surface sharply with her wand.

Harry stared in amazement as what had previously been a solid rock retained its outline and yet began to ripple, ebb and flow like liquid mercury. The ripples subsided, and in the shimmering pool confined within Ginny's hands, images began to form. Dimly a picture of the common room could be seen, candlelight glinting, and fire blazing warmth through the empty room. The portrait hole swung silently open, yet neither wizard nor ghost was seen. Stillness remained in this place, perforated only by the crackling fire and spitting logs. As the portrait hole closed, Harry noticed a sudden movement, as what could only have been the invisibility cloak was removed in a swift flourish, drifting like silver gossamer from his appearing fingers. Ginny, too, materialised from nowhere, standing very close in front of him, trembling slightly, her eyes wide with uncertainty.

Harry's brow furrowed as he watched the images, and without thinking about it, slid his arm around Ginny's waist to somehow try and protect her from something that hadn't even happened

yet. She smiled briefly up at him, and returned her gaze to the stone, where the figures of themselves were lost in a silent embrace. The picture flickered and died; the liquid nature of the magic reverting once more to the opaqueness of solid stone in Ginny's hand.

"So, that'll be happening in an hour's time?" he wondered out loud, slightly incredulous that he was actually seeing the future, rather than inventing it, for a change.

"It could be," Ginny responded in an strangely serious tone. "Depends on what we do to change it. I wonder what's going to happen. That looked a bit odd."

"You looked upset," Harry said, thoughtfully. "Maybe we should just leave things for tonight, then it can't happen."

"Harry!" she sounded quite scandalised at the thought. "It'll happen anyway. All that'll have changed is that we won't know what it is." She leapt up and held her hand out for him. "C'mon. Let's go and find out."

Reluctantly, Harry got to his feet, knowing she was right, and reached for the Marauder's Map, which he'd brought downstairs with him. He touched it with his wand, declaring that he was absolutely up to no good, and watched the familiar lines shooting across the parchment, drawing the boundaries and passageways of the castle and all those contained within it. Ginny watched in fascination as a couple of dots stalked through the corridors, marking Argus Filch and Mrs Norris patrolling the third floor.

"Keep your eye on that," he whispered in her ear, passing her the map. "It shows everyone in Hogwarts and it'll tell us if anyone is nearby. Even though they can't see us, we're still solid under the cloak, and we'll be in trouble if anyone walks into us."

"This was your dad's?" she asked in awe, touching the little dot with her own name above it in minuscule writing, right next to his own. Harry nodded, and watched Ginny's face break into an impish grin. "You know," she said, her brown eyes dancing merrily. "I think I'd have liked your dad. He did rule breaking with real style!"

Harry chuckled softly, and threw the invisibility cloak around them; smoother than silk, and as light as air. Ginny shivered as the fabric brushed over her, falling in waves around their feet.

"Stay close," Harry whispered as they moved into the moonlit corridor beyond the portrait hole.

They wandered slowly through the eerie silence of the school, uncertain of what they were looking for, or even where they were going. The long passageways twisted and turned into one another; high windows sent shafts of pale blue light searing through the shadows into elongated shapes stretching across the floor. Armour glinted in this ghostly light, making the figures seem as if they were about to move at any second, whilst darkness appeared to be creeping up stealthily, encroaching upon them from every corner. The moon was flimsy in the frosty night air, yet her beams were enough for them as they wound their way around the place.

Ginny paused abruptly in a patch of moonlight by a large window, and Harry collided with her.

"This is weird," she said fervently, looking down at the ground and stepping heavily backwards. "We're not casting shadows or anything."

"That's because we're invisible, Gin," he teased in an undertone. "Can you get off my foot, please?" he added, sounding mildly anguished.

"Sorry," she giggled softly, removing the offending part of her anatomy. "I was wondering what that was. It's difficult to see what you're up to under here."

"I'm not up to anything," Harry protested, lifting his hands in a gesture of surrender and trying not to laugh. "That is, nothing apart from luring you to be alone with me, out of bounds in the middle of the night, with all sorts of magical objects we probably shouldn't have. Other than that, I think we're absolutely fine."

A sudden movement ahead made them freeze with fear. Footsteps sounded quickly along the narrow fourth floor corridor, muffled at first and then becoming increasingly clearer as they approached. Harry came to his senses, caught Ginny's hand, and rapidly pulled her flat against the wall, his arm pinning her in. They held their breath and waited. An eternity seemed to tick by. They waited. At last the silhouette of a man in a black gown appeared, the darkness of his shoulder length hair, and the hooked nose of his profile clearly visible as he passed through the strip of moonlight right beside them, and onwards, up the stairs to the fifth floor. As he disappeared from view, Harry felt Ginny relax beneath his arm, her unsteady breathing drifting past his ear echoing the pounding of his own heart.

"I forgot to watch the map," she whispered apologetically.

"Where's he off to?" Harry muttered with urgency.

"Heading past the Muggle Studies classrooms." Ginny quickly squinted at the map, and traced the dot with her finger. "He's up on the main fifth floor corridor."

"There's something wrong there somewhere," Harry said quietly, musing over what he had just seen. "It's not often you see Snape out of the dungeons. I wonder what he's up to."

"Well, there's only one way to find out," Ginny said slowly, and gripping Harry's hand tightly, she began to climb the stairs.

Voices could be heard; the deep voices of men speaking quickly and urgently. Sounds of rapid movement and rifling through drawers were easily identifiable, as Harry and Ginny shrank breathlessly back into a shadowy alcove opposite the room in question. They listened and waited. The map clearly showed Severus Snape and an entirely unfamiliar name located within, and they sounded frantic. Words were not distinguishable until, after a few moments of silence, the door flew open with considerable force, Snape's silhouette standing in the frame.

"I suppose it'll be Potter next," he muttered grimly beneath his breath. "Moblicorpus."

Harry recognised the spell, but felt his stomach heave when a body suspended grotesquely in mid-air drifted through the darkened doorway. The deathly-white head lolled sideways in the moonlit corridor, a blackened stain of blood flooded the width of the forehead; his limbs twitched in a hideous pantomime, as if suspended from strings by a giant puppet master. The ghastly figure lurched towards them, dark eyes staring sightlessly, relentlessly, right where they were hiding; his face contorted and frozen in agony for all eternity. Ginny whimpered imperceptibly as she stood her ground, but Harry could feel her shaking badly. Snape snapped the door shut behind him, and with a swift glance around him to ensure he was unobserved, strode off down the corridor, his ghoulish companion floating in his wake.

Wordlessly, Harry somehow managed to move Ginny from the spot upon which she was rooted; somehow guided her back through the maze of corridors to the safety of the common room. The portrait hole closed behind them, and he removed the cloak in a swift flourish, letting it drift like silver gossamer from his fingers onto the floor. Ginny stood very close in front of him, trembling still, her dark eyes wide with uncertainty and horror as she slowly turned to face him. Without a sound, she flung herself at him, burying her head deeply in his shoulder, where he held her tightly.

* * * * *

"Harry! Harry! Wake up!" Hermione's voice was filled with agitation, and he could feel her shaking his arm. Dimly he wondered why she was trying to wake him; what was she doing in their dormitory anyway? He rolled onto his back. Instead of the bed he was expecting to find beneath him, there was only air. He gasped in astonishment as he felt himself falling, and landed with an unceremonious thump on the floor. Opening his eyes, wondering what on earth was going on, he heard a surprised squeak as a whirl of red crashed down heavily on top of him, winding him completely.

"Harry! Ron is going to kill you when he sees this," Hermione moaned, distractedly looking towards the stairwell.

Harry struggled to fill his lungs with air again, aching with the effort. Between the strands of crimson hair, which half-covered his face, he could make out the common room ceiling, and realised, with a jolt, what must have happened. Ginny scrambled quickly off him, looking very red-faced and incredibly apologetic, as she bent to see if he was injured.

"I'm fine," he wheezed painfully, propping himself up against the sofa and taking a deep breath. Then another. He grinned wickedly at Ginny as his breathing returned to normal. "I didn't realise you weighed so much."

She playfully slapped him, an expression of comical outrage on her face.

"Honestly!" Hermione snapped at the pair of them in a voice that sounded uncannily like Professor McGonagall. "What did you think you were doing? *Anyone* could have found you."

Harry watched Ginny turn the exact same shade as her hair, and warmth flooded his own face, as he thought about it.

"Hermione," he protested feebly.

"Harry!" she said, furiously. "You know how difficult this is for Ron to deal with. He's trying *really* hard. You spending the night on the sofa with Ginny is hardly likely to help matters. Is it?"

"We didn't mean to," he explained quickly, flushing even more furiously than before. "Really we didn't, Hermione. It was just that Ginny worked out what the stone did, and we...we saw some things last night we couldn't ignore. I suppose we must have just drifted off. We were down here pretty late talking about it."

Ginny perched on the edge of one of the armchairs nearby and ran her hands through her hair, pushing it off her face.

"It was awful, Hermione," she said, looking rather pale and wan, now that her blushes had subsided. She rubbed her eyes sleepily, and Harry felt his insides melting, as he watched her struggling to wake up properly. "I'm going to go and soak in a bath," she confessed wearily as

she got to her feet. "It's probably best if I'm not here when Ron comes down anyway. See you for breakfast, Harry?"

"Yeah. See you for breakfast," he smiled, at what was rapidly becoming a catch phrase in their relationship, and watched her disappear from sight.

"Well? What did happen?" Hermione asked anxiously, and Harry leaned forward and began to explain what had gone on the previous night. He was demonstrating the Hour Stone, when Ron literally ran into the room, still clad in his pyjamas, looking slightly more wild than usual.

"There you are!" he said, in relief, looking at Harry. "Where did you get to last night? Your bed's not been slept in."

"Fell asleep down here," Harry admitted sheepishly, deliberately omitting to tell him the entire truth of the matter. "Hermione's just woken me up. I've got a great crick in my neck this morning, I can tell you," he added, stretching and massaging the aching area.

"Harry's found out what the stone does," Hermione added quickly. "It predicts the future. Tells us what'll be happening in an hour, right here. Look at this!"

Ron leaned over the back of the sofa and watched with interest as the stone glimmered with the magic flowing through it, curiously liquid, yet strangely solid. Images appeared before their eyes, the confines of the common room clearly depicted. This time, Fred and George, laughing mischievously, were planting something beneath a cushion right where they were sitting.

Harry glanced at Ron, and carefully, avoiding the merest mention of Ginny in the tale, repeated what he had witnessed on the fifth floor corridor the previous evening. Hermione blanched at the description of the body, and even Ron looked shaken by the news.

"I suppose it'll be Potter next," he repeated slightly unsteadily. "What's he going to do, Harry?"

* * * * *

Breakfast in the holidays was always a strange occasion, although Harry rather liked it. The tables in the Great Hall were laid out as usual, but the students were few and sparsely scattered. The Gryffindor table had only four tiny groups dotted along its length, and the meal was far more relaxed than was usual in term time, with less competition for the marmalade and empty toast racks were instantly replenished. Ginny joined them a little way into the meal, still looking rather tired and drawn, but considerably less dishevelled than when Harry had last seen her. He blushed at the thought.

Various owls swooped into the room in a whirr of fluttering feathers, bringing missives to the room's occupants. The snowy-white coat of Hedwig soared into view, and she plummeted gracefully down to Harry, delivering a letter, and nipping his fingers affectionately with her beak.

"It's from Hagrid," Harry said, through a mouthful of hot buttered toast. "He wants to know if we all want to go down there for tea today."

"Definitely," said Ron, reaching across Ginny for the orange juice.

Hermione was struggling to unravel her copy of *'The Daily Prophet'* from one of the school owls. She smiled over at him. "It's a good idea, Harry. He might be able to tell us a bit more about what's going on."

She unrolled her newspaper and scanned the headlines whilst the barn owl took flight with a whoosh of wings. Ron's knife clattered noisily to his plate as he saw her expression change.

"What is it?"

She shook her head, and without saying a word pushed the paper over to Harry, hands trembling.

A wizard photograph dominated the first page. A young man, not far into his twenties was looking up at him under the headline *'Cruciatius Curse Carnage Continues'*. Harry didn't need Ginny's horrified gasp to remind him. They had both seen him before, his features twisted almost beyond recognition in agony, suspended in moonlight in the fifth floor corridor.

Detention and Deductions

*"I skimmed flat stones across Black Moss on a day
So still I could hear each set of ripples
As they crossed. I felt each stone's inertia
Spend itself against the water, then sink."*

—Simon Armitage

Snowdrops bravely left the warm, dark earth and poked their heads through the remaining patches of snow on the lawns, shivering in the bracing January air. Ginny saw them first, and was utterly enchanted by the tiny, fragile flowers. Harry watched her bend to touch them gently, her vivid hair whirling around her in the breeze, casting a beautifully stark contrast with the whiteness of the world.

He'd clambered up onto the stone wall surrounding the rose garden, and was sitting kicking his feet against it, as he waited for her to take notes on some of the plants she needed for an essay. He was brooding badly, but trying hard not to let it show. Ginny knew; her expression when she looked at him sometimes told him that, but she never pressed him on it, for which he was eternally grateful. The incident at Christmas had really bothered him, far more than he cared to admit. It wasn't so much the threat of Voldemort wanting to kill him that was churning away inside him; more a sickening sensation of guilt.

He did feel guilty; very guilty. He was alive; Cedric was dead. His parents had died because of him too. How many other people were going to meet a terrible fate in the clutches of Lord Voldemort and his supporters? It had been his choice that had let Wormtail escape, and worst of all, it was his blood which had allowed Voldemort to rise again. He should have been able to do *something* to prevent that. He kicked the wall hard in frustration, and little fragments of stone splintered and crumbled on the earth.

That report in *'The Daily Prophet'* had made him uneasy. He'd known that Voldemort's hold was growing, and that people were starting to live in fear again, but it all seemed so safe here at Hogwarts. It was easy to forget about it all sometimes. Too easy. That man they'd seen, Athenasius Scott, had been tortured to the very brink of death by the Death Eaters, seeking information for Voldemort. The newspaper told of the final action that ended his life; a laughing hooded figure had used the Imperius curse on the broken man, and made him blast through his brain with his own wand.

Seeing that body in the moonlit corridor had brought it all back. The contorted, twisted face of a soul in fiendish torment; of suffering so bad that death was an ally. Harry could hear the cold thin voice, mercilessly penetrating the back of his mind, casting the curse on him with such relish:

'Crucio!'

He could hear his own screams, as the agony ripped through his body; nerve endings ablaze in the most excruciating torture, pain blistering its way from the core of him, severing through every inch until it exploded through his very skin. He closed his eyes. Heart beating fast.

Yet he had survived.

* * * * *

Term had already begun in earnest, and the castle was filled with voices clamouring in the hall and reverberating through the corridors with happy news of this and that. Harry felt strangely alienated from it all, like being underwater whilst everyone else was conversing on dry land, but the colossal

increase in workload for the fifth years as they approached their O.W.L.s was enough to shift his mind from the worst of his worries.

"I can't believe they expect us to do all this," Ron moaned at regular intervals, from behind large stacks of books. "What do they think we are? House elves or something?"

"Don't say that!" Hermione snapped, as she wearily lifted her head from the long roll of parchment covered in her tiny handwriting. "Anyway, the work's not so bad. Some of this is really interesting."

"It's not so bad if you have 30 hours in the day, Hermione," he retorted, rolling his eyes at Harry. It said a lot about how much pressure they were under that Ron didn't even have time to argue with her properly, but contented himself with a mere shrug before he submerged himself in his books, sighing heavily, once more.

Between this and regular Quidditch training sessions neither Ron nor Harry had much time to themselves. The Quidditch was both exhilarating and exhausting, and Harry pushed his team to their very limits of endurance under the pretext of the forthcoming match against Slytherin, which none of them had any intention of losing. Harry wasn't complaining about the pressure like the rest of his peers; he was all too thankful for it. Sheer exhaustion made him collapse in bed each night into dreamless sleep, rather than nightmares.

Time with Ginny was also incredibly scarce. Breakfast was the only opportunity they had to be together some days, and both of them regarded this half-hour jealously. Harry would often smile at her as she passed him in the corridor, heading in the opposite direction, surrounded by a chattering gaggle of the rest of the Gryffindor fourth years, but rarely got an opportunity to say more than a couple of words to her. He was elated when she began learning summoning charms with Professor Flitwick, as once or twice he was hurrying to class and heard her delighted voice, somewhere behind him, giggle,

"Accio!"

Before he'd realised what had happened, he'd been magically abducted into a nearby broom cupboard, where Ginny was waiting, wearing that innocent expression that he found utterly irresistible.

"Fancy seeing you here," she laughed softly, her eyes twinkling up at him as he pulled her into his arms to kiss her. "Such a coincidence." Five minutes later, Harry would be found running down the corridor, hair untidier than ever, late for his lesson, but with a completely irrepressible grin on his face.

The lessons themselves were also increasing in pace and intensity as their exams grew ever closer. Tiredness lined every face, tempers were short and on more than one occasion Lavender Brown had fled a classroom in floods of tears. Neville looked permanently woebegone and he was developing something of a mental block about even the simplest of spells, to the extent where he couldn't even transfigure a match stick into a needle and they'd been doing that since the first year.

"I've had enough of this," Ron muttered to Harry, as they trudged down the dimly lit underground passageways to the Potions dungeon one Friday afternoon. "We could all do with a good laugh, if you ask me, and anyway, it's about time I got that detention with Snape to see what we can find out about what he's up to." He grinned over at Harry and pulled a small glass jar out of his bag. "Blasting Beetle Eyes," he whispered, eyes sparkling in anticipation. "Fred and George's new prototype."

Gryffindors lined up along one wall of the corridor, with the Slytherins opposite them. Little was said until they caught the end of a conversation that Malfoy was having as he strolled up with Crabbe and Goyle and joined the end of the Slytherin line.

"Of course, Father always said that this O.W.L.s year would sort out the sheep from the goats. I don't know why everyone is complaining; we wouldn't want just *anyone* getting qualifications as a wizard, even if Dumbledore does let them into the school." The stress levels became almost audible at this, and the air crackled with tension. Emotions, which had been wound up tightly like coiled springs, exploded all at once and the small underground passageway rang with sheer fury. Malfoy regarded them in disdain, not looking in the slightest bit disconcerted, but as Harry quickly realised, this was mainly because Snape was now standing in the doorway.

A total hush fell over the class, and they made their way silently into the dungeon, despondent to have lost ten points for Gryffindor. They sat at their regular tables, and without any bidding, rescued their text books from their bags, opened them and waited. Snape strolled around the cavernous room, black eyes glittering with malice as they rested briefly on Harry, and then moved on. Harry glared back, loathing the Potions Master every bit as much as Snape hated him.

As he listened to Snape explain about the potion they were to be attempting that lesson and asking questions directed straight at class members like bullets, part of Harry's brain was elsewhere. He regarded Snape dispassionately for once, and wondered what it was that had persuaded him to

return to Voldemort's service. A lot of things really didn't make any sense at all. If Snape had been responsible for the death of the man in the fifth floor corridor because he'd been with the Death Eaters, then why had he brought the body to Hogwarts, and how? Why was it that Dumbledore trusted him? Harry frowned deeply, and wished he understood.

"The Reversere Potion is an extremely powerful one," Snape intoned, his eyes relentlessly travelling round the dungeon, pausing on each pupil. "It can also be extremely useful, as Mr Malfoy has just informed us. Remember, this potion has the effect of healing, even if someone is on the very brink of death, yet if you brew it incorrectly it can easily become poisonous. Whether or not any of you are capable of making it accurately, we shall see when we test it at the end of the lesson." His lips parted into a disparaging sneer as his eyes rested on Neville. "So I can see that our numbers will be depleted very shortly," he added silkily as Neville stared fearfully back.

Harry and Ron worked almost silently round their cauldron, focusing on exact measurements for the potion. Snape drifted around the room, peering at their work, and criticising harshly.

"Finnegan, it says two teaspoons of ground bat bones. You'll have to learn to read better than that," Snape's voice echoed through the quietness of the room, and Harry saw Seamus scowl at his teacher when his back was turned. Hermione was next to Ron and Harry. She had instantly paired up with Neville in a desperate attempt to protect him from the worst of Snape's malevolence, but nervously kept checking up on what Ron and Harry were doing.

"She doesn't trust us," Ron said in an undertone, grinning at Harry when Snape's back was turned.

"I'm not surprised," Harry chuckled beneath his breath. "What do these things of Fred and George's *do* exactly?"

"No idea," whispered Ron cheerfully. "Let's find out."

He unscrewed the lid from the jar and prodded the contents curiously with his index finger. Harry had to fight to keep himself from laughing out loud when he saw the expression of utter revulsion on Ron's face.

"How many do we put in?" Harry asked, watching Snape bend over to praise Malfoy's potion.

"This many," Ron grinned, letting a pinch of the beetle eyes fall into their cauldron. They stepped backwards. Rapidly.

It was better than they could have ever imagined. The 'Blasting Beetle Eyes' certainly lived up to their title. The emerald potion bubbled furiously, building up momentum as the rumbling increased. Within seconds, a massive explosion caused the entire contents of their pewter cauldron to hurtle from the confines of the container, and ricochet off the ceiling. Liquid shot across the dungeon at every conceivable angle, drenching the entire class with a greenish slimy substance. The screams and shrieks rang through the cavernous room, as both Gryffindors and Slytherins felt the impact and scattered for shelter.

"Potter and Weasley!" Snape's voice cut coldly through the chaos that reigned in the room. He surveyed their charred and partially molten cauldron, and moved towards them looking rather menacing. "I might have guessed." The class froze and watched anxiously. A large gloop of green slime dripped silently from the ceiling and landed on Snape's greasy black hair, in what would have been an absolutely hilarious manner, had it not been for the expression on his face. Harry's vision was partially obscured by the sludge covering his glasses, and he hurriedly wiped them on the only clean bit of his robes he could find. He pushed them up his nose again to find Snape's face merely inches away from his own, staring at them with thinly veiled disgust. "Detention," he spat the word out. "You will be here tonight until this place is spotless, and you will not be using magic to achieve it. I think that and fifty points from Gryffindor will persuade you never to attempt something like this again. "

The class slipped and slid on the slime as they silently struggled to leave the dungeon, hair glued against their heads by the sticky remains of the potion. None of them looked at each other, until they were halfway back to the Gryffindor common room, and Harry sneaked a sideways glance at Hermione. He could see her lips firmly pressed together, and her eyes were fixed on the floor in front of her. His heart sank. They clambered through the portrait hole, squelching and dripping the potion everywhere, and stood regarding one another in stunned silence. Seamus caught Dean's eye as a glob of the greenish liquid oozed from Parvati's hair onto her nose, and they suddenly exploded into fits of laughter. A couple of seconds later the entirety of the Gryffindor fifth years, still covered in slime, were howling with absolute pleasure at what had just happened.

"Did you see Malfoy?" Hermione giggled hysterically. The tension, which had been weighing her down recently, disappeared like summer morning mist. "He was absolutely covered in the stuff. And *Snape!*"

"It was so cool!" Dean's laughter was uncontrollable. "I mean, you've upset the Slytherins *and*

got us out of Potions early. You can't get better than that."

* * * * *

Detention that evening was every bit as grim as they expected, although it did turn up something quite curious. Harry was on his hands and knees, thoughtfully scrubbing his way around the floor where they had been sitting. He paused every now and then, dipped his brush back into the soapy water, and began scouring more green potion off the stone flags. Ron was equally busily engaged in wiping down the walls at the furthest end of the dungeon. He was moving vigorously to get it done. Muggle cleaning never had been Ron's favourite past time. Both of their wands lay untouched on Snape's desk.

Snape watched them for a while, and then wandered into his little office at the back of the classroom, leaving the door ajar so he could hear if they did anything extraordinary. It was at this point that their secret weapon came into play. Hermione's hand and wand appeared out of thin air, and Harry just heard her voice softly casting a scouring charm on the ceiling, which was miraculously clear a few minutes later. They had argued with her about coming with them, but she'd been quite insistent about it; she had needed a laugh as much as any of them, she explained. Besides, being safely concealed within Harry's invisibility cloak, she could examine the contents of the dungeon at leisure, whilst giving them a hand with the cleaning at the same time.

At last, Harry knelt back on his heels, his back aching and hands sore, and wiped his brow on his sleeve. A disembodied hand was clearly visible turning papers on Snape's desk. It paused, waved cheerfully at him, and then continued with its work.

"I think that's it from down here," he said in relief. "How's it going over there?"

"Oh, I'm having more fun than I've ever had in my life," Ron retorted with sarcasm, balancing precariously on a tall wooden stool to reach an awkward splatter of the substance above the door. "If anyone comes in now, I'm done for. You've missed a bit under that desk, Harry."

Harry groaned and crawled to the spot Ron had indicated, banging his head on the table as he did so.

Suddenly, he was distracted from his task by a frantic waving from Hermione's hand, more of her arm appearing into view in her desperate efforts to attract their attention. He scrambled to his feet, listening carefully for sounds of Snape returning, but there were none.

"There's a big bit across here," he said meaningfully to Ron. "Want to give me a hand when you've finished that?" Ron twisted round to see, and gave a startled yelp as the stool unexpectedly overbalanced and came crashing to the floor with him. Hermione's hand instantly vanished, and Snape's profile appeared in the doorway.

"Do try and be more careful, Weasley," he said nastily, down to where Ron was sprawled across the floor. "I think you've caused enough damage in here already." He turned to Harry, his dark eyes filled with more hatred than ever. "Potter, you need to scrub over again by my desk. It's not clean enough." Harry silently sank back to his knees, not far from where he reckoned Hermione was, and began washing the floor again. He was seething inwardly; the floor was spotless, and he knew Snape was doing this deliberately to provoke him. However, Hermione had obviously found something, and the sooner Snape went back into his office, the better. He diligently scoured the flags, and to his relief, Snape soon lost interest and disappeared.

He straightened up, and raised his eyebrows quizzically at the thin air before him. The hand appeared again and pointed to a series of press clippings half-hidden beneath a stack of parchment. Harry stared in disbelief when he flicked through them. They were all articles about Death Eater activities from The Daily Prophet, but if Snape was so heavily involved, why would he want to keep the reports? It was definitely odd for him to leave evidence like this lying around. Hermione's hand grabbed his arm and tugged him further along the desk, letting go to jab frantically at a thin leather bound volume, emblazoned with the legend, 'Palliative Potions'. Harry tried to fathom what this could mean, but before he could whisper the question forming in his mind, he heard a gruff voice drifting through the door to Snape's office.

"Severus, they say the next one is going to happen tonight," the new voice said, filled entirely with panic. Ron stood, stock still, near the door, leaning slightly sideways to try and see who was speaking.

"It can't," Snape's tones too were uncharacteristically tense as he spoke to the other man. "Everything isn't in place yet." He paused, and they heard a scraping of a chair. Ron and Harry immediately began cleaning with a vengeance, and the door creaked open. "Potter. Weasley. Get out of my sight!" Snape snapped at them. Harry and Ron looked at each other and mutely began to collect the cleaning utensils together. "Just go!" Snape yelled. They did as they were bid, Hermione kept a hand on Harry's back, so he could feel where she was, and they all hurried out of

the dungeon safely.

"What's going on?" Ron asked in a hushed voice, when they were safely ensconced in the common room once more. It was late now because the detention had taken far longer than they had expected, and Harry noticed, with a pang of regret, that Ginny appeared to have gone to bed.

"I'm not sure," Hermione said slowly, her forehead wrinkled in concentration. "Whatever the whole story is, I don't think Snape has gone back into You-Know-Who's service. I really don't." Harry and Ron looked at her in surprise, and she gazed back steadily. "Look at it like this," she explained. "He's keeping track of what the Death Eaters are up to because we found that pile of press clippings. If he honestly was one of You-Know-Who's trusted inner circle, he'd know all that stuff anyway."

"But there was that man telling him what was going to happen tonight," Harry objected.

"I know," Hermione said, frowning even more deeply. "But what if...what if Snape's involved from a different angle? There was that book on palliative potions, and they're designed to reduce the suffering of the dying. Suppose he's double-crossing You-Know-Who and not Dumbledore. He can't stop the killings, but he can do something to help those being attacked."

"What about that body, then?" Ron asked, sounding completely incredulous at Hermione's far-flung theory. "He wasn't taking that for a picnic."

"Cedric wanted his body returned to his parents," Harry said quietly, and he felt a bit awkward as his two friends looked at him with sudden concern; he had spoken very little to them about this. "Maybe that's what Snape was doing at Christmas." He stared into the crackling flames in the grate, and watched them dancing, hundreds of shades of orange and yellow entwining and casting a warm glow around them. At length he looked back up, and smiled wryly. "I never thought I'd hear myself saying this, Hermione, but I think you're right."

"Hey!" she protested in mock-outrage, throwing a cushion at him and laughing. Then she suddenly became quite serious once more. She leaned forwards and spoke in a lower tone. "The thing that really worries me is that there are obviously ways that people can get in and out of Hogwarts. Snape did it with the body, and someone was in his office visiting him tonight. If You-Know-Who is after you Harry, you might not be as safe here as we thought." Her expression was full of anxiety and her voice quivered slightly as she added, "Oh Harry, you will be careful, won't you?"

* * * * *

Harry's eyes flickered open the following morning to see the inky blue darkness of the dormitory being slowly diluted by the watery light of morning. For a moment, he couldn't understand what had woken him, but then he felt a dim throbbing in his head; the echo of what would have been excruciating pain shooting through his scar, had it not been for Ginny and the charm. At six in the morning, he reasoned it was pointless to try and go back to sleep, so he slid out of bed, pulled on some clothes, and took his book of Quidditch tactics downstairs for company.

He had just settled into one of the chairs by the fire, when a set of footsteps rapidly pattering down the stairs made him glance up. Ginny emerged through the shadows of the stairwell, blinking sleepily as she struggled into a rather large chequered dressing gown, which Harry recognised as an old one of Ron's from his second year. He smiled at her dishevelled appearance, her hair completely wild and untamed, and saw her dark eyes dart around the common room apprehensively, until they came to rest on him.

"I thought it was you," she exclaimed in relief. Harry noticed her rubbing her left wrist as she hurried towards him. "Are you OK?"

"Fine," he said, grinning and reaching out for her. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you with scar pains, but it's so good to see you for a change."

She smiled softly at him, and to Harry's delight, responded to his touch by curling up contentedly in his lap, a wayward lock of scarlet hair tickling his ear.

"Well, at least it shows the charm's still working," she said, stretching up her hand to trace his scar and sending shivers of pleasure down his spine. "It must have been a bad one this time."

"Mm." Harry could feel her still warm from sleep as he held her closely in his arms, and kissed her forehead. "Y'know," he teased her gently. "I never thought I'd be doing this with Ron's dressing gown."

"I'm glad to hear it," she laughed, and settled into silence, content simply to be there with him. Harry could feel happiness flooding through him, waging a war against the worries which had recently taken up residence and were squatting in his heart. He could feel her head nestled right beside his own, her steady breath drifting over his skin and the wonderful smell of her hair. His fears about Voldemort were cast aside as the enchantment that was Ginny Weasley overpowered his

every sense.

"Harry?" Her voice broke through the stillness, after a while. "You don't have to bottle all of this up and deal with it on your own. You do know that, don't you?"

He subconsciously tightened his grip on her. Ginny had this uncanny ability to see straight through him, and it was quite unnerving sometimes. He'd always dealt with things on his own; even Ron and Hermione only got an edited version of most things. With Ginny, he wanted to trust her; he did trust her, but this was difficult.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Gin, do you want to go for a walk round the lake or somewhere?"

"OK," she smiled at him, and wriggled off his knee. "Although I'm passing up the chance of a wonderful row with Ron. Can you *imagine* his expression if he caught us now?" Her eyes danced impishly as she pictured her brother's confused horror. "Ginny, what are you doing down here with Harry at this time in the morning? Go and put some clothes on. I mean, you're wearing *clothes*, but you should be wearing *clothes*." Harry snorted with laughter.

Fifteen minutes later they were outside in the crisp stillness of the morning air. Dew drenched the grass still, and the hems of their cloaks absorbed the moisture rather like sponges, as they trampled their way down the lawns to the edge of the lake. The water itself was a steely-grey colour, mirroring the coldness of the sky. It was deadly calm, not a ripple shattered the surface. Clouds hung heavy overhead, as the entire world seemed to be holding its breath. They turned, as if with one mind, to stroll clockwise round the lake, the earthen path worn smooth by feet of yesteryear. He briefly wondered if his parents had been amongst those who had walked this way once, and half-smiled to himself. Ginny slid her hand into his, but said nothing as they wandered along the undulating track beside the shore, stepping around tree roots, and glancing out over the tranquillity of the stretch of water on their right.

They rounded the final bend, the castle turrets looming large above the trees, and Harry came to a sudden halt. Ginny whirled round to look at him, her hair rippling over her shoulders in its myriad of colours.

"Ginny, is your wrist still hurting?" Harry asked with some trepidation.

"Not now," she replied, moving closer to him. "It gave a bit of a stronger twinge just before, then it stopped altogether. Why?"

"Mine too," he said, a sensation of dread beginning to form. He pulled away from her, and began to walk restlessly in the opposite direction.

"Harry!"

He turned to face her, and was torn apart by the conflicting emotions struggling to explode from within. Her eyes were clouded with confusion and concern, and he saw her nervously fiddle with her fingers as she tried to work out what to say to him. He sank down on a nearby log, and ran his fingers through his hair, as he gazed fixedly over the water, not knowing what to say either.

"Gin," he whispered, hardly trusting himself to speak. "The pain stops when Voldemort has finished whatever it was he was up to. Something's just happened. Something awful. It must have been. I've not felt the scar much since you did the charm in October."

"You can't do anything about that, Harry," she responded softly, sitting down next to him. "It's not your fault."

Harry picked up a stone and threw it forcefully into the lake. A large splash of water sent hundreds of tiny droplets into the air, tumbling down on the glassy surface. Tiny ripples spread out and collided with one another as they stretched across the calmness of the lake.

"It feels like it's my fault," he said angrily, as he picked up another stone to hurl.

"Harry!" Ginny said his name so forcefully that he looked up at her in surprise. "All you're guilty of is not dying when he tried to kill you, and saving me from the Chamber of Secrets. Personally I think they're good things."

"You don't know the whole story," Harry replied grimly, skimming his second stone across the water and watching it bounce four times before it sank. He explained to her, haltingly at first, then words tumbling out of his mouth so fast he could barely stop them; Wormtail's escape, the rebirth of Voldemort, all that had happened. Ginny listened, blanching when she heard what he'd been through, but gazing steadily at him all the while with those deep brown eyes. She heard every word without interruption, until he could speak no more.

"It's not your fault," she repeated, holding him in her arms. "It's like you said to me last summer; none of this is your fault. Let go of the past, Harry."

"It's not easy," he said wryly.

"I know. It takes time, but you can't keep blaming yourself like this."

"How did you get to understand me so well?" he smiled, and leaned to kiss her.

"Ah, well..." Harry was entertained to see her blushing.

"Ginny?"

"OK," she giggled. "You'll like this. You know that massive crush I had on you in my first and second year?"

"I had noticed something of the sort," Harry teased. "I seem to remember being pinned to the floor and serenaded in a corridor by a dwarf."

"Don't remind me," she turned puce, and buried her head briefly in her hands. "Anyway, I must have spent *hours* following you around. I watched every single Quidditch practise from the library, and found out things about you from everyone who knew you. If that wasn't embarrassing enough, I even had to resort to reading every book I could get my hands on with you in it..." Her voice trailed away, and she joined in with Harry's laughter.

"You're wonderful," Harry said, grinning at her, when he had finished chuckling.

"I think that about you as well," she said quietly. "I want to help if I can. Don't shut me out, Harry."

"I won't," he promised.

The castle was strangely silent when they returned from their stroll. A swift glance at his watch told Harry that it was time for breakfast, yet the Great Hall was entirely deserted. None of the tables were even laid for the meal. Ginny looked at him quizzically, and they hurried up the marble staircase, and along various deserted corridors and more stairs until they reached the common room.

They almost collided with Professor McGonagall as they clambered past the fat lady and into the room.

"Where have you been?" she said sharply, her eyes surveying them seriously through her spectacles.

"Just for a walk around the lake before breakfast," Ginny explained, looking extremely confused by everything, especially as they hadn't broken any rules, for once. Harry was not surprised she was bamboozled; the whole of Gryffindor were crowded into the common room, and Ginny's three brothers were now descending upon her with huge hugs of total relief.

"What's happened?" Harry asked quickly.

"You are to stay in the common room," Professor McGonagall told them both. "We need to complete a thorough search of the castle and grounds. A student has been taken from the castle, and we fear..." She took a steady breath. "Stay here, Potter. That's all I ask."

As Professor McGonagall swept out of the room, Harry turned to Ron and Hermione.

"We thought something had happened to you," Hermione explained.

"McGonagall reckons it's one of those ways in here we were talking about last night that was used to take this kid," Ron added. "That's what they're searching for. They think it's to do with You-Know-Who."

— CHAPTER SEVENTEEN —

The Lady Vanishes

*“Through me you pass into the city of woe:
Through me you pass into eternal pain...
All hope abandon, ye who enter here.”*

—Dante Alighieri

Harry pored over the report in *The Daily Prophet* for the third time during his Sunday morning breakfast, Ginny leaning in close to his shoulder so she could see it too. The reality was far worse than he could have imagined when he'd woken up with scar pains yesterday. The student who had been taken from the castle was a first year girl from Ravenclaw, someone none of them really knew, but that didn't eradicate the impact of what had happened to her. His toast lay forgotten on his plate, as he read and reread the vicious destruction of the entire McCallum family.

It was immediately clear as to why this particular family had been targeted by the Death Eaters. Mr McCallum had been a senior Ministry of Magic official, who had been heavily involved in the trials of many of Voldemort's supporters, many of whom were still confined by the Dementors in Azkaban. He had been tortured for Ministry information, but as far as the newspaper was aware, he had resisted.

The report had sickened them all, especially finding out about how they had used his wife and children. When it had become apparent to the Death Eaters that Mr McCallum was not going to give in to their pressure, they forced him to watch them perform the Cruciatius Curse repeatedly on his wife, his eleven year old daughter, and nine year old son. There had been no hope for this man. He was doomed. It was a revenge attack, pure and simple, the Dark Mark illuminating the sky afterwards to celebrate their murders.

There was a further large spread in the newspaper about Hogwarts. Lucy McCallum should have been safe at school, and *The Daily Prophet* was outraged that such a thing could happen to her. It called for an immediate investigation as to how this could have occurred, and raised the question of the safety of the rest of the students, even wondering if the school should be closed. Much was made of the fact that this was the third time in four years that students had found themselves in mortal peril whilst supposedly in the care of Albus Dumbledore, and the last two occasions had resulted in violent deaths.

Harry looked up from the newspaper, his hands trembling and stomach churning unpleasantly. He felt a hand gently touch his back.

“Let's go for a walk,” Ginny whispered softly so only he could hear. He nodded, wanting to talk with her and knowing she understood.

* * * * *

Nothing had been found when the teachers had combed the castle for any sort of portal or port key, but with such a colossal task of checking every item within the vastness of the castle, it was virtually impossible. That morning they had been set free from the confines of their common room, with the caveat that they must be careful and touch nothing out of the ordinary. Lessons resumed as normal on Monday morning with Professor Trelawney predicting Harry's death with more certainty and conviction than ever. Then the days and weeks slowly slid by in a haze.

Transfiguration was the final double lesson of the day each Tuesday, and Professor McGonagall was making them work extremely hard to ensure excellent results. They had begun to study human transfiguration, and so far it had all been theory, and very dusty and dry theory at that. As March crept into sight, she delighted most of the class by announcing at the start of the lesson that they

were ready to attempt a simple transfiguration of themselves. It was going to be into some sort of object, rather than into a living creature or plant, which was far more difficult and wouldn't be studied until the sixth and seventh years. Neville looked absolutely terrified by the prospect of changing his appearance at all, mainly because he was having more trouble than ever with his magic.

"We'll start with something quite basic," Professor McGonagall said crisply, directing them to page two-hundred and twelve of their text books. "The transfiguration exercises you'll find here will only alter your appearance for a couple of minutes, so they are ideal to begin with. Choose one of the objects listed, and try it on yourself. No one else. Do you hear me, Thomas?" she added sternly to Dean, who was idly gazing out of the window. "Remember, *concentration* is the key."

Harry saw Hermione briskly rolling her sleeves up, eager to try her hand at this new form of transfiguration, and quickly exchanged glances with Ron. Personally, Harry was more inclined to feel like Neville about transforming himself. Supposing he got stuck half-way, and had to spend the rest of the day as part saucepan. It didn't bear thinking about.

"What are you going to go for?" Ron muttered to Harry, as they scanned down the list of objects.

"Dunno," Harry said. "Erm, how about a broomstick? I've ridden one often enough, so I suppose I might as well see it from the other side. How about you?"

"I'm quite tempted by the kettle," Ron said in a deadly serious tone, making Harry choke back a laugh. "I can see me as a kettle, can't you? Or maybe I should be a plant pot? No. No, definitely the kettle. What are you going to do Hermione?" He turned around to look at his girlfriend to be confronted by a grandfather clock ticking gently away in the middle of the room. "Fair enough," he laughed at her, patting the casing affectionately. "Nice carving, Hermione." The time piece chimed the quarter hour in reply.

"Oh, very good Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall's voice cut across the classroom. "Now let's see what the rest of you can do."

Harry really tried. He screwed up his face in concentration and attempted to cast the spell on himself. It felt very strange to be doing this; apart from the polyjuice potion they'd spent most of the last five years doing magic on other things. A warm, tingling sensation filled him as he focused his wand and his mind on his task and he got the distinct impression that his limbs were dissolving until they were made entirely of molten rubber. He glanced down at his fingers a few minutes later to see what had changed, and saw that there were still there.

"You've done part of it, Harry," Ron laughed at him. "Love the new hair style."

Harry felt the twigs protruding from his head, and was entertained to discover that they stuck out at all angles, pretty much like his hair did normally. He glanced over at Ron, whose skin had turned a shiny silvery colour and provided a startling contrast to the vibrancy of his red hair. As Ron spoke, steam came out of his mouth, but other than that, he was no nearer to being a kettle than Harry was to being a broom..

"Told you that you should have spent longer leaning the theory," Hermione smiled at the pair of them, having now reverted to her normal form.

"What's that ticking noise, Hermione?" Ron said suddenly, an expression of sheer delight crossing his face as he moved closer to her, listening carefully.

"Oh, nothing," said Hermione quickly, turning slightly pink.

"No, I can definitely hear it," Ron assured her, the silvery sheen beginning to fade from his face, to be replaced by his freckles and a wicked grin. "Don't tell me Hermione Granger's made a mistake? Maybe you should have spent longer learning the theory."

"Ron! It's not funny," she snapped, tears suddenly filling her eyes. "I did work on it; you know I did."

"It's OK," he reassured her hastily, when he realised that she was genuinely upset. Harry thought he understood why. The last time Hermione had transformed herself into anything was with the polyjuice potion back in their second year and it had gone badly wrong, resulting in a lengthy stay in the hospital wing until she'd stopped looking like Millicent Bulstrode's cat. Ron had his arm around Hermione now, and was anxiously looking for Professor McGonagall to help her. "Honestly, Hermione. We get stuff wrong all the time; just think about Harry's teapot. They'll be able to fix this, no worries."

She smiled weakly, but her mind was put to ease by Professor McGonagall, who was brisk and business-like on the topic.

"It's a perfectly normal side-effect Miss Granger. You'll find it'll wear off in an hour or so. I suggest you read Chapter 13 of '*Transfiguration Traits*' to improve your technique. It offers a few suggestions of ways to avoid the longer term effects of personal transfiguration."

When they left the classroom at the end of the lesson, they could hear the storm that had been

brewing earlier in the day worsening. The wind forcefully rattled the windows in their frames, battering wildly against the castle walls, whilst the thunder rumbled ominously in the distance. The sky was overcast and heavy with darkness, ever-deepening clouds swirling lower as rain began to pound steadily. A shock of white brilliance shot its bolt nearby, illuminating the corridor for a breath of a second, and vanishing once more.

"I'm glad I'm not out in that," Ron commented, staring out of the corridor window at the wildness outside. "I take it you're not mad enough to go ahead with Quidditch practice tonight, Harry?"

"I think we can give it a miss, just this once," Harry replied, smiling to himself. "I was thinking of loitering here for a while to try and see Ginny. She's just had Muggle Studies, so she should be heading this way any minute."

"Oh yes?" Ron raised his eyebrows, and grinned at Harry, making him blush slightly. "Since when did my little sister become more important than Quidditch?"

"I'm going to the library to see about that book Professor McGonagall recommended," Hermione interrupted, accompanied by a steady ticking sound. "I want to get this right before next lesson. Unless either of you desperately want a visit to the library, how about I just see you both at dinner?"

They both nodded at her and she hurried off down the corridor with her books, robes flapping out in her wake.

"Ginny seems happy these days," Ron commented, completely out of the blue, as he gazed out at the storm. Harry glanced out through the misted panes to see a straggle of extremely bedraggled Hufflepuff third years stagger towards the castle from their Care of Magical Creatures at Hagrid's cabin.

"It's probably the Muggle poetry," Harry said jokingly. "I can't get her to put the book down."

"That's amazing enough for Ginny," Ron laughed. Seeing Harry's puzzled expression, he explained further. "She's clever, you know. She picks up things a lot more quickly than I do, and what's even more frustrating is that she's got the talent to get as many O.W.L.s as Bill or Percy without really trying. The only thing she's ever had trouble with is Divination, but that's no surprise really; you know what Trelawney's like. Ginny's problem is she gets bored too quickly, so this Muggle poetry business is quite an eye opener. Dad's dying with pride about the whole thing."

"I'll bet," Harry smiled, stunned at what he was learning about Ginny. There was so much about her he still didn't know, that he hadn't even bothered to find out.

Before he had a chance to interrogate Ron further about his sister, a rush of Gryffindor fourth years flowed down the stairs beside them, heading from Muggle Studies down to the Great Hall. Harry was beginning to wonder if he'd somehow missed Ginny in the tide of students when she appeared, swinging her books in her hand and humming quietly to herself as she bounced down each step. Her dark eyes lit up with happiness as she saw Harry waiting for her.

"Can I kidnap you for dinner?" Harry asked, unable to stop himself from grinning at her. Her face fell.

"Oh Harry! I'd love to but I can't," she replied. "I promised Colin I'd help him with his summoning charms, and I can't let him down because we've got a test tomorrow. I'm really sorry."

"That's OK," Harry sighed, ruffling her hair gently with his fingers, and hating every inch of Colin Creevey with all his heart.

"How about later tonight?" she asked him, as a peal of thunder growled savagely outside the window. "I've got a bit of homework, but it's not too bad."

"Don't talk to us about homework," Ron interjected bitterly. "Ours is about the size of a mountain troll, and it's all due in tomorrow."

"Ah!" she said sympathetically. Her brother glared at her, and then deliberately wandered a little way up the corridor to stare at a portrait of ancient Quidditch players scoring goals and give them a few minutes alone.

"See you for breakfast, then?" Harry muttered in her ear, as he took advantage of Ron's obliging lack of attention and hugged her.

"Looks like it," she smiled wistfully. "Are you sure you don't mind? I feel bad about this."

"I'll live with it," he teased. "Go on, before I change my mind and run off with you altogether."

She stood on tiptoes, leaning against him to brush a tingling kiss softly against his cheek, making him catch his breath.

"I love you," she whispered, blushing slightly, before scurrying off down the corridor towards the Charms classrooms leaving Harry in stunned silence.

She *loved* him.

He blinked and the realisation hit him hard, like being run over by the Knight Bus. He loved her; totally, unconditionally. He loved everything that made her uniquely Ginny; the way she screwed

up her nose when she was trying to concentrate, the way she drove her brothers insane with her incessant teasing, and he even loved her incredible audacity when she stole his last pair of clean socks. He adored the way he could tell her anything, and knew she'd understand, but most of all he simply loved being near her.

Heart beating quickly, he glanced down the corridor. He *had* to find her. Right now.

Before he'd taken more than a couple of steps his bag split open, text books cascading out of it and onto the floor. His bottle of ink shot forwards and smashed messily against the wall beneath the portrait of an elderly woman, with her hair scraped tightly back into a very severe bun. She stared disapprovingly at Harry, as he scabbled around on the floor, desperately trying to rescue everything as quickly as possible.

"What happened?" Ron asked, hurrying over and bending to help Harry salvage his books.

"Bag split," Harry muttered, waving his hand at the mess by way of explanation. He looked at Ron vaguely. He'd completely forgotten that he'd been there.

"I'm not surprised," Ron said, frowning at Harry and holding out the Hour Stone. "Why are you carrying this around with you? It must weigh as much as a baby hippogriff."

"I was going to use it in the Quidditch changing rooms," Harry confessed, his mind still reeling over Ginny. "To see if we could eavesdrop on the Slytherin tactics for next weekend. No good tonight though."

"Excellent plan," Ron said, sounding very impressed. "I wish I'd thought of that."

"Ron, I've got to go and find Ginny," Harry blurted out, stuffing everything back into his magically repaired school bag and swinging it over his shoulder.

"But you've just seen her," Ron stammered, totally perplexed by what was going on. "What's up Harry?"

Harry didn't wait to discuss it further, and sprinted along the corridor towards the Charms classrooms. The Hour Stone was heavy and banged viciously against his leg forcing Harry to slow his pace. Ron caught up with him, and as they rounded the corner to head East they heard a female voice yell furiously,

"Give it back!"

"That's Ginny," Ron panted, grinning over at Harry. "I'd recognise those dulcet tones anywhere. I pity the git who's upset her."

"No!" her terrified shriek rebounded along the corridor, halting both boys momentarily in their tracks. A squeal of pain followed and then silence.

"Something's wrong," Harry gasped, his heart in his mouth. Ignoring the stone bruising his leg, he pounded down the corridor, desperately seeking any sign of her whirlwind of red hair, but found none. Turning round at the dead end, he saw Ron standing, staring down at something, looking quite aghast. He fled back along the hall.

"What?" he yelled frantically.

"Her books." Ron, pointed shakily to a small pile of books beside the foot of a suit of armour, and more alarmingly, the crumpled copy of Ginny's poetry book thrown open on the floor, the pages torn and gently fluttering in the light movement of air they'd caused. Harry knelt to gently pick it up, smoothing the pages in his hands.

"Where is she?" He looked at Ron, hoping against hope that his worst fears weren't about to come true.

"I dunno," Ron replied, looking as anxious as Harry felt. "But there's no way she'd leave her Muggle poetry like this."

Harry got to his feet and began searching frantically for her, running his hands through his hair in desperation. His eye caught sight of another object nearby, a pale wooden stem, lying half hidden behind a grey stone statue of a dwarf in the corner. He stooped to retrieve it, and his fears immediately intensified. Ginny's wand. She wouldn't have gone anywhere voluntarily without that.

"Ron," he said helplessly, not daring to think. "Where is she?"

"The Hour Stone," Ron yelled suddenly. "It might help..."

"It shows the future, not the past," Harry snapped.

"Shut up and listen for a change," Ron shouted back. "If we look at the future we might be able to work it out backwards. It's better than nothing."

Harry yanked it out of his bag with shaking fingers, panic gripping every inch of his being.

"*Praedictum*," he tapped the stone, and watched fearfully as the images began to form. His blood ran cold. Moments later he steeled himself to look at Ron, a feeling of nausea rising in his throat, that of bitterest bile. He couldn't breathe. His head was spinning with sheer terror. Ron was ghastly white, eyes still staring transfixed in horror at the stone, even though it was opaque once

more. Something Ginny had once said to him fluttered through Harry's mind:

"Who knows how long we've got; a week, a month, a year, a life time?"

They had been together for three months; just three months.

"I won't let it happen," Harry whispered hoarsely. "Get Dumbledore. I'll go and get her back. Whatever it takes, I won't let anything happen to her."

"Harry, I'll come with you." Ron was shaking as much as he was. "You can't do this on your own. Why didn't that bloody protection spell work?"

"I don't know, but I've been lucky before," Harry said grimly. "Get Dumbledore. He'll know what to do." He tucked Ginny's wand into his belt, and nodded seriously over at Ron. "I promise I'll get her out of there somehow. It's me they're really after, so I'll just have to make sure they stay away from her, one way or another."

"Harry?"

"Mm?"

"Be careful. All right?" Ron said shakily, putting his hand onto Harry's shoulder.

Harry nodded mutely, worry twisting and wringing his stomach tightly.

"Get Dumbledore," he repeated. Then without a backwards glance, his throat dry with what he might find, he paced forwards. Hagrid had told him once that this time would come and they'd have to meet it when they did. Well, he needed to do that now all right. He *had* to.

Clasping his own wand tightly, he reached out a quivering hand, and firmly touched the stone statue of the dwarf with the twisted beard half hidden in shadows.

— CHAPTER EIGHTEEN —

To Die For

*“Love all, trust a few,
Do wrong to none; be able for thine enemy
Rather in power than use, and keep thy friend
Under thy life’s own key.”*

—Shakespeare

Harry fell from thin air, slamming heavily into the stone floor of the underground room he had been transported to, hands outstretched to break his fall.

“Great start,” he muttered to himself, checking that the place was deserted, then sitting up and flicking pieces of gravel out of the tiny cuts in his palms. He grimaced slightly, but from past experience, he knew there would be far worse to come than the bruises currently forming on the heels of his hands. He scrambled quickly to his feet, and checked his wand, which at least didn’t seem to have suffered any damage by his violent entry into this place.

Harry looked around him. He was in a room, which he wouldn’t have been at all surprised to find at Hogwarts. It was a circular place, crafted out of large slabs of sandstone, with a vaulted ceiling, decorated with buttresses, ornate carving across each curve and plinth. The only item which was in the room appeared to be a statue; a twin of the grey dwarf with the twisted beard who had transported him thus far, and Harry knew that this was his only route home. The domed ceiling made his footsteps echo quietly as he crept forwards to a Gothic archway portraying a sculpted serpent crushing its deadly coils around the image of a vanquished lion. He briefly touched the sandstone wall, feeling its coolness against the moistness of his still trembling hands. Where would they have taken Ginny?

Steadily he edged forward, and in the dimly lit area framed by the arch, he could see a narrow spiral staircase twisting upwards, the treads heavily worn on the wider part of each step, giving them a very uneven appearance. He grasped the rope banister to go up the stairs and swiftly recoiled as the rope writhed under his fingers. His heart thudded against his ribs. It wasn’t a rope; it was a living hissing snake. Harry’s brain worked quickly, and he bent down to stare at the serpent, steadily gazing into the unblinking tearless eyes to apologise.

A hissing, spitting sound escaped from his own mouth, bringing back memories of three years ago, but he dismissed them. It wasn’t the time to be thinking about that now. He needed to find Ginny, and this snake would have seen her, he was certain of that.

“Who came here just before me?” Harry asked the snake quickly, keeping his voice as low as possible.

“A black hooded figure and a girl with hair like fire,” the snake hissed in reply.

“Are you sure?” Harry felt quite desperate. The snake writhed again and affirmed it. “Where have they taken her?”

“Where they took the last one,” the snake responded, its forked tongue flickering in the candle light. “There is a room directly opposite these stairs, just one floor above where we are now. They’ll be there *questioning* her.”

“I need to get her out of there,” Harry explained, beginning to panic again about what they might be doing to her as part of their questioning. “Has anyone ever escaped before?” The snake swayed its head hypnotically from side to side.

“Not from the Death Eaters,” it hissed. “One man has been taking corpses out this way.” Harry nodded. Hermione had almost certainly been right about Snape.

“Thanks,” he said to the snake, and was about to get to his feet when the snake surveyed him closely through black beady eyes.

"Are you the Potter boy?" it asked, fixing its gaze on Harry's scar. Harry nodded again. "Be careful," it continued. "I've heard them talking about you. They will harm you. They are planning your death for a very precise moment in time, to complete a spell for the Dark Lord's total victory over the wizarding world."

Harry crept stealthily up the stairs, shrinking back into shadow on the landing above. The snake was right. The heavy oak door immediately opposite had a light shining out in the gap between the bottom of the door and the floor. Harry wished fervently that he had the invisibility cloak with him, but it was safely stowed in his trunk back in the fifth year boys' dormitory in Gryffindor Tower. He flattened himself against the darkest part of the wall, holding his breath, as the door opposite swung open, the dancing flickering light of the fire within permeated some of the varying shades of shadow in the hallway, but could not reach its fingers as far as to betray Harry's presence. Two men were silhouetted against the light of the room.

"That'll hold her until the Dark Lord is ready," the taller man on the right said in a gruff voice. "No need for us to be there now."

"Just as well," muttered the other quite bitterly. Their shadows diminished as they got further down the corridor, and Harry could just make out the second man bemoaning the pain in his bitten hand. He grinned slightly at this and it gave him the courage he needed. Wand or no wand, Ginny was fighting back, and there was no way she was going to give in without a mammoth struggle. Listening carefully for any movement, he crossed the corridor, and pressed his ear against the door. No sound came from within but the crackling of flames.

"Alohomora," he whispered, and the door clicked obligingly open, allowing him to slide through.

The new room was a large one, not much different in size to the Great Hall, but it was nowhere near as welcoming. A huge stone fireplace was further along the wall opposite the door, its massive chimney breast carved with further serpent motifs dominated the place. Firelight glimmered through the darkness of the rest of the room, casting eerie shadows over what little furniture there was, highlighting a small isolated figure with cascades of vibrantly red hair. She was struggling ferociously with something, but he couldn't see what. Harry's heart leapt.

"Ginny!" Relief flooded through him as he ran across the empty room to her, grateful to see she was still alive. She whirled around on the spot to face him, her emotions bubbling rapidly to the surface.

"Harry!" she gasped, sounding incredibly thankful to see him. Then her expression changed to one of real anxiety. "What are you doing here? You shouldn't have come. If they find you, they'll kill you, and I couldn't bear that."

"Never mind that now," Harry said quickly, realising that there was a problem as he tried to put his arm around her and found his way blocked by some magical force. "What is this?" His hands ran up some sort of invisible cylinder that was clearly confining Ginny where she stood. She leaned against it, pushing with all her might; her hands whitened with the pressure, but to no avail.

"It's the tencidula spell," she said bleakly. "I read about it once in one of Dad's books. It's no good Harry. Only the person who cast the spell on me can remove it, and there's no other way through. I'm trapped."

"OK," he said, thinking rapidly. He placed his hand against hers, the magic barrier separated them, but it was close enough. "It's not looking good, Gin," he added honestly, his own fear reflected in the depths of her eyes. "I don't know what he's planning, but I want you to promise me something. Something important." Her brown eyes melted into his, tugging at his heart. "You'll be fine with the Imperius Curse, but there's no way they're just going to stop at that. Ginny, I want...I need...you to promise me that whatever they do to you, you'll use our charm bond and deflect as much of the magic on to me as you can. Please Ginny," he begged, his voice cracking in desperation. "I'll do anything to get you out of here."

"On one condition," she said, looking at him intently. "Harry, I want you to use the charm the same way." He opened his mouth to protest, but she shook her head and continued before he had a chance. "I know you don't want to, but it's the only way. He won't be expecting it. If we trust each other completely and work together, we might actually stand a chance of getting out of here."

"I'll do it," he said firmly, looking steadily into her eyes and gaining strength. "We'll do it. Together."

"Harry," she said urgently, "There's something I need to tell you about that bond..."

Harry jumped nervously. Someone was coming. Ginny stopped speaking and frantically waved him away, and with a last longing glance back at her, he scuttled behind the heavy crimson drapes just a few feet from her prison. Through a chink in the curtain he could see her. The coldness of the condensation on the glass against his back brought with it a sudden chill of reality. This was no nightmarish vision; Ginny could die. Heart thumping uneasily, he fingered his wand anxiously

and waited.

Ginny began pushing furiously against her invisible boundaries, yelling to be let out, and Harry sensed the presence of someone else in the room. He shifted his position slightly, and felt his stomach lurch when he saw the small balding wizard who had been responsible for the deaths of his parents. Wormtail.

"Not just yet," the wheezing voice said with a trace of amusement. "We are just waiting for our uninvited guest to arrive, but I'm sure it won't be too long before Harry gets here, and then we can get down to the real business of the evening."

"And what makes you think Harry will come?" Ginny said defiantly. "He's not stupid, you know. He's got a good idea of what you're up to."

"Oh, Harry will come to save you; or he'll try to," Wormtail said confidently, strolling in a circle around Ginny and regarding her carefully from head to toe. "That's what he did in the Chamber of Secrets, wasn't it?"

"How do you know that?" Ginny whispered curiously.

"It's amazing what you can learn as a Weasley family rat," he responded, sounding rather smug about the whole thing.

"You?" she gasped in horror, turning rather pale.

"Yes, me." Wormtail sounded very satisfied with himself. "I arrived just after you were born, and saw you grow up, but even I never imagined just how useful you would turn out to be."

"Useful?" she echoed, as Harry's stomach churned with dread.

"Oh yes, Ginny. You are going to be extremely useful to us today."

"I'd rather let you kill me than get anywhere near Harry," she spat, eyes blazing in true anger, as she struggled against the boundaries of her prison to get at him. The door creaked open, and Harry felt an ache throbbing distantly in his scar. Even without looking he knew who it was.

"That might easily be arranged," a cold, high-pitched voice cut across the room. Ginny gasped in horror, and Harry suddenly realised that she had never seen Voldemort before; not after he had been magically transformed from the handsome boy known as Tom Riddle. "Release her!" he commanded imperiously. A muttered spell was cast, and Ginny staggered when the boundary disappeared, falling face first onto the floor in a rush of russet hair.

Harry watched breathlessly, feeling completely paralysed as the tall, thin shape of the most evil wizard the world could remember, approached the person he loved with all his heart. He had never known fear like this. His head was spinning wildly and he felt panic rising steadily up towards his throat like bile. Ginny looked up at Voldemort, her chin set in determination. She stared unflinchingly into the merciless red eyes, mere slits in the white taut skin of the snake-like man. His nostrils flared slightly as he regarded her.

"What do you want?" Harry heard her say, in a voice most unlike her own.

"All will be revealed in good time," he said in an expressionless tone. "Learn patience Ginny. Or perhaps I need to teach you?" He ran a long, pointed finger across the gash on her cheek, across the softness of her skin. Harry saw her wince, and his fists clenched themselves tightly at his side. "I see someone already has," he said silkily. "Perhaps your obedience will be better than your patience. We shall see."

Harry's mind was working in a frenzy. How was he going to get her out of there? He needed Ron for a tactical manoeuvre such as this, and for a second wished he hadn't sent him for Dumbledore. There were three fully grown wizards in the room, and they were quite some distance from the door. He had Ginny's wand, and perhaps if he could somehow get it to her, they would stand a chance. Suddenly that cold hard voice cut through his thoughts.

"Come and join us, Harry. Face me like the man your father tried to be."

A peal of mirthless laughter followed, and Harry could make out the penetrating eyes of Voldemort staring unblinkingly at his hiding place. Harry's throat constricted and went dry. He swallowed awkwardly, knowing that he had no choice. His every movement would be observed now, and the chances of either of them escaping seemed to evaporate.

Pushing his way from behind the drapes, he moved further into the chamber, towards Ginny. Unprotected and alone, he felt rather like the first pawn in the game of wizard chess; completely vulnerable to the charge of impending battle with the enemy. Harry frowned briefly. He did feel just like a pawn. He glanced curiously at Voldemort, his panic and fear bizarrely fading a little. Was Voldemort simply playing a game with him? A battle of wills? Were they merely playing pieces in his overall plan? Instinctively he moved towards Ginny, a deeply rooted need to protect her surfacing in him. Every wand was trained on him to prevent it, so he stood still, gazing into her eyes. This was it, and they both knew it.

"To business," Voldemort's high-pitched voice hissed briefly on the latter syllable. "The knife, Wormtail." His servant whimpered slightly, and hurried forward, bowing deeply to his master, laying an unsheathed blade on the small oak table before them. The steel glinted in the flickering light of the room, ominously hinting at what was to come. Harry saw Ginny's eyes dart over to him, their dark depths showing how frightened she really was, then back to the dagger once more. Harry breathed deeply, his entire body taut with tension, ready to spring to action at any second.

"Now, let me see," a sinister smile played almost imperceptibly across Voldemort's ghostly lipless mouth, the redness of his eyes glowing like embers, ready to burn. "True love? I think not." His wand pointed directly at Ginny. "The knife is there. Hurt him," he commanded. "Imperio!"

Ginny's jaw was clenched firmly, and Harry saw she was utterly focused on what she had to do. A dull pain echoed around his head, and flooded him with relief. She'd done it. He felt an incredible sense of pride in her as she stared directly up at Voldemort, her eyes almost black as they shone with hatred.

"I won't," she said forcefully. "I do love him."

"Interesting," Voldemort mused out loud, as he paced around her. "How very...*touching*." He raised his wand slowly to Ginny again.

"Stop it!" Harry yelled suddenly, unable to bear it any longer. He was trembling from head to foot in a peculiar mixture of anger and terror. "If you want to kill me, then that's fine, but let her go."

"Oh, we do *want* you, Harry," the cold voice said smoothly. "Your death is essential for my plans...but not just yet. Not today. You will be called upon soon enough, and after we are done here, you will be begging me to let you die."

Harry's mind was reeling. This was all very unexpected. If they weren't after him right now, then what were they doing? Slowly a nagging thought began to penetrate his brain. They were using Ginny to get to him. They'd tried getting her to physically hurt him, but she could resist the Imperius Curse, so they'd...the concept was too horrible, but Harry forced himself to think it...they'd tear him apart emotionally, just like he'd read in the newspaper with the McCallums. They were going to torture her, and force him to watch. Suddenly he knew it was true. He had to stop it.

"Let her go," he growled through gritted teeth.

"I have no intention of doing that. You need to learn and understand what power is; real power. You need to learn that you will never be able to defeat me. Lord Voldemort is too great. You need to discover how to sink to your knees and beg for my mercy."

"Never!" Harry shouted, raising his wand, but Voldemort was too quick for him.

"Crucio!"

Harry saw it happen as if in slow motion. Ginny screamed in agony; a high-pitched noise, which pierced through his very soul. She crumpled and writhed around clutching her stomach, her entire face distorted by the white hot burning pain erupting inside her. Her shrieks continued, wild and uncontrolled, as they reverberated around the chamber. Voldemort jerked his wand, his eyes glimmering with pleasure as the torture intensified.

"Come on, Ginny," Harry urged her silently, focusing his mind on her. "Use the charm. Use the charm. Come on."

Slowly and steadily he could feel a tide of aching pain washing through his bones, gradually absorbing itself through every inch of his body. Ignoring the wands, and the ever increasing flow of torment, he hurried to her and held her in his arms. He glanced around the room wildly; somehow he had to get her out of here before things got any worse. Then as the pain began to subside he saw her looking steadily up at him, her beautiful eyes lined with the traces of suffering, but he could see that the bond between them was still strong. They had to hang on to that.

He grasped her hand firmly in his, squeezing her fingers gently, and turned to face Voldemort, blocking her entirely from his sight.

"Move out of the way," Voldemort instructed in a calm but deadly voice.

"No!" Harry asserted with all his might, and braced himself for what he knew was coming.

"You should have learnt to obey me by now, Harry," he laughed coldly. "Perhaps you need another lesson. Crucio!"

Harry managed to glance apologetically at her for a split second before the curse hit him. He bit back hard on the pain and thought of Ginny. She loved him. Somehow, that was enough, and he stood steadily on his feet, upright and certain, and faced Voldemort, who was still casting the spell upon him. A flicker of confusion fled over the older wizard's face, as Harry glared at him, rather than screaming in anguish. He was dimly aware of Ginny's fingernails digging into the soft flesh of his hand as she took the brunt of the curse in silence.

"I will never leave her," Harry shouted angrily, as Voldemort removed his wand. Harry knew that this was their only chance. Voldemort was disconcerted by the lack of effect of the Cruciatus Curse on him, and if they were going to make a break for it, it had to be now.

"Stupefy!" he yelled, waving his wand in Voldemort's direction, and pulling Ginny towards the door. They were within inches of the threshold of this great room, when they heard a voice cry,

"Deicio."

Harry felt his hand wrenched apart from Ginny's as his body was propelled through the air, across the room, and his back impacted heavily and painfully against the ridged wooden paneling, which lined the place. He slid to the floor, but instantly scrambled to his feet, frantic to reach her again.

"Expelliarmus," he shouted. A wand flew out of the hand of the nearest Death Eater, but Voldemort turned on him, the narrow cat-like slits, pupils in those hideous scarlet eyes, penetrated deeply into him, staring unblinkingly with venom, as he was pitched hard into the wall once more.

The white mouth stretched into a taut smile, which contained no pity. He moved towards Ginny, holding her gaze. Her eyes widened with unspoken fear.

"You love him, you say. Enough to die for?" The peal of merciless laughter which followed was hard to bear, as Harry suddenly understood, and flung himself towards Ginny with all his might, trying desperately to put himself between her and the curse he knew was coming.

"Avada Kedavra."

A blast of green light shot through the dimness of the room.

— CHAPTER NINETEEN —

A New Dawn

*“April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.”*

—T.S. Eliot

Screams pervaded Harry’s every conscious thought as he collapsed onto his knees, his head splitting apart. Hammering blows of the worst pain he had ever felt in his life drilled through his skull, mercilessly, relentlessly. The stabbing agony twisted inside him, ripping each nerve apart, and blistering, scalding through the lightning bolt scar on his forehead. The piercing screams continued, but Harry had no concept of whether it was himself or Ginny crying out.

Slowly the pain dimmed, resorting to a savage throb beating through his head, and he became acutely aware of the voice of Voldemort nearby.

“Remember, you will never win against me, Harry. Feel the pain; what you have just felt, and what you are about to feel when you see. You will beg me to kill you, but I will let you suffer until I am ready for you.” Harry was vaguely aware of Voldemort turning, and commanding someone, “Come!” before the robes whisked away and footsteps faded into the distance.

He looked up shakily, his vision still badly blurred from the pain, dreading to think what he might see. Ginny was there, inches from him, hair fanned all around her in waves of flames, as she lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. Icy cold water seemed to flood his veins, chilling him to the very marrow. His heart contracted. Surely not...

He leaned over to touch her, in a nightmarish trance, smoothing her hair gently back from the paleness of her face, and tenderly caressing the gash on her cheek. Her eyes were closed, and skin seemed as if it were made of finest porcelain; so beautiful and yet so fragile, and so easily broken. Numbly he knelt there, and cradled her in his arms, softly rocking her to soothe her from the pain. She lay limply in his embrace, and he buried his head in her hair, breathing in her scent, and never wanting to let go. He had failed. He had lost her.

“Harry,” wheezed a voice nearby, and a hand tugged urgently on the sleeve of his robes. Harry didn’t even bother looking up. He shook his head, and held Ginny to him even more tightly. He didn’t care. They could do anything they wanted to him. Nothing, nothing could be worse than this.

“Harry,” the voice repeated, panic beginning to rise. In part of Harry’s mind the message registered. It was Wormtail urging him to take Ginny’s body and go immediately. The portal had to be destroyed, on Voldemort’s orders. A flat dullness weighed heavily upon his heart, as he mechanically got to his feet, lifted Ginny carefully in his arms and somehow found himself in the dungeon once more. He kissed her forehead gently, and whispered,

“It’s all right Gin. We’re going home.”

* * * * *

Harry’s feet impacted forcibly on the ground, causing his legs to buckle beneath him, and he stumbled, falling to his knees. Instinctively he clasped Ginny to him, to ensure that she was safe. His eyes were tightly closed, his cheek pressed against hers, and as the confusion and cacophony of voices reigned around them, all Harry could think about was Ginny. Nothing else mattered.

He heard his name being called, a hand pressing painfully on his right shoulder, and eventually he looked up, the corridor swaying unnervingly before his eyes. Dumbledore was there, bending

over them, looking searchingly at them both with serious blue eyes. Ron's face floated into sight behind him, and Harry's heart almost stopped.

"Minerva, we need to get them both up to the hospital wing immediately." Dumbledore's voice was anxious, and he let Ginny's wrist fall to her side once more. "Harry," he said gently. "You need to let her go." Harry stared into those bright blue eyes, an ache filling his insides entirely. He trusted Dumbledore, but the anguish of releasing Ginny from his arms was too great. He couldn't do it. "Harry, please." Dumbledore's voice was quiet, yet firm. Harry did as he was bid, but felt his heart cracking in two as he saw her limp form being conjured onto a stretcher to be taken from him; saw her hair glittering with such life in the candlelight. The bitter irony of it galled him. The pain tearing into him now was far, far worse than anything the Cruciatius Curse could inflict upon him.

"Come on, Harry," another voice said, sliding an arm gently round him and helping him to stand. It was Hermione. "They're taking her to the hospital wing." He stared at her, wanting to say something, but the agony inside was building up to a crescendo, and struggling to escape. His throat was dry. He couldn't speak.

Somehow Hermione guided him up there, and the door clicked shut behind them. Harry glanced wildly around the room for Ginny, and saw an area of the wing being obscured by the clinically white hospital screens. The reality hit him hard. He sank to the floor, his back against the wall, and buried his head in his arms, trying to blot out everything that had just happened. She'd come bouncing through the door at any second, eyes alight with laughter and hair dancing vivaciously around her face, to tease him and tell him it had all been a joke. The lump constricting his throat was thickening and he could taste the saltiness of the unshed tears.

"Harry, what's happened?" Ron spoke, breaking through Harry's reverie, sounding completely desperate and terrified. Harry forced himself to look up at his best friend, his stomach curdling with what he had to tell him. How could he tell Ron news like this? It was all Harry's fault; he should have been faster, should have been able to stop that curse from hitting her. Somehow.

"It was..." he began unsteadily, then retched. "Let me out of here. I'm going to be sick." He staggered to his feet, and blindly pushed his way into the hospital wing bathroom.

* * * * *

Harry plunged his entire head into the stone sink he'd filled with cold water, letting the flow of water from the tap pour over his neck, and stream through his hair. He was shaking uncontrollably, but the iciness surrounding him made him more aware of the reality. It was true and he knew it. He lifted his head from the enormous basin, and shook himself like a dog, droplets of water flying everywhere, hair settling untidily where ever it fell. His reflection gazed back at him from the mirror above the sink; he was almost grey with the horror of what had happened, his green eyes deadened, not wanting to believe. His scar was clearly visible through the strands of his dripping wet hair. It was not as it normally appeared, however, as it stood out, livid against his forehead, and was painful to the touch. But what did it matter? What did anything matter now?

"Are you OK?" Ron's face appeared in the mirror behind him, seeming to be more worried than Harry had ever seen him. Harry shook his head, and held on tightly to the basin for support. Ron was struggling to say something, his face contorted with fear of what the answer might be. "Ginny's not...It's not what we thought, is it? It can't be..."

Harry turned around, and lifted his eyes slowly to Ron's. The expression on his face must have said it all. What little colour remained in Ron's face flooded away. "No!" he gasped, grabbing Harry's arms and shaking him savagely. "No! Tell me she's not! Please, Harry!"

"I can't." Harry heard his own voice, distant and flat.

His eyes fell back to the floor unable to bear looking at Ron any longer. He felt Ron let go of him. He couldn't blame Ron, not wanting to be near him, not after that. To his amazement, Ron grabbed him in a brotherly hug, and each clung on tightly to the other as if for dear life. It was too much to bear. Each face mirrored the other, screwed up fiercely against the pain. Harry felt the choking sensation intensify, his eyes stinging with unfamiliar tears, as a deep shuddering sob erupted from deep within him.

"Harry, Ron, can I have a word, please?" Dumbledore's kindly tones interrupted them a few minutes later. "Harry, it was the Avada Kedavra, wasn't it?" Harry nodded, his heart like lead. "Come through," Dumbledore said gently, gesturing towards the main room once more. "I have something to show you." Harry glanced over at Ron, who was wiping his eyes abruptly, and followed Dumbledore across the room and around the hospital screen. Harry was vaguely aware of Hermione following behind them, and of Madam Pomfrey fussing around the bed and smoothing the coverlets, but his eyes were drawn to Ginny. Her skin was the same hue as the crisp white bed linen, her

freckles had almost vanished from view, and her long hair was carelessly strewn across the pillow in ripples containing every conceivable shade of the red spectrum. Harry moved closer, his heart twisting inside his chest. Then he clutched suddenly at Ron's arm.

"She's breathing," he gasped. "How?"

Ron sank down rapidly in a nearby chair, Hermione moved beside him, her eyes anxiously darting between them.

"What happened, Harry?" Dumbledore said gently, fixing Harry with that piercing stare. "I need to know the full story."

Harry told him everything: Ginny's disappearance in the Charms corridor, the plans for his death in the future, the charm bond deflecting the curses and that blast of green light which he'd thought had killed her.

"Why didn't it?" Ron croaked, looking up at Dumbledore.

"I think the reason for that may well lie in Harry and the charm," Dumbledore said thoughtfully, stroking his long white beard. He turned Ginny's left hand over so that they could see the scar on the inside of her wrist. Normally it was a ghostly silvery white, which zigzagged across her skin, but it was currently livid red, just like Harry's.

"What were you thinking about when the curse hit her, Harry?"

"Just about Ginny," Harry said, his breathing very unsteady as he relived the memory. "I was concentrating on getting in between her and the curse."

"You'd have given your life for her?" Dumbledore probed gently. Harry smiled shakily down at Ginny, and nodded. He would give anything for Ginny. "You know this charm is the partner of the one your mother did on you as a child? It works through love; pure and unconditional love. You being prepared to die for her, as your mother did for you, is what has made this charm work the way it did. I believe that what happened, in this particular case, is that the impact of the Avada Kedavra was shared between you, and consequently weakened. That's probably how Ginny has survived at all."

"What's going to happen to her now?" Ron whispered nervously, watching his sister's shallow breathing.

"I wish I knew," Dumbledore said gently. "It may be quite some time before she regains consciousness, if indeed she does at all."

"I've got to get Fred and George," Ron blurted out suddenly. "And Mum and Dad'll need to know."

"Professor McGonagall has gone for your brothers," Dumbledore reassured Ron. "I will be contacting your parents as soon as I leave here. Harry, I want you to stay here for a few days. You will have taken quite a bit of that curse on yourself, and we need to make sure there are no after effects for you." He smiled at Harry. "I dare say you won't complain for once. It means you can stay with Ginny." Harry tried to smile back, but the lump was forming in his throat again, and he couldn't; he nodded instead as Dumbledore swept out of the room, leaving them in stunned silence.

"You're bleeding, Harry," Hermione exclaimed suddenly, her voice quivering. She lifted her arm from around Ron's shoulders, and reached across to Harry. He blinked in surprise; he hadn't even noticed the great gash in his shoulder, which was now sticky with congealed blood around the rip in his robes.

"Must've happened when I hit the wall," he said blankly, picking up Ginny's hand in his own, and holding it tightly, still hardly daring to believe that she might have cheated Voldemort and Death. Her fingers were warm to his touch.

"Let's get it healed up then," Madam Pomfrey said practically, appearing round the screen.

"It's fine," Harry asserted, returning his gaze quickly to Ginny, half terrified that she'd disappear again.

"It most certainly is *not* fine," Madam Pomfrey snapped, examining the gaping wound.

"Look, I said it's fine!" Harry yelled, in a rare outburst of temper. "Just go away and leave me alone!"

Madam Pomfrey tutted loudly about ungrateful students, and retreated haughtily to her office. Hermione slipped out just behind her, and Harry could hear her explaining that he obviously didn't want to leave Ginny, not just yet. When Hermione returned, with a jar full of steaming purple liquid, it was clear that she had no intention of listening to Harry's outburst. She perched on the arm of his chair and looked seriously at him, and he could see that she was worried.

"Sorry," he muttered. "It's just all getting a bit much."

"It's OK, Harry," she said softly. "Let me heal it up for you though. I can do it here. The last thing you want right now is some sort of infection getting into it. You'll not be any good for Ginny when she wakes up then."

Harry knew this was common sense, and gave in, without even attempting to argue with Hermione. He wriggled his right arm out of his robes, and through the sleeve of his t-shirt beneath, raising it awkwardly around his neck to let her do her magic on his shoulder. He heard her sharp intake of breath, as she lifted his shirt higher.

"What did he do to you?" she whispered, staring in horror at the deep purple bruises and welts covering his back.

"That was to stop me getting to Ginny," Harry explained, wincing as Hermione touched him. Suddenly his whole body, which had been numb with shock, seemed to ache; his head, the scar, every muscle and nerve he possessed throbbed. Ron had seen the damage too, and shook his head. When Hermione was occupied in repairing the wound, he leaned over.

"Thanks Harry," he muttered. "She'd not have made it without you." He looked carefully at Harry, and shook his head. "It must've been awful."

"It was," Harry whispered. "I've never been so scared in all my life." He stared down at Ginny, and added fearfully. "I only hope she's going to be OK now."

* * * * *

Time drifted by in a very strange fashion; seeming to stand still for aeons, then hours would pass by in the blink of an eye. People too swam in and out of focus in Harry's mind as they came into the hospital wing. He was aware of Fred and George at one point, pacing restlessly around to room, pausing only to look helplessly at their little sister. Both of them were pent up balls of energy, waiting to explode at any second with frustration and anger. Harry simply curled up in a chair beside Ginny, watching her constantly; hoping, with every ounce of strength that he possessed that she would open her eyes and smile. He had absolutely refused to go to bed, and dozed fitfully in the armchair, right where he could see her.

Nightmares were ever present. Every time he closed his eyes, he could see a slow motion replay, showing the fear in her eyes, the cold merciless laughter and then the blinding flash of green light. He struggled to reach her, as if through ever thickening treacle, limbs dragging heavily like lead, but each time it was too late. His eyes would snap open, heart pounding frantically, body drenched in a cold sweat; then he heard her regular breathing and it calmed him. Once he awoke from the nightmare terrified to see a shadowy figure bending over her, and half-leapt to his feet before he'd realised it was Mrs Weasley.

"Oh, Harry dear!" she whispered, her voice trembling slightly as she spoke. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"S all right," he replied, his heart steadying once more to it's regular rhythmic beat. "Is she OK?"

"Just the same," she said quietly.

"I'm sorry I couldn't...I tried to...I wish..." Harry said brokenly, running his hand through his dishevelled hair.

"I know," Mrs Weasley replied, tears brimming in her eyes. "I know, Harry." She gathered him into her arms, and soothed him as if her were one of her own children. After a while, she wiped her eyes and looked sternly at him. "And what are you doing cat-napping in a chair? You've been through a lot as well, and you need your rest." Harry began to protest, but she ignored him. "Bed! Now! I'll sit with Ginny tonight."

* * * * *

Several days later Harry was sitting in the hospital wing working on a Potions essay for Snape. He had acquired a small table, placed it facing Ginny's bed, and was scratching away thoughtfully with his quill, glancing up every now and then to check she was still there. There had been no change in her unconscious state since she had been brought up to the wing, and Harry was starting to worry more and more about her.

With Ron and Hermione's encouragement, he had attempted to go back to lessons the previous day, especially as he seemed to have suffered no physical damage from the curse himself. However, he had got as far as the Charms corridor, when memories rushed back and he began to shake so badly that he couldn't get to Professor Flitwick's classroom and literally fled straight back up to Madam Pomfrey. Dumbledore had given him permission to stay there for the interim, and had asserted that this was only on the condition that Harry kept pace with the work that the rest of the fifth years were covering in their classes. Consequently, Harry was working harder than he had ever done in his life, books permanently strewn all around him.

"Time for a break, Gin," he said, finishing his essay, throwing his quill down and stretching enthusiastically. He stuffed the text book back in his bag, and he caught sight of some books that

weren't usually in there. Pulling them out, he recognised them as Ginny's. They were the ones that she'd dropped in the corridor and someone had obviously put them into his bag, which he'd abandoned nearby. His hand rested briefly on the book of Muggle poems, and he smiled to himself at the memory of her totally absorbed in it just an hour before the Christmas Ball. Dumbledore had suggested talking to her, and Harry was doing that, but perhaps reading to her might help. He looked at her; she loved that book. It was worth a try.

"OK," he said sternly to her. "But if you *ever* tell anyone I've been reading poetry to you, there'll be trouble!"

He opened the volume and flicked through it, wondering where to begin. A bookmark guided his hands to an appropriate page, and he was just about to skim through the poem, when he caught sight of what the bookmark was. It was a photograph; one he hadn't even known had been taken. It portrayed himself and Ginny down by the lake, not long ago judging by the trees breaking out into bud, and leaves beginning to unfurl. Unlike the photograph he had of the two of them, this was a more pensive shot; his arm around her and she leaned in so close that it was impossible to tell where one set of robes began and the other ended. It was a tranquil mood, with relatively little movement for a wizard photograph, and it exuded a feeling of peace, of calm, and Harry remembered the sheer happiness of being content with her like that. He watched his photographed self bend his head to kiss her cheek, and a blissful smile fluttered across her lips. A sudden heaviness filled him, and unable to bear watching any longer, he casually flipped the photograph over, and saw a little fragment of Ginny's neat script on the reverse.

"For Harry - just in case."

Harry stared at the note. Had she known what was coming? It was perfectly possible; she studied Divination too, and was almost certainly a lot more talented in that area than he was. Why hadn't she said anything to him?

He turned his attention back to the poem the photograph had demarcated, and began to read quietly to her, feeling slightly foolish and awkward at first. It was a love poem, written by someone called Robert Herrick, and as Harry read steadily on, it took on a very personal slant; it was almost as if Ginny were talking to him.

*"A heart as soft, a heart as kind,
A heart as sound and free
As in the whole world thou canst find,
That heart I'll give to thee."*

His eyes flickered up to her face. That was exactly what she'd done, given him her entire heart, and there was nothing he wanted more than to have her love him. In Ginny he had found peace, he had found the home he had been searching for all his life; someone who wanted him just for being him. He felt his throat thickening again, but swallowed quickly and continued reading the fluid flow of the verse to her. His voice trembled as he came across the lines:

*"Or bid me die, and I will dare
E'en death to die for thee."*

Visions of Voldemort flashed across his mind. Ginny's eyes full of hatred and courage as she had faced him down and refused to buckle to his demands to hurt Harry, because she loved him. Her determination that he should be safe, whatever the cost to herself. She had challenged death for him, and death had almost won. Her very future hung in the balance before him. He breathed deeply to steady himself before beginning the final verse.

"Thou art my life, my love my heart,"

He stopped abruptly, unable to continue for a moment. His own feelings for Ginny had always been incredibly difficult to articulate, yet this line summed them up so simply and so completely. She was part of him, just as his heart was; the part of him that mattered most. He reached over to her, and gently traced the scar from the heel of her hand across the inside of her wrist, reading the final lines to her.

*"And hast command of every part
To live and die for thee."*

The words shot through his brain like a blinding flash of illumination; thoughts whirling round in his head as he caressed her scar thoughtfully once more. What if he did actually have the power of life and death over her, right there beneath his fingertips? Dumbledore had said at one point that the bond between them could well have been severed by the destructive force of the curse, but there was a chance that it was still working. Ginny had wanted to tell him something important about the charm that night. What if...?

He leapt into action, rifling frantically through her pile of books. His heart skipped a beat; it was there. His fingers closed around the slender ancient volume, which Dumbledore had given to her, and he skipped through the pages with trembling hands until he came to the charm Ginny had done. He settled down to read it carefully.

* * * * *

"Hermione!" Harry pounced on her the second she walked through the door into the hospital wing. He'd known she'd come up straight after lessons ended to bring him his work. She jumped visibly in shock.

"Harry!" she gasped, clutching her chest in panic. "Don't do that to me!"

"I need your help! Now!" he said urgently, pulling her towards the bed where Ginny lay. "Please, Hermione."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked in bewilderment, dropping her heavy school bag beside his table.

"This," Harry said firmly, pointing out a passage in a tiny script in Dumbledore's book.

She bent over it, her eyes widening in horror as she saw what the page contained, then looked back up at him.

"No, Harry!" she stammered. "You can't. It could kill you."

"I know," he said softly. "But it might help Ginny. I can't just sit here and do nothing."

"Harry!" she protested, her eyes beginning to fill with tears.

"Hermione, would you think twice about it if it was Ron lying here instead?" he asked her, almost brutally. "Ginny obviously took the brunt of the Avada Kedavra, and all I'm going to try and do is equal things out a bit; use our charm bond to try and shift some more of that curse onto me."

"It's not as easy as that," Hermione said, looking at the spell again. "This is powerful magic, Harry. The odds of getting it wrong are incredible."

"I don't care about the odds," he exclaimed feverishly, running his hand through his hair. "What I need you to do is help me to put the two scars together. Ginny's is a mirror image of mine, so they should match up exactly. I'd have done it myself, but I can't see my own forehead to make sure they're lined up properly."

"It is so dangerous," Hermione moaned fearfully.

"I *want* to do it," he insisted forcefully. "I love her, Hermione."

Hermione's tears suddenly splashed down her cheeks, and she threw her arms around him and hugged him hard.

"Tell her that if anything happens," he whispered.

"It's not going to go wrong," Hermione said, brushing the tears away. "I'll help."

Harry settled himself down on the edge of Ginny's bed, leaned over and kissed her gently. He lifted her arm, gently clasping her fingers in his hand, and raised it until her wrist was roughly level with his own scar. Hermione guided him, and suddenly Harry felt a shockwave of something like electricity shoot through the lightning bolt on his forehead as the two scars joined together, matching perfectly. The magic was still there. There was a chance.

He breathed deeply. This *had* to work.

Pointing his wand at the connection between them, he reiterated the charm Ginny had performed in October.

"*Coniungo.*"

He closed his eyes firmly and concentrated everything on her. Ginny, and only Ginny, was all that existed to him. Pain was almost instantly present in his scar, an ache at first, then gradually building up to a large crescendo; pulsating, then beating, then the hammering blows of agony which rained down inside his skull. Harry clung on tightly, determined to take what he could of the curse from her. He could sense the flow of energy between them, and didn't dare open his eyes in case the connection was broken. Her fingers twitched slightly in his hand, but unlike Orpheus he had no intention of losing his Eurydice. He had to keep going. The pain shot violently through him, making him gasp aloud, his head spinning madly.

"Harry! Stop!" Hermione's voice was urgent, her hand gripping his shoulder tightly. "Look!

Harry, look at her! I'd better go and get Madam Pomfrey."

He opened his eyes tentatively, and his heart leapt. A pair of deep brown eyes were smiling up at him very sleepily.

"Harry," her voice was a faint whisper of delight to see him, and then a flicker of panic crossed her face.

"It's fine, Ginny," he croaked, stroking her cheek gently. "He's gone now. You're safe, I promise."

"But...?" she looked puzzled.

He wanted to explain, but he could barely breathe with the pressure forming in his chest. Tears flooded painfully to the surface, but he didn't care for once. "I love you, Ginny Weasley, and you've just scared the life out of me," he choked out, half-crying, half-laughing.

— CHAPTER TWENTY —

Seize the Day

“Carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero.”
(Seize the present day, trusting the morrow as little as may be)

—Horace

“I’m going up to see Ginny after breakfast,” Harry said to Ron a couple of Saturdays later, as he poured himself an orange juice. “Are you coming?”

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” Fred Weasley’s amused voice floated down the table towards them. “We’ve just been there and she’s in a foul mood. I think Madam Pomfrey’s just about ready to assassinate her.”

“That sounds about right,” Ron grinned back at Harry whilst buttering his toast thickly. “That’s my little sister for you.”

“You can’t blame her for being fed up,” Hermione pointed out reasonably. “Being stuck in the hospital wing for so long is bound to drive anyone mad.”

“True,” Harry agreed wholeheartedly; his various incarcerations in the hospital wing had hardly been his favourite times either. “It doesn’t help that Ginny’s trying to escape at every opportunity. She’s not strong enough to walk yet, so Madam Pomfrey caught her trying to levitate her way out yesterday.”

“Patience is definitely not one of her virtues,” Ron spluttered in a fit of laughter at his sister’s exploits. He waved his toast meaningfully in Harry’s direction. “Unless you count the five years she waited for you to notice her.”

Harry felt himself turn scarlet, then he laughed at himself.

“Yeah, I suppose I was a bit slow on the uptake. Still, I’m going to make it up to her now. I thought I’d take some work up there and spend the day with her, and hopefully that’ll keep her out of mischief for a while.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” retorted Ron cheerfully.

“We’ll follow you up in a little while, Harry,” Hermione said softly.

She glanced over to Ron, who stretched across the table for her hand, and squeezed her fingers gently. An intimate smile played between the two of them. Harry saw it, and smiled to himself as he deliberately shifted his gaze down to his porridge and stirred it thoughtfully. Voldemort’s actions had made a difference not just to his relationship with Ginny, but to them all, and there had been a far greater display of tenderness between Ron and Hermione throughout the past two weeks. Ron had revealed a very vulnerable part of him in his fear for his little sister’s life, and Hermione had responded to this the only way she’d known how; caring less now about what others thought about their displays of affection, and more about Ron and what he was feeling. They needed the time alone together, just like he did with Ginny. There was a lot that needed to be worked through before any sort of equilibrium or normality could be restored.

Summer was only just beginning, light streaming in shafts of brilliance through the arching window half-way up the marble staircase, ensnaring glittering dust hovering within each beam. Harry bounded happily up the steps, his bag swinging from his shoulder. Ginny was recovering; slowly it was true, but she was definitely making progress. Her mind was as sharp as ever, but the curse had left her extremely weak physically and it was going to be a long haul for her to get back to full strength again.

Harry smiled wryly to himself. He would have never thought it possible, but he’d eventually come across someone who was a worse patient than he was. Couple that with a particularly well developed version of the Weasley stubborn streak, and it was hardly surprising that Madam Pomfrey

was at the end of her tether with Ginny. He rounded the corner and pushed open the door to the hospital wing.

A small night-gowned figure with masses of coppery hair stood at the far end of the hospital wing, clutching the bed rail in a desperate attempt to steady herself. Harry could see the expression of grim determination on her face as she let go, and took a couple of wobbling steps unaided before her legs gave out and she collapsed in a heap of temper and frustration.

"I don't want to go to bed!" she yelled at him furiously, when he rescued her from the floor and carried her back towards the armchair in her corner of the ward.

"Who said anything about that?" he grinned wickedly down at her. "I think it's a little early in our relationship to be talking to me about going to bed." She giggled and wrapped her arms tightly round his neck, her anger swiftly evaporating. "And don't you dare get mad with me, Ginny Weasley, or I'll drop you."

"You wouldn't," she said, looking up at him with pleading eyes.

"That's playing dirty," he laughed, feeling the agonising tug at his heart strings she'd intended. He settled them both into the chair, Ginny curled up comfortably in his lap, and he relaxed feeling her there right beside him.

"Sorry," she whispered. "I just feel so..." She clenched her fists and looked straight at him. "So helpless I suppose. I hate this."

"I know you do," he replied. "I should have kept that charm going for longer to take more of the curse, then you wouldn't be going through all this."

"No you shouldn't, Harry," she said adamantly. "Hermione was right to stop it when she did. You had a blistering headache all last week as it was, and any longer would have done real damage to you. Things'll be back to normal soon enough."

"What's normal?" he laughed.

"Oh, I don't know," she looked impishly up at him. "Waging war against the most evil wizard the world has ever known, rescuing a damsel in distress from certain death. The average sort of day for Harry Potter!" He laughed with her, although the memories she'd conjured up were still painful; he had come so close to losing her.

"Do you ever think about the future, Gin?" he asked seriously, his voice muffled in her hair.

"Yes," she confessed, shifting slightly and running her fingers gently down his cheek, making him shiver with pleasure. "I think about what Voldemort said to you too. He's waiting for a time to kill you, and we don't know when or why."

"I'll understand if you don't want that sort of a future with me," he said, nervously awaiting her reply. "You're going to get badly hurt by it, whatever happens."

"Harry," she said softly, lifting his gaze to her own. "I'll be worried anyway. I know why you feel like this, and how terrifying it must have been. I've loved you for such a long time, and I've had to watch all sorts of awful things happen to you, like when you fell fifty feet from your broomstick. I saw you after the third task last year, not knowing if you were alive or dead, and I couldn't even come up here to find out. You were Ron's friend, not mine, you see."

"Gin, I'm so sorry," he whispered guiltily, kissing her fingers. "I had no idea."

"It doesn't matter," she said, shaking her head decisively. "Harry, I want to be with you. Whatever the future holds, I want to face it with you. Unless you don't want me to..." Her voice wavered a little and Harry hastened to reassure her.

"I want that more than anything," he said, holding her firmly in his arms. "I just don't want you to go through anything like that with Voldemort again. Watching you being hit by those curses because of me, because I love you..." He broke off, unable to continue as his mind relived the horrors.

"I'd do it all again for you," she whispered, reaching up to kiss him. "We can't live looking at what's going to happen some day. We have to take each day as it comes and live for the moment, for now at least. No one knows what tomorrow holds, but we have each other right here, right now and that's enough for me."

* * * * *

The exams grew ever closer, and Harry was frantic with everything he had to fit into his day; the lessons, piles of homework and revision, extra Quidditch practices and visiting Ginny in the hospital wing. Ginny had been absolutely livid when she'd discovered they'd forfeited the match against Slytherin because of her, but as Ron had pointed out, they'd all been so worried the chances of concentrating on that particular game were slim to say the least, and there was no way their Seeker would have been allowed out of Madam Pomfrey's watchful gaze only a couple of days after such a

near brush with death. They simply had to win their final match against Hufflepuff to claim victory of the House Cup this year, but the points difference they needed was an alarmingly large one.

Ginny took pity on Harry, and insisted that at the very least he had to combine his school work with visiting her.

"Honestly Harry, I'm bored stiff," she sighed, lying obediently back on her pillows. "Would you mind teaching me some new stuff as part of your revision? If you know it well enough to show me, you'll know it well enough to pass your O.W.L.s with it."

They began with Transfiguration, and Harry was surprised, both at how much he appeared to know and how much he learned during their hours together. Ginny was an adept pupil who grasped new ideas extremely quickly, and he was kept on his toes by answering her questions. She was delighted with the concept of personal transfiguration, and, much to Harry's amusement and Madam Pomfrey's horror, began to transfigure herself into all sorts of objects to escape detection. She borrowed his book, and by his next visit had even mastered some of the work from the sixth year. He looked frantically around for her, wondering if she had turned into bedroom slippers again. His eye was caught by a peace lily plant perched on her bedside table, leaves trembling with what could have only been Ginny's irrepressible giggles. He tickled the leaves gently with his fingers and she instantly sprang back into her normal shape, knocking a nearby jug of water onto the floor.

"You're feeling better," he grinned at her, helping her down from the cabinet top.

"How did you guess?" she replied, eyes twinkling up at him as he slid his arm round her for support.

"Well, finding you up there for a start," Harry teased her, tucking a wayward strand of hair behind her ears. "You couldn't have done that a week ago."

"I suppose not," she sighed, glancing out of the window gloomily. "It's still driving me mad though, being cooped up in here on a glorious day like this."

"How would you feel about escaping outside for a couple of hours?" Harry asked mischievously.

"I'd love it!" Her face lit up with enthusiasm for a flicker of a second, and then it fell again. "It's not very likely though, is it?" she added peevishly.

"Isn't it?" Harry could barely keep the laughter out of his voice.

"You know very well it's not," she snapped. Then she paused and looked curiously up at him. "Harry Potter," she said sternly. "What do you know that I don't?"

"Get some clothes on," he chuckled. "I've spent ages this morning wheedling Madam Pomfrey round to thinking that some fresh air and sunshine will be good for you. I think we need to get out of here quickly before she changes her mind."

"You're wonderful!" Ginny threw her arms round him and hugged him with all of her might.

"Give me a yell when you're ready," he said, blushing madly and retreating to the other side of the screen.

Ginny was leaning heavily on his arm by the time they made it down to the entrance hall, and was trembling with the effort. Her enthusiasm was not curtailed in the slightest, as this was first time in six weeks that she'd been outside the confines of the hospital wing and wild hippogriffs wouldn't have dragged her back. Harry guided her gently across the lawns to the spot where Ron and Hermione were sprawled, propping themselves on their elbows to revise from their text books and enjoy the sunshine.

"Look who I've got," Harry grinned, making Ron and Hermione glance up quickly.

"Ginny!" Ron leapt to his feet and helped her to sit down, anxiety plastered all over her face. "Should you be out here?"

"Don't fuss, or you'll spoil it," she growled at him. "I'm absolutely fine, and believe me, it feels good to be outside."

Harry smiled, and idly lay back on the grass enjoying the sensation of the warm summer sun pulsating down on him. He tucked his hands behind his head and stretched luxuriously, squinting up into the bright blueness of the sky. The lightest of breezes drifted over him, and he could sense Ginny right there beside him. This was how it should be. This was perfect.

A book landed heavily on his stomach causing him to yelp.

"We're revising History of Magic," Hermione explained firmly. "We've got the exam next week, so you can't afford the time off now, Harry."

Harry rolled over onto his stomach, to protect it from further attack, pushed his glasses up his nose and pulled a face at Ginny, making her giggle.

"What are you up to," he sighed, opening the volume and leafing through the pages.

"It's that blasted Urn the Norn thing again," Ron muttered darkly. "If that comes up on the exam I'm done for."

"Just concentrate," Hermione sighed in exasperation. "If you'd only listened in the lesson in the first place you wouldn't be having the trouble now!"

"Hermione," he protested in absolute outrage. "Have you any idea how difficult it is to stay awake in those lessons? And besides, I seem to remember I had other things on my mind that day. You, for example." He grinned meaningfully at her, making her blush.

"The Norms are Scandinavian rulers of the fates. They have had a massive impact on the history of the place, especially in the third and fourth centuries. There are three of them; Urd, Verdandi and Skuld, and their control of the past, present and future of Ygdrassil caused massive conflict with the neighbouring areas," Harry explained from memory, causing Ron to goggle in disbelief at him. Harry laughed at his expression. "You can blame Ginny. She's the most ferocious taskmaster ever. I don't think anyone's ever made me work so hard in my entire life."

They spent a very pleasant afternoon on the castle lawns, chatting as they steadily worked their way through their notes and text books. Ginny's mood had improved significantly, and Harry smiled as he watched her, her hair dancing lightly in the soft summer breeze as if ruffled by invisible hands. She relaxed beside him, talking eagerly to Colin Creevey and her other friends who drifted their way. Fred and George spotted her, and their eyes lit up with mischief, as they hurried across the grounds.

"You managed to escape then?" George chuckled.

"Oh we've really, really missed you, Gin!" Fred added, a twinkle in his eye.

"I'm sure you survived," Ginny retorted dryly.

"Things just haven't been the same without you," George said in a very melancholic manner.

"We didn't realise what a massive impact you had on our lives until these past six weeks without you," Fred proclaimed dramatically.

"Yeah. I mean, we've got up every morning and found we had socks," George said in total astonishment. "I can't imagine how that could have happened." Ron sniggered appreciatively in the background.

"So just to show our total appreciation for our little sister..." Fred began.

"...we have a little present for you," George rounded the sentence off and they grinned wickedly at her.

"I know what your presents are like," Ginny started to object, but before she had a chance to continue, they pointed their wands at the castle and cast a spell completely in unison.

"Accio talaris totalis!"

Harry glanced curiously at Ron. It was some form of summoning spell, but quite what they could be summoning for her, he simply couldn't work out. Then he heard a series of shrieks and when he saw what was causing the chaos he began to laugh uncontrollably. Every single pair of socks within the confines of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry were flying directly at them through the lazy afternoon sunshine. Socks of all different shapes, colours and sizes, soared through the air as easily and gracefully as birds. They fluttered and swooped as they flew, steadily covering the lawn and half-burying them. A flood of students cascaded outside, watching the spectacle in amazement. Ginny caught sight of Ron and squealed with laughter, entirely incapable of speech. Harry followed where her finger was pointing, and his own hysteria increased.

"Nice look, Ron," he choked, seeing his friend's hair adorned with a rather fetching slinky black stocking. Hermione struggled though the ever increasing mound of socks, tears rolling down her face and pulled it off him.

"Ron Weasley!" she giggled, trying to sound outraged with him, but failing dismally. "I never thought I'd catch you wearing stockings." He leapt at her, and tickled her mercilessly, rapidly disappearing from sight under the deluge of balled up socks.

"And what exactly is going on here?" Professor McGonagall's crispest tones cut across the mirth, sobering them slightly. Harry pulled Ginny towards him, woollen missiles still falling heavily from the sky on them. One pair of star covered ones bounced wildly off the ground and smacked Harry in the nose, causing Ginny to collapse in hysterical giggles again.

"Enough!" Professor McGonagall snapped. "Finite incantem."

The storm of socks ceased instantly, although the laughter ensued for quite some time. Steely eyes surveyed the scene through her severe spectacles, and Harry was convinced he saw her lips twitch just for a second. "Who is responsible?" she asked.

"Us," Fred admitted sheepishly, nodding towards George.

"My office please. Both of you. Now!" she instructed them curtly.

They trudged off slowly up towards the castle, through the mountains of socks, shrugging with resignation.

"Please Professor," Ginny said, hiccuping with giggles and tears streaming down her cheeks.

"They were doing it to cheer me up; it's probably as much my fault as theirs."

"They performed the spell, Miss Weasley," Professor McGonagall stated, smiling gently at her. "They must take the consequences." She raised her voice and spoke to the assembled throng of students. "I suggest everyone collects their own possessions as quickly and as sensibly as they can." She stooped and retrieved some fetching tartan socks of her own before heading to her room to deal with the miscreants from Gryffindor.

Harry watched the staff and students sifting through the piles on the lawn, and clutched Ginny tightly with hilarity when he saw Snape disapprovingly stroll to an area nearby to rescue, and instantly conceal, some of his black socks which appeared to be covered in attractive little pink hearts.

"Wonder who gave him those," he muttered in Ginny's ear. She choked back her giggles, as she handed a pair of orange floral ones up to Professor Sprout.

A high-pitched voice could be heard soaring over the grounds:

"Harry Potter, Sir! They has got Dobby's socks..."

"C'mon," Harry grinned at her. "Let's get out of here."

Abandoning their own socks, Harry helped Ginny to her feet, and they slowly walked back. Harry shot her a sideways glance; her eyes were bright with laughter, but it was obvious that she was completely exhausted. She was shaking badly with the simple effort of putting one foot in front of the other.

"Ginny," he began, knowing she was going to yell at him for being over-protective.

"I'll manage," she said with real determination. "It's just up a few floors and along the corridor." She suddenly clutched at his arm, and he caught her, sitting her down swiftly at the foot of the marble staircase.

"I know you can manage," he said gently, crouching beside her. "But you don't have to."

"I'll do it," she said grimly.

"OK," he agreed, wrestling his fears for her safety into submission. He had to let her make her own decisions if this relationship was going to work. "Just take it steadily, Ginny, otherwise there's no way Madam Pomfrey'll let me borrow you again."

She looked up at him in surprise with her fluid chocolate-brown eyes, and Harry could see a tempest of conflict storming within her.

"You know," she said quietly. "No one has ever just let me do something like this before. I've always had to fight to do what I want to. You've seen what it's like with my brothers."

"I'm worried about you trying this," Harry admitted honestly. "But this is your decision, not mine."

"Oh Harry!" her eyes shone with tears, which she hastily blinked away. There was a long pause as her eyes searched his. "Am I too heavy to carry up there?" she whispered at last, smiling slightly at him. He shook his head, and with her consent, lifted her gently in his arms.

"It's safer than me trying to magic you up there," he chuckled as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"It's been a wonderful afternoon," she giggled when they reached the hospital wing, his arms now aching so badly that they felt as if they were about to fall off. "Thank you."

"Yeah," he laughed with her. "You can learn a lot about people from their socks, I reckon. I never knew Dean had a pair with 'sex god' printed on them."

"And who did *that* stocking belong to?" Ginny said with relish.

"One of the sixth or seventh year girls?" Harry hazarded a guess.

"No! Come on Harry! We can do better than that," Ginny said with impish mischief all over her face as Harry put her down on her bed. "How about...Malfoy?"

He exploded in laughter at the outrageous thought, the noise bringing Madam Pomfrey swiftly out of her office, accompanied by Dumbledore.

"It sounds like you were right Potter. It has done her a lot of good," Madam Pomfrey said, looking at Ginny's happy face.

"Well, it's all to do with socks, you see, Poppy," Dumbledore said, his blue eyes twinkling merrily at them. "I always say, and I'm sure Ginny will agree with me, whatever is going to happen in the world, one can never have too many socks."

Epilogue

*"Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach."*

–John Donne

The train rattled south along the track, heading ever nearer to King's Cross Station. The landscape beyond the window of their compartment shifted from the northerly wildness of purple moorland and heather, to a neatly trimmed patchwork quilt combining glorious shades of green and fertile earthy fields stitched together by dry stone walls. Sunlight and shadow danced across the scene through the whiteness of the billowing clouds sailing past overhead.

Pigwidgeon hooted noisily from his cage, drawing Harry's attention back inside the train. They'd been lucky this time and managed to get a whole compartment to themselves, so there was plenty of space. Ron was taking full advantage of this by sprawling out across as many seats as he could manage, and Crookshanks purred loudly at him as he slunk subtly onto Ron's chest, circled once and settled down, fixing him with a steady gaze from intelligent amber eyes.

"Gerroff," Ron muttered sleepily, pushing the ginger cat away.

Crookshanks stared unblinkingly at him and didn't move an inch.

"I said get off," Ron raised his voice angrily and sat up slightly. Eighteen sharp as needle claws dug in deeply causing Ron to leap to his feet yelling loudly.

"Don't be such a baby," Ginny laughed, looking up from her book of Muggle poems.

"That cat's never liked me!" he grumbled, massaging the injured area.

"Rubbish!" Hermione retorted. "You were just in his seat, that's all. See?"

Sure enough, when they looked, Crookshanks was curled up, apparently fast asleep in the chair, looking to all intents and purposes rather like a very fluffy orange cushion.

"Hmm," Ron glowered at the cat, and settled himself into a neighbouring seat.

"Are you OK, Harry?" Hermione asked suddenly. "You're really quiet."

"Yeah, I'm fine," he responded in what he hoped was a cheerful tone of voice.

This summer was one all the fifth years had been looking forward to. They had finished their O.W.L.s and there was little preparation to be done for next year, so they viewed it as a time for idleness and fun. Harry, however, was looking forward to going back to the Dursley's even less than usual, mainly because it would mean two long, interminable months apart from Ginny. Since their encounter with Voldemort he'd wanted to be around her as much as possible, and enjoy the time they had together. It was going to be so difficult to let her go. He knew she was in safe hands with her parents, and nothing would happen to her at home, but even so, he was not looking forward to saying goodbye. In fact, it was far worse than that. He was dreading it.

"It's only for a few weeks, Harry," Ginny said softly, smiling at him and reaching for his hand. He smiled back. He should have known he wouldn't have fooled her by pretending. "Dumbledore did say you could come through to The Burrow again for the last two weeks of the holidays."

"Yeah, but he's got six weeks with the Dursleys," Ron interjected, the disparaging tone in his voice showing exactly what he thought of that.

"Don't remind me," Harry said, feeling gloomier than ever.

"Come on, Harry," Hermione reassured him. "We'll write to you all the time, and send you sweets and things. You know, it might not be so bad this year. Surely they'll be pleased with you? I mean, you did *really* well in your O.W.L.s."

Harry gave a hollow laugh.

"They wouldn't care if my results were as good as yours, Hermione."

"Still can't believe I passed *any* of those exams," Ron said, pulling out the parchment informing him of his results. "I had to make up half the things in History of Magic again."

"Mum'll kill you if she finds that out!" Ginny was horrified.

"Well, you're going to find next year easy at any rate," Harry teased her, running his fingers gently through her hair.

"I must admit, the magic is a lot more fun as you get higher up the school," she laughed, transforming herself instantly and easily into a beach ball, which rolled around on the seat with the movement of the train.

"How does she do that?" Ron asked incredulously.

Harry grinned wickedly at her, and pointed his own wand carefully at the brightly coloured ball.

"Accio!"

It flew straight into his hands, and she reappeared seconds later on his knee, looking rather pink and dishevelled. She gave a little nervous giggle.

"I must remember," she said, looking sideways at Harry and flushing furiously. "If I turn into something like that, you have absolutely no concept of *where* you're putting your hands."

Harry felt the warmth flood into his face, as ferociously as if he had been plunged into boiling water.

"I...I..." he stammered, not knowing where to look.

"Harry!" Ron exploded in outrage. "That's my little sister!"

"It's hardly his fault," Hermione said, with a twinkle in her eye. "Which bit of me did you think you were patting that time I was a clock in Transfiguration?"

Ron opened and closed his mouth, and gradually turned as red as Harry.

"I didn't...?" he gasped at last in horror.

Before she could answer, the compartment door slid open and Fred and George strolled in, looking particularly cheerful.

"How does it feel to be finished Hogwarts?" Harry asked, recovering some of his composure. Ginny beamed at him, and wriggled closer so her head was nestled into his shoulder, enjoying these final moments together as the train sped relentlessly onwards into the very heart of the city. He slid his arm nervously around her, taking very great care to keep his hand on her waist.

"Brilliant!" Fred said exuberantly.

"Couldn't be better!" George echoed. "You'll never guess what we're doing over the summer, Harry."

"Annoying us?" Ron suggested, still looking warily at Hermione, who was smiling back at him very enigmatically.

"Yeah, but apart from that," Fred laughed.

"We've got a lease on a shop in Diagon Alley," George burst out, unable to contain the news any longer. "We can actually get this joke shop idea off the ground."

"It's *really* going to happen," Fred said, eyes glowing with enthusiasm. "We get the place at the beginning of August. You've *got* to come through for the opening, Harry!"

"I'll try to," Harry said, suddenly feeling a little happier. "Any excuse to get away from the Dursleys for a bit."

"Where are you getting the money for all this from?" Ron asked suddenly, frowning suspiciously at Fred and George.

"Oh, it's an investment," George said airily, with a sly grin at Harry.

"We're here!" Fred exclaimed, sticking his head out of the window and changing the subject before Ron had a chance to interrogate them further. The screeching squeal of the train braking confirmed their imminent arrival at Platform Nine and Three Quarters. "We'll get Ginny's trunk," Fred said, grabbing one end of it and hoisting it to the door as the train lurched to a standstill. "Are you OK getting her back through the barrier, Harry?"

"No problem," Harry laughed at Ginny's outraged expression. He hugged her before she clambered off his knee to collect the remainder of her things together.

The platform was a turbulent sea of Hogwarts students, baggage and animals. Hedwig awoke from the slumber of the journey and looked disapprovingly at the scene from her cage, which was balanced on top of Harry's trunk. The queue was already forming for the barrier, where the wizened old guard was permitting them through in small groups so as not to alarm the Muggles on the other side.

"We'll catch you up," Harry said suddenly to Ron and Hermione, stopping dead in his tracks. He blushed again, as they both gave him knowing smiles. "Well," he protested, chuckling slightly. "Uncle Vernon's hardly going to give me a chance to say goodbye, is he?"

"Fair enough," Ron grinned. "But I'll be timing you!"

Harry watched their retreating backs, and turned swiftly to face Ginny, hardly knowing what to say to her.

"It'll soon be August," she said softly, reaching a hand up to his cheek. "I'll write to you, I promise. I'll even pinch Hermes if I have to!"

"Percy'll love that," Harry smiled, knowing exactly what her brother's reaction would be to find that his owl had suddenly disappeared.

"Let's just make this a quick goodbye," she said, chewing her lip. "It might hurt less."

He made an incoherent noise and wrapped his arms around her in a warm embrace, feeling her clinging to him equally tightly. The scent of her hair, the tickling sensation when it brushed against his nose, made him smile. Their lips met in a curiously tender way, so gentle, yet filled with so much love.

They finally broke apart, and after a few moments silence Harry squeezed her hand.

"Come on, then," he said quietly, knowing this had to be done. Pushing the trolley before them, they headed towards the barrier, stepping quickly through it, without a backwards glance, into the heady summer of Muggle London.

— *THE END* —

Author's note: Well, this is it! 'Carpe Diem' is officially finished, and I really hope you've enjoyed reading it as much as I've enjoyed writing it.

Thank you to everyone who's been reviewing and keeping me going with such fantastic encouragement, and a special thank you to Paula (who has forcibly stopped me editing out some of the better bits in a fit of panic that I was being completely useless).

Needless to say, the characters, the world, and an awful lot of the other stuff belongs to J.K.Rowling. The poem contained in Chapter 19 is "To Anthea, Who May Command Him Anything" by Robert Herrick, and if you want the full text try <http://www.bartleby.com/101/266.html> Other quotations, I hope are suitably labelled at the beginning of chapters.

Appendix — Riverside Reflections

Ottery St. Catchpole

*"The swallow of summer, cartwheeling through crimson,
Touches the honey-slow river and turning
Returns to the hand stretched from under the eaves —
A boomerang of rejoicing shadow."*

—Ted Hughes, *Work and Play*

It was going to be a glorious summer's day Harry Potter reflected, halfway through dressing. He leaned out of Ron's bedroom window, staring out across the Weasley's rambling and overgrown garden, towards the orchard. The lightest of breezes ruffled his hair seductively off his forehead, and he could see the leaves of the aspen tree on the hill quivering gently. Sunlight was already streaming through the sky, mere wisps of clouds idly lazing in their blue bed, too sloth-like to spoil the clearness of the day. A whistling, chirruping of the swallow above his head made him smile. It had recently made its nest under the eaves, much to the displeasure of the family ghoul, who was clanking things more noisily than ever in a fit of pique. The bird took flight again, lithe and graceful, and Harry watched her, fluttering and swooping as she cut through the sky until she became a mere speck in the distance.

The smell of summer wafted around him; a soft smell of flowers, freshly cut grass, and warmth. The perpetual downpour from the last week had vanished, and now, here with the Weasleys, it felt good to be alive.

Still smiling, he was just about to retreat back into Ron's bedroom, when a sudden movement caught his eye. It was Ginny. Propping himself up comfortably at the window he watched her in amusement. She was padding barefoot around the garden like a sleek ginger cat. Sunlight bounced impatiently off her hair as she wound her way back down towards the house, the summer breeze tugging gently at the hem of her dress, making it dance above her knees. A small squeak of surprise caused his grin to widen when she narrowly avoided standing on a gnome, and had to dodge swiftly away from his wrath, her hair rippling in a wave of sunlight down her back. Lazily she collected flowers together, darting butterfly-like between this flowerbed and that, clearly enjoying the early morning solitude. Hedwig hooted jealously from her cage.

"Shush!" Harry said to her. "I'm enjoying this."

He turned his attention back to the garden to find Ginny grinning up at him.

"Morning, Harry!" she said cheerfully. "I was wondering if you were ever going to get up."

"Nice flowers," he retorted. "Very girlie."

She pulled a face at him and he laughed.

"I thought I'd surprise Mum," she said.

"Not much of a surprise now. She'd have heard you two counties away." Fred's voice interrupted sleepily from his window on the floor below. "What are you two yelling about anyway?"

"Yeah, it's bad enough having you drooling all over each other, without you waking us up at the crack of dawn as well," George moaned.

"It's nearly eight o' clock," Ginny retorted. "You're due in Diagon Alley before nine. At this rate you'll never get that shop of yours off the ground."

"And Ron's in the bathroom," Harry pointed out. "You could be cutting it a bit fine."

There was a mad scrambling in the room below, and Harry grinned down at Ginny.

A/N: A short piece of nothing very much from the summer after 'Carpe Diem'. This begins as a story, but chapters two and three will be thoughts from Ginny's and Harry's perspectives.

Characters and most of the setting belong to JKR. The riverbank, fields and trees, however, are mine, and are very good friends!

"Where are my socks?" Fred could be heard yelling from inside their room. His head appeared at the window again, and he glared down at his little sister. "Ginny?"

"Not me this time," she laughed in delight, showing him her bare feet. "I can pinch some from you if you want me to, though. I wouldn't want you to feel neglected."

There was a growl of frustration and Fred disappeared again.

"Speaking of you pinching things," Harry said, struggling to hide his laughter. "You don't happen to have the white t-shirt I've been looking for this morning, do you?" He loved the way she blushed and squirmed at the question. She rubbed her foot up and down the back of her leg.

"Fraid so," she confessed, eyes sparkling with a distinct lack of repentance. Harry laughed. He'd have forgiven her anything, especially after what had happened to her a few months before, when he'd believed Voldemort had killed her. She could steal his entire wardrobe if she wanted it.

"It's OK. I'll find something else," he teased, clambering down from the windowsill. "See you for breakfast?"

"Definitely," she said, blowing a kiss up to him, and disappearing into the house in an energetic whirl of hair, legs and laughter.

The Weasley kitchen was increasingly chaotic in the mornings now that four of the family were Apparating to work at roughly the same time. Harry wandered down to breakfast with Ron, and rapidly pinned himself against the wall as Mr Weasley charged past, robes awry, frantically searching for an important piece of parchment that he knew he'd left somewhere safe, but couldn't remember where.

"I left it here, Molly," he said in agitation, burrowing through a mountain of parchment on the dresser. Percy was standing by the table, robes neatly pressed. He had a slice of hot buttered toast in his hand, and was using it almost like a weapon as he gesticulated at the twins.

"Honestly, you can't expect to run a business dressed like that. You have no idea!"

"Shut up, Perce," Fred retorted darkly. "What would you know about having a laugh anyway?"

"That's hardly the point," Percy said, bristling with anger.

"Boys! Boys!" Mr Weasley said vaguely. "Ah! There it is! Goodbye then, Molly. I shouldn't be late." He kissed her cheek briefly and then disappeared from sight with a little 'pop'.

"I'd better go too," Percy said haughtily. "I've a busy day at the Ministry today, doing an *important* job, not like some I could mention."

"Enjoy testing the Belgian owl feather quills," George said, grinning at Fred. They vanished into thin air before Percy had a chance to reply, and with a snort, Percy followed immediately afterwards.

The whole house seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. Harry and Ron sank into chairs at the scrubbed deal table in the centre of the small kitchen and began to help themselves to tea and toast. Mrs Weasley was cooking, and a heavenly smell of bacon and sausages pervaded the entire room.

"What are you three up to today?" Mrs Weasley asked, when her daughter wandered into the room and put the flowers in a vase in the middle of the table. She waved her wand at the sausages and they obligingly rotated themselves to cook on the other side.

"Dunno," Ron replied, through a mouthful of hot buttered toast.

"I thought a picnic by the river might be nice," Ginny said, smiling softly at Harry, her dark brown eyes melting into his own and filling him with warmth. She reached across her brother to pinch some of his toast.

"I get the message," Ron grinned, slapping her hand away from his breakfast. "You want to borrow Harry for a few hours, for a romantic picnic down by the river. I don't know, Gin. I really don't think we should let you go unchaperoned."

"Ron!" she exclaimed incredulously. "You're not being serious are you?"

"Deadly serious," Ron replied, watching her horrified expression for a moment and then bursting out into fits of laughter.

"Just you wait," Ginny's eyes twinkled mischievously, and she leapt at her brother and tickled him mercilessly.

"Stop it!" he gasped breathlessly, writhing off his chair onto the floor. "Mum! Tell her!"

"Ron, get off the floor! You're making the place look untidy!" Mrs Weasley said briskly, filling plates with sausages, bacon and eggs and putting them on the table. "Ginny dear, I think that's Pigwidgeon outside. Could you let him in please?"

With a final baleful look at her red-faced brother Ginny opened the window, and the tiny owl fluttered in, bouncing around the kitchen madly in his excitement.

"Keep still, you stupid feathery git," Ron exclaimed in exasperation, now on his feet trying to unfasten the parchment from his owl's leg. "Honestly, you'd have thought he'd have learnt how to

behave by now, wouldn't you?"

"You haven't," chuckled Ginny, sliding onto the seat beside Harry, and helping herself to breakfast. Harry couldn't keep his eyes off her. He had been away from her for six long weeks, and it felt so good to be beside her again. He couldn't believe that she was actually there. He reached for her hand just to check that she wasn't a figment of his imagination, and was thrilled to see her smile with sheer pleasure at him, as she squeezed his fingers gently.

"It's from Hermione," Ron said, unravelling the parchment and beginning to read the note. "She's arriving on Saturday afternoon." His eyes scanned further down the page, and Harry could see a small smile playing across his mouth, before he folded the parchment away into his pocket. "It's going to be a terrible wrench, but I suppose I can just about deal with not coming on this picnic with you! I really should write back to Hermione." Ron chuckled. "How about some Quidditch in the orchard when you get back, Harry?"

"Sounds perfect," Harry grinned.

* * * * *

The sun was high in the sky, casting short black shadows on the ground as they left The Burrow. Harry was carrying the willow basket of food, not so much out of any sense of chivalry, but rather to leave Ginny free to wrestle with her wide-brimmed hat, which her mother had insisted that she wore due to the heat of the day and the Weasley tendency to freckle and burn. They strolled lazily through the garden and over the fence into the meadow.

"Oh this is ridiculous," Ginny grumbled as her hat flew off in the breeze again. "Don't tell Mum I'm doing this," she added removing the offending article altogether, grinning at Harry, and swinging it loosely from her hand. Her hair glinted in a myriad of shades of red in the sunshine, and the sheer beauty of it entranced him once more, tempting him to touch it. Hand in hand they wove their way through the rustling, whispering grasses towards the old gnarled oak standing proudly on the knoll claiming dominion over the fields, which sloped gently down to the water. They paused on the ridge beside it, staring at the scene before them. The windows of Ottery St Catchpole glinted in the distance, nestled cosily at the foot of the steep hill Harry remembered climbing for the Quidditch World Cup a couple of years before. The river wound its way lazily across the verdant landscape, hiding from sight behind trees along the banks and reappearing a little way further on as if playing a game with the observer. It glittered and shone in the sunlight, flashes of gold rebounding enticingly off the ripples.

"Race you down?" she said impishly grinning at him, and set off quickly before he'd had a chance to respond, hair and dress fluttering in the breeze behind her. Harry followed, hindered by the picnic basket, but fast enough to level with her toward the bottom of the hill. She slowed and stopped beside a couple of ancient trees leaning out across the river, gasping for breath, and he abandoned the basket on the ground, to pull her into his arms.

"I've missed you," he said breathlessly, his blood beating erratically through his veins. His hand slid at last into the thickness of her hair, and she looked up, suddenly and directly, at him with her dark eyes, making his breath even unsteadier. A moment later and they were entwined in an embrace, his lips on hers, burning with a new desire, which had caught him entirely unaware until he was enveloped in the velvety depths of it. Ginny's body moulded against his, as she responded with equal passion to his every touch.

At length, they pulled apart, Ginny's eyes wider and darker than ever, searching his soul.

"Wow!" she gasped sounding slightly dazed. "I wasn't expecting that."

"Me neither," Harry admitted, feeling rather intoxicated by the experience. "That was..." He had no words to describe what it was exactly, so he simply smiled at her, and she giggled.

"It was, wasn't it?" she said, hugging him tightly. "I've missed you too. It's been awful this summer without you."

"Ah, but there's no getting rid of me now," he teased, spreading the picnic blanket beneath the tree right next to the river. "You're stuck with me until next July."

"I don't know how I'm going to cope," she sighed tragically, her eyes twinkling with mischief. She settled herself down on the rug beside him, tossed her hat aside and grinned. "I'll just have to learn some repelling charms or maybe even a good magical barrier one to keep you away."

"You dare," he spluttered, leaning over to tickle her. She squirmed beneath his fingers, making Harry's pulse race. He stopped abruptly, uncertain of himself and his feelings, and stared out quickly over the water.

"What's up?" she asked curiously.

"Nothing," he said, vaguely, and reached over to the basket. "Here you go," he grinned, throwing her book of Muggle poems across. His own Quidditch book was there too, so he settled down on the

blanket with her, for what promised to be a wonderful afternoon.

Ginny's Muggle Poetry

*"I ne'er was struck before that hour
With love so sudden and so sweet."*

It feels so perfect to be here like this, with him: to be able to stretch out, feeling the warmth of the sun filtering softly through the leaves and leaving dancing patterns of brightness on my arms. I love it here, right down beside the river; I always have. This is my tree, my world, and Harry...well, I suppose Harry is mine too. Looking over at him now, I can't stop myself from smiling, even though he doesn't know I'm watching him. There's something about him that magnetises me, that draws me to him; I just can't explain it, but I know I'd never want to be without him. He's sprawled there, only a few feet from me with that wonderful furrow of concentration across his brow as he reads. I want to slide across and kiss it away, hoping those emerald green eyes will flicker up to mine, making my insides quiver in the way that only he can. I still can't believe that he loves me.

*"And stole my heart away complete.
My face turned pale as deadly pale,
My legs refused to walk away,"*

It's funny, even a year ago, if anyone had asked me about Harry, I'd have said that this was never going to happen. I mean, why would it? What on earth would he ever see in his best friend's little sister, who just so happened to have a massive and very embarrassing crush on him? Even thinking about it makes me cringe. Why, oh why, did I do those things? I must have been completely demented. I suppose it's sort of comical now, the way I blushed and stammered and generally behaved like a startled sheep every time I went near him, but it was excruciating at the time. Harry said that it didn't bother him much and he laughs about it, but I have a sneaking suspicion that's mainly because of the way I tormented him when he was trying to ask me to the ball last Christmas. The confused expression on his face during that week was worth any amount of Galleons; beetroot purple every time he saw me, and I'll never forget that time he was so busy staring at me that he walked smack into the portrait of the Fat Lady. It was even better than the time he spread porridge on his toast. The look on her face! And his! Oh, it was absolutely hilarious. I'm not sure she's ever going to forgive him for that one. That cut-glass accent of hers sounded completely outraged.

"I may be only a picture, but I have feelings!"

I wonder if I could embarrass him now? Or make him laugh? I love it when he finds something funny; the way his eyes crinkle and disappear to almost nothing, as he loses control and abandons himself to gales of irrepressible laughter. He's kicked his shoes off. Now there's an idea. If I edge very, very slowly across the rug, he might not notice, and I might just be able to reach...Yes I think I can.

*"And then my blood rushed to my face...
And blood burnt round my heart."*

Well, that certainly got a dramatic reaction; I had no idea his feet were so ticklish but I'm sure I can put that knowledge to some good use in the future. I loved the real squawk of surprise he uttered, when he realised what I was up to, and his Quidditch book flew through the air faster than a Snitch. I have to admit, I prefer it now that he's less worried about me, and gives as good as he gets. I'm every bit as ticklish as he is. I know from the outset he's always going to win, mainly because he's so much stronger than I am, but part of the fun, in this particular game, is playing to lose. Being pinned to the ground by Harry Potter, and tickled relentlessly is not exactly a hardship, especially not when it dissolves so smoothly into one of those kisses...

...Those kisses. I've never felt anything like that when he's kissed me before. Today, it was as if he'd put his entire soul and every ounce of passion he possessed into it, still so gentle, but making me burn, molten lava building up inside me. The sensation of being held against him like that makes the blood pound through my veins with such a dizzying, exhilarating effect that I want more.

This is very different to the style of 'Carpe Diem' but it's something I wanted to try out. A massive thanks to those who have held my hand and reassured me about this chapter. I really appreciate it J

The poetry in this chapter is John Clare's "First Love" and the whole text can be found at:
http://www.pioneeris.net/poetry/first_love.htm.

Harry and Ginny belong entirely to J.K.Rowling, but it's always nice to borrow them for the afternoon.

No...I don't...Not just yet...I'm not sure. So many emotions, all cannoning uncontrollably around inside me, and all I want to do is hold him tightly my arms and never let him go, because one of these days, when I do let go, Voldemort will be waiting for him, and I can't bear the thought of that. I'd rather die than let anything happen to him. Whatever it takes, whatever I have to do, I *will* do it. Anything to keep him safe.

"Is love's bed always snow?"

He looks so contented now, the breeze blowing through his hair, ruffling it the way I love to. I adore the personality of his hair, the way it refuses to be calmed and tamed, but stubbornly does its own thing, just like me. When he turns the page, he shifts his head to the left and I can just make out the outline of his scar - that scar - *our* scar. I can see it snaking away across my wrist, joining us together in the strongest of magical bonds for all eternity. That bond saved my life. It's ironic really, because I did that charm to save him. Closing my eyes, I can remember it all so clearly: that Cruciatius Curse, twisting and tearing and burning; the agony of it erupting through every inch of me. I've never felt anything like that before, and never want to again. Harry did it though. He was incredible, standing so firmly and facing Voldemort, swearing to stay with me forever.

Harry dying is something that terrifies me. Voldemort is coming for him, we both know it, but we don't know when. Peace and happiness, like this, could be shattered at any second when the Dark Lord clicks his fingers and decides it's time. I sometimes wonder how Harry copes with having this sword of Damocles hanging over his head; it's something none of the books about him have ever bothered thinking about. It makes me furious when people treat him just as a name, '*The famous Harry Potter.*' He's more than that. Oh, so much more.

*"She seemed to hear my silent voice,
Not love's appeal to know."*

He's feeling restless now; something's started to bother him. For once, I've got no idea of what it could be, but I can see the energy building inside him, the tenseness as he moves his shoulder backwards, released only as a stone skims swiftly and speedily across the river. That's Harry brooding about something, I know it. I've seen it before. Another stone, and another thought sinks with it, deep down to the bed of the river.

"A knut for your thoughts," Gran always used to say, but I suspect it's not as easy for Harry. He knows I'm here, and when he wants to talk, he will. It's always the waiting that's most difficult, to watch him struggle with something and be unable to do anything to help. Until then, I'll keep him laughing, keep him safe, keep loving him with all my heart. Distracting him is easy: a swift shout and an apple thrown in his direction is enough to make him turn and grin. It's never going to be easy for us, not like it is for Ron and Hermione, but it's worth it. It's Harry.

*"My heart has left its dwelling-place
And can return no more."*

Living for the moment is all that matters. Enjoying the sunshine sprinkling light through the canopy of leaves above and the snatches of laughter we share to stave away the fear. It's just perfect, listening to the gurgle as the river rushes by and engulfed by the heady scent of summer meadows. Best of all, is feeling his arm around me, holding me so tightly and so securely to him. I can hear his heart beating steadily against my ear, sense the rise and fall of his chest with every breath. If only moments like this could last forever.

But they don't.

Harry's Quidditch Book

"Though there is no limit imposed on the height to which a player may rise during the game, he or she must not stray over the boundary lines of the pitch. Should a player fly over the boundary, his or her team must surrender the Quaffle to the opposing team."

It's hard to believe that I'm actually here after awful the summer I've just had. I actually need to pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming. No more Dursleys for another year. A whole year. Imagine it...Dudley can scream all he wants now about not having the latest Playstation game, and

Quotations in this chapter are taken directly from "Quidditch through the Ages" by Kennilworthy Whisp. Other things belong to JKR, apart from Harry's thoughts, which are my fault.

Aunt Petunia is, no doubt, fussing all over him and making sure he gets whatever it is he's after now. It'll all be forgotten in a day or two, and he'll want something different. No more Uncle Vernon, turning purple and raging about my 'unnaturalness' whatever I do, whatever I say. Nothing's ever good enough for them, but I suppose, deep down, I gave up on them a long time ago, just like they did with me. There's no more pretending not to exist in my room either. It's wonderful out here, feeling the sun for a change. After spending six weeks trapped inside Privet Drive, this is virtually paradise. Here I'm free. I don't have to keep up the appearance of being something I'm not. I can be myself...especially with Ginny...Especially with her.

She said this was her favourite spot at home, and I can see why. It's peaceful here; no noise really, apart from the river gurgling away, splashing over those boulders down by our feet. There's no tension, no fear. Feeling the sunshine, beating down on my shoulders, warming every inch of me, makes me feel so alive. Somehow it makes me think that everything's going to be all right. It's a good feeling. Maybe it's all to do with being back with the Weasleys? They're the closest thing to a real family I'm ever going to get, I suppose. They don't care about the stupid stuff, and it's so...so...oh, I don't know...they just want me as me. And that makes all the difference in the world.

"The Captain of a team may call for 'time out' by signalling to the referee. This is the only time players' feet are allowed to touch the ground during a match."

How could I spend five years virtually ignoring Ginny? I should have called for this sort of 'time out' a long while before I finally got round to it. I love the way she just knows what I'm thinking, the way she understands before I even try to tell her what's going on in my head. She's so funny with that. It's strange sometimes having someone there who knows me so well, but it's amazing too. I can see her over there now, curled up with her book under the shady part of the tree, that ridiculous hat just abandoned by her feet. She's so close. I could just reach out and touch her and she'd look up at me, her eyes sparkling like they always do, and I could tell her I love her.

The first thing I always see when I glance up is her hair. The wonderful wildness of that hair is so much part of her personality. It gets angry right along with her, and flies so tempestuously, spitting every shade of blistering red fire that it can. Yet it can be calmed so easily to sparkle in the sunlight like it is now. The gentle copper shining, so contented, happy and at peace with her and the world. It's nice seeing her like this; so still, enjoying that ever-present book of Muggle poems. I'll not complain. I owe that book a lot...I owe her even more.

I can see tiny freckles springing into life across her nose, one by one from the sunshine. Her mum will know for a certainty she's not been wearing the hat, but Ginny won't care. That part of her always makes me smile; that refusal to be contained, confined...she's got a certain irrepressibility that makes her do things. A bit like Fred and George, I suppose, but a whole lot cuter! She's incredible. It's that little mischievous twinkle she gets in her eyes sometimes that makes me laugh. You never know quite what she's going to be up to next.

"The referee may award penalties against a team. The Chaser taking the penalty will fly from the central circle towards the scoring area. All players other than the Chaser and opposing Keeper must keep well back whilst the penalty is taken."

The rat! I can't believe she just did that! Lying there, all sweetly and innocently reading one minute, and attacking my feet the next. How could she? She knows how ticklish I am. Oh, revenge is going to have to happen here. She can't get away with that. No way! It's bad enough stealing my socks, but this...this is war!

Suddenly, and I'm not sure how, I've got her pinned down on the rug, giggling madly from where I've been tickling her. Her hair is sprawled madly all over the place, and her brown eyes are full of hysterical laughter, looking up at me and shining with such warmth. It makes me feel an almost hollow ache inside, until another of those kisses fills every sense I seem to have and sets my pulse racing. Then only Ginny exists; I want nothing more.

"The Quaffle may be taken from another player's grasp but under no circumstances must one player seize hold of any part of another player's anatomy."

What did I do? This isn't how it was last term, and I don't want things to change. Not yet. Not for a long time. I've only just got her back and I'm slowly beginning to believe that she's going to be fine after everything that's happened to her. I didn't mean to kiss her like that. I don't even know where that came from, or what to do. I...I...want, but I don't...

Why does everything have to be so complicated? If only real life were as simple as Quidditch.

"In the case of injury, no substitution of players will take place."

I think, if I'm honest, I'm still terrified of what Voldemort might do to her. He came so close to killing her last time, and I couldn't bear it. I'm putting her in danger simply by loving her, and I know I should tell her to keep away from me, but I can't do it. It's not just that she'd kill me, and I know she'd have no hesitation in that if I dared, but I don't want to be without her. Not now, not ever.

I suppose we both knew how this would be, right from the very beginning, but I'm not sure that makes it a whole lot easier to deal with. Even now, the memory of that flash of green light makes me shake, brings back those haunting nightmares where I'm constantly trying to reach her, but I fail in ghastly slow motion over and over again. The sight of her crumpling to the floor like that. Her piercing scream.

Skimming stones across the water gets rid of some of the panic, makes it a bit easier to deal with. I daren't even think about what the future holds; Ginny's right, we've just got to take each day as it comes, step by step just as the stone bounces along the surface of the river, and if we're lucky we might not even sink from sight at the end of it. Ginny's been incredible about it all. I'll never forget that fierce look of determination on her face when she stood up to Voldemort, refusing to buckle beneath his curses because she loves me. That charm. She's given me so much. Every day I'm amazed she's there beside me, that she loves me. What I've done to deserve someone as wonderful her, I have no idea. I want to give her the world, but how can I with Voldemort's threats hanging over us? Whatever it takes I'm going to make sure she's protected from him in the future. I'm never going to let him get near her again.

"Wands may be taken onto the pitch but must under no circumstances be used against opposing team members..."

We've got to make the rest of the summer a good one, for all our sakes. We need to laugh, to get things back to some sort of normality, to stop jumping at shadows in every corner, or waiting for the axe to fall. It's time to live. It's time to have some fun. She deserves it. Ginny always makes me laugh, with the things she does, and what she says. I don't think I'm ever going to have any socks ever again. How does she steal them anyway? I always thought it was a Summoning Charm, but she's not allowed to use magic in the holidays. And now she's started on my t-shirts. I can't help but smile. Only Ginny...

I wonder if I could persuade her up onto a broom later when I'm playing Quidditch with Ron. She's always giggled about the fact that her brothers never let her fly, as she was far too much of a liability on the ground without being let loose in the air as well. I'm sure she'd rise to the challenge, and knowing her she'll be brilliant at it.

"A game of Quidditch ends only when the Golden Snitch has been caught, or by mutual consent of the two team Captains."

Peace is here, with her. Feeling her securely in my arms, gently breathing and relaxing beside me. I've missed her so much. This is exactly how it should be. The wayward strands of her red hair tickling my ear, and the gentle breeze drifting over us makes it perfect. The soft sounds of chaffinches chatter somewhere in the leafy canopy above us, and the warmth causes such a pleasant sleepy sensation. Why move? This is right where I want to be.

Let the future take care of itself.