All In
by Holly1492

Summary

How would the Golden Trio's story have changed if Ron had worked up the nerve to express his true feelings to Hermione earlier—say, on the night before Dumbledore's funeral? Quite a bit, as it turns out. Quite a bit indeed. COMPLETE!
This is my first fanfic — inspired by some of my favorite R/Hr writers, including TMBlue, jesrod82, writergirl8, HeRonFan, HalfASlug, Wordsmithsonian, R.W. plus me and so many others.

Here's the gist: It's the night before Dumbledore's funeral. Ron and Hermione have a lot to talk about. Enjoy!


The idea of it is doing my head in. All our heads, to be honest. Hermione is next to me on the big sofa, staring intensely, in that way that only she does, gazing deep into the Common Room hearth, where the fire is just beginning to burn down to embers. I can tell she's knackered — she's chewing her lower lip and rubbing her hands up and down her arms, almost holding herself to keep it together — and I can also tell from the crinkle in between her brows that she's thinking hard, having spent the day fussing over Harry and now trying to work out what the buggering fuck the three of us are going to do next without Dumbledore to guide us or at least drop us a few mysterious hints now and then.

At least she succeeded in getting Harry to take himself upstairs for some well-deserved shuteye. But she's miles from sleep and, to tell the truth, so am I. She's not the only one who's trying to work out a solution to our problems and what we're up against — though I'm sure her methods are much more, well, methodical, than mine, while my thoughts are admittedly more scattershot. My mind keeps reeling from the image of Dumbledore lying crumpled in the courtyard, to the astonished look on Harry's face as he told us what he'd just learned about Snape and the Half Blood Prince, to the sound of Hermione's sniffles as she collapsed on the sofa next to me a little while ago, exhaling in exhaustion.

Hermione and I are the only ones left in the Common Room now — it's got to be well past 1 o'clock in the morning, and it's as quiet as an old castle like this can be, with just the breeze rustling the curtain at the high window, which is cracked open just a bit, and the pop of the fire keeping us company. Hermione's sitting nearby but not close enough to satisfy my inner lustful teenager. We've been on good terms since the end of the Great Lavender Incident — also known as the biggest fucking mistake of my pathetic excuse for a life — but the status of our, um, "relationship," for lack of a better word, is murky at best nowadays. Having her effectively shut out of my life during those months I wasted with Lavender proved at least one thing: Life without Hermione is a life that's quite simply not worth living. And judging by how hurt she was during that whole effing fiasco, I have a hunch that she may feel something for me that's beyond mere friendship. In fact, I know it.

The question that's hung over my head since then, however, is whether I can ever make it up to her, whether I deserve her, whether I can make her happy. Because she deserves to be happy. Hermione, more than anyone I can think of save maybe Harry himself, deserves a life that's free of care and worry — and when this bloody war is over, that's what I hope they both get, and I'll do anything to ensure that they do. I would like to think I could be part of that picture with her, but that's entirely up to her at this point. I am at her command, mate. I'm a goner. And I don't care if that makes me sound like a tit — this girl is worth any sacrifice I could make. I may not know where the next year will take us or what it holds in store, but I know this: I will protect her and Harry 'til my dying
breath. Losing Dumbledore has been a blow, but there's still reason for hope. Harry is the bloody Chosen One, isn't he, and Hermione is without a doubt as brilliant as any witch or wizard now living, regardless of her years. Between the two of them, I know they have what it takes to unravel this Horcrux problem eventually and then take down You-Know-Who. My part in it will simply be to protect them — it's easy to forget they were raised by muggles, but every now and then they need a born-and-raised wizard like me to help them interpret what they're seeing and make sense of it all. So I can contribute that. That plus my life, which I'd happily lay down for either one of them.

Listen to me, sounding all noble. Shite. I'm not that high and mighty, really. If I had my choice, I'd survive this thing, thank you very much. But if it comes right down to it — and it might — I know what I would do. If Harry and Hermione can go on and live a life without fear, then that's just going to have to be enough for me. I jolly well love them both that much. And there I go, sounding like a tit again. Hell, who cares. I just hope to Merlin she knows. Actually, I think lately she's been cottoning on to it.

An ember in the fireplace pops loudly and just as suddenly, the sofa cushion behind me shakes and I realize that Hermione has just shivered deeply. I turn to her and notice that, like she has a million times before, she's catching a chill because she was too deep in her thoughts to bother putting on a bloody jumper. All she's wearing is a faded old Chudley Cannons T-shirt that I gave her years ago during the Quidditch World Cup — well, she pretty much stole it, to be more precise, because I lent it to her and she just never found a reason to give it back — a pair of grey flannel pyjama pants and some ratty grey socks. She's brilliant, this one, but not always terribly practical when it comes to taking care of herself. Just another reason she needs me, I reckon.

"Here," I say, breaking the silence. I raise my arms and pull off my old maroon Weasley jumper and hand it to her. "Chilly in here, isn't it? You need this."

Her eyes snap to mine, and I give myself points for succeeding in one thing: Making that little crease between her furrowed brows disappear, because she's torn her gaze away from the dying fire and onto my face, and her lips curl into a little half smile that I would describe as shy if I weren't talking about a girl who's been my best friend since she was 11.

"Well, now you're going to be chilly, aren't you?" she whispers, and I look down at my arms and shrug. I'm still wearing one of my Gryffindor quidditch practice jerseys and a pair of plaid flannel pyjamas, too.

"I've got long sleeves on — good enough for me," I say.

She smiles a little more widely and her eyes trail away from my face toward — wait, is she looking at my shoulders? Yes ... well, now my arms. I feel my ears turn a little pink — damn these ears — and shift back into the sofa cushions to resume gazing into the hearth. Out the corner of my eye, however, I see her quietly bunch up my jumper and pull it over her head. Her hair, which had been tied up in a messy bun, comes loose and tumbles over her shoulders as she pushes her arms into the sleeves. She rolls the sleeves up several inches so now they're just covering the backs of her hands. She pulls the hem down so that now the jumper is covering her all the way down to her mid-thigh. She's practically swimming in it, she's so petite. And now she's hugging herself again, running her hands up and down her arms and, bloody hell, is she smelling the collar of my jumper? Sweet Merlin, I believe she is. The sight of her in my jumper, sniffing it, nestled in it, is doing things to me — things that I'd rather she didn't notice at this moment.

I swallow the growing lump in my throat and will my eyes to remain fixed on the burning logs. I still haven't worked out the biggest problem — the "do I deserve her?" problem — and I can't let anything happen until I do. Hell, actually, I reckon I already know the answer. No! No, you don't
fucking deserve her, you eedjit. And now's not the time anyway. Dumbledore's funeral is tomorrow, for the love of Merlin. Get the hell out of here before you do something she'll only live to regret.

"Well, er, it's getting late, isn't it — big day tomorrow — guess I'll head up and crash," I say, leaning forward to stand.

But then, as I place my hands on the edge of the sofa to hoist myself up from the cushions, Hermione grabs my right wrist and cries, surprisingly loudly, "Wait!" Then she coughs a bit, still holding tight to my wrist, and whispers, almost apologetically, "Don't go. Not yet."

Bloody hell. All right, then, I guess I'm not going anywhere. Because Hermione, my Mione, for some reason beyond my bloody comprehension, wants me to stay. So be it.

I turn to her, shifting on the edge of the sofa, trying to stay level and not push the situation in any direction she doesn't want it to go. Stay neutral, I'm telling myself. She's emotional right now. Don't take advantage. Cool it. But my ruddy ears are getting pinker, I just know it. Shit.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees, and bring my hands together. She's still holding my wrist, but now she's running her thumb over the back of my hand. Holy buggering fuck. I pull my eyes up from her hand to her face and see that her eyes are brimming with tears. Well, shit. Before I have a chance to talk myself out of it, I'm leaning back against the pillows again and pulling her into my arms. And just like that, she's folded herself into me, her legs across my lap, her free hand clutching my jersey, her face tucked into my neck, and I'm cradling her, my nose buried deep in the curls at the crown of her head. God, even after a day like this, she smells delicious. Yes, delicious. You heard me.

There isn't much to say, really — I know she just needs to cry, and knowing her like I do, I know she needs to feel safe before she can cry. And I know that, due to some pretty fucking deep magic that only wizards like Dumbledore and, well, Hermione could ever truly understand, she feels safe with me. So she cries. Not a wracking, ugly, gasping-for-breath cry — just a gentle one, and I know it's a mix of sadness about Dumbledore, worry over Harry, fear over the future, anger over the bloody Death Eaters, concern about keeping her parents safe, wishing she could just be a normal student when she can't, just the whole bleeding heap of dragon dung. So I let her cry into my neck, marveling at how tiny she is, and I just make, I dunno, little shooshing sounds, fanning my fingers over her shoulders and her back as she calms herself down. I can feel her eyelashes on my neck. She sniffs. And I don't know, there's just something about that sniffing sound, and the feel of her soft little body curled up in my arms, and the occasional shiver that runs through her that lights a little flare of anger in my mind for a moment — this girl, this beautiful, brilliant, kind, brave and passionate girl, should never be reduced to feeling this way, balled up and frightened for her life and the lives of those she loves. Dammit. It's not bloody fair. It isn't right. Effing You Know Who … I'd like to kick him in the balls.

"It'll be all right, I promise you, Hermione. It will," I whisper into her hair. And I know people always say shit like that at times like this and little phrases of this sort are usually just bollocks, hardly any more meaningful than the shooshing sounds that I was making earlier. But, for me, this is a promise. It will be all right for her. I'm pledging that to her here and now. I'm going to make it all right for her or I'm going to die trying.

I shift my position a bit so I can take my left hand and lift her face so she can see that I mean it. I need her to hear — and see — that I mean it. I need her to believe it.

"It's going to be all right in the end, Hermione, you'll see," I say, reaching my fingers under her chin to tip her gaze toward me. "We've got a shit-ton of work to do, and it's exhausting to think about
right now, I'll grant you, but I know we can do it. I know it because you and Harry are on the case, and I know you can't fail. And I'm going to be backing you up every step of the way Hermione."

She sniffs again and her eyes are half-lidded, darting from point to point all over my face, trying to take in what I've said and make herself believe it. She's so quiet, though, as quiet as a mouse tonight. This girl, who usually will talk my ears off, has hardly raised her voice above a whisper and has only put about ten words together since we settled here on this sofa more than an hour ago. It's up to me to fill the gap.

"Listen," I say, brushing my thumb over her cheek to wipe away a tear that's spilled over from her reddened eyes. "I know you're not big on prophecies, and I know this may sound mental, but I really believe, deep down, that this whole shitstorm that we find ourselves in is going to work out. And here's why." I shift again so that now I'm holding her face in both my hands. I need her to hear this. So I take a deep breath and slow down, so she can run her mind over each word I'm about to say as I'm saying it. I look deep into her eyes — Merlin, they are deep, aren't they? Deep and chocolatey. So sweet.

Shit! Focus! Focus, you idiot. Right. I take another deep breath and dive in. "Listen, Hermione … I'm rambling, yeah?" She smiles and nods. "OK, it's true. But … and again, I know you don't set a lot of store in prophecies. But you and me and Harry, we found each other, I think, because we were meant to find each other, if that makes any sense, and we're meant to be the ones to do the task ahead of us, to take that bastard down." She nods a little. OK, that's progress. Continue, idiot. "We clicked almost from the beginning, the three of us, and I reckon that with all we've been through, we three are as bonded as we could be if we had shared the same blood. We're battle-tested. We're proven. You may not always look it, Hermione, but you and Harry are fucking badasses" — she laughs, and I can't help but chuckle for a second before continuing lest I lose my momentum — "and You Know Who is going to rue the day that he chose to mess with us, I swear it."

She's smiling now, and I'm running my fingers down the side of her neck, and I can't help continuing because I'm just getting warmed up and I feel like maybe I'm finally getting through to her and snuffing out that fear that's been clouding her eyes all night.

"I'm not saying it won't be dangerous. I'm not saying I'm not scared shitless, because I am. But I am saying that I feel it in my bones: We'll accomplish our mission, we'll get 'er done. We will. And you'll see — we're going to kick that bastard's arse, and then you'll go back to Hogwarts, see what they know, and you'll get your 537 NEWTs, and then you'll invent 63 new spells that no one has never even dared to think of, and then you'll free the house elves, and then you'll become the bleeding Minister of Magic, and then you'll go down in 'Hogwarts: A History' as one of the most brilliant witches who ever lived. You're going to make it, Hermione, because you were meant to make it. I've got your back. I'm going to see to it that you make it, do you understand me?"

She's doing that thing again where her eyes are darting everywhere over my face now, but her eyes are wide and her eyebrows are raised this time, like she's shocked by what she's heard. Shit. I thought I was getting through to her.

"Ron?" she says, again at just a whisper. "You're going to 'see to it'? Do you mean what I think you mean?"

Bollocks. She's on to me. Should have known.

I wrap my hands lightly around each side of her neck, sinking my fingers deep into her hair, and take a deep breath to gather my thoughts. I can tell, even in her generally knackered state, she can rise to a fight if I don't play my cards just right here.
"I reckon I mean exactly what I said, Hermione. There's a war ahead. It's going to be bloody difficult. But you're going to make it through. I'm going to see to it. Period."

She's scrunching up her forehead again — and shit, there's that crinkle between her eyebrows again. Dammit.

"But what about you, Ron?" she says, a little louder and clearer this time. Crap. "You keep talking about me making it, so to speak — and Harry making it, too — but what about you? When you picture what's going to happen, you see yourself making it too, right?"

I search her face for a moment — a moment too long, apparently, because now the color is rising in her cheeks.

"Ron!" She sits up a little straighter and my hands slip from her neck to her shoulders. "Ronald Bilius Weasley. You promise me, right this minute — promise me! — that you're planning on making it, too. If you don't, I'll hex you into next week."

She doesn't realize how adorable she is when she's righteous, especially when she's swarmed by my giant Weasley jumper, so now's not a good time for me to chuckle, but I do. It just slips out. A big mistake, it turns out.

"I'm serious, Ron!" Now she's practically shouting and pointing a finger in my face.

"Quiet, Mione, or you'll wake the whole castle!" I hiss back.

"I could not care less if everyone from here to Hogsmeade hears me, Ron! You are going to promise me," she says, pinching my arm for emphasis, "that you are planning on making it, too. Merlin help you if you don't!" She shakes her finger again right at the tip of my nose, glaring at me and willing me to contradict her.

I raise my hands in fake surrender. "All right, all right — for fuck's sake, Mione, yes, I'd like very much to survive this whole thing and live to a ripe old age, OK?" Her posture softens slightly and I rub the spot that she pinched. "Bloody hell," I mutter.

She smiles sheepishly. "Language, Ronald."

I roll my eyes.

"It's just that I don't like all this talk of me making it through, and Harry making it through, as if you're somehow not. I don't like what you're implying, Ron."

"What am I implying?"

She straightens the jumper sleeves slightly and runs her fingers through her hair as if to flatten it, only making it wilder and more tantalizing in the process. I know she's trying to look and sound intimidating and superior while ignoring the fact that her legs are still stretched across my lap and the grey socks on her tiny little feet are flopping off the ends of her toes. God, she's sweet enough to eat. "You're implying that you would sacrifice yourself — do something stupid and noble — if you had to in order to be sure Harry survives or I survive," she says. "You're talking rubbish, Ronald, and I won't stand for it."

I let out a puff of air from my lips and flop my back onto the sofa cushions behind me. "It's just the truth, Hermione," I say quietly, no longer afraid that she'll de-bollocks me for admitting it.

She's not glaring anymore. In fact, she's edging closer, leaning against the sofa cushion, too,
looking into my face with an expression of, what is it? Longing? I wish — and yet, again, it isn't right to wish. Not now.

I run both hands through my hair, hoping it'll clear my head. What the hell. Dumbledore's dead, a bloody war is about to break out, we've got a mission ahead of us that looks pretty damned near impossible to me — I might as well lay my Exploding Snap cards on the table, so to speak.

"Look, Hermione, I reckon you deserve the truth. So here it is." I turn to look at her. She's on the verge of tears again. I place my hands on her shoulders to steady her. "Yes," I say firmly, "if I had to choose between my life and yours, between my life and Harry's, I know what I'd choose. I'd choose to let you live, to let Harry live — and I reckon you'd do the same for me if it came right down to it." She nods. She can't deny it. I squeeze her shoulders briefly with my hands, trying to buck her up so she can hear the rest of it.

"I'm a pureblood. If I wanted to, I could sit out this whole war and could probably scratch out an existence in a Death Eater-type world. It's not the world I would choose, mind, and I'd be an outcast for sure, but I could survive in it. They wouldn't really have a reason to fanny about with me, the Death Eaters, because that's how much 'purity' matters to them. I may be a 'blood traitor,' as they call it, but in the end they'd let me live because to them, I'm valuable. I'm valuable because I'm a pureblood and I can help them continue their stupid pureblood tradition."

She shudders, and I pull her closer, so that our foreheads are touching. I can't see her face anymore but it's just as well — I'm not sure I can say what I need to say if I know she's looking at me, anyway. So I rest my hands back where they were earlier, along the sides of her neck, and carry on, focusing my gaze on her lips, which are just inches from mine. She's clutching the front of my shirt with both her little fists. It would be so easy to kiss her right now — and I wonder if maybe she wants me to — but I won't.

"I don't want to live in that world. You've got to know that, course. But what you probably don't know is that I'm fighting for a very specific purpose." I take another deep breath. I'm going to need it for what I'm about to say. "What I'm fighting for is a world where you, Hermione Granger, can live and be brilliant without fear. I could say 'people like you,' or muggle-borns, or throw Harry or my family in there for good measure — and all that's true, I want all of those people to be free — but that would be sort of sidestepping the truth. Because when it gets right down to it, all I want is a world that's safe for you, Hermione, for you — and if all those other people get to enjoy it, that's great, good for them. But it doesn't mean shit if you can't be in it and leading it and amazing everyone in it like I know you can. A world where you can be Hermione Effing Granger, blood status be damned — that's the world I'm fighting for. And that's a world worth dying for, in my opinion." I can see tears trailing down her cheek near her lips, and I'm a little teary myself. Gotta break the mood. "If you want to hex me now, be my guest," I say, and she smiles softly and lets out a little half laugh, half sob.

"I don't want to hex you," she says, wiping a tear off her chin and then clutching my wrists, which are resting on either side of her chin. "I'd rather kiss you."

I close my eyes, take in a long, shuddering breath, and exhale slowly. I've wanted to kiss this girl for years — years — and it would be so effing easy to do right now, to just melt into her. She's offering, after all, which throws me for a loop. But no … she has to know. I've got to keep my head on straight. This is too important. I open my eyes, our foreheads still tilted against one another, and I concentrate on the only thing in my sight — her lips.

"Hermione, I don't think there's anything I'd like more in this world than to kiss you right now. But you have to understand something, and this is big so really, really listen to me."
I feel her tremble beneath my hands, and she clears her throat. "I'm listening, Ron," she replies in a tiny voice.

"Right. Good," I say. "Merlin, I'm sorry — I seem to be doing all the talking tonight, yeah?"

She smiles. "You can be pretty chatty when you want to be," she whispers. "But yes, you're on a roll tonight," she adds, her voice quavering a little on those last few words. She's nervous. I don't want to make her nervous. Shit. But I've got to tell her. I've got to be sure she understands.

"I could kiss you right now — snog you senseless, to be honest — but you've got to know what it means first, and you've got a bigger choice to make here than I think you realize."

I feel her eyebrows rise on her forehead as it leans against mine. Great — she thinks I'm a nutter. Still, I've got to press on. It's not like I ever planned to say any of this — I have no plan at all, as a matter of fact — but the moment is here and the words are just spilling out of me and they absolutely have to be said. I know I'd hate myself later if I didn't at least try to make her know what's in my head and in my heart.

"Li-listen," I continue, stuttering a bit. "I know this is going to sound mental, because for anybody else this would just be a kiss for Merlin's sake, no big deal, but just bear with me. With the whole wizarding world going up in bloody flames, there's too much at stake now, and the old rules just don't apply anymore. So you've got to know … you've got to know that …"

I take another deep breath, close my eyes, sink my fingers deeper into her curly locks, and press my forehead a little more firmly against hers. "Hermione, if I kiss you right now — honest to Merlin, that's it for me. I'm done. I wouldn't have had the bollocks to tell you this a year ago, but I can say it now. If you let me kiss you, that seals the deal for me, I swear, because I'm going to want it all. I'm all in, Hermione, all in. If I kiss you, then I'm yours and you are most undoubtedly mine and that's it, from here on out, until the day I drop dead. No more doubt, no more second-guessing, no more kid stuff."

Lord, I'm rambling. Gotta keep going — in for a knut, in for a galleon, as they say. I'm fairly drunk just on the sweet smell of her, she's so close. "I'm in deep, Hermione … I've loved you so fucking much for so fucking long … if I kiss you now, there's no turning back. If I kiss you now, you're mine, and that means I'm going to fight like hell to keep you safe, walk through fire if I have to, work my arse off so you'll never ask yourself why you chose me, and … yeah, sod it, I'm just going to say it … if I kiss you now I'm going to want the whole deal at some point down the road, Mione." I stop myself before I can say what that really means — a cottage full of ginger-haired kids, a dog, even sodding Crookshanks, for all I care. Probably better skip telling her that part, at least at the moment. But there's more to warn her about.

"And given how cocked up everything in the world is right now, I'm not going to be one of those modern blokes who can, I dunno, give you your space or be casual or non-committal or whatever because you know how mental I can be about you. If I kiss you, I'm going to be even more overprotective and possessive and bloody caveman-like than I've been before, and I know that side of me can drive you mad. So I need you to think about it. Think about it long and hard, Hermione, because this isn't just a kiss — not for me, anyway. Once we open this door, I won't be able to close it again, ever. I love you too much to know what it is to have you and then to lose you or try to live without you. Do you understand?"

She's full-on crying now. I'm such a bastard. And, just like that, I've botched up one of the two most important friendships of my life beyond all recognition. Still, I wouldn't take any of it back. It needed to be said. Something within me demanded it, and it just felt right to say — even if it means the girl of my dreams will never be mine.
My eyes are still closed and I'm waiting for her to say something — anything — and bracing for her to pull away and ask for some time to think, because I know how much my Hermione likes to think. Then, softly, slowly, I feel her lips, warm, wet and salty from her tears, press up against my mouth. The wordiest girl in the world isn't bending my ear with her thoughts, she's not slapping me senseless, she's not dragging herself out of my arms. She's quietly angling her perfect, pink, pouty lips against mine and now she's making a soft little "mmmm" sound like it's the only thing that could possibly be said at a moment like this.

Without taking time to think, I respond in kind. I've been babbling like a lunatic for the past few minutes and now all I can do is kiss her back, because Hermione Granger — Hermione Granger — is wrapping her arms around my neck and pressing her chest against mine and deepening this kiss that I had started to think was never going to happen. I come to my senses just slightly, enough to realize that my hands are still cradling her neck, my thumbs just grazing her cheeks, and I pull back a bit, breaking the kiss, because I just have to look in her eyes — to check that she's understood me. I mean, yes, she's the brightest witch of her age, but I wouldn't bet my life on my ability to communicate what's in my head.

"You OK, then?" I mumble, mentally kicking myself for even having to ask.

"I'm more than OK. I'm perfect. I'm ecstatic," Hermione says, eyes sparkling with unshed tears. Her cheeks are pink and her lips are swollen, her hair is a mass of caramel brown curls and fuck me, she's gorgeous. She's smiling like she's been Obliviated, and I can't help smiling back. "I love you so much, Ron. So much," she chokes over a new round of tears — happy ones this time. And then she's thrown herself against me again, planting her face into the crook of my neck and crying like there's no tomorrow.

I'm still smiling like I'm boggled on Firewhiskey. I wrap my arms all the way around her and pull her close to me, kissing the top of her head. "You realize you've basically given me permission to drive you mad for pretty much the rest of your life, yeah?" I say into her hair. "Because, you know, I've just admitted that I'm — what's that thing you always call me — a neon-and-fall?"

"A Neanderthal," she says a bit swottily before pressing her lips to my neck and, sweet Merlin, sucking it ever so slightly. She stops only long enough to say, "and maybe I like the Neanderthal in you, did you ever think of that?"

"No you don't. Just about every row we've ever had, you've called me one of those neander-things, and it's always when you think I'm being over-protective or underestimating your ability to take care of yourself in a battle or some other rubbish," I say, still speaking into her curly mane. "You can't stand that about me."

"Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you done talking?"

"Maybe."

"Can you talk to me while you're kissing me then?"

"I can certainly try."

And I do. In one swift movement, Hermione raises her arms back around my neck and I give her a gentle shove and somehow she's lying back across the length of the sofa and I'm stretched out on
my side, half covering her with my body and smothering her lips with mine.

We start out slow because, after all, we've never kissed before tonight, and despite how long we've known each other and all the gibberish I just uttered and the, erm, compromising position we are now in, I guess we're both suddenly feeling a little shy. We're just running our lips softly against one another right now, feeling each other out, you might say, and my heart is already throbbing. She's so bloody soft. Her lips are like little pillows, so tender and sweet. I sound like a right prat, don't I. She's making these tiny cooing sounds now and then, like a little dove, and I can't believe that something so innocent-sounding could also be so erotic, because each noise she makes is quickening my pulse. "I love you, Hermione Jean Granger" I whisper, immediately feeling like a prat just on reflex, until I have to remind myself that I can say that now. I don't have to stifle it anymore. She knows. And it's bloody brilliant. She must think it's brilliant too, because she's smiling as she's kissing me. It's so good to see her smile after all the tears and sadness of the day.

I run my tongue against her lower lip and soon her mouth is open and our tongues are swirling against each other and I can't believe that one evening can contain so many emotions — I'm so bloody happy right now, delirious really, and just a few hours ago I was at one of the lowest points of my life. Emotional range of a teaspoon my left testicle. She makes me dizzy, this girl, and bugger all if she doesn't seem to want me at least as much as I want her. It's impossible.

As recently as 24 hours ago, I would never have believed that I could be so bold as I'm being right now, but I'm quite literally lying on top of my Hermione, cupping her bum with my free hand and pressing her hips to mine as she does the most mind-bending thing to my tongue. She's sucking on it and it's sending shock waves straight to my middle, which I'm now brazenly grinding against hers, and she's grinding back. Now she's sucking on my lower lip. Dear lord. I thought I wanted her before but the reality of actually having her here now is so far beyond what my feeble imagination could conjure even as recently as yesterday — I almost feel sorry for the pathetic, horny teenager that I was until a few minutes ago, the guy who for years had wanked to dream images of this beautiful girl now in my arms. Merlin, what that guy didn't know — the real thing is so much better than the imaginary version.

I have to have more of her, so I almost reluctantly pull away from her mouth and run my lips down to her throat. "You're mine now, aren't you," I hiss into her neck, surprised at how hoarse and gruff my voice sounds and how turned on I am by the feeling of her hands running up and down my back.

"Oh God, Ron, yes — all yours," she says as she pushes her hands through my hair and wraps a leg around mine. "I've always been yours. Always."

I'm nuzzling a particularly tasty spot just beneath her ear as she says this and start sucking, which I'm guessing she likes because she responds by bending her neck away from me to give me more access — and then running her hands down my back toward my bum. "Always?" I whisper into her ear, really wanting to know. "For how long?" I ask, before finding her earlobe with my lips and giving it a long, slow suck.

"Oh God, Ronnnnnnnallllllld," she moans, apparently distracted by my attentions to her neck. Hermione — my Hermione — is moaning in my arms. Blimey. But she wouldn't be Hermione if she didn't answer a direct question, and do so with precision. "For so long, Ron, so long — ever since the day you defended me to Malfoy and wound up coughing slugs, you've been my hero, and you didn't even know it."

That was, wait … bloody hell … was that second year? "That long, Hermione? That long you've fancied me?" I've still got my face buried between her neck and her shoulder, kissing her there
between each sentence, but now I'm sliding my hand up from her bum and slipping it under that wonderful old threadbare Chudley Cannons shirt and my Weasley jumper, feeling her torso, which is so firm and yet so incredibly soft and curvy. She's wiggling in a way that allows me more room to move down there, and I decide that I may just die right here, right now.

"Yes, that long," she pants. "And you?"

I think about it while running my hand over her hip and her exposed waist. But I don't have to think long. I know the answer. "I reckon I've always fancied you, Mione, but I was too stupid to know what it was." I lick her earlobe again — she moans. Crikey! "I knew I felt something more than friendship when you were petrified — I thought I'd go spare until you came to, I really did — but I started to sort it out in fourth year, at the Yule Ball." She chuckles, and I can feel the vibration against my lips. "No surprise," I continue, "and then, of course, the invitation to Slughorn's ruddy party did my head in. By then, I was so in love with you, I could hardly see straight."

"Mmmmmm," is her answer. "So long ago," she whispers and lets out a long sigh.

God, so much wasted time. I'm about to fall into that old emotional hole — one I've stumbled into so many times before, where I kick myself stupid for being such an asshat for so many years — but Hermione interrupts my thoughts by grabbing my chin with her hand and lifting my face to meet hers. "Let's not spoil tonight by worrying about the mistakes we made before," she whispers with a sweet little smile on her lips. "Let's talk about now, about the future."

Well, all right then. But suddenly, I don't feel like talking. I stop to really look at her, raising myself up on my elbows, and I see that she's splayed out on the sofa, her hair a curly mane, her lips slightly redder now than usual, her cheeks tinged with the sweetest blush. It's pretty dark in the Common Room — only the fire and a bit of moonlight spilling in through the windows to light our way — but I swear, I can see everything so clearly. This girl, this incredible girl, loves me — me. She's got to be mental. Gorgeous, irresistible, mental — and all mine. Hell's bells.

And, once again, I'm crushing my lips to hers, and she's answering my kisses enthusiastically. And while we were rocking and rolling into each other earlier, I somehow managed to settle myself on top of her altogether and now she's wrapping her arms and both legs around me, holding on tight. I'm propping myself up by my elbows, trying not to crush her tiny frame with all my weight, but she's pulling down on my back and shoulders, almost willing me to press myself fully against her. I have to pull my lips away from hers again to ask: "Are you sure?" And she nods, so I lower myself onto her completely and she just groans in delight. My God, she's practically purring. "OK?" I ask.

"Oh God, yessssssss, Ron," she sighs against my lips. "It feels wonderful to be completely surrounded by you like this," she adds between kisses. "So safe," kiss, "so cozy," kiss, "so secure," she murmurs as she kisses her way down my chin and to my neck.

"That's right, you're safe here with me," I breathe into her other ear, which has gone woefully unattended until now. "You're mine. I protect what's mine."

"Yes, Ron, oh yes," she says, and then she does something that sends shock waves through my entire body — she wraps her legs even more tightly around my waist and presses her hips against mine and starts — holy buggering fuck — starts, well, pulsating beneath me. And I know she can feel me right there because, let's face it, I'm hard as an effing rock right now. But she doesn't seem offended — in fact, she seems absolutely, entirely, completely turned on. "Ronnnnnn, you feel so good, so hard," she whispers as she wiggles her hips beneath me. "You think I don't love the cave man in you, Ron — you're so wrong." She sucks on my lower lip again for a moment, and then murmurs on: "I want to belong to you, Ron — I want to give myself to you. Take me." With that, I'm once again emboldened beyond my wildest dreams. She's grinding against me, and I start
grinding back with gusto. My movements draw a deep moan from somewhere inside Hermione, and she hums, "Mmmmmmmmm … don't stop. Never stop. You're my knight in shining armor, Ron."

We both know this statement is corny as hell, but neither of us cares — we're just that far gone. And these words flip some sort of switch in my head, because now I'm gripping her to me, thrusting away, feeling myself getting lost in full-on love and lust for this girl. She's got to know what she does to me. And I know that, someday, our pillow talk will go on to explore other topics but, for tonight, it's all about possession, about driving the point through my thick skull that she's mine and I'm hers and nothing is ever going to change it. I'm intoxicated by the idea. And that only spurs me on as I continue to rhythmically — shamelessly — knead myself between her legs.

"No one else can have you now — no one," I murmur in her ear, still grinding away down below.

"No, no one," she agrees with a whimper as I take her earlobe into my mouth and nibble on it lightly with my teeth. "I belong to you, Ron. Forever."

"I love you, Hermione — I fucking love you so much," I say, trailing my lips down to the little divot between her collarbones. "I've wanted you for so long, did you know that? Only you. God, just the thought of anyone else touching you, kissing you, drives me mad. I'll do anything to protect you, to keep you." At this point, I realize I'm babbling like a nutter … and it suddenly dawns on me that this is what that old expression "sweet nothings" really means … but I don't care. The words are just falling out of my head and I hear them spilling out of my mouth, and on any other day I would have been embarrassed or even sickened to hear myself spout such nonsense, but it's what's in my heart and, well, Hermione doesn't seem to mind. In fact, she's more than meeting me halfway. So, what the hell … I'm just going to keep going. "Say it," I whisper. "Say you don't want anyone else."

"I don't want anyone else, Ron. I never have, I never will," she pants. "I love you. I've only ever loved you." We're both getting pretty worked up by now — and for a fleeting second, I remember that we're in the Common Room. But it's incredibly late, we're totally alone and fuck it, I couldn't stop now if I tried, even if McGonagall burst in and held a wand to my head. I'm over the moon, I'm ridiculously turned on, and if we keep thrusting away like this, I'm going to come no matter what, and soon. I lean back for a second to see if any of these concerns appear to be going through Hermione's head and, fortunately, they definitely are not, because she's got her eyes squeezed shut, her lips pressed together in a tight line, her hands pulling at my hips, and she's humming and moaning and damn it if she's not also just, well, concentrating like she would when learning the formula for a new potion. She's mesmerizing, and the look on her face is putting me over the edge.

"God, you're so beautiful," I whisper. "I want you forever." I return my lips to her mouth and gently slide one hand back under her shirt and my jumper, tracing my fingers up to her tit — no, dammit, her breast, she wouldn't want me to call it a tit — and it feels so soft and firm, a perfect handful. "Mine," I mutter. I squeeze her tit slightly and then run my fingertips over her nipple, causing Hermione to buck and shudder beneath me, moaning. Bloody hell. "Oh yes," she says into my mouth. "Yes, Ron, more … please … Oh God." So, of course, I comply, rolling her nipple between my thumb and forefinger while thrusting my tongue into her mouth in rhythm with the movement of our hips.

"You like that, love?" I growl. God, I'm growling.

"Yes, yessssss … don't stop, please."

And again, I'm lost in the moment, a moment I can hardly believe is real. I've pictured something pretty much exactly like this so many times before, but this is really happening. Hermione's skin
feels so velvety and warm beneath my fingertips ... she's a mesmerizing blend of softness and firmness. And her nipple has shrunk to a hard little nub beneath my touch. Every time I brush it or tweak it with the pads of my fingers, she moans in a way I could never have imagined in all my past wanking sessions - and there have been many, all starring this beautiful girl.

We carry on like this, touching and rubbing, and before I know it, Hermione is arching her back, thrusting herself into my hand, opening her lips wide and letting out the deepest, sexiest moan I've ever heard right into my mouth. Blimey, she's coming. This realization sends me over the edge, and suddenly I'm there as well. Something like her name oozes from my lips in a long and probably quite loud groan, but I'm past caring who might hear. I'm done in. I'm wrecked. I'm spent.

We both shiver and squirm for another minute or so, still reeling, and I know I've got to have a huge, dovey grin on my face. But I don't mind looking like the world's biggest prat. I just made Hermione Granger come. And that is just about the greatest thing I have ever accomplished so far in this life. Too bad they don't give out NEWTs for this sort of thing.

Hermione, for her part, is lying back, panting, eyes still shut, but with a look of total relaxation on her face and the slightest hint of a grin. I'm propped up on one arm looking down at her in disbelief. Her breathing is starting to return to normal — mine, too — and slowly she opens her eyes. Seeing my face, she's now positively beaming. God, I love this girl.

"Well, hello," she says in a slightly wicked tone, though the shy smile on her face tells me she may be as shocked as I am that we just, well, went there.

"Hi there," I say, dipping my head down to tap the tip of my nose against hers.

"Did that really just happen?" she asks.

"Yes, I'm pretty sure it did."

"Wow," she says, running the fingers of one hand through my hair while dropping her other hand to my chest, where she's now gripping my jersey once again in her little fist like she did before things got so, er, heated. "This changes everything, you know."

"Is that a promise?" I ask, lifting her hand from my chest and turning it over so I can kiss her palm. She then moves her palm to my cheek and I lean into it, still smiling.

"Yes, that's a promise," she says. "I'm all in, Ron, all in."

"That makes two of us."
The Treehouse

Chapter Summary

After a separation of some weeks, Ron and Hermione are reunited — and ready to take things to the next level.

Chapter 2: The Treehouse

The breeze coming in through the treehouse window ruffles the curls around Hermione's head, picking up the vanilla-ish scent of her shampoo and making me feel even more punch-drunk as we sit on the floor, gently and almost timidly kissing. It's been weeks since our last time alone — that night in the Common Room, before Dumbledore's funeral — and blimey, I missed her so much, I thought I was going 'round the twist. Of course, that night in the Common Room provided me plenty of fodder for many a late-night wank during our summer of "forced separation," as she called it, but there's nothing like the real thing — and the real thing, Hermione, is here now, sitting cross-legged in front of me, leaning in, by the light of that brilliant bluebell flame she conjured, to a sweet kiss that's far more chaste than I originally had in mind when I invited her up here. But I don't want to rush her. I have a hunch she's felt a little funny about what happened that night in the Common Room, thinking maybe we went a little too far, too fast — but I've tried to assure her that, bloody hell, that night was the natural result of something like five years of lust. Five years of lust plus a healthy dose of anxiety, fear, dread, grief and what have you, that is. It was hardly a normal night. And she's got nothing to feel ashamed of. She's bloody perfect. And by "perfect," I mean she's willing to bend the rules now and then, which is one of the things I love most about her.

When Hermione arrived at the Burrow this morning, just after dawn, I wanted to pick her up off her feet and snog her stupid, but one look at her and I realized that was the last thing she needed. She was a right mess. I led her up to my room where she sort of, I dunno, melted into a puddle of tears. I didn't know what else to do but just sit on the bed, pull her into my lap and hold her until she calmed down and could tell me what was wrong. When she finally managed to croak out what she'd done to her parents, I was blown away — she's ruddy brilliant. She feels so guilty about having to face this thing with her parents alone — I should have been there to help her, to support her. There was no way for her to let me know ahead of time, though. But seriously, what other witch of our age could hatch such a plan and make it happen? She's effing amazing. Even as I degnomed the garden later in the afternoon — for the tenth time this week, at mum's urging — I found myself shaking my head and marveling over what she'd done. Hermione Granger. The brightest witch of her age. That title hardly seems big enough for her.

Took some doing getting her up here into the treehouse tonight, I can tell you that. Mum's been on a wedding-preparation rampage, of course, and so the whole household has been slaving away pretty much non-stop, Hermione included. After all the weeks of missing her — with no way to be in touch ("Owls are too dangerous right now!") Mum huffed more than once) — it was driving me mad to finally have Hermione safe and sound at the Burrow without being able to be alone with her, much less touch her.
What I needed was some proof that what happened that night in the Common Room was real, not just another fantasy conjured up in the shower or in the privacy of my four-poster at Hogwarts. 'Course, I know in my head that it was real — and I meant every bloody word I said that night. But after years of figuring she fancied Harry, not me — and she certainly would be mental not to fancy Harry — I guess it was just a shock to find that she really cared for me. The whole thing left me sort of Stupefied, to be honest.

So today, having Hermione so close and yet being unable to be really alone with her all day long … well, it was torture. Even at dinner, when I figured I could at least make some eye contact and maybe even play a little footsie under the table, Mum seated her at the far corner opposite me. Is Mum keeping me away from Hermione on purpose?

After dinner, Hermione offered to clear up — as she always does — and I offered to help — which I usually don't — and I think my spasm of helpfulness, unusual as it was, caught Mum's attention. But I don't ruddy care.

As Hermione used her wand to Levitate the dishes into the sink, I crept up behind her, carrying a platter and a fistful of dirty forks, and leaned toward her ear. "Hermione," I whispered, slightly embarrassed at the moan in my voice. "You're driving me mad. I've got to get you alone somewhere or I'll burst."

I could tell she had a wicked little grin on her face, but she turned it from me and pretended to concentrate on scrubbing the gravy boat in front of her. "Hush, Ron — your mother will hear," she quietly scolded.

"Hermione!" I hissed, placing the platter and forks on the counter with a clatter. "Help a bloke out, for the love of Merlin. I'm crawling the walls."

She turned her face to me and raised an eyebrow — but her do-gooder facade was cracking, I could tell. I can always sense when Hermione Granger is contemplating a serious breach of the law.

"Ron, honestly —"

"I have an idea," I said, cutting her off.

She shot a quick glance toward the dining room table and I looked over my shoulder to follow her gaze. The family and some Order members were all loudly chattering away as usual — something about the wedding, no doubt — and all seemed blissfully unaware that Hermione and I were holding a little confab in the dim light of the kitchen.

She turned toward me and, leaning her bum against the kitchen counter, huffed out a short sigh and crossed her arms over her chest. This gesture, I knew, was meant to intimidate me, but I learned a long time ago that it means she's pretending to be annoyed while actually listening and waiting to be persuaded.

"All right, here's the plan. Meet me in the kitchen at midnight."

"Here, in the kitchen?" she whispered harshly. "You want to snog here, in the kitchen?"

"Hell no," I replied a little too loudly, stealing a quick glance over my shoulder to be sure no one heard. Close one. "No," I repeated, a little more softly. "Just meet me here, OK? I know a place where we can have a little privacy and, I dunno, get caught up on things."

She smirked. "Get caught up? Is that what they're calling it nowadays?"
"Merlin, Hermione, we haven't been together in weeks — yeah, I'd like to get caught up without Mum breaking in to order me to degnome the garden or to have you change the bedsheets for the twentieth time."

"Ron, you know your Mum's house rules as well as I do. 'No boy and girl are to be together alone in the same room while staying under her roof,' period, the end. It's non-negotiable."

"Yeah, well, I'm not talking about doing anything under her roof," I replied perhaps a mite too testily for a bloke who's trying to talk a bird into a snogging session. "I'm talking about the old treehouse by the back meadow."

"What? We can't go outside the wards, Ron — you know that!" she snapped back, again craning her neck quickly to be sure we weren't being overheard by the rest of the family at the dining table.

"It's not outside the wards! It's just within the outer edge. And it's not under her roof — it's mine. The twins and I built that treehouse. What happens in the treehouse has always been our secret, just between us."

She tapped her foot and tightened her grip on her arms — again, a motion that could be misinterpreted by the novice Hermione-watcher as a sign of disapproval, but which I know from years of experience is a signal that she's cottoning on to an idea, despite trying to uphold appearances.

I decided to take a different tack. What's amazing to me is knowing that, a year ago, I might have chosen to start begging at this moment, but things are different between me and Hermione now, and I know now that she responds better to, umm, I guess you might say more commanding forms of persuasion. I lowered my voice an octave and leaned in towards her so our eyes were almost level. "Mione, love — gods, if I can't kiss you, even just for a few minutes, I'll lose my mind," I moaned softly. "Say you'll come with me."

She smiled slightly.

"Come on," I whispered, sensing victory was at hand. I leaned a little closer, placing one hand on either side of her hips, and looked deep into her eyes. "You know you want to. Say it. Be a love and say you will."

"I will," she replied, her face cracking into my favorite I'm-breaking-the-rules-and-it-feels-so-good grin. "Midnight."

So now we're here, huddled inside the treehouse high in the mammoth oak tree, both clad in our pyjamas, and I couldn't resist the little shiver that ran through me when we met in the kitchen and I saw that Hermione had topped off her gray plaid flannels with my Weasley jumper, which stretches down well past her bum. I brought along a couple of quilts, one of which Hermione helpfully Transformed into a cushiony sort of thing that's right comfortable to sit on, though I'd rather be reclining on it if I had my druthers. Again, though, I need to keep myself in check — don't want to make any unwelcome moves.

"Mmmmmmmm," she hums against my lips, and that almost does me in. I place her hands on my crossed ankles, dropping them there, and lift my own hands to the sides of her face, running my tongue along her lips and hoping she'll open up to me.

Thank Merlin, she does — after a moment, that is. And it's bliss. Our tongues are swirling about now, and every now and then we surface for air.
"Good Godric, I've missed you," I breathe into her lips.

"I missed you too, darling," she whispers, and I smile at the Cambridge-y way she says that word — "dah-ling" — knowing somehow that I'm the only one she's ever called such a thing and marveling at the thought. Darling. It kills me every time she says it. "I missed you so much."

I'm taking it as a good sign that she hasn't resisted my deepening this kiss, so I decide now's the time to try to get more comfortable. I've just got to get closer to her. Slowly and carefully, I slip my hands down to her shoulders and nudge her ever so slightly downward. She takes the hint and softly tumbles over, me following, our lips never parting, until she's lying on her side and I'm next to her, leaning on one elbow and loving this new position, because now I can run my free hand over her back and down to her bum — and sweet Merlin, she's not stopping me. I move my lips from her own down to her jawline and then to her neck, and she moans as I run my tongue up and down the side of her throat, as I've dreamed of doing countless times these past few weeks. Her neck is so long and smooth and graceful — Merlin, I sound like a tit again.

But lying here next to her like this, with her little frame curled up next to mine, it's impossible not to notice how petite she is, and it sends a surge through me of something I can't name — protectiveness, I guess, like I don't want anything or anyone to harm her, including me. She's so sweet, even vulnerable in a way, Hermione is — though sometimes people overlook it because they can't see past that "I can handle anything" front she puts up. And look at her — she's gorgeous. It sort of hit me all at once in fourth year — unfortunately at the same time Krum noticed — but she really is. She's beautiful. And, well, graceful. And here I am using all sorts of words that she probably doesn't even think are in my vocabulary. Like graceful and petite and gorgeous — and luscious and irresistible and enchanting and seductive while I'm at it. So sue me.

She's making those little cooing sounds again that make me so mental — murmuring little "oohs" and "mmms" into my hair as I run my lips up and down her neck, and I'm dimly aware that I'm making my share of noises, too — deep grumbles and moans. I'm still propped on one elbow, hovering over her. I'm gripping the back of her head with one hand while the other is roaming from her shoulders down her spine to her bum and back again, feeling my way over the contours of my — well, her — jumper. She is soft and firm in all the right places. She smells delectable — another word that would surprise Hermione.

"Mmmmmmmmm, Mione, if only you knew how many times I've dreamed of being here with you," I say into her neck, maybe louder and more firmly than she expected — but honestly, out here in the solitude of the treehouse, with nothing but cricketsong and the nighttime breeze in the background, I don't give a goblin's damn about volume anymore.

"You have?" she murmurs, running her hands through my hair. Does she know what that does to me?

"Yes, I have, so many times," I say, continuing to run my lips over her neck and down to the bit of collarbone peeking out from beneath her jumper.

"What have you dreamed of, exactly?"

I lift my face away from her neck and prop myself back up on my elbow to look at her properly. She's biting her bottom lip and looking up at me through her eyelashes. "You really want to know?" I ask.

"Yes, I do. At least, I think I do," she says with a winsome little smile.

Blimey. How much should I tell? She looks like she really wants to know — and knowing my
Hermione, when she wants to know something, she usually gets her way. Well, this could be embarrassing, but …

"Well, I've dreamt of kissing you in here for one thing," I say.

"Check," she whispers, still smiling.

"Yeah, check," I say with a laugh. "And I've dreamt of, well" — I pause for a gulp of air before continuing — "umm … seeing you."

"Seeing me?"

"Yeah, you know — uh, seeing parts of you that I, uh, haven't seen yet."

"Oh," she says. She's looking down at my hand now, which is resting on her waist.

Suddenly I feel a little bolder — I don't know why. "And I guess I've thought about, uh, seeing you," I add.

"Yes."

Her eyes are still tilted away from me, and her cheeks are starting to pink up with a blush that's now threatening to light up the room. Crap. Maybe I shouldn't have told her that. Have I gone too far?

"Go on," she says quietly, not moving her gaze from my hand.

Uhhhh, right then. Well. OK. She wants to know more. Shite.

"Umm, I guess I've thought about touching you — and you, uh, you know — touching me," I say.

There's a long silence and, at least to my ears, it seems as if somebody turned up the volume on the crickets outside way, way up. Damn! She probably thinks I'm some sort of a pervert. Good job, Weasley, you wanker.

"You want to see me … and … touch me?" she asks, again so softly that she's barely audible.

I gulp again. "Yeah. Yeah, I do."

To my surprise, she lifts her eyes to mine and grins broadly. "Oh, that's so good to know," she breathes with a heavy sigh.

I can't help but chuckle in disbelief. "Hey, aren't you supposed to be the smartest witch of your age, or haven't you noticed that I've been trying all day to get you alone so I can snog you 'til you can't see straight?"

She giggles. Hermione Granger is giggling in my arms. Well, fuck me.

"Course I want to touch you — and I'll be damned if I don't want you to touch me, too," I add, just to be sure she gets my drift. "You're mental, woman."

She swats my arm lightly and then tugs at my shoulders so that I'm now lying on my side facing her, one arm nestled under her head and the other wrapped around her waist. She pulls back so I can see her face, and she presses her hands against my chest.

"It's just that," she says, pressing her lips together tightly for a moment to gather her thoughts. "It's
just that, well … I hope you like what you see. And touch."

I roll my eyes. "Hermione Granger, I can offer you a 100% fail-safe guarantee that whatever you allow me to see or touch will be the most beautiful thing I've ever seen or touched, because it's you, you nutter," I say rather more sternly than I intended. She smiles. "What I can't guarantee," I add, "is that I will remain conscious. I may be so overwhelmed by my dreams coming true that I pass out."

She shakes my shoulder and says, "Can't you be serious for more than 60 seconds at a time?"

I look up at the ceiling and ponder the question. "Nope."

"Shut it, you!" she squeals, stifling a laugh, and swats me again on the shoulder.

"Good lord, woman, hasn't anyone ever told you that violence never solved anything?"

She's still laughing but I can tell there's a bit of shyness behind it. She's biting her lower lip gently through her smile and looking up at me with her chin tilted down. God, how could she not know how gorgeous she is? "Seriously," I say, taking a stray lock of her hair in hand and curling it between my fingers, "you're so bloody beautiful, and ... well, if you decide to share something this private and special with me ... and you don't have to unless you want to ... how could I be anything but thrilled?"

"Oh, Ron," she answers with a little quiver in her voice. "I'm sorry, it's just that ... despite everything we said to each other that night in the Common Room ... I don't know, it's just been so long since then. I suppose I just allowed some of my old insecurities to get the better of me." She shakes her head, looking bothered. "I apologize — I'm sure I'm not making any sense. You probably wouldn't really understand."

"No — no, I think I do," I say, gripping her waist with my hand and noticing how curvy and slender it is.

"I wish you could understand — it would make things so much easier — but I'm finding that when I'm in your arms like this, I get a little tongue-tied," she says. "Would you think it's weird if ... if ... if I read you a passage from my journal? Something that explains what I'm trying to say?"

I can't help but grin. I knew Hermione kept a journal. I've seen her scribbling away at it in the Common Room so many nights, pausing every now and then to chew her quill and mull over her next words. There have been times when I would have paid every galleon I had to see inside that journal, and here she is offering to read me a chunk of it — for free! How can I say no? But I have to at least try to be a gentleman about it.

"Look, you don't have to read me anything that's too personal or private," I say. "But yeah, if you want to read me something then, yeah, bugger ... I'm all ears."

"Language, Ronald," she smirks as she sits up, grabs her wand and points it toward the window to Ginny's bedroom — which is blessedly open. "Accio Journal," she commands and, within moments, the familiar leather-bound book appears.

She smiles bashfully at me as she settles back down on her side with the journal in hand. This time she's the one propped up on one elbow, and I'm lying down below, looking up at her and admiring her in the semi-darkness. Her hair, which had been pulled into a neat plait when we first came up here, has fallen into a mess of curls — and I love it, especially now, backlit as it is by the moonlight outside. She's so beautiful.
She lights the tip of her wand, flicks her eyes toward me — I'm guessing she's a little nervous to be sharing this with me, but I'm genuinely interested and she must have seen it in my face that she can trust me. So she thumbs her way to the proper page.

"I wrote this just a few weeks before the end of term," she explains. "You and I were speaking again, you had chucked Lavender, but I was still unsure of, um, what was going on," she says, waving her hand back and forth between us. "You know, whether I had a chance to, umm, get your attention."

"You always had my undivided attention, I assure you."

"Ha! As if," she says with a grin. "Anyway, we were sitting together in the Common Room one night, waiting for Harry, I think, when I wrote this. I was pretending to do homework but, really, I was just sort of studying you."

I laugh. "I reckon I must have been doing the same thing," I reply.

"Really?" she says breathlessly, a thunderstruck smile on her face.

Mental, this one is. "Egads, Hermione, that's what I did practically every night since fourth year."

She sighs and shakes her head. "Right. So … where were we? Oh yes, the journal. OK, well, this should give you some idea of my mental state back then. Maybe it'll help you understand how much I have to unlearn some of my past beliefs."

"OK, I'm ready," I say.

"Here goes nothing," she replies, smiling, and turns her attention back to the book. She clears her throat, raises her left eyebrow, and begins reading in the clear, confident tone that I have come to think of as Classroom Hermione:

"15 APRIL 1997

"The truth is, I'm just going to have to come to terms with reality. Ronald Weasley may have certain feelings for me, but I shouldn't make more of them than they really are. First of all, he's a randy teenage boy, I'm a girl and, ipso facto, he's going to have certain impulses that have more to do with his brainless male anatomy than have to do with any special regard he may have for me personally. Second, I'm his friend — one of his two best friends, thank you very much — and so naturally he would care enough not to want to hurt my feelings intentionally. So, if he senses that I'm attracted to him, he wouldn't necessarily want to do or say anything that would break my heart. He'd try to let me down easy. The Lavender thing, in light of this truth, was an anomaly. A big, fat, annoying anomaly, but an anomaly nonetheless."

I snort out a laugh, and she lowers the book for a moment to smack me on the arm with it.

"Oi!" I shout.

"Shut it, Ronald — this is hard for me!"

"All right, all right, woman — go on," I say, rubbing my arm melodramatically. I can't wipe the grin off my face, but Hermione seems slightly rattled now. I have a feeling we're about to get to the hard part, because the mood has changed. She's now speaking in the tone I'm coming to know as Pre-Snog-Session Hermione — a little shy and unsure.

"The third issue — and this is the hardest to acknowledge, but acknowledge it I must — is that I
quite simply am not Ron Weasley's type nor have I ever been. Judging by Ron's romantic history (such as it is) up until now, he has been attracted to a grand total of three drop-dead gorgeous, buxom, curvaceous, sexy, enticing, outgoing and eminently fanciable blondes: Madam Rosmerta, Fleur Delacour, and Lavender Brown. I, Hermione Granger, have nothing more in common with this trio than the fact that, well, we all walk upright and, as best I can tell, we all have all of our own teeth."

I let out a grunt of disapproval — but she flashes her eyes at me and I realize I'm supposed to shut it and keep listening. So be it.

"No, facts are facts," she continues. "Despite whatever glimmers of attraction Ron Weasley may broadcast in my general direction, the truth is that I am not what he is really looking for. I need to accept this."

She holds up a hand to quiet me down before I can interrupt again.

"I may have dodged a bullet, as muggles would say, when Ron finally got around to chucking Lavender Brown, but eventually Ron will find the woman of his dreams, and it could happen sooner than I think. When Ron survived the poisoning, I promised myself that, no matter what, I would be his friend for life and I would never again let any dispute cause me to neglect our friendship as I had done while he was dating Lavender. I privately pledged that I would do whatever it takes to guarantee his happiness — including facing down Voldemort himself, if I have to. But, until now, I hadn't really pondered this one possibility: That when Ron does find his soul mate — and he will, because no man as, well, Ron-like as he is will remain unattached for long — I'm going to have to find a way to live with it. I'm going to have to learn how to manage in a world where Ron Weasley is happily in love with someone else.

"She's out there somewhere, and she's very likely a tall, lovely blonde. Obviously he doesn't like the loud, brassy type or he'd still be with Lavender, so this blonde he's seeking will be different from Lav-Lav — she'll be sweet-natured and demure, she'll be a home-and-hearth type, she'll be quiet and docile. She'll be kind and smart — but not scary-smart — and she'll smother him with the kind of love he deserves. She'll be pretty but modest about it. She'll be warm and friendly to me because I'm Ron's friend. Damn it, I'll probably like her. She's a Hufflepuff, most likely. Hufflepuff is loaded with girls who fit this description. Who's that fourth-year Hufflepuff who's always making eyes at Ron in the corridors — Cecilia Middlebrooks, was that her name? Oh, great. Cecilia's sweet as can be. He'd go mad for her.

"And then, after a brief but intense courtship, he'll marry her. Ronald Bilius Weasley — my Ronald Bilius Weasley — will get married. To someone else. Cecilia Middlebrooks, maybe.

"And he's a family man, Ron is — the ultimate family man, isn't he. That's just one of the many reasons I love him so much. And because he's a family man, he and Cecilia or whoever … they're not going to waste any time. They're going to dive right in and have babies. Scads of them. An adorable, freckled assortment of blonde and ginger kids — three of each color.

"And me? I'll pop 'round their place on holidays bearing dentist-approved treats and I'll visit for family gatherings — the maiden auntie, the one who takes said kids to the British Museum on Sundays or spirits them to my flat for sleepovers so their parents can go off on a long-overdue weekend getaway to Hogsmeade for a second honeymoon.

"Oh, gods."

There's a long pause, during which time we both stare at the journal in her hands, and I notice the sound of the branches outside swaying in the breeze. She closes the journal, sets it beside her on
the floor, and sniffles a little bit, and that spurs me to speak. "Hermione, I never … I mean … that's mental, you know, the idea of you as an old spinster aunt. Even if I never snapped out of it and made a move on you, you would never, ever wind up alone like that."

By now, I'm no longer lying back. I've slowly lifted myself so I'm leaning back on my arms — the better to see her face in the wandlight — and I'm just mesmerized by everything I've been hearing. Hermione Granger thought she wasn't what I was looking for? That's completely deranged. But then, I didn't really give her much reason to think otherwise, did I? Bugger.

She extinguishes the light of her wand and slowly lays back down onto the quilt she Transformed into a cushion beneath us. She has a pensive look on her face. She's waiting for me to say more.

I swivel on my hips to face her. "Gods, I knew I'd hurt you with the Lavender business. And, truth be told, I really meant to, at least at first — which makes me a right bastard, I know. But I had no idea it went that deep, honestly. I was just so crazy jealous that Krum was your first snog, not me, and —"

"Wait, what?" she says, cutting me off.

"It's fine, don't worry, I get it. It's water under the bridge, isn't it? But it really got to me that I wasn't your first snog — Vicky was — and I couldn't —"

"That's not true, Ron," she says, pulling herself up to sit with her legs crossed, her back straight as a rail.

"Huh? What's not true?"

"Viktor and I never snogged," she says heatedly. "Where did you ever hear such a thing?"

"Hermione, it's OK. I mean, he's an international Quidditch star and he fancied you like mad, as plenty of blokes have, I'll have you know, and Merlin knows you deserved the attention and you had no reason to wait for me to pull my head out of my arse. I get it. It doesn't really mean anything anymore, and I really am fine with it. Or at least I'm trying to be."

"You can't be fine with it because there's nothing to be fine with, Ron! Listen to what I'm saying to you: I never snogged Viktor."

"Wait, are you serious?"

"Dead serious," she says, searching my face with her eyes. "Who told you that I did?"

I gulp and slump back down to the floor to lie on my back, covering my eyes with my arms.

"Ginny."

"Ginny? Ginny told you I snogged Viktor? Why would she do that?"

"Don't be cross with Ginny — it's not really her fault. We were rowing. The details aren't important now except that I was being a pig-headed prat — no surprise. I walked in on her snogging Dean and she had some choice words for me about minding my own business, and then she tossed in some stuff about how everybody else in the world had snogged by now — Harry had snogged Cho, you had snogged Viktor, and how I was the only loser who hadn't gotten around to it yet. I'm sure she had no idea she had just shattered my heart into about a thousand pieces. But I deserved it. I was being an arse."

"Sounds like you were," Hermione says in a much softer and quieter voice. "But you didn't deserve
that, Ron — especially since what she told you wasn't true."

"Hmmm," I say, my arms still crossed over my eyes.

"Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"May I ask you a question?"

I shrug. "Sure."

"When did you and Ginny have this row?"

I stop to think — and then I remember. "It was right before the match against Slytherin."

"So, after I asked you to Slughorn's Christmas party?"

"Yeah, yeah it was."

"Oh, Merlin," she whispers. "That explains a lot."

"I'm so sorry, Hermione. I was such an idiot. It wasn't hard for me to believe that Krum had snogged you — hell, I wanted to so badly, and yet I couldn't imagine how I could compete with someone like him. And —"

"Ron, please," she says, lifting my arms away from my face. "Look at me."

I drop my arms to my sides and look up to see her sitting above me, tears pooling in her brown eyes.

She places one hand gently on my chest and slides down to lie down next to me in the crook of my arm, with her head nestled on my shoulder. "We really did a number on one another back then, didn't we?" she whispers, rubbing her hand up and down my chest ever so slowly.

I gather her into my arms and squeeze her gently. "Yeah, I reckon we did."

"I won't lie, Ron. Viktor did kiss me — three times, to be exact. And I liked it. I liked the attention. It was flattering. But it was a far cry from snogging. It was all very innocent, really, and I knew it would go no further because, well, Viktor wasn't you," she says, lifting her head for a moment to look into my eyes before settling back down to her previous position. "I so wanted you to be my first kiss — I really did — and I'm sort of sad now that you weren't. But … what's the point of regrets? We're together now," she says, grasping a bunch of my shirt in her fist, "and that's what matters."

"You're right, as usual," I say, planting a kiss on the top of her head. "But still, hearing what you wrote ... all that stuff ... well, I've got a lot to make up for, I suppose." I run my hands up and down her back, pulling her closer to me. "I'm gobsmacked to hear you say you didn't think you're my type. For Merlin's sake — you're it for me. You always have been. I mean, Rosmerta who?"

She chuckles and slaps my chest playfully, then raises her hand to my chin. Our eyes meet. Then, she looks down at my lips and pulls herself up and forward to kiss me deeply. She's pressing her chest against mine, and I'm loving the feel of her body moving against me — she's light as air — and she's running her fingers through my hair while I'm wrapping my arms tightly around her middle. She's making those little cooing moans again.
She pulls back to catch her breath and she presses her cheek to mine.

"I love you so much, Ronald Weasley," she whispers.

"I love you too, Hermione Granger," I answer. "But tell me more about this Cecilia Middlebrooks," I add, earning myself a giant smack on the chest.

"Not funny, Weasley," she says, her cheek still pressed to mine. But I can tell she's trying not to laugh.

"All right, all right. Again with the violence. Sheesh."

"Just don't forget that I'm capable of it, mister."

"Sorted," I say, shifting our weight and flipping her over so that she's on her back now and I'm lying on my hip, looking down at her beautiful, smiling face. "So, I'm your first proper snog, then?"

"Yes, you are."

"That's as it should be," I say, grinning cheekily.

"Is that so?" she answers, twining her arms 'round my neck.

"Yes, that is most definitely so," I say, tucking her more firmly against me and running a hand over her flannel-covered bum.

"And why is that?"

"I thought we had already firmly established the whys and wherefores, Miss Granger, back in the Common Room," I say very softly, in a voice that comes out darker and deeper than I expected. She bites her lip in response and her eyes widen, but she is pulling me closer. I lock my eyes on hers. "You. Are. Mine." I press my forehead to hers. Lately I've been surprising even myself with the thoughts that come out of my head on the subject of Hermione Granger, but I can't help it — they're there and they need to be said. And she doesn't seem to object. Quite the contrary. Hermione Granger, who has never backed down from a fight with me ever, is happily allowing me to declare Checkmate — and my heart is soaring. I'll be damned. "No one else — no one — can have you now, can they," I toss in for good measure. She shakes her head timidly. "You belong to me now," I say, kissing her lightly, before pulling back to add, "if that's all right with you, that is."

Hermione responds with a deep, slow moan and meets my lips with her own. This kiss is deeper than any other we've shared tonight — our tongues are dueling, but she's letting mine win. I'm thrusting my tongue deep into her sweet, soft mouth and she's — oh, gods — she's sucking on it, even as my hips involuntarily mirror the movement against hers. I stretch one leg over both of hers and pull the lower part of her body closer to mine. She drops her arms from my shoulders down to my lower back and presses me against her. Now I'm fully on top of her and her hands are cupping my bum, rising and falling with the rhythm of my hips.

"This is where you belong, right here," I murmur against her lips, realizing that I'm once again slipping into the verbal nonsense that oozed out of my brain during our Common Room snog session — but it somehow feels right.

"Oh yes, Ron," she sighs. "Yesssss."

"You're mine, aren't you," I pant.
"Yes," she says, pressing our bodies more firmly together.

"Say it."

"I'm yours, Ron."

For a bloke who's never had much of anything that's ever really belonged to him, these words are downright intoxicating. I know I'm a possessive git, but I'm drunk on the idea — and the baffling thing is, Hermione doesn't seem to mind.

"That's right, love, forever," I say, and I plunge back in for another taste of her mouth. She complies so sweetly. She's scrumptious. I squeeze her tighter against me and roll onto my back. She squeaks in surprise at her new position atop my chest and chuckles before pulling my lower lip between hers and sucking firmly. I return the favor when she's through, drawing my lips over her upper lip first before taking her lower lip between mine and nibbling on it ever so lightly. She purrs her approval.

"Do you remember what we were talking about earlier?" I whisper.

"Hmm?" she hums distractedly as she kisses my chin and then down to my neck.

"The things that I've dreamed of doing with you in this treehouse," I remind her.

"Ohhhhhhh," she breathes into my neck, and I can hear the grin in it.

"Oh indeed," I say.

She props herself up on my chest and wipes some stray locks of hair away from her forehead. "It was a while ago now, but I do seem to recall some of it," she says, smiling.

I pause to take her in for a moment. Her lips are slightly swollen now, making her look all the more kissable, and her hair is a wild mass of curls. Her eyes, so dark in this light, are studying my face, and she's lightly splaying her fingers across my chest.

"I want to see you," I murmur.

She knits her brow. "See me?"

"Yes."

She breaks into a shy little grin. "Well … that makes perfect sense." I raise an eyebrow in response. "After all," she says, "why shouldn't a man want to see what belongs to him?"

She's going to be the death of me, this girl.

With that, she sits up and primly tucks her legs beneath her, sitting about a foot away from me. She reaches for the hem of her jumper. "Is this what you had in mind?" she asks with an arch in her brow. I nod. Slowly, carefully, she lifts the jumper and pulls it over her head and off her arms, revealing a creamy-colored flannel pyjama top beneath. It has short sleeves and a row of tiny buttons up the front — very feminine, but not in an over-the-top, Lavender-ish kind of way. Modest, simple and understated — just like Hermione — and I feel a throb pass through me so powerfully that she might as well be wearing a black lace negligee. Not that I would mind seeing Hermione in a black lace negligee, you understand, but somehow the sight of my sweet girl in this innocent-looking pyjama top is causing a powerful electric current to buzz from one end of my body to the other.
She drops her gaze to the buttons on the front of her top, flicks her eyes to mine, bites down on her lower lip and then returns her gaze back to her buttons. She brings both hands slowly to the bottom button and undoes it ever so carefully, looking up again quickly to check my reaction. Then she undoes the next button, and then the next one, until her top is peeking open from the bottom up and I can see her belly button. I gulp. Her belly button is perfect — just as I imagined — a little indentation in her otherwise flat stomach, and there's a mole right next to it that I fully intend to run my lips over as soon as humanly possible. She hesitates on the last button, looking up with a shy smile one last time and then down again to open it up. Gradually, she parts the top open just a bit, and the underside of her right breast is revealed to me, and I just about lose it right there — before reminding myself that there's more to see. She opens her shirt fully now and then quickly slips it off her shoulders, almost as if she wants to get it done before she can change her mind.

The next sound to be heard is me taking in a sharp breath of air through my clenched jaw. Gods, her tits are ab-so-fucking beautiful. Just beautiful. They're perfect, actually. I tried so hard to imagine what they would look like, and I could never quite get it right — always too round or too pointy or too big or too flat or whatever — but here they are and they're perfect. Just right. Firm-looking, curvy, perfect handfuls — not too big, not too small. They suit her. She's still sitting about a foot away, just far enough that I can take her all in.

I drag my eyes up to her face — I realize I've been shamelessly staring at her chest — but judging by the little smile on her lips — which reminds me, ridiculously, of the time she set Snape's robes on fire — I'm guessing she's not that arsed about it. If anything, she seems to be having a private laugh at the frying-pan-to-the-back-of-the-head reaction I'm displaying. But I can't help it — this is better than any daydream I've ever had. Hermione Granger, in the flesh.

"You're so beautiful, Hermione," I say firmly, looking directly into her eyes. "You've got to know that."

She shrugs.

"You are bloody gorgeous. I can't believe how gorgeous you are."

She smiles and shrugs again, shaking her head slightly. Now I'm embarrassing her — and I can tell that she doesn't really believe me. But I figure I've got a lifetime to convince her of the truth of my words. In the meantime, I can't keep my eyes from migrating back down to her breasts, the objects of so many wanking sessions for years and years and years.

"Touch them," I say to her — and this demand seems to surprise her, because her eyebrows shoot up about an inch and she says, "Hmm?"

"Touch them for me, love," I repeat, again meeting her eyes directly. She's still surprised, and I am, too, truth be told. But again, I have an urge and I don't see any reason not to go with it.

She seems to be coming to the same conclusion that I am — that whatever this weird, stream-of-consciousness inspiration is that's pouring out of my head, it's kind of a turn-on, so why fight it? Because the next thing I know, a wicked grin flickers across her face again before she adopts a more serious expression and then lifts her hands to just hover over each nipple. Our eyes meet again. I nod. And that does it. She lowers her hands to her chest and lightly fingers each nipple. And I am watching, still lying on my back, thinking I may just cream my pyjamas this very second. Holy buggering fuck — my Hermione is touching her breasts, right in front of me, and now she's graduating from feather-light caresses to running her palms over the surface of her tits and squeezing them tighter than I would have dared. Good Godric.

"Hermione, love," I say, raising myself to a sitting position. My cock is pounding to the rhythm of

She reaches out with both hands, takes my left hand, and slowly lifts it toward her right breast. I've felt her before, that night in the Common Room, but it's different to see things, and I'm straining to believe that all this is actually happening.

My skin makes contact with hers and it's … so … warm. The surface is smooth and soft. I shift so the weight of her breast is cupped in the palm of my hand and I notice how firm and just, well, lovely her flesh is … how sweet … and — what is the word? — *supple,* that's it … and I'm just overcome. Hermione trusts me, she's letting me touch her in a way I know that no one has ever touched her before … letting me see things that no one has ever seen before … and I know it makes me sound like a ponce but I'm just sort of moved by the whole experience. God, I love her so much. I take her other breast in my other hand and just, well, weigh them, running my thumbs gently over the surface while she glides her hands up and down my arms. I look up into her face and she chuckles softly again — I'm sure I must be wearing a ridiculous expression — but then I lift my right hand to her cheek and kiss her gently.

"Thank you for letting me look at you, love," I say. "Thank you so much. You're incredible. You're even more beautiful than I imagined, and I've imagined you for years."

I look down at her chest again and that's when I notice the faint pink scar slanting across it, starting at her right collarbone, curving over her caramel-colored nipple and and descending between her breasts down to her left ribcage — a remnant of her injury at the Department of Mysteries. I gently slide the fingertips of my right hand over it and she shivers. "Even this is beautiful," I whisper, "because it reminds me what a brave little badass my girl is." I lightly kiss the line where the scar crosses her collarbone. "And it reminds me how close I came to losing you. It'll always remind me of how much I want to protect you."

She wraps her arms around my neck and we're kissing again. "Oh darling," she breathes. With one hand still caressing her breast, I reach my arm around her waist and pull her to me. I'm sitting on the cushion and she's now kneeling between my legs, skimming her hands up and down my arms, bringing her breasts within kissing distance of my lips. I can't resist. I carefully, gently cover her left nipple with my lips and am taken aback by the depth of the moan that escapes Hermione's mouth. She moans, tosses her head back and clasps her hands around my head and deep into my hair — an encouraging sign indeed. Emboldened by her response, I flick my tongue back and forth over her hardened nipple, and then suck on it, at first lightly and then more firmly. Now Hermione is quite literally squirming in my arms and moaning my name. I have landed smack dab in the middle of Heaven.

"Yesssssss, Ron … don't stop," she says.

I'm not even remotely interested in stopping. In fact, I'm just getting started. I continue to kiss, suck, lick and nibble at one breast and then the other while running my hands down her back and beneath the elastic waistband of her flannel pjama bottoms. Reaching down I feel the velvety skin of her bum and give it a squeeze with both hands. She murmurs her approval, placing a hand under her right breast, which I'm now sucking tenderly, and she cradles it, as if to hold it in place for me as I continue feasting on it. God, she feels so good.

"Ooooooh, Ronald," she coos, dropping kisses on my neck and shoulders. "I love your arms … your shoulders … your back." She sucks in a deep breath through her nostrils. "You're so strong — so virile."

I'm not even entirely sure what "virile" means, truth be told, but I'm pretty sure it's something
about being manly, and that's all I need — I suddenly feel like the cave-man I warned her about becoming.

I pull her toward me and slowly lower us both so that I'm lying on my back and she's above me again, somehow keeping my lips in contact with her breast the entire time. Then I flip us over so she's beneath me and I lean back.

"Show me more," I say, tucking my fingers into her pyjama bottoms again for a moment and giving her bum another squeeze. "I want to see all of you."

She seems a little more sure of herself this time, a little less hesitant. I lean back to give her the room she needs to hook her thumbs into her waistband and slowly slip her pyjamas down. She pulls them past her knees, kicks them off, and then lies back and drapes one arm across her waist, one over her head. Now she's wearing nothing but a bashful smile.

Blimey.

I'm trying not to be too much of a perv, ogling her like she's a Nimbus 2000, but it can't be helped. I've just never seen such an extraordinary sight. Her legs look longer than I expected for such a tiny girl, and at the point where her legs meet her tummy, there's an enticing little patch of light brown, curly hair. More perfection.

"Hermione, I don't have the words to describe … Merlin, don't you know how sexy you are?"

"Ron," she says, blushing furiously.

"You are. You truly are. Every bit of you." I reach out and run my fingers lightly over her left nipple, causing her to close her eyes, inhale deeply through her nostrils again, press her knees together and point her toes.

"Does that feel good?" I ask, knowing the answer.

"God, yes," she says, eyes shut tight.

I do it again, and she bucks her hips in response, her knees still pressed tightly together.

"I've never done this before," I say. It just slips out. I didn't really mean to say it — at least not right now, when I should be letting my hands do the talking. Fuck.

She opens her eyes. "Really?"

"Really."

"Oh. I guess … I reckoned that you and Lavender —"

"Nope."

She stifles a smile, but I saw it there for a millisecond. "Why?" she asks.

"Because she wasn't you," I say, figuring I might as well be honest, and she seems to recognize her words being repeated back to her. But they're true. "I always wanted this with you."

"Oh Ron," she says, a little hitch in her voice. "I'm so glad."

I'm cupping her breast in my hand again and stroking it rather absent-mindedly with my thumb, lost for words. She's making those sexy little humming noises again and her eyes have once again
drifted shut as she squirms beneath my touch. The horny bastard in me says, "Enough talking, already!" but I'm overruling him for once. This is too big. I've got a feeling there's something that needs to come out of this thick skull of mine but, as usual, I won't really know what it is until I start. So here goes.

"Listen, Hermione," I whisper, and her eyes pop open. She places one hand on my cheek and rests the other on the back of the hand that's fondling her breast, wordlessly encouraging me to keep doing what I'm doing. Her eyes meet mine and, gods, they're so deep and dark and warm. My mind wanders around in them for a minute before I recollect what I was up to. Oh yeah.

"It seems like maybe we both needed some, I dunno, reassurance, I suppose you might say, over these last few weeks being apart," I say, my hand still caressing the underside of her breast, and she nods. "Sounds like you let yourself second-guess all that happened and all that we said back there in the Common Room that night — and I don't blame you. I did, too."

"I did, Ron — and I'm sorry," she says, looking up into my face with a furrowed brow. "I know I should have more confidence, but it's just hard to drive it into my brain that you've always fancied me as much as I've fancied you. That night was like a dream. And when I found myself back home in Cambridge without you, it was easy to let my mind play tricks on me, to tell myself that I'm awake now, and that night was just another fantasy. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, unfortunately, I do — because I was doing pretty much the same thing here in Devon," I say, leaning in to the hand she has pressed to my cheek and planting a kiss on her palm. "I never doubted the stuff I had to say that night — but I started to doubt that the stuff you had to say was for real. Mental, yeah?"

"Not really," she says with a sad little shrug. "I think we both are going to need some convincing from time to time."

"Right, well … I guess that's what I'm on about right now," I say, giving her breast a slight squeeze and noticing how it moves in my hand. "I want you to know that I absolutely, positively meant everything I said that night, and then some." I nod and look to her to be sure she's still with me. She nods back. So, OK, she's hanging in there. "This runs deep for me — and yeah, there's stuff I didn't say that night that I couldn't say because the time's just not right yet. But honest, I stand by all of it. All of it. I'll look after you as best I can. I'll protect you — or I'll die trying. And when this whole shitshow with You-Know-Who is over, I'll do everything I can to try to make you happy. Because you're it for me, Mione … I love you, and I'll never forget how lucky I am that you love me back."

Tears are leaking out of the corners of her eyes, but I've finally figured out that these are the good kind.

"Oh, Ronald — I meant everything I said that night, too," she whispers, slipping her hand from my cheek up into my hair. "I missed you so much while we were apart. I tried so hard to be strong, putting my plan in place for my parents, researching the spellwork, getting everything sorted, worrying about Harry — but I realized I'm really no good without you, Ron. You keep me sane. You keep me grounded. I never want to be disconnected from you like that ever again. I'll go mad."

I lay on my side so we're facing one another again, mesmerized by what she's telling me. It doesn't seem to faze her that she's devoid of all clothing and I'm still wearing every stitch of my pyjamas — an old T-shirt from Charlie's dragon camp in Romania and a beat-up pair of flannel trousers. We're just locked on one another's faces right now — there's still so much left to say. She's stroking my chest and looking straight into my eyes.

I shift my hand to her waist and feel the curves of her hip and her bum, waiting, because I can tell,
from years of listening to Hermione talk, that there's more.

"You really have no idea, do you," she says.

I shrug and shake my head, smiling sheepishly.

"Oh, Ron," she says, grasping my bicep and squeezing it firmly.

"No idea of what?" I say after a pause.

She shakes her head in exasperation. "No idea how much I need you, how powerful you are," she answers as she idly massages my chest and shoulders. I suck in a deep breath of air.

"You know I've thought about this a lot, so bear with me," she continues with an adorably serious expression — adorable because, of course, she's having a typical Hermione-esque conversation with me while lying in my arms completely starkers. "I think because you were born and raised in the wizarding world, you have a tendency to regard certain aspects of yourself as being so, well, commonplace and ordinary as to be hardly worth noticing — you can't deny it's true."

I shrug and nod slightly.

"I've watched you for years, and I honestly think your magic operates on a totally intuitive level. You trust your gut, your instincts. And, when you're not overthinking it, the magic that flows out of you is so naturally elegant. You're a brilliant wizard, Ronald, powerful in an elemental way. At the same time, you see the big picture, the tactics, the strategy. You can anticipate what others will do. And people listen to you — you're a natural leader. You are so, so clever."

She wraps her hands around my face to be sure I'm listening.

"You undervalue yourself. I know you do," she whispers, cupping my cheek in one hand while running the fingers of her other hand over my fringe and then through my hair. "Harry and I, we need you, darling. We're not complete without you. I'm not complete without you. Please, never forget it."

I purse my lips in an effort to control my emotions, and I can feel the heat rising to my ears — a sure sign that they're turning bright red. What did I ever do to deserve this girl? She could have anybody at Hogwarts — or beyond, for that matter — but she's here with me and, Merlin, she loves me. I'll never understand it, but … a feeling starts to surge in me as I consider what she's said, as I try to see myself as she sees me, and it's so warm and so strong. I have no words for it, but I figure it must be Love — the kind Dumbledore was always on about — and I can't resist it. I'm riding the crest of a tremendous wave, and it's so potent. I lean in and crush my lips to hers, and she settles onto her back, pulling me over her, and I can't help myself — I'm bursting with energy all of a sudden, even though it's got to be like 1:30 in the morning at this point. I couldn't care less. I feel like I could run a marathon, I'm so turned on. And Hermione is right there with me, clutching me to her like her life depends on it.

"You are, Ron, you are — you're my hero," she whispers back.

"It means so much — everything — to hear you say that," I whisper between kisses to her throat, sliding my hand from its present position on her bum to her belly, and then down to the tuft of soft, curly hair between her legs. "Mmm … Mione … Mione, love … be my girl, always … I want to
build my whole world around you."

"Always," she says, opening her legs slightly to accommodate my hand, which I realize is quite large compared to her tiny figure. "Mmmm, yes, don't stop, Ron. Please … please."

I shift my weight, now lying on my side, to make room and lower my hand down between her legs, feeling my way through a warm, slick, irresistible maze of curls and fleshy folds. I have no buggering idea what I'm doing but, for some reason, I'm not the slightest bit worried about it. Years of listening to George and Fred's advice — and exaggerated boasting — is finally paying off. I am touching her in a way that I imagine I'd like to be touched, and it seems to be working because Mione is writhing beneath my hand, moaning my name. Fred and George flash in my mind again — and I'm about to chase them out because, honestly, why am I thinking of those two idiots right now? But then I remember the unsolicited advice that they forced on me last summer: "If you want to know how to know how to make a witch's toes curl and cry out your name, Ronniekins," Fred said with a wiggle of his eyebrows — "and we know you do..."

"Have her show you how she does it to herself," George finished with a grin.

Having five older brothers wasn't always a picnic, but at times like this, I can't help but be thankful.

"Show me," I murmur into Hermione's ear. "Show me how you like to be touched."

I realize I'm asking her to show me a very private thing, but I want to know how best to please her — and who better to ask? She opens her eyes and looks at me for a moment before shutting them again, a blush rising in her cheeks as she bites her lip, then she apparently decides to trust me because she slides her right hand underneath mine, where it's resting between her legs, and strokes herself, slowly at first and then a little faster. I clasp my hand over hers and mirror her movement, and come to realize pretty quickly that the middle finger is where the action is. Her hand is so tiny in mine, and I figure that if she can give herself pleasure with her tiny little fingers, I can probably do so much more for her with mine.

I lean down to her ear and ask, "Do you think of me when you touch yourself?"

"Yes," she admits, and I feel an immediate jolt to my middle as I picture her pleasuring herself in her four-poster at Hogwarts. Dear lord. I wonder if my todger could possibly get any harder — I'm ridiculously turned on right now.

"That's right. Teach me what you like," I rasp, hoping I'm appealing to some inner schoolroom fantasy of hers. "Teach me. Teach me how to love you."

She moans again, speeding up the movement of her finger, and I decide I've got the hang of it and can take it from here. "Let me," I say as I lift her hand up, placing it on her belly as I return my fingers to her folds. "Just relax and let me make you feel good, yeah?" I resume fingering her between her legs and then, finding her opening, I have a stroke of inspiration and experimentally slip a finger inside, causing her to buck her hips and hiss, "Oh, yessssss, Ron. Oh, God. Right there. Right there."

She's touching her breasts again now with both hands, and I lower my face to the one nearest me on her left and start sucking it while continuing to caress her between her legs, occasionally dipping my finger inside, and soon her hips are thrusting upward almost in time with every stroke of my hand. Her breathing is getting shallower and I can tell she's close but I can also tell she's holding back just a little bit — I sense maybe she's worried about letting go completely, looking silly, seeming wanton, some mental shite like that. So I raise my face to the crook of her neck and tell her, "You're so beautiful when you're wild like this. So beautiful. I love you so much."
She hums in appreciation. "Oh, God, I'm ... so close," she whispers, then holds her breath.

"Come on, love — come for me," I say. "Come for me."

And a few seconds later, I hear it before I can see it — a long, low moan that sounds something like my name. Her hand is gripping my bicep tightly. I raise my head and see that her back is arched, her toes are pointed, and her mouth is open in an "O." "Oh, yessssss," she finally shouts — so loud I'm glad I Muffliatoed the place — "yes, Ron, yes!"

I move my hand up, away from her legs and to her belly, stroking it gently as she comes down. Her breathing is ragged, her eyes are still shut, but there's a big, drunken grin on her face. She's exquisite, especially now. Her face is kind of, I dunno, dewy, and she's practically glowing. After a few minutes of letting her breathing even out as I drop sloppy kisses on her neck and shoulder, she lets out a deep, shuddering sigh. "Merlin — that was," she pauses, looking for the right word. "That was ab-so-fucking-lutely incredible."

We both dissolve into laughter. "Language, Granger!" I cough.

"Obviously, you're a bad influence on me," she says between chuckles, still breathing heavily.

"Obviously."

"I love you so much."

"I love you, too."

"Hey, do you know what I just noticed?" she continues, rolling onto her side to look me in the face, her cheeks still pink from exertion.

"No, what?"

She reaches down and tucks a hand under the hem of my T-shirt to stroke my waist. "You still have all your clothes on, Mr. Weasley," she says with a pout. "That's hardly fair."

"I may not be fair, but I quite like it this way," I say with an evil grin, but my grin falters for a second as she reaches around behind me and slides her hand down into my flannel trousers and rubs my bum. "Oh, God," I moan. "I'll give you exactly five hours to quit doing that, Granger."

"Yes, sir," she says, pulling her hands away, rolling me over onto my back and peeling the T-shirt off my upper body. The next thing I know, she's kneeling next to me and running her hands up and down my chest and over my shoulders. "Ron," she says, "You. Are. So. Stunning."

"You're getting me confused with you, love."

"No — have you looked in the mirror lately?"

"Yeah, it told me this morning that I need a haircut."

"Oh, no, don't cut it. I like it long," she says, her hands still roaming my torso. "And yes, you're stunning. Your shoulders have broadened this year. And your arms, they're so — "

"Scarred?"

"Well, yes, there are scars there — and I quite like them," she says, tracing the slightly whitened lines left on my arms by those bloody brains with her fingertips, and the scars tingle slightly at her touch in a way I've never noticed until now. Before I can give it much thought, she's talking again,
and I let myself be lulled back into the present. "Some men put tattoos on their arms to prove to the world that they're fierce. You don't have to. These scars do the job for you — they say everything I need to know about you."

I can't help but smile.

"But I wasn't thinking of your scars. I was thinking of your muscles. All that Quidditch practice has done you good, darling," she says with a smile. "You're quite fit, and don't think girls don't notice, because they do. Though I'll hex any one of them who dares to even think about sneaking a love potion into one of your Chocolate Cauldrons ever again."

"No worries — you the only one for me."

"Good," she says, and then runs her hands down my abdomen to the top of my pyjama trousers. She pauses there before slowly moving her hand lower. She touches me through the fabric — which feels bloody amazing, by the way — and her eyes widen. "Oh my goodness" she whispers. "I didn't … I mean … it's, um … big."

Now, I don't think there's a bloke alive who wouldn't be right chuffed to hear his girlfriend say something like this when she first feels his knob, and I can assure you that I'm no exception. "It's all for you, love," I tell her.

"You got that right, Weasley," she answers. God, I love this girl.

Before I know it, she's got hold of the waistband of my trousers. She gives them a little tug and then slips them down my legs, tossing them aside. Her eyes are riveted on my cock, which is as hard as a fucking railroad spike right now and honestly bigger than even I have ever seen it. She studies it with a wary grin on her face, biting her lower lip every now and then.

The scrutiny is making me feel restless, so take matters into my own hands, so to speak. I fold my left arm behind my head and, with my right hand, I grip myself — an action that causes Hermione's eyes to widen even further. "Blimey," she breathes.

"You like it?" I ask.

She lets out a short, strangled moan. "It's … it's magnificent, Ron. You're simply magnificent."

I reach over and take her hand. Sensing no resistance, I guide it toward myself and press her fingers there. The feel of her skin on the sensitive surface is spellbinding. I'm buzzing. She moves closer, kneeling next to my hips, and replaces my hand with hers. "Like this?" she asks.

I press her fingers against myself more firmly. "Really, I can squeeze that hard?" she says.

"Oh yessssss … yes, you most certainly can."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"This is the opposite of hurting."

"Good," she says, picking up the pace with her right hand. I take her left hand and place it on my balls — she gets the idea in an instant, bless her, and gently fondles them — and, with that, I am rendered completely and utterly helpless, savoring the feeling of her soft fingers running over me. "Oh, Merlin, love … fucking hell … that's it," I say, laying back and letting her take over. "God, I love you so much. I've wanted you for so long, Mione."
"Oh Ron, you're ... you're gorgeous."

The sound of her saying these words is almost all it takes to drive me over the brink. I stroke her thigh with the hand nearest her legs and plunge my other hand into my hair and run it down to the back of my neck, biting down hard on my lower lip. I clamp my eyes shut because I'm so incredibly close, I know that if I look down and see her little hands wrapped around my crank, I'll come in a heartbeat. I let out a long, low, mumbling growl — "Hermmmmmiiiiiiiooooneeeee" — and bask in the sensations coursing from my center through my extremities and back again. "Mmmmmmm ... god yeah, Mione ... fllllfffffuck ... oh, that's so good ... so fucking good," I moan, knowing that this is one time my foul mouth isn't likely to earn her disapproval. After a few minutes of on-the-edge bliss, I give in to the temptation to look — I've just got to see — so I open my eyes and there's the sight I've been craving for years: Hermione Granger, the love of my life, starkers, her breasts swaying with her movements, running her hands over my cock. And that's it.

I barely have time to warn her — "I'm coming, love, I'm coming" — before I'm shooting off, groaning her name.

I've got my eyes shut tight again, savoring the tingling feeling that's still running through my body. I'm wasted, I'm high as a kite, I'm ass-over-cauldron, I'm delirious. I feel her kiss my forehead and then hear her mutter a cleansing charm, and suddenly I feel clean and dry. "Merlin, I love you so fucking much, Hermione," I breathe out between panting breaths as my heart rate starts to settle down. "Come 'ere."

She settles down at my side and I wrap my arms tightly around her. "That was … wow," I say.

She hums and nuzzles her face into my chest. "Yes, it was," she says.

I'm rubbing my arms up and down her back, squeezing her from time to time, and then I hear a little yawn. It's got to be sometime around 2:30 or 3 o'clock, I reckon. And mum will be up at 6:30, like clockwork, to start breakfast.

I reach for my wand, Levitate the extra blanket over to us and, with a flick, it settles on top of us. I pull her close to me again and revel in the feel of her bare skin against mine.

"Hand me my wand, would you, Ron?" she says.

"Sure — what are you doing?"

She sighs. "Casting a Tempus Evigilo," she says through a yawn. "Honestly — don't you ever pay attention in Charms?"

"Not if I can help it."

"It's like a muggle alarm clock," she explains while stifling another yawn. "My wand will vibrate — I've set it to go off at 5:30. That should give plenty of time for me to Apparate us back to the landing outside Ginny's room before anyone wakes up."

"Brilliant, you are."

She huffs and slaps my arm lightly before wiggling herself a little closer to me and planting her head on my shoulder. "I could get used to this, falling asleep in your arms," she says.

"Yeah, me too."

The wind rustles in the leaves outside.
"Someday," she says after a moment.

"Absolutely," I say, giving her an extra squeeze.

"Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for bringing me out here with you. I didn't realize how much I needed it."

"Anytime. And I don't mean that just because I'm a randy git. I mean anytime you need a break, or just a shoulder to lean on, you know I'm here, right?"

"I do."

I do. I like the sound of that, the way she says it.

She slips off to sleep before I do — I like thinking that I'm keeping watch until she's out fully — but soon I'm adrift, too, in dreams of what could be.

oo00oo

A/N: "All In" is AU, obvs, but I don't think it's so far off-base as to be implausible. It was relatively easy for me to imagine that Ron might have worked up the nerve to make a move in a crisis, such as in the wake of Dumbledore's death, and once I imagined that, the rest unfolded from there. I like this version of Ron — in the first chapter, it's him, only a little more confident, a little more willing to take a risk because, what the hell, the world is coming apart at the seams, isn't it? And, in subsequent chapters, I imagine the growing sexual connection with Hermione will change his outlook — for the better and, at one critical moment, for the worst.

If you haven't read the books, you might not recognize this Ron. In general, I think the movies really did his character a disservice, relying on him mainly for comic relief. Ron *is* funny, of course, but he's so much more than that. When I imagine Ron, I imagine him as Book Ron, with a healthy dose of the humor and depth that Rupert Grint brought to Movie Ron.

Cheers,

Holly.
Chapter Summary

The hunt begins ... and our favorite couple adjusts to their newfound status.

Chapter 3: Grimmauld Place

We're alone in this, the three of us. Totally effing alone.

I lean against the windowframe and part the browned and tattered lace curtain with the back of my hand to peer over Grimmauld Square, two stories below. The light from the streetlamp just outside the front stairway is dim and yellow, casting most of the sidewalk in sooty shadows. A man strolls out of the darkness with a big, drooling bulldog on a leash, pausing just long enough by the lamppost for the dog to lift his leg before he disappears again into the darkness. A young muggle couple follows a minute later, arms draped around each other, laughing, falling against one another and clearly drunk. They stop and kiss before stumbling on — and, for just that moment, I wish that could be me and Mione, drunken lovers rambling about London without a care in the world.

Damn.

I turn and adjust my eyes to the low light of the bedroom, the details visible only because the fire is going. It's summer but it's surprisingly chilly in this dingy old house — I've had to keep a fire going almost since we got here, otherwise Hermione shivers so much that her teeth chatter. She's been across the hall in the loo for ten minutes — and I know I'm a nutter, but I shiver involuntarily when I realize that she's out of my sight. Get a grip, Weasley — she's only in the shower — but still. My nerves have been on edge ever since we ran into those Death Eaters in that god-forsaken cafe last night. I have to keep reminding myself that the three of us are still here, all in one piece, and that Dad's Patronus was meant to reassure us that everybody is safe. Even so ... hell, I'm jumpy. I sit on the bed and, almost as soon as my bum makes contact with the duvet, I leap up again. Fuck. What would Mione think if she came in here and found me sitting on the bed with a come-hither-type look on my face? She'd probably think I was being a horny, presumptuous git. And then she'd hex me within an inch of my life. Shit. OK, umm, I guess that means it's back to pacing, doesn't it. I nervously step back to the window.

Just then, the door cracks open, and I turn to see Hermione squeeze her way through the half-opened door, almost as if she's sneaking in and hoping not to be noticed. Her head is wrapped in a towel and she's clutching her white terrycloth bathrobe closed at the collar and, suddenly, I feel my heart go "clunk." She's entering our room — our room — where she is going to sleep for the night — the whole night — with me. Me. Sweet Merlin H. Ambrosius in a chicken basket.

"Hi," she whispers, clutching her robe a little tighter.

I snap out of it. "Hi," I answer back, a little too loudly to sound casual. "Nice shower?" Oh gods, now I'm thinking of her in the shower. Holy goblin shit.

"Oh, um, yes," she says, tearing her eyes from mine and lifting a hand to adjust the towel on her head. "Your turn."
"Oh yeah. Right," I say, but somehow I can't move. I can feel my ears heating up. Damned ears.

I will my feet to step in the general direction of the door and, as I do, she picks up her little beaded bag from the bed, rummages around in it, extracts a fresh set of pyjamas for me — an old Weasley's Wizard Wheezes T-shirt and a pair of cotton trousers — and hands them over. "Your toothbrush is next to the sink," she says. "I'm afraid you'll have to share my toothpaste."

"Er, thanks," I mumble and quickly sidestep past her and through the door, closing it quietly behind me. In the hallway, I let out a breath that I didn't know I was holding, and then step into the bathroom. Good grief, why am I so effing nervous? I mean, it's not as if Hermione and I haven't slept together before. There was that night in the treehouse, of course — oh, gods, the treehouse — and last night, she and Harry and I shared the floor of the drawing room. But ever since Harry announced that he was going to take Sirius' old room upstairs from now on — causing Hermione to figure that the two of us might be more comfortable in the room that she and Ginny shared last summer — I've been a jittery, turned-on mess.

I adjust the tap on the shower and step in, hoping the hot water — and maybe some shampoo — will clear my head.

I guess I'm wondering if I'm going to be able to sleep in the same room with her and also stay under some semblance of control. I don't want to put any pressure on her. She's scared enough. I'll just have to hang back, take my cues from her and keep my big, stupid mitts to myself as much as possible. In the meantime, there's always the time-tested method of keeping myself in check: a good old-fashioned bedtime wank.

The water, which Hermione magically restored last night after finding that the creaky old pipes were blocked up, feels glorious on my chilled skin. I expect my mind to roam to the most tried-and-true wanking scenarios — Hermione in my bed at Hogwarts, Hermione at the center of the Quidditch pitch at midnight, Hermione in the Astronomy Tower, old favorites all. But, for some reason, my inner randy sod keeps wanting to relive a more recent — and less obvious — scene: Hermione on the dance floor just last night, swaying in my arms in the glow of the lantern light.

I was gobsmacked when I first saw her descend the stairs at the Burrow wearing that glorious, filmy red dress that showed off her neck, shoulders, arms, legs, and just enough cleavage — but not too much. She looked like a goddess who'd stepped down from a cloud somewhere and landed in our faded old lounge. Later, standing behind Bill at the altar, I had a clear view of her, sitting next to Harry in the row behind my parents. Later still, when the dancing began, I happily reached out a hand to her and she took it, bold as brass — and we strutted onto the dance floor to the swear-to-Merlin audible gasps of several people nearby. The sight of me and Hermione, dancing cheek to cheek without caring who knew it or what conclusions they might jump to, must have come to a shock to, well, pretty much everybody.

I felt like I'd won the Quidditch World Cup.

I rested my cheek on the top of Hermione's head, held her close, and breathed in the vanilla-scented aroma of her. She couldn't see them but just behind her, by the punch bowl, stood Fred and George, looking positively agog. "About time, little bro," George called, just loud enough to be heard over the music. I could feel Hermione chuckle against my chest. "Save a dance for me, wouldja Hermione?" Fred shouted. I nimbly spun her around, flashed a rude gesture in the twins' direction, and led her to the other side of the floor.

Three songs later, I caught sight of Krum out the corner of my eye, sidling his way toward us. Damned if I was going to let him cut in. "Bit warm in here," I whispered into her ear, then leaned back and lifted her chin with my finger. I cocked my head toward the exit. "Care to get out of here
and cool off?"

At her quick smile and nod, I wrapped an arm around her waist and led her toward the doorway on the far side of the tent, grabbing two butterbeers from a waiter’s tray as we threaded our way through the crowd of dancers and away from Krum. *Suck dragon eggs, Vicky.*

Soon we were in the meadow and strolling toward the pond out back, yards from the party, and found a little privacy behind the giant willow tree that overhangs the water.

Gods, can I wank to this? Apparently I can, because the memory of what happened next is making me hard. I reach down, remembering the taste of wedding cake and butterbeer on her lips, the feel of her hands running up and down my back and into my hair, the curve of her bum as I pulled her close to me and slipped my hands beneath her skirt. Merlin, she was glorious.

"I think everyone was a bit surprised to see us out there dancing together," she whispered as my lips traveled down to her neck.

"Mmm hmm."

"No, honestly, Ronald, that was quite brazen of us," she said in a teasing tone. "There will be talk."

"Mmm hmm."

"I loved it," she whispered right in my ear, making me laugh against her throat.

"I loved it too," I replied, "especially when Krum turned three different shades of green."

"Oh, Ronald, when are you going to let that go?"

"Approximately never," I mumbled, returning my attention to her throat.

She made a little grumbly noise, but the sound was soon muffled as I pressed my lips back to hers and plunged my tongue into her mouth. Her knees must have been weakening because soon my arms, wrapped tightly around her waist, were pretty much all that was holding her up as she ground her tummy against me in a slow, agonizing rhythm. She looped her arms around my neck and tipped her head back, allowing me to drop my tongue down to her the side of her throat again and then to her chest. And then she did the damnedest thing — she dropped her left arm, slipped the strap of her dress over her shoulder and pulled it down, revealing her breast to me, and I just about came right then and there. Her bare breast was so beautiful, so god-damned mouth-watering, peeking out at me from above the scarlet fabric.

All thoughts of being gentle went right out of my head. I descended on her nipple, licking it and then taking it fully in my mouth, sucking it deeply — more deeply than I had dared before. She moaned, then drew in a deep breath through her teeth. "Yessssssss," she whispered. I sucked again, this time flicking my tongue over her nipple, back and forth.

"I can't get enough of you, Mione," I murmured, my lips still circling the tip. "I need more."

She hummed, long and low, before answering. And then, pulling back slightly, she slipped her other strap down. "Your wish," she said breathlessly, "is my command."

My cock throbbed in appreciation. The sight of her — tits firm and exposed to the night air, nipples erect, skin so creamy against the dark red of her dress, hair messed up and falling free in the moonlight — well, it was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen in my life up 'til then.

"I love you, Hermione," I said quite loudly, probably with too much gratitude in my voice to come across as truly cool, but it didn't really matter. She was smiling like I'd just given her a birthday,
Christmas and graduation present all rolled up in one. So I dove in, holding her up by the waist with my left hand while grasping her breast with my right. I pinched her nipple while bending to suck on the other, nibbling it and sucking it in turns. She hissed again and ran her hands through my hair.

We snogged a few minutes longer — me fondling her tits basically non-stop the whole time, her kneading my back and my bum with a remarkably firm grip — before deciding that we might be missed and, soon, we rejoined the party. And it's a bloody good thing we did, because it wasn't long after we straightened ourselves up and got back inside the tent that Kingsley's Patronus landed and all hell broke loose. But that's not good wanking material, is it, so I shift my focus to what I wanted to do before making our way back to the tent.

Gods, what I wanted to do was turn her around, press her hands against the tree trunk, lift up her skirt, spread my hands across those velvety cheeks of hers — which, truth be told, I haven't really seen yet, but a bloke can imagine, can't he? — then bend her over and give her a proper rogering from behind. She'd squeak in surprise at first, but she'd like it, wouldn't she. She'd grip the bark and bend herself forward to give me a better angle, and I'd sink deeper into her, grasping her hips to pull her to me and thrusting even harder. She'd turn her head to look over her bare shoulder, catch sight of me ramming into her from behind, my thumbs pressing deep into her cheeks, and then she'd bite her lip, close her eyes and moan my name.

The shower is still flowing hot over my shoulders, and I'm leaning against the tiled wall with one straight arm working myself quickly with the other hand. One more mental inventory of Hermione's bum, her skirt flipped up onto her back, and that's all she wrote. I'm shooting off in my hand with a growl. I shudder as the last waves of pleasure ripple through me.

Soon I'm freshly washed, dried, brushed and clad in my pyjamas. I return to the bedroom hoping Hermione's none the wiser — and, to my surprise, I find she's tucked snugly under the covers, sitting up against the headboard, and reading what appears to be a magazine by the light of the candle on the nightstand. She must have dried her hair with her wand while I was away, because it's fluffy and so soft-looking — I want to sink my fingers into it.

"Hey there," I say, trying to sound relaxed, and yet I'm riveted where I stand by the door.

"Hi," she says, lifting her eyes to mine before returning them to the text. A private little grin crosses her lips, and she lightly pats the duvet next to her without looking my way. "Come to bed," she murmurs.

She doesn't have to ask me twice. I turn the covers down and climb in, feeling a jolt of excitement sizzle through me as I tuck a few pillows behind my back to get comfortable. I'm so giddy to be sitting next to her like this that I'm almost ashamed of myself.

"Whatcha reading?"

"Hmm?"

"What're you reading? It doesn't exactly look like Witch Weekly."

"No, I suppose it doesn't," she says, dropping the magazine to her lap. "Sorry — I just couldn't spend another minute scrutinizing 'Beedle and the Bard' tonight, so I thought I'd do a little light reading before bed to take my mind off things."

I take a closer look at the magazine. "Light reading? You call this light reading? It looks like a ruddy medical journal."
"That's because it is a medical journal, silly," she says with a grin, flipping the thing over so I can see the cover. "It's the latest Annals of the Royal Medi-Wizards Society, Edition Three-Thousand and Seventy Four, Volume III."

"What the bloody hell are you doing reading that?"

"Well, if you must know," she says with a snigger, "I borrowed it from Professor Vector. I had a fascinating chat with her a few weeks before end of term. She pointed me toward this article summarizing the research some academic medi-wizards in the States are embarking in the area of magical anatomy — that is, the study of how and why certain homo sapiens are endowed with magical abilities and others aren't. And among those who do have magical capabilities, the question is: Where are those abilities housed within the human anatomy?"

"Actually, that is pretty interesting, now you mention it," I concede. "So, what do they think's going on with all that, anyway?"

She seems surprised that I'm genuinely interested, but she recovers quickly, warming to the subject. "Well, their theory, of course, is that surely the brain has something to do with it, but which region?"

"Hmm."

"It's amazing to think, really, how little we know about some areas of magic — it's comparable to how relatively little muggle scientists actually know about the inner functioning of the muggle brain."

"Well, there's science, and then there's what I know," I say while scratching my chin rather absentmindedly.

"What do you mean?"

I pause to stretch my arms and legs before settling deeper into the pillows and crossing my arms. "Well, tell me this: How are these medi-wizards going to come up with the answers?"

She thumbs through the article again. "Professor Vector says their work will involve a combination of magical medical scanning techniques and even Legilimency, as well as muggle forms of dissection."

"Dissection — you mean fannying about with scalpels and whatnot? Yikes."

"Yeah, I know," she says. "Dissection was never my favorite classroom activity in either muggle or magical school."

"OK, well, think about this: If you crack the noggin of, say, that bloke you're so mad for — Chopin — do you think you'd be able to see something in there that says he was a musical genius?"

She crinkles her brow. "Well, maybe … but maybe not," she says, the corners of her lips turned down in that way she has when she's really thinking hard. I bump her shoulder with mine. "You know Dean collects muggle music magazines, yeah?"

She nods but looks like she's wondering what music magazines have to do with anything. "Well, last year there was one on Dean's nightstand with that chap Pull MeCockoff on the cover."

She chokes back a laugh and covers her smile with one hand while punching my shoulder with the
"That's Paul McCartney. Ronald! Honestly!"

Of course, I know who bleeding Paul McCartney is. I'm not that out of touch with the muggle world. I just like getting a rise out of Hermione.

"Whoever! Anyway, the point is, I flipped through it and, well, they were asking him about how he writes a song, and he said he didn't really know. The songs, they just kind of come to him. And when he's really feeling it, you know, when he's in the flow, it almost seems like they are coming from somewhere else, somewhere outside of him."

She nods, and her eyes are so bright as they dart back and forth quickly over my face. Godric, she's beautiful.

"And I thought, you know, magic sort of feels like that, at least to me. It's like it's there, more or less, in the air around me ... and I just know how to, I dunno ... tap into it, know what I mean?"

"Yes, I think I do, actually," she says as her smile broadens. I don't know why she's grinning so much.

"So, yeah, I think it's basically like either you can channel magic or you can't. I don't lose a lot of sleep worrying about why," I say with a shrug. "Don't get me wrong — if these blighters can sort it out and if maybe it can help people, then more power to them. In the meantime, I can't help wondering if they're asking the right questions."

Hermione chuckles to herself, tosses the journal on the nightstand next to her and then shimmies closer to me, tucking herself under my arm and leaning her head on my shoulder. She nuzzles her forehead against my chin and takes a long, deep breath.

"Ronald Weasley, do you have any idea how brilliant you are?"

I wrap her up in my arms and pull her closer. "Yes. Yes, I do," I reply flatly. "It's a wonder you can keep up with me, honestly."

"It is indeed," she says, cuddling deeper into my embrace. She skims a hand over my bare arms, tracing the scars there, and I feel that tingling sensation again. She sighs. "I'm bewitched by your skin," she whispers.

"Hmm?"

"It's a strange thing for a girl to be obsessed with in a man, I realize, but you have the most beautiful, luminous skin."

I snort.

"Go ahead and scoff ... I could tell you exactly how much time I've spent staring at your skin over the years, Ronald Weasley, but it would give you a big head."

I laugh and kiss her hair. "And here I was beginning to think you were actually interested in my mind."

She lets out a little squeal of laughter. "Your mind and only your mind, Mr. Weasley."

"Well, that's a disappointment."

I squeeze her again and we both settle down a little deeper into the pillows.
"Seriously, though," she says after a minute, stroking my arms again. "Before you came in here, I was trying to distract myself from, well — everything — and so I just started pondering the researchers' question of where magic resides within a wizard's body. And I guess my mind couldn't help but turn to the many times I have caught myself staring at your skin." She glances up at me, as if to check that I'm still listening. And of course I am. I smile back at her and then she drops her head back down to my shoulder. "I know it sounds barmy, but when I look at your skin I see magic there, just sort of, well … shimmering beneath the surface … I know that's daft … but it seems as if magic is fairly crackling within you, Ron, if that makes any sense."

Blimey. I certainly don't see what Hermione sees, then. I can't really think what to say to something so beautiful, so I just shrug and pull her closer. I breathe in the scent of her hair, freshly washed, and will myself not to think of all the shite she was attempting to distract herself from. That'll all wait until morning. Right now, we're here, we're safe and we're together. Harry's sleeping upstairs, and we've cast an Admonitrix charm on his room so we can hear him if he calls out in his sleep. We're forming a plan, we're working together and, even though the feeling of, well, aloneness can be sort of overpowering, we're not alone, really. The Order is still out there fighting with us, people are rebelling, people are fighting back. We've got to be strong for each other. We've got to be in the now.

"I love you, you know," I whisper into her hair.

"I love you, too," she mumbles back.

"It feels good to be able to say it now."

"Mmmmm," she answers. After a minute, I hear a faint little snore, and I realize she's fallen asleep.

She's safe and sound, right here in my arms, and that's good enough for me at the moment. Harry will want to start strategizing again in the morning, so it's best that I let her get her rest. I reach for the Deluminator in my pyjama pocket and give it a click to snuff out the candle before dropping it to the nightstand next to me. Then I snuggle a bit deeper into the duvet, shifting a slumbering Hermione along with me, until we're both tucked in snugly beneath the covers.

A bloke could get used to this.
Explosions

Chapter Summary

The big first.

Chapter 4: Explosions

"Profligo! Volcare! Diffindo!" The curses are hurtling through my mind as quickly as my wand can cast them. If I weren't so goddamned furious, I'd feel like a twat for upending the furniture, tearing the curtains and otherwise fucking up the bedroom that's become our private sanctuary — after all, Hermione has spent a lot of time over the past few days spiffing it up. But since I just stormed out of the latest in a series of blazing rows with her — this one the worst of all so far — I've just got to do something with all this pent-up energy or I'll explode, furniture be damned.

"Strapparsi," I think as I thrust my wand toward the duvet, causing it to shred itself and burst into a cloud of feathers. One "Confrego Minima" later, and the pillows are reduced to smouldering ash. Another "Volcare," and the desk is flipped over, Hermione's papers flying into the air. "Expulsar," and there go the pictures on the wall.

"Dammit," I growl over the lump in my throat as I lean against the mantlepiece and drop my forehead onto my folded arms. I flex my grip on my wand and rub my head against my forearm roughly, willing myself not to cry. And then I brace myself for her to walk in any minute, see what I've done, and start the inevitable Round II of the Worst Fight We've Ever Had Since The Great Crookshanks Vs. Scabbers Wars.

Fuck. Me.

All right, I admit, I'm being a childish prat right now. But I ask you, what's a bloke supposed to do in this fucking situation? She's infuriating, she is. Just fifteen minutes ago, after eating dinner below stairs in the kitchen, we were yelling our heads off at one another — for the second time today and the fourth time this week — over her bull-headed insistence that she is going to take turns staking out the bleeding Ministry of Magic. Over my Uncle Bilius's shrunken left bollock she is. She's barking if she thinks I'm going to allow her, a muggle-born, to be within a dragon's farting range of the Ministry right now. She knows they're rounding up muggle-borns and doing Merlin only knows what with them. But will she listen to reason? Hell no. H-E-L-L no. God damn it.

"Don't you dare, Ronald Weasley," she shouted, fists on her hips, after what seemed like ages of pointless arguing. "Don't you dare think you can order me about."

"I'm not ordering you about, Hermione, I'm trying to talk sense into you!"

"Excuse me?" she shrieked. "Sense? You're trying to talk sense?"

"Yes, and you know precisely why."

"Oh yes, I know why," she answered in a low tone that was meant to scare me — but it didn't — and then her volume rose again. "It's because I'm a girl, isn't it? You think a girl can't take care of herself. A girl isn't capable —"

"Oh for fuck's sake, don't play that 'girl' card with me again, Hermione. It's getting old."
"I'm not playing anything," she said crisply, pushing up the sleeves of my old Chudley Cannons jersey, which extends well past her fingers, as if she was gearing up for a fist fight. "I'm merely stating the truth, Ronald — which is that you think I'm not able to handle a dangerous situation because I'm a girl! I am indeed a girl, but that shouldn't make any difference! But it does to you, doesn't it—"

At these words, I grabbed my hair with both hands in utter frustration and turned my face toward the ceiling. Gahhhhhhhhh! Then I dropped my arms to my sides, clenched my fists and turned to face her dead-on. "All right, fine, have it your way," I shouted, advancing on her swiftly so I was standing an inch in front of her and she practically had to bend over backward to glare into my face. I felt my jaw clench a few times before I answered. "I do think it makes a difference that you're a girl, Hermione Granger," I said, my voice quieter and ten times deeper than it was before. "I'm a bloke, Hermione. I'm bigger than you. I'm stronger than you. I'm faster than you. And yes, I have noticed that you are a girl. And if you think that arseholes like that don't have very particular ways to hurt you because you're a girl, then you haven't been paying attention." I took another breath through my nostrils, and she almost leaped to fill the pause, but I put my hands on my hips, looked her dead in the eye, and, surprisingly, she stopped. "So, yeah, it does make a difference, dammit. This is what I warned you about that night in the Common Room — I told you things would change. You had a choice to make then and you've got a choice to make now."

I could see that I'd thrown her for a loop — she looked bewildered for a beat or two before crossing her arms and huffing, "That was entirely different. That wasn't the same thing at all."

"This is exactly what I was talking about that night, Hermione. Don't pretend you don't know it. You're too clever for that."

She shook her head and barked out an angry little laugh. "Are you trying to say that because you're my boyfriend now that you have some sort of … of … of … veto power over my actions? That you can tell me what I can and can't do?" she said, tilting her head to the side, her eyebrows raised in astonishment.

Merlin's brassiere. Shit. God fucking dammit. Was she intentionally trying to hack me off? "What I'm telling you … what I'm telling you … is that I made a vow that night that I would walk through fire to protect you. What I'm telling you is that I realized that night that there are worse things than dying, Hermione, far worse things — and one of those would be seeing you get hurt or, worse, get killed. I know that what we're doing is dangerous — I knew it would be then — but I swore I would do whatever I could, Hermione, to keep you as safe as I can. I guess that makes me a ruddy bastard, doesn't it."

"So because I'm your girlfriend — because I'm a girl —"

I turned away from her abruptly — probably more abruptly than I should have, dammit — and slammed my fist on the kitchen table, rattling the dishes and probably scaring Harry, who had scarpered upstairs when the argument first started. "Hermione," I shouted, leaning on my arms and concentrating on the woodgrain of the table, not wanting to look her in the face. "Don't you realize what I'm talking about? God fucking dammit, it matters that you're a girl. It matters that you're a muggle-born. I'm sorry, but it does! Think about it! These are Death Eaters we're talking about, Hermione. Death Eaters!" I straightened up to face her. "What do you think they would do if they caught you at the Ministry?"

She paused to consider. I could practically see the brainwaves running through her head. I knew she was at least thinking about my point, but she was resisting it fiercely.

After a moment, her face signaled that she'd found a counter-argument — and she took a deep
breath to voice it. "Ronald, consider this," she said, trying to put on her "be reasonable" voice, which only made my blood pressure tick upward another few points. "We’d adhere to a strict timetable," she said evenly. "If I didn't return to Grimmauld Place by a mutually agreed-upon hour, that would be a signal that you and Harry should look for me. Of course, this contingency wouldn't be necessary at all, since I'd have the Invisibility Cloak and I'd be perfectly safe, but —"

I threw my arms in the air and gripped the top of my head, as if trying to keep it from flying off my neck. "Are you fucking kidding me, Hermione? Really?! Do you really think that would work? That is the most fucked-up plan of all time."

"Well if you would just calm down and reason it out with me, maybe we could refine it or work out the kinks! We could do that if you weren't being be such a, such a — such a pig-headed Neanderthal!"

At that, I ran my hands down over my face, turned on my heel and marched out of there before I really did some damage to the most important relationship in my life. But I wanted to punch a fucking wall. Perhaps I should have punched Mrs. Black on my way up the stairs. Didn't think of that. Shit.

I bumped into Harry coming down the stairs as I was going up.

"Another rough night, huh mate?" he said.

"Yeah, something like that," I grumbled as I shoved my way past him.

"Hey," he said with an unusually harsh tone, looking up at me from the stair below. "That's my sister in there you know."

I looked down, thrust my hands into my pockets and kicked my trainers. Fuck. "Yeah, I know."

"Could you go a little easier on her, mate? She's just trying to be part of the team."

I sighed. "Shit, Harry, I know that — but I'm trying not to get her killed, you know? That's my job now, for crying out loud."

He pursed his lips and studied his own trainers. "Yeah, I know. And I'm not saying I'd do that much different if I were in your shoes — you know, if it were Ginny with us. Really. But … I dunno, we need her, Ron."

"Don't I know it," I said, rubbing the back of my neck. "You and I would be dead about a hundred times over by now if it weren't for her."

Harry shrugged. "Well, I guess I'll go down there and, uh, clean up, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah. Thanks," I said, turning again toward the upstairs landing and heading to our room, feeling like a colossal arsehole.

And now here I am, knowing I'm in for more misery before this night is out when she comes up here and sees the condition of our room — that is, if she comes up here. She might decide to spend the night away from me and kip in the drawing room. Not sure which outcome would be worse. But I had to try to get my point across, didn't I, no matter how much I buggered everything up. I had to. I know deep-down that Harry's right — we need Hermione 100 percent — and I even know even deeper-down that Hermione is right — she's just as capable as we are. Hell, ten times more so. She's effing amazing.
But when I think of what could happen if she got caught at the Ministry, of what those evil fucking scumbags could do to her if they got their mitts on her, my stomach lurches and I just … can't. I don't want to think about it, but it keeps coming to me: Mulciber, Nott, Avery … and I've seen the way Old Man Malfoy looks at her, that sodding pervert. Merlin, the thought of any of them touching her … laughing at her, leering at her … hurting her … with no mercy … doesn't she know I cannot let that happen? Can-NOT. Suddenly my insides twist and I feel on the verge of throwing up. I'm choking on a knot high in my throat, and I press my eyes shut against my forearm. I lean harder against the mantle, clutching my wand that much tighter in my fist. I can't — I will not — cry. I will not. Though I know my shoulders are shaking and I'm practically sobbing already. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I don't know what I'd do if they got hold of her, if they laid a finger on even one hair on her head, I'd, I'd—

And, just then, I hear the door creak open. Fuck. Fuckity fuck fuck fuck. I'm in for it now.

"Ron?" she says, but wait … that was definitely not the tone I was expecting.

I try to pull myself together, wiping my face against my arm before straightening up. But I can't turn to look at her — not yet.

I press the heels of my palms hard against my eyes and leave them there. Then I feel it, a gentle touch on my right shoulder. Her fingers, so small and delicate, caress my arm and I feel a slight tingling in my scars there that I suddenly remember I've felt before — ever since the Common Room, this happens. But only when she touches me there and only when I'm really, really effing emotional. I don't know why I haven't made the connection before, but I don't have time or the mental bandwidth to sort it out right now.

"Darling," she whispers, probably thinking I haven't noticed she's there. I turn and before she can really see into my face I quickly swoop down and wrap her in my arms, drop my wand to the floor and, no matter how hard I try, I can't really contain myself and I'm just clutching her to me, burying my face in her hair and choking out these stupid-sounding half sobs. She wraps her arms around me, rubs my back and rocks me, whispering, "It's all right … shhhhh … it's all right … I'm so sorry, so sorry."

I can't even form words, I'm so fucked up right now. I just let her hold me and, well, I'm sort of sputtering like a great ginger pillock, gasping and choking back tears until I can't hold them anymore, then letting out a burst of tears, a strangled wail, before regaining my strength and stuffing it all back down. I'm shaking. My throat burns. When I feel like I can't fight it anymore, though, I break down and just sob shamelessly into her hair, and I sort of, I dunno, slowly sink to the floor — I'm too big for her to hold me up anyway, and my knees are buckling beneath me — and soon she's nestled in my lap on the rug before the fireplace, her arms holding me, and I'm just basically unloading on her shoulder while she runs her hands over my back and through my hair.

And there we sit, me absolutely losing my shit, right there in the middle of the shattered remains of what used to be our bedroom.

God damn.

I slowly start to come to my senses again and that's when I notice my arms are still tingling a bit, but it's starting to subside. She continues to stroke me soothingly. I've still got my eyes shut tight, but I can at least breathe now and I feel one of her hands leave my shoulders for a moment. Then I hear the swishing sound of her wand, and suddenly I hear the room reassembling itself — the rustle of papers reshuffling into order, the ca-clunkity-chunk of the armoire flipping back to its original position, the swoosh of feathers restuffing themselves into the duvet. She returns her hand to my back and I pull her closer.
Finally, when I think I can manage to talk without sounding like a berk, I lift my head from her shoulder and look at her face, which is rosy-cheeked and wet from tears, ringed by a crown of messy curls. "Sorry," I say, wiping my nose on my sleeve. "I'm so sorry, Hermione. Really."

She cups my cheek in her hand. "I am, too, Ron. Honestly."

I close my eyes again and lean forward so our foreheads are touching. "I'm just never going to be able to make you understand, am I?" I whisper.

"No, I think I do understand, at least a little bit," she says softly. "Actually, Harry deserves some small portion of the credit for that."

"Talked to you, did he?" I say, leaning back to an upright position before wiping my nose on my sleeve again.

"Mmm hmm," she hums, and then there's silence for a bit. Gods, I'm such a git, crying in front of her like that. I wouldn't blame her if she were seriously reconsidering everything. Some boyfriend, wilting into a puddle of tears and snot right in front of her.

She sighs. Here it comes — the shitstorm I've been bracing for. I grimace.

"I love that you want to protect me, Ron," she says, sliding her hand down my arm, and there's that prickly, tingly feeling again — not altogether unpleasant — and then I do a doubletake when I realize what she just said.

"Wait — what?"

She smiles sweetly. "I said, I love that you want to protect me — more than you know, obviously. I truly do."

She shifts so that we're now facing one another, sitting cross-legged on the rug, and places her hands in mine.

"Well, love, I can tell you one thing: That is absolutely not what I expected to hear right now," I say with a little half-smile before feeling another shudder — a leftover from my just-finished effing crying jag — rattling through me, making my shoulders shake.

She squeezes my hand. "Ron, the trouble is, we are in a very dangerous situation and, no matter how much you may want to protect me — or how much I may want to protect you, by the way — the fact is that what we're up against is very big and very scary," she says, taking a deep breath and squeezing my hands firmly. "We may be going into situations where we simply aren't going to be able to protect one another — or Harry — as much as we would like. And we have to let each other off the hook if something terrible happens. It's just reality."

I sigh and drop her hands in favor of holding her face so I can really look at it. We stare deeply into one another's eyes for I don't know how long before I can speak again. "I don't think you realize how much you mean to me," I whisper.

She smiles and chokes up. "Oh, I think I do," she replies with a tremble in her voice.

I'm cupping her cheeks in my hands, rubbing my thumbs over her lips. "No, love, I haven't really come right out and said it as plainly as maybe I should, but … you're my whole future. Everything I have planned … everything I hope to do in my life … you're in the middle of all of it. Without you, my whole future goes straight to shit."

Her eyes are now brimming with tears.
"You know I think you're capable, right?" I ask, feeling the need to continue. "You know there's no one on this green Earth who's more impressed by your powers than I am, right?"

She nods, her lower lip shaking a bit.

"I don't want you to ever think I don't believe in you, because I do — so much — and I know how much Harry and I owe you. I wouldn't be here now if it weren't for you."

She sniffs.

"And all I can do to try to pay you back is to try to return the favor, know what I mean? To keep you out of harm's way as much as I can, OK?"

"OK," she answers, tears now streaming down her face and running into my palms.

"I know I can't control you. I don't want to control you — well, except in very special situations," I say with a smirk, and she smiles through her tears and sticks her tongue out at me. But I still need to be serious for at least another minute. "I guess all I can ask at this point is that you try not to take any unnecessary risks, all right? Can you do that for me?"

She nods and, with that, we're wrapped up in a tight bear hug, pulling one another up to our knees and squeezing each other tight.

"Oh, Ron, I love you so much," she says as she presses her face against my shoulder. "I can't picture my future without you either."

I think about that for a second. She's pictured her future — and I'm in it. Blimey.

That does it for me. I stand and, before either of us has a chance to think, I'm reaching down and lifting her into my arms, pressing her against my chest. She winds her arms around my neck and our lips meet. I step toward the bed, rest one knee on it, and lower her down onto the magically restored duvet, never losing contact with her sweet lips. Her head is propped on top of the pile of pillows that just a few minutes ago had been a heap of ash. I'm kneeling above her, straddling one of her legs while bending the other one at the knee with my hand and feeling her glorious bum through her jeans.

She slowly slides her hands from my scalp to my neck to my shoulders and then down over my arms, and I feel that tingling in my scars again — and hell, it feels so good. I don't know what the fuck is causing that sensation but, frankly, I don't care right now. All I know is my knob is throbbing in my jeans, and she must be able to feel it against her leg because now she's kneading her thigh between my legs and it's driving me wild.

As she sucks on my tongue, she makes one of those patented little cooing sounds again. "God, I love it when you do that," I say between kisses.

"Do what?" she breathes into my mouth.

"Let out those little noises," I say.

She does it again and sniggers.

"Yeah, like that," I say before plunging my tongue back in her mouth for a moment. "There it is again," I whisper. "It drives me mad. You keep that up, I'm going to start calling you my Little Dove."
"I think I just might like that," she says, and I thrust my tongue between her lips again, push her knee down and climb over her so that I'm now leaning between her legs, pressing myself directly against her center.

Propping myself up on one elbow, I reach down beneath the hem of her shirt — well, again, my shirt — and tug it up, maybe rougher than I meant to — though she doesn't seem to mind — and cup her bra-covered breast in my hand. Over the time we've been at Grimmauld Place, I've spent so much time touching, fondling, kissing, and otherwise studying Hermione's tits, and I've got to say, I'm confident I'll never get tired of them. They're so firm, so round, so sexy, so sweet. I grab her hip and flip her over so she's now on top of me and then I pull the shirt from her body, tossing it onto the floor. She smiles, settles herself on top of me and then, while rotating her hips maddeningly against me, she pulls her wand from her back pocket and flicks it to extinguish all the candles but the one on her nightstand. Suddenly, now, the room is much darker, but she's glowing in the light of the fire in the hearth and the candle burning nearby, and her bra — my favorite, the little black one — contrasts with her skin, which is so white, so soft. I'm holding her by the waist with both hands as she kneels above me, and watch her as she casts a silencing charm toward the door before she drops her wand on the nightstand. She slowly reaches behind her back, unhooks her bra, then slips it off her shoulders, bit by bit, before flinging it to the floor.

I waste no time sliding my hands up her torso to grab her bare flesh, and she answers by rubbing herself even more forcefully into my lap and pressing her hands against the back of mine as I grip her between my fingers, pinching and teasing in the way I've come to know she loves.

"Feel good?" I ask.

She doesn't answer, but closes her eyes and throws her head back, letting out a deep moan.

"Can you feel how hard you make me?" I rasp. I'm babbling again — as I've discovered I pretty much always do when things get hot and heavy with Hermione, though I never was moved to blathering in the Lavender days. Who cares, though — Hermione doesn't seem to mind. In fact, it seems to turn her on. I look up and see that she's smiling above me, though her eyes are shut tight.

"Mmmmmmmmmm," she hums.

"You like it when I touch you this way, don't you?" I add, not bothering to control my runaway mouth.

"Mmmmmmm, yessssss," she replies, her head still tilted back, her hands now running over my wrists and down my arms. A surge of energy flashes through my cock at the thought that I'm learning her signals — signals no one else knows. I've seen her like no one has ever seen her or ever will see her. I'm learning all the secret things — things that possibly she doesn't even know yet — about how to turn her on, to bring her pleasure, and it makes me think maybe I know what it feels like to be the most powerful wizard on Earth.

I pull her down to me abruptly and flip her over so she's beneath me again. Kneeling astride her, I peel my shirt off. I have the urge to lean down and press my chest against hers immediately, because I've found that there are few things more exhilarating than the feel of her bare skin against mine. But, looking down, I see her laid out there below me — she's so fucking ravishing, with her hair fanned out around her head and her nipples so dark and hard — I stroke her breasts again with both hands instead, flicking at her tips with my thumbs and making her whimper, hiss, and bury her hands in her hair.

I reach down to the button of her jeans, undo it and shift my weight off of her so I can strip her trousers and knickers off in one go. She rolls onto her side to face me, crossing one leg over the
other so that every curve of her body is accentuated in the candlelight, then she dips her chin and looks at me from beneath her eyelashes with a blazing look that's not quite a smile — more like a challenge.

I rise up, stand by the bed, kick off my trainers, and step out of my jeans and pants, my prick swaying and quivering in anticipation as I flex and stretch the muscles in my feet, my legs, my bum, my shoulders, my neck and my arms to steady myself. I finally rest my hands on my hips and take a deep breath. Until now, she's been meeting my eyes with hers, but now that my cock is out and at eye level, her gaze is drawn to it. I've come to realize, in the short time we've been together, that my penis, honestly, is a bit big for her — so big that, on the four mind-bendingly amazing occasions she's attempted it, she's barely been able to get her little mouth around it. The first time was on our second night in this room, when she rather experimentally touched her lips to it and then licked it lightly — and it was, without a doubt, the most effing amazing thing I'd ever felt in my life up until that moment. The next night, she was a little bolder, running her tongue from between my legs all the way up my shaft, and then she sort of tucked her tongue inside the pinhole at the tip of my cock — which again, was fucking amazing — and then she managed to take a few inches of me into her mouth. She quickly realized that I'm just a little too … well … thick, I guess … and she actually apologized for being unable to take me all the way in. Of course, I told her she was barmy — because I came, and explosively at that — and afterward I taught her what she needed to know about where to touch, when to go slow, when to go fast, where to be gentle, where to be firm … at which point she got me off yet again. She's proving to be a very fast learner. Of course. And there's nothing sexier than the sight of Hermione licking and sucking me. I could watch her do it all day.

She props herself up on her elbow and reaches out to touch me ever so lightly, and a deep groan rises in my chest. She takes me fully in hand with a tight grip and pulls firmly, slowly, then pumps her hand back down to the base again before repeating the motion.

"That's right, love," I say, my voice coming out gravelly and low as I thrust my hips roughly into her hand. "Ohhhh, God, Mione. Fuck, you make me so hard."

She scoots over so she's kneeling at the edge of the bed and takes the tip of me into her mouth. I plow my hands into her hair and grasp the sides of her head, the better to guide her. She moans and I can feel the vibrations all the way down to my core.

She pulls back, licks her way down and back up again — all the while with my hands still cupping her head — before propping herself back on her heels and looking up into my eyes.

"Do you know the spell?" she says in a breathy voice.

I moan, wondering if she means what I think she means. "You mean, that spell?" I ask.

She smiles. "Yes, that spell," she says. "I want you. I'm ready."

Since I have been ready pretty much since fourth year, these words are music to my ears. But…

I sit on the edge of the bed next to her and look directly into her face — which is level with mine for once because she's still kneeling with her bum resting on her feet. I rub the back of my neck and feel the heat rise in my ears, a sure sign that they're turning pink. "Are you sure? I mean, don't misunderstand — I'd like to shag you to within an inch of your life right now — but I won't do it, I can't do it, unless I know you're really, you know, ready."

She bites her lower lip, shifts her gaze down to my lips and then back up to my eyes. "Yes, I'm totally ready. I'm totally ready to be totally yours."
I shrug, my hand still at the back of my neck. "You know, we don't have to go all the way for me to be totally yours, Mione — I already am."

With that, she launches herself at me, kissing me like she needs it to breathe. I sort of, I dunno, counter-lunge — crushing my lips to hers, pressing my hands to her shoulders and pushing her back so that we both somehow tumble backward, me on top.

"Hermione, love, I love you forever," I mumble as we roll ourselves further toward the center of the bed. She smiles, and I grab her chin and pull her mouth to mine, plunging my tongue deep inside. Her skin feels so incredible — soft and warm — against mine, and then, as I look at her through half-opened eyes, my mind travels back to every bit of advice I ever got about this moment. Growing up with five older brothers had its downsides, but it certainly left me with no shortage of sexual coaching.

"The first thing and maybe only thing you've got to remember, little bro, is the clitoris," Bill said in a professorial tone as we sat in the pub outside Ottery St. Catchpole two summers ago.

I looked around to be sure no one could hear us. Thank Merlin the music was loud.

"The clitor-what?"

"The clitoris, my boy," Bill replied cheerily, clapping a hand to my shoulder. "Find it, conquer it and you will conquer all."

He proceeded to give me a rather clinical dissertation on the subject right there amid the pipe smoke, the Quidditch banter and the warbling of Celestine Warbeck, as we sat tucked away in the back corner farthest from the bar. I have to admit, I learned a lot — and Hermione has benefited from it up 'til now.

Then there was the night, the following Christmas, when Fred and George barged into my room bearing a stack of dog-eared old magazines.

"Sorry to interrupt you, Ronniekins," said Fred.

"Oh dear, been beating the bishop? Well, perhaps we should let you get back to it," said George.

"No, of course not," I said, pressing a pillow to my lap because, truth be told, I had just started thinking about Hermione — again — and was in need of a quick wank.

"Well, we just thought we'd bequeath you with a private Christmas present — a few selections from our Warlock's Dungeon archives, dear little brother, to help you along on your journey," said Fred as he handed the pile of battered girlie magazines to me with a bow and a flourish of his arm.

"Ah yes, we hate to part with them, really," said George, "but over the years we have gleaned all the information from these back issues that they could possibly impart, and we now believe they could be helpful to you in your seemingly endless quest to unlock the sexual secrets of the elusive Miss Hermione Jean Granger."

I tossed the pillow sharply at George's head — scoring a direct hit, I should note.

After the usual back-and-forth mind-fucking that the two of them just can never resist giving me, they got down to business, explaining — without my asking, mind you — the ins and outs so to speak of bedding the opposite sex.

"You'll think of us when it's your first time with Hermione, Ronnie, and here's why," said Fred.
"Shut. It. You. We're not talking about Hermione."

"Oh, we're not?" said George, his eyebrows rising.

"Is there someone else?" asked Fred.

"No!" I shouted. "No, it's just — I don't want you talking about her like that. I don't even want you thinking about her like that."

Fred and George exchanged an amused look and then said, simultaneously, "Too late."

"Fuck you two. Fuck you both with a broomstick. A splintered broomstick," I said, which only made them dissolve into laughter.

"Are you going to let us finish this little lecture," said George, "or are you determined to sleep alone with only your fist for company for the rest of your pathetic life?" said Fred.

I ran my fingers through my hair in annoyance. "All right, all right. Go on then."

"Fine," said Fred. "As I was saying before we were so rudely interrupted, you'll think of us when it's your first time with — Miss X — and you can thank us later, because here is the secret to making your first time absolutely mind-blowing not just for you but for her."

"Which of course is more important," said George.

"Indeed. And here it is," said Fred.

"First, Ronniekins, be absolutely, positively sure you make her come before you do anything else," said George.

"Make absolutely sure," said Fred, "because, Ronniekins, even though you're hung like a horse—"

"Hey!" I yelled.

"No offense, little bro," said George, "but we've seen your kit and even by Weasley standards — which are considerable, I daresay — you are monumental."

"Bravo," said Fred with a nod and a polite clap of the hands.

"Oh for the love of Merlin," I said, covering my face with my palms.

"At any rate," Fred continued with a dramatic clearing of his throat. "No matter how much pornographers may want you to believe otherwise, your todger, no matter how gigantic, is very likely not going to do the job for Herm—, I mean, for your girl."

"Huh?"

"You've heard of the clitoris, yeah?" said George.

"Oh for fuck's sake," I said.

"Well, her clt, her bean, her nub — call it what you will — is unfortunately not really all that close to her slit," George continued.

"And you have to be sure you give her clt the attention it deserves before you go plunging in," said Fred, "because, if you do, she'll be nice and slick and wet and ready for you."
"Oh gods."

"And with a crank like yours, she'll need to be," said George.

"Shut. It. You!"

"Tsk, tsk," they said in unison.

"Such manners, Fred."

"Shocking, isn't it, George."

"Should we tell him the rest?"

"Hmm … look at him. It's hard not to take pity on the poor blighter, isn't it, no matter how crude and primitive he is."

"Let's be merciful then, shall we?"

"Yes, let's."

"Gahhhhh," I said. "Just get on with it then!"

"All right, little bro, just be aware that the problem that plagues pretty much every first-timer is what we experts call popping your cork a bit too early — otherwise known to the layman as 'premature ejaculation,'" said Fred.

"Yeah. You'll be so gobsmacked that Herm—, I mean, your girl is willing to let you pop her cherry," said George, "that you'll get one, maybe two quick thrusts in and then, pow!, Bob's your uncle."

"You don't want to come before she's even had a chance to notice you're there, mate," said Fred.

I pondered this and realized that if, by some blessed miracle, I ever had a chance to get a leg over with Hermione, I would most likely come in a heartbeat. After all, it would be the culmination of literally years of foreplay. Shit. "OK, OK, I get it. So what do I do?"

"Here's the genius part, little bro — and again, you'll thank us later," said George.

"We accept small bills, barter, gift certificates, even muggle credit cards," said Fred.

"Right, here it is," said George. "Before you dive in there and give her the old heave-ho, you've got to come first."

"Huh?"

Fred and George chuckled to one another, highly amused at my confusion.

"It is a counter-intuitive move, we admit," said Fred. "But it's guaranteed to make you last when it matters most. Again, make her come. Use your hands, your mouth, your wand, whatever …"

"…and then have her make you come — with her mouth, her hands, or, in your case, a bloody plunger," said George. "You'll be spewing in an instant, because you'll be so bloody turned on, and then you'll be rock hard again a few minutes later, ready to go for a lot longer when it comes time to really doing the deed."
Good Gandalf's ghost, they were on to something there. Looking down at Hermione, stretched out on her back beneath me, draped diagonally across the bed, I realize I'm going to have to send the twins a thank-you gift once this bloody war is over.

I shift so I'm lying on my left side next to her. As I reach down between her legs with my right hand, she parts her legs slightly and I rub my palm over her center, applying even pressure all over, in the way I now know she likes. She hisses, gasps and coos as I pull my palm away and finger her. I smile at the sound and lower my head to her ear. "You like that, Little Dove?"

"Mmmmm," she says, and I can feel her legs tightening as she flexes her toes.

"I want you to come for me, love," I whisper into her ear, speeding up the pace of my fingers. "I want make you to feel as good as you make me feel."

"You do, Ron — always," she says in a breathy voice as she caresses my arm.

I lift my face to her left breast and pull her nipple between my lips, sucking and nibbling it rather mercilessly. She gasps, and I smile against her skin. Then I raise myself up and kneel next to her hips, still stroking her, and press one finger in, then another. I draw my fingers in and out, slowly at first and then faster.

I lift my lips from her breast for a moment and look at her face: Her eyes are shut tight, her hair is loose and wild, and she's breathing through clenched teeth. Gods, she's gorgeous.

The sight of her causes my cock to throb almost painfully. She purrs as I lower my lips find her clit with my tongue. I flick it back and forth, light and quick, then with more force, in a side-by-side motion, while still plunging my fingers in and out of her slit, which is amazingly wet and slippery now. I know she likes what I'm doing, because she's raking her fingers over my scalp, grabbing my hair every now and then, and making the most fucktastic sounds as her breathing gets shallower and soon her legs are ramrod-straight and her hips are bucking up into my lips and she's shouting out, "Ronnnnnnnn! Oh Merlin, Ronnnnnnnnn, don't stop … please …"

I continue doing … well, everything I've been doing … until she pulls my face away from her, which has come to be the signal to stop. She's panting. "Oh darling," she whispers, pulling her hands from my hair and running them through her own. "Oh, sweet Merlin."

"Liked that, eh?"

"Mmmmmmmmm," she breathes, running her hands down her neck, over her shoulders and over her breasts.

"You're a little minx, you are," I whisper, feeling the grin grow on my face.

Her eyes are still shut but she smiles at my words, and, as she's coming down from her peak, I swiftly climb on top of her, run my right hand behind her head, sink my fingers into her hair just above her neck and tilt her face up to mine. She opens her eyes in surprise, then gives me a challenging little smile. I bend my face down to hers and kiss her roughly, and she wraps her arms tightly around my shoulders in reply.

I'm straddling her, and I know she can feel my prick beating and thrumming against her belly. She's grinding against me, murmuring little cooing noises so sweet and low. I roll over so she's on top of me. Now's the moment.

"Should I do the charm?" she whispers into my ear.
I take a deep breath. Good Godric, I'm hard as a rock.

"Not yet, love," I say, and she pulls back to look at me with a crinkled brow.

"Don't you want to, umm … you know?" she asks timidly.

Fuck! She thinks I'm rejecting her. Shit. Good going, you prat.

I cup her cheek in my hand. "Hell yes, Hermione, if you'll have me, I'd like to make love to you all night."

She seems reassured, because at least her brow isn't wrinkled anymore. "But first," I say, and I shift her off of me so that she's lying by my left side, then I take her hand and guide it to my cock, which is actually hot to the touch now, I'm so turned on.

"Do me first, love," I say, looking straight in her eyes.

She looks a little confused — because a knob job has, up until now, pretty much been our endgame.

"Trust me," I say, pressing her hand and wrapping it around me. "It'll all make sense later."

She smiles a little half smile and decides to go with it, and soon she's climbed between my legs and her curly head is bobbing up and down over my groin, her nipples every now and then grazing my thighs, and I'm in ecstasy. "That's right, Little Dove," I moan, weaving my fingers into her hair. "Oh gods, right there. Good girl."

By now — and this should hardly be surprising — she's masterful at this, she is, her hands, lips and tongue working together, and within seconds I'm exploding in her mouth, wave after wave of pleasure rippling through my entire body.

She curls up next to me and I pull her close, and we both lay there, panting and enjoying the afterglow. For a minute, I worry that the twins' advice is bollocks, because I feel so spent I can hardly move, much less believe I'll get hard again. But then, Hermione starts kissing my neck lightly and stroking my chest, and I smile because old Gred and Forge are proved right again — damn them both to hell.

She and I have somehow found a second round of energy, because we're snogging like it's the very first time, rolling about the bed. Her mouth still tastes a bit salty, and that thought drives me wild. I roll us over so she's on her back, her lower half pinned beneath me, and prop myself up on one elbow. "Now's the time to do the charm," I say. She nods and lifts her wand from the bedside table, wordlessly doing the incantation over me.

"Your wish is my command," she says with a smile, reminding me of that night under the willow tree, then she tosses her wand carelessly to the other side of the room with a laugh.

That's all it takes. I lunge at her, burying my face in her neck and sucking on it enthusiastically. She responds in kind. We're clawing at each other desperately now, and after a few minutes, she literally pleads with me to take her.

"Please, Ron — please," she whispers in my ear. "I want to feel you inside me. I want to be one with you. Please."

This is it. There's no turning back from here. Hell's bells.
We're looking deep in each other's eyes now. I'm still on my side, but I push my right knee between her legs and tell her, "open up for me then," wondering just for a fleeting second where I ever got the inspiration to be so bold in bed with her. But then I shrug it off mentally and carry on.

She complies, and then I pivot so that I'm lying directly on top of her, poised at her entrance, her hands pressed against my chest. I look at her, the question in my eyes, and she nods. With that, I reach down to guide myself into her, pausing first to rub up and down against her slick folds for a moment, savoring the moment, and the warmth, and the wetness. "I love you so much, Hermione Granger."

"I love you too, Ronald Weasley," she whispers back. And, with that, I find her opening and ease myself in.

The feeling is so … exquisitely … tight. Nothing, absolutely nothing, that I've experienced before can compare to this, and I'm not even all the way in yet. I've pushed as far as I can go before meeting some, I guess you might say, resistance, and neither of us dares to move further. Our gazes are still locked on each other — I'm searching her face for any sign of discomfort or second thoughts, but I see none. Instead, she seems to be melting before me into a look I haven't seen before — bliss and love and, I dunno, joy, maybe, all mixed together in her expression. Maybe surprise, too, because in a second she moans, "Oh my God, Ron, you are SO big." I can't help but chuckle a little bit.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"No, quite the contrary."

"If this hurts — ever — I want you to tell me and I'll stop, OK?"

"OK."

I shift so that I'm resting on my elbows, my forearms bent so I can hold her face in my hands. "You feel so incredible," I say with a little wobble in my voice. She smiles, then says, "We're one now."

"Mmm," I answer. "And you are mine."

And, with that, I press again, a little more firmly this time, and whatever resistance was there seems to fall away because, after Hermione lets out a little puff of air from her lips — "I'm all right, I'm all right, no worries," she quickly assures me — I sink all the way into her and never, ever — not with my hands, not with her hands, not with her lips — have I ever felt anything so amazingly good as this feeling, almost as if it's pulling me in. The warm, wet and even pressure on every centimeter of me is mesmerizing. But I've got to have more. I slowly pull back — almost all the way out — then plunge back in again, a little more forcefully this time, and she moans in pleasure, running her hands from my chest around my sides and then onto my back.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuck, Mione, you feel so incredibly good," I say between deep, sloppy kisses. "You're so warm and soft and sweet, love."

I'm still taking my time, moving slowly, just soaking in this new feeling, and whispering every filthy thought that flickers through my mind into her ear. She's practically purring beneath me, raising her hips to meet mine with every thrust, and soon she wraps her legs around me and rests her heels on my bum, forcing me even deeper inside her little frame. I can hardly believe a girl so small can accommodate, well, all of me, but she can and she seems to want more. So I increase the speed of my hips, pulling my right hand away from her face and drawing it down to her breast.
"Only me," I rasp into her neck. "I'm the only one who can ever have you like this."

"Only you, Ron, always," she whispers back, fanning her fingers through the hair at the nape of my neck. "No one else."

I'm sucking her ear as she says this, and then my mind flickers back to my earlier panic over those effing Death Eaters, and how mental I get at the thought of any of them violating her, and I choke up again for a second. "Anyone who ever tries to … to hurt you … they'll have to deal with me, you know that, don't you?"

"Oh Ron," she says with what I can tell are tears in her voice. "You're so … Merlin, I'm so glad I found you. I'm so glad you're mine and I'm yours."

"You are mine, until the day I die, sweetheart," I answer.

"And after," she says. She presses my chest closer to her with her arms and soon we're carried away again the rhythm of our movements, and I start to feel the familiar quiver at the root of my cock. I'm lost in her, going somewhere I've never been before, thinking about mental things like how I want to do this for the rest of my life, sharing a bed, doing this very thing, knocking her up someday, and before I can think how deranged it is that such ideas are in my head right now, the waves of the most powerful pleasure I've ever felt are crashing over me, and I'm calling her name over and over into her shoulder.

We collapse into one another's arms, but I stay inside her for a while, relishing the warmth of her body around mine as I kiss her deeply.

She hums contentedly, and soon I pull out, dropping to my back and pulling her toward me. She curls up against my chest. If I thought I was spent before, I am most definitely spent now.

"Love, I'm not sure I'm going to be able to stay awake for long," I say. "You've wiped me out."

She chuckles. "Same here."

"Can we make a deal?"

"What are the terms?"

"Can we agree to settle every argument this way?"

She laughs, props herself up on one elbow, and extends her hand to me. "Let's shake on it, Mr. Weasley."

"Done."
A surprise decision that somehow feels right.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 5: Vows

Sweet Merlin, I've got to keep my eyes closed for another minute or I know the sight that awaits me will throw me over the edge way too soon. As it is, just the feel of her, the sound of her, the smell of her — all of it is setting me on fire. I've been squeezing her bum, my thumbs meeting at the cleavage between her cheeks, and now my hands are traveling up to her little waist and, using her spine as a guide, I slide them further on up her back. At her shoulder blades, I spread my fingers, reach down beneath her and clutch her tits — gods, they're so firm, so perfect.

Hermione's on all fours at the center of the bed, I'm kneeling behind her, and she's been moaning and begging for more. "Just like that, Ron … oh, yessssss." Merlin, she's fantastic — and as Fred and George say, it's always the quiet ones you have to watch out for. Isn't it the truth. Fucking hell.

Despite what I know would be a spectacular sight, I'm keeping my eyes shut, trying to last as long as I can — because, as distractions from terror go, making love to Hermione Granger ranks right up there at the top of my list. But even I can't resist looking when I feel her chest lowering to press against the duvet. I straighten up, return my hands to her hips, and pull her against me again as I open my eyes and see that she's dropped her head, her shoulders and her chest to the bed. She's got her face turned to the side against the duvet, partially obscured by several curly strands of her hair, but the expression on her face is still visible and, fuck me she's gorgeous — her upper teeth are biting into her lower lip and there's a wicked little smile on her face, her eyes closed tight. And, the effect of this new position is that her rear end is on offer to me, stuck high in the air … and it seems as if she's sort of, I dunno … submitting herself to me … and that thought is enough to set off a chain reaction as I growl "Mmmmmmmmyyyyy-yyyyy-oouoo-neehee" like the sodding Neanderthal that she knows I am.

Afterward, she clings to me in her usual spot, tucked snugly into the crook between my left arm and my chest, and I try not to let myself think about the inevitable shitstorm that's ahead. The day after tomorrow, we're infiltrating the ruddy Ministry of Magic. And, despite all my attempts to dissuade her, Hermione is coming along. She's right, though — we need her.

I pull her closer and kiss the top of her head. She hums appreciatively and wraps her left arm around my chest, pressing her cheek to my shoulder.

"Galleon for your thoughts," she whispers.

"Mine aren't worth a galleon tonight, love. Or most nights, now that you ask. More like a knut, maybe."

"Hmm … you have been very quiet this evening," she says, sliding her hand up to my face and running her fingers over my scruff. I haven't felt like shaving the past few days, and she doesn't seem to mind.
"Yeah, guess I'm all talked out, at least when it comes to the mission," I say. "I can't go over it all in my head one more time or I'll go mad. And yet, my mind keeps turning back to it."

"Try not to think about it anymore tonight," she says, turning my face to hers and planting a kiss on my jaw.

"Well, you managed to divert my attention for about an hour there, so that's something."
She chuckles. "I'm afraid that particular technique can only be applied so often in a given evening."

"Bummer."

"Indeed."

We settle into a comfortable silence for a few minutes, just holding and occasionally squeezing one another, and I'm surprised that I almost feel like slumbering, despite how jumpy I've been all day. I'm just starting to doze when Hermione speaks again.

"Every now and then I check with Harry to be sure he's OK with things," she whispers.

"You mean, with, um, us?"

"Yes, with us."

"Yeah, I've talked with him about it and—"

"You have?"

I laugh. "Are you surprised? I mean, we're best mates. It would be pretty hard to keep it a secret from him."

"Oh, I just — well, I didn't know boys talked about things like that."

"Love, we talk about all sorts of things that would probably surprise you — but don't worry, I would never share the gory details."

"Well, thanks for that."

"Don't mention it."

"So, sounds like he's told you pretty much what he's told me — that he's fine with it all."

"Well, yeah — as long as we never again forget to cast a good, solid silencing charm. I think the memory of last Tuesday night is going to be forever burned into his brain."

"Oh gods, I've been trying to forget about that," she says, putting her hand over her eyes.

"Yeah, I think Harry is, too."

We both laugh. And then it's silent again, but I can tell that Hermione's mind is still whirring. So I fight to stay awake until she gives voice to her next thoughts.

"Ron, may I ask you a question?" she says rather timidly, running her fingertips over my chest.

I shrug and kiss her head again. "Anything."

There's a long pause, and then …
"What do you think about when we're making love?"

Bloody hell, what do I think about? Good lord, why is she asking that? Crap, I don't think she knows Legilimency, does she?

"Umm," I murmur, automatically raising my right hand to the back of my neck and feeling my ears turn beet red. "You mean, other than your tits and bits?"

That answer earns me a slap on the chest. "Honestly, Ronald! For heaven's sake," she says, then sighs in exasperation.

"You mean, other than the fact that I'm the luckiest bastard in the world?"

"Oh, please …"

"Well, maybe it would help if you would tell me what you think about."

She lets out a little huff of frustration. "Honestly, I guess I'm just trying not to dwell on the Ministry mission right now, so my mind is wandering to different topics, and this one's been on my mind lately — I don't know why. You'll think I'm a bit mad if I tell you what I think about."

"No I won't."

"Yes you will."

"OK, maybe I will."

She groans. "You're impossible."

"And you love it."

This earns me another little punch, but at least she's laughing now.

I decide to go easy on her an give her a little of what she's fishing for. Why not? After all, I do think of all sorts of ruddy madness while she's in my arms. "If you're asking what dirty thoughts go through my head when we're going at it, well, that shouldn't be a mystery, because most of it comes right out my mouth."

"Hmm, that's true. You do have a filthy mouth, Ronald," she says with a smile in her voice.

"Heh — that filthy mouth is my secret weapon when it comes to you. Renders you powerless against my charms, it does."

"I can't argue with that," she says with a smirk. I chuckle and squeeze her closer to me.

Bloody hell — I could tell her what's been on my mind — but she'll think I'm a tit if I tell her, won't she? Fuck.

Before I have a chance to work up the nerve, she jumps in.

"I guess I think about how safe you make me feel — how cherished," she whispers. "How glad I am that I'm yours. How feminine I feel when I'm with you — which is something I haven't always felt in my life."

I grin like an idiot — there's no use fighting it. She slays me, she's so adorable sometimes.
"I like noticing the physical differences between us," she continues. "You know, how big your hands are compared to mine, how muscular your arms are — that sort of thing."

I scratch my scruffy chin. "Yeah, I admit that turns me on, too."

"As the French say, 'Vive la difference.'"

I wrap my free arm behind my neck to prop my head up and sigh. "Those ruddy French — they've got a saying for everything."

"Hmm," she nods. "Of course, the feminist in me is surprised that your possessiveness is so, well, stimulating, but it is," she says before biting her lip. "I think about how much I want to give to you," she continues, with a little hitch in her voice, "how much I want to have with you — someday, that is, when this is all over."

That's pretty much what I think about, too. Maybe I should tell her. Hell, considering the mental mission we're going on the day after tomorrow, who knows if I'll ever have the chance to tell her ever if I don't do it now? She deserves to know.

"Yeah, I think things like that too, Mione," I whisper, trying to sound casual and casting my eyes to the ceiling.

"You do?" she nearly shouts, propping herself up so she can look into my face with a curious and excited gleam in her eye.

I stroke her cheek and she leans into it. That gesture — the way she slowly blinks, kisses my palm and looks back at me with such trust — it causes a surge of tenderness to well up in my heart and I just have to tell her what's really in my head. "Yeah, I think about the future — a lot," I whisper. "You might be shocked to know how much I think about things like that, actually, even when we're in the, uh, the heat of the moment."

Her eyes dart around my face like they sometimes do when she really wants to be sure she's hearing me. "Tell me," she murmurs. She leans a little harder against my chest. "Please," she adds, pursuing her lips and nodding.

I gulp. Bugger. "I mean, bear in mind, this notion comes to me sometimes when I'm, uh, about to, you know, come, ever since we, uh, you know, started going all the way," I sputter, feeling my ears burn, "and it's not like I want it to happen right now — that would be deranged — but still, it, uh, sort of comes to mind and, uh, it's just a turn-on I guess, and—"

"Ronald, I'm sorry, but I think you've lost me," she says.

"Sorry, was I rambling?"

"A bit."

"Yeah, I was, wasn't I?" I run my hand over my face. Bloody hell. "Well, love, when things are getting really hot and heavy, I imagine — I, uh, I imagine that I'm, uh…" — oh, fuck — "…that I'm knocking you up."

She shakes her head and there's that damned crinkle in her brow again. She lets out a little puff of a laugh. Shit.

"You mean, like, we're, um, we're making a baby?" she asks.
Dammit. Why didn't I make up something?

"Gods, Mione, yeah — I'm sorry, it's just some stupid mental thing that comes into my head sometimes — well, almost every time, to be honest — and I don't know why and, and, and I didn't expect it and I know it's maybe more of that bloody caveman stuff about me, but I dunno … it's not like I planned it, it just happens, and—"

Before I can finish, she presses her fingers to my lips and I shut up.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley, that is perhaps the sweetest, the sexiest thing that you've ever said to me. Ever." She's smiling like I just declared her to be Head Girl. Blimey.

She climbs on top of me and plants her lips on mine. "Oh, Ron, I love you so much," she breathes between kisses.

Well, this is a surprise. "I love you," I reply, pressing my forehead to hers. She rubs her nose against mine and hums. My heart flips. "Sometimes I think I'll never be able to make you understand how much, Little Dove."

"Words aren't always enough, are they?" she says, laying back and pulling me to lean on my side, hovering over her.

I prop my head on my hand and study her, stroking her arm with my free hand and wondering for the umpteenth time how I got to be so lucky to love her and have her love me back. "That doesn't freak you out, what I just said — about, you know, babies and everything?" I ask.

She smiles and shakes her head.

"I know it's barmy," I whisper, "that we're saying these things to each other when, let's face it, we haven't even had a proper date."

"I know — if we were normal teenagers, we'd probably just be going to Hogsmeade together or going to the muggle cinema or somesuch," she says with a wistful smile. "But, well, let's be honest — there's a war going on. I guess it has a way of accelerating things."

"Hmm." I shrug. Maybe I'm mental, but that's one aspect of the war that I kind of don't mind. After all the years of longing for her, I'm glad we can skip the preliminaries and just be together. "You know, come to think of it, I'd rather think about the distant future than the immediate future, if you know what I mean. At least for tonight."

She nods. "OK, tell me what you see."

We stare at each other for a minute and then — I don't know why — we both burst out in giggles.

"This is a little embarrassing," I say. "Blokes aren't supposed to think about this stuff."

She strokes my scruff again. "Well, you're no ordinary bloke," she says fondly.

"You're a clever one, Granger — getting what you want out of me using flattery, eh?" She chuckles. "You'd be an excellent interrogator."

"I'll bear it in mind after I get my NEWTs."

"All right, but be careful what you wish for, because I've got a pretty detailed picture in my head. It might not be what you have in mind."
"Amaze me."

I chuckle and lay down so we're facing each other side-by-side. She rests her hand beneath my chin and fingers the stubble there some more. I settle my gaze on her eyes for a minute — or maybe more, I can't tell — and get lost in what I see there. A future. It seems so real, so possible — and yet, I feel a pang in my chest, almost like I did when I longed for her love and thought I could never have it. This future we're fighting for, it might never happen. Shite.

Focus, eedjit! You're supposed to be cheering her up. Damn. All right … think!

"Well, this part doesn't really come to me so much while we're making love," I say slowly as I gather my thoughts, "but it's something I've thought about at other times," I confess.

She smiles and nods, running her thumb back and forth gently across my lower lip.

"I guess I picture a little cottage somewhere in the country — you wouldn't mind the country, would you?"

She shakes her head.

"I guess I'd like to have enough room out back for Quidditch, you know? So our, uh," — I gulp — "so our kids can learn to play."

She smiles and sniffs.

"That sounds lovely, Ronald, honestly."

Despite my mild embarrassment, I smile inwardly at the sound of her calling me Ronald. It used to be the name she called me when she was hacked off — and it still is — but lately it's also turned into a term of endearment. I can't believe how much things have changed between us, and in such a short span of time. Gods. Then I realize I've been silent for a little too long, so I blink a few times and continue. "What about you? What do you picture?"

"Pretty much what you just described," she whispers with a little grin and another sniffle.

"Pretty much?"

"Well, I also picture a rather large library where they can read with me."

I kiss her thumb, which is still stroking my lower lip. "Well, that goes without saying."

"And maybe a pond for swimming."

"Duly noted," I say, grasping the hand that's been caressing my lips and kissing it before placing it against my chest and holding it there. "So, umm, what do you think — are we going to be the type to uh, plan every detail of, you know, erm, making a baby, or are we going to just sort of go for the surprise factor?"

She chuckles. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you know, if it were up to me — and I know it's not! Not entirely anyway," I say with a smirk, "I'd just sort of, you know, pull the goalie as the Canadians say — no contraceptive charms, no potions, whatever — and make love and see what happens. Seems more fun that way."

"You mean, instead of being responsible, seeing a Healer, eating properly, being sure you've got your career and your education and your finances in order and all that?" she asks, her eyebrows
raised.

"Well, yeah ... I mean, yeah, instead of all that."

She laughs. "Well, thank goodness these decisions are a long way ahead of us."

I shrug. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Are you disappointed?"

"No! Well, no, I mean, bloody hell, we're not ready for anything like that, are we? It's just ... well, it's just nice to think about, isn't it? Specially at times like this."

She pecks my cheek and settles down to lay on her back and stare at the ceiling. "I couldn't agree more, Ronald."

Silence creeps over us again, and judging by the worried look that's slowly crept onto her face, I'm pretty sure she's thinking what I'm thinking — that we'll be lucky if we get in and out of the Ministry in one piece without winding up in Azkaban or worse. *Fuck.*

She sighs and I decide I can't let her sink into a funk. Not now.

"Sorta wish we didn't have to wait, though," I whisper, and she rolls onto her side again to look at me with a surprised expression. "Don't get me wrong! I'm not talking about a ruddy baby, for Merlin's sake — bloody hell! Just for, you know, other things."

She sighs. "Yes, but with the war on, some things will have to wait."

Yeah, of course. Who knows where we'll be two nights from now? Hopefully we'll be safely back here at Grimmauld Place with the locket in hand, celebrating our success. But ... what if ... Merlin, I hate this bloody war.

But then I'm struck by a flash of inspiration.

I sit up suddenly and pivot on my hip and lean over her. "Hermione, some things don't have to wait if we don't want them to," I say, louder than we've been speaking all night, and I know I've just startled her a bit, but I can feel an instant surge of excitement. Merlin, five minutes ago I was ready to sleep, and now I feel like I could wrestle a Hippogriff.

She sits up with a puzzled look on her face. "What are you talking about?" she says, sounding a little worried.

"No, no, no — I'm not talking about getting ourselves in the family way — blimey!" She breathes a sigh of relief. "Merlin, Hermione, I'm not *that* mental."

"All right, well then what *are* you on about?"

"Let's get bonded," I say excitedly, trying to ignore the sudden panic I'm feeling at the thought that she might say no. She wouldn't do that — would she?

She shakes her head, chuckles as if she can't believe her ears, then says, "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me, Hermione," I say, now with a tone like I'm trying to talk her into sneaking down to Hogsmeade or skiving off prefects rounds. "Let's get bonded. Now. Tonight."
I'm half expecting her to yell at me, or to feel my forehead to see if I've got a fever, or to require some persuasion, but instead she breaks into a big, warm grin. "Are you serious?"

I laugh — which maybe isn't the best way to prove I'm serious, but, "Yeah, yeah I am. I'm not kidding. I mean, it's something I guess I always figured we'd do someday but, you know, maybe someday needs to be now."

"Holy smokes," she whispers. "Could we, really?"

"Yeah, why not?"

Her eyes roam the room as if looking for the reason to jump out at her from behind the curtains or from inside the armoire. "Well, for one thing," she says with a furrowed brow, "I don't know the spells or the vows."

I chuckle, because I know what I'm about to say is the last thing she'd ever expect.

"OK, so … you're going to think I'm daft," I say with a slight wince, "but, umm … I, uh … I pretty much know the bonding ceremony by heart."

"What?" she says, her eyes raking over every point of my face. "Who are you and what have you done with Ronald Weasley?"

"Oi! I come from a gigantic family, for Merlin's sake. Do you know how many sodding aunts, uncles and first, second and quintuple cousins I have? I've probably had to suffer through at least a hundred bloody weddings in my short, tortured life," I say. "Don't judge."

"Sorry," she says, chuckling, "but I'm judging."

"Yeah, well, Judgey Wudgey was a bear," I reply.

With this, she completely loses it, exhaling a long, hysterical "pffffffttttttttttt!" before flopping back down onto the mattress and dissolving into full-throated laughter, snorts and all. I'm smiling so hard my face hurts — this whole situation has somehow turned hilarious.

"But, you know," I say, bending down over the edge of the bed to grab her white terrycloth robe from the floor and tossing it to her, "maybe we shouldn't do this starkers."

She catches the robe and slips it on while I stand up and retrieve my Gryffindor Quidditch jersey and my flannel pyjama trousers, which are lying in a heap on the desk chair.

"Ronald Weasley," she says quietly as she rises to stand next to the bed. "You really aren't joking, are you?"

I step toward her and take both her hands, suddenly sobering up. "No, I'm not." I bend slightly to meet her eyes. "I've never been more serious, actually."

She's tearing up again. I seem to always be doing that to her.

Through her tears, she squares her shoulders, nods emphatically and says in a firm voice, "Let's do this, then."

Merlin's great, bleeding hemorrhoids — I don't even know where this idea came from, but here we are. It seems right though, somehow. And what's really strange is, I know what to do and Hermione doesn't. Can't think of too many times when that's happened before.
"OK, then," I say, squeezing her hands between mine. "Umm, let's stand by the hearth then, all right?"

We shuffle over to stand on the rug and just sort of stare at one another for a second.

"We're really doing this, aren't we?" she says, smiling and biting her bottom lip.

"Yeah, I guess we are."

"We don't need an officiant to oversee this whole thing? You know, perhaps that little spirit-wizard who presided over Bill and Fleur's ceremony?"

I shake my head. "Nope. That's a fairly modern tradition, the spirit-wizard, I mean. The ceremony itself is ancient — and as long as both parties are willing, it's the real deal."

She's grinning like a fiend and shaking her head slowly like this is the craziest idea she's ever heard — and yet she's totally game. "So, how do we start?"

"Uh, well, give me a minute to try to remember," I say. "The vows are pretty complex."

"I couldn't help but notice, while Bill and Fleur said their vows, that the groom makes most of the promises and whatnot," she says. "That's different from muggle weddings."

"Yeah?"

"Well, yes — in most muggle ceremonies, the bride and groom say basically the same things."

I shrug. "Now's probably not a good time to tell you this, but I'm pretty sure wizarding marriage vows date back to a time when brides didn't have a lot of power over this stuff."

"Charming."

"Well, I think the bloke is supposed to step up with some pretty iron-clad promises to try to make it better for her. That's why he yammers on and on and the bride doesn't say much. If that makes any sense. Which I guess it doesn't."

The conversation trails off and after a minute we both realize we've been silent for what feels like ages. I can do nothing but stare into her eyes, and she's staring back into mine. Gods, we're doing this. We're really doing this.

Suddenly, she cracks into a giggle again. This breaks the spell, and we both start smiling.

"OK, so, again," I say with a smirk, "if you can manage to contain your mirth, woman, I'll walk you through it."

"Scout's honor," she says, crossing her heart.

"I have no idea what that means," I reply with mock annoyance.

"It's a muggle thing — no worries."

"Fine. So here goes. This is a four-stage process if I remember correctly."

"All righty, then," she says, looking a little uncertain all of a sudden.

I look her deep in the eyes. "I'm really not joking around here."
She takes a deep breath. "Neither am I. Honestly. I guess I'm laughing now and then because I'm just a little nervous."

"If you'd rather not —"

"No, no," she sputters. "I want to." She shakes her head as if to clear it. "I want to — very much. I'm actually, just, well … I'm just kind of boggled by the idea that you want to."

I rub the back of my neck with my right hand as I feel my ears heat up. "Well, yeah, I do. I mean, this isn't exactly how I pictured it —"

"Wait, you pictured it?"

"Well, uh, yeah," I say, still rubbing my neck. "Hell, yeah. Sure I have. And yeah, someday I hope we can do this properly, you know, with me getting down on one knee and really asking you, and with our families and friends being there, and Harry and Ginny standing up with us, and that funny little spirit-wizard waving his wand at us — you know, the whole works."

She sniffs and suddenly she's blinking back tears again. "Oh, Ronald." Next thing I know, she's got her arms draped around my neck and she's buried her face under my chin, sniffling.

I wrap my arms around her waist. "Hey, hey there, you … I love you, remember?"

She nods.

"Then let's do this thing, yeah?"

She pulls back, sniffs again, and looks up into my eyes. "OK," she says with another nod.

"Right," I say with a little throat-clearing cough. "So, like I was saying, there are four big sections to this whole thing, although I don't remember why. Something about the four winds or the four directions on the compass or something like that. I never paid that much attention to the backstory. Anyway, just bear with me because I may muck this up from time to time, but here's the gist. First, there's the, uh, the declaration of intent — where I figure both parties, I dunno, own up that they're doing this with their eyes more or less open, I guess — you know, nobody's got a wand to the back of their head. That sort of thing." I stop and nod at her. "So, you ready?"

She blows a little puff of air from her lips, wipes the tears from her cheeks, and then nods. "Mmm hmm."

"OK, uh, so, you stay standing right there where you are for this chunk of it, and I, uh, step back and draw a circle of light around me on the floor with my wand."

"Right."

I clear my throat and shrug. I guess this is it.

"Nuptiae Inardesco," I mumble and, stepping off the rug, I turn on my heel with my wand pointed downward, and I'm rather surprised to find that I've managed to create a circle of low, flaming yellow light on the hardwood around my bare feet. Huh — who knew? This gibberish just might work.

I look up at her, standing there just a few feet away from me on the hearth rug and, I don't know, maybe it's something about the way she's rubbing her hands together nervously, or the way her fluffy white robe looks like maybe it's a size too big on her, but suddenly, she seems so tiny to me,
and it dawns on me that I'm about to become that much more responsible for her — and maybe I'm crazy, but I want to.

If I don't snap out of this daze I'm in, though, it's never going to happen. "Um, OK," I say, rubbing my neck again. "So, I state my intention now. Here goes." I smile — and she smiles back. The hilarity of the previous few minutes has faded into something that feels entirely different. I can't quite describe it — I'm happy but also, all of a sudden, surprisingly nervous. My damned ears are positively scorching.

I see that Hermione's eyes are brimming with tears again, and this causes a lump to form in my throat. I'm not sure I can speak without sounding like a plonker, but I've got to try.

"I, Ronald Bilius Weasley," I whisper, with an embarrassing little warble in my voice. I take a deep breath to steady myself. "I, Ronald Bilius Weasley" — I repeat, more satisfied this time with my tone — "invite you, Hermione Jean Granger …"

I pause for a deep breath before plunging back in.

"To join with me …" I gulp again, looking down at the fiery circle for a millisecond before meeting her eyes. "To join with me in magical communion, to promise to love and stand by one another, forsaking all others, in life and beyond, where we shall meet, remember, and love again."

She sniffs and hiccups, and I can't help but smile, even though I feel as if my heart is beating so hard that it's going to crack my ribs. I lift my right hand and she grasps it in her left one, running her thumb over my knuckles before taking a deep, shaky breath, squaring her shoulders and stepping into the circle to stand facing me.

"Right. Righty-o. OK. Good," I say. Good lord, she's standing here with me inside this flaming ruddy circle. "Can you believe we're doing this?" I whisper to her.

"Just barely," she whispers back with a little grin.

"Pinch me to prove it's real."

She pinches my bicep with her right hand — rather hard, it must be said. "Oww!"

"Sorry."

I clear my throat. "No worries. I deserved that. OK … so … oh yeah."

My hand is shaking, but she squeezes it ever so slightly within her fingers, and that gives me the focus I need to continue.

"Yeah, so then there's the promising part. Some of this kind of repeats some of the earlier bit — but I guess you've accepted my invitation, if you will, and now we're both kind of reiterating what we're up to, yeah?"

"Mmm hmm … I remember something about that from Bill and Fleur's ceremony."

"Wasn't that long ago, was it?"

She nods. "And yet it feels like a million years," she whispers.

I shrug and smile back at her.

"OK, I think I remember this bit," I say, my heart pounding in my ears, "but stop me if I bollix it
She nods. I fold both of her hands inside mine and take a minute to study her face. It hits me that this is one of those moments that I will look back on for decades. Hell, I'll probably remember it on my death bed. So I try to study everything about it — the way the light is playing around her curly hair, creating a backlit halo around her head … the way her eyes are flickering over my face … the pink sheen of her cheeks … the plumpness of her lips. Gods, she's beautiful. I want her so much. Hell if she doesn't want me, too. Sweet Merlin, what did I ever do to deserve this?

I gaze down, deep into those chocolate-brown eyes, and for a half a second, I see a series of images in my mind's eye: Hermione cowering beneath a sink as the mountain troll swings his club … Hermione Petrified in Madame Pomfrey's infirmary … Hermione punching Malfoy in the face … Hermione knitting caps for the house elves … and I decide that I have to do what I can to rise to the occasion, even if I'm suddenly feeling scared shitless. She deserves nothing less. So here goes.

"Do you, Hermione Granger, promise to be my … be my … my wedded and magically bonded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, in plenty and in poverty, in sickness and in health, to love, to protect and to cherish, 'til death do us part?"

She crinkles her brow. Shit.

"Ron," she says questioningly, shaking her head from side to side slowly. "I don't remember the words 'to protect' in there."

Damn.

"All right — I just slipped it in," I say with a grimace.

She smirks. "Oh, for heaven's sake, Ronald."

"I was hoping you wouldn't notice," I grumble. "I want to protect you, Mione — is that such a crime?"

She lets out a deep sigh. "No, I suppose not. Let's try that last line again, shall we?"

I can't help but snort out a little laugh. Little Miss Bossypants, even now. "All right. Here goes: 'To have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, in plenty and in poverty, in sickness and in health, to love, TO PROTECT" — I repeat with an exaggerated scowl — "and to cherish, 'til death do us part?" "

She sniffs, nods and then whispers, "I do," with a sweet little smile.

I choke out a another quick laugh — I can't help it. I can hardly believe this is happening. We must both be barking mad.

"OK, now it's your turn," I whisper.

"Oh, ummmmm …" She sucks in her lower lip. "I think I remember all the words."

"I'll nudge you if you screw it up."

"OK, thanks," she says. She shivers, and I lift her hands and press a kiss to the back of each one for confidence. It makes a difference, I think, because her eyes meet mine and she seems more sure of herself. She smiles and takes the plunge.

"Do you, Ronald Weasley, promise to be my wedded and magically bonded husband, to have and
to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, in plenty and in poverty, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, 'til death do us part?"

There's a buzzing in my brain and I'm conscious once again that my face hurts, I'm smiling so much. Hermione Granger has just asked me — me — something that I … well, if I confessed how many times I have pictured this, I'd be labeled a right ponce. Hell. I am a ponce. Who cares? She's saying these incredible words. I just … can't … I just can't do anything more than try to control this ridiculous, painful smile on my face, take a deep breath, and say the words she's apparently waiting to hear.

"I do," I whisper. And then I squeeze her hands to remind myself this is all really happening.

She deflates slightly — and it occurs to me that she's been holding her breath. She inhales again and straightens back up to her normal height, a watery smile gracing her face.

"OK, love, here's the tricky part," I murmur, knowing that what's coming next may seem a little, um, barbaric maybe — at least to a muggle-born. I remember looking at Hermione during this point in Bill and Fleur's ceremony and noticing how pale she became. And yet, it's part of the deal, in a manner of speaking.

"Umm, oh yes, yes, I remember," she whispers.

"We don't have to."

"Yes. Yes. I want to," she answers.

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely."

"OK, then."

I know what I have to do. I take my wand from my back pocket, conjure a clean white cotton handkerchief, and take her left hand in my right.

"All right — now, if the spirit-wizard were here, he'd do this to our palms, but since this is just us and it's sort of a do-it-yourself thing, I think we can get away with something a little less dramatic, yeah?"

She crinkles her brow. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe just our fingertips."

She considers it for a second and seems to come to a decision, because her brow clears. "Sure. Yes, you're right."

"Atta girl. OK. You trust me?"

"Completely."

"This shouldn't hurt much."

"Don't worry."

"OK."
I hate what I have to do, but it's the next step in the process — the third step, to be precise.

Pointing my wand at my finger, I force my hands not to shake as I mutter the incantation — "Matrimonio Intersecare" — and a small cut appears across the pad of my right index finger. I do the same to Hermione's left hand. She winces as my wand slices in. I note the little quiver in her smile as I take her hand in mine, press our bleeding pointer fingers together, and wrap them in the handkerchief. I stoop down to make eye contact with her — to be sure she's OK — and she meets my eyes reassuringly.

"Hermione Jean Granger," I begin, my voice trembling. This. Is. Big. Merlin, I hope she knows how much I mean this. "From this day forward, my fate and thine are forever intertwined." I pause to swallow, slightly amazed that I'm remembering all these words. She looks up at me. Is this brilliant, beautiful girl mad to be doing this with me? Probably. Probably, yeah. I figure I'm lucky she's that mental. "By the life that courses within my blood," I continue, my voice a little stronger now, "I take thee to my hand, my heart, my magic and my spirit," I gulp — blimey — "to be my chosen one. To desire thee and be desired by thee, to possess thee, and be possessed by thee, without sin or shame, for naught can exist in the purity of my love for thee."

The cut in my finger drums in synch with my pulse, and I feel a warmth spread from the point where our fingers are joined down into my palm, then through my arm — sending a noticeable prickle through my scars — and into my chest and then the rest of my body. Judging by the way her eyes have shifted to her hand and then to her arm, I'm guessing she's feeling a similar sensation.

I decide now's as good a time as any to continue. The words I'm about to say have always been my favorite part.

"Ye are now blood of my blood, and bone of my bone," I whisper. "I give ye my body, that we two might be one. I give ye my spirit, 'til our life shall be done."

Tears are streaming down her face now — though it's a bit hard to make out, truth be told, because my eyes are clouded with tears as well. I hear the sound of a quick sob from deep within her chest, though I can hardly make it out past the drumming of my heart in my ears.

"Now, the fourth and final part, which we can't really do properly because I don't have a ring to give you," I say. "Sorry."

She shakes her head. "It's all right."

"No, it's not all right, really — but I promise I'll make it up to you someday, yeah?"

She nods and grins at me. Good Godric, I just cut her finger and she's smiling at me. Deranged, she is.

"Right then. Here we go," I say, looking about the room in an effort to calm my nerves. First, I lift my wand to heal our fingertips and, taking both her hands in mine, I run the fingers of my right hand over the fourth finger of her left hand, where I should be placing a ring on her finger if only I had one to give. "I hereto pledge thee my troth," I say. "With my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods and with my name I thee endow. Have no fear, and let not the ways nor words of the unenlightened give you unease, for there is no greater magic in this world than two people joined together in love."

I don't know exactly what magic is at work here, but I quickly realize that this is pretty deep, ancient stuff, because a current of some kind — like a blend of electricity, a gust of wind and a wall of fast-moving water, if that's even possible — is flowing in and around my body, and I'd ask
Hermione if she was feeling the same thing but I honestly can't speak. Time seems to have stopped … well … ticking.

Then, finally, something happens that I actually expected to happen, because it's happened at every bonding ceremony I've ever witnessed but one (the wedding of my second-cousin, who apparently wasn't really in love with her intended and therefore the magic didn't stick): The fiery ring at our feet rises from the floor and forms a shimmery cylinder around us that looks sort of like a veil of cascading, silvery snow, and it stretches until it extends just above my head. And then, almost as quickly, it dissipates. And suddenly, time seems to kick back in again, and the tingly, current-like feeling begins to subside.

The two of us are left standing there, holding one another's hands, equally gobsmacked.

"Wow. Did you feel that?" says Hermione through an astonished-looking smile, tears staining her cheeks.

"Yeah, I did. At least, I think I did."

"Wow."

"I know."

She squeezes my hands in her little fingers. "To be honest, I wasn't really sure what was going to happen there. I mean, I've only seen one bonding ceremony, and, and … well, I'm just …"

"Stupefied? Boggled? Flabbergasted?"

She chuckles. "I was going to say, 'moved.' "

"You said it," I say, cupping her face in my hands. "You know, if that little spirit-wizard feller were here, he'd declare that I may now kiss the bride."

"Perhaps you should," she says with mock earnestness, meeting my gaze with a watery smile. "I mean, the magic might not be complete without it."

"Can't risk that," I whisper, rubbing our noses together briefly before planting a small kiss on her lips. And I do indeed feel something — a sort of fizzling in my bloodstream, like those Sizzling Eldercherry Phosphates that they sell at Fortescue's.

"Did you feel that?" she whispers against my lips.

"This is getting interesting," I say, lifting her off her feet and carrying her back to the bed.

I lay her down, untie her robe, and proceed to suckle on her breasts, one after the other, as she sighs and tugs on my shirt, pulling it over my head and off my arms. Then she presses her little hand to my cock, which has grown rock hard and is now straining against my trousers. "Oh Ron, I want you so much," she whispers as she slides the trousers off my bum.

My skin — particularly on my arms — is ablaze, but it feels so good.

I swiftly slide my trousers off and quickly position myself above her. "I've just got to have you, Hermione — now," I rasp against her lips.

She answers with a sigh, plunging her fingers into my hair, rubbing her nose up and down next to mine again and speaking against my lips. "Make me your wife."
Keeping my face so close to hers that our noses are still touching, I plunge my cock inside her, and we both let out a deep, simultaneous moan as a warm shiver runs through my body from my toes to my head — and, from the sounds she's making, I'm imagining she's feeling something similar.
"Gods, I love you, Hermione Granger," I whisper against her lips.

I feel her smile. "I think I'm Hermione Weasley now," she replies in a breathy voice as she wraps her robe-clad arms around my shoulders.

"Merlin bless me," I whisper back. "You are, aren't you?"

"Mmm hmm."

And we make love like that, quietly and gently, both sort of wrapped up in her fluffy white terrycloth robe, which is falling off her arms and surrounding us in her beautiful vanilla-ish smell, and with every thrust I feel that warm shivering sensation sinking deeper, from the surface of my skin, down into my muscles, through my veins and creeping into my bones. Between every kiss, there's an "I love you" being uttered by one of us, and I can't help it, I've got tears in my eyes. So does she. After a few minutes, I come inside her — it's not as explosive as other times, just, again, warm, in a way I haven't felt it before, but it lasts longer and I never want it to end. But it does, and eventually we both fall back on the bed and wrap ourselves around one another while we try to catch our breath.

I lean my cheek against the top of her head, and soon I'm able to form normal words again. "So I'm fairly certain I just endowed you with all my worldly goods," I whisper into her hair. "I guess this means you're entitled to 50 percent of my Chocolate Frog cards, Little Dove."

"Hmm," she replies, and I can feel the curve of her cheek as she smiles against my chest. "And I do believe you now possess 50 percent of my secret stash of Flourish & Blotts' Premium Parchment."

I squeeze her shoulders and settle us both a little deeper into the pillows. "We are very rich, aren't we, Mrs. Weasley," I say. "Very rich indeed."
Things get dark.

Chapter 6: Fire and Ice

"Here," I barked as I dropped a fat salmon onto the kitchen table with a thunk, turned my back and marched to my bunk, not waiting for Hermione's reply.

She may not appreciate my manners, but at least we'll eat something other than mushrooms and dandelion greens tonight. I'm bloody hungry, Harry's bloody hungry—and so is she—but she doesn't make it terribly easy to do anything about it. Everything's a row nowadays. Even something as simple as the plan to use the Invisibility Cloak to get groceries in a nearby muggle town has become an opportunity for her to accuse me of being insufferable and controlling. Sure, I know she's the only one of us who really understands muggle money, but does that mean I should be just fine with letting her wander into town on her own without me? Hell, no. Not with Dementors roaming the streets and muggleborns being hunted like sodding animals. I go with her or she doesn't go — period. Is it my fault that I'm too tall to fit under the cloak with her? And apparently I'm a jackass because I've complained that the last few campsites we've chosen have no water—and, therefore, no fish—nearby. But honestly, how hard is it for a bleeding wizard to Accio a goddamned fish? Not very—that is, unless you're nowhere near a lake or a bloody stream, for the love of Merlin.

And starving isn't an option, either. She may not remember it, but I took a vow to protect her, and I won't let her waste away to nothing if I have the power to do something about it. I don't give a damn if she doesn't like my methods. She says she doesn't approve when I capture rabbits because they're, well, cute—but they're also delicious, for fuck's sake. And I'll steal if I have to before I'll let my family go hungry. One night, when lifting some eggs from a local farmer's chicken coop—and leaving a ruddy pound note in the nest at Hermione's insistence—I also helped myself to a chicken. You'd think I'd murdered a house elf the way she reacted, going on and on about justice and the farmer's livelihood. I told her I reckoned the ledgers would be balanced when the three of us save the effing world from You-Know-Who, thank you very much. She scoffed, but we stretched that chicken into three meals. And what's the thanks I got? Silence and another night of whacking off alone in the shower. Fucking hell.

I ease off my coat and kick off my boots, settle back on my bunk and look at the sling, now dangling off the top bunk, where I left it before I went fishing. I know she'll insist that I put it back on my arm, but I hate the way it cuts into the skin of my neck. I'm starting to think I can get by without it pretty much all the time now, but the last time I suggested that, she went mental, saying some bollocks like I'd reopen the splinch wound and then I'd have to start healing all over again and then where would we be. Another fucking argument.

Doesn't help that I haven't been able to touch her in two bloody weeks. Blimey, I never thought I'd miss dingy old Grimmauld Place. At least there we had some privacy—and even before we went all the way, we slept in one another's arms every night. But now that all three of us are bunking in the same space in this smelly tent, Hermione says she doesn't want to make Harry uncomfortable
or some shite like that, so it's hands off. But I can't help but wonder if maybe there's more to it than that.

When we first landed in this canvas shitbag, she couldn't keep her hands off me. Well, she was actually nursing me, truth be told — I was a right mess, granted — but still, it meant that she was constantly at my bedside, changing my bandages, sponging off my forehead, feeding me, bringing me water, and generally hovering over me. I didn't realize then that this was as close to getting any action with her as I was going to be from now on. If I had, I might have screwed up the strength to at least snog her here and there when I had the chance — though I doubt I would have had the energy back then. Still, it felt good to be fussed over. Now that I'm well enough to move around, it's like she's put up a force field around herself. Or that's how it feels.

I broke through it that one night two weeks ago, when Harry was on watch. I had been sitting on my bunk, messing with the wireless. Nothing. Exasperated, I set the radio aside and picked up the Deluminator, lying back and just absent-mindedly clicking it on and off. Then I heard the sound of water running in the bathroom, and I realized that Hermione was getting in the shower.

Sensing a prime opportunity — one I hadn't had in weeks — I tugged off the sling, slipped into the bathroom, locked the door behind me, and cast a silencing charm. I slowly drew back the curtain and proceeded to scare the living devil out of Hermione — not that I meant to, mind.

"Ronald Weasley! How dare you sneak in here and startle me like that!" she shouted, crossing her arms over her breasts and twisting away from me. I just stood there, boggled by the sight of her — bubbles drifting down from her hair to her shoulders, and then over her arms and down the mounds of her breasts. That's when I noticed what I should have remembered: She was wearing the locket. Already I was beginning to hate that ruddy thing. But its presence explained the growing ringing in my ears. I'd started to notice that I didn't even need to be wearing the thing — I just had to be near it — and it almost made me physically sick. You-Know-Who must have put some incredibly Dark Magic on that mother-effer.

"Good Godric, Hermione," I said in a low voice. "It's been so long—"

"Where's Harry?" she interrupted, rather loudly.

Harry. It's always Harry with her. Fucking hell. "He's still out by the campfire on watch," I whispered. "And keep it down. I cast a Silencing charm, but these things are only so effective, woman."

"You cast a Silencing charm?" she answered in a tiny, breathy voice, a look of astonishment coming over her face.

I nodded.

"Why?"

Merlin! I ran my fingers through my hair in frustration. "Why? You can't imagine why?" I hissed. "Because I haven't had a chance to be alone with my wife, to make love to my wife, since I don't know when," I said, aware that my volume was rising — and also aware that I had been shushing her just a moment before, and that I didn't bloody care that I was being unfair or inconsistent or whatever the hell she was about to say I was being. "I came in here because I thought maybe, just maybe, you wouldn't mind some private time with your bloody husband. That's why. And maybe—"

"I'm sorry," she said, cutting me off, and she immediately looked as if she regretted sounding so
harsh a second earlier. "I'm sorry," she repeated in a softer voice this time, lowering her hands from her shoulders to her elbows and then finally to her sides. "I, I — I didn't think."

I wasn't quite ready to be forgiving — I wasn't expecting her to be so contrite. I'd actually been gearing up for a row. So I wasn't exactly sure what to say next.

She distracted herself by looking at the soap dish hanging from the shower head and fingering it nervously. Looking away from me, she said, "I've missed you," so quietly that I could barely hear it over the rush of the water.

I couldn't take it anymore. In a flash, I pulled my shirt off and tossed it to the floor. Then I reached into the shower, grabbed the hand that had been toying with the soap dish, and pulled her to me — maybe a bit rougher than I should have, but she didn't resist and she stepped out of the stream of water and into my arms. I captured her waist with my left arm and reached behind her shoulders with my right, pressing her wet chest to mine — and, in that instant, my skin came into contact with that sodding locket, and the low-level buzzing in my ears that I'd always noticed when that fucker was around turned up a few notches. She certainly was taking Harry's rule about wearing that damned thing seriously, even taking it with her into the shower.

"Hermione, I … please," I rasped, leaning back, "take that bloody locket off."

She quietly complied, lifting the chain from her neck, laying it on the back of sink, then resting her hands on my chest with her face turned away from me. The buzzing lessened somewhat and I was able to think a bit clearer.

"Look at me," I whispered.

Her eyes lingered on the locket. Then she tilted her face up to me, and for the first time since I stepped into the room with her, I felt like she was really looking at me — and I was really looking at her.

"Hermione, I …"

I exhaled in frustration. There was too much to say — and no time to say it. But before I could gather my thoughts, Hermione threw her arms around my neck and pulled my face to hers. Our mouths crashed together, teeth bumping, lips nearly bruising, and our tongues dueled for dominance.

But this was a wrestling match I wasn't about to lose. I lowered my hands to her bum, digging my fingers into her damp cheeks, and pressed her waist to me, grinding the front of my jeans against her core until she was pinned between me and the sink. She hummed and moaned around my tongue and dug her fingers into my bare back.

With my tongue still deep in her mouth, I shifted my hands lower on her bum, lifted her onto the sink and then shoved my hands between her thighs to spread them wider, making room for me to step in and continue thrusting against her. She pulled her mouth from mine and tipped her neck back, so I could run my tongue over the curve of it and bury my hands in her wet hair, which was tumbling down toward the sink. She hissed when I slid my tongue down to her right nipple and began to suck. Then I started nibbling — so hard, in fact, that I expected her to slap my face away but, instead, she laced her fingers around my head and held me there, a deep "yessssssssssssss" sliding through her lips as she nestled her hands into my bare back.

After a few minutes of that — accompanied by wave after wave of throaty moans … "please, Ron" … "yes, Ron" … "don't stop, Ron" — I tugged her bottom closer to the edge of the sink and leaned
I looked her over. She was panting, and so was I. Her chest was heaving, her tits — reddened from my sucking and biting — rising and falling with each breath. Her hair was damp and wild, and her lips were slightly swollen. My cock twitched against her, and I knew she felt it, even through my jeans. I wrapped my arms a little tighter around her waist and pressed her harder against me.

"Undo me," I said firmly, leaning back a bit more.

Her eyes searched my face. She bit her lower lip, then shifted her gaze to my belt. I watched her little fingers slowly unfasten the buckle before she went to work on the button of my jeans and tugged at my zip.

I could easily have done all this myself, but I wanted to watch her do it, to watch her do something that I'd asked — no, told — her to do, to watch her reach into my trousers, to watch her nudge my pants down to just beneath my bum, to watch her free my cock, pulling it out into the dim lantern light and running her fingers over the skin of my knob for the first time in weeks. The sensation, the feel of her skin on mine … well, it had been so long that it actually felt as new and exciting as it did the very first time.

As I held her hips in my hands, she pumped my cock in her little fist once, and then again, and I pursed my lips, threw my head back, and sucked a deep lungful of air through my nostrils. She pumped again and it felt so good, it was almost agonizing. On the exhale, I lifted my head, straightened up, and reached down to still her hand. She froze and looked up at me curiously, her fist still wrapped around me.

I placed my hands on my hips, my belt and trousers hanging from my knees, which were now spread slightly apart. Looking her in the eye, I whispered, "Budge off of there, Hermione."

She looked unsure for a second, then her eyes darkened and — with a swiftness that I frankly found a bit surprising, though I didn't show it — she complied, scooting down off the sink to stand before me, looking up into my face passively, her hand remaining on my cock, which was throbbing painfully.

I stepped back and nodded, and she must have understood my wordless command, because she knelt down before me, so the object of her attention was just level with her chin, and looked up at me as if awaiting instructions. I gave her another firm nod, and she licked the underside tentatively. Then she sucked on the tip more strongly before pausing to run her tongue downward again and Merlin, I'm getting hard again just thinking about it now. I was so erect, ready to explode and so starved for her. The possessive sodding caveman in me — the one I had warned her about that night in the Common Room — was running at full tilt. I mean, no one can ever really explain why certain things turn them on the way they do — especially in the heat of the moment — but looking back on it now, I realize I was being driven mental by the sight of her, kneeling there on the floor, the feel of her lapping at me, but also just the idea that, after all these weeks of feeling practically ignored by her, she was now concentrating fully on me, fully on my cock, fully on giving me pleasure, and it was a surge of pure adrenaline. I was moaning, my skin was tingling.

Opening wide, she took in as much of me as she could. I hissed out a breath, then threaded my fingers into the wet curls on either side of her face and held her head in place, moving my hips back and forth. I shut my eyes and got lost in the feeling rolling through me as her lips slid up and down — that is, until she coughed, and that broke the spell. I snapped out of it and only then realized how much my ears had been ringing and buzzing because, as soon as she made that choking sound, I pulled back and the buzzing subsided significantly. Alarmed, I looked down to
see that she seemed to be trying to re-establish the rhythm that had just been broken.

I stooped down and pulled at her chin, breaking the bond and bringing her back to her senses.

"Hermione," I whispered. "Did I … did I … make you choke?"

She shook her head. "No! Well, a bit. Not really," she whispered. I knew she was lying, but I didn't know why. Back at Grimmauld Place, I always tried so hard not to make her gag when she was giving me head — I didn't like thinking that I might be hurting her. Now, I clearly had, but she was denying it. I looked at the locket — and she followed my gaze.

"Hermione, I'm going to get rid of that thing for at least a few minutes."

She nodded and remained on her knees. I lifted the chain from the sink, feeling the burning and prickling that came over me — especially in my arms — every time I touched that bloody piece of junk, and I turned to open the bathroom door. Peeking through the crack, I saw that Harry must have still been outside by the campfire, so I dangled the locket from the doorknob, closed the door and resealed it before placing my wand on the sink.

The buzzing and ringing lessened somewhat — at least to a point where I could think again, and feel a bit more like myself.

"Better?" she asked.

"Hmm," I replied, shrugging, and managed a little half-smile for what felt like the first time in days. "Hermione, that locket does … things to me," I said.

"I know. Me, too," she replied, then gnawed her bottom lip. "I notice that it seems to … I don't know … it seems to be worse for you, though."

"Hmm."

"Was Harry out there?" she asked, rising slowly to her feet and covering her breasts with her arms.


"Good," she whispered, looking down at her arms, then lowering them to her sides. She grabbed my wand from the sink and waved it over my cock, wordlessly doing the Contraception charm. Then she reached across to me, laying my fingertips in hers and gently pulling me toward her. I kicked my trousers off my legs and stepped forward. Keeping her chin tucked down, she looked up at me through her eyelashes. "Maybe we can finish what we started, then?" she asked. "It seems to be worse for you, though."

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She lifted her hands and rubbed my chest — an action that caused my cock to throb again and flex upward a few inches, literally nudging itself into the patch of soft, curly hair between her legs. She moaned and stood on tiptoe to kiss me, and I pushed my tongue between her lips. She sucked it hard, bringing to mind the feel of her lips on my cock. Dropping my right hand between us, I reached down and ran my fingers over her center, rougher than I'd done before, and she gasped around my tongue then sucked it again that much harder. I began stroking her steadily, feeling her wetness — slicker and more slippery than the water that was flowing around us. As her breathing shallowed and her legs tightened around my hand, I sped up and lightened my touch until
she threw her head back and rocked her hips to and fro against my finger, riding the crest of a loud, long orgasm.

Not waiting for her to come down from her high, I looped my right arm under her left knee and lifted it, positioned myself and plowed inside her roughly. "Oh God, yessssss," she cried out, and I found myself almost hoping that Harry could hear. "Yes, Ron, yessss," she moaned as she pressed kisses all over my neck and chin and nipped at my lower lip. "Fuck me," she said breathily. "Yes."

I lifted her other knee and pressed her back against the shower wall as she clung to me with her arms and legs, and I lowered my lips to her neck and sucked it savagely, not caring that I'd probably leave marks there. I was banging her mercilessly — though, judging by the noises she was making, she was bloody well loving it.

"You like it rough, eh?" I spoke into her ear.

"Mmmmmm," she moaned. "Don't stop."

"Feel good?"

"Sooookoo good. God, I've missed you. I've missed this. I've missed us."

"Me, too," I breathed, straightening my back and continuing to thrust upward into her. "I've missed you so much." Soon I was grunting out her name and collapsing against her, crushing her against the tile wall as she dropped her feet to the floor.

I'm snapped out of my reverie by the sound of pans clattering in the kitchen. Hermione is getting ready to cook that salmon I caught. Fuck … reliving the memory of our encounter in the bathroom has left me with an iron-clad erection, but there's nothing to do for it. It didn't help that, as soon as we cleaned ourselves up and exited the bathroom that night, we stumbled into the kitchen to find Harry there making himself a cuppa. It was an awkward moment, to say the least, since there was clearly no doubt in his mind what we had been up to in the bathroom. He threw me a raised eyebrow and an amused smirk. I shrugged back at him and he chuckled. Hermione, however, was mortified and later that night informed me in no uncertain terms that as far as she was concerned, "we simply cannot — cannot! — put Harry in that position ever again." Bloody hell.

So now here I sit in a cold bed with a raging hard-on. If I approached her now, in the kitchen, with a tentpole like this in my trousers, she'd probably hex me.

What's a bloke to do?

Lay back in my bunk and wait for nature to take its course, that's what. Think about Quidditch. Besides, it's almost time for me to go on watch. I look across the room at her, watching her as she cleans the fish and chops what look like mushrooms — more ruddy mushrooms. Still, she's beautiful, isn't she? And she's mine — isn't she? Lately I've been wondering.

Soon I feel I can walk around without too much pain or embarrassment. I rise and stretch.

"I didn't thank you for the fish," she says as she works, not looking at me.

"No."

"Well … thanks," she says, rather awkwardly.

I nod. "My turn to take watch," I say, reaching for my coat and stepping into my boots.
She looks at the clock above the sink. "Oh dear — yes, I guess it's that time, isn't it," she says with an attempt at cheeriness. "Well, I'll bring a plate out to you later, shall I?"

"Mmkay," I mumble.

I part the tent flap and, just like always, the buzzing in my ears turns up a few notches in volume, getting louder with every step I take in the locket's direction. There it is, hanging off Harry's neck. Soon it'll be on mine. I shudder.

"Hey mate," Harry says from his perch on a giant fallen tree beside the campfire.

"Hey," I answer back, settling down next to him, wrapping my arms around my knees and picking up a stick to poke at the embers. "Dinner soon."

"Yeah, good," says Harry, trying to sound pleasant, but I can tell from the look on his face that it's a struggle. That fucking locket must be doing a number on him, too.

He looks me over. "Kind of quiet today, yeah? Between you two, I mean."

I shrug. "Guess so," I say with something between a grimace and a smile. "Beats the alternative."

He chuckles. "Yeah, I guess."

I scratch the back of my neck. No point delaying it. "Time for me to take over," I say, and Harry lets out a deep sigh. He at least has the grace to try to conceal his joy, but I can tell he can't wait to get that sodding hunk of metal off of him. He pulls the chain over his head and swings it to me. As soon as it hits my hand, a burning sensation shoots up my arms. Bloody hell. I loop that fucker around my neck and let it drop beneath my shirt.

A silence falls between us, and we both turn our attention to the fire, poking it half-heartedly now and then with sticks or the tip of a boot. The buzzing in my head continues, but I am learning to let it settle into the background. I've tried to talk to Harry about it, but I can tell it sort of spooks him. He's got enough problems — doesn't need me carrying on about a sodding headache.

After a few minutes, Harry leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees and clears his throat nervously. "I worry about her, you know," he says.

The buzzing jumps right back to the front of my brain. He worries about her? He worries about my wife, does he? Like I don't? Who the fuck does he think he is?

I slowly turn my face to him, and he must see something there that alarms him, because he begins backpedaling. "Listen mate," he sputters. "I'm sorry, it's just that—"

"It's just that what, Harry?" I say darkly, just above a whisper.

He searches my face. "It's just that … I dunno … things seem so, well, tense between the two of you, and I'm just trying to work out why, that's all."

I turn my face back to the fire at poke at it roughly with the stick in my hand.

"Not much to tell," I snarl.

Harry resumes shoving a few ashen coals about with his feet. He sighs.

Fuck. He probably figured this would happen. Hermione and I finally get it together — right on the eve of this bloody Horcrux hunt, for Merlin's sake — and now he's stuck in the midst of some kind
of sodding lovers' spat, which I'm sure he's figuring is the very last thing he needs right now. The morning after Hermione and I got bonded, we told him our news — we didn't mean to, actually, but he guessed from our goofy, lovestruck expressions that something was up and eventually sort of wormed it out of us. Come to think of it, Hermione was the one who didn't want to tell Harry that morning, not me. She seemed to think it would make him uncomfortable. Bloody hell — was she ashamed or something, even then? Shit.

Anyway, Harry congratulated us and seemed genuinely happy about it all. We celebrated over a big breakfast, but it didn't last long. There was the Ministry mission to prepare for, after all, and everything went straight to shit after that, of course. Now, weeks later, here we are, and I don't know what he's trying to get out of me right now — and I have no bloody idea what to tell him anyway. Everything seems beyond fucked up.

Harry clears his throat again, and I do a double-take — it's almost as if I'd forgotten that he was even there. "Ron, I know it's hard," he says, pausing to clear his throat again. Blimey, he sounds nervous. But I don't look at him. "I know it's hard," he continues, "for all of us to be in such close quarters. But, um, I want you to know that it's OK with me if, uh, you two need to be, you know, alone together sometimes."

I smirk. "Ta, mate," I say with a note of sarcasm that surprises even me, "but the person who needs to hear that right now is your other best friend."

Harry lets out a puff of air from between his lips. "Well, maybe I'll talk to her," he says. Then he stands and turns to head back into the tent — but not before giving me a little punch on the shoulder. "Call if you need anything, 'kay?"

I wave weakly, lean forward on my knees, and stare into the flames.

Soon the sky darkens.

Before long, I hear the sound of the two of them talking in there in the glow of the lantern light inside the tent. I can't quite make out what they're saying but, blimey, they're quite chatty, aren't they.

I stab at the fire again. Maybe I'll talk to her, he says. Yeah, they certainly seem to have a lot to talk about lately, those two. Up one end of the country and down the other, talking, talking, talking. All talk and no action.

Blimey, what are they talking about in there?

I hear the sound of laughter and I find myself on my feet, suddenly feeling the need to move. I pace around the fire, feeling restless. The laughter dies down and I hear the clatter of dishes and cutlery — they're cleaning up. Forgotten about bringing me dinner, I suppose.

Just then, a shaft of light escapes from the tent flap and I turn to see Hermione approaching me with a plate and a glass of water.

I sit on the log and she joins me. I can't help but notice, however, that she's sitting a good two feet away from me. She hands me the plate and sets the glass on the grass at my feet. I tuck in to a large filet of the salmon, and damned if it isn't good. She's done something to it — some sort of mustard thing — that's kind of tasty, and there's slice of bread and a pile of ruddy mushrooms next to it, and I plan to eat each and every one of them. I like a mushroom as much as the next person — I just don't like them as a bloody entree.
"Sorry it took so long to bring this to you, Ron," she says, turning her face to the fire. "Harry and I just got to talking and I lost track of time."

"Hmph," I reply, still chewing.

"He reckons we should Apparate somewhere farther up north tomorrow morning," Hermione says absently, just to fill the silence, I think. "Somewhere near water with fish in it," she adds quickly, before I have a chance to reiterate that point.

I nod and mop my plate with the bread. "Sounds like a plan."

I notice that eating a decent meal has brought down the buzzing in my ears somewhat, but it's still there, and fuck if my arms aren't burning like the coils in that muggle toaster that Dad likes to muck about with in the shed.

I drop the plate on the ground and rub my hands over my forearms.

"Is it your scars again?" she asks timidly.

I nod.

"Does it hurt much?"

"It's nothing."

She reaches out to touch my left arm, the one nearest to her. "Maybe I should take a look," she says, and as her hand makes contact with my sleeve, I feel a jolt of pain so intense, even through my bloody coat, that I flinch — just for a millisecond — and she notices.

"S'all right," I mutter as she pulls her hand away.

She shakes her head. "That shouldn't be happening, Ron."

"Well, I can't very well control it, now can I?" I bark, and she recoils. I sigh, run my hands through my hair roughly, then rest my hands on my knees. "It's just that I hate this fucking locket," I say in a lower tone, trying to control myself. "I hate wearing it. I hate how it feels. That's all."

"Mmmmm," she hums softly. "We all do."

This statement hacks me off — I experience a flash of anger at her words, because damn it, all of us may hate it, but nobody seems to feel it as much as I do. Part of me wonders why I'm so angry at her over such a simple statement — hell, why I'm so angry at her all the time — but that part is overruled by the angry current flowing through my head.

All I can do without shouting is to nod, so that's what I do.

A few minutes of awkward silence follow, in which Hermione looks up at the stars overhead and I stare deep into the fire, brooding. Being with her has never been so hard before. We were so happy for a few weeks there back at Grimmauld Place. Weren't we? Even the rows we had back then were about the mission, about how much I wanted to take care of her, not so much about us, and we always made up in the end. I dunno — she seemed happy back then, anyway. I know I was. But was she, really? Or did she just get into the sex because it was new and different and felt good? Maybe letting me fuck her was just a distraction from her fear of this mission — something that made her feel relatively safe for a little while. She knew I wanted it, that's for sure. Maybe she just did it to humor me, to be a friend to me, because it would make me happy.
And getting bonded — she seemed to think it was a good idea at the time. Though it was my idea after all, not hers. Maybe she just played along as a way to take her mind off things, to take her mind off the danger, to take her mind off what she did to her parents … who the fuck knows. Maybe she figured we wouldn't survive the Ministry mission anyway and so, what the hell, why not give poor Ron a thrill. Did she pity me? I was kind of a basket case when she came into the room that night, wasn't I. Shit. All I know now is that she feels like she's a million miles away from me, and I'm just so angry, pretty much non-stop, and so hurt that I can barely speak sometimes. She never lets me touch her because — because Harry, that's why — and when I wear this fucking locket, I almost don't want her to touch me because it sends ruddy shockwaves through my scars. Fuck.

Then an idea bubbles up from the back of my brain and it hurts so much that I try to tamp it down, but it's too strong and it plants itself before my eyes: Maybe she settled for me because she realized Harry wasn't available anymore — he'd already given his heart to Ginny. No! Fucking hell, I can't let myself think that. God damn it, I can't. I close my eyes and breathe deeply, and the thought starts to fade, but it's still there, flickering in the background, threatening to flare back up again. Damn it. I've got to keep that one at bay.

It would help if I felt like all this agony was getting us somewhere, like we had a plan, or some direction, like we were accomplishing something. But no, it's starting to feel like we're just flailing around, hopeless and helpless. So we're going north tomorrow. Great. Moving for the sake of moving — that's not a good way to win a chess game.

I stretch my neck and roll my shoulders. Hermione notices the motion and looks at me.

"So," I say, not really knowing why. I guess I just want to say something. "So, uh, what else did you two get up to in there earlier?"

"Hmm?"

"You and Harry," I say, tipping my head toward the tent. "Sounded fairly gabby earlier. Just figured you had to be talking about more than the plan to go north."

Turning her eyes back to the campfire, she replies, "I guess we did talk about a few other things, come to think of it." She tucks her hair behind her ears and gnaws her lip nervously. "Harry said he noticed that, that you and I …" She clears her throat. "That things have been strained between us."

I harrumph.

Her eyes dart nervously from the fire to her feet to the tent, and then back to the fire. "He says he wouldn't mind if, if …"

"If you and I spent some time alone?" I supply, knowing this is what she was about to say and wondering why she was having trouble getting the words out.

"Yes — that."

I laugh. "Well, that's big of him, isn't it?"

"Ron!" she snaps, turning to face me and crossing her arms over her chest. "He didn't mean it that way. But even you have to admit this is an awkward situation we're in."

I rake my fingers through my hair again. Bloody hell. It's beyond awkward. It's maddening.

"He just noticed that we've been, well, distant from one another," she continues, "and—"
"I can think of one way to fix that, Hermione," I say lowly.

That comment catches her off guard, I think, because she pauses, her mouth opening and closing a few times as she searches for the right response.

"Ron, we can't," she says pleadingly.

"You just said it yourself — Harry's trying to tell us that it's OK."

"He's just saying that, Ron, because the tension — it's just too much — but I don't think he really means it, we can't share a bed in the same room with him, and I —"

"Bloody hell, woman!" I bellow, jumping to my feet and rushing to the opposite side of the campfire. "If you don't want me to touch you anymore, then just say so, but stop acting like Harry's the reason!"

I glare at her over the flames, the scars on my arms flaring, the buzzing in my head almost deafening, and she's looking at me with an expression of total confusion — which quickly morphs to fury. "That's not what I'm saying at all, Ronald! Where did you ever get such a, such a, such an idiotic idea?"

"Oh, I'm an idiot now, is that it?"

"You're acting like one at the moment, yes!"

I put my hands on my hips, purse my lips and look down at my feet to gather my thoughts. Then, straightening up to my full height, I speak, shoulders back, but in a lower tone so she'll be forced to listen closely to every word.

"I see how it is now," I say with an angry smile, and she leans forward, straining to hear. "I see it all very, very clearly."

"I don't understand," she says worriedly. "I just —"

I raise my palm, a signal that she should shut it — and, amazingly, she does.

I clear my throat. "I may be an idiot, Hermione, but even I can come to understand things given enough time, and I am ever so slowly starting to sort it all out," I say. "You've made it obvious enough, even for me. You don't want anything to do with me. You can hardly bear the sight of me, and you most certainly don't want me to lay a finger on you anymore, so you —"

"Oh, for the love of Merlin!" she shouts, leaping to her feet. "Is that what all this is really about? Sex? Sex?! Gods, why is that so ruddy important to you? Is sex all you think about? Is that all I am to you?"

"You. Are. My. WIFE!"

She shivers, takes a step backwards, and bumps into the log she had just been sitting on, almost losing her balance. When she straightens up, I see tears welling in her eyes, sparkling in the light of the fire, and part of me wants to run to her, take her in my arms and apologize — but a stronger part of me, speaking from somewhere deep in my head, wants her to feel the pain that I'm feeling, wants to punish her.

She turns and walks swiftly toward the tent, slapping the flap aside and striding in. I sink to the ground, cross my legs, and hold my head in my hands. I hear a few muffled words pass between her
and Harry, and then the lantern light dims and all is silent — except for the distant sound of her crying in her bunk.

The buzzing in my head, meanwhile, roars above the cricketsong.
Darkness and Light

Chapter Summary

Longing for reconnection.

Chapter 7: Darkness and Light

I had a dream last night — another ruddy dream about nothing in particular, just re-living an ordinary slice of life, and nothing especially scary or exciting happened in it. But just like every other time, I woke up in the middle of it shaking and crying just the same, with that pang in my chest that will not go away.

This dream, like all the others, had Hermione in it, of course. Hermione and me — and sometimes Harry — simply being together. Last night it was Hermione and me in the Common Room, reading by the hearth, not even talking. It went on for hours, like in real time, and I found myself looking up like I used to do back then, sneaking a peek at her, and being sort of dumbstruck by how pretty she was, how the intelligence and kindness shone from her face. Something about the way her eyebrows arched over her eyes, how high her forehead was, how her nose came to a perfect little point, the curve of her cheek, the angle of her chin. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, my heart would thump from the sight of her, being near her, and I guess this was one of those times. She had her hair pinned back away from her face in the way she sometimes wore it, especially at school — so that it all sort of piled up at the top of her head then tumbled down over her shoulders. I dunno — I stink at describing these things, but I know what it looked like, and I always liked it when she wore it that way.

The firelight was doing things to her hair and her face — adding kind of golden colors to it, I guess, making her curls look redder somehow and her eyes look lighter, like the color of firewhiskey. I felt so warm and comfortable being in her presence, like I belonged right there, right then, and would never want to be anywhere else. I couldn't stop looking at her and, at some point, she must have noticed because she tilted her eyes up from the book she was reading — meaning to just steal a glance, I think — but her gaze stuck to mine for a minute, and she smiled. Her lips, her teeth … the way her smile caused her cheeks to round out and her eyes to crinkle slightly … gods, I wanted her, so, so badly.

She opened her mouth to speak — and then, suddenly, I was awake, shaking in my bed. And it hit me — like it always does. It wasn't real. Well, it was real — I'd already lived it once, a million years ago. But it might as well have been a fantasy for all the good it's doing me now. She's Merlin only knows how many miles away, I thought, and with that realization came the tears. More ruddy tears. God dammit.

Now here I sit on what's become my favorite boulder on this beach — the one with an arse-sized dent in it, where I can sit and stare at the sea and think for hours and, frankly, stay out of Bill and Fleur's hair. They're probably getting sick of me already. Hell, I'm sick of me. And yet, there's no escaping myself, is there? I'm stuck with the memory of my many, many fuck-ups. Bloody hell.

The wind is icy and relentless this morning, whipping grains of sand in my face and smelling strongly of salt and fish. It's cold out here — too cold, really, and there's a storm on the horizon, but
I'm not going back inside. I just … can't.

How did it come to this — me, staring like a bleeding eedjit at the ocean, and her fuck knows where? I swore I'd protect her. I gave her my vow. She begged me to stay — and yet, I ignored her. I meant to hurt her. The locket fucked me up good, but that's no excuse. I broke my vow. I broke my own heart.

That thought moves me to my feet, and I start walking down the beach and away from the cottage, picking up a stick along the way and thrashing at the sand with it as I go.

And, just like in my dreams, scenes insist on being relived as I walk along. At least in my dreams I browse through pleasant memories, which proves that my unconscious mind is merciful. When I'm awake, I can't take that kind of pity on myself.

As I climb a dune that leads to a small cove beneath the cliffs, my mind turns back to the last time we were alone before the big break — it's one of the moments I least want to see again — and yet I can't fight it. The memory is too strong. It demands to be re-examined for the hundredth bloody time.

We were deep in the woods, just the two of us, gathering firewood. Being careful to stay within the wards, of course, but far enough away from the tent that I reckoned we could take advantage of the opportunity to be alone. I was wearing the bleeding locket, of course. I always seemed to be doing so at my worst times. The ever-present buzzing sensation was ringing in my ears.

"The days are getting shorter," she murmured, looking up at the treetops overhead and tightening the collar of her jacket.

"Yeah, and soon we'll have snow," I said, catching sight of a good-sized branch by a giant, fallen tree.

I stepped toward the tree and, using a Severing charm, started removing the branch from the trunk. To my left, she continued to gather smaller branches for kindling into her arms, bundling them into tidy bunches with a Tying charm. Out the corner of my eye, I saw her bend over, and the sight of her round little bum in her jeans sent a flame of desire straight to my core.

Hermione drew nearer, unaware of my staring at her. When she was within a yard of me, I dropped the branch I had been working on and stood tall. "Hey," I said, and she froze and looked first at the locket hanging against my chest, then at my face.

"Hey," she answered, but I saw her clutch the bundle in her arms closer to her chest.

"Put that down," I said in an even tone.

She did as she was told, dropping the bundle to her side.

"Come here," I said, still sounding controlled — though my cock was already throbbing.

Again, she did as she was told, stepping toward me, though she was now studying the bulge in my trousers.

She came to stand a foot in front of me, then turned her face upward, dwelling for a split-second on the locket, before looking me in the eyes.

I stepped forward to close the gap between us — a voice inside me remembered that at a moment like this, I would normally take her face in my hands and just, well, kiss her softly — but
something stronger came over me and I found myself grabbing at her hips and yanking her forward. Her hands landed on my chest with a dull slap and her eyes were brought level with the locket. She shuddered. But then I jerked her even closer and dug my hands into her bum and squeezed it roughly. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath through clenched teeth. The scars on my arms stung and sizzled.

My mind was racing. I had something to prove to her — something I no longer felt at liberty to say with words — but I wanted to show her, to make it crystal-clear: She was mine. Mine. It became a chant in my head — mine, mine, MINE — accompanied by the escalating buzz in my ears.

I bent to press my face to hers, and she opened her lips to me immediately, allowing me to plow my tongue deep into her mouth. She whimpered and wriggled against me, but I kept going, kissing her hard and wrapping my arms tightly around her little waist. My cock pounded. I gyrated my hips against her in a crude imitation of what I wanted to do once I got her knickers out of the way, and she answered by clawing at the collar of my jacket and then lifting her arms to cross them behind my neck, pulling me closer.

We snogged like that, roughly, hungrily, for what felt like hours. I decided to ignore the intense burning in my arms. Every now and then, she'd push back — pressing her hands against my chest or turning her face away from me — but then I'd press my physical advantage, shamelessly forcing her to stay put when I wanted her to stay put, to move when I wanted her to move. Each time, she would slowly bend to me, moaning and humming against my lips. The sounds she made caused sparks to fly in my head. The buzzing was almost excruciating — and the voice rattling around in my brain insisted that I still had a point to drive home, and drive it home I must.

I straightened, breaking the kiss, and grasped her by the shoulders, turning her away from me and toward the giant, fallen tree trunk. She looked over her shoulder at me — first at my eyes, and then at the locket — then turned to face the tree. With that, I grabbed her hips, ignoring her gasp, and pressed my chest against her back, bending her over until her hands rested on the trunk.

She stayed in that position as I straightened up. I reached around and unfastened the button of her jeans, then yanked her trousers and her knickers down, exposing her bum to the pale, late autumn sun. She shivered. I ran my fingers over her cheeks, watching them pink up in the cold air, savoring her moans as she stood on tiptoe to press herself into my hands. I didn't know anymore if she wanted me, but she wanted this, and I was going to give it to her.

I leaned back and yanked open my zip, freeing and pumping myself a few times with my fist before prodding her folds, teasing her. She whimpered and shimmied her bottom against me. Triumphant, I rubbed against her again, smiling at the wetness I found there. Then I plunged in — no preliminaries. She inhaled sharply and moaned, digging her fingers into the bark of the tree. I clutched her hips and watched myself disappear inside her, as deep as I could go.

"Mmmmmmmmnnnn," she hummed, in the same key, I noticed, as the buzzing in my ears, and I thrust a little harder one more time before pulling back and plunging in again. The buzzing slowly rose an octave, louder, fuzzier, and I soon felt surrounded by it, and my arms prickled intensely in a way that wasn't altogether unpleasant. I couldn't think. I closed my eyes and slipped into the blackness there, answering some sort of internal rhythm as I pushed myself inside her again and again, harder and faster and rougher. Something in my head, coming from that same deep place I'd been hearing from so often back then, told me I was getting through to her, reminding her — but then, suddenly, abruptly, shockingly, I heard something — her voice, I thought, and then I really heard it: "Ron, stop — you're hurting me."

My eyes flew open and I looked down to see her looking back at me over her shoulders, a hint of alarm in her eyes. I let go of her hips immediately as if they were burning me and pulled away from
her, falling backward until I could catch myself and recover my balance. The buzzing ceased for
the first time in weeks, even though that bloody locket was still hanging around my neck. Holy
buggering fuck. Shit. God fucking dammit. I'd hurt her — my Hermione, I'd hurt her — what the
fuck just happened? She was pulling herself together, straightening out her clothes. I looked down,
realized the state I was in and did the same. In a panic, I stumbled forward a step or two toward her
to comfort her, to somehow try to apologize — "Hermione, I, I …" I gasped — and then I caught
myself, reckoning she might not want me to touch her at all, not after what I'd done. She looked at
me, and I thought I saw something there I'd never seen before — was it fear? — and my stomach
lurched. She was safe now, she was within the wards, I was the last thing she needed — she needed
Harry — and I turned on my heel and ran to the edge of the clearing, dropping down to my knees
and retching, throwing up everything in my gut and then some onto the forest floor. I looked down
at the puddle of sick beneath me and saw that bleeding locket swinging over it. I pulled it off my
neck and threw it as far as I could toward the trees, then I heaved again, vomiting until my
abdomen was sore. I fell to my side and rolled away from the sick, shivering and suddenly sweaty
and cold. I laid on my stomach, willing myself not to hurl again, as I listened to the sound of her
words playing over and over in my head. "Ron, stop — you're hurting me."

I shook, and I could feel tears forming in my eyes but they wouldn't fall — I was in a strange state
of shock. I fully expected that Hermione had gone running back to the tent, to the safety of Harry
— and I wouldn't have blamed her if she had — but in a minute, I felt a touch on my shoulder, and I
realized it was her, kneeling next to me.

I couldn't look at her, I was so ashamed, and so I buried my face in my arms.

"Are you all right?" I managed to whisper. It was all I wanted to know. Everything else was
bullshit now — I knew that.

She squeezed my shoulder. "Yes. Yes, I'm perfectly fine, Ron," she murmured. "It was just for a
second that … that … I hurt — but I spoke up right away and you didn't hesitate. You stopped. I
didn't have to ask you twice."

I felt a wave of relief, but then I felt sick again. I'd hurt her. It didn't matter that she was OK now
— there was a moment when she most definitely wasn't OK, and it was my fault. And I didn't
really understand how I'd gotten into this situation or how to get out of it. All I knew for sure was
that the goddamned locket did dangerous things to me — and, therefore, I was dangerous to her.
And that was something I wasn't prepared to live with. Ever.

"Hermione," I whispered into my arm, "you're OK?"

"Yes, Ron, I'm OK," she said gently.

"If you're really OK, then I think you should head back to the tent, yeah?" I croaked.

She paused to consider. "Come with me."

I pressed my forehead to my arm and thought — hard. I felt dizzy and fought down another bout of
nausea. Merlin, I needed to pull myself together. How could I face Harry in this state? I'd hurt her,
dammit. Because I couldn't control myself, I'd hurt her. Me — the one who promised to protect her
until my dying day. I'd hurt her. Fuck.

"Mione," I muttered — and it dawned on me that I hadn't called her that since the Ministry
mission, literally months ago, until just now — "I think it's best if you leave me alone for a while.
Honestly."
I couldn't see her because my face was still buried in my arms, but I listened, and there was a long silence. "You can find your way back by yourself, yeah?" I whispered.

"Mmm hmm."

"You're not worried about going alone?"

"No — it's not terribly far."

"Go then. Harry's there. He'll take care of you."

She touched my shoulder lightly again — no stinging, I noticed — then I heard the crinkle of leaves beneath her feet as she rose and slowly walked away from me in the direction of camp.

I laid there for I don't know how long, cursing myself and waiting for the forest to stop spinning around me like I'd had too much Firewhiskey. Then it occurred to me — I hadn't done the god-damned Contraception charm. Neither of us had. Neither of us had even thought about it. For the love of Merlin, I could have knocked her up — now, at the worst possible time, and I didn't even know it. She could never be pregnant on the road like this — it'd kill her. My selfish need to get my rocks off — it could have killed her. Dear lord. I retched again, not even bothering to rise to my knees. I just leaned over and spilled whatever was left in my stomach onto the leaves next to me. Thank Merlin she stopped me. Thank Merlin.

Eventually I rose to all fours. I felt weak, and the exertion touched off another fit of retching, but I had nothing left to throw up. I coughed and hacked until the feeling passed, then remembered I had to find that god damned, mother-effing locket. I crawled in the direction I had thrown it, through piles of leaves and twigs, and the increasing buzzing in my head and stinging in my arms told me I was getting close. I heard it before I saw it — lying in a pile of dead leaves, shining and flickering. God, I hated that fucker. The buzzing was ear-splitting as I picked it up and looped it around my neck. The scars on my arms nearly hissed in reply.

Somehow I put one foot in front of the other and staggered back to camp. I headed for the campfire, not the tent, knowing she would be inside. As I approached the fire, however, I heard the tent flap open, and there stood Harry, eyes ablaze, jaw squared, lips pressed together in a tight line. He marched toward me and I knew what he was going to do, perhaps before he even did. I did nothing to stop him. When he got within a foot of me, he hauled his arm back and punched me square in the mouth. Stars flashed before my eyes as I stepped back to regain my balance. Straightening up, I looked down at him and saw him standing spread-legged and defiant, his chest heaving, clenching his fists and clearly waiting for me to fight back — or at least to say something.

Instead, I cupped my jaw in my hand, felt a warm trickle of blood pass over it, and sat on the log behind me. Harry stood there, seemingly infuriated by my non-response, but I figured the last thing he wanted to hear was "thank you." Those words, however, were all I could think. I reckoned I deserved a bust to the chops — or worse.

"Hey," a familiar voice calls to me, and I turn to look over my shoulder to see Bill standing at the top of the sand dune, several yards above the point where I've been sitting and thinking for Merlin only knows how long. "There you are," he says as he half steps, half slides down the hill toward me. "Fleur was beginning to worry."

"Sorry," I mutter.

"No — no problem," he says. "Mind if I sit?"
I shrug. He sits.

Looking out over the cove, as I've been doing, Bill wraps his arms around his knees. I can see out the corner of my eye that he's studying me, but I can't meet his gaze. I tilt my eyes toward the cliffs across the water.

"It's bloody cold out here," Bill says, turning his collar up to his neck. I nod. We settle into silence again until he feels the need to break it. "Look, Ronnie, I know you feel you fucked up in some massive way, but you've got to talk about it, man, or you'll explode."

I sigh. "There's not much I can tell you, Bill — not without breaking the promise we made to Dumbledore."

He growls in frustration and runs his fingers through his hair — a gesture that almost makes me laugh, it's so familiar. Do all the Weasley men do that?

"Surely there's got to be a way to tell me what's bothering you without getting into the particulars," he says.

I consider it. I'd like nothing better than to unload some of this shite — but then, if I told him what I'd done, he'd never forgive me. Would he? It's too big a risk. Still, it's tempting. And I can't help but love him for wanting to help me, no matter how little I deserve it. He's a good brother, Bill is.

Shit.

"Yeah, I guess I can give you the, uh, broad outlines as it were," I say. "And don't call me Shirley."

He laughs, and the sound of it lifts me a bit — I haven't really laughed in ages, it seems, and I'd almost forgotten how much I've always needed it.

Right, well … where to start? "I can't tell you much but I can tell you this. We're searching for certain objects connected with Vol—"

"Don't say it!" Bill screams, leaning forward and grabbing my arm. "Fucking hell, Ronnie, don't say that name — ever! You scared the shit out of me there."

"Merlin, Bill, I didn't know you were one of those ponces who was afraid of a fricking word."

"No, it's not that — damn it, Ronnie, there's a trace on that word now. Didn't you know? You say it, and you bring the wrath of hell down on you. Death Eaters from out of nowhere. Trust me — never, ever say that word ever again. Do you understand me?"

Hell's bells. "All right, fine. Calm down, for crying out loud," I growl, amazed at the way he was nearly hyperventilating. "I've only been isolated in a goddamned tent for four months or however long, no contact with the outside world. How was I to know?"

"It's fine — sorry," he says, dropping my arm "Just a little jumpy lately, I guess."


"OK, whatever … go on."

We both settle back down, and I lean back on my arms, tracing the shoreline with my eyes.

"Like I was saying," I say with a half smile, and he chuckles. "Dumbledore set us a mission to find certain … objects. We found one, and it was a dark motherfucker, Bill. I've seen some dark shit in
all the years I've been helping Harry, but never anything like this."

He hums and scratches his chin. "How do you mean?"

"I mean, it could do things to you, Billy, just by being near it. It created certain, sort of, vibrations — I don't know how to describe it — except that it felt like it was digging its way into your brain, hooking itself in there like a parasite. It would find your deepest fears and reflect them back to you, make them seem real, make you mental. At least that's what it did to me. Didn't fully realize how bad it was until I got away from it."

"Holy shit," Bill says, shaking his head. "So it did that to all three of you?"

I pause to consider. "Well, yes and no," I say. "I think we would all agree it affected me the worst. Turned me into a right bastard. But it hit Harry hard, too — made his scar hurt, made him moody about leaving Ginny behind, distracted him from the mission now and then. He'd sort of, I dunno, fold himself into himself, almost forget we were there sometimes. I think it might have brought some stuff back to him about his childhood with those ruddy Dursley arseholes — I dunno. We never talked about it. I'm just guessing."

"Blimey. How about Hermione?"

Hermione. That was harder to answer. I rub my hand over the stubble on my chin, remembering the feeling of Harry's fist plowing into my jaw. I loved him for punching me. Is that insane?

"Hermione … well, it made her short-tempered, more volatile than I'd ever known her to be before. She was always cross with me about one thing or another when that thing was around — not that I didn't deserve it, mind. 'Course, it wasn't easy for her. She was living in a tent with two smelly, ill-tempered men." I smile at Bill, he chuckles, and then I turn my face back to the shoreline. "We weren't making much progress on the mission. We had so little to go on, and I knew that Hermione spent all her waking hours running through the possibilities and probabilities in her head, trying to find the key to unlock the problem before us, and it was making her mental that she couldn't figure it out. I think the lock—, er, the *object,* made her question her intelligence, made her insecure about the abilities that we all just took for granted in her. I think it might have even churned up feelings in her about being muggleborn — maybe feeling like she didn't really belong in this world after all, that she wasn't as capable as we all thought she was to handle the mission. Again, I don't know for sure — we never talked about it, believe it or not — so I'm just reading between the lines. But I think it also affected the way she related to me."

This last statement must have surprised Bill, because I turn to face him again and he's looking back at me questioningly, his eyebrows raised.

"The way she related to you? How so?" He grins and nudges me with his elbow. "We all couldn't help but notice how cozy you two seemed at the wedding."

"Heh, yeah," I say, rubbing the back of my neck. "We were."

"So, uh, you two, you're uh—"

"We're bonded, Bill."

There's a long pause, and I'm suddenly very aware of the wind whipping our hair about and the sound of the waves crashing into the beach below us.

Bill clears his throat. "I'm sorry — must be the wind, but I thought I heard you say that you … and Hermione Granger … are bonded."
Bill stands, walks a few steps down the dune, turns to look up at me, then shakes his head in disbelief. "Holy living dragon shit, Ron, are you fucking kidding me?"

I stand, suddenly annoyed. "Is that really so surprising, Bill? Really? I've only been in love with her since forever ago, for Merlin's sake."

Bill rubs his chin, looking chastened. "No, of course, I know how you've always felt about her. Hell, everybody knows. That's not it. It's just — good lord, Ron, I wasn't expecting you to say you'd gone ahead and done it. That's a big step."

"Well, yeah," I mumble, suddenly feeling silly for getting so worked up. "And I know Mum will have kittens when she finds out. We reckoned that, if we lived, we'd do it up properly later, with family and all, but … well … seemed like a good idea at the time. We weren't sure we'd live to see more than another sunrise or two."

Bill drops his hands to his hips and looks down at his feet. "Gods, I'm sorry, Ron. Of course. I didn't think about that."

I step down the dune toward him and we both walk further toward the shore, settling on a couple of boulders closer to the water. The wind is less fierce here — probably because the dunes and cliffs above us create a sort of shelter from it — and we are better able to talk without shouting over the breeze.

I bend down, grab a handful of pebbles, and chuck them into the water one by one, noticing the dark clouds have moved closer to shore. It's going to snow soon.

"So, you're an old married man now like me, eh?" Bill says, trying to reopen the conversation.


Bill runs his hand over his face. "Gods, no wonder you've been going slowly mad since you got here."

"Yeah, pretty much," I say, throwing the last of my pebbles as far as I can. "Though, I don't know … I've been thinking that maybe she's better off where she is, with Harry."

Bill shakes his head. "You can't mean that, little bro."

I glare at him. "You have no idea, Bill."

He stands. "I have some idea, Ron. Don't forget, I'm bonded, too. I know what it is. I know what it's like. She's better off with you, and I think you know it."

"Yeah, well, she had a choice … and … she stayed behind."

Picking up a few stones of his own, Bill stands and turns toward the water, skipping one pebble, then another. "Hell no, Ron. I don't know all the details, but I do know this: If you're bonded, she's better off with you, no matter what."

I look at the back of his head as he continues to throw rocks, wondering at his words. "How can you be so sure?" I ask, my voice sounding hoarse. I'm suddenly choked up.
Bill turns to face me, turning a pebble over in his fingers. "You did the whole bonding ritual, eh?" he asks.

I nod.

"The blood of my blood stuff — everything?"

"Yeah."

"So the silver thing happened? You know, the, sort of, tube of snowy light?"

"Yep."

"Wow. Well done, little bro. Yeah, it was the real deal, then."

"Definitely."

I'm not following him. He turns to face me again, smiling softly, like he's about to explain two-plus-two-equals-four to the biggest idiot in the world. Which he is, I guess.

"Listen," he says, settling back down on the boulder nearest me, and resting his forearms on his knees. I sit to face him.

"Mum's not going to have kittens when she finds out. You know why?"

I shake my head.

"Because she knows, like anyone who is bonded knows: The magic wouldn't have worked — it wouldn't stick — if it wasn't meant to be."

I stop and think about it. My second cousin — what was her name again? Esme? Oh yeah.

"Yeah, you're remembering Esme's ceremony, eh?"

I nod.

"That's just it, Ron. The bonding ceremony can't be faked. It works or it doesn't — and there's a reason for that. I'm sure Mum and Dad will want to kill you for doing it without them, but they'll accept it — and Hermione — immediately, because they know that if you're bonded, it's real. That's all there is to it. The magic doesn't lie. She's family now. As good as blood — because you mixed your blood, remember? She's a Weasley, through and through. Just like Fleur is now. And just like you and I will always be brothers, Hermione will always be your wife, no matter what. That bond, once it's made, can never be broken, no matter how much shit life throws your way."

Blimey. I feel like a tit, but there are tears in my eyes. I miss her so much it physically hurts. My chest aches. I drop my face to my hands.

"What the hell happened?" Bill asks. "I mean, I know how protective you are of Hermione ..." he says, his voice trailing off. "Then again, you haven't told me what the locket did to you."

Huh. What the hell happened? It's a good question. I lift my face and look out over the water and ask it of myself again, letting my eyes follow two seagulls circling one another and swooping over the waves. I remember the feelings all so clearly, but the actions, the events ... it happened so suddenly, spun out of control so quickly. It was over before I really knew it had begun.

It was the night after the infamous punch to the jaw, and Harry and I hadn't really spoken to one
another since then. He was still furious, Hermione was unsettled and nervous, and I was morose and frustrated, convinced that this entire mission was leading us all straight to hell. I'd been lying in my bunk that afternoon, ruminating over the time, just a few days earlier, when I caught Harry and Hermione walking back from the woods, walking closer to one another than I cared for them to be, and Harry made some sort of remark about her perfume that made her laugh … and, just thinking about it, I had the feeling all over again that I wanted to take a swing at him, and I was actually angry at myself that I hadn't taken the opportunity to do so by the campfire when he punched me in the gob. I was wearing the sodding locket — of fucking course — and couldn't contain the increasingly murderous thoughts that were running through my head as the two of them celebrated their discovery that the Sword of Gryffindor was the tool we needed to destroy that bloody hunk of rust. The Sword of Gryffindor might as well have been on the effing Moon — we were no closer to our objective than we had been when we woke up that morning.

We'd started arguing, Harry and I. I was amazed I could hear him over the buzzing in my head. I'd almost forgotten that Hermione was there until she begged for me to remove the locket from my neck.

"Please take it off," she cried. "You wouldn't be talking like this is you hadn't been wearing it all day."

"Yeah he would," Harry cut in.

There was more back and forth over how little we had to go on, over how I couldn't believe the way neither of them seemed overly concerned about the fate of my family, and then I said some pretty shitty things about Harry's own parents. Damn.

"Then GO!" Harry roared. "Go back to them, pretend you got over your spattergroit and Mummy'll be able to feed you up and—"

I made a move for my wand but, before Harry could match my action, Hermione had raised her own. "Protego!" she cried, and a barrier formed forcing me onto one side, Hermione and Harry on the other. I stumbled back, amazed as always by the power of her magic. The scars on my arms positively ached.

Harry and I glared at one another through the invisible barrier.

"Leave the Horcrux," Harry said menacingly.

I looked at him to be sure I understood.

"You heard me," he said. "Go, but leave the Horcrux."

I wrenched the chain from over my head and chucked the locket into a nearby chair. I turned to Hermione, who stood next to Harry looking anguished, her hands knit together, her forehead creased with worry.

"What about you?" I said roughly.

"What do you mean?" she answered, looking utterly confused.

"Are you staying, or what?"

"I …" She looked torn. "Ron, please."

"Need I remind you — yet again — that you are my bloody wife?" I said darkly.
She shook her head then looked at Harry, who didn't return her glance — he was too busy glaring at me.

"Ron, we made a promise to Harry—"

"You made a promise to ME!" I said. "God damn it, Hermione, you made a promise to me. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

She sobbed. "Of course it does, Ron. It means everything. But, but … that promise will come to nothing if we don't carry through with this mission. Please, Ron, you've got to see that!"

"I don't need to see anything other than what's right in front of my eyes right now. And it's clear as day, isn't it. I know, you've said it before — I'm an idiot. I'm a little slow, yeah?" I said, pointing to my head with a sarcastic sneer. "But I finally get it. It's finally sunk in. You choose him. The Brightest Witch Of Her Age and The Bloody Chosen One. It makes perfect sense."

I turned, picked up my rucksack, and barreled through the tent flap, immediately drenched by the downpour outside.

"Ron, no — please — come back, come back!"

But I had a head start on her — she must have run into her own Shield charm, because by the time she made it out of the tent and into the rainstorm, I was just getting set to Disapparate.

I turned on the spot and took one final look at her, my heart breaking in my chest. She cried desperately, slipping on the mud. And then I was gone.

"Ron?"

"Huh?"

I feel a nudge on my shoulder, and quickly realize it's Bill.

"Oh, bloody hell, sorry," I say.

"Got lost in your thoughts there, eh?"

"Yeah, guess I did."

"Maybe you just need to eat. When Fleur sent me out here, it was an hour until dinner. I'm sure she's ready for us to get back there by now."

"Hmm."

We rise and head in the direction of the cottage. I'm relieved to have an excuse not to tell him my tale.

Later that night, about an hour after Bill and Fleur have turned in for the night, I retreat to my bedroom, grab my rucksack from the chair next to the bed, and lean back against the headboard. Kicking off my shoes and getting comfortable atop the duvet, I rummage around inside the bag and extract my most precious possession: a letter that Hermione apparently tucked into my bag the night before I left her. It must have been a few hours after the incident in the woods, the day when I hurt her and I made myself so sick. She made no mention of writing this note — she must have expected that I would find it eventually. Unfortunately for me, that didn't happen until days later, when I'd escaped the Snatchers and found my way to Shell Cottage. By then, the words she had
written were soothing — but they also made me dead miserable. I'd cried as I read them the first
time through, then panicked when I saw that my tears had smudged some of the words. That's
when I put an Impervious charm on the parchmen to preserve it and then got into the habit of
reading her letter every night before bed. Without her words, I found, I couldn't sleep.

Unfolding the parchment, I lean back against the pillows and savor her slanted handwriting, her
elegance, the largeness of her heart. How I miss her. Will I ever find her? And, if I do, can she
ever forgive me? Sweet Merlin, help me.

Dear Ronald,

I hope someday soon you will find this letter. When you do, I pray you are clear-headed enough to
read my words and take them to your heart.

You know me well enough by now to know how much I value list-making. It's an activity that helps
me to think, helps me to prioritize, helps me to stay focused and centered. I feel a need to do that
now, especially since my mind seems so disoriented in the presence of this blasted Horcrux. I know
it's hurting you ten times more than it's hurting me, Ron — and I think I know why — and it
troubles me that I can't seem to help you. It's as if the thing can read our thoughts and fears, that it
knows which buttons to press to set us against one another. I hate it. I hate it so much.

To fight the locket's horrid influence, I recently created a list — a list of all the reasons why I fell
in love with Ronald Weasley, and why I love him still. Because I know he's still in there. I see
flashes of him, even now, and I miss him so much.

Here's my list. May it help you as it has helped me.

**This Is The Man I Married, Ronald Bilius Weasley:**

- Ron Weasley, who is loyal and brave, and who can be so very kind to his friends and loved ones.

- Ron Weasley, who was the youngest of all his brothers, and constantly felt compared to them,
that he didn't measure up somehow.

- Ron Weasley, who befriended Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, the most famous boy in the
wizarding world, and took all his burdens on his own 11-year-old shoulders.

- Ron Weasley, who ignored feelings of jealousy for his friend, and stood by Harry's side to
support him.

- Ron Weasley, who was Harry Potter's first friend after a lifetime of living with the Dursleys, and
was maybe the first person in Harry's memory to love the skinny little kid with broken glasses and
messy hair.

- Ron Weasley, who made fun of me when he was 11 years old, and made sure I knew he didn't
mean it for the rest of our lives.

- Ron Weasley, who spent a ridiculous amount of time explaining wizard culture because his two
best friends grew up muggles.

- Ron Weasley, who had hand-me-down everything, and yet got genuinely excited when Harry
received the best competitive broomstick ever made.

- Ron Weasley, who sacrificed himself because "that's the game" when he was 11 years old.
Ron Weasley, a pureblood who was raised with morals and, even if he didn't quite understand his privilege, fought to level the playing field so he didn't have claim to that privilege anymore.

Ron Weasley, who didn't have a lot but shared what he did have without a second thought.

Ron Weasley, who had a family, which he more than gladly shared with the boy who had none.

Ron Weasley, who wrote to his mum, to ask her to make his new friend Harry a Christmas present too because he wasn't getting anything from home that year.

Ron Weasley, who stole a car to rescue Harry from his aunt and uncle.

Ron Weasley, who threw up slugs because Draco Malfoy called his best friend a mudblood.

Ron Weasley, who stood up and defended Harry on his broken leg against a supposed mass murderer because "you'll have to go through me to get to him."

Ron Weasley, who loved his little sister, and never quite forgave himself for letting her spend that first year in all that pain.

Ron Weasley, with scars up and down his arms from that night in fifth year that still gives him nightmares.

Ron Weasley, who is fighting a war he could easily sit out, in order to make the world safe for me. Me, and our children, and our children's children.

Dearest, dearest Ron, I love you so much. I hope, when this dark time is over, that we can find that love again. I *know* it's there. I believe in it. I hope you do, too.

Your loving wife,

Hermione Weasley.

God, I love her. I love them both. Where are they now, I wonder. What can I possibly do to find them?

I sigh and fold the letter, return it to the rucksack, and pull out the Deluminator, flicking it on and off half-heartedly. The lights go on. Then they go off. Then they go on again — nothing unusual.

And suddenly I feel the Deluminator vibrate in my hand and then I hear it — Hermione's voice, as clear as day.

I'm going mental. But I heard it. I heard my name, I know I did. And it was Hermione's voice — I'd know that voice anywhere — saying my name and something about a wand. Am I going mad?

I study the Deluminator in my hand. It doesn't look any different. But something *was* different — I could feel it.

I click the Deluminator again. The lights go out in my room, but another light appears right outside the window.

It's a ball of light, kind of pulsing, and bluish, like that light you get around a Portkey.

This is it. Something tells me I've got to move — now — and I do. Jumping up, I grab my rucksack, toss my few possessions in it, pull on my shoes and coat and scribble a quick note to Bill and Fleur on a scrap of parchment and leave it on the bedside table: "I think I've sussed out how to
find them. Please don't worry about me. Thanks for everything, and take care. Love, Ron."

I hurry down the stairs as swiftly and quietly as I can, then run into the garden.

The little ball of bluish light is hovering there, waiting for me.

I walk toward the light, and it slowly moves away from me. I immediately understand that I'm supposed to stick with it as it bobs along, so I follow it as it turns and leads me behind the shed. I reckon I should be afraid right now, but I'm not. Not at all. In fact, I'm oddly calm. And just as I decide that I can trust this thing to take me where I long to go, it floats into my chest and sort of, well, envelops me in its warmth. I know what I have to do. Taking out my wand, I turn and Disapparate on the spot, praying that this magic that Dumbledore conjured will carry me back to my heart's desire.

oooOOOooo

A/N — I owe a nod to a writer named solemnlyswearrr, who posted a lovely list of Ron Weasley's finest qualities on Tumblr. A modified version appears here in Hermione's letter.
Chapter 8: Reunion

I'm kneeling, fists in the snow, lungs burning like I can't get enough air, and I know I should be freezing to death because I'm sopping wet, but my head is burning like a furnace and I'm sweating all over. What the bloody hell just happened? What the bloody hell did I just see? And did Harry see it, too?

He's kneeling next to me now, his hand on my shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Ron. So sorry," he says. Yep, he saw it. Fuck.

"You've got to know, mate — you must know — it's never been like that between me and Hermione, ever. You know that, yeah?"

I nod, still shaking and fighting for breath, the Sword of Gryffindor lying heavily in my right fist.

"She's my sister, mate. She's the sister I never had, Ron, and I reckon I'm the brother she never had. Merlin, I thought you knew."

"Harry, I …" I croak, fighting against the lump that's sprung up in my throat. "I know what you're trying to say, but—"

"No, look at me," he says. "I don't think you do."

I sit back on my knees and meet his gaze. His brow is furrowed, crinkling his scar, and he seems almost as shaken by what he's seen as I am. He sits, too, ignoring the cold and snow and mud, to face me.

"Listen, Ron, if only you knew what happened to her — what happened to us — after you left."

"Damn it, Harry, I'll never be able to apologize enough for what I did. I know I fucked up, I know—"

"No, wait, that's not what I mean!" he shouts. I search his face in the moonlight, which is surprisingly bright, then sink down so I'm now sitting cross-legged, snow be damned. "You leaving — that was as much my fault as it was yours. I told you to leave. No! No, listen," he says, raising his hand as I lean forward to interrupt him. "I threw you out, Ron — I think we both knew Slytherin's locket contained Dark Magic, and I think we both knew it was playing tricks with our heads. But even so, there's no excuse for the way I treated you that night." He pauses for a shaky breath and adjusts his glasses. Looking down at his hands, he continues. "I said things that I knew would get the worst possible reaction out of you, Ron," he whispers, then presses on, almost as if he's yelling at himself. "You know, some weird part of me actually enjoyed watching you suffer that night. I've had to think a lot about that ever since, and I try to tell myself that it was just the locket talking, but, dammit Ron, I really envied you. I envied that you had your girl with you and I
had to leave mine behind. I envied you that you had a family to worry about and I didn't. That sounds mental now, I know, but that's how I felt, and I took it out on you. It was wrong."

Holy Cornish Pixie crap on a cracker. So I'm not the only one who's been carrying around a shit-ton of guilt since that night.

"Look, Harry, that's all in the past now, right? I mean, that locket was the ultimate mind-fucker. I don't hold it against you, and you don't owe me—"

"Wait, there's more, Ron."

Fuck, what else could there be? I take a deep breath to brace myself, then nod as if to signal I'm ready for the worst.

Harry runs his hands through his hair, gathering his thoughts. "I really hate to tell you this, because I know you're going to kick yourself around the bleeding forest for it, but you deserve to know — especially in light of what the locket tried to make you think tonight."

"OK," I say tentatively.

"Hermione…"

I feel my pulse quicken. "What about Hermione?" I ask, dreading the answer. Is she hurt? Where is she anyway? I don't know why this didn't occur to me until now, but if Harry's here, then she's alone. She's not safe! Then I remember the Contraception charm — or, my failure to use it that one time, to be more precise. Merlin's beard!

Sensing my panic, Harry waves his hands in the air. "No, no, she's fine," he shouts. "Gods, sorry … she's fine … physically, that is. But, well, losing you," he stops and searches for the right words. "She was devastated by it, mate, I won't lie."

Shit.

"Actually, the two of us, we both sank into a funk while you were gone," Harry continues. "We just couldn't seem to lift one another up. Eventually it dawned on me how much we both have always relied on *you* for that — you know, to keep me from moping around, to keep her from overthinking everything. Without you, we were both dead miserable." He fidgets with his wand — and that's when I realize he's carrying Hermione's wand, not his. What the hell? I make a mental note to ask about that story later.

Harry sighs. "I really worried for her sometimes, mate," he continues, lifting his eyes to the treetops overhead. "Those first few weeks, she cried herself to sleep every night. Then it sort of tapered off, but that was almost worse."

Fucking hell. I rise to my feet and pace around the clearing, the sword still hanging from my hand. I always knew this was going to be hard, but the reality of it, confronting the damage I'd done … it's almost too much. How can I ever make this right? Harry seems fine having me back — we're mates again, no questions asked. But … well, I'd be kidding myself if I expected it to be this easy with Hermione.

"She loves you, Ron. Deep."

I know that if I speak right now, I'll just sob like an effing baby, so I try to gulp down the lump in my throat and just nod.
I thrust my free hand in my pocket and look down at my boots. I'm not sure what to do next. Every cell in my body is screaming out to go to the campsite and let her do her worst to me — it would all be worth it to simply lay eyes on her again. But part of me wonders if that's best for her, or if maybe we should give her fair warning that I'm about to, uh, drop in. Bloody hell...

Next thing I know, Harry's flung his arm around my shoulder.

"Gotta face the music sometime, mate," he says wryly.

I smirk and let loose a nervous laugh. Can't help it. But all I can really do is nod at this point and shrug.

"OK, then," he says. "I'll show you the way."

Too soon and not soon enough, if that makes any sense, we arrive at the edge of the clearing where Hermione and Harry had set up camp earlier that day. The sky is black as coal, but the moon is bright, and the tent is dark. My guess is, Hermione's asleep.

Harry slips quietly through the tent flap, and I follow him, my pulse hammering so hard I can feel it in my throat.

Harry lights a candle and places it on the little nightstand next to my old bunk, and that's when I see her, for the first time in I can't say how long, and my heart thuds at the sight of her. I expected to find her in her own bunk but, no, she's in mine, tucked under my wool blanket. She's lying on her back, and her face, which is turned toward me on the pillow, is bathed in candlelight now and surrounded by a curtain of dark brown curls. She looks so peaceful and so precious and so tiny lying there, with one hand pinned under her ear, the other spread across her tummy, and that's when I notice that she's wearing my old long-sleeved flannel pyjama shirt, which is at least six sizes too big for her. The collar hangs open and, in the shadows, I can see the curve of her neck, and the little dip at the base of her throat between her collarbones where she likes to dab perfume sometimes, and I so want to kiss and smell her skin there, to bury my face in her hair and beg her to forgive me, to take me back …

I'm lost in this thought when Harry reaches forward and gives Hermione's shoulder a gentle nudge. "Hermione," he whispers. She grimaces and hums lowly, turning her face away from me, away from the light. "Hermione, wake up," Harry says, a little more loudly this time. He sits on the edge of her bed and squeezes her shoulder lightly. "Hermione."

With that, she turns her face back into the candlelight, though her eyes are still closed. She grumbles something incoherent, then buries her face in the pillow. "Is it my turn already?" she says, her voice muffled by her curls.

"No, that's not it," he replies, brushing her hair from her forehead, only to see it flop back where it was, and I can't help but smile at the futility of trying to control Hermione's hair. "Wake up, Hermione — someone's here."

"What?" she mutters, her eyes still obscured by waves of curly locks. "Impossible," she whispers, brushing her hair off her forehead. "Who? Where?"

With that, Harry stands and steps aside, revealing … well … me.

Hermione lifts her head from the pillow and looks past Harry, her eyes landing on my face, and I see it, just for a second — a glimmer of the look she gave me as we stood within that circle of low-lying flames back at Grimmauld Place. Hope. A small smile blooms on her lips for one
heartbreaking moment, only to dissolve as her lower lip trembles. And then, gradually, her eyebrows rise, as if she can't believe what her own eyes are telling her. She carefully folds back the bedcovers, sits up, slowly swings her feet to the floor, then rises tentatively and takes one step toward me, looking for all the world like a sleep-walker. Then she stops, just out of arm's reach.

I gulp.

"Are you real?" she whispers, looking up at me, her eyes flitting across my face.

I nod. Yes, I'm pretty certain this is real — though I realize I must be quite a sight: wet, shivering, and lugging the Sword of Gryffindor of all things in my right hand. But then it occurs to me that I've dreamed this moment so many times before. Maybe it isn't real. Maybe I'm imagining it again.

"You're alive." It's not a question. I hear a note of relief there, but still ... she says it like she's not entirely sure it's true, like it's a theory she's still testing out.

I nod again.

There's a pause. Then …

"You left." A dry factual statement, recited like a snippet memorized from "Hogwarts: A History," but with a hint of disappointment and hurt.

She doesn't say it like an accusation, but I feel it all the same. Breaking her gaze, I nod again, turning my attention to my boots. I stuff my free hand in my pocket.

There is another, longer pause, in which I search my mind for all the things I'd planned to say if ever I was lucky enough to find myself standing right here, right now. But nothing is coming to me. Not one sodding word. What could I say that would possibly be good enough? What can I do that would ever fix what I've broken? Fucking hell, there's a lump in my throat the size of a Quaffle. Even if I could think of something to say, I doubt I'd be able to speak.

I'm seriously considering stepping back, retreating, to give her some space, to find Harry, who has somehow disappeared without me knowing it, and … that's when I hear it, spoken firmly and solemnly.

"You came back."

I lift my eyes, my lips pursed together, jaw clenched, and nod again. She has her arms clutched around her waist, hugging herself, and her eyes are overflowing with tears.

"I knew you would," she says, her voice cracking.

Merlin, I so want to reach out and hold her — she looks so small, so fragile, like I've hurt her so badly. But I know somehow that it's not the right thing yet. Still, my arms ache to wrap themselves around her, so I shove my hand that much deeper into my pocket to control myself.

I try my voice out. "I wanted to come back right away," I say, sounding gravelly but at least comprehensible. "I tried to come back the minute I left, but I got captured."

"Captured?" she says in a small, worried voice, her forehead wrinkling.

I nod. "Snatchers."

She shakes her head, and I realize she and Harry probably don't know. I clear my throat.
"Snatchers," I explain, speaking low, "they travel the countryside capturing fugitives, muggleborns, traitors to You-Know-Who. They turn them in to the Ministry to collect a bounty."

She searches my face again. "And you, you ran into some of them?" she asks, sounding frightened of the answer.

I shrug. "Yeah, pretty much as soon as I landed on solid ground." She looks worried, which is mental, because here I stand. But, this whole business is mental, isn't it. "Only had me for a night, though. I escaped."

She shudders.

"I tried Apparating back to the campsite where we last … where I … left," I say, my voice wobbling. "But you were gone."

At that, she swallows, chokes a bit, her face crumpling into a look of agony as the tears flow. She lifts her hands to her eyes and I instinctively step forward, before I even have a chance to think, wanting to fold her in my arms.

"No!" she shouts, sensing I've come nearer. She holds one hand up and I freeze, feeling a stab of remorse pierce my heart. I drop my hands to my sides. "No," she repeats, more softly now. "Not yet. I … I need time … to think … to sort this out."

I step back. "Sure, yeah … I understand," I say, though honestly, I really don't. All I want to do is hold her. My mind is such a mess … jumbled-up fragments of sentences that still need to be said, a whole story I still have to unravel for them about how I got here … hell, she doesn't even know the locket's been destroyed yet … but all that is bollocks right now compared to this impulse to simply embrace her and clutch her to my chest. Bloody hell, that's the only clear thought in my head right now.

I look around the tent and there's Harry, leaning mutely against the kitchen counter, trying desperately to look like he isn't listening to every word we've been saying.

Harry straightens up. Hermione hears him, turns toward him and, amazingly — alarmingly — lets out a little laugh. "I'm sure you two are fast friends again," she says to Harry, smiling through her tears. "You probably were right as rain again in a split-second. But it's not that easy for me."

Harry strides toward her. "Ron saved my life."

"What?"

"You didn't notice what he's carrying, did you," Harry continues, unable to suppress his smile, and Hermione shifts her gaze to the sword in my right hand.

"Merlin, I didn't see it until just now," she says, all astonishment. She looks up at me, amazed — the tears of the previous moment apparently forgotten, her inborn curiosity overruling all else. There's my girl. "How did … where … I mean," she sputters. "Good Godric, I need a cuppa."

Harry chuckles and turns back into the kitchen to make tea while Hermione, still in a daze, sinks into the easy chair next to the bunk. I suddenly feel mildly ridiculous standing there holding the bleeding Sword of Gryffindor so I rather awkwardly lay it on the kitchen table and sit on a chair there. She stares at the sword from her seat.

"Guess we should start from the beginning, eh Ron?" Harry says from across the counter as he lights the kitchen lantern.
I lean back in my chair. "The beginning?" I say. "Blimey. I'll have to go back a ways."

Harry hands us each our tea and settles into the chair across from me at the kitchen table — but only after drying us both with Hermione's wand.

"So, you mentioned something about Snatchers," Harry supplies, sensing I need a nudge.

"Oh yeah, right," I say, taking a sip. "Well, I ran into a nasty, smelly gang of 'em — though, fortunately for me, they weren't the brightest bunch. Got away — and managed to knick a few extra wands while I was at it, in case you need one, mate. I notice you're using Hermione's."

"Yeah," Harry says, fingering Hermione's wand on the table in front of him. "Long story. I'll tell you that one some other time."

"Fair enough. Anyway," I say, tilting onto the back legs of my chair and laying the whole story out — from the Snatchers to Shell Cottage.

"Shell Cottage?" Harry asks.

"Bill and Fleur's new place. It's right on the seaside. Beautiful, really — though I can't say I enjoyed it much. I'm sure I wasn't a very pleasant houseguest. Right miserable, I was."

Hermione pipes up. "Wait — how are Bill and Fleur? The family? Is everyone all right?"

She's leaning forward on her elbows, concerned, and I feel a warmth welling up inside me before I have a chance to even think about what's causing it. Then it hits me, what she said, how she said it. The family. Not your family. The family. She's worried for them. She's worried for them because she is one of them. And I can't squash it down — a smile comes over my face that's probably out of proportion to the news I have to share, which isn't much. "I didn't see anyone other than Bill and Fleur — Mum and Dad are still in hiding with Muriel, everybody's gone underground and is staying there, more or less. Bill's in touch and says they're all fine — or as well as can be expected."

"Ginny?" Harry asks.

"Still at Hogwarts, but you knew that already from the Marauders' Map, didn't you?" I say with a grin before taking another sip of tea.

Harry looks a little embarrassed that I know his secret, but I don't blame him. If I'd had a map that pinpointed Hermione's location over the past few weeks, I would never have taken my eyes off of it.

"Course, Fred and George aren't to be kept down," I add, figuring Harry wouldn't mind a change of subject. "The twins, they've started this pirate broadcast on the wireless — it's brilliant, really — they're doing it with some other Order members. Keeps folks up to date on the battle against You-Know-Who, aims to boost everybody's spirits, that sort of thing. We'll have to try to tune it in tomorrow. You need a password to find it — it can be a little tricky to pick up — but it's worth it."

"That's tremendous," Harry says. "Good old Gred and Forge."

"Mmm," Hermione adds, rising to make more tea. "What's the programme called?"

"It's called 'Potterwatch.'" I reply, watching for Harry's reaction, which is pretty much what I expected. His cheeks redden, he runs his fingers through his hair, and stammers out a few mumbled syllables.
"Listen, mate, what better name than 'Potterwatch'? It's not about you so much as the cause — and sorry, like it or not, your name pulls people together, keeps 'em motivated. That's what the show's about."

"Well, I think it's wonderful," says Hermione, settling into the chair next to Harry with a full pot of tea. "And leave it to Fred and George to try to lift everyone's morale. It's what they're best at." She sees my cup is empty and reaches for it, filling it and adding the exact amount of sugar that I like — which is, quite a lot — before returning it to me. I'm chuffed that she remembers how I take my tea, though I realize my reactions to even her smallest kindnesses are bordering on ridiculous. I'm just so starved for any kind of tenderness from her that even a bleeding spoonful of sugar is making my heart flutter.

"So, mate, you've taken us as far as Shell Cottage," Harry says, reaching for the teapot. "Then what?"

I stir my tea and gather my thoughts. There's so much to tell, and it's hard to know how to put it all into words. I reach into my pocket, pull out the Deluminator, and place it on the table. "Well, I finally found out what this is for."

Harry chuckles. "You mean, it's not just for turning lights on and off?"

"Hey, how was I to know? It didn't come with a ruddy instruction manual, now did it?"

Hermione reaches out and strokes the surface of the Deluminator with her little fingers. "What does it do, then?" she asks in a small voice. "How does it work?"

I feel a little choked up all of a sudden. I can't just come right out and say that Dumbledore knew I'd need a way to find her. Can I? Fuck, I probably wouldn't be able to explain it that well — though it makes perfect sense to me. Old Man Dumbledore. How did he know?

I tell them about the ball of blue light that suspended itself outside my window at Shell Cottage, watching a look of amazement settle over both of their faces as I tell my tale. I tell them about the past three days, Apparating (or, I guess, Deluminating) from place to place — waiting, hoping, expecting to see them — and they recall hearing someone fumbling about just outside the wards, not aware of course that it was me. Then I tell them about seeing the Patronus, and I start telling the story of following Harry and diving after him into the frozen pond before I realize that, shit, I've just stumbled into a subject that I'd rather not discuss.

Not sensing my sudden bout of nerves, Harry picks up where I left off. "Ron was brilliant, Hermione — you should have seen him," he says. "Here, Hermione, try lifting this," Harry says, placing the handle in Hermione's hand.

"Oof, I didn't realize the sword was this heavy," she says before laying it back down gently.

"It weighs a ton, I can tell you," Harry continues, not noticing the pleading looks I'm shooting in his direction. "And Ron — he was amazing — he hoisted this thing up over his head, battle-axe style, but he swung it like it was a feather and, and …"

And then Harry looks at me, eyes wide. Yeah, mate — now you remember, I think to myself. Way to go.

"Well, er," I mumble. "It wasn't really that big of a deal."

"Oh, yeah, um … it was just pretty great to see, that's all," Harry says with remarkably less enthusiasm than he was displaying just a moment ago. Crap.
Hermione looks back and forth between us, eyebrows raised. "OK, so … what happened?"

"Well, uh, I, uh, then I basically, erm, opened the locket and, uh, held it in place, and Ron … he smashed it with the sword."

"Er, yeah," I add, as if my mutterings are going to make a difference at this point. Great Gandalf's ghost, Harry's a terrible liar. Come to think of it, so am I.

Hermione smirks. She's on to us. "Well, that certainly is a fascinating story," she says. "You two certainly do know how to spin a yarn."

Harry shoots me a sheepish glance. I glare at him, thinking, Shut. It. You.

Wanting to change the subject yet again, I kick Harry under the table. "Show it her," I say.

"What? Oh, oh yeah," he says, reaching deep into his pocket and fishing out the locket, which is now bent and blackened.

He drops it on the table in front of Hermione, who prods at it hesitantly with her index finger. "Extraordinary," she whispers. "It must have put up some kind of defense. I mean, the Dark Magic that You-Know-Who put on this object was really advanced — I think it knew we meant to destroy it." She looks back and forth between us, hoping we'll give up more details, but we've both clammed up. "It's hard to imagine that it wouldn't have mounted one last effort to thwart you."

We both shrug. Harry mutters, "Well, er, it certainly was a Dark piece of work." I just cough lamely.

Hermione sighs and rises from the table. "I'm sure more details will come to you in time," she says with a roll of her eyes, picking up the teapot and returning it to the kitchen. I'm amazed she's not pressing us for more information, but … well maybe I'm not the only one who's learned a few lessons recently. She seems content to let it drop for now. I breathe a sigh of relief.

Standing in the kitchen, Hermione looks at the clock, and I follow her gaze and see that it's 2:30 in the morning.

She clears her throat, suddenly looking a bit jumpy. She dries off the countertop with a tea towel and says in a high-pitched voice that betrays her nervousness, "Umm, it's late, isn't it. Perhaps we should all just … um … get some sleep and we can continue catching up on news in the morning."

"Good idea," Harry chimes in. "What do you guys say we skip the watch thing tonight. I think all of us could use the rest — and you," he says, nodding in my direction. "You've been sleeping rough for three nights. Frankly, my friend, you could use a shower."

I give myself a whiff and, egads, Harry's right.

"First, let's put up an extra layer of enchantments just to be on the safe side," I say, standing up and heading toward the tent flap. "Harry, come with me. Bill taught me a new one — Praesidium Cognominatio. Only lets in people who share your name. 'Course, with a family my size, that doesn't significantly cut down the list of potential intruders. But still, it's a pretty good extra barrier."

Harry chuckles and rises to join me. "Yeah, we should put out the campfire too, then," he says, then turns to Hermione. "Will you be all right in here?" he asks.

I can't help but notice how, well, sweet Harry's been to Hermione all night tonight — brushing the
hair from her forehead, bringing her tea, and checking on her just now. All actions that would have made me want to rip his head off just a few months ago — but now, instead, they just make me think I'm lucky he's such a good brother to her. She's been well cared-for while I was away.

She nods. "I'll just, um, tidy up a bit, shall I? You two go ahead."

Outside, I extinguish the fire with my wand. Harry stands and watches me with his hands on his hips and his head down. "Bloody hell, I'm sorry, mate," he says. "I sort of barreled ahead there and started talking about, you know, the locket — but it was just so incredible, I guess I got carried away."

"No worries. I almost stumbled into the subject myself before I remembered."

He sighs and stomps on a few logs with his boot to be sure they're fully out.

I put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, Harry. I'll tell her — eventually. It was, I dunno, it was just a lot to get into tonight. And maybe it's something she and I should talk about in private."

"Yeah," he says with a nod. "I get it. Still, I've got to tell you, I'm amazed she didn't hex your bits off when she first woke up."

I laugh. "Mate, I know I've hacked her off, but I still think she rather likes my bits."

"Shut it," he says, giving me a playful shove.

I shove him back. "You brought my bits up, not me." We both kick some dirt on the campfire. "Anyway, yeah, this wasn't the reception I was expecting. But then, I didn't really know what to expect, really. I'd pictured this moment so many times, and every scenario was a little different. But I never imagined anything like this."

"Me neither."

I gulp. "You pictured it?"

There's a pause. "Yeah, I did," Harry says, raising his eyes to me. "I always hoped you'd come back. Almost from the moment you left."

Shit. "Guess it's a good thing Dumbledore always knew I'd leave you someday," I say.

Harry shakes his head. "You got that wrong, mate. He always knew you'd want to come back."

Feeling like I'm going to choke on the lump in my throat, I cross my arms over my chest and look up at the sky, which is still as black as slate. When I feel like I can control my voice again, I say, "So, want to learn that new enchantment?"

After a few minutes of wandwork, Harry and I step back inside and I'm gobsmacked by what we find.

Hermione is nowhere to be seen — then I hear her prattling in the bathroom. But while Harry and I were outdoors, she made quick work of the place. On the far side of the tent, opposite the kitchen, stands my bunk. Well, it used to be my bunk, but Hermione has Transfigured it into a four-poster not unlike my old one at Hogwarts. I know it's mine because it's covered in my wool blanket, and a pair of my old flannel pyjamas, which I must have left behind, is folded neatly atop the pillows.

The other bunks remain where they were, closer to the tent flap. Hermione has Transfigured one of
them into a four-poster as well, presumably for Harry, since his rucksack is sitting on it.

"Blimey," Harry whispers, and we exchange astonished looks. "Why didn't we think of doing this sooner?"

I chuckle nervously. "Yeah. Are we wizards or aren't we?"

It's just beginning to register with me — and I think with Harry — that she's only Transfigured two bunks, not three, but just then, the bathroom door cracks open and Hermione steps out, studying her little feet like they're the most interesting thing she's ever seen. She clears her throat. "The bathroom's free. Who's next? Harry?"

He shakes his head. "No, I'm good. A quick Cleansing charm is enough for me tonight. I'm knackered." He jerks his thumb toward his four-poster. "Brilliant, by the way, Hermione. Thanks."

She looks up at him, her cheeks reddening. "Oh, it was nothing," she whispers, wringing her hands together nervously.

Harry climbs atop his bed and tugs at the curtains overhead. "Well, 'night," he says. "See you guys in the morning." And, with that, he disappears behind the layer of fabric and I hear him cast a quick Silencing charm.

Hell's bells.

I realize I've been rooted to the spot by the tent flap since Harry and I stepped inside. "Well, then …" she breathes, and that snaps me out of my daze.

"Uh, I, uh, yeah — better hit the shower," I say.

"Oh yes," she sputters, almost leaping away from the bathroom door to make room for me. "Umm, there are clean towels on the shelf, there's a new toothbrush in the holder for you, and — oh — I, umm, these have been freshly laundered," she says, tripping over her feet toward the four-poster and reaching for the folded pile of pyjamas. "They're probably cleaner than anything you have in your rucksack," she says, handing them to me, her eyes still cast downward.

I nod. This is the closest we've been since I arrived at the tent, and she can't quite look at me. But I take a moment to study her in the lantern light. There, just within reach, are the freckles sprayed across the bridge of her nose, and there's the mole on her neck, and there's that one curl above her left eyebrow that always refuses to mesh with the others, and there's that vanilla smell of hers. Good Godric, I missed her. I'm overwhelmed by her nearness, but she's so skittish, like a bird in a cage — I can hardly bring myself to do anything but thank her for the pyjamas and stumble backward into the bathroom.

The hot water feels like heaven. I try not to let my mind wander to whatever might be next, but it can't be helped. Does she mean for us to share a bed? It would seem so — but then, she might be out there Transfiguring a third bunk into a four-poster for herself at this very moment. It's best not to get my hopes up.

Still, as I lather up, I think what it would be like to lay next to her — something I haven't done since Grimmauld Place, which seems like years ago — to hold her in my arms, to kiss her. And, just like that, I'm hard as an anvil. I decide not to fight it. If she does want to share a bed, it's probably best if I don't show up seeming like I'm expecting anything that she might not be ready for. And if she doesn't want to share a bed — Good Godric, I hope she does, though — it's probably best that I, er, take care of business now in order to avoid any embarrassment later.
Jiminy Quidditch, I'm a nervous wreck.

With a soapy hand, I reach down and stroke myself, thinking of the last time Hermione and I properly made love back at Grimmauld Place, the night before the Ministry mission.

Looking back on it now, I can see that we were both desperate and frightened — which, at the time, translated into such a here-and-now kind of feeling, like everything we were doing could possibly be the last time, and therefore it should be savored. I couldn't get enough of her, kissing every part of her body — including her feet, for Merlin's sake — and soon she was riding me, raising and lowering herself above me as I laid back and watched, my hands cupping her breasts. She was so beautiful, lit from behind by the hearth fire, and the sight of her above me, the feel of her wrapped around me so warm and tight — I willed myself to memorize it all. She ran her hands up and down my arms, from the place where my hands were cradling her tits down to my shoulders, and then she leaned forward, bringing her nipples within reach of my lips. I suckled each one, gently at first and then more fiercely, and she moaned, wrapping her hands around my head and urging me to keep going. I felt the base of my cock twitch and I grabbed her hips, holding her still as I plowed myself inside her over and over again, hard and fast, until I exploded inside her and she collapsed on top of me, sweating and panting.

The memory of those last few seconds sends me over the edge, and I'm coming in my fist, my forehead pressed against the cold tile of the shower.

I finish straightening myself out, brush my teeth and dry myself off with my wand. Checking my reflection in the mirror, I wonder if I should shave. But then, I remember that she rather likes me on the scruffy side so, deciding I'm presentable enough, I extinguish the lantern light and turn toward the door.

I pause with my hand on the doorknob, trying to calm my nerves.

"No time like the present, mate," I mutter to myself, and pull the door open.

I find the tent is now completely dark but for the light of one candle, which sits on the nightstand next to the bed nearest the kitchen. And there, perched on the very edge of the bed, sits Hermione, nervously twisting her fingers together in her lap, her toes resting on a small ottoman that she must have set there to help her climb up to her present spot.

She's looking at her hands. Blimey, she's as nervous as I am. I step forward, tossing my dirty clothes on top of my rucksack on the floor. "Felt good to clean up after all this time," I say, trying to sound lively and failing miserably.

"Mmm, I can imagine," she says into her lap. She angles her eyes toward my feet, as if measuring the distance between us, then buds over about a foot. Quite slowly, she reaches her hand over the empty space beside her and taps it. "You must be dead on your feet," she whispers. "Come sit."

I'm over there in a heartbeat, but then I realize I've maybe moved too fast for her, because she looks a little startled. I stop and lower my backside slowly to the bed about a foot away from her, my palms pressed against the mattress, and I grimace when I realize that my weight is causing her to tip slightly toward me, and she's fighting it.

I'm at a loss for what to say next. "So …"

"So …" she answers.

After a painful pause, I see her peek at me from beneath her lashes.
"Feels different having the locket gone, no?" she asks.

I nod. "Very."

She returns to studying her hands. "Thank you. Thank you for destroying it."

I chuckle. "It was my pleasure, believe me."

She smiles. "I hope you'll tell me someday what really happened ... the whole story, I mean."

I nod, and then I realize she can't see me. I clear my throat, trying not to sound like such a nervous berk. "Hermione, I promise you I'll tell you everything — someday — but tonight's just not the night."

She nods back. "It's all right. I expect we're both exhausted anyway."

"Mmm."

She grimaces, like she's cursing herself, then screws up the nerve to look me in the eyes. "I'm sorry I'm so, that everything is so ... so awkward," she says. "It's just, I have so many emotions running through me, demanding my attention, I hardly know what to say or think or feel."

"Me too," I whisper. "But I guess I'm just choosing to focus on one or two of them right now."

Her eyes dart back and forth between mine, and I almost see a smile gathering at the corners of her mouth. "Which ones?"

I run my eyes from her hair to her forehead, to her cheek, to her lips, then up to her eyes before answering. Merlin, she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. "Relief and gratitude will do for tonight."

She sucks in a breath, sobs, and nods. "Excellent choices."

And somehow the wall between us falls down, and she's in my arms, her face pressed to my neck, sobbing, and I fall back and press her to me and it feels like that night in the Common Room all over again — the newness of it, the hunger for her, doing my head in.

I still have the presence of mind to reach for my wand, however, and close the curtains, seal them with a Muffliato for Harry's sake, and drop my wand to the nightstand. I lay back against the pillows and pull her along with me until we're stretched out side-by-side in one another's arms, my face buried in her wonderful-smelling hair, her tiny frame tucked in where it's always belonged, in the spot between my left arm and my chest.

"Gods, I love you, Hermione — I love you so much," I sigh into her curls as she cries, clutching my pyjama collar in her free hand. "I'm so sorry, love, I'm so sorry. I promised you I'd protect you, I promised you ... and I failed. I fucked up. I'm so sorry. I'll never forgive myself for it."

She clutches me tighter then runs her hand over my cheek, shushing me.

"No, it's true, Hermione," I say, overruling her attempt to quiet me. "You deserved so much better. I treated you horribly, and Merlin only knows what could have happened to you — what could have happened to you both — when I left. I regretted it straight away, tried so hard to find you, to get back to you ... and when I realized I'd lost you forever, I thought I'd go mad."

She props herself up on one elbow so she's facing me. "Oh Ron, I just thank heavens you're alive. I
was so worried over what might become of you. I was so miserable too, Ron. Please, promise me, you'll never—"

"Never!" I bark. "I'll never, ever leave your side again, Hermione, I swear on my life. Nothing can ever keep me away from you — not ever. Do you understand?"

She nods. "Nothing has ever kept you away from me, as it turns out," she says, smiling through her tears.

I'm confounded by this. "What do you mean? I left you."

She sniffs. "Yes, you did," she says, nodding again and wiping at her cheek with her free hand. "But, against all odds, you came back."

I grimace. Harry tried to sell me that shite earlier, but I'm not buying it from Hermione.

"That's bollocks, Hermione. I never should have left in the first place." She sits up and looks at me squarely — like she hasn't done since I returned tonight. "And you never would have left if it hadn't been for that blasted locket," she says forcefully.

"Nonsense. The locket's no excuse."

She pushes up the sleeves of the giant pyjama shirt she's wearing. "Now listen here, Ronald Weasley," she chirps. "For better or worse, I've had plenty of time to think about this, and when I think about something for this long, you'd better believe I can come up with the proper answers. And, in this case, the proper answer is that the locket is entirely to blame for what happened — not just to you, but to all of us."

I can't help but chuckle inwardly at her, arguing with me here in bed like a ruddy barrister, but I can't concede her point. At least not yet. I shake my head slowly.

"Look ... let me lay it out for you," she says, pushing her hair back from her forehead. "First of all, let's stipulate that this locket was imbued with some serious Dark Magic — the darkest I've certainly ever seen."

"Yeah, OK. Fine."

"Now, we know how other objects like it have behaved in the past — and how they have affected those who have been unfortunate enough to come into contact with them, yes?"

I nod, but I'm not entirely sure where she's going just yet.

She senses I'm not following. "Just hear me out. Moving backwards from the most recent example to the earliest example, let's start with Marvolo Gaunt's ring. You-Know-Who placed a curse so powerful on it that it attacked Dumbledore and set off a reaction that would have eventually killed him if Snape hadn't done the job first, yes?"

"OK."

"Very, very Dark and powerful stuff. And the curse was activated by skin-on-skin contact, yes?"

"Yes."

"Right. My theory is that the ring was programmed, if you will, to attack a wearer only if it sensed that the wearer intended to destroy it. This remains a theory in the case of the ring, mind you,
because I don't have enough data to prove it out, but if you examine the other cases within our scope of knowledge, I think you'll see a pattern."

I shrug.

"OK, so, moving back in time to the Diary."

I gulp. Ginny. I don't know why, but I haven't thought about this one in a while.

"You certainly cannot argue that Ginevra Weasley can or should be held responsible for the things she did under the Diary's influence," Hermione states firmly, really getting into it now.

"No, but Ginny was just a first-year, wasn't she, not a fully grown wizard, and she—"

"It doesn't matter how old she was, Ronald — the Horcrux wormed its way into her mind and controlled her actions. And when it sensed that Harry was intent on destroying it, the Diary activated a series of defenses. It. Fought. Back."

I shake my head. I'm still not seeing it.

"Ronald, there are a lot of reasons why I'm dying to know what happened when you destroyed the locket, but this is the prime one: I'm guessing it put up a fight, yes?"

I press my eyes shut for a minute, trying to stifle the memory. But I can't deny it. I nod.

"Right," she says, a little shaken by my answer despite the fact that it fits with her theory. "Good. Don't you see? You-Know-Who didn't just create these Horcruxes and then walk away. They are precious objects to him, containing material that tethers him to life. It only makes sense that he would place massive jinxes, enchantments and curses around them to keep them safe."

She huffs out a little puff of air in exasperation, seeing that I'm still not convinced.

"The locket did nothing to harm Umbridge. Why? Because it knew somehow that she had no intention of destroying it. But with us? It started attacking right away. It was programmed to do so, Ronald. It was putting in motion the Dark Magic that You-Know-Who placed there to protect it. In light of what we knew about the ring, we were mad to ever wear the locket, to let it come into such close contact with our bodies for such long periods of time. To do that — it was utter poison."

Gods. I can see most of what she's saying, but she's overlooking some very important details.

"Hermione, that doesn't explain why the locket affected me more than you, more than Harry," I argue, rising until I'm sitting cross-legged facing her. "You can't deny that it did."

She shakes her head. "No, I would never deny it. The locket knew exactly what it was doing."

"Yeah, it sensed a weakness, and it went for it," I mutter and drop my eyes to the bed.

"No, Ron, you're wrong."

I look up at her, confused.

"It sensed a strength, and it went for it."

Now, Hermione has said a lot of mental things to me in her day, but this has to be the mentalest. I scrunch up my face at her. "You're barking."
"No, hear me out," she says, placing her hands in mine. "That locket knew the only way it could survive was to break the trio up. It set us against one another in any way it could, feeding off our fears and insecurities. It discovered, I think, that it could gain swifter entry into you, in a manner of speaking, via the scars you received that night at the Department of Mysteries. Those scars opened a portal into your subconscious, Ron, you can't argue otherwise — you've suffered nightmares since the injury, I know you have. And the locket took advantage of that portal, digging in—"

"Yeah, like I said, it found a weakness. In me."

"No! Stop thinking like a bloody muggle and listen!" she shouts.

Blimey — now that's something I've never heard Hermione say. Bugger all.

"I mean, stop being so blind to the magical evidence right in front of you, Ronald! Think like the Wizard Chess master you are, for Merlin's sake!" She pauses to squeeze my hands. "The locket knew that, in order to survive, the one person it had to knock out, as it were, was you. Without you, Harry and I were rudderless, completely lacking direction and energy. We literally sagged into a pointless routine, Ron — we were going nowhere. Harry was totally distracted, brooding over thoughts of Dumbledore and Grindelwald and mooning at the Marauder's Map all day, I was content to mope about and be miserable, missing you, and the locket was perfectly safe as long as that was the case. It knew what we didn't — which was that Harry and I may be bright and talented and what have you, but we're next to useless without you, Ron. You're the animating force of the trio, Ronald, the one who keeps me and Harry from falling apart. The locket had to eliminate you from the picture or it didn't stand a chance — and it used the best means necessary, your scars, to accomplish it. Don't you see? It attacked our greatest and least-appreciated strength."

I just — I can't believe — could this be true? I rub my hands over my face in disbelief, blinking back the tears that are threatening to form behind my eyelids.

"You beat that locket time and time again, Ron. Think about it. The locket was trying to make you hurt me. It happened more than once. Remember that night in the loo, when … well, when I, um, choked?"

Bloody hell. Yes, of course I remember. I nod sheepishly. I was such an arsehole, jamming my cock into her mouth like an animal without regard for her need to fucking breathe. I'm still ashamed of it.

She squeezes my hand again. "Don't overlook this, because it's very important, Ron. I choked. And. You. STOPPED. You stopped immediately, Ron. No questions asked. And you were smart enough to get that locket as far away from us as you could. You overcame the locket's influence because you sensed that you were hurting me, that it was making you hurt me — and nothing, not even that god-forsaken locket, could make you physically hurt me."

Tears are welling in my eyes, because I know where she's going next.

She sees them and gets a little teary, too.

"And then … in the forest. I hated seeing you berate yourself that day, darling. The locket took things that were true about us and exaggerated them. It knew our sexual relationship. It knew that you are, in bed, well, somewhat forceful and dominant — in a good way!" she says, hurrying to reassure me. "And it knew that I rather like that about you and, um, that I enjoy the sensation of, well, letting you be in charge, so to speak … and, the point is, it exacerbated those tendencies in us. So on the rare occasions when we were, um … together … I would submit myself to you without question, and you … well … the thing is, when I felt pain, I spoke up, and you stopped right away,
despite the fact that I could tell you were, uh, sort of somewhere else at that moment. You broke the connection with the locket immediately and you fought it. And you won. It made you terribly sick to do it, but you won, Ron. That locket knew you were powerful."

I'm speechless. I'm staring at the space between us on the bed. I so want to believe what she's saying, but … but to do so, I'd have to let myself off the hook for months of horrible behavior, and I'm just not sure I'm ready to do that. I was such a bastard. Gods …

"Your scars don't hurt anymore, do they?" she asks, squeezing my hand and dipping her face before mine to regain my attention.

"Huh?"

"I said, your scars don't hurt you anymore now that the locket is gone, do they?"

Crikey. They don't.

I shake my head, tears welling in my eyes.

She sniffs. "And I know this, Ronald, like I know the back of my hand, and don't you forget it," she says firmly, tears already streaming down her cheeks. "Nothing, no hunk of junk locket, no Snatchers, no Dark Magic — nothing would ever stop you from coming back to me," she says, pausing to take a shuddering breath though a slight, shaky smile. "I know that," she continues, "or my name isn't Hermione Weasley."

Suddenly, whatever had been holding me back from truly hearing her, from truly believing her … well, it crumbles, and I swiftly take her by the shoulders and clutch her to me, pulling us both back down onto the pillows behind me, and I crush my lips to hers. She opens her mouth and runs her tongue against my lower lip experimentally, and I respond with my tongue, pushing her lips open and exploring her mouth and, gods, it's been so long, it all feels new again. She wraps her arms around my neck and I roll us over so I'm on top of her now, glorying in the feel of her beneath me. I pull my lips from hers and reach down to unbutton the top button of her — well, my — pyjama shirt, looking her in the eye to be sure it's all right. Before I know it, though, she's waving my wand over my groin, wordlessly doing the Contraception charm, then she's unbuttoning my shirt as well, and soon we're madly removing one another's clothes and without much more fuss or foreplay, she's wrapped her arms and legs around me, our foreheads are pressed together, our noses bumping and rubbing, and I'm so moved I can barely speak — but speak I must.

Positioning myself above her, I lean back and look at her face. "Ye are blood of my blood, and bone of my bone," I whisper hoarsely. "I give ye my body, that we two might be one."

She presses her lips to mine, and we become one in a way we never have before. This time, there's no room for doubt. She is mine, and I am hers, and nothing — no war, no Death Eaters, nothing — will ever, ever change it.

oooOOOooo

A/N — This truly is what I think was going on with Ron in Deathly Hallows. I was always a little frustrated that JKR never really explored what happened to him via those scars. So here's my take. Hope you enjoyed it.

I realize that my version of the reunion is very, very different from what happened in the book. But this version feels right for this story - at least to me. Should she have stayed mad longer? Given the connection that exists between them in my version, that just didn't seem plausible. But I'm curious
to know what you think.
Knights and Doves

Chapter Summary

Malfoy Manor in an entirely new light.

Chapter 9: Knights and Doves

"Can you hear me, Ron? Open your eyes, mate."

I feel someone jerking me about by my shoulders, a hand slapping my cheek. Is that Harry? Sounds like Harry. But I dunno. My head feels like it's splitting open.

"I think he's coming to."

"Finally."

Wait, that sounds like Bill.

Another slap.

"Ow, for fuck's sake," I mutter, cringing against the slapping. Then, through the fog, I hear a blurt of nervous laughter. Yep, that's Harry.

"Mione," I croak. "Where is ... where?" My skull aches. I open my eyes but I can't seem to focus. Everything is fuzzy and grey. I can just make out what looks like Harry's face, upside down, right above me ... I guess I'm on a floor somewhere ... and there's Bill, standing over his shoulder. Bloody hell. But wait ... they're not answering me.

I try to sit up and I'm hit by a wave of pain in my forehead. I grimace, suddenly dizzy and queasy, and fall back to the floor, my head hitting the planks with a thump. "Where is she?" I moan through clenched teeth.

"She's here, Ron — she's on the bed," Harry says, but I can't see him. It hurts too much to open my eyes. "Hermione's OK," he nearly shouts. "Or she's going to be," he adds more quietly.

"The bed? Where?" I mumble, forcing myself to sit up despite the jolt of pain that blazes through my neck and into my brain. I've got to see Hermione for myself. Straining to open my eyes, I can see the shape of her ... gods, she's so tiny ... splayed out on a bed, and I think that's Fleur leaning over her and wiping her face. Once I'm satisfied she's breathing — thank Merlin — I cast my eyes about the room and begin to recognize my surroundings. We're in the bedroom I slept in while hiding out with Bill and Fleur — and suddenly I feel the familiar stab of embarrassment and shame, thinking about all the nights I spent here longing for Hermione and Harry.

"Shell Cottage?"

"Yeah, mate," Harry says. "We made it. You did it."

I have no idea what it is that he thinks I did ... the last thing I remember, he and I were dueling Death Eaters at Malfoy Manor, and everything after that is a blank. Merlin. What the fuck
happened?

I pull myself to my knees. "Ron, lay back down, now," Bill scolds as he grabs me by the shoulders. "You're dehydrated and you're going to need a slew of potions once we set Hermione right. The last thing we need is for you to fall and crack your head open."

"Don't care," I growl and drag myself out of Bill's hands and onto the bed to sit by Hermione's feet. I'm beginning to see a bit more clearly now — though the lantern light is stinging my pupils — and I almost wish I couldn't see because, hell, Hermione looks dreadful.

Fleur has clearly tidied her up with a Cleansing charm, and while I was knocked out they must have changed her into a fresh nightgown. But despite all that, she's got bruises up and down her arms and legs as well as vicious scrapes across her cheek and forehead. My eyes are drawn, however, to the red line that cuts across her beautiful white throat — and I start to remember how it got there, and I slowly start to lose it.

"Mione, I'm so sorry," I choke, lowering my face to her knees and clutching her legs. "I'm so sorry, love. I tried. I tried." I'm babbling now, sobbing into the fabric of her nightgown, and I hear Bill and Harry shuffle toward the door. Then I feel the mattress shift — Fleur is leaving, too — and grab her arm suddenly, looking up. "No, please, Fleur — stay," I mutter through my tears. "Please. Help her."

I snort, straighten up and try to pull myself together for Fleur's sake. It's fucking embarrassing how much I've cried these past few months. But Fleur reaches out, strokes my cheek and gives me a sad smile. "I will do everything in my power to help her, Ronald," she says, her eyes welling up with tears to match my own. "She is my sister now. I want her to remain so for a very long time."

I nod and mouth the words "thank you," though I can't seem to release them from my throat. I wipe my nose on my sleeve.

Fleur turns her attention back to Hermione. Picking up a bottle of Dittany and a hand towel from the nightstand, she says, "This wound on her neck, I must attend to it." I pull myself further up on the bed so I can reach Hermione's hands and hold them. I watch Fleur dab the wound and a flash of what caused it appears before my eyes. That fucking bitch LeStrange. Did I kill her? I wanted to. I hope I did. I just can't remember.

After a few minutes, Fleur dresses Hermione's neck with a thick gauze bandage. The Dittany clears up the cuts and scratches on Hermione's face, arms and legs remarkably quickly. The bruising, however, will be with her for a while. "Dittany, it can only do so much, no?" Fleur says as she continues her work. "She suffered, Ronald," she adds. "But Hermione, she is une femme forte — very, very strong. You must believe."

I nod, gulping down a sob, and squeeze Hermione's knees in my trembling hands.

"I have already tended to her wounds, the ones that were, how you say, the most critical — on her chest and her back," Fleur continues. "She woke briefly — I am afraid it was from the pain." I wince, and she squeezes my hand before continuing. "But that allowed me to get some Skele-Gro into her — her ribs, so many were cracked. Her wrist, it was also broken, the poor little bichette. I gave her some pain potion and Dreamless Sleep as well before she passed out again — though she will need much more, to help her with the aftereffects of the Crucio."

Fleur waves her wand slowly over Hermione's abdomen. "I have been checking her for internal injuries every few minutes like so. I am relieved, however, that she does not seem to be bleeding anywhere inside her body, though she gave us a scare when you first brought her here, mon frere."

I brought her here? Blimey, I don't effing remember any of that.

Fleur leans back and sits up straighter, places her hands on her lower back, and stretches. She seems satisfied for the moment that she's done all she can for Hermione, that she's resting comfortably.

"She looks so … so … hurt," I rasp.

Fleur nods with a grim little smile. "Mmm. You do not remember what your love looked like when you first placed her on this bed, do you?"

I shake my head.

She sighs, feeling Hermione's forehead with the back of her hand. "Her fever, it is down," she whispers with a note of relief. Then she turns to look at me. "It is a good thing you cannot remember, Ronald. Honestly. It a blessing."

Merlin's beard. I feel a cold chill run up my spine. I should have been there — I should have been awake for her, not passed out on the bloody floor like a twat.

Fleur stands and reaches for a washbasin on the dresser. She Vanishes the water there with her wand and refills it with an Aguamenti, then picks up a fresh flannel and comes to sit next to me on the bed, setting the washbasin on her lap. "Let me look at you now," she whispers. She shakes her head and mutters something in French under her breath — sounds like "obstine," though I can't be sure, though I've certainly heard her call Bill that enough times. She wipes my face down then cleans my hands.

"Your fingers. What happened to your fingers, Ronald?" she says, setting the basin on the floor.

I shrug. I don't feel like describing anything that happened in the basement of Malfoy Manor, how desperate I was to claw my way out of there. Fleur decides not to press me any further, instead Accioing the bottle of Dittany and healing the deep cuts and scrapes on my knuckles, fingertips, fingernails, and palms.

She reaches to the nearest nightstand for her medicine bag and pours me a generous dose of Blood-Replenishing Potion. She hands it to me and nods. I down it — it's foul, bitter with the flavor of vinegar, onion and something that tastes like black licorice — but already I can feel my dizziness subsiding somewhat. Then she spoons out a portion of Marrow Fortifier. I've never had this one before. Tastes like rotten fish. Setting the potion bottles aside, Fleur conjures a waterglass, fills it with her wand, and urges me to drink one, two, then three glassfuls.

"Blimey, I'll be in the loo all night."

She shakes her head. "No, my dear, you must to drink this and much more. What you did tonight left you dreadfully dehydrated and drained your blood of iron — you have, how you say, l'anemie, you understand? Anemia. To recover you must rest, perhaps for a day or two, perhaps longer."

I shake my head. "I don't …"

"You do not know what you did, do you?"

She reaches down for the flannel in the basin, wrings it out, then lifts it to my forehead.

"I can't remember much of anything that happened right before we got here," I confess to Fleur. "It's scaring me a bit."
She returns the flannel to the washbasin and turns to me. "I was not there, Ronald, so the details, they are not clear to me. But the details are not important right now. What is important is rest. You must rest. You must sleep. You must eat. You must … reconstituer … er, replenish your blood. Hermione must heal, but so must you, mon chere."

I look past Fleur's shoulder at Hermione, still lying peacefully atop the bed. Thank the heavens above she's alive. I can't … I just can't imagine, if she hadn't … ugh, I can't cry again. Not now.

Somehow, after a minute or so, I push the tearful feeling down again and regain control of my throat. "Thank you for looking after her," I say, turning to Fleur. "She has to be all right, Fleur. She has to be."

Fleur squeezes my hand. "She will be. As you will be. You will be well for one another's sake."

I nod.

"And now, my brother, I must insist that you bathe," she says with a little smirk. "You are quite ripe."

I chuckle, but hell, no — I'm not leaving Hermione's side. I shake my head.

She reads my thoughts. "Ronald, do not worry yourself. She will not be alone. I will stay with her. You will only be away for a few minutes, no? She will be fine."

I consider it, but before I can answer, she calls over her shoulder: "William!"

Bill must have been standing right outside, because the door flies open and he immediately stumbles through.

He eyes me and immediately looks embarrassed. "Sorry," he says.

"Subtle," I reply.

"OK, so sue me — I was listening. Fucking hell, Ronnie — you show up here, half-dead, with your wife, battered and bruised, in your arms. Yeah, I'm a little curious about what the hell is going on. Bugger."


Bill sighs. "Anyway, what do you need, my love?"

"I need you to fetch Ronald some fresh clothes and help him into the shower, darling."

"Hang on," I cut in, "I don't need any help."

Before either of them has a chance to stop me, I'm pulling myself up to my feet — and I immediately regret it, nearly keeling over as a dizzy spell rocks my brain.

"Merlin!" Bill cries as he catches me in his arms. "What did I say earlier about you breaking your head open, little bro?"

Bill straightens me up, throwing my arm over his shoulder and helping me to the door. "Sorry — I was feeling better for a minute there," I mutter. "Didn't realize I was so weak."

Bill hauls me into the loo and sets me down on a bench beneath the towel rack. "Need help with those?" he asks as I reach down to pull off my boots and socks.
"No, I think I've got it."

"Hey, I'm not sure you should stand that long on your own. I think you'd be better off taking a bath, Ronnie." He turns on the tap and I'm momentarily mesmerized by the steam rising from it.

I don't argue. Actually, a hot bath sounds ridiculously wonderful right about now. "Can't take a long one, though," I say. "Got to get back to Hermione."

Bill nods and reaches for some bath salts. "Harry tells us she was Crucioed more than once," he says hesitantly, looking away from me and into the water, making more of a display out of Conjuring bubbles than I know is strictly necessary.


"Sweet mother of Merlin," Bill says, easing himself down to sit on the edge of the tub. He presses his hands on his knees and drops his head. "Was she … do you know … was she conscious the whole time?"

I nod and blink back another ruddy wave of tears. "I tried," I manage to croak out after a long, uncomfortable pause. "I tried to get them to take me instead. And then … I tried to get to her … but I couldn't, Bill … we …"

Bill places a hand on my knee, which is still covered by my filthy jeans. "You did get to her, Ron. You saved her life. And I think she knows it."

I sink forward, propping my elbows on my knees and holding my face in my hands, literally trying to stuff the tears back down my throat. I've got to pull myself together. "I don't remember what happened, Billy. I don't. But if those Crucios hurt her mind in some way, brother, I'm telling you right now, I … I can't be held responsible for my actions. Someone will pay. I guarantee it."

He squeezes my knee — hard. "And I'll be right there with you, little bro," he says with a creak in his voice. "But let's take it one step at a time, eh?"

Lying back in the water, I try to command the memories to return to me, and some of them do — little fragments and snippets, anyway. I'm quite sure that if I remember everything that happened at Malfoy Manor, I'll be downright horrified and maybe even sick, and yet I can't fight the urge to push my mind there, to try to recollect it all.

I see Lucius Malfoy's astonished face turning toward us as he realizes Harry and I are attacking. I see shards of broken glass flying in all directions. I see Bellatrix LeStrange behind Hermione. I remember the rage rising in me at the sight of it. But that's all. None of it fits in sequence. It's all random and jumbled. Shit.

I pull myself out of the bath and half-step, half-crawl back to the bench, where I manage to dry off and then dress myself in the flannel pyjamas Bill left for me there. It feels so good to be clean again, wearing something soft and warm. Now all I need is to wrap myself around Hermione and I'll be that much closer to sane again.

Bill pops his head in the door and then helps me back to the bedroom. I feel like a prat that I can barely walk without assistance, but he insists my weakness is temporary. Or at least that's what Fleur tells him. Thank Merlin they teach so much of the Healing Arts at Beauxbatons or we'd all be screwed tonight.

Bill helps me settle in beneath the covers next to Hermione, and even though she's still out cold, I can't resist pulling her to me and pressing her head to my chest.
Bill ruffles my hair and steps toward the door. "One of us will check in on you in four hours to give you more potions," he says. I smile at him, and I'm about to thank him for, well … everything … but he sees where I'm going and cuts me off. "Nevermind all that. Just get some rest. You need to take care of yourself and get strong again, because she's going to need you, brother."

I nod and he steps out, closing the door behind him with a click.

I wrap my arms around Hermione, careful not to squeeze her too hard lest I injure her ribs, and sink my face into her hair.

"Mione, my Mione … you've got to pull through, love, and soon, or I'll run mad," I whisper against her curls.

No response. Just her breathing, which is still comforting in its own way, continuing at its steady pace.

I lean back and look at her face, her cheek pressed against my chest. She's fast asleep — Fleur's homemade Dreamless Sleep is still doing its job. And that's a good thing, I know, though part of me would love nothing more than to see her open those milk-chocolate-brown eyes of hers, look me over, and scold me for something like leaving the window open too wide or letting the lantern burn too long, wasting oil.

I return to resting my head on top of hers. "You'll come back to me soon, won't you, love?" I mutter into her hair, realizing that I'm mental, of course, for talking to someone who's under the influence of Dreamless Sleep.

"I'll be right here waiting for you when you wake up. In the meantime, don't be afraid. I've got you. I'll look out for you. Don't you worry 'bout a thing, Mione. You rest now."

In what seems like the blink of an eye, it's just about 24 hours earlier, and Hermione and I are back in the four-poster she conjured for us inside the tent. It's dark but for the light of the kitchen lantern creeping into our bed through a crease in the curtains. It's quiet. Harry's on watch. We're alone and, after the scare at the Lovegoods' a few days earlier, things are blessedly calm.

This is a dream, right? I guess I must be sleeping because this feels like a dream. But I lived it once — just last night. Seems like a year ago. But yeah, it's a good memory. Might as well let the dream roll on.

I'm lying on top of her, which she tells me she likes, and I guess I should pull out but, I don't know … afterward … I always kind of like the feeling of staying there, surrounded by her warmth. She takes a deep breath, then exhales slowly. I line my nose up along the side of hers and brush her lips with my own. "Mmmmm, Little Dove," I mumble into her mouth. "That was … that was … sweet Merlin, I love you so much."

Her breath hitches, then she kisses me softly. "Do you realize that, the whole time we had the locket with us, you never, ever called me that?" she whispers against my lips.

I pull back a bit to look in her eyes. "What, I didn't call you Little Dove? Not once? Really?"

She shakes her head, looking a little sad. "Never."

I think about it. Blimey, she's right. I never called her "Mione" either during all that time, come to think of it. Damned locket.

I press my nose back to hers and resume covering her lips, jaw and neck with soft kisses. "Well,
you're still my Little Dove, aren't you," I whisper between kisses. In the past, she used to pretend to be impatient with all the pet names I've contrived for her, but I've always known that she felt differently deep down. Lately, however, she's been meeting me halfway. She smiles and kisses me back. "Hmm?" I ask again.

"Always," she breathes. She wraps her arms around my neck. "And you're still my knight in shining armor."

I chuckle against her lips. "Me armor's a bit dinged up nowadays, love."

She squeezes my shoulders then runs her hands down to my chest. "Well, there may be a scuff and a scratch here and there, but they're all proof of how tough you are," she says, pausing to kiss me again. "And how brave." Another kiss. "How valiant."

I sigh. "Guess I still feel like a bit of a fallen knight, if you know what I mean," I say, rolling over onto my side so we're facing one another on the pillow.

She rests her hand on my cheek. I kiss her palm. "What's important isn't the falling," she says, "it's the getting back up."

I smile. "I'll try to remember that."

"Do."

Soon I feel a hand shaking my shoulder. "Ron. Hey, Ron. Wake up, mate."

It's Harry. Ugh. Did four hours just pass by already? Fucking hell, I'm knackered.

I squint and open my eyes enough to see that he's brought in a tray with some potions bottles and what looks to be a bowl of soup, and he's placed it on the dresser across from the bed.

He shakes my shoulder again. "Ron," he whispers. "Sorry, but it's time for your next dose."

Blimey, I can barely move. I slowly ease Hermione out of my arms and down to the mattress. She's still out cold.

Harry helps me take another round of awful potions and then stagger to the loo. Afterward, we bump into Fleur in the hallway. "Ronald, you must eat, but come into our room and do so," she whispers, tightening the belt on her robe. "Hermione, she needs her rest."

Still leaning on Harry, I shake my head. "No, I won't leave her alone."

Fleur tucks herself in under my other arm and leads me and Harry into the master bedroom, despite my protests. "Look, Ronald, the door to your room is open. Regardez," she says, gesturing across the hall, and sure enough, Hermione is in plain sight, though she's still slumbering. "I will leave the door to our room open so we will hear and see her if she wakes," Fleur adds. "For now, however, you must eat immédiatement, and it is best if Hermione is not disturbed."

Harry nods and goes to get the soup from the next room as Fleur guides me to one of the two comfy old overstuffed chairs opposite the bed.

"Where's Bill?" I ask.

"He is checking on everyone once more before reinforcing the defensive enchantments outside and turning out the lights for the night."
Harry returns and hands me the bowl of soup — chicken noodle, and it smells heavenly — then settles back onto the chair opposite me.

"Ronald, you require more than soup. I shall return shortly," Fleur says and floats out of the room.

"What time is it, mate?" I ask Harry between spoonfuls.

"Two a.m., I think."

"Good Godric, I'm sorry you had to wake up to play nursemaid, Harry."

"Nah, I offered. Besides, I wanted to take a peek at Hermione. She looks a little better. Not so pale, at least."

I shrug. "I wouldn't know, really. I can't remember what she looked like when we first got here."

Harry scratches his head. "How much do you remember, anyway?"

I put the empty bowl down on the end table between us. "That's tough to say. Since we got here, bits of it have come back to me, but hardly more than a little burst here and there. Not much to go on."

Harry leans forward on his elbows, wordlessly urging me to keep going.

"I mean, I remember, er, what happened to Wormtail," I say. Harry shudders, as do I. "And I remember the two of us climbing the stairs and waiting for our moment to attack," Harry nods. "I remember that bitch LeStrange offering Hermione to ... to Greyback," I say, feeling suddenly queasy at the memory. "And I remember running into the drawing room and dueling with those sick fucks. The last thing I remember is Malfoy, the slimy little ferret—" Harry interrupts me with a disgusted grunt of agreement — "I remember him picking my wand up off the floor, and I remember cursing myself for allowing us to be disarmed, and then seeing LeStrange press that fucking knife to Hermione's throat," I continue. "I was furious — and so fucking angry at myself for letting Hermione get hurt like that, and I felt this rage building inside me, Harry. After that, it's like a dark red curtain dropped before my eyes and everything just sort of disappeared on me."

Harry shakes his head. "Well, you may not remember, but I promise you, what happened next is something I will never forget for as long as I live."

I sit up a little straighter. "What the hell happened then?" I whisper, a little more loudly than I meant to. We both shoot a look across the hall at Hermione, but she hasn't moved a muscle.

"You really have no idea?"

"For fuck's sake, Harry," I whisper harshly. "How many times do I have to say it? No, I have no effing idea. The next thing I remember, I'm waking up on the floor in Shell Cottage and I'm weak as a baby bowtruckle. Fat lot of good I can do for Hermione in this condition. I'm useless as a pile of gnome shit, as always, and just when she needs me, I go—"

"Don't say that, Ron," he says, cutting me off.

"Well it's the truth. I can't even make it to the damned loo by myself right now."

"OK, I'll fill you in. I've already told Bill and Fleur most of the details, and—"

"Harry!" I bark. "How much did you tell? Didn't Dumbledore warn us—"
He raises his hands in surrender. "Don't worry! I didn't tell them about the—" He stops and lowers his voice. "About the horcruxes. But I think it's all right to tell them where we were and who we were dealing with. And besides, they had to know what happened in order to heal Hermione and you."

I sigh and flop back into the chair. "Fair enough. Sorry — guess I'm still a little jumpy."

"No worries, mate."

Just then, Fleur returns with a platter of crusty buttered bread, a glass of milk and an apple tart. "You must eat, but it must be bland food for the next little while," she says, placing the platter on the table next to me and handing me a napkin and a fork. She sits on the edge of the bed and is soon joined by Bill, who looks about as done in as I've ever seen him.

"I'm sorry, everybody," I say, tucking into a slice of bread and taking a big gulp of milk. "I'll eat quick and we can all get back to sleep, yeah?"

"No, take your time, Ronald. Do not rush," Fleur says, settling back to make herself more comfortable atop the bed.

Harry clears his throat. "I was just about to tell Ron what happened at Malfoy Manor," he says.

Bill and Fleur both sit up.

"You think that is a good idea to discuss right now?" Fleur asks, sounding a mite frightened.

"No time like the present," says Bill, wrapping an arm around Fleur's shoulder. "He needs to know sometime and, hell, if it were me, I'd want to know right now."

Fleur pauses to consider, her forehead furrowed, then nods reluctantly. I look at Harry. He looks like he's bursting to tell me. So, I shrug and say, "All right, get on with it."

Harry leans forward and places his elbows on his knees. He runs his hands through his hair.

"OK … um … sorry, but you're going to have to bear with me," he says, "because what happened tonight is pretty damned hard to describe. And let me just say right now that if you ever want to hear me tell it again, you go ahead and ask anytime." He shakes his head and laughs. "It's such a crime you can't remember it, because it's the kind of thing you'd want to tell your grandkids about someday."

Now I'm starting to get a little irritated. I rub the back of my neck and try to control my temper. Everybody keeps going on and on about something I did tonight, but nobody seems prepared to tell me what the buggering fuck it was.

Harry must sense my exasperation, because he sits up, straightens his glasses and clears his throat.

"You conjured Raw Magic tonight, mate."

I blink a few times, rapidly. I shake my head. Did I hear that right?

What the actual hell. Raw Magic? Without a wand? I haven't produced Raw Magic since I was a kid. And even then, the most I ever managed was setting George's pants on fire by accident. Well, it was more like they got singed a little bit. He deserved it, but that's beside the point.

"Hell's bells, Harry, that can't be right. I mean, Raw Magic is something kids release when they
don't know how to control themselves. Adult wizards … they don't use Raw Magic."

Fleur clears her throat and shakes her head. "It is indeed a rareté for a fully grown wizard to channel Raw Magic without benefit of a wand, that is true. Quite rare. But unprecedented? Non. I am sure Hermione herself could tell you of several recorded cases. It can happen when the situation calls for it, Ronald, in times of … le cataclysme … how you say … agitation? Adversity? A crisis, no?"

Blimey.

"But it is very dangerous magic … unstable … volatile," she adds. "A wizard must be powerful to summon it, but he pays a toll." She shoots a worried look at Bill, who squeezes her shoulder.

"That's why Fleur's after you to eat, rest, drink water and take those blood and marrow-replenishing potions," Bill explains. "Tapping into Raw Magic isn't really harmful to children because they can't sustain it long enough for it to do them physical harm, but channeling Raw Magic can seriously deplete an adult's strength and energy. Makes you incredibly weak, Ron — that's why you showed up here so dehydrated and anemic. And, obviously, it can make you lose consciousness. So you're going to have to take it easy for a while, little bro."

Crikey. "Uh, OK." I still can't quite believe what they're telling me.

Bill chuckles. "Still, Merlin's beard, Ronnie — you used Raw Magic," he laughs. "Raw Effing Wandless Magic! Do you know how rare that is?"

I shake my head. Good Godric. I turn to Harry. "So, when did this happen exactly? I remember LeStrange pressing that knife to Hermione's neck," I say, pausing when Fleur gasps at the description. I nod at her and give her a little half-smile. "Hermione's better now, thanks to you," I tell Fleur, and she smiles back and wipes her eyes. "But, anyway, Harry, it pretty much stops there for me."

Harry looks at the ceiling like he's trying to piece it all together in his head.

"It was crazy," he says. "Let me be sure I've got this all in the right order. OK, so … Bellatrix forced us to drop our wands and Draco picked them up. You remember that part?"

"Uh huh — sort of."

"Mate, you turned to look at Bellatrix and you saw her push that knife harder against Hermione's neck, just as clearly as I did, and at that moment—" Harry gulps before continuing, "blood started to trickle from beneath the blade, and I could tell that something … I dunno … something snapped in your head," Harry continues, his face a blend of amusement, wonder and maybe even a dash of fear. "I was standing three or maybe four feet from you, but I could feel it. It started out kind of gradual, but it built very quickly, kind of like a wave of, I dunno, heat or electricity or energy or something."

He squints and shakes his head. "This part was just mental," he says. "It was like all the energy in the room was flowing into you, Ron. I could feel it moving toward you, like a current. I kept looking at your face to try to figure out what was going on, but you were totally focused on Bellatrix — I could see your jaw flexing, and you were staring daggers right into her eyes. Meanwhile, this current kept flowing into you, slowly at first, like I said, and then in sort of a rush."

Harry turns to Bill and Fleur. "I'm describing it like this all happened in slow motion, because that's
"Go on," Bill says in a low whisper, like Harry's telling a story he's never heard from Beedle and the Bard.

Harry turns back to me. "None of this is coming back to you, Ron?"

I grimace, trying to force myself to remember. Damn. "Nope."

"Anyway, you had been clenching your fists open and closed at your sides, but then — sweet Merlin, this was amazing, you really don't remember it? — you opened your fists and flexed your fingers, and I could feel it, plain as day — the current suddenly reversed. It started sort of, I dunno, flowing out of you in waves. Hermione would probably know the word for it. I'm not doing a very good job of describing it, but … blimey, I'd never felt anything like it before. I broke out in a cold sweat from it though as it rushed over me — it was sort of hot and cold at the same time, and it was so strong I could almost hear it. I know that doesn't make any sense."

"Mon dieu," Fleur murmurs, sitting up a little straighter, placing a hand at the base of her throat.

Harry shakes his head with a grim chuckle before continuing. "So, everybody in the whole room turned to look at you, and you were still staring straight at Bellatrix — it was the scariest expression, mate, I swear, like totally calm and totally angry at the same time — and you said, very firmly, not shouting, just loud and sort of menacing: "Take. Your. Bloody. Hands. Off. MY. WIFE!"

Bill laughs and claps his hands together. "That's my little brother!" he says, jumping up and slapping me on the back before sitting on the floor cross-legged next to Harry's chair.

I, however, am completely and utterly gobsmacked by what I'm hearing. Speechless.

Harry flops back into the chair and plants both his hands on his forehead. "It was effing wild, Bill, I'm telling you. The Malfoys, Bellatrix, Greyback, they'd all been feeling this wave come off of you, Ron, and nobody knew what it was, and they had been just sort of staring at you, wondering what the hell you were going to do next … it was so quiet in there you could her a flobberworm fart … sorry, Fleur … and then you tell Bellatrix to let go of Hermione, and then Bellatrix makes the mistake of laughing."

I lean my forearms on my knees. "Shit, that can't be everything that happened. Sweet Merlin's bunions, Harry — Bellatrix wouldn't have let Hermione go just because I got a little testy with her."

"No, there's way more to it than that," Harry continues. "So, Bellatrix laughed and then, well, you just sort of … exploded."

"Exploded?"

Harry laughs and nods. "Yeah. Something flowed from your chest, down your arms and out of the palms of your hands, Ron, and when it got to the palms of your hands, there was a loud explosion — boom! — and what came out of your palms looked like fire. Or, at least it was shaped like fire, like flames. But actually, it was a bright, white light. Yeah, that's probably the best way to describe it — a beam of incredibly bright, white light."

He shakes his head in amazement. "Anyway, so, this beam, it — bloody hell — it shot out of your hands in Bellatrix's direction, but then it, then it ricocheted all around the room, and it literally blew all of them — the Malfoys, Greyback and Bellatrix — it sent them flying off of their feet and threw them all backwards, Ron. It was … gods, it was so incredible. At the same time, every piece
of glass in the room — mirrors, windows, chandeliers, goblets, everything — it all just shattered, so there were shards of glass flying everywhere. Bellatrix dropped Hermione and slammed into the wall like a rag doll, Greyback flew over a sofa, Old Man Malfoy wound up in the hearth. And they just laid there, like you'd Stupefied them. It was madness."

Bill lets out a low whistle. "Bloody hell, Harry. Then what happened?"

"Well, before I had time to think, Ron staggered over to Hermione and knelt next to her there on the floor, in the midst of all that broken glass."

Harry turns to me. "You were totally dazed, but you pulled her into your arms. I knew we had to Disapparate out of there and fast. I also knew you were in no shape to do it yourself. So I shouted to Dobby to Disapparate with the two of you, I picked up a handful of wands from the floor and scooped up Griphook, and the next thing I knew, we were all on the beach outside Shell Cottage."

Some of the little fragments of memories that I recalled earlier tonight are starting to fit into place now. I'm vaguely remembering the surge of energy that Harry described — a feeling that was hot and cold at the same time. But most of the details are still a blank.

"That's not all," Harry says, pulling me from my thoughts. "When we landed here, you were pretty out of it, almost like you were in a trance. You looked like you'd fall over at any moment, but you stood up and carried Hermione to the house. I tried to get you to hand her to me, because you looked like a puff of wind could blow you over at that point, but it was like you couldn't even hear me. You just kept trudging forward."

"Oh yeah," Bill chimes in. "I opened the door and you didn't even acknowledge my presence, Ronnie. You marched through the dining room, up the stairs and into the bedroom. You laid Hermione on the bed, and then you collapsed on the floor. You were out for almost half an hour before we were able to bring you 'round."

I sink to the back of my chair. "Merlin bless me," I sigh. I can't say more than that. I mean, what the hell ... this is just too much to make sense of right now. I think about the conversation Hermione and I had back at Grimmauld Place — the one about magic and where it comes from, where it resides in the body — and I so wish she were awake right now so I could ask her about it, compare notes, share theories. She would be fascinated by this entire conversation. Merlin, I pray she wakes up soon.

"That is enough talk for now, I believe," Fleur says with a note of disapproval in her voice, rising from the bed and approaching me with a worried brow. "Let's allow Ronald to rest."

Harry and Bill look chastened. Fleur doesn't seem to share their enthusiasm for the story but, then again, she's a Healer at heart, and her main concern seems to be getting me better. The telling and retelling of adventure stories isn't a priority for her.

Bill grabs me by the armpits and pulls me up rather unceremoniously, and he and Harry step to either side of me to walk me across the hall and deposit me into bed next to Hermione. Fleur feels Hermione's forehead one more time before turning out the lantern on the nightstand with her wand. "Sleep now, Ronald," she says, "and sweet dreams."

Bill accompanies her out the door, followed by Harry.

"Harry?" I whisper as Harry has nearly shut the door.

He leans through the opening. "Hmm?"
"Thanks, mate — for everything."

Harry smiles. "I think I'm the one who should be thanking you, Ron. For a minute there, I thought we were goners."

"Heh," I chuckle as I curl myself next to Hermione and wrap an arm around her shoulders. "Anytime, Harry. Anytime."

He laughs and closes the door, leaving me and Hermione alone in the darkness, with only a shaft of moonlight illuminating her face.

I wonder if she knows what happened. When that LeStrange bitch was holding her up and pressing that fricking knife to her throat, Hermione didn't really seem fully conscious. Merlin, I almost hope she's as clueless about what happened as I am — I wouldn't want her to have to relive the feeling of having a blade held to her neck. It's bad enough she'll have to remember those fucking Snatchers leering at her, feeling her up, and Greyback drooling over her. They're lucky they got out of the room before I blew my stack, those bastards. If I ever see that Scabior again, he's a dead man.

My eyelids feel terribly, terribly heavy. Next thing I know, I'm adrift, with Hermione in my arms, and I'm sinking into a warm, dark and comfortable place … she's safe, for now, and I can let my guard down enough to rest along with her.

She turns to me in our sleep. I know I'm dreaming — and, who knows, maybe she is having the same dream. I decide to roll with it. "Sleep well, my gallant knight," she whispers in my ear with a little smile, almost as if she knows how ridiculous that nickname sounds.

I kiss her head. "Sleep well, Little Dove. I'll see you on the morrow."
Chapter 10: The Most Powerful Magic There Is

"It seems I'm forever putting jumpers on you," I say, trying to sound severe but knowing I'm only amusing her. Hermione is sitting on a weather-beaten wooden bench by the cliff that overlooks the beach beneath Shell Cottage. Though the temperature is surprisingly mild this evening, there's a fierce wind blowing and, of course, Hermione is shivering.

She smiles. "Oh, thank you so much," she says, and I can't help but notice her voice still sounds a little hoarse, even after a few days' rest and Fleur's loving care. I offer her that old Weasley jumper that she loves so much and she pulls it over herself, pausing to run her hands up and down her arms before budging over on the bench and patting the space next to her. I sit and wrap an arm around her shoulder, leaning against the back of the bench and resting one ankle on my knee. She cuddles up against me and we both turn our attention to the open sea and the sunset beyond it. It's nightfall, and the clouds on the horizon signal a storm is coming.

We sit in comfortable silence, each content to explore our own thoughts as the sky and sea turn pink and purple in the light of the setting sun. I study Hermione's profile out the corner of my eye — a trick I perfected at Hogwarts, when I couldn't risk being caught admiring her. Fleur's care is evident in Hermione's face: Her cheeks have pinked up, and the dark circles under her eyes have all but disappeared. Her neck is no longer bandaged since the knife wound has closed up, and the bruises on her face and arms have shrunk and faded. Her back and chest are another story, somewhat black-and-blue even after several poultices of elderweed and thornroot. Fleur says Crucio marks can be stubborn. Hermione is still weak as a kitten, but all in all, she's on the mend, and I find myself thanking Merlin, the universe, the heavens above — hell, anyone out there who's listening — several times a day for our good fortune.

Hermione is of course thankful as well, mainly for Fleur and Bill, who have taken such tender care of her. She keeps including me on her list of saviors, so to speak, but I honestly don't think I did anything that I should be terribly cocky about. The fact that she was in that kind of danger to begin with still kills me — I should have found a way to get the Snatchers away from her, should have done something sooner to disarm Bellatrix. I didn't keep that bitch from torturing her. And yeah, at a certain point, I was able to summon … something, I don't really know what … but that goes down in my book as an accident, basically. There was no strategy involved. It was a fluke. Blind luck. Hard to take credit for that, no matter what everyone else says.

In fact, I know I'm bloody lucky that Hermione is alive and her mind seems sharp — though she does tire easily now, truth be told. I bounced back quicker than she did — the next day, really — but then, I wasn't tortured to within an inch of my life. She could easily have come out of the Malfoys' in similar shape to Neville's parents, but somehow she held on. She's the hero, if you ask me. How she managed to shield her mind from those Crucios, to come up with a plausible story about the sword, and to stick with it despite the pain and fear … it's incredible that she could do it, and her bravery bought me and Harry precious time to act. I told her as much this morning — and
got the usual lecture about how I don't give myself enough credit and blah, blah, blah.

"Ron, are you all right?" she whispers, stilling my knee with her hand — and I realize that it must have been bouncing at 100 miles per hour. Whenever I think of what happened at the Malfoys', I can't seem to sit still.


She gives me a sad little smile. "Me, too." She squeezes my knee then returns her hand to my chest. I wrap both arms around her and hold her tight, resting my chin on the top of her head.

"It was a delicious meal tonight," Hermione says. "Fleur's an excellent cook, isn't she."

"She is. I quite liked those potatoes you made, though."

She chuckles. "It's fairly difficult to ruin a potato."

"Oh, I don't know. I've done it."

She stretches and yawns.

"Sleepy?" I ask.

"Yes, though I shouldn't be. It's only half eight."

"Come on, it's getting chilly out here. Let's go inside and relax for a bit, then we'll get you to bed, yeah?"

She smiles, and I help her into the house. In the lounge, we find a quiet scene. Dean and Bill are just finishing up cleaning the kitchen, talking Quidditch. Fleur has stretched out on a window seat with a book, and Luna is settled in next to her, knitting.

"Care to kick my backside in Wizards Chess, Ron?" Harry calls out from the dining room table.

I look to Hermione. She nods. We shuffle over to the little hearthside seating area where Harry and I play — two overstuffed chairs facing one another over a small table that carries the chess board and, opposite, a small loveseat. Harry settles into one chair and I drop down into the other, fully expecting Hermione to deposit herself on the sofa but, to my surprise, she climbs onto my lap and curls up, tucking her forehead against my neck and her feet on the chair's poufy arm.

Hermione has never been much for public displays of affection, but that's all changed since Malfoy Manor. Whenever she's in a room with me now, we're touching in some way. Harry at first seemed mildly amused by it all, but must have gotten used to it, because he hardly bats an eye as Hermione snuggles in closer to me. I, however, haven't quite gotten over the way my heart skips every time she holds my hand or tucks herself against my chest.

I wrap my arms around Hermione and announce my first move — king's knight to bishop six — and the pieces slide into place at my command. Harry starts fiddling nervously with his pawns, and soon I feel her eyelashes blink closed against my neck, her breathing evens out, and I know she's dozing.

Harry and I get rather wrapped up in the game. Hours go by, and the other occupants of the cottage eventually bid us goodnight one by one, though the three of us remain by the fire.

Later, the distant rumble of thunder followed by a clap of lightning causes Hermione to stir in my
arms. She stretches. "Oh, I didn't realize I'd drifted off," she says through a yawn.

I squeeze her and kiss her head.

"What time is it?" she asks.

"No idea," Harry answers, not looking up from the game. "Not quite midnight, I think."

"Hmm," she says, sitting up to survey the chessboard. "Time to wrap this game up and get a proper night's sleep, don't you think, boys?"

"Don't worry, love, we're just about done here," I say quietly.

"No, we aren't!" Harry says, shaking his head in annoyance. He turns his attention back to the board. "Give us a few more minutes, Hermione — I've got an idea I'm still working out here, just two more moves…"

He points at a pawn with his wand and orders it forward one space, then leans back with a triumphant smile.

I turn to Hermione. "All right, love — time to head upstairs. 'Night, Harry."

I move to lift Hermione from my lap, and Harry cries, "Hey, just a mo’ … where do you think you're going?"

I pause and look back at the board. "Oh, sorry, I forgot," I say, reaching forward and taking Harry's pawn with my bishop while trying to suppress a grin. "Checkmate, mate."


"See you in the morning, Harry," I say, rising from my chair and patting him on the shoulder.

"Rematch tomorrow," he says with an amused smirk.

Hermione kisses him on the forehead. "Better luck next time, Harry."

In the bedroom, Hermione curls up in her usual spot on my left and I tuck the covers tightly around her — a gesture she claims she finds silly, but I know she secretly likes it very much. I fall back against the pillows, wondering why I'm so exhausted — all we really did today was talk about the mission and spend more time interviewing Ollivander. Maybe I'm not quite as recovered as I think I am just yet. I reach for the Deluminator on the bedside table and snuff out the lights. The chess game was a welcome distraction from the dark thoughts that haunted me earlier while Hermione and I sat outside, but I'm finding they're creeping back into my brain.

Hermione sighs and snuggles closer. "It was so lovely to see Professor Lupin — I mean, Remus — last night, wasn't it?"

"Mmm."

"Wonderful news about the baby."

"Yeah," I say, kissing the top of her head.

We lay there in silence for a minute, listening to the rain outside.

"Makes one hopeful," she says, followed by a yawn.
"How do you mean?"

"You know — new life in the midst of war and all that," she says, yawning again. "It's good to be reminded the world keeps on turning, no matter what."

"I guess."

She lifts her head from my shoulder. "Ron, are you quite all right? You seem … you seem far away tonight."

I shrug. "I'm right here. Honestly. I suppose when you brought up Lupin, my mind went somewhere different than yours did. You're right about the baby, of course. Hell yeah, it's great news. But I was thinking about the other stuff Lupin had to say."

She searches my face in the darkness. "You mean about … about Bellatrix and the Malfoys … and … Greyback?"

"Mmm."

Hermione returns her cheek to my chest, and I pull her against me, feeling my throat clench for the hundredth time in the past bloody week, though this time I can't sort out why. I'm not only angry … I'm disappointed … and scared. And maybe even ashamed.

Hermione fingers the collar of my nightshirt and sighs. "They have no idea where we are right now, Ron. We're safe — I'm safe — for the time being. You don't have to worry that—"

"Hermione, they survived, and they could hurt you again."

She pauses to consider. Then she lifts the fingers that had been toying with my collar to my cheek and strokes the beard that I've allowed to grow there these past few days. "There are no guarantees, darling," she says in a tone that's meant to soothe me, but I also hear a note of fear in it, and my throat clenches again.

"You think I'm worried that I won't be able to protect you if we cross their paths again," I say, "and yeah, that's part of it, but … but it's … it's deeper than that, love."

I capture a strand of hair that's escaped from her plait and twist it gently in my fingers, pressing my cheek to the crown of her head.

"I worry this war is changing me, Mione."

She takes the hand that's playing with her hair and pulls it to her lips, kissing the fingertips. "It's a war, Ronald," she murmurs against my hand. "You wouldn't be human if such a thing didn't change you. It's changed me, I know that. But you're still you. You're still Ron Weasley."

I shake my head.

"I don't know," I say, picking up her curl again. "Depends on what's changing, I guess."

We're interrupted by another rumble of thunder outside.

"What do you mean?"

Hell, what do I mean? I stop to try to sort out my feelings. But then, I start speaking before I'm really sure what's in my heart — I'm beginning to figure out that this almost doesn't matter when it comes to Hermione. She helps me find I'm looking for.
"It's just … I reckon … Mione, can I be honest with you?"

She lets out a little laugh. "That would be my preference, yes."

"All right. Here it is." I pause to play with her hair again for a moment.

"When Lupin told us LeStrange and the Malfoys and Greyback are still alive and kicking, I was … I was really, really angry, love. I was fucking disappointed, I won't lie. Then I realized what that meant. It meant that, deep down, I had honestly hoped I had killed them, or at least that I had killed Bellatrix. And then I was horrified, because even though that bitch can go straight to hell as far as I'm concerned, I never really thought of myself … gods …"

I run my free hand through my hair, trying to find the words. She leans up on her elbow to look in my eyes.

"Mione, I never really thought of myself as a killer," I continue. "I mean, if I'd killed someone … even if it was one of them … what would that make me … and what would you think … and then I thought, bloody hell, why shouldn't I have wanted to kill her? She tried to kill you, after all. And then I thought what a useless berk I am that I didn't kill her, and how I really should have. And then —"

"Ronald," Hermione says, "look at me." She takes my cheek in her hand. "Look at me, darling."

We both sit up and she turns my face firmly toward her. I can't quite lift my eyes to meet hers. "Look at me," she repeats, more softly this time — and I do.

Now she has both hands on my cheeks and she's looking me up and down in the moonlight. "Ron," she says, her thumbs brushing my beard. "From the moment the Snatchers caught us to the moment we escaped Malfoy Manor, you did the best you could do — the best anyone could do — in a terrible situation that was not of your own creation."

She sees something in my face she apparently doesn't like, because she looks frustrated now. "No, listen to me! You had to choose from a range of awful alternatives and had no time to consider the consequences of your choices. You acted on instinct, yes, but your instincts, Ronald, are often correct, especially in a battle. I know this from experience."

She pulls herself up so she's facing me, sitting on her knees, still holding my face in her hands. "And here's another thing I know: I wouldn't be here right now if it wasn't for you, Ron. You saved my life. And I won't listen to you diminish that or minimize it ever again. If you had killed that night, it would have been justified. They attacked us, Ron, not the other way 'round. You did what you had to do."

I shake my head slightly, though she's still gripping my face. "Mione, I … I wasn't even conscious of what I was doing when that ruddy explosion happened. I don't think—"

Hermione exhales loudly. "Now you listen to me, Ronald Weasley," she says sternly, her voice sharpening like she's about to lecture me on the importance of prefects rounds or the unfair treatment of house elves. "Yes, you summoned Raw Magic, and I was alert enough to witness some of it, and it was the most extraordinary thing I've ever seen a wizard do — and that's saying something."

She clears her throat and dips her head to catch my gaze, which has slowly slid down to her shoulder in the moonlight. "I know you can't stand to hear a compliment, but it's true, Ron. Just accept it. You did something extraordinary, all right? Would it kill you to admit it?"
I shrug. She chuckles.

"Besides, as extraordinary as the wandless magic was, Ron," she continues, with a softer tone now, "that's not the whole story of how you saved my life."

Stunned, I look up to meet her gaze, and she loosens her grip on my cheeks so she's simply caressing my face.

"Sorry, but what are you on about?" I say. "You've lost me."

She smiles. She runs her eyes up and down my face again slowly, taking me in. "Oh, Ronald Bilius Weasley." She shakes her head and bites her lip. "Don't you know? I could never have survived the Crucio if it wasn't for you."

Huh? She knows what I'm thinking, because she continues before I have a chance to argue.

"Ron, when you and Harry were forced downstairs … and I stayed behind … with Bellatrix … you could hear it … you could hear me, couldn't you?"

I close my eyes for a moment, chasing away the memory of her screams. I open my eyes and nod.

"I could hear you too," she whispers, tears forming in her eyes. With a strangled sob, she adds, "I heard you calling my name, and …"

She leans forward and props her head on my shoulder, sobbing, and I ease us back down to the pillows, lying side-by-side. I feel her tears moistening my collar. "It's all right now," I whisper into her hair as I pull her close. "You're here now. I love you. It's all right."

She settles down after a few minutes and pulls her head back to look at me across the pillows. "Yes, it's all right because you didn't give up," she says, pausing to shake her head before continuing. "You couldn't be in the same room with me so you did the next best thing — you let me know you were there, so I wouldn't feel alone."

I shrug. "I think Harry, Luna and Dean might beg to differ. They thought I was deranged."

"Nevermind that," she says with a shake of her head. "Ron, I don't mean to scare you, but there were times, after the fourth or fifth Crucio, when I really started to think I couldn't hold on. And after eight or so, the idea of … I don't know … letting go … honestly, it had a certain appeal."

Sweet Merlin. I lift my hand to her face and sink my fingers into her hair. "Don't say that," I croak. "It's true," she says. "The pain … it was like nothing I've ever felt before. And all I wanted to do was escape it. And when she wasn't cursing me, there was the fear — of her kicks and punches, of her knife, of Greyback worst of all. I can't say what was worse."

I feel a shudder shake me hard — so hard that she notices it. "It's all right now," she reminds me gently, and I will myself to settle down so I can really listen to her. I know she has more to say.

"When we were sitting outside earlier this evening, darling, I could tell you were lost in your own thoughts, and I certainly was lost in mine. And sitting there, I pieced some things together, some things that have been at the back of my mind ever since I woke up from the Dreamless Sleep."

I nod and she pauses, looking over toward the window, which is being pelted with rain. Her eyes settle there as she continues, like she's picturing something she was told as a tiny child and had almost forgotten. "Tonight I remembered what came to me as you called out my name during the
torture," she says, still looking toward the window. "I was so frightened as Bellatrix cursed me, but every time I thought about giving in, letting go … dying … I would hear you call me, and it would remind me that there's something **beyond** the present, if that makes any sense. The sound of your voice reminded me there's a future, Ron, something worth staying alive for, and I needed to be strong so we could have it," she says, drawing her eyes back to my face, "so we could have it together."

I know she's got more to tell me, but I can't stop myself — I reach out and pull her to me, clutching her tightly to my chest. "You're trembling," she whispers, wrapping one hand around my shoulder and stroking my chest with the other. "Shh, don't worry, I'm here now. We're here now. It's over."

I can't speak. All I can do is squeeze her tighter and hope she knows I'm listening.

"I remembered some things tonight — my memory of the torture has been a little patchy, but tonight some things came through to me," she continues, remarkably clearly. "And I realized that this future that came to mind while Bellatrix was cursing me, it wasn't just an abstract thing. I think, in some way that I don't quite understand, I went somewhere else to escape the pain … somewhere you led me to with your voice. The pictures that came into my head there … well, they were beautiful, and they seemed almost real to me. And the things I pictured … it wasn't me being named Head Girl, or breaking the Hogwarts record for the highest NEWT scores, or getting a big, important job at the Ministry. Accomplishments and accolades weren't enough to shield me from the pain that witch was inflicting on me."

She pulls back so she can look into my face again through the darkness. Her face is sparkling with tears. "Maybe it was Remus's news that brought the specifics back to me … but what I pictured as Bellatrix was hurting me, when the Crucios went on and on and on like they would never stop … was you and me, Ron. All the things we talked about back at Grimmauld Place, all the plans we made. I'd hear you crying out my name from down below and, somehow, my mind followed you … and I visualized that little cottage in the countryside that we talked about, surrounded by a garden and a makeshift Quidditch pitch out back." She smiles. "I pictured you putting around there in the garden, degnoming without complaint — because it was *your* garden now, not your Mum's. I pictured us painting and wallpapering … you putting up shelves for me to store my books … I saw us making love in our own bed at night … cooking together in our kitchen … I saw myself one sunny day, waiting for you to come home so I could give you the news …" She sniffs and smiles, choking back a sob. "To give you the news … that we would have a baby …"

As she's been speaking, I've felt my heart begin to pound like it's going to bust out of my chest, I love her so much. And just now, at these last words, I can't hold back anymore. I lay her down on the pillows and crush my lips to hers. I've been so careful with her as she's recovered, trying not to be a randy git, and I don't want to hurt her, but I … well, I just can't resist at least kissing her, even if that's all she can manage, because I've just got to feel her, to remind myself that she's alive and she wants me and she's mine.

She wraps her arms around my shoulders tighter than I thought she'd be able, and that's all the encouragement I need. Still careful not to put any weight on her, I delve my tongue into her mouth and she moans in response, sucking it in deeper and wrapping one leg around mine.

I can taste our tears on my lips, but something about it — that we're both crying and snogging at the same time — well, it's strangely wonderful, especially because I'm not sure if the tears are of sadness over her suffering or joy over her survival, or maybe both. All I know right now is, the tears are proof that we've both managed to stay alive thus far, and we're together, and the thought of it makes me want her like I didn't know was possible before.
Still, I'm holding back. She may not be ready. Perhaps she's too frail yet. Maybe I shouldn't.

And then, to my surprise, she takes my hand — never breaking our kiss — and guides it to her breast, moaning into my mouth as I run my fingers gently over her pyjama-covered softness.

I moan, too — I've missed her so much — and, still kissing me, she reaches to unbutton her top button, then the next. Then I realize what she's doing and reach down to help her out. Within seconds, she's shimmied out of her pyjamas and we're both working on mine, and soon we're lying side-by-side in one another's arms enjoying the skin-to-skin contact I've literally craved for days, and I'm nibbling on her ear as she plants kisses on my shoulder, neck and arms.

"Tell me more, Mione," I murmur against her skin, my cock drumming against her belly. "I want to hear all of it … all of it …"

"Mmm," she hums next to my ear, "you were so surprised by my news, darling, and so happy."

"I will be. You know I'll be over the moon."

She lets out a little laugh. "What did I write about you in my journal … the ultimate family man, remember?"

I return my lips to her mouth. For a minute, I'm caught up in a wave of passion for her, then I remember her injuries and pull back. In that moment, she reaches over my head for the wand sitting on the nightstand next to the Deluminator — and she waves it over my middle, saying the incantation, and shoots a Silencing charm at the door. I clear my throat. "Are you sure?"

She slips the wand beneath her pillow and nods.

"No, really … I don't want to hurt you, Little Dove. I can wait."

She wraps her arms around my neck. "I can't wait, Ron. Please."

I return my lips to her mouth. For a minute, I'm caught up in a wave of passion for her, then I remember her injuries and pull back. In that moment, she reaches over my head for the wand sitting on the nightstand next to the Deluminator — and she waves it over my middle, saying the incantation, and shoots a Silencing charm at the door. I clear my throat. "Are you sure?"

She slips the wand beneath her pillow and nods.

"No, really … I don't want to hurt you, Little Dove. I can wait."

She wraps her arms around my neck. "I can't wait, Ron. Please."

I kiss her again. Then I prop myself up on one elbow next to her and look her in the eyes while stroking her breasts, then her belly, and then the warmth and wetness between her legs. She's bruised, but her bruises only make me feel more tender toward her — she's so sweet, so strong. As I begin to massage her, she moans appreciatively and squirms in the way that has always driven me mental. I lay down on my side so I can whisper in her ear. "You're so beautiful, Little Dove, still so beautiful and so, so sweet … I've missed this so much."

She inhales sharply and her legs tighten. "I've missed this, too," she answers. "Oh, Ron … please don't stop."

"Let me love you, my brave girl," I whisper. "Let me make you feel good … come, Little Dove … come for me."

Within minutes, she does, her cheek tucked beneath mine as she breathes in sharply against my neck, then lets out a long, low moan and sinks down into the pillows. I lay back and she nestles herself against me. We listen to the rain splashing against the window for a minute. Then she kisses my neck and lowers her hand to my cock, which is hard as granite.

I pull her hand away and plant it on my chest, holding it there with my palm. "No, love," I say rather abruptly, then realize I may have hurt her feelings. "It's not that I don't want you — Merlin knows I do. It's just that …"

"You won't hurt me, Ron," she whispers, wiggling her hand out from beneath mine and returning it
to my cock, which she begins to massage gently, and I'm suddenly on fire.

"Are you sure, Mione?" I ask as I raise myself up on one elbow. "I'd kick myself into next week if I hurt you."

"I'm positive," she says, still stroking me. "Please."

I want her so badly — and gods, she wants me, too. I can't resist her. But I decide to prop myself up on my elbows so I won't crush her — at least not too much. I hope.

I climb above her carefully and position myself, pausing there to look in her eyes. "I love you so much, Mione. I just can't say it enough."

"I love you too, Ron."

"I want everything with you. Everything."

She smiles and drapes her arms loosely around my neck. "Then take it, Ron. Take it."

I slide into her and, though we've done this so many times before, this time feels different. The things that are so easy to take for granted — her warmth, her pulse, her breath, the sounds she makes, the feel of her skin against mine — well, I'm overwhelmed with a feeling of gratitude for all these things, which could so easily have been taken away from me, from us. I know she and Harry and I are still in deep shit, but right now, I feel like the luckiest man in the world.

She opens herself up to me with such trust and, moving slowly and carefully, I savor every inch of her. I kiss her scars and bruises. Angling my nose against hers, I pepper her lips with gentle kisses. She's such an incredible blend of softness and strength, this girl. I could love her like this all night — I expected my arms to be tired by now, but I decide I could hold myself up like this forever if she needed me to.

We're thrusting against one another in a slower and gentler way than I'm used to, and eventually I feel a slow wave of pleasure building that washes over me, deep and long — like nothing I've ever felt before. And not long after that, I'm spent, rolling over on my back and pulling her with me. I cradle her in my arms and cover us both in the bedclothes, tucking her in again like I did earlier, which draws a little chuckle from her.

She sighs. "It's still raining outside."

"Mmm."

"I love sleeping to the sound of the rain."

"Me, too."

She rubs my chest, kissing my neck. "While we're still awake … there's one thing I didn't get to tell you earlier. About, you know, that future I was talking about."

I give her a squeeze to indicate I'm listening.

"I pictured one more scenario before the whole … thing … with Bellatrix was over," she breathes, then returns her lips to my neck.

I kiss the top of her head. "Tell me."

I lean back to look into her eyes and give her a smile in the darkness. She smiles back, her cheek
propped on my shoulder.

"I heard your voice, screaming my name, and then I saw..." she stops and bites her lower lip, searching my face one more time before continuing.

"I saw myself handing you a little bundle for the first time — our baby," she says with a little half-laugh, half-sob. "And the look on your face, Ron, as you held that child in your arms ... I'm sorry, I don't have the words to describe it. But the happiness I felt seeing you, it was like a Patronus. It shielded me from her. I think it was Love — the kind Dumbledore always taught us about — and it gave me the power I needed to get through that night, Ron. I don't know how, it just did. And you wielded that power in that moment just as surely as you wielded Raw Magic. Your love saved my life in more ways than one," she says as she touches my cheek. "Please, never forget that."

"You're amazing, you are," I answer. Tilting my forehead against hers, I gather my thoughts and count my blessings. I'm crying like a ponce, but I don't care. She's alive. She loves me and she's alive. "I'll never, ever forget anything you've said tonight for as long as I live," I whisper against her lips, my voice cracking. "I love you, Little Dove, more than anything. And we'll get there. We will."
Lost and Found

Chapter Summary

After the final battle, a reckoning.

Chapter 11: Lost and Found

I think it over and over, playing out different scenarios, possibilities, permutations and moves in my head. If I'd turned to face him just a second sooner … if I'd seen that curse flying his way … or maybe if he hadn't been laughing at a joke … distracted …

I know there's no way around it. Life isn't an effing chess game. If there's anything this war has taught me, it's that there are no do-overs. Unless you have a Time-Turner — but as tempting as it is, even I know that this way lies madness. I have to accept. I have to.

And yet, my damned brain won't stop churning, trying to come up with a way out, a solution to a problem that has no ruddy solution.

Casting my eyes about the Great Hall, I see we aren't the only ones doing … whatever it is we're doing. It's only been an hour now since the three of us rejoined the family after visiting Dumbledore's office, and what's overpowering me at the moment is the realization that this isn't going to get any easier. The pain I'm feeling, the weight of it, is going to be with me for … how long? How will I find a way to bear it?

That's the moment I search for Hermione, and I see that she's where she's been for the past 15 minutes or so: Holding Ginny in her arms, rocking her back and forth. Ginny's not crying, but she's shaking and clutching Hermione to her like she's never going to let go.

My eyes meet Hermione's and she gives me a sad grin. She'll be all right, she seems to be saying. How are you?

I shrug as if to say, Been better.

She nods. I'll be with you soon.

I sigh and turn my eyes to the marble floor beneath my feet.

Fred is dead.

I can't even begin to know how to get it through my head. I can't fathom it. I'm just … numb.

Mum and Dad have been in McGonagall's office for almost as long as Harry, Hermione and I have been back with the family and, in a way, I'm glad to have this break from their grief. Seeing Mum fall apart was hard enough, but watching Dad try to hold it together for her sake was worse in many ways. He's a hard example to live up to, old Arthur is. It's going to take me a lifetime to get there, I think.

I tear my eyes from the floor and Harry appears — I'm not quite sure where he's been until now. He gives my shoulder a pat as he passes. He looks like he's been crying. Well, why the hell not.
Haven't we all? He cocks his head in the direction of Hermione and Ginny, clearly wondering if it's OK to approach. I nod and silently shoo him along.

He steps toward them. Hermione lifts her eyes to him and smiles sadly. Ginny, her face still tucked against Hermione's shoulder, isn't aware he's there. I watch Harry and Hermione hold a wordless conversation of their own, and soon Harry places his hand on Ginny's head and she turns to face him. He steps back, clearly not sure if she'll welcome comfort from him or if he's overstepping his bounds. He believes things between them are beyond fucked up since he left on the mission — clearly he doesn't know Ginny the way I do. And, sure enough, she rises to her feet, then falls into his arms, and it's good to see him wrap himself around her, holding her up. She's crying now and, in a weird way, it's good to see that, too. Hermione's eyes meet mine again — and I see that she's also tearful now. Harry and Ginny shuffle away toward the front doors, apparently looking to be alone. Hermione comes to sit beside me, and I wrap an arm around her and pull her close.

I kiss the top of her head, and she drapes her arms around my middle. I see Charlie's eyebrows shoot up, and he trades a glance with Percy, who looks amused at the sight of us. I kiss Hermione again just to be sure they know it was no fluke. Charlie chuckles and elbows Percy in the ribs. Hermione tilts her face up to me. "How are you doing, darling?"

I shrug. I don't really have words to describe how I'm doing. I stop trying to find them and settle for simply studying her face instead. It's smudged with grime, cut through here and there with the tracks of tears. There are fresh scrapes on her cheeks and forehead, and ashes scattered throughout her hair. Gods, she's beautiful. I can't help it. Despite everything, I crack into a smile.

"We did it, didn't we?" I whisper.

She nods and her lips curl into a small, tentative smile. "Yes. I do believe we did."

I pull her to me again with both arms and hold her close, tucking her legs over my lap. I never want to let her go.

Those of us who remain — Bill and Charlie, Percy, Fleur with her arm wrapped around George's shoulder — sit quietly, sniffing, hugging, occasionally whispering. Waiting. For what, we don't know. We're just waiting. After some amount of time — no idea how much — Harry and Ginny drift back into the Great Hall holding hands. I am surprised at how relieved I am at the sight. And then we all sit some more, not really speaking much, just thinking and … being.

Mum and Dad return a few minutes after that. Mum's eyes are red and her eyelids are puffy, but otherwise, she seems calmer than I expected. Dad's lips are pulled into a tight line. He's clearly trying to hold it together.

Fleur pulls Mum to her and sets her down on the bench next to George, and George leans into her like he probably hasn't done since he was a kid. Fleur finds Bill and sits on his lap. Dad's still standing and we all turn our attention to him.

Dad presses his fist to his lips, clears his throat, then rubs his hands together. "Well, your mother and I have been consulting with Minerva and Kingsley about, erm … next steps," he says, planting his hands deeply in his pockets. "Minerva says the kitchens here at Hogwarts are functional and the house elves are already busy preparing meals for those who wish to stay."

He looks at his watch. "It's midday now. I reckon all of us should clean ourselves up, eat, then get some rest here and head back to the Burrow tomorrow morning. Minerva says the whole family is welcome to kip in Gryffindor Tower. There should be plenty of room, since most students and their
families have cleared out or are doing so now."

Charlie's hand appears above the crowd.

"You don't have to raise your hand to speak, son," Dad says, smiling.

Charlie looks embarrassed for a moment before lowering his hand. "Sorry — being here at Hogwarts, I guess it's just force of habit."

Dad chuckles sadly.

"Anyway, Dad, I was wondering," Charlie continues. "Why not head back to the Burrow now?"

The idea of seeing the Burrow again, sleeping in my old bed at home, does sound appealing, I have to admit.

"I'd love nothing more than to go home right now, Charlie," Dad replies, "but it's Kingsley's belief that we'd be wise to sweep the Burrow for curses and other dark enchantments before we try to re-enter it. And I'd rather not force your mother to worry about feeding you lot just now. It's best that we stay here, pull ourselves together, and start out fresh in the morning."

"I agree," says George in a creaky voice, and we all turn to look at him, astonished to hear him speak for the first time in hours. "We should all stay here tonight. I'm not ready to … leave him yet."

Mum nods and pulls George close.

"Well, that's settled, then," Dad says, stepping over and wrapping an arm around Mum's shoulder. "What say we head up to the Tower, tidy up, and meet back down here in the Great Hall at 3? Minerva says the house elves should be ready to serve supper by then."

With that, we all make the slow march up to the Tower, winding through the rubble and ashes of the damaged school. Arriving in the Common Room — which is remarkably unscathed — Hermione reaches into her beaded bag and pulls out a fresh change of clothes for me and Harry. She hands them to me, and we linger for a moment. But we decide, without speaking, not to rock the boat for now, and she follows Mum, Ginny and Fleur up the girls' staircase and toward the showers. I join the men on the boys' side.

In the boys' shower, I search my heart, trying to decide when is the right time to inform Mum and Dad that Hermione and I … well, that Hermione is a Weasley now. No time seems right, and yet it must be done. But when? I reckon the time will present itself — and soon.

And then it hits me. Hell's bells … I'm not a kid anymore. I just fought in a bloody war. I'm a husband now. Hermione is my wife. She's my family, as much a Weasley as anyone here in this Tower. I don't have to slink around, ask for permission or apologize. It is what it is. So there.

Of course, this resolution wobbles a bit as I enter the Common Room a few minutes later and see Mum there, looking so pale and small. And yet, I know I'm right — my family deserves to know, and Hermione deserves to have me speak up for her. So … fuck … here goes nothing.

At the moment, the only ones present in the Common Room are me, Mum and Dad — though from the bustling I hear upstairs, I sense that the others will be down soon.

My parents are sitting, tucked into one another's arms, on the big sofa before the hearth, and for a millisecond a memory of that glorious night Hermione and I spent there on that very sofa flashes in
my brain. Bloody hell. Got to chase that thought away quickly.

I clear my throat.

"Mum? Dad?"

They turn their eyes to me and Mum gives me a smile. "Come here, my brave boy," she says, and I sit next to her, allowing her to wrap me in one of her bone-crushing bear hug. It feels good. She's still my Mum, after all. Merlin, I've missed her.

Soon she pulls back, allowing me to breathe again. I straighten up and decide to sit on the ottoman in front of them — the better to look in both their faces and read their reactions. Blimey, this is going to be tricky, but I think of Hermione and my obligation to her — I need to do right by her — so I, well, just jump in and hope for the best.

"I, uh … you see … there's something important that I have to tell you both," I say, too softly for my liking. So I clear my throat and try again, a little louder this time. "It's big. And I'm not sure what you'll think about it, but you deserve to know. I've been hoping to find the right time to tell you this, but, what with … well … everything … I'm just not sure when that's going to be. But I can't put it off. It's too important. And I don't want you to think that I'm ashamed of it or that I have any regrets about it, because I don't. In fact, it's the best thing that's ever happened to me, though I know you might feel differently, and I—"

"Ronnie," Dad says gently, cutting me off and derailing my train of thought. "Whatever you have to say, son, it's all right. Just, please … why don't you just come out and tell us."

Mum squeezes his hand and turns her attention to me.

Shit.

I cough and look at my shoes. "Maybe now is a good time to tell you how terribly, terribly proud we are of you, Ronnie," Mum says with a hitch in her voice. I lift my eyes and look back and forth between them both.

Dad nods. "I'm afraid our … loss … may overshadow the joy we feel that the war is over, but nothing can lessen the pride we feel over what you have done, my boy," he says. "You and Hermione and Harry. We're over the moon, Ron, we truly are."

I prop my elbows on my knees and return my gaze to the floor, waiting for the lump in my throat to settle. Blimey.

After a minute, Dad pipes up again. "What was it you wanted to tell us, son?"

I straighten up and look him in the eye. Somehow I feel the confidence I lacked before, and I'm able to say what I need to say in an even tone — not defiantly, not apologetically, just … I dunno … neutrally. All I can do is hope that they don't freak out.

"Mum, Dad, this past year on the road, the three of us had some pretty rough times. Like the whole family had, I'm sure, in different ways. But I won't lie. There were times when I reckoned … well, I reckoned Harry, Hermione and I would be lucky to see this day, let me put it that way. Like the night before we infiltrated the Ministry and—"

"Hang on — you what?" Mum says, stunned.

Dad pats her hand. "There, there, Molly."
She looks at his hand on hers, then raises her eyes back to me. "You … you entered the Ministry? While you were on the Most Wanted list. Did I hear that right?" She turns to Dad and scowls. "And you knew about this, Arthur?"

Dad nods, looking chastened. "Word spread that there was a break-in, Molly, and several of us in the office were able to piece it together, though the higher ups weren't saying much. But yes, we knew." Before she can yell at him for failing to inform her, he speaks up again. "Kingsley and I decided it was best to keep the information as quiet as possible, love, for the trio's safety and for the safety of the family if ever any of us were … interrogated. I'm very sorry. But I'd do the same again if I had to."

She searches his face and apparently decides that there are better things to row about right now, so she turns to me again.

"Anyway … I started to think about … well … what I was fighting for," I continue. "The future. What I wanted it to look like. And it occurred to me that I … I'm sorry, I shouldn't be saying this in light of what happened today, Mum, but … it occurred to me that I might not live to see it."

Mum gasps, and I place my hand on her knee as Dad tightens his grip on her shoulder.

"It's all right, Mum. I'm here now. I'm fine," I whisper.

She grips my hand and nods. "Of course, dear. I know. It's just … Oh, Ronnie, we were so worried for you. For all of you."

I nod. "And I was worried for you and the whole family too, Mum. I thought I'd go mad from worry sometimes. Honest. Just, please … please try to hear me out, OK?"

She sniffles and wipes her nose with her handkerchief and gives me a little smile, signaling she's going to try her best to listen.

"Preparing for that Ministry mission was … it was the first big, ruddy frightening thing we attempted after the mess at the wedding, and all three of us were nervous about it. Though none of us wanted to show it, for fear of all of us just sort of crumbling."

Mum grips her handkerchief tighter, and Dad gives her shoulders a gentle squeeze.

"I was climbing the walls, thinking how mental this whole plan was. The odds of us getting out of there alive seemed slim any way I sliced it — and getting chucked into Azkaban seemed like a realistic possibility, too. Hermione and I rowed fairly constantly for a week, because I was trying to convince her to stay behind. No surprise, I lost that argument — over and over again."

Dad and Mum exchange a quick glance and smile at each other before returning their gaze to me.

I rub the back of my neck. "So, one night, Hermione and I got to talking, and one thing led to another, and … well … Mum, Dad…" Bloody hell, why am I so nervous? Take a deep breath, you eedjit.

I straighten up, square my shoulders, and lift my chin.

"Hermione and I … we got bonded."

Mum gasps, and then there's a long, looooooooong pause. Mum's blinking rapidly, her mouth slightly agape. Dad's straightened up and, if I didn't know better, I'd say he looks mildly amused.
Mum closes her mouth, shakes her head slightly, then opens and closes her mouth again several more times, seemingly at a loss for words. Dad slowly lifts his hand to his chin, scratches it, and nods a few times, looking down at the floor.

"You … and Hermione … are bonded," he says, as if repeating it slowly will help him make sense of it.

I nod. "Yes. Yes, we are."

Dad scratches his chin again and I'll be damned if he isn't starting to smile just a bit. Definitely not what I expected. Mum's mouth is still opening and closing silently. She looks at Dad, as if seeking an answer to some unknown question, then looks back at me, her face still a blank.

"Son, are you absolutely certain you're bonded — that you performed the magic properly?" Dad asks, now looking me over like he's trying to figure out if I … I dunno … look different now that I'm bonded or something.

"I'm positive, Dad."

He pauses to think. "You … you did the flaming circle … the Nuptiae Inardesco?" he says.

"Mmm hmm."

He scratches his chin again. "And … and the blood ceremony?"

"Yep."

He purses his lips and ponders for another second. "And you got the … the uh …"

"The snowy silvery shimmery tube-type thing? Yeah, yeah we did."

Mum gasps again and she and Dad stare at one another, shaking their heads. Dad's still got a distracted little grin on his face and suddenly, amazingly, Mum does, too. Good Godric.

Dad shrugs at Mum. "Well what do you know about that?" he whispers.

"Do you think?" she replies, raising an eyebrow.

"It couldn't have worked if it wasn't…"

"True," she says, nodding. "But, could it be?"

"Well … I suppose … blimey," he breathes.

"Too young!" she whispers in a harsh tone. "Far too young."

Dad shrugs. "Only about a year younger than we were, love."

"But still," she sputters. "Heavens."

"If it wasn't meant to be, Molly…"

She considers. "The magic wouldn't work otherwise, would it?"

"Mmm," he says.

"Merlin bless me."
I'm beginning to feel like they've forgotten I'm there.

Then Mum presses her hands to her heart and gives me a watery grin. "Oh … oh … my baby … oh, Ronnie."

And before I know it, she's launched herself at me, nearly knocking me off the ottoman.

"Oof! Mum, you're choking me," I mutter into her bosom.

Mum, of course, is ignoring my pleas and sobbing into my hair. She settles down next to me on the ottoman and grips me even tighter. Fortunately, I am now sitting taller than she is and thus am able to breathe. I shoot my father a look, and am amazed that he's beaming.

"This isn't quite the reaction I was expecting," I say over Mum's head.

Dad chuckles. Mum, still crying, leans back and grabs my face in her hands. "Don't get me wrong, my dear boy — I'm furious that you did this without us," she says, squeezing my face — hard — though she's still smiling like she just won the Gringotts National Lottery. "And Hermione's parents will be horrified. And you're both far too young. But … but …" She dissolves into tears again, though she is still — unbelievably and amazingly — smiling like she's taken a bludger to the head.

Just then, Harry, Bill, Charlie, Percy and George stumble down the stairs from the boys' dormitories and spill into the Common Room, and they stop in their tracks at the sight of us. I can only imagine what an odd sight Mum, Dad and I make right now, clustered together, all of us teary but also grinning like idiots.

I look at Bill and he smirks. He knows exactly what's going on. Harry is quietly chuckling. Charlie, Percy and George, however — they're mystified.

Percy clears his throat. "Er, Mum?" he asks tentatively. "Um, are you quite all right?"

Mum stands, pulling me with her and Dad follows.

"Ronnie here has some news. It's, well, it's just … I'm so … oh, Merlin bless me, I can't even believe it," she sputters. The guys all gather 'round.

"Goodness gracious, hasn't there been enough news around here for one day?" Percy asks.

"Not news like this," Harry says, stifling a laugh.

"All right then," says Charlie, clapping his hand to my shoulder and squeezing it hard. "Let's hear it, little bro."

Before I can open my mouth to speak, I hear the door to the girls' dormitory open and down come Ginny and Fleur.

"What's up?" Ginny asks, drifting over to Harry and taking his hand.

"Ron's got news," Harry says with a grin.

"All right," Ginny says, turning to me. "Spill it, Ron."

"Uhhhhhh," I mumble, not sure where to start.

"Where's Hermione?" Mum asks anxiously.
"Right here," Hermione says brightly from the stairs behind the crowd. "Sorry, to be late, my hair takes so long to dry. Are we going down to … wait, what's going on?"

It seems to slowly occur to Hermione that everyone in the room has turned around and is now gaping at her as she stands there on the third stair up from the bottom, and she looks back at us with a quizzical expression, her brow crinkled.

I come to my senses and step toward Hermione. Holding out my hand, I lead her down the rest of the stairs and turn to face the group, placing my arm around her shoulder for good measure.

Bill and Fleur are looking at us with knowing grins. Harry looks like he wants to burst out laughing. Ginny looks completely baffled. And I can tell that if it wasn't for Dad's tight grip on her arm, Mum would have rushed forward to wrap Hermione in a bone-crushing hug by now.

I clear my throat. Hermione looks up at me expectantly. I give her a little hug for courage, and she hugs me back. No time like the present, eh?

"All right, everybody, here's the news. I would like to introduce you to someone you've never met before. Hermione Jean Weasley."

There's a long pause. Ginny turns to look at Harry. He shrugs. Bill chuckles, and Fleur covers her grin with her hand.

"Ron?" George whispers. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

I nod, pull Hermione closer, and stand as tall as I'm able. "Hermione and I are bonded."

Another long pause.

And then there's explosion of shouting, whoops and general mayhem.

"Wait, what?!"

"Bonded?"

"You mean, as in, married bonded?"

"What the bloody hell!"

"When did this happen?"

"Are you effing kidding me?!"

Mum beats everyone to Hermione, swooping down on her and crushing her in a tight hug that nearly lifts Hermione off the floor. Hermione, for her part, hugs back almost as enthusiastically, which is something I've never seen her do to Mum before.

"Oh, my girl, my girl," Mum is sobbing into Hermione's ear. "Oh, I always hoped … not this soon, mind … but I always hoped … oh, welcome to the family, my dear girl …"

Hermione is now sobbing, too — I can hardly believe any of us have any tears left to shed, but we do, and there are plenty all around.

My brothers, meanwhile, are already giving me the business. I'm being hugged, punched in the shoulder, slapped on the back, squeezed, shoved and generally manhandled.
"Merlin Bloody Churchill, Ron, did you forget you're the youngest?" Charlie shouts over the din. "You're not supposed to get bonded before I do."

"If I waited for you, mate, I'd be old and gray."

"Damn straight. I'm never getting bonded."

"Never say never."

"Ah yes, that's what always happens when a man gets married," George says as he claps me on the back. I turn to look at him, and though he looks dreadfully pale and drawn, it's clear that even in the depths of grief, he can't resist the opportunity to take the mickey out of me. "You old married codgers. You're always going on and on about the wonders of marital bliss. Always recommending it to everyone else."

"I don't recommend marriage in general," I reply with a smile. "I just recommend being married to Hermione. And sorry, boys, she's taken."

"Oh Ron, their ignorance is sort of sad, isn't it? There's much to be said for the bonded state," says Bill, casting a look across the room at Fleur, who is now wrapped around Hermione and trading sobs with her, with Dad and Mum hugging and wiping away tears in the background. "But then, none of them would understand, would they?"

I shake my head with a chuckle.

"Still enjoying married life then, eh?" he says, elbowing me hard in the ribs.

I wince and cough. Bloody hell, Bill's strong. "Well, uh, let me put it this way — I'm looking forward to living the married life without being on the run from bloody Death Eaters."

"Hear, hear," says Charlie.

"Harry Potter, how long have you known about this?" Ginny shouts in mock irritation, hands on her hips.

Harry raises his hands in surrender and casts a "help me" look my way. "Uh, pretty much since Day One."

"Day One? And how come you didn't say anything? You should have told us all straight away, as in the second you landed in the Room of Requirement!"

"Uh, Ginny," I cut in. "You do realize that we were a little busy at that moment."

"Still," she says. "After a lifetime of having a houseful of brothers, a girl can use all the sisters she can get. And the next time—" she points a finger at the others with an amused glare "—the next time any one of you lot gets bonded, you'd better not keep my new sister a secret from me. Understand?"

"Understood," says George, stepping forward and wrapping Ginny in a hug.

Mum and Fleur pull Hermione into the middle of the crowd, Dad following them with a silly grin on his face. It feels good to see him smiling, especially on this day of all days.

I can't get within three feet of Hermione — she's swarmed by my brothers, including Harry.

After a few minutes of this carrying on, I clear my throat melodramatically. "Uh, excuse me,
everyone, but if you could tear yourselves away from my wife for a moment…"

Charlie takes this as his cue to grab Hermione, twirl her around and dip her to the floor like a bloody ballroom dancer. "All right, all right," I mutter. "Could you waltz her down to the Great Hall, then, because I'm so hungry I could eat a Hippogriff. And after that, since Harry, Hermione and I have been awake for going on 24 hours, I'd like to get some sleep."

George elbows Percy. "Sleep — is that what they're calling it nowadays, Ronniekins?"

"Shut it, you," I say, throwing an arm around George's shoulder. Fleur, Ginny and Mum surround Hermione — who is now blushing profusely — and we all head toward the portrait hole.

The smattering of families, Order members and teachers gathered in the Great Hall seem surprised to see the Weasleys barreling boisterously into the room, looking not nearly as downcast as we were when we left. Professor McGonagall approaches us with a look on her face that clearly suggests she thinks we've all flipped our collective wigs.

"Erm, is everything all right, Arthur?" McGonagall asks with a worried expression.

"Well, Minerva," Dad says to her and then turns his attention to the rest of the crowd — and it seems that every set of eyes in that giant room has somehow focused on him at that very moment — "everything is not all right, truth be told. Not by a long shot. Not today." He stops to clear his throat and takes in the room. "We have suffered a terrible blow today — all of us have," he says, nodding to the crowd and speaking louder, the better to be heard. "It will take days, weeks, months … and in some ways, even years … to recover from what we have experienced today."

Blimey, Dad's giving a speech. I look around the room and, well, I'll be damned if he doesn't have the whole place bloody mesmerized.

"Actually, 'recover' may be too strong a word for what lies before us," he continues. "I'm not sure it's possible to fully recover from the loss of a child, a sibling or a spouse. But I do know it's possible to heal, to cope, and to live in a way that honors a lost loved one's memory."

McGonagall sinks to sit on the bench next to her, and we all follow her cue. Dad remains standing and I realize he's the only one in the room who is. You could hear an owl's feather drop in here right now.

"In my family's case, we have lost someone who brought incredible light and joy to our lives, to the lives of everyone who knew him, and even to people who didn't, through his business in Diagon Alley," Dad says, pausing for a second to regain control of his voice. "Fred Weasley may have lived a short life, but he lived it to the fullest, and he died fighting for a cause he believed in right down to his marrow. We will all miss him terribly. He can never be replaced. And we know his twin brother George will feel the loss more intensely than perhaps even Molly and I will."

Mum, who is sitting next to Hermione, their arms draped around one another, lifts a hand to wipe a tear from her face, and Hermione drops her head to Mum's shoulder. George is sitting on Mum's other side; he leans against Mum slightly, clearly fighting back tears.

"But Minerva, today has also brought us reason to celebrate," Dad says, clearly enjoying this moment. "And if we are to honor my son's memory, then celebrate we must, because that is precisely what he would have wanted us to do. Fred Weasley was not one for tears and sadness. His life was all about optimism and hope. And so, it is important to give this day its due. Today, we have seen the defeat of," he pauses for a moment before apparently deciding to say it, "of Voldemort, and we saw it happen through the incredible bravery and sacrifice of someone I think
of as a son: Harry."

Dad turns to Harry, who is sitting next to me, and holds out his hand. The Hall explodes with applause, and Dad gestures to Harry to rise and acknowledge the crowd. I push Harry forward, and Harry complies, sheepishly. He nods, raises his hand in a half-hearted wave, and sits as quickly as civility will allow.

After a minute or two, the applause dies down, and Dad continues. "And Harry will be the first to tell you — because he's already said as much to me — that he could not have done what he did today without the support of his two best friends, Ron and Hermione."

Hermione and I look to one another from across the table, both stunned by the applause now swirling around us. Dad signals to us to stand, and we do, though I can feel the heat rising to my ears and I'm sure they're flaming red. We both sink back to our seats and exchange a look of relief that the adulation is over.

Dad raises his hands to quiet the crowd. "Life is like that, isn't it, Minerva," he adds. "It breaks our hearts, it challenges us, it brings us joy and even rapture. And sometimes, as it has today, it does all of these things at the same time."

McGonagall nods and smiles, her face streaked with tears.

"Life is full of surprises, that much is certain, Minerva. The minute Voldemort fell, I knew we would have ample reason to celebrate today, despite the pain of our loss," he says, sinking his hands into his pockets. Then he looks up to the magical ceiling and smiles. "And the son Molly and I lost today would not want us to wallow in grief. He'd want us to celebrate this victory for which he made the ultimate sacrifice. In fact, he'd insist on it."

He reaches for Mum's shoulder and gives it a squeeze before continuing. "But Minerva, I had no idea that we would have yet another reason to celebrate today. We just learned about it a few moments ago, and it's the kind of news that reaffirms my faith that life, despite its pains, is well worth living, and the cause that motivated all of us in this war was well worth fighting for. Because the news we received today would never have been possible in a world where Voldemort had his way. You see, Minerva, my son, a so-called 'pureblood,' as Voldemort would put it, has married a muggleborn, and we couldn't be happier to call her a Weasley."

There's a stunned silence. Neville, sitting two tables down with his grandmother, speaks up. "Hang on … Mr. Weasley … um, are you talking about … are you saying …"

I stand and smile. "Yeah, mate, that's what he's saying."

Charlie chuckles. McGonagall clears her throat and stands, her eyes darting between Dad's and mine. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I still don't quite understand."

Neville rises. "I think he's saying, professor…oh, Merlin, that's, that's…” Before he can finish the sentence, Neville is threading his way between the tables toward me, a broad smile on his face. "That's bloody fantastic, Ron," he says when he arrives before me and he gives my hand a hearty shake.

McGonagall straightens up to her full height. "Will someone please tell me what in blazes is going on here?" she says in her most professorial voice.

Hermione stands and clears her throat. "Ron and I are bonded, professor. Married."

Gasps echo throughout the room, and then there's another chorus of shouts, whistles and hoots, and
we're swamped once again by a throng of well-wishers — only this time, a much larger throng. I look across the crowd at Hermione — she's laughing and crying at the same time, hugging Hagrid, then Luna, then Neville, then Kingsley, then Dean, then Seamus. I note that Seamus hugs her a bit too long for my liking, but I'll deal with him later.

Eventually, the pandemonium dies down and we settle down to eat. For the first time since we went upstairs to shower, I'm able to sit next to Hermione, and I'm determined not to let her out of my grip again for the rest of the day.

Eventually, McGonagall joins us and sits next to Hermione, taking her face in her hands. "I confess, child, that I always thought you and Mr. Weasley would … well, in fact, I bet five galleons on it in the faculty pool. I expect to be collecting from Poppy later today. But, I must also say, dear girl, that you … well, I don't need to tell you how high my hopes are for you, do I?"

Hermione shakes her head, apparently too choked up to speak. She grips McGonagall's arms in her hands.

"You're sure then?" McGonagall asks.

Hermione nods.

"I trust your judgment on this. If you're sure, then I'm sure," McGonagall whispers, and kisses Hermione on the forehead. "You know where to find me if ever you need anything, yes? And I do mean anything."

Hermione nods again, and throws her arms around McGonagall. Incredibly — at least to me — McGonagall hugs her back.

Those surprises Dad was talking about just keep on coming today.

"You and Mr. Weasley will want to be staying in private accommodations," McGonagall proclaims quietly. It's not a question. Hermione shrugs briefly and gives a faint nod. "The Head Girl quarters are free and remarkably undamaged," McGonagall continues. "I changed the password just before coming to the Great Hall to dine. It's 'Victory.'"

Hermione finally finds her voice. "Thank you, professor," she rasps. "Thank you so much. For everything."

McGonagall just smiles, nods to me, then rises and walks away.

Blimey.

After the last of the food is served, people start saying their farewells and filing out of the Great Hall and toward their various rooms for the evening.

It becomes fairly clear that the Weasleys are going to take up occupancy of Gryffindor Tower pretty much by themselves. Neville and his grandmother are heading home tonight, as are Seamus and Dean.

Once we reach the Fat Lady's portrait, Hermione tugs Harry's sleeve. He stops. She reaches into her beaded bag and extracts a fresh set of pyjamas for him and a toothbrush, as well as a change of clothes for the morning. "Once we get back to the Burrow," she says, "I'll empty this old thing out and give you everything that belongs to you, Harry."

"That's fine," Harry says. "You know, I don't think Ron and I ever really thanked you properly for
sorting all that stuff out — the clothes and whatnot."

"No, you never did," she says with a wry grin.

"Well, you know … there's a lot to thank you for," he says, "but we'll have to do it privately, just the three of us, yeah?"

Before I know it, Harry and Hermione are hugging. I join them.

The rest of the family starts filing through the portrait hole. Mum, Dad and Ginny hang back to wait for us. Harry turns and joins them. Hermione and I stay rooted where we are.

"You coming, dears?" Mum asks.

I put my arm around Hermione's shoulder. "McGonagall offered us the Head Girl's suite, Mum. We'll meet you here in the Common Room tomorrow."

Mum looks like she wants to object, but then … well … she reconsiders.

"All right then," she says, shooting a look to Dad. "We'll see you in the morning."

With that, she reaches out and encloses Hermione in yet another monster hug. "You get your rest, my dear, and we'll see you soon."

"Yes, of course," Hermione answers. "You need your rest, too, Mrs. Weasley. Please get some."

"It's Molly now, sweet girl," Mum says, clapping her hand on Hermione's cheek.

"Thank you … Molly," Hermione whispers.

Soon, but not soon enough for my exhausted body, Hermione and I find ourselves outside the Head Girl's quarters.

"Victory," Hermione declares, and the large, carved wooden door in front of us swings open. Before Hermione can step forward to enter, I tap her on the shoulder. She stops and I swiftly scoop her up into my arms.

She tosses her head back and laughs. "What are you doing?"

"We just had a wedding reception of sorts, didn't we," I say. "Seems like I ought to be carrying my bride over the threshold, yeah?"

"Ha! Well, go right ahead then, darling," she says, wrapping her arms around my neck and cuddling up to me.

Upon stepping inside, I set her down on the cushy Oriental rug that's spread across the floor and decide immediately that I should have had more ambition to be Head Boy. The Head Girl quarters are downright palatial. There's an en suite bathroom, a hearth surrounded by a little seating area with two comfy-looking overstuffed chairs and an ottoman. On the opposite wall, there's giant rolltop desk, and a small round dining table is tucked into the corner with enough space to seat two. The mullioned windows on either side of the hearth reveal a view of the lake and the valley beyond. The room is dominated, however, by a giant four-poster bed surrounded by deep crimson curtains.

"This. Is. Incredible," Hermione breathes.
"I'll say. Bill always said the Head Student suites were pretty wicked, but he never let on that they were anything like this."

Hermione steps toward the hearth and lights it with her wand. "Why don't we take turns freshening up, and then get some rest? I can't remember the last time we slept," she says, reaching into her beaded bag and handing over my favorite Cannons T-shirt, a clean pair of flannel trousers, and a toothbrush.

"Good idea."

Later, Hermione takes her turn in the loo and I settle into one of the chairs by the hearth, not really thinking so much as, well, feeling. My mind is too numb to think. Today has been … overwhelming.

Soon, Hermione emerges from the bathroom wearing my all-time favorite nightgown of hers. It's not meant to be sexy, really, but it is — at least to me. It's just so her. Something about the way it scoops down from her shoulders to just above her breasts … something about the color, which looks like it's white but when you get up close you realize that it's really just a pale, pale pink … something about how soft and almost fuzzy the flannel is, the way it skims her calves and makes her look so … pure. I feel a lump rising in my throat.

She meets my gaze and pauses in the doorway. Then she slowly steps over to join me, settling in on my lap and running her hand over my cheek, which I realize I haven't shaved in over a week, and I'm pretty close to having a full beard. She doesn't seem to mind.

"I'm sorry," I whisper with a small smile. "It's just, I have so many emotions running through me, demanding my attention, I hardly know what to say or think or feel."

She grins widely, recognizing that I'm quoting her words from one of the most important moments in our relationship. She slides her hand from my cheek down to my shoulder and then to my chest.

"So I guess I'm just choosing to focus on one or two of them right now," I continue.

She nods and plays along. "Which ones?"

"Relief and gratitude will do for tonight."

She smiles like I haven't seen her smile in ages. "Excellent choices."

In a heartbeat, she's pressed her lips to mine, and we're snogging like we haven't had time to do since Shell Cottage. It feels even more wonderful than it ever has before to be loving her like this, and as she pulls my lower lip gently between her teeth, I wonder why, then it occurs to me. The way my family embraced her today … and the way she embraced them back … it made the bonding feel more real, somehow, and deeper, and gods … I just love her so much.

I wrap my arms around her, stand, and carry her to the bed. Setting her down gently atop the covers, I climb in next to her as she runs her hands up and down my chest. "We made it, Hermione," I whisper, looking deep into her eyes. "We made it, didn't we?"

"Oh Ron, there were so many times when I was sure we wouldn't."

"But we did. We're here. We've taken some heavy losses, but Dad's right. We've got a lot to celebrate, and Fred and Tonks and Remus … they wouldn't want us to lose sight of that, would they?"
She shakes her head, her eyes welling with tears. "No, they wouldn't. They'd want us to live … and love … and carry on."

"Then that's what we'll do, Little Dove," I say, and crush my lips to hers.

We're both tearful as we kiss, slowly undress one another and do the Contraception charm, and you'd think that the tears would be weird, but they're not. This is just … the way the moment has to play out, somehow, and we've shifted so that I'm sitting, my back leaning against the pillows propped against the giant, carved headboard, and Hermione is straddling my lap, hovering just above me.

She takes my face in her hands, wiping the tears on my cheeks with her thumbs. "Tonight is the first night of the rest of our lives, Ronald," she whispers, studying my face. "From here on, nothing will keep us apart. We'll never spend another night away from each other. We'll never spend another night on the run. Tonight we begin the life we have always been fighting for."

I nod, and she kisses me deeply as she settles herself slowly, and I submerge myself in her warmth, thrusting upward to meet her. She pulls up and lowers herself again, more firmly this time. She leans back and offers her breasts to me, and I suckle them tenderly as she runs her fingers through my hair. She tastes so sweet. Her nipples harden in my mouth and — I can't help it, I know it's strange — I picture a baby, our baby, suckling there, and that thought sends a jolt through me. I'm quite sure other blokes don't think of things like babies, especially in the heat of the moment, and for a second, I wonder what on Earth is wrong with me. But then Hermione moans and suddenly I don't care. The idea of planting making a baby, starting a family of our own with her, is the most erotic fucking thing I've ever thought, and who the fuck cares if it's weird. After a war like this, all definitions of normal have gone right out the window.

I hold her hips and thrust myself more deeply into her, marveling for the hundredth time that her little frame can take in all of me, and she moans again — then gasps. "Oh, God, do that again, Ronald." I thrust again the same way, and she throws her head back. "Mmmmmmmmmm," she hums. "Keep doing that, darling, please."

Sweet Merlin, she's coming. That's never happened while I've been inside her — the angle has just never seemed to be quite right to get her there — but this position is apparently hitting the spot, so to speak, and so I thrust again and again, clutching her by the bum.

"Oh, yessssssss, Ron, yes," she pants, her tits bouncing, her little hands gripping my shoulders. "Don't stop."

I hold her bum still and push my hips upward over and over again, licking and nibbling her nipples in the way I know she likes. "That's it," I whisper against her tit. "Come for me, Mione. Come on, love."

And within seconds, she tosses her head forward, resting her cheek on my shoulder, and she shudders, moaning loudly against my neck. "Oh, Ronnaaaaaaaaa." I feel her insides clamp rhythmically around me, and the next thing I know, I'm joining her, calling out her name so loudly that I'm thankful the Head Girl's quarters are in such a remote part of the castle.

We settle down after a few minutes, collapsing into one another's arms, and curl ourselves around each other as we always seem to do as we fall asleep.

I kiss her forehead as she settles in against my chest and wraps an arm around my middle. I look about the room and see that the sun is setting outside, and the room is bathed in golden sunlight and the warmth of the fire.
"I love you so much, Ron."

"I love you, too — I wish there were better words to say how much."

She hugs me and then goes quiet for a minute. Just when I think she's nodded off, she whispers my name. "Ron?"

"Mmm?"

"You remember you said once that the war had changed you."

I nod and kiss her forehead.

"And I confessed that I thought it had changed me, too, but I didn't say how. It didn't seem important to say it at that moment. But it's been on my mind quite a bit today."

I brush her hair from her brow. "Well, then, by all means, let me hear it, love."

She tilts her head back so we can see one another.

"I felt like a Weasley today," she says timidly. "For the first time I felt it, really and truly."

A second ago, I was ready to drop off into Dreamland, but now I'm alert, and I prop myself up on one elbow, looking down at her and cupping her face in my free hand.

"I have no doubt that the war has changed me, Ronald. Realigned my priorities. You have to understand, darling," she says, placing her hand over the one that I've clasped to her cheek. "I'm an only child … an only child raised in the muggle world, which is so completely foreign to yours. And when I first entered the magical world, I thought the only way I could get along in it was to prove that I belonged, to excel, to be the absolute best at everything."

She kisses my palm and continues. "And what I've learned over time is that the most important thing, in the magical world or in the muggle world ... it isn't accomplishments, it isn't glory. It's being there for those you love ... loving and giving love in return." She smiles and I try to swallow past the lump in my throat. "What saved me when I was being Crucioed?" she continues, "it wasn't my childhood fantasy of being Head Girl. It was my desire to love and be loved by you, Ron. The war taught me there is nothing more important than family, and that's a big lesson for someone like me, who was raised an only child and has spent so many years feeling estranged from the world I grew up in."

She sniffs, and I sink my fingers into her hair. "My parents will always be my family, Ron, and I miss them so much and I can't wait to see them again. But you're my family now too, Ron, and your family is my family, and Harry is my family. Belonging to that family, even though I was raised a muggle ... that's what I was fighting for."

I tilt her head back and plant my lips gently on hers.

"Thank you," I murmur against her lips. "Thank you for telling me this. You are and always will be the center of my world, you know that, yes?"

"Mmm," she hums with a smile.

We kiss some more, but soon we both feel sleep coming to claim us.

The last thing I remember is whispering "sweet dreams, Little Dove," into her ear, and then I'm
The next morning, we make love again — because why the hell not — and then rejoin the family in the Common Room. Dad, it appears, has been up for a while, and there's a pot of tea, muffins, plates of bacon and sausages, and a chafing dish full of scrambled eggs set out on one of the big tables there, courtesy of the house elves, Dad says.

The rest of the family descends the stairs one by one until we're all assembled and tucking in to a big breakfast.

Afterward, Dad stands. "All right, everyone," he says, clapping his hands together. "Here's the plan. The men will go to the Burrow now and deal with taking down any dark enchantments and re-establishing the protective wards. The women will remain here until we come back to give the all-clear."

Ginny, Hermione and Fleur exchange a look. Uh oh.

Dad apparently expects a row. He raises his hand to maintain order. "This is non-negotiable, so I expect no guff from anyone here. You girls will look after your mother while I'm gone and consult with Minerva about plans for … erm … Fred."

The mention of Fred seems to deflate Hermione, Ginny and Fleur. Hermione looks to me and smiles sheepishly. Then she raises her hand tentatively.

"Um, excuse me, Mr. Weasley."

Dad smiles. "Arthur, dear."

"Oh, um, yes … Arthur," she says with a little grin. "May I at least offer some ideas about the spellwork you're about to undertake? I have made some calculations and I think they might be helpful."

Dad nods, purses his lips and shoots an impressed look at me, then at Bill.

"By all means, my girl, what do you have in mind?"

Hermione stands and steps to one of the large study tables at the other side of the room, signaling that Dad and the rest of us should follow.

She conjures a piece of parchment with her wand then rummages in her beaded bag for a quill and a bottle of ink.

"All right," she says, clearing her throat. "I can't pretend to know more than Bill does about code-breaking and counter-jinxes, since he's made a living at it for all these years."

Bill smiles and throws an arm around her shoulder, giving her a gentle squeeze.

"I'm sure you'd be a quick study at Gringotts," he says.

Hermione laughs. "That's assuming they ever let me in the place again."

Mum perks up. "What's that?" she stammers. "Don't tell me … first you lot break into the Ministry, then Gringotts?"

"Oh yeah, Mum," says Bill. "I don't know all the details yet, but let's just say the word has already gotten around."
Harry snickers. "Nevermind all that, Hermione — just tell us what's up there in that brilliant head of yours."

Hermione grins at him.

"OK, well … Arthur, I think it would be wise to re-establish all the usual wards around the Burrow, but there's one that we haven't had to consider until now, and that's an anti-paparazzi defense."

"Huh?" George says.

"Journalists. If our experience with Rita Skeeter is any guide, the Burrow will be swarmed with reporters and photographers seeking to get an interview or a picture of the so-called 'Chosen One' and his closest supporters, yes?"

We all nod. Blimey, I hadn't thought of this, but she's right. The Skeeters of the world could make life bloody difficult for the next few weeks.

"Right, so … we'll want to make the Burrow unplottable to journalists and curiosity-seekers. There is a way to do this — to reinforce the existing wards regimen with an extra layer of protection," says Hermione, clearly warming to her subject. "It's something I learned, surprisingly enough, from Tom Riddle himself, and it's—"

"I beg your pardon?!" I bellow.

Hermione looks a bit taken aback, but then collects herself. "Calm down, darling," she says, ignoring the snort from George. "Don't forget, I've spent these past many months thinking hard about Voldemort's spellwork and, like it or not, he was a gifted wizard. Dumbledore would agree, I'm sure. Riddle used his powers for ill but, in analyzing his techniques, I learned quite a bit. What's remarkable is how elementary some of his ideas were … how elegant they were in their simplicity."

I shudder, but I have to concede her point.

She turns to Bill. "Here's the thing, Bill. Voldemort created various dark objects — we three are not at liberty to say much about them — but these objects had an uncanny ability to detect whether or not you intended to harm or destroy them. If they sensed you were a threat to their existence, they would attack. I happened to bring along some books from the restricted section of the Hogwarts Library on our journey — remind me to return them, Ron — and I happen to know that Tom Riddle checked several of them out when he was a student. In my readings, I came across some ancient charms — very primitive but powerful stuff, mind — that looked very much like they could give Voldemort's objects the power they possessed to identify and single out people who were a threat versus those who were not."

Bill, still holding Hermione under his arm, looks up at Dad and then at me. "Blimey."

"It's quite simple, really," she continues. "Look." She bends over the table and draws out an Arithmantic formula using a series of Runes — and I quickly realize that the only other person in the room who has any idea what she's on about now is Bill. None of the rest of us can even begin to read Runes.

"Now, as you cast the Cave Inimicum — the most basic of protective spells — you simply lay in an extra incantation, placed here," she says, pointing to the formula, "between the intentional declaration and the closing expression. In this case, we will want to define this new rule to act as a
charm against intruders, journalists and curiosity-seekers, the Latin formulations for which would read as so: 'Auctor, nuncius, intrusus,' she says, pausing to jot down the language. "Add that and the Burrow should be virtually invisible to all but those whom we would welcome."

Bill clicks his tongue and shakes his head. "Merlin bless me," he says. "You really are the brightest witch of your age, aren't you?"

Hermione beams. "So I've been told."

"Well, I'll definitely do this, love, thank you so much," Bill says, planting a kiss on her forehead.

"No, wait — there's more," Hermione says.

"Bloody hell," says George, flopping down onto a nearby sofa. "I feel like I'm in school again."

"Hang in there, George," says Bill. Then he gives a quick nod to Hermione. "Go on, Hermione."

She nods and returns her eyes to the parchment.

"Once you do a basic scan of the Burrow for dark enchantments," she says, "you'll want to be on the lookout for incendiary charms as you enter."

Bill scratches his chin. "How do you mean?"

"One of the Death Eaters' favorite booby traps was to jinx things to scald on contact with the skin. We experienced it at Gringotts, but it's known to be a common ploy elsewhere." She scribbles out another series of Runes. "An ordinary, everyday-looking object such as a tea kettle or a wooden spoon can contain a jinx such as this, so you'd be wise to cast a general anti-Incendiarius Extitisti spell as you enter each room."

"Blimey," says Charlie, leaning over Hermione's shoulder.

"Oh, and don't forget to cast an anti-Colloportus charm in each room as well," she adds.

"How come?" says Charlie.

"I haven't seen it myself, but I have read that the Death Eaters were fond of creating covert portkeys out of objects in their enemies' homes and offices — portkeys that they could use to stage surprise attacks," she says.

"Hm … where'd you read that?" Harry asks.

Hermione looks down at her feet. "Erm, the Quibbler, actually," she says.

I snort.

"Yes, Ronald — I know that I haven't always viewed the Quibbler as the most, um, high-quality journalism," she says, raising an eyebrow at me, "but I'd like to think recent experience has opened my mind to even the most offbeat sources of information. And this particular story rings true to me. It can't hurt to be aware of it and take precautions."

"Hermione's right," says Dad. "We'll take that extra step, just in case. Now, it's time to get going — that is, unless you have anything else to add, dear."

Hermione shakes her head, folds the parchment and hands it to Bill. "No, that should do it, Arthur. Send a Patronus if you have any trouble with that 'Auctor, nuncius, intrusus' part, Bill. But I'm sure
you'll do fine."

"Crikey, why don't we just bring Hermione along with us, then?" says Charlie.

I look at Charlie, and then at Hermione, fully expecting her to jump at the chance. I'm prepping myself for another Row of the Century, but what happens next amazes me.

"No, Charlie," Hermione says, placing a hand on his arm. "My place is here with your Mum. We'll look after her and will see you soon, all right?"

I breathe a silent sigh of relief — knowing that if I show her how truly relieved I am that she's not coming, I'll only hack her off.

"Right then," says Dad. "Let's go, men."

Everyone mills about for a minute, saying our farewells. "Hey," I whisper, tugging Hermione into a private corner by the hearth. "Thank you for going along with Dad's wishes. I didn't know he was going to pull that whole blokes-only thing. I know you can handle yourself in any—"

"Shh," she whispers, cutting me off. "It's OK, really. This is the hardly the time for any of us to argue or bicker just to make a point. I'm happy to be here and support your mum — honestly."

"Well, thanks," I say, kissing the tip of her nose. "I'll be a little more at ease knowing you're here to help out Mum and Ginny — and George."

She nods and gives me one more quick hug before breaking away. I pivot, looking for Harry and stepping toward the portrait hole. As I'm about to exit, I hear Hermione call my name and turn to see she's still standing by the hearth, wringing her hands.

"Please, please be careful," she says softly, tears welling in her eyes.

"I will. Don't worry," I say, returning to her side and wrapping my arms about her one more time.

"After all we've been through … now that the fighting is over … I don't want you to let down your guard and get hurt," she whispers.

"I promise. I'll be as careful as I can be," I say into her hair.

She nods into my shirt.

"Thank you for taking care of things here," I whisper and give her one last kiss. "Don't worry. I'll come back for you soon. Nothing can keep me from you. Not now, not ever."
Chapter Summary

Farewells and remembrances.

Chapter 12: More Than One Day Can Hold

I am absolutely knackered, but my brain just won't quiet down enough to sleep. Too much happened today — way too much — and I can't seem to stop sifting through it all in my head, re-examining events and conversations. Hermione dropped off to sleep easily, just as she has every night since we returned to the Burrow. I'm worried about her, actually. It's not like her to sleep this much. She assures me she's fine, and Merlin knows she deserves the rest. Still...

She's curled up on her side with her back to my chest, and I again savor the opportunity to simply look at her, to touch her and smell her in the privacy of my room. Bedding Hermione in my boyhood room is, quite honestly, the fulfillment of a longstanding fantasy, and though it's been a week since we've been home, the mildly-against-the-rules thrill of making love to her here every night still hasn't gotten old. I wasn't expecting her to be so … well … amorous tonight in the wake of Fred's funeral, of all things, but there was something about it, the way she fussed over me, the way she soothed me, the way she offered herself to me. What she did for me tonight was comforting but also … what was the word Hermione used? Oh yeah, affirming. It was.

Thinking about it, I curl up closer to her and wrap my arm around her waist, and she responds in her sleep, wiggling herself against my chest and nuzzling the arm that I've tucked beneath her cheek.

As I think about how giving and sweet she was as she made love to me tonight, a pang of tenderness for her that almost hurts ripples through me. I reckon I shouldn't be surprised that I feel so emotional right now — I buried a brother today, after all — but the lengths to which Hermione will go to make me feel loved, well, it still has a way of amazing me.

I had shooed her up here to bed earlier than she would have cared to go, but I honestly didn't do it with any randy motivations in mind. Quite the contrary — after several ice-cold butterbeers and a shot or two of Firewhiskey downed with Harry, Seamus, Neville and Dean, I was feeling just on the edge of being pleasantly drunk at the party that George insisted on throwing instead of a funeral on Fred's behalf. It was a feeling I hadn't had in I don't know how long. And it felt damned good. As the guys and I perched atop the picnic table by the back porch, I looked across the lawn and my eyes settled on Hermione, sitting on the grass with Luna and Ginny, bathed in the warm light of the floating lanterns that George had scattered throughout the garden. She had kicked her shoes off and was wiggling her toes in the grass. She was so beautiful there in her pale pink dress, the one that reminded me so much of my favorite nightgown of hers, but she looked … terribly tired. The past week has been draining for all of us. So many funerals, so much grief. Ginny was resting her head on Hermione's shoulder, and Hermione was smiling affectionately as Luna waved her hands in the air telling Merlin only knows what kind of a barmy story, but I could tell Hermione was losing steam. I decided I should probably take her upstairs soon and urge her to get some rest.
Though we'd originally come to bed because I was concerned about her and how sleepy she seemed to be, once we got up here, the tables turned.

"Sit down," she said, lowering me to the bed and, before I could object, she knelt on the ground and pulled off my shoes, then slipped my navy suit jacket off my shoulders, folding it neatly and laying it carefully on the dresser behind her. Then she stood, turned and slowly slid the zip on the back of her dress down. She stepped out of it and laid it next to my jacket. She cast a silencing charm at the door.

I looked her over. Here in the dim candlelight of my room, her curves were accentuated by light and shadow, and her white bra and knickers looked warm and golden. Scars and bruises were still evident on her chest and torso, but they only made me love her more and long to caress and kiss them.

"Lie down," she whispered, and I complied.

She pulled off my tie, and I smiled to look at it — it was a fiery purple silk, to match the outlandishly appropriate purple suit that George wore. George had insisted we all wear anything but black to the funeral, and I jumped at the chance. It felt good to shed the uniform of grief that we'd all been wearing for so many days. Hermione gently and carefully unbuttoned my light blue shirt, unbuckled my belt, undid the zip on my trousers, and peeled off what remained of my clothes.

"Mione, I—"

"Shhhhhhh," she whispered, pressing a finger to my lips. "Let me take care of you tonight," she said. "After everything you did today … everything you've done for me … what Kingsley told us … please, just, relax. Relax, darling, and let me love you."

I smiled beneath her finger and nodded sheepishly.

She seemed so bowled over by what Kingsley had revealed earlier that evening, but she really didn't have to be. I only did what I think any halfway decent husband would. I mean, not long after the battle, I took Kingsley aside in the Great Hall and asked him if he could help us retrieve Hermione's parents. That's really all I did. I figured he might have some connections down there, and it turns out he does. The ruddy Australian Minister of Magic, as it happens, is an old friend of Kingsley's from their days as student interns at the International Confederation of Magic. And, surprisingly, the Australian Aurors knew all about Harry and us and were keen to help. The only reason I didn't tell Hermione about what I'd asked Kingsley to do was that I didn't want to get her hopes up. I didn't expect Kingsley to be able to help, much less do it so fast. So when he told us tonight that the Australians had located Hermione's parents and stood ready to help us in any way necessary, I was stunned. Any anger that Hermione might have felt over my decision to reveal her secret to Kingsley melted away when he shared the dossier containing her parents' address, surveillance photos and details of their current life. They're safe. And when Kingsley assured her that she had no need to worry about being prosecuted for bending several magical laws to the breaking point by altering her parents' memories, she positively beamed as the relief seemed to wash over her.

She didn't need to do anything in particular to thank me for enlisting Kingsley's help, but I was happy to be on the receiving end of her loving attention all the same.

After hushing me, she smiled and lowered her finger to my chin, then stroked my freshly shaved face. "I sort of miss your scruff," she whispered, "but I like you this way, too." Then her eyes roved over my face, and she brushed my fringe back from my forehead. "Roll over," she commanded. I
wasn't sure what she had in mind, but I didn't argue, either.

I stretched out face-down on the bed. She straddled my back and ran her hands firmly up and down my spine before settling them on my shoulders and proceeding to give me the most mesmerizing backrub I've ever had. Well, come to think of it, it was the only backrub I've ever had. But still, the feeling of her skin on mine, her fingers digging rhythmically into my neck and shoulderblades, and then down to my bum … well, I started to relax so completely that I felt I was almost melting into the mattress. Every now and then I would release a long, deep moan, which caused Hermione to dig deeper, and as she found tight spots and knots of pain that I didn't even know were there, I felt myself letting go and, weirdly, I thought how good it was to be alive … how good it was to be in my body, if that makes any sense, and to have it be tended to by someone who cares for me so much. I know that sounds mental, but those were the thoughts that oozed through my brain as Hermione worked the muscles of my lower back, and then my bum, and on down to my legs and feet. When she turned her attention to my arms, I groaned, eyes shut, as she kneaded and massaged my muscles all the way down to my fingers, and only as she pressed her hands against me did I realize how much tension I'd been carrying there. By the time she finished working my palms, I was nearly in tears.

Then, she sat beside me on the bed and lowered her lips to my ear. "Roll over, good sir knight."

I followed her order. Hermione, still curled up next to me, raised her hands and sank her fingers into my hair, massaging my scalp with the pads of her fingertips. Though the sight of her in her underwear was tantalizing, I couldn't help but close my eyes as she caressed my head and then my neck and even, blimey, my ears — it felt so good. She ran her hands down either side of my neck then knitted her fingers around my shoulders, once again pressing and kneading them until I was loose and comfortable. Then, amazingly, she lightened her strokes, just barely caressing the skin of my face. She started by touching her fingers to my forehead, smoothing out the lines there, then my nose, then my cheeks. Then she brushed her hands lightly over my shoulders, then my arms, then my chest, pausing to pay particular attention to my nipples. At that, I opened my eyes to take in the sight of her … my Mione … paying that kind of attention to me … me … and I don't know, maybe it was the state of relaxation she'd brought me to, maybe it was the emotion of the day, but I found myself so moved, I choked up. Gods, I love her.

She didn't see me eyeing her, though, because she was focused on her hands, studying the skin and muscle beneath them as she worked. I closed my eyes again and turned myself over to the feeling of her touch.

She stroked her way down my chest and toward my middle. My cock, which had already begun to throb and swell, was now standing at attention, and though my eyes were still closed, I expected that she would — no, I hoped — that she would touch me there next. But Hermione had other ideas.

She shifted on the bed to kneel by my feet, then moved her fingertips over my toes, then my feet. She gently stroked my calves for what seemed like minutes, then dragged her fingers softly and slowly over my thighs. As her fingers climbed higher on my legs, I pulsed and twitched in anticipation of her touch. Her unhurried, gentle caresses drove me to a strange state — a mix of relaxation and deep desire. She had reduced me to a puddle, my body limp, but my dick hard, hot and thumping. I felt as if I could barely move a muscle. She lingered on my thighs, her fingers rising and falling. Just as her hands grazed the space between my legs, however, she pulled back. I opened my eyes in time to watch her reach behind her back to unhook her bra. She tossed it aside and then knelt between my legs, shimmying out of her knickers.

She met my gaze.
"What would you like me to do for you, my love?" she whispered huskily. "Your wish is my command," she continued with a knowing little smile.

Oh, gods.

I was fully aware, of course, that she knew bloody well what I wanted her to do just then, but I played along because I've come to realize one very important thing: Hermione likes indulging even my most scandalous desires, and she likes hearing me put those desires — even the rather bossy ones, surprisingly enough — into the most colorful language possible. My filthy mouth, for whatever reason, really seems to turn her on.

I inhaled deeply. "Suck me, Mione," I breathed. "I want you to suck me, love."

Not missing a beat, she smiled and pressed her hands on my knees, then ran them firmly up my thighs, leaning forward and grazing her nipples against one leg, then the other. I felt her curly locks sweep against my skin, and then the warm, wet sensation of her tongue on my bollocks, first left, then right. I moaned, "oh yes, love, yessssssss," as she gently sucked me there. "Good girl."

Normally, as horny as I was, I would be thrusting my hips and scooping aside her hair to afford me a clear view, but I was so relaxed at this moment that I just laid back, my arms sinking into the bed, and let her set the pace. She sunk one hand beneath my bum and lapped at my balls for a while longer, my cock swaying and quivering above her, and she moaned and hummed. "That's so good," I murmured. "So good."

With her free hand, she then stroked the skin beneath my bollocks while shifting her lips upward to the base of my cock. Slowly, she dragged her tongue up the underside of my prick, an agonizingly slow journey. I threw my head back, burying it deep into the pillow, and closed my eyes, savoring the feeling as her wet lips and warm tongue suckled and teased the sensitive skin at the crown of my cock.

"I want to make you feel good, Ron," she whispered against my skin. Then she opened her lips and took me in, just a bit at first, then the rest, as far as she could go. She wrapped her warm fingers around the few inches that wouldn't fit, stroking me with her fingertips, and I felt her tongue squirm and nestle against me as she pulled back and then took me in again, moaning, humming and breathing deeply through her nostrils as she moved.

I moaned loudly. "Ahhhhhhhh, Mione, that's right, love. Suck me hard, Mione. Deeper ... ooh, deeper ... yessss." She hummed in response, taking me in even deeper, farther than ever before. "Oh yeah, love, right there ... right there ... that feels so fucking good, love." She'd brought me to such a strange, rare combined state of calm and lust that all I could do, really, was just lay back and enjoy the sensations, marvelling for what seemed like the millionth time that she loved me, that she was willing to do something so intimate and, well, god-damned sexy to me and for me, and as she sucked harder and deeper, I got more turned on, moaning deeply, luxuriating in the pleasure she was drawing out from somewhere deep inside me. Soon I felt the telltale tingling that signaled I was going to come and come hard. I would have warned her, but I was just too far gone.
Nevertheless, she seemed ready — she's learned my signals — and soon I growled out her name, trusting the Silencing charms she'd set to muffle the sound of my shouts. Meanwhile, she hummed and murmured against me, lapping up and down like I was the most delicious thing she'd ever tasted.

Normally, after coming that powerfully, I'd be near comatose. But tonight of all nights, I still can't seem to stop thinking. Today just contained more emotion, more action, than one day really should hold.

Lying here, as Hermione slumbers in my arms, I can't help wondering how I could feel so god
damned lucky and so god damned sad all at the same time. I love Hermione so much, and she loves me. Harry is recovering from his ordeal with Voldemort. He and Ginny seem back on track. The wizarding world is rebuilding. And yet … Fred … how can we ever feel whole again without him?

Completely unbidden, a memory flashes in my head of Fred — on a rare occasion when it was just him and me, supposedly studying in the Library at Hogwarts. George, I'm guessing, was out on a date, as per usual.

"Merlin, when did Pansy Parkinson grow tits?" Fred whispered — rather loudly — at me from across the study table, leaning his chair on its back legs to get a better view of Pansy from across the room.

I looked around, hoping to high heaven that Pansy was nowhere within listening distance. "Pansy Parkinson? Why are you looking at her?"

Fred sniggered. "Parkinson may be a Slytherin, but I wouldn't throw her out of bed for it."

"Would you please shut your gob, Fred? If I don't get this Potions essay done by tomorrow morning, Snape will grind me into a powder and store me in his closet."

"That greasy git."

"I couldn't agree more, but still."

"Why don't you have Granger help you?" Fred said, cocking his head toward Hermione, who was sitting, apparently ignoring us, at the far end of the Library, her face obscured by a stack of books.

I coughed. "She's getting a little tired of saving my sorry ass, to be honest," I answered. "'Sides, I can manage."

Fred snorted. I felt my blood pressure rise.

"And anyway, Fred, maybe I don't want to constantly be asking her for help every time the homework gets a little tough, you know? Maybe I don't want her to think I'm a bleeding eedjit who can't think for myself. Did you ever consider that?"

Fred tapped his lip with his quill. "Hmm … why does it matter so much what Granger thinks of your mental capacity anyway, Ronnie? I mean, she's only a friend, right?"

I decided not to answer and instead lowered my head and returned my focus to my miserable essay.

"Speaking of Granger…” said Fred. I looked up, wondering what the buggering hell he was going to say about my girl. Not that she was my girl back then. But still. "Oh, gods," Fred continued, derailing his own train of thought. "Did you see that, little bro? Laetitia Hardwick just dropped a book and bent over to pick it up. Good lord, I never realized what an impeccable arse she's got. Blimey. Those Ravenclaw girls drive me wild."

I decided to let it pass and hoped he would forget the entire subject of Hermione, but I wasn't that lucky. "Let's see … where were we? Oh yes," Fred murmured with a wicked grin. He stole a glance in Hermione's direction, apparently realized she wasn't looking our way, and let his eyes linger on her legs, which did look particularly spectacular that night in a pair of grey tights.

"What about her?" I grunted, failing to mask my annoyance.
"Ronnie, my boy, if you don't make a move on that bird soon, I'm warning you, I will."

Bloody hell. I pointed at him and sputtered incoherently for a moment. "You stay away from Hermione, you tosser," I hissed when I could finally find my voice, looking right and left to be sure I hadn't drawn the attention of Madame Pince.

Fred chuckled. "Why on Earth should I do that, Ronnie? Granger's a free woman after all, isn't she?"

I grumbled something unintelligible under my breath.

"Aha, methinks I perceive the issue," said Fred. "Granger's a free woman, but you'd rather she wasn't."

"Stuff it, Fred!"

Madame Pince erupted with a "shhhhhhhhh!" and a fiery glare from her desk.

Hermione shot us a glare of her own.

"Listen, little bro," Fred continued, kicking my shin under the table. "I'm just taking the piss. I know Granger is off-limits. I'm just trying to get you fired up to do something about it."

I tightened my fist and then loosened it when I realized I'd crumpled my Potions essay. Shit. Am I that pathetic that even Fred is trying to get me motivated? "It's not that I don't want to do something about it, Fred. I just don't know what to do about it."

Fred shook his head. "You're making it more complicated than it has to be Ronnie."

Was I? It always seemed so easy for Fred and George. They could pull just about any girl. But then I realized it might have been easier for them because they didn't ruddy care. My problem was I cared — perhaps way too much.

"I don't know. There's a lot at stake there. Hermione and I — we're best friends. If I make a move and she's not interested, things could get weird."

Fred kicked me in the shin again.

"Ow!"

This earned us another harsh "shhhhhhhhh!" from Madame Pince.

"Bloody hell, Fred," I said, reaching down to rub my leg.

"You really think she's not interested? What are you, fucking blind?"

I balled up my Potions essay and threw it, bouncing it off his head. "I'm not blind — just realistic," I said.

Fred cleared his throat. "Ronnie, look at me."

I reluctantly lifted my eyes from my shin, suddenly feeling a little choked up and praying he wouldn't notice. "Damn, Ron, I know George and I like to take the mick, but … honestly … Granger'd be right chuffed if you asked her out, kid, and uh, she'd have good reason to be."

Holy crap, I thought. Did Fred just say something nice to me?
"Sometimes you've just got to roll the dice in this life, little bro. Take the risk. Know what I mean?"

I nodded.

"Now forget we ever had this conversation. Wouldn't want George to think I've gone soft."

"Sorted."

Hermione shifts in her sleep, flipping over to face me and nestling her cheek onto my chest. She moans something unintelligible and drifts off again. In the darkness, I can see the circles under her eyes that have been there pretty much since the battle ended. I'm so glad Kingsley insisted on all three of us getting complete physicals at St. Mungo's tomorrow. Hermione resisted, of course, but Kingsley is right — with all the Dark Magic we've been exposed to, all the injuries, the near-starvation and sleep deprivation, it's time that all of us get a thorough examination. Hermione has been dead set against seeing a Healer, and I think I know her well enough to guess why. She's afraid of what they might find. I know, deep down, she's been worried about the aftereffects of the Crucio and, truth be told, so am I. "We have Healers at St. Mungo's who are specialists in countering the effects of Dark Magic, Hermione," Kingsley assured her. "Incredibly skilled people who can undo any spell damage done, administer antidotes, perform counterjinxes and diagnose conditions that other Healers might miss. Please, allow me to do this for your sake. It would put my mind to rest knowing that all three of you have received the best possible care. For all the sacrifices you have made, this is the very least that the magical community owes to you."

It was only then that Hermione consented — but even so, she wasn't happy about it. Despite her protests, I know she deserves to see the best Healers the Ministry can offer, and I'll throw her over my shoulder and carry her there myself if I have to, no matter how much she might argue.

In the back of my mind, I've been wondering if George ought to see a Healer at some point, too. He's been putting on a brave face — too brave, really. I'll need to keep a close eye on him. He hasn't always appreciated my interference these past few days. But then, he did cave in the other day inside Dad's shed and let me in on his plans for the funeral, didn't he? Maybe if I keep pushing, however gently, he'll let me help him more.

For most of the week leading up to the funeral today, George had been holed up in Dad's shed. Every time I stuck my head in there to check on him, he seemed surprisingly fine. Well, fine as in red-eyed and sniffling, but still … active, and apparently working on something that mattered a lot to him.

He always chased me away, but the day before yesterday I was determined to stick around and find out what he was up to.

"Bloody hell," George moaned as I entered the shed after lunch, shouting at me from behind a bookcase where he'd apparently been puttering away. "If I've told you once, Ronnie, I've told you a thousand times. I'm fine, for fuck's sake. I'm just working on something and it's ruddy important."

I shrugged and reached out to fiddle with the knobs on Dad's muggle dictaphone-thingy. "Well, good … that's good, George," I said, kicking at the workbench gently with my trainer. "Just want to be sure, you know. Can't have you hiding yourself away for too long. Mum worries, you know."

I shrugged and reached out to fiddle with the knobs on Dad's muggle dictaphone-thingy. "Well, good … that's good, George," I said, kicking at the workbench gently with my trainer. "Just want to be sure, you know. Can't have you hiding yourself away for too long. Mum worries, you know."

George stuck his head out from behind the bookcase where he was working. "Oh, Mum worries, eh?" he said with a sad, sarcastic grin.

"All right, fine, I admit it — I worry, OK? Blimey, pardon me for being concerned. But you've been out here tinkering around for hours on end for the past five days. It's a little … weird."
George paused and fidgeted with his wand. "Sorry to worry you, Ron, really," he said with a sigh. "But honestly, I'm not out here by myself because I can't face the world or any of that rot."

He actually sounded convincing. But I wondered if I should believe him. I sighed.

"And hey, listen," he said in a gentler tone. "I'm also not of a mind to off myself, if that's what worries you."

I shook my head.

"And I'm not out here drinking myself into a stupor either," he said. "Though I could go for a butterbeer right about now."

I smiled. "Well, that can be arranged."

"Good. Go grab a couple of cold ones and come back. I'll show you what I'm up to, but you have to keep it quiet. It's kind of a surprise for tomorrow. For the, uh, you know."

For the funeral. George hadn't been able to bring himself to say the word, but that's what he was talking about. Obviously George was working up something for Fred that would stand out from the grim ceremonies we'd experienced all week. And why the hell not? It was only fitting. A by-the-book funeral would never do for Fred Weasley.

I went to fetch the butterbeers, glad that George was willing to let me in on his little secret.

Since the day we arrived back at the Burrow, it was clear the funeral was going to be a George Weasley Production. Mum and Dad bowed to his wishes on every detail — and neither seemed to resent it. In fact, it just seemed right, somehow, that George would know precisely how Fred would want to be sent off.

George insisted on an evening event. It was warm and starry, with a slight breeze. A beautiful night. Unforgettable, really, not just because of the amazing invention that George had clued me in on, but because of the words he spoke.

George stood before the gathering assembled there in the garden and placed his hands on the casket lid, apparently gathering his thoughts. He let the silence build for a minute or two, focusing the crowd's attention on him and what we were all doing there. Always the showman, that George.

Then he straightened up, placed his hands in his pockets, and spoke in a surprisingly clear and calm tone.

"We are here to acknowledge the passing of Fred Weasley — brother … son … friend … independent spirit, entrepreneur, inventor, intellectual, idealist, iconoclast, conversationalist, creative force, freedom fighter, rule breaker, sharp dresser, Quidditch freak, wit and all-around bon vivant.

"It's only natural that we should grieve the passing of Fred Weasley. We'll never see another one like him, and that's saying something coming from his twin. But truly, though he and I bore certain physical and philosophical similarities, Fred was in most ways utterly unique — fearless and guided by his own personal code of conduct. Paramount in that code was the importance of fun — not just fun for fun's sake, not just screwing around for the sake of screwing around. Fun, to Fred, was really the pursuit of joy, and joy, to Fred, was one of those things that makes life worth living. Joy is fleeting, he knew, but it is worth seeking out and then sharing — and sometimes the journey to joy could be as meaningful and fulfilling as the destination itself."
"And that's why this memorial to Fred today will not be a funeral but a farewell party, a celebration of the brief but intense and wonderful life of someone who really, really knew how to live. A shared pursuit of joy, for this one night."

I lifted Hermione's hand to my lips briefly then squeezed it, thinking of all the joy the two of us had already shared even in the shitstorm of this war, and how much joy is yet to come. I'm devastated that Fred won't be there to share in it, but I chased that thought away as George continued speaking.

"I've got a few surprises to share with you to get the party going," George said. "But first, I need to say a few more things. And I want you to listen carefully because they're important.

"You see, the pursuit of joy has everything to do with why Fred got involved in the fight against Voldemort to begin with. He recognized, quite rightly, that joy was simply not possible in a world where Voldemort reigned, and he found this idea deeply, deeply offensive. The fight to preserve joy … well, it was a fight Fred was willing to give up his life to win."

I wondered if Harry was hearing this and really listening to it. I traded a look with Hermione and could tell that she was thinking much the same thing, because she shot a quick look at Harry then turned to me and nodded. *He seems to be tuned in,* she seemed to be saying.

I crossed my fingers and give her a little smile. *I sure hope so, love.*

"Fred knew the risks when he got involved in this war," said George. "We both did. We talked about it. Our mum lost brothers in the previous war, and we were aware that Azkaban or death were distinct possibilities if the work we were doing went wrong. So, we prepared for it. And we promised one another that no matter what, whichever one of us lived to see the victory over Voldemort would dedicate himself to the fine art of living well. And, in Fred's honor, that's precisely what I intend to do. I recommend that every one of you here take a similar pledge, in honor of Fred. I know nothing would make him happier."

George paused to clear his throat, and I wiped away the tears that had been pooling in my eyes and focused my gaze to the horizon, which still was edged with gold though the sun had set at least an hour earlier. "I hope you don't think I'm minimizing our grief. God damn it, I'll miss Fred. I'll never get over his loss," said George, choking back tears. "And we should absolutely take time to grieve him. That's only right. But we can't let grief consume us or become a habit. For us to lose sight of Fred's passion for joy would be like snuffing out the light that he brought to our lives. It would be a disservice to his memory. We have to help one another with this, to remind one another from time to time. I'm asking all of you to do that for me."

He pressed a fist to his lips.

A minute later, he had gathered himself sufficiently to carry on.

"So, in accordance with Fred's wishes, allow me to share with you a beta test of one of our last collaborative creations."

George extracted his wand from his back pocket and flourished it in the direction of Dad's shed. The doors popped open and out flew an odd object that looked uncannily like one of dear old Arthur's favorite muggle artifacts. Dad called it a "movie projectile," I thought, and as George's creation drew nearer, I realized that it was Dad's sodding movie projectile, or at least a souped-up version of it. George had only described the broad outlines of the idea to me, but he had refused to let me see the finished product, saying he wanted me to enjoy the surprise along with everyone else. With the projectile now hovering before him, George conjured a stand for it in the aisle, and
the projectile settled itself on top of it. With another wave of his wand, George conjured a large, white wall behind him, and then he turned to address the group again.

"This, my friends, is a device that functions in a similar way to one some of you may have seen before — a Pensieve, which is a vessel one can enter in order to immerse oneself in one's own memories or the memories of others. If you've ever seen or experienced a Pensieve, however, you'll know that it has certain drawbacks — most particularly, it can be damned hard to stuff more than a handful of people into it. When one wishes to share memories with a crowd the size of this one, what is one to do? We'd have to form a queue from here to Ottery St. Catchpole to get us all into a Pensieve.

"Early in the war, Fred and I decided we wanted to record certain memories and preserve them in such a way that they could be viewed by a large audience. If you come from a family as huge as ours, you'll understand the impulse."

Mum and Dad both chuckled, and the sound surprised and delighted me.

"So Fred and I extracted and reproduced key memories, assembled them, and drew up the blueprints for what you see before you. The working title for it is The Memory Projector. It operates on a similar principle to a muggle film projector, which some of you may have seen from time to time. Now, please sit back and relive a few memories from my life and Fred's life. Since these are our memories, you'll see them from our point of view. Our eyes were the cameras, so to speak. I hope you enjoy these events from Fred's brief time with us — we sure as hell did."

With that, George flicked his wand and the projector — I guess it wasn't a projectile — sprang to life and clattered away. George then sat on the empty chair next to Dad, who wrapped an arm around his shoulder, and we all settled back to watch, and I gripped Hermione's hand a little tighter … the family visiting the ruins of ancient Egypt … gods, was I ever that small? … George, and then Fred, flying over the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch in the heat of a match … bustling through the streets of Hogsmeade with dozens of classmates, and there was a murmur in the crowd as people recognized themselves … then a Christmas at the Burrow with the whole family plus various Order members … more murmurs and laughter … flying Dad's Ford Anglia to the effing Dursleys, and pulling those ruddy bars off the window … more laughter … twirling and singing through the crowd at the Quidditch World Cup fan encampment …. dancing at the Yule Ball, the Weird Sisters rocking in the background …. swimming in the pond out back … most spectacularly, at least to me, the twins' triumphant departure from Hogwarts, with Umbridge being chased by a giant fiery dragon … and then Opening Day at Weasley Wizard Wheezes.

The effect was dazzling and disconcerting, seeing all these events from Fred's perspective alternating with George's. Through it all, I looked over at Mum, Dad and George from time to time, and they were laughing and hugging one another in turns, wiping tears from their cheeks, loving every minute. The Umbridge memory in particular ignited a wild round of whoops, cheers and whistles in the crowd — I know that this one will go down as Fred and George's greatest moment in most people's minds — and then, the screen cleared and we were presented with the image of Fred's face, sitting in the back office at Wheezes.

"You ready there, Georgie? All righty, then," said Fred, looking directly at us, which was quite weird and thrilling at the same time. "'Allo there, everyone. This is Fred, of course, just looking deeply into the limpid pools of my brother George's eyes." At this, the scene goes out of focus for a second and then we see a ledger being thrown at Fred's head. He dodges it, straightens up, laughing, then continues. "Well, aaaaaaaaaaawwwwy, if you're seeing this folks, it's because, well, I've popped me clogs, so to speak. I've crossed over into the great beyond. I've bought the farm, cashed in my chips, shuffled off this mortal coil. I've croaked, hopped the broomstick, joined the
great Quidditch team in the sky. I'm taking a dirt nap. I'm tits up. You get the idea: Oi! I'm dead, for Merlin's sake. I'm quite certain you'll miss me — and who could blame you, really — but please do me a favor. The occasion of my death will very likely be an opportunity to gather a great many people together — I was popular after all, wasn't I? Please don't waste it on a funeral. Eat, drink and be merry for my sake … after all, wherever I am right now, I guarantee you I am having the very best time possible. Please do give my love to my Mum and Dad … and I'll see you on the other side, everybody. Cheers!" The screen then went dark, and the sky filled with a fireworks show to rival the one that Fred and George set off that fateful day at Hogwarts.

Lying now in the darkness, the memory of Fred's face, ten feet tall in front of us, causes a lump to rise in my throat, and suddenly I'm sobbing. Hermione stirs and raises her head to look at me. "Oh, darling," she whispers, leaning up on her arms and kissing away my tears. "I'm so sorry, Ronald, so, so sorry."

I pull her to me and unload a fresh round of tears into her hair, and it feels miserable and like a blessed relief all at once. "I just know I'm going to miss him so much, Mione," I pant. "And I'm so fucking worried about George … and Mum … and I feel like such a selfish arse for being happy too at a time like this … and … and …"

She shooshes me. "Darling," she says, pulling away so she can really look at me. She wipes my tears and toys with my fringe, then plants feather-light kisses on my eyelids, my cheeks, my nose, my lips. "Your Dad said something on the day of the battle that's really stuck with me," she says, looking deep into my eyes. "Life breaks our hearts, Ron. It challenges us. It brings us joy and even rapture. And sometimes it does all of these things at the same time." She kisses my lips chastely. "Truer words were never spoken, my love. It doesn't make it any easier, but if life can do all these things to us at once, then it has to be all right to feel *all* the feelings that go along with it. In our case, it's a mix of happiness and sorrow. And as George reminded us today, we must feel the sorrow and yet try not to let it overwhelm us. We'll heal. We'll help one another to heal. I know we will."

With that, I feel a wave of exhaustion roll over me. I tug her shoulder and she settles into the spot by my chest, draping an arm over me. I kiss the top of her head. "Thank you, Mione. You're right, as usual. Let's sleep, yeah?" She nods, and soon I'm floating into the darkness, content for now that though world isn't exactly the way it ought to be, what's left of it is good and fine and sweet and worth treasuring.
Healing

Chapter Summary

Malfoy Manor isn't so easily forgotten.

Chapter 13: Healing

"Hey mate," Harry says, rising from his seat outside St. Mungo's Intensive Examination wing. "How'd it go?"

I smile and look around the waiting room. "Fine. Gave me some potions they want me to take for the next few weeks. Guess I didn't do myself any favors with that Raw Magic thing — I'm still a little anemic, or so they say."


"Nah, not too hard to fix," I say, giving him a nudge with my elbow. "They spent a lot of time monkeying about with the old brain scars on my arms, too, but, well, I reckon there's good news there."

Harry raises his eyebrows. "How so?"

"I'm not sure how, but they tell me the inner damage sort of, er, healed itself. No more pain, no more nightmares."


I shrug. "Wish they could make the marks go away, but apparently those are with me for good."

Harry laughs. "Good thing Hermione thinks they're sexy."

"Shut it, you," I reply with a smirk, rubbing the back of my neck and feeling my ears go pink. "Speaking of, where is she?"

"Dunno. I've been here for about 10 minutes. Expect she'll be here soon."

Harry and I grab a cuppa from the commissary across from the waiting room, trying to ignore the patients, visitors and staff who are openly staring at us. I still haven't gotten used to being recognized everywhere we go. Harry doesn't seem fazed by it — this has pretty much been his life for years — but I'm finding it a tad unnerving. People keep walking up to us, thanking us, shaking our hands. It's slowly dawning on me that I have to be on my best behavior now — that if I'm caught doing or saying something stupid in public, it could come back to haunt me. Anonymity, I now realize, has its upsides. And though the adulation can sometimes rattle me, what's worse are the sidelong glances … the chilling glares that sometimes come our way from people who maybe aren't so thrilled that our side won.

We carry our tea back to the sofa in the empty waiting room and settle in, figuring Hermione will be along shortly. Putting my feet up on the coffee table in front of us, I stretch out and make myself comfortable. "How about you, mate?" I ask with a grin. "Reckon you'll live or what?"
Harry sips his tea. "So they tell me. Really, I only had some cuts and bruises to deal with, surprisingly enough. Mostly it was just spellwork — checking internally for traces of Dark Magic, but they didn't really find any signs of it except for around my scar, and that they cleared up with a few counterspells, apparently. No potions, but they want to see me again in a month for a follow-up."

"Wow, that's great news, but I've got to admit I'm surprised," I say.

"Me, too, to be honest," Harry replies, gripping his teacup in both hands and resting his feet on the table next to mine. "I reckoned that with my luck, they'd be whisking me to some isolation unit somewhere for months on end."

"Mr. Potter, I'm sorry to have to tell you that you have a critical case of Voldemortitis," I say in my best interpretation of the old coot who examined me. Harry kicks my foot with his and takes another sip of tea to hide his grin.

A comfortable silence descends on us, and we content ourselves with watching Healers, nurses, orderlies and the occasional patient or visitor wander through the hallway outside the waiting room.

After about ten minutes, though, I flick my eyes to the clock on the wall and start to wonder where the hell Hermione is. We agreed we'd meet here after our checkups, and the plan was to go to the Leaky to meet up with Neville, Luna and Ginny.

A young Healer's aide passes by and I sit up, clearing my throat. "Excuse me," I say, rising to my feet. She sees me and approaches, clutching a clipboard to her chest nervously. "Y-yes, Mr. Weasley?" she says timidly, batting her eyes at me. "How can I help you?" she continues with a flirtatious smirk. Blimey.

"Uh, we were expecting to meet here with my wife," I say. She openly frowns at my use of the word "wife." Heh. "Maybe she's been delayed. Is there anywhere we could go to check? She's a patient in the Intensive Examination ward."

With a noticeably cooler tone, she promises she'll go look into it, but before she can exit the room, a Healer who looks to be about Dad's age, a bloke with a completely bald head and thick grey eyebrows, walks in, adjusts the thick horn-rimmed glasses on his face and rests his hands on the lapels of his white lab robes. "Mr. Weasley?" he asks with a serious tone.

I nod. Fuck. I don't like the way this guy sounds. Harry rises to stand behind me.

The Healer steps forward and extends a hand to me. I shake it. "My name is Grendys. Anton Grendys," he says with an unusual accent that I can't quite place. Eastern European? "I am the head of Dark Magic Diagnostics here at St. Mungo's, and I was asked by Kingsley Shacklebolt himself to handle your wife's case," he continues. "I have been examining her for the past hour or so and, well, if you would come along with me, Mr. Weasley, I would like to speak with you privately."

I turn to look at Harry. "Erm…"

"Mr. Potter," says Grendys, cutting me off and stepping toward Harry to extend his hand. Harry shakes it. "It's an honor to meet you. To meet you both," he says with a formal little bow. "And Mrs. Weasley as well, of course," Grendys adds. "The wizarding world owes all three of you a debt of gratitude and more."

Harry nods. He's heard this particular speech or some variation of it a million times before, and yet
I'm amazed at how graciously he takes it every time. "Thank you, Healer Grendys," Harry says modestly. "Um, will you and Ron be terribly long, sir?"

Grendys considers. "Mr. Potter, my conference with Mr. Weasley could be quite lengthy. And I'll be honest. Mrs. Weasley isn't going home tonight. So if you two had any plans following this appointment, it may be necessary to change them."

I gulp. "I beg your pardon?" I say, rather more roughly than I intended.

Grendys returns his attention to me. "I'll explain in my chambers, Mr. Weasley," he says patiently. I nod and clap him on the upper arm in apology — a gesture that seems to surprise him, but he gives me a warm smile.

My heart is pounding, but before I can panic, I run through the short-term contingencies in my mind. "All right," I say, turning to Harry. "Mate, how about this: You go make our apologies to Neville and Luna, then go let the family know what's up, yeah? If Hermione's going to be here tonight, she'll need a few things to be comfortable. You know how she is about her toothbrush. And maybe some pyjamas and her favorite robe, OK?"

Harry nods. "Sorted, Ron. Don't worry. I'll come back as soon as I can, yeah?"

"Yeah, you do that. She'll want to see you."

Harry turns to head for the door, then stops to give me a quick one-armed hug. "Back soon."

I watch him leave, realizing it feels a bit weird to be joining this guy Grendys without Harry. It's always been the three of us, hasn't it. But, well … the war's over and, bloody hell, I'm married, aren't I?

I turn back to Grendys. He extends his arm toward the hallway and I follow him down several long corridors, feeling my heartbeat quicken. I clench my fists open and shut as we walk. We arrive at his office and he opens the door to reveal a warm-looking, wood-paneled room chock full of gadgets and implements that look like they would fit right in at Dumbledore's old lair.

"Please, do take a seat, Mr. Weasley," Grendys says, gesturing to one of two leather chairs in front of a wide wooden desk. He settles himself in on the other side of the desk and wiggles his glasses on his face again, picking up a clipboard and reviewing some notes before speaking. He places the clipboard down then leans back, resting his elbows on the arms of his chair and steepling his fingers beneath his chin.

"First let me say, Mr. Weasley, that your wife is quite an extraordinary young woman," says Grendys. "But then, I do believe that by saying so, I'm telling you something that you already know."

I grimace. When is he going to tell me what the hell is going on?

"She is extraordinary for many reasons," he continues. "Not the least of which is this: I have rarely seen anyone withstand quite so many Crucio curses and survive, much less maintain their sanity."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "So, her mind … she's …"

"Perfectly sane. And that is to be celebrated. To see such an exceptional mind damaged, well, it would have been a great loss for the entire wizarding world."

I drop my head and run my hands through my hair. Holy buggering fuck, her mind is intact. Thank
Merlin. Thank sweet Merlin. But wait, then why …

I lift my eyes to Grendys and he smiles grimly, as if reading my thoughts.

"I have no worries about your wife's mind, Mr. Weasley," he says, lowering his hands to rest on the desk and leaning forward. "The Crucio can, however, cause other types of damage, especially when administered so frequently and in such rapid succession. Being an Unforgivable, it is among the Darkest Magic known to wizardkind, the Crucio. Judging by her scars, bruises and the magical signature the curses left behind, most of the Dark spells your wife sustained were delivered to her abdomen and her back. I am afraid she has sustained some fairly serious internal injuries as a result."

I clench my jaw and grip the arms of my chair. I feel as if my heart has stopped beating for a moment. "Internal injuries?" I rasp.

Grendys nods slowly, rises, and steps around the desk to sit in the chair next to me. "Whoever healed your wife in the initial days after the attack is to be commended — was it you?"

I shake my head. "My sister-in-law."

He nods and purses his lips. "She did a remarkable job, and I'm guessing she did it under less-than-ideal circumstances. I am quite confident that your wife's internal injuries would be much worse — nigh unto irreversible — if she hadn't received such diligent care in the immediate aftermath of the curse." I gulp and silently thank heaven for Fleur.

"I'm guessing your sister-in-law gave Mrs. Weasley a fairly potent pain potion," he says.

I nod. "Fleur has always had a knack for potions."

"The pain potion was critical. You see, the Crucio attacks the victim's central nervous system, Mr. Weasley. The pain potion your wife received of course neutralized the pain, but it had the additional effect of reducing inflammation throughout all of her neural pathways, and that significantly reduced the Crucio's effect on her nerves and, ultimately, her brain. And, you see, the Crucio lingers in the body. Had your wife not received plenty of pain potions so quickly, the Crucio would have slowly crept throughout her nervous system, causing the protective lining around her nerves to atrophy and eventually causing electrical synapses in her brain to misfire. This creates the insanity effect that is so commonly associated with extreme exposure to Crucio."

I shudder. Grendys clears his throat and fiddles with his glasses again.

"Despite those early interventions, I'm afraid Mrs. Weasley has suffered deeper damage, the kind that is nearly impossible to detect without proper training and equipment. That's why I recommend that she stay here in my ward for several days, a week or perhaps more, to receive intensive care. We have specially trained Healers here, Mr. Weasley, who are using state-of-the-art methods to undo the effects of Dark Magic. I can assure you that your wife will receive the best treatments known to Healing Science. It would be wrong of me to promise she will be 100 percent restored to what she was before the traumas of the past year, but she is young, strong and determined. And she is in good hands with my team. We will get her as close to 100 percent healthy as any Healers can."

He coughs. Is he choked up? Blimey, I think he is. "We would do as much for any patient, of course, but our team is especially motivated in your wife's case by our knowledge that she sustained these injuries in such a noble and crucial fight," he continues in a softer tone, less official-sounding, more human. "Please believe me, Mr. Weasley, there isn't one of us who isn't fully committed to returning Hermione Weasley to complete health."
At this, I start shaking. "What's the matter with her, exactly?" I ask, not caring about the wobble in my voice.

Grendys reaches out and rests his hand on my arm.

"What I've told you so far is all that I've told your wife up to this point. I think it's only right that I tell you the rest when you are together," he says gently.

He leans back and checks his watch. "Thirty minutes ago, I gave her a Shikyu Hiringyu serum. It's an effective treatment developed by Japanese Healers, but it has the short-term effect of rendering a patient very, very sleepy. However, that effect typically lasts for only about three quarters of an hour. Your wife dozed off immediately upon taking it, but she should be coming 'round in about ten minutes or so. I will take you to her now."

"Thank you," I breathe. "If you hadn't shown me the way to her soon, I was thinking about just getting up and trying to find her myself."

He chuckles grimly. "I would expect nothing less," he says. "Follow me."

We exit his office through a side door and enter a hallway that looks nothing like any other place I've yet seen inside St. Mungo's. The waiting room where Harry and I were hanging out and the clinic where we were examined were both brightly lit. White was the dominant color there, with maybe some pale blues or greens thrown in to break things up. Here, the hallways are paneled in dark wood, the floors are some sort of reddish stone, and the corridors are lit with flickering lantern light. We walk to the end of the hall and stop in front of a large double door of dark carved wood. Grendys waves his wand and the doors open. There, at the center of a similarly dark-paneled room, lies Hermione, looking pale, quiet and small at the center of a large bed. She's fast asleep. A Healer's aide sits in the corner, her eyes focused on what looks like a round mirror with pink and purple lines wiggling across it. She's jotting down notes on a clipboard.

"How is our patient, McKendry?" Grendys asks quietly.

The aide turns and smiles at me. "Oh, Mr. Weasley, good afternoon," she says in a flustered voice. "May I just say how grateful—"

"Not now, McKendry," Grendys says, barely masking his annoyance. "Please just provide a status report."

"Oh, of course — yes, yes — my apologies," she says, straightening herself and looking at her clipboard. "Well, the patient's dianetic levels have improved somewhat — to the 75 percent range. Blood oxygen is still below normal — registering at just 86 right now, but that's an improvement. Neurolytic modulations have improved as well, to 75 over 100. T-cells are still weak, however. And her cruoris readings could be better, but they should improve with another dose of the Epazote draught."

Grendys nods and presses his finger to his lips. "Hmm. I see. What was that neurolytic measurement again?"

"Seventy-five over 100, sir."

"I was rather hoping for 80," he says, removing his glasses and polishing them on his robes.

"Understandable," says McKendry. "If we can reduce the swelling along her thoracic intercostal nerves, I expect her neurolytic scores will improve markedly."
"You're quite correct, McKendry. Let's administer another round of the tincture of cyanocobalamin when she awakens, just to be on the safe side."

As the two of them have clucked away, I've been focused on Hermione, who hasn't stirred despite the noise. The dark circles beneath her eyes — the ones that have had me so worried — are still there. And her skin looks so white, her features so drawn. I want to climb into the bed and hold her, but I restrain myself, opting instead to sink into the chair next to the bed and wait for her to wake up. In the meantime, I content myself with watching her chest rise and fall beneath the covers, a sign that, thank Merlin, she's breathing and at the very least comfortable.

"Mr. Weasley, we will leave you alone with your wife for a few minutes, yes?" Grendys says. "She will be a bit groggy when she awakens, but that is perfectly normal — an aftereffect of that Japanese serum I was telling you about. We'll give you a little time together and then will come in to check on you both after that, all right?"


He gives my shoulder a squeeze then accompanies McKendry out the door into the hallway.

I turn back to Hermione and take her little hand in mine. It's cold. I shudder. I'm used to her being so warm and lively.

"I'm here, love. I'm here," I breathe. Maybe she can't hear me. "We'll take care of you, Little Dove," I say a little louder this time. "I'm here, Mione."

That's all I can think to say out loud without falling apart. I lean over the bed and rest my forehead on Hermione's thigh. "I'm here, Mione," I repeat. "I'll be here when you wake up, love. You rest until then, Little Dove. You rest."

I press my eyes shut against her, trying hard to remain composed. But I'm so damned scared, I'm still shaking. Something is seriously wrong, or this codger Grendys wouldn't be wanting to keep her here for so long. God damn it, I should have killed all of those sick fucks at Malfoy Manor when I had the chance. I swear, if these Healers can't fix whatever's wrong with Hermione … as Merlin is my witness … I will personally throttle Malfoy and his fucking father with my bare hands.

I roll my head back and forth, rubbing my forehead against her leg, trying to psych myself up to hang on and keep from crying. "Come back to me, love," I whisper. "Whatever it is, we'll face it together. Just please, come back to me."

From out of nowhere, I feel fingertips smoothing my hair, and I lift my head to see Hermione looking down at me, tears filling her eyes.

"Mione," I whisper, sitting up a little straighter. "You're … oh Merlin, Mione … may I?"

She seems to know what I'm asking, because she lifts her arms slightly and launch myself into them. "I don't want to hurt you," I mutter into her neck.

"You won't," she whispers.

And, with that, the tears that I have been stuffing down for the past half hour or so force themselves to the surface, but I fight them back. I'm gasping for breath, clasping her to me.

"It's all right," she whispers.
I clutch her tighter. "Yes, it will be," I say, trying to sound confident but knowing I'm falling woefully short. "Whatever we're up against here, we'll face it together, yeah?" I say, pulling back slightly to look her in the eyes.

She nods, caressing my cheek. "Yes, we will."

Just then, the door opens and Grendys re-enters.

I sit up straighter as the Healer approaches, and he pulls the chair I'd been sitting in closer to him and settles down in it. I plant myself more comfortably at the edge of Hermione's bed and take her hands in mine. We both turn to face Grendys.

"How do you feel right now, Mrs. Weasley?" he asks with a kind smile.

"Still a bit sleepy," Hermione answers with a little yawn.

"Yes, that is to be expected. The aftereffects of the serum should wear off in the next few minutes," Grendys says. "Are you feeling quite alert enough to chat just now?"

She nods. "Yes. And I'm sure that if I happen to miss anything, Ronald here will be paying close attention."

I grin at her, squeeze her hands, and stroke her cheek before turning my attention fully to Grendys.

The Healer extracts his wand and waves it toward Hermione's bed, raising the end supporting her head. "Comfortable, Mrs. Weasley?"

She nods and manages a little smile.

"Very good. Well, I've filled you both in on some of the background, but there's more to tell. I thought it best to share this information with you as a couple."

Hermione and I exchange a look.

"As I've told you both, we are concerned about deep-seated internal effects of the curses you sustained, Mrs. Weasley. They have, unfortunately, had several weeks to settle in. I believe the odds of reversing them are still favorable, but we have some work to do to make up for lost time."

He pauses and clears his throat. Crap. He looks like whatever he's about to say isn't going to be easy. Not a good sign. My heart is pounding in my throat.

"We've seen signs of soft-tissue damage in the lining of your heart and your stomach, Mrs. Weasley. The heart damage would explain the fatigue you've been experiencing. And it sounds as if you've had some difficulty with eating and digesting lately, yes?"

Hermione nods. Merlin. I didn't know about the digestive trouble. She must see the look of confusion on my face, because she squeezes my hands and nods. "Not to worry, darling. I've just been limiting myself to tea and toast at most meals for the past week, maybe a bit of soup. I wouldn't expect you to have noticed with all that's been going on."

Shit. I should have noticed. But I didn't. "I'm so sorry, Mione. Why didn't you say anything?"

She smiles weakly. "I didn't want to worry you."

Ugh.
Grendys clears his throat again. "The good news about the heart and stomach damage is that it is fairly easy to reverse. We've already begun. The antidotes you took earlier, Mrs. Weasley, were largely directed at undoing that damage, and based on the vital signs that we have been monitoring, we have already made very encouraging progress. I'm confident we will return your heart function and your stomach function to normal levels in a very short period of time — perhaps even as soon as the next 24 hours if all goes well."

Hermione breathes a sigh of relief and I lift her hands to kiss them before dropping them back to my lap.

"I'm happy to report that your lung function also appears to be nearly normal, Mrs. Weasley, so that's a positive," Grendys continues. "But …"

I might be imagining it, but the pause after that "but" seems like it goes on forever and ever.

"But …" he repeats, "one system in particular has been hard-hit, and your symptoms are consistent with what we have seen in other documented cases."

I feel every muscle in my body coil itself into a knot, and I'm ready to launch myself at this bloody tosser if he doesn't come out and tell us what he's on about, and right now.

He must sense my agitation, because he leans forward and places a hand on Hermione's arm, and a pained expression comes over his face.

"Mrs. Weasley," he says softly. "Because the Crucio was directed so consistently at your abdomen, there appears to be extensive internal scarring in the general area of your reproductive system — the internal lining of your uterus has sustained some damage, but what concerns me more than that is the scarring around to the fallopian tubes and the ovaries. As you most likely know, these are very delicate organs. I am hopeful that we can reverse the effects of the Crucio there, but I cannot know for sure if we can restore … fertility … until we have had an opportunity to administer more targeted remedies."

My eyes track over every point on Grendys' face, and then I slowly realize that my jaw is hanging open. I shut it, then turn to Hermione, whose face is red, her eyes swollen with tears. She's looking at Grendys, too, with an expression of disbelief.

"Are you saying I can't … we can't …" she murmurs.

"I wish I could give you a clearer prognosis, Mrs. Weasley, but right now, there simply isn't enough data," he replies. "I recommend we begin treatments at once and, after four or five days, we should know better what we're up against. We haven't seen many cases of women … well … surviving so much Crucio exposure, so the outlook is difficult to determine. But, on the plus side, we know which serums, antidotes and counterspells developed by Healers the world over have delivered the most potent results against Crucio damage, and we stand ready to deploy the full arsenal of these treatments."

"Uh, all right, then," I stammer, my voice sounding choked and hoarse. "What kind of treatments are we talking about?"

Grendys straightens up and adjusts his glasses, apparently relieved to be able to talk about actions he can take, things he can control, rather than unknowns.

"The best course of treatment, in my team's view, would attack the problem from multiple fronts," he says with a crisper tone. "If you consent, Mrs. Weasley, we would administer a more potent
dose of the Shikyu Hiringyu serum you took earlier, and we would maintain that dosage for seven
days, perhaps as many as ten. This serum has proven to be extremely effective in removing Dark
scar tissue from female reproductive organs. The serum does, however, have a significant side
effect, which you have experienced: It puts the patient in a suspended dream state — not altogether
unpleasant, I'm told, but it means that you would be rendered effectively unconscious during the
length of the treatment — in this case, for the better part of a week," Grendys explains.

I look at Hermione. "It wasn't bad," she says, trying to smile at me. "I could use the sleep."
I shake my head at her and scowl. "Don't joke about that."

"I'm sorry, darling," she answers, rubbing my hands in hers. "It'll be all right. It will."

I tear my gaze from her face and back to Grendys. "What else?"

"The second course of action would be to cast a series of healing spells via our most skilled
Surgical Wand Wielders," he says. "They would place you, Mrs. Weasley, under the Curatium
Falloppio, the Mehnyak Utero, and the Ovaire Curatif on a rotating basis throughout the course of
treatment. These are spells that can be safely and easily cast while you are in the Hibernation
Trance brought on by the Shikyu Hiringyu serum.

"The third leg of our strategy would be to cast a Menstruo Benessere, which forms a magical
chamber of sorts, a bio-regenerative force field that cushions the patient on all sides and beams
alpha waves, positive ionic radiation and beta-crystallic vibrations to damaged tissue on a 24/7
basis. The radiant energy field surrounding the patient accelerates the growth of healthy cells while
helping the body to shed damaged ones."

Suddenly, I can't think. I'm just … my mind is fucking reeling. Hermione's hurt. Seriously hurt.
These blighters are talking about putting her under for a bloody week or maybe more. She's going
to need round-the-clock care, and all sorts of sodding potions and spells that I've never effing heard
of. And even then … she might not …

I turn to look at Hermione, and she looks right back at me, her head nestled deep inside her pillow,
and we're both simply … boggled … I'm probably squeezing her hands harder than I ought to, but
… I can't let go … and my heart is pounding so hard I can feel it in my effing ears.

"This is a lot of information to take in, I realize," Grendys says, but I can barely hear him. He might
as well be a thousand miles away. "I'll give you two a few moments alone, shall I?"

I nod absently, but I can't really focus on him or anything other than the look of abject fear in
Hermione's eyes. Dear, sweet Merlin. Soon Hermione's eyes are pooling with tears, and mine are,
too. In a flash, we're clutching each other, and I'm lying on top of her, choking back tears against
her shoulder, while she weeps into mine.

"Oh, Mione … my Mione … I shouldn't have let her … oh gods…"

"No, please … oh, Ron, darling … please … it wasn't your fault … I just … I'm … so sorry, so
sorry…"

"Shhh … don't … don't do that. Don't apologize…"

I feel her nod against my chest, and then she unleashes another stream of sobs. My mind is a
jumble, and after days of mourning, I can hardly believe I have found a new well of grief to tap
into, but I have, and this one is deeper than I could have imagined. Gods, we may never … our
plans … oh, Merlin. I'm trying desperately not to cry, sensing that she needs me to hold it together,
to be strong. If I start to lose it, maybe she will, too.

We both sort of calm down for a minute, then Hermione tumbles into tears again, and I lean back and cup her face in my hands.

"We'll get through this, love," I say firmly, looking her in the eyes and trying, however ineffectively, to put on a braver face. My throat is burning from the lump I'm choking down. "Whatever life throws at us, Little Dove, whatever lies ahead, we'll get through it. Together, like we always have. I promise you, Mione."

She shakes her head. "Oh, Ron … but … but … I know what this means to you, to us…"

I feel a shudder run through me. Got to stay focused. "One step at a time," I say with a hoarse voice, so hoarse I almost don't recognize myself. "First we get you well, sweetheart, then we see what's next, yeah?"

She studies my face and then is racked by another round of sobs. She pulls me close and I hold her tight. After a few minutes, she says in a tiny voice, "I'm frightened."

I nod. "Me, too."

Another pause. "I want…"


I pull her closer, shooshing her. "Oh, Mione…"

Just then, a hand grasps my shoulder and gives it a gentle shake. "Mr. Weasley? I'm sorry to interrupt, Mr. Weasley, but …"

I sniff, pull back slightly from Hermione, and raise my eyes. It's McKendry. Grendys is standing behind her. "I'm dreadfully sorry to interrupt, Mr. Weasley, but we must get started if we are to…"

She's talking but I'm not really listening. I suddenly realize that Hermione and I haven't really talked about what we're going to do. I mean, Grendys & Company seem convinced that we need to follow their recommendations and follow them now. Ignoring whatever McKendry's blathering about, I turn to look at Hermione.

"What do you want to do, love?"

"Hmm?" She seems confused by the question.

McKendry has stopped talking.

"What do you want to do, Hermione? Does this seem right to you?"

And then it occurs to me. Who the hell is this Grendys anyway? He seems nice enough, but … I've never seen him before in my bloody life, have I. And yet, bugger … I've let him touch my wife, for fuck's sake. What was I thinking? Where was this guy during the war? I mean, what better way for the Death Eaters to finish the job that fucking Bellatrix bitch started than through a Healer…

The Patronus takes off, and Hermione struggles to lift herself up onto her elbows. "Ronald Bilius Weasley! What on Earth do you think you're doing?"

"I've got some questions, some serious fucking questions, Hermione, and I'm going to put them to the only person I trust to answer them, god damn it, and I'm going to do it now."

"Mr. Weasley, I—" Grendys says.

"I don't mean to offend you or anyone else on your staff, Grendys," I growl, cutting him off, "but I just spent the past year being chased by Death Eaters, Snatchers and bloody Voldemort himself. And in the process, your patient was tortured to within an inch of her life. If you think I'm going to let you lay one more finger on my wife without checking you out, you're barking."

"Ronald, please!" Hermione huffs, wobbling on her elbows.

"Mione, let me handle this," I huff right back. "And lie down."

"Ronald, these people are taking care of me, and—"

"No, Mrs. Weasley," Grendys cuts in with a kind smile that suddenly makes me feel a little foolish. "Your husband is quite right to be so cautious, and it speaks well of him that he is thinking of every contingency."

"Well," Hermione sputters, "that's … that's not the point …"

"Firstly, I do insist that you lie back down as your husband suggested, Mrs. Weasley. And secondly, yes, you're entitled to some reassurance about my background and qualifications. If it will put your husband's mind at ease, then of course, it will all be worthwhile."

Just then, the door opens and in strides Kingsley.

He makes a beeline for the opposite side of Hermione's bed and takes her hands in his own. "How's my comrade-in-arms?" he asks gently, kissing her on the forehead. Blimey, I'd forgotten that Kingsley and Hermione had been paired together on the infamous Night of Multiple Harrys, as I've come to think of it. How could that have slipped my mind?

"Minister, I'm so sorry—" Hermione stammers.

"It's Kingsley, love. It'll always be Kingsley to you lot."

She smiles weakly. "Kingsley. Kingsley, I'm so sorry to drag you here like this. I know you must have a million other more important things to do, but—"

"Hermione, I thought I made it perfectly clear at the funeral yesterday that there is no higher priority for me at the moment than to see to the well-being of you, Ron and Harry. And besides, I was already on my way to the Ward to check up on you anyway — Harry let me know that you are likely to be here for a little while. In fact, he and Ginny and Arthur and Molly are hoping to see you, as well. They're in the waiting room."

Hermione nods. Kingsley sits on the edge of the bed opposite me. Surprisingly, he's smiling.

He looks across at me and laughs mildly, punching me in the shoulder — hard. "Playing the part of protective husband, eh Ron?"

I rub the back of my neck and I can feel my ears heating up. Damn. "Sorry Kingsley, but … bugger
all … I have no idea who, er, this Healer is," I say, cocking my thumb at Grendys, "and he's proposing all sorts of mad spells and treatments, and suddenly I just got this paranoid feeling. Like, who the hell is this bloke and whose side was he on during the war anyway? And well, if I were a Death Eater who wanted to eff with one of the so-called Golden Trio, what better way to do it than through a trusted Healer, know what I mean?" I clear my throat. "Sorry, Grendys," I say, shooting him a guilty look.

"No need to apologize, Mr. Weasley, I assure you," Grendys says.

"Ron," Kingsley says, clapping a hand on my shoulder. "Grendys here is someone I would trust with my life. In fact, I have on several occasions. Like most St. Mungo's staffers, he remained on duty during the war, treating anyone who came in, regardless of the circumstances — as all great Healers do. He risked his life and his reputation on several occasions by treating muggleborns and half-bloods, and even worked with the Order's underground network to get as many patients as he could out of danger by smuggling them out of the country."

Grendys nods, looking a little embarrassed at Kingsley's praise.

"Why don't I know your name from Hogwarts, then?" I ask, wanting to be sure I've covered every possible angle.

Grendys smiles. "That's a fair question, Mr. Weasley. A great many St. Mungo's Healers get their initial training at Hogwarts. I, however, come from a family of Healers that spans back dozens of generations. All of the Healers in my family trained at the Institut Kežmarské outside Bratislava. It is an academy for Healers that has been in operation since the thirteenth century. I also received a medical degree at Comenius University, a muggle institution. I was born and raised in Marianka, just outside Bratislava, and there I might still be if I had not met a certain blonde-haired young lady in my senior-level Alchemic Potions class at Kežmarské and married her. She was raised in Godric's Hollow, and that's where we live now."

Bloody hell. I've just made a colossal arse of myself.

"Grendys, I owe you an apology," I mumble. "I feel like a berk."

"It's quite all right, I assure you," Grendys says warmly. "You and your wife have had a lot to cope with in a very short amount of time. It is understandable that you would be wary, especially after the year you have had."

I nod, but I still feel like an arse.

"Skepticism — that is to say, not taking things at face value — that's an Auror's trait, Ron," Kingsley chimes in, and I feel my ears go red again.

"Well, anyway, all right …" I mutter. Hermione takes my hand and squeezes it.

McKendry clears her throat. We all turn to her. "As I was going to say earlier, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, if we are to proceed with the treatments, then it is imperative that we begin as soon as possible."

I look at Hermione. She nods to me. I nod to McKendry.

"We trust you," Hermione says.

"Please," I add. "I'm sorry to be such an anvil-head. Please, do whatever you can." The lump rises in my throat again, nearly choking me. But I still have to speak. I look first to McKendry, then to
Grendys. "I'm placing my wife's life in your hands. There's nothing more precious to me than that."

Grendys nods solemnly, and then Hermione pulls me to her. We hug one more time as Kingsley steps away from the bed. "Grendys, I realize that time is of the essence," Kingsley says, "but may I have the family step in for a moment?"

"Yes, but only just for a moment, I must insist," Grendys says.

The next thing I know, Harry, Ginny, Mum and Dad are bustling into the room. I step back and let them smother Hermione in hugs and kisses. I'm pretty sure they don't know the full story of Hermione's condition yet, but they're saying all the right things — about how she's in the best possible hands, they're sure she'll be just fine as soon as this is over, and on and on. I'm standing back, watching the general pandemonium. I look over to Grendys, who has reached for the mirror with the squiggly lines on it and is poking at it with his finger. He meets my gaze and smiles. I chuckle back grimly and shrug in the general direction of my family. He reads my thoughts.

Grendys clears his throat loudly. "Excuse me, everyone," he says above the din. "I'm sure Mrs. Weasley is gratified by your attention, but it is time to begin her treatment. If you would please make your way to the waiting room, I will be with you shortly to give you an update."

Mum, Dad and Ginny dutifully file toward the door with Kingsley. Harry hangs back. He leans over the bed and presses his forehead against Hermione's. "You know how much I need you to come back to us, yeah?" he whispers. She nods and wraps her arms around his neck, pulling him down for another bear hug — at least the third he's given her since he came in here. "I'll be right outside," he croaks before giving her a quick peck on the cheek and pulling away.

Harry squeezes my arm before heading for the door.

"Right, then, Mr. Weasley, you are welcome to sit in the chair on the far side of the bed for the time being," McKendry says.

But first, I sit on the edge of the bed and lean over Hermione one more time. "I'll be seeing you soon, love," I say, feeling surer than I did before for some reason, and I'm glad that I have somehow found the power to seem calmer than I really am — for her sake. "I love you, Hermione Weasley. And I always will."

She gives me a watery smile. "I love you, too, darling."

I kiss Hermione's pale lips and pull away, stroking her cheek before dropping to the seat next to the bed and taking her hand in mine.


Thatcher nods and races for the door.

McKendry approaches Hermione with what looks to me like a plastic bag with a long tube sticking out of it. She waves her wand and suspends it in the air over Hermione's head and then, to my horror, she takes the end of the tube and — bloody hell, is she going to poke that tube into the back of Hermione's hand?

"Hey!" I grumble.
Hermione turns to look at me, stunned by my sudden outburst. "Ron, don't worry — they're placing an intravenous line in me, darling. I've had one before. It doesn't hurt."

"What? I've never seen a contraption like that," I say.

Grendys speaks up from across the room. "It is indeed a muggle device, Mr. Weasley, which might explain why you have never seen it before. But it is rather effective at delivering medication directly into the bloodstream as well as providing fluids and nutrients when a patient is unconscious."

Oh, bugger everything within a five-mile range. I'm a wreck.

"It'll be fine, Ron," Hermione says soothingly, nodding to McKendry to go ahead. I look away. Thankfully, by the time I look back, Hermione's hand is swathed in a bandage so I don't have to look at that sodding tube sinking into her vein. Gah.

I squeeze the hand that doesn't have a tube sticking out of it and run my fingers up and down her wrist. "I'm OK, Mione. Don't worry about me, love. I'm sorry. Just relax."

She smiles. "You try to relax too, OK?"

I nod.

"All right, Mrs. Weasley, McKendry here has the Shikyu Hiringyu serum, which she will be adding to your I.V. now. You remember how that felt at first, yes?"

Hermione nods. She turns to me, sensing, I think, that I need reassurance. Come to think of it, I do. "It feels warm at first, Ron, and then just sort of tingly. Then you just drift off into a pleasant sleep. Please remember that, darling. I'll be fine, and comfortable, all right?"

I nod again, the lump in my throat climbing higher.

McKendry uses a long needle-looking thing to poke into the bag above Hermione's head and, I dunno, sort of pours the ruddy serum in. Hermione looks at me and I look back. Remarkably quickly, her eyes begin sinking shut. "I love you, Hermione," I whisper.

Her eyes open a bit wider for a second before continuing to slowly shut. "I love you, too, Ronald. I'll see you soon."

And, with that, she is adrift.

Grendys steps to the bedside opposite me. He gives me an apologetic smile and says, "I'm afraid I must ask you to let go of your wife's hand now, Mr. Weasley," he says. I raise the back of her hand to my lips then carefully lay it on her belly and lean back. Grendys then elevates his wand over Hermione's head. "Menstruo Benessere," he says, and — bloody hell — Hermione's body rises from the bed slowly, hovering about a foot above it, and then she is surrounded by a warm pink, I dunno … bubble, I suppose. This must be that bio-regenerative thing that Grendys was on about.

The sight of her, so small and still inside this chamber, outside of my reach, causes the lump in my throat to ache even worse than it did before.

"Mr. Weasley, why don't you step outside for a few moments and visit with your relatives?" McKendry says. "They are here to support you, after all, and Mrs. Weasley is in good hands for the moment. We have some spells we are going to conduct, and then we will join you to update the entire family."
I nod, taking one more look at Hermione before trudging toward the door.

I open it to find Harry, Ginny, Mum, Dad, Kingsley and — bloody hell — McGonagall sitting in a small private waiting room just outside Hermione's chambers. They all stand. Mum holds out her arms and, like I'm bloody sleepwalking, I move to her wordlessly and hurl myself against her, letting loose the flood of tears that has been threatening to escape for the past hour or so. Mum holds me tight, rocking me, shooshing me, and I sob incoherently against her shoulder. Oh gods, I can't think straight … I can't even speak, much less form sentences. Merlin help me.

Eventually I settle down enough to be able to breathe and, later still, to be able to speak, and I pull back and nod. "I'll be OK. I promise. I'll be OK. It's just that, that she …"

And suddenly I'm choking again. Mum wraps me in her arms again and Dad rubs my back with his hand.

"It's all right, son," he whispers. "Or it will be, Ronnie. It will."

"She needs …" I mutter.

"What does she need, Ronnie?" Mum murmurs soothingly.

Oh gods. "She needs … she needs her Mum," I reply.

After a pause, Mum whispers, "of course she does, dear," but I can tell she's just humoring me.

I look up over Mum's shoulder and Harry meets my eye.

"Well, let's bloody well get her then, eh mate?" says Harry with a fierce look the likes of which I haven't seen since the day of the battle.

I nod at him and crack into a half grin. "Damn straight."
Chapter 14: Secret Keepers

"Ron, Harry, I am not at all comfortable with the two of you going to the other side of the planet while Death Eaters are at large," says Kingsley with a scowl. "The Australians have expressed their willingness to do anything necessary to help. If I asked Minister Quinlan, he would dispatch a team of Aurors and Spellbreakers from Sydney to the Grangers' home today, without hesitation. That way, you wouldn't need to take any unnecessary risks."

Harry and I exchange a look. He knows exactly what I'm thinking, and vice versa.

I need to be diplomatic here. Not exactly my greatest skill. But Kingsley's help will be critical if we are to pull this mission off quickly enough to be back here by the time Hermione wakes up from that sodding Japanese potion.

"Kingsley," I say, trying to keep my voice even. "I appreciate all you've done — more than I can say. Truly. And we're psyched the Australians are willing to help, because we're going to need them. Knowing Hermione's wandwork, it's going to take a damned skilled Spellbreaker to undo the charm she placed on her parents — especially since she won't be there to offer guidance."

Kingsley nods. "I'm glad you're listening to reason. Let me just send a Patronus to Quinlan now and—"

"Sorry, Kingsley, but I think you jumped ahead of Ron a few steps there," Harry interjects. Everyone crowded into this little waiting room outside Hermione's hospital chambers — Kingsley, Mum, Dad and McGonagall — turns to Harry, a little shocked to hear him pipe up. Well, everyone but Ginny. She's beaming at him and takes his hand. "Hear Ron out," Harry adds in a milder tone, looking down at Ginny and giving her a smile. Then he returns his gaze to Kingsley. "Please."

I give Harry a nod as if to say, thanks mate, and I know he understands. "Kingsley," I continue, turning back to him. "We absolutely, positively need your help. And yes, we need the Australians' help. But Harry and I are going to fetch Hermione's parents, and we're going to get them here before she wakes up. I'm afraid that's final. We're going, with or without your help."

Harry grimaces at me for a second. Apparently that last bit was a touch too aggressive to be considered remotely diplomatic. But it's the truth.

Kingsley's brow furrows.

"But Ronald," Mum cuts in, her voice shaking. "Kingsley's right. It's so far, and it's so dangerous."

"It's far, Mum, and yeah, there are still bastards out there who mean us harm. I promise we'll take every precaution and we'll be back here as soon as we can," I say, resting a hand on her shoulder and looking into her eyes. I know the past year has taken a lot out of her — there are more streaks
of gray in her hair now, and her skin has grown so pale, probably from spending too many months cooped up indoors at Auntie Muriel's. I don't want to cause her more pain, but I just don't see any way around it. So it's up to me to reassure her as best I can. "Harry and I know what we're doing, I promise you," I say softly. "But think about it, Mum," I add, cocking my head toward Harry. "Hermione, Harry and I started this mission almost a year ago — and Hermione was forced to take one of the toughest steps in it without us."

McGonagall, meanwhile, seems completely lost. She's shaking her head, her brow furrowed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Weasley. I don't know what you're referring to, this 'step' you're talking about."

Suddenly I feel a little guilty for keeping her in the dark about so many things for so long.

"On her own, Professor, with no help from anyone," I explain, as gently as I can manage, "Hermione had to figure out a way to protect her parents before we took off on this mission. You've seen how the Death Eaters trashed the Grangers' house while we were on the hunt, Kingsley — the Grangers would be dead if they'd been in Cambridge when the Death Eaters broke through the protective enchantments Hermione put on the place. And Hermione saw it coming weeks in advance. But she couldn't turn to the Ministry for help — it was infiltrated with Death Eaters who would sooner have killed all three of them simply for being so-called mudbloods," I add, shuddering at the feel of the word in my mouth, "much less being in league with the sodding Chosen One. She couldn't turn to any of her teachers at Hogwarts, not that you wouldn't have helped her, Professor, and of course Hagrid would have helped her in heartbeat if he could. But she couldn't risk putting either of you in danger, since Hogwarts was under the control of the bleeding Ministry."

McGonagall nods and blinks back the tears that have been threatening to fall.

"But Ron," Mum interrupts. "I wish she would have come to me and your father. We might have been able to do something for her parents through the Order."

"I'm sorry, but she thought about that. And she knew that even if she had gotten help from the Order, her parents would never have agreed to leave the country — or let her accompany us on the assignment Dumbledore set for us — if they knew what kind of danger she was in," I say, meeting Mum's gaze. "She hated having to use subterfuge, I know she did. But if she hadn't, the Grangers would either have insisted on staying in Britain, which would have been like signing their death warrant, or they would have insisted on pulling Hermione out of the mission, which would have been like signing ours. All three of us knew we couldn't do what Dumbledore asked us to do without Hermione."

McGonagall chokes back a sob. "I so wish she had come to me. I should have seen…"

Harry, who is standing nearest McGonagall, turns to her and places a hand rather awkwardly on her upper arm. "You couldn't have known, Professor. Dumbledore insisted on absolute secrecy."

"It was too much to ask of people so young," she replies, pressing a hand over Harry's. "Too much."

He sighs. "We all did what we had to do, I suppose," Harry says, "and that includes Dumbledore."

I clear my throat. "And Hermione did what she had to do," I add. "She saw no choice but to alter her parents' memories. And knowing Hermione, she ran through every possible option in her head before she settled on that step. Then she made absolutely sure she did everything flawlessly. She set up a charm that sent her parents' patients to other practices believing the Grangers were on an extended holiday, she placed enchantments on the house to make the neighbors believe the same thing, she rearranged her parents' finances, she created new identities for them … the magic
involved … sweet Merlin, it was monumental. Then she had to come up with a spell that would erase the memory of her existence from the minds of the only family she had. And she had to do all that alone, because communication with me and Harry by Owl, Floo or any other means was out of the question."

Just thinking of it causes the lump to rise again in my throat. Damn.

"Now, she's fighting injuries she got while she was effing alone again," I continue, knowing I still have to convince Kingsley, and stifling my rage and tears. "And she tells me she's frightened and … in a moment of weakness that I'm sure she'd take back if she could … she admits to me that she wants her Mum. Her Mum, who's thousands of miles away and has no idea who she even has a daughter anymore."

I take a deep breath and gather myself. I need to be strong now — for her.

"I know none of you were there when I took my bonding vows with Hermione, but the promise I made that day is bona fide," I say, realizing I'm nearly shouting now, but not bloody caring. "Hermione is blood of my blood, bone of my bone — and that means her parents are that to me, too. So if you think I'm going to let strangers from the Australian Ministry waltz into the Grangers' house, fanny about with their memories, and then try to explain what's happened to them and where their daughter is without me being there to help out, then you don't know me very well. Harry, Hermione and I are on a mission, and this mission isn't done until Hermione's parents are back where they belong, safe and sound. If Hermione's not able to be there for the last mile, Harry and I will be."

There's a stunned silence. Then Harry claps me on the back.

"That about sums it up," Harry says, turning to the group. "So, what'll it be?"

Mum's sniffling. McGonagall still looks mildly confused but also … impressed? Yes, I think I've seen that look from her before. Ginny's beaming through her tears. Dad's flat-out smiling at us, his hands planted deep in his pockets. And Kingsley … he's nodding.

"Ron, remind me to talk to you later about a career in the Wizengamot," Kingsley says, extending a hand to me with a wicked grin. We shake hands, and he pulls me into a hug. "I'll help, but with a few conditions," he continues. "First, you'll wait until I can set up international Portkeys to get you there, which should be by first thing tomorrow morning," he says, looking at his watch. "Second, when you land in Sydney, you'll be accompanied by members of the Australian Auror and Spellbreaker squads."

I shrug. "Done and done," I reply.

"Not so fast," he says, suddenly looking serious. "There's a third condition."

Harry and I exchange a wary look.

Then Kingsley breaks into a wide grin. "Get your arses back here with the Grangers," he says, "before that girl wakes up."

The next morning, I awaken with a start. Harry is shaking my shoulder. "It's 6 o'clock Ron," he says. I open my eyes and remember where I am: curled up on a cot next to Hermione's hospital bed. I sit up and try to rub the kink out of my neck. You'd think a magical hospital could come up with a more comfortable cot, for the love of Merlin.

"Morning, mate," Harry whispers as he drops two rucksacks on the floor at the foot of Hermione's
"Morning," I grumble as I rise to my feet to stretch.

"How'd she do last night?" Harry says, eyeing Hermione through the pink medi-bubble with a look of concern.

I shrug. "Quiet. She really doesn't stir much on this stuff — which they tell me is good, but I dunno, I'd rather see more signs of life, if you know what I mean."

George steps through the door, as Mum promised he would when she headed home last night. He looks like he hasn't slept at all, with dark circles under his eyes and his hair pointing in all directions. He shuffles up to me and gives me a punch on the arm. "How's our girl?" he says, cocking his head toward Hermione with a grim half-smile.

"Mum filled you in, yeah?" I ask.

He nods.

"Well, then … she's going to be in this sleep state for the next week or so."

Harry checks his watch. "Ron, we have to move if we're going to meet that 7 o'clock Portkey," he says, stooping down and tossing me a rucksack.

I hoist it onto my shoulders. "Oof, what did Mum pack in here?"

"I don't know the whole list, but I'm pretty sure there's at least a dozen pairs of underwear in mine," Harry says as he swings his rucksack on.

George laughs mirthlessly, points his wand at my cot, and Transforms it into a reclining easy chair, stretching out on it. "You all run along," he says. "I'll look after Sleeping Beauty here. Ginny says she'll come spell me at noon, and then Fleur is taking the evening shift."

I feel a mix of guilt and gratitude that my siblings, Mum, Dad, Luna, Neville and even McGonagall and Hagrid have agreed to take turns sitting by Hermione's bedside while Harry and I are away. But I really don't want her to be alone. I look at her, longing to hold her, to kiss her, to whisper in her ear that I'm going to get her parents and I'll be back soon, but I can't what with that damned pink bubble. Not being able to touch her is driving me mad.

"Don't worry, little bro," George says, cutting into my worried thoughts. "She'll be in good hands with the staff here. And one of us will always be here to keep an eye on her."

"Thanks," I say weakly.

"Hey, what's the point of having a huge family if you can't cover round-the-clock hospital shifts?" George says nonchalantly. "Now get out of here. And be careful."

As we freshen up in a men's room down the hall, Harry runs through the plan Kingsley provided last night. "Kingsley says he's lined up Aurors to meet us and hang out with us between each Portkey," Harry says as I brush my teeth. "I've never traveled this far by Portkey before, but apparently it's necessary to rest for at least 15 minutes between each one."

"Oh yeah," I say through a mouthful of toothpaste. "When we went to Egypt, it took three Portkeys, and I threw up after the second one."
"Well that's just lovely," Harry says.

"Hey, I was a kid. Won't happen this time."

"No it won't — because we're going to be sure we take the proper break each time."

"Sheesh, all right, all right. We'll do it properly. Merlin, you're as bad as Hermione."

"I'll tell her you said that."

I laugh and dry my face with a towel.

Harry stretches and continues. "Anyway, so our first destination is—"

"Wait — don't say it," I interrupt. "Blimey."

"Huh?"

"Just … do you have it written down?"

"Erm, yeah."

"That's good enough for me, mate. But let's not talk about it here in the sodding men's room," I say, stealing a look beneath the door of the stall behind me. "Never know who's listening."

"You've gotten paranoid, you know that?"

"Gee, I wonder why."

Harry punches me in the arm and we both pull on our rucksacks. We grab a quick bite in the commissary — not too much, since Portkeys and full stomachs don't mix — and head to the first Portkey station in a remote corner of Hampstead Heath, behind a brick bridge spanning a stream. From there, we land in what looks like a merchant's stall in a market in Istanbul. A Turkish Auror named Azize meets us and stands guard during our holdover. Nice girl — dark skin, straight black hair, blue eyes, big into dragons, apparently — Charlie would fall head over heels for her. Next stop is inside a bus depot just outside Bangalore. The Auror there is a bloke named Winston, after the British prime minister for some ruddy reason. Not too chatty, this one, but that's OK. He's on high alert, which Harry and I appreciate. On the third leg — Bangalore to Jakarta — I feel the familiar queasiness, but it settles quickly when the Auror there, a young woman named Anggun, gives me a mint.

Thankfully, Jakarta to Sydney goes without a hitch. Upon landing in the middle of a Quidditch pitch, we're greeted by three men and one woman. The shortest of the men — a stocky bloke with a square jaw and a nest of greying blond hair on top of his head, approaches us and says the agreed-upon code word to prove he's legit: "Expelliarmus."

Harry smiles, just as he did when Kingsley told him that was going to be the password. "It's your trademark, Harry," Kingsley had said with a wink. "Couldn't think of anything better. No Death Eater would say it. Not now."

We answer with our agreed-upon password — "Dumbledore" — but the stocky bloke is already grinning from ear to ear.

"Fergus Quinlan, boys," he says in a booming voice, extending his hand and giving us both a hearty handshake. "As Minister of Magic, please allow me to welcome you to Australia, Mr.
Potter, Mr. Weasley."

Bloody hell. He's the blooming Australian Minister. Don't these Ministers have anything better to do than to fanny about with me and Harry?

The two of us are still a bit rattled by the Portkey, but before we can really get our bearings, Quinlan is jostling us over to his Auror team and introducing us around. "Of course, no introductions are necessary," Quinlan says giving Harry's back a rough slap and nearly knocking him over. "Everyone down here knows who you two are. But let me introduce you to Jenkins, Mortimer and Adina. Adina here is a Spellbreaker — the best we've got." Adina is what Australians would call an Aborigone, I think — she has very dark and brilliant, radiant skin, black hair that's tightly curled in ringlets about her head, a broad, white smile and twinkling eyes. She gives us a little bow and nods to Quinlan to continue. "Adina here will be helping you on the wandwork with Miss Granger's parents. Mortimer and Jenkins, on the other hand, are here simply because they're badasses, eh boys?" They grimace, apparently uncomfortable with Quinlan's brand of praise. Jenkins seems friendly enough — a big, round bloke with a buzzcut and an owl tattoo on his forearm — but Mortimer looks like he'd rather be anywhere else. He silently sizes us up through a curtain of long blond hair and nods. "These two here, their only job is to keep you lot safe," Quinlan barrels on, "and they will. They'll get you where you need to go and make sure you don't encounter any difficulties along the way. Kingsley tells us you're working on a tight schedule, so let's cut out the malarkey and get down to business, yeah?"

I'm still shaking hands with the Aurors as Quinlan says this — and I look over at Harry and can't help but laugh. Crikey.

"I've got to be honest," I say with a grin. "I wasn't expecting to the Minister himself to be here to greet us, and I wasn't expecting you to be this up to speed on what we're here for."

Quinlan barks out a laugh. "Kingsley spelled it all out for me, and let me just say, we go back a long, long way, Kingsley and I. I'd do whatever he asked no matter what, but when he told me the ones who needed help were Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger — well, I dropped everything."

I rub the back of my neck. Before I can speak, Harry answers. "We're honored to hear you say that, Minister," he says.

"Quinlan, my boy, Quinlan!"

"Er, Quinlan — thanks. Very honored. And we have the utmost respect for Kingsley as well. We do have a rather delicate mission to complete here, we need to do it quickly, and, yeah, we'll be honest — we could use all the help we can get."

Quinlan grins. "Right. What say you to this, then, boys," he says, slapping his hands together. "It's about 7 p.m. Sydney time now, fellas, and you must be right knackered from all that Portkey nonsense. Tough form of travel if you ask me, but it beats the hell out of Transcontinental Floo. At any rate, what say we Apparate you two back to the Ministry — you're welcome to bunk in the guest quarters in the Minister's suite there. We'll want to keep your visit on the down-low, so no hotels. Then we can go over a few of the particulars with the team, and then we'll get you two fed up, rested and we'll start fresh tomorrow. How 'bout it?"

Harry and I trade a nod. "Lead on, Quinlan," he says, and we Side-Along with him to his office.

I should be sleepy — the steaks and potatoes that Quinlan ordered in for us were big enough to choke a Hippogriff, and all the Portkeying did sort of get to me, but now that Harry and I are
settled in for the night inside Quinlan's amazingly lavish guest quarters, all I feel like doing is pacing. Harry's not sleepy either. After all, it's something like early evening back in London. Not exactly bedtime. We've both gone over the plan for tomorrow at least a dozen times. I think all we managed to do was to get one another keyed up — especially when Adina started talking about backup plans that we'll have to follow if her code-breaking goes wrong. Shit.

I try to distract myself by taking in the view of Sydney Harbor and wandering about the balcony and through the many rooms in this bright, modern-looking suite — there's a full bar, a pool table, three bedrooms, three baths, a kitchen, a parlor and a dining room, all done up in whites and greys and blues and light-colored wood — but pretty soon the walking tour grows old. I hadn't realized how unsettled I'd feel being this far away from Hermione at a time like this. I can't stop thinking about her in that pink bubble. I have to remind myself that people she trusts are with her — probably Fleur right now.

"Ron," says Harry from his current perch on the sofa, "will you please sit down? You're making me dizzy with all this pacing."

I stop and sink my hands into my pockets. "Sorry. I just … don't quite know what to do with myself. I almost wish we had headed over to the Grangers' tonight."

Harry sighs. "Let's watch some telly, yeah?" He reaches for a small rectangular box with green and blue buttons that's been sitting on the ottoman in front of him and points it toward the far wall. The wall lights up and Harry starts pressing various buttons — thank Merlin he knows how to work these muggle-y things — and soon he finds what he says is an Australian rules football match.

I grab a couple of beers from the bar, hand him one, and settle down on the far end of the sofa and stretch out, trying to pay attention to the game, though I don't know a bloody thing about it.

"Any idea what the rules are?" I ask.

"Not really. But I figure we can sort it out as we watch."

"Sure."

Soon my mind is wandering, and I can tell Harry's is, too. When we've drained our beers, Harry jumps up and grabs a couple more, plus a bag of crisps. Too bad I'm in such a mood — otherwise, I'd really enjoy this place. There's a limitless supply of snacks in the larder and more beer than I've ever seen in one place outside of a pub — all various muggle brands that I've never heard of before.

We chow down — not that I'm hungry, it's just something to do — and watch the match in a distracted state.

By our third beer, I'm beginning to feel … maybe not tired, maybe not relaxed … just, maybe … a little less worried. Hell, Harry and I can do this. Yeah, explaining all this shite to the Grangers is going to be tough, but … they'll get it eventually … right? And besides … we all want the same thing … we want Hermione to be healthy and happy. We can pull together around that … right? Oh, bugger. They're going to want to throttle me. Still … this is what Hermione wants. What Hermione needs. I told her I'd walk through fire for her, and I meant it. And I'm starting to have the feeling that recovering her parents tomorrow is going to be more like walking through fire than I bargained for.

I lean back and sigh. This sound draws Harry's attention.
"It's going to be all right, Ron. It really is."

"Yeah," I say, kicking off my trainers. "I know. It's just … hell, there's just so much to think about right now. I'm making myself mental."

"One step at a time, mate."

I chuckle grimly. "Yeah, that's what I said to Hermione last night after …" Shit. I didn't really want to bring that up with Harry. He knows, of course, but it's, well, awkward.

He looks at me questioningly, though. What the hell. Might as well finish the thought. "After the Healer told us … the news," I add weakly.

He forms a silent "oh" with his lips, then looks down at his beer. "You know, if you want to talk about that…"

"No," I say a little too quickly and sharply. Harry seems — offended, maybe? "Crap, it's not that I don't want to talk about … well, if I did want to talk about it, of course it would be with you, Harry … It's just, it's hard, you know? And I haven't quite sorted out how I feel about it all. No, that's not true. I know exactly how I feel, but … I mean, I'm…"

I start to realize that I'm rambling. Harry is looking at me like he thinks I'm mad but he's trying really, really hard not to show it. "Bugger." Look, Harry, the truth is, I'm fucking gutted about it. If I told you how much, you'd think I'm weird."

Harry smiles sadly. "Too late," he says. "I already think you're weird." I toss a crisp at his head and he chuckles.

"But seriously," he says, putting his beer bottle down on the end table next to him and turning to face me. "You've got a right to be gutted about it, Ron. It's … it's a big deal."

"Hmmppph," I mumble, nodding and looking down at my beer while choking on yet another ruddy lump in my throat.

"Those Healers, though," he continues. "They seem to know what they're doing, yeah? I mean, if there's a way to, uh, work it all out, I think they'll find it."

Part of me knows he's right, knows it's important to hold onto hope, but another part of me — the larger part, frankly, that's downright exhausted by this fucking war and all the grief and sorrow and worry — well, that part of me feels like I can't risk hoping. The possibility of disappointment feels too real somehow. A lot of things have gone right in my life lately — winning Hermione and winning the war being tops on that list — but quite a few things have gone terribly, terribly wrong.

"I dunno, Harry," I mutter, wondering if I should even hint at how much this matters to me, or if Harry will find my daydreaming about a sodding family at this stage of my life to be mildly pathetic. Maybe it's the beer talking, but I decide to bumble ahead. I mean, this is Harry, after all. "Did you ever, you know, picture yourself … you know, with a kid and all?"

Harry purses his lips and looks past my head, toward the windows. "Yes and no," he says slowly. "That's the honest answer."

He runs his hand through his hair. "You really want to know?"

I nod.
"If we're going to go there then, hell, I need another beer and more crisps," he says, heading for the kitchen.

He hands another beer to me as he returns, and we dig in to a fresh bag of crisps and a box of pretzels. "This is an odd thing to tell you over a bag of crisps," he says with a dry smile, pressing a button to make the noise of the football match go away. "But, umm, I was fairly sure for years there, Ron, that I wouldn't survive this thing with Voldemort. So imagining a future with a career and a wife and kids and all that — it just wasn't something I spent much time worrying about."

"Fucking hell, Harry. That's, that's …"

"Yeah, kinda mental, I know."

"No, I was going to say awful, actually."

"Well, it was that, too," he says, taking another swig of his beer. "I mean, when Ginny and I got together, I allowed myself to think about those things now and then, but the real fun in it for me was the here and now — the chance to take a mental break from Voldemort and all that shite and just … live, you know? To enjoy things that other kids our age took for granted. Like having a girlfriend. I couldn't see too far past that — at least not back then — and I didn't really want to. That changed on the hunt, though. I started to think about what I wanted if things worked out — though that seemed like a pretty big if. And I knew that if things worked out, whatever future I might have, I hoped to have it with Ginny. I guess that's why I spent so much time staring at her dot on the Marauder's Map. It was torture, but I couldn't stop doing it."

"Merlin."

"Yeah."

We're quiet for a minute, letting our eyes wander aimlessly over the football match on the wall.

"It's always been the complete opposite for me," I blurt out without really planning it.

"Hmm?"

I shrug. "You're going to think I'm a nutter, and I'm not going to be able to describe this very well, I don't suppose, but … thinking about the future … Hermione … and, you know, kids and all that … sometimes those thoughts were the only thing that kept me going, Harry."

There's a long silence. Harry nods. "Yeah, that makes sense, mate."

I'm not so sure it really does make sense, but I'm too choked up to speak, so we both pretend to be interested in the match for a minute. After a few more sips of beer, I feel like my throat is loose enough to talk again without sounding like too much of a tit.

"I know that it's ridiculous to think about, you know, babies of all things at our age. It's kind of embarrassing to admit it's even been on my mind. Probably wouldn't have been if there hadn't been a ruddy war on. I guess the world expects a bloke to be more like, I dunno, Seamus or Dean or McLaggen or even Fred and George — just, you know, looking to have a good time, pull a girl here and there, always on the make," I say glumly. "Might have been easier if I had been that way."

I'm not looking at Harry so I'm a little surprised at how firm his voice sounds when he answers.

"You could never be like those guys, Ron."
"Never. I mean," he continues, "it's always been Hermione for you. Always. Even when you nearly effed up your chances with her for good with that whole Lavender mess, it's always been Hermione. So, you know — so what? You come from a big family and you want that with her. Why should you feel bad about that? You don't have to apologize to anybody. OK, so you're not bloody Cormac McLaggen. Thank Merlin."

I rub my neck, feeling a bit choked up again, trying to absorb what Harry's just said. I feel a pang of homesickness for Hermione all of a sudden, but I stuff it down.

After another awkward minute in which we both stare at the match without really watching it, I feel the need to speak up again.

"I wasn't thinking it would or should happen soon. Kids, I mean. But I liked thinking that it could happen. Someday. You know?"

Harry looks down into the bag of crisps in his lap. "And it still could, mate. You can't give up hope."

I purse my lips. "Yeah. We'll see."

Suddenly I'm feeling sleepy. "Time for some shuteye, I think," I say, rising and collecting an armful of empties.

Harry does the same, crumpling the pile of crisps bags. "All right — I'll cast a Tempus Evigilo to wake us up at 7 a.m., yeah?" he says.

"Sounds good."

We shuffle toward our rooms and, before I close the door, I stop and turn. "Hey, Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

He smiles, gives me a little salute, and steps into his room.

Next morning, outside Mr. and Mrs. Granger's — erm, I mean, Mr. and Mrs. Wilkins' — posh-looking house on a tree-lined suburban street, I'm suddenly racked with nerves. Holy buggering fuck. The plan that Adina helped us put in place is sound, I know it is. But I'm not worried about that so much. It's the way Hermione's parents are going to react when I tell them ... blimey ... everything. I keep going over it in my head. Should I start with the fact that we're effing married? No, if I start there, I may not survive to tell them the rest. Should I start with the fact that Hermione's in hospital? No, too much of a shock. It's better to ease into that. Tell them about the war? Voldemort? Death Eaters? Malfoy Manor? Buggeration, I'm a wreck.

Harry senses my nerves but seems to decide for the time being to leave it alone. Jenkins, Mortimer and Adina are with us anyway. They all seem ready to go.

Before you can say, "Bob's your uncle" (or "I'm your bloody son-in-law"), we're inside the residence of Wendell and Monica Wilkins, Jenkins and Mortimer having Stunned them both in the front hallway before hoisting them over their shoulders, carrying them deeper into the house and depositing them on the sofa in the lounge. Quinlan was right — Mortimer and Jenkins are badass.
It occurs to me with a shudder, though, just how easy it would have been for any random Death Eaters to break their way into Hermione's house in Cambridge and attack her parents. They would have been goners. This thought only confirms my belief that Hermione was right to do what she did. And I have a feeling I'm going to have to bear that in mind in just a few minutes.

Jenkins then goes to stand guard outside the front door, while Mortimer takes up a position at the back. Harry and I, meanwhile, stand awkwardly before Hermione's parents, assessing the situation. I'd noticed it before, but now that I've got time to really look, it occurs to me all over again how much Hermione really does resemble her Mum. She got her curly hair from her father it would seem — and, she has claimed, her father also bequeathed her with his fiery temper.

I gulp at the thought.

"OK, so," says Harry, sounding a little wobbly. "Erm, do your thing, Adina."

Adina, who stands a good four inches shorter than Harry, steps forward confidently and takes a moment to look the Grangers over. A kindly smile comes over her face. "I like them," she declares. Not what I was expecting to hear. I mean, not that I disagree, but … "Yes. They're lovely," Adina says quietly. "Quite lovely."

She senses my confusion and looks up at me. "I'm reading their auras," she explains. "A useful first step for a Spellbreaker — to get a sense of the subject's inner landscape, in a manner of speaking. There's a warmth about the mother, a kindness, an interest in the wider world. The curiosity — it runs very deep in her. The father — highly intelligent, a bit more rigid in his way of thinking, perhaps, but that's only because he wants everything to go well for those he loves. He's a planner. But it's for good reasons. It's a way to be less fearful."

Harry kicks my trainer. "Sounds familiar, eh?" he says with a half grin.

I chuckle. "No kidding."

"There's a pain there, too, for both of them," Adina continues. "Something's been taken from them, but it seems to predate the memory modification. A longing, and a fear that it can never be returned to them." She shakes her head. "Sad. They're good people."

Harry clears his throat. "You can tell all that from just … looking at people?"

Adina smiles and nods at him. "It's all right there, Harry." Harry squints at Hermione's parents then turns back to Adina and shrugs. She laughs. "I could take the mickey out of you for not seeing it — it would give Jenkins and Mortimer a laugh if I did — but the truth is you shouldn't feel bad. Not everyone can read auras. It's something I've always been able to do, for as long as I can remember — a trait that runs in my family. Aura-reading is not a required skill for Spellbreaking, but I've found it to be most helpful in my work."

Adina takes her wand from her back pocket and waves it slowly over Hermione's mother first, from head to toe, then over Hermione's father. She purses her lips, her brow furrowed, and repeats the wand movement. Then she makes another pass with her wand, this time concentrating on the Grangers' heads. I watch Adina closely, fascinated, and notice her face go from a look of intense concentration to puzzlement and then … she breaks into a broad, white-toothed smile.

"Ahhhhhhhhhh," she says, straightening up and leaning back with one hand on her lower back and a finger tapping her chin. She shakes her head slowly and smiles broadly, her eyes trained on the Grangers. "Very, very clever," she says with a certain amusement. "Very clever indeed."
I'm dying to know what she's on about, but I decide not to derail her train of thought. She smiles again and shakes her head, focusing now on Mr. Granger's forehead and moving her wand in a sideways motion from his chin up to his eyebrows. "There it is," Adina whispers to herself. "Oh, that's good. That's jolly good. Hmm."

Harry, I can tell, can hardly stand it. "Soooooo…" he breathes, jamming his hands into his pockets. "Umm, how's it looking, Adina?"

"I think I've just about got it sorted," Adina says, rubbing her chin. "It's quite complex but also remarkably simple. The work of a sophisticated thinker."

Harry and I exchange a smile. "You're right about that," Harry says.

"Oh yes, I've read about your Miss Granger — her reputation precedes her, it must be said. But spellwork such as this provides a different level of insight into the workings of the spellcaster's mind, and this one is … well, the Arithmantic sequences are quite elegant and original. I admit I'm deeply impressed."

Now, it's no surprise to me — nor to Harry, I'm sure — to hear Hermione praised for her intelligence, but to hear it from someone who's never laid eyes on her and who so clearly understands what makes Hermione unique … well, it sets off a chain reaction in my heart. First, pride … then immense relief that her mind is still intact despite the torture … then longing. I feel myself choking up a little and silently kick myself for being such an emotional basket case lately. But it can't be helped. Hermione is beyond special. I can't believe how close we came to losing her.

Fortunately for me, Harry's focused on Adina and Hermione's parents. "So, do you think you know how to, umm, undo whatever it was that she did?" he says.

"Yes. Yes, I think I do," Adina replies, "but first, if you will allow me, I must ask you both if I might scan you as I've scanned the Grangers."

"Huh?" I say before I have a chance to stop myself.

Adina gestures toward two armchairs on the opposite side of the room. "Please, sit," she says.

Harry looks at me, eyebrows raised, and I shrug my shoulders. "Uh, OK," I mutter, and we sit down.

Adina runs her wand over us both in a similar fashion to what she did to the Grangers, occasionally muttering a "what do you know about that" or a "I never thought of that" to herself. After a few minutes of this on both of us, she steps back and places her fists on her hips.

"Gentlemen, I'm not sure you realize quite how brilliant your comrade Miss Granger really is," she says.

Harry laughs. "Actually, we have a very good idea," he says. "We'd both be dead about a dozen different ways if it weren't for Hermione."

Adina chuckles. "Having seen her sorcery, I believe you," she says. "Allow me to explain. You see, judging by the wandwork patterns I'm picking up in the Grangers and in both of you, I have concluded that Miss Granger quite adeptly modified several classical spells to achieve outcomes that previous spellcasters hadn't considered. I'll spare you the details except to note the most ingenious adaptation of all, which I may very well mimic in my own work from here on. You are, of course, familiar with the Fidelius charm — Secret Keepers, yes?"
Harry and I both nod. I fight against the feeling that I'm back in Flitwick's class.

"Here's the interesting twist: After placing the memory modifications on her parents, Miss Granger used an altered Fidelius charm to make herself the Secret Keeper — in other words, she set it up so that she was the only one who could unlock the spell, thus keeping her parents safe so that they could withstand even the harshest interrogation," Adina explains, finishing with an expression that indicates she expects us to be as astonished and amazed as she is.

Harry and I must look terribly confused, because she frowns.

"Sorry, Adina, but doesn't that mean we're screwed?" I ask, flicking a look to Harry, who nods his agreement. "I mean, if Hermione's the Secret Keeper, then we can't do shite without her being here."

Adina shakes her head. "Well, here's the brilliant part. Miss Granger set up a sub-spell — a modification known as a Diminuitur Carmine — on her basic Memoria Falsus. If I'm reading it correctly, this modification allows secondary Secret Keepers, otherwise known as Tacitus Custode, to undo the charm if necessary. Actually, she set three Tacitus Custode in addition to herself as the primary Secret Keeper — you, Ron, you, Harry, as well as a someone named Ginevra."

I grimace and think it over. But wait — the Fidelius charm allows Secondary Keepers all the time. That's how the charm that hid Grimmauld Place from the Death Eaters worked. What's so different about this?

Adina reads my expression and answers before I can even speak. "It's not a simple matter of creating Secondary Keepers — if it were, the charm would be quite elementary and relatively easy for a sophisticated Spellbreaker to decode. And remember, all that is required to break the Fidelius charm is for the Secret Keeper to divulge the secret. No, Miss Granger calculated for that possibility. She put in place several extra layers of charmwork that are biorhythmic-responsive. In other words, the spell requires one of the Secret Keepers to come into physical contact with her parents in order to undo it. So divulging the secret to a third party — a Death Eater, for instance — wouldn't be enough for the spell to be decoded. One of the Secret Keepers has to touch her parents before the spell can be lifted and their memories restored. It's known to Spellwriters as a Toccare Modification."

Holy Centaur shit.

"Yes," Adina continues, apparently noticing our gobsmacked reactions. "Miss Granger put modifications in place so that you and this Ginevra—"

"My sister," I cut in.

Adina nods. "So that one of the three of you could reverse the spell if, for some reason, she was unable to do so herself. Or if …" she trails off, stopping before she can say what we're already thinking.

"If she didn't survive," I supply, feeling the familiar lump form again in my throat.

"Precisely," says Adina quietly.

Bugger. Bugger, bugger, bugger. Hermione cast this spell fully expecting that she might not live to undo it. For a second, I feel like I'll upchuck my breakfast. But then I get a hold of myself. Gods, Mione, I think, I wish you didn't have to sort this all out without us. How many effing times have I failed you over the years? Shit, too many bloody times to count…
After a minute, I feel a hand on my shoulder. It's Harry.

"You all right, mate?" he asks warily.

"Yeah, sorry," I answer. "Got a little distracted, I reckon."

He looks at me like he knows exactly what was going through my head. I square my jaw and meet his gaze. "M'all right now, Harry. Really."

"OK, so …" Harry says, turning back to Adina. "What do we need to do, then?"

A few minutes later, Harry has a hand on Hermione's father's shoulder, and I'm holding Hermione's mother's hands in mine. Her hands feel cold, actually, and I remember that the Stunning spell can cause people to feel quite chilled, so I rub her hands gently in mine and blow on them now and then. Meanwhile, we watch Adina cast her countercharms — most of them wordlessly, though occasionally a familiar incantation slips out. "Memorare Ripresa … Tiempos Verdadero … Ensinnen." The whole process takes a remarkably long time. Feels like some fifteen minutes have gone by as Adina works them both simultaneously. Slowly, I feel the skin of Hermione's Mum's hands warm up on their own, and soon Adina speaks the final incantation out loud: "Rennervate."

Hermione's mother starts to come around first. She blinks rapidly and her limbs, once stiffened by the Stunning spell, loosen and she sinks deeper into the sofa for a moment. Her eyes scan the room and then focus on me. Her brow furrows. I look over at Harry and see that Hermione's father is catching up, running his eyes over Harry's face.

Adina conjures two glasses and fills them with water, handing them to me and then to Harry. I hold out the glass to Mrs. Granger and she gives me a distracted nod. I can't help but grin at her innate politeness — so like Hermione. The woman is waking up from a Stunning spell and yet she has the presence of mind to mouth the words "thank you" to me before taking sip.

After a moment, she attempts to speak but her voice is hoarse. She coughs and takes another sip of water, then tries her voice again.

"R-Ron?" she whispers. "Is that you?"

I nod. "Yes, Mrs. Granger. It's Ron Weasley. You remember me?"

She nods slightly. "I … yes, I do."

"Hermione," Mr. Granger mumbles distractedly, rubbing a hand across his forehead. "Where? Where is Hermione?"

Harry and I exchange a look.

"Mr. Granger," Harry says gently. "We're here on Hermione's behalf. Just relax, and we'll explain."
Thicker Than Water

Chapter 15: Thicker Than Water

Mrs. Granger touches my shoulder, lifting me out of my dark mood. I've been brooding for the past hour or so, looking out the aeroplane window at the moon over the clouds. Things got heated more than once back there at the house, and I know Mr. Granger didn't really mean half the shit he said, but … well, maybe some of his jabs stung because, deep down, I agree with him. I should have talked Hermione out of coming with us in the first place. Hell, I probably should have just grabbed Harry right after Dumbledore died and taken off after Voldemort with him then, just the two of us. But then where would we be? At least Hermione wouldn't be in hospital, I suppose.

"My husband means well, Ron," Mrs. Granger says gently, settling into the seat next to mine. "It's just … very difficult to make sense of everything you've told us, since we don't come from your world." She looks across the cabin at Mr. Granger, who is sitting making uncomfortable conversation with Harry. She follows my gaze, and we both smile for a moment as yet another unsuspecting muggle approaches our end of the first-class cabin, only to smile blankly and quietly reverse course, gently turned away by the modified Repello Muggletum charm that the Australian Aurors placed around us as we boarded. Mrs. Granger then returns her attention to me, looking me over with a sad grin. "It's going to take some time," she adds, "for Hugh to … well, to absorb it all. Please try to be patient with him."

I nod and look down at my feet. "Believe it or not, I actually understand at least some of how he feels, Mrs. Granger."

"Eleanor," she says. "Please. After all, we're family now, aren't we?" she says, tipping her head to catch my gaze.

"Eleanor," I say awkwardly. "I can only imagine how mad this whole thing must sound to someone who doesn't live in the wizarding world. Hell, in retelling it all, it sounded mad to me, and I lived it."

And madness it certainly was. When Mr. and Mrs. Granger — erm, Hugh and Eleanor — finally seemed to have recovered their strength following Adina's spellwork, I set about telling them the story of … everything. I stood to face them and started with what seemed to be the most important information — that Hermione was in hospital recovering from injuries sustained during the war, that none of them were life-threatening, but they were serious. This, as expected, set Mr. Granger off on a fit of pacing and brought Mrs. Granger to tears. Harry, at that point, had been the target of Mr. Granger's ire — what little Hermione had actually shared with her parents about Hogwarts most likely revolved around Harry anyway, so I guess it was natural that they might leap to conclusions about Harry's role in this whole mess — but I quickly nipped that in the bud.

"Mr. Granger, I understand that you're angry, and you have every right to be," I said in a louder voice than was probably wise, "but if you're going to yell at anybody here, yell at me. This all rests on my shoulders. This whole thing — including Hermione's current condition, her treatment, her
This stopped Mr. Granger in his tracks. He traded an astonished look with his wife, then turned to me, his face reddening. "I beg your pardon?"

"I said Hermione is my responsibility. Harry's here because he's her best friend. I'm here because I'm her husband."

In retrospect, I might have chosen a more subtle way to work this fact into the conversation, but it just sort of fell out of my mouth. Mrs. Granger, who had been standing and pacing in a criss-cross pattern with Mr. Granger, pressed a hand to her chest and sank down to take a seat on the sofa next to Harry. Mr. Granger, on the other hand, seemed strangely energized by this news. I always had him pegged for a rather intellectual, mild-mannered sort of bloke, but within seconds, he was advancing on me, rolling up his shirt-sleeves like he'd enjoy nothing better than serving me a knuckle sandwich. Harry's quick Protego was the only thing that kept me from receiving a black eye as a wedding gift from my new father-in-law.

Fortunately, Mrs. Granger stepped in and calmed Mr. Granger down enough for me to continue explaining. After a few minutes of huffing and puffing, Harry felt it was safe to drop the Protego, and we all settled back down to our seats.

From there, I decided the best course was to start the story at the very beginning, with the Philosopher's Stone and Voldemort living under Professor Quirrell's sodding turban, and right then, from the looks on the Grangers' faces, I knew that I'd be lucky if I got through this whole conversation without them locking me in the fucking loony bin. As I talked, it became clear just how much Hermione had kept from them. I know why she did it, but it was time to come clean, and I took it upon myself to do it for her. Every now and then, Mr. Granger would … well … explode — letting off an enormous amount of steam in the form of some of the most creative cursing I've ever heard, which is saying something — and I would back off and let him blow because, blimey, I'd probably have to do the same thing from time to time if some nitwit sauntered into my ruddy lounge and started telling me the dozens of different ways that my own daughter had cheated Death with her two best friends, all before the age of 17.

Mrs. Granger had just returned from the kitchen bearing yet another pot of tea and some biscuits when Mr. Granger popped his cork yet again.

"So, Dumbledore didn't die of old age — he was murdered," he said with rising volume. "On Hogwarts grounds. Murdered! Is that what you're telling me?"

"Well, yes and no," I stammered. "It's true that he didn't die what you might call a natural death. But we learned later that his murder was, well … staged, in a manner of speaking. He was dying anyway as a result of that curse I told you about, and he knew he had to die at Snape's hands in order to fulfill certain aspects of the Prophecy. And he also had to protect Snape's identity as a counter-agent, so making it appear that Snape was a cold-blooded killer helped to reinforce the idea that Snape was actually in league with the Death Eaters against Dumbledore, you see? And —"

Mr. Granger jumped from his chair at that point and buried his fingers in his hair. "Utter insanity. It's utter insanity that things like this were happening at our daughter's school of all places. I always knew there was something dodgy about that place. We should have kept Hermione home and sent her to Oxford or Cambridge for university as planned — I knew we should have, Eleanor," he said, pacing back and forth across the lounge and gesturing wildly with his arms.

"Hugh, you're getting into a lather again, darling—" Eleanor said nervously.
"Don't Hugh me, Eleanor," he snapped as he pivoted sharply and made another pass in front of the hearth. "How many letters of inquiry did we receive about Hermione from how many exclusive schools? Sevenoaks, Roedean, Cheltenham, Wycombe Abbey — and what do we do? We ship her off to some barmy pile of bricks somewhere in the Scottish Highlands — a place we can't even visit, mind you. All because some gray-haired nutter in a purple robe pops by and sweet-talks us into it. What in God's name was I thinking? I'm the worst kind of idiot."

By then, he had indeed worked himself into yet another state, and I rose to my feet to try to get him to look at me — mainly because I figured if he was looking at me, he'd stop yelling at Hermione's mum and direct his anger back at me. He took the bait, because the next thing I knew, he was pointing at me and marching in my direction, his face red and his eyes wild.

"God blessed," he said, thrusting his finger toward my chest, eyes narrowing, teeth clenched, "if we had kept Hermione at home like I'd wanted to, she'd never be in this mess. She never would have found out about this ridiculous wizarding society of yours, she never would have gotten mixed up in this ridiculous war of yours, she'd be safe and sound, and she most certainly wouldn't be bloody married. Married! She isn't even twenty! Our daughter — our gifted, brilliant, beautiful daughter. She could have grown up to be the bleeding Prime Minister or the Secretary General of the sodding United Nations — but no, she's married, and to who? A wizard! A dozy, penniless, teenaged wizard who's dropped out of school, with no prospects, no career, no connections. Oh, for the love of all that is holy!" That last bit hurt, but hey … I figured he was entitled. I'm not exactly premium son-in-law material to someone like Hugh Granger, obviously. Not much to recommend me. But then he stepped into my personal space and glared up in my face. "And if I find out," he continued darkly, "if I find out that my daughter had to marry you, if you … if she's got a bun in the oven, young man … I'm not sure I can be held responsible for my actions."

I knew, for some reason that I still can't quite explain, that the worst thing I could do at that moment was to look away from him, and so we wound up just staring each other down for a good, long minute. That is, until Mrs. Granger stepped between the two of us and urged Mr. Granger to calm down.

I took a second to glance across the room at Harry, who looked like he was about to faint. I thought he might prefer to face down Voldemort again rather than sit through another second of this conversation. But he seemed to have the same thought that I did at that moment — that we were doing this for Hermione's sake — because he took a deep breath, ran his hands through his hair, then settled down on the sofa next to Mrs. Granger, who was distracting herself by pouring another round of tea that no one really wanted.

Just then — completely unexpectedly — Fergus Quinlan of all people barged into the front hallway rather loudly, as I had come to realize he did pretty much everything, shouting greetings to Jenkins and with a guest in tow. Mr. Granger rose to his feet, astonished, and pulled himself together enough to mutter, "Dear God in Heaven, is that … are you …"

Quinlan's guest stepped forward, wearing a wide grin, and shook Mr. Granger's hand. Mrs. Granger rose to her feet behind him, her mouth gaping open.

"Mr. Granger, Mrs. Granger," I said, gesturing toward Quinlan. "This is the Australian Minister for Magic, Fergus Quinlan. And this … erm, I'm sorry …"

Quinlan's guest, dressed in an impeccable dark blue suit, a bright red tie and wire-rimmed glasses, approached me and shook my hand firmly. "Oh, that's quite all right, son. My name is John Howard, Mr. Weasley. I am the Prime Minister of Australia. When Fergus here told me that Ron Weasley and Harry Potter were visiting, I insisted he bring me by so I could give you my thanks."
As Harry stepped forward to shake Mr. Howard's hand, I stole a peek at the Grangers, who looked utterly gobsmacked.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, please allow me to offer my personal thanks for your sacrifices and your bravery," Howard said. Then he turned to the Grangers. "If your daughter were here, I'd say the same to her, I assure you," he said with a little bow.

Then, turning back to me and Harry, he continued: "Fergus kept me apprised of the events of the wizarding war as it unfolded in Britain, so I've known for some time just how much was at stake in the fight. And though mugglekind can never be aware of the debt of gratitude owed to you lads and Miss Granger, please know that I am conscious of it, and I am pleased that Fergus will be granting you three the Ganymede's Cross, the Australian wizarding world's highest honor. Congratulations."

"That is indeed a great honor, sir," Harry said sheepishly. "It's really not necessary, but—"

"Nonsense, Harry," said Quinlan, throwing an arm around Harry's shoulder. "And I don't mind saying, there's a bit of money in it for you as well. Five thousand galleons Australian for each of you. I only wish it could be more."

Blimey, I thought. Five thousand galleons. I had no idea what Australian galleons were worth, but if they were anything like British galleons, that would be more money piled up in one place at one time than I'd ever dreamed I could have.

"Of course, we never thought of award money when we were on our mission," I said quietly, suddenly feeling a little embarrassed at my focus on the galleons.

"Heavens no," said Howard. "But money is the least we can offer to show our respect for your service."

"Oh dear, where are my manners?" Mrs. Granger piped up, seeming to come to her senses. "Please, do sit, gentlemen, and let me pour you some tea."

Everyone settled into a seat while Mrs. Granger ran to the kitchen for more teacups. Harry seemed to sense an opportunity, because he leaned forward in his chair and said, rather loudly and awkwardly, "You happened to stop by just as Ron was filling in the Grangers on the events of the last year of the war — when the three of us were on our mission for Dumbledore."

"Oh, well, we came at the ideal time then," Howard said, accepting a cup from Mrs. Granger. "I'm fascinated. Please continue, Mr. Weasley."

I shot a look at Harry and he grinned at me. Now's your chance, mate, he seemed to be saying, eyebrows raised. And I realized he was probably right. If the Grangers were ever going to understand how important the events of this past year really were — and the critical role Hermione played in all of it — then this was my best shot at getting the point across.

I kept my explanation Horcrux-free, thank goodness, and I told them only enough about what happened between me and Hermione to make them understand why we decided to get bonded while skipping over the, well, the lust-fueled culmination of six or so years of frustrated longing. I figured Mr. Granger didn't need to know that part. Malfoy Manor was difficult to describe without dissolving into tears, but I managed it somehow. Mrs. Granger had a tough time keeping it together during that part, but thankfully she was sitting close enough that I was able to reach across and take her hand — and she seemed to appreciate the gesture. She held my hand tightly for the remainder
of the conversation, and I took a moment now and then to stroke hers gently in mine, noticing the similarity in the shape of her fingers, so like Hermione's. Then, of course, I had to describe the final battle … then Fred. By the time I got to the part about Hermione's hospitalization — and how she told me she wanted her Mum — the sun was setting.

"Well, Mr. Weasley," the prime minister cut in at that part, "it would seem we've got to get you lot back to London straight away. And I know just how to do it."

Quinlan assured the Grangers that his Ministry would take care of all the details there on the ground in Sydney — everything from packing up and selling the house to informing the dental practice where Mr. Granger had been working occasional shifts that he was heading back to Britain. Within minutes, or so it seemed, the Grangers had packed a couple of suitcases and we were whisked to the muggle airport in the Prime Minister's limousine — with the Prime Minister tagging along, amazingly enough — while a team of Aurors followed behind in Quinlan's vehicle. We had a full police escort to the British Airways main gate, at which point we were whisked through security with false papers provided by Quinlan, shuffled aboard the next available flight to London, and placed in first class under enchantments that allowed no muggles except the Grangers and the flight crew anywhere near us. Quinlan himself saw us onto the aeroplane and bade us farewell.

Mr. Granger avoided me throughout the entire first leg of the trip — which was just as well, since I was rather jumpy about the prospect of flying in this muggle tin can called an aeroplane, and the added stress of dealing with Hermione's angry father would have made an already unpleasant experience that much worse. But now, on our Dubai-to-London flight, Mr. Granger seems to be sizing me up from across the way. He says something to Mrs. Granger, she pats his arm, and then he gets up and strolls over to me, sitting where Harry was until Harry got up to wander about the cabin and stretch his legs.

"Hermione tells me you're a chess player," Mr. Granger says.

I nod. "You?"

"Oh, I've played a little in my day," he says, leaning his chair back a bit. "Played on the chess team at Cambridge — don't mind telling you I rated about 2200 at one point. I haven't found the time to play that much these past few years, but when … well, when we landed in Australia, I more or less rediscovered my love of the game. Eleanor and I considered ourselves to be in semi-retirement down there, and that gave me lots of time to read up and get back in game form."

"Read up?"


I shake my head. "Spass-who?"

Mr. Granger rolls his eyes. "Boris Spassky. He played an epic series of games against a chap named Bobby Fischer back in 1972, I believe it was. Some of the greatest chess ever played. If you don't have the books, I'll lend them to you. Excellent stuff."

I realize this is as close to a peace offering as I'm ever going to get from Mr. Granger — and it's quite a good one, actually — so I decide to take it, figuring it'll only last as long as Hermione's in hospital. I have a feeling once she's well again, we'll be treated to another series of blowups. But, until then, I'm happy to talk chess.
Mr. Granger reaches into the inside breast pocket of his jacket and extracts what looks like a
pocketbook but, when he opens it, I see that it's actually a small travel-sized muggle chess set. He
places it on the table between us and suddenly I'm dying a thousand deaths. For fuck's sake, I'm
going to play a game of chess against my ruddy father-in-law — a guy who not eight hours ago
wanted to physically rip me limb from limb. Sounds like he's a good enough player to sense it if I
take it easy on him — and he'd likely be insulted if I did. And yet, if I win … blimey.

Turns out I needn't have worried about unintentionally patronizing him, because Mr. Granger is a
damned capable opponent — the best I've played since Bill first taught me the game. His opening
gambit is remarkably aggressive — though under the circumstances, that probably shouldn't
surprise me — and he keeps consistent control of the center of the board. I actually start to sweat it
for a few minutes when he anticipates my Boden's Mate and fends off my bishop. But my endgame
proves too strong for him, because he doesn't see that I've triangulated his king, and soon — with a
cringe — I'm declaring checkmate.

Mr. Granger leans back and motions to the barmaid — erm, or flight attendant, as Eleanor
informed me they're properly called — and orders us a couple of beers. I try to conceal my
wonderment. He raises his glass to me and takes a sip. "You say you've never studied the masters?"
he asks.

I shake my head. "I learned the game from my brother Bill. He taught me a few classic moves —
like that Boden's Mate I tried on you toward the end there, and the Berlin Defense, and the
Maróczy Bind, and the Latvian Gambit, but most of it I just kind of worked out for myself over the
years."

He taps his lip with his finger and hums. "You play often?"

"As often as I can," I answer. "Though sometimes I'm stuck sort of playing against myself, if that
makes any sense."

He nods. "That's one way to learn," he says with a chuckle. "When's the last time you lost a game?"

I wince and try to sidestep the question, knowing there's no good way to answer it directly without
sounding like a self-important prat. "Well," I say slowly, "my brother taught me when I was eight. I
beat him for the first time — I mean really beat him, not like he was letting me win — when I was
11. I remember because it was the day I got my Hogwarts letter. For the whole summer after that,
Bill really poured it on, beating me senseless, over and over again, every day. It was incredibly
frustrating, because I'd had that one win, you know, so I knew it wasn't impossible. And then, one
night, I can't quite explain what happened but something … clicked. It was like suddenly I could
see the board like I never had before, and I could see what was coming, and I knew what I had to
do two, three, sometimes four moves ahead in order to put myself in a position where I might be
able to win. The night before I left for Hogwarts, I finally beat him again."

Mr. Granger takes another swig. "And you haven't lost since, have you?" he says, wiping his lips
with the back of his hand.

I feel my ears turn red and I shift my gaze to my beer. "Well, there aren't any really serious players
at Hogwarts," I mutter, "so it's not like…you know…"

At that, I hear the sound of Mr. Granger setting up the board again. "Let's go," he says firmly,
looking at the board rather than at me.

In the Ministry limousine that whisks us from the airport to St. Mungo's, I feel the weight of
sleeplessness pressing on me — after all, it's been more than 24 hours since Harry and I arrived at
the Grangers' home in Sydney, and I feel like I've lived several lifetimes since then. My legs are like lead, and my eyelids are drooping. I look around the car and we're all in similar states of semi-wakefulness. Mrs. Granger is dozing, with her head on Mr. Granger's shoulder. Mr. Granger, for his part, has his cheek propped on his fist, his eyes lolling shut. Harry is sprawled on the seat next to me, out cold.

But that all changes when the car comes to a stop outside the hospital. I feel a surge of adrenaline, knowing I'm about to make good on at least one bleeding promise to Hermione. Her Mum's here. That doesn't mean that all will be well — not by a mile — but it will make a difference to both of them when Hermione wakes up.

Hermione is still in that damned medi-bubble when we return. I don't know why I should be surprised — maybe somewhere in the back of my mind I was hoping that the Healer would change his mind while we were away and decide everything was fine and none of this was necessary. I had tried to prepare the Grangers for what they would find when they entered the room, what Hermione would look like, but they're staggered nonetheless by the sight of her, so pale and thin, so frail and tiny-looking, inside that odd floating bubble. I know it must be throwing them, because Mrs. Granger has barely noticed anyone in the room but Hermione as she's slowly drifted toward Hermione's bed, even though Ginny has hopped up to greet the Grangers and is surprised, I think, to find herself folded into Mr. Granger's distracted embrace.

I step up behind Mrs. Granger and put a hand on her shoulder. "She isn't in any pain, Eleanor, or so the Healers tell me," I whisper. She nods. "Actually, I asked the nurse to inform the head Healer that you're here. I wouldn't be surprised if he stops by soon and you can ask him any questions you like."

With that, I Conjure a chair — the first time I've ever Conjured anything so big, come to think of it — and set Mrs. Granger down in it. She smiles faintly, and I cross the room to Mr. Granger. "Hugh, I'm going to let my parents know that we've arrived. I'll be back."

Hours later, or so it feels, I'm being shaken awake on that sodding cot next to Hermione's bed again. Somehow my parents talked Hugh and Eleanor into going home with them to the Burrow last night, having explained that their house in Cambridge was still in need of restoration and a magical cleansing. In fact, that's on the agenda today.

I get another rough shake. "Ronnie, wake up."

It's Bill. "I'm up, I'm up," I whisper roughly, sitting up though my eyes are still closed. I open them to find, to my chagrin, that Bill is not alone. Dad, Harry and — bloody hell — Hugh are standing behind him, arms crossed, all looking rather amused at my disheveled state.

"Are we Apparating to Cambridge today or aren't we, little bro?" Bill asks, giving me a gentle shove.

"We are — just give me a minute."

I pause to take in Hermione, still fast asleep.

"She's improved, I think," Dad says, more for Hugh's benefit than anything else, I imagine. I can't help but agree, though.

"She's not quite so pale," I say softly, wishing for the millionth time that I could touch her through that bubble.
Hugh comes to stand next to me. "I'll have to take your word for it that she looks better," he says, not unkindly.

I nod. "She does," I say. "Truly. Hermione is incredibly strong, sir. Always has been. But, of course, you knew that."

I see out the corner of my eye that Hugh is shaking his head. "Maybe not as well as you know it, Ron," he says.

I turn to look at him. "She hasn't changed as much as you might think, sir. She's still your daughter. She's still Hermione."

He pulls his eyes away from her to look at me, and I see that he's tearful.

I place a hand on his shoulder, and we both turn back to gaze at her.

"Ron," Dad says, stepping up behind us. "Hagrid's here to sit with Hermione now. Perhaps we should get moving, yes?"

Within minutes, the five of us have Apparated to the back garden of the Grangers' house in Cambridge. We had warned Hugh that the experience of Side-Along Apparation would be, well, unsettling, and sure enough he's bent over, nearly heaving among his prize roses. Dad helps him straighten up and right himself. And then we all look around and survey the damage. Dad and Harry go 'round the front, while Hugh, Bill and I explore the back.

From the outside, the house looks perfectly intact. But we know, from the Auror team that checked the house and broke it of curses immediately after the final battle, that the interior is a total shambles. The pictures the team sent back showed the worst of it, but seeing it in person is a different thing entirely — much worse, in fact. I feel a shudder run through me just thinking that fucking Death Eaters were in this house not so long ago, looking for Hermione, looking for her parents, looking for clues, willing to kill if they had to.

We know the Aurors have taken down the Dark enchantments, but we decide to play it safe and have Bill give the place a quick scan before we step in any farther than the kitchen. Bill declares the first floor free of booby traps and so we go ahead and start looking around, sizing up what needs doing.

Everywhere we look, there's destruction. Furniture upended, rugs ripped to shreds, holes punched in walls, scorch marks on the ceiling.

At the base of the stairs, Bill casts another Detecting spell and then gives us the all-clear.

The upstairs is remarkably intact — except, that is, for Hermione's room, which is a total wreck. Papers and books are strewn about, the bed is torn up, and on the walls, which were once covered in a sweet paper patterned with tiny roses, her favorite flower, someone has burned the letters "M-U-D-B-L-O-O-D" in giant letters.

I explain what that word means to Hugh. He shakes his head.

"Ron, I think I owe you an apology," he says after taking a few moments to collect himself.

This statement completely throws me. "Hugh … no. There's no need to apologize at a time like this. I mean, bloody hell, this is just awful, and believe me, most wizards would never use this word, and I really don't think—"
"I didn't completely believe you," he says quietly, cutting me off. "When you said Hermione had no choice … that we would have been killed if we'd stayed here … I didn't really believe you. I thought that was hyperbole, Ron, something you felt you needed to say to justify Hermione's actions." He sighs. "Now I realize that you — and she — that you were both right. Whoever did this, well … we're still alive, and we have Hermione to thank for that."

I choke back a sob, because I know how deeply Hermione felt that she'd betrayed her parents, how much she worried all throughout the mission about the way they would react if and when she reunited with them, how certain she was that they would never forgive her. "I hope you can tell her that someday, Hugh," I say, not caring how scratchy and choked my voice sounds. "I know it would mean a lot to her."

Dad and Harry join us. "I've taken a more complete set of pictures than the Aurors were able to take on the day they came here to break the enchantments," Dad says quietly. "Kingsley's asked me to share them with the Reconstruction Squad. I know it looks dreadful right now, Hugh, but Kingsley's assured me that the Ministry will set it all to right — and from what I can tell, it all looks very doable with the right charmwork. The Reconstruction lads — they're the best."

"Thank you, Arthur," says Hugh, looking fairly crestfallen. "Thank you, everyone. You've all been … very kind."

"That's what family's for," says Harry with a small grin. Hugh looks up, a bit surprised and, after a moment, smiles back.

The next morning, Grendys informs us that he expects to take Hermione out from under that blasted Japanese serum sometime around noon. I'm elated at first, but then I feel apprehension wash over me. What if she wakes up and … she's still not … oh damn. I choose to stay focused on the one thing I know for sure — which is, that if she wakes up and Grendys takes her out of that fucking bubble, I'll be able to touch her again and, for now, I decide that's all that matters. Ginny sends out an all-points bulletin to the entire family, and we're all gathered 'round, anxiously awaiting the moment when Grendys and McKendry give her the serum antidote.

Hermione's parents are standing closest to Hermione, on opposite sides of the bed. Dad's behind Eleanor, Mum's behind Hugh. Harry, Ginny, Bill, Fleur, George, Charlie, Percy, Luna, Neville, McGonagall, Hagrid and Kingsley fill in the remaining space around the bed. On any other day, it would be like a veritable circus in here with all these people gathered in one place, probably laughing and carrying on. But at this moment, it's as quiet as Madame Pince's Library. We're all watching Grendys and McKendry as they check their equipment and go through their various motions. Grendys angles his way in between Hagrid and Kingsley and waves his wand, lowering Hermione and her pink medi-bubble to the bed. Then the bubble slowly dissolves. Meanwhile, McKendry shuffles in behind Eleanor, reaches for that strange-looking plastic bag that's been suspended above Hermione's head for the past week, and pours in what Grendys tells me is an antidote to the Shikyu Hiringyu. McKendry's informed me the antidote works pretty quickly. We'll see.

I hang back by the door, taking it all in, feeling my heart pounding in my chest.

Fortunately, I'm tall enough to see, from my vantage point, over Ginny and Harry's heads, and I watch Hermione's fingers begin to wiggle atop her blankets, then her eyelids flutter before she slowly opens them, squinting against the light of the room. McKendry waves her wand over Hermione's face — administering a cleansing charm, I'm guessing — because suddenly Hermione looks a bit fresher and she blinks a few times, her eyes still not quite focusing.

"Hermione, Hermione love," her mother says, taking Hermione's hand.
"M-mmm-Mum?" Hermione stammers, still dazed and apparently unable to see terribly well just yet. "Mum, Dad, is that? Are you?"

In a split second, Eleanor is smothering Hermione in hugs and kisses, and Hugh piles on a moment later. "Oh Mum, oh Mum, are you really here? Is this really real?" Hermione mutters into her mother's shoulder, the tears flowing heavily now. Her mother chuckles a bit through her tears. "Yes, darling, it's real. I'm here. We're all here, darling. All of us."

"Oh Mum, I was so … so … frightened, Mum," Hermione sobs.

Hermione clings to her mother for so long, I can hardly keep from sobbing myself. Seeing her like this, surrounded by her parents, reminds me how much Hermione has given up for this mission, how distant she's felt from her family — for years, really. I vow to myself that's going to change. Hermione's a witch, yes, but her family means so much to her. She shouldn't have to choose one world or the other.

Soon Hermione's parents are pulling back, and Mum and Dad take their turns fussing over Hermione, hugging her, kissing her cheeks, crying with her. Then comes Ginny, then Fleur and Bill … on down the line. It's good to see Hermione on the receiving end of so much love and attention, though she's still fairly out of it. The serum's aftereffects will take a while to wear off. Still, there's so much emotion in the room, there's not a dry fricking eye in the house.

Harry steps up and throws his arms around her, and Hermione pulls him close. "Oh, Harry … Harry … my parents … it means so much."

Harry presses his forehead to hers. "We did it for you, Hermione. Ron said you wanted them, and nothing was going to stop us once you said the word."

"Ron …" she breathes and almost like a door has opened, the crowd parts and Hermione looks up, making eye contact with me for the first time since she's awakened.

I'm still standing across the room, apart from everyone, my heart beating so hard I can feel it in my eardrums. Harry pulls back from Hermione and I step forward, slowly at first, clenching my jaw, trying desperately to fight down the tears threatening to rise. And then, it might as well be just me and her — I lose sight of everyone else — and I'm moving quicker until I'm basically hurling myself into her arms, crushing her to me and we're both openly weeping and not caring that we're nowhere near alone.

"Mione, my Mione," I'm choking into Hermione's hair, pulling her even closer, gripping her tightly against my chest. "You're back … Mione …"

Hermione tightens her arms around me. "L-l-l-love you, R-r-ron," she stammers, nearly incomprehensibly. "Oh, darling." Then she collapses into another wave of tears.

Both of us seem to be beyond words, and so we settle for simply holding each other, swaying back and forth, and sobbing in a way that should be embarrassing in front of so many people, but I'm past caring. All I can think is how glad I am that she's awake, how relieved I am that we managed to get her parents here in one piece, how frightened I am of what the Healers are going to tell us next … but, mostly, how I never, ever want to let her go ever, ever, ever again.

"I never," I mumble, knowing I sound mildly mad. "I never want to be … that far from you … never. Please, please …"

"No, never, darling," she answers in a hoarse whisper.
"I'll never leave … never again," I sputter. "I love you so much. So much."

"I know," she murmurs, rocking me.

With that, she loosens her grip on my back as if to pull away and look in my face.

"No, not yet!" I rasp, not ready to break contact just yet, and I clutch her tighter to me, perhaps more roughly than I should have done. This draws a little chuckle from the rest of the people in the room. But they can go jump. I'm not letting go of her just yet. After a minute more of her calming caresses, I mumble against her neck, "Bloody hell, I think there are other people in this room, love," and that draws another laugh.

"Really?" she says with a smile in her voice, angling her forehead against mine. "For the past few minutes, it's been only you."
Chapter Summary

Home and hearth.

Chapter 16: Vines

Even when she's awake, Hermione is still mighty drowsy — and every few hours McKendry or Grendys come in to administer another short-term dose of the Shikyu Hiringyu while they examine her and do their wandwork, which means she's out cold for big chunks of time. Still, I haven't left her room since we returned from Australia yesterday. And though we've rarely been without a constant rotation of visitors — right now, it's Eleanor keeping me company as Hermione dozes — I can't stand the idea of her being alone, even as she's sleeping. I know Eleanor feels the same way.

Dad, Hugh, Harry and Ginny are at the Grangers' house in Cambridge, helping with the clean-up. Bill and Charlie went with George this morning to see what needs doing to reopen the shop. Percy is back at work at the Ministry. And Mum is apparently up at Shell Cottage on some sort of errand involving Fleur.

"Her cheeks look a bit pinker today, don't they?" Eleanor asks from the seat next to mine at Hermione's bedside.

"Hmm," I answer, nodding. "And when she's awake, she seems livelier."

"Yes. I noticed that this morning."

"Though it's good to see her resting so quietly right now," I add. "She was up and down quite a bit last night."

"Mmm. I'm glad you were here, then," she says.

With that, we lapse back into silence for a while. I'm surprised that I don't feel more uncomfortable with Eleanor — Hugh's a different story — but Eleanor seems surprisingly … well, not exactly supportive … I'm sure she's horrified that Hermione's married so young … and married to me … but she doesn't seem quite as angry about it all as Hugh is. I wonder if maybe I should ask her about it. But no, that would be stupid. Best not to open that particular box of Every-Flavor Beans, you eedjit. Just because she's not threatening to rip your head off doesn't mean she's thrilled to have you as a son-in-law. Still, though … she did say we're family that one time, on the aeroplane …

"I wasn't completely surprised, you know," Eleanor says quietly, distracting me from my jumbled thoughts.

"Hmm?" I mutter stupidly. "Umm, sorry … you weren't surprised by …"

"By you. And Hermione," Eleanor says with a small smile, flicking her gaze to me momentarily before returning her eyes to Hermione. "Getting together, I mean. I knew it had to happen sometime."

"You … um, you knew?"
She chuckles and crosses her legs. "Of course. I was confident you two would sort it out at some point. A girl doesn't write home to complain about one particular boy for years on end without there being a spark behind it all," she says with a grin. "And she'd kill me for telling you this, but she cried on my shoulder more than once about you, Ron. The last year at Hogwarts in particular."


Eleanor lets out a small laugh. "It happens. You both had points to make, it would seem, and you hurt one another along the way from time to time. But I reckoned it was meant to be eventually."

Gah! Why is it that everybody saw it before we did?

Eleanor continues before I can come up with a response. "Of course, Hugh doesn't know about how hurt Hermione was over the years. I reckoned that was for a mother to know. So that might explain why this all strikes him as so new. For me however … well, the only thing that surprised me was … how soon, and to what, erm, degree you finally got it sorted."

I shrug, feeling my ears turning pink. "Umm, well, honestly, Eleanor, I doubt we would have gotten married quite so young if the circumstances had been different, but—"

"Oh, you've explained all that, and I understand," she cuts in.

"Well, yes, and thanks for that," I say sheepishly. "But I think it's important for you to know, I always sort of hoped it would happen someday. Winding up with Hermione, I mean. I wouldn't want you to think it only happened because, you know, I reckoned I had nothing to lose. And I certainly wouldn't want you to think I might regret it now that the war's over or whatever. Because, I … well, I don't. I could never."

A long silence follows, and I start to feel like a tit. I mean, what does Eleanor care what I want or what I might regret. Hermione is her top priority, not me. And for all I know, she feels the way Hugh does, that Hermione's too young to be married, that I'm not good enough for her — and on that latter point, who am I to argue? He made it pretty clear during one of his tirades back in Sydney, when he accused me of using magic to trick Hermione into marrying me, that he has a fairly low opinion of me. And later, when he said he would insist on an annulment when we got back to Britain … well, I notice he hasn't brought that up since, thank Merlin. But still, it's early days. Once Hermione's out of hospital, will her parents' push her to reconsider this marriage? And if they did, would I be right to fight it? I mean, Hugh has a point — Hermione could certainly do better.

Shit.

I must have been lost in my thoughts for longer than I supposed, because soon I feel Eleanor nudge me, and it's clear from her expression that she's been trying to get my attention. "Are you quite all right, Ron?" she asks.


Another silence. And then, "Ron, may I ask you a question?" she asks in a small voice.

I turn to look Eleanor squarely in the face. She looks tired, I notice, but her eyes are still sharp and bright, like Hermione's can so often be. She smiles nervously, then seems to find the resolve she needs to ask me something rather uncomfortable.

"How long have you loved my daughter?"
The question causes my mind to flip through a thousand different memories, and I can't help but smile even at the painful ones, because it comes to me all over again that I've loved Hermione for so long, it feels like my whole life. 'Course, I didn't know it most of the time. When I think of my first-year self, so irritated by Hermione and yet so hell bent on impressing her somehow, I realize that I fancied her in some half-witted boyish way even then. I think about what I said to her that night in the Common Room, before Dumbledore's funeral — the notion that she and Harry and I were meant to find one another, were meant to be together. I haven't thought about that particular idea for a while, but it floats into my head just now. And in the same way that I knew in my bones that I should follow the Deluminator's light, I know in my bones that I was meant to love Hermione Granger. It's that simple. I don't know who set these particular wheels in motion — and I'm satisfied that I'll never know — but we found each other, and Harry, and at the risk of sounding grand and self-important, I daresay the world is better off for it. Dumbledore was right. Love is the most powerful magic there is.

Suddenly, I don't feel afraid of Eleanor's reaction anymore. I can answer her question. I could tell her I've loved her daughter since the day I was born, as impossible as that sounds. I know Eleanor wouldn't understand that answer, so I'll have to fudge a little bit to get my meaning across, but it's the truth. And I know that I'll love Hermione until the day I die. Making others believe it doesn't seem important anymore. I believe it. That's what matters.

Leaning forward with my elbows on my knees, I look at Hermione's face and then turn my gaze to Eleanor. "When Hermione and I met, there was definitely something between us," I say. "I wasn't sure what it was then, 'course, but looking back on it, it must have been something. I mean, if I hadn't cared about what she thought of me, I wouldn't have gotten so hacked off with her so often, right?" Eleanor chuckles and leans forward a bit, as if eager to hear more. I straighten up to face her more directly. "I reckon I loved Hermione as much as any 11-year-old boy can love any girl — though the feelings were sort of mysterious to me and a bit scary sometimes — and those feelings have grown along with me, I think."

I'm not sure exactly what Eleanor is fishing for, but I'm guessing it's something along the lines of reassurance, so I decide to give her the best dose of it that I can. Maybe it will help her feel a bit better about all the shite that's going on. I certainly hope so.

"Eleanor," I say confidently. "Even if you and Hugh never forgive me, even if Hermione decides after all this that she'd rather return with you to the muggle world and leave me behind, even if I never see her again after we leave this hospital, I know that loving Hermione is right. I can't do otherwise."

Eleanor looks taken aback. Her mouth falls open slightly before she catches herself and shuts it, giving her head a small shake.

"There's something you don't know about wizarding wedding vows. Umm, well, we call them bonding vows," I tell her. "The magic, it's very ancient and very powerful. You can't fake it, you can't fool it, you can't use it to trick someone into marrying you if the love isn't genuine. The thing about it is, if the couple isn't meant to be bonded, then the magic doesn't work. It just ... fizzles."

She nods slowly. I think she understands what I'm saying.

"I've never seen a muggle wedding, but Hermione tells me it's quite different than a bonding ceremony. Muggles don't, um, they don't take a blood oath, do they?"

I can tell from the gobsmacked look on Eleanor's face that she has no idea what I'm on about.

I clear my throat. Shit. Why did I bring this up? "Erm, it's just one part of the ceremony, but
basically it involves each person, well, cutting their hand—" Eleanor suddenly looks mildly sick "—and, uh, rubbing them together. So, yeah, you … uh … you become blood of one another's blood."

Eleanor is looking at me like I'm a visitor from another planet — which, in a way, I guess I am.

"So … you're, um … you're mixing your blood, you see, mixing your magic," I continue, realizing just how mental I must sound to Eleanor, and yet somehow being unable to stop now that I'm in this deep. "So, uh, you become tied to one another by blood, and tied to everyone else in their family by blood. It's kind of a big deal, I reckon."

Shit. I should stop talking now. And yet … for some reason … I keep bumbling away.

"I know that won't really sway Hugh's opinion one way or the other," I add, "but I figure you have a right to know."

We both settle back in our seats and turn to watch Hermione sleeping, the silence broken only by the whirr of the instruments at Hermione's bedsit. Judging by her reaction, Eleanor must now think that I'm basically some kind of blood-drinking vampire or maybe a cannibal. It's tough to tell. We're quiet for a few minutes, listening to the sound of Hermione breathing and the occasional click of footsteps in the corridor.

Soon, Eleanor clears her throat. Obviously she's been thinking about what I've said. I count it as a plus that she hasn't jumped up and run screaming from the room — at least not yet.

So I'm surprised — quite surprised — by what she says next. "I would like to see a bonding ceremony someday," she whispers.

"Oh!" I sputter a bit too quickly. "Oh, uh, well, Hermione and I always reckoned that, if we made it through the war, we'd do it right, you know, a proper ceremony, with all our family and friends around."

"That would be … lovely," she says. "I'd like that."

I laugh. "That makes one of you, I suppose."

There's another long pause.

"When it comes to Hermione's father, Ron," she says after a while, "I think the greatest thing you have going in your favor is that Hugh respects Hermione's opinion."

I squint and give her a half grin, as if to say, Come on.

She smiles back. "I don't mean that he always agrees with everything she says or thinks. But on the fundamental things, he trusts her judgment — we both do. Something this big … well, it would be hard for him to deny her for long. She's his little girl, after all."

I can't help but chuckle at that.

Silence falls again, but it feels easier than it has been. Then Eleanor giggles, seemingly at nothing in particular.

"What?" I ask with a grin.

"Oh, I was just thinking," she says, still chuckling and covering her smile with her hand. "You
know, Hugh wouldn't appreciate being reminded of this just now, but my parents were dead set against me marrying him. My father threatened to disown me for it."

"That's … huh? Hugh Granger?"

She nods, stifling another laugh. "Yes. Hugh Granger, indeed!"

Why on Earth would anybody object to Hugh Granger as a son-in-law? He's always seemed like an upstanding guy … good career … family man …

Apparently Eleanor senses my confusion. "You notice that Hugh can be a bit of a hothead, yes?" she asks.

I can't help but laugh a little.

"Well, my parents noticed it, too, and were concerned about it. He was worse when he was younger. And they were also worried about the differences in our upbringing, to be quite honest. Not that it was fair of them, mind, but they held it against him that he was from a working-class background. Hugh comes from a long line of tradesmen — plasterers, actually. He was the first in his family to go to university. My father was a barrister, you see, and his father was a banker. So Hugh and I came from very different worlds."

Huh. "I know what that feels like," I say, and she gives me a sly grin.

"The point is," she adds, "my father came 'round. It took a while, but it did happen."

Well, I guess that's encouraging.

"So, erm, how did you and Hugh meet?"

"We met at university, in dental school," she says, looking up at the ceiling. "Hugh originally wanted to be a physician, truth be told, but his father could barely tolerate the idea that Hugh wasn't going to be a plasterer. His father insisted that he pursue something more practical than medical school, which would have taken many, many years to complete. And so, Hugh settled for dentistry. I think Hugh was always a bit disappointed that he didn't pursue to his original goal, and I think that's why he's so hopeful about Hermione's future. He sees limitless potential for her, and he wants her to fulfill it."

"Well, who could blame him?" I jump in without hesitation. "I mean, Hermione could be anything. Really — anything. I can't think of a thing she couldn't do with her life if she set her mind to it. Except maybe playing professional Quidditch. She's bollocks at flying, but that's about the only magic she hasn't mastered."

Eleanor's smile turns sad for a moment. "We actually haven't seen Hermione do much magic at all."

Crikey, that's right. Hermione wouldn't have been allowed to do magic away from Hogwarts until she was 17. What a crime that her parents have no idea what she can really do.

"That'll have to change from now on," I say. "You're going to hear a lot of talk about Hermione being the brightest witch of her age, and it's no exaggeration, Eleanor. She's bloody brilliant. Honestly."

Eleanor gives me a teary grin. "I have no doubt that's true," she says. "I want her to be happy. To me, everything else is secondary."
A while later, Hermione stirs and begins to awaken just as Harry, Ginny, Dad and Hugh bustle into the room looking disheveled but enthused following a day of clean-up work. They lavish love and attention on a still-drowsy Hermione until Grendys steps in.

"Good afternoon, everyone," he says rather awkwardly, clearly not expecting such a big crowd. "Erm, it's grand to see Mrs. Weasley has so many loved ones at her side, but I wonder if I might have a private word with her and her husband."

Merlin's bunions. It's bad enough that Grendys keeps calling Hermione "Mrs. Weasley" every time he turns around — I can only imagine how irritating that must be to Hugh — but this time he's gone and tossed in "husband" for good measure, and he's giving Hermione's parents the heave-ho to boot. Bloody hell.

"Are you sure her mother and I shouldn't stay?" Hugh asks, barely masking his indignation.

Grendys grimaces. "I'm very sorry, but I must insist on speaking with the Weasleys alone."

Eleanor and I trade a pained smirk.

"I'll come get you as soon as I can," I tell her, and she bends over Hermione to give her a hug and a kiss before patting me on the cheek and leaving the room along with Hugh and the rest of the crowd. Suddenly I'm not caring so much about Hugh being out-of-joint as I am about whatever it is that Grendys has to say. If he's shooing everyone out of the room, it can't be good. Can it?

Grendys moves to Hermione's bed and uses his wand to adjust it so that Hermione can sit comfortably. I settle in on the edge of the bed next to Hermione and take her hand, trying to ignore the pounding in my chest.

Grendys Conjures a chair and sits down, setting his clip board and parchment on the nightstand. He clears his throat, fiddles with his glasses, and then takes a moment to look down at his hands.

"I'm sorry to take so long to gather my thoughts, but I was hoping to be able to give you somewhat better news at this point," he says quietly.

Hermione clutches my hand tightly, and I nudge myself closer to her, though neither of us can tear our eyes from Grendys' face.

I'm so panicked, I feel I couldn't speak if I tried. Bugger. Bugger, bugger, bugger.

Then I hear Hermione whimper, and my eyes snap to her. Her lower lip is trembling. I lean over and press my lips to her forehead. "It's all right, love, I'm here," I whisper against her skin, not caring that Grendys is sitting right there. "I'm here. We'll be all right. We will."

Grendys clears his throat, drawing our attention back to him. "The good news is that the Dark scar tissue has been cleared from the much of the interior lining of the uterus and from the ovaries," he says. "And that is a significant improvement over where we were at this time a week or so ago. Let's not lose sight of that."

"But …" Hermione squeaks. "There's a but, isn't there?"

"There is," Grendys says with a small smile and a nod. "I had hoped to see the Fallopian tubes cleared as well by now, but there is still scarring there that will take some time to heal. More time than I had originally counted on, I'll be honest."

Hermione chokes back a sob, and I run the palm of my hand across her forehead and down her
cheek.

"I'm not here to tell you there is no hope. Not at all," Grendys adds. "The treatment, however, will need to shift from a short-term approach to a long-term approach. It is to your advantage — to your great advantage — that you are bonded."

I feel the old anger that I experienced the very first night I met Grendys surging within me again. Something about his almost diagonal way of explaining things — when I'm wild with fear and grief — makes me want to scream. What the hell? How could our being bonded have anything to do with Hermione's recovery, for fuck's sake?

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Hermione manages to breathe out through her tears.

Grendys straightens his glasses again. "Mrs. Weasley, I am reasonably confident that, with the healing we've managed to bring about in your uterus and ovaries, we will eventually be able to restore fertility, but it will take longer than I had originally calculated. And it will require the treatment to be extended."

We must look completely mystified, because he wiggles his glasses again and presses on.

"You can't mean she has to keep taking that sodding Japanese potion forever and ever, do you?" I bark.

"Oh no, no," Grendys sputters. "Well, I mean, yes, I would recommend coming into my office and taking a short-term, 45-minute dose once a month — perhaps after each menstrual cycle, Mrs. Weasley — for the foreseeable future. But no, not on a 24-hour basis as we did in this initial, intensive therapy."

Thank Merlin. Hermione breathes an audible sigh of relief.

"Then what are you on about, Grendys? I don't know about Hermione here, but I'm completely lost."

Grendys takes a deep breath. "If I may be so bold, may I ask whether the two of you use the Contraceptive charm when you make love?"

I gulp, trying to stifle my irritation. Why does he keep answering questions with more questions?

"Yes. Yes, of course," Hermione answers in a tiny voice.

"Well, that must cease," Grendys says.

Hermione and I must both look thoroughly confused, because he gives us a little smile and carries on. "You see, when the two of you became bonded, you mixed your blood via the Matrimonio Intersecare, did you not?"

Hermione looks my way uncertainly. I nod. "I mean, yeah, that's the right incantation, right? I didn't screw it up, did I?"

"Oh no, based on my tests, it would seem that it was done perfectly. No worries," Grendys says reassuringly. "The Matrimonio Intersecare — this is an ancient and powerful incantation. The amount of blood shared in the bonding ceremony is obviously quite small — infinitesimal, really — and normally wouldn't do much to bring about any kind of blood transformation. Without the incantation, two people could cut themselves, press the wounds together, and whatever blood cells were transferred in the act would most likely be destroyed by each party's immune systems. Our
bodies aren't really designed to mix blood in this way. The incantation, however, makes it possible for blood cells and magic to mix without triggering an immune system response. It's one reason why you may have experienced the spread of a warm, tingling sensation from the point of the wound throughout your bodies immediately after performing the spell."

Holy Kneazle dung. I turn to Hermione. "I felt it. Did you?"

She smiles at the memory and squeezes my hands. "Yes. I did."

"The blood bond is actually a blending of each party's magical DNA. Healers know the phenomenon as Compartido Magia — your blood type stays the same as before, for instance, but your magical powers become blended to a degree, and some researchers say they get stronger as well. Actually, there's a team of medi-wizards in the States doing some fascinating research in this very area right now — I was just reading about it in the Royal Annals a few months ago — they're trying to identify the source of magical DNA, the precise area where it resides in the body, and I must say—"

"Yeah, yeah, we know all about that," I cut in, probably sounding more irritated than I should because Hermione is shooting me a scowl.

"Oh yes," she says sweetly, trying to cover up for my bad manners. "I happened to hear about that research and I believe I read the same article."

Grendys beams. "You did! Merlin bless me! Oh, well, weren't you impressed by the double-blind method they're attempting? It's a jolly good idea, though if it were up to me—"

"Grendys!" I nearly shout.

He practically jumps out of his chair before remembering what he's about. "Oh dear, I'm terribly sorry. I got a bit carried away there, didn't I? It's just that … well … I don't get to talk about such fascinating clinical research very often with a patient," he says to me, looking bewildered. He turns to Hermione and whispers, "We'll have to discuss it later, dear." She nods and looks as if she can't decide whether she should laugh or cry.

"Now, where was I?" Oh yes," says Grendys, righting himself in his chair and wigging his glasses again. "The bonding is significant in this case because it means the two of you now share certain magical antibodies, and it means that your, umm, your semen, Mr. Weasley, now has healing properties that will be quite effective in breaking down the last remaining traces of Dark scar tissue in Mrs. Weasley's reproductive system."

Huh? "Wait — are you saying that just by, erm, shagging, that I could have cured Hermione's injuries without all of this Japanese serum nonsense and all your advanced spellwork and whatnot?"

"Oh, heavens no," says Grendys. "Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, I assure you, the spell damage was far too extensive for that. No, we needed to intervene aggressively to reverse the scarring that was already there and prevent it from spreading. But now that we've undone the vast majority of those magical injuries, Mr. Weasley, yes, your semen will be a useful — perhaps even vital — component of the treatment from here on out, thanks to the Compartido Magia brought about by your bonding. In fact, I daresay, Mrs. Weasley, that the odds of fully recovering your reproductive health are next to nil without it."

I'm now trying to decide whether Grendys is barking or a genius. Maybe he's a little of both. I trade a look with Hermione, whose brow is furrowed like she's trying to work out the most complicated
"Healer Grendys, if Ron's, um, semen" — she says, blushing — "has healing properties by virtue of the Compartido Magia you describe, why can't we, erm, use it while also employing the Contraception charm?"

"Ah, well, that's a very interesting question," Grendys says, clearly enjoying the chance to delve into a theoretical conversation again. "You see, Mrs. Weasley, human semen contains a lipid compound called prostaglandin, which suppresses an immune response by the female against this foreign invader, so to speak. The Contraception charm, Conceptuum Impeditionem, works via several magical mechanisms, but one of them is by removing prostaglandin from a wizard's semen. Without prostaglandin, semen can't survive in the female reproductive system. Thus, no conception. For our purposes, however, a lack of prostaglandin is a very bad thing. Very bad indeed. You see, prostaglandin is one of a suite of lipids, amino acids, enzymes and magical antitoxins — known in Healing parlance as Protivoyadiye Guerison. These healing agents are present in Mr. Weasley's semen and, because of your blood bonding, their levels are uniquely tailored to your magical DNA, Mrs. Weasley, meaning they are ideally suited to reversing the spell damage that remains in your system. These beneficial elements, however, are typically wiped out by the Contraception charm. So, yes Mr. Weasley, *shagging,* as you put it, will very likely finish the job we've started here. But for it to have any healing effect, it must be done without the Conceptuum Impeditionem."

"But … but …" Hermione sputters. "I mean, I suppose I'm just so used to using that incantation … I can't imagine not …"

Grendys smiles. "I know. Young people nowadays are well-conditioned to using the Contraception spell, and that's a very good thing in most circumstances. But you needn't worry overmuch about conceiving sooner than you are ready to, Mrs. Weasley. I predict it will take several years for your fertility to be fully restored. Between now and then … well, I recommend plenty of … erm … treatments," he says with a surprising little wiggle in his eyebrows. "Doctor's orders," he adds, grinning.

Blimey. Shagging. Shagging is the answer. Sweet Merlin. This is just about the most mental thing I've ever heard. Hermione looks at me and suddenly, surprisingly, starts giggling. I try to stuff it down for a second, but I can't help it — soon I'm laughing too, tears rolling down my cheeks, and we're practically collapsing in each other's arms, chortling like we've been hit with the world's most powerful Cheering charm.

"Good Godric, Ron," she says through her chuckles. "I'm sorry, but this is just …"

"…the greatest day of my life?" I supply, and she swats my arm before dissolving into snorting laughter yet again.

"I was going to say this is not what I was expecting to hear," Hermione hiccups, trying to sober up, probably for Grendys' sake. But it's no use. Soon she's exploded into open-mouthed laughter again, and I'm happy to join her.

The next morning, bright and early, I'm rolling Hermione out of St. Mungo's in a wheelchair — much to her irritation, because she'd rather walk — but I remind her at nearly every turn that the wheelchair is hospital policy.

"Hospital policy my Aunt Fanny's bloomers," she mutters.

"Language, dear," I scold, earning myself a dark look from over Hermione's shoulder. Soon I'm
wheeling her through the front entrance and toward a waiting Ministry limousine, which Kingsley has arranged to take us back to the Burrow. I'm a bit surprised that Hermione's parents aren't here to ride along, but perhaps they're tired of the constant back-and-forth between London and Devon. All the Side-Along Apparition these past few days has tapped their energy — they're simply not used to it. Besides, Grendys sent us home on strict orders that Hermione wasn't to Floo or Apparate for at least another day, so it looks like we have a three-hour car ride ahead of us.

In the back seat, I fold Hermione into my arms. She curls up next to me, and I kiss the top of her head before resting my cheek there.

"It feels like I've been wanting to go home forever," she breathes into my chest, and I can't help but notice that she refers to the Burrow, my home, as her home, and the thought causes my heart to throb once or twice.

"Mmm," I answer. "Can't wait to be out in the country again. We've been indoors for so long, stuck in that hospital room. I could use some fresh air, how about you?"

She nods. I pull her closer, and soon her body slackens and I realize she's sleeping. I stretch my legs, sink a little deeper into the car seat, and try to turn off my brain. But, as the limo slips onto the motorway leading out of London, my mind rolls forward several miles and days ahead of us, wondering what's next. We're going to the Burrow, but is that really home anymore? Do Hermione and I belong there now that we're married? Somehow I don't think so. And what do we do about school, money, jobs … George … Mum … Harry? And then there's Hermione's parents. Can I ever win them over? Should I? I mean, I want what's right for her, even if that doesn't include me. It would hurt like hell, but … oh, shit. I hope to Merlin that's not what she wants. I have to stop thinking that way. She loves me — I know she does. Her parents are just going to have to get used to the idea.

As the car accelerates onto open highway, the exhaustion of a week or more of anxiety, grief, travel and bad sleep overtakes me, and soon I'm adrift, pulling Hermione closer in my arms.

I open my eyes sometime later to the familiar sight of Devon's rolling hills, and I realize we're getting fairly close to Ottery St. Catchpole. On the northern edge of the village, however, the driver goes left when he should have gone right at the bridge spanning the River Otter.

"Erm," I say, coughing a bit to get the driver's attention. "Sorry, sir, but the Burrow's down Barrack Road. Looks like we missed our turn."

Hermione wakes up and stretches. "Problem?" she says quietly, looking up into my face.

"Oh, no worries, love — it can be tough to navigate these backroads," I say more for the driver's benefit than for hers. "We can get back to the Burrow pretty easily if we just take a right down Toadpit Way," I continue, leaning forward to give him a hand with the directions.

The driver shakes his head. "Sorry, Mr. Weasley, but I've been asked to take you to a different destination," he says crisply, keeping his eyes on the road.

Suddenly, the budding paranoiac in me stirs. Who the fuck is this guy and where the bloody hell is he taking us? Before I have a chance to say anything more, however, the driver pulls left into a narrow, hedge-lined lane I recognize quite well.

Hermione sits up and looks confused. "Is everything all right, Ron?"

"I…" The truth is I'm not sure but I don't want to alarm her. Too late — she's leaning forward now
and peering out the front window, too, probably wondering, as I am, why the driver is taking us away from the Burrow. We're quite close to the Burrow. I know we are. I've walked this winding lane, Orchard's End, a million times before, but it leads to only one place, and that's Vine Cottage, which has been empty since Uncle Bilius died. Fred and George and I used to walk up Orchard's End to pick apples from the rows of trees behind Bilius' place and to swim in his pond. Hell, this driver must be mixed up.

"Mate, when you get to the end of this lane, I'm afraid you're going to have to turn around," I say, trying to mask the nervous edge in my voice. "It's a dead end." I begin to reach for my wand, trying my best to move slowly so as not to draw the driver's attention — or Hermione's for that matter — but then we clear the last hedge and Vine Cottage comes into view. There, on the wide front porch, sit Harry and Ginny. Wait, what?

The car comes to a stop on the tree-shaded driveway. I hop out quickly and come around to Hermione's side of the car, opening the door for her and offering her my hand to help her out, but my eyes are riveted on Harry and Ginny, who are now standing and strolling toward us, smiling widely. Ginny runs ahead and wraps Hermione in a giant bear hug. Then, behind them, the front door to the cottage opens and out come Mum and Dad … and then Hugh and Eleanor. What the actual hell is going on here?

Our parents catch up with Harry and Ginny and they all quickly engulf Hermione in hugs and kisses. "You look wonderful, darling," Eleanor tells her and kisses her forehead. Mum agrees and pulls Hermione into a teary embrace.

Soon Dad steps over to me, smiling widely and slapping an arm around my right shoulder. "Dad, what are we doing at Bilius's place?" I ask.

My question seems to have captured everyone else's attention. Hermione kisses her father's cheek then steps up to me and tucks herself in on my left side. I look down at her. She seems as puzzled as I am.

"Oh, we're not at Bilius's place, son," Dad answers. "And what are we doing here, you ask? Why, I do believe we're having lunch, eh, Molly?"

Mum nods, wiping her hands on her apron.

Hermione and I share another puzzled look.

"Huh? … But I … I mean, that is … we don't..." Hermione and I stammer over one another.

"Come, come," Mum says, holding out her hands to Hermione and pulling her along toward the cottage. "We'll explain over sandwiches. You look like you could use some feeding up, dear."

I search Dad's face, but he just chuckles and shrugs, following Mum up the path to the wide-roofed front porch of Bilius's old stone cottage. Hugh throws an arm around Eleanor's shoulders and strolls along behind Dad, leaving me, Harry and Ginny to pull the luggage from the boot.

Harry and Ginny simply giggle to one another, seemingly unwilling to say anything that might shed light on what the buggering hell is going on here. I grab a few bags, Harry grabs a few more, and we wind our way up the path to the picnic lunch that Eleanor and Ginny are spreading on a table next to the front door as Mum deposits Hermione on the porch swing.

"Sit!" Mum commands, pointing to the space next to Hermione on the swing. Of course, I do as she asks, giving her an exaggerated salute in the process before taking Hermione's hand in mine and
giving it a squeeze.

Hugh and Eleanor sit themselves on the white wicker chairs next to us. Harry and Ginny, holding hands, return to their seats on the wide front stairs, and Mum steps up next to Dad, who wraps an arm around her and — blimey, it looks like he's about to give another ruddy speech. Damn, this is becoming a habit with him.

"Hermione, Ron, this cottage has been in the Weasley family for generations. You know it, Ron, as my brother Bilius's place, but it was my great-uncle's before that, and my great-grandfather's before that," he says, casting his eyes over the ivy-covered stones of the first floor and nodding appreciatively. "Molly, Hugh, Eleanor and I put our heads together this past week and decided that this cottage has been neglected for too long. It deserves to be put to use again. And we're hoping you two will be willing to do the job."

I'm speechless. I look down at Hermione, whose mouth is gaping open, but it begins to bend into a wide smile. "Oh, Mr. Weasley," she sputters, and then gets up and launches herself at Dad, wrapping her arms around his neck and burying her face in his shoulder.

"Arthur, dear," he says, patting her back gently and kissing the top of her head.

"Oh yes, I'm sorry — Arthur," she says, correcting herself with a laugh and pulling back to wipe the tears from her eyes.

I rise and look at Mum. "What ... don't you ... I mean, you didn't have to," I stammer. "Uh, why us?"

"Why not you?" Mum says as if I've just said the most daft thing ever. "Bill and Fleur are settled at Shell Cottage. And, I'll admit, I wasn't expecting my *youngest* son to be the next to get married but, well, the cottage is yours if you want it, dear."

I look over Mum's head at Hugh and Eleanor. Eleanor, for her part, is smiling like she's drunk on Firewhiskey. Hugh kisses her hand, which he's been holding, before standing up and stepping toward me.

"Ron," he says, attempting to keep his voice level, though I can tell he's got a lump in his throat, "I hope you and Hermione will be happy here," he says while shaking my hand firmly.

I look at Hermione, who is still standing in Dad's arms.

"We will be, Daddy," she says, stepping toward Hugh and letting him wrap her in a tight embrace.

"You'd better be," he murmurs into her hair. "We've spent the better part of a week fixing this old place up. If you don't love it, we'll all be quite cross — especially Ginny and Harry here. They've been scrubbing and sweeping this place for days."

Hermione laughs and squeezes her father tighter.

Then it occurs to me — wait, I thought everybody was working with the Restoration Squad on the house in Cambridge all this week. Hugh looks at me and seems to read my thoughts, because he pipes up before I can form the sentence. "Cambridge can wait," he says. "This was more important."

Hermione makes a little noise like a blend of a laugh and a sob. "Well, I want to see it, then!" she says, wiping the tears from her eyes.
"Eat first, darling," says Eleanor, "and then we'll give you the grand tour."

After lunch, we all decide to take pity on Hermione — who's been absolutely squirming to get inside the house — and we take a look around.

It's been years since I've been inside Vine Cottage. I've always loved the covered porch where we've been eating lunch. It wraps all the way around the house. Ginny and I used to rock back and forth for hours on Bilius's porch swing — I'm so happy it's still here. From there, we pass into the little entryway beyond the wide, oak front door. Through the arch on the right there's a sitting room with a beamed ceiling that runs the entire length of the house, a giant stone fireplace surrounded by built-in bookcases and French doors at the far end that open up onto the back porch and overlook the garden beyond. Through the arch on the left, there's a small dining room with dark wood paneling that goes from the floor to just about three feet beneath the ceiling — Hermione squeals, "Oh, what gorgeous wainscoting," though I have no idea what that is — and there's a swinging door that leads to a kitchen with another stone hearth, a built-in breakfast nook, a tiny loo off to the side and a door to the back garden.

There's not a stick of furniture on the first floor, but the wooden floors are freshly scrubbed, the windows sparkle, and we're told that Harry and Ginny were the ones who whitewashed the walls and stripped the woodwork so that everything is gleaming and new.

Hermione is more energized than I've seen her since before Malfoy Manor — she's buzzing, bouncing from room to room, exclaiming over how bright and sunny each one is, how quaint, how sweet, how cozy, what endless possibilities the cottage presents, thanking everyone as she moves from room to room looking like an overexcited kid on Christmas morning. The rest of us are clumped together, following her as she zooms from spot to spot and laughing quietly at her giddiness.

A winding staircase faces the front door, leading to the second floor. Hermione practically runs up the stairs, well ahead of me, oohing and ahhing at the size of the three bedrooms above, how suitable one would be as a library, how convenient the bath off the main hallway will be, and on and on. Before I can catch up with her, she's barged into the master bedroom, which I remember as a wide room that took up the entire back half of the second floor overlooking the back garden. I step through the doorway and I'm suddenly as gobsmacked as she apparently is.

She's standing in the middle of this very large, completely furnished room, which has a hearth, a sitting area and an en suite bathroom at the near end. The far end, meanwhile, is dominated by an enormous four-poster bed — the biggest bed I've ever seen — and another set of French doors leading to a balcony that opens up to a view of the River Otter valley beyond the back garden. There's more of that wainscoting stuff that Hermione was on about downstairs, and the space above it is covered with an ivory-colored wallpaper that's sprinkled with creamy roses, and I'm reminded of the rose wallpaper in her old bedroom in Cambridge. Beneath Hermione's feet is a giant, Persian rug done in reds and golds — Gryffindor colors. There's a pillowy, cushiony windowseat done up in similar colors, and the duvet on the bed and the sofas by the hearth are Gryffindor crimson, too.

We look at each other, both flabbergasted, and then it dawns on us that the rest of the crowd hasn't followed us up to the bedroom. They're all downstairs. Hermione takes me by the hand, and we both walk down, rather sheepishly, it must be said, only to find that they're all packing up and getting ready to go.

We say tearful farewells — Mum assures us that there's more food in the kitchen, and Dad reminds me that he and Harry set up some protective enchantments, though he thinks we ought to reinforce them come nightfall. Hugh claps me on the back and gives my hand another hearty shake while
Eleanor kisses Hermione's cheeks one more time. We offer more thank-yous to the whole group than they probably care to hear. I feel like a prat, actually. After all, how can we really thank them all for what they've done? And yet, they don't seem to want to hear it — in fact, they're all waving us off like we're mad.

Our parents and Ginny are already halfway down the path to the lane before I can I catch up with Harry on the porch. "Hey, mate — I, I just …"

Harry turns and gives me a friendly punch on the arm. "Ron, you guys keep thanking us and thanking us," he says.

"Well … yeah. I mean, this is big."

Harry puts his hands on his hips, shakes his head, and looks down at his trainers, chuckling. "You know, Ron, you can be really thick sometimes," he says with a sly grin. "You should know by now — thanks aren't necessary anymore. Not between us." Then he turns, grabs Ginny's hand, and follows the rest of the group down the path toward the Burrow.

Hermione steps through the front door, joins me on the porch and wraps her arm around my waist. I slip my arm around her shoulders and we slowly step down the stairs and onto the path, watching as our parents and then Harry and Ginny turn down the lane and then disappear behind the hedge, laughing as Harry and Ginny turn to give us one last wave.

I look down at Hermione. She's smiling and crying at the same time. Then we both turn to look up at the cottage. It is a handsome old place — always has been — with wide pillars made of rounded grey stones holding up the porch ceiling, big mullioned windows, a sloping slate roof, and ivy growing everywhere. It's been neglected, it's true, but … well, it's perfect. At least, it's perfect to me. But … I need to be sure.

"So, um, do you … do you like it?" I ask, my voice sounding smaller than I expected.

Hermione looks up at me, shocked. "Like it? Oh Ronald, I love it."

"Really?"

"Really."

This is all I need to hear. Before I can give my worries another thought, I scoop Hermione up in my arms and carry her toward the front steps.

She whoops in surprise and then quickly wraps her arms around my neck, laughing. "What are you doing, Mr. Weasley?" she says.

"I'm carrying my bride into our home, Mrs. Weasley," I reply.

I kick the big door closed behind me, kick off my boots, then amble toward the staircase with Hermione in my arms. "And now what are you doing, Mr. Weasley," she asks with a sly grin.

"I'm taking us to the only room with any sodding furniture in it, Mrs. Weasley."

As I climb the stairs, I'm so happy I can't stop grinning, and yet I can hardly blink back the tears in my eyes. I'm completely overwhelmed. We're home. We're safe.

I lay Hermione on the bed and lean over her. She looks up into my eyes. "We're alone," she whispers.
I nod.

"It feels like years, doesn't it?" she says.

I lower my face to hers and we touch noses. "A lifetime," I say. She angles her chin so that our lips are now lightly brushing against one another. "I've missed you," she says against my lips.

"Me too."

"You went so far for me, good sir knight," she says.

"Ten thousand miles," I answer, pressing my lips more firmly against hers. Then I pull back a bit. "That's one of the only muggle songs I know, actually."

"Hmm?" she asks, slowly opening her eyes, which had slid shut as we were kissing.

"You know, that old Red Red Rose song," I answer, fingering one of her curls with my right hand as I lean over her on my left elbow.

She crinkles her brow. "Wait, Robert Burns? You know Robert Burns?"

"Just a bit," I answer. "How's that one go again?" It takes me a second, but then I remember the melody, and I hum a bit of it. "And fare thee well, my only love," I sort of sing and mumble, "and fare thee well a while. And I will come again, my love, tho' it were ten thousand mile."

Like me, Hermione's smiling and crying again. We're a couple of nutters, we are. She wraps her arms more tightly around my shoulders and pulls me to her, and soon we're snogging, and it's been so long, her lips feel almost new to me, like they did that night in the Common Room more than a year ago.

As we kiss, I slowly unbutton Hermione's blouse, running my fingers over her breasts and skimming her throat with my lips. I open my eyes for a moment and I'm taken aback by what I see.

"Your scars," I murmur.

She nods and smiles. "I know. Grendys said that was a happy side-effect of the anti-Dark Magic treatment. The external scars healed along with the internal ones."

I nod distractedly. Blimey. The scar on her throat, once angry and red, has shrunk to a faint pink line. And if I didn't know that scar from the Department of Mysteries had been there, I would barely notice it now. It's been reduced to a pale white mark across her chest.

"That's wonderful, honestly," I whisper, returning my hand to her breast. "Gods, you're so beautiful. So beautiful."

We continue to undress one another, slowly, lovingly, one item of clothing at a time, pausing to lavish kisses on every newly exposed inch of skin. Before long, we're both starkers, stretched out atop the duvet. Hermione's on top of me at the moment, running her hands over my shoulders and down my chest, letting me kiss and nibble on one of her breasts, then the other as I dig my fingers into her bum.

I reach my right hand down and stroke her, and she hums deeply, running her fingers through my hair as I continue to kiss her breast. She moves her hips in synch with my fingers. "Oh Ron, right
there," she cries above my head. "Right there. Oh, gods, oh Ron," she breathes. In a moment, she
digs her fingers deeply into my hair and tosses her head back, crying out a series of "ohhs" and
"ahhs."

By now, I don't just want her, I need her. I wrap an arm around her shoulder and flip us over so I'm
lying above her and press my forehead to hers. "Mione, love," I pant. "I've got to have you —
now."

She hums against my lips. "Please, Ron," she murmurs as she opens her legs and runs her hands up
my chest, over my shoulders and into my hair. "Please, darling."

I position myself above her, savoring the feeling of her warmth there for a moment before thrusting
inside. "Oh gods," she moans. "Oh, how I've longed for this ... for you."

My head is swimming. "You feel soooooooooo good, love. So fucking good," I whisper as I pump
away, perhaps more roughly than I should considering she's just back from hospital, but she's
wrapping her arms and legs around me tightly and begging for more.

"Oh yes, Ron, yes ... please ... don't stop," she says.

I'm on fire for her. The feeling of being inside her again, of being one with her again, it's fucking
overwhelming. I lean on my left elbow and run my right hand from her bum down to the back of
her knee, pulling her closer to me with every thrust. "You're mine, aren't you," I whisper against her
ear, nibbling it slightly as I do. "Mine."

"Always," she whispers back, cupping my bum and bucking her hips to meet mine.

"Blood of my blood," I whisper against her ear.

"Forever," she whispers back.

And then, from somewhere deep inside me, I feel a wave of pleasure building up and gradually
inundating me until I'm crying out Hermione's name in one long, slow, strangled wail. I'm too
turned on to think, but as I come down from it, it occurs to me that this time felt different — fuller,
somehow, more powerful, and I wonder if it's because it's the first I've ever experienced without
the Conceptuum Impeditionem. The idea seems sort of crazy, but then, I've heard a lot of crazy
shite in the past few days — hell, in the past few years. Almost anything seems possible at this
point.

I roll over onto my back, pulling Hermione into my arms, and she curls up next to me while
dragging the duvet sloppily over us. We're propped up on a pile of pillows and, from this vantage
point, we can see through the French doors that the afternoon sun is starting to set behind the hills
in the valley below.

Hermione turns her head to gaze at the sunset, framed by the vines surrounding the doors.
Meanwhile, I'm gazing at her.

"It's a beautiful view, isn't it?" she says dreamily.

"Hmm. It is."
Next Steps

Chapter Summary

Time to think about a career, yeah?

Chapter 17: Next Steps

"The diplomatic courier dropped this off from the U.S. Department of Magic this morning," Kingsley says, taking a large, blue leather pouch emblazoned with a gold eagle emblem off his desk and handing it to me. "Go ahead, open it."

I look over to Harry and Hermione. Harry shrugs. Hermione, meanwhile, can't tear her eyes from the pouch — I can tell from the look on her face that she's dying to know what's inside.

I give the pouch a little shake. "Well, it's not ticking."

Kingsley grins, and I start to wonder if he already knows what this is all about.

I pull the zipper and reach inside, finding three envelopes made of creamy ivory paper — the fancy kind I haven't felt since my Hogwarts letter arrived. One envelope is addressed to Harry, one to Hermione, one to me.

"You go first," I say, stepping over to Harry and handing him the envelope with his name on it. He rips it open and pulls out a letter on the same posh paper, unfolds it and runs his eyes over it.

"Blimey," he breathes. "We've been granted the Salem Prize."

"What the hell is that?" I ask.

Harry shrugs and scans the letter further. "American wizarding society's highest honor, apparently," he says, sounding a bit astonished. "We're invited to attend a medals ceremony in Washington, if we like. But even if we can't, the prize is ours. Ten thousand staters each, apparently."

"OK," I reply. "What the hell's a stater?"

"It's American wizarding currency," Hermione answers, "comparable to a galleon. I believe the exchange rate is about one and a half staters to the galleon lately."

"Merlin," I breathe. I quickly tear open my envelope and read the letter over. Apparently the money has already been deposited in our vaults at Gringotts. Bloody hell.

"There's more where that came from," Kingsley says. He pulls a folder from the top drawer of his desk, extracts a letter from it and hands it to Hermione.

"I don't read German," she says, "but hang on." She reluctantly pulls the wand from her pocket — she's still using Bellatrix's damned wand, and I know she hates it. "Translatium Diutisc," she mutters as she waves the wand over the paper, and the language changes from German to English.
"The Vaettir's Crown," she breathes, eyes wide. "Five thousand ducats, already deposited."

Kingsley hands her another roll of parchment. "This one's in French," she says. "This I can read." We all watch as she takes in the page. "They want to give us the Prix de Sorcier and three thousand Livres apiece," she says before squealing out an "ooh la la!" and clutching the parchment to her chest. "An awards ceremony in Paris! I haven't been to Paris in years."

Kingsley smiles and gestures to the seating area by the hearth at the far end of his office. We stroll over there and join him. "And this isn't even counting the nations that have contacted my secretary to indicate their parliaments and ministries are planning similar honors — Norway has been in touch, Brazil, Japan, Spain, Canada, Italy, Turkey, Iran. I expect the three of you could spend the next year on a world tour picking up awards and statues and medals. But I honestly wouldn't advise it. I know you think I'm a terrible stick in the mud, but international travel is far too risky for the three of you right now."

He pauses to laugh, shaking his head. "Hermione, you should have seen the way that husband of yours reacted when I told him I thought going to Australia was too dangerous. He really gave me what for." I can feel my ears heat up and Hermione reaches over to grab my hand and give it a squeeze.

"Well, that was different," I mutter.

"Of course it was," Kingsley says. "I'm just giving you the business, Ron. But honestly, I do think that as long as there are still Death Eaters on the loose, it's best if you three keep a low profile and guard your movements, even here in Britain. Going overseas to collect honors, no matter how well-intentioned these ministers are … well, you could make yourselves a terribly tempting target for a Voldemort supporter with a grudge."

Harry snorts. "Yeah, and then there are those ministers who probably are offering us rewards without the best of intentions," he says. "I'm sure more than one of them would like nothing better than to have their pictures taken with one of the so-called 'Golden Trio' for their own political reasons."

"Precisely," says Hermione. "That's why I think we really need to think hard as a team about what we do next. Obviously, we still have work to do here within the Ministry to give our testimony for the Wizengamot Commission's post-war report, but we also need a media strategy. We have been fielding so many interview requests from all over the world, and so far we've been turning them all down. But we can't maintain our public silence for much longer or the Rita Skeeters of the world will fill in the blanks for us, and the results probably won't be pretty."

"Good point, love," I say with a snigger, "though I doubt Skeeter will risk messing with you ever again." She smiles. "Seriously, though," I continue, "if we're going to give any newspaper or magazine an interview, I really think it ought to be Lovegood. Could help him get the Quibbler back up off the ground, don't you think? Seems the least we could do."

The others nod. "If that's your wish, I'll have my media secretary drop Xenophilius a line today," Kingsley says. "Consider it done." He scribbles a note on a piece of parchment, waves his wand at it, and it takes off through the mail slot in the doorway. "Now, before you cast too many aspersions on politicians in need of a little of the Golden Trio glory, don't forget that I have an award of my own to present to you. Fortunately, there will be no need to travel overseas to collect it. You see, you three have been nominated to receive the Order of Merlin First Class, and I'm happy to report the Wizengamot approved the motion just this morning. We'll hold an official awards ceremony along with a Reconciliation Gala here in the Ministry Ballroom in about six weeks' time."
What? The Order of Merlin? *First Class*? Good Godric. Mum's going to burst her buttons.

I look to Harry, who's gone pale, and then to Hermione, who is trying to find words but seems to have forgotten how to speak — her mouth is hanging open ever so slightly.

Kingsley smiles at our Stupefied reaction. "Harry, Hermione, Ron, you should know, first of all, the Order of Merlin First Class entitles you to seats on the Wizengamot — though you'll have to wait a few years, since Wizengamot bylaws stipulate that members must be 25 before they can assume their seats on the council. The second thing you should know: It's been decades since anyone has won a First Class Merlin. And I can't think of anyone who deserves it more than you three," he says, pausing to press his fist to his lips for a minute. Crap, is Kingsley choked up? I think he is. Blimey. "And I don't mind saying, though I know it's not really about the money," he forces himself to continue in a louder, cheerier voice, "that there's a financial honorarium attached to this award as well. Twenty-five thousand galleons. Congratulations."

Hermione raises her hand to her chest. "Twenty-five thousand … oh, that's, that's…"

"…unbelievable," I supply.

"Incredible," Harry adds.

Hermione laughs, fanning herself with her hands. "Wonderful, extraordinary, marvelous, spectacular, breathtaking, astounding, mind-boggling — and completely and totally unnecessary," she says.

I nudge her with my elbow. "Hey, speak for yourself," I say with a grin, and Kingsley bends over laughing. I'm joking, of course — and I really don't want Kingsley to think that any of what we did over the past year was in pursuit of money. In fact, nothing could have been further from our minds. Hell, I was happy to simply survive, thank you very much — I wasn't even aware that these honorary awards had anything to do with money. But, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thrilled to finally have some money for once in my life. I don't want or need much really — just enough to be sure that I can take care of Hermione if I need to, to give us options if ever we're lucky enough to have a family, to be able to give her and my children and maybe even my parents nice things now and then instead of always having to try to stretch a knut or make do with grotty hand-me-downs.

Harry and I talked about the money a little bit on the way back from Australia — not knowing that Quinlan's prize was only to be the first of so many. Harry told me he would set up the Australian award money in trust for Teddy, and I wouldn't be surprised if he sends more of it Teddy's way now. I really can't speak for Hermione's money, but I've already got plans for mine.

I'm figuring we're about done with this meeting and I'm starting to imagine tucking into a steak and kidney pie and lifting a celebratory flagon of butterbeer at the Leaky as planned, but apparently Kingsley has other ideas.

He clears his throat. "Before I let you go, there are one or two other matters I'd like to discuss," he says.

The three of us exchange a wary glance, and we must look incredibly edgy because Kingsley laughs out loud. "For heaven's sake, you three, you're not at Hogwarts anymore. It's not like I'm handing out detentions."

"Sorry, Kingsley, force of habit, I reckon," I say with a smile.

"Yeah, what's on your mind?" Harry adds.
"Well, I'm glad this conversation has been so forward-looking, because that's precisely what I'd like to talk with you three about: Your futures. Your plans now that the war is over and your lives can once again become your own. Have any of you given any thought to what you'd like to do next?"

Merlin's rusty faucet, I haven't had time to think of anything other than funerals, the Australia mission and Hermione's health. The future? Now that I know I've got one, my picture of it is surprisingly blank. I do know one thing: I'm not going back to Hogwarts. Hermione, however … I always reckoned she'd want to finish her NEWTs. It'll suck Gargoyle tits if she goes back without me, but if that's what she wants to do well, hell, I'll just have to learn to live with it and pretend I'm OK. I owe her at least that much.

Suddenly it dawns on me that we've all been fairly quiet. I decide to break the uncomfortable silence.

"Well, um, honestly Kingsley, I've always wanted to be an Auror. At least, that was the track I hoped to be on after my OWLs."

Harry nods. "Me, too," he says. "Though the D.A. sessions also put the idea in my head that I might like to teach someday, maybe down the road."

"You'd be good at that, mate," I reply. "You're a natural."

Hermione hums her agreement. The sound draws Kingsley's attention to her. "And what about you, Hermione? Surely the brightest witch of her age must have big plans."

Hermione is surprisingly quiet, her eyes trained on a point in the middle distance over Kingsley's head. "Umm, yes, I have some ideas, but they're not terribly well-formed," she murmurs.

"Do your plans include returning to Hogwarts?" Kingsley asks softly.

Hermione thinks for a moment and shakes her head. "You know, Kingsley, if you had asked me that a year ago, I would have said, 'of course.' But, well, things have changed, haven't they."

"What are you on about?" I chime in quickly, before I have a chance to really think about it. "You always … I mean, I always reckoned you'd go back to Hogwarts and finish your NEWTs and all that. Your education has always been so important to you. I'm surprised that we haven't really talked about this whole thing yet, come to think of it, but hell, life's just been one thing after another since the final battle.

She gives me a sad smile. "I do want to sit for my NEWTs, Ron. But going back to Hogwarts full-time? That doesn't seem right anymore — not now."

Kingsley stands and strides toward the hearth, looking deep into the fire with his hands behind his back for a minute before turning to face us. "Well, this is good. This is exactly the conversation I wanted to have with the three of you. Because, I have anticipated your wishes," he says with a little grin, "and, if I do say so myself, I did a remarkably good job at it. I hope you'll forgive me, but I've taken the liberty of exploring some possibilities on your behalf."

Harry looks to me and then to Hermione, then leans forward in his seat. "Do tell, Kingsley."

Kingsley places his hands on his hips. "Perhaps it would help if I started by laying out the priorities of my administration." Crap. Why is everybody so keen to make speeches lately? Kingsley must see that I've worked hard to keep myself from rolling my eyes, because he laughs. "Don't worry, Ron, this will all tie together and make sense in a minute. Just bear with me, yeah?"
"Right. As I was saying, I am setting three priorities for the Ministry in this time of post-war recovery. First is security," he says, holding one finger in the air. "This is our Number One job right now — rounding up the remaining Death Eaters, bringing wrongdoers and their accomplices to justice, and making our society safe for all witches and wizards regardless of blood status. Second is rebuilding. Hogwarts isn't the only wizarding institution brought low by the war. The Ministry itself requires renovation after sustaining extensive damage. Wizarding homes — in some cases, entire wizarding villages — have been wiped out. Commercial districts such as Diagon Alley were hobbled. Businesses were forced to shut down, creating enormous economic hardship. Entire departments of the Ministry were decimated and need to be reorganized in a way that reflects current realities of wizarding society. So we have a very large reconstruction job ahead of us from one end of Britain to the other. The third priority is reconciliation and reform — healing the wounds of the war, breaking down the cultural barriers that made Voldemort's rise possible to begin with, and reworking our legal system to ensure equal treatment for all magical beings. That's what the Shacklebolt administration will stand for, and I'm happy to say that we're already seeing pledges of cooperation even from the most conservative members of the Wizengamot."

Harry stands. "I know I can speak for Ron and Hermione when I say we're behind you 100 percent, Kingsley. Your priorities and ours … well, they're one and the same."

I nod and stand to clap Kingsley on the back, and Hermione steps up to stand next to me and places her hand in mine. "Yeah, we're with you, Kingsley," I say. "The only question is, where do you see us fitting in to this plan? I mean, how can we help?"

"Well, that's just it, Ron. Rebuilding the Auror force is going to be an essential part of Priority Number One — security and justice."

I know from what Dad's already told us that the Ministry's Auror Office was dealt a serious blow by the war, obviously, and that the only thing that's keeping the British Ministry afloat and secure right now is the cooperation of foreign governments. Spain, France, Sweden and Belgium all sent Aurors as reinforcements in the immediate aftermath of the war. But they're not a long-term substitute for British-born Aurors who know the landscape, understand the culture and, frankly, speak the language.

"I've been in meetings with Brocklehurst, the head of the Auror Academy," Kingsley continues, interrupting my distracted thoughts. "He's agreed to condense the training course from six months to three. The first month will be a 24/7 boot camp — 100 percent on-site at the Academy barracks at St. Agnes Island. No breaks during that first month. It'll be full-on, intensive instruction in field operations, logistics, defensive strategy and physical conditioning. The following two months will be held at the Camden training facility here in London, five days a week, 12 hour days, with weekend breaks. At the end of three months, those cadets who remain will be qualified to join the Auror Corps as apprentices to the few Senior Aurors who remain. That's a seriously accelerated schedule, but we think the recruits who will be signing up will be battle-tested and more ready for field work than any training class since the first wizarding war."

Harry looks at me and gives me a terse nod. We both know we have a hell of a lot to learn, but I reckon everything we've done since we were sodding first years has to count for something.

"The Auror Corps has always attracted the best and the brightest, but we hope to up the ante even further by boosting Auror pay and improving the work experience to allow Senior Aurors to do more professional development work and collaborate with overseas security agencies as a stepping stone to broader careers in international diplomacy, intelligence and education," Kingsley says,
looking to Hermione. I wonder if he figures the notion of becoming a diplomat or an intelligence officer would be appealing to her. Merlin knows she'd be excellent at any of those things — and she'd be a hell of an Auror, no doubt — but is this what she wants? She's never, ever said she wanted to be anything like an Auror. If she chose this path, how would I handle it? I mean, would I be up for Grimmauld Place-style arguments every time she had to go out on a mission? *Fuck.*

"Most recruits will be required to take written and physical tests in order to qualify for entry," he adds, "but you three as well as Neville Longbottom are in if you want to be, no questions asked. We will extend the same offer to Ginevra, though Molly and Arthur have made it crystal-clear that they expect her to complete her seventh year at Hogwarts." Hell, yes, they certainly have made that clear. Mum has huffed and puffed about it more than once in my presence.

"The next Academy is scheduled to begin on September 1st, which means that if you wanted, the three of you could be fully qualified apprentice Aurors by Christmas," Kingsley says.

Great Gandalf's ghost, in six months I could be an Auror. My life's ambition. I look at Harry and he's wearing a smile as wide as mine. Hermione, however, is a different story. She looks troubled. Kingsley, I think, also reads her expression.

"Here, let's sit down, everybody," Kingsley says gently, and we all follow his lead. He turns to Hermione. "I wanted to include you in this offer, Hermione, because of course if you're interested in the Corps, no one here would stand in your way. Quite the contrary — I'd back you every step of the way. But it is entirely your decision."

Hermione presses her hands together and looks at him with a small smile. "Thank you, Kingsley. That means a lot to me."

I reach out and take one of her hands in mine. "What are you thinking?"

She rubs my hand in both of hers and purses her lips. "It's just, I've never had the ambition to be an Auror. I'm sorry, Kingsley."

"Don't apologize, Hermione. All I'm doing is pointing out one door that's open to you," he replies. "But there are many, many others."

She shrugs. "I do want to complete my NEWTs, but with all the challenges facing the wizarding world right now, it seems ... I don't know ... *selfish* somehow to hive myself away at Hogwarts when I could be out here, making a real difference," she says with a determined tone. "As you were laying out your priorities, Kingsley, all three of them resonated for me, honestly, and I thought I'd like to be involved in each and every one of them. On the security front, I'd like to be involved in the prosecution of the remaining Death Eaters. On the rebuilding front, I'd like to be involved in the restoration of order, seeing justice done for those who were harmed by the war. On the reform front, I'd like to be involved in passing new laws that would protect the vulnerable — and I think my voice could make a difference, especially since I am a muggleborn married to a pureblood."

I squeeze her hand and she gives me a little smile before returning her gaze to Kingsley. Gods, she's effing amazing, this one.

Kingsley is smiling, too. "Hermione, your answer is music to my ears, quite honestly. I was rather hoping you would say something along those lines, because I would very much like you to be involved in all three administrative priorities. I reached out to Minerva yesterday and hammered out a tentative plan — pending your approval, of course — that would allow you to complete your NEWTs while working for me as a special attaché for magical policy. Your duties in this role would be open-ended. While the Ministry has many challenges ahead and each department will be
drilling deep into the problems pertaining to their particular areas, I need someone with your skills, someone with a nimble and broad mind, someone I trust implicitly, to move from problem to problem, analyze data, think through strategies, do research as necessary, and make intelligent policy recommendations directly to me. It will be an opportunity to be my eyes and ears on a range of topics, to problem-solve, and to advocate for causes you care about."

Kingsley is a bloody genius. This is just the kind of work that Hermione was born to do. How many times have I sat and listened to her prattle on about her fears that working for the Ministry would mean winding up in an office somewhere shuffling paper and never making a real difference? At Kingsley's side, she could make an impact right away — as someone with her brains and heart should. I'm grinning from ear to ear like a simpleton. Hermione looks at Harry, then at me — she's grinning like a fool, too — but suddenly she looks worried. She returns her gaze to Kingsley.

"Wait, where do my NEWTs come in?" she asks.

"Ah, I knew you wouldn't let that detail slip past," he says with a smile. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, Hermione, but Minerva is quite confident that you could sit your NEWTs tomorrow and pass with a record-breaking score. That said, she knows how much your education matters to you. She proposes having you treat the coming year as a practicum — your work with me would count for academic credit. You would Floo to Hogwarts on Fridays to do one-on-one conferences with Minerva, Professor Flitwick and Professor Vector on your day-to-day work as well as a course of assigned reading and independent study. What do you think?"

Later that afternoon, I'm feeling a bit light-headed — because Harry and I, and even Hermione, have more or less tied one on at the Leaky. We're not stone-cold drunk, but we're feeling very, very good and, god dammit, it's about time. We had lunch — and countless butterbeers — with Neville, Ginny and Luna but, before long, George, Angelina and Lee joined us, and then Dean and Seamus wandered in, and gradually the crowd of us had taken over the far corner of the pub and things had started to get pretty raucous. But what the hell — we had a lot to celebrate and, at every turn, I took it upon myself to brag about — and embarrass the living daylights out of — my brilliant wife. Everyone's agog at the new job she'll start at the Minister's side on September 1st. I couldn't be more proud of her if I tried. I mean, who but Hermione would receive such an offer? And who but Hermione would deserve it so?

Hermione, of course, has been shooshing me the whole time, and it's just as well, because actually I have a plan of my own for the afternoon and I don't want to get too legless or I won't be able to pull it off. I sneak a peek at the clock behind the bar and decide it's time to shove off.

I extract myself from a loud Quidditch argument between Seamus and Oliver Wood, who stumbled in a little while ago, and wind my way through the crowd until I'm just behind Hermione, who is listening and laughing as Luna, Lee and Ginny trade stories about their work on the Hogwarts reconstruction crew. I lay my hands gently on Hermione's hips, not caring that we're surrounded by a throng of people, and lean down over her shoulder so she can hear me through the buzz of conversation and music. "Let's get out of here, Mrs. Weasley," I murmur through a little grin, keeping my lips close to her ear. "I have some serious business that must be attended to." I see her cheek curve upward, and she nuzzles it against my nose while pressing her hands on top of mine where they lay on her hip bones.

"What exactly do you have in mind, Mr. Weasley," she murmurs saucily over her shoulder, lifting my hands and turning so that she's standing with her back against the wall behind her. I step forward and rest my forearm on the wall about a foot above her head, and she tilts her face up to look at me. Gods, it's not just the butterbeer talking — she's beautiful, and the warm, dim light
inside the Leaky only accentuates it. Her eyes are sparkling and dark, her skin is so creamy … I return my free hand to her hip and caress her there … and I think of all the times that I've wanted to be with her here, just like this, plainly in love with her and her plainly in love with me, with no shame and no awkwardness, and my heart pangs in my chest. I must have been looking into her eyes for longer than I thought, because soon she giggles and bites her bottom lip, raising her hands from their spot behind her back and looping them around my neck. "Are you going to kiss me or aren't you, darling?"

"Oh, I do believe I'm going to kiss you," I reply, lowering my lips to hers and kissing her deeply. If Hermione has any objections to kissing me so openly and tenderly in public, she certainly isn't letting on, but soon, and unsurprisingly, I hear George in the background.

"Oi, get a room," he shouts, tossing a well-aimed ice cube at the back of my head.

Hermione and I break the kiss, laughing. I take her hand in mine. "Good idea, brother," I shout above the heads of the crowd and, with that, I pull Hermione along with me toward the exit, stopping only briefly to confirm with Harry that he and Ginny are coming to Vine Cottage the next night for dinner.

Outside the Leaky, we turn the corner onto the quiet side street that runs along the pub's north wall, and Hermione stops to lean her right shoulder against the bricks. She places her left hand on her hip and crosses her ankles while looking up into my face from beneath her lashes. She smiles. "So, Mr. Weasley," she asks in a sing-song voice, "what is this business you say you must attend to?"

I step closer to her and she shifts so that her back is against the bricks, her palms flat on the wall behind her bum. I prop my hands on the wall on either side of her head, boxing her in, then tilt my face down and graze her lips with mine. "You'll see," I murmur, "but first you must be a good girl and agree to do as I say."

At this, I see the eyebrow over her right eye shoot upward. Her grin widens. "Hmm," she hums, and then she grabs the lapels of my jacket in her little fists and pulls me to her roughly, taking my lower lip between her teeth and nibbling it slightly, before releasing it to whisper, "Your wish has always been my command, good sir knight."

Fucking hell, she drives me wild. "If we weren't in the middle of Diagon Alley I'd snog you senseless — you know that, yeah?" I mutter against her lips. "But seriously, there are two stops I want to make — and then I'd like to continue this conversation in private, Mrs. Weasley."

She answers by letting go of my lapels, smoothing her palms over my chest, and then planting a deep kiss on my lips. I loop my arms around her waist and crush myself against her, pressing her between my hips and the wall.

After a minute, I pull back, my arms still wrapped tightly around her waist. "All right, then," I say, though I'm a little winded. "Trust me?"

She nods.

"Good," I reply. "Mind Side-Alonging with me?"

"Of course not."

"With your eyes closed?"

"Umm, OK," she answers with a grin.
I straighten up, grab my wand, and offer her my arm. She presses her eyes shut tight then takes hold of my forearm, and a second later we're in front of a familiar old shop in another quarter of Diagon Alley.

Hermione looks up at the sign above the door. "Ollivander's?"

I nod. "Reckon it's long past time that we got rid of that ... thing you've been using." I say with a grimace. "And I might as well get an upgrade, too."

She rises on her toes and kisses my cheek. "You're brilliant, you are."

My ears warm up slightly as I reach for the door to hold it open for her.

The bell over the door rings as we enter, and before Old Man Ollivander can shuffle from the back room to the front counter, Hermione and I take a quick look around and realize in short order that though the store is covered with a thick layer of dust, the stock of wands is remarkably intact. I had expected that the Death Eaters would have made a mess of this place, rummaging around for wands and other magical objects. But I must have been wrong. Soon, Ollivander appears. He recognizes us immediately and comes around the counter to give Hermione a shaky hug, his red-rimmed eyes full of tears.

"Oh, my dear, you're looking quite well," he says, resting his hands on Hermione's shoulders. "I've thought of you so often. I was rather hoping you'd come in soon. I can't imagine you want to be using ... that particular wand anymore."

Hermione smiles sadly and nods, extracting Bellatrix's crooked wand from her pocket.

Ollivander takes it and rolls it between his bony fingers. He makes a "tsk, tsk" sound and shakes his head. "Shame," he says. "It's a beautiful wand. Excellent materials. One of my better creations, it must be said." He sighs. "A terrible waste, but it must be done."

With that, he places Bellatrix's wand on the glass countertop, waves his own wand over it, and Bellatrix's wand disappears in a poof of silver smoke. Hermione finds my hand with hers and squeezes it hard. I look down into her face. "I, umm ... it's ..." she whispers up to me. "I didn't expect this, but I feel better somehow. Lighter."

"Oh, that doesn't surprise me, young lady," Ollivander says. "That wand generated a fair share of Dark Magic over the years, my dear girl — some of it directed at you when you were most vulnerable. I have no doubt that you were picking up its vibrations long after it injured you. It resisted your magic, didn't it?"

She nods. "It would do my bidding, but ... reluctantly," she says in a small voice. "It never felt natural. The magic just didn't flow properly with that wand."

I lift Hermione's hand to my lips and give it a quick kiss. "But that's over now," I say. "Time to start fresh."

Ollivander turns and waves his arm toward the stacks and stacks of wand boxes behind him. "Good heavens, yes, my dear. Don't despair. The right wand is here. We just have to let it find you."

Hermione sniffs. "It's all right, love. Mr. Ollivander here, he's a genius," I say, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. "If anyone can match you with the right wand, he can." She nods, her lip trembling, and I give her a little squeeze.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," Ollivander says. He turns to pat Hermione on the cheek. "Now let me
see," he says. "If memory serves, Miss Granger — forgive me, Mrs. Weasley — your original wand was made of vine wood and possessed a dragon heartstring core, yes?"

"Y-y-yes," she says in a tiny voice.

"Ah, very good. And it was 10 and three quarters inches if I'm not mistaken. That's a bit short for you now — you've grown, you see, though you are still a rather petite thing, so you will probably be wanting something still on the smaller side. Hmm."

He taps his finger against his lips, scanning the shelves behind him. "It's probably best to begin with wands comprised of the same materials as your original, at least as a starting point. Now, let me see."

He slides his ladder over to the right and climbs up with surprising speed for a man so old and, until recently, so infirm. He pulls two boxes from the top shelf, scurries down, then shifts the ladder to the left and takes down three more boxes from the far end of the room.

As he scrambles about, Hermione remarks, "We were pleased to see your shop so well-stocked so soon after the war."

He laughs softly as he reaches below the counter for one more box. "Ah, well, You-Know-Who wasn't really interested in my wands. He was mainly interested in me, what I could tell him about the Elder Wand. So when the Death Eaters came for me, they left my inventory more or less alone, surprisingly enough. Though I was also fortunate that Carrington, the candlestick merchant across the way, kept a close eye on my store while I was, erm, detained. Not every businessman in Diagon Alley was so lucky. Which reminds me, Mr. Weasley, I was very sorry to hear of your family's loss. I do hope your brother George will reopen his shop soon."

I wasn't expecting Fred to come up, and I'm momentarily sort of stunned, so all I can do is nod and mumble, "Thank you, sir."

Ollivander gives a little bow, then blows the dust off the boxes he's gathered and opens each in turn. Hermione tries them one by one, growing increasingly frustrated. I can tell that she's hoping that every new wand she tries will be The One, and her disappointment is palpable.

Ollivander announces that his original theory — that a vinewood and dragon heartstring combination might be suitable, since that was the stuff of her first wand — has pretty much been disproven. As Hermione becomes more and more dejected, the old man begins muttering to himself. "Hmm, that could be worth a try," he mumbles. "But then, well … that would be unusual. However, the circumstances here are rather unusual, aren't they."

Hermione shoots me a look of concern. It isn't the first time we've wondered if the war may have sent Ollivander a little bit around the bend. But then, he snaps out of it and returns his attention to us.

"Mr. Weasley, may I ask, are you on the market for a new wand today as well?" he says.

"Er, well, yes, I was hoping to get something that works better for me than Pettigrew's old wand here," I say, pulling Scabbers' wand from my pocket and placing it on the countertop before Ollivander.

"I see," he replies. "Good. Very good. This is quite helpful. Quite helpful."

He picks up Pettigrew's wand and looks it over. "You mastered this wand completely, it would seem," he says with a small grin.
"Uh, I reckon so. Never had a moment's trouble with it, really," I answer. "That said, it doesn't feel as … right … as my own wand did."

"Hmm. Yes, that one was willow wood with a unicorn hair core. Fourteen inches. A substantial wand — strong but flexible. Consistent. Bonded to you straight away, did it?"

I nod, smiling at the memory. Lord, I didn't realize until now how much I missed that wand.

"Yes, yes," he says. "If you two will indulge me for just a moment, I have a notion, but I will have to excuse myself for a moment to retrieve what I believe we're looking for from the attic. I'll be but a moment."

Before either of us can say anything, Ollivander's ducking into his storeroom and climbing a set of stairs. We hear the floorboards overhead creaking and he shuffles about. After a few minutes, he returns, his hair a bit mussed up and a cobweb or two clinging to his maroon waistcoat.

He lays two matching boxes on the countertop in front of us, shoving the others aside. The boxes are quite pretty, actually. Unlike the others, which are cardboard, these are made of wood and painted in reds and golds.

"Mrs. Weasley, I do hope you won't mind, but I would like your husband to try this wand first," he says, lifting the lid on the slightly larger box to reveal a wand nestled in red velvet.

This wand looks nothing like my old one. The wood of the shaft is darker than the wand Mum and Dad bought for me after Charlie's hand-me-down finally gave up the ghost. The wood is knotty, too, unlike my old wand, though it's been polished to a high shine. It's longer than my old wand, and thicker — and, unlike my old wand, it has a handle crafted of a different and lighter-colored wood.

Ollivander clears his throat. "You'll be interested to know, Mr. Weasley, that the cases I crafted to protect these wands are made of willow — the same material as your original wand. Though this wand is constructed of different woods, it has picked up the willow vibrations of flexibility and stability."

I have no idea why that should matter one way or the other. All I know is I am suddenly gagging to hold this wand. As I reach for it — even before I touch it — I sense something. A spark, almost. And as my skin comes into contact with its smooth surface, I feel the familiar, warm sensation that I felt when my last wand chose me. It starts in my fingers, then spreads up my arm and soon covers my whole body, so that I almost feel goosebumps. I must be smiling, because see Ollivander and Hermione are, too, and then I release a breath that I didn't realize I was holding.

"Blimey, this is it," I say through a disbelieving grin.

Ollivander purses his lips. "Do an incantation to be sure," he says.

I point to one of Ollivander's discarded boxes and say, "Wingardium Leviosa," shooting Hermione a little wink, and the box takes off, flying about the shop at my command before landing with a plop back on the countertop.

"Wow," I tell Ollivander, "that felt really, really good. Even my old wand didn't feel this good."

"A very interesting result. I'll explain in a moment. But first," he says, turning to Hermione, "Mrs. Weasley, if you please …" He opens the slightly smaller box and, within, there's a wand that looks almost exactly like the one I just tried out, only it's about two inches shorter and it's slimmer as well. Hermione looks to me, then looks to the wand. I watch her face closely as she reaches out to
touch it. Before her fingers even make contact, she's smiling, and can tell that she's feeling … something.

She doesn't grasp the wand right away. Instead she, well, strokes it, and the smile on her face widens. She bites her lower lip and lifts the wand, then closes her eyes.

"It feels … warm," she says, her eyes still shut. "Familiar. Like it's a part of my body." She opens her eyes and looks at the wand in her hand in wonderment.

"Try it out," says Ollivander.

Hermione doesn't hesitate. Before I can wonder what spell she's going to cast, her silver otter Patronus is sliding out the end of the wand and zooming about the room. I marvel first of all that she's attempted a spell that's always been such a challenge for her, and second that she's doing it wordlessly and apparently with precious little effort. She turns to me, her mouth slightly open, a look of delight on her face. "Goodness, I've never been able to cast a Patronus so easily before," she says. "That's extraordinary."

"No, love, you're extraordinary," I say, shaking my head as I wrap my arm around her shoulder once again. "So, Mr. Ollivander, can't help but notice that these wands look alike. What's the deal?"

Ollivander leans his hands against the counter.

"These wands look alike on the outside, Mr. Weasley, it's true, but that is not where the similarity ends. Let me tell you a little story."

I groan inwardly as I realize I'm about to hear another ruddy speech.

Ollivander doesn't seem to notice my chagrin. "A wandmaker is constantly on the hunt for materials, and the materials' provenance matters tremendously. You see, many years ago, I received special permission from Albus Dumbledore to scan the forest at the edge of Hogwarts' grounds for materials. The Forbidden Forest is well-known among wandmakers as a place where some of the finest and most delicate magical woods can be obtained," he says.

I smile at the thought that I might have a wand from Hogwarts. Hermione meets my gaze, and I know she's thinking the same thing.

"I came upon this vinewood in the forest — it struck me as ideal wand material," he says, pointing to the dark shaft of the wand. "The vine was a very, very old, well-established plant, twined tightly around one of the largest trees in the forest. The tree was a Rowan tree. Are you familiar with the Rowan?"

I shake my head, but Hermione beams like she's the only one who knows the answer in History of Magic. If we weren't in Ollivander's shop right now, I swear she'd be raising her hand and hoping to be called on. "Oh, the Rowan is a beautiful tree," she says. "It produces bright red berries, and its foliage is a glorious bright orange color in the autumn. And I do believe it's a member of the Rosaceae family. Rowans have a prominent place in legends going back to Greek and Roman times as very powerful, magical trees. In Norse mythology, in fact, the Rowan is known as the tree from which the first woman was made."

Ollivander grins at her. "What they say about you is true, isn't it?" he says. "You are the brightest witch of your age."

Hermione blushes and I give her shoulder a squeeze.
"Interestingly enough, Mrs. Weasley, Rowan wood is also closely associated with images of masculinity and believed to have protective properties, meaning those who wield it stand a better chance of fending off Dark Magic," Ollivander adds. "Meanwhile, the ivy growing around this old Rowan tree that I found in the Forbidden Forest appeared to be almost as ancient as the tree itself. And, as you most likely know, Mrs. Weasley, ivy has a long magical history as well, stretching back to the nursing of the infant Dionysus in ancient Greek times, yes?"

I look to Hermione and she nods, then returns her attention back to Ollivander.

"Of course, ivy is associated with fertility and familial love — as the Greek tale of Bacchus teaches us," Ollivander says, but I have no idea what he's on about, "and it plays a crucial role in the old Cornish legend of Tristan and Iseult — the love knot formed between the lovers' graves was fashioned of ivy, of course."

Hermione crinkles her forehead like she's trying very hard to understand. "I suppose I never realized how much attention wandmakers pay to things like the origins of their materials, or the legends surrounding them," she says.

He smiles. "Well, yes, but you say the word 'legends' as if these are mere stories. What wandmakers realize, of course, is that each legend has a basis in truth. The legends reflect the true power of the materials themselves. So the careful selection of those materials … well, for a wandmaker, it's crucial. Vinewood of ivy, for instance, has been coveted by wandmakers for its endurance, its sensitivity, its magical conductivity. So the combination of these two woods as I found them in the wild, Rowan and ivy, so closely entwined with one another, so interdependent, and both having such a rich magical history … well, it struck me that they could make a smashing hybrid wand."

"A hybrid wand?" I say. "Never heard of a hybrid wand."

Ollivander leans forward on the counter. "A hybrid wand combines more than one type of wood and sometimes more than one type of core. The wand in your hand is both."

I must look completely confused, because Ollivander laughs softly to himself. "That day, I collected only as many branches as I needed to make two wands — wandmakers are very careful not to overharvest their materials. Later that night, I camped in the forest — this was decades ago, mind. I'm not much for camping anymore! At any rate, I was sitting by the campfire when, in the distance, there was a loud roar, followed by the sounds of a mighty struggle. I decided to investigate and followed the sound to a clearing, where I came upon a Hippogriff and a Centaur locked in combat. The Hippogriff was getting the better of the Centaur, pecking at him with its beak and grabbing at his flanks with his claws. The two of them were completely focused on one another, so I was surprised when the young Centaur looked up and made eye contact with me at one point — I will never forget his pleading look. He understood, as I did, that he was losing this battle and would die, and something in his expression begged me to intervene. Before I could think, I did."

Hermione shudders, and Ollivander pats the hand that she has resting on the countertop. "You'll be happy to know, Mrs. Weasley, that both combatants survived. You see, I cast a Protego, the most powerful one I could conjure, and they fell away from one another. The Hippogriff was startled by my magic and fled. That left me with the injured Centaur, whom I healed as best I could. As I tended to his wounds, he explained that he was out on a hunting expedition and had somehow gotten separated from his pack. As he wandered, he stumbled upon a Hippogriff's nest, quite accidentally drawing the attention of a Hippogriff mother with a very, very young cub. Hippogriffs can be quite territorial, he told me, and the Hippogriff cub's father swept in to protect the nest."
I nod. "Hippogriffs can definitely be tricky," I say.

"But then, so can Centaurs," Hermione adds with a smirk.

"Very true on both counts," Ollivander replies. "Regardless, the Centaur told me his name was Sigurd. He was terribly thankful for what I had done for him. As we talked, he learned that I am a wandmaker, and he offered me two hairs from his tail as a way to return the favor I had performed for him. I declined, of course, but Sigurd insisted, and I realized what an unusually powerful material I was being given. You must understand, wandmakers must procure material from living creatures in a humane way. The material must be offered voluntarily, must be found, or must be collected from a creature who has just recently died a natural death. So materials like dragon heartstrings and unicorn hairs cannot be hunted. Centaur hairs, however — they are remarkably rare in wandmaking because, of course, Centaurs are such proud and singular creatures. They are typically very distrustful of wizards and rarely, if ever, present their hairs to wandmakers. I accepted his gift, and I also noticed that several Hippogriff feathers lay on the ground where the two had done battle. I took two of the feathers with me."

"And you decided to make two hybrid wands," Hermione says. "Why two?"

It occurs to me that Ollivander has never, ever talked this much about wandmaking — he's always been weirdly secretive about his methods — but, for some reason, he's really opening up to Hermione, and I try to mask my surprise because, honestly, I'm fascinated, and I don't want him to stop talking. I fancy this wand very much, and I like knowing where it came from — I already know more about it than I've known about any other wand I've owned. And, for a second, I think that someday I'd like to tell my kids the story that Ollivander's telling now — but then, I'm distracted by the pang in my chest. My kids. Our kids. Is it right to keep counting on that, on them? I mean, Grendys sounded encouraging, but he didn't offer any guarantees, did he? Buggeration.

"The circumstances that surround the wand materials can affect the materials' magic," Ollivander says to Hermione as I tune back into the conversation. "In this case, I was intrigued by the duality of the scene presented to me. Woods from two plants that had grown to be so closely entwined over centuries. Woods that represented male and female ends of the sorceric spectrum. Magical creatures at odds — but both innocent, in their way. One lost, one protecting. It occurred to me that, with Centaur hairs, Hippogriff feathers, and these woods, I could craft a matching set of wands that would be quite powerful when the right couple came along to use them. And, apparently, the right couple has."

As we leave the shop, Hermione is practically walking on air. She refuses to put her wand back in its case, preferring instead to keep it in her hand. Actually, I can't argue with her. I feel the same way. So she stows the cases in her beaded bag and turns to me with a grin.

"So sweet of Ollivander to give us these wands, but I feel terrible that he wouldn't let us pay anything," she says.

"I know. But he seemed to really want us to have them. Or, rather, he really wanted you to have them. I think he's sweet on you."

She slaps my shoulder. "So, Mr. Weasley, Ollivander's was the first stop. What is the second?"

"Patience, Mrs. Weasley," I reply. "Remember you agreed to do as I say?"

She laughs softly, nods, and bites her lower lip.

"Good," I answer. "Then close your eyes and take my arm."
A moment later, we land in front of another shop at the far end of Diagon Alley. The sun is beginning to set but, thankfully, the shops are still open, and the proprietor of this one is expecting me. I tell Hermione to keep her eyes closed and lead her through the front door.

I walk Hermione to the counter where Mr. Jemms is already standing with a wide grin on his face. "Ah, Mr. Weasley, so good to see you again," he says, shooting a look at Hermione, who still has her eyes shut tight but is now grimacing in confusion. "And this, I presume, is the young lady you have told me so much about."

I nod. "Yep, Mr. Jemms, this is Hermione. All right, love, open your eyes now."

Hermione opens her eyes to see first the roly-poly form of Mr. Jemms and then the black velvet cloth on the counter in front of him where he has arranged row upon row of diamond rings specially picked for her.

"Jemm's Jewels," she whispers in astonishment. And then, louder, "Jemm's Jewels? Oh … oh, Ronald!" And, in a flash, she's jumped up into my arms, her feet off the floor, and she's kissing me like there's no tomorrow. Jemms, a big, round fellow with a rather large grey mustache and a pot belly, chortles quietly to himself. Before too long, Hermione remembers herself and pulls away from me, but she's still breathless and tearful.

"Oh Ron, you didn't need to … you shouldn't have … oh, but I'm so … oh, darling …" she sputters.

Taking Hermione's face in my hands, I wipe the tears from her cheeks with my thumbs. I reckon Jemms, the most famous purveyor of goblin-made jewelry in Diagon Alley, has seen this sort of thing a million times before, so I don't mind letting this play out for another minute in his presence.

"Mione, when we got bonded, I didn't have a ring to offer you," I say, sinking my fingers deeper into her hair. "I reckon I owe you an engagement ring and a wedding ring, love. So I thought maybe you should pick out an engagement ring to wear right now, and a wedding band that I could give you when we do the bonding ceremony again with our families." She's crying so hard right now, I feel a sudden rush of panic. "That is, erm, if you want to, you know, wear my ring."

She's crying like a nutter now, and she launches herself at me again, wrapping her arms around my neck. "Oh, Ron," she sobs, nearly incoherent.

It takes a few minutes, but I finally manage to calm Hermione down enough to introduce her properly to Mr. Jemms and to get her to look at some of the rings I've asked him to select for her. It doesn't take too terribly long before she's settled on one that she seems to adore. I've been urging her to pick the biggest diamond in the bunch — money doesn't matter, not now anyway, and if it were up to me she'd walk out of this shop with a diamond the size of a muggle toaster — but she promises me the one she likes best is a square-cut stone that's slightly smaller than the biggest one Jemms' has shown her. I cross-examine her to be sure she absolutely loves it and she's not just picking it because it's smaller. She promises me that it's the one she wants above all others, and I'm satisfied.

It is a pretty little ring, now I come to look at it. Two smaller blue stones — Jemms tells me they're sapphires — are set on either side of the diamond at the center. There's a wedding band to match, the platinum encrusted with little diamonds and sapphires all around. Jemms places the wedding band in a velvet box, which I tuck into the inner pocket of my jacket, then he hands the engagement ring to me.

I hold it between the thumb and forefinger of my right hand for a minute, just looking at it and thinking.
We're the only ones in the store — it's just about closing time — and Jemms seems to sense that this is a private moment, so he makes up an excuse to step into his office and take care of the paperwork.

At the sound of Jemms' office door closing, I come to my senses and look down at Hermione, who is looking up at me expectantly, tears once again pooling in her eyes. She's so beautiful, here in the glow of Jemms' lanterns, the light bouncing around off the many jewels, mirrors and glass cases in the store. I think about how lovely Hermione looked the night we took our bonding vows, and smile inwardly at how precious and innocent she looked in her too-big white robe. For a crazy second, I wonder if she'd be willing to marry me again in that robe, but even I'm not dumb enough to ask her that out loud.

"Mione," I whisper, reaching across to take her left hand in mine.

She nods.

"Will you … would you, uh … will you marry me again?"

She nods again with a sniffle.

I lift her hand and place the ring at the tip of her finger, looking down at it, mesmerized. But I stop before sliding it on. I pull my eyes from her hand and look into her face. Her lower lip is trembling, and her eyes are riveted on mine.

"I hereto pledge thee my troth," I say softly, wondering if I can be heard over the pounding of my heart. "With my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods and with my name I thee endow. Have no fear, and let not the ways nor words of the unenlightened give you unease, for there is no greater magic in this world than two people joined together in love."

With that, I slip the ring over her finger, and I feel a surge of warmth come over me much like it did the night we were first bonded. I think she feels it, too, because she shakes slightly before giving me a watery grin.

Later, at home — I still love thinking that word, home — I carry a laughing Hermione over the threshold once again, because I just can't seem to be able to stop myself from doing hokey shite like that tonight, and I set her down by the hearth in our bedroom. She takes her new wand from her pocket, lights the fire, and urges me to sit. "I'll just be a moment," she whispers as she steps into the loo.

I stretch out on the sofa and put my feet up on the ottoman, marveling at my luck. I mean, me, sodding Ronald Bilius Weasley. Hermione Granger has agreed to marry me, not just once but twice. She shares my bed. She shares my name. And someday, if luck holds out, she'll be the mother of my children. How the hell did this happen?

Before I have a chance to mull it over much longer, Hermione appears in the doorway. She's wearing a long nightgown that stretches down to skim just above her toes, but it's clingy and she looks incredibly curvy in it. It's that same pale color of creamy pink that I think she's beginning to understand I love on her, and as she slides herself onto my lap, I feel the fabric — it's satiny or silky or, bloody hell, I don't know what it's made of. All I know is that it's soft and smooth and she feels incredible in it. She wraps her arms around me and sinks her fingers into my hair, and I kiss her shoulder, so bare and pale and soft next to the straps of her gown, and run my hands over her thighs. She smells … like heaven.

"Are you really mine, love?" I ask.
She smiles and pulls her left hand from my hair, taking my hand from her hip and laying her palm on mine. "I have a ring right here," she says, "that proves I am."

I chuckle, but for some weird reason, I feel like crying. I thought I was finally starting to get past my recent days of crying like a tit at the drop of a hat, but maybe not.

"No, love, I don't … I don't think…" I run my thumb over the stones of her ring. Shit, what's got me so choked up? What am I trying to say? I take a deep breath and dive in, figuring the words will come to me if I just start talking. "I know I've probably said it a hundred times, Mione, but sometimes I just can't believe it, you know? I snap out of it now and then, I look at you, and I just think, bloody hell, is this really my life? Or maybe I'm going to wake up in my four-poster at Hogwarts and realize that this isn't real — it was all some sort of crazy dream."

She answers by pressing her lips to mine and shimmying deeper into my lap. "It's a dream, my dear, sweet, precious husband," she murmurs. "It's a dream, and it's also real."
Gods, she's so soft and so warm. And when she does that thing — oh there, she did it again just now — that thing where she sucks on my lower lip, nipping at it, then nibbles my chin and throat and ears with little kisses and begs me to go harder, sometimes it's all I can do to keep from coming right then and there.

It feels so bloody good to be surrounded by her like this, tumbling and rolling over our ginormous bed, tangled in sheets and blankets — I never want it to end. We started out so slow tonight, still sentimental and emotional after an evening spent at Ollivander's and Jemm's. At the beginning, I told her how amazed I am that she's mine, even after all this time, and she took this as an invitation to prove it to me all over again — and she did it so tenderly that it sometimes brought tears to both our eyes. I took my time savoring every curve of her body, the smell of her hair, the velvety feel of her skin against my lips, the sound of each little moan and gasp. I easily spent half an hour drinking her in, undressing her, stroking her, watching how her skin reacts when I touch her, noticing how her breathing shallows out when I caress her center, running my tongue and my lips between her legs, tasting her until she threw her head back against the arm of the sofa and moaned my name, long and slow. But once I carried her from the sofa to the bed, things built into something more forceful and, well, the energy shifted. She started rather playfully resisting me, challenging me, though she soon lost that little battle, only to console herself by running her hands up and down my arms and whispering in my ear, "I love your arms." Now she's pinned beneath me, my hands holding her wrists down above her head, and she's nuzzling my neck, cooing the most fucktastic things against my lips, my neck, my ear.

"Oh, you feel sooooooooooo good," she purrs, writhing beneath me. "You fill me up."

"You like that, don't you, love," I pant against her ear in a gravelly voice, going deeper as she wraps her legs around my bum. "You like feeling me deep inside you, don't you." Once again, I'm ridiculously chatty in the heat of the moment — but she seems to have no objections.

"Yessssssss," she rasps. "Don't stop, Ron. Harder, harder, please…"

I thrust even deeper and she inhales sharply through clenched teeth. "I want you to come, Ron," she whispers. "Come ... deep inside me."

I've been on the verge of doing just that for a few minutes now, and those words are enough to do it for me. I moan, feeling waves of fire rippling through my body.

I let go of her wrists and she wraps her arms around my shoulders as I roll over onto my back,
pulling her with me. I'm spent, wiped out, drained … and apparently, so is she, because the next thing I know, I'm waking up to the sound of the Prophet delivery owl pecking at the bedroom window in the early morning light. Somehow I just slept seven hours without even being aware of it. I pull myself out of bed, open the window, yank the rolled up Prophet from the owl's talons, drop a knut in his collection pouch, and toss the newspaper at the foot of the bed while I stagger into the loo to freshen up. As I shuffle across the floor, I hear Hermione moan and stretch.

"What time is it?" she mumbles through a yawn.

I squint at the clock on the mantle and groan. "Half seven."

"Mmmmmmm," she hums, and I hear the sound of her punching her pillow. "It's too early to be up. Come back to bed."

I crawl back under the covers after a few minutes and curl up behind her as she lies on her side facing away from the window.

"Your feet are cold," she mutters.

"Mmm, that's why I need you to warm me up," I reply sleepily, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her to me. But we're both still so worn out from the night before that we slip back into a Saturday morning slumber.

A few hours later, I rise again and make my way toward the shower. Just as I'm about to turn on the tap, however, I hear a sharp gasp from the bedroom and lean back to look Hermione's way. She's sitting up on the bed, eyes trained on The Daily Prophet, which she's clutching in her fists. "What in blazes?" she whispers, her eyes meeting mine.

And, just at that moment, before I have a chance to ask Hermione what's upsetting her in today's newspaper, in flies yet another owl — a Ministry owl this time. It's landed on the windowsill with a loud hoot, holding out a large, golden envelope embossed with the Ministry crest.

That night, Harry and Ginny have come over, as scheduled, for dinner. But Mum and Dad, upset by today's news, have dropped by, too — and they have brought along Hugh and Eleanor. Apparently Dad Flooed up to Cambridge to fetch them once he and Mum got a load of the Prophet front page, figuring Hermione would want to see her parents. Thank Merlin he did. Upon seeing Eleanor, the calm-and-cool facade that Hermione had constructed for herself to get through the day crumbled before our eyes, and she threw herself, sobbing, into the arms of her mother.

Hugh looks crestfallen for a moment, like he wants to wrap Hermione in a hug but Eleanor — who has hustled Hermione upstairs with Mum and Ginny in tow — beat him to it. To occupy himself, Hugh scans the room and his eyes fall on the crumpled copy of the Daily Prophet laying on the coffee table, a photo of me leaning over Hermione against the wall of the Leaky Cauldron smack dab in the center of the front page. "I cannot believe the nerve of these so-called journalists," Hugh mutters, picking the paper up. "I didn't have a chance to read past the headline before Arthur Apparated us down here. How bad is it, Ron?"

I hand him one of four butterbeers that I've Accioed from the kitchen. "Normally, Hugh, it would just be merely embarrassing, but nothing that we couldn't shrug off. Harry's faced far worse from the press — and it's not the first time I've seen The Prophet twist something innocent into something so … sick. But in light of what Hermione's been through lately, I'd still like to Apparate to the Prophet newsroom and punch somebody's nose in."
Hugh, still scanning the page, makes a huffing sound like he agrees with me completely.

Harry, Dad, Hugh and I settle in on the sofas facing the hearth, and Hugh starts reading the article — almost as if he can't help himself — though I've already read it from top to bottom so many times that I could almost recite it word-for-word from memory.

**THE NEXT GOLDEN TRIO?**

By Palanca Toggle

*The Chosen One's chosen sidekicks, Ronald Weasley and his erstwhile-best-friend-now-wife Hermione Granger-Weasley, are certainly living up—or down—to every cliche you've ever heard about newlyweds. Judging by these snaps taken last night at the Leaky Cauldron, the dynamic duo can't keep their hands off one another, giving patrons quite a show as they openly canoodled in public with little regard for the prying eyes, wagging tongues—and Daily Prophet cameras—in the crowd around them.*

"Spending a year roughing it has certainly lowered their inhibitions," observed one put-out patron who witnessed the libidinous display at the Leaky. "The two of them were practically rutting like animals inside the pub before someone shouted that they should get a room. And all that I can say to whoever made that particular suggestion is, 'Bravo.'"

"At Hogwarts, everybody and their brother knew Weasley fancied Granger. It was an open secret," says another in-the-know source. But we're told few observers truly expected the so-called Brightest Witch of Her Age to ever look at Ron Weasley as anything more than a friend. That must have changed while Mr. Weasley, Ms. Granger—now Granger-Weasley, apparently—and their best friend, Harry Potter, were on the road this past year. What exactly prompted the change of relationship status? The newly minted Mr. and Mrs. Weasley have kept as mum on the details of their romance as they have on the details of their mission.

That said, last night's snogging sessions both inside and outside the Leaky certainly lend some credence to the rumors circulating ever since Ms. Granger-Weasley recently spent an extended period being treated in a secluded wing of St. Mungo's. Onlookers at the Leaky noted that Ms. Granger-Weasley, after losing considerable weight during the Trio's mission to track down You-Know-Who, has started to pack the pounds back on. Could that be a baby bump we spy under that clingy jumper of hers? What else could explain the couple's hush-hush, hurry-up nuptials?

*If our bet is right, Mr. Weasley and his new bride will be a Golden Trio of their own in just a few months' time.*

Hugh is turning several different shades of red as he reads.

"Gods, I'm so sorry, Hugh—this is all my fault," I mutter.

Hugh looks up from the page.

"Bollocks!" he nearly shouts.

I struggle to hide my shock.

"This is no more your fault than it is Hermione's," he adds, much to my amazement. "Granted, no father wants to see a picture of his little girl kissing *anyone,* but hell, son, you're both young"—my stomach does a little flip at the sound of Hugh calling me son—"and if a young man can't kiss his wife whenever he bloody well wants to, then what's the point of being young?"
Dad chuckles from his end of the sofa next to Hugh. "I couldn't agree more, Hugh. When Molly and I were that age, well... let's just say I'm glad *we* weren't followed around by paparazzi. It would have made for far more scandalous pictures than this."

"Ugh, Dad!" I moan, covering my ears. "Nobody, I mean nobody wants to hear that." Harry lets out a snort and then dissolves into open-mouthed laughter.

"But seriously, though," Dad says. "The photos are really the least troubling part of this whole thing."

We all grimace, knowing that Dad's right — the talk of a "baby bump" has hurt Hermione deeply, and the thought of it brings me back to my feet to pace back and forth in front of the hearth, where I've been pacing in fits and starts pretty much all day, running my hands through my hair in frustration and occasionally punching my fist into my palm. I can't help it — I just want to hex this Palanca Toggle person, whoever the hell she is, into oblivion.

It doesn't help matters that the Ministry's Wizengamot Commission on Truth, Justice and Reconciliation chose today of all days to send a summons requesting that Hermione, Harry and I testify in the prosecution of the Malfoys. I'm fairly confident that on any other day, Hermione would have agreed to cooperate, however reluctantly, but now that her emotions have been so stirred up by this Daily Prophet shite, she can hardly think about reliving the Malfoy Manor nightmare without melting into tears.

I'm still pacing when I hear Hermione say my name in a near whisper from the bottom of the stairs. I turn abruptly to face her, startled by the sound of her voice. She's flanked on both sides by Mum and Eleanor, and Ginny is standing behind her on the stairs, a hand on her shoulder.

Hermione gives me a teary little smile. "You'll wear out the floorboards if you keep that up," she says in a slightly brighter tone.

I cross the room to fold her into a hug, and she hugs me back firmly. Mum can't resist ruffling my hair while Eleanor gives my arm a gentle pat. I'm so choked up I can hardly speak, but fortunately Hermione knows and she fills the gap. "It's a good thing I made a big enough chicken and leek pie to feed an army," she says with a hitch in her voice, pulling back to look up at me and then across the room at Harry, Hugh and Dad. "Let's eat, shall we?"

Dinner is actually pretty pleasant, all things considered. It's obvious that time alone with Eleanor, Ginny and Mum has done Hermione a world of good, and while she's still fairly sniffly, she seems happy to be reminded that we're all here for her. Another plus: The chicken and leek pie is delicious. Hermione has insisted on learning how to make some of Mum's specialties, and I shouldn't be surprised that she's proved to be a quick study.

None of us seem to have to think too hard to come up with conversation topics that steer well clear of the Prophet or the Wizengamot Commission. Harry fills us in on the letter he received from Hagrid today, reporting that Grawp has adopted a wild kneazle as a pet. Ginny, meanwhile, reckons she's going to have to go with Luna to Diagon Alley to buy a new cauldron for Potions class next year, and she's starting to think about what classes she ought to take to best prepare for her NEWTs. Eleanor describes how she's redecorating the house in Cambridge now that the Reconstruction Squad is done with it. Mum says she's pleased that George has been going to Wheezes every morning, though it will still be several weeks before he's ready to even think about reopening, and Dad adds that he's taking it as a healthy sign that George is talking about moving back into his flat above the shop. Hugh, meanwhile, finds a way to repeat something he's been saying quite a bit lately—that he thinks I ought to consider playing chess competitively, mentioning yet again that there are plenty of amateur tournaments that would be worth my while.
I'm mulling that idea over as I hear Hermione clear her throat slightly, drawing my attention to her at the far end of the table opposite me.

"So," she says to Mum. "Have you told Ron, Harry and Dad the news?"

For just a flash, Mum looks a tad guilty, then shoots a look at Dad. "Oh, well, no dear," she sputters, turning to Hermione. "I suppose I thought it could wait until another day."

Hermione reaches out and puts a hand over Mum's, grasping it tightly. "Please, Molly," she says with a wobble in her voice. "This is the happiest news — and now I know, Ginny knows and my Mum knows, and I presume Arthur knows as well. It's only right that the whole family should be in on it now."

Merlin's salted nuts, haven't we had enough news for one day? Mum must have filled Hermione, Ginny and Eleanor in on something big while they were upstairs, but my head is so stuffed with random information and raw emotion today, I can hardly guess what it might be.

Mum clasps her free hand over Hermione's and then shoots a little grin at her, then at Dad. "It is the best of news, isn't it," she says.

Harry and I exchange a look, and then I glance at Hugh, who shrugs back at me. "OK Mum, spill," I say.

She lifts her hand from Hermione's and reaches for the handkerchief in her pocket, wiping her eyes with it before speaking. "Fleur is pregnant," she says simply.

Oh, bugger.

There's a long, uncomfortable silence as Hermione and I lock eyes on one another.

I know that outwardly I'm keeping it together and I'm even nodding and I must have something like a smile plastered on my face, because my cheeks sort of hurt, but … crap.

I feel as if all the wind's been knocked out of me, which I know is ridiculous because, after all, Hermione and I aren't even remotely ready to have a kid yet — we're way too young. But still … oh gods, how is it that Hermione seems so genuinely enthused about this, especially after all that crap in the Prophet today? Well, I guess she's had half an hour or so to get used to the idea, hasn't she. I, meanwhile, feel like I've just taken a Bludger to the gut.

I sort of come to my senses as I realize that Eleanor and Ginny have had the grace to fill in the conversational blanks. I steal a glance at Hugh and I see that he looks as gobsmacked as I am, but Eleanor is exclaiming that Mum must be so happy to be a grandmother soon, and Ginny is saying how much Fleur and Bill have wanted this and for so long, and how great it is and all that. Harry just looks pleased but also slightly uncomfortable, and Dad tosses in something about how nice it is to welcome a new member of the family after so much sadness. That comment is what really brings me back to the present. God damn it, I should be happy about this, too — and really, deep down, I am of course — but … but …

I raise my fist to my lips, trying to hold myself together. I can't dare to look at Hermione — not now. Instead, I'm just staring hard at the red tablecloth — more specifically, at a bit of pie crust that's fallen off the edge of the casserole, and I blink several times, forcing the tears back down as best I can. I must have made a sound — yeah, yeah I did, sort of a mangled cough — and now everybody around the table is looking at me, including Hermione. Shit.

"Ron," Hermione says in a low tone. "It's all right. Really it is."
I tear my eyes from the tabletop and look up at her. She's trying to smile, though it's not very convincing. Every time she seems satisfied that she's pulled her lips into an acceptably upward curve, they wobble a bit and slip downward.

I shake my head slightly. Crap. How am I going to get out of this without falling apart in front of everyone?

Before I have a chance to think of a way to worm my way out of the room and, I don't know, go kick something, Dad places a hand on my shoulder.

"You OK, Ronnie?" he says softly.

I pull my eyes from Hermione's face to his.

And that's when I notice how much older Dad looks lately. He looks better than he did at around the time of Fred's funeral, sure, but still ... the war's been hard on him. The lines around his eyes have deepened, his hair is so much grayer. And that's when I feel myself starting to get angry.

"God dammit," I mutter, my voice creaking. I lean my elbow on the table in front of me, still resting my lips against my fist, and stare into the platter of green beans. "Bill and Fleur — you know I think they're Kneazle's knees, Dad. You know I do." Somehow, right now, it feels easier to pretend I'm just talking to Dad instead of to a whole roomful of people. "But ... but ... god damn it, I should be jumping for joy over this news. It's the greatest thing to happen to this family since I don't know when, Dad. But it feels like ... it feels like this is just another fucking thing that bitch has taken away from us, you know?" Everyone in the room knows I mean Bellatrix. I just can't bring myself to say her name in this house. I look up at Hermione, who is staring silently at me from across the table, tears leaking out of her eyes. "I want to be happy for Bill and Fleur. I do." I shake my head, my eyes still trained on Hermione, but in my mind I'm still talking to Dad. "It's just ... it's just that ... I can't explain it."

Dad sighs and rubs my arm.

After a minute, he clears his throat to speak. "I won't insult you by saying that I know how you feel Ron, because none of us here, with the possible exception of Hermione, can ever know. I'm just so sorry."

Something about the pity in his voice moves me and makes me mental at the same time. I don't want to be pitied. I also don't want to be misunderstood. I force myself to speak again, though all I really want is to run out the back door, grab my broom and fly into the night for a few hours.

"Don't get me wrong, everybody," I say, speaking to Hermione now. "It's not like ... like Hermione and I were planning on, you know, a family anytime soon — not for years," I say.

"Oh no, of course not," Eleanor chimes in. "We understand that, dear."

I look at Eleanor and manage a little smile. "It's just, you know, Grendys gave us some hope. No guarantees, but hope. And really, I can be happy for Bill and Fleur — I am, I am happy for Bill and Fleur — it's just going to take me a little while to get used to the idea, yeah?"

Hermione sniffs and all eyes shift to her. "If we can't be happy for Fleur and Bill — genuinely happy — then Bellatrix has the last laugh, doesn't she?"

I shudder with aurge of loathing at the sound of that name. But I know Hermione's right. I know she is. I have to find a way.
I straighten up in my seat. "Of course, love," I say, a little more firmly than before. "Bill's my brother. That'll never change. And Fleur is my sister. She saved your life. Don't worry, I'll get there. Just give me a little time, OK?"

She nods and smiles, sniffling again.

I've been so focused on Hermione that I haven't noticed Harry's reactions until just now.

He's looking down, elbows on the table, resting his forehead on his palms.

"You all right there, mate?" I say.

Ginny wraps her arm around Harry's shoulder and then looks at me apologetically. I can tell from her expression that she knows exactly what's going through Harry's head — and, suddenly, I do, too.

"Harry, don't do that to yourself," I say.

He drops his hands to the table and looks up, eyes red. "Do what?"

"You know what — the old Potter Guilt Complex. This isn't your fault, brother. It just isn't."

"No, you're right," Harry replies with a steely edge in his voice. "It's not my fault. And it's not your fault. And it's certainly not Hermione's fault. The person who is really at fault — well, she's dead. But she's not the only one I blame." He turns to look at Hermione, who is dabbing at her eyes with her napkin. "I blame the Malfoys," he says, pressing his index finger on the table for emphasis.

"The Malfoys are every bit as responsible as Bellatrix LeStrange was, Hermione. And that's why I really think all three of us need to testify before the Wizengamot Commission, Hermione. I know you don't want to, but—"

"Hang on there, Harry," I cut in, probably louder than I ought to. "If Hermione doesn't want to dredge all that up, then no one here is going to force her."

"Here, here," says Hugh. "I'd like to rip those Malfoys limb from limb with my bare hands, but if Hermione doesn't want to talk about what happened, then that's all there is to it. The Wizengamot Commission is going to have to convict the Malfoys on some other charge. God knows there has to be plenty of other evidence against them."

Mum sighs. "Oh yes," she says. "They certainly were in with the so-called Dark Lord from the very beginning. There has to be a laundry list of crimes that can be attributed to that lot."

"Narcissa showed me some mercy and therefore probably deserves some sort of a lighter sentence if you ask me," Harry says, "but I'm all for throwing the book at Lucius and Draco."

Dad nods. "I'm not sure the Wizengamot can do it without iron-clad testimony from multiple witnesses, though," he says.

"That's just the kind of information that the three of us can deliver," says Harry. "Dobby, too."

"Nope," I reply. "If Hermione's not up for testifying, then we're not testifying. Case closed."

Suddenly, Hermione clears her throat loudly.

"Excuse me, but do I have any say in this?" she says.

Eleanor turns to her and drapes an arm over her shoulder. "Of course you do, dear. We're sorry,"
she says, scanning the faces around the table before returning her gaze to Hermione. "I suppose we all just got a little carried away, didn't we. But you've been so adamant that you don't want to go before the Commission, darling. And I don't blame you."

Hermione folds her napkin and places it on the table next to her plate. Squeezing her mother's hand, Hermione looks across the table at me. She gives me a small smile and — bloody hell, I know that look. It's her going-to-battle look, and the sight of it warms my heart.

"Harry, you're right," she says quietly, straightening up slightly in her seat and raising her chin. "I have to testify. I must. I owe it to the wizarding community, I owe it to myself, I owe it to you and, most important, I owe it to Ron. After all, I wasn't the only one who was tortured at Malfoy Manor that night, was I?"

At bedtime, Hermione tucks herself into bed to read while I finish washing up. Soon I join her, propping myself up against the headboard and leaning back against a pile of pillows. She tosses her book onto the nightstand, turns off the lights with her wand, and curls herself up in my arms, nuzzling her cheek against my chest.

I plant a kiss on the top of her head. "Well done tonight on the dinner, love," I say.

"I burnt the almonds in the green bean dish just a bit, I think," she replies.

"I like them burnt."

"Well, then I'm sure you loved these," she says with a little laugh.

"I did."

I settle a little deeper into the pillows and pull her even closer. "You know, Hermione, you really don't have to testify if you don't want to. I mean, don't misunderstand — no one wants to see the Malfoys pay more than I do. But if you don't want to talk about what happened that night, no one should be able to force you. It's your choice. If anyone tries to make you do something you don't want to do, they'll have to deal with me first."

She straightens up to look at me and cups my cheek in her hand. "Thank you. That means the world to me, it really does. Harry's right, though. It'll be hard, but I need to do this. I feel like giving my testimony will help me move on, to close the book on that whole horrible night."

I nod and lean my cheek into her palm, feeling choked up again. Bloody hell, she's so strong, this one, always willing to do what's right, even when it hurts like hell. "You're my hero — you know that, don't you?" I ask.

A look of surprise sweeps over her face, and then a wide smile. "Really?"

"Really."

With that, she practically leaps back into my arms and crushes her cheek against the hollow of my neck, and I can feel tears trickling there against my skin. "I love you so much, Ron."

"I love you too, Mione."

She sniffs for a few minutes and I just hold her, hoping we're doing the right thing, hoping I can be strong for her, because she's going to need it. After a little while, she speaks again, softer and sleepier this time. "I'm sorry, you know."
I crinkle my forehead and squint at the moon outside our window, wondering what she could possibly be on about. "Sorry for what, love?"

There's another long silence.

"Sorry that ... that it's so hard to be happy for Fleur and Bill."

Oh, crap.

I pull her tighter against my chest. "Please don't be sorry for that. Don't. And besides, I'm happy. I am." I pause for a few seconds, wondering if I should ask what I want to ask. Then I decide to risk it. "Are you ... happy about it?"

She nuzzles my neck for a moment, then lets out a little sigh. "I am — now. But it took me a little while."

"Me too."

Another silence descends. And then ...

"That isn't to say it's going to be easy, though, watching them, you know..." she says, seeming to search for the right words. "You know, watching Fleur get bigger ... watching Bill set up the nursery ... watching the family get excited about the new arrival. It's ... it's silly, I realize. I mean, we're not — that was always going to be years ahead of us, right? And yet—"

"You don't have to explain it to me," I whisper hoarsely. "I know exactly what you mean. Exactly. It's going to be hard to see them having something we both want someday — and to know we might not ever have it ourselves."

She sobs, and suddenly I feel like a prat for putting it all into words so plainly. But, well, it's how we both feel. It's the truth.

"We have to have faith in what Grendys tells us though, Little Dove," I add, running my hand up and down her back and pressing my cheek against the top of her head. "There's a good chance everything will be fine. There is."

I feel her nod against my neck. She sniffs loudly. "That's true. Very true. Yes. And, in the meantime, we have to find a way to appreciate the gift we're being given, don't we?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we're going to be an aunt and an uncle now, aren't we?"

"Heh," I say with a small laugh. "I'd almost forgotten."

I try to picture it. Bill and Fleur's baby — bloody hell, it'll probably be the most gorgeous creature ever born. And Bill is going to be mental about that kid. For years, he prided himself on being single, footloose and fancy-free — never one to be tied down. But I know that's just because he hadn't met the right woman until Fleur came along. And now ... well, he's going to be out of his mind with joy over this baby. He's probably going to act like he invented fatherhood — Bill's always had a serious case of Eldest Child Syndrome — but hell yeah, he's going to be an amazing dad.

"They're going to be good parents," I say.
"You'll be a good uncle."

"And you'll be the best auntie there is."

"Well, I'm certainly going to try."

"Atta girl."
Chapter 19: Epistles and Epiphanies

Tuesday, 1 September 1998

Good Sir Knight,

All day I had told myself that I wasn't going to start this letter by writing anything so pathetic as, "I miss you so much." But, damn it, I do. I miss you so much that it actually physically hurts, darling. When you and Harry Apparated away from Vine Cottage this morning, I thought I might go mad, it hurt so much. And I hadn't fully anticipated how difficult it would be to be without both you *and* Harry. I can't think of a time when I've had to make do without "my boys" except for the occasional school holiday.

Eventually I pulled myself together, and I was certainly busy enough as the day went on to keep my mind occupied, but the pain in my chest from missing you — it's almost unbearable sometimes, as it is now. Here I sit in my childhood bedroom, pining for you, my darling. The scene is not unfamiliar. I did my fair share of pining for you here in this room over the years, after all, but the feeling now is so much more intense. I long for you, Ronald. Where are the arms I rely upon to make me feel safe and warm at night? I don't belong here in my old bedroom in Cambridge anymore — I belong with you — and now that I know what it is to be with you every day, to sleep with you every night … this old bed suddenly feels so big and cold.

I know I shouldn't complain about my physical surroundings — I'm sure they're far more comfortable than the Auror Academy barracks at St. Agnes Island. And I don't want to start another row over the need for me to stay in Cambridge while you're away. You've made your point, and I concede that I am indeed safer here, with all the protective enchantments that you and Bill put in place around my parents' house, than I would have been if I'd stayed at Vine Cottage all alone. It's comforting to be with my parents. And yet, I do miss Vine Cottage so. It's our home now, isn't it. Once you're back from Basic Training, I never want to leave Vine Cottage again!

My first day on the job with Kingsley — I call him "Minister" at work, despite his protestations — was indeed excellent. You were right — I'm loving it. There's so much to do. Kingsley had me shadow him for the day today. I sat in on a session of the full Wizengamot — it's amazing to think that we'll have seats there ourselves in a few years! — and then I followed him to a press conference on the formation of the new Department for the Protection of Magical Creatures. I'm so delighted that he followed through on my suggestion of a name change for that department. A title is a small thing, granted, but it speaks volumes, and "Care and Regulation" is so condescending, so species-normative, is it not? The new name reflects the new ethos — that this department will be dedicated to protecting the rights of all magical creatures and ensuring their equal treatment before the law. I'm thrilled about the new direction.

I also sat in on a brief meeting with Kingsley's attaché for public relations and protocol, the Right Honorable Sir Chumley Dunder. In the muggle world, he's a baronet or somesuch. But he also
happens to be a wizard. Just judging by appearances, I'd say he makes Professor McGonagall look positively youthful. (Don't you dare tell her I said that!) Chum, as he likes to be called, is something like a third cousin thirteen times removed from the Queen, or so I'm told. At any rate, he's a fascinating chap — terribly formal, which shouldn't be surprising, but also a very charming fellow. A bit dotty, but he seems to have a good heart and he couldn't say enough good things about you and Harry. So I can attest that you have at least one very devoted fan.

Chum agrees that we should sit for an interview with the Quibbler as soon as you boys are through with training. And he promises he'll help to keep the Prophet in line. We'll see.

Apparently Chum has talked Kingsley into delaying the Order of Merlin Gala until you and Harry have completed your Auror training, which only makes sense. At the moment, the tentative date is in January. That should give me plenty of time to get your dress robes sorted. I saw a smart-looking set in the window of Madam Malkin's on my way in to the office this morning. You'd look gorgeous in them — they're a deep navy blue velvet. Not that you care one way or the other, I know, but rest assured there's not a bit of lace on them.

In other news … Kingsley says tomorrow he'd like me to spend the afternoon meeting with Riddlesworth, the muggleborn witch who has been brought back from exile to run the Wizengamot Commission's Prosecutorial Task Force. She's the one who will be handling the case against the Malfoys, and Kingsley feels it's important that the two of us waste no time in assembling the evidence needed. As a witness, I cannot of course take as active a role as I would like in this particular prosecution, but I can be helpful in assembling background information.

I learned today that the Malfoys are in protective custody at an undisclosed location and under 24-hour guard. I'm told they've hired a very expensive defense team of barristers trained at the Sorceric Institute of Law in Vladivostok, but given the testimony that I've already seen in the files, I think they'd save themselves a fair bit of money by negotiating a plea deal. The allegations against Lucius in particular are shocking — and that's setting aside the counts that involve us — and the evidence Riddlesworth has put together is already quite damning. It may be more difficult to get lengthy sentences for Narcissa and Draco, but that may change when Riddlesworth's team collects our testimony.

I'm so glad I finally decided to follow through and cooperate with the Commission, Ronald, I really am. I know you've worried about this, but darling, please don't. I feel that testifying is what's best for everyone. And, you know me — if I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it right. So I'm going to give this prosecution everything I've got. The Malfoys will be sorry they ever messed with me or anyone I care about, that's for damned sure.

You see what a terrible influence you've been on me? I've used two curse words in this letter so far and I'm not even done writing yet! That said, I do think I should wrap this up and try — as difficult as it will be — to get some sleep. Tomorrow will be another busy day.

As I turn out the light, I will try not to think of how far you are from me, my sweet darling, and as I look at the Moon through my window, I will try not to wonder whether you are looking at it, too. As I slip off into Dreamland, I will try not to imagine that you are curled up in your bed, picturing your arms wrapped around me in a warm embrace. I will try not to imagine these things because, if I do, I will only be sadder than I already am, so forlorn and missing my own dear husband so very, very much.

I'm trying to be a grown-up about all this, trying very hard to remind myself that we will only be apart for a month, for Heaven's sake, and yet the month stretches out so long before me. I do hope you will take care of yourself, my love. I'm so terribly, terribly proud of you — you know that, yes?
Well, I am. It's such a pleasure, when people ask about you, to be able to tell them that you're in training at St. Agnes Island, that you will soon be an Auror. And what a magnificent Auror you will be.

Sleep is calling me, darling, and so I will sign off now and ask Peaches to deliver this to you. Pigwidgeon seems happy to let her handle such a long-distance flight — and I'm happy to keep him close to me, as silly as he is. Oh dear, Peaches is hooting at me now — she seems to know I'm about to set her on a mission, and she's excited! You were right about her when you spotted her at Eeylops, love. She's a smart owl, and so sweet. I do believe she misses you, so she will appreciate this chance to see you again, even if it's only for a little while. If only I could fold myself up in this envelope and go along with her. What I wouldn't give to kiss you good night, my love — such a simple thing. I promise that after this separation, I will never take something as seemingly small as a good-night kiss for granted ever again.

Take care of yourself, give my best to Harry, and do write when you can. Spare me no details. You have my permission to be as filthy, lewd, indecent, naughty, and lickerish as you care to be. In fact, forget permission. This is an order.

In the meantime, I send you every bit of my love, my darling, and know that I'm living only for the chance to hear from you again. Please make it soon.

Your loving wife,

Little Dove.

oooOOOooo

1 September 1998
St. Agnes Island

My darling wife,

Do you know how much I like calling you that? My wife. Gods, when I think of myself back in our Hogwarts days — how hopeless I felt, fancying you and yet so certain that you would never be mine — I can hardly believe I can now begin a letter to you in such a way. I'm the luckiest bloke in the world, I truly am.

Ever since Harry and I landed at St. Agnes this morning, we have been on the go, but you have never been far from my thoughts, Mione. We went out for a five-mile run first thing before breakfast — and our drillmaster, Arduus, says that's going to be our routine every morning, evidently. I was surprised that I was able to do it rather easily — Harry hung in there, too — but some of the others seemed to struggle with it. I reckon the past year got Harry and me into decent physical shape. After breakfast, it was two hours of more physical drills — calisthenics, situps, pushups and all that madness, plus defensive dueling maneuvers — and then lunch. The food's not altogether bad, but nothing like yours, Mum's, Eleanor's or even Ginny's. I could teach the mess hall wizard a thing or two about how to treat an egg, I can tell you that much. I didn't know it was possible to ruin an egg, but this guy seems to have sorted it out. Fortunately, he didn't manage to muck up the bacon sandwiches, and after a morning of running, climbing, swinging by my arms, crawling through tunnels and otherwise exercising my arse off, I found room for at least 10 of them.

We spent the afternoon on defensive spellwork — basically showing Arduus what we already know, so he could sort of establish a baseline, I guess, and figure out the group's strengths and weaknesses and what we need to work on next. I don't mean to brag, but even I was a bit surprised
at how much more Harry, Neville and I could manage versus the rest of the group. Guess this past year or so of going through hell on Earth taught us all a thing or two. We were some of the only guys who were able to conjure a corporeal Patronus, surprisingly enough, but I reckon that's pretty advanced stuff. On other more common spells — Protego, Expelliarmus, Incarcerous, Stupefy, that sort of thing — the difference between us and the rest of the recruits was really just speed, reaction time. Neville in particular is damned impressive. The past year of fighting the Carrows and leading the student rebellion put him in harm's way on more than one occasion, so it should be no surprise that the experience honed his dueling skills. And I guess it's in his blood — his parents were Aurors, after all — so it's great to see him finding his footing so quickly.

Harry, as you might expect, impressed the hell out of pretty much everybody — well, there are a few arseholes who are hanging back, withholding judgment, reckoning The Chosen One has to prove himself to them, which is ridiculous — but yeah, Harry outdueled the drillmaster more than once. Me, I held my own.

We ran another five miles before dinner, and I was so hungry afterward that I could easily have eaten a whole plate of the mess hall wizard's eggs, but thankfully the menu consisted of roast turkey with all the fixings. I stuffed myself. Then we hit the books — had to read three chapters on field strategy. There'll be a quiz in the morning, but I'm not too arsed about it. It read a lot like one of Hugh's chess books to me. Tell him I said so.

Here's one good thing about the accommodations, such as they are, here at St. Agnes: The bunks have curtains, so at least a bloke can get a little privacy. It's well past lights-out right now, but I'm sitting up in bed thinking of you, love, and wishing we didn't have to be apart. I know you're cross with me for insisting that you stay in Cambridge, but honestly, Mione, if you were alone at Vine Cottage I'd be going mental with worry right now. I'll sleep better tonight knowing that you're there on Sedley Taylor Road with your parents under a blanket of protective spells. If I can't be there looking out for you, I like knowing your Dad is, love. He's a tough old nut, isn't he. He seems like such a straitlaced bloke on the surface, but get to know him and you realize he's not one to mess with. I can't help but like that about the guy.

Sheesh — I was just about to write something sappy about picturing you snug in your bedroom in Cambridge, and then I go and start writing something dopey about your old man. What's the matter with me? Reckon I don't quite know how to write a proper love letter yet — haven't really had the chance, have I. Though I imagine I'll get the hang of it over the next month.

I miss you, my darling wife. Apparating away from you today was so hard — and the pain of missing you for the rest of the day was even harder — but I know what's going to keep me motivated over the next month: The knowledge that when I come out of this, I'm going to be that much more ready to protect you, love. I'm not going to apologize for saying so. I know you can take care of yourself but, I can't help it, Mione — I'm still the cave-man you married. You're just going to have to put up with me, sweetheart.

I won't lie — I know I'll sleep tonight. I'm right knackered. But I won't sleep quite as well as I would if you were by my side, my sweet wife. I miss you so much. It actually hurts. Is that mad? You might think so. But I've got this pain in my chest, Mione, and I know it won't go away until I see you again.

Are you thinking of me right now, my love? I'm certainly thinking of you, and I am happy to sleep soon knowing that you will be in my dreams.

Your devoted husband,

Ronald.
Good morning, love. Peaches landed with your letter in time for me to read it over breakfast. Actually, the mess hall is like a ruddy library this morning. You could hear a Pygmy Puff burp in here, everyone is so busy reading their letters from home. Madame Pince would be right proud. As I scribble this, Harry is across the table from me with the most hilarious lovesick expression on his face. The letter he got from Ginny this morning must be doing his head in, the poor guy. I've only got time to write a few more lines before tucking this note into Peaches' talons so she can carry it to you. Sadly, I won't have time to make good on your order to be my usual horny self here, so I'll have to follow through on that tonight. Please forgive the delay — I promise to be utterly indecent in my next letter.

In the meantime, please know that I'm missing you like mad, Mione. But we'll be together again soon, my love …

Ron.

oooOOOooo

Bloody hell, I never thought my entire body could hurt like this, but it does. After a week of running ten miles a day, my feet are no longer blistered — they're just sore. My legs ache. And yet — I feel good. I'm knackered, but I feel good. When I feel myself start to slow down, when I'm tempted to cut a corner, when I'd rather roll over and catch a few extra winks instead of re-reading my class notes before bed, I remind myself why I'm here. I tell myself I need to protect her, I need to make her proud … and the energy I need comes to me from out of nowhere. Nobody is more surprised than I am, but at the moment I am somehow at the top of the class. That couldn't possibly last, though, could it. I mean, some of the scoring is slanted in my favor because I'm, well, bigger and faster than most. But it's hard to believe that natural advantages like that are going to tip the scales for long.

For now, I'm just trying to downplay the importance of all this scoring — I mean, grades and ranks and evaluations and whatnot don't really count in real-world situations, or so I keep saying — but it's ruddy hard to keep things on the down-low what with Arduus always announcing the tally at the end of each dinner hour. I wince every time, thinking this is a great way to make all the recruits in the class hate my guts but, so far, no one seems to be holding it against me. No one I care about anyway. There are a couple of arseholes — Thayer and Noble — who gave Harry a hard time when we first got here and they're still on my shit list. They now seem to think both Harry and I get special treatment, but they can go fuck themselves. The one whose opinion I care about most is Harry. I keep looking at him for signs that he's annoyed at being Number Two to me in the scoring, but he keeps slapping me on the back and saying he's chuffed about it. He's a good friend, Harry is. I'm embarrassed to think of all the times I felt envious of him when we were kids. I always wanted to be Number One at something — and now that I actually am, I don't know what to do with myself.

I've even come to like Conargan, the mess hall wizard. His eggs are shite but the man knows his way around a potato, and his shepherd's pie might be as good as Mum's, which is saying something. Not that I would ever dare to say that out loud.

Looking around the mess hall just now as the lot of us shovel food into ourselves in relative silence, I realize we're all too tired to talk and yet … I didn't think this was possible, but … I really like what I'm doing. This could be the first time in my entire life when I'm in a sort of school-like setting and I feel like I have a purpose, like what I'm doing has some connection to where I want to go in my life, if that makes any sense. I'll never be the kind of person like Hermione who can just
get interested in any old sodding topic just for the sake of being interested in it — but for the first time, I know what it is to really care about what I'm learning and to want to learn it without someone telling me to. Feels good.

"Pass the peas, will you, mate?" Harry says, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah, sure."

"What's with you? You looked like you were about a million miles away there," Harry says. "I'd bet you were thinking of Hermione but you had a goofy smile on your face. Lately when you think of her, you look like the president of the local Lonely Hearts Club."

"Well, yeah, I miss her like crazy, but erm, I was just thinking … you know, that this is kind of working out, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"This. You know. St. Agnes. Training."

Harry takes another scoop of shepherd's pie. "It's what we've always wanted to do," he says as he tucks in. "Nice to know we can hack it. But I knew we would."

oooOOOooo

8 September 1998
St. Agnes Island
Little Dove,

Gods, I miss you so much. I know we both keep swearing we're going to stop saying so, but I can't help it — the feeling just never goes away. I may be dueling, I may be on the climbing wall with curses flying around my head, I may be running before dawn with a crowd of recruits, I may be gagging on Conargan's rubbery eggs, but I never stop thinking of you, I never stop re-reading your letters in my mind, I never stop counting the days until I can hold you again.

I probably don't say it enough, but I'm so proud of you, Mione, I really am. In your last letter, you sounded so surprised that Kingsley would take your advice about the health clinic proposal, but honestly, you are so right — the Ministry should have set up local clinics in all the major wizarding communities a long time ago instead of requiring people to Apparate or Floo to St. Mungo's. And sounds like if you hadn't recommended it, Kingsley wouldn't have created a budget for it. You're brilliant, you are.

And I'm glad the Malfoy trial prep is coming along. I know you're eager to get it over with, but I'm relieved in a way that no court action will take place until early next year. I want to be there with you every step of the way when the trial begins, and I certainly can't do that right now.

Speaking of steps …

I may have stepped in it a bit in field operations class yesterday. The instructor, Benedict, is beginning to teach us attack formations, and he's really into simulations — which is good — but I sort of blurted out an opinion in the heat of the planning for a mock battle that turned out to be … umm … correct, but that I probably should have kept to myself. If I had it to do over again, I might try harder to keep my mouth shut — but then, my team would lose. It was only a simulation, mind — nobody's life was in danger or anything — but in the real world, you don't get do-overs, do you?
I guess I should back up and explain. Benedict divided the class into two teams — 15 recruits apiece. Neville and Harry were on my team for a change, which almost never happens. I think the instructors like to split the three of us up. Sort of makes sense, I suppose. Anyway, this time the three of us were together on the Red Team. Our team’s mission was to surround and overtake a house occupied by "the enemy," which was really just the other 15 recruits operating as the Blue Team. Our goal was to enter the house and take the Blue Team occupants into custody. Their goal was to successfully fend us off. In these live drills, we’re using real spells, so you can cast pretty much anything except spells that could really harm someone — like Confringo or Sectumsempra, not to mention Unforgivables.

And there were no appointed leaders in this drill, by the way — and I think that’s part of the idea, too, to see who rises to the occasion.

So there we were, the 15 of us standing around and sort of assessing the situation. The house we had to attack was set about midway up a sloping hill, with lots of high ground behind it. Our position, which was known to the occupants, was on low ground — a trench, really — about fifty yards in front of the house.

Thayer, the tosser who’s been riding Harry hard ever since Day One, was unfortunately on our team, and he started advocating a plan which basically would have involved us waiting for nightfall (which was in about half an hour) and then surrounding the house and attacking from all sides at every possible angle. I thought this was a crap plan, and not just because it was Thayer's (though I admit his stupid, extra good-looking Ravenclaw face had something to do with it).

Noble couldn’t praise this stupid idea enough, and I could tell that they were starting to gain some support from the rest of the team. Harry and Neville shot me a grim look — they both knew, as I did, that with this approach we might as well hand the Blue Team our 50 points right now and call it a night. But Harry’s been intentionally hanging back and letting others take the lead, and Neville just shook his head like he wasn’t sure he had a better plan.

The instructor, Benedict, a big burly guy with no neck who scares the living daylights out of pretty much everybody, was listening in, taking notes — but as the group began to sort of embrace Thayer’s plan, Benedict started making noises like, "Well, then, get on with it." And that’s when I blurted out my objections. The only thing I’m proud of is that I didn’t say out loud what an idiotic idea it was to surround the house on all sides, especially when we had only 15 guys. Really dumb.

Everybody was just staring at me, and I froze for a second until I remembered what I was about. And so, I just started babbling — well, over butterbeers later on, Neville objected when I called it babbling. He said it sounded like strategizing to him. But that’s Neville for you.

Anyway, I told the group that, first of all, if we followed Thayer’s plan, half of our forces would be attacking the house from a terrible position — low ground. To climb uphill and attack entrenched defenders is suicide, even in the cover of night. The defenders would be on higher ground and would therefore see those unfortunate team members approaching and would be well-positioned to pick them off one-by-one.

I argued that our best advantage as attackers was the high ground at the back of the house. I proposed creating not one but two diversions — really, just a tactic from the quidditch playbook, Harry’s beloved Wronski Feint. To make a long story short, I suggested breaking into three units. Two recruits would remain in the trench, another two would take cover in the stand of trees at the north of the house, and the remaining eleven of us, under cover of Disillusionment charms, would go south and then west to take up positions on high ground behind the house. The smaller units would employ a Duplicatam Hominem charm — two each — to create magical body doubles and
make themselves appear to be a greater number. Of course, in broad daylight, a body double would fool no one, since they can't move and they're really quite fake-looking. But under cover of night, they can be dead useful. Fred and George used to create body doubles of themselves just to scare the pants off me when we were kids, so I know all about how they work. To a defender looking out into the darkness from the house, these two groups, with four body doubles apiece, would appear to be six in number, not two.

Then, at Neville's signal — the sound of a Thestral call, which he's pretty damned good at imitating — the first pair would send up flares and shoot whatever spells they liked at the house from the trench, the brighter and flashier the better, thus drawing fire from the defenders within the cabin. The second pair, in the clump of trees, would wait thirty seconds before launching a similar diversion, at which point our larger group would descend quietly from high ground and overtake the house from behind. The two smaller groups would then be well-positioned to capture any of the Blue Team trying to escape via the front of the house using Body-Bind curses or Stunning spells.

The physical arrangement of the attack I stole shamelessly from none other than Boris Spassky, one of your Dad's chess heroes, and I'm happy to report that Spassky might have made a decent Auror, because the whole thing worked. Neville got a little singed by a teammate's overenthusiastic use of a Sparkling charm, but all in all, it was a success and we were able to capture the Blue Team without any losses. Even Thayer had to admit afterward that it went well — though he still maintained that we could have done it using his plan because we're all just that goddammed good. I decided not to argue with him.

Benedict asked me to come to his office tomorrow — why, I have no idea — but I'm half expecting that he's going to give me a lecture about not showing up a teammate in front of the group or somesuch. We'll see. In the meantime, I'm happy. All in all, it was actually a fun day.

I'd like nothing better than to celebrate our triumph by bedding my one true love, but I'm afraid that joy will have to wait a few weeks more, Little Dove. You'll be ready for me when I return, will you not? Prepare yourself, because your knight will soon return from battle and will expect his reward.

Have you been thinking of me as you curl up in bed at night? Oh, my love, I have been thinking of you — so much so that I'm especially grateful for the drapes around these bunks. I'm sure I'm not the only one closing the curtains and casting a Silencing charm at lights-out. But then, none of these blokes are reading letters written by you, the lovely and extraordinarily naughty Mrs. Hermione Weasley. The things you wrote in your last letter were quite shocking, madam — shocking and positively brilliant. If you can find a way for us to shag on the porch swing without getting a splinter or shattering the damned thing into a million pieces, then more power to you, Little Dove. You have my unequivocal support.

Right now, I'd give almost anything to have you tucked safe and warm, snug and cozy, inside this bunk with me. I'd claim you as my own if you were here — give you a proper rogering, truth be told, because a minx like you, with such scandalous ideas, deserves nothing less.

At the risk of sounding conceited, I think you're going to enjoy the results of my training when I return to Vine Cottage. I've put on muscles despite my attempts to blunt the effects of exercise with a mountain of bacon sandwiches. How do I know you'll like what you see? Blimey, if I look half as ripped nowadays as Harry and Neville do lately, then I'm suddenly quite shaggable. Holy hell, Neville's so fit, I'd consider doing him myself if I were so inclined. You'll barely recognize the blighter next time you see him. But hey — don't even think it, love. You're mine!

Gods, Mione, I'm here in this cold bunk in these lonely barracks, but my mind keeps drifting back
to you and how good we are together, how drunk I can be on the feel of you, the smell of you, the
taste of you. It's been weeks, but the sweetness of your lips still lingers on mine. Did I ever tell you:
I never knew what craving was until you finally gave yourself to me, love, and now that you're
away from me, I sometimes think I'll run mad from longing. I'd wanted you for so many years, the
pining just sort of became a part of me. It was so hard to drive it through my thick, bony skull that
you had chosen me — out of all the world, you had chosen the sidekick, the easily overlooked
Number Two. I know you'd scold me for thinking such things now, after all we've been through, but
I want to be Number One at something for once, and I want it to be this, being an Auror. I don't
want it for me so much as I want it for you — so that you can be proud, so that no one will ever
wonder again why you chose me, love. No one but me, that is. I'll never quite get over it.

Nothing compares to your eyes, Mione, nothing is like the golden brown I can so easily get lost in
if I let myself. I miss those eyes, I miss your voice, I miss your touch, I miss your mind, I miss your
smell. Please say you'll always be mine, love. Tell me again and again. I love you.

Until tomorrow …

Ron.

oooOOOooo

Fuck. This can't be good. Benedict orders me to report to his office, then he keeps me waiting for
15 minutes. From my seat in the waiting room, I can hear the muffled sound of his voice yelling at
someone — and I could swear I recognize the other voice. Sounds a lot like Kingsley. Shit.

After a while longer, the door opens and Benedict sticks his close-shaved, jug-shaped head out into
the waiting room.

I jump up to my feet before he has a chance to yell at me for being insubordinate.

"Weasley," he says, looking me up and down. "Get your arse in here."

I follow Benedict in and stand before his desk as he marches around behind it and sits himself
down. He looks up and seems surprised that I'm still standing. "Be seated, Weasley."

Erm, OK.

I sit on one of the two wooden chairs placed before his desk. Then there's a long, uncomfortable
silence.

I look across the desk at him and notice that he's staring at me, almost like he's sizing me up. I
gulp, but for some reason I decide I can't — or shouldn't — look away from him. I try not to seem
to confrontational about it, just meeting his gaze calmly and letting him take whatever time he
apparently needs to get around to saying whatever the buggering fuck he's going to say.

I'm jumpy as a frog in a cauldron but I can't let him see that. So I concentrate on staying still and
keeping my eyes on his. Mother of Merlin, what's he on about?

"I've been watching you, Weasley," he finally begins.

At least he's talking, but this isn't exactly what I wanted to hear. I reckon the safest thing I can do at
this moment is simply to nod. Words seem too risky right now somehow.

"I admit I was skeptical when I heard Kingsley had waved you into the program, Weasley, I won't
lie," he continues. "I told him straight out it was a big mistake to let anyone in without qualifying
first."

Oh, Merlin's bleeding gums. Is this old coot handing me my walking papers? Fucking hell, what'll I tell Hermione?

I'm so worked up that I almost don't hear what he says next.

"I have to admit I was wrong about you, Weasley," he says.

Wait, what?

"Of course, we all expected Potter to excel here, but you? I wasn't so sure."

Yeah, that sounds about par for the course.

"There's no denying that Potter has skill — he outclasses you in defensive spellwork, though given his experience, that shouldn't be a surprise," he says, giving me a piercing look with gray eyes that are so light they're kind of scary. "Potter's a little quicker than you on the wand draw and he's nimbler in obstacle courses, but those are skills where his smaller size can be an advantage. That said, you're a close second to Potter in defensive work, Weasley, the stats show it over and over again. And you've consistently outscored everyone in this class including Potter in every other ranking, from field operations to logistics, dueling, reflex times, physical aptitude, endurance, perceptual reasoning, strategy, on and on. Hogwarts forwarded your transcripts and while your marks are decent, I wouldn't have pegged you as a standout. What's changed?"

I shrug. There's no point trying to pull one over on this guy. For better or worse.

"I reckon I was always able to get by with, erm, what you might call minimal effort at Hogwarts," I answer, trying to keep my voice level. "I'd like to say I would have had more energy for schoolwork if I hadn't chosen the sodding Boy Who Lived as a best friend, but that wouldn't really be the truth. Even if I hadn't been distracted by trying to keep Harry alive, I would probably have found other excuses to blow off schoolwork. But I like to think I can apply myself when it really matters — and, to me, this matters."

Benedict rubs the gray stubble on his chin and appraises me again.

"And this matters because?"

Bugger. I swallow hard and take a second to gather my thoughts. "Well, from the time I went to Hogwarts, sir, I wanted to be an Auror, honestly, but it really wasn't until Dumbledore died that it all clicked into place for me. Before that, my ambition to be an Auror was kid's stuff — you know, just daydreams. But then I found my motivation. The war began. My best friend became a bigger target than ever. My girl became my wife. My brother died. My parents suffered. I had an obligation to do right by all of them, and I knew that being an Auror was my way to achieve that. I have a future now, but it's only worth living if I can make it safe for the people I care about. That's why I'm here."

He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms. He sighs.

"You're a puzzle, Weasley, that's for damned sure," he mutters. "I would never have guessed it when you first landed here, but you're a natural leader. The other recruits listen to you, and that's a trait that can't be taught. Have you thought about what you want to do when training is over?"

Huh? I'm tempted to mumble something about, I dunno, being a ruddy Auror, but I reckon it's better not to be a smart-ass.
Benedict must take my momentary, stupefied silence for an answer, because he lets out a mirthless chuckle and rises from his seat, coming around to lean on the desk before me. "Apparently you haven't heard of the officer's training program," he says. "This is one of the weaknesses of Kingsley's hurry-up-and-train-'em approach, though I'll deny I said that if it's ever repeated. You lot have barely had the time to learn anything about a long-term career, you're so overwhelmed learning the short-term skills. But yeah, there's an officer-prep track that follows basic training, and I think you and Potter ought to be on it."

oooOOOooo

15 September 1998

Ronald,

I am really quite cross with you. I just received a long-overdue owl from Harry in which he informs me that you, Ronald Bilius Weasley, are and have been at the top of your recruiting class pretty much since Day One of training. Why did you not tell me this?! I'm positively busting my buttons — and don't give me any of that "tone of surprise" business. You had to know I'd be walking on clouds over such news — I just don't understand why on Earth you would keep it to yourself.

He also tells me that you and he are being recommended for the Officer Training Corps. Honestly, Ronald, you have been a most diligent correspondent, writing the most beautiful and occasionally naughty letters every single day, and never once did you see fit to spare a line for this most crucial information. I could throttle you, I really could.

If you're expecting me to keep this news quiet, you are bound to be woefully disappointed, because the next thing I am going to do after giving this letter to Peaches is to Floo over to the Burrow and fill your mother in. Why should she be deprived of such a lovely excuse to celebrate, I ask you. And don't think for one minute that I'm going to keep George in the dark, either. This will be the first thing I tell him when I help out at the shop this weekend, you can bet on that.

Merlin, if you were with me now I don't know if I would hex you or snog you senseless, you great ginger prat.

That's all I have to say. I truly am quite put out.

Hermione.

P.S. — I love you and couldn't be prouder of you if I tried. But honestly!

oooOOOooo

16 September 1998
St. Agnes Island

Dearest, sweetest, loveliest Hermione,

How can I ever explain what's in my heart? I have known you so long, loved you so long, I sometimes hardly know where I end and you begin. If I am a good man, if I am the man you want, it is only because you have made me so, Hermione. Everything I do is in the hope of making you happy. All I could want is to make you proud. Be cross with me if you like. Hex me if you must. But if you're proud that I'm your man, then nothing else matters.

Your loyal knight,
Ronald.

oooOOOOoo

God damn it, my feet hurt. And I'm wet. And I'm cold. I would say the charm of this rainy, rocky, windy little island has most definitely worn off. It doesn't help that Benedict keeps putting me on the same team as Thayer and Noble. Why didn't more Gryffindors come out for Auror training this year, anyway? If I have to listen to these two sing the Ravenclaw house song one more time on this watch, as we march around the camp perimeter in the rain like a trio of bleeding eedjits, I might just blow a gasket.

Thank Merlin this nonsense is over in a week. I want to go home. I could go for a big slice of Mum's treacle tart right about now. I could go for sleeping in a bed that's long enough to fit my feet in. I could go for shagging my wife, thank you very much.

Meanwhile, these jerks insist on rating the female recruits according to looks.

"Perkins is cute, but she's rather more full of herself than she ought to be," says Noble.

"That's just because she won't give you the time of day," Thayer replies.

Blimey, Thayer just said something I agree with.

"Course, Weasley here is quite above making time with the birds around here, isn't he?" Thayer continues.

Oh well, I'm back to hating him.

"Why's that?" says Noble, who clearly knows exactly why.

I swear I don't really hate these guys as much as I seem to right now, I really don't. It's just that they're on my last nerve.

"Don't you read The Prophet old boy?" Thayer says. "Mr. and Mrs. Weasley have been front-page news, haven't they."

I roll my eyes. Thankfully, I spy Arduus ahead of us in the distance. He's waving us back to the barracks. "Your shift's over for the night, boys," he barks. "Get your arses into the showers and hit the sack. We do a ten-mile run at dawn."

Great. Oh well … at least I don't have to stay on rounds with these two gits.

oooOOOOoo

28 September 1998

My dearest Ronald,

Just three more days! Sweet Merlin, I can hardly believe it.

I'm delighted that we have made it this far, but the remaining stretch of time seems almost unbearable. Please hurry back to me, my love. I promise I will make it worth your while.

Ginny and your Mum want to have a welcome home party for you, Harry and Neville. I've urged them to make it on the day *after* you return home because I want you all to myself for at least 24 hours before I'll let anyone else get to you.
I will be ready for you, good sir knight. Come home to me soon, my darling.

Until then, I remain …

Your loving wife,

Mione.

P.S. — By the way, the answer to the question in your last letter is yes, most definitely, yes. Yes, yes, yes. I've been imagining every little thing I'd like you to do to me when you get home to Vine Cottage, my darling. And I'm willing to do anything you desire when you return because your wish is, of course, my command, as always. You make the rules. I'll be a good girl. I'll do anything you say.

I so miss the feeling of being surrounded by you, filled up by you, overwhelmed by you, lost in you as you wrap your arms around me, move above me, and drive your long, thick, juicy cock inside me, taking me as only you ever have, as only you ever can. I cannot wait to be one with you again, Ronald, my big, strong Auror, my knight in shining armor. Please don't make me wait a minute longer than I have to.

HW.

oooOOOooo

29 September 1998
St. Agnes Island

Mione,

You'll be the death of me, you will, Little Dove. You are a naughty, naughty girl, aren't you.

Well, I hope you have been resting and taking your vitamins, sweetheart, because you certainly won't be getting any rest when I get home. You will be mine, all mine, that night and forever after that, little wife of mine. Hell, you've got me all worked up, and I still have 48 hours to go before I can get my hands on you again.

I can taste you on my lips already, love. Are you ready for me?

As for welcome home parties — the only one I want to attend is at Vine Cottage, with you and only you.

Until then, be a good girl …

Ron.

oooOOOoooo

I drop my rucksack and look up from my spot on the path and run my eyes over the cottage, the vines swaying in the evening breeze. Is it real? I've dreamt of this moment so many times. Gods, I pray I'm awake.

Then I see her pulling back the curtain, dropping it suddenly, and then yanking open the front door. She stops and stares at me for a moment — wondering as I am, I suppose, if this is really happening, if I'm really home. Look at her. She's … she's so beautiful, in that pale pink dress that I love so much, her hair loose and wild the way I like it best. Before I can make another move, she's
scampering across the porch, down the steps and into my arms, and I'm swinging her in a circle then clutching her to my chest, and she's crying so hard that I can already feel her tears through my shirt.

"I'm home, Little Dove," I mumble into her hair. "I'm home."
Reckoning

Chapter Summary

Weaknesses are confirmed and new powers are revealed.

Chapter 20: Reckoning

It's so quiet now, but for several hours tonight, this room was filled with the sounds of wild lovemaking. Let's face it, both Hermione and I can be pretty passionate people but, even by our standards, this particular reunion had to set some sort of record. When I arrived home from St. Agnes, I had swept her up into my arms, carried her across the front lawn up the porch stairs, through the entryway and straight up to the bedroom, and we proceeded to tumble into our bed.

We shagged twice in an hour, then Hermione flitted downstairs to bring me up the special dinner she had prepared as a surprise: a savory cottage pie, green beans with the slightly burnt almonds that I have come to love so much, two flagons of butterbeer, homemade bread—which she swears she's made for me before, but it never, ever tasted this good—and some sort of amazing, boozy rum cake that she tells me was a recipe of her grandmother's. We slipped on bathrobes and ate in the seating area by the bedroom fireplace as the sun set in the hills behind the cottage, casting the room in the orange-y glow of the hearth. We laughed and talked as we ate, stopping now and then just to look at one another or to kiss now and then in a surprisingly shy way, considering how busy we were ravishing each other just an hour before.

The first time was basically what you might call a desperation shag — Hermione cried pretty much the whole time, but they were happy tears, or so she said when I paused for a moment to be sure. "I'm fine, Ronald, honestly — I just can't believe this is real. You're really home. You're really mine," she said, and I answered by crushing my lips to hers, unable to do or say anything else as I pushed the straps of her dress off her shoulders to expose her breasts—breaking several of her buttons in the process—then lifted her skirt and literally ripped her knickers off, kissing away her tears then taking her as she moaned my name.

The second time was more, well, romantic, you might say. She took her time finishing the job of undressing me since all I'd done the last time was to undo my zip. As she pulled off my trousers, then my pants, then my shirt, she stopped to appreciate the changes wrought by one month of training at St. Agony, as I had come to call it. Sitting there on the bed, the tatters of her dress and her underthings tossed aside, she ran her hands over my legs, then my arms, then my chest. I laid on the bed watching her in the dim light of the fire, her hair mussed and wild, her eyes still wet with tears, a little smile bending one corner of her mouth. Gods, I thought, she's so beautiful. And the feeling of her fingers on my skin — I knew that I could never get tired of it.

"You were quite fit before you ever even thought of going to St. Agnes, but look at you now," she said with a flirtatious lilt in her voice. "You've got muscles on top of your muscles, darling."

She stroked my arms again, paying particular attention to my shoulders, which even I had noticed had become broader — mainly because none of my shirts fit quite right anymore.

"All the better to protect you with, my dear," I said with a grin.
She smiled back, knowing I'm only half serious — but only *half* — then traced her fingers down my chest to my waist and then to my stomach, which has indeed flattened out quite noticeably despite my steady diet of Conargan-approved meals. Then she leaned over, placing her lips by my ear, her nipple skimming against my bicep. "My big, strong knight in shining armor has come back to me, hasn't he?" she whispered, lowering her free hand from my stomach to my cock, which was once again standing at attention.

"Never to leave you again, love," I replied, then felt myself involuntarily press my head back into the pillows and groan as she stroked me firmly. "Oh Merlin, Mione, that feels so good," I said, between deep intakes of breath. "If only you knew how many times I've dreamed of you touching me just that way. Gods."

I looked down in time to watch her lower her tongue to the tip of me before opening wide and taking me in as deep as she could do. After that point, words failed me — I was just too turned on, too moved, too … everything … to speak. So I used my hands to communicate, sinking my fingers into her hair to encourage her to keep going, then pulling her head up and back when I felt the urge to roll her onto her back and have my way with her.

"Oh Ron," she moaned as I entered her and kissed her neck. "This is where I belong … right here … in your arms," she murmured.

All I could do was hum my agreement against her neck.

After dinner, the lovemaking was more playful — I think eating gave us both a lift, and we didn't even bother to leave the sofa. She simply opened her robe, then opened mine, and straddled me, and I happily kissed and nipped at her breasts, letting her move above me as she pleased. As we snogged, I grabbed my wand and cast a vibrating charm — Tremefacio — that one of the lads was always going on about back at St. Agnes, and I thought, if I was the type to kiss and tell, I'd have to thank him next time I see him at Camden, because Hermione at first flinched when I applied it between her legs, but then she positively melted, letting out a long "oooooookh" as she rocked back and forth against the length of my wand, the action taking place just inches above my cock. I leaned against the back of the sofa, mesmerized, playing with her breasts with my free hand as Hermione writhed above me, her eyes squeezed shut, her teeth biting into her bottom lip, her head occasionally jerking backward as she moaned. Gods, I thought, she's so beautiful, even at a moment like this — especially at a moment like this, when she's not worrying about how she looks or what anyone thinks and is trusting me completely with her body. Soon, she came, and then she settled onto me and I let her set the pace, amazed that I had the energy to come a third time in one night before collapsing into a heap, laying back on the sofa with a slightly sweaty and worn-out Hermione sprawled out on top of me.

Eventually, we cleaned up and crawled into bed, and Hermione dropped off to sleep remarkably quickly. The clock on the mantle now says it's 1:45 in the morning. I, however, am just too … I dunno … too buzzed to doze. It feels almost like, if I fall asleep, this will all disappear, and I'll be back at St. Agnes Island. But of course Hermione really is here in my arms, she really is dozing comfortably, and we really are curled up in our big, cozy bed. Together. As we should be.

The next day, after Hermione and I spend many lazy hours lolling around in bed and making love over and over again, we finally drag ourselves over to The Burrow for the big Welcome Home party that Mum insisted on throwing for me, Harry and Neville.

Scads of people are here. Mum's really outdone herself this time. The spread — laid out under a giant, sparkling "WELCOME HOME" sign — is incredible. She's done a roast beef, a giant glazed ham, potatoes, salad, several treacle tarts, chocolate cake, cookies … she must have been cooking
for days, though she insists that Eleanor had a lot to do with it as well. Practically the whole of our 
Gryffindor class is here — including Lavender, which I thought would be awkward, but she and 
Hermione seem to get on since the battle (go figure) — plus the remains of the D.A., McGonagall, 
Hagrid, Kingsley, Lee Jordan, Angelina Johnson, and Neville's grandmother (who is surprisingly 
lively tonight).

Ginny and the other Hogwarts students were given special permission to Floo in from 
McGonagall's office for the occasion, and Ginny and Harry now seem to be joined at the hip. 
Charlie came in from Romania. Andromeda Tonks is here with Teddy. I can tell that the sight of 
Andromeda rattles Hermione a bit — Andromeda looks so much like her bitch of a sister. But 
Teddy's adorable, and Hermione can't seem to keep her hands off him, which is giving her and 
Andromeda a reason to talk and bond. Nice to see. Hermione invited Sir Chumley Dunder, and he's 
settled himself onto an armchair next to Slughorn, who seems to have taken quite a shine to me 
since my Hogwarts days, surprisingly enough.

Percy has brought a girlfriend. Hermione tells me her name is Audrey. She's quite nice and very 
smart, Mione says, and the two of them have been dating for a few weeks, apparently. Hermione 
also informed me before the party that she suspects there's something going on between George 
and Angelina — I'll be keeping an eye on the two of them for clues. Bill and Fleur are here — 
evidently Hermione has been visiting Fleur every weekend just to check in, and I'm glad she 
warned me ahead of time that Fleur has gotten bigger in the past month, because otherwise I would 
probably have said something terrible like, "Dear lord, you're enormous" when I first laid eyes on 
er. I keep watching Hermione for signs that all the baby-ness — you know, hanging out with 
Teddy, and Fleur being so obviously pregnant now — might be upsetting her in some way. But, 
surprisingly, she seems to relish holding Teddy and watching his hair turn different colors, and she 
and Fleur have spent a good amount of the evening talking and laughing together. The sight of 
Teddy cuddling her — and Fleur inviting her to feel her bump — well, it warms my heart, truth be 
told. Someday, maybe …

I'm snapped from these thoughts by the arrival of Luna, who has brought along her Dad. 
Apparently Hermione has given Xenophilius permission to bring along a writer and a photographer 
to report on the occasion for the next issue of the Quibbler. While Xeno is busy overseeing his 
staffers, I can't help but notice that Luna has drifted over in Neville's direction — and he seems 
quite happy to see her. Hmm.

The party's in full swing — the drink has been flowing non-stop for hours, someone turned up the 
music, and there are people in virtually every corner of the house. I step into the kitchen to grab a 
fresh butterbeer for me and Hermione, and Hugh follows me. He grabs my elbow and quietly pulls 
me out onto the back porch.

"What's up?"

Hugh looks over his shoulder for a second to be sure we're alone. Then he says in a low tone, 
"Sorry to pry, Ron, but I've just got to ask." He looks around again then leans forward. "Umm, how 
did … how did Hermione sleep last night?"

Uh. What? I search my mind for anything — anything — to say other than, "You mean, after I 
shagged her three times?" My mouth must have dropped open in the process, because soon I'm 
aware that my jaw is just flapping — and then Hugh sort of comes to his senses and gasps.

"Oh!" he sputters, straightening up and running a hand through his hair. "Oh, I mean — oh, I'm 
dreadfully sorry, Ron, erm — I was just — that's not what I —"

"No, of course," I blurt.
"Of course," he answers, his eyes wide. "It's just that … oh, bugger."

Then, unexpectedly, he chuckles. And then I chuckle. And soon were both laughing nervously.

"Holy hell, Hugh."

"I know. Sorry about that."

We both sort of regain our equilibrium and I wind up shrugging and handing him the butterbeer that I had meant for Hermione. He takes a swig and chuckles again.

"OK, so, uh … why do you want to know about how Hermione's sleeping?" I ask.

Hugh looks around again. "She didn't tell you?"

Suddenly my heart thumps. Fuck. I feel the hair at the back of my neck prickle. Why's he acting so jumpy? Something is seriously off.

"Tell me what?" I say as slowly and softly as possible.

Hugh lets out a long sigh. "She had, umm, Hermione had nightmares while you were gone, Ron."

"Nightmares?"

"Yes. Bad ones."

I shudder and feel a ripple of cold run through me, because I'm pretty sure I know exactly what these nightmares were about.

"How often?"

Hugh stalls, and I know the answer, but I still have to ask.

"Every night?"

Hugh nods. "Eleanor and I were usually able to calm her down enough to get her back to sleep but, yes, every night. The first time was the night you left for St. Agnes. Gave us quite a fright, I don't mind telling you. She was screaming some nonsense—'It's a fake!' and then, later 'No, don't let him'—like her life depended on it. She called out your name more than once. We had the damnedest time waking her up to snap her out of it. And when we did, she cried her eyes out. I've never seen her so agitated."

I stagger backwards a step or two and then turn toward the stairs that lead to the back garden. I've got to sit down. I don't care that it's cold out here. Hugh follows and sits next to me on the top step.

Hugh looks me over. "I take it from your astonished reaction that she never had a nightmare like that with you," he says.

I shake my head. "No. Never." Shit. How much should I say? "Hugh, did Hermione ever tell you what the nightmares were about?"

He takes another sip of his butterbeer. "She may have told Eleanor, but she certainly never told me. Just something about the war, she said, but she wouldn't really get into details, no matter how many times I asked. And believe me, I did ask."

Good Godric, of course she kept him in the dark. Hermione! Gods, I could throttle her sometimes.
I've got a decision to make — and I know she's not going to like it but, god damn it, it has to be done. "Look, Hugh, you know how Hermione is, but—"

"Of course I know," he cuts in with a smirk. "Why the hell do you think I keep looking over my shoulder?"

We both laugh quietly.

"Listen, here's the thing. I know exactly what those nightmares were about, Hugh. I was there. I skated over a lot of the gory details back in Sydney when I told you the story of the war. But … well, hell, if I had a daughter, I'd bloody well want to know. I reckon you deserve to know the entire story."

Later that night, Hermione and I decide to Floo home because we're both a little too tipsy to Apparate.

As we tumble out of the fireplace in the lounge at Vine Cottage, Hermione dusts herself off. "What a lovely party," she says, taking my hand and leading me up the stairs. "I really do think everyone had a great time — and did you see Neville and Luna in the dining room? I think something's developing there, don't you?"

Hermione doesn't notice that I haven't answered her question — in fact, I haven't said a word. I'm too busy thinking.

"And George and Angie are cute together, aren't they? I told you there was something going on with the two of them, I just knew it," she continues as she steps into the loo. "It's nice to see. George deserves to be happy, doesn't he. And your mother's roast — she walked me through how she did it. That herb crust was just to die for."

I light the fire with my wand and then settle onto the sofa as she brushes her teeth, and I gather my thoughts as I hear the sound of water splashing. "My father," she continues, stepping out of the bathroom and patting her face with a towel, "I couldn't believe how emotional he was when he and Mum Apparated home with your Dad tonight. I suppose he had one butterbeer too many, because he just couldn't stop hugging me."

Well, here goes nothing. I clear my throat. "Honey, sit down," I say, patting the seat next to me. Hermione stops in her tracks and blanches. She steps over and sinks slowly onto the sofa, giving me a wary look. She's clutching the towel in her hands.

"Why didn't you tell me about the nightmares?"

She does a double take. "What?"

I squint and lean forward an inch, looking deep into her eyes. "The nightmares, love. You know what I'm talking about."

She raises an eyebrow, then tears her eyes from mine and shifts them to the towel, which she is twisting in her hands.

There's a long silence. "I know you're trying to sort out whether you should deny it, Mione, but don't. Your dad took me aside tonight and told me all about it."
She looks up at me, her lower lip quivering. "I didn't … I …"

I'm half expecting her to get angry, give me tongue-lashing for talking about something private with her dad, or talking behind her back, or not consulting her first or some shite like that — because that's what Hermione does when she feels cornered. She gets angry. So I'm a little shocked when, instead, she just grimaces and starts crying, throwing herself at me. I pull her to me and she folds herself into my lap, just like she did that very first night in the Common Room, the night before Dumbledore's funeral, and I remember how vulnerable she seemed then and how much more so she seems now. She puts up such a tough front, it's easy to forget that the war has been incredibly hard on her.

I'm kissing her hair and she's muttering things like "I'm sorry, so sorry," against my neck, which is now wet with her tears.

"Hermione," I whisper. "Sorry, love, but there's no point hoping that I'm not going to worry about you. And your Dad's worried about you, too. He wanted to know what your nightmares were about, and I told him — because I have a pretty good idea."

She leans back and looks up at me, her cheeks slick with tears. "You did?" she sniffs.

I nod.

"Oh, Ron, why? Why did you do that?" she whispers back.

I sigh. Shit. I rub the palm of my hand against the back of my neck to buy myself time to think. How am I going to explain this? It's going to be tricky, because this stuff runs pretty deep. But I think I know the best way to proceed.

"May I ask you a question?"

She crinkles her brow and then nods slowly.

"Have you told your Mum what happened at Malfoy Manor?"

She looks guilty for a second and then nods. "Yes. Well, I spared her a few details — about Greyback, mostly — but yes, I confided in her," she says, before adding in a slightly harsher tone, "and I asked her not to tell anyone else."

Bloody hell … women. Why are they always doing shite like this?

"And you didn't tell your Dad because …"

She fiddles with the hem of her jumper, her legs still stretched across my lap. "Because … because I didn't want to upset him."

I drop my head and shake it back and forth — mainly because I think that if I don't, I'll roll my eyes, and I don't want her to see me doing that. She honestly thought her Dad wouldn't wonder what the hell was going on? And that, if she kept him out of the loop, she'd avoid upsetting him? Merlin's mole cream.

After a moment, I straighten up and look her in the eyes.

"And you didn't tell me about the nightmares because …"

She searches my face then looks away at the fire. "I didn't want to worry you," she answers in a
small voice.

Fucking hell.

I take her by the shoulders and turn her firmly to look at me. She looks rattled, and I realize I need to calm down. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, smiling slightly at her along the way — and she seems comforted by that, because her shoulders loosen a bit. I rub them with my hands, and then her arms, thinking again how small she is, and yet how strong.

"Hermione, have you forgotten what I said the night we were bonded? 'Cause I haven't. 'From this day forward, my fate and thine are forever intertwined,' remember?" She's keeping perfectly still, searching my face with her eyes. I can tell she's still trying to decide whether to throw some anger my way or not. I take a deep breath and decide to dive back in. If she's going to hex me, she might as well know why. "You can't protect me from loving you, Mione. That's a risk I decided to take a long, long time ago. And yeah, love is risky as hell. Anything bad that ever happens to you — it's going to hurt me just as much. But, you know, that's part of the deal. And I reckon it's the same for your Dad. He took that risk when he and your Mum decided to have you in the first place." Her lip is quivering again. I don't want to make her cry, but these things need to be said. "You've done so much to protect your parents, love, and you made the right call when you sent them to Australia, but the war's over now. It's OK to allow the people you love to … to love you back."

Tears are flowing freely down her cheeks now. Slowly, she leans her forehead against mine and drapes her arms around my neck. I pull her close and soon she's cradled in my arms, crying into my shirt. "Do you want to tell me what happened in the nightmares?"

She sniffles loudly and wipes her face on my sleeve. I reach for my wand and Conjure a handkerchief and give it to her. "Thank you," she mumbles, her cheek still pressed against my chest.

I feel her whole body shudder for a second. "It was," she says in a creaky voice, then she clears her throat. "It was basically the same as the real thing," she continues, sounding a little less froggy this time. "Bellatrix," she says, and I feel a twinge of anger pulse through me at the sound of that name, "Bellatrix … she was above me, cursing me. The Malfoys, Greyback and Wormtail were standing there watching. What was different, though, was that you weren't there — in the dungeon, I mean. I couldn't hear you. I kept listening for you, but you weren't there. You didn't come barging into the room. You didn't summon Raw Magic. You weren't there to save me. So the torture kept happening. And then…" She gasps, her body convulsing in a spasm of shudders once again, and I tighten my grip on her, leaning my cheek against the crown of her head. "And then, she gave me to Greyback. That's usually when the nightmare would end — just as Greyback," she pauses and shakes again, "just as he climbed on top of me. That's when I would start really screaming out loud, I think."

I pull Hermione even closer to me, if that's possible, aware that I'm now crying into her hair, and she's crying, too. "Oh, Gods … oh, bloody hell … I'm so sorry, love," I say in a choked voice, tears wetting my face. "But we stopped them … we got you out of there … don't forget that … and I swear I'll never let anyone hurt you like that again … that's why I'm doing what I'm doing at St. Agnes … at Camden …"

She clutches my arm in her hand and curls her legs up, pressing herself tighter against my chest. I soon realize that I've got to pull myself together for her sake, though. I've got to reassure her. And I promise myself that later, when we're both calm, I'm going to try to convince her to see an Emotional Healer at St. Mungo's. I should have insisted on it sooner, damn it.

"Let's not forget," I whisper into her hair. "I was there, right? I did come for you. I was there —
Harry and Dobby, too — and we fought for you, love, didn't we. And you know we always will, right? Harry will always fight just as hard as I would when it comes to you. You'll never be alone, Mione, not really. And you don't have to be brave for us all the time. You're hurting, love, and for good reason. Please, please … let me take care of you. Please."

I feel her shake her head slightly. "But … but …"

"No buts," I say more firmly. "Mione, this is the job I signed up for — being your husband. And that means looking after you just like you look after me, yeah?" She lets out a little huff and wipes her nose with the handkerchief. I reach down and tug at her chin lightly to get her to look at me.

Her face is glazed with tears, her cheeks are covered in pink blotches, her nose is runny and her hair is a mass of curls shooting in every direction. She's a mess. A gorgeous mess. I take the handkerchief from her hand, fold it, and dab her cheeks dry. Then I press it to her nose and say, "blow." She does, and we both chuckle.

"You know," I say softly, handing the handkerchief back to her, "even if you'd never agreed to marry me, I reckon I'd still have the urge to protect you and I always would, because … well, I can't help it. It's just what I am. I know my protectiveness drives you mad sometimes, but—"

"It doesn't drive me mad," she says, cutting me off. "If I've ever seemed annoyed by it … well, it was mostly when we were younger, and I didn't know what it meant, and it flustered me, I think." A little smile comes to her lips as she studies my face before reaching up to cup my cheek in her hand, running her thumb through the tear tracks still there. "I found it so difficult to interpret your meaning — it made me hopeful that you might care, but at the same time, it made me defensive, because I didn't want you to think I couldn't take care of myself. But … well … that was a long time ago. I've grown used to the idea over time, Ron, honestly, and I think the nightmares made me realize just how much I've come to depend on you. You are my knight in shining armor, darling. You truly are."

I lean my forehead against hers and shut my eyes. "That's all I've ever wanted to be. That's it."

Monday morning, I'm up before dawn and Apparating to London for our first day at the Camden Auror Training Facility. It's a bit intimidating — the place is used regularly by Aurors for workouts, intensive conditioning, mid-career skills enhancement, that sort of thing, so there are full-fledged Senior Aurors everywhere you look. There's a mess hall here, too — we're expected to have breakfast together as a recruiting class, surprisingly enough. Something about group cohesion or some rubbish. I'd rather have Hermione's toad-in-the-hole and a cup of her muggle coffee. But still … the mess hall cook here knows how to make eggs, at least.

I look around the table and realize that we're down to just 20 recruits. Ten must not have made the cut after St. Agnes. Noble's not here, I see. Thayer looks a bit bereft. Heh. Harry and Neville and I, however, are still in, and when we are shown the way to the recruits' locker room, I'm dismayed to see that the rankings are posted there. I had half hoped that the rankings from St. Agnes wouldn't carry over here to Camden — you know, clean slate and all that — but no.

I'm still first in class. Harry's second. A decent bloke named Baxter — who is British-born but spent most of his life in the States — is third. Padma Patil, who has proved to be as badass as a Ravenclaw can get, is ranked fourth just ahead of Neville.

After a morning workout and a classroom overview of how our Potions training is going to come into play in our Auror work, there's lunch and then we're sent to the medical wing for a full physical.
The guys are all sitting in the Academy Healer's waiting room — the girls are evidently set up in a different wing of the clinic. We're lined up on metal benches in our skivvies and socks, and it's right cold in here. If we weren't sick before coming in here, I'm betting we all will be now, because I'm chilled to the bone.

Just my luck, I'm last in line. For a while, I had chalked up the long wait to the fact that my name begins with "W," but when Young and Zinn got in ahead of me, I started to wonder.

After another 10 minutes or so, a kindly looking old gent in Healer's robes comes out into the waiting room and looks me over. "You're Mr. Weasley, I presume," he says.

I rise to my feet, look around the now-empty waiting room and nod with a grin. "Reckon so, sir."

"Do come in," he says, gesturing to the doorway that leads to his examining room.

The Healer introduces himself as Dr. Jonathan Lampert. As he does a routine examination, he tells me trained as an Auror with Kingsley back in the day, and then he completed Healer training. He's been head of the Auror Corps' special medical detail ever since. Seems like a good bloke. I dunno — I just get a good vibe off of him, and I'm learning to trust my gut on that sort of thing. When he's through examining me, waving his wand over me, poking and prodding me, he proclaims me in excellent health.

"I understand you're married, Weasley," he says with a wink.

I nod. He chuckles. "Oh, to be 18 again," he says wistfully. Then he sits down at his desk and pulls out a hefty file, which he tells me contains my medical records dating back to my days as a bun in the oven. Blimey.

"We don't usually look this far back, Weasley. But we do routinely review recruits' medical records, and when the results of your last tests at St. Mungo's — after the Battle of Hogwarts — came across my desk, I put in a request for your full index file. And, frankly, that's why I held your examination for last. I've already had a word with Brocklehurst, the head of the department, about your history, and he agrees that we ought to have a deeper conversation about it. In fact, he should be joining us shortly," he says, tossing me a set of recruits' robes. I slip them on but …

Erm … shit. What the hell does this mean? I'm not sure I'm quite in the mood to discuss my medical history with any old Tom, Dick or even a Harry.

Before I have a chance to say anything one way or the other, in strides Brocklehurst — I recognize him from the picture in our St. Agnes training manual — plus a much younger guy in Senior Auror's robes. I stand at attention.

"At ease, recruit," Brocklehurst says as he steps forward and gives my hand a powerful shake — so powerful it almost hurts. He's a giant of a fellow — a good inch or two taller than I am, with broad shoulders, a neck as thick as my thigh, a square jaw and clear blue eyes. The only things that give away his age are his midsection, which probably was quite muscular at one time but now looks a tidge on the soft side, and his thinning gray hair.

"Weasley, Weasley, it's a pleasure to meet you, lad," he says, finally letting go of my hand, which is now slightly aching. "Welcome to Camden, young man. I've been keeping tabs on your scoring at St. Agnes. Looking forward to seeing how you do in a more classroom-intensive setting like Camden here."

I nod, wondering what the buggering fuck I can say other than, "yes, sir," which I manage to get
out in a crisp tone despite my nerves. I mean, bloody hell, this is Brocklehurst, the head of the whole department. What the hell is he doing keeping tabs on my scores — much less coming to see me? Doesn't he have better things to do?

"Weasley, let me introduce you to Keith Hale." I turn and shake the hand of the much younger man to Brocklehurst's left. Blimey. I try not to do a double-take when I look at him. I don't mind saying, Hale is one hell of a good-looking guy. I know blokes are supposed to pretend that we don't notice that sort of thing, but this chap is Cedric Diggory-level handsome. Looks like something out of a photo spread in Witches' Weekly.

He gives me a broad smile — his teeth so white they're almost blinding. Crikey. "It's an honor to meet you, Weasley," he says. "Been following your career" — my career? what career? — "since your Quidditch days. I'm Gryffindor class of '91."

I quickly do the math in my head. "'91, eh? So, wait … did you graduate Hogwarts with Tonks?"

His face darkens for a moment and he nods. "Yeah. She and I went through training together," he says with a little creak in his voice. "A real loss for the Corps — and for me. She was a friend."

"Me, too," I add, suddenly feeling a little choked up.

Brocklehurst's booming voice pulls me from my thoughts of Tonks. "So, Weasley, you're probably wondering why we're here," he says.

"Well, actually," I answer warily, "um, yes."

"Right then. Let's not beat around the bush. Everyone in this room is aware of what you've done up 'til now, Weasley, what with your work at Harry Potter's side. And you've been putting up some impressive numbers in the training program so far. But there's a detail in your medical record that caught Lampert's attention here, and we think it merits further review."

I gulp.

Lampert notices the look on my face. "It's nothing to be terribly concerned about, Weasley," he says. "Don't worry — you're not dying."

This remark cracks Brocklehurst and Hale up. Grr. I'm starting to get a little annoyed. What the hell is this all about?

Lampert clears his throat. "Do sit down everyone," he says. Brocklehurst and Hale pull up the two metal chairs on either side of the door and settle into them. Lambert sits down at his desk. Seeing no alternative, I climb back onto the examining table, though my position there makes me feel slightly ridiculous, especially since I have no shoes on.

"Here's the deal, Weasley," says Brocklehurst, "we took a close look at the record of the exam you had at St. Mungo's at Kingsley's request. It indicates that you received treatment for Potentia Praecantatio — the aftereffects of summoning Raw Magic. That's correct, yes?"

"Yes, sir," I say, a little sheepishly.

Brocklehurst and Hale exchange a look. "You realize that summoning Raw Magic is a very rare thing indeed, eh Weasley?" Brocklehurst continues.

"So I've been told."
Brocklehurst straightens up. "Weasley, based on your medical record and the fact that you summoned powerful enough Raw Magic as an adult to knock out a roomful of wizards, we are reasonably certain that you are an Ingenitus."

An Ingenitus? I've actually heard that term before, but I don't really remember what it means.

Lampert leans forward. "An Ingenitus, Weasley, is a wizard with certain innate, inborn strengths. Intuition and a connection with the natural forces of the world around us — these are traits that all wizards share. But in an Ingenitus, those abilities are heightened. The ability to perform Wandless Magic is the hallmark of the Ingenitus. A wizard, even an Ingenitus, will never be able to operate wandlessly on a regular basis as, say, a House Elf does. But as you've seen, Weasley, it's possible to perform wandless magic under duress. An Ingenitus, however, when properly trained, can manage it in certain situations and conditions - and, with practice, he or she can do it without the exhaustion that you suffered when you performed Raw Magic during the war."

"You can imagine," add Brocklehurst, "how handy that skill can be in an Auror's line of work."

"Bloody hell, yeah," I say distractedly, before realizing what I'm about. "I mean … um … sorry, sir."

Brocklehurst laughs and slaps his knee. "No worries, lad. So here's the thing. You lot are rare, but you're not alone. Hale here is an Ingenitus. And so what we have in mind is to have you get together with him a few times a week to hone your skills. Probably the most important skill that he can teach you right now is one that, oddly enough, is one of the most simple: How to Accio a wand. It's amazing how often an Auror finds himself in a situation where he's been disarmed, and he'd love to be able to get his hands on a wand and just can't. If he or someone on his team can Accio a wand — well, problem solved, eh?"

Hell, yeah. My mind immediately flies to Malfoy Manor. How fantastic would it have been to be able to Accio a wand while Harry and I were stuck in that god-damned cellar, or while Bellatrix was holding that fucking knife to Hermione's throat? How many nightmare-filled nights could I have spared her? Damn it. I wish I'd known about this Ingenitus shite sooner.

"When do we start?" I ask, drawing a surprised laugh from the group.
Instincts

Chapter Summary

Learning to harness previously unrecognized strengths.

Chapter 21: Instincts

"That was closer this time — much better," Hale says in what's meant to be a soothing tone, but I feel like I'm just not getting the hang of it.

My wand is sitting, rather lonely-looking, on a chair across the Camden gymnasium that Hale and I have been using for one-on-one Ingenitus training. "I definitely saw movement that time, Weasley. Don't get discouraged," Hale says. "It's a bit like learning to ride a broom. The first time feels completely wrong, but then you get the hang of it and it's something you never forget."

I laugh. "Yeah, Hermione says the same sort of thing about riding one of those muggle bi-slickal thingies — but you'll never catch me dead on one of those."

"You don't know what you're missing, mate," Hale says. "Me Mum was muggleborn and insisted I learn to ride a bike. They're great fun."

"Well, I'll stick to my broom, thank you very much."

Hale and I have been at this Ingenitus shite since yesterday, mostly getting to know one another, talking about the ways that Wandless Magic can be handy in the field, and going over theory. It's been a weird relief to meet someone who has had similar experiences to mine — and to find out that I'm not mental, just … different. Hale asked me to think of times when maybe my Ingenitus thing — my magical instincts, as Hale might call them — were really working and to talk about what that was like. At first, it was tough to think of any, but then, once I thought of one — the time I understood that I needed to let the Deluminator's ball of light sink into my chest and then Apparate to find Hermione and Harry — examples kept coming to mind to the point where I decided to stop or I'd wind up telling him my whole life story.

The biggest thing — the thing that is still really blowing my mind even though he said it about 24 hours ago — is what he had to say about my longstanding hunch that Harry, Hermione and I were destined to find each other and to do the mission against Voldemort. I've talked to both Harry and Hermione about this notion in the past, and each of them seem to think of it as a nice enough concept, but they don't really seem to get that I mean it — that it's not some soft-headed fancy. I really, really believe we're bonded in some way, the three of us, and that our coming together was not totally random. I can't explain why I feel this way except that it's something that's just sort of … I dunno … in my bones. I held back on telling Hale about this idea because, at first, I reckoned he'd think I was a nutter. But after all the stuff I've already told him — and all the times he just nodded and said, "yep, that's an Ingenitus thing," — I figured I could take the risk. So I shouldn't have been surprised when he asked me to tell him more about the connection to Harry and Hermione.

"Hmm," he said, twirling his wand distractedly as he listened. "You've got a gut-level feeling about it, Weasley, which tells me that it's for real. If you thought the idea was nonsense, it wouldn't stick
with you this way, but you've been thinking about this for years."

Hale Accioed us a couple of bottles of pumpkin juice from the canteen across the hall and handed one to me. "As you go on in your studies, Weasley, you're going to find that connections like the one you're talking about with Potter and your wife aren't just possible, they're real," he said. "We'll probably never know how or why, but the linkage — Ingenitus scholars call it Fate Bonding — that's very, very real. I have no doubt you three have that kind of connection. Which isn't to say you didn't all make choices or that the stories of your lives are already written — we all have free will to do as we please, ultimately. But for one of you to break the link, to deviate from your purpose … well, it would be very tough to do. Chances are that if the link between the three of you has survived what you've already been through, then nothing will break it, ever."

That feels right — in fact, it feels like something I've always known, and that's one of the big things that Hale emphasizes when we talk about what it's like to be an Ingenitus. He talks about the feeling that something rings true, and says that it really does feel almost like the ringing of a bell — a big, deep bell, like the bells in Hogwarts Tower. It resonates with you. The guy does go on a lot about instinct, but I really am starting to get what he means.

Even so, I can't help but doubt that I'm as much of an Ingenitus as he and Brocklehurst seem to think. "I mean," I said to Hale on the way in to training today, "if you told my wife that I have a fine-tuned instinct or whatever, she might laugh at you. I'm hardly the most tuned-in guy — or intuitive or perceptive, as she would probably call it — especially when it comes to feelings or whatnot. I've been a right prat sometimes."

Hale opens the door to the gym and holds it as I pass through. "No one said being an Ingenitus makes you a genius or gives you special powers of Occlumency or The Sight or anything like that. In fact, I knew one Ingenitus years ago, before the war — he was was dumb as a box of rocks, especially when it came to dealing with other people. He could be a bona fide arse. But damn, that guy could sense when trouble was coming long before others could. He had what muggles would call a sixth sense about that sort of thing."

Today, Hale is trying to teach me how to Accio my wand, probably the most important skill an Ingenitus Auror can have, I reckon, and he seems willing to keep going even though it's after 6 o'clock — "you're on a roll, Weasley, you really are" — but just then, Harry sticks his head in the gym door.

"Hey there Ron, Keith," Harry calls out. "Fancy dinner at the Leaky?"


He smiles and nods. "Why not? But first, come on in here, Potter. Let's show you what Weasley's got going on."

Oh, crap. I've got nothing going on. That's the whole problem. I've been concentrating on my damned wand for half an hour and it's barely budged.

Hale reads the look on my face and laughs. "Come on, Weasley, hang in there. Maybe Harry here would be interested, yeah?"

Harry steps into the room excitedly, tossing his rucksack in the corner. "Hell yeah. I've been dying to know what this is all about."

"OK, the thing you need to know, Harry, is that what separates an Ingenitus from other types of
wizards is the heightened ability to sense and then harness the natural energy around them. Of course, all wizards have this ability to one degree or another, but it's an innate, inborn thing in an Ingenitus, and much more pronounced. I guess you could say that Ingenitii have sharp magical instincts — their intuition, at least about magical stuff, is often correct because, for whatever reason, they're able to pick up and interpret the energy around them. That's why they're able to harness Raw Magic when they have to."

Harry nods. "You don't have to convince me. I was there when Ron pulled off the Raw Magic stunt of the century at Malfoy Manor. Something I'll never forget."

Hale grins and slaps my back. "The trick is learn how to do it in a way that doesn't make you pass out," he says with a laugh. "Learning how to Accio a wand is really the key, because if you can do that, then, even if you've been disarmed, you regain the upper hand on an opponent and do it without almost literally killing yourself."

Hale explains that my display of Raw Magic was indeed unusual — and not the kind of thing that an Ingenitus ought to be doing every day, even if they could. It's bloody draining — as I can attest. "But the fact that Weasley could do it at all means his Ingenitus Pathway is open. Wide open, in fact — like a firehose — and the challenge for him is going to be to learn to open and close it at will, not just when the situation is so dire that the energy flows into and out of him so violently."

If my "pathway" as he calls it is so open, then how come I can't Accio my damned wand?

"OK, so … today is Weasley's first day of practical training, Harry. So far, we've just been talking theory and background, but now we're really going to put this stuff to use," Hale continues, ignoring my chagrin. "Nobody can Accio wandlessly the first time they try, Weasley — at least nobody that I've seen. So stop beating yourself up."

Harry laughs. "Good luck with that."

I grumble.

"You've managed to make that wand move ever so slightly, mate — and I haven't even really taught you the full technique yet. So there's every reason to be confident. Just relax and listen." Harry flops down onto the bench next to us, but Hale and I remain standing.

"So Weasley, I read your testimony about the Raw Magic incident and the medical report that St. Mungo's filed a while later. It sounds like what you did was classic Ingenitus stuff — which is to say, you pulled energy from around you into your body and then channeled it outward, yeah?"

I snort. "Yeah, I guess," I sputter, "but I blanked out, remember? Harry had to fill in a lot of the gaps in my testimony."

"But wait," Harry says, jumping up from his seat. "That's just what happened, Ron. I felt it. It was like an invisible wave was drawn toward you, and then … it was so crazy … it shot out of you like a cannon. It was incredible," he says with a grin.

Hale nods and turns to me. "So we know you can summon energy, Weasley. Now here's the secret to turning Raw Magic into Channeled, Wandless Magic. I know you were one of the only recruits who could conjure a Corporeal Patronus when you entered the Auror program, yeah?"

I exchange a look with Harry and then shrug. "Well, uh, yeah. So?"

"So, what do you do to conjure your Patronus?"
Gods … I bite my tongue before I say something really embarrassing out loud. The first thing that enters my head is Hermione. All I have to do is think of any number of moments with her — the night I finally told her I loved her, the first time we made love at Grimmauld Place, the night we got bonded, the way she took me back during the hunt, carrying her over the threshold at Vine Cottage … on and on. I must have stopped to think for a couple of beats too long, because both Harry and Hale are smirking at me.

"I think we know how he conjures a Patronus, mate," Harry says to Hale.

"Shut it, Harry."

"Anyway," says Hale, trying to stifle a grin, "so the energy required to conjure a Patronus is positive — it's a powerful, happy memory. And you plainly have those in abundance."

Harry elbows me in the ribs. I push him by the side of his head and he tumbles sideways with a snorting laugh.

"The psychic action required to summon a wand to you is quite similar, Weasley. You need to bring forth a mental trigger — imagine an experience in which you needed to have a wand but didn't. A dangerous situation. A distressing situation. A moment when the shit was really hitting the fan. The more real it is to you, the better."

Blimey. I don't have to stop and think for even a split second to know that my mental trigger is and always will be Malfoy Manor. Pounding my fists against the walls in that bloody dungeon, clawing at the stones, listening to Hermione wailing above me and knowing there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it — that feeling of helplessness was so overpowering, it still makes me slightly sick just thinking about it.

"Right. OK," I say, hoping my voice doesn't sound too choked off. "And then what?"

"Well, if the memory is strong enough, then all you should need to do is hold out your hand, concentrate on your wand — or any wand, for that matter — and it should come to you once you invoke the incantation." He demonstrates, Accioing my wand from across the room. Harry and I both give him a mocking round of applause, and he gives an exaggerated bow. "Now you give it a go."

Harry and I exchange a look. "Can I try it first?" Harry says. "I'm just curious."

Hale pats him on the back, then takes Harry's wand and walks both wands across the gymnasium, placing them on the chair at the other side of the room. "Go ahead, mate," Hale calls out.

Harry closes his eyes, an intense look of concentration on his face. I'm sure there have to be dozens of memories that could work for him, but if I had to guess, I'd say he's thinking of the time in the cemetery at Little Hangleton, where Riddle came back to physical form, when Cedric was killed. After a few moments, he reaches out toward his wand with his right hand and shouts, "Accio!"

A moment later, he opens his eyes, looking a bit disappointed.

"It's OK, Harry," Hale shouts from his spot next to the wands. "Either you've got it or you don't, mate."

Harry laughs. "No worries. I just wanted to see if I could pull it off. Obviously Wandless Magic isn't my department."
I pat him on the shoulder as Hale Levitates Harry's wand back to him.

"Your turn, Weasley," Hale calls out. "And don't worry — I've never seen anybody do it the first try, even when they've been taught the theory behind the spell like you just have. It may take a few tries — maybe even a few days — before you can really do it."

I nod and step forward, spreading my legs apart a little bit. I don't know what's come over me, but now that Hale's explained the idea — that it's sort of a reverse Patronus — I suddenly have absolutely no doubt. It's not going to take me more than one try, and it's sure as hell not going to take me a few days. That damned wand is coming into my hand, and it's coming now.

I don't close my eyes. I don't strain to concentrate. I just straighten up … set my jaw … throw my shoulders back … raise my hand … think the incantation … and my wand flies like a shot into my palm.

"Holy shit," Harry says in a stunned whisper.

Hale, for his part, looks equally gobsmacked. Then he tucks his wand under his arm and starts clapping. "Bloody hell, Weasley, I think you've got it."

"You think?" I ask with a half grin, twirling my wand between my fingers.

"Yeah, just a bit around the edges," Hale says, laughing. "Bloody hell, man."

"Does this mean we can go eat now?" I ask.

"Heck yeah," says Harry, throwing an arm around my shoulder. "And I'm buying, fellas. I reckon it's wise to stay on the good side of a man who can summon a wand. That little trick could be ruddy useful someday."

The Leaky turns out to be more crowded than I expected for a Wednesday night, but Harry takes the lead, threading through the crowd, and manages to nab us a table toward the back. Heads turn as we move through the pub, but that's been pretty much standard operating procedure ever since the war. Harry draws a lot of stares — and I reckon, since we're with Hale, whom I've nicknamed Pretty Boy, it's only natural that we're drawing attention. After all, the bloke looks like that Michelangelo statue of David pretty much come to life.

I shoot Hermione a Patronus letting her know where we are and telling her to let me know when she's ready to leave the office so I can come get her, since it's getting fairly late. She Patronuses back a quick OK. After a while, it becomes clear that the pub is so jammed that the only way to get a food order in to the kitchen is to go to the bar. I offer to do the honors. I step to the bar and wave to Hannah Abbott, who throws me a grin as she pulls the tap and shouts that she'll be with me in a sec. I lean my elbow against the bar and take a look around and, bloody hell, that's when I notice how many women are in here tonight — and how many of them are looking at me. I look over my shoulder for a second, reckoning Hale or maybe Harry must be behind me. But no, it's just me. One of them — a blonde who, I have to admit, has a fairly difficult-to-ignore rack stuffed into a low-cut blouse that has to be three sizes too small — gives me a sly grin and then sort of sidles over, looking me up and down. "You're Ron Weasley," she says, running her hands down her hips.

"Uh, yeah." Must get rid of this bird, and quick. "Yes. That would be my name. Yes. Yes it is."

She emits a tinkling little laugh. She seems genuinely amused. Apparently my idiotic, monosyllabic response qualifies as witty banter to this one. "Are you alone tonight?" she says.

and waving at Hannah again — trying to get her attention without appearing to be too desperate. I mean, I don't want to be rude, but chatting up a bird in a crowded pub is not what I have in mind — and I can just imagine the Daily Prophet headline if one of their ruddy photographers catches me even looking in this girl's direction.

Before my pulse can quicken any more, I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn to see none other than Hermione looking up at me with a funny little grin on her face. "Hey, love," I say, perhaps a bit too loudly to sound truly innocent, and Hermione just shakes her head and laughs. She turns to the mini-skirted blonde and says, quite casually, "Shove off," before wrapping her arms around my neck and planting a sloppy wet kiss on my lips, which I reciprocate quite happily, lifting her off the floor slightly.

I lower Hermione to the floor and laugh out loud. "Thank Godric you're here," I mutter against her lips. "That bird scared me."

"Never fear, darling — I will always protect you from such terrors."

"Thank Merlin for that," I answer, finally seeing Hannah headed our way. "The usual, love?"
Hermione nods. "Hannah, the lads and I will have three fish and chips, please, and the lady here would like a chopped salad, easy on the blue cheese. Oh, and three butter beers and a glass of white wine — pinot grigio if you have any. If not, then sauvignon blanc."

"No worries — Hi, Hermione!" Hannah says as she runs through the swinging door to the kitchen.

Then it dawns on me. "Wait a second, what are you doing here?" I say, turning back to Hermione. "I told you to send me a Patronus when you were ready to head out."

She grimaces. "Sorry — I decided I couldn't wait, so I headed over."

"Damn it, Mione, it's late and it's dark outside — you know I don't like you wandering around Diagon Alley at night."

"I wasn't 'wandering around' as you put it, Ronald," she says, rolling her eyes. "I Apparated from the Ministry to just in front of the pub. Honestly, you're ridiculous sometimes."

"Maybe I am. I don't know," I say, lowering my lips to brush up against hers again. "I just don't like the idea of you being out of my sight," I add before kissing her softly. What I don't say is what's really on the back of my mind. I don't like the idea of her being in the Ministry alone at night. I don't like the idea of her being at Vine Cottage alone ever. And this nagging feeling of dread is driving me just slightly mental.
Greater Than A Teaspoon

Chapter Summary

The first post-war Christmas.

Chapter 22: Greater Than A Teaspoon

It's Christmas Day, and The Burrow is in its usual state of holiday pandemonium — and yet, at the same time, it's not. Fred isn't here, and every now and then Mum lets her sadness peek through the cracks in the otherwise cheery front she's been putting on. Hermione distracted me well enough from the prevailing mood this morning with breakfast in bed. "Eat up," she said merrily as she placed a tray of all my favorites over my lap. "Full-fledged Aurors have to eat a big breakfast, do they not? Never let it be said that I'm not taking proper care of you now that you're officially on the force."

I rolled my eyes and swatted at her bum as she crawled into bed next to me. "First of all, you take excellent care of me in all the most important ways," I said with a saucy grin — thinking of the way she woke me that morning, rousing me from a dead sleep by taking my limp cock into her mouth and sucking it until I was hard as a rock and very, very awake. "Secondly," I added, "I'm an Apprentice Auror, love. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"That's not what it sounded like at the graduation ceremony last night," she said, snatching a piece of bacon from my plate. "As far as I'm concerned, you're as good as an Auror now."

"I'll tell Brocklehurst you said so."

She stole a hunk of potato, then said, "I may just tell him myself, since I am indeed the Minister's special attache for policy."

"You do," I replied, waving a forkful of scrambled eggs at her nose, "and I'll give you a spanking, young lady."

"Ooh! Is that a promise?"

I nearly choked on my eggs at that remark and might have been a goner if Hermione hadn't slapped my back hard a couple of times.

"Are you trying to kill me, woman?"

She let out a snort. "Not until you've accrued more of a pension, my dear."

We ate happily and then made love again — her lips tasted like bacon, which was intoxicating. As we dozed and cuddled in bed afterward, Hermione eventually fell back into a rather deep sleep, giving me the opportunity I had been seeking to slip away. I pulled on my robe and flannel trousers, stepped into my slippers, and tiptoed downstairs and onto the front porch, shooting a quick look over my shoulder to be sure Hermione hadn't followed me before casting a Patronus to George. "All clear, George. Come on over."

Within moments, George Apparated just outside the wards and then entered carrying the giant
"Thanks, bro," I said. I was so excited that I actually hugged George, which is something he doesn't usually tolerate. Surprisingly enough, he hugged me back. "Happy Christmas, Ronnieskins," he said, and that's when I noticed how tired he looked, with bags under his red-rimmed eyes.

"You all right, George?"

He shrugged. "It's going to be a long day, if you know what I mean."

I knew exactly what he meant. "If you want to talk about it, you know, let's go inside and have a cuppa."

"Nah, I told Mum I'd be over to help her set up for tonight. But thanks, bro. Better get this pressie of yours inside before it gets much colder out here," he said, gesturing to the box. "I'll miss this one, I will. Been good company. See you at Mum and Dad's later, yeah?"

"Absolutely."

I tiptoed back upstairs, carrying the box — which was right heavy — into the bedroom. Hermione, for her part, hadn't moved an inch. She was out cold. Poor girl — I did give her quite a workout earlier, but she certainly didn't complain. Far from it. The mental image of Hermione this morning, pinned beneath me and begging me to bang her harder, flitted into my brain for a moment, and I had to shake my head to refocus on the task at hand.

I skulked over to the bedside and set the box down on my side of it. Then, I reached over and gave Hermione's shoulder a gentle nudge. "Wake up, Little Dove," I said. "Your Christmas present is here."

I'll never forget the look on her face when she woke up, sized up the gigantic box on the bed next to her, and untied the ribbon.

The top flew open as Hermione's pressie jumped up, placing his enormous, furry paws on the edge of the box.

Hermione's eyes widened, and she looked at me with an open-mouthed grin. "Ronald! What on Earth? A dog?! Oh, Merlin, a puppy!" she squealed as she rolled up her pyjama sleeves, reached for the dog and lifted him out of the box. "Oh, Ron!"

The puppy — a wiggling mass of dark brown hair, with floppy black ears and patches of light brown around his eyes and nose — squirmed in her arms and licked her face, his tail wagging furiously. "Oh, darling, you shouldn't have! Oh, but he's so cute," she sighed, clutching his chubby body closer to her chest. "What in the world were you thinking, Ronald? We can't have a dog right now." Just then, he licked her lips again, the pads of his paws drumming against her neck. "Oh but, oh dear, he's … oh …"

She looked deep into his eyes and I knew all resistance was at an end. She was in love. Atta boy, Whatever-your-name-is, I thought.

She shook her head and laughed. "Ron, he's enormous. What kind of dog is he, anyway?"

"What, he doesn't look familiar to you?" I said, reaching over to scratch the pup behind the ears.

"No, not really," she said. She furrowed her brow and held him up so she could look him over more
closely. "Should I recognize him?"

"Well, you know his Dad well enough. He's one of Fang's pups."

Hermione gasped and looked him over again. "You're kidding!"

"No! Hagrid mentioned at the St. Agnes party a few weeks ago that Fang had gotten frisky with an Argos in Hogsmeade and, the next thing he knew, the owner had Owled Hagrid to complain that his prized Argos was in the family way. Apparently the bloke was hacked off because Fang had knocked up one of a line of prize-winning show dogs, and mixing with a mangy beast like him put end to that. Anyway, I got the idea right then and there. Told Hagrid to pick a pup for you."

You really could see the Argos in him — more of a hunting dog look, with a slightly pointier nose and longer legs than a Boarhound like Fang would have. But, I thought as I looked him over, the puppy has his father's floppy ears and folds of furry skin. He's a total mutt, I decided, but he's adorable.

Hermione gently plopped the dog into her lap and he curled up into a tight ball then rolled over onto his back, inviting Hermione to scratch his belly. "Your father was Fang and your mother was an Argos — which means you've got magical blood that dates all the way back to Odysseus, don't you little pooch?" she said while staring deeply into his eyes and stroking his fur. "I wonder if your kisses have healing powers like a purebred Argos's would." She ran her fingers over his legs and paws, the smile on her face widening. "Sweet Merlin," she said, "you're going to be ginormous when you grow up, you adorable little thing, you!"

"That's the idea, honey," I said. "If you're going to be here alone sometimes, you ought to have a guard dog to keep you company. And since he's magical, he should be easy to train."

She smiled and scratched the dog's head behind the ears again, running her hand along his round body, flipping him over and patting his bum, causing him to wag his tail violently. "I think he likes me," she said tentatively, like she almost couldn't believe it. "Oh, Ron … aside from my ring … and my wand … and your Weasley jumper," she threw in with a little laugh, "this dog is, honestly … he's the most wonderful gift anyone has ever given me … truly, darling."

I felt like walking on air hearing Hermione say that, I really did. I couldn't help thinking of all the shite she'd been through in the past year or so — plenty of it my fault — and the thought that I could do something to make her look that happy … well, it occurred to me that I could get addicted to this feeling. Even then, I started to wonder what I could do next to get this kind of reaction from her.

Waking me from my reverie, she asked, "What should we name him, then?"

I reached over and plucked the puppy from Hermione's lap, noticing his gigantic paws all over again. "Hmm. Let's take him with us to the Burrow today and get to know him. I think a name will come to us."

Hermione sat back against the headboard and looked at the two of us, me and old-what's-his-name, and smiled broadly.

"Well, Mr. Puppy rather overshadows the gift I got for you, doesn't he?" she said, looking up at me and biting her lower lip.

"Impossible," I replied.

"We'll see," she said, reaching for her wand and murmuring "Accio Ron's Present."
A moment later, a long, rectangular box wrapped in gold paper and a Gryffindor-red bow flew into the room and landed on the bed next to me and Mr. No-Name. Hermione reached over and grabbed the dog. "Go ahead — open it," she cried, her grin growing wide. "Happy Christmas, darling."

I couldn't contain myself, lunging at the box and ripping at the paper furiously. Inside, wrapped in layers of gold-colored paper and nestled in a burgundy leather carrying case, I found the sleek, shiny, elegant, gorgeous state-of-the-art broom of my dreams. "A Nimbus 2002," I said breathlessly. I mean, blimey. The Cleansweep Eleven that Mum and Dad bought me years ago is serviceable enough, but a Nimbus 2002? It's a ruddy work of art. "It's never been flown. It's pristine. It still has that new broom smell," I said, not even attempting to hide my wonderment as I tore my eyes from the broom and up to her face. "Mione, I … I can't believe … good Godric …" I stammered.

Hermione hugged the dog and looked down into his face. "He seems surprised, doesn't he, Mr. Puppy?"

"I am surprised," I whispered, unable to resist running my fingers over the broom's bristles. Crikey, I thought, they're smooth as glass.

"Well you shouldn't be surprised," Hermione said. "You deserve the very best, darling. Always."

Sitting here now, jammed onto a sofa in The Burrow with Hermione tucked under my arm on one side, Eleanor on the other, and The Dog Who Has Not Been Named on my lap, I feel … well, I'm happy, of course. I love Christmas, and I love that we're all together, and I already love this ridiculous large puppy. But the funk that's been threatening to overtake me all day is there, too, no matter how much the puppy may lick me. And he is quite a licker.

I reckon Hermione is chalking up my mood to Fred's absence — and that's certainly a part of it — and I'm content to let her think that's the whole story. But sitting here, holding her close, letting the family conversation wash over me as we all digest our enormous dinner, my mind drifts to other matters. The vague feeling of anxiety for Hermione's safety has troubled me for weeks — really, ever since I got back from St. Agnes and she started working so intensely on the Malfoy prosecution with Riddlesworth. I can't put my finger on what's bothering me — and I admit it doesn't make a lot of sense, because she's rarely alone and, even when she is, Hermione has certainly proved time and again that she can take care of herself. It's just that, every now and then, I get a weird little prickly feeling that makes the hair on the back of my neck sort of bristle and, when I do, I feel the urge to, I dunno, just check on her and make sure everything's OK. She's beginning to believe I'm paranoid, I think, because every time I show up unannounced in her office at the Ministry or step into the kitchen and check the lock on the door for no particular reason while she's cooking, she looks at me like I'm a nutter.

But even that isn't the whole reason for my unease today. It's hard not to think back to where we were last Christmas — me at Shell Cottage, Hermione and Harry fuck knows where. Shit. Suddenly I feel the need to move.

I stretch and lean forward on the sofa, lifting my arm from its place around Hermione's shoulders. "I'm going to take little You-Know-Who outside for a You-Know-What," I say.

"Want me to go with you?" she asks, unfolding her legs, which had been curled up under her bum as she leaned against me earlier.

"No, that's all right. I could do with a stretch of the legs anyway."
She looks for a moment like she's going to protest, then somehow she looks like she makes a
decision to let me have some private time. "Oh good," she sighs, settling back against the sofa and
running her hands up and down the arms of her new — and first-ever — Weasley jumper with a
little smile on her face. "I'm rather enjoying being snug and warm here in the house."

"No worries," I say, nodding to Eleanor and hoisting the dog into my arms.

Outside, I set the dog on the ground and let him sniff the grass, which is covered with a thin layer
of snow and frost. It's quite dark and has been for about an hour now, and the air smells like it's
going to snow. I can see my breath in the golden glow of light that's flowing out onto the lawn
through the windows. I stand back and look up at the house and listen to the muffled sound of
music and laughter coming from inside, a cocktail of feelings swirling in my gut — grief for Fred,
worry for George, relief that the rest of my family is safe, pride that Harry and I graduated Auror
training last night at the top of our class, excitement about the next step in our Auror career,
gratitude for Hermione and all that we have together, despite the niggling worry over her safety …
but, mostly, I'm weighed down by the tremendous weight of shame. Last Christmas, Harry,
Hermione and I were apart. I'd abandoned them. I spent the holiday more or less in hiding at Shell
Cottage. I keep trying to remind myself of all the things both Hermione and Harry have said to ease
my guilt, but somehow, the arrival of the holiday, with all its sentimental trappings, has brought it
all back, full force. I chuckle mirthlessly at the thought that I'm the same person Hermione once
accused of having the emotional range of a teaspoon. What I wouldn't give right now to be that
guy.

Then I feel Mr. What's His Name rub up against my leg, and I follow him down the path toward
the front fence. I shove my hands in the pockets of my trousers to keep them warm. And that's
when I feel it — that prickly, nervous sensation again — and my eyes are drawn to the road at the
end of the drive, just outside the wards. I squint, but can see nothing there. I reach to my back
pocket and pull out my wand. I swear I see — or rather feel — movement, but almost as quickly as
the feeling comes over me, it goes away. Before giving up on my suspicions entirely, I shout a
quick, "Oi, who's there?" and nearly jump out of my skin when Harry answers from about twenty
feet behind me: "Just me and the puppy, mate!"

I turn to find Harry grinning and walking toward me in the darkness, the pup in his arms.

"Malcolm X. Merlin, Harry, don't ever, ever do that again," I sigh, bending over to rest my hands
on my knees and regain my breath. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry," Harry says, dropping the dog to the ground and slapping me on the back. "Who did you
think it was?"

I straighten up, run my fingers through my hair, and let out a long puff of breath. "Bloody hell, I
dunno," I mutter. "Forget it — I must be cracking up."

"S'all right," Harry says. He peers down toward the road then looks up at me. "You had that feeling
again, didn't you."

I nod. "Comes and goes."

There's a long silence as we both stand and watch the dog tromp through the grass. A gnome jumps
up from a pile of dead leaves and runs, and the dog gives chase on his pudgy little legs for a while
before giving up and trotting back to us, his ears flopping in the chilly breeze.

"You're not crazy, you know," Harry says, breaking the silence.
"Huh?"

"You're not crazy," he says a little more loudly. "Whatever that feeling is about — it's probably real."

It's not much, just three words — "you're not crazy" — but somehow, a little of that heavy feeling lifts off of me. Harry gets it. Thank Merlin.

"I just wish I knew what was causing it," I say, picking the dog up and holding him belly-up in my arms.

Harry scratches the dog under the chin. "I don't suppose you've told Hermione about it."

I shake my head and he laughs.

"Figures," he says. "Though I don't blame you. It'd probably only worry her."

"Yeah."

We lapse into silence again as the dog squirms in my arms, trying to angle himself so he can nibble on Harry's fingers. When Harry pulls his hand away, the dog contents himself with chewing on the collar of my jacket.

Harry scratches the dog's ears, then looks up at me for a second before looking away toward the road again.

"So, uh, what else is up with you?" he asks, so quietly that I almost don't hear him.

Uhhhhhhhh … how much of this do I really want to get into right now? Shit.

"I mean," he continues, a little more confidently now, "everybody in the whole family, we're all sad about … you know … about Fred today, but there's something else going on with you, isn't there."

I hold the dog up and look him in the face for a minute, and he licks the tip of my nose. I think about lying and telling Harry that everything is just fine, but that seems wrong somehow. He knows me well enough to know that I'm … off … and he's worked up the nerve to ask. I reckon I ought to try to be straight with him.

The dog wiggles like he wants to run around again, so I put him down. "Sorry, Harry, have I been that much of a drag today?"

"No," Harry says promptly. "No, not really. I doubt anybody else has noticed it but me and Hermione."

"Hermione noticed?"

Harry gives me a smirk as if to say, Are you kidding me?

"All right," I moan, rubbing the back of my neck. "Of course Hermione noticed."

We both chuckle and I stretch before taking a deep breath and trying to figure out where to begin. "I dunno, Harry — it's just, well, it's Christmas, isn't it. I suppose Christmas is one of those times when a person looks back and thinks about, you know, Christmases past, usually in a good way. And so, uhh, naturally my mind goes back to where I was at Christmas last year, and … well … you know …"
Harry stoops down to pet the dog. "I figured," he says, cupping the dog's face in his hands. "Ron, are you ever going to stop beating yourself up about that?"

There's a pause, and I thank Merlin that the dog is here to provide a distraction, because I'm not sure what I'd do if Harry were looking at me right now. I'm too choked up to answer.

Harry must sense that he should continue to look away, because he focuses even more intently on the dog, flipping him over onto his back and tickling his belly, and the dog writhes there happily, his ears splayed on the ground.

"I stopped beating you up about it pretty much the night you left," Harry says, still looking down, almost as if he's talking to the dog. "And since then, Ron, I've honestly come to believe that everything that happened on the hunt — everything — it all happened for a reason. We all played our part in it, all three of us. I wish you could see it, because I really, really don't think you've got anything to be ashamed of. In fact, just the opposite."

I'm still watching Harry messing around with the dog, but my vision is blurred by tears. Soon the dog flips over onto his feet and trots in a circle around Harry, and Harry straightens up to look at me.

"Thanks," I manage to say without sounding like too much of a tit. "It helps to hear you say that."

He nods. "I mean it."

We give each other a one-armed hug. Afterward, I dry my eyes on my sleeve and tilt my head toward the house. "Think there's any treacle tart left?"

Harry grins. "I hid some in the pantry."

"And to think," I say, nudging his shoulder with my elbow as he, Mr. No-Name and I stroll back to the house, "I outscored you in Tactics class."

Later, the party starts to wind down. Hermione and I get set to Floo home with the puppy, but first we say our farewells. Bill and Fleur left hours ago because apparently when Fleur isn't eating nowadays she's sleeping. But that still leaves tons of people to hug, kiss and whatnot and, seemingly half an hour after we decided to go, we're finally getting ready to step into the fireplace with our gifts and our dog piled in our arms — but not before Hermione reminds her Mum and Dad that they're on the guest list for the Order of Merlin gala on New Year's Eve. She had to pull a few strings to get security clearance to allow muggles in to the party, but once Kingsley got wind of it, he offered to invite them as his special guests and, suddenly, all resistance from the Ministry security department seemed to melt away.

That night, we curl up in bed with the dog between us. "We'll have to get him a bed of his own," Hermione murmurs. "If he gets used to sleeping in here with us, soon we won't all fit in here."

"I know," I reply. "I think he grew an inch just in the past few hours."

The dog places his chin on my thigh and looks up at me. I yawn, prop myself up on a pile of pillows and reach to my nightstand for the Fischer and Spassky book that Hugh lent me that evening. Hermione continues to pet and coo at the dog as I thumb my way to the description of the epic Game Six of the Reykjavik tournament, widely regarded as one of the greatest chess matches of all time. I'm just starting to get into it when Hermione pipes up, "That's it!"

"What's it?"
"Boris."

"Huh?"

"For the dog," she says, picking him up and thrusting him toward me. "Boris Spassky, one of your chess heroes. Doesn't he look like a Boris?"

I put down the book and take the dog from her arms, looking him in the face. You know, he does sort of look like a Boris. That name is actually quite perfect for him. But … but …

"But I got him for you, love. Shouldn't he be named after one of your heroes?"

She smirks. "What are we supposed to call him, then — Minerva?"

"I see your point." Laughing and flipping the dog over in my arms so I can blow on his belly, I decide to give in. "Boris it is, then. Boris Granger Weasley."

"Good boy, Boris," Hermione says, then climbs out of bed and rummages around in the closet, pulling out a large rectangular box. She waves her wand over it and Transforms it into a cushiony-looking dog bed of sorts — "I'll get him a proper one soon," she says — and then takes Boris from me and plops him down in it on the floor. He whimpers for a moment, then she takes my old Weasley jumper from her dresser and tucks it around him, and he curls up and sort of buries himself in it. "I agree with you Boris. There's nothing more comfy than one of Ron's old Weasley jumpers."

She returns to bed by climbing over me, taking the book from my hands as she goes, and waves her wand toward the fireplace to stoke the flames there. Then she tucks herself into her favorite spot, in the crook beneath my arm, and curls up against my chest under the covers. I kiss the top of her head and look out the window.

"It's snowing even harder out there now," I say.

She hums. "And it's so cozy in here."

I pull her closer, and she complies, nuzzling deeper into my arms. "I hope you had a happy Christmas, darling," she whispers against my chest.

"I did, love, thanks to you."

"And Harry, no?"

I pause, and she pulls her head back to look up at me.

"You seemed in better spirits after he spoke with you," she says.

For a second, I can't decide whether to be annoyed that the two of them were so clearly conspiring over me or whether to be touched by it. But before I can sort it out, she speaks again. "All day long, I've wanted to say something about what a wonderful first Christmas this has been for us, but I've resisted because I know what you're thinking."

I think, Oh you do, do you? I can't say it out loud, but for the lump in my throat. She reads it in my face, however.

"Ronald, darling," she says, raising her hand to my cheek, "this may not be our first Christmas as man and wife, that's true. And we may not have been together last Christmas but, as far as I'm
concerned, we were. I think we both would have preferred to be in one another's company, but we certainly were together in our hearts. I spent the whole day thinking about you, pining for you, and I'm quite confident you did the same for me."

I'm too close to tears to do much more than nod.

"We both know too well what it is to long for one another, Ronald, to miss one another desperately," she says, stroking my cheek. "I reckon that's good reason to savor Christmases like this one. Let's not suffer anymore over things we can't change. Let's remember this as our first Christmas since the war. Let's celebrate the fact that we'll never spend another Christmas apart ever again."

In a flash, I'm rolling her onto her back and pressing my lips to hers, my tears wetting her face as she opens her mouth and allows my tongue inside. As sure as I am of her love, at times like this I still can find the realization of it overwhelming. She loves me — me — and the thought of it fills me with the kind of energy that in my boyhood days might have made me want to jump up and run wild around the castle waving my arms in the air, but now makes me want to be one with her, to consume her, to savor the feeling of our bodies joining and hope it never ends.

We begin undressing each other frantically.

"Gods, Hermione, I love you," I say rather loudly against her lips as I tuck her body beneath mine. "I love everything — even the things that drive me mad."

She chuckles and wraps her legs around my waist. "I feel precisely the same way, Ronald."

I know it's wrong that I think of these things at times like this — Hermione is a woman, a person, a genius, not a possession, not an object — but on some level, deep down, I can't help it: To grow up with so little that I could really call my own, to feel so deeply that I didn't deserve the best that the world had to offer … well, it does something to a person. And I think that's why I still catch myself sometimes in a state of amazement over Hermione's love. Because she's giving it to me so freely … she's giving everything she is to me so freely … it makes me wonder how I got to be so lucky all of a sudden. And the thought that she's mine, when for so many years there was so little that I could truly call mine … it's overpowering. Because there's no better girl than Hermione as far as I can see, no woman whose love is more worth having, more worth fighting for.

I lower my lips to her neck and breathe in her scent. "You really do love me, don't you," I say, knowing the answer but needing to hear it.

"You and only you, Ron," she says into my ear as I position myself above her. "It's always been you, Ron," she continues. "Only you, darling, ever since first year, ever since that chess match where you sacrificed yourself for Harry's sake. Only you. I was made for you, Ron, for you and no one else."

That does it for me. I slide inside and she moans deeply. "Gods, Ron, I love you," she breathes, cupping my face in her hands as I press my entire weight against her.

"I'll never understand it, but I'm so glad you do," I answer, marveling anew at how warm she is, how soft.

She smiles and kisses me, sliding her hands from my face to my shoulders and then down my arms. "It's not something to understand," she says. "It's something to believe."
Chapter Summary

Giving credit where credit is due — and using new tools in the real world.

Chapter 23: Duty And Honor

I can't help but grin. Look at Harry in his brand-new dress robes over there, in the spotlight, rubbing elbows with Kingsley and the Supreme Mugwump of the Wizengamot like he's been doing this his whole life. Which, in a way, I reckon he has. Earlier today, Ginny told me she's been watching Harry for signs that he's nervous. "You can bet your last knut that if I were expected to speak before hundreds of people tonight, I'd be a wreck," she said. "But Harry? He actually seems to be looking forward to it."

All the more reason to be glad Harry finally caved in to Hermione's will and agreed to do the speaking for us tonight. Of course, Harry being Harry, he had wanted all three of us to take the podium in turns, but Hermione disagreed vehemently, and I took her point. "People want to hear from you, Harry — you. Like it or not, you're the symbol, the voice of a generation. Ron and I will stand beside you. We'll back you up. But if anyone is going to speak at the Order of Merlin gala, it must be you."

Harry locked himself away at Grimmauld Place for days working on this speech. Never, in all the years that we slaved away side-by-side on essays at Hogwarts, did I ever see him work so hard on writing anything. He was pretty funny about it, too. Hermione was the only one he would let read it, and even then, he wouldn't show her anything but snippets — never the whole thing. The two of them worked on those pieces of the speech together for a few hours the other night. She said it's pretty awesome — sounds like Harry but, well, bigger, I guess, which she said is fitting for the occasion. We'll see.

Kingsley's been talking for what feels like an hour now, but I know it's only been about ten minutes. Still, it's awkward sitting up here on this stage in front of this throng of people, being talked about, knowing that pretty much every eye in the place is upon you. That is, when people aren't craning their necks to look at Princess Anne in the private box to the right of the stage. Hermione said she had no idea that the princess was magical — apparently the only one in the Royal Family who is — until Chum told her. "Explains some of her fashion choices," Hermione muttered, though I have no idea what that meant.

The scrutiny of the crowd is kind of agonizing, truth be told. My ears heated up to red-alert range about five minutes ago and I reckon they won't cool down until this whole thing is over and they open up the floor for dancing. Until then, the banquet goes on — and the adventures of Harry, Hermione and me versus Voldemort are Topic Number One.

As Kingsley prattles on about our feats and accomplishments, I steal another look at Hermione sitting next to me. Gods, she's pretty tonight. She did something with her hair — it's curly but the curls are, I dunno, they're shiny and they sort of drape over her shoulders, you might say, in loose ringlets. She says Fleur helped her with it. And there's something shimmery on her eyelids, and her cheeks and lips are even rosier than usual. I know I've said it before, but she does have beautiful
skin, Hermione does. I only wish she wasn't showing so much of it tonight. She came down the stairs at Vine Cottage wearing an eye-popping, floor-length gown in the same navy blue color as my new dress robes, and my heart thumped at the sight of her. The dress, I noticed, is fairly form-fitting, but it was all well and good from the front, because the neckline, as she called it, basically skimmed her collarbone. The problem, as far as I'm concerned, is the back. It plunges down to just above her bum. When I objected — rather loudly insisting that she put on a cardigan or a raincoat or something — she only laughed, grabbed her satin wrap from the armchair where Crookshanks had been sleeping on it and walked out the door to join Harry and Ginny on the front steps.

"And so, without further ado," Kingsley finally says at the lectern — oh, thank Merlin, I thought he'd never wrap this up — "I have the great privilege to present to you our honorees: Hermione Granger Weasley, Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter."

Kingsley steps back from the podium and turns to us, gesturing to us to stand. We comply, of course, and the place erupts in the loudest applause I've ever heard. If I squint a bit I can see into the front row, where Mum and Dad are sitting with Eleanor and Hugh. Mum and Eleanor are clutching one another, arm in arm. Mum's dabbing her eyes with a hanky, and Eleanor is smiling like a nutter. Dad and Hugh are clapping along with the rest of the crowd and, over the din, I can hear the whoops and whistles of Seamus Finnegan, Dean Thomas, Lee Jordan and George.

I start to believe that the applause won't ever end, but then, Kingsley waves Harry over to the lectern, and as Harry takes his place, the audience slowly quiets down and people begin to take their seats.

Harry clears his throat and — just as Ginny predicted — he looks like he was born to be here at this very moment, cool as a cucumber.

"On behalf of myself, Hermione Granger Weasley and Ronald Weasley, I would like to thank you for your kind welcome. Your Royal Highness Princess Anne, Minister Shacklebolt, Prime Minister Blair, Members of the Wizengamot, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates from Commonwealth Wizarding Communities, Secretary General Annan, Ambassadors, ladies and gentlemen, we are humbled by the honor being bestowed upon us today. Mr. Weasley, Ms. Granger Weasley and I are aware of its import and the responsibility we now have to live up to it.

"We gather tonight, on the eve of a new year, to look back on what brought us to this place, and to look ahead. As you know, the three of us performed a certain service. Specifically, we helped end the reign of terror brought to this world by a Dark wizard who styled himself as Lord Voldemort, but who came into the world with a much humbler name: Tom Riddle. Minister Shacklebolt has already shared with you the broad outlines of our mission. It's up to me to thank you for recognizing it and to share at least a few thoughts about its meaning and about those who sacrificed so much to bring it to a conclusion.

"Tom Riddle and I came to know one another quite well over the years.

"He tried to convince me I was weak, of course, that I had no business attempting to take down one of the most powerful wizards of this age or any age. The chief evidence of my inadequacy, in his view, was the fact that I would never be able to defeat him without the help of my friends. And, on this one point, Riddle and I were in rare and complete agreement.

"The truth is, I would not be standing here today — and, I daresay, Riddle might still be among us — if it wasn't for the love of my parents, if it wasn't for the support of the scores of people who put their own lives on the line to help me.

"It would be impossible to name the countless people — known and unknown to me — who joined

"I must also acknowledge the Weasleys, who have accepted me, made extraordinary sacrifices on my behalf and, in the process, became the family I never had. I can never repay what they have given me. Arthur and Molly Weasley. Ginevra Weasley. William Weasley and Fleur Delacour Weasley. Charles Weasley. Percy Weasley. George Weasley and Fred Weasley.

"I share the honor you bestow on me tonight with all of these individuals.

"It's only right, however, that the Wizengamot has chosen to grant the Order of Merlin First Class to the two people who have joined me on this stage tonight. Were it not for the faith, loyalty, bravery, energy and intelligence that Hermione Jean Granger Weasley and Ronald Bilius Weasley consistently displayed from our first year at Hogwarts, I promise you, I wouldn't have survived to see this day. And, if not for them, what state would our world be in right now? I don't like to think about it. They deserve an equal measure of credit for the outcome of this fight. It was a fight that was simply unwinnable without both them."

Harry pauses to acknowledge a small round of applause that's broken out at these words, and I feel my ears begin to burn. Harry clears his throat and the crowd quiets down.

"The fight began in our very first year at Hogwarts, when the three of us were just 11 years old," Harry continues. "When I met Ronald Weasley on the Hogwarts Express on our way to our first year of school, he knew who I was immediately. You see, Ron is a member of a family of purebloods — a clan with a deep history in the wizarding world which was for me, at that point, a complete mystery, since I was raised among muggles. Ron recognized me and knew what I didn't completely understand yet. He knew that I was the so-called Chosen One, the Boy Who Lived. Having grown up in the wizarding world, Ron knew the legends of my early life. And therefore he knew better than I did what was likely ahead for me. Now, knowing all this, Ron could easily have steered well clear of me and the trouble that he must have known surrounded me. But he did the exact opposite. From Day One, Ron became my friend, my ambassador to a world that puzzled and sometimes overwhelmed me, and, when I really needed it, my protector and my champion. He shared everything he had with me, never expecting anything in return. Knowing Ron, he would hasten to add that 'everything he had' wasn't much in material terms, but he was rich in the most important way — he had a large and loving family, and he brought me into their embrace and never looked back.

"And then came Hermione Jean Granger. What can I say about her?" Harry asks. I reach over and take Hermione's hand and give it a squeeze. She smiles back sheepishly.

"Hermione also became part of my world in our first year at Hogwarts," Harry says, "and since the moment she befriended me, she has, in her own inimitable way, looked out for me. I can say with all honesty that I owe her my life many times over, and so, for that matter, does Ron. Hermione's faith never faltered, her loyalty never yielded. She fussd over me, worried for my well-being, harped at me about my schoolwork, tirelessly cheered for me. Most important, she never stopped bringing her formidable intellect to bear on every problem I ever faced, no matter how daunting. She regarded my struggles as her struggles. She was always in my corner, always on my side, no matter what. She has been, in short, my sister — as much a sister to me as if we actually shared the same parents. She loves me unquestioningly, and she knows I feel the same for her. Hermione's ingenuity is an awesome thing to behold, particularly under the kind of pressure that I believe most
people in this room could barely imagine, much less endure. Her level-headedness in combat is like nothing I have ever seen — I believe she truly has nerves of steel. In addition, there is no one more committed to justice, more dedicated to knowledge, more concerned for the downtrodden, more kind to her friends, more brave and clear-thinking under pressure, more pure of spirit than Hermione. But cross her — or harm anyone she cares about — at your peril."

At this point, Harry turns to Hermione and shoots her a grin, as waves of soft laughter ripple through the audience. Hermione crosses her arms and nods in mock annoyance, and Harry laughs openly. Then he soberes up and returns his eyes to the crowd.

"I differ from Ron and Hermione in one significant way. You see, I was drawn into this struggle by Tom Riddle himself," he continues. "I didn't have much choice in it. Ron and Hermione, however, did. Each of them could have walked away for their own reasons. Each of them could have left me to face my fate alone. By virtue of his pureblood status, Ron could easily have taken a pass — or, worse, supported those who would have enslaved half-bloods and muggleborns, a stance that could have yielded him many personal benefits in the society Tom Riddle envisioned. But Ron rejected that vision. In fact, he did everything in his power to oppose it.

"And as a muggleborn who wasn't always made to feel terribly welcome in the wizarding world which was so new to her, Hermione Granger could have been forgiven if she looked at the growing conflict — one in which people of her kind were targeted — and abandoned it, returning to the muggle culture in which she was raised. But she didn't. She stood with me and with Ron, fighting to make a better world for wizards of all backgrounds, despite the fact that some of those very wizards quite happily opposed her in this fight, and despite the fact that prejudice against her and her fellow muggleborns persists to this day.

"Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger Weasley chose to stand with me, to fight for what they believed was right. And make no mistake: They both made tremendous personal sacrifices and suffered grave injuries along the way. Theirs was not the easy choice.

"Albus Dumbledore once told me that there would be a time when we all must choose between what is easy and what is right. Hermione and Ron chose what was right time and time again. That's why I'm proud to say they are my very best friends.

"Tom Riddle, for his part, was wrong to think that the reliance on friends and loved ones like these is a weakness. In fact, that's the great lesson of this war and its conclusion. Bringing an end to Voldemort's reign of terror was a team effort, and the motivating force behind it for me, for Hermione and for Ron, was Love — love for family, love for friends, love for freedom, love for justice, love for the world at large, love for future generations, love for one another. If I may paraphrase Albus Dumbledore again, I will remind you all of one of his most important teachings — that Love is the most powerful magic there is. The prophecy that reflected my lifelong tie to Tom Riddle stated that he would be vanquished by someone who had power the Dark Lord knew not. That power, it turns out, was Love. I'd like to think of this gathering tonight as a celebration of that truth. If we hold that truth in our hearts and minds, then never again will we have to face another Tom Riddle, for Tom Riddles are only possible in the absence of Love.

"I thank you."

As Harry steps away from the podium to face us, the room explodes in applause again. Hermione and I rise from our seats. Harry's face is now streaked with tears, as is Hermione's, and as they embrace, the noise of the crowd rises. And, just as I think the sound couldn't get much louder, Harry straightens up, lets go of Hermione, and turns to me. We exchange a handshake that turns into a hug, and the audience reaction is deafening. Even so, I can somehow still hear Harry when
he says, "I love you, mate," into my ear, and I can only hope he hears me when I reply in kind.

Now I can finally do what I’d looked forward to doing all night — twirling my wife around the dance floor and holding her in my arms. She has occasionally hinted that perhaps we ought to dance with other people for the sake of decorum or some such shite, but I can’t be bothered. "If you felt that way, love, then you shouldn't have worn this dress," I say as I lower my hand from the small of her back to the top of her bum. She swats my arm but then allows me to pull her closer.

Beyond Hermione's head, my eye lands on Thayer, who is patrolling the perimeter of the dance floor, one of the Aurors assigned to security duty tonight. He was actually pretty gracious about having to work this event tonight, surprisingly enough — he’s turned out to be far less obnoxious now that Noble is no longer in the picture — but Kingsley has assured us that the Auror Corps will soon be relieved of routine security tasks like this once his and Brocklehurst's newly formed Magical Police Force is fully operational, which means it'll soon be someone else's job to keep the peace and stand around looking bored at soirees like this. And that'll suit me just fine. All the Aurors agree: We'd rather put our focus on the really bad guys, investigating Dark wizards, that sort of thing, than police Diagon Alley, bounce drunks out of the Three Broomsticks for Madame Rosmerta or stand security at Ministry functions. I squeeze Hermione's hand gently at the thought that a better division of labor between Aurors and the new Magical Police will make her that much safer.

And that’s when it sneaks up on me — the now-too-familiar feeling, that ruddy tingling at the back of my neck, the hairs there standing on end. I look around, trying to seem casual, as I take mental note of everyone's positions. Harry's dancing across the room with McGonagall. Ginny's dancing with Dad. Mum's chatting with Mrs. Longbottom by the punchbowl. Hugh and Eleanor are dancing right behind me and Hermione. Kingsley is talking with the U.N. Secretary General and the Prime Minister. The crowd is still thick — I don't think one person has even thought about heading home yet. Crap.

Meanwhile, the tingly feeling intensifies — quite frankly, to a level I've never felt before, and it's starting to rattle me. Something is seriously, seriously wrong, I can feel it — but by all appearances, everything is normal. A few months ago, I would have considered myself a nutter, but I've learned enough from Hale to know that this sensation is nothing to ignore.

I look back over in Thayer's direction and see that he seems oblivious to whatever the buggering fuck it is that I'm sensing. Shit, is Hale on duty tonight? Damn it, no — he said he was going to be in the States visiting family over the hols, didn't he. Hell's bells. Right, well …

The natural course of our movement on the dance floor takes me within range of Thayer. The tingling at the back of my neck rises to the point where I can almost hear it, and that's when I make a decision. I step back from Hermione, relieved to find that Hugh and Eleanor are close by.

Still holding her by the arm, I turn away from her and look up toward the ceiling, drawing my wand with my free hand. I tuck Hermione behind me — well, OK, I sort of shove her, but I there isn't time for niceties. Something — I can't say what — tells me I ought to be looking up. But why? What am I looking for?

"Ron?" Hermione says from behind me, amused at first. "What's going on? What are you looking at?"

"Hmm?" I say distractedly, my eyes scanning the uppermost tier of opera boxes toward the Ministry auditorium's magical ceiling, four stories up from the dance floor. "Can't explain right now, love," I say, keeping myself in front of her, so she's facing my back. "Just stay behind me and do as I say," I say rather forcefully, surprised that no one in the crowd seems to have noticed what
we're doing.

I hear Hermione huff from behind me, and I know she's on the verge of snapping at me — in fact, she probably would have done so by now if we weren't surrounded by so many people. "Ronald Bilius Weasley," she says in a tone just loud enough to be heard over the music and the dancers, "I insist that you tell me right now what is going on."

Meanwhile, my eyes sense movement way high up toward the ceiling. Ignoring Hermione's demands, I turn and cast a Protego Bullesco, enveloping Hermione, Eleanor and Hugh in a bubble-like Protego shield.

"Ron, what's the matter?" Hermione says, and I can tell from her tone of voice that she's shifting from annoyance to fear. And then it dawns on her that she and her parents are encased inside a pretty powerful force field — like no Protego she was ever taught at Hogwarts. "What in blazes are you doing, Ronald? What's going on?"

"Get out your wand, love, and watch after your parents."

Her face reddens and she looks like she's about to give me what for, though she at least does as I say and extracts her wand from her beaded bag. Then I cast a Furtivia Patronus to Harry, Brocklehurst and Kingsley telling them to meet me and Thayer by the orchestra side of the dance floor pronto.

"What did you just do?" Hermione hisses as her parents cotton on to the fact that they're inside an invisible protective bubble and crowd in around Hermione.

"I sent a Furtivia Patronus — it's a special kind of invisible Patronus. Don't worry — just stay alert. I'll explain later," I add over my shoulder.

Before Hermione can give me a piece of her mind — because I'm sure I'm going to hear some bollocks later about how she can take care of herself and how dare I seal her in some sort of Protego shield and how she fought in the ruddy Battle of Hogwarts and doesn't need my help and on and on — I stride over to Thayer and give him a nudge. "Hey — see anything unusual?" I ask.

Thayer shrugs. "No, why?"

Fuck. I can't explain this — I just need him to bloody well pay attention. "Keep an eye on the ceiling and the uppermost level of opera boxes. I think something's going on up there."

Soon Harry joins us, and then Kingsley and Brocklehurst. "You're picking up something, Weasley?" Brocklehurst says, and thank Merlin he's here — at least I don't have to explain this whole sodding Ingenitus thing to him. He knows that when I say I'm sensing something that I'm not off my nut.

I nod to him. "There's something up toward the top of the auditorium, by the ceiling. I'm not sure what yet."

As the orchestra keeps playing and dancers continue to swirl around us, we train our eyes toward the magical ceiling — which is a lot like the magical ceiling at Hogwarts, reflecting the conditions outside. Brocklehurst dispatches an invisible Furtivia Patronus to other Aurors on the premises. "I need reinforcements on the D-Level immediately."

"If there's someone up there," Kingsley says, "they must have a Ministry security clearance, because we've got this building sealed tight tonight."
And then, I see it — or maybe I just sense it … I'm still too new at this to tell, honestly — but I
detect a flash of motion again high above us, and I raise my wand and train it on the spot. Just then,
a long, black plume of smoke appears in the magical ceiling overhead and, ever so slowly, it forms
into a miniature but unmistakable version of Voldemort's well-known Dark Mark.

As soon as the smoky symbol appears, people look up and suddenly there's pandemonium. People
are screaming, women are crying, dancers are running from the floor in all directions as the music
stops and musicians flee the stage. All eyes are looking upward as this jaw-dropping display — a
symbol of the era that everyone here had hoped and prayed was at an end — expands across the
ceiling.

Harry, Thayer, Kingsley, Brocklehurst and I are still scanning the upper levels of the auditorium.
Near the source of the smoke, I detect a blur of motion again, and I point my wand toward it.
*Stupefy*, I think, casting the most powerful Stunner I could conjure and, just as I do, a deep,
booming voice emanates from the mouth of the smoky snake crawling from the Dark Mark's skull:
"FREE THE MALFOYS!" at a volume that echoes throughout the auditorium.

At the same time, whoever or *what-ever* I just Stunned is falling from the ceiling, and I cast an
Incarcerous to bind it in ropes and then a quick Arresto Momentum to slow its fall. "Cast a
Cushioning charm, someone — now!" I shout, and Harry does the honors as the seemingly empty
mass of ropes falls to the ground and bystanders scatter to get out of the way.

Our group as well as every other sodding Auror on the force come running toward the pile of ropes
and Kingsley casts a Hominem Revelio. In a flash, a middle-aged wizard in dark, tattered robes
appears, bound tightly by my ropes, his Disillusionment charm undone by Kingsley's spell.

"Rookwood!" Kingsley shouts as the man struggles against his bindings.

Fuck. Augustus Rookwood? I've never laid eyes on the sod before, but I've certainly seen pictures
of him and his surviving Death Eater buddies on "Wanted" posters on every bulletin board in the
Auror Office. The guy used to work for the Ministry as an Unspeakable — one of the most coveted
positions in the organization — but he chose the wrong side in the war, didn't he? What the fuck is
he doing setting off Death Eater dungbombs at this event — and why the fuck does he care what
happens to the bleeding Malfoys?

Before I can think on it a second longer, Brocklehurst is Levitating Rookwood and he, Thayer and
a mass of Senior Aurors are leading him out of the ballroom. Kingsley places a hand on my
shoulder, then points his wand toward the ceiling, banishing the weakening replica of the Dark
Mark. When he's through, he nods to me and Harry. "Boys, I'm going to try to calm this crowd
down, and then we'll meet with the rest of the team to try to get some answers."

As we tumble out of the fireplace and into the lounge at Vine Cottage hours later, Hermione, I can
tell, can't decide whether she's still furious with me for putting her in that Protego Bullesco with her
parents, or worried about the message Rookwood's Dark Mark sent, or impressed that I was able to
help contain the threat so quickly, or some combination of the three. I'm satisfied to let her simmer
because, frankly, all I give a shit about is that she's safe, the family is safe, my friends are safe …
and, as best we can tell from the interrogation report that followed Rookwood's arrest, he was
acting alone.

"I just don't understand why you felt the need to enclose me in that — what was it again?"

"A Protego Bullesco, love. It's a Protego charm that was modified by Auror Research. Same
principle as the one you know from Hogwarts — just, well, three-dimensional, I guess." I turn to
pick up Boris and let him out the back door.
"Well, whatever it was, I appreciate you placing my parents in it, Ronald, I really do — but when are you going to learn that I don't need that kind of protection?"

I groan and pull off my tie, sticking my head out the door to keep an eye on Boris, who is enthusiastically roaming over the lawn, sniffing all the way.

"And how did you know that something was going on, anyway?" she continues, hooking her wrap on the coat rack by the front door. "No one else in the room was aware there was a problem — you seemed to be a good five minutes ahead of everyone."

Boris barrels into the house and looks like he'd love to play, but this really isn't the right time. The puppy runs around the sofa, his ears flapping and his giant paws thumping, waking Pigwidgeon, who has been sleeping on his perch by the fireplace, in the process. Pigwidgeon takes off, chasing Boris around the coffee table and disturbing Crookshanks' slumber atop the ottoman. Crookshanks' loud hiss wakes Peaches, who had been resting on the windowseat, and soon the living room is alive with the sounds of Crookshanks' angry meows, frantic hooting and the occasional high-pitched puppy bark from Boris. That is, until Hermione lifts Boris in her arms and heads for the staircase.

"I can see that you're not going to come clean about this, Ronald," she says crisply over her shoulder. "Something's going on, but obviously you think I'm not entitled to know what it is."

I sigh. Oh, for fuck's sake. What a way to ring in the New Year.

I trudge up the stairs and into the bedroom to find Boris curled up in his cushy bed by the fireplace, which Hermione must have lit before she went into the bathroom.

I undress and slip on my dark blue St. Agnes workout shirt and a pair of flannel pyjama trousers, choosing to use the loo down the hall in order to give Hermione her space.

By the time I come back, she's … blimey, she's wearing a … I dunno, what are those things called again? Negligees, I think. Yeah, one of those. This one is dark blue and slinky and silky-looking and just barely covers her bum and … wait … she's sitting at the edge of the bed with her little feet tucked beneath her like she's been looking forward to my arrival.

I look around and then catch myself. Who the bloody hell did I think she was waiting for? Uh, this just wasn't what I was expecting.

She pats the space on the bed next to her. In a blink, I'm there.

"All right," she says, raising her shoulder to her cheek and looking up at me through her lashes. "Are you going to tell me what's going on or aren't you?"

I chuckle. This woman is truly going to be the death of me.

"All right, all right," I say. "You might as well get comfortable, love, because this is kind of a long story."

An hour or so later, we're sitting against the headboard, snuggled up in a pile of pillows. I've explained my Ingenitus status to her — and endured the predictable blowup over my failure to clue her in and my feeble excuse that I just didn't want to worry her until I understood it better myself — and we've gone over everything we now know about Rookwood and this little stunt he pulled at the Ministry tonight. It seems Rookwood is one of a handful of surviving Death Eaters who resent the pending prosecution of the Malfoys, which is weird considering that, if I were a Death Eater, I'd think the Malfoys were ruddy defectors and traitors. But Hermione reckons the few Death Eaters
who aren't either dead or in Azkaban at this point must feel terribly persecuted being on the run and all, and they're rallying around the Malfoys as a symbol of their lost glory or some rubbish. She's right, I'm sure.

But Merlin's smelly trainers, Rookwood got to the upper levels of the Ministry auditorium using a retired password — someone in the Ministry Security Office is having their arse handed to them right about now, I'm guessing — and he decided he would use the opportunity to send a message to the Shacklebolt administration. The message, apparently, is that we'll know no peace if we continue to pursue the case against the Malfoys and any remaining Death Eaters who aren't already in custody. Well, I've got news for Rookwood — I'll meet him and Lucius Malfoy in Hell before I let Riddlesworth drop that prosecution. The Malfoys will know justice no matter what, whether it's via the Ministry prosecution or courtesy of Yours Truly.

And then, inevitably, the conversation turns to the topic that I least want to discuss — the old "I Don't Need Your Protection" chestnut.

"Well I don't, Ronald," Hermione huffs. "You have no idea how insulting it is, as a veteran of innumerable battles, to find yourself sheathed in a force field, unable to do much other than hold your wand and watch a potential fight unfold. It was maddening."

"Hermione, please — your parents are muggles. They were defenseless in this situation. They required protection," I reply. "I could have cast the Protego around them alone, but I needed to be sure that someone would be there to look out for them if for some reason the Protego got broken. That someone was you."

She nods for a moment, then, slowly, a smirk comes over her face. She smells bullshit. Damn.

"Come off it, Ron. that's not why you included me in that bubble."

I rub the back of my neck with my hand. "Well, that's not the whole reason …"

"Oh, Ronald," she sighs in exasperation. "Honestly."

Fuck. What am I supposed to say? One thing's for certain: She's on to me. Bloody hell.

"Listen, Hermione," I say rather sternly, and I can tell already that I'm starting on a bad foot. Oh well, what I'm about to say simply must be said. I can't take it anymore.

"I respect your experience in combat. I know what you're capable of. You've been dead scary ever since first year. No one messes with you. I get it, believe me. I've got the canary scars to prove it."

She grins despite herself. OK, good. Maybe I'm getting somewhere.

"But honey, please … I can't keep having this argument. It has to end now or I'll go mad."

She sits up, pulling herself out of my arms, and looks at me straight on. Uh oh.

"Hermione, I'm going to remind you of something, not as a way to say 'I told you so,' or 'gotcha,' or whatever, but just to show you that what's going on here is really nothing new or terribly surprising, OK?"

She grimaces. "OK," she replies in a small voice, crossing her arms.

"Right." I clear my throat and try not to sound nervous — though I know she could hex me at any moment. But then I remember what I'm about, and my resolve strengthens. This shite has to end,
"Love, you remember that night in the Common Room — you know the one, where I confessed to you every bleeding caveman instinct that I've ever had about you, every impulse I reckoned I would always feel about protecting you?"

Of course she does. I know she does. But I need to start there.

"Well, long before that night, I pledged to myself that I'd keep you safe if I could — even though I knew full well that I had no right whatsoever to think I was more capable than you. Not in the ways that really matter, anyway. Because you were and you always have been brilliant, especially when the shit's really hitting the fan."

She smiles slightly, though she tries to stifle it. I know she suspects I'm just buttering her up, but I really mean it — and I hope she knows I'm sincere.

"Sweetheart, you're awesome — and you are and always will be the brightest witch of your age. But I'm asking you, please, to think about what a difference these past few months have made, not to overlook what I've learned and will keep learning, if I'm lucky, in Auror training."

Her expression is shifting, and I sense that the ice is beginning to break. She's smiling ever so slightly.

"Because I've learned things, Hermione, things that you don't know, as brilliant as you are. Things like that Furtivia Patronus, which only Aurors use," I continue. "And I'm learning these things for one reason and one reason only: to keep you safe."

She's smiling a touch more widely now, but she's still silent.

"And if you keep protesting my efforts to do what I quite simply promised you I'd do from the very beginning," I add with a half grin, "then I'm going to become rather cross."

Her face, slightly smiling, remains immobile but for her right eyebrow, which rises slightly in challenge. "Oh?" she whispers.

I nod. "Oh yes."

Ever so slowly, ever so gradually, Hermione sinks back into the pillows, her eyes never leaving mine. "Are you saying," she whispers, "that I've been … naughty?"

I chuckle then try to train my face into something like a stern look again. "I'm afraid you have, my girl. Very, very naughty indeed," I say in the low, gravelly tone that I know drives her slightly wild.

"Oh dear," she answers, her voice still barely audible.

I nod. "And when you're naughty, young lady, I'm afraid you leave me little choice but to take certain corrective measures."

She gasps. "What kind of corrective measures?" she asks, barely concealing a wicked little grin.

"Oh, that's for me to know," I say. "Particularly if you continue to resist."

"Resist?" she asks breathlessly, biting her lower lip. "Resist what, may I ask?"

"Well," I growl, leaning toward her. "If you continue to resist some very basic facts, my dear. Despite your obvious intelligence, you still seem unclear on several of them."
Hermione sinks a little deeper into the pillows and bites her lip again. "Such as?"

Oh, gods, I love this girl. Just when I think we're in for a night of rowing, she comes around and signals that she basically gets it — and forgives — which is lovely enough, but then she turns it into a game, the kind of game she knows I love more than chess and Quidditch combined, which is saying something.

I slide my arm between her back and the pillows and grasp her waist, pulling her a little closer to me. "Such as … the fact that you, my dear, married a caveman, and you are quite glad you did."

She lifts her hand to my chest and slides it up to my shoulder, sinking lower as I lean a bit closer over her. "Oh, I am, am I?" she asks, looking up at me with a sly smile.

"Oh yes," I answer. I lean over a bit more and touch my nose to hers. "And it's time that you admitted it. I'm the most overprotective, possessive man in the world, and you're my woman, and you wouldn't have it any other way."

She smiles and rubs her nose against mine, still running her palms up and down my chest.

"Mmmmmm," she hums against my lips.

"I only wish that while I snuck the words 'to protect' into my vows, I had somehow worked the words 'to obey' into yours," I whisper, ghosting my lips from side to side over hers while reaching down and sliding her negligee up to her waist, exposing her bare bottom. I return my hand to her bum and, feeling bold, I give it a little, experimental swat — just one — and am downright amazed when, instead of a scolding, I get a hum of approval from her as she inhales deeply through her nostrils then shimmy closer and caresses my chest, lifting her leg over my hip.

"In this room, my gallant knight, I will gladly obey," she murmurs.

Mother of Merlin, I am so turned on right now, I think I've died and gone to Heaven.

I smile and sit up, pull off my St. Agnes shirt, then lean back, sitting up against the pillows. "Come here," I say with a growl, and pull her toward me so that she is now straddling my waist. "Can you feel what you do to me, how hard you make me?" I ask, thrusting my hips upward against her. She nods then — fuck me — she starts sliding back and forth over the unmistakable bulge in my trousers.

"May I touch myself?"

Holy fuck, did she just ask … for my permission? Bloody hell.

I nod. Fuck yeah, you can touch yourself any old time, love. Blimey.

And she does, sliding her hands over her silky negligee as I grip her bum and rub her firmly against me, my fingers kneading her flesh. I relish the sight of her, the dark blue of the fabric contrasting with her creamy skin, her long hair falling about her shoulders. Then I grab her hem and yank the negligee up and over her head, tossing it to the side. Hermione props her left hand against my shoulder and reaches down with her right to stroke herself, leaning forward just enough so that I can nibble her tits. She's riding me, eyes closed tight, humming and cooing, and I can feel her warmth and wetness through the flannel of my trousers. Thinking of the way she responded the last time I was bold enough to try it, I risk giving her bum another tiny swat, and she tosses her head back, the curls of her hair dangling so low that they're brushing against my hands.

"Oh yes," she cries. "Oh gods, Ron, yes."
Well, all righty then. I give her another little smack on her other buttock and she purrs in response. I suck at her nipples and give them each a little bite. "That's right," I say as her nipple springs from between my teeth. "Come for me, Little Dove. Come for your man."

And soon she does, silently at first but then loudly.

She collapses in a heap against my chest and rests there for a few minutes, catching her breath as I stroke her back.

After a little while, she lets out a satisfied sigh then sits up, a sultry look on her face. "And now, my gallant knight, I am at your disposal," she whispers as she laces her arms around my neck. "Your wish is my command."

I feel like grinning — I'm so beside myself with lust — but decide to play it differently. "All right," I say in a low tone. "Take off my trousers."

She kisses my lips then dutifully climbs off of me, sliding her hands down my chest and to the waist of my pyjamas. She gives them a little tug, peeling them off my legs and tossing them over her shoulder. She looks back to me, one eyebrow raised.

"Now suck me," I command quietly.

She straddles my legs and lowers her lips to my balls, licking them with the tip of her tongue before opening wide and taking them gently into her mouth, one at a time. Great Gandalf's ghost, there's nothing like the feeling of her mouth on any portion of my cock, but I'm especially fond of what she does to my bollocks. I've never felt anything like it.

"Oh, love, that's so good," I breathe, throwing my head back against the pillows. "So good. Good girl."

She begins to lick upward and, by the time she gets to the tip and takes me in, my fingers having sunk deep into her hair, I realize that if I don't have her pull her lips away from me soon, I'll be coming in her mouth — and the truth is, I want to feel all of her, to somehow underscore the point of this argument-turned-lovemaking-session.

"Mione," I whisper, capturing her attention. I tug her head away from me slightly and she takes my meaning, lifting her face to look at me. I pull her up against my chest and roll us over so she's pinned beneath me, lying flat against the bed, and crush my mouth to hers. We snog passionately, her arms wrapped tight around my shoulders, her fingers deep in my hair.

"Oh Ron," she moans as I press myself against her and ease in.

I move slowly at first, then more forcefully, and she responds by wrapping her legs around my waist. "You're my big, strong Auror, aren't you?" she whispers against my neck, her hands running up and down from my elbows to my shoulders. "I loved watching you tonight," she continues. "I loved seeing you take that Death Eater down, I loved knowing you were doing it for me."

I growl into her shoulder.

"I love being right here, Ron, wrapped up in you," she says, her breath shallow and hoarse. "I love that you're my man, and that I'm your woman," she murmurs between breaths. "I love belonging to you."

"That's right, love — you do. You belong to me," I croak, feeling myself throb deep inside her.

"You're mine. Mine. And you can't fight it — I'll protect you 'til the day I die."
"I don't want to fight it anymore, Ronald," she says. "Do what you must."

And, with that, I'm done for — a wave of pleasure overtakes me and, within moments, I'm falling back against the bed and pulling her into my embrace.

The next morning, I awaken to a funny sight — Hermione, starkers, sitting up against the headboard with her portable writing desk propped up against her knees. She's scribbling away on a long piece of parchment, her fingertips stained with ink.

I stretch, yawn and look out the window. Bloody hell — it's hardly past dawn.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," she says, barely taking a moment to stop writing.

"G'morning, love," I answer. "What, may I ask, are you doing?"

She smiles and blows on the parchment to dry the ink.

"I got to thinking about that Protego Bullesco charm. It's really quite brilliant. But as I sat inside it last night, it occurred to me that it could do with some improvements. I mean, what good is it to place that kind of a charm around someone who is perfectly capable of casting powerful spells? Of course, it's quite useful to be protected from incoming curses, but wouldn't it be better if the person inside were able to be on offense as well?"

Sweet Merlin, I need a cup of tea before I can really focus on this. But she keeps going.

"At any rate, I think that, with a few modifications, the Bullesco could be altered to make it permeable from the inside. Here," she says, pointing to a series of runes on the parchment. "By placing a Permeabalo Invariam here, it's quite possible that the occupant of the Bullesco could manage to cast spells while being protected from incoming ones. I think it's worth testing, anyway. I intend to speak with Brocklehurst about it come Monday."

All I can do is chuckle. "I love you more than life itself, Hermione Granger Weasley. I truly do."
Chapter 24: An Unexpected Visitor

My footsteps echo as I stride down this long, dark corridor toward Hermione's office. I don't like that her office has been moved to this wing, but she insists it can't be helped and besides, it's only temporary — the Minister's suite sustained some damage during the war, and both Hermione and Kingsley have been displaced for a few weeks while everything is repaired. What bothers me is that she's now on a separate floor from Kingsley, down several long, empty and twisting corridors that don't seem well-lit enough in my opinion. The nearest person to her is Simpson, the security guard stationed at the elevator bay, and that old codger can hardly stand much less come running if there's an emergency. Half the time he's asleep as he was just now when I stepped off the elevator from the Auror's level. Hermione's been burning the midnight oil for the past few weeks preparing for the Malfoy trial. At least she's agreed to stay put in her office each night and let me escort her home when she's ready to go. The appearance of the Dark Mark at the gala — along with a few other random outbreaks of pro-Malfoy propaganda like it in the weeks since — have driven home the point to her: This prosecution is risky, and her connection with it makes her a target.

As I make the last turn down this marble corridor, passing through a set of double doors to the hallway leading to Hermione's chambers, I stop and listen. Why? I feel that prickly feeling at the back of my neck. Fucking hell.

I cast a Pedes Silencio charm on my feet to muffle the noise of my footsteps and take off at a run toward Hermione's office door, which I can now see is slightly ajar — a stripe of yellow light pours from it across the darkened corridor. The tingly feeling is stronger now, and when I get within three feet of the doorway, I stop and lean against the wall, wand drawn, inching forward to listen to what might be going on inside.

"We have certainly taken the opposition into consideration, sir, but we cannot allow these outbursts of feeling to sway our pursuit of justice," Hermione says to someone in a shaky but firm voice. Shit. She sounds nervous.

"Well, that is certainly reassuring," comes a deep, silky male voice in a strange accent that I can't place. "It's quite fortunate, then, that I happened to be misdirected down this particular corridor tonight."

I don't like the sound of this guy. What he's saying sounds innocent enough, but there's an undertone — some sort of unspoken message being conveyed — and it's causing the hair at the back of my neck to rise uncomfortably.

I step forward and push the door open to find Hermione standing stiffly, pressed up against the credenza behind her desk, her face pale, while a tall man — almost as tall as I am — stands in front of her desk, his back to the doorway. He has a long, shiny, white-blond braid of hair down his back and is wearing deep green velvet robes.
Hermione sees me enter and is visibly relieved. She relaxes slightly and steps toward me, taking my hand and, as she does so, her visitor follows her with his eyes, turning to face us.

There's a tense pause before Hermione remembers herself. "Monsieur Armand Selwyn-Burke, this is my husband, Ronald Weasley," Hermione says and then, uncharacteristically, she slides one shoulder behind my arm and stands slightly behind me. Holy shit. This sod has unnerved her — which almost never happens.

His eyes meet mine, and the tingly feeling rises. A sneering smile crosses his thin lips as he looks me up and down, his face a remarkably close replica of none other than Lucius Malfoy, only a little heavier and maybe about ten years older. "Ah, Mr. Weasley," he says in a drawling tone that sounds so familiar, and yet his accent is completely unlike any I've heard before. "It's always a pleasure, is it not, to meet a fellow member of the Sacred Twenty-Eight."

The very mention of that title is like fingernails on a chalkboard to me — my family has always resented being listed in that damned Pure-Blood Directory as one of the 28 known "completely pure" wizarding clans, but obviously this creep thinks it's something to be proud of. The prickly feeling at the back of my neck only intensifies.

I grimace. "I don't really pay that any mind," I answer as he extends his hand to me and gives me a flaccid handshake — the kind where the back of his hand is skyward, as if he looks for all the world like he expects me to bend over and kiss it or something. I'm beginning to really hate this git and I've only been in his presence for about 30 seconds.

"Well," he answers, "good breeding is certainly less and less valued in this world of late, but I realize that those who share that view are in an increasingly shrinking minority."

*That's right, brother. And don't you forget it.*

Hermione breaks the next awkward silence. "Monsieur Selwyn-Burke is on an extended stay here in London. He's taken a leave of absence from his law firm in Grenoble, France to represent his distant cousins, the Malfoys, at trial."

I look the guy up and down. "I thought the Malfoys hired lawyers from Vladivostok," I mutter.

"Ah yes," Selwyn-Burke replies. "I was educated at the Sorceric Institute in Vladivostok, as were my law partners — one of the finest schools of wizarding law in the world, if I may say so."

"Hmm," I grunt.

After another long pause, Selwyn-Burke adjusts the collar of his robes. "I understand your wife is working quite closely with Madame Riddlesworth on the prosecution," he says.

*Yeah, so? Tell me something I *didn't* know, genius.*

When I make no reply, he continues.

"The Shacklebolt administration was kind enough to allow me access to the Ministry law library on a limited basis in order to conduct my research for the defense team and, well, I must have made a few wrong turns on my way there, because I just happened to find myself here in the office of Mrs. Weasley, and, since I made this rather unexpected appearance, she was kind of enough to discuss some of the broad outlines of the case with me — on a purely professional basis, you understand."

*No, I jolly well *don't* understand, you prat. "You lost your way and wound up here?" I say incredulously. "The law library is in the North Wing. This is Fifth Floor South."*
"Indeed. I must have been given some dreadfully inaccurate directions by the gentleman at the information desk," Selwyn-Burke says through that sneery little smile that's popped back onto his face. "Mrs. Weasley graciously provided clearer directions to my ultimate destination," he adds with a courtly nod.

I stifle the urge to roll my eyes.

"But my stars, I can't help but notice that Mrs. Weasley's office is quite remote, is it not?" he continues, waving his hand limply at his surroundings. "It would be a terrible shame if some sort of ghastly mishap were to take place in such an isolated corner of the building. One can't be too careful nowadays, can one. Seclusion certainly fosters concentration but, well ... you are an Auror, are you not, Mr. Weasley? How could I forget. I am quite certain you have considered every possible threat to your wife's safety and have planned for every contingency. You would, after all, as a trained professional, wouldn't you. But still, one can't help but hope, Mrs. Weasley, that such inaccessible accommodations as these are temporary."

"They are," Hermione says, and I notice a little squeak in her voice. I squeeze her hand. "I should return to the Minister's office suite within a week or so," she adds, sounding a bit more level this time.

Silence descends on us again, and I become aware that I must be openly glowering at this arsehole. He's trouble, and I don't like what he's implying — though nothing he's said could be taken by a court of law as an outright threat. Still, I don't buy that he's just "happened" to stumble into Hermione's office — and it's time for him to shove off.

He clears his throat and rocks back and forth from heel to toe for a moment before looking toward the door. "Well, I suppose I should point myself toward the Library before it grows too late to get in, should I not?"

I turn so that Hermione is just that little bit more behind me and then lift my arm toward the door. On your bike, I'm thinking. Selwyn-Burke takes this as his cue and steps toward the doorway. But first, he stops and turns back to us.

"Good evening, Mrs. Weasley," he says with another ridiculous little bow. "Mr. Weasley. We will meet again."

And then he's gone, thank Merlin.

I slam the door behind him and cast a Muffliato and a locking charm.

"What the fuck did that tosser say before I got here?" I nearly shout.

Hermione shrinks a bit, her lip quivering, and then I stop myself. I'm angry — but I shouldn't take it out on her. 'I'm sorry love — so sorry," I say softly. "I didn't mean to yell."

With that, she hurls herself into my arms, and I pull her to me, resting my cheek on the top of her head. Shit, she's trembling.

"Shhh," I whisper into her curls. "It's all right. He's gone. I'm so sorry, Little Dove. It's OK now."

I pick her up in my arms and settle into one of the leather chairs facing her desk, cradling her in my lap.

After a minute, she stops trembling and lifts her face from where it's been buried against my neck.
She shivers noticeably one more time but then seems to settle down. "I'm sorry, he just seriously rattled me," she says. "I heard footsteps coming down the hall and I expected it was you. So imagine my surprise when a man who's a dead-ringer for Lucius Malfoy stepped in the doorway."

"Shit, love, I'm sorry — I should have been here sooner."

"No, it's not your fault. You were five minutes early as it was. I just … he just … scared me, that's all."

"Have you met him before?"

"No, never. But he seemed to know me. I'm sure he's seen us in the press or whatnot."

"What did he say to you before I got here?"

"Not much, honestly. He just introduced himself, explained his relationship to Lucius Malfoy — apparently they're something like second cousins or something on the maternal side — and talked about how he's hoping for clemency since the Malfoys weren't active participants in the final battle. All I did, mostly, was listen. He apologized for interrupting me, made the same oddly detailed observations about how out of the way my office is, then said something about the recent string of pro-Malfoy demonstrations. He said he 'worried' that these Malfoy sympathizers might make me concerned for my personal safety, especially since I have such a high profile in the media and am so recognizable. And I think that's when you came in."

God damn it. If Hermione weren't sitting in my lap right now, I'd be on my feet, pacing. I want to run after that guy and punch him in the face as a retroactive payment for scaring Hermione so.

"You have a bad feeling about him, don't you?" she asks in a small voice.

I look her in the eyes and consider lying about it. I don't want to scare her more than she already is. But … she can always tell when I'm lying anyway. Shit.

She must have read the answer in my expression, because now she looks deeply worried.

"Look, Mione, this wazzock is just trying to get in your head. But he doesn't know what he's in for — this moron is messing with THE Hermione Granger Weasley. Nobody fucks with her, right? He'll live to realize his mistake, just like Dolores Umbridge, Marietta Edgecombe and Draco Malfoy himself have done over the years. In the meantime, we're placing a guard here in the office with you. And no more late nights alone up here. Understand?"

She smiles and nods, sitting taller. Thank Merlin I don't have to row with her over this one.

The next weekend, I'm sitting, with Boris on my lap, by the fireplace in Cambridge, fending off a surprisingly aggressive offensive attack from Hugh's knight and queen. Damn. He still hasn't won a game against me, but he's come bloody close on a couple of occasions, and this is one of them. I left a pawn and a bishop hanging — a mistake I don't usually make — but I guess I've got to chalk it up to the distraction of Hermione. She and her Mum are in the kitchen preparing dinner, but Hermione occasionally passes by the lounge as she sets the table in the dining room, and I can't help feasting my eyes on her in the outfit Eleanor bought for her on the high street that morning. The skirt shows off Hermione's bum like few things I've ever seen on her — Hermione said it's a "pencil skirt," whatever that means. All I know is, it's black and smooth and she looks curvy and sexy in it — an effect that Eleanor probably didn't intend. She's wearing it with black tights and a clingy black turtleneck, and I can't help it — every time I see her in it want to grab her and run my hands all over her.
Of course, I've been a randy sod all day, ever since Hermione returned to Vine Cottage from her monthly appointment with Grendys early this morning and reported that he's seeing signs that she's healing, slowly but surely. Hermione was so exuberant about the news that she fairly leapt into my arms right there in the lounge when she came home, and we, erm, christened the new sofa that arrived this week, tearing one another's clothes off and shagging each other stupid. The way she looked, bent over the sofa cushions on her knees, her bare bum so soft and shapely under my hands as I took her from behind … sweet mother of Merlin. And we were half an hour late Flooing over here tonight because I just had to have her one more time before we left Vine Cottage. Gave her a good rogering as she stepped out of the shower — she just looked so, I dunno, juicy and sweet, and I couldn't resist lifting her off her feet and fucking her right then and there against the wall of the loo. The noises she made … long moans, low and deep … gods…

"Check, Ronald," Hugh announces.

Huh?

I draw my eyes from Hermione's pencil-skirt-clad bum in the next room to the chessboard, then up to Hugh's face. He's smirking at me knowingly. This game has gone completely pear-shaped on me — and Hugh knows it. I think he senses victory is at hand. Time to get serious.

Ten moves and a Legall's Mate later, that's all she wrote.

"Checkmate, sir."

"Damn it, Ron, I'm going to get you one of these days," Hugh mutters.

"You came close this time."

"Well, I'd rather it was by virtue of my brilliant play rather than my daughter's brilliant backside."

Hugh smiles and steps into the kitchen to freshen up his drink, leaving me in the lounge sputtering like a plonker.

Just then, Mum and Dad Floo in as planned. After greeting Eleanor and Hugh, Mum wraps Hermione in a tight hug. "Well, how did it go, dear?" she asks, pulling back and taking Hermione's hands in hers.

Huh, she must know about Hermione's appointment today. I had no idea Hermione shared such things with Mum — though it's sort of nice to know.

Soon, Mum's hugging Hermione enthusiastically again. "Oh, that's wonderful, my girl! Just wonderful. I'm so happy. That's marvelous news. Healer Grendys, he's the best, isn't he?"

I silently thank Merlin that Hermione and I have never told our parents about Grendys' shagging prescription — we've let them believe that Grendys' entire course of treatment at this point involves potions, spells and the magic of time.

Dad's standing nearby with a smile on his face, and when Mum finally lets Hermione go, he wraps an arm around Hermione's shoulder and gives her a little hug.

Hermione dabs away happy tears. "Yes, Grendys is the very best," Hermione says, and she and Mum follow Eleanor into the kitchen.

Hugh steps in from the kitchen bearing three fresh bottles of beer and hands one each to Dad and me.
"The place is really looking terrific, Hugh," Dad says, looking around the lounge. "It's hard to believe how quickly you and Eleanor have pulled it all back together."

"Eleanor deserves most of the credit, honestly," Dad says. "She's taken the opportunity to completely redo certain rooms. I believe she's having the time of her life."

Dad steps toward the window and peers outside. "Merlin's beard," he breathes. "Hugh, is that a new automobile I see in the driveway?"

Hugh raises his hand to his forehead. "I'm sorry, Arthur, I meant to tell you — I know what a nutter you are for muggle automobiles. Yes, we bought a new car just this week. Hermione sold our old one back when she sent us to Australia. Got a good price for it, too, I don't mind saying. Brilliant girl. Anyway, come along, come along — I'll take you lads for a spin."

Hugh steps into the kitchen to grab the car keys from a hook by the back door, gives Eleanor a kiss on the cheek and explains that the three of us are going to check out the new wheels.

Dad, for his part, looks like a kid on Christmas morning. He's positively awestruck, shuffling across the Grangers' semi-circular gravel drive, his eyes fixed on the shiny hunk of dark blue metal that's parked at the far end toward the waist-high brick wall that lines the front of the property.

"Dearie me, it's gigantic. What kind of automobile is it?" Dad says breathlessly.

"It's a Range Rover," says Hugh, twirling the keychain on his index finger. "Drives like a dream. Come on, let's go for a joyride. I keep finding excuses to take it out, but Eleanor's starting to scold me about needlessly burning fossil fuels."

"I'd love to see how she runs," Dad says, admiring the tyres, "but, erm, would you mind very much, Hugh, if we popped the bonnet and took a look at the enginery thingy?"

"With pleasure. It's got a five-speed automatic transmission and a BMW turbodiesel engine," Hugh says, to Dad's delight. I'm bored already, but I'm getting a kick out of watching Dad and Hugh bonding — and the look of childlike wonderment on Dad's face as Hugh points out the reservoir for the windscreen cleaning liquid.

Then, without warning, I feel it again. The hair on the back of my neck bristles. I look around and quietly do a quick survey of our immediate surroundings, glad that Dad and Hugh seem totally distracted by the car.

We're standing by the low brick wall that separates the Grangers' front lawn from the very quiet suburban lane that runs in front of the house. The driveway gate is closed. The nearest neighboring houses are some fifty metres to either side of us. Trees line both sides of the street, but since it's winter, they don't do much to obscure my view of the street or the sidewalk.

And then I see him, strolling along with a walking stick, looking like he's just out for a stretch of the legs. Mother-effing Armand Selwyn-Burke, dressed in muggle clothes — a tweed jacket, khaki pants, a fedora and a pipe — that make him resemble an eccentric country squire taking a constitutional about the neighborhood.

What in holy hell is that git doing in Cambridge?

"Well, what an odd coincidence," Selwyn-Burke warbles as he approaches and places a hand on the brick wall, which I recall represents the very edge of the protective wards that Bill and I placed around the Grangers' property. "Imagine my surprise at seeing you here in this ancient and noble town, Mr. Weasley. Good gracious, if I didn't know any better, I would say you were following
me," he says with a little laugh. I fight the urge to punch the self-satisfied grin off his face.

Dad and Hugh straighten up and look to me, then to Selwyn-Burke. Shit. I've actually got to introduce this wanker. The back of my neck tingles anew.

"Erm, Monsieur Armand Selwyn-Burke, this is my father-in-law, Dr. Hugh Granger, and my father, Arthur Weasley," I say unenthusiastically, placing my hands on my hips and straightening up to my full height. Dad and Hugh reach over the wall to shake his hand — he gives them that same ruddy "kiss me, you fool" handshake that I got the other day, and I smile as I see Hugh's smirk afterwards. There's a lot to like about Hugh — not the least is that, despite his education and wealth, he's still got a bit of the old plasterer about him, and clearly Armand Selwyn-Burke is not his cup of tea.

"Monsieur Selwyn-Burke is an attorney from Grenoble — he's defending his cousins, the Malfoys, in the upcoming trial," I add.

Dad sets his jaw and narrows his eyes, clearly thinking what I'm thinking. What the buggering fuck is this tosser doing in Cambridge, then, and what the buggering fuck is he doing traipsing down Sedley Taylor Road, bold as brass?

"Well, you're a long way from London, Monsieur," Dad says slowly, barely masking the suspicion in his voice. "What brings you to Cambridgeshire?"

"Oh, well, it is Sunday after all, is it not," Selwyn-Burke says, tucking his walking stick under his arm and tugging the leather gloves from his fingers one at a time. "Since I am a visitor to Britain — my branch of the Malfoy-Selwyn-Burke family having roots in Switzerland and the French Alps, you see — I thought I would take the opportunity of spending some free time touring around this lovely, historic city. I've heard so much about this community and its reputation for culture and ideas. I suppose I should hardly be surprised to learn that Mrs. Weasley was raised here, knowing her renown as the brightest witch of her age." He gives a little bow in Hugh's direction. "I take it this is where your daughter grew up, Dr. Granger?"

That's it. He's brought up Hermione — that's good enough for me.

I know exactly where my wand is. It's next to the chessboard in the lounge. I stretch out my left arm, palm up, and say, quite loudly, "Accio Wand." I don't need to do the incantation verbally anymore, but I like the effect. In an instant, the side door to the house opens and out flies my wand, landing neatly in my hand. I twirl it in my fingers and look at Selwyn-Burke with a half-grin. His eyebrows are raised, his mouth has dropped open and is now flapping silently. He's fucking gobsmacked — as is Dad, quite honestly, though I'm not really all that focused on him right now.

As Selwyn-Burke continues to struggle for words, I step forward to face him directly about a foot in front of Dad and Hugh, my feet spread about as wide as my shoulders. I cross my arms slowly, keeping the wand in his view.

"Yeah, that happened, Monsieur," I growl.

"I … that's, that's … impossible … well, I've never seen…” he sputters.

"No, you've never seen anything like that before, have you," I say. Then, nodding toward the main road from whence he came, I add, "Time for you to clear off, isn't it, Monsieur?"

"Well, I never intended … I simply, rather, I just happened to walk this way, and…"

"And you're going to forget you ever even heard of Sedley Taylor Road, aren't you," I add
menacingly.

The blighter blanches and turns on his heel, disappearing around the corner as quickly as his feet will carry him.

Over dinner, Dad can't stop slapping my back and telling and retelling the story of me scaring the living dragon dung out of this odd French chap who clearly was here for one reason and one reason alone — to try to intimidate us, to send a message that he knows precisely where we live, and it occurs to me that the unsettled feeling I got on Christmas Day at the Burrow was probably no accident. Selwyn-Burke or some employee of his was very likely checking out the premises. I don't know why I didn't make the connection sooner.

"So, Ronald," says Eleanor, carving another slice of roast beef for me. "Let me be sure I understand. Summoning a wand — it's uncommon?"

"Uncommon!" Dad blurts with a broad grin. "It's not just uncommon, Ellie, it's almost unheard of." He slaps my back again — hard. Merlin's hangnail, I never expected Dad to be so excited about this Ingenitus thing. But I guess I should cut him some slack. It's all new to him. I hadn't really gotten around to telling Mum and Dad about it until just now.

"You see," Mum says to Eleanor, clearly sensing that Dad's not capable of doing anything much more than spouting exclamations at this point, "the vast majority of witches and wizards are unable to perform magic without a wand. When they're children, of course, they can do what's known as Raw Magic—"

"Oh, we know all about that," Hugh says with a wink to Hermione. "I'll never forget the time you made it rain in our bedroom because we told you it was time for bed, Muffin."

"Ugh, please, Dad … when are you going to stop bringing that up?" she says, smiling and turning red at the same time.

Mum continues to fill Eleanor and Hugh in on the particulars of Raw Magic and Ingenitii and how rare my abilities are — her chest puffing up with pride on more than on occasion, which I confess is kind of nice to see. But then, my eye is drawn back to Hermione.

She's unusually quiet, stabbing weakly at her mum's fondant potatoes, which is a surprise, because I happen to know these are a particular favorite of hers.

"You all right, love?" I ask across the table.

She looks up and then realizes all eyes are upon her. I don't mean to put her on the spot — she seemed to have calmed down somewhat by the time dinner was put on the table, though when we first told her about our unexpected visitor, she seemed surprisingly shaken by it. After much reassurance from all of us that everything is now well and would be well as long as we maintain the wards and keep an eye on one another, she settled down. But now, I can tell — she's nervous again.

She gives me a half-hearted smile. "I have a confession to make," she says shakily.

"Oh?" I put my knife and fork down on the table.

She looks at her plate, a guilty expression crossing her face.

"Yesterday I received a parchment," she says quietly. "It … it warned me that I should think twice about testifying."
"What?!" both Hugh and I shout at once.

"Where is this ruddy parchment?" I ask, perhaps more loudly than I ought to.

"It's … it's gone," she answers. "It went up in flames as soon as I read it. It's not traceable."

Before I can shout again, she adds, "Simpson was with me — the guard — he's always in my office now — he saw it, too, so there's a witness. He saw what it said. No worries."

"No worries?" I shout, practically leaping out of my chair to pace about the dining room. "No worries? Mione, you received a written threat and you're saying, 'No worries'? Bloody hell, woman!"

"Ronald," Mum scolds.

"Don't 'Ronald' me right now, Mum, please. Why didn't you say anything, Hermione?"

Hermione slams her fork onto the table. "Because … this!" she says, waving her arm in my direction before burying her face in her hands. "Because I knew you'd blow up over it, and I just didn't want … didn't want…"

And now she's crying. Shit.

Eleanor and Mum both crowd around Hermione, draping their arms about her shoulders and tut-tutting, while Mum gives me one of her patented "you've really done it this time, mister" glares over Hermione's head.

Bugger.

I run my hands through my hair in exasperation. Hugh rises and looks to Dad, cocking his head toward the lounge. Dad stands and grabs my arm, and the three of us beat a hasty retreat.

"All right," Dad says when we get out of earshot of the dining room. "Obviously the Malfoy team is trying to intimidate Hermione out of testifying, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways."

"Yes, that little visit from Monsieur Limpwrist von Ponytail was about as subtle as an anvil on the head," says Hugh.

I can't help but laugh despite the situation. Who knew I was going to wind up loving Hugh so much?

"At any rate, we'll have to bring this to the attention of both Riddlesworth and Kingsley," Dad says.

"I already told Kingsley and Brocklehurst about the late-night Ministry visit," I reply. "That's why that old duffer Simpson is stationed inside her office whenever she's there lately, which helps. But with Selwyn-Burke showing up here in Cambridge, and now the word of a threatening letter…" I sigh and run my hands through my hair again. "First of all, she's got to move back into Kingsley's suite immediately. I don't care if that means she's got to sit on Kingsley's lap. And then … hell … if I know Hermione, she's going to want to testify no matter what, but if it's going to make her a target …"

Shit. No one wants to see the Malfoys pay more than I do — and how satisfying would it be to see Hermione get to tell her story before the entire Wizengamot. Gods, I've daydreamed about it so many times. But she's put her life on the line for this cause too often. I'm not sure what's right anymore.
I look down at the rug beneath my feet and try to collect myself. Soon I feel Hugh's hand on my shoulder.

"Ron, there's no question Hermione will testify," he says with a determined tone, and I lift my eyes to look into his face. "My daughter's got more grit than anyone I know. No veiled threats, no flaming letters are going to stop that girl from doing what's right. Our job, for better or worse, is to keep her safe so she can do what she needs to do."
Justice

Chapter Summary

Revenge is an act of passion; vengeance of justice. Injuries are revenged; crimes are avenged.
-- Samuel Johnson

Chapter 25: Justice

Gandalf's great galloping ghost, I am married to the most brilliant and the most maddening woman alive. Of course, I wouldn't have it any other way. A perfect example: This morning, when we were getting dressed and ready for Day Two, Week Two of the Malfoy trial, and she made another little "confession."

"Ronald, do you recall a few months back when I Apparated to the Leaky and found you cringing in terror as that blonde tart made a pass at you?" Hermione said with a cheeky grin as she slipped on her tights.

"How could I forget?"

"Well, I told a Little White Lie just then — and I reckon I'd better come clean now, darling, because today in court you'll see the results of it," she answered as she straightened her fucktastic pencil skirt and pulled on a pair of black boots.

I sat on the sofa by the hearth. "I'm listening, love. 'Fess up."

She grinned and came to sit next to me. "You got cross with me because I didn't wait for you to come pick me up at the Ministry, remember? And I said I'd gotten an idea and then Apparated straight to the Leaky, yes?"

I nodded.

"Well, I did Apparate directly to the Leaky, but only after I Apparated to Wheezes to talk with George about my idea and ask him a favor."

And now, here in the Wizengamot chambers, I'm dying to see whatever the hell it is that she and George dreamed up that day. She wouldn't tell me anything more this morning — especially after I gently scolded her for keeping yet another secret from me and promised to punish her terribly, terribly severely for it later tonight, which only drew a saucy smirk from her in response. But she said I'll know what she was talking about when I see it.

The chambers are packed to the gills. Brocklehurst allowed me and Harry an extended leave during the trial in case our testimony is needed. But, interestingly enough, we haven't been called to the stand yet, and Shirley Riddlesworth tells us our testimony might not be required at all — which is kind of mind-blowing.

The first week of trial had little to do with Hermione, Harry and me, as it turns out, though Harry and I sat through all of it as Riddlesworth painstakingly walked the Wizengamot through the case
Hermione says Riddlesworth's plan is to let the evidence have a cumulative effect — to detail the Malfoys' many crimes over time before getting to the pièce de résistance, so to speak: the events at Malfoy Manor. Hermione was right when she said some of the accusations against Lucius Malfoy would make your hair curl — or straighten, in her case: Murder, multiple counts of aggravated sexual assault, torture of muggles, kidnapping, extortion, sedition, treason, abuse of house elves … the testimony in some of these allegations has been brutal and difficult to sit through. The allegations against Draco aren't as numerous, but they're still severe — chiefly, allowing Death Eaters into Hogwarts, an action that led to my brother Bill being maimed by Greyback. The thought of it sends a chill through me once again — and reminds me that I've been right to hate Draco Malfoy all along. The allegations against Narcissa Malfoy are probably the least damning — conspiracy to commit murder, accessory to murder, collusion, abuse of house elves — but it's still enough to potentially put her in Azkaban for a good long time.

As Riddlesworth takes us through it in daily testimony, the details are all fitting together, piece by piece, and the events of Hermione's torture at Malfoy Manor are going to be the cherry on top of a disgusting heap of dragon dung.

Having watched Riddlesworth for the past few days, I can say this much: The woman's a badass. She looks harmless enough. She's fairly petite — just barely taller than Hermione — slender, with delicate features, skin the color of pale parchment, bright blue eyes and straight silver hair cut at a sharp angle just skimming her chin. She favors big round glasses in wild colors — today they're bright red — and deep red lipstick. She's quiet and organized, rarely raising her voice above conversation-level in the courtroom. But there's a fierceness there just beneath the surface, a righteousness — Hermione says Riddlesworth's parents were executed by Voldemort supporters in the first Wizarding War — and it's clear she's a whip-smart and experienced prosecutor. That's one of the reasons she was forced to flee the country when the Ministry infiltration began — she was responsible for putting many Death Eaters behind bars in Azkaban, and she was almost as juicy a target as Harry himself when the wartime shit started flying.

Because Hermione is scheduled as a potential witness, she can't of course take an active part in the questioning of witnesses or the presentation of evidence at trial. But she's worked side-by-side with Riddlesworth behind the scenes, taking depositions, doing legal research, and she's chuffed to be allowed to sit at counsel's table. Every now and then, she'll whisper something in Riddlesworth's ear, make a suggestion, hand over some notes, and it's gratifying to see this experienced old hand listen so closely to what Hermione has to say and take her ideas into account.

That's my girl.

Everybody's here in the chambers today — the whole damned family, plus Hugh and Eleanor, by special dispensation of the Minister, and Hagrid, McGonagall and most of the members of the D.A. — because Riddlesworth tells us this is when she's going to lay out the events of that night at Malfoy Manor.

Harry testified yesterday about the events leading up to our being brought to Malfoy Manor — our capture by Scabior and his gang. I kept expecting Selwyn-Burke to try to trip Harry up on cross-examination, but he barely asked Harry more than two or three questions the whole time before standing down. Riddlesworth explained later over dinner at Vine Cottage that if she were in Selwyn-Burke's shoes, she would have done the same. "Harry Potter is a hero in the eyes of most of the members of the Wizengamot, Ron. You can't appear to be attacking him or undercutting him — not without making your client look even worse than he already does in the eyes of those
judging him," she said.

Smart.

Riddlesworth also said she wasn't likely to call me or to call Hermione to testify. When I pressed her to explain, she only said, "Wait and see," and shared a conspiratorial little grin with Hermione before asking me to pass the gravy.

So, here we are, waiting for the big moment. Eleanor's on one side of me, Mum's on the other, and they're both clutching my arms, sometimes so tight that I think my hands might go numb. But it is tense in here. Hermione, Harry and I — and, well, Riddlesworth — are the only ones in the crowd who really know the story of what's going to happen next but, even so, the whole assembly seems to sense that what's coming today is big. Harry's testimony yesterday brought us right to the point where Harry and I were chucked downstairs in the Malfoy's basement, leaving Hermione alone with those arseholes.

The Chief Justice of the trial, Helena Macmillan (Ernie's mum), gavels the assembly to order: "Hear ye, hear ye, Day Seven in this trial of the People vs. The Family Malfoy will now come to order. Madame Prosecutor, if you are prepared, please continue."

From where I'm sitting, I can see the Malfoys' faces clearly as they sit at the defense table. Lucius seems completely relaxed, but with Narcissa and Draco, the body language tells a different story. Narcissa is sitting next to Lucius but seems to be leaning away from him, and she looks as if she hasn't slept in days. Draco, his hair uncharacteristically mussed and dull, is completely drained of color but for the dark circles under his eyes. His knee hasn't stopped bobbing once since he sat down, and his fingers are endlessly drumming the arms of his chair. I'd almost feel sorry for him if I hadn't been reminded just last week of how he let those fucking Death Eaters into Hogwarts — an attack that left my brother scarred for life.

Riddlesworth rises and steps toward the lectern facing the Wizengamot. "Thank you, your honor," she says. "Yes, I am prepared to call the Peoples' next witness to the stand: Mr. George Weasley."

Huh? George Weasley?

A murmur ripples through the crowd. Obviously I'm not the only one surprised to hear George called to testify. Harry leans forward from his spot down the row from me and gives me a questioning look. I shrug and he shrugs back. Oh well … this should be interesting.

Meanwhile, George seems unfazed that he's being called to speak before the hundreds of people packed into this chamber and members of the wizarding press corps from around the world. He winds his way from the family's row of seats to the aisle, then down several staircases until he's on the stage below us. He gives Hermione a little wink as he takes his seat on the raised witness stand next to the Chief Justice's desk that Harry occupied yesterday.

After stating his name, his home address and his occupation — "inventor, entrepreneur, co-founder of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes and freelance crank" — George settles back in his seat with a smile, crosses his hands in his lap, and awaits further questioning.

"Mr. Weasley, you and your brother, now deceased, have several wizarding patents to your credit, do you not?"

"We do," he says with a grin while examining the fingernails on his right hand and then buffing them against his jacket collar. "Several score, I daresay."
"And, to your knowledge, how many of them are currently in use by the British Ministry of Magic, and in what capacities?"

"Oh, I can think of at least ten to twelve that are now in common use, particularly in law enforcement: Extendable Ears, Decoy Detonators, Weather in a Bottle, Dungbombs, Portable Swamps, the Box 'O' Rockets. I have yet to persuade Ministry Procurement Department officials that they are in need of our exclusive Jinx Off kit, but, well, tomorrow is another day. I'm proud to say that our Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder is now part of the field kits of both British and American Aurors, though that's an import, mind — we can't take credit for inventing the powder, only for making it wildly popular. Oh, and Weasley's original Bruise Removal Paste is now standard equipment in all wards of St. Mungo's and various other Ministry-run health clinics. I'm sure there's more, but those are the ones that come to mind just now. Unless I'm mistaken, the Ministry has not yet availed itself of our steady supply of U-No-Poo, though I can think of many practical applications."

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," says Riddlesworth, crossing her hands behind her back. "I understand you have a new product just coming out of development and soon to become an item in inventory at your Diagon Alley store — the Memory Projector, I believe it's called. Is that correct?"

"Yes, ma'am. I have brought along the latest prototype if you would care to see how it works."

"Yes, please," says Riddlesworth and, with that, George extracts his wand from his breast pocket, points it toward his other breast pocket, and out comes a small box, about the size of a loaf of bread, which he Levitates to the center of the stage. Then, with another stroke of his wand, the package opens and out of this tiny box comes the gigantic Memory Projector that I remember from Fred's funeral. The projector sets itself up on a long tripod that drops from beneath it.

"Mr. Weasley, would you please explain the basic functioning of this device?"

I look to Selwyn-Burke and, for the first time since the trial began last week, I see a sign of exasperation on his face. He's grimacing and rubbing his lower lip with his index finger. I wonder if he's as confused as we are about what George is doing up there and what the bloody hell this has to do with Malfoy Manor.

"You see, Madame Prosecutor," says George in a jaunty tone, "my brother and I fell in love with the idea of the Pensieve at Hogwarts, because our Headmaster, Professor Albus Dumbledore, was in possession of a fine one. As you know, Pensieves allow the user to witness memories — any intact memory will do, whether it's one of your own or someone else's. My brother and I have long been fascinated with memory and perception — our line of perfectly safe and remarkably affordable Patented Daydream Charms is a testament to that interest — and as we began to experiment with ideas related to the Pensieve concept, we discerned one important flaw in the original's design. And, that is, that it is difficult — nigh unto impossible — to show memories to large numbers of people with an original Pensieve. Taking inspiration from film projectors commonly found in muggle cinemas, we sought to solve that problem. With the Memory Projector, it is possible to input a memory and then have it projected onto a large screen, so that an audience of nearly any size — an audience of this size, for instance — can view it in one go."

"Excellent, Mr. Weasley. Would you care to give us a brief demonstration?"

"It would be my pleasure," says George. Then he turns in his seat to face Madame Macmillan next to him. "Madame Justice, would you be so kind as to extract your memory of, say, my answer to the last question — taking care of course to include my mention of the Patented Daydream Charm, the perfect birthday, wedding and Bar Mitzvah gift?"
Madame Macmillan looks surprised to be addressed directly by the witness but, gathering herself, she nods and presses her wand to her temple, pulling out a silvery strand of memory which she then deposits in a small vial Conjured by George.

"May I?" George says to Riddlesworth, gesturing toward the Projector, and she sweeps her arm toward the center of the stage and bows as if to say, *by all means*.

George steps down and walks to the Projector, Conjures a screen about the size of a Quidditch goal, and Levitates the screen so that it hangs just above Hermione's head at the prosecutor's table. It's a good position, actually, since almost everyone in the assembly has a good view of it from that vantage point.

George waves his wand, causing the lights throughout the auditorium to dim slightly. Then he pours Madame Macmillan's memory into the special receptacle that he demonstrated to me way back that day in Dad's shed. He points his wand at the Projector and, with a click, the rotors start turning and, within seconds, George's last answer — including his mention of Patented Daydream Charms — plays on the screen from Macmillan's viewpoint.

As George returns the lights to their previous levels, there's a murmur moving through the crowd. The Memory Projector really is an extraordinary device.

George resumes his seat, legs crossed casually.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Weasley," says Riddlesworth. "Madame Justice, I have no further questions for this witness."

"Monsieur Selwyn-Burke, do you have any questions for this witness?" Macmillan asks.

"But of course," Selwyn-Burke says with an exaggerated smirk, leaning forward over the defendants' table. "The only question I have, Madame Justice, is what on Earth this device has to do with the case at hand."

"Is that your only question, Monsieur?" Madame Macmillan replies.

"It is."

"That is not a question this witness can answer, Monsieur, as you well know," she says rather testily. She turns to George and gives him a little smile. "You are excused then, Mr. Weasley."

As George takes his seat next to Dad, he earns a pat on the back from Harry. "Well done, mate," Harry says, and I lean forward and reach across Mum to shake George's hand.

Meanwhile, Hermione and Riddlesworth have their heads together at the prosecution table.

"Madame Prosecutor," Macmillan says. "I share Monsieur Selwyn-Burke's curiosity about the presence of this device in this courtroom. What is your intention?"

Riddlesworth rises again and faces Macmillan.

"I intend, Madame Justice, to use this device to show this court a memory of the events at Malfoy Manor that took place immediately following the action laid out in Harry Potter's testimony yesterday."

"Objection!" Selwyn-Burke shouts, rising to his feet. "Madame Justice, perhaps the prosecutor must be reminded that human memories are inadmissible in this court or in any international court
of wizarding law. Human memories are notoriously easy to tamper with."

"Monsieur Selwyn-Burke need not trouble himself. I require no such reminders," Riddlesworth says coolly. "The memory I intend to share with this court is not a human one."

"What?" Selwyn-Burke sputters, his face reddening.

Riddlesworth smiles and turns to Hermione, giving her a quick nod.

That must be Hermione's cue, because she rises and lifts a ridiculously large law book from the table in front of her and steps forward to stand next to Riddlesworth, facing Macmillan's desk. "Statute 1417 stroke J9B of the International Wizarding Witness Code, Amended and Updated as of January 1990, states that certain non-human memories are admissible as evidence — in particular, house elf memories, as they are impervious to human tampering, as has been demonstrated through magical experimentation dating back to the tenth century."

Hermione slams the book shut and returns to her seat, taking a second to look up at me and giving me a barely perceptible grin. I think I see where this is headed — and it's genius. And I realize, as if I should ever have had a doubt, that what's ahead is 100 percent pure Hermione — it's the idea she had that night back at the Leaky, the kind of thing that only someone as house-elf obsessed as Hermione is could dream up. Only Hermione would connect George's invention and a house elf memory, as I expect she's about to do here. Only Hermione would know that Dobby's memory is priceless to the prosecution. Only Hermione would be audacious enough to do something this gutsy in a court of law. I'm so ruddy proud of her, I'm speechless.

"The prosecution is correct, Monsieur," says Macmillan. "House elves are notoriously unreliable witnesses because they will often testify as their masters command them to. But house elf memories, in their raw form, are, as the prosecution states, known to be invulnerable to human manipulation. You may proceed, Madame Prosecutor."

Riddlesworth gives Macmillan a bow. "The People," she says, "call Dobby the House Elf to the stand."

In an instant, Dobby Apparates onto the center of the stage from Merlin knows where — he certainly wasn't in the audience.

"Mister Dobby," says Riddlesworth, pointing to the empty seat next to Macmillan. "Please do sit down."

Dobby takes his place and waits, looking completely confident and at ease though his feet are dangling a good 10 inches above the floorboards beneath him.

"Mister Dobby, you were present at Malfoy Manor on the night of 27 March 1998, were you not?" Riddlesworth asks.

"Yes, Madame, Dobby was."

"Do you have a complete memory of what happened in your presence on that occasion?"

"Yes, Dobby does."

"Are you wiling to share that memory with us here today?"

"Yes, Dobby is."
Riddlesworth Conjures a vial and hands it to Dobby, who raises his index finger to his forehead and pulls out a long, golden-colored memory. I’ve seen wizard memories before and they're always silver, so the gold color sort of surprises me. Then Dobby places the strand in the vial and hands it back to Riddlesworth, who steps back and turns to Macmillan.

"Madame Justice, since concerns have been raised here about the admissibility of house elf memories, I would like to call upon the Court Clerk, Malcolm Vance, to step forward and examine the Runic code sequence embedded in this elf's memory to confirm that it is intact and authentic," she says.

"So ordered," says Macmillan, and an older bloke in grey robes steps forward from the gallery and bows to the Chief Justice's chair. He takes the vial from Riddlesworth, Conjures a looking glass, then uses his wand to pull Dobby's memory out and Levitate it in one long golden strand that stretches clear across the stage. With the looking glass, Vance starts at one end of the strand, slowly scrutinizing it inch by inch before reaching the end. At that point, he returns the memory back to the vial and Vanishes his looking glass.

"This memory," he announces, "is intact and authentic."

"Very good," says Macmillan, who then faces Riddlesworth. "Proceed, Madame Prosecutor."

Oh, shit. If this is the memory I think it is, it's going to be tough viewing for Hermione. Hell, it's going to be tough viewing for all of us. But she must know what's coming. I keep watching her face for signs of distress, but I see none. Instead, she's got her jaw set and her eyes trained on Lucius Malfoy — in fact, she's downright glaring at him — and I realize that this is how she's chosen to get through the next portion of today's court action: By staring holes through Lucius bloody Malfoy. I couldn't be prouder of her if I tried.

And then, as Riddlesworth lowers the lights and pours Dobby's memory into the Projector, the shitshow begins.

Fucking hell. I hadn't realized how, well, crazed I sounded there in that basement, but I'm yelling Hermione's name like a madman. Harry looks desperate, his face red, his chest heaving, as he instructs Dobby to Apparate Luna, Dean and Ollivander to Shell Cottage, and then to return. Hermione's screams can be heard from above, and the sound of them, even muffled, is enough to sicken me all over again. I place a hand over Eleanor's, which is still clutching my arm, and hold it tight. Our eyes meet and a tear spills over onto her cheek. "I'm so sorry, Eleanor," I whisper. "This isn't going to get any easier."

Hugh, sitting to Eleanor's left, wraps an arm around his wife's back and gives my shoulder a firm pat. "She made it — we have to keep reminding ourselves of that," he says softly.

Eleanor nods.

Soon, Dobby's back at Malfoy Manor, this time cowering in a darkened corner inside the ballroom where Harry and I are dueling with the Malfoys, Bellatrix LeStrange and Greyback. My eye goes to Hermione, splayed out on the floor in the memory, bleeding and bruised, and my heart breaks. At the time, I was so focused on dueling that I didn't see Bellatrix grab her. But then …

"STOP OR SHE DIES!" that bitch screams in the memory. "Drop your wands. Drop them, or we'll see exactly how filthy her blood is! I said, drop them!"

"All right!" Harry shouts, and we both toss our wands to the floor.
"Good!" Bellatrix yells. "Draco, pick them up! The Dark Lord is coming, Harry Potter! Your death approaches! Now... Cissy, I think we ought to tie these little heroes up again, while Greyback takes care of Miss Mudblood. I am sure the Dark Lord will not begrudge you the girl, Greyback, after what you have done tonight."

And then, in Dobby's memory, it happens. LeStrange presses her knife just that much harder against Hermione's neck, and then some very strange shit starts to go down. It's pretty much as I pictured it based on Harry's description. Everybody in the room sort of pauses to notice the weird shift in energy that's taking place in the air — you can almost hear a humming noise in the background. I'm standing there with my eyes trained on LeStrange, flexing my hands open and shut — which I now know is an Ingenitus motion, a way to draw energy in — and then, after about a minute of this odd stirring sensation, with everyone in the memory looking right at me, the thing I still can't effing remember unfolds before me. Bellatrix lets out a little laugh, and I reply, in a low and growly voice: "Take. Your. Bloody. Hands. Off. MY. WIFE!"

And then, I raise my hands in LeStrange's direction, palms up, there's an incredibly loud explosion, and the room is filled with light so bright that it must have blinded Dobby slightly, because he's squinting through it and trying to see what's going on. This beam of white fire — Harry was right to describe it that way — shoots out of my hands and ricochets around the room, blowing things to bits — windows, mirrors, bottles, the chandelier overhead — and the Malfoys, Greyback and LeStrange, are knocked unconscious and thrown backwards, skidding in all directions across the floor.

The memory ends as Dobby scrambles over through the broken glass to grab me, an unconscious Hermione in my arms, and Disapparates us to Shell Cottage and to safety.

With that, Riddlesworth stands and brings the lights back to their normal level and shuts off the Memory Projector.

Merlin's Aunt Matilda, the place has gone completely silent. I look around and realize that just about every eye in the room is upon me. Even my own Mum is looking at me like she's never seen me before. Blimey. Then, from way up in the cheap seats toward the top of the auditorium, one person starts clapping, slowly at first, then faster, and that person is joined by others, and the next thing I know, the whole place has erupted into wild applause. Holy shit.

Then I see, down on the stage, that Hermione is still sitting at the counsel's table, but she's looking up at me, her face streaked with tears, and a smile as wide as her face. I can't help but smile back at her. Then I'm being jostled from side to side as Eleanor and Mum both hug me so hard I feel that I'm being ripped limb from limb, then Harry's pounding me on the back, then Dad and Hugh, and soon random strangers are reaching out from the rows ahead and behind me to pat me, shake my hand and generally manhandle me. It's a bit overwhelming.

I look to Macmillan expecting her to settle the room down, but she's letting the hullabaloo go on. Though her face is stony, I see her lip waver slightly into ... is that a grin? I can't be sure because soon she's pounding her gavel and demanding that the court come to order.

It takes a few minutes but, eventually, quiet returns, but not before George has stood up, placed his fingers in his mouth, and whistled in that incredibly loud way that I've never been able to do. "Right, you lot," he shouts. "Shut yer gobs!"

Almost immediately, silence returns, and Macmillan clears her throat. "Erm, thank you, Mr. Weasley," she says, stifling a grin. "Madame Riddlesworth, do you have any further questions for this witness?"
"No Madame Justice, I do not. The prosecution rests for the time being." I steal a glance at the Malfoys' table and note that Lucius still looks as defiant as ever, but Narcissa's eyes are fixed on the floor and Draco's mouth is set in a tight line as he stares, surprisingly enough, directly at Hermione, though I don't pick up the usual signs of disgust that he typically sends her way. I have to wonder what he's thinking, but I don't have time to ponder it as the action resumes.

"Monsieur Selwyn-Burke?" Macmillan says.

"Yes, Madame?"

"Any questions for this witness, sir?"

"Yes, Madame, but only a few," Selwyn-Burke says as he rises and approaches Dobby.

"Mister Dobby, you were at one time in the employ of the Malfoy family, were you not?"

Dobby shakes his head. "No, Dobby was never employed by the Malfoys."

Selwyn-Burke steps back, looks to Lucius, then back to Dobby, shaking his head. "Mister Dobby, please consider that you are testifying under oath. Now, again, I must ask if you were ever in the employ of the Malfoy family."

"No. If Malfoys employ Dobby, Malfoys pay Dobby. Malfoys never pay Dobby or anyone else if they can help it."

Soft laughter bubbles throughout the crowd.

"All right, then," Selwyn-Burke says, grasping the lapels of his robes with his hands. "Have it your way, Mr. Dobby. Your employment relationship with the Malfoys was not a paid one. That is understood. House elves are rarely if ever paid for their services. Everyone knows this."

"Not Dobby. Dobby is a free elf," Dobby says proudly, puffing his chest out.

"You will kindly limit your remarks to answering the questions put to you, Mr. Dobby," Selwyn-Burke says. "Now, to continue. Would you say that the Malfoys were good employers?"

Dobby shakes his head vigorously. "No, the Malfoys beat Dobby, starved Dobby. Dobby does not miss the Malfoys."

"So you believe the Malfoys were cruel to you, that they mistreated you," Selwyn-Burke says.

Dobby nods. "Yes."

"So cruel that you would be willing to twist your testimony to discredit them?" Selwyn-Burke says in a scathing tone.

"Objection!" Riddlesworth shouts, and Macmillan bangs her gavel.

"You may question this witness, Monsieur Selwyn-Burke, but you may not put words in his mouth," Macmillan says.

"That's quite all right, Madame Justice," Selwyn-Burke says with a sneer. "I have no further questions for this witness." He strides over to the defense table and takes his seat.

"Mr. Dobby, thank you for your testimony. You are excused."
Selwyn-Burke rises at his table again. "Madame Justice, now that the previous witness is no longer among us, I do believe it's incumbent on me to point out how unorthodox it is for a prosecution to rely on memories — especially house elf memories, for heaven's sake — as a pillar of its case."

"Unorthodox, Monsieur, but not unprecedented," Hermione shouts as she jumps to her feet. Then, she seems to catch herself, looks a bit abashed, then looks to Macmillan apologetically and then to Riddlesworth, who is sitting at her side. Riddlesworth, bless her, gives Hermione a little nod of encouragement.

"Er, if it uh, if it would please the court," Hermione continues in a smaller voice, then clears her throat.

"It would," says Macmillan, plainly amused.

"Um, well then," Hermione continues, then takes a deep breath. "Madame Justice, house elf memories have indeed been submitted as evidence in two important cases in the annals of international wizarding law. The most recent known occasion was in the trial of the murder conviction of a witch named Adrienne Bell in what was then constituted as the 15th British Wizengamot of 1408. The first time was in a contractual dispute between the wizarding nations of Spain and Portugal, a dispute that settled the current boundary between these two nations — a boundary that both muggles and wizarding communities recognize to this day. House elf memories provided key evidence in both cases."

"I do believe you are correct, Mrs. Granger Weasley, and I thank you for confirming my recollection of the relevant case law," Macmillan says with a bow of her head.

"Furthermore," adds Riddlesworth, now standing next to Hermione, "the prosecution informs the court that it has not waived its right to submit more memory evidence. As the charges against Lucius Malfoy in particular are capital in nature, the prosecution can and will extract crucial memories from him under the influence of Veritaserum, if necessary, to help the court reach a conclusion on the facts of the case."

I look to Lucius Malfoy and, if it were possible for his skin to get much whiter, it just did. He looks positively shaken by the idea that he could be submitted to Veritaserum. I'm guessing his attorney didn't clue him in to this fact, especially given the glower that Lucius just shot in Selwyn-Burke's direction.

Selwyn-Burke stands. "Your honor, I would request a private conference with my clients."

Macmillan looks at her watch, nods and raises her gavel. "Audience granted. This court will be in recess until 2 o'clock this afternoon."

Rarely have I ever seen the Leaky Cauldron so raucous during the daytime as it is during the three-hour court recess. It feels almost as if every bleeding person present in the courtroom — minus the Malfoys — has decided to come here to eat lunch, grab a pint and await the next chapter in this morning's drama.

Hugh and Dad are clustered in the corner telling and retelling the story of Dobby's memory to Hagrid, who apparently stepped away to the loo just before Dobby was called to the stand and then wasn't allowed back into the chambers.

Percy, Charlie and Bill, meanwhile, are discussing the legal points of the case. "Technically,"
Percy explains, "the defense would normally have the opportunity now to counter the prosecution and argue for dismissal or a reduced sentence but, obviously, Dobby's testimony was pretty damning."

"Yeah, it'll be interesting to see what kind of a plea deal the Malfoys try to get away with," says Bill. "I really thought this trial would drag on for at least another week."

"I'm disappointed," says Charlie. "I was really looking forward to watching each of those Malfoys squirm in the witness stand. If they cut a deal, we won't get to see it."

"That's true," says Percy, "but I'd rather see a swift conclusion to this case, even if it means we don't get the satisfaction of a full trial. As long as the terms are good, then I can live with it. And trust me — Shirley Riddlesworth won't settle for anything less than a tough sentence for each of them. Though the one she really wants is Lucius. Word is he was involved in the attack that left Riddlesworth's parents dead."

As my brothers chat, I'm trying to keep as low a profile as possible, though I'm quite certain a Daily Prophet photographer caught me coming in here, and I wouldn't be surprised if there are more cameras scattered surreptitiously throughout the crowd inside the pub. The consensus among the D.A. members seems to be that I'll be front-page news come morning — and I shudder to think what ridiculous headline the Prophet's editors will think up about my display of Raw Magic. "Raw Magic, raw sex appeal," George shouts, and all my old Hogwarts mates roar with laughter.

"Shut it, George," I mutter, my ears blazing.

Just then, from behind me, I hear one girl say to another — at a volume that suggests she meant for me to hear it: "I've always fancied gingers, but after seeing that memory, I've got to say this one's even more shaggable than ever."

Oh, bloody hell. Where's Hermione?

I look across the pub, where she's been hanging out with Mum, Riddlesworth, Ginny, Eleanor, McGonagall and Fleur, who looks like she's about ready to pop any minute, she's so pregnant. Just then, Riddlesworth receives a Patronus — she and Hermione listen and then stand, looking excited.

"Ron," Hermione says breathlessly as she makes her way through the throng to reach me. "I've got to run. Shirley and I have been summoned back to the courtroom. Sounds like the Malfoys want to make a deal."

"You don't think you're going without me, do you?" I say with a grin.

"No, come to think of it, I've seen the way the women in this pub have been looking at you," she says, raising her voice enough so that the girl behind me can clearly hear her. "You, my dear husband, are coming with me," she says even more loudly as she loops her arm through mine. If I didn't know better, I'd swear Hermione stuck her tongue out at that bird as we left.

People start filing back into the courtroom about an hour later, and then, promptly at 2 o'clock, Justice Macmillan resumes her place and calls the court back to order. The Malfoys file in under guard and take their seats at the defense table with their attorney, who looks pale and drawn and is sitting separated from the trio by a good three feet. They're not a happy bunch.

Hermione and Riddlesworth file in and take their places at the prosecutors' table, looking mildly triumphant. This is a good sign.

"Hear ye, hear ye," says Macmillan, reaching for a long, official-looking parchment and holding it
up. "I have here before me a written agreement reached just now between the prosecution and counsel for the Malfoy family. Before it can be ratified, it is my duty to lay out the terms in open court.

"In the case of the People vs. Narcissa Malfoy, Mrs. Malfoy pleads guilty to the charges of accessory to torture, abuse of house elves, collusion and sedition. Her sentence, as agreed by the prosecution, is ten years house arrest."

The crowd stirs. Some people near me seem to think this sentence isn't severe enough — but I overhear more than one person saying they think it's too harsh.

Macmillan continues. "In the case of the People vs. Draco Malfoy, Mr. Malfoy pleads guilty to sedition and accessory to torture and terrorism. His sentence, as agreed by the prosecution, is ten years without a wand. The Ministry has the means to monitor his wand use, and any violation of this decree shall result in a five-year sentence in Azkaban."


"So would I," I answer. "But look at it this way: Now the ferret gets to know what it's like to live like a muggle. It's a fitting punishment. I'll bet you a million galleons that Hermione thought of it."

"Yeah, it's just devious enough to be her handiwork," George says with a grin. "Makes a fella proud."

Harry, who's sitting right in front of us, turns around and high-fives us both.

Macmillan bangs her gavel again and the audience quiets down.

"In the case of the People vs. Lucius Malfoy, Mr. Malfoy pleads guilty to conspiracy to commit murder, aggravated sexual assault, torture of muggles, kidnapping, extortion, sedition, treason, and abuse of house elves," Macmillan announces.

The audience reaction is stunned silence, followed after a few beats by more furious whispering. "It would seem that Lucius accepted the entire slate of charges against him, perhaps to ensure the lighter sentences for his wife and son," says Percy, who's sitting at my left.

"Hope they throw the book at him," George answers.

"His sentence, as agreed by the prosecution," Macmillan continues, "is life in Azkaban."

The crowd erupts — some people, amazingly, are openly cheering. The emotion in the room is palpable. I look down at the Malfoys and see that Draco appears to be shrinking into his seat and — damn it, I can't help it — I feel a little bit sorry for him. His life is ruined. He's facing a pretty grim reality. He's guilty, his parents are guilty … his father is about to get his ass tossed into Azkaban, starting today. It's … well, it's heavy.

"Ron," says Harry, snapping me from my thoughts. I look down and see that he's leaning back to look at me, and I think he knows what I'm thinking. "Yeah, I feel a pang too, mate, but don't forget — Draco's our age. He could have chosen a different path. He could have chosen Sirius's path. But he didn't."

I nod. Harry's right, of course. And hell … Draco stood by passively while Hermione was writhing on the floor in front of him, being tortured to within an inch of her life. I've got no business feeling sorry for him. I'm actually a little angry with myself that I do.
Before I can think any more on it, Macmillan is banging her gavel again, and the noise dies down.

"As a condition of these orders, Lucius, Narcissa and Draco Malfoy are barred from membership in the Wizengamot for life. Upon completion of the sentences laid out today, both Narcissa and Draco Malfoy will be obligated to perform three years of community service to be specified at a follow-up hearing in ten years' time.

"This concludes this prosecution," Macmillan concludes, banging her gavel. "Guards, you may take the defendants away."

With that, the Malfoys are escorted from the courtroom, and the auditorium erupts in cheers, whoops and whistles. No one seems to want to leave yet — it's just madness — and so the remaining, more-or-less normal courtroom action that's left to be done takes place even as the audience stands and claps and generally makes a commotion. Macmillan steps down from the bench and shakes hands first with Riddlesworth, then with Hermione. Then she steps over to Selwyn-Burke and I nearly laugh out loud when I see the look that comes over her face as she feels that tosser's dead-fish of a handshake. Hermione and Riddlesworth exit with the rest of the Wizengamot, and I know we'll be able to catch up with them in the Minister's suite once this crowd thins out.

We all stand and stretch. Hugh and Eleanor are in the row ahead of me with Harry, Mum and Dad. Eleanor has tears in her eyes. "Oh, Ronald," she says, throwing her arms about my neck and pulling me down into an awkward hug over the seats. "I'm so proud of Hermione and of you, dear," she says. "So proud."

When she finally lets me go, Hugh takes my hand and shakes it. "Justice was done," is all he can say. His voice is cracking with emotion.

I nod in agreement. "I believe it was, Hugh. Hermione saw to it. But then, she always does. The Malfoys should have thought of that before they messed with our girl."
Chapter Summary

Joy and sadness overwhelm our favorite couple, all in one day.

Chapter 26: A Great Wave

"Hey there you two, are you decent?" says Bill, his hands covering his eyes as his head appears in the flames of the hearth in the lounge, where Hermione and I have been waiting on tenterhooks for news ever since we woke up this morning.

"Of course we're decent now, you prat," I answer with a grin. "It's nearly noon."

Bill laughs. "Sorry about earlier," he says, but I know he's not really sorry — otherwise he wouldn't be laughing.

"Yeah, well, if you're going to Floo someone's bedroom at midnight unannounced, then you shouldn't be surprised by what you see," I say, and Hermione swats my arm.

"Ron, honestly!"

"No worries, Hermione," says Bill. "I didn't see anything too scandalous last night." Thank Merlin he didn't, but it was a close call.

Even though his head is engulfed in green fire, I can tell Bill's got the biggest grin of his life on his face — and I breathe a sigh of relief at the sight of it. "The baby's here — all's well — come over now. Bring Boris!"

"All right, Bill, we'll be along in two shakes," Hermione shouts in excitement as she runs around the lounge frantically gathering up gifts, packages, a crock of beef stew that she made this morning.

Fleur's decision to give birth at home — with only Bill and a midwife witch for company — was a controversial one when she and Bill first announced it a few months ago. "You know, dear, I do know a thing or two about childbirth," Mum huffed, and Bill says Fleur received a Howler from her Mum screaming — in French, of course — that a hospital is the only safe place to have a baby.

Bill and Fleur stuck to their plans, though, and at about midnight last night, Bill's head appeared in our bedroom fireplace at a rather, erm, inopportune time to announce that Fleur was in labor and to stay tuned for further updates.

Fleur's desire for local care, in fact, was one of the things that inspired Hermione's push to have the Ministry create health clinics in every wizarding village throughout Britain. Fleur pointed out — and Hermione agreed — that requiring witches who are so pregnant that they can't see their feet to Floo or Apparate to London for appointments with a Healer is dangerous and also downright inconsiderate. Frankly, Fleur's been big as a house for weeks now. I would have been amazed if she could have even fit in the fireplace at Shell Cottage if she'd tried. Hermione found a surprisingly deep pocket of support for the idea among the Healer Corps. What was lacking, apparently, was someone actually thinking to simply ask for it. And now, a network of Healers and midwives is
being set up across the country — and Fleur's midwife Flooed to her this morning from Tinworth.

Hermione and Fleur have bonded so much since the war. I don't think Hermione will ever forget the tender loving care she received from Fleur at Shell Cottage, of course. But the friendship goes even deeper than that, I think. Fleur, after all, was selected as the Tri-Wizard Champion to represent Beauxbatons — people tend to forget that, don't they — so she, like Hermione, is a witch with some serious skills. Beyond that, I dunno … I reckon Fleur and Hermione sort of think alike. And I think they both know what it's like to be resented for things they can't help — like being French, or being muggleborn, or being smart, or being beautiful. And they both married Weasleys, for that matter. Proves they're both a bit mental, if you ask me, and I guess that's as good a basis for friendship as any.

We tumble out of the fireplace inside Shell Cottage and find, to our surprise, that we seem to be the only ones here. The place is incredibly quiet. How is it possible that we beat Mum? I would have guessed that not even a wild Hippogriff could keep Mum from getting her arms around her first grandchild.

Then Bill's head pokes out from over the upstairs railing. "Oi, Ron and Hermione, is that you?" he calls. "Come on up."

Hermione and I exchange a shrug. She places Boris on the floor and the three of us tramp up the stairs, me carrying the piles of stuff that Hermione insisted on bringing — a giant woven basket filled with blankets and nappies and lotions and potions, a stuffed bear, a rattle and whatnot — and enter the master bedroom to find Fleur, looking gorgeous and serene, as usual, sitting up in bed with a tiny bundle in her arms.

"Oh my goodness," Hermione breathes and, in an instant, she sits on the side of the bed, and Fleur clutches her close with her free arm while Hermione pulls Fleur into both of hers, and, bloody hell, they're both crying like nutters. Hermione hasn't even stopped to look at the baby yet.

I put down the load in my arms, barely avoiding tripping over Boris, and cross the room to hug Bill, who's been standing on the other side of the bed with one hand resting on the headboard, looking at Fleur like she's the most amazing thing he's ever seen. He cocks his head toward the girls and shrugs. It occurs to me that maybe their tears at a time like this are just one of those things a bloke will never understand. They seem to be happy tears, though … at least I hope they are. I've been nervous about how Hermione would handle the day the baby arrives. But judging by the watery grins she and Fleur are giving one another now that they've pulled apart, I'm starting to think that maybe I needn't have worried so much.

"Let me see her," Hermione whispers, and Fleur holds up the baby, an incredibly, amazingly, frighteningly tiny little thing with round pink cheeks and the smallest hands I've ever seen.

Fleur wordlessly places the baby in Hermione's arms, and, well, the expression that comes over Hermione is one I'll never forget. The smile that's lighting her face, the way she looks the baby over … it's a gaze that's so sweet and warm and tender, it's almost like a caress, though I know I sound like a tit for saying so … I've never seen anything quite like it, and I've become quite the expert on Hermione's expressions.

"She's beautiful," Hermione murmurs, her eyes never straying from the baby's face. "Absolutely, positively beautiful." Hermione gently brushes back the blanket that's been covering the baby's head and strokes her tuft of wispy hair. "She can't seem to decide if she wants to be a blonde or a ginger, can she," Hermione says, still grinning.

"No," says Fleur. "She is somewhere between my color and Bill's right now — which is fine as far
as I am concerned."

"Absolutely," says Hermione, still looking the baby up and down. "What's her name?"

Fleur reaches up and grabs Bill's hand. Bill sits down next to Fleur and plants a kiss on her forehead. "Her name is Victoire," Fleur announces proudly.

"Victoire," Hermione repeats in a soft tone. "Victoire. That is as it should be," she adds, fingering the baby's fist. The baby, surprisingly, opens her fingers and takes hold of Hermione's.

"How do you mean, love," I ask quietly, crossing back to Hermione's side of the bed and settling down next to her.

"I mean," says Hermione, her eyes still trained on the baby, "her generation is the one we fought for, isn't it? Her generation is why we had to win."

"Indeed," says Bill.

There's a long silence as all four of us just sort of, well, stare at the baby. It's one of those moments when words seem like more of a nuisance than anything else. I can't really concentrate on words, anyway. Everything about this little creature is just sort of … mesmerizing. It's hard to believe she's real, she's so small and quiet there in Hermione's arms. And, bloody hell, she is just as gorgeous as I'd always imagined she'd be. She's a dead ringer for Fleur right now, but there's Bill in her, too. Half the fun, as I look at her, is figuring out which bits resemble which parent.

It's the most common thing in the world, isn't it, a baby. I mean, one's literally born every second or something like that — I haven't checked the stats. So you'd think the arrival of another one would hardly stop the world from turning 'round. And yet, here the four of us sit, hypnotized, as the baby's lips twitch occasionally or her fingers stretch and curl. She's a ruddy miracle, she is.

"So," I say after a while. "I reckoned Mum would be here in a heartbeat to snatch this child from your arms and run off with her. Where is everybody, anyway?"

Bill leans back against the headboard and drapes an arm around Fleur's shoulders. "Nobody knows she's been born yet," he says. "You two are the first we've told."

For the first time since Victoire landed in her arms, Hermione tears her eyes from her. She gives me a quick, astonished look, and then we both turn to Bill and Fleur, who have matching little grins on their faces.

"There's method to our madness," Bill continues. "You see, we wanted you to meet Victoire privately so we could ask you something important."

He looks to Fleur, who adds, "We would be honored if you would be Victoire's godparents."

Godparents?

I look at Hermione, holding that tiny, helpless, irreplaceable creature in her arms. Hermione's mouth has dropped open — and, in a second, I realize that mine has, too. Then Hermione's sniffling and looking at me with tears in her eyes, her lower lip quivering. And suddenly, I know in my bones that we're both thinking the exact same thing. This is it. No matter how much healing Grendys says he's seen, no matter how many potions and spells and sodding medi-bubbles he may throw at the problem, he's offered us no guarantees. I know it, Hermione knows it, and Bill and Fleur know it. So this moment, right now, may be as close as Hermione and I ever get, the nearest thing we'll ever feel to being parents. It's very possible we'll never have the chance to share a little
being who's half her, half me, and that thought breaks the scars on my heart open just a crack. I'm surprised all over again that having a kid is something I even care about — blokes my age aren't supposed to even be thinking about stuff like that — but ... hell, I just do. I can't explain it, and I'm sorry, but I don't think it's weird, not really. Hoping for a moment like this ... well, it's what got me through the ruddy war, isn't it.

I look down at the baby, still sleeping in Hermione's arms, her little fist still clutching Hermione's pinky, and I feel a surge of warmth rise inside me. What Bill and Fleur are offering us is an honor, but it's also an opportunity, and it's also a tremendous responsibility. Once we do the spell, this baby's welfare becomes almost as much our responsibility as it is Bill and Fleur's. I don't even have to think about it — yes, of course, I'm in. I'm all in. And, as the realization of just how much I want this hits me like a wave, it occurs to me why Bill and Fleur chose to ask us this privately. Normally, the godparent thing is a big ceremony with family and friends and food and booze — but, well, our situation isn't normal, is it. Soon, my vision of Hermione and the baby is blurred by the tears welling up in my eyes.

"Right," I croak. "Hand me my goddaughter then, will you?"

Hermione lets out a watery little half laugh, half sob and places the baby carefully in my arms, caressing her head one more time before sitting back and letting me hold her. Gods, she's so tiny, not much bigger than a Quaffle. And I'll be damned if she doesn't smell good, like the candy floss at Fortescue's. Her little feet, now sticking out from her blanket, look like tiny biscuits. Bloody hell, I think I'm hungry.

I look up at the others and notice that there's not a dry eye in the place — well, all except Victoire's, that is. Her eyes are closed gently, like she's just taken a draught of Dreamless Sleep.

"So," Bill says, his voice a little choked. "Shall we do this, then?"

Hermione takes Fleur's hand in hers. "It's entirely up to you two, of course, but if you'd rather do the spell with the family here, it's really quite all right, isn't it, Ron?" says Hermione, looking back at me for a moment to be sure.

I nod my agreement.

"Are you certain about that?" says Bill. "I mean, we just thought that since, you know ... that maybe you'd prefer privacy, but ..."

Fleur caresses Hermione's hand in both of her own. "My love, we can do the spell any way we like. I know it is the tradition to perform it with family present, no? But as we saw during the war, it does not always have to be that way. The godparents do not even need to be present — consider how Lupin and Tonks made Harry the godfather of Theodore. They must have used a Remotio version of the spell, I am thinking, since Harry was away."

Hermione places her free hand on top of Fleur's. "It's OK — honestly, it is. I can handle it. You worry about me too much."

"How can I help but worry about you, my darling?" Fleur says. "You were my patient once, after all."

Hermione chuckles. "Yes, but what's the worst thing that could happen if we do this with all the family around?" Hermione replies. "I might shed a tear or two as the spell is cast. I'll survive — and besides, I'm guessing your mothers will both be crying so much, no one will notice if I get a little misty."
Fleur grins widely and Bill reaches over to give Hermione a quick hug. "It's settled, then. I'll Floo the family — Fleur's family first, since they'll need a little extra time to Portkey here from France — and we'll do it tonight."

Fleur, content to let me hold the baby while Bill goes downstairs to notify the family, settles down in her pillows and closes her eyes, and Hermione pulls the blankets higher and tucks her in. "Rest for a while," Hermione whispers. "It'll be mayhem here in a few minutes."

Fleur laughs and sinks deeper into the pillows. Meanwhile, Hermione budes closer to me and rests her cheek on my shoulder, and we both sit and take the sight of Victoire in together, every amazing inch of her.

"She's perfect, isn't she?" Hermione whispers.

"Hmm."

She is perfect. Her lips are deep pink … her eyebrows arch like Bill's … and I just noticed her fingernails, which are barely bigger than the head of a pin. Her skin's the color of milk. Blimey, I am hungry.

Soon, there's a commotion downstairs — Mum, Flooing in from the Burrow, and Ginny, Flooing in from Hogwarts, must have collided in the fireplace, because suddenly there's a loud clattering and a lot of high-pitched yelling. But it doesn't last long, because a minute later, we hear the sound of feet running up the stairs and Ginny, by virtue of her youth, I reckon, beats Mum into the room and demands with a grin, "Hand her over!"

I'm actually a bit put out that I have to let go of Victoire, but I figure I'll get my chance again soon enough. Hermione and I step aside and allow Mum and Ginny to take our places on the bed as Fleur perks up and accepts congratulations from them both.

Hermione asks Fleur if she would like anything, and Fleur responds, "a cup of tea would be lovely," and, with that, the two of us head down to the kitchen to start setting up for what's likely to be a pretty raucous party.

Dad Floos in next, weighed down by a pile of parcels. "Your mother dumped these on me and took off at a sprint when we got your Floo," he says to Bill before plopping the packages on the dining room table and pulling Bill into a giant hug. "Congratulations, son," he says. "Welcome to the club."

My heart pangs a little bit to hear it, and I turn to Hermione, who takes my hand and gives it a gentle squeeze. "It'll be all right," she whispers. "We have much to be thankful for — like Victoire — don't we."

I kiss her on the forehead. "You're right, love. Of course. You're always right."

"And don't you forget it."

Harry arrives next by Floo from Grimmauld Place, followed by Gabrielle Delacour Portkeying in from Beauxbatons, and soon, the house is full of Weasleys, Delacours, and enough food and drink to feed an army. Fleur remains in bed as a steady stream of visitors pop in two or three at a time to ooh and ahh at the baby. As the party kicks into high gear downstairs an hour or so later, Bill is bouncing between the bedroom upstairs and the kitchen below, but I notice he's starting to look a little ragged. After all, he was up all night. Soon, in the kitchen, Hermione gives me and Bill a nudge and says, "You know, it's lovely to have everyone here, but maybe we should get this show
on the road so we can shoo everyone home soon and you and Fleur can get some rest."

Bill smiles and nods. "Yeah, that's a good idea," he says. "Though thank goodness Fleur's Mum
and Gabrielle are staying over with us for a few days to help out, so we should be in good shape
tonight. You guys gather everybody, and we'll do this, yeah?"

While everyone assembles in the lounge, I pull Hermione aside in the kitchen, the only place in the
whole house where we can have a moment's privacy right now. "You OK?"

She nods. "I am. You?"

I nod back. I'm feeling a little shaky — and, truthfully, she looks a little shaky to me, too, but I kiss
the backs of her hands and try to sound confident. "We'll get through this," I whisper.

"Of course we will. I'm thrilled to be doing it. Honestly," she says.

"Me, too. So, do you know the gist of the ceremony?"

"I've read about it, of course … I mean, I know that the father says the incantation, and if the
godparents aren't present, there's a different way to do the spell so that it takes effect remotely. And
I know that we'll basically be bonded to the baby as a result. But, no, I've never seen it done, so I'm
actually dying to see what happens."

Hell, she actually knows more about how the Berakah Goneus ceremony works than I thought.
Should have known Hermione would have read about it somewhere. But, reading's one thing —
doing it is something else again. "It's a pretty cool ceremony, actually," I tell her. "We don't really
have to do much. This is Bill's show. And, as a matter of fact, you don't have to do anything at all
other than hold the baby. The men do all the talking in this one."

"I know! Why is that?" Hermione says with a smirk.

"Oh, some rubbish about how the baby is already closely bonded to the mother because it's sort of,
you know, been inside her for nine months and how the magic of the Berakah Goneus helps
strengthen the bond to the father or whatever," I say, realizing how daft that sounds. "I don't know,
I mean, I wasn't around when this shite got written, was I. It's thousands of years old. Don't blame
me."

She chuckles. "All right, all right. You're off the hook."

"Good."

A few minutes later, we're all squeezed into the lounge, chattering away and passing the baby
around. Dad and Mr. Delacour Levitated Fleur down from the bedroom a little while ago, and she's
now sitting in one of the big cushy chairs by the fireplace. Somewhere along the way she somehow
managed to extract the baby from Mum's arms.

"Right-o," says Bill as he sits on the arm of Fleur's chair, and the room quiets down."Thanks,
everybody, for being here for the ceremony. I know both Fleur and I seem a little tired and out of
it, but we're both over the moon, truly, and, well, it means the world that you're all here with us.
We'd like to get started now, though, and afterward, I'm hoping my lovely wife here can get a little
sleep."

"Get it while you can," Dad says with a wink, and Mum swats his arm while Conjuring a
handkerchief and dabbing at her eyes with it.
"OK, so," Bill says, looking around at everyone in the room. It's quite a scene, all of us stuffed into this cozy little space. Ginny is sitting on Harry's lap in the armchair across from Fleur. George and Mr. and Mrs. Delacour are on the sofa across from the loveseat where Hermione and I are sitting. Charlie is standing behind them, holding Boris, and Gabrielle is standing next to him petting Boris's ears. Percy and Audrey are tucked into the window seat, holding hands. Mum and Dad sit down next to them. "Fleur and I asked Ron and Hermione to receive the Berakah Goneus," Bill continues. "We're thrilled they said yes."

I wrap an arm around Hermione's shoulder and pull her close. And, sure enough, Hermione's prediction was spot-on: Both Mum and Mrs. Delacour are already weeping. I look down at Hermione and she's a little teary, too. Hell's bells.

Bill turns to Mum and Dad. "Uh, you two have done this a few times, right?"

Mum and Dad chuckle. "Plenty," Mum says.

"You'll straighten me out if I screw it up, yeah?"

"You'll do fine, son," says Dad.

"OK. Here goes."

Hermione, I notice, looks a little lost all of a sudden. I stand, pulling her along with me, and Bill stands too, turning to take Victoire from Fleur's arms. He steps toward us and hands the baby to Hermione. That look of total adoration comes over her face again, and it knocks me on my arse all just like it did the first time she laid eyes on Victoire. She'd be a hell of a mother, Hermione would, and that thought hits me hard because, for some reason, the possibility seems so remote to me just now. I thank Merlin that I've got a task to do and there's a roomful of people watching, because otherwise I might break down right here and now. So I stuff these thoughts down as quickly as I can and try to concentrate on Bill.

He takes out his wand and I take out mine.

"Do I need my wand?" Hermione whispers.

"Nope, boys only," Bill answers with a cheeky grin.

Hermione rolls her eyes and smiles.

Bill clears his throat and looks to me. I place an arm around Hermione's shoulder and pull her close to my side and hold my wand out about a foot over Victoire, who is wide awake now, sucking her fist, and wiggling her feet. Bill raises his wand and holds the tip of it against mine.

"Do you, Ronald and Hermione Weasley, agree to be godparents to Victoire Weasley, to offer guidance and comfort, friendship and sanctuary, home and hearth, in times of doubt or difficulty, in times of joy and sorrow, and, if necessary, to raise her as your own?" Bill says.

"We do," I answer.

"Do you accept the honor and responsibility of guiding this child into adulthood and beyond, to stand with her today, tomorrow and beyond?"

"We do."

"Then cast the spell that binds the three of you in eternity as godfather, godmother and child," says
Bill, raising his eyebrows and nodding to signal he's ready to say the first part. I nod back. I'm ready, too.

He starts. "Berakah…"

"Goneus," I answer.

"Aldas," he says.

"Vazba," I answer.

"Afeto," he says.

"Sanctuarium," I answer.

As I say that word of the incantation, a green light appears between our wands, and Bill and I point our wands upwards toward the ceiling. Bill steps back and the green light breaks away from his wand, even as it continues to spill out of mine, and soon a shimmering green cylinder of light, a lot like the one we experienced in our bonding ceremony, surrounds Hermione, Victoire and me. It slowly cascades down from the tip of my wand to the floor, until Bill utters the final word of the incantation.

"Netsach," he says, and the green light sinks into the floor.

And, at that point, everybody jumps to their feet and rushes us. There are hugs and kisses and tears all around — and we raise enough of a ruckus that, suddenly, Victoire is crying and screaming her lungs out.

"So much for getting some sleep," Hermione says sheepishly as she hands the baby back to Fleur.

When we exit the bedroom fireplace back at Vine Cottage a few hours later, Hermione is still buzzing and happily talking a mile a minute. She sets Boris down, then lights the fire with a swish of her wand, then hangs her cardigan in the armoire, then steps into the loo, prattling all the way about how beautiful Victoire is and how sure she was that the baby would be gorgeous because how could she not be with parents as handsome as Fleur and Bill and how proud Mum and Dad looked and how nice it is that the Delacours are staying for the next week and how moving the ceremony was and how sure she is that Harry is starting to think about popping the question to Ginny and how she wonders what their kids might look like and how sweet it would be if they had Ginny's red hair and Harry's green eyes — never noticing that I'm still standing where I landed, my hand gripping the mantlepiece, trying to pull my head together.

The talking in the next room only stops when she pauses to brush her teeth. That's when she must have noticed my silence because, in a second, she leans out the bathroom door, her toothbrush still in hand, and says, "Ron, are you quite all right?"

Am I all right? I don't know. I don't really know if I'm all right. I'm just standing here, thinking. Well, feeling more like. But what? I'm happy about everything that happened today … and I'm proud … and I'm humbled, I know I am — I love Victoire already, almost like I was born loving her, which is the way I feel about Hermione and Harry. But then, why do I feel like I'm drowning, like I'm standing on the bottom of the Black Lake with 100 feet of water between me and dry air?

I see Hermione's expression change as she slowly sets down her toothbrush and approaches me, then wraps her arms around my shoulders and, before I know it, she's sitting on the sofa and I'm splayed out on my side with my head on her lap, my arms coiled tightly around her waist, my face pressed against her belly, and I'm gulping for air between the most gut-wracking sobs that have
come out of me since the war and Fred's funeral.

Grief is crashing over me like a great wave, and I can't stop it. I tried at first but then thought, sod it, it's just too deep, and I just sank into it, and now … shit.

Hermione is stroking my hair, my face, my shoulders, my back. "Oh darling, my sweet darling," she murmurs. "It's all right. Let it out, darling."

I hate it that she's seeing me like this but then, if I can't let her see it, who can I let this out with? And the way she's being so kind and strong and understanding right now … it only pulls more sobs from me, because I love her so much and I can't believe how lucky I am that I can lose my shit like this in front of her and she's not horrified. Pretty soon I start to pull out of it, feeling more embarrassed as I do, but she keeps whispering sweet reassurances in such a gentle voice, it makes me feel like maybe I haven't made a complete and total berk of myself in her eyes. At least I hope so.

I gradually loosen my grip on her waist and eventually flop over so that I'm lying on my back with my head still resting in her lap, and she's cupping my cheek in her hand and wiping away my tears, a look of such tenderness and concern on her face. Gods, I love her so much.

"Merlin, I'm so sorry, Mione," I say with a creaky voice. "I don't know what came over me just then."

She shakes her head. "No, don't apologize, Ronald. Please. It's been a long, exhausting, emotional day."

"I've had Thestral rides with fewer ups and downs," I say, pressing the heels of my hands against my eyes and letting out a deep, shaky breath. "Sweet Merlin. I reckon I was so worried about how you would manage this day, I forgot to worry about me."

She chuckles softly, misty-eyed, and rubs my chest. "Oh, Ronald …"

We just look at each other for a while. I'm not sure what to say and, I reckon, neither is she. It just is what it is. We're sad. Most days, it kind of settles into the background, so much so that you almost don't notice it. But at a time like this, I dunno … I guess it just caught up with me.

"How did you get through it without falling apart?" I ask after a while.

She thinks about it for a minute, then smiles and wipes her eye. "I spent the last few weeks preparing for it, to be quite honest. I suppose I just decided to force myself to focus on Fleur's happiness, how much I wanted this day to be perfect for her, and I think it was. I was happy about that, and that was enough to carry me through, at least for today. But don't forget, my sweet knight, I've had a lot more opportunity to grieve this situation than you have."

I grimace. "How do you mean, love? I've known about your, um, condition just as long as you."

She shakes her head. "I'm not talking about time so much. It's my body, first of all, so I couldn't help but more or less obsess over it in the beginning. No, the difference is you, darling, how much help you've given me. You have spent so much energy worrying over me, trying to be sure that I'm all right. You even talked me into going to see a Mind Healer, which was so helpful. Obviously I haven't done as good a job looking out for you."

"Don't say that," I answer, sitting up and settling in next to her. "Let's face it. It's been tough for both of us in different ways. Today was … well, it was wonderful, and I'm in love with that baby already, Hermione, believe me. Today just brought up some feelings that went a little deeper than I
bargained for, I reckon."

As she takes my hand and lifts my arm to wrap it around her shoulder, she says, "We can't lose hope, darling."

I look down into her face and soak her in for a long time. "I don't think I've been completely honest with you," I say, my eyes feeling watery again. God damn it.

She crinkles her forehead.

"Hermione, I..." But then, I'm stuck, my throat constricting as I think of everything that's in my heart. "I don't know if I've ever ... if I've ever really come clean with you about just how much ... just how much I want ... I wanted ... someday ... to have a kid with you."

"Oh, Ron," she whispers in a shaky voice. "Don't worry. You've never had to say it. I've always known."

"Really?"

Hermione takes my hand and stands, then takes my other hand and steps back as her lips bend into a sad half smile. She takes another step backward and I stand and follow her as she leads me to the bed. She lays back on it and I climb in above her.

I press my forehead to hers, our noses rubbing. "I love you, you know," I whisper. "You're enough for me. Honestly. You know that, right?"

She lets out a sob and presses her lips to mine. "You're everything to me, Ron," she says. "I love you so much."

We make love that way, slowly, gently and, oddly, both with tears falling from our eyes. I've never felt closer to Hermione in my life as I do right now, because I know she's the only other person on Earth who shares this private thing with me, this quiet mix of sadness and hope. And as I move inside her, the motion is calm and unhurried. I'm not looking to get off so much as to be joined with her, to be one with her, surrounded by her, and to think of things that still might be if Luck is on our side.
Chapter Summary

It had to happen sometime. Might as well be today.

Chapter 27: Confessions

"Ahhhhhhh, Myyyyy-ohhhhh-neeee, oh gods," I growl before sucking in a deep lungful of air through clenched teeth. "Yes, love … mmm … right there."

I sink my fingers into her hair as her head bobs slowly up and down. She hums as I grip the nape of her neck, and the vibration spreads deliciously through me. "Mione, that's sooooo good, love. So good."

Just the sight of her, my hand in her curls, her lips wrapped around me, her nipples brushing up against my thigh … sweet Merlin … I can't help it … even after all this time, it still amazes me … Hermione … my Mione … is doing this to me. And that thought triggers the kind of orgasm that feels like it's started from as deep down as my toes … as I moan loudly … and explode for what feels like hours.

My head drops back lifelessly onto the pillows and I gulp for air. "Oh, sweetheart, that was … holy hell … that was incredible."

My eyes are closed, but I hear Hermione hum her agreement as she tidies us up with her wand. Then she crawls up and lies next to me. She props herself up on her elbow and caresses my chest as I loop my arms about her waist. "You liked that?" she purrs.

"Wasn't it obvious?" I ask with a grin, opening my eyes to my favorite sight — Hermione, her lips pink and swollen in the candlelight, her wild hair falling about her bare shoulders and skimming her breasts. I pull her to me and press my lips to the side of her neck, sucking the spot that I know drives her mad. "You're a minx, you are," I say against her skin.

"Only for you," she answers into my ear.

"That's right."

"What else would you like for your birthday?" she whispers. "Your wish, of course, is my command."

The Chudley Cannons season tickets were awesome, the blow job was tremendous … but up until now, I haven't said what I really want for my birthday. Maybe now's the time. I'm still nuzzling her neck, and I don't want to stop. She tastes so damned good. "There is something I want," I murmur. "Something I need…"

"Goodness, Ronald," she answers, pulling away slightly and settling herself into the crook of my arm. "You're insatiable. We've already shagged twice today."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."
She laughs and swats my arm. "Honestly."

"Get your mind out of the gutter, woman," I reply. "Much as I'd love to have another romp — once I regain my strength that is — I was thinking of something entirely different."

"Imagine my surprise," she drawls as she traces her fingers over my bicep.

I pull her close and kiss her forehead. "No, the only other thing I want for my birthday should be quite easy to supply," I say.

"Do tell."

I rise up, flip her onto her back and lean over her. "I want you to tell me the day when you'll take bonding vows with me in front of all our friends and family."

The playful grin on her face melts into an expression of wonderment. "Oh, Ronald," she whispers, her lower lip trembling. "Oh darling."

Our lips meet and she threads her arms around my neck. After a few minutes, she whispers, "I'm sorry it's taken so long. It's just that, with getting my parents settled back into Cambridge, and moving in here, and you and Harry in training, and then the holidays, and then the Order of Merlin gala, and then the trial, and then Victoire's arrival … there's just been so much going on."

"I understand, love, I do," I answer, looping my arm under her bum and dragging her beneath me. "But all that shite's over now. Let's set a date."

She laughs and kisses me again. "You're wonderful, you know that, don't you?"

"That's why you married me."

"As a matter of fact, it is."

"Well then, tell me the date."

"Hmm," she says, her eyes tipping up toward the ceiling. "Let's see. Today is the first of March … we'll need some time to sort out invitations, food, a dress … how about our second anniversary, the 30th of August, or the nearest Saturday to it?" I quickly chase away the memory of our first anniversary on the eve of my trip to St. Agnes, shagging over and over again until we were both sore. I feel a stupid grin come over my face.

"So," she says, snapping me from my trance. "Would the end of August do?"

"The 30th of August?" I moan. "That's six months away!"

"Too soon?"

"No, it's not too bloody soon," I answer. "I was thinking more like, you know, next Saturday or something."

"Next Saturday! Ronald Weasley, you can't plan a proper wedding in a week and a half."

I grumble but I guess I have to concede she's right. I flop over to my side of the bed and she crawls back into her traditional spot against my chest. "Don't be cross," she murmurs, stroking my chin. "And don't worry — I don't have anything elaborate in mind. Nothing like Bill and Fleur's ceremony. In fact, let's keep it simple — just family and very close friends. We could do it here, in the back garden. Would that be all right with you?"
I smile at the thought. Just family and a few close friends to watch me do something that seemed, not so long ago, to be a complete impossibility: Marrying Hermione Granger. Hermione Granger. She'd be right hacked off if she knew this was the thought going through my head right now. In fact, it was a thought very much like this one, a couple of weeks ago, that sparked one of the only rows we've had since the war ended.

It started innocently enough. We were up in the attic, unloading old boxes of Hermione's childhood memorabilia — stuff that Eleanor had passed along as part of her seemingly endless mission to redecorate the entire house in Cambridge. As I used my wand to empty a dusty crate and Levitate the contents to a nearby shelf, I realized what exactly it was that I was Levitating: Volumes 1 through 25 of Hermione's old diary. Merlin's Y-fronts!

"Well, well, well, what have we here?" I said with an exaggerated snarl. "This could be very interesting reading indeed."

"What's that?" Hermione said distractedly, not even looking up from the desk she was polishing across the way.

"Your diary, my love, in all its multi-volumed glory," I answered, and her head shot up, a look of panic in her eyes.

"First of all, Ronald Bilius Weasley, it's a journal, not a diary, and don't you dare—"

"A diary by any other name would still be a fascinating read," I said, enjoying the pink that was rising in her cheeks.

"Don't even think about it, mister," she snapped, stepping over to snatch Volume 7 from my clutches. "These are my personal, private thoughts, Ronald. For you to read them would be a violation of my trust," she added, waving a feather-duster in my face.

"Oh, you trust me, do you?" I said gleefully.

"Not entirely," she answered, crossing her arms with a defiant grin. "I placed a jinx on those notebooks. Open them to see just how much I trust you — I dare you."

I pretended to be devastated that she trusted me so little as to booby-trap her diary, but I decided not to take her up on her dare. I've learned over time not to doubt Hermione's ability to hex just about anything.

"Come on, love, I'm dying to know what was going on in that head of yours back in the day," I pleaded. "You've already read me one passage, that night in the treehouse. What's the harm in letting me see more?"

She sighed and ran her fingers up and down the spine of Volume 7. "Truth be told, darling, the contents of this journal are not as juicy as you might think," she said as she settled down on the tattered old ottoman behind her and gazed at the book's cover wistfully, a little smile coming to her face. "It's just a lot of childish daydreams and random thoughts, really. Some study notes here and there. Nothing too salacious."

"Anything about me?" I said as I settled down next to her on the ottoman.

She laughed out loud and swatted my arm. "Aren't we full of ourselves?"

"Well, come on — I'm sure that if I'd been the type of person to keep a diary, mine would have been about nothing but you. And maybe some Quidditch. And updates and Harry's latest brushes
with Death. But my diary would mostly be about you."

"It's a journal, not a diary!"

"Whatever. The point is, I would have been writing about you, trying to make sense out of whatever the hell it was I was feeling about you, probably from as far back as fourth year."

Her eyes softened. "Really?"

"Hell yeah," I answered. "And if I were writing one now, I'd probably spend most of it trying to convince myself that our life now is real — that we're really together, that you chose me when you could have chosen anyone or anything other than me, other than this. I'd spend hours marveling at how effing lucky I am that you somehow displayed such an uncharacteristic lapse in judgment."

I meant that last bit as a joke, but apparently she didn't think it was funny. As I spoke, I watched her face fall. Her brow crinkled, the corners of her lips curved downward. "Do you still think those things, even after all this time?" she said.

"Well, yeah. Yeah, pretty much. I do."

She shook her head. "Ron, when are you going to stop thinking that way?" she said sharply. "When are you going to stop thinking that my being with you somehow doesn't make any sense? When are you going to believe that you deserve the life you have now?"

I was a bit boggled that she was taking this so seriously. How did this turn into an argument? I was telling her that I love her like mad and I'm aware how lucky I am that she loves me — right? I reviewed the conversation in my head, trying to sort out where I went wrong.

She filled in the silence.

"Ronald," she said again, sounding more than mildly exasperated. "You can be so maddening! For years, people have said I'm the so-called brightest witch of my age, whatever that means, right? Well, maybe I am — it's not for me to say. But as far as I'm concerned, you are absolutely, positively my equal. In fact, your skills exceed mine in many respects. You're brave, you're strong, you're intelligent, you're, you're — you're bloody gifted, all right? — and you deserve the respect of the entire wizarding world. In fact, you have it! When are you going to get that through that stubborn ginger head of yours?"

I could feel my ears burning. Of course, I was chuffed to hear her say these things, but I started to suspect we were arguing about two different things. "I think you're sort of missing the point," I said rather harshly, and I realized as soon as I'd said it that this was not a great move.

"All right, then, please show me the light. What exactly is the point?"

I rose to my feet and paced for a minute. Bloody hell, I thought, what is the point?

And then it came to me. I turned to look at her sitting on that dingy old ottoman, the dust in the air sparkling in the afternoon light pouring into the otherwise dark attic, the curls that had fallen out of her pony tail shimmering.

"The point is," I sighed, running my fingers through my hair and then placing my hands on my hips. "The point is that it wasn't so long ago, Hermione, when I longed for you, I mean … I don't think you have any idea, even now … I know we've talked and laughed about our history a million times, but sometimes I wonder if you've ever really understood. I didn't just fancy you. I yearned for you. I could never talk about it, especially when I was so young and stupid that I didn't have the
skills — not the smallest bloody idea — of what it really meant or how to tell you. It was an ache that never went away for me, ever — not even when I was with Lavender. And I was convinced — without a doubt, mind, without a shadow of a doubt — that I would never, ever have you, that you didn't see me that way and that you never, ever would. It feels like a lifetime ago, I know, but think about it," I said, turning my gaze toward the journals on the bookcase next to me and fingering the binding. "A lot's happened, but it wasn't that long ago that I thought I was going to have to live my whole life without you. I was going to have to watch you fall in love with someone else, to watch you be happy with someone else. And I had no idea how I would handle it."

I took a deep breath and dropped my head to stare at my feet. "Even worse, I thought I'd have to watch you choose Harry. I thought I'd have to watch you be happy with Harry. I dreaded the day when you would wake up and realize that Harry was The One for you. I reckoned it was coming, and it seemed … well, it seemed so real to me …"

I got a little choked up, so I kept my eyes pointed at the floor. Then I heard her murmur something soft and low.

"That's what you saw in the locket, wasn't it?" she whispered, so softly that, if I didn't know any better, I might have thought I'd imagined it.

I sank down slowly to sit on my old trunk. I nodded and looked to the floor again. "I swore I'd tell you someday, didn't I?" I said, looking up to glimpse her eyes before looking down again. "Reckon this is the day."

I looked up at the ceiling and stuck my lower lip out to blow the fringe out of my eyes. Bloody hell, I thought, where do I begin? I shrugged and dove in. "You were right to think the locket fought back, Hermione. It did," I said. "Harry decided I was the one who had to destroy it. So he held it and opened it using Parseltongue, and the plan was that I would smash the manky thing with the sword. Well, when it opened … uh … it showed me my worst fears, Hermione. Everything. It was Riddle's voice. He called me by name … told me he'd seen my dreams. Told me I was least loved by my Mum because she always wanted a daughter. Told me I was least loved by the girl who preferred my friend. Second-best, always. Then he showed me … Harry … and you … telling me you were better off without me, telling me no one could prefer me to Harry, telling me you fancied one another. That's when I kind of lost it and slammed the sword down on the bloody thing."

There was a long silence. A silence in which I noticed that I wasn't an emotional wreck, which surprised me. Whenever I pictured telling Hermione the locket story — and I always knew I'd have to do it someday — I reckoned that it would be so tough to tell that I'd be choked up. But, when push came to shove, I wasn't. Maybe that was a good sign. Maybe it meant the locket really didn't have any hold over me anymore. I could hear Hermione sniffling on the ottoman across from me, but I decided not to meet her eye just yet. I knew the sight of her crying would cause me to stop, to lose momentum, and there was more I still had to say. I leaned forward, placing my forearms on my knees, and pressed on, keeping my eyes on the floorboards.

"Hermione, Riddle threw my very worst fears at me — my worst fears at the time, anyway — and Harry saw it all. You think because I joke around, because I say how amazed I am that you love me, that I still don't think I'm good enough for you. But I know you love me, Hermione, you've convinced me of that, and I know what we have is real and solid and right. I don't question it anymore. You've just got to understand, though — when I marvel at the fact that you're my wife, my actual, honest-to-Merlin wife, it's just a way of, I dunno, sort of savoring the fact. Because it's amazing and sometimes it's still hard for me to believe my wish came true. Don't forget, two years isn't that long a time, Hermione. On this day two years ago, I was convinced I could never be the thing I most wanted to be — your man. It seemed impossible. Hell, I was still stuck with Lavender.
You weren't even speaking to me. And now look at us. I'm not questioning that it's real so much as … well, counting my blessings, I reckon." I looked up then and saw that she was indeed tearful, but she was also smiling. "Do you understand?"

Her smile broadened a bit. "I think so," she whispered.

Then, she really surprised me. "Accio Journal Number Eleven," she said, and one of the neatly-bound notebooks removed itself from the shelf behind me and flew to her hand.

"Pick a page," she said. "Any page."

"Huh?"

She flipped through the pages of the book with her thumb and said, "Pick any page in this book. Any page."

I shrugged and she thumbed through the pages again, holding the book out to me. At random, I stuck my index finger into the center of it as the pages flipped past. She smiled, opened the book to the page I'd chosen, and dropped it on her lap.

"Ah yes, this is a particularly good one," she said. "Ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"Just listen."

"29 OCTOBER 1993 —

"Snape assigned us 24 inches on the properties of Feverfew, Burdock and Arnica, due Monday. Fortunately, I borrowed Professor Sprout's Herbalists' Guide last summer and so I should have a bit of a head-start on the research, but still, it could take me the better part of the night to stitch together the information I need.

"I really *should* get started on it, but it's no good … I just can't concentrate on my schoolwork tonight. I'm too stirred up, too excited about the weekend ahead.

Tomorrow, of course, is a Hogsmeade Saturday. My heart aches for Harry that he can't go, it really does. But I have a confession to make: When it dawned on me that this meant Ron and I would be making our way to Hogsmeade Village together *alone,* spending the whole day together *alone,* and walking back to the castle together *alone,* my heart skipped several beats. I am joyful and petrified all at the same time. What if he finally, finally notices me? What if he decides he likes the way I wear my hair? What if he walks close to me? What if he holds my hand? But, then again, what if I do something wrong? What if we get into an argument? What if he decides he'd rather spend time with someone else? What if that someone else is a girl?

"It's all too much to think about, too much to feel, without tripping over myself. All I can do is pick out a flattering jumper, tame my hair into something that doesn't resemble a bird's nest, and hope for the best.

"Oh, Diary—"

"Hey!" I cut in. "I thought you said this was a journal."

Hermione stuck her tongue out at me and then returned her eyes to the notebook.
"Oh, *Diary,*" she continued with a grin, "I don't know what to hope for, honestly. Once again, as I have so many times, I expect I'll be walking an emotional tightrope tomorrow. If I let on that I fancy him, maybe he'll be pleased — but, then again, maybe he'll be horrified. And if he's horrified, can we ever be best friends again?

"Diary, I lied just now. I *do* know what to hope for. The trouble is, I know I won't get it. Not now. Not ever.

"What do I hope, exactly? I hope I wake up bright and early tomorrow morning, that it's sunny and crisp outside, and that I'll be able to figure out something to do with my hair other than pull it back into a sad old ponytail. I hope the jumper I plan to wear is something Ron might like — though I know it's more likely he'll hardly notice it one way or the other.

"I hope the house elves make a splendid morning feast that will leave Ron in the kind of delightful mood that's only possible when he's stuffed full of pancakes, eggs and bacon. I hope that, on the way down to Hogsmeade, he looks at me out the corner of his eye and decides he'd like to hold my hand. And I hope that he would pluck up the nerve to do it — to actually reach out and take my hand in his. That would be grand.

"I hope that we have plenty to talk about, that there are no awkward silences, and that he's as obnoxious and silly as he always is because even though I pretend I don't approve, I actually adore his idiotic sense of humor. I hope we go to Scrivenshaft's just … *because* … and I hope he gives me the business about it even though he probably wouldn't mind wasting an hour or so there, because I love it when he takes the mickey out of me for my obsession with books and quills and whatnot.

"I hope we go to Honeydukes and he lets me buy him some Chocolate Frogs. I hope he insists we stop by Dervish & Banges, because then I'll get to pretend that I have no interest in such rubbish as quidditch gear when in fact, I like few things better than imagining Ron playing quidditch and watching him fly.

"And I hope he suggests we stop by the Three Broomsticks for lunch and a few drinks, and I hope he holds the door open for me as we enter, and I hope even that he holds my chair as I sit in it and he orders for us. I hope he barely even notices Madam Rosmerta is there, and that we sit by the fire for hours talking and sometimes not talking — just watching the crowd, seeing who pops in, and relaxing as we rarely get to do.

"I hope that, as we make our way back to the castle, he notices what I've noticed so often: That we would fit well together, walking side-by-side, and that, if he wanted to, he could wrap his arm around my shoulder and keep on walking without breaking stride because I'm just the right size to be tucked under his arm like that.

"I hope we get to walk alone, with no other students around. And I hope that, at some point along the way, maybe he might have a notion to kiss me, maybe. That would be … perfect. Too perfect for words.

"But I'm wrong to hope for these things, Diary, I know I am. It's just a daydream — nothing more. I should know better than to let my imagination run away with me. Ron doesn't see me that way, and he never will. I'm his friend, and I will never be more than that to him. When will I ever learn?"

She smiled sadly, closed the book and laid it across her lap, lifting her eyes to meet mine. "That was just one random day, darling," she said.

I rose and knelt before her on the dusty attic floor, taking the notebook from her lap and laying it
on the shelf to her right. "I remember that particular weekend, though," I said. "I remember it like it was yesterday."

She smiled and lifted her hand to my cheek. "Do you?"

"I was nervous the night before, just like you were. Had butterflies in my stomach. Don't think I slept much. I was too excited about what might happen between us the next day, but I felt all the dread that you did," I said. I couldn't help but laugh. "We were quite a pair, even back then, weren't we?"

"Indeed we were."

Suddenly, I feel a nudge against my chest, and Hermione is shaking me. Shit, did I fall asleep?

She laughs as I blink rapidly and sit up against the pillows. "I can't believe you, Ronald Weasley," she says with a grin. "You nodded off in mid-conversation."

She props herself up on her elbow to face me. "I don't know where you've been for the past few minutes, my love, but judging by the smile on your face, I'm going to guess it was pleasant," she says.

"Sorry, love," I say sheepishly. "I didn't realize I'd slipped away there."

"Well, you could give a girl a complex doing that," she says. "I didn't realize I was that boring."

"You're hardly boring," I reply. "You've kept me very, very interested all night long. Reckon you just wore me out."

"That's more like it," she says, curling up next to me against the pillows. "So, Ronald, does the 30th of August suit or doesn't it, darling?"

I look her over, her hair falling over her bare shoulders, her pink lips curled into a sweet smile. She was right way back in 1993, wasn't she. We do fit together, and not just the way she tucks in so perfectly at my side, as she predicted she would. All of our ridiculous insecurities, all of our strengths and weaknesses … I reckon they make us what we are, for better and for worse. They make us a couple. And at this point, I honestly don't think I'd have it any other way.

"August 30th will do, love. It'll do just fine."
The In-Between

Chapter Summary

Of course it is happening inside your head, Ron, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?

Chapter 28: The In-Between

"Fred? Holy centaur shit … what the hell are you doing here?"

"Oh, don't worry, Ronnieskins — I'm only stopping by," Fred says from above me as I rub my eyes and look around. We're in the treehouse at the Burrow — sort of. I'm lying on the floor and Fred is sitting, his legs crossed comfortably, on the only chair in the place. What the bloody hell is going on? "You haven't croaked," Fred adds with a casual air as if talking to me from beyond is the most natural thing in the world. "And you're not asleep. You're just sort of, well, taking a breather."

I'm still lying down but then I feel a surge of panic and sit up abruptly. "Where's Hermione? Is she all right?" I nearly shout, and Fred uncrosses his legs and leans forward, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"The eternally lovely Miss Granger — or, I suppose I should call her Mrs. Weasley — is perfectly fine, little bro. No worries about her," says Fred. "It's you we're all concerned about."

What the entire fuck is going on? Fred answers my unspoken question before I even have a chance to form it.

"You're unconscious, Ronald. Quite alive, but let's just say you are … how shall I put this … untethered from your body at the moment. It's, as best I can tell, a temporary condition. No need to be alarmed," he says, easing back into his chair.

"Huh?" I mumble, pulling myself up to sit cross-legged on the floor and rubbing the back of my neck. "What happened?"

"You don't remember?"

I think hard … there's something about Hogwarts … an attack of some sort … oh, fuck. "Yeah, I remember now. Merlin's great sagging bollocks, Fred, this has been one hell of a day."

"You've had a lot of those lately," he says.

Come to think of it, I have — but how would Fred know?

Again, he answers before I can even put the thought into words.

"Oh, I've been hanging around here and there," he says with a grin, examining his fingernails. "You know, just sort of checking up on everyone from time to time. You and Hermione have been most interesting to look in on — good gracious, little brother, do you two ever stop shagging?"

I scowl at Fred and he throws his head back and laughs, in the way he always did. Or does. I'm...
completely confused.

Again, he seems to read my thought and responds. "You're in The In-Between, Ronnie," he says. "I can come and go from it if I like, and so can you, but we each enter and exit it from different directions, so to speak. You don't need to make sense of it. Just relax and go with it."

Right. Relax. Tough to do sitting on the hard wooden floor. And again, Fred somehow anticipates my thoughts and Conjures a chair for me — a big, cushy one, just like my favorite in the lounge at Vine Cottage. I'm utterly baffled about what's going on, but I might as well be comfortable while I try to sort it out. "Thanks, Gred," I mutter and then wince at the thought that I've just sort of brought up George in a sideways sort of way, and I stand up and sink into the chair hoping I haven't said something I shouldn't.

"Ah," says Fred with a mild grin. "That would normally be my cue to ask how good old Forge is doing, but I already know the answer — perhaps better than you do," he says. "I'm proud to say he's living up to our agreement and getting on with his life. He's drinking a bit too much — but I know you and Hermione are already on the case about that. He'll come around. And I see that Angie's keeping him from tippling too much as well, which is good."

I'm amazed that Fred seems OK with George and Angie being, well, together, but he chuckles before I can speak. "I'm fine with it, Ronnie, truly. In fact, I'm more than fine with it. I'm delighted. I've learned some things on the other side, and one thing is this: George and Angie were meant to be. I know some people have wondered if Angie's interest in George is a bit ghoulish, but that's not it, really. They help one another. They both lost something, and they're helping one another to find something new. I know that doesn't make a lot of sense, but that's the only way I can describe it."

Actually, it does sort of make sense. And I'm glad.

We both just sit in silence for a minute, gazing out the windows of the treehouse, and I notice that it's a gentle spring day outside, a light breeze blowing the long grass beyond the lawn into windy patterns. It's a day just like it was at Hogwarts when … well, what exactly did happen? I try to sort it out in my head.

It was Graduation Day — that much I remember. Hermione was at the podium giving the valedictory address. I was on duty — every Auror that could be spared was stationed in and around the castle. The Ministry's Intelligence Department was on high alert after receiving reports that the last remnants of the old Death Eaters and their sympathizers might be planning something to disrupt the graduation ceremony. It was the first anniversary of the final battle, after all, and those gits must have decided that this was a good opportunity to send some sort of message — which was, I reckon, that they didn't accept the "new order" and would resist Kingsley's efforts to get past the old blood-status mania that made the war possible in the first place.

Because the Auror Corps was now reasonably up to speed and armed with new defensive tools, Brocklehurst urged Kingsley and McGonagall to go ahead with the ceremony despite the warnings. One of the most important of those new defensive tools was none other than Hermione's creation, the modified Protego Bullesco.

I'll never forget how proud I was when she came to the Camden training facility to demonstrate the spell to the entire Corps.

"I don't know if I like being briefed on a new defensive technique to use at Hogwarts' graduation by the student who's giving the ruddy valedictory address," Thayer had said to me with a smirk, nudging me in the ribs as we entered the gymnasium at Camden.
If he'd said anything like that to me six months ago, I might have punched him in the face — or at least thought about it. But after being on duty with him for months, I knew this was just his way of taking the mickey.

As we filed into the room, I smiled at Hermione, who was standing by a large chalkboard at the center of the gym, chatting with Brocklehurst, in front of several rows of folding chairs. She gave Padma, who was sitting in the row ahead of us, a little wave as I settled into a seat between Harry and Thayer. I couldn't help but notice that several of the older Aurors were eyeing Hermione a bit too appreciatively for my liking.

"Why did she have to wear that fucktastic pencil skirt today," I thought. But there wasn't much I could do about it, was there. I reckoned this was simply my fate for marrying Hermione — other blokes were going to admire her, weren't they. Well, enjoy the view, boys, and then eat shit — because that's my wife. I looked at Harry and he just shrugged and nudged me with his shoulder.

"Come to order, people," Brocklehurst boomed from the front of the room, his hands on his hips. "As you know, you are here to review an important modification to one of the most effective defensive spells in the Corps' arsenal. This briefing is Top Secret, under conditions of Rule 10-97 of the Auror Codebook. The spell you are about to learn is classified, according to Subsection J of the Ministry Intelligence Registry. Understood?"

A general murmur of agreement rippled through the group, and Brocklehurst cleared his throat to continue. "Aurors, it's my pleasure to introduce Hermione Granger Weasley. She has developed an important modification to the classified Protego Bullesco spell. The modification has been reviewed by the Ministry's Department of Sorceric Experimentation, the Diagnostics Division's Arithmantics consultants and has been tested thoroughly at St. Agnes. The modification provides —"

Brocklehurst's train of thought was interrupted by a hand that rose in the audience a few rows ahead of me and Harry. "Excuse me, sir," came the voice — one I recognized as one of the most senior Aurors still in the field — and one of the few Slytherins still on the force, Shia Withersbane.

"Yes, Withersbane?" Brocklehurst said.

"The original Protego Bullesco is a classified spell, is it not?" she asked coolly.

"It is."

"And Mrs. Weasley is married to an Apprentice Auror, is she not?"

"She is," said Brocklehurst, a note of annoyance rising in his voice.

"I am confident you will correct me if I'm wrong, sir, but aren't members of the Auror Corps expected to keep classified spells classified? If that is the case, it would seem to me that an Apprentice Auror sharing classified information with a spouse would be grounds for disciplinary action, not for an informational meeting," she said drily.

Hermione, who had been standing next to Brocklehurst this whole time, stiffened and pulled herself up to her full height, her chin rising defiantly. Gods, I thought, she's spectacular.

Brocklehurst's face, by this time, had turned bright red. "Perhaps you are unaware, Withersbane, that Hermione Granger Weasley, a recipient of the Order of Merlin First Class, is special attaché for policy to the Minister of Magic and will be a member in full standing of the Wizengamot when she reaches the age of eligibility. She enjoys a top-level security clearance — higher than yours, I daresay — by virtue of her position within the Minister's office. Mrs. Weasley has the full
confidence of the leadership of this department. The spell she is about to demonstrate to you could jolly well save your life and the lives of every person in this room if used properly. You are out of order, Withersbane."

Withersbane looked completely unfazed by this response, merely bowing her head slightly to Brocklehurst and then crossing her arms.

"Now, if I may continue," Brocklehurst said in a slightly lower volume, though there was still an edge to his voice. "Hiram Bell, a member of the Auror Corps from 1916 to 1930, modified the original Protego spell to create the Protego Bullesco that Aurors around the world use today. Bell's patent still stands. It is a dead useful spell and I expect everyone here to continue to employ it, particularly when shielding muggles, children, and injured or incapacitated witches and wizards from attack."

Brocklehurst stepped back and lifted his arm in Hermione's direction. "Mrs. Weasley's modification is known as the Protego Bullesco Impermeabalo. It is patented in her name. I cede the floor to her now for a brief explanation of the underlying Arithmancy and then a demonstration."

A round of surprisingly enthusiastic applause rolled through the room — and I sensed that my colleagues were clapping a little more loudly than than they might normally in order to send Withersbane a message.

Hermione nodded her head and thanked Brocklehurst. She looked completely cool and collected up there, and a wave of pride welled up in me. I couldn't help it — I had a giant grin on my face and, stealing a glance at Harry, I could see that he had one, too.

"Thanks to my husband, I have been inside a Protego Bullesco, quite against my will," she said, and my colleagues laughed loudly, knowing full well the story of what happened the night of the Order of Merlin Gala. Neville, who was sitting right behind us, whacked me on the head with a rolled up copy of that day's Prophet. "As I stood inside it, perfectly safe, thank you very much," she continued with a knowing smirk, "I realized that I could be of absolutely no help if a full-on battle were to unfold before me. My spells would merely bounce uselessly off the Protego Shield, and some of them, depending on their metafortic ranking, might actually be harmful to those inside."

She turned to the chalkboard and waved her wand at it, and a series of Runes appeared. "With that experience in mind, I set about creating a modification that would allow witches and wizards who are placed inside a Protego Bullesco to cast outbound spells.

"There were numerous Arithmantic challenges to overcome. Firstly, a Protego Bullesco is indeed among the most powerful force fields wizardkind can Conjure. Creating an interior exemption could erode the exterior exoskelatic membrane. That difficulty proved relatively easy to overcome with a minor Runic modification to the declaration of intent on the original Protego Bullesco, seen here," she said, pointing to a Rune in the first series of the spell.

"Blimey, she's brilliant," Harry murmured.

"I know," I whispered back. "I never stop being amazed by it."

"Through trial and error," she continued, "the Ministry's Arithmantics consultants and I were able to create a shield that's as impervious to external attack as an unmodified Protego is, but that will allow a wizard standing inside to cast spells outward. The benefits are obvious, so I won't bore you with those details. That said, there is one shortcoming to the current formula, and the Ministry's Arithmantics consultants continue to work on it. Hiram Bell's Protego Bullesco is virtually infinite — it will hold until the original caster undoes it, or until it is overridden by someone who is..."
recognized by the caster's wand as a friend, not an enemy. A Protego Bullesco Impermeabalo is only effective for about three quarters of an hour. Of course, it's rare, in a battle situation, to need any Protego for that long — but it's a limitation of the spell that I'm about to show you, and one that you should be aware of before attempting to use it in the field."

Hermione then Levitated the chalkboard to the far side of the gymnasium and turned back to the group. "I'm happy to walk through the underlying Runic properties of the spell with any of you after the demonstration, but at this point it's probably best to simply show you the spell so you can see how it works. I know full well that Aurors are doers," she added with a grin as she twirled her wand, "and most of you learn best from showing, not telling."

The crowd laughed again and we all rose from our seats. Hermione Vanished the chairs neatly and led the group to the center of the gymnasium. I noticed that Susan Collins — an Auror a few years ahead of us in the program who's proved to be among the best we have, and who also happens to be a lesbian — was running her eyes over Hermione's backside rather appraisingly. I couldn't help but laugh to myself. Hermione's appeal, I thought, is apparently universal.

"She's magnificent," Neville whispered to me and Harry as we walked, and Thayer must have been within earshot, because he chimed in. "Bloody hell, Weasley, she certainly is."

It's a wonder the buttons on my shirt didn't pop off, I was so proud of her.

We all gathered 'round as Brocklehurst called us back to order. "All right," he said, "we need a few volunteers. That means you, Withersbane, plus Longbottom, Thayer, Winston, Perkins, Patil and Collins."

I always got a kick out of Brocklehurst's definition of "volunteer."

"Now," said Brocklehurst, "Mrs. Weasley will cast the Impermeabalo around Withersbane, Longbottom and Thayer, here. The rest of you step back."

The trio of "volunteers" gathered together, and Hermione raised her wand in their direction with an upward swoop and said the incantation: "Protego Bullesco Impermeabalo."

In an instant, a slightly golden bubble trailed out of Hermione's wand and encased the three of them.

"You'll notice the yellowish cast of the bubble," Hermione said to the group, running her hand over the outer edge of the Protego. "This is intentional, so that those placed inside are aware—even if you cast the spell wordlessly—that the bubble is impermeable and therefore they are at liberty to cast outbound spells if necessary. This is an important safety feature. Note it well. If you are cast inside a Protego Bullesco and notice no yellow shading, then you are not inside an Impermeabalo version and, therefore, it can be downright dangerous to attempt to do any wandwork within it."

Brocklehurst stepped forward again. "Very good. Now Patil, Collins, Perkins and Winston, I want you to cast attack spells against the outer shell of the Protego, on my order. Keep them non-lethal, please. Begin."

The rest of us stepped back a bit more as Padma and the other three barraged the Protego with all manner of wordless spells. Judging by the color of them, it looked like they were trying everything from Stunning spells to Expelliarmus, and everything was bouncing off. After a few minutes, it was pretty obvious that this Protego was just as outwardly strong as any other we've seen.

"Stand down," Brocklehurst boomed, and the spell-casting ceased. "Now, for safety's sake, we'll
have the trio inside the shield cast non-lethal spells of their choosing outward toward that end of the gymnasium," he said, pointing toward a row of dummies that had been set up for purposes of the demonstration.

"Proceed," Brocklehurst ordered, and Neville, Withersbane and Thayer cast their spells away from us. Within seconds, the dummies at the other end of the room were being blown to bits, upended, Vanished and otherwise demolished.

When they were through, Hermione raised her wand and added, "And just to demonstrate that the shield remains outwardly inviolable despite the spells just cast from within, allow me," and she cast a powerful Incarcerous toward it. Nothing. It bounced right off.

The crowd both inside and outside the bubble burst into spontaneous applause — that is, with the exception of Withersbane, who merely crossed her arms and looked mildly disgusted.

Hermione then reviewed the incantation for us, then the Corps broke into small groups and we all got to practice it for roughly an hour, with Hermione circulating amongst the group to correct people's wand angle, the force of their incantation, that sort of thing. By the time we were through, everyone in the room was able to cast a full-scale Impermeabalo with little difficulty. Hermione also demonstrated the Impermeabalo Maxima version — a bubble that could contain an entire roomful of people — with the caveat that its effectiveness at this time could only endure for 15 minutes. Still … another right useful modification. All of us were chuffed. This spell could make it a lot easier to protect a large crowd of people — something that we knew could come in handy at a major gathering like the one at Hogwarts in a few weeks' time.

"I'd like to reiterate to the group that this spell is 100 percent classified," Brocklehurst announced. "The last thing we need is for opponents to have this spell at their disposal."

"Oh, but sir," Hermione interrupted a bit sheepishly. "With that contingency in mind, I have taken the liberty of writing a counter-jinx."

Brocklehurst turned to her, his eyebrows raised. "A what?"

"A counterjinx to the Protego Bulresco Impermeabalo, sir. So that Aurors in battle can undo an opponent's Impermeabalo if necessary."

Brocklehurst turned red again, but this time he burst out laughing. "Merlin's tits, Mrs. Weasley," he said after he settled down a bit. "Then by all means, show it to us."

"She is indeed exceedingly amazing," says Fred, snapping me back to reality — or wherever it is I happen to be at the moment. "Hermione, I mean," Fred adds with a wistful smile. "You were thinking of her just now."

Yeah, I was. How do you keep knowing what I'm thinking?"

"I can't rightly say that I know," Fred answers. "The rules of this new game haven't been fully explained to me. I'm sort of working it out as I go along."


The smile on his face fades a bit. "I've missed you too, Ronniekins. Miss taking the piss out of you. I get the feeling it would be harder for me to do it nowadays. You've become quite formidable."
I shake my head. "I haven't changed that much. Not really."

Fred leans forward, his elbows on his knees. "No, come to think of it, you haven't changed really — not inwardly at least. The only thing that's changed is that you can see it now."

"See what?"

Fred points to his chest, and then to mine. "You can see what's inside there now. What you're made of," he says. "You couldn't see it before, but now you can."

Fuck. He's right.

"Hell yeah, I'm right. Just because I'm dead doesn't mean I've stopped being right about everything," he says with a smirk.

I can't help but laugh. Even in death, Fred is still Fred.

"So, are you having an easier time remembering what happened?" he asks, leaning back in his chair and stretching his legs out toward the door of the treehouse.

I think about it again. Yeah, I was guarding the graduation ceremony. Since the threats had come to light a few weeks earlier, McGonagall had decided to move the ceremony indoors despite hundreds of years of tradition that called for it happening on the lawn.

That much I remember. Hermione was at the podium speaking. I had been having "The Feeling," as I'd come to call it, all afternoon — that prickly sensation that caused my hair to stand on end — but it came on really strong when I went on a security rotation and came across Withersbane at the back of the Great Hall. She wasn't supposed to be there — she had been assigned to backstage security, meaning she should have been toward the front, where Hermione was speaking.

I shot a silent Patronus to Harry, who was also supposed to be on backstage duty. "Mate, what's Withersbane doing out here in the hall?"

He Patronused back: "Shit, is that where she is? She's gone missing."

I remember some sort of explosion, and then I looked to Withersbane, who had slipped out the giant double doors of the Great Hall and was speeding toward the entrance of the castle. I cast a Binding spell at her as quickly as I could, and she fell to the floor. Meanwhile, Aurors were casting impermeable Protegos over the crowd left and right — the whole room was blanketed, thank Merlin. Then there was another loud boom and that's all I can remember. I must have blacked out.

"The feeling you got about that Withersbane chick was spot on," Fred says. "She's bad news. But I do believe she's getting what's coming to her, thanks to you."

"What do you mean?"

"As best I can tell, she's being held in custody for helping Death Eaters enter the castle wards during the graduation ceremony. She's in league with those bastards," he says. "You tripped her up before she could get away, but you were injured in the process, apparently. Some upper-story stones were dislodged in the explosion, and you were knocked out as they fell. Anyway, I reckon that when that happened, that's when I sensed that you were entering The In-Between and decided I should pop by."

I looked around the treehouse. "So, this is The In-Between?"
"It is for you."

Huh. I can think of worse places to be In-Between.

"What's next?"

"It's funny you ask, because I'm getting the feeling you're heading back."

"Wait, what?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid this is the part where you go your way and I go mine. I'll be seeing you, Ronnie, as the old song says. Don't know where, don't know when. But I know we'll meet again some sunny day," he says, standing up from his chair.

I rise, too, and pull Fred to me. "Wait, not yet," I say, wrapping him in a tight hug and pressing my eyes shut against the tears welling up in them. "I don't think I ever said it, not once, but I love you, Fred."

He pulls me tightly into his arms. "I love you too, Ron. Always have, always will."

Next thing I know, I'm blinking against a glaring light. I open my eyes slightly, squinting just enough to make out what looks like an examining room inside St. Mungo's. There's an effing bright lamp over my head, and I try to raise my arm to shield my eyes from it, and that's when I realize that someone is holding my hand. It's Hermione. I blink a few more times and feel myself smile as her face comes into focus. "Hello there, love," I say, my voice surprisingly hoarse. "Where have you been?"
Chapter Summary

She's amazing, she is.

Chapter 29: Tender Hearts

"I heard you were being released today, Weasley, so I thought I'd stop by," Brocklehurst says as he strides energetically toward my hospital bed, nodding to Hermione and Eleanor.

"Thanks, sir," I sputter, trying to hide my surprise at seeing the head of the entire Auror Department taking the time to visit me at St. Mungo's. Good Godric. Then, realizing I've created a rather awkward pause, I introduce Brocklehurst to Eleanor, who seems dazzled to meet him. And then it occurs to me — Brocklehurst really is a rather imposing figure. He's a giant of a man, built like a brick shitthouse, and Hermione has told me before that he looks a lot like a muggle cinema star named John Wayne, though I have no idea who that is, or was, or whatever.

After the introductions are over with, Brocklehurst settles into the seat next to Eleanor's. Hermione, who is sitting on the edge of the bed next to me, fills the next awkward pause.

"So, Commander Brocklehurst, I understand that—"

"Oh, please, young lady, after all the work we've done together, I think it's time you started calling me Bernard," Brocklehurst says kindly.

Hermione blushes. "Very well, Bernard."

He cocks his thumb in my direction, adding, "Your husband, however, doesn't have that privilege." Hermione and Eleanor laugh.

If I didn't know better, I'd say Brocklehurst, who's approaching 50 years old, if memory serves, is a bit sweet on Hermione. Not that I can blame him. It's kind of amusing to watch, actually — and I've been so bored in his hospital room this past week, I'll take all the entertainment I can get.

"So, as I was saying, Bernard," Hermione says, trying his first name on for size experimentally, "I understand that Riddlesworth was able to secure Withersbane's prosecution just yesterday."

"Indeed she was," Brocklehurst replies. "Damned fine prosecutor, Shirley is. The best in the business." He crosses his legs, leans back, and a surprisingly wistful look comes across his face. "I don't mind telling you, Mrs. Weasley—"

"Hermione," she says quickly.

"Hermione," he answers with a grin that lights up his face. "I don't mind telling you that Shirley and I … well, this was a long, long time ago, mind … but Shirley and I were once what you might call sweethearts."

"Is that right? I had no idea," Hermione coos, and I think I recognize the look that's coming over her face. The gears in her head are turning furiously. Shirley Riddlesworth is single, and so is
Brocklehurst. Oh, crap. If Hermione's thinking what I think she's thinking, this could lead to a sticky end.

"What happened, if I may be so bold," Hermione says, leaning forward from where she's sitting on the edge of my bed. Eleanor leans in, too, looking utterly fascinated.

Women.

"Oh, well, it was during the first war," he says, rubbing his chin. "We were students together at Hogwarts, Shirley and I. I always had a little crush on her at school, but we didn't take up with one another until we both joined the Ministry. She was just starting out in the Law Enforcement Division, and I was an Apprentice Auror. Oh, you should have seen her back then — that silvery hair she has now was jet black. She's still beautiful if you ask me, but she was a stunner back then. Smart as a whip. Funny. Loved to laugh."

Holy stepmum of Merlin, Bernard Brocklehurst — a mountain of a man who can strike fear into any Auror's heart with just a look — is sitting in my hospital room spinning yarns about his love life to my wife and mother-in-law, in terms that could easily be ripped from the pages of Witches Weekly. If anyone had told me this would happen, I'd have said they were deranged. But here he is. I try not to laugh, but it's damned hard.

"If I may say so, Commander, it sounds as if you still harbor what the French would call a tendresse for Miss Riddlesworth," Eleanor says.

Brocklehurst smiles. "You're quite perceptive, Mrs. Granger."

"Eleanor."

"Thank you — Eleanor," he says. "I think about it from time to time, but … well … things changed when Shirley's parents were killed. She cut me off, you might say, focused on her work, on bringing those bastards to justice. Didn't have time for anything else, she said. I suppose it's all water under the bridge now."

It's a good thing that the three of them are completely ignoring me, because I'm too gobsmacked to speak. I cannot believe for the life of me that this conversation is taking place. And Hermione, I can tell, is already sorting out how to play matchmaker.

"At any rate," Brocklehurst booms, returning to his usual flinty self, "Withersbane is in Azkaban now where she belongs, and her accomplices will be following her soon. We do believe we've rounded up all of them — five, total."

"I don't understand," Eleanor says. "How could she be prosecuted and jailed so quickly? It took months to try the Malfoys. The attack at the graduation ceremony was just a week ago."

"It's because Withersbane is an Auror, Mum," Hermione supplies. "The Criminal Code as it applies to Aurors is quite stringent. If an Auror is found to have violated the Code, he or she can be prosecuted immediately — and they can be forced to testify under the influence of Veritaserum, which virtually ensures a swift and accurate legal outcome. Withersbane's accomplices were not Aurors, so they will face the usual civilian prosecution."

"She's the only Auror among them, but the damage is done," Brocklehurst chimes in. "Every spell, jinx, hex, potion and curse in the Classified Auror Field Manual is now compromised. It's a serious setback to the entire Corps. A major security breach."

I look at Hermione and see that she's tapping her lip with her index finger, a sure sign that she's got
an idea and, more often than not, a damned good one.

"Bernard, I've been thinking about that," she says, "and I believe I may have worked out a solution."

"Do tell," says Brocklehurst.

Just then, my Healer, a young guy named Sullivan who tells me he was a classmate of Charlie's, steps into the room. "So sorry to interrupt," Sullivan says, "but I thought you'd want to know as soon as possible that you are officially discharged and free to go home. I just signed off on the paperwork. We'll want to see you back here on Wednesday for a check-up. Until that day, no Apparating, no Floo. But otherwise you're good to go, Ron. Just remember to keep off your feet as much as possible for the next week and take it easy. Concussions can be tricky. You can feel fine one minute and lousy the next, so don't overdo. And say hello to Charlie next time you see him."

Hermione slides off the bed and shakes his hand. "Thank you so much, Healer Sullivan. You've been wonderful. And don't worry — I'll be sure he doesn't push himself too hard."

"Well, see that you do. You know these Aurors," he says with a smiling nod to Brocklehurst, "they never can sit still for long."

Brocklehurst rises and turns to me. "That's right, Weasley. Do whatever it takes to get well, because we want you back, and quick," he says as he slaps my back and gives me a handshake that crushes my fingers.

"Thank you, sir," I say, pulling myself up from the bed and swinging my legs over the side.

Hermione steps up and gives Brocklehurst a hug — a hug, of all things. Blimey.

"Thanks so much for stopping by, Bernard," she says. "Why don't you come to Vine Cottage for dinner tomorrow night and I'll walk you through that solution I was going to tell you about."

Brocklehurst straightens up and smiles. "I'd be delighted, Hermione," he says, beaming. Then he turns to me and says, a bit more soberly, "In the meantime, you ought to know that I've put you in for a special citation, Weasley. That was damned fine work back there at Hogwarts, son. If Withersbane had gotten away, there's no telling where she'd be right now. There's a Bronze Star in it for you, and soon — and along with that comes a raise."

Brocklehurst heads out, I step into a change of clothes, and soon Hermione is pushing me to the front doors of St. Mungo's, where Hugh and Eleanor are waiting in the Range Rover for the long drive to Devon.

As we roll down hallway after hallway, I wish I could just stand up and walk like a full-grown man. "I hate having to be wheeled around like a bloody invalid," I moan.

"Hospital policy," Hermione chirps from behind me.

"Hospital policy my Aunt Fanny's bloomers," I grumble.

Hermione only laughs and says, "Language, Ronald."

A few hours later, once Hugh and Eleanor see that Hermione and I are comfortably settled at Vine Cottage, they take off for the Burrow and I, thankfully, am left alone with my beautiful wife, something I've been craving after a week of being poked and prodded by St. Mungo's Healers, worried over by Mum, and fed several painful doses of Skele-Gro.
Hermione's fed me up and then insisted I slip on pyjamas and get in bed. She's opened the french doors wide to let in the late spring breeze, and I'm quite content to sit against a pile of pillows and gaze out over the valley below in the early evening light, with Boris curled up on my lap. Hermione comes to join me after straightening up the kitchen and reinforcing the wards outside.

"How are my boys?" she says, sliding in next to me on her side of the bed and giving Boris's ears a rub.


She smiles and I pull her to me, tucking her into the crook of my arm as she rests her head on my shoulder. I kiss her forehead. "It's good to be home, Mione."

"It's good to have you home," she says. "Thank Merlin."

"Sorry, love. Did I scare you?"

"Like mad," she whispers. "But I know worrying about you is part of the deal."

"Mmm." I know she worries, and I hate that she does. But I suppose it can't be helped. "All I can do is promise you that I'm as prepared as I can be, and I'll never do anything rash or stupid," I whisper against her hair. "And I do promise that, Mione. When I'm on an assignment, my goal is to get back to you, Little Dove, no matter what. Always."

She wraps her arm around my middle and scoots even closer, tilting her face up to look at me. "My big, gallant, clever knight," she says with a little smile. "I worry, it's true, but I also couldn't be prouder if I tried. You sensed trouble, you acted fast, and you saved many lives in the process. You were magnificent."

"I just did my job," I answer matter-of-factly.

"And you did it remarkably well, darling," she counters. "There's nothing you can say that will convince me you weren't magnificent," she adds, peppering my neck, my chin and my jawline with little kisses. "You're so brave," she says before planting another little kiss on the side of my neck ... "so strong" ... another kiss ... "so swift" ... another kiss ... "so powerful" ... another kiss ... "and all mine."

She rises to kiss me on the lips, then settles back into the crook of my arm. "And I, for one," she continues, "am quite looking forward to spending a week fussing over you, good sir knight."

"That's excellent," I answer, "because I quite like being fussed over by you, and you quite like to fuss."

"Very true. And how shall I begin?" she asks, sitting up for a moment to lift Boris off my lap and drop him to the floor.

"You can begin," I say, "by taking off that big, fuzzy cardigan."

She kneels next to me on the bed and does as she is told, sliding the pink cardigan off her shoulders, tossing it to the chair next to my nightstand, and revealing the pink camisole she had been wearing beneath it. Her pleated skirt is hiked up slightly, exposing the thighs that I have longed to caress for days.

"Much better," I growl. "Now how'd you get so far away from me? Get over here, Mrs. Weasley."
"Ah, ah, ah," she says, wagging her finger at me. "The Healers don't want you to overexert yourself, remember?"

Bloody hell, she knows exactly what she's doing, the minx. I haven't had her in more than a week, and I can tell from the peeks she's stealing that she's well aware of the growing bulge in my trousers. She loves to torture me — and I quite like it, too.

"I can think of several ways that you could fuss over me that would require little to no exertion on my part, Little Dove," I murmur, reaching out for her hand and pulling her over to straddle me.

As she loops her arms around my neck and grinds herself against my lap, I run my hands up her thighs. "Sweet Merlin, Mione," I whisper against her lips. "I've missed you so much, missed this so much."

"Oh Ron," Hermione breathes, taking my face in her hands. "I've missed this, too. You have to promise me again and again that you'll always be careful, that you'll always come back to me, darling. I can't live without you."

"I promise, love. Always."

Before long, we're both starkers, and she's astride me, her breasts within easy reach of my lips, and I'm gripping her hips tightly as she rides me. Soon, we're both spent — I suppose I haven't fully recovered yet, have I? — but it's wonderful just to be inside her, surrounded by her warmth, cradling her in my arms as she lays against me, her cheek resting on my chest.

After a while, she whispers, "I was so frightened, Ronald … when you were … when you were out."

I kiss the top of her head. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. Honestly I am. I'm afraid this is the part of the job that never gets any easier, does it."

She shakes her head slightly. "Well, with each Death Eater we put in Azkaban, the risk diminishes. Or that's the way I'm choosing to see it, anyway."

"I think that's the very best way to see it," I reply. "If we didn't see it that way, I suppose we'd go mad. We're making progress — you, me, Harry, Neville, Kingsley, Riddlesworth, Brocklehurst, McGonagall, all of us — we're making the world a little safer with each passing day. That's all we can do. It's exhausting sometimes, I know, but think of what a difference we've made already."

She nods against my chest and hums. She sounds exhausted.

"Let's get some sleep, Little Dove, yeah?"

Next morning, I awaken to find Hermione has let me have a little lie-in. She must have tiptoed downstairs, because there's no sign of her here in our bedroom suite. Then I hear the distinct sound of someone arriving by Floo in the lounge, and then the unmistakable sound of a baby crying. Victoire.

That's enough to pull me out of bed. There are few things that energize me more than Victoire. I hurry through washing up and brushing my teeth, then throw on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and hustle downstairs to find Fleur and the baby in the kitchen with Hermione. Victoire, as has been common nowadays, is bawling her eyes out. Fleur looks exhausted. Hermione tells me the baby has been colicky lately, and Fleur is at her wit's end.

"I am so sorry, Ronald," Fleur says over the din, bouncing the baby in her arms. "I told Hermione I
would Floo over this morning to bring you a fresh batch of your favorite fig biscuits, and Victoire was quiet as a mouse this morning, but now … well, I apologize for waking you up."

"No worries, Fleur, I was already awake," I reply, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "Hand over my goddaughter," I say with a smile, hoping to wipe that look of exasperation off Fleur's face, and Fleur lays the baby in my waiting arms with a look of exhausted gratitude. Hermione steps up with a cup of fresh tea for Fleur and the two of them escape with Boris to the back porch while I try to settle Victoire down in the kitchen.

I look down at Victoire, remembering how petrified I was the first time I held her — she was so small I was sure I'd break her. But I like to think I've learned a thing or two since then, and there are honestly few things I enjoy more than holding her in my arms, even when she's yelling like a banshee. "There, there, my girl," I say, bobbing her in my arms. "What's the matter, eh? How's the nappy?" I lift her and give her bum a sniff. Nope, all's well at that end. Right. "Can't imagine your Mum hasn't fed you up this morning. You tired then? Can't get your rest? Well, who could with all this noise going on. Come on, now."

I take Victoire out the front door. It's a beautiful morning. Maybe she just needs some fresh air. She's still wiggling and, well, screaming, but I can't help it — she's so beautiful and tiny, I could look at her all day, even in this state. She's almost painfully cute, a tuft of reddish blonde hair atop her head, her face all bunched up, her fists clenched tight. The screaming doesn't bother me that much. But apparently it bothers Crookshanks, who had been happily snoozing on the porch swing until Victoire and I stepped outside. He stands up, looks the baby and me over through half-lidded eyes, then jumps down from his perch to pad down the steps and slink away behind Hermione's new rose bushes and out of sight. Reckon I can't blame him. Victoire's got a set of lungs on her.

I sit on the swing and try my best to soothe the baby, resting my lips on her forehead and humming to her, but she's just not having it. Before long, Hermione, Fleur and Boris emerge from around back and join me on the front porch. "I feel guilty for leaving her with you when she is in this state, Ronald. Allow me," says Fleur, gesturing to take the baby back.

"Um, may I try?" Hermione says rather bashfully.

"Ha! My sweet," says Fleur with a laugh, "be my guest."

I'm a bit reluctant to let go of Victoire despite how noisy she is — I like holding her, dammit — but Hermione looks like she has an idea. And if it will help Victoire to be more comfortable well, then, that's fine. I'll just have to steal her from Hermione later.

"Here goes nothing," Hermione says with a shy little grin.

Hermione takes Victoire from me and then does something I didn't expect. She takes the baby's arms, folds them across the baby's chest, then flips the baby over so the baby is — blimey, she's face-down. Then Hermione places her hand over the baby's crossed arms, snuggling the baby's chin between her thumb and forefinger. Then she takes her other hand, grasps the baby's bum, and picks her up so the baby is leaning forward at, well, it looks to me like a 45-degree angle. And, miraculously, Victoire stops crying. Instantly. In fact, she opens her little peepers, looks around, and suddenly seems very interested in the world around her, minus the screaming. Whatever was troubling her is over.

"Mon dieu!" Fleur practically shouts. "Where did you learn to do that?"

Hermione smirks. "Where do you think I learned it? In a book!"
My heart pangs at the thought that Hermione's read books on babies. But of course she has. Oh Hermione, love. And look at her. She's gently bouncing the baby up and down, rocking her back and forth, and Victoire has been transformed from a screaming meemie to a sweet, fat, happy cherub, flying contentedly at a 45-degree angle at the height of Hermione's hip. It's a bloody miracle.

"Quite honestly, I'm a bit surprised it worked," Hermione says softly, spinning slowly around to give Victoire a view of her surroundings. "I've never done this before."

"Au contraire, my darling, you look as if you have been doing this all of your life," says Fleur in an astonished tone.

"Of course I haven't," Hermione says. "I've never even changed a nappy, much less calmed a crying baby. Chalk this up to beginner's luck."

Fleur gives Victoire's bum, still nestled in Hermione's hand, a quick whiff and says, "Well, ma soeur, there is no time like the present, as they say. This is a nappy in need of a change. Do you care to learn?"

Hermione grins like she's just won a prize. "Of course!"

Hours later, Fleur and the baby have Flooed back to Shell Cottage, I'm stretched out on the sofa reading "My Sixty Memorable Games," by the chess genius Bobby Fischer — a get-well gift from Hugh — and Hermione is bustling around in the kitchen making a roast, potatoes and apple pie for Brocklehurst. Boris is following her here and there, hoping she'll drop a morsel on the floor. In the meantime, she's got something up her sleeve for tonight, I can tell, but she won't come clean about what it is. All she'll say is that she sent a message to Brocklehurst — Bernard, as she's now fond of calling him — via Peaches, telling him to Floo over at 6 o'clock and not to worry about dressing up, since this will be a simple dinner at home.

Promptly at six, Brocklehurst appears in the fireplace, and I stand to greet him, trying not to show my surprise at seeing him out of uniform. In casual clothes, he's still an imposing guy, but the V-neck jumper he's wearing makes him less intimidating, somehow.

He gives Hermione a rather large bouquet of flowers, she excuses herself to put them in water and then finish up dinner, and I'm left to entertain Brocklehurst — my ruddy boss, for Merlin's sake — by myself in the lounge.

After serving him a butterbeer and giving him a mildly awkward house tour, we settle down on the sofas opposite one another by the hearth. There's an uncomfortably long pause, and then he spies my Bobby Fischer book. "Chess player, eh Weasley?" he says.

I gulp. **Holy dragon dung.**

"Yeah, I sort of, you know ... I play a bit."

"Well, we have that in common, son," he says. "I don't spend a lot of time reading about the game, but I do like to play when I can. Care to give it a go?"

"Uh, sure." As I reach for the chess set on the bookcase behind me, my mind turns grimly to the first time I ever played my father-in-law. I can't decide which is worse — playing Hugh or playing Brocklehurst. This could go very, very badly for me very, very quickly.

Turns out Brocklehurst is a better chess player than he let on. He starts with a Ruy Lopez opening, which is a remarkably sophisticated and complex series of moves, and I'm immediately on my
heels. For a minute, I ponder the wisdom of letting him beat me, but then I decide I couldn't live with myself if I did, so I sort of roll up my sleeves, mentally speaking, and pour it on. I see where he's headed. I fall back on some middlegame strategies from the book Hugh lent me by Nimzovitch. I break the right side of the board open by capturing his bishop, and soon his queen is on the run. I pursue and pick up some momentum, but not before losing a knight and a rook for my trouble. Damn, Brocklehurst is good. Still, I'm starting to see a pattern in his play, and I am about to lay down a check — not a checkmate just yet, but a good, strong, scary check — when the doorbell rings. The doorbell? Who the hell could that be?

Before I have a chance to get up and answer it, Hermione runs out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, trilling, "I'll get it, I'll get it!" with a wicked little smile on her face. A moment later, I see why.

Shirley Riddlesworth is standing at the doorway, holding a bottle of red wine. "So sorry, darling," she says to Hermione, kissing both her cheeks before stepping into the entryway. "I'm a bit early, but I finished up at the office and reckoned we could catch up on Prosecution Department gossip over a glass of wine," she continues, removing her coat and hanging it on the hook by the door, where she's hung her coat dozens of times. "And maybe I could help you finish whatever it is you're serving, but—"

She nearly drops the bottle when she turns and sees who is sitting in the lounge across the chessboard from me.

"Bernie?"

"Shirl?"

I can tell immediately that Riddlesworth is annoyed with Hermione, but she's too polite to let it show much — at least not in front of me and Brocklehurst. Brocklehurst, for his part, looks like someone just hit him with some sort of a combination of a Stunning spell and a Cheering charm. He slowly rises to his feet and says, in a boyish voice that surprises me so much I almost want to laugh, "Good evening, Shirley. It's lovely to see you."

"What a surprise to see you, Bernard," Riddlesworth says, smiling slightly and then seeming to catch herself. Then she shoots a brief glare at Hermione, who only grins back innocently. "I had no idea you'd be joining us tonight," Riddlesworth adds.

"Oh, I didn't mention it?" Hermione says, still beaming but trying to straighten out her face. "Oh dear. Well, look at this lovely wine you've brought, Shirley. You shouldn't have."

"It was nothing. Let's take it into the kitchen and open it so it can breathe, shall we?" Riddlesworth says, grabbing Hermione by the elbow. "Glad you're feeling better, Ronald," she says in passing.

"Finish your game, gentlemen," Hermione calls over her shoulder and she and Shirley shuffle through the dining room. "We'll be with you in a bit."

With that, I hear the door to the kitchen swing shut and the sound of muffled voices before one of them — Hermione, I'm guessing — casts a Silencing charm.

"Oh, well, erm … sorry, Weasley," Brocklehurst says, sinking back onto the sofa. "Where were we? Your move, yes?"

I look at his crestfallen expression and suddenly don't really feel like crushing him on the chessboard anymore, but there's really no helping it now. He's stumbled into my Prescott's Snare.
It's only a matter of three or four moves before it's over.

Great goblin's gonads, Hermione's right — Brocklehurst is nursing a broken heart.

A few minutes later, I have indeed kicked his chessplaying ass, and I decide to smooth it over by Accioing a couple of fresh butterbeers and inviting Brocklehurst to come out onto the front porch with me. Boris follows us. Brocklehurst drops onto the porch swing, staring at the bottle in his hands, looking for all the world like I imagine I did the night of the Yule Ball. I sit on the rattan chair opposite him.

"Erm, Commander, I honestly didn't know that Hermione had invited Shirley over tonight. I would have warned you if I had," I say.

Boris jumps up onto the porch swing, curls up and lays his head on Brocklehurst's knee. The poor man scratches the dog gently behind the ears and sighs. "No worries, Weasley. I know women can't help themselves — they're all matchmakers at heart, and it's right sweet that Hermione tried," he says. "To tell the truth, I don't mind at all. I'd be thrilled if Shirley would … well, nevermind. It's silly, isn't it."

I take a swig and lean back, for some reason no longer worried that I'm talking to my boss.

"It's not silly," I say. "It's your life we're talking about. Not silly at all."

He rustles the dog's ears absently, still frowning. "I've tried before, Weasley. Flowers, chocolates, cards, invitations, and all I've got to show for it is Sweet Fanny Adams. She's moved on."

Before I can formulate an answer, Hermione's grinning face appears in the doorway. "Gentlemen, dinner is served."

Somehow, miraculously, Shirley has not only chosen to stay but she's actually looking rather calm and even pleasant as we all take our seats in the dining room. It helps that Hermione makes a hell of a roast, and Shirley knows it, having dined with us many times before. But Hermione must have said something to her in the kitchen to change the mood, because Shirley is sporting a little smile, and if I didn't know better, I'd say she was blushing as the four of us make our various bumbling attempts to begin and maintain a conversation.

We manage it by opening with Ministry chit-chat, and fortunately there's enough news to keep us all occupied. I steal a glance at Hermione and she, like me, seems to be trying not to crack up, but it's quite difficult. Shirley Riddlesworth and Bernard Brocklehurst, two of the most formidable ass-kickers at the Ministry, are sitting across from one another at our table like two kids on their first date at Madam Puddifoots. Shirley is averting her eyes, occasionally touching her hair or giggling — giggling! — and Brocklehurst is shamelessly staring at her, a broad grin plastered to his face. He can't take his eyes off her. Gods, the guy's got it bad.

Eventually, we serve dessert, and that's when Hermione gets around to talking about the one sane reason we're all here — to discuss whatever idea it is she has to deal with the Auror Corps spells that are now potentially known to Withersbane's accomplices and Merlin knows who else. And it actually makes sense that Shirley is here to discuss this — she's the one who prosecuted Withersbane after all, and she'll be tackling the accomplices' trials next, so she knows the case inside and out. And with her security clearance, she already knows everything in the Classified Auror Field Manual.

"So what's in that brilliant head of yours, Hermione?" Brocklehurst says as he stirs his coffee.
Hermione wipes her lips with her napkin and folds it neatly. Then she twists the napkin in her hands. "To begin, it's necessary to back up and tell you about something I'm not terribly proud of, though it had to be done," Hermione says, looking a bit nervous. "You see, in order to protect my parents during the war, I altered their memories. In so doing, I created a chain-reaction spell that altered the memories of all those they knew. I devised new identities for them — new, childless identities — and sent them to Australia, where they believed they were entering semi-retirement. A feature of the spell I built modified the memories of their co-workers, patients and friends — they believed my parents had gone on a lengthy sabbatical, though they didn't know where."

Brocklehurst and Riddlesworth both look completely flabbergasted. Shirley reaches out and takes Hermione's hand, and Hermione looks at her and gives her a sad smile. "You did the right thing, dear," says Shirley with a sniffle. "If only I'd thought of doing something so brilliant, my parents might be here now."

Hermione's eyes well with tears, and the two of them sit for a moment just looking at their hands, clasped together on the table. Eventually, Hermione pulls herself together. "So," she continues, trying to sound more chipper, "I suppose that's a long-winded way of saying I know a lot about memory modification spells. And I think I could construct one that would wipe Withersbane's memory of the Classified Auror Field Manual and, by extension, would wipe the memories of all those she shared the information with."

There's a long pause as Shirley, Brocklehurst and I exchange dumbfounded looks. "Hermione," Shirley says when she can finally find her voice, "that would be an incredibly complex bit of spellwriting."

"It would be phenomenal if you could do it, though," Brocklehurst adds.

"If Hermione says she can do it, then she can do it," I pipe up. Everybody looks at me. I clear my throat and proceed in a softer voice. "Hermione's already done it. And if she says she can do it again, she can do it again. It's that simple."

Brocklehurst and Shirley trade a smile. "It's good you have such faith in your wife, Weasley," he says. "I do, too, and I reckon I speak for Shirley here as well, eh?"

Riddlesworth nods and squeezes Hermione's hand again.

"All right, young lady," Riddlesworth says. "Blow our minds."

Hermione beams, then reaches for her wand and says "Accio Memoraria notes."

In no time, several rolls of parchment fly into the room from Hermione' library upstairs. She rises to grab them while the rest of us shove the apple pie and the coffee out of the way so she can spread them out on the table.

"As you can imagine, I did extensive research and took copious notes before attempting to do anything to my parents' memories," she says. "I kept these notes, of course, and now I'm glad I did."

Beelzebub's bonnet, she's brilliant this one.

"The standard Obliviate charm is a fairly blunt instrument," she continues, leaning over the notes. She's really in her element now — Hermione, I realize all over again, was born to do what she's doing now. I'm so thankful Kingsley saw it. I just can't stop being amazed at what she can do.

"In its base form, the Obliviate will essentially wipe out all memory, and we don't want that for our
purposes," she says, not aware of my adoring thoughts. "We want the subject to remember essentially who they are, to be able to function at a certain day-to-day level — merely to forget certain key bits of information. For that reason, I was ready to abandon the Obliviate as a foundational spell altogether and try to devise something new — that is, until I took the time to delve into Norfolk Theowald's original patent for the Obliviate spell from the year 1214. I was surprised that the underlying Arithmancy is actually fairly open-ended, allowing remarkably precise parameters if Incantated in the proper sequence."

I steal a glance at both Riddlesworth and Brocklehurst, and they're totally absorbed, their eyes fixed on the parchment and following Hermione's finger as she traces her way through the formula. I'm delighted to find that I, too, am somehow able to follow along. Living with Hermione for this long must be rubbing off on me.

"The scope of the Obliviate can be limited in any number of ways based on these variables," she says, pointing to a series of Runes on the page. "In Withersbane's case, I would recommend setting a parameter according to timespan. We know she has been a member of the Auror Corps from 1987 to 1999, so the incantation would have to include the setting "Tempus 3070 ad 3092, to be in keeping with the Sorceric calendar."

Is it wrong that I want to throw her on the table and snog her senseless right now? I don't care that we have company.

"Then you add a limitation based on the type of information you want to withhold from her consciousness. In this case, we want her to forget anything she learned as an Auror. By adding the terms 'Erasa Auroris Intelligentsia,' we can erase her memory of ever having been an Auror, and her memory of her Auror training would vanish along with it. This is a broader parameter than the one I set for my parents, because I wanted them to remember their dental training so they could make a living. But I was sending them to Australia, not to Azkaban," Hermione says, and Brocklehurst stifles a chuckle.

"So," Hermione continues crisply, "this takes care of Withersbane, but it doesn't address how to wipe the memories of any of those to whom she may have divulged classified information. To address this problem, it's necessary to marry the Obliviate incantation to another, rarer incantation, the Transducio." She straightens up and looks at the ceiling, tapping her wand on her open palm. "I'm surprised the Transducio isn't used more often, because it can be dead useful. It was written in 1847 by an Irish gentleman named Marshall, and it has certain similarities to the Imperio, though less ethically questionable, actually … but I digress."

Shaking her head, she returns her attention to the parchment. "At any rate, the Transducio can transmit the coding, so to speak, that we have embedded in Withersbane's consciousness to any of those who have come into contact with her — not just her accomplices in the Hogwarts break-in, but anyone else we may not know of who cooperated with her subterfuge over time. I used the Transducio, in my parents' case, to transmit the false information to others in their acquaintance that they were going on an extended leave of absence. We don't need to do anything that elaborate here. To have her associates merely forget that Withersbane was an Auror — and therefore to forget anything they learned from her about Auror techniques — is sufficient. Of course, we ourselves want to remember that she was an Auror, so we need to create just one further limitation — to block the information from those who learned it with criminal or venal intent. To do that, you add a Venalis Crimio exemption here."

Hermione clears her throat and presses on. "The resulting spell combination will extend to anyone else they shared that information with, by the way. So I would recommend trying the other defendants in the Hogwarts break-in as quickly as possible, then making and storing a replica of
Withersbane's memory under Veritaserum for use in any future prosecutions, and then placing her under the spell I've laid out here," Hermione says, pointing to a long line of runes at the bottom of the parchment.

"Barring any tweaks that the Ministry's Arithmantic consultants may recommend, I imagine the incantation would go something like this: 'Obliviate Tempus 3070 ad 3092,' with the corresponding wand movement normally used for Obliviate here," she explains, indicating the line on the script, "then 'Erasa Auroris Intelligentsia,' again, with the proper wand movement for Specificity here, and then 'Transducio Broadcastra,' followed by 'Venalis Crimio' here, to have the Transducio carry over to any and all criminals or potential criminals who have come into contact with the classified information. It sounds a bit complicated, I realize, but it's actually rather elementary when you think about it. I'm sure the Ministry's Arithmancy guys will think it's quite crude, really, but it should work."

She straightens up to look at us and there's a long, long pause.

"Merlin's beard," Brocklehurst says in a hushed tone. "That's … that's …"

There's another pause, and then Riddlesworth continues his thought. "That's … it's … well, it's positively brilliant," she says, a smile growing on her face. "Merlin bless me, Hermione, if this works, the entire Auror Code will be spared from this breach."

"Oh, it'll work," I say, and Hermione returns in her chair and picks up her coffee, grinning at me over her cup. "I have no doubt."

Brocklehurst and Riddlesworth linger for far longer than I expected in the lounge after dinner. The conversation between them is halting and awkward, so much so that I keep expecting one or the other of them to get uncomfortable enough to announce that they're going to head out. And yet, while they can barely talk to one another in complete sentences, they can't stop looking at one another, dopey smiles occasionally creeping onto each of their faces before one or the other of them notices it and abruptly attempts to return to a more sedate expression. I'm beginning to despair that they'll never leave when the clock above the mantle strikes eleven, and that seems to shake Riddlesworth and then Brocklehurst out of their daze.

"Oh dear, look at the time," Riddlesworth says hurriedly, rising from her position on the sofa next to Hermione. The motion causes Brocklehurst, who's been sitting next to me on the opposite sofa, to nearly jump to his feet, too, and that seems to startle Riddlesworth slightly before she can cover up her shocked expression.

He stands awkwardly across from her. For a moment, he seems to be trying to figure out what to do with his hands, before seemingly deciding that it's best to place them behind his back. "Given the hour, Shirley," he says, "I rather think it would be best if I Side-Alonge you home."

A smile briefly blooms on Riddlesworth's face, then she checks it. "Oh, you're very kind, Bernard, but that won't be necessary, honestly."

"Oh, but … but … but it is quite late," Brocklehurst stammers, "and you read the Prophet as closely as I do, Shirley. The streets still aren't as safe as any of us would like."

Riddlesworth considers, then softens. "Perhaps you're right, Bernard. I would be much obliged if you would see me home."

Hermione and I rise to bid them farewell and watch from the porch as the two of them walk slowly—not too close to one another, but not to distant, either—down the stairs, through the front
garden and to the outer edge of the wards. Brocklehurst extends his arm timidly in her direction, and she gingerly places her hand on it, and poof — they're gone.

I throw my arm around Hermione and pull her close. "You are a very, very naughty girl," I whisper in her ear.

"Oh? What could you possibly mean?" she says, slipping out from under my arm and returning to the house to finish tidying up the kitchen. This is my cue to step out to the front garden and reinforce the wards for the night.

It's a warm night, actually — warmer than we normally get in spring, the kind of night that reminds me of the very best of summer, when Hermione and Harry would be with us at the Burrow and we'd sometimes climb out onto the roof to lay back and look at the stars or sneak out to the pond to take a nighttime swim. I turn to look up at the house and settle down onto a giant boulder that's been there in the garden since I was a kid — hell, since the Earth was new, probably — and take it all in. Over the cricketsong, I can hear the sound of Hermione humming as she stacks dishes in the kitchen. Peaches and Pig, bathed in the golden light spilling out from the lounge, are sitting on the porch railing, probably getting ready for a midnight hunt. No sign of Crookshanks — he's on the prowl, no doubt — but Boris is silhouetted in the front doorway, sitting and waiting for me patiently.

I should concentrate on the incantations I need to perform to reinforce the wards, but I can't help it — it's been such an extraordinary and, in some ways, such a weird day. Mostly, I find myself trying to make sense of this thing Dumbledore called Love — I mean, bloody hell, Hermione was tinkering with some volatile stuff when she threw Riddlesworth and Brocklehurst together, wasn't she. And yet … who knows? Maybe all that particular spark of Love between those two required was a little puff of air to turn it back into a flame? It certainly felt that way tonight.

And then my thoughts turn to Hermione, and the wonder of watching her putting her mighty mind to work on problems ranging from undoing a criminal's memory to trying to rekindle a lost love to trying to settle down a screaming baby, all in one day. She's amazing, she is.

It breaks my heart that she's invested time and energy into researching baby care, but I can't say I'm surprised. That's Hermione for you. And seeing her bounce that baby in her arms warmed my heart and broke it a bit at the same time. It always does.

Sitting here in the warmth of the breeze, lulled by the crickets and the moonlight, it dawns on me that if Hermione were willing and able, I'd start a family with her right now — I'd march right into that house, sweep her into my arms, and get going. I wouldn't give a rip if people think we're too young. We're not. I'm ready. But then ... I remember.

Dear Merlin, I hope … well, I probably shouldn't hope. I should just accept whatever comes.

Hoping is starting to hurt.
The Renewal

Chapter Summary

Making good on a promise made way back at Grimmauld Place.

Chapter 30: The Renewal

My hand must have slid over the edge of the bed while I was sleeping, because I can feel Boris nudging it with his wet nose. And now I can hear him whimpering. I keep my eyes pressed shut, hoping that if I ignore him he'll go away and I can go back to sleep, but no such luck. He nudges me again, and this time lets out a soft yelp. Damn it. We magicked Crookshanks' cat flap on the kitchen door months ago so that it will get bigger when Boris wants to go out, but it doesn't matter — Boris likes his morning walkies.

Ugh.

My head aches slightly — I should probably get up and take a dose of Hangover Potion anyway, just to take the edge off. I lift my head from my pillow and see Hermione sprawled out on her tummy, her hair draped loosely over her cheek, her lips parted slightly. Even now, she's a beautiful sight in the morning. I smile as I think about how passionate she was last night after everyone left, then I slide out of bed, trying not to wake her as I step into some slippers and shuffle toward the stairs, Boris bounding along beside me.

Downstairs, I'm amazed to find that things are in remarkably good order. I don't really remember what state we left things in once the last of the guests Disapparated, but Ginny was a great help, waving her wand here and there and straightening everything in sight.

I put the kettle on then stumble to the back porch, Boris in tow, and let him wander on the lawn. The only evidence that a wedding took place here last night is the tent, the sides of which are flapping gently in the early morning breeze.

I felt we should take a honeymoon out of town — Paris, I was thinking, because Hermione loves it so — but Kingsley counseled that as long as Death Eaters were still on the loose, travel just isn't safe for us or for Harry right about now. As I sit here on the back stairs, watching Boris romp in the tall grass beyond the lawn as the sun rises on the valley, I'm actually happy that we're here at home. It's good. Paris can wait.

The kettle whistles and I step inside to make a cuppa, have a swig of Hangover Potion, then come back out to watch Boris. As I sit on the top step, an Owl swoops down and drops a copy of the Sunday Prophet on my lap. And there, toward the bottom of Page 1, is the headline: "GOLDEN DUO RENEW THEIR VOWS! Exclusive pictures in the Society section, Page 58."

I roll my eyes and flip the pages, dreading what I'm going to find. Chumley Dunder had recommended that we allow a Prophet reporter and photographer to cover the wedding. We had granted an exclusive interview announcing the nuptials to The Quibbler a few weeks earlier — again, at Chum's urging. But Chum insisted that we had to throw The Prophet a bone and let them at least butt in to the reception. I didn't necessarily mind cooperating with The Quibbler, because Xenophilius and his crew have been fair in their coverage of us, particularly during the Malfoy
trial. I was totally opposed to The Prophet, however, just on principle. That is, until Chum reminded me how tough that Leaky Cauldron exposé was on Hermione and that, if we barred The Prophet access, they'd be more likely to write something nasty about us. Tossers.

I really couldn't have cared less about media coverage one way or the other. But Chum says we're in the public eye, like it or not, and we're going to have to learn how to deal with it.

OK, here's Page 58. And …

… hmm. Maybe it won't be that bad.

There's a giant picture of Hermione and me after the ceremony — we barred the reporter and photographer from attending the bonding itself, only granting them access to the dinner party afterward, and I'm still glad we did. I sit on the steps and gaze at the photograph for a minute as it repeats, over and over: Me putting my arm about her shoulder, her wrapping her arm around my waist and looking up at me with a sweet smile. Gods, she was beautiful yesterday. Not that she isn't always, but she was especially so then.

Other photos are sprinkled throughout the page: Harry giving his toast … Neville and Luna, laughing … Dad throwing his arm around Mum's shoulder. So far, so good.

Beneath the giant photo of me and Hermione, there's this. I start reading, bracing myself for The Prophet's usual nonsense.

oooOOOooo

THE WEDDING OF THE YEAR!

Exclusive photos: Two members of The Golden Trio — the Chosen One's best mates — renew their matrimonial bonds in an intimate ceremony that includes only close friends, family, and your trusty Prophet correspondent, Society Page Editor Palanca Toggle. Come along with us for this exclusive glimpse of the social event of the year.

By Palanca Toggle
Sunday, 29 August 1999

They're already bonded, it's true, but that didn't stop war heroes Hermione Granger-Weasley and Ronald Weasley from renewing their vows last night in an intimate garden ceremony at their home in a countryside location that remains undisclosed for security reasons.

It's a rare day when two Order of Merlin First Class honorees are united in magical matrimony, but only family and the famous couple's very closest friends witnessed the ceremony on a warm and lovely late-summer evening. The Prophet, however, was granted exclusive access to the afterparty, and it proved to be a gathering of what's coming to be known in Ministry circles as The New Order, leaders committed to the post-war ideals of the Shacklebolt administration.

As Ms. Granger-Weasley is Minister for Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt's top policy aide, it comes as no surprise that he made the guest list, as did Mr. Weasley's boss, Auror Corps Commander Bernard Brocklehurst, who was never far from the side of Shirley Riddlesworth, the Law Enforcement Division's ace prosecutor and a mentor to Ms. Granger-Weasley. Other notable names in attendance included Hogwarts Headmistress Minerva McGonagall and Ministry Chief of Protocol Sir Chumley Dunder, as well as Diagon Alley mega-merchant George Weasley and his girlfriend Angelina Johnson, star Chaser of the Holyhead Harpies quidditch team, plus Apprentice Auror and leader of the Hogwarts student rebellion Neville Longbottom, who spent
much of the evening gazing quite fondly, we noticed, at Luna Lovegood, recent Hogwarts graduate and daughter of Quibbler Publisher Xenophilius Lovegood.

None other than The Chosen One, Harry Potter, was chosen, if you’ll forgive the pun, to stand at Mr. Weasley’s side as best man during the ceremony, and Ms. Granger-Weasley was attended by longtime friend Ginevra Weasley, who, with Mr. Longbottom, led the Hogwarts student resistance in the final year of the Second Wizarding War. Ms. Weasley, her flaming red locks contrasting becomingly with her graceful, dark blue satin gown, is seen in frequent company with Mr. Potter about town, but well-placed sources insist to The Prophet that they are "just friends." Judging by how closely Ms. Weasley and Mr. Potter were sitting next to one another at the wedding banquet, The Prophet has reason to doubt the veracity of those reports.

The bride looked stunning in a simple and exquisite floor-length, pearl-colored silk crepe gown with a gently scooped neckline that reminded this reporter very much of the dress worn by muggle society doyenne Carolyn Bessette when she married John F. Kennedy Jr., son of the former muggle president of the United States, three years ago. Not since the wedding of Lady Diana Spencer to Prince Charles has a wedding dress set off such a sartorial storm as Ms. Bessette's did in both the wizarding and the muggle fashion worlds, and Ms. Bessette's influence could hardly have been realized on a more suitable subject than Ms. Granger-Weasley, whose slender figure was shown to best advantage in this gown's column cut and straightforward sleeveless silhouette, which she accentuated with tulle silk fingerless gloves that extended past her elbows. Her dark, curly hair falling loose over her shoulders and crowned by a fingertip gossamer veil of hand-rolled tulle silk edged in ivory satin ribbon, Ms. Granger-Weasley walked down the aisle carrying a bouquet of creamy white roses bound by a satin sash that matched Mr. Weasley's dark blue, smartly cut muggle suit — a nod, Mr. Weasley said, to his wife's muggle parentage. "Understated, elegant and timeless," is what Prophet Fashion Editor Hella Vackostume declared when shown our exclusive photos of the couple's ensemble. We couldn't agree more.

Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger-Weasley reportedly took their original bonding vows during the war, with no witnesses. Though the vows they took back then are magically binding, the two of them promised one another they would hold a proper ceremony with family and friends present once the war was over. "We really owe it to our parents," Mr. Weasley said in a private interview before the festivities. "We wanted to share this with them."

Both sets of parents were, of course, beaming as The Prophet circulated amongst the party-goers following the ceremony. The bride's parents, Hugh Granger and wife Eleanor, muggles who reside in Cambridgeshire, posed for photos with the groom's parents, Arthur Weasley, recently promoted to head of the Ministry's Post-War Reconciliation Task Force, and his wife Molly.

"We couldn't be prouder of the two of them," said Mr. Arthur Weasley, "and we have been blessed to have the Grangers become part of our family."

Following the ceremony, a sumptuous feast was held in the Weasley's back garden, decorated charmingly with candles, floating lanterns and arrangements of cream-colored roses.

Other honored guests at the festivities: Gringotts Bank executive William Weasley, his wife, Fleur, and daughter Victoire; internationally known dragon expert Charles Weasley, who Portkeyed in from Romania for the occasion; Ministry Undersecretary for Procurement Percy Weasley and girlfriend Audrey Bagnold; Hogwarts faculty member Rubeus Hagrid; recent Hogwarts graduates Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas, and Mr. Potter's godson Theodore Lupin, accompanied by his grandmother, Andromeda Tonks.
Well, all in all, it could have been a lot worse, couldn't it. I know Chum leaned on this Toggle woman quite heavily to keep things above-board, and it must have worked, because this is about as close to fair as The Prophet has ever been to us. Even then, of course, it wouldn't be a Prophet story if it didn't contain its share of inaccuracies. I mean, Harry and Ginny are "just friends"? Who the hell are these "well-placed sources" Toggle's talking to? And the implication that Kingsley, Brocklehurst and Shirley were there for brown-nosing purposes is ridiculous, too — Hermione fought side-by-side with Kingsley during the war, for one thing, and Shirley's become a close friend to her. Brocklehurst? Well, as uncomfortable as it was for me at first, he and I have been thrown together socially quite a bit lately — ever since Hermione successfully meddled with his love life, that is. For weeks, I got a lot of laughs at Brocklehurst's expense, because he looked so hilariously lovestruck, practically tripping over his own feet even at his Ministry office, bumping into things with a brainless grin on his face — that is, until Harry whacked me on the back of the head and reminded me that I've been known to look the same way. Eff you, Harry.

I laugh and take another sip of my tea, which has gone cold. I don't have a wand, but I smile to myself and point my pinky at the cup, summoning just enough Raw Magic to heat it back up. Gods, this Raw Magic thing has advantages for a lazy sod like me.

I scan the garden for Boris and watch him for a few minutes as he happily chases gnomes. If I had known how effective a dog can be at keeping a garden gnome-free, I would have talked Mum into getting a pooch years ago.

My eye returns to the photo of Hermione and me. She truly was magnificent in that dress — though I would never have described it the way Toggle did. I mean, what the hell is tulle, anyway? All I know is, she looked even more beautiful than I had always dreamed she would be. Months ago, as she started thinking about what she might wear, I told her I had only one request: that she not do anything to straighten her hair. I like it just the way it is, and I especially like it when she lets it fall free about her shoulders. So I could feel my smile widen as I saw her emerge from the house on her father's arm in the light of the setting sun, her long curls framing her face beneath her veil.

I hadn't expected her to wear a veil over her face, but she explained later that her mother insisted it was a family tradition, and so it became my job to lift the veil from her face at the end of the ceremony and to fold it back without dislodging Aunt Muriel's goblin-made tiara, which was holding the veil in place. I managed it somehow. But there was something about looking at her through that tissue-thin veil that made my heart pound just a little bit harder. It made her look that much more precious and delicate, somehow, that much more like a gift that I was bloody lucky to get to open, if that makes any sense, and she is a gift, the greatest gift I've ever gotten. That was the thought in my head as she walked toward me and Harry, with Ginny following behind, through the garden and between the rows of chairs set up beneath the tent — and, as I have done so many times before, I marveled that this is really my life. After all the hell we've been through, we've made it. We're here. Sure, things aren't perfect, we still have struggles, but that's life, isn't it. Whatever else Fate throws at us, we'll handle it together. Always have.

I whistle for Boris and he lopes up the hill toward me, his ears flopping against his jowls, and he follows me into the house. I get a fresh cup of tea, steal a hunk of the pound cake Mum brought yesterday and then shuffle to the front porch and flop down onto the porch swing, stretching my legs out to rest on the ottoman. Boris curls up in the sun at the top of the stairs, and in the distance I see Crookshanks prowling amid Hermione's roses.

Yet another Owl comes my way — it's Ginny's new owl, Mortimer. He lands on the arm of the swing and holds out a note to me. I take it, feed him a piece of pound cake, and he takes off.
Good morning, lovebirds!

Just a quick note to say congratulations again to you, Ron and Hermione. I've seen my share of weddings, and yours was far and away the most beautiful. It was beautiful because it was simple and heartfelt, and I love you both so much.

Love,

Ginny.

P.S. — Yes, this really is Ginny. Don't worry, Ron — I'll be back to my usual self, taking the mickey out of you at every opportunity, but not until the glow of last night's festivities wears off a bit!

It was heartfelt, wasn't it. Mum had been a bit upset at first that we didn't want to make a bigger deal of it, inviting all the cousins and people we barely know, hiring a band, bringing in a caterer, etc., etc. But she listened to reason eventually. We told her we wanted to keep it to the people who are really most important to us right now. Just a small gathering, the ceremony, and then a dinner party — with some dancing if the mood struck. Of course, she got vexed all over again when we told her we didn't want to have that little spirit wizard feller do the honors for us — that we wanted to do it ourselves — but she eventually came 'round. I reckoned I'd handled the spellwork well enough on my own back at Grimmauld Place, and I wanted to do it again.

I had expected to be nervous, but I really wasn't. In fact, I was dead calm. That's what happens, I reckon, when you're sure about something and you don't mind anyone knowing it.

Hugh shook my hand then placed Hermione's hand in mine. He sat down next to Eleanor and I turned to face the group, assembled in two rows of chairs, with Hagrid standing at the back, his head grazing the roof of the tent.

Hermione gave my hand a squeeze and, with that, I started.

"Hermione and I took our bonding vows on the night of 30 August 1997, at a time when, frankly, we couldn't be sure we'd live to see this day," I said, and Mum dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. The waterworks had begun. "We were young to take that step — still are, I reckon. But the magic proves that I was right to hope that Hermione might love me as much as I love her, because the spells we cast that night bonded us eternally. They didn't have to, as you know. If Hermione and I weren't meant to be together, the magic wouldn't have worked. I thank Heaven it did."

I turned to Hermione and gave her a little smile. Then she spoke, sounding every bit as confident as I felt. "On that night two years ago," she said, "Ron and I promised each other that, if we survived the war, we would renew our bonds with our friends and family around us. Thank you for being here to share in our joy."

She looked to me and gave me a small nod.

For a second, my mind flitted to the way she looked that night at Grimmauld Place, looking so small and innocent in her oversized white terrycloth dressing gown. I smiled at the memory, then returned to the present.

I planted a kiss on the back of her hand and stepped away from her. She turned, handed her
bouquet to Ginny, and faced me again.

I pointed my wand at the floor and turned around, saying the incantation "Nuptiae Inardesco." A circle of cool, low-lying yellow flames formed on the temporary floor beneath my feet. Then I straightened up to my full height and addressed her, looking deep into her eyes, which were already welling up with tears. "I, Ronald Bilius Weasley, invite you, Hermione Jean Granger, to join with me in magical communion, to promise to love and stand by one another, forsaking all others, in life and beyond, where we shall meet, remember, and love again."

I lifted my right hand and she took it in hers, threw her shoulders back, and stepped into the circle to join me, her lips curling upward in a smile, even as they wobbled and trembled a bit.

I smiled back at her, placed my wand back inside the inner pocket of my suitcoat, and took both her hands in mine. This was it. My heart pounded, not with nervousness, but with sheer, crazy, shameless joy. Gods, I thought, she's willing to do all this again. With me. I'll never stop being thrilled by it. "Do you, Hermione Jean Granger, promise to be my wedded and magically bonded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, in plenty and in poverty, in sickness and in health, to love, to protect and to cherish, 'til death do us part?"

"I do," she said, her lower lip trembling, and I so wanted to wipe the tear that fell from her eye at that moment. Then she said, in a voice that was firm and steady despite her tears, "Do you, Ronald Bilius Weasley, promise to be my wedded and magically bonded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, in plenty and in poverty, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, 'til death do us part?"

"I do," I say without hesitation, squeezing her little hands in mine for emphasis.

She sniffled a bit, then peeled the glove off her left hand and passed it to Ginny.

Removing my wand from my breast pocket, I Conjured a satiny piece of fabric and held it in my left hand as I lifted my wand to make an incision across the palm of my right hand with the incantation "Matrimonio Intersecare." It didn't hurt as much as I expected. I then did the same to Hermione's left hand, and I watched her face as I did it, hoping I wasn't hurting her. She didn't even wince.

Then, I placed her hand in mine, pressing our palms together and wrapping the satin cloth around them both several times. I tilted my head to catch her gaze again, wordlessly wondering if she was all right — and she smiled back as if to say she was. So I knew I could keep going.

I stood tall and placed my wand back in my pocket, then laid my free hand on top of hers. "Hermione Jean Granger, from this day forward, my fate and thine are forever intertwined. By the life that courses within my blood, I take thee to my hand, my heart, my magic and my spirit, to be my chosen one. To desire thee and be desired by thee, to possess thee and be possessed by thee, without sin or shame, for naught can exist in the purity of my love for thee."

And that's when I felt the feeling I remember so well from the first time when took our vows — that warm sensation that spread from the point where our wounds met, up through my arms and then into my chest and throughout my entire body. Only this time, it felt even more powerful than it did the first time — maybe because, back then, we only joined our fingertips. I couldn't be sure. I felt a throbbing at the point of contact between her hand and mine — almost as if my pulse and hers were connected somehow, beating in time. All I knew was the feeling of it was intense and
moving — and, for the first time in the whole ceremony, my vision started to blur with tears. This was real. This was forever.

And then I got to repeat the part I always liked best in every bonding ceremony I ever attended. "Ye are now blood of my blood and bone of my bone," I said with a hoarse whisper, because I felt pretty choked up at this point. "I give ye my body, that we two might be one. I give ye my spirit, 'til our life shall be done."

Hermione, by this point, wasn't even trying to stifle her tears. They were flowing freely down her cheeks, which had grown even pinker. She looked bloody gorgeous.

I unwrapped our hands and noticed that there was surprisingly little blood. I Vanished the cloth then cleaned and healed her palm, then mine, using Raw Magic via my index finger. I lifted her palm to my lips and kissed it, and she giggled softly. Still holding her left hand in my right, I turned to Harry, who handed me the wedding band that Hermione picked out so long ago at Jemm's. "Thanks, mate," I said quietly, and he simply nodded. That's when I noticed that Harry was teary, too. Holy shit.

I looked at the ring in my fingers — it was so little. She's so little, I thought. As mental as that sounds, that's what I was thinking at that moment. Gods, I thought, there's so much power in that little frame of hers. I guess the enormity of the responsibility I was taking for her was hitting me again, as it did the first time. But I just sort of gulped it down and thanked Merlin that I was being given the honor of looking after her — because it is an honor. She's an effing national treasure, she is, with that mind of hers, and I reminded myself for the hundredth time that I was the luckiest bloke alive to be the one who got to care for her and keep her safe.

I took the ring and held it to the third finger of her left hand. "I hereto pledge thee my troth," I said, sliding the ring down her the base of her finger. "With my body I thee worship, with all my worldly goods and with my name I thee endow. Have no fear, and let not the ways nor words of the unenlightened give you unease, for there is no greater magic in this world than two people joined together in love."

At that moment, the windy, current-like feeling that I recalled from last time swirled around us, then the familiar cylinder of shimmering, snowy-looking light rose from the flames on the floor and enveloped us and slowly dissolved.

I let go of her hands, gently grasped the front edge of her veil, and lifted it up and over her head, fully revealing her smiling, tear-stained face to me. I took her damp cheeks in my hands and bent to kiss her lightly, and that's when our family and friends, who had been remarkably quiet up to that point, leapt to their feet and started clapping, whistling and cheering.

We broke the kiss and laughed against one another's lips. "Bloody hell, I think there are other people at this wedding, love," I said, loud enough for the rest of the group to hear.

"Really?" she answered, just as loudly. "For the past few minutes, it's only been you."

That earned us another round of whoops and hollers, and then the crowd descended on us. Mum, who was openly weeping, crushed me and then Hermione in her arms. Eleanor, who was no less tearful than Mum, couldn't stop kissing us both on the cheeks. Dad hugged me tighter than I can remember him ever doing, and even Hugh hugged me long and hard, which I don't think he'd ever really done before then. "I'm proud of you, son," he said in my ear, and I couldn't help it — I had to pretend to cough to cover up the sob that erupted in my throat.

Then came George. "Blimey, I can't believe you did that all by yourself the first time without
mucking it up, little bro," he said. "Hermione must have helped."

"Nope," Hermione piped up from behind me. "It was 100 percent Ron, both times," she added proudly.

George smirked. "I should have known he'd be capable of something that complex when the benefits were so obvious," he said with a smirk, then punched me in the arm and wrapped me in a hug.

"Shut it," I answered, but hugged him back just as firmly.

After I'd been hugged, kissed and had my back slapped hard by everyone in the crowd — including Ginny, who was so tearful she was nearly speechless — I came across Harry, who had been hanging back and letting the others have at us. Hermione, at that moment, joined us. We stood there, the three of us, looking back and forth among each other for a minute and then … it was like we all agreed to do it at once … we pulled one another into a three-way hug and, blimey, Harry was crying. I can't think of too many times when he's cried like that — at least not in front of me or any of the rest of us, for that matter — but he was nigh unto blubbering, and I think he was glad I had my back to the rest of the group because he couldn't really be seen so well with me in the way.

He sniffled a bit and Hermione took her arm from around my back to cradle his cheek in her hand. She kissed his other cheek and he looked at her, regaining some semblance of control of himself.

"You both know, don't you? You know how much … how much …" he sputtered before his voice trailed off.

I nodded. "We know, mate," I said.

"It's still the three of us, Harry," said Hermione, still stroking his cheek with her thumbs. "Always. Always."

He smiled and then wiped his face with his hands. "Good," he said, shaking his head as if to clear it. "Thanks."

Dinner was, of course, splendid. Mum supervised the preparations. She knows I love her herbed roast beef — and Hermione has become a fan — so she and Eleanor made several, along with potatoes au gratin, "accidental green beans," as Hermione has come to call them ever since I fell in love with the almonds she unintentionally burnt, homemade rolls, salad, strawberries and cream, an enormous iced fruitcake, and scads of champagne, butterbeer, Ogden's and ale.

Since the party was small — just 25 of us, counting me and Hermione — my brilliant bride had decided long ago that she wanted us all to sit at one table. She wrote a rather elaborate spell beforehand and shortly amazed us all by performing it, flourishing her wand beneath the tent. In an instant, a giant, round table appeared, covered with a dark blue tablecloth that matched the color of Harry's and my suits. At the center was large arrangement of ivory-colored and pale yellow roses — not too tall, I remember her saying, so that we could all see one another over them. The flowers were surrounded by small candles. With another flick of her wand, place settings appeared — china, silverware, glasses, placecards marking where each of us were to sit, the whole bit — and then the chairs that our guests had sat upon to watch the ceremony arranged themselves around the table. One more flick of Hermione's wand, and music started playing — a selection of muggle music that she had told me her Dad quite liked, some bloke named Armstrong and a lady called Ella Fitzgerald.

With that, we sat down and Mum Accioed the first course. I hadn't expected to be so hungry, but I was, and I tucked in greedily.
Thank Merlin Mum made three roasts — I don't think there was a bit left over, it was so delicious. The potatoes made the rounds of the table several times, and the champagne flowed freely. By the time we got around to making the traditional speeches, I was quite content — on any other day, I might have seriously considered taking a nap, I felt so good. But it was time to stand and say what was in my heart, if I could. It's a good job I took the time to write some things down on a notecard the night before. I had it in my pocket as backup but, as I rose to my feet, I suddenly realized that I'd be able to wing it well enough.

I refilled my champagne glass and lifted it, placing my other hand on Hermione's shoulder. She looked up at me and laid her hand on top of mine, giving me a warm smile. I couldn't help it — I just had to kiss her just then, and I did. "Knock it off!" George moaned, throwing a dinner roll at my head.

"All right, all right," I muttered. "I was going to say thanks to all of you for being here and sharing this moment with us, and that sentiment still applies to the rest of you. But to my brother George, I can only say this." And, with that, I quickly picked up the dinner roll he'd thrown at me and bounced it quite smartly off the top of George's head.

"What I'd rather do is tell you about my brilliant wife," I said. "Harry asked me the other day if I remembered when I first knew that I loved Hermione as something more than a friend, and I know it's odd, but I can't really answer that question. That's because, as soon as I worked up the nerve to tell her how I felt — it seems so long ago now — something shifted for me. You see, I had already come to feel that Hermione and Harry and I had been friends since the day I was born — even though I didn't meet them until I was 11. It was sort of the same thing once I declared myself to her. Suddenly, it seemed to me that I had loved her all my life as well, that I was born to love her, and honestly, I reckon I was."

Hermione clasped my hand in hers at that point and pressed the back of it to her lips, then she held it tightly in both her hands for the remainder of my speech.

"It's an amazing thing to be married to someone you have known and loved since you were 11," I said. "You would think there's nothing new to learn in such a situation — that nothing about the other person could possibly surprise you anymore. Maybe it's proof of just how wondrous and amazing Hermione is that this isn't the case — at least, not for me — because I continue to be fascinated by her, to see undiscovered depths in her, to be touched by her immense heart, to be awed by her strength. Everyone knows she's the brightest witch of her age, and that would be enough to make her one of the most remarkable people walking the Earth right now, but she's more than that. Far more. And I thank the universe every day, every goddamned day, that she's chosen to walk the Earth with me."

"Hermione," I concluded, raising my glass. And everyone repeated, "Hermione," and drank 'til their glasses were empty.

I sat and Hermione planted a gigantic kiss on my lips. "Knock it off!" George yelled again, tossing the dinner roll back. This time, Hermione caught it in her hand before it could land and threw it right back at him. I beamed with pride.

I'd already warned Hugh that I wanted to speak first, since Hermione and I were hosting, and he didn't seem to mind this upending of tradition. This meant it was his turn next, and he seemed more than ready. He kissed Eleanor and then stood, clearing his throat and apparently gathering his thoughts.

"A father looks forward to his daughter's wedding day with a mix of hope and trepidation," he said, planting his hands in his pockets. "When you hold a helpless little baby in your arms, then a tender
little girl, it's hard to imagine ever letting her go, ever placing her fate in anyone else's hands. And yet, one must eventually."

He paused and wiped his eye, smiling apologetically, before continuing.

"All Hermione's life, I've wondered what kind of man she might wind up marrying. Because, after all, Hermione is no ordinary girl. From the cradle onward, Hermione has always been exceptional — we all know this. The discovery of her magical talents, of course, mystified her mother and me but, over the years, we've come to see her magic as just another aspect of her tremendous intelligence and unconquerable spirit. It was difficult sending her to Hogwarts at the age of 11 — an act of faith, really — because, for us, it meant we were giving her over to a world that was beyond our knowledge and comprehension, a world where she belonged and we, potentially, truly didn't. She is our only child, as you know, and so the pain of this separation was perhaps greater for us than it might be for other muggle parents who send their children to a magical school like Hogwarts. But we trusted, deep down, that Hogwarts was the best path for Hermione — that if she was born with these abilities, it must have been for a reason, and therefore it was for the best that she obtain the education required to make the most of them." He smiled wistfully and looked down at Eleanor, who dabbed her tear-stained cheeks with her napkin.

"I'd be lying if I said I was thrilled to learn that Hermione had gotten married along the way," Hugh added, drawing a laugh from the group. "I worried that she was too young. I worried that her marriage to a wizard would only increase the distance between her world and ours. I worried that the young man she married couldn't possibly understand the gift he'd been given, to have won the love of someone as extraordinary as Hermione is. I worried that the young man she'd married would be unable to care for her as she deserves. I worried that he might stifle her, might feel overshadowed by her, might learn to resent her for her outsized abilities."

Looking at Hermione, I saw that she was looking up at her father, tears streaming down her cheeks. I reached my arm around her shoulder and she leaned against me, eyes still fixed on Hugh.

"I didn't have much say in the matter. I had to learn to live with Hermione's decision," Hugh continued, lifting his glass of muggle ale. "Of course, Hermione's decision was the right one. I don't know how I could have expected anything less from her. She is Hermione, after all. The young man she chose is absolutely the right man. He's proved it again and again in just the short time I've known him, and I know he will continue to do so. I was blind and now I see, as an old muggle song says. I've come to think of this young man as a son — a son who perhaps doesn't know how very much we appreciate his love of family, and how very much we appreciate that he thinks of us as such because, in many ways, he's brought our daughter back to us. And so, I say, To Ron and Hermione."

"To Ron and Hermione," everyone chimed back, even as Hermione rose and flung her arms about her father's shoulders, pressing her cheek to his. Hugh laughed and reached out behind her to shake my hand.

"Thanks, sir," I said, looking up at him from my seat.

"Thank you, son," he whispered back.

Finally, it was Harry's turn to speak. He clinked his fork against his glass to get everyone's attention, but it really wasn't necessary — the whole group was riveted to him.

"I revealed much of what I feel about Ron and Hermione at the Order of Merlin ceremony a while back, and I believe all of us were there for that occasion," he began. "But what I spoke of then was only what I could say before a crowd of hundreds. Now that we've pared it down to this circle of
people, I think I can say much, much more.

"I grew up with my muggle aunt, her husband and her son," Harry began. "For the first 11 years of my life, they were what I thought family was. However reluctantly, they fed me and they put a roof over my head — albeit in a broom closet under the front stairs, but still, it was a roof." A grim smile came to his face.

"Then, at Hogwarts, I got to know Ron and, soon after, Hermione. We bonded almost instantly. They shared my joys and my sorrows. They were my sounding board in times of crisis. They worried over the problems before me. They risked detentions to go with me to visit Hagrid's hut." Hagrid boomed out a laugh, and Harry laughed right back. Then he sobered up again. "They had my back in battle. They cheered my victories. They fussed over me when I didn't get enough rest, nagged me when I didn't get enough to eat, badgered me when my grades fell. Well, truth be told, it was only Hermione who did the fussing, nagging and badgering." Everyone laughed, and Hermione said in mock indignation, "Where's that dinner roll?"

"At any rate," Harry continued, shooting Hermione a joking glare, "this is a long-winded way of saying that Hermione and Ron became my new definition of family, the definition I still live by. The fact that we share no blood connection hardly matters — not after what we've been through. I've often wondered how that bond between the three of us was formed so easily, so solidly, so nearly instantaneously all those many years ago. It might seem a bit mad that Ron and Hermione were willing to lay down their lives for me when we only knew one another for the briefest of times back then. But I reckon it's a bit like when a new baby is born. When I first laid eyes on Teddy, and then Victoire, I knew in my heart I'd do anything for them — not because I knew them terribly well at all, but because I knew I was meant to know them, and I loved them both as soon as I'd set eyes on them."

At that moment, Teddy put potatoes in his hair, and Harry laughed as Andromeda cleaned it with her wand.

"I'm going to betray a confidence and tell you that Ron has said he thinks he, Hermione and I were somehow fated to be together in this life — that it was prophesied somewhere, somehow, before any of us were born. He thinks I don't fully understand what he's talking about, that I don't completely agree. But I have to tell him, right now, that I do understand, and I do agree. What else could explain that instant connection, that spark of recognition, that came to me when we first met? What else could explain a friendship that's endured so much?"

Harry got a bit choked up at this point. He paused and raised his fist to his lips before reaching down and taking a sip of water. Afterward, he said, "Here's something else I couldn't talk about at the Order of Merlin ceremony, but I can tell you now because you are all near and dear to me. This is the first time I've spoken of it, even to Ron and Hermione." He cleared his throat again to regain control of his voice. "There was a time, after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, when I encountered Voldemort in the Ministry Atrium. He attacked, attempted to kill me. I was saved by Dumbledore, who dueled with Voldemort. After a time, Voldemort Disapparated and attempted to enter my body, to Possess me. I could hear him," Harry said, pointing to his head, "in here, and I could feel him," he continued, pointing to his chest, "in here. It was excruciating. I was dimly aware that Dumbledore was kneeling next to me, but all I could really concentrate on was the battle going on inside my head. Images from my life and from Voldemort's were mixing together in my mind, and I sensed for a moment that he was stronger than I was, that he would prevail. But then, I remembered. I remembered Love — what Dumbledore always taught us about its power. And I began to beat him back with memories of every bit of Love I'd ever experienced," he said.

"Molly, you came to me, and the memory of Sirius hugging me at Grimmauld Place, and Lupin
and Tonks sharing stories around the Christmas table. And I could feel Voldemort's grip on me weakening," he said. "But what chased Voldemort out of me for good were the memories that came next, the memories of Ron and Hermione, laughing with me in the Common Room, marching down to the Great Hall with me for breakfast, being lulled to sleep on the Hogwarts Express, stumbling out of the Three Broomsticks on a Hogsmeade weekend … and soon, I felt pity for Voldemort, actual pity, because I realized I had something that he, a fellow orphan boy like me, never did. I had Love. And I told him so. I told him I felt sorry for him. I felt sorry for him that he had never known Love. And that was more than he could take. He exited my body. He ran from me, as fast as he could go. You, my family, helped do that for me. You're my family, all of you, far more than those people who let me sleep in their broom closet all those years ago. You're my family, and it all started with Ron and Hermione. Ron and Hermione gave that to me, and it's a debt I can never repay."

Then, Harry reached down and picked up his bottle of butterbeer. "Ron and Hermione," he said. While everyone else joined him in the toast, I rose and approached him. We stood before one another for a moment, and then I threw my arms around him in a crushed hug in probably the tightest hug I'd ever given him in my life.

The whole party cheered and clapped, but we kept hugging, and the only thing that snapped me out of it was the loud honking sound of Hagrid blowing his nose into his enormous handkerchief.

I'm lifted out of my thoughts by the sound of the screen door opening and out comes Hermione, still a little sleepy-eyed, in her pyjamas. "There you are," she says. "Imagine my surprise, awakening the day after our wedding — well, our second wedding — to find myself quite alone in my bed," she says with a grin as she curls herself up next to me on the swing.

I wrap an arm around her and set my empty teacup down on the railing. "Sorry, love, but you looked so peaceful sleeping there, I didn't have the heart to wake you," I say, giving her forehead a quick peck. "Besides, Boris wanted his walkies, and I wanted my Hangover Potion."

"Oh dear," she says, kissing the side of my neck. "How are you feeling now?"

"Never felt better, love. Honestly. Never felt better."
Chapter Summary

A security breach is uncovered.

Chapter 31: Tangled Webs

I laugh to myself as I collapse onto the pillows and catch my breath, Hermione panting in exhaustion by my side. When I saw Fred in The In-Between, he needled me about how often Hermione and I go at it. Well, since we renewed our bonds on Saturday, we've been rutting like a couple of monkeys. I can't seem to get enough of her. Thank Merlin we took the week off following the bonding just to relax and have some semblance of a honeymoon. I'm honestly not sure I could get through a normal workday lately without Apparating home once an hour or so to give her a good, thorough rogering.

Hermione's convinced it's something to do with the deepening of the Matrimonio Intersecare bond — and who am I to argue? All I know is, I see her, I want her. And fortunately, she wants me, too.

"Oh, darling," she purrs as she curls up next to me and drapes her arm across my chest. "You are absolutely insatiable."

"If that means I want to shag you rotten every chance I get, then yeah, I'm insatiable, love," I reply — and she, of course, smacks my chest lightly and huffs before giggling into my neck. "And you wouldn't have it any other way, woman — don't pretend otherwise," I add.

"You see right through me," she says with a smirk.

"Besides, if you didn't want me to throw you over my shoulder, carry you up here and have my way with you, then you shouldn't have worn those knee-high boots and that miniskirt out to dinner with Ginny and Harry tonight," I continue. "You were asking for it, you naughty girl."

"Mmm," she hums against my chin, where she's been planting kisses across my stubbled jawline — I haven't shaved in days, and she says she likes it that way. "Perhaps awakening the caveman in you was my plan all along."

I laugh and flip her over so she's lying beneath me again. "You little minx," I murmur, rubbing my nose alongside hers. "Just when I think I'm completely in charge here in our private little sanctuary, you prove that I'm actually quite under your spell."

She tilts her chin upward and presses her lips to mine, and I plunge my tongue deep inside her mouth. We snog like that for a while, then I slide my lips to her ear and then to her neck, savoring the taste of her skin.

"That's the funny thing about that particular spell," Hermione whispers into my ear. "It goes 'round and 'round, doesn't it. I win when I lose."

"Hmm, I think I know precisely what you mean," I reply, sliding my hand from her bum up her side and to her breast. I lower my mouth to her and suck roughly, and she grasps my cheeks and
then runs her fingers deep into my hair. "Oh gods, Ronald, yes," she breathes. "Yes, darling."

Just the sound of her breathing out my name drives me wild, and I realize that I am, quite amazingly, hard as a rock again and ready to go. I've had her in a series of acrobatic positions today — most recently, with her bent over the side of the bed, her bum presented to me like the most delicious treat in the world — but right now there's nothing I'd like more than to simply keep her tucked beneath me, to hold her down by her arms and show her who's still boss. And judging by the way she's moaning and cooing and writhing beneath me, I have a feeling she wouldn't mind one little bit.

"Open up for me, Little Dove," I say, pressing my hand to her inner thigh. "That's right," I add as I position myself above her.

"Oh, please darling, please," she whispers, wiggling her hips so her center, already slick and warm, is rubbing against the tip of my prick. "Yes, please," she moans.

I shake my head slightly, then move myself teasingly up and down, rubbing against her in the way I know makes her mental. "Tell me, love. Tell me what you want."

She smiles then shakes her head and bites her lower lip. Oh, I think, you're going to play it that way, are you? All right, then.

I pull away quickly, straddling her and sitting up just long enough to grab her wrists and pin them over her head. She yelps playfully but seems satisfied to let me hold her arms down with one hand while I prop myself up with the other and return my cock to her center. "Tell me," I say in a demanding growl, and she positively whimpers, her lips curling upward in a sultry smile. "Tell me what I'm going to do to you."

"Mmm," she hums. "You're going to fuck me, aren't you," she says, taking particular pleasure in pronouncing the word "fuck," knowing that anytime a swear word passes those sweet lips of hers, it drives me wild.

I nod. "Yes, my dear, I am. And how am I going to fuck you?"

"Hard," she says, wrapping her legs around my waist. "Please, fuck me hard, Ronald."

Well, all right then. I sink into her roughly, and she hisses in pleasure, pressing her heels against my bum. "Oh, Ronnnnnnnnnnn," she says in an undertone as I press my entire weight against her. "Please, please, don't stop."

"Not until you come for me, Little Dove," I whisper, my forehead pressed against hers. "I want you to come for me."

"Mmm," she hums, pressing her wrists upward against my hand and then moaning her approval when I force them back down. "You're so big ... so big and strong ... gods, yes."

I sink my face into the space between her cheek and her shoulder and suck hard on her neck, which I know she likes because now she's crying out loudly — "Oh, yes! Yes!" — and bucking her hips against mine.

I want her to come but, with her arms pinned down, she can't touch herself, which is usually the way she gets herself going. Fortunately for us both, I know my foul mouth is her ultimate weakness, so I turn it up a notch to help her along.

"That's right," I mumble against her neck. "You like it when I take you like this, don't you?"
"Mmm," she answers between pants and moans, sounding mildly mental.

"You like it when I take what's mine," I add.

"Mmm, yes," she whimpers.

"You like being fucked by your big, strong knight, don't you?"

"Yessssss," she hisses.

"You belong to me, don't you? You're all mine."

"All yours, Ronald, always."

"Mine," I say lowly, thrusting away at her. "Mine."

And then I feel the familiar pulsing as her head tilts back and her mouth opens wide. She's coming. "Yeah, Mione, that's right. Come. Come for me," I pant. Soon she relaxes somewhat and moans in satisfaction. I'm savoring every stroke, loving the feeling of being deep inside her, and once she regains her senses, she starts urging me on.

"Oh, yes, Ronald … come inside me, darling, come deep inside me," she rasps. She must know I'm teetering on the edge. "Plant your seed inside me, Ron, please, I need you," she adds … and that's the first time she's ever said anything like that while we're making love … anything about, well, knocking her up … and the thought drives me over the brink … and before I know it, I'm riding the crest of my own orgasm, grunting as I shoot off inside her for the third time today. Gods, if I felt spent before, I'm positively legless now.

After a moment, I let go of her wrists and move as if to roll off of her, but she wraps her arms about my shoulders and nuzzles my neck. "No, please, not yet," she whispers. "Stay while you can."

I smile and prop myself up on my elbows so I can really see her.

She smiles back a bit sheepishly. "I just like this," she says. She really doesn't have to explain, but I don't stop her, because I love hearing it. "I like feeling you inside me. I like being so snug here beneath you. Stay," she whispers, rubbing her palms against my chest. And, of course, I do. Because, all the macho pillow talk aside, her wish is my command.

The following Monday, we're both back at work at the Ministry, and before I can even get my jacket off, an interdepartmental memo flies into the Auror Department staff room and lands on my desk. At the desk next to mine, I see that Harry has received one at precisely the same time.

oooOOOooo

TO: Ronald Weasley, Apprentice Auror
FROM: Bernard Brocklehurst, Head of Department
DATE: 6 September 1999
SUBJECT: Meeting — Classified Level A — Urgent

Weasley, your presence is required immediately. Proceed to my office as soon as you receive this memo. Your shift supervisor, Simmons, has been informed that you will be away for the better part of the morning. My secretary has been instructed to wave you in when you arrive.

BB
I look up and I realize that Harry's received the exact same memo. We both jump up from our desks and he meets me at the door to the hallway that leads to Brocklehurst's suite.

"What the hell do you think this is about, mate?" Harry whispers.

"Hell if I know," I answer.

"Nice way to start the first day back from your honeymoon, eh?" he says, nudging me with his elbow.

I can feel my ears redden and I rub the back of my neck as we hustle down the hall.

"Ah, Potter, Weasley, come in," Brocklehurst barks from behind his desk. I look around and see that, bloody hell, Hermione is here, as are Shirley Riddlesworth, Keith Hale, and the Minister himself. Next to Kingsley sits some bloke I've never laid eyes on before — a guy I'd guess is about Percy or Charlie's age, wearing a dark green robes and thick horn-rimmed glasses.

"Sorry, sir, I hope we haven't kept you waiting long," Harry says.

"No worries, Potter. Sit, sit," says Brocklehurst, gesturing to the only two available seats in the office.

I look at Hermione and she gives me a barely perceptible smile and a wink.

"Right. Now that we're all here, allow me to bring you up to speed. I'm not sure if all of you know Gibbons," he says, nodding to the green-robed guy. "Martin Gibbons, Hogwarts Class of '94," Brocklehurst continues. "He's been working as an Arithmantic consultant at the Ministry ever since, and has spent the past few weeks refining the memory charm first designed by Ms. Weasley for the Withersbane case."

Gibbons gives the group a smile and a little bow. Now I can connect a name with a face. Over dinner at the Burrow a few weeks back, Hermione mentioned working on spell code with this guy, and Percy has vouched for him being a decent enough chap, since they were both prefects at Hogwarts.

"Gibbons shared some recent findings with me, and I decided they were important enough that they merited bringing you all here, including the Minister," Brocklehurst says. "Gibbons, why don't you walk the group through what you showed me."

"Thank you, Commander," Gibbons says with a nod. Then he rises to Conjure a whiteboard. "First, let me say that the spellwork as originally written by Ms. Weasley here was marvelous — elegant, simple and effective. I reviewed her underlying Runic sequences and triplechecked her Arithmancy and found absolutely nothing lacking. In fact, I learned a few things — and I daresay that the Ministry should be able to make use of this spellwork on future cases, and as such, it will remain Classified. I've already recommended that we enter her incantation sequence for a patent, which should be coming through in the next several weeks, if my friend in the Ministry Department of Intellectual Property has anything to say about it."

He gives Hermione a little nod, and my chest puffs with pride. This will be Hermione's second spell patent since she joined the Ministry — and she's not yet 20 years old. Good Godric, she's amazing, she is. I steal a look at Harry, and he's got the same dopey grin on his face that I have. He looks at me and raises his eyebrows as if to say, *Yep, she's hot shit all right.*
"The only modification I could think to make to Ms. Weasley's original formula was to append a Trace on it — in other words, to add an incantation that would allow us to track the people with whom Withersbane may have shared Classified information," Gibbons added. "It took almost a week to work it out, but with Ms. Weasley's help I was able to crack the code two weeks ago. I couldn't have done it without her insights."

I'm so over the moon hearing this, I allow myself to picture grabbing Hermione and ravishing her atop Brocklehurst's enormous desk. But I chase that notion away as Gibbons speaks up again.

"As you know, Ms. Riddlesworth completed the prosecution of Withersbane's accomplices last week, and after we collected Withersbane's full memory under Veritaserum, we ran Ms. Weasley's memory spell on her with the additional Trace. Our findings were surprising."

He turns to the whiteboard, waves his wand at it, and something like a family tree appears — but we all understand immediately that this represents the people to whom Withersbane directly revealed Auror Corps secrets.

"Not surprisingly," Gibbons says, "Withersbane shared Classified information with her direct accomplices in the Hogwarts graduation ceremony attack — Knutsen, Snear, Gross, Hibbert and Dunmartin. None of these people were Aurors or known Death Eaters — merely Voldemort sympathizers and, thanks to Ms. Riddlesworth's prosecution, all are safely in Azkaban and their memories of Classified Ministry intelligence have been wiped clean via Ms. Weasley's spell. What was surprising, however — at least to me — was to find that Withersbane had shared Classified information with two known Death Eaters."

Fucking hell. An Auror in league with people in Voldemort's closest circle. It would have been unthinkable before the war. But, then again, lots of things were unthinkable back then, weren't they.

"The lesser of these was Augustus Rookwood," Gibbons adds. "Withersbane was on security duty the night of the Order of Merlin Gala, and she helped Rookwood gain access to the D-Level, where he set off that miniature replica of the Dark Mark. But to the best of our knowledge, that was Withersbane's only contact with Rookwood. Her more important Death Eater contact — and the one who asked her to cooperate with Rookwood — was none other than Lucius Malfoy."

There's an audible gasp in the room. Lucius Fucking Malfoy. What next?

"Withersbane first became involved with Lucius Malfoy at least four years before his recent trial and imprisonment. It's a moot point now, since he's imprisoned for life and his memory is now wiped via Ms. Weasley's spell," Gibbons says. "But, you'll see more recently, as recently as this year," he says, pointing to the scribbles on the whiteboard, "Withersbane also divulged Classified information to Armand Selwyn-Burke, Mr. Malfoy's distant cousin and his representative at trial."

Holy Gremlin shit. Selwyn-Burke. Withersbane was feeding that tosser information. Damn it — how could a security breach this serious have happened within the Corps? No wonder Selwyn-Burke knew where Hermione's office was. No wonder he knew where her parents lived. Withersbane told him everything he wanted to know, obviously.

Even as I'm thinking it, Kingsley is saying that very thing. "For the love of Merlin," he booms. "How in bloody hell did we have a double-agent inside the Auror Corps for this long with none of us knowing?"

Before Brocklehurst can say anything in his own department's defense, Hermione jumps in.
"Minister," she says soothingly. "Let's not forget the state the Auror Corps was in when Commander Brocklehurst resumed his post following the war. The department had been thoroughly infiltrated by Voldemort sympathizers, as you well know. I rather think it's remarkable that there may have been only one double agent who slipped through our post-war security screening. I think the important thing now, rather than assigning blame, is to discuss what measures we need to take to assure the integrity of the current Corps — and then to act on what we've learned about Withersbane's cooperation with Monsieur Selwyn-Burke."

Kingsley rubs his chin and nods. "You're right, of course," he says in a softer tone. "Even so, it seems to me we need to submit each and every member of the Department to a full Spectral Scan under Veritaserum — Senior and Apprentice Aurors alike. Brocklehurst, I'll expect you to treat this as a direct command immediately."

"Yes, sir," Brocklehurst answers, clearly relieved that Hermione piped up on his behalf.

"But first, we will have Weasley and Gibbons review the Spectral Scan code," Kingsley continues, looking to Hermione and the bespectacled chap, "to be sure it's air-tight."

Hermione and Gibbons nod silently.

"That leaves the question of what to do about Monsieur Selwyn-Burke," Shirley says.

"Ah, well, that's where Hale, Weasley and Potter come in," Brocklehurst says, folding his hands on his desk. "Gentlemen, it's your job to track that bastard down in Grenoble and bring him back here for trial. You'll sit down with McKenzie after this meeting to begin working out a game plan. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Harry, Keith and I say simultaneously.

"Before you do, there's relevant information in the Withersbane case file that we should discuss here as a group." Brocklehurst says. "Again, I must emphasize that the information you are about to hear is Classified Level A. Ms. Riddlesworth," he continues, giving Shirley a mildly silly smile — and I have to work hard not to snicker out loud — "please walk us through your team's findings."

Shirley straightens up in her seat, coughs slightly and — sweet Merlin, is she blushing? I do believe she is. In a wink, however, she's back to her usual self. "As you know, Commander, my prosecutors interrogated Withersbane under the influence of Veritaserum prior to making a duplicate of her memory of her years of service as an Auror. We have two case specialists reviewing those memories even now but, as you can well imagine, this will be a time-consuming undertaking in light of Withersbane's term of service on the Corps. That said, her Veritaserum testimony proved enlightening and the preliminary, tripletime review of the past 12 months of memory adds detail to our understanding of what she was hoping to accomplish via the Hogwarts incident."

I can't help but shudder at the thought of having my memories probed like that. No matter how horrid Withersbane may be, it's a chilling idea — having your head cracked open, more or less, and all of your private and personal thoughts laid bare for a team of Ministry staffers — total strangers or, maybe worse, people you actually know — to see. Reckon she should have thought of that before she broke the Auror Code, but still …

"The attack on Hogwarts' graduation apparently was a Plan B or even a Plan C attack. It would seem that the attack on Hogwarts was initiated as a way to express opposition to the new Shacklebolt regime, to send a message that there remains a core of people dedicated to Voldemort's ideas. But allow me to back up a bit," Shirley says, pausing to rifle through a pile of parchment on
her lap. She puts on her reading glasses and continues. "In her Veritaserum-induced testimony, Withersbane confirmed that she was a Voldemort sympathizer during the war, but unlike other pro-Voldemort employees within the Ministry, she elected to keep her views quiet — a way to hedge her bets in case the so-called Dark Lord did not prevail. In this, she was prescient."

Hell yeah, she was. There certainly were times when Voldemort's success seemed almost to be a certainty, but apparently she wasn't taking her chances. Well, no one ever said Withersbane wasn't smart.

"During the war, she made frequent contact with Lucius Malfoy," Shirley continues. "In fact, the relationship was sexual in nature. Not romantic — merely sexual."

Blech. Lucius Malfoy having sex. It's going to take me a while to get that image out of my head.

"During their assignations, which typically took place inside the Ministry, little was said, but it was understood that they were available to one another if either of them ever required assistance," Shirley says. "Malfoy and Withersbane recognized one another as kindred spirits. He helped her career by connecting her with powerful people inside the Dark Lord's inner circle, she helped him in his efforts to support Voldemort by divulging potentially useful information from within the Auror Corps. She was present, for instance, during what has come to be known as the Battle of the Department of Mysteries. While she was never a full-fledged Death Eater and never met Voldemort in person, she assisted Malfoy with certain logistical information such as how to navigate the Department's intentionally befuddling architecture — information that made it possible for Malfoy and his team to track down the Hogwarts students who had come there under the false belief that Sirius Black was in danger."

I steal a look at Harry, who has turned white as a sheet. Without even asking, I can tell what he's thinking. I'd bet a million galleons that he's wishing he had a Time Turner so he could go back just a few months and punch Withersbane in the face.

"After the war, Malfoy reached out to Withersbane for help in defending himself against prosecution. He knew full well that the charges against him were serious and that the evidence we had collected to support those charges was solid," Shirley adds. She looks at the parchment in her hands again, pauses for a moment, then gives Hermione a tender look. I wonder what's up, but it soon becomes clear. "Malfoy apparently believed his best defense — perhaps his only defense — was to intimidate those who might testify against him at trial and, in this, Ms. Weasley was chief in his thoughts."

Instantly, I feel my blood pressure spike. My heart is pounding in my ears, and I'm fighting the urge to get up and start pacing about the room — or worse, to Apparate over to Azkaban and teach Malfoy a lesson he'll never forget. But I'm surrounded by some of the uppermost people in the administration. I'm going to have to control myself but … effing hell. Harry gives me a grim look — clearly he's fighting the same urges that I am, because his face is bright red.

"When Malfoy hired Selwyn-Burke as his representative, Withersbane provided information to him on the location of Ms. Weasley's temporary office during Ministry reconstruction, on the location of Ms. Weasley's in-laws' home in Devon, and her sister-in-law's parents' home in France. She also provided information on Ms. Weasley's parents' home in Cambridge as well as their residence in Sydney," Shirley continues in a softer tone, reaching over to Hermione and giving her hand a little squeeze.

"In Sydney?" Hermione sputters. "But … how?"

"Once your parents were recovered, Hermione, the Aurors involved in Australia and here — and
all those along the way on Ron and Harry's journey — had to file reports, and Withersbane would have known how to access them," Shirley says.

"Holy buggering fuck, Harry," I blurt, not caring who hears me. "Remember last Christmas, when I was convinced there was someone fannying about down by the gate at the Burrow? It was Withersbane. I know it."

"You are correct," Shirley says. "She testified that she personally staked out all of the British locations — including the Burrow last Christmas, as well as Vine Cottage during your training at St. Agnes, the Weasleys' home in Devonshire — and she provided locations and notes on your family members' typical day-to-day movements, including those of George Weasley at his store in Diagon Alley, to Selwyn-Burke at Malfoy's request. Furthermore, the information she gleaned from Auror Corps files was useful to Selwyn-Burke. It was Selwyn-Burke who sent that letter warning you not to testify, Hermione. In addition, he financed various pro-Malfoy demonstrations around town. There's plenty of evidence to indict and possibly convict him on charges of witness tampering, intimidation and ... I'm sorry to say ... on conspiracy to commit kidnapping and murder."

"But I don't understand," Hermione says, her brow furrowed. "All Selwyn-Burke ever did — that we know of, anyway — was to show up at my office, and then to 'pretend' to accidentally stumble upon my parents' home in Cambridge. Both appearances were unnerving, I'll grant you, but nothing more. Death Eaters and their friends aren't exactly known for subtlety."

Shirley gives a mirthless laugh. "You're correct about that. Indeed, Malfoy and Selwyn-Burke were mulling more ... well, lethal measures ... but two factors forced them to reconsider. Firstly, Selwyn-Burke worried that an outright attack on any of these residences or on your office might be traceable to Withersbane and then to him and Malfoy. As a lawyer trained in the International Magical Code, you see, he was aware that if Withersbane had been suspected of violating her Auror Oath, she could be subject to Veritaserum interrogation. But even more intimidating, evidently, was what happened when Selwyn-Burke made his little visit to Cambridge. Apparently your husband's display of Raw Magic forced Monsieur Selwyn-Burke to rethink his options, Hermione. You see, Lucius Malfoy had considered the events of Malfoy Manor to be a one-time fluke — a young wizard's panicked response to seeing a loved one hurt. It was only when Selwyn-Burke reported back to him that Mr. Weasley here was capable of Summoning a wand that he and Malfoy put the pieces together. They realized that they were dealing with an Ingenitus — and that therefore they would need to be much more measured in their approach to the problem."

I look up at Hermione and she's giving me That Look — the eyes-swimming-with-tears, wobbly-lipped-smiley kind she gets sometimes when it comes to me — and I feel my ears start to heat up. Bugger. Everybody's looking at me.

"Right," Brocklehurst cuts in, thankfully deflecting attention from me. "Well, that's where Weasley re-enters the picture. As I said earlier, gentlemen," he says, addressing me, Keith and Harry, "you are to fetch Selwyn-Burke from Grenoble. Before you are to do anything, however, you are to do the necessary legwork and devise a plan. Then you will report back here and brief me on it," he says.

Kingsley rises and places a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Boys, we're counting on you to get Selwyn-Burke's arse back here to face justice," he says.

"Yes, sir," we answer in unison, and then we are dismissed.
Wins and Losses

Chapter Summary

A triumph and a tragedy.

Chapter 32: Wins and Losses

I try not to sniffle too loudly or move too much, because Hermione's finally asleep in my arms after hours of crying so much I thought she'd run out of tears. She needs her rest. So do I, come to think of it, but I know I won't sleep anytime soon. I'm on overload. I'm cried out. My head is so stuffed with new information that I feel it might burst. Meanwhile, there's an ache in my chest that throbs with each beat of my heart. I'm exhausted. And there's no end in sight. Dear, sweet, ever-loving Merlin, how could so much happen in one bloody day?

To think, this morning dawned bright and clear in Grenoble, 600 miles from here, and all went well, surprisingly enough. Well, it bloody well should have gone well. Harry, Keith and I certainly put enough time and effort into laying out every detail, leaving nothing to chance.

When we presented our plan last week to Simmons, our shift supervisor, and to Brocklehurst, it certainly seemed airtight. We decided to let Keith do the talking, since he was the senior guy on our team.

"We know from French Auror Services that Selwyn-Burke is going about his usual routine, apparently unaware that he's being tailed by our French counterparts," Keith told them as he stood before the whiteboard in Brocklehurst's suite. He waved his wand at the board and the map we had prepared appeared there. "We know Selwyn-Burke keeps his office within his residence, Manse du Selwyn, up a steep road called Lans en Vercours in the mountains above Grenoble's version of Diagon Alley, Rue de Felix. Rue de Felix is a hidden knot of small lanes tucked behind a statue inside the city's Eglise Saint Louis, a stone's throw from Place Victor Hugo, dead in the center of the city." With another wave of his wand, a view of Rue de Felix appeared on the whiteboard.

"Based on intelligence shared with us by Aurors stationed full-time in Grenoble, we believe the best approach is to apprehend Selwyn-Burke when he is away from his fortress-like home," Keith said. He waved his wand again and the scene changed. "Our Grenoble contacts tell us he makes a weekly pilgrimage to a spa in Rue de Felix, a place called Salon Anais, for a massage, steam bath and a facial every Wednesday afternoon."

I remember laughing when I first heard this detail about Selwyn-Burke's weekly comings and goings. And even now, I can't help but crack a grin at the thought of him getting his nails done with little slices of cucumbers over his eyes. What a ponce.

"The good news, according to Claudine Beaumont, head of Grenoble's Bureaux d'Aurors, is that the proprietress of Salon Anais is very much on our side. Beaumont's briefing papers say she's a muggleborn witch named Anais St. Pierre, and she lost her father in the first war. Therefore she's been on the French Auror payroll as a spy, fighting against Dark wizards, since she was a teenager," Keith continued, waving his wand again and Conjuring a picture of St. Pierre — a dark-haired witch with large blue eyes and a rather large though not unattractive nose. "We're told she'd like nothing better than to see bastards like Selwyn-Burke pay for their allegiance to Dark forces,
and Beaumont says St. Pierre is the first person we'll meet when we arrive in Grenoble. In fact, she runs a small inn upstairs from the spa. Beaumont tells us she'll be booking a room there for us since it's no longer high season. All the better. We can spend some time casing the place and refining our attack plan before Selwyn-Burke arrives."

Brocklehurst leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin. "You're sure you shouldn't try to take him closer to his home out of town?" he asked.

The three of us looked at each other. Harry decided to field this one. "We considered that possibility, sir, but his home is a walled compound and the Grenoble Corps reports that it's under heavy security wards."

"Hmm," Brocklehurst said, still mulling. "I see your point, gentlemen, but I worry that, by operating in such a populous area, you run the risk of being detected. Potter, your face is known around the world."

"We've thought of that, sir," Keith said. "We'll employ extensive glamours — we even tried a few out the other night, and Potter's own girlfriend didn't recognize him."

That was true. Harry — glamoured to be blonde-haired and brown-eyed — walked up behind Ginny inside the Leaky Cauldron on a particularly crowded night and pinched her arse. He lived to regret it.

The Grenoble operation went surprisingly smoothly, all things considered. The three of us had to bunk in one room — the first time I've slept away from Hermione since St. Agnes, and I didn't realize how much I'd gotten used to sharing a bed with someone. I didn't sleep particularly well, and it wasn't because I was nervous about the mission. In fact, I reckoned our chances of screwing the mission up were fairly limited. We spent a week on the ground — even watched Selwyn-Burke come in for his weekly treatment with his favorite Ukrainian masseuse, a tall, imposing white-blond bird named Oksana, just to see how it all usually went down — and we felt fairly certain that we'd pull it off.

Adding to my certainty was knowing that both Keith and I could Conjure Raw Magic if we had to. Of course, I wasn't a big fan of the linchpin of the plan at first: I'd Polyjuice myself as Oksana so that I could be in the room when Selwyn-Burke let his guard down, so to speak, and it would all unfold from there.

"What? Are you serious?" was all I could sputter when Harry laid this idea on me and Keith. "Why me?"

"Because you're about the same size as Oksana," Harry answered. "She's a big girl — or haven't you noticed?"

"Why does that matter? I mean, Polyjuice is Polyjuice, mate."

"Ron, you must know that Polyjuice is least upsetting to your system when you're transforming into someone who's built like you," Keith chimed in.


"You'll be fine," Harry said, barely stifling a laugh.

"Easy for you to say," I growled. Even I had to admit that it made the most sense for me to transform into Oksana, but that didn't make it any easier when I looked down and saw my bits had disappeared and transformed into, well, a thatch of surprisingly dark hair. Holy shit — who knew
Oksana’s curtains wouldn’t match the carpet, so to speak.

When I stepped out of Oksana’s dressing room, Harry and Keith didn't even attempt to cover up their amusement. In fact, they had to hold one another up, they were laughing so hard.

"Har-de-har-har," I barked. "You can both go straight to hell."

"You look lovely," Keith said, biting his lower lip hard and then falling into another fit of laughter.

"Shut it, Hale," I answered.

"That skirt is a little tight though, mate," Harry said. "I think you've been letting yourself go lately."

"Are you saying she's fat?" said Keith.

"I'm not fat," I huffed. "I'm just big-boned. There's a difference. Now, if you'll excuse me."

I straightened my skirt, tossed my hair to the side, and exited to take my position in the massage suite and await my client’s arrival.

What none of us had anticipated, of course, was that Selwyn-Burke can get pretty handsy, as Ginny would put it, and Oksana hadn't warned us to expect him to be rather, erm, forward once we were in that little massage room together all by our lonesomes. Fortunately for me, Oksana only speaks Ukrainian, so I didn't have to mimic her voice when the tosser started feeling me up — but I did have to stop myself from giving him a good bust to the chops. That is, at least until I knew that he had stowed his wand with his clothing and Keith and Harry were in position to enter the room and announce his arrest.

Of course, it wouldn't have been a mission involving me and Harry without an unexpected mishap, and this one took the form of a duel with Selwyn-Burke's driver in the lobby of the salon. Selwyn-Burke typically shows up alone but apparently today he had other plans and brought along his driver. We had to take that jerk in for processing, too — but not before he managed to clip Harry in the arm with a Stinging spell that left a nasty gash. Even so, a quick Stunning spell and a Body-Bind curse later, and that was all she wrote. We had Selwyn-Burke and his goon back to the Grenoble Auror Station by lunchtime, then Portkeyed them back to the Paris HQ. The goon stayed behind there for processing, and we Portkeyed Selwyn-Burke the rest of the way to London. Easy peasy.

From there, Keith and I took Harry to St. Mungo's to have his injured wing looked at. Still, we counted our blessings that, in a relatively short and stress-free amount of time, we were able to nab that berk.

Once the Healers took Harry into an examining room, Keith and I headed to the hospital Aurors' Station to shower and change into fresh robes. We were a mess, both of us. Afterward, we sauntered down to the Commissary, grabbed a cup of tea, and settled into the waiting room to wait for Harry to be released.

"Weasley, you said nothing ever goes according to plan with you and Potter. But Grenoble went off without a hitch," Keith said to me with a grin as he stirred his tea.

"My point exactly, mate," I said, stretching my legs out to rest them on the coffee table in front of us. "Going off without a hitch was most definitely not the plan."

Just then, Healer McKendry, Grendys' assistant, walked past the waiting room and did a double-take when she saw me. "Mr. Weasley," she said with a look of surprise as she approached. "Is your
wife back in again so soon?"

I stood to greet her. "Hermione? Oh, no — I'm here waiting for a colleague. He got injured on an Auror mission with us, but he should be fine. Hermione, though — heck, I reckon she hasn't been here since her Shikyu treatment last month."

McKendry searched my face. Something was wrong — the hair on the back of my neck prickled uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, Mr. Weasley, I spoke out of turn. I … I … I'm dreadfully sorry."

"What do you mean?" I rasped, my throat suddenly dry as sandpaper.

"I … oh, dear," McKendry said, looking back and forth from me to Keith. At that point, Keith rose and placed a hand on my shoulder. Obviously, he was picking up the same vibe I was. Something was very, very off.

"Mr. Weasley, I'm sorry, I shouldn't discuss your wife's case in the waiting room—"

"No worries," I replied sharply, cutting her off. "Anything you have to say about Hermione you can say in front of my mate, here. Just, please — what's wrong?"

McKendry rubbed her hands together then sunk them deep into the pockets of her lab coat. "Your wife, she was here today in the emergency room, Mr. Weasley. She's home now. In fact, Healer Grendys is there checking in on her now."

That's all I needed to hear. I looked at Keith, and he just nodded — I didn't even have to tell him what I was thinking. "Go," he said. "Now."

Even as he said it, however, I was already out the door and running down the hallway at full speed. I zoomed past the Commisary, down the stairs and to the hospital lobby, skidding to a stop in front of the Floo Station, a row of fireplaces that connected St. Mungo's to every major wizarding village in the country. "Vine Cottage, Devon!" I yelled into one and, after a bumpy ride, landed arse-over-cauldron in the lounge.

I straightened up and found Mum standing there gripping her apron, looking ashen and worried. I must have looked just as bad, because all she could do was sputter, "Oh, Ronnie," and lift her arms in my direction. I stepped toward her, placing my hands on her shoulders as she gripped my arms, and looked deep into her eyes. "Where is she, Mum?"

Mum couldn't seem to speak, however. She just looked toward the staircase. I broke away from her, my heart pounding painfully, and took the stairs at a run, two at a time. "Hermione!" I shouted at the top of the stairs, barreling into the bedroom to a sight I reckon I won't soon forget: My Mione … her eyes closed in the dying afternoon light … looking so small and frail … lying on her side … tucked beneath the covers … as Grendys waved his wand over her in a slow and steady formation.

I stood in the doorway, rooted to the spot. That's when Grendys straightened up and turned to look at me, his lips pressed tightly together in a grim line. "Mr. Weasley," he said with a pitying tone that I didn't like one bit, though I knew he meant well. "I placed your wife in a sleep state so I could examine her. Please allow me to awaken her and then I'll step out to give the two of you some privacy."

All I could do was nod and try to control the frantic beating of my heart. Was she hurt? Was she sick? Would she be all right? What the bloody hell happened? And whatever it was, why did it have to happen when I was hundreds of miles away from her?
Grendys twirled his wand over Hermione's eyes and, very slowly, they opened, and I saw, even from my spot in the doorway, that they were red, probably from crying. She gradually awakened a bit more, and that's when I found the strength to lift my feet from the floor and approach the bed. Grendys stepped back and I kneeled down where he had been standing, bringing my eyes level with Hermione's. She was still groggy, but she recognized me immediately, of course. Her chin shook as she reached out and rested her hand on my jawline. "Oh, Ronald, thank Merlin you're all right," she said, still curled up on her side, her cheek pressed deep into her pillow.

I took her hand from my face, kissed her palm, and pressed her little hand in both of mine. "Of course I'm all right, my love," I said. "The mission went perfectly. But that's not important. I'm home now. I told you nothing would keep me from you, and I meant it."

The corners of her lips curled upwards, but it couldn't quite be called a smile. Then she shuddered. "I'm so sorry … so sorry," she whispered in a wobbly voice, as fresh tears welled in her eyes and spilled over onto her cheeks.

Bloody hell, I thought, why is she apologizing? What the hell is going on?

"Hermione, there's nothing to be sorry for, love. I'm the one who should be apologizing. You're sick, obviously, and I wasn't here to take care of you. But I'm here now, Little Dove, I'm here, and I won't leave your side until you're better." I kissed her knuckles and crushed the back of her hand against my lips, fighting to control the quaver in my voice. I was afraid of the answer, but I had to know … I had to ask. "Tell me what's wrong, Mione, or I'll run mad."

"You don't know?" she said, barely loud enough to hear.

I shook my head slightly. "All I know is you were in the emergency room today. Mione, please."

"Oh, Ronald," she sighed, squeezing her eyes shut as a wave of tears overtook her. I pressed my forehead against hers, fighting to stay calm, clutching her hand to my chest.

"Shh," I whispered. "It's all right. Whatever it is, love, it's all right."

She sniffled loudly and shuddered again. "Ron, darling, I … I had … I had a miscarriage."

A … what? The word hit me like a gust of icy wind, and I could feel my ears ringing like someone had sounded a gong. "Love, do you mean … were you …"

She nodded, and I pulled my face away from hers a few inches so I could see her and be sure I understood. "I was … I had been … that is," she said, trying to organize her thoughts. "I had suspected for a few weeks, but I wanted to be sure," she said, sniffling again. "Right after you left for Grenoble, I cast the Pregnancy Diagnostic spell on myself, and it was positive, Ronald. It was positive. I … I was pregnant."

My heart, which had been running on overdrive ever since I left McKendry and Keith, throbbed painfully. "We were … wait, I mean, you were …" I stammered.

She smiled through her tears, still hiccuping and sniffing. "I was so looking forward to surprising you when you got home," she whispered. "Oh, Ron, I couldn't wait to tell you. But then, this morning, I was …." Her voice trailed off, and her eyes roved sadly over my face. "When I woke up, I was in pain. I made it to the loo, but then I … well, there was so much blood. I think I may have passed out for a bit."

I winced and clutched her hand tighter. "I'm all right now, Ron, honestly. I woke up after a bit, I think, and managed to get to the fireplace to Floo for your Mum. She's been so wonderful all day
today, darling … she Apparated here right away, contacted Healer Grendys, took me to St. Mungo's … and that's when they told me that I … that we … well, they told me that there would be no baby."

With that, she dissolved into another round of tears, eyes shut tight, and I looked her over. Merlin, she was expecting. After all this time, after all the heartache, it finally happened. But then, it got taken away from her, just like that. From us, I mean. Merlin. A baby. But not.

Still kneeling, I lowered my cheek to hers and, well, I just let go. I was so stupefied, I didn't know what to think — and then I realized that thinking wasn't so important at the moment, and that's when the tears came. I couldn't believe it. If things had been a little bit different, I could have come home today to the news that we were going to have a baby. But instead …

I felt the familiar surge of anger rise in my chest — the bitterness I'd felt for so long against LeStrange and the Malfoys. But this time, surprisingly, it didn't last long. In various ways, they've all paid, they're all paying. It doesn't change anything, though, does it. Hermione, I realized, is still hurting. She'll continue to hurt no matter what happens to the Malfoys. It doesn't matter. What matters is that we're together, that we have Love, which is something those berks never had, not really. With Love, we'll get through this. We always have.

We must have been quite a sight — the two of us, our heads bowed together, both weeping like we had nothing left to lose. And that's when Grendys chose to rejoin us, knocking lightly on the door and stepping over to seat himself in the chair next to the nightstand. I was aware of his presence, but it still took me a minute to collect myself and face him. Hermione, for her part, didn't try quite as hard — though she didn't need to. I imagine Grendys had seen her in much worse shape long before I arrived home.

I straightened up and sat on the edge of the bed, still holding Hermione's hand. At the same time, Grendys leaned forward and reached under the covers, revealing a hot-water bottle that had been pressed against Hermione's middle. I hadn't realized it was there. "Let me warm this back up for you," Grendys said with a wave of his wand.

"Thank you," Hermione whispered with a scratchy voice.

Grendys settled back in the chair and looked us over, a sympathetic smile crossing his lips. "I'm so very sorry this happened, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, I truly am," he said. "But … well, I know this is not quite the right time to say this. It's far too soon for you to truly comprehend it, and you very much deserve to mourn this loss. But I would like to emphasize the positive right now, because there is some good news buried in this turn of events. And if there's anything I'd like to leave you with today, it's a ray of hope."

I take a deep, shuddering breath and wipe my face with my palms before taking Hermione's hand back in both of mine and turning to face Grendys. "Sir, I'd like nothing better than to hear some good news right about now," I said with a sigh.

His smile warmed.

"Mrs. Weasley, I would like to show you what your reproductive organs looked like when you first came to me for treatment," he said gently to Hermione. "Would that be all right?"

Hermione sniffled and nodded.

"All right, then. Let's prop you up a bit so you can see a bit better, shall we?" he said, rising from his chair.
Hermione instinctively went to raise herself up on her elbows, but Grendys tsk-tdsked her. "Allow your husband and me to do this for you, Mrs. Weasley," he said. "For today and for the next few days, you really are not to exert yourself. You must promise me that you'll cooperate."

"I'll be sure of it," I answered, and Hermione merely made a sound like a half-choked sob.

I reached down and wrapped my arms around Hermione's back, lifting her into a slightly upright position while Grendys stuffed two extra pillows behind her. Once she was comfortably situated, he raised his wand.

"What I'm about to show you is a Corporeal Scan of your lower abdomen. The spell we use to generate these images is quite new, but I must say, it's been an extraordinary help to Healers around the world. It allows us to generate and store a three-dimensional picture of any internal organ or system," he said. "We've taken several Scans of your reproductive system since you came under my care, Mrs. Weasley, and I can Conjure them just by referencing your case file. It's quite a neat little piece of spellwork — which I know you'll appreciate, being an expert on such things."

For the first time since I returned, Hermione gave a genuine little smile.

Then, Grendys spoke into the tip of his wand. "Hermione Jean Granger Weasley, Case Number HJGW-19091979-20051998, Corporeal Scan 1." Then he flicked his wand toward the foot of the bed and, before our eyes, there appeared one of the weirdest sights I've ever seen: Hermione's insides, in full color, in three dimensions.

"Remarkable," Hermione breathed despite herself. I looked at her and marveled — even in her weakened and saddened state, the incredible mind inside that little head of hers stood in wonderment at spellwork so elegant and impressive. I felt a surge of warmth wash through me and wondered if I would ever stop being amazed by the depths of her.

"This is what your uterus, your Fallopian tubes and your ovaries looked like, Mrs. Weasley, on that day you first came into the Dark Magic Diagnostics Department," Grendys said. "Just for the sake of reference, let me show you a Scan of a perfectly healthy woman's reproductive system so we can do a side-by-side comparison." He flicked his wand again and — good Godric — another set of Fallopian tubes, ovaries and a uterus appeared next to Hermione's, and even to me, the difference was stark. Hermione's system was a blackened, bruised, lumpy, scarred mess. Sweet Merlin.

"Notice the Fallopian tubes in particular on the healthy Scan — taken of a young woman roughly the same age as you, Mrs. Weasley. Perfectly smooth and pink. Your Scan, however, showed extensive Crucio scarring — this dark purple and gray tissue clinging to the exterior of your ovaries and Fallopian tubes is the outward sign of it. If we look at the transverse view," he said, flicking his wand to show a cross-section of Hermione's uterus, "we see similar purplish masses on the interior lining, scarring so thick that even if a fertilized egg were to somehow pass through your Fallopian tubes, it would have been quite impossible for it to find purchase here within your womb."

I felt Hermione's hand tighten in mine, and I gave it a little squeeze. "That was then, love. That was a long time ago," I whispered.

"That's quite right, Mr. Weasley," Grendys added. "This is the view of your organs before we gave you that very first Shikyu Hiringyu treatment, Mrs. Weasley. Bear that in mind. Now allow me to show you the next important scan in your case file," he said, brandishing his wand to make the healthy one disappear while returning Hermione's first Scan to its original view.

He spoke into his wand again. "Hermione Jean Granger Weasley, Case Number HJGW-19091979-
"With another flick of his wand, another view of Hermione's reproductive system appeared, this one still significantly effed up, but remarkably better than the first. "We took a Scan every day that you were under the intensive Shikyu Hiringyu treatment, of course. The one you see before you now is from the day when we took you out from under the round-the-clock dosage," he said. "As you can see, there's still extensive scarring but, as I told you that day, the ovaries had largely been cleared, and—" he said, flicking his wand to give us a cross-section view of the uterus again, "the interior lining of the uterus was remarkably healthier at this point, though some Dark scarring remained, and the lining that had been cleared still looked fairly irritated and reddened, which is quite common in the immediate aftermath of treatment. The Fallopian tubes, however, were still rather a mess, were they not?"

I couldn't help but nod my agreement because, Merlin's tweezers, they really were — still cloaked in purplish, bubbly-looking gunk. "With scarring this thick, no egg could pass — and no sperm could reach it. A great deal of healing was still necessary."

Hermione sniffled again and I reached out to stroke her cheek. I wanted to tell her it's all right, but I wasn't sure that was the right thing to say. I mean, clearly everything isn't all right. Not yet, anyway. All I could do was hope that what Grendys had to say next might be positive.

"And now," he said, waving his wand again, "here is the Scan we took just this morning, when you arrived in the Emergency Room."

When it came into view, Hermione and I both gasped simultaneously. It was … well, it was near perfect. Yes, there were still blackish-purple masses on the ovaries and, when Grendys opened up the uterus view, there were still a few patches of that junk there as well, but the Fallopian tubes were pink and clear. Bloody amazing.

"I share your astonishment," Grendys said, apparently reading the looks on our faces. "I would never have predicted this much improvement this quickly. My original expectation, based on your case history and on known precedents, was that it would be several years, as many as five to ten years, before we would witness healing this extensive."

"What accounts for it, then?" Hermione asked, still sounding somewhat awestruck.

"If I had to guess — and it's only a guess at this point, because I haven't had an opportunity to do any testing to back it up — I would say that the renewal of the bonding spellwork had something to do with it. Mrs. Weasley explained to me that you did the full-fledged version of the Matrimonio Intersecare spell this time, Mr. Weasley, with a complete incision across the palm, is that correct?" he said, looking to me.

I nodded. I mean, yeah, I cut just our fingertips the first time because, well, I was nervous and didn't want to hurt her. But the second time, I felt surer of myself — and it only seemed right to do it the traditional way.

"My first-blush analysis is that the renewed spell accelerated healing by compounding the bond between you. Your magical DNA is now that much more blended," Grendys said, "and thus the restorative properties in Mr. Weasley's semen are that much more potent."

I shook my head as if to clear it. "If that's the case, sir," I said, "what went wrong this time? I mean, why did we lose this … this …" I wanted to say "baby," but for some reason, I just couldn't. And besides, I thought, was it really right to think of it as a baby yet?

"Well, it would appear that, in this case, the fertilized egg attempted to implant itself on a stretch of uterine tissue here," he said, pointing to a purplish blotch on Hermione's uterine lining with his
wand. "That's section is still fairly scarred and wouldn't be able to support an implanted embryo for long. Despite all that, this particular embryo was a tough little bugger, if you don't mind me saying so. It managed to survive in rather hostile conditions for a full eight weeks, which is saying something."

I don't know why — something about what Grendys said just then, or the way he said it, choked me up. In the very short time that I'd been allowed to absorb the reality that Hermione had been pregnant, it was sort of an abstract idea — a concept, a condition, a microscopic thingamabob. But to hear Grendys describe that embryo — a combination of Hermione and me … our kid — as being a tough little bugger, well, it brought a fresh flow of tears to my eyes and a lump to my throat. I wish I hadn't, because I knew I had to be strong for Hermione's sake, but I sputtered a few times and then broke down, sobbing like a plonker into Hermione's lap. Of course it was a tough little bugger. It was ours. God damn it … I needed to pull myself together, but the tears wouldn't stop.

"Shh," she whispered, stroking my hair with her hands. "Oh, darling."

Grendys busied himself, I think, with Vanishing the Scans while I tried to collect myself.

He cleared his throat and, next thing I knew, Grendys was sitting in the chair again and had reached out to place a hand on my shoulder. At that, I straightened up and sniffled a few times, wiping my face with my sleeve. "Sorry," I choked. "I'm OK. Really."

He gave my shoulder a squeeze. "It's quite all right, Mr. Weasley. You've had a lot of new information to process in a very short period of time, and it's difficult information at that," he said.

I sniffled and wiped my face again. "Thanks."

"Now, let's talk about next steps," he continued. "First, it's imperative, Mrs. Weasley, that you rest — and I mean really rest — for at least a week if not more. By that I mean you must stay off your feet. Sleep. Eat well. No work. I repeat," he said with a grin, "no work. I know you too well, Mrs. Weasley. I'm going to count on your husband here to keep you honest. No work."

"You can count on me, sir," I said with a smirk and a mock salute.

"Good. Next, we have some decisions to make about your future treatment," he said. "None of these decisions must be made immediately, but it would be good to begin mulling your options."

Hermione looked to me and then back to Grendys. "Options?"

"Well, yes," he said. "If we continue along current lines, the chances are good that you will experience more miscarriages, and we don't want that. As you can see, it's draining in more ways than one."

That's for damned sure. I never want to see Hermione go through anything even remotely like this ever again.

"We can prevent future miscarriages by employing a muggle medicine — the contraceptive pill. You have probably heard of it, yes, Mrs. Weasley?"

Hermione nodded. "Of course. It's the most effective form of birth control known to muggles," she said.

"It is indeed, and equally effective for witches. The trouble is that, for our purposes, it is likely to impede healing — or slow the repair of scarred tissue considerably — because the hormones within The Pill, as muggles call it, retard the conversion of Dark scars to healthy cells. We're in
some untested territory here, of course, because I don't know too many cases quite like yours, Mrs. Weasley. But this much we know: The upside to The Pill is that it will regulate ovulation and therefore make future miscarriages unlikely. The downside to The Pill is that we may bring the remarkable pace of healing that you've seen thus far to a standstill."

Shit. Hermione and I traded a look and I wondered what she was thinking. After what she'd suffered, I couldn't blame her if The Pill had been the option she chose. It's familiar to her, after all, since she was raised in the muggle world, and who could blame her if she never wanted to risk another miserable miscarriage for as long as she lives? I could hardly expect her to put her health in jeopardy for any reason. Gods, I hardly knew what to think of this option. Fortunately, Grendys spoke up at that point to explain another path we might take.

"The other option is to proceed as we have until now, but to employ another contraceptive system that's familiar in the muggle world," said Grendys. "That would be the Rhythm Method."

The wha?

Grendys couldn't help but chuckle at my obvious confusion. "There's an old joke among muggles, Mr. Weasley. It goes like this: 'What do you call people who practice the Rhythm Method?'"

I shook my head.

"Parents," he answered, and lapsed into a fit of giggles despite himself. I kicked his shoe and he came back to his senses. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry, it's just that, well, for muggles, the Rhythm Method involves a lot of guesswork. It requires a couple to track the woman's ovulation and then to, erm, refrain from intercourse during those days — usually about four or five days out of every month. For muggles, this is a bit of a shot in the dark, but for wizardkind, it's a simple matter of using an Ovulation Monitorio charm. It's actually quite effective when done properly. If we employ this method, we can be reasonably certain that you won't conceive until you're quite prepared to do so. Meantime, on the non-ovulating days of the month, you can make love as you like without worry — while gaining the healing benefits that have helped repair Mrs. Weasley's damaged cells up 'til now."

"Blimey," I exhaled. "What's the downside?"

"Well, even wizards and witches have been known to, um, screw up the Rhythm Method, Mr. Weasley. In the heat of passion, so to speak, it can sometimes be difficult to stop what one has started," he said, and I could swear at that moment that I saw him blush.

Of course, I could picture what he meant in a heartbeat. Sweet Merlin, I've never had to hold myself back with Hermione. Would I have the strength to do so in the future? Especially if she got carried away, too, and literally begged me — as she's done so many times before?

"We'll think about it, Healer Grendys," Hermione said weakly.

"Mrs. Weasley, would you do me one favor?" he answered.

"Of course," Hermione replied.

"I would be very honored if I could be on a first-name basis with someone as brave and brilliant as you, my dear," he said. "Please, call me Anton."

Hermione smiles and sniffs. "Only if you'll call me Hermione."

"As you wish."
Eventually, I showed Grendys downstairs and, after he Flooed back to St. Mungo's, I filled Mum in on the broad outlines of what we'd learned. I thanked her for taking care of Hermione while I was away and she grabbed my face between her hands and pulled it down so she could kiss my forehead. "She's my own daughter," Mum said. "You never need thank me for taking care of her again."

With that, she listed all the food that she had stuffed into the icebox, urged me to Floo if we needed anything, and informed me that Hugh and Eleanor are driving down from Cambridge and will stay the night at the Burrow. "The four of us will stop by at mid-morning to check on you if that's all right," she said.

As it was quite all right, it was all I could do to simply nod, kiss her on the cheek, and escort her into the fireplace.

I had turned to come upstairs and return to Hermione's side when the fireplace erupted with green smoke again and out rolled Harry.

He straightened up, dusted himself off by the mantle and said, "I heard."

Standing there, he looked so small and alone — and I felt for a second like he had somehow turned into that scrawny little kid I first met on the Hogwarts Express.

"She'll be OK," I said, running my hands through my hair, and he let out the long breath that I reckoned he'd been holding without even knowing it. He stepped toward me — just a half-step, and then stopped himself.

"Is it … can I …"

Then I swiftly closed the distance between us — taking him by surprise, I think — crushed him in a hug and sobbed on his shoulder. Slowly, I felt him wrap his arms around my back. "It'll be all right," he said. "We'll all be all right."
Four Years Later

Chapter Summary

Jump ahead — without benefit of a Time-Turner!

Chapter 33: Four Years Later

"Hey look, Neville — if it isn't one half of 'This Year's Need-to-Know Couple' gracing us with his presence," Harry said through a grin as Neville merely chortled his agreement.

"You know," I replied in as dignified a voice as I could muster while straightening my robes and dusting off the Floo powder, "a leader of the Shacklebolt administration's new vanguard shouldn't have to put up with shite like this from two berks like you."

Harry, of course, let out a snort and Neville coughed so hard to keep from laughing that I thought he might choke.

I can't blame these guys, my closest friends, for taking the mickey out of me. Naturally, the very day that I was scheduled to Floo to Hogsmeade to review Harry's new Defense Against the Dark Arts Training Practicum for students who want to be Aurors or Magical Police, Witch Weekly had to go ahead and publish its long-awaited profile of me and Hermione under the enormously embarrassing headline, "Meet The New Order's Power Couple." For fuck's sake.

If the tables were turned, I'd be getting plenty of mileage out of this ridiculous article — giving Harry or Neville every bit of grief that I could manage. Bad job for me, the tables aren't turned. Why Hermione let Chum talk her into granting Witch Weekly this interview in the first place, I'll never know. But what Neville and Harry are dishing out is nothing to what I expect to hear next time I see George. This bloody article will give him priceless ammunition that should last him at least a year. And I knew it as soon as the owl dropped the latest issue on my lap this morning.

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WITCH WEEKLY

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THE NEW ORDER'S POWER COUPLE

Think you know the Golden Trio's Hermione Granger Weasley and Ronald Weasley? Well, think again. On the fifth anniversary of renowned Battle of Hogwarts, take an exclusive look at this famously private couple's daily lives, their passions, their pursuits, and the cozy countryside home whose location remains a closely guarded secret to all but their closest friends and confidantes.

By Maxime Eddlesome
Photography by Jack Needle

It's been five years since Hermione Granger Weasley and Ronald Weasley concluded the mission of a lifetime — with best friend Harry Potter — of taking down Lord Voldemort, but this high-
powered couple's influence on the national and international stage has only grown since then.

Even as Mr. Potter has dialed down his involvement in the day-to-day running of the British Auror Corps to create a training programme for Aurors-to-be at his alma mater, his longtime best mate Mr. Weasley, 23, has ascended to a leadership position within the Corps, now serving as Lieutenant in charge of Auror Field Operations and Strategy and one of Commander Bernard Brocklehurst's right-hand men. In short order, he's become a key leader of the Shacklebolt administration's new vanguard.

His wife of six years, Hermione Granger-Weasley, is no less accomplished, having served since 1998 as Minister for Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt's Special Attaché for Policy, a position that allows this multitalented witch and Hogwarts valedictorian to bring her influence to bear on all manner of issues that matter most to her, from improving the delivery of health care within wizarding communities nationwide — a model that's been adopted throughout Europe — to advocating for the creation of wizarding elementary schools, to prosecuting Dark wizards still at large. Along the way, she has racked up an impressive range of spellwriting patents — 23, as of this writing, or one for every year of her brief but action-packed life.

As if being the first recipients of the Order of Merlin First Class in decades wasn't enough, the Weasleys, along with Mr. Potter, have been granted similar honors by wizarding governments worldwide, and both have used their fame to promote the values the Shacklebolt administration has come to be known for — namely, equality, justice and fairness for all magical beings.

"Their very marriage itself is a testament to those ideals," says good friend and close professional associate Sir Chumley Dunder, Minister Shacklebolt's top advisor for public affairs and protocol. "Their dearest friend, Harry Potter, is and always will be The Chosen One, the living symbol of his generation's rejection of wizardkind's archaic obsession with blood status. But, in many ways, Ron and Hermione's marriage is the embodiment of the New Order."

Longtime wizarding society-watcher Ivana Babble, retired gossip columnist for the Daily Prophet, agrees.

"The Weasleys are the public, day-to-day, living personification of the 'new' Ministry," she declares. "The storyline writes itself: Old pureblood family from the Sacred 28 joins in matrimony with a new-blooded muggleborn who is changing the status quo left, right and center. Why, just by living their lives, they are unmitigated proof that Voldemort's ideas are terribly outmoded and have no place in modern wizarding Britain."

And in just over a year's time — next September, to be exact — Ms. Granger Weasley will reach the age of eligibility to take her seat on the Wizengamot, to be followed by her husband, who turns 25 the following March. Expect to see their political influence only increase from that point onward.

"These are the people to know within the Ministry right now, and I expect it will be that way for quite some time," says Witch Weekly Political Editor Nick Tincture. "Look no further than Mr. Weasley's call for reconvening the triennial International Confederation of Aurors conference, which had been suspended during the last war, for evidence of their influence. When that event takes place here in Britain this summer, it will bring the eyes of the wizarding world back to our nation, but in the best way possible. After decades of being thought of worldwide as a place that was hopelessly mired in conflict and cultural discord, the 'new' British Ministry is now at the cutting-edge of reform and fair-mindedness — a remarkable turnaround, and it has everything to do with the Weasleys and the example they set. I expect their clout only to grow once they have full seats on the Wizengamot and can form a formidable voting bloc along with their closest colleague,
Don't think that the Weasleys' impact is only being felt in the realm of politics and policy, however. Ms. Granger Weasley, with her muggleborn aesthetic, has proved to be a style-setter as well, frequenting cutting-edge shops in Diagon Alley and the boutiques of muggle fashion centers, which is only natural since she has one well-shod foot firmly set in both worlds.

"Hermione has impeccable taste, and her wardrobe has a relaxed and natural vibe," says French Witch Vogue Editor Louise d'Orsay, who has featured Ms. Granger Weasley in no less than five cover spreads in as many years. "She leans toward the classics in her day and eveningwear, but she's also unafraid to experiment, to mix old and new, vintage and modern. There's a freshness about her look that is right in step with the 'Cool Britannia' ethos that's emanating from London nowadays in both the wizarding and muggle worlds." Her husband isn't ashamed to confess that his wife essentially makes all of his sartorial choices for him at this point — and why shouldn't he? She's made the most of his decidedly eye-catching gifts, opting to put him in navies, blues, greens and light grays as much as possible, and steering him toward well-cut and timeless jackets, tailored dress shirts and sleek jeans — all of which emphasize his tall and lean physique.

"You see him out on Diagon Alley in a shirt of deep French blue, and you can bet that, within a week, every other young wizard in London will be clamoring for the same item," says noted merchant Madame Malkin, who has added a muggle-style clothing emporium to her traditional lineup of wizarding robes and hats — a concession, she admits, to young wizards' and witches' interests in modern fashion.

And in his off hours, Mr. Weasley has become a noted competitor on the international chess circuit, earning a Top 100 berth in the muggle World Chess Federation rankings.

"He has a natural aptitude for the game, but he's really stepped it up in the last few years under the tutelage of his father-in-law, who played competitive chess as a student at Cambridge," says Mr. Weasley's friend and direct supervisor in the Auror Department, Captain Keith Hale. "The skills that make him an excellent chess player are also what make him an excellent Auror. He thinks strategically. Always has."

Ay-yi-yi … and this was just the introduction. The Q&A segment with me and Hermione — including photos of the two of us traipsing through Diagon Alley, prowling around the corridors of the Ministry, and hanging out at home with Boris, Crookshanks and the owls — goes into even more nauseating detail on our personal lives. It's excruciating.

"Merlin's sweatsocks, Hermione, I hate the people in this article — and they're us!" I moaned this morning as I flipped from the intro to the Q&A inside.

So I can hardly blame Harry and Neville … if Hermione and I are even half as obnoxious as Witch Weekly makes us out to be, we deserve every bit of mockery that's coming our way.

Harry, for some reason, decides to take pity on me. "No worries, mate," he says, handing me a cup of tea from the break room at his new practice facility in Hogsmeade. "I've been the subject of my share of Witch Weekly features. They have a way of making you sound like you're the last person on Earth you'd want to spend any time with."

"Precisely," I answer.

"Besides," he adds after taking a sip of his own tea, "Ginny warns me The Prophet is planning
wall-to-wall coverage of our so-called 'Wedding of the Century,' so I imagine we'll seem just about as loathsome as you guys do — maybe moreso — when that comes out."

"You brought that on yourself, mate," I say.

Neville nods as Harry hands him a cuppa. "If Ron said it once he said it a million times, Harry: Elope!"

"Too late now," I add. "You have no idea how long Mum has been planning this wedding in her head. All you can do now is grin and bear it."

"All right, all right — can we move on to happier topics?" Harry mutters through a barely stifled grin. "Let's review these potential recruits, shall we?"

Still carrying our tea, the three of us leave the lounge area of Harry's brand-spanking-new training facility, pass through a set of double-doors, and enter a large gymnasium, where a cluster of seventh years are practicing Expelliarmus maneuvers.

"These students have consistently received top marks in DADA, though there are one or two in this group whose marks are perhaps not top-of-the-class but whose physical skills are impressive," Harry says. "Cutler, there — the tall blond bloke — he's captain of the Hufflepuff quidditch team. Great reflexes, great instincts. His DADA scores could be better, but I'm thinking that if I work with him one-on-one, I could bring him up to Auror entry level. He's pretty motivated to improve."

Harry nods his head toward a fairly short, dark-haired girl across from Cutler. "Then there's Gupta over there," he says. "She's a cousin of Padma and Parvati's. Ravenclaw. Her wandwork is definitely reminiscent of Padma's — quick and efficient. I think she's got a lot of potential, if not as an Auror, then definitely in the Magical Police Force."

Harry prattles on about several of the other students, who continue to work on their Expelliarmus drills while trying not to be distracted by our presence, and as he talks, it occurs to me: Harry is happy as a pig in shit right now. He's talked about wanting to be an Auror ever since we were kids but, in my heart of hearts, I always felt his real passion was for teaching. I first got a glimpse of it when we formed the D.A. He's got a knack for explaining things, for making the complex seem simple, and for motivating people to push themselves. And if there's anyone who can speak from experience about how to defend against the Dark Arts, it's Harry. I'm thrilled that he pitched McGonagall and Brocklehurst on the idea for this program for potential Auror and Police Force recruits — and I wouldn't be at all surprised if someday it becomes his full-time work, rather than the half-time endeavor that it is now.

After a few minutes, Neville Vanishes his tea and gives us both a handshake. "I'd love to stick around," he says, "but I've got a meeting with McGonagall and Sprout to talk about some tweaks to the OWL-level Herbology and Potions curriculum."

"Oh, really?" I ask.

"Yeah — we're basically stealing Harry's idea, trying to think of ways to help Hogwarts grads prep to work with me in the Auror labs," he says. "These kids are getting plenty of theoretical training, and that's all well and good, but I'm hoping we can work in more practical stuff as well. Wish me luck."

I slap Neville on the back. "Anything you can do to make Potions easier, I'm all for it, brother," I say. "See you back in the office next week."
"Next week?" Neville asks.

"Oh yeah, forgot to mention," I answer. "I've got to Portkey over to Wales tomorrow to oversee the Rowle mission. Don't know how long it'll take, but I'll probably be out for a couple of days."

"All right, Ron," says Neville. "Just be careful, all right?"

Next evening, I'm Portkeying to Caerphilly with Padma and Thayer. We had received a tip a few weeks back that Thorfinn Rowle has taken up residence on an old farm outside of town — which was news, because most of our spies believed he had fled Britain for Norway, his mother's birthplace, after Voldemort's fall. This is a classic "tag 'em and bag 'em" mission — we know where he is, we know his movements, we know his associates — and I don't typically go on routine arrest runs anymore now that I'm in charge of field strategy. But when I heard that Rowle had dared to set foot on British soil, even after all this time, I volunteered to be part of the arrest party. This one's personal for me. Rowle was one of the Death Eaters who broke into the Astronomy Tower back in 1997 — a battle that left my brother Bill maimed — and he was the one who set Hagrid's hut on fire that same night, the prick.

What we hadn't expected — and what I can't believe our informers didn't pick up on — was that Rowle isn't living alone in Caerphilly. As soon as we take up positions along the stone wall about 100 yards outside the farmhouse, Padma sights something through the window: A woman. A woman holding a small child.

"See for yourself," Padma whispers, handing me her Omnioculars. I replay what she saw and, sure enough, she's right. There's a woman and child — looks like a small boy maybe a year old — in there. I have to wonder if there's anyone else. Shit.

"Check it out," I murmur to Thayer, handing Padma's Omnioculars to him. He nods. God damn it, this complicates matters.

Then Thayer speaks up. "We've got to rule out the possibility that there's anyone else in there," he says.

"Go for it, mate," I reply, and Thayer casts a silent Homenum Revelio Maxima — the stealth Auror version that reveals the number of people in a structure and their approximate locations. Within seconds, we see three infrared images cast on the outer walls of the house: the outlines of the woman and child in the kitchen, and the outline of a very, very large man — we have to assume it's Rowle, and blimey, I'd forgotten how huge he is — sitting in a room toward the front of the house, presumably the lounge. There's no further sign of life within the building.

"Right then," I say after pondering the situation for a moment. "We've got a choice to make. We can bag the mission right now and try to calculate a time when we can come back and get the blighter when he's alone. Or we proceed despite the fact that there's a woman and child in the house right now. I know what I think we ought to do, but I'd like to hear your ideas before making a call one way or the other."

"Well, we know nothing about the woman inside that house," says Padma. "She could be an accomplice of some sort. But then again, she could also be an innocent bystander — someone Rowle is imposing upon or using in some way for cover. Either way, one thing's for certain: That child is innocent, and I don't think we should risk his life unnecessarily."

"Thanks, Patil," I answer. "Thayer?"

"The risk of walking away now is that Rowle will disappear again," Thayer says, rubbing his chin.
"This clown's been on the Ministry's Most Wanted list since 1998. If we don't nab him now, who knows when we'll get another chance?"

I stand and look at the house for a minute, mulling over Padma and Thayer's points — all of which are valid. The infrared images are fading somewhat, but we can still detect motion. The woman and child have been pacing rather frantically since we cast the spell, and as they pass the kitchen window one more time, I can see, even without Padma's Omnioculars, that the boy is screaming hysterically. And just at that moment, I see the giant figure of Rowle rise from his seat in the next room and stride into the kitchen.

"Holy shit," I breathe, and the others follow my gaze toward the house.

There, we all see that Rowle is prying the child from the woman's arms. She's cowing, and then she attempts to strike Rowle, but we see him thrust his arm in her direction and she flies across the room, landing in a heap by the back door of the house. Then, Rowle is shaking the child — hard — and that's all it takes for me.

"Mates, I think old Thorfinn just made our decision for us. The plan I have in mind isn't perfect but it's the best we can do since we no longer have a numbers advantage. The only good news is that he's distracted," I say. "I'll head around to the back of the house. You two head to the front. On my signal, you guys enter and, if you have a clear shot, blast away at Rowle. Nothing lethal — there's a kid in there. I'll cover the woman and try to get my hands on the baby — you guys take down Rowle. Sound like a plan?"


As I sneak up and crouch by the back door, I can hear screaming as clearly as if I were in the room. It's so loud, in fact, that I feel comfortable doing a preliminary Alomahora on the door just to be sure it's not locked. There's no way anyone in that room will hear the slight click of the spell over that din.

"God damn it, Drella, shut this miserable bastard of yours up!" Rowle shouts above the sound of the boy's cries.

"I've been trying, Thor, not that you'd notice, since you do nothing but sit in the lounge and drink Ogden's all day," the woman yells back and, from the sound of her voice, I'm guessing she's still slumped by the door. "Screaming at him and shaking him isn't going to help!"

"Well neither is coddling him like you've done the past hour," Rowle booms back. "Damned brat," he says, and I hear the distinct sound of a hand striking flesh — and then the boy's cries become even more shrill and high-pitched. God damn it.

That's all I can take. I reckon that if Rowle's got his hands full with the kid, his wand hand's busy. I send up a flare from my wand and then bust in, casting a quick Bodybind curse and then a Protego Bullesco over the woman before she even knows what's hit her. Meanwhile, the other two have entered through the front of the house and they're coming in behind Rowle, who is so astonished by my entry that he hasn't even noticed them yet. "Who the bloody fuck are you?" he screams over the sound of the child, whose wails have grown even wilder.

"I'm with the Ministry Auror Corps, and you're under arrest," I shouted, pointing my wand at him, and noticing all over again how ginormous he is — a mountain of muscle topped by an ice-blond head.

Rowle laughed mockingly. "Well if it isn't Ronald fucking Weasley," he growled. "You think
"You're here to arrest me, you filthy blood traitor? You and what army?"

"This army," shouted Padma, and Rowle whirled around to face her and Thayer. "Put down the child," Padma ordered.

"You can go fuck yourself, little lady — or I'd be happy to do the job for you if one of these wazzocks would take this kid off my hands," Rowle replies with a snort.

Rowle's back is still turned to me, and I decide this is as good a time as any to try to snatch the kid from his arms. At that moment, however, Rowle whirls and pulls out his wand, pressing it to the child's neck.

"Now let's all just take a deep breath and calm down, shall we?" he says with a sneer, and though the child is no longer screaming, the woman behind me sees that Rowle is holding a wand to her baby's neck, and she lets out a blood-curdling howl, muffled somewhat by the force of the Bullesco.

"Now," Rowle continues, "I want you three Auror arseholes to drop your wands. Right. This. Minute."

Thayer and Padma shoot me a look and, nodding to them, I take the lead, dropping my wand to the floor and raising my hands. Padma and Thayer follow suit, but they're both looking me straight in the eyes. I look to both of them, then shift my eyes to the kid and back again, and I sense that they get my drift. It's up to them to grab the kid — because Rowle has no idea what's about to hit him.

"Huh, some Aurors you lot are," Rowle says, backing away from me a step then Accioing all three of our wands into his fist. "Auror Corps has really let their standards down since the war, haven't they. Well, that should have been obvious when I saw they let a Weasley on the force. Fucking hell … nothing's sacred anymore, is it."

As Rowle's been talking, he's lowered the wands and stashed them in his back pocket, and now that he no longer has a wand pressed to his throat, the boy is crying again. "Fucking whinger," Rowle barks, hauling back and slapping the kid across the face. That's it. I raise my hand and blast Rowle with enough Raw Magic to generate a silent Stupefy while Padma leaps forward the catch the crying child before he hits the floor. Rowle lands with a hard thump — and if the processors at Azkaban happen to notice he's got a bruise roughly the size of my boot on his abdomen, I won't deny I had something to do with it.

Back at HQ, we learn that Rowle is indeed the kid's father and the mother is Rowle's longtime girlfriend — who isn't known to be connected with any criminal activity but is likely to face charges for aiding and abetting a fugitive. So … the kid's Dad is going to Azkaban for a good long time, and his Mum's probably going to be there with him, perhaps for a little while. Ministry Social Services stopped by and took the kid — said he'll be placed in protective custody until they can find a relative or a suitable home for him.

Merlin, a suitable home. That kid's probably never known a suitable home — and if Rowle and his Mum are any indication of what their relatives might be like, he probably never will.

My mind is full of these fairly depressing thoughts as I clean up in the HQ locker room, get dressed, and Apparate back to Vine Cottage, landing just outside the protective wards and then entering to set myself down on my favorite boulder in the garden. It's nearly dawn, and even though Hermione's an early riser, even she isn't likely to be awake right now. I'm dying to go inside, wrap myself around her and try to forget the sight of that kid being shaken and slapped, the sound of his cries.
The war's over, but it's still a crazy, fucked-up world. I don't know how I could ever have been so young and naive as to think everything would change just because we shit-canned Voldemort. There are still horrible people out there doing horrible things. Probably always will be.

I look up and notice that the light's just come on in our room. Perhaps Hermione's up. I Conjure a Patronus and speak into it with my usual post-mission greeting — "woman of the house, the man of the house is home" — and my silver terrier takes off and bounds through the window.

Her silver otter arrives a moment later, carrying Hermione's response. "Well, what is the man of the house waiting for?" she says in a sultry voice that almost makes me lose track of what I've been thinking.

I stretch, lift my duffel from the ground, fling it over my back, and march through the front door. Boris bounds over to see me and barely flinches as I drop the duffel at my feet and kick off my boots. Then Hermione appears at the top of the stairs, wearing the loveliest nightgown I've seen on her in quite some time — long, emerald green and satiny-looking.

"I had a feeling you were home," she says.

"Really?"

"Hmm."

"I'm the one who's supposed to be the Ingenitus, love," I say, looking up at her with a smile.

"Well, maybe living with one this long has rubbed off on me," she answers, leaning on the railing. "I do carry some of your magical DNA, after all."

I take the stairs two at a time and met her at the top step, pulling her to me. She wraps her arms around my neck. "Welcome home, darling," she breathes against my lips, and I kiss her deeply.

After a moment, however, she pulls away and searches my face. "What's wrong?" she whispers.

"Nothing really, love. Just a tough case tonight."

"Mission accomplished though, yes?" she asks as she takes me by the hand and leads me into the bedroom.

I sigh and sit on the bed, and Hermione stands before me, unbuttoning my jacket, then my shirt. "The mission went more or less as planned," I tell her. "Rowle's in Azkaban. It's just … well, there was a kid involved."

She pauses and gasps, dropping my shirt onto the armchair next to the nightstand, and slowly sinks down to sit on the bed next to me.

"Oh, Ron, is he … is she … is everything all right?"

"Yes and no," I answer. "We Apparated to the house in Caerphilly and discovered that Rowle wasn't alone. Our informer hadn't mentioned anything about a woman and a baby — a boy, cute as a button, about a year old — but they were there in the house with him when we arrived. When we got back to HQ, we found out that the two of them had only arrived the previous day. Until then, Rowle had been alone."

"Oh dear," Hermione breathed. "Is Rowle the father?"

I run my fingers through my hair, not caring that I've made it stand in ten different directions by
"Yeah, he's the Dad. And not exactly a candidate for Father of the Year, if you ask me. Let's just leave it at that, love. It would only upset you if I told you more."

"But … but … where is the child now?" she asked, her voice quiver.

"Social Services. Protective custody, for now. He's probably better off."

Hermione sniffles. I take her hand in mine, thinking I should say something comforting, because there are few things that make Hermione more emotional than tales from the field of women, children or animals who've been harmed by the criminals the Aurors take in. But … I dunno … I just can't think of anything particularly upbeat to say. This case has me so angry. I rub the back of my neck with my other hand then rise and stride to the hearth, picking up a fire iron and poking at the flames with it.

Hermione comes to stand behind me and wordlessly places her hands on my shoulders, resting her cheek on my back.

"Gods, they really ought to make you get a license before you can have a kid, know what I mean, Mione?" I blurt, still facing the fire. I feel the tear that's just fallen down my cheek being warmed by the flames. "Total pricks like Rowle can be a father. Total pricks like Rowle can shake their kid, hit their kid, scream at their kid, scare their kid, not give a shit about their kid — put a god damned wand to their kid's neck — and yet they're still fathers, aren't they. All it takes is a thimbleful of sperm, for Merlin's sake, and even the lowest lowlife on the planet can be a father. It's really … it's just really fucked up."

There's a long silence. All I can do is stare into the flames.

"I can't argue with you," Hermione finally murmurs against my back. Then I feel her grasp on my shoulders tighten slightly, and then she's turning me around to face her. She slides her hands from my shoulders up my neck and to my cheeks, then says, very softly, what she always says when I've come home upset by a mission. But she says it with such conviction, such tenderness, looking deep into my eyes, that I know each time she's telling the absolute truth. "Ronald, you did the very best you could do in a difficult set of circumstances, you made the most of what you had to work with, and you left the situation better than you found it. That's all any Auror can do, and you're the best Auror I know." Then she kisses me softly, slips her hands down my arms and clasps my hands, stepping back from me slightly. "Now, my big, strong, gallant knight needs his rest and some tender loving care, doesn't he. Come to bed, darling."

I follow her back to the bed and climb in, shedding my trousers along the way, and pull her close to me, her silky nightgown caressing my bare skin. "I love you, Hermione Weasley," I whisper into her hair.

"I love you too, Ronald. So much." Even after all these years, I never get tired of hearing it. Never. The familiar wave of warmth spreads over me as she runs her hands up and down my chest and lies back, silently inviting me to follow and lay on top of her — and, of course, I do. I love the feeling of her beneath me — always have. I laugh to myself when I think of all those back issues of The Warlock's Dungeon that Fred and George gave me years ago, each page chock full of photographs of the most elaborate sex positions known to wizardkind. And Merlin knows Hermione and I have tried them all. But for me, there's nothing like the way we are now — with her underneath me, soft, protected, welcoming … and me above, facing her — and I don't really care that the geniuses at The Warlock's Dungeon call it the most plain-vanilla sex position of all time.

I lean over and kiss her cheek, then her ear, then her neck, lingering over her favorite spot by her collarbone as I lean on one elbow, slowly undo the little buttons on the bodice of her gown and
reach in to fondle her breasts.

"Mmmmmmmmm," she hums as she nudges the strap of her gown off her shoulder and then grasps the back of my neck, urging me to suckle on her nipples. I do, lowering my lips to her chest, licking, sucking and nibbling, and loving the feeling of her writhing in pleasure beneath me. "Oh, gods," she whispers, "yes, darling."

I hike up the hem of her gown and caress between her legs. "Oh love," I say, "I want to make you feel good."

"You do," she murmurs back, directing my fingers to the spot she likes most for me to touch, and I pick up the pace, stroking her gently at first and then more forcefully, until her legs stretch and tighten, her breath shallows, her back arches and she cries out, her head pressed deep into the pillows. "Oh, Ron!" she shouts, clutching my arm. "Oh ... oh, gods."

By now, I'm so desperate for her, I'm throbbing, and she must feel it, because after she settles down a bit from her climax, she slips her little hand into my pants and grasps my cock, then strokes it firmly. "Little Dove," I mutter against her tits, "sweet Merlin, I want you."

Next thing I know, Hermione has grabbed her wand and Vanished her nightgown and my pants — I'll have to ask her to re-Conjure that particular pair later, because they were my favorites — and now she's got her hand back on my cock, pumping it steadily, as I lie on my side with one leg straddling her. "What do you want, darling?" she asks softly, with a flirtatious lilt in her voice, as she continues to stroke my shaft. "What does my big, strong knight want?"

"I want you," I gasp as she strokes me again.

"Hmmmmmmmm," she hums with a smile, her voice still breathy from her orgasm, her cheeks pink and glowing. "What do you want, exactly," she adds, biting her lower lip and stroking me slowly, teasingly.

I decide to play it the way I know she wants it — because she loves to bait me like this, getting a little cheeky with me, taunting me, a tad defiant, a bit naughty, and she'll keep doing it until I react the way I know she wants me to — by taking over and reminding her who's really the boss. Which is funny because, of course, the boss is doing exactly what she wants. More of that "I win when I lose" stuff that she and I have talked about so many times before, I suppose.

I let her tempt me like that a bit more, running her fingertip around the head of my cock, lightly cupping and caressing my balls, as she torments me further. "You'll have to be more specific, Auror of mine. What exactly do you want?"

I throw my head back involuntarily and moan — gods, what she's doing feels soooooooo good. I can't even speak, it feels so good.

"I can't very well obey my man's every command if he won't tell me what he wants, can I?" she murmurs — knowing, I'm sure, that she's tiptoeing very close to the line.

"I want to fuck you," I whisper into her ear, and I see out the corner of my eye that she's pressed her knees together and she's wiggling her bum a little, a trusty sign that she's thoroughly turned on.

She bites her lip again and breathes, "You want to fuck me, do you?"

"Mmmmmmm," I murmur against her neck. "I do."

"And how, pray tell, do you want to fuck me?" she says, emphasizing the word "fuck" in the way
she knows drives me mental.

That's when I flip her over onto her back and press her deep into the mattress with my full weight. "Like this," I growl, forcing one knee and then the other between her legs and positioning myself at her entrance, which is pleasantly warm and wet. "Just like this," I repeat, sliding myself inside her forcefully and she melts beneath me, cooing her approval.

"I'm going to fuck you just like this, woman," I pant, "as hard and as long as I like, and you're going to like it, aren't you."

"Mmm, yes," she says. "Yesssss, darling."

"Because you're mine, aren't you," I add, pressing my face against the side of her neck.

"Yes."

"Say it," I demand. "Tell me."

"I'm yours, Ronald," she moans as she wraps her arms and legs around my back. "I'm yours. I belong to you. Only you."

"That's right," I say, propping myself up on my elbows to face her. "And no one else can have you, can they? No one else can fuck you, can they?"

"No one," she answers. "Never. I don't want anyone else, darling. I never have. Only you, Ron. Only you."

Those words are just as crazy-making to me now as they've ever been, and I give up on talking for the time being, instead just riding the waves of feelings coming over me as I take her in — so beautiful, so willing, so giving, so mine — here in our bed, in our cozy house, in our world that isn't perfect but is still better than anything I could ever have imagined, and I savor knowing that I love her and she loves me, that she was willing to mix her blood with mine not once but twice, and I think of all the things I still hope to have with her someday, and slowly, the feeling builds to a crest, a powerful orgasm and, with that, my erection throbs hard, rhythmically, and I thrust myself as deep inside her as I can go before succumbing and collapsing on top of her.

"Dear, sweet Merlin," Hermione breathes as she caresses my back then squeezes me tightly against her. "I must say, darling, I hate it when you go on missions, but I do so love it when you come back."

"I know what you mean," I sigh as I settle onto my back and pull her along with me so she's curled up in my arms. I Summon the blanket that's crumpled at the foot of the bed and Levitate it over us before letting it drop down so she doesn't catch a chill. We both lie there quietly for a few minutes, simply regaining our breath, as the morning sun starts to light the room.

And then, it hits me like a ton of bricks.

"Merlin H. Bugger-me-senseless, Mione!" I shout, sitting up in a panic. "This was … this is … wait a minute … isn't this one of your no-go days?"

I look to her, my heart pounding in my chest, and it takes a second before the look on her face really registers in my brain. She's smiling. Wait, am I wrong? Maybe I've got the dates mixed up — I've been awake for more than 24 hours after all. What day is it, anyway? Holy shit — I've always been downright rigid about not making love on the days when Hermione's ovulating. I'm determined never to see her go through another miscarriage again as long as I live, and I won't let
my inner randy sod ever put her health in jeopardy. So … what just happened? I'm right, I'm sure I'm right — if this is Friday, and it is — then she's on the last day of what we've come to call her "no-go zone," and I should be keeping my paws to myself. Or, at least, keeping my cock to myself.

God damn it.

"I'm so sorry, love … I don't know what happened … I forgot … well, I didn't forget … oh, shit," I mutter.


I flop back to my side, still kicking myself, and she turns over on her side to face me, tucking her hands under her cheek.

"It is one of 'those' days," she says.

Oh, bugger.

"It is one of those days," she continues. "And I don't care."

Wait, what?

"I'm tired of no-go zones, Ronald," she says. "I'm tired of all of it. And, well, I checked with Anton at my last Shikyu appointment the other day, and he gave me the all-clear. I'm tired of waiting, darling."

I'm gobsmacked. It must be because all the blood that flowed to my cock just a few minutes ago still hasn't returned to my brain, because I'm having a hard time processing everything that Hermione's just said.

"So … you're healed?" I ask, my voice sounding raspy just from exhaustion, I think.

"Mostly. There's still some scarring on my right ovary and here and there on the outer walls of my uterus, but …"

"Wow," I breathe. "So … does this mean we can start using the Contraception Charm again, instead of the Rhythm Method? Sorry to be so dense, I just want to be sure I understand."

She smiles and places a hand on my cheek, brushing my lips with her thumb. "Well, we can use the Contraception Charm if we want to," she says. "But … well … I don't really want to. That is, um, I'm only speaking for myself, mind. Of course, I want to know what you think."

"Uh, OK, love … sorry, but I'm still trying to catch up, here," I stammer. "We can use the Contraception Charm again, but you, uh … you don't want to. Do I have that right?"

She bites her lower lip and nods.

"Meaning, you want to just, uh … see what happens?" I continue.

She nods again.

"Meaning that, if we make love like we did just now … and by some miracle another tough little bugger comes along and plants itself inside you … and we wind up having a baby … that's what you want?" I ask, and I can feel the grin growing on my face.

She's biting even harder on her lip, stifling a grin, and her eyebrows rise as she nods again.
"And you want to know what I think of that?" I ask, smiling wide.

Another nod.

"I'll tell you exactly what I think," I growl, springing on top of Hermione and snogging her like there's no tomorrow.
Making Love

Chapter Summary

Time to abandon Grendys' plan.

Chapter 34: Making Love

"I can't believe you even have to ask me what I think about this idea, love," I say between taking deep gulps of air. I'm so phenomenally turned on by the very notion of getting her pregnant … apparently we both are, because we've been snogging energetically despite the hour, rolling around the bed like a couple of nutters, panting and laughing. "Gods," I mutter as I move my mouth from her lips to her neck. "This is only a dream come true for me. Are you kidding?"

She chuckles and squeezes my shoulders as I roll over onto my back and pull her on top of me. "Well, I thought we should at least talk about it," she says, propping herself up on her elbows to look me in the eye.

"Talk? It's a little too late for that, love," I reply, playing with her hair as it dangles over her shoulders. "After all, you already let me break the 'no-go' rule."

"Who cares?" she replies with a laugh. "I mean, it's sort of exciting, isn't it, breaking the rules."

I slap her backside lightly and answer, "Who are you and what have you done with Hermione Weasley?"

She collapses into a fit of giggles and I flip her over so she's on her back again, pinned beneath me. "This was the last day of the 'no-go zone,' so odds are nothing will happen this time," she says between giggles. "Though you never know. It's not an exact science."

"Well, I'm all for increasing the odds if you are, Little Dove," I whisper, nuzzling her nose with mine.

"Dear lord, aren't you tired yet? You just got home from a mission."

"I was tired," I reply. "But now I'm betting I could outrun a Centaur."

"Well, that wouldn't do at all. I want you to stay right here," she says, cupping her hands on my bum and giving it a squeeze.

"Oh, don't worry, love," I reply. "I'm not going anywhere. I can think of things I'd much rather do with all this energy."

"I can, too," she says as she kisses my neck. Sinking my fingers into her hair, I cradle her head in my hands and lift my chin to give her better access. Gods, the feeling of her lips on my neck never fails to make me mental. "Make love to me again, darling," she whispers as she trails kisses along the column of my neck. "Make love to me again and again."

"That's the plan, love," I murmur, reaching down to position my cock, which is once again rock-hard, against her. "Let's make a baby." With that, I slide in, savoring the warmth and wetness that I
find there, and she curls her legs around mine, still gripping my bum with her hands.

"Oooooooh, Ronald," she purrs. "Oh darling, I've wanted this for so long."

"I have too," I breathe against her cheek. "So long."

And it's true. I have. I should tell her. She already knows, I think, but I want to be sure. This is too big. This is too important. "Mione," I murmur into her ear as I thrust deeply, moving slowly, taking my time. "This moment … right now … doing this for … well … for all the right reasons … you've got to know, love, this is what got me through the war. This. Right now."

Hermione lets out a small sob and drags her hands from my bum to my shoulders, pulling me close. And we make love that way — gently, quietly, you might even say reverently — nothing like the time just before. I kiss away her tears as I move, and she kisses me back, on my cheeks, on my nose, on my forehead, on my chin.

"I suppose this is what 'making love' really means," she whispers against my jawline.

I couldn't agree more.

We stay in bed on and off for the rest of the day — resting and, well, not resting — until we both have to return to the office the following morning.

And now, here I sit, realizing I should have kept my big, stupid gob shut when the idea struck me to resume the old triennial International Aurors Conferences. Because if I had, I wouldn't be suffering through yet another in a series of organizing meetings for the damned thing. Should have known Brocklehurst would put me in charge of the whole bloody mess.

Actually, it hasn't been that bad — it's been sort of fun, truth be told. I don't have to do a lot of the actual work. My main job is just to make decisions on the stuff others present to me — Brocklehurst says it's to spare him the trouble. I'm just a little cranky today because, cor blimey, that wife of mine just wouldn't let me get that much sleep. I don't want to complain — heaven knows I'm enjoying every shag — but Merlin! Even I have my limits. When she woke me before dawn this morning, saying, "Come on, let's have one more go before breakfast," I had to laugh out loud.

"Great Gandalf's ghost, woman, are you trying to kill me?" I moaned. But then, of course, I shagged her rotten.

I should be concentrating on this meeting, but honestly, I feel like we've pretty much finalized everything, and we seem to have reached that point where people just need to repeat themselves so they can … I dunno … hear themselves talk, I reckon.

I mean, we've already settled on the biggest issues — that we want to cut back on the number of lectures in favor of open-ended, networking-style gatherings, small-group breakout sessions and Q&As with some of the thought leaders in the field. I've already approved the speaker lineup that Padma and Collins have drawn up, including Adina Dalabon, the Australian Spellbreaker, whom Hermione has been keen to meet. Meanwhile, McGonagall has agreed to let us host the event at Hogwarts since the campus will be shut down for the summer hols. And I've emphasized that one of the most important things, to me, is to be sure that there's good food available for every session. Merlin's tits … the top brass of every department within the Corps is sitting around this table, and I'm thinking about Hermione and food. I've got to pull myself together. As soon as there's a break in the action, I'm going to declare this meeting over and suggest we all nip over to the Leaky for lunch.
Later that afternoon, I Apparate up to Hogwarts to touch base with McGonagall about plans for the conference.

"Please do come in, Ronald," McGonagall says briskly, rising from her desk. Dumbledore's portrait wakes up and sputters to life behind her.

"My stars, Minerva, you didn't tell me Mr. Weasley would be dropping by for a visit," he says with a wry smile.

"Of course I did, Albus," McGonagall scolds over her shoulder. "You're getting forgetful in your old age."

"Ah, well, it was bound to happen," he replies. "At any rate, it's good to see you, Mr. Weasley. I do hope your good wife is doing well."

"Very well, sir, thank you. She'll be pleased to know you asked about her," I answer, taking the seat that McGonagall points me to after the two of us exchange a friendly handshake.

"I know you're here to go over some of the finer details of the conference plans, Ronald," McGonagall says as she settles down behind her desk again, "but first, I really must ask: How is Hermione doing, truly?"

I know what McGonagall's really asking about but, given the events of the past 24 hours or so, my mind goes places it shouldn't, and I have to fight to block the mental image of Hermione on all fours this morning, moaning my name as I took her from behind. My hesitation seems to amuse Dumbledore, however, because he supplies an answer before I can.

"For heaven's sake, Minerva, you can't imagine that two young people in their early twenties might find ways to fill their hours other than chewing the fat with old codgers like us?" he says with a smile.

"Old codgers? So I'm an old codger now, am I? Speak for yourself," she says, scowling at him, then turning back to me and giving me a little wink. "At any rate, Ronald, you know how I feel about Hermione. I just want to be sure she's happy, that her career is going well," she says.

"Honestly, ma'am, I can't imagine her career going much better unless she were to be named Minister for Magic," I reply. "She's practically running the place as it is. My job, to tell the truth, is to remind her when it's time to come home and take a break. I've been pretty good at it, if I do say so myself."

"Well, you keep doing that, Ronald," McGonagall says. "Now, I suppose we should discuss your plans for using the Great Hall for the conference's opening ceremony," she adds, turning her attention to a sheaf of notes on her desk.

A few hours later, I walk by the Protective Custody offices on my way to pick up Hermione at her office. Come to think of it, Protective Custody isn't really on the way — actually, it's down several flights of stairs and in a different wing of the building from Hermione's suite — but still. Through the glass double doors that lead to the department, I see that the light in the front office is still on, even though it's late. An old nun, Sister Miriam, is sitting behind the front desk, scribbling on some parchment with an oversized quill, and she looks up and smiles at the sound of my knock. I met her when we turned the Rowle baby in, and she struck me right away as the type of person who was born to do the job she does. The way she took that kid into her arms, the way her weathered old face transformed into something younger, brighter, beneath that black veil of hers
... well, it warmed my heart.

She picks up her wand in her bony hand and waves it in the direction of the door. At the sound of the click, I open the door and stick my head in.

"Good evening, sister."

"Oh, Mr. Weasley, how very good to see you," says Sister Miriam. "Come in, come in."

I nod and approach the desk.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Mr. Weasley?" she says, laying down her quill and folding her hands.

"Oh, well, ma'am, I just happened to be passing by and, uh, well." Suddenly I'm drawing a blank. What the hell am I doing here? I stand there like a berk, and as I do, Sister Miriam looks me over, a little grin growing on her wrinkled face.

"Of course, you're following up on the Rowle boy, aren't you?" she says.

"Uh ... well, yes, I suppose I am, ma'am."

"How good of you," she says, rising from her desk. "Not every Auror takes the time to check on such things, I can assure you."

"Well, uh, how is he?"

"Oh, I'm very grateful you brought him to us, Mr. Weasley. Poor child was terribly malnourished when he arrived here, and it seemed he hadn't been bathed or properly changed in days. But it's amazing how resilient children are. We washed him, fed him up and he went right to sleep. He's in the nursery now — the only one at the moment. Would you care to see him?"

See him? Hell yes, I'd like to see him. But ... well ... should I?

Sister Miriam seems amused by just about everything I'm doing, including standing here like a prat thinking about her question. Before I can even answer, she's gesturing toward the door behind her and opening it for me, and I follow her in.

We walk quietly down a short hallway to a darkened room that's lined with all manner of cots, rocking chairs, cradles and bassinets. In the nearest corner, in the glow of a nearby nightlight, I see a lump beneath a blue blanket inside a fairly large cot. I stop in my tracks for a second, and then approach slowly. Yes, that's the boy I held the other night — only now, instead of wailing hysterically, tears cutting tracks through the dirt on his cheeks, he's sleeping peacefully on his back, two chubby little fists resting on either side of his head. The hair that had been so matted and dirty that night is now clean and, blimey, remarkably blond. I would never have guessed that under all that dirt this kid was that blond. I lean over the bars of the cot and, looking closer, I see it — the mark that his father left on his cheek when he slapped him. I feel a sudden surge of anger just thinking about it. This kid's not even a year old.

After tucking the baby's blankets in a bit tighter around his little form, Sister Miriam sits in the rocking chair on the opposite side of the cot from me and gives me an encouraging smile. I remain standing, wondering why I'm even there, but ... well, I can't take my eyes off this kid. Yeah, he looks like Rowle but ... he's a beauty, isn't he?

I lower my hand to touch one of his and, before I know it, he's grabbed my finger with one of his
fists and he's holding on tight. Remarkably tight. He's still asleep, though. Just sleeping and holding on to me.

I can't help but wonder what he's dreaming about. I hope it's something good — something that doesn't involve his father knocking him senseless, or his mother screaming over his head at his Da.

I lean on the railing and look up at Sister Miriam for a second before returning my gaze to the kid. "So, uh, what's going to happen to him?" I ask, just above a whisper.

"Oh, he'll be with us, but I must confess our options are a bit limited at the time being," Sister Miriam answers a bit more loudly than I expected, but the kid doesn't even flinch. "Don't worry," she says, apparently reading my thoughts. "After what he's been through, this child will likely sleep through anything."

"Hmm," I say, returning my eyes to the boy. "So … options are limited? What do you mean?"

"Well, before the war, we had a fairly extensive network of foster homes set up throughout Britain. That network broke down somewhat during the Voldemort years, as you can imagine, and so many of our foster families sustained such heavy losses in the fighting that they really weren't looking to take in a lot of children. So, we're still rebuilding. That said, this child will be particularly difficult to place, his father being who he is."

"Well, it's not his fault that his Dad's a Death Eater," I whisper.

"No, I should say not. I'm a muggleborn, Mr. Weasley — raised in a Catholic orphanage until Dumbledore came to take me to Hogwarts at the age of 11 — so I understand what blood prejudice is. The sad thing, however, is that those who fought on the right side of the war sometimes forget that blood prejudice flows both ways. I've seen potential adoptive parents turn down Death Eater children in a heartbeat. These children are looked upon as bad seeds, aren't they. It's a pity."

Blimey. I'd like to think I'm not one of those people that Sister Miriam describes but, honestly, am I? I mean, this kid's Dad was one of the Death Eaters who attacked us on Tottenham Court Road. His Dad was one of the Death Eaters who invaded Hogwarts on the night Bill was nearly killed. His Dad burned down Hagrid's hut, for Merlin's sake. Gods …

"What about his Mum?" I ask. "She's not a Death Eater."

"No, but I imagine Miss Livingston will be spending a fair amount of time in Azkaban nevertheless," Sister Miriam answers. "Even if she were to be released tomorrow, though, I doubt she could regain custody of this child. I certainly would fight it tooth and nail. This boy was terribly neglected when he came in here. To the best of my knowledge, she was supporting herself via prostitution before she reconnected with Mr. Rowle."

Prostitution? Well, that's just great. Merlin knows what this kid has seen.

"No extended family?" I ask, rubbing the boy's knuckles with my thumb while he continues to grip my index finger like his life depends on it.

"None. Mr. Rowle's parents are dead. Miss Livingston was raised by a single mother, who evidently died during the war. Her father is unknown. No aunts and uncles. No cousins. This boy is quite alone," she says. "But he's a survivor, this one. He's been through a lot, but he's hanging on."

"Hmm," I hum, still stroking his soft little knuckles. "Tough little bugger, aren't you."
Fuck. Why did I come here tonight? I should have gone straight to Hermione's office like I said I was going to do. Better yet, I should have just gone home and met Hermione there. What's the matter with me? God damn it…

But then, I look at him again. There's that little tuft of white blond curls on the top of his head, and that angry red mark on his cheek.

Bloody hell.

"I don't even know his name," I say, more to myself than Sister Miriam.

"It's Leo."

Leo. Good name. Surprisingly good name.

Oh, fuck it.

I Conjure a Patronus wandlessly and speak into it. "Mione, love, if you can get away now, would you please come meet me in the Protective Custody Department? It's on Subcorridor S in the North Wing, honey."

As my terrier takes off, Sister Miriam chuckles.

"Your wife requires no directions, Mr. Weasley," she says, barely concealing a grin. "She can find her way here quite well on her own, I assure you."

"I'm sorry, sister … what do you mean?"

"I mean," she says, rising to lean on the cot railing across from me, "Mrs. Weasley was here visiting little Leo this afternoon." With that, she reaches across the cot to pat my shoulder and returns to the front office to wait for Hermione.
Chapter Summary

Change is hard.

Chapter 35: Actions and Reactions

"Are you OUT of your MIND?" McGonagall booms from the back porch.

And, just like that, we've found a new extreme in the range of reactions to our decision to bring Baby Leo home with us. Previously, Hugh represented the negative end of the spectrum, wondering out loud whether Hermione had considered what adopting a baby at the age of 23 would mean to our careers. But Hugh's just been surpassed by McGonagall.

At the opposite end of the possible reactions was Hagrid, who had merely Flooed into the lounge and demanded that we place this baby in his arms immediately. Of course, Hagrid's been known to see the beauty in Acromantulas and Blast-ended Skrewts, so I shouldn't have been surprised that he didn't flinch at the prospect of loving a kid fathered by a Death Eater.

In between those two extremes stand most of the rest of the family. Mum and Eleanor are a bit worried that we're getting ourselves in over our heads, but both seem to be warming up to the idea. Dad and Ginny are closer to the Hagrid end of the range, both reckoning that we're capable of making up our own minds and meanwhile seeming fairly mesmerized by Baby Leo's astounding blond-haired beauty. Similarly, Bill and Fleur — vacationing with Fleur's family in France — Owled us a one sentence parchment: "Thrilled! Can't wait to meet our new nephew!" Smack in the middle stands Harry, who at first wanted to be damned sure that we were doing what was right for us. Once Hermione and I assured him that this is what we both want, and that we're committed to working through all the complications together, he was satisfied — and eager to pry Baby Leo out of Hagrid's arms.

"Far be it from me not to love an orphan," Harry said before kissing the sleeping baby's forehead, and if I hadn't been so distracted by McGonagall's arrival, I might have choked up.

But then McGonagall did barrel into the room, eyes ablaze, cheeks reddened, insisting on speaking with Hermione in private. That's what brought the two of them to the settee on the back porch.

"I'm hardly surprised that Ronald would do something so impulsive, so reckless," McGonagall sputters. "But you, my dear. A move this intemperate, this rash … well, it's simply so unlike you. Did Ronald pressure you into it?"

"Absolutely not, Minerva. Ron and I reached the same conclusion about Leo quite separately. When Ron came home from the mission the other day and told me about the baby, I … I can't explain it. I had to go see the baby for myself. I couldn't stop thinking about him and the trouble he
was in. I hadn't even laid eyes on him, and yet I couldn't rest until I'd checked in on him to see that he was all right. And clearly Ron felt the same way, because he stopped in for a visit, too. When we sat down to discuss it, we both realized we'd reached the same decision: This baby belongs with us."

There's a long pause.

"I'm sure he's a lovely baby, and I'm sure he needs a good home," McGonagall sighs. "But my dear, please consider: You are a gifted young woman with abilities that deserve to be realized to their fullest potential. If you plan your career carefully, make the right decisions along the way, there's no telling what you could be someday. There are virtually no limits for someone of your talent, Hermione. I can't sit by and watch you throw that all away."

I hear Hermione huff and decide that I'd better high-tail it out of the kitchen. I get out of there just in time to hear Hermione say, "Minerva, please come into the house with me. I have something to say to you and to the rest of the family."

I hot-foot it to the front porch, where Hagrid is sitting on the stairs holding Baby Leo — he must have insisted that Harry hand him over — with Ginny sitting by his knee cooing over the baby's blond curls. Mum and Eleanor are on the porch swing, Harry is seated on the railing next to Dad, and I plop myself down on the rattan chair opposite Hugh.

Just then, Hermione and McGonagall emerge through the front door. "Minerva, please sit down," she says, and I rise to offer McGonagall my seat — and to stand next to Hermione, because I suddenly have the feeling she's going to need some support.

Hermione clears her throat and stretches herself to her full height.

"Listen, everyone, I appreciate that all of you are concerned about us and the decision we've made," she says. "I really do. But I need you to understand a few things."

She places her hands on her hips, and I can practically feel the waves of emotion flowing out of her, she's so angry. But, surprisingly, she doesn't yell. In fact, she's remarkably calm. She reaches for my hand. I take hers in mine and give the back of it a quick kiss, and she flashes me a little smile before proceeding.

"Ronald and I may be young, but we're not children anymore. The war saw to that. The war changed us, for better and for worse. But there's one thing that got us both through the war — one precious thing that literally saved my life — and that was hope for the future, a future in which we might be able to live a calm, normal, peaceful existence, the kind we didn't experience in our Hogwarts years. A future lived in a quiet, cozy home like this one. A future surrounded by our friends and family. A future that includes children."

I drop her hand and wrap my arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to my side. She looks up at me and gives me a watery smile before proceeding.

"We didn't realize that the war would make it so difficult for us to realize that portion of our dream. We haven't given up on that dream. The Healers say it could happen for us, and soon. But it could be a good long wait as well," she says quietly, pausing to dab her eyes.

"In the meantime, this little boy came into our lives," she continues, gesturing toward Baby Leo sleeping in Hagrid's arms. "He needs parents now. His father is in Azkaban for life. His mother has signed over custody to the Ministry, saying she doesn't want him around anymore even when she gets out of Azkaban. She says he's a reminder of Thorfinn, and she wants a clean break."
It's true. Sister Miriam told us she visited Leo's Mum at Azkaban this morning and the woman signed the papers, making it perfectly clear she was not interested in the baby anymore. I found it impossible to believe, but Miriam merely shook her head and said, "I've seen this sort of thing before, particularly during the war, Mr. Weasley. In a way, it's a blessing." I'm not sure I'm ready to consider a mother giving up on her child as a blessing, but I decided to trust Miriam's experience for the time being.

Hermione sniffles and draws my attention back to the present. "We could easily shrug our shoulders and hope that Sister Miriam and her staff find a home for this child. Or hope that the experience of growing up in an orphanage — which seems the most likely outcome for him — doesn't scar him too much," she says.

"For reasons I can't explain, I can't live with those two options. For reasons I can't explain, reasons that might seem entirely unsound to you, Ron and I both feel drawn to this child. Is it sudden? Is it unexpected? Is it irrational? Yes, yes and yes. But I would argue that having a child — any child — is the ultimate irrational decision. Who in their right mind would take on responsibility for the total care of a helpless human being? And yet, thankfully, people make that irrational decision every day. I would like to think that the people who chose to bring me, Ron and Harry into the world, as irrational as they were to do so, made a contribution to the wellbeing of that world, since we bloody well saved it after all. I don't like to claim credit for that act too often, since it was most definitely a group effort, but damn it, our being here made an effing difference when it mattered most. And we wouldn't have been here to do what we did during the war if the people who came before us hadn't been brave enough to make life's most irrational decision."

Blimey, Hermione's swearing. I look around and see that everyone looks just about as shocked as I am.

"I would further like to think that the people who taught us, who shaped our young minds, who guided us to be who we are now, also made a contribution to the wellbeing of that world," she adds, looking to McGonagall.

"And I would like to think that, by taking on responsibility for Leo, by giving him the kind of home he otherwise might never have, Ron and I are making a contribution of our own to the wellbeing of that world. I'm not entirely sure how this is going to work. Ron is in the middle of an enormous project — bringing the next International Aurors Conference to Britain," she says, reaching up to place her hand atop the one I've rested on her shoulder. "I have just wrapped up writing the new Wizarding Elementary Schools legislation and have been thinking about taking some time to work on an Arithmancy and Spell Writing book project with Professor Vector. How will Leo fit into that picture? I'm honestly not sure. I don't bloody well know. But I do know this: Ron and I have worked out similarly complicated problems before, and we can and will work this one out. I know we can because all of you have been there to help us do that very thing before, and I hope you'll be here to help us now. We're doing the Adoption Charm with Leo next week, and you're all invited. If you want to be here and celebrate with us, we'll be most gratified to include you. If you'd rather not be here, that's up to you."

Her words are followed by a long, painful silence.

As I stand here boggled by everything she's just had to say — and how capable she is of making her case so clearly, even when she's really hacked off — I realize that she was right to expect that a speech like this might be necessary. Just last night, hours after we brought Leo home for the first time, she predicted as much.

I woke up and noticed that Hermione wasn't in bed with me. Still groggy, I looked at the clock on
the mantle. It was 2:30 in the morning. And then, I remembered: Leo.

I stepped into my slippers and reached for my jumper. Shuffling out into the hallway, I turned left and tiptoed down to the room we had decided to turn into Leo's nursery. And, sure enough, there was Hermione, standing over the cot in the light of a lone candle, looking down and stroking Leo's curly locks.

I walked in behind her and wrapped my arms around her middle, crouching down to rest my chin on her shoulder.

"I just can't believe he's here. That he's real," she whispered, leaning her cheek against mine.

"I know. It's a big change. A lot to take in."

"And yet, he's meant to be here with us, isn't he," she said.

"Feels that way," I whispered back.

"Hmm," she murmured. Then there was a long spell where we both just stood there staring at the baby, who was sleeping on his side, one fist against his lips, the other clutching his little blanket.

After a while, Hermione broke the silence with a whisper. "Ronald, I have a confession to make."

"Oh, this could be good," I said, kissing her temple and pulling her tight against me.

She stroked the baby's cheek with the back of her finger, then straightened up and wrapped her arms around mine, still coiled around her middle, and hummed in contentment as she leaned her back against me.

"I don't know what you're going to think of this, because it's a pretty radical idea — at least for me," she said softly. "But, ever since the war … I mean, have you ever wondered … did you ever think about the path you were on, and … do you know how everyone expects you to do a certain thing and be a certain way?"

I laughed and shrugged, pressing my lips to her cheek. "I'm afraid you've lost me, honey."

She shifted in my arms and turned to face me, her lips curved upward in a sleepy grin, and wordlessly took my hand in hers to lead me toward the door — but not before reaching into the cot and tucking the blanket snugly behind Leo's back and then dousing the candle with her wand.

I followed Hermione down the hall and back into our room, knowing that the Admonitrix charm we cast on the nursery earlier would alert us if Leo wakes up. She led me back to the bed, slipped off her dressing gown, and we both crawled under the covers together.

"C'mere, Little Dove," I said, gathering her into my arms. "Take your time and tell me what's on your mind. I'm not going anywhere."

"Thank you," she sighed happily, then rested her cheek against my chest, toying with a button on my pajama shirt. "It's hard to know where to begin. And I'm not sure what you're going to think of this — not really. It's a little scary, because it runs counter to everything you've ever expected of me — or at least, what other people have expected of me."

I realized she was a little wound up despite my reassurances, so I did what I always do at times like that: I tucked my finger beneath her chin to tilt her face toward mine, looked her in the eyes, and said, "It's only me, love. Whatever you want to say, I'm listening, OK?"
And, as always, she smiled and planted a big kiss on my lips — and then suddenly seemed much better able to gather her thoughts.

"I love you so much. Have I told you lately?" she said, trailing her index finger lightly across my lower lip.

"I never get tired of hearing it," I replied, kissing her finger.

"Good. Well, where was I? Oh yes," she said, straightening up a bit to face me. "Obviously, you've known me since we were 11. And, in all that time, my whole identity, the way everyone in the world perceives me — well, it all revolves around achievement, doesn't it. I've always been expected to be the head of the class, the top of the field and all that. Sometimes it was a lot of pressure, but I always rose to the occasion. Why? Partly because I wanted to, and partly because I was expected to, know what I mean?"

I studied her face in the firelight. She was being so … Hermione … so earnest, so eager to be understood. I couldn't help but smile and nod.

"The war changed me," she continued. "I think you're the only person on Earth who completely understands what I'm talking about. Harry, too, though not as much as you. And the rest of the family … well, they think they get it, but they really don't. You're the only one I've ever told about the visions that helped me survive Malfoy Manor."

I felt a slight shudder pass through me, as it always does every time Malfoy Manor comes up, and she noticed, pausing to kiss my cheek before continuing. "The circumstances were awful, Ronald, but the visions were so sweet," she whispered. "Still so precious to me."

"I know," I said. "Go on. I'm sorry to distract you."

She smiled knowingly and pressed on.

"I learned things about myself, about my real values, during the war — and I know you're aware of that because we share those values, we've talked about them. But I expect that others are going to struggle to make sense of what we're doing. They're not going to understand how much having a family means to me. And they're certainly not going to understand this," she said, then looked down, fiddling with the button on my pyjama shirt again. "Oh dear, this is difficult to say out loud. I didn't expect it to be so hard to say to you, of all people," she added with a shake of her head.

"What is it? It can't be that bad."

"It's not bad exactly," she said, still fixated on my button. "It's just, well, it doesn't quite fit perhaps with what you expect of me — what anyone expects of me. But I can't help it. I've thought about it for a long time, and it just feels right to me."

I didn't really know what she was on about, but gods, I wished she could spit it out — not because I was getting tired — though I was — but because I wanted to reassure her that there was pretty much nothing she could say that would make me think badly of her. I decided to simply pull her closer and try to let her know that whatever it was, it was going to be all right.

"I love you no matter what, Hermione — you know that, right?"

She nodded.

"So, just come out and tell me, Little Dove. Tell me whatever it is that's troubling you. We can work it out together, yeah?"
"You're right, of course," she said, raising her face back up to mine and tucking her hair behind her ears. She searched my face for a moment, and then took a deep breath. "OK, here it is," she said, then paused to bite her lip. "I want to cut back on work so I can take care of Leo."

I blinked for a few seconds, trying to be sure I heard her right. I must have taken a little too long to process her statement, because suddenly a worried look came over her face — brow crinkled, lips set in a tight line. "Would that be … would that be all right with you?" she whispered.

I tried to work to control my face at this moment. I really did. But I couldn't help it. I laughed. Which I knew was absolutely, positively the wrong thing to do, but … gods.

"Wait, why are you laughing?" she said, looking confused and horrified.

"I'm not," I sputtered.

"Yes, you are."

I pulled myself together and ran my hands up to her shoulders, holding her in place as I collected myself. "OK, yeah, I laughed for a second, but only because you're so mental, woman," I said, stifling another giggle before sobering up to really consider her words. "Hermione, honestly, how could you think I'd be anything but thrilled by what you just said?"

Her eyes crisscrossed my face, and then I noticed the corners of her lips were curling into a smile. "You wouldn't be upset?"

"Hell, no. Why would I be upset?"

"You know, 'the brightest witch of her age' and all that," she said. "Shouldn't I be out, I don't know, running the world instead of here at Vine Cottage looking after a baby? I'll bet you a galleon we hear something like that when we invite the family over tomorrow. I'm sure this idea will be a disappointment to a lot of people."

"Like your Dad," I supply.

"And Minerva."

"And maybe even your Mum," I add.

"Precisely."

"Well, you know, it's not written in stone that you would have to cut back, Mione. I mean, we could hire help or see if my Mum would be willing to pitch in. It's not all up to you, love."

She hummed and nodded. "I've thought about that."

"Or, you know, I could step away from the Corps for a while," I said. "I never really thought about being a stay-at-home Dad, but I reckon I could get the hang of it."

Hermione smiled. "I imagine you could, too. But … would you want to?"

I thought about it for a minute, but then decided it was best to be completely honest. "To be truthful, Hermione, I could do it if you wanted me to, I truly could. But what I want more than anything is for you to be happy. If you think being home with Leo would make you happy, then that's what I want more than anything."
"Oh, Ron," she said, and threw herself into my arms. "Oh darling," she whispered against my chest. "I've been so happy working with Kingsley these past few years, and I've learned so much. I don't want to pull back completely — just enough to work on this book with Professor Vector and get prepared to take my seat on the Wizengamot. That plus a baby should be enough to keep me very busy — but it's what I want, it really is."

"Then that's what we'll do," I said into her hair. "I'll Summon Dobby tomorrow. He's always said he's happy to help out — you know, maybe we'll just have him pop by every day to see that the larder is stocked, make a meal now and then, help tidy up."

"For pay, of course," Hermione said.

"Of course," I replied, kissing the crown of her head.

"And who knows?" she answered, leaning up again to kiss me on the chin. "Leo may still want a brother or a sister someday."

I leaned over so that she was lying with her back on the pillows, with me hovering above her. "And now I have a confession of my own to make, Little Dove," I murmured.

She snaked her arms around my neck and breathed a little "oh?"

"Mmm hmm," I said, kissing her forehead and then her nose before brushing her lips lightly with mine. "I can't think of anything more wonderful," I continued, planting another little kiss on her lips, "more appealing," I added, moving my mouth to her ear, "more god-damned erotic than the idea of coming home to you every evening in this cozy house, with one baby in the nursery and who knows how many more on the way." A few minutes earlier, I had been on the verge of exhaustion, but not anymore. I dragged my lips from her earlobe to her neck, and then down to her collarbone. Meanwhile, she sank her fingers into my hair and wrapped one leg around mine, pulling me tighter to her. "That scenario is my all-time favorite fantasy, Mione. Has been for years. A dream come true."

We made love passionately, and I'd happily relive it all in my mind, but suddenly I realize that my father-in-law is speaking after the awkward pause in which everyone merely stared at Hermione, obviously moved by her words.

"Hagrid," Hugh just said, rising from his seat and stepping toward the front steps. "I wonder if you would mind handing over my grandson for a few minutes."

As Hagrid gently tucks Leo into Hugh's arms, the baby awakens and does what I'm coming to realize is one of his favorite things to do — he reaches up and grabs the nose of whoever is holding him. Hugh looks comical, his nose being held by a toddler, but the look on his face — of tenderness and awe — is no laughing matter. Hermione squeezes my hand tighter as she watches her father stroll over toward McGonagall and deposit the baby on her lap.

"He'll be one of your students soon enough, Minerva," Hugh says, squatting down next to McGonagall's seat to look more closely at the boy in her arms.

"He will indeed, Hugh," McGonagall sighs, and I marvel as her face melts from its previous stony state into a gentle smile. "And a bright one he'll be, I'm quite sure," she says. "His parents, after all, learned the most important lesson Hogwarts had to offer," she continues, looking up at me and Hermione from her seat. "Didn't Dumbledore always teach us that we must all face the choice between what is right and what is easy?" With that, Leo grabs McGonagall's nose. She laughs and adds, "I'm so glad we can all count on you two to do what is right."
Chapter 36: Son

I don't think I've been so bloody tired since the war.

Who knew a baby who can't even walk yet could wear out two full-grown adults?

So far in the week that I've taken off work to spend with Leo, I've been pooped on, peed on, spat on, drooled on, bitten (though that was unintentional on Leo's part, to be fair — I was looking at his bottom tooth and, well, my finger got in the way), awakened by screams in the middle of the night, splashed with bathwater, and had food thrown at me. I've stepped on a wooden block and nearly twisted my ankle. I've fallen asleep sitting up. I've paced in slow motion around the house for what seems like hours at a time, index finger clutched tight in Leo's hands, stooping sideways, as he tries out his walking legs. I've crawled on my hands and knees to "escape" him as he's chased me, laughing and gurgling, around the lounge. I've tried, rather unsuccessfully, to keep Boris from licking him — in fact, I've pretty much given up on that — and more than once I've had to jump up and move the cat food when Leo has spotted it and decided to give it a taste.

In short, I'm having the time of my life.

Right now, Hermione and I are both sprawled out on the floor in the lounge in front of the hearth, her head resting on my stomach, my legs propped up on the ottoman, with Leo crawling around us and climbing on top of us. It's the only way we could think of to keep him entertained while allowing us both to be relatively motionless. In an hour or so, it'll be his bedtime. Until then, my only goal is to keep my eyes open — well, and keep the kid from crawling into the fireplace.

Thank Merlin for Dobby. If not for him, we'd have starved this past week. Neither Hermione nor I have much spare energy for cooking or going to the market in Ottery St. Catchpole right now. Along the way, I've discovered that the homemade baby food that Dobby whips up is actually quite tasty. When Leo turned up his nose at the pureed peas, I polished them off with gusto. Dobby's even handled the catering for tomorrow's adoption party, bless him, Apparating over every morning from Hogwarts, where he prefers to bunk with the other house elves. Thanks to Dobby, all Hermione and I have to do for the ceremony is wake up, put on something clean, and be sure we don't have baby food in our hair.

"I'll have to contact Dobby before we go to bed tonight and let him know that we'll have one more guest for dinner," Hermione says as she runs her eyes over her planning notes one more time before Vanishing them to her office upstairs. "Charlie Owled today to say he's bringing a date."

"Oh, you don't say," I reply. "Well I'll be dipped in dragon dung. Any idea who?"

"Nope, it's a total mystery," she says, rolling onto her side with her head still propped on my tummy. She reaches out to capture Leo in her arm as he crawls by and then swings him up onto my chest. "I don't envy her, whoever she is," Hermione continues, patting Leo's diapered bum. "She'll
face an incredible amount of scrutiny what with all the family being here, won't she."

"Hmm," I mumble as Leo grabs my nose and makes the gurgly sound that's his version of a laugh.

I haven't told Hermione that I've been interfering in Charlie's love life — didn't want to say too much, too soon — but I have. Charlie hasn't said whether my interference has paid off, but I reckon I'll find out tomorrow.

To free my nose from his grip, I wrap my hands around Leo's waist and lift him over my head, arms extended, so he's dangling facedown a few feet above me, drooling happily onto my shirt.

Hermione chuckles, and I peel my eyes away from Leo for a moment to look at her. She's biting her lip and smiling in a way that's unfamiliar to me. She's pleased, but it's more than that, I think. She looks … what is it? Content. She looks content. Yeah, that's it.

It's a weird moment because I realize that, in all the years I've known Hermione, I've never seen this look. Contentment. And then I realize that, blimey, I might be content, too, come to think of it … really content with my life for the first time ever. I thought I was doing well enough before — I mean, living with Hermione has been everything I could have wanted it to be and more. But this … this is different.

As she lays against my tummy, I feel a little quiver run through Hermione, and her smile shifts, her brow crinkling slightly.

There's a long pause and we're simply looking at each other, me still holding Leo aloft.

"Do you feel it?" she whispers, barely audible.

I study her face, watching the previous version of her smile return, and then I feel it warming my own face, my lips curving upward, my cheeks reddening.

"Yeah, I think I do," I whisper back.

"It's … it's … I'm not really sure what the word is for it," she says. "I keep trying to think of it and then it slips away from me."

I shrug, jostling Leo slightly and drawing another gurgling chuckle from him.

Then I say, "I think you're happy."

Hermione's eyebrows rise, and she whispers, "Oh," like I just reminded her where she left her wand or something.

And then, slowly and gradually, it starts. Giggling. Hermione starts giggling. And it's infectious, because within seconds, I'm giggling, too. I lower Leo down to sit to my chest as Hermione sits up and crisscrosses her legs, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes.

"I had no idea," she says, still snickering.

"Yeah, holy shit," I add, unable to control the belly laughs. "We're happy."

We have no idea why we're laughing, really, and neither does Leo, but he doesn't seem to care. He wiggles his legs, nearly kicking me in the chin, and laughs along.

The next afternoon, Ginny is the first to Floo over to help get ready for the ceremony. She can't seem to get enough of Leo.
"Dad just Apparated up to Cambridge to bring your parents down to The Burrow," she says to Hermione as she picks Leo up, rather unnecessarily, from his high-chair, where he's been eating lunch — or, rather, where he's been rubbing bananas onto his cheeks. "Oof! Oh my goodness, young man," Ginny says as she hoists the baby onto her hip, "I do believe you've put on a few pounds since I saw you last, and that was only two days ago."

"Mmm," says Hermione over her teacup. "It's incredible how much this boy eats. He's happy to tuck into anything we put in front of him. Peaches, applesauce, potatoes, beef stew … he's going to be a big boy."

I'm watching the two of them fuss over Leo from my perch at the kitchen table, but as delighted as I am to see Leo devour everything in sight, my heart still pangs a bit at the thought. He was such a mess when Padma, Thayer and I first recovered him at that farmhouse in Wales — and so clearly hungry. I wonder if I'll ever be able to shake the memory of how miserable he was. How his own parents could treat him the way they did … I'll never understand it.

On the first day Leo was with us here at Vine Cottage, he was so withdrawn, almost shy. Like he wanted to be hugged, he was desperate to be cuddled, but he couldn't be sure how it was going to go if he let us in. Hermione noticed — and then, when she pointed it out, I noticed it, too — that he warmed up to me quicker. Her theory was that he recognized me because of my flaming red hair, and that I'd already proved myself to be trustworthy. I reckon that made some sense. And maybe I made him feel safe, since he was in my arms from the moment Padma handed him over at the arrest until we dropped him off with Sister Miriam. In fact, Leo fairly well clung to me with both fists the entire time that night, scanning my face almost constantly and occasionally looking deep into my eyes. He barely made a peep while we were together for all those hours the night of the arrest — which was remarkable considering how loudly he was wailing when my team and I stormed the house. Did he know I wouldn't hurt him? Obviously he didn't, but somewhere in that little head of his, I think he decided he could take a chance on me, at least for that little while. I'm going to damned well make sure he never regrets it.

It wasn't until bedtime that first night with us that Leo really let down his guard with Hermione — and she reckons it was merely because he was dead knackered and craved a woman's comforting touch. She may have been right, because after we bathed him and dressed him in a fresh pair of footie pyjamas, she wrapped him in a big, fuzzy blanket, sat with him in the rocking chair next to his cot and, for the first time all day, he curled up in her arms, grabbed her nose, and drifted off to sleep as she hummed a soft tune into his curls.

Since then, he's slowly come out of his shell, to the point where he's now willing to cry if he needs something, if he's upset, if he's tired or hungry or whatever. After spending as much time as I have these past few years with Victoire — and now, her new little brother Louis — we had expected more crying, so it was a little weird that Leo was so quiet the first few days. The occasional tears and fussing, when they finally came a few days later, were almost reassuring, because they meant he felt safe enough to act like a regular baby without worrying that one of us was going to fly off the handle.

It's hard to believe we've had him for two weeks. Sometimes it feels like he's been with us forever — like it's the most natural thing in the world — and other times, it still surprises me that he's here, that he's ours. Or, that he's about to be ours. His mother signed over custody right away but, surprisingly, it took Rowle a little bit longer to do so — who knows why. Sister Miriam thinks it may have just been spite, wanting to punish us somehow for his predicament. But who cares? After the ceremony today, Leo will be our son, 100 percent. Rowle? Well, he made his choices — the wrong ones — a long time ago.
"Are you ready?" Sister Miriam asks me quietly, catching me red-handed as I sneak a piece of Dobby's treacle tart in the kitchen as the party outside rolls on.

Wiping the crumbs from my lips, I swallow quickly and mutter, "Erm, yeah … yes, I am, Sister. Sorry. Is everyone here?"

She smiles and joins me in the doorway, and we survey the scene in the back garden.

Amazingly, the late May weather is cooperating with us, and every guest we invited was able to come. Aside from immediate family, there's what we've come to think of as extended family — Neville and Luna (who cut short their Nargle-hunting vacation in Norway by two days for the occasion), Hagrid, McGonagall, Keith Hale (minus his girlfriend, who apparently dumped him recently, surprisingly enough), Padma, Kingsley, Chum, Brocklehurst and Shirley, and Anton Grendys and his wife Doris. Angie is showing off the gigantic engagement ring that George gave her at Valentine's Day — Padma and Luna are ooh-ing over it as she wiggles her fingers before them. Harry and Ginny are taking guff from Seamus for the fancy-pants look of their wedding invitations, which were just mailed this week. Teddy and Victoire are chasing each other around the rose bushes, and Bill and Fleur are proudly showing off Baby Louis.

Dobby is circulating appetizers throughout the crowd — even though Hermione specifically told him she considers him a guest today, not a servant. He just paused to offer a canapé to Azize Yilmaz, the dark-haired, blue-eyed Turkish Auror — and dragon enthusiast — who helped me and Harry on our stopover in Istanbul as we journeyed to Australia so long ago. From the look of things, I'd say I was right to predict that she and Charlie would hit it off — he can't keep his hands off her, despite Mum's occasional sharp looks. And to think that he actually had the nerve to complain to me when I used the excuse of planning the upcoming International Aurors Conference as a way to introduce the two of them, since she expressed an interest in a seminar on harnessing dragons for field work and Charlie had offered to lead it. Ginny tells me Charlie and Azize have been carrying on a hot-and-heavy long-distance romance for months ever since. I'll remind him later that he owes me one.

Audrey and Percy, meanwhile, are already seated, apparently thinking it's time to get this show on the road.

Evidently, Sister Miriam agrees, and she shuffles me out the kitchen door and toward the front of the rows of seats that we have set up in the shade of the big oak tree out back.

"Right then," says Sister Miriam crisply, clasping her hands together and facing the crowd. Leo wiggles and babbles in Hermione's arms as we stand behind Miriam. "Show of hands, please: How many here have witnessed a Benimseme ceremony before?"

After a moment, a wave of chuckles passes through the group as we all realize none of us have seen a wizarding adoption. Blimey. Not one of us.

"No worries," says Miriam. "That's quite all right. Since that's the case, it's probably best that I explain what I'm doing as I go, yes? Very good."

She clears her throat and proceeds in a slightly louder voice which, amusingly, also raises her already high, birdlike voice by a few notes. "The Benimseme is a fairly ancient charm," she squeaks. "It originated in Turkey — thus a variant of the Turkish word for 'adoption' being the incantation. It is a quite powerful and a memorable ceremony."

I steal a look at Hugh and Eleanor, and I can't help but chuckle inwardly at the slightly befuddled look on their faces. They're the only muggles here — the only muggles for miles, probably — and I
wonder if sometimes they feel as if they've landed on a strange, outer planet when they're with us, even after all these years.

"You'll recognize some aspects of the wizarding wedding vows in this ceremony," Miriam continues, "as well as elements of the charms that bind godparents and godchildren together. But the Benimseme incantation goes a step farther than does the godparents spell, also known as the Berakah Goneus charm. Once we perform the Benimseme, this child will be bound to his new parents as abidingly and indisputably as he would be if he were born of them. Like the wedding ceremony, what we are doing today is creating a blood bond, one that will connect this child to every person here who shares his new parents' blood — and to those who are to come."

I think about how gobsmacked I was by the sensation when we did the Berakah Goneus spell with Victoire. And even though I've been thinking of little else but this moment for the past few weeks, the unfuckingbelievableness of what we're about to do hits me anew. Blimey, Hermione and I … who were a couple of 11-year-olds … well, it feels like it was yesterday sometimes … the two of us are going to be this little kid's parents. His parents. For some reason — I can't say why — I can't tear my eyes away from the little trainers that Hermione placed on Leo's feet today. They typically crack me up because they're, well, they're just so small and cute, and Leo's entire outfit today, right down to the tiny trousers and miniature jumper he's dressed in, has had a similar effect on me all day, making me giggle involuntarily and want to pick him up and squeeze him. But now, looking at his little shoe dangling there before me, I feel overcome with emotion, including not a small amount of fear. He's helpless. He needs a Dad. Am I good enough to be that for him? Who the hell do I think I am, anyway? Crap.

I tear my eyes away from Leo's tiny shoe, still wondering why it's fascinated me so, and somehow my gaze falls on my own Dad, sitting in the front row just beyond Miriam. I can tell he's been more or less staring at me, and when my eyes meet his, he just smiles and nods. I can't be certain, but it's almost like he's read my thoughts, and his expression seems to say, You can do this.

Then I look down at Leo, who is staring right up into Hermione's eyes as she rocks him gently in her arms, and I find it — the courage that slipped away from me for a moment. Hell yeah, I can do this. Just watch.

I flick my eyes back to Dad for a second and nod back. Don't worry, I've got this, I think, and he chuckles slightly and nods back, wrapping his arm around Mum, who is seated at his side. I decide that's a good idea, and curl my arm around Hermione's shoulder for good measure.

"As you know," Miriam adds, "Ronald and Hermione are bonded and therefore they share magical blood. As the Matrimonio Intersecare spell dictates, they have become blood of one another's blood, bone of one another's bone. The Benimseme spell requires a similar blood oath. I typically place the child under a mild Sleeping spell at this point in the proceedings. Not to worry — it wouldn't hurt him even if he were awake. I just would rather not startle the poor little fellow."

With that, Miriam extracts her wand from the pocket of her dark grey nun's habit and waves it briefly over Leo's head, and he drops off like a top. Hermione giggles softly and kisses his forehead.

"The mother's role in the ceremony is to hold the child as Hermione is doing. The father, meanwhile, performs the blood oath. Since the father and the mother in this case are already joined, the blood connection between Ronald and Leo will also bind Hermione — and, in fact, everyone here who shares their blood."

Hermione looks up to me, her eyes already swimming with tears. I get lost in their chocolatey depths for a moment, like I've done so many times before. It only lasts for a split-second, but it's
definitely there — deep in her eyes, I see a flicker of her on the night we first took our bonding vows, standing before the hearth wrapped in an oversized white terrycloth dressing gown, her wobbly smile lighting my heart. Merlin's tufty toupee, I can hardly believe everything we've been through since then. And now … gods, we're doing this. We're really doing this. I'm not scared anymore. Just … amazed.

"Let's get started," I whisper to Hermione.

"OK," she whispers back, her smile broadening.

"All right then, Ronald," Miriam chirps, snapping us out of our private moment. "It's your turn."

That's a well-meaning jab at the pace of my chess-playing. You see, Miriam, it turns out, is quite the chess enthusiast, and since she's been spending so much time visiting the house, we've fallen into the habit of playing. Miriam, however, likes her chess speedy — and isn't above nudging me when she thinks I'm dragging arse. "It's your turn" has become an almost constant refrain.

I know what she's after, however — she's already walked us through the ceremony privately and it is indeed "my turn."

I give Hermione's shoulder another hug, grab Leo's trainer-clad toe and squeeze it, then step away and point my wand at the floor. I say the incantation, "Benimseme Inardesco," and, as I walk around Hermione and Leo, a low-lying line of flames forms at our feet, encircling us.

"Jolly good, jolly good, Ronald," Miriam says. Then she turns to the group. "Right. Now, friends, here is the next step: the declaration of intent. Spellwriters like Hermione know how very important that step is in any complex bit of magic. As you will see, the declaration is spoken by the father-to-be."

Miriam turns to me and places her wand about six inches above Leo's head, and I raise mine to meet hers.

Fortunately, I have scribbled notes to myself on the palm of my hand, though I've pretty much memorized what I need to say. I try to hold my wand steady as Hermione sniffles occasionally next to me.

Then I stand tall and decide I should say this bit as clearly and firmly as possible. "We, Ronald Bilius Weasley and Hermione Jean Weasley, claim this child, born 298 days ago to Thorfinn Rowle and Gwyneth Livingston, as our own child, blood of our blood, bone of our bone. We pledge to provide for him, to protect him, to shelter him, to care for him, to honor him as a reminder of the great gift and the great mystery of life."

"Wonderful," Miriam says, lowering her wand so she can face the group once again. "And now, the Benimseme Intersecare — the blood oath."

Miriam turns back to me and gives me a wink. I put my wand away since I reckon this part might be a little easier if I have both hands free. Miriam raises her wand and holds it over my head as I say, "Benimseme Intersecare" and then use Raw Magic to make a small incision in the tip of my left index finger. Then I take Leo's little hand and pause to look at it for a second. His fingers are so tiny. I remember hating to cut into Hermione's finger that first time back at Grimmauld Place, and yet, it had to be done. I take a deep breath, repeat the incantation, and make the tiniest slice possible in Leo's index finger. Then I place the little cut against mine, holding it firmly there.

Then, surprisingly, I'm totally calm, and I remember word-for-word the next incantation as Miriam
taught it to me — despite the fact that it's rather long.

"I offer thee my blood. I offer thee my name. I offer thee my magic," I say, looking down at Leo's face, so relaxed in sleep. "Born Leo Rowle, you are now and forever shall be Leo Frederick Weasley. You are…"

I pause for a moment. It's probably such a short span of time that no one else notices it — I doubt even Hermione detected it — but I think about what I'm about to say and what it really means, and my throat tightens for half a second. I power through it and manage to croak out the next two words.

"…my son."

At that moment, a surge of warmth flows from the point where our fingers are connected, up through my arm, just as it did when Hermione and I took our bonding vows, and I look at Hermione and realize, judging by the amazed look on her face, that she's feeling it, too. I feel Leo's pulse where our fingertips meet, and with each beat, the warmth spreads further throughout my body.

With that, Miriam raises her wand skyward, says "Benimseme Maxima," and the cool, low-lying flames that had been burning around our feet slowly rise and form a red-colored, shimmering cylinder of light around the three of us. I'm still holding Leo's finger to mine, my eyes are still locked on Hermione's, and I don't quite know what's happening but I know that I'll never, ever again be the bloke I was before I stepped into this circle. I'm a Dad now. My heart pounds as the current-like swirl of energy that engulfed us during our bonding ceremony overtakes us again and then, quite gradually, it subsides as the red cylinder of light around us dissolves and disappears.

That's my cue to heal Leo's finger, then mine. I whistle for Boris, and he runs up from his spot next to Hagrid in the back row of seats and does the honors, as I taught him to yesterday. Hermione laughs and stoops to allow Boris to lick Leo's finger, then the dog steps over to lick mine, and his magical Argos tongue heals us both.

And then, Miriam turns back to the group.

"It is finished," she says quite simply, and the garden erupts in applause.

I pull a sobbing Hermione to me, Leo still slumbering in her arms.

"It's finished, eh?" she whispers in my ear with a smile in her voice. "I rather think it's only just beginning."
Chapter Summary

Auras contain more than meets the eye.

Chapter 37: Seeing What Can't Be Seen

"Ronald, come with me," says Adina, who has found me Levitating a stack of dishes into the kitchen sink.

"Hmm?" I answer. "Just a minute — I've just got to bring the cutlery in here and I'll be all set for now."

"Consider it done," she says, waving her wand toward the dinner table as a procession of knives, forks and spoons flies into the kitchen and they stack themselves neatly in the sink.

Huh. "Well, thanks," I say. "You don't have to help out, Adina. You're a guest. And 'sides, we can leave all this for tomorrow. Dobby will be by in the morning to tidy up."

"That's good," she says, "because I really do need to speak with you and Hermione."

I wonder what's so urgent. It's nearly midnight. The dinner party — which Hermione insisted on throwing at our place to celebrate the successful end of the International Aurors Conference — is pretty much over. Sure, Kingsley and Fergus Quinlan are still by the campfire out back, drinking and singing old songs, alternating between laughing uproariously and sobbing on one another's shoulders like a couple of nutters, but I reckon they'll either pass out or Floo back to Kingsley's place eventually like they said they would. Brocklehurst and Shirley left hours ago — but not before Bernie asked Hermione if he could take home leftovers of her herbed roast, since he's such a huge fan. Harry and Ginny left right afterward, saying they had a final fitting for their wedding dress robes at Madame Malkin's in the morning. Neville and Luna helped clean up the garden and the front and back porches before Apparating to their new house near Xenophilius's place. And I was a bit relieved, truth be told, when Dirk Benedict Apparated back to St. Agnes Island. Even after all these years, that guy still scares me a little bit. He's definitely in touch with his inner drill master.

Keith Hale, interestingly enough, stuck around the house until just a few minutes ago, locked in deep conversation with Adina — and from the looks of it, they weren't merely discussing the finer points of Adina's Spellbreaking seminar or the nuances of Australian Rules football. I wasn't the only one who noticed sparks flying between the two of them all night. Padma, Luna, Susan Collins and Hermione spent the evening whispering and giggling about it. That is, when they weren't gossiping about Charlie and Azize, who are apparently still a hot-and-heavy item, at least judging by the way she sat on his lap in the lounge after Hermione served pudding. I mean, the ruddy British, Australian and American Ministers for Magic were sitting right there with them in the lounge — you'd think Charlie would be able to restrain himself. Oh well … their antics made for lively after-dinner conversation.

Adina surprises me by taking my hand and dragging me out of the kitchen. "Hermione?" she calls as we approach the front hallway.
"I'm up here, Dina," Hermione says from upstairs. "Just checking to be sure there are enough
pillows on your bed," she adds as she appears at the top of the stairway.

Adina tugs on my hand and pulls me up the stairs behind her. Hermione gives us both a quizzical
look as we climb to meet her, and all I can do is smile and shrug over Adina's head.

In the upstairs hallway, Adina turns to me and Hermione and gives us both a broad, blinding smile.

"I think I know why you're smiling so brightly," Hermione says with a mischievous grin.

"Oh you do, do you?" Adina replies, letting go of my hand to give Hermione a little hug.

"Yes, I think I do," Hermione says. "It was hard not to notice that you and a certain handsome
British Auror have a certain chemistry."

"Now listen, Hermione, there's nothing going on between me and Adina," I cut in, causing them
both to turn to me, look me over once or twice, and then burst out laughing.

"Oy!" I sputter, trying hard not to smile.

"All right, all right, darling," Hermione says with a smirk, peeling herself away from Adina to give
me a little pat on the cheek. "You're a handsome British Auror too, dear. We know."

"That's better," I say with a mock pout. "But please, sweet Merlin, please don't tell me you dragged
me up here so I can trade hen talk about your love life, Adina."

Adina shakes her head laughing. "No, Hermione and I can do plenty of that ourselves in the
morning — and there is quite a bit to talk about I think. Keith's adorable," she says, drawing a
squeal of delight from Hermione. "No, I need to talk to you both about something entirely different.
I know it's a bit weird, but, well, this is one of those things that people with my abilities have to do
now and then."

I wonder what she's on about, but she's smiling, so it can't be bad, right?

Hermione shrugs and says, "OK, umm …"

"Let's step into your bedroom, all right?" Adina adds, apparently sensing our hesitation.

"Fine," Hermione says. "Let me just look in on Leo one more time," she says, ducking into Leo's
room and turning out the bluebell flames that she had set there earlier. Thank goodness she thought
to put an Insulato sound-proofing charm on Leo's room earlier, or all the noise around here tonight
might have kept him up.

When she's satisfied that Leo is sleeping tight, Hermione rejoins us, and we all head into the master
bedroom, where Hermione lights the lanterns with her wand and Adina and I settle onto the sofa.
Hermione then plops down on the ottoman.

"OK, Adina, what's up?" she says.

Adina is positively beaming. If it's not Keith that she wants to talk about, then what in blazes has
her glowing like this?

"All right, you two, I know it's rather odd that I've asked to speak to you at this hour, but, well,
since I'm heading back to Australia tomorrow, I reckon there's no time like the present," Adina
says.
Hermione and I trade a confused look.

"Umm … all right, Adina, what are you on about?" I ask.

"It's something that I noticed when I arrived. Something I knew about immediately but decided not to discuss because, well, it's fairly personal — and, for all I knew, you both were perfectly aware of the situation and didn't require any interference from me," she says. "And all week long, I've been waiting for signs that the two of you know what I know. But it's obvious you don't. And so, I have to tell you. In fact, I'm dying to tell you."

"Oooooookaaaaaaay," Hermione says, clearly not sure where this is headed. But, then again, neither am I.

"I know you think I'm mad, but here goes," says Adina. "As you know, I can read auras, right?"

We both nod.

"It's something I can't help. It's something I see without even trying — your aura is just there, a visible field — at least, it's visible to me — that tells me so much about you. I see it automatically, but there's a spell I can cast to show you what your aura looks like — temporarily, anyway. Would you like to see Ronald's?"

We both nod again. Bloody hell yeah, I'd like to see my aura.

"OK, stand up, Ronald," Adina says, rising to her feet.

I leap up to face her. "Watch yourself in the mirror over there," Adina says, pointing toward Hermione's vanity across the room.

As I turn to look in that direction, Adina waves her wand over my head and says the incantation, "Auroris Revelio." And what happens next is pretty damned amazing. It's sort of gradual, but eventually a shimmering halo of light appears, extending about three inches from the surface of my body, and it's actually quite bright.

"Blimey," I breathe, "it's … wow, it's incredibly blue. How can you even see me through all this light?"

"It's distracting at first, isn't it?" Adina says. "You get used to it. But yes, Ronald, your aura is quite distinctive. You see how deep and rich the blue is? The color is in the indigo range of the spectrum, actually, though yours is unusually deep. Indigo is the color of intense feeling, loyalty, rootedness. It tells me that you have learned to remain calm during a crisis. Others lean on you for support. But you notice that reddish tinge around the edges?"

I didn't see it at first, but now I do. "It's a very bright, clear red, which tells me you're also powerful, sensual, passionate, energetic and competitive. It's an interesting mix, one I don't see too often."

"Well, I'll be damned," I say in an astonished voice, and Adina laughs out loud. I turn to Hermione, who is looking at me like she's never seen me before.

"That is … positively … incredible," Hermione says, her mouth hanging open afterward. "You see that around everyone, Adina?"

"Mmm hmm," Adina answers. "Comes in handy. Keith's is bright red," she adds wiggling her eyebrows at Hermione. "I'll tell you what that means later."
Hermione and I, meanwhile, remain boggled by what we're seeing, until the light starts to slowly fade and disappear from our view. "Unfortunately, the Auroris Revelio doesn't last that long," Adina says, "but it can at least give you a glimpse of what I see."

"Wow, that was brilliant, Adina," I say, "but, umm … so?"

I sit back down on the sofa and look up at her.

She smiles. "Bear in mind that this is what I see when I look at everyone, yes? So, when I came to stay with you a week ago, imagine my surprise when I met Hermione and saw this."

She reaches out her hand to Hermione, who takes it and stands. "Auroris Revelio," Adina says with a wave of her wand and, slowly and gradually, Hermione's aura comes into view. She and I both gasp when we see it, because it's actually quite gorgeous. It's a yellowish shade of orange — again, a very bright and intense hue. "This shade of orange is associated with scientific minds and, well, perfectionism," Adina says.

Hermione laughs, looking at herself in the mirror. "Guilty as charged," she says with a shrug.

"You have a love for detailed work and mentally challenging projects," Adina says.

"Check and check," I add.

"I should also note," Adina says with a grin, "that orange is the opposite of blue on the color wheel — you two are quite complementary in more ways than one."

"We are, aren't we?" Hermione says playfully, waving her arms in the air and enjoying the movement of her aura.

"Now," Adina says, pointing to the outer ring of the light surrounding Hermione's form. "What you probably haven't noticed are these silvery sparkles within all that overwhelming orange."

She's right. I hadn't noticed. But now that she's called my attention to it, they're there, clear as day. Glistening silver sparkles.

"It's unusual to see silver in someone's aura. And it's usually temporary," Adina says. "That's because these silvery sparkles are an unmistakable sign of … pregnancy."

Hermione, who up 'til that moment had been jokingly waving her arms in the air, freezes in mid-motion. "A sign of … of what?" she gasps.

"Pregnancy, my friend," says Adina. "You may not know it, but I'm sure beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are up the duff."

Hermione turns to look down at me, still sitting on the sofa, her mouth slightly agape.

I look up at her, noticing that the orange-and-silver glow is starting to fade as the Auroris Revelio spell wears off, and I feel my heart thumping in my chest. I want to believe what Adina's just said, but … gods, we've been disappointed so many times before.

"Hang on, Adina," I say slowly, rising to take Hermione's hand. "How can you be so sure?"

"Well," she says, taking Hermione's other hand, "when was your last cycle, Hermione?"

Hermione shakes her head slowly, brow furrowed. "I've been so irregular since the war, it's hard to remember," she says. "It was … let me think … it was certainly before Leo. Actually, I take that
back. It was the week that we brought Leo home with us. I remember now. It started the morning after he joined us here at Vine Cottage."

"Hmm," says Adina. "How have you been feeling?"

"Well, I've been quite tired, now that you ask," Hermione whispers, "but I chalked that up to Leo. He's starting to toddle now, and I'm constantly chasing him around the house. And, well, I've felt a bit unwell a few mornings, but nothing worth worrying about."

"My dear Hermione," says Adina, "today is July 26. If I'm right — and I'm pretty sure I am — then I reckon you're eight or nine weeks along."

Hermione looks as flabbergasted as I feel — but I notice that she's equally as hesitant.

"Well," she says quietly, brow still furrowed, "there's one very good way to find out."

Adina nods, but I have no idea what Hermione's talking about. She must see the confusion in my face.

"The Praegnatio Invenire charm, darling," Hermione says, still at a whisper, as if saying it too loud will somehow jinx us. "I suppose you wouldn't know it but, trust me, every witch does."

Adina drops our hands and moves toward the door. "Since I already know what the Praegnatio will tell you, I will leave you both to this very private moment," she says, stepping out into the hallway. "Good night, you three, and see you in the morning," she says, closing the door behind her with a grin.

That leaves Hermione and me standing there hand-in-hand by the hearth.

Hermione looks up to me, a smile tentatively wavering at the corners of her lips. My heart is drumming — hard — and my stomach is flipping for the second or third time since Adina said the word "pregnancy."

"Do you … do you really think…" I stammer, a smile tugging at my lips despite my fear.

Hermione bites her bottom lip. "It won't be hard to find out," she says.

"Should … do you want to … I mean, if you aren't, then, that's OK, but…" Oh, bugger, I'm dying to know, but I'm worried that if we do this Preg-natty-whatever-it-is spell and we get the wrong answer, Hermione will be devastated.

"It'll be all right either way," Hermione says soothingly, seemingly reading my thoughts.

I nod. "OK, well, uh … what do we do?"

She smiles and draws her wand from her back pocket with her free hand. Then she casts a quick Muffliato at the door. "Just in case," she says with a little grin.

"Good idea," I say, squeezing the hand I'm holding in mine. "I'm ready when you are, love."

She nods and holds her wand about level with her breasts and parallel to the floor. "Praegnatio Invenire," she says in a breathy whisper, then slowly pushes her wand downward until it's level with her hips.

Then, almost as gradually as the Aurorios Revelio brought our auras into view, it happens. A light that looks quite a bit like the aura did — shiny and extending two or three inches from the surface
of Hermione's body — appears over her belly. Only this light is bright, bright green.

"It's green," I say stupidly. Obviously, it's green. But what does it mean? I pull my eyes away from her middle, not realizing that I've been openly staring, completely fixated … and that's when I notice the tears streaking down Hermione's cheeks.

"It's green," she says, shaking her head. "Oh, Ron. I'm … we're … I'm pregnant."

Pregnant.

Eight or nine weeks.

Pregnant.

A baby.

I feel like my head is stuffed with cotton, like I'm walking under water, like the world has started spinning in slow motion … I can't … quite … fathom …

"A baby?" I murmur.

Then, I focus on Hermione's face. I mean, really focus on it. She's looking back at me, her eyebrows raised, her mouth open slightly, a giant smile lighting her face. And then she starts laughing, and that's when the cotton in my head disappears, I resurface from that weird underwater feeling and I realize what's really going on.

"Good Godric, Mione — a baby!" I shout, grabbing her by the shoulders.

She nods and shouts back, "Oh, Ronald!" Then she throws her arms around my neck and I pick her up and twirl her around on the spot. She's laughing and crying at the same time, her cheek pressed to mine as we spin and spin.

We stop spinning — I'm a little dizzy — and I lower her feet to the floor then crush her to me, kissing her madly everywhere … her cheeks, her forehead, her nose, her eyes and then her mouth. "Mione, love, oh gods," I'm mumbling against her skin, still covering her face and her neck with kisses. "Merlin, I love you. I love you so much."

"I love you too, darling," she answers as she threads her fingers into my hair.

"C'mere," I growl and pick her up — she hoots with surprise — and I carry her to the bed, placing her down gently and climbing on top of her, unable to stop landing kisses on every inch of skin I can find. Rolling around the bed with her in a frenzy of kissing and panting and laughing and crying, I peel off her shirt and then her trousers, then her bra, then her knickers and soon she's lying before me, starkers, and I pause to take her in.

Gods.

Lying next to her now, I prop myself up on my elbow to look at her, gently caressing her belly. "There's a baby in there," I whisper, the smile on my face so big and wide that it almost hurts.

"Mmm hmm," she hums with a chuckle, placing one hand on mine while raising the other to stroke my chin. "Your baby. Our baby."

"Do you … does it … do you feel different?" I ask.

She laughs. "I do now," she says, "though maybe I'm just imagining it."
"Well, I sure as hell feel different," I sigh, leaning over to kiss her tummy.


"How so," I ask, my lips still pressed to her tummy, which I'm now slowly covering with kisses.

She runs her fingers through my hair and hums happily, then lets out a long exhale. "Well, if my last cycle started when Leo came to us, I was probably in the old 'no-go zone' around the time of the adoption ceremony — and you remember what it was like that night," she says as she gives my earlobe a playful pinch.

Remember it? I'm quite sure I'll never forget it.

Once the Benimseme spell was cast, I felt so invigorated, so psyched, so overjoyed, I could have flown without a broom. And I couldn't help it — I just couldn't be that far from Hermione the whole night. When I wasn't holding her hand, I was wrapping an arm around her shoulder, resting my hand at the small of her back, or curling a lock of her hair around my finger. As happy as I was that all our friends and family were there, I couldn't wait to be with Hermione and Leo … my new little family … alone.

When the last of the guests Flooed home after dinner, Hermione and I put Leo to bed together. As we bathed him, combed his hair, slathered lotion on him and slipped him into a fresh nappy and his little pyjamas, I was so stupid with happiness, I couldn't keep what I'm sure was a dopey-looking grin off my face — even when Leo splashed me, giggling and slapping his palms against the surface of the bathwater.

Instead of taking him into the nursery, I turned left from the bathroom and carried him into our room, plopping down with him on the sofa by the hearth. Hermione followed, of course, and settled in next to me as I propped my feet on the ottoman, bent my legs and placed Leo on my lap facing us. I gripped him firmly in both hands to keep him from teetering over onto the floor, and he smiled back at us, his eyes switching from my face to Hermione's and back again.

"You're a Weasley now, aren't you Leo," Hermione said brightly, reaching out to take one of his hands in hers.

Leo babbled incoherently in response, then seemed to think of something that amused him greatly, because he chuckled loudly, kicking his legs against my chest.

"I agree, Leo," she continued. "It's fun to become a Weasley."

"I wouldn't know, of course," I said.

"True," said Hermione, resting her head on my shoulder. "Your Daddy's been a Weasley all his life, hasn't he, Leo?"

That was it. It was the first time either of us had used that word — Daddy — to describe me, and my heart raced. Daddy. We'd been careful not to get ahead of ourselves until now, never referring to Leo as our son, or to ourselves as his parents, or his Mum, or his Dad. But … saying it now, I felt a surge of warmth run through me. Daddy.

"I really am his Dad now, aren't I?" I said to Hermione as she tilted her head on my shoulder to kiss me on the chin.

"One hundred percent," she said.
I tipped my head to rest my cheek atop her curls. "And you're his Mum now, aren't you."

"One hundred percent," she answered.

"I know it's daft that I keep repeating it to myself. I mean, I know in my heart that it's true, but it's taking a while for my head to catch up," I said.

"Mmm … I know what you mean," she said. "Do you know what he means, Leo?"

Leo's answer was to lean forward, eyes drooping slightly, and climb up onto my chest, settling down against me facedown.

"Someone's knackered," I said. I meant to get up and tuck him into his bed, but it felt too good to stay right where we were, just as we were — a trio — as Hermione leaned against my side and Leo's little body rose and fell in time with my breathing, chewing distractedly on his fist.

A few minutes later, Hermione broke the silence. "Come with me, little man," she said, reaching to pluck Leo from my chest. "It's time for beddy-bye."

Normally I'd let Hermione put Leo to bed by herself, but that night, I felt compelled to tag along, and as she laid him down and tucked his covers around him, I held her close by the waist. We both stood there at his bedside for quite some time, just looking at him.

"He's a good boy, isn't he?" Hermione whispered.

"The best," I murmured in her ear.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For finding him."

"Oh. Well, I'd say he sort of found us, didn't he. He more or less wormed his way into my heart that night and wouldn't let go."

"That's true. He could have wormed his way into Thayer or Padma's heart that night — but he chose yours," she said, clasping her hands onto my forearms, which were wrapped tightly around her middle. "He knew your heart was the right one, because it was open. That's how Harry found you, after all."

"Hmm?"

It had been ages since I'd thought about the day Harry and I met, way back on Platform Nine and Three Quarters. Gods, it felt like several lifetimes ago. I must have stood there thinking, pressing her back against my front, my cheek resting on the top of her head, for longer than I knew, because she spoke up again before I could really sort out my feelings.

"When you were younger, you could be an insensitive prat sometimes, Ron, but deep down, when it really counts, you're the most tender-hearted softie I know, and I believe that's why Harry found you then and why Leo found you now," she said. "And it's one of the things that makes you such a wonderful father."

I laugh into her hair. "I'm not sure I've been a father long enough to be rated a wonderful one yet, love."
"Well, I've never been shy about telling you when you're wrong, good sir knight, and you're wrong about that."

My mind flipped back to the day I got the letter saying I was going to be a prefect — I don't know why my mind went there, but it did — and I remembered keenly how hurt I was that Hermione was surprised I'd been given the title. Looking back, it was unfair of me to be so hacked off with her, but I know now that it was because I wanted her to be proud of me, I wanted to measure up in her eyes. Her good opinion still matters to me more than she realizes, and as we stood there gazing at Leo, that realization choked me up all over again.

"I told you once, back when I was at St. Agnes, that there was nothing more important to me than to be a great Auror, Mione, because I wanted you to be proud of me," I said. "But that's changed."

"Mmmmmmm," she hummed, stroking my forearms gently. "How so?"

"There's nothing — nothing — more important to me than being a good husband to you and a good father to Leo," I answered. "And to, well, any other kids who may come along. Being a great Auror comes second to all that for me now."

"Oh, Ron," Hermione murmured, turning in my arms to face me and running her hands up my chest. "I love you, Ronald Weasley. Have I told you lately?"

I didn't answer. Instead, I lowered my face to hers and caressed her lips with mine before deepening the kiss. She responded by sliding her hands up to my shoulders and then snaking her arms around my neck, tipping her head back. We snogged like randy kids like that in the darkness of Leo's room until I remembered where we were and what we were about. In a heartbeat, I lifted her into my arms and carried her back to our room — but only after Hermione, still in my arms, insisted that I stop in the hallway and let her reinforce the Admonitrix charm on Leo's room.

In the warmth and comfort of our big bed, I made love to her that night, pouring out my heart with each kiss, with each move. I must have seemed like a babbling nutter, but I couldn't help myself … there was so much to say, and she's gotten used to my chatty ways by now.

"You're everything, Mione," I said as I entered her, my forehead pressed to hers, our noses sliding next to one another's. "Everything. You, this home, this family, you're my whole world, Little Dove, just like I told you I wanted you to be."

"Oh, darling," she whispered back, wrapping her legs around my middle and clasping my face in her hands. "I love you, Ron, I love you so much," she said, tracing my chin and neck with little kisses. "I'm the luckiest woman in the world, sweetheart, I truly am."

I think about it now, as Hermione and I lie here on the bed, my hand still stroking her now-pregnant belly — blimey, she's pregnant, gods! — and I realize that yeah, it seems right. That was the night this baby was conceived. I don't know how I know … I just … know.

Hermione looks up at me with a grin that tells me she's thinking what I'm thinking. "If it seems to you that that was the night, then that was the night, darling," she says. "Your Ingenitus instincts are usually on the money."

"Doesn't matter, really, but I'd like to think some of that Benimseme magic was at work that night," I say.

"Mmmmm," she answers, rolling onto her side and slowly unbuttoning my shirt and then undoing my belt. "I'd say there were all kinds of magic at work that night, Ronald."
Shouts and Murmurs

Chapter Summary

The Prophet strikes again.

Chapter 38: Shouts and Murmurs

I'm angry, but my reaction is nothing compared to Hermione's.

"That damned Palanca Toggle," she mutters, banging around in our hotel suite bathroom as she gets dressed. "She's bloody lucky that she crossed me now, when I'm supposedly too mature to consider hexing her. But, sweet Merlin, if she had done something this despicable to me and mine just a few years ago, she'd be sporting a rash that would make Marietta Edgecombe's look like a mosquito bite."

"That's my girl," I say from my perch on the bed, where I'm trying my best to pull some socks onto Leo's feet so we can join the rest of the family down in the lobby for a late-morning breakfast. "Let's try not to let this thing ruin our entire day, eh? I mean, I'll stop in to the Prophet office on my way to work next week to speak with the editor. Until then, all we can do is get ourselves upset, and what's the point of that?"

"You're right, of course," Hermione says, stepping into the room and helping me finish putting Leo's shoes on. "It's just — honestly, every time I think about it, I get angry all over again."

I do, too, truth be told — but it does neither Hermione, nor the baby in her tummy, nor Leo any good for her to get so worked up. As it is, Leo's been watching us both very closely this morning — and I have to reckon he's aware that we're both upset. Not that we don't have reason to be.

Even though we're in the remote hills of Ireland, The Sunday Prophet delivery Owl found us this morning, and we of course rushed to read the writeup on Harry and Ginny's wedding last night. Actually, we couldn't have avoided seeing it even if we'd wanted to — the story took up the entire front page, as well as several pages toward the center of the paper. And it was, indeed, touted as "The Wedding of the Century." Oh, brother.

Harry adopted a philosophical attitude about the whole thing several months ago, figuring that this was really a Mum & Ginevra production, and that it was his job to shut up and show up, so to speak. So, when Ginny hired a 20-piece orchestra to play music before, during and after the ceremony, Harry didn't blink. When she insisted that a flock of doves be released at the moment they said their "I dos," Harry merely nodded. When she directed the baker to add one more layer to a cake that already stood five feet tall, Harry shrugged. When she announced that she wanted to honeymoon in Greece for a month, Harry smiled and cleared his calendar.

It was indeed an over-the-top extravaganza, the kind of wedding that Mum's most likely been dreaming of since the day Ginny was born. And because Ginny is the only Weasley kid so far to put up no resistance whatsoever to Mum's vision — and who in fact bought into it 100 percent — the event was every bit as excessive as ours even Bill's were not.
So, of course, while we were still tucked in bed — and Leo remained fast asleep in his part of the suite — we rushed to unwrap the newspaper this morning and take it all in:

**HARRY POTTER WEDS!**

**It's official, ladies: The Boy Who Lived is off the market**

At last, 'Chosen One' **Harry Potter** and his longtime girlfriend, Holyhead Harpies star seeker **Ginevra Weasley**, are united in wedlock in a lavish ceremony before friends, family and 250 other dazzled onlookers. The guest list includes everyone who is anyone — Ministry officials, foreign dignitaries, Quidditch stars and entertainment icons — and thanks to The Sunday Prophet, the guest list now also includes you. Come with us as we crash the Wedding of the Century!

By Palanca Toggle

Photos by Suzy Newsance

The gilt-edged invitations instructed lucky wedding guests to gather at private Portkey stations scattered throughout the country. At the appointed time, those ultra-secret Portkeys transported them to a remote, undisclosed location: a castle, which can now be identified as Castle Weasmuth, an ancient, majestic, tumbledown manse and the ancestral home of the Weasley family, nestled in remote mountain country within County Donegal, Ireland.

Upon landing at Weasmuth, guests found the grounds magically transformed into a white, green and gold wonderland bathed in late-afternoon sunshine, soon to be dappled with the orange glow of lantern light and candles.

It was difficult not to feel a frisson of excitement. Holders of this much-sought-after invitation — all 300 or so of us — were descending on Weasmuth to witness what will, without a doubt, go down as the most talked-about, most memorable, most opulent wedding the wizarding world has seen in decades. That is, not since the union of the groom's grandparents, Fleamont and Euphemia Potter, nuptials that are still discussed today among witches and wizards of a certain age who recall the wedding party that sported eight groomsmen, eight bridesmaids, and a flamboyant wedding luncheon that included lobster bisque, crab legs, duck a l'orange, endless bottles of Bollinger and a rum cake flambeed at tableside by a Hungarian hornet-tails dragon.

The Potter-Weasley festivities, while lacking a dragon, were no less grandiose. The bride, **Ginevra Weasley**, was attended by sister-in-law and maid-of-honor **Hermione Weasley** as well as close friend **Luna Lovegood**. Ms. Weasley disclosed prior to the ceremony that she set the color scheme for the entire affair based on the famously green color of her groom's eyes, and therefore her bridesmaids were attired in a fetching shade of light chartreuse, accents of which were captured in the bride's bouquet.

The groom, **Harry Potter**, and his groomsmen, best man **Ronald Weasley** and **Neville Longbottom**, were turned out in a muggle-style black tuxedos with waistcoats cut from the same chartreuse silk that adorned the bridesmaids.

The bride was outfitted in a flowing white silk gown designed by noted Diagon Alley bridal designer **Adzerella Fontainebleu** that featured a 12-foot train and a cathedral-length veil.

The flower girl, the bride's niece **Victoire Weasley**, was accompanied down the aisle by a last-minute addition to the wedding party, her newly adopted cousin **Leo Weasley**, who toddled along gripping her hand and the hand of the groom's godson, **Theodore Lupin**. Theodore presented the rings to the groom before Leo was scooped up by his adoptive grandmother, **Molly Weasley**, and seated with the rest of the Weasley family. (For more on Leo Weasley, see Page 25.)
Wait, what?

At these words, I bolted upright in bed, followed immediately by Hermione, and we both started tearing at the paper, ignoring the remaining blather about Ginny’s dress and tiara, and trying to get to Page 25 as quickly as we bloody well could.

And there it was.

**Shock, dismay and whispers as**

**Weasleys adopt Death Eater baby**

By Palanca Toggle

The surprise of the Potter-Weasley nuptials for many onlookers was the realization that the maid-of-honor, Hermione Weasley, in more formal times past would have been correctly referred to as matron-of-honor.

That’s right, dear readers, Ms. Weasley and her husband, the bride’s brother Ronald Weasley, appeared at the wedding with their new adoptive son in tow. Sources tell The Prophet that he was officially adopted only weeks ago, but that’s not the most surprising news. No, what is exceptional — and potentially explosive — is the news that the young boy, roughly a year old, is the biological son of a Death Eater.

Indeed, the child is the result of the unwed union of noted Death Eater Thorfinn Rowle and Gwyneth Livingston, an American-born witch who ran in Death Eater circles during the war and was reputed to be a lady of the evening much favored by Voldemort’s inner coterie. Rowle, of course, was on the Ministry’s most wanted list for years after the war and Mr. Weasley himself led the Auror team that effected his capture earlier this year. The Death Eater, still sporting the Dark Mark, is now serving a life sentence in Azkaban; his erstwhile girlfriend, Ms. Livingston, is serving a five-year sentence for aiding and abetting a fugitive, colluding with Death Eaters, larceny and an outstanding warrant related to her defrauding Gringotts Bank of several thousand galleons before the war.

Both biological parents signed away custodial rights to the child, The Prophet has learned. But that didn’t stop the whispers as news of the adoption spread — and those whispers are only likely to rise in volume now that the child’s origins are more widely known.

"Well, it’s quite ... surprising," said one guest, who struggled for words while confessing not to be close to the Weasleys — and requested anonymity. "It’s quite difficult for anyone who survived the war to imagine how one could open one’s home to a criminal's spawn. I’m sorry, I know that sounds unkind, but, well, it is what it is."

On the other end of the spectrum were reactions among those who may not long for the days of Voldemort’s reign, but who nevertheless lament the breakdown of the cultural norms that preceded his rise.

"Reform is all well and good," said one high-ranking Wizengamot member who spoke on condition of anonymity, "but it’s possible to push too much change too quickly. The Weasleys have been at the forefront of a laudable transformation of the Ministry. But changing an organization is one thing. Changing a culture is another. And their presumption that all wizardkind is ready for reform, is ready to ignore blood status — well, to some, it reeks of arrogance. And I shudder to think what this child's actual parents would think of his being raised by a muggleborn, war hero or no."

By the time we finished reading this filth, the edges of the newspaper were crumpled in my fists
and I was shaking with rage. I was so furious, in fact, that I rather unintentionally set the paper on fire via Raw Magic, and Hermione had to quickly snuff it out and Vanish the ashes with her wand before collapsing in a wave of tears.

Fortunately, we both managed to calm down somewhat before Leo woke up, and Hermione bustled into the room adjoining ours — where he had slept soundly through the night, thank Merlin — and carried him in to join us in bed for a cuddle. As they approached, his bright white hair contrasting so brilliantly with hers, I was struck all over again by what a beautiful pair they make, how lovingly she holds him, how tightly he clings to her as she does so. She's his mother. He's a baby, a little person, someone who doesn't deserve to be judged for the actions of the people who conceived him. The bonding ceremony yesterday, the adoption ceremony a few weeks ago … they all reminded me how much wizards care about blood … how that obsession can sometimes lead people to believe the kind of shite that Voldemort spewed, the kind of shite that Palanca Toggle wrote about Leo. But even if there was no blood connection between us, I would hope that I'd be able to look at Leo as a kid who, with the right upbringing, can eventually make his own decisions, live by his own code. Sirius did it. I intend to teach Leo about him someday.

I decided to keep these thoughts to myself for the time being — no point stirring things up — but first I made a silent promise that I'd give Toggle a very large piece of my mind at the next opportunity.

We join the family downstairs and it's immediately obvious that every one of them has read The Prophet's trash. I'm carrying Leo, which turns out to be a very good thing, because as soon as we appear in the lobby, Eleanor and Hugh jump up from their seats at the breakfast table and come rushing toward us, and I'm happy to see Hermione engulfed in her parents' arms. Poor Mione — she's openly weeping on her mother's shoulder, not caring that hotel staff and other guests are bustling around us. Thankfully, the family breakfast has been set up in a private room off the lobby, so Hugh and I quickly scoot Hermione and Eleanor inside and shut the doors from prying eyes.

Luna asks for Leo and soon he's being passed from Neville to McGonagall, Percy to Audrey, Mr. Delacour to Mrs. Delacour, Charlie to Azize, Andromeda to Teddy, and finally to Hagrid, who happily bounces Leo on his knee as the two of them tuck into a giant plate of bacon.

Meanwhile, Hermione settles down somewhat as Eleanor and Hugh comfort her. Mum and Dad, for their part, step over to tend to me, and I have to admit that I'm too upset to even speak. I can't decide whether to cry or whether to break something.

"Ronnie, I fully intend to give the Prophet's editor a talking to as soon as we check out of the hotel today," Dad says, clapping me on the back. "Kingsley's beat me to it. Apparently he checked out of the hotel this morning after reading that … thing … and Portkeyed back to London so he could schedule a meeting with The Prophet's editor. He told us he'd give us an update as soon as he can. In the meantime, he sends his love."

All I can muster is a nod. I'm afraid if I attempt to talk, I'll just sound like a berk.

Mum fills the gap. "Please, darlings, please believe me," she says, turning to pull Hermione and Eleanor close. "Not one of us here," Mum continues, "not one of us agrees with anything that was in that horrible article. We love you and we adore that baby. I don't want any of that poison to seep into your heads, do you understand me? Leo is a love, he's one of us, and I'll happily hex anyone who says any different."

Bill hands Baby Louis to his mother-in-law and stands to join us. "By Merlin, Ron, I hope you know that Fleur and I could never feel that way about Leo. After all, he's our own godson."
"I do know that, Bill, and I appreciate it," I answer. "We both do."

George rises and sinks his hands into his pockets. "Mum speaks for all of us, Ronnie," he says sincerely, nary a note of jesting in his voice. "Angie will tell you, the first thing I did this morning was send an Owl to The Prophet to cancel all of my advertising contracts with them. Wheezes will never place an ad in that rag again, brother."

"Thanks, Georgie," I answer quietly, and he wraps me in a tight but quick hug.

We break apart when a bellboy steps into the room and approaches me bearing a note. "Mr. Weasley, this message just arrived for you by Owl," he says. I take it, hand him a tip, and rip it open.

"It's from Harry," I tell the group.

"All the way from Greece!" Hagrid pipes up, still bouncing Leo on his knee. "You don't think we're going to let you get away with not reading that out loud to all of us, do you? What's he say?"

I can't help but smile — Hagrid has never liked secrets. That's why he's so bad at keeping them.

"Hang on," I say, "let's sit down."

Hermione hasn't eaten yet and she really must — plus, I want her to get off her feet. All this emotional argy-bargy has got to be exhausting her. She nods and everybody returns to their seats, followed by Hermione.

I remain standing to read the note.

"OK," I say, quickly running my eyes over the page once before diving in.

Ron,

Ginny and I received our copy of The Prophet an hour ago and we're both sick about it. I would have written to you immediately but my first instinct was to send a Howler to Palanca Toggle telling her exactly what I think of her, and then to send an Owl to her editor to let him know that under no circumstances will Ginny and I ever cooperate with The Prophet's reporters, editors or photographers again. He assures me that my message will be published as a Letter to the Editor in the next issue.

I felt a little bit better after venting, but it didn't last long, because my mind immediately switched to how you and Hermione must be feeling. I'm so hacked off I'm tempted to quit this holiday and come home just for the pleasure of kicking some Daily Prophet arses in person. It probably won't surprise you that Ginny feels the same way times roughly one hundred.

This line draws a few giggles from the group.

I want to scream, I really do. Voldemort may be dead — the three of us bloody well saw to that — but his ideas have the damnedest way of holding on.

"Ain't it the truth," Hagrid sighs. Then Leo waves a piece of bacon in his face and Hagrid smiles while chomping down and taking a big bite out of it, a move that causes Leo to laugh hysterically.

As everyone chuckles over Hagrid and Leo's hijinks, my eyes go to the next section of Harry's note, and I realize it's going to be tough to read out loud. My throat tightens, but I continue, hoping everybody will understand why my voice is so wobbly.
Ron, thanks to you, I haven't had to wonder what my life would be like if I had a brother, because you've been that for me ever since the day we met on Platform Nine and Three Quarters. The bonding ceremony only reinforced what was already true. You're my brother. Hermione is my sister. Leo is my nephew. When someone hurts you, I hurt too. If you need me, I'll be there in a flash. Just say the word.

Harry.

I look up and everybody's looking back at me, but my eyes are drawn straight to Hermione, who has a big, genuine smile on her face, though her cheeks are streaked with tears. I haven't seen her smile like that all morning.

"That's it," she declares, drawing everyone's attention away from me and over to her. "I'll be damned if I'm going to let idiots like Palanca Toggle and her so-called 'sources' drag us down. We'll drop a line to Harry and Ginny later to say they should stay right where they are and enjoy their honeymoon. In the meantime, everybody, let's eat."

Those words are music to my ears, not that I'm hungry — though I am, god damn it — but because Hermione really needs to eat in the mornings lately or she gets terribly light-headed. So I'm relieved to take my seat next to her and watch her reach for the platter of scrambled eggs.

Hagrid seems happy to keep Leo on his lap. The two of them are contentedly feeding one another porridge and they're both a ruddy mess. Soon the conversation drifts to Luna and Neville, who are in the midst of planning a wedding of their own.

Neville's explaining that the ring he gave to Luna has been in his family for generations when I notice it — Hermione's stopped eating, and she looks a little green around the gills. "Excuse me," she says quietly and hustles away toward the ladies' loo. Luna meets my gaze, smiles slightly, and floats off in the same direction. No one else around the table seems to have much noticed their departure, but I am pretty sure I know exactly what's happening. Hermione's tossing her biscuits, most likely. Unless she has a bite to eat fairly soon after rising, this happens lately. Grendys says it's normal, but I kick myself anyway for failing to get her down her quicker to get some food into her.

A little while later, Hermione returns to the room looking a little less pale, and Luna drifts in behind her with a glowing smile on her face.

Luna's smile catches Mum's eye, and then, almost as plainly as if she were speaking out loud, I watch the expression shift on Mum's face. Her eyes flick from Hermione to me and back again. Uh oh.

Before I can sort out what to do to divert Mum's attention, Luna speaks up.

"Hermione is looking quite well considering everything, isn't she everyone?" Luna says in her trademark gauzy voice.

"Considering what?" Mum says rather more sharply than I think she may have intended.

"Considering—" Luna begins to say, but Hermione cuts her off by clearing her throat loudly.
Then Hermione shoots me a sheepish look. "I didn't say anything," she mutters under her breath. "She just figured it out."

"It wasn't that difficult," Luna says at full volume.
Mum's sputtering at this point, and Eleanor seems to be cottoning on as well.

"It's plain as day," Luna continues. "The change in the helio vibrations. It's quite pronounced."

Hermione sighs.

"All right," she says, then takes my hand and kisses it.

We trade a look.

"So, are we doing this?" I say with a grin.

"Yes, I suppose we are," she answers, grinning back.

"You want to do the honors?" I say.

"No, you start," she answers.

"Are you feeling better?" I ask at a slightly lower volume.

She nods.

I tune back in to the rest of the group and — blimey — everybody is looking at us. Mum and Eleanor by now are both grinning slightly. So is Fleur. Everyone else — with the exception of Luna — looks totally perplexed.

No time like the present, I reckon.

I clear my throat and then take the plunge. "Well, everyone," I begin, "we were hoping to hold off on announcing this until Ginny and Harry get back. But, as I suspect some of you have already surmised," I say, shooting a smile at Mum …

"I'm pregnant," Hermione nearly shouts, a smile lighting her face.

There's silence for a moment, and then everyone goes absolutely bonkers.

"I knew it!"

"Merlin bless me!"

"What do you know about that!"

Every sodding person in the room has leapt to their feet. Hagrid's practically tossing Leo in his arms, he's so excited. They're all shouting, laughing, crying, hugging and generally carrying on. I step back for a moment, barely registering the back-slapping and kissing and hugging that's coming my way, because I can't seem to tear my eyes from Hermione. She's so gorgeous right now — despite being pale and having just upchucked her breakfast, she's glowing. She's surrounded by her family and her closest friends, and she's reaching to pull Leo from Hagrid's arms. Gods, I love her. Unlike Luna, I don't see the change in Hermione's helio vibrations — whatever those are — but it doesn't matter. She's expecting. Our kid — our second kid — is growing inside her. And suddenly, I realize that, Prophet or no, there's nothing that can bring me down. Not really. I have everything I need. And so does she.
Chapter 39: The End

"Very good, Mrs. Weasley — just breathe and try your best not to push. I know it's hard," says Simmons, Hermione's trusted, gray-haired midwife, who estimates she has delivered hundreds of babies in her career. "You're doing beautifully, my girl, truly you are."

She is indeed. I'm a wreck, but Hermione seems reasonably calm, all things considered. I can't believe she has the energy to talk right now, but she's been downright chatty for the last few minutes.

"Thank Merlin for the Maternitatis charm," she huffs with a small smile. "It's actually quite cruel that wizardkind can't share it with muggles."

"I couldn't agree more," Simmons answers while still keeping her focus on Hermione's, well … on her job. "I can't imagine giving birth the muggle way, with all that pain and screaming. Which isn't to say labor isn't uncomfortable even with the Maternitatis — it's bloody hard work — but it doesn't have to hurt quite so much, does it?"

"No indeed," Hermione says, still trying to keep her breathing shallow so Simmons can do … erm … whatever it is she's doing down there. I'm so nervous, all I can really focus on is Hermione's face, which is pink and dewy and gorgeous despite all the exertion. She's squeezing my hand like her life depends on it, and I'm so dumbstruck, all I can do is occasionally lean my forehead against hers and whisper nonsensical encouragement. "You're amazing, love. You're doing so well. Almost there." Like I know what I'm on about. Which she must know I don't. All I really know is, I'd happily trade places with her in an instant if I could. She's so little, and yet she's so bloody strong. She'll never stop impressing me, no matter how long I live.

"Very good, Mrs. Weasley," Simmons pipes up, now suddenly looking up at us, and I feel my heart jump. "We're going to start really pushing in a moment. Keep your breathing shallow until I say go, and when I do, I want you to push down hard, all right?"

Hermione nods, her forehead crinkled, her lips puffed out as she tries with all her might to resist the urge to push.


Hermione, meanwhile, is bearing down with all her might, beads of sweat rolling off her brow. She leans forward slightly and I realize that I'm not much help where I am right now, sitting at the bedside and just, well, holding her hand and pressing a cool, damp cloth to her forehead now and then. As I cast my eyes about searching for something — anything — I can do to be more useful, I feel a jolt of inspiration. Kicking off my shoes, I climb into the bed behind Hermione's back and wrap my legs around her bum so she can lean back against my chest, and I hug her about her middle.
"Oh, that's brilliant darling," she pants. "Brilliant. Thank you."

With that, she grabs my knees and pushes again, and I'm in a better position to hold her, pour words of comfort into her ear and feel at least a bit more like I'm carrying some of the load. Which I know I'm not. God damn it, I hate feeling so useless, especially when she's doing something so difficult.

"Wonderful," Simmons says. "Wonderful, my love. We made great progress there, didn't we. Very good progress. Rest for a moment until the next contraction comes, sweetheart."

Hermione sighs and leans back against me, her skin glistening, and drops her head onto my shoulder. I cover her cheek with kisses and caress her belly. "Oh gods, I'm getting tired," she whispers.

"Almost there, love," I whisper back. "You're so strong, so brave. I'm in awe of you, I truly am."

"Well, there's no turning back now, is there?" she says with a laugh between breaths. "It's not as if I can quit and go home."

"True. Neither can I, though. I'm with you the whole way, all right?"

She nods and I can tell from the crinkle in her brow and — blimey — the movement in her belly that another contraction is coming on.

"All right, Mrs. Weasley, let's use this one to our advantage. Push, sweetheart, push!" Simmons bellows.

Hermione leans forward and I lean with her, holding her as she groans through another long contraction.

"We're almost there, Mrs. Weasley, truly," Simmons continues. "Here's the head, darling. I know it's hard, but push again. Keep going!"

It continues like this — excruciating, difficult work, and as Hermione pants and puffs and moans and cries out, I have to wonder … holy shit … if this is what childbirth is like with the Maternitatis charm taking the edge off the pain, how bad must it be for muggles who do without it? I'm reminded, not for the first time, that whoever labeled women The Weaker Sex ought to have been tarred and feathered.

Time goes by … I have no ruddy idea how long … but then, suddenly, things start happening blazingly quick. An orderly rushes into the room, then another, then another — I have no idea how they knew that this is the moment, but they're here now, and I thank Merlin that Simmons has more pairs of hands at the ready, because she's suddenly calling out, "we're crowning!" and soon, miraculously, the baby's head emerges into the bright light of the room.

"Oh, Mione," I say stupidly, unable to find words beyond her name. "Mione, can you see?"

"Yes," she says, crying and laughing at the same time, "I can."

"All right, relax again for just a moment," Simmons says, but I can't imagine how anyone could possibly relax at a time like this. I mean, sweet Merlin!

Soon, Hermione's hit with another contraction, and she's pushing with everything she's got. "Here come the shoulders," Simmons says, smiling as she firmly cradles the baby's head. "Keep going, darling. Good job, mum. Wonderful."
And, just like that, the baby emerges, skin purple, covered in red goo, gurgling and sucking in a first lungful of air.

"It's a boy," Simmons announces crisply as she wraps the baby in a cotton blanket, plops him gently atop Hermione's belly, and returns to her work. "Congratulations, mum. Well done. Take a moment to say hello, but let's stay alert for that next contraction. There's still work to do."

Hermione and I are both awestruck, boggled, looking down at this tiny little man who has just entered the world, stretching his arms, waving his fists and throwing his head back to let out an ear-splitting wail as Hermione scoops him into her arms. "Shh, shh," she says, tears streaming from her cheeks. "You've had a long afternoon, haven't you, darling. Well, you're here now. It's all right."

One of the orderlies comes along and snips and seals off the baby's umbilical cord with her wand, then wraps him snugly again in his blanket. I reach out and touch his hand, knowing he'll grab my finger and hold on tight — and he doesn't disappoint. "Welcome to the world, little guy," I manage to say over the lump in my throat.

We're staring at him, caressing him and generally mesmerized by him for what seems like hours but I'm sure it's only a few minutes before Hermione begins to feel another wave of contractions coming on. Since I'm still tucked behind her and determined to continue helping her out, another orderly swoops in to pick up the baby, clean him up and get him sorted while we're busy.

"Well, I'm very pleased to say that Baby Number Two seems ready to make an entrance," Simmons says. "They're not always this quick about it, but I won't argue. It's better to get this done with dispatch."

"Oh Ron, help me, please," Hermione says, and my heart starts pounding.

"What do you need, love? Anything, anything."

"Just, just … oh Merlin … just hold me, all right? I'm running out of steam," she says.

I wrap my arms tightly around her middle and press my cheek against hers. "I'm here, Little Dove, I'm here. You can do this. I know you can. You're the strongest person I know, Hermione. You can do this."

She sobs and drops her head to my shoulder. "I'm trying, Ron, I really am. I just …"

She's overtaken by a contraction, and Simmons shouts, "Push, Mrs. Weasley, push!"

"I can't," Hermione answers weakly.

"You must!" Simmons barks.

Suddenly I realize that what Hermione needs is to lean forward, though she seems to have lost the energy to do it by herself. So I lean forward for her, angling my chest against her back and helping her to get more upright.

"Yes, Mr. Weasley, that's it," says Simmons. "That's bloody good. Keep it up."

I'm totally going on instinct at this point, and scared to death by Hermione's sudden loss of energy. "Mione, love, I'm right here, sweetheart," I say, knowing that I'm basically just babbling nonsense at this point, but I'm too scared to say anything coherent. "I'm right here. We'll get this baby born, Mione. We will."
"I'm all right," Hermione pants, though she sounds so tired.

"The head is presenting," Simmons announces with an edge to her voice. "Rest for a moment, Mrs. Weasley, but let's use this next contraction to finish the job, all right?"

Hermione can only nod. She leans back against my chest, heaving for breath. One of the orderlies comes to mop her brow and whispers encouragement. "You're doing wonderfully, Mrs. Weasley. Almost there."

Hermione nods again, but her head drops back against my shoulder. Blimey, she's exhausted.

Inevitably, almost cruelly, the next contraction comes along, and somehow Hermione finds the strength to lean into it and push when Simmons instructs her to. "We have another crowning baby here," Simmons says brightly. "One more big push and the head will be out, darling. You can do it. We're almost at the finish line. Almost there. Don't give up."

Hermione, meanwhile, is digging her fingers into my thighs — so deeply that I'm sure I'll have bruises there later, but I couldn't care less.

"It's hard work, I know," Simmons says as the baby's head appears. "That's why they call it labor, darling, but you're doing such a wonderful job. The head is out. Let's rest."

Again, we're presented with the incredible and somewhat odd sight of a baby's head sticking out from Hermione's body, but it's the most amazing sight — another little life, another child, half me, half Hermione. Incredible. I'm speechless for a few minutes — I can't even come up with my usual stream of ridiculous inspirational gibberish. But before too long, Hermione's body takes over and she's pushing through yet another contraction. I say a quick prayer that it's the last and, sure enough, the baby's shoulders emerge and, in another few seconds, Simmons is announcing, "It's a girl!"

"A girl," Hermione breathes, panting and wheezing for breath. "One of each, darling. One of each."

I know I should answer, but all I can do is cry, quite honestly. I'm completely at a loss. Two. Two babies. Both healthy. Gods. I rest my cheek against Hermione's and hold her tight, knowing that's all I'm really good for at the moment.

She pats my arm gently. "It's all right, darling," she murmurs.

"Are you?" I croak into her ear. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm perfectly fine now, Ronald," she says with a smile, still heaving for breath. "But there's still a bit of work to do."

After a few minutes more of strain, the placentas are delivered, and Hermione can truly call her work done. Gods, she's incredible. I crawl out from behind her to let her fall back against the pillows, then, with a shaky wand hand, I do a cleansing charm on her head and shoulders, since I know she doesn't like to be so sweaty. Simmons is waving her wand around, too, no doubt healing Hermione's battered and stretched skin and muscle where she can, while the orderlies tend to the babies.

As Hermione is Levitated from her bed and into the loo to be tidied up and changed into fresh pyjamas, both of the newcomers are presented to me, clean, dry and swaddled in fluffy blankets. The orderlies both openly laugh at my gobsmacked expression as they place the babies in my arms and shuffle me over to the armchair in the corner so I can hold them without risking dropping them.
"You'll get the hang of holding two of them soon enough," one of the orderlies says as I settle into the seat and gather myself enough to really look at the babies. Gods, they're both gorgeous. Round, plump, pink-cheeked, both topped off with flaming red peachfuzz. "Yep, you're Weasleys all right," I whisper.

They're both awake and are being remarkably quiet, all things considered. They're blinking and staring, stretching and cooing, almost as if they can hardly believe how much room there is to move now that they're out of that tight, dark space. As I take inventory of their fingers — good, ten each — and watch the peachfuzz atop their heads dry and lighten, Leo springs to mind. I try to imagine ever not wanting these babies, ever signing away my rights to keep and protect them. I wonder what Leo looked like when he was first born, and I wish I could have seen him. I bet he was stunning. I don't know how Rowle and Livingston did it, letting him go the way they did, but suddenly, weirdly, I'm thankful to them. Thankful that they did let him go. Thankful that, no matter how hard or not-so-hard it was for them, they ultimately did the right thing.

I'm lost in these thoughts when Hermione returns to the room, looking fresh and lovely in a clean pink set of pajamas and a flannel dressing gown. Her hair, which had grown matted and sweaty during the delivery, is clean, dry and folded into a neat plait. Her cheeks are still red from the exertion of the day, but she looks newly energized.

The orderlies Levitate her into the bed and magically enlarge it for her. "I have a feeling you're going to need the extra room," one of them says with a grin. Hermione hums her agreement and then stretches out her arms in my direction. "Bring those darlings over here, Ronald," she says. "I need to see them better."

With that, the orderlies slip out of the room, but not before announcing that Simmons will be back in about half an hour to check on us. "Just shout if you need anything at all," the taller one says — crikey, I really should learn their names — "our station is just across the hall."

I'm not quite sure how I'm going to manage it, but somehow I do: I rise slowly, balancing both babies in my arms, then pad toward the bed and extend the arm that's holding our new daughter toward Hermione. "She has your nose," I whisper.

"She does, doesn't she?" Hermione murmurs as she folds the baby into her arms and graces her with that same warm, adoring smile that I first saw cross her face on the day we met Victoire. Hermione loves being a mum. It's a good job she does, because these two are going to be a handful.

She budges over and I join her on the bed, shifting our son so he's facing his mother. "He's a beauty, isn't he?" I say.

"He is," Hermione says as she leans against me, shoulder-to-shoulder. "His hair is lighter than hers, I think, isn't it?"

"Hmm. I think so. Like mine. Hers is more like Ginny's, I think. Deeper. She's going to be a stunner."

Hermione chuckles. "Darling, she was just born. Don't tell me you're already worrying about keeping boys away from her."

I smile and stroke the baby's cheek with my free hand. "That's the essence of strategy, Hermione. Long-term planning."

Just then, the baby in Hermione's arms starts to fuss a bit, her face reddening, her little fists tightening. "Someone's ready for a feed, I think," Hermione says, unbuttoning her pyjama top.
"Here goes nothing," she says, biting her lower lip as she maneuvers the baby into position to nurse.

"You're amazing, you are," I whisper, settling my cheek on top of Hermione's head to watch with wonder as the baby instinctively latches on and begins to suck away. Gods.

"Hardly seems fair," I mutter, not really even realizing that I've said that out loud.

"Hmm?" Hermione hums.

"Oh, I mean, you've worked so hard, you're so tired, and now you've got to feed these two little buggers."

"It's all right, darling," Hermione answers. "I don't mind. In fact, it's ... well, it's lovely."

I look down and notice the look of utter contentment on the baby's face, and I have to agree. It is lovely.

After another minute in which I silently watch the quiet spectacle of mother and child nursing, Hermione's voice breaks into my thoughts.

"So, now that we've met them, are we still good with the names we picked out?"

I lift our son to my lips and kiss his cheeks, then his forehead, then his nose. Hermione chuckles, and I turn to look at her, tears spilling over onto her smiling cheeks.

"You OK?" I ask.

She nods. "I just love you so much," she whispers.

My heart thumps. Even after all this time, she's capable of making my heart thump. No one else can. "I love you too, Hermione. I can't believe how deep it goes for me, love. Honestly."

I lean over and plant a kiss on her lips. "So this one's Robert, then?" I say as I straighten up.

"Mmm hmm," Hermione says, "after Mum's father."

"Right-o. And this one is Clare, yes?"

"She looks like a Clare to me."

"Me, too."

"Then Clare it is."

"Brilliant."

Just then, Baby Robert starts to kick his legs and grimace. "Uh oh, I think Bobby's hungry too, sweetheart," I say.

"Oh dear," says Hermione. "Well, erm, let's see if we can't work this out, shall we?"

As Hermione unbuttons her shirt the rest of the way, I Accio a few extra pillows from the sideboard across the room and stuff them under her elbows, then carefully lay our boy in Hermione's free arm and help her guide him to her breast. He latches on like a champ and soon I'm boggled by the sight of both babies suckling happily at the same time. "Blimey, are you all right?"
I say, leaning across Hermione's legs.

"I'm beyond all right," she says with a little smile. "If you don't mind, I might shut my eyes for a few minutes, though. I'm knackered."

"If I don't mind? Hell, no, I don't mind. By all means get some rest, sweetheart," I say, feeling utterly useless once again. "Forget I'm here."

"Impossible, my darling," she whispers, her eyes still shut. "If my knight in shining armor wasn't here standing watch, I wouldn't be able to sleep at all."

She's being silly — or just a little bit silly — but I don't care. That statement reminds me what I'm here for. To take care of her, to look after all of them. And suddenly I don't feel quite so useless.

Half an hour later on the dot, Simmons returns, examines Hermione, looks Robert and Clare over, and declares that all seems topvermost, which we've come to learn is a Simmonsism for doing just swimmingly. The babies are both done nursing, they're freshly burped and they're now slumbering quietly, Robert in Hermione's arms, Clare in mine. After bustling about the room making sure we have everything we need, Simmons heads for the door. "Oh," she says as she reaches for the handle, "I almost forgot. Mr. Weasley, your mother asked me to tell you that she's just down the hall in the visitor's lounge."

"Oh, wonderful," I answer. "Would you please ask her to send the kids in? She'll understand — we've already discussed how we want this to go."

"Of course!" Simmons says brightly. "I'll escort them down here myself, shall I?"

I decide it's best that I should stand for the coming onslaught, so I hand Clare to Hermione and manage to get to my feet just in time for the door to fly open. With a chorus of shouts and shrieks, Leo, Rose and Hugo pile in through the doorway.

"Are they here? Are they here?" Rosie squeals, her dark red pigtails flapping as she hops up and down. "They are! They're here! The babies are here!"

She launches herself into the bed on Hermione's right side, while Leo jumps in on Hermione's left, laughing. Rosie is so excited, she can't stop bouncing up and down.

"There's two of them, Leo! There's two of them!" Rosie shouts.

"I told you Mum was having twins, Rose. That's means two," Leo answers with a roll of his eyes as he drapes his arms around Hermione's neck.

"Ssssshhhhhh, kids, please, Robert and Clare are sleeping," Hermione says.

"Okay," Rose says in an exaggerated whisper. "Does that mean I can't hold them?"

"Not right now, darling," Hermione answers.

"Please? Oh please, may I hold one, Mummy? It's not fair — you've got both of them."

"Later, sweetheart. Just look at them for now, all right?"

"So their names are Robert and Clare?" Leo asks, leaning his head against Hermione's shoulder. "I like those names."

Hugo, meanwhile, is standing at the foot of the bed, looking a touch forlorn. He's been having a bit
of trouble adjusting to the idea that, once the twins arrive, he wouldn't be the baby of the family anymore. I'm sympathetic. I walk over to take him in my arms, but before I reach him, he bunches his fists and grimaces — and, just like that, the petals on every bouquet of flowers in the room, and there are quite a few of them, fall off. This is Hugo's signature Raw Magic move — when he's upset, nearby plants are guaranteed to wilt. The philodendron that Hermione has nurtured from a cutting into an impressive vine inside the lounge has died and been magically revived several times over Hugo's three-year lifetime. Who knows — we may have another Ingenitus on our hands with this one.

"Hey, Hugh," I whisper, kneeling down to talk to him at eye level. He looks up at me, his blue eyes pooling with tears, his flushed cheeks nearly the color of his red hair. "It's OK, buddy. Let's go see Mum, yeah?"

At a time like this, Daddy is chopped dragon liver compared to attention from Mum. I know this. I get it. Hugo's feeling displaced. Probably doesn't help that Rosie developed the habit of calling Hugo "The Babe" a long time ago, and the nickname sort of stuck. It doesn't seem right to stop calling him that, despite the arrival of two new babies. Hugo will always be The Babe to me.

"Come here, Babe," I say, hauling him up so he can get a better look at the babies. "You're going to get to be a big brother now, Hugo. Bobby and Clare are going to look up to you."

"Yeah, you'll get to boss them around," Leo adds.

"Ssshhhh," Hermione says. "Honestly, Leo. Nevermind that. Now, where's my Hugo? Come here, Babe," she says and I hoist him over Leo's head so he can get a kiss from his Mum. It soon becomes clear that a kiss won't be enough — Hugo is squirming to get out of my grip and onto his Mum come hell or high water. Hermione chuckles at the sight of me trying to keep from dropping him.

"Here, I'll trade you," Hermione says, lifting Baby Clare up toward me while I nestle Hugo down on the bed next to Leo. I pick up Clare and then — what the hell, why not — Robert next, and Hugo takes this opportunity to plant himself firmly on Hermione's chest. This causes Leo and Rose to crowd in, too, and soon Hermione is essentially buried in children. Not that she seems to mind. I laugh to myself as I put one sleeping baby in one bassinet, and then the other. It seems the need to matter, to bask in the glory of Mum's embrace despite the arrival of these new, cute interlopers, never quite wears off, no matter how old kids get. Harry pops into my head — I wonder why for a second, and then I realize, it's probably because, with every new baby born into the family, I marvel all over again at how Harry turned out to be such a great person despite the fact that he was raised by people who treated him worse than most people would treat a pet. I'll never stop being amazed by it.

As I plant myself back in the armchair next to the bed, Hermione remembers what I had totally forgotten.

"Daddy, where did you put those pressies that the babies brought for their new brothers and sister?" Hermione chirps from beneath the pile of kids.

"Pressies?" Rosie gasps, beaming and clapping her hands.

Hermione shooshes her again, then continues. "Yes, I do believe they're in the closet there, aren't they, Daddy?"

"Indeed they are," I say, rising to reach into the closet and pull out a shopping bag that contains the results of one of the only positive contributions I've been able to make to this day — gifts that are a
quite brazen attempt to buy the kids' affection for their new siblings. Well, Hugo's affection, that is. I thought it might take the sting out of this day for him, and as he unwraps his miniature flying dragon with quite lifelike (though blessedly cool to the touch) fiery breath and watches it bob and dip around his mother's bed, Hugo seems quite satisfied and distracted from the new rivals for his Mum's attention. Rosie is similarly entranced by her Holyhead Harpies figurine of her Aunt Ginny, complete with a working, scale-model Nimbus 2008, Ginny's broom of choice. Soon the miniature Ginny is flying circles around Hugo's dragon, and both children are laughing and sliding off the bed to run after their new toys.

The babies, amazingly, remain sound asleep. "These two wouldn't stir if the Hogwarts Express drove through this room," I say, and Hermione laughs.

"They've been hearing all the noise this lot makes for months now," she says. "They must be used to it."

I look around and realize that Leo has disappeared, and then I remember that his gift — which I bought ages ago at Wheezes — is a toy Invisibility Cloak, one that only works for a few minutes at a time, and soon he's slowly reappearing before our eyes. He hasn't budged from his spot next to Hermione, however. In fact, once he's fully visible again, he lays down next to her and enjoys a cuddle minus Rosie and Hugo. I turn my attention back to the bassinets next to the armchair and that's when I notice that Rosie has joined me. She climbs up onto my lap and leans against my chest, her cheek pressed against my shoulder as we look at the babies. "They are cute, aren't they," she says quietly.

"I couldn't agree more, Rosie girl."

"I wish you'd let me hold one of them," she says with a pout.

"Maybe later, honey."

"You always say 'maybe later,' and that always means 'no.'"

"'Always' is a big word."

"No it's not. It's only——" she stops to count her fingers with an annoyed look on her face. "It's only six letters, Daddy."

I can't help but laugh, though I know I shouldn't. "Sometimes I think you're your mother all over again," I say as I kiss the top of her head. And that's not such a bad thing, I think. After a few more cuddles, Hermione signals that it's OK to let in Mum and the rest of the family that we know are most likely crowding the waiting room. I send a Patronus out there, and in they stumble — first Mum and Dad, followed by Harry and Ginny, with James and Al in tow. I stand to introduce them all to Clare and Bobby, and afterward Mum fills us in on the roll call of people she's already Flooed with the news of the babies' birth.

"Charlie's Portkeying in tomorrow, and George and Angie say they'll be by after the shop closes," Mum announces. "Fleur and Bill and the kids will Floo over when he gets off from Gringotts. Oh, and Hermione dear, your parents are driving down from Cambridge right now. They wanted to have the car with them, though Merlin knows why they would. Side-Alonging seems so much easier."

"I think they don't want to be a bother," Hermione says, clearly amused by the sight of my Dad trying to decide which baby to pick up and hold first.
"So, you decided to have this lot in hospital after all," Harry says to Hermione as he stoops over the bed to wrap her in an enormous bear hug.

"Well, that wasn't really my choice — it was Anton's," says Hermione, still holding Harry tight as he kisses her forehead. Once he straightens up and settles himself on the edge of the bed next to her, she continues. "It was all well and good to have the others at home, but with twins, he felt it was just too risky."

"I for one am very glad," says Mum as she picks up Clare, and that's when I notice that Dad has decided to go with Bobby, for now, and he's contentedly rocking him in his arms and holding him up to admire him in the late-afternoon light filtering in through the window. "I've got nothing against home births, mind," Mum adds. "After all, Ronnie was born at the Burrow — though that was just because he was in such a hurry to be born, he didn't give us time to Floo to St. Mungo's. But with your medical history, I do think Anton was right to be sure you were here in case there were any complications. Delivering twins can be tricky."

"As you well know," Hermione says with a smile.

Ginny looks around the room and notices all the shriveled floral bouquets surrounded by fallen flower petals. "Aha," she says, "I see that my favorite nephew named Hugo has been at it again," she says, stooping down to give Hugo a tickle and then waving her wand to magically restore all the bouquets to the state they were in before Hugo's bout of Raw Magic effed them up beyond recognition. Once they're all back to normal, she stops to read the cards. "I can't believe all the flowers you've received — these must have landed while you were in labor!" she says.

"Most of them did," Hermione says with a laugh. "Ron reported to HQ that he wasn't coming to work, and that seemed to set off a stream of congratulations."

"I'll say," Ginny murmurs. "Let's see … oh, this arrangement from Bernie and Shirley is gorgeous," she says, reading the card and then turning to the next vase. "And Kingsley outdid himself with this one. And — sweet Merlin! Adina and Keith got the news all the way in Australia already?"

"Apparently they did," Hermione says. "And somewhere over there — I think it's on the credenza — there's a letter from Adina saying that they're expecting, too! She's due in November. Look for it!"

Ginny squeals in delight, finds the note, then sits on the edge of the bed opposite Harry to read it. "Oh, that's just wonderful," Ginny says, reaching over to take Hermione's hand and give her a kiss on the cheek. "But let's talk about you, dear sister. You certainly don't look any worse for the wear after delivering twins, Hermione," she says with a grin.

"Thank you," Hermione answers, "but honestly, it wasn't that awful."

"Could have fooled me, love," I say. "I was worried for you now and then."

"It beats the tent," Hermione says with a wink in my direction. I can't help but smile back at her.

The others miss the joke. I don't blame them — it's always been a private one between me and Hermione, and my mind goes back to the first time she ever said it. Rosie had just been born — blimey, that was six years ago now — Leo had an ear infection and was therefore awake and screaming for a good part of the night, Crookshanks had gone missing for a day or two (though he turned up rather nonchalantly a few days later, eager for a treat and a cuddle with Hermione), and Professor Vector had earlier that day sent Hermione a particularly heavy spell formula to decode for their ongoing book project. Bottom line: Hermione had good reason to be tired and frazzled, but
she was neither that night. In fact, as she finished feeding Rosie and then helped me get Leo settled down for the night, I noticed that she looked a bit tired around the edges but she was otherwise fairly serene.

When I marveled at it, she said, "It beats the tent."

"Huh?"

She laughed and took me by the hand as we retreated to our own bedroom. "You never think about it? Then tent, I mean," she said as she folded back the covers and patted the mattress next to her.

I jumped in, wrapped an arm around her shoulder, and shrugged as I crossed my legs to get comfortable. "To tell you the truth, love, I've been busy trying to forget about the tent ever since the war."

"I hear you but, well, I suppose it's different for me," she said, sinking down into my arms and settling her cheek upon my chest. "Those months in the tent … honestly, they were some of the lowest times of my life. So many nights, Ronald, I laid alone in that tent dreaming of you, wishing for a life like the one we have now. And those dreams came true, didn't they. It's hard for me to resent one minute of the noise and nuisance when my dreams of this life kept me going, kept me sane, through the hardest times I've ever faced. So … when I feel myself getting overwhelmed, getting frustrated, whatever, I just tell myself, 'It beats the tent.' Works every time."

I nudged her chin with my thumb and forefinger, and she looked up at me. "You're brilliant, did you know that?" I whispered.

She smiled. "So I've been told."

"And yet you married me."

She stretched to plant a kiss on my chin. "More proof that I'm the smartest witch of my age," she murmured.

We made love that night — the first time in what felt like weeks, but I knew it had only been a few days — and I savored the feeling that she was happy, that the life we'd found together was the life she wanted. I damn well knew that it was the life I wanted, but it felt especially good to know that her needs were being met, that someone as marvelous and intelligent as she is could be satisfied sharing her world with me. Thinking of it now makes me crave alone time with her all over again. As nice as it is to have visitors … well …

Just then, there's a quick knock, and the door cracks open to reveal the face of one of the orderlies. "Excuse me, Captain Weasley, someone from the Auror Department is here to see you," she says.

"Right — tell him I'll be right there."

"Oh, Ronald, you can't possibly be working today of all days," Mum says in a scolding tone.

"Can't help it, Mum. There's a hot case — Harry knows — it's coming to trial in the next few weeks, and we're taking a lot of depositions. I told the staff that I couldn't be disturbed while my wife was in labor. But, uh, I reckon somebody knows we're in the clear now," I say with a wink to Hermione.

"Go ahead, darling. I'm not going anywhere," Hermione replies with a grin.

"See that you don't," I answer, and step outside.
I don't immediately recognize the Apprentice Auror who's waiting for me in the hallway, but judging by the way his face drains of color at my approach, I figure he's pretty new.

He stands at attention and I look him over. Merlin, are we recruiting 12-year-olds nowadays? Did I ever look this young?

"At ease, Auror," I say, and he deflates somewhat, looking relieved. "What do you have for me, erm—"

"Monteith, sir. Brian Monteith."

"Monteith. Very good. So, uh, what do you have for me, Monteith? Out with it."

It never fails to surprise me how frightened some of these new recruits look when I talk to them. I'm not the kind of guy who flies off the handle or barks out orders. I keep telling Harry he's got to stop putting the fear of God into these kids now that he's in charge of the training program. Bloody hell.

"Yes, sir. Longbottom asked me to inform you that we brought Draco Malfoy in today for questioning under Veritaserum. It turns out he was financing the operation, as you suspected. He's been escorted to Azkaban."

This is good news — damned good news. We've been tracking a smuggling ring for months now, a group of wizards who are illegally importing counterfeit galleons and trafficking squibs as slave labor, frequently in the sex trade. Sick stuff. The toughest question to answer was where the money was coming from to pay for this network and, going on a hunch, I decided we should ask Malfoy some questions about it, since some of the arrests we made early on were onetime associates of his old man's. Sure enough, the hunch seems to be paying off.

"I appreciate the update, Monteith. Well done."

"Oh, and uh, sir, uh, Longbottom also asked me to tell you congratulations, and that he and his wife will be stopping by tomorrow to meet the new babies," Monteith says. Then a startled look comes over his face and he rapidly blurts out, "Oh, I should say congratulations too, sir."

I laugh, and suddenly Monteith seems a little lost. Clearly this wasn't the reaction he was expecting. "Thanks, Monteith," I say, clapping him on the shoulder and reaching out to shake his hand. "Thanks a lot. Stand down, Monteith, and head back to HQ, all right?"

"Yes, sir."

I watch him as he strides away from me, seemingly as fast as his feet will carry him, and I turn to head back to Hermione's room, shaking my head.

"Oh, Mr. Weasley!" someone calls from behind me. I look and see that it's Hermione's Wizengamot assistant, Sally, who, as usual, is practically running and seems perpetually to have her arms overstuffed with parchments, notebooks and ledgers.

"Hi, Sally, good to see you," I say, stooping to help her pick up a few papers that have drifted out of her grip.

"I was picking up some records for the new children's mediwizard clinic legislation that Mrs. Weasley is writing, and I thought I'd stop by the Healer's station to ask how she's doing," Sally says, smiling as she pushes her glasses up on her nose, a motion that causes her to drop another sheaf of parchment.
"She's doing tremendously, Sally," I say, bending down to scoop things up for her yet again. "In fact, come on in and meet the babies."

I push open the door for her and Sally joins the group, oohing and aahing over Clare and then Bobby.

I hang back by the doorway and watch the scene unfold. Actually, I'm pretty much focused on Hermione, sitting as she is with Hugo once again wrapped in her arms — he must have reclaimed his spot on his Mum's lap — chatting merrily with Sally and taking a moment to look at one of the parchments that she carried in. I don't know where Hermione is getting the energy to deal with all these visitors — in fact, I should probably chase everybody out soon — but she seems to be genuinely enjoying herself. And I'm enjoying watching her.

As it often does at times like this, my mind goes back to the very first night that Hermione and I became a couple, way back in the Common Room. Good lord, was that 12 years ago already? I do believe it was. Gods, look at us now, with a five kids and a couple of nephews running around this room. All because I awakened my inner Gryffindor that night all those years ago and finally found the nerve to tell Hermione how I really felt.

"Hermione, if I kiss you right now — honest to Merlin, that's it for me," I told her that night. "I'm done. I wouldn't have had the bollocks to tell you this a year ago, but I can say it now. If you let me kiss you, that seals the deal for me, I swear, because I'm going to want it all. I'm all in, Hermione, all in. If I kiss you, then I'm yours and you are most undoubtedly mine and that's it, from here on out, until the day I drop dead. No more doubt, no more second-guessing, no more kid stuff."

Turns out I was wrong about the doubt and second-guessing. There was still plenty of that shite to come. But most of what I said that night was spot-on. Going all in … best decision of my life.

~ Finis ~

Thanks for reading! Please leave a review and let me know what you thought …

xoxo,

Holly.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!