The Last Hurrah

by aidacaroti

Summary

There's a new drug on the street and the bodies are dropping faster than ever before. Auror Weasley is on the case. Unlike most narcotics, this drug seems to have a higher mortality rate. Is this really just a load of overdosed teens or is something else going on?

"I'll tell you what's bloody wrong! I spent my morning, my entire morning, chasing after one lone druggy, who, admittedly, was very quick on his feet for someone who the Healers declared had been millimetres away from a severe overdose, that's not to mention the blisters these ridiculous pointy shoes have given me. All of this, as well as my weight in paper work, without my partner, because my partner-" he jabbed a finger into Harry's chest. "Is now sat in a nice warm office, in an expensively comfy chair."

Harry waited, and Ron, who was on a roll, paused, breathing heavily. "Which is not to say-obviously- that I'm not happy, no, proud even, that you got yourself a promotion, and have broken yet more records, because I am, but - you know, - well maybe you don't- but I'm having, maybe, a tiny, minuscule problem with adjusting to the change."
Winter had blown over the country, bringing a cold frost and icy winds. The people were more often than not huddled up in heavy coats with thick hats pulled down to their ears when they dared brave the unseasonably cold weather. The muggle population had taken to hiding indoors with the heaters pumping a summer-like warmth through the shivering house. The muggle police had reported an overall drop in crime as even the criminals dared not venture inside. However, the same could not be said for the Wizarding population.

His breath came in icy puffs as he ran round the corner, barrelling into surprised shoppers

"Sorry!" he called over his shoulder, watching them grumble as they got back to their feet. He waved again apologetically, but stumbled and tripped in his inattention. The distance between he and his prey. With a burst of speed, he careered around the corner- barely making it- reaching out to grab the man, who turned and leapt over the dented, metal bins as he escaped into the alleyway between the crooked and decrepit buildings.

He cursed vehemently and threw his arms outward in his frustrating. Why did the most simple of his cases end in a chase? When would he be classed as too mature for sprinting around muggle London like a crazed lunatic? These questions, like many that danced around his brain, he didn't have the answer too. He did know, however, that he would never live it down if a two-bit criminal got the better of him, a war-hero-turned-auror. With a sigh, a plea to high heavens, he resolutely twitched his wand, sending the bins crashing and rolling down the now deserted street. His woollen hat, that had previously been pulled tightly around his large ears, didn't quite hide his red locks that stuck out from under his lopsided and badly knitted hat. If he had been in Wizarding London, everyone would know who he was. As it was, he was amongst the scum of muggle London; the wrapped up shoppers could not distinguish him from the rest of the city. Thank Merlin for that, last thing he needed was another article about him in the Daily Prophet.

However, the squirrelly looking fella in front of him clearly knew who he was despite the fact his aurors badge was hidden firmly under his coat. He signed as he continued the chase, unable to stun him while he was running at this speed. His aim was good, but even the best of duellers didn't curse while sprinting. Probably. Maybe he'd ask Harry about his spell proficiency at a top sprint. Although given the fact the only running Harry had been doing lately was between desks…. Perhaps he was better not to. His pace was even, but he wished that he'd worn his trainers rather than the pinchy useless shoes his wife had bought him. He'd told her as much. He still didn't think he'd deserved the night on the sofa to think about 'appropriate responses to gifts, Ronald'. They rounded another corner, barely slowing this time the man didn't manage to keep on his feet. His legs went from under him and he tumbled head over heels. The man laid in a stupor, panic creeping over his face like frost over a car.

"Finally," Ron wheezed, regretting that second helping of pie the night before. And perhaps also the bar of chocolate he'd gobbled for his lunch.

The other man said nothing, exhausted and high as he was.

"Come on, mate," Ron said, picking the trembling man up. "Let's get you a drink and some food." He couldn't help the pity that had overtaken him as he got a better look at the man he had spent half the morning (and his months allotted exercise) chasing. The man looked even worse closer up, his hair was filthy and matted. His face, young as it was, was sallow and sunken. Because of this, he was as gentle as he could be as he placed the cuffs on him. "How long ago did you have your fix? Are you safe to travel?" He questioned softly, placing a gently hand on his shoulder, which trembled
under his large hand. Whether from fear or his fix, he couldn't yet tell. The man didn't respond for a long moment, but then he gingerly nodded his head. Ron wondered if the man was younger than him, he thought he was, but he wondered if anyone would know that from the hand life had evidently handed the poor man before him. He didn't recognise him, but then again, he'd barely paid attention to his own year never mind the younger kids whilst at Hogwarts. They began to walk, the man leaning heavily on him, all the fight long since left him, and they slowly made their way further away from the still watching muggles. He held the man's arm and turned. He kept his destination in mind, splinching was still something he was prone to if he didn't concentrate, and he felt the sucking, compressing feeling of being shoved down a narrow tube.

The bottle of pain-no-more sat at his desk, he gave it a weary glare, knowing his meddling (but beautiful, caring and wonderful) wife had left it there for him. His hand came to his face without intention, rubbing along his aching brow. He threw himself into his chair, and picked up the dainty bottle. He unstoppered the cork, and threw a gulp back with a sign. Instantly, the tension in his body and head seemed to release as though the dam had burst. He couldn't help the groan of satisfaction he released.

"I thought you would need that," Harry said with a wry chuckle. Ron groaned theatrically, turning to face him with a frown. His ears tipped pink as he realised who had so thoughtfully placed that bottle upon his desk...

"I was fine," he said shortly, trying to ignore his now burning face, pulling the newest file towards him. "Now, if you don't mind," he made a 'shooing' gesture. Harry either didn't notice or didn't care, for he didn't move. "What?" Ron said in exasperation.

Harry pulled up a chair to his tiny cubby and tugged the report from him, quickly scanning its contents. "So you think he can lead you to the dealer?" he asked as he scanned the rest of the interview.

"Don't you have your own desk, in your own office, far away from me and the other lowly aurors-"

"Ron-

"Oh I know," Ron said rolling his eyes and pulling up the corner of his lip. "Stop being a prat, Ron. Stop complaining, Ron." he said putting on a squeaky voice that sounded more like a cross between a parakeet and a mouse than a person.

"Was that supposed to be me or Hermione?" Harry asked, unable to hide his amusement much to Ron's continued ire.

"Aren't you going to ask me what's wrong? Harry? Head Auror Potter?" Ron snapped waspishly, dipping his quill in his everlasting ink and snatching the report back.

"No," Harry paused, waiting for the inevitable, "because you're probably just-"

"I'll tell you what's bloody wrong! I spent my morning, my entire morning, chasing after one lone druggy, who, admittedly, was very quick on his feet for someone who the Healers declared had been millilitres away from a severe overdose, that's not to mention the blisters these ridiculous pointy shoes have given me. All of this, as well as my weight in paper work, without my partner, because my partner-" he jabbed a finger into Harry's chest. "Is now sat in a nice warm office, in an expensively comfy chair."

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yet more records, because I am, but - you know, - well maybe you don't- but I'm having, maybe, a tiny, miniscule problem with adjusting to the change."

"I hadn't noticed," Harry deadpanned. Ron broke off, and glared yet again. "I can give you another partner, we have more recruits that have about finished their training, but they'd need a guide, they'd need training on the job…"

Ron rolled his eyes skyward, "training up a probie? While I've got this drug dealing ring to break as well as two court cases due? No thank you. Give them to Dennis. Or Applebee."

"But you're the one complaining about not having a partner!"

"Yeah, but I don't want a stupid trainee! If I can't have you as a partner, I don't want one," Ron said vehemently, jabbing the air as he spoke.

"Oh Ron," Harry said, wiping at his face, "I didn't know you felt that way."

"Oh shut up, you great big prat," Ron said bending his head down and making a start on his work, which wouldn't go away just because his boss wouldn't. "Your crocodile tears don't fool me. It's just, I miss having someone half-way competent at their job. You, at the very least, were always good for diverting attention away from me in a duel."

Harry rubbed his side at the memory of one of the last cases they'd worked together, that one had ended with him in Mungos and a very angry Ginny. Ron caught the action, and smiled brightly, "don't worry Harry, I'll make sure the next one gets me, my turn and all."

"When you get the break in this case, I'll go with you. Even if I'm wanted by the Ministry of Magic himself."

Ron snorted.

"Just get me caught up on what's happened so far. I knew you were following a probable dealing location?"

Ron sighed, pulling his notes towards him even though he reckoned he could recall the details of this case in his sleep at this point. "Well it all started when James Raimes turned up dead from an expected overdose. The autopsy report showed that the drug he'd consumed was potent enough to cause overdoses in even small amounts. In fact, the drug, which I've taken to calling ShitShow, can cause addiction even after accidental exposure. Most people are ingesting it, Raimes certainly did, which is why he succumbed to an overdose only a week or so after first trying it. Raimes wasn't new to drugs, he'd tried everything from muggle heroin to Dragon Eye. It seems he wasn't sure on the dosage, with it being so strong it was easily done. He isn't the only one, five more bodies in the last week, one a muggle. Creevey looked at some of that muggle CCTV and followed the muggle in his last 24 hours."

"And this is where you got a possible location?"

"Yeah, on the West-end. I staked it out for a couple of hours, the only person to turn up was Gilly Anderson, 22. He's in St. Mungos for observation, he took a turn during the interview. I'm hoping I'll get more when he's sober and not vomiting."

Harry chewed on his quill, "so this is someone who is happy enough amongst muggles to set up his operation and deal out of muggle London. It's also interesting that he or she is dealing to muggles as well as witches and wizards."
"That's what I thought to, it's clear they aren't interested in who they hurt. To be honest, Harry, I think it the tip of the iceberg. More bodies are going to turn up, and quickly with the potency of the drugs, and that's not to mention how many lives are going to be ruined by the drug."

"Is it possible that more deaths could be attributed to, what did you call it? ShitShow?"

Ron grimaced, "I'd bet my life on it, if one muggle has been exposed to it, you can bet there's more."

"I'll run that down for you," Harry said, finishing his notes and standing, looking at the battered old watch on his wrist.

"Nothing better to do?"

"Certainly nothing else as interesting," Harry replied with more than a note of sincerity. Ron softened and smiled at his old friend. He knew that Harry was a man of action and sitting behind a desk would never come easy to him. "Now, come on, it's past six and Hermione will kill you if you're not home soon."

Ron brightened, throwing down his quill, which splattered across his paperwork, and tugging on his coat and hat. "As much as Hermione loves the kids, working from home is driving her crazy. Hugo's just started crawling, and he loves grabbing at things he shouldn't have."

Harry smiled warmly, summoning his own coat from his office. He looked around the auror office despite it being late, a couple of aurors were still finishing up and he bid them 'goodnight' and with a point at the clock, encouraged them to get going. It was now getting late, and although crime never stopped, overworked aurors certainly did. "Lily's getting to her feet at the moment, but she's got her hands on everything, I can't remember the boys ever being such a worry!"

"Girls are the worst!" They chuckled.

The door to the office clicked shut.
"Hermione!" Ron bellowed from the top of the stairs. "Have you seen my dress robes!" Ron waited, towel around his waist with his hair still dripping from his shower. He glanced at his watch and swore fiercely. "Hermione!" He bellowed again, peering down the stairs.

Hermione appeared at the bottom, already dressed for the day- what a show off. "They are probably wherever you last had them. Do you remember where you put them?"

Ron forced calm, stamping down the screech that was building in his throat. "If I knew where I'd put them, Hermione, I wouldn't be having this bloody conversation!" He said through gritted teeth. He saw her narrow her eyes and prepared himself for an onslaught.

"It wouldn't hurt you to be more organised, Ronald! You're a grown man, with children!" Hermione said waspishly, drawing her wand. She flicked it and his crumpled-definitely-not-washed robes flew into her hand. She flicked her wand over them again making them look almost fresh. "It's not like you couldn't have done that." She said, passing them up to Ron, who blushed fiercely- why hadn't he thought to do that?

"Have I told you I love you?" he asked, smiling as he took them into her hands. He watched as she softened with that fond smile that told him he was out of trouble.

"Not today, now hurry. You promised you'd drop Rosie at playschool on your way to work."

He glanced at his watch and grimaced. Ron dashed back into the bedroom and hurriedly got ready. Today was a busy day, as all were, and he needed to be in the Wizengamot at 10. He wanted a little time to go over his notes before he was expected to answer a million and one questions by the stern faced men and women. Honestly, he understood that justice and trials were important but sometimes they made it so much harder than it needed to be. It was also irritating that although Harry had been his partner on the case, he wasn't needed at the trial. It was just another change Harry's new position afforded.

As he reached the kitchen, his heart did a little jump as it often did when he caught sight of his family. His family.

Rose barrelled over to him on unsteady, pudgy legs. "Daddy, Daddy!" he scooped her up and gave her a kiss, tugging on her braids. Rose has inherited her mother's curly hair, but she'd definitely got his appetite. Hugo, whose hair was turning into a dark auburn as time passed, was in his high chair, arms folded and shaking his head at the food in front of him. "Hugo, you're not getting anything else," Hermione tried to stay sternly, holding a spoon out for the wriggling boy. Hugo didn't seem to care, he was safe in the assumption that his mummy wouldn't let him starve.

"NO," Hugo wailed in the high pitch way only small children can somehow manage.

"What are you trying to poison him with today?" Ron asked, pressing a kiss into Hermione's hairline. Sometimes, only sometimes, and not that he'd ever tell his wife, he thought he would scream and cry if he had to stomach what Hugo did. Hermione turned her back on Hugo's wailing, dropping the spoon onto the highchair.

"Banana, which Hugo loved yesterday," Hermione sighed. Ron shook his head at Hugo. His son was content to eat play-do, but turned his nose up at mashed banana? What was that all about?

"Sit down, love." Hermione grabbed the toast from the side and plonked it onto the table,
encouraging Rosie to sit back down before taking her own seat and buttering herself some toast. Ron poured two strong coffees, and placed them on the table. He leant back against the counter and smiled. "Do you want a juice, Rosie?" He opened the fridge, expecting the answer of yes.

"It's Rose!" she chided, frowning at him as though he was stupid. Ron rolled his eyes at his headstrong three year old. He worried for the soon-coming time when she could string enough words together to well and truly put him in his place.

"Rose, would you like some juice?"

It was mornings like this when he was often late out of the door. Not because the chaos made him stay, or made him late. But instead because it was hard to tear himself away from them. Most people would think he was mad, but he came from a big family. A family of different ages and likes and dislikes. Yet as a child, sitting down to eat had always been the best part of the day. That hadn't changed for him. He sat down, plonking a juice in front of his daughter. Hugo was finally eating his banana. Grinning, he smeared his toast with far too much butter. He caught Hermione's eye. A knowing look crossed her face and she too grinned at their little growing family. Soon, he would have to rush out the door laden with coats and a small child who'd wail the entire way to playschool. He wouldn't change it for the world.

Ron hurried back to his desk, pulling his dress robes loose as he went. Although his robes were no longer frilly (and he would never quite forgive his mother for that), his hatred for dress robes remained. They were uncomfortable, itchy almost. No matter how long he had been on the job, or how his expensive his dress robes had become, he much preferred to be undercover walking through the muggle world in his favourite jeans. Walking the beat would always be his favourite part of this job. Interacting with the public was what he enjoyed. Still, he had been in the Wizengamort and he hadn't really had much of a choice in his attire. He could only imagine the horror on the old coots' faces had he turned up in anything other than robes. He plopped down at his desk feeling drained. Luckily, he'd had a couple of hours this morning to finish his report from yesterday after dropping Rose off ("Daddy, I don't want to stay here!") so at least he didn't have that to finish as well.

He checked his watch and considered calling the playschool. Rose had only been going for a couple of weeks and she'd been finding the adjustment hard. However, It was just after noon. Hermione would be picking her up soon. He didn't want to come across as one of those pushy parents who wouldn't let their children out of their sight…

Sighing, he pulled the file in front of him and checked through it. "Gemino," he poked the file. The file jumped up and split into two identical files. With a swish, he sent it into Harry's office. He hadn't been given a name by Anderson, but he had an idea where they were dealing from. If he could find one of the dealers it would lead him back to the mastermind behind it. He pulled out a map, and starred where he'd picked up Anderson the previous day.

He glared at the map for a long minute. Was it best to look at where they lived or where they worked? However, where they lived wouldn't have that much impact on a wizard. Unfortunately, there were too many ways a wizard could travel without being traced.

The first victim, James Raimes. Lived in Stratford in a small flat. He put a dot on the location, it was only two miles away from where he'd picked up Anderson.

The second victim, Dolly Peterson, 17, was found on the Wanstead Flats, not too far out of Stratford. However, her family lived in Durham, so she must have travelled to get her hit and then been unable to apparate... The fifth victim, a muggle, lived on Crownfield road, in Stratford. It was he that led them to Anderson, again in Stratford…
Ron chewed his quill, it was as he had already known. Anderson, Peterson, Raimes and the muggle, John Phillips, had got the product somewhere in Stratford. No doubt, the dealer was moving around, it would be stupid not to. Ron doubted this was a new dealer, he'd already got loyal customers… and they knew where to find him. All that had changed was the drug he was peddling. Whether or not the dealer knew how strong it was, was another story. Ron doubted any dealer would want their clientele dropping like flies.

The only problem was the other two didn't fit the pattern. Where the others had either lived, worked or died near Stratford, they had not. One had been from Sheffield, the other from Liverpool. One had worked in Hogsmeade, the other hadn't worked at all. There must be another dealer, but where he was, or where they were dealing from, he couldn't be sure.

"So," Harry said, pulling up a chair. "Do you want the bad news or the good news?" Ron groaned theatrically.

"The good news," he decided.

Harry grinned, "you were right, which brings me to the bad news- I suspect we can add two more muggles to your list of overdoses."

"Shit," Ron said, "where were they from?"

Harry consulted the files in front of him, "Kelly Shepard had no fixed address, but she was from Manchester. She was found on a back street in Manchester city centre and taken into hospital, she died on the way. She had a history of drug abuse and it was suspected that she'd overdosed on heroin. While I was searching, I had a look into her postmortem, it seemed to me that it was likely that she'd taken our drug. I checked it out with St. Mungos and they agreed." Ron noted down the information, how many dealers were there for this relatively new drug? And who was making it?

"The second," Harry said again checking his notes, "was a school kid, Jamie Williamson, 15."

Ron noted it down, the end of his quill sinking through the parchment as he stabbed the dot on the 'I'. "Where was he from?"

"Cheshire. Knutsford, specifically. He was found in his bedroom by his Dad."

"Right, when did they die?" Ron said tightly, not needing to look up to know that Harry was as fed up of this case as he was. Some crimes he could understand. But drug crimes just preyed on the vulnerable, the sad, the addicted, the young and impressionable… This case was a damn mess.

"Kelly was brought in two days ago, Jamie yesterday."

"Right, I need to interview the family and friends, someone will have to know who they were getting the drugs from." He hoped they did, he needed a break in this case.

"I agree, but we also need to keep an eye on where you found Anderson."

"Head Auror Potter," Ron said, pleadingly, "I am finally, finally, requesting some help with this case."

"I thought you'd say that, I sent Greg and Creevey to interview the parents of Jamie. You interview Anderson, you built a bond yesterday and it would be a shame to let it go to waste." Ron didn't need to look up to feel Harry's good humour. Unfortunately, he'd left his good mood back at home. Spending the morning rehashing the Khalid murder hadn't helped any either.

"I don't think you can call holding the guy as he puked his innards out a 'bond'." Ron wrinkled his
nose. He readily gathered the files he needed. He snatched his badge of the desk and attached it sulkily to his dress robes before smoothing them down.

"Not going to get changed?" Harry asked lightly.

"Too much effort," Ron said. He privately thought that the robes and badge might jolt Anderson into giving something useful. "And what about you? Mr Head Auror in charge?"

"I'm going to ask Sturgis if he will reassign some of the regional officers to help out."

Ron agreed, he also knew that Podmore would do anything he could to prevent anymore deaths. They were very lucky they had Podmore as Head of Magical Law Enforcement. If they had a pencil pusher like his brother… well they wouldn't get half as much done.

"I also need to speak to him about my replacement as Deputy." Ron's head snapped up to look at him.

"Greg is senior, surely it would be him?"

Harry rolled his eyes, "Greg isn't interested in management, you know that. He'd rather train the new recruits."

"So, who-"

"You great dolt, it's you of course." Ron opened and closed his mouth a few times, his head spinning. A promotion? To Deputy Head auror? "It needs to be confirmed, but it's just a formality at this point." Harry clapped him on the back, but Ron still couldn't speak. "You do want it?" Harry asked confused, "I mean, there might be more paperwork, but it'll be a more senior position and there will be a decent pay rise…"

"No, of course-" blustered Ron, his head still spinning. "It's just out of the blue, you know?"

"Honestly Ron, people think I'm dense." Harry strode towards the bullpen door. "I'll get you a drink tomorrow at the George and the Dragon, to celebrate."

Ron swallowed and gathered up everything he needed. He'd always wanted to be an auror, and he was proud of everything they'd achieved. Yet, he wasn't sure he was ready for this promotion. He wasn't even sure he deserved it. He shook himself angrily, that didn't matter right now. What did matter was the seven people lying dead because of a drug he couldn't stop. What mattered was the parents who tonight, while he tucked in his two darling children, would be sobbing into each other's arms. He needed to solve this case because right now he could think of nothing else. They had to be close to answers now, and with everyone working together it was only a matter of time before they had the bastard behind bars.

Until then, he would have to put it all from his mind.

He strode out of the office, stuffing the files into his bag as he went. He had a case to solve, a drug to get off the street and way too much on his plate right now. It was not long after lunch and the corridors were heaving, weaving through people he struggled to make any progress through the heavy press of bodies. He ducked as a flock of memos flew over his head (he hated the dratted things, didn't people have legs?) and into the lift. "Hold it!" He yelled, dashing forward. A hand stopped the doors. "Thanks," he panted.

The lift sank towards the atrium and he allowed himself to sink against the wall of the lift. He absentmindedly traced the outline of his badge.
He smiled.
Killing you, Killing me

Chapter Summary

Ron gets increasingly desperate in his search for answers. Who is making this drug? Why? And why does Ron feel like every death is his fault...

St. Mungo’s held mixed emotions for Ron. Both of his children had been born here, Hugo very recently. Not to mention the hoards of nieces and nephews… On the other hand, this place held the uncomfortable memory of his father- his first brush with the idea of mortality. While you could argue the good memories far outweighed the bad, the bad memories were poisonous enough to infect his opinion of this place. It was not, by far, his favourite place in the world. At least Azkaban had a view of the sea…

It was rare for him to pass through the doors of St. Mungo’s. Sometimes, though thankfully rarely, he’d find himself here for some auror-related injury. Other-times, he’d be here to visit some idiotic auror with a death wish (Harry). Still, despite his hatred of the place, he couldn't deny the beauty of it. Surprisingly for a place hidden inside an abandoned shopfront, it had an odd sense of beauty. A sense of importance. Its white stone floors glistened in the light of the crystal chandeliers that swung from above the waiting room. Several witches stood at the apparation point. Beside them, by the main door, stood several very clean fireplaces. Every now and again green light would spit a witch or wizard out onto the hard, cold floor. Everyone that arrived seemed to rush, there was Ron who seemed to meander. Everyone else rushed from place to place, as fast as they could. St. Mungo's was rarely quiet; this day proved no exception.

At the reception desk sat a stern-faced witch, whose face implied a no nonsense attitude. The waiting room was quiet despite the amount of people waiting in the green worn chairs dotted around the room. The witches and wizards that sat in them all nursed their own injuries with sullen acceptance. The witch surveyed the land as a lioness would her pride.

On her chest, pinned to her white apron, was an engraved badge.

Juliette Scholes

Medi-Witch

Ron put on his best charming smile as he reached her desk. She seemed thoroughly unimpressed, and her glare caused the corners of his mouth to slip before he tacked his smile more firmly on. "I'm here to see Gilly Anderson."

The witch pursed her lips, and slowly began to leaf down her roll of parchment. The silence stretched on, the only noise the rustle of her slowly unrolling parchment. Ron held in his groan, though his smile became fixed and painful. He fought the urge to tap his foot and instead simply focused on keeping a pleasant expression upon his weary face.
Eventually, after what seemed to Ron an age, she replied, "Third floor, room 2."

"Thank you!" Ron said brightly, noticing her eyes narrow at him. He turned to leave. Normally when a witch began to look at him like that, he knew to run. The look rarely ended well for him, between his mother, Hermione, Ginny and his own daughter- he was always best to run and work out what he'd done later. Her sudden voice stopped him before he'd the chance to complete his escape.

"Aren't you Ron Weasley?" She asked, leaning forward and gathering the attention of a fellow nearby with antlers for ears.

"Ummm…yes?" he replied. He self-consciously tucked his hands into the front of his robes and rocked from foot to foot.

"You saved that little boy last month, the one who touched that cursed chest?" She asked almost leaning over the desk now. Ron took half a step back, his ears burning.

"I didn't save him, you guys did that." He wasn't being bashful- he'd barely been able to keep the kid breathing. He'd been certain that he was too slow, too clumsy, yet the healers had pulled him back at the last moment.

"Oh no, I was there, I treated him when he came in… if it hadn't been for you…” she trailed off and Ron took this as an opportunity to scuttle out backwards, almost tripping over a woman who'd transfigured her foot into a table leg.

"Yeah, umm… thanks anyway!" he called, sighing in relief as the elevator doors slid shut around him. His ears were still red as he exited the lift on the third floor.

Room two was the first on his right, and the door opened into a somewhat gloomy ward lined with three beds on either side. Only two of the beds were occupied. The first bed contained a young woman who was bent over shaking uncontrollably in laughter. Tears streamed down her face as she shook in endless mirth. A healer was stroking her back, passing her a potion.

"Not much longer till this kicks in, Helena, then it will be time for a nice nap, I'd have thought."

Ron slipped past them towards the sorry-state for a man in the end bed. Anderson was also hunched over, but not with laughter. His were shakes of a different kind.

The healer, whose blonde hair was tied neatly into a low bun, bustled over. "How we doing, Gilly?" She asked, ignoring Ron.

Gilly didn't reply, but the witch didn't seem to care, running her wand over him and frowning before making a note on the parchment and finally turning towards Ron.

"Visiting hours are 5pm till 8."

Ron held up his badge for her to see. "Ron Weasley," he introduced, "I'm investigating the new drug craze, and Gilly here is my only witness."

The healer crossed her arms, frowning disapprovingly. "He's in no fit state to answer questions without incriminating himself. I will have to ask for you to come back tomorrow when he will, hopefully, be in a better frame of mind."

"Healer…"
"Jenkins," she said tartily, not letting up her protective stance.

"Healer Jenkins, Gilly here isn't in any trouble, I think he's going through enough as it is. However, Gilly is the only one who knows who is distributing a drug that, in the last two weeks, has killed seven people, that we know of- one only fifteen years old. I have no doubt that more will die from this drug, and the only person who can help me is that lump lying on the bed. I know he's sick; so are many more that won't be lucky enough to wind up on your floor, Healer Jenkins."

The healer's face didn't soften, but her arms did relax slightly. "You can have half an hour, Auror Weasley, any longer and I will be forced to make a complaint."

"Thank you." With a severe glare, the woman disappeared back out into the ward. Ron watched her retreat before taking the one chair beside the poor fellow's bed. He couldn't help but idly wonder how many (if any) others had sat by poor Gilly as he went through his withdrawal.

"Gilly, it's Auror Weasley, Ron- um," Ron broke off as the man was yet to raise his head. "I would say it's nice to see you doing better, but I have to say you look but a fraction better than when you swan dived in my interview room."

Ron scratched the back of his head, wincing as he felt the thinness George had been teasing him about for months. Perhaps Jenkins was right, Gilly certainly didn't seem up for any type of conversation- especially not one as important as this.

"Am I going to jail?" Gilly croaked, his head still hanging between his trembling legs.

"No, Gilly," Ron said softly, leaning forward in his chair in the hope that Gilly would pick his head up. He didn't, but fat tears landed on the bed sheet. Ron put a hand on his back. He waited.

"What do you want from me?" Gilly eventually asked, he looked up his bloodshot eyes meeting Ron's.

"I wanted to see how you were doing."

Gilly snorted, "No, that's not why you're here." He shuddered as he spoke, trembling and sweating without seemingly noticing.

"Perhaps not," Ron agreed, "you are the first person, that we know of, that has survived this drug after overdosing."

"So I'm an experiment?" He snarled, "go away."

"I will leave you in peace soon, but I need to know where the drug is coming from." Gilly shook harder, his head rocking from side to side in panic. "I- I can't."

"We can protect you, if you need it. Get you into a good program- we can help you."

"You're lying- no one wants to help me."

"I do, Gilly," Ron pressed firmly. "You've got your whole life ahead of you- we can get you clean, we can help you."

"I'm not stupid," Gilly said with as much strength as he could muster.

"You are if you let anyone else die, Gilly." Ron said, leaning forward and eyeing him with a look of complete seriousness. "If you don't tell us, and someone else dies…" Ron trailed off. He waited, the
seconds ticking over uncomfortably as he forced himself to neither speak nor look away.

"I don't know much," he eventually mumbled, his face crumpling into despair.

"Tell me what you do know," Ron soothed.

Ron burst back into the office, barely pausing in his steps as he blundered through the maze of overflowing desks and legs. He had one target in mind.

"Yo, Weasley!" someone yelled. He ignored them completely, focusing on his goal: the glass door opposite where a bedraggled man sat surrounded by mountains of paperwork. A quill twirled in his hands as he frowned at the parchment before him.

Ron threw the door open with a crash as loud as a canon. Harry jumped, sending his papers flying like carosoles through the air.

"Ron!" Harry said, dropping to scoop up the papers. Ron stood, chest heaving and body trembling.

"I know where they are making the drugs."

Harry's head snapped up, still crouched on the floor like a rabbit in the headlights. "That's great, Ron- give me a couple of days and we can put together a raid; we can scope the place out." Harry stood gingerly, he'd twisted his knee at the weekend playing quidditch with Teddy and Dominique, Ron knew. Although, Harry's knee had been messed up when he'd shattered it on one of the last cases they'd worked together. No matter how good the Skele-Grow had been, it had never been the same.

"No," Ron said vehemently, jabbing his wand onto the desk as if to prove his point. "We go tonight."

Harry frowned, taking in Ron's frantic, heaving chest and the way his eyes seemed almost too bright for his face. It came as some surprise to Harry that Ron wasn't the usual put-together auror that he usually was. Every auror has a case that ends up taking over your life; that infects your every thought, moment, action until it is finally solved. For Harry, that case had happened to him just over a year ago, The McNeil Boy, a case that he still deemed so important, so affecting, that even now it could ruin his entire day if he allowed it. Ron, however, while the dutiful and caring auror, had always had a way of distancing himself from his cases. An ability that Harry envied with every fibre of his being. But then again, he'd known that this case had been affecting his friend. He'd seen the agony in his face as they'd discovered body after body... After every lead turning cold before they'd even had a chance to investigate.

"Ron, we can't go now," Harry said firmly. Ron shook with something, and the tip of his wand pressed into the dark mahogany wood.

"If we don't, they'll move the operations. We go now!" Ron was flushed. His ears burning.

"But protocol-"

"Damn the paperwork, damn it all!" Ron finally lost the last thread of his unravelling temper. The wood sizzled and popped, turning black beneath the wand. Harry forced himself not to flinch at the ferocity of his anger. "How many more bodies do you want us to trip over, how many families do you want to send weeping?" Ron fumed, his ears and face a crimson Harry had never seen. "People are dying, Harry. I've talked to their families, I've seen their bodies. If we don't- if we fail to-" Ron sagged, weighed down by a weight he couldn't shake. "You remember Ritchie Coote?"
Harry wracked his mind for the name, a tingling feeling running down his spine as he wondered why on earth he would be asking this. The answer came to him suddenly, "he was chaser for Gryffindor. The year I was captain."

"No, beater. Never quite as good as Fred and George but a beater nonetheless," Ron corrected his eyes blazing as fiercely as the hearth in Griffindor tower on a freezing night. "He's dead."

Harry, who had known where this dangerous conversation was heading, simply winced. Seeing this, Ron's fury grew, spiralling out of him uncontrolled.

"He's dead Harry! Had his whole life ahead of him, now…"

"We will get them, Ron, but with planning and time."

Ron shook violently, the bags under his eyes standing out starkly against his pale face. "Harry, I know where they are; I know where they will be. We can't let anyone else lose a son, a daughter- we can't."

"Ron-"

"It's killing me."

Silence descended upon the room. Harry looked into his friend's eyes and the sorrow, the pain, the horror- well, he decided it was killing him too.

"I still want to do this right- wait," Harry said, firmly holding up his hand. "But we will go tonight."

Ron's eyes closed. He seemed to sag- the weight of the last few weeks momentarily lifting as finally they had a lead, a chance. The plan had been set; the choice made. They would move on the house tonight and one way or another this whole dreadful mess would be over. Finally, they would have their guys in custody and the vulnerable would be safe and the dead avenged. Finally, Ron would be able to relax into dreamless sleep. He would be able to hold his children, laugh with his friends without this dreadful case hanging over him, shadowing his every move. He'd longed for so long for this case to be over and now they had the opportunity to strike as the wand was hot.
Auror Down

Chapter Summary

An auror mission goes dreadfully wrong.

The night was crisp, the air almost biting with each gust of wind. Still, even the chill of the night could not cool the anger pulsing through him. Six aurors surrounded the place. Within a couple of minutes, they would be able to apprehend the leader of the drugs ring, and then Ron would be home-too late to tuck the kids into bed but early enough to see his wife. He longed for this case to be over; he was looking forward to investigating burglaries for the next couple of months.

Harry stood beside him eyeing his old, battered watch. The hands slowly ticked forward as they waited to move on the house. Already, wards had been set up to prevent anyone from apparating out of the house. A quick charm had revealed three life signs inside although where they were was anyone's guess.

"Nice night for it," Ron said clutching his wand tightly. The sky was dark, the glow of the stars hidden by a thick blanket of cloud.

Harry smiled, "Not for those inside it won't be."

"Pub on Friday? Stevens told me he's got a new ale for the George and Dragon," Ron said his eyes darting from Harry's watch to the front door. He could see Greg dragging Creevey behind some bins as the young lad was eagerly pacing forward. He knew, but couldn't see, Applebee and Jackson standing on the perimeter- ready for any runners.

"You know I wouldn't miss it for the world," Harry said fondly. "But I'm pretty sure it's your turn to buy!"

"You earn more you cheap git," Ron snarked back, a grin betraying his true feelings. Adrenaline began to race through his veins, making him twitch where he stood. Waiting, waiting...

"Right, 5, 4, 3, 2-..." and they were off. They surged towards the house, wands aloft. Ron opened the front door forcefully, taking the left hand side, Harry on his shoulder as he always was.

"Aurors! Surrender your wands!" The hallway was bare. Wooden walls, wooden floors. Nowhere to hide, completely barren of those they'd come to seize.

A blast echoed through the house with a scream of anger. Ron and Harry shared a glance, why could the bad guys never come easily?

They surged forward into the first room, back to back. It was a small sitting room, bare but for two cracked sofas that lined two of the walls. A bookshelf- lacking books- sat across the remaining wall. The dark room was lit by one candle. Ron stepped in further.

"Empty," he said, inching towards the door beside the bookcase. With a flick of his wand the door flew open. They moved forward. A bang of violent purple lit up the doorway and they dropped to the floor, rolling to each side of the door.
"This is Head Auror Potter, I need you to put down your wand and-" a screech and a bang drowned out Harry's poor attempt at persuasion.

Ron pulled a face, "Nice one mate, looks like he'll be coming over for cuddles anytime now." Ron lent through the doorway. "OI dipshit! Pack it in unless you want the guy who KILLED the Dark Lord to come and crucify your ass!"

"Why do you always say that? It makes no sense, I didn't-"

"Alright, alright! I'm coming out," a timid voice called out. Ron's grin grew wider than his face as Harry's became steadily more stony. Ron fought the urge to stick his tongue out at The-One-Who-Vanquished-The-Dark-Arse deeming it mighty unprofessional. However, from the dangerous edge in Harry's eyes, Ron could tell Harry wouldn't stand for anymore gloating.

"Throw out your wand and come towards the door with your arms up," Ron commanded, jumping to his feet with a bounce, Harry stood too. The guy came forward- a young man, obviously using as well as dealing, with long lanky hair and eyes far too wide for his face who was shaking hard. Harry cuff ed the man while Ron picked up the fallen wand twirling it through his fingers. "Well that was just-"

A creak had them all whipping round. Their wands rose, ready to slash the air.

"Woah, boys! Just me," Greg laughed quietly.

"Oldridge, you know better than to sneak up on-"

"Calm it Potter, if you two weren't sharing doe eyes, you'd have heard me coming," Oldridge shook his head with familiar fondness. "Creevey got a runner, nearly squished the poor Bastard. Rest of the downstairs is clear."

"Two down," Ron said baring his teeth into a vicious looking sneer, "One to go."

"Take this one," Harry said, "We'll search the upstairs." Oldridge grabbed the man by the shoulder and began to manhandle him out of the room towards the back as Ron and Harry as one turned to head towards the hallway. Neither spoke; they didn't want their quarry to know how close they were. The stairs were old, and no doubt creaky, but a simple spell prevented that. They walked upstairs besides each other hearts thrumming with newfound adrenaline. At the top of the stairs, they were confronted with three doors. Harry held a hand out and tilted his head, concentrating intently. After several seconds, a creak echoed from the door on the right. Harry nodded, Ron wiped his brow and moved to the left of the door jam. Harry moved to the right.

Ron held up his hand then his fingers and began to count them down.

3

2

1

They burst into the room, wands high. The room was dark, but their lit wands trailed light into the dark corners. There was as moment of stillness, then a rush of movement from the back corner. A flash of silver-grey shot out. Harry dove to the right, landing in a roll. Ron sidestepped and threw an expelliarmus into the gloom.

"Put your wand down and hands up!" Harry bellowed authoritatively as no wand came flying into
Ron's hand.

A voice screamed, "Avada Kedavra!" a jet of green shot towards Ron, who yelled in turn:

"Accio desk!"

The desk flew into the path of the curse and shattered and blistered as it ate its way through the wood.

A man, short in stature and shaking, stepped out of the gloom. The desk clattered to the floor as a rush of heat shot across towards them. Ron, staggering and swearing as the desk fell onto his foot, shuffled back behind a wardrobe in the cluttered room.

The room was suddenly alight and Ron gasped as he narrowed his eyes against the glare of the sudden blinding light in the dark, dank room. Crackling and pops filled the room, and then Harry screamed. Ron's heart thudded, and he jumped out from behind the wardrobe. Fire had cut through the room. Harry was nowhere to be seen through the smoke and flame. Ron's mind was a million miles away, years away, in another burning room...

"Harry!" he yelled stepping out from his shelter and sending water onto the flames which died almost immediately. "Harry!"

"Watch out!" Harry choked from the other side of the room, "Ron-"

But his warning came too late, Ron turned into a cutting curse that sliced into his thigh, cutting through his robes and into the fleshy muscle. A strangled yell passed through his lips as he sank onto one knee as blood bubbled out of the mercilessly shallow wound.

Ron's wand was up, his second distraction costing him dearly as another curse was coming his way, he raised his wand again, too late to stop it-

Then, Harry was there, stood in front of him, arms wide. His shield glowing brightly as the spells rained down upon it. Ron gasped, sweat pouring down his face, he raised his wand to his leg-

"Hurry up- that curse I blocked was dark, the next one might-" He broke off with a cry as the wizard began across the room, hurling spells in quick succession.

Ron stood on his freshly healed leg, the skin taut and pulling as he put weight on it. He hissed in pain but pushed it away. There was no time for that now. Another curse smashed into Harry’s shield. Ron watched Harry's arm tremble under the barrage. They needed to move, the guy had them on the back-foot as they'd been surprised by his power. However, Ron knew that they were a well-trained and well-oiled machine. No two other aurors where as strong together as he and Harry was.

"Break and dodge?" Ron asked. The dark curses were rebounding off the shield, but that didn't matter. He could see through the the trembling and Harry's tense shoulders that the curses would soon crack through. They needed to move and get the guy on the defensive.

"Together?" Harry was shaking in earnest now, and the smell of singed hair and burnt flesh rolled off him. Ron nodded, and without counting, for they knew each other too well, they broke apart spinning into a duelling position. They didn't retreat to the corners of the room. Instead they stood beside each other in plain view. They could finish this.

The man across from them was rat-like, twitching all over, and his eyes darted in panic. His wand, however, held steady. They were unfortunate enough that the moron behind all of this, wasn't a moron. The curses he'd been throwing were dark and hard to learn (and even harder to cast.) Ron
squared his shoulders, firing a cutting curse into the melee. They quickly fell into a pattern. Ron remained on the offensive while Harry defended them transfiguring objects into shields that blistered and cracked when struck.

It happened suddenly.

It happened without warning.

To Ron, it happened in slow motion.

Harry parried a particularly nasty curse with a wall he'd hastily conjured. The wall exploded, sending Harry and Ron flying and pummelling them with splintered brick. Ron could see Harry blinking heavily trying to clear his eyes of the grit. Ron stood quickly, he'd avoided the worst of the blast, but where was his wand? In horror, he realised it must have dropped—Harry lunged unsteadily to his feet, his wand rising slowly, too slowly. He hadn't realised Ron was missing his wand and couldn't defend them. The man, encouraged from the momentary distraction he'd caused, fired a pulsing, twisting purple spell that reeked of dark magic towards the still out-of-it Harry. There was no time. He screamed a warning, but he knew the spell would get there before he could do anything.

In horror, determination, and fear, he pushed Harry as hard as he could toppling the smaller man yet again to the floor. He couldn't react. The spell hit him in the side and he couldn't think.

He screamed as his eyes rolled back and he fell to the floor twitching and thrashing before falling limp.

Harry had yelped as he'd been pushed by firm hands. With a crash, his head had collided with the floor. The impact jarred him and helped to clear his foggy brain.

Screaming. Ron was screaming!

He looked up in time to see Ron crash to the floor lifelessly. "Ron!" he screamed. A man laughed. Ron wasn't moving and that— that bastard was laughing.

Harry turned his wand casting without even a thought. The man fell, unmoving. Alive, dead… Harry couldn't bring himself to care.

He fell to the ground beside Ron. He was gasping now. Struggling to breathe. As their eyes met, Harry saw only panic reflected in his shining crystal blue eyes.

"Ron, it's okay, it's okay-shh now," he soothed his own horror and panic noticeable in his tone. His eyes trailed up and down the body of his friend and he knew that this was bad. Ron was fighting the curse, he could see him struggling against whatever it was it was doing to him, but Harry knew he wouldn't be able to fight forever. The spell had been dark, and old- He fought the panic down, his hands running across his friend's wan face, lifting him. He pulled him towards his chest without another thought his mind blind with panic; Ron was cradled against him softly trembling in his arms. Maybe he did it to help him breathe. More probable was that it was what he needed, craved-closeness. To feel the pounding heart beneath his hand. To know Ron still had life in him. To know he was still fighting. "Finite Incantatem," he murmured. Nothing happened. Ron's struggle continued until Harry had repeated the phrase over and over and over again. "HELP," he bellowed, "Auror down! Auror down!" he jabbed at the distress beacon at his label and knew someone would be here soon.

Harry cupped Ron's cheek, pushing his face upwards so that Ron's panic-stricken ones would meet his own.
"It's okay, it's okay."

But it wasn't they both knew it now. Ron was shaking uncontrollably, his breathing becoming shallower, and he was pale, so very pale.

"Harry," Ron choked.

"I'm here, I'm here," Harry rambled, resuming the rocking as his eyes darted nervously towards the door. "I'll make a portkey, I'll get you out of here-"

"Stop- please," Ron gasped, "Stop." A lump rose in his throat as Ron's hand slowly rose to clutch his own, to clutch the hand that was still holding his cheek. Tears dripped down his nose, splashing onto Ron's auror cloak that was covered in dust, grime and blood. "Tell Hermione- tell - I love -,"

Harry shook his head furiously.

"Look out-," he trailed off out of breath, "Rose, Hugo- please Harry," he begged. Harry's tear filled eyes met Ron's and he couldn't deny his friend even though he wasn't going to die- Harry wouldn't let him- and he nodded. Ron sagged in his arms, his eyes rolling in his head.

"Ron!" he sobbed.

"Harry, I-" but Ron couldn't fight the curse anymore, whatever it had been, and his eyes rolled up, his eyes still part open, becoming limp in Harry's arms. Harry gasped, sobbed. What could he do? Ron was-

No.

Ron Weasley was not going to die.

He laid his old friend down, as though he was a babe, on his back. He tilted Ron's head up, and pressed his ear over his friend's mouth and nose, glaring down his chest. Willing there to be movement, or sound.

There was neither. Ron lay still. Not breathing.

"Harry!" It was Greg in the doorway.

"Mungo's- now!" Harry yelled, not looking towards the man and instead starting on the compressions he'd practised long ago but had never before needed to use. "Quickly!" he called.

A second later a disk was pressed into his hand, Greg dropped to the other side of him, pressing Ron's finger and her own to the portkey as it activated.

They arrived in the gleaming white entrance to St. Mungos. There was a moment of stillness, then screams, shouts. Greg was up, he was speaking- yelling. Healers were jumping to attention and they wrestled Ron away from him He couldn't even think, or move. He just watched as they whisked him away on a floating stretcher the noise seeming to come from the end of a very long tunnel.

Harry sat, alone, at the emergency entrance of St. Mungo's, and sobbed.
The cool air pressed in on him from all sides as his finger trailed the pattern of the wood grain on the battered, old bedside table. The room held just the one bed- the amount of red-haired visitors had allowed that- along with the face of the wizard himself.

Across from Harry, in a hard unforgiving chair, slept Hermione. Her head was pillowed on her arms that were resting on the edge of the bed atop of the crisp white sheet. He knew that she'd wake up regretting it- he neck alone would be stiff and sore- yet he didn't wake her. It had taken hours of her pacing, crying and her general panic till she had finally conceded to sit and rest. Harry knew her well enough that it was better for her to rest now as she would only repeat the same motions over and over again driving him to the brink. It was kinder for them both to let her sleep.

Not to mention, there was nothing worse than waiting, which is exactly what they'd been doing for the last ten hours…

Of course, the first hour had been the worst. He shuddered remembering the body, Ron's body, being whisked away- the still form of his by friend disappearing from sight along with, it had seemed, his ability to breathe.

He gulped past the lump that had rose in his throat and wiped at his itchy eyes. The waiting was always the worst, although it usually wasn't Harry himself doing the waiting. That was the crux of the matter, so to speak, it was usually Harry in that bed. Usually him that was not fine.

He hadn't even been able to tell Hermione himself. Instead, it had been Greg. It should have been him. Guilt crawled inside him like a fleet of spiders. It should have been him, it was his job. He was the auror in charge… He was- is- their friend, but he couldn't do it. Perhaps he was a coward. He felt like one. He felt more than that, he felt weak. He looked over at Hermione who, despite her tears, had been a pillar of strength. Unlike him.

Ron was laid on a virtual balance beam, hanging between dead and alive and he, Harry, was unable to form a coherent sentence. Guilt bubbled up like an out of control potion- at the brink of over spilling.

Ron shouldn't be in that bed.

Harry clapped his hand over his mouth.

It should be a him.

If he hadn't been so stupid as to be hit…

If he hadn't had been so confused…

If he had seen that spell…

If Ron hadn't pushed him out of the way…

If. If. If. The world was built upon it, but the questions could give no answers for the truth was Ron and had pushed him out of the way. The truth was, it was Ron that had stopped breathing. It was Ron they weren't sure would ever wake up.

Ron had stepped in front of an old spell, a dark spell; it had raced through his nervous system and
obliterated it. The damage to his spine and heart had been the worst- the healers had only just got his heart beating again and even then it had stopped three more times (along with Harry's). The healers didn't know what to do. They hadn't seen anything like it before and, while they had been able to stop Ron from deteriorating further, they had been unable to heal any of the damage done. Harry could tell from the faces of the healers that it didn't look good.

Harry's mind drifted to his niece and nephew… Little Rose, so full of fire even at her young age, and little Hugo, who hadn't yet said his first words or taken his first steps. He forced himself to look up from his knees and towards Ron's pale face. He hoped beyond hope that his little nephew wouldn't know the same pain as his, that of never knowing your parent. His mind flashed to Teddy, 11 years old already, but his life forever filled with unanswered questions: 'would mum be proud of him? would his dad like his friends? What would mum say about this?' That wasn't an upbringing he would wish on any child, and certainly not on Ron's children.

And the Weasleys. The poor Weasleys. They'd barely survived the loss of one son, another… It didn't bear thinking about.

"Mr Potter?" The sudden soft voice made him jump and his eyes watered as his knee bashed harshly into the wooden bedside table. He looked up, still clutching his knee, into the sympathetic face of a healer- she held out a steaming cup of coffee to him, which he took gratefully.

"My mum is a muggle, I have a stash of coffee if you ever need any." Harry nodded, his lip quirking as he thought of the one time Ron had tried coffee. He'd never got the taste for it, unlike Harry and Hermione who both frequently bled the stuff.

"Do you know any more?" He asked gruffly, wincing at the strain in his voice.

Her face tightened and Harry could see the corners of her lips turn down, "Healer Philips and Miller are working on it but there hasn't been any breakthroughs yet," she paused, "Until we know what the spell was we simply can't undo the damage." Harry nodded, he'd known this even though he'd hoped they would be able to cure Ron before they found out the spell in question. Greg had the man in custody and Harry could only hope that the man would confess during his interrogation. Otherwise, they would have to get permission from the European Wizarding Rights Commision and use Veritism - and that would take time, time Harry wasn't sure they had. He nodded and thanked the healer, who smiled sadly, made a note on the chart and left.

He itched to do something, anything, but he knew that he was not in the right frame of mind to act- a point both Kingsley and Greg had been keen to make. Still, doing nothing was a foreign feeling and one he did not enjoy.

The room had been busy all day with various loud Weasleys. Now it was quiet, as was the hospital, as it was late into the night. Mrs Weasley, or Molly as he had been told to call her many times, had been in and out most of the day. She'd kissed Ron on the forehead and fussed with the sheet. She'd given both Harry and Hermione a tight hug but he was sure that he hadn't imagined the rather stiff way she'd held him- so very different from her usual warm hugs.

George had been briefly to visit carrying a, hopefully unused, toilet seat with 'Get Well Soon' written in flashing neon lights. Ginny had been by but had hurried home after she'd seen Ron and checked that Harry was actually alright. Audrey had been left with the kids and, while they liked her, they would rather have their kids, and Ron and Hermione's, with them.

Harry drank his coffee.

He hated seeing Ron like this. Ron was always active, always restless- more so than Harry
nowadays. To see his so still and unresponsive to even his wife, was wrong. He sat, keeping watch, until the clock ticked them into a new day.

It was early the next morning when Hermione blinked awake. He could tell when she woke because her shoulders suddenly stiffened as he dreams faded and realisation dawned. She sat up, brushing her hair out of her face and gazing groggly as Ron's still form. Her hand rose, then hesitated as though unsure, then slowly stroked over his face lovingly.

"Any change?" she murmured. Her hand rested on his cheek, her thumb softly brushing over the freckles there.

"No," he said. She winced and shook herself straightening her back and meeting his eye firmly.

"Hell beat this, Harry."

Harry wished he could feel the same optimism but he could not dare to hope. His heart ached as he looked at his best friends - he could not voice the fear that was stirring in his heart. He couldn't destroy her hope. He just couldn't do that to her. So he simply nodded. Before long, even with the coffee, his eyes began to drift shut.

Harry jerked awake and was momentarily confused before reality crashed back down. He groaned and checked his watch. 8am. He'd been asleep three hours.

He looked up; the room was still the same, as was the man that lie in the bed. However, across from him was no longer Hermione. There, with greying hair tied into a bun, and usually rosy cheeks turned sallow, was Molly.

"Morning, Harry," Molly said trying to smile. Harry sat up ever straighter and tried to untangle his robes. He blearily blinked around him. "Hermione has gone to get showered," she answered his unasked question. "Ginny has the children for now, but we are going to swap at lunchtime." Harry nodded, ignoring the clench in his chest.

Molly stroked through Ron's hair, her soft caresses flattening his auburn locks back into place. It would have infuriated the prone man if he was at all with it. "Rose kept asking where her Daddy was-," she broke off her cheeks reddening as she fought of the tears Harry knew were building. "I didn't know what to say."

Neither did Harry.

Molly sniffled quietly into her handkerchief.

"Has anyone been by?" He asked instead.

Molly shook her head, "When I arrived, they said he was still critical- until they know, until they know what he was hit with … well, they'll just make him comfortable," Molly said, her voice littered with bitterness.

Harry scrubbed at his face, "I'll contact the office, see if we can push through the veritism request."

Molly scrutinised him, her features softening, "You need to eat first."

Harry nodded to her even though he had no intention of doing so. He stood to leave them hovered unsure. What was the common courtesy to a best friend in a magical coma? He paused again and then reached out and grasped Ron's shoulder tightly. His eyes stung. His eyes slipped shut as his forced himself to turn away, away from Ron, and towards his Mother-In-Law. He bent and pressed
kiss against her cheek. He counted the twelve steps toward the door and then froze.

"I'll tell you the second anything changes," Molly said warmly. He gave her a tight smile, and left.

As he clicked the door shut, he exhaled heavily and pressed the heels of his palm into his eyes. He stood unmoving for a moment. The hospital lights lit up the corridor in a painful pretence of daylight. The corridors, usually heaving with bodies, were still mercifully quiet. At the end of the corridor was a healer station occupied by a lone witch reading several rolls of parchment. He strode with scissor like steps to the desk and waited. It wouldn't hurt to check again- to see if anything, anything, had changed.

After a few moments, she looked up with a disgruntled expression upon her face, then she froze. Her eyes were as wide as her mouth as she stared in pure astonishment at the man in front of her. Her dark face paled as she took in the man before her.

"Goo- good morning, Mr Potter," she said in a rush, her words tumbling over themselves as they fell out. 'Im so so sorry for, well, for-"

"Have you got an update of Auror Weasley," he said briskly ignoring her blathering. She floundered over her papers growing increasingly flustered.

"Yes!" She said in a strangled sort of voice. "I had it right here- I don't know where-"

Harry, overtired as he was, somehow managed to force down the growing frustration and keep the polite look firmly affixed to his face.

Several agonising seconds passed by. "Oh! It's right here, I have no idea how it managed to get under that," she exclaimed in relief. Her eyes darted across the page and then she glanced between the parchment and Harry, her face notifying Harry immediately that this wasn't going to be 'good news'. In fact, he was quite sure it was going to be considered 'bad news'.

She coughed tensely. "Auror Weasley is fit and young, but, well, sorry, but it has damaged his spinal cord severely. Because he is young, we can suppose that if he ever regains consciousness he will gain some mobility back." Harry felt as if he had plunged underwater. Drowning under the weight of it all. How could they cope if Ron couldn't walk? Couldn't move? Ron was always moving, always had been since they'd known each other- he was only ever still during chess. "Of course, the sooner we know the curse, the sooner we can begin to actively work against it. Healer Philips hopes that the damage to his heart and spine will be reversed by lifting the curse." She looked at him, and, probably because of his stricken expression, took pity on him. "Your friend has already proven he is a fighter- as long as he keeps fighting, there is hope."

Harry looked at her earnest face and a childish question passed his lips before he could reign it in. "Does he hear us? Does he know that we are there?"

She licked her lips as she thought. "He's not showing any signs of awareness, all the tests we have carried out have showed no response." Harry closed his eyes not sure what he'd wanted her to say, but he knew this hadn't been it. "But, Mr Potter, that doesn't mean that bits aren't getting through. Harry nodded beginning to feel somewhat glad that Ron was asleep and unaware- unlike the rest of them.

Unbeknown to them all, Ron could hear everything.

Everything.

And he could do nothing.
Chapter 6

Hours turned into days which, before they knew it, turned into weeks and still, somehow, the world continued it's orbit- life, so to speak, went on. Ron knew all of this from the snippets of conversation he overheard. He knew this because every hour passed in mind-numbing boredom, and sheer terror. At least, he could reassure himself, it could be worse; he could have no visitors; no voices to hang onto with all his strength; and if that had been the case, he knew he wouldn't still be among the living because they were the sole reason he was continuing this unending fight. Those voices wouldn't let him drift, or disappear like he so wanted to. They kept him going. They kept him fighting. They kept him alive. Even Percy, who could bore even the unconscious, and who had recently been moved into the Department of International relations- and boy did they know it- was a welcome distraction. Even the three hour monologue he had been forced to endure on the French Ministry's stance on Spain's refusal to condemn rogue black market exporters of of Gillyweed had been worth it.

Why was Percy so boring? Like really? Was he the wand sellers? Or had he been dropped on his head too often as a baby?

Surprisingly, Percy wasn't his least favourite visitor. Shockingly, his most irritating brother was fourth from bottom which was an impressive achievement Ron would love to tell him of. If only he could move, talk and scratch the tickle under his left eye that had been irritating him for the past four or so hours.

No, his least favourite visitor was George because he somehow managed to hover between manic and depressed- both irritating and frustrating in their own ways. Sometimes, George would simply poke and prod him (the other day he had shoved his finger sharply between his ribs which Ron would have thumped him for if he'd been able) which was goddamn annoying. Other times, most times, he would sit, shake, and sob. That, that hurt. Ron knew how hard George had found life after Fred. Because that's how they all qualified it, still, life before, technicolor and wonderful, and then the cold harsh reality of after. He hadn't realised, hadn't even considered, that his death, his injury, could affect George just as much.

George was visiting now. He was silent. The silence was uneasy; Ron felt as though a million spiders were crawling up and down his body. He wished he could shudder. Wished he could scratch that tickle under his left eye, actually.

"Ronnie," said a quiet voice right in his ear. If he wasn't stuck in this never ending body-bind, he'd have jumped a mile and cursed the bugger. "Ron, I can't do this," George whispered brokenly, and Ron could feel the shaking of his brother's body beside his still one. He could feel the wetness that dripped onto his cheek.

If only he could turn his ears of and disappear from here. He didn't want to hear this. His heart sank further as the shaking continued. He didn't deserve this. He didn't deserve to suffer this. Neither of them deserved this. He couldn't listen. He couldn't hear his big brother sob for him, break for him, when there was nothing he could do to fix it. If he could only vanish from existence, like he'd never been here, and save them both from this heartbreak.

"Ron-" George broke off, a heavy hand coming to rest upon his neck. Not caressing, but feeling. Feeling for his pulse; the heartbeat that proved he was still here and fighting. Ron felt like a coward as he wished to be anywhere but here. He'd once been described, aptly at the time, to having the emotional range of a teaspoon. Overtime, he'd got better at voicing and explaining his feelings- especially with Hermione and his children, but never with his brothers. After the war, he'd tried to be the rock for his family. He had been the one to watch out for George, to pull Percy from his room.
He'd even learnt to cook while his mother had still been unable to function. Then, when she was becoming herself again, they'd cooked together and learnt to laugh in this new world of broken families. He'd even put off following his dream of being an auror by eight months because he'd known that George, and his family, who for so long had played second fiddle to Harry, Dumbledore and the Horcrux mission, needed him. There weren't many things he felt like he could be proud of in life, but he was proud of how he'd been able to support his family after the war. He knew, that for once, he had helped rather than hindered.

In all that time, he'd never truly lost control in front of his family. He'd refused to become the man who stormed away from his feelings, who left when things become difficult. He'd decided that he was going to be brave, steadfast and dependable for a family that had always been that for him. He'd forced himself to be the strength his family needed. That wasn't to say he hadn't cried, or lost control, because of course he had- he was Ronald Weasley after all, and a Gryffindor to boot- but he'd always been with Hermione, with Harry and once even with Neville. He hated feeling out of control with his family. He'd wasted too many years taking it out on them to ever feel the need.

George's emotion broke him: he didn't want to be the cause of such harrowing pain. He wished he could scream: "I'm here! I'm here! I'm okay!" But he couldn't. He could only lie useless like a puppet with its strings cut.

A door opened and snapped closed jolting Ron out of his self-pity. No one spoke and Ron hated it. He hated that he didn't know who was in the room. He hated that he couldn't move. He hated that he had not control over his bodily functions. He hated that he still couldn't scratch under his eye. Most of all, however, he hated that he'd let himself get into this position. A chair was drawn up on the same side as George and there was a rustle of fabric. Ron could imagine the person placing an arm around a pale, trembling George. The silence crept on. The silence made it all the harder to stay. The urge to drift off grew no matter how he fought. He could feel panic closing in on him; he didn't want to drift: he didn't know where he went, but he knew with certainty that sooner or later he would be unable to come back.

"Thought it was Harry's watch next?" George asked shakily. Ron's consciousness surged forward again with a rush of relief.

A sigh escaped the other person. It was deep and gravelly. His Dad? Bill? Certainly not Percy- Percy's entire being was far too nasally.

"No, Skeeter is publishing another story and he's trying, with Kingsley, to put a stop to it." It was Charlie's voice. Charlie was back from Romania? Nobody ever told him anything! George grunted but didn't say anything else. "You doing okay?" Charlie asked in a voice Ron was sure he used with injured dragons- all careful and calming. Ron would have rolled his eyes. It was always better to be to the point with George. Also, what the heck was Skeeter writing and why did Harry need to help? Harry was above average on his visiting scale. He was certainly better than Percy. Not to mention he had the most interesting news (if a rather over helping of irritating guilt).

"Well, my little brother is in a magical coma hanging from death by his fingertips. So, yeah, I'm going with no," he said sarcastically.

Ron would have grinned, or high fived George. George had got very good at patronising straight-laced humour of late. Although, Ron much preferred it when it wasn't directed at him. "You don't have to be a dick," Charlie said sullenly.

"No, but I am," George said in a sing-song voice. A voice Ron had, in the past, when it was directed at him, wanted to punch George for.
"You been sat here moping then?" Charlie asked waspishly. "Or have you just been cheerfully informing Ron that he's going to die?"

There was a sharp intake of breath. "Ron is not going to die," George said rather desperately. Ron was more aware of the rise and fall of his chest, his heartbeat that pounded sluggishly. Life suddenly seems so fleeting when you about to topple away from it.

"I know that," said Charlie unconvincingly. Why did Charlie have to come and be a Debbie-downer? He and George were perfectly happy pretending he was going to be fine. Sort of. George had been crying a lot, hadn't he? Actually, maybe Charlie wasn't that bad. Not as good as Percy and his Gillyweed, though. Least Percy never mentioned death and Ron in the same breath.

"He will not die." The words were firm, even if a little wobbly.

Ron felt a surge of warmth (hopefully is was a surge of warm love because he really didn't want to have wet himself in front of his brother-again). George was such a hypocrite. He'd been perfectly happy to sit and mope thinking Ron was going to die when he thought no one could hear him. Only George could sit here and sob believing his brother was going to die, only to get angry at the next person for thinking the same thing. Ron was going to remind him that he was a hypocrite if he ever woke up. When he woke up he corrected desperately.

"I know." There was a pause and Ron could feel himself listening on tenterhooks. Merlin, he missed being able to see. And move. And talk. This body-bind unconscious thing was so last week.

"Because if he dies, I'm going to kill him. I've only just started to- well started to-" Ron knew what George couldn't say. He knew that George had only, in the past couple of years, started to work through his grief for Fred. He'd only just started to live again. He'd only just managed to move on. It had been awful through the years watching George struggle as they all began to move on. They'd had to watch him suffer through addiction, and depression and everything else. George had been through so much and just as his life was back on track and he had Angelina, and baby Fred this was happening. Another thing to derail his life. Ron could feel tears surging forward. "It'd kill me Charlie, to lose him. I know it would." Ron believed him, he believed every word.

Charlie moved; George moved. Chairs squawked as they were dragged over the tiled floor. They both surged forward into each other's arms. Ron could feel their sadness and the weight of this crashed down on him again. Tears began to fall down Ron's cheeks, rolling down, leaving a wet trail where they'd kissed his skin. Still more tears fell while his brothers cried beside him. Weasley brothers crying together, it would seem.

He wished he'd just died in that house.

Anything other than this never ending pain.

"Charlie!" George said suddenly his voice thick with worry. "Ron's crying, he's crying- is that... is that normal?" There was panic in George's tone, but also hope. "Get someone, quick!" Charlie dashed from the room overturning his chair as he went. "Can you hear me Ronnie?" George said softly into his ear, a hand clutching at Ron's. "If you can hear me, do something, squeeze my hand, flicker those gorgeous, girly eyelashes," Ron's heart sank like a stone because he knew he couldn't give George what they both needed. Still, he tired, and tried, until his grip with reality was slipping. Whilst he concentrated on the seemingly impossible, other people managed to slide into the room without him noticing. People prodded, poked, swished and flicked. Meanwhile, he tried to twitch something, even an ear would do. He pushed everything in him that was left into giving some sort of
signal. He thought, for a second, he'd managed to twitch his fingers, but before he could try again and be certain his mouth was opened a potion was poured in.

No.

Please no, he was just managing to... he could have maybe…

He was beginning to feel strange.

"Involuntary reaction to the pain," a healer said crisply. "We've given him another pain potion and he should be feeling its effects now." There were wrong- they were so wrong, and he was going to slip away. He was going to fall away. Panic clawed at him and more tears rolled down his slack face. He was scared; he was more scared than he could ever remember being. This was worse than those bloody acromantulas. Why couldn't someone help him? Why did no one know he was screaming out for help? Did no one care that they were killing him?

He couldn't feel the cool air around him anymore, or the soft touch of the bed sheets on his body. Even the itch that had been bugging him for so long had gone away. The sounds of footsteps and breathing dimmed and was replaced with a soft buzzing.

Was this what it felt like to die?

No.

No.

NO!

Ron wanted to scream as the potion washed over him. He could feel himself slipping further away. He could no longer feel his brothers' hands in his. If this wasn't death then surely death was better.
Chapter 7

Darkness. Darkness was all he was aware of.

He was afraid. He was more scared than he could ever remember being.

He stood. He could see nothing around him. He couldn't even feel his own body- not even the rustle of fabric as he moved. Nothing. Just dark, dank blackness. He sucked in a deep, rattling breath.

Slowly, the darkness began to clear, and he turned around in wonder. Thick fog fluttered along the floor, so deep it threaded its way up past his knees to his waist. He couldn't see the floor or his legs. He looked up from the thick winding fog and realised that the darkness was lightening to a dark indigo- it almost looked beautiful. In fact, if it wasn't for the fog, his general confusion, and the panic that had frozen his insides, he would say it was almost pretty. Despite the fog, the dark and the confusion, he knew that this place meant something to him. He'd been here before… he was sure. He turned again in wonder, trying to remember… anything.

Was he dead?

He patted himself, but felt no injury. He opened the palms of his hands out in front of him, turning them over. He was suddenly conscious of what he was wearing, and he pushed up the sleeve of the loose cotton shirt he was wearing to reveal… nothing. His wand holster was absent. He hadn't gone anywhere without that in years. He looked down at the loose linen trousers and his confusion grew. He didn't own these clothes. He didn't have his wand. Something was wrong.

He took a cautious step forward and stopped: he didn't know why exactly, but he wasn't supposed to be able to do that. He didn't feel scared anymore. He felt comfortable, and he knew that he was safe here. He knew this place, and the terror that had gripped him was gone. Nothing bad would happen to him here.

The sky was slowly lightening, as if a new day was dawning, and he could see the fuzzy outlines of trees in the distance.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here?" a sudden voice cried out from behind him.

Ron's heart jumped into his throat and he froze for a second. He closed his eyes. He counted to ten. He summoned his courage and turned.

Fred. Fred in his dragon skin jacket and jeans. Fred, who was most certainly dead, was walking purposefully through the fog towards him with an expression of utter fury on his face. "You should not be here!" he said furiously, looking him up and down. Ron blinked too dumb-struck to talk. "What the bloody hell are you playing at?"

"Sorry, I… what?" Ron said faintly.

Fred threw up his hands in exasperation and stalked through the mist to a small patch of grass that appeared as suddenly as the man himself. Ron followed him with wide-eyes and a sinking heart. He sat heavily beside his dead brother. Fred crossed his arms.

"Am I dead?" Ron asked. He closed his eyes. He could remember; there was a man, a curse, and Harry…

"How in Merlin's pants am I supposed to know?" Fred said kicking at a tuft of grass. There was a
curse they couldn't cure- he'd been in hospital. It was coming back to him with a frightening suddenness.

"You don't know?" Ron asked. Fred rolled his eyes.

"I know I'm dead, but I've still got better things to do than watch your ridiculously heroic life."

Ron snorted, a snarky retort on his lips before he stopped- suddenly knowing. "I was hit by a curse, on a mission," he said shakily. He could remember it all, Harry's heartbroken face, the tears of George, of Charlie… Hermione, Rosie… tiny little Hugo. He remembered it all.

"Can't really say anything about that one," Fred said moodily, "Exactly what happened to me."

They fell into an uneasy silence watching the day grow lighter and the shadows grow smaller.

"It's good to see you," Ron said eventually.

Fred quirked an eyebrow at him, his lips twitching, and, despite himself, Ron could also feel a laugh bubbling, "Wish I could say the same Ronnikins."

They fell into silence again, although this time it felt comfortable. Ron found his voice, "I've been unconscious, for weeks I think. I haven't been able to talk, or move…" Ron shuddered flexing his fingers constantly afraid they would suddenly go still again.

"Sounds like fun," Fred said, with a tight smile.

"Yeah," Ron said. He looked at Fred again, unable to fight the urge to speak. "I'm, well, glad to be talking to someone actually. Even if, you know, you are dead."

"As eloquent as ever, little brother. It's a wonder you finally got your act together with Hermione."

"I thought you had better things to do than watch my life?" Ron laughed easily, taking in the sunlit clearing they were now sat in. He knew this place, but he couldn't place it. Still, its familiarity didn't bring comfort but a sense of anxiousness. It reminded him most though of the orchard just outside The Burrow they used to play Quidditch in when they were younger. A place he was sure they would one day be watching their children learn to play. He smiled at the thought. He could imagine his mum and dad in deck chairs as they sat heads turned up towards the sky. He could imagine Hermione wringing her hands as she watched the children in the sky above her. He could imagine a fed up George, who had sold his broom and refused to fly since the battle, tugging her into a seat and shoving (a probably spiked) pumpkin juice into her hand. Fleur would probably be fussing over all the children and carrying out sun-blocking spells. Harry, Harry would be in the air, like a kid himself, tumbling with the children. He entertained himself wondering what position Rosie would play. Would she play at all? Or would she be on the ground like her mother wringing her hands, or with her nose stuck in a good book. Hugo, who had been born looking like a bowling ball with legs, would probably be a beater. Harry and Ginny's children, there was no doubt, would play. It was in their blood- if he believed in that sort of thing. He could imagine his godson, Jimmy, darting through the players howling with laughter. Ron smiled at the thought of what was to come. To those days that were yet to dawn.

A stone settled in his chest when he realised he would never experience it for himself.

He wanted to scream. To break things. To cry at the unfairness of the world. Why had he got so short a time with his children? Why was he being ripped away from them when they needed him.

He looked over to Fred and guilt fell upon him. He thought of Colin Creevey. He thought of Teddy
Lupin, and, most of all, he thought of Harry. His children were loved fiercely by so many. They had
their beautiful, caring, brave and wonderful mother. They'd be fine. How could he complain when
he knew his children had so much more than Harry had been given?

Life wasn't fair. It wasn't.

It never is.

"I don't think you're dead," Fred said conversationally.

Ron blinked heavily. He caged the hope that was trying to flutter into him. He could accept his
death, he was just accepting his death. '"You don't?'" he half-whispered, staring at Fred. Fred, who
was staring over the clearing thoughtfully, shook his head.

"I think, if you were dead, we'd know."

"So I'm alive?"

Fred tilted his head, "No, I don't think do."

His hope, in its gilded cage, died. '"Right." They were silent for a while. '"I've missed you," Ron said
thickly.

"I don't doubt it," laughed Fred, '"I'm the life and soul of any party."

"And-" he said in a rush, '"I love you." He felt his cheeks staining, and he looked down at his linen
clad knees.

Fred made a strangled noise, and Ron's head shot up. '"I never doubted that either," Fred said. Ron
was memorised by the wetness he found in Fred's eyes. Fred smiled, painfully, at him and placed a
heavy hand on his neck pulling him into a tight hug. '"I love you too, you idiot."

They fell silent with Ron crushed into his brother's chest. '"I'm sorry," Ron muttered into Fred's chest.
"That you-"

"If you are going to apologise, I'm going to-"

"We didn't see a lot of each other, in that last year," the words, words he'd thought but never really
said, tumbled out. Ron wondered whether Fred could feel his shaking.

"Yeah," Fred said almost fondly, "because you were fighting You-Know-Poo." Ron chuckled
through his tears.

"I know."

"Saving the world."

"I know," Ron said.

They paused, and Ron pulled himself upright, keeping his hand tightly wound into Fred's jacket as if
he was afraid he'd disappear. With his other hand, he wiped his eyes. '"Would you change anything,"
Fred asked.

Ron thought hard. Of course, he knew what he'd have changed, but that had nothing to do with Fred
and everything to do with him, and with Harry. He looked around the clearing they were in. The
shadows reformed. A river bubbled. He knew where he was now. '"Yes," he breathed. There was no
tent, but this place featured so heavily in his nightmares that he could no longer mistake it. It was the clearing they had learnt about the Sword of Gryffindor. The clearing where Harry and Hermione had realised that the sword could destroy the horcruxes. The clearing in which they'd argued. The clearing where he'd made the biggest mistake of his life.

The clearing where he'd walked away.

"You wouldn't have changed going with them," Fred said looking at him sadly. Ron couldn't help but wonder whether he knew what this place represented to him.

"No."

Fred nodded proudly. "Then don't apologise," he said simply. Fred stood and walked over to where Ron knew the tent had once been. He could almost hear the whispers of that argument. Ron wrapped his arms around himself and followed. "It's funny isn't it?" Fred asked suddenly.

"What?"

"I'm minding my own business- meeting some tasty witches in the afterlife- and yet I still end up being cock-blocked by my brother."

Ron choked on a laugh and Fred smiled widely. "So have we decided then? Whether I'm dead or alive?" Ron asked worrying his lip.

Fred suddenly looked serious again- and wasn't that scary. "I think you get to decide that one."

"What?"

"I think you are in the in-between. You aren't dead, you aren't alive."

"Are you making this up?" Ron asked, certain that Fred was playing one last cruel joke on him.

"Maybe a little," Fred grinned, "But I'm the only dead source you've got- unless you are expecting Dumbledore."

"So what do I do?" Ron asked desperately. Fred said nothing but simply gazed at him expectantly. Ron sighed and thought for a second. "I can leave here with you, or go back."

"I imagine so."

"I hate that you are enjoying this," Ron said faintly. "If I go back, will I be okay?" He thought of those weeks locked in his own body. He thought of the healers saying that he may never walk again.

"I don't know," Fred sighed.

"But how can I make a decision if I don't know all the facts?"

"You've obviously been married to Hermione too long, Ron," Fred said wryly.

"But-"

"Ron, life- and death- is more than just knowing. I don't know what will happen if you chose to go back. Neither do you, but, unlike me, unlike so many others, you have the choice- the chance," Fred said, grasping him by the shoulders.

"But-"
"I can't tell you what to do, Ron. I wish I could. I wish I could tell you what would happen, but I don't know that either. None of us do."

"I'm scared," Ron croaked looking around him. He understood truly now why he had been brought to this place.

"I know."

Ron wanted to run, but he steeled himself. "Hermione and the kids need me," he said firmly. He thought of being locked back into his body and shuddered. "And Harry, Harry won't rest until he knows what I was cursed with- I trust him to fix me." Fred nodded with pride shining in his eyes. "And, even if I can't walk, even if I'm never healed fully, I don't care."

"My little Ronnie's all grown up," Fred said in a very mum way.

"I have to go back."

"A true Gryffindor," Fred said wiping a fake tear from his eye.

"Thank you, Fred."

Fred smiled warmly at him. "I am proud of you Ron." Ron smiled back at him, a warmth filling him at the words. "Thank you, for looking after George," Fred said, his smile twitching down slightly.

"He'll be so mad when I tell him that I saw you."

Fred shook his head, "Don't tell him," he said fearfully. "I don't think… it's for the best."

Ron nodded slowly, looking around. "So what happens now?"

"I reckon I get going, and you stay where you are," Fred said simply looking past Ron with a warm smile. Ron turned and looked, but he couldn't see what Fred was looking at. Ron looked back towards him.

They locked eyes and Ron launched himself onto Fred, wrapping his arms around him tightly. He was taller than Fred, as he was George, and Fred had to rise to his toes. Ron chuckled. "I wish you could come back with me," Ron said as he pulled away.

"As do I, but what is, simply is."

Ron wrinkled his nose. "How very Dumbledore"

Fred laughed loudly. His face still young and free of the lines and pain George's carried. Forever frozen as he was when he died. "I'll tell him you said that."

Fred turned and began to walk away. He waved at someone before him that Ron couldn't see. When he got to the stream, he turned and called, "Don't forget to laugh Ron, it's the best magic there is." Ron nodded, unsurprised by the tears that were tumbling down his face. Fred, whose body was fading as he stepped across the stream, walked backwards pulling from his pocket a firework. With a laugh, he sent it flying into the air. Ron watched it, amazed. It tumbled and fizzed and, with a bang, exploded. The flash was so bright that Ron had to squeeze his eyes shut. The clearing and Fred fell away.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Recap: Ron was injured on a case. He was struck with a curse of unknown origin. Until Harry and co can find out what the curse was, Ron will lay unresponsive and steadily growing weaker.

The 'Chosen' one.

"There's got to be something I can do!" Harry said in frustration, his scuffed shoes pacing the length of the hospital room followed by Ginny's tired eyes. The last few days had been... hard. Difficult. Horrible. There didn't seem to be an appropriate adjective to describe the agony they had been through. Every time they'd thought it couldn't get any worse, well, it had. "Burrell won't tell us what the curse was, no attempt of plea bargaining has helped... all of our searches have turned nothing up. The Unspeakables have been unspeakably useless. What else can we do?! We have to do something!" The panic had been building since that first awful night and it seemed, for all of them, they were reaching the crescendo. Harry, who had been as patient and understanding as possible, was worried, tired and angry and that in in itself was a toxic combination.

Ginny rubbed at the dark bags that she knew marred her face. Between the hospital, having three young children, and caring for Hugo and Rose... she wasn't getting any sleep either. Sitting by her brother everyday and watching him, as well as Hermione, her best friend, and her own husband slowly deteriorate further and further... well that certainly didn't help. "What about the European Union of Magic?" The words were said knowing the answer would be the same as the other fifty times she'd asked.

"They are still stonewalling us on the whole veritism idea. It's not exactly my favourite option but at the moment it's the only one we have," Harry signed again stopping and leaning against the wall. His head tilted back, his palms pressing against the cold tile wall. He looked as though he simply wanted to sink through it. The sight made Ginny's heart clench painfully and she looked away quickly to blink away her tears.

"You'll think of something," Ginny said softly. Then, in an effort to lighten the constant heavy mood she said, "You are The-Boy-Who-Lived."

Harry scoffed. "Not exactly helping me here is it?"

Ginny sat up straighter, struck by a sudden and clarifying idea. Excitement danced through her body like a giddying charm. "But it could though, couldn't it?"

"What do you mean?" said Harry narrowing his eyes in confusion. He had leaned forward slightly through, his body uncurling away from the wall as if in hope.

"Well, they aren't going to go any faster unless you make them go faster." Ginny was beyond excited now, her tiredness burning away as an idea took hold.

Harry rolled his eyes. "What do you think I've been doing for the last few weeks? Twiddling my thumbs?" Heat rose in Ginny's cheeks but still, she pressed on.
"They aren't listening to you now, but they will when you have the entire country on our side!" Her grin was wide enough to split her face and Harry looked at her curiously, comprehension lacking from his weary face.

Harry shook his head, "Ginny-

"No! We are done being quiet. I know you hate the power that has been given you by being who you are, but the fact is you do it. People love you. They respect you. If we talk to the press, mention that Ron's condition has got worse and the only chance he has is for us to use veritism... Then the EUM will have no choice but to grant permission!"

"Ginny, no..." Harry's mouth had dropped open as his mind whirred with Ginny's plan.

"Harry, we don't know the long term damage being done. We have to do something!" Ginny said in a stern way that left almost no wiggle room for disagreements. Ginny was fierce, she always had been, and she, as the product of a house where she was the youngest and the sole girl, was very used to getting her own way. From the jut to her jaw and the square in her shoulders, Harry knew he was up against her at her strongest.

"Don't you think I know that?" Snapped Harry's his hands going to his hair as he spoke. "I hate this too. I hate it all but-"

"Just talk the Prophet. They've been camped outside the hospital for days... weeks even. Give them a quote or two and they'll do the rest." Her eyes were wide and pleading and Harry knew in his heart of hearts that he would be unable to resist even if he truly wanted to

"Ginny, it would be beyond hypocritical, and it might not even work!" The thought of needing that rag that had dragged his name and the names of all those he loved through the mud time after time after time was sickening. Even as he began to play with the idea, shame rolled down him at the thought of every insult they had ever leveled against him. From calling him crazy and a liar, to blaming him for Voldemort's actions... He had promised himself that he would never do anything to help them; he, since the war, had never even given the filthy waste of tree so much as a quote. He'd once even gone as far as to wear the exact same outfit for weeks in a row so they couldn't even print photos of him.

"It will work: it has to work."

"Ginny-

"He'd do it for you," Ginny said simply without heat. They both paused, "I know you are proud, I know you don't want to ask them to help us. But maybe this is the only thing that can help."

Harry paused, sighed, and closed his eyes. "Fine."

"Thank you."

**WEASLEY LAYS DYING: WILL THE E.U.M LET HIM DIE?**

**BY PERRY SPRINGER**

Just over two months ago, Ronald Weasley, Deputy of the Auror's, was struck down whilst arresting fugitive Raymond Burrell, 39, who has since been charged with production of a controlled drug with intention to supply, possession of a controlled drug as well as nine counts of manslaughter and one attempt of murder. Since then, Ronald Weasley has failed to regain consciousness. Information on his condition has been limited, but we have received further intel that his condition hangs on whether
the EUM (European Union of Magic) grants permission to administer veritism to the accused to uncover the curse used.

Ronald Weasley, known as Ron to his friends, is a much loved and respected Ministry employee. Not only is he highly regarded, he is also a war hero of the second wizarding war. Weasley, along with Harry Potter and Hermione Weasley (nee Granger), were responsible for the retrieval and destruction of several items that are believed to have given power to Voldemort. He was awarded the Order of Merlin Second Class from the Minister of Magic for his heroism. Yet, although his life hangs in the balance, the EUM has seen fit to delay a vote on his case for a further three weeks—three weeks that Mr Weasley may not have.

"At this time, we do not know what effect the curse is having over this prolonged period of time," Harry Potter—life-long friend of Weasley—was quoted as saying yesterday evening. "We have tried every legal mean to get confirmation of the curse used. The healers will be unable to undo this horrific act without knowledge of the curse itself. Ron is currently being held in a form of stasis. He is alive, but that is all he is. Without knowledge of the curse itself he will not get better. He will either remain in his current state, whilst the world continues around him, or he will die." Healers have further supported this statement with one saying, "Weasley should be dead already, the fact he isn't is incredible, but without a reversal, he is simply living on borrowed time. Mr Potter further added, "Over the years, I have, quite accidentally, become a figure of hope and bravery for this country. However, I could never have vanquished Tom Riddle [You-Know-Who] without the undying support and friendship of Ron Weasley. Please, help us save Ron Weasley like he has saved me, and all of you, hundreds of times over." Ronald Weasley has two young children, Rose and Hugo, with his wife, Hermione. Their youngest child is less than a year old.

With the urgency of this case apparent to all involved, it is a wonder that the EUM is not treating this as a matter of urgency. Weasley is Britain's hero—a brave man who has devoted his entire life to the safety of wizarding Britain. We, at the Prophet, urge you all to pick up your quills. As a country, we can force the EUM to make a decision, and, more importantly, we can save Ronald Weasley's life.

"You must have hated this," Ginny said. The sun was rising over the hills as Ginny and Harry sat in their small kitchen sipping tea in relative peace whilst the children slept on. Harry grunted in a way that was familiar to Ginny for Harry wasn't much of a morning person. "When will we know if this has worked?"

"I'm not sure- I'm going to give it a couple of days."

"And then what are you going to do?" Ginny asked intensely as Harry purposefully avoided her gaze.

Harry paused, "Just do it anyway."

"Harry-"

"No," said Harry matter of factly. "If they aren't going to make a decision till it's too late, or if they make the wrong decision—Merlin help me, I will do it anyway."

"But Harry-"

"I'm not going to sit here waiting for Ron to die when I know I can do something to stop it," said Harry firmly. "I hope they will make up their minds, but if they don't, well… I know what I'll be doing." He could tell he had scared her and he hated himself for it, but he could see no other way out of this whole situation in a way that was acceptable. Because Ron dying, well, that was unacceptable.
"I know you're desperate, we all are, but we still have to be rational, we can't just do what we want! It makes a mockery of the entire system!"

Harry sighed heavily, "I know it does, but it's Ron." The thought of going against everything he, Ron, Hermione and Kingsley had fought to create pained him deeply, but the thought of a life without Ron was infinitely worse.

"Harry, this is far bigger than just Ron. You aren't at school anymore! You can't just run about and do what you want. We have laws to obey whether we agree with them or not. If you did it, if you broke the law, it wouldn't be a detention." Harry bristled at her accusation. He was not blindly racing forward like he had at school.

"So what? What does any of that matter?" His tone was as sharp as glass and he hated how Ginny's face became a mask of stone at it

"It's the laws you've helped to create! What would that say about us if we break those rules as soon as they become inconvenient to us?" Ginny said turning away from Harry to stare out over the gardens. Ginny understood, of course she did, Ron was her brother for Merlin's sake, but still, she was far more used to taking a back seat than Harry was. Harry, however many years later, still had that dratted 'Saving People Thing,' and it only served to get him further into trouble

"Then the law is wrong. I'm not saying I'm going to do it; I hope I won't have to, but if I'm forced to, or put into a position where I need to, of course I would break the law to save Ron," Harry broke off, and his hand reached out to softly cup her cheek. "Ron is far too important. He's been with me through everything, and the rest of it can't matter. Who cares if I lose my job? Who cares if I go to jail? I was nothing before Ron, nothing, and I'll do anything to save him. Ginny, I'm sorry, I really am."

Ginny's head fell against his chest and his arms wrapped tightly around her. "You wouldn't be the man I loved if you didn't," she murmured softly to him. They held each other as their tea went cold until slowly, like a dawning sun, Ginny realised what Harry was planning upon...

"Do you think, because you are the chosen one, they might let you off with a caution? Is that your grand backup plan?" Harry stiffened slightly around her and Ginny looked up, a sad smile playing on her face. "Or are you hoping that they'll just let you off scott free?"

Harry coloured slightly. "Not exactly, but it has to be worth something right? Dumbledore always did what he thought was right, despite the consequences. That's what I need to do too."

"It's our choices who make us who we truly are?" Ginny said sadly.

Harry nodded, "Don't worry Ginny, it's all going to work out. I swear I will make it work out."

Ginny's blazing eyes locked on his, filled with defiance, pain, suffering, but most of all love and trust. When she looked at him like that, he felt like he could do anything, and for her, for Ron for Hermione and all those who'd stood by him through it all- he would. To hell with any consequences.

Letters from our dear readers

_I can't believe that the EUM will do nothing to save Mr Weasley! What is the point of bureaucracy if it prevents us from helping people in need! I've written myself, and several of my book club have joined in. We can save Ron Weasley together!_

_Agatha O'Donnell_
hands? Let us not forget that the EUM did nothing when You-Know-Who was bathing our world in blood. Instead it was children like Mr Weasley who saved us all. The EUM must make a decision now! The only decision!

Leonard Jackson

While the plight of Weasley has affected me deeply, we cannot forget the laws this new government was built upon. The EUM will make a decision when they have debated the case. It is not up to Mr Potter to decide which laws and regulations to follow.

Rupert Parkinson

If Harry Potter says this is the right thing to do, then it's the right thing to do. No ifs or buts. I stand with Harry Potter.

Beatrix Goldthorpe

We must save Ron as he saved us! Long live the King!

Demelza Robins

I respect Potter, of course I do, but he's wrong on this. We can't force them to make a decision that suits us. That isn't democracy. What if it wasn't Weasley? Would Potter still care? Would he still be throwing his weight around?! No, of course he wouldn't be. Are we really going to say that Weasley deserves to live more than anyone else?

Noreen Wright

The EUM doesn't care about us! This should be a decision for our Ministry, not anyone else's.

-Pete

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