

Harry Potter

Brighter Than Sunshine

hgfan1111

Contents

Brighter Than Sunshine	3
Prologue	4
Chapter 1.....	10
Chapter 2.....	32
Chapter 3.....	60
Chapter 4.....	81
Chapter 5.....	103
Chapter 6.....	125
Chapter 7.....	144
Chapter 8.....	164
Chapter 9.....	185
Chapter 10.....	205
Chapter 11.....	226
Chapter 12.....	248
Chapter 13.....	272
Chapter 14.....	296
Chapter 15.....	321
Chapter 16.....	341
Epilogue.....	364
Additional Scene: Flying Without A Net	369
Additional Scene: Finally Getting to Those Bloke Things	373
Additional Scene: Ginny's Journey	384

Brighter Than Sunshine

Fandom: Harry Potter.

Author: hgfan1111.

Characters: Ginny Weasley. Harry Potter.

Pairing: Ginny/Harry.

Other Tags: AU – Canon Divergent.

Status: 167,400 words; 16 Chapters, plus Prologue and Epilogue, plus 3 Additional Scenes; Complete.

Summary: The smoke clears from the Final Battle and the world is not the same. But even in the darkness, a light can still shine, leading lost souls home.

Prologue

August 1998

Ron Weasley looked over the ground of Hogwarts Castle. From where he stood in the seventh floor corridor he had a commanding view of the Forbidden Forest, the Quidditch Pitch, and he could just see the edges of the Black Lake. It all seemed so peaceful, definitely not the sight of a horrid battle.

But, if he looked closer, let his eyes focus on the grounds, rather than skimming them, he could see the pockmarks in the lawn, the scorched trees and thin lines of grey smoke trailing up from certain places.

Thankfully, all of the bodies, and the injured had been removed from his sight. He wasn't sure he could take seeing them down there anymore.

"Where is he?" Hermione's frantic words, repeated over and over since Harry had disappeared shortly after the battle had come to a halt, irritated him. It wasn't that Ron was insensitive to her feelings of annoyance and building panic for their best friend. But more that Ron didn't have an answer to give. Not a sure one, at any rate.

"I don't know," he mumbled once more. It had become his standard answer and he could tell by Hermione's rumble of frustration that she didn't appreciate it any more than he appreciated her repeated question. His arm, still wrapped in a thick bandage, throbbed. At least he'd been able to escape faster than Neville, who was still quarantined down in the hospital wing trying to convince Madam Pomfrey that it was the Sword of Gryffindor he had cut his leg on, not the venomous fangs of the now-defunct Nagini.

Ron was proud of himself and Neville for finishing off the snake, just as they'd promised Harry they would. Harry's work was now one step closer to being finished... if they could find him.

"You don't think he'd actually listen to..." Fred started speaking and then broke off, grimacing at the thought.

Ron glanced at his brother, who had joined him in staring out over the grounds. Stiffly, Ron nodded. "I think he would."

George came up on Ron's other side, the scorched shoulder of his robes rubbing Ron's and the acrid smell of smoke accompanying him. "And he'd take Ginny with him?" The question drove a spike of pain through Ron's heart. He'd hoped that wherever Ginny was, she was safe. He had no doubt that Harry would do his best to keep her safe, but he prayed, rather selfishly he realized, that she wasn't with Harry.

"There's still a chance she left with the others," Fred mumbled. Ron could tell that he didn't believe what he'd said. It was more holding on to that last ray of hope, no matter how thin it was.

"Yeah," Ron agreed with a nod, his voice breaking in the middle. "She probably left with the other

students. She was adamant that they be safe. She probably helped them down through the tunnels and out to Hogsmeade.”

Next to him, George snorted. Not the reaction Ron had anticipated from his words.

“Did you just—”

“Use the word ‘adamant’?” Fred finished, a wide grin spreading on his filthy, smudged face.

Ron rolled his eyes and pushed away from the window ledge to try and stop Hermione pacing a hole through the stone floor.

* * *

Harry stumbled on an exposed tree root, but was able to right himself without pulling Ginny down on top of him. They were draped in his Invisibility Cloak, weaving their way through the thick forest toward...

Well... Harry didn’t want to dwell on what they were walking toward. It was hard enough forcing one foot in front of the other, when all he wanted to do was drag Ginny back to the castle and lock her in some classroom or cupboard with a billion locking charms on it.

His irritation with her for finding him and demanding to come with him faded, however, with each step they took into the forest. Now, they were clinging to each other, not saying a word, but communicating all the same.

He could feel her heavy breath on his back, through his tattered robes, and felt the halting quality of it. His own breath felt harsh and weighty, mostly because he was keeping a current tally in his head of every breath, every heartbeat.

Voldemort’s words, ringing out over the grounds of the castle, echoed in Harry’s head. *One hour to present himself.*

Of course he was going to go. There was never any option. Harry knew—had known—since before the fateful words had been spoken. It was his destiny.

Having Ginny next to him hadn’t entered his realm of possibility. When she’d stepped out in front of him in the entrance hall, the Invisibility Cloak draped over her arm and her wand clenched in a fist, Harry had been unable to avoid her piercing glare.

“Forever, Harry,” she whispered. Harry wasn’t sure whether she had just said it again against his back, or whether he was still replaying his memory. Either way, it didn’t matter.

They had promised to love each other forever, and she had called him on that promise. There had been no time to discuss it, no time to argue or refute anything.

Ginny knew, as well as he did what they were walking towards.

As if sensing his thoughts, Ginny squeezed his hand and wrapped her other arm around his waist, pulling herself closer to his back.

"It'll be alright," she whispered.

Harry took a deep breath and willed himself to believe it.

"Forever," he whispered, taking comfort from her presence and the promise they had made. He knew somewhere buried in the folds of her robes was the small diamond ring Harry had given her when he'd made his promise. He swore he could feel it now, rubbing against his back, although he knew that was rubbish.

He slowed his step now, feeling the press of responsibility on him. He could hear someone speaking, just out of the group of trees he and Ginny were still in.

This was it.

Rustling off to his left startled him and Ginny shot off a spell before he could even train his wand.

"Watch it, Weasel."

Harry swore under his breath and rolled his eyes.

"Malfoy," he hissed, finally seeing the blond boy peek out from behind a tree. How had he not realized they were being followed? "What the hell are you doing here?" He sighed, tugging at the Cloak until he and Ginny were uncovered. Useless now, Harry dropped the Cloak next to him.

"I came to see if you'd really do it, Potter," Malfoy sneered quietly, his nose scrunching as if he smelled something awful. Harry narrowed his eyes as Draco peered closely at Ginny, who still had her wand trained on him.

"I'd have thought you'd be far away from here." Harry shook his head and returned his eyes to the area in front of him.

"Had to make sure my best interests were covered, didn't I?" Malfoy said as he ignored Ginny's wand and turned to look where Harry was staring.

"Always out for yourself," Harry mumbled.

"Be thankful I am. Otherwise you wouldn't know half of what you do now, Potter."

Harry couldn't do more than nod at that. It was true, in a twisted sort of way. When Severus Snape had been murdered by Voldemort for failing to provide access to Harry while he was still at the Dursley's, Malfoy had stepped up to fill the role of spy.

Most in the Order didn't trust the little squeak, with good reason.

"And what do you have to gain now?" Ginny hissed, coming up on Harry's other side and taking his hand once more.

Strangely, Malfoy chuckled. "Maybe I just want to see the show, Weasel."

Ginny took a breath to respond but the hair on the back of Harry's head stood up.

"Quiet," he whispered to them both. All three stood silently, watching the clearing beyond the trees.

Harry could see movement, a black shape drifting into the open area.

"He's waiting in there," Draco said quietly, less alert than he should have been.

Harry turned to stare at him. "Whose side are you on?" he demanded, feeling as if he were seeing things more clearly than he had in a long time.

"Depends on who comes out of there alive," Malfoy said and turned to walk away. Harry watched him disappear into the trees and swallowed thickly.

"I can't talk you into going back, can I?" he asked his feet.

"Not on your life, Harry," Ginny answered, startling him. He truly hadn't been sure if he was talking to her or his own feet.

He turned, his eyes frantically searching her face and then focusing on her chocolate eyes.

"Forever," he nodded, tightening his grip on his wand.

"You bet your arse," she grinned, although it didn't reach her eyes. She too held her wand out in battle position and, together, they turned, Ginny falling in line behind him and allowing her hand to slip from his as they walked toward the clearing.

* * *

Ron held tightly to Hermione, who had broken down completely just minutes ago. Her bushy head was buried under his chin as she sniffled into his robes.

It was painfully obvious now that Harry had marched into the forest on Voldemort's request. Ginny's whereabouts were still not known; but Ron could guess at where she'd gone. As the minutes ticked away on the clock, Ron's heartbeat fell in line with each movement of the second hand.

They were all gathered in the Great Hall now, waiting and listening, huddled in small groups here and there.

Off behind him a bit, he could hear Fred and George whispering about some new product. It was rather ironic that they would be inspired with a prank idea in the middle of a war, but then again, maybe they just needed something to think about.

Ron would give anything now to have something in his mind to occupy him.

The rest of his family was around them too. Bill sat on the floor, his back up against the stone wall, Fleur asleep on his chest. Next to him sat Percy, his bandage wrapped head nodding forward in exhaustion every now and again.

His mother and father were further away, but wrapped in each other's arms. They looked asleep, each of their eyes closed against the pale light of dawn just now filtering in the high windows. But

every once in awhile, Ron could see one of them move slightly. If he had to guess, he would say they were both praying.

Charlie was sitting alone, stoically watching the doors of the Great Hall, his wand tucked into his massive, folded arms. He was the most alert of the group, seemingly guarding them. Which, Ron realized, was probably exactly what he was doing.

Although Ron didn't know if he were keeping someone out, or keeping them all in. He'd been the one to stare Ron down when he'd mumbled earlier about sneaking out to find Harry. Not that it would have worked, Ron growled to himself, Aurors were stationed all over the castle, even positioned in front of all the secret exits. Ron suspected that Harry had given the Marauder's Map to Kingsley as Ron hadn't been able to find it in Harry's rucksack, even though he'd known it was there earlier. Bloody Harry.

Everyone jumped, wands at the ready, when the doors slammed open. Ron flinched when Hermione gasped, realizing he'd stood quickly and nearly dumped her onto the floor.

"Fire... in the forest," Remus gasped, clutching at his side as if he'd run a long way to deliver the news.

Ron's heart jumped into his throat, knowing what probably lay out there. He took one look at his brothers before they all bolted out the door, scrambling ahead of the others that had the same idea.

Neville kept up with him for a moment before falling back behind Fred and George on one side and Charlie on the other.

Ron had no idea where Hermione was as they sprinted down the lawn and toward the forest. He was certain that she was behind him, but the overwhelming need to get to Harry was all consuming.

The four Weasleys led the pack into the forest, yelling and charging. Bill joined them, shooting spells to cut away thick vegetation.

A huge roar made them pull up a bit and they changed direction, following the sound until they came upon Hagrid and Grawp, pulling trees from their roots in frustration as they battled through the forest.

Spellfire broke out to their left and some of the group dropped out to join the fight.

Ron and his brothers pressed forward, following in the wake of the natural disaster that was Hagrid and his Giant brother.

Ron's vision tunneled as they continued into the darker forest. The acrid, choking smoke was billowing out between the trees, blocking what little light was coming from the early morning sun.

Hagrid's bellow of anguish only made Ron run faster, stumbling and tripping through the undergrowth, clinging to Bill's robes as his foot got tangled in a root.

"No... NO!" he roared as they entered the smoldering clearing. He felt as if nothing was processing

in his mind correctly. He could only see one thing at a time, but they weren't adding up.

Hagrid had a limp Malfoy pinned five feet up in a tree, his massive arm pressing against the boy's throat.

Kingsley and Tonks were spraying massive jets of water over the burned area.

And in the center of the clearing, smoking, the edges still on fire, were three charred lumps.

"No, no, no," Ron repeated over and over, staring at the figures, not wanting to believe what his mind was telling him. He sank to his knees, his arms limp at his sides.

Hagrid gave a roar of pain and pulled away, leaving Malfoy to drop puppet-like to the forest floor.

"Look at his hands, man!" Charlie roared, his wand trained on Hagrid, who was rubbing a red welt on his face.

Hagrid backed away, staring at Malfoy for the first time. Ron watched the scene, his mind reeling as he tried to piece things together.

Malfoy's hands were indeed a bloody mess, as if he'd stuck them into the fire.

"I tried," he gasped. Kingsley had knelt by him, casting healing charms as Malfoy spluttered, and cried, and shook. "I tried to pull them out."

Ron jerked around as the most primal cry of pain rent the air. His parents had arrived at the clearing. Unable to move his body, Ron continued to kneel at the burnt circle, staring ahead and feeling his heart break into a thousand pieces.

Chapter 1

August 1998 through October 1998

The alarm sounded across the small hospital, sending doctors and nurses scurrying left and right as an arriving ambulance wailed its approach.

Dr. Oliver Wilbanks bounced on the balls of his feet, his eyes darting left and right to make sure his staff was in place. It wasn't the major metropolitan hospital in Manchester, but it was one of the finest around, in his opinion.

"Have they rung in at all so we can know what to expect?" he asked the Head Nurse, Marie Pirtie, standing in anticipation next to him.

She nodded briskly. "Pedestrian vs. Vehicle." She wasn't as young as she used to be, Oliver mused, but a better trauma nurse couldn't be found. He liked working with her because she seemed to anticipate his requests before he made them and didn't get ruffled by his loud voice and clipped demands. She understood that he didn't mean to be harsh—just efficient.

Wilbanks grimaced. "Never pretty."

Screeching tires were heard out the wide glass doors and the staff jumped into action, orderlies rushing to open the doors. Wilbanks and Pirtie watched as the doors flew open and the Medics wheeled out a gurney.

The doctor quickly stepped forward, assessing the patient. "Tell me," he demanded. The Medic, used to the brisk nature of the man, didn't flinch but began to reel off vital statistics.

"Male of unknown age, probably late teens or early twenties. Blood pressure is at ninety over forty. He's suffered head trauma, severe contusion to the right leg. Fractured left arm. His left hand is completely shattered as well. Fractured ribs and pneumothorax. Multiple contusions and bruises about the face and torso. He's missing a whole chunk out of his forehead." The gurney was wheeled toward a trauma room as the procession scurried alongside it.

Wilbanks narrowed his eyes at the bloody mess that was the young man's face. An open wound along his jaw was held together with surgical tape, while another steady line of blood dripped from under his hairline. A wide bandage around his forehead was steadily turning red.

"Skull fractures?" he asked, peering at the forehead and moving his hands to probe the boy's head.

"Not that we could tell," the Medic answered. He stepped back and out of the way as the team of nurses helped to lift the patient onto a stable bed.

"Any clue who he is?" Doctor Wilbanks asked as the nurses placed an oxygen mask on the boy's face while another began to remove his clothing.

"No idea," the Medic shook his head. "He's not carrying any identification. And there weren't any witnesses to the accident. A motorist found the boy on the side of the road."

Wilbanks winced and shook his head. As more and more of the boy was revealed, his scowl became more pronounced. "Get a monitor on him, Marie. Type and cross—hang five units. We need to get some blood back in this kid; I'm surprised he hasn't bled out. Get the blood work done too."

"We need to assess the pneumothorax. Get X-Ray ready." Wilbanks pulled his stethoscope off of his neck and held it against the purple and black flesh, listening and tapping at various points.

A young man, pushing a rather large machine entered. "X-Ray," Marie called and moved aside to help the technician get his portable scanner in place.

Wilbanks stepped back, allowing the man to do his job. "I want three films, from different angles. And get the left arm and hand while you're here too."

The tech rolled his eyes but nodded anyway. A few quick movements and he stepped away. "Get those developed NOW!"

"Yes, Doctor Wilbanks," the tech nodded. Marie gave him a quick wink as he hurried from the room.

"I want everything ready for a chest tube, just in case," the doctor demanded. "Up that oxygen to one hundred percent and see if that increases his vital signs."

Immediately the doctor stepped in and began unwrapping the thick bandage around the boy's leg. A tight tourniquet was squeezing his upper thigh enough to stem the flow of blood from the wound just above his knee.

"Gruesome," Wilbanks grimaced as he inspected the severed muscle and tissue. Luckily, it looked as if whatever had sliced through the leg had done it cleanly and had missed any major arteries. "Get surgery on the line for me, Marie." The nurse nodded efficiently at his no-nonsense tone.

The doctor then moved on to the fractured arm. It was held in a stiff splint, and the wound was still seeping blood, slowly soaking the sheet beneath the boy.

"Blood pressure is ninety-five over fifty, Doctor."

"Good," Wilbanks grunted. He quickly grabbed a bottle of saline solution and used it to clean the debris out of the wound. The water dripped pink onto the floor. He probed a bit near the white bone sticking out, pulling the muscle and flesh away so that he could see the fragment. That would need surgery too, he decided.

Moving up to the bandage around his head, Oliver winced. There was a large chunk of flesh missing from his forehead. Bracing himself, the doctor slid his finger into the wound, feeling for bone chips and fragments. He hated this part. Thankfully, the bone was smooth and seemed completely intact. There would need to be a skin graft to cover the wound, though.

Overall this kid was a mess.

"Doctor," Marie approached him, holding the black X-rays out in front of her. "These just came back."

The doctor nodded, very satisfied at the speed of the technician. He'd have to make sure to thank the man later. He quickly assessed the films, pointing out to the nurse the issues.

"Looks like a simple pneumothorax—see the darker section, here..." He pointed toward a black part of the picture. "Let's try a thorocentesis first and then the tube if that doesn't work."

"Yes, Doctor."

The doctor pulled a rolling stool up the side of the bed and moved the patient's arm up and out of the way. Marie handed him a large syringe with a lethal looking needle on the end. Focusing solely on what he was doing, and drowning out the beeps and commotion of the trauma room, Oliver pressed the tip of the needle in between two ribs and into the chest cavity. He nodded when he felt the pressure against the needle relax a bit.

Removing the needle, Oliver wiped his brow. "I want another X-ray and let's set up an EKG as well. How is his pressure doing?" he asked the nurse who was monitoring vital signs.

"He looks like he's doing much better, sir. One hundred over sixty-five."

"Dr. Wilbanks," Marie said, nodding her head toward the door where the Surgeon had just entered.

Oliver continued to stare at the boy. He seemed so young—far too young to be involved in such a mess. But, Oliver had seen worse in his years of trauma rotations in various hospitals. Pulling his eyes away from the broken body, he nodded toward the Surgeon, who was reading charts and getting the information from Marie.

He returned to studying the boy, whose heart rate was beginning to stabilize and his breathing to even. Mentally, he catalogued the injuries, softly probing the bruises and soft abdomen. The blackening bruise along his left side, under which there were several broken ribs, could have easily come from the impact of the vehicle—as could the broken arm. He supposed that the head could have come from hitting something as well. The leg wound, however, puzzled Oliver. The cut was so clean, free of jagged edges—as if made by a blade of some sort. And the missing square of flesh on the forehead, as well; it was too cleanly cut to be an accident.

The boy's chest had several dark bruises as well. Oliver traced them with his fingers and then stilled as his eyes settled on a darkening bruise on the boy's neck. It was barely visible beneath the collar they'd placed on him to keep his neck and head still. But Oliver could distinctly make out the finger shapes. This boy had been choked, violently it seemed.

"Hang on," he mumbled as the Surgeon prepared to take the boy away. Oliver reached for his right hand and examined the knuckles and fingernails. The skin was broken and bloodied and there was material under his fingernails. Whatever had happened, the boy had been fighting for his life.

Just as Oliver began to search for more bruises, the boy gave a violent jerk and his eyes flew open. The nurses struggled to secure his arms down to the table and he struggled against their hold, his hand groping at the neck brace and then the splint on his arm.

"You're alright," Oliver soothed, awed by the brightness of the green eyes staring up at him. Those eyes darted left and right as he thrashed. Oliver placed his hands gently, but firmly, on the boy's

shoulders. "You need to stop moving, you're going to hurt yourself even further. You're safe here," he added as an afterthought. The boy seemed wild with fright.

The eyes stopped their mad searching and focused in on Oliver, making him shiver with their intensity.

"Do you know where you are?" The boy attempted to move his head side to side, but Oliver stopped him. "If you can't speak, then blink your eyes at me, once for yes, twice for no."

"No," the boy rasped out, his voice sounding like he hadn't used it in ages.

Oliver nodded. "You're in hospital," he stated. "Do you remember how you were hurt?"

The eyes took on a far away look as he blinked and then focused on Oliver again. "No."

"Okay," Oliver soothed. "We think you were hit by a car. Someone found you on the side of the road and called for an ambulance."

Pain filled the emerald eyes, clouding them a bit. Oliver blinked several times, wondering how so much emotion could show through just the eyes. "Are you in pain?"

"Yes."

"Where does it hurt the most?"

"Ch—chest," the boy grunted out, wincing at the pain of the single word.

"You've broken some ribs," Oliver nodded. "What about anywhere else?"

"All... over." The admission caused the boy to close his eyes. Oliver nodded as he relaxed more against the restraints and lost consciousness.

"Marie, make note of these injuries and take a sample for the police." The nurse nodded and went about her duties.

Oliver approached the Surgeon, tucking his hands deep into the pockets of his jacket. Now that the rush was over, his adrenaline was dropping, making him feel much older than his twenty-seven years.

"He's in bad shape," he commented. The Surgeon looked up from the chart and pursed his lips gravely.

"Not the worst I've seen, but he'll take some time."

Oliver looked back over at the boy, whose shaggy black hair was matted to his head with dried blood. "Will he make it?" Somehow, this thin boy had worked his way into Oliver's mind and wouldn't let go. Something about his brilliant green eyes staring up into Oliver's shook him like never before. More than anything, Oliver wanted this kid to make it.

"It's always up to them, isn't it?" the Surgeon asked. He nodded to the orderlies and turned to

leave the room. "I'll let you know when we're out."

"Thanks," Oliver nodded. He watched the boy's bed until it disappeared in the lift, praying that the Surgeon would be able to help him.

Hours later, his shift already ended for the day, Oliver Wilbanks sat in the uncomfortable seats outside the surgical area and waited. He really should be getting home to his wife. She would worry, he knew. But the desire to check on the young man had overridden the desire for a home cooked meal, even if he had to cook it himself. His wife had a knack for burning water.

"Oliver."

He started, eyes lifting from the fading tile floor when the Surgeon approached, loosening his surgical garb. Standing abruptly, Oliver shifted his jacket in his hands. The gurney carrying a draped figure was wheeled past and both men watched it until it disappeared into a room down the hall.

"Well?"

The Surgeon sighed, rubbing hands over his face, etched with tiredness. "He shouldn't be alive; but he made it."

Oliver released a breath and nodded jerkily. How had he let himself get so drawn into this boy's world? Without even thinking it through, Oliver knew; it was his eyes, pleading for answers, yet holding more strength than he should have had at such a young age.

"He coded twice on the table."

"Damage?" Oliver asked, wincing at the mental image.

"Some," the Surgeon sighed and motioned for Oliver to follow him, walking slowly along the empty corridor. "We repaired the leg, took a fair amount of stitching to do that. Put one pin in his wrist and pieced his hand back together. Plastered his arm once we fit the bone back together. That may never heal completely. The skin graft on the head was a delicate process. It shouldn't scar though." The dull listing of repairs proceeded as Oliver swallowed thickly.

"What about the lung?"

"It was fine," the Surgeon nodded. "And the ribs will heal over time."

"When do you expect him to wake?"

The Surgeon studied the young doctor and Oliver resisted the urge to shift under the strong gaze. "Not until tomorrow sometime," he said. They stopped in front of the door where the nurses were attaching the young man up to various monitors and machines. "He's going to have some severe pain."

Oliver nodded. "Morphine?"

"Yeah."

Both men stood at the doorway, watching in silence as the mechanical beeping sounds filled the room and the nurses passed out the door and onto other assignments.

“You should go home, Oliver,” the Surgeon suggested. “Don’t you have a young wife waiting for you?”

Nodding distractedly, Oliver gave one last look at the boy before turning away. “Yeah, I do.”

The Surgeon smiled and clapped him on the back. “Best get home then. It’s never wise to keep a woman waiting.”

Oliver smiled and silently vowed to check back on the boy. “No, I agree.” Although he knew his Ella would forgive him when he told her about the boy.

“It’s not fair,” he grunted, leaning on a thick tree trunk near the edge of the orchard in the back of the Burrow.

“No, it’s not,” came the reply from the somber woman on his left. Remus looked at her and their eyes met, sharing the sorrow of the situation. “But you and I both know that life never is.” She slipped her hand inside his larger, calloused one and leaned her head against his shoulder. “No one should have to bury a child, let alone two.”

Remus nodded jerkily, steeling himself as he looked at the two new headstones and the family of redheads huddled around them. “Are they going to make it?” He wasn’t sure he’d voiced his thought out-loud until his wife answered.

“It’s going to be hard. But they’re strong. They’ll take care of each other.”

Her words seemed confirmed as the family broke apart, drifting away from the graves in couples, clinging to each other tightly.

Remus caught Arthur’s eyes as he helped a frail and stumbling Molly past. The Weasley patriarch nodded; perhaps in appreciation for all that Remus had done to help with the funerals, perhaps in acknowledgment that Remus had lost family as well.

“Come on, Molly’s going to need some help back at the Burrow.”

He nodded absently and allowed Dora to pull him toward the ramshackle, crooked house where the family was disappearing. Once they reached the area, Remus glanced back at the shiny black headstones, feeling as if he’d buried two of his own children with Harry and Ginny.

The beep-beep-beep in the room was enough to drive anyone crazy. It drove into his skull, seeped into his skin until his every muscle twitched from it. He pressed his eyes closed tightly, wincing from the pain in his head. For a moment, he couldn’t tell if it was actual pain or only induced by the numbing sound.

He tried to roll in the bed, not liking the stiffness of the mattress or the way it felt as if he’d laid on his back for days—years even. His chest violently protested the movement, as did his shoulder, which he now realized was aching quite harshly.

Giving it up as a bad job, he let his eyes flutter open, blinking at the brightness of the room.

“Sorry.”

Someone, whom he couldn't see yet, shifted about in the room—footsteps shuffling back and forth—and darkened the room by closing the blinds.

He tried to speak, but it only came out as a harsh grunt, tearing through his dry throat.

“Hang on.” A dark shadow, backlit by the orange light from the windows leaned over until he could make out a shape. Something was pressed onto his bottom lip and he closed his lips over it, instinctively sucking. Straw. Water.

He let his eyes close with the relief that the moisture gave him, un-sticking his mouth and bringing life back to his throat and insides.

“More?”

“Yeah,” he rasped. More shuffling and the straw was back. He drained the water once more and finally felt sated.

“Where am I?” His mind reeled, searching back and trying to grasp anything that would give him a hint as to what was happening to him. It was like trying to hold water, though. Thoughts poured through the holes quicker than he could grasp, making no sense and not connecting at all. He gave an agonized groan as his eyes closed harshly—only a memory of a bright light bathing him remained.

“You're in hospital,” came the reply, a bit harsh in his ears. Whoever it was didn't have a quiet voice.

He searched again, trying to reconcile that statement with the flash of light. It didn't add up to him somehow. “How?”

The form, now recognizable with a masculine voice, shrugged and leaned forward to turn on a small light near the side of the bed. “We think you were hit by a car,” he said. You were found by the side of the road. But there were other wounds that we're not sure about.”

Frustration and anger at not being able to remember welled and he hissed as his shoulder gave a painful throb.

“You've got some severe injuries there,” the man said again. “I'd like to examine you, if you don't mind.”

He stared at the partially lit face, searching for any reason to trust the man at all. Something registered as he studied the short blonde hair, light colored eyes—he thought they were probably blue, but it was hard to tell—and sharp, but nice-looking features.

“I am a doctor, by the way,” the man smiled, holding up some sort of plastic badge. He gave it a glance and then nodded wearily. A physical exam wasn't really what he was up for, but then again, there was nothing more to do as he still couldn't find anything to grasp on to.

He relaxed back into the bed as much as he could while the doctor peered into his eyes with a small flashlight, examined the side of his face, causing him to wince, and probed at a tender spot on his head.

“Looks as if the stitches are healing up well,” the doctor commented casually. “You’ll have some healthy scars, but they’ll fade over time.” Slowly peeling back a bandage on his head, the doctor peered at the wound closer. “This one will take a bit more time.”

“What about the arm?” he asked, glancing over to see a thick white plaster covering most of the appendage and a large bandage wrapped around his hand. The whole apparatus was being supported by cords and pulleys, hanging from a large metal brace.

The doctor sighed and rubbed his jaw roughly. “It’s a bad break. You might not get full use of it again. If you do, it’s going to take time. I’d plan for a healthy dose of physical therapy, if I were you.”

The doctor seemed satisfied as he moved away from his head and lifted the blanket that he could feel covering his lower half.

“My legs?” he asked, forcing his mind on sending an impulse to his toes. He could almost feel the tingle run down his legs and into the nerves on his feet. Slowly, all ten toes replied, although the right one caused a jet of excruciating pain to come back.

“The surgeon knit the tissue back together.”

He struggled to get upright, gasping at the pain in his chest.

“Yeah,” the doctor grinned wryly, “you won’t be able to move for awhile.” He replaced the blanket and moved around to lean his hip against the left side of the bed. “Whatever happened to you made a real mess.”

He fought the urge to roll his eyes, mentally taking stock of the remaining body parts and calculating what was injured and what wasn’t.

“Do you remember what happened?”

The question caught him off guard, and his inventory stopped abruptly as his mind shifted into a different direction. He closed his eyes, screwing up his face as much as he dared and looked back into his memory.

But it was useless, as an empty black void came back. The only thing that made any impression was the bright light and the sight of the doctor’s face.

“No,” he whispered. Realization began to set in and he shifted, his chest beginning to heave as he fought for breath.

“You need to calm down.”

The words echoed through the room—or his head—it really didn’t matter. Why couldn’t he

remember anything? Casting his mind back, he searched frantically for the earliest thing—a childhood memory had to be there somewhere. It must be the medicine they had him on. Surely it was blocking his mind somehow, making it a blank, empty black hole.

He thrashed again, pushing against the restraining hands of the man and not caring at the pain that rocketed through his body.

“Don’t make me sedate you!”

A firm hand gripped the sides of his head and the bright eyes of the doctor—he could now see the brilliant blue color—locked on his. “You’re going to undo all the work that’s been done.”

“Can’t... remember,” he hissed. Realization flashed across the Doctor’s face and he pulled away, correctly sensing that the panic was subsiding. If only that were the reality; instead, the panic was seeping into him, filling the voids left by memories that should be there. But he did recognize the sense in not doing more damage to his broken body.

“That could be the injuries,” the doctor admitted. “Hopefully things will start to become clearer over time. I’m sure your doctor will want an MRI or a CT scan.”

The terms rattled in his brain, not making sense; but he didn’t care. The void drained him of what little emotion he could muster. He was tempted to hang onto the anger just to feel something, but it was too tiring right now.

“I thought *you* were my doctor.”

“No,” the man shook his head and smiled, revealing brilliant white teeth. “I was the Attending Physician when you were brought into the Casualty.”

“Why are you here, then?” he sighed, focusing his eyes up on the ceiling tiles and counting the small round holes in them.

“Actually, I don’t know,” the Doctor said. “I just... I guess I just wanted to check on you. Does that bother you?”

He didn’t answer, but let his eyes focus on the next tile over. Three hundred and eight holes. Wonder if the next one has the same, he thought, and began counting again.

“Alright.” The bed shifted and he felt the doctor move away from him. “If you don’t mind, I’ll come back and check on you later. If you have any questions you can ask for me. I’m Doctor Oliver Wilbanks, and I work down in the Casualty. But if you ask for me, I’ll come.”

Three hundred and eight holes in that one as well.

“Do you remember your name?”

Next tile.

“Okay. I’m going to call you Jack, then,” Wilbanks suggested before leaving the room.

The beeping sound filled his ears again, helping him count the holes until he fell asleep.

Anne Wilkins was running late. Something she found irritating, yet unavoidable, at times. A single mother of two, Anne's job at the hospital in Kendal kept her sane.

"Good morning, Doctor Ellison," she greeted a young man less than half her age as he nodded to her from across the hall. She felt a bit guilty for watching him pass, her eyes darting to his firm backside involuntarily. The Nursing Pool was right, he was quite the catch. But Anne's days of platinum blond hair curled immaculately, and cute little outfits had passed her by. Now it was graying hair and comfortable shoes.

Anne only hoped that he hadn't been in to see her first patient and noticed the lack of attention already today.

"Sorry I'm late, love," she greeted the young woman in the bed. "Carter's car wouldn't start this morning and he needed money for the train." She bustled about, doing her duties while chatting away. The blinds were opened, letting in slats of light to brighten the room. "And then my Missy just had to have her purple shirt; as if she couldn't press the thing on her own."

Water was poured into a clean glass and set on the bedside table. The chart that hung at the end of the bed was glanced at, important times noted, and then replaced.

"And how are you doing today, love?"

Anne turned her full attention to her favorite patient. Strange, she thought, tracing the face she'd memorized, because she'd never spoken to the girl.

It had been a full month since the young woman had been brought into the hospital. She'd been found in the middle of an elderly couple's farmyard and brought into the Casualty.

Blood covered the pale skin, only allowing a flash of freckles to show through. Anne watched in shock as her young face was slowly revealed stripe by stripe as the water washed away dried blood and grime.

She couldn't be older than Anne's own daughter, Melissa. Only a baby. But the cuts and bruises marring her flesh made Anne's chest ache. Something horrible had happened to this beautiful young woman.

"I've got a head injury here," the doctor called as he gently ran his fingers into the matted red hair.

'Damn,' Anne muttered to herself and concentrated back on the work in front of her. The girl was so dehydrated that it was hard to get the IV into her arm. But Anne was well practiced at it and finally achieved the desired goal.

"IV in," she called.

The doctor nodded, not looking up from where he was examining the gaping wound on the back of her head.

Anne's eyes raced over the girl's still form, drawn to the thin chain around her neck that held a small diamond ring. Whoever this girl was, she was far too young for that ring to belong to her. Anne looked down and lifted her slim hands, making a note to take a sample of the tissue and blood underneath the nails. But that wasn't what captured her full attention. It was the bright pink nail polish that did it, the same shade that Melissa had been applying to her own fingernails that morning. This girl's was worn and chipped, but still as pink as ever.

The doctor's voice entered her consciousness again, strong, but low. "Anne, make sure and get a rape kit done on her."

Anne's reality gave a little jerk and she nodded. "You think—"

"I don't know," the doctor shook his head. "But we'd best be thorough."

Anne tightened her grip on the slack hand and nodded, looking down at the pink polish once more. She was just a baby...

Anne could still see the faint lines where her skin had been marred with cuts and scratches. Several of them had been severe enough to require stitches. The young woman hadn't awoken from her coma yet, but Anne had hope that one morning she would come in to see those eyes open and a smile on her face.

Taking her right arm firmly, Anne began to work the muscles, kneading out the stiffness and rotating each joint to help keep them limber. One day the girl would wake and thank her for this.

"You're looking better today, I think. More color in your cheeks." Anne continued to move her legs and arms, rotating where she needed and adjusting blankets and the hospital gown. "I told you that the sunshine would do you good. Old Betty, that's your afternoon nurse... well, she thinks it's too bright for you. But I say that sunshine always does wonders for your soul. I remember when Jim passed on. I didn't want to see the sun for days. And Missy, my youngest you remember, she just kept opening windows and trying to talk me outside. It helped. It really did."

"Now, girly," Anne said sternly, moving to the side of the bed where she could wash the woman's face with a damp cloth, "we need to find you a name. Since no one has come forward to claim you yet, I guess that's up to me." Anne took a brush from the bedside table, one she had purchased with her own money, and brushed the long, coppery-red hair until it gleamed.

"My Jim named our daughter. He'd always wanted a Melissa." She giggled guiltily. "But not me. Oh, don't get me wrong, I think Missy's name suits her just fine. But I really always wanted an Emma."

Pausing in her movements, Anne glanced down at the unchanged face sprinkled with freckles. "What do you think?"

Anne resumed her brushing when there was no change. "Emma it is, then." Once the brushing was finished, and Anne had checked the growth of the short hair near the base of Emma's skull where it was now just really growing back after the stitches had healed, she changed Emma's gown and opened the bedside table.

There, inside, laid the ring that Anne had first seen around Emma's neck. Betty always took it off in

the evening, claiming that Anne was crazy for putting it back around the young girl's neck. Anne could still hear her ringing criticism, 'what if she strangles herself.' But, to Anne, the ring symbolized who this young girl was—even if they never did find out for sure. It was a tie back into her past, something that Anne knew Emma needed.

And so Anne replaced the necklace every morning like a ritual—just like opening the curtains and letting the sun in.

"I'll be back later, Emma. You just rest." She glanced at the woman one last time and sighed in contentment at the peaceful look on her face.

The lanky redhead folded himself down next to the two headstones, mostly facing the one on his right.

"This isn't how it was supposed to be," he whispered, reaching out to trace his fingers along the deep 'H' etched in the surface of the stone. "You were supposed to be here."

Tears began to well and Ron blinked them away harshly. He wasn't supposed to cry anymore. Hermione had told him all about the different stages of grief, and Ron had thought his crying days were over. She'd told him all about denial and bargaining and anger. But he didn't think he'd gone through all that. When they'd first stumbled upon the scene of the Final Battle, Ron had definitely experienced the denial part. For two days he'd walked around in a complete daze mumbling about how this couldn't possibly be happening.

He'd been so angry that he'd put his hand through the plasterboard in his bedroom in numerous places; each time charming away the blood and bruises so that no one would see.

Replaying every scene of the past two years in his mind, Ron had exhausted himself trying to find where the change had come that meant that Harry and Ginny had to die. He'd even nicked one of Hermione's books and read all about time-turners, just in case.

Two days after the funeral, Ron had snuck into Ginny's room at the Burrow, flinching when he realized that it was now Hermione's room—not his sister's, because she was dead. He had found Hermione's book about grieving and had actually read parts of it, covertly sneaking looks into the deserted hallway, wondering why he was so different from the rest of his family.

Ron shifted so that he could see both of the graves, speaking to his little sister and his best mate both.

"Mum and Dad are doing a lot better than I expected." He felt a bit self conscious speaking to a simple stone, rather than the two people he imagined sitting in front of him. But, somehow, it helped.

"Mum has a rough day now and then, and Dad has to take her aside. I don't want to know what they talk about, locked in their bedroom for hours." Ron's hand absently brushed the lush grass Bill had charmed over the graves. Out of habit, his fingers tugged at a long strand, pulling slowly until it released the soft, white end.

"I overheard Bill telling Dad that they think Fleur is pregnant." Ron blinked in the harsh summer

sun. "He's taking her to France for awhile. Maybe..." He trailed off and used his fingernail to strip the grass into parchment-thin pieces. "Maybe it doesn't hurt as much when you're farther away."

Tossing aside his useless pieces, Ron shook his head. "Charlie left the day after the funeral. He said goodbye and just left. I don't think he's the sort of bloke to deal with this kind of thing well, you know. He's back with his dragons—but he writes more now. Mum hides the letters, so I think he's writing about... stuff."

A small smile tickled his lips and he glanced over at the grey letters spelling his sister's name. "Fred and George are developing a whole new line for the two of you." He closed his eyes and tried to picture Ginny's face as he'd seen it a hundred-thousand times, but never fully appreciated. She would love that one day, somewhere, some child would play a prank that had been inspired by her. "I'm a bit afraid to ask, really."

Ron sighed and pulled his knees up tighter into him. "Percy went back to the Ministry. He says there's too much work to do for him to sit around. I know he still hurts. I caught him the other day looking at a picture of you, Ginny. He got all flustered and denied it, but I saw him crying."

He slipped into silence, listening only to the rustle of the trees above him and the birds calling in the foliage. He knew Harry would want to know about Hermione, but it was a very painful subject still.

"Hermione's doing well," he lied, knowing that if either Harry or Ginny were here, they would be able to tell he was lying. He missed that. He wanted Ginny to slug his shoulder and glare at him until he caved and told the truth. He wanted Harry to cross his arms in front of him and give that look that said that he wasn't going to believe a word of it and that he was hurt that Ron would lie to him.

But they couldn't give him the looks. So he lied; hating that he could get away with it.

"She took a job at the Ministry. Law Division. Dad says she's stirring things up something awful over there." Ron didn't add that he hadn't actually spoken more than pleasantries to Hermione in three days. It just seemed so... draining... to talk about personal things right now.

So they said 'hello' and 'good morning' and 'how was work'. And Ron had even kissed her cheek a time or two. But they never said 'how are you feeling' or 'I hurt'.

If he spoke to her, Hermione would want answers. She would want to know where they stood; were they still seeing each other, or were they no longer together?

The years-old urge to spill his secrets to Harry rose up in him until he couldn't contain it any longer.

"Ginny, close your ears," he mumbled to his left.

"I'm in a real pickle here, mate. I don't know what to do about Hermione." Ron stared at the letters, wishing they could give him any comfort at all. "I'm afraid I'm really mucking things up, Harry. And I don't know how to fix them; and I'm not sure I can."

He sighed and let his eyes close tightly, listening closely, praying to hear Harry's voice one more

time; telling him what to do. But all he could hear was the leaves moving. No magical phrases whispered on the wind, no words of wisdom from his best friend.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought you’d say,” Ron answered dully. Pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes, he watched as the bright day flashed to black and stars of light twinkled in his vision.

“I know you’ve been listening too, Ginny,” he said without opening his eyes. “Any advice for your older brother?”

Ron sighed heavily and allowed his vision to come back, wincing at the sight of the two black stones in front of him. He picked at another piece of tall grass.

“Wherever you two are...” He swallowed and cursed as the thickness that always preceded tears swelled in his throat. “I hope you’re together. And happy,” he finished in a whisper. “Because I don’t think I can take the thought of you not together.” Ron straightened his back abruptly, stretching out the muscles and pushing the pain from his emotions away.

“And don’t worry about me and Hermione. We’ll... we’ll figure it out one of these days. Yeah?”

He stood, distractedly brushing off the backside of his robes, and not really caring if there were grass and dirt on them. “I’ve got to get back. I promised Dad I’d help him move that air conditioner-er he found the other day into his shop.” Smiling tightly at the thought, Ron shook his head.

“Maybe it’s a good thing that some things never change.” One last glance at the headstones, and Ron tucked his hands into his pockets and trudged through the thick grass toward the lonely looking building next to the crooked house.

Jack sat on the edge of his bed, his feet barely skimming the floor. The room was one thing he absolutely detested, seeing it as a bit of a prison that had held him over the past month. But, in reality, it was his own mind that was the prison.

An empty, desolate place where he still couldn’t grasp more than a few flashes of things that made no sense.

“You look anxious.”

Jack smiled as Oliver sank down onto the bed next to him. The two had struck up an awkward and unlikely friendship of sorts over the past few weeks. Jack still wasn’t sure why the young doctor came around as often as he did. The fact that it made Jack feel a bit like a charity case didn’t sit well with him. But Oliver didn’t seem bothered by it at all and still showed up regularly after his shifts were over. And somewhere along the line, Jack had become used to his presence.

“I am a bit,” Jack agreed. Although, he had to admit, he wasn’t sure why. There wasn’t anything out there for him—no one waiting outside the doors of the hospital to go home to. After four weeks, Jack still had no clue who he really was.

Oliver nodded and studied him thoughtfully. Jack shifted under his piercing blue gaze, sensing a deep conversation coming on. The only rule that the two had established in their friendship, of

sorts, was that Jack didn't like to talk about his medical and memory issues. Oliver had pressed at first, but had backed off when Jack had protested. They rarely talked about anything too serious.

"Those are my papers?" he asked, eyeing the plain folder that Oliver was tapping on his leg.

"They're your freedom," Oliver smiled but still held onto them.

"So, what's the verdict?" Jack grunted, now staring at the wall across from him, his eyes tracing the faded pattern on the curtains.

"You'll live," Oliver smirked. "But I'm not sure how."

Jack glanced at him out of the corner of his eye and shrugged. The other doctors had already told him this. Out of habit more than anything, his hand came up and brushed the fringe away from the healing patch of skin on his forehead.

"They all say the same thing," Oliver gestured to the papers. "Your wounds have healed miraculously. There's no medical explanation as to why your arm should even work again, let alone have full range of motion like you do."

He'd like to say he was just a fast healer, but Jack couldn't; he couldn't remember if he was or not.

"And the memory?" he asked, curious as to what Oliver's opinion would be. Numerous experts had given their theories, but that didn't make them right.

Oliver sighed and shrugged. "I'm no expert—"

"I know that," Jack snapped. "I'm not asking you as one."

They sat in silence for a minute before Oliver pulled a thin black film out of the file and held it up to the light. "The scar tissue on the hippocampus confuses me a bit," he mumbled. "I still can't figure out how the injury happened."

Jack nodded, having heard this before. He also knew what would come next.

"The other injuries worry me too." Oliver stopped speaking and pulled out a set of photographs that Jack had stared at enough to memorize perfectly. The police had definitely showed him them enough, trying to find out what had happened to him. Jack knew that if he looked over he would see the pale flesh of his own neck, marred by the deep purple bruise in the shape of a man's hand. He would see the gaping head wound, leaking blood down his face, and the numerous cuts and bruises. The next picture down would show broken and missing fingernails full of hair and skin and blood, and a strange scar on the back of his hand, spelling out puzzling words.

"It'll be fine," Jack mumbled unconvincingly. He had to push past the pain that welled up inside him at the thought of that photograph. The police had finally concluded that he must be a runaway from an abusive home that had unluckily been struck by a car. Jack couldn't dispute their theories, and the case had been closed for lack of evidence.

"No it won't," Oliver said bluntly. "But I guess that's what you have to tell yourself."

Jack bristled in annoyance, jumping off of his perch on the bed and pacing a bit. “It *will*/i be fine,” he reaffirmed. The thought of the injuries, as well as the possible meaning behind them, both frustrated and scared Jack more than he cared to think about. Add to that the fact that he would soon be outside these walls, with no resources and no place to go, and Jack was completely in over his head.

Oliver nodded and closed the file. Jack knew he wasn’t satisfied with the answer, but that he wouldn’t push any further.

“Come on, I’ll walk you out.”

“Yeah,” Jack sighed, ruffling his hair and pressing his thumb and forefinger into his eyes, just below his glasses. He gave one last glance at the room, feeling a compulsion to run in and climb back in the bed. It was insane, he knew. But this was the only thing he remembered.

Together, they walked down several flights of stairs, pointedly ignoring the lifts. Jack had only used them when his leg had been at its worst. As soon as the wound had healed, he had begun taking the stairs anytime he needed to leave the floor he was on, to strengthen the muscles. It seemed important.

They reached the exterior doors of the hospital and stopped, both staring out at the crisp fall day. Jack shivered involuntarily and rubbed at the worn corduroy of his second hand pants. The shirt was donated too, as well as everything else he wore, and the few things in the plastic bag he carried.

“What do you have planned?” Oliver asked, jarring him from his musings.

“Don’t know,” Jack shrugged. “I guess I’ll see when I get out there.”

“Doesn’t really sound attractive to me,” Oliver shook his head. “You know you’re welcome to—”

“I know,” Jack interrupted. He shifted a bit guiltily. Accepting a stranger’s charity didn’t seem like the kind of thing he should do. And, really, what did he know of Doctor Wilbanks more than a few things they’d talked about over dry, tasteless hospital food; nothing.

“There are shelters out there.” The man stood straight, his pressed, pale blue cotton shirt and striped tie looking perfectly in place with his white coat. Jack fought the irrational annoyance at the man and shrugged.

“We’ll see.”

Oliver sighed and held out his hand, startling Jack. “You know where to find me.”

Jack stared at him, still not understanding the motivation behind this man’s actions. Surely he couldn’t be this involved with all of his patients. Hesitantly, he accepted the handshake and turned on his heel. He took several steps outside the doors, paused and continued on. The bland hospital porridge he’d eaten for breakfast churned in his stomach as he came to the first street to cross. Jack swallowed hard and took the steps to cross it. He hadn’t been this far away from the hospital in more than a month.

A stiff wind hit him as he rounded the corner and he shivered, finally peeking back to where he could no longer see Oliver in the doorway. Allowing himself a moment to gather his thoughts, Jack leaned back against a red brick building and glanced down into the bag that held everything he owned in the world. Scowling, he tugged at a thick roll of fabric and pulled out a coat that looked close to brand new. The fabric was luxuriously solid and rugged, while the liner felt soft and perfect against his hand. The thing must have cost more than Jack could even imagine spending on anything. He glanced inside at the label and felt the air rush from his lungs forcefully.

O. Wilbanks was stitched in perfect lettering on a thin, white label inside. Jack scowled at the letters, determined that he should take the coat back, but hesitating all the same. If Oliver had wanted him to have the coat...

Quickly pushing away the emotions that the thought brought up, Jack shoved his arm into the sleeve and pulled the front closed. It was a bit big, as Oliver had been a head taller than Jack, but it was very warm.

He pulled out the paperwork that Oliver had put in the bag and glanced at the records. Jack Ingalls. That was his name now; a name that someone else had chosen for him. It was something, at least. Determination flooded him as he tucked the bag under his arm and continued walking away from the hospital that was now the only thing in his past.

Emma lay on her side, her hands tucked under cheek, keeping it separate from the scratchy fabric of the hospital sheets.

The doctors said she'd been in a coma for just over a month. But Emma couldn't remember anything much. There was an overwhelming feeling of pain and a panicked sensation, mostly. Her dreams often featured red light and trying to escape from it.

"Morning, duck."

Emma turned her head and gave a small smile when Anne came into the room. The nurse had been the first person that Emma had seen when she woke, the one that had told her of the name she'd chosen for her, and the one to wipe away the tears when they came.

And they came often lately. Emma just felt so... lost. And it wasn't just her missing memories and past—something was very wrong with her. She felt as if a huge part of her had been physically torn away, as if she was only half a person.

The hospital counselor had come to see her and assured her that she would be fine; that it was just the loss of her memories that she was mourning.

"Feeling any better, love?" Anne asked as she settled a tray of unappetizing canteen food in front of Emma.

"No," she answered honestly and turned back away from Anne. She hated to be this way, because Anne had been nothing but wonderful to her. But the neurologist had just left, telling her that nothing was physically wrong with her, despite the scar tissue all over her brain. She would be leaving the hospital soon; but with no place to go, Emma was clinging to every last minute she had here.

"I was thinking," Anne said, propping herself onto the end of the bed and sighing heavily. "That maybe you'd like to come and stay with me for a bit when you get out of here."

Emma glanced over at the woman, loathing the look of pity that she would surely see on the middle-aged face.

But Anne was facing outward, wringing her hands slowly in her lap. Emma got the strange impression that she was extremely nervous.

"You don't want me there," she answered quietly.

Anne's head whipped around and she stared at the young girl. "Of course I do! I wouldn't have asked if I didn't."

"No," Emma shook her head slowly. "You have your own family. I would only be a burden. Plus, we still don't know who attacked me. What if he comes back to finish the job?" It had been a huge fear of Emma's ever since Anne had told her what the police suspected. She hadn't been raped, but she'd been beaten severely enough to put her into a month long coma.

"I couldn't put your family in danger like that."

Anne bristled and stood quickly, fussing with the blankets in a way that caused a wave of familiarity to wash over Emma; but it was gone before she could place it.

"Nonsense," Anne protested in her firmest voice. "You've been here for over a month and no one has tried anything." Finally, she turned her warm blue eyes on Emma and grasped her thin hand in hers. "You don't have anywhere else to go, Emma. And I know it's daft," two round blotches of color lit up her cheeks, "but I've come to rather think of you as my own, in some strange way. I can't imagine sending you out there all alone."

Emma wanted to protest. She couldn't imagine moving into a stranger's home, with people she didn't know and no memory of who she was. Then again, some part of her reasoned, that's they way it would be anywhere she went. At least with Anne she had a familiarity of sorts. The woman was very warm and motherly. "I don't know," she answered back, less firmly than she would have liked.

"You're only seventeen, Emma," Anne stated firmly. The doctors had been forced to estimate her age, having no clues to her identity to draw on. "And you'll need to finish your schooling. My Missy is just a year older than you. She'd love to show you around and help you out. The truth is you'd be doing me a favor. I don't get to spend enough time with her and I know she could use a friend."

Emma laid her head back against the bed, pondering what she should do. It really wasn't fair, she thought. She was too young to have this sort of choice thrust on her. She should be home, wherever that was, with her family, if she had one, finishing up her schooling and being a teenage girl.

And the opportunity to do just that was sitting in front of her face. Yet, no matter how attractive Anne made it sound, part of Emma kept pulling her away from it—like there was something very important for her to be doing. Maybe it was that missing half that she kept coming to. But whatever it was—it was gone now; forced away by some strange twist of fate. And now she was here... at this

crossroads with two paths in front of her. And she had no clue which road to take...

Sometimes, though, all it took was a leap of faith.

Emma closed her eyes, trying to feel her way through the darkness that encompassed her mind.

"Alright," she whispered, nodding her head slightly. "Alright."

Anne's grip tightened on her hand and she gave a happy sigh. "You don't have to make any promises, duck. But you give it a try and see if you like it."

Emma opened her eyes and took a deep breath. Something inside of her settled a bit and she allowed a rare smile to peek out. At least she had somewhere to go.

Hermione Granger watched her boyfriend pace back and forth through the kitchen of the Burrow, worrying his hair until it stood completely on end, making him look completely wild and desperate.

The last two months had changed Ron in ways Hermione had not expected. He had seemed so strong and rock solid after the Final Battle, despite all that they had lost. He'd held her while she broke down, helped his family with the arrangements and even stepped in to run the family for a bit.

She supposed she should have known that he was holding everything inside. The signs were all there. Now that life had moved on, days turning into weeks then into months, Ron's façade was beginning to crack.

"Scrimgeour needs to get his head out of his arse," he growled in the direction of the wireless, which was on low in the background.

Mrs. Weasley dropped the pan she'd been drying, the clank ricocheting off of the walls. "Ronald Weasley!"

Ron, however, ignored his mother's rebuke and began his circuit of the room again. His eyes were wild, darting here and there as he listened to the Minister speak about the upcoming festivities to celebrate the fall of Voldemort.

Hermione was reminded of a caged tiger as Ron passed her, his finger trailing along the tabletop, yet avoiding touching anyone. Ron didn't allow physical contact anymore. It puzzled Hermione, who had the opposite urge; to touch everyone just to assure herself that they were real and there.

Despite living in the same house, she and Ron rarely spoke at all.

"How can he think all the Death Eaters are caught?" Ron demanded, tugging at his hair once more. It was getting very long, Hermione noted, curling down over his ears and falling into his eyes. But the verbal lashing he had unleashed on his mother for offering to cut it for him weeks ago was enough to deter anyone from the suggestion again.

"He's trying, Ron," Mr. Weasley stood, holding out his hands to stop his youngest son from moving around him.

Ron grunted and changed direction, pointedly avoiding Hermione's eyes as he passed.

"It happened after the first war too," Mrs. Weasley sniffed, sinking down next to Hermione and patting her hand gently. Hermione accepted the gesture and closed her eyes against the pain. "People just needed something to brighten their spirits."

"And that turned out so well," Ron snapped. "Bloody Voldemort was never gone."

"He's gone this time, Ron," Hermione said softly. She stared at him, silently willing him to look at her.

When he did, peering at her through his fiery fringe, Hermione flinched. His blue eyes were ice. There was none of the warmth that she'd come to love; no acceptance. Just bitterness and anger.

"You don't think I *know* that?"

His words made the whole room feel as if a Dementor had just entered. Hermione glanced down at her tea, wondering if it would freeze over.

"Ronald." Mr. Weasley stepped into his son's path once more. Hermione could see that his shoulders were set. There was going to be an explosion soon.

But Hermione didn't want the explosion that was coming. Gathering her courage, she squeezed Molly's hand and stood—it was time for *her* to cause the explosion this time.

"Arthur," she addressed Ron's father in a caring and polite voice, laying her hand on his shoulder. "Let me."

His aged blue eyes met hers, searching. Hermione straightened her back and nodded once to show that she understood what she was doing, despite the shaking in her limbs.

"Alright," he acknowledged. Gathering his wife to him, Arthur Weasley narrowed his eyes in thought at his youngest son and nodded back at Hermione before helping Molly out of the room. A soft squelching sound sealed the door.

Hermione looked down at her feet, pressing her toes tightly down to the floor through her sensible shoes. "Ron—"

"Just a minute..."

She glared up at his hushed demand to see him bent over the wireless, fiddling with the dials. The Minister's voice poured out at an alarming volume, but Ron didn't seem to care. He turned his back to her, bracing himself on the table; his head bent low in front of him.

"...Order of Merlin's to be awarded at the ceremony..."

Scrimgeour's voice was all bravado, laced with relief, and what seemed like false sympathy. She could see him now, in her mind, shaking his mane of hair in sorrow as he scowled the appropriate amount of time.

"Yes, some of those awards will be posthumous. The defeat of You-Know-Who—" Ron growled loudly here, drowning out the Minister's words "—left us forever in Harry Potter's debt."

Hermione winced when Ron pounded his fist on the table. “And Ginny means nothing?” he roared. His arm coiled back and Hermione winced, knowing that he was about to physically strike the wireless. His hand, however, froze when the voice came back on.

“... and, of course, to a valiant spy in the war effort, Mr. Draco Malfoy, who stood alongside our hero and narrowly escaped death himself.”

“Thank you, Minister.” His voice, one that she’d heard for so many years now, dripped honey and oozed allure. “I only wish I’d been able to do more for Harry and Ginny... The Wizarding World has suffered a great loss and we’ll never be the same. I know I’m forever changed by their sacrifice—”

Bile rose in Hermione’s throat, burning her mouth and making her shiver. She could see Malfoy, standing at the Minister’s side dressed in the finest robes of black silk, pristine platinum hair pulled back from his face, and probably still wearing the bandages on his hands from the burns he’d sustained in the Battle.

“He’s lying.”

Ron’s hissed words broke her from her imaginings and she nodded. “Yes, he is.”

“But no one cares.”

“No, they don’t,” she conceded with a sigh. Taking a chance, she slid a bit closer to him.

“He killed them,” Ron stated plainly. His voice was so calm that it shook Hermione. It wasn’t an accusation, really, but more of a realization on his part.

She shook her head, unable to let that thought penetrate her brain. Whatever Draco Malfoy was, he wasn’t a killer. He’d proved that up on the Astronomy Tower in sixth year.

“I don’t think he did.”

“He did,” Ron nodded, turning his head slightly so that she could just see his profile. “And one day I’ll kill him.”

Hermione jerked back at the venom in his words. She held no illusions that Ron didn’t really believe that.

“Ron, you don’t—”

“I do,” he roared, finally letting his anger fly and smashing the wireless with his fists. “I will kill him for what he did to them.”

“Harry wouldn’t—”

Ron spun and faced her, his chest heaving. His face bore the most painful look she’d ever seen. “Harry’s *dead*, Hermione. He doesn’t get a say in what I do. In fact, I think he’d be cheering me on. I know he would. He never trusted that slimy bastard—never.”

His words struck her like a physical blow and she recoiled from him, not recognizing the man that

he had become. She simply stared as he ranted on and on, pacing and knocking things onto the floor.

It hurt to see him in so much pain, and yet holding her too far away to allow her to help. She couldn't think of anything she'd ever read on how to deal with what stood before her. Hermione's books were failing her right now. This was well beyond the anger stages of grief—it bordered on psychotic. She was in way over her head.

"You don't mean that," she whispered. He halted his march through a pile of flour on the floor, fine white clouds billowing around his tattered trainers. "You wouldn't really do something to him—you'd end up in Azkaban."

"Better than where he sent Harry and Ginny," he returned harshly.

Tears finally spilled over Hermione's cheeks and she felt them wet the front of her blouse. "You can't mean that."

"I do."

"You'd be away from me." Hermione finally brought out what she'd needed to say for weeks. She wanted to add 'you already are' but thought it best to leave it unsaid.

"It wouldn't matter," he hissed, "because they'd be avenged."

Ron growled and stormed out the back door, leaving her in the mess of a kitchen with no further answers.

Slowly, she sank down into a chair that sat in the middle of the room, an island in the destruction. She supposed that she truly did have answers. She'd done her best, tried everything she knew of to help Ron through his grief. But he never accepted her help. He didn't want to hear her talk about the stages of grief; he didn't want to hear her ideas of how he could move on. He only wanted to hold on to the pain and heartache.

And, in a way, she could understand that. Holding on to those feelings made him feel closer to Harry and Ginny.

But at the same time, it pushed him further away from everyone else.

Resolve filled her as she sat. They both needed their space. If things were right, if they were meant to be, they would find their way back to each other. If not...

Hermione stood, brushing her hands along her cheeks to remove her tears. It hurt, deeply, that Ron thought he needed to do this on his own. But Hermione's tears and tantrums wouldn't convince him otherwise. Until then, she had things she needed to do. And Ron, obviously, needed some time.

Chapter 2

May 1999 through April 2000

Jack laughed as Runt, a boy who was extraordinarily strong considering his small size and thin build, finished the punch line to his dirty joke. Another boy, aptly named Squeaks for his voice which was constantly breaking, guffawed mightily and Jack enjoyed the sound. It wasn't much, but they could at least laugh together.

Jack hated the warehouse district. He hated the pungent river air and the way that he could never fully wash the smell off of his body. He hated the back breaking labor that chewed up his hands, leaving them blistered and calloused at the end of the day. He hated the thick, beefy men who worked here with their filthy mouths and content-to-be-nothing attitudes.

But the warehouses had been the only place hiring a young man with no education, no experience and no past. Jack hadn't been in a position to be picky. The boss had glared down at him through the cigar hazy office when he'd answered the ad. Jack hadn't bothered to even fill out an application, knowing with one look at the man that a CV meant nothing. He'd started work as the lowest man on the team ten minutes later.

The meager pay he drew was enough to allow him a filthy room at a run-down building of flats a block from the warehouse. But it was a roof over his head. And Jack paid the rent. It was better than spending his days in and out of shelters as he had all winter after leaving the hospital.

"An' so I says to 'im, ya got nuffink on me guv," Squeaks said, gathering another round of laughter from the group of men lounging on the hard packed dirt behind the warehouse where they unloaded every imaginable cargo.

Jack sat back against the rough plank wall and crossed his arms in front of him. He really wouldn't call these blokes friends. But they were about all he had. And they were mostly good lads. Younger than Jack, some of them run-aways or has-beens—all of society's throw-aways. Just like him. Yet Jack couldn't suppress the urge to shiver at that. They weren't anything like him at all, actually.

These men, and most of the others who worked here, were content with their lot in life. They were perfectly happy living where they did, smoking and drinking away their pay, and trudging through their work day after day.

But Jack had dreams. While the others used their days off to sleep and get drunk, or to sleep with any of the loose women around, Jack took walks into the heart of the city. He loved to stare up at the huge buildings, imagining he was part of the activity swirling around him.

Now that he had a permanent address, he could check books out of the library. He devoured book after book, soaking up everything he could of life. He wasn't particular about what he read, either. Everything from fantasy to biographical works interested him. It didn't matter, because they were a way to escape where he was everyday.

His favorite place was the University. The thick shade trees and green grass of the Commons drew

him like a magnet. He would spend hours sitting in the gardens, reading or simply pondering a future where he didn't have to go back to the dingy room or the docks. Of course, they would never let him stay there. He'd been kicked out by the coppers more times than not for being a vagrant. But he didn't hold that against them. It wasn't their fault; they were just doing their jobs.

It had been awhile since he'd taken a walk through the campus. Maybe it was time again.

"Oi! Poshy!"

Jack bristled at the nickname. Blue, the huge, daft gaffer had dubbed him 'Poshy' the first day once he'd heard Jack's *posh* accent. It was true that Jack didn't have the Mancurian roots that most of the workers showed. He was at least basically educated. Jack wasn't even positive that Runt could read. But that didn't mean he liked being singled out for it. The fact that Blue was as dumb as a brick didn't help either.

"Piss off, Blue!" Squeaks called out, his voice breaking in the middle. Jack grinned at him, but sobered when Blue's face darkened and he jumped at the thin boy, quicker than Jack had ever seen him move.

Squeaks flailed and kicked as Blue lifted him off the ground and pinned him against the building.

Runt made a dive for Blue's legs but was caught by a thick armed thug and held off the ground a few inches, still screaming obscenities and scratching at the man's arm. The other boys scattered quickly, disappearing fast down alleyways and behind other buildings. Jack didn't blame them. Blue and his friends had a reputation for getting what they wanted and hurting people in the process.

Jack rose to his feet slowly, keeping his eyes on the others around him. Blue was the leader of this little gang and Jack knew to keep his head in front of them. He was quicker than all of them, but the few times they had caught him had meant enough pain for Jack that he remembered the lessons.

"What do you want, Blue?"

"Kick 'im in the goolies, Jack!" Runt called out, only to be slapped upside the head.

Jack's eyes never wavered from the watery, dull ones of the bully in front of him. Their gazes locked, Jack swayed slightly when Blue's face was replaced with a flicker of a thick-jowled, blond man with an enormous moustache. He shook the flash away and focused back on the situation. Now wasn't the time for one of his 'memories'.

"You fink you're so smart, Poshy," Blue growled. "Fink you're better'n all of us, wif your books an' your learnin'. But you're no better'n any of us, Poshy. You're a nobody, jus' like ever'one else."

Squeaks gasped for air under Blue's grasp on his neck and Jack glared at the purple bruise that was rising to the surface under his sausage-like fingers. Fury filled him and he lunged forward, taking no thought to the brick wall he was about to run into.

Blue, caught off guard by Jack's sudden charge, let Squeaks go and the boy slid down the wall, scrambling out of the way.

Jack squared his shoulder and put all of his weight behind it, driving himself into the low belly of the man. Blue grunted deeply when they impacted and the two tangled in the hard dirt, scuffling as they fought.

Jack's head rang where Blue's meaty fist drove into his jaw. But he was able to land a strong punch into Blue's left side, bruising his kidney and a lightning fast jab up into Blue's jaw. The air was expelled from his lungs when Blue rolled them and put all of his weight on Jack's stomach.

His ribs, always tender from where they'd been broken before, protested under the press and Jack gasped for air. Blue grinned down at him, his bloody mouth opening to show a few missing teeth, and brought back his fist. Jack had no doubt that his life was going to end.

An instant later, Jack was scrambling free, clawing and crawling along the ground and Blue was blown completely off of him, laying spread-eagle meters away.

"Bloody hell!" The thug holding Runt dropped him quickly, eyes as big as saucers. He backed away from Jack slowly before turning and running away. The others left in the alleyway stared at him and slunk into the shadows of the buildings, melting away into the afternoon.

Jack spit blood out of his mouth and wiped it on his sleeve, standing slowly and taking stock of all his limbs.

For the very first time, both Squeaks and Runt backed away from Jack as well. They stared at him as if he were something they'd never seen before.

"You alright?" he asked Squeaks, staring at the blood rising to the surface of the boy's skin.

"Y-yeah," Squeaks mumbled.

"What was tha', Jack?" Runt panted, still keeping a wary distance from him.

Jack swore softly and glared down at his feet. This wasn't the first time something strange had happened to him. He just wished he could understand what it was and how it happened. Several times in the past year when he'd been in danger things had happened to help him escape. And, one time, just as he'd torn through his last usable pair of trousers, he'd found another pair in his small flat. He supposed he might have tucked them away and forgotten about it, but it was unlikely.

"I don't know," he admitted, spitting out the last of the blood in his mouth and wincing as he straightened. His back ached and his shoulder throbbed where he'd hit Blue in the gut.

"I never seen anyfink like it," Squeaks shook his head.

Jack was about to respond when the low snarl of the boss echoed through the alley. "Ingalls!"

He stood up straight, determined to keep his mouth shut. He really needed this job if he was going to save enough money to get out of this place.

The beefy man came to a stop in front of Jack, his eyes scanning the alley and seeing Blue still lying across the way.

“Blokes said ye were fightin’ back ‘ere,” he barked.

“Blue was choking Squeaks,” Jack said firmly, his eyes planted on the man’s large middle. He glanced up to see the boss squinting at the boy who was backed up into the brick of the building. He nodded jerkily and lifted his head, showing the hand shaped bruise.

The boss grunted and shuffled over closer to Blue.

“Ye do this, Ingalls?” he grunted, peering at Jack. His eyes narrowed calculatingly, eying the thin man up and down.

Jack nodded. The other two gave him looks of sympathy and Jack knew his employed days were numbered.

“Get yer fings, Ingalls.”

Jack sighed mightily, knowing it was useless to argue. Blue was the supervisor and punishment for laying him out would obviously be swift, no matter what kind of git he was.

“Yes, sir,” he mumbled. He nodded toward the two boys, who stared at him, both looking torn between defending him and keeping their mouths shut. He winked at them and they both relaxed, perhaps understanding that he was going to take all of the blame and spare them their jobs.

“Yer a trouble causer, Ingalls,” the boss said, walking more than an arms length away from Jack. He seemed vaguely impressed, yet wary of the man next to him. “I can’ ’ave ye ’round no more.”

“Yes, sir,” Jack mumbled. His dreams of enrolling in the University faded as he gathered his meager belongings from his cubby and trudged back to his flat.

* * *

Tonks looked down at the tiny face cradled in her arms and marveled at her daughter. She was such a miracle, with her perfect hands and miniscule feet, and bright purple hair.

Remus had been so scared when Tonks had told him she was pregnant. Just thinking about it as she nursed the voracious little monkey made Tonks chuckle. He’d been so sure that his lycanthropy would be passed along to any child they might have. Thankfully, they were past the war—Merlin knows the kind of guilt trip having a child in the middle of that mess might have caused him.

Tonks sighed in contentment against the heavy sofa in the lounge at Grimmauld Place. In her wildest dreams, Tonks never would have seen herself living in this place—let alone having a healthy, happy family here. But the months following the war had certainly changed a lot of things. Suddenly, things like home and family and children had been replaced in her mind where only being an Auror, being the life of the party and duty to the Order had lived.

And little Orion Mary had been the first major change for Tonks. She knew that one day the Aurors would call again; and she would return to continue her work changing the world. But right now... now her chance to alter the future needed to be fed, and burped and changed.

“Morning, dear.”

Tonks smiled lazily up at Remus as he brought a tray laden with tea and scones into the room.

“Morning,” she yawned back. “Your daughter was up all night again.”

Remus grinned and brushed his finger along the cheek of the suckling baby. “Why is she always my daughter when she cries, or won’t sleep or poos in her nappy?”

Tonks grinned up at him. “That’s just the way it is,” she shrugged. “Fact of life, dear; best to accept it now.”

He chuckled and sat down next to her, pulling his wife and daughter into his embrace. “I’m sure she’ll be my daughter when she demands to wear combat boots to school and when she comes downstairs sporting yellow and green striped hair.” He leaned closer and brushed his hand along the thick tuft of hair on the baby’s head. She moaned and worked her little mouth harder, milk leaking out of the corner in response.

“We’ll just be glad she has such good taste,” Tonks defended softly.

Together, they watched as she finished eating and slipped into deep sleep, her mouth finally falling away and hanging open in slumber.

“Little monkey,” Tonks chided softly, lifting the baby onto her shoulder to be burped. “What meeting are you off to today?” she asked Remus, taking a bite of the scone he offered, smothered in strawberry jam and clotted cream.

Remus sighed heavily and took his own bite. “It’s the Werewolf Committee today,” he admitted. “Scrimgeour wants to get the final legislation done and to the Wizengamot before the press gets hold of it.”

“I don’t blame him,” Tonks sighed, still patting the baby firmly on the back. “Is it what you’d hoped for?”

“Not nearly enough,” Remus grimaced. “But it’s a step in the right direction. At least it rescinds all that registration nonsense that Umbridge pushed through.”

“Do you think the werewolves will be happy with it?”

“No,” Remus shook his head. “We all understand that we’ll be treated as second class citizens, or worse. But any progress forward is helpful.”

“You’ve done a proper job of it,” Tonks complimented, reaching up to kiss his cheek.

“What do you have planned today?” Remus asked, holding out his arm to take Orion as Tonks stood and stretched, her violently orange pajama shirt raising enough to give him a tantalizing view of her once-again flat tummy.

Tonks smirked, knowing just where her husband’s eyes were. “Ori and I are going to visit Molly today. It’s supposed to be nice out so I thought we’d walk to the graves also, get a bit of fresh air,

maybe kip in the shade.”

Remus smiled fondly and nodded. Tonks knew the mention of the gravesite still caused his heart to twinge; she had not doubt that it always would—just as it did hers. But it had been almost a year since the Final Battle, and time had begun to heal the wounds a bit.

“It’ll be good for Ori to be raised with the Weasleys,” he affirmed softly.

“It will,” Tonks affirmed. “Fleur is due soon. Did I tell you they think it’ll be a girl?”

Remus nodded distractedly and Tonks rolled her eyes. “Have you heard from Ron lately?” She watched as his face narrowed in pain and regret.

Ron had been a very sore subject with everyone for a long time. After Hermione had moved back home with her parents, Ron had taken a counter job at Fred and George’s shop, and had shared their flat for awhile. Tonks heard that he had now moved into his own flat somewhere in Diagon Alley.

“No,” Remus sighed. “And we could really use his help with this Skeeter thing.”

“I thought you and Hermione had agreed to turn her in to the Wizengamot,” Tonks observed. She gently accepted the baby from Remus and laid her in the portable cot across the room.

“I think that’s all we have left,” Remus sighed and ruffled his hair. “We were hoping that it wouldn’t come to that, but she’s bound and determined to get this book published.”

Tonks nodded distractedly, thinking of the damage that would be done by a Rita Skeeter book about Harry. The book she’d written about Dumbledore had stirred up the whole Wizarding community and was still talked about as scandalous.

Hermione, fresh from her break up with Ron, had buried herself in the Law Division at the Ministry, helping to make sweeping changes. She’d been successful over the past year at stopping Rita Skeeter from publishing her book. Tonks knew that eventually it would happen, but the longer they could hold it off, the better.

“Maybe you should try seeing him again,” Tonks suggested gently, her hands skimming his shoulders and feeling the tension mount in the muscles.

“I’ve tried, Dora,” he sighed. “I think it’s up to him now.”

Her heart clenched in her chest but she nodded. They had all tried reasoning with Ron. It had been months since he’d shown up at a Weasley dinner. Perhaps he feared that Hermione would be there, perhaps he just wanted to hide from everyone. At least they’d convinced Hermione to start coming again. She hadn’t wanted to keep Ron away from his family and would only come when Molly pressed her. But through the months they’d worn her down enough that she was back to her regular monthly attendance.

“Maybe Molly and I can come up with some new ideas,” Tonks shrugged.

“It couldn’t hurt,” Remus said as he stood and took her into his arms for a goodbye kiss. “In the meantime, see if you can catch a kip.”

“Brilliant idea,” she cheered softly, already feeling the tendrils of sleep reaching for her as she nuzzled into his warm embrace.

* * *

The dark amber liquid slid along the side of the glass as Ron turned it in place, the ice cubes making a soft clinking sound. Fred and George always teased him that he was a nancy boy for drinking his firewhiskey with ice. But Ron liked the contrast of the cold liquid entering his mouth and then burning down his throat.

He leaned forward, resting both of his forearms on the scarred wood of the bar and laying his chin there, watching the ice sparkle in his glass, reflecting what little light there was in the pub.

“’lo, Ron.”

He smiled as Neville’s soft voice greeted him. His eyes didn’t stray from the drink as Neville settled into the stool next to him and got the attention of the barman.

“Butterbeer please,” he requested. A bottle was handed over and Neville sighed deeply as he drank from it.

“Don’t usually see you in here,” Ron said casually. Inside, he wondered which of his family members had put Neville up to tracking him down today. It seemed they were always trying to get him to do something.

“I come in a fair bit,” Neville admitted, leaning his elbows on the bar and tracing his finger around the rim of the bottle. “It’s nice to relax after a long day.”

“It is,” Ron shrugged and glanced over at his friend. Although, he wasn’t sure he still had the right to call anyone his friend after the past year. Neville looked well enough, he supposed. Ron was actually surprised to see that he looked a lot older than he’d remembered. “Are you still at Hogwarts?”

“Yeah,” Neville admitted with a shrug and a small smile. “Professor Sprout is thinking about retiring in a year or two. Then I’ll take over for her.”

Ron’s eyebrow rose in surprise. Somehow, Neville seemed far too young to be a Professor... of anything. “Brilliant, Nev,” Ron cheered. He held up his glass in toast and drank deeply from it, welcoming the way the liquid made him feel relaxed and happy. He hadn’t been truly happy for a long time now.

Neville chattered on, informing Ron of what their classmates had been doing over the past year and making general observations of the world in general. Ron listened, hearing what he was saying, but really only absorbing the overall impressions.

Hearing what Seamus and Dean were doing with their lives only accented the fact that Harry wasn’t

there. The five Gryffindors had spent many hours talking about nothing and everything in the Tower. They'd become close, almost like cousins and, at times, brothers. But one of their number hadn't survived. Ron had a hard time dealing with that realization, even though it had been almost a year.

"Are you going to the ceremony?"

Ron started at Neville's question and grimaced. The year anniversary of the defeat of Voldemort was coming up and the plans for a large celebration had been talked about for weeks. There was to be a large gathering in Diagon Alley with speeches and other boring Ministry niceties. Fred and George were planning on a huge sale on that day, so Ron had no doubt he would get chained to the front counter, despite the fact that he'd rather spend the day in bed in his own flat.

"No."

Neville, surprisingly, didn't act as if he were surprised. "I still haven't decided if I'm going to go or not."

"Really?" Ron asked, surprising even himself. It must be the drink, he thought wryly, because normally he wouldn't care what anyone else was doing.

"No," Neville shook his head. "I don't want to stand around all day listening to people waffle on about Harry and Ginny when they never even knew them."

Ron stared at him, wondering how he could voice the exact thought sitting in Ron's brain right now.

"None of them know that little squeaking sound that Harry used to make right before he started snoring." Neville smiled, a bit sadly, and then took a long pull from his bottle.

Ron laughed. "Or that Ginny had to have only marmalade on her toast. She hated butter."

Neville grinned and nodded. "Remember when Harry used to kick his covers off?"

"Yeah," Ron chuckled, "he hated having his feet confined—"

"—you could almost count down to it."

"Fifteen seconds," Ron agreed. "He'd be in bed fifteen seconds and then give that huge kick—"

"And roll over and go to sleep." The two men laughed as the memories came back with a vengeance. "He always believed in me," Neville continued.

"Yeah," Ron said, feeling a bit overwhelmed by the remembrances.

"And when he would nick Hermione's homework when the two of you were in the middle of a row..."

Ron narrowed his eyes, trying to remember if he'd ever seen that. "I didn't know he did that."

"Yeah," Neville chuckled. "He did it all the time. He'd reach right around one or the other of you

and read as much as he could before she'd turn back."

"The little bugger never told me that," he mused quietly.

"At times..." Neville faded out and stared down at the dark wood. "I wonder, you know, if I can feel him."

Ron opened his mouth to reply but couldn't think of the right words. There had only been a few times, early on—just after the funerals, actually—where Ron had been sure he could feel Harry, and even Ginny's, presence. But it had been a long time.

"But sometimes," Neville continued talking to his empty bottle, "I just get so angry that it blocks everything else out." Ron swallowed thickly, feeling a bit like he'd shrunk in his seat. "But I hold onto the anger, because it lets me feel something—something other than sadness."

Ron's throat tightened and he swallowed, not willing to take a drink because he knew it would choke him. He'd never thought anyone could speak the words in his mind before—never thought anyone else would understand.

Everyone had picked up the pieces, gone on with their lives. It felt like such a betrayal to do so.

"But they wouldn't want me to feel that way," Neville smiled sadly. "They would want me to be happy when I remember those things."

Ron couldn't do more than stare ahead and blink back the tears that gathered in his eyes. The heavy press of guilt weighed on him. No matter how many times he'd heard many of these same things over the past year, it hadn't hit him quite this way.

"One... one time, when we were little," Ron choked out, swiping angrily at the tears that leaked out of his eyes, "Ginny had this doll... She hated playing with dolls. But Mum bought it for her..." Neville turned to face him, listening intently. Ron felt a bit uncomfortable. He hadn't willingly talked about Harry and Ginny for months. "She stuffed it away in a drawer somewhere. Until Fred and George found it..."

Ron continued his story through a thick voice and many stops and starts. Neville didn't seem to mind, though, as he kept listening. They ended up laughing again at the end and Ron was relieved to feel more normal than he had in a long time.

"You need to remember them," Neville said shortly, as he slid from his stool and place a few coins on the bar. "Not the anger, Ron, because it's poisoning you."

Those words, spoken from anyone else, in any other way, would have had Ron up and his fists flying. But tonight, from one of his oldest friends, they struck a chord deep in Ron. And, for just a moment, he could hear Harry's voice telling him the same thing.

He couldn't do more than nod his head as Neville slapped his back and silently slipped out of the pub.

Emma pulled her bare feet up underneath her and hugged the pillow she was wrapped around even tighter to herself. She watched as Missy glanced through a box of childhood treasures, pondering what to keep and what to bin.

"I'm going to miss you," Emma whispered for the hundredth time and grimaced as more tears came to her eyes.

Missy smiled sadly and shrugged one shoulder. "I'll miss you too."

The two girls slipped into silent contemplation, Missy still continuing to sort her belongings into three piles; one to bin, one to leave, and one to take with her when she moved out on her own.

Emma sighed, her fingers going to the chain on her neck out of habit and playing with the ring that hung there.

The last year had been very trying for her, although absolutely wonderful in ways. When Anne had brought her to the Wilkins home, Emma had almost changed her mind completely about staying there. Carter, the oldest child seemed rather indifferent to the whole situation. He was older, however, and lived on his own anyway. Emma shifted uncomfortably at the thought of him. He was wonderful, really; a very nice young man who was good looking and held a respectable job. But lately he'd begun looking at Emma a bit differently and it made her wary.

Emma had avoided boys mostly in the year of school she'd just completed. Staring part way through the term, and having no memories of previous school, Emma had been at an immediate disadvantage. Getting involved with boys, no matter how attractive they were, was something that Emma didn't allow herself.

Thankfully, Missy had been around. After a rocky start, she and Emma had become as close as natural sisters.

"You remember when Mum brought you home?" Missy asked, unconsciously mirroring Emma's own thoughts.

"Yeah," Emma mumbled, looking down at the chipped polish on her toenails. No matter what she did, she could never keep it looking fresh. "I was so scared."

Missy smiled and laid a stack of clothing aside to be stored. She smiled a bit sheepishly. "I wasn't very happy at first."

"I could tell," Emma nodded, smiling fondly at the thought that felt ancient and brand new at the same time.

Missy sat down next to her and scooted so that they were shoulder to shoulder along the headboard. "I just kept thinking that Mum didn't need another project. Ever since Dad died, Mum had been collecting little things to do here and there. She tried knitting," Missy chuckled and Emma could only guess that it hadn't been a pretty sight, "and needlework. She even tried DIY." Missy sighed and nudged Emma with her shoulder. "I thought you were just another of her projects."

"Thanks," Emma replied dryly. She supposed that the comment should have stung; but it didn't

because she knew this was just Missy's way. She was blunt and sometimes hurtful, but never on purpose.

"I'm glad I was wrong."

Emma turned and smiled at the girl, who was a year older than she was. The two looked nothing alike. Missy was taller and had a much more womanly figure. Her blond hair and blue eyes captured more than one male stare as they would walk down the street. Emma was short and trim, with red hair and hideous freckles. Her hair seemed to be her best feature and a lot of people commented on it.

"Me too," Emma sighed and lay her head down on Missy's shoulder. "It's not going to be the same without you here."

"I'll only be an hour away by train."

"I know," Emma said softly. "But I'm still stuck here."

Missy rubbed her hand and nodded. "The offer still stands—you can come with me."

"I promised Anne that I would finish school," Emma shrugged. It was true; however Emma knew that the fear of drifting out there in such a huge world held her back more than anything. Out there was where she had been hurt, where a huge part of her had gone missing—the year hadn't softened the edges of that pain enough for her to go back out into it. She supposed it was a bit cowardly; but she was safe and content here, and so she would stay until another choice was put in front of her.

Missy caught her eye and Emma knew that she understood all the reasons, without having to say anything more.

Emma's hand returned to the ring that dangled from a gold chain around her neck, and she slid it on and off of the tip of her finger.

"You'll come and see me, yeah?" Missy said, her voice cracking with emotion.

"I will," Emma said firmly. "You know I will."

"Good," Missy said. She handed over another box of memorabilia and the two girls began sifting through it again.

Fred and George were waiting for Ron when he walked into the store. For a moment, he considered bolting back outside at the sight of their devious faces and raised eyebrows.

"What?" he demanded after calculating that they'd be on him before he could make his escape.

"We think, that it's time, little brother," Fred started, moving toward him in a rather menacing way.

"For you to find a job," George continued.

Ron backed away, his hand automatically going for his wand. He was fairly sure they wouldn't do

anything *permanent* to him, but that didn't mean he wouldn't suffer.

"I already have one," he protested. He'd been wary about taking the counter job from his brothers from the first day. However, they hadn't asked questions or made demands, really. They'd been the only ones in his family to leave him alone—which was strange in itself, as the twins usually took the mickey out of him for everything.

Somehow, today felt like the day they'd heap a year's worth on him.

"Actually," Fred grinned, turning to his mirror image.

"You don't," George chuckled.

Ron's hand dropped away from his wand and his jaw fell open. "You... you're sacking me?"

"Pretty much," George nodded.

"It's time for you to spread your wings, my little owl," Fred smirked, reaching up on tiptoe to pat Ron's head. "Spread your wings and fly."

"Like hell," Ron growled, batting Fred's arm away from him. "You can't sack me. I haven't done anything wrong."

"Actually," George pondered, stroking his chin as he rested his hip against the counter, "if you had read your contract, you'd realize we can do pretty much—"

"Anything," Fred finished with a waggle of his eyebrows.

Ron spluttered and stammered before he glared at them. He hadn't read the employment contract. At all. And they knew it because they'd watched him quickly sign with barely a scan. Reading things like that had always been... Hermione's thing...

"And what am I supposed to do?" Ron demanded, raising his voice in frustration and ruffling his hair. "I've got rent to pay."

"Certainly it can't be too much," Fred shrugged.

"Yeah," George agreed with a grimace, "we've been to your place, mate. I wouldn't pay more than eight—"

"Six," Fred interrupted.

"Yeah, six galleons a month."

Ron rolled his eyes and tried to figure out the angle of their prank; because that's what it had to be.

"What is it you really want?" Ron demanded, sighing heavily. He wasn't in the mood to deal with his brothers like this. Neville's words a few days before weighed heavily on his mind, not allowing him to sleep for more than a few hours at a time. His appetite had thinned down to almost nothing,

leaving him surly and off kilter.

Fred quickly conjured a chair and settled onto it. “Well, now that’s the right question.”

“It is,” George nodded as he hopped up onto the sales counter, his legs dangling off the edge.

Ron sighed, ruffled his hair in annoyance and shifted in his spot. It was best to let the twins talk when they were in a mood like this, because, if he kept trying to interrupt, or figure out what they wanted, he’d go mental.

“We want you, not to put it too bluntly,” Fred said, “to get your head out of your arse.”

Staring wide eyed at his brother, Ron couldn’t even grasp onto an insult or defense to hurl back. Somehow, he ended up sitting and vaguely realized one of them must have conjured a chair.

“So...” George continued, “We’re offering you a one-time deal.”

“Deal?” Ron asked warily. He had no doubts that the contract they’d slipped him included some clause where they claimed ownership of his soul—that would be very like them. What more could they want? Years of humiliating servitude where he would test out every product they invented and submit to intense physical scrutiny while they stood by making notes?

“Yeah,” George nodded. Reaching back behind himself, into the counter, he pulled out a thick sheaf of parchment. “You fill these out, submit to some tests—”

“See, I knew you’d say that!” Ron jumped forward in his seat.

“Sit down,” Fred demanded. His harsh tone shocked Ron more than anything else. “It’s not *our* tests, prat.”

Ron’s confusion and curiosity overrode his frustration. “What tests?”

The twins glanced at each other, sharing an un-nameable look, before George took a deep breath.

“Auror entrance exams.”

Once again, the feelings that had been his familiar companions for months now flooded him. Betrayal, anger, grief.

“I don’t want to be an Auror,” he stated plainly, jumping to his feet and moving quickly to the exit.

“Hermione told us that you and Harry both talked about being Aurors,” Fred stated. The door before Ron squelched closed and he scowled at it.

“You’ve been talking to Hermione?” he asked, his feelings whirling inside of him. He hadn’t even thought Hermione would want to speak about him anymore—not after the way he had pushed her away enough that she had left.

And the worst part was that Ron really had no idea what her feelings were—because they hadn’t even had a huge row about it. He’d walked out, she’d left. And things had just stayed like that for

months.

He allowed himself to only feel the intense anger and numbness that came with all-encompassing grief.

“She talks about you all the time,” George admitted, his soft voice breaking through Ron’s shell.

Ron pondered that for a moment, his fingers reaching out to rest on the cool metal of the doorknob. “What does she—” He broke off, not sure if he wanted to know what she thought of him, or what she said about him.

“She misses you,” Fred said, “although I can’t imagine why, you surly git.”

“You haven’t ruined things completely,” George said as he slid off the counter and took a few steps closer. Ron could feel him there, just behind.

“I... I don’t...”

“We know, Ron.” George clapped him on the shoulder and exerted slight pressure, making Ron turn around. He guided Ron back to the chair as visions of Hermione warred in his mind.

He saw her as she was in school, fiery and sure of herself. And there were times, over the past year, that he’d sought her out, deliberately staying in the shadows to silently watch her. He’d even been to the Ministry a time or two—convinced he should approach her before he would lose all nerve and leave. Several times he’d gone to a Weasley dinner and then backed away at seeing Hermione inside, laughing and taking part in what she had every right to be a part of.

“Let’s get back to this deal,” Fred said, somewhere off in the distance. Ron pushed his thoughts to the side, afraid that if he let them run wild they would make him break down in front of his brothers.

“You take the exams, and... when you get accepted, you enter training.”

“I won’t get accepted,” Ron said dully. “Being an Auror was always Harry’s dream—he was best at it.”

Fred shook his head as if Ron was completely missing the point and George grunted, “Thick as a plank, this one is.”

“Harry was great at it,” Fred conceded. “But so were you.”

Ron chewed the inside of his lip—not convinced, but not in the mood to argue about his dead friend.

“You enter training,” George continued, “and get your life in order.”

“And then you go and talk to Hermione.”

Ron leaned forward and rested his head in his palms, looking down at the floor. It all sounded so simple when they listed it like that. As if everything would fall into place and things would be right again. Without Harry and Ginny, nothing felt right anymore.

"I'm not sure I can do this," Ron said, not even realizing that he was actually considering doing what they had proposed. "I'm not strong enough."

"You were once," George said softly. "Back before you let all this other shite rule your life."

"You're better than what you've allowed yourself, Ron," Fred said, shaking his head in a disappointed sort of way.

"Where would I live?" Ron mumbled down to the floor. "I can't do training and have a job too."

"You move back into the flat here," Fred shrugged. "It may cramp our free-wheeling, wild-women lifestyle—" Ron snorted. The twins were married with a set of twins each.

"But we're willing to make sacrifices," George added with a chuckle. "You're family, after all."

"And you can continue on here for a bit; put in what hours you can."

"Mum would love to have you back at the Burrow," George offered.

Ron lifted his head and peered at them through his thick fringe. "You just sacked me."

Fred grinned and shrugged a shoulder. "When have you ever taken us seriously?"

Ron considered this for a minute before nodding. The possibilities warred in his head. Deep inside, he knew that he needed to change. He *wanted* to change. But doing this, making his dreams come true, just sounded like so much work. And he didn't know if he could do it alone. Being an Auror had always been what he wanted; *what he and Harry had wanted*.

"Can I think about it?" he tentatively asked.

"The deadline is in two weeks," George shrugged. "We'll give you one before we pummel your arse into signing the papers."

"Yeah, we'll fill out the rest for you." Fred wagged his eyebrows. Ron had no doubt that they *would* fill them out, and shuddered slightly at the thought of what they would put.

"I'll let you know," he stood and slowly walked to the door, flicking his wand at it and silently breaking the seal.

"Oi," George called out, "where are you going? Your shift is about to start."

"You sacked me, remember," Ron quipped back over his shoulder. There was no way he was going to be able to work today, he knew. Instead, the idea of wandering around the Alley, and perhaps finding a nice shady spot to think sounded better.

* * *

The water lapped at the rocky shore just a few meters below his feet and Bill Weasley watched it in contentment. This was one thing he loved about Shell Cottage. Listening to the sound of the ocean as he fell asleep every night was very soothing. Fleur loved it also, and that was a good thing as she

hadn't been fully convinced that living in England once they'd gotten married was the best idea. Surprisingly, it was her that fell in love with the quaint little cottage and had insisted that they purchase it straight away.

Ron, who was perched on the rock next to him, sighed heavily, drawing his oldest brother's attention.

"I've always liked it here," Ron said.

"Yeah," Bill agreed. "Remember when we were growing up and Mum and Dad would take us to Grandma Weasley's house?"

Ron smiled fondly and nodded, tossing a small pebble as far out into the waves as he could. "I don't remember much—mostly playing near the water and sleeping in the loft of the barn."

"I guess you were a bit small..." Bill faded off, tossing his own pebble and watching Ron out of the corner of his eye.

Ron had always been a bit of a puzzle to Bill. Growing up, they had been so far apart in age. And Bill didn't really know Ron at all before he was off traipsing around Egypt. He only had his mother's letters and a few visits to go on when contemplating his brother's place in the family.

While he'd been a bit of a mystery, Ron wore his personality out in front, so to speak. It hadn't taken Bill long to get the general idea—however, Ron had proved him wrong time and time again; showing a depth of feeling that always astounded and impressed his older siblings.

"Things are going well at the Academy?" Bill asked, brushing dirt off of his hands onto his jeans.

Ron shrugged, but Bill could see the contented look on his face. "Yeah, things are good. I didn't like it at first."

"Why enter then?" Bill asked, "Besides the fact that Fred and George threatened you."

Ron sighed and dropped the last few rocks in his hands, clapping them together before scratching the back of his head. "At first... well, I did it just to have something to do, really. I was tired of doing nothing." He gave a sheepish glance at Bill, who nodded, understanding the restless feeling. "And then... well, it kind of became this thing... to honor Harry, you know."

Bill's visit to his family just weeks before Ron got his first Hogwarts letter had left Bill with the impression of a lazy, rather coddled child who wouldn't make friends too easily. Not to say that Ron was spoiled—none of them had that luxury—but Ron had been well taken care of growing up.

The Ron that Bill had seen develop over the years had made him proud to call his brother a Weasley. Ron's unwavering support of Harry had really turned him into a man.

"I guess that's a good enough motivation to begin..."

"Yeah," Ron mumbled, pulling his feet up onto the rock in front of him and then leaning his elbows onto his knees.

“But I’m surprised it’s kept you going,” Bill continued. “Tonks told me the other day that you’ve been really making an impression over there.”

Ron smiled and shrugged a shoulder. “I guess so.” He ruffled his hair again and then, strangely, brushed his hand over his heart before continuing. “I started because of Harry—it’s what I figured he’d want me to do. But once I got there... things just started to fall into place, I guess. I liked what I was doing—and who I’m starting to become.”

Bill smiled as the explanation hit home. The past year had been very hard on all of the Weasleys. Losing both Harry and Ginny had been a blow that Bill wasn’t sure they could all recover from. However, Ron wasn’t the one that Bill had pictured breaking down completely. He’d held everything together all through the funerals—only to lose it completely weeks later.

“I’m glad you’ve found your own place in it then,” Bill said softly. “Honoring Harry is great...”

“Yeah,” Ron sighed, brushing his chest again.

“Ron,” Bill broke in, “that’s the second time I’ve seen you touch your chest. Did you get hurt?”

Ron’s face flushed deep red and Bill’s eyebrows rose. What on earth could he be that embarrassed about?

“N-no,” he stammered, shaking his head. “I’m fine.”

Bill’s eyes narrowed at the lie. Being the oldest, Bill could probably spot a lie from one of his brothers almost as fast as their parents could. And Ron had never hidden things well. “Right. Now pull the other one...”

“Bill—” Ron warned.

“Show me.”

Ron sighed and Bill could see the war going on inside of him. Eventually, his hand moved to edge of his Chudley Cannons, fluorescent orange, t-shirt and he shucked it off. Grimacing must a bit, Ron turned his body to face Bill, while looking anywhere but his brother.

“Holy Merlin,” Bill sighed, slipping off of his rock to squat next to Ron, peering at the colorful picture on his chest.

Two Hungarian Horntails, one a brilliant green and the other a vibrant red, were etched into the skin over Ron’s heart. The two dragons nuzzled each other and pawed at the ground restlessly.

“I got it the day I got accepted into the Academy,” Ron said, his voice hoarse and breaking. He shivered just a bit and goosepimples broke out on his forearms from the cool, salty spray of the ocean.

And, suddenly, Bill understood. This was Ron’s tribute to Harry and Ginny. The tale of Harry’s supposed dragon tattoo had been a painful, but funny, joke throughout the family ever since Ron had mentioned Ginny’s remark.

“And the other one is Ginny?” Bill asked, taking in every detail of the magnificent scene done in miniature.

“Yeah,” Ron nodded, glancing fondly down at his chest. The red dragon shifted, stamping her feet and blowing a tiny jet of fire. The green dragon, his scales almost rippling in the bright afternoon sun, wrapped his neck around the red dragon and they caressed each other for a moment. “I thought it fit.”

Bill pulled back, his throat feeling thick. “It does.”

Ron pulled his shirt back over his head and arms, fidgeting in his place. “Don’t tell Mum, yeah? Or the twins.”

Bill nodded, not exactly sure what he should say. He was still contemplating the two dragons etched in his brother’s skin when Ron cleared his throat again.

“I need your advice, Bill. I thought with you being married and all, I should probably talk to you. And the twins would never give me real advice.”

“About what?” Bill asked, his curiosity peaked now.

Ron glanced at him and then back out to sea. “I want to get Hermione back.”

The slow smile that spread over Bill’s face spread out through his body. And, suddenly, the chilly sea air didn’t seem to penetrate him any deeper. Ron was starting to come home.

* * *

The sunlight shone through the window and into the room, lighting up the corner of her pristine desk and making the dancing dust mites glow in the beam. Unfortunately, Hermione sighed, it wasn’t real. Her office at the Ministry was floors below the surface. Magical Maintenance must have gotten the pay increase they had been angling for; all of the windows had shown only the brightest and best weather. At least it wasn’t as dreary and wet as the October skies outside, she appeased herself.

Hermione hated the dying fall. To her, it seemed the worst season of the year. It was too cold for anything to grow, but not quite snow weather. The skeletal branches of the trees surrounding her parent’s house cast eerie shadows on the brown garden and the dead flowers still in the beds made her inexplicably sad.

The colder weather now meant longer days at work—both coming and going in the half-lit day. It wasn’t the work that bothered Hermione; because she reveled in it. Her time in the Law Division had been very well spent and the progress that the Ministry was making was a very fulfilling sight.

A few of Hermione’s pet projects had been well received, while others were still taking a fair bit of convincing to get momentum behind them.

The latest Werewolf legislation wasn’t exactly what she and Remus Lupin had been pushing for, but it seemed to pacify both sides for the moment. Just as hard, if not worse, was the bill for House Elf

Rights that Hermione was now researching.

But, her superiors had assured her that they had faith in her and that if she kept up the pace that she'd set over the past year, Hermione would be Head of the department in less than ten year's time. It would be a record.

And while she'd smiled and gone along with their back pats and congratulations, inside she had been falling apart. Her work was the only thing she had to keep her going, really.

Eight months. She had moved out of the Burrow and into her parents' home again eight months ago. And Ron hadn't come to her since. They'd seen each other several times since. They'd even spent a few very awkward meals at the Weasley home until Ron would, invariably, excuse himself and disappear.

And there had been times, several in fact, where Hermione had been sure he was around. Those few moments, she would close her eyes and will him the courage to approach her. But he never did.

Hermione wasn't even sure she knew what to say to him if he ever did come to her. She still loved him; that she knew for sure. But unless he took some significant steps to make the changes in his life that needed to be made...

She shook those thoughts right out of her head. In the beginning, Hermione had lied to herself, promising herself that she would wait forever for Ron. Weeks passed and her patience held strong. After all, Ron was grieving not only his best mate, but his younger sister as well. Hermione had waited years for him to see what was in front of his face. She could give him a bit longer.

Christmas passed and Hermione was devastated when Ron only appeared for an hour or two, completely avoiding any room she was in—even to the point of leaving if she entered.

On Valentine's Day, Terry Boot, who worked in the same office as she did, asked her out. She had taken a shaky breath and run to the loo before composing herself enough to tell him that she wasn't interested.

Weeks became months and Hermione's resolve weakened. Terry was becoming more and more persistent, even though she had explained her reluctance to accept his dinner invitations. He was never rude or pushy, thank Merlin, but his determination showed more and more with each rejection.

In May, she had finally given in and accepted his offer of a stroll through the Natural History Museum and dinner afterwards. And it had been pleasant, walking through the exhibits and talking with Terry about the educational aspects of everything. But Hermione couldn't stop herself from thinking of Ron's reaction every time Terry pointed out something that seemed to fascinate him. No date with Ron would have ever been as structured—as dead dull—as that one had been.

Afterwards, Hermione had honestly told Terry that she still didn't think she was ready to date. She took pride in the fact that she had been completely truthful with him from the beginning. And Terry, bless him, had backed off. He still made it a point to do nice things for her, bring her small flowers, hold doors, and including her in discussions during teatime, but he was respecting her wishes regarding her dating life.

Hermione glanced at the wristwatch she wore and nodded in satisfaction. She still had time to stop at home before meeting Remus and Tonks for dinner. She was excited to see little Orion again. It seemed that the baby changed so much between visits that it was like meeting a whole different person every time you saw her.

She tucked away her current research with a sigh and marked another day off on her schedule. In two days she was having lunch with Luna, she remembered. She would definitely need to make sure she breezed through the latest Quibbler editions so that she would be well versed in whatever Luna might talk about. The publication seemed a bit too silly to someone as straight minded as Hermione, yet Luna was still her friend.

Hermione bid goodbye to her fellow workers, blushing a bit when Terry walked her to the door. Impulsively, Hermione pressed a fast kiss to his cheek before stepping out into the hallway.

She took a deep breath and chided herself for flushing at the action. Why shouldn't she be polite to someone who obviously liked her? Because he's not Ron, her traitorous mind quipped back.

'Well, Ron's not here now, is he?' she firmly stated to herself.

Percy was in the lift, just leaving for the day as well. They exchanged pleasant greetings and chuckled over various happenings in the family before casually walking toward the Apparition point.

"... you'll be there for Sunday's dinner?"

Hermione missed most of Percy's question because, there, standing in the Atrium was Ron.

Her heart skipped a beat as she studied his appearance, which was dramatically different than she'd seen in quite some time. His hair was neatly trimmed and short. His face was free of stubble, or even the beard he'd attempted to grow during the winter. There were no dark rings circling his eyes, betraying his lack of sleeping; those eyes, so bright and blue, were clear and bright as they looked right at her.

Startlingly, he was also wearing the navy blue robes that were seen on Auror trainees.

"'lo, Hermione," he greeted. "Percy," he nodded to his brother. Hermione, who had forgotten all about the other Weasley standing next to her, glanced over at him to see him wink and give a wide smile to her.

"Ron," he nodded in return. "I'll see you both on Sunday evening."

Hermione shifted about, uncomfortable in the silence.

"You look nice," Ron complimented. He seemed entirely unaware of the crowds of people milling around them, making their way to the exits for the end of the workday.

"Thank you," she said to the floor. "You... you do as well." She glanced up and saw his ears redden just a bit. "I hadn't heard that you were with the Aurors now."

He nodded, his eyes never leaving hers. "Yeah. I started a few months ago."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and tried to understand why she hadn't known that. Usually the Weasleys were very vocal on updating her of what Ron was doing.

"I asked them not to say anything," he said quietly, answering her unasked question. Familiarity began to creep back in and Hermione found herself fighting it, irrational as it was. It shouldn't be this easy to feel those buried feelings stir. Those eight months apart should make it harder—as hard as the unsaid words between them.

"Why?" she asked. Anger bubbled along with emotional exhaustion—warring for dominance.

Ron shrugged a shoulder and glanced at a group of women who giggled and walked hurriedly away. "I guess I just wanted to tell you myself."

Hermione sighed and nodded. She could understand that, but she felt a bit... ambushed by this. How many people had known what was going on in Ron's life and hadn't told her? And why had she been completely relegated to the end of the list.

"I just wanted some time," he continued, "to get things in order before I talked to you."

Her jaw clenched and she glanced around at the ever-growing crowd. "Ron... could we, erm, take this someplace else?" Through the faces, Hermione knew that she could feel Terry's eyes on her. At once she was relieved and embarrassed.

Ron seemed to have just realized how many people were actually listening in and nodded awkwardly. "The Leaky Cauldron?" he asked.

Hermione nodded, relieved that he had suggested somewhere public. She wasn't sure what she'd have said if he'd suggested his flat. "Sure."

They flooded straight into the pub and Tom waved them to the back room. Hermione peered at Ron suspiciously, and watched as his ears flame.

It appeared as if Ron had made arrangements to reserve the room. "Rather sure I'd come with you, weren't you?"

His smile was slow and completely crooked. He shrugged, "I figured it was worth the chance." Hermione nodded, a bit flattered at the confidence that he was showing. This was so unlike the Ron she'd known much of her life. "What would you like?" he asked, nodding toward the bar, which she could just see outside the door.

"Oh," Hermione grimaced, "actually, I can't stay long." Ron's face fell and he nodded jerkily. She couldn't quite read his expression, but she guessed it bordered on resignation. "I'm supposed to have dinner with Remus and Tonks."

They stood in awkward silence for a minute before Hermione sighed. "But I have time for a drink." She felt a bit silly for making the first concession, but it seemed as if Ron had actually put some work into this meeting. A lot, if his appearance said anything.

"Okay," he mumbled with a hesitant smile.

Once he had returned with their drinks, he sat across from her, uncomfortably shifting in his seat.

"I just wanted to see how you were," he started, his ears flaming. "And... see you again."

"It has been awhile," she conceded, sipping at her drink.

Ron nodded. "Too long."

Hermione sighed and rubbed her forehead. She really wasn't prepared to do this today. Whenever she'd pictured this moment, she'd been so much more... calm and self-assured. Although she definitely hadn't pictured him looking quite this together... or, if she were honest, completely attractive—which could account for her feelings of being off-kilter.

"Eight months," she nodded. "You haven't spoken to me properly in eight months."

Ron winced and set his drink back down on the table, his fingers fidgeting. "I know," he said quietly. "And I'm not sure if you can ever forgive me for that."

"Is that what you want? Forgiveness?" The words came out harsher than Hermione intended and she scolded herself. Underneath it all, she had known why Ron was pushing her away. She had made the conscious decision not to go after him and to allow him space without her pushing him into a relationship. That didn't mean there was any less hurt when he had walked away, just that Hermione had spent hours dissecting each and every moment from the Final Battle until the breakup, and she thought she understood.

Awkwardly, Ron shrugged. "I have no right to ask you for anything."

"But—"

"But I would like that," he continued, his eyes meeting hers plainly. She'd always been able to read him fairly well, she thought. And those eyes today were as clear and honest as she ever remembered them being. "I also... I want to say thank you." He seemed relieved when she sat back in her chair. She could wait for him to finish. "For not pushing. I know I hurt you, and I'm sorry for that. Hurt was all I knew how to feel for a long time."

"And now?" she asked quietly, her fingers twisting in her lap for luck, as she'd done when she was little and had been hoping for a miracle.

Ron sighed and smiled, a bit sadly. "Took me a long time," he shrugged. "But I think I'm on the right road now. I've joined the Aurors." He gave a proud smile that faded just a bit when she didn't respond. "It's not easy. Fifteen hour days sometimes—loads more coursework."

She had the instant desire to ask him how he was doing in those courses—a throwback to Hogwarts days, she guessed, when she would check his and Harry's homework for them—but she resisted.

"I wasn't sure I'd like it," he shrugged. "I'd always gone along with Harry, you know, when he said he wanted to be an Auror." She noticed the slight hesitation in his voice when he mentioned Harry's name, but at least he was talking about their friend now. He had rarely mentioned him before. "But I do like it."

“That’s good,” she said quietly. There were so many questions she wanted to ask: what about his family, how was he dealing with the grief, what did his training entail... Her mind whirled, trying to find the right one to ask. “Have you seen your parents?” She finally settled on one, knowing that she needed the answer to this. Next to her, Molly and Arthur had taken Ron’s dark attitude very hard. She supposed that, as his parents, they blamed themselves for letting him down, for not doing enough.

Ron nodded, his smile widening. “I have.”

A flash of irritation sparked inside her. “Am I the last you’ve come to see?”

He shifted guiltily and shrugged. “I thought that would be best. I didn’t want you to see me until I’d gotten my life back together. Maybe I should have come to you first, maybe I should have asked for your help. But you’ve always been the one to pick up the pieces for me. You were always the one I came to when something went wrong. And... I needed to fix this on my own.”

Hermione’s heart twisted. This man before her certainly wasn’t the man she’d been in love with for years. No—he was so much better. Now that he’d gotten a handle on the pain and grief of losing two people so dear to him, he’d allowed himself to mature and grow into the man that he was going to be.

“I want another chance, Hermione,” he whispered fervently. “I know I don’t deserve one, but I want one.”

Two parts of Hermione stepped forward—one demanding that she kiss him right now, tell him all was forgiven, and one, the more sensible, Hermione-like voice, instructing her to calm her racing heart and to take things one step at a time.

“I think,” she started and then stopped to clear the emotion from her voice. “I think I’d like to talk some more and see where we are.”

His face fell momentarily before he shored it up and nodded. “I’d like that.”

“Maybe we can have lunch.”

“Or dinner,” he suggested with a nod.

Hermione’s smile couldn’t be held back as an idea came to her. “Or dinner,” she nodded. “In fact, there’s a dinner Sunday at the Burrow.”

“We could go together,” he suggested, stealing the words from her. Somehow, though, it sounded better coming from him.

“Okay,” she said quietly. “I’d like that.”

* * *

Draco brushed the lapels of his fine robes, admiring the fit of them in the mirror. Yes, these would do just fine. He nodded to the young witch standing behind him, her measuring tape now limply

draped over her shoulder. Just to see her blush, he gave her a quick wink and his flirtatious smile.

"I might need some new trousers as well," he said lazily, watching as her cheeks flamed and she giggled.

This was a very silly game, he knew. She couldn't be more than eighteen, really. But he just couldn't stop playing. Sadly, he knew he didn't have time today to show this little girl all about Malfoy magnetism. He had an appointment—one that he was loathe to keep, but was obligated to nonetheless. After all, it would do nothing but further his plans.

"Unfortunately," he drawled, "I'll have to come back another day to get them." He slipped his arms out of the robe and held it out on his finger for the girl to take. She gladly accepted them, batting her eyes at him.

"I work again Thursday," she whispered in a surprisingly self-assured voice as she brushed past him again.

Draco's eyebrows shot up and, despite himself, he was impressed. He'd not really considered her for more than a shameless little flirt—but maybe he had misjudged. Thursday... that might work. He'd have to make his excuses with Astoria, but she wouldn't know the difference.

"I'll keep that in mind," he grinned, letting his eyes slide up and down the girl's curves, appreciating the tight fit of the robes near the top.

Ten minutes later, he was strolling down the middle of Diagon Alley, his new robes having been retrieved by his House Elf. Out of habit more than anything, he crossed the Alley a few shops before that garishly dreadful Weasley's store and continued on swiftly, hardly sparing the distasteful place a glance.

He was extremely irritated when, arriving fashionably late, he was entirely alone in the private back room of the Leaky Cauldron. Meeting here was certainly not his choice. It was far too public for him. No doubt the Aurors kept a close eye on the activity in here—that snoop Tom poked around enough to be an informant of some sort.

The first glass of red wine that he ordered did little to ease his nerves, but the second helped. He didn't even flinch when she walked in, her poison smile spreading wider at the sight of his empty goblets.

"Mr. Malfoy," she greeted.

Draco slid himself to the edge of the chair and stood, straightening his robes. "Miss Skeeter," he nodded. "I would have thought that you would have been more polite, seeing as I informed you that I had to arrange my schedule to meet you." He had, in truth, moved his afternoon nap two hours later to accommodate the meeting. But let her think she had interrupted something much more vital.

"I apologize, Mr. Malfoy—may I call you Draco?" Her tone belied her words and she sank down into the seat opposite him, her acid-green quill propping itself next to her.

"You may not," Draco drawled as he rearranged himself. He was half tempted to walk out now—the utter... insolence of the situation affronting him. However, knowing Skeeter's reputation and having been tipped off to what she actually wanted from him, he ignored the insult and silently consented to her questions.

As she laid out the plans for her upcoming book about Harry Potter, Draco studied the woman. From what he understood, she had just been released from six months in Azkaban for being an unregistered Animagus. Of course, Draco had known that since he was fourteen. But he wasn't sure who had turned her in to the Ministry—someone who she had crossed with her salacious stories, or some do-gooder who had stumbled upon the truth.

"What I want from you, Mr. Malfoy, is your impressions... what you remember from the Final Battle." Venom dripped from her words and Draco couldn't help but smile as his opportunity opened up wide.

"Well," he scowled, "I don't like to speak ill of the dead..."

* * *

Jack shivered in the cool spring breeze. The past winter had been extremely tough for him—even worse than the first winter after the hospital. At least he'd had somewhere to go then.

This winter had been spent huddled under bridges, crowded into abandoned buildings and pulled up tight to strangers, just to share their warmth. The thick coat that Doctor Wilbanks had given him was long gone, given to a young boy who was more alone in the world than even Jack had ever felt. That had been when he thought things were looking up. Then a string of jobs that he couldn't hold on to came along. One thing or another conspired against him and Jack decided that the universe simply hated him.

He needed to find something to eat, and a warmer place to sleep tonight. He leaned back against the brick building, soaking the warmth of the day from it. Jack hated stealing, but it looked as if he didn't have much choice. He eased out into the normal flow of foot traffic along the sidewalk. The city center was very busy during the middle of the day and he should be able to snatch a shopping bag or even a wallet and slip into the crowd quickly.

Hating himself just a bit more, Jack began to scan the crowd as they stopped at the pelican crossing. Several possibilities presented themselves. Just in front of him, to the side a bit, was a woman carrying a handbag loosely in her hand while she chatted with the woman next to her. Jack could easily nick the bag and disappear. The only thing holding him back was the worn wedding ring on her finger. It glinted at him and made his stomach churn. This woman had a family she was feeding. Jack's gaze moved on.

Another possibility presented itself, however, when a man in an expensive suit started talking loudly on his mobile. Jack slid closer to him, ignoring the boring conversation about financial matters, and studied the man.

No wedding ring, not even a pale strip of skin there. That most likely meant no family at home. Jack almost bit through his lip when the man removed his wallet from his pocket and glanced inside it quickly before shoving it haphazardly back. Jack could still see the corner of the leather as the

crossing light changed and the crowd began to herd across the street.

Quickly, Jack picked up his pace to match the man's. Seeing his opportunity as the crossing crowd narrowed, he surged ahead, bumping into the man in a way that made it look like he had tripped.

"Sorry," he mumbled, continuing on, his head held down and his hand firmly holding the man's wallet in his own pocket.

He continued on past a few storefronts before ducking into a dark alleyway. Glancing around, Jack pulled out the wallet and gasped at the wedge of twenties inside. He could eat for months on that amount, and perhaps get a new jumper and trousers.

Relief flooded him, as well as an illness born of having to live as he did; nicking milk off of porches, eggs out of henhouses and sometimes even clothing off of drying lines wasn't exactly a step up in life. Neither was being a pickpocket.

Jack sighed and stuffed the wallet deep into his pocket—he wasn't the only thief around—before he turned on his heel to leave the alley. He slid to a stop, however, as the calculating eyes of the man watching him flashed.

Not wanting another run in with the coppers, Jack bolted down the alley, dodging left and right to shake the man. Unfortunately, he'd never been in this particular alley before and he came up to a dead stop.

Jack reached behind him and pulled his knife out, squaring himself as he'd learned over the years. The man, who had kept up with him well, held out his hands in supplication.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

* * *

Derek Graeber watched as the crowds ebbed and flowed along the sidewalks, coming and going throughout the day. He'd rarely seen this many people all at once, having grown up in a relatively isolated area. There were a few trips to London while growing up, but it was different to be out on his own now.

He could have gone to Oxford or Cambridge. But they didn't interest him as much as the other Uni's did. There was just so much... pomp and circumstance with the other two. His mother had nearly died when Derek had told them he was moving to Manchester to attend University. His father had just stared at him, mumbled something about wasted opportunities and thrown up his hands at the whole deal.

They just didn't understand how Derek, put through all the best public schools, could settle for what they considered a lesser education. But to him, the real education was in living life. It was in watching the crowds in front of him, in the way that people interacted with each other and the way the real world worked. Book learning could only get you so far, he thought.

Take the crowd standing in front of him now, as he sipped at his cup of overpriced coffee. There were businessmen on their mobiles, possibly out for tea and then back to the office. There were

posh ladies, their arms laden with shopping bags and their fancy clothing. Alongside them were the everyday workers, postmen, laborers... the usual mix.

Seeing them all mingling together was a study in real life, Derek thought.

He watched several groups come and go across the street before one man caught his attention. He was thin and rather average height with shaggy black hair and smudged glasses. He looked rather like a tramp, although a well kept one, at that. His clothing was repaired and moderately clean, although very used.

He stood near the back of the crowd, more observant than any person Derek remembered seeing. Quickly, hoping to watch the man for a bit, Derek finished his coffee and gathered his things, swinging his rucksack onto his back. He stayed far enough away that he could still see the man clearly, but not look as if he were staring.

The man shoved his hands deep into his pockets and glanced nervously around. He moved farther into the crowd and Derek followed, watching as the man sized up the people around him.

Derek finally caught on as the man stood near an older couple of ladies carrying heavy handbags. The man's hand came out and twitched, as if he were about to nick the bag. But something stopped him. Not understanding, but thinking the man might have lost his nerve, Derek followed, fully vested in the story unfolding in front of him.

The man in the expensive suit seemed to be the victim of choice. Derek felt a brief stab of guilt that he wasn't going to stop the robbery, but pushed it aside. Something about the black-haired man compelled him to keep watching.

The crowd around them began to move as the crossing light changed and Derek watched in amazement as the man lifted the wallet without being detected. Derek wanted to laugh, just a bit, at the skill shown—until he saw the face of the man. Anguish and disgust shone clearly in his bright green eyes.

Entranced further, Derek followed the man until he ducked into an alley, hiding in the dark shadow of the entrance as the man inspected his find.

Realization began to set in as Derek watched the gamut of expressions that shaded the man's face. This man had to be homeless, or very nearly, anyway. The wad in that wallet was probably enough to feed him for a long time.

The most striking thing, however, was how young he actually seemed. He couldn't be more than a few years older than Derek himself. He was good looking, but wore a heavy cloud of care.

Derek started when the man looked up and caught him watching. The man jumped into action, and instinctively, Derek followed, chasing him down the alley.

The dead stop came faster than Derek was predicting and the man spun, facing him. Fear jumped through him as a lethal looking knife was produced. Derek held out his hands, trying to indicate that his motive wasn't to hurt the man.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

The man’s eyes darkened and he shifted his stance, bracing himself even further.

“I promise,” Derek called out. “That was some talent—I’ll bet he never knew you lifted that.”

“What do you want?”

Derek’s face twitched as he stood completely still. There was no doubt in his mind that this man would defend himself, violently, if provoked.

“Can I... can I buy you a cuppa?”

The knife lowered a fraction of an inch as the man scowled at him. “A what?”

“A cuppa,” Derek repeated, willing himself to relax a bit. “Or something to nosh.”

The man lowered the knife the rest of the way, but Derek could tell that it would flash into action again at the slightest provocation.

“Come on,” he cajoled. “I just... you look like you could use a cuppa.”

He wasn’t sure what convinced the man, but he nodded slowly, peering into Derek’s eyes and making him shiver as if he’d been thoroughly judged.

“Alright,” the man said finally, his voice rather harsh and raspy.

Derek breathed a sigh of relief and gestured back down the alley. The two fell into an easy stride, far enough apart that the man could get away if he desired. A bit confused at his own motivations, Derek searched for something to say. He half expected the man to bolt once they’d reached the busy street, but he didn’t. Together, they walked toward a small, mostly empty café.

“I’m new in town,” Derek shrugged. “I could use someone to show me around. What do you say?”

Chapter 3

June 2000 through July 2001

The wedding marquee took up most of the entirety of the garden at the Burrow, standing out bright white against the luscious green of the summer trees. Ron's eyes traced the edges of it as he fiddled with his tie, his fingers feeling thick and cumbersome.

"Let me help," Neville insisted, nudging Ron's hands away from his throat and grinning when Ron grumbled.

"I can never do these on myself," Ron explained, staring up at the ceiling as Neville twisted and tugged at the fabric.

"How did you manage at school then?" Neville asked with a chuckle. "You always had yours tied."

Ron felt his ears heat a bit. "I made Harry hold it, and then I just slipped it over my head."

Neville's movements stilled for a second before he nodded firmly and flattened out the tie against Ron's throat. "Gran made me learn," he shrugged. "I used to stand in front of the mirror for hours tying and untying granddad's old neckties."

Ron glanced at himself in the mirror and was surprised at the perfectly tied knot. "Thanks, Nev."

"No problem," Neville shrugged and sat down onto the edge of the bed. "Someone will be up for us when it's time to go."

Ron nodded absently and slid a finger around his collar, pulling it away from the warm flesh there. His old room, being at the very top of the Burrow, always collected all the heat. Cooling charms could only do so much, he'd learned over the years. Of course, by the time he'd been able to do them himself, he'd moved to his own flat.

"Ron."

He turned at Neville's soft voice. "Yeah?"

Ron was reminded of the once-pudgy boy that he and Harry had met on the train to Hogwarts in that moment. Neville was looking down at his polished shoes, biting his bottom lip and seemed to be contemplating something deeply.

"I'm not taking his place, you know."

His heart jumped into his throat. There was no need to ask who Neville was talking about. They'd had this conversation when Ron had asked Neville to stand up for him at the wedding.

"I know, Nev." Ron's eyes returned to the window, looking beyond the tent now to the two gleaming black headstones he could just make out under the tree on the edge of the orchard.

Neville joined him and they stood shoulder to shoulder. "He'd be happy for you both."

Ron smiled, picturing Harry's face grinning at him and probably coming up with some off-color comment about marrying Hermione and how he'd known it would happen since they were all twelve.

"I hope so," Ron said, hating that his voice hitched.

"Not getting melancholy now, are you, little brother?"

Ron rolled his eyes as Fred and George walked into the room, identical in their loud, bright purple robes.

"Has Mum seen what you're planning on wearing to my wedding?" Ron quipped, feeling the need to blink his eyes at their brightness.

"Why, of course, good man," Fred beamed, straightening his lapels.

"No she hasn't," he snickered. "Because the two of you wouldn't be up here hiding from her if she had."

George shifted and glanced around guiltily. "We may have distracted her a bit."

Neville snorted next to him and Ron laughed.

"Anyway," Fred continued. "Remus just came upstairs and told us to get you. It's time."

"Time to tie the knot..." George grinned.

Fred snickered. "Join the wands..."

"Shackle yourself..."

"Strap on the old ball and chain..."

"Do the deed."

"No, no, brother," Fred grinned, "that comes later." Ron could tell, however, that they both had planned this. He wondered how many times they had practiced, trying to find just the right words to make him turn bright red.

Ron couldn't help the blush that spread over his face. Neville sounded like he was choking to death and the twins seemed very satisfied with themselves.

"We get the picture," he stated, moving toward his brothers to usher them out of the room. "We'll be right down."

Fred and George left, quipping degrading and more and more salacious terms as they continued down the stairway. Ron closed the door with a click. He smiled guiltily at Neville and shrugged.

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine,” Neville waived it away and moved to collect his outer robes from the edge of the bed. “You have your wand.”

Ron patted his pocket, feeling the slim wood there. “Yeah. You have the ring?”

“Yeah,” Neville nodded. He smiled readily and slapped Ron on the back as they opened the door and made their way down to the kitchen, where Ron’s mother would no doubt be waiting for them impatiently.

When they passed the landing where Ginny’s room used to be, Ron reached out and ran his fingers along the wood there, thinking less about the girl currently inside than the one who used to live there. Ginny should be there now, as should Harry, helping Hermione get ready. Instead, Hermione had asked Luna to stand for her.

And Luna had been great, really. She’d been there for both of them one hundred percent. She had just the right knack for mentioning something entirely absurd at a moment when the tension in the room was too thick to deal with. Ron had been completely shocked when she’d gone off on some tangent during a planning meeting about some unknown plant that would make a perfect centerpiece for the head table. Hermione had only smiled serenely and nudged Ron, explaining in a low whisper that Luna was only doing it to relieve stress and to make them relax. Suddenly, Luna’s timing and her love of the unusual made a whole lot more sense.

“Did Luna ever convince Hermione to allow her to wear yellow?” he asked, grinning at the thought.

Neville chuckled. “No, she finally relented. I thought Hermione was going to strangle her.”

“Well, I’m sure old Xenophilius will show up in his proper wedding attire,” Ron said. A fondness for eccentricities welled up inside of him. At least he would be able to laugh a few times today.

* * *

Neville was extremely nervous about making his toast. He knew that his part was coming up soon, because the meal was almost over.

Looking out over the crowd, strangely, didn’t make him more nervous as he’d imagined it would. Instead, seeing old friends from school, the large showing of redheaded Weasleys and a handful of other people whom he’d known for years, Neville took strength from their smiling, content faces.

He could feel the parchment he’d written his speech down on in the pocket of his dress shirt, but patted it just to make sure. Neville had struggled with what to say for weeks. He’d even gone to Professor Lupin—Remus, he still insisted Neville call him—and asked him to look over what he’d written. The man had read through it and congratulated Neville on doing so well.

But now, Neville wasn’t sure if he could deliver what he’d written. He glanced at Ron and Hermione, thrilled at the entirely content and smitten looks on their faces. When he thought about what he should say... what he’d planned to say... somehow it just didn’t seem right.

He continued to think about it, watching the crowd in front of him. Professor Lupin and his wife, Tonks were there; their daughter sitting on her mother's lap and making grabs at the cake as her hair changed colors randomly.

Hagrid sat in the back of the tent, crowded into a corner with some of the Hogwarts professors. He waved a meaty hand at Neville and beamed at him.

Fred and George, he knew, were up to something. That should prove entertaining, he thought as he shuddered. Hopefully they'd hold off until he was finished speaking at least.

Dean and Seamus were seated at a table not far away. Their attention, however, was on the lithe figure of Gabrielle Delacour who sat with Bill and Fleur. Neville did notice, however, the young woman stealing looks at the two men as well.

His eyes continued around the room until they jerked to rest on the far side of the marquee. It was beginning to grow dark, the lightning bugs glowing in the pre-dark light out, flitting in and out of the garden. There was just enough light, however, to make out the two gravestones that he and Ron had been staring at earlier in the day.

His own words came back to him in that moment. 'I'm not replacing him...'

No one should ever replace Harry, Neville knew. He also knew that no one could.

And Ginny... well, she was her own kind of special.

Neville felt a chill rush through him, despite the heat of the evening. He knew what he wanted to say.

His time came a few minutes later and he stood, holding his shaking goblet up in front of him and clearing his throat.

"I had this toast all planned, tonight. I was going to talk about how wonderful Ron and Hermione look, and how much they deserve to be together."

He glanced over to find both Hermione and Ron watching him, curious looks on their faces. Luna, dressed stunningly in pale pink, gave him a look that he took only courage from. Somehow, he had no doubt that she knew what he was going to say.

"And they do, don't get me wrong," he smiled. "I think it was said best by their best friend, Harry Potter." Neville focused his eyes on the back of the tent, immersing himself in the memory fully. "In our sixth year, when Ron was still chasing Lavender Brown around," he heard Hermione huff mightily next to him and several others chuckle in the room. "And Hermione was sending flocks of canaries after him," the twins hooted loudly and whistled. Neville didn't need to look around to feel the heat from the blushes of the couple next to him. "Harry said something to me that just... rang true. He and I were in the Common Room one day when Ron and Hermione had just had one of their blazing rows. 'I wonder when they'll realize how much in love they are with each other,' he said." Neville chuckled at the memory of Harry's face, awash in wonder and disbelief. "Which I thought was a bit ironic considering how arse over elbow he was over Ginny at the time." Ripples of laughter flittered through the guests.

“And he was right,” Neville continued, holding his glass aloft. “Ron and Hermione were made for each other. Harry could see it then—and he’d definitely agree that it’s about time that we were all here, at their wedding.” He grinned, glancing back to see Hermione wipe tears away and Ron lean over to kiss her cheek, “To Ron and Hermione!”

Later that evening, dancing in Luna’s arms, Neville felt fully contented with his decision to change his toast. Using Harry’s words, not his own, to define Ron and Hermione’s relationship just seemed right.

“I loved the toast, Neville,” Luna said, her voice sending shivers down his spine. “And I’m sure Harry would have wanted to say those words if he’d been able to speak today.”

“Yeah, if he were here,” Neville sighed, feeling the weight of their missing friend profoundly.

Luna peered at him through wide blue eyes. “But Harry was here, Neville. Don’t you feel him all around you?” She cocked her head thoughtfully, as if listening to something Neville couldn’t hear. “Ginny as well.”

He stared at her, wondering if she truly could hear something. It wouldn’t be the first time. He could remember, very clearly, she and Harry in the Veil Room at the Ministry, being able to hear voices. Hermione had attributed it later to both Luna and Harry witnessing death. But Neville had always been able to see thestrals, just as they could.

“I feel them both around me every day,” Luna continued, a happy smile on her face. Her fingers brushed the back of his neck and Neville shivered—not just from the subject they were talking about.

“I do sometimes,” he admitted, pulling her a little closer. Luna nuzzled under his chin, pressing her ear over his heart. “And one day we’ll see them again.”

* * *

A contented sigh escaped Molly as she looked over her brood, now gathered for a Saturday morning breakfast at the Burrow. It wasn’t often that they met on a day other than the first Sunday of the month. However, several circumstances had arisen that made it necessary for more than one couple to miss tomorrow’s dinner. Having breakfast together had been Percy’s suggestion, and had been embraced whole-heartedly by everyone.

It meant that Molly had needed to get up earlier than she had for a long time. With the children gone now, she didn’t feel the need to rise and make a huge meal every morning. But today the fry-up had been enjoyable and brought back wonderful memories for the Weasley Matriarch.

She bustled around, refilling juice glasses, kissing cheeks, wiping porridge off of tiny faces, and generally enjoying listening to the varied conversations in the room.

“... no, we’ve finally finished testing that. It’s about ready to go out on the shelves...”

“... Ron, I’m just saying that the Aurors could really use something like this...”

“... and then the Minister said...”

“... Fred, would you please watch your daughters, they just dumped juice all over my lap...”

“... no, I don’t honestly think that she’ll grow up to act like that...”

Over the heads of her children, their spouses and the six grandchildren, Molly caught her husband’s eye and he winked at her. She sighed again and allowed herself to sink into the chair that had always been hers, directly across the table from her husband.

Overall, it was an exhausting, but pleasurable, meal with only two incidents. George’s twin sons were calmed and cleaned up of the porridge they’d decided to throw at Orion, and Victoire was comforted when she cried for attention.

Molly began to levitate dish after dish to the sink when she was met by a window full of owls, blinking their wide eyes at her. She gasped in fright and clasped her hand to her thundering heart.

“Didn’t the paper already come?” Bill mused, his hand trailing over her shoulders as he moved around her to open the window. Several owls fluttered in, depositing rolled cylinders of parchment around the table.

“Must be a special edition,” Ron said, through a mouthful of potatoes.

“Oh no,” Hermione gasped. Molly’s eyes went wide as she snatched one of the rolls and opened it quickly, her face hidden by her hair as she scanned it, her head rocking side to side.

“I can’t believe she managed it,” Remus said, scowling in distaste at his own copy of the paper.

“What?” Molly asked, feeling a bit frantic. Everyone seemed engrossed in the news.

“Rita Skeeter,” Bill drawled. “She’s at it again.”

“The old cow,” Ron muttered treacherously, pushing the remnants of his breakfast away from him as if they disgusted him now.

Fred cleared his throat and started to read aloud.

“Harry Potter—Chosen One or Not? Due out next week is Rita Skeeter’s latest biography details the life of our hero, Harry Potter. From the tragic beginnings of his life, to the disturbing images of his childhood, and the recklessness of youth, Rita uncovers hidden skeletons in the closet of the boy we believed was destined to save us all.”

“Ruddy cow,” Ron reiterated, staring at his wife, who was beginning to shake as she got further and further down the article.

George picked up where his twin left off, reading over his shoulder. “Did Harry suffer from madness? What was the prophecy that marked this boy, only just able to walk when he first met You-Know-Who, to be the saviour of the Wizarding world? What was his relationship with Albus Dumbledore, and why was Harry allowed so much leverage while at Hogwarts? How was this boy, a mere eighteen years old, able to defeat the most feared Wizard in history? These questions and

much more are answered when Betty Braithwaite was allowed an exclusive interview with Rita, see page 8.”

Pages rustled all over the room as page eight was located. Molly moved so that she could see the paper over her husband’s shoulder. A photograph of Harry staring dully at Dumbledore, his hand still clutching the lifeless body of Cedric Diggory, graced the top of the page. Molly winced, hating that she could remember that moment so vividly.

Below that photograph was one of Rita Skeeter, wearing her bejeweled glasses and grinning up at them, giving what Molly assumed was supposed to be pleasant wave now and again.

Bill cleared his throat and took his turn at reading.

“I’ve been waiting for years to publish my book on Harry Potter,” the author tells me over a perfect cup of tea at a lovely little tea shop in Hogsmeade. Rita has been kind enough to take a moment from her frighteningly busy schedule to gossip with me about her latest book. Her series of biographies of famous Witches and Wizards adds another chapter with this edition, sure to be a best seller.

“What collection would be complete without a book on Harry Potter?” Skeeter asks with a quick wink.

Unlike her previous editions, this seven-hundred-page book was delayed almost two years after the death of Harry Potter. When I asked her about that, Rita explained. “I thought it best, you see, to give the family a proper period of mourning before the book came out.”

I also asked if Potter’s friends had been contacted to participate in the book. Rita gave a sad sigh and nodded. “Yes, I did ask Hermione Granger, his former girlfriend, and Reginald Weasley to give their thoughts about their friend. They declined, of course. Personally, I think they’ve both been terribly affected by the tragedy of young Harry’s demise. It makes one wonder at the nature of such a relationship.

“I was, however, able to speak to several of Harry’s classmates and I’ve got a very good picture of his school years.”

And what of his early years, I ask, knowing that nothing more than speculation and rumor abound about those missing ten years.

“Well,” Rita leans forward in her chair, an air of mystery and secrecy about her, “I was also able to find the Muggle relatives that Harry lived with for those years. Harry’s youth was very troubled,” she shakes her head sadly. “There are tales of wild, accidental magic, abuse of younger children in the neighborhood, and horrid fits of madness.”

Shocked at this revelation, I ask Rita what the worst surprise was. Rita laughs at her, sounding like the tinkling of a bell.

“Now, now, Betty, if I told you all of my secrets, then no one would need to buy my book, would they?”

I also asked about Harry's love life. Rita's articles, published earlier in Harry's life, hint at a close relationship with Hermione Granger. Were there other witches in Harry's life?

Rita grins and taps her perfectly manicured nails on the table. "Of course, Harry never got over the betrayal of his first love, Hermione Granger. She traipsed around the castle, flaunting one relationship after another right under Harry's nose, without a thought to the poor boy's heart. It seems that, in her grief, she has turned to Harry's best friend, Roland Weasley. I've even heard that they were married a few months ago. Poor girl will probably never get over losing Harry. And poor Roland, fated to always remain in a dead man's shadow."

"Of course, Harry had his flings as well," Rita continues with a scandalous grin. "I talk all about that in chapter four."

It's common knowledge that Potter was found, dead, alongside rumored girlfriend, Ginevra Weasley. I asked about this and Rita squirms in her chair, positively bursting with glee at this question.

"Yes, he was supposedly seeing Ginevra, or Ginny as her friends called her, at the time of his death. However, several sources have confirmed that they broke up in the spring of 1997."

I asked how it was possible then, that Miss Weasley was by his side when he faced off with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Rita gave me a knowing look, which has me absolutely shaking with the need to purchase this book to find out all the juicy details.

"That is a sad part of this tale, I'm afraid," she frowns. "Young Ginevra was positively obsessed with Harry. She was forever chasing after him, dropping his name into conversations and claiming to be in a relationship with him. I honestly think that Harry did date her out of pity for the homely young thing and to ease his own broken heart after Hermione Granger trampled it once again."

"However," she continues, "that is possibly the most tragic thing our Harry could have done. Ginevra Weasley had a troubled past, tainted by magic of the darkest kind. She herself was associated with the wizard who we know as Lord Voldemort. From her tender first years at Hogwarts, classmates describe a girl who suffered from unpredictable mood swings. One minute she was reserved and shy, the next she was brandishing her wand in your face, they tell me. And she left a wake of destroyed and brokenhearted wizards in her path."

When I gasp in shock, Rita nods sadly, wiping at the moisture that has gathered in her eyes during the distressing tale.

The rumors still abound to this day as to how Potter was able to defeat the Dark Lord. When I ask Rita, she chuckles and shakes her head. "You're not going to pry that information out of me, Betty, my dear. But... I will say that I have garnered an exclusive interview with the only survivor of that fateful battle, Mr. Draco Malfoy."

Finished digging scandalous details from the book, I felt compelled to ask about Rita's recent stint in Azkaban.

She is contrite and shamed as she admits that she dabbled in becoming an Animagus and had not finished registering with the Ministry when she was turned in.

"I've paid my debt to society," she defends penitently. "And I hope that my incorrect choices can be an example to young witches and wizards around the world. In fact, I'm considering a book about my experiences with the law after this latest edition is completed."

I'm sure, as all her other books have been, that story would be another best seller. Rita bid me a good day as she went on about her busy schedule and I returned to my humble reporter's desk, shivering in anticipation of the secrets this newest book will reveal."

Stunned silence filled the kitchen at the Burrow as Bill finished reading the article. Molly glanced up to where Hermione was staring at the parchment, building fury etched on her features. Molly had never before seen a fire in her daughter-in-law's eyes like it was. There was no doubt that nothing short of murder was running through her mind.

"That... absolute..." she spluttered, searching for the appropriate words.

"Cow?" Fred asked, his waggling eyebrows showing behind the Daily Prophet that he and George had been sharing.

"Berk?" George added, grinning around one side of the paper. Molly rolled her eyes. She did, however, appreciate what they were trying to do. Levity had always been their way of dealing with most stressful situations.

"Clot?"

"Oooh, nice one, my good looking fellow," George cheered. "How about nitwit?"

"Nah," Fred shook his head. "Not nearly vicious enough. What about—"

"ENOUGH!" Hermione roared, whipping her wand out and shooting a rather violent orange spell that disintegrated the newspaper in front of the twins. Molly gasped as Hermione gave an inarticulate roar and stormed into the living room.

"Merlin," Ron moaned, pushing his chair out from the table. "Er... sorry about that..." He shifted on his feet, edging closer to the door while looking guiltily at his brothers. "She's... well, she's been—"

"Just go, Ron," Remus shook his head, concern filling his face.

"Right," Ron quickly ducked out the door and the rest of the family turned to see George lick his finger, reach over and put out the tiny flame that was singeing Fred's eyebrow.

"Wow," Bill said, staring at the fluttering remnants of the newspaper smoldering to the ground.

Molly took a deep breath, trying to grasp what had just happened in her kitchen. She turned to Arthur, looking for a bit of guidance, only to scowl at the look of utter glee on his face.

Tonks, it seemed, found the situation hilarious as well, since her hair flashed several colors. Her laughter couldn't be held back any further and she finally gave it up as a bad job, tossing her hands up and filling the kitchen with laughter. Several others followed, including Fred and George themselves.

Molly wanted to be scandalized, but the overwhelming stress of the situation, along with Hermione's... creative release was almost more than she could handle. Despite trying to hold it back, a giggle escaped her traitorous lips as well.

"I think we needed that," Remus said, a smile breaking through his concern.

Fred and George, inspired by Hermione, proceeded to set fire to all of the newspapers in varying and imaginative ways.

Molly sank down next to her husband, leaning her head onto his shoulder when his arm came around her.

"This isn't supposed to happen," she shook her head, thinking back to the hurtful accusations in the article. The book would surely be worse, she knew.

"I know, Mollywobbles," Arthur whispered into her hair. "But we'll get through it."

She nodded, closing her eyes and taking a small bit of comfort from the discussion about the best way to destroy the last remaining Daily Prophet. Yes, they'd get through it, together.

* * *

Arthur hummed a Celestina Warbeck song as he walked slowly through the halls of the Ministry. Molly had been lightly singing it this morning while she made breakfast and it had stuck in his head. It was just nice to see her starting to be happy again. Things had been going so well until that awful Rita Skeeter book had come out a few months ago. Molly had gone to bed for three days when the first articles had come out in the Daily Prophet detailing the stories inside the book.

He rotated his shoulder slightly, wincing at the numbness and pain that shot through the joint and down his arm. He must have slept wrong on that side of his body, he decided. Brushing aside the discomfort of his aging body, Arthur peeked his head inside his former office in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department. It didn't seem the same now that he'd been gone so long. Perkins must not be in yet, he thought as he eyed the empty room with several parchment airplanes circling the ceiling.

"Best get on with the day," Arthur muttered to himself as he made his way over to the lifts. His new office was on the next floor near the heart of Auror Headquarters. It made him much more aware of what was going on, but in the same respect, offered much less peace and quiet.

Once in the lift, Arthur grimaced at the tingling down his arm and shifted in his spot.

"Injured, Arthur?"

He chuckled at the question from Mafalda Hopkirk, who looked as if she'd just arrived for the day.

"Nothing more than rheumatism, I'm afraid," he chuckled. "Rheumatism and old age."

"Ah," she nodded her agreement. "Yes, aging is not for the faint of heart, is it?"

Arthur nodded fervently and then held out his hand to steady himself as a wave of dizziness washed

over him. Maybe he was coming down with something, was his immediate thought. Two of the grandchildren, Victoire and Orion, had been to visit during the weekend and both had been fighting the sniffles. Well, Molly would fix him right up with a dose of Pepper-Up potion as soon as he got home. His ears would be steaming in no time.

“Have a nice day, Arthur,” Mafalda greeted as the doors opened and Arthur blinked to get his bearings.

“You as well,” he nodded back. The doors closed behind him and he was left standing alone in the empty hallway. He shivered and realized he’d broken out in a sweat. Maybe he’d best go to his office and contemplate seeing a Healer today.

The numbness from his arm seemed to be spreading as he shuffled down the corridor. He could see his door and hoped that he’d be able to make it further without the rest of his body giving out on him.

Voices from the Auror office sounded and Arthur did his best to straighten and not grimace. A woman and her small daughter exited, probably seeing the father off to work. The little girl clasped her mother’s hand tightly as she skipped along, her coppery, curled hair bouncing as she flounced along.

Arthur’s heart gave a mighty jolt as his mind flashed to another place and another time—where another redheaded little girl, holding tight to her father’s hand bounced along these same hallways, impishly grinning up at him and melting his heart.

The little girl waved at him as they passed and Arthur’s vision blinked black a time or two. He swayed on the spot and shuffled forward. Only a few more steps to his office. His vision tunneled and he drew himself along the hallway, fighting rising panic with the pounding of his heart.

Once he’d gotten inside the office door, he closed it quickly, hoping to block out the memories that were drowning him. Ginny laughing at something the twins had done to Ron, Harry finally smiling as if he had just accepted he was part of their family, a tiny round face looking out from pink blankets and Molly’s voice telling him that he finally had a daughter, the strength and determination of a sixteen year old Ginny looking radiant in the golden robes at Bill’s wedding, Harry’s face, determined and dirt-caked, at the Final Battle.

... two blackened bodies, lying side by side in a charred and burnt clearing in the forest...

Arthur grunted heavily, all the air escaping from his lungs, as the floor came up to meet him. The dusty smell of the carpet filled his lungs as he struggled for breath. His head pounded—a blinding pain that he couldn’t begin to grasp the edges of.

Vaguely, the idea that he needed help flittered in and out of his mind, but he couldn’t make his arms work to reach his wand. He closed his eyes briefly, grimacing and groaning at the blinding pain. Black spots swam in his vision when he opened them again to see two shiny black shoes. He heard another voice speaking but couldn’t make out the words before everything went entirely black and he surrendered to the pain.

His last thoughts were of the shiny, red hair of his little girl.

Ron yawned deeply, stretching his arms above his head and feeling his back crack loudly. He winced at the stab of pain caused by the low sofa he'd been kipping on.

"Go home, Ron," Charlie's gravelly voice sounded from across the dark room.

"When did you get in?" Ron asked.

Charlie sparked a light in the fireplace and the kindling started to crackle, spreading warm light through the room. He stood slowly and Ron could hear him sigh. "A few hours ago."

"You should have woken me, you blighter," Ron scolded, standing to shake his brother's hand and pull him into a hug.

Charlie chuckled softly and shook his head. "You looked too peaceful, lying there with your mouth open, drool hanging off your chin and roaring like one of my dragons. Merlin, Ron, you need to get that thing looked at." He laughed as Ron took a swing at him.

It was good to see his brother again. Even seeing him five months ago seemed too long. Ron was sure that it was the shock of his dad's stroke that made the whole family come together closer than before.

"So... how long are you here for?" Ron asked, rubbing his eyes and blinking away the sleep. He really should get home to Hermione, but all of the brothers had made a vow not to leave their mother alone while their father was still recuperating. It just happened to be Ron's night.

Charlie sank down onto the sofa and rubbed the back of his neck. "Actually..." Ron narrowed his eyes at seeing Charlie fidget. Charlie was a lot like the twins, he thought—rarely embarrassed and only rarely blushing. "We're moving back here."

Ron was thrilled and slapped him on the knee until one of those words sank in deeper to his brain. "That's great—hang on! 'We'?"

"Er... yeah," Charlie shifted guiltily. "Magdalena and I... Maggie..." He tugged at the collar of his shirt and Ron grinned, finally catching on. "Well, she's upstairs sleeping now."

"Serious?"

"Yeah," Charlie grinned, holding up his finger and wiggling it, showing off the glint of gold.

Ron's jaw dropped and he stared at his older brother, and then glanced at the closed door that led to his parent's bedroom, almost waiting for his mother to storm out after smelling the guilt in the air.

"You're married? When?"

"Shhhh!" Charlie scolded, "no one knows." He shot his own look at the stairs and Ron smirked. "Four weeks," he admitted. "We were going to tell everyone... but..."

Ron narrowed his eyes at the nervousness and then started as something inside his head clicked. "When's the baby due?"

Charlie grimaced and rolled his neck, working a stiff kink out of it. "Four months."

"Merlin's pants, Charlie," Ron mumbled, a grin spreading over his face. "No one knows?"

"Well," Charlie shrugged. "Bill knows... and now you."

"Wow," Ron shook his head and whistled low. "I don't want to be you in the morning."

"Mum knew we were seeing each other."

"Bet she didn't know you were—"

"That's enough," Charlie stood, agitated. "Besides, we're moving back here now. That'll soften the blow."

Ron contemplated that and decided that he and Hermione might just need to plan on having breakfast at the Burrow.

"How are things?" Charlie asked, pacing near the fireplace and studying the framed photographs there. He stopped in front of an old one, taken back a few years before Ron had gotten his Hogwarts letter.

"Better," Ron shrugged. "Dad's still dealing with some issues from the stroke. He has trouble walking some days and his right side isn't as strong as it used to be. But he's talking well again."

"Bill told me they moved their room down here," Charlie said, glancing around the living room.

"Yeah," Ron nodded. "We came a few days before he got out of hospital and moved everything into the small room off of the entry. It's easier for him not to have to deal with the stairs. Bill enlarged it."

"Sounds like you've been taking care of things well, Ron," Charlie complimented. Ron flushed and rubbed the back of his neck. He still felt very guilty for missing the signs of his father's ill health, even though Hermione assured him that it was virtually impossible to catch everything.

"We've been trying."

"How's Hermione holding up?"

Ron sighed, leaning back into the cushions and staring up at the cracked ceiling. There was a stain there from some twin disaster when Ron had been younger. Ron traced a thin crack all the way across the room where it joined the wall. "She's fine. She's got it into her head to write her own book now. To try and get Harry and Ginny's real story out there."

"Damned Skeeter," Charlie seethed, leaning his back against the warming stones near the fireplace. "Anything Hermione writes will be well received."

“Yeah,” Ron nodded. “If she can get it done. I think this really hit her when the book came out. She’d been working so hard to stop Rita from publishing it.”

“She bought us two years,” Charlie shrugged.

Ron agreed and then shrugged. “But Hermione’s been having a hard time with it. She says it’s really hard to put into words what Harry meant to her—to us all. And she can’t quite deal with Ginny’s section yet.”

“I can only imagine,” Charlie said sympathetically while he scrubbed at his face with calloused hands.

“We’ve actually... well...” Ron trailed off, studying his hands and picking at a scab on the back of one of them. “We’ve been thinking about starting a family as well.” The thought made him smile now—although at times when the idea popped into his head, Ron wanted to go screaming down the halls of the Ministry. Was it normal to be elated and scared completely out of your mind by the same idea?

“But Hermione wants to make a bit more headway on the book first.”

Charlie grinned and nodded his understanding.

“She was having a rough time of it and took what she had to Remus. He told her that those who would read and believe Skeeter’s trash will still be around in a year or two. And maybe the extra time might be just what she needs to put her feelings into words.”

“That sounds like good advice, Ron,” Charlie complimented.

“Yeah,” he agreed, yawning again.

“Go home, Ron,” Charlie said again, smiling slowly. “We can talk more later.”

Ron nodded, standing and moving over to the fireplace, looking at the same picture Charlie had been studying earlier.

“She was so beautiful,” he murmured, his thick finger tracing Ginny’s face, even as the image tried to dodge his touch.

“She was,” Charlie agreed, his voice thick. “This is the reason we came home,” he said softly. Ron understood, without him elaborating further.

Family. It was the reason Ron did everything he did now. It had taken him years to fully understand what Harry had known all along. Everything was about family.

Ron sighed, thinking of what he would see now if he were given a chance at the Mirror of Erised. He was fairly sure he knew what image would be staring back at him.

He closed his eyes, trying to remember the awe of an eleven year-old boy standing in front of that magical mirror. How could he have... wasted... that moment on personal glory? It made his ears burn simply thinking about it now. The image that swam to the front of his mind was truly his heart’s

greatest desire; a family full of love and laughter, complete with Harry and Ginny and the hoard of red-headed, green-eyed children that he wished he'd be able to spoil rotten as their favorite uncle.

That image faded as Ron opened his eyes, just as it always did when faced with the morning light after his best dreams.

"Have a good night, Charlie," he said softly, grabbing a handful of floo powder from the can on the mantel and disappearing through the green flames.

* * *

Sighing heavily, Jack pushed his hands violently through his hair and shoved the books away from him. The words were swimming in front of his eyes, not making sense any longer.

"Biology?" Derek grunted from where he too was buried in books.

Jack nodded. "Yeah. I can't seem to get past this chapter, though." He slid his glasses off and rubbed at his tired eyes before slipping them back on. His wristwatch came back into focus and he swore mightily. "I've got to go. I'm going to be late."

Derek looked up from his work and grimaced. "Wills will be fine with it, don't worry."

"No," Jack sighed gathering up his revising and shoving it roughly into his rucksack. "I was late the other day too." Snatching a jumper off the back of a rickety chair, he quipped a quick goodbye to his flat mate and charged out the door.

He pulled a knit hat over his head as he slid around the corner, barely keeping his footing on the icy sidewalk.

Since meeting Derek last April, Jack's life had changed dramatically. He now had a decent place to stay and was fulfilling a dream to attend University. However, the challenge was in working two jobs to be able to pay his share of the rent, food costs and the fees for school.

Derek had been able to get him hired on at Lang's Market stocking shelves once the store closed. Jack had impressed the owner with his strong work ethic and desire to prove himself.

He'd also started just this past fall at Harper's Discount Books unloading heavy boxes off of the large trucks that came in.

Add to that the hours of courses that he'd signed up for and the hours of revising, and it made for very little time for Jack to do anything else.

Derek had time for chasing birds and going on dates—Jack didn't allow himself that luxury. Yes, he looked and watched the girls—he was still male, after all. There would be time for that later, Jack thought. Right now he needed to scratch his way through Uni, to give himself a shot at a better life.

Only falling twice, Jack slid into the market with only a few minutes to spare before his shift started.

"Almost late again, Ingalls," José, the other man who stocked shelves with him, grinned.

Jack allowed a smile to escape in between his harsh breaths. "Yeah. Wills here yet?"

"No," José shook his head. "He wouldn't care if you were late, you know. He's just glad you're still here—being a fresher and all."

Jack chuckled and shoved his things into his cubby, pulling out the thick gloves he wore while unloading the pallets of boxes and tins. His hands were already a mass of scratches and scars—no need to add to them.

The two men attacked the work voraciously, both knowing that the faster the work was done, the earlier they would get to go home. For Jack, it meant another few hours he could read over his Biology text before the class in the morning.

Derek had once asked Jack why he worked so hard. Jack had only stared at his friend, feeling jealousy well in him at Derek's easy life. It wasn't as if Derek lorded his wealth or upbringing over Jack at all. In fact, Jack had nothing but respect for the way his friend had decided to make his own way in the world, rather than rely on his wealthy parents' name and fortune. The two lived in a more impoverished section of town—Jack out of need, Derek out of interest. Derek did make regular withdrawals from his education fund, and had offered to pay Jack's way as well, purely out of friendship. But Jack had, on principle, refused. There was no way he would take more than Derek had already offered. It was something that went unspoken between the two.

Jack's back ached as he muscled the massive boxes of tinned goods. He could hear José singing a horrid rendition of the seventies song playing over the market loud speakers. It was off key, but a familiar sound after working so many nights together. Seven nights a week.

He shook his head, wiping sweat from his brow and jumped out of the way as José trudged through, pulling a huge pallet of tins behind him on a pallet jack.

"Don't just bodge it," Jack called out, getting only a rude hand gesture in return.

By the end of the evening, Jack's arms were screaming at him and he could barely keep his eyes open as he stumbled through the deserted, frozen streets and into the deathly silent flat. He staggered down the hallway, stopping to stare at the blue and gold striped tie hanging off of Derek's doorknob.

He shook his head, thankful that he hadn't been home earlier and that the night's activities seemed to be over for the time being. He really didn't want to hear that right now.

Staring at his books later as he lay in his bed, Jack decided that reading now didn't make much sense. He wouldn't remember a word anyway. A giggle sounded from the room next to his and Jack groaned, pulling his pillow over his head and trying to block out the sounds of Derek's love life.

* * *

Tonks watched as Hermione patiently answered Ori's questions about the book that Hermione had just gifted her with for her second birthday. Tonks had a sad feeling that the moment the newness wore off, the book would be relegated to the dusty pile of seldom used items in Orion's bedroom. However, for the moment, the animated jungle animals dancing around the tree in the center of

the cover had the little girl fascinated.

“She’s very bright,” Hermione complimented, once Ori had asked all of her questions and moved on to play at the small table that held her plastic tea set.

Tonks gave a wink. “No, that’s just her hair.” She and Hermione chuckled over the joke. “Yellow has become her favorite color lately and she’s constantly finding new shades to demonstrate.

“The book I read said it takes years to master the change,” Hermione observed, accepting the cup of tea that Tonks offered.

“It can,” Tonks nodded, sliding her leg underneath her in the seat and adding entirely too much sugar to her tea. “I think it’ll help that I can do it. I can explain to her how to slow things down and concentrate on what she wants to look like.”

“Was it hard for you?” Hermione asked.

Tonks thought about the question for a moment before shrugging. “I guess so,” she admitted. “But it’s not like I knew anything different. For me it was a challenge—something to set me apart from everyone else.”

“When I learned about you,” Hermione explained, “I have to admit I was a little jealous.” She gave a nervous little giggle and Tonks grinned, wrinkling her brow and changing her hair to mimic Hermione’s bushy brown curls.

“Well, it’s a curse that I gladly bear,” Tonks sighed, returning to her spiky pink look.

The two lapsed into comfortable silence, watching Orion play with her dolls and scold them for spilling their invisible tea.

“So, how are you doing?” Tonks asked. “Really.”

Hermione sighed, rubbed her temple and shrugged. “I’m doing better now. I’m still embarrassed that I had that complete breakdown.”

Tonks waved it away, shaking her head. “I’m surprised you held it together all these years.”

“I didn’t, really,” Hermione admitted. “I think I just buried it under work, and the issues with Ron. Then he came around and we started dating, then came the wedding. Through it all, I was doing everything I could to stop Rita Skeeter from publishing that damned book.”

“You let yourself get pushed to the wayside,” Tonks nodded. “I can understand how that would be an attractive idea.”

Hermione nodded. “But when she was able to get it printed... I just lost it.” She gave a very guilty smile that made Tonks laugh.

“We all need those moments in life, you know. It’s perfectly acceptable. Besides, it gave Gred and Forge a healthy respect for your skills with a wand.”

Hermione clasped her hand over her mouth to control the laughter that escaped. "I guess you're right."

"And now that it's out... you can get on with your life."

She nodded, glancing over at Orion again. Charlie had mentioned to Tonks that Ron and Hermione were thinking about starting a family. She watched the other woman with a more critical eye, seeing how Hermione seemed to be cataloguing Orion's expressions and actions. Tonks hated to tell her, but Orion was as different a child as one could expect. However, that was something that Hermione needed to experience for herself.

"And how is the book coming?"

"Better," Hermione sighed, setting her tea cup down. "It's not been easy putting into words what Harry meant to Ron or me. And Ginny... well, she was the closest thing I'll ever have to a sister, I think. She was my first female friend, and as close as Ron and Harry were to me, that just can't compare."

"I agree," Tonks nodded. "Every girl needs a girlfriend to gossip with."

"Exactly," Hermione agreed.

"How far have you gotten?"

"Only through third year, actually," she admitted. "I really didn't want to dwell on the early years, but it seems like I just can't say enough about Harry as a friend and his courage and strength. I'm afraid it will all read a bit like a fantasy novel, actually."

"Remus was impressed with what you let him read so far," Tonks shook her head. "I think you're just over thinking things, Hermione. It's one of your greatest weaknesses, if you don't mind me saying. You always discount your abilities and then you think too much."

Hermione looked slightly offended for a moment before looking away, blinking suspiciously. "Harry told me the same thing," she said softly, "that last year when we were out hunting Horcruxes."

Tonks winked. "Smart boy, that."

"Yes, he was," Hermione nodded and smiled fondly. "I really can't wait until I can write about him and Ginny. There was just something between them... I'm not sure if I can even explain it."

"No, I know what you mean," Tonks shook her head. "It was like when they were together the world was this brand new place full of amazing possibilities."

"That's it," Hermione nodded. "Anyway, I want that part to be special. It needs to be to make people understand."

"I think people will," Tonks said, contemplating the thought. "Most of us are a sucker for romance stories. That's why all of those novels sell so fast. People want to read about something that's out of the ordinary, something that gives them hope for the future. Harry and Ginny had that in

spades.”

Hermione smiled fondly and agreed. “Their story was very romantic.”

“You’ll find the words,” Tonks nodded. “I have no doubt your book will be an even bigger best seller than Skeeter’s could ever hope for.”

“I’m not in it for the money,” Hermione explained, making Tonks smile. “In fact, all of the money from the book is going to several charities.”

“I think that’s a brilliant idea,” Tonks grinned. “And I know Harry would approve.”

* * *

Emma read Missy’s letter for the third time and then tucked it under a photograph on her bedside table, unsure of how she felt about her friend’s request.

The past year had been hard without Missy around. Emma had felt very alone when she returned to school in the fall. She had a few friends, but no one as close as Missy had been. The year had been challenging and Emma was glad it was over.

In fact, she had just finished her A-Levels and couldn’t be happier to be done. Emma had buried herself in revision for the last few months, hoping that her marks on the tests would allow her to consider University.

She rolled onto her stomach, balling her pillow under her arms and propping her head up on it. The sunlight from a gorgeous summer day spilled in the window, making Emma very aware that it was well past the time she should be up and moving. She could hear Anne moving around downstairs, her voice drifting up through the floorboards. That could only mean one thing—Carter was here.

Emma groaned, burying her face in the bedding. Carter was nothing if not persistent. He had been coming around increasingly over the past few weeks. Emma had tried to let him down easy a few months ago by telling him that she was very busy with revising for her exams and wasn’t interested in dating anyone right now. He had agreed that she should focus on her exams, but he still offered to take her to school in the mornings and was around often in the evenings and on weekends.

He was nice enough, Emma guessed, and decent looking. It just seemed... a bit like dating a distant cousin, or even a brother—not that Emma had much to compare it to. She had allowed a few boys to take her out this year, despite her reservations. However, none of them lasted past a few dates. She wasn’t looking for anything serious right now. Her puzzled past and muddled future was enough to be getting on with, she thought.

She turned over in bed when Anne knocked at her door. “Come in.”

“Still in bed, you lazy-bones?” she teased good naturedly as she entered the room, carrying a large tray full of wonderful smelling breakfast items.

“I guess so,” Emma sighed and sat up, making room for her friend at the end of the bed. Anne was much more than a friend—more like a mother, really—although it didn’t feel right for Emma to call

her that.

“That’s alright,” Anne patted her foot under the duvet and winked at her. “You’re entitled to a lie in after working so hard.”

Emma sighed and accepted the glass of orange juice that Anne handed her. She drank it, like she always did, not to be rude. However, orange juice had always seemed so... bitter to Emma. She craved something more mellow and with a... richer flavor. “I should have gotten up and helped you with breakfast.”

“Pish,” Anne waved her hand in front of her, “It was only Carter and I, duck, no need to get up and wait on lazy old me. Besides, I know you’re up here hiding from Carter too.” She gave a knowing smile and Emma flushed.

She shrugged her shoulder, looking down at a loose thread on the blanket and picking at it. “Carter’s alright. I really shouldn’t treat him that way.”

Anne sighed and smiled fondly. “We can’t choose who we fall in love with, Emma. You’re not beholden to have feelings for Carter simply out of... gratitude for our family or any other thing. Now, don’t get me wrong, I’d love to have you as a permanent part of this family, but I understand that sometimes our heart leads us down a different path.”

Emma chewed at her bottom lip, glancing at the letter Missy had sent and wondering if she should talk to Anne about it.

“I know that look...” Anne said, adjusting herself so that she could see Emma fully. They’d spent many nights just like this—sitting across from each other and talking about Emma’s past and what she wanted for the future. “My Melissa gave me that same look last year, about this same time.”

Emma smiled and shrugged a shoulder. “I guess I’m just ready to see what’s out there for me.”

“I understand completely,” Anne shook her head. “It was hard for me to let my children go, Emma. I miss them more than anything. But you each have your own lives to live, your own dreams to chase. And what kind of a mother would I be if I held my children back from their dreams? I couldn’t live with myself if one of them passed up an opportunity just to stay home with me and make sure I was fed every day.”

Smiling, Emma nodded, understanding what she was saying. “I’m scared,” she admitted.

“Adventure always begins with a little fear,” Anne shrugged. “Change isn’t easy, but it’s usually worth it.”

Emma chuckled, scrambling forward to lean over the breakfast tray and engulf Anne in a huge hug.

“I’ve rarely told you how much it means to me that you let me stay with you,” she choked out, feeling a bit silly to cry so easily. “You’ve given me everything, you know. And I won’t ever be able to repay that.”

“You don’t need to, love,” Anne shook her head. “Just go out there and live your life the best that

you can. That's all the thanks I need." She pulled back and smoothed the red tendrils of hair away from Emma's face, wiping her tears away with her thumbs.

Emma nodded and sniffed. The two shared a laugh and then began to talk about Emma moving to Manchester.

"I'd like to go and see Missy if I could," Emma said softly as she picked at the crust on her toast. "It's been since Christmas. She keeps telling me that there's room at her flat."

"There should be," Anne nodded, chuckling as Emma took another piece of toast and bypassed the butter to spread a healthy dose of marmalade on the bread. "Thank the Lord that Jim left us with a sizeable amount in the bank."

Emma nodded and licked the marmalade off of her finger before taking a satisfied bite of the toast. "She even says the coffee shop where she works might be hiring."

"It sounds like you've got it all worked out, Emma."

She shrugged, feeling her cheeks heat. She almost didn't want to admit that she'd been using the time between revision sessions to plan her move. It seemed a bit ungrateful to Anne to even think about it. Emma owed her everything.

"How about," Anne started, a mischievous look on her face, "you and I plan a trip, just us girls, out there to see Missy soon? I think I can manage a day or two off from the hospital."

Emma grinned and giggled. "That sounds wonderful, Anne. I think we'd have a great time."

"Carter will pout," Anne nodded and then shrugged, "but he'll get over it."

They planned and laughed for a few more minutes before Anne left and Emma swung her legs down over the edge of the bed. She had a lot of packing and planning to do if she was going to move in a month. And... she had a letter to write. Missy would be so thrilled.

Chapter 4

August 2001 through October 2001

Emma glanced over at Carter in annoyance, but pushed the feeling away. It wasn't his fault that Anne had been called into an emergency at the hospital and hadn't been able to go with her to Manchester to visit Missy.

And, it was rather lucky that Carter had been able to take the day off, although Emma wasn't sure if she would have preferred to come alone or not.

Carter had been nothing but polite, but it was the extreme chivalry and protectiveness that drove Emma insane. She was a strong woman. She had survived more than Carter Wilkins could imagine in his wildest dreams—not that she could remember it all. It was more a feeling than anything, she thought; a feeling that she had lived several lifetimes already in her short eighteen years.

"Would you like pudding, Emma?" Carter asked, holding his hand out to the waiter who was moving the pudding cart through the restaurant.

"No, thank you." Emma shook her head, silently cursing Missy for having a course this afternoon. They'd spent a very pleasant morning seeing her flat, walking down the streets to the coffee shop where Missy worked and then touring the campus of the Uni. If she hadn't been convinced before, Emma was definitely decided now.

In a few days she would have all of her packing finished and make arrangements to get her things down here to Manchester. Carter would, no doubt, offer his car, but Emma really would prefer Anne bring her.

"We have a few more hours before we need to catch the train home," Carter mused as he paid the bill and held out his arm to escort her out of the restaurant. "Is there anything else you'd like to see?"

Emma pondered, knowing that if Missy, or even Anne, were with her there would be a thousand things for them to see.

"I wouldn't mind seeing Manchester Uni," Carter carried on, before Emma could even answer.

She sighed and shrugged, letting her arm slip from his. He continued to talk, flipping aside his rather longer blond hair. Carter had watched some picture a few months back where the actor had been a bit of a rogue with longer hair. Ever since then, he'd been trying to grow his out. Anne just shook her head and whispered that it was really to impress Emma.

She wasn't impressed. At all. In fact, his longer blond hair rather annoyed her, even though she wasn't sure why. It just irritated her in an irrational way.

Very soon, she told herself as they boarded another train and made their way across town, she would be living here with Missy, and Carter Wilkins would be a thing of the past. Even though the

thought made her feel a bit guilty, it made her smile. She didn't want to be awful to him, even he didn't deserve that, but the man never took no for an answer.

Emma sighed as she leaned her head back against the wall of the train, her hand trailing up to play with the end of the plait Anne had helped her put in her long hair this morning. Mentally, she planned how she would decorate the empty bedroom in the flat she and Missy would soon share.

* * *

Jack finally let himself relax after a long day at work. The shelves of Manchester's newest bookstore were now stocked, the displays set and the final details completed and waiting the Grand Opening tomorrow afternoon.

Normally, Jack didn't work in that part of the city; the bookstore where he'd started out unloading boxes and then worked his way up to managing the Children and Young Adults section was in a poorer part of the metropolis, closer to Salford. His Store Manager had approached Jack earlier in the week and asked him to help out at the new branch for a few days until they got settled. Jack was more than happy to have the overtime and the extra pay that went with it. Now, the rumble and rocking motion of the train was almost lulling him to sleep.

A discarded newspaper sat in the seat next to him and Jack picked it up, thumbing through the headlines but seeing nothing of interest. The same stories of corrupt politicians promising tax reform, public sightings of the Royal Family and the like filled the pages. Those sorts of things did not interest him.

He had far greater concerns on his mind; such as how to get his flat mate to pay his share of the rent before it was due instead of a week after, and whether or not the loaf of bread that he'd forgetfully left out on the kitchen counter earlier that morning would be too dry to make a sarny or two for him when he got home. And it wasn't that Derek was irresponsible, more that he was just easily distracted.

He glanced up as the train slowed for another stop. The hiss of the doors opening and the travelers jostling in and out kept his focus for a moment before his eyes returned to an article about an upcoming dog show in the park. Jack sighed and rustled the pages closed, letting his eyes sweep over the faces in the car with him, wondering what errands had brought them out for the day.

Across the aisle and two seats over was an elderly woman who wore an ancient looking hat perched on her blue hair at a crazy angle. She wore a bright floral printed frock and clutched a wrinkled brown paper bag in her lap. Her eyes were shut tightly and Jack wondered, amusedly, if she hated taking the train.

Six seats down from the old woman was a youth dressed in baggy and ill-fitting clothing that looked brand new, but obviously was not made for someone so thin and scrawny. He wore headphones that the loud, thumping music leaked out of. Jack narrowed his eyes at the boy as the youth eyed the old woman, hoping that the threat of retribution in his stare would put any thoughts of violence against the elderly out of the boy's mind. He had to smile when the boy quelled slightly and looked away from Jack.

A man in a grey business suit yakked on his mobile and complained loudly that he could not hear the

caller. Jack smirked to himself and continued to let his eyes wander. Another man, nearer to Jack's own age, sat right next to the doorway. He was blond and fair, with well manicured clothing that showed at least a bit of wealth. Next to him...

Jack swallowed hard. Next to the blonde man was the most beautiful woman that Jack had ever seen. Her pale skin was accented by a smattering of freckles across her cheeks and nose. Her lips were full and pink, the nose upturned just a bit at the end. Her long red hair was pulled back into some sort of plait that draped over one shoulder. Jack wondered how many shades of color were actually in that hair. From where he sat he thought that there were more than he would be able to count.

It was her eyes, however, that really caught Jack's attention. They were a very deep chocolate brown, wide and expressive, and... looking right at him.

Dark pink bloomed on her cheeks as she quickly looked down at her lap. Jack had to smile at catching her watching him. Somehow, though, he couldn't make himself look away. Sure enough, her face lifted and she glanced at him again. This time their gazes held for a moment as they seemed to study each other.

Jack had seen beautiful women before; exotic women with dark skin, blonde Nordic beauties and curvy brunettes came into the bookstore on a regular basis. He'd been on a few dates in the past few months—pushed by Derek, of course—even had a good night kiss or two, but something always seemed to be missing. The 'spark', for lack of a better word, was never there to hold his interest past a few hours of niceties.

And, for the precisely twenty-seven seconds while the two gazes locked across the crowded commuter train, Jack wondered if he'd found it. The moment was broken, however, when the blonde man touched the redhead's arm and her attention shifted over to him.

It figures, Jack thought dejectedly. He cursed his racing heart and fluttery stomach as he let his eyes lose focus onto the flashes of life outside the window.

Traitorous as they were, his eyes kept wandering back to the redhead. She seemed to be only half listening to what her traveling companion was saying as she looked down at the floor of the train.

Jack's stop was announced and he laid the forgotten newspaper on the seat next to him and shifted in his own seat, preparing to depart. For another moment, their eyes met and the woman smiled brilliantly at him, her cheeks blossoming pink, making his stomach turn over again. The train shuddered to a stop and Jack reluctantly stood, his eyes never leaving hers. The passengers getting off jostled and finally Jack had to take his turn in leaving. The noise of the terminal assailed his ears and he instantly wished for the semi-silence of the atmosphere he'd just left.

Unable to help himself, Jack looked back into the window. The redheaded woman had turned in her seat and was watching him through the glass. She pressed a hand against the window and her smile faded just a bit as Jack gave a small resigned shrug and lifted his hand in goodbye. The train pulled out of the station and she was gone.

He wasn't even conscious of the five block walk home that day. The sun had never shone so brightly, nor had the late summer air ever been as pleasant as it was that afternoon. He was

vaguely aware of the rough and tumble boys of the neighborhood who attempted to engage him in a game of football. Jack half-heartedly kicked the ball back toward them and continued on his way.

“About time you got home,” Derek grumbled as his black-haired roommate entered the second floor flat. “Was the train late?”

“Huh?” Jack grunted as he flopped back onto the worn second-hand sofa that was nearly the only piece of furniture in the small living room.

Derek turned from where he was leaning against the kitchen counter. “I asked if the train was—” he broke off when he realized that Jack wasn’t hearing anything. “What’s with you today, mate?”

Jack didn’t answer for a moment and then startled suddenly. “What’re you talking about?”

Derek grinned. “You, you sod. That’s what I’m talking about. Something must have happened for you to be grinning that wide.” He laughed out loud as Jack flushed and turned his head away.

“It’s that little blond bird at the store isn’t it?” Derek laughed. “She finally gave in to the old Ingalls charm and you got a look in her trousers.”

“Don’t be crude,” Jack scolded. “And no... it has nothing to do with her.”

Derek smirked and wagged his eyebrows. “Someone else then?” He laughed even harder when Jack tossed a dirty sock taken from the cushion at him. “Come on, a bloke doesn’t smile like that unless someone’s been playing with his—”

“OI!” Jack yelled. “Can’t a bloke just have a nice day? It’s beautiful outside. The sun is shining, the sky is blue...”

“Whatever,” Derek smiled.

Jack sighed and stared out the window, not even seeing the row of rather filthy, red brick houses across the lane. Derek went back to eating out of the white cardboard take-away box that held something that may have once resembled Chinese food.

“Did you ever have one perfect moment?” Jack finally asked. “Just one moment in the middle of the day, when you least expect it. You’re doing something you do every day, nothing really important, and BAM! You realize that you’ve just done something, or seen something that makes this the perfect moment in time?”

“Er, not really,” Derek grunted, giving his flat mate his full attention.

“I had that today... on the train home. One perfect moment.”

Derek considered his friend for a few minutes and then tossed the empty food container into the rubbish bin.

“I met someone today,” Jack said softly. “Well... we didn’t *really* meet.”

“Come again?” Derek shook his head in confusion.

“On the train,” Jack continued. “There was this woman. She was... beautiful doesn’t even describe her... angelic is more like it.” He nodded, knowing that was the word he was looking for. “She was... just perfect.”

“I see,” Derek said, flopping down on the sofa next to Jack. “And did this ‘angel’ give you her number.”

Jack shrugged. “We never spoke.”

“Er...”

“It was that one perfect moment. I looked at her, she looked at me... and that was it.”

Derek was silent for a minute and then finally roughly slugged Jack in the shoulder. “You need to get out more, mate. Next time, talk to the girl.”

Jack shrugged and absently rubbed his arm. “I don’t know.”

“Wake up to reality, mate,” Derek grunted as he stood up. “You’ll probably never see this girl again. Ever.”

“I know,” Jack conceded with a sigh. “But...”

“Yeah,” Derek said. “That one perfect moment.” The two friends both looked outside the window again. “It’s all for the best anyway... she probably had a high pitched squeaky voice.” Jack felt the corners of his mouth turn up slightly. “That’s it; she had a laugh like a hyena. Or maybe she would have just wanted you for your money.”

Jack finally let himself laugh as he glanced around the flat. Second hand furniture was scarce. The walls of the old flat were dingy and a dull-grey color. Any electronics brought into this neighborhood were sure to disappear in less than a day.

“Come on,” Derek reached down and pulled Jack to his feet. “I’ll buy you a weak, watered-down pint at the pub before you head off to job number two.”

* * *

Emma pushed her by-now frizzy hair behind her ear and wiped her hands on the apron that she wore. The coffee house was crazy this time of the morning. She had always figured that the early morning rush was the worst. But by far, the late morning push of young mothers dressed in track pants and jogging outfits as they dropped their children off at the local primary schools was the worst. At least in the morning, customers weren’t up to chatting yet, they ordered their coffee and lattes and mochas to go. The mothers wanted to chat with everyone about the latest gossip, how much weight so-and-so had lost that week, what illness their child had picked up at the minder. It was all a bit numbing to Emma.

“Break time,” she finally breathed out as she glanced up at the clock. She caught Missy’s attention at the register and gave a head jerk toward the back room. She could make out the mouthed ‘go ahead’ and removed her apron quickly before another mother could shout out her order of an extra

grande non-fat latte with extra foam.

“Rough morning?” Carl, the store manager, asked as Emma sighed and sank down onto one of the rather uncomfortable chairs in the back room.

“You could say that,” Emma laughed. “You’d think I’d get used to it after two months.”

Carl laughed and closed the accounting books he’d been looking at. “Yeah, mornings are always rough. The night shift isn’t so bad though, lots of quiet time.”

Emma nodded and rolled her head to ease the aching muscles. She reached back to rub her neck, pushing the thick plait over her shoulder and out of the way of her fingers.

“Would you consider switching to the evening shift?” Carl asked suddenly. “I could really use someone reliable to help me out.”

Emma sat up straight and stared at him. “Are you sure, Carl?” she spluttered. “I’ve only been here a few weeks.”

Carl smiled. “I know, but you know your way around here pretty well. You’ve got a head for the numbers and I know you’re reliable. Missy can handle the morning if I get someone new in here too. Nate, the kid that usually closes for me on weeknights, is finishing up the term at University and he wants less hours.”

Emma considered for a minute. Taking a later shift at the coffee house would allow her to get an early morning job as well as keeping this one. The more money she made, the faster she could apply to University herself and find a better life.

“Yes, Carl,” she answered with a smile. “I think I will take the shift change.”

“Good.” Carl gathered up his paperwork and books. “Have a good break, Emma. And we’ll start on the new shift next week.”

“Thanks, Carl,” Emma said, a genuine smile on her face for the first time in a few weeks.

Hours later she sat in the window seat of the flat she shared with Missy and let her head rest against the coolness of the glass. Her hand absently went to the chain she wore around her neck, lifting the ring that lay heavily on the bottom of it. The gold was getting more and more tarnished from where her fingers habitually rubbed over it. The once-shiny square diamond on the top was now dull. It was the only thing she had from... before, and she couldn’t bring herself to part with it.

The move to Manchester hadn’t been as adventurous as Emma had hoped. Yes, she and Missy had spent a few days seeing the sights and enjoying themselves. But fairly soon it was time for Missy to go back to Uni and Emma to start work.

“Daydreaming again,” Missy giggled as she tossed a small pillow at Emma.

Emma only sighed in response and slipped the ring beneath her shirt.

“The mystery man this time?” Missy questioned. “Or someone new?” Emma tried to keep the

agitation from showing too much as she stiffened her back. “I noticed you and Carl talking earlier today. He’s a bit old for my tastes, but to each their own.”

Emma smiled. “It’s not Carl.”

“Ah, the mysterious and elusive fiancé then,” Missy nodded knowingly.

Emma swung her legs down from the sill and stood, stretching. “I know it’s silly. It probably has nothing to do with being engaged. For all I know, it was my mother’s or something like that and I just wore it on the chain to be sentimental.”

Missy smiled and then shook her head. “Nope, I’m betting... a secret engagement.”

The once familiar game between the girls lightened Emma’s mood, even if the subject was rather dark. “I was no more than seventeen when I met you, you know. That’s far too young to be engaged.”

“Not if it was true love,” Missy protested as she began straightening up the flat somewhat.

“You watch too many shows on the telly, Melissa,” Emma sighed.

“I know,” Missy sighed dramatically. “But wouldn’t it be nice, one day, to have a life like that? Nothing exciting ever happens around here anyway; secret engagements, knights on white horses, soul mates... that would sure make things interesting once again.”

“You know I don’t believe in all of that stuff,” Emma said as she reluctantly began helping to clean. How two young women could make that much mess she would never understand.

“Oh, but you should,” Missy replied. “Maybe that’s your problem, you don’t believe in love anymore, in magic, in—”

“Reality,” Emma protested.

“Umhmm,” Missy quirked an eyebrow in slyness. “I remember a few weeks ago when you came here with Carter. You had that secret smile then.”

Emma spluttered and then laughed, knowing her red face would give her away.

“Ah ha!” Missy proclaimed. “I knew it. Something happened that day. Please tell me it wasn’t Carter. You know I can only handle my brother so much, and if my best friend and he were involved...” She let the sentence die as she gave a rather horrified look.

Emma just laughed. “Carter... well, it’s not from his lack of trying, I’ll assure you that. No, it had nothing to do with Carter. I just... on the train, there was this man.”

Missy plopped down on the small sofa and settled in for what seemed to be a good story. Emma just blushed even further and shook her head.

“It’s really nothing, and I’ll never see him again. But, for a minute, when our eyes met... I wondered.”

“What if?” Missy asked softly.

“Yeah,” Emma nodded. “What if?” The two girls sat in dreamy silence for a few minutes.

“So, what did he look like?”

“Who?”

Missy rolled her eyes. “The man on the train.”

“Oh, well, he had black hair and it was rather messy, you know.”

“Messy? Like he had never seen a comb in his life, or messy like he’d been in a hurry and the wind mussed it up?”

Emma thought back. “Messy like he’d had a long day at work and had run his fingers through it several times.” Missy nodded her understanding.

“He had glasses, small and not too thick. But his eyes... oh, he had beautiful eyes.” Emma closed her eyes and recalled the smile that the man wore. “Brilliant green eyes.”

“What was he wearing?”

“Oh,” Emma screwed up her face slightly. “You know, I’m not sure I even noticed. It was nice that day, so I don’t think he was wearing a jumper. Some sort of uniform shirt, I’m sure.”

Missy nodded and then stood as she noticed the time. “He sounds wonderful, love. Listen, I’ve got to get to class-Art History,” she pulled a face as she gathered her rucksack and a light jacket. “You’ll be alright here tonight?”

Emma laid her head on the back of the couch and nodded. “Yeah. Oh! I almost forgot to tell you that Carl asked me to switch to the night shift. It’ll be good and then I can get a day job also.”

“Oh,” Missy said as she grabbed an apple out of the kitchen. “Well, that will help you get closer to Uni... but I’ll miss working with you.”

Emma sighed. “I know. But... Hey! You like Art History!” she proclaimed as she realized what Missy had just said. “Isn’t there that *bloke* in there?”

Missy blushed and fumbled with the door. “No... well, yeah, I guess so. He’s just a friend, really.”

“Uhhuh,” Emma grinned knowingly. “Just a friend.”

“Oh, honestly,” Missy grinned as she left the flat and Emma laughed at her.

* * *

“Almost there... almost there,” Ron guided his wife through the door, his hands over her eyes.

“Honestly, Ronald,” Hermione huffed. Her annoyance was betrayed as she laughed, though. “You

could have just used a blindfold charm.”

Ron stopped, his face going slack. “There’s a blindfold charm?”

“Of course there’s a blindfold charm,” Hermione huffed.

“A few more steps.” He grinned, knowing that he if hadn’t prodded her forward, she would have lectured him on the proper wand movements and pronunciation of the spell.

“Ronald—”

“Alright,” he said, removing his hands. “You can look now.”

He stepped back, taking in the room he’d brought her to and trying to keep his face from cracking. He hadn’t smiled this much since their wedding pictures.

Hermione smiled widely, clasping her hands in front of her face while she studied the wall to wall cherry bookshelves. The floors were a bit worn, Ron knew, but this room would be perfect for her study. He told her so.

“It would be,” she agreed, throwing her arms around him. It took him by surprise and he picked her up and swung her around.

“The whole house is amazing, Ron,” she confirmed, pressing a kiss to his lips. “I can’t believe you found it.”

“Me either,” Ron ruffled his hair. They’d been talking about buying a house for a few months, but hadn’t been able to find the right one. When the Estate Agent had called the other day, Hermione had been in the middle of another chapter of her book. Ron offered to go and look at the property and let her know.

He was pleasantly surprised by all the room and the back garden especially. It wasn’t large enough for a Quidditch pitch, but enough space for beginning broom lessons. The study, however, was what made Ron want to bring Hermione back.

“Come on,” Ron grabbed her hand and tugged her to the large double doors that led out to the garden. “See, you can leave these doors open...” Ron opened them wide and they laughed when a stiff breeze blew a few leaves into the room. “Well... in the summer, anyway, and see the kids.” He felt his ears heat at the thought of having children with Hermione. They had talked about it, even to the point of planning to begin trying.

Hermione’s book had put things on hold. But that was fine with Ron. Whatever Hermione wanted was fine with him.

They walked out into the garden, Ron putting his arm around Hermione’s shoulders in the chilly breeze. “I was thinking we’d ask Neville to come over and help us sort all of this out.”

“Mmm, it is a bit of a mess, isn’t it?”

The trees along the edge of the property were overgrown, their branches bowing heavily with half-

shed leaves. The bushes and lawn were unkempt and growing wild.

“I’d love to be able to grow some fresh potions ingredients,” Hermione agreed. “And some flowers would be lovely.”

“Yeah. Maybe...” Ron’s face flushed and he scuffed his toe along the broken pavers. “Maybe we could plant some lilacs. They were always Ginny’s favorite.”

Hermione smiled and squeezed his ribs tightly. “I’d love that,” she agreed. Let’s plant it right here, next to the study, so I can smell them when they bloom.

“Brilliant,” Ron agreed, leaning down to kiss her. Together, they went back into the house, securing the doors behind them.

“Can we really afford this, Ron?” Hermione asked, worrying her lip. “Because I was working on the budget the other day, and now that I’m working less hours—”

Ron held up his hand to stave off her question. “We’re going to be fine. You’re not the only one who knows how to budget.”

She raised an eyebrow at him and he laughed. “Alright, I had Percy help me, but...”

“That’s what I thought,” she laughed.

Ron scratched the back of his neck and shrugged. “Fred and George are going to loan us the down.”

Hermione, thankfully, kept her comment back, possibly knowing how much it had cost him to go to his brothers and ask for their help. It had been Ron’s pride that had kept him from straightening himself up, costing them an entire year—it wasn’t something he liked to think about.

However, when Ron weighed the benefits of swallowing his pride and accepting a small loan from his brothers, who were doing extremely well in their business, and not having a suitable place to raise a family—Ron’s pride lost every time.

Fred and George had offered Ron Harry’s shares of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes, saying that they were sure Harry would want Ron to have it. The Ministry had seized all of the other Potter assets, since Harry’s will had left everything to Ginny, and he had no living relatives. Thankfully, there were no records of Harry ever owning shares of the store. The twins had done some fancy accounting and, along with Percy’s help, had managed to keep Scrimgeour from finding out about the money.

Ron had declined their offer, suggesting that they keep the shares and let them grow. The family could decide what to do with the money someday—or it would be there if someone needed it.

Percy had suggested a small loan with a reasonable interest rate and Ron had agreed. They’d shaken hands on the deal, and, although both parties had protested, saying that they didn’t need documentation, signed Percy’s quilled agreement.

“Is this the house you want?” Ron asked, pressing his lips into Hermione’s hair. Her arms came

around his neck and she pondered for a minute.

“There’s enough room so that we can use magic without worrying the neighbors,” Hermione listed.

“Enough room to fly a bit, as long as it’s kept low,” Ron chuckled.

“More than enough bedrooms to fill,” Hermione quipped, giving him a heated look.

Ron swallowed harshly and grinned. “Your own library.”

“And a garage for your father to fill with all manner of Muggle rubbish.”

Ron had to laugh, knowing that his father would indeed begin parting with his beloved collection. He’d already sent several things to each of his sons. Ron had been able to avoid it at first, by claiming that his and Hermione’s one bedroom flat wasn’t large enough. That excuse wouldn’t work for much longer.

“So... you like the house?”

Hermione gave one last glance around the room and nodded. “I love the house.”

* * *

Jack had just finished the large stack of dishes that had been collecting on various surfaces in the kitchen of the flat when Derek entered and collapsed noisily on the sofa.

“Rough day?” Jack laughed.

“No, not really,” Derek mumbled from where his face pressed into the cushion. “Tell me again, why I’m taking so many courses?”

“Because you’re suicidal,” Jack answered happily back. “And because you stood in the registration queue behind a whole lot of good looking birds and signed up for every course that they took.”

“Right,” Derek lifted his head to smile at Jack. “And I’ve been out with how many of them? Where as you, who took all the logical and productive classes, have been on three dates in your entire life.”

Jack tossed a soggy flannel at Derek who caught it and tossed it back. “Well, I’m well out of that now.”

Derek winced at the realization of his words. “Yeah, but you’ll be back to it next term.”

Jack nodded and dried his hands off. “Just as soon as I can earn the money to live off of again.”

“I told you—”

“Don’t worry about it, yeah?” Jack interrupted and Derek knew better than to push his friend. “So, what new girl are you seeing this week?”

Derek rolled over and grinned happily at the dingy ceiling. "Melissa."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, just don't forget the tie on the door handle next time you bring one home. I don't fancy walking in on that again."

"Oi! It only happened that one—"

"Twice!"

Derek grinned. "Alright, twice. You know I wouldn't mind seeing a tie on the door handle once or twice."

Jack stood abruptly and moved to look out the window. "Why are you so worried about my love life?"

"Or lack thereof?" Derek teased. "Because, you're only twenty-three, mate. You need to live a little."

"I live just fine, thanks," Jack growled.

"Whatever, mate," Derek agreed wryly. "Listen, Melissa and I are meeting a group of friends at a pub just down the way, why don't you come with us?"

Jack shook his head. "No, I think I'll stay here, have a kip."

"You never come with us." Jack only shrugged. "Look, at least meet us later, before you go to work. Melissa works at this little coffee house, the one on the corner of Lower Seedley and Langworthy." Jack nodded showing that he understood which one. "Her flat mate works the closing shift and Melissa always shows up to walk her home."

"I don't think—"

Derek growled. "Just be there!"

Jack began to protest again but then shrugged. He really didn't do much socially with anyone and felt rather guilty that his friend was noticing. "I'll think about it."

"Fine," Derek grinned. "I'm going to shower. The coffee place closes at eight."

"I said I'll think about it," Jack defended.

Half-seven found Jack shuffling his feet back and forth on the sidewalk across the street from the well-lit coffee house. His hands were shoved deep in the pockets of his thin jacket and he hunched his shoulders against the cool November temperature. It was stupid, he knew, to feel this nervous over meeting a group of people in a social setting. But, Jack was rather a loner of sorts, always feeling left out in a crowd, although no one else ever seemed to show that they knew how he felt.

Maybe it came from being so poor, he thought. He was always very conscious of how much things cost and how many hours of working it would take to earn back what he spent. Maybe it was that he really didn't have any memories, and the few he had were not pleasant at all. He quickly shoved

those feelings down deep where they belonged and determined that tonight he would try to fit in with Derek's friends and not feel so out of place.

He could see the small group in the window, laughing at something Derek had said. A rather curvy blond woman seemed attached to Derek's left arm and shot him adoring smiles every few minutes. Jack grinned to think that he would have to wear earplugs tonight, or find somewhere else to kip so that he wouldn't know the entirety of Derek's social life.

There was another man in the group as well. Jack recognized him from several events at the Uni—Joe or John, or something like that. There were a small handful of girls as well and Jack hoped that Derek wouldn't try to push one of them on him. The three girls he'd been out with hadn't really been his choice, two were setup by Derek and the other... well, the other he had asked out. They'd been out two or three times, but she was rather forward and it made Jack uncomfortable.

"You made it!" Derek's voice boomed from the corner table and he stood to pull another chair into the group as Jack approached, slightly flushed from the attention of the others on him.

"Yeah," Jack said. "I thought I'd drop by for a few minutes."

"Everyone, this is Jack, my flat mate. Jack, this is Melissa," he gestured toward the blond woman he'd been sitting next to. "Joe, you remember him. Cassie, Kristine, Tara and... I'm sorry, I don't remember your name, love."

"Tease," Melissa squealed and shoved Derek playfully.

"You remember Dianna," Derek nodded toward the short brunette who he and Jack had shared a class the last term with.

"Hello," Jack said as he accepted the seat. He observed the group awkwardly as they began their conversation again about some subject at the University.

"So, Jack, I haven't seen you around lately," Dianna said.

"I've taken a bit of time off," Jack explained, "not really sure what I want to do yet."

"Brilliant," Joe complimented. "Otherwise you get stuck in something like Internal Medicine, like me, and hating every minute of it." The group laughed and Jack was confused for a moment.

"Don't listen to a thing he says, duck," Kristine explained, wrapping her arm through Joe's. "He loves every minute of it and he's going to be an excellent doctor." She leaned over and gave Joe an affectionate peck on the lips.

"Do you work, Jack?" Melissa asked.

"Yeah," Jack said. "I work over at the bookstore on West One."

"Oh, I know that one," Cassie piped up. "I go in there all the time. They have the best tabloid section." She giggled and the girls all joined her.

"Go get a coffee, Jack," Joe motioned to the group of cups on the table. Jack shook his head.

“No thanks, I don’t really like it much.”

Derek rolled his eyes. “They serve other things, mate.”

Jack flushed slightly and glanced around the shop. There was only one other table occupied. The young couple there was completely engrossed in each other and oblivious to the world.

“Tell Emma that she should come and join us,” Melissa called out and Jack frowned in confusion. Then he remembered something that Derek had said before; Melissa came to walk her flat mate home. Jack nodded absently and approached the counter, staring at the large sign above him that proclaimed hundreds of varieties of coffee.

“What can I get for you, sir?”

Jack shook his head absently and then glanced down at the woman behind the counter. “I don’t...”

Green eyes met brown and the two stared at each other.

“It’s... it’s you,” Jack whispered, vaguely wondering why his head felt full of cotton.

“The train,” Emma whispered right back. She self-consciously lifted a hand to straighten her hair, which had been haphazardly pulled back into a ponytail earlier in the evening.

Jack cleared his throat and blushed slightly. He really hadn’t ever thought he’d see her again.

“Erm, I’ll take a tea, I guess. White with one.”

Emma nodded distractedly. “Oh, yeah, right.” She shook herself slightly and then gathered a cup and poured tea into it, adding the milk and sugar. “Here,” she added as she set it down in front of her, tea slopping lazily over the side.

Jack couldn’t seem to take his eyes off of her. She was even more beautiful tonight, with her messy apron and rather frazzled appearance. He smiled as the tea dripped down the cup.

“Oh!” Emma cried. “I’m so sorry. I’m not usually this much of a plonker!”

“It’s alright,” Jack said softly. He reached out to cover her hand as she wiped up the spills from the counter with a wet flannel. “I don’t mind.”

“Yeah,” Emma breathed, looking up into his eyes again.

“How much?” Jack’s smile widened as he watched Emma stare at him.

“What?”

“For the tea,” Jack motioned with their joined hands. Emma looked down and jumped as she saw her fingers still touching his. He held back a sigh of regret when she pulled away.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I made a mess of it anyway.”

"I don't want to get you in trouble," Jack protested, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a handful of coins.

"Honestly," Emma said, flushing even more brightly. "Don't think on it."

Jack nodded and swallowed thickly. "At least let me buy you a cuppa, or a coffee if you prefer." It was his turn to look down at the counter and blush. He could feel his face heating and took a deep breath to calm himself.

"I'd like that," she said. "My name's Emma, by the way."

"Jack," he answered and held out his hand for her to shake.

* * *

Derek leaned into Melissa's shoulder and, catching her attention, nodded his head to where Jack and Emma had sat at a small round table together.

"Well," Melissa said, raising her eyebrows. "I never would have thought..."

"Me neither," Derek mused. He was more than slightly amused that Emma had declined to join their group all night claiming that she should be working, but had just joined Jack with no protests at all. In fact, it didn't seem to him that she was even aware she was at work still.

"He's a good bloke then?" Melissa whispered to him.

Derek nodded. "One of the best. It surprises me though, he's usually really reserved, especially around girls."

"Emma's not really one to open up either."

They both turned and smiled to each other as the couple they were watching laughed and seemed very at ease together.

"Have they met before?" Derek asked.

"Not that I knew about," Melissa admitted. "Emma's never mentioned meeting anyone... well, except this one man on the train a few months back."

"The train?" Derek asked, his memory triggered by a distant and somewhat dreamy expression on Jack's face.

"Yeah, it was just before she moved down here to stay with me," Melissa offered. "My brother Carter came down here with her and we spent the day together. She told me that she'd seen this man on the train and he kept staring at her, but not in a bad way, you know what I mean. She said he was really cute and that it would always make her wonder what might have been if they'd been able to talk."

Derek grinned to himself. "I think they might have *just* been able to." He winked at Melissa and her eyes went wide in recognition.

“So...” Jack said, searching for a safe topic to spark some conversation. He really didn’t think raptures over her beauty were the best way to start the evening.

Emma blushed again, but smiled widely. “Yeah.”

“You work here.”

She laughed and took a sip of her tea and then reached to add a bit of honey. “Well, yeah.”

Jack blushed and grinned down into his tea cup. “That was stupid, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s alright. I only started a few months ago.”

“Really? Where did you work before then?”

Emma smiled at his question. He seemed genuinely interested in the answer and it didn’t hurt that he was even cuter close up. His hair was just as messy tonight as it had been that day on the train. His brilliant green eyes sparkled brightly behind his glasses and the smile... it was enough to send her heart racing; completely crooked and it made his nose scrunch the tiniest bit. The only thing to mar the perfection that she found was a faint scar running all along the left side of his jaw, almost hidden on the underside and one peaking out from his hairline.

“I didn’t, well, not around here anyway,” Emma answered. “I just moved here actually.”

“You live with Melissa, right?” Jack asked and then laughed at her shocked expression. “Derek mentioned something.”

“Oh, how do you know them?”

Jack felt like slapping his forehead. She hadn’t seen him with the group by the window. “Derek’s my flat mate.”

Emma laughed. “That explains quite a bit then.”

Jack laughed. “Yeah, actually, it does. But I can’t take credit, or blame, for him.”

“Yes,” Emma grinned. “He’s... interesting.”

“That’s one word for it.” The two laughed and then drank their tea for a few moments in silence. “So, where did you live before?”

“Oh, actually, I’ve lived with Melissa’s family in Kendal since... well for two years now.”

“That’s where your family is from?” Jack wondered at his question as he caught a flash of pain in Emma’s face. “I’m sorry—”

“No, don’t be,” Emma interrupted. “I don’t have any family that I know of. Actually... I was in an accident a few years ago and don’t really have any memory prior to that.”

Jack almost dropped his cup as he sat up straight and gaped at her. "Are you taking the mickey?"

Emma shifted uncomfortably. "No, I'm not. Why?"

"It's just... well, I was hit by a car two years ago and... I don't have more than a handful of memories before that."

Emma swallowed hard and reached across to grip his hand. "I don't..." She shook her head. "I've never met anyone else," she whispered.

"Me either," Jack agreed. He gave her hand a quick squeeze but didn't let go. "Anyway, I don't have any family either."

"What do you remember, if you don't mind me asking?" Emma asked.

Jack shook his head and furrowed his brow in concentration. "Not many things. Flashes of light, mostly. I don't recall anything about my childhood, except a vague feeling of being very poor and not very happy."

Emma reached her other hand across and rubbed their clasped hands. "I don't even have that much to go on. I woke up in hospital with no memories—nothing to go on except a necklace around my neck. Sometimes I think I remember a bright light, but I don't know what it means."

Jack smiled in sympathy, but somehow they both knew it was genuine and not full of pity. "You've done well for yourself then."

Emma smiled. "I guess I've done alright. I have a fairly good job. I'm saving to be able to go to University soon."

"Me as well," Jack agreed. "I've been able to go two terms so far. It's a lot more expensive than I'd imagined. I worked two jobs as well as doing my courses; about wore myself out."

Emma laughed. "I bet you did."

"It'll be easier if I just earn enough that I can pay for everything up front and then have enough to live on. Although," he smiled wryly, "the way it looks I'll be doing it this way until I'm thirty." He snorted in humorless laughter and Emma joined him.

"We're in the same place."

They continued to talk about the University and all the subjects they'd both hoped to study, their work and many other things, completely ignoring the now-cold tea in front of them, and oblivious to the ticking of the clock and the world around them.

When the lights in the coffee shop turned off abruptly, Emma gasped, realizing that she was supposed to be closing up the shop.

"I'm so sorry," she apologized and gathered up both of their forgotten cups. "I've taken up all your time with your friends. And I'm going to get fired for not doing my job."

Jack grinned at her frazzled state and shook his head. "I had a good time tonight." He glanced at his watch and then swore softly. "Sorry," he blushed. "Is it really half-nine?"

Emma groaned in answer and hurried over to the counter. "I'm sorry."

"No," Jack ruffled his hair in annoyance. "It's not that. I just... I have to go to work. I'm already late." He smiled apologetically.

"Oh," Emma turned to face him once more. "The bookshop is open this late?"

Jack smiled. "No, I also work at the market just down the street stocking shelves at night."

Emma smiled and nodded in understanding.

"You'll be alright, here... alone I mean?" Jack asked.

"Oh," Emma started and glanced around to find the group of friends by the window watching the scene in amusement.

"We'll get her home safe for you, Jack," Derek called out and Jack blushed. He rolled his eyes and turned back to Emma, taking a step toward her.

"I... I really had a nice time tonight." Emma nodded in agreement. "And, I'd like to see you again. Erm, if you want to that is. I mean, we don't have to be at the coffee shop or anything. We could, I don't know, go to the pictures, or—"

Emma stepped forward and grinned at him. "Jack." Jack stopped rambling and smiled in embarrassment. "I'd like to see you as well."

"Tomorrow night?"

Emma grimaced. "I've got to close again tomorrow."

Jack nodded and thought for a minute. "The next night then?" He hated that he sounded so eager, but he just couldn't hide it.

Emma smiled and blushed as Melissa gave a silent cheer behind Jack. "A group of us were going out clubbing, actually."

"You're welcome to come along, Jack," Derek called out.

Jack laughed and nodded. "I'm not too good at the dancing stuff," he confided softly to Emma.

"It's alright, neither am I," Emma agreed. "So, day after tomorrow."

Jack grinned and leaned in to kiss her cheek. "I've got to go."

Emma nodded and smiled in return. "Have a nice night." Jack backed slowly to the door and then, with one final smile, left the coffee house.

“Jack!” He turned around as Emma leaned out the glass door.

“What?” He grinned at her impish smile.

“That day on the train? What was it you liked about me?”

Jack frowned in contemplation and then laughed at her crestfallen face. “It wasn’t just one thing,” he said. “It was a hundred different things.”

Emma laughed out loud, a sound that rang down the street like the peal of a bell. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

* * *

Missy sighed as she saw her flat mate once again perched in the window seat.

“Em, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” the redhead answered and then swiped angrily at the tears that had left tracks down her face. “It’s stupid.”

Missy joined the other woman on the seat and pulled her head down onto a welcome shoulder. “It’s not ‘nothing’. Is it Jack? Was he rude tonight or something?”

Emma snorted a laugh through her tears. “No. Jack was... wonderful. Everything tonight was out of a dream.”

“Then what’s the problem? You’re not still worried that Carl is going to be mad at you? Because I told you, Cassie and I cleaned the whole place up while you and Jack were lost in your own little world. We only closed ten minutes late and besides, he’ll never know.”

Emma laughed again. “I know. You lot are such wonderful friends. I appreciate it.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Missy asked. She had a vague idea what it might be, and hoped she’d be able to help.

“It’s just... am I a horrible person?” Emma asked, looking up at her friend pleadingly.

“What! Why on earth would you think that?”

Emma shrugged her shoulders. “Because I can feel myself giving up.” It was then that Missy saw the ring and necklace clutched in Emma’s hand.

“On *him*? The mystery man?” Emma nodded and Missy sighed.

“No, you’re not a horrible person. It’s been years, love. We’ve had this conversation before,” she answered carefully.

“I know,” Emma swiped at more tears. “It’s just...”

Missy reached up to stroke Emma's brilliant red hair. "It's just that you've met someone that makes your heart race and you feel like you're betraying someone else by feeling that way." Emma nodded.

"Should I even be feeling this way about Jack?"

"How do you feel about him?" Missy asked. "I mean, you only met tonight, despite that 'miraculous and perfect meeting on the train'." Emma giggled at the dramatic tone her friend used.

"There's something there," Emma answered vaguely. "I felt it the moment our eyes first met. And tonight when he touched me... it was... like a spark. I feel completely comfortable around him, which is utterly ridiculous because I'm not even comfortable around myself."

"It doesn't hurt that he's really cute," Missy added.

Emma laughed, her tears close to being forgotten. "There is that."

Missy sighed heavily. "I think you owe it to yourself, and to Jack, to find out where this is going for you. Maybe it'll never be more than a few fun dates, or it could be something that lasts for a lot longer. But I think it's a healthy step."

Emma didn't answer except to nod against her friend's shoulder.

"And, maybe it's time to put the ring away for awhile." Missy closed Emma's hand over the ring until it was completely out of sight.

"Maybe it is," Emma agreed.

* * *

"You're a cold, cruel... little, little man, Draco Malfoy!"

The urge to laugh welled in him and Draco couldn't keep it in. Astoria had been getting more and more difficult to handle lately. She'd just become so... demanding. Wanting to know where he was at all times, who he was with and what he was doing. And then, after interrogating him for what seemed like hours, she would play coy and claim that she was needed at her parents' home, and that they expected her to remain pure before her marriage to Draco. He'd already had her several times, but she was a bit of a bore, really. Not an adventurous bone in her body.

"Fine!" she yelled, "I'm going to my parents."

Having had enough, Draco stood and walked casually to the sideboard in the richly decorated drawing room. "That will suit me just fine. Leave the ring, love."

She gasped behind him and he could picture her clutching at the full carat diamond ring. He'd spent a small fortune on the ring, but only the best could be seen on the finger of Mrs. Malfoy. And Astoria had definitely fit the bill for a beautiful Malfoy woman. She was tall and thin, and very, very blonde.

Draco hadn't had much to choose from in the way of pureblood women who weren't already

betrotthed. Only the best families still participated in the old ways. Astoria was young and idealistic. Give her a few months alone and Draco knew she'd come crawling back.

In the meantime, he would have one less person watching his every move.

"You don't mean that?"

"Actually," Draco drawled, holding up his glass of red wine to see the light from the window shining through the deep burgundy color, "I do." He took a sip, appreciating the full flavor of the wine, before looking over to see Astoria's paler than usual face.

"Fine," she snapped, she slid the ring off and tossed it at him, hitting him in the chest. The ring slid down to the floor and, rather than giving her the satisfaction of seeing him pick it up, Draco stepped over it, and sat back down at his desk.

"I'm sure you can find your way out."

Astoria screamed in rage and stomped off down the hallway.

Draco chuckled, sitting back in his chair and hoisting his feet onto the desk. How many times had he come into this same room and seen his father in this exact position? More times than he could remember, actually.

A twinge of annoyance at the old memories flashed through him and Draco yelled for his house-elf.

"Yes, Master?" The elf bowed low and Draco inspected his uniform. Unlike his father, Draco had a healthy respect for the magic of the house elves. Not that he thought they were by any means equals. But he did know that treating them as a servant, and not something that he had stepped in, would get him more respect than his father had ever been shown by the lowly little beings.

"Miss Greengrass has gone home for the evening," he informed the elf. "There will only be one for dinner."

"Of course, Master." The elf wrung his little hands, but bowed low and cracked out of sight.

Yes, Draco mused, the next few weeks would be good. Perhaps he'd even pay a call back to get a few more dress robes. He'd seen the young girl several times last year before Astoria had found out and thrown an embarrassing tantrum. Perhaps it was time to see if the shapely young lady was still around. He could always go to Paris as well...

Astoria would come to her senses, or rather Donovan Greengrass would convince his daughter that taking the Malfoy name would be in her best interest. He'd educate his daughter in what it meant to be head of a house such as the Malfoy's. Donovan himself was rumored to have several mistresses.

And she would come back, crawling on her hands and knees. She would put the ring back on, resume planning their extravagant wedding and spending his unlimited fortune, and learn to turn her head the other way when her husband came home smelling of another woman's perfume.

After all, Draco was on top of the world. The accusations he'd made about Potter in that slimy little Rita Skeeter book had brought his name back into the news again. He'd even been offered several thousand galleons for an exclusive of his own story of the Final Battle. Of course, if that were the offer now... they would pay ten times that in a few months.

He sipped at his wine, reveling in the silence of the huge manor house. Yes, Draco Malfoy had arrived.

Chapter 5

November 2001 through December 2001

Jack smiled nervously as the group around him chatted and laughed. They were waiting in line to get into the area's newest dance club. Emma stood next to him; her hand clasped tightly in his own and chuckled at his fidgeting.

"Stop, Jack," she said. "Honestly! I fixed your collar and hair at the flat. You'll just mess it up if you—"

"I know, I know," Jack mumbled, although his smile betrayed that he wasn't upset. She had indeed tamed his wild locks when he and Derek had arrived at the girls' flat to pick them up. Jack was amazed that she'd been able to make it somewhat presentable. He'd spent hard earned money on a new pair of dark grey trousers, a pale green button-down shirt and black blazer. The money was well spent, if the looks that Emma was giving him were any indication.

Emma was a vision of beauty. She was wearing a knee-length black dress that hugged all her curves in the right places and strappy little heels that drove Jack wild. Her hair was curled tightly and piled on her head so that a few strands hung down in spirals. Jack fought the overwhelming urge to touch one of them.

"I'm just nervous," Jack confessed. "I've never been to a place like this and I'm not really sure what to do."

"Neither have I," Emma admitted and then smiled mischievously, "at least I don't think I have."

Jack snorted and then schooled his features as the bouncer eyed him suspiciously. Derek leaned back and whispered loudly behind his hand to Jack.

"I think he recognizes you from your other life. Better make a run for it, Jack."

"Other life?" Melissa swung around.

"Oh yeah," Derek grinned, "the one where he's a womanizing drinker that parties all night and gambles away the day."

"Very funny," Jack grumbled. He shot a betrayed look at Emma when she laughed. "Not you as well."

"It was funny," she confessed and Derek beamed at her.

"Oh, honestly," Melissa rolled her eyes.

The bouncer finally let them in after flirting outrageously with the women. Jack checked Emma's coat and took her hand again as they entered the hazy, loud atmosphere of the club.

"Wow," he mumbled, completely in awe at the flashing lights, pounding rhythm, and heat of the

bodies pressed together.

"Yeah," Emma agreed and pulled closer into his side. The crowd swallowed them up as Derek and Melissa moved confidently through them and toward a series of high tables near one wall.

"Would you ladies like something to drink?" Derek asked as the four reached one of the tables and claimed it for their own. Jack smiled as Emma tried her best to ignore the sticky surface of the table.

"What would you like?" he asked, laying his head close to her ear so that she could hear him.

"Oh," Emma scrunched her face in thought. "I'm not much of a drinker. How about a white wine?" Jack nodded thoughtfully and winked as he followed Derek to the bar.

The two men returned after ten minutes, each carrying drinks.

"Come on, Derek, let's dance!" Melissa shouted and grabbed his hand. Derek chugged a large gulp of his drink and winked at Jack as the blond tugged him toward the dance floor.

Emma laughed and shifted so that Jack could sit next to her.

"They make a good couple," Jack said, leaning toward her again.

Emma nodded. "They do, but I'm not sure how serious it is. Missy can be a little flighty, if you know what I mean."

Jack nodded. "I was wondering why you call her Missy?"

"I don't know," Emma shrugged. "It's what her family calls her, even though she doesn't really like it."

"I see," Jack nodded and took a sip of the amber liquid in his small glass.

"Would you like to dance?" he finally asked as a slower rhythm started.

"I'll give it a go," Emma grinned and placed her wine glass down. The two made their way to the crowded floor and Jack took her in his arms. "I never thanked you for walking me home last night," she said, her breath on his neck causing him to shiver.

Jack fought the urge to blush. Even though they'd arranged the date for tonight, he hadn't been able to stop himself from showing up at the coffee shop last night as she closed and walking her home. They'd talked about all sorts of things on the fifteen minute walk, holding hands the whole way.

"It was nothing," he protested. "I didn't want you walking alone. And..." he finally gave in to the blush and Emma smiled at his transparent state. "I really wanted to see you again."

Emma nodded and laid her cheek on his shoulder. "I wanted to see you too," she said softly in his ear. Jack shivered again and pulled her closer as they swayed to the music.

The song ended and they tried their best to fast dance to the next one, laughing and stumbling their way through it. Finally, they gave up and made their way back to the table and their drinks.

“I need to use the loo,” Jack said. “You’ll be alright?” Emma nodded and pointed to where Derek and Melissa were making their way to the table.

When he returned it was to find some other bloke leaning over Emma, seemingly trying to talk her into dancing, although it looked to Jack as if he was really trying to see down her dress.

“Everything alright, Emma?” Jack asked, eyeing the other man up and down.

“Sod off, pal,” the large man growled. “I was talking to the lady.”

“Yes,” Jack agreed. “I can see that you were chatting up my date.”

The man smirked, laying his arm along Emma’s shoulders which she tried to shrug off. “Your loss, mate. She was sitting here all alone.” His attention turned back to Emma as Jack raised an eyebrow at her.

“Come on and dance with me,” the other man pleaded. “Surely your boyfriend can’t object to one dance.” He faced Jack with challenge in his eyes.

“That would be up to the lady, I believe,” Jack said. Emma stared at him in shock and appreciation. All the other men she’d ever been around had tried to shelter and smother her with male protection, but Jack was giving her the choice.

“One dance,” she agreed and followed the man out from the tables. On her way by, she reached up and laid her hand on Jack’s chest in reassurance. “I’ll be right back,” she said softly. Jack just smiled and nodded.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Derek’s voice made Jack turn and shrug as the other couple sat at the table. “You’re just letting that minger take her?”

“She’s fine,” Jack said casually.

“You don’t know that,” Derek protested. “He could be... well, he could be after just about anything.”

Jack chuckled. “Well, I think it’s safe to say exactly what he’s after, but Emma can handle herself.”

“And if she can’t?”

Jack shrugged. “It isn’t my place to say that.”

Melissa smiled at him and leaned in closer. “Yet,” she mumbled, winning a grin of thanks from Jack.

Emma soon marched back with a scowl on her face, grumbling about gits with wandering hands. Jack laughed and took her into his arms to dance with her.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," he said to her as they moved closer together.

Emma continued to scowl and finally burst out in laughter. "No you aren't. You just wanted to see me slap him."

Jack pulled back, an amused look on his face. "Did you?"

"No," Emma sighed. "I kneed him in the bits." Jack rocked back in laughter and Emma joined him.

"I told Derek you could take care of yourself."

Emma's expression softened. "Thanks, Jack, I really appreciate that. Most men think they need to protect a woman they're out with."

"I'm not saying I enjoyed it," Jack conceded as they continued to sway together. "In fact, some very primitive cave-man part of me was demanding that I pummel the berk."

Emma snorted. "Well, thank you for suppressing your primal tendencies then."

"Jack?"

The two turned as a shapely brunette stood in front of them, hands on her hips. "I *thought* it was you."

Jack sighed mentally and nodded to her, a fake smile plastered on his lips. "Sophie."

The brunette flashed her perfectly white smile and stuck her hand out toward Emma, invading the space of the couple dancing. "I don't think we've met. I'm Sophie Taylor. Jack and I've... well," she blushed spectacularly and winked, "we've *gone out* a few times."

Emma shook the limp hand in distaste and glanced over at Jack who seemed to be building up anger. "Emma," she replied.

"Sophie, don't imply things that you know didn't happen."

The woman ignored Jack and smiled again at Emma. "Well, aren't you just a lovely little thing? Jack, you scoundrel, they get younger every time I see you. What are you, dear, eighteen?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "It was nice seeing you, Sophie, but I think Emma and I will get back to our dance now." With that he spun Emma away and they moved further into the crowd. Emma glanced over her shoulder to see Sophie glaring at the couple and vaguely wondered if her highly make-uped face would crack in frustration.

"Do I even want to know?" Emma asked as she wrapped her arms around Jack's neck and they began dancing again.

Jack blew out a deep breath and let himself relax. "She and I went out a couple of times. She's... well, she's a bit of a..."

"Scarlet woman?" Emma prompted and then laughed at the look of surprise on Jack's face.

“Where on earth did you hear that phrase?” he laughed.

Emma clapped a hand to her mouth and giggled. “Honestly, I don’t know. I’m not sure I’ve ever really heard it before. It just popped out.”

Jack laughed. “I think it applies.”

“So,” Emma prompted, “you and she...”

“Nothing happened,” Jack growled. “She’s been spreading rumors though, and I think that the fact that I won’t see her again just fuels her fire.”

“Well, I’m not sure if that bodes well for the future then,” Emma sighed, trying to hide the amusement on her face.

“Huh?” Jack queried.

“Well, I had high hopes for tonight, but if you wouldn’t give it up for a woman like that after a few dates, what hope do I have?”

Jack stopped dancing and pulled back from her gaping.

She burst out laughing at the incredulous look on his face. “I was only kidding, Jack,” Emma explained.

Jack grinned and pulled her even closer, growling into her ear as she wrapped her arms tighter around his neck. “I don’t think you were, Miss Stanton. I think you’re trying to get into my trousers.”

Emma laughed and pulled away as Jack poked her ribs.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” he teased. “You only like me for my body!” Emma continued to giggle and protest as Jack tickled her. “Just what kind of a boy do you think I am?”

“A randy one!” she exclaimed.

Jack stopped short and smiled at her. “Well, you’d be right. But that doesn’t mean—”

“I know,” Emma cut him off. “I was only teasing.”

“Okay.” They continued to dance and Emma laid her head on his shoulder. “Hey, do you want to get out of here?” Emma lifted her head and searched his face. “I don’t mean for that...”

“I know,” Emma agreed again. “Yeah, I do.”

Jack nodded and took her hand, leading her over to their table. “We’re leaving,” he explained to Derek and Melissa. Derek nodded and then grinned evilly.

“Don’t forget the tie!” He howled in laughter as Jack turned away without a word. “And use protection!” Jack didn’t respond more than to throw a rude hand gesture over his shoulder.

Jack wrapped an arm around Emma's shoulders as they walked away from the noise of the club district. "Are you warm enough?"

"For now," Emma smiled. There was a light dusting of snow on the ground but no flakes were falling. "Where did you want to go?"

"Nowhere really," Jack answered. "I just wanted to get out of there."

Emma agreed and snuggled in closer to his side.

"I could take you home, if you like, or we could go to get a bite to eat."

"I am hungry," Emma said, smiling up at him.

"That's settled then. What are you in the mood for?"

"Pretty much anything," she said. "I'm not terribly into Indian food though."

"I agree," Jack said. "I can't seem to get a taste for curry."

They finally settled on a small Italian restaurant a few blocks from Emma's flat. The waiter seated them in a cozy booth in the dark corner of the room.

"That's better," Jack said. "Now I feel like I can talk to you without having to yell. Did you want another wine?"

Emma shook her head. "No, too much makes me dizzy. I'll just have water with lemon, if that's alright."

"Make that two," Jack said to the waiter who nodded and left them with the menus.

They laughed about the evening as they chose their entrée's and waited for the food.

"You never told me how you met Derek," Emma commented once he'd finished telling a particular funny story about a girl who had shown up at their flat one day looking for Derek.

"Ah," Jack grimaced. "It's not my finest hour, I'll admit. Do you really want to know?"

"I do," Emma nodded, curious at the somewhat closed-off expression that Jack now wore.

He sighed and took a drink before starting. "You remember me telling you that I was in a car accident several years ago." Emma nodded and he continued. "Well, I was pretty messed up. I had a few broken ribs, broken arm, lots of cuts and scrapes. My entire right side was one huge bruise, I guess from where I landed after the car hit me. I had hit my head pretty hard and they said that's why I have such a bad memory."

He took another drink and glanced around nervously.

"When I finally got out of hospital..." Jack fidgeted his hands and Emma finally reached over to clasp them in hers which made him smile softly, although he wouldn't meet her eyes. "There was

no one... I had nowhere to go.”

“So...”

“I was homeless. I lived on the streets and in shelters.”

Emma gasped and Jack looked away. “For how long?” she whispered.

“Almost two years,” he admitted, now looking at their joined hands. “I tried to get work where I could, but with no records for schooling or identification of any sort...”

“I can imagine how hard it was,” Emma agreed.

“Sometimes... well, I had to steal to get what I needed.” Finally he glanced up to see Emma smiling softly at him, tears in her eyes. “You’re not mad at me?”

Emma laughed through the tears that spilled out. “Why would I be? Jack, if it weren’t for the fact that Melissa’s mum was a nurse at the hospital where I was taken and that she took me in afterwards, I would have been in the same place you were. I was extremely lucky and I’m thankful for it, but don’t think that I judge you for a moment for surviving.”

Jack blinked back his own emotions and swallowed the lump in his throat. “I tried really hard not to take from anyone who I could tell had a family. Although, once I did take some clothes off of a laundry line,” he admitted guiltily. “I usually just took a few pounds here and there, wherever I could, so that I could buy food.”

Emma removed her hand from the tangle of fingers and laid it alongside his cheek in support.

“There was a doctor at the hospital... he offered me help after I got out. I tried to find him once, but they said he didn’t work there anymore. He went somewhere else.”

Jack took a deep breath and continued. “One day I had lifted a wallet from a man in an expensive suit. I turned around and there was Derek, watching every move I made. My first instinct was to run for it, but he caught up with me. I was sure he was going to ring the coppers and turn me in. Instead, he took me to this café and bought me a huge meal. Took me to his flat and let me shower, gave me a change of clothes from his own wardrobe and took me to a market where he knew the owner. That’s where I got the night job stocking shelves.”

He sighed heavily. “I’ll never be able to repay him for what he did for me.”

Emma nodded in understanding. “Has he asked you to?”

“No!” Jack protested. “He’s never said another word about it. In fact, we’ve rarely spoken about it. I tried once to tell him what it meant to me... but I’m not so good with words and I messed it up as usual.”

“I think you’re just fine with words,” Emma consoled. “Would you have done the same?” She continued when Jack looked confused. “If it had been you in Derek’s shoes, would you have helped someone else?”

"I like to think I would," Jack nodded.

"I think you would."

"You've only known me three days," Jack protested.

"I know enough," Emma said softly. Their food arrived and Jack seemed to settle considerably now that he knew Emma wouldn't judge him for his past crimes. The evening continued nicely and they finally found themselves at the base of the stairs that led up to Emma's flat.

"I had a good time tonight," Jack sighed.

"Despite all the interruptions?" Emma laughed, thinking of the man that she'd had to put in his place, and Sophie.

Jack smiled. "Despite those."

"I did too," Emma agreed. They stood in silence for a minute before Jack leaned closer and their lips met. The kiss was sweet and entirely too short for both of them. Emma grinned as she grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him down to kiss her again. This kiss was much deeper and full of passion.

"Goodnight," Jack whispered breathlessly as they pulled away from each other.

"Goodnight," Emma agreed, a dazed smile on her face.

* * *

Emma grinned to herself as she sat on the sofa in the dark and waited. She could hear the fumbling for keys out in the hallway and almost laughed out loud when Derek and Melissa stumbled in, lips locked between them and groping each other heavily.

"Ahem," she cleared her throat and they both tipped over, crashing to the floor in surprise. Emma clicked on the lamp next to her and knelt on the sofa, leaning against the back and looking over onto the floor where the two lay tangled together. Derek was massaging his lips and Missy the back of her head.

"So sorry to interrupt," Emma smirked.

"Why're you here?" grumbled Derek.

"Last time I checked, I lived here," Emma replied dryly.

"Yeah, but you and Jack..." he broke off, eyeing her raised eyebrow.

"Me and Jack?"

"Well, you left early and... t-together... and I thought..."

Melissa pushed him off of her and laughed. "You thought that they'd be shagging! Derek, they've

only gone out on one date!”

Derek just stuttered and stood from his position on the floor. “I didn’t mean that... I just...”

“Save it,” Emma smiled. “I’m sure I know what you thought. And, you can make up for it by answering a few questions.”

“Questions?” Derek asked warily.

Melissa just smirked and began to remove the clips from her hair. “You sit down and answer Em’s questions, and I’m going to get out of this dress.”

Derek swallowed hard and followed his girlfriend’s progress longingly.

“Alright, loverboy,” Emma smirked.

Derek sighed resignedly. “What do you want to know? I’m assuming it’s about Jack.”

Emma nodded. “He told me about how you two met.” She watched as Derek stilled. “Is it true?”

“What did he tell you?”

“That you caught him stealing and helped him rather than turning him in.”

Derek nodded. “It’s true. Although I bet he left out the highlights.”

“The highlights?” Emma asked.

“Yeah, all the parts that make him look good,” Derek added with a wry smile. “I took him somewhere where he could eat and the bloke near cleaned the place out. I thought it was suspicious, so I asked him how long it’d been since he’d eaten, turns out that it’d been almost four days.”

Emma sighed and sank down further into the cushions.

“The clothes he had were not much to look at, and they were thin as well. It was early spring and he had no coat. He said the hospital had given him one but it’d been stolen. Personally, I think he gave it to someone else.”

“Why would you think that?” Emma asked.

Derek shrugged. “I don’t have any real proof, but Jack’s like that. He never buys more than his basic needs and even though he says he saves everything he makes, I know he gives a lot of it away. I’ve seen young homeless kids approach him and he’ll give them every last note in his wallet. Last Christmas he came home from work, gathered up all his warm winter clothing, except four jumpers, and marched out the door with it. I never saw it again, and I don’t think he knows I know.”

Emma opened her mouth to reply but couldn’t seem to find the words.

“And the wallet that he stole from that bloke, the day we met, he posted it back to him. I caught

him doing it the next day. I never saw him take any money out of it at all, and mind you there were hundreds of pounds in there. That was the only time I've ever asked him about it and he just shrugged and said that he hadn't needed it after all."

"What about the scar on the back of his right hand?" Emma asked. "I haven't really gotten a good look at it, but it looks like words or something."

Derek nodded. "It says 'I must not tell lies'. He has no idea where it came from. I suspect quite a bit of abuse in his past, whether it was from his parents or someone else, I don't know."

Emma sat in silence as Derek faded off. Melissa joined them on the sofa and wiped away her own tears. Obviously, she'd been listening in the hall.

"You love him, don't you?" Derek finally asked.

"I don't know," Emma said. "But I think I'm starting to."

"Good," Derek nodded. "He needs someone like you."

* * *

She screwed up her face tightly, staring into the mirror, until her hair changed. Patterns, Tonks had learned over the years, were not easy.

"Ooo, very nice," the mirror complimented the red on one side and green on the other. Remus hated this mirror, she knew. She tried explaining to him that it was no use hating an inanimate object. But the mirror was less than flattering for him, Tonks knew, pointing out new grey hairs and wrinkles.

"It just likes variety," she told him, making her hair flash a brilliant blue.

Remus laughed and reached up to tug at her locks. "Variety? Is that what you call this?"

The memory made Tonks smile as she eyed her hair critically. "Maybe if I make my eyes match," she mumbled to no one. The bathroom was empty, although she knew it wouldn't be long before Remus came knocking. In fact, she grinned, she could hear his footsteps now.

"Dora!" he called through the door. "We're going to be late."

"Nonsense," she replied back, scrunching her face one last time until she ended up with pure white hair tipped with red and green. "There, perfect." She nodded and didn't listen to the mirror's opinion as she swung the door wide.

"That took long enough," Remus ribbed her good naturedly. Orion, sitting in his arms, squealed when she saw her mother and tried to copy her hair—only ending up a messy pink color instead.

"Well, at least she's trying," Tonks shrugged. They made their way downstairs, while Tonks went through a checklist of what they needed to take with them.

"You got the stack of gifts, near the back?"

“The ones with the large ‘W’ marked on all the packages?” Remus asked dryly. “Yeah. Really subtle, by the way.”

Tonks raised an eyebrow at his teasing. “I’ll deal with you later,” she growled.

Remus’ face lit and he grinned. “Promise?”

Tonks laughed and reached for Ori. “No promises. Did you get the nappy bag from off of the table?”

“Yes,” Remus chorused.

“And the plate of biscuits that Mum sent over?”

“Yes,” he answered again in a patient voice. His tone, however, was getting tight and she could tell that her questions were bothering him. Oh, how she loved to wind that man up.

“What about—”

“Dora,” he sighed. “I’ve got everything. Now, if we don’t get there, Molly will send someone out to look for us. And, with our luck, it will be one of the twins.”

Tonks chuckled at the suggestion and moved to a corner of the drawing room they had designated for Apparition.

“Do you think that’s wise?” Remus asked, his eyes wide. “She’s still too young to focus completely on where you’re going.”

Fighting the urge to roll her eyes, Tonks nodded. “It’s fine. She’s a big girl now and knows that she wants to go see Grammy Weasley.” She turned to her daughter and in a very sickly voice started to tickle the little girl. “Don’t you, Ori. You love to see your Grammy Weasley.”

Ori nodded and wrapped her arms tightly around her mother’s neck, her little legs wrapping around her middle until Tonks didn’t even have to hold onto her any longer. She gave a quick wink to her husband and Apparated to the Burrow.

* * *

The chaos of a Burrow Christmas was just what she needed, Tonks decided. One never knew what might happen.

“Is that... a gnome?” she mumbled, peering at the top of the Christmas tree.

“Yep,” Fred proclaimed cheerily. “It’s an old tradition. Although we made Ron catch him this year—he won the contest.”

Tonks raised an eyebrow at him and then shrugged, “I’m not going to ask—really, I’m not.”

Fred laughed and waggled his eyebrows. “Find me later if you change your mind. I’ll be the one surrounded by gorgeous women.”

Tonks snorted. "You're biased," she laughed.

"And you're just jealous," he quipped back with a wink, stooping over to lift his twin daughters into his arms. "Come on girls... has Daddy ever told you about the time he and Uncle George charmed Filch's nasty old cat to think Snape's feet were mice?"

She really shouldn't laugh. But Tonks couldn't help it.

"He's creating monsters."

She turned as Ron came up beside her and handed over a cup of eggnog. "Yes, he is. And George isn't any better. When we came in he had the boys in the kitchen and was teaching them to pout for biscuits."

"One day they'll regret it," Ron nodded, a fond smile on his face.

"Really?" Tonks grinned. Her eyes scanned the room and found Orion peppering Remus and Arthur with questions. The two men looked a bit frazzled, but neither would ever disappoint the little girl.

"Probably not," Ron agreed. "So how are you liking being back at work?"

Tonks grinned. "It's only a few days a week, but I love it. I've missed being in the know these past years. Kingsley slipped me bits now and again, and being in the Order helps."

"Yeah," Ron nodded and took another sip of the highly spiked drink. "Although, even being in the Department you don't always get to know everything."

Tonks hid her smile. She had wondered when Ron first appeared at her side what his motivations were. Now, it seemed, he wanted the gen on something.

"And what is it they're not telling you?" she asked, lowering her voice slightly.

Ron shrugged a shoulder and ruffled his hair; a sure sign that he was annoyed at something. "Nothing, really. I just—I know they have Malfoy under watch."

Tonks sighed. "Ron, you know I can't—"

"I don't want specifics," he hissed, his face becoming a harsh reminder of the anger he had lived in not too far in the past. As if realizing who he was talking to, he sighed and softened. "I just... I just feel like I should be included. I know why Kingsley doesn't want me there, but I'm not obsessed, really I'm not."

Tonks narrowed her eyes, debating that point internally. "I understand your feelings, I really do, Ron."

"Anything you can give me, Tonks," he sighed, finishing the rest of his drink in one great swallow. "I just know he was more involved than he admits. And I know that Hermione says it's just me hating him—but it's more than that, I swear. The whole story... it just doesn't feel right."

Tonks couldn't help but to agree, despite having no evidence. And Kingsley agreed as well, although

he couldn't officially say so. As far as the Ministry was concerned, the surveillance of Draco Malfoy was nothing more than a general interest because of his past and connections to the Dark Arts.

She weighed her choices before responding. If she told Ron something that made him do something irrational, then she would be culpable. However, seeing as everything they had was so... tame, she didn't see what it could hurt.

"He's been very quiet actually," she admitted, her eyes darting around the room to make sure no one was listening. "A few trips to the continent, but nothing unusual. We think he has a mistress in Paris."

Ron grimaced but stayed silent.

"Astoria Greengrass broke their engagement," Tonks continued with a nasty smile. "She claims he broke the terms by spreading himself around, if you get my drift. He hasn't responded back, so we're not sure, but it's probably true."

Ron glared at her in distaste. "Do I even want to know how you know this stuff?"

Tonks grinned and waggled her eyebrows. "Nope."

"Fine," he nodded. "Just... no more of the gossip rubbish. I don't care about that stuff." He shuffled and squirmed in place, a look of utter distaste on his face. "Is he involved in any Dark Magic? What's he doing for money?"

Tonks chuckled at his discomfort. "For now, he seems to be living off of his parent's money."

"I'm sure old Lucius is rolling in his grave," he mumbled.

"Probably," Tonks shrugged. "He's been spotted a time or two in Knockturn Alley."

"And no one's done anything about that?"

Tonks raised an eyebrow at his raised voice and Ron flushed. "It's not a crime, duck. If I remember right, you've been there a time or two yourself."

Ron's ears burned bright red, making Tonks swell with pride. "But he had to have been down there for some reason."

"You sound like Harry," she mused, and then kicked herself mentally when Ron's expression darkened.

"I guess I do," he finally admitted and then shrugged. "I still think he was right all those years ago."

"He was," Tonks sighed. "And, yes, Draco's probably up to something, but until we can find concrete proof..."

"His lies aren't enough?" Ron asked. "You know what he said in that... shite that Skeeter had published. Harry did *not* use Dark Magic to defeat V-Voldemort."

"I know that," Tonks nodded. "And you know that. Because we both know that Harry wouldn't ever stoop that low. But, legally, we can't do anything to him, Ron. And you know that. You've had Evidence classes." Ron nodded and squirmed. Tonks knew she had won a major point, although having done so didn't make her feel good. She was sure that Draco Malfoy was more involved in the Final Battle than he had said. But there was no *proof*.

"You'll keep me informed?" Ron mumbled, eyeing Hermione as she stood and began to make her way toward them.

"You'll keep this quiet?" Tonks asked back. He rolled his eyes and she chuckled.

"I can keep a secret."

"So can I, love," Tonks quipped. "For example... I've not told anyone about that lovely little tattoo on your chest."

Ron's face heated and Tonks grinned, loving that she could ruffle him so fast. "You're not supposed to know about that."

"Well," she shrugged, "It's not like you had a shirt on."

His jaw dropped. "I was in the changing room, Tonks," he hissed. "The *men's* changing room. You weren't supposed to be in there anyway."

Tonks laughed loudly when Hermione joined them, her arms going around Ron's waist. "What are you two talking about over here? You looked like it was rather intense."

Ron shot a pleading look at Tonks and she nodded in understanding. "We were discussing dragon lore."

Hermione looked more confused than ever as Tonks bounced away, deciding it was time to find her daughter and see what kind of havoc they could cause together.

* * *

Jack shifted in the backseat of Derek's car, causing Emma to nudge his shoulder with hers and peer at him.

"Nervous?" she whispered and he shrugged, trying to look less like a teenage boy off to face the firing squad.

To say that Jack had been dreading Christmas was an understatement. He hated the holiday, to be honest. He had no memories of it from before and the past years had been spent watching people bustle about with overflowing shopping bags and wrapped gifts. There had been no thought given to the homeless man huddled in the corner of the alleyway just trying to keep warm.

And Jack was highly embarrassed to admit that for a pickpocket—Christmas was one of the best times. He'd learned quickly to watch for the shoppers coming out of the storefronts with wallets hastily shoved in pockets and armloads of shopping bags. At least he'd been able to buy some new

clothing and a hot meal. But the lingering thought that someone had gone without because of him made his food hard to swallow.

Last Christmas had been better. He'd been living with Derek by that time and working both jobs while going to Uni. When Derek had been summoned home, Jack had used the excuse that he needed to catch up on studying and sleep to avoid trailing along with him to the posh London home.

But it was different with Emma. Jack wanted to be with Emma more than anything. The past two months had flown by and Jack could hardly remember a time when they hadn't been together. They saw each other every day that they could, even if it was only the few minutes in between Emma's closing the coffee house and Jack's night shift at the market.

So the discomfort and confusion that welled up in him over Emma's invitation to come with her to Kendal had taken him by surprise. For weeks after she had asked him to come, Jack quietly debated the choices in his head. He was terrified of meeting Anne—what if she didn't approve of him? Jack could tell, just by looking at the expression on Emma's face when she spoke of Anne, that his girlfriend thought the world of the woman.

And in a way, without even meeting her, so did Jack. She had taken a complete stranger into her home and given Emma opportunities that she never would have had living on the streets. Just the thought of Emma living as he had, forced to steal and beg for food, made him shiver, and Emma's thumb caressed his hand, bringing him back to present.

Jack forced a smile for her and shifted to place his arm around her shoulders. Just when he'd finally committed, to himself and to Emma, to make this work, he'd become even more unsettled than ever.

His dreams, something he'd always shaken off before now as not mattering, had become more vivid than ever, always circling around the holiday. And Jack didn't know what to make of them. Where they simple dreams? Or were they memories of his former life?

The first one was a warm table filled with laughter and heaping with food. Jack had been very content and satisfied, even though he couldn't see the faces in the dream and it unnerved him.

The second, and the one that had shaken him up the worst, was of himself kissing a dark haired woman in a half-lit room. That was the first time Jack had woken being thankful that he didn't remember anything. The dream left him feeling out of sorts and not himself for the rest of the day, and it flashed in his mind later when he greeted Emma with a kiss.

The third, though, only made him feel lower than he'd ever been. He was enclosed in a small space, but there wasn't enough light to see where he was. Jack had always been a bit claustrophobic and the dream made that come back ten-fold. What little light there was came through a vent of some sort on the small doorway in front of him. He could hear the sounds of people talking in the distance, but couldn't make out the words. However, in the background was the sound of a radio playing music that he recognized as Christmas music. Just before he woke, Jack was startled by a banging on the vent, the metallic sound grating on his nerves. "Merry Christmas, Freak," had echoed through his head in a slow-motion, underwater voice. The sweat he'd awoken in hadn't made Jack feel any better.

"You're being quiet," Emma whispered, reaching up to trace a finger along his jaw.

"Sorry," Jack mumbled, trying to look contrite. "I guess I'm a bit preoccupied."

"Jack," Emma scolded softly, "you don't have to worry about this. Anne will love you."

They'd had this conversation before but suddenly, only a few miles away from their destination, Jack felt the need to have it again.

"What if she doesn't?" he voiced, his voice low and unsure. He didn't look at her, not wanting to see the disappointment in her face. Instead, he focused on Derek, in the front seat, driving through the snow storm, his knuckles white on the wheel. Missy sat next to him, her hand on his shoulder, trying to make idle conversation.

"She will," Emma assured him, putting slight pressure on his chin until he turned to face her. "I love you, Jack. And I know that Anne's going to see that the moment she sees us together." Jack chewed his lip, still not feeling relieved.

Emma sighed and dropped her hand from his chin, and rolled her eyes. "Alright, let's pretend for a minute that she doesn't like you. Let's say she thinks you're not worthy of me and wants you to stop seeing me."

Jack squirmed as his heart clenched and he turned his head away, gazing out at the snow hitting the windows.

"What would you do?" she asked softly, giving his hand a squeeze. "Answer me that, Jack."

He shook his head, not wanting to say anything through his thick throat. The thought of being without Emma now made him feel out of balance and his stomach rolled. "I'd... I'd..."

"You'd walk away," Emma nodded. "Because that's what you do."

Jack spun to protest that he didn't back down from anything when her finger came up and pressed on his lips.

"I don't mean that you leave," she explained, "but you sacrifice. It's who you are, Jack. I've seen it time and time again in these past weeks. I've never met a man like you."

"You say that like it's a good thing," he mumbled looking down at their intertwined hands.

Emma sighed and laid her head on his shoulder. "Sometimes it is," she admitted. "But most of the time it's a pain in the arse."

Jack couldn't help but chuckle at her bluntness. Emma's sense of humor and her ability to put him in his place with just a word or two was something that both rankled and endeared her to him.

"And you'd be wrong," she whispered into the skin of his neck. "To leave, I mean. Because I wouldn't want you to." She lifted her head and her deep brown eyes looked deeply into his, making his chest tighten in a whole different way. "Yes, I value Anne's opinion. Yes, she's important to me. But you're the one I'm in love with, Jack. You're the one..." she trailed off, turning her head away

from him.

Jack wasn't sure what she had stopped herself from saying, but he could see her eyelashes flutter, holding back emotion. She hated to cry in front of him. It had only happened one time before, when she had told him about waking up in the hospital, and she'd fought the tears the whole time, only giving in when Jack had pulled her to him.

"You're the one for me too," Jack chanced whispering. He caught Derek's eye in the mirror, but ignored it as he pulled Emma's face around and placed a kiss on her lips.

The feel of her soft lips, responding against his own, was like a shot of courage into his heart. Suddenly, it didn't matter that someone might not like the idea of them together. It didn't matter that Jack didn't feel he'd ever be worthy of her. And it didn't matter that Derek was loudly clearing his throat in the front seat, or that Missy was giggling. All that mattered was that Emma was still kissing him, and her tongue was caressing the roof of his mouth and her hands...

"We're here!"

Missy's cry finally broke through the haze in Jack's head and he pulled away, despite the moan from Emma. His face heated as he turned to see both Missy and Derek turned around in their seats and laughing at them.

"You might want to take a minute," Derek suggested with a waggle of his eyebrows. "Wouldn't want Anne to see you all worked up."

Jack lifted a single fingered salute at his best mate, but couldn't help laughing.

"Come on," Emma said, tugging at the front of his jumper. He could tell she was excited at being able to introduce him to Anne.

* * *

Anne watched as the two couples got out of the car parked in front of her house. She didn't let the curtains move; in case they thought she was spying on them. Which, she realized with a stab of guilt, she was.

She'd been looking forward to this day for a long time. Having Missy's boyfriend, one that seemed like he might go the distance with the energetic and driven young woman, and Emma's boyfriend, in the house for Christmas was something that Anne hadn't expected. Missy had, of course, written all about the two young men and seemed quite smitten with Derek.

Emma had written about Jack as well, but her letters were much more cryptic than Missy's, much like the woman herself. Anne was thrilled that Emma had found someone that she assured Anne she was in love with. The speed of the relationship was quite another thing. Emma had explained Jack's memory loss and Anne was very surprised by the similarities.

Now she was getting her chance to meet the two young men and see just what these two young women found irresistible.

Anne watched the couples get their things from the boot of the car, studying their movements and expressions as closely as she could through the sheer curtains.

Derek and Missy came up the walk first. Anne was immediately impressed by the young man, who wore a wide smile as he slipped and slid around, teasing her daughter about tossing her into a snow pile.

He was extremely handsome with his medium brown hair swept off of his brow. Standing only a few inches taller than Missy herself, he was thin but very well kept. His wool coat was an expensive one; Anne could tell by the way it hung off of his shoulders. But he looked like he wore it casually, as if the quality and price really didn't matter to him at all. She loved the way he held her daughter's hand tucked in his arm—a real gentleman, Anne thought.

Jack and Emma came next, both taking their turns in sliding along the icy sidewalk, their rucksacks dangling off of one of Jack's shoulders.

Jack was at least a head taller than Emma, which wasn't hard as Emma was a tiny little thing. His hair was hidden under a knitted cap, but Anne could see the dark ends poking out from the edges. He wore glasses, as well.

She shot a look at Carter, who was reading in the corner. Brooding, more like, Anne huffed. When Emma replied to Anne's invitation that she was bringing Jack for Christmas, Anne had sat Carter down and explained that Emma was seeing someone and that he was spending the holiday with them. Carter had sighed dejectedly and explained that Emma had told him that she wasn't interested in his advances on the evening of the first visit to Manchester. But he was still holding out hope that she'd change her mind. Anne hated to be the one to break his heart, but from what she could see, Emma and Jack seemed entirely attached to each other.

Anne stepped back from the window and down the hallway to open the door as the two couples could be heard stamping the snow and wetness from their feet.

Once the introductions were made, Anne bustled them all into the small, tidy kitchen to have cups of hot chocolate and eat plates of the biscuits that she had been baking for days.

She caught Emma's eye at the back of the group and the young woman let her friends move ahead.

"He's cute," Anne complimented in a whisper, grinning at Emma's blush.

"He is," Emma returned.

"Don't look so worried, duck," Anne said as she wound her arm through Emma's and the continued slowly down the hall. "I think he's a very nice young man."

She could see Emma take a deep breath, and guessed that it was in relief. "He was so nervous to come here."

"Why?" Anne goggled. "It's not as if I'd eat him alive!"

Emma giggled and nudged Anne with her hip. "He's just was."

"I guess that's understandable," Anne sighed. "I remember when Jim came to meet my parents the first time." She sighed in remembrance of all those years ago. "But it's a bit different," she continued. "I'm not your mother, nor is Jack facing an overprotective father."

"True," Emma conceded. "Although he's having to face Carter."

Anne chuckled. "Don't be too tough on him, love. It's hard to languish in love. Besides, he'll get the picture when he really takes a look at the two of you together."

Emma blushed deeply. "How can you tell?" she asked softly, her eyes darting into the kitchen where Jack was running his fingers through his messy hair. "You've only just met him."

"I can see it in your face, love," Anne answered wisely, reaching up to caress Emma's cheek. "And I remember that feeling."

Emma beamed at her, reaching up on tiptoe to give her a kiss on the cheek, before slipping fully into the kitchen and taking her place at Jack's side.

Anne sighed, leaning against the doorframe and looked at the two couples. Both obviously in love, but so very different from each other.

Derek and Missy were laughing casually, teasing each other about the proper way to drink hot chocolate, while Jack and Emma sat, shoulder to shoulder, sharing deep and knowing looks.

It made Anne miss Jim all the more, but at the same time, she felt the charge of young love in the air. It was something that this old house had been lacking for a lot of years. And it was time to celebrate it.

* * *

Jack started when he came out of the bathroom, hair still damp from his shower, and came face to face with Carter, Melissa's brother. He looked the same, Jack thought, as the first time Jack had ever seen Emma—blond, well groomed and dressed impeccably.

Jack moved to the side of the hallway, giving Carter enough room to pass. "Excuse me," he mumbled, draping his moist towel over his shoulder.

Carter, however, didn't move, but stared at Jack.

"Can I help you with something?" Jack asked, meeting the man's eyes steadily. He'd been able to tell from the first moment he'd walked into the Wilkins' home, that Carter didn't like him. And the way the man followed Emma around, jumping in front of her to do things, or taking every opportunity to touch her in some way, made Jack's chest rumble with possessiveness.

"You don't deserve her," Carter hissed, his eyes darting to the closed door where Missy and Emma were staying. "I don't know what she sees in you."

Jack narrowed his eyes and stood straighter, causing the thin Carter to take a step backwards. Jack wasn't a man to be intimidated by someone like this... bloody plonker. He'd stood up to much worse

over the years.

“Regardless,” Jack said, “I’m the one she’s chosen to be with.”

Carter looked as he wanted to respond but Derek’s messy head poked out of the bedroom that he and Jack were sharing.

“All right, mate?”

“All right,” Jack responded, not taking his eyes from Carter. From the corner of his eye, he saw Derek nod, eye Carter for a moment, and then disappear back into the room. Derek knew Jack could take care of himself, and that made Jack smile a bit.

Carter must have seen the hardness in Jack’s face, because he swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down several times.

“Look,” Jack said, relaxing his shoulders a bit so that he wasn’t completely intimidating the other man. “I know that you’ve got this... thing for Emma.”

“I love her,” Carter said softly. Jack winced, but pressed forward.

“She’s something,” he agreed. “But you need to understand that I love her as well.”

Carter shifted, glancing back at the girls’ closed door. “Be good to her,” he whispered. Jack could tell the words were costing him.

“I will,” he agreed, holding out his hand for Carter to shake. “You have my word on it.”

“If you ever hurt her...” He trailed off and eyed the scared and calloused hand for a moment before shaking it limply and turning away and hurrying down the steps. Jack watched him go before shaking his head and continuing on into his room.

* * *

“I’m glad you came,” Emma whispered into Jack’s ear as they cuddled under a thick homemade quilt on the swing that lived on the wide wrap-around porch.

“Me too,” Jack whispered back.

“So, what did you think?”

“About what?” Jack questioned, tearing his eyes away from where the setting sun was lighting up the snowy terrain.

“About Christmas... here... with me.” Emma poked his side under the blanket they shared and Jack squirmed away from her fingers.

“It was perfect,” Jack said. “Not that I have much to compare it to; but if I did, it would still win.”

Emma lay her head down on Jack’s shoulder and sighed. “Anne really likes you.”

Jack smirked. "Carter doesn't."

Emma laughed. "Carter's a special case."

"Yeah, I could tell he had feelings for you when he tried to corner me in the hall and threatened me if I ever hurt you."

"He didn't!" Emma gasped. She'd known bringing Jack would hurt Carter a bit, but she truly believed that it was just a crush that the man had on her and that it would go away when he saw how happy she was with Jack.

Jack nodded. "He did, but don't worry, we came to an... understanding, of sorts, I guess. I won't ever hurt you and he agrees not to try and remove my tonsils through my nostrils."

Emma laughed and nuzzled his neck. "I love you," she whispered.

Jack grinned. He loved hearing her say that, even though Derek did tell him that it was too soon for the two of them to be using... *ithat/i*... word.

"I love you too, Em." They sat quietly together while Jack used his foot to rock them a bit in the swing.

"Can I tell you something?" Emma finally asked and Jack's attention was fully on her as her tone was serious.

"Sure, love, you can tell me anything."

"It has to do with... before..." Jack nodded. 'Before' was the term both of them used to indicate their lives before both of their traumatic memory losses.

"When I woke up in hospital, they told me it wasn't an accident I'd been in, that I'd been beaten, probably mugged, by the looks of it." Jack continued to nod as they'd been over this territory before. "Well, there was something else. I was wearing this when they brought me in; it was tucked under the clothes that I had on. The clothing was ruined by all the blood and dirt on it and they had to throw it away."

She held out her hand and a thin gold chain lay there along with a ring topped by a square diamond. Jack picked the ring up and looked at it, glancing at her to find her worrying her lip.

"It's an engagement ring," he stated. He wasn't quite sure why she was telling him this story.

"Yes, that's what I thought too," Emma nodded. "I wore it for years around my neck, waiting."

Jack sobered a bit and laid the ring back onto her hand, although his eyes didn't leave it. What was she trying to tell him? That she'd been in love before, enough to be engaged? That the man she'd been with before had come back into her life? That she didn't want to get serious with Jack while there was still a chance that this other man might return? Hadn't she just said she loved him? The ring lay there, mocking him as his mind whirled.

"I wanted you to know about it, because we said we'd be completely honest with each other."

Jack nodded and cleared his throat, finally forcing his eyes away from the trinket.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say, Em. Do you... want to find this man, or something?”

“No!” Emma denied, pulling away from him so that she could look into his face. “I’m telling you this because the day after we really met, in the coffee shop, I took this necklace off and I’ve not worn it since. I lived for years in the ‘what if’; always wondering who this might have been, if I’d seen him on the street a hundred times and not even known it. For all I know, this might not have been my ring. It might have been my mother’s or sister’s—or anyone else’s.” Her eyes filled with tears and Jack instantly felt guilty for his rogue thoughts.

“I’m telling you that I’m finally ready to move into the future part of my life, I’ve had enough of living in the past. I’m ready to give you my whole heart Jack, if that’s what you want. I know it’s early in our relationship, but I just wanted you to know that I’m in this one hundred percent.”

Jack pulled her close to him and laid their foreheads together. “I am too, love. What I had in the past, whatever it was, doesn’t matter now. I have you in my life and that is what makes it worth living. You and I both know that there was something there, some sort of... pull... when we met. This is for real.”

Emma nodded and tilted her head to meet his lips for a soul-searing kiss.

“I love you, Emma Stanton,” he whispered when they pulled apart.

“And I love you, Jack Ingalls.”

Chapter 6

January 2002 through May 2002

Hermione's eyes widened as she stared at the bright purple potion floating in the cauldron. She blinked twice and grabbed the book again, carefully reading the ingredients list and the directions one more time, her finger trailing the page as she mumbled the words.

Realizing she'd done everything right, and what that implied, she slumped to the tile floor in the bathroom, staring at the cauldron. It was the same cauldron that she, Ron, and Harry had used to brew Polyjuice in second year. Somewhere along the line, brewing her potions in the bathroom had become a habit as well. Strange, how so many life changing events for her had happened in a bathroom...

Some things really did come full circle, she thought, as she glanced at the book she'd taken her potion instructions from. *Household Charms for the Charming...* by Gilderoy Lockhart. Fraud he may have been in Defense Against the Dark Arts, but his books of household charms were still bestsellers. Molly Weasley herself swore by them, although she scowled whenever she was forced to open one of them. They no longer held a place of honor on the mantel of her kitchen fireplace, but were tucked away in a cupboard.

Hermione's mind whirled, trying to grasp any end and make sense of it. So many strands of thought—and so little time to decide how to approach anything. She mentally counted back; only eight months—thirty-two weeks to prepare. She ruffled her hair, trying to decide if she could possibly make this all work.

She'd have to start right away, she decided. No more time for sitting on cold tile floors and staring at strange colored potions.

With a flick of her wand, she vanished the potion, cleaned her cauldron and stored it in its usual place under the sink.

First things first; she would spend the afternoon making a chart to schedule all of the things that needed to be done. There were owls to send, appointments to be made. And, she thought with a smile, one Auror that needed to hear the news in person.

* * *

Growling in frustration, Ron flipped back to the front of the file he was trying to decipher and searched for what he was missing. A headache gnawed at the base of his skull, fingering up into the area behind his eyes.

He'd been at this desk for hours, staring at the pile of documents for a case that had been solved years ago, but that he was required to sift through for his course in Evidence Gathering. Bloody useless, if you asked him. The real Auror work was out in the field, not in the paperwork. If he'd known how much paperwork was involved in being an Auror, he might have changed his mind.

He rolled his head on his neck and blinked several times to focus back on the words in front of him.

If he was right, what they were searching for was something that had been missed at the scene of the crime. However, to Ron, the pieces of the puzzle weren't fitting and it was driving him nuts.

"Oi! Weasley!"

Ron growled again, putting his finger down to mark his spot and picking his head up to bellow back to one of his fellow trainees.

"What do you want, Meyers?"

If he kept getting interrupted, he'd never get this case study done and then he'd have to stay later tonight. And that wouldn't do, because it was Chinese night. He loved Chinese night. While he and Hermione had lived in their tiny flat in London, they had made it a tradition to get takeaway every Wednesday evening at the Chinese restaurant down the street.

After moving, it seemed a shame to stop the tradition, so Ron would Apparate there every Wednesday and get two orders of Kung Pao Pork, one order of Spicy Chicken, and a huge box of Chow Mein.

"You've got a visitor!" Meyers called back, peeking his head over Ron's cubicle and winking.

Ron rolled his eyes. It wasn't often that someone visited him at work. It was probably Fred or George, come to tell him about some new product that would have the whole department either rolling on the floor in laughter, or surrounding the twins, wands drawn.

"Alright, alright," Ron growled. "Tell whoever it is to keep their knickers on."

Meyers chuckled and scratched the back of his head. "You want 'em to know that, you tell 'em, mate."

Ron huffily marked his place in the file, put a mild security charm on it and left his desk, tugging at his tie and grumbling about git brothers.

His eyebrows rose, however, when he saw that it wasn't his brothers at all, who were waiting in the chairs at the front of the Auror department.

"Hermione," he greeted her, shocked that she had come to see him at work. She usually made it a point not to bother him at work, and he did the same, although, occasionally, they would arrange to meet for lunch. He knew that today was her day off, and that she'd planned to get some house cleaning done and perhaps do a bit of shopping.

"Hello, Ron," she smiled, standing up to greet him. Ron silently said a thankful prayer that Meyers hadn't conveyed his sentiment earlier. *That* wouldn't have gone over well at all.

Ron leaned in to kiss her cheek, uncomfortably aware of the many eyes in the office that peeked over cubicles and around doorways. Aurors were notoriously nosy.

"What are you doing here?" he asked impulsively and then grimaced. "Not that I don't want you

here, or that you can't stop by at any time." He could feel his ears burn as she smiled at him.

"Actually," she said, taking his hand. "I was wondering if you could tear yourself away to have lunch with me."

Conflict and suspicion, rose up in him and he scowled. Hermione was very rarely spontaneous... not that he didn't appreciate it, but it was unlike her. Just last month she had scolded him for doing the same thing that she was doing now; showing up in his office, unannounced, for a lunch date.

"Well," he stalled, trying to figure out if he could make it happen. "I really shouldn't," he explained. "Connor is all over me about getting this case study done. And I'm two behind as it is. I just can't seem to see the connection in this case and it's sending me around the twist."

He flinched when he saw the crushed look come over her face. She stared down at their joined hands and nodded.

"Hermione," he moaned. "Don't be like this. You know I'm working extra hours to try and make up for you taking time off." He knew he'd made a wrong choice to use that tactic when her face started to turn red. The warning bells were going off in his head, and his mind was yelling at him to stop. But his mouth... it just kept talking. "And to help pay off the house that you wanted. I've got to work twice as hard, as well, because of what my name is. Everyone thinks it's so easy being a Weasley. But it's not—"

"Ron," she interrupted, holding out her hand in front of his face. "If you can't go, please just tell me."

He knew he'd pay for it later, but he shook his head. "I can't go."

She sighed heavily and then nodded resignedly, although Ron could see the anger building up behind her eyes.

"Fine. I'll see you at home tonight then."

"Hermione," he moaned as she turned on her heel and walked out the door.

"Hermione!" Cursing himself, Ron chased after her, finally catching her before the lifts, pressing her finger repeatedly onto the small button to summon the car.

"I'm sorry," he continued. "I shouldn't have said those things." She didn't look at him but he could tell she was crying. "Hermione, please don't cry," he pleaded, reaching around to turn her toward him.

"I'm trying not to!" she said, swiping angrily at her eyes. "We both agreed that the book was a worthy pursuit."

"We did," Ron agreed, not knowing if she heard him over her continuing words, punctuated by sobs.

"... and you agreed that it was alright for me to cut my hours back... and now it's so close to being done..."

"I know, Hermione," he begged, taking her face in his hands to wipe away the tears.

"... and I'm going to be further behind because of this. I don't even know if I'll finish it! I only have eight months. And there's so much to do..."

Ron narrowed his eyes, trying to follow her train of thought. What did she mean eight months? And why was his not going to lunch with her possibly making her not finish her book?

She continued to cry and to talk as Ron mentally stumbled along behind her.

"... there's just so much pressure. I mean, what if I'm no good at it..."

"Hermione, the book is amazing, everyone says so."

"... it's not like you can read the guides and just *know* how to do everything. I know, because I've read them all. And they don't tell you what to do if it gets sick, or how to make it eat. I've heard that most problems come within the first thirty-six hours. I don't know if I can handle that..."

Ron's brain finally began to shut down as he tried to picture a book getting sick.

"Hermione!" He shook her shoulders gently. "Love, you're not making a bit of sense. We were talking about going to lunch... and then the book... and then, well I have no idea what you're talking about now."

"I'm talking about the *baby*, Ron!" she wailed, leaning into his chest as Ron looked dumbfounded at the people staring at him from the open lift.

"Ba—baby?"

The witch in front of the group giggled, hiding her laughter behind her hand, although not very effectively.

"Well, lad?" an older man prompted him, a chiding expression on his face.

Ron blinked at him and then glanced down to his wife, wetting the front of his robes with her tears.

"Yes, the *baby*, Ron. I'm *pregnant*."

Cheering broke out in the lift car just before the doors closed shut and it disappeared.

The words seemed to take forever to make their way into his head. And it took even longer for him to force his brain to wake his body up.

"Are you angry?" Hermione asked, pulling back to look at him through puffy eyes.

"Angry?" Ron asked, staring down at her with wide eyes. Anger wasn't an emotion he could relate to right now. In fact, he was struggling to keep oxygen flowing.

"Yes," Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "It's not the best timing, is it? Ideally, it would have been best after I'd finished the book and done all the promotional work for it. But these things have

a way of happening—”

Knowing that she would continue, and possibly get all worked up again, Ron did the only thing that worked to shut her up; he leaned down and kissed her.

The word baby kept echoing through his head as they clung to each other, in turns making him terrified and elated. They’d talked about having a child, yes, but the reality was so much different than the words.

“You’re not angry?” Hermione asked when they broke apart.

He shook his head and asked the first question that came to mind. “Can we name it Harry?”

Hermione’s mouth opened and closed several times before a very tender look came over her. “What if it’s a girl?”

Ron shrugged, his mind still reeling. He was going to be a father. To a son. That he would name Harry.

“We’re certainly not naming my daughter Harry,” Hermione continued, although she was smiling at him. Ron knew she was teasing, but he couldn’t do more than nod.

“Ginny, then,” he said softly. Hermione looked at him one last time before nodding.

“But not Ginevra,” Ron explained, reaching over to push the lift button, “she always hated that name. It has to be Ginny.”

“Ron, what about work?”

“Forget it,” he said as the lift arrived and he led her into the deserted car. “This is more important.”

* * *

Jack and Emma were in her flat, sprawled on the couch and engaged in a heavy snogging session. Jack’s shirt had been abandoned near the beginning and Emma’s hung open, exposing her throat and delicate skin to Jack’s kisses. He felt a bit out of control; his head was spinning and his mind was thick. But they’d both been working long hours and with Derek and Missy always around, time alone was a hard thing to come by.

They’d discussed how fast and how far to take their relationship, both agreeing to take their time and wait before becoming fully intimate. But the soft sounds that Emma was making, the way she purred against his skin, drove Jack insane. He knew he’d have to pull back soon.

Jack slowly removed her shirt, sliding his lips down her shoulder, and reached around her back to unhook her bra while they continued to kiss passionately. The thought that someone might walk in didn’t deter them much. His fingers felt thick and cumbersome as they searched the thin piece of elastic and he growled into her mouth, even as she giggled against him.

“Here, let me,” she offered.

Jack growled again, determined to win this battle. Emma yelped when the garment slipped out of his hand and snapped her on the bare back. Jack felt his face heat and started to turn away, but Emma only kissed him again and helped guide his hands back to work.

The small clasps seemed to be mocking him and he closed his eyes tightly, silently wishing that the whole thing would just disappear.

And it did. Completely.

Emma squealed and covered herself with her arms, pulling back in shock.

Jack's eyes went wide when he'd realized he done it again and, in doing so, had probably completely alienated the woman he loved. Now she'd see him for the freak he really was.

"What the hell was that?" she asked, a look of complete bewilderment on her face as she scrambled to cover herself with her discarded shirt.

"Erm," Jack mumbled as he looked around, praying her bra had just come off easily and could be found somewhere close. "Not really sure," he admitted. Complete disappointment filled him as Emma climbed off of him and stood glancing around. She finally sighed and sat down next to him. He didn't dare to move an inch, shirtless and with his trousers completely undone.

Emma studied him for a minute before clearing her throat. "Has this happened before, Jack?"

Jack's eyes pinched shut and he replaced his glasses, slowly buttoning up his trousers. "Not exactly," he admitted. It was the complete truth, in a way.

"But something similar?"

He squirmed in discomfort and glanced around for his shirt before shrugging one shoulder. He couldn't bear to look at her and see her disgusted face.

"Jack, look at me please."

"No," he answered, surprising even himself.

"Why not?" Her warm hand lay alongside his cheek and he closed his eyes again.

"Because..." he sighed. "Because I don't want to see you look at me *that way*."

Emma sighed. "What way is that, exactly, Jack? You don't want to see me look at the man I love."

Jack flinched. "You'll change your mind."

"Why?" she persisted. "Because strange things happen around you?" He chanced a glance up at her when she chuckled and shifted so that she was sitting even closer to him. Her arm wrapped through his and she laid her head on his shoulder.

"This one time, it was about a year after I got out of hospital... I was frustrated about something, it seems silly now because I don't even remember what it was. I'd been having a really bad day and

something had set me off.” Her voice lowered so that he could barely hear her. “Jack, I made every piece of glass in my bedroom shatter.”

Jack didn’t know what to say so he sat in silence, feeling his heart pound and hearing hers as well.

“Do you think I’m a freak?” she whispered and he turned, gathered her into his arms instantly. He hated that word. It dredged up horrid sensations in him that made a fire burn deep in his chest.

“No! No, you’re not that, Em. You’re perfect, and beautiful and wonderful and...”

“And the same as you,” she finished. “We’re the same, Jack.”

And Jack nodded in understanding. He’d never met another person who shared the same secrets he did and it made him love her all the more.

He’d leaned in to capture her lips and the kiss calmed them both. Jack pulled her with him as he lay back on the sofa, cuddling her into his side.

“It’s always been like this for me,” he admitted in a low voice. Things he never had seen himself admitting to anyone drifted to the front of his mind and he felt them fall out of his mouth faster than he could control them.

Emma’s own experiences joined his and Jack held her tight as his chest thumped loudly.

They really were the same.

“I tell everyone I don’t remember anything,” he said softly, stroking her long hair gently. “But it’s not true.” Emma lifted her head and peered at him. Jack chewed the inside of his lip before sighing. “I remember some things—not much that makes sense, but...”

“I remember pain,” Emma admitted. “Horribly terrifying pain. And a bright light.”

Jack winced, cupping her cheek in his hand and watching as her face grimaced at the memory.

“And someone standing over me,” she whispered in a tortured voice. “I can’t see his face, but I know I was scared.”

“Oh, Em...”

She nuzzled back into him and Jack held her against his bare chest, shivering at the feel of her breath on his skin.

“I remember flashes of light, mostly,” he admitted softly. “Lots of green light; although, sometimes it’s red. And I have these really strange dreams; almost like I’m flying... but I can’t figure it out. There are people too, but only shadows and I can’t make out what they’re saying.”

“Why did this happen to us?” Emma asked.

Jack tightened his grip on her, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I don’t know, but it’s better now that you’re here.”

Emma looked up at him and nodded. “Yeah, I know. It’s better for me too.”

Contentment seeped slowly into Jack’s mind, pushing aside the unsettling thoughts of the past and taking comfort from the warmth of the woman in his arms. Somehow, his itching need to know his past slipped away more and more now that Emma was in his life. And Jack finally felt himself accepting that maybe the past didn’t matter, that his real life had begun the moment Emma had taken his hand.

* * *

Blaise Zabini smiled pleasantly as he knocked on the door to the posh flat and waited for the owner to answer. Really, why Draco needed a flat when he owned a whole bloody mansion was beyond Blaise.

However, he had never been handed the type of wealth that Draco had at his disposal. Blaise’s mother was wealthy, living off of the money of her deceased husbands, but she had not seen fit to pass much of that along to Blaise, especially now that he was a working Auror. In fact, he was a bit of a disgrace to her, if the truth be told; which amused Blaise to no end.

Baiting Draco was something that Blaise took great pride in. He probably should find something more useful to do with his time, such as find a girlfriend, or a hobby. But Blaise had seen enough of his mother’s romances come and go, quite dramatically, that he’d grown rather cynical about love. And tormenting Malfoy was rather like a hobby in a lot of ways.

“Please come in, Mister Zabini. The Master is in the parlor, he will see you now,” the old house elf greeted Blaise, who nodded distractedly and made his way to the small room off to the side. It really was too small to be called a parlor, but one must keep up pretenses, he supposed.

“Zabini,” Malfoy nodded at him from where his face was stuck in a stack of parchment. Blaise’s eyebrow rose as he considered what might be in the papers. He suspected it was absolutely nothing worthy of such concentration, but let Draco put on his show.

He sank into a heavy leather chair, letting the book he’d kept tucked under his arm slide into his lap. His dark face slit into a wide grin seeing the title staring back at him.

It wasn’t what he’d call a remarkable read—rather dry, actually. But it was everything that he’d expected coming from the swotty Gryffindor, Hermione Weasley. In fact, the only thing that intrigued him at all had been the section dealing with Horcruxes. Blaise had been extremely surprised that Weasley had divulged that information and just as shocked that the Ministry had allowed her to do so.

Blaise hadn’t known about the dark objects before, but it explained much. He had to give his begrudging respect to the group of friends who had tracked them all down and finished them one by one, making the Dark Lord vulnerable.

Not that Blaise could recognize anything spectacular about The-Boy-Who-Lived... or, well, *didn’t*, as it were, he thought with a smirk. It seemed like a round of good luck was to blame for much of his success in life.

He grinned again when his mind drifted back to the second surprise in the book. Toward the end, Weasley had taken direct objection against Draco's claims that Potter and the Weasley girl had used Dark Magic to kill Lord Voldemort. Instead, she claimed that it was the complete opposite—a destruction of Dark Objects that had resulted in the Dark Lord's demise.

Weasley had vilified Draco, which made Blaise's respect for her raise a bit, as she'd done it in such a veiled fashion that he wondered if Draco would even see the insult. Strange, he'd never consider her to have an ounce of Slytherin in her body.

Draco finished scribbling something in the stack of parchment and slowly pushed it away from himself across the wide, cherry wood desk.

"What do you need, Blaise?" he asked. Blaise smiled, liking that Draco was getting right to the point. He had anticipated spending at least twenty minutes on useless pleasantries and gossip about their former schoolmates.

"Right to the point," he acknowledged with a nod, "I see you've learned when to dispense with the frivolous."

"You wouldn't be here unless you had something to tell me, would you?" Draco asked, his pale eyebrow arching in a sneer that he must have worked hours on in the mirror, Blaise thought. It was a perfect replica of how his father used to look down his nose at others.

Blaise shrugged and held up the book, giving it a little momentum as he tossed the heavy tome onto the desk. The important parchments fluttered and a few sailed to the floor. Draco watched them come to rest on the Persian rug before turning his attention back to the book. His nose scrunched in distaste and he stood from his chair, leaning over the book, but not touching it at all.

"Why did you bring me this rubbish?"

Amusement twittered inside Blaise as he watched the mask Draco had become famous for over the past few years crack just a bit. "I thought you might be interested in what was on the bestseller's list."

"Hardly," Malfoy drawled. He still hadn't touched the book, but his eyes kept darting to it as he walked to a heavy sideboard, opened the doors and poured himself a drink.

Blaise rolled his eyes. No class whatsoever, he thought, as Malfoy drank the liquid and offered not a drop to his guest.

"Weasley asks some insightful questions," he shrugged, sinking lower in his chair and laying his head on the back cushion.

Draco snorted and glared at him. "You've actually read this... drivel?"

Blaise grinned and shrugged a shoulder. "I always read everything on the list."

Making a sound at the back of his throat, Draco brought his drink back to his desk and glared at the book again. Blaise had no doubt that he would attack the book, scouring the pages for mention of

his name, the moment that the door closed behind Blaise. It was why he'd brought the book here, after all. He only wished he could see it in person—see the man tug at the neck of his robes and run his manicured hand through his hair roughly.

"You need a woman," Draco growled at him as he dropped down into his chair and lifted his legs to rest them on the surface of the desk, his polished shoes coming to rest on the book itself.

"Maybe," Blaise shrugged nonchalantly, "I hear yours is for sale." Draco almost choked on his drink, but recovered well and Blaise hid his smile. "Donovan Greengrass is currently searching for a new pureblood family for his daughter to marry into."

Draco laid his head back on his seat and stared up at the ceiling, startling Blaise. Did he really have feelings for Astoria? That surprised Blaise more than anything. He had never pictured it as a love match, but as Draco's inadequate scrambling to gain some status in the pureblood community again.

"Astoria told me that you were to be betrothed as well," Draco said quietly, his own cutting edge to the words.

Blaise shrugged again. "I was," he sighed, "but I chose not to follow the tradition. Daphne and I never really got on at Hogwarts."

Despite himself, Draco looked impressed. For Donovan Greengrass to have offered his eldest daughter to Blaise was a high compliment.

"The old man was relieved when I declined the offer," Blaise explained, honestly. He doubted he would ever marry, anyway. His family history wasn't something that made Blaise particularly proud, and it carried a reputation of its own.

Draco nodded, although Blaise doubted that he understood all the subtleties behind it.

He stood, boredom with both subjects gnawing at him. "You might read the book," he suggested. "I don't go in for all the Saint Potter drivel," he shrugged, "but there are some things in there I'll bet you didn't even know."

Draco stared at him, not looking at the book at all. "If she printed anything about me at all—"

"Don't be stupid," Blaise snapped. "She certainly wasn't. Don't forget she works in the Law Department." His message delivered, and a bit of amusement achieved for the day, Blaise turned and left.

* * *

Emma sat with the side of her head against the cold glass of the windowpane. The book she'd been reading was still in her lap, but had been abandoned for the chance to watch the heavy snowfall. She'd always loved watching the snow when it dropped from the sky in huge clumps like it was tonight. It was peaceful and made the world outside look clean and fresh.

The bare trees, so much like skeletons earlier today, now wore thick coats of white. Even the deserted streets were completely white, not a tire track in them. Emma knew that by morning the

muddy grayness would return and the wonder of a January snowstorm would fade, but tonight it was wonderful.

The flat was quiet tonight except for Missy's frantic page turning as she struggled to do her revision. Every now and then she would sigh or huff in frustration and Emma would hide a smile that would only be reflected back to her in the window.

"Who on earth..." she muttered as she watched a poor soul struggle through the several inches of snow, slipping and sliding along the sidewalk. Whoever it was must have had some important mission in mind to bring them out on such a cold and wet night. He continued to slide his way past where she could see, stopping in the square of light her window made on the snow and raising his face and arm up to wave.

"Jack!" Emma yelled out in surprise. She really hadn't expected to see him tonight. She shouldn't have, either. They'd spoken earlier on the phone and Jack had told her he was picking up an extra shift at the food mart that evening.

"What's that nutter doing out there tonight?" Missy asked as Emma waved back to him, a grin stretching her face.

"I don't know," Emma said as she scrambled off of the window seat and straightened her jumper self consciously. "I thought he said he had to work." She could hear him greet someone out in the stairwell and then the sound of his boots on the landing outside their door.

Missy reached out and swung the door wide before he even had a chance to knock.

"You're mental, did you know that?" she challenged his sheepish grin.

"Probably," he agreed and removed his hat quickly revealing hair that was so mussed up that it made Emma giggle. She stood across the room from him, her hands over her mouth to hide her laughter as Jack awkwardly stepped in the door.

"I thought you had to work," Emma said as she took a slow step toward him.

Jack shrugged. "Not tonight." She watched as his eyes darted over the Missy and then back to her. He seemed incredibly nervous and she wondered if something was wrong.

"I'll just go into my room, then," Missy said. Emma felt a bit bad; the flat was, after all, both of theirs.

"Missy, you don't have to—"

"Why don't we take a walk," Jack suggested at the same time.

"Now?" Emma asked, swinging back around to see that the snow seemed to be falling slower now.

"Yeah," Jack nodded, his shy smile lighting up his face. "It's wonderful out there. Everything's covered in snow and it's so quiet..."

Emma frowned for a minute, trying to decide why a walk outside sounded so perfect right now.

"Alright," she finally nodded, knowing that anywhere Jack asked her to go she would gladly follow. Her eyes followed as Missy, a smug smile on her face, cleaned up her revising and trailed it all back down the short hallway. Once she was in the room, Emma turned back to Jack who was watching her, a strange look on his face.

Not holding back any longer, Emma launched herself at him, taking him by surprise as he laughed and wrapped his arms around her.

"I missed you today," she said quietly as their lips met. Obviously, Jack felt the same. His kisses were almost desperate and he held her tightly to him.

"Missed you too," he whispered, his cheeks heating next to hers.

"Give me a minute to get ready," she finally said and Jack nodded, his eyes never straying from her lips. Reluctantly, she pulled away and hurried to gather her winter things. Once she was sufficiently draped in her warmest woolen clothing, she gave Jack another kiss and straightened the knit hat he'd replaced before wrapping her arm through his and walking with him out the door.

They didn't say more than a few words during the short walk down the sidewalk and into the playpark. They giggled and slid around on the slick earth, Jack even fell on his bum, almost pulling Emma down with him.

Finally, they reached a small copse of trees where the snow wasn't as deep and a partially dry bench sat. Jack rubbed his mittens over it, drying the rest of it as much as he could before grandly presenting it to Emma. She laughed and pulled him down next to her, snuggling into his side.

"It's so beautiful out tonight," she mused, watching the large clumps thin slowly until only a few remained, dancing down from the white sky.

"It is," Jack agreed. She could feel his eyes on her, but didn't look at him. Whatever he had come all this way to tell her, she could be patient for. Jack was like that—sometimes he had to think about something for a long time before he told her, other times it spilled out of his mouth like it burned him.

"Emma, I..."

Slowly, she turned to look up into his face. She grinned at the look of concentration on his handsome features. He hadn't shaved tonight and the dark stubble shadowing his jaw made her want to touch him. Unable to resist, she slid her hand out of the warm wool and up along his cheek, thrilling at the scratching sound and the feel of his cold skin.

"What is it, Jack?"

"I, erm..." He started and stopped again, nervously glancing down at his hands, restlessly moving in his lap. Suddenly, in one smooth movement, he was in front of her, on his knee and holding out a small, velvet covered box.

"I love you, Emma. And I know it's soon, maybe too soon... but I can't see me without you."

Emma stared, absolutely stunned as she realized what was happening.

“I’ve never met anyone like you before, and I don’t think I ever will. You... understand who I am, even when I don’t.”

“It’s the same for me,” she breathed. Jack nodded, his crooked smile finally making an appearance. He took one final breath before diving in.

“Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she nodded, tears rimming her eyes. She threw herself into his arms, knocking them both onto the snowy ground.

Their lips met gently and Jack rolled until they were side by side, kissing and holding on to each other.

“Really?” he asked, their combined breath fogging his glasses.

Emma laughed at his awed question and pressed a kiss to the end of his red nose. “Really.”

* * *

Jack straightened his tie nervously and pulled his hand up to run through his hair, stopping just a moment before he touched it.

“Isn’t she ready yet?” he mumbled, resuming the pacing he had just abandoned.

Derek chuckled and slapped him on the back. “Don’t worry about it, mate,” he soothed. “It’s not like she’s going to back out or anything.”

Jack’s heart pounded and he felt all the blood drain from his face. “You don’t think...”

Derek’s laughter echoed around the room that served as the Registrar’s waiting room. “Jack, mate, you are entirely too gullible.”

“Git,” Jack growled, although he did manage to crack a smile. Of course Emma wouldn’t change her mind. She’d been just as sure as he was when Jack had proposed two weeks ago.

Had it only been two weeks?

Sometimes it amazed Jack that his time with Emma seemed to both fly by and crawl. It seemed to him as if he’d known her forever. He could hardly imagine his life without her now.

And shortly, he wouldn’t have to.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” the Registrar greeted them both as he came in, trailed by a harried looking woman, carrying a stack of papers. “Reginald Ellis—Superintendent Registrar.” He shook both of their hands firmly and Jack swallowed thickly, praying he could make it through the day without embarrassing himself.

“Jack Ingalls, and this is my best mate, Derek Graeber.”

Ellis nodded his approval. “And the bride?”

“She’ll be right out,” Derek replied confidently, squeezing Jack’s shoulder a bit. “You know how these ladies are.” He winked at the older woman who smiled slightly, but didn’t seem to be as taken in by Derek’s charm as most women were.

Ellis chuckled and opened his file to glance at the documents inside. “Everything seems in order,” he nodded. “Now we just wait—”

“We’re coming,” Missy said from behind them. Anne was fussing at Emma’s hair as they continued to walk, smoothing the length of crimson wave down her back.

Jack felt all of the air rush from his lungs at the sight of Emma in the simple, but elegant pale ivory dress.

“Do you like it?” she asked, her cheeks taking on a pink pallor. She did a little spin in front of him, but Jack honestly couldn’t tell one feature of the gown from another right then. All he knew was that it hugged her tiny body perfectly, showing off every curve and every wonderful place that he couldn’t wait to discover tonight, and that if she didn’t stop looking like that, or if someone didn’t smack the back of his head, he was going to forget to breathe and then he was going to tip over and really embarrass himself.

“Looks like our beautiful bride is ready,” Ellis said and Jack took a huge gulp of air and finally accepted Emma’s hand.

“Jack,” she peered at him with a worried look, “Are you okay?”

He nodded frantically, still staring open mouthed at her. “Fine.”

Emma narrowed her eyes at him before opening them wider and smirking at him. “You’re nervous.”

Jack felt his face heat and he glanced around to see that Anne was fussing with Derek’s suit collar and sneaking small looks at the two of them. “Not about... you, or anything,” Jack shook his head and lifted his eyes to look into hers. “About messing up.”

Emma laughed and leaned forward to hug him. “You don’t need to worry about that, Jack,” she explained. “It’s only the five of us here.”

He grimaced. “Derek will take the mickey for years if I bugger this up.”

Sighing and rolling her eyes at him, she patted his tie and straightened the lapels of his new suit. “Then don’t,” she suggested with a shrug. “Jack, let’s do this. Let’s get married.”

Her soft words buoyed him up and he nodded, taking her hand firmly in his. All he needed to remember was that they were in this together and that they loved each other.

“Yeah,” he smiled sheepishly. “Let’s get married.”

The blast of dry heat from her wand melted the last muddy patches of snow away from the area around the headstones. Molly appraised the black stones for a moment before casting a mild cleaning charm to dispel the winter grime and mud from them completely. Soon they were gleaming just as they had when they were new.

Over three years now, she thought as she sunk down to her knees, wincing at the cracking in her joints. She knew there would be muddy patches on her knees, but mud had never been more than a mild challenge to get out of fabric.

"I brought you some flowers," she said softly. "Dear Neville brought them over the other day, but today is the first day it's been nice enough to bring them outside." She shifted the two pots of flowers over to sit between the two stones. "They're such lovely things—he bred them himself, you know."

She smiled as the two flowers, brilliant crimson red petals against full, deep green leaves, sparked and caught fire, golden flames dancing along the edges and burning in toward the center.

"Oh, dear, it must be burning time." Molly fussed, frowning at the flowers. She had hoped that they would stay nice a little longer before they burned. "He calls them Phoenix Blooms," she said, reaching forward to nudge the stems, knocking the ash off down into the pot. "Don't worry, though," she said, moving back to her spot in front of both graves, "in a few hours, the new buds will come out and be beautiful for a few days before they burn again."

She stared at the stones, feeling emotion well in her. Molly tried to come out to the graves once a week. She'd missed a few visits this past winter, due to heavy snow storms. But on those days she would spend her few minutes of remembering standing at the window, her eyes searching out the stones against the backdrop of the forest.

Charlie didn't understand what she called her 'quiet moments' and had gently chided her to move on. She only smiled knowingly and patted his cheek.

"One day, you'll understand," she explained, looking over at her energetic grandson, Hayden, his son, as he stumbled around the kitchen.

Molly couldn't just move on. She had buried a part of herself out there on the edge of the forest with Harry and Ginny. Nothing would ever be the same again. Yes, she could go on living—she could love her grandchildren and take care of her husband—but she needed her quiet moments to remember.

"Your father is doing well again," she spoke to both graves as her children. "It'll be two years this next fall." She shook her head both at how fast and slow time moved. "He's got all his speech back, although he does get frustrated at times when he can't say exactly what's in his mind."

"Charlie took him out flying the other day, and nearly scared the life out of me. At least he had enough sense to cast a sticking charm to the broom. But your father loved it." She shook her head, both in wonder at the ability of men to act like young boys and at the lump that welled in her throat at the thought of losing Arthur like she almost had.

"I swear that man will be the end of me. But I suppose you would agree with Charlie," she continued, brushing her hand over the new shoots of grass on the uneven ground. "I imagine both of you would have been right up there with him, probably trying to get him to do some... insane dive, or something."

The thought made a rare smile come to her face. No doubt that Harry and Ginny would have been the first to suggest the flying as a way to get Arthur out of the house.

"Hermione is doing well. Her book has been a huge success and they're talking about doing another printing of it already. She hasn't been as sick as she expected to be," Molly continued. "They've... they've decided to name the baby Harry, if it's a boy."

Her throat tightened and she shifted on her sore knees. "And... Ginny if it's a girl. We all thought it was right to let them use the names. They were your best friends."

"Mum." Charlie's hands on her shoulders made her jump. She'd been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't even heard him approach.

"Oh, Charlie, dear."

"Mum, you shouldn't be down there on the wet ground. You're going to hurt yourself."

Molly smiled, allowing him to help her up from her knees, and patted his cheek. "Just because I let you move back in here, young man, doesn't mean you know everything."

Charlie chuckled and shook his head. "Dad was looking for you."

She rolled her eyes, gave one last glance at the Phoenix Blooms before taking Charlie's arm and let him lead her back toward the house.

"I told him that I was coming out here."

"I know," Charlie said with a smile. "He just forgot."

"We need to be patient with him, Charlie," she scolded softly. "He's making good progress. Percy even said he did amazingly well at the Ministry the other day."

Charlie nodded. "I think it would be good for him to take the advisory position that they've offered him. It would make him feel a bit more useful."

Molly considered that for a few minutes, while they walked back through the garden and into the kitchen of the Burrow. Having Arthur away from the house made Molly nervous, but Charlie did have a point. She'd seen the disgusted looks on her husband's face when he heard Ron and Percy talking about what was happening at the Ministry. Arthur had never been one to sit back and watch from the sidelines. Pushing her own fears to the side, Molly nodded. "I think you're right, Charlie."

* * *

Emma wiped her mouth with the moist flannel draped on the sink and brushed her teeth for the second time. She rolled her eyes in the mirror and reached for the brush to straighten her hair once

again.

Groaning loudly when she noticed the time on the watch Jack always forgot to strap to his wrist, Emma rushed through her actions. She was going to be late if she didn't hurry.

She didn't have time to even grab a bite to eat, although she wasn't sure she could even keep it down if she had. This bug was really taking it out of her. Luckily, Jack had already been gone to work when she'd started throwing up today. Yesterday, he'd threatened to stay home, but Emma had convinced him that she would live through a mild case of the flu.

"Morning, Emma," Carl greeted as she slipped in the back door of the coffee shop, taking a deep breath. For some reason, the freshly ground coffee beans settled her stomach.

"Sorry I'm late, Carl."

He smiled benignly and glanced at the clock. "Just on time, actually. You're still looking a bit pale," he observed.

Emma waved it off and hung up her coat in her cubby, wrapping her apron around her waist. "I'll be fine, Carl, I promise. Just a little bug."

"Are you sure?" he asked skeptically. "Because I don't want you to wear yourself down."

"I'm sure," she nodded, grateful that he was as understanding as he had been. When she and Jack had gotten married, Carl had supported her decision to move back to the day shift so that she could spend a few hours with Jack in the evening. He had also given up his night job at the market.

"You look terrible," Missy hissed at her in between customers.

Emma rolled her eyes but didn't comment. She knew she didn't look great. Her usually pale skin was extremely pasty, making her freckles stand out like black dots across her cheeks and nose. Her hair was limp and dull as well. Wasn't it enough that Jack had commented on it? Now she had to put up with Missy's critical comments.

The morning dragged on while Emma tried to hold back her scowls and bad mood.

"Seriously," Missy cornered her when the crowd thinned in late morning, "you really look like rubbish, Emma. Is everything alright?"

"It's fine," Emma snapped, rubbing her temple, where a headache was beginning to settle. "I just have the flu."

Missy narrowed her eyes perceptively and Emma squirmed. "How long have you been sick?"

"Well," Emma sighed, wiping the counter down and rinsing some spoons in the sink, "I called in ill yesterday, and I didn't feel well a few days before that."

"Mmhmm."

Emma held back her annoyance and took a deep breath. There really was no reason to be annoyed

with Missy, she was only worried about her friend. "About two weeks, I guess. Maybe three."

"Love," Missy sighed, placing her arm around Emma's shoulders, "the flu doesn't last that long." Emma's heart raced as Missy gave her a knowing look.

"Could you be?" she asked.

Emma bit the inside of her lip and stared at the water pouring from the tap into the sink. *Could she be pregnant?* She and Jack had been so careful. He'd been adamant that they use protection until they both felt it was time to start a family. But nothing was fool-proof, she knew. The thought made her a bit panicky.

Missy must have read her mind, because she pulled her into a hug. "Oh, love, everything will be alright."

"We're not ready," Emma murmured, feeling as if the possibility was making her completely numb. "Jack was going back to Uni in the fall."

"You may not be," Missy dismissed. "When you take your lunch, slip over to the Chemist's and buy a test."

Emma nodded, swiping at the tears that had welled in her eyes. Would Jack be upset if she were pregnant? No. She knew he wouldn't be. They talked about starting a family and he seemed very excited about having a child... one day.

"Alright," Emma nodded again when she'd regained composure. She glanced at the clock and groaned. At least two more hours until she could take the test. She might just go insane before then.

Staring down at the small stick with the two lines on it wouldn't make it any less true, Emma knew. The panic that she'd felt all morning, reviewing every conversation with Jack about having children, had been pushed aside. The moment that she'd seen those two lines, plain as day in front of her, a seed of disbelief and pure joy had begun to swell in her.

Emma pressed her hand low on her belly, closing her eyes and imagining the tiny little life growing inside of her. She and Jack had done that. They'd created this wonderful, amazing and bloody scary person inside there.

It was a hard thing to imagine, Emma thought. The concept of them as parents was such an abstract thing—so far in the future, she thought—that it wasn't completely real. Yet, the proof was there. And not just on the test. Something had changed inside of her, even though it seemed absurd that she could possibly feel it, Emma *iknew/i* she was a mother now.

Now all that was left was to tell Jack. She prayed that he wouldn't be too disappointed. This didn't have to change all their plans. He could still go back to Uni. Emma could work right up until the baby was born. They'd make it somehow.

Jack's keys in the door startled her and she hid the test behind her in the cushions of the sofa.

“Em, are you feeling better?” He quickly discarded his jacket and hat near the door and hurried over to her.

Emma nodded, not trusting herself completely not to scream out her news to him. “I’m feeling much better.”

“Good,” he said and then leaned forward to press a kiss to her forehead. He nudged her and squeezed on the small sofa next to her, pulling her legs over his lap. “I was worried about you all day.”

Emma’s heart tightened as she pondered just how to tell him that he was going to be a daddy.

“That’s sweet,” she said, tracing his stubble-lined jaw. “But you worry too much.”

Surprisingly, he didn’t argue with her as she expected him to, but reached out to take her hand in his. “Em... don’t get upset...”

Her eyes narrowed at him in suspicion. “Why would I—”

“But I think you might be pregnant.” His voice was low and his cheeks flushed darkly.

Emma’s mouth opened and closed several times before she burst out laughing, not believing that he could have figured it out.

“Jack—”

“I just think that, with all the symptoms you’ve been showing—”

“Jack—”

“And the way you’ve been feeling...” He ruffled his hair awkwardly and she grinned even wider. “That it’s a possibility.”

“Jack!” Her hand darted forward to lift his chin, turning him to look directly at her. “You’re going to be a daddy, Jack,” she whispered. She forgot all about the test stuffed in the sofa cushions as she leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth.

“Really?” he asked when she pulled back.

Emma laughed and nodded, climbing fully onto his lap. “I took a test today.”

“And—”

“And it was positive.”

Chapter 7

October 2002

Four years and still the Burrow was not the same. Remus Lupin sighed as he entered the back kitchen with only a knock. The noise from the other room indicated that the family, and quite a bit of it, was already there.

“Oh, Remus, dear,” Molly started as she entered the kitchen. “Tonks told us you’d be coming late. I hadn’t realized that much time had passed.

“I’m sorry, Molly. The board meeting went longer than I’d hoped.” He couldn’t help but notice how much thinner the years had made Molly, along with the completely grey head of hair.

“It’s quite alright,” she assured him. “There’s still a bit of food left if you’re hungry. Better get on it though, as Ron’s in the house and will surely be hungry again.”

Remus chuckled and helped himself to a plateful of the wonderful food spread on the counters. He sat himself down at the kitchen table and Molly set a cup of tea in front of him.

“Ah, Molly, you know how to spoil a man.”

She swatted him on the shoulder but smiled nonetheless. It was a nice thing to see, and something that didn’t happen often; only since the grandchildren had begun arriving.

“And there’s my wayward husband,” Tonks crowed as she entered the room. “Molly, Fred and George have disappeared again and—”

“Say no more!” Molly set a firm expression on her face and patted the wand sticking out of the pocket on her apron as she left the room.

“You love getting those two in trouble,” Remus mused as Tonks sat down next to him and picked at his food.

“Yes, I do. They deserve it and you know it. I won’t even mention the four little terrors that they are raising.”

Remus chuckled. Both Fred and George Weasley had eloped with their Hogwarts girlfriends, Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet not two months after the Final Battle. They’d taken quite the verbal lashing afterwards by Molly, but she soon broke down when they admitted that they couldn’t see having a big family wedding so close after the funerals.

And, really, Remus couldn’t blame them. Although, he did wonder at the luck of the world when only ten months later found the births of two new sets of Weasley twins; one set of girls, one set of boys. Yes, the Weasley family had certainly bloomed with children the few years after the war. Bill and Fleur had another baby on the way, to add to their little Victoire. Charlie and Maggie were expecting their second son any day now. Ron and Hermione were busy with preparations for their first born. The Lupins were as much a part of the family as anyone now.

“Long meeting?” Tonks asked breaking him from his thoughts.

“Yes,” Remus agreed with a sigh. “They just can’t seem to understand that a memorial should be for all the victims of the war, not just for Harry and Ginny.”

“I know, love.” Tonks rubbed his back gently as he pushed the plate away from him. “But the public only sees what it wants to see and the committee is no different.”

“Harry’d hate this,” Remus mumbled.

“So would Ginny,” Tonks agreed. “But they’re not here to say, so it’s up to you and me, and the rest of the family, to speak for them.”

“I know,” Remus agreed. “Now, no more of this melancholy. Let’s get in there and see what mayhem Gred and Forge have cooked up tonight.”

“Alright, old man, that’s the spirit,” Tonks grinned and moved away as Remus grumbled in outrage.

“Old man?”

* * *

“Evening Hermione,” Remus greeted his former student as she sat propped on the sofa. Her large belly protruded and Remus was fairly sure that she only had a few weeks of pregnancy left.

“Evening, Remus. How did the meeting go?”

Remus groaned as he sat next to her. His eyes wandered to where his daughter was laughing in the corner with a hoard of Weasley children.

“That good?” Hermione laughed.

“I’d rather not talk about it tonight, if you don’t mind. It’s the same argument every meeting, anyway. Although now that they’ve read your book, at least they’re willing to believe a bit of the truth.” Hermione’s best selling biography of Harry had done wonders to repair the damage Rita Skeeter had caused last year with her sensationalist drivel, and Remus would be eternally grateful to Hermione for it. He’d been very touched to read the humorous, and sometimes painful, account of a flawed hero who only wanted to be loved.

He smiled to himself as Orion’s hair cycled through several colors as she laughed. He knew that control over her powers would come with age, just as Dora’s had.

Hermione nodded and smiled as Ron joined the pair and sat next to his wife.

“Hi, Remus.”

“Hello, Ron. How are things at the Ministry?”

Ron beamed and absently rubbed his wife’s belly. “Things are good. I’ll be finished with training in a few months.” Hermione smiled proudly at him and patted his knee.

“I’ll keep that in mind when I go out in public,” Remus joked as he waggled his eyebrows.

“Hey, love,” Ron suddenly brightened, “maybe Remus can help you out?” Remus perked up and studied the two.

“You mean so you don’t have to do it, Ron?” Hermione queried.

“Well,” Ron squirmed. “He’d know much more than I would about that sort of thing.”

Hermione huffed. “Never mind, I’ll just do it myself.”

“I’d be happy to—” Remus wasn’t heard as the two continued to bicker.

“Hermione, you know you’re supposed to be on bed rest. As little movement as possible—that’s what the healer said. You’re lucky I allowed you to come tonight! I certainly don’t want you traipsing around in the Muggle world.”

“Allowed me?” Hermione spluttered.

“Ahem,” Remus cleared his throat loudly to break up the pair. “Hermione, I’d be happy to help you with anything you need.”

Hermione glared at Ron one last time but seemed to deflate as she thought about it longer. “Well, it’s the twins’ birthday soon—”

“Pandora and Persephone’s, and Gideon and Fabian’s,” Ron clarified. Remus nodded at him, although he’d known exactly which twins Hermione had been talking about.

“And I was thinking of getting them some books, but not Wizarding books. I’d like to get them some classic children’s books.”

“Muggle books,” Ron rolled his eyes.

“Ronald, children should have a well-rounded education, and—”

“I think it’s a grand idea,” Remus said, heading off another round. “What can I do to help?”

“Well, I’d need someone to pick them up for me,” Hermione searched his face hopefully. “I can give you a few titles to choose from. There’s a bookstore not far from where an aunt of mine lives that has the best prices I’ve found.”

“Sounds good,” Remus agreed. “Let me know what you want and when you want them, and I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you, Remus, I appreciate it.”

“What are families for?” the werewolf asked with a wink.

* * *

The amber liquid slid inside the glass as Draco turned it, held up against the light, the tiny prisms in the crystal making it sparkle against his hand.

He was alone in the Mansion today. He'd even sent the house elves scurrying to wherever it was they hid when he was in a temper.

Draco hated melancholy, and he'd been miserable ever since Blaise had laid that damn book on his desk ten months ago. Draco couldn't stop dwelling on it. Whatever made him actually open the cursed thing, he couldn't say. Pride and vanity his heart told him, but he scoffed at this thought.

It ate at him that Granger had been so veiled in her words, not accusing him directly, but hinting that all was not well. The worst was her claim that her pillock of a husband, and that bumbler, Longbottom, had been the ones to destroy the final Horcrux, Nagini.

Draco had thrown the book across the room upon reading that, wholly unsatisfied with the loud thump it made when it hit the wall and dropped to the floor. It would have been poetic justice for it to burst into flames. Draco had stopped just short of cursing the abominable thing.

Of course, there was no way for them to know that the snake that the Weasel and Longbottom had killed hours before the Final Battle had not been Nagini, simply a decoy of the Dark Lord's.

He seethed with the desire—the insistent need—to prove to them that he was the one. Draco Malfoy had been the one to ensure that Potter could do his job. At times, the irony of the situation was so great that it made Draco cackle with glee. Ronald Weasley, best friend to The-Boy-Who-Lived was a failure. But, then again, Draco had always known that.

It had been hard these past ten months to keep his mouth closed and his head down. Granger had raised so many questions in her book. Questions that only Draco could answer. But his answers would only lead to more questions... and that could never be good.

He sipped from his glass of two hundred year-old Firewhiskey and savored the rich flavor. Some day, he vowed, people would know the truth—that *he* had been the one to bring the fall of the Dark Lord—and they would look at him differently. They would speak his name the way they spoke Potter's, only Draco wouldn't have to die for it to happen. The thought brought a crooked smile to his face. He was a patient man; he could wait to have everything that he deserved. And he deserved so much more than he had.

He scowled at his desk. It was Potter who had taken it all away from him. Potter who had been too slow in doing what he was destined to do, and had cost Draco everything.

Potter and... Parkinson.

A stab of pain shot through Draco's heart at the name. He rarely allowed himself to think about Pansy. It seemed like so long ago—a different lifetime—when they had sat on the grounds at Hogwarts and talked of their future together. Betrothed since they were small, Draco and Pansy had agreed to spend time getting to know each other during their school years. And Draco had, despite his cynicism, fallen in love with the witch. He had actually allowed himself to picture a future with her on his arm.

And then the war came, violently sweeping into their lives and... ruining everything. His father had made demands and Draco was caught up in the doomed-to-fail plot to assassinate Albus Dumbledore.

A year after that... unfortunate incident, Draco was still waiting for Potter to do his job. He hid in the dark corners of Hogwarts, sneaking in to see Pansy and to gather information, watching as Potter came and went from the castle, stealing moments with the little Weasley girl every chance he got. It disgusted Draco to see him so unfocused while the world outside the castle doors fell apart. He hurried on to see Pansy, savoring their own stolen moments.

Draco laid his head back against his chair and let himself fully sink into the memories.

Pansy held her head against his chest and he breathed down into her hair. She always smelled so wonderful—something... citrus or fruity in some way. Draco dreamt about that scent when he was away from her.

"It's almost over," he promised her. "A few more months."

Pansy nodded, entangling her legs with his. Her quietness worried him; she usually had so much to tell him.

"Has it been horrible?" he asked. "Without me here?"

She raised her head, her dark eyes going a bit glassy. Her mouth opened, perhaps to tell him some of what she was feeling being alone here in the castle, but she closed it again and lay her head back down on his chest. "It's been bearable. I've... well, I've found things to do."

"That's good, my love," he whispered, leaning down to kiss the top of her head. Reluctantly, he pulled away from her, noticing that she didn't fight him this time. "I need to go," he mumbled. "I can't take the chance that they find me here. Old McGonagall would have me hanging upside down from the Great Hall without a warning."

Pansy looked at him—a very simple look that he didn't know the meaning behind. "Will you come again?" she asked, her hands fidgeting at her sides and then clasping behind her back, making her seem very small and fragile to Draco.

"Probably not," he admitted. "It's getting harder and harder to do. Potter is in and out of here so much that they're sure to find out soon and seal the passages."

"They know," Pansy shook her head, annoyance radiating from her. "They just let him get away with it, like always. He's never had to follow the rules." Her bottom lip came out in a pout and she crossed her arms and scowled down at the floor.

Draco smiled and leaned forward to kiss her quickly. "Soon," he promised, taking her by the shoulders. "Soon we'll have our forever."

She looked doubtful, chewing on her bottom lip, and Draco wished he could take her doubts and worries away. "Do you know which side..." She trailed off and looked at him, her eyes pleading for an answer.

He sighed, wishing he could give her a definite answer. "I don't," he admitted. "But whichever side wins we'll still be together. I need to go." She nodded, turning away from him. Pansy always hated to see him leave, so she never watched.

Draco hated that memory, but at the same time it was one of his most cherished. He'd carried that stolen moment for months, replaying it all the time in his head. Strange, he thought now, that he could have missed all the clues. For, when he took a very objective view of the memory, as he sometimes did when he placed the thoughts in his pensieve, Pansy was radiating doubt. Perhaps she was already making plans in April. By August, however, he knew the truth.

He had to see her one last time, in case everything went pear shaped and... well, he didn't like to think about that. He'd been in enough scrapes lately that he felt confident he could get out of most situations. This time, was a bit different though. Both sides were expecting him to deliver, as he'd promised, and both sides were in for a surprise when he did.

The Parkinson Mansion was dark and Draco slinked around the far side. If the small door leading to the garden was unlocked, that meant that Pansy was welcoming him in. If it were locked, she'd probably followed her parents into hiding. Draco had tried to convince her to go in the two very brief conversations they'd had over the previous months, but she was determined to stay in England.

He skirted the Flutterby bushes under the large windows, fearing they might release a shower of blooms off into the night and alert someone that he was here.

The small iron door creaked with rust when he pushed on it and Draco silenced it, cursing himself for forgetting that it always did that. It was open—Pansy was here and waiting for him.

Hurrying up the hidden passage, Draco couldn't help but smile. It was almost over. Things were coming to a head fast.

"You came."

Draco stopped dead at the mumbled words in the darkness. His foot hovered over the first step on the landing to Pansy's room. But her voice was coming from the darkness down the hall. He turned, a smile gracing his lips. She was expecting him—

It died however, when he saw her shadow, not waiting for him, but in the arms of someone else.

"I had to come," the other man whispered, holding her tight to him.

Draco's heart plummeted and his grip on his wand tightened as he watched the exchange. Who the man was, however, he couldn't see.

"I had to make sure you were alright. I don't like you alone in this house, Pansy."

"It's all boarded up," she protested, her hands moving up and down the man's back in the same way they'd always done when she embraced Draco. "Everyone thinks I've gone with Mother to France."

The man leaned down to kiss her and Draco felt the bile rise in his throat. Try as he may, though, he couldn't get his feet to move.

"Have you heard anything about your father?"

Pansy shook her head. "I haven't, but I know he's gone to join... them."

"My father as well," he admitted and Draco's ears perked up. The man was younger then. Draco still could only see his back in the darkness. "He finally took the mark," the man admitted, "after all these years of waiting."

Draco swore silently. There was only one man who fit that description. Draco himself had held Nathaniel Nott's arm when the Dark Lord branded him.

"Oh, Ted," Pansy wailed, her arms coming around his neck tightly. "They'll be looking for you."

Theodore Nott had been a classmate of Draco's since first year at Hogwarts. They'd shared a dorm room, eaten at the Slytherin table and gone to class together. How had Draco never seen this in him? Surely he would have known that Pansy and Nott...

"I won't take the mark," he defied valiantly. "I won't be what he wants me to be."

Pansy's hands came up and held his face, making Draco turn away as the shadows of light painted such a tender look on her face.

"Then let's go," she pleaded with him. "We can leave tonight."

"Where would we go, Pansy?"

She seemed to think about it for a minute. "Mother is on the continent. She's in Paris."

"Your mother would never approve—"

"I know," Pansy interrupted. "They still think I'm pining after Draco. But I'm done waiting for him to play the hero, when he's really only playing the fool."

Draco's chest tightened and his head pounded. How could she say that, he asked himself. Didn't she understand that he was doing this for her—for them?

"I won't wait around like some damsel in distress," she stated vehemently. "We can leave."

Nott seemed to waver, even as he pulled her closer to him.

"We'll leave, and then we can get married and live as we want to live."

Draco took a step forward, staying to the edge of the hallway in the darkness. His wand raised, waiting for the right moment to strike. The pounding in his ears, his own heartbeat thundering in his chest, almost drowned out Nott's whispered response.

"Okay." Nott leaned forward and kissed her deeply, lifting Pansy completely off the floor in his

embrace.

They can't leave, he thought. I won't let them make a fool of me after all that I've done.

He knew he would only get one chance. Stunning them both would take a miracle that Draco didn't know if he had left. He'd used up too many miracles in his short life. Just as he was about to strike, he remembered what he kept in his trousers pocket.

A feral smile spread across his face as he took a handful of the fine black powder and tossed it into the air. He aimed blindly, shooting a barrage of stunners into the black abyss. Two loud thumps sounded and Draco nodded grimly to himself. He used the wall to guide himself until his foot came into contact with a body. Crouching down, he felt for both clammy hands and clasped them in his, whispering the trigger phrase for the portkey that resided in the small gold lapel pin on his robes.

Once he had arrived at Malfoy Manor, Draco cast aside the two bodies, viciously stunning them both once again, and smiling in satisfaction when Nott's body slammed into the wall with a crunch.

"Draco, is that you?"

His mother's voice pierced the door and Draco jumped, cursing quietly before running a hand through his hair to smooth it, and straightening his rumpled robes.

"I'm coming, Mother," he called, allowing himself one last glance at his traitorous fiancé and her lover.

He cracked the door, only allowing a sliver of his face to show, his eye searching for the beautiful and stately face that was, obviously, the only woman devoted to him. His mother had always been beautiful, but the war was taking its toll on her. Her face was pale and there were dark circles around her eyes.

"Your father is waiting for you in his study, Draco," she said. He could see her eyes searching the space where the door was open, narrowing when he pressed his body more into the crack. Draco's palms began to sweat.

"Please tell him I'll be right there."

"You have already kept him waiting, Draco," she scowled. "He is not a man of patience."

Irritation and anger welled in him and he bit back a cutting remark. Of course, his father would think there was nothing more important in his life than running back and forth between Potter and the Death Eaters.

Instead, Draco sighed. "I've rather got... an issue I'm dealing with, Mother," he tried to explain. "Please tell him that I will be down as soon as I can."

His mother looked at him reluctantly, peering into the partially opened doorway once more. Draco slide his foot slowly behind the door, bracing it with his leg so that she couldn't force past him. Although it wasn't likely, as he had grown larger than her in the past few years.

"Very well," she admitted, nodding primly and turning to go.

Draco sighed in relief and closed the door, turning his back to it and staring at the stunned bodies in the room. What was he to do with—

A loud blast and raining bits of wood scattered over him, knocking him to his knees. When he turned, his mother was standing in the doorway, her feet planted and her wand held out in front of her.

"I knew you were hiding..." Her eyes went wide, seeing the bodies and then turning a confused look on her son.

Draco growled, standing and brushing the slivers of door off of himself, wincing as a few pieces penetrated his robes and poked his skin.

"I told you—" He advanced on his mother, his own wand coming into his hand. He didn't remember reaching for it, but it was there now, and his palm itched, waiting for the magic to be used.

His father, however, blasted him back, knocking him to his knees again. Lucius stood in the doorway, his grey eyes taking in everything in the room, only lingering on the bodies for a moment.

"Dead?" he asked.

Draco wiped a small trickle of blood from the side of his mouth with the back of his hand and winced. "Stunned. I caught them together. Pansy..." His throat tightened as the truth burned in his chest. "They were running away together; eloping."

Lucius's eyes betrayed his surprise for a minute before they went hard again. Draco chanced a look at his mother, to see her staring at the girl he'd been betrothed to for years.

"Why didn't you kill them where you found them?" Lucius said casually. His voice had an edge to it that made Draco weary. "Why bring them here?"

Feeling incredibly stupid, Draco shrugged a shoulder. "It was a momentary decision," he defended. "They were about to flee. I... I didn't think—"

"No," Lucius said with a sigh, "you didn't think. You rarely do, Draco. We've spoiled you for far too many years."

Indignant anger welled up in him, although he knew to keep his mouth shut.

"You can rectify that now, Draco."

His throat closed at his father's words, his heart coming to rest in it. He was suggesting...

"Please get on with it," Lucius drawled, staring at his son with unseeing eyes. "The Dark Lord expects us shortly."

Draco fought the urge to vomit. He closed his eyes and tried to picture himself saying the words, making the green light come from his wand.

'Draco, Draco, you are not a killer.'

Dumbledore's words atop the Astronomy tower more than a year ago echoed through his head as the picture refused to come. He cracked his eyes open again, staring at his father, and then looking to his mother, finding her with a blank, unemotional mask that he had seen far too often.

"Do it," his father commanded.

Draco turned toward the bodies, rolling his wand in his hand and fearing that it would fall to the floor from the wetness of his palm. He raised his wand and poised it there, pointing right at Pansy, willing himself to gather the courage and hatred enough to say the words.

Two quick flashes of light startled him. Green racing toward the bodies, tossing them into the air. Draco flinched away, his wand clattering to the hardwood floor and rolling away from him.

"Such a disappointment."

The words rang in his head as he watched his father walk out of the room and saw his mother staring blankly at the corpses.

"Put them in one of the passages," she ordered tonelessly. "The elves never clean there."

Draco's fist pounded the desk in front of him and he welcomed the pain. It made it easier to focus on here and now, to blot the image of Pansy's vacant eyes from his mind.

He stood violently, searching the room for anything to distract himself. This house always brought bad memories, which was why he spent most of his time in the London flat. He had come here to do business. And this place was completely private. He never allowed anyone at the Mansion anymore—hadn't since Astoria had left him.

Once, with her by his side, Draco had thought he could replace the dark images of this home in his mind with new ones. But it wasn't meant to be.

Thinking of Astoria only made him queasy. The Daily Prophet had, just this morning, printed an announcement of her engagement to Rudolph Ellington, a Slytherin from a lower ranked pureblood family. He was Astoria's own age and had somehow escaped the time honored tradition of betrothal.

Swearing violently, Draco yanked open a drawer in his desk and tugged at the silvery cloth, pulling it free and letting the liquid-like feel of it caress his fingers.

Smiling, he pulled it around his shoulders and made his way to the grand front entrance, feeling a bit reckless and bold. He was sure he'd seen someone watching the Manor when he'd arrived yesterday. He knew it was probably the Ministry; they watched him from time to time.

But he didn't want them following him today. It had been some time since he'd been to Paris. Genevieve would forgive him, he knew, especially when he took her shopping and lavished her with gifts. She always forgave him.

Remus glanced at the list one more time and chuckled. Hermione had definitely given him enough to choose from. The list had more than fifteen titles of things that she found acceptable.

Harper's Discount Books loomed in front of him and he had to shake his head. Muggle buildings were amazing; and this one wasn't even overly large. The neighborhood was a bit rougher than some, but judging from the people coming and going out of the glass doors, the bookstore did a brisk business.

Remus shrugged, burying the list in his jacket pocket and entered the warm atmosphere of the store. It was bright and comfortable with cozy little nooks filled with oversized chairs. The books were housed on low shelves that boasted their themes; history, fiction, biography and hundreds of others. He could see why this place was a favorite of Hermione's. And, judging from the smell, there was a coffee shop attached somewhere.

Browsing through the aisles, Remus wondered if his wife would hex him if he spent more time here. Hundreds of interesting titles jumped off the shelves at him.

Finally, he came to the back corner of the store which was painted in bright primary colors and had low tables and chairs positioned around. Colorful posters advertising the newest children's books were everywhere. There was even a tiny amphitheater of sorts made of short, wide carpeted steps where Remus assumed there was some sort of story time or other. The sign in front of it proclaimed that Saturday afternoon there would be a reading of four fall themed books.

Orion would definitely like someplace like this, although Remus knew her vibrant personality, in addition to her ever-varying hair color, would be less than welcome here. His three-year-old would have to settle for story time with Daddy.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Remus turned to see a young woman in her late teens, or so he guessed, standing behind him. He tried not to smirk at her appearance, and then sobered instantly when he realized that his own wife sported many of these looks on occasion.

The girl, *Rain* from what her nametag said, had dark hair in dreadlocks with the tips dyed electric blue. She had a ring in her nose and two in one of her eyebrows. She wore what looked to be the standard red and blue uniform shirt although hers was adorned by a black studded belt and worn over black leggings and combat boots.

"Actually," Remus said as he pulled the list from his pocket, "maybe you can help me find a few of these titles. I'm shopping for a friend's children and I'm not sure where to start."

He held the list out to her and she raised an eyebrow in speculation before snapping her chewing gum and rolling her eyes. "I guess I could look them up on the computer."

Remus wanted to tell her not to strain herself but refrained. "I'd be happy for any help that you could give me."

Rain rolled her eyes again and turned on her heel stalking back to where a desk sat against the wall.

She didn't say a thing but started pecking away on a computer keyboard. Remus smiled to himself and wandered near the desk.

"Did you want all of these?" she asked, a bored tone to her voice.

"A fair few of them if I can," Remus answered. Rain moved a piece of hair out of her face and bent over the computer again. Remus wondered what she'd do if he pulled his wand and began summoning them to himself. Somehow, he doubted it would make her raise a pierced eyebrow.

"Here's the list." She handed him off a large sheet of paper that had the book titles and their supposed locations. Remus glanced at it and wondered if it was in English.

"Erm..."

"Right," Rain drawled, "I'm on my break."

Remus just stared at her retreating back, his hand hung at his side, the paper dangling there. Finally, he shrugged and began to study the list again. Muttering to himself and trying to read the miniscule print, he began to walk up and down the aisles. He managed to find two of the titles, by sheer luck he imagined, before he finally threw up his arms in exasperation. He glanced around and finally found another red and blue shirted employee unloading books into the last aisle.

"I wonder if I could bother you for a moment?" Remus glanced down at his list again. "I've been trying to find these books, but the notations don't make any sense to me."

The man stood and came to his side, glancing down at the paper he held.

"Let me guess... Rain helped you?"

Remus laughed out loud and then clamped his mouth shut. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's me who's sorry," the man sighed. "She's not the brightest star in the bunch, but she's all I have right now."

Remus glanced up at the man and then back down to the paper. His heart began racing as he let his eyes lift once more.

"What titles are you searching for?"

Remus felt his throat close up as he stared at the black haired, green-eyed man. "Huh?"

"The books," he pointed to the list, "I can probably find them faster than the computer could."

"Oh," Remus shook his head, feeling suddenly faint. His chest tightened painfully and his heart gave a hitch. There were times, over the past few years, when he would see a head covered in messy hair in the middle of a crowd and his heart would immediately demand it was Harry, while his head knew it was completely irrational. Remus had done the same thing for years after James and Lily had died as well.

"Are you well, sir?"

Remus didn't answer, but swayed on his feet. The man moved quickly to place a chair behind Remus and he sat down heavily.

"Shall I ring someone for you?"

Remus lifted his head again and blinked hard. The man was the spitting image of Harry. His eyes glanced down at the nametag. *Jack Ingalls, Manager-Young Adults & Children's Section*. But it couldn't be...

"No," Remus finally choked out. His pounding heart slowed a bit as he forced himself to focus on the patterned rug. "I'm sorry; you just took me by surprise."

Jack frowned slightly. "Are you sure? You look a little... peaked."

Remus took a deep breath and nodded. "I'll be fine, just a little faint. You look... remarkably like someone I used to know."

Jack smiled tentatively and crouched to pick up the paper that had fallen unnoticed to the floor.

"Why don't I gather these books while you sit here? If you're still feeling faint afterwards—"

"No, no," Remus protested, finally tearing his eyes away from the man when he saw how uncomfortably he was fidgeting. "I'm sure I'll be fine."

"Alright," Jack agreed slowly and moved to began gathering the books.

His heart thumped wildly, while his brain argued. 'It can't possibly be him. Harry is dead. He died four years ago. Don't do this to yourself'

Remus took a moment to collect himself, placing a hand over his racing heart. He'd feared for a moment that he would have a heart attack. He wasn't as young as he used to be, and the shock of seeing someone who closely resembled Harry....well, he feared it might have been too much. Once his breathing was under control, he let his eyes find Jack again and watched as he made quick work of finding the books.

Jack was a bit taller and broader of shoulder than Harry had been. His hair was cut shorter than Harry had ever worn it, but Harry had always worn it long to cover the scar on his forehead. The infamous scar wasn't present on Jack's face. Shouldn't that be proof enough, Remus argued with himself. A curse scar like the one that Harry had would never go away. Dumbledore himself had told Remus that when he asked about it in Harry's third year.

There were, however, other scars, specifically a rather nasty one along his jawline and a faint outline of one that disappeared into his hair line. He wore glasses as well, although they were different than Harry had ever worn.

Remus shook his head, weighing the differences against the possibility. It wouldn't be Harry—there was no logical proof that it was.

Harry's body had been recovered, the Ministry was sure that their hero had been killed along with

his girlfriend, Ginny, when they'd confronted Voldemort.

Remus' heart continued to ache. The space of four years could have explained some of the changes. Harry would be twenty-three now. The new scars could be explained away as well; the Final Battle had been extremely bloody.

The absence of the famous scar convinced Remus, though. Harry was gone.

"We have everything but three of these titles in stock, sir. If you are interested in getting the other three, I can check with our other branch, or we can special order them for you."

"No," Remus protested as he stood and followed Jack—*not Harry*—to the counter where the register sat. "I think the ones that I have will be enough, thank you."

Jack seemed to search his face for a minute and then finally nodded. "I'll just total these up for you then."

"Thank you," Remus said. He took the opportunity to study Jack even closer, wondering at how cruel fate was in creating two men who could look so much alike.

'It's not Harry,' he told his heart again, feeling the dull ache sink into his stomach a bit. He was convinced, even if his heart still longed for it to be Harry.

Jack gave him the total and then lifted his right hand to rub the exact place on his forehead where Harry's scar had been. Remus shook himself. How many times had he seen Harry make that exact gesture? His eyes widened as time slowed—there on the back of Jack's hand was a strange shaped scar, almost as if someone had written on his hand with a knife.

Remus sucked in a breath and felt his heart give another painful jolt.

"Are you sure there isn't someone I can ring for you?" Jack asked again, genuinely concerned for his customer.

"No, thank you," Remus choked out. "I'll be fine." Jack scowled at him and Remus had to swallow tears at the look that Harry had given him often. His mind whirled, screaming at him things that he didn't allow himself to hear. He only knew that his heart had been right.

Jack continued to watch Remus skeptically as he paid for the books and gathered up the bag.

"At least let me ring a cab for you," Jack tried again.

"Thank you, no. I'm just up the street."

"Alright," Jack nodded. "Have a nice day." He lifted a hand in parting as Remus slowly left the children's section and he returned to restocking the shelf.

It was the hardest thirty eight steps of Remus' life. Once he'd made it outside the store, he leaned against the warm brick building and bent over to rest his hands on his knees. The stack of books in his plastic bag tipped over, spilling onto the wet sidewalk. Remus stared at the books and tried to decide the best thing to do.

Emma arched her back, wincing at the uncomfortable stab of pain that shot across it.

“Ooo, you’re lucky baby Ingalls,” she poked her belly, growling down as a small foot lodged in the area where her kidney should be. “You just try that when you’re out and we’ll see how I react.”

She shuffled forward, her ratty and worn carpet slippers scuffing on the floor that needed cleaning. Emma hated that it looked dingy, but she just couldn’t bring herself to get down on her hands and knees and scrub it. Besides, if Jack ever found out she did it, he’d throw a wobbly.

“I can’t wait till this is over,” she grumbled, wrapping her arms around her round belly and lifting up just a bit, enjoying the relief of pressure for a moment.

That’s not true, she admitted silently. Being pregnant had been absolutely brilliant. The first time she had felt the baby move, it was like carrying the best secret in the world around with you—the fluttering of wings against your belly that no one knew about.

And when she’d pressed Jack’s hand to her growing bump, letting him feel his child push against him, she’d truly known the meaning of the word miracle.

But it was frustrating to be stuck in their small flat for so many hours a day. Emma had planned on working right up until the baby was born, but complications had developed in the last few months, forcing Emma to rest more than she wanted.

Last month, after working a double shift at the coffee shop, Emma had come home and laid down for a nap before Jack got off work. She’d awoken when Jack came into the flat to find a large spot of blood on the bed. They’d rushed immediately to the Hospital. Her doctor had suggested bed rest and little activity for the remainder of the pregnancy.

To make up for the loss of Emma’s income, Jack had been forced to work nights at the market again, stocking shelves. That meant they only had a few hours together in the evening before he was off to his second job. It was frustrating, but Emma didn’t know a way around it, at least for now.

“Listen here, you little...” she scolded her belly as the baby kicked sharply again. Emma held onto the counter, rubbing her fingers over the sore spot on her belly.

Jack’s keys rattled in the door and she sighed in happiness. It would be wonderful to have someone to talk to. Some days Mrs. Browne from the next flat over stopped in to talk to Emma, but she was in Ireland visiting her sister this week. It had been extremely quiet around the flat lately, and it was enough to drive Emma around the twist.

“You look tired, love,” she greeted him, wrapping her arms around his waste and going up on her toes to give him a kiss.

Jack sighed, melting a bit into her embrace, one arm wrapping around her back and the other going down to rub circles on her belly.

"I am," he admitted. "But it's better now that I'm home."

Emma kissed him again and led him to the sofa where they could sit. The cooker would chime when the food was done, but right now she just needed a few quite minutes together.

"I really missed you today," she admitted once they were cuddled together. Jack's eyes were closed and his hand continued to rub on her belly. The baby seemed to notice, because little feet and hands were pushing out all over, making strange ripples.

"Missed you too," he mumbled, tilting his head to kiss her temple and then sighing as he opened his eyes. "That is so strange," he said, his fingers tracing a ripple. His face was suddenly alight with awe and excitement, despite his exhaustion. Emma placed her hand on his and they felt their baby together in silence until the timer on the cooker went off.

"There was the strangest man that came into the store today," Jack commented as he helped her stand. "I thought he was having a fit or something..."

Emma listened to his story, simply enjoying the few minutes that they had together.

* * *

"She's perfect," Ron whispered, his fingers ghosting over the thin wisps of red hair on his daughter's tiny head.

"She is," Hermione agreed, wiping tears from her eyes.

Arthur felt a bit like he was intruding, standing at the doorway looking in, his hands resting on his wife's shoulders as they watched their newest granddaughter being welcomed by her parents.

He looked down at Molly and gave her forehead a quick kiss. "Hermione did well?" he asked quietly.

Molly nodded, not bothering to wipe her own tears. The midwife had just left, Arthur knew, after checking on the baby and mother. "She did wonderfully," Molly informed him. "Almost twenty hours. But both mum and baby are very healthy."

Arthur chuckled. "She's got a healthy set of lungs, at least." The commotion down in the kitchen had stopped when the robust cries of the newest Weasley had sounded through the Burrow. It was soon overshadowed by a hearty cheer from everyone present.

"Everyone has gone home now," Arthur assured her. "It's getting late and we knew they wouldn't be up to visitors yet. I'm sure everyone will be back around in a day or two."

"I'm so glad they decided to have her here," Molly mumbled, reaching up to pat his hand. Arthur grinned, remembering the quite lively discussion of where Hermione was going to give birth. Typically, Hermione had rushed right out and bought every book on magical midwifery she could find, reading them all before interviewing four Midwives and then choosing one.

"Have you decided on a name yet?" Arthur asked, raising his voice just a bit so that Ron and Hermione could hear him.

Ron glanced at him and then back to his wife, sharing a silent conversation before turning back to his parents and grinning, his finger locked in his daughter's tight fist.

"Ginny Rose," he said softly.

Molly gasped, but Arthur could tell it was in happiness. His own eyes flooded with tears as he stared at little Ginny Rose. She even looked like her namesake, he thought, with the red hair and the square Weasley chin.

"It's beautiful," he managed with a nod. "Simply beautiful."

Ron beamed proudly, leaning forward to kiss Hermione's chin before they returned their focus to daughter.

Arthur squeezed Molly's shoulders and urged her to follow him out of the room. He knew that these moments were some of the most precious for the new family. He'd get his chance to hold his Ginny Rose in time, and then he'd tell her all about her Aunt Ginny.

* * *

"Remus, you need to stop pacing," Tonks chided as she sipped from her cup of tea. He knew she was scared. He had come home completely agitated from his trip to the bookstore and had locked himself in the library for hours before he'd come out. He'd done that for two weeks after the Final Battle, only coming out for the funerals, and it hadn't been a pretty scene then.

"I know, Dora," he sighed.

"Whatever it is, we'll face it together, like we've done everything else."

Remus nodded absently. "Ori's alright with Molly?"

Tonks nodded. "She's fine. I didn't mention anything about a meeting either," she answered his questioning look. "I think Molly thinks that you're taking me out for a romantic dinner. In fact, she rather hinted that an only child had a very boring life."

Remus's eyes grew wide. "She wants us to..."

Tonks grinned and nodded. "That's what I gather."

He shook his head and began pacing again. "Let's get through this mess first," he mumbled and Tonks narrowed her eyes at him. They both turned as the fireplace flared green and Minerva McGonagall stepped out. She was quickly followed by an almost bald Arthur Weasley.

Remus grimaced when he saw how slowly Arthur moved. The stroke he had suffered once it set in that he'd buried his youngest child and the closest thing he had to a seventh son had aged him a decade. He was now on forced retirement from the Ministry, although he did do some consulting on the side and was there more often than not. His children had really stepped up in the meantime and were taking care of their aging parents.

Kingsley Shacklebolt was the last one in the room and Remus quickly sealed the floo, placed an

Imperturbable Charm on the door and began pacing again.

"I brought the files you asked for Remus," the large black man said softly. Remus nodded and turned to pace again.

"Remus," Minerva scolded him slightly. When he didn't answer, she turned to face Tonks who only shrugged.

"Right," Remus finally said. "I'm going to tell you all something that will make you think I'm crazy. I promise you I'm not." This statement brought rather severe reactions from the group.

"Yesterday," Remus continued, "I went to Manchester to purchase some Muggle books for Hermione. She'd given me the address of a discount bookstore that she knew of and a list of titles that she wanted. I went to get the books, but had to ask for help as their cataloging system leaves much to be desired."

Remus took a deep breath. "The man that helped me... well..."

"What is it Remus?" Arthur asked in a soft voice.

Remus looked at the man who had lost so much and cursed himself for the heartache he was going to cause now. "It was Harry," he whispered.

The room was heavy with silence.

"There have been others, Remus, who have thought they've seen him," Kingsley informed his friend, his voice full of sympathy.

"No! This was him, I swear it to you!" Remus protested.

"As much as we all want to believe—" Minerva began.

"I know," Remus assured them, meeting each gaze steadily. "He's grown up; taller that is, broader in shoulder, but it *is* him."

"Did you speak to him, Remus?" Tonks asked.

Remus nodded fervently. "It was the same voice, only a bit deeper. He used the same gestures Harry had—you remember how he used to rub his scar?"

"The scar was there?" Arthur asked, looking down at his hands.

"Well... no, but—"

"Remus," Kingsley laid his hand on the man's shoulder.

"I know what I saw!" Remus stood again, almost frantic. "The scar on his forehead wasn't there, but others were, ones he's must have gotten in the Final Battle. And the one on his right hand..."

Minerva flinched, and Tonks nodded Remus onward. "I must not tell lies." He sat heavily again. "It

was there, a little muddled, but I could tell it was there.”

“And what would you have us do, Remus?” Minerva said. “As head of the Order, I need to have some suggestion.”

“I don’t want to call out the whole Order,” Remus shook his head. “What if we just sent Dora, in disguise, to see?”

“What would I do, Remus? Walk up to him and ask?”

“Have we considered the thought that Harry might not want to be found?” Arthur asked quietly.

“I’ve considered everything,” Remus sighed as he pushed his hands roughly through his hair. His hours yesterday had been spent thinking through every possibility. “But he didn’t recognize me, Arthur. I swear to you, I was closer to him than you and I are right now and he didn’t know me from the next man on the street.”

Tonks stood and laid her hands on Remus’ back. “Maybe he’s suffered some form of memory loss.”

“It can’t be him,” Kingsley shook his head. “The Ministry studied the area. Four magical signatures in the area and only one was left standing afterwards. The Malfoy boy saw Potter and Weasley killed.” He shook his head in apology when Arthur flinched.

“We must consider the source,” Minerva huffed. “Draco Malfoy always was a liar.”

“What would he have to gain?” Kingsley queried.

“I’m not sure, Kingsley, but I hardly think that the boy’s word alone is proof.”

“The bodies, then!” He offered, flipping the file open to where black and white photographs of a charred circle were resting. The group turned away as one. “You can see three bodies there clearly. The evidence around them supported both Potter and the Weasley girl as well as You-Know-Who.”

Remus stood and closed the file, laying a hand on Arthur’s shoulder. “I know what the file says, Kingsley. I’ve read it a hundred times already. I was there that day. I smelled the burning flesh.”

He took a deep breath and continued. “All we have is Malfoy’s word. We never looked beyond what he told us. But there are ways,” he said, hating the desperation that crept into his voice, “spells or Muggle technology.”

“I’m not asking you to reopen the case, Kingsley. All I’m asking for is the chance for Dora to go in to confirm what I saw.”

“What about the bodies, Remus?” Kingsley sank back down into his chair and stared at the file. “If Harry survived…”

“If Harry survived,” Remus continued, “then that means there was more going on than we knew, that we never considered.”

The room was silent for a minute until Arthur removed his glasses and rubbed his face harshly.

"We have to try," he said. "If there's any way—" He stopped and swallowed several times, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. "If Harry survived, then there might be a chance that Ginny did. Maybe he knows something. At the very least, we might have *Harry* back."

"It can't hurt, can it?" Minerva asked the room in general.

"I can go tomorrow," Tonks offered.

"If there is something, any hint that it might actually be him, Tonks..." Kingsley trailed off. "Look, I liked the kid as much as the next person, but I have to be realistic here. This would open up a whole mess of inquiries at the Ministry. We're talking about..." He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "We're talking about deliberate conspiracy."

Tonks nodded. "I understand. And you know that I won't do anything rash. I'll quietly make my observations and then let you know."

"Agreed," Minerva finally said. The group slowly left one by one. Remus took Arthur aside before the older man could leave.

"I'm sorry, Arthur," he started. "The last thing I wanted to do was give you more pain."

"I know, Remus. And believe me when I say that I understand."

"If there's any chance, no matter how slim it is..."

"I agree with you," Arthur said. "Please let me know if I can help in any way. I'm going to ask you to keep this from the family right now. Ron will need to know soon, but with the new baby..."

"No!" Remus shook his head, "I completely understand. I won't say anything until we're sure." He trailed off for a moment and Arthur patted him on the shoulder.

"There's something else, isn't there?"

Remus grimaced and nodded. "I just... I want you to be prepared, Arthur. Harry... he was wearing a wedding band."

Arthur raised his eyebrows and considered for a minute. "Well..." he swallowed thickly. "If the boy's found someone that can make him happy..."

Remus nodded, pain evident on his face. "I only said something because I know how close he and Ginny were."

Arthur nodded. "You did the right thing, Remus."

"I didn't say anything at the meeting, because... well, I think this was enough to stir up. But, I will tell Dora so that she will be prepared."

Arthur nodded and smiled gently at him. "Good luck, and let me know."

"I will."

Chapter 8

October 2002

Tonks wandered through the bookstore in her disguise as a middle aged woman with frizzy blond hair and runners in her stockings.

"Excuse me," she stopped a woman who was carrying a stack of teetering books. "I was wondering if you could point out the Children's section."

The woman raised an eyebrow and pointed to the brightly painted corner of the store.

"Thanks," Tonks nodded and made her way toward the area, eyes raking the aisles for any sign of Harry. She ended up searching the whole children's area, picking up a book here and there so as not to arouse suspicion, without seeing him.

"Are you going to buy those?"

Tonks grinned at the rebellious teenager that Remus had described. "I thought I'd shove them up my girdle and try to make a run for it."

Rain only raised an eyebrow.

Tonks sighed and laid the books down on a small table. "Actually, I need to speak with your manager."

Rain snapped her gum and appraised the lady before shrugging. "He left a few minutes ago."

Tonks swore internally and stalked toward the entrance to the store, hoping that Harry wouldn't be far gone. She had no way of knowing what direction he'd be leaving in though, and things didn't look good for surveillance work today. She quickly glanced around the outside area, any hope of catching him deflating at the sight of all the cars parked next to the building.

"Jack, hurry your arse up, you lazy git!"

Tonks swung around to see a tall, dark haired man in his mid twenties leaning against the entryway to an alley beside the store.

"I'm coming you impatient bastard," was the reply. Tonks' breath caught in her throat as she waited for the man to emerge. Seconds later 'Jack' came out of the alley, straightening his jacket and nudging the other man with his shoulder.

"Your wife might wait for you, but Missy will have my bollocks if I'm late again."

Jack laughed as the two began walking down the sidewalk. Tonks followed at a discreet enough distance, and slipped a thin flesh colored device into her ear. The Twins had invented the 'Elephant Ears' listening devices toward the middle of the war. They made eavesdropping much easier and Tonks was able to still hear the conversation taking place ahead of her. She was also able to use an

Auror 'Spy Camera' to snap a few silent shots of Har-Jack's profile.

"You think Missy's bad? Try having a *pregnant* wife!"

Tonks tripped on the concrete in front of her and cursed quietly. Remus was right, Harry was married—or, well, Jack was anyway—and they were expecting.

"Besides," Jack observed, "they've been out shopping. They'll be at least twenty minutes late."

The other man laughed and the two began to talk of mundane things such as work and people they knew. Tonks continued to follow.

"You know," the other man turned to Jack as they walked, "you complain about Emma and her mood swings with the pregnancy but, I've never seen anyone mention it and you not grin ear to ear, mate."

Tonks could make out the lopsided grin even from the far side of Jack. She quickly lifted the camera and took another discreet photo.

"It's amazing, Derek. When the baby moves now, I can feel it, I mean *ireally/i* feel it this time. Emma's been able to for ages, but... it makes it all somehow more real."

Derek grinned at his friend. "Don't go all sappy on me again. You did enough of that when the two of you started seeing each other."

"And you and Missy just disgusted Emma and me," Jack said and laughed as Derek took a swing at him.

Tonks slowed down as the two men entered a coffee house on the corner. She ducked into the alleyway and glancing around, morphed back to her usual appearance, knowing that she ought to fit right in.

She was lucky to find a table near the two men and sipped her tea as she pretended to read a newspaper.

"How was Kendal?" Jack asked and Derek groaned.

"Remind me why I chose to spend a week with Missy's family?"

Jack laughed. "I liked Anne," he shrugged. "She's supported us both in our choices. Although Carter had a few things to say about me dating '*his girl*'."

Derek smirked. "You could kick nancy boy Carter's arse any day, Jack. No, it's Anne who's the scary one."

"You're still breathing," Jack observed. "It must not have been that bad. I thought she was nice."

"Again," Derek rolled his eyes, "you weren't dating her *daughter*. And, you and Emma had only been dating a few months when you met her. Although, come to think of it, how did you survive? You two elope after only dating for two months—"

"It was three, you git," Jack growled with a smile.

"Same difference," Derek added. "And then another two months after that, you knock her up."

"That is such a derogatory term, you know?" Jack laughed. "I didn't *knock her up*, I impregnated my wife." The two both grimaced and laughed. "Alright, that sounds just as bad."

"Whatever you call it, you still did it to her pseudo-daughter. What did Anne say when Emma called her and told her about the wedding?"

"She was happy for us, although I know she told Emma it was too fast. She..." Jack trailed off and Tonks lifted her face to see a bit of a blush on his cheeks. "She asked if Emma was pregnant." Tonks took three more pictures in quick succession.

"Well," Derek laughed. "That's what you get when you only date two months before eloping!"

"We didn't elope," Jack protested. "You were there. And it was three months."

"The Magistrate's office counts as eloping, mate, I hate to tell you."

Jack flushed again but grinned. "We just thought the money would be better spent on other things and since neither of us has any family... Besides, Anne was there."

"I know," Derek protested and took a drink of his coffee. "And I agree. I know I'd rather elope."

Jack laughed. "So, you and Missy are that serious then?"

Derek choked on his coffee and spluttered it all over the table. "That's not what I meant!"

"Yeah," Jack agreed with an evil smile, "but it's what you *said*."

Derek laid his head on the table. "Speak a word of this and you're dead, Ingalls."

Jack only laughed. "Here come the girls." The two men stood as two women joined them and Tonks shifted in her seat to catch a glimpse of Jack's wife. The tea she'd been drinking tipped over when she bumped it and stained the newspaper as it continued unchecked along the table. Tonks didn't notice.

"Hello, love," Jack kissed the woman quickly and then rubbed her growing belly, causing her to laugh. Her fiery red hair was pulled back in a ponytail and her skin was pale from the cold temperature outside.

"Hello. How was work?"

"It was alright," Jack said. "Hello, Missy," he greeted the other woman with a peck on the cheek as the two settled at the small round table.

"Can I get you anything, Em?" Derek asked.

"Oh, just a glass of juice? Apple, if they have it."

“Sure thing,” Derek winked and moved off to the counter. Tonks had to force herself to stop staring at the woman next to Jack and concentrate instead on what they were saying. She again lifted the camera and took photos, two of Emma and two of the couple together.

“So, what did you buy today?”

“Oh, it’s so cute!” Missy cooed. She handed a bag over the table and Emma pulled out a pale blue outfit with little farm animals all over it.

“See?” she beamed at Jack as she laid it over the small bulge of her stomach. Jack just smiled indulgently at her.

“Em, we don’t know the sex of the baby, why are you buying blue?”

“Girls can wear blue!” Missy protested and Emma nodded her agreement.

“Besides,” Emma said leaning in to kiss Jack softly, “I just have this feeling that it’s a boy.”

“As long as his son doesn’t have to wear pink!” Derek proclaimed as he distributed the drinks all around. Emma beamed at him and took a long drink from her apple juice.

“Perfect,” she said setting it down again. “And, we got a few receiving blankets, some nappies and a few other small things.”

“I thought you were looking for a pram?” Jack asked as he sipped his tea.

“We were, but the store was out of the one I had my heart set on. You remember the dark green one, Jack? They can order it in though. I’ll check back in a few weeks.”

“You should have given them your number and then they could have rung you when they get it in,” Derek said.

Both Jack and Emma flushed slightly. “Well,” Emma began, “we’ve actually cancelled our telephone for a bit.”

“What?” Derek and Missy both sat upright.

“With me having to quit work and Jack only getting so many hours at the bookstore—” Emma explained.

“Jack,” Derek scowled, “you could have asked for help, mate.”

“Emma,” Missy protested, “you should really have a phone. What if something happens and you need help?”

“I know,” Jack consoled, “but it’s only for a little while. And, Mrs. Browne next door has a phone that we can use if we need to.” Emma smiled at him and patted his hand that lay on the table. “Anyway, I’ve started back at the market at nights and—”

“Jack,” Derek warned, “you’re never going to get back to University this way.”

Surprisingly, Jack smiled back at his friend. “I know, but it doesn’t matter when I finish. Some things are more important.” Jack said this last sentence while smiling down at his wife and patting her belly.

“Still,” Missy protested.

Tonks tuned out the rest of the conversation and began to search for details so that she could report back. Emma’s hair was shoulder length. She looked a bit pale and thin for being pregnant, but Tonks had first hand experience that all pregnancies were different. Both Jack and Emma wore clothes that appeared to be well taken care of, but on the older side. Even Emma’s maternity clothes seemed to be second hand.

She startled when the two couples rose and traded hugs and goodbye’s back and forth. Taking this as her cue, Tonks slipped out of the door and hurried back to the alley across the street to change her appearance again. This time she was a stylish woman of mid-forty as she waited for Harry and—er, Jack and Emma to come out of the shop. When they did, Jack’s arm wrapped around Emma’s shoulders. Tonks followed after, taking a couple full-length shots.

They seemed in no big hurry as they walked slowly down the street.

“Feeling alright, love?” Jack asked as he kissed Emma’s temple.

“A little tired,” Emma admitted. “But other than that it’s been a good day.”

“Good, but you’ll have to make up for today by resting more tomorrow. You know what Doctor Summers said.”

“You worry too much,” Emma said as she poked Jack’s side and he flinched away laughing.

“I may,” Jack agreed. “But it’s only because I love you and the baby.”

“We know, love,” Emma said, turning her head to capture his lips. They continued on in silence for a block or two before Emma laid her head on his shoulder and sighed.

“What’s wrong, love?”

“I just wish it were *easier*. I hate that you have to work so many hours. We hardly see each other.”

“I know,” Jack mumbled, kissing her hair. “But it’s only for a little while. We’ve so much to buy for this little one.”

Emma nodded and laid her hand along her stomach. “I’ve changed my mind about the pram.”

Jack stopped mid-stride and looked down at her. “Why?”

Emma’s cheeks turned pink and she looked away. “It’s just not important to have that one. I can find one at a second hand shop, or we’ll do without.”

“Em, that’s not—”

"No," she turned back to him and placed a finger on his lips to stop his protests. "It's really not. It's more important that you be able to be there with us. I want our baby to know both his parents. That's something that neither of us can say, and I won't have that happen for him."

Jack hugged her tight to him and blinked back tears. "I know, love. I want that more than anything. We'll make it work; I swear to you that we will." After a moment they began walking again and Tonks stepped into a deserted shop to change her appearance again. A blonde woman in her early thirties, wearing a track suit, emerged and began to follow the couple again.

"You really think it's a boy?" Jack asked as they turned on a street corner.

Emma grinned up at him. "I really think it is."

"Then we'd better get busy on names. So far we've only chosen two possible girl names."

Tonks hung back as the couple entered an older building of flats. The neighborhood looked fairly well kept, although the red brick looked to be more than fifty years old. There was no way to tell from the outside which flat was theirs, but Tonks at least had a basic address. She walked down the street for a bit, trying to settle her thoughts and calm her racing heart beat.

Down at the end of the block was a well-used play park. The swings and merry-go round were worn from use, but the park was clean and looked of good repair. Tonks smiled when she thought about a small child playing here. Perhaps this very park was why Jack and Emma had chosen the flat that they had.

What would happen when Tonks reported what she'd found? She'd been skeptical when Remus had admitted that he thought he'd found Harry, even though she felt a bit guilty for doubting her husband. However, she didn't doubt anymore.

The possibility of restoring what was once thought gone... well, she couldn't fully wrap her head around that.

The couple was happy, despite struggling for money and dealing with everyday trials. Tonks wondered if taking them from this was the right decision.

In the Wizarding world, they would have family to rely on and money to buy the things that they and their child would need. However, the anonymity of this quiet street with its rows of flat houses would be a far cry from the celebrity status they would have if they returned.

Finally shrugging and deciding that it wasn't really her decision to make, Tonks moved to a completely isolated area of the park and Disapparated.

* * *

Remus was waiting when Tonks returned and she could tell he'd been pacing a groove in the floor.

"Well?" he demanded and then sighed at her raised eyebrow.

"It's him," Tonks nodded. "I'm sure of it."

"Yes!" Remus crowed. "We have to be able to bring him home..." He hurried out of the room muttering vague plans about retrieving Harry. Tonks followed, much more subdued.

"There's more," she said softly as Remus flitted around the kitchen fixing himself a cup of tea, and not listening to what she was saying.

"We'll need to get in touch with everyone and let them know. Kingsley can find someone to take care of memory charms, can't he?"

"Remus." When the man turned around, Tonks took the tea cup out of his hand and pulled him to the table. "I think you need to sit down."

"Tonks, you're scaring me now." His eyes grew wide as he sank down onto a straight-backed wooden chair.

She only nodded. "There's more. You remember what we talked about just before I left?"

Remus nodded. "Of course I do. But if Harry's really married, then... we'll just accept her. She's most likely a Muggle, but that's not stopped anyone in the family before. Why are you shaking your head at me?"

Tonks sighed. "Remus, I saw his wife today."

"Oh," Remus said. "Well, did she look nice?"

Tonks smiled. "Yes, she looked... well, I can say that you'll definitely approve of her."

"Well, then..."

"Remus, it's Ginny." Once again, complete silence echoed around the room, pressing in on their ears.

"Say again?"

"It's Ginny. Harry is married to Ginny. Or rather, *Jack* is married to *Emma*."

Remus stood swiftly and ran his hands through his hair as the pacing began again. "Why... how..."

Tonks managed a small smile. "Well that leaves 'who', 'what', 'when' and 'where'." She sobered when she saw the pain on his face.

"If it's both of them... do you think they do know who they are?"

Tonks shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Well, I guess if one survived... it's logical to think that they've been together all this time. Actually, it does make me feel a bit better thinking that they've not been alone through all of this."

"It's stranger than that, Remus. Will you please sit down while I tell you this?"

“Am I driving you crazy?” he smirked.

“Yes,” Tonks growled. “That and I’m rather worried about your health when I continue with the story.” Remus sunk onto the chair and faced her.

“Harry, or Jack—”

“Let’s just call him Harry for the sake of *our* sanity.”

“Alright,” Tonks agreed. “Harry met up with a friend of his, someone named Derek. The two walked to a coffee shop and sat down to wait for Harry’s wife and Derek’s girlfriend, who had gone out shopping together. I was able to overhear most of their conversation.” She continued when Remus nodded.

“Harry and Ginny haven’t been together this whole time. They’ve only been married almost a year, and it’s rather confusing, but I think they only met just *over* a year ago. There was some vague reference to them only dating a few months before eloping.”

“How is that... that doesn’t even make any sense, Dora.” Remus scowled down at the table.

“I know,” Tonks held up her hands. “I promise you that I’ve run it over and over in my mind to make sure I got all the details right. There was also a reference about someplace up in Kendal. I think that may have been where Emm-Ginny was for a time.”

She sighed. “And there’s more...”

Remus nodded thoughtfully.

“Ginny’s expecting; about five or six months along from what I can tell.”

They stared at each other for a moment before a huge grin broke out on Remus’ face. “That’s the best news I’ve heard in quite awhile.” Tonks smiled too.

“They look so happy, Remus, really in love, you know. Life isn’t easy for them, though. Money’s an issue and there may or may not be some health issues with the baby. Ginny mentioned that she’d had to quit her job and that they’d cancelled their telephone line. Harry works at the bookstore during the day and has another job somewhere at night.”

“I can’t imagine it being easy for them.”

“It’s not.”

“Did you catch any sign of magic used?”

Tonks shook her head. “Those two were completely oblivious to it. There’s no magic usage there. Or if there is, it’s completely not intentional.”

A horrified look came over Remus’ face. “What if they can’t?”

“Can’t? What do you mean?”

"I mean, what if whatever happened in the Final Battle... what if it took their magic? There's been no word all these years about magic usage in strange locations. Nothing to indicate that they've done anything that would be unusual."

Tonks seemed to grasp what he'd been saying and wore her own horrified look.

"I don't think it will matter," Remus finally sighed. "No one in this family will think any less of them if they can't use magic any longer."

"I've never heard of that happening before, though."

"We've not dealt with anything like this before. We'd never dealt with Voldemort before either."

"You're right, of course. No one in the family will think much of it when they realize that they have them both back. The public however..."

"Nothing is simple with the two of them, is it?" Remus finally chuckled. "How on earth did the two of them find each other, fall in love and get married? You do realize that the odds of that..."

"I know," Tonks said. "I'm sure it would send Hermione into fits of euphoria to calculate the *iactual/i* odds, but I'm just in awe that it happened."

"I never really believed in that, you know... one person being specifically meant for another person. In this case it seems like that's what has happened."

Tonks only nodded. "When is everyone expecting a report?"

Remus harshly rubbed his face with his palms. "Tonight, I think. I'm sure we can't hold anyone back."

"We need to look into what happened at the battle as well," Tonks said. "This is going to cause a huge mess, you realize. Scrimgeour isn't going to like this in the least."

Remus nodded. "You and Kingsley will have to deal with that. I just need to deal with the entire Weasley clan." They both chuckled wryly and let it die out as the implications of that thought settled in.

"Trade you?" Remus asked hopefully.

"Not on your life," Tonks shook her head. "Although I do think we might need to have a Healer nearby when we tell Arthur. Not only does he get Harry back, but his daughter and a new grandbaby."

* * *

Arthur Weasley held his glasses in his hand as he came through the floo to Grimmauld Place. The kitchen was warmer than it had ever been before, he noticed. It was strange what he did notice these days. The past four years had been very hard on the Weasley family. The loss of Harry and Ginny had left him feeling like his heart had been ripped out and trampled upon. But there were so many things to do directly after, and Molly was in no shape to do them.

Thankfully, the Order had stepped in to help wherever possible. Once the large joint funeral was over and the Ministry had been sorted, life settled into something that might have resembled what it should have been. It was a hollow sort of existence where Arthur did what he'd needed to do simply because there was no one else to do it.

Then the terrible day in October when he'd gone to work already not feeling well. It hadn't taken more than a glimpse of the little red-headed girl in the hallway to send him over the edge. The pain had been blinding—even worse than when Voldemort's snake had bitten him.

It was Percy who found him there on his office floor. The stroke had done minor damage to his brain that the Healers were able to heal almost completely. He still had some speech issues and some days his hands wouldn't do what he wanted them to do. Arthur mused that it wasn't such a bad thing considering what could have happened to him. Charlie and Maggie had moved into the Burrow and were still there to this day, helping take care of Molly as well as Arthur himself.

This latest news though, that Harry might actually be alive, made him more than a little nervous about his health. He had grandchildren now to help raise, and Molly to take care of. So, he absolutely refused to get his hopes up until there was enough proof to decide. Having the boy who had been like a seventh son to him back would be... There were absolutely no words that he could use to describe what it would feel like. The fact that he may or may not be married really didn't matter. Arthur knew that no one would hold the boy's moving on against him.

"Evening, Arthur," Minerva greeted him as she entered the kitchen. "We've set up in the drawing room tonight. I've just come down to get some more tea."

"Thank you, Minerva."

"How is Molly?"

Arthur smiled gently and innocently wondered when the whole lot of them had grown so old. He noticed that he and Molly weren't the only ones sporting heads of entirely grey hair. "She's well, thank you. Charlie's wife has been in and out of labor for the past day or so, so Molly is truly in her element. Another grandbaby should be just what she needs to get her through the holidays. And Hermione and Ron's little girl is doing well. They've named her Ginny Rose."

"They are miracles, aren't they?" Minerva asked as she levitated the tray of tea servings.

"They truly are."

The others greeted him when he came in and he glanced around the room to see a large map of England pinned to one wall and one entire table filled with paperwork and a few more glossy papers that he assumed were photographs.

"I'm assuming that the outcome was satisfactory," he said, spreading his hands wide, "if all this is any evidence."

No one answered him except with concerned smiles as he took a seat.

"Arthur," Remus began. "We were wondering if you'd like one of your sons here with us tonight. It

might be helpful to have another mind in on this.”

Arthur frowned intelligently, knowing there was more that they weren't telling him. He sighed and nodded thoughtfully. “I believe Bill is at home tonight. I can step through the floo for him if you wish.”

“I'll get him for you,” Kingsley said as he quickly exited the room. A few minutes of excruciating silence ensued.

* * *

Bill Weasley glared at the strand of grey hair mixed in with the bright red, and gave a mighty tug on the end of it. He wasn't *that* old! Certainly not old enough to be battling grey hair.

Although his daughter, Victoire, might be to blame for it. He and Fleur definitely had their hands full with that one. She was every bit her mother, Bill vowed, with her batting eyelashes and cunning wiles that had him wrapped around her little finger.

Fleur was feeding Dominique while Bill read a third bedtime story to Victoire. The little imp had finally nodded off, her strawberry blonde hair spread around the pillow like a halo. Bill was hoping that the baby would fall asleep quickly and maybe he could gain a few minutes of his wife's attention.

Her frantic call from the living room, however, set him running, his wand held aloft.

“Beell!” she called again, just as he entered the room. Kingsley Shackelbolt's head was floating in the fire and Bill relaxed his wand, shooting a dark look at his wife, who had scared at least three more grey hairs into his head.

“Eet iz your fazzer,” she glared right back, her shoulders squared as she patted little Dominique on his back.

Bill's heart plummeted as he knelt in front of the fire.

“Kingsley?”

“Sorry to bother you so late, Bill,” the man said. “But I wonder if you wouldn't mind stepping through. Your father is here and asked that I get you.”

Bill opened his mouth to ask if his father was injured, flashes of an ashen faced Arthur lying in St. Mungo's coming into his mind.

“He's fine,” Kingsley held up a hand, stalling the question. “We could use your help, though.”

Bill narrowed his eyes. Kingsley was always rather reserved, but his vagueness this time meant that he wasn't willing to say exactly what was happening over the Floo Network.

He glanced over his shoulder to Fleur, who was waiving him on. “Go. I 'ave some reading to do.”

“Alright, I'll come right through,” he agreed.

Kingsley nodded. "We're at Grimmauld."

Bill kissed his wife goodbye, pressed a quick kiss to his sleeping son's forehead and flooded into the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. Kingsley shook his hand with a genial smile and indicated the stairs leading upward.

"We're upstairs in the drawing room," he said, his deep voice filling the kitchen, even though he spoke softly.

Long, powerful strides carried him quickly up the stairs and into the room. He slowed as his eyes took in the state of the room, the map on the wall and the photographs everywhere.

"Dad?" Bill questioned as he came fully into the room and saw his father sitting on the sofa. "Is everything alright?"

Kingsley spoke from the doorway. "I didn't tell him anything other than you requested his presence, Arthur."

Arthur nodded his thanks and motioned for his son to join him on the sofa. Bill sat, looking at the faces in the room, trying to decide what on earth was happening. Remus stood, fidgeting in place before he cleared his throat.

"Bill," Remus said softly, "Harry's alive. He's been found living as a Muggle."

The tall redhead took the statement well, he thought. His mind screamed a million possibilities as he listened to Remus present his encounter and Tonks continue with her narrative. He knew these people would never lie to him, nor would they make jokes about a situation like this. But the possibility... it seemed... so absolutely outrageous. Only when Tonks handed around a photograph of Harry smiling and speaking to another man did Bill allow himself to fully take a breath.

Bill stood, the photo in one hand, and ran the other through his long hair. "It's him then, isn't it?" Tonks nodded solemnly and Bill laid the photo on the stack. "If Harry survived, do you think that Ginny had a chance?" The question escaped his mouth before he had the chance to process it himself. He wasn't even sure there could be an answer.

The question was meant to be toward the group, but Bill's eyes strayed to his father.

"We can only hope, Bill," Arthur nodded. "You know I want that more than anything. It's a miracle that Harry survived at all."

"There is more," Tonks said softly. Bill's head jerked around and then whipped back as his father spoke.

"Is this about the other?" Arthur asked, turning toward Remus.

"Other?" Minerva spoke up. "Was there something else, Remus?"

Remus sighed and smiled softly at Tonks. "When I saw Harry, I noticed that he was wearing a wedding band." Bill's heart pounded as he tried to mentally piece this huge puzzle together. He was

usually very good at these sorts of things; however it had been some years since he had used these reason and logic skills. Right now, he was content to listen to the others, filling in what he could.

“He’s married?” Kingsley asked.

“It would appear so,” Remus confirmed, his eyes darted toward Tonks and Bill knew there was more they weren’t saying.

“That may complicate bringing him back to our world,” Kingsley said, slipping deep into thought.

“Not so much as you would think,” Tonks said with a wry smile. “I saw his wife today.” Her gaze wandered to the two Weasleys, and Bill reached his hand down to rest on his father’s shoulder. The thought of Harry married to someone that wasn’t Ginny hurt deeply. But Bill couldn’t blame him, really, not if there were other issues going on.

“As long as he’s happy, Tonks,” Arthur acknowledged. “It’s been four years after all.”

Bill nodded his agreement. “We have no right to expect him to even remember Ginny, let alone... Well, it’s good that he’s moved on.”

Tonks nodded. “He and his wife met last year and after only a few months they eloped. She has no family, except there is evidence of her being taken care of by a woman in Kendal. Her name is Emma and it appears that she’s also about five or six months pregnant.

She reached over to another stack of photos but held them in her hand before passing them on. “They look very happy together, even though they are rather poor. They live in an older neighborhood of flats, but it seems clean and well kept. Jack, that’s the name Harry is using now,” she explained to Bill, “Jack Ingalls. Jack works at a local bookstore where he manages the Children and Young Adult’s section. He also has a night job somewhere. Emma, his wife, doesn’t work. There was something said about her having to quit her job and I think it might be due to the pregnancy.”

Tonks slowly handed the new photos to Bill who had to steel himself to see Harry with someone that wasn’t his sister. His breath caught in his throat as he looked at the first one. Jack was beaming at a woman next to him. The vibrant red hair and impish smile on her face made Bill’s eyes water.

“You said they only met a year ago?” he whispered.

“That’s what I gathered from what I overheard. I think it was some kind of chance encounter.”

Bill nodded and turned over another one where Jack and Emma were kissing softly. He continued to look through them, tears finally escaping and dripping down his face. He saw them walking down the street, their arms around each other and then Jack caressing Emma’s swollen belly and grinning in adoration.

“I don’t know how it’s possible,” he whispered before lowering the photos. “Only the two of them...” Tonks had begun silently crying as well and nodded. The reality of the situation seemed even more amazing than the fact that they had both survived.

Bill wiped his tears and turned to Arthur. “It’s Ginny, Dad. Somehow, they survived and went three

years apart before finding each other.”

“It’s not possible,” Arthur whispered before taking the photos that Bill held out. His eyes raced over them, seemingly memorizing every expression and line. Finally, he came to one where both Jack and Emma were laughing, Jack’s hand casually rested on Emma’s belly. “But, somehow, with the two of them I can believe it.” His whispered words echoed through the room.

Bill was torn—there were still so many questions, but his heart was pounding away, making his head spin. He felt a million things at once: relief, joy, anger, somewhat drunken euphoria, and under it all a nagging need to know what had happened.

“It is truly a miracle,” Minerva nodded, passing the photographs on to Kingsley who stared at them with rapt attention.

“How on earth did they survive?” Bill asked the question that needed to be asked. “Many of us saw the bodies.”

“We took things for granted,” Kingsley conceded with a sigh. “We only have the word of the witness, Draco Malfoy.”

Bill nodded thoughtfully. “Do you have the paperwork?”

Kingsley nodded. “I even have photographs of the scene, although I’ll warn you they are pretty graphic.”

Bill nodded and stood to follow the man. Whatever was in the photographs, Bill knew they wouldn’t be as graphic as the image that was engraved on his mind from being there that day. The smells and acrid tastes and the feeling of having his heart ripped out of his chest over and over again... no photograph could possibly show that. Arthur joined them although he averted his eyes at the most graphic of the photographs.

“Here is the clearing where the duel with Voldemort took place.” He pointed to a photograph of a heavily wooded area that had a rather large circular burn in the center of it. “According to Mr. Malfoy, Harry and Ginny came into the clearing here,” Kingsley indicated the start of the forest.

“Malfoy claims that he followed at a discreet distance behind Harry as to watch his back.” He grimaced when Bill snorted humorlessly. “It was here in this clearing that the duel happened. We know a few of the spells that were used as Malfoy stayed hidden most of the time and watched. Voldemort put Ginny under the Cruciatus several times. There were cutting curses and the like.” He sighed. “Malfoy’s claims that Harry used Dark Magic are fairly new. He didn’t say anything during our first interview, but he acted like he knew more. Under pressure from the Ministry, we didn’t pursue it.” Kingsley looked around the room before shrugging. “Scrimgeour didn’t want the publicity if it got out that Harry did use Dark Magic.”

“You think he did?” Bill asked, surprised. Although, he had to admit, if it had been him facing Voldemort, and not Harry, Bill would have used anything and everything he knew to get rid of the Monster.

Kingsley grimaced. “There was Dark Magic used,” he admitted slowly. The fact that he didn’t

explain who had used it was not lost on Bill. Kingsley suspected, or perhaps had some proof, that Harry had used some Dark spell. Bill nodded at him to continue.

“The final spell, and we don’t know who cast it, was Fiendfyre.” He pulled out the last photograph showing a very charred region and three lumps near the center which Bill knew to have once been human bodies.

“Ginny fell first and that’s when Malfoy said You-Know-Who used the killing curse on her.”

“And he said Harry stood by and watched all of this?” Bill interrupted. He shook his head violently. “That’s a load of rubbish, if you ask me. Harry would never—”

Kingsley shook his head. “No, Malfoy said that Harry was trying his best to break the connection and to take the brunt of the spells. He even said that Harry voluntarily stepped in front of the Cruciatus more than once, taking it himself instead of it getting Ginny.” Bill nodded in understanding. That sounded like the Harry he had known—or knew... It was all rather confusing in his mind at the moment.

“We’re not exactly sure what happened next, as no one was awake. Malfoy claims to have come into the fight at this point and been stunned. He was sporting several rather deep cuts along his head and back when we got there.”

“Anyway,” Kingsley continued. “We’re not sure exactly what happened from there, but the theory is that one of them finished off the other, and then called forth Fiendfyre, obviously losing control of it and getting trapped in the flames themselves. Malfoy claims that when he awoke the entire area was on fire. He tried to pull the bodies out, but was unsuccessful. He did have burns on his hands and clothing, if you’ll remember.”

“So, we don’t know for sure what killed Harry and Ginny?”

“This is just what the Ministry has assumed,” Kingsley agreed. “We don’t have wands to test. Even Mr. Malfoy’s was lost when he tried to pull the bodies from the fire. There are some magical residues that were tested, but it’s almost impossible to retrace all the steps when we don’t have evidence. The Fiendfyre destroyed a huge area.”

“The Ministry actually thinks Harry called Fiendfyre?” Tonks asked, glaring at the Head Auror. “That doesn’t sound like him at all.”

Kingsley shook his head and glanced around nervously. “This information is top secret...”

“King—” Bill started, but stopped when Kingsley held up his hand.

“I know, Bill.” He stood rigid, hands clasped behind his back. “The Ministry believes that Voldemort killed Ginny and Harry, and then called Fiendfyre himself. He must have lost control of it. You all know what that spell is capable of.”

Bill groaned and rubbed his face. “All this time, they’ve been lying to the public.”

“Of course,” Kingsley stated boldly. “Would you want to know that it’s an accident that Voldemort

is dead? The Ministry needed a hero. And whether it's right or wrong, they chose Harry. So they charmed the reports. Officially, Harry killed Voldemort and the magical backlash, in turn, killed both he and Ginny."

Bill's mind mulled that thought over and over. He was outraged that the Ministry could use Harry's name that way. However... the logical side of him understood what Kingsley was saying. The public outcry would have been huge if the truth was admitted. He looked down at the final photograph once more, swallowing the bile that rose in his throat.

"What makes the Ministry so sure that these are Harry and Ginny?" Bill asked, pointing to the two charred remains lying close together.

Kingsley set the photograph down and picked up another report. "The mangled frames to Harry's glasses were found on this body right here. It is also of similar height and build to Harry. There was ash found nearby from what we assume was a wand made from Holly. The core, a phoenix feather, actually survived the burning. Olivander has identified it as belonging to Harry's wand."

He pointed toward the second figure. "This body is definitely female, see the dark area around the head, that's what the lab experts say is the hair, although they can't tell for sure what color. Ash from her oak wand was found near the body. The core was destroyed, but several people have confirmed that Ginny had an oak wand of eight inches."

A long forgotten memory floated to the surface of his mind and Bill grabbed hold of it. "What about the ring?" Bill blurted. He lifted his head and noted the confusion in the room. "Harry had given Ginny an engagement ring, only weeks before. Did they ever find it?"

Several heads came around at this information.

"Did you say that Harry had given Ginny a *ring*?" Remus asked.

Bill nodded. "I think only a few of us knew about it. I found out by accident. She wore it on a gold chain around her neck and tucked into her shirt. There would be no mistaking it if they found it. It had a square cut diamond on it."

Remus sat down heavily in his seat and placed his head in his hands.

"Remus?"

"The ring was Lily's," he explained. "Harry found it in the Potter vault that summer. I never thought to ask where it was... after. James gave that to Lily the day they graduated Hogwarts. It was her engagement ring."

Even though he hadn't heard the words from either Harry or Ginny's mouth, Bill knew it was true.

"They were engaged?" Minerva gasped. Everyone knew she was talking about Harry and Ginny, not James and Lily.

Bill shrugged. "I'm not sure of the details because, as I said, I only saw it by accident. Maybe Ron or Hermione would know more. But I know Ginny would have been wearing it that day. She would not

have taken it off, thinking it a sort of talisman, I believe.”

Kingsley nodded thoughtfully. “It’s not here in the records.”

Bill turned back to the photographs. “The way I see it, you have very little evidence that this is Harry and Ginny. You have only things that can be removed from a body and staged on another one, and the word of someone who is highly questionable in the whole thing, and a known liar.”

“Are you saying that those... corpses...” Minerva scrunched her face in distaste, “Are someone else completely?”

Bill nodded. “It wouldn’t be too hard. Transport two individuals who are similar in build and height to Harry and Ginny into the clearing while Harry and Ginny are unconscious, transfer the items used to identify them to the bodies and then set the fire. I’ve seen Fiendfyre used, and it rarely leaves traces of anything, but it does sometimes miss metal.”

He looked up at Kingsley who had his brow furrowed in thought. “There are Muggle procedures for identifying bodies with very little to go on. Surely they could test them now.” The thought of desecrating the graves didn’t sit well with Bill, but he knew it would need to be done. “Did the Ministry test the magical signatures of the area?”

Kingsley nodded and pointed to a section of the report. “Right here it shows three high levels of concentration beginning, another joining in with strong spells later and then finally a huge power output at the end.” He shifted guiltily and pointed at something else. “There are several spikes in power throughout the battle, generally meaning Dark Magic.”

“Those are the only signatures they found?”

“There were a few very faint traces around the periphery, but the Ministry thinks that they are residual magic, from months, if not years, before.”

“Faint traces,” Bill mused, deep in thought. “Did they track Apparition and Portkeys? Wouldn’t a Portkey, made somewhere else, leave faint residue?” He turned to Minerva who nodded her head.

“That is quite right,” she said. “The power behind a Portkey comes in the making of them, not in the activating. So, yes, residual magic may exist from triggering the item.”

Bill spun on his heel and slammed his fist into the photograph, not caring if he ruined it. “I’d say you need to talk to your witness again, Kingsley. See if his story has changed at all in four years, beyond the rubbish he’s spouting to the press. And we need to look into the records and see who went missing around that time. That’s where you’ll find out who these bodies are.”

“I agree,” both Remus and Tonks said together.

“If Harry and Ginny survived the Battle, and we now know they did, then we need to know who those others are and why they were placed there. If it isn’t Malfoy to blame, then someone else was in the shadows that day. Someone staged it to look as if Harry and Ginny died. They wanted the world to believe that. Then they moved Harry and Ginny somewhere else, and definitely modified their memories.”

“Why go to all the trouble though?” Kingsley interrupted. “If it was malicious, why not just kill Harry and Ginny outright? Why hide them at all?”

Bill shrugged. “Motive isn’t what I’m good at,” he admitted. “But I know that Malfoy lied about one thing for sure. Ginny was not killed with Avada Kedavra. Harry would have thrown himself in front of that in an instant, the same as he did the Cruciatus. Also, as we now know... she’s alive.”

“I’ll set up a meeting with Malfoy this week,” Kingsley promised. “I can tell him that the paperwork was damaged and we need to go over his statement again.”

“That will make him happy,” Remus growled.

“Actually, he’ll be rather pleased with it, I’d say,” Arthur spoke up finally. “He’s always strutting around the Ministry these days, trying to look more important than he is. This will give him an excuse to wear his father’s old cloaks and use Lucius’ old cane again. Maybe Percy can help with that, Kingsley.” The Auror nodded thoughtfully.

“What are we going to do about Harry and Ginny?” Bill asked, looking between Remus and his father. The desire to track them down tonight and whisk them away to the Burrow where they would be safe and with family was overwhelming. But Bill knew better than to suggest such a thing.

“My best suggestion is for one of us to make contact. I think we need to know what we’re dealing with. Do they remember and are simply staying out of the Wizarding world by choice? Have they lost all memories completely? Can they even still do magic? Despite the gaping holes in that report,” Remus pointed to the paperwork Kingsley held, “the Ministry was right about a few things. I was there in the clearing that day. The devastation... it was completely indescribable. You could feel the magic in the air and it quite literally hurt to breathe in. I’ve been back there since and nothing grows on that spot, the animals of the forest avoid it like the plague. Something horrific happened in that clearing and we don’t know how it affected them.”

“It won’t matter to us,” Bill stated, plainly, believing every word he was saying. “It doesn’t matter if they are Squibs or Muggles, or whatever you want to call them.”

“I know, Bill,” Remus nodded. “To me either, but it may matter to them. We have to be aware of that when we approach them.”

* * *

Ron glared at the wall in his office, darkly thinking of the scene he had just witnessed.

“Everyone around here is barmy,” he mumbled to the air.

Twice in the past three days he’d interrupted a conversation between Bill and his father, hushed, hurried words flying between them. Remus had come to the Burrow once and taken Arthur out into the shed to talk to him. Ron’s mother hadn’t been happy about that and he’d joined her, scowling out the window. When she’d leaned toward him and asked if he had any Extendable Ears, Ron had snorted out a laugh. Charlie, upon seeing the two of them in such moods, had wisely reminded them of the date. Arthur and Molly’s Anniversary was only a few days away.

But Ron didn't think it was an Anniversary surprise that his father was planning. There was too much other suspicious activity going on to believe that excuse.

Kingsley's office, just down the hall from Ron's new one, now that he was a full Auror, had been a hotbed of activity, although he was trying to keep it quiet. Even Percy seemed to be involved, which shocked Ron completely; ducking in and out of Kingsley's office several times.

There was a steady stream of parchment airplanes flying in and out of the Head Auror's door—all the bright blue color signaling classified information.

Tonks was in and out of the Ministry all day now. And Orion spent much of her time shuffled between the Burrow and Tonks' parent's home.

Something was brewing—and Ron was determined to figure it out.

So, he'd waited until Tonks hurried by a stack of files in her arms, and had followed her. That's when he'd come upon her and his own father, discussing something in the hallway outside Arthur's office. Ron's ears buzzed and he rolled his eyes, recognizing the Muffliato curse.

He should really be working on his own cases, he knew. The small stack of files on his own messy desk just couldn't hold his attention, however. The mystery of what was going on with the Order members crowded everything else out of his mind.

Frustrated, Ron stood and decided to get himself another cup of coffee. Maybe he could stumble upon another conversation that would make no sense, or that he'd be blocked from hearing, he thought wryly.

The outside office was rather quiet and Ron realized that his brooding had occupied him long enough that he had now missed a good portion of his lunch.

"Great," he grumbled, rubbing his stomach as it growled.

There were a few stale, left-over pasties from the morning on the table with the overheated coffee, so Ron snatched them up and began to eat as he walked back to his office.

Just as he was about to go back inside, resigned to opening his own files, Tonks hurried by, a huge parchment rolled like a map under her arm.

Ron glared at her, making an instant decision. Risking life and limb, he reached out and grabbed her arm, tugging her into his office and shutting the door before he slumped to the ground.

When he came to, his vision spun. Tonks, or several of her, was standing above him, her arms crossed and her wand tapping on her shoulder.

"Bugger and blast! Ron, that was a stupid thing to do."

Ron groaned, holding his head as he sat up. "I wouldn't have to do things like that if you'd keep your promise." He glared at her, catching the surprise and guilt on her face before it disappeared behind her mask of efficiency.

“Ron—”

“Tonks, don’t patronize me,” he snapped. He rolled his eyes when she smirked at him. “Yes, I know what it means,” he rolled his eyes. “Listen, I know something’s going on. Kingsley’s office may as well not have a door; it’s been opened so many times. And you’re back at the Ministry full-time, my Dad is here all the time... even Percy knows what’s going on.”

Tonks sighed and hopped up onto the edge of Ron’s desk. “Ron... you need to go and talk to Kingsley.”

“I don’t want to talk to Kingsley,” he pouted, feeling incredibly immature, but not really caring. “You promised to keep me in the loop. If it’s something with Malfoy—”

“Ron,” she snapped. He stopped his rant, startled by the unusually harsh tone of her voice. “You need to talk to Kingsley,” she repeated as she slid off of the desk, gathered up her parchments and made her way to the door.

“And if you ever attack me like that again, you’ll get a lot worse than a stunner.”

Ron stared after her, his mind trying to add one more piece to the puzzle. Tonks hadn’t denied that there was something going on. In fact, her refusal to say anything was perhaps as much confirmation as he could get out of her.

Determination flooded him as he left his office and stalked the short distance to Kingsley’s. He hesitated just a moment before rapping his knuckles on the wood.

“Come,” Kingsley called out, muffled through the door.

Ron took a deep breath and opened it, sticking his head inside.

“Do you have a minute?” he asked, feeling a bit sheepish now that he saw the mass of work that Kingsley seemed to be in the middle of. His desk was stacked with piles of files, parchment sticking out of them haphazardly, and at least three blue paper airplanes hovered near the ceiling.

Kingsley sighed and indicated a chair in front of his desk. “Sit down, Ron. I’ve been meaning to talk to you.”

Irritation filled Ron as he sank into the chair. It was an easy thing to say that Kingsley had been *meaning* to talk to him. But whether it was true or not...

“Something’s going on,” Ron blurted.

Kingsley nodded after a thoughtful look. “At first I wasn’t sure we were going to include you,” he admitted and then held up his hand as Ron started to protest. “And I’m not going to assign you to the case... but, I do believe you have a right to know what’s happening.”

Ron grumbled to himself. He knew it was a bit unreasonable to expect that he’d be assigned to whatever the case was, since he was a junior Auror. And that wasn’t what was bothering him. It was the fact that he was a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and the stir seemed to be among the

Order members, yet he hadn't been told anything.

"Ron," Kingsley said, standing from his chair and leaning onto the desk. Ron gulped at the impressive figure that the man cut. "Harry and Ginny are alive."

Chapter 9

October 2002 through November 2002

“Ron.”

“Ron.”

He started, jerking his head up to blink at the man with his large hand on Ron’s shoulder.

“Are you alright?”

Confusion filled him as he scowled, trying to remember what he was doing. He reviewed the last few minutes in his mind and almost fell out of his chair. Kingsley’s words echoed in his head.

Harry’s alive. Ginny’s alive.

“Oh,” he said lamely, his mind still struggling to connect the words the right way in his mind. “I mean...”

“It’s alright,” Kingsley smiled sadly at him. “I know it’s a shock. I should have been more tactful about it than that.”

“No,” Ron shook his head slowly and then reached up to press his fingers into his eyes, wincing as white dots swam in his vision. “Are you... I mean...” He huffed mightily. “I don’t even know what to ask.”

Kingsley nodded and nudged aside a stack of files on his desk, leaning his large frame up against the wood. “Why don’t you let me talk for a minute while you take it all in.” He waited and Ron, realizing he was waiting for an answer, nodded.

It couldn’t be, his mind raced. They couldn’t be alive. Discreetly, he slid his hand to the soft flesh of his underarm and pinched the skin there, wincing when it hurt. Nope, not dreaming.

“Several days ago, Remus encountered a man who he thought might be Harry.” Ron felt a bit dizzy; his mind screaming at him that it was not possible. Kingsley continued. “He originally told several of us in the Order. Tonks went back in disguise and confirmed that we believe it is Harry. And not only that, Ginny is alive as well.” He took a deep breath, and Ron looked up, his eyes pleading for more. “They’re married and expecting a baby soon.”

It was all too much, Ron’s brain pounded as he struggled. Standing, he reached up and gripped his hair painfully in both hands. “No, No... I would have known. They can’t be...”

“We’re making plans to contact them within the week,” Kingsley said softly.

The thought ricocheted around his head for a minute before fierce determination took over.

Harry’s alive. Ginny’s alive.

"I want to be there." Ron watched as Kingsley's face tightened and his eyes narrowed.

"Ron, I know you want—"

"No! I want to be there. I deserve to be there. He's... he's my best mate," his voice broke and he swallowed thickly. "My sister. You don't understand." He sank into the chair again, his chest tightening until he thought he wouldn't be able to breathe. "I should have been there. It should have been me. I promised him... I would be there to watch his back."

Kingsley's big hand came down on his shoulder, squeezing tightly and causing a few tears to drip out and disappear into the royal blue carpeting.

"Ron, you can't blame yourself," the rich bass voice said softly. "Harry and Ginny both made their choices. But we're being given a second chance here."

Ron sniffled, wiping his eyes and nose quickly with the back of his hand. "I *need* to be there, you have to understand that."

Kingsley took a deep breath. "I do," he nodded. "But you need to understand that I can't allow that to happen, Ron."

Red flashed in his eyes and he tried to stand, but Kingsley's hand on his shoulder held him firmly in place. "You kept this from me... my own family knows, and—"

"Ron!"

Shaken by the snapping command of the Head Auror, Ron shut his mouth. "Right now, we've been able to keep this information from the Ministry." He raised his eyebrows and Ron furrowed his eyebrows. "Tonks is working on recruiting new Aurors for the Academy. Percy is coordinating a records Audit for the Minister's office. Even your father is consulting on a rash of Muggle baiting that has cropped up recently."

"What does that have to do with—Oh." Ron's eyebrows rose as he finally understood what Kingsley was conveying.

"If I were to pull you—Harry's best mate—from your cases, and assign you to surveillance, or evidence, or any other thing that has the name 'Potter' or 'Weasley' stamped all over it, the Minister would know about it in a heartbeat. And once he did, we would lose the ability to handle the situation. It's already going to be a nightmare, without adding the press coverage and the Minister's own agenda."

Ron scowled, hating that Kingsley was right. He still felt as if he had every right to be the first to talk to Harry.

"Can I take a leave of absence?" he asked as the idea popped into his mind.

"That wouldn't be wise," Kingsley shook his head. "It would draw the wrong kind of attention."

Ron growled in frustration and stood, pacing the floor.

“What’s the first thing you would do, Ron, if I told you where Harry is?”

Harry’s alive. Ginny’s alive.

The answer was out of his mouth before he even completed the thought. “I’d go get him.”

Kingsley sighed and nodded. “I know. And I understand, believe me, I do. But we can’t do that until we know what we’re dealing with.”

“What do you mean?” Ron glared. “Are you saying... what are you saying?”

“We think we’re dealing with complete memory loss,” Kingsley explained. “But until we are able to talk to them both, perhaps even have a Healer examine them...”

Emotional exhaustion settled on Ron as he stood in the middle of the office, his hands hanging limply at his side.

“Ron,” Kingsley stood and approached, “I promise you that I will do my best to keep you informed. You do have every right to know what’s going on. And it was wrong not to come to you first, but we wanted to make sure. We had to know.”

Ron let the words wash over him, nodding, but not fully listening anymore. The realization was too much to deal with. For four years, when he opened his eyes in the morning, before he did anything else, Ron repeated the truth over and over in his mind. *iHarry’s gone. Ginny’s gone./i* It was a harsh way to wake up, but with it done, he could get out of bed and move on with determination.

And now his reality, the one he’d forced himself to accept and move on from, was being shaken. He was afraid to step outside Kingsley’s office. What if he did and found that he wasn’t an Auror, but was... something else. What if he went home to find that he wasn’t married to Hermione, and that they didn’t have Ginny Rose in their lives?

It was too much to handle and Ron began to shake.

“Ron, you need to go home.” His head snapped up at Kingsley’s soft, but commanding, tone. “Do you want me to send a Healer over?”

He shook his head. “It would upset Hermione.”

Hermione! His eyes grew wide as he remembered his wife. “I have to tell her!”

Kingsley sighed. “Ron—”

“She has just as much right as I do!” Ron defended, drawing energy from the anger bubbling low in his stomach. “I can’t lie to her...”

“I understand,” Kingsley said with a sigh. “It would be best if you could wait a few days. Let us make contact and know what we’re dealing with—”

“She’ll know something is wrong,” Ron shook his head. And she would. Ron could never lie to her.

Kingsley nodded. "I said it would be best, but I understand, Ron. When you do tell her, please try and convince her that we're working on a plan."

"She's going to want to help," Ron shook his head.

"I know that," Kingsley sighed. "But we need to keep this from Scrimgeour for as long as possible."

"She'll understand that," Ron nodded.

"And I do want her help," Kingsley said firmly. "It's going to take everyone's help to get this mess all straightened out. I'll involve you as much as I can, Ron, but you have to understand it might be limited." Ron looked at him and noticed, for the first time, the creases and wrinkles starting to show in the Auror's face.

"Go home, Ron. Talk to your wife. I'll contact you in a few days when we have a plan."

Ron nodded woodenly, feeling his stomach bubble. Maybe he would go home and go straight to bed. He had a lot to figure out, not the least of which was trying to tell his wife what he'd learned today.

* * *

Remus scowled slightly as he pulled his coat tighter to him and shuffled his way along the icy sidewalk. It had been six days since the meeting with the select members of the Order and Remus was still unsure why he'd been the one selected to make contact with Harry and Ginny. He'd tried to explain to them his affected behavior of their first encounter and how it might hinder the meeting. They, in turn, had pointed out that it in fact might help things along as Harry had seemed sympathetic to Remus.

So, here he was, standing in front of the bookstore again, wondering what on earth he was going to say to Harry to convince him of who he was. Chances were the young man would either laugh at him or call the authorities to have Remus carted away.

"Good Afternoon, sir, welcome to Harper's Discount Books." The woman who greeted him had an overly cheerful face and Remus smiled at her, knowing that under her breath she was probably chanting how much she was getting paid for this job. He'd noticed that many Muggle stores employed door greeters during the busier holiday seasons and thought maybe it was a good idea that he'd have to mention to Fred and George.

"Thank you," he mumbled as he allowed his eyes to adjust to the lower light inside the building. His feet seemed to know where they were going, although he had to admit he was incredibly nervous. This initial contact would set the pace with which they could all be reunited with family and he was unsure how it would go.

His favorite salesperson, Rain, was idling behind the counter as Remus entered the Children's section. Her hair was tipped a vibrant color of yellow today and she looked as if she'd had a few more piercings since his last visit—or maybe it was that she'd just changed the jewelry in those piercings.

Remus browsed the floor for almost twenty minutes, ignoring all Rain's scowling, before catching a glimpse of Harry-er, Jack.

"You can take your break now, Rain." Remus looked up to see Jack join his young employee behind the counter.

"I like the yellow today." Remus had to grin at Jack's flat words. "Maybe you could try red and green for the holidays." Rain didn't reply with more than a two finger salute which made Jack chuckle. "Play nice, Rain."

The girl left and Remus took a deep breath, moving to approach the area where Jack was gathering books that had been left on the low multi-colored tables.

"Excuse me."

"Yes, sir, what can I help you with today?" Jack stopped short as he recognized the older man.

"Ah, I see you remember me."

Jack nodded and lifted a slightly concerned eyebrow at him. "Yes, sir. Was there a problem with the books you purchased, or can I help you with something else?"

"No," Remus shook his head and tried to smile reassuringly. "The books were perfect. I'm sure the children will love them. Actually, I wanted to apologize for my behavior the other day and ask if you had a moment that we could speak privately."

Jack narrowed his eyes appraisingly, but nodded his understanding. "What is this about?"

"Well," Remus began, "I'm sure you noticed how... distracted I was the other day. It's just that you look remarkably like someone I thought to be, well... dead. I'd like to talk to you a bit about that..."

"You think I'm this other person?" Jack asked skeptically.

"It's possible, you look almost identical," Remus nodded.

Jack considered for a minute before answering. "I have lunch break in an hour. There's a little café around the corner where I sometimes eat lunch. I'll give you a few minutes."

Remus smiled gratefully. "I appreciate it, Mr. Ingalls. I promise not to take up too much of your time. My name is Remus Lupin, by the way."

Jack nodded and started to gather the books again. Remus took that as a dismissal and slowly left the area, watching Jack closely.

Remus had just sat down at a small round table in the overly warm café when Jack walked in the door. He nodded toward the older man and un-wrapped the scarf from his neck as he walked toward the table.

"What can I get for you?" The waitress appeared as soon as Jack was seated.

“A bowl of the soup and half a ham sandwich,” Remus said, browsing the menu.

“Nothing for me, thanks,” Jack mumbled and Remus looked up at him. The young man’s face was slightly red and he didn’t meet either the waitress’s or Remus’ eyes. Remus had thought Jack looked a bit on the thin side when he’d first seen him and now the comment that Tonks had made about him working two jobs and still wearing second hand clothing made more sense to Remus.

“Have something,” he motioned to the menu which sat in front of Jack. “Come on, I’m buying.”

“No thanks, really—” Jack protested.

“Look, I’m taking up your lunch hour,” Remus said. “I’m more than happy to buy you lunch.”

Jack looked about to protest again, but instead glanced at the menu. “Roast beef on wheat, please.”

Remus smiled and nodded to the waitress. “Make it a full and he’ll have a bowl of the soup as well.” Jack scowled and Remus just laughed.

“So, what makes you think I’m the person you’re looking for, Mr. Lupin?” Jack asked. “You said he was dead, right?”

Remus nodded. “Up until recently we had thought he had died. Now evidence has come out that makes us think we were mistaken.”

“What does this have to do with me?” Jack asked.

“I think you are him.”

Surprisingly, Jack laughed. “And I should just take your word on that?”

“No,” Remus smiled. “I would be disappointed if you did.”

“So, what can you tell me to prove it?” Jack asked, absently rubbing his right hand where the faint scar-words were etched.

Remus smiled. “I can tell you where you got that scar, for one.”

Jack looked down at his hand and scowled. Remus continued. “It was when you were fifteen. You had a particularly malicious professor at school and she thought that was an apt punishment for detention.”

“Doesn’t really matter,” mumbled Jack as he pulled his hand off of the table, “I don’t remember my school years.”

Remus nodded, knowing that would probably be the answer. “Another thing is that you look almost exactly like Harry,” Remus said.

Jack shrugged. “One person can look like another without it meaning much.”

"I agree," Remus said, "although sometimes it means everything. You see, I knew your parents, Harry, and you look strikingly like your father, although you have your mother's eyes."

Jack's scowl darkened and he looked out the window quickly. "My name is Jack," he stated firmly. "Is that what this whole thing is about, my parents? Did they owe you money or something?" Jack kept on even as Remus stared at him in confusion. "Because you should know I don't even know who they were. So, you can forget trying to get anything from me."

"Har-Jack," Remus shook his head. "This isn't about your parents." He stopped, considering the right way to say what he needed to. Deciding to take the direct approach, because Harry usually wanted that, he spoke. "Your parents died when you were a year old."

Jack shook his head. "I don't remember anything." He made to stand and Remus held out his hand.

"Please, don't go."

Sighing, Jack sank back into the chair and ruffled his hair. "I just don't think I'm this person you're looking for."

Remus shook his head, "What else do you remember?"

Jack scowled at him again. "I think that's a rather personal question, don't you?"

"I didn't mean to offend. Look, Harry-I mean Jack-I've known you since you were thirteen and I was a Professor at your school—"

"What school?" Jack asked.

Remus was quiet for a moment before deciding to go with a partial truth. "It was a private boarding school in Scotland."

"Wrong again," Jack said, shaking his head. "I never could have gone to a private school."

Remus shook his head in confusion. They'd started off on the wrong foot, just as Remus had known would happen. "Look, Jack, there's not much I can tell you to convince you. I'm positive that you are Harry." He stood and rummaged in his pocket for a moment. "I'd like to talk some more if you change your mind." He placed a small scrap of paper with a phone number on it. "Call and leave a message at this number and I'll get in touch."

Jack pushed the paper away from him and shook his head, but Remus pushed it back toward him again. "Keep it then, just for emergencies."

Jack nodded awkwardly and buried the paper in his pocket.

A last minute thought entered Remus' mind, and he opened his wallet, taking out a worn picture that had slightly torn edges and fading color. The photo was still, as it had been taken with a Muggle camera. Remus smiled at the faces he'd carried with him for years and placed it face down on the table.

"That's a picture of your parents, Harry. They were wonderful people. Please call if you change

your mind.”

With that, he left the table and handed a twenty pound note to the waitress, motioning to the table when she raised an eyebrow. She only nodded and proceeded to deliver both sandwiches and soups to the table.

Out on the sidewalk, Remus chastised himself for possibly ruining their chances with Harry. He gave one last look in the window and saw Jack lift the small photo and gape at the faces. He could only hope that Jack would be curious enough to call.

* * *

Emma turned out the light in the hallway and entered the small bedroom in the flat. Jack sat with his back toward her, staring off at one wall, wearing only his boxers; his pajama bottoms in his hand. He didn't seem to notice when she entered.

“Are you ready for bed?” She finally called to him after she put her night dress on. He hadn't even moved. She huffed at him crossed her arms. “Jack!”

He finally turned and his face flushed. “What?”

Emma sighed. “I asked you if you were going to sleep in those pajamas or just use them as hand warmers.” She laughed when he looked confusedly down to the pants in his hand and then at himself dressed in only his boxers.

“Honestly, Jack, you've been so distracted tonight. Did something happen at work?”

He shrugged and moved to put on the pants. Then he climbed into bed and held up the covers so that Emma could slide in next to him.

“I don't think I've been distracted all night. I complimented you on dinner,” he smiled at her as she clicked off the small bedside lamp.

“Ummhmm, and what did we have for dinner?”

“It was the best chicken I've ever eaten,” Jack said as Emma laid her head on his shoulder and his arm wrapped around her.

“We had ham, you prat,” Emma laughed. She poked his side and he wiggled a bit but then settled down.

“I *have* been distracted,” he admitted.

“Is something wrong, love?” Emma asked. She splayed her hand across his bare chest and he reached up and took it in his own.

“Do you remember the other night when I told you about that man who came into the bookstore, and how I was worried he'd had a fit or something?”

Emma nodded.

“Well, he came back today. He said he knew me.” The statement weighed heavy in the air and Emma finally answered.

“What did you say?”

Jack shifted a bit. “He asked me to have lunch with him and I agreed, more out of curiosity than anything. He told me that he’d known my parents, and that they’d died when I was a year old.”

Emma took a deep breath and held it waiting for him to continue. Jack rarely spoke of his past, or the memory loss, and Emma knew that it was a very painful subject for him. It was for them both, actually.

“I told him that he was wrong... about me.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said that he was sure he was right, that I was this... Harry...” Jack stopped when Emma sat up on her elbow.

Something deep inside her... clicked on hearing that name. Emma couldn’t say exactly why, but it sounded so... right. And yet, her mind was so muddled and hazy that it felt completely wrong at the same time. She reached over and switched the lamp on. Jack blinked his eyes to adjust them.

“What did he call you?”

Jack furrowed his brow. “Harry. He said my name was Harry, but I have no idea if it’s right. Does the name Harry mean something to you?”

“No...” Emma shook her head, trying to sort out her feelings about it. “Or maybe it does. There’s something about it...” She shrugged and looked at him again.

“Maybe it’s a name you’ve thought of for the baby?”

“Harry Ingalls.” Emma shrugged as she repeated it. “I like the other names we’ve talked about better.”

“I agree,” Jack said. He shifted when Emma lay back down and turned the lamp off. They lay in silence for a few minutes.

“Do you think he’s lying?” Emma asked softly.

“No,” Jack answered slowly. “I’m not sure what I think. But I know *ihe/i* believes it.”

“And you don’t?”

Jack shrugged and Emma could tell he was having trouble with this. She reached over and tugged at him until he rested his head on her breast and his arms went around her.

“I’m not sure what I believe anymore. Nothing he said stirred anything in me, yet...” he sighed and Emma began to run her fingers through his hair gently. “My memories... they’re all messed up, you

know. I tried to think back as far as I could today and that just made me even more confused.”

“How so, love?” Emma whispered.

“The memories... they’re different. It’s hard to explain, but it’s like I’m watching a show on the telly or something. It’s disjointed and they hold no emotion for me as themselves.” He growled and hugged her tighter. “This isn’t making sense. I can’t really explain it.”

“I think I understand,” Emma said after thinking about it for a minute. “Even though I don’t have any real memories past four years ago, I can relate a bit. It’s not the memories that evoke the feelings, it’s the fact that they *should*, but they don’t.” Jack nodded against her and she thought she felt wetness under his face on her thin nightdress. “Oh, love, I know how tender these things make *my* heart. You’re always so strong.”

“No, I’m not,” Jack protested with a laugh through his tears.

“You are very strong, Jack, even if you don’t believe it. A weaker man would have never survived the things you’ve gone through.” Emma gave his head a kiss and continued stroking his hair. “So, what are you going to do about this man?”

Jack sniffed and then sighed. “I told him he was mistaken and he got up to leave. He gave me a phone number to call in case I changed my mind.”

Emma waited for him to continue, but pressed on when he didn’t say anything more. “Are you going to call him?”

“What would I say?” His voice was muffled into her chest and she lightly scratched his head.

“I don’t know, Jack,” Emma said softly, “but I think you have some time to decide how you feel. Think about it and then make the best decision for yourself.”

Jack snorted out a laugh. “The only good decision I’ve made in my life is you.”

Emma grinned into the dark. “Well that is true; and see how well that turned out.”

Jack lifted his head and growled as he kissed her.

* * *

Emma looked out the window at the new sheet of white snow and smiled. She wanted nothing more than to be out there in the clean whiteness, laughing and playing.

“Next year,” she mused as she rubbed her belly. Visions of taking walks as a family with the baby all bundled up against the cold came to her mind.

She spent the next hour sitting on the sofa, folding laundry and watching a very dry program on the telly. Once she had finished folding and putting away the clothing she moved to the window again. The sun had come out behind the clouds and begun to melt the morning snow; the roads were black, the sidewalks clear and the snow dripped off of the tree branches.

Feeling a bit rebellious, Emma gathered her coat, hat and mittens. She slipped on her extremely sensible boots and locked the door behind her. These afternoon walks of hers were supposedly off limits, but Emma always felt a bit better about life after a bit of exercise and fresh air. This was one of the only guilty pleasures that she allowed herself, and it was enough to make her happy.

The crisp air did much to wipe away the bit of depression that had set in today and Emma smiled as she passed her neighbors at an extremely slow pace. Only eight more weeks to go, she thought wistfully. She would miss being pregnant. It was nothing short of a miracle to her each time that the baby—and she just *iknew/i* it was a boy—rolled over or kicked. Now that Jack could feel him too they spent hours laying quietly together while their son made her stomach jump and vibrate. Jack talked to him about the things they would do together and all the wonderful things he would see in the world.

Emma's favorite destination on her afternoon walks was the play park at the end of the block. She loved to watch the small children crawl all over the toys and the mothers chat with each other. This spring she would be able to put the baby in a pram and bring him for walks there too.

Her favorite bench was draped in sunlight today and Emma almost giggled with excitement. She supposed all the time being cooped up was making her a little mental. And Jack's melancholy mood lately hadn't helped. The iron of the bench was warm as she sat and turned to watch a mother of two young boys struggle to keep them in their mittens and hats.

"It turned out to be a wonderful day, didn't it?"

Emma turned to see an older gentleman wrapped in a thick wool coat and wearing a hat perch himself on the other end of her bench. He seemed familiar, but she couldn't place him. Perhaps she'd seen him around the neighborhood before.

"It did," she agreed with a smile. "I always think that this is my favorite time of year, waking up to a crisp and perfect white blanket covering everything." She laughed a bit. "And then the spring comes and I get all excited again."

The older man smiled gently and seemed to study her behind his thin glasses, his kindly eyes making her feel warm inside. "I agree, I can't ever say that I have a favorite season, because the next one comes and I change my mind."

Emma laughed and turned to fully face him. There was something extremely familiar and comforting about his presence, and Emma relaxed a bit.

"You're not from around here," she stated. "I can tell because of the accent."

The man smiled. "No, my wife and I live in Devon. I'm just here for... erm, business." His statement seemed to be a bit of a question, but Emma ignored it, choosing instead to follow the laughter from across the park.

"You have family around here?"

"No," the man denied, somewhat sadly Emma thought. "Much of my family is in London or thereabouts. Two of my sons have settled in Devon with their families though."

Emma smiled at him. "I'll bet it's wonderful to have family so close."

The man nodded. "You don't live close to family?"

"It's only my husband and myself, actually," Emma flushed slightly and looked away, feeling a wave of jealousy sweep through her. Her hand strayed to her belly though, feeling the baby stir within her.

"I see," the man said softly. "But it looks like you'll soon be three." He gestured to her swollen middle and Emma smiled.

"Yes, that's true. And everyone tells me to enjoy the quiet now because I'll never have it again," she chuckled.

"Yes, children are a handful," he acknowledged. "My wife and I raised seven ourselves."

"Seven?" Emma gasped. She couldn't even comprehend that many children. She immediately pictured herself surrounded by so many little ones and shook her head, knowing that she couldn't handle that. "Bless your wife then, sir!"

The man laughed. "Yes, I'm sure she would be thankful for it. They were wonderful years though; lots of chaos and noise, but so much love..."

Emma studied the man closer and noticed the heaviness in his eyes, as well as the wrinkles in the pale skin. His hat hid what looked like a few wisps of grey hair.

"I know I can't handle seven," Emma said, rubbing her stomach again. "I'm trying to imagine how I'll manage with the one."

"The baby's healthy then?"

"Oh, yes," Emma nodded. "It's been a rough pregnancy though." She wasn't quite sure why she was telling a complete stranger so much about her life, but something about the man brought a father or grandfather figure to her mind. "We almost lost him a few times and I'm supposed to be on bed rest, but the walls of a small flat close in on you after awhile."

The man chuckled and his eyes sparkled at her. "I'm sorry to stare," the man said when she looked away and blushed. "It's just that you remind me so much of my daughter and I was just wondering what it would have been like to see her excitement about being a mother." The man turned away.

"Your daughter, she—"

"She died," he confirmed. "She and her boyfriend were murdered several years ago."

Emma gasped. "I'm so sorry."

The man nodded, looking out into the snow covered park. "I like to think she'd be just like you, excited at the prospect of a new life, but frustrated at being held down." Emma nodded and wasn't sure what to say next. "I'm sure your family would be proud of you," he said with a smile.

Emma shrugged and looked down at her feet. "Thank you," she said softly. "I would hope so."

They sat in silence for a few minutes before the man spoke again.

"Your husband, what does he do?"

Emma smiled. "Jack works two jobs right now, just for a bit. We're saving money so that he can finish University."

"He takes good care of you?"

"We take good care of each other," Emma said with passion.

The man swallowed hard and nodded. "That's all anyone can hope for really."

Emma stood and stretched her back out. "It was nice to chat with you, but I'd better get back. Jack will have my head if he catches me out again."

The man stood and held out his hand for her to shake. "It was wonderful talking with you as well. You take care of yourself and that baby—and Jack too," he added with a wink.

"I will," Emma assured him and turned to go. She made it only a few steps before she heard his whispered 'goodbye, Ginny'. When she turned to ask him what he meant, he was gone.

* * *

Draco Malfoy strode purposefully through the hallways in the Ministry of Magic, his finely woven cape billowing out behind him and the sharp click of the walking cane he carried punctuating each step. He had worn it today specifically to draw attention to himself.

It really was a bother coming all the way down here to review such useless information, but, above all, appearances had to be maintained. Minister Scrimgeour himself had been the one to send the summons after all; well at least it came from his office, from that useless Weasel that followed the Minister around day and night.

He thought back to the official letterhead that had shown up delivered by a regal looking owl and remembered that it had indicated the meeting would take place in a seldom used office on the floor below the Minister's offices.

As he walked along the hallways, he thought back to his recent week in Paris. Genevieve had been more than a little annoyed at his appearance until he reminded her that he paid the rent on her flat. Then she had welcomed him inside warmly. But seven days was all he could be with her before she got tired of him and started hinting that she had other things to do.

Since returning to England, he hadn't seen anyone from the Ministry ducking behind bushes or shadows around the Manor. He suspected that the Aurors used him for training their newest members, as the faces he was starting to be able to pick out of a crowd seemed to be getting younger and younger.

As annoying as the thought was, it really didn't anger him as he knew it probably should. A quick

note to Blaise had confirmed that it was rather a joke around the Academy that the recruits be put on 'Malfoy Duty'. Disgusted with the idea, Draco had made it his mission to put the Aurors through their paces, erratically popping in and out of places, using the Invisibility Cloak when he could, and generally making a nuisance of himself. At least it amused him.

The Weasel was waiting in the drab office, along with another swotty looking woman when Draco entered.

"Thank you so much for coming, Mr. Malfoy," Percy's clipped tones focused Draco's attention. "The Ministry appreciates your efforts in helping us to reconstruct these files."

"I am a humble servant for the Ministry," Draco bowed formally to the redhead who straightened his glasses and then set about to shuffle paperwork from the long table at which the woman was seated. Draco bit back a sneer and chose a seat as far from Weasley as he could.

"This is Ms. Jacobs from the records department," Percy introduced the woman and Draco took a moment to study her. He'd never seen her before, but then again, she wasn't the type that he'd notice. Ravenclaw definitely, Draco thought with a raised eyebrow. Her face was wholly unremarkable save for the square glasses perched on her prim nose. Her robes looked to be of sturdy material that had certainly seen better days, but was at least clean.

"Shall we get on with it then?" Draco asked.

Percy cleared his throat and lifted his head from the parchments he was perusing. "We're just waiting for one other person, Mr. Malfoy. Auror Shacklebolt's information needs to be gathered again as well, and we feel that, as he was the original Auror interviewing you, the two of you combined will perhaps recall more information."

Draco narrowed his eyes in annoyance. He hated Aurors; always poking their noses where they shouldn't go, always searching for things that weren't there. Not that Draco had anything to hide these days—at least not that anyone could prove. He was much smarter than his parents had been; keeping his business dealings just inside the law. No one knew, for example, about the crate of questionable objects sitting in the basement of Malfoy Manor. He smiled smugly, thinking that no one would ever connect any of it to him.

"What happened to the original file, if you don't mind me asking?"

It was the woman who answered—Ms. Jenkins... or something.

"Our offices are located directly below the offices of the Experimental Charms division," she explained in a very dull voice. "There was a horrible accident and one whole section of filing was ruined. We've had to reconstruct years of work so far."

Draco rolled his eyes at the inconvenience, but said nothing.

"Sorry I'm late." The tall black man whom Draco had spent several hours with years ago entered the room. "Right pain in the arse this is, Weatherby," he growled and Percy puffed his chest indignantly. Draco smirked to himself and sat up straighter in the uncomfortable chair. Perhaps this wouldn't be a complete waste of his time after all. At the very least Shacklebolt might prove

entertaining.

“Be that as it may, Auror Shacklebolt,” Percy sternly lectured, “the proper care of records is vital to the running of the Ministry.”

“Don’t get your knickers in a twist, Percival,” Kingsley drawled and rolled his eyes at Draco. “Now, Mr. Malfoy, let’s get this over with for both of our sakes.”

Draco sat up promptly, suddenly liking the idea of an interview.

“Ms. Jacobs, are you ready?” Percy asked.

“I am.” The witch tapped the plain black quill and it stood at attention on the thick pad of parchment.

“Very well,” Kingsley said. “Now, Mr. Malfoy, if you could relate to us the circumstances that found you at the Final Battle, please?”

Draco sighed, acting completely bored, but heartened by the look of discomfort on the Weasel’s face. It would be interesting to see his reaction when Draco revealed just how dark their beloved hero, Harry Potter, was.

“I served as a spy for the Ministry during the Dark Lord’s last year,” he explained. “I reported information about his movements and what plans I could to the proper authorities...”

* * *

Percy removed his glasses a few minutes after Draco Malfoy had exited the room. He sighed heavily and slouched in the firm chair he’d perched himself in for the last several hours.

“He’s lying,” Ms. Jacobs said, her prim and proper façade slipping as she quickly unbuttoned the wool robes she wore and stretched her feet, now clad in combat boots, up to rest on the table.

“Through his teeth,” Kingsley sighed as he reached across to pull the ink covered parchments toward himself.

“I just don’t understand his motivation,” Percy said quietly. “What could he possibly have to gain from lying about this?”

Ms. Jacobs snorted and tossed the square glasses onto the table. “He’s a snake; they don’t need motivation to lie.” She scrunched up her nose tightly and soon relaxed as bright spikes of pink hair materialized where the mousy brown hair had been a moment before. “It’s inbred, I think.”

“You would know,” Kingsley chuckled.

Tonks bristled a bit. “Don’t look at me, I was in Hufflepuff.”

Kingsley turned to Percy and raised an eyebrow. “Most violent ‘Puff I’ve ever met.”

Percy shook his head again and glanced over the notes he’d made. “Some of the things he stated

today completely contradict what he said in the first interviews.”

“That’s nothing,” Tonks drawled. She shoved a stack of yellowing parchment his way and Percy found himself staring at a black and white photograph of a younger Draco Malfoy, still sporting cuts and bandages days after the Final Battle. “Read this one. He told Rita Skeeter that he suspected Harry used the Dark Arts, although he said he couldn’t prove it.”

“I read it back then,” Percy frowned in disgust as he pushed it away.

“But then today, he admits that he saw Harry cast Sectumsempra, and alluded to the fact that he used the Unforgivables.”

Percy stared at Tonks, the implications of the statement rattling through his mind. It wasn’t something he wanted to deal with, even if he didn’t believe the slimy ferret.

“Minerva has been researching missing persons during the Battle, and up to a month before it. She sent over the list of students killed and missing during the Final Battle, as well as the two weeks prior. All students were accounted for. Then she made a separate list for other disappearances that we know of.” Kingsley laid a copy of the report before Percy and his eyes swam and the list of names. There were so many. *Too many.*

“Anything?” Tonks asked after a minute or two.

“Maybe...” Percy said as his eye caught two names further down the second list. They were under a banner written in the Headmistress’s precise writing. “These two here. Pansy Parkinson and Theodore Nott. I remember the names, but I can’t picture the faces.” Percy vaguely remembered the names as belonging in Slytherin, but couldn’t recall more than that.

“Says here they disappeared a week before the battle,” Tonks pondered out loud. “Parkinson was supposed to join her mother in Paris.”

Kingsley nodded. “I remember that. Priscilla Parkinson made a formal complaint. She insisted that her daughter was the victim of foul play.”

“Whatever happened?” Percy raised his head to look at the Auror.

Kingsley shrugged. “We sent someone out to investigate, but we were rather short handed at the time.” He shook his head. “We checked Parkinson’s Manor but didn’t find anything out of the ordinary. Some of the students in their year at Hogwarts said they’d run off to get married. Apparently, Parkinson was betrothed to Malfoy, but she was seeing Nott behind his back during their seventh year.”

“And what did Mrs. Parkinson say?”

“She was hysterical,” Kingsley frowned. “She came storming in here to my office demanding we send the Aurors out to find her daughter. That she’d never elope with Nott because he didn’t have the proper breeding. That rather sealed it for us,” he said with a shrug. “Maybe she did run off with him. The case wasn’t given much thought because the Final Battle took place so soon after it.”

"What ever happened?" Percy asked. His quill scribbled along the surface of the parchment, making notes for him to check the records.

"Never heard anything more about it," Kingsley shrugged. "Priscilla Parkinson was found dead in her home a few days after the Battle. Her husband had been killed on Hogwarts grounds; black mark burned into his arm." He shook his head. "Nothing seemed out of place so we turned the case over the Magical Law Enforcement. Their report says that they found no evidence of foul play. Mrs. Parkinson seemed to have died of a heart attack. St. Mungo's confirmed it."

"Could a heart attack be induced?" Percy asked, this time looking between the two Aurors.

"Maybe," Tonks shrugged. "There are potions that can speed up a person's heart rate. One good scare after that might do it."

"That or the stress of being discovered as supporting Death Eaters might have been too much for her."

"And what of the Nott family?" Percy asked after scribbling a note to check with a Healer about traces of potions remaining in deceased victims.

"Haven't heard a thing," Kingsley said. "Although Nott was raised by his widower father who was killed at the Final Battle."

"On our side?"

Kingsley smirked. "Theirs."

"Hmm."

"They might be a fit," Tonks said thoughtfully as she glanced at the paperwork. "Parkinson was roughly the same size as Ginny. A few charms..."

Percy's quill shook in his hand. "Are you suggesting that... someone *imurdered*/i Miss Parkinson and Mr. Nott, and exchanged their bodies for Harry and Ginny?" The concept, although Percy had to admit fit most of the pieces, was so distasteful that it was almost unthinkable.

"A theory," Kingsley nodded. "We know that there were two bodies in that clearing. What we don't know is if they were dead when they arrived or whether the deed was done right there."

"It might fit," Tonks mused as she pulled the interview with Malfoy toward her. "Malfoy said he was knocked out right before the climax of the Battle. When he woke up, the clearing was already on fire and the bodies already being consumed by it." She looked up at Kingsley. "Would he have had enough time to replace Harry and Ginny with Parkinson and Nott?"

Kingsley pondered for a minute, rubbing his chin. "He may have. That theory works if he was the one who started the fire afterwards. But he'd have to have the bodies available. There wouldn't have been enough time to murder Nott and Parkinson and then switch the bodies."

"You think he killed them and then kept them somewhere, hidden?" Tonks asked.

“It’s a possibility,” Kingsley shrugged. “Especially if you take into account the rumors that Parkinson was running around with Nott behind Draco’s back. If that was true, Malfoy could have been desperate enough to do something.”

Tonks scrunched up her face. “I don’t see him as a killer. I don’t think he has the stones.” Percy was inclined to agree, although he wasn’t sure what Malfoy would do when backed into a corner.

Kingsley sighed and rubbed his face. “Whether he killed them, or not, he still would have needed to get the bodies to the scene.”

“Portkey,” Percy suggested, seeing it as the most logical choice. “A remote triggered Portkey and he could bring anything he wanted with him.”

“Can’t we trace a Portkey?” Tonks asked. “I know that sometimes it’s harder when it’s charmed outside of the area. But I’ve seen it done.”

Percy looked over to Kingsley, knowing that he would be most likely of the three to know the answer to that. He vaguely remembered Bill saying something like that once.

Kingsley shuffled through the paperwork, scowling as his eyes scanned back and forth across it. “They never checked for a Portkey.” Tonks growled and Percy rubbed the back of his neck, where a headache was starting to form.

“What about Apparition?” he asked, making notes again. Gross negligence in evidence gathering was the least of their issues, especially when they were dealing with two possible murders, Dark Magic, and a conspiracy to cover all of it up.

“No reason to,” Kingsley shrugged. A heavy sigh followed this. “We need to follow up on Nott, see if he would have been a good match for Harry’s build and height.”

“He had dark hair, if I remember right,” Percy said, a vague memory of taking points from a group of Slytherins came to mind.

Kingsley nodded decisively. “It’s time to start a more thorough investigation. Tonks, you look into Nott. I’m going to set up full-time surveillance for Malfoy. I don’t think we’ve tipped him off, but it would be good to see what he’s up to.”

* * *

Jack shifted on his feet and watched the traffic move along the slushy street, splashing muddy wetness onto the sidewalks. This was silly, he thought, waiting here wouldn’t make up his mind any more.

Emma had kicked him out of the flat for the day, claiming that his pacing and moodiness were depressing her. She’d pressed a small shopping list into his palm, handed him his coat, pushed him out into the hall and threatened his very existence if he returned before at least two hours had passed. He knew from the serious expression on her face that she meant what she said.

Ten minutes later found him outside the small market where he worked nights, knowing he could

easily go in and find the items that she had requested, but then he'd have at least... he consulted his watch... exactly one hundred and ten more minutes until he could safely pass over the threshold of his home again.

As it had for the hundredth time that week, Jack's hand found the paper with Remus Lupin's number on it. Emma had given up trying to advise Jack on what to do about his past. She'd supported him that first night when he'd decided that he'd forget all about the strange man. Then she'd supported him the next day when he'd decided to call the number. He'd chickened out before even leaving the flat though. She'd finally thrown up her hands and told him that she loved him but she would gladly take away his ability to speak if he tried to convince her of his decisions one more time.

"Just do it, Ingalls," he growled as he stalked over to the phone box and pressed the numbers.

"Wotcher."

Jack almost hung up before taking a deep breath. "Erm, I'm sorry, I think I may have the wrong number."

"Who ya lookin' for love?" came the voice of the woman.

Jack shook his head and glanced around. "Remus Lupin, please. This is Jack Ingalls, I don't know if he remembers me, or if he even wants to talk to me..." He trailed off as there was dead silence on the other end.

"I'll get him for you, please hold."

Jack contemplated hanging up again before a rather gravelly voice came on the line.

"Jack?"

"Mr. Lupin," Jack answered. "I'm sorry, maybe this wasn't a good idea."

"Don't hang up!"

Jack sighed and glanced around again, watching as the shoppers entered and exited the store. "I'm still here."

"Good," Remus answered. "How are you, Jack?"

Jack shrugged and then felt stupid because the man couldn't see him. "I've been fine."

"That's good," Remus said and the two sat in silence for a moment before he cleared his throat. "It's good to hear from you. I wasn't sure if you would ever ring."

"I almost didn't," Jack admitted. "I'm still not convinced that I am who you think I am."

"I can understand that."

"But some of the things you said made me think. You've really turned my life upside down with this

whole business, you know.”

“I never meant to hurt you, Jack.”

“I know,” Jack acknowledged and sighed. “Is there any chance we can meet again? I have a few questions of my own.”

“Just tell me when and where, Jack. I know you put in a lot of hours at work, but my schedule is completely flexible.”

Jack thought for a minute. He’d like to meet somewhere private and he contemplated at the flat, but immediately discarded that option. He still wasn’t completely comfortable with this whole situation and didn’t want to expose Emma to any more stress than she already had.

“How about the café again? It’s not ever that busy.”

“That sounds fine, Jack. When would you like to meet?”

“I’m not sure where you live,” Jack said. “The number wasn’t familiar, so...”

“It’s a mobile,” Remus explained. “I’m not... actually, I’m not all that far from you.”

Jack glanced at his watch again. He now had just one hundred minutes to waste. *At least* she’d said. “Well, I’m free now, but—”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes,” Remus said, taking Jack by surprise.

“O-okay,” Jack stammered and wondered if he could get to the café from here in less than twenty minutes. It took him at least ten minutes to walk from the flat to the bookstore and that was in the opposite direction than he’d turned earlier today. “I’ll do my best to make it.”

He could hear Remus chuckle on the other end. “I’ll wait if I don’t see you then. I’ll even buy lunch again.”

Jack smiled. “Yeah, but you have to eat it this time.”

“It’s a deal.”

“Alright,” Jack said, feeling awkward now that their subject had been exhausted. “See you there.”

He hung up the phone and stared at it, backing slowly out of the box. He was really going to do this...

Chapter 10

November 2002

"You're such a pretty baby," Hermione cooed down to her daughter, brushing her fingertips over the newborn's rosy pink cheek. "My pretty, pretty Ginny Rose."

The baby shuddered in a sigh, her tiny lips quivering as she finally stopped sucking and Hermione pulled her away, watching milk pool on her tiny chin.

She pulled her gown closed and lifted the baby onto her shoulder, patting her back firmly, yet gently.

Hermione had been so nervous about being a mother. But really, more of it was instinctual than anything. Especially right at first, she realized. Molly had been wonderful about being there the first few days of Ginny Rose's life, gently giving advice but not pushing too hard. Hermione truly appreciated that. Her own mother helped as well, but Molly had more experience with Weasley babies, their voracious appetites and temper tantrums. And Ginny Rose was definitely a Weasley through and through.

Molly chuckled and wiped away memory tears when Hermione told her of Ginny Rose's full-on screaming when she was hungry or had soiled her nappy.

"She's just like her namesake then," Molly said fondly, pressing a kiss to her granddaughter's forehead. "You'll have your hands full."

Hermione smiled softly as the baby let out a loud belch and squirmed into her mother's neck, fully content now that her little stomach was tight with milk. Completely zonked, as Ron would say.

She really should get up and tidy the house. But the allure of the soft baby scent, and the warmth of the little body next to hers made Hermione sink lower in the bed, curling around her daughter.

Strictly speaking, she knew she shouldn't sleep with the baby. There were so many things that could go wrong—she could roll over in her own sleep and crush the baby, the blankets could press against her tiny face and smother her, she could get spoiled for sleeping in her own little cot. The books had listed endless reasons why it was a horrid idea.

But the urge to keep her there, close enough that Hermione could feel the tiny heart beat in her chest, and feel her sweet, milky breath on her neck, was too much.

"Just for a bit," Hermione whispered to her daughter, allowing her eyes to slip closed.

She was startled out of her nap by the bed moving. Ron was sitting on the end, his back to her, staring off at the wall. He had one shoe in his hand, dangling toward the floor before it slid down his leg unnoticed.

"Ron," she whispered, blinking her eyes against the brightness of the sun showing through the windows. It was far too early for him to be home. Certainly she couldn't have been asleep all day.

Ginny Rose never would have missed her two hour feeding.

Hermione frantically reached for the baby, feeling her exactly where she had been, sleeping happily on Hermione's shoulder, putting the muscles there to sleep.

"Ron," she repeated when he didn't move. "What's wrong? Why are you home?"

This time he flinched, looking up at her slowly, his ears turning red. "Just... wanted to come home."

"Are you ill?" Hermione asked. Ron loved his job. She knew he wouldn't leave unless something had happened.

"I'm fine," he said softly, his eyes roaming over her and settling on the bundle in her arms. He turned fully, lifting one leg up to sit on the bed. "How is she?" he asked.

Hermione frowned at him, sure he was hiding something. But she answered anyway. Sometimes Ron had to wrap his mind around a problem before he could talk about it. Now must be one of those times. Or perhaps it was something he couldn't speak about, one of his cases that wasn't going well. "She's fine. We both are." Somehow it seemed necessary to add that last part. His shoulders sank a bit in relief and she pondered that.

"That's good." He nodded woodenly, still looking at the two of them. Something much darker, much larger hovered in his blue eyes, however.

"Ron..."

"Harry's alive." His voice was low, barely a whisper, but it cut through the room louder than a clap of thunder. "Ginny too."

Hermione's heart pounded and she worried that it would wake Ginny Rose. The baby did squirm and Hermione scolded herself, loosening her grip from where it had become tight.

"Ron..." she whispered. His eyes were heavy and dark, and she wondered, just for a minute, if he had lost his mind. "You... don't say that." Her voice was as harsh as his and tears clouded her vision. "You can't just say things like that."

He nodded. "That's how I felt too."

"You're not making sense," Hermione said, shifting the baby down into her arm, watching as she curled into a little 'C' shape and then relaxed against her mother's warm body. "Did something happen?" Her eyes darted to the bedside table, searching out her wand. It was within reach. Should she summon someone... Arthur or Bill?

"Remus found him. Living as a Muggle. Him and Ginny. They're going to have a baby."

His stare shifted back to the wall and Hermione gasped, recognizing the hollow, lost look that Ron had worn for almost a year after the Final Battle.

"Ron—"

“And I don’t know what to feel,” he said. “I want to be happy... but I’m not sure I know how to feel that anymore. Not about them. It’s not... real.”

Despite all the logical arguments running around in her head, Hermione believed him. Ron wouldn’t do this to her. He wouldn’t say anything until he was sure.

“Harry’s going to be a dad... just like me.”

She swallowed thickly, scooting to the end of the bed and standing to lay Ginny Rose in her cot. The baby moaned and made a scrunched face of protest before she settled back in sleep.

Hermione sat down next to Ron, her shoulder brushing his bicep. “He’d be a good dad,” she whispered.

“I know,” he answered right away. “But... I can’t see it. I can’t see it in my head, you know. They’re married. Tonks has seen them. Ginny—my little sister—she’s going to have a baby.”

Hermione let the tears fall down her cheeks unchecked, feeling them drip onto her dressing gown and soak to the skin below.

“You’re sure?” she asked as she laid her head against his arm.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “Kingsley said so.”

Hermione nodded, knowing that it had to be true then. Kingsley was not a man who was easy to convince. He was strong and unwavering. If he believed that they’d found Harry and Ginny—then it must be true.

Ron’s strong arm came around her shoulders and he lifted her into his lap, tugging her with him onto the bed. He wrapped around her as she continued to cry—tears of relief, of disbelief, and of anger over the missing years.

“Harry and Ginny,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to her head. She could feel his tears sinking into her hair, spreading out over her head.

And she understood the need to say the names. It was a reassurance. It was a prayer.

* * *

Remus pushed the button to end the phone call and stared at his wife in disbelief. “It was him... Harry—erm, Jack.”

“I know, Remus,” Tonks smirked, “I answered the phone, remember?”

“He...” his hands pushed through his mostly grey hair. “He wants to meet right now.”

“Are you going to be able to Disapparate in your state?” Tonks asked, only half joking.

Remus nodded even though he wasn’t sure himself. “I’ll be fine.” He quickly gathered his winter cloak, hat and gloves before kissing his wife thoroughly. “Give Ori a kiss for me. I shouldn’t be too

late, but it depends on... well..."

"I know," Tonks said, carefully pushing him out the back door where he could Apparate from the lot behind them. "She'll miss her daddy, but I'm sure all will be forgiven when she gets to finally meet Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny."

"Dora," Remus warned, feeling his chest tighten. "It's a little too early to be promising—"

"You're the one who's been telling her stories since she was in the womb," Tonks scolded.

"I know," Remus grinned sheepishly. "Am I getting my hopes up over nothing, Dora?"

Tonks contemplated for a minute before shrugging. "I hope not, but be careful Remus. He's not guaranteed to take any of this well; it's such a dramatic change to what he thinks he knows."

"I know," Remus said softly. "I'll do my best to be gentle."

Tonks gave him a final kiss and watched as he disappeared from in front of her.

* * *

"I must be insane," Jack mumbled to himself in-between taking huge gasps of air. He'd just walked—well stalked was more like it—the whole way from the market to the café in less than fifteen minutes. Now that he was here, however, the determination was slowly ebbing into nervousness. "You can do this," he affirmed to himself and entered the café.

Mr. Lupin was seated at the very furthest corner booth and the rest of the seats were deserted. Jack removed his knit hat and scarf as he wove his way toward the man, running his fingers through his hair, trying to get it to lie down. It never did, however.

"You came."

Jack smiled, shifting his woolen things back and forth in his hands. His feet squeaked on the hard floor of the café, making him feel like he should slip his feet out of the Wellingtons. "You doubted it?"

Remus shrugged. "I wondered. You sounded a bit nervous on the phone."

Jack sat across from him and laid his winter things on the seat next to him. "I was," he nodded. "I've talked myself into ringing you, and then right back out again, for the last week."

"What made you decide to call?" Remus asked as he handed over a menu.

"I'm not sure exactly. I keep running over my memories in my head and... some things just don't add up. When I tried to reconcile what you told me with what I thought knew..." He shrugged.

"I understand. The mind does funny things to us, doesn't it?" Jack nodded and looked down at the menu, not seeing much, but grateful for having something to do with his hands.

"Back again?" the same waitress from their earlier visit stood next to their table with a pad of

paper. "What'll it be today?"

His eyes darted back to the menu, searching for anything. His mind really wasn't on food, and he hadn't even thought about what to eat. "I'll have the fish and chips, and a Coke," Jack said, glancing up to where Remus took out a pair of glasses and sheepishly perched them on the tip of his nose, shooting a crooked smile at him. Jack smiled and looked away. Something about this man—perhaps it was his soft, understanding voice, or his unassuming manner—made Jack relax.

"That sounds good, although I'll have water instead. And a piece of apple tart for after." He grinned and glanced up to Jack. "My wife would have a fit," he explained, "but my wife's not here."

Jack smirked down at the menu. "I'll take a piece of cherry then." He shrugged when the waitress raised an eyebrow. "My wife's not here either."

"Alright," the waitress smiled. "But next time you bring her in here, ducky, I'm telling." Both Jack and Remus chuckled.

"Fair enough," Jack nodded. They continued to smile as she walked away.

"So..." Jack began. His hands intertwined themselves nervously on the table in front of him.

"Jack, I just want to tell you that everything I'm going to tell you today is the absolute truth, as far as I know it. I'm not in the habit of lying to people."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Lupin." Jack shifted in his spot, a bubble of panic rising in him. What if he didn't like what he heard? Could he just... walk away from this and continue being who he was?

"Please, call me Remus. Every time you call me mister, I turn around to see if my father is behind me." Jack chuckled and inclined his head in agreement.

Remus ruffled his hair and sighed. "I guess the first thing I should really do is ask you how much you remember of your life, and what it was that made you forget."

Jack nodded thoughtfully and grimaced. What he remembered of his life wasn't pleasant. And he wasn't even sure how much of it was simply dreams or imaginings, and what was real. It all seemed a bit surreal, if you asked him. "It was four years ago: a car accident, or so they say. All I remember is waking up in hospital and being told that I had barely lived. The police came and said that I'd been found on the side of the road and they were assuming that I'd been hit by a car. The doctors think that the hit I took on my head did some damage to the memory parts of my brain as I only remember flashes of things before the accident. But I don't know if they're real." Remus nodded thoughtfully and motioned for Jack to continue. "The first memories I have are really more impressions than anything."

"Some memories are like that," Remus agreed.

Jack grimaced and glanced over the top of his glasses to the other man. "I..."

"What is it?"

"I just know that you said you knew my parents, and..." he sighed and ruffled the back of his hair in a way that made Remus smile. "The memories, they aren't flattering, Remus. They're rather..."

"It's alright, Jack. I think I understand what you are trying to tell me. I promise to be as objective as I can."

Jack nodded. "The feeling was of being poor, very poor. I think we were homeless most of the time. There's pain too." Jack rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses. Emma was the only one he had ever talked of his past about. Even Derek didn't know the extent of how much he had gathered from his impressions, or memories, or nightmares—whichever they were. "I don't remember school at all. I must have gone, because I can do maths and read and write. But I don't remember people, really. No one close, anyway."

"It sounds like a very lonely existence," Remus said softly.

Jack shrugged. "I survived," he said and seemed to steel himself a bit. "After the accident, well, things didn't get much better." He swallowed thickly and looked down at his hands, his eyes tracing the scars there. "I had nowhere to go after I got out of hospital and lived in and out of shelters for a year. Found a job on the wharf for a bit, but... then that ended and I had nowhere to go. The shelters are crowded with women and children—there isn't a lot of room for men." He glanced up and saw that Remus was watching him, but his face didn't betray any disgust or pity. "Then I met Derek and things changed. I have Emma now," his voice cracked with emotion and Jack cursed silently. "My life is good now, which is why I think I've been so hesitant to listen to what you have to say."

"I can understand that Jack, I really can. I spent almost fifteen years drifting myself, sometimes homeless and rarely wanted; until I was able to find a group of people who welcomed me and helped me turn my life around."

Jack was shocked to learn that. He opened his mouth to ask about it when the waitress brought the tray of food over to them. He helped her position the trays and then noticed Remus looking strangely at the woman. He seemed to be sitting stiffly in his seat until he caught Jack's eye and smiled. Jack glanced back and forth between the two, wondering what he'd missed.

"If you two don't mind, I'm going to take my own lunch break. We haven't had anyone enter since you came in and I'm starved. Yell out if you need anything, alright?"

"Thank you very much, we'll be sure to call for you," Remus answered as she turned on her heel and left the two men alone in the front of the café.

Jack was going to ask what that was all about until he saw Remus shake his head slightly. Confused, he dismissed the feeling of something being wrong and sprinkled vinegar on the fish and potatoes.

"Where did you come up with the name Jack Ingalls?" Remus asked. Jack scowled to himself and swallowed the bite he'd taken.

"A doctor at the hospital chose it for me," he said simply. He stopped for a moment, realizing he'd not thought about Oliver Wilbanks in quite some time. Shaking it off, he continued his tale. "The police searched and found no records to match me, not even a birth date."

“July 31st, 1980,” Remus said softly and Jack looked confused for a moment before raising an eyebrow.

“I’m only twenty-one?” he asked, almost to himself.

“How old did you think you were?” Remus asked in wonder.

“I—” Jack blew out a frustrated breath. “I feel much older. I’d guess at twenty-four or so.”

“I’m positive of the date,” Remus said with a smile. “I was there you know.”

“There?”

“In the house when you were born,” Remus stated proudly. “Just before midnight on the last day of July. Lost a healthy wager to Sirius too, I’ll have you know. Sirius was your Godfather,” he explained. “He had bet for a July baby and I said August.”

“Anyway, I thought the name worked as no one could suggest anything else. So, now I’m Jack Ingalls.”

“Well, Jack Ingalls, your real name is Harry Potter.”

“Potter,” Jack said, testing the weight of it on his tongue. He shrugged, admitting that it wasn’t jogging his memory.

Remus brushed his hands off of the paper napkin near his plate and pushed the half eaten meal out of his way. He settled his elbows on the table and seemed to be thinking of the best approach to telling Jack something. Jack, sensing the changing atmosphere, wiped his mouth and moved his food away a bit too.

“I guess the best way to do this is just to start,” Remus said with a smile. “Have you ever done anything that you couldn’t explain?” Jack just furrowed his brow further.

“Let me rephrase that. Has anything happened to you, or around you, especially when you are emotional, that you couldn’t account for? For instance, glass shattering when you get angry or found things that you knew you’d lost.”

Jack shrugged and looked out of the window, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. Flashes of strange moments, scary things happening to him and having no explanation for them came into his mind like a parade of scenes. He scowled darkly. They weren’t happy thoughts.

“Don’t be embarrassed, it’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Remus soothed with a smile. “There are thousands of us in this country alone.”

“Of what?” Jack asked softly. He wasn’t quite sure if he wanted to know or not.

“Wizards,” Remus answered plainly. “You, Jack, are a wizard. And to quote an old friend of mine, ‘a thumpin’ good one at that’.

“I... I...” Jack floundered for a moment before searching Remus’ face completely. “I’m not sure what

to say.”

“You don’t seem all that surprised, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“No, I mean... yes, I am. But, at the same time, it explains some things.” He pushed his hand through his hair before sticking out his finger and pushing his glass of half-drunk Coke around the table. “It’s all a bit... insane.”

Remus nodded. “I’ll be happy to explain a bit more about our world, but first I think you need a bit more history about who you are, Harry.” Jack’s head lifted at the sound of his real name. He wasn’t sure why he was accepting this. It was absurd... sheer lunacy... Yet, he couldn’t stop his heart from believing it. It felt... righter than anything he had ever felt, save falling in love with Emma and having a child with her.

The next hour Remus gave a fairly detailed account of Harry Potter’s life up until he was eighteen.

Jack sat in stunned silence, wanting to deny everything, but somehow finding enough kernel of true feeling behind it that he was forcing himself to accept it. When Remus stopped, Jack lifted his head from where he’d been silently shredding paper napkins.

“There’s more, isn’t there?” he asked in a hoarse voice. Remus’ pained expression told him that the worst was to come. “What happened to make you think that I’d died?”

“We call it the Final Battle. You and your two best friends had found all that you needed to find on your quest and Voldemort finally confronted you at the school.” Jack nodded, but didn’t meet his eyes. “No one is sure of exactly what happened, but suffice it to say, when the smoke and fire cleared, there were three bodies and one survivor, or so we thought. Tom Riddle, or Voldemort as he preferred to be called, was dead. And so were you and... another person.”

Jack snorted a laugh. “This is ridiculous, you realize?”

Remus opened his mouth to protest that he was telling the truth, but the look on Jack’s face must have told him that the man believed him, he just didn’t want to.

“This has all the makings for a bad movie; the hero, the villain, the fight to the death. The only thing that’s missing is the hero’s girl.” He froze for a minute and then stared at Remus. A flash of a very old dream came back to him as he swallowed around the lump in his throat. “There was a girl, wasn’t there, Remus?”

Remus’ face darkened and he looked down at his hands. “Yes, there was a girl,” he answered quietly.

Jack sat in stunned silence, his mind racing to try to remember anything concrete. “Were we...?”

“Very close,” Remus confirmed, his voice softening almost painfully. “I didn’t know anything about it, but her brother told me that you were secretly engaged.”

Jack stood up abruptly, his chair scraping along the floor loudly. “I... I can’t... shite, Remus,” he tousled his hair violently and looked down at the other man with a very pained expression. “Remus,

I'm married. We're... happy together. We're having a baby in two months. I can't just walk away from that! I won't!"

Remus held up his hands in protest. "Calm down, Jack! No one is asking you to leave your wife. None of us would ever ask you to abandon your family."

Jack calmed a bit but still seemed agitated. "I don't remember anythi—" He froze and Remus stared at him. Jack blushed and sat heavily in the chair. "There was a dream," he began softly. "A girl—I never really saw her face, but I know that I had... feelings for her. It was all very hazy and indistinct." Jack sighed heavily. "I haven't had that dream again since... well since just before Emma and I got married. Before that, well, I always wondered, you know, but I assumed it was just a dream."

Remus nodded thoughtfully but remained silent.

"She's alright then, this girl?" Jack finally asked after a few minutes of silence.

"As far as I understand it, she's very happy," Remus informed him.

"Good," Jack said, relieved. The thought of being with anyone besides Emma made his stomach roll. "I just wouldn't want anyone to go through that."

Remus nodded. "There's a bit more to the story. If you'll let me..."

"I'm not sure I can take any more," Jack said truthfully. He sank lower in the seat, brushing the shredded paper away from him.

"Yes, well," Remus smiled wryly, "you'll forgive me but I'm just getting to the good part. And, if you don't mind me being cheeky... the 'magic' part of this whole situation."

Jack raised an eyebrow, but nodded. He wasn't really in the mood for a joke, but Remus seemed more at ease now.

"The girl, Ginny was her name, was there with you at the Final Battle."

Jack searched his memory for what he'd learned that day. "Wait, you said there were three bodies..." Dread filled him as he started to put the pieces together.

"Exactly," Remus nodded. "We thought Ginny had been killed as well."

"But she hadn't," Jack stated more than asked.

Remus shook his head. "She's another miracle like you."

"She's alive then? You said she was happy."

"We just found her," Remus acknowledged, "and from what Dora, my wife, says, she seems very happy in the life she's made for herself."

Jack nodded, feeling better thinking that whoever this girl was—had he *loved* her? He must have if

they'd been engaged—she had been able to move on. “Was she injured?” Jack asked.

“Yes, similar to you, it seems; possibly total memory loss. She probably has some scarring and such that has never fully disappeared.” Remus watched Jack closely and it made him squirm.

“We assume she was in hospital somewhere just like you were, in fact it would have been the same time you were. The only thing of hers that we can find missing, that might identify her, was the engagement ring you gave her.”

Jack's stomach plummeted and he felt the food he'd eaten earlier threaten to make a reappearance. No... it couldn't be... but the pieces fit. He closed his eyes tightly, thinking of Emma's glorious red hair; running his fingers through it always calmed him.

A bright flash of a moment—his fingers combing through red hair on the bright shores of a large lake, and the blinding sun high in the sky.

“Marry me?”

“Yes.”

Jack swallowed. How was it possible? Could his Emma really be... “Gold band, square cut diamond on top,” Jack wondered aloud in almost a whisper.

Remus smiled broadly. “Gold band, square cut diamond,” he confirmed.

Jack paled and slipped a bit in his seat and Remus jerked forward, his hands out, possibly worried that Jack had fainted. “How?” he finally whispered as he laid his head on the table. “Emma is...”

“Emma is Ginny,” Remus nodded. “We're still not sure how it happened,” he admitted. “Believe me we've been over this more times than you could have imagined, and we just can't figure out how the two of you, with no memories to draw from, could find each other after four years and then fall completely in love all over again.”

“So, you're saying that Emma is... Ginny?” Jack clarified, spreading his fingers out over the chipped tabletop, needing to feel the firm surface on his skin to ground himself.

“Yes, I am,” Remus nodded.

Jack sat stunned. “What... how am I going to explain this to her?” he asked in a quiet voice. “She's... I don't know if she'll believe me, Remus.”

Remus reached into his pocket and removed a tiny book and then a slender stick which he tapped on the book and it began to grow in his hand. Jack's eyes widened and he glanced around nervously, looking for the waitress. The café was empty, however.

“It's alright,” Remus said with a small smile. “I cast a distraction charm earlier; she'll never know anything's going on out here.” Jack only shrugged in acceptance, because he didn't feel there was anything more he could do, and glanced curiously at the book. Remus set it in front of him and flipped the top cover open. Inside were photographs—but they moved and Jack was tempted to slam

the book closed again.

"It's a spell," Remus explained, seeing Jack's apprehension. "I've gathered these over the years as... well, as kind of a tribute to the two of you, I guess. I had Dora help me duplicate them this week so that you could have a copy."

Jack nodded in gratitude, but his eyes never left the pages in front of him. Remus pointed out various people, explaining who they were and such, as Jack soaked in their faces. Finally, on one of the later pages, Jack's attention focused on a single shot of Ginny looking off into the distance. She was dressed very nicely in a dress of gold shimmery fabric, her hair pulled up into an elegant twist. Jack's finger lovingly traced the outline of her face on the photograph.

"I wish I could remember this," he whispered. "She's so lovely."

"Yes, she was," Remus answered. "But that wasn't an especially nice memory, despite how she looks in the picture, Jack. You and Ginny began dating in your sixth year of school, her fifth. At the end of the year, you broke things off with her, scared that she would get hurt. This picture was during the summer when you were trying to stay away from each other. This was her oldest brother's wedding and you were both there. It was almost painful to see the two of you separated like that. Anyone who looked at you could see how much you loved each other."

Jack's brow furrowed. "She must have hated me."

"She understood at the time," Remus protested. "And it wasn't very long before you two were together again. I don't know the details, but I caught you not two months later kissing her for all you were worth." He gave a sly smile.

Jack blushed, but grinned, his fingers still tracing a very young Emma—er, Ginny's face in the photograph. "I still can't figure out how we were able to find each other again."

Remus shrugged and shook his head. "We may never know," he answered.

Jack sighed and glanced at his watch. "Shite! I told Emma I'd be back in two hours. I've been gone for four. She's probably sick with worry." He stood, reaching for his coat.

"It's alright," Remus chuckled, standing as well. "I'd better get going as well. I'd like to see my daughter before bed."

"How old is she?" Jack asked as he reapplied his scarf and hat.

Remus grinned. "She's a very precocious three. We named her Orion Mary."

"That's an unusual name," Jack said. "Is it a family one?"

"No," Remus said. "It was Sirius' middle name. We were planning on using it for a boy, but Ori surprised us and came out a girl. Dora said that in a family of already strange names, one more wouldn't matter." Jack chuckled. "You mentioned that Emma was expecting? Have you chosen any names?" he asked as Jack beamed.

“We’ve talked about a few,” Jack explained. “I think we’ve chosen Elizabeth Anne for a girl and James Derek for a boy.” He felt his chest swell a bit at the thought of his child, growing protected within his wife.

Remus froze in his step. “Why those names?”

“Is something wrong with them?”

“No,” Remus protested. “I just wondered if you had some motivation.”

“The middle names are of people that have helped us over the past. Anne is the woman who took Emma in when she had nowhere to go. Derek is my best mate; he gave me a home when I didn’t have one, a chance when no one else would.”

Remus nodded, looking off to the fading light outside. “It’s just that Elizabeth was your mother’s middle name and your father’s name was James, it’s also your middle name.”

Jack froze and then finally nodded. “I guess we were inspired then.” The thought of another coincidence—another tie to their former lives, was overwhelming. He tried to straighten it all in his mind, compartmentalize it so that he could deal with it. But, he’d never been very good at doing that.

They stood in silence for a few minutes before Jack laughed deeply. “What in the hell am I going to tell her?”

“I’d be more than happy to meet with the both of you if you have any questions,” Remus smiled.

Jack nodded stiffly. “That might be a good idea. I’ll take this album,” he motioned to the book tucked under his arm, “and talk to her.”

Remus turned and placed a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “It’s almost Christmas, and you may not have any blood family left, Jack, but you still have family and friends that would love to see you. Gin—Emma has a large family also.”

“We’ll think about it,” Jack promised half-heartedly. He couldn’t quite decide why the idea made him uncomfortable. “This really isn’t the best timing for Emma though. With the baby coming… well, it’s been rather a tricky pregnancy and she’s not supposed to be under any sort of stress.”

“I understand, and so will her family,” Remus promised. “But, just know that you’re not alone, Jack. You can ring me for anything; don’t be worried about bothering anyone.”

Jack nodded and shook Remus’ hand. “Thank you, really.”

* * *

Ron watched his wife pace back and forth across the living room; although he supposed her movements could technically be termed stalking. For someone so small, she made good time across the room and back.

Ginny Rose happily lay on her back on her father’s lap, staring up at the colorful bits of fabric that

Ron had charmed to dance in front of her.

"It's been a whole day," Hermione stated firmly, throwing her hands out to the sides. "Twenty-four hours since Kingsley told you. Why haven't they contacted us?"

Ron shrugged, knowing that words would be useless right now. Hermione needed to get this out in the open. She'd cried last night; today was the time for logic. It didn't make sense to Ron's way of thinking, but he'd given up trying to figure her out years ago.

She stopped in front of the fireplace, sticking her head inside the empty grate. "You don't think it's broken, do you?"

He snorted a laugh and then schooled his features when she spun on her heel, eyes narrowed, arms folded and foot tapping. "No, love, I think the floo is working just fine."

Hermione growled, causing Ron to hide a smirk by checking on his daughter. "I don't know how you can be so calm, Ronald Weasley!" she said, her arms flying up the ceiling. "They're out there... and we're stuck here."

"Hermione," Ron tried again, his tiredness showing in his voice. While Hermione had slept last night, Ron had lain awake, his mind trying to make sense of the whole thing. "You know as well as I do that someone will contact us when they know more."

"I know, Ron," Hermione wailed. He could see tears welling up in her eyes again and sighed. "But there is so much I could be doing, rather than sitting here doing nothing."

Ron scowled at her, his large fingers finding their way into Ginny Rose's hands, wiggling slowly so that her little arms circled in front of her. "Taking care of Ginny Rose isn't nothing, Hermione."

She gasped and flew to his side, reaching out to caress the baby's head. "That's not what I meant, Ron—"

"I know," he soothed. "And I understand your frustration. I don't bloody well want to be stuck here either—"

"Ronald!" Hermione scolded him for his language, making Ron chuckle. "She can hear you, you know. One day you're going to have to explain why your daughter has the mouth of a common laborer."

Ron chuckled again and looked down at his little girl. She gave a mighty yawn and wiggled her feet against his stomach. "Then you'll be just like your Aunt Ginny, won't you? She could out curse any of us boys."

"Oh, honestly," Hermione huffed, standing and beginning her pacing again.

Ginny Rose began fussing and Ron picked her up, canceling the fabric spell, and held her against his chest as he rose and began to bounce her slowly up and down. "Hermione, why don't you feed her again? I'll put her down for her nap and then you can take a nice, long bath—"

A chime from the fireplace startled them and Hermione drew her wand, lighting a fire in the grate. Green flames erupted and Kingsley's face glowed into focus.

"Good morning."

"Morning, Kingsley," Ron greeted. Hermione stood next to him, her arms crushing his bicep. He could feel her nails digging little half-moon prints into his skin and grimaced at her. But her focus was only on the face in the flames.

"I'm sorry to bother you at home."

"Its fine," Ron dismissed.

"Do you have any news?" Hermione said, letting go of Ron's arm and hurrying forward so that she was as close to the fireplace as she could be with the heat radiating out from it.

"Nothing yet, I'm afraid," he shook his head. "We should be hearing from Remus soon. He's the one we've designated to make contact with Harry and Ginny."

Hermione nodded, surprising Ron. He was sure she would demand to be there, just as Ron wanted to. "Is there anything we can do?" she asked.

Kingsley's face lit up. "Actually, that's what I was calling for. We need some research done, Hermione, and I think you're just the one to do it."

Ron could see that Hermione looked flattered and he was grateful that Kingsley had found some way for her to help. He only wished he had a place in the whole plan. Sitting around and waiting had to be the worst feeling in the world.

"What do you need researched?" Hermione asked, summoning a quill and parchment to her.

"We need to know all the different types of memory charms, obliviation spells, memory potions—anything that might have been used to destroy, alter or modify memories," Kingsley explained.

Hermione's quill stopped writing and she lowered the notes. "Is that what happened to them?" she asked quietly.

Ron could hear his own heart hammering in his ears. Ginny Rose squirmed against him and he began bouncing again, patting her back gently.

"We're not sure," Kingsley admitted. "But we want to be prepared for anything we may need. If it was a spell, or a potion—if their memories really were meddled with, then we need to know if it's even possible to reverse, or repair, the damage."

"I understand," Hermione nodded.

Logically, it made sense to Ron that something had to have been done to their memories. He couldn't honestly picture Harry and Ginny leaving voluntarily and staying away, not sending word to their family. It wasn't like them at all. So, it had to be a memory charm—something obscure that had been cast. He stopped his mind, however, when it began to consider who might be responsible

for something so... heinous. There would be time for that later.

Hermione continued to make a list of the curses and potions that Kingsley was naming.

“We need to especially look into Dark Magic as well,” he admitted.

Ron felt a shiver rise up his spine and saw Hermione’s quill skip a bit on the parchment.

“How do I do that without raising suspicion?” she asked, looking up at the man who they both respected greatly.

“You could always claim to be writing another book,” Ron shrugged.

Hermione turned to him, a speculative look on her face. “That might work.”

“Well done, Ron,” Kingsley cheered. “That’s brilliant. You’ll still need to be careful.”

Hermione nodded, beaming at Ron. He felt his chest swell a bit and grinned back at her.

“I will,” she agreed.

“There are quite a few Dark Magic books at Grimmauld Place,” Kingsley suggested. “I’m sure Remus could help you out quite a bit. And I’ll make sure whatever we have at the Ministry can be sent to you, discreetly of course.”

Ron sighed contentedly to watch Hermione’s face light up. The project sounded like something she would enjoy very much—it would drive him nuts—but Hermione liked that sort of thing. Knowing her, she probably *would* write a whole other book about the subject.

Content for the minute, Ron swayed with Ginny Rose on his shoulder. Now if he could only think of a way that he could help...

* * *

Tonks sat sideways on the loveseat, her bare feet dangling over the side and the book she was reading from propped up on her lap.

The words had long since stopped making sense, as her mind wandered toward her absent husband. She glanced at the clock on the mantel and started to realize it had been over four hours since Remus had left. It hadn’t seemed that long, but Orion had worn her out, playing games all over the house—her favorite was hide and seek—giving her a bath and putting her to bed.

She wasn’t sure if the time away was a good sign or not. It could mean several things: Jack was actually listening to Remus and accepting what he told him, Jack had rejected everything Remus had said, leaving Remus depressed enough to seek out a pub, or... well, she didn’t like to think about anything else.

The sound of someone entering the downstairs kitchen made her sit up straight. Tonks smothered the urge to race down and see if it was Remus. If it was, he’d be up to see her soon enough.

She quickly drew her wand, however, when someone came barreling up the steps, knocking into walls and calling for her the whole way. Too many years of Auror instincts kicked in and she positioned herself silently by the door, aiming at the opening.

Remus, or someone looking just like him, burst in the door looking younger than Tonks had ever seen him. She quickly swung her leg out low, sweeping his legs out from under him and throwing him face first into the floor.

“Who are you?” she demanded as she pressed her knee into his back, her wand held at the side of his throat, pressing into the flesh there.

“It’s me,” the man protested, struggling to get his hands out from underneath his chest.

“Prove it,” Tonks growled. “What did you do the night Orion was born?”

The man groaned, allowing his face to press into the carpet. “Do I really have to say?” he whined. “Besides, you’ve told too many people that story.”

Tonks grinned, knowing that it had to be Remus. No one else would turn that shade of purple. “Then you won’t mind repeating it.”

Remus growled struggling again against the weight of her body pressing him into the floor. “She wasn’t born at night... she was born in the morning.”

“And?” Tonks grinned, enjoying every second of watching him squirm.

“And...” Remus sighed and gave up, surrendering the fight. “And I passed out... missed the entire birth.”

She grinned down at him and moved her knee to the opposite side, straddling his back, before leaning over to press a kiss to his cheek. “Yes, you did, ducky.”

He growled and twisted underneath her, pulling her down so that she was pinned under him. “That was entirely unnecessary,” he scolded her. “No one else can get into this house.”

Tonks laughed, squealing when he dug his fingers into her ribs. “Gred and Forge can.”

Remus contemplated that for a moment before raising an eyebrow to acknowledge her point.

“Besides,” Tonks said, pulling him down to kiss her. “My old man doesn’t run up stairs that way.”

“Your old man?” Remus squawked indignantly. “Old man?”

“Yep,” she grinned up at him. “He’s dignified and swotty and—”

“Finish that and I’ll show you dignified,” Remus growled, capturing her lips and rolling fully onto her.

“I’m assuming,” Tonks said as his lips traveled along her jaw and down her neck, “that things went well.”

Remus sat up, a grin on his face making him look twenty years younger. “It’s him, Dora,” he crowed. “It’s really him.”

“I thought we established that, love,” she raised an eyebrow at him, reaching up to brush locks of silvery grey hair out of his face.

“No,” he shook his head. “He remembers things—not a lot, but... he believed me, Dora.” He finished softly, rolling to the side and bringing her with him so they were cuddled together. “He believed me that he was magical, and about his past, and about Ginny.”

Tonks opened her mouth to reply but closed it again, not sure what to ask.

“He was going home to talk to Emma,” Remus said softly. “I told him to call if he had questions. Or if he wanted me to come and talk to Emma.”

“Did he like the photographs?” Tonks asked. She’d spent hours duplicating them and putting them into the book for Remus to take.

“He loved them,” Remus said. “Although I think when I first showed them to him he was scared out of his mind.”

“Do you blame him?” Tonks smiled.

“No,” Remus shook his head and sighed mightily. “I don’t.”

They lapsed into comfortable silence while Tonks considered what the next steps would be.

“We’re getting them back, Dora,” Remus said, his hand coming up to cup her cheek as he turned and kissed her gently. “They’re coming home.”

* * *

The shadow down the alley was dark enough for Draco to make it all the way out, without having to reveal himself to the Auror trailing him.

It was another rookie, he could tell. They always did stupid things to give themselves away—tripping on something, wearing the wrong thing in the wrong place and not blending in well enough.

But the game of cat and mouse was getting old. It took too much time to go where he wanted to go and do what he wanted to do when he had to shake a follower from his trail. And, much as it annoyed him, he had to admit they were getting better. Years ago, when Draco had first started noticing strange people watching him, it had made him furious. But they were so inept that it really didn’t matter. And they weren’t really watching closely—just more observing than anything. There wasn’t anything he could do about it anyway, not without revealing that he knew they were there.

Swearing quietly as the Auror came out into the bright sunlight of day, Draco stepped into a small Muggle café, moved quickly toward the loo and Disapparated. Let them try and follow that, he thought smugly.

* * *

The walk home in the cold air didn't seem nearly long enough, Jack reflected, as he reached the row of flats that he and Emma had made their home for almost the whole last year. He stopped on the step and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"What in the bloody hell am I going to tell her?" he mumbled and then gave a wry chuckle. There was nothing for it; it would have to be the truth. But could she handle the truth.? She was the strong one, he knew that. And, chances were, she'd accept it faster than he had.

Neither of them had ever admitted it to anyone else before... but there was another reason that the two of them had connected so easily. Despite both of their tragic pasts, they shared another thing... a much darker secret that they'd only discovered a week or two before becoming engaged. Both of them made strange things happen.

They rarely spoke of it.

And now, having just listened to Remus explain things, Jack knew why they were different. The thought steeled his resolve and he entered the building.

Emma woke from her groggy nap when Jack kissed her. It took a moment of blinking and trying to get her brain to reconnect before she scowled at him.

"Five hours?" she growled.

Jack, the insufferable git, grinned. "It was only four."

"And a half," Emma informed him, although she didn't pull away. "The extra half counts for more."

"It does?" he laughed.

Emma narrowed her eyes at him and poked him viciously in the side. "Yes, it does. It should count for... triple."

Jack laughed again and leaned forward to kiss her. "Then I'll have to make up for it." He climbed onto the second-hand sofa with her, wrapping as tightly as he could.

She threaded her arms around him, but pouted just the same. "You scared me," she admitted. "I have a very vivid imagination and it was working hard."

Leaning above her on his elbow, Jack traced the outline of her face with his finger. "I'm sorry. I lost track of time."

She looked at him, seeing the sincerity in his face and nodded. "Did you meet up with Derek?"

His face stiffened. "No," he admitted softly. "I called Mr. Lupin."

His words melted softly in the air between them and Emma took a moment to digest what that meant.

"And?" she asked, her heart beating just a bit faster.

Jack pulled away, sat up and ran his hand through his hair. "And... he knew me."

Emma stared at him for a long minute. The baby woke inside her, little limbs moving against her belly. She brought her hand down unconsciously and cradled the bump. Jack looked over at her, smiled sadly and placed his hand alongside hers.

"Are you upset by it?" she finally asked, watching his face closely.

Even though she wanted to give Jack everything—this link to his past made her feel... a bit threatened, if she were honest. She had no idea what to expect. She knew that Jack loved her—he would never leave her. Irrational as the fear may be, however, it was still there, and Emma selfishly held on to it.

Jack sighed and reached for her hand, helping her to sit up. Slowly, he edged her to sit between his knees, his strong hands pressing on her lower back. Emma groaned in relief and leaned forward a bit, letting his thumbs press into all the right places.

"Not upset," he sighed. "It's all a bit... surreal to me still."

"But you don't think he was lying?" She winced when he reached a particularly tender knot and his thumb rubbed it over and over, working the muscle to relax.

"No, he was telling the truth."

Emma nodded, sighing as Jack's hands moved slowly up her back, kneading the tension away. "And..."

Jack chuckled. "And," he continued, "the things he told me... they were amazing, Em." His fingers stopped working and she glanced back over her shoulder, watching as his face filled with confusion and extreme stress. "How much do you want to know?" he asked.

Emma turned and laid her body against his, her ear coming to rest against his chest, just over his heart. If it was bad, she vowed, she could always focus on his heartbeat.

"Everything," she whispered.

Jack sighed and held her to him. "You know how we're... different?" he asked.

She lifted her head, peering closely at him before nodding. She could feel her face heat and hid it into his chest. These... abnormalities were a great source of uneasiness for Emma. She didn't like thinking about them; it made her... uncomfortable in a weird way.

"We're supposed to be, Emma," Jack assured her, lifting her chin to look into her eyes. "We're... magical. I'm a wizard, and you're a witch."

Emma felt the uncontrollable desire to laugh hysterically at him. There was no way... Witches were those horrible creatures on the telly... or the little girls running around on Halloween with their faces painted green and covered in warts.

However, the laugh died somewhere behind the sob that escaped. The word he'd used didn't fit for

her, but the feeling... Well, she couldn't define what it was, but she knew he was right.

"Oh, love," he said, gathering her to him. "This is a good thing. There are... hundreds of people like us—thousands, maybe."

A million questions paraded through her mind but she couldn't grasp any of them, so Emma settled back in against his chest as he continued to talk, telling her about his life as Harry Potter, or what he remembered from Remus Lupin's tale. When she couldn't handle it any longer, a burning question spilled out of her.

"And where do I fit into all of this?" she asked.

Jack lifted her face again, wiping away her tears before kissing her. "You're mine," he said. "And nothing is going to change that."

"I know," she said, taking a bit of comfort from his conviction.

"Are you sure you're feeling up to this?" Jack asked again. Fear flooded into her slowly, and she reached down to cradle the baby. Strangely, he was still and she didn't feel anything to worry about.

"I'm fine," she assured him.

Jack sighed and nodded. "Your name is Ginny Weasley," he said, his lips ghosting along her temple. "You have a large family."

Emma's tears leaked out slowly, soaking Jack's shirt as she thought about that. Like Jack had said, it was all a bit... too much. She'd gone from having only Jack and the baby to having people out there that cared about her. Yet, it didn't seem real.

"What happened to us, Jack?" she asked, her fingers digging into the skin on his arms.

"They don't know for sure," he shrugged, smoothing her hair down her back with his free hand. "Someone messed with our memories."

"Why us?" she asked, looking up at him. "Why would someone hurt us?"

"I don't know," Jack admitted. "There's more if you can handle it?" Emma looked away for a minute, her heart thundering in his chest. "This is the best part," Jack assured her in a soft voice.

Finally, she pulled her thoughts together long enough to nod. She could use a 'best part' right now.

"You and I—Harry and Ginny—we were together, Em. Engaged."

Her head spun, feeling light and full of fluff—the sort of feeling she had when she'd first awoken from her coma. It was disorienting and left her feeling out of control of her own body.

"Em?" Jack asked, leaning toward her and wrapping his arms around her as she swayed. "Are you alright?"

“Yeah,” she mumbled. “Just...”

“I’m laying you down,” he said, as he did just that. She felt the cushions along her back and closed her eyes against the room spinning. “Should I ring someone?”

Her mind finally caught up to what Jack was saying and she shook her head. “No,” she whispered, “just dizzy.”

His worried face loomed above her when she opened her eyes slowly, and she reached up to slide her hand along his cheek.

“I remember giving you the ring,” he said softly. “When Remus was telling me... I had this flash. You and I were sitting—”

“By a lake,” Emma said in wonder, closing her eyes tightly to grasp the fading image in her head. “And it was sunny.”

“Yeah,” Jack said, laying his head gently on her belly.

“You and I,” Emma said, reaching down to run her fingers through his hair.

“You and I,” he agreed. “I promised you forever.”

“We found each other,” she whispered in awe, the spinning feeling starting to return. The memory started to fade from her mind. “Forever, Jack,” she whispered, feeling him tighten his grip on her.

Chapter 11

November 2002 to December 2002

“So, do you have any questions?” Remus watched as Emma glanced up at Jack, who sat next to her on the small sofa, their hands clasped tightly together.

“Thousands,” Emma said softly and shook her head in amazement. Even hearing this all for the second time made her feel disoriented. “But I have no idea where to begin.”

“I understand,” Remus smiled kindly. He’d been very gentle when retelling their story for Emma tonight and she was grateful.

“It’s like something out of some storybook, isn’t it?” she asked, turning back to Jack.

He shrugged. “But it makes sense.”

“It does,” she confirmed softly and rubbed her forehead. Jack narrowed his eyes at her and she just waved his concern off. Really, she felt better now than she had in awhile. Maybe it was the fact that the fantastical story seemed to... fit, even if it made her feel strange.

“How is it that we didn’t remember this?” Emma asked softly, speaking mostly to herself.

“We believe that someone placed a memory charm on you,” Remus explained. “Either that, or completely obliterated your memories altogether. We have someone researching that.”

“How could someone do that?” she asked in a horrified voice. The thought made her feel dirty and... violated. “How can someone just take everything that you are, everything that you know, and make it all disappear?”

“It’s an evil thing,” Remus acknowledged.

“Do you know who did it?” Jack asked as he slipped his arm around his wife and pulled her closer to him, placing a kiss on her head when she snuggled into him.

“We’re investigating that,” Remus nodded. “The Ministry will have to be informed, at some point. But for now, we’re hoping to keep your survival as quiet as possible.”

“Why is that?” Jack asked.

Remus sighed and ruffled his hair a bit. “Remember that in our world—the Wizarding world—you are a celebrity, Jack. And Emma as well. People know the names of Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley. It’s been over four years but the two of you are lauded as heroes.”

Emma winced against Jack’s shoulder. It didn’t sound like the type of life that she would ever want.

“What if we don’t want to return?” Jack asked the question that was on both of their minds. They’d talked about it long hours into the night last night—whether to stay as they were, or return.

Remus sighed again. “Well, that is your right. But there will be people who would be very disappointed. Emma has a family—”

“I don’t remember them,” she observed dispassionately. It felt a bit cruel, but she was tired and wasn’t sure how to cope with all of this.

“No, but they love you. Ginny was the center of that family, the brightest one of them all.”

“Somehow I don’t doubt that,” Jack said softly, kissing her forehead.

“And they’d all but adopted Harry as one of their own,” Remus continued.

Emma felt Jack flinch a bit at Remus’ words and nuzzled into him closer, reaching down to take his hand. She knew the idea of him not having anyone out there bothered him more than he let on.

“You don’t have to decide right now,” Remus comforted them both. “In fact, I’ve not told the family much at all. Arthur, that’s your father,” he nodded to Emma, “and a few of your brothers know, but we’ve kept it quiet.”

Jack, perhaps feeling Emma’s exhaustion emanating from her, nodded abruptly and stood, holding out his hand to Remus. “Thank you for coming. We’ll need some time to discuss what we want to do.”

“I understand,” Remus said. “And, I don’t want to pressure you in any way, but once the family knows, they’ll want to see you.”

Emma glanced up at Jack as she relaxed back into the sofa and rubbed her belly. The baby shifted and she winced as a sharp elbow or knee ground against her ribs.

“I’d be more than happy to come back and show you a bit more magic,” Remus offered. “And I’m sure my wife, Dora, and even Orion, our daughter, would love to come. In fact, why don’t you pick a day and we’ll bring dinner. It’ll be very casual and maybe we can answer a few more questions for you.”

Jack glanced down at her and Emma shrugged a shoulder, feeling more exhausted than ever.

“We’ll let you know,” Jack offered, the concern he felt for his wife evident on his face.

“Fair enough.”

“Here are the medical records you asked for,” Jack said, holding out two tattered files thick with paperwork.

Remus nodded. “I’ll make sure they get into the right hands.”

Once Jack had seen Remus out, he returned to the sofa and gathered a weeping Emma up into his arms.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered into the warm skin of his neck. “I’m not sure why I’m crying.”

"It's alright," he soothed, rubbing her back and holding her tightly to him. "I can only imagine what you're feeling right now."

"I have parents," she sobbed, an awed tone filling her voice. "And brothers, and nieces and nephews."

"That's a good thing," Jack confirmed. His voice was rather tight and she was sure he was thinking of the fact that he had no family left.

"Remus said they loved you."

"I don't remember," he said softly.

Emma pulled back and swiped at her tears before giggling. "Neither do I." Jack smiled sadly and leaned forward to kiss her gently.

"Come on, let's go have a kip." And he carried her to their bed and spooned up behind her, his arms holding her belly and her hands clasped over his.

* * *

"Making any progress?" Ron asked, shuffling down the stairs from putting Ginny Rose down for the next few hours. Hermione raised her head from where she was reading and making notes.

"Some," she nodded. "I had no idea there were so many different ways to alter memories."

Ron tugged a chair from the far side of her office and leaned over the desk, his eyes scanning her notes, but not really reading them.

"For example, a simple Obliviate only masks the memories," she lectured, "it doesn't erase them all together. It's like... putting a wall in front of them."

"Do you think that's what was done?" Ron asked, his finger lifting the stack of notes that his wife had taken. It must be an inch thick.

"No," Hermione shook her head. "Remus mentioned that both Jack and Emma have flashes of memory from time to time. When an Obliviation is broken, even a small part, the whole spell collapses, freeing all of the memories. That's obviously not happening here."

Ron nodded, pondering that. "What else could have been used?"

"Well," Hermione said, pushing the book away from her a bit and leafing through her notes. "There are several potions that I'm going to have to investigate further. But I think I can safely rule out most memory charms, modifications and such. They're simply not strong enough to last four years and be as complete as this one seems to be. Of course, if I can get my hands on the medical records that might help."

"Are you already through all of these?" Ron asked, his hand indicating the four large stacks of books leaning against the wall of the office.

“Yes,” Hermione nodded distractedly. “Those are all the books from the Hogwarts library that have more than a mention of memory modification or charming. I already sent the Ministry’s ones back to Kingsley.”

Ron stared at her, a bit goggle-eyed. “How have you had time to read all of these?” he mumbled in awe. He would accuse her of having a time turner had he not known they had all been destroyed during their daring raid on the Ministry in fifth year.

“Of course I haven’t read all of them, Ron,” Hermione scowled down at something in her notes and used her quill to highlight something else. “I used an index charm.”

Ron thought about that before scowling. “There’s an index charm?”

Hermione raised her eyes from her work, studying at him intently. “Of course there’s an index charm, Ron. You don’t honestly believe that I read every book you’ve seen me with over the years.”

“Yeah,” he nodded vigorously, “I did.”

Hermione snorted and shook her head at him. “Honestly, if I had to read every book I needed for a single research paper, I’d have never left the Hogwarts library.”

“Well—” Ron drawled, but a quick look from his wife silenced him. He cleared his throat, searching for anything to get him out of trouble, and latched onto the first thought that entered his mind. “Did you know that Harry used to nick your papers while you and I were rowing?” He smiled proudly when she closed her mouth, indignant fury spreading across her face.

“He didn’t?”

“Neville said so,” Ron tattled, grinning.

Hermione burst out laughing then and pushed her paperwork away from her. “That little... cheater.”

Ron snorted. “Is that the best you can come up with, ‘cheater’?”

“Well,” Hermione defended. “Yes.”

His smile died when she turned to look at him, tears filling her eyes. “I won’t even scold him.”

Ron reached over and tugged her into his embrace. “I know,” he soothed. “And I won’t take the mickey out of him for putting Ginny in the pudding club.”

Hermione snorted and buried her face in his shirt, grasping tightly to the fabric. “Do you think they’ll ever be the same again?”

“No,” Ron answered honestly. “But that’s alright.”

They were quiet for a minute before she nodded and pulled away, wiping her tears off of her cheeks. “I promised Dora I’d come over and get the box of books that Remus set aside.”

“The ones from the Black stuff?” Ron asked. When she nodded, he stood. “I’ll get them for you.”

Ginny Rose might wake up soon and you'd better be ready to feed her. I won't be gone more than a few minutes."

Hermione laughed and agreed as Ron tossed floo powder in the grate and called out, "12 Grimmauld Place."

* * *

The family was all seated, watching him closely as he stood in front of the fireplace mantel, looking at the dozens of framed faces lining the old oak piece of wood. There were so many memories there—years and years of smiling, happy times. Arthur sighed deeply and vowed to add to that collection of photographs soon.

"Thank you for coming," he said softly, fidgeting with his hand that tingled and wouldn't close right. Giving it an annoyed shake, he continued. "And thank you for finding places for your little ones to be."

"Not a problem, Dad," George called out.

"Yeah," Fred piped up. "We haven't had Aunt Muriel watch the twins in yonks."

Molly gasped, "You didn't!" even as Arthur smiled. He knew the boys were winding their mother up. There was no way that Muriel would ever agree to watching the two sets of troublesome twins—nor would she probably survive it if she had.

"Our parents have them," Katie assured Molly with an agreeing nod from Alicia.

"Thank Merlin," Molly muttered, pressing her hand to her chest.

Arthur winked at George and tried to school his features more appropriately for the topic of tonight's Weasley Family Council. Bill gave him a nod of confidence, as did Percy, before Arthur's eyes settled on his youngest son. Ron was sitting with his arm wrapped around Hermione, who was rocking little Ginny Rose.

"I know we haven't had one of these meetings in a long time," he started. "But some things have been brought to light recently that I thought it was time you knew about."

"Arthur—"

"In a minute, Molly," he soothed, holding up his hand. "Last week, Remus contacted me and asked me to come to Grimmauld Place. When I arrived, there were several of the Order members there." He sighed and shifted his stiff leg, grimacing at the pain in the joint. "Remus told us a fantastic story—one that I had a hard time believing."

"Dad—"

"Just a minute, Fred," he said. "Remus went to Manchester, to a bookstore there. The man that helped him, a Muggle, looked exactly like Harry."

Molly gasped, her handkerchief covering her mouth. Arthur looked at her, a sad smile stretching

across his face.

“At first, I didn’t want to believe it might be true,” he said. “I’ve spent so much time telling myself that they’re gone...” his voice broke and he took a minute, swallowing thickly before nodding. “But it was true.”

“It was Harry?” Charlie asked, shifting toward his mother and pulling her into his embrace. Maggie, next to him, cuddled their newborn son to her, rocking the baby.

“It was,” Arthur confirmed.

Fred and George leaned toward each other, talking in quick whispers. Arthur held up his hand and cleared his throat.

“He’s living in Manchester, under the name of Jack Ingalls.”

“He’s lost his memory,” Ron added, smiling sheepishly at his father for interrupting.

Arthur nodded and continued. “He has no significant memory of anything before waking up in the hospital four years ago. Remus has been meeting with him... and with his wife.” Molly gasped again and Arthur caught her eye. “Molly, it’s Ginny,” he whispered.

“It is,” Bill nodded. “I’ve seen the pictures.”

Molly made a sound of protest, pushing away from Charlie and standing, hands on her hips, facing her eldest son. “You... you’ve known about this? All this time?”

“For a few days,” Bill nodded, his eyes darting to his father.

Arthur stepped forward and placed his hands on his wife’s shoulders. “It was my wish that we make sure before we told the entire family,” he said firmly, turning her around to face him. “We had to be sure,” he said softly. Her eyes flashed and he knew he was not going to get off easy for the decision, but she nodded resolutely, indicating to him that she would discuss it later, when they were alone.

Sighing, he continued. “Ginny has no memory either. They were in different towns, in different hospitals. They met—a completely chance encounter, Remus tells me—only a year ago, were married a few months after that, and are now expecting their first child.”

Molly moaned and swayed in his grasp, her hands fisting in his robes and wetting the fabric with her tears.

“The Order has been investigating,” Bill picked up the tale, gaining a nod from his father.

“The Aurors are going to be called in soon,” Ron said softly. “Kingsley is taking the case himself.”

“Who would do something like that?” Charlie asked, a hard expression on his face.

Ron opened his mouth to reply but Arthur cut him off, feeling that now wasn’t the time for that discussion. “We’re working on figuring that out, Charlie.”

“Remus has seen them?” Molly asked, pulling back from her husband. “Remus has seen... my baby, my Ginny... and Harry?”

Arthur smiled, reaching down to wipe away his wife's tears. “He's been in their home,” he nodded, “several times.” He took a deep breath. “And I've seen Ginny myself. I wasn't supposed to go,” he admitted, giving a sheepish shrug. “But I just had to see for myself.”

Molly's eyes looked deeply into his and the rest of the family faded away momentarily. He was talking to *her*, reassuring *her* that their child—their children—were alright.

“She's radiant, Molly. Glowing, in fact. And she seems... so in love with him.”

“She always was,” Molly whispered.

Arthur nodded and moved her grey hair off of her shoulder, marveling when he saw a tiny hint of red still mixed into it. “I was at the play park just down from their flat, trying to find the courage to knock on the door. And then she was there, in her boots and hat and mittens. And I swore I could see her like she was when she was little—cheeks pink from the cold, eyes darting about to take in everything. We sat on the bench and talked.”

“She—”

“I didn't tell her who I was,” he answered her question before it could be asked. “We just... talked.”

Molly's eyes searched his again and he willed her to know what he did, to be able to see the love in his daughter's eyes when she spoke about her husband and the child within her.

“She's still Ginny,” he said. “Even when she's Emma. I can still see that... spark in her.”

“Can I see them?” she asked hopefully, her hands winding under his arms and across his back.

“Soon,” he promised, pulling her into his embrace and not caring that tears were falling from his own eyes, in the middle of the family. “We'll see them soon.”

* * *

Ron closed the rough wooden door behind him and turned to see his brothers perched on various surfaces around the cluttered shed that was his father's sanctuary.

“Who was it?” Charlie demanded harshly, his muscular arms folded over his chest.

Ron winced, knowing that he probably should keep quiet. He glanced over at Bill who looked thoughtful before shrugging one shoulder.

“Malfoy,” Percy spoke up.

Charlie stared at him before turning his gaze back to Ron.

Fred and George looked at each other before nodding once, standing and pulling their wands.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Bill demanded as he settled back against the tattered seat of Sirius’ old motorbike. Ron remembered his father vaguely speaking about fixing the old thing up, but that was before the stroke took so much out of him.

“To the shop, of course,” Fred glared at him as if he were stupid.

Ron snorted. “To get what?”

George grinned and the ferocity of it made Ron shiver. “Little of this, little of that,” he shrugged.

“Ferret bait,” Fred added at the same time.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Charlie demanded. “We need a plan.”

“The Ministry is—” Ron started.

“The Ministry is doing nothing, Ron,” Charlie hissed. “That much is obvious.”

“We don’t know—” Percy started, but Bill cut him off.

“We know enough. I’ve seen the evidence.”

“There’s evidence?” Charlie took a large step toward Ron and, despite being a good eight inches taller than his brother, Ron stepped back. You just didn’t mess with a bloke who once worked with dragons for a living.

The brothers all looked at Ron, harsh faces demanding answers. “It’s all circumstantial,” he admitted. “I’m with you, believe me,” he held out his hands in protest. “I have more right to skin Malfoy alive than anyone—except maybe Harry.”

“We’ll be in line right after you, mate” Fred grimaced.

“What we need,” Percy said thoughtfully, “is a plan.”

“What sort of plan?” Ron asked, narrowing his eyes. Percy’s participation in this whole thing surprised Ron. He was usually the voice of reason amongst the hotheaded Weasleys.

“A plan in case the Ministry isn’t successful,” Percy shrugged as if it were completely obvious.

They all exchanged looks, breaking into wide, feral grins.

“Can we include some fireworks?” Fred asked.

“Please?” George begged.

Ron couldn’t hold in a laugh at their completely innocent and eager faces. He cracked up, leaning over onto the cluttered work counter, Muggle batteries and plugs flying onto the dirt floor.

“I could probably get my hands on a dragon,” Charlie said, his face completely serious and thoughtful. “Voegle wouldn’t ask too many questions.”

That sent his brothers into another fit of laughter. It felt horrible, and wonderfully freeing at the same time, to be laughing this much at such a serious thing. Ron could almost see Harry, standing against the table next to him, holding his side and laughing until he needed to remove his glasses. It was a very bittersweet thought, and Ron promised himself that it would happen soon.

“There was this hex I heard about once,” Bill mused after he’d calmed down. “I always wanted to try it.”

“What was it?” Ron asked, his sides starting to hurt from laughing so hard.

“Testes Twistes,” Bill proclaimed. They all winced when Bill grinned. “I heard if you hold your wand just right, and give it a twist, just... like so,” he demonstrated, holding his wand out in front of him, “you hear this really satisfying... pop.”

Ron groaned imagining the scene. When the shock of the idea wore off, and he pictured Malfoy’s eyes bulging out of his head, he started to laugh again.

“You know,” Percy grinned, a look that Ron had to struggle to remember. Days of young boys climbing trees and skipping rocks was the last time he remembered Percy being like this—engaging his brothers like this, and laughing and smiling with them. “I’ve always wanted to do a traditional English fox hunt.” Ron stared at him, wondering if Percy had lost his mind.

“I suppose a ferret would substitute well for a fox, don’t you?” he asked, raising an eyebrow at his brothers.

Fred and George latched onto the idea quickly, each grabbing old broomsticks and climbing aboard them like horses, calling ‘cheerio’ and ‘good on you, old boy’ to each other as they galloped around the shed.

“Hermione wouldn’t let me keep a ferret pelt in the house,” Ron quipped, sending his brothers into gales of laughter.

“Nah, we’d give it to Ginny to deal with,” Bill smiled. The brothers all winced at the thought.

“Come to think of it,” George said. “Maybe we don’t have to do anything to Malferret at all.”

“Come off it,” Fred growled. “We’re not letting him get off—”

“He may be right,” Bill put in. “We could just hand him over to Harry and Ginny.”

The reality of that statement shook them all and the laughter faded as they silently dealt with the feelings it brought up.

“How could he do it?” Ron asked the room in general. “How could he... just take everything away?”

“Jealousy,” Charlie shrugged.

“But why not kill them?” Percy asked.

“Malfoy never had the stones,” Fred said.

“Yeah,” George added, “He couldn’t even kill a frail old man on the Astronomy Tower.”

They all nodded, deep in thought.

“Besides,” Bill said quietly, “this hurt us all. He took everything they had away from them. Stripped them of their identities, their magic... and each other. He took everything that he envied away from them. And in the process, he came out looking like a hero.”

“Slimy little ferret,” Fred growled, tossing the half-forgotten broom he still held into the back of the shed where it clattered against shelves full of abandoned projects.

“I’m going to kill him with my bare hands,” Ron proclaimed.

“No you’re not,” Percy said firmly. “You’ve got a family now, Ronald. And as much as I agree with you, you need to think about them first.”

Ron ducked his head, feeling his cheeks heat from the gentle reprimand. The thought of being kept away from Hermione and Ginny Rose chilled his revenge lust.

“You’ve all got families,” Percy said, looking around at his brothers. “If it comes to that...” he cleared his throat and shifted in his robes. “If we do have to... take action. I’ll be the one to take the blame.”

“Now, hang on,” Ron scrambled to his feet, protesting over the tops of his other brother’s yells.

“I’m the one without a family,” Percy nodded logically.

“What about us?” George growled into his older brother’s face. “You don’t consider us family?”

“Too good for us?” Fred asked. But there was no bite in his words, because Ron could see the pain in his face at the thought of losing another brother.

“Of course not,” Percy defended, his hands up in front of him to ward off the stocky twins advancing toward him. “I only meant that I am not married, nor do I have children.”

“Yeah,” Charlie growled, “but you’ve still got family.”

“And family sticks together,” Ron added.

“It won’t come to that,” Bill assured them, calming the fears for a moment. “The Ministry will take care of it, and if they don’t... the Order will.”

“Yes, well,” Percy cleared his throat. “Ron, you keep us informed.”

Ron nodded, feeling very drained all of a sudden.

“We’ve got to get them home,” he mumbled. His brothers nodded solemnly.

“We will,” Bill assured him. “Kingsley’s got the Aurors on Malfoy day and night, Remus is working with Harry and Ginny, and Hermione’s reading every book in sight.” Ron snorted at that, rubbing

the back of his neck. "They'll come home soon."

"I hope you're right," Ron mumbled to himself.

* * *

Tonks smiled at the couple who were now sitting together on the worn yet comfortable chair. Emma was draped across Jack's lap and the two were whispering back and forth as they waited for the time that the Portkey would activate.

Several different methods of travel had been contemplated for the Ingalls' to get to the Burrow in Devon. Tonks had offered to side-along Apparate Emma there, but both Jack and Emma had refused flatly.

They had suggested driving, but as none of the participants in this latest adventure owned a car, that was out. Both Tonks and Remus were nervous about Emma's landing with a Portkey, until Emma herself questioned if they could just make a chair into the Portkey and she could sit in it. Remus and Tonks had studied each other and both shrugged at their apparent lack of creativity and Emma's brilliant idea.

Tonks tried not to hear the quiet words passing between the two but found it hard not to.

* * *

"Are you nervous?"

"About the travel?" Emma asked as she lay her head down on Jack's shoulder. "Or about the family?"

"Both," Jack shrugged. "Mostly about everyone's reaction."

"I'm not sure what to expect," Emma said quietly. Her fingers found the space between buttons on Jack's shirt and slipped inside, rubbing the skin underneath. "I just want everything to go well, you know."

"I know," Jack said and sighed. Emma pulled back a bit until she could see his face clearly.

"What is it?"

"I just..." Jack flushed and looked away. "I'm nervous too."

"That's understandable, Jack. Neither of us remembers anything of our pasts, and now this has been placed in front of us."

"I know," Jack shrugged and Emma reached up to lay her hand along his face. "I just wonder what they'll think about me."

"They already love you, Remus told us that."

Jack shrugged. "They loved Harry; I'm not Harry."

“And I’m not Ginny,” Emma protested.

“What if they think I’m not good enough for you?” Jack asked in a quiet voice, finally giving voice to his fears. “They’re *your* family, Em. They look like you and have the same blood and all. I don’t have anyone like that.”

Emma reached over to take Jack’s hand and placed it firmly on her belly. “You have me and our child. We’re all the family that you will ever need, Jack; the rest is just... like icing on a cake. You and I, and our children, are the most important thing. I’m sure I loved my parents and brothers and I might even, with time, learn to love them again. But what you and I have is real, it’s strong and it’s right here; I’m not about to forget that, Jack.”

Jack smiled sadly as he caressed her belly. “I don’t know what I did to ever deserve you.”

“You were you,” Emma answered and kissed him softly.

* * *

Molly wiped her hands on her apron one more time, the damp fabric not doing much to drive her nerves away.

The table was set with her best dishes. She’d been baking and preparing food all day, but it still didn’t seem enough. She glanced at the sideboard, groaning under the weight of all the food.

“Oh no,” she mumbled to the empty kitchen, “I forgot to make an apple tart for Charlie. He’ll be so disappointed.”

A soft chuckle sounded from behind her and she turned to see her husband leaning against the door jam, his arms crossed in front of him. “Charlie will live,” he scolded slightly. “Besides, I doubt if he’ll even notice.”

“I had to make all their favorites,” Molly worried again. “It’s the first time—”

Her voice failed and she rolled her eyes at herself, hating that the past two weeks had been spent crying so much. It felt like she had been thrust back four years, to the weeks after the funeral—only flipped upside down. She wasn’t mourning anymore, but her tears still couldn’t be called joyous or celebratory. They were tears of anger, and frustration and mourning the loss of those four years.

Arthur’s arms wrapped around her from behind and he kissed her cheek softly. “I thought we agreed no more tears.”

“I never agreed,” she chuckled, wiping at the evidence.

“It’s going to be hard,” he agreed softly, rocking her back and forth. Molly sighed and laid her head against his shoulder. “They likely won’t remember anything.”

“I know,” she whispered, her heart beating painfully at the thought. A million flashes of past moments played in her mind—impish grins and childish pranks and skinned knees and tears shed over cups of tea.

“But we have to try our best,” Arthur continued.

“I know,” she affirmed again. They’d spent hours talking, late into the still blackness of their bedroom; talking about what it would be like to have them come, what they would remember, what the family should expect.

“Now, come on,” Arthur tugged gently at her waist, “hang up the apron. Come out and share a cup of eggnog with me. The children are restless and I promised them a story.”

Molly laughed when he pulled away from her, playfully holding out his hand in invitation. She sighed, cast one last warming charm over the food and removed her worn apron, hanging in on the hook by the back door.

The living room was bedlam. Her eyes drifted over the chaos and she winced as one of Fred’s daughters ran head-long into the Christmas tree making it shudder and skid along the hardwood floor. Bobbles and ornaments rained down onto the floor and scattered under chairs and feet. Molly silently waved her wand and the tree righted itself, decorations returning to their spots. Pandora didn’t slow down at all, but kept right on moving through the room.

“Never a dull moment,” Arthur mused, a contented smile filling his face.

“No, there isn’t,” Molly agreed. She watched as Arthur did his best to gather the children around his favorite chair, storybook in hand. The parents seemed relieved when the littlest Weasleys sat on the ground, their eager faces looking up to their grandfather as he read them the true story of Saint Nicholas and his magical journey around the earth.

“I remember that story,” Bill said as he came up beside her, his arm wrapping over her shoulder.

“It wasn’t until you’d gone off to Hogwarts that you refused to listen to it,” Molly raised her eyebrow in challenge.

Bill only smiled and shrugged. “It was tradition.”

“It’s about time we got back to those traditions,” Molly said wistfully. Her eyes traveled over to the clock on the wall, the hands for Harry and Ginny pointing at ‘Lost’ as they had for four years.

If only Molly had understood what that meant. The day of the Final Battle, those hands had slipped over to that position and hadn’t moved since. It puzzled Molly, why they didn’t simply fall off the clock altogether, but being the only clock of its kind, she hadn’t any precedent to judge it by.

“They’ll be here soon, Mum,” Bill soothed. He patted her shoulder soothingly and she turned her attention back to her husband, trying to focus on what he was saying, rather than counting the seconds hand as it marched around the clock.

“Wotcher!” Tonks called out from the kitchen, making Molly jump. It had only been a few minutes that she had been musing on how wonderful it was to see so many children in the Burrow again.

The call could only mean one thing as Dora and Remus were bringing Harry and—Jack and Emma.

Molly shook her head, trying to remind herself to use the other names. It would be hard, but Remus felt that it was best, for now, to use Jack and Emma.

Her nervousness returned ten-fold and she held onto the back of the sofa, not sure if it was to keep her upright or to keep her from racing into the other room and grabbing both of her children in a huge, rib-crushing hug.

It seemed to take forever for them to enter the room; her heart beat away the seconds. And then, suddenly, there they were.

Molly sucked in a breath at how different they looked—yet so similar to how she remembered them.

Harry was taller and broader of shoulder. His face was... harder, if that was the right word. So much more angular and aged than she'd imagined he would look. He looked less like his father's pictures too. Molly supposed age and circumstance had done that for him.

Ginny—well, she was simply beautiful. Her red hair was clipped back partially, letting some of the curls fall around her shoulders. Her face was thin, but her cheeks were pink—either from the cold outside or the heat of the room they had just entered.

Tucked into Jack's side tightly, she seemed thinner and not much taller than she had been when Molly had last seen her. The small bump of a belly was the thing that drew Molly's attention most. Ginny's hand was curled around it, protecting the baby inside as her eyes scanned the crowd in front of them.

"Jack and Emma," Remus said, joining the couple on Jack's side. "These are the Weasleys—your family."

The look of utter bewilderment and empty recognition hurt the most, Molly thought. But she steeled herself, knowing that someone had to make the first move. *Remember the names*, she scolded herself.

"It's nice to finally see you again," she said quietly as she stepped forward. She took a deep breath, willing her cracking voice to calm down. "We've missed you."

Jack nodded woodenly, his features not giving away any emotion. Emma smiled nervously at her.

"May I?" Molly asked, holding out her arms. The couple exchanged a quick glance before Emma leaned forward, letting her mother pull her into a light embrace. Molly made sure to keep it soft and gentle, not wanting to frighten the young woman.

Jack was far less comfortable with the show of affection and stiffly patted her on the back. Oh dear, she thought, that was worse than Harry had been at his most distant. What on earth had happened to this boy to make him like this? She brushed the thought away, knowing there would be time to analyze it later.

Arthur stepped up beside her, his hand comfortably resting on her shoulder.

"You," Emma said softly, awe and confusion in her face.

“Forgive me?” Arthur asked softly. “When we found you... I just had to know.”

Emma looked torn before she and Jack shared a look. She leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on her father’s cheek. “You could have told me,” she said softly so that only the four could hear.

“I should have,” Arthur insisted. Father and daughter shared a quiet moment; their eyes locked before Arthur cleared his throat and thrust his hand out for Jack to shake.

“Thank you,” he said simply, “for making her happy. And... welcome home.”

Jack opened his mouth to reply but simply nodded instead. “My pleasure,” he finally choked out.

Molly watched it all, her heart aching from the desire to grab these two children up and wrap them in homemade quilts and make them hot chocolate and never let them go.

“Molly, perhaps now would be a good time for dinner?”

She nodded at Arthur’s words. “I’ve made all your favorites,” she smiled and then it slipped. “At least—they used to be...”

“I’m sure we’ll love everything,” Emma said softly. “Remus has told us what a wonderful cook you are.”

Molly blushed and forced out a laugh. “Oh, I don’t know about that...”

She led the way, opening the door to the expanded kitchen, and sighing as her family... all together at last, filed in and took their seats.

She watched as Jack and Emma sat next to each other, Emma’s hand reaching for his and giving it a quick squeeze. His shoulders relaxed a bit, but he still had the alert look of a protective animal about him.

It might not be perfect yet, she mused as Hermione and Katie helped her levitate dishes onto the table, but it was what they had to start with.

* * *

There were redheads everywhere and it made Emma rather dizzy. She clung to Jack’s arm, feeling his heartbeat against her fingers.

“All right?”

“All right,” she nodded back. She took a deep breath and stepped back into the kitchen, painfully aware of the many sets of eyes on them both.

“There are two empty places here,” a bushy-haired brunette woman offered and Emma smiled gratefully, sure she could not possibly let go of Jack right now. He felt like the only thing anchoring her in a sea of confusing feelings.

Before coming here, Emma was half expecting the place and the people to cause a cascade of long-

forgotten memories. Both disappointed and relieved that it hadn't happened, Emma sighed as Jack pulled her chair out for her. He sat stiffly in his own, his shoulder brushing hers. It seemed cramped in the room, but it was warm and cozy. Emma closed her eyes, letting the smells and sounds wash over her, straining to catch anything that might help her orient herself.

"We've expanded the kitchen, of course," Molly—the woman who was supposed to be her mother—said. Emma saw the same eyes that looked back at her in the mirror every day in the aged face and it caused a swell of emotion. Looking around the table, she could pick her own features out of most of the faces.

The thought made her gasp a tiny bit and Jack turned worried eyes on her. She smiled, and not being able to explain it to him, she shifted and patted her belly, blaming it on the baby.

"It's very nice," she nodded, smiling at Molly. Despite the similarities in their looks, she still couldn't bring herself to let the word 'mother' fall from her lips. It just wasn't real yet.

"Now, dish up everyone!" Arthur urged, taking his place at the head of the table.

Emma started, feeling Jack do the same next to her, as the food began hovering over the table, moving on after each person had taken a portion.

"It takes a bit to get used to," the bushy-haired woman whispered, cradling her tiny baby to her chest while her husband filled her plate. "I remember the first time I came to the Burrow, my eyes nearly popped out of my head."

Emma nodded, remembering that Remus had told them the woman's name was Hermione and that she was married to Ginny's youngest brother, Ron. The idea of having that many siblings—let alone any at all—still boggled Emma's mind.

"'Bout like the first time I went to your parents'," Ron agreed.

Hermione chuckled and patted his arm. "I thought we'd never get you out of the kitchen."

"Your family isn't magical?" Emma asked, nodding when Jack offered her a dinner roll. She flashed him a quick look, wondering what exactly he thought of all of this. He looked as utterly bewildered as she felt—yet even more so, as his dark hair stood out amongst all the redheads.

"No," Hermione shook her head. "I'm a Muggleborn. Neither of my parents are magical at all. Although, we think my great-grandmother may have been a witch."

Emma nodded politely, not sure what to say to that. She turned back to her plate, taking small bits of each dish. Jack raised his eyebrow when she took a few green beans off of the dish that floated by. She raised an eyebrow back in challenge and felt her cheeks flush.

"You hate green beans," he whispered.

"I know," she shrugged a shoulder. "But I don't want to be rude." He watched her for a minute before she felt his leg nudge hers gently. "Besides, you hate ham and chicken pie," she pointed out, nodding to the generous helping he had heaped on his plate. "How are you going to choke that

down?"

Jack smiled slightly, nudging her again. "No clue," he admitted.

Emma raised her eyes, catching several guilty eyes darting away from where they must have been listening.

"You don't have to eat anything you don't like," Molly suggested in a small voice. "I just wasn't sure... you always used to love green beans."

"Oh," Emma sighed, looking down at the limp strands of green and swallowing thickly.

"Maybe it's the pregnancy," Tonks suggested from across the table. "I remember not being able to stomach tomatoes at all. Remus couldn't even say the word before I would be sick."

"She's being serious," Remus added, gathering chuckles from around the table.

"It might be," Emma conceded, although she knew it was a lie. "We'll be fine," she nodded, after taking a deep breath.

The family continued to serve themselves, massive amounts of food disappearing from their plates and strange conversations bouncing around the table. Her throat tightened as the meal continued, allowing her to only take small bites and force them down.

"... I think it may be Puddlemere's year," one of the twin men said.

"I was planning on painting the shed this next Spring I think..."

Ron scoffed through a mouthful of food, earning himself an elbow to the side from Hermione. "What about the Cannons?" Several of the men, and a few of the women, chuckled.

"... Mum, I was wondering if you'd watch the girls this week one day..."

"Ron, you're delusional," the thick-armed man said loudly. Emma was fairly sure his name was Charlie—or was it Bill?

"... and the Minister just needs to add his recommendation to the bill..."

"You always say that," Ron continued. "And just look what they did last year..."

"... what are your plans for the holiday, Dora..."

"Don't mind them," Hermione excused bouncing the baby on her shoulder while taking small bites. "They go a bit insane about Quidditch."

"Bung a roll over here, Bill!"

"... it's all sixes and sevens, anyway..."

"... how we're going to deal with the press..."

“... Fred, your daughters are up to something over there...”

Emma flinched, her head spinning at many different conversations. Mixed in the middle were words that she felt should have meant things to her... but they didn't. It all sounded a bit like insane nonsense. Dora caught her eye amidst the chaos and winked. Emma took a deep breath to clear her head.

“Jack, what do you study at Uni?” Hermione asked, making Jack jerk forward a bit in his chair. He hurriedly chewed his bite and took a drink before answering softly.

“Law enforcement is what I'm planning,” he said, catching Emma's eye. She latched onto the subject, thankful to Hermione for stilling the movement of the room for a moment.

“He's a brilliant student,” Emma said, reaching for his hand and lacing their fingers together.

Jack smiled gratefully and squeezed her hand. She could feel the tension in him and glanced around the table, hoping that the meal was almost over. What she wanted, more than anything, was a few quiet moments with only Jack, wrapped in his arms where the world made sense and she knew she belonged.

“Let's all move to the sitting room,” Arthur suggested, perhaps seeing Jack and Emma's discomfort. “Molly, we'll take coffee in there I think.”

“Oh, that is a wonderful idea,” the Weasley matriarch agreed. She pulled out her wand, something Emma just couldn't quite get used to, and began floating dishes and food to the sideboard and the counters.

Jack squeezed her hand and Emma focused back on him.

“Just a bit longer,” he suggested quietly as he helped her stand. Emma nodded in agreement, sighing. If he could handle it, so could she.

* * *

Ron Weasley was very puzzled by the man standing next to him. Harry—Jack—had finally left Ginny—Emma's—side for the first time that evening, although he was only a few steps away. Jack was very emotionally closed off, even more so than Harry had ever been. The man hadn't said more than a few sentences all night. Emma had done most of the talking, although even that was scarce and with many glances at her husband, almost as if measuring each word carefully.

“Are you really my Uncle Hawwy?”

Ron's attention focused near his knees where Fred's daughter, Persephone, stood in front of the two men. Jack shifted the bottle of Butterbeer in his hand and squatted down to face the little girl.

“What do you think?” he asked, quirked an eyebrow and smiling at her.

The girl narrowed her eyes in concentration and placed her small hands on either side of his face. “You look like his pictures,” she murmured, turning his head this way and that. Her fingers pushed

his hair back a bit, and then pulled the skin on his nose, causing his glasses to slide to the end. She leaned in closer to his face and peered deep into his eyes.

“You’re nice like my Daddy said he was.”

Jack smiled but stayed silent as she continued to look him up and down. Her tiny fingers touched the ragged scar along his jaw and then reached down and took his right hand in hers, tracing the scar-words there.

“What do you think?” Jack asked again.

The little girl shrugged and then smiled. “I don’t know. But, I think you could be... if you wanted to.” Fairly awkward chuckles were heard around and Jack rose to his full height again, glancing to see Emma watching him closely. He raised an eyebrow at her and she nodded with a small smile. This seemed to appease him and he took another drink of the Butterbeer.

When Ron had first offered it, Jack refused with a scrunched up nose, but Ron persisted and Jack had taken the bottle. He seemed pleasantly surprised at the taste and continued to sip it as the women drifted toward Ginny, who settled onto the comfortable sofa.

“So, you two thought up any names yet?” Ron asked Jack, hoping to spark any kind of conversation with his once-best friend. He hated the awkwardness between them. It felt so... wrong.

“Yeah,” Jack nodded, his eyes wandering to his wife who was glancing through a photo album of someone’s wedding. Their eyes locked for a moment and she gave a half-hearted shrug and smile. “For a girl it’ll be Elizabeth Anne and for a boy it’ll be James Derek.”

Ron nodded thoughtfully. “Did anyone tell you—”

“That James was my dad?” Jack asked with a small smile. Ron nodded. “Yeah, Remus did, but Emma and I had already chosen it before we knew.”

Ron drained his bottle although he continued to hold it. “Why Derek?”

Jack glanced at the red headed man and then at his wife again. “Derek is my best mate’s name.” Ron flinched and tightened his grip on the bottle, but Jack didn’t seem to notice. “We’ve been mates for a couple of years now,” Jack explained. “Seen each other through hell and all. He’s seeing Emma’s best friend also.”

“So you and this Derek are close?” Ron asked. He looked away quickly, trying to hide the hurt at hearing that Harry—Jack!—didn’t remember him at all.

Jack eyed him for the tightness in his tone before nodding. “Like brothers,” he confirmed. “We went to this football match last year, England versus United States.” Jack’s face lit up at the memory. “So we’re in the stands and we’re cheering like mad, yelling, drinking and generally making a nuisance of ourselves, right. Derek even has this Cross of St. George painted on his chest.” Jack laughed and Ron only half-smirked, visions of himself and Harry at Quidditch games coming to mind. They’d never been; but Ron had always wanted to go. The World Cup didn’t count, according to Ron, as they hadn’t been old enough to do all the things Ron pictured them doing—*Bloke Things*.

“Then, all hell breaks loose,” Jack continued. “England makes the final goal, only a few seconds to go, and wins the match. The crowd goes insane, screaming, pushing and trying to get down onto the field. Derek and I were climbing over the seats, trying to get out of their way. This huge bloke grabs Derek by the waist and hauls him off into the middle of this... riot. So, I start hopping chairs, trying to get down to him. Finally, he manages to get loose from the bloke and Derek hauls off and clocks him.”

Ron could only nod in acceptance that he was hearing the story. A slow rage had started to build in his stomach and he didn’t know if it would make him explode or just be sick all over his shoes.

“So, I dive in, fists flying, into the middle of all these Yanks, bent on proving that their team was robbed of the victory.” Jack shook his head in amusement and took another pull of his drink. “We both got arrested and hauled off to jail. Emma had to come get me.”

“I bet she wasn’t too happy about that,” Ron said with a smirk.

“No,” Jack shook his head. “She wasn’t; but don’t let her fool you, if she hadn’t been pregnant she’d been right there with me.”

“She’s scrappy,” Ron said with a fond glance at the woman who was once his little sister.

“You have no idea,” Jack mumbled with a smile.

Ron swallowed the bile that rose in his throat. He *did* know how Ginny could be. Silently, as he watched both Jack and Emma, he vowed to make Malfoy pay. He didn’t care if it cost him everything he owned—he would pound the ferret into the mud for taking so much away from his family.

It should have been he and Harry as best mates. Nothing against this... Derek, whoever he was, but he had no right to be Harry’s best mate. That was Ron’s spot. And Harry should never have to tell Ron about how feisty his sister could be. It shouldn’t be awkward and hard to talk to Harry.

But it was... and it was all Malfoy’s fault.

Jack slowly wandered over to where Emma was talking with Ron’s mother, standing in front of the large Grandfather clock there.

He watched awed at the tenderness and affection that radiated from both Jack and Emma—even as they just touched hands. Jack’s hand came to rest along Emma’s back and she leaned into him tightly, their bodies melding together.

Ron swallowed thickly, remembering how Harry and Ginny used to stand the same way.

A small spike of victory shot through him seeing that; whatever Malfoy had hoped to accomplish with his deceit and evil and lies—it hadn’t happened. He had gained four years, yes, but he hadn’t won.

From what Ron could see, it was Harry and Ginny who had won. They were together. They’d found each other, despite overwhelming odds, and were finally on their way home.

That was certainly something to think about. Ron decided then and there, if he ever got to face Malfoy alone, he'd be sure to point that out to the man. *Harry and Ginny had won.*

* * *

Molly held back all evening, watching and waiting until Emma was alone. She now stood in front of the grandfather clock, her head tilted to the side and her hand bracing her back as she studied the intricate hands on it.

The confused and completely overwhelmed look on her face all evening made Molly feel a bit selfish. She should have realized that the Weasley family was a force to be reckoned with, and that it might be too much for Jack and Emma tonight. But the deep ache in her heart could only be satisfied with seeing her baby, and she had begged Remus to invite the Ingalls' for dinner.

Molly could see now that it may have been too much. Emma was looking pale and extremely tired as she stood all alone.

"I wish I had known what that meant," she said quietly as she approached Emma. Her hand reached out and traced the glass where both Ginny's and Harry's hands still pointed at lost.

"How does it work?" Emma asked, her eyes not leaving the hands of the clock, which showed where each family member was.

Molly studied her profile for a minute, shaken that she could see the little girl she had raised in the young woman before her.

"It's a part of your magic," Molly said simply. "When you were born, we placed a small drop of your blood on the hand. I charmed them myself."

Emma nodded thoughtfully. "And it's said lost..."

"Ever since then," Molly nodded sadly, old regret welling like a soap bubble inside of her. "If I had known..." She swallowed a sob and shook her head, knowing that breaking down now would only make Emma feel more uncomfortable. "We assumed that it meant the way you had been... lost... to us. If I had known that it didn't mean..."

"That we had died," Emma said, her eyes meeting Molly's for a moment. "You can't blame yourself." Her words were soft, yet they drove into Molly's heart deeply.

"I'm a mother," she protested, swiping at the tears that escaped down her cheeks. "I should know these things."

Emma smiled sadly and rubbed her belly. "I worry about that," she admitted with a nod. "If I'll be able to tell he's in trouble."

Molly sighed, taking a chance and reaching out to place her hand over her daughter's, feeling the tight stretch of skin over her growing grandchild. Her heart swelled when Emma didn't pull away, but smiled once again.

"All mothers feel that," she admitted. "I'd like to say it gets better with each one, but I can't. You'll always worry. It's part of being a mother."

Emma nodded, her hand turning over to clasp Molly's tightly. "I'm sorry," she said softly, her own tears falling down flushed cheeks. "I'm sorry that you had to worry these four years."

"You can't blame yourself," Molly echoed her words back before reaching forward and wrapping her arms around the frail shoulders of her daughter. This time, Emma gave herself over fully to the embrace.

The feeling was wonderful, but it faded as Emma pulled away. "Why doesn't it say 'home' now?" she asked, wiping her tears and pressing her hand into her back again.

Molly composed herself as Jack came up behind his wife, his hands taking the place of hers and pressing lightly into the muscles there.

"I'm not positive," Molly admitted. "But I think it's because you're still a bit lost." She smiled, watching the couple share a silent conversation.

"I think it's time to get you home, love," Jack said quietly, caressing the side of her face gently. Molly sighed happily at the gesture, and the love she could see behind it. There wasn't much more she could have wished for her daughter.

"I'm tired," Emma nodded, laying her head in the crook of Jack's neck and wrapping her arms around him.

"You know where we are now," Molly nodded. "We're here if you need something." It hurt to let them go, when all she wanted was to take them upstairs and give them a home to live in, and the family that they'd obviously been without for all these years.

"We appreciate it," Jack said, looking deeply into her eyes. Molly smiled, finally—after the entire evening watching him—she could see a bit of acceptance and understanding in those clear emerald eyes.

"Next week is Christmas," she ventured. "I'm not sure what your plans for the holiday are..."

Emma looked up at her husband and then at her mother. "Can we let you know?"

"Of course," Molly nodded, reaching out to pat her arm gently. "You look entirely knackered, dear. Let Jack take you home and get some rest."

Emma nodded, sinking back into Jack's embrace. "Thank you," Jack said softly.

Molly nodded, feeling her chest tighten. She stepped away slowly, searching for Arthur in the room. Almost as if he sensed her need, he materialized in front of her, taking her in his own arms.

"They'll be fine, Mollywobbles," he whispered into her hair. "They know their way home now."

She could only nod as her tears soaked into the worn fabric of his robes. "They do," she said softly.

Chapter 12

December 2002

The slam of the heavy book echoed through the room and Hermione froze, afraid that she might have awakened Ginny Rose. She sat completely still and listened, but the baby didn't cry.

Frustration crested over her like a huge wave, leaving only exhaustion and confusion in its wake. She had been through everything; every resource both the Order and the Ministry could find and she was no closer to understanding what may have happened to Harry and Ginny.

Hermione's eyes hurt after looking at so much small print, some of it written in old English, with all the extra additions. Ron had scolded her, saying that soon she might need glasses. Silently, she admitted that he might be right; but admitting it out loud to him was a completely different thing.

There were still several potions to look through, however Hermione wasn't hopeful. None of them had powerful enough ingredients to do the kind of damage that was indicated by the Muggle medical records that Remus had provided.

Glancing at the tattered file folders, Hermione reached out and touched the edges of them, shuddering again at the descriptions of the injuries both Harry and Ginny had sustained.

The evening Remus delivered them to her would forever be etched into her memory.

She sat at her desk, pushing away her research materials and took a deep breath. Ron had come home early, claiming that he was tired and wanted to spend the evening lying on the sofa. Hermione had smiled in understanding and handed their daughter over. Ron had grimaced for a moment, parenting obviously not part of his plans; until Ginny Rose cooed at him. And then he was happy to take her into his arms and tell her little stories while she stared up at him.

Sighing, and knowing that the information wouldn't get any better by waiting, Hermione opened the top file and found Emma Stanton's medical file. She glanced through it carefully, noting any injuries on a separate piece of parchment. Head trauma, cuts and bruises... the things that Hermione would have suspected. No indication of sexual trauma.

"Thank Merlin," she breathed deeply at that. Everything else seemed to be in order, until she turned the page and found the results of multiple CT scans and x-rays. Hermione peered at the images, trying to find anything out of place, before she summoned a large tome and flipped it open to where it showed a cross-section diagram of a human brain. The medical book had been a gift from her colleagues at the Law Division when she'd announced her pregnancy. And while she hadn't used it often, there were times when she glanced through it.

"That's not right," she murmured, her finger tracing the large, dark shape over the area where the hippocampus should be. She lay the image down and flipped through the paperwork until she found the physician's notes about the scan.

"Large mass of scar tissue located on hippocampus. Possible cause of memory loss. Origin

unknown," she repeated.

Quickly opening Jack's file, she located his CT scan images as well. The same dark mass was on his brain as well.

"That helps," she murmured, laying the images back into their respective folders. She noted the scar tissue on her parchment and closed Emma's file, turning her attention to Jack's.

What she read there, however, horrified her. The deep cuts, broken bones, punctured lung... the list was too long for her to fathom him living. And with only Muggle medicine to help him heal—it was a wonder he could function at all.

The most horrific thing, however, was the stack of photographs showing the injuries in great detail.

She cried out when she uncovered the fourth one. A great hole was cut into the skin of Jack's forehead, down to the bone, where Harry's scar had been.

Ron was at her side in an instant, Ginny Rose wailing in the other room.

"What is it?" he yelled, his wand pulled and his eyes wild.

"Oh, Ron," she cried, clasping at his robes and burying her face against the gore. "Look what happened to him! Look what he did!"

"Bloody hell," Ron swore, violently turning away from the desk. He cleared his throat several times and Hermione knew he was swallowing back vomit. She herself felt like losing her entire dinner. "That explains the missing scar."

"They must have done a skin graft," Hermione mumbled, reaching blindly behind her to turn the photos over. She couldn't take seeing them anymore. "Is Ginny Rose—"

"She's fine," Ron mumbled, running his hand through his hair roughly before squeezing her shoulders. "She's just mad because I put her down on her blanket. When you screamed—"

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, looking up at him. "When I saw that..."

"I understand," Ron nodded jerkily. He looked as if he might still be sick, pale and slightly green.

"I'll get Ginny Rose," she suggested. "Why don't you... take a minute."

Ron nodded distractedly, his eyes wandering to the stack of overturned photographs before snapping quickly away again. "I'm going to make him pay, Hermione."

Fear coursed through her at the coldness in his voice, but the image of Harry's disfigured face flashed before her and she pressed a hand to her queasy stomach. "I know, Ron," she said softly.

Hermione sighed, roughly rubbing her eyes again, willing the photograph to go away. It was true what they said, you could never get rid of something you had seen—it would always be burned into your brain. Forever.

The sound of the floo activating in the sitting room, drew Hermione out of her office. Tonks and Orion were struggling out of the fireplace, Orion clutching a huge bag stuffed with play things.

“Hope you don’t mind,” Tonks said with a shrug. “We’ve been cooped up all day.”

Hermione smiled and leaned down to kiss Orion’s head. “Not at all,” she said, smoothing the little girl’s chestnut brown curls. “Ginny Rose is still asleep, but I could use a study break.”

Tonks scrunched up her nose. “Things not going well?”

Fighting back tears with a sigh of frustration, Hermione shook her head. “I’ve looked through everything, Dora. I can’t find anything that could explain what happened to them.”

Tonks nodded and turned as Orion upended her entire bag and toys scattered all over the floor.

“She’s fine,” Hermione dismissed Tonks’ glare. “Honestly, we’re going to have to get used to it. And, it’s not as if Ron picks up after himself anyway. There’s always something lying about that shouldn’t be.”

“Very true,” Tonks nodded, sinking down into a plush chair. “We didn’t just come on a social call, though.” She pointed to a box near the fireplace. “I was cleaning earlier—”

“You?” Hermione scoffed. “Cleaning?”

“Alright,” Tonks nodded, her cheeks blushing to rival as Weasley, “I tripped over an old bookcase in the attic and it fell over. I found a few more books tucked back behind it. I thought I’d bring them over. They look Dark to me.”

Hermione sighed, staring at the box. She really should start thinking about what to make for dinner. Ron would be home in a few hours, and he wouldn’t be in a good mood. He was supposed to be meeting with Kingsley to discuss the progress, or lack thereof, on Harry and Ginny’s case. Come to think of it...

“Dora, aren’t you supposed to be at a meeting?” Hermione asked, finally standing and retrieving the box. It wouldn’t hurt anything to glance through the books while she visited with her friend.

“I am,” Tonks sighed. “But I’ve been working so much lately that Orion thinks Molly and my mother are better than me. Besides, Kingsley will fill me in.”

Hermione nodded in sympathy, the thought of having to leave Ginny Rose for so long was heart wrenching.

“Well, I’m sure she’s enjoying the time with her mum,” Hermione smiled at the little girl who was pretending to charm her dolls into doing something with her toy wand. Hermione pulled the first book out and grimaced at the gruesome cover, *Dark Arts Moste Terrible*.

“It’s been fun,” Tonks agreed. “We’ve played more games in the past two days than we have in the past two months.”

Hermione smiled sadly, understanding the difficulty in juggling a family and a career.

"You have been looking more tired lately," she observed casually, cracking open the book and sighing at the description of a potion to cause infertility. '... most often used for servants...' she read and then blanched at the thought. What a horrid book!

"I have been tired," Tonks admitted. "I think it's this case. As if it weren't stressful enough, trying to keep it out of the press and away from the Minister is sending me around the twist. I'm having to work two different angles, just to cover my tracks."

Hermione nodded again. She had been having some of the same concerns while masquerading with the book she was supposedly trying to write. Although, she mused, she truly *could* write a book on memory charms now, having read almost everything available.

She continued to thumb through the book, scowling at the illustrations and the descriptions of horrid spells. Her finger trailed down the page as she watched Orion scold one of her dolls for spilling invisible tea everywhere. She and Tonks shared a chuckle.

Her eyes drifted back to the book, half listening as Ori dictated behavior to her toys.

Knee Reversing Hex.

Muscle Freezing Charm.

Internal Fire Hex.

Memory Blocking Charm.

The book jolted in her lap as her finger followed the instructions...

... incantation... malicious intent... blood to bind the spell...

"No," she muttered, sitting up in the chair, ignoring Tonks' worried question. "No, it can't be."

... permanent if the caster chooses... only reversible by breaking the blood seal...

"That's it," she whispered, standing, the book hanging limply at her side. "He used a blood seal." Her mind raced with the possibilities. The word 'reversible' repeated over and over in her head.

Suddenly, she knew she had to go to the Ministry. Ron had to know this. Kingsley had to know.

What had been done could be undone... it would be almost impossible, but it could be done.

"Can you watch Ginny Rose!" she blurted out. Tonks stared at her, mouth gaping open.

"Er... yes, I can stay."

"I found it, Dora," Hermione stated, her heart pounding with each word she said. "I found it."

Tonks stared at her a moment more before nodding decisively. "Go!" she yelled.

"There's milk in the cold larder," Hermione muttered as she stumbled to the fireplace.

Tonks had already thrown in a handful of floo powder and was trying to guide Hermione into the green flames.

“Ministry of Magic, Atrium,” Tonks yelled for Hermione.

Vaguely, Hermione reached up and touched her tousled hair, wondering if it was prudent to run through the halls of the Ministry haphazardly dressed and clutching a book to her.

But the thought was pushed to the back of her head when the Atrium came into focus and she realized... she had found the missing puzzle piece.

They could undo the treachery that Malfoy had started so long ago. She was going to get her best friends back.

* * *

Ron ruffled his hair in annoyance and stared at the map of the Final Battle once more. He was missing something, he just knew it.

“I can’t believe that they never checked for Apparition or Portkeys,” he muttered.

Kingsley, sitting at the table across from him sighed and rubbed his face harshly. “I know, Ron. The whole investigation was very rushed and a complete bodge job.”

“Get it done, whether it’s dirty or not,” Ron nodded. “That sounds like Scrimgeour.”

“It’s not as if he’s incompetent,” Kingsley said, although the hint of doubt in his voice was enough to make Ron question what the Head Auror might know.

“Kingsley, are you trying to tell me that they didn’t do a thorough job?” Ron’s stomach rolled at the thought.

The man’s black eyes settled on Ron, piercing straight into him. “The Ministry did what they felt needed to be done, Ron. I’m not excusing it, because it wasn’t done right. My biggest regret is that I didn’t push hard enough, as an Auror or as a member of the Order. It was all so... confusing and abrupt,” he shook his head. “There are no excuses. We failed Harry and Ginny. And, one day, I’ll ask for their forgiveness, but not until I do everything in my power now to get them back with us and punish who did this to them. That’s all I have left to offer them.”

Ron nodded, understanding the sentiment behind the words. He felt the same. Everyone had been so caught up in mourning and cleaning up the mess after the war that they had let Harry and Ginny down. No one had asked the important questions, and the answers had faded into the past.

“I know I’m missing something,” Ron muttered as he rubbed his eyes and let them focus back on the map. “There has to be some other proof around here.”

“Maybe you need to take a break,” Kingsley suggested. “Get a cup of coffee, something to eat... Sometimes things become clearer when you’re not looking at them.”

Ron nodded distractedly, placing his finger over the two small figures on the map that represented

Harry and Ginny. The small dots labeled with their names came from the edge of the map, weaving in and out of the undergrowth. The dots stopped at the edge of the clearing, faced Draco Malfoy's dot and then turned back to the clearing once his dot disappeared off the edge of the image. Then they would move forward into the middle of the trees, facing a red dot that represented Voldemort before fading off and beginning the process again.

Ron watched it over and over again, counting each second from the edge of the map to the middle of the clearing. He growled as it restarted again. Every time he watched it, the knot in his stomach grew. They were marching to their deaths, willingly—or what they thought might end in death—while he sat in the Great Hall at the castle, waiting like some... pillock!

He felt as if he betrayed Harry, by sitting there all those years ago. Ron had known at the time what was happening; he just couldn't admit it to himself. He kept hoping that any moment, Harry would slide up beside him, lift off his Invisibility Cloak and tell him to budge up, because he was hungry...

The thought slammed into him with the weight of a brick.

"Did anyone ever find Harry's Invisibility Cloak?" he asked Kingsley, ruffling paperwork in his haste to find a list of the few items which had been located around the scene.

Kingsley scowled as he looked through his own paperwork. "I don't remember reading anything about it. You're sure he had it?"

Ron nodded vigorously. "He didn't go anywhere without it those last two years. Kept it stuffed in his pocket all the time."

The two men looked at every paper, scattering the discarded ones all over the surface of the table they had been working at.

"It's not here," Kingsley sighed. "That means it either wasn't found, or it was destroyed."

"Or someone nicked it," Ron raised an eyebrow. He pulled the scene map from under the mess and watched until the three dots converged. "Look, here," he pointed, "this is where Malfoy said they stopped and talked with him."

"Yeah," Kingsley nodded, his brow furrowing.

"They would have removed the Cloak," Ron shrugged. "You can't hold a conversation with one of those on. Not well, anyway."

Kingsley nodded, but he still looked skeptical. "Even if they did, it doesn't prove anything. The fire—"

"Burned from here out," Ron stated, pointing to the edge of the clearing. "It didn't burn backward. If they dropped the Cloak here, it would have still been there. We passed right by it when we ran there."

Kingsley sank back to his chair and rubbed his face again. "It could still be out there now."

“No,” Ron shook his head. “Malfoy would have seen them remove it. There’s no way he would have left something that valuable lying there for all this time. He’s got it, King. I’ll bet next month’s wages on it.”

“Even so, Ron—”

“Would it be enough to get us into the Manor if we could prove that he had it?”

Kingsley scowled down at his hands, thinking it through. “It might. The Aurors following him have mentioned periods of time when they’ve been following him and he’s simply disappeared.”

“He’s got it,” Ron said, a bubble of elation rising inside him.

“We might not find anything, Ron,” Kingsley shook his head. “In fact, I’ll be surprised if we do. He’s not stupid.”

“No,” Ron shook his head, “but he’s arrogant. And we can use that against him.”

They both started when the door rattled and a highly agitated Hermione threw it open. She ducked, holding the book in front of her.

Thankfully, Ron’s stunner went wide as he jerked his wand up and Kingsley was able to stop his spell before it completely got out of his mouth.

“Hermione,” Ron scolded, moving swiftly toward her. “You know better than to come in here—”

“I found it!” she yelled, a huge grin splitting her face.

“Found what?” Ron demanded, his heart pounding loudly in his chest. She had scared five years off his life by bursting in the door like that. The fact that he knew Kingsley had locked the door made it even more maddening.

“The spell!” she yelled, thumping the heavy book down onto the table, knocking parchment to the floor. “I found what was done to them.”

A wave of dizziness hit at the implications to that statement. She found it. His mind repeated it over and over.

“It’s a Memory Blocker,” Hermione lectured, still wearing her grin. “Whoever used it—”

“Malfoy!” Ron interrupted. Hermione glanced at him but continued, not contradicting him.

“—sealed it with their blood.”

“Sounds like Dark Magic alright,” Kingsley nodded, coming to stand behind Hermione, reading over her shoulder at the passage she was pointing at in the book.

Her eyes met Ron’s across the table and he was surprised to see her tear up, her jaw trembling. “It can be reversed, Ron,” she said softly.

Ron jerked out of his seat, pacing around the room, the words rattling in his head.

“Can we prove it was Malfoy?” he demanded.

Hermione nodded. “His blood and magical signature will match the spell.”

Ron nodded decisively, turning to see Kingsley watching him closely. “Is it enough that he has the Cloak?”

A wide grin split the large black man’s face, his white teeth sparkling. “It’ll get us into the Manor.”

Ron sighed, sinking down into the chair behind him, his head in his hands. “It’s enough,” he said down to the dots on the map. “I’ll get him, I promise you,” he whispered, his finger tracing the dots once more. “I’ll get him.”

* * *

The flat was quiet when Jack entered, which surprised him. They were supposed to leave for the Weasley’s for Christmas Eve dinner soon and he was sure Emma would have met him at the door, anxious to go. He was, after all, almost an hour later than he planned to be. The store manager had insisted he stay and have a cup of eggnog for a few minutes at the small gathering of employees. Jack had hurriedly drunk the cup that had been thrust into his hand, all the while knowing that Emma would be ready to leave.

The evening they had spent with Emma’s family had been pleasant, even though it was draining—both mentally and physically. It had taken Emma nearly two full days to recover emotionally, but she was very much looking forward to spending Christmas with her parents and brothers.

Jack could still see the struggle in her when referring to the Weasleys as her family. Family was such a foreign concept for them both. But she was trying. And Jack silently vowed to keep his hesitation to a minimum, for everyone’s sake.

He quietly hung up his winter things and removed his snow covered boots by the door. With a smile, he walked back toward the single bedroom in the flat, sure Emma had probably just lay down for a quick kip and fallen completely asleep.

Sure enough, she was lying on the bed, a thin blanket pulled over her as she slept.

Jack sat on the edge of the bed, watching her. His heart beat faster just seeing her there. Amazement and gratitude for this wonderful woman—for all that she had given him, and all that she was now giving him—filled him. Gently, he reached out and caressed the swell of her belly where his child grew. He pulled back, however, at the tightness in the muscles. Emma groaned and wrapped tightly around herself, her eyes fluttering open.

“Em?” He leaned down over her, just now noticing the thin layer of moisture on her face. “Em, please...”

“Jack,” she whispered, panting as she held her belly. “The baby...”

Fear stabbed into him as he slid off the bed, kneeling on the floor and holding her belly alongside her own hands. "Now?" he asked.

She nodded, whimpering as her belly tightened rock solid and her body trembled underneath his hands. Panic settled low in his belly as his mind frantically raced for what to do. It was too soon! It wasn't time for the baby yet. They still had six weeks.

"I wasn't sure..." she cried, tears running down her face. "I thought I was just tired." Her body relaxed as the pain subsided. Jack reached forward and wiped her wet face. "I tried to sleep, but... they just kept coming."

"It's alright, love, we'll get you to the hospital."

She shook her head, trying to get up off of the mattress. "The dinner..."

"Will have to wait," Jack insisted. "You're the first priority." He helped her move to a sitting position and searched around for a pair of socks for her bare feet.

"Ohhhh," she moaned, leaning forward.

"Another one?" Jack asked, standing in front of her and trying to get her to look up at him. "You need to relax."

"I'm trying," she snapped. Jack didn't respond because he knew she would never intentionally be sharp with him. It was the pain and worry talking, not his Emma. He waited patiently, pulling her head to his belly and rocking her slightly as she breathed through the pain.

"They're coming faster," she mumbled once the wave had ended.

Jack nodded, a grim determination settling on him. He needed to get Emma to the hospital. He'd prefer to ring someone to come and get them, but they still didn't have a telephone, and Mrs. Browne was at her friend's home tonight.

"Come on, love, let's get you out of here." Slowly, he helped her stand, wrapping his arm around her back and under her arms, helping her shuffle to the front door. "Can you lean on the wall while I get your boots on?" Jack asked. Emma nodded, rubbing at her face harshly. She did just that and Jack hurriedly slipped on her Wellingtons, making sure the laces were tied so that she wouldn't trip. He stood again when she gasped, her hands pressing on her belly.

"Noooo," she moaned, leaning into his chest and gripping his jumper. Jack rocked her again, whispering words of encouragement to her and smoothing her long hair down her back.

"Coat, love," he urged, draping the clothing around her shoulders and helping her slide her arms into the sleeves. She was weak; he could tell by the way she leaned against him, letting Jack take most of her weight.

"Em, you should have called the store," he scolded softly as he pulled on his own boots and coat. "Didn't Mrs. Browne leave her key for you?" Emma's glare as he helped guide her out the door was enough to stop that train of thought right away. They'd discuss it later.

They needed to stop twice more on their way outside. Luckily, there was a cab slowly driving down the street and Jack whistled sharply for it. Getting Emma inside was another story altogether as another contraction seized her at the moment he opened the door. She braced herself on the door and groaned loudly.

“Jack...”

“What?” he stepped back, his hands held high, wondering what he’d done wrong already. His heart pounded as she made a disgusted face and looked down at herself.

“I think my water just broke.”

“Er...”

“Bloody hell!” the cab driver cursed from the front seat, looking back over his shoulder, a horrified look on his young, spotty face.

Jack took a deep breath and nodded. “We best get you there then.”

“I can’t do this,” Emma muttered, shaking her head even as she ducked into the back seat.

“Yes you can,” Jack urged. “You can do this. You’re strong.” He slid in next to her, wincing when she gripped his hand like a vice.

“Hospital then?” the driver asked, his wide eyes staring at Jack in the mirror.

Jack could only nod as Emma gripped his hand even tighter, panting as another contraction hit her. He stared at her pale face, watching as the energy literally drained out of her. His own breathing was shallow and rapid as he let himself, just for a moment, think about what was actually happening.

He was going to be a father... tonight!

He wasn’t ready. There should still be six weeks... Six weeks to read the books that he’d quickly skimmed but never taken fully seriously. Six weeks to put together the cot they had purchased several weeks ago. Six weeks for it to really sink in.

Those six weeks were gone now, in a whirl of pain and groans and a throbbing hand and a very wet seat in the back of a cab.

“Almost there,” Jack muttered, glancing out the window as Emma sagged against him and he kissed her forehead. The driver glanced in the mirror again, his panicked expression enough to strike Jack as somewhat funny. Jack wasn’t sure if the words were to reassure himself or Emma.

The screech of tires in front of the Casualty doors on the hospital sprung Jack into action. He fumbled with his wallet and the driver shook his head, his pale face looking anywhere but Emma’s limp form in the backseat.

“No charge,” he said hastily.

Jack nodded and swiftly opened the door.

“Alright love,” he said softly wrapping his arms around his wife. “We’re here, Em.” She didn’t respond, but slumped further against him. Jack’s chest tightened and he lifted her face. “Emma? Em? Shite!”

In a swift motion, he slid his arm under her legs and lifted her with him out of the car, cradling her to his chest. His feet slid along the icy sidewalk and he struggled to keep them both upright.

“Help!” he called out, praying that someone would hear him and come for them. “Help!” he tried again.

The doors to the Casualty opened and a tall figure, wearing a white coat stepped outside, peering up into the grey evening sky.

“Help, please?” Jack tried once more, shifting Emma higher. “My wife... having a baby...”

The man spun, reaching forward to help Jack carry his burden into the hospital.

“When did she go into labor?”

Jack struggled, his own throat closing tightly. “Earlier today,” he managed to force out. “I was at work, when I came home...” He shook his head, feeling too much emotion to continue.

The man swung into action, demanding a bed in a loud voice, his commands echoed around the Casualty as people hustled toward them. Jack watched it all standing in the same spot, his arms feeling empty and as if they might float toward the ceiling without Emma’s weight in them.

His eyes followed as the nurses moved around Emma’s figure on the white sheet of the hospital bed. Flashes of his own time in hospital came back with a vengeance, making him dizzy.

Jack stumbled forward, his hand coming out and wrapping around Emma’s thin hand as it hung off one side of the bed.

The movement in the room played around him in slow motion and the sounds came to him as if he were underwater.

“Are they...” he swallowed thickly, not sure he could handle the answer. “Will they be... alright?”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I do,” the doctor said.

“Okay,” he whispered, turning his focus back onto his wife. Her cheeks were starting to regain their color as the medical team worked on her.

“When did her water break?” the nurse asked. Jack blinked at him before shaking himself mentally.

“Erm... just as we were coming,” he offered, ruffling his hair. “She’s only at thirty four weeks,” he offered.

“Why don’t you step out into the hall and give the nurse your information.” The doctor moved

forward, his hand guiding Jack into the corridor outside the room.

“No.” Jack pleaded, looking back at Emma lying on the bed. “I have to know...”

“I understand,” he said, clapping Jack firmly on the shoulder. “We’re going to do everything we can.”

“And the... the baby?” Jack asked, his throat closing tight at the thought of losing their child.

“I’m a bit concerned at the low heart rate,” he said honestly. “But we need to monitor it for a bit. I’ll probably recommend surgery.”

Jack nodded woodenly, turning to look back through the window, bringing his hand up to rest on the glass. A deep breath pushed out Jack’s cheeks and he nodded jerkily. “Thanks.”

The doctor returned to the room and Jack tried to calm his racing heart. He wouldn’t be any good to anyone if he couldn’t get a handle on himself.

“Jack?”

He spun at the question, looking up into a face he hadn’t seen in years.

“Oliver,” he said softly, feeling even more thick-headed.

The tall blond man’s smile slipped from his face as he noticed Jack’s distress. “Is everything alright?”

Jack nodded jerkily, motioning toward the room behind him. “My wife... she’s in labor, and... it’s too early.”

Oliver winced and moved to look into the room, his shoulder brushing Jack’s.

“Taylor is a good doctor,” he said quietly. Jack didn’t know what to say, so he nodded. “She’s in good hands, Jack.”

“Okay,” he said softly.

Oliver sighed next to him, straightening the thick wool coat he had been pulling on when he first spoke to Jack.

“I thought it was you when I saw you come in. When I heard you speak, I knew it was.”

“They said you had left,” Jack said softly, his mind rolling back over the memory of trying to find the man, glad that the pain of those years spent homeless was only a dull twitch now.

“I did, for a bit,” Oliver admitted. “I had the opportunity to go abroad to study. My wife and I only came back a few months ago.”

Jack glanced at the man and nodded.

"I've thought about you a lot over the years, Jack," Oliver sighed. "Wondered what became of you, where you were, if you were alright."

"I am now," Jack said as he watched the activity in the room slow. It seemed as if the emergency was subsiding now. Emma's cheeks were a healthy pink and she was stirring now.

"How early?" Oliver asked, a pained expression on his face.

"Six weeks," Jack admitted with a sigh. He loosened the heavy coat he wore and tugged at the scarf that was making his throat itch.

Oliver hissed in a breath. "There's a decent newborn care unit here," he nodded.

"Good," Jack nodded. "Listen... I never really thanked you—"

"You didn't have to," Oliver said, an easy smile coming to his face. He held out his hand and Jack looked at it before placing his own rough one there and shaking the man's hand. "You've made something of yourself, Jack. You've got a lovely wife, you're about to be a father... that's all the thanks I need."

Jack nodded, his throat closing up. He cursed his wild emotions and blinked away the wetness that gathered in his eyes.

"Looks as if she's waking," Oliver said, clapping his hand on Jack's shoulder. "You'd better get in there. And I'd better get home. Ella will wonder what's keeping me."

"Yeah," Jack said roughly. The two stared into the window for a moment more before Jack turned. "Happy Christmas, Oliver."

"Happy Christmas, Jack" Oliver said, pulling on a set of gloves and wrapping his own scarf around his neck.

Jack watched as the man walked out of the hospital, giving one last wave and smile over his shoulder.

He took a deep breath and removed his coat before going in to Emma's side. Her eyes were fluttering open now and he wanted to be the first thing she saw.

* * *

Remus winced watching Molly pace back and forth in the kitchen. The sideboard and tables were piled high with food but no one was being allowed to touch it.

"And you're sure—"

"Molly," he scolded softly, matching his stride with hers until he stood in front of her, his hands gently coming to rest on her upper arms. "When I got there, no one was there. The door was locked."

"Where could they be?" she asked, her eyebrows knitting together.

Remus sighed, wondering the same thing, but still having no answers. He had been scheduled to bring Jack and Emma by Portkey to the Burrow for Christmas Eve dinner. But there had been no answer to his repeated knocks. Worried, Remus slipped into the back alley behind the flat building and Apparated to Devon.

Arthur came into the kitchen, bundled up in warm winter clothing. "We're all divided up, Remus. We'll start checking the areas you suggested."

Remus nodded before patting Molly's shoulder and reaching for his own winter things sitting on the back of a chair. "Let's get started then."

He turned away as Arthur approached Molly and they shared a whispered conversation.

"Come on, old man," Tonks sighed. "Let's get started."

"Dora—"

"Don't," she held up her hand and he winced. Remus sighed, knowing that his continued insistence that she stay home because of her recent bout with flu wouldn't go over well. "You need me."

He snorted out a laugh and pressed a kiss to her temple. "Truer words were never spoken," he mumbled and then grunted when she dug her knuckle into his ribs. He rubbed at the spot as she took over, barking orders to each of the groups going out to search for Jack and Emma.

"You and I," Tonks said as she turned to him and took a hold of his scarf, "are off to the hospitals."

Remus nodded, allowing her to pull him out the door.

Four hospitals in Manchester later and there was still no luck.

"They might have gone to Kendal," Tonks suggested.

"Not with Emma's health the way it was," Remus shook his head.

"Then on we search," Tonks nodded. She pulled out a map and pointed to the next hospital on the list. "Let's try this one."

Remus nodded, leading her around to the back of the flats and the place he had Apparated from earlier.

"You think they're alright?" she asked, pausing before disappearing.

"I hope so," Remus shrugged.

"Why didn't they ring someone?" Tonks mumbled.

"I don't know, Dora," Remus sighed. "It's very much like Harry, you have to admit. And I think Jack and Emma have gotten used to being on their own. They might not even think to tell anyone."

The hospital was small, but bustling with people as they entered, surprising for Christmas Eve night.

Remus made a quiet inquiry at the front desk and was directed up to the third floor. They exited the lift hand in hand and stopped a few doors down where Derek and Melissa waited in a small alcove.

“Hello,” Derek greeted. Remus and Tonks had only met the couple once, but understood the attachment Jack and Emma had there. It would be similar to finding Ron and Hermione waiting outside Harry and Ginny’s hospital room.

“Hello,” Remus greeted. “We just found out,” he nodded, sharing a quick glance with Tonks.

“Yeah,” Derek said, pulling his hands from his jeans pocket and shook Remus’ hand. “We came as soon as we heard.”

“Any news?”

Derek went pale and shook his head. “Not in the last few minutes.”

“What happened?” Tonks asked as she sat next to Melissa who had red eyes and puffy cheeks, apparently from crying.

“Emma’s had a rough time of it,” Derek sighed as he sat next to his fiancé and Remus took the chair opposite them. “She was in labor all day. She’s been in hospital before—”

“Jack said that it was different this time, though,” Melissa said in a quiet voice. “She was in so much pain.”

“It’s too early,” Derek shook his head. “The doctor’s are worried that the baby will be too small, that it won’t live.”

Remus sighed as Tonks comforted Melissa who’d begun crying again. “How are they holding up?” he asked Derek in a low voice.

“Jack’s... well, it’s hard to tell, really. He’s so...”

“Stoic?” Remus asked with a wry smile.

“Yeah,” Derek nodded with his own smirk. “And Emma... well, she’s a mess.”

“Understandable, I guess,” Remus acknowledged quietly. He sat back in his chair and rubbed his face harshly.

Their heads snapped up when the sigh of an opening door was heard across the hall. A very disheveled and pale Jack stepped out, his eyes darting all over the place. He closed the door behind him and took a step before stopping at the sight of Remus and Tonks now standing before him.

“Jack,” Remus said softly. Tonks took a quick step and wrapped her arms around him. He patted her back awkwardly but seemed to take a small bit of comfort from the embrace.

“Ice,” he said softly as he held up the paper cup in his hand. “She wants ice.”

"I'll get it," Melissa jumped up, Derek at her heels.

"We'll get it for you, mate," he clapped Jack on the back.

"We came as soon as we could," Tonks said as she fussed over Jack, straightening his clothing and patting his hair to make it lay down. Jack, Remus was surprised, didn't seem to be bothered much by her mothering; he took it all without much reaction and just stared off down the hall. Or perhaps he was so worried and tired that he didn't even notice.

"Derek told us that the doctors are worried," Remus finally said. Jack nodded woodenly, his face a mask of frustration and helplessness.

"Her blood pressure is too high," he mumbled. "And the baby is in distress they say. Heart rate is all over the board."

"Is there anything we can do?" Tonks asked and Jack only stared at her before shrugging.

"Nothing," he finally said. "It's just a matter of time. They're trying to get Emma's pressure stabilized so that they can take her to surgery. They're afraid if they wait too long..." he choked a bit and scrunched up his face. Remus could see the pool of tears in his eyes even though he blinked them back.

"Maybe..." Remus started and shifted uncomfortably. "Would you consent to having a Healer look at her?" he asked. "Maybe there's something that magic can help." His voice was soft and low. Jack glanced up and Remus could tell a denial was on his lips. Surprisingly though, he shrugged.

"I'll take any help you can offer," he said as he harshly rubbed his forehead where the once-famous scar had been.

Remus nodded to Tonks who swiftly began to walk toward the lift. "I promise she'll be discreet. You can trust this woman, Jack."

Jack nodded and then glanced back at the door behind him. "I'd better..."

"Yeah," Remus agreed.

Jack hesitated and then glanced back at Remus. "You want to come in for a minute?"

"Oh," Remus was stunned by the offer. His first instinct was to refuse, but he realized how much Jack was offering with the seemingly simple gesture.

"Alright, for a moment," he conceded.

The room was grey, the light from the car park sneaking through the blinds in horizontal stripes. There was an antiseptic smell that permeated his nostrils, along with the scent of too-warm bodies; although it was not overwhelming.

"Em, Remus and Dora have come to see you," Jack said softly and the woman lying in the bed turned her head.

Remus did his best to smile at the swollen face of the redhead he'd known so well, so many years ago. Her eyes were bloodshot and she looked as if sleep had been a foreign term for far too long.

"Hi," she croaked out.

"Missy's getting the ice," Jack informed her as he moved to her side and took her hand in his, stroking stray hairs out of her face gently.

Emma nodded and lovingly glanced up at him before turning back to Remus and shifting uncomfortably. "I probably look a mess," she offered with a chuckle.

Remus smiled. "You look lovely," he said. "All women do in motherhood." He cringed just a bit at the anguish that passed over Emma's features. A single tear slid down her cheek but she swiped it away.

"I've sent Dora to contact a Healer we know, Emma," Remus went on. "She'll be able to tell you if there's anything magic can do to help. I'm not sure what can be done, but it's worth a try, isn't it?"

Emma nodded and sniffled. Jack wordlessly handed her a tissue and she dabbed at her eyes.

"She should be here any minute," Remus assured them. "Is there anything else that I can do?"

"No," Emma smiled gratefully and then settled back in the bed. "Thank you though." She immediately tensed and gripped Jack's hand hard as a wave of pain enveloped her.

"Breathe," Jack whispered as he crouched down beside the bed and they locked gazes. "Em, you need to breathe." She began panting slightly and then relaxed as the pain subsided.

Jack gently wiped her brow with a moist cloth and kissed her forehead as Emma sank back into the bed and closed her eyes. Remus felt the concern and love radiating from Jack and was reminded of his own experiences helping Dora through her labor—well, most of it, anyway.

A small knock on the door startled all three of them and Dora's head peeked around with a smile.

"Wotcher you two," she greeted. "I brought someone who'd like to meet you." She stepped into the room with an older woman of similar build and the same heart-shaped face.

"This is Andromeda Tonks," she offered with a smile and an arm wrapped around the woman, "my mum. Mum, this is Jack and Emma Ingalls."

"It's nice to meet you," Andromeda replied with a soft voice. She swiftly moved over to the bedside and shook Jack's hand firmly, patting Emma on the shoulder gently. "Now, let's see what we can do to help you."

Remus backed away from the bedside, allowing his mother-in-law to move around as needed. He felt a warm hand clasp in his and looked over to where Tonks was watching her mother work. His gaze returned to watch as Andromeda moved efficiently around the bed, waving her wand and speaking in a low and caring voice the entire time.

Jack looked highly agitated and Emma a bit unsure as her skin glowed different colors.

“... pressure’s a bit high... looks alright... let’s see... hmmm...” Andromeda kept muttering as Jack’s hold on Emma’s hand tightened.

“Ah-ha!” The healer finally crowed as she flicked her wand and a filmy apparition appeared above Emma’s belly. Clearly, you could make out the tiny form of the baby, curled around itself.

“Oh!” Emma breathed and clasped a hand over her mouth. Jack opened and shut his mouth several times before shaking his head. Remus smiled as Tonks squeezed his hand.

The baby was very small and had a head covered with thick black hair. The little hands fisted and flexed alternately and seemed to flinch with every movement that Emma made.

“Alright, little one,” Andromeda said softly, “let’s see what we can do to help you.” She glanced over at the couple with a warm smile. “Do you want to know the sex of the baby?”

“No, not yet,” Emma whispered and Andromeda nodded smartly, casting one more spell that caused a blurry area to form around the baby’s lower half. She quickly went back to studying the infant and nodded thoughtfully.

“What is it?” Jack asked, his voice cracking.

“The umbilical cord is wrapped around this little one’s neck,” she explained, pointing to the grey band cording around the baby. “It’s cutting off the oxygen supply and not allowing the baby to descend correctly.”

“Is there anything you can do?” Emma whispered, clearly horrified at the thought of her child in distress.

Andromeda nodded. “It’s difficult, but I’ve done it several times before.” She gestured to Tonks who stepped forward immediately. “Nymphadora, I’m going to need your help. I need you to sustain the monitor spell while I try to levitate the cord.”

Tonks nodded nervously and pulled her wand. The image flickered a bit, but held when Andromeda withdrew her wand.

Another contraction set in and Emma groaned as she wrapped her arms around her belly.

“Breathe, love,” Jack encouraged her, glancing around the room. Remus winced at the image of the baby as it grimaced and struggled against the pressure of the cord. He swore he could see the face darken a bit and prayed that Andromeda would be able to do this. When the pain had ebbed, Jack wiped Emma’s forehead.

“Please,” Emma begged, reaching for the Healer’s hand. “You have to do something!”

Andromeda only smiled and patted the young woman’s arm lovingly. “I’ll do my best, dear.” Once again, her focus settled on the image and her wand became a blaze of movement. Slowly, almost excruciatingly, Remus could see the cord shift a bit here and there and the baby wiggle in response.

“Now hold still you little impatient one,” Andromeda mumbled and Remus bit back a smile. “Ah,

I've almost got it. Now, this may hurt just for a moment Emma dear..."

Emma grasped Jack's hand and Remus saw the man wince as he buried his face in her shoulder. He could clearly see Jack's wet cheeks and swallowed against the knot in his throat. The image of the baby jerked violently as Andromeda made one final movement and Emma groaned heavily, panting through the pain. She continued to cry and whimper as Andromeda's wand spun around her.

"It's finished," the healer sighed and sank down onto the edge of the bed. "I've managed to get a little arm under the cord. It's no longer choking the baby, but it's best if delivery is in the next hour or so."

Emma and Jack both nodded although their attention never wavered from the image of their child.

"Everything is..." Jack swallowed thickly. "It'll be alright?"

"It should," Andromeda nodded. She peered closely at the image of the baby, nodding satisfactorily.

Jack nodded again, setting himself on the edge of the bed and resting his forehead against Emma's.

Tonks let the spell slowly fade and moved back to Remus' side, her hand finding his.

"I'll stay in the hall," Andromeda promised, fixing the blankets around Emma before smiling satisfactorily.

The three quietly stepped into the hall, not noticed by the couple.

* * *

Arthur Weasley watched as his wife woodenly moved around the Burrow. The entire evening had been very quiet. Even the children had sensed the tension in the air and had eaten their dinners quickly.

Their little bodies had then gathered around the Christmas tree, pointing and whispering about the brightly colored packages sitting under its wide branches.

Remus had sent a Patronus message hours before explaining that Jack and Emma were in hospital and that he thought it best if everyone simply stayed at the Burrow to wait for news.

Molly vehemently protested right away, but Arthur convinced her that a hoard of Weasleys descending on a Muggle hospital on Christmas Eve wasn't likely to settle either Jack or Emma at all. She finally agreed and tried to go on about the evening cheerfully.

One by one, the children had flocked home, carrying sleeping grandchildren draped in their arms. Arthur promised to contact them as soon as they had any news.

"Why don't you go on up and take a bath, dear?" he suggested and Molly shook her head to protest. "I can manage the cleaning up," he suggested with a wry smile. "And if I don't, then we'll just do it together in the morning." Surprisingly, she chuckled softly and nodded, removing her worn apron and hanging it on the peg near the back door. Arthur watched with affection as she slowly began up

the steps, moving much slower than she had when they were younger.

Perhaps he ought to suggest moving their bedroom to the main floor again. Once he was able to walk again after his stroke, they had both insisted that they move back into their original room. He knew Molly would never go for that idea though; all of their children had been born in the bedroom where she and Arthur still slept. Come to think of it, he thought with a wider smile, they'd all been conceived there as well. Although, it was questionable with the twins... after all, there had been that bottle of Elf wine and a rather warm night in July...

Those thoughts were chased by other... pleasant ones and fairly soon, Arthur had finished the dishes and the dishrag was rubbing a spot on the table that was now a bit duller than the rest. He hurriedly dispatched it to the sink and flicked his wand again to extinguish the candles, leaving the one in the window still burning as it had for many years now... ever since Harry, Ron and Hermione had left on their 'quest'.

He yawned heavily and tried to walk lightly on the stairs so as not to disturb Molly if she had gone on to bed. He hadn't heard the water flow through the pipes, so it was probable that she'd never made it to the bath.

The bedroom was dark and quiet and Arthur was relieved to see Molly's still form cuddled under the blankets near the middle of the bed. He smiled at the lifelong habit. Whenever he wasn't in the bed, Molly would scoot toward his side. She always claimed she'd been searching for his warmth; but Arthur knew she was really just a bed and cover hog. His daughter, Ginny, had developed the same habit. Briefly, his mind flickered to another area of the country and he hoped that Ginny—or Emma, as it was now—was cuddled up close to Jack. They both deserved that small measure of comfort.

The normal creaks and shifting of the Burrow were a welcome sound as Arthur lay back on the bed, pulling the covers over him and banishing the chill of the December night. He was startled when Molly sniffed loudly next to him. He'd been mistaken; she hadn't been asleep after all.

"We haven't heard anything," she whispered.

Arthur smiled into the darkness and removed his clothing, fumbling for the pajamas that Molly always laid out for him on the foot of the bed.

"No news is good news, Mollywobbles," he said softly. "I'm sure we'll hear something by tomorrow morning. Perhaps there will be an owl waiting when we wake up."

They both sat up when a loud chirping sound echoed through the empty house. Just after the Final Battle, Bill had charmed the fireplaces to emit an alarm when someone was trying to connect.

He and Molly shared a look in the dark of the bedroom before scrambling to get their dressing gowns on over their pajamas.

The two made their way quickly to the fireplace in the kitchen which still had a few glowing coals. Molly's wand flicked and flames roared to life as Arthur quickly said the incantation and password to unlock the wards on the floo connection. It was ingenious the things that Bill had come up with for family security, really.

“Arthur!” A very cheerful, although tired, face greeted him.

“Remus, is everything alright? You’re message was vague—”

“Everything’s fine, really,” Remus shook his head and then rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment. “I’m sorry that I made it seem like... well, I was rather in a hurry when I sent that and—”

“Get on with it!”

Arthur bit back a smirk when Tonks’ voice echoed in the background.

“Good evening to you also, Tonks.”

“Wotcher, Arthur.” A heart-shaped face edged Remus’ out of the way. Tonks looked extremely tired but happy, and Arthur hoped they had good news.

“Dora,” Remus’ voice complained. “You told me I could floo them.”

“Oh, all right.” Arthur chuckled as Tonks rolled her eyes and Remus’ face appeared.

“Are you sure nothing is—”

Remus shook his head and seemed to be fighting back a large grin. “I just wanted to give the two of you another Christmas present.” Arthur glanced at Molly who stood at his side, shoulders shrugging upward in bewilderment.

“But, Remus... Christmas isn’t until tomorrow,” Arthur said as he glanced at his watch. It was after midnight.

Remus chuckled. “Well, I’m a little early getting it to you, but it truly is a Christmas present.”

Arthur scratched his head and shrugged his acceptance while Remus beamed at him.

“I just wanted to be the first to tell you that you are grandparents again.”

It took a moment for understanding to sink into his half-asleep brain; a moment longer than it took for Molly to understand, if her scream was any indication.

Remus looked as pleased as if he were the grandfather himself. And, Arthur mused, he probably felt as close as he could.

“James Derek Ingalls was born at ten fifty-eight tonight... erm, yesterday I guess that is.”

“Remus,” Arthur gripped the sides of the fireplace and finally knelt completely on the cooling hearthstone. “Is everything... it’s too early, isn’t it?”

Remus’ smile darkened a bit as he nodded. “Mother and baby are doing well now. It was scary there for a bit—the cord was wrapped around his neck and the doctors were afraid they might lose him and Emma as well. But Andromeda... Tonks’ mother, I’m not sure if you’ve met her... well, she’s a

Healer and midwife.” Remus scratched his head again. “She came and was able to help.”

Arthur nodded and glanced at his wife who was sitting at the kitchen table, wiping at her eyes with a handkerchief. She looked a bit dazed and Arthur smiled.

“And Jack?”

“Proud as can be,” Remus crowed. “He was a right mess when we first got there, though. They had a rough time of it.”

“Understandable,” Arthur nodded. “The first one is always the hardest.”

“But once Andromeda helped and James was born... well,” Remus stopped and Arthur could tell he was a bit choked up. “He’s such a tiny little thing too,” he finally said as he shook away more emotion. “Just barely five pounds.”

“Merlin,” Arthur breathed. All of their babies had been rather large, although Ginny was on the small side, Molly assured him, at just seven pounds. “He *is*/i a tiny thing.”

Remus chuckled. “Looks just like Jack, too; a full head of matted black hair, although I can’t say anything about his eyes yet, they seemed a bit dark the one time I saw them.”

“Maybe he’ll get Ginny’s eyes,” Molly mused from behind him, her voice thick with emotion.

“And you said everything was alright?”

“Fine,” Remus nodded. “Emma came through strong and was sleeping after nursing Jay—that’s what they’re calling him—for a few minutes right before we left.”

Arthur immediately felt lighthearted, as if a huge weight had been lifted off of his shoulders.

“Thank you for telling us, Remus.”

“Jack asked me to contact you, Arthur,” Remus said. “Even though you know I would have anyway.”

The thickness was back in Arthur’s throat. “Be sure to thank him for me—for both of us.”

“I will, Arthur. Now go back to sleep. You too, Molly.”

Arthur sat back on his heels, his old knees cracking loudly as the fire died out.

“Wow,” he muttered, rubbing his balding head. “All these grandchildren—it never gets old, does it?”

Molly sniffled again and shook her head. “Little Jay Potter,” she mumbled.

“Soon,” Arthur promised, rising and kissing the crown of her head. “That’ll be his name soon.”

* * *

The flat was empty when Draco arrived. He called out for Genevieve, his voice echoing through the

posh space. He closed the door behind him and looked around, dropping his bag and cloak on the velvet sofa in the entryway.

But the flat remained quiet—deathly so, Draco thought. A strange shaped shadow loomed in the corner of the sitting room and Draco lit his wand, casting a beam of light onto the dark shape.

A Christmas tree.

His beam of light traveled down to underneath the boughs, where a thick rug skirted the base of it, but no gifts lay underneath.

Swearing, Draco lit several lamps and fumbled around in the kitchen, searching for something to eat.

Perhaps he should have informed Genevieve that he was coming. But the trip to Paris had been a last minute decision, prompted by the emptiness of Malfoy Manor and his London flat.

She hadn't been gone long, he mused. Her expensive perfume still graced the air and the large, silk clad bed was rumpled.

After a wholly unsatisfying meal of crusty bread and cheese, Draco poured himself a generous snifter of brandy and sat in front of the now-lit tree, the small fireplace burning brightly next to him.

He held up the glass to the light, swirling the dark burgundy liquid before taking a drink.

The silence of the room pressed in on him and Draco stared at the tree, feeling very alone.

* * *

Jack sighed both in contentment and tiredness. The emotional rollercoaster of the past few hours still didn't seem real. Neither did the tiny being cradled in his arms, his face peeking out from the bundle of blankets surrounding him.

"Is he sleeping now?" Emma's exhausted whisper startled him from staring at his son. He didn't know she was still awake.

"Yeah," he said, shifting so that he could place the small bundle in her arms. "He just closed his eyes."

"Are they still dark?" Emma asked, scooting a bit in the bed and patting the small space she made so that Jack could crawl into the bed with them.

He smiled at her, feeling a bit foolish, but climbed in anyway, shifting gently so he didn't jostle them too much.

"You were amazing today," he said softly, leaning his head against hers and kissing her forehead, tasting the salt of her sweat dried there.

Emma sighed happily and snuggled into his embrace. "He's here," she said, her fingers brushing the

baby's thick hair. "It still doesn't seem real."

"I know," Jack agreed. "He's perfect." They sat in silence, watching their son sleep, his tiny face twitching now and then. "We're a family," Jack whispered.

Emma chuckled and kissed his jaw. "We were before, Jack," she protested softly. "We're just... a bigger family now."

He realized with a start, she was right. He and Emma had been their own family for almost a year. And now they had Jay. Somehow, things felt just right.

Emma's breathing against his neck grew deep and steady and Jack let his eyes drift to the window where he could see soft globs of snow falling from the sky.

"Happy Christmas," he murmured, laying his head back against the pillow and resting his hand along the length of his son's body.

Chapter 13

January 2003

Blaise Zabini was not normally a social person. He preferred to work, eat and sleep alone. There were times when he sought companionship, but those moments were few and far between. The fact that he was even standing in the darkened interior of the pub showed that he was either entirely bored or had been intrigued by the offer enough to come out in the cold January air. It had been some time, however, since he had ruffled Malfoy's feathers.

"Zabini," the blond head nodded toward him and Blaise smirked at the obviousness of the man he was meeting. Malfoy's note had asked him to be discreet. *Him!* And here the blonde prat sat in a fairly busy pub during the busiest time of the evening. Blaise shook his head and shrugged off the annoyance.

"Malfoy," he greeted the man back. Blaise took the indicated seat casually, folding his long legs below the table and glancing around surreptitiously. "You could have picked a more visible place," he said dryly. "Ministry of Magic perhaps? Right in the middle of the atrium?"

Malfoy smirked and shrugged even as he took a long drink from his glass of blood-red wine. "You worry too much."

"And you're not paranoid enough," Blaise bit back.

"You and all that Auror nonsense," Draco shook his head as his grey eyes pierced Blaise's. "Constant vigilance and all that."

"It's kept me alive so far." Blaise could see the fear in those eyes, the way they darted around the room, watching people come and go. Even through the man's casual mask, Blaise could see the way his fingers were white from gripping the glass. Something was getting to him.

"You know I could pay you much better than any Ministry job," Malfoy offered as he motioned to the waiter to bring him another drink. Blaise only smiled at the usual offer.

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Draco. Besides, you like me where I am. I'm useful, yes? What do you want, Malfoy? There has to be something you need."

Draco drained the rest of his wine and pushed the empty goblet to the edge of the table, anxiously watching as the bartender went about his business. "I need information."

Blaise barely contained an eye-roll. "Obviously."

Continuing as if he hadn't heard, Malfoy spoke again. "There have been Aurors poking around lately."

"No more than usual," Blaise grinned. "They've always been there. It's a punishment in the Academy. You muck up you get 'Malfoy Duty'."

Draco scowled at him. "This is... more serious. They're getting better. They followed me to Paris last week. And I've heard they may be... investigating an older matter."

Blaise shrugged a shoulder. This was an old game, one Malfoy never got tired of playing. "I'll need a better clue than that."

Malfoy shifted in his chair and leaned over the table again. "Potter," he said quickly and Blaise raised an eyebrow.

"Potter? What about it? It's old news."

"That's what I say," Malfoy agreed. "But there have been people sniffing around, putting their noses where they don't belong. They think I can't see through their veiled attempts to get me to incriminate myself. But I'm not stupid, Zabini, I know they're searching for something."

"Then why do you need me?" Blaise asked, sipping from a glass of firewhiskey that the waiter had just brought. "It sounds like you've got another source."

"Several, in fact," Draco agreed but then fiddled with the cuffs of his robes. "But no one is as close as you. You're an Auror, Blaise; and one with higher clearance than most. If there's an issue you can... inform me."

Blaise considered for a minute before leaning forward. "And what could I possibly inform you of?" He continued with a sly smile, his voice dropping low. "There have been stirrings in the department, rumors that something isn't quite right with the way the case was closed."

"Stirrings?" Draco asked, and Blaise smiled at how easy it was to rile the blonde.

"And rumors," he confirmed with a knowing wink. "Your name has been batted around a bit."

"And what is being said?"

"It's suspicious, you know, how you were the only one at the scene that lived. How your story now doesn't quite match with your story then."

Draco sighed heavily and drained most of the new glass of wine. Blaise could see the tremble in his hand. He leaned even further over the table and smirked at the man.

"You should have just killed them instead of bollixing it up with memory charms."

Draco choked as he swallowed and Blaise finished his drink in one swift gulp.

"You'll—you'll let me know if there's anything... more serious?" Draco whispered harshly as the tall black man stood.

Blaise chuckled. "Can it get more serious than that?" He laughed outright when Draco paled further. "I'll be in touch."

The Auror pulled his cloak tighter as he made his way through the dodgy crowd and out into the middle of Hogsmeade. It was starting to snow again and he shook it out of his eyes, beginning his

march toward the other end of town. He doubled back twice and then crossed the street, stopping erratically to stare into shop windows here and there, all the while watching the reflections in the glass. When he was sure he hadn't been followed, he slipped into Gladrags Wizard Wear and pulled a set of robes off of the rack, moving toward the back dressing rooms with a nod to the woman working the counter.

"That was quick."

Blaise smiled as he quickly closed the door behind him and tossed the too-large garment to one side without a thought. He shrugged and began to unfasten his own cloak, all the while pulling on a flesh-colored string that attached in the back pocket of his trousers.

"Did you hear it all?"

Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Head Auror himself, grinned a toothy smile. "Every bleeding word."

Tonks chuckled as she helped retrieve the recording device. "Any indication of what he'll do now?"

Blaise shrugged. "He's a scared rabbit now. Be sure to have him watched around the clock. I'd be surprised if it takes more than a day or two to bolt."

"Paris?" Tonks asked.

"Maybe," Blaise shrugged. "But he knows you followed him at Christmas. I'd say probably the Manor." He watched them exchange a glance and knew that there was more information they weren't giving out. But that was alright, he could guess most of it and the rest would come out in time. Blaise was a patient man.

"That was rather cheeky what you said at the end there..." Shacklebolt observed. "Now he knows we're on to him."

Once again, the Auror seemed not to care. "He'll think twice about his next move now. He knows I'm not stupid. I heard the rumors going around that last year. He may just think I figured it out."

"Why do you think he didn't just kill them?" Tonks asked as she settled on the only chair in the cramped dressing room that had been silenced and secured hours ago.

Blaise raised an eyebrow in thought. "Personally, I don't think he's got the stomach to kill."

"What about Nott and Parkinson?" Kingsley asked. "We definitely have two dead bodies."

"The word was that they were messing around and got caught," Blaise offered.

"By Malfoy?"

"Maybe, but more likely by their parents... or maybe Narcissa or Lucius. Pansy and Draco were betrothed since they were born."

"Would Malfoy have killed them over that?"

“Probably not,” Blaise shook his head. “Draco always talked big, but I really don’t think he could. He was playing with the big boys and got caught up in their schemes when he was sixteen. My bet would be that Nott and Parkinson got stupid and then got caught. Lucius would have been more than willing, and able, to kill them.”

“So Draco just takes their bodies?” Tonks asked with a grimace.

“If it suited his purposes,” Blaise shrugged casually.

“And why the memory charms? Why give them anything at all?”

Blaise seemed to think about it for a minute before answering. “For Potter, he was trying to erase anything that gave him an identity. He was left alone, without his magic, separated from the people who loved him. Those are all things that Draco fears, and maybe suffered from a bit. We’d all heard the rumors about how Potter grew up, but no one really believed them. Malfoy and Snape made sure all of us in Slytherin knew that the ‘pampered prince’ had got everything he ever wanted.”

Tonks snorted and shook her head. “How could they have said that? If they only knew...”

“It really didn’t matter, did it?” Blaise asked. “It was easier to believe that he was Dumbledore’s favorite, the Boy-Who-Lived who got everything he ever wanted, everything he could have ever needed. By taking that away, Draco would have felt vindicated and superior.”

Kingsley sighed and rubbed his bald head. “Well, we’ll know soon enough and maybe then get the chance to feed him some Veratiserum.” The three people studied each other in silence before Kingsley spoke again.

“Thank you for your help, Zabini. Let me know if he contacts you again.”

“I will.”

“Why do you do it, Zabini?” Tonks asked, a thoughtful expression on her face.

Blaise smiled widely while doing up his cloak. “Draco is boring. He’s not learned anything since school, always thinking that his money and his name can get him somewhere. Besides,” he shrugged, “you pay better.”

* * *

The door to his study in the Manor had barely closed before Draco was pulling at his heavy woolen cloak, fumbling with the button at his collar. When it finally slipped through the hole, he panted and leaned against the cold but ornate door.

“Damn them,” he hissed and flung himself toward the velvet chair that he always sat in. “Damn, damn, damn,” he vehemently swore again, banging his fist down onto the arm of the chair.

He’d worked so hard for so many years to just put the past behind him. It had been a stupid, vengeful thing to do, he knew. But he’d been so young... just barely eighteen at the time. And Potter was just so... heroic and noble and all of those horrid qualities that Draco had always hated

most. And the Weasley girl wasn't any better.

But time, it seemed, was unraveling his schemes and Draco could feel the cold, clammy press on his chest. Guilt.

It wasn't that he regretted what he'd done, more so that he regretted that he might get caught. Years spent without hearing how successful Harry Potter was were well worth it, Draco thought. There, of course, had been the press grabbing headlines of the 'heroes' deaths, but even those had faded over time. And Draco had done his best to cast shadows on Potter as much as he could.

He took a moment to still his breathing and calm his racing heart. There was no way that anyone could find out what he'd done. He had faith in his own magical ability. The Memory Block would hold until Draco himself broke it; which was likely to happen... never.

Potter was out there, somewhere, living a completely unremarkable life. Draco wasn't even positive he'd been able to survive after being dumped on the side of that road and left for dead. And the Weasley girl was probably living in some squalor somewhere, married to some no-name Muggle and no doubt turning out filthy red headed beggars.

Draco had won in the end.

He closed his eyes and allowed himself to remember that feeling; the overwhelming, triumphant feeling of being on top of the world.

Draco hid in the trees, watching as Potter and Weasley stepped into the clearing. The Dark Lord bowed low, his wand held wide out to the side and his red eyes never moving from his opponents.

"Potter," he greeted, his voice hissing and causing a shiver to run down Draco's spine. He hated the man. Draco now knew that's what he was; a cowardly man who would destroy anything or anyone who got in his way.

"I see you've brought your little girlfriend."

Even from this distance, Draco could see Potter's teeth grind. Weasley, however, stood her ground, covering Potter's back, just as she had promised she would. A spark of annoyance, and grudging respect, shot through Draco. Pansy would have never done that for him; nor would he have trusted her like Potter trusted Weasley.

"Tom."

Draco was surprised that Potter showed none of the fear he'd expected. He was a statue—immovable and impressive.

"Do not use that name, half blood," Lord Voldemort hissed. "I am Lord Voldemort!"

Lightning fast, Potter was the first to strike, his wand a blaze of speed and the golden spell rocketed across the clearing. It was batted away by the Dark Lord easily, but he bowed slightly in recognition before firing his own spell back... right at Ginny Weasley.

“Protego!”

Two loud shouts rent the clearing and Draco rocked back on his heels, sinking lower to the ground. The power of that shield far surpassed anything Draco had seen in his eighteen years. Even Draco’s father hadn’t been able to produce such a strong, sure shield.

The spellfire continued, lighting up the darkening forest. Several times Draco was forced to duck behind trees and rocks as he moved to keep the view of the battle before him. The shoulder of his robes smoked as a spell sent from Weasley was deflected. She screamed in pain as the Cruciatus hit her and Draco watched, amazed, as Potter dove in front of her, a primal roar ricocheting off through the trees.

Voldemort lifted the curse and stood over the two, his wand poised for the kill. Draco winced, knowing that he may have to step in and help here. Loathe as he was for Potter to win—he couldn’t abide watching such an easy kill. Potter had fallen for the oldest trick—he’d worn his heart on his sleeve.

The pale wand slashed out quickly and Potter screamed as a vicious gash opened along his jaw. Despite the wound and the blood running down his neck and into his robes, Potter shakily stood from his knees and faced his nemesis, the two sets of eyes locked for a moment before Potter spit in the demon’s face.

A second later and the battle had begun again. Weasley had recovered enough to fire spells from her position on the forest floor and struggle back up to her feet. Potter drew the Dark Lord’s fire away until it looked as if he had opened himself up to Weasley’s wand. He spun, however, at just the right moment and Weasley went flying like a discarded rag doll.

Potter struck, and Draco’s eyes flew wide open as the Sectumsempra spell hit the Dark Lord, opening his back wide, his robes in tatters.

Draco was surprised that Potter had used the spell at all. It was considered Dark Magic. Truthfully, Draco could care less that Potter used Dark Magic. In fact, if he were more familiar with it, maybe this fight would have been over by now. Although, he should know better than anyone that Potter would do anything he could to win. After all, Potter hadn’t thought twice about using it on Draco.

The delay was just enough for Weasley to scramble back to safety and for Potter to send a stunner at the Dark Lord. It was deflected, however, in a vicious slash of the yew wand.

Bouncing on the balls of his feet, Draco shifted to see what Weasley was doing. He could only see the outline of her slinking in the shadows. Just as he shifted, a dark shape struck from the forest floor, missing him by inches.

“Bloody snake!” Draco hissed, falling back to his behind and scrambling away as the giant python, Nagini, rounded herself for another strike. He fumbled his wand, his mind racing to find just the right spell.

“Sectumsempra!”

If it worked for Potter...

The snake writhed, struggling to get to him, despite its mostly severed head. Draco used the spell again, hearing the satisfying squelch as the body was cut into two separate pieces.

He gripped his heart as it pounded in his chest, and stared at the lifeless, massive snake.

His cover, however, had been blown and red spells shot out from the clearing, causing him to dive to the floor. Crawling quickly, he made his way around a thick copse of trees and to the far side of the opening, where Potter and Weasley had first emerged.

Spell fire once again lit up the night and Draco focused back in, his wand now poised to help Potter. He was well and committed now, he knew, after killing Nagini. He'd inadvertently destroyed the last Horcrux and helped Potter in the fight.

A simple trip jinx flew from his wand and the Dark Lord stumbled, panting as he bled from several wounds. Potter's left arm hung limply at his side and Weasley was hobbling on what looked like a broken ankle.

Draco was just about to cast a cutting hex when a stunner, deflected off of Weasley's shield, hit him and the world went black.

When he awoke again, the forest was quiet. A loud bird called obnoxiously in the pale light of dusk. Draco blinked, taking a mental inventory of all of his parts before sitting up and staring into the clearing. What he expected to see, however, wasn't what his eyes delivered.

Lying in the clearing, were three bodies, all silent and still. Draco crouched down, surveying the scene and waiting for some movement. He counted quietly to sixty, and then did it again. When nothing happened, he lowered his wand a fraction and moved into the clearing.

He crouch-walked toward the Dark Lord first, pointing his wand deliberately to the monster's head. Empty, pupil less eyes looked upward to the canopy, a horrified look petrified on the snakelike face. Deep gouges and scratches marring the skin.

Draco held out his boot, and nudged the body, waiting for it to spring upward and wrap skeletal hands around Draco's throat, choking the life out of him. He let out a breath that he didn't know he was holding and stared at the corpse.

The tension and adrenaline from the earlier battle was gone and now Draco only felt the bone tired of the moment. Relief and disbelief mingled.

Had he ever really thought this day would come?

If he were honest with himself... no. He had never envisioned a day when Potter would actually defeat the demon.

"Bastard," Draco whispered, glaring at the dead body. "Bastard," he repeated over and over, punctuating each word with a kick to the body. Bones crunched beneath his boots and a slow trickle of blood spurted out of the mouth after a particularly vicious kick to the chest. Each jab had a memory behind it.

His father, the mighty Lucius Malfoy, kneeling in front of his Lord and Master just hours ago, cast aside with a casual killing curse for failing to deliver Potter.

Kick.

His mother, wailing over her husband's dead body, felled by a sneered Avada Kedavra because her Lord couldn't stand to hear her cry any longer.

Kick.

A childhood spent watching murders and rapes and things a child should never have to see.

Kick. Kick.

His energy spent, Draco fell to his knees, his lungs burning with the effort. His eyes slid to the side, taking in the broken bodies of Potter and Weasley, collapsed next to each other, their heads only centimeters away from each other.

Draco stood, wiping the sweat off of his face with the sleeve of his robe and stumbled toward them, expecting that they were both dead as well.

Weasley looked pale and unnatural against the dark forest floor, her red hair spread around her like a flame. She had a heavy black bruise along one cheek and her right eye was swelling, a small cut leaking a trickle of blood down to pool in the hollow of her ear. Her ankle bent to one side awkwardly and Draco remembered thinking she had broken it earlier. Her eyes, however, were closed—not open in the horrified death stare typical of the killing curse.

Potter lay next to her, his glasses hanging crazily off of his face, his eyes closed as well. The cut on his jaw was jagged and gaping open, showing the pure white of bone below it. Draco's eyes traveled down his body, noting the way his robes pulled dramatically to one side. His neck was very red and Draco wondered if he'd been physically choked.

Low on his leg was a deep cut, oozing blood. His left arm bent strangely and Draco could see white flecks of bone standing out in the red tissue.

Draco sank to his knees again, staring at the bodies.

It was over. Potter had done it.

He scratched his neck and tried to contemplate a world where Voldemort no longer was. He closed his eyes and imagined the Aurors finding them.

Potter would be a martyr, of course. Saint Potter. Draco had always called him that in the dark of the Slytherin Common Room and everyone had laughed. They wouldn't laugh any more.

There would, no doubt, be holidays and parades and... well, the thought made bile rise in his throat.

The Gryffindor Prince—his Princess at his side.

Fury rose in him unchecked, boiling the acid in his stomach until it choked him. No, the world didn't need another martyr. It didn't need another Saint.

An idea rose in his head slowly. Draco was the only witness. He alone could say what had happened.

Shakily, he reached out and took Potter's wand from his limp hand. Pressing the tips of the wands together, he whispered, "Prior Incantato."

He swore violently when the ghost of an Expelliarmus, several cutting spells, and shield charms came out. Anger rose in him as he kept repeating the charm, watching as spell after spell echoed out of the wand—nothing more serious than the Sectumsempra that Draco had seen Potter cast.

Slumping back to the floor, Draco rested his head against his knee, breathing heavily.

Potter had defeated the strongest wizard alive with a damn disarming spell.

The impossibility of the situation made a hysterical bubble of laughter escape him and Draco let it come, enjoying the drained feeling that it left him with.

He tossed the wand back toward Potter, sighing heavily and trying to decide what to do. He should alert the Aurors to come and retrieve the bodies, even though the thought of it made him sick again.

"The world doesn't need another saint," he whispered viciously at Potter's dead body. He glared at the two of them—so devoted to each other, even in death, that their hands were even curled into each other. Draco stared at the blood stained fingers, anger building in him, wave after wave.

When Potter's finger twitched, Draco shook his head, his eyes going wide as he crawled forward, placing his face less than six inches from the two hands. The finger moved again and Draco swore, pulling back.

As much as the world didn't need another martyr, they definitely did not need a live Harry Potter, crowing like a Merlin-deemed hero from the rooftops. He'd had enough of the high life for years. The thought of the world worshiping someone like Potter made Draco so irrationally angry that he couldn't even think straight.

He jumped away, pacing back and forth as his chest heaved.

Potter grinning up at him from the Daily Prophet.

Potter marching through the Ministry, turning every head and currying favor with the Wizarding world's leaders.

Draco growled mightily, spinning on his heel and pointing his wand at the two bodies, the words of the killing curse echoing through his head.

Do it.

Do it.

You're weak. Pathetic.

"Stop!" Draco grabbed his head, hearing his father's voice repeating words he'd heard since he was small.

Whatever he was, Draco was no killer. He cast a stunner instead, satisfied when Potter's body jumped off of the floor. Just to be sure, he stunned Weasley as well. If Potter was alive, chances were that his little girlfriend was too.

Pacing again, Draco pushed his filthy hands through his hair, trying to decide what to do.

He couldn't kill them, that was certain.

What could he do?

Whatever it was, he needed to act fast. It had already been at least ten minutes since he'd awakened.

The solution came to him when he pictured Potter and Weasley standing ready to enter the clearing. Weasley dropped the Invisibility Cloak to the floor... Invisibility...

He could make them disappear.

He could simply make them vanish from the earth. Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley would no longer exist.

Memory charms could be broken, that much he knew. He'd heard his father expounding that fact many times through the years. Make no mistakes that you need to erase—memory charms can be broken.

But not Memory Blocks...

A scene flashed before him—he was fifteen, hiding from his demanding father and coddling mother in one of Malfoy Manor's hidden passages, the tip of his wand lit as he read the book in front of him, 'Dark Arts Moste Terrible'. They never found him and, although he'd paid for it later, Draco had hidden for hours, reading the secrets of Dark Magic.

The incantation rang in his head as he turned back toward the bodies. The decision made, he stalked toward them, raising his wand determinedly.

Draco brought his wand down to his palm, wincing as he pulled it across the flesh, blossoms of red blood flowed freely. He walked over to his victims, holding his hand out so that the blood flowed down his clenched fist and dripped onto their foreheads.

Potter stirred, his head slowly rolling from side to side and Draco's eyes widened, marveling disgustedly at the strength of the boy.

"Oblivisci Totalum"

Bright red light filled the clearing, making Draco wince and cover his eyes with his arm. It faded

very quickly leaving bright flashes of light in his vision.

It seemed too easy, he thought, as he licked his lips. He wiped his sweaty palms on his robes and cried out when his palm throbbed. He quickly healed the cut and crouched down staring at the bodies.

“Need to get rid of them,” he muttered to himself. But where could he take them? And what would he do when the others came; because they would. His eyes darted back and forth, thinking of a hundred different plans. Whatever he did, he would need to replace the bodies...

Bodies...

There were two dead bodies at Malfoy Manor right now. The traitorous bitch Parkinson and her lover, Nott. His father had killed them just hours ago. Had it really only been that long? It seemed like days... months even.

A devilish smile spread across Draco’s face as he realized that he had the perfect solution to two different problems. He could dispose of the bodies, and make Potter and his girlfriend disappear forever.

They didn’t deserve the fame that they would reap. Draco, if anyone, deserved it all. He had taken all of the risk, playing the spy for both sides. He had risked his life more times than Potter had broken the rules. Draco was a real man, while Potter was a pathetic little boy who was very, very lucky.

He would need to hurry.

Apparating directly into Malfoy Manor was tricky, unless one knew exactly the places to land. Normally, one would arrive in the Reception Parlor and wait for the House Elves to announce you. But Draco knew that several of the hidden passageways contained lapses in the wards. The place where Draco had hid Parkinson’s and Nott’s bodies was one of those places.

The stench almost overwhelmed him when he arrived in the pitch black room. Draco gagged and coughed, feeling around for any small object that he might be able to charm into a Portkey.

An eagle feather quill would work just fine, he decided as his fingers closed around it. Reaching out, he grasped the two lifeless and cold hands before activating the Portkey back to the clearing.

He landed with a rough thump, falling to his behind and averting his eyes as the pasty white faces of his former betrothed and her boyfriend stared at him accusingly.

“Shut it,” he growled to them both, hurriedly stepping over to Potter and Weasley and divesting them of their clothing. Luckily, they were both wearing distasteful Muggle jeans and t-shirts under their robes, so he was only forced to remove the outer robes.

It was no easy feat forcing the dead, uncooperative bodies into the robes, but Draco managed it. He levitated Potter and Weasley out of the way and placed Parkinson and Nott in their places. A few charms to duplicate hair color, just in case. Draco tossed both Potter and Weasley’s wand onto their bodies along with Potter’s glasses and stared at them.

Satisfaction welled in him. It served all of them right. He was so much smarter than any of them.

Now to place Potter and Weasley as far from civilization as he could. He chuckled at the idea of them alone; bleeding, broken and missing everything that made them who they were.

Death was too easy a solution, Draco decided. It was better to make them suffer. No memories, no magic, no family—nothing.

Weasley was first—Apparated to an area not too far from the Lake District. Draco had been there once, as a young child. He dumped her lifeless body in a field full of tall grass after glancing around to make sure no one was around.

Potter was next, abandoned on a country lane outside of Manchester. Draco placed him in the middle of the road, hoping that a vehicle would come along and finish the job.

He stared down at the boy one last time, the dark pink of his scar pulsating in the dim light of his wand tip. That damned scar. It stood for everything that Draco hated.

Viciously, he knelt and used a cutting charm to remove the chunk of skin where the scar resided. Sickeningly satisfied, Draco gripped the hunk of flesh in his hand tightly and Apparated away.

He laughed as he placed the scarred tissue on Nott's forehead and walked out to the edge of the clearing. He took a deep breath and cast the charm to call forth a controlled Fiendfyre. The massive explosion of heat knocked him back onto his behind, forcefully jabbing a gnarled tree root into his back.

The fire took only a moment to incinerate the clearing and burn the bodies to ash.

Taking a deep breath to prepare himself, Draco threw his wand into the fire, rubbed his hands on his robes, and then held them momentarily into the flames, screaming in agony as the skin bubbled and sizzled. He continued screaming as the flames burned out, sank to his knees and let the emotions of the past days finally out, his eyes burning with tears as he cradled his ruined hands to his chest.

Draco heard them approach, his head spinning from the pain; that oaf Hagrid and his giant brother, tearing entire trees out of the soil on their way to the clearing.

The next thing he knew, Draco was being lifted off of the ground and pinned to a tree, all air cut off as a huge, meaty arm pressed against his throat, closing it off.

"I tried," Draco repeated over and over, his voice harsh and grating.

His body dropped and the world spun as he continued to speak. "I tried, I tried..." His eyes closed and he knew no more.

Draco sighed, glancing down at his hands, the back still showing faint scars from the burns. It had hurt his pride more than his flesh to keep those scars—but appearances had to be maintained. Whenever someone saw the marred flesh, their minds jumped to the story, how the pale boy had tried so valiantly to be a hero.

Reminiscing would get him nowhere, and Draco knew that. He had to be prepared. The Ministry was closing in on him. Perhaps a business trip to the continent... There was that message from the Dark Artifacts buyer in Greece. Draco had been planning to ignore it, as the man had a reputation for dealing in goods with slightly questionable authenticity.

Yes, a trip might just be in order...

"Master," the wheezy voice of the old house elf cut through the silence of the house and Draco started.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Master," the house elf started again, wringing his hands slowly in front of him, "there is being people in the garden—wizards, Master."

Draco shot out of his chair, moving swiftly to the window, and peering through the sheer curtains there, careful not to disturb them and give away his position.

"Get down to the kitchens," Draco demanded and the house elf nearly tripped over himself scurrying out the door after a hasty half-bow.

"Damn Aurors," Draco hissed. They were everywhere, leaning against the wrought iron fence surrounding the property, lining the walk. The hollow sound of a firm fist beating on the ornate front doors startled him.

He knew there would only be a split second for him to make his decision. One more knock and the Aurors would probably use a bludgeoning spell on the door, breaking their way in. His eyes darted to his desk drawer, where the Invisibility Cloak was folded neatly.

If he could just get there... he might have a chance to slip into one of the secret passageways. Perhaps the one that led to the gardening shed. From there he could sneak away. He'd need to be careful at the Apparition check points, perhaps he could even take a flask of Polyjuice with him. Merlin knows there was enough down in the secret chamber...

Another thunderous boom rattled the house and Malfoy knew he was out of time.

"DRACO MALFOY!"

Draco winced as the immense voice filled the Manor, making the crystal glasses on the sideboard next to him rattle in their place. He heaved a great sigh, recognizing the voice of the Head Auror, Kingsley Shacklebolt immediately. If he was the one here...

He stood, rooted to the spot in the study, his heart matching the heavy footsteps he could hear on the stairway. Five Aurors, dressed in navy blue robes, threw open the doors, their wands aiming all around the room. One gave a shrill whistle, making the hairs on Malfoy's arms and neck stand up.

"Well, well," Kingsley drawled, taking large strides into the room. "Mister Malfoy."

"You... you can't come in here," Draco challenged, his voice breaking in the middle. He winced at

the weak sound of his words in the face of the monolith of a man. "You have no right."

Shacklebolt chuckled and reached into his robes. Draco flinched, imagining that he was pulling his wand. Only a sheaf of folded parchment emerged, Kingsley shoving it under Draco's nose. "That gives me the right *Mister* Malfoy."

The dark eyes penetrated his own and Malfoy swallowed audibly, breaking the gaze and glancing around the room.

"Tear it apart," Shacklebolt snapped, making him jump. The Aurors sprang into action, spells flashing all around the room as they searched every conceivable nook and cranny.

Draco swallowed harshly, grimacing as an Auror removed a painting of his mother and discovered a large wall safe. "What are you searching for; perhaps... perhaps I can save you the time."

The bright white, toothy grin assured Draco that the Auror had no intention of letting him 'help' in the search.

"Commander."

Draco groaned as both men turned to see an Auror levitating a silvery cloth from out of the desk.

"Good work, Meyers."

Shacklebolt spun back around, roughly gripping the front of Draco's robes. "Draco Malfoy, you're under arrest for theft."

"Theft?" Draco croaked. All of this... utter nonsense had been about the Cloak all along? "I found that in the forest."

"Tell it to the Wizengamot," Shacklebolt snarled. His wand flashed out and Draco jerked as his clothing was rustled all about him. It felt as if a large hand had just felt up and down his body. A moment later and his hands were bound behind him, the wrists stuck together. His wand was roughly tossed to one of the searching Aurors who sealed it in a bubble charm.

"Let's go." Shacklebolt kept a tight grip on the back of Draco's robes, lifting as they marched out of the room. Draco almost had to walk on his tip-toes to keep from choking. The twisted fabric also kept him from protesting too much. Whenever he opened his mouth to speak, the Auror would give a quick jerk upward, forcing Draco to swallow his words.

A dozen different excuses and arguments played in his mind as they made their way out of the Manor. They couldn't do this to him. He needed to have a few minutes to think this through and he'd find a way out of this. He always came out on top.

If the Cloak was all they had...

Draco's hopes, however, were crushed as they walked past the sitting room and Auror Tonks stepped out, levitating a box with a bubble charm around it.

"Found what you needed then?" Shacklebolt asked. The woman grinned in a rather feral way, her

eyes looking Malfoy up and down.

“Viscus Infirmatio,” she nodded, “and a fair bit of it at that.” She held up the box, showing dozens of vials and bottles. “Same poison found in Iris Parkinson’s blood. Several vials of Polyjuice and Draught of Living Death as well.”

“Seems like you’re under arrest for murder, as well.” Shacklebolt gave another vicious jerk of Draco’s collar and he choked, coughing and flailing. He kicked his leg back, trying to connect with anything, or get a decent foot hold to ease his choking a bit. He swore as the tip of a wand dug into his side, and then the world around him went black.

* * *

“It’s amazing how much he looks like you,” Ron said as he brushed the tuft of black hair along the baby’s head. He glanced up at Jack, who was leaning against the side of Emma’s chair.

“You said that last time you were here,” Emma said softly, pulling aside the blanket as Jay tugged his arm out to wave in the air.

“It’s still true,” Ron said. He studied the baby, awed that he was holding a tiny bit of Harry and Ginny in his arms. It was one thing to see his daughter and see his own expressions on her face. But seeing Jay... it was nothing short of a miracle. It was seeing something that Ron had never allowed himself to picture, because he hadn’t allowed himself to think of Harry and Ginny as alive for so long. The tiny boy, who was so much a visible evidence of his parents, fit entirely in Ron’s palm. He gently bounced him up and down.

“You know, I just thought about it... Jay and Ginny Rose will be in the same year at Hogwarts.” The thought made his heart swell a bit—a Potter and a Weasley at Hogwarts once again.

Remus cleared his throat across from them, setting his tea cup and saucer down on the small table in front of the sofa.

“We did have a reason for coming, besides Ron’s obsessive need to see his nephew.” Jack and Emma chuckled as Ron’s face flushed.

“Don’t listen to them, Jay,” Ron said to the baby. “I’m going to be your favorite uncle.”

“No doubt,” Remus smiled. His attention turned back to Jack and Emma as Ron lifted the baby more fully into his arms. “Hermione was able to find the curse that we think was used against you.”

Emma sucked in a deep breath and fumbled for Jack’s hand, which rested on her shoulder.

“It’s reversible,” Remus admitted, “but that doesn’t mean it’s going to be easy.”

Ron grimaced at the thought. He and Hermione had spent hours over the past few days discussing what might be able to break the block.

“What do we have to do?” Jack asked, his voice deep and husky.

“There’s a chance that triggering the memories would remove it completely,” Remus admitted, a

skeptical look on his face. “But by our calculations, that only has a very small chance of working, possibly around three percent.”

“That doesn’t sound optimistic,” Emma sighed. Ron watched as she and Jack shared a silent conversation, wondering what was going on inside their heads. They hadn’t communicated much in the way of their feelings with anyone. Even Remus, who seemed to be closer to them than anyone else, admitted that he didn’t know what they thought about magic, or the Wizarding World as a whole.

“There is another way,” Remus admitted. “And the odds are much greater that the block would be removed completely. However,” he sighed and rubbed his hair roughly. Ron looked down at the baby, who had drifted off to sleep against the warmth of his uncle’s body. “The process is much more difficult. It requires a blood sacrifice from the person who originally performed the Dark Ritual.”

Jack swore softly, standing and moving to the window, staring out at the grey January day.

“Someone has to... die, for us to get our memories back?” Emma asked softly, a horrified look on her face.

“No,” Remus shook his head. “I only meant that the blood had to be willingly given, rather than forcibly taken.”

“And the chances of that happening are... well, they aren’t good,” Ron added, exchanging a glance with Remus. He knew that right now, Tonks and Kingsley were serving a search warrant on Malfoy Manor. Ron had fought long and hard to be included in the Auror party, but Kingsley, perhaps knowing his temper, had overruled him and asked him to accompany Remus to the Ingalls’ home instead.

“Are you any closer to finding who did this to us?” Jack asked, his back still to the room. Ron had heard that tone so many times in Harry’s voice that it sent a shiver down his spine. Determination and anger. But there was a harder edge to it now, something colder and more calculating. And, he supposed it was justified. Jack had been through a lot—things that Ron didn’t even want to consider.

“We are,” Remus admitted. “In fact—”

His words were cut off when Emma gasped loudly. Ron jerked at the bright silver lynx form that streaked into the flat. Jay, disturbed by the movement, began wailing.

“Suspect on his way to the Ministry. Report to Auror Headquarters Auror Weasley.” The voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt came out of the lynx’s mouth before it faded away.

Emma gathered her crying son from Ron’s arms, and Ron stared at Remus before turning to Jack, who had stepped between his family and the strange animal apparition.

“They got him!” Ron said, a huge grin spreading over his face. “I need to get back—”

“I’m coming with you,” Jack demanded, his face stony with resolution. Their eyes locked and Ron

stared at him, a chill making the hair on the back of his neck stand up. The man in front of him might be Jack, but the eyes—those bright green, open, honest eyes—those were Harry.

“Er...” Remus stepped forward. “I’m not sure—”

“Yeah,” Ron nodded firmly. “I’ll take you.” Jack nodded once before turning to Emma, whispering quietly to her as she soothed the baby.

Remus grabbed Ron’s arm and gave it a little shake. “Ron, this can’t be a good idea.”

“Why not?” Ron demanded. “He has every right to be there. After what Malfoy did to them...”

“This can’t end well,” Remus sighed, sensing that Ron wasn’t going to back down, and knowing that if Ron didn’t take him, Jack would find some way to get there himself—just as Harry would have.

Jack rejoined them, Emma at his side. “I don’t want to leave Emma here alone,” he shook his head.

“Is there a way I could go to... the Burrow?” she asked, voicing her question to Remus.

Remus sighed, turning to Jack. “There’s no way I can talk you out of this?”

Jack’s jaw squared and he looked defiantly back at Remus. “No.”

“Very well,” Remus agreed. “But don’t do anything stupid.”

Ron grinned. “We wouldn’t—”

“I’m not thick,” Remus interrupted. “You two are more likely to get into trouble than a Hippogriff in a ferret farm.”

Ron laughed mightily, the adrenaline starting to build at the thought of getting a crack at Malfoy.

“You know,” he observed, “that’s kind of the picture I had.”

Remus rolled his eyes. “Come on, Emma. We’ll gather some things and I’ll take you to the Burrow.”

“Be careful, Jack,” she said. “Don’t... well, don’t kill him.”

“Not yet,” Jack growled. His features softened though at Emma’s reproachful look.

Ron turned his back as they said their private goodbyes. His stomach was starting to churn in anticipation and anger. He latched onto that feeling, knowing he would need it to carry him through the next few hours.

“Ready,” Jack said, coming up beside him.

“Take my arm,” Ron instructed. “Let me guide us there. If you fight against the feeling we’ll splinch.”

“I don’t like that word,” Jack mumbled, taking a firm grip on his arm. Ron winced a bit at the

tightness of the hold, but refused to say anything about it.

“It feels worse than it sounds,” Ron assured him. “Hold on.”

* * *

Jack decided immediately that he didn't like Apparition. He could admit it was dead useful though. After all, he had just been in Manchester and now he was somewhere in the heart of London, several floors below ground if Ron was to be believed.

“Stick close to me, we'll get right through security,” Ron mumbled. “Might want to keep your head down, you're supposed to be dead.”

Jack fought against the rising need to laugh out loud at that statement. Instead, he put his head down, watching the bottom of Ron's blue robes.

“Who you bringing in today, Weasley?”

“Ingalls,” Ron barked as they reached the front of the line leading into the Ministry. “Jack Ingalls.”

The man, wearing a name tag identifying him as Eric, glanced at a piece of paper, scowling down. “Ingalls... Ingalls... I don't have any record—”

“Cor, Eric, don't you get tired of being naff?” Ron grumbled. “He's with me.”

Jack bit his tongue to keep from laughing and pretended to study the Ministry, which, in reality he was.

“Wand?”

He jumped when he realized that Eric was asking him for his.

“Er...” he thought fast, pretending to pat down his trousers and jumper.

“Did you leave it again, you daft prat!” Ron growled.

“Guess so,” Jack mumbled.

“Come on,” Ron glared at him, motioning him forward and past Eric the security guard. “You'd forget your head...”

Jack chuckled as they walked down the corridor. “Emma tells me that all the time.”

“We need to get you a wand,” Ron nodded. “Too bad your old one was ruined.”

Jack shrugged. “Aren't they all the same?”

“Nah,” Ron said, motioning to the staircases in the far corner, rather than the lines that stood in front of the lifts. “The wand chooses the Wizard, or so they say.” He motioned to the stairs. “It's only a few flights up.”

Jack nodded, following Ron up until they came to the floor Ron wanted. He motioned for Jack to follow and Jack tried to look around without drawing too much attention to himself.

“Ron!”

Jack glanced up to see Tonks motioning them from a doorway at the end of the hall.

“Didn’t plan on seeing you today,” she greeted Jack with a small hug. It made him uncomfortable, but he returned it, his eyes scanning the room, preparing himself to see the man responsible for hurting Emma and him.

“Didn’t plan on being here,” he admitted when Tonks pulled back.

“Kingsley’s in with him now,” she informed them, pointing to one wall at the end of the room that seemed to be a transparent wall between the two rooms. “He can’t see you,” she informed Jack as he stared at the scene in front of him.

“He budge yet?” Ron asked.

Jack moved closer to the window and studied the man who sat motionless, his chair in the middle of the room. His pale face and long blonde hair didn’t bring any memories to mind, but looking at him brought up a well of anger inside Jack that he fought to control. He couldn’t tell if it was recognition, or simple anger that this man was responsible for so much agony. The conversation behind him continued, sometimes making sense and at other times incomprehensible to him.

“Not a word.”

“You found the Cloak?”

“Yeah, at the Manor.”

“Any thing else.”

“Potions and lots of Dark artifacts.”

Jack thought the blonde man looked wholly unremarkable, unlikely to be the vile and evil type of person capable of causing so much pain. But Jack wasn’t thick; he knew that looks could be deceiving.

“Am I allowed to go in?” Ron asked. Jack turned at the cold tone of voice and flinched at the fury etched on the tall redhead’s features. He didn’t know this man well, but what he did know, he was starting to like more and more.

“Not going to happen, ducky,” Tonks sighed. “You know *I’m* all for the idea.”

“Five minutes,” Ron confirmed solidly. “If I don’t have him squealing like a pig in five minutes, then it won’t matter anymore.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Tonks raised her eyebrow.

The large black man who had been inside the interrogation room as well came out, sighing and rubbing his eyes wearily.

"I'm not sure I've met anyone so stupid in my life," he shook his head. He held his hand out to Jack. "Kingsley Shacklebolt, Mr. Ingalls." Jack shook it firmly and nodded, not sure what to say in return.

Tonks chuckled and Jack stared at Ron, whose jaw was twitching, his teeth audibly grinding.

"Three minutes?" Ron asked plainly.

The man sighed, shared a glance with Tonks and then nodded once. "Two minutes."

* * *

Draco allowed himself to relax a small bit as Auror Shacklebolt left the room. He glanced at the large window across from him, knowing they were watching him.

Their questions were coming too close, and it made Draco feel nauseated. He'd expected questions about Potter and Weasley, prepared himself even for accusations about Nott and Pansy. But when Shacklebolt had arrested him for the murder of Iris Parkinson, Draco's stomach had dropped to his toes.

It was definitely not his finest hour; he would be the first to admit. He had simply panicked. The stupid bint wouldn't shut her mouth and leave well enough alone. Draco had been in the clear... the Aurors had stopped coming around, stopped asking questions.

But Iris Parkinson had started screaming hers.

She'd always been a bit of a nosy parker, Draco thought, sticking her nose into things she knew nothing about. He had to shut her up, and he had to make it look like an accident.

While staring at the dungeons below the Manor, a memory had surfaced.

He was twelve years old and home for the summer from his first year at Hogwarts; full of idealistic goals and heady adolescent dreams. One morning in late August, his father woke him early and brought him to the dungeons below the Manor. An old, tattered man stared at him wide eyed. He was sitting in a straight backed chair and was obviously silenced as his mouth moved but no sound came out.

"This is a Muggle, Draco," Lucius explained. "Absolutely worthless. See how they live, wallowing in their squalor, living under bridges and in filthy hovels. You are far better than they are, my son."

Draco nodded, his eyes riveted on the man's watery blue ones.

"You have your wand?"

Draco jerked his head up, nodding jerkily.

"Hold it on him. If he moves, you are to stun him. Do you understand?"

Tears welled in his eyes, but he blinked them back and nodded anyway. His wand nearly slipped out of his sweaty hand, but he gripped it tighter and raised it, ignoring the shaking tip.

Lucius studied his potions shelves, grinning when his eye caught the one he wanted. He held up the blue vial for Draco to see before approaching the Muggle and forcing his mouth open with a spell that Draco didn't know.

"Viscus Infirmitio," Lucius explained as he poured the thick liquid down the man's throat. "Weak heart."

Draco's arm shook as the Muggle gasped, clutching his throat, his arms flailing and reaching for Lucius who had stepped away rather than be touched by the filthy man. A few moments later, Lucius yelled loudly from behind the man, causing him to grab his chest and struggle for breath. Draco jumped as well and his wand clattered to the floor. He stooped quickly and scooped it back up, struggling to raise it in defense of himself again.

Draco watched as the man collapsed, gasping for air, his face turned up pleading for help, his arm outstretched as he took his final breath.

It took a second for Draco to recognize the warmth running down his legs for what it was.

"Pathetically weak," his father had proclaimed, sneering down at him. "Clean yourself up. At least the potion was a success."

Draco was left alone, staring at the dead Muggle. He stayed in the dungeon for hours, trying to convince himself that it didn't matter; it was only a Muggle, after all.

The same blue vial of potion stood out on the shelf and Draco ran his fingers along the dusty surface. The decision was over quickly. He slipped the vial into his pocket, gathered his things and Apparated to Parkinson Manor, sneaking into the same entrance he had used to visit Pansy in the past.

There was no way they had enough evidence to convict him, Draco told himself over and over. His confidence faded more and more as Shacklebolt questioned him, but he remained silent and unmoved.

When the Weasel came in, Malfoy narrowed his eyes. He should have known the redheaded oaf would be mixed up in all of this. Draco watched him pace back and forth, his face becoming redder each pass.

"You're weak, Malfoy," Weasley hissed, glaring at him.

The words he'd heard so much growing up struck something deep inside him and he felt the need to lash out against it, to prove that he wasn't weak.

"Stronger than Potter," he sneered, knowing it would push exactly the right buttons. He was rewarded when Weasley cursed. "He was the weak one."

"Harry was stronger than you know—stronger than anyone knows," Weasley said, his voice cracking

in the middle.

“He was weak enough to die!” Draco snapped back, reveling in the choking sound that Weasley made.

“You bastard! I’ll kill you for what you did to him!”

Draco saw the fist coming at him but couldn’t move out of the way fast enough to avoid it. The cracking sound his jaw made echoed through his head and fire shot through his body as the chair he was on flew backward.

He swung out violently, trying to defend himself from the onslaught of heavy blows raining down on him. Time after time his face was hit; his nose crunched in and his jaw hung loose. Dark shadows swam in and out of his vision as someone yelled and the weight disappeared from his body. Draco scrambled away from Weasley, stumbling to stand. One last blow knocked his head back, sending a jolt of pain down his spine before everything went black.

* * *

Ron was through the door faster than Jack could fathom and he spun, pressing his hands against the one-way window.

He watched as Ron paced back and forth in front of the man, hardly garnering a glance from Blondie.

And then something Ron said made his face twitch. The man bit back an acidic reply, his face twisting into a sneer.

Jack rocked back at the look, grabbing his head as flashes of light played across his mind. The same face, the same nasty look on his face, hovered over him. His fist was in plain sight and Jack watched as a dark substance dripped onto his head. He felt it splash against his skin.

“Oblivisci Totalum,” Jack whispered, his head pounding in the present as his knees hit the tile floor. “Oblivisci Totalum.”

Strong arms wrapped around his chest and hauled him to his feet. The memory played over and over in his mind as Jack focused on the absolute hatred in the face of the man—the same man that was in the next room.

“Damnit,” Kingsley shouted as he sat Jack violently in a chair and tore into the other room.

Jack lifted his head, still clutching his temples, just in time to see Ron being bodily lifted off of Blondie, shaking his fist out and wiping the corner of his mouth, smearing a drop of blood down his face.

Ron lunged past Kingsley one last time and landed a beautiful punch. Blondie’s head snapped back in slow motion, blood and spittle spraying everywhere as he flew backward and landed in a heap on the floor.

“That’s enough!”

Jack shook his head to clear it as Kingsley’s demand bounced off the walls. Ron came back into the room, swearing violently and struggling against Tonks, who was marching forward, pushing him back.

“Smarmy little bastard,” Ron hissed, glancing over at Jack.

Jack could only stare at him, echoes of the memory making him shudder.

“It’s him,” he said softly. “I remember. It’s him.”

“Bloody hell,” Tonks swore, still holding Ron back. The enraged redhead met Jack’s gaze and something passed between them. Jack couldn’t explain it, but he knew that Ron understood him completely, through and through.

“Let me in there, Tonks!” Ron shouted, but finally held up his hands in surrender when Tonks drew her wand on him, pointing the tip menacingly close to his nose.

“Don’t make me stun you, Auror!” she roared. Jack was surprised that such a small person could command such a voice.

Kingsley came back into the room, a look of absolute rage on his face. “Tonks, get a medic in here.”

“Yes, sir,” she nodded, lowering her wand slowly, shooting Jack a questioning glance.

Jack could only stare at Ron, whose shoulders were now slumped, perhaps contemplating the punishment that he faced. Jack suddenly felt a bond of understanding, respect and friendship with him.

Kingsley stared at Ron, his intense gaze making Ron squirm further. Jack prepared himself for a very embarrassing, loud dressing down. Instead, Kingsley sighed, his shoulders slumping. “Do you understand what you’ve done, Ron?” he asked in a controlled, tired voice. “Do you know what’s going to happen if the Ministry finds out about this... or the press?”

Ron looked up, his eyes meeting Kingsley’s, strong and unrepentant. “I don’t care. I know what he did.”

Kingsley glared at the younger man and took a deep breath, perhaps to begin yelling.

“I remember,” Jack blurted out, shakily rising to his feet. “I remember that man.”

Both Ron and Kingsley jerked to attention, Ron moving quickly to slide a chair next to Jack so he could use it for balance.

“He stood over me and let blood drip from his fist onto my face.” The memory played back fiercely over and over in Jack’s head. He reached up absently and rubbed his forehead, knowing it was impossible, but feeling the splash of blood on his skin all the same. “Then he said... something. Oblivisci Totalum. And then there was a flash of red light. And then black.”

Jack looked up, hoping that they would be able to explain what he'd witnessed to him. "What does that mean?"

Kingsley cleared his throat. "You were awake?" he asked, his voice low and husky.

Jack nodded, his eyes darting back and forth. "Was that it? When he took our memories?"

"Yes," Ron nodded. "That's the Memory Block he used."

Jack's head swirled and he groped for the chair, sinking slowly into it. The wood beneath him felt good; it was real and solid in a world where not much else was right now.

"I don't know what to say..." Ron started, shaking his head. "I never thought anyone would be capable of something this horrible. Even seeing what we did in the war..."

Kingsley nodded and leaned heavily against the wall.

The door to the room opened and Jack looked up, expecting to see Tonks bringing a medic back in to heal the man in the other room.

Instead, a large man, looking rather like a lion with tawny hair and beard, streaked with grey, filled the space made for the door.

"Auror Shacklebolt." His voice was commanding and Jack glanced over to Ron, seeing him groan silently, his body slumping. "Would you mind explaining to me why you have Draco Malfoy in a Ministry holding cell?"

"Damn," Ron hissed under his breath, low enough that only Jack heard.

Jack didn't know the man, but he got the gen. They were all in very big trouble.

Chapter 14

January 2003

It had been over an hour since the Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, had come into the interrogation room in Auror Headquarters demanding answers.

Kingsley disappeared with the Minister shortly after the Minister's untimely arrival, giving a significant look to Ron on his way out.

Ron winced and turned to Jack. "I wouldn't want to be in that office."

Jack stared at the open doorway, feeling both extremely guilty and confused. "He won't lose his job, will he?"

"Not likely," Ron said, sighing as he sank down in a chair next to Jack. They both watched as Tonks came in, trailed by two other people whom Jack assumed were doctors or... what did they call them? Healers.

Ron and Jack waited in the room, not watching through the window, but staring at the dull tile floor.

"You alright?" Ron asked.

Jack let out a heavy breath and shrugged a shoulder. "It's a bit like getting hit by a lorry."

Ron snorted. "Wouldn't know."

An ironic snort slipped out of him. "I would," he admitted. "The memories... they come rushing back and they just... flood your mind with these... visions."

Ron looked at him, his tongue probing the now swelling corner of his cracked lip.

"I don't..." Jack shook his head, not sure what he wanted to say, or ask, or feel.

"It was really him?"

"Yeah," Jack nodded. "I saw him clearly."

Ron nodded, a grim look on his face.

They spent the rest of the time in silence. Jack replayed the memory, reliving each horrific detail so that he could find a place in his head for it. The flashes through the years were so jumbled and sporadic, that placing them on any kind of timeline was almost impossible.

Percy was the one who summoned them, telling them that the Minister wanted to see them.

"How bad is it, Perce?" Ron asked, keeping his tone low. Jack had to take long strides to keep up

with the two brothers.

"It's bad," Percy said in a quiet voice. "He's furious."

"Bloody prick," Ron hissed. "Part of this is his fault, you know. But he'll never admit it."

Jack reached out, grabbing Ron's arm and jerking him to a halt. "What do you mean? Was he involved in this?"

Ron winced, his eyes darting up and down the hall. Jack narrowed his eyes. "I deserve the truth."

Ron nodded, looking him straight in the eye before indicating a door behind them. Percy looked annoyed, but joined them. Ron brought out his wand and the door made a squelching noise.

"After the Final Battle," he said in a low voice, "Scrimgeour rushed the investigation. They only really talked to Malfoy. There was information we're just finding out about now."

"Were there other witnesses?" Jack asked, his stomach churning with betrayal and anger.

"No," Ron shook his head. "But he pressured the Aurors to close the case fast. To keep things quiet if there were questions."

Jack sucked in a deep breath and locked his jaw. "Could they have found us sooner?"

Ron's eyes met his, showing hurt and a bit of the betrayal that Jack was feeling. "They might have."

Jack thought about that for a minute. But 'what if' was useless now. "Did he know about Malfoy?"

"I don't think so," Ron answered honestly. He glanced over at Percy who shook his head.

"He didn't know. There were questions," Percy admitted, "about his story—inconsistencies—but they were kept quiet. The Minister made sure the files were kept from me. I never worked on them. He said it was out of respect for our family and what we'd gone through. But now I know he was just trying to keep me from asking questions."

A slow fire began to burn in Jack's belly and he nodded, brushing past both Ron and Percy.

"Open the damned door," he said, not caring if he offended them. Let them think what they would; he had a politician to deal with.

This time, Ron and Percy were hurrying to catch up with Jack as he stalked through the hallways. Percy guided them to the large office and Jack opened the door, not caring what he was interrupting. Vaguely, he glanced at the fancy gold nameplate next to the door; Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic.

Scrimgeour was behind his desk and stood immediately. "What is the meaning of this? Weasley, I told you to have them wait—"

"I think I've waited long enough," Jack growled, striding right up to the man's desk and staring him

in the eye.

“Mr. Potter.”

“Ingalls,” Jack corrected. “My name is Jack Ingalls. It may have once been Harry Potter, but I can’t remember.” Ron, standing next to him, winced. So did the Minister.

“Mr. Ingalls,” the man corrected with a heavy sigh, “perhaps you and I should have a conversation.”

“I think so,” Jack stated, not moving his eyes from the amber ones of the man he was already beginning to hate.

“Perhaps, gentlemen—” the Minister started but Jack slammed his hand down on the desk, the sharp rap snapping them all to attention.

“They stay.” Scrimgeour puffed up his chest, about to object. “Unless you have something to hide, Minister.”

“Do you know who you are talking to, young man?”

“Do you?” Jack retorted, calling on the slow burn within him to fuel his indignant anger.

“I am the Minister of Magic—”

“And I am the man who killed Voldemort.”

“We don’t know that for sure—”

“I do,” Jack stated, not caring that he was lying just a bit. It didn’t matter that he didn’t have a clear memory of that exact moment of his past. He knew deep down that he had done what he was supposed to do; he had defeated an evil, treacherous monster.

Scrimgeour’s eyes darted behind Jack. “Shacklebolt said that your memory was gone.”

“I have some memories.”

“That’s not possible with a Memory Block,” Scrimgeour shook his head.

“When was the last time you had one placed on you?” Jack asked, enjoying the way the man squirmed a tiny bit.

“Well—”

“I suggest, *Minister*, that you start by explaining why you hindered the investigation into my supposed death. Why you purposely buried information that may have found my wife and me sooner. Why you caused our family to grieve unnecessarily. And don’t you dare tell me I have no right to that information.”

Scrimgeour stared back at him before sitting slowly in his seat, his back straight and his hands folded in front of him.

“Are you implying—”

“I’m stating,” Jack clarified. “You wanted this case closed before the press found out anything else that painted the Ministry in a bad light.”

Scrimgeour heaved himself into his chair and Jack backed away from the desk a step. The Minister stared at him, his amber eyes clouding slightly. Jack knew he had hit upon the truth. Scrimgeour’s eyes darted around the room and he let his shoulders slump in a tired sigh.

“Mr. Ingalls, you weren’t here immediately following the battle. You didn’t see the devastation and almost complete collapse of this government. You didn’t see good witches and wizards working twenty-four hours a day to find homes for families without them, or to rebuild Diagon Alley or Hogwarts.”

“Whose fault was that?” Jack snapped acidly.

Scrimgeour conceded the point with a nod. “Auror Shacklebolt assures me that the evidence now points to Mr. Malfoy as the person responsible for the Memory Block. I assure you that the Ministry will do everything they can to prosecute—”

“With all due respect,” Jack drawled, “that doesn’t give me much faith, Minister.”

“Our first priority is to validate all of the evidence and restore your memory as quickly as possible,” Scrimgeour continued, not paying attention to Jack’s words.

Jack stared at the man, the silence in the room growing awkward. He could hear Ron, Percy and Kingsley behind him, their robes rustling and their breathing heavy.

“I don’t believe you,” Jack said quietly. “Your first priority is to cover your own arse and make sure no one knows you cocked up.”

Scrimgeour looked as if he wanted to bolt out of his seat and accost Jack, his face turned red and his shoulders shook.

“I think we can both agree that neither of us want a nasty story in the press about this whole affair.”

Jack shook his head, knowing that would be the man’s answer. “I think the press might be very interested in my story, actually,” Jack shrugged. The very thought of answering questions from a reporter made his blood run cold, but Scrimgeour didn’t need to know that.

The Minister sighed deeply and laid his palms flat on the clean desk. “There must be some sort of compromise...”

“There always is,” Jack agreed sarcastically, finally letting himself sit on the edge of one of the hard-backed wooden chairs in front of the desk.

“What is it, Mr. Ingalls, that you want me to do for you?”

Jack stared at the man for a moment before nodding. “What will happen to Malfoy?”

"If it's proven that he is the one responsible," Scrimgeour answered diplomatically, "then he will probably be sentenced to Azkaban."

"He deserves the Kiss," Ron grumbled next to Jack.

Jack made a mental note to ask about that later, but plowed on ahead. "I want you to use every resource you can to fully investigate what happened four years ago. And I want the results made public, no matter who they disparage."

"You can't be serious," Scrimgeour blustered. "Young man, do you understand that there have been accusations made against you for using Dark Magic."

Jack sighed, disgust for the tactics of this man filling him. "Mr. Scrimgeour, I think I've proven that I don't need your world to survive." Behind him, several harsh breaths were let out and he prayed that they would keep quiet and let him say what he needed to say. "I don't really care what the press, or the public, say about what I did or didn't do out there. My wife and I were very happy in our lives. Of course, we prefer to be where our family is—any sane person would. "

"You really don't care—"

"It's *you*, Minister," Jack continued without pausing, "who doesn't need a scandal on your hands."

Scrimgeour blew a harsh breath out of his nose. Jack could tell it was going against every bone in his body for the man to remain quiet.

"And if I pledge the entire weight of the Ministry behind this?" he finally asked.

Jack sat back in the chair, contemplating the man's question. "Full disclosure?"

Scrimgeour winced but nodded jerkily.

"Kingsley will be the one in charge," Jack demanded. "I won't have one of you politicians finding a way to spin this for your own good. You should have thought of the consequences of your choices four years ago; now they're coming back to bite you in the arse."

Again, Scrimgeour nodded. "Auror Shacklebolt has full discretion on this matter."

Percy cleared his throat from behind and Jack turned, watching him from the corner of his eye.

"You'll want to investigate Mr. Potter's will as soon as possible."

Jack stared at his brother-in-law who stoically stared at the Minister. "There were... irregularities in the way it was handled."

"Will?" Jack asked.

Percy nodded, his eyes slowly finding Jack's. "You made a will, before the Final Battle. But you left everything to Ginny, and then the Weasleys after her." Jack wasn't surprised; it sounded like something he might do. "When it looked as if both you and Ginny had... died," Percy continued, "the Ministry seized the funds."

Jack spun back in his seat, seeing a momentary look of pain on the Minister's face.

"Based on Mr. Malfoy's testimony," Percy continued, "Ginny supposedly died first, meaning that the estate would pass to the Weasley family to be divided up equally between the surviving members. The Ministry claims the will is null and void because of the accusation of Dark Magic use. They labeled you a criminal, Harry."

Jack narrowed his eyes at the man, but spoke to Percy. "Where is the money now?"

"I've been able to discover that Gringotts was ordered to hand over the accounts. They refused, simply freezing them instead. The will was not executed. Of course, now that both you and Ginny have been found alive, the will is voided anyway."

"He tried that with Dumbledore's will too," Ron said slowly, "because you wouldn't cooperate with him."

Jack stood, nodding his head slowly. "You have two weeks, Minister, to return to me what is rightfully mine, to finish investigating what should have been done years ago, and to punish the person responsible." Scrimgeour began to splutter but Jack held up his hand. "If you don't, I'll find the nastiest reporter I can, and I'll lay your administration open for everyone to see."

"You can't threaten me like that," Scrimgeour bellowed, jerking to his feet. "You have no proof of any of this. You have no memory—you don't remember any of it."

Jack turned on his heel, chuckling dryly. "You'll do it," he nodded, "because you're scared about what I *do* remember."

He walked confidently out of the office, the others following.

"Bloody hell," Ron mumbled, rubbing his face harshly and staring at Jack. "I've never seen anyone talk to him like that."

"I have," Percy said softly. "Harry did it before, told him that he would respect the Minister when the Minister proved he was worthy of it."

Jack stared at the man, trying to remember those words coming out of his mouth. It sounded like something he would say, even if he couldn't remember it.

"Is it true? About the money, I mean," Ron asked Percy.

"It is," Percy nodded. "I only found the paperwork when I began to dig deeper. I'm sorry, Jack—"

"It doesn't matter," Jack waved it away. "I don't blame you for any of this."

"We're all partially guilty," Kingsley said, speaking up finally. "All of us let our grief and exhaustion dictate what we believed. All we can do now is restore to you everything that we can."

Jack stared at the large man and nodded, feeling the sincerity in his words.

"Are you going to lose your job?" he asked Percy frankly.

Percy contemplated that for a moment before shrugging. "It's quite possible."

"Doesn't matter," Kingsley said, a sly grin spreading across his face. "As of two hours ago, Percy was transferred to the Auror Division. I must have forgotten to file the paperwork. Oops."

The four men chuckled, moving slowly down the corridor.

"That was... intense, Jack," Ron said. "I don't think I could see Harry ever being that... Slytherin."

Jack thought about that for a moment, the implications sinking in. "Harry Potter grew up, Ron," he said honestly.

* * *

Molly bounced the baby lightly in her arms, rocking with each step she took and hummed a lullaby—the same one she'd sung to all of her children and grandchildren.

Little Jay was such a precious thing. So tiny, yet at only a two weeks old he showed so much personality. He was a voracious eater with a healthy set of lungs. Just like his mother, Molly mused to herself.

She glanced up from Jay and watched Emma studying the photographs on the mantel.

"I wish I could remember this," she muttered, shaking her head and furrowing her brow. "Everyone looks like they're having so much fun."

Molly walked over, careful to keep baby Jay facing outward. He always protested when he couldn't see what was going on around him.

The picture Emma had been looking at was one of Molly's favorites. It was taken the summer before Ron, Hermione and Harry's sixth year. Despite the rocky beginning, those hot summer days had been full of laughter and fun.

"Oh yes," Molly mused, "you were all having fun. See the brooms in the grass?" Emma nodded. "I think that was the first time the three of you convinced Hermione to play two-a-side Quidditch in the orchard. You were up there for hours."

Emma's fingers traced over a younger version of herself, sitting in the grass next to an amazingly young looking Jack. The two were laughing hysterically, watching Ron and Hermione bickering.

"Were we together yet?" Emma asked. Her brow furrowed tightly, as if searching her mind for the memory.

"Not yet," Molly shook her head. "Although if you watch closely, you'll catch Harry watching you." She grinned as the photograph Harry snuck a look at Ginny who was still laughing. "Poor boy had no idea what he was feeling," Molly tutted, bouncing Jay lightly as he began to fuss.

"I still don't think he does at times," Emma smiled, placing the frame back in its place on the mantel and reaching for her son. "Come here, you little monkey," she cooed, "it's about time to feed you again."

Molly stood in place, watching the tender play-by-play of son and mother. Emma slowly sat on the sofa, lifting a thin blanket over her shoulder. Jay, lying in his mother's lap began to fuss louder, his arms waving and his little legs pumping up and down, pushing against his mother's body lightly.

"You know what's going to happen, don't you?" Emma teased.

"It's only the two of us now," Molly said softly as Emma struggled to cover herself with the blanket. "Your father went out with Remus for a bit."

Emma nodded and let the blanket fall to the side before lifting the squirming baby and allowing him to latch on. His hungry, panicked cries faded away to happy, little baby moans of contentment as he drank his milk.

Molly's eyes filled with tears and she scolded herself. It was silly to be so emotional over such a small moment, but she couldn't help it.

Remus had taken her aside after bringing Emma and Jay this morning, explaining that it was Emma's request that brought them here. Molly was grateful for the chance to get to know her daughter again, and, of course, her grandson.

"I wish we had some baby pictures of Jack," Emma said softly, looking down as her son ate greedily. "Everyone says how much Jay looks like him."

Molly bit her lip, knowing that only a few pictures actually existed—and those were upstairs, locked in a battered Hogwarts trunk with the initials 'H.P.' in gold letters on the outside of it. The trunk had been left here at the Burrow and its owner had not returned to claim it. Yet.

"I may have what you're looking for," Molly admitted. "I'll be right back."

The trunk was in the same place as when it had been placed there, four years ago. Molly knew that both Ron and Hermione had been up to the attic several times, opening it and looking through the souvenirs. Ron had even worn a pair of Harry's old socks for luck on his Wedding day. Of course, he didn't know she knew that.

But Molly had never opened the trunk herself. She just couldn't bear to see the most valuable treasures of a seventeen year-old boy that she had loved as a son. It was time, however, to brush the dust off of these memories and hand them back to the rightful owner.

The item she was searching for was buried under two Weasley jumpers, making her heart beat faster as she pushed them aside. Harry was always such a dear about his jumpers, keeping them all; although he'd given the smallest ones to Ginny, who had worn them until the yarn faded. The photo album was neatly placed in the bottom of the trunk. In fact, everything looked as if someone had taken great care to organize and clean it.

That had to have been Hermione. Molly knew that Harry, while greatly valuing his possessions, never would have folded his clothing just right, or stacked his books and parchments in such a neat manner. He had been a teenage boy, after all.

Molly clutched the album to her, closing the trunk slowly and replacing the latch. She came down

into the sitting room and watched as Emma attached Jay on the other side and he began eating once again.

“He’s going to be huge if he keeps eating this way,” Emma chuckled. Molly smiled down at them and then settled herself on the sofa.

“You were the same way, dear.” She placed the album on her knees. “Rubeus Hagrid made this album for Harry after his first year at Hogwarts. He wanted Harry to have something of his past. Poor dear hadn’t ever seen a picture of his parents before then.”

She opened the book slowly, balancing it on her knee so that Emma could see the pictures as she turned the pages.

“This is James and Lily on their wedding day. The man behind them is Sirius, Harry’s godfather,” Molly explained, pointing out each person.

“Jack has his mother’s eyes,” Emma mused quietly. “I’ve always loved his eyes.”

Molly nodded. “I wondered if this little one would get them too.”

Emma smiled down at Jay, stroking his soft cheek. He let out a shuddering sigh in response and his mouth went slack, milk pooling down onto his chin. “Maybe the next one will.”

* * *

Emma relaxed, lifting the baby to her shoulder as her mother turned the pages slowly, pointing out people and telling what stories she knew.

When she opened the last page, a folded piece of parchment fell out, emitting shrill, although muted, notes of singing.

Emma stared at the paper with the faded hand-drawn broom on the front. Suddenly, she saw the same paper, with a much darker illustration, in her own trembling hands.

It was dark and the whole stone corridor she was standing in lit with a flash of lightning from the window. She jumped and looked up at two huge wooden doors. Slowly, she gathered her courage, silently cursing her pounding heart. The door was almost silent as she pushed against it.

He was in the last bed in the row, his black hair standing out against the white linen of the pillowcase. He looked so young; so peaceful without his glasses.

She hesitated, running her fingers along the crease in the card once more, convincing herself that she could do this.

“Just do it, Ginny,” she mumbled to the stillness. “You made it for him.”

It had taken her forever, and the promise of five chocolate frogs, to convince George to show her the spell for making the broom on the card move. In the end, she’d ended up searching the library anyway, because she couldn’t make the spell work. She settled for making the card sing instead.

She raised her hand to nudge Harry's shoulder, but stopped just short of waking him. Maybe it would be better if she just left the card. Then her face wouldn't go all red when he looked at it. And she wouldn't have to know whether he hated it or not.

The memory faded and Emma reached out, lifting the handmade card.

"I made this for him," she said quietly. "I didn't know he kept it."

Molly stared at her and she felt her face heat. "I just remembered it now," Emma explained. "It happens sometimes. I remember little things. I never remember much that's important." She felt a bit disgusted at herself, truth be told, because it seemed she only remembered trivial things. She wanted to remember important things that would help them restore their memories—not silly singing cards.

"I think it's important," her mother soothed. "Obviously Harry did as well, because he kept the card. Harry's trunk is full of things that meant something to him—and they're not necessarily things that the world would see as treasures."

Emma considered that, her fingers tracing the hand-drawn broom on the front of the card. "I just don't feel like I'm doing anything useful."

"Emma," Molly started, hesitating on the name for a moment. Emma looked up, startled that her mother had addressed her in the unfamiliar way. "You and Jay are Jack's life. You're doing the most important thing for him right now—you're taking care of your family. Jack and Harry may be very different people, but I can tell they value the same thing. Harry's first priority was always his friends, who he treated as his family."

She was right, and Emma scolded herself for getting lost in the desire to be in the middle of things.

"I forget sometimes," she said quietly. Jay shifted against her shoulder, his little puffs of breath brushing against her neck.

"When all of this is over," Molly said, "you and Jay will be here for Jack."

Emma chuckled. "You sound like you've given this advice before."

"I have," Molly nodded. "When Harry had to leave you to protect you. You were so... crushed, yet you understood. When you came home that year, I could tell. I knew without having to be told what had happened. And so I held you, and told you the same thing." She reached up and smoothed Emma's hair gently. "Well, almost the same thing."

Emma smiled, leaning her head into her mother's touch and soaking up the affection. She may not remember the woman more than a few bits of feeling, but she knew this was what having a mother felt like.

"Thank you," she said softly.

Molly smiled, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "I'll remind you anytime you need it, love."

Jack's head pounded and he pressed his thumbs into his eyes beneath his glasses.

"I hate that," he grumbled, letting go of Ron's arm and glancing around at the gold light left by the fading sun. It lit up the snow on the trees and made the branches glow a bit.

"You always did," Ron chuckled, shoving his hands deep into his pockets and marching alongside Jack down the worn and muddy path to the Burrow. "Always said you'd rather ride a broom."

"Well, now I'd rather drive." Jack felt a bit irrational being grouchy at something so simple.

"It takes some getting used to," Ron assured him. "We all had trouble with it at first."

Jack glanced at him, raising a skeptical eyebrow, but smiled slightly just the same. There was something there between the two men now—something that hadn't existed, for Jack anyway, before today. He guessed he could call it friendship, but it felt different from what he shared with Derek.

With Ron, he felt awkward, because he couldn't remember the things and events that had made them such good friends; but Ron could. It made it hard to relate. Yet, at the same time, there was a feeling of having known someone for so many years that your life felt hollow without them.

"We'll see," was all that Jack could promise.

The heat in the kitchen was stifling and the smells of food cooking wafted toward him, wrapping him in what he could only describe as 'home'. His heart beat funny inside his chest; each thump demanding he see Emma and Jay—hold them, kiss them, let himself be swallowed in their love. It was a building, urgent need inside of him and he went in search of them immediately.

Molly and Arthur were in the sitting room, talking quietly when he entered.

"Hello, Jack," Arthur greeted. "I heard you and Ron made quite the impression at the Ministry today."

"All lies!" Ron called, an easy-going smile on his face as he entered the room.

Jack smiled awkwardly, his eyes darting around the room for his family.

"They're upstairs in Ginny's old room," Molly said quietly, her hand resting on his arm. "Jay was fussy and Emma wanted a few minutes of quiet. First landing, second door."

Jack couldn't help the smile that stretched over his face as he thanked her and darted out of the room, taking the steps two at a time, while still trying to be quiet.

The door opened with a slight creak and Jack winced, seeing Emma inside lying on the bed, Jay tucked into her arm.

"We're awake," she said softly, her eyes shining in the half light of the room. Jack nodded, closing the door behind him.

The bed was small—only single width—but Jack wasted no time in shucking his shoes and jumper and climbing in next to Emma, his arms seeking her out and pulling her and Jay to his chest.

“I missed you,” he mumbled to the skin on her forehead.

“We missed you,” Emma replied. They kissed several times before Jack turned his attention to his son, who was staring wide eyed at him.

“Hello, little man.” The baby cooed up at him and Jack lifted him, bringing the tiny body up to rest on his chest. Jay squirmed a bit before sighing and accepting his new position, legs curled up under his body and arms reaching around Jack’s chest. “I hope you’ve been good for your Mum.”

“He has,” Emma assured him, her fingers running up and down the skin on Jay’s arm. “He’s been very good.”

“Your Mum said he was fussy.”

“A bit,” Emma agreed. “I think he’s just not used to more people around. And he missed his Daddy.”

“I’m not going anywhere for awhile.”

“Good,” Emma said, snuggling down into his embrace even further.

Jack allowed himself to fully relax now, soaking in the warmth and tenderness of the moment.

“You don’t have to tell me if it’s too much...” Emma started. “But I’ll listen if you need to talk about it.”

Jack glanced at her and nodded. “I just need to find the words.”

“Alright,” she nodded, laying her head back down on his shoulder and her hand on top of their son.

The day’s events flashed before him like a movie of someone else’s life. At times they were overwhelming and unbelievable. But... they still made sense.

He began to talk slowly, telling her every detail he could remember. It all came spilling out of him, sentence after sentence, story after story. And Emma soaked it all in, asking quiet questions when he needed to clarify and lending her quiet support, as she always did.

When he finished, they sat in the silence of the dusky room, their breathing making the only sounds.

“Where do we go from here?” Emma asked. Her voice was full of emotion and Jack scowled up at the ceiling, wishing he could shelter her from all of this, but knowing that she had as much right to know it as he did.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “The Aurors told me that they’ll keep me informed; and I know that Ron would anyway.”

“It sounds like the two of you found your friendship again,” Emma observed.

Jack nodded. "It's still kind of strange, but yeah."

"And what do we do about our memories? Remus said they could be restored?"

"It's a possibility," Jack nodded. "Ron said that Hermione would be coming by to talk to us about that. I don't really know what all is entailed in it, but it doesn't sound easy."

Emma nodded slowly. "And what do we do about... our lives. Do we stay where we are, in our flat, with you working your jobs and seeing our friends? Or do we give it all up and be in this world?" She sounded so conflicted, reflecting Jack's own questions and fears.

"I don't know," he sighed. "This life we've been living... it's a part of us and always will be. We can't just walk away from it completely. It's part of what's made us who we are."

"I agree," Emma said. "And I can't say goodbye to Missy and Anne, or even Derek."

Jack chuckled. "Me either."

"Could we... tell them?" Emma asked softly. "About all of this?"

Jack shrugged. "I don't think so, but that doesn't mean I don't want to. It feels like lying, to me."

"I know," Emma said, rising up on her elbow and looking down at him. "I told Missy about finding my family. She knows that much."

"Derek also," Jack nodded. He rubbed his eyes under his glasses again, thankful that the quietness of the room and the warmth of Emma's embrace had helped him order his thoughts enough that the headache he had earlier had gone away.

"Ron said..." Jack sighed, hating the idea, but needing to tell Emma anyway. "He says that they could make Derek and Missy forget. There's a memory charm they could use."

"No," Emma said decisively. "That's not right."

"I know," he soothed her, patting Jay on the back gently when he stirred at his mother's raised voice. "I told him that wasn't right."

Emma looked at him for a minute before nodding. "We can't do to them what was done to us—not even a single memory."

"I agree." She settled back into his side. "Maybe we could talk to your parents about how to handle this," he suggested. "They seem to be handling things well."

"Better than I would imagine myself doing in their shoes," Emma said with a shake of her head. "They offered to let us stay here," she said softly.

Jack's first instinct was to refuse. But he bit his tongue, hearing the hope in her voice.

"Is that what you want?" he asked. He turned his head, looking into her warm brown eyes.

She returned his gaze before nodding. "I think so. For a bit at least. I just feel like we should know these people better. They're our family and it feels wrong that we don't know them."

Jack nodded, understanding what she was saying. Although, for him, it felt a bit different. It was awkward since this was genetically Emma's family, yet they thought of him as one of their own, and had since he was quite young.

"I want Jay to know them all," Emma continued.

"I do as well," Jack nodded. The baby stirred against his chest, pulling his arms in under him and scrunching up his face. "He deserves a family."

"He does," Emma agreed.

Jack sighed, smoothing Emma's hair away from her face. "Then we'll stay for a bit."

"Really?" she asked, hope shining brightly in her eyes and her smile widening.

"Yeah," he nodded. "We'll stay. Although... we're going to have to do something about this bed."

Emma laughed and kissed him. "I'm sure they can do something... just... magic it bigger or something."

"As long as it stays that way," Jack chuckled. "I don't want to end up on my arse in the middle of the night."

"Jack," Emma chided him, sitting up so she could lift a protesting Jay off of his chest.

Jack watched, enthralled as Emma scooted up against the headboard of the bed and removed her top so that she could nurse Jay.

"All he does is eat," she grumbled, although Jack could tell that she wasn't upset by it.

"He's a growing boy," he protested for his son, chuckling when the little monkey latched on with impatient hungry grunts.

Careful not to disturb them too much, Jack pulled Emma forward a bit and seated himself behind her so that her back was pressed against his chest. Together, they cradled their son as he ate.

Jack let his eyes close, listening as Ginny hummed a song he'd never heard her sing before.

"That's nice," he complimented, feeling drowsy listening to the melody. Slowly, he slipped off to sleep.

* * *

She chose the Burrow, hoping that a more familiar setting would help ease the discomfort and confusion she feared she would cause.

The Ministry was out of the question, given Jack and Ron's behavior there a few days past. Not that

Hermione blamed them. Their actions, short of Ron's bar room brawling, had been entirely justified.

And Jack and Emma had been living at the Burrow for the past few days, much to Molly and Arthur's delight. It really seemed the best situation for both families as there were more people to help with Jay. They were comfortable here.

Once Molly heard what Hermione was planning, she prepared a huge tea complete with homemade biscuits, scones, jam and clotted cream. Hermione just shook her head, knowing that it was Molly's way of doing what she could.

Hermione sat on one side of the table, Ron next to her, Jack and Emma across from her. Both Arthur and Remus were here as well. Jay and Ginny Rose were off with Molly in another part of the house, probably being spoiled rotten by now.

With her books and research spread out in front of her, Hermione finally felt ready.

"So," Ron started. Hermione could see his nervousness and anticipation warring on his face. "How hard is this going to be?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, looking back at Jack and Emma. There was much more nervousness and anxiety on that side of the table. They sat tightly together, their hands clasped below the wooden surface.

"It's going to be very hard, I won't lie to you," Hermione admitted. Jack looked stoically down at the table while Emma nodded firmly. "I've spent the last few days in the Department of Mysteries, researching every aspect of this curse I can find, as well as everything I could find about memory restoration or alteration."

"What are the chances of this working?" Arthur asked.

Hermione winced, wishing that they could get into the specifics before they discussed how likely it was to work.

"I would say better than average," Hermione sighed. "You've both had significant memory breakthroughs in the recent past. The Block is weakening."

"I didn't think that was possible," Remus scowled. "Everything I've read about the Block says it should be complete and total."

"I have several theories about that," Hermione nodded, shuffling through her notes until she found the right one. "First, the Block was done by someone who had never performed it before, thus it lacked the power to contain all of the memories. Second, both of you have such strong magic, that it's simply fighting the Block more than expected."

Jack and Emma exchanged a look that Hermione couldn't decipher and she continued.

"Either way, it's to our advantage. It may mean that the process of breaking the block will be easier."

“What can we expect?” Jack asked, his tone very guarded.

“To be honest,” Hermione answered, “we’re not sure. There hasn’t been any recorded history of anyone breaking the curse. That doesn’t mean it hasn’t happened,” she rode over Ron’s protests, “it just means that no one has recorded how it happened.”

“So it’ll be experimental,” Emma nodded, looking less sure of herself.

“Yes,” Hermione nodded. “We’ll start by asking Malfoy to remove the curse.”

“That man isn’t getting anywhere near my family,” Jack growled, his dark gaze shaking Hermione.

“I’m sorry,” she soothed, “I didn’t phrase that correctly. To break the curse, we need Malfoy’s blood, willingly given.”

“He’ll never do that,” Ron growled.

Hermione sighed. “It won’t be easy.”

“If he refuses?” Arthur asked. “Can it be taken forcefully from him?”

“Would it be considered willing if he were under the Imperius curse?” Ron suggested. Hermione winced at the suggestion.

“Those aren’t the most ideal situations,” Hermione shook her head. She hated the idea of breaking the law, even though they’d used it in the past. It just seemed... wrong to use an Unforgiveable, no matter what Malfoy had done. “Although we can’t rule them out completely. The Ministry is planning on trying several approaches to get Malfoy to give his blood voluntarily.” Hermione knew if it were their last option, she would cast the curse herself.

“If he won’t give it,” Jack began, glancing up at her, “what are the chances of this working?”

“Lower,” Hermione said, “but it still *might*/i work. If the curse was ineptly cast, or your magic is breaking it down naturally then we’ve got a better chance.”

“Will there be pain?” Emma asked, her jaw squaring strongly. Hermione remembered seeing that determined look on Ginny’s face many times.

“There might be,” Hermione admitted. “Like I said before, this is all conjecture. We can only look at the process and guess as to what the results might be.”

“We understand that,” Jack nodded. His piercing gaze focused on her and Hermione swallowed thickly.

“When the block is finally removed, we think there might be some pain associated with the memories coming back. It may be compounded for the both of you, remembering the event that triggered all of this.”

Silence echoed in the kitchen and Hermione watched as Jack and Emma held a silent conversation, their eyes and expression showing much more than they probably wished to give away.

“Are there any other side effects?” Jack asked, turning back to her.

Hermione sighed, knowing that she needed to be completely honest with them both. These were her oldest friends, and they were living in a nightmare caused by a bitter man. Hermione offered their only hope of restoring what rightfully belonged to them—what should have never been taken in the first place.

“There is one other problem that may arise. If the Block is strong enough, or if it fights the release, you might lose everything all over again.”

“What are the odds of that happening?” Jack asked.

Hermione bit her lip. “About even with the Block breaking away entirely.”

Ron swore violently, pushing his chair away from the table and pacing the room in long strides. Remus lowered his head until it was almost level with the table. Arthur reached forward and slowly pulled one of the books off of the stack in front of her, probably more to give him something to do with his hands than for information.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her heart clenching in her chest. “I wish I could make you promises, or tell you that everything will be alright.”

Jack smiled sadly and Emma wiped away tears. “We appreciate all you’ve done for us, Hermione. We understand that nothing is ever guaranteed.”

Hermione nodded, wiping away tears that escaped. Ron’s large hands clasped over her shoulders and she could feel him shaking behind her.

“Can we have some time to discuss this?” Jack asked. “We need to talk about it and decide what the best thing for our family is.”

Everyone nodded. “That’s only fair,” Hermione agreed. “Kingsley wants to get started with Malfoy as soon as possible. The evidence is proving enough to bring him before the Wizengamot. Once they get their hands on him, we may not have any leverage to get him to willingly give his blood.”

“It won’t be long,” Jack said, standing slowly and helping Emma out of her chair. The two quietly left the room, walking very close together.

“That was horrible,” Hermione mumbled, staring down at her notes. “I can’t imagine making that decision.”

“Whatever their decision,” Arthur said, “we’ll support them. We love them the same, no matter what names they go by.”

* * *

The Burrow was quiet, but Emma couldn’t sleep. She knew Jack was awake next to her as well. His breathing hadn’t deepened yet like it usually did when he slept. And his leg twitched now and again, a muscle spasm that he said the doctors explained was a remnant of his injury so many years

ago.

“Jack,” she whispered, laying her hand on his leg, stilling it.

He sighed deeply and turned in her embrace, letting them lie face to face. “I can’t stop thinking about it,” he said. “Weighing the odds, rethinking everything I know, and trying to justify either decision.”

“I know,” she said. “I’ve been doing the same.”

It had been a quiet evening at the Weasley home. Word quickly spread of the choice she and Jack had to make, and everyone must have silently agreed to leave them to it, because no one had said anything to them about it. And they had all made extra effort to give them both space.

But now Jay was in his cot on the other side of the room sleeping soundly, and the house was quiet.

“The decision would be an easy one,” Jack explained, “if I didn’t have you and Jay in my life. I can’t imagine not remembering you again.”

“Or our wedding...”

“Or our life together...”

“Or Jay...” Emma sighed, the thought of forgetting her child leaving her feeling hollow, like her heart was being ripped out of its home.

Jack nudged her and grinned. “Or making Jay.”

Emma couldn’t do anything but snort her amusement. “We can’t ever forget that.”

“Not at all,” Jack shook his head solemnly. “Being with you, Emma... it’s the most wonderful thing in the world.”

“I feel the same,” she agreed, leaning forward to give him a kiss.

“Then we shouldn’t do this,” Jack said, although Emma could hear the question in his voice.

“At the same time,” she said, reaching out to rub the stubble on his jaw, “we could offer Jay so much more if we had those memories.”

“We could,” Jack conceded.

“I don’t remember my first broom ride, or the first time I did magic.” Emma scowled into the darkness at that thought. How was she supposed to teach her son those things if she couldn’t remember them?

“I don’t remember the first time I saw you, or the first time we kissed,” Jack said. “What if he comes to me and asks me about that? All I can tell him is the second time.”

“I don’t even know if you were my first boyfriend,” Emma admitted, cuddling closer to him. “Did I

ever kiss anyone else?”

“Did we ever make love before?” Jack asked softly. “I think about that sometimes. And if we didn’t, did we want to?”

“I would have wanted to,” Emma said, her hands splaying out across his bare chest. “Because I can’t imagine loving you any less than I do now.”

They kissed softly for a few minutes before cuddling together under the warm, homemade quilts.

“What if I went first?” Jack asked. “Then the risk is only on me. You’d be here for Jay if something went wrong.”

Emma clung to him, hating the idea immediately. “I can’t be without you, Jack.”

“I know,” he said, kissing her temple. “I don’t want to even imagine my life without you.”

The hurtful thought lingered between them like an open sore. Finally, Emma sat up, resting her chin on Jack’s chest and looking at him closely.

“You fell in love with me,” she said softly.

“Twice,” he nodded, his fingers tracing the features of her face.

“Would you do it again?”

“Definitely,” he agreed without a thought. “You’re everything to me, Emma.”

“I would fall in love with you again,” she assured him. “The first time you kissed me, the second time,” she smiled at his chuckle, “I knew you. I might not have understood what my heart was telling me, but I *knew* you, Jack.”

“I knew you as well,” he said.

“And we couldn’t forget Jay.”

“No,” he shook his head. “We couldn’t. He’s us.”

“He is,” Emma agreed, leaning forward to press her lips against his.

“What about if we wrote it all down,” Jack suggested. “We’d be missing the details, but we’d know each other.”

“It might work,” Emma agreed. “It would be worth a try.”

“If we do this,” Jack nodded. “I still don’t know if it’s worth it.”

“I don’t know the right answer,” Emma admitted.

“Let’s try and sleep, love,” Jack said. He leaned up and kissed her deeply, tugging her until they

spooned together, as tightly as they could get in the expanded bed.

Emma felt lightheaded as Jack's arm wrapped around her body. There were too many thoughts in her head. She felt a bit like they should be spilling out of her ears.

Jack's breathe on her shoulder and the heat of him up against her body soothed her and she closed her eyes, letting her breathing slow until she drifted off.

Some hours later, she woke to find the bed next to her empty. The linens were cold, meaning that Jack had been up for some time. The clock next to the bed read two in the morning.

"Jack?" she asked quietly. Jay would be up anytime now for his next feeding, but Emma wanted to check on her husband first.

"I'm here." A shadow near the window moved and she relaxed. "Sorry if I woke you."

"You didn't," she denied. "Jay will be up soon."

"He's been stirring."

Emma scooted out of the bed, tugging on her dressing gown in the chill of the room. She tiptoed across the icy floorboards to check that Jay was covered. Jack must have already tucked him in, as the blankets were tightly wrapped around his body.

"Can't sleep, love?" she asked, pressing a kiss to the back of Jack's head as she came up behind him. He was sitting on the narrow window seat, letting the light of an almost full moon show on the papers in his lap.

"Too many thoughts," he admitted.

Emma smiled, remembering the same thought in her head hours ago. "I know. What are you looking at?"

Jack shrugged, looking down at the papers, even as he leaned further back against her. "Our medical files," he said softly. "I've been staring at one picture for a long time."

Emma winced. Jack had always been morbidly fascinated by the photographs of his own injuries. She wondered sometimes if he were trying to remember each moment of pain, building a map in his head of why he had certain scars and marks.

He tugged a photo from the file and Emma slammed her eyes closed. She hated that one and refused to look at it more than she had to.

"I had a scar on my forehead," Jack said. "And the bastard cut it out."

Emma buried her face in his back, clutching his chest tightly. "I know."

"He took everything away from me that mattered. He took my family, my identity... and you."

"Jack," Emma pleaded, "don't let your anger with this man make your decision for you."

"I'm not," he denied. "I think I made that the moment you said you would fall in love with me again."

She brought her head up, loosening her grip and sliding around so that she could climb on his lap. The papers crunched underneath her, but she didn't care.

"I just want him to pay for what he did to us," Jack explained. "He has to know that people can't hurt each other like that. But that's just something good that comes along with my choice, Emma."

His arms held her close, crushing her against him. "I want to remember you, Emma. I want to remember what made me fall in love with you the first time, and the second time, and... if I have to, the third time. Because I won't ever stop loving you."

Emma's throat closed tightly. Her mouth wouldn't work right to form the words and all she could do was nod, letting her tears fall on his skin and inhaling the scent that was uniquely Jack.

"If you don't want me to..."

"I do," Emma said softly. "I'm just scared."

"I am as well," Jack said. "But I won't let you go, Emma. You're always going to be mine."

Emma repeated those words over and over in her head, clinging to him in the moonlight streaming through the window.

They would be alright—they had to be—because they had been before. They were strong when they were together. And she wasn't going to ever let him go either. So it was going to work.

* * *

Draco Malfoy stared at the small rock before flicking it away from him, watching it bounce off the corner and right back to him.

Four days in the same cell, with nothing else to do, had made him an expert on predicting the perfect angle, strength of flick and place on the wall to hit.

The first day he'd been sleeping off the effects of waking from a stunning spell. If one was woken by enervating, then the feeling of disorientation and sluggishness was much easier to manage. However, when one was left to wake on their own, the symptoms were close to the worst hangover you could imagine.

The blinding headache had nearly done him in, not to mention the queasiness and spinning of the small room. Had he been able to muster enough strength, Draco would have yelled until someone brought something to him.

As it was, he simply tried to sleep much of it away and then stared at the drab walls the rest of the time.

The game, ironically named 'Flick', had been born on his second day. He made the mistake of playing near the front of the cell, flicking the pebble into the wards, watching them spark and

sizzle, grinning when the Aurors would come running, wands drawn.

All it had taken was one warning that they'd stun him again and let him wake up on his own before Draco decided the back corner was far better suited to his entertainment.

"Malfoy!"

"Go away," Draco said, pretending to concentrate on his pebble closely. "I didn't summon you." It was a perverse little pleasure, but one he never got tired of. Taunting the guards, treating them as if he were in here by his own choice rather than their 'hospitality' was something he could do very well. Not that any of them really cared. Dumb Gryffindors, the lot of them.

"You've got a visitor."

"No thank you," Draco said, biting his bottom lip as he changed the angle of his flick the tiniest bit. He swore creatively when the rock missed the flagstone he expected it to land on and bounced away under the rickety camp bed that sat in the corner of the room.

"That's no way to talk to an old school chum."

The voice made his skin crawl and Draco growled, retrieving his pebble to flick again.

"If you've come to gloat, Weasel, I'm not in the mood. I'm rather busy, as you can see." He couldn't help the snort of laughter that rose in his throat and bubbled out.

"Yeah, I can see that."

Draco refused to turn and acknowledge the man. His pride was still bruised from the cheap way Weasley had been allowed to physically assault him. The evidence might be gone, but Draco could still feel every blow rain down on him, marring his flesh.

He flicked the pebble again, compensating for the change of angle by adding a bit more force. It ricocheted off of the desired spot and landed just a few centimeters from where it should have.

"Yes," Draco hissed, reaching for the pebble again.

"Accio pebble!"

"Damnit!" he yelled when it slid from his hands, summoned from beyond the ward on the cell and into Weasley's hand. "That's mine." Draco growled, standing in one swift motion and moving to within inches of where he knew the wards were.

"I'll give it back when I'm done talking to you, ferret."

"Typical Gryffindor bully," Draco grumbled, crossing his arms.

"Typical Slytherin stubborn," Weasley growled back. "You have something that I need. I have something that you want."

Draco scoffed, refusing to look at the man. Instead, his eyes traced the edges of his cell.

“Anything I have is worth more than that rock, Weasel.”

“No doubt,” he nodded, tossing the rock up in the air and catching it again.

“How about we make a deal?”

“Go away, Weasel.”

“You’re not even going to hear me out?”

Draco blew out a breath in frustration before shrugging. “It’s not like I have much choice. You can talk until you pass out from lack of oxygen—which, admittedly, won’t take long—and I can’t do anything about it. Despite being innocent, I apparently don’t have any rights.”

Weasley guffawed. “Innocent my arse.”

“Talk, Weasel,” Draco challenged. “You came all the way down here to say something, best get it off your chest.”

“I want some of your blood,” he shrugged.

Draco blinked, his mind calculating if he had just heard what his ears told him he heard.

“Didn’t you extract enough the other day?” he snapped.

Weasley sneered menacingly. “Not as much as I would have liked.”

“At least we’re being honest.” Draco walked away, standing in the corner of his cell and studying the wall as if it contained one of the portraits his father had paid thousands of galleons for.

“Much as I would love to take your blood forcibly,” Weasley continued, “I want you to give it willingly.”

“Are you drunk?” Malfoy scowled.

“On occasion, but not currently.”

Draco glared at the man’s crude humor. “The answer is no.”

“No pebble then,” Weasley shrugged, tossing the small bit of rock away from him. Draco watched it bounce away, cursing internally, but refusing to let his irritation show on his face.

“You’ll have to do better than that, Weasel.”

“How about another game,” the large redhead shrugged. “A game of cat and mouse.”

Draco raised an eyebrow disbelievingly. “I suppose I’m the mouse.”

“Well I sure as hell wouldn’t be running from you.”

Losing interest in this conversation quickly, Draco moved closer to the wards. “I’m not here for your

amusement.” He moved to the side and bellowed for the Auror guard to come and escort his ‘visitor’ to anywhere Draco wouldn’t have to see him.

“You don’t want to play?” Weasley said. “I thought you liked games, Draco.”

“Don’t call me that,” Draco hissed. “Auror!”

“How about I drop the wards,” Weasley suggested, flicking out his wand and doing just what he suggested. Draco’s interest was piqued now, despite himself. “And I’ll unlock the bars,” Weasley continued, the lock turning from his spell and the door clanging open.

“Now, you run.”

Draco took a step backward. He wasn’t stupid enough to trust an obnoxious Gryffindor with nothing better to do than to taunt him.

“Run,” Weasley suggested, a completely amused look on his face. “You’re misunderstanding the game completely,” he shook his head and lowered his voice as if speaking to a very young child. “You run. You get chased. When you’re caught, the game is over and you give me what I want, willingly. If you get away... then I’m out of luck.”

Draco sneered at him. “Shut it, Weasel. I suppose you lay in bed last night thinking this up. Granger must have appreciated the break from your breeding program.” He patted himself on the back as Weasley took a step forward. Something, however, stopped him and he broke out in an amused grin.

“So, are you up for a game or not?”

Sighing mightily, Draco shook his head. “You must be more stupid than I thought. I’m not going to play your little game, Weasel. I’m not going to run. I’m not going to let you chase me, and I sure the hell am not going to give you my blood.”

He could have sworn a giggle escaped the man and scrunched up his face in disgust. He turned away, wishing the man would lose interest and leave him alone.

“I didn’t say I was going to be the one chasing you, Malfoy.”

Draco spun on his heel. A second figure stepped in front of the cell and Draco’s knees shook, almost sending him to the floor.

“No!” he hissed. “No, no, no.” His lungs burned and his heart pounded as he looked at the black haired, green-eyed man.

“It’s been a long time, Malfoy.”

The voice and the smug smile drove into his head like a knife.

“I’m hurt that you don’t like my game.”

“No,” Draco said, giving into the pleas of his legs and collapsing to his knees. It couldn’t be...

Potter.

Chapter 15

January 2003 to February 2003

Jack grinned, watching the panic spread over the pale face in the roughly hewn cell.

"I'm hurt that you don't like my game," he said.

Malfoy wailed pathetically, sinking to his knees, without removing his eyes from Jack's.

"I assure you it's me," Jack said, leaning forward and lacing his arms through the bars. It seemed a bit risky, but Jack knew that Ron's wand was firmly in his hand. Malfoy wouldn't try anything now.

"I know what you're thinking," Jack continued, staring at the man's slack face. "You're thinking... it can't possibly be him. It can't be Potter, because Potter doesn't exist anymore. Potter disappeared four years ago."

"You're rather pathetic, you know," Ron stepped forward, casually leaning against the bars of the still open cell.

"Rather," Jack agreed with a nod. "I'm actually a bit disappointed, you know?" He phrased his musing to Ron, but knew that Malfoy was listening. "I would have thought that Malfoy would have been able to pull off a simple Memory Block."

"I see what you mean," Ron shrugged thoughtfully.

Jack turned his attention back to the man in the cell, who seemed to be gathering himself back together. He stood, his legs wobbly.

"You're trying to trick me," he said plainly, although his voice was a bit higher than it had been earlier. "Potter was killed in the Final Battle."

"Wrong again," Jack drawled. He turned back to Ron. "He's dumber than I remember." He drew out Arthur's borrowed wand, which hardly sparked for him, and pointed it at Draco. "I'm just going to Imperius him and get it over with."

Draco ducked. "You can't do this!" he squawked. "That's an Unforgivable." He turned to Ron, eyes wide. "You can't let him get away with it—you're an officer of the Ministry."

Ron crossed his arms and leaned against the bars again. "You're under the impression that I give a damn." He made a grand sweeping gesture toward the cell. "Bash away, mate."

Jack chuckled at the look of absolute shock on Malfoy's face. He really was much more stupid than Ron had said. Either that or he was a superb actor. The wand felt good in Jack's hand, yet wrong at the same time. But Jack raised it anyway, leveling it at the man and opening his mouth, a fierce look taking over his features.

"It won't work," Malfoy finally spluttered. "The blood has to be willingly given—" His voice cracked

and he paled even further—surprising Jack. His mouth snapped shut, realizing what he'd just said.

"Would you care to finish that statement?" Ron asked.

Malfoy's cheeks flushed bright red. "I'm not going to say something you can use against me."

"What exactly did you hope to accomplish?" Jack asked. He, Emma, Ron and Hermione had stayed up late last night discussing every aspect of this plan and trying to decide Malfoy's motivations behind what he had done.

"Because as far as I can see, whatever it was, you did a piss-poor job."

"Can you do anything right?" Ron asked condescendingly. "Couldn't kill Dumbledore, couldn't be a half decent spy. Definitely couldn't cast a Memory Block worth a damn."

Malfoy bent over, his hands on his wobbly knees.

Jack squatted down until he could see Malfoy's face. "Everything you wanted, everything you hoped to gain, was rubbish. It may have worked for a while, but in the end, you didn't win. I did."

"No," Draco shook his head, his long blond hair falling into his face.

"Yes," Jack confirmed. "The things you took from me, apart from Ginny and my family—they don't mean anything to me—never did. I never wanted the fame. I couldn't care less about the money."

Draco's Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"And I got Ginny and my family back."

"You're a failure, Draco. You're worse off than when you started." Ron's voice came from behind Jack.

Malfoy continued to shake his head, even as his knees swayed.

"Ginny and I are married now," Jack continued, reaching into his borrowed robes and producing a photograph of his new family, taken just yesterday at the Burrow. "We have a son."

Malfoy glanced at the photograph as Jack slid it into his line of vision. Jack assumed it was the same kind of perverse curiosity that drew him to the photographs of his injured and mutilated body. Malfoy's eyes snapped shut and Jack withdrew the photo, hiding it back in his pocket.

"And you're all alone," Ron picked up his line. "Astoria Greengrass was married two days ago." He removed the large spread that was featured in the Daily Prophet and tossed it so that the newspaper was looking up at Malfoy from the floor. Greengrass, in her opulent wedding robes preened and smiled beautifully for the camera. "She'll be carrying his child, *his heir*, within a month," Ron predicted. Malfoy flinched visibly, swatting the newspaper away from him violently.

"Your mistress, Genevieve, the one in Paris... she's going to testify against you, Draco," Jack said. "All those business deals she witnessed." Kingsley had let this little tidbit slip when Jack and Ron had presented their plan to him, and it seemed easy to slip it into the two-sided conversation.

For a brief moment, the look of agony on Malfoy's face made bile rise in Jack's throat. He hated acting like this; it just seemed so wrong. But it was a part to play, and one that Jack would gladly do to save his family.

"You have nothing left," Jack continued.

"You're being charged for Iris Parkinson's murder, Malfoy. They're investigating you as an accessory for the murders of Pansy Parkinson and Theodore Nott." Ron stopped when Malfoy looked up at him, trying to gather a respectable sneer.

"Oh, I know you didn't actually kill them. But you stood by and watched Daddy do it," Ron guessed. The shadow that crossed the other man's face told enough of the truth.

"And now you're going to be charged with practicing Dark Magic, hindering an investigation and assault," Jack finished. "You've been busy."

Ron snorted. "You may be able to buy yourself some leniency by willingly giving your blood."

Draco lifted his head, his face showing his complete, crumpled defeat. Last night, Jack had been unsure whether their plan would work. Ron had explained that a Slytherin always weighs his choices against what was best for him. If they offered any kind of deal, then Malfoy would take his best option.

"I'll testify at your trial," Jack said impulsively. "Tell them about what you did as a spy for us." Ron glared at him, but he ignored it.

Malfoy straightened, finding strength somewhere within him. "No deal," he spat. "You need my blood to break the Block. If not for you, then for your whore." Jack bit the inside of his cheek, keeping himself from taking a step forward. If he did, he wouldn't be able to hold himself back from killing the man with his bare hands. "I'd rather rot in Azkaban, secure in the knowledge that you'll never get what you want from me, Potter."

"You're not going to Azkaban," Jack said, glancing at Ron, who was narrowing his eyes at Jack's improvisation. Everything they'd rehearsed was in the toilet now, it didn't matter what Jack said. "They're going to perform a Memory Block on you. The Department of Mysteries is fascinated by it. And you know whose blood they're going to use to seal it?"

Draco refused to look at him, his face turning greener by the moment. "That's right," Jack continued. "Mine. They're going to take everything from you, Malfoy. Your name, your heritage, your money... your magic. You'll be nothing but a helpless, homeless Muggle. Dropped in the middle of the street to die, just like you did to me."

Malfoy shook all over, his hand groping for the edge of the camp bed. He sunk into it and rested his head in his hands.

"You can't do that to me," he mumbled to the floor. "I'd rather die."

"Give me what I want and I'll stop it from happening."

"You don't have the authority," Draco shook his head slowly. He seemed resigned that it was better to die than to live without the life he had become accustomed to living.

"You think they're going to deny Harry Potter anything?" Ron asked.

"Maybe I'll let you think about it," Jack said. "I could even give you some pointers about living on the streets. There's always work down at the wharfs. And the first time you eat your dinner from a rubbish bin hurts your pride a bit. But the second time isn't as bad, and by the tenth time, you don't care where you're getting your meal."

Ron shifted next to him. Jack's gaze didn't wander far from the man in front of him.

"I'll be back in the morning. Have a good night, Draco."

He walked back out of the cell, noting Ron's face scrunched as if he were swallowing bile. Jack kept his back to the small enclosure while Ron closed it back up. The heavy metal bars made him jump as they slammed shut. The sound echoed up and down the corridor. He heard Ron mutter something under his breath and a low humming sound started. The wards going up, Jack guessed.

Ron stepped up beside him, stuffing his wand in the pocket in his robes. They didn't say anything as they walked away. Jack's stomach turned violently and he swallowed thickly.

They were almost to the exit for the Ministry holding cells when they heard a muffled "Wait!" called out.

Jack nodded to Kingsley and Tonks, who sat just inside the door. They hurried away while Ron and Jack continued on. The moment they stepped outside the door, Jack retched to the side, emptying his stomach of the meager contents he had managed to choke down in his nervousness that morning.

Ron's hand clamped down on his shoulder and the mess vanished with a wave of his wand.

"You alright."

"No," Jack admitted. "But I will be soon."

* * *

"Happy Anniversary, love." Emma grinned as Jack nuzzled her neck, causing goose pimples to shoot up and down her back.

"Happy Anniversary," she greeted him back, turning in his embrace and looking up into his eyes, bright and unshielded by his glasses.

"I got you something," Jack said softly, holding up a small blue case. He chewed at the corner of his lip nervously and Emma snatched it, leaning up to press a kiss to his mouth. He pressed her back, deepening the kiss further.

"Where's Jay?" she asked as his lips traveled down her neck.

“Your Mum has him,” he mumbled, grinning as he kissed her again. “And she’s going to keep him for a couple of hours.”

Emma grinned, wrapping her arms around his neck. They hadn’t had a moment alone since Jay had been born and the idea sounded wonderful. Even as she thought it though, a stab of doubt began to filter in.

“Stop it,” Jack said, pressing his finger against her lips. “I know you’re worrying about him. They’re just downstairs and we won’t be forever. And,” he cut off her protests with another kiss, “your Mum raised seven of you. I think she can handle one seven pound baby while his parents celebrate.”

She grinned at him. “You know me too well,” she said. Jack kissed her again and pulled back.

“Open it,” he urged. “I wanted you to have this today... just in case.”

“Nothing is going to happen, Jack,” Emma scowled. The words were easy to say—Jack always needed reassurance—but they were harder to believe herself.

Together, they had decided that Jack would be the first to drink the potion and undergo treatment to remove the Memory Block. The thought of possibly losing him terrified her. But they’d agreed that the risk was worth it.

“It’s going to be fine,” Jack agreed. “Go on, open it. I know it’s killing you.”

Emma laughed and cracked open the box. Her breath stuck in her throat at the sight.

The small, square cut diamond on the gold band sparkled and shown brighter than it ever had.

“I had it cleaned and repaired,” Jack said. “It’s one thing I remember really well from before—giving that to you. And... I wanted you to have it again.”

Emma wiped tears from her eyes and slid the ring on her finger where it came to rest on top of her simple gold wedding band. “I love it,” she said, reaching forward to grab Jack’s face, pulling him to her. “I love you.”

“Forever, Emma,” Jack mumbled as they lost themselves in each other.

* * *

Ron swallowed thickly, watching as Hermione helped to get Jack settled into the room. Jack had asked to stay at the Burrow during his treatment, despite the arguments of the Unspeakables who insisted on being present.

The Minister, who was on shaky ground and quite possibly his last few days in office, put his full weight behind the investigation and into pressuring the Department of Mysteries to avail themselves to Hermione’s every need.

“Are you comfortable?” Hermione asked, reaching around to fluff the three extra pillows she had brought into the room.

"No," Jack admitted, smirking at her. "I'll be fine, Hermione." The scene hit Ron right in the gut. The banter was so... Harry, that it was shocking. Even without his memories, Jack was Harry, he just didn't realize it.

"Jack's tough," Emma said from the opposite side of the room. She bounced little James Derek on her hip, rocking back and forth to sooth the baby.

"Thanks, love," Jack laughed. He rubbed at the loose pajamas that Hermione had provided him with. Ron winced in sympathy. For some reason, Hermione had the knack of buying the itchiest pajamas possible. She never tolerated Ron sleeping in his old t-shirts, but he did it anyway. Fred and George always teased him that one day his marriage would be over, and in her tearstained goodbye note, Hermione would confess that she needed a man who would wear proper pyjamas.

"Galleon says he shucks them off the moment she leaves the room."

Ron turned to give Fred a silencing glare, but his brother simply shrugged and smiled wider. George held out his hands innocently.

The rest of the family was crowded into the hallway, spilling into the room; small faces peeked between Aunts and Uncles, over shoes and between knees.

"You don't have to do this for us, Jack," Molly offered, sniffing into her handkerchief.

Jack smiled, his cheeks turning red as he flexed his bare feet on the floorboards. "I know."

"Be careful," Arthur said. "You're a part of our family with or without remembering."

Jack swallowed and nodded. "Thank you," he said softly. He and Emma exchanged glances and Ron knew they were both anxious to get started, yet ready to hop on brooms and escape out the window of the bedroom.

"Come on, everyone," Ron said, holding up his arms and stepping in front of the door. "Let the man have some privacy."

Everyone grumbled and teased, just like they always did in the Weasley family.

"Move along," Ron prodded the twins.

"Oh, gerroff, Ron," George grumbled, pulling a camera from behind his back.

"Come on, Ronniekins, do you know what the Daily Prophet wouldn't pay for a shot of our hero in his jammies?" Fred squealed like a raving fangirl, fluttering his eyelashes and trying, though not very hard, to get past Ron.

"Out, the lot of you!" Ron threatened, forcefully pushing the twins out the door. Hermione shared an eye roll with him.

"You're next, my little man," Arthur said, collecting Jay from Emma's arms. "Let's go see if we can nick some ice cream."

Ron's mother roared indignantly. "Don't you dare, Arthur Weasley, you'll ruin that child forever!" She followed Arthur out the door, scolding him the whole way.

Ron turned back around to assure Jack and Emma that he really wouldn't feed their five week old child ice cream, only to find them locked in an ardent embrace.

"Er..."

"Let them have a moment, Ronald," Hermione scolded softly, probably seeing Ron's look of discomfort. No matter how old Ginny got, Ron wasn't sure he could handle seeing her being that... amorous with anyone. He shifted his eyes when Jack's hand groped her bum, repeating over and over in his mind that they were married.

"You can change your mind," Emma said softly once they'd pulled apart. Their foreheads rested together and they looked more like one person than two.

"I know," Jack said again. "But I won't."

Emma nodded against him. "I'll be here as much as I can."

"Don't," Jack shook his head. "I don't want you to see me like that."

"Jack—"

"No, Emma," Jack protested, placing his finger over her mouth. "I can't bear to think of you watching me suffer. It's going to be hard enough knowing that you might have to go through it."

"I'll be here," Emma stated, placing her hands on either side of his face and pulling him down into another deep kiss. "Just like you'll be there for me."

Ron watched, feeling his throat closing up at the obvious love and connection between his best mate and little sister. Hermione slipped her hand in his and laid her head against his upper arm.

"Forever," Emma nodded, her tears splashing down onto Jack's pajama top.

"Forever," Jack agreed.

Ron's chest jerked as he swallowed a sob. He blinked up to the ceiling, praying that he could hold it together long enough to do his part.

"Mr. Ingalls," the Unspeakable stepped forward from the corner of the room. "It's time to begin."

Jack nodded, still clutching Emma to him.

"I'll need a drop of your blood, Mr. and Mrs. Ingalls."

They both moved, still embracing, so that the man could add their blood to the potion.

"A close family member's," the Unspeakable asked.

Emma removed a small vial from her pocket. Ron had held baby Jay earlier that morning while Hermione made a small cut in his heel and collected the blood. The baby had howled himself hoarse, but it was necessary. Afterwards, Ron had rocked his nephew to sleep, telling him all the stories he could remember about he and Harry.

“Someone you love like family,” The Unspeakable said.

Ron stepped forward and bared the palm of his hand, wincing when the cut was made. He repeated the moment Jack had asked him to play this part in the ritual over and over. He dripped his blood into the potion, watching it sizzle and pop. *Jack loves me like family.*

“Someone who loves you like family.”

Hermione stepped forward, bravely offering her own palm. When her part was finished, Ron wrapped his arms around her and held her from behind, half burying his face in her hair. His eyes kept darting to Jack and Emma, who stood in a similar embrace.

“Those whom you share memories with,” the Unspeakable said softly.

Ron provided a vial, filled with much more blood. Each of the Weasley family members had offered up their own blood in a heartbeat when Ron had asked. The Unspeakable had explained that the more connections that Jack had, the stronger the potion would be. Remus and Tonks, as well as Hagrid and Professor McGonagall, had also offered up their blood.

“And, finally, the betrayer.”

The man added drops from the last vial, full of Draco Malfoy’s blood. The potion sizzled, flashing brightly several times before settling down into a milky white substance. Every so often, red sparks would skitter across the top of it.

“And it’s done,” he muttered. “If you will take your place, Mr. Ingalls.”

Jack gave one last desperate kiss to Emma, before climbing into the bed and pulling the quilt up under his arms.

“Good luck, Jack,” Hermione said softly.

“Yeah,” Ron agreed. “Don’t worry about a thing, mate, we’ll be here.”

“Take care of Emma and James.” Jack’s eyes locked on Ron’s and his heart jolted. There wasn’t a more precious gift that Jack could give him than to trust him to take care of his family.

“I will, you have my word.”

Jack held his gaze a moment more before nodding and swallowing all the liquid in the vial the Unspeakable held in front of him.

“Disgusting,” Jack grimaced as he wiped the back of his mouth with his pyjama sleeve.

“Come on,” Hermione tugged at Ron as Emma climbed onto the single sized bed, wrapping her arms

around Jack. “We’ll come back and get her when he falls asleep.”

Ron nodded, surreptitiously wiping his tears on his shoulder. He followed her out of the room, closing the door behind him.

“Are you...” Hermione stared at him. “Ron, are you crying?”

He jerked away from her awed stare, trying to hide his tears from her.

“Ron,” she scolded, pulling at his arm to get him to turn. She laughed when he pulled away again. “It’s okay to cry.”

“No, it’s not,” he said, his voice cracking.

“Yes, it is,” she assured him, although he didn’t believe her because she was still laughing at him. “It was very emotional in there.”

“You’re not crying,” he protested, feeling like a big baby.

“I’ve cried more than I care to think about lately,” Hermione said. “Come on, let’s go downstairs.”

“Don’t tell Fred and George,” he whined, using his wand to dry the wet spots on his favorite Chudley Cannons t-shirt. Hermione shook her head, laughing.

“Everyone cries now and then, Ron,” Hermione said softly as they walked into the sitting room.

Ron grimaced, glaring at her and trying to convey his need for secrecy. If Fred and George found out he blubbered like a baby, he’d never hear the end of it.

“Look, even Tonks is crying,” Hermione pointed out.

Ron scowled, scanning the room and finding Tonks in the middle of the room, crying on Katie’s shoulder.

“Strange,” he murmured. “Tonks never cries.” Hermione opened her mouth to comment but closed it again when Remus approached his wife.

“Come on, love,” he soothed, trying to gather her into his arms.

“I’m not speaking to you, old man,” she mumbled, pulling away from him.

Ron narrowed his eyes, wondering what had happened between them.

“Are you still on about that?” Remus grumbled, a grin splitting his face.

“Yes,” Tonks glared at him.

Remus sighed mightily and rolled his eyes. “It’s not like I *meant* to get you pregnant—”

The rest of his words were drowned out when Ron’s mother squealed in delight, along with most of

the other women. Ron wasn't sure, but he thought both Fred and George had inserted themselves in the group hug as well.

Charlie joined Ron, coming to stand beside him and slapping him on the back.

"Why is she angry?" Ron asked, staring at Tonks with wide eyes.

"She's not," Charlie chuckled. "She's just... Tonks. She takes a bit to get used to new ideas. She'll be happy about it soon."

Ron shook his head, knowing he would never understand women.

"Life goes on," Charlie said softly.

"Yeah," Ron admitted, wagging his eyebrows at a widely grinning, and completely unrepentant, Remus. "It does." His eyes wandered to the floor above him, where one of their own struggled against tremendous odds. But then again, that had always been a part of Harry's life.

* * *

Emma dozed fitfully next to Jack. His rest was not peaceful, but it was what they expected. Her muscles sore from holding him, she moved to a comfortable chair that had been placed next to the bed. Molly brought Jay in to be fed when he needed it and Emma would take Jack's hand and place it on their son, talking to them both in loving tones.

Jack was quiet now and Emma was sitting in the chair uncomfortably. Jay was overdue for his feeding, although Molly hadn't brought him in. He's likely sleeping, Emma told herself. She planned on leaving the room for a bit when he did come in to be fed. She needed to get out and get some perspective on life outside these four walls before she could come back in.

The Ministry Unspeakable, Emmett Dolson, a man in his mid fifties with graying brown hair and a round face, was reading a book in the corner of the room, his wand lighting up the pages before him.

Jack's back arched and his face contorted for a moment before he stilled. Behind his eyelids, his eyes were wildly racing back and forth.

"He'll likely react physically to some of the memories," the Unspeakable explained quietly. Emma nodded, having heard it before. But it didn't make it any easier to watch happen. It hurt thinking that he might be in physical or emotional pain. He had already gone through so much in his life.

"Is he in pain?" Emma asked. "Can't we do something about that?"

Mr. Dolson closed his book slowly and stood. He reached down and took Jack's wrist in his. Emma assumed he was counting pulse beats.

"I wish I could tell you yes," he said softly, laying Jack's arm back down on the blanket.

"Mr. Dolson—"

“Please, call me Emmett,” he said with an easy smile. His voice was quiet and soothing. “The potion we made was a highly complicated and usually highly illegal one. I doubt even the most astute potions student could make it, and some Potions Masters would be hard pressed to do so.”

Jack rolled onto his side and Emma reached up to tuck him into bed again.

“Each part of the potion plays an important part in breaking the Memory Block down. You provide the strength for Mr. Ingalls—”

“Call him Jack, please,” Emma said. “And I’m Emma.”

The man tipped his head toward her and continued.

“You, Emma, are Jack’s strength. You give him the hope to keep fighting. You are his heart. Your son gives Jack the hope for a future and the tie to his family—both past and present. In James, Jack has a further blood connection to his parents and grandparents, as well as your family.”

“And the others?” Emma asked.

“Your family represents different things to Jack. Your parents always accepted Harry unconditionally, making him feel as if he were one of the family, rather than someone who stood on his own. In contrast, but still the same, their connection will help to restore the memories of Harry’s early childhood to Jack. His time at the Dursleys may never have been pleasant, but it shaped who Harry was fundamentally.”

Emmett smiled slowly. “Your brothers give Jack companionship and acceptance of his peers. They offer older brother figures who Jack could call on if he needed help or advice, as well as offering humor.”

“And Ron and Hermione?”

“Other than yourself and your son, Emma, theirs is the most important contribution. They offer Jack a connection to Harry during some of his most trying and tragic moments. From all that I’ve read about your husband, and from the things that Hermione has told me, both she and Ron were there at Harry’s highest and lowest points—save the Final Battle and the four years following. The others, Mr. Lupin and Professor McGonagall, even Mr. Hagrid, fill the role of mentors and connect Jack to Harry’s schooling.”

Emmett’s face clouded into a scowl. “Mr. Malfoy’s blood holds the key to the Block. The ritual he performed built a wall in front of Harry’s memories. It left what made him essentially what he was—his sense of loyalty and strength. Strangely, this is the first case ever recorded where memories have broken through. Although, admittedly, there haven’t been many recorded uses of the Memory Block at all.”

“Hermione told us that Jack might lose all of his memory again,” Emma said. Her mind reeled with the information that was being fed into it. It was hard to think that so many little things were needed to undo one impulsive, evil act.

“It’s a possibility,” Emmett nodded wearily. “We wanted you to be aware that it could happen. I

would consider that a worst case scenario.” He turned to face her, his eyes bright and clear. “Emma, I want you to know that I volunteered to be the one to help you and your husband. Not because of the implications that it could have for my career, but because I truly believe in the connection that you and your husband have. In the Department of Mysteries, deep in the Ministry of Magic, there is a room where we study love.”

Emma narrowed her eyes. A room where they studied love? It didn’t sound like much of a mystery to her. Love... just was.

“The connection that you and your husband share, one that transcended Dark Magic, broke through a Memory Block—that is reputed to be unbreakable unless released by the caster—and by all accounts is as strong, if not stronger, than the bond you shared with Mr. Potter... well, I knew I had to be the one to help you.”

Her head felt heavy, as if it were filled with wet cotton. “I’m not sure what’s so special about Jack and me,” she protested softly, reaching out to take Jack’s slack hand.

Emmett smiled softly. “Whatever it is, I think it will only help the both of you.”

* * *

He had counted every brick in the walls, every flagstone on the floor... even trying to find intricate patterns in the roughly hewn textures.

Anything he could think of to make Potter’s words stop ringing in his head. He’d given up on trying to convince himself that it hadn’t really happened—that Potter couldn’t possibly be here.

Somehow, the Memory Block had failed, at least partially, and allowed Potter to find his way back. The Weasley girl as well.

Failure.

Failure.

Potter’s voice mingled with his father’s in his head and Draco pressed his palms over his eyes, trying to force the words out.

He had no clue what day it was. Before Potter had come, Draco had kept count of meals—three a day, then the light left the corridor and he slept. Now his days and nights were all a mess. Mealtime came and went without him moving from his thin camp bed. The corridor seemed to stay dark all the time and rarely did anyone pass by his cell.

Black stars swirled in his eyes and Draco removed his hands, welcoming the flash of white that would distract him for a moment.

“There’s a distinct difference between going insane and voluntarily tossing yourself in its path, you know.”

Draco stared up at the ceiling, not responding at all to Blaise’s words.

“But maybe you don’t care anymore.”

The words did little to blot out Draco’s thoughts, so he didn’t react at all.

Blaise whistled low. “Potter did a number on you, didn’t he?”

“Shut it,” Draco said softly. He glanced up to see Blaise smirking at him, arms crossed and resting against the bars just as Weasley had done.

“Ah, you are still alive. I was beginning to wonder if you’d taken the coward’s way out.”

Draco rolled his eyes. He hadn’t even considered suicide—it was rather cowardly and crude. But even if he had, how would he have managed it? There was only the bed and the bedclothes were charmed to disappear if Draco pulled them off.

“I do have to hand it to Potter,” Blaise continued, “whatever he said to you was worse than what you did to him. He’s going to make a damned good Auror, you know. I never really saw him as a Slytherin...”

“Don’t say that name,” Draco hissed, sitting up with a grunt and holding his head.

Disappointment.

Rubbish.

Piss-poor job.

Draco growled in frustration, flashes of his life impeded his memories until it was too hard to even think at all.

“You’re no different than me,” he hissed, peering at Blaise through hazy eyes that hadn’t focused for far too long. “You’re the same... Slytherin through and through.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Blaise shook his head, a lazy smile on his face. “It has nothing to do with school houses, or colors. It’s about the choices we make.”

Draco tried to focus on his words, scowling at him. “It has everything to do with it,” he shook his head.

“Not at all,” Blaise protested. “It’s all about our *choices*.”

“You don’t really buy into all that Dumbledore, Gryffindor mentality?” he demanded, an ironic laugh bubbling out of him. “Choices...”

Blaise shrugged one shoulder. “I know that you and I started out a lot the same. Eleven year-old boys, wide eyed with wonder at beginning a new adventure. But somewhere along the way, I learned the lessons I needed to, while you only learned what you were taught.”

Draco scowled, walking forward and leaning against the wall, the coldness of the brick seeping into his skin.

"You sold out," he said.

Blaise's rich laugh sounded harsh against Draco's ears. "No, I wasn't the one that did," he answered mysteriously. "I may play their games occasionally, but I'm happy, Draco. I'm right where I want to be. And I didn't have to step on anyone to get here."

His eyes traveled up and down Draco's filthy form and Draco twitched, feeling openly displayed and uncomfortable.

"You stepped on the wrong people, Draco, and you've lost everything that you thought you ever wanted."

The word was unsaid, but entirely implied.

Failure.

"Why did you give your blood?" Blaise asked, moving closer to peer into Draco's eyes.

It was the same question that Draco had been asking himself since the moment he stuck his arm through the bars and watched the Aurors fill a vial.

"They would have taken it anyway." The tiredness that felt bone deep edged into his words and Draco slumped against the wall, allowing it to hold him up.

Blaise shook his head. "It wouldn't have worked if you had been unwilling. Or at least it wouldn't have worked as well. You would have been able to hold onto that thought in Azkaban."

Draco's legs started to shake again and he swore softly, hating the tightness that also pressed against his chest. "They were going to use the Block on me. Potter told me."

Blaise was quiet for a long minute. "I'm not sure whether to laugh at the fact that Potter actually successfully lied to you, or that you believed him."

Malfoy shook his head. "I didn't think they'd do it..."

"But the possibility scared you enough to give them what they wanted," Blaise nodded.

"I can't live like that," Draco said. "Being a... Muggle." The word brought bile up behind it and burned his throat and mouth.

Blaise narrowed his eyes and shook his head. The look of pity he wore made Draco gag again. "You wouldn't know the difference."

"I'd know," Draco shook his head. "I know I would." He stared down at the floor, convincing himself that he would have to know.

A heavy sigh escaped Blaise and Draco looked at him again. "Your trial begins in two days," he said heavily. "Rumor is that they're breaking the Memory Block right now. If Potter gets all his memory back, then he's set to testify."

The words didn't make sense in his head and Draco scowled at him, repeating them over and over in his head. "Breaking... wait..."

"Got there yet?" Blaise asked, a nasty smile spreading across his face.

The pieces slowly clicked into place and Draco retched, bringing up only thick acid. He spat it to the side, catching the wards and making them pop and flash brightly.

"He lied..."

Blaise laughed again. "If he does get those memories back, Draco, you are buggered. You better start praying that the ritual fails and he loses what he does have."

Draco slid down the wall, staring at the bars. Just outside them, beyond his reach, was the small pebble he had played with days ago. It was there... but it didn't matter. Even the game had lost its allure now.

Could one really... pray for something like that, Draco asked himself. The question almost slipped out of his mouth before he clamped his teeth shut around it.

"Choices, Malfoy, it was all about the choices."

Blaise was gone. Drifted away to somewhere Draco didn't know. All that was left were his words, his thoughts cramming into Draco's already full head and threatening to make him collapse.

The words began to echo again and Draco groaned loudly. He forced his eyes to stare at the flagstone near his feet. There were small holes worn in the surface.

One.

Two.

Three.

* * *

Jack allowed his eyes to droop, strange sensations swirling inside of him. He wasn't sure whether it was the potion making him feel this way, or just the anticipation and dread swirling inside of him. Honestly, it felt like a bad bout with gas... but he wasn't going to complain to anyone about it.

Emma was heavy on his shoulder and it tingled where her head pressed. Just as he was going to protest and ask her to move, he found he didn't care anymore. Darkness crept in slowly, offset by the occasional red burst of light, reminding Jack of the surface of the potion he had drunk.

His head felt light and rather... floaty. The place where he was now was quiet. Empty and black. Jack looked around, starting when his feet made a slight splashing sound. There was water on the floor—a very thin layer of water—not enough to soak into his shoes, but enough to puzzle him.

A red light flashed in the distance and Jack took a few steps toward it. It came closer on its own, gaining speed as it moved.

Once when he'd had nothing better to do, Jack had sat on a park bench in the shade, watching the children play on the toys and run in their little games. One brave little boy sat next to him, although not too closely. He sketched away on a book of paper, occasionally closing the book and flipping through the pages.

"What is it you have there," Jack asked, leaning over when his curiosity couldn't be shoved down again.

"A picture book," the boy answered proudly. "My brother taught me to make them." He held up the book, showing a small, childish drawing of a stick figure in one corner of the page. Then he lifted the page and the stick figure was present again, only changed slightly.

"See how he's different every time?"

Jack nodded, narrowing his eyes. "Now watch," the boy suggested, closing the book again and holding it up so that the pages flipped by quickly. Jack watched, mesmerized as the little drawing danced and moved around the small corner of paper.

That's what this feels like, Jack decided, as memories started to drift to the surface of his consciousness. A picture book flipping by—filled with his life. The memories began slowly, moving past him as he examined them.

Ron, his face smudged with dirt and a sickly looking rat poking out of his pocket, asked Jack if he could share the compartment.

A giant castle looming over him as the boat he was in slid silently across the surface of the water.

The comfortable warmth of the soft bed beneath him, the thick velvet hangings keeping the heat of sleep against his skin.

A sallow-faced man, sneering down at him and pointing at a smoking cauldron in front of him.

The slow pace didn't last long and the visions came flying past Jack as he stood in the void. He trembled, afraid he would miss one and the picture wouldn't become clear at the end.

His own life danced and moved before him, just as the little boy's animation had. Jack braced himself once again, annoyed that his toes were getting wet and cold now.

An ornate, gold mirror stood in front of him and he reached out, letting his fingers slide down the surface.

A huge man, his face barely visible through a tangled black beard, smiled at him and handed him a book. Jack opened it and saw pictures of his family inside. His heart swelled.

Jack tried to hold on to that memory, but it slipped away quickly, being replaced by a hundred other moments. His head ached already and he forced himself to breathe. The blackness around him swirled with faces and words and feelings.

Surely this had to be a good thing, Jack thought. The Memory Block broke. He told himself that over

and over. If it didn't, I wouldn't be seeing these things, he affirmed. The water was up to his ankles now, numbing his feet completely.

Emma's face flashed by more and more often, maturing ever time. Jack focused on her and a cascade of instants flooded him.

Emma lay pale and cold on the stone floor. Jack could hear water dripping in the background and his own voice pleading for her to not be dead.

Jack watched as she danced past him in another boy's arms.

He was desperate to catch one of these memories and to examine it more closely. He watched for the perfect one and held it in front of his eyes, willing it to stay there so he could watch it over and over.

Emma's determined look set his blood on fire. She ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. His heart pounded and he leaned down, pressing his lips against hers. His chest constricted and then expanded, threatening to burst as she kissed him back. Slowly he pulled back, smiling at her dazed expression.

The moment slipped away and Jack growled in frustration.

He was determined to stay away from her. He'd made his decision. Jack could feel the weight of it pressing on his shoulders. The unsure, panicky, positive feeling that this is what he was supposed to do. Ginny would be safe without him. She would be fine, despite the heartbroken looks she tried to hide from him on the other side of the dance floor.

Jack willed that memory away, choking on the brokenhearted look on Ginny's face. It was almost too much to bear.

Moment after moment flipped by him and Jack resigned himself to taking them all in. There would be time to examine them later.

The next set of memories hit him with physical force and Jack almost lost his footing. His feet sloshed in the water, now at the level of his knees. It was icy cold, like standing in a lake of black water.

Pain seared through his forehead and Jack clamped his hand over it, staring at the monster in front of him. But Voldemort didn't move. He continued to stare at Jack and the scar on his forehead burned endlessly.

His arm hurt now. Jack looked down and saw blood oozing from a jagged cut along his forearm. It pulsed with his heart, bleeding more and more life out of him as he struggled against the ropes that held him to the icy stone.

A scream of agony rent the air and strong arms came around him, preventing him from lurching forward through the veil. He had to go, though, because Sirius was just beyond that thin curtain.

Dumbledore arced out over empty air, falling in slow motion toward the ground.

Jack slammed his hands over his ears, praying that he wouldn't hear the sound of the body landing, but knowing that it would echo in his head forever. He shivered, pulling his arms into his body, clasped in front of him to keep warm.

The water was now to his hips, dulling all sensation below his waist. In a way, he wished it would dull his head as well, because the memories were overwhelming. They were so random, yet made so much sense.

They flashed by faster now and Jack's stomach gave a lurch even as his teeth began to chatter.

Hermione, her hair glowing from behind as she sat in front of the fire. She laughed at him and Jack had to laugh back.

Ron looking decidedly green as he clutched a broomstick and a song echoed in the background.

Ginny, her crimson hair chasing her like fire as she flew on her broom, a Quaffle tucked under one arm and a predatory gleam in her eye.

Fred and George, wrapping their arms around his shoulder—when had he been shorter than them?—and confiding the secrets of the Marauder's Map.

Hundreds of memories swirled and Jack shivered violently. The water now pressed against his chest and back. It seemed thicker than actual water now that he looked at it, felt it against the bare skin of his arms.

Ginny's face loomed over his and he grinned up at her ruffled hair. Her lips were swollen and she was breathing harshly. Slowly, she lowered her weight onto him and Harry groaned in appreciation, reaching up to capture her lips once more. His hands threaded into her hair, tangling hopelessly in the glorious red strands as she moved against him.

His heart pounded in his chest. Ginny's arms were wrapped around him from behind and something filmy was draped over them both.

"Forever, Harry," she whispered.

"Forever," he whispered, taking comfort from her presence and the promise they had made. He knew somewhere buried in the folds of her robes was the small diamond ring Harry had given her when he'd made his promise. He swore he could feel it now, rubbing against his back, although he knew that was rubbish.

"Forever, Ginny," he whispered back to her as she faded into the darkness. Water splashed into his mouth and Harry spit it back out. He forced himself to take small breaths, to not panic, even though the water was obviously still rising. He could swim, he told himself. Experimentally, Harry lifted his foot and moved it around. It still worked, despite being so cold he could barely feel it.

The next memory flashed and Jack took a deep breath, praying it would be over soon.

Harry panted, out of breath. His left arm throbbed uselessly at his side. He blinked the spots out of his vision, his wand held in front of him.

Ginny was at his side, limping and biting her lip, but still ready to defend.

"You can't win, Potter," Voldemort hissed.

"We've destroyed all of your Horcruxes," Harry called back, his lungs burning from the air it took to say even that little.

Voldemort grinned a wide, toothy grin and Harry's stomach rolled again. "You may think you've won, boy, but Lord Voldemort is too cunning for you."

"You're too arrogant for your own good," Ginny called back. They both dodged as a cutting curse sliced across the clearing. Harry yelped in pain as it dug into his thigh. His vision blackened for a moment, but cleared when Ginny called out to him.

"I'm fine," he lied, focusing on the monster before them once again.

"You can not win, Potter," Voldemort repeated taking a sure step forward. Harry's arm shook, but he held his wand steady. They traded volley's one last time before Voldemort swiftly moved in close, his hand closing around Harry's throat. Harry coughed and choked, clawing at the monster's hand.

"Dumbledore told me... last Horcrux," Harry said managed. Voldemort looked shocked for a moment, releasing his hold. Harry slumped to the ground, but shakily stood again. Voldemort retreated once more, his wand held high.

Inside Harry's head, he prayed that Ginny would forgive him for what he needed to do. She either knew more than she allowed, or was better at reading him than he thought, because she screamed, crawling forward, her lame leg dragging behind. She clutched at his arm, her fingernails pressing into his skin.

"Harry!"

"I'm sorry, Ginny," he whispered. "Forever." Very deliberately, he let his wand slide out of his hand and fall to the forest floor. Ginny's scream echoed in his head and all he could see was her wide eyes. A green light enveloped him as pain flashed in his chest.

Harry's legs ached and he coughed out water, fighting against the pull of sinking lower in the rising depths. He knew he was crying, but he was already so wet, it didn't matter.

"I'm going to drown," he mumbled aloud, even as his numb legs gave in a little and his face bobbed under water. He struggled back to the surface, panting and searching for a way to escape where he was going.

Red light flashed again and Harry slowed his legs, allowing himself to sink into the water as the last memory came.

His eyes fluttered open and he lay completely still. The clearing was silent—not even a bird made a noise. He could feel his wand, long and cylindrical, pressing against his chest. Slowly, he inched his hand up and clasped it tightly. There was a solid form next to his leg and he prayed it wasn't

Ginny, knowing that it probably was. He would be with her soon. He had chosen to come back to finish off the monster. Then he could rejoin his parents and Sirius and Ginny. They would have their forever.

Something rustled behind him and Harry prepared himself to flip over, doing so in one swift, painful movement.

Voldemort stood above him, his wand pointed and his red eyes wide.

"It can't be," he hissed.

Harry lifted his wand in defense, his mind grasping anything that it could.

"Avada Ked—"

"Expelliarmus!" Harry roared.

Voldemort and his wand parted, each flying a different way. Green light flashed in the clearing once more and Harry slumped back, his heart pounding. He let his wand roll out of his fingers, fumbling to pull Ginny's still form to him. His trembling hand found her neck. Relief flooded him when he felt the soft thrum-thrum of her heart beating at her pulse point.

The tears came then. Tears of exhaustion and disbelief and pain. He slumped back, fully spread out on the ground and stared up at the green canopy above him, swaying in the breeze.

It was over.

The leaves spun in circles and Harry groped for Ginny's hand, tangling their fingers together as his eyes drooped more and more.

Harry could see the surface of the water receding before him. He wanted to struggle, but it was just so hard, so cold. Everything faded before him and he looked down to the empty blackness, the last of his breath escaping as silvery bubbles floating upward.

Chapter 16

January 2003 to April 2003

Emma rested her head against Jack's shoulder, leaning forward on the edge of her chair. His struggling and twitching had stopped, but his breathing was harsh and irregular.

"I think he's coming out of it," Emmett suggested, rubbing his face. Emma could hear the scratch of two days worth of stubble on it. The man hadn't left the room for more than a few minutes to use the loo since Jack had started sleeping.

"I hope so," Emma mumbled, straightening her back and digging her knuckles into the kinks in the muscles. "I'm not sure how much more of this I can take."

"Emma," Emmett said softly, "you need to prepare yourself."

"You don't think it worked," she said, her eyes traveling to the small diamond ring on her finger. The skin beneath the ring was raw and red where Emma had spun it around her finger repeatedly. She started to do it again before jerking her hands away from each other and standing, moving to stare out at the bleak January day beyond the glass.

"I don't know if it did or not."

She nodded, feeling tears well in her eyes again. Cursing herself, she scrubbed at them. Maybe it was time to get out of this room again. The walls felt like they were closing in on her, pressing an unknown future down on her shoulders, without giving her any assurance that she would survive it.

"I won't lose him," she proclaimed, sounding much less sure of herself than she wanted to be. "If he's... different, I'll hold on to him. I can make him love me again." She turned to him, a defiant, determined feeling spreading through her.

Emmett's large hand patted her shoulder in a fatherly manner. "I'm hoping for the best—"

"But preparing for the worst," she finished, looking at his sympathetic eyes.

"It's in my nature," he shrugged. "There's a bit more hope and a little less prepare, if that helps."

Emma laughed, nodding. "Strange, but it does."

Emmett moved across the room, settling into his favorite spot against the wall, the thick book he always read sitting open in his lap.

Emma rolled her shoulders, looking out at the snow covered trees, their branches stretching up to scratch the overcast sky. The strange urge to be out there, soaring through the air, feeling the cold wind bite her cheeks until they were numb came over her.

Her family had told her that Ginny was amazing on a broom. Ron even mentioned that Ginny had talked about playing Quidditch professionally.

Emma couldn't imagine shooting through the sky; but the anticipation of feeling herself do just that filled her.

"Do you mind if I crack the window?" she asked. "Would it be harmful?"

"Not at all," Emmett shook his head. "The fresh air would be welcome."

Emma clicked the old latch, stubborn against years' worth of paint gumming up the mechanism. The glass slid up easily and she leaned down, breathing deeply.

Momentary relief flooded her as the blast of winter air hit her in the face. It was fresh and clean, and washed away the uncertainty that had oppressed her for days.

Emma took huge, gulping breaths, filling her lungs until they burned. It made her dizzy, but the sharp coldness grounded her.

"Ginny!"

Her head jerked up, banging on the sash. She cursed, closing her eyes against both the searing pain in her skull and the black spots that danced in front of her eyes.

"Jack!" She spun around, swerving around Emmett, who was standing at Jack's bedside, and clambered over the end of the bed to get to him.

"Ginny!"

He cried out again, trembling on the bed. Emma climbed up his body, laying herself gently on top of him and clasping his face in hers.

"I'm here, love. I'm here."

His arms clumsily groped for her, finally clasping around her back as his eyes fluttered open.

"I'm here, Jack," she said again, kissing his chin and then his lips. He was still rather limp and unresponsive, but Emma knew that would change—as long as the potion did what it was supposed to.

"Talk to me, Jack," Emma begged quietly, burying her face in his neck.

"It's alright, Ginny," he said softly. "I'm alright."

A sob welled in her throat and she shuddered. The warmth of his skin against her chilled face burned her cheeks. His arms tightened around her back and he rolled slightly, laying them both on their sides as his lips met hers.

Emma continued to kiss him, her hands grasping his hair tightly. He was alright. He was fine. This was Harry... or Jack... or whoever he was. But he was hers.

"I didn't know what to do," Emma admitted. "I was so afraid. Was it horrible?"

Harry nodded. "It was bad," he admitted. "Worse than I imagined. Suffocating and drowning and choking all at once." His voice was raspy and low, vibrating into her body.

Despair swept through her and she took a steadying breath. If it was bad for Jack... what would it be like for her?

"I thought I was gone," he said, softly, his eyes searching her face. She knew she must be horribly out of focus for him, but he wouldn't care right now. "It was so dark. And the water kept rising and rising. And it was so cold. When it got over my head... I was so tired, I didn't want to fight anymore"

Emma shook her head, wiping clumsily at his wet cheeks. "How did you manage?"

"I held on to you," he admitted simply. "In all that darkness, I could see you, brighter than anything. Brighter than sunshine. I found those moments in my mind and I came home."

Emma laughed, a soggy, choking sound as she pulled his face to her, kissing him again.

"I'll just give you two a moment."

The voice was in the distance and Emma promptly forgot about it as Harry pulled her to him.

"I love you, Ginny."

"I love you, Jack."

They stared at each other for a minute, Ginny's hand coming up to trace his features, brushing the dark whiskers with her fingers.

"I'm so glad you're back," she whispered.

"I'm sorry I made you wait," Harry answered, pressing a kiss against her passing fingers. "It seemed to take a year and a moment all at once."

"Two days," Emma informed him. "You've been asleep two days."

Harry's eyes went out of focus and Emma furrowed her brow, wondering what he was thinking about.

"Talk to me, Jack," she urged. "You can tell me anything."

He nodded, turning back to her. "I'm just trying to get it all straight, Em," he admitted. "It's a lot to deal with. Eighteen years of memories."

Emma sat up on her elbow, her fingers finding the space between the buttons on his pyjamas and tucking between them to brush against his chest.

"And then I have to add in the things I know about our life together."

"Tell me something..." she whispered.

Harry reached up and smoothed a bit of hair behind her ear. "What do you want to know?"

"The first time I saw you," she said quickly.

"It was on the train," he said.

"No," she shook her head. "The first, first time. Not the second, first time."

Harry leaned up and brushed her lips with his. "Trains must be our thing, love."

Her eyebrows rose slowly. "We met on a train?"

Harry nodded. "The train to Hogwarts. Well, not really on it—on the platform. I was trying to get to the platform, but I was a clueless, skinny little waif of a thing—"

Emma snorted, resting her arm on his chest and laying her head on it.

"Don't laugh," Harry protested, poking her sides softly, causing her to squirm under his fingers, "I'm lucky there wasn't a stiff wind, I'd have blown right away. Besides, you were quite taken with me."

"Of course I was," Emma agreed, not knowing, but guessing all the same. Her fingers ghosted along his cheek. "Any little girl would have fallen in love with you."

"No," Harry shook his head, "only the most special ones." He closed his eyes, a slow smile spreading across his face. "I can still see you, running after the train, crying and laughing at the same time, waving at your brothers and me."

"I always loved you," Emma said softly, her brow furrowed. It was more of a feeling than anything. At least she couldn't fathom a time when she wouldn't have been in love with him.

Harry went quiet again, his fingers trailing through her hair gently. She closed her eyes, swimming in the feeling of him.

"We promised forever," he said softly. "I couldn't leave until I gave you that promise."

Emma let the words wash over her, not fighting the tears that rose behind her eyelids.

"When we were in the forest, and I thought you were gone. I wanted to go too. I thought maybe..." Harry's voice broke and his chest hitched several times. Emma's eyes fluttered open and saw his lower jaw trembling. "Maybe our forever was somewhere else. I was going to finish him off, make it safe for everyone else. Then I'd die, and we could have our forever."

"Oh, Jack," she murmured, moving so that her weight rested on him again. "Our forever is here. It's you and me and it's Jay."

Harry nodded jerkily, causing his tears to spill down his face and drip into his ears.

"Forever," he mumbled, leaning up to kiss her.

The Weasleys were gathered in the kitchen, perched on every available surface. The room itself, along with the dining table, had been expanded to its very limits. The children were lined up on the floor against the sideboard, their plates levitating in front of them—which they thought was simply brilliant, judging by the squeals of delight they were making.

Ron took a deep breath, welcoming the warmth of home and family. Soft conversations rattled around the table, mixed with the clank of serving spoons on crockery. Ginny Rose made soft cooing sounds from her baby carrier, which hovered just behind her mother. James was currently in Fleur's arms, but his wide yawns meant he would be in his own carrier soon.

"How much longer do you imagine it will take?" Bill asked Hermione, passing a plate heaping with steamed vegetables. Hermione looked thoughtful for a minute before responding.

"I'm sure we'll know soon—"

"Do we need to talk about it?" Tonks interrupted, passing the mashed potatoes by without taking any. She looked down at the lonely dinner roll on her plate and, sighing, took a dry bite of the bread.

Ron grinned at her grouchy mood and gladly spooned up his own helping, plus hers, when the bowl floated past him.

"I agree," Arthur said, his tone indicating that discussion was now over. "Talking about what we already know won't make time pass any faster." Ron was still awed that his father could command the respect and obedience of them all now that they were adults.

"Two goblins, a werewolf and a vampire walk into a pub..."

Everyone groaned and tossed various items of food at Fred, who snatched a roll out of the air and held it up in thanks. "Cheers, I didn't get one when the plate passed."

"That joke gets older every time you tell it," Ron mumbled through his bite of roast.

"It would help if it were appropriate for children," Alicia said, her eyebrows raising to reprimand her husband.

"Or funny," Charlie put in, leaning around his wife to smirk at Fred.

"Oi! What a bunch of critics," George shook his head.

"That's enough, boys," their mother scolded them from behind. Her harsh tone disappeared however when she reached from behind Fred to deposit another dinner roll on his plate and patted his cheek.

Ron shook his head. Molly Weasley's patented cure for everything that ails you—feed it!

A door closed somewhere upstairs and the whole kitchen froze, their eyes staring at the rafters running along the ceiling.

“Couldn’t hold it any longer apparently,” George muttered, receiving a chuckle from several people at the table.

Nothing more was heard and noise crept back into the room. Ron sighed, shaking away the worry and disappointment. Hermione, sitting next to him, patted his knee.

“Soon,” she said softly.

He nodded and took a large bite of his food, barely tasting it. It was a shame, he thought, perfectly wonderful food even lost its taste when you couldn’t think of anything but what was happening somewhere else.

“I don’t mean to impose, but would you happen to have space for one more?”

‘Emmett the Unspeakable’, as Ron had come to refer to him—like he was some sort of superhero—stood at the bottom of the staircase, wearing a sheepish look.

Silence once again settled on the room, but was broken when Bill quickly slid his chair out and offered it to the man.

Everyone shuffled in their chairs, bumping elbows together to seat one more person at the already groaning table. The food immediately levitated again from the sideboard, inching forward slowly.

“I appreciate it,” Emmett said. “The walls rather close in on you after a bit.”

“Of course,” Arthur said. Ron watched another plate dance its way across the kitchen. It almost made it all the way before crashing spectacularly on the floor.

“Bloody hell,” Fred jumped up, scrambling over the broken crockery and trying to get the children out of the way.

“Fred!” Alicia scolded.

“Mum?” Bill asked, staring at Molly closely.

Ron spun around, taking in the blank stare of his mother. Several people, seeing that she was concentrating on something, followed her line of sight out the kitchen door and into the sitting room where the family clock was just visible.

“Arthur,” Molly said, her voice choking. She gathered her apron to her mouth, covering it as a sob escaped.

Stunned at what his brain told his eyes they were seeing, Ron stood, not bothering to stop the glass of pumpkin juice he bumped. It splashed on the table, making people squawk and jump to salvage their dinners. He blinked several times, narrowing his eyes and peering at the clock.

“Are you...” he trailed off, not sure what he wanted to ask.

The only one still interested in eating was Emmett, who gladly took advantage of the deserted table to help himself to the food.

“Did I mention that Harry woke up?” he asked, a smirk worthy of a Weasley on his face.

Ron’s head felt like it was stuffed with cotton as he swung back around. Harry’s hand on the clock pointed to ‘home’.

“The Block was successfully removed.” Emmett shrugged and took a bite of bread, his eyes rolling back into his head in appreciation.

The eruption of sound was deafening and dinner was abandoned completely in favor of hugging everyone in sight.

Ron lost track of how many people wrapped their arms around him—some from very odd angles, and often more than one at a time. Fred’s girls, Pandora and Persephone each took the opportunity to wrap themselves on his ankles, perching their behinds on his feet and grinning up at him. This seemed to be their newest favorite perch and it usually annoyed him to no end. But today it didn’t faze him at all.

Hermione jumped into his arms, careful not to bump the girls. She peppered his face with kisses and Ron tried his best to return them as much as possible.

Harry.

He had said *Harry*. Not Jack.

“He’s back!” Hermione cheered.

The words soaked into his skin and Ron slowly smiled, feeling a bit of his heart thaw—a part he hadn’t let himself feel in a long time.

“I want to see him!” Molly determined, doing her best to wiggle through the bodies toward the staircase.

Emmett flushed slightly and Ron narrowed his eyes at the man. “Erm... you may want to give them some time.”

The noise in the room filtered out as everyone listened in.

“They were rather... occupied when I left.”

Huge grins broke out and chuckles were hidden behind hands. Ron snorted and shook his head.

“Only Harry...” he mumbled, leaning down to kiss his wife. “You realize what would happen if we tried that in my parents’ house?”

* * *

It was two days later when Harry and Emma were back in the same room, this time their positions reversed.

Harry held Emma to him, staring into her eyes.

"You can do this," he assured her. "It's not going to be easy."

"I know," she nodded, chewing her bottom lip until Harry kissed her to get her to release it.

"You're sure you can handle Jay?" she asked. Harry rolled his eyes and chuckled.

"You've stored more milk than he'll eat in a week, Emma. He's going to be fine. Besides, it's not like I'm alone."

"I know," Emma threw her head back and groaned. "I hope I'm strong enough, Jack."

He smiled sadly, caressing her cheek with his hand. "You're stronger than I am, Em," he said softly. "You always have been."

Emma looked back up at him. "It doesn't feel like it at times."

"We're almost there, Em," he soothed. "A few more days and we can really begin to live again. Just hold onto me, Em. Never let go."

She nodded jerkily and he leaned in to kiss her again, hoping to distract her from becoming emotional.

"Don't you two ever quit?"

They broke apart with a chuckle. Harry held up his hand behind Emma's back, showing Ron what he thought of being interrupted.

"Emmett's ready," Ron said. "And Jay's right brassed off at me again," he said, holding up the small vial of his blood.

Harry winced. "I'll be down with him in a minute. I just want to get Emma settled."

"Don't worry about it," Ron waved him off. "It's a chance for Mum to save the day again."

Harry chuckled and nudged Emma toward the bed. Emmett prepared the same potion, with the same meticulous concern as he had for Harry's ritual. When he was done, he held the vial out for Emma to take.

"Bet it tastes horrible," she grimaced.

"They always do," Harry assured her. She stared at the potion and then glanced at him, the blazing look he loved overtaking her features before she swallowed it quickly.

"Urgh," she agreed, handing the vial back to Emmett.

"Now, let's get you into bed," Harry urged, lifting her feet and tucking them into the blanket.

"Is that a proposition, Jack?"

"It might be," he teased back, smiling down at her. She seemed so young and pale here in this bed,

her crimson hair flared out against the white linen. “But I’ll have to deliver later.”

“Spoil sport,” Emma scowled at him.

“You’re going to be too tired in a few minutes,” Harry promised her. “The potion acts fast.”

Her brow furrowed and her bottom lip stuck out just a bit. “Stay with me?” she asked.

Harry smiled crookedly and nodded, nudging her over a bit. “Of course I’ll stay.” She was warm against his side and he breathed heavily, closing his eyes.

They were alone in the room, but Harry knew everyone was just beyond the door.

“What’s the first thing you’re going to do?” he asked, thinking that a distraction might help calm her fears and allow her to drift off.

“I want to fly,” Emma said softly. “I don’t remember it, and I think I miss it.”

Harry smirked, shaking his head a bit and pressing a kiss to her temple. “We’ll go flying then,” he promised.

Hours later, as Ginny slept fitfully, Harry sat in the same chair she had watched him from and stared at her.

“You look like you could use some company.”

Harry smiled and nodded to the only other chair in the room. “Come in, Remus.”

The man pushed away from where he was leaning against the door jam casually and pulled the chair next to Harry.

“How is she?” he asked.

Harry shrugged a shoulder, glancing back to where Ginny lay, suddenly very still. “She’s good,” he said. “Well, as good as can be expected, I guess. It’s not easy.”

Remus shook his head in awe. “No, I can’t imagine it is.”

“I still have moments where I wonder which I am—Harry or Jack.” It was hard for him to articulate it to people—this concept of having such different sets of memories and of being two different people. Ginny understood as much as anyone could. And Harry knew that in a few days they could really sit down and discuss what it felt like. Ron didn’t understand at all and simply changed the subject to Quidditch. And sometimes Harry appreciated that.

Hermione, on the other hand, got a maddeningly curious look on her face if Harry so much as mentioned Jack. He could tell she was itching to quiz him. Thankfully, she had restrained herself so far.

He and Ginny still called each other Jack and Emma often. It seemed... intimate between them to share those names. That’s who they had been when they met, the second time, fell in love, the

second time, and had begun their family together.

Jack and Emma would always be a part of Harry and Ginny. They were special in a way that Harry couldn't explain to anyone.

"Jack wasn't so different from Harry," Remus observed.

Harry tipped his head to the side considering that for a moment. "In some ways," he agreed. "But in others we're vastly different."

Remus chuckled, nodding his understanding. "How much have you told Derek and Melissa?"

Harry sighed, laying his head back against the chair. The question had been unspoken for too long, yet Harry wanted to avoid it even longer.

"We told them we found Emma's family," he shrugged. "They know there's more to it, especially since we've virtually disappeared now. I think Derek will start to push for answers soon."

Remus nodded, his grey eyes looking closely at Harry.

"You're going to Oblivate them, aren't you?" Harry asked, his voice cracking.

"That's what the Ministry wants," he nodded. His tone convinced Harry that Remus didn't agree, at least not completely.

His heart felt heavy and his stomach churned, threatening to reintroduce his breakfast from hours before. "They're Jay's Godparents," he protested. "Do we get a choice?" Harry met Remus' gaze, noticing how tired the man looked.

"I'm sure Kingsley will talk to you about it."

Harry nodded stiffly. "Then probably not." The thought of looking into his friend's face and seeing no recognition there made him physically ill.

"Kingsley may listen to you, but it's not only him you need to convince. The Statute of Secrecy is fairly straightforward."

"And completely antiquated," Harry grumbled. He had no ambition for political upheaval or law reform, that was more along Hermione's agenda for her life. "And wrong," he added.

"In this case," Remus sighed, "I agree with you, Harry. Obliviation has its place and purpose. But I agree that it shouldn't be used here."

Harry nodded, looking over when Ginny's body jerked a bit. "What do I tell them to convince them not to do it, Remus?"

Remus leaned forward, running his hands through his graying hair. "Well, that's the question, isn't it?"

Harry drifted away in his mind, pondering what he could say that would explain to Kingsley, and

whoever else that needed to know, what it felt like to be missing part of your life.

"I never knew how lonely I was," Harry said, his voice soft and low, "until I met Derek. Logically, I knew it was just me, you know." He glanced up at Remus who was watching him, regret and sympathy swirling in his eyes. Remus knew what it was like; Harry had forgotten that. He reached out and took Ginny's warm hand in his, drawing strength from just touching her.

"And then he was there. I had someone to talk with, someone to laugh with. I missed Ron so much." His voice broke and Harry swallowed the tightness away. "And I never even knew it. Derek was there for me. He gave me... strength to go on. A desire to be something better than I thought I could be."

Remus nodded. "Your father and Sirius gave me that."

"Missy gave Emma a sister. And Anne... Merlin, Remus, she loves that woman like a mother."

"I know," Remus nodded.

"I can't let the Ministry take that from them."

"You may not have a choice."

"We always have choices," Harry shook his head slowly, his fingertip tracing the lines on Ginny's palm.

"When your memories are gone, there's this... hole. And you may not ever know what's missing, but you can feel it. It's always there—and you're drawn to it." Harry stared at the cracking white plaster on the walls. "In quiet moments, you think about it, trying to fill the hole, but nothing ever quite fits."

The room was heavy with silence. Ginny's breathing and the movement of her body were the only sounds.

"You tell them that, Harry," Remus said softly. His hand rested lightly on Harry's shoulder. "You say it just like that."

Harry nodded, glancing at the man before returning his gaze to his wife's hand. "I will," he vowed quietly.

* * *

Arthur nodded to the two witches he passed in the corridor, not even realizing he was whistling a strange tune until he had reached his seldom used office.

Molly had been in such a fine mood this morning, listening to Celestina Warbeck on the wireless while she made breakfast. They'd even danced a few bars around the kitchen, Molly's wooden spoon dripping eggs all over the floor.

It was so different now. Everything, really, Arthur mused.

That didn't mean there weren't problems. He scowled thinking of the upcoming trial later this morning. That wasn't going to be pleasant at all.

But Harry assured them he was ready. The Ministry had planned on having Ginny testify as well, until both Harry and Kingsley pointed out that she knew nothing more than Harry did.

So Ginny was still at the Burrow now, taking care of James, who had come down with his first cold.

Arthur smiled, thinking of last night when Ginny had used an eyedropper to give him a tiny dose of Pepper-up Potion. His little face had turned bright red and his ears had steamed as he screamed about the unfairness of it all.

Harry had come in at just the wrong moment, smirked and made a comment about James definitely taking after his mother's temper. A running battle had ensued, finally ending with Ginny sitting on Harry's stomach and threatening to stay there forever. Their laughter had filled the Burrow, warming Arthur down to his toes.

It was wonderful to have them back again.

"Arthur, the courtroom is filling."

Remus stood in his doorway and Arthur nodded.

"Lost in your thoughts?" Remus asked, patting his friend on the back as Arthur exited his office and set a locking spell.

"I was," Arthur sighed.

"Well, we'd best get down there," Remus smiled easily. "Someone will see two empty seats and be in them in a heartbeat."

Arthur chuckled. Seating for the trial was at a premium. The Ministry simply refused to expand the courtroom, which was probably for the best. There was going to be enough press there as it was.

"Cor," Arthur breathed as he entered the room. He'd never seen this many faces in one of the seldom used courtrooms. The full Wizengamot, in their regal plum robes, were seated imperiously in their high benches, looking down at the courtroom.

A spike of sympathy for Harry, who had lived this scene when he was fifteen, shot through him. Arthur couldn't imagine the imposing feeling it must cause, to be standing there in front of all of those people asking questions and demanding answers.

"How is Harry holding up?" Arthur asked. The lad had looked rather pale at breakfast, not eating more than a slice of dry toast.

"He's ready for it to be over, I think," Remus admitted. The two men took their seats, nodding to those in the audience that they knew.

A loud clanging sound was heard and everyone turned to watch Draco Malfoy be brought into the courtroom. He looked well taken care of, despite the pallor and sunken cheeks.

Arthur furrowed his brow. Malfoy looked very much like his father, but the high set Black cheekbones were apparent as well.

Malfoy stared at the chair in the center of the room and only moved forward when he was sharply prodded in the back by the escorting Auror's wand. He slowly sank down into the imposing chair and the chains wrapped over his wrists and around his ankles, making the entire crowd jump at their sound.

"Mr. Malfoy," Rufus Scrimgeour's gruff voice echoed through the chamber, silencing the audience. "If you are ready."

Arthur thought the man looked ready to vomit all over his shoes, but he nodded, his blonde hair coming forward to frame his face.

Percy stood, holding a scroll, reading from it with perfect diction.

Arthur let the words wash over him, not really caring. He couldn't take his eyes off of Malfoy's profile. Gone was the haughty, self-important man that used to strut through the Ministry corridors, his father's cape flapping behind him.

Here instead was a wreck of a man whose choices reflected a lifetime of bigoted adults foisting their opinions on him and molding him into what they thought he should be. But, as Harry had pointed out in a discussion just the other night, it was Malfoy himself who had chosen to act on those beliefs. No one had held a wand to his head and forced him to forever change the lives of so many people.

Remus nudged Arthur and he sat up, now paying full attention to the proceedings.

Harry entered, pausing only a moment to look at Malfoy before taking a seat and giving his testimony. His voice was clear and his descriptions easy to understand, even though the words he spoke made Arthur's gut clench.

Malfoy didn't dispute anything Harry said, and sank lower and lower in his chair.

Arthur almost excused himself to be sick when Harry described waking up in the hospital, not remembering anything.

"Steady," Remus breathed, giving Arthur's arm a squeeze. His grey eyes measured Arthur closely, perhaps thinking of the stroke not so many years ago.

"I'm fine," Arthur assured him, forcing out half a smile that felt more like a grimace. "Just..."

"Yeah," Remus nodded jerkily. The lines around his mouth assured Arthur that he felt ill as well.

The trial was fairly short, Arthur thought. He was surprised when it ended just before lunch, but the evidence was damning. Harry's testimony had hammered all the proverbial nails in Malfoy's coffin. Yet, Harry had never been condescending or nasty in his comments.

Arthur was proud of him. Proud of the man he had become.

“Draco Malfoy, the Wizengamot finds you guilty of the murder of Iris Parkinson, guilty of accessory to murder of Pansy Parkinson and Theodore Nott, and the illegal, and Dark Magic practice of using a Memory Block against one witch and one wizard.”

The proclamation sounded like a low, solitary bell around the dungeon.

“The seriousness of these crimes usually holds the penalty of a Dementor’s kiss.”

Arthur sucked in his breath, wincing. He hated Dementors; no matter what purpose the Wizarding world thought they served.

“However, Mr. Potter has submitted a statement to the Wizengamot suggesting that your sentence be commuted to a life lived in Azkaban.”

Heads spun and looked at Harry, who stared blankly, defiantly ahead.

Arthur was even more proud of him. He nodded firmly. Mercy. It was the right thing to do.

“In debt to Mr. Potter, we have voted to follow his wishes. You are hereby sentenced to spend the remainder of your life in Azkaban prison, and the sentence is to begin immediately.”

Malfoy, unresponsive until now, stared up at the Wizengamot. Arthur tried to decipher the strange look on his face. For an instant, it looked as if the worst sentence possible had been imposed on him. Then silent resignation took over. His eyes settled on Harry, who held his gaze and nodded once.

Arthur wasn’t sure what had passed between the two men—but it was something significant, he knew.

“Come on,” Remus urged, tugging at his elbow. “Harry will be trying to get out of here soon, before the press can corner him.”

Arthur chuckled. News of Harry and Ginny’s return had been in every newspaper and on every witch’s and wizard’s lips since the story was first reported. It would still be some time before either Harry or Ginny was seen outside the Burrow without an Auror escort.

The two men made their way out of the courtroom, watching as Harry inched his way toward the doors. The press closed in on him. Ron stood next to Harry, his large hand helping steady his friend’s shoulder and move him forward. Three other Aurors surrounded Harry as the reporters yelled their questions.

“Mr. Potter, could you pose for a picture.”

“Mr. Potter, what are you going to do now?”

“Mr. Potter, can you confirm rumors of you joining the Aurors?”

The questions went on and on as Harry kept his head down, pressing forward.

“Mr. Potter, do you feel that justice was served?”

Arthur was surprised when Harry faltered in his step, turning to look at the man who had asked him.

“No,” Harry answered softly. “I don’t.”

Shocked silence spread through the crowd.

“There is no justice for something like this. It can never be repaid.” Harry’s voice was full of emotion, far different from the mechanical reciting of facts he had given in the courtroom. “You can’t have those years back.”

“Then why did you ask that Mr. Malfoy’s life be spared?”

Harry thought about that for a moment. “Because I’m not like him,” he said simply. No further explanation was needed as he turned on his heel, Ron at his side, and pressed through the crowd.

* * *

Harry sat at the far edge of the pub, in the shadows. His back was to the wall—which was a bit much, he knew, especially since he was in the Muggle world, far from where anyone would recognize him and blind him with camera flashes. Here he was simply Jack, meeting a friend for a drink.

He’d almost finished his pint of bitter when Derek came in, glancing around the pub before sliding heavily into his seat and signaling the barman that he would have the same as Harry.

“How are you?” Harry asked, nervously swallowing. He’d fought so hard against the Ministry to assure that Derek and Missy and Anne wouldn’t have to be Obliviated. And now that he had won, it was time to tell Derek the truth.

“Alright,” Derek nodded stiffly. His eyes told Harry enough and he sighed heavily.

“Don’t be like that.”

“Don’t be like what?” Derek asked, shrugging in innocence.

“This,” Harry protested, holding out his hand toward Derek. “I’m sorry, Derek.”

Derek nodded slowly, his eyes still not leaving his friend. “My best mate disappears for weeks, taking his wife, who I love like a sister, and *my godson* with him. And I don’t get so much as a by your leave.”

Harry sighed, running his fingers up and down the pint glass, trying to decide what to tell his friend. He and Ginny had talked about it for hours. Their friends deserved to know the whole truth.

“Are you going to tell me what’s been happening?” Derek asked.

Harry hated the thinly veiled bitterness in Derek’s voice, but he understood it.

“I am,” Harry said. “I’m just trying to decide how to do it.”

Derek stared at him before the side of his mouth quirked. “Got yourself into some sort of mess, haven’t you.”

“In a way,” Harry agreed with a crooked smile. “We found Ginny—erm, Emma’s family.”

Derek stared at him. “Her name is Ginny.” He seemed to be testing the weight of it on his tongue before shrugging.

“It is,” Harry nodded. “She was born in Devon. And she has six older brothers.”

“Blimey, Jack,” Derek laughed. “And you’re still alive?”

Harry chuckled. “Currently, yes.”

“They never knew where she was? Did they ever look?”

Sighing, Harry shook his head. “They thought she had died in... an accident. They were told she was dead.”

Derek winced. “That’s where you’ve been staying.”

“It is,” Harry nodded. “We wanted to give them a chance to get to know us again, to meet Jay.”

Derek nodded, taking a sip from his pint. “Wait... you said ‘us’—what do you mean?”

Harry ruffled his hair, glanced around and surreptitiously cast *Muffliato* around them, his wand tucked under the table.

“There’s a lot more to the story, Derek.”

His friend narrowed his eyes, more in confusion than doubt. “I’m listening.”

“You know I’ve never lied to you, right?” Harry asked.

“And you’d better not start now,” Derek nodded. “Whatever it is, Jack, I can handle it.”

Harry snorted, wondering if he really could, and shook his head to clear it. “My name isn’t Jack Ingalls.”

“Well, we knew that,” Derek scoffed.

“It’s Harry Potter...”

An hour later, and four empty pints, Derek sat back against his chair, his eyes wide. Harry could have sworn there was steam coming from his ears from trying to process everything.

“I’m not sure what to say,” he finally said.

Harry nodded in understanding. “It’s a lot to take in.”

“Everything’s going to change now,” Derek said morosely. “You’re part of that world now.”

Harry shook his head. "That doesn't mean I can't be part of this one anymore. I was always a part of that world, Derek, I just didn't know it."

"You're a... wizard," Derek said, the word slow to come out of his mouth.

"Yes."

"Emma—er, Ginny... she's a witch?"

Harry almost snorted at the phrase, which said anywhere else would bring about a very different connotation. "She is."

They lapsed into silence for a minute and Harry let out a deep breath. He felt lighter for having told Derek the truth. Yet it looked as if the weight had simply been passed to his friend, whose shoulders slumped heavily. Hopefully Ginny was having as good of luck with Missy and Anne. They'd decided that splitting things up this afternoon might be easier. Harry still wasn't sure about that, but he thought maybe he'd gotten the better end of the bargain.

Derek stared down at his hands. "There's really a game called... queerditch." He raised an eyebrow, meeting Harry's gaze with a quirked smile.

Harry snorted, his laugh welling from deep inside of him. "Er... yeah. But it's called Kw-i-ditch," he enunciated, rubbing the back of his head.

"And it's like football..." Derek peered at him, "except... on brooms."

"Yeah," Harry laughed. Maybe it was a male thing, he thought, this fascination with sports. Or maybe it was just Harry's taste in friends.

"Fifty feet in the air?"

"Sometimes higher," Harry shrugged, an easy smile stretching on his face. "How about I arrange for us to see a game soon?" he asked.

A curious expression crept across Derek's face, even though Harry could tell he was still struggling with the idea. "I might forgive you for keeping this from me then."

Harry laughed again, his stomach loosening; he didn't realize he'd been clenching it.

"So... you believe me then?" Harry asked. He watched his friend closely as Derek's face ran a gamut of expressions.

"You're completely, certifiably nutters," Derek shook his head. "But... yeah."

* * *

Harry hovered over James as the baby smiled his wide, toothless grin at him.

"I think he's really starting to recognize me," Harry said, giving an awe filled smile to Ginny. She rolled her eyes and chuckled, holding her place in the magazine she was reading.

Harry growled at her and reached up, running his finger along the bottom of her bare foot, which dangled off the side of the sofa. She squealed loudly and tucked her feet up under her, giving him her patented death glare.

“Harry,” she said, her voice bordering on the tone she used when she was patronizing him. “Jay has been able to recognize you for a long time.”

He felt his cheeks heat and shrugged, turning back to his son.

“But I’m your favorite,” he teased, capturing Jay’s waving hand between his lips and pretending to chew on it.

“Not bloody likely,” Ginny commented, although her distracted tone told him she’d gone back to reading the Quidditch article.

“Why not?” Harry asked, snatching the baby up and lifting him high in the air. “I could be, you don’t know...”

Ginny sighed, exasperated and tossed the magazine away from her. “When you grow a pair of these,” she reached up and cupped her breasts, making Harry flush bright red, “then I’m sure you will be his favorite.”

“Er... maybe I came at the wrong time.”

They both turned, looking at Ron, who stood in the doorway to the sitting room, wearing a faded, maroon Weasley jumper with a gold ‘R’ on the chest, and two shovels in his hand.

“What are you doing with those?” Harry asked, quirking an eyebrow.

“Digging,” Ron announced with a roll of his eyes, saying it should be very obvious.

“Digging,” Harry repeated.

“Yeah,” Ron nodded. “Want to help?”

Harry glanced over at Ginny who raised her shoulder in bewilderment.

“Er...”

“I thought you might want to help me.”

Whatever Ron was on about, it seemed important to him. Besides, Harry hadn’t been out recently.

“Alright,” he shrugged. “Just let me pull on a jumper.”

Ron’s smile spread wide and he nodded, leaning on the two shovels.

Harry placed Jay in his carrier and hurried up the steps, two at a time to the bedroom that he and Ginny still shared with Jay. They had talked about finding their own flat soon, but it had only been a few months, and Ginny was still enjoying her family’s company.

When he came back down, he had the distinct feeling he had interrupted a conversation because Ginny's eyes were misty with emotion and the tips of Ron's ears were burning.

"Ready?"

Harry glanced once more at Ginny. She shrugged off his questioning look and went up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

"Don't be too late," she said softly. He was momentarily distracted by her soft lips and the more intimate tone in her voice. If only Ron wasn't standing behind him... clearing his throat and sounding highly agitated.

"Alright... Digger," Harry grinned, skeptically taking the shovel. "Lead on."

Ron seemed to know where he was going, his long strides forcing Harry to hurry in keeping up. They passed through the garden and struck out across the clearing, toward the orchard, the moist grass sticking to their shoes and wetting the edges of their trousers.

Realization dawned on Harry as they got closer to the trees.

"The ground was too frozen before now," Ron murmured, slowing his movement as the two black headstones came into view—gaping holes standing empty in front of them.

The bodies of Pansy Parkinson and Theodore Nott had been removed before Malfoy's trial. Harry wasn't sure where they rested now... he'd have to find out. It seemed somehow important to know.

"Why not just magic the dirt back in?" Harry asked. He felt strange standing in front of what had once been his grave—in weird way. It was morose, yet fascinating all the same.

Ron shrugged his shoulder, not meeting Harry's eye completely. "It seems only right that we do it this way. We dug them by hand."

"Really?"

Harry stared at the long, rectangular holes, side by side in the rich brown earth. It wasn't something he'd ever thought about. But, instantly, he knew that if the situation had been reversed, if for some reason he'd needed to bury Ron—the thought made his stomach turn uncomfortably—he would have dug the grave in just the same way.

"Yeah," Ron nodded. He sunk his shovel into the pile of dirt off to one side with a loud grunt. "I think it helped."

Harry nodded, watching as the shovel-full of dirt cascaded down into the muddy depths. He watched several minutes more before digging in his own shovel, lifting the dirt above the hole in front of Ginny's headstone.

As the dirt fell, Harry mentally added a bad memory to it. He pressed the nose of the shovel in again, feeling a bit better.

Shovel after shovel swung over the hole, the two friends working in silence only disturbed by their

grunts and sighs.

Once the first hole was full, Harry let his shovel fall to the ground, his arms screaming in protest. He slumped to the ground, breathing heavily.

As he worked, all of the horrid memories of the past exorcised themselves to the surface of his mind, down his arm, down the shovel and into the dirt. He felt a bit like he'd buried some of his demons in that hole.

"You're right," he said softly, glancing to where Ron squatted next to the other hole. "It does help."

Ron nodded, rocking back to sit fully on the dirt.

Harry moved over to sit next to him, and then scooted so that his feet were dangling in the opening for the grave. He snorted out a laugh and glance up at Ron.

"You're a sick bastard," Ron shook his head, although he joined Harry, his own legs dangling down into the darkness.

"Ron," Harry began, feeling that he needed to say something, but not knowing what yet. "Thank you."

They looked at each other closely, both feeling awkward.

"It's just dirt," Ron shrugged.

"Not for this," Harry motioned to the shovels and the remaining pile of dirt to be moved. "For this," he gestured to the hole. "And for not giving up on us."

Ron shook his head jerkily. He made a strange sound low in his throat and Harry thought he might be crying. He averted his eyes, looking straight forward into the trees.

"I did give up," Ron finally said. "I didn't want to."

"Hermione told me," Harry said. "But you didn't give up hope, Ron, you gave up the anger. That's different."

Ron sucked in a harsh breath. "I should have done something... anything."

Harry shook his head. "Ron... there are always going to be regrets. I gave up all hope. You should be mad at me for that."

"You didn't know."

"I did," Harry protested, rubbing the place over his aching heart. "I knew in here, Ron."

"I forgot to remember sometimes," Ron admitted, his voice very low. "It was easier to be angry than to remember."

Harry nodded, understanding perfectly. “Tonks told me about something,” he said, a wicked smile breaking out on his face. He bit his lip, trying not to break out in laughter.

“Shite,” Ron grumbled. “That damn woman told you, didn’t she?” His face glowed red in the late afternoon sun and Harry laughed mightily.

“Come on then, let us see it.”

“No,” Ron protested, shoving Harry’s shoulder hard enough that he tipped over sideways.

“Oi,” Harry protested. “If I had one, I’d show you.”

Ron shook his head, absently rubbing the spot over his heart where Tonks had confided that Ron’s tattoo resided.

“Come on,” Harry cajoled. “I won’t tell anyone—not even Ginny if you don’t want.”

Ron groaned loudly, his head flopping back on his shoulders and staring at the sky. “You promise?”

Harry’s smile stretched across his face and he nodded enthusiastically, surreptitiously hiding his crossed fingers behind him.

“I only got it because I thought you were dead,” Ron protested, shucking off his jumper and tugging his sweaty undershirt out of his trousers. “I should get it removed now,” he grumbled.

Harry’s desire to laugh died in his throat as the tattoo was revealed. Two highly detailed dragons stamped and roared fire on his chest.

“Ron,” he said, emotion choking him. “I don’t know what to say...”

“You can bloody well give a good eulogy for me if Mum ever finds out about this.” Ron awkwardly tucked his shirt back on, leaving the jumper off.

“Ron—”

“Don’t say anything, Harry,” Ron protested. “You’ll just muck it up.”

Harry snorted and nodded his acceptance of that. “Yeah, I would.”

“Come on, let’s get this one started or we’ll miss Mum’s dinner.” Ron heaved himself up off the ground with a mighty growl and picked up his shovel. He had two full swings in before he lowered it and stared at Harry, who hadn’t moved from his spot.

“You going to help, mate?”

Harry looked up at him, grateful that Ron wasn’t the type to get all choked up in emotion. It felt just right finishing this together.

“Yeah,” Harry nodded, standing and taking his own shovel in hand again.

They worked in silence again for a bit.

“Is this a private party, or can anyone join?”

Harry wiped the sweat from his face with his sleeve and grinned as Ginny wrapped her arms around his middle, two Butterbeer bottles dangling from her hands.

“It’s all yours,” Ron offered the shovel, snatching one of the chilled bottles from her, throwing his head back and draining a good portion of it.

“So all you do is dig?” Ginny asked, looking up at Harry.

“Just dig,” Harry nodded, nudging the end of her nose with his own.

“Shouldn’t be too hard,” she nodded. They stood locked in their embrace for a minute before Ginny handed him the bottle and took the shovel from him.

Harry watched her work, the late afternoon sun lighting up her hair, making it shine brightly.

“Save some for us,” Fred called out as he and George hurried across the garden.

Harry’s eyes widened in amusement as the rest of the Weasley’s poured out of the back of the Burrow, worn trousers and faded jumpers decorating them. Even Molly and Arthur looked ready to work.

“I think we could all use the fresh air,” Arthur clapped his son-in-law on the back.

Harry grinned and nodded, throwing his hand wide in invitation. Fred and George each took one side of the right headstone, taking it in turns to push and pull on the stone, loosening it from the earth.

A hearty cheer rose all around the family when they finally freed it.

Ginny, through with her turn, wrapped her arms around Harry’s middle, snuggling into his side.

“Wait... where are the kids?”

“Alicia’s watching the sprogs,” Fred called.

George grinned. “She’s in the pudding club again.”

Congratulations and laughter rolled around the clearing.

“We’re hoping for another set of twins,” Fred responded honestly, his wide grin leaving everyone with no doubt that he was serious.

Harry groaned loudly, leaning down to kiss Ginny’s head. “He’s insane,” he mumbled.

“Usually,” Ginny agreed, laughing as Charlie and Ron took their turn removing Harry’s headstone.

Harry smiled in contentment. Hermione, mud splattered on the side of her nose, cheered Ron on,

and even delicate Fleur lifted a shovel or two, doing her part to heal a bit of the past.

The normalcy of a situation that should not feel normal washed over him. Harry finally realized that he was home. It had been a long journey, but he'd found his family.

Epilogue

July 2010

Ginny's eyes fluttered open, bright sunlight filtering through the curtains on the window. She was amazed that she'd slept so late. She had been awake before seven every morning for years. Usually that didn't bother her much, as the house was quiet that early in the morning. But sometimes she appreciated just being lazy in bed.

Having three children meant that rarely happened.

She could feel Harry behind her, his breathing still slow and deep. Realization of what day it was settled on her and she smiled, rolling over to study her husband's face. Another year older—not that it mattered. He was more handsome than he had been the first time she'd seen him, skinny and frightened on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. And he was just as handsome the second time she'd noticed him, on the train in Manchester, his hair wild and his eyes tired.

The years had added new wrinkles and laugh lines around his mouth. His hair was as black as ever, not a gray hair in sight. That frustrated Ginny a bit as she'd found three just the other day on her own head. But she supposed that they'd earned every wrinkle and grey hair—like badges of honor for all that they'd been through.

Her fingers involuntarily reached up and traced the faint lines around his slack mouth. It felt good to see those marks creasing his mouth, where his smile stretched. They'd certainly had enough to smile about in the last seven years.

Seven years.

Ginny blew out a breath at that thought. It seemed so short at times. She still remembered James' tiny body cradled in Harry's large hand. His frail little fingers clasped around their larger fingers...

And yet, it seemed long ago as well. She closed her eyes and tried to remember those distant days of being Emma. It was such a different life and the memories were fading.

"Jack," she whispered, leaning forward to press a kiss against his chin. "Wake up, Jack."

Harry shifted, his hand coming up to rub his eyes. "Morning," he mumbled groggily.

"Harry Birthday, Jack."

He smiled slowly and wrapped his arms around her. "I forgot."

Ginny smiled, kissing him again. "I know. I had a hard time keeping the kids quiet about it."

One of his eyes opened and peered at her. "Are you planning something?"

She laughed, snuggling down into his embrace. "Aren't I always planning something?"

Harry chuckled. "Do I get to know?"

"Hmm." She pretended to think about it before shaking her head. "You'll know at dinner tonight." Laughing as he stuck his lip out in a pout, Ginny rolled her eyes. "Don't try and figure it out, Harry. It was Jay's idea and he worked hard on it."

A skeptical, wary look spread across his face. "Nothing's going to blow up, is it?"

Ginny laughed. James had taken a special interest in his Uncles' Fred and George's shop and always begged to go in when they went to Diagon Alley.

"I make no promises," she held up her hand.

"It's quiet now," Harry suggested, running his hands up her back slowly.

Ginny's face heated and she nodded. "It is."

"Do we have time?" he asked as he rolled her over, pressing kisses on the tender flesh below her ear.

"We might," she agreed, lifting her hair out of the way so he could continue.

They kissed several times and Harry's hand was on its way into her pyjama shirt when footsteps and giggles echoed down the hall.

Harry growled against her skin, removing his hand and straightening her pyjamas.

"Ah, the police," Ginny nodded. They both sighed, looking at each other and smiling in disappointment and resignation.

"Later?" Harry asked hopefully.

"We'll see," was all that Ginny would promise. It was going to be a full day, after all. She knew she'd give in whenever they could find a quiet moment, but it was fun to see him squirm a bit.

"Happy birthday, Daddy!"

Three little voices cheered from the doorway before bolting across the hardwood floor, jumping mid stride and landing in the middle of the bed, a tangle of knees and elbows.

Lily was still too small to jump onto the mattress as her older brothers had, so she stood at the side of the bed, her arms held high, her brown eyes wide with hope.

"Come here, Princess," Harry grunted, lifting his daughter into the mass of bodies, where she wiggled into her own place, tucked into Harry's side, and holding Al's hand.

Ginny sighed in contentment, glancing up over two heads of black hair and one of red to find her husband's eyes smiling expressively at her.

"Thank you," he said softly.

Jay and Al giggled, which set Lily off as well.

“For what, Daddy?” Jay asked. “We haven’t even given you your presents yet.”

“Mummy already gave me a couple,” Harry protested, ruffling his oldest son’s hair playfully.

“Mum!” Al protested. “You said we had to wait.”

Ginny laughed and held up her hands in protest. “These were special presents,” she claimed. “You can give Daddy yours later.”

“Yay!” both boys cheered and Lily, not understanding but enjoying the excitement anyway, began jumping on the bed.

“Come on, you monkeys,” Ginny called, rolling herself out from under the very mussed covers. “Let’s go make breakfast for Daddy.”

More loud cheers sounded as the kids scrambled off of the bed and tore out of the room.

“Good luck with that,” Harry sighed as he hefted himself out of bed, stretching his whole body.

Ginny wrapped her arms around his torso, laying her head back to look up at him. “You go take a shower while we make breakfast. Ron’s coming at ten to pick you up.”

Harry chuckled, rubbing her back gently. “It’s only the Cannons, Ginny. It’s not like we’ll miss much if we’re late.”

“True,” Ginny agreed. “But you know how Ron is. It’s a tradition. And this time it just happens to land on your birthday.”

“I know,” Harry said, leaning down to kiss her. “I meant what I said earlier, Ginny. You never have to give me a birthday present—you’ve already given me so much.”

Ginny smiled up at him, her heart beating loudly in her chest. “I do have one present to give you.”

“Should it wait until later?” Harry asked, his eyebrow raising. “I wouldn’t want you to get in trouble with Albus.”

Ginny laughed. “Nope,” she shook her head. “It’s a surprise present.”

“Oh, the best kind then,” Harry said, rocking her side to side in their embrace. “Come on then, tell me what it is.”

His wide grin melted her heart and she went up on tiptoe, whispering in his ear.

She pulled away, giggling at the shocked look on his face.

“R-really?”

“Uh huh,” she nodded.

He looked utterly adorable with his hair messy from bed, creases from the sheet still pressed into his cheek and the awestruck look on his face.

“In April.”

Harry grinned widely, leaning down to capture her lips in a fierce kiss. “Thank you, thank you,” he whispered over and over again, his hand coming down to brush her belly. Their kissing turned passionate for a minute before Jay’s voice was heard calling from below.

“Muuu-uum!”

“You’d better get down there. Jay will try and get started on his own,” Harry said, sighing loudly and still placing kisses on her face.

Ginny groaned, kissing him one last time. “Harry Birthday, Jack.”

“I love you, Em,” he said softly, his fingers tracing her jawline.

Ginny sighed as they parted and hurried down to the kitchen to see what her children had gotten into. Her own hand caressed her belly on the way down the stairs. Maybe this one would be another girl, to balance out their numbers. But it really didn’t matter, Ginny knew. They would love this child just as much as they did the others.

“Mum,” Jay accosted her when she finally reached the kitchen. “Al said Daddy has to have eggs, but I said he likes scones better.”

“Then we’ll make both,” Ginny suggested. Lily was in her seat munching on a handful of Wizard Puffs while Al dug through the cupboards.

“How about the two of you work on your cards for Daddy while I get breakfast started?” she asked, flicking her wand to levitate the four-year-old down from the counter.

“What time are Uncle Derek and Aunt Missy coming?” Jay asked, glancing over at the clock. Ginny could see him counting the numbers, his mouth moving slowly with each word. Time telling was a relatively new skill.

“Six o’clock,” Ginny informed him. Jay was fascinated with his Godparents being Muggles. He loved to hear them tell stories of the time when Daddy and Mummy had been Muggles as well. She and Harry had worried after asking Derek and Missy to stand for Jay that there would be problems. After all, Jay was a magical child. How could two Muggles ever hope to relate to him? But they did well. The Graebers were at the Potter home often, bringing their own children, Ben and Sarah, to romp in the back garden with Jay, Albus and Lily. “That still leaves plenty of time to get chores done as well, little man.”

Jay groaned and went back to the folded parchment in front of him.

“I want to fly!” Albus informed her.

“Not today,” Ginny shook her head as she measured the right ingredients for a batch of scones and

placed a rising charm on them. "Today you need to clean your bedroom and help to get ready for the party.

"Party!" Lily cheered, throwing a Wizard Puff across the table. Albus snatched it in the air and Ginny blinked. Perhaps they had another Seeker in the family.

"Yes, Lily, Daddy's party. But remember," Ginny bent down to kiss her daughter's auburn mass of curls, "it's a secret."

She suspected that Harry already knew about the party. After all, keeping a seven year-old, a four year-old and a toddler quiet about something that large was impossible. But Harry played along well and she knew he'd act surprised tonight for the children's sake.

"Will there be cake?" Jay asked, painstakingly writing his name on the inside of the parchment. It was never simply 'Jay' that he wrote. No, he used his full name, the letters stretching all along the inside of the card.

"Of course there will be cake," Ginny said, placing the now risen scones in the oven. She then lit the fire under the burner and started to prepare Harry's favorite scrambled eggs, with just a bit of dill and cheese in them. "When have we ever had a birthday without Grandma Molly's cake?"

"Will Grandma Anne be here?" Al asked, his eyes hopeful. Ginny smiled. Albus had taken a particular liking to Missy's mother and had officially adopted her as 'Grandma Anne', which thrilled the woman. She certainly seemed to have a soft spot for the raven haired, green-eyed little scamp.

"Grandma Anne will be here," she nodded. "Aunt Hermione will go and get her later."

Jay's expressive, dark eyes met hers. "Do you think Daddy will like his present?"

"He'll love it, Jay," Ginny said confidently. The children had been working on a photo book for Harry, collecting photographs and using sticking charms to glue them to the pages in the book along with handmade cards and little drawings that they had created. She had no doubt that the book would have a prominent place on Harry's desk at Auror Headquarters.

"What's all this?" Harry asked as he came into the kitchen, hair still damp from his shower. His clean scent washed over Ginny and she took a deep breath, memorizing, for the millionth time it seemed, the smells that always reminded her of him.

"It's breakfast, Daddy," Albus said matter-of-factly.

"Oh," Harry nodded understandingly. "I thought it was supper!"

"Daaaddy!" Al rolled his eyes.

"Look," Jay said, pointing to the food now being levitated to the table and the parchment cards the children had made. "There's everything you need!"

Harry caught Ginny's eye and he nodded. "Yep, everything I need, right here."

Additional Scene: Flying Without A Net

Author's Note:

This is the first of the deleted/additional scenes for Brighter. Some bits were written and needed to be fleshed out more for these; some were fully sections that just never made it into the story for one reason or another. Like the deleted scenes in the 'extras' sections of DVD's, these bits are usually unbeta'ed and a bit raw.

"Sure you're ready for this?" Harry asked as he held out the broom for Ginny to take.

"Are you?" she retorted back, batting her eyelashes at him playfully.

Harry laughed and mounted his broom, kicking off into the frozen February sky. The wind was harsh against his face, numbing his cheeks. But it felt exhilarating to be in the air again. He didn't realize how much he missed this.

Now the few dreams he'd had about flying when he was Jack made sense. This was the feeling he was trying to understand—like floating on clouds, or falling with only the thrill and none of the fear.

He glanced behind him, seeing Ginny just kick off. Her face split into a huge grin and her pale cheeks flamed instantly pink from the biting cold. He hovered, watching her in awe as she streaked across the sky, her red hair chasing her like a flame.

She really was the loveliest thing he could imagine.

"Wake up, Jack!" she called, startling him from his musings. Something heavy thumped him in the back and he spun to see a Quaffle falling away from him. Grinning, he leaned forward on his broom, diving to catch it before it touched the ground.

If Ginny wanted a game, he'd play. Four years out of practice didn't seem to matter to either of them as they fell into a gentle game, tossing the Quaffle through a makeshift hoop at one end of the clearing.

"Nice one, Potter," Ginny called out as she dove to catch the shot Harry had just made.

Harry hovered again, watching as Ginny set up another run, diving around invisible opponents and tucking the Quaffle under her arm. She really should have played professionally, Harry sighed. He felt a bit guilty that she wouldn't have that opportunity now.

He'd even brought it up a few nights ago, offering to stay home with Jay, rather than join the Aurors, so that Ginny could have her shot at playing for the Harpies. She had clearly been touched by his offer, and knew it was genuine, before she explained that it would have to remain a dream. She wanted to be home with Jay. Maybe one day there would be something that she would be interested in doing outside the home, but for now she was very content to be a wife and mother.

He cheered as she made the shot, happy to stay where he was and watch.

* * *

Ginny wiped away a bit of sweat from her forehead, tucked the Quaffle under her arm and racing back to start another run.

In this moment, with her eyes focused on the goal, hearing Harry cheer for her from where he hovered, and feeling the exhilaration of flying again, Ginny's heart actually considered Harry's offer to stay home with the baby.

But the thought was brushed away immediately. She couldn't see herself traveling so much and coming home to learn that James had learned to crawl, or said his first word, and she hadn't been there to see it.

Flying had always been important to Ginny. It was her escape when she was young and feeling oppressed by her brothers. At Hogwarts, playing Quidditch had been a way for Ginny to assert who she really was and to stand out from the rest. The fact that Harry ended up noticing her for her playing, and thought she was an equal on the pitch only added to her enjoyment of the sport.

But she could look forward to the time when she would be able to bring James up here and teach him to play, just like his parents.

She hovered for just a second more, twisting the Quaffle in her arms before leaning forward on her broom, gaining speed. Harry whooped as she passed him and a wide grin spread over her face. The goal was coming closer and closer and she tensed, preparing to throw the ball through it. Just before she reached it, however, she gripped the broom tightly with her thighs and rolled it. Two tight spirals and one giant heave—the ball sailed right through.

"That was bloody wicked, Gin!" Harry cheered, pulling up level with her and reaching out to her.

Ginny took his cold hand in hers, giving it a quick squeeze before an idea came to her.

The Quaffle lay forgotten on the ground as Ginny gazed in to Harry's eyes. "Let's fly together," she suggested.

He grinned and nodded. "I always wanted to do that."

Together, they floated slowly to the ground, their hands still laced between them. Ginny let her broom fall to the ground and moved to straddle Harry's, slipping front of him. His arms wrapped around her waist and she scooted back into his embrace.

"Might be hard to balance," Harry observed as he pushed off, lifting them into the air.

"Might be," Ginny admitted. "But I have faith in your abilities." His chuckle vibrated along her back and she turned her head to place a small kiss to his neck.

The balance issue only bothered Harry for a moment before he seemed to find the right way to grip the broom and tilt. Soon they were chasing along, winding through the trees.

Ginny was happy to let Harry take full control as she enjoyed the feel of the cold wind on her face and Harry's warm body pressed to her back. She closed her eyes briefly and let her whole body relax.

Flying and Harry—two of her most favorite things; although she had to admit that James was somewhere in there now too. But flying and Harry had always been her two most guilty pleasures. She fought the urge to chuckle at that thought, and wiggled back against Harry further.

"Faster?" Harry asked, his voice low, tickling the hairs near her ear.

"Yeah," she said, opening her eyes and tightening her grip on the broom.

Harry lifted the nose, urging it upward above the treetops. When they got high enough, she felt Harry's body tense behind hers and his thighs grip her hips.

"Hold on," he urged, leaning over her until they were both leaning almost flat. The broom rolled slightly to the right as Harry tipped the nose downward at a steep angle.

Down they flew, hurtling through the air until the last possible second when Harry pulled up sharply on the broom. Ginny's hands gripped his knees tightly and she squealed in delight as the tips of her toes brushed the snowy ground.

"Fun?" Harry's breathless question made her shiver and she nodded.

"Wicked," she answered back, turning her head to kiss him, her hand sliding up to hold his jaw. They skimmed along the surface of the ground, hovering up and down as they continued to kiss.

A giggle broke them apart and Ginny turned, expecting to find one of her sister-in-laws or one of the nieces. Instead, the dirty blond hair sticking out from under the blue hand-knit cap made her squeal in delight.

"Luna!"

Ginny scrambled to get off of the broom, almost knocking Harry off in the process. He laughed right along with her, however, and lowered them so that Ginny could get off easier.

"Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt," Neville, who was walking with Luna, their mitten-covered hands clasped between them, said.

"That's alright," Harry conceded. "Probably not the safest activity anyway."

Ginny made it to Luna in a few bounds through the snow and wrapped her arms around her friend. Luna laughed, returning the wild hug.

"I've missed you so much," Ginny said, feeling tears spring to her eyes.

"You just didn't realize it," Luna nodded when they pulled apart. "I understand."

Harry's arm was on Ginny's shoulder now, his other hand shaking Neville's firmly.

“We owled Ron and Hermione,” Neville explained, his pink cheeks peeking out from a scarf that matched Luna’s hat—the same uneven stitches were in both. “We wanted to see you, but you’ve been so busy with... everything.”

“Its fine,” Ginny protested, feeling more than a bit overwhelmed at seeing two of her oldest friends. “We should have sent our own owl inviting you over.”

“We didn’t want to intrude,” Neville protested.

“Don’t worry about it,” Harry dismissed.

“Let’s go in and warm up,” Ginny suggested. “Jay will be getting hungry again soon.” The two couples started making their way to the Burrow. Harry summoned Ginny’s broom, as well as the Quaffle. Surprisingly, it was Neville who reached out and caught the leather ball.

“Ron told us about your son,” he said, tucking the ball under his arm and taking Luna’s hand in his again. “Told us how much he looks like you, Harry.”

“Would you mind if I called you Jack?” Luna blurted out. Harry stopped walking and stared at her. Ginny couldn’t help but chuckle and shake her head. “I like the name Harry,” she continued, “but Jack is just so fun to say.”

Harry, to his credit, shook his head. “That’s fine, Luna.”

“I’ll stick with Harry and Ginny, if you don’t mind,” Neville said, giving a fond smile to his girlfriend.

“Fine by me,” Harry said, slinging his arm around Ginny’s shoulders. “It’s all the same to me.”

Ginny threw her head back in a laugh. She really had missed her friends, even if she hadn’t known it, like Luna said.

Author’s Note:

I wrote a bit of the Luna/Neville scene in this story, and then never put it in. At the time, it didn’t seem like it was an end that needed to be tidied. I knew that Neville and Luna would make their presence known just as soon as the family was settled once again. I added the first broom ride here because I thought it would be fun.

Additional Scene: Finally Getting to Those *Bloke Things*

Derek bounced on the balls of his feet, clapping his hands in front of him several times.

“It won’t go faster like that,” Missy called out from where she was folding laundry.

“I know,” he cringed, sinking onto the sofa next to her and grabbing a handful of socks to match up. “I just...”

“You’re nervous,” Missy nodded. “And excited.”

“Yeah,” Derek shrugged. “What if I hate it?”

Missy scoffed and tossed a balled-up pair of socks at his head. “You? Hate anything that has to do with sports? Not likely.”

She had a point and Derek chewed the inside of his lip before sighing heavily. “What if... what if I don’t understand it?” he asked, his voice betraying much more insecurity than he wanted to show. “What if Jack’s mate, Ron...”

Missy abandoned her pile of laundry and slid into his lap, curling up against him. “You’re worried that if Jack has to choose between you and Ron, that he’ll choose Ron.”

Derek didn’t want to admit it, but that’s exactly what he was thinking. He and Jack had shared so much. But Ron and Harry—they had a friendship between them that Derek couldn’t even begin to compete with.

“But it’s more than just that,” he protested, winding a lock of Missy’s hair around his finger. His other hand absently strayed to her left hand, brushing against the engagement ring he’d given her just a few weeks ago.

Jack and Emma had come for dinner, bringing little Jay with them. In the middle of it all, Derek had slid down to one knee and asked Missy to marry him. The two couples laughed and talked late into the night, trading off holding Jay, and planning for a small wedding.

It had been fun—almost like old times again—hearing Jack’s laugh echo around the flat. Although, he did have to admit... this ‘Harry business’ had done a lot to loosen Jack up. Harry was much more relaxed than Jack had ever been.

Derek shook his head. Thinking of Jack as two different people made his head hurt. But neither Jack nor Emma seemed bothered when Derek and Missy called them by either of their names. Derek knew that Missy was making a very concerted effort to call Emma, Ginny, and Jack, Harry. Maybe he should try that with Jack. What would it hurt? No matter what Derek called him, Jack would always be the same to him.

“We’re going into *his* world,” Derek said, laying his head back against the sofa. “I don’t know what

I'm doing there. *There* I'm the different one."

"Derek," Missy said. Her tone bordered on impatience and Derek steeled himself; getting called out by his fiancé was never a fun thing. "Did you know there was something... different about Jack when you first met him?"

He let his mind wander back to those first few days around Jack. He couldn't put his finger on it then, but there had always been something odd about him.

"Yeah," he admitted.

"And yet, you were still his best mate," Missy pointed out. "You still lived with him for over a year and didn't say anything to him about it."

"Yeah," he shrugged. "I just... it didn't matter, really. He was always... just Jack."

"Don't you think you're judging him a bit harshly then?"

Derek scowled, trying to decide what, exactly, she meant.

"You think he might reject you because you're different," Missy continued explaining.

Suddenly, Derek realized she was right. He felt his face flush and buried it in Missy's embrace. "You're right."

"I usually am," Missy nodded, running her fingers through his hair. "You need to give this your full effort, Derek. Ron is part of Harry's family. He's Ginny's brother."

"I know," Derek said, his voice still muffled. "But he was Jack's friend first."

"This isn't a competition, Derek," Missy sighed. "Harry isn't choosing between you. He doesn't have to do that. If the both of you will make an effort, then he can have both of you."

"You make it sound like we're two kids, trying to share a biscuit or something," Derek scowled as he pulled away a bit. She was right, and he knew it, but it still made him feel a bit wary, thinking of what he was going to do today.

Missy laughed and leaned down to kiss him. "If that's the way you need to think of it, love."

A loud 'pop' from the corner of the lounge made them both jump.

"Damnit, Jack!" Derek cursed. "Can't you warn a bloke when you're going to do that?"

Jack's grinning face, however, looking more like a boy than the man he knew, made Derek smile himself.

"What? Like ring a bell?"

"Anything," Derek growled, leaning forward to kiss Missy again. She squirmed in his lap, trying to get away from him before giving in.

“Like you would have noticed anyway,” Jack said dryly, raising an eyebrow.

“Morning, Harry,” Missy said, finally succeeding in pulling away from Derek.

“Morning,” Jack greeted her with a quick kiss to the cheek. “I’ll try not to get us all in jail today.”

Derek grinned at the reference. “If this Kw-i-ditch thing is like you’ve talked it up to be,” he growled around a smile, “then we’d better end up in jail.”

Jack laughed, a sound that filled the lounge and made Derek relax a bit. “That was a good time,” he conceded.

“I’ll be home in a few hours,” Derek said, catching Missy around the waist for one last kiss.

“Unless the match goes for three days,” Jack interjected. Derek’s jaw dropped.

“They can go that long?”

Jack shrugged nonchalantly. “It’s happened in the past. But, don’t worry about it. We’re seeing the Cannons today. We may be home by lunch.”

Derek considered that thought. “That good?”

Jack chuckled, shaking his head. “That bad. But it’s Ron’s favorite team. And it really doesn’t matter much, a game is a game. Besides, they’re playing the Appleby Arrows, one of the best teams around.”

“Cool,” Derek shrugged. “Do I need to bring anything?”

“Just yourself,” Jack shrugged. “Come on, hang onto my arm and I’ll take us both there.”

Derek shuddered just a bit at the thought of Apparation. It didn’t feel... natural at all; even though Derek could admit that it was dead useful.

* * *

Ron had been virtually silent all day, and he knew it was annoying Hermione. She had that look that she got about her when her Arithmancy calculations weren’t behaving in the way they should—her eyes narrowed and her mouth pulled into that thin line...

“Ron, you’re acting like you’re going into battle,” she finally sighed, gathering his barely-touched breakfast plate and banishing it to the kitchen.

“Maybe I am,” he growled out, scowling down into the remains of his coffee.

She sighed heavily and moved around behind him, digging her fingers into the stiff muscles of his neck and shoulders. He was torn between nudging her away because he really *iwanted*/i to stay annoyed, and accepting the relief that her strong hands could give to his tense shoulders.

“It is not going to be that bad,” Hermione soothed, digging her thumbs into a particularly deep

knot.

"It might," Ron winced at the pain that shot down his arm. Hermione was oblivious, however, as she continued to knead.

"Honestly, Ron. You and Derek are not competing over Harry. He's not some... prize to be won."

Ron locked his jaw. Of course she didn't understand. Hermione had no problem *sharing* Ginny with Missy. They'd even all gone shopping together. He shuddered at the thought, although it was probably more at the idea of spending a whole day shopping...

"At least admit to yourself why you're worried about this," Hermione scolded, digging even deeper.

Ron grimaced, trying to pull away from her, but Hermione was too strong. "Alright," he growled. "I'm... I'm jealous."

"Mmmhmmm," Hermione nodded, relaxing her grip just a bit. Now that the gates were open, however, Ron couldn't quite seem to shut them.

"This bloke was there for Harry when I couldn't be. He was... Harry's best mate."

"No," Hermione said soothingly, her fingers sliding up the tender spots right behind his ears. "He was *Jack's* best mate."

"Whatever," Ron sighed as he let his eyes close. Damn it... she always knew how to get him talking. "And... I can't compete with that."

"Who made it a competition?" Hermione asked thoughtfully.

Ron chewed the inside of his lip for a minute. "No one. Me, I guess."

"Has Harry shown any sign of leaving you behind, Ron?"

"No," he admitted, shrugging his shoulders. He sighed when her fingers moved up into his hairline, releasing even more tension.

"Harry's not the type to leave someone important to him, Ron. That's not who he is."

Her words rankled just a bit, especially because he knew she was right. Harry would never do that.

"Don't ask him to do it," she scolded softly. "Don't make him choose between you, Ron. Derek was a very important part of Jack's life. He gave Jack a home, he connected to him in a way that Jack hadn't ever had anybody. The two of you are more alike than even you realize."

"But why do we have to meet?" Ron asked, trying to keep the whining quality out of his voice. "He's a... Muggle. We don't have anything in common."

"Besides a best friend," Hermione countered. "I'll bet you have even more in common than you think. After all, Harry chose both of you."

It irritated him that she could talk sense into him when he really had no plans to be rational at all. It wasn't like he was planning on sabotaging the meeting, or even tossing Derek from the stands, although he was reserving that last action... just in case.

"Is Neville meeting you there, or coming here?" Hermione asked, her fingers running up and down his scalp. Ron's eyes closed again and his jaw hung slack.

"There," he mumbled.

"Good," Hermione whispered, leaning in to give his ear a kiss. "Because if you don't get going, you're going to be late."

"Shite," Ron growled, his eyes flying open. "Where's my Cannon's shirt? And my hat? Should I buy another one for Harry? He threatened to wear his Puddlemere shirt, do you believe that?"

Hermione just laughed as Ron scrambled around the room, gathering things he needed.

It wasn't until he was fully ready to go that Ron glanced at the clock and swore again. The hand pointed at 'Very good job. You'll be early.'

"Damn woman," he grumbled, deciding to leave anyway. He may just get a Firewhiskey to start the day. And it wasn't even ten yet.

* * *

Neville wasn't sure, exactly, why Ron had asked him to come to the game today. He supposed it was more habit than anything. He and Ron had come to every Cannons game they could manage for almost two years now.

Then again, maybe it's to even up the numbers, he told himself as he walked into the booth and saw Ron sitting anxiously, all alone. His one knee was bouncing out a rhythmic tune on the wooden floor and his eyes were darting all over the program.

"Hey," Neville greeted, melting into a chair next to his friend. "I think it's going to be a good game."

"Yeah," Ron nodded jerkily. "The Cannons have been playing strong lately."

It was a lie, but Neville could appreciate the need Ron had to reassure himself—of anything right now.

"Heard from Harry?"

"He should be here soon," Ron said, his leg picking up tempo. "He's bringing... Derek."

Neville nodded. "Yeah, that's what he told me. It'll be interesting to see his reaction. Remember the first game at Hogwarts, watching Dean's eyes bulge."

Ron's leg stopped and his face split into a lopsided grin. "Yeah. I remember Harry's face too. I thought he was going to throw up, right there on his broom."

“And when he caught the snitch—”

“Right in his mouth,” they both finished together, chuckling.

“It’ll be fine, Ron,” Neville shrugged, patting him on the shoulder. “Harry chooses good friends.”

Ron stared at him for a moment before he nodded. “He does.”

Any further thought was interrupted when Harry entered the booth, followed by a wide-eyed man. He was taller than Harry and was good looking, despite the way his jaw hung a bit open as he stared at the field.

“’Lo, Nev,” Harry greeted him with a firm handshake, and nudged Ron as he slid past him. “This is Derek Graeber.”

“Nice to meet you, Derek,” Neville said, standing and offering his hand. “Neville Longbottom.”

“Ron Weasley,” Ron offered, reluctantly sticking out his hand as well.

Derek shook them both awkwardly and glanced at Harry, who winked at him.

“You ever had a Butterbeer, Derek?” Neville asked.

“Nope,” Derek shook his head. “Do I want one?”

Neville looked over at Ron, wondering what he was thinking now that he’d met Derek face to face. It couldn’t be easy, but Neville could definitely see that he was going to try—his jaw was more lax than it had been when Neville had gotten here.

“Hell yes!” Ron affirmed. “It’s not Quidditch without Butterbeer.”

Harry’s shoulders seemed to relax and he nodded to Neville. “Get me one too, will you?”

“Sure thing, Harry,” Neville smiled, pleased that the tension seemed to be dissipating quickly.

* * *

Harry sat back in his seat as Ron yelled, doing a horribly embarrassing dance and cheering along with the rest of the crowd. His laugh started low in his belly and bubbled up, stretching his face so wide he thought it might crack. Derek shifted in his seat, but seemed amused by watching Ron as well.

“He’s always like this,” Neville shook his head, tipping his Butterbeer back to take a long pull from it.

“I’m sure he is,” Harry nodded. He laughed again as Ron roared his approval of the Chaser formation. Derek was now watching the game closer, leaning forward in his seat, his own Butterbeer dangling from his hand.

“Alright?” Harry nudged him.

“Yeah,” Derek responded distractedly. “That move there,” he pointed to one of the Arrow’s chasers that streaked by. “What’s that called?”

“That’s new,” Ron answered before Harry could. “See, the Chasers all lined up at the far end over there, and began making their run. And the lead Chaser, he’s the one with the Quaffle...” Ron carried on and Derek stood, leaning his forearms on the railing and asking thoughtful questions.

Whatever awkwardness had been between Harry’s two friends before seemed to dissolve in the wake of a decent game.

“I always love coming with him,” Neville said simply, glancing up at Ron.

“Yeah?” Harry asked, taking a drink of his own warm Butterbeer.

“Yeah,” Neville nodded, his own face stretching into a lazy smile. He drained the rest of his bottle, held it up to Harry in mock salute, before switching it for Ron’s untouched one.

Harry almost fell out of his chair laughing so hard.

Derek and Ron turned and gave both he and Neville a look that said they clearly thought the men were completely mental. The Arrows stealing the Quaffle from the Cannons drew their attention back and he focused intently on the game.

“Ohhh, come on!” Ron protested.

“Are you blind?” Derek growled out, glaring at the referee in the middle of the pitch. “That was clearly...” He struggled for the word, but Ron came to his rescue.

“Blatching!”

“Yeah,” Derek nodded. “Blatching! Whatever the hell that is!”

“I haven’t had to buy a drink in years,” Neville shrugged, casting a guilty look at Ron’s back.

Harry shook his head and slumped further down in his seat. The bubbles in his Butterbeer tickled his nose and gave him a light feeling. Today was exactly what he needed. His eyes automatically scanned the pitch for any hint of gold. Both Seekers were intently searching as well.

Lazily, he sighed and half-heartedly cheered when the Cannons made an attempt at a goal. Ron’s voice rose above the crowd, urging his favorite team onto victory. Derek’s followed along and the two men cheered until the goal fell short and they both groaned simultaneously.

A year ago, Harry had been at a game like this. Although he was Jack then, and it was Football, not Quidditch. And he had been with only Derek, and not Ron, Neville, and Derek.

One year.

Twelve months.

A lifetime ago.

"You're getting all melancholy again, Harry," Ron scolded, finally sinking back into his chair. "You promised you wouldn't do that today." Derek smirked, taking a drink from his bottle.

Harry scowled at Ron and shrugged, blowing out a breath. "I know."

"How's Jay?" Neville asked.

Harry's face stretched into a smile again. "He's amazing!"

Ron rolled his eyes. "We're not talking about kids!" he scolded. "No kids, no jobs, no witches. We're blokes; here to... do *bloke* things!"

Both Harry and Neville laughed out loud. Derek just smiled. "Alright, mate," Harry soothed his best friend. "We'll do *bloke* things."

"Like get drunk," Neville raised his pilfered Butterbeer. Ron nodded his approval, clearly oblivious to the reoccurring theft.

"And get in fights," Harry nodded, nudging Ron with his shoulder.

Ron laughed. "That's right! Defending our team's honor!"

"And even get arrested if we feel like it!" Derek seemed amused by this all, and shot a glance at Harry who shrugged, silently admitting that he'd told his friends the story.

"Your wives might bail you out of jail," Neville shook his head. "But Luna would leave me in there to rot."

Harry laughed again, picturing Luna looking down her nose at a hung over, but repentant, Neville.

"Missy wouldn't be too pleased I don't think," Derek admitted with a grimace. "Although, I think she half expects it, being with Harry and all."

The three others laughed. The fact that Derek referred to him as Harry, and not Jack, was not wasted on Harry. It was the first time he'd ever heard his friend say it. It didn't bother Harry either way, but maybe it was a good sign.

"Oi!" Ron shouted. "No witches remember!" Although his irritation was veiled with his own laughter. "Besides, Hermione would probably find more laws to charge me with breaking."

"Ginny would be disappointed that I had so much fun without her," Harry proclaimed fondly. He could almost see the hurt look on her face and it made him laugh even more.

Harry knew they must look completely and utterly nutters. Four grown men drinking and giggling in the middle of a stadium full of Quidditch fans. But it felt good to be doing something so normal.

All of them stood, cheering loudly as one of the Cannon's Chasers made a streaking dive for an unattended goal.

"Yes!" Ron screamed. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

A loud groan rippled through the audience as the Chaser miscalculated and hit the goal post himself, the Quaffle dropping to the ground.

“Ohhh,” Neville winced. “He’s going to feel that in the morning.”

“I think he’s feeling it now,” Harry shook his head, staring as the dazed Chaser flew in slow circles around the post.

They all dropped back into their chairs, sighing.

“Oi! What the hell happened to my beer?”

Ron stared into the bottle and Harry laughed again, his face stretching so far he knew it would burst.

* * *

“Shhh!”

Harry rolled his eyes as Ron and Derek started into another rousing chorus, marred by forgotten words, giggles and drunken slurs. Somewhere during the last hour of the game, when Chudley’s Keeper allowed the twenty-fourth goal in unhindered, Ron had begun ordering Firewhiskeys instead of Butterbeers. Both Neville and Harry had passed, ignoring the comments about their manhood, and being called pansy-arsed, nancy boys.

A little name calling never hurt.

“Chuuuuuuddllllleeeeyyy, the oonlyyyy—hiccup—one for meeeeeee...”

“Silence him, please,” Neville begged, nodding his head to Ron, who was bellowing out a very melancholy version of the Cannon’s fight song. “I’d do it, but I can’t reach my wand.”

“He’s fine,” Harry smirked, hefting Derek’s arm a bit higher on his shoulders and shuffling a few more steps to the sofa where he unceremoniously dropped his friend.

“Harry?”

“It’s me, Missy,” Harry confirmed to the darkness of the hallway. Apparating the two drunkards to Derek and Missy’s flat hadn’t probably been the best idea. But Harry really hadn’t wanted to take them home with him to the Burrow. He didn’t think he could handle the lecture from Molly, really.

“We didn’t get arrested this time,” Harry added cheerfully, keeping silent the rest of that statement. *Barely.*

Missy clicked on a light in the kitchen, the beam flooding out to the living room, causing Harry to blink and squint.

“Did you drink it, or bath in it?” she asked, tying her dressing gown around her more firmly.

“Well,” Harry scratched his head. “Ron was a bit sore about the loss,” he motioned to Ron who was

mumbling the fight song now, leaning heavily on Neville, who brought his hand up in a pathetic little wave. “And he and Derek—well, they really hit it off, and...”

“I get the picture,” she sighed, glancing down at her fiancé. Derek gave her a sloppy grin in return.

“Mishy, you’re not gon’a b’leve it, but they got theesh... er... broomsh and they fly really fasht...”

“Thanks for bringing him home in once piece,” Missy giggled, dodging away as Derek made a grab to pull her down onto his lap.

“Next time,” Ron slurred out, pointing at Derek, his arm waiving in front of Neville. “You buy tha whishkey, mate!”

“Deal!” Derek yelled out, causing them all to wince.

“At least he had a good time,” Missy shrugged, going up on tiptoes to kiss Harry’s cheek. “Give Ginny my love and tell her I’ll talk to her soon.”

“I will,” Harry nodded.

“Melissha... guesh what?” Derek asked, struggling to get to his feet. “I wanna be a wizshard!”

“Good lord,” Missy shook her head, wrapping her arm around Derek’s middle.

“I’m afraid we may have created a monster,” Harry shrugged unrepentantly. The fact that Derek was now completely enamored with the Wizarding world was a bit exciting to him. The promise Derek had extracted from Ron to make him escort Derek to all the best Wizarding pubs was a bit less hopeful... but Harry supposed he could chaperone a few of those outings.

His concerns that he would be torn by having to deal with two very different friendships seemed far away tonight in the glow of the successful ‘Bloke Day’.

“An’ don’ forget!” Ron stammered, clutching onto Neville tighter as the other man prepared to Apparate away. “We’re gonna go to that foootball game.”

“Yessh!” Derek cheered again before tipping completely over onto the floor and bursting out in giggles. “I won’ forget.”

“Come on,” Harry prompted Neville. “Let’s get ‘Happy’ here home,” he nudged Ron in the side and his friend wrapped a heavy arm over Harry’s shoulders.

“Shee, Harry, I tol’ you I wouldn’t kill tha bloke!”

Harry couldn’t help but snort out a laugh at that. “That’s great, Ron. Now, let’s take you home to see Hermione.”

Ron’s happy mood dissipated and he clutched the front of Harry’s robes, tightly, making Harry sway. “Harry, I think she’s gonna kill me...”

“I’ll protect you,” Harry promised, patting Ron’s head patronizingly.

“And I still have my sword,” Neville offered helpfully, grinning at Harry over Ron’s head of matted red hair.

“Ohh, goooood,” Ron said.

“Night,” Harry called out to a very bemused Missy who seemed to be debating letting Derek continue to snore on the floor, and trying to drag him down the hall.

“Thanks, Harry. I’m sure he had a great time. Whether he’ll remember or not is another question.”

Harry and Neville both laughed and latched on to Ron. “Ready?” Harry asked.

“Harry... I don’t feel sho good,” Ron warned in a whiny voice.

Harry sighed and rolled his eyes, letting Appartation take them both.

Author’s Note:

This scene probably would have been fine in the story, but I felt it didn’t flow as well with the last chapter. shrugs Oh well, you’ve got it now. ;)

Additional Scene: Ginny's Journey

Emma sighed, snuggling into the bed further. Jack was there, his arm draped over her middle and his warm side pressed against hers. She could feel his breath against her forehead, moving the small hairs there, back and forth, back and forth.

The rhythm of his breathing lulled Ginny and she closed her eyes, allowing the warmth of Jack's embrace to take her into sleep.

Her first impression was of searing, dry heat, not cold like Jack had described. She tried to look around, but it was dark, with only a faint, pink light in the distance.

Jack had also said he was standing in water, but Emma didn't feel her toes getting wet. She shifted in place and wobbled, her feet sinking just a bit... like sand.

In front of her loomed a huge shape that she was just barely able to make out in the growing light. Pink stretched across the sky, like fingers of light scratching the night away.

Emma could see the shape now. It was a pyramid and she was surrounded by sand. She'd read about Egypt, and seen programs on the telly; it should be completely foreign, but something about it whispered the familiar.

A bright red light shot across the sky, emanating from the top of the pyramid, and Ginny took a hesitating step forward. Jack had promised her she was going to have to work for this... so she took another step, and then another.

Soon she was at the base of the pyramid, looking up, staring at the dawn that was breaking, shining like a beacon while she stood in the shadow of the monolithic shape.

Another red light flashed across the sky, making Emma remember the way the potion had looked.

Emma took a breath in the sweltering heat. She'd only been here for a few minutes, but she was already sweating, her shirt sticking to her back uncomfortably.

"You have to earn it," she scolded herself, reaching forward with her foot to test her weight on the first step in the pyramid.

Something flashed in her mind, a picture of a young girl... and Emma knew... it was a memory.

It was finally dark enough that she could sneak outside without being seen. Her father's wand was tucked in the waistband of her pyjamas, nicked from where he'd left it earlier tonight. The dew was cold on her feet as she snuck across the garden to the broom shed.

The same little girl was huddled under the kitchen table, staying directly in the middle, curled around her knees. Three pairs of legs surrounded her and she listened as Bill explained that he was moving to Egypt. Tears ran down her cheeks and she tried to muffle her sniffles in her arms. Her favorite brother was leaving her...

The family was out in the back garden, Fred, George and Ronnie chasing gnomes while her mother sat behind her, plaiting her hair and discouraging all attempts to run around like the boys were. Percy and her father were talking a few feet away, softly laughing about something that didn't make any sense to Emma. Charlie and Bill were racing on their brooms, but Charlie was winning. One day, Emma thought, she'd beat them all.

Emma gasped and clutched for the stairs in front of her, scrabbling the sand and small rocks away from the foothold. Jack had tried to explain how overwhelming the memories were, but he could never have described this.

The light flashed again, brightening the sky enough for Emma to look up and see hundreds of stairs looming in front of her. Panting from both the heat and the exertion, Emma started forward again, lifting one heavy foot in front of the other.

A skinny, scrawny boy who was barely taller than her caught her eye and smiled before being distracted away. Her heart thumped mightily in her chest...

The same face, just a bit older now, blinked at her behind smudged glasses. She glanced down at herself, to see that she was clad only in a thin nightdress before squeaking and disappearing back up the stairs, horrified that Harry had seen her like this.

Emma stared down at the small, worn book, hesitatingly opening it to find blank pages. Dear Diary, she wrote, her letters stretching out along the page. Harry gave me his books today, I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it, but he smiled when he tipped them into my cauldron, I love how his eyes crinkle at the corners when he smiles... The writing began to fade into the book and her eyes widened.

She woke from her daze in a corridor that she didn't remember ever being in. And there was red paint all over her new Hogwarts robes. Her mother was going to kill her... Maybe she could find a charm to remove it.

Emma gasped as Jack's young face loomed before her. He was so... small and different. It startled her to see him this way.

Her legs ached as she climbed, looking behind her to see that she'd only moved about ten steps or so from the bottom. Using the sleeve of her shirt, she wiped away the sweat from her face, hissing as the salt got into one of her eyes.

She glanced guiltily around the table, needing so much to tell what she knew to... someone... anyone, really. The secret was just too much to bear anymore... and people were starting to get hurt. Harry was there, then, sitting across from her and Emma gathered the courage to tell him.

The tears on her face almost froze in the coldness of the Chamber. "Come, lay down right here, Ginny," Tom said, his words dripping like warm honey. "This won't hurt at all, at least, not for long."

Jack was much older now and Emma flinched watching him stare at the pretty Cho Chang, his cheeks flushing and his breathing harsh. She turned away, not willing to watch him fall in love with someone else.

Emma stumbled on the step in front of her and fell, cursing as her shin banged painfully into the stone below it.

Tom and Cho and... Jack.

Tears were streaming down her face as she continued upward, crawling on her hands and knees, only staring upward toward her goal, which seemed forever away. The higher she climbed, the narrower the stairs became, covered in sand and rocks. The sun was beating down on her now, and the dry wind was starting to blow sand at her, stinging her eyes and face until they were now raw.

Jack's face came with more regularity, his cheekbones widening and his jawline darkening as he aged. It made her miss him even more, stuck in this place.

'You can do this, Emma,' she assured herself. 'Jack did it, so can you.'

The way he looked at her after the Department of Mysteries, less like Ron's little sister... and more like a friend and equal. Harry's eyes caught hers on occasion, across the Great Hall or in the Common Room, and she wondered... if there could ever be something between the two of them.

Harry's eyes were darker up this close, Ginny decided, she'd always thought they were so bright green, but, really, there were flecks of gold in them. Thankfully, all the gossiping girls at Hogwarts hadn't ever been this close to begin to fall completely in love with his eyes like she was now. And it didn't help when his hand tenderly brushed bits of her hair out of his way so that he could lean down and kiss her.

Her strength and determination came back as she saw flash after flash of she and Harry together, and then Ron and Hermione would join them, laughing or talking.

Neville and Luna were with her, sneaking in and out of shadows to get to Snape's office. Michael had seen the Sword in its place in the Headmaster's office. He was the one who told them where it was. But it was Ginny's determination and drive to rightfully return the Sword to Harry. Dumbledore had meant for Harry to have it.

They were almost there when a shadow, darker than night, stepped out in front of them. "Weasley," the voice drawled, making Ginny shudder.

The sandstorm was ferocious now, swirling so hard that Ginny couldn't bear to keep her eyes open; she'd torn off a bit of her shirt to cover her mouth and nose with as she continued to climb. Now she could only crawl forward, feeling with her hands for each step and then slowly moving up.

The memories were overwhelming, cramming into her head and making it throb. She wasn't sure if she could take much more of this, but there was still so far to go...

Ginny pressed her front to his back, wrapping her arms around him. There was no way he was going to leave her now. They'd promised forever, and Ginny meant it.

"Forever, Harry," she whispered.

"Forever," he whispered back, pressing his hands to hers. They continued forward, past Malfoy and

all his useless banter and into the clearing, where they awaited their fate together.

Ginny gasped as she groped for the next step, finding only air. She chanced cracking one eye open and found that not only had she climbed to the top, but the sand had risen as well, meaning she was only a few feet above the shifting, churning mass of solid ocean that threatened to pull her under.

Ginny screamed as Harry's wand slid from his grasp and he stared at her.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," he whispered. "Forever."

He couldn't do this... he couldn't leave her here alone. She rushed forward, only to get blown back by the force of the Killing Curse. The green shown all around, making her eyes ache.

And all though the clearing, Voldemort's evil laugh as Harry's lifeless body fell. Ginny stared at it for only a minute before her brain told her what to do. Harry's voice echoed in her head. "... last Horcrux..."

It was finished. Harry had sacrificed himself so that Ginny could kill Voldemort.

She stood on shaky legs and leveled her wand at the monster.

"Goodbye Tom," she whispered before screaming once more. "Sectumsempra!"

The cutting spell went deep, slashes across Voldemort's chest. Ginny breathed in again to repeat the spell, aiming for his head this time. But, even in the agony of pain, Tom was faster. His wand flicked out, sending her flying backward, landing her right next to Harry.

"You stupid, little girl," Tom hissed, clutching his chest that oozed fluids. "Now you'll die just like him."

Ginny fumbled for Harry's cold hand. "I'm sorry, Harry," she whispered as blackness overtook her.

Ginny gasped, clutching at the cloth that covered her face, taking in huge gulps of air despite the sand that came with it. She'd reached the top now, but it was no use, the land around her was a sea of dull brown, the sand covering everything in waves that blocked out anything. It tugged at her feet, and sometimes her knees.

She covered her eyes and looked around, trying to find anything to cling to. But the pyramid was gone now, covered in the sand-ocean. And it was rising higher and higher, pulling her under with it.

"I'm sorry, Harry!" she screamed, finally losing her fight with the current. It pulled her under inch by inch as she scratched her fingers along the only bit of stone she could still feel.

The sand filled in her mouth, making her choke and cough until she couldn't fight anymore. Ginny went limp, allowing the sea to take her.

* * *

Harry was asleep, his head thrown back on the seat, when Ginny gasped, spluttering and choking. He almost fell over in his haste to get to her side.

“I’m here, Gin,” he repeated softly, stroking her pale face until her eyes fluttered open. “Oh, babe,” he whispered, leaning down to press kisses to her face.

“Harry...” she cried, tears filling her eyes. “James! I need James.”

He blinked at her, and opened his mouth to reply.

“He’s here,” Hermione said from the hallway, carrying James, who was wrapped tightly in his blankets. “I thought you might be about ready for a visit.

“My baby,” Ginny gasped, reaching for him. Harry gently held her shoulder down and moved so that Hermione could hand James over. Ginny clasped the baby to her, tears leaking down her face as she fumbled for Harry’s hand.

“See, we took good care of him,” Harry said, emotion filling his voice. He leaned forward and kissed her temple.

“I know,” Ginny choked out through her tears. “I knew you would.”

James stared up at them both, his dark eyes wide and his little mouth open just a bit.

Ginny chuckled, and looked up at Harry through her misty eyes.

“Everything alright, Gin?” Harry whispered finally.

“Everything is good, Harry,” she said, squeezing his hand tightly in her own.

Author’s Note:

There are many reasons why I didn’t write this scene for the actual story. First, because of the way I set up the Memory Block, this whole scene basically had to be a replica of Harry’s—I loathe writing the same scene over and over.

Second, it accomplished nothing to further the plot. Maybe it would have given Ginny a bit more balance in the last chapters, but I didn’t think it was necessary.

Third, the imagery losses something in comparison to Harry’s scene. Emma knows what Harry knows, going into this. She understands what is going to happen, and she doesn’t struggle against the memories, she simply lets them wash over her. To me, that ‘cheapens’ the writing a bit, because we don’t get the full impact of her emotions to these memories.

That said, I chose to do this scene now because so many people asked about it. And now you have it.