

Parallel

by jmlane57

Harry Potter, now a 21-year-old Auror, returns home after four years away fighting the forces of Darkness in order to renew friendships and hopefully rekindle his former romance with Ginny Weasley.

Chapter 1: Harry in Love

Chapter 1 of 27

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Harry James Potter was in love. And what's more, he had been in love for a long time...but his nobility had forced him to give her up in an attempt to spare her the fate of his parents and beloved godfather, Sirius Black. On the other hand, no amount of fighting his feelings was doing him an ounce of good now. He was deeply and irrevocably in love, and nothing he could do, nothing he told himself, changed that fact one bit. The problem was, did she still feel the same for him or had she gone on to someone else?

The mere thought of that possibility sent a sharp pain through his heart, as if a dragon's claws had slashed it in two ... but he couldn't blame her if she had. He hoped she knew that he hadn't wanted to do it, that it was the hardest thing he had ever done in his now 21 years of life, four years post-Hogwarts.

In that time he had made a name for himself as an Auror, second only to the renowned "Mad-Eye" Moody. But not only was his bachelor flat terribly empty and lonely without his beloved beside him ... his *life* was, period! He recalled what his friend Hermione had said shortly after he and Ginny had parted: "Harry, I can understand why you felt you had to break up with Ginny, but you mustn't be afraid to love. Your parents were not afraid, remember, despite the danger from You-Know-Who. You mustn't be, either.

"They were not afraid to love, not afraid to marry and have you. Can't you see that no matter what you do now, You-Know-Who or no You-Know-Who, that Ginny is your destiny, just as your mother was to your father? I remember Sirius mentioning once that risk is what made a given course of action exciting for him. True love is worth any risk, Harry. Don't deny yourself that happiness. If anyone deserves it, you do."

Harry could not argue with anything she said, and the pain inside him, the emptiness in his life, heart and home without Ginny, argued even more strongly for her side ... but he could not simply arrogantly assume that Ginny had refused all offers and remained loyal to him. Naturally his heart hoped that very thing, but his head told him it was unrealistic, even foolish, to take it for granted.

He had tried his best to keep in touch with his friends, but his Auror duties had consumed the majority of his waking hours for the better part of the past four years since he had left school. When he did think of them, it was usually very late at night when he was feeling especially lonely...and his pain had increased tenfold at the mention of Sirius.

They had had a tragically short but very happy relationship, and Sirius had become a mixture of surrogate father and big brother to Harry, helping and advising him whenever he could, even while he had to remain in hiding after his escape from Azkaban. Only after his death had he finally been exonerated of all charges against him.

Harry wished more than anything that he could have talked to Sirius about his feelings for Ginny yet, at the same time, knew he would have hesitated to do so because his godfather had died a childless bachelor ... and whatever the danger from Lord Voldemort, Harry knew that was the one thing he *didn't* want. Eventually, he wanted to be the

father of at least one child...and when he was, he knew he wanted Ginny to be the mother of that child.

They would teach their child to be a member of the wizarding world as they were, even send him or her to Hogwarts eventually...although Harry would never forget his Muggle heritage. But first, he had to track her down and find out what her life situation was like. Second, it was necessary for him to find out if she still loved him.

He could only hope that her and Ron's parents, Arthur and Molly Weasley, still lived in the Burrow and could help him, even a little. He had not taken a real vacation (at least not more than a weekend here and there, anyway) since he had become an Auror, so it was long past time for him to do so ... and, while he was at it, update himself on what had been happening with both his closest friends and the girl he still loved.

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The next morning, shortly after he had awakened, bathed, and dressed, Harry had reluctantly decided to Apparate to the Burrow. It was sufficiently late in the year that it was far too cold to fly on his broomstick, a considerably more advanced version of the Firebolt Sirius had given him while he was in school after his old broomstick had been destroyed. In fact, the Firebolt Five Thousand could go faster, fly higher and do more complicated manoeuvres than he had ever dreamed of...but he was too impatient to pack on cold-weather gear.

Apparition wasn't the most comfortable way to travel, but it was quick ... and Harry had no idea where the nearest Portkey to his present home was, since he had moved several times in the four years following his leaving Hogwarts, finally signing the home Sirius had left him at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London, over to the Order of the Phoenix for their permanent headquarters.

His Auror duties had usually necessitated his being able to travel great distances rapidly and at a moment's notice...so often that Harry had eventually decided to simply maintain his Apparition Licence on a regular basis. He reserved the use of his Firebolt Five Thousand for warmer weather, like late spring or summer. Maybe even into early fall. But right now, his main concern was finding out what had happened to his friends...and Ginny. If anyone would know, it was Molly Weasley.

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Once he had recovered from the decidedly unpleasant sensation of having the breath literally squeezed out of him, if only momentarily, Harry found himself standing in the driveway of the Burrow. It looked just the same; it was as if time had passed it by. But surely the people inside could not have stayed the same. As the old saying went, time waited for no man...not even a wizard.

Oh well, he had best get himself in gear. He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders and straightened his clothing, then marched smartly up to the door and knocked. The kitchen curtain was pulled back slightly, and Harry had a brief glimpse of startled brown eyes and untidy red hair with streaks of grey in it before Molly Weasley opened the door and enfolded her surrogate son in a hug that once again took Harry's breath away, if momentarily. Just the same, this latter sensation was infinitely more pleasant than the former.

"Harry, dear! So wonderful to see you! It's been so long! Come on in and have some breakfast!"

"Good to see you too," the young Auror managed once he had caught his breath again. "How are things with you?"

"Oh, just the same as always," Molly dismissed, automatically pointing her wand to the necessary dishes and utensils (including pots and pans filled with his favourite breakfast foods: biscuits, porridge, toasted brown bread with jam, bacon, eggs ... and milk, automatically setting them at what had always been his regular place at the table). Harry would have preferred pumpkin juice or even butterbeer, but when Molly was in her lovingly dictatorial mood, nothing he said would budge her from her conviction that milk was the healthiest possible breakfast drink ... so he didn't try.

He simply took his place at the table and sat down, picked up his knife and fork and began to eat. He found that he was now hungry enough for three helpings, having had little appetite for food up to this point. Once he was full, Harry found time to look around and ask where everyone else was. It had been at least two hours since he had arrived, yet only he and Molly...Mrs. Weasley...were in the room. He suspected that Mr. Weasley was probably at work, but what about Ron? And most importantly, what about Ginny?

He was well aware that the other Weasley siblings were long since grown and gone, possibly even with businesses, if not families, of their own. If Harry remembered correctly, Ron's older brother Bill had married Fleur Delacour, one of his fellow champions in the Triwizard Tournament seven years ago ... but that was all he knew for sure. What had happened in the meantime?

"Mrs. Weasley ..." he began.

"Molly," she corrected. "You're a man now, Harry; you can call me by my Christian name."

"All right ... Molly. I have a few questions for you."

"What would you like to know, dear?" Molly had bewitched her cup of tea so that it would automatically refill and add cream and sugar to the tea in the amounts she liked best when she said the word. In fact, she didn't even have to hold it, just keep it suspended in midair close to her. All she needed to do when she wanted a swallow was to move the cup so she could drink, then return it to the original position.

"I'm afraid I'm frightfully behind on what's happened with Ron, Hermione and your family. Could you please update me?"

"Of course, dear. Fred and George have expanded their business and have now twice as much space as they originally did and are making Galleons hand over fist; I think they're too busy with their business to date much, though. Charlie still lives in Romania and has found a lovely wife there, both a very talented witch and Animagus...I think she can turn into a white Persian cat or something...although they don't have any children yet.

"But if I know this lot, it's only a matter of time, since Bill and Fleur now have a son two years old and another baby on the way, so I'm a Grandma now." Molly smiled at the thought, but didn't elaborate. "As for Percy, we're finally reconciled; it's taken this long for him to finally accept that you were right about You-Know-Who. He never liked to admit he was wrong about anything."

Harry smiled and nodded, noting the glow of happiness in Mrs. Weasley's eyes that her third son was back in the family fold. He was now due to be promoted to Assistant Minister of Magic, in fact, under Rufus Scrimgeour, Cornelius Fudge's successor. "Just the same, I'm sure you're most concerned about what happened to Ron and Hermione."

"It has crossed my mind, yes," Harry returned dryly, taking a sip of his large glass of milk flavoured with his favourite Honeydukes chocolate.

Molly sighed and began after taking another swallow of her tea. "Ron now works as his father's assistant at the Ministry of Magic, and Hermione has decided to become a teacher."

"A teacher! Well, she's certainly brainy enough...but just what has she decided to teach?"

"I don't think she really knows yet. All I know is that she's working toward her teaching degree ... and if I know Hermione, she'll not only earn it, but get Merlin knows how many honours on top of that!"

"Is there anything you could tell me as to their ... personal relationship? I never let on to Ron that I knew, but I suspected that he was slowly but surely falling in love with Hermione. Jealousy such as he displayed at the Yule Ball in our fourth year upon seeing her with the Durmstrang champion, Krum, convinced me of that. He kept telling himself no one had asked her to the Ball and kept denying it right up until the time we went there ... but I've never known her to lie, particularly about something like that.

"Just the same, I can't say that I didn't find her most attractive myself in her evening dress and fancy hair. You know at the time that I fancied Cho Chang, but even as beautiful as she was, Hermione gave her stiff competition. I wouldn't have been normal if I hadn't been attracted to her. However ..." His voice trailed off, wanting more than anything to ask about Ginny but afraid to because if the news wasn't good, he would be devastated. Just the same, he had to know, whatever the risk.

"However?" Molly prompted, leaning over to take a bite of cheese Danish, one of which was hovering next to her teacup, then leaning back in her chair.

"It's Ginny that I'm most curious about." Harry's tone was almost too quiet for Mrs. Weasley to hear, but even at that, she heard the hope mixed with fear in his young voice. "What's happened to her in the last few years?"

"Well, for one thing, she graduated from Hogwarts the year after you, Ron and Hermione. She now lives in London, in a small flat not too far from St. Mungo's. She decided to become a Healer."

"I'm glad she's doing well financially. What about ... emotionally?" he forced out.

"You mean, does she still ... care for you?" Molly spoke for him. "Of course, Harry. She always has; I believe she always will. Just the same, she knows it's best to go on with life as best she can. Even at that, your leaving caused her almost unbearable heartache. I lost count of how many nights she cried herself to sleep in my arms. It was over a year before she could bring herself to begin her Healer studies."

"I'm very sorry to have hurt her ... Molly," he apologized, pain again slashing through his heart at what his extraordinarily difficult and painful (but nonetheless necessary) actions had done to his beloved. "I didn't want to do it. But you must know and understand why I had to."

"I do, my dear," Molly crooned, reaching a hand to touch Harry's. He looked up into her kind brown eyes and knew she must read the love and pain in his own green ones. "But that didn't make it any easier for her to endure being without you. None of her other male friends have meant half as much to her as you do. I now firmly believe that you were...*are*...the love of her life. You always have been, from the moment the two of you first met ... and always will be."

Just as she is mine, Harry thought to himself, but was unable to voice that sentiment at the moment. He didn't dare until and unless he could be certain of Ginny's continued love for him. "Do you have her address? I'd like to go see her."

Molly Weasley seemed to hesitate for a moment, but that hesitation was erased when she looked again into Harry's sea-green eyes, reciting it to him. He prepared himself to once again Apparate to Ginny's home ... or would it be better if he went to her workplace instead?

"Oh, yes, could you tell me what hours she works?"

Molly gave them to him; because of this, Harry rearranged his plans slightly. It was just about time for her to get off work, so he would go there and ask her to dinner, since she would surely be too tired to cook a meal. "I'd better go soon ... Molly. Give my best to everyone and let Ron know I'll try to keep in closer touch with him and Hermione after this. By the way, you never did say how things were between them."

"As I said, you know how stubborn this lot are; up until about a year or so ago, Ron was still denying his feelings for Hermione. It wasn't until she confronted him once and for all about it that he finally admitted it, and they began seriously dating. In fact, I believe they're even ... sharing a flat now." With that, Molly gave Harry the address, which was fortunately not too far from Ginny's own flat, so he would be able to walk there instead of having to Apparate again.

"Have you any idea whether or not they've thought about...getting married?" Harry made himself say as he got to his feet after finishing his milk and wiping his lips with a napkin.

"Not that I know of. You know how hard it is for Ron to deal with women on a romantic basis. I know he loves her, but I'll have to ask Hermione what she intends to do about it if he doesn't get up the nerve to propose to her soon."

"Maybe I'll give him some Felix Felicis or something," Harry suggested. "All he needs is a little confidence."

"That's an idea," Molly agreed just before once again enveloping Harry in a tight hug. "Come to think of it, you could probably use some yourself, dear." She put a motherly hand on his cheek; Harry smiled even as his eyes misted with tears and patted her hand before she withdrew it. "Best of luck with Ginny. Let me know how things turn out. I've always thought of you as part of the family, and I would dearly love for you to truly be my son, if only by marriage."

"That's up to Ginny, I'm afraid," Harry returned quietly. "I'd better go now, before I lose what little nerve I've still got." They hugged tightly again and he left, once again Apparating before Molly's eyes. She was used to the noise one made while Apparating, but still found it most unpleasant. Just the same, her heart went out to the young man who had just visited her.

He was obviously deeply in love with her daughter, but at the same time, very unsure of himself as to whether or not Ginny still loved him and forgave him for what he had had to do four years ago. Molly wished she could have been certain of what would transpire, but all she could do was hope and pray things worked out for them ... because if anyone deserved happiness, it was Harry...particularly after all he had been through in his life.

More than most grown wizards experienced in a lifetime! Harry needed someone to love him and take care of him ... and Ginny was the ideal person to do that. But it would only happen if she was willing...and Molly prayed for both their sakes that she was even as she turned back to her teacup and Danish to finish them off. Then she cleaned up the kitchen with a few verbal orders and waves of her wand before going upstairs to dress.

Chapter 2: Reunion

Chapter 2 of 27

Harry and Ginny are officially reunited after he visits her at her workplace.

It was only a short time later that Harry stepped through the window of the boarded-up department store that served as the entrance to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. After stating his business to the dummy, he stepped through the window and into the lobby. At the front desk, he asked where he would find Ginny; he was told that she worked on the fourth floor, which covered witch and wizarding patients with Spell Damage. She had always been good at that sort of thing, so it didn't surprise him that she would choose that as her specialty. He soon located a lift going that way and within moments had stepped onto the fourth floor.

There was also a desk there occupied by a kindly-looking, grey-haired witch in green robes, most likely the Chief Healer on this floor. Harry approached the desk and asked for Ginny.

"Trainee Healer Weasley? What is your business with her, young sir?"

"I'm an ... old friend of hers and wish to...surprise her," Harry replied, knowing how inane his excuse was, but knowing it was the best he could come up with on short notice.

After a short silence, the grey-haired witch said, "She is presently in the break room. It is down the hall and to your right, the sixth door."

"Thank you," Harry returned with a smile before taking his leave, his heart beginning to pound so fast that he was hard-pressed to control himself and make his legs move...but by a supreme act of will, he managed. It was both the longest and shortest trek he had ever made. He wanted to believe he would get a warm reception, but as before, could not be sure of anything. He had to take matters one step at a time.

Finally he found himself at the door of the break room and slowly, cautiously looked in the door. After a moment's search he located the painfully familiar red-gold locks. She was sitting with her back to him, sipping pumpkin juice from a glass she had bewitched so it was sitting in mid-air; beside it was a small plate with a sandwich on it. Harry was unsure just what kind of sandwich, but judging by the smell, he believed it was her favourite: mince, seasoned with onions. Beside it was yet another small plate with two fairy cakes on it with pink icing.

She seemed to be alone in the room, a fortuitous occurrence for their hopefully happy reunion. His feet felt like lead weights had been attached to them, but he finally managed to reach the small table where she was sitting. He didn't want to frighten her by touching her, so he simply spoke quietly, but in his old crooning manner, which he only employed when they were alone.

"Gin? It's Harry. May I speak to you?"

For a moment, he was sure she wasn't going to answer him; then she looked up and their eyes met. She did not speak, but it was not necessary; her eyes said all that needed to be said. A moment later, she was in his arms and they kissed passionately. The ecstatic sensation of having her in his arms, feeling her body close to his once again after so long was almost unendurable; he just couldn't seem to get enough of her.

Neither of the reunited lovers had any idea how long they stood together, kissing hungrily, but it didn't matter. All that was important was that they were together again. When they finally managed to regain a semblance of control over their emotions, Ginny smiled and gestured to the other chair at the table. "Harry ... Harry ... it's so wonderful to see you again. I've missed you so!"

"Not half as much as I've missed you," he crooned back to her, their hands now locked across the table; her food was forgotten in the joy of their reunion. "I'm told that you just got off work. Would you like to have dinner somewhere?"

"Thank you, no, Harry. I'm not hungry ... not now." *Not for anything but you*, she finished in her mind even as she once again smiled, brought his hands to her lips and kissed them...then held one to her cheek. "I just want to be alone with you to catch up on the last few years," Ginny returned tenderly.

It was incredible that Harry could feel so much just being near her, but it was undeniable. He now wondered how he had ever survived the last four years without her. It was like he had been deprived of something vital to his survival and had gotten it back just barely in time.

"I'm sorry for ever leaving you. It was the biggest mistake I ever made."

"It doesn't matter now, beloved. What matters is that we're together again." With one sweep of her wand, the food she had been eating disappeared, and she gathered up her cloak from the back of her chair. Harry helped her put it back on, and they left the break room to head back down the hall to the lift. When they passed the grey-haired witch at the desk, her eyes widened at the young couple seemingly glued together, they were walking so close, arms wrapped around each other...and the young man's green eyes scarcely left the brown eyes of the young woman. They could not simply be friends, not acting like that, the Chief Healer told herself, but it was not her place to comment on it. They were of age and could do as they wished.

A moment later, the couple stepped into the lift and made their way back to the lobby. Harry had vowed not to touch her again until they were certain of no prying eyes upon them, but it turned out to be the most difficult vow he had ever made. His lips positively hungered for hers, and his hands positively itched to feel her body, preferably her bare body, beneath them. However, he would have to content himself with feeling his arms around her until they could reach her flat and get out of public view.

The trip seemed endless, but at last they arrived. She then pointed her wand at the door, and it opened to admit them; after they stepped through, she did it again, and the door was effectively locked. Nothing short of an atomic bomb could have opened it after a Locking Charm had been placed on it.

The couple began to once again kiss passionately upon returning to each other's arms, and their hands hungrily roamed over the other as they stood in her living room. "Oh ... Ginny ... Ginny ..."

"Harry ..." she sighed blissfully, the fingers of her left hand stroking the back of his neck, the other ruffling his already unruly hair as they continued to kiss. Surely Heaven had come to earth for them, and the last thing they wanted was to leave it. In fact, Harry had no intention of doing so until absolutely necessary and began backing her toward the couch. Upon reaching it, he began to lower her to the pillow at the left end.

Once she was lying beneath him, his hands began exploring and soon had her robes parted; her small but perfect breasts were soon bared, the baby-pink nipples hard and erect. "Gin, I've wanted this for so long ..." A moment later, his lips found and began to gently caress one breast and then the other. She held his head close to her, arching her back as she moaned at the feel of his hands and lips loving her.

"Yes, my love. Yes," she insisted, her own hands beginning to explore and soon finding the hardness of his arousal. His trousers began to feel like a prison, and Harry knew he would have to divest himself of them before too much longer. It seemed as if Ginny had read his mind, for even as he began moving sensuously against her, his lips hungrily exploring the silky, scented warmth of her throat, her hands were reaching for the waistband of his jeans and attempting to open them.

But even in the midst of his fast-rising passion, Harry knew there was something important he should do before he could allow himself to join with Ginny. "No, Gin, we can't," he protested against her lips even as he returned to kiss her again. "Not until you've placed a Contraceptive Charm on yourself."

"I don't want to," she crooned back, unwilling to release his lips even long enough to talk. "I want to have your baby, Harry *Many* babies. Maybe even as many as Mum and Dad."

"Not right now," he gently insisted. "If you don't do it, I will. It's your choice. You've got to make up your mind while I still have some control left."

"If you say so," she sighed, reaching for her forgotten wand and pointing to herself. *Contra*, she called out. "Okay, I'm safe to touch now. Let's get on with it."

This time he allowed her to remove his jeans and jacket, then his T-shirt and underdrawers. It took only a few minutes longer for him to divest her of her remaining clothing; then he put the other pillow on the sofa under her hips to prepare her for his entry...and once there, he intended to remain there as long as he wished. There was a lot of lost time to make up for, and he intended to make the most of it. Just the same, there was something he had to ask, had to be sure of before he could proceed.

Again, Ginny seemed to read his mind; one would think she was an accomplished Legilimens or something. "I am a virgin, Harry. I may have had many boyfriends, but the physical bits never went beyond kissing. I would not allow it. You are the only one with the right to possess my body, just as you have possessed my heart."

Harry could not have verbally expressed his happiness at hearing this. "I ... am also a...virgin, as you put it, Ginny. Somehow, it never seemed ... right. Until now. Until you."

Ginny took his face into her hands and kissed him hard. "I can't tell you how happy I am to hear that, Harry. Now let us lose our virginity together ..." With that, he parted her unresisting legs sufficiently to accommodate him, then began moving his hips, slowly at first, then faster and faster ... until he gave one last sharp forward thrust. Ginny

cried out softly for a moment; then Harry's hardness seemed to sink into her without any further resistance...and they were joined.

The next thing he knew, her arms and legs were wrapped around him. He smelled honeysuckle in her silky, red-gold hair as he buried his face in it, feeling more at home inside her warm, welcoming body, in her arms, than he had ever felt anywhere except Hogwarts.

"Harry, if you only knew how sweet and warm your lips feel and taste to me, how strong, yet gentle, your hands feel as they touch me ... how natural it feels for your body to join with mine...then your arms around me ... When I am in your arms, beloved, I am home ... and I never want to leave that home."

"Nor do I," he crooned back to her, tightening his arms around her as much as he dared. "My life has been so ... empty without you, Gin. As if a part of myself was missing all these years."

"You are the missing piece of *my* puzzle, Harry, that is for certain," Ginny insisted, this time burying her face in the warmth of his throat, feeling his pounding heart under her lips. "Would you like to ... share my flat as well?" she blurted out while she still had the nerve. It was something she wanted very much, but after four years of loneliness, she could not be certain what his answer would be, even after they had shared such tenderly passionate love and lost their virginity together.

"There's nothing I would like better," he smiled, stroking her lips with a finger. "But we need to have a long talk before we make any long-term plans."

Ginny sighed as she manoeuvred herself so that her head was on Harry's bare chest and one ear over his still rapidly beating heart, her arms locked around his waist. He rested his cheek on the top of her head and gently tightened his own embrace. "I suppose you're right, my love," she reluctantly conceded. "Just the same, after having been without you for so long, I have no intention of ever letting you go again."

"I have no intention of ever leaving you again," he assured her. "If I do leave, we will leave together."

"With Ron and Hermione?" she wondered. "Or will it be just us?"

"I think we're going to need all the help we can get to track down and vanquish Voldemort, so yes, Ron and Hermione will be with us too. By the way, have you seen them lately? Your mother said they were now ... sharing a flat."

"Not since I started working," she told him. "But yes, she's right about their sharing a flat."

"Do you know if they plan on getting married? I asked your mum, but she couldn't tell me anything."

"Oh, I think both Ron and Hermione would like nothing better, but you know how he is around women. We may need to help him out ... that is, if Hermione doesn't take matters into her own hands," Ginny laughed. "And I wouldn't put it past her."

"Neither would I," Harry laughed, feeling happier than he had in years. How could he ever have left Ginny behind for a moment, much less four years? Well, one thing was for sure...he would never make that mistake again. From now on, if he needed to travel anywhere, she would travel with him, taking a leave of absence from the hospital if necessary. Her healing skills would also come in handy should anyone become injured. They were quiet for a moment, then Harry said, knowing he had to do it while he still had the nerve, "Gin?"

"Yes?"

"I've got to ask you this while I still have the nerve, even though it may seem sudden to you since we've just found each other again."

"What is it?"

"When and if we can manage it, will you ... marry me?" Harry couldn't believe he was actually saying it...actually proposing marriage! But at the same time, he knew it was the right thing to do, the only way to ensure that Ginny would belong to him forever.

For a long time, there was silence, then Ginny lifted her lover's head and found his lips with hers in a lingering, soulful kiss which held every ounce of her love and passion for him. Only after reluctantly ending it did she speak the words he longed to hear. "Yes, my love. I would be honoured."

"You have made me happier than I could ever express," Harry returned, his voice laced with love and gratitude as he returned the kiss, every bit as lingering and soulful and filled with his love and passion for her. "But now, I find myself ... hungry to be one with you again." With that, he turned her beneath him and with tender passion, once again possessed not only her body, but her mind and heart. Once they finished and their passions were at least momentarily sated, the lovers were totally enervated, so they decided to simply go to sleep now and talk in the morning.

Chapter 3: Recollections and Unexpected Visitors

Chapter 3 of 27

The couple recall the highlights of their relationship upon spending a long, lovely night together - until their idyll is interrupted by unexpected visitors.

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And they did talk ... but only after another long and lovely lovemaking session. Once the talk began, however, one recollection led to another, until finally they reached the fourth year and what had happened at the Yule Ball. "I know I went with Neville Longbottom that year, but I naturally noticed you in your dress robes. You looked so handsome, Harry; so much so that you nearly took my breath away. I wished more than anything that we had had a chance to dance together. You have no idea how much I envied Parvati!"

Harry could still recall the silly, almost lovesick, look on Neville Longbottom's face when he had come in, much later than Ron or himself...in fact, they had already gone to bed by the time Neville returned from the Ball. Harry knew that Ginny had gone with him, and was unable to help wondering what she had done to provoke that look. He had never been able to bring himself to ask her (or Neville, for that matter), but he had always wondered, even speculated. Had she simply allowed him to kiss her goodnight, or had it been more?

He knew that Neville was the shy, studious type, rarely going for social events of any kind, particularly those which involved taking a girl. Just the same, there was a first time for everything, and perhaps Ginny had been the catalyst which had prompted Neville's. At the mere thought of them together, however, the monster inside Harry strained against its chains. If he hadn't liked Neville, he wouldn't have hesitated to hex him into the middle of next week for even laying a hand on Ginny, much less kissing

her (or anything else physical).

Just the same, Harry was ashamed that he had been too blind at the time to recognize Ginny for the treasure she was; he had, in fact, been too wrapped up in his infatuation with Cho Chang and had scarcely noticed Ginny. But thankfully, time had matured him...matured both of them, really...and in his sixth year (and her fifth), Harry had finally started seriously dating Ginny. He couldn't help laughing as he recalled the gobsmacked look on Ron's face when he had seen Harry kissing Ginny, not only in front of him but about fifty or so other people.

But at the time, Harry had not cared. What mattered was that Ginny was in his arms and that she wanted him. What mattered most, however, was that Ron had eventually come around and given them his blessing. For most of the time Harry had known Ginny, however, she had seemed little more than a child to him, simply Ron's baby sister, but over time, she had become an extraordinarily lovely woman...and she belonged to him. And if he had any say in the matter, she always would. He was now certain that there was definitely some truth in the adage, "There is nothing more irresistible to a man than a woman who's in love with him."

They were sitting up in bed, the covers up to their waists, although they had not dressed yet. Ginny's head was on his shoulder and her arms locked around him, as were his around her. But at this thought, Harry's remorse was so great at having kept her at arm's length for so long that he was sure it would take him the rest of his life to make it up to her ... but all that was possible was to take it one day at a time. For now, however, he did the only thing he *could* do at this point: lifted her head and bent his own down to kiss her with a lingering, tender passion.

"Wow! What was that for?" Ginny asked when he finally, reluctantly, released her, her lips still throbbing pleasurably from his kiss.

"I just felt like it," he said by way of explanation. "After all, we've got a lot of time to make up for."

You can say that again! she thought, still scarcely able to believe that this moment was really happening, that Harry was really here with her, in her arms, in her bed ... and that they had just spent a long, lovely night together. What if Ron and Hermione dropped by and found them like this? How would she ever explain it? Just the same, neither had a right to judge them, considering what they themselves were doing. She and Harry had nothing to be ashamed of.

And as if this thought had literally conjured them up, the next thing they knew, a knock came on the front door of the flat. The couple looked at each other with a mixture of love and apprehension. "Who could that be? Are you expecting anybody, Ginny?"

"No," she returned. "Do you think it could actually be Ron and Hermione?"

"If not, maybe just one of them," Harry suggested. "Just the same, I think we better get up and get dressed...especially if *it's* them."

"And if that's the case, I want to tell them that you proposed to me and get their reaction."

Harry frowned at her. "Don't you think we should tell your parents first? Besides, I have no idea when we'll be able to do it, under the present circumstances."

"The point is that if you could manage to propose, that might just prompt Ron to do the same with Hermione," Ginny pointed out, deftly (albeit unwillingly) extricating herself from Harry's arms and reaching for her wand to summon her nightgown, slippers and dressing-gown. "Just the same, I'd better go out first, to be on the safe side. You can get dressed while you're waiting, if you like."

Harry sighed and didn't argue further; Ginny gave him one last kiss before departing the room after donning her clothes. While waiting, he showered and dressed in fresh clothes, then carefully made his way to the door and listened. He couldn't hear anything, and was unable to help wishing for a pair of Fred and George's Extendable Ears. What was happening in the living room? If Ginny didn't come back soon, he would have to take a chance and go to find out.

* * * * *

It was as they had surmised; Ron and Hermione were standing at the door expectantly. Ginny's smile was somewhat forced as she beckoned them inside; she had hoped to be able to spend the entire day alone with Harry.

"You all right, Sis? You look like you just got out of bed," Ron commented after kissing his sister on the forehead and closing the door behind them.

"I'm fine," she assured him. "Just wasn't expecting you lot, that's all."

"If you say so," he returned skeptically. "Hermione and I were going out for a bite and thought you might like to come along, so we dropped by."

"I wouldn't mind, except for one thing," she remarked cryptically.

"And what's that one thing?" Hermione put in.

"Me," a new voice interjected. All whirled to find Harry standing a short distance away, having gotten tired of waiting for Ginny to return and deciding to find out what was going on.

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed. "When did you get back? I thought you were still working as an Auror."

"I am ... but I decided to take a vacation. Haven't had one in ages," he explained.

"So you decided to look us up ... among other things?" Hermione looked from Harry to Ginny and back again, giving them a knowing smile.

"Among other things," Harry returned ambiguously, neither confirming or denying their suspicions.

"How long have you been here?" Ron asked.

"Got in yesterday morning," Harry supplied. "Visited your mum. She told me what all had been happening with everyone."

"Why didn't you come to see us first?" Ron wondered. "Surely Mum told you where we live."

"I intended to, I assure you," Harry replied. "It's just that Ginny and I had a lot to talk about, a lot to catch up on first. After all, I haven't seen her for four years."

"I can imagine." Hermione's knowing smile widened. "Did you and Ginny spend the night together?" she asked point-blank.

"Hermione, that's none of our business," Ron admonished her.

"Keep out of this, Ron," she shot back. "Besides, I'm surprised you're not the one asking this. I would think you'd want to know, being that Harry is your best friend and Ginny is your sister." There was a long silence from both young men, so Hermione spoke again. "I'm waiting for an answer, Harry."

"What if I said we had?" he finally returned, an almost defiant note in his voice.

"For Merlin's sake, Harry, we're not judging you. We know how you feel about Ginny. We were just wondering if you'd finally decided to do something about it."

"*Do* something about it? I already *did* something about it, back in sixth year, for your information."

"But you also broke up with her a few weeks later, after Dumbledore was killed. Did you finally realise that you can't be afraid to love her, that true love is worth any risk, just as I told you then?"

"When you put it that way, I suppose I have," he confessed quietly, walking over to Ginny and putting a possessive arm around her before kissing her. "In fact, I even..."

"You what?" Hermione interrupted.

"I ... proposed to her," Harry made himself say.

For a long time, no one moved or spoke ... and hardly dared breathe.

Finally, Ron broke the silence. "Mate, did you say...what I thought you said?"

"Yes. I asked Ginny to marry me ... and she accepted." Harry's arm tightened around Ginny; she moved closer and looked up at her intended with loving eyes. "But don't worry, Ron. You'll not be losing a best friend; instead, you'll be gaining a brother-in-law. However, I can't say just when we'll be able to do it. I just wanted to make sure that Ginny knew how much I loved her and that I wanted to spend my life with her, whatever the risks."

"That's more like it," Hermione commented approvingly. *Now, if I can just get Ron to propose to me, we'll be doing something* she finished in her mind. "Now, do you want to join us for a bite or not?"

"I suppose so. I just need to get dressed," Ginny reluctantly agreed. "Give me a few minutes." With that, she extricated herself from Harry's arm and left the room.

Harry was left alone with his two friends, who had suddenly become his inquisitors, whether they meant to or not. Fortunately, Hermione finally apologized for being nosy.

"We're sorry to be so nosy, Harry...but we had to know," she returned apologetically.

"It's all right," he assured them. "As long as you don't make a habit of it."

After fifteen minutes more of small talk, Ginny rejoined them, and the two couples left the flat after Ginny reinstated the Locking Charm on her door, unsure of where they were going, but at the same time, not really caring as long as they were with their two closest friends. Now if they could only get Ron to propose to Hermione, everything would be fine ... and there might even be a double wedding!

* * * * *

Even as much in love as they themselves were, Hermione and Ron found themselves acutely embarrassed at the open, unashamed way Harry and Ginny were looking at and touching each other. They felt almost like voyeurs, as if they were watching intimacies they weren't meant to see. It was obvious that their respective friend and sister would much rather have been alone, but since they had been pressured, albeit gently, to join them in a public place, they had to make the best of it.

Just as the waitress was bringing their food, the other two noticed that Harry had brought Ginny's hand to his lips and kissed it passionately; she then reached both her hands up to cradle his face and pulled him down into a lingering kiss. There had been no time to warn the other couple of the waitress's approach; consequently, she gave Ron and Hermione a funny look upon noting the other couple's compromising position. The best they could say was, "Bear with them. They just got engaged."

The waitress gave them another funny look, then smiled indulgently, as though humouring them. "They probably shouldn't be out in public, then." Privately, she couldn't help thinking that the couple in question should be hosed down or something to cool them off, but said nothing out loud.

"Well, we kind of ... twisted their arms. They didn't have much choice," Hermione attempted to explain.

"If it'll help, I suggest that you change your order to take-out; then you could take it home and eat it ... whenever." It seemed that the waitress was fast becoming just as embarrassed and trying to make the best of an awkward situation.

"That might be a good idea," Hermione agreed; one look at Ron told her that he wholeheartedly concurred. "If you would do that, please, then bring us the bill."

"Yes, ma'am," the waitress assented, then left the food on the table to go get some take-out containers. A quick look out of the corner of her eye told Hermione that her friend and his intended were still at it; in fact, they hadn't missed a beat. She was unsure how she and Ron were going to get them out of the restaurant, but both intended to give it their best shot.

A short time later, the waitress came back with the necessary containers; it took Ron and Hermione several minutes to get the food all ready, close on to twenty, in fact, since they not only had to do their own but the ones for Harry and Ginny as well, because the pair was...shall we say...otherwise engaged and unlikely to stop any time soon.

Hermione had Ron take the food to their car, then return to help her get the other two out of public view. By this time, it was uncertain that they would be able to accomplish their objective, even together; Ginny was now on Harry's lap and had her arms around his neck. His arms were locked around her waist. It didn't seem as if they had even once come up for air once they had begun snogging ... and snogging, big-time!

They finally agreed to have one of them pull while the other pushed in order to get the other, totally oblivious couple out of sight. It took another twenty minutes, but they finally managed to get them on their feet...and with Ron pulling on one side and Hermione the other, out the door and headed for the car. It was fortunate they hadn't Apparated here, because at this point, neither Harry nor Ginny was in any condition to do so, at least not on their own.

"Well, it serves us right for making them come along," Ron muttered as they stuffed the other couple into the back seat of the car. "Blimey! I swear I've never seen anyone so ... bloody ... *hot* for each other!" *Not even ourselves*, he thought, fighting off a blush at the thought of the many times he and Hermione had gone at it just as hot and heavy. But at least they had had the presence of mind to seek privacy before doing so! And one thing was for sure: it would be a long time before they returned to *this* restaurant again.

As if Hermione had been a Legilimens herself, she finished what he had stated. "As we told the waitress, Ron, bear with them. They have four years to make up for, and it's going to take longer than overnight for them to do it."

"In which case, let's just get them back to Ginny's flat, get them situated ... say, on the living room sofa or in her bedroom ... then put the food in the fridge and leave them a note."

"I don't think it would make any difference where we put them. They're so engrossed in each other that nothing short of Voldemort himself and his entire squad of Death Eaters could distract them!"

"At this point, I don't think even *they* could," Ron couldn't help sniggering even as he pulled the car into the parking lot near Ginny's flat. "Hermione, do you think you can get her door open?"

"I'll give it a try," she promised...and although it took another good twenty minutes, Hermione's expertise with spells and charms to both do and undo a given thing served her in good stead. It was easiest for them to place the still-heavily-snogging couple on the couch and place the food in the fridge, then Hermione scribbled a quick note on the nearest piece of parchment. Their work done, they took their leave and headed for their own nearby flat to have their meal in peace ... then maybe have a little snogging session of their own!

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It was well into the next hour before the aforementioned couple finally came back to earth. After very reluctantly releasing each other, they looked around, surprised to find themselves back in Ginny's flat. "How the bloody hell did we get back here?" Harry wondered. "The last I remember, we were still in the restaurant, waiting for our food to come."

"I have an idea," Ginny remarked ambiguously. "In the meantime, let me check something in the kitchen." She got up and headed for the kitchen; Harry got up and followed her, as if she was metal and he a magnet. "Um-hm, I was right. The food's in the fridge and here's a note from Hermione," Ginny remarked even as she grabbed said note off the table and attempted to read it. However, it wasn't easy for her to do so, for Harry had snaked his arms around her and was pressing passionately against her, hungry lips having found their way to the pounding pulse in her throat. "Harry, please. That makes me crazy! Besides, I'm trying to read this note."

"You make *me* crazy," he crooned in a voice heavy with barely-concealed passion. "And you can read the note later."

However, this was one time when Ginny's physical hunger for food would win out over her sexual hunger. "Stop it, Harry! I want you as much as you want me, but right now we need to have something to eat."

His lips found her nearest ear and whispered sexy suggestions for her dinner menu that had everything to do with a certain male appendage of his, which needed her immediate attention before he could concentrate on food for any length of time. *Oh Merlin, why am I so godawful weak where Harry is concerned?* she lamented. "All right, we'll do it," she finally gave in. "But after that, we eat!" Her tone was so commanding that Harry didn't even think of arguing with her. With that, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her back to the bedroom.

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Once they managed to get to the food, one pointing of her wand at the food and the brief order, "Food, re-heat," provided them with basically the same bill of fare as they would have gotten had they been in any condition to stay in the restaurant. She even managed to conjure up some cold butterbeer, which the couple used to wash their somewhat delayed meal down.

"I hate to think how we must have embarrassed Ron and Hermione," Ginny commented, at the same time unable to help giggling at the thought as she looked across the table at Harry.

"We've got to make it up to them at some point," Harry stated just before taking another bite of his individual mince pie, seasoned similarly to meatloaf. "We have got to learn to control ourselves better, that's all."

"I'm fine, as long as I'm not around you," she threw back. "Otherwise my resolve goes totally out the window!"

"In which case, we may have to go with them separately. The only problem with that is that we won't be together."

"We can stand an hour or so apart, can't we?" But even as Ginny said this, she knew that that would be the longest time she could stay away from Harry now that he was back in her life ... barring her time at work, that is...and even then, that was pushing it.

"I suppose so," Harry reluctantly agreed before taking a swallow of butterbeer. "But not on a regular basis. At least not for the foreseeable future ... and not outside of our work."

"Have you been able to track down any more Horcruxes?" she asked conversationally.

"I have a pretty fair idea of where another one is, but haven't had the opportunity to check out my theory yet," he informed her.

"How many are there left, including the one that Voldemort has with him?"

"Four, I think," Harry mused thoughtfully. "But there's no set limit on this ... and even if there were, as I said earlier, I won't be separated from you...or my friends...again, whatever the risks. I learned how wrong I was to do that, but the hard way!"

"When you do decide to go after it, I'm sure you'll let us all know," she returned softly, reaching a hand to cover his after he had momentarily set down his fork.

"Count on it," he assured her. "Meanwhile, let's finish eating ... then we can get back to more important things." He looked up at her, giving her a sly wink, a suggestive twinkle in his sea-green eyes.

"Of course, my love." She returned the sly wink with an answering twinkle in her eyes, then resumed eating in order to satisfy her hunger for food before satisfying her hunger for Harry...at least temporarily. That was a hunger she doubted would ever be satisfied ...

A/N: *The illustration at the beginning of the chapter was done by a very talented friend of mine, Marianne, specifically for this fic. She has told me she doesn't mind my posting them online as long as she gets proper credit.*

Chapter 4: Private Talks

Chapter 4 of 27

Harry and Ginny have private talks with their friends, apologising for their actions of three days previously.

It was three days later before Ginny had the opportunity to get together with Hermione and thank her for what she and Ron had done. "I'm sorry we got so ... preoccupied, but you know how I am whenever Harry's near me. I just can't say no."

"No apology necessary, Gin. You two are in love; it's understandable. Not to mention the fact that you both have four years of separation to make up for."

"Just the same, I hate to think how we must have embarrassed you and Ron," Ginny continued. "So we're going to do our best to control ourselves from now on."

Hermione laughed. "I wouldn't even attempt that for a while, Gin. When love has been rekindled, it's going to burn hot and heavy for a long time. We'll just have to learn not to take you two anywhere in public again for the foreseeable future."

"How are things with you and that clueless prat brother of mine?" Ginny asked. "Has he managed to shore up his courage enough to propose to you?"

"We're fine for the moment," Hermione dismissed. "Besides, what matters most to me is that Ron and I are together."

"But you'd still like to marry him eventually," Ginny countered.

"Of course, but I can be patient...for a while, anyway. If he takes much longer, though ..." Hermione's voice trailed off ominously.

"If you need help, just let us know," Ginny offered. "Harry's even suggested spiking one of Ron's drinks with Felix Felicis in order to give him the needed confidence."

"That's an idea," Hermione found herself agreeing. "But I'd feel better if he could manage to do it on his own." She had begun knitting again, and the needles, attached to considerable lengths of brightly-coloured yarn contained in a medium-sized basket (red and gold for their old House colours), hovered in midair slightly to her right, rapidly turning out something Ginny couldn't immediately identify.

"What are you knitting?" Ginny wondered.

"A scarf for Ron," Hermione replied. "I've already done one for myself. Once I'm finished with this, we'll have a matching set." The older young woman sighed and took a drink of pumpkin juice, the glass containing it also hovering nearby, then resumed speaking. "By the way, have you asked Harry to move in with you yet?"

"What makes you think I've done any such thing?" Ginny tried to bluff, even as she fought off a blush at the thought of what she and Harry had been doing when she asked him.

"You forget how well I know both of you," Hermione countered. "You've asked him already. May I know what he said?"

"He said he was ... willing ... but that we had to have a long talk before making any concrete long-term plans."

"Have you discussed what to do should he need to leave again?"

"Yes. He says he's not about to be separated from us again, whatever the risks ... that he had learned his lesson but the hard way, trying to track down Dark wizards and witches by himself these last few years."

"I assume that means that you'll be accompanying us," Hermione remarked.

"Damn bloody right," Ginny stated firmly. "After four years apart, I'm not about to let Harry out of my sight again for any longer than necessary...and I think you can understand why. I'm willing to take any risk in order to ensure that I remain by his side."

Hermione simply nodded and smiled in response, taking another swallow of pumpkin juice before checking the progress of the scarf she was making and pronouncing it sufficient for one day's knitting. "Just where *are* our men, anyway?" she wondered as she noted the time and commented, "It's been two hours since Ron dropped me off here."

"Oh, probably chewing the fat with Harry in a pub somewhere," Ginny speculated. "Although I'm sure they'll be back soon. We've got to be pretty hot stuff, though, for our men not to want to be separated from us any longer than necessary, you know?"

Hermione didn't reply, but looked up, and the two young women exchanged sly, knowing smiles. It may have been a naughty thought, but that was part of the fun of romance...part of what gave it its unique "spice." Just the same, she couldn't help wishing that she and Ginny could have been flies on the wall and able to listen in on the conversation between Harry and Ron, wherever they were.

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In actuality, the two young men had decided to Apparate to their favourite pub in Hogsmeade, the Three Broomsticks, and were enjoying a butterbeer and two large individual mince pies seasoned to their taste. Almost the moment they had set foot there, Harry felt duty-bound to apologise to his friend for his and Ginny's actions of three days previously.

"Don't worry about it, mate. I understand," Ron generously dismissed. "You and Gin have a lot of time to make up for."

"But we didn't mean to do it," Harry protested as they were led to a vacant table, were seated and gave their orders to the attractive young witch in short pink robes and matching hat with a jeweled brim who served as the current waitress. In spite of himself, Ron couldn't help checking her out as she had walked away from their table to fill their orders. He hadn't noticed whether or not Harry had done so, and had been unable to bring himself to ask.

"I know. As I said, don't worry about it. I'd half-expected it, really, since you haven't seen her for four years."

"Just the same, she and I have already agreed to at least try to control ourselves better after this. Either that, or go out with you and Hermione separately."

In spite of himself, Ron was glad to hear that; anything to spare himself and Hermione another scene like the one in the other restaurant. "But if you can't, mate, we'll certainly understand. Just try to give us a little warning after this, okay?"

"Fair enough," Harry agreed before eating some more of the mince pie and washing it down with butterbeer. "How are matters going with you and Hermione? Proposed to her yet?"

"Fine," Ron insisted, but Harry knew him well enough to detect disquiet and even nervousness in his friend's mannerisms and tone of voice. "As for proposing ..." His voice trailed off, and he couldn't make himself complete the sentence.

"Come on, mate, you know you want to marry her," Harry gently insisted. "Just as I know she wants to marry you. If I can bring myself to propose, so can you."

"Easier said than done, Harry," Ron returned, stark fear written all over his freckled face.

"All you need's a little confidence, mate," came the reassuring reply. "She loves you; I hardly think she'd turn you down." He had, in fact, brought along his bottle of Felix Felicis and was waiting for the right opportunity to spike Ron's drink with it in order to give him sufficient confidence...but so far, that moment hadn't arrived.

With luck, he wouldn't need more than a few hours' worth ... but there was still the matter of actually getting it into the drink without his friend's noticing. Or maybe he could even put some in the mince pie. It was, in fact, closer to him on the small table between them than the mug of butterbeer, anyway. That might be the more practical approach. But just when he was ready to give up, Ron stood up and said he had to visit the men's loo.

"I'll be just a few minutes, Harry," he promised. Even at that, Harry was hard-pressed to wait until Ron was out of sight before he got out the small bottle of the golden-coloured potion and shook a few drops into the remaining butterbeer. He then recorked the bottle and hid it in an inner pocket of his jeans jacket, innocently returning to his meal even as he saw Ron returning.

Hopefully within the next few days he would be hearing from one of the girls that a date had finally been set for the marriage. At the very least, he would be able to tell Ginny what he had done to help his friend and future brother-in-law end his bachelorhood as Harry knew he wanted to; he simply needed a gentle push in the right direction.

"Don't you think it's time we got back to the girls, Harry?" Ron suggested upon re-seating himself...and to Harry's scarcely-concealed delight, he took a long swig of the

butterbeer to wash down the last of his mince pie.

"Definitely," Harry agreed. "Just let me finish my own pie." A few minutes later they called for the bill, each chipping in some Sickles for the cost of the bill and 15% gratuity. Upon leaving the pub, the two young wizards Apparated back to Ginny's flat in order that Ron could pick up Hermione and return to their own flat.

"Bloody hell! I don't think I'll ever get used to that squeezing sensation, Harry. I swear, it feels like I'm being pushed through a narrow tube or something!" Ron exclaimed after being released from Apparition. The two young men had re-appeared on the sidewalk, which bordered the parking lot in front of Ginny's flat.

"I know," his companion agreed. "I'm not fond of it, either, but it's the quickest way to travel outside of broomsticks...and I think you'll have to agree it's too cold for flying at the moment."

A short time later, they were greeting their ladies and Hermione was ready to go, already having packed her bag and finished the chicken sandwich and pumpkin juice Ginny had served. "Ready to go, luv?" Ron asked Hermione as he approached her. She got up and smiled at him before they shared a brief kiss.

"If you are," she returned. "See you both later, Ginny, Harry. We've got to get back home."

"Take care," Harry said just before his two friends Apparated; Ginny echoed his sentiments.

"Did you have a good time, beloved?" she asked once they were alone again.

"Can't complain," Harry assured her. "Oh yes, I managed to put some Felix Felicis in Ron's drink. With any luck, he should feel confident enough to propose to Hermione in the not-too-distant future."

"I hope so," Ginny returned. "I'm just thankful that you didn't need any." She moved to meet him, and they almost literally melted into each other's arms, their lips meeting in a long, delicious kiss. It soon turned passionate, and Harry wasted no time in scooping his lover into his arms to carry her into the living room for a most enjoyable hour of snogging...and eventual lovemaking.

Ginny had not placed a Contraceptive Charm on herself this time, although it was obvious that Harry had assumed she had and acted accordingly. She half-hoped she could "forget" often enough in order to become pregnant. She positively hungered to feel Harry's child growing and developing inside her. Even at that, it probably wasn't a good idea, but Ginny wasn't necessarily going to let that stop her.

It was risky, attempting lovemaking without said charm, but it was the spontaneous interludes that often proved the most fertile, so she was willing to take the risk. After all, she was the one who would carry the child. In essence, Harry would have the fun and she would do the work ... but she loved him enough that it was scarcely any trouble at all. She just hoped that he would be too happy upon hearing of her eventual pregnancy to lecture her on the subject of contraception any time soon. Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end ... or at the very least, bad pennies turn up just when you least expect them, especially for Harry and his lady love.

Chapter 5: Close Encounters of the Slytherin Kind/Damage Control

Chapter 5 of 27

Harry recalls incidents with Malfoy and company in the midst of moving in with Ginny, not to mention a time when she, Ron and Hermione had to do damage control on his behalf.

The day started out all right, but that was one of the few good things about it. Harry had decided to move in with Ginny, and together, they went to his former home to get his belongings. But just as they arrived back at her flat and were ready to begin taking his things inside, and the loving couple thought they were alone, Harry pulled Ginny out of sight (or so he thought) for a moment to kiss her passionately, allowing his hands to wander deliciously, provoking soft sighs of pleasure against his lips even as he moved sensuously against her.

They were brought down to earth the hard way by a sneering but all-too-familiar voice. "Hey, Potter! Is that you?"

"So what if it is, Malfoy?" Harry shot back, abruptly releasing her. "What business is it of yours?"

"I live here, Potter. What are you doing here?" The white-blond former Slytherin and Harry's perpetual nemesis was standing by his car, flanked by his usual stooges, Crabbe and Goyle, both of whom were carrying what looked like groceries to Harry. Not that he was surprised. Malfoy was so full of himself that he would never stoop to doing such menial labour. He relegated things like that to either house-elves or stooges.

"I live here, too," Harry threw back defiantly. "And for your information, Ginny is my fiancée."

"You've gone daft! What did she ever see in you?"

"If you don't know, it wouldn't do any good for me to tell you ... because to understand would require intelligence...and that lets you three out right there!"

"Harry, don't start anything," Ginny warned. "We have better things to do."

"In a minute, luv. I've got to teach a certain smart-mouth git some manners."

It was fortunate that Ginny was there, though, otherwise there would have been a very nasty confrontation. Instead of Harry drawing his wand and preparing to hex Malfoy and his stooges, it was her.

"It would be very much appreciated if you ... gentlemen would simply go about your business and refrain from harassing me and my fiancé," Ginny stated pleasantly, but with an ominous tone to her ordinarily sweet, musical voice.

"Oh, really? And just what will you do if we don't?" Malfoy sneered, directing Crabbe and Goyle to set down the groceries and prepare for a fight.

"Hex you into the middle of the next century," Ginny threatened, her soft brown eyes having turned hard and black as obsidian, her wand pointed at them in a threatening manner. "And I assure you, I can do it!"

At this point, even Harry knew that she meant business and tried to intervene. "Gin, honey, we've got to get the car unloaded. We don't have time for this."

"There's always time to make an example of three lowlives," she retorted, preparing to shoot her favourite hex at them...and Harry knew how nasty it was, so he tried to warn them what was coming despite his dislike of them. Of course, they never had listened to him before, so they deserved whatever they got.

"I suggest you back off, Malfoy, because if Ginny throws at you what I think she's going to, you and your trained gorillas are going to end up in St. Mungo's for a month."

"Yeah, Potter? You just try it and we'll see who ends up in St. Mungo's!" Malfoy reached for his own wand and brandished it in Ginny and Harry's faces.

"Okay, Malfoy, I tried to warn you," Harry sighed.

But just as Ginny was preparing to throw her hex at them, the couple heard the sounds of Apparating, and their three tormentors were gone...at least temporarily.

"They're gone," she observed. "Luckily for them. Now let's get the car unloaded. Remember, we've still got another load to pick up back at your old place. Just the same, I think I'll stay out here and stand guard while you get your stuff inside, just in case they decide to come back."

"They've always been cowards, Gin; it's not surprising that they'd Apparate out of here to keep you from hexing them. Stupid gits like that never want to fight unless they have a gang to back them up...either that, or trained gorillas like Crabbe and Goyle."

"Don't worry, luv. Even if they do come back, I can handle them," Ginny assured him, but Harry would have none of it.

"Don't try to take them on alone, Gin; I know what they're capable of and I assure you..."

She stepped up to him and cut him off with a kiss. "They don't know what I'm capable of," she countered. "But if they continue to harass us, they're going to find out! Now get going, my love, or we'll not finish before dark!"

Harry knew it would do no good to argue with her, simply do as told...and within half an hour everything had been unloaded from the car. Of course, using magic can be a great time-saver; he hardly had to lift a finger, simply made the belongings float inside and set themselves on the living room floor ... or any other available space in the area.

Once he got everything inside and he and Ginny had safely locked her door behind them, having already decided to pick up the rest of his things the following day, Harry began to point his wand at the places he wanted them to go and they went, and if something else was in the way, he deftly moved it aside.

By dark, all that was necessary to do was put what relatively few articles of clothing he had away, and that was done with one swift wave of his wand in the direction of the bedroom closet, whose doors opened seemingly of their own accord, and the robes and dress shoes hung themselves on hangers, as did dress shirts, ties and trousers. Casual clothes went in the nearby six-drawer dresser (Ginny had cleared out some space for Harry's use), a dresser that didn't look large enough to accommodate everything, but it did. One drawer for jumpers and socks, another drawer for jeans and other casual trousers, and finally one for T-shirts and other casual shirts.

After completing the first step of his moving-in, Harry suggested they eat something, since they were going to be needing all the energy they could get in the not-too-distant future, he told Ginny with a sly wink in her direction. A short time later, they were doing just that, since Ginny had found out how the plates at the Hogwarts school automatically filled up with whatever the person before it wanted, food-wise, and she had learned the spells that made that possible. Saved a lot of time and trouble cooking, that was for sure!

Over the meal, he decided to reminisce some more about their days at Hogwarts, particularly one of the times shortly after they had begun dating in his sixth year and her fifth. Of course, it hadn't always been easy to find places for a rendezvous or assignments; there had even been times when he had had to employ the Invisibility Cloak in order to afford himself and Ginny some necessary privacy. There was one incident in particular that he would never forget.

Mainly because the part with Ginny had been so pleasant ... at least up to the time someone (Malfoy, as it turned out) stepped on the cloak and pulled it off them. Harry had done his best to make sure that Malfoy and his stooges didn't learn of his romance with Ginny; they'd never let him live it down...particularly if they happened to catch them snogging each other.

To their acute embarrassment, there were laughs, catcalls and wolf whistles once their assignation spot became apparent ... most of them from Malfoy and company. "Well, isn't this sweet? Potter snogging the Weasel's sister! How long has this been going on, Potter? Does the Weasel know what you're doing to sweet, innocent Ginny?"

In spite of himself, Harry felt his cheeks flame crimson; however, his anger more than canceled out his embarrassment. "Bugger off, Malfoy. This is none of your bloody business!"

Malfoy ts'ked a few times and waved an admonishing finger back and forth. "Language, Potter. You don't want me reporting you to Dumbledore, do you?"

"I don't give a damn what you do, Malfoy. Even if you did report me, it wouldn't do you an ounce of good, because there's no law against dating here ... snogging, either. Much less occasional swearing."

"Maybe not, but I do believe there *is* a law against indecent exposure ... *and* your lady love is showing far more of her legs and chest than she should. You're not exactly respectable, either. I suggest both of you get decent before you get arrested."

This reminded Harry that his shirt wasn't buttoned, and that he must have lipstick all over his mouth ... not to mention a hickey or two. He suppressed a shiver at the thought of Ginny's small, even teeth gently biting and sucking...fortunately, in spots where Malfoy was unlikely to see them. One at the junction of his neck and right shoulder, the other on the opposite junction. But they would only be missed if he got his shirt buttoned up *tout suite* ... which he did, as rapidly as he dared. He'd even discovered that his jeans were partly unzipped, but fortunately his shirt-tails were sufficient to cover it.

"It's still none of your business, Malfoy ... and it would be very much appreciated if you would allow Ginny some privacy instead of ogling her. Remember, she's my girlfriend, not yours." He was thankful there were some bushes nearby; he motioned Ginny to go behind them and fix herself in private.

"Oh? What makes you think I couldn't win her over if I wanted to?"

"Mainly because she loves me ... and in the second place, she'd sooner kiss a Blast-Ended Skrewt than you! She told me that herself."

"Well, I must say I don't think much of her taste in men if she enjoys snogging with you, Potter. I would also suggest you find a better spot to do it; save you both a lot of grief."

"For your information, you thickheaded twit, we couldn't *find* a suitable spot ... until we got here. It was going fine until you stepped on my Invisibility Cloak and found us." At this point Harry dug into his trousers pocket and found some tissues, carefully wiping his mouth free of lipstick. In spite of himself, his groin tightened upon recalling the taste of it...butterscotch, one of his favourite flavours.

Of course, Ginny didn't really need to wear lipstick. He found her lips delicious, regardless of what type of lipstick she wore ... if she wore any at all. Usually, she just wore clear lip gloss so that if they were in danger of being late because they'd lost track of time while snogging, which was dangerously easy to do, at least he wouldn't have to worry about having to wipe lipstick off his mouth.

But Malfoy didn't need to know that. He knew too much as it was. And he would certainly never let Harry live it down if he realized how aroused Harry still was. If they hadn't been interrupted, Harry had been seriously thinking of hauling Ginny behind the bushes and into a private spot he knew where they would *definitely* not be disturbed.

At least, not if he had anything to say about it. Even if he had to hex the spot to keep away intruders!

"Besides, I never see you snogging Pansy Parkinson anymore, Malfoy. What's the matter with her? She's usually all over you like a rash. Or did she wise up and look for greener pastures? Which reminds me...I'll *give* you a rash ... right where it hurts most, too ... if you say a single word to anyone about how you found Ginny and me!"

"So help me, Potter, if you say one more word about Pansy ..." Malfoy's face had become just as red with embarrassment as Harry's had been.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ginny waiting for him under one of the big trees in the school courtyard near the Black Lake, another favourite assignation spot of theirs, so he took a step and turned in that direction. "One last thing...if I hear from Ginny that anyone's harassing her about this, especially anyone from Slytherin, I swear I'll make you sorry you ever met me! I still know that *Sectumsemptra* thing, remember ... and if you push me too far, I just may decide to use it again. And I'll have either Ron or Hermione make sure that Snape isn't around to bail you out."

With that, he stalked off in Ginny's direction without waiting for a reply from his adversary; upon reaching her, he slid an arm around her and brushed her ear with his lips, whispering to her that they would head for the common room. Since most students were in class about now (as a sixth year, he had several free periods per day, and this was one of them...and fortunately, Ginny did too ... at least at this point in time), it was unlikely that they would be disturbed there...unless someone came unexpectedly.

If nothing else, they would go to the Room of Requirement and spend the free period there ... or in a pinch, the empty dormitory...and pull the curtains around his bed for privacy. He was becoming all het up again and would have to get cooled down before he could face anyone. Did all young blokes feel this randy upon getting serious with a girl? Too bad he couldn't ask Sirius about it ... he would surely know.

But his godfather was dead, killed by his evil cousin Bellatrix Lestrange, a Death Eater, in the Department of Mysteries, which Harry still blamed himself for. Dead, just like his unfortunate parents. He had had a vision of Sirius being tortured there and was convinced it was really happening, so he had rallied everyone he could, including Ginny, to help him rescue Sirius.

It turned out that he had been lied to by the evil house-elf Kreacher that Sirius had left the house, when in reality, he had been upstairs with Buckbeak the hippogriff. Sirius had hightailed it to the Department of Mysteries once he'd heard that Harry and company were there...and was killed for his trouble.

Bellatrix's potent spell had propelled him through a magical veil from which it was said that no one ever returned ... and he didn't. To this day, it was still a sensitive subject for Harry ... and he believed it always would be. There would always be an empty spot in Harry's heart that Sirius had once filled...because no one else could replace him; not now, not ever. Only Ginny's love and support were even beginning to help ease that pain, even a little. He didn't know what he would do without her...or Ron and Hermione, for that matter.

There had even been times he had broken down and cried, tears of grief and guilt for his beloved godfather, first unjustly accused of betraying his closest friends, Harry's parents, not to mention over a dozen murders he didn't commit and spending years in prison, then having to remain in hiding, constantly on the run, even after escaping ... and now this!

At one point, Ron was holding Harry and doing all he could to comfort him, but knew it wasn't working, so he sent Hermione to fetch Ginny and bring her up to the boys' dormitory. Technically Hermione didn't belong there either, but this was an emergency. Harry needed his friends with him at a time like this, and at this point, propriety be damned!

But for a long time, though, not even Ginny could ease his pain; there was a point where he had thrown himself face-down, burying his face in her lap; his sobs were bitter and heart-rending. "Oh, love, please don't cry. Sirius wouldn't want you to," she crooned. It only made Harry cry harder.

After a while all were convinced that Harry wasn't just crying for Sirius, but for all the love and good times he had been denied because of his parents' murders, having lost them at so young an age ... and for the incredible burden of being who and what he was. Far too heavy a burden for one so young...but there was still more to come. Mercifully, Harry didn't know this at the time, something for which Ginny and his friends were immensely thankful.

After a while, however, Harry seemed to have cried himself out...so Ginny suggested that Ron and Hermione leave so she could be alone with Harry. She sensed that right now what he needed most was sleep, so she got out some strong sleeping potion she had obtained from Madam Pomfrey, the head of the Hospital Wing, and gave it to him. Nothing untoward would happen, because he would be deeply asleep; she would simply hold him in her arms while he slept and keep the curtains drawn for privacy.

She also warned them not to disturb them unless it was an emergency, and even then, she would allow only Ron or Hermione to do so. (Of course, later on, things would change, but at the moment she was simply showing her feelings for him in as constructive a manner as possible so as not to embarrass him...at least not too much.)

But despite his best efforts, Harry found tears in his eyes at the painful memories...and enough of them so that Ginny noticed. She said nothing, however, simply led him to the tree and they sat down beneath it. She leaned against it and told Harry he could lie with his head in her lap if he wanted to. For a time he did just that, and she spent the time either stroking his silky, if unruly, hair and occasionally brought one of his hands to her lips and kissed it. This usually provoked a tender smile from him and a caress of her cheek by that same hand.

"Thank you for loving me, Ginny. I don't think I could have survived this without you. Ron and Hermione are great friends, but not even they could replace you."

"It was my pleasure," she smiled. "Besides, you deserve it."

"But I don't deserve you," he lamented. "The way I've treated you ..."

She put a finger on his lips to stop him. "No more of that, love. The past is past. This is today, here and now ... and in the here and now, we love each other. Let this be simply a happy, peaceful time for us to be alone together and share that love."

"Too bad Sirius never had that chance," Harry murmured even as he settled his head back into Ginny's lap and she resumed stroking his hair.

"We don't know that for sure," she pointed out.

"Well, if he did, he never mentioned it," Harry countered.

"I think that was because there was far too much else to concern yourselves with ... if you get my drift." Her voice had taken on a no-nonsense tone, and Harry knew that this meant she would allow no more of him feeling sorry for himself. He had more important things to think about: their love, for instance. "I also suspect that he might have considered you too young to discuss it with at the time."

"Too young!" Harry exclaimed, sitting bolt upright, green eyes blazing. "I'm bloody sixteen years old!"

"Now, yes," Ginny returned calmly, putting a tender hand on her beloved's cheek; Harry smiled despite his ire and covered her hand with his. "Not when you first met him, though. At that point, you still thought he'd betrayed your parents and gotten them killed ... and because of this, you were ready to kill first and ask questions later. Fortunately, Sirius had a chance to explain himself and you had a change of heart about him upon realizing he was innocent, that he would rather have died than betray his friends. I believe it was shortly before that that you learned he was your godfather."

"He even wanted me to come live with him once his name was cleared," Harry recalled sadly. "But I never got the chance. They didn't exonerate him until after his death." The young wizard closed his eyes in sorrow. "It's not fair, Gin. Just not fair. He missed out on so much, lost so much ... including his life."

"I know, my love. I miss him too; he was always very nice to me...and I could tell that he loved you dearly."

"He was the closest thing I ever had to a father figure, other than Dumbledore," Harry remarked. "I miss him so much, Gin. I think I always will."

Not long afterward, Harry manoeuvred himself so that his head was resting on Ginny's breast; she simply held him gently, alternately stroking his hair or his back. Harry had never rested on a warmer, more comfortable (or sweetly scented) pillow, and it was immensely soothing to feel the gentle rise and fall of Ginny's chest under his cheek ... not to mention the touch of her hand. Her soft breathing was slowly but surely lulling him to sleep...and with Ginny near, he doubted he would have any nightmares. And if he did, she would be here to chase them away.

Not much later, Ginny felt her beloved's head become heavier and realized that he had fallen asleep. She realised that his face had softened, long, thick lashes covering his beautiful sea-green eyes, and his glasses were slipping down his nose. She gently manoeuvred them off and placed them in her left shirt pocket for safekeeping. He looked like a little boy, about five years old ... the child she hoped they could have one day. Hopefully, only the first of many for them. Meanwhile, she would take life one day at a time.

What mattered was that Harry was here to share it with her, give his love to her...the love for which she had hungered so very long. She sent up a silent prayer of thankfulness that she had at last been granted the love of the one she loved so much, the chance to spend time with him, share his life, the good times and bad ... *May this happiness we share never end. May we always be together and in love, whatever else happens in our lives.* With that happy thought, she tightened her arms around him and allowed herself to fall asleep as well.

Chapter 6: Romantic Interlude/Ron's Proposal

Chapter 6 of 27

Harry and Ginny share a romantic moment in the common room; with some discreet help from Harry and Felix Felicis, Ron is finally prompted to propose to Hermione.

It only took them a short time to reach the Gryffindor common room; fortunately the Fat Lady, whose portrait served as the doorway and usually required a password which seemed to change at her whim, was awake and seemed to be in fairly good humour. Her eyebrows rose at the sight of Harry and Ginny with their arms around each other and stealing looks of love at one another, but simply said, "Password."

"Valentine's Day," Harry said. Which reminded him, he had to get Ginny something...and he was sure that she had something in mind for him. For the time being, however, all that mattered was that they would soon be alone together.

The portrait hole opened up and he carried Ginny through, as if carrying her over the threshold; then they headed for the cushy chair nearest the fire, which was always kept going...if only for those who needed to use it for quick transportation via the Floo Network. In this case, however, it would simply serve as a romantic backdrop to the young lovers' private rendezvous.

Harry seated himself in the chair, then pulled Ginny into his lap and manoeuvred her so that her lower legs hung over the chair arm, but her head was on his shoulder and his arms gently but securely around her. Her silky red-gold hair tickled the bare skin of his cheek as it rested there; she sighed happily as he laced his fingers and rested them on the indented curve of her slender waist.

"Comfortable?" he asked tenderly, moving to plant a warm kiss on the top of her head.

She simply gave a soft murmur of assent, then laid her cheek on his shoulder again, resting one small hand over his heart. Again, it was Heaven to feel Ginny close to him and smell the honeysuckle scent which seemed to emanate from every part of her.

"You know something?" he finally ventured to say.

"What?" she prompted.

"I wasn't sure how you were going to react after you ran toward me that day of the Quidditch Cup match, and I simply pulled you close and kissed you. I didn't even ask your permission," Harry recalled, still unsure of how Ginny had seen that day and his most unexpected actions in response to her throwing herself into his arms. "What's more, I snogged you in front of at least fifty people, including Ron and Hermione!"

Ginny didn't reply, simply manoeuvred so that their faces were close, then kissed him deeply. Harry had always thought the claim that seeing pinwheels, stars and flashing lights when a romantic partner kissed you was a lot of codswallop...but now he knew it was true because he was experiencing it right now. For a long time, they simply continued to kiss long and tenderly; surely he could not have felt happier in his entire life.

It seemed as though it wasn't really his own life he was living at all; it seemed such a drastic change from what he was used to ... but he certainly wasn't complaining! Especially not if he could love and be loved by the sweetest girl he had ever known...or would ever know.

It was several blissful moments later before she reluctantly released his lips. He couldn't help thinking that it had seemed to last just as long as the public kiss they had shared the day of the Quidditch Cup. In fact, if it lasted much longer, Harry was sure his mind would go completely blank and he would be unable to think at all, just feel. But Ginny seemed to know just when and where to stop, for it was at this point she looked up at him, her whole heart in her soft brown eyes.

"If I minded, do you really think I would be here now? It was pure Heaven. In fact, for a time, I couldn't think of anything but your arms around me and your lips on mine. By the time you released me, I scarcely knew my own name. I was stunned and surprised at what you'd done, certainly, but most happily so. You may be certain of that, beloved ... for now and always!"

This time it was Harry's turn to be happily stunned. He couldn't speak for a while. He felt so much, so deeply, for the girl in his arms, that he knew that he was unlikely to ever feel like this again...for anyone else. Only Ginny. "I love you, Ginevra Molly Weasley."

"And I love you, Harry James Potter." Those were the last words exchanged between the loving pair for the remainder of the evening. It was late when Ron and Hermione returned from their own rendezvous, and it was the latter who gently nudged Ron upon noting Harry and Ginny curled up together in the armchair nearest the fire, arms wrapped around each other and both sound asleep ... but with blissfully happy looks on their faces.

"Would you care to speculate on what those two have been up to this evening?" Hermione asked with a knowing smile.

"Not necessary," Ron replied. "It's pretty bloody obvious."

"You don't mind any more?" Hermione tossed back. "Once you got over the shock of Harry's kissing Ginny in front of us and all of Gryffindor House, you were ready to take him apart piece by piece."

"That was before it registered as to how happy Ginny was after he'd done it. Shocked and stunned, yes, but at the same time, happier than I've ever seen her. Besides, he knows he'd better treat her right. Especially since if he doesn't, he'll have six extremely ticked-off elder brothers to contend with ... and I'd be at the head of the pack. He'd have to be totally mental to knowingly risk that!"

Naturally they made sure to keep their voices down in order not to disturb the sleeping lovers and decided not to bother them, simply making their own goodnights after a long kiss as well as a mental note to bring it up to at least one of them at the first opportunity. Ron had already vowed to be the one to track down Harry and tell him what he and Hermione had seen, but even as he prepared for bed in the boys' dormitory, his bed not far from the one Harry normally occupied, Ron was almost dead certain that Hermione would manage to do it first, despite his best efforts.

* * * * *

But what ended up happening on the romantic front wasn't at all what Ron expected. As a result of the discreet spiking of his butterbeer by Harry, Ron was even seriously considering proposing to Hermione...and not only that, setting a definite date for their marriage! He thought that Valentine's Day the following year would be perfect. Now all he had to do was propose and suggest that day for their marriage.

As soon as Hermione got home from work (her hours as a trainee teacher were somewhat later than Ron's at the Ministry), Ron greeted her as he normally did with their usual kiss and hug ... but what happened after that *wasn't* normal...and anything but routine. "Come sit with me on the couch, Hermione."

Her eyes widened but she didn't question him, simply followed him there, and they sat down together. "What is it, Ron?"

"There's something very important I need to ask you. This isn't going to be easy for me, so don't say anything until I'm finished."

She looked thoroughly mystified by now, but nodded in agreement.

"Well ... you know how long we've been together ..." She nodded again. "... I hope you also know how much I ... love you, even if I can't always say it or show it as I should."

Again, Hermione said nothing, simply reached to take his hands in hers. Both blushed as their eyes met; then Ron swallowed hard and started again. "I'm sorry for taking so bloody long to do this, but ... well ... I guess what I'm trying to say is that I...don't want to lose you. Not now, not ever. Would you ... *marry me*?" she finished in her mind, her heart pounding in excited anticipation, sure that the long-awaited proposal was only moments away. It was several tense moments later that Ron finally finished his sentence. "Oh, bloody hell! Why does this have to be ... so ... effing *hard*? I ... I want to ... marry you!"

There was another tense silence as Hermione let this sink in. Ron had finally proposed! The silence lengthened until it was almost unbearable, but neither seemed able to break it until Ron swallowed hard and made himself say again, clear and true, "Hermione, I ... love you. I've always ... loved you. Please ... marry me."

That was when Hermione smiled back, tears of happiness in her eyes as she reached to cradle Ron's face in her hands. "Yes, Ron. A thousand times yes!" Then she kissed him, long and deeply. This time it was Ron who experienced the stars, pinwheels and flashing lights. "See, that wasn't so hard, was it?" she continued once they had separated.

"Hard enough," he returned, even as he took her hand and raised it to his lips, then placed it on his nearest cheek.

"Just the same, you had to know that I would accept," she countered. "You have just made me the happiest woman in the whole wizarding world, Ronald Bilius Weasley."

"Just as you have made me ... the happiest man ... Hermione Jane Granger."

"Wait till we tell Harry and Ginny!" she exclaimed happily; her happiness was infectious, so Ron echoed her enthusiasm. "You can have Harry as your best man, and I can have Ginny as my bridesmaid ... or matron of honour, depending on when she and Harry finally get married."

"Hermione ... there's something else," Ron remarked, voice almost too quiet for her to catch.

"Such as?" she prompted.

"When did you ... want to ... get married?"

"Whenever you like," she tossed back. "Seriously, I think Valentine's Day would be a lovely day to get married. The day for lovers and all."

"Not this one, though. Next year," he said.

"Of course not this one, silly," Hermione laughed. "That's far too soon. Next year." A moment later her expression sobered. "I just realized ... that's an entire year away." After another tense silence, she spoke again. "Just the same, knowing your mum, it will likely take that long to get everything organized, your family being so large and all. Me, being an only child, I just have my parents."

"When did you want to ... tell our parents?" Ron asked, happier than he could ever remember being in his life, yet still apprehensive at what lay ahead for his and Hermione's future life together, for obvious reasons.

"How about your birthday next month?" his new fiancée suggested. "We can go see my folks first, then the Burrow to break it to your family. By then, you should be able to get me the proper rings."

"I *knew* I forgot something!" Ron exclaimed. "Sorry, luv."

"It's all right," she soothed him, stroking his lips with a finger. "What matters is that you finally managed to propose. We can go together to pick out the rings ... that is, unless you would prefer Harry and Ginny to help us."

"That ... might be ... a good idea," Ron found himself agreeing. "I'm ... getting tired, though. Let's ... go to bed." Even as long as they'd been living and sleeping together, Ron found that difficult to say. But he wasn't too worried; Hermione had enough brass for both of them.

"After I shower. I like to be clean when we go to bed, you know," Hermione reminded him.

In spite of himself, Ron couldn't help recalling how sweet Hermione had always smelled, particularly when she had just come out of the shower. Her rose-musk perfume never failed to send his libido into the stratosphere ... not to mention the times when she would come out of the bathroom in just a towel...then drop it once she knew he was watching, so he could feast his hungry eyes on her nude beauty. He had never seen a woman naked before this, but doubted anyone could look as beautiful as his own. And now she would be his wife

"I'll be waiting for you," he directed, getting up and turning in the direction of their bedroom, thankful that he had already showered shortly before her return.

"I'll be there shortly," she promised with a sly wink, already planning to use her rose-musk perfume again ... maybe even wear just a towel again, then call to him and drop it once he looked in her direction.

Chapter 7: Serious Discussion/More Recollections

Chapter 7 of 27

Harry and Ginny discuss her going with him, Ron and Hermione to find/destroy the Horcruxes and Voldemort. He also recalls other incidents from his time at Hogwarts.

THREE MONTHS LATER

This was one of the few times Harry and Ginny hadn't made love upon waking up as they had done on a pretty much regular basis since he had moved in with her ... but he knew he had to get down to serious business soon. Particularly in regards to whether or not she was going to accompany him, Ron and Hermione when they finally left to seek out the rest of the Horcruxes, then once that was accomplished, seek out Voldemort and destroy him once and for all. He knew how determined she was to accompany them, but he still had serious reservations about that...and he was sure that her family would as well.

Even at that, the lovers decided to have a lie-in; the bedroom was as good a place as any (and better than most) for a serious discussion. Besides, once they were finished with the discussion, they could get down to the *really* important things ...

"Gin? You awake?" Harry kissed Ginny on the forehead, then when she didn't awaken, lifted her face to his and kissed her more deeply.

"Yes, beloved," she finally replied when he released her. "How could I not be when you kiss me like that?"

Harry smiled and squeezed her, then sobered. "We've got to talk. Seriously talk."

"May I assume this is about your ... our ... going after the other Horcruxes, then Voldemort himself?"

□

"You assume correctly," Harry returned softly, unsure of how to phrase his next words even as they sat up and situated the bedcovers around themselves. He was so afraid for all that he loved in the wizarding world, not to mention the Muggle world ... but most of all, he was afraid for Ginny. The last thing he wanted to do was leave her behind, especially not after they had just found one another again and renewed their love, but on the other hand, how could he bear to have her risk her precious life by allowing her to accompany him? He loved her so much ...

"Don't even think of trying to talk me out of going with you, Harry. I'm fully aware of the dangers involved. I've had my run-ins with You-Know-Who myself, you know."

The tone of her voice stilled his own tongue, at least for a time; he simply listened to her.

"Harry, listen carefully. I'm only going to say this once. *I ... am ... going ... with ... you!* Going, and that's all there is to it! I would far rather experience the danger *with you* than be home agonizing over what might be happening to you, Ron or Hermione, what You-Know-Who might be doing to you ..."

This was when Harry found his voice again. "Gin ... *Please. Try* to understand. I ... can't ... *won't* lose you! The last thing I want to do is leave you behind, but at the same time, how can I ask you to knowingly risk your life? I've ... already lost my mum and dad, not to mention Sirius, because of Voldemort. I *don't* want to add your name to that list. It's bad enough that Ron and Hermione are going to risk theirs. Also, Cedric Diggory died simply because he got between me and Voldemort. Do you see what I'm trying to say? *Understand* me. *I will not be responsible for any more deaths! Especially ... not ... yours!*" Harry's voice was hoarse with love, anguish and unshed tears as his voice all but broke.

Ginny cradled Harry's face in her hands, equal love and determination in her eyes as she gazed into his. "I understand, beloved. I assure you, I understand. All too well. But you understand *me* now. *I will not be parted from you!*"

Harry pulled her close and held her tightly, tears in his eyes. "Gin, luv ... *don't* do this for me. I'm not worth your ... so very precious life!" She had never looked more beautiful to him than she did now. His lovely, unselfish, courageous Ginny. How he loved her! And never more than now, when she had so willingly placed her precious, irreplaceable life on the line simply to remain by his side. What had he ever done to merit such dogged devotion?

The only way he could think of to protect her was to leave her behind, even as repugnant as that thought was. How could he possibly keep her anywhere near safe with Voldemort having not only put a price on his head, but those of everyone close to him? And now, more than ever, that included Ginny.

"Harry, you *are* worth it. You are worth everything in the world to me!" And as if reading his mind, Ginny spoke again. "Even if I did stay behind, how do you know that You-Know-Who wouldn't send some Death Eaters or dementors after me, then bring me to you and force you to watch as he did Merlin knows what to me?"

Harry had to admit that she had a point, but was still extremely reluctant to give in.

Ginny stroked his lips with a finger. "And even if we did end up dying, my love, what would matter to me was that we died ~~to~~ *together* ... together in the cause of justice!"

"Gin, understand. I have no idea how long this is going to take. Weeks, at least...perhaps months, if not years. I cannot stand the idea of you in danger, nor do I want Voldemort to use us, our love, against me ... or against *us*. Please, if only for the sake of our future ... *stay behind.*" Harry took a breath, then resumed speaking after visibly pulling himself together.

"To get back to the subject, I've finally figured out who this R.A.B. was who had stolen the real Horcrux, in the cave that Dumbledore took me to, and replaced it with a fake one. He was Sirius's brother, and he was a Death Eater."

Ordinarily, Ginny could never have ignored her beloved's outspoken, heartfelt plea, but this time she had to. Being with Harry, fighting by his side, mattered far more to her than any potential danger she might be exposed to. It wouldn't be the first time, at that. Ginny didn't react for a time; it was as if someone had placed a Stunning Spell on her. When she did, her voice was scarcely audible.

"Sirius's brother?"

"His name was Regulus. Regulus Adolphus Black. R.A.B. Sirius's younger brother. Sirius was the only good wizard in his immediate family. Virtually all of them were Voldemort sympathizers, if not Death Eaters. Sirius's cousin, Bellatrix, was a Death Eater too. She was also the one who ended up killing him."

"But you said that the note also mentioned that this ... Regulus ... intended to destroy the real Horcrux he had stolen and was willing to die if it meant Voldemort meeting his match one day, as well as his hope that when he did, he would be mortal once again. Sounds like he got ... disenchanted or something, albeit far too late, and attempted to atone for what he had done, even if he knew that he would likely die for it."

"Precisely," Harry agreed. "Which is exactly why I'm so against your going with us. Virtually everyone who's ever stood in Voldemort's way is dead, some of whom were very close to me, as you know. As my girlfriend and potential wife, you would be the closest of all...a perfect target for Voldemort to take out his vengeance on, especially once he learned your connection to me. Even if he couldn't hurt me directly, physically, he could do it to me emotionally by controlling, torturing or killing someone close to me."

"Oh, my love," Ginny crooned. Now she understood. It wasn't that Harry didn't want her with him; he simply wanted to keep her as safe as possible. Even at that, her determination to accompany him remained unchanged. She could no more stay behind than he could. "I understand what you're trying to say now. But I'm a witch too, you know, and a good one...just like Hermione. And Mum always told me that 'two heads are better than one.' She's always believed it, even if it was originally a Muggle saying. And remember, beloved, you *did* say you would need all the help you could get. I'm also a Healer, which would come in handy should any of us become injured."

Harry sighed resignedly. "So you still intend to accompany us?"

"Damn bloody right," Ginny shot back. "Now, may I know where you think this next Horcrux is?"

"I think it's most likely buried with Sirius's brother Regulus. It would explain why it's remained lost all these years."

Ginny frowned thoughtfully. "Entirely possible. Do you know where he's buried?"

"Sirius once told me there was a Black family plot in London's largest wizarding cemetery. I strongly suspect that we'll find Regulus...and the Horcrux...there."

"Do you know the location of the cemetery?"

"Yes, although it's likely to be at least fairly difficult finding the specific Black plot I'm looking for. They were a prominent pureblood wizarding family, but as I mentioned earlier, there were some who were Voldemort sympathizers. It's likely that they'll be buried separately from the rest of the Blacks, even if technically in the same plot of land."

"When were you planning to go?"

"Another week," Harry stated firmly. "In the meantime, you simply go to work as usual...then once the end of that week nears, see if you can get an extended leave of absence to accompany us."

"That may not be easy," she warned him. "After all, I've only been there a few months ... and am still, at least technically, a trainee Healer."

"Then you intend to give up your job if they won't allow you the leave of absence?" Harry inquired, still hopeful in spite of himself that Ginny would be forced to stay behind in order to keep her job. But she dispelled that hope with her next words.

"I do. I told you that I will not be parted from you, and I meant it."

Harry sighed sadly. It was obvious that there was no way even he was going to be able to stop Ginny from accompanying him, Ron and Hermione. Still, he gave in much against his better judgment ... so there would be no one to blame but himself...and Voldemort...if something happened in the midst of their quest and he lost her as well.

"All right. But remember, it was your idea," he reluctantly conceded, already prepared to mourn her loss even while praying it would never happen. Not too many people survived encounters with Voldemort.

Harry had only survived initially because of his mother's sacrifice for him ... and the rest of the time he had managed with outside help, such as Dumbledore's phoenix Fawkes' tears, which could heal wounds, and the sword purported to have belonged to the founder of Gryffindor House, Godric Gryffindor, which had helped him slay the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets in his second year.

He had nearly lost Ginny then since she had been possessed by Voldemort via his old diary, also a Horcrux, which Ginny had had in her possession. It was bad enough when she was simply Ron's sister; how much worse would it be for them now that she was his fiancée and the potential mother of his children?

Then in his third year, he had managed to fend off dementors who were after new escapee (and his godfather) Sirius Black with the assistance of his Patronus, a stag, who...as it had turned out...was representative of his father, James (nicknamed Prongs), who was not only a wizard but an Animagus who could turn into a stag at will. Harry had always been told he greatly resembled James, and not only in looks. In the end, Harry and his friends had also managed to assist Sirius to flee to freedom on Buckbeak the hippogriff.

But the most deadly confrontation of all up to that point had come in his fourth year...Voldemort had returned with the help of his parents' former friend, Peter Pettigrew, the one who ultimately had betrayed them to him and caused their deaths. For years he had hidden himself in his Animagus form, that of a rat and Ron's pet, Scabbers.

But Wormtail had managed to escape in his animal form while they were all busy striving to keep out of the clutches of Remus Lupin after he had changed into his werewolf form. Wormtail had also been the one to kill Cedric Diggory in the graveyard the Triwizard Cup (which had turned out to be a Portkey) had transported them to, all on Voldemort's orders.

The encounter with the reborn Voldemort had been nightmarish, beginning with being bound to the tombstone of the latter's ancestors, then his arm being slashed open in order to obtain an enemy's blood sample for the Dark Lord's rebirth: and although Harry had been released from his bondage on the tombstone, he had ended up lying on the cold ground, writhing in ineffable pain, tortured by the Cruciatius Curse until he was ordered up onto his feet to face down the Dark Lord.

Voldemort had also amused himself by taunting Harry, declaring that he would kill him, utterly destroy him, declaring that if anyone spoke of him after this, they would refer to the fact that Harry had supposedly begged for death...and Voldemort, "being a merciful Lord," would grant it to him. However, no one knew better than Harry that mercy was alien to Voldemort. He was evil personified; there were no redeeming qualities in him whatsoever, especially when Harry had moved away and turned his back on him. "Don't you turn your back on me, Harry Potter! I want you to look at me when I kill you...I want to see the light leave your eyes!"

Voldemort had even touched him on his scar, causing Harry almost unbearable pain and prompting agonized screams from his throat. The only remotely good thing about it had been the fact that Harry had seen his parents...or their ghosts, at any rate.

Just the same, the disembodied spirits had assisted him in fleeing from the old graveyard by means of the Triwizard Cup-cum-Portkey after having been released from Voldemort's wand via the *Priori Incantatem*, which usually happened when two wands such as his own and Voldemort's each had a phoenix feather (and from the *same* phoenix at that...Fawkes) embedded in them...and when it occurred, the wand expelled the ghosts of those it had killed prior to that moment in time.

Cedric's ghost had also asked him to take his body back to his father; there had also been another spirit there, that of an old man, the original caretaker of the old Riddle house (Voldemort's family name; he had been a half-blood, the son of a Muggle father and a witch mother) who had inadvertently intruded on a secret meeting between Voldemort and two cohorts, one of whom was the son of the head of the International Commission for Magical Cooperation, Bartemius "Barty" Crouch. The younger Crouch had become a Death Eater whom his father had been forced to send to Azkaban.

However, he had somehow escaped and took the form of the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, noted Auror "Mad-Eye" Moody (all the while holding the real Moody prisoner) via Polyjuice Potion, which enabled the user to become anyone they wanted...but only for an hour. Crouch/Moody had been the one who had put Harry's name in the Goblet of Fire and thus forced him to participate in the Triwizard Tournament despite the fact he was underage.

As far as Harry knew, the fake Moody was helping him through the three dangerous tasks outlined in the Tournament on Dumbledore's orders. Only afterward, when he had returned to the Tournament grounds with Cedric's body, the fake Moody had dragged him away, still sobbing and struggling to get away from him. Because of this, Harry did not learn the entire truth of the matter until some time later. Not until then had it registered with Harry why the fake Moody was constantly taking drinks from a hip

flask he always kept with him: it had been to renew the effects of the Polyjuice Potion.

However, Harry had first begun to suspect the true reason why the fake Moody constantly took drinks from a hip flask when he was in the Prefects' bathroom on Hogwarts' fifth floor, acting on Cedric's suggestion and attempting to decipher the meaning of the second clue in the egg he had obtained during the first task. The female ghost known as Moaning Myrtle had suggested he open the egg underwater while he was there: the only time the message had been understandable. (Any time before that, the egg emitted a piercing screech when opened.)

It had also been the fake Moody (aka Crouch Jr.) who had helped Neville Longbottom, a fellow fourth year who had an aptitude for herbology, discover the means for Harry to breathe underwater for the necessary hour in order to rescue the "treasures" taken from each of the four Triwizard champions ... by using a magical plant called gillyweed, which enabled the person who swallowed it to grow gills, not to mention other fish-like characteristics such as webbed hands and flippers for feet ... but only for an hour, a similarity shared with Polyjuice Potion.

The other champions had used a form of Transfiguration to turn into a shark (or at least half of one) and the Bubblehead Charm, which gave the user a bubble of air around their heads, another means of breathing underwater. It had been Cedric who had been meant to rescue Cho Chang, who had been his date at the Yule Ball, just as Hermione had been meant to be rescued by Viktor Krum of the Durmstrang school of magic, since she had been *his* date for the ball.

The female champion from the French school of magic, Beauxbatons, Fleur Delacour, had been forced to abort her attempt to retrieve her "treasure" from the lake because she had been accosted by water demons known as grindylows, leaving it to Harry to rescue both Ron and her little sister Gabrielle. Despite the fact that Harry had technically finished last, he was ultimately awarded second place for his "extraordinary moral fiber" in attempting to rescue all four "treasures," not just the one designated for him.

Unfortunately, Harry knew that it would take far more than "extraordinary moral fiber" to bring himself, his friends, and possibly Ginny, through their adventures involving the discovery of the remaining Horcruxes and the ultimate...and most likely final...showdown between himself and Voldemort, alive. It wouldn't surprise him, in fact, if the Horcruxes were all guarded by something similar to what he and Dumbledore had found in the cave they had gone to together shortly before the Hogwarts headmaster's death. Voldemort wasn't about to allow the pieces of his soul to be so easily found and destroyed, whatever he had to do to prevent it.

Well, enough of dwelling on dark, gloomy things. Harry far preferred light, happy things whenever he could get them...like love. Particularly the incident that had marked the beginning of his romance with Ginny: Gryffindor House winning the Quidditch Cup. She had come running up to him and thrown her arms around him. And in spite of the fact there had been at least fifty people watching them, including Ron and Hermione, Harry had pulled Ginny close and kissed her...long, deep and deliciously.

Harry had had no sense of time during the encounter; all he had been aware of was the feel of Ginny in his arms, the warm, almost unbearable sweetness of her lips and the honeysuckle smell of her. When at last they had separated...and most reluctantly, at that...she had looked up at him through half-closed brown eyes, soft eyes which were misty with love, and her lips were sweetly swollen from his kiss. But even as irrational as Harry's next desire had been, it was most understandable: all he wanted to do was kiss Ginny like that all over again.

Harry had naturally agonized for days over his growing feelings for Ginny and the jealousy he felt, which had been like a barely-restrained monster inside him when others of the male persuasion paid court to her, but his main concern had been how Ron might react to his snogging his sister, not to mention what Ron would think of him dating Ginny. In the end, fortunately, Ron had come around, for which Harry was immensely thankful ... and if all went well, he would not only be Ron's best mate, but related to him (specifically, his brother-in-law) through his, Harry's, marriage to Ginny.

But Harry knew better than to count on everything going well, so he told himself to simply take matters one step at a time and act as circumstances dictated. He had to keep in mind that part of the prophecy in the Department of Mysteries that had concerned him and Voldemort referred to a "power that the Dark Lord knows not." Dumbledore had told him that this power was love...that Harry's ability to love would prove to be his ultimate weapon against the powers of Darkness.

Harry truly hoped so, for it might be the only way that he and his friends...and Ginny...would survive the trials and tribulations which lay ahead of them. Only then could he consider trying to live an even halfway normal wizarding life with Ginny, marrying her and having children ... possibly even as many as the Weasleys themselves. They might even settle in the same place where James and Lily Potter had begun (and ended) their lives together...and where Harry had been born: Godric's Hollow, a Muggle village which had nonetheless boasted a small witch and wizard population, James and Lily among them.

Of course, neither he nor Ginny knew yet that Ron had finally gotten up the gumption to propose to Hermione (mainly due to Harry's discreet assistance with the Felix Felicis potion), and once they did, that would be one of the few happy things to occur in their lives, possibly for many months, if not years, to come.

Chapter 8: Preparations/Erotic Dream

Chapter 8 of 27

While preparing to leave on their quest, Ginny recalls an erotic dream she once had about Harry.

The week before their departure was a busy one, what with making preparations for same, making sure they had all the necessary supplies that they could lay their hands on as well as having gone with Ron and Hermione to help pick out their rings. They had naturally been thrilled to hear about Ron's proposal, and there had been hugs and backslapping all around; Harry had naturally agreed to be Ron's best man and Ginny would attend Hermione, either as a bridesmaid or matron of honour.

She couldn't have said which at the moment because she had no idea when she and Harry would be able to get married. So much depended on the circumstances and conditions being just right! There was also another secret she was concealing from Harry at the moment: the night before they had gone out with Ron and Hermione to help pick out their wedding rings, she and Harry had once again shared a tenderly passionate night together.

In fact, it seemed even twice as tender and passionate as usual. What's more, Ginny had again "forgotten" to put the Contraceptive Charm on herself. Harry had not asked whether or not she was doing it, and she was glad of this, for she could never have lied to him, but he would surely be livid if he found out she wasn't doing it.

If they made love without the protection of the Contraceptive Charm even once more, there was a 99% chance that she would end up pregnant by the end of it, so she would have to do her best to see that she seduced Harry into making love to her at least one more time before they left on their quest. Of course, if she did end up pregnant, it would be a question of how long she could conceal it.

Even if Harry and Ron didn't know the signs to look for, though, Ginny was willing to bet that Hermione did and would be the one most likely to confront her on the subject at some point, if not owl her mother about it. She and Ron were likely using the Contraceptive Charm themselves and no doubt intended to continue to do so throughout their quest. But no amount of lectures as to how foolish her actions were...particularly considering the kind of danger they were likely to find themselves in...would change Ginny's mind; to her it was only logical to ensure that she became pregnant at least once, particularly if something happened to Harry. In that event, at least she would have his child to live for ... provided she survived their "adventures" herself.

On a brighter note, Ginny recalled when Harry had described to her his experiences in the Prefects' bathroom in his fourth year. How she wished she could have been there, somehow been able to conceal herself...perhaps with an Invisibility Cloak...to observe him as he bathed. She had always wondered what he looked like without clothes. His body seemed so beautiful and perfect when he was clothed, but how she wished she could have known then what she knew now! Even after only their first night together, she knew she had been right. Harry's unclothed body was every bit as beautiful as his clothed one. She always blushed crimson at the thoughts this prompted, particularly when she had had a dream based on these same recollections ...

She and Harry had spent most of the evening in the Gryffindor common room; it was fairly late, and everyone else had gone to bed by the time he stood up and held out his hand to her, as if to follow him. But follow him where? She soon found out; upon reaching the fifth-floor Prefects' bathroom, Harry gave the necessary password and they went inside.

"What are we doing here?" she asked.

Harry released her hand and turned to face her with a sly smile and suggestive wink. "Why do you think we're here?"

"But I haven't got any bathing suit or anything with me," she protested innocently.

"No need for them," he informed her. "This is a bath, not a swimming pool, despite how large it is."

Even as much as she wanted to, Ginny was scandalized at what he seemed to be suggesting. "Just what are you suggesting, Harry?"

"Simply that we ... bathe together," he returned, voice deceptively calm. If she could only have known how his heart was pounding at the mere thought of possibly seeing Ginny without clothes. He had always wondered what her breasts looked like, what colour her nipples were and what colour hair covered the feminine mound between her short but slender and perfectly formed legs ...

"I'm not undressing without something to cover myself before getting into the tub, even if it's only a towel," she returned firmly.

"No problem. The towels are over there on racks." He pointed to the corner nearest them. As she moved toward the area; he called after her. "Bring several, at least two for each of us, to be on the safe side, okay, Gin?"

"Okay," she called back.

Once she did so, she returned and handed him two towels. "Where can I undress?"

"Just go into the shadows. I didn't find anyplace to serve as an undressing room when I was originally here," he explained.

"In that case, make sure to keep your back turned until I say otherwise," she directed him.

Harry sighed in affectionate exasperation, but said, "All right. Let me know when you're ready so I can get ready."

"No problem," she called back as she headed for the shadows.

She undressed quickly and tucked a large towel around her, making sure it was secure before she dared venture out. "Harry? I'm ready."

"Great. Just give me a few minutes, then we can get into the bath." He passed her on the way to the shadows, once again giving her a sly smile and wink.

In spite of herself, Ginny's heart was pounding double-time as she waited, clad only in a large towel, waiting for Harry to return. Why had he brought her here? What did he have in mind? She turned around to see the portrait of the mermaid on the wall watching her. She had better remind Harry to put the mermaid to sleep; otherwise they might be embarrassed later.

She jumped when she heard Harry speak to her seemingly out of nowhere. "Ready to go in?"

"When...whenever you are," she stammered, once again blushing crimson and hoping Harry couldn't see her do it.

"Don't be frightened, Gin. I would never hurt you," he assured her. "And I would certainly never do anything you don't want me to."

"I know you wouldn't, Harry. It's just that I've ... never done this before."

"Neither have I, really, so it's a new thing for both of us ... skinny-dipping."

"Skinny-what?" she prompted.

"Skinny-dipping. It's when you bathe in a pool without a bathing suit."

"Don't you usually take your clothes off to bathe?" she asked.

"To bathe, yes, but we're not here to bathe," Harry almost crooned. "I have something far nicer in mind."

"Like what?"

"You'll find out," he smiled. "Come on, let's get in." He held out his hand to her again, and they walked to the edge of the bath. She snuck a look at the portrait of the mermaid and was glad to see that she was asleep. Harry had obviously noted the same thing she had and taken the necessary action.

"Do you want us to go in at the same time or go in one at a time?" he finally asked upon noting that she hadn't moved.

"Doesn't make any difference," Ginny replied.

"All right, I'll go first. That way I can help you in, make sure you don't slip."

"As long as you keep your eyes closed when you do," she threw back. "At least until I get into the water all the way."

Again, Harry sighed in affectionate exasperation, but simply said, "All right. Fair enough."

She was quite surprised to note that he seemed unembarrassed about removing the towel around his waist in her presence. She had noted when he'd first come back that he hadn't gotten chest hair yet, although he was old enough to do so, at least technically. But that wasn't so important. What she wondered about was ... other places not generally shown in public. She blushed crimson yet again. What was wrong with her that she was having such naughty thoughts? Mum and Dad would have thrown a fit if

they knew what she was doing, much less her brothers, particularly if they knew she was doing it with a boy ... or rather, a young man. Especially after curfew!

Harry dropped the towel at her feet and got in the bath; Ginny noted his gently rounded, beautifully formed bum and the smooth lines of his bare back. Not to mention his shoulders, which were just beginning to widen out ... and his waist was slender. He didn't have any excess flesh anywhere...except, hopefully, one certain ... special ... spot.

It took Harry calling to her to bring Ginny back to reality. "Come on in, Gin. The water's fine."

"I'll be there in a minute," she promised, reaching for the towel to loosen it in preparation for entering the bath. "Remember, keep your eyes closed as you help me in."

Harry sighed yet again but said nothing, simply held out his hand to her. Even in the fairly dim light provided by the torches, she could see that his eyes were indeed closed. She could only hope they would remain so until she was decently covered by water and bubbles.

However, his eyes didn't stay closed...at least not fully. He had opened them just a crack as Ginny was stepping in, and his heart nearly stopped at the nude beauty of her. Tiny yet perfectly formed breasts with baby-pink nipples, a dusting of freckles all over, slender waist and beautiful legs, and...best of all...the hair over her pubic mound was every bit as red-gold as the hair on her head. She was so beautiful, so perfect ... like a porcelain miniature. Far too good for him. He'd tried to be a gentleman, tried not to look, but the temptation had been too great to resist. And was he ever glad he hadn't! Oh, the sights you saw when other people didn't know you were looking ...

Surely this was more than any young bloke should be expected to endure...to have a beautiful naked girl so close, yet so far. More than his heart and body should be expected to endure, particularly considering the way he had come to feel about her. Just the same, Ron would have been livid had he known what Harry was doing now, much less what he planned to do later ... and with Ron's baby sister! If he caught them, there would likely be Hell to pay...literally...but right now, Harry didn't care.

How very much he ached to kiss and caress that sweet perfection, feel that silky skin beneath his hungry eyes ... and even hungrier hands and lips! Ginny, you're so beautiful ... But she was a shy and sheltered young woman; he mustn't rush her. A shy and sheltered young woman, yes...but a shy and sheltered young woman with six older brothers, one of whom was his best mate! He had better be careful.

"Harry, it's okay to look now. I'm sitting down."

When he dared to look, Ginny was sitting with her elbows resting on the edge of the bath, her bare shoulders glistening with water droplets, the waterline coming to just below her arms, covering her breasts ... for the moment. For a long time they just sat there beside each other; Harry hardly dared look at her for more than a few seconds at a time; otherwise he was sure she would read his guilty secret in his eyes.

"Harry?" she called out.

"What?"

"Are we supposed to do anything ... special while skinny-dipping?"

"Anything 'special'? No. We can do whatever we choose to do."

"What did you want to do?" she threw back.

"Ginny, may I ... touch you?" he cautiously ventured, moving slightly closer but still not within touching distance...yet.

"Touch me where?" she wondered.

"Nowhere you don't want me to," he answered her. "May I sit close to you?"

"I suppose so," she returned. He edged cautiously closer until he was within touching distance; then they sat quietly, not speaking, for several tense moments, until Harry gently touched her shoulder.

"Ginny?" Harry wished she could have known his thoughts, how much and how long he had hungered for this moment. Hungered for her ... to kiss her, touch her, perhaps even join physically with her. But only if she wanted it as much as he did. "May I tell you that I think ... you're very beautiful?"

"Thank you, Harry. I'm glad you think so," she returned softly, not meeting his eyes even as much as she wanted to.

With or without clothes, he thought daringly as he inched closer, until he was able to grasp her right hand, then lift it to his lips and kiss it gently. This was when their eyes met...and both of their young hearts pounded with a mixture of desire and anticipation. "Ginny, may I ... hold you?"

There was a long silence; then she finally said, "You may."

Harry forced himself to move carefully, slowly, drawing her gradually closer to him until their bodies just touched. Harry fervently hoped he would be able to conceal his growing arousal until he could prepare her properly, but couldn't count on it. What mattered was that he had made progress. Ginny was allowing him to hold her. In a tub. Alone. And most importantly, with no clothes on!

A short time later he said, "You can put your head on my shoulder if you like."

She said nothing, but the next thing Harry knew, Ginny had manoeuvred herself so that her head was on his right shoulder; the corresponding arm cautiously slid around her bare waist.

"Comfortable?" he asked softly, finding it progressively more difficult not to simply turn her toward him and ravish her...but he mustn't. He had to take it slow, and he would, but there was no way in Hell that it was going to be easy! A short time later, he moved her hair aside and gently brushed her nearest ear with his lips.

She shivered but otherwise made no move to get away, which Harry took as a good sign. Just the same, he had no idea how much longer he was going to be able to endure being so close to her like this without possessing her in some way, any way, even if it was only a kiss. He had no idea how much she wanted him to do the very things he was thinking about, even though she was pleased he wasn't trying to rush her. All the same, this couldn't be easy for him. From what she'd heard, young men were easily aroused ... and in this kind of situation, Ginny was sure that Harry must be. Perhaps it would help if she let him kiss her.

"Harry?" she asked softly. "Would you like to ... kiss me?"

Need you ask? he thought...but outwardly, merely said, "Very much." It took a few seconds to manoeuvre her properly, but he soon had her facing him, kissing-close. A moment later his lips found hers, gently, carefully ... then the pressure deepened and his arms tightened gently around her. "Ginny ..."

"Harry ..." she whispered against his lips, and one of his hands began to cautiously explore her. She gasped softly at his touch, but didn't try to move away...didn't seem to want to, for which he was immensely thankful.

A moment later she felt his lips travel down her body until he reached her breasts. She again gasped softly as his lips found one and one hand found the other, gently kissing and caressing. Her gasp became louder as his caresses became more intimate, although still tentative, and her nipples became hard and erect with excitement. "Harry ..."

"Ginny ... let me touch you. Let me ... love you. I ... need you."

Her answer was only a whisper, but it was the one he wanted to hear. "I ... need you too, Harry."

She then felt his hand slide down her body until it reached the junction between her legs. "Ginny, open your legs for me." Harry's voice was so sweet and held a crooning quality. Ginny could scarcely bear its beauty, much less the perfection that was his eyes, his face, his nose, his smile... every inch of him!

His fingers moved tentatively and her legs opened, almost of their own accord. He gently, cautiously, moved to stroke her intimately in her most private spot. He soon found that she was very wet there...a wetness that had nothing to do with the water. He gently explored further and soon began to fondle her in her most secret place. In a short time she began to softly cry out.

"Oh ... oh ... It didn't take much longer for her to almost be literally writhing under his touch. "Oh ... Harry ... Harry ... that feels so good."

"Do you want me to keep doing it?" he whispered, the warmth of his breath feathering her nearest ear.

"Yes ... yes ..." she almost moaned. "It feels ... so wonderful. So ... very wonderful ..."

It wasn't much later that Ginny found herself reaching a peak of pleasure she had never felt before; soon she was literally panting, and her writhing had increased geometrically with every passing moment. About thirty seconds later, however, she came back down to earth. "Oh ... Harry ... I've never felt anything like that before."

"I'm ... glad you enjoyed it," he returned softly, attempting to conceal his own arousal but not quite succeeding.

"Oh, Harry, I'm sorry. You must need something too."

"You ... might say that," he forced out, gently guiding her hand to his iron-hard manhood.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked as their eyes met.

"Just stroke it, caress it ... but be careful, it's sensitive," he admonished.

"I would never hurt you, Harry," she crooned. "I love you."

"I know, Gin. I know. Now, if you would ..." He gently pressed down on her hand, which held his hardness in it.

"Of course." With that, her hands gently began caressing and stroking him. It wasn't long before he began to moan in pleasure and move restlessly.

"Oh ... Ginny ... keep ... doing ... that. It ... feels ... wonderful."

Ginny had no idea what she was doing; all she knew for sure was that her partner was enjoying it ... and enjoying it immensely! She continued to stroke and caress him; not long afterward, Harry arched his back and cried out.

"Oh, Merlin ... I can't stop ... I can't ..."

His hardness seemed to pulse in her hand for a time; then it stopped and he settled back onto the edge of the bath, almost literally as limp as the proverbial dishrag...then after he had rested a few moments, he lifted his head and smiled radiantly at her.

"Thank you, Ginny. Now may I ask something else of you?" His voice had once again taken on an almost unbearably sweet quality that Ginny just couldn't resist. She was literally putty in Harry's hands, and he knew it! But fortunately he was decent enough not to try to take advantage of her innocence, vulnerability or trust in him. "I ... want to ... make love ... to you."

"How do we do that?" was her only question.

"Lean against the side of the bath. Now open your arms ... and legs ... wider. Wider. Yes. That'll be fine. Now once I get situated, put your arms and legs around me."

She soon felt his arousal once again, having regained its former hardness, the head gently pressing at the opening between her legs. She even felt it going inside a little ... more ... more ... then she flinched and cried out softly.

"Ginny? Are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

"No. It just ... startled me, that's all," she assured him.

Harry frowned but didn't question her, simply resumed his previous ministrations ... until he felt himself roughly a quarter of the way inside her. But he couldn't go any further; there was a barrier preventing it ... so he knew what he had to do. She then felt him begin to move his hips faster and faster; when she least expected it, he thrust forward sharply, eliciting a soft cry from her...and felt himself break through the barrier. After that he seemed to sink into her with no barrier between them whatsoever...and they were one.

Once they had finished, she asked, "Why did you want me to come here tonight, Harry?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow," he said.

"Leaving? Where are you going?"

"Where do you think? To find Voldemort ... the Horcruxes ... and destroy them all. But I wanted to be with you like this at least once, since we might never have this chance again, depending on what happens. You were wonderful, Ginny. I'll never forget what you've done for me, the beautiful memories you've given me. Thank you." He lifted his head and found her lips in a deep, delicious kiss.

"Thank you, Harry. I love you."

"I love you, Gin. Please stay as sweet as you are ... and take care of yourself for me while I'm gone."

"I will. You be careful too."

"I'll do my best. We'd better get dressed now." They stood up and he helped her out; they were still naked but she no longer felt any shyness around him. He disappeared into the shadows for a while, then reappeared, carrying her clothes. "Here you go."

"Thanks."

Once she was dressed and the tub had been drained, they left the bathroom. He walked her as far as the door to the Gryffindor House girls' dorm. "I wish you could come up with me," Ginny blurted out before she could stop herself.

"Wouldn't that be something to explain!" Harry laughed. "Maybe another time, Gin. Right now I've got to get some sleep. I want to get an early start tomorrow. See you later." He drew her close and kissed her deeply, sweetly, one last time, then released her and walked away without looking back.

Oh, Merlin, what a beautiful dream it had been ... yet no more beautiful than what was her reality now. She would have to tell Harry about the dream at the first opportunity. Meanwhile, she had a job to do. Washing clothes, packing ... fortunately, she had magic to help her do everything, so it could be done in a fraction of the time. There were only three days to go now until they left. She supposed they would either Apparate or use their brooms, she wasn't sure. She'd have to ask Harry; he had the last word on such things.

Ginny noted that he wasn't in bed with her, then heard the sound of the shower going in the bathroom ... then he came out, a towel tied around his slender middle, his hair as unruly as ever...but at least it was clean. She moved to kiss him, then nuzzled his neck. "Mmm. You smell wonderful."

"No more than you," Harry countered with a smile and wink, nuzzling her in return...then they released each other and resumed their previous business. "When are Ron and Hermione supposed to come Friday?"

"Around seven, I think ... so we'd better make sure to be ready and not forget anything because we won't be able to come back for it."

"By the way, how are we going to get ... where we're going? Apparate, use our brooms or what?"

"I was thinking, a combination of the two, so we'd better get our brooms ready while we're at it."

"Are we going to take our owls with us?" she wondered. She had recently gotten one of her own, a male greatly resembling Harry's own Hedwig ... but this one had different colour eyes. Blue to Hedwig's golden brown. Maybe they could even breed the owls at some point if things worked out and everyone returned alive.

"Probably better take at least one, just in case of an emergency. How about your Armand, since he's youngest and fittest?" Harry suggested.

"What'll you do with Hedwig and the others?" Ginny wondered.

"Keep them at your mum's for the time being," was the reply. "Best place for them until we can get back." *If we get back*, Harry finished in his mind, but said nothing more out loud ... at least not in Ginny's hearing. Yet he had to be careful nonetheless; she seemed to be able to pick up his thoughts from thin air, even without Legilimency.

* * * * *

The three days seemed to pass like sand through an hourglass...and true to form, Ginny was indeed able to seduce Harry into making love to her one last time before they left. The only question now, how long would it take before her likely pregnancy started to make itself known...and not only to her?

* * * * *

They spent the last day making arrangements for the care of their homes ... that is, the one Harry shared with Ginny and the one Hermione and Ron shared. One could only hope, however, that they would actually return to them. After this night, only Merlin knew where they would be, the places they would have to sleep. That is, when they got the chance...or dared to do so.

Perhaps they could take turns, two of them keeping watch over the others who slept ... then vice versa. Of course, there was always the possibility that one or the other couple would want to be alone for a little romantic interlude. At a time like that, the last thing they would want was to be overheard or observed ... maybe a Silencing Charm and an opaque forcefield, which would only work for the people casting it.

Would they even have a chance to keep themselves properly clean, clothed and fed? They were witches and wizards, after all; it was certainly possible, but what if they were in a danger zone or something and didn't dare use magic for fear it would give their presence away? It was as likely to be simply a matter of taking advantage of one's opportunities as they came along, if nothing else.

Chapter 9: Departure/At the Cemetery

Chapter 9 of 27

The four depart and head for the cemetery Sirius once told Harry about and see if his hunch about one of the Horcruxes being buried there is true - in the grave of Death Eater Regulus Black.

A/N: I know that the names I put for Sirius's parents aren't official, but I don't care for the official ones, and this is fanfic, so bear with me.

Since it was later in the year, and thus warmer weather, the four decided to forego Apparating, at least for now, and use their brooms. Harry naturally led the way, since he was the one who knew where they were going and how to get there, not to mention how to proceed once they had arrived.

Ginny hadn't been feeling too well lately, even light-headed at times; she hoped she wouldn't pass out in mid-flight or something. Just the same, she couldn't help feeling excited. Did this mean she was actually pregnant? She couldn't recall whether or not there was something in the wizarding world that could tell a woman whether or not she was pregnant, although she had heard there were such things in the Muggle world. Maybe she'd have to get one of those, if she got the chance, and test herself at the first opportunity. It might also be a good idea to ask Hermione at some point if there was; since she and Ron were sleeping together, she would be the one most likely to know one way or the other.

It took some hours to get there; it was late afternoon when they arrived. They set down not far from the cemetery gates, then placed their brooms up in a tree for safekeeping after placing an Invisibility Charm on them. Harry had decided to bring along the Invisibility Cloak inherited from his father for personal use (which usually meant emergency use). The cemetery seemed quite old; many graves bore birth and death dates decades if not centuries past, and the further they went in, the further back the dates went. Each was sure they had to be at least within the vicinity of the Black family plot by now, if nothing else. If only there had been someone around to ask ... There hadn't even been a sign to tell the name of the cemetery, for Merlin's sake!

Just when they were ready to give up, Harry gave a shout. "Hey! Over here!" He turned to the right and started off running, grabbing Ginny's hand just as Ron grabbed Hermione's and followed the other couple. They stopped within a few moments; upon catching their breaths, all looked around. There it was, right in front of them, in letters at least a foot high:

THE ANCIENT AND MOST NOBLE HOUSE OF BLACK

ADOLPHUS BLACK

1929 1979

HUSBAND OF WILHELMINA

WILHELMINA BLACK

1925 - 1987

WIFE OF ADOLPHUS

The four young people perused the weathered looking stones for some time, too busy examining them to make any comments until Harry said, "Do you think these were Sirius's parents?"

"Possibly," Hermione put in. "In cemeteries like these, with family plots, the grown children who died would usually also be buried here...with their spouses if they were married and alone if they weren't. Have you seen any stone which says 'Regulus Black' yet?"

"Not so far, but I'm sure it's around here somewhere. It's got to be," Harry declared. "The dates of the parents' deaths fit, for one thing. Sirius was in his late thirties when I knew him; he said his brother was about five years younger than him and had died fifteen years before."

"That would be around the time you were born, if memory serves," Ginny put in. "I mean, at the time Sirius told you these things, you were around fifteen. This was about six years ago, in 1995."

"So Regulus would have to have died sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s, if I'm figuring correctly," Ron observed.

"That's fairly recent, so it can't be too far away. Ginny ..." Harry pulled Ginny along with him, and the couple went around to the other side. A few moments later Ron and Hermione heard him call to them. "Hey, Ron, Hermione! Get over here!"

They ran around the other side ... and lo, before their eyes, was just what they'd come here for: the grave of Regulus Black.

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"Oh, Merlin, there it is," Ginny observed; Harry and the others seemed stunned speechless.

For a long time there was silence; Ginny couldn't be sure what Harry was thinking, but suspected he was trying to figure a way to determine whether or not the Horcrux in question was actually here...and if it was, how to get it. Finally she noted him reaching into his inner robe pocket and drawing out his wand. "*Accio Horcrux!*" he finally shouted, pointing at the grave after casting a protective spell around the four of them.

For a long time nothing seemed to happen; then a strange noise reached their ears, as if something was digging up through the earth. Soon something square and gold seemed to literally burst out of the ground covering the grave, then hovered in mid-air for a moment before Harry drew it close enough to him to grab it. His heart pounded in spite of himself. If this was indeed a real Horcrux, destroying it would likely bring Voldemort and his entire band of Death Eaters after them; he would feel the destruction of part of his soul, that was for sure...and what's more, he would know who had destroyed it.

The box was tarnished and looked old, covered with dust and dirt...and looked as though it had a lock, for which a key was necessary. Therefore, the four began to search for said key. Finally, something was found on the bottom of the box. It didn't look much like any key they had ever seen, but they couldn't afford to guess wrong. Unfortunately they seemed unable to pry it off the box.

"Maybe you need a spell to get the key off," Ron suggested.

"I hope not, since we would have no way of knowing which one Regulus Black used and thus would have no way of opening the box and destroying the Horcrux," Harry reminded him.

"Perhaps melting the lock ..." Ginny murmured half under her breath.

All looked up at her, although only Harry spoke. "What did you say, Gin?"

"Melt the lock," she suggested.

"The way this box seems to be made, even if we did, there's still no guarantee it would open," he countered.

"No guarantee it wouldn't, either," she threw back.

"I suppose you're right," Harry conceded. "But how to melt the lock?"

"Light up the end of the wand, hold it against the lock and say, 'Lock, melt!' What else? You might have to wait for a while, but *it should* melt," Ginny retorted, fast losing her patience, which was unlike her. "Remember, light not only gives off illumination, it gives off *heat!*"

They all knew she had a temper, which was natural for anyone with red hair, as Harry well knew, if only because of his friendship with Ron...but this was something else again. Was something wrong with her ... something *physically* wrong? Or was there old Dark magic still at work here, if only at Regulus's grave?

If that was the case, they could never have gotten the box that held the Horcrux so easily. It had to be something else, and Harry intended to ask her just what at the first opportunity. Meanwhile, it wouldn't hurt to at least try what she had suggested.

Strangely enough, it worked. It took about half an hour or so, but it worked...and to their delight, once the lock had been melted, the top of the box almost literally popped off ... to show them what they most needed to see: the *true* locket that had belonged to Salazar Slytherin, which Tom Marvolo Riddle had stolen from the witch Hepzibah Smith after killing her all those years ago. Inside must be ... *the Horcrux!*

"Now, everybody stand back. I'm going to destroy this bloody thing," Harry warned, his voice cold and hard. The others moved back a safe distance and watched as he pointed his wand at the box and the locket inside, which carried a piece of the most evil wizard alive. Once it was gone, there would only be three Horcruxes left, one of them inside Voldemort himself.

It was the plan that he would be mortal again by the time they found him; the destruction of the Horcruxes would accomplish that. Unfortunately it wouldn't make him or his followers any less dangerous, but it would be easier to deal with them once they finally managed to catch up with Harry and company ... and if they could manage it, that

wouldn't be for a long time to come.

The three observers held their breath as Harry inhaled and called out, *"Destructo!"* With a deafening thunderclap and blinding flash of light, it was done. The only thing left was smoke coming from where the box had been.

Ginny was the first to regain her mobility; she ran to Harry and again threw herself into his arms. And as before, he pulled her close and kissed her for a long time while Ron and Hermione ran to join them...then there were hugs, kisses and tears of happiness and congratulations all around, most of them from the girls. "We did it ... or rather, Harry did it!" Ginny exclaimed. "Only three more to go now!"

Even with the post-event euphoria pouring all through him, Harry couldn't help thinking that this had been far too easy. Why hadn't there been Death Eater guards or even dementors here to guard something as important as a piece of the Dark Lord's soul? Why had it been almost absurdly easy to destroy it?

Maybe Voldemort had long ago washed his hands of Regulus Black, but Harry felt sure that he would make it his business to know where all the pieces of his soul were located.

Therefore, the four expected a confrontation in the not-too-distant future, if not from Voldemort himself, some Death Eaters or dementors...if not both. For the time being, though, mission accomplished! Harry's hunch had paid off. Now all they had to do was figure out the location of the others. Knowing Hermione's penchant for books, the local library might be a good place to start.

With that, the four young witches and wizards made their way back to the front of the cemetery and retrieved their brooms from the tree, making them visible again, and took off in search of the library.

* * * * *

The library looked as old as the cemetery, and it wasn't as easy to gain access to it as it had been to the cemetery. No amount of verbal persuasion worked on the hard-faced, grey-haired and ancient-looking guardian of the library. Only Hermione's Stupefying the librarian had allowed them to pass through unmolested; they followed her to the sections where the books on magic and all associated artifacts, spells and whatnot were located.

Dozens of books were levitated to two different tables with their wands; then the four sat down...Ron and Hermione at one table, Harry and Ginny at another ...and they began searching. In spite of herself Ginny was pleased that they would be too occupied with searching for possible locations of the remaining Horcruxes to ask her too many probing questions as to her recent behaviour ... specifically, the way she had snapped at them. Despite redheads' reputations for wicked tempers, Ginny was generally sweet-natured. She had to be either sick or upset emotionally to snap at anyone.

Just the same, she knew it was only a matter of time until they started asking nosy questions. Ron she could handle; she had been doing that all their lives. It was Harry and Hermione who worried her. They had both given her funny looks at the time, although they hadn't questioned her about it at that point. She knew she had better make sure to have some believable answers for them when they did, though.

Chapter 10: Suspicion

Chapter 10 of 27

Ginny's unusual behaviour sparks suspicion as to the possibility that she may be pregnant.

It was several hours later, and it had become quite dark by the time they decided to quit for the night. Hermione un-Stupefied the librarian and modified her memory, and was thus able to check out the books that held the most promising leads so they could go over them. The problem was, in order to return them on time, they would have to stay in the area...at least temporarily...so they decided to go to Sirius's former home and the HQ of the Order of the Phoenix for a while ... the safest place they knew of to hole up.

However, time and maturity had changed sleeping arrangements considerably; both young couples shared rooms. The older members of the Order raised eyebrows but didn't say anything since these couples had done too much for them in recent years for their judgment, intelligence and expertise with battling the Dark Arts to be too quickly questioned, despite their youth.

They were congratulated upon their respective engagements, although all knew that it was likely to be some time...months, if not years, before Harry and Ginny could take their wedding vows. It was necessary to take care of Voldemort and destroy the remaining Horcruxes first. Ron and Hermione, on the other hand, chattered on happily about their upcoming nuptials. It would be some trick for them to marry too, particularly in the midst of their quest, but all believed it could be managed if handled right. The discovery and destruction of the fourth Horcrux was also celebrated in grand fashion, and all stayed up late discussing said adventure.

Well, at least most of them did. It was around ten that night that Ginny begged off and kissed Harry good-night before retiring, feeling more nauseous than she ever had in her life. She lay down on their bed upon undressing, keeping on only her underwear, and placed a cold, wet washcloth on her forehead, since she felt feverish and bloated in addition to her nausea. She had also been unable to eat much that evening, which she was sure was going to prompt even further questions. It was looking more and more like she was definitely pregnant.

Ginny could well imagine how Harry would react, what he would say, if he even suspected (and she couldn't help being convinced that he did), although he still hadn't questioned her as of yet. He would most likely demand that she return home...at the very least...and she had no intention of doing that, but at the same time, didn't want to risk the baby any more than necessary ... provided she was indeed pregnant. She intended to do her best to make sure she was asleep by the time he came to join her so he wouldn't have a chance to question her. Of course, this was only putting off the inevitable, but those were the breaks.

However, as it turned out, Harry wasn't the one who cornered her first. She had gotten up early the following morning, leaving her beloved most reluctantly, but needed to be alone to think what she was going to do, what she was going to say ... and could never have done it had she remained near him. Fortunately, her mum was there to fix them breakfast (not that she ate that much); her father couldn't get away from work.

Not long afterward, Molly joined her daughter at the kitchen table, soon followed by Hermione, who said that Ron was still asleep and unlikely to awaken for some time. The only one they really had to worry about possibly walking in on them would be Harry. It was getting so he didn't sleep well alone any more, particularly because his nightmares always returned if Ginny wasn't with him to chase them away. If only because of this, Ginny would have to try to cut the conversation as short as possible should her mother and Hermione decide to back her into the proverbial corner regarding her behaviour...and it was beginning to look that way.

"We have some questions for you, young lady." Molly's voice was loving yet firm and would brook no stonewalling.

"What kind of questions, Mum?" she asked innocently, although she knew all too well.

"I think you know," Molly shot back, taking a drink of tea and a bite of eggs. "You look pale as a ghost, you haven't eaten in at least two days ..."

"I'm just tired, Mum," Ginny insisted. "We've been keeping some late nights recently."

Molly frowned skeptically. "Is there anything wrong between you and Harry?"

"No, of course not. Why would you ask that?"

"You don't generally go off and leave him alone. That's one reason. You also don't generally snap at people, and I'm told you did while you were at the cemetery."

"I was just impatient, Mum, that's all."

"Don't lie to me, young lady." Molly's voice was hard and cold. "Something is wrong, and I want to know what it is."

"Nothing's wrong, Mum. Why can't you believe me?"

"Because despite your claims, something *is* wrong ... and I'm not the only one who's noticed it." Hermione sat down with her own meal and began eating, listening quietly to the conversation between her two companions as she did so...but ready to jump in at any time should she feel called upon to do so.

Molly tried to meet her daughter's eyes but Ginny avoided her mother's gaze assiduously, making her more and more suspicious. "Ginevra Molly Weasley, if you don't tell me the truth and *right now* I swear by all that's holy, I'll use Legilimency on you!"

Ginny sighed, knowing when she was licked. If there was one thing Molly Weasley didn't do, it was make idle threats. "All right, Mum ... but you and Hermione have got to promise that it won't go any further." She met Hermione's eyes; the other young woman nodded and smiled reassuringly.

"That's more like it." Molly smiled, taking another sip of tea and a bite of toast with butter and jam. "Now let's have it."

"Mum, Hermione, I ... think I may be ... pregnant," Ginny confessed, her voice almost too quiet for the others to hear.

Molly looked as though she had been hit by a Stunning Spell at first, then recovered, visibly pulling herself together. "I see. Does Harry know?"

"No, and I don't want him to know, at least not right away, because he'd make me go home and I have no intention of doing that."

"But sooner or later he's going to guess, you know that," Molly pointed out.

"I know, Mum, but there's nothing I can do about that."

"Haven't you been putting Contraceptive Charms on yourself beforehand?" the older woman wondered.

"Not for the last couple of weeks," Ginny reluctantly revealed.

"Why haven't you?" Molly put in, upset but not surprised.

"I want Harry's baby. I told him that. He said not right now, but considering our situation, I thought it best if I did, in the event something happened to him."

"Pregnancy can be hazardous under the best of conditions, darling. Believe me, I know ... and the conditions you'll be enduring are dangerous enough without adding pregnancy to the mix."

"Mum, I waited four years for Harry to come back into my life. I'm not about to leave him now, pregnancy or no pregnancy!" Ginny's voice had gone up two octaves, and if Mrs. Weasley hadn't placed a Silencing Charm on the door immediately, she would have awakened the entire household.

"Keep your voice down," Molly warned. "Even a Silencing Charm has its limits."

"Sorry, Mum," Ginny apologised.

"Then all we can do is give you some Anti-Nausea Potion to take with you; I'll give Hermione a list of the ingredients and how to mix them, so if you run out, she can make more for you, wherever you may be," Molly assured her youngest child and only daughter, who even now was likely to be carrying yet another grandchild for herself and Arthur...provided she and the baby survived and they were able to return safely from their hazardous quest. "Another thing, dearest. You must eat as balanced a diet as possible in order to keep yourself and the baby healthy. I'll give you the diet I always followed while I was pregnant; you may modify it to your own tastes."

"Thanks, Mum. I appreciate it," Ginny smiled and squeezed her mother's hands affectionately.

"Even at that, you must know that Harry's likely to confront you about this at some point, particularly once he finds out...and I'm sure he'll be very upset that you allowed this to happen when you knew that you would be going into danger."

"I know, Mum, I know," Ginny returned impatiently. "I assure you, I'll do everything I can to stay out of harm's way...if only for the baby's sake."

"For your own sake as well," Molly insisted. "We can't replace you, you know. The Anti-Nausea Potion should be ready soon, so you can take some of that...then I suggest you try to eat something."

"I'll try, Mum," Ginny tentatively promised, leaning back in her chair and closing her eyes momentarily. The other two women at the table, young and old, gave her looks of concern but knew they were doing all they possibly could for her. After this it was up to Ginny herself ... and Harry, once he got used to the idea. *If* he got used to the idea.

* * * * *

Within half an hour the Anti-Nausea Potion was ready, and Molly put what looked like a fairly large amount in what seemed to be a fairly small bottle ... but in the wizarding world, looks could be...and were...definitely deceiving. Even at that, how long it would last would depend on how nauseated she got. Ginny could only see one problem; what if she got nauseated around Harry and the bottle was not at hand or she was out of it, Hermione not having been able to brew more? She'd really be in for it then, because he would surely demand...yes, demand...an explanation for her actions, and she would have to give it to him.

She also assumed it was pregnancy-safe, that it wouldn't affect her unborn child (or potential unborn child). Molly also decided to double-check to see that Ginny was actually pregnant by casting a Pregnancy Detection Spell on her. It worked similar to a pregnancy test kit. If the woman wasn't pregnant, there was no change, but if she was, her skin would turn blue. Ginny could just imagine how Harry would react if he came down about now and happened to see her.

Five minutes later, Molly and Hermione looked up to see that Ginny's skin had definitely turned blue. However, five minutes after that, she was back to normal.

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione remarked. "It's true."

"And Harry's not going to be the only one upset. What about Arthur? What about her brothers, especially Ron, once they find out?" Molly pointed out. "Arthur knows Harry's back, of course, but he doesn't know that Harry moved in with Ginny ... and the same goes for her brothers, except for Ron."

"So what are we supposed to do?"

"The only thing we *can* do, Hermione...help her as much as possible and pray the others don't find out before we have a chance to figure out something to tell them. Meanwhile, we women must keep this among ourselves." Molly met the eyes of both her daughter and Hermione; both younger women nodded in agreement. "At least for the time being."

Chapter 11: Conversation/Arguments

Chapter 11 of 27

Harry finds out and reacts predictably; then they decide to marry, as do Ron and Hermione, in a double wedding.

Fortunately, they began to speak of other things after this, which was a good thing because it was just at this precise moment that the door opened and a still-sleepy but fully-dressed Harry walked in. Molly and Hermione greeted him with nods and smiles, Ginny with a smile and kiss. "Why'd you leave, Gin? I missed you." He reached for her nearest hand and brought it to his lips, then bent down to nuzzle her neck, still holding her hand; the other two women pretended not to notice.

"Couldn't sleep, luv," she explained. "So I decided to come down and have a talk with Mum and Hermione while she fixed breakfast."

"Feeling all right? I couldn't help noticing that you've looked quite peaky lately and you've not been eating." His tone showed the proper concern for her well-being, but at the same time, Ginny knew even Harry's patience wasn't limitless. He was surely curious regarding her recent behaviour, and if she didn't supply him with answers soon, he'd take matters into his own hands to find out for himself, whatever he had to do.

"I'm all right now ... and I ate some, so that should help."

"I hope so," Harry returned. "Remember, we've got to remain as healthy as possible during this quest." He yawned deeply and stretched, then sat down and looked at Molly expectantly, but she was already getting his food together for him. Within moments it was set before him via her wand, complete with a large glass of pumpkin juice, and he began to eat. He looked around after a few moments. "Ron not up yet?"

"No," Hermione supplied. "You know how he is. Never likes to get up early."

"Makes you wonder how he ever made it through Hogwarts, then," Harry joked between bites of food and drinks of juice.

"I think it was me as much as anything," Hermione remarked. "Particularly all the times I bailed you two out when you hadn't bothered to study or take notes."

Before she could go into a long harangue on the subject, Harry changed it to a more current one: the quest for the remaining Horcruxes and what they intended to do once the final showdown came to pass ... and no one in the room had any illusions that it wouldn't, particularly not once the last of the Horcruxes had been destroyed except for the one in Voldemort himself.

"Been able to find anything which might lead us to one of the other Horcruxes yet, Harry?" Hermione couldn't help asking.

"No, but I intend to keep looking. What about you?"

Hermione shook her head, but they weren't on a time-limit here. They would take as long as necessary, whatever was necessary, to find the Horcruxes. Until then, it was simply a matter of staying one step ahead of the Death Eaters and/or dementors. In spite of himself, Harry couldn't help an evil grin. Wouldn't it be something if the dementors got Voldemort instead of him or one of his companions and didn't realise it until it was too late?

"Harry, dear, that is a most unpleasant smile. What are you thinking?" Molly asked suspiciously.

"Oh, nothing really, just how great it would be if one of the dementors got Voldemort while trying to catch one of us," Harry replied. "That would really take care of him but good to have what little soul he still has after we get through with him sucked out of him. I might not even have to kill him then, since he'd already be worse than dead."

"Why does it have to be you that does it?" Ginny put in petulantly. "Why couldn't it be one of us...even me?"

Harry gave his fiancée a funny look.

"Well, why couldn't it? I'm just as much a witch as you are a wizard, you know."

"I know, Gin, but you don't have a psychic link with the Dark Lord. I do. That's why I have the kind of nightmares I do ... which are more like visions than dreams."

"You forget, I was possessed by him at one point. That's something even you haven't experienced, Mister Big Shot," she threw back. "Why must you feel that it's your personal duty to save the world, as if no one else was capable?"

He gave her a sheepish smile. "My 'stupid nobility,' I guess. And the fact that I'm supposed to be the 'Chosen One,' the one prophesied to kill him."

"Just the same, I'm frankly convinced that you've got something that Muggles call a 'Messiah complex,' an almost obsessive need to try and save the world, and never mind the danger to yourself. What's more, it's a strong belief that you're the only one who can. Dad once told me that they lock up people like that in the Muggle world. I don't remember Sirius ever mentioning that your father ever felt such a compulsive need to go out and risk his life trying to save the world. Makes me wonder where you got it from."

This latest tirade struck a mental alarm inside Harry's head and he set down his fork, this time giving his intended a hard look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I simply mean that it's unnecessary, not to mention ridiculous, for you to constantly be the one to take the weight of the whole world on your shoulders. No matter how good a wizard you are, Harry, even you are just one. *And* you're young. Even grown wizards need help sometimes. That's one reason the Order was formed, not to mention the Ministry of Magic. It's a cinch you couldn't have killed that basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets all by yourself, that's for sure ... to name just one incident."

"Ginevra Molly Weasley, that's enough!" Molly warned, but Ginny ignored her.

She took a breath and prepared to go on, but Harry held up a hand to stop her, his green eyes blazing. "That's enough, Gin. I get the point." Their eyes met and held, Harry's warning her not to speak further if she knew what was good for her. Now he knew that something was definitely wrong with her, something emotional...if not

physical...and he was determined to find out what.

"At least the Order is *usually* willing to work *with* me. As for the Ministry, if you'll recall, my dear, in my fifth year they did everything they could to discredit me...name-calling, lies, and slander virtually every day in the *Daily Prophet*. They even sent that evil cow Umbridge to Hogwarts to put me through hell because I wouldn't knuckle under to her or the Ministry ... and all because *they* were in such serious denial!

"Also, my hand is permanently scarred because she made me use my own blood for ink during my detentions with her! And their denial nearly cost the wizarding world its life...and *certainly* cost Sirius his...before they were forced to face the truth, that Voldemort*was* back! And then to top it off, they actually tried to get me to*join* them. *This*, after all they'd put me through that year! It's a wonder I ever survived!"

His anger was such that it cowed even Molly, who had remained silent the whole time Harry was speaking. Whatever had possessed Ginny of all people to attack him like that? It had to be due to a pregnancy-induced mood. She herself had had enough of them to recognise one when she saw one.

This was when Ginny realised she'd said too much. "I'm sorry, luv, I'm just not feeling good. Because of that I let my tongue run away with me. I meant nothing against you, I swear! Please forgive me."

For a long time Harry remained silent, still hurt and angry because of Ginny's accusations. By now he was convinced that something had to be wrong with her and he'd find out what it was, even if he had to perform Legilimency!

"All right, you're forgiven ... this time. But just what was it that set you off, for Merlin's sake? I've never known you to jump down people's throats like that, especially not mine."

"I want to tell you, luv, more than anything, but..."

"But *what*? Will somebody please tell me what the bloody hell is going on?" Molly renewed the Silencing Charm on the door, but even at that, she was sure that Harry's angry shouting was of sufficient volume to awaken even Ron, and he slept like the dead.

"All right, Harry, but only if you promise to keep your temper," Molly returned calmly. "After all, Ron is still asleep." *I think*, she finished in her mind. The next half-hour would tell one way or the other.

Harry reluctantly promised...then the bomb fell.

"Ginny is ... pregnant."

Harry was stunned into silence upon hearing this. Oh Merlin, no!*No!* But all he said, once he finally regained his voice, was, "Why, Ginny? Why did you let this happen?"

"I *told* you why," she retorted. "I want your baby. Especially now, considering our situation. That way, in the event something happened to you, I would at least have something to live for."

"Provided you survived yourself," Harry threw back. "For Merlin's sake, Ginny, our quest is going to be dangerous enough without our having to worry about you being pregnant!" Harry found himself shouting once again and forcibly restrained his temper. "That does it. You're going back home, and *right now*, even if I have to stun you and take you back myself!"

"Never!" Ginny shot back. "I'm *not* leaving you, especially not now! And if you take me back, I'll never forgive you, Harry James Potter...not for as long as I live!"

At least you'll be alive, Harry thought sadly. "Yes, you are! Molly, talk some sense into her, for Merlin's sake! If it was dangerous for her to be here before, it's ten times as dangerous now!"

"I'm sorry, Harry," Molly replied gently, attempting to soothe him. "But Ginny is a grown woman, free to make her own choices. I understand how you feel, but not even I can force her to stay behind if she's this determined to go with you."

Harry closed his eyes and sighed deeply, visibly pulling himself together. He was certain there was a conspiracy to drive him crazy and that all his closest associates were part of it...most of all, his beloved fiancée! He didn't want to force her, but saw no other way to keep her (and now their baby) anywhere near safe. Why couldn't he make her see that staying with him wasn't worth risking her (and now their child's) life? It was one thing to risk his own, Ron's or Hermione's, quite another to risk hers...especially now that she was pregnant. If she was so determined to stay with him and risk her life, however, then there was only one thing left for him to do.

"Then we've got to get married," he said. "Soon. Within the next week at the latest."

Everyone looked at him, scarcely able to believe what they had just heard.

"Yes, you heard right. Ginny and I have to get married. At least that way, the love we have will be doubled and that should help us in our fight."

Ginny could scarcely believe she'd heard right. Harry wanted to get married...and within the next week? How could it possibly be done? There was far too much involved in a Weasley family wedding to possibly be ready in that short a time!

However, Harry's expertise with Legilimency helped him to surmise what they all must be thinking. "It can't be anything fancy, just immediate family and friends before a..." He stopped short upon realising he had no idea how to go about getting married in the wizarding world. If he and Ginny were going to have to marry this quickly, it would have to be in Muggle fashion. At least that way he had some idea of how to proceed. There wouldn't be time to do a proper wizarding wedding until and if they returned safely.

"Molly, send an owl to the Burrow, tell them what we've decided and when the wedding is going to be ... but *don't* tell them that Ginny's pregnant. I'll do that myself when the time comes. Now that this place is properly cleaned up, we'll hold it here. Ginny, we've got to go out and pick rings as soon as the stores open. You'd better get dressed. Hermione, do you think you and Ron could accompany us?"

"I'd have to see. It all depends on whether or not I can wake him up."

"Go, then ... and let me know one way or the other. Thanks for the great breakfast, Molly. Let's go, Gin." He stood up and reached for her hand to guide her back upstairs to their shared room so they could get changed. Hermione was just disappearing into the room she shared with Ron when Harry and Ginny reached the top of the stairs, then detoured into their own room.

Within twenty minutes they were ready, but hadn't heard from Hermione, so couldn't be sure whether or not Ron was in gear yet. Finally they went to the door and knocked. Hermione came to the door and said, "He's up, Harry. Just give us a few minutes and we'll be right with you."

"All right, fine. See you in a few minutes." He turned for the stairs, still holding Ginny's hand, and went down to the living room again to wait with Molly.

Chapter 12: At the Jeweller's/Discovery/The Dark Lord

Chapter 12 of 27

The four go to the jewelers' for an engagement and wedding ring. Hermione believes she's found the possible location of another Horcrux - the Hogwarts library - and Voldemort learns of the destruction of the fourth Horcrux.

It was yet another half-hour, however, before Hermione finally appeared, Ron at her heels, still yawning but fully dressed. When their eyes met, Harry saw questions there and knew he would have to answer them before too much longer. Meanwhile, he was still trying to take in all that had happened and get used to it himself. Until then, it was unlikely that he could explain anything to anybody.

Molly wanted Ron to eat something, but he waved off her hand, assuring her that he would eat when they returned from the jewelers'. Upon determining where the nearest jewelry store was, the young wizards and witches decided to Apparate there to save time; they could bear a few moments' discomfort as long as they held their breaths. A tight squeeze later, they found themselves in front of a latter-day version of Zales Jewelers, a noted Muggle institution. Harry made a mental note to get something for Ginny that represented the wizarding world they both inhabited, but for the time being, this was the best he could do.

They had made sure to wear Muggle clothing so that they didn't stand out; Ginny was in a jumper that matched Harry's eyes, along with a snug pair of light green denims (she didn't feel bloated at this point) and her favorite white slippers. Harry wore black jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt with the phrase QUIDDITCH IS THE ONLY WAY TO FLY in light blue on it, charmed so that only magical people could see it, with matching dragon hide boots. Ron wore a jumper that matched his hair and his favourite pair of jeans and clunky shoes; Hermione wore snug blue denims with a matching top trimmed with lace and denim Mary-Janes. Both young women wore their hair long and loose, held in place only with hairbands.

When they walked in, the salesperson behind the counter, an attractive older woman in a maroon outfit, smiled and asked, "May I help you?"

"Yes," Harry said. "We'd like to look at some engagement/wedding bands."

If the woman had any questions as to just that of the two women present that Harry meant to buy the rings for, her questions were answered within seconds when Ginny moved up beside him and put a possessive arm around him, as he did around her. Then they shared a sweet but brief kiss.

"Of course, sir. Have you any preferences?"

"Just a nice diamond, maybe a carat, set in yellow gold with two smaller ones on each side, then the wedding band with maybe a dozen smaller diamonds set into it."

"I believe I just may have what you're looking for," the woman smiled, opening a case next to where she was standing and reaching in.

A moment later she placed the flat holder for the rings on the counter and allowed her customers to peruse them. "What is your lady's ring size?"

"Six, I believe," Harry said. "Mine is nine."

She gave them samples to try on to make sure of the size; then they decided on a set very similar to what he had mentioned earlier. "Do you have these in our size?" Harry asked.

"Let me check ... Hmmm ... Yes, I believe I do. You're in luck. You won't even need to have these sized."

"Great. How much are they?"

"Five hundred pounds ... or roughly \$3,500," she told him.

Harry reached into his pocket for the stated amount, having had to exchange his Gringotts gold for greenbacks. With tax, it came to roughly \$3,725; they decided not to take a box for the engagement ring, just the wedding bands. Upon slipping them into his pocket, Harry turned to Ginny and asked her to hold out her hand so he could place the engagement ring on her finger. After doing so, he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it, then pulled her close for a long kiss.

"Congratulations," the clerk said.

"Thank you," Harry returned; then the four left the store. "Well, that much is done. Now we've got to get back home and start studying those books again." He already knew where he intended to begin and hoped that Hermione did too. They couldn't afford to waste any time, not with Voldemort and company on the loose. With that, the couples Apparated back to number twelve, Grimmauld Place; upon arrival, they headed back upstairs to their respective rooms and the books awaiting them.

* * * * *

When they broke for dinner that evening, Harry and Ginny agreed to ask if Ron and Hermione would like to be married when they were...if only to be on the safe side. After all, the more love they could muster up, the more they would have to fight with. His two friends looked at each other wordlessly for a long time, mentally debating.

Harry was well aware how much they would prefer to be married on Valentine's Day the following year, but who knew where they would be next year this time...or even if they would all still be among the living? No, if they wanted to do it, it was best that they do it now, and since a wedding was being planned anyway, why not make it a double one? If things worked out for them and they came back in one piece, they could re-marry then ... and even if it wasn't on Valentine's Day, try to make it as close as possible.

Finally their heads lifted to face their friends and Ron spoke. "All right, mate, we'll have a double wedding with you and Ginny."

"Great. I suggest you tell your mum, so she can plan accordingly. Meanwhile, we'd better tuck in before she starts wondering if we decided to stay in our rooms and snog or something."

With that, the two couples left Ron and Hermione's room and went downstairs for their meal. They had better enjoy the meals here while they could, though, because once they left, it might be a long time before they had another one even remotely comparable.

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Over dinner, though, all concerned were pleased to learn that Hermione had found a somewhat obscure passage in one of the books that seemed promising. She had showed it to Harry, and they had discussed it, agreeing that it had to be referring to their old school (and Voldemort's), Hogwarts, as a likely spot to locate another of the Horcruxes. They knew he had been looking for an artifact from each House and had found one for every House but Gryffindor.

As far as they knew, that one (the sword from Godric Gryffindor) was safe, having been put under various charms and spells, not to mention armed guard. The one they

were looking for now concerned Ravenclaw House ... and Hermione's nose for books had convinced her that it would most likely be found in the school library. The others had learned to respect her hunches over the years, but still couldn't imagine that book she could possibly have in mind.

If Harry went out on a limb, he might have guessed "Hogwarts...A History," that Hermione had loved to quote from *ad nauseum* over their years there ... but none of them could be sure of anything at the moment. If that's where it turned out the Ravenclaw Horcrux was, and they destroyed it, fine. Until then, they mustn't get their hopes up too high; simply hope for the best. However, they decided that they would all travel to Hogwarts again after the weddings had taken place and the two couples had each had at least a short honeymoon.

It would not be a social call, of course, but serious business, although Harry naturally planned to bring Headmistress Minerva McGonagall up to date on what they had been up to. They had also agreed to postgrad courses, for there were some things in the postgraduate curriculum that would serve them well in the upcoming battle, but they would have to do it via owl post...or at least the vast majority of it, since they would be too far away from the school to stay there on a regular basis as was the norm.

Harry and the others vowed that that would be one of the things they would discuss with McGonagall, how they could manage to supplement their studies even while fighting

the Dark Lord. If owl post wasn't possible, perhaps they could suggest another means. Details, of course, would have to wait until they got there, but all agreed that it was what they wanted to do ... and just as soon as they possibly could.

* * * * *

Voldemort was livid. How could it possibly have happened? He had hidden it so well, been so certain that it would never be found! "What do you mean, destroyed?"

"Just that, my Lord," Wormtail reported quietly, submissively, to his angry master, his face looking every bit as rat-like as his animal alter-ego. "The fourth Horcrux placed in the locket belonging to Salazar Slytherin has been destroyed."

"But how? We put it into the traitor Regulus Black's grave in order to throw Potter and the others off the track!"

"I have no idea, my Lord. Just the same, it seems that he...they...have indeed discovered it and destroyed it," Wormtail continued. "Do you wish us to take steps to protect the remaining Horcruxes?"

"You have to ask, Wormtail?" Voldemort's voice was deceptively calm. "Yes, of course! Send as many Death Eaters and dementors as you can to each site and make sure that neither Potter nor any of his companions reaches them, whatever you have to do. I have no intention of allowing them to destroy the other Horcruxes as easily as they destroyed this one."

"It shall be done, my Lord," Wormtail assured him, bowing as best he could with his mis-shapen body and taking his leave.

Once his minion was gone, Voldemort closed his eyes and searched his mind for the essence that was his enemy, now 21-year-old Auror Harry James Potter. Ever since he had killed the boy's parents 20 years ago and was repelled so violently by the spell Lily Potter had used to defend her only child, so much so that he had lost his powers and his original body and was the next thing to dead, they had shared a psychic link, and many times Harry had had horrific visions of what was going on in Voldemort's mind, his scar paining him mightily whenever the Dark Lord was feeling particularly vehement anger or other powerful emotions, particularly since his rebirth seven years ago.

Had it been Harry alone who was after him, Voldemort would have dismissed it as inconsequential...at least publicly...although the prophecy was never far from his mind. Neither of them could survive while the other lived; Harry was the Chosen One destined to kill him. But his nemesis was accompanied by two...no, three...companions, two of them female ... and if his latest premonition was correct, one of them was Potter's woman, his lover of four years past who had only recently come back into his life. What's more, the woman was the sister of another of his companions, one Ronald Bilius Weasley. The other woman was Weasley's own long-time lover, one Hermione Jane Granger...and all had been students at his own favourite place, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

He had not felt too much from Potter lately, emotions- or thoughts-wise; he suspected that this was mostly due to his Auror training. Just the same, he had had flashes of what he suspected would be Potter's next move against him. Hogwarts School ... the library ... and a specific book entitled "Hogwarts...A History," that had originally belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw, the founder of Ravenclaw House, and that held yet another piece of his soul...another Horcrux. This discovery was likely due to the Mudblood Granger's penchant for books. He cursed them all with an unspeakably vulgar oath, but reserved his worst for Potter himself.

If Potter and company managed to destroy this one as well despite his precautions, Voldemort knew he would soon be obliged to go after them himself and make an example of them once and for all for having the audacity to think they could defeat him. Him, Voldemort, the greatest Dark wizard of all time! Particularly since the only remaining pieces of his soul would then be found within himself and his faithful snake companion Nagini.

And if the unthinkable happened and Nagini was destroyed as well, Voldemort vowed with every ounce of hatred left in him that he would do everything he could to take Potter and all three of his companions down with him should they actually manage to mortally wound him. At the very least, he would torture them via the Cruciatus Curse and enjoy watching them writhe and scream in agony, playing with them like a cat would play with a mouse it was preparing to devour.

And this would be before setting the Death Eaters and dementors upon them! Particularly satisfying would be to see Potter's woman writhing and screaming as he tortured her and Potter being forced to watch, frozen by a Body-Bind Spell, unable to do a thing to help her. Either that or seeing her soul sucked out of her by the dreaded Kiss, if not both. He would not be so easily destroyed by these four arrogant young upstarts...not now, not ever...prophecy or no prophecy!

Chapter 13: Harry's Sorrow/Double Wedding

Chapter 13 of 27

Harry feels sorrow that his parents cannot be present to see him marry Ginny; then the weddings themselves take place.

Meanwhile, blissfully unaware of Voldemort's plans...at least for the moment...the four in question were busily preparing for their upcoming weddings. Because of the

seriousness of their situation, however, honeymoons were presently out of the question. At least an ordinary honeymoon where they went away on holiday for several days. If they were going to have anything, it would have to be right here at Grimmauld Place.

It didn't look half bad now that it had been cleaned up and made livable. Harry only wished that Sirius could be here so he could go to him and discuss his feelings regarding the upcoming weddings and the reason why they were doing it so quickly, in order to make sure they would have a full reserve of love to draw on to battle the Dark Lord.

But most of all, he wished his parents could see the lovely girl who would be their son's bride in a matter of days as he gazed at the one picture he had of them, smiling with their arms around each other; Lily Potter was even blowing a kiss with her free hand. *How I wish you could see her, Mum and Dad. I'm sure you would love her as much as I do.* Harry's heart ached almost unbearably, pierced by a pain that had never completely gone away, not in 20 years ... not ever.

His parents had died protecting him. He had been far too young to know them before they died, but had always missed them during the milestones in his life ... and this one in particular. They had sacrificed their lives in order that he might live. He had to go on, had to defeat Voldemort once and for all, if only to prove himself worthy of their sacrifice and be the best father he knew how to be to his and Ginny's child.

And I intend to make sure that we're every bit as happy as the two of you without having to worry about being hurt or killed as the two of you were for my sake. What's more, Ginny, my fiancée, is carrying my child ... but she insists on fighting by my side in spite of the danger to both herself and the child. I love her even more for it, but am totally and thoroughly terrified for them both. Please watch over us. I want my child to be able to grow up with both of his or her parents.

A gentle touch brought him back to reality; he looked up into Ginny's soft brown eyes...eyes filled with love and compassion for his pain. "What's the matter, luv?"

Harry sighed and rested the hand holding the picture on one thigh. "Just wishing my mum and dad could be here to see us get married." He lifted the picture up again and gave it a lingering, wistful glance. "I guess yours will have to do, though ..."

"Beloved, you know that Mum and Dad love you like their own," Ginny reminded him, drawing him into her arms; Harry again rested his head on her breast and held her tightly.

"I know, Gin, but I still wish my own mum and dad could be here. I know they would love you just as much as I do." For a time he was quiet, soothed by the loving strokes of Ginny's fingers on his silky but always-unruly hair.

"Thank you, beloved. I'm sure I would love them too ... no, *I* do love them. I always will love them, even if I never knew them."

"Why?" Harry had to ask even as he remained cradled in his fiancée's arms.

"Because they gave life to you, the man I have loved since we were children and whom I will love as long as I live."

There was an even longer silence this time before Harry spoke again, speechless at such a poignant expression of love. "Thank you, Gin. That means ... everything to me."

"Just as you mean everything to me." Ginny kissed the top of his head and rested her cheek on it. "Just as I am convinced that we will ultimately win the day. ~~We~~*will* prevail over Voldemort. *We must*. It's our destiny, and we must fulfill it, if only for the sake of our child!"

"I wish I were as confident as you," came the soft reply from the vicinity of her breast.

"We'll make it, beloved. *Whatever we have to go through, we'll make it.* You just wait and see!"

* * * * *

All too soon, it was time for the weddings. All concerned were naturally nervous, particularly the prospective bridegrooms; though they couldn't be happier that they were finally marrying the ladies they loved, whatever the circumstances surrounding the dual ceremonies. Once Arthur Weasley had learned that his two youngest children were to be married, he took a week's leave of absence from his work at the Ministry in order that he not miss it ... particularly not his chance to give away his only daughter to the man she had loved since she was a child.

Since there was no time to make wedding or bridesmaid dresses, Molly took it upon herself to buy them for both brides ... with financial help from Harry. They were about the same size, but Hermione was taller, being 5'7" to Ginny's 5'3", not to mention their widely differing tastes in clothes. Hermione decided on a long, sheath-like gown that hugged her slender body, with long lace sleeves and a sweetheart neckline. She decided to forego a veil, deciding to wear her hair as she had for the Yule Ball with a length of roses, her favourite flower, woven through her chestnut tresses and a pearl necklace around her long, slender throat.

Ginny, on the other hand, opted for a short, lacy, sleeveless Empire-waisted dress with a transparent lace short-sleeved jacket; the hem of said dress came to roughly two inches above her knees, showing off her beautiful legs to full advantage. She also opted for flowers in her hair in lieu of a veil, but wanted to wear it long and flowing with her favourite honeysuckle blossoms woven through it and the ends of her hair curled.

It had been decided that Harry and Ginny would be married first since they had waited the longest for this day; then they could attend their friends at the latter's wedding. A Muggle minister of the Episcopalian faith that Arthur Weasley knew had been obtained to marry them, but would have to be Apparated in and out of the building because number twelve, Grimmauld Place had been bewitched to be undetectable by Muggles, just as his memory would have to be modified slightly in order that he not inadvertently give away its location.

Ron had always disliked dressing up, but at least this time *he* was able to choose the suit he would wear for his wedding...rented because he could not afford to buy one. Harry's suit was similar to the dress robes he had worn for the Yule Ball but more Muggle-like than Ron's. As the two young bridegrooms prepared themselves, Ron voiced his happiness yet, at the same time, stark fear at his upcoming wedding...so much so that he was afraid he would be sick in front of everybody at the wrong time.

"Mate, I had no idea I would ever see this day. I couldn't be happier because Hermione will finally be totally mine, but at the same time, I've never been more bloody scared!"

"From what I understand, that's normal for bridegrooms, Ron," Harry tried to soothe his friend. "For Merlin's sake, do you really think *I'm* calm?"

"You certainly seem to be," Ron observed, unable to tell otherwise.

"Pretence, mate, all pretence. I feel just as you do. Couldn't be happier, but at the same time, scared as all hell!"

Just then a knock came on the door; they opened it to admit Molly Weasley, dressed in a long pale blue dress with a floor-length lace jacket covering it as well as matching flowers in her fiery red-gold hair with its endearing touch of grey. She smiled as she recalled what her husband had said upon seeing her in her wedding finery: "Mollywobbles, you look just as you did on our wedding day!"

"Oh, go on! I do not!" she had dismissed with a laugh even as she blushed, and attractively so...at least to her doting husband.

"Then will you settle for being the most beautiful mother of the bride...and groom...I've ever seen?" Arthur had interjected with a sly smile.

In this case, she fussed over the young men before her, one her son and the other one whom she loved like her own ... the one who would soon be an official member of her family via his marriage to her daughter. She regretted that the weddings had to be rushed, but the circumstances demanded it, so she had to adapt as best she could.

She almost literally hugged the stuffing out of both of them. "Oh, boys, you look so handsome! Your brides aren't going to be able to take their eyes off you!"

"Thanks, Mum," Ron returned sheepishly, blushing as red as his hair.

Even Harry turned pink. "Thanks, Molly."

"I wish you both every happiness in your marriages, boys. You take good care of your ladies now. Especially you, Harry."

"Don't worry, Molly. I'll protect her with my life!" Harry assured her.

"Better go now and see what's keeping the girls. See you later!" With a quick kiss on each of their cheeks, she bustled out.

Once the door was closed behind her, the two young men looked at each other and laughed. "Your mum is really something else, Ron," Harry observed.

"Tell me about it," came the reply.

"Makes me miss mine all the more," Harry returned quietly, pain once again piercing his heart like a knife. "I wish so much that they could meet Ginny. I know they would love her as much as I do."

A long silence fell between the two friends before Ron put a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder. "I'm sure they're with you in spirit, mate. Let's go." He turned for the door and Harry followed him out wordlessly.

The Grimmauld Place living room was decorated with flowers within an inch of its life and a makeshift altar was set up near the front of the house, the minister waiting behind it. Harry knew of the old tradition of not allowing the bridal couple to see each other before the wedding on the wedding day and frankly thought it outdated and ridiculous, but allowed it in order that matters proceed as rapidly as possible.

A moment later Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" began as the doors to the living room opened and Ginny entered on her father's arm. In spite of his attempt to control himself, Harry's pulse rate went into orbit at the sight of his bride coming toward him, radiant with love and happiness, not to mention honeysuckle flowers in her long, flowing red-gold hair (and hands) and her beautiful legs shown to full advantage. If he had his way, those sweet arms and lovely legs would soon be wrapped around him ... He fought to banish the erotic thoughts the picture prompted. That would happen soon enough; now it was his duty to control himself at least long enough to be decently married.

A few minutes later the couple reached the altar, their arms linked and holding hands.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the marriage of this man, Harry James Potter, and this woman, Ginevra Molly Weasley. Who gives the woman to be married to this man?" the minister asked.

"Her mother and I do," Arthur Weasley spoke out from a short distance away.

"Very well. We shall continue. Harry James Potter, take your bride's hand and repeat after me ... 'I, Harry James Potter, take you, Ginevra Molly Weasley, as my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, in sickness and health, for richer, for poorer, to love and cherish for as long as we both shall live.' "

Harry did so, although it was the most difficult thing he had ever done ... then the minister turned toward Ginny.

"Ginevra Molly Weasley, take your groom's hand and repeat after me: 'I, Ginevra Molly Weasley, take you, Harry James Potter, as my lawfully wedded husband, to have and hold, in sickness and health, for richer, for poorer, to love and cherish for as long as we both shall live.' "

Once that was complete, the minister said, "Rings, please," then had Ginny hold out her left hand in preparation for Harry's slipping the wedding band onto it. "Harry James Potter, repeat after me: 'With this ring I thee wed, and hereby take thee, Ginevra Molly Weasley, as my wife, now and forever.' "

Harry was so nervous that he was sure he was visibly shaking, but he managed to get the ring on Ginny's finger; the minister turned toward her again.

"Ginevra Molly Weasley, take your groom's hand and repeat after me: 'With this ring I thee wed, and hereby take thee, Harry James Potter, as my husband, now and forever.' "

Ginny's heart was pounding with a mixture of nervousness and elation at not only standing here being married, but actually standing here being married ~~to~~ Harry...but she managed to state the above with a clear, true voice as she slid the matching band onto Harry's ring finger.

They then turned to face the minister again, hands linked. "By the power vested in me by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, I now pronounce Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley husband and wife. Harry, you may kiss your bride."

The look in Harry's eyes when they met hers literally took Ginny's breath away, as did the long, passionate kiss they shared...their first as husband and wife. It was a long time before they came up for air, and when they did, they were enveloped in hugs and kisses of congratulations from what friends and family had been present ... but they couldn't go overboard with said congratulations; there was another wedding to be performed. Even now, the second bride was waiting with Arthur Weasley acting as surrogate father behind the closed doors at the end of the living room.

The newlyweds then parted to join their friends and stand with them as they were married, Harry as Ron's best man and Ginny as Hermione's matron of honour. The second wedding proceeded much as the first; only the names were different ... and soon the minister was again saying, "By the power vested in me by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, I now pronounce Ronald Bilius Weasley and Hermione Jane Granger husband and wife. Ronald, you may kiss your bride."

Ron seemed frozen in place for a moment; then Hermione smiled softly at him and reached up to stroke his cheek. This motivated him to step forward and gather his new wife into his arms to kiss her soundly, albeit briefly, since Ron had never been one for public demonstrations of affection and only allowed it now because it was necessary to be married.

"My friends, I now introduce to you Mr. and Mrs. Harry James Potter and Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Bilius Weasley!" the minister announced with a flourish.

Again, there were hugs and kisses all around, not to mention happy tears from Molly as she hugged all four of the young newlyweds after taking pictures of virtually everyone involved. Harry and Ron were both pleased that this much had been accomplished, but how long would they be allowed to share married happiness with their new wives? How long until Voldemort and company invaded them? They finally agreed to simply take what private time was granted them to be husband and wife and be grateful for it. Meanwhile, it was time for them to get started on their mutual wedding nights.

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Harry's wish was soon granted. Barely fifteen minutes after the door to their room had closed, he had divested both himself and his new bride of their finery and placed her on what would now be their marriage bed. Her arms and legs entwined around him as he positioned himself atop her. Moments later, he was provoking soft sighs of pleasure even as the newlyweds passionately kissed and caressed.

With the small part of his mind not fully occupied with his wedding night, Harry was certain that Ron and Hermione must be doing the same thing and likely enjoying it every bit as much as himself and Ginny. Meanwhile, it was best for him to get back to pleasuring her. The doing of that had always been far more pleasant than the talking.

Chapter 14: Engaging the Dark Forces

Chapter 14 of 27

In the midst of the couples' mutual wedding nights, Dark forces invade Grimmauld Place.

However, their bliss would prove to be short-lived, for even as the two newly married couples were enjoying their wedding nights, Dark forces (consisting of a handful of Voldemort's most devoted followers, including Bellatrix Lestrange, the killer of Sirius Black, and an equal amount of dementors) gathered a short distance away, prepared to strike. But it was not the right time yet. It was necessary for the pairs to believe themselves safe from invasion, at least for the time being, until the Dark Lord decreed otherwise. Until then, they would wait.

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It was only when a sharp pain in Harry's scar awakened him from a sound sleep in his wife's arms that he sensed something very wrong. Dark forces were present in the vicinity of Grimmauld Place, perhaps even Voldemort himself. He hated to leave Ginny, especially after they had shared such a tenderly passionate time together, but as Dumbledore had once said, "There will come a time when one will have to choose between what is right and what is easy." That time seemed to have arrived.

It would not be easy, but it...their cause...was just and right, and it was Harry's duty to be the standard-bearer, whether he wanted it or not. He somehow managed to extricate himself from Ginny's arms and dressed quickly in casual clothes, grabbing his wand from the dresser as he headed out. He met a sleepy but fully dressed Ron, who reported that Hermione was dressing and would be out soon.

"What's going on, mate?"

"Death Eaters," Harry replied by way of explanation. "They're preparing to strike."

"How do you know?"

"I can feel it. Get ready." That was when Hermione stepped up to join them, wand also at the ready, as was Ron's, and the three headed out to face their fate, whatever it turned out to be. However, not to be outdone, Mrs. Ginevra "Ginny" Weasley-Potter had quickly risen and dressed, knowing what must be transpiring, and hurriedly sprinted after her husband, brother and sister-in-law with every intention of joining them, wand in hand, ready to defend all that she loved with her last drop of blood ... that, first and foremost, meant Harry, their child and her family.

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Harry's face darkened when he saw that Ginny had joined them as they approached the front door. *No*, Gin! This has nothing to do with you. Go back to bed."

"No! I told you I wanted to fight by your side, and nothing you say is going to stop me! And you seem to forget that I have a score to settle with You-Know-Who myself!"

"Gin, it's not that I don't want you with me ..." His voice trailed off.

"Then shut it and let me be with you," she shot back. "What are we facing?" she asked, looking around at her husband, brother and sister-in-law to see who would speak first.

"Death Eaters," Harry reluctantly supplied. "At least half a dozen of them. And about as many dementors. Be careful; they can sneak up on you when you least expect it."

As they stepped outside, the four noticed that Bellatrix Lestrange was heading up the group of Death Eaters, that was composed of the newly escaped Lucius Malfoy, Barty Crouch Jr., Macnair, and the fathers of Draco Malfoy's cronies, Crabbe and Goyle. All carried wands, wearing their Death Eater robes and deadly smiles.

"Bellatrix," Harry spoke, his voice poisonously sweet. "I might have known I'd see you here, particularly after what you did to Sirius." Harry was filled with hatred and an equally great desire to kill this filthy, rotten bitch as mercilessly as she had killed Sirius. Unfortunately, if he gave rein to his feelings, he would be no better than she was.

Just the same, he positively itched to hurl the *Avada Kedavra* or Killing Curse at her...or better yet, the *Cruciatus* or Torture Curse...hear and see her screaming and writhing in agony as she no doubt wished to do to him or one of his companions ... if not the *Sectumsemptra*, as he had once hurled at the perpetual thorn in his side named Draco Malfoy. Perhaps even the *Imperius*, that would give him control over every move she made. He could manoeuvre her like a puppet on a string if he wanted to. Not that he thought she would countenance it, of course...not if she could prevent his doing it...but it was nice to think about.

"Sirius. My dear, *dear* cousin," she returned, contempt dripping from every word. "I hear he was your godfather, Harry."

"Yeah. So what are you doing here?"

"What do you think we're doing here? We're going to make an example of you once and for all. No one destroys a part of our master and gets away with it!"

"Oh, really? It seems that we already have...and what's more, we're already planning to destroy the others as well ... and then your dear~~dear~~ master himself!"

It was Ginny who saw that Lucius Malfoy had pointed his wand at Harry, who was oblivious to everything but Bellatrix. "Harry! Watch out!" she called, pointing her wand at Malfoy. "*Expelliarmus!*"

Her spell hit the elder Malfoy square in the chest and knocked him flat after throwing him several feet; Harry and the others gave her a surprised look, then returned their icy gazes to Bellatrix. "You deliberately distracted me!" he shot at her.

"Of course I did, Potter. A perfect way to blindside you," she gloated.

"But it didn't work. My wife saw what was coming and prevented it."

"Oh, is this *spunky* little redhead your wife?" Bellatrix's voice was like poisoned honey as she made the adjective "spunky" sound like an insult. "How sweet! How long has that been going on?"

"None of your business," Harry snapped back. "Now I suggest you think twice about attacking us. I've already informed the Order and they're on their way ... not to mention every Auror in London will be converging on this spot within moments."

"A bluff, Potter," she sneered. "You and your companions are all alone."

"Fine. Believe that if you like." The next thing any of them knew, several pops were heard, indicative of several wizards Apparating into view ... among them Remus Lupin, "Mad-Eye" Moody, and various other members of the Order of the Phoenix as well as several assorted Aurors he worked with, not all of them known to him either by name or on sight.

But that was only the beginning. Moments later, the whooshing of many brooms and further pops indicated the arrival of yet more reinforcements, including that of former members of the D.A., otherwise known as Dumbledore's Army, formed at Hogwarts during the tyrannical regime of former Ministry official Dolores Umbridge. Harry smiled as he noted the presence of Seamus Finnigan, Neville Longbottom, Angelina Johnson and the Patil twins. Those were all he had the presence of mind to notice, although he was sure there were others present.

"Alone, are we?" he remarked with as fake a smile as he could muster.

"Damn you, Potter. You're too smart, too lucky, for your own good," Bellatrix cursed. "But sooner or later your luck will run out...and that's when I'll get you! You and your entire band of cronies!"

"I can hardly wait," Harry returned with a deadly smile, barely noticing Lucius Malfoy being helped to his feet by two of his fellow Death Eaters. Nor did he notice that a dementor was sneaking up on him from behind, being once again immersed in his conversation with Bellatrix...by her design again, no doubt. "Especially since I owe you big-time for Sirius. By the way, I suggest you never mention his name again. You aren't worthy of speaking it, much less breathing the same air he did!"

"*Harry!*" This time it was Hermione who called out. "*Behind you!*"

He whirled around and quickly dispatched the dementor with a Stunning Spell before it could reach him; the others, hovering a short distance away, slunk back a safe distance and waited for their chance to catch the great Harry Potter unawares. But Harry wasn't about to allow that.

"Anyone else care to step up?" he asked, brandishing his wand in a threatening manner. "Just try it. We're ready!" Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Ginny beside him, brandishing her own wand in her delicately formed right hand in the same manner, a fierce look on her face and brown eyes blazing with righteous anger at anyone who dared to attack her or her family, particularly her beloved husband.

In spite of himself, Harry had to admire what she had done, dispatching Malfoy with the *Expelliarmus* before he could use any of the Unforgivable Curses on Harry. It seemed that she had already proved herself a valuable ally in battle ... among other things. But those things would have to wait for the moment; they had more important matters to clear up first.

"Very well," Bellatrix reluctantly conceded. "It seems that we are indeed outnumbered...for the moment. But my time will come...and then ... you're mine, Potter! But I'll take care of your companions first so they won't be able to help you."

"Indeed? You intend to do this all by yourself?"

"I will not be by myself then any more than you are now, Potter," Bellatrix spat.

"I'll be right beside her," vowed the younger Crouch, whom Harry couldn't help but think had the look of a psychopath about him. In fact, he wouldn't have been at all surprised if it had been the younger Crouch, a convicted Death Eater, who had conjured the Dark Mark at the Quidditch World Cup in Harry's fourth year, although he had had no idea who had done it at the time.

"I'll take care of your female companions, Potter...starting with your sweet little wife ... not to mention Weasley's little bed-bunny." He darted a glance at Hermione; she mirrored Ginny's glare and pointed her wand warningly, daring him to make a move. "In fact, I shall enjoy showing them what a *real* man feels like!"

Crouch then leered nastily at Ginny; she gave back an icy glare and continued to brandish her wand at the Death Eaters as if to say, "Touch me, my husband or any of us here and you die by my hand!"

"You'll have to get past Ron and me first," Harry bit out, his tone freezing the very air.

"Oh, we will, Potter. I assure you, we will," Crouch vowed. "It's only a matter of time." Then he exchanged glances with Bellatrix and the forces of Darkness slunk away ... but all of the good forces knew that they would be back...and most likely when they least expected it.

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Soon all the Dark forces were gone and Harry looked around at everyone, knowing he owed them all a debt of thanks for showing up so quickly. He could only hope they would do so again when a real battle was looming ... such as when Voldemort himself decided to show up.

"Thanks for showing up so quickly, everybody," he told them as a group.

All smiled and there were murmurs of acknowledgment, but it was "Mad-Eye" Moody who stepped up to Harry. "Congratulations, Potter. Masterfully done."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry smiled after their strong handshake. "I appreciate it."

"Sorry, that wasn't me ... although I wish it could have been, from what I've heard about you," Moody confessed. "From what I understand, you are second only to me at putting Dark wizards and witches into Azkaban."

"Well, I've had plenty of practise," Harry revealed. "Nor were all the tactics, strategies or spells I used learned in school."

"Are you sure you don't need any further help?" Moody asked. "We can stick around for a while if you like, just in case Bellatrix and company decide to try again."

"That might be a good idea, if only to be on the safe side. Just the same, we better put the Order, the D.A. and every Auror within Apparating distance on red-alert."

"Excellent idea," Moody enthusiastically agreed. "We'll be off, then. Congratulations on your marriages, Harry, Ron. Every happiness."

All the others present smiled and murmured similar acknowledgments; then the sound of Apparating and brooms whooshing was once again heard as the good forces (some of them, anyway) departed. Harry noted that most of the D.A. members had remained, along with some of the Order and a few Aurors he knew.

"Well, gang, I think the trouble's over for now. Let's get back to bed," Harry called to his married friends. "Gin ..." She stepped up beside him and he steered her back toward the house and their bedroom. All the same, everyone concerned knew that this had only been a skirmish.

Next time the tactics wouldn't stop with a few dementors and Death Eaters attempting to shoot Unforgivable Curses. People were going to get hurt, maybe even killed in the next confrontation; Harry had to prepare for that ... and he had to prepare his three companions as well. But for the moment, things had settled down.

He, Ron and Hermione shared goodnights at their respective bedroom doors; then Harry stepped into the room he shared with Ginny and turned in her direction upon closing the door. She was already undressing; for a moment Harry was transfixed, enjoying every moment of her impromptu strip-tease. Best of all, he knew it was for him alone.

Ginny moved to the center of the bed and lay down again, her red-gold hair streaming over the pillow beneath her head, her eyes heavy-lidded and her voice sultry. "Come

back to bed, luv. We have a honeymoon to finish."

Harry needed no further urging. Within moments he had divested himself of his clothing and joined his wife on the bed, gathering her into his arms and kissing her passionately. After they had happily snogged, then caressed for a while, he lifted her head to face him, a grateful smile on his lips as he rested his cheek on her hair, then gently kissed it, one arm still around her as they lay together. "Thank you for dispatching Malfoy for me, Gin. I might have known he would try something like that."

"My pleasure," Ginny acknowledged. "I told you I would be valuable to you, didn't I?"

"You already are," he assured her. "But it's all the better when you can defend my back as well. And you noticed what that dementor tried to do. That's something you've got to be constantly on the watch for. I can't tell you how many times they've tried it on me." Harry hugged her firmly, then continued. "But I can't promise things will always work out this well. You've got to be ready for literally anything...and Death Eaters, not to mention dementors, are notorious for doing what you least expect ... just when you least expect it."

"Oh, don't worry, my love, I intend to be ready," Ginny assured him with a smile, then lifted Harry's head to face her and moved to kiss him deeply, intent on making him forget everything but her nearness ... and within moments she had succeeded. Not only that, the married lovers remained happily engaged (in more ways than one) for the rest of the night.

Chapter 15: On to Hogwarts

Chapter 15 of 27

The four go to Hogwarts to discuss the next step in their quest with McGonagall and meet a strangely familiar young boy in the process.

It was at breakfast that they made plans to return to Hogwarts to find the fifth Horcrux, although that wasn't all they talked about. At least one of the other things Harry decided to bring up was the time in the Pensieve when he had fallen into what turned out to be Snape's worst memory and found his father James and Sirius tormenting him by turning him upside down with a Levicorpus Spell.

Harry had always been proud to be compared with his father up to that point but, after seeing the way Snape had been treated, had a better understanding of why the one-time Potions master had hated James and Sirius so much. Also of why he disliked *him* so much. It was most likely because Harry reminded him so much of James. It was only after he had had a long talk with Sirius about his experiences in Snape's memory that Harry had regained even a semblance of his original respect for his father.

Sirius had said he wasn't proud of what they had done, but that a lot of people did cruel, thoughtless things at fifteen that they would never do as an adult ... and that James had eventually matured (by their seventh year, actually), and that was when he and Lily had finally begun dating ... and married almost straight out of school, approximately June 1979. Harry had been born just over a year later.

But it wasn't only that, that he had asked questions about: there had been one point at that Lily Evans, his future mother, had come upon James and Sirius dangling Snape upside down and verbally chastised them within an inch of their lives. The intensity of her dislike for them at the time made Harry wonder how she and James could ever have fallen in love, much less married.

If Harry had been asked at that point to judge as to the likelihood of his parents getting together, much less his being born, he would have come out with a resounding, "No way in bloody hell!" Come to think of it, if he'd been told when he first met Ginny that he would eventually fall in love with her and marry her, he would have most likely have made a sour face and said, "Never in a million years!" Just went to show what strange twists life could take sometimes....

There was something else that had nagged at him for some time, and he finally recalled just what. Lily's hair had been the same red-gold as Ginny's, and they resembled one another so closely that they could have been sisters. It was obvious that Harry shared James's penchant for beautiful redheads. The main difference between Ginny and his mother was the colour of their eyes: Ginny's a soft, warm brown, Lily's a bright green...eyes that he had inherited.

It was obviously no coincidence that Harry had fallen in love with a beautiful redhead just as his father had ... and at a crucial point in each of their relationships, the prospect for its blossoming into love, much less marriage, had looked bleak, to put it mildly. But destiny had obviously had other plans...and was he ever glad of that!

The best Harry could hope for now was that he and Ginny would, unlike his own parents, both survive to raise their child...then a third generation of witchcraft and wizardry would begin once that child began their studies at Hogwarts.

Who knew, Harry might even become the D.A.D.A. teacher and teach his own son or daughter! That is, if he didn't become an Auror or pro Quidditch player.... They'd just have to wait and see how their quest turned out. If he and his companions could manage to destroy all the Horcruxes and vanquish the greatest Dark wizard in a century as planned, Harry would have truly incredible stories to tell!

That reminded him, he would have to send Armand, Ginny's owl, to Hogwarts as soon as possible to let McGonagall know that they were coming and what they wanted to discuss with her. That is, once Armand returned from his previous assignment to the Burrow. In the meantime, they had to figure out the best course of action to locate the next Horcrux and destroy it as soon as possible upon arrival.

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Armand returned an hour after they had decided this, somewhat windblown but otherwise all right, and as soon as Harry and company had composed a letter to Hogwarts Headmistress Minerva McGonagall outlining their plans and requesting a meeting with her to discuss how to go about their search for the next Horcrux, they sent him out again. Once he was gone on his new assignment, they took steps to prepare for their journey. Since it was late spring, they decided to go to Hogwarts on their brooms and stay as long as necessary to accomplish their purpose, since the school had accommodations for guests. (The dormitories were reserved for the regular live-in students.)

They spent a good part of the next few hours discussing how they would treat any students they happened to run into, particularly if it was pointed out that Harry and company were former students themselves...and most distinguished alumni at that for having successfully battled the Dark Lord so many times. Harry had no doubt that at least one point he and his friends would be surrounded by rapt first-years (among others) wanting to hear every detail of their adventures. Provided they weren't too busy with their search, that is.

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Harry awakened to Ginny gently shaking him; he looked up at the window and saw Armand hovering outside. He got up and opened the window, noting the envelope in the owl's beak as Armand flew in, then landed on Ginny's shoulder. He carefully extricated the envelope and opened it upon recognising McGonagall's handwriting.

From the Desk of Minerva McGonagall

Dear Mr. Potter:

We would be honoured to have you and your friends visit our school, especially if it will help further your efforts to find and destroy all the Horcruxes. I have made arrangements for you all to stay in some of our guest quarters. I look forward to our discussion and hope you will see fit to say a few words to our current students while you're here. Please send an owl with all the details surrounding your arrival at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Headmistress

Harry's grin widened with every passing moment; he looked up to see Ginny giving him a questioning look. He gave her the note, and after she had perused it for a while, began to grin herself. "Now all we have to do is owl Ron and Hermione to meet us there," she told him. "Were you thinking to tell the students of our adventures so far while we're there?"

"Among other things," he remarked cryptically.

"Are demonstrations of your magical abilities included in those 'other things,' such as Transfiguration and Patronuses?"

"Quite possibly," Harry remarked with an enigmatic smile.

Ginny returned the smile. "Of course, it's entirely possible that they'll ask to see some demonstrations of what myself and the others can do as well, particularly if it's stuff they haven't covered yet ... that should be especially fascinating to the first-years."

"That's for sure," Harry agreed with a hearty laugh that warmed Ginny's heart. With all he had been through in his life, there had been precious little for him to laugh or even smile about ... but since they had reunited and gotten married, she had made it her business to do anything and everything in her power to make him happy and planned to continue to do so for the duration of their married life.

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After sending Armand off again with their answer, they made preparations for a long stay at the school, sending their belongings on ahead via the Floo Network, warning McGonagall to be expecting them through the fireplace in her office...then have someone take them to their assigned quarters. They weren't sure how Ron and Hermione were going to do things, but what mattered was that they were ready when they needed to be.

The morning after sending the owl off again, Harry and Ginny rose early and mounted their brooms, flying side-by-side the whole way and periodically slowing down in order to either hold hands for a time or even kiss briefly, holding onto the brooms with one hand. Because of this, it took somewhat longer than usual, but what mattered was that the trip had been an enjoyable one.

Almost as soon as they dismounted their brooms, Ron and Hermione appeared to greet them. After smiles and hugs all around, they went to deposit their brooms in their quarters and check in with McGonagall. On the way they passed some first-years on the way to classes; the children looked wide-eyed with shock and wonder at their presence. However, only one had the courage to approach them ... a small, skinny boy of eleven with unruly black hair and glasses that reminded Harry very much of himself at that age. It was also incredible that they could be so small. Had he ever been that small or that scared?

"Excuse me, sir. Are you actually Harry Potter?"

"Yes. This is my wife, Ginny, and my friends Ron and Hermione Weasley. We were all once students here, just like you."

"We've heard so much about all of you. I hope you'll be talking to us at some point about your adventures."

"Don't worry, Headmistress McGonagall's already arranged that," Harry assured the boy with a smile.

"Thank you, sir. We can hardly wait! See you later. We've got to get to class now." With one last smile at him, one that totally stunned Harry because of its similarity to another, more well-known smile, the boy rejoined his other classmates, who had remained at a safe distance from the new arrivals.

Once the children were gone, Harry voiced the thoughts he had been having earlier. "I don't recall our ever being that small ... or that scared ... as a first-year. Did you see how the other kids kept their distance?"

"I'm sure they'll eventually learn to relax around us if we're here long enough," Hermione pointed out. "Especially if we tell them about a few of our *mis*adventures." All present laughed at that, then began to make their way toward McGonagall's office.

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As they recalled from years before, a password was required for them to be able to pass. Harry couldn't help wondering if McGonagall's were as imaginative as Dumbledore's had been. That reminded him, maybe he could visit with the late former headmaster's portrait while there and bring him up to date on their lives so far. For the time being, however, they had to concentrate on the business they had come here to discuss.

Harry and the others stood outside the door and knocked; McGonagall's voice came back. "Come on in, Harry. Bring your wife and your friends with you."

Harry couldn't imagine how McGonagall could have known it was them, but didn't question her ability, simply opened the door and went inside, followed by his wife and his friends.

"Harry, how good to see you again! You too, Ginny, Ron, Hermione. I hope you've all been well and happy."

"Can't complain," Harry returned with a smile. "But this isn't a social call...at least not entirely. We've got to get down to business. I'm sure you remember how I mentioned in my last post that we've determined the location of the fifth Horcrux...and that it's in the school library, in one of the books. It's simply a matter of finding it ... but Hermione has a pretty good idea where to look, so it shouldn't take as long as we expect."

"Most likely," McGonagall agreed, not smiling but her eyes softening. "Of course we'll do everything we can to help you. Just say the word."

"Thanks, Professor," Harry remarked.

"Minerva," she corrected. "You're all of age now, so you may all call me by my Christian name."

"All right ... Minerva," Harry replied. "Now, if we may get started ..."

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And so it was arranged. Harry and company would take the necessary postgraduate courses to give them as much of an advantage over Voldemort as possible. Unfortunately Harry saw that one of those skills was Occlumency, the ability to block his mind off from his adversary. He remembered all too well the fiasco with Snape and hoped that whoever the instructor was this time would actually strengthen him this time instead of weakening him.

Fortunately he had become a highly skilled Legilimens during the last four years (another necessary skill), so that was one less thing he had to worry about. Just the same, it might be a good idea to take a refresher course to see if he could strengthen his mind-reading skills. Harry had warned McGonagall that they might have to pick up and leave at a moment's notice; she nodded understandingly and said in that event, arrangements would be made to continue their studies via Portkey.

Their course materials could be turned into one and would automatically be sent to the school for grading upon completion and their stating its intended destination ... then returned to them the same way, wherever they happened to be. Far safer than owl post, since owls could be intercepted and their cargo confiscated.

For the time being, however, they would remain here as long as it took to discover and destroy the fifth Horcrux. Harry had every intention of using the same protective spell as in the cemetery to not only protect himself and his friends but anyone who might be within the danger zone of the Dark magic inherent in the Horcrux ... as well as the other books in the library, many of them very old, of great historical value and thus irreplaceable.

The Hogwarts librarian, Madam Pince, did a double take upon seeing Harry and company enter, but had been informed earlier that day by McGonagall that they would be coming and to do all she possibly could to assist them in their search for the book/Horcrux should they need it. Since Hermione was the one who knew where the book was likely to be found. Harry and Ginny were behind her, hand-in-hand; Ron was walking beside his wife and doing the same.

It was a far longer walk than they remembered it being, but it had to be kept in mind that they were older now and not as full of vinegar as they used to be. Not that they were old, by any means...only in their twenties, after all ... but by no means were they children anymore, either. After another interminable time walking, both Harry and Ginny were wondering if they were ever going to reach their intended destination; it seemed like they'd been walking forever.

He finally decided to gently touch Hermione's mind and ask her how far they still had to go; after her initial surprise at his mind-touch, she mentally assured him that it wasn't much further. However, he wasn't to destroy anything until and unless she confirmed that it was indeed what they were looking for.

They had passed many of the current students, glad to see that the school colours for each were still the same, particularly the red and gold for Gryffindor. Harry couldn't help wondering for a moment if the children they had met earlier were in Gryffindor House, Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff. The Slytherin robes were green and white, and the children had not been wearing those colours.

In fact, Harry couldn't recall just what colours they *had* been wearing, just that they weren't green and white. Also, Slytherins had never been accused of fear or shyness; quite the contrary. In fact, the majority had been quite outspoken, sometimes rudely so ... in fact, they rarely missed a chance to insult or discredit anyone from another House, particularly Gryffindor. Harry was particularly glad that Draco Malfoy was nowhere around right now, particularly after what he had attempted to do just prior to Dumbledore's death.

He also couldn't help wondering just when the Death Eaters and dementors were going to come after them again. Since they were at Hogwarts searching for another Horcrux, it wouldn't surprise Harry if they attempted something while he and his friends were here. In that event, how quickly could he expect reinforcements to show up? Even the most sophisticated of broomsticks could only go so fast; only those who Apparated or came by Portkey could be expected to show up at a moment's notice ... or even a *few* moments' notice.

Even at that, they could only Apparate as far as the school gates; Apparition could not be done within the school grounds proper, as Hermione had reminded them time and again. However, as far as he knew, there was no reason those coming by Portkey couldn't make it into the grounds proper to help him and his friends should they need it.

He was brought back to reality by Hermione's voice. "I think I found it! Just let me check it first." Harry looked up to find her with the book already in her hands, examining it carefully with her wand; after a time she looked up at him, beaming. "Here it is, Harry." She handed it to him. "This is the Horcrux."

"Great," he returned with a grin. "Now where should we go to destroy it?"

"As far away from the buildings as possible, I think ... so let's get out of the library, then we'll go from there."

She again led the way, since she was most familiar with the library layout; about fifteen minutes later they stepped outside and closed the heavy side doors behind them. Another long walk later, she deemed it safe to destroy the Horcrux. Unfortunately they were unaware that unfriendly eyes were watching them; Wormtail and Crouch Jr. were hiding unobtrusively in the ten-story North Tower, which had a large window overlooking the grounds.

"Do you think they've actually found the Horcrux we were sent here to protect, Barty?" Wormtail asked.

Crouch pointed his wand in the direction of Harry and company. "Unfortunately, yes. The Dark Lord is definitely *not* going to be pleased with us. All we can do now is double the security on the remaining Horcruxes."

"Should we not try to stop them?" Wormtail asked.

"How? We cannot Apparate within the grounds, as you know...and our broomsticks are hidden a considerable distance from our hiding place here. Nor do we have a Portkey to transport us to their location. By the time we did arrive, the Horcrux would most likely already be destroyed. It would seem that Potter and his cohorts are one step ahead of us *again*, at least for now. However, we must not allow them access to the remaining Horcruxes, that are in our friend Nagini and the Dark Lord himself, no matter what we have to do to prevent it. Meanwhile, it's best that we get back to our broomsticks, return to the Dark Lord and make our report."

Wormtail nodded mutely, his heart pounding in fear as he thought of Voldemort's likely reaction to their unfavourable report. Despite the fact that the only mistake made was in timing, they were likely to be severely punished...via the Cruciatus Curse, at the very least. The two men left the tower room and within half an hour were on their brooms, having lifted the Invisibility Charm earlier placed on them, our heroes having been unaware of their presence ... at least for the moment. But that would not be the case for long...and meanwhile, they had left their calling card hovering in the air above the North Tower: the Dark Mark.

* * * * *

By the time Hermione deemed it safe to place the Horcrux on the ground and prepare to destroy it, they were at least a quarter of a mile from the castle. Harry warned the others to stay a safe distance away even while placing the protective spell earlier used in the cemetery around them ... then around himself, even as he pointed his wand at the Dark object and called out, "*Destructo!*"

Again a thunderclap and a bolt of lightning was heard and seen; the book/Horcrux was now only a pile of smouldering ash ten feet away. But again, Harry seemed uneasy, even though he couldn't be sure as to just why ... until he heard piercing screams from the girls. He looked up, following their white faces, then trembling hands, pointing to something in the sky...and that was when white-hot pain seared through his scar, making him cry out and clutch his forehead. The Dark Mark! They must have been followed here and secretly observed; that was the only way the forces of Darkness could have known of their errand.

"W-what do you think it means, Harry?" Ginny wondered as they made their way back to the castle.

"It means that Voldemort knows that the fifth Horcrux is gone and that we'd better be expecting company in the not-too-distant future...and *not* friendly company, either. We've got to warn McGonagall immediately so she can take steps to protect the students. Let's go. There's no time to lose!" With that, he grabbed Ginny's hand and they took off running; Ron grabbed Hermione's hand and followed suit.

Even as they ran, Harry made a mental note to contact everyone who had come before so they could be in place by the time Voldemort and company arrived...and he had

no doubts but that this time, the Dark Lord would show up personally, considerably weakened but still fighting mad. Just as he had no doubts but that Voldemort would pull with him every Death Eater and dementor he could muster for his side, since this upcoming battle would not simply be a skirmish but an all-out war between Good and Evil. Consequently Harry had to make sure that Good and Evil were evenly matched so that they had a fair chance at victory without too many casualties.

Chapter 16: Rematch/Death of Voldemort/Ginny's Injury

Chapter 16 of 27

The Final Battle on the grounds of Hogwarts. Ginny and many others are injured, but what matters is that Voldemort and several Death Eaters are either killed or captured.

The four were breathless by the time they arrived at McGonagall's office, bursting in unannounced, apologising even as they did so. "Minerva! Sorry ... to barge in like this, but ... something very bad has happened!"

"Harry, slow down! Catch your breath before you try to speak!" McGonagall admonished.

"Sorry again ... but we just saw the Dark Mark! It's ... hovering over the North Tower!"

"Oh, sweet Merlin ..." she murmured under her breath. "The students!"

"We've got to ... see that they're protected ... contact the Order ... the D.A. ... Aurors ..."

"They will be contacted, I assure you, Harry. Now please calm yourself or else you'll be useless, both to yourself and us."

It took several minutes, but finally everyone had managed to calm themselves and settle their heartbeats and breathing into more-or-less normal patterns. McGonagall conjured up some water for her unexpected guests to drink and bade them sit down in the chairs in front of her desk. Since there were only two, the girls had to sit on their men's laps...but considering the fact they were all newlyweds, no one minded.

"Now," McGonagall continued softly. "Suppose you tell me what happened."

"We had just destroyed the fifth Horcrux when I ... heard the girls scream. That was when I followed their pointed fingers and saw the ... Dark Mark over the North Tower. Some ... Death Eaters must have been placed here in an attempt to protect the Horcrux, but it turned out they couldn't ... so they must have left to tell Voldemort. He's bound to be ... fighting mad because of this, so we've got to be ready for him when he comes. Be as ready as we can be to fight both the Death Eaters and ... dementors."

"As I said, Harry, we shall be. Wait here." With that, she grabbed a handful of Floo powder, stepped into her fireplace and said, "Number twelve, Grimmauld Place!"

McGonagall was gone for roughly half an hour, but when she returned, her demeanour was that of someone who had just had the weight of the world taken from her shoulders. "Everyone has been notified, Harry," she told him. "They assured me that they're ready to assist us whenever we say the word. Now to take steps to protect the students."

She clicked on a small button on her desk, then began to speak. *All students of all Houses and years ... this is Headmistress Minerva McGonagall. I have just been informed that we will soon be invaded by the forces of Darkness and are therefore in grave danger. Classes are suspended until further notice. All of you return to your dormitories immediately and remain there until I or another faculty member says otherwise. Do not leave the dormitories under any circumstances. I repeat, do not leave the dormitories. If you do, we cannot guarantee your safety.*

Upon completion of her announcement, McGonagall released the button and lifted her head to face Harry and company. "I have done all I can do, Harry. It's up to you and the others now."

"I know, Minerva, and we'll be ready," Harry assured her. "All of us."

Just then Ginny took a swig from her bottle of Anti-Nausea Potion since her stomach had begun churning dangerously and she didn't want to throw up in front of McGonagall. Just the same, the older witch suspected something and wasn't afraid to voice her concerns.

"Is something wrong, my dear?" she asked Ginny. "Are you not feeling well?"

Ginny was torn between her desire to tell her of her pregnancy and remaining by Harry's side to defend his back; the latter eventually won out. "I'm all right ... Minerva," she insisted.

The Hogwarts Headmistress frowned skeptically but didn't question her. "If you say so. We had better go outside and prepare to meet our reinforcements. They told me the majority of them would be Apparating to save time; as a result, we'll have to meet them at the gates and let them in ... then watch for the rest, who will be coming via Portkey."

"I just hope Voldemort and company don't beat them here," Harry put in as they headed down the road in front of the castle, on their way to the gates, upon leaving McGonagall's office. It took several minutes for them to make it outside, but once outside, they made good time. There were several dozen witches and wizards of varying ages and colours of robes, along with the majority of the Aurors Harry worked with standing at the gates. The D.A. must be coming via Portkey, so he had to watch for them ... and mentally directed his wife to do so as well.

McGonagall pointed her wand at the gates, said, "Open," and they did so, allowing the large group of witches and wizards outside to come in. Once everyone was in, she said, "Close," and the gates closed ... and locked. When they arrived back at the courtyard, they were gratified to see that virtually the entire D.A. membership was there. Upon reaching them and looking around for Angelina Johnson and the Patil twins, Harry stepped up to Neville Longbottom and asked where they were.

"The Patil twins, family emergency. They had to go back to India yesterday. As for Angelina ..." Neville's voice trailed off ominously.

"What about Angelina?" Harry persisted.

"Some of the Order went to her home, concerned when she didn't answer their summons. They found her ..."

"Found her? What happened?"

"They ... detected Dark magic residue in the wreckage of her house upon arrival. Mad-Eye says that ... either Voldemort himself or some Death Eaters ... got her. She and both her parents are ... dead."

"Sweet Merlin ..." Hermione murmured, horrified. Ron looked as though he had been hit by a strong Stunning Spell; he said not a word, simply stood beside his wife, clutching her hand tightly, speechless with shock and horror. As for Ginny, she stood beside her husband, clutching his hand in a death grip, also speechless with shock and horror.

Harry closed his eyes in pain. He had known and liked Angelina. She was an excellent Quidditch player, almost as good as he was ... not to mention a talented witch, particularly in potion-making; that had never been his strong suit...at least not until he had obtained the Half-Blood Prince's Advanced Potions textbook. Now she and her parents had become the first casualties of this newest war ... and would not be the last.

"Neville, do you know if ... Angelina had any other family besides her parents?" Harry wondered. "If so, they'll have to be notified."

Neville shook his head sadly. "She was an ... only child, I'm afraid."

"Dear God," Harry murmured, almost too quietly for even those nearest him to hear.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Neville apologised.

"You have nothing to be sorry about, Neville. None of us could have foreseen the killing starting so soon. This is Voldemort's fault...and I'll see that he pays dearly for every life he takes, every drop of blood he sheds!"

Just then, an ominous voice laced with quiet malevolence reached their ears. "Indeed, Harry? It'll be most interesting to see how you do it."

Harry and company whirled around to see Voldemort standing there, less than thirty feet away from them.

"Voldemort!" was all he had the chance to say before the Dark Lord pointed his wand directly at his adversary and prepared to shoot the Cruciatus Curse at him. He was surrounded by Death Eaters, dementors and werewolves, most prominently Fenrir Greyback, Bellatrix Lestrange and Barty Crouch Jr. Lucius Malfoy didn't seem to be in evidence; perhaps the *Expelliarmus* spell Ginny had hit him with had affected him more than he let on. After all, he was no longer a young man.

"So, we meet again, Potter," Crouch hissed. Bellatrix hadn't spoken yet, although it was not necessary. Harry could see the hatred of him and his friends in her blazing eyes as she pointed her wand in his direction, also prepared to shoot an Unforgivable Curse at him ... preferably the *Avada Kedavra*.

"Lay a hand on either of the girls and you'll regret it, Crouch," Harry returned, his voice quiet and deadly.

"Really. And just how do you plan to stop me?" Crouch shot back.

"That's for me to know and you to find out." Ordinarily what Harry was doing would be nothing less than foolhardy, what with several Death Eaters' wands pointed straight at him, but fortunately for him, his companions were prepared to do whatever was necessary to protect him.

Ginny, in fact, had her wand pointed straight at Crouch, while Hermione had hers pointed at Bellatrix. As for Ron, he had followed his wife's directions and was helping her hold Bellatrix at bay. But how long they could do so, neither could have said. They just hoped they could do it long enough to give Harry the upper hand.

"Where are your ... reinforcements, Potter?" Crouch taunted him.

"Oh, they're here, you may have no doubt of that," Harry threw back, even now seeing some of them creeping up behind the Death Eaters. Unfortunately, there were also several dementors and werewolves behind the D.A. and Order members. Harry didn't dare shout a warning to them, so he sent a mental message to Neville and Mad-Eye to be careful, that dementors and werewolves were trying to sneak up on them, trusting them to spread the word to the others with them.

He couldn't watch what was happening to them, being too occupied with Voldemort and his trained killers, though he did catch some crying out and flashes of light as wands shot waves of debilitating energy toward the adversaries, eventually driving them back a safe distance. For a while it was quiet, then Harry spoke again. "Told you."

"And I seem to recall telling *you* that one day your luck would run out, Potter...and that day has come," Bellatrix finally said, her voice fairly dripping hatred and contempt.

"And as I have said before, no one destroys part of our master's soul and gets away with it!" With that, she pointed her wand at him and shouted, "*Crucio*!"

"Harry!" Ginny shouted, prompting him to move aside just in time even as she pointed her own wand in Bellatrix's direction and shouted, "*Petrificus Totalus*!"

Unfortunately the spell missed Bellatrix and hit one of the other Death Eaters, Harry wasn't sure which one ... but this gave him time to point his own wand and shout the same thing Ginny had. Bellatrix screamed as the spell hit her, then froze like a statue, unable to move.

"You'll pay for that, Potter," Crouch snarled, lifting his own wand up and preparing to use it.

"Why don't you just shut it, Crouch? You're becoming bloody annoying," Ron interjected, his wand now pointing toward the young Death Eater.

"Yeah? And what do you intend to do about it, Weasley?"

"You'll be sorry you asked that," Ron returned, his tone becoming just as deadly as Harry's as he pointed his wand at Crouch. "*Crucio*!"

The spell hit Crouch square in the chest and he fell to the ground, screaming and hissing like a snake, writhing in agony as Ron held him captive with his wand ... and shortly thereafter, Hermione's joined it.

By this time, Voldemort had stepped closer to Harry and the two were exchanging murderous looks at each other. "You and your friends are entirely too cocky for your own good, Potter. That is what is going to get you killed."

"Oh, really? We'll see about that. I can't afford to die, you see ... not before I kill your snake *and you*! And I assure you, I *will* kill you both! I've got a lot of vengeance that's built up in me over the years, over all the innocents you've killed, including my parents...and now my friend Angelina and her family. If you push me too far, I'll use some of that and make you sorry you ever crossed paths with me!"

"Really? I assure you, Potter, the wizard hasn't been born who can best me!"

"You forget the prophecy, *my Lord*. He already has ... and he is standing before you right now! Prepare to die!" Harry then lifted his wand, pointing it at his adversary and prepared to use the same spell Voldemort had used to kill his parents ... and attempted to use on him as a helpless baby.

"No, Potter, *you* prepare to die!" Voldemort shot back, his wand pointing directly at Harry's chest, intending to hit him right in the heart. But before he had been able to do so, he was distracted by Bellatrix's scream. He had attempted to ignore it, but in the end could not...and this was his downfall, literally.

"*Avada Kedavra*!" Harry shouted, his wand pointing directly to the Dark Lord's chest. The killing energy shot out and struck him right where the heart would be in a normal person. Voldemort let out a blood-chilling scream and dropped his wand, collapsing to the ground and lying still.

For a long time there was deathly silence, then the remaining Death Eaters came to life. "Get Potter! He's killed our master!" screamed Macnair, who had been nearest

Voldemort when he fell but unable to catch him before he hit the ground. But to their shock and dismay, the D.A. members and the Order swiftly and efficiently dispatched the remainder of the Dark forces, including Macnair, via a mixture of Body-Bind spells and Petrification. Or so they thought ...

Unknown to anyone, Crouch had been fighting with every ounce of his strength to resist the Cruciatus Curse, and before anyone could stop him, he weakly lifted his wand and pointed it at the nearest person ... Ginny. "*Imperio!*" he croaked.

Ginny screamed and collapsed; Harry realised what had happened once her grip had relaxed. "Ginny!" He wondered who could have done it, then looked around from where he was kneeling next to Ginny's prone body and spotted Crouch, still in agony but obviously strong enough to fight off the curse, if only for a short time.

"You may have killed the Dark Lord, Potter, but I have control of your wife! Release Bellatrix and myself or else I'll make her kill you ... then your friends and herself!"

This time Harry literally saw red, hatred welling up inside him like lava in an active volcano. He was mad as hell and wasn't going to take this anymore ... particularly not when it involved the woman he loved, the mother of his child. *That does it, Crouch,* he thought murderously. *You had your chance and you blew it. I had intended to spare you and simply put you back in Azkaban ... but you just forfeited your life with what you've done to Ginny!*

Harry didn't say anything verbally this time, simply allowed his actions to speak for him. *Avada Kedavra!* he thought, pointing his wand at Crouch's back, just ten feet away, aiming for his heart. Crouch screamed and fell back onto the ground as the killing energy from Harry's nonverbal curse hit him. He rolled over face-down and was still.

After that Harry returned his attention to Ginny; he leaned down and gathered her into his arms, resting her head on his nearest shoulder. "Gin ... Honey ... Speak to me! Tell me you're all right!"

For a while she simply lay limp on his shoulder, her eyes closed and her face pale, but then she spoke. Almost too quietly for anyone to hear, but Harry did. "Harry ... Harry, what hit me? I felt a sharp pain in my chest, then screamed and collapsed."

"Crouch hit you with the Imperius Curse. His plan was to control you, make you kill me, Ron and Hermione ... but I stopped him dead. Literally."

"You ... mean ..."

"Damn bloody right. I had intended to spare him, simply return him to Azkaban, but when he shot you, he forfeited his life right then and there."

"What about ... Voldemort?" she forced out, still cradled in her husband's strong arms.

"I got him," Harry informed her. "He's finished. It's over. The Order and D.A. are mopping up the rest of the Death Eaters, werewolves and dementors." Before he could go on, he found that Ron had joined him and dropped down on his sister's other side.

"Sis? *Sis!* Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Ron. We've done it...we've won! Thanks to Harry."

She then tried to get up but neither of them would allow it. "Oh no, you don't," the latter admonished. "You're too weak to walk just yet. I'm going to carry you to the hospital wing and see that you get checked over...then have Madam Pomfrey give you something for sleep."

"But, Harry ..."

"No buts," he returned firmly. "I want to make sure you and the baby are both going to be healthy." Ginny couldn't argue with that, so she quieted and simply allowed Harry to carry her back to the castle, Ron beside him the whole way. Hermione remained back with the rest of the good forces, helping them cart off the bodies and bring back the injured for treatment. Once that was finished, she would join them in watching over Ginny.

Chapter 17: Aftermath/Talk with Students/Post-Grad Work

Chapter 17 of 27

Harry and company sit in the hospital wing with Ginny while she recovers, soon deciding to have a talk with the current crop of students and another discussion with McGonagall regarding postgrad work to upgrade their magical skills.

Ginny was eventually given a clean bill of health, but still needed bed rest for a time to regain her strength after being hit with such a powerful spell. It wasn't until she was asleep, though, and Harry and company were sitting around her bed, Harry holding one of her hands in both of his, that Madam Pomfrey quietly approached Harry with what she hoped would be good news.

"Mr. Potter, your wife should recover fully, but I found something I think you should know," the Hogwarts nurse informed him.

"She's pregnant," Harry blurted out before the nurse could.

"Yes," came the reply. "How did you know?"

"I found out before this confrontation...but she insisted on accompanying us," he explained.

"That was a very dangerous thing to do," the nurse admonished.

"I know, but it wasn't my decision. We all tried to stop her, but Ginny would have none of it."

For a time there was stunned silence, then Madam Pomfrey spoke again. "Your wife must love you very much indeed if she was willing to risk both her life and that of your child in order to remain by your side in such a dangerous battle."

How well I know, Harry thought even as he raised Ginny's hand to his lips and kissed it, then placed it on his cheek. *have never deserved her love for me ... but nonetheless I could not be ... happier that it is indeed me that she loves. I can only pray that she never stops.*

Some hours passed and both Ron and Hermione were becoming sleepy; but they were still reluctant to leave Ginny's side. However, both Harry and Madam Pomfrey insisted that they do so in order to get the proper rest. The majority of their work was done, but they still had to find Nagini and destroy her before they could rest easy, even for a little while.

Of course, there would probably always be Dark witches and wizards, but as long as Voldemort was out of the picture, and Harry and his fellow Aurors remained vigilant, there shouldn't be too much danger of another Voldemort coming to power. Until then, they would take care of themselves, make sure they were sufficiently rested, healed and fed in order to be ready for the next phase of their quest.

Both of Harry's friends gave him their own form of comfort and encouragement before leaving, however...Hermione with a kiss on the top of his head and Ron with an encouraging pat on the shoulder. Technically, Harry too was exhausted, but refused to leave Ginny's side; finally, Madam Pomfrey suggested that a curtain be pulled around her bed for privacy and he join her there. At least that way he could get some rest and still remain with her as he obviously wanted to.

Ginny did not wake up until well into the next afternoon; Harry was still with her but had managed to get some rest in the meantime, so he was sitting beside her again, holding her hand, when she opened her eyes. Ron and Hermione had returned around ten that morning and were once again on the other side of her bed. All were watching her as she awakened; the first face she saw was that of her concerned husband.

"Harry," she murmured quietly, weakly reaching up to briefly caress his cheek.

"Gin. Welcome back, luv. Don't try to do too much yet. Madam Pomfrey says it'll take a while before you're fully recovered. That Imperius Curse is a very strong spell, and you got hit with a full dose."

"Is ... the baby all right?" she asked.

"The baby's fine," Harry assured her. "Now I think you should acknowledge your brother and sister-in-law. They've spent almost as much time sitting with you as I have."

Ginny weakly turned her head on the pillow to face Ron and Hermione, trying to reach for one of their hands but not quite making it. Hermione covered the rest of the distance. "Just take it easy, Ginny. We'll be here for as long as you need us."

"That goes double for me," Ron put in.

"Thank you ... all," she murmured quietly. "I ... appreciate it, but you didn't have to ... do it."

"The hell we didn't," Ron threw back. "You're my sister ... my *only* sister ... and you're carrying my niece or nephew. I'm bloody well going to see to it that you come through this healthy in spite of your insistence on going where angels fear to tread."

"And you're my friend, Ginny." Hermione tightened her grip on Ginny's other hand; Harry was holding the other one. "I don't want anything more to happen to you."

"I'll try not to ... let anything else happen," Ginny promised, but just the same, all knew that if a situation like this should rise again, they would do it all over again in spite of the dangers involved as long as it meant their fighting side-by-side for the cause of justice.

Harry had naturally informed the rest of the Weasleys, and they were on their way here right now, or more specifically, Arthur and Molly. The rest of Ginny's brothers simply sent their love and best wishes for her speedy recovery since they could not come personally.

Just then, the door banged open and Molly Weasley ran up to her daughter's side. "Ginny, darling! How do you feel?" Harry moved aside to make room for her; Arthur joined her a moment later after a brief conversation with his son-in-law as to his daughter's state of health.

"Fine, Mum," Ginny assured her. "Don't worry."

"Don't worry! How can I not worry when you insist on following Harry into battle despite the fact that you're pregnant?"

"The battle's over now, Mum," Ginny said. "We won. Voldemort is dead ... and the Death Eaters are either in Azkaban or dead. Particularly the one who shot me. Harry got him."

"Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that," Arthur put in. "May I now assume that your quest is over, Harry?"

"Not quite. I still have to find Nagini and destroy her." Harry got down on one knee beside the head of Ginny's bed and put a hand on her shoulder to let her know he was still there. She smiled softly at him, then returned her gaze to her parents' concerned faces.

"But that can wait for a while, can't it?" Arthur asked hopefully.

"For a while," Harry tentatively promised. "But probably just long enough for Ginny to be fully recovered. I don't want Nagini to slip through my fingers if I can help it."

Arthur and Molly both looked frightened for their youngest child's safety, not to mention that of their unborn grandchild, but knew that nothing, not even pregnancy, would stop Ginny from accompanying her husband on whatever quest he decided to embark.

"Meanwhile, we have obligations to fulfill right here. Remember our postgrad courses and our promise to give a talk to the students here about our adventures," Harry reminded them.

"Merlin, that's right," Hermione remarked. "We'd better get moving on them as soon as possible in order to be prepared for anything else that might crop up ... and figure out what we want to discuss with the students."

The warning had been lifted from the school, and classes had resumed once the battlefield had been cleared of any and all residue, both magical and physical. Harry looked up at his closest female friend and best mate's wife. "I thought it might be a good idea for us to have a question and answer session, at least for the first part of it, to find out what the kids are most curious about concerning us and our adventures."

Hermione thought a moment and found nothing to object to in Harry's suggestion, so she nodded and smiled in agreement. Just the same, she was sure that many of the students would be curious as to what had happened during the battle, so they had better be prepared to answer any questions they might come up with. For the time being, however, all that was necessary for them to do was take care of themselves, both emotionally and physically.

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Since their postgraduate work wasn't due to begin for several days (McGonagall had mentioned that it might take up to a week), Harry and company decided to arrange a time to meet with any and all interested students and have a talk with them about their adventures (and *mis*-adventures). After the students gathered in the Great Hall, the four began with the aforementioned Q&A session to find out what the students were most interested in hearing about.

The top subjects were as follows (not necessarily in order):

Most memorable Quidditch moments; what happened during the Triwizard Tournament; how the four met and became friends; how their romances began; what was it like to fight the Dark Lord; a general idea of what occurred during the latest (and last) battle; the Yule Ball in fourth year; each one's first date (when, who with, what happened); a memorable time with Malfoy and company, and finally, what it had been like for them as first-years.

Of course, there were other things the students were curious about, but these were the first ones to come to mind. Harry had passed out papers to them, asking them to write down what they would most like to hear about, then pass them back and they would choose which ones via a show of hands. Whichever one garnered the most votes, it would be discussed first.

The final tally for each was out of 105 students (35 from three of the houses and all the years), twelve chose #1, what was it like to fight Voldemort; ten chose #2, what happened at the Triwizard Tournament; eight picked #3, a general idea of what happened in the most recent (and hopefully last) battle; six picked #4, the Yule Ball in fourth year and what happened there; four chose #5, a memorable time with Malfoy and company.

The rest had varied amounts, ranging from four to two votes. However, all concerned were convinced that they would be lucky to get through half of what was listed. Some of the things had been pleasant, some of them horrendously traumatic, particularly the number one choice. However, Harry could see in the children's faces how much they wanted to hear all about it, so he would have to somehow dredge up the strength and give them what they wanted.

He sighed, not fond of the idea of recalling any of the times he had fought Voldemort. On the other hand, it had been said that it could be therapeutic to talk about a personally traumatic experience, if one could manage to bring themselves to do so, so he decided to begin the actual discussion by relating what had happened near the end of the Triwizard Tournament seven years back...the year Voldemort had been reborn.

Harry finally swallowed hard and squared his shoulders, opening his mouth to speak ... but nothing came out. Finally Ron patted his shoulder reassuringly, then Hermione squeezed his hand encouragingly. However, it was what Ginny did that helped motivate him the most: she put an arm around him and squeezed him, then stood on her tiptoes to brush her lips across his right ear and murmur, "We can make it through this if we draw strength from each other, my love. Take my strength."

Harry looked up at the sea of expectant young faces waiting for him to speak, spread out like a living blanket before him. Suddenly he had a brainstorm and began looking for the boy he had met earlier...the boy who had reminded him so much of himself. Finally he located him in the front row center, not twenty feet away. Harry's eyes met those of the boy, and then he spoke.

"Sorry to take so long to get going. Bear with me. I ask only one thing: would the boy in the front row center seat please stand up and introduce himself?"

The boy seemed frozen for a second, then made himself stand up. "M-my name is James ... Adolphus ... Black," he finally finished after a long pause, during which he had swallowed hard and drew himself up to his full height. "I'm a first-year Gryffindor."

Upon hearing that, all four of the friends looked at each other. Dear gods, was it possible? Had Sirius not been the last Black after all? Harry had to find out. Was this boy Sirius's son? If so, who was his mother and where was she now? Had Sirius known of his son's existence? If he had, it was a secret Sirius had never shared, not even with Harry, even as close as they eventually became ... but why wouldn't he?

Surely he would know how happy Harry would be to know that Sirius had not been totally left out of the romance and children game. Sirius was dead, however, and since there was unlikely to be anyone left to ask about it, it was highly probable that the full details of same would remain a mystery for all time. That is, unless Sirius's former lover was willing to talk about their one-time relationship and how it had come about.

"May I ask your parents' names?" Harry asked, as gently as he could because he could see how self-conscious, if not totally petrified, the boy was.

"My mother's name is Rose ... she's a witch. I was told that my father's name was Sirius. I was also told that he was a ... great wizard, a member of an ancient ... and very noble pure-blood family. My mum and dad parted before I was born. I never met him, never knew him, although Mum told me that she kept him ... up-to-date on me from the moment I was born. Pictures, letters ..." Young James swallowed hard and made himself continue.

"They had been ... engaged when my mum became pregnant with me. I was told later that my dad had been accused of ... killing several people and had been put into Azkaban ... the wizarding prison. She had ... wanted to visit him there, but he had told her he didn't want her anywhere near such a ... horrible place. She could never ... bring herself to marry anyone because of this and raised me virtually by herself. Then, just recently I heard that my dad had ... died a few years after escaping from Azkaban."

Was murdered, is more accurate, Harry thought, and it was my fault. I in effect lured him to the Department of Mysteries to be the sacrificial lamb for Voldemort and his ilk! It was best for the boy if he didn't know that, however. Surely what he already knew was tough enough for an eleven-year-old to deal with without piling more on top of it. But it might make the boy feel better if Harry could manage to tell him that Sirius had been his godfather. He made a mental note to seek the boy out at the first opportunity and tell him, especially of where the name "James" had surely come from: Sirius's best friend, Harry's father. "Where were you born, James?" Harry asked, even more gently ... and the answer he got was even more of a shock.

"Godric's Hollow, the Muggle village ... They have a ... small wizarding population. However, we live in a small flat in the ... North London suburb of ... Hampstead now."

Hampstead! In spite of himself, Harry felt as though he had been punched in the stomach and all the air forced out of him. Hampstead was less than five miles from Grimmauld Place, the site of Sirius's family home! Had Sirius known how close his son was to him? If Harry had known this before, he would have seen to it that the boy inherited a share of his father's estate upon Sirius's death.

However, in the wizarding world, it was forbidden to bequeath anything to an illegitimate child, and Sirius had surely known this, so he had left it to Harry, his godson. Just the same, Harry was seriously thinking of approaching James Black's mother at some point and offering her some of her late lover's fortune, if only to help her son ... Sirius's son! He even considered telling this Rose, Sirius's former lover and the mother of his son, all the details of Sirius's having been framed for murder, then giving her the option of telling young James the full story at her discretion.

"Thank you for the ... information, James. I will ... get back with you later. Now it's time to start discussing what we came here to discuss. You may sit down." Young James smiled timidly and resumed his seat. "Well, here goes. Better late than never. Some of you may know that You-Know-Who was reborn some years ago. But what you are unlikely to know was that I was there when it happened. It took a servant's flesh, his father's bone and my blood to bring him back."

One child, a young girl who reminded Harry very much of a younger Hermione, raised her hand. Harry bade her stand up and introduce herself. "Araminta Collingsworth. I'm a first-year Ravenclaw. My mum is a witch and my dad is an Auror. This is my question: why was your blood needed, Mr. Potter?"

"Because I was You-Know-Who's sworn enemy, the only one who had ever survived the Killing Curse. You see, he had...killed my parents when I was just a baby, a little over a year old ... and had tried to ... kill me. But instead, the curse rebounded on him and he lost not only his powers but his mortal body as well. After that he ... went into hiding and no more was heard from him until ... seven years ago."

Another hand went up in the second row, a young boy of approximately twelve with hazel eyes and reddish-brown hair. Again Harry asked him to stand up and introduce himself, then ask his question. "I'm Montgomery O'Donnell. I'm a second-year Hufflepuff. My dad is Irish and my mum is Scottish. He is a wizard and my mum is a Healer at St. Mungo's. My question is this: What exactly is the Killing Curse?"

"It is one of the three so-called 'Unforgivable' Curses. They are so named because the use of any one of them is punishable by a life sentence in Azkaban. The first one is called the *Imperius* Curse...the Controlling Curse. The second, the *Cruciatius*, is otherwise known as the Torture Curse. Finally, there is the *Avada Kedavra* ... the Killing Curse. That's how I got this scar."

Harry moved his thick bangs aside to show the assemblage the lightning-shaped scar on his forehead, something he ordinarily didn't care to discuss, something he preferred to hide whenever possible. But he made an exception in this case in order to drive his point home as to just how horrendous the aforementioned curses could be.

"Shortly before I ... duelled with ... You-Know-Who, he ... got me with the Torture Curse. Let me tell you, I never felt such pain in my life...and hope I ... never do again."

Yet another hand went up, this time belonging to an African girl of thirteen that reminded him of Angelina. Harry bade her stand up and introduce herself. "Penda. My last

name is the Swahili word for magic and is ... virtually unpronounceable, so forgive me if I don't tell you what it is. I'm thirteen and a third-year Gryffindor. This is my question: Why was ... You-Know-Who so determined to kill you?"

"Because of a prophecy he had once heard that told of a boy 'born as July dies.' Me. July 31 is my birthday. It was also said that the Chosen One, as he was called, would also be born of parents who had already defied him three times ... *my* parents. It was ... also said that because of this, I had been made ... his equal ... and that neither of us could live peacefully while the other was alive.

"But even though he did not intend it, You-Know-Who inadvertently bestowed on me, his most bitter enemy, the greatest weapon on earth ... the ability to love. That is how I ... ultimately managed to destroy him, because this was 'a power that the Dark Lord knows not.' More on that later, though. Does anyone else have any other questions on this subject?"

Yet another hand went up in the sixth row ... this time a lanky young man of fourteen with auburn hair and green eyes, the same age Harry had been when Voldemort was reborn. Harry thought of Ginny's pregnancy, unable to help speculating on what a son of theirs might look like: most probably very similar to the young man now standing before him. He had to ask her her thoughts on the matter at the earliest opportunity. "I'm Vincent Kingsley, a fourth-year Ravenclaw. My question is as follows: Do you think that hate is all that You-Know-Who ever had?"

Harry smiled sadly. "No ... but it's all he had left. Now, if no one else has further questions, I'll move on to another subject." He waited, but no more questions came. Finally Harry exchanged glances with his wife, then his friends, before clearing his throat and referring to the papers in his hands. "Would any of you object to ... hearing about ... our first dates?"

Technically this wasn't the next in line, votes-wise, but one that Harry found far more pleasant to recall. There were negative murmurs from the Hogwarts student body. "All right, I'll tell about ... mine first."

Harry was a very private person and had never found it easy to speak of anything personal, especially where it concerned his love life, but this was a whole new generation...James Black being a prime example...a generation unlikely to be too knowledgeable as to how matters had been in the wizarding world when Harry and company had originally been students here.

"When I was ... fourteen and in fourth year, I ... developed a crush on a ... beautiful Asian girl named Cho Chang. She was ... somewhat older than me, around fifteen, and quite popular. I didn't have the ... chance to date her, however, until my fifth year. We went to the wizarding village of Hogsmeade for the date; it was on Valentine's Day. However, we had ... kissed prior to that, on Christmas Eve the previous year. But our ... relationship didn't last long, and in my sixth year, I ... began dating the girl who eventually became my wife, my best mate Ron's sister, Ginny."

Harry decided not to elaborate on the details of his relationship with Ginny, but would have no objections to either Ron, Hermione or Ginny doing so...at least, not as long as he was there to monitor what they said. "So, feel free to ask any one of my companions questions regarding ... their relationship with me. However, I reserve the right to edit or even eliminate what I deem the most ... personal aspects."

There was deathly silence for a time, then a statuesque girl of fifteen with black hair and brown eyes, not to mention a Hispanic look about her...most likely a fifth-year...raised her hand. As before, Harry had her stand up and introduce herself. "Mr. Potter, I am Maria Elena Velasquez. My mum is an Auror and my dad works at the Ministry of Magic. I'm a fifth-year Hufflepuff. I have a question for your wife."

Harry motioned Ginny to step up beside him; she had been standing close by, but somewhat behind him most of the time he had been speaking. "What would you like to know, Maria?" Ginny asked with a smile.

"I would like to know when you first realised you loved Harry Potter."

Again, there was a deathly silence for a time while Ginny digested this; then she smiled and said, "I first met him when I was ten years old. For a long time I was too afraid to even speak to him, even though I started Hogwarts the year after him and my brother Ron here." She gestured toward Ron, who was standing near Harry on the other side, his arm around Hermione. "I was eventually advised to get to know other boys, and I did, although Harry was never far from my thoughts ... or my heart." Ginny looked up to smile tenderly at her husband.

"It wasn't until my fifth year that Harry finally noticed me ... but it wasn't until our first kiss the day of the Quidditch Cup match that year that I knew, once and for all, that I loved him. However, we broke up a few weeks later...please don't ask me to elaborate as to just why; it's still a painful subject to me, hope you understand...and he went away for four years to travel throughout England working as an Auror, tracking down Dark wizards and witches for a living.

"It wasn't until just recently that we ... renewed our relationship and soon after that, got married." She kind of wanted to tell them about her pregnancy but wasn't sure if she should; she exchanged glances with Harry and the others. They smiled understandingly but shook their heads. Now wasn't the time. Perhaps later, when her pregnancy was further advanced. Right now, they had more pressing things to concern themselves with, such as their supplemental studies.

A short time later, Harry glanced at the clock on the far wall and noted that it was getting toward late afternoon, close on to suppertime, in fact. "I think we've talked enough for today. Let's all get some supper, then a good night's sleep ... and continue the discussion tomorrow. Any objections?"

There were negative murmurs, then the students filed out of the Great Hall, some in groups, some in pairs, and still others by themselves, the majority of whom smiled and waved to the alumni who had come to visit and talk with them. Harry saw the eleven-year-old James Black leave the Hall, making another mental note to approach McGonagall at the earliest opportunity and see what he could find out about the boy's background before daring to approach him or (eventually) his mother.

Perhaps he could put out some feelers on the WWN (Wizarding Wireless Network) and get some answers that way ... or failing that, go to the main Office of Witchcraft and Wizarding Genealogy in South London's Highgate section, reported to make the most detailed family trees in all of England, and see what he could find out about Sirius's family.

For the time being, however, it was best that they have supper, then get busy on their post-grad studies as soon as possible after they had eaten (they had come through earlier that day). Just the same, he had best consider just what else he was willing to discuss about either himself and Ginny or Ron and Hermione and discuss it with them before they resumed the talks with the current crop of Hogwarts students the following day.

Chapter 18: More Q&A Sessions/Personal Discussions

Chapter 18 of 27

More Q&A sessions are held with the students even as Harry and Ginny discuss their observations about the boy in question and decide what to do next.

The Q&A sessions on the rest of the subjects as well as the interactive discussion among Harry and company and the current Hogwarts students went about the same as the initial one. The second time around, Ginny had more of a role, not to mention Ron and Hermione, although Harry monitored what they said and tactfully steered them away from anything too personal about any of them while doing his best to satisfy the students' curiosity about his friends and himself.

So far he had not seen any Slytherins among the students and couldn't say that he was surprised, not if their attitude toward Muggles and non-purebloods had stayed the same over the last few years. Still, what occupied Harry's mind the most was the young boy James Black. From his descriptions, his father had certainly *sounded* like it could have been Sirius, that's for sure.

Now that he thought about it, some key points stood out in his mind regarding the boy; for instance, his smile ... He had only seen Sirius smile a few times, usually when reminiscing about his times with Harry's parents or his other close friends such as Remus Lupin, but was only now beginning to realise that the main reason he had gotten so rattled that day when he'd first seen the boy was because of his strangely familiar smile; and now he knew the reason why: It was Sirius's smile! Not his eyes, though; James Black seemed to have hazel eyes. Sirius had had grey eyes. Perhaps James had his mother's eyes, as Harry himself did, even though in every other aspect he resembled a younger version of his father.

However, now that the postgrad study course materials had arrived, the four knuckled down and almost literally put their noses to the proverbial grindstone. They had agreed beforehand to get together to do their study assignments, to make sure they got done (and have them double-checked by budding teacher Hermione, although Harry had been no slouch as a student teacher of D.A.D.A. during the days of Dolores Umbridge).

However, they were able to read their textbooks and make notes on their own, although Hermione naturally checked to see that they had covered all the relevant points in the various subjects before moving on to the next chapter of each given book. Other times they had to practice various spells and charms on each other, and when they went wrong, it was usually Hermione (again) who bailed them out when they made a mistake.

Just the same, there were times when Ginny's increasing pregnancy was making her feel as sick as the proverbial dog in spite of the Anti-Nausea Potion made by Molly and given to her daughter before their departure. By this time she was nearly out, so she suggested to Hermione that she make some more while they had access to the proper ingredients. It was fortunate that it didn't take nearly as long to steep as did Felix Felicis or Polyjuice Potion; just an hour, in fact ... and the effects lasted for roughly eight hours, usually just long enough for Harry and Ginny to get a night's sleep before it wore off.

Nausea was one thing, though...moods were something else again. They had owled Molly Weasley at least once, asking what to do to make Ginny's pregnancy-induced moods bearable for everyone, particularly Harry and Ginny herself. Molly generously listed several things she herself had done to keep from cutting off Arthur at the knees or either of her older boys, Charlie and Bill, when they were younger and she was pregnant with their younger siblings.

When Harry had read these over, he had sighed with relief; one time on the receiving end of his wife's caustic tongue had been a great sufficiency for him, and at the very least he hoped to keep it to a minimum...as did Ron and Hermione themselves. Ron had even privately confessed to Harry that he wasn't sure he wanted to find out what kind of moods Hermione might experience in the event she got pregnant; she had enough of a temper as it was.

"Better try to prepare yourself as best you can right now, mate," Harry advised him. "Remember what your mum said. This happens many times over the course of a woman's pregnancy."

"In that case, I hope Hermione only becomes pregnant once," Ron remarked, glad that his wife was still using the Contraceptive Charm...at least as far as he knew. Privately, Harry hoped that would be the case with Ginny, but considering how fertile Molly Weasley had been, it was best that he be prepared for her to be every bit as prolific as her mother, although he would personally be content with two children, one of each gender, if not twins. Either fraternal or identical, like Fred and George.

Perhaps a daughter who looked like her mother and a son who looked like him, although stranger things had happened. It could work out the other way around...their daughter could look like him and their son like Ginny. Meanwhile, it was necessary for everyone to simply get through the pregnancy with their sanity and marriages intact.

On a more serious note, Harry and company began to plan for the next phase of their quest, to seek out the last Horcrux that they were convinced had been placed in Voldemort's pet snake Nagini. Harry was a past master of Parseltongue, the snake language, and if anyone could bluff their way in to where she was and destroy her, it would be him. But first, they had to find her...and they had absolutely no clue even where to start looking.

Just the same, they had no doubts whatsoever that once sufficient word was spread that the prophecy had been fulfilled and that Harry James Potter, the Chosen One of the prophecy, had at last killed the Dark Lord, that security would (at bare minimum) be doubled, if not tripled, in order to keep her safe. The problem was, where was she? Harry had no idea where Voldemort's last hideout had been, and none of the captured Death Eaters would talk, including Wormtail; some had even committed suicide rather than confess or live the rest of their days in Azkaban.

But the information had to be out there somewhere, and he intended to find it, whatever he had to do. This might actually turn out to be the toughest part of the whole thing, who could say? Maybe he could ask himself what he would do if *he* were a large snake and had to keep hidden from his enemies for an extended length of time.

Which reminded him, what could Harry expect once it was learned that he had used the Killing Curse to vanquish the Dark Lord? Not to mention Ron using the Torture Curse on Barty Crouch Jr.? He liked the idea of it being decided that what they had done was justified; after all, in any war, it was usually a matter of kill or be killed. Of course, he must not take it for granted, just take things one day at a time and hope for the best. It was also decided to leave Bellatrix Lestrange Petrified, at least for the foreseeable future; that way there was no way she could cause any more deaths or misery. She was far too dangerous to be allowed to have freedom of movement.

Once safely behind the gates and walls of Azkaban, the remaining living Death Eaters had been released from the two spells that had allowed the forces of good to gain the upper hand...Petrification and the Body-Bind Spell...and after the trials had ended, all had earned the mandatory life sentence. The dementors went back to their original jobs at Azkaban, but would be closely watched by both authorities at the prison and the Bureau of Magical Law Enforcement from now on.

In the midst of everything else, though, Harry had naturally discussed what he wanted to do in regards to young James Black...but first with Ginny; then she could argue at his side with Ron and Hermione (should they object) once she knew the full story. At the moment, though, he was stretched out full-length on their bed in just a T-shirt and PJ bottoms, his feet bare and his ankles crossed, leaning against the headboard of the four-poster, reading the latest chapter in his Occlumency textbook with Ginny curled up against him in just a lacy shortie nightgown, her head on his chest, reading one on Legilimency.

"Gin?" he asked softly, lowering his book to look down at her. She lifted her head to face him, both love and curiosity in her soft brown eyes as she set down her own book.

"Yes, luv?"

"What did you think of the young boy we met our first day here, the one who spoke to us?"

"Seemed nice enough, if somewhat shy," she observed. "Also, I couldn't help but be reminded of you at that age...I mean, a shy, skinny kid with unruly hair and glasses ..."

"Not just that, though. Did his ... smile ... seem at all familiar to you?"

Ginny wracked her brain for a while; then she finally figured out what Harry was talking about. "Come to think of it, *do* remember seeing a smile like that somewhere before ..."

"Sirius," Harry said.

"Sirius?" she questioned.

"It's Sirius's smile," Harry insisted. "That boy has got to be Sirius's son! It couldn't be anyone else, because his only brother died twenty years ago and was younger than him...and this boy is just eleven."

"Do you think we should talk to Minerva about it?" Ginny asked.

"That might be a good place to start," Harry agreed. "Then I was thinking to check on the Wizarding Wireless Network for any genealogical information on the Black family, see what I can dig up there. Then go to the Highgate section of South London where there is an Office of Witchcraft and Wizarding Genealogy and do some research on Sirius's family tree, hopefully find some people who knew him and his family during the time in question, then find out if they can tell me anything about a former steady girlfriend or fiancée for Sirius ... things like that.

"If there *is* an answer, it'll be there, because the family trees there are the most detailed in all of Britain." He was even hopeful that he would find the name of Rose, James Black's mother, included...not to mention young James himself. "Would you like to come with me? It'd be almost like a vacation since we wouldn't have to worry about searching for Horcruxes or anything ... at least not for a while. There's only one left now, anyway."

"I'd love to. When were you thinking of going?"

"Another week or so. I want to talk to Minerva before we go, see what she can tell me about James and his mother ... then maybe Apparate when the time comes. Thank Merlin it doesn't last long; I still feel like I'm literally getting the breath squeezed out of me every time I do it."

"I know what you mean...but maybe if we hold tightly to each other, we won't notice it so much."

Harry smiled and shook his head in wonder. Leave it to Ginny to make even Apparition seem pleasant as long as they were doing it together.

"Are we going to tell Ron and Hermione anything about this?" she asked then, moving to sit cross-legged on the bed beside her husband even as Harry moved into a sitting position with his own legs crossed, their books marked and set aside.

"No; I don't feel like arguing with them. We're just going. The only one we're telling is Minerva; maybe we can leave a letter with her explaining why and approximately how long we'll be gone or something."

"They're not going to like it," Ginny warned.

"They're just going to have to not like it," Harry threw back. "If this boy James Black really is Sirius's son, I owe it to him to find out all I can about his and Sirius's background and tell both James and his mother of my own relationship with Sirius ... then if his mother is willing, give her a portion of Sirius's fortune to use for James's care and education to ease her financial burdens. I feel certain that Sirius would want that."

Ginny frowned thoughtfully. Yes, Sirius probably *would* approve of that idea...but if they didn't plan things just right, Ron and Hermione would never let her or Harry hear the end of it for leaving them in the dark about what they intended to do, much less leaving them behind. Even as much as she loved her brother and sister-in-law, pleasing Harry held a far higher priority in her mind.

He was her husband, after all. It was a wife's duty to stand by her husband in whatever he wanted to do ... within reason, of course, and despite how insane the idea might have sounded at first glance, Ginny knew the reasoning behind it was sound and logical...and if successful, would greatly help a single mother raising a son by herself. And if they could develop an affectionate relationship with them as well, that would be simply icing on the cake, as it were. She could definitely understand why Harry might want to keep in touch with them...because they were the last living links to his late godfather ... and if only for this reason alone, the Black line would continue. Harry would see to it that it did, if only for Sirius's sake.

* * * * *

However, Ron and Hermione knew Harry and Ginny well enough to know that they were plotting something and keeping the details from them. Hermione even confronted them about it, but neither Harry nor Ginny would confirm or deny her suspicions. They also couldn't help wondering what had happened to them one day around two o'clock in the afternoon for roughly two hours.

They even staked out the door of their quarters, but to no avail; Harry and Ginny had obviously used a portable Portkey to get past them. It was finally decided that if anyone was likely to know what they were up to, it would be McGonagall. They would go see her themselves once they knew that Harry and Ginny were away from there and busy with other things.

They could certainly understand Harry's wanting to help young James Black, but didn't think it would be a good idea to disrupt his life or that of his mother just when they had managed to hammer out a relatively pleasant existence. But everything they said had just seemed to go in one ear and out the other; whenever that happened, trouble inevitably followed in one form or another ... and if possible, they had to steer them away from it, whatever they had to do.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Harry and Ginny were sitting in McGonagall's office; once again she was sitting curled up in his lap, head on his shoulder and their arms around each other. However, despite the romantic position, their conversation was anything but. "So, Minerva, is there anything you can tell us about the background of first-year Gryffindor James Adolphus Black?"

McGonagall smiled indulgently at the young couple, but her voice was firm and no-nonsense. "Harry, you know that student records are generally kept confidential, access granted strictly on a need-to-know basis. I can understand your wish to find out more about him, especially considering the strong possibility that he is the son of Sirius Black, because he resembles him so strongly...but we must proceed with great care. Otherwise, we could end up seriously disrupting both young James's life and that of his mother...and I'm sure their lives have been difficult enough."

"Minerva, I only want to help him. I feel sure that is what Sirius would want."

"Perhaps, but that is not your decision. You must consider the possible consequences of your actions. Many times just when one thinks they're helping someone, their good intentions can backfire drastically."

"Minerva, I would never do anything to..." Harry began to protest.

McGonagall held up a hand to stop him. "I know, Harry, I know. You don't have to remind me." She was silent for a time; then she said, "Very well, I'll give you what information we have ... but you must swear to keep it to yourself. Do not tell anyone, not even your friends, much less James or his mother, if you can avoid it. If they ask you directly, of course, you must not lie, but..." She broke off, then abruptly stood up and moved over to a large file cabinet in one corner of the office, only recently installed after she moved into what had once belonged to Dumbledore.

She searched diligently for a time, then retrieved a file that looked to Harry to be fairly thick; of course, that could be a trick of the light, but what mattered most was that they would finally learn some important details that would be likely to help them in their subsequent genealogical search. She handed it to Ginny, who held it securely and didn't look at it; there would be time enough to peruse it in detail after they returned to their room.

She even put a double Locking Charm on its door so they were not disturbed, after getting something to eat, bringing it there so they could grab some nourishment while they were poring over the information contained in the file. They could figure out the next step to take depending on what they found...be it going to the Wizarding Wireless Network or the main Office of Witchcraft and Wizarding Genealogy in Highgate.

Both could now only hope that James and his mother would appreciate Harry's efforts to help them, not to mention his own experiences with Sirius. Maybe Harry could

even learn something about Sirius he hadn't known before to boot, thanks to this Rose, James's mother. Just the same, he was sure that Rose's last name could not be Black, since she and Sirius had not been married, although she had obviously given the boy his father's last name.

He might find out even more if he could manage to discover Rose's last name. Meanwhile, they had a lot of papers to go through, so they had best get started. Ginny set up the food and drink on portable trays near the bed; then they got back on it, once again sitting cross-legged as Ginny watched Harry open the file, then hand her a fistful of papers before returning to grab a fistful of his own. Even at that, they felt guilty at going behind their friends' backs, vowing to tell them everything just as soon as they decently could.

Chapter 19: Important Discoveries/Two Passionate Nights

Chapter 19 of 27

The couple makes several important discoveries about the boy and his family in the midst of two passionate nights together. Harry and Ginny decide to travel to London to do some genealogical research.

A/N: This is somewhat AU in order to accommodate the theory of a secret marriage and child for Sirius, so that is why the boy's birthday and the marriage date are what they are, ten years later than in canon. Also, the one who wrote the "Magic Works" song from Goblet of Fire is Jarvis Cocker and the singer is Jason Buckle.

Ginny was the first to find significant information ... which was contained in an original copy of James Black's birth certificate, not the least of which was the discovery of his mother Rose's last name: Shacklebolt, which meant that she was related to Kingsley Shacklebolt (a daughter or niece, perhaps) and consequently, just as much a pure-blood as Sirius had been, which in turn meant that young James Black was too.

Another scan of the information contained therein also netted the boy's birthdate: March 28, 1990 ... in the main wizarding hospital in Godric's Hollow, just as Harry had been. And what's more, just a week after Sirius's own birthday. But what made her cry out and grab Harry's nearest arm was the fact that Sirius's name was listed under "Father."

"Harry! Look!" She thrust the certificate under his nose.

He looked up impatiently at her for a moment, having been perusing something else, but his eyes widened in stunned shock as he noted what Ginny had. "Bloody hell! Sirius is listed here! Do you know what that means?"

"Yes. He must have known Rose was pregnant ... and not only that, she must have been pregnant when he went into Azkaban."

"Well, at least we know what family name to look under for information on Rose, which is definitely a step in the right direction. We'll see if they know anything about Sirius's relationship with her, whether she was simply a steady girlfriend or if they'd planned to be married when he was framed for murder."

"It's likely, but whether the Shacklebolts...or Kingsley, for that matter...will be willing to discuss it or not depends on how they felt about Sirius and his relationship with her to begin with," Ginny pointed out.

Harry frowned thoughtfully. "You have a point there. We'd better handle them with kid gloves until we find out for sure."

"Have you found anything yet?" Ginny finally managed to ask, deciding it was better to wait until Harry was calm again before asking because she knew how much he disliked being interrupted or having his concentration broken.

"I was just about to call it to your attention when you called out and grabbed my arm," he informed her, holding out another paper to her...which turned out to be a copy of the Godric's Hollow hospital record of James's birth, noting the time he had been born, which was 3:21 a.m., as well as his weight, which was seven pounds, ten ounces; and his length, which was twenty inches. Ginny examined it in silence for a time, then looked up and smiled.

"Seems we both found something significant quite early on. A good sign, don't you think?"

"If our good fortune continues, yes," Harry remarked cautiously. "But we're still going to need all the information we can lay our hands on before we dare go to the Office of Witchcraft and Wizarding Genealogy in Highgate."

"Then we keep looking?"

"We keep looking," he confirmed. "Set aside what we think might be important and put everything else back in the file."

"Got it." With that, they resumed perusing the material before them.

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It was well into the night before they decided to quit temporarily and continue in the morning. It was mainly due to Ginny's near-photographic memory that they remembered to finish dinner and clear it away ... which was a good thing for Harry, who had a penchant for not eating if he was hurting a lot emotionally or overly preoccupied with something, such as one of his numerous nightmares ... which had fortunately lessened considerably in number, both due to his marriage to Ginny and the death of Voldemort.

Since they didn't want to waste water, the couple decided to shower together, which they had not done before now. They had made love in numerous places outside of the bedroom, but the shower had not been one of them. That was about to change. They went into the bathroom together, undressed without a word, then Harry reached in and turned on the shower after placing a rubber mat into the shower stall to prevent slipping.

The shower stall was just large enough to accommodate two people...as long as they were standing close together, that is ... and one may be assured that they definitely intended to do so...and then some! They stepped under the pleasantly warm spray, allowing themselves to get thoroughly wet, then soaped each other all over. But even as much as Harry wanted her, he made himself wait to do anything until after she had washed and rinsed his hair; then he did hers.

□

Upon finishing, he stook a step and drew her delightfully wet body close to his own, politely requesting entrance. Ginny's arms and legs once again seemed to open of their

own accord, then wrap around him even as he began to move sensuously inside her.

"Oh, sweet Merlin ... Harry ..."

"Ginny ... this is like Heaven on earth. I've never felt more at home anywhere. How could I ever have stayed away from you for so long? I have to be the world's biggest git!"

"No, just the world's noblest," she corrected.

"But you do agree that I was a git for not coming back to you long ago," he noted.

"Well, of course." She laughed just before he once again kissed her passionately, then moved to her neck, where he immediately proceeded to gently bite and suck on the area at the junction of it and her left shoulder, leaving a hickey. "That goes without saying. Har-ree!" she squealed as she felt his teeth nip her neck, then gently suck. "What are you doing?"

"Well, you once gave me two hickeys, so the least I can do is give you one back." He laughed, kissing the area upon finishing.

"You silly twit! If Ron or Hermione sees it, they'll never let me live it down," she groused.

"That's the whole idea," Harry returned wickedly even as he gave one final, delicious thrust and the beauty burst over them.

"Oh, sweet Merlin ... Harry, that was incredible!" Her knees were weak by the time he let her down onto her feet again, which was why he held her securely for a time until the strength came back into her legs. "One thing is for sure...you were never meant to be celibate!"

"Damn bloody right," he purred like a large cat. "Especially not four years' worth! And that was definitely one of our more pleasurable encounters, if I do say so myself." He smiled slyly. "Ready to go to bed now?"

"Might be a good idea," she agreed; with that, he shut off the water, which was beginning to feel cold, then stepped out with her and they dried themselves off. That ended up renewing their desire, and he was soon carrying her to bed and laying her down on it, even as their old magic almost literally exploded between them all over again.

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Once that was finished and they were sated, at least for the time being, Ginny rested her head on her husband's chest and draped one arm over him. "I should have expected you to be highly sexed," he murmured just over her head. "From what I've heard, redheads usually are."

"Especially if they marry highly-sexed people with black hair and green eyes," Ginny threw back. "You shortchange yourself, my love." At this point she thought of the erotic dream she had once had about him and decided that this was the moment to tell him about it...that is, after she had mentioned her old fantasy of wishing she could have observed him in the Prefects' bathroom. "Did I ever tell you this one fantasy I always

had about you?" she asked.

"No. Tell me about it," Harry directed.

"Before I do, please keep in mind that this comes from the mind of a frustrated, lovesick girl, extremely lonely and longing for the touch and closeness of the boy she loved, who was far away at the time, playing Sir Galahad."

"Of course," he promised, intending to ask her about the 'Sir Galahad' reference at the first opportunity. "Now what is it?" After she had told him, Harry's eyes widened in a mixture of pleasure and shock. "I had no idea ... You naughty girl! I should punish you for such thoughts!" he threatened playfully.

"But I like being naughty," Ginny insisted. "As long as it's with you! Besides, you haven't heard anything yet!" She then proceeded to tell him the erotic dream.

Once she had finished, Harry was stunned into silence for a while. Not that he hadn't seriously considered doing such a thing before he originally left, but had been totally unaware that Ginny had wanted it as much as he. If he had known that, he might have gone through with it. As it was, he had unknowingly denied himself a night of tender passion, which he could have relived over and over through the ensuing four years in order to get him through the rough times. As it was, he had only had the memories of their few weeks together, the feel of her in his arms, her heart pounding against his own and the sweet taste of her lips beneath his.

"As I said, Gin, you're a dreadfully naughty girl! Whatever am I to do with you when you have dreams like that?" He squeezed her hard and laughed.

"Make them come true, of course," she returned wickedly.

"You mean ...?" he inquired, abruptly releasing her.

"Why not, as long as we're here?" she replied.

"It'll have to be carefully planned, you know," he gently admonished her. "After all, we don't want Ron and Hermione busting in on us. It also might be a good idea to use the portable Portkey again, this time setting it for the coordinates of the Prefects' bathroom."

"Is there a means of locking the doors?"

"Of course," he assured her. "I just need to put a Locking Charm on it." *Not to mention put the mermaid in the portrait to sleep ... if she's still there, that is,* he finished in his mind. He also hoped that Moaning Myrtle wouldn't get one of her voyeuristic ideas and decide to watch them while they were there; he would have to try to convince her to stay away should he happen to see her before their planned rendezvous. "Meanwhile, let's get some sleep so we can get an early start on the remainder of those files. Good night, Gin. Sweet dreams." He lifted her face to his

and gave her a lingering good-night kiss.

"Good night, luv. Sleep well."

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Harry happened to awaken first, and to be on the safe side, he decided to set up the portable Portkey and prepare things in the Prefects' bathroom while he was at it, hopefully meeting Moaning Myrtle again to tell her not to watch when he brought Ginny here later. Of course, there was no guarantee she would listen, but he hoped she would cut him some slack, at least this once.

He made sure the towels were ready and took the time to choose the taps he wanted to use. The next thing he heard was, ironically, the voice he'd most wanted to hear...at least at the moment. "Hello again, Harry," the transparent Myrtle greeted him. "Aren't you a little old to be here? Surely you've graduated by now."

"Yes, I did, four years ago. We're here now to do some talks with the current students," he explained. "Just the same, I need to ask a favour of you."

"Of course, Harry," Myrtle agreed with a giggle. "Do you intend to be a naughty boy again?"

"You could say that," he concurred. "But it has nothing to do with Polyjuice Potion or a golden egg this time. I'm going to be bringing someone here, and would prefer you

not to watch or listen in."

"Why, Harry, are you accusing me of voyeurism?"

"Yes, I am. In fact, the one I'm bringing here is my wife, and I want to be alone with her. *Totally* alone. Do you understand me?"

The teenage female ghost's face screwed up in an almost childish pout, but she replied, "Oh, very well. I suppose I could go explore the castle or something. Maybe Nearly Headless Nick would be willing to endure my company. How long will you and your ... wife ... be here?"

"Couldn't say for sure ... but at least an hour, if not two. Oh, one more question before you go. Has the password changed from the last time I was here?"

"I think it's 'honeysuckle rose' now. Why?"

"Just curious. Remember your promise now, Myrtle," he warned.

"Oh, Harry, you're no fun," the female spirit groused. "But don't worry, I'll stay away." With that, she flew up through the ceiling and was gone.

Harry was unable to stifle a laugh at Myrtle's mock-hurt demeanour, certain that she wished she could deny what he had accused her of, but knowing she was unable to. Hopefully he and Ginny could share some private quality time together without having to worry about possibly putting on a show for any of the resident spirits. They'd just have to wait and see ... as it were.

* * * * *

Ginny was just awakening when Harry returned to their quarters; she noticed that he was dressed and asked where he'd gone. "To set things up in the Prefects' bathroom for us," he explained. "And I made Myrtle promise that she wouldn't spy on us while we were there, as she did on me last time."

"I bet she didn't like that," Ginny laughed. "Just the same, it'll be good to know we won't have to worry about being watched. By the way, when were we going to go there?"

"I was thinking after supper tonight, around eight or so, so we'll have plenty of time to ourselves." He gave her a sly wink and provocative smile.

"Now who's being naughty?" she playfully accused, moving over to greet him with their usual morning embrace and kiss. "Do you want to have breakfast now? I can conjure some up; then we can get back to the files."

"Sounds great. Bacon, four slices, eggs done sunny-side up, hash brown potatoes and toast with strawberry jam for me, along with a big glass of pumpkin juice. I want to have a shower and change into fresh clothes."

"Coming up, luv," she smiled, patting his cheek before turning on her heel and disappearing into their small adjoining kitchenette. Harry patted her hand, then turned for the nearby regular bathroom for his morning shower after obtaining a fresh set of clothes from the chest of drawers beside the bed.

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By the time Harry returned, the table was all laid out with their favourite breakfast, including a large pitcher of iced pumpkin juice. His stomach growled as he approached the table and took a deep breath to savour the smells of cooked bacon, fried eggs and freshly toasted bread, butter and strawberry jam.

He had never been able to eat well at the Dursleys' and was thankful to have had friends whom he could call upon to supplement his diet. Not to mention his summer visits at The Burrow and Molly's wonderful cooking. His mouth watered just thinking about it. Ahh ... *dee-fish*!! Almost as delicious as Ginny herself ... but that was for later. Meanwhile, he had another hunger to fill.

After breakfast, they moved to the bed again, which Ginny had made during his absence, most likely with a Bed-Making Spell...then sat on it cross-legged and began to go through the remaining papers in the personal file on James Black. Silence reigned for a time, broken only by the occasional rustling of paper; then a soft exclamation from Harry brought Ginny's head up. "Bugger! I ... don't ... effing ... *believe* it! Why didn't Sirius ever *tell* me?"

"What is it, Harry?" she asked, curious as to what he had found.

He didn't reply, simply handed her something else that looked like an official paper ... and not just any official paper, either...*an marriage license*! For Sirius Black and Rose Shacklebolt, approved by the Ministry of Magic's Division of Marriage and Children ... and dated January 28, 1990! So they *had* been married after all ... but Rose had obviously decided to keep her maiden name. Both wondered why for a time; then the answer clicked into Harry's mind.

It wouldn't have been good for her to have made the marriage public, since Sirius was believed to be a serial killer and was a known felon at the time, despite his pureblood background. Harry supposed he should have guessed long ago that Sirius wasn't the kind of person not to "make an honest woman" of anyone he might have impregnated. Bloody hell! If what they had already found was any indication, what *else* could they expect to run across in this file?

"Oh my God," Ginny murmured half-under her breath. "Sirius was ...*married*?"

"Apparently," Harry returned. "But if it's true, why didn't his will reflect it? That way he could have left something to Rose and his son. It would have been perfectly legal for him to do so; instead, he left everything to me. Why? I didn't need it. Mum and Dad left me plenty ... then I got some more when Dumbledore died ..." He closed his eyes in pain at the painful references; Ginny rested a comforting hand over her husband's nearest one. He looked up and met her eyes, anguish and sorrow in their sparkling green depths and thick dark lashes, reflecting through the lenses of his glasses.

"I assume Sirius did it because he loved you," Ginny opined. "You were like a son to him."

"He could still have left something for her and his real son," Harry countered. "It just doesn't make sense."

"Maybe he offered to; how do we know? Maybe Rose is the real independent type who won't accept what she considers charity, even from a husband. You know that the Shackletons aren't exactly rolling in Galleons like the Blacks were. The original genteel poor."

"That's a possibility," Harry conceded. "Can you imagine how Ron and Hermione would react if they knew this? Not to mention the rest of the wizarding world? But it's probably a good idea to keep it to ourselves, at least for now ... if only for the sake of preserving Rose and young James's privacy. As I recall, Sirius was just as private a person as me, never wanted his personal life to be under public scrutiny, so even as much as we'd like to shout it to the world, we have to respect his wishes and keep it quiet."

"I suppose so," Ginny agreed, although she knew several people in her own family who would have been thrilled to know that Sirius had not only been married but a father, her parents among them. Molly had remarked often how sad it was that Sirius had had to live his life alone, without a wife and family, but if she ever saw this...or a picture of young James...she'd totally freak!

She truly hoped one day to be able to tell at least a few select family and friends like Hermione, but for the time being, mum was the word. She and Harry would be the only ones who knew, and whatever else Harry was, Ginny knew that he had never betrayed a confidence made to him. Whatever secrets were told to him remained secret, although he surely knew a lot of damaging stuff on people ... herself among them, not to mention his two closest friends.

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It was well into the afternoon by the time they finished going through the file and had amassed roughly a dozen items relating to either young James's birth or Sirius and Rose's marriage. It was also likely that Sirius had kept his marriage secret because Rose was from a poor family and the Blacks were very snobbish on that score. There had even been a *wedding picture* of them amongst the papers, for Merlin's sake! Sirius had looked so young, so handsome, so happy, having had an arm around his new wife in the picture, and Rose looked very beautiful and very much in love ... not to mention very pregnant, about seven months.

They couldn't have had much time together as husband and wife, since Sirius had been arrested, convicted and serving time within a month of said marriage. Harry had promised Minerva he wouldn't keep anything from the file, although there was no law that prevented him from making copies of that picture for himself before replacing it in the file. Not to mention James Black's birth certificate, the hospital record and the marriage licence.

Once they had finished going through the file, Harry decided to drop it off at McGonagall's office just before he and Ginny went to the Prefects' bathroom, telling himself to suggest that Rose take over the deed to number twelve, Grimmauld Place, if only for the sake of giving her son an inheritance from his father's side when he came of age, especially now that it had been cleaned up and made livable.

He would have to discuss it with the Order before doing so, of course, but do his best to keep Rose and James's names out of it. Maybe just say he wanted to give the house to a friend of his who had also once been close to Sirius ... and he fully intended to meet Rose and get to know her, so that would at least *technically* be true. In the meantime, however, he and Ginny had a nice, long, romantic evening alone together to look forward to.

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Once eight o'clock rolled around and they had finished supper, the couple used the portable Portkey to gain entrance to the Prefects' bathroom. Just the same, Harry brought along his wand, placing a Locking Charm on the door so they would not be disturbed. Both wore just bathrobes and slippers; Ginny left her hair down, a red-gold cascade that now reached the middle of her back.

She had once intended to cut it, but Harry definitively vetoed that, declaring that he loved long hair on women, particularly *longed-gold* hair...loved to bury his face in it, smell its fragrance, run his fingers through its silky strands ... and this was one of the times when Ginny was all too happy to accede to her husband's wishes.

On a whim, she had also brought along a battery-operated Muggle-type "boom box", obtained from Arthur Weasley, along with a tape of the "Magic Waltz" from the fourth-year Christmas Ball, at which she had not had a chance to dance with Harry. Maybe now they would finally be able to; she had always thought the waltz very beautiful, so she had asked McGonagall for a copy and saved it all these years ... just for a moment like this.

Harry's sharp eyes naturally noticed it, particularly the fact that there was a tape in it, although he didn't say anything to her at first. Time enough for that once they got to their destination. What he didn't know, however, was that she'd also snuck another tape into her robe pocket, one featuring Ravel's *Bolero*, one of the most sensuous pieces of music ever written ... and therefore very relevant to the evening ahead of them. Both were, in fact ... and even now she could recall the lyrics as if she'd heard them only yesterday:

And dance your final dance
This is your final chance
To hold the one you love
You know you've waited long enough
So believe that magic works
Don't be afraid of being hurt
Don't let this magic die
The answer's there
Just look in her eyes
And make your final move
Don't be scared
She wants you to
Yes, it's hard, but
You must be brave
Don't let this moment slip away
And don't believe that magic can die
No, no, no
This magic can't die
So dance your final dance
For this is your final chance

She set the boom-box and extra tape within reach when they got into the pool; this time, however, they had no compunctions about appearing naked before the other because of their months-long-intimate association. He did help her in, however, although he kept his eyes open as he did so, neither of them having any modesty on that score...at least not while alone together.

"I never thought I'd actually be here with you in real life," Ginny commented as they settled themselves in the water, his arms around her and her head on his shoulder as she curled up next to him and the scented pink and blue bubbles surrounded them.

"Neither did I, frankly," Harry returned. "Gin, why didn't you tell me about your fantasy before I originally left? I had no idea you wanted me that much. If you had, I could have accommodated you, and we would have both been left with beautiful memories, if nothing else."

"You had too much else to concern you at the time, luv," she reminded him. Not her real reason for not telling him, but it would do for the moment. "How about a swim? Race you to the deep end. Ten Galleons says I make it there before you do!"

"Not bloody likely," he growled playfully. "I'd beat you in a walk!"

"You're on, Mister!" With that, Ginny deftly extricated herself from his arms and took off swimming, moving almost too fast for Harry to have even realised she'd moved. It was at least a minute before he managed to catch up with her, a quarter of the way across the swimming pool-sized bath. And it turned out she was right...she *did* beat him there.

When he did manage to catch her, Harry suspected that it was because she allowed it. He pulled her close and kissed her deeply, caressing her with one hand as they trod water.

"Blimey, Gin, how'd you ever manage to beat me?" Harry asked upon reluctantly breaking off the kiss and releasing her.

"I've had more of a chance to swim than you have, you know," she pointed out, leaning her elbows against the edge of the pool. "It was a wonder you did so well during the second task in the Triwizard Tournament. I could understand your overcoming the dragon fairly easily, since you were able to utilize your Quidditch skills, but you had no such advantage at the Black Lake ... nor in the maze."

"You ... mean you ... watched the whole thing?" He had frankly hoped Ginny hadn't, if only for the sake of not seeing him in danger or injured, but after what she'd just said, he had to assume otherwise and could only hope it hadn't upset her too much.

"Of course. I sat in the stands just behind Ron and Hermione," she recalled. "And don't worry, luv. I was frightened for you, of course, but at the same time, I knew you'd be able to pull it off. You're too smart, too skilled, not to ... and I wouldn't be surprised if everyone in the stadium heard me scream when you swooped down and grabbed the golden egg one-handed. You were incredible, my love, truly incredible!" She smiled when Harry propped his elbows next to hers, leaning on the side of the pool while they talked.

Harry was glad to hear she had such faith in his abilities, but frankly, if it hadn't been for the help of the one who he had believed to be "Mad-Eye" Moody, he'd never have made it ... particularly not without the help of Hagrid, Cedric and Neville, who had provided him with the means to complete the tasks via their own associations with the fake Moody, who had turned out to be Crouch Jr. in disguise. But even if he'd mentioned it, she would have had none of it, did not want to hear of him denigrating himself. There was enough of that from other quarters without Harry adding to it.

"Which reminds me ... would you like to hear some music now? There's some I saved from the fourth-year Christmas Ball."

Harry felt almost as if he'd been hit by a Stunning Spell. "You mean you have ... a copy of that waltz?"

"I asked McGonagall for a copy of it. It was so beautiful that I just couldn't pass up the chance. It reminded me so much of us."

"Maybe us now, but not then," he gently reminded her. How he wished he'd had the brains (not to mention the taste) to have pursued her then! Things could have been so different for them ...

"The point is, it *did* remind me of us; that is why I wanted to have it. After a time I memorised the words, and to this day can sing them from memory." She began softly humming the melody as she left the side of the pool and began to swim back to the other end, part of the time doing a backstroke, other times a breast-stroke. Harry could do little more than dog-paddle, but managed to reach the other end of the pool shortly after Ginny did. She was so much more than he deserved; how could he ever have won the heart of such an incredible girl?

Shortly thereafter, the instrumental melody of the "Magic Waltz" began to fill the air and Ginny actually started to sing along with it. Harry had had no idea she could sing at all, much less sing so sweetly and beautifully ... just like the angel she was. Upon reaching the other end of the pool, he sat on a submerged bench, legs crossed as he rested his elbows on the edge of the pool again, totally mesmerised by the sound of Ginny singing ... and somehow Harry knew she was singing for him alone. And she was right; the words were indeed reminiscent of them...or at least their present feelings for each other.

When she finished, Harry smiled and applauded his sweet songbird; Ginny bowed her head and blushed attractively at his adulation. He couldn't help noting that she didn't blush only on her face, but on her entire body ... a small and compact but very beautiful body for which he had developed an almost insatiable hunger...a hunger which seemed to grow with every passing moment, especially over the last few minutes.

He moved over close to where the boom-box was, which was where she was. "That was beautiful, Gin. I had no idea you could sing like that."

"I'm ... glad you like it, luv," she smiled, unable to help blushing slightly again at his intense scrutiny. "I wouldn't do it for anyone but you."

"There is something else I would like very much," he crooned as he moved ever closer to her, gently pulling her body close to his own and moving sensuously upon reaching her. "Can you guess what?"

"I think so." In spite of herself, Ginny's heart began to pound and her breath quicken, particularly as her husband's hands and lips became progressively hungrier. This was even more incredible than the dream...and best of all, this was reality!

"Gin ... darling ... sweetheart ... never leave me. Never stop loving me," her husband whispered passionately, thrilling her more with every passing moment.

"Never, Harry ... never ... I'll never leave you ...*could* never leave you. It would be easier to have my heart torn out ... you are a part of me, now and forever ..."

Ginny had set the other tape to play after the other one stopped, and by this point the strains of Ravel's *Bolero* filled the air; for a while, they even moved to the rhythm of the music. How could anything feel this good and still be legal?

After a time he became almost a deadweight against her, even as he sighed happily and found her ear with his lips.

"Gin ... I didn't think it was possible, but I truly believe that this was even better than last night."

"Spontaneity tends to increase the partners' pleasure in a romantic relationship, from what I understand."

"The partners being in love helps too," he pointed out. "Although I remember the sex education book here saying that sex is usually better when the partners can be friends as well as lovers ... in essence, like as well as love each other."

"I remember Mum saying that too; she sat me down and told me 'the birds and the bees' during one school vacation right after I started my first period. I was about thirteen. And I was always able to talk to her; she never seemed to shy away from any questions I had on the subject. I think it's mainly for that reason that I never felt the need to experiment before we got together."

It was so sad that Harry couldn't have had a much better knowledge of the ins and outs of romantic relationships long before now...mainly due to his growing up an orphan, without any true positive grown-up influence until he had met Dumbledore...and later on, Sirius ... but what mattered was that he loved her, they were together, and best of all, were going to have a baby! So even if he had gotten the vast majority of his knowledge out of a book, she didn't think he did too shabbily when it came to pleasuring her. In fact, it seemed that he got a lot of his own pleasure out of doing so. How many men were capable of that?

She had no idea; all she knew for sure was that Harry was...and if only for that reason, considered herself lucky to have him in her life. He could be very sweet and tender on one hand, on another, almost bruisingly passionate ... but either way, she loved it, because it was all part of him. Part of the man she had loved since she was a child, the man she would always love ... no matter what happened in their lives.

"I would hope that she told you about people as well," Harry quipped, a mischievous twinkle in his beautiful green eyes.

"Twit! You know bloody well what I mean!" She playfully popped him one on the jaw.

"Hey! What brought that on?" he protested, equally playfully, grabbing her arm and holding it away from him for a moment. "I won't let go of you until you promise not to hit me again."

"I'll hit you whenever I bloody well feel like it, Harry James Potter," Ginny declared in mock anger...then dissolved into laughter, which is always contagious; soon they were both laughing like children. "Now don't you think we should get back to our room?" she asked when they both recovered from their spell of almost insane laughter. Ginny was so glad that she was able to make Harry laugh, that he could relax enough with her to allow himself to do so...and she prayed that would be the case for the duration of their married life.

"Might be a good idea," he agreed. "At least we managed to drop off the file, even though Minerva wasn't there. Oh well, as long as she got it back. I put it where she'll be able to find it easily."

It took only a short time for them to dry off and don their robes again; after donning his own, Harry moved to drain the bath.

"How long do you think we're going to be able to avoid Ron and Hermione?" she asked once they had taken the Portkey back to their room, most likely once again avoiding said friends, which had to be frustrating as all hell for them.

"I have no idea," came the reply. "I can only hope it's long enough so that we can go to Highgate and Hampstead before they catch up with us."

"Can you imagine what'll happen when they do? They'll probably pin us down and not let us up until we've told them everything we've been doing!"

"Wouldn't surprise me at all," Harry laughed again as he headed for the bed, dropping the robe on the way. "Hermione is especially good at that." Ginny savoured her husband's male beauty. It was scarcely believable that he truly loved her, truly belonged to her ... and not just in a legal sense! She was also sure that there were many marriageable women out there who would have loved to take her place...but Harry wasn't that kind of person. Once he made a romantic commitment to someone, it was for life ... and it was to one person alone. Ginny was proud and thankful beyond words that he had chosen her to be that one person.

Harry's voice brought her back to reality. "Hey, Gin, come to bed. We need to get some sleep!" Within moments, she knew that he meant just that. Fun and games were over, at least for now. Sleep was the order of the night; they could not be at their best without it, either now or later. She dropped her own robe upon reaching her side of the bed and slid in beside him; his arms automatically went around her, and her head found its way to his right shoulder even as his head found its way to her left. Within moments, they were deeply asleep.

Chapter 20: Dancing Lessons/Mrs. Sirius Black

Chapter 20 of 27

Harry gets dancing lessons from Hermione as a surprise for Ginny; while in London, he and Ginny track down the woman they believe to be Sirius's secret wife and the mother of the boy they met - Harry's father's namesake. Harry even ends up offering her Sirius's fortune and the ownership of number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Harry again rose before Ginny did, and it was a good thing, too ... for if she'd known where he was going, she'd have demanded to go too...and he wanted to surprise her. He didn't feel like walking any distance at the moment, so he used the portable Portkey to transport himself to the door of his married friends, Ron and Hermione. To say that they were stunned to see him after so many days of his and Ginny's avoiding them would be to damn with faint praise, but to Hermione's credit, she rose to the occasion magnificently.

"Well! I thought you two had forgotten we existed!"

"Sorry." Harry smiled sheepishly. "We've been kind of busy."

"I can imagine," Hermione threw back. "Now what did you need to see us for?"

"I want to surprise Ginny, and I need you two to help me do it."

His two friends looked at each other, totally mystified.

"I saw that look, you two," Harry remarked in a mock scolding tone. "Just give me a minute and I'll explain."

"All right, explain," Hermione retorted.

"You remember the Yule Ball in fourth year, I assume," was the next thing out of Harry's mouth.

"I remember ... but I'd rather forget," Hermione said. "Just as I'm sure Ron would, considering what happened."

"Don't mean to make you remember anything bad," Harry apologised. "I just need you to help me with something."

"Like what?" Hermione prompted.

"Dancing. I want to be able to dance with Ginny, and I don't know the first thing about it ... particularly waltzing. She told me she had a tape of the waltz from that night, and I promised her I would dance it with her. I need you to teach me how to dance it properly."

"You looked like you were doing all right to me," Hermione opined.

"That wasn't any of my doing, I assure you. Parvati was telling me what to do. I'd never danced before in my life up to that point. I also noticed how well you were dancing with Krum."

"Well ... I don't suppose Ron would mind. That is, as long as he's there to keep an eye on things. But, Harry, how in Merlin's name are we going to keep this from Ginny? You know how good she is at seemingly picking things up from thin air, particularly when they concern you."

"I'll think of something. ... Now, will you help me?"

"I just said I would," Hermione returned, voice touched with impatience. "When did you want to start?"

"How about tomorrow? I'll have enough fun trying to think of an excuse for being away from her today without being gone for hours in the bargain."

"All right, how does eight o'clock sound?"

"Okay, I guess. Ginny doesn't usually wake up before ten."

"All right, eight it is. See you then. You just make sure *you're* awake in time ... and don't forget your dancing shoes!" Just as Harry was about to leave, she added, "Oh, by the way, as soon as you see fit to tell us, we'd really like to know what you two have been up to the last few days."

"We will. Promise. No time now. Got to go!" With that, Harry touched the portable Portkey and was gone.

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Harry was there bright and early the next morning, ready to dance ... or rather, as ready as he would ever be. And as expected, both of his friends were awake to join him. He was sure that it had to be a supreme effort for Ron to drag himself out of bed before noon, but he had managed. "I assume you know where to put your hands, Harry," Hermione remarked as she moved to join him.

"Of course I do, now."

"Okay. Ron, start the music." With that, the dancing lesson began.

It was fortunate that Harry had a good memory; otherwise he'd have literally fallen over his own feet trying to keep up with Hermione. More than once she'd either had to pull him back into line or do intricate steps in order to keep him from stepping on her toes ... and it didn't help Harry's morale to have a pair of steely-blue Weasley eyes boring a hole in his back every time he got within range. Only natural, he supposed, knowing too well that Ron was most *definitely* the jealous type, particularly when it came to Hermione. Just the same, he should know he had nothing to worry about, not when Harry was so pie-eyed in love with Ginny!

They decided to call it quits after about an hour or so in order that the dancers could rest their feet and have some refreshments. While they were resting, Harry decided to recount one point in his past when he was about twelve and Dudley had been forced to take dancing lessons. He had hated every minute and had looked stupid to boot, particularly crammed into his one best black wool suit, dress shirt, tie and dress shoes, but Aunt Petunia had insisted. Naturally, Harry was excluded from participating, but hardly minded...at least not in this situation. He definitely enjoyed seeing "dear Dudders" fall over his own big feet, that was for sure!

Of course, Harry didn't dare laugh in front of them for fear of being punished, but after a while it got *very* hard to hold in. After a time, he had to force himself not to run out of the room, holding a hand to his mouth, then once behind his door, put a Silencing Charm on it, then laughed until his sides hurt and tears streamed down his face. And that's basically what his friends were doing once he finished relating Dudley's dancing woes, if not rolling on the floor holding their sides.

Whenever Harry felt down, all he needed to do was think of Dudley crammed into that hot, black wool suit, his shirt looking like it was choking him, the neck was so tight ... not to mention the shoes that had to be killing him, and he automatically cheered up. Now maybe his lowlife cousin had some idea of what he had put Harry through when he was made a fool of by Dudley on almost a daily basis in front of their peers! Harry really wished that some of his neighborhood bully cousin's gang members could have seen him like that; they'd never have let him live it down.

It would almost have been worth a bloody nose, black eye or even a belt-whipping by Uncle Vernon to have seen the looks on their faces! Thank Merlin he was away from them and never had to go back again. It was a cinch, too, that Dudley probably wouldn't be able to find a girl who could countenance him, so he'd probably die a bachelor ... and probably end up on the streets after his parents died because he disdained working for a living, believing that the world owed him a hand-out because he had always had virtually everything he'd ever wanted handed to him on a silver platter.

Fortunately, by the time Harry returned to Ginny, he had a ready-made excuse; he was doing something special for her that he couldn't tell her about because he wanted to surprise her. She still looked skeptical at that, but didn't question him further. Meanwhile, they had to make plans to go to London and both go to the WWN and the main Wizarding Genealogy outfit, not to mention look up Rose ... address-wise, it might be a good idea to look under both Shackbolt and Shackbolt-Black; who knew which one she was currently using? They shouldn't go too far wrong if they remembered that she lived in Hampstead and likely couldn't afford to move every year as he once had.

Hermione had estimated it would take about a week to teach him the basic waltz steps ... and that was if Harry was a quick study ... and so he was, in most things, but in this case, could make no guarantees, simply give it his best shot. Just the same, a week should be just enough time for him to master the steps before he and Ginny were due to leave for London. He would spring the dancing surprise on her at a strategic moment during their stay there.

In addition, Harry had already told McGonagall not to show Ron and Hermione the letter he had given her explaining his and Ginny's absence until after they were well away and would be unable to stop them. All the same, he and Ginny planned to take their wands and other defensive measures in the event of an emergency while there. Unlikely, but it didn't pay to take unnecessary chances.

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Unfortunately, when they finally did arrive there, it was on a Sunday so nothing was open; the only thing they could do was see if they could find Rose in Hampstead. They managed to find her in the London phone book under her maiden name, and armed with her address, they Apparated almost to her door. They also took the copies of the articles found in James Black's file to back up their claims in case she was skeptical of them and who they said they were.

Harry thought it would be best if he knocked on her door; she would be more likely to recognise him than Ginny in spite of their marriage. When Harry saw her, he knew immediately why Sirius had fallen in love with her so easily; she was still a very attractive woman, even though she had to be at least in her forties, if not more, now.

"Yes? What can I do for you?"

"Ms. Shackbolt? My name is Harry Potter, and this is my wife, Ginny. We are ... close friends of Sirius Black and former Hogwarts students, the witchcraft and wizarding school I understand your son, James, is presently attending."

Rose acted like she had been Stunned or something for a moment, just standing there frozen, unable to speak or move for a long time. *The* Harry Potter, the famous Auror who killed the Dark Lord recently?"

"The same," Harry admitted. "We would like to speak with you if possible. About your son, and about Sirius Black and your relationship with him."

"How do you know Sirius?" she asked, still skeptical even while ushering them inside.

"He was my parents' best friend and best man at their wedding. Not to mention the fact that he was my godfather," Harry told her as the door closed behind them. "I have also discovered evidence that you and Sirius were once ... married."

"Briefly," Rose reluctantly admitted. "And that was years ago."

"But you never remarried," Harry pointed out.

"No. I saw no point. I ... loved Sirius too much," she quietly admitted. "But since he forbade me from coming to see him at Azkaban, I gave him what I could...pictures and information on our son, James. I assume you know that the boy you know as James Black is our son?"

"Yes," Harry admitted.

"I also want you to know that I never believed that Sirius killed anyone; I told him as much," she declared, gesturing to the nearby sofa, in front of which was a coffee table with a pot, three cups and a plate of fairy cakes with white icing. Harry and Ginny sat on the sofa while Rose sat in an overstuffed chair facing them. "I knew him as well as anyone, and he was not that kind of person."

"Damn bloody right he wasn't," Harry declared. "Sorry about the language."

"It's all right," she dismissed. "I've heard worse. Just the same, you can't be here simply to tell me that you're Sirius's godson and all that. There must be another reason."

"There is ... and please hear me out before you give me your decision. Sirius left me his fortune...quite a considerable one, too...and I'm here to offer some of it to you. For your son James's care and education only, mind you. I have enough of an inheritance from my parents; I have little need of Sirius's money. He only left it to me because he had no one else at the time. I also feel sure that Sirius would want me to help you now, since he didn't dare acknowledge you or your son himself, even at the time he died, because he was still considered a criminal, even though he was no longer at Azkaban."

Both Harry and Ginny could see that Rose was torn between her stubborn independence and her wish for her son to have the best of everything she could give him.

"I also know where your son's name comes from. James is my father's name, Sirius's best friend ... and Adolphus is Sirius's father's name."

Rose took a long swallow of tea, then set it down again and reached for a fairy cake, beginning to unwrap it, then took a bite and swallowed before answering. "Well, Mr. Potter, I must say ... you really seem to have done your homework. My compliments."

"It was because I cared about Sirius; one of the few people who ever deserved it. So, if only for your son's sake, because I care about him...and you...because of your connection to Sirius, I want to help ease your financial burdens. I know it could not have been easy to raise a son by yourself, especially since your family is not nearly as well-off as the Blacks. Accepting this money will not only make both of your lives easier, it will make me happy ... but most of all, you'll make *Sirius* happy."

"How can you know that?"

"Because I kept in close touch with him while he was in hiding; he confided a lot to me. I knew the kind of man he was. We never discussed your marriage or James, of course; Ginny and I just found that out recently."

Rose gave Ginny a lingering look; then the two women smiled at each other. "Mrs. Potter, do you know that you greatly resemble your mother-in-law?"

"You ... once saw a picture of my parents?" Harry asked, incredulous, speaking before Ginny could draw breath to do so.

"Just their wedding picture; Sirius showed it to me once. Your mother had red hair and green eyes and was very beautiful ... and your wife looks so much like her that it's uncanny."

"Aren't you going to say that I look just like my father except for my green eyes ... my mum's eyes?" Harry wondered. "I heard that so much that it got bloody boring after a while."

"I imagine so," Rose laughed. "Well, don't worry. *I'm* not going to say it."

"Thank you. I appreciate it. Just the same, I must have Dad's penchant for redheads in order to have married one myself," Harry opined, taking another sip of tea. He would have preferred pumpkin juice or butterbeer, but one had to take what one's hostess offered or risk offending her. "It was great to hear that Sirius hadn't been totally out of the marriage and children game, even though I understand the two of you were only together for a month before he was put into Azkaban."

"Three weeks and six days, to be exact," Rose revealed.

"There's something else I want to mention," Harry said. "I was also bequeathed Sirius's family home in London. Since Ginny and I have our own flat elsewhere, we don't need the house, so we would like you to have it ... if only to give your son an inheritance when he comes of age."

"Oh, Mr. Potter, really! This is far too generous of you. First the money, then a house ... I mean, you hardly know me! How do you know I'm worthy of it?"

"Harry," he corrected. "And it's for your son as much as it is for you. And besides, Sirius loved you both. I know from experience that he doesn't fall in love easily, but when he does, it's for life ... and any woman who wins his love is bound to be special. You don't have to move into it if you don't want to, especially since it is presently the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix."

"I'm sure you've heard of it...Ginny and I are members...but it once belonged to Sirius, and I feel sure he would approve if I gave it to you and James. I have obtained the consent of the current Head of the Order, Mr. Arthur Weasley, my father-in-law, to offer it to you. Just keep it for your son until he's old enough, then sign the deed over to him. At the moment, however, I'm willing to sign it over to you. I have it with me if you want to do it now."

Rose was once again quiet; Harry was sure that it felt to her like she'd been literally knocked for a loop. To not only be offered a fortune but a house to boot ... and what's more, to meet the great Auror Harry James Potter, who had showed up at her door literally out of the blue to offer her these things that had turned out to belong to Sirius Black, her late husband. The famous Auror and slayer of the Dark Lord, who had turned out to be Sirius's godson, and his wife, who greatly resembled Harry's late mother Lily.

"Rose? Are you all right?" Harry asked gently, looking at the older woman with concern.

"Yes, I'm fine. This is just ... all ... quite a bit to take in."

"I imagine so," Harry agreed with a soft chuckle. "So ... is it a deal?"

"I ... suppose so. I'd be an ... unnatural mother to refuse my son something that belonged to his father. Where is the deed?"

"Right here." Harry pulled it out of his inner jacket pocket and offered it to her. Rose put on a pair of half-moon glasses that resembled Dumbledore's and carefully examined the deed before signing it. She noted that Harry and Arthur had already signed it in the proper places.

"Forgive my caution. I'm a solicitor," she told him.

"Quite understandable," Harry smiled. "Congratulations, Ms. Shackbolt; you are now the owner of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London ... that, incidentally, is less than five miles from here, so maybe one of these days you could visit the Order. As Sirius's wife, they would not refuse you. Especially not if I vouch for you."

"Oh ... Harry, you're doing entirely too much!" Rose exclaimed. "How will I ever repay you?"

"Not necessary. Your being willing to take what I want to give you will be repayment enough. Also, as far as the money is concerned, just go to the Gringotts Bank, ask for this person" Harry handed her a piece of parchment with a name and number on it... "and he will direct you to my vault that holds the money from Sirius I want to give you. Just say that I sent you...don't worry, I'll give you a note authorising you to do so...and he will turn the money over to you once you present identification proving that you

are ... or were once ... Mrs. Sirius Black. No questions asked. However much I choose to give you."

"Which is?" Rose softly prompted, what was happening finally beginning to register with her.

"How does ten thousand Galleons grab you?"

"Oh ... Harry, that's more money than I...or my son...could possibly spend in a lifetime!"

"But just in case you do, I have authorised the Head of the Gringotts Bank to open a standing account for you that will never run dry, in your own name. I'll see to it...even if I have to put my own money into it ... although that is unlikely, because as I said, Sirius's fortune is considerable, and that is what will be in the account."

By this time Rose was almost in tears, she was so happy. She may have lost Sirius, but she had his son, and now his house and his money, as befitted a proper widow of such a great wizard. Most importantly, she had met his wonderful, generous godson, the great Harry Potter, slayer of the Dark Lord, and his lovely wife. Truly, she was one of the luckiest women in the world!

"Lastly, we ask that we be allowed to visit your son James while he is home from school," Harry requested. "Being with Sirius's son will almost be like being with him again."

"Of course, of course! You're both welcome any time. Thank you ... thank you so very much, Harry ... Ginny ..."

"It was our pleasure," the couple smiled. "Now, if you'll excuse us, we must be on our way...but we will meet again, I assure you. Farewell for now."

Rose followed them to the door, now definitely in tears of happiness, insisting on embracing them both, but lingering with Harry the longest before releasing him. "Bless you ... bless you both ..."

It took a while for the couple to extricate themselves politely, but they finally managed. Once they had, however, Ginny asked, "Do you still intend to go to the Office of Witchcraft and Wizarding Genealogy?"

"Why not, as long as we're here?" Harry replied. "In the meantime, however, I have a surprise for you...but we need to go back to our room first and get dressed up."

Ginny frowned suspiciously at him. "What have you got up your sleeve, Harry James Potter?"

"Just my arm, I assure you," he quipped. "Seriously, I want to take you out for the fanciest dinner I can afford, then ... we can have our dance that we missed so long ago." This part of his explanation was almost crooned, and had the predictable effect on Ginny. It was a wonder she didn't melt into a puddle at his feet! Truly, what had she ever done to deserve such an incredible man?

"Oh, Harry ..." She couldn't resist giving him a loving embrace and lingering kiss. "Thank you, my love. Thank you."

"My pleasure," he crooned back, happily accepting her ministrations. "Now let's get back to our room and get ready."

Chapter 21: Unexpected Encounter/Nagini is Destroyed

Chapter 21 of 27

While on a night out in London, Harry and Ginny encounter Nagini and her guardians, and are forced to engage them without any outside help - but fortunately the Light side prevails due to the element of surprise.

Thus began the most wonderful and unforgettable night of Ginevra Weasley-Potter's entire life. Once it sank in that Harry was serious, she mentally went through all the fancy dresses she owned and decided that the newest one she'd gotten some weeks back, but not had a chance to wear yet, would be perfect. It brought out the gold highlights in her hair, and what's more, it was short, glittery-gold, and strapless ... but most importantly, it would knock Harry's eyes out the moment he laid eyes on it! Since their reunion, virtually every clothing purchase she had made was done with Harry in mind, and this dress in particular.

She did not yet know how to conjure up clothing, so she'd had to do it the Muggle way, but she had learned how to conjure up hairstyles ... and tried out many different ones before deciding on one that left her almost waist-length hair down, but curled almost all the way up to her head, leaving her ears bare so she could use the earrings he had given her the one Christmas which had occurred during the time they had first been dating, the ones that looked like they were made of a million tiny stars. She had also found a jeweled choker that had both clear and golden gems in it, gems which had the power to hypnotise a person who looked at them long enough into doing the wearer's every bidding. Not that Harry particularly needed it; besides, she liked to think she could do that all by herself.

It was fortunate that there were two bathrooms in their hotel suite, so they could prepare themselves separately. She smiled as she passed the one bathroom on the way to the other, hearing the water going, well able to imagine Harry in all his glory standing beneath the steaming spray. She shook her head violently. She had to keep her mind on their upcoming evening instead of how much she wanted to be making mad, passionate love to Harry...beginning with snogging him senseless first, of course. That would surely come later tonight. *Meanwhile, get your bloody bum moving, girl, she mentally ordered herself. You know you want to make a grand entrance in that absolutely divine dress and enjoy the way it makes Harry look ... like he wants to devour you on the spot, you look so delicious!*

She smiled wickedly at that thought and entered the second bathroom.

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Ginny would have been pleased if she had known what was running through Harry's mind at that particular moment ... virtually the same thing that was running through hers. So much so that he was seriously thinking of switching to cold water, if only briefly, so he could calm down sufficiently as he imagined Ginny in all her glory standing under steaming spray. Merlin, he had to stop this or else he'd never be ready in time!

He had no idea what dress she would choose, although he suspected it would be the newest one she had bought recently, the short, strapless, gold glittery one. He had never mentioned that he'd seen it almost as soon as she'd brought it home, and could just imagine how delicious she would look in it. He could only hope, however, that his imagination would have nothing on the reality. Meanwhile, he had to get his bum in gear, or else she'd never let him hear the end of it for keeping her waiting and preventing her from making her grand entrance.

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Within the next half-hour, Harry was ready...or at least as ready as he would ever be. He had magically enlarged his original dress robes from school so that they would fit his now 21-year-old and considerably more filled-out (but still slender and well-built) body. The best he could do was dry his hair and comb it a bit; it just would *not* behave, no matter what he did. The most he could say for it was that it was clean and combed to the best of his ability. As a final touch, he put on a bit of what he knew to be Ginny's favourite aftershave, a Muggle fragrance called *English Leather*.

Ginny should be almost ready by now; he might as well go out and wait for her, not wanting to deprive her of the chance to make a grand entrance and thus (supposedly) surprise him with her divine new dress. He left the bathroom, where he had decided to dress, and stepped out, looking around for his wife, but didn't see her anywhere. She must not be ready yet. However, he hoped she would be out soon, since their reservations were for eight and it was already seven-thirty.

It was seven-forty-five before he heard the other door open and her soft voice call to him. "Harry? I'm ready. What do you think?"

He turned around...and was almost instantaneously transported to Heaven. Or at least it seemed that way, for the vision before him could not be real. She had to be an angel; she looked too lovely and perfect to be anything else. Ginny's red-gold hair was in curls all the way down to her waist, a white and gold choker around her long, slender neck...and the earrings that looked like a million tiny stars glittered in her ears.

Her eye makeup accented the dress and her jewelry to perfection, but what Harry couldn't tear his eyes off of was the dress itself, not to mention the lovely body inside it ... and the beautiful legs it showed off, encased in matching gold hose, and her feet in strappy gold dress sandals with one-inch heels. She had always looked delicious to him, but that feeling seemed to multiply a thousandfold as he saw her actually wearing the dress. He could scarcely keep himself from literally drooling; she looked simply ... *scrumptious*. Just wait until they got back home and he got her alone!

"Gin ... you look ..." He couldn't think of a word to describe how marvelous she looked for some time, but knew he had to say something...so he finally said, "Simply ... incredible!"

She smiled radiantly at him, her faux fur stole over one arm and glittery gold evening purse in her hand. "Thank you, luv. I'm ... glad you like it. We'd better go now, or we'll be late."

"Oh ... yeah ... right." It was intoxicating to him simply being near her, especially since she had put on her new perfume as well, roses mixed with something else. He couldn't have said what. All he knew was that it was every bit as lovely a smell as befitted the lady herself.

Apparition wasn't good for a pregnant woman, so they had to go via Muggle taxi. Fortunately, the restaurant wasn't far away, just about ten minutes' drive. To be on the safe side, both had brought along their wands, although each knew several ways to use magic without them by now.

Upon arrival, he helped her out of the taxi, and they headed for the ornate doors of the restaurant. Once inside, her stole was checked in, although Harry elected to keep the jacket of his dress robes on. But this restaurant was not a Muggle-type restaurant. All they needed to do after being seated at their reserved table by a solicitous waiter was place their order with the plates, as at the Hogwarts school, and it appeared.

Ginny had always loved seafood, particularly shrimp, so she ordered a large plate of shrimp scampi and a side salad with ranch dressing. Since this was a fancy meal, Harry had foregone their customary drinks and ordered some expensive champagne, the Muggle brand of Dom Perignon. Harry enjoyed seafood too, but not this time. He ordered a t-bone steak, medium-well done and seasoned as he liked it, and also a side salad but with Bleu Cheese dressing.

It was roughly an hour later before the band began to play, and as they played the current song, Harry knew that the next one would be the one he had requested: the Magic Waltz. He could hardly wait to surprise Ginny with his newfound ability to dance it with her.

"Oh, am I full!" she declared shortly after Harry had finished his own meal. "Can we dance now, luv? I need to work off some of this food."

"Of course." She looked at him, somewhat surprised that he would agree so easily, but didn't question him about it, simply took his arm when he offered it as he led her out onto the dance floor. Almost as soon as they reached it, the strains of the "Magic Waltz" began; Ginny seemed stunned speechless for a minute, then managed to say his name. "Harry ...?"

"Surprise," he returned softly with a tender smile. "May I have this dance, my lovely?"

"I would be honoured, sir." Ginny could hardly believe this was really happening; she was actually in Harry's arms, actually waltzing with him. Where had he learned to do it? As far as she knew, he didn't know the first thing about it! Had he done it simply to please her or what? But none of that mattered now; all that was important was that they were finally having their long-delayed dance.

After a time the pair became oblivious to everything but each other, never noticing the fact that other couples had stopped to watch them. What really got to her big-time, though, was the fact that Harry began to sing softly to her under his breath. She caught the words, "... hold the one you love; you know you've waited long enough ... the answer's there ... just look in her eyes ... make your move ... don't be scared, she wants you to ... and don't believe that magic can die ... no, no, no, this magic can't die ..."

"And it never will," he softly declared as the melody lapsed into the instrumental version. "You are ... magic to me, Gin."

"As you are magic to me, my love. And thank you ever so much for the dance...but where on earth did you learn to do it?"

"Later," he whispered, breath feathering her nearest ear. "Don't spoil the moment."

So she didn't speak any more after that, simply savoured the feeling of Harry close to her, the gentle strength of his arms around her, the smell of his aftershave and his cheek resting on hers. Truly, Heaven had come to earth for her ... and she would never forget this night as long as she lived. They had finally had their long-awaited dance...and now that she knew he could do it, she would suggest at the first opportunity that they do this every year on their anniversary: renew their marriage vows in the morning, then go out for a romantic dinner and dance that evening. Unfortunately, an unexpected encounter was about to take place ...

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They were brought back to reality the hard way, by an agitated voice. "*All patrons, this is an emergency! Dark forces are in the area and an evacuation is underway! We regret the inconvenience, and will refund your money if you wish later, but you must leave immediately for your own safety!*"

"Harry, did you hear that? Dark forces in the area. But how can that be?"

"I can only surmise that Nagini and her guardians must have been sighted," he returned ominously. "We'd better get ready ... Bugger! Why did this have to happen now, with just the two of us here?"

Obviously there was no way they were going to get a taxi now, so they'd likely have to walk back to the hotel. Because of the ensuing panic due to the dire announcement, the couple thought it best to flatten themselves against the nearest wall until the crowd thinned out. Ginny's heart pounded as Harry pulled hard on her hand, both of them breathing rapidly as they rested against the cold brick wall. She hadn't even had the chance to get her stole back ... and now this!

The screech of tyres racing away, the pops of Apparition and whooshing of brooms, all combined with the screams of panicked patrons to create a scene out of both Harry and Ginny's worst nightmares. Then, just as they didn't think matters could get any worse, they did. Two Death Eaters appeared on brooms, along with a large snake that they never let out of their sight even as all three moved down the street, coming right toward them, as of yet unaware of the presence of the young witch and wizard ... but they soon would be ... just as Harry felt a searing pain shoot through the scar on his forehead.

Harry had wanted to confront Nagini eventually, of course, but not here and not like this. How could he and a six-months-pregnant Ginny ever manage to get out *of* this

situation in one piece? There was no way for him to call for help, none at all. What were they going to do? Suddenly it came to him. The element of surprise was their only chance. He mentally told Ginny to grab her wand and be prepared to fight, but not to call out and alert their adversaries.

He pointed his wand at the Death Eater on his right and thought *Imperio!* just as he sensed that Ginny was doing the same thing to the other one. As they had hoped, the element of surprise gave them the advantage ... but only for the moment. It was up to them to keep it, or Nagini would surely escape! They made the Death Eaters land and stand aside, simply holding their brooms, unable to do anything else but Harry and Ginny's bidding.

Nagini sensed that something had happened to her guardians and reared up, hissing ominously; Harry knew that she was aware they were close by and prepared to flee at the first sight of them. This was when he knew he had to soothe her, make her think it was all right, if only long enough to destroy her ... and this was where his mastery of Parseltongue came in. The problem was, he would have to risk relinquishing control of the Death Eater. That is, unless ...

Ginny! he called out mentally. *Can you handle both Death Eaters? I need to go after Nagini!*

I can try, she returned, only able to think of expanding the field around the Death Eater presently under her control to include the other one so Harry could concentrate on Nagini. Without looking to confirm that it was done...there was no time...he found himself reverting seemingly automatically to Parseltongue ... and what's more, using a crooning tone he usually used only with Ginny. Nagini may have been a snake, but she was still female, and he had to use that against her...if he could. Even if she was only momentarily bested, that would be all he would need to destroy her ... but only if he could lull her fears long enough.

//It's all right, Nagini my sssweet. You're sssafe.//

//Masster?// came her voice. *//Isss that you? I thought you were dead.//*

//I'm here, my sssweet. No one will harm you.// But even as Harry thought this, he pointed his wand at the large snake, knowing it was now or never. This might be his only chance, and he mustn't waste it. Nor was there any indecision about which curse to use. Even as he thought the *Avada Kedavra*, however, he felt Ginny add her love to his own, making it that much stronger.

He felt Nagini's surprise, then a horrible mental cry, a cross between a scream and a hiss ... and finally nothing. When he dared to look, he saw only a large, unmoving mass coiled on the ground. To be on the safe side, he waited a little longer to ensure that the snake was indeed dead, only then daring to sneak a glimpse in Ginny's direction to see how she was doing with the Death Eaters. He was gratified to see that they had not moved from their original spot, seeming to be in a hypnotic trance, totally unaware of the demise of their charge.

Ginny! He called out in triumph despite the risk of disrupting her concentration and thus her control of the two Death Eaters *I did it! Nagini is dead!*

That's wonderful, my love. Now will you help me with these Death Eaters? I don't think I can hold the forcefield much longer.

Of course. Sorry,luv.

It's all right. Just take one of them.

Right away. He felt her mental sigh of relief, then her reinforcing of her concentration and thus increasing her control of the individual Death Eater before her.

Just when he least expected it, however, he heard the sound of pops that meant someone was Apparating ... several, in fact. A moment later he was stunned and surprised to hear the voice of Mad-Eye Moody.

"Potter, is that you? We just got word that Nagini was in the area! What happened?"

"She's dead. I killed her."

Moody seemed stunned himself to hear this. "What? Are you sure?"

"Yes. She's just down the street. That way." Harry pointed in the opposite direction, about one hundred feet away. Moody didn't move, and for a while, Harry was sure he didn't fully believe him. "I assure you, she's dead. I made certain of that. All the Horcruxes are gone now."

"You killed her? You and ... your wife, by yourselves?"

"Yes, sir. In fact we've got Nagini's two guardians under the ... Imperius Curse."

Moody looked around and saw the two Death Eaters, still under Ginny's control via the Imperius Curse, then motioned two other Aurors who had accompanied him to take control of them so she could be released from her duties.

Ginny jumped when she felt the hand on her shoulder, then relaxed when she heard a soothing male voice. "It's all right, Mrs. Potter. You may cease your control now. We'll handle it." Help had arrived, albeit a bit after the fact, but what mattered was that they were here. She lowered her wand and moved over to join Harry and Moody; Harry slid an arm around her when she was close enough, still holding his own wand.

Once she joined him, Moody looked them both over, still in evening clothes, eyes widening upon seeing that Ginny was pregnant. "This happened while the two of you were ... out for the evening? And ... with you *pregnant*, Mrs. Potter?"

"Ginny," she corrected. "Yes. We had just had dinner and a dance ... then there was a call to evacuate the area because Dark forces had been sighted. Shortly after we came out of the restaurant, we saw the two Death Eaters and ... Nagini a short distance down the street. There was no way we could call for help, so we had to fend for ourselves. Harry told me to use the ... Imperius Curse on the Death Eaters; then once I had control of both of them, he ... went after Nagini and used Parseltongue just long enough so he was able to kill her."

"Then all the Horcruxes are gone, and thus the threat of Voldemort," Moody stated matter-of-factly. "I must report this to the Order ... the Aurors ... the Ministry ... but do not leave the area until after more of our people have arrived and it has been secured, Harry. Don't worry; they will see to the disposition of Nagini and take the Death Eaters into custody."

"Thank you, sir." Harry knew that both he and Ginny's clothing, hair and exposed skin surfaces had become soiled, but fortunately that was all that had happened to them...mainly due to Harry's quick thinking. They had been extraordinarily fortunate. Just wait until they told Ron and Hermione about this! He was sure they would demand a first-hand account, even if they learned the basic facts via the Order or something.

And he could just imagine how the Weasleys would react ... particularly when they learned the circumstances under which it had happened, especially the fact that Ginny had held two Death Eaters under her control for an extended period of time, in spite of the fact that she was six months pregnant. Pregnant witches were not ordinarily in that type of situation, but Ginny was no ordinary witch, as she had so recently demonstrated.

How Harry wished he could have told Sirius and Dumbledore about this...not to mention his parents! He could only hope that they somehow knew, and were proud of him for his accomplishment. Dumbledore had been right. Love had been his ultimate weapon. By combining their individual feelings together, he and Ginny had conquered the forces of Darkness ... and by themselves! Light and love were things that Dark forces could not abide, and Harry had an abundance of both, especially since Ginny had come back into his life.

Harry barely heard the pops that indicated that more reinforcements had arrived, or the whooshing of brooms. Shortly after that, however, he heard Moody say, "The area has been secured. You and Ginny may leave now. We will be in touch with you in the near future. Congratulations ... and our compliments on a job well done."

"Again, thank you, sir." Harry smiled...one of the few real smiles he had managed to give lately...but what mattered to Ginny was that he could finally do it. He had finally triumphed once and for all over Voldemort and company ... no, *they* had. They had done it together...just the two of them!

A short time later, after Moody had Disapparated to give the news to the Order (among others), Harry turned in the direction of their hotel and began walking down the street, his arm still around Ginny. Now that it was all over, they realised how tired they really were. Sleep would be welcome ... but only after they'd cleaned up could they fall into bed. On the way, she put her head on his shoulder, and he drew her closer even as she put an arm around him. Because of her bulk, they could not hold each other as they would have liked, but what mattered was the nearness of the other, so they could live with this minor inconvenience, at least for now.

The walk seemed endless, but at last they reached the hotel. By this time Harry sensed that Ginny was all but asleep...and he wasn't far behind. Perhaps a shower could wait until morning. As it turned out, it was all they could do to make it to their suite. Once there, they locked the door behind them, got out of their finery and literally fell into bed, deeply asleep as soon as their heads hit the pillow.

Chapter 22: Red-Hot Mama/Meeting/Genealogical Search

Chapter 22 of 27

Our couple shares yet another passionate night together even while Ron and Hermione meet with McGonagall about them. Harry and Ginny then do some genealogical research - he on the Blacks, she on the Prewetts, her mother's family.

Upon awakening and their customary morning love, Ginny made sure to find out what she had wanted to know the previous evening...how Harry had managed to dance with her. He cuddled her close, one arm around her, and murmured softly, "Practice."

"Practice? With whom?" she inquired, a touch of suspicion in her voice. "I would have been glad to help you. I know how to waltz quite well. Just ask Neville."

"I know ... but I wanted to surprise you, as I said," he reminded her. "I asked Hermione. I noticed how well she was dancing with Krum at the Ball and thought she could help me."

"I can imagine how Ron reacted to that." Ginny laughed.

"Oh, you may be assured that he was there watching the whole time. I swear, I felt like his eyes were boring holes through me every time I got near him! Bloody hell, is he ever the jealous type ... even of me ... and in my case, he should know better, considering who I'm married to." He gave her a tender smile and squeezed her briefly but firmly.

"You probably should have reminded him of the time McGonagall made him dance with her in front of everybody, for you know he's never been the dancing type." Ginny laughed again. "The look on his face was priceless ... like all he wanted to do was disappear or sink through the floor!"

"Believe me, I considered it, but the mood he was in at the time, I figured it was best not to because he would likely have decked me, best mate or not."

"Just the same, I felt kind of sorry for him, being put on display like that. He must have felt nothing less than thoroughly mortified," Ginny remarked sympathetically. "Especially to have it happen before you and all his peers, including Hermione, Fred, George and me."

"Yeah, I imagine so. I still remember asking Fred and George if they were ever going to let him forget this, and they said, 'Never!' And to this day, they still haven't, as far as I know."

"That's for sure," Ginny confirmed. "From what I've heard from Hermione, they still tease him about it whenever they see him, no matter how many times she threatens to hex them for it."

"She shouldn't just threaten," Harry remarked. "She ought to just out-and-out hex them once and for all. At the very least, that should make them think twice about teasing him again. I mean, how would they have felt if it had been one of them and Ron was always teasing him about it?"

"Well, you should know that Fred and George aren't ones to think of those things. Just the same, they're not bad blokes; they've just never completely grown up. Mum has lectured them till she's blue in the face, and they still do it. I get the distinct feeling they always will."

"Blimey, what a family I've married into!" Harry exclaimed. "But as long as I have you, it's worth it. I'm sorry to have taken so long to realise how incredible you are."

"Let's just say that it wasn't easy to wait...or to see you with Cho Chang...but what matters is that you finally did," Ginny assured him. "And I may have said that *gave up* on you, at least at that point in time, but that does not mean I ever *got over* you."

"It wasn't easy to think of you with that Dean or Michael, either. And I don't like to admit this, but as I look back, knowing you went to the Ball with Neville, I was even jealous as hell of him, since he was able to hold you and dance with you when I wasn't. I always wondered, in fact, just what you did to make him look as he did when he came up to the dorm around midnight that night."

"How did he look?"

"Basically, a mixture of astonishment and lovesickness."

"For pity's sake, all I did was kiss him good night," Ginny dismissed.

"Well, considering that it's Neville, that would be all it would take," Harry reminded her, finding it very hard to contain the green-eyed monster inside him ... or more accurately, that *was* him, upon hearing that.

Ginny seemed to sense this and said, "Please, Harry, *don't* go after him. That was years ago, and it only happened once. He's happily married to Luna Lovegood now, and

I really don't think she'd appreciate it if you hexed him into the middle of next week simply for kissing me. We weren't together then, you know, so I was a free agent."

"That still doesn't mean I have to like the idea," Harry countered. "And can you say that you only kissed Dean and Michael once?" he demanded.

"No, of course not," she had to admit. "But those were bonafide relationships. Neville was just a one-time thing. Besides, he's a good, decent person. If he'd thought you wanted me at the time, he probably would have asked someone else to the Ball rather than get in your way. He's never been one to move in on someone else's territory; never been the Don Juan type. He's far too shy and unsure of himself for that. I also think the main reason he ended up gravitating to Luna was because she was like that herself; they're like kindred spirits."

"She always seemed nice enough, if a bit loopy, just like him," Harry recalled. "Somehow I can't be surprised at their getting together ... and I'm glad for them both. I just hope I don't find out about too many more of your former...paramours, that's all."

"Paramours?" Ginny laughed. "Harry, *you're* my only paramour. The others were just warmups for the real thing."

"Then you better make sure to love me *a lot*, lady. Enough to make me forget all those others," he warned her with a seductive growl, nuzzling her neck and preparing to turn her beneath him once again.

□

"I'll be happy to." The next thing Harry knew, Ginny had taken the initiative and turned *him* beneath *her*, preparing to ride him like a pony, something she had never done before, but had always fantasised about doing ... and now it was coming true, both of them moaning softly in pleasure as she moved atop him and he cradled her breasts in his hands.

What's more, she intended to thoroughly wear him out before she was through with him. And one may be sure that the moment she began her sexy ministrations, he was literally knocked for a loop and didn't come down to earth again for several hours. Especially considering (and maybe in spite of) her pregnancy, Harry would eventually have to admit that his sweet little wife was one red-hot mama, and that he had every intention of keeping that red-hot mama all to himself!

* * * * *

While this was going on, of course, our other couple was meeting with McGonagall to find out just what Harry and Ginny had been up to all the times they had managed to avoid them. As requested, the Hogwarts headmistress handed Hermione the letter Harry had given her earlier, which explained everything. She opened it; then she and Ron read it together. McGonagall was also sure she knew how they must be feeling about the whole matter, simply judging by the looks on their faces as they read.

"For Merlin's sake, has Harry gone completely mental?" Hermione questioned heatedly. "How could you have let him do this, Minerva? Why didn't you stop them?"

"Harry is a grown man, Hermione. I have no control over him. I can only advise him ... and if he chooses to do these things for James Black and his mother, than who am I to stand in his way? After all, what's wrong with helping someone?"

"When it disrupts their lives, that's not helping!" Hermione threw back.

"But from what I've heard, it's *not* disrupting their lives. I thought the same as you at first, but it turns out that this Rose Shacklebolt was actually married to Sirius Black for a time and has his child, whom they named James, after Sirius's best friend and Harry's father. All Harry wanted to do was give her a share of Sirius's fortune, since he certainly doesn't need it ... nor does he need Grimmauld Place. You know as well as I do that he and Ginny have their own flat, just as you two do. You may disagree with him, but from what I understand, their meeting with Rose went very well, and she accepted both the money and the ownership of Grimmauld Place, if only as an inheritance for her son when he comes of age."

In spite of themselves, these statements deflated any additional arguments Ron or Hermione might have tried to make. They should have known that Harry's reasoning would be sound and logical and in the boy's best interests, and if they ended up in an affectionate relationship, all the better for everyone concerned.

"Then they intend to continue the relationship?" Hermione asked, her voice much quieter now.

"As far as I know," McGonagall replied. "So don't you two worry your heads too much about Harry. He may have had more than his share of problems and hardships, but he's basically a good, decent person. Just support him in this as friends should, and everything should be fine. I ask only that the four of you keep this amongst yourselves for the sake of preserving the boy's privacy...and that of his mother. Not to mention out of respect to Sirius's memory, as I'm sure Harry and Ginny intend to do."

"Just the same, that can't be the only reason they went to London," Hermione insisted.

"No, it wasn't...but it's best that you allow time for Harry and Ginny to tell you themselves. You know they always do, eventually. Just be patient."

It was at this moment that an owl flew in, an envelope in its beak, and landed on McGonagall's desk. She took the envelope and the bird flew off again; once it was gone, she opened the envelope and began to read the message inside. Her eyes widened like saucers, and the couple across from her could only guess at what she was reading.

"Minerva, what is it?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"Oh, Merlin, I can't believe it ..." McGonagall murmured, turning pale. "It's over. It's actually over. They've done it!"

"Who's done *what*?" Ron shot back impatiently. "Minerva, tell us what that bloody thing says already!"

But she couldn't; she simply handed the message over to Ron and Hermione to read for themselves. This time both *other* went pale in reaction to the message. It seemed that Harry and Ginny had gone out to dinner and dancing, then upon leaving the restaurant because of an emergency warning that Dark forces were in the area, came upon two Death Eaters and Voldemort's snake Nagini, reported to hold the last piece of the Dark Lord's soul.

He and Ginny had managed to get the Death Eaters under their control via the Imperius Curse; then Harry employed his mastery of Parseltongue to fool Nagini into thinking he was her master. It worked just long enough for him to lull her into a false sense of security and destroy her. Help hadn't arrived until after it was all over, so the battle had fallen to them ... but from the looks of things, there really hadn't been much of a battle, for the Dark forces had obviously been taken by surprise.

Come to think of it, that was the only way Harry and Ginny could have managed to win by themselves ... but what mattered was that they *did* win. There was truly something *big* to celebrate now, especially once Harry and Ginny came back! No more Horcruxes to look for and destroy now...but best of all, no more Voldemort! Not to mention a son of Sirius's and his mother to get to know in order to ease their grief at losing him.

Now they would be able to settle down to at least a halfway normal wizarding life, although it was likely they would always need to remain vigilant for new Dark wizards and witches that might crop up. But as long as Harry and those like him were on the job, the wizarding world wouldn't have a whole lot to worry about on that score.

* * * * *

It wasn't until breakfast the following morning that Harry managed to remember to ask Ginny about her 'Sir Galahad' reference. "It refers to an extraordinarily brave and noble English knight from the sixth century who was a member of that era's King Arthur's Round Table. Sound familiar?"

"You think I'm like ... that knight?"

"Like him? You could *be* him!" Ginny exclaimed. "Not that I particularly held that against you ... but that didn't make living without you any easier these last four years."

"Well, you won't have to anymore. Not if I can help it, anyway. There's no reason for me to go anywhere now, at least not without you ... not anymore, especially since we're rid of Voldemort, the Death Eaters and the Horcruxes."

"Hopefully we can now have at least a halfway normal life together," Ginny remarked just before taking another bite of her Denver omelet, then a swig of pumpkin juice.

"Hopefully," Harry concurred as he followed suit on the other side of the table. "When did you want to go to the Genealogy outfit?"

"As soon as we finish breakfast, then get ready," Ginny told him. "I was thinking I'd even look up some stuff on Mum's family, the Prewetts, while we're there as you're looking up stuff on Sirius's family."

"Why would you want to do that?" Harry wondered as he polished off the last of his food and drink.

"I just want to check something that Mum asked me about, make sure it's accurate," she replied. "Nothing drastic. Just the same, I promised her I would, since we were here anyway, and let her know what I find out."

"Shouldn't be any problem," Harry returned absently, already planning how he would go about his genealogical search. First Sirius's immediate family, then gradually work back, maybe about a century or so ... at least for starters. Then if he found something he wanted to follow up or find out more about, take it from there. Maybe even ask Rose what she knew about her ancestors, if anything.

Then, once James had a school holiday and if they were available to visit, go spend some time with him and perhaps tell him about Sirius. Harry could just imagine how young James Black would react when he told him about all the times Sirius had mentioned when his own father James, the boy's namesake, was in school, not to mention the experiences he and Sirius had had together and the conversations they had had, either face-to-face, via owl post or the fireplace.

Within the next hour and a half, they had taken a Muggle taxi to the street where the Genealogy outfit could be found and got as close to it as they could, then walked the rest of the way. Exercise would be good for Ginny, as long as she didn't overdo it. In keeping with the rainy, overcast weather, they wore water-resistant jackets, wore sturdy shoes with non-skid soles and carried umbrellas.

Upon arrival, the couple made their way to the desk and asked where the files for the letters B and P could be found. "The first half of the alphabet may be found on this floor, but the second half is on the second floor, so whichever one of you is looking for the name beginning with the letter P must go up there."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other; then he asked, "Is there a lift that goes up there? My wife is six months pregnant; I don't think she should try to climb stairs."

"Of course, sir. That way." The kindly-looking, grey-haired wizard behind the counter pointed to his right.

"Thank you. If there's anything else we need, we'll let you know," Harry replied with a grateful smile.

"Thank you, sir. We're here to serve." With that, the grey-haired wizard turned back to his cluttered desk and sat down, piles of files and moving pictures scattered everywhere in his immediate vicinity.

Harry and Ginny made their way to the lift, and he got her onto it safely, giving her a quick kiss before parting. "If you need me, luv, you know what to do."

"Of course." She smiled. "Same goes for you. See you later." With that, the lift doors closed between them.

Harry turned on his heel and made his way to the area where the grey-haired wizard had told him the B files were. When he arrived, he found several people doing the same thing he had come to do, but they were so engrossed in what they were doing that they barely noticed him. He was pleased in spite of himself, because usually if he showed up anywhere, there was a double-take from someone...at the very least.

He finally found a vacant chair and used his wand to find the first file which said, "BLACK, ADOLPHUS & WILHELMINA," Sirius's parents. The first thing he found was the record of their marriage, which had taken place on October 31, 1955, at the Black family home, Grimmauld Place. The next record was that of Sirius's birth, March 21, 1960, then that of Regulus, August 30, 1965, both of which were also at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

He then found a short article from an old *Daily Prophet* dated September 9th, 1987, stating, "Mrs. Wilhelmina Black, age 62, died at her home, number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London, on August 30th. She was preceded in death by her husband of 32 years, Adolphus, and one son, Regulus, both of whom died in 1980. She is survived by another son, Sirius Marcus, aged 27 years. Funeral services are pending."

There was even a picture of Mrs. Black as a young woman accompanying the short obituary. Harry had to admit that she had been a handsome woman when she was young, but just the same, he could scarcely equate the woman in the picture with the nasty, foul-mouthed old woman in the portrait that he knew. The portrait no one had been able to get down off the entryway wall even now. The two portraits seemed as different as night and day. Those of the Order at Grimmauld Place simply made sure to keep the curtains closed over it; that way there was little cause for her to start screaming curses, racial epithets and dire threats ... not that she needed much.

He searched a little further and was stunned to find another *Daily Prophet* article dated July 17, 1976. It told of the then-16-year-old Sirius's row with his father, the enraged Adolphus Black eventually disowning his first-born son, making the 11-year-old Regulus his heir, because Sirius had decided to follow the path of Light rather than follow in his family's footsteps and support the Dark Lord.

According to the article, Sirius, a sixth-year student at Hogwarts, had reportedly fled to find refuge with the family of his closest friend, James Potter, at the Potter family home, Spinner's End, in Godric's Hollow. It was too long to read all at once, close to three pages, so Harry told himself to print out the article so he could go over it at home and perhaps discuss it with the others in the Order, not to mention his friends and Ginny, and see what he could find out from some of the older members who had been around then.

Now there was something else Harry had to look up. Maybe he would cut his search in the B section short for today and see what he could find out about Spinner's End, supposedly his grandparents' home in Godric's Hollow. He had never heard of it, nor had anything belonging to his deceased parents that he had found in his vault upon coming of age mentioned it. If he couldn't find anything here, he would probably have to go to Godric's Hollow itself and see what he could find out there.

A short search later netted him an obituary for both Adolphus Black and Regulus. It was reported that they had both died at the hands of Voldemort's Death Eaters after a frightened Regulus had tried to flee his obligations to the Dark Lord when Voldemort had ordered him to kill his father. An enraged Voldemort had had them both killed by Bellatrix, who had been a devout supporter of the Dark Lord even then. (It turned out that she was the daughter of Adolphus's older brother Septimus and his wife Bianca, and 21 years old at the time, just a year older than Sirius.)

The obituary, again taken from a back issue of the *Daily Prophet*, was dated April 26, 1980 and read as follows:

"Mr. Adolphus Black, aged 50, and his son, Regulus, aged 15, were reportedly killed today by Death Eater Bellatrix Black, aged 21, allegedly a cousin of the younger Black, at their home, number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London, on the Dark Lord's orders after Regulus reportedly refused You-Know-Who's command to kill his father and fled You-Know-Who's latest hideout to return to his family home.

"They are survived by Adolphus's wife and Regulus's mother, Mrs. Wilhelmina Black. There is reportedly another, older son, Sirius Marcus, now aged 20, who also survives, but who was disowned by his enraged father at age 16 and reportedly fled to the home of a friend after a furious row. Nothing has been heard from Sirius Black regarding his feelings on the deaths of his father and brother."

Well, of course there wouldn't be! Harry wasn't surprised at that at all...Sirius had told him all about it ages ago. His godfather had not returned to his family home even once after the row with his father, having no reason to speak to or even see him face-to-face since, declaring Adolphus Black thoroughly twisted and evil and his brother not much better, although he did see him intermittently.

Mainly in fruitless attempts to convert him to the Light, which the younger sibling had repeatedly refused ... that is, until he had fled back home and the Death Eaters had killed Adolphus and Regulus upon catching up with him. The latter had died a coward's death, in keeping with his cowardly actions ... and in the process, taken his father with him. Sirius had not considered their deaths any loss whatsoever, frankly glad that there were two less of their ilk walking the earth.

However, because he was reportedly the last surviving male Black, Sirius had inherited the remaining Black family fortune and Grimmauld Place, among other things, despite his having been disowned so many years before. That was the only reason he had gotten any of it...and Sirius had told Harry he would have preferred it if it had all gone for taxes or something, because he certainly had no use for it.

It had been speculated that Sirius was still living with James and Harry's grandparents, but that could not be confirmed, because neither of the senior Potters would say one way or the other. Sirius had told him that that had been because they were trying to spare him unsavoury publicity as the sole remaining Black, particularly in view of the manner in which Adolphus and Regulus had died.

Harry didn't feel like searching any further for anything more about the Blacks, at least not today. He was more concerned about seeing what he could turn up about Spinners' End and his grandparents, reportedly named Robert and Sarah Potter, according to some genealogical material left to him by his parents in his vault. In fact, Sirius had once told him that James's middle name was Robert, so it was possible that sons in the wizarding world were given their fathers' names for middle names, since Harry's own middle name was that of his father.

He went back to the article about Sirius leaving home and printed it out, then closed the file on the Blacks and took the lift up to the second floor. He located Ginny in the midst of reading an article about her two late uncles, Gideon and Fabian Prewett, Molly's brothers. It had reportedly taken five Death Eaters to kill them, and they were considered heroes.

She looked up after Harry had kissed her on the top of her head, surprised at his presence. "What are you doing here, luv? I thought you'd still be busy with the Black file."

"I found something in it that I want to check out, something that mentioned my grandparents in connection with Sirius's leaving home, so I thought I'd look for it while we were here. How are you doing?"

"Okay. I think I found what Mum wanted in this article on Uncle Fabian and Uncle Gideon. She'd always wanted to know how many Death Eaters it had taken to kill them. Here, it says five ... and the article even names them. I'll probably print this out so I can show it to her."

Harry leaned over to scan the article, unsurprised by three of the names listed: Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, although they were naturally not the ones he knew because the Prewett brothers' deaths had taken place at least ten years before. Possibly the fathers of the current crop, but Harry couldn't have said for sure.

"She should be pleased, then. I'll be just down the aisle if you need anything."

He kissed her on the top of the head again and headed down the aisle, seating himself about twenty feet away where the P-O file began. He tapped the file cabinet with his wand and it opened, the file folder containing the genealogical information on "POTTER, ROBERT AND SARAH" lifting itself out of the cabinet and into Harry's hands. It was fortunate that there was a large table nearby, and that it was unoccupied. In fact, Ginny was the only other person on this aisle.

Harry moved to the table and opened the file, beginning to spread out the various articles and moving pictures, looking for anything dated during 1976, the year Sirius had left home, not to mention anything about Spinner's End and his grandparents. It took some time, as well as another fat file folder, for him to find even part of what he was looking for, but eventually Harry found both a floor plan for Spinner's End and a large black and white photo of the house, dated in the late 1950s, around the time his father, an only child born of elderly parents, had been born ... a house which seemed more like a mansion.

Harry had been aware that his family was a very old wizarding clan and that they had had a lot of money, but never imagined *this*, not in his wildest dreams. Did someone outside the family now own Spinner's End, or was it in the possession of another member of his father's family? Harry had to find out. It would be great to own a place like that, that was for sure! If Ginny had as many children as Harry suspected she would, it would be only logical to have a big house to raise them all in ... and what better one than his family's ancestral home?

Not long after coming upon the picture of the house, Harry was stunned to come upon a picture of his grandparents Robert and Sarah. They were indeed elderly, as Sirius had once mentioned. The picture had been taken in the mid-1950s, and they looked like they were at least in their 80s, even then, although wizards and witches tended to live a long time and one-hundred-plus was not unusual ... sometimes even two hundred. Just the same, Harry could see James's face in that of his paternal grandfather, suspecting that that was likely to be how he himself would look at that age ... how James would probably have looked had he lived.

He almost literally went straight up upon feeling a touch on his hand that held the picture. "Sorry, luv. Didn't mean to startle you. I'm finished now, so I thought I'd come down here and see how you were doing. Who's the picture of?"

"I'll give you one guess. Take a look at the old man ... a really *good* look ... and tell me what you see."

Ginny gave him a funny look, but did so ... and after a time, Harry noticed her eyes widening with a mixture of shock and realisation. "Oh, Merlin! Are those people ... who I think they are?"

"That depends on who you think they are."

"The ... old man. He looks like ... you might, if you were old. Or how your father might have looked at that age, had he lived."

"That is my paternal grandfather, Robert Potter. The woman is his wife and my grandmother, Sarah. I've found genealogical stuff in my vault my parents left me that says my dad was an only child, that they had him when they were quite elderly ... in their 80s. This picture was taken a few years before Dad was born, in the mid-1950s or thereabouts, if I remember the writing on the back correctly. Witches can have children far later than Muggle women; a witch in her 80s is roughly the equivalent of a Muggle woman in her 40s. They reportedly died before I was born, somewhere between 1976 and 1981. Probably even before Mum and Dad were married."

But Ginny was only half-listening; she had been going through some of the other stuff in the file and once again thrust something under Harry's nose. "Look!" she called out.

He took it from her and examined it, eyes widening when he realised what it was...a marriage license for Robert and Sarah Potter, dated over a century ago ... October 28, 1891, in fact. It seemed that his grandparents had been married almost fifty years when his father had been born...forty-eight, to be exact!

"Do you think ... Dad's birth certificate would be here?" Harry couldn't help asking.

"Quite possible," Ginny confirmed. "Do you want me to look for it?"

"Let's look together; it'll go faster," Harry suggested.

As they had done with James Black's file, each took a pile of papers and went through them. For a long time there was silence, broken only by the rustle of paper; finally Harry thrust something under Ginny's nose. "I think I found it! Check this and see what you think."

Ginny noted the old-fashioned calligraphy on the certificate, not to mention the Old English writing, faded but still readable ... which she did, out loud:

"NAME OF CHILD: James Robert Potter

DATE OF BIRTH: April 30, 1959

TIME OF BIRTH: 4:21 p.m.

PLACE OF BIRTH: Spinner's End, Godric's Hollow, England

PARENTS: Robert Elias Potter and Sarah Elizabeth Millington

WEIGHT: 9 pounds, 3 ounces

LENGTH: 22 inches long

DESCRIPTION OF CHILD: Dark brown hair, hazel eyes, fair complexion"

"He was sure a big one, wasn't he?" She laughed. "I hope ours isn't that big. I don't think I could handle it." Ginny placed a protective hand on her ever-enlarging belly.

"How do you know we won't have twins? Remember, Molly...your mum...had Fred and George, so it's definitely possible."

"You're right ... Sweet Merlin! Do you really think...?"

"Couldn't say for sure, but it could happen," Harry opined. "After all, Fred and George are living proof."

"Wow ... that's quite a bit to consider," Ginny remarked. "I'm frankly still not quite used to the idea of *asingle* child, much less twins!" She sighed and leaned back in her chair, once again resting a hand on her large belly. "Were you able to find everything you were looking for?"

"No, but we can always come back tomorrow if you're getting tired," Harry remarked, giving his wife a look which was a mixture of concern and sternness. "Which I'm pretty sure you are. It can't be easy for you to get around in your present condition."

"You're the one that made me this way, Mister," she reminded him.

"It was *your* idea to get pregnant, my dear," he countered. "Not that I don't want the child, mind you. Of course I do. I would just have preferred it to be a little further in the future." He sighed. "Oh well, at least I don't have to worry about Voldemort or any Death Eaters getting a hold of you. He, and several of them, are dead ... and the rest are in Azkaban."

"Nor do we have to worry about any more than the ordinary risks involved in a pregnancy. Mum's already told me how to handle things and what to expect at any given time, so I shouldn't have too much of a problem. She even gave me the diet she usually followed when pregnant with me and my brothers, and told me to modify it to my own tastes."

"Well, so you're quite well-prepared, then," Harry observed.

"As well as I can be," Ginny returned with a weary smile. "Come to think of it, it might be a good idea to leave now. I'm tired, my back hurts, and my feet are swollen."

"Do you think you can make it to the front door of the building? I can get a taxi from there, then carry you up to our room the rest of the way."

"I think so ... if you help me."

"I shall be happy to, my lady," came the gallant reply from Ginny's own personal Sir Galahad. "Shall we go?" He turned her in the direction of the exit after replacing the papers and such in the file, then the file folder back in the cabinet, closing it with a touch of his wand. She tried not to make a sound of discomfort, but Harry could swear several times by the time they reached the door that Ginny had groaned softly. Whether it was her feet or her back paining her, he couldn't have said, and besides, it didn't make any difference. He had to get her off her feet as soon as possible in order for her to feel better.

Once they had stepped out the door of the building, Harry motioned for a taxi while Ginny leaned heavily on him, all but asleep in spite of her best efforts. He had even had to rescue the printout of the article she had promised to her mother and place it with his own. The other things he wanted to print out, he could come back and do by himself if necessary, if she didn't feel up to coming with him ... and he suspected that she probably wouldn't.

Within five minutes, a yellow and black checkered taxi pulled up; Harry helped Ginny in and got in beside her, pulling her head down to rest on his shoulder and sliding one arm around her even as the taxi pulled out. Harry told the driver where to go, and within ten minutes they were there ... but even in that short a time, he discovered that she had fallen asleep.

He carefully manoeuvred her out of the car and scooped her up in his arms, her head again resting on his shoulder as he carried her, one arm draped around his neck and the other resting on her belly. It was fortunate that he didn't have to carry her up several flights of stairs; instead, he simply had to step into a lift which took them to their tenth-floor suite.

Upon reaching the door, he simply spoke to it. "Door, open," was one of the types of wandless magic he had learned as an Auror ... which was a good thing, because he couldn't have gotten it open otherwise. At least not without having to put Ginny down and possibly waking her in the process in order to get hold of his wand.

The door swung open and Harry walked through, heading straight for their hotel bedroom, placing her on the queen-size bed after telling the suite door to close and lock. Once that had been accomplished, he turned his attention to preparing her for bed, deciding it was best and easiest to simply undress her down to her bra and knickers, then place her in bed and pull the covers over her. Then he could look after himself.

He placed the printouts on the table at the right side of the bed...his side...then began undressing himself. He simply piled the clothes alongside the printouts and fell into bed a short time later, not realising he had been just as tired as she until he had gotten here. Automatically pulling Ginny into his arms as he slid in beside her, Harry was asleep almost as soon as his own head hit the pillow next to hers.

Chapter 23: Inquiries/Harvest Festival/Sleepless Night

Chapter 23 of 27

Harry makes inquiries regarding the availability of his family's ancestral home; he and Ginny return to the Burrow for the

In the end, Harry did indeed return to the Wizarding Genealogy Office by himself to print out more of the stuff on his family...or specifically, his grandparents...and the home they and his father had lived in. He also took steps to find out just who owned Spinner's End now, if anyone ... and if it was currently unoccupied and for sale, he intended to grab it himself, which was only fitting, considering it was his family's ancestral home.

After this the two couples returned to their original flats, but Harry knew that given Ginny's pregnancy, their current residence would not be enough. Once the baby arrived, they would definitely have to move elsewhere. Hopefully by then he would have managed to purchase Spinner's End. The original flat was all right for now, though, and that's what mattered.

He was also contacted regarding his, Ron's and Ginny's use of Unforgivable Curses in their triumphs over Voldemort and Nagini, but upon Harry's explaining the circumstances under which they'd been obliged to use them, the penalty that would ordinarily stand against them was suspended ... this time. However, they were warned not to use them unless it was a dire emergency, as it had been this time; otherwise the ordinary penalty would apply and they would each end up in Azkaban for life. Harry assured them that they wouldn't, and so it was all right...at least for now.

* * * * *

Not too long after they had returned to their own flats, it was time for the Harvest Festival, the UK version of Thanksgiving, which usually took place in September. Harry could just imagine what it would be like if all the married Weasley brothers and their wives and/or families (those who had them, that is...like Bill) came to the Burrow for the holiday. Arthur and Molly might even have to magically expand the Burrow to hold everyone.

Even then, there would be some trick to pulling that off, especially since rooms would be needed for Ron and Hermione, himself and Ginny, Bill and Fleur (and their son) ... and possibly Charlie and his new wife, if they decided to come. Percy would likely spend the holiday with his girlfriend Penelope Clearwater...his fiancée now, if what Molly reported was correct...and her family.

Ginny's relationship with Fleur was still somewhat strained (even now, she still called her erstwhile sister-in-law "Phlegm" on occasion), but at least now they had something in common ... they were both pregnant...Fleur for the second time. Harry personally got along well with Fleur, so if interactions between the couples were necessary, he was usually the one who handled it. Just the same, it wouldn't surprise him if Ginny and Fleur got together at some point, if only to discuss their mutual pregnancies. Animosities between women could be and often were at least temporarily suspended if they had something in common to talk about.

Harry had gotten Hedwig back just recently, so he used her to owl Molly that they would be coming for the holiday. Molly owled back that she had heard from Bill and Charlie and both would be coming for the holiday with their wives and/or families. Percy had even said he would drop by briefly with Penelope to greet everyone and catch up on the latest news on the home front, but not to expect him to stay long because Penelope's mother would be waiting dinner for them.

Molly also said that she hadn't heard from Ron and Hermione yet, but knowing the latter as he did, Harry was sure she would, very shortly. He wondered whether or not Fred and George would come; Molly hadn't mentioned them. Just the same, Harry was sure they would show up, if only long enough to stuff their faces with their mother's cooking, brag about their latest business ventures, if not give out samples of same, then leave.

By this time, Harry and Ginny had used Portkeys enough so that they weren't thrown to the ground every time they let go of them, which was a good thing, especially considering Ginny's advanced pregnancy. She was now seven months along and looked ready to pop, even though her due date wasn't until mid-December. The Healer who was her regular physician hadn't mentioned whether or not she was carrying twins, although she was certainly big enough to be doing so ... at least to Harry's eyes.

The one good thing about the advanced pregnancy was that Ginny's volatile moods seemed to be all but gone, for which Harry was thankful. She also had a sharply increased appetite; fortunately no really strange food combinations, as he had heard pregnant women sometimes had, like pickles and ice cream or chocolate with pizza or something. Her most unusual craving had been for Pumpkin Pasties, macaroni and cheese and Chocolate Frogs with butterbeer. (More than once Harry had had to Apparate to the nearest store to get her more of each.) Molly said her worst had been pickles and ice cream with Honeydukes peanut butter fudge sauce, and that had been when she was pregnant with Fred and George.

The next thing either saw, though, was a new owl they had never seen before tapping at their window, a honey-coloured one with brown eyes and a pale green envelope in its beak. It turned out to belong to Rose Shacklebolt-Black, who was inviting them to spend Christmas with her and young James, since he would be home for the holidays. Ginny wanted very much to accept, but Harry was hesitant, since he had no idea of how her pregnancy was going to turn out and didn't want to accept, then have her give birth in the middle of everything. The best they could promise would be that they would drop by and spend a few hours with them, perhaps have something to eat while there and a talk with her and the boy about Sirius. Longer visits would have to wait until after the baby was born.

* * * * *

The Harvest Festival feast went pretty much as expected. Molly had said to him shortly after he and Ginny had arrived that she'd never heard from Fred and George, yet they had Apparated in at virtually the last moment, laden with samples of their newest products and kisses on the cheek for each Weasley lady, including ... especially ... their mother. Bill and a very pregnant Fleur showed up next, Bill (still with a ponytail) carrying their two-year-old son, Pierre Sebastian, a beautiful little blond boy with crystal-blue eyes, who Molly positively doted on and was carrying around virtually every moment she wasn't cooking.

Next came Ron and Hermione; Harry had been right about her getting him to come early, even if she'd had to literally drag him out of bed and Apparate them both here in their nightclothes. Even at that, Harry was as sure as anything that they didn't wear nightclothes any more than he or Ginny did; that was just a figure of speech. He hadn't noticed the arrival of Charlie, the other elder Weasley brother, until Molly's scream of delight brought him back to reality. He turned around to see her hugging the stuffing out of Charlie while a lovely woman with deep blue eyes and white-blonde hair smiled beside him. At first Harry was sure she had to be a Veela, but he had never heard of Veelas also being Animagi ... and Charlie's wife was reportedly an Animagus (could turn into a Persian cat).

Charlie deftly extricated himself with a smile. "Good to see you too, Mum. This is my wife, Rosabelle. Rosabelle, this is my mother Molly." The two women nodded and smiled at each other in acknowledgment.

The next few minutes were spent introducing Rosabelle to everyone else present. When they reached Harry and Ginny, Charlie hugged his sister as best he could and kissed her on the cheek. "Lookin' good, little sis."

"Charlie, don't be disgusting. I look like a weinie ready to pop," Ginny dismissed.

"But a very *cute* weinie," Charlie teased in an attempt to lighten the mood. "Now I want to introduce my wife. Rosabelle, this is Ginny, my sister, and her husband, Harry Potter."

Rosabelle's eyes widened. "*The* Harry Potter, the famous Auror who killed the Dark Lord?"

"The same," Charlie confirmed before Harry could speak. "I hear you and Gin also got rid of You-Know-Who's snake singlehanded, Harry."

"That's right," Harry confirmed. "But it was very sudden and there was no way for us to call for help, so I knew our only chance would be to catch Nagini and her guardians by surprise. Gin used the Imperius Curse to control the Death Eaters while I went after Nagini."

Rosabelle gasped, stunned, upon hearing that. "You ... used an Unforgivable Curse?"

"Two, actually, but we had no choice. It was the only way to beat them. I then used Parseltongue to lull Nagini into a false sense of security long enough to destroy her."

Rosabelle went white. "You ... can speak ... Parseltongue?"

"Yes. I've been able to do it for years; I've just never needed to use it very much until now," Harry explained.

"I've never heard of anyone who can speak Parseltongue other than the Dark Lord."

"Well, I ... had kind of a ... history with him, so it's sort of a ... natural talent," Harry continued, reluctant to reveal it but knowing it was necessary.

"A ... history?" Rosabelle questioned.

"It's a long story ... and if you don't mind, one I ... don't care to relate at the moment," Harry made himself say, clutching Ginny's hand tightly for the strength to speak.

Rosabelle looked disappointed and crestfallen, but didn't pressure him further ... fortunately for her, especially since Ginny was giving her a fierce look and Charlie was pulling on her arm, intending to go over to Ron and Hermione next and introduce her to them.

Many times over the course of the next few hours Harry caught Rosabelle giving him lingering looks, but she never spoke to him again. During that time, he once again heard Molly scream with delight as Percy and Penelope Apparated into the living room. She again hugged the stuffing out of her son while smiling a greeting to his intended.

"It's ... good to see you again, Mum." Percy looked around and spotted Harry, visibly stiffening but making himself go over to greet his brother-in-law, if only for his sister's sake.

"Hello, Harry," Percy greeted him, stiffly but politely, Penelope at his side, their hands linked and the diamond in her engagement ring catching the light, making multi-coloured streaks in the air as she moved her hand to show it off.

"Percy. Congratulations on your engagement. Every happiness to you and Penelope," Harry returned, politely but every bit as stiffly, still not fully trusting him after the way Percy had treated him during his fifth year.

"Thanks, Harry. I understand I'm going to be an uncle." He darted a look at Ginny, who dared him to say anything against her husband.

"Yeah. Ginny's due in December."

Percy looked his sister over questioningly. "Looks like she's carrying a whole litter, not just one baby."

"So what if she is? What business is that of yours?" Harry had had about as much as he could stomach of Percy and his superior attitude.

"Nothing wrong with that, Harry. Just making an observation," Percy tried to apologise. "It frankly wouldn't surprise me if Ginny was as prolific as Mum."

"Let's go, Percy," Penelope entreated. "We still have other people to greet." She attempted to steer him toward Ron and Hermione, watching from a short distance away and concerned that Harry might decide to lash out at him. Couldn't blame him if he did; Percy was acting his usual stuffy self.

Once they finally left, Ginny stared daggers after him, wishing she'd had her wand. If she had, she would have hexed him into the middle of next week for being such a stupid prat and talking to Harry as he had, brother or not.

"Are you all right, luv?" she asked, noting that Harry's hands had balled into fists, as if he were restraining himself from striking Percy. "Don't mind Percy; he's just being his usual thick-headed self."

"I didn't like the way he compared you to a cat carrying a litter of kittens. Stupid git," Harry muttered. "Just the same, I think you're too big to be carrying just one baby. Ask your personal Healer to check you for twins."

"I was considering that," Ginny revealed. "Mum said the only time she remembered being this big when she was pregnant was when she was carrying Fred and George. I think she also said she'd had them six weeks early, too."

"You don't have much time left, then, if that's any indication," Harry remarked. "You'd better have a checkup tomorrow."

"You need an appointment, Harry," she reminded him. "I'm not my Healer's only patient."

"No time for that," he insisted. "In fact, I think we better consider booking you a room at St. Mungo's, if only to be on the safe side."

"You worry too much, luv," she tried to soothe him. "I'll be fine."

"I come by it naturally," he threw back. "And I'm going to be a father soon, so you'd better get used to it."

They didn't speak further, for it was at this point that Molly called everyone in to dinner ... but both of them knew they would be discussing it later, possibly even after they'd gone to bed.

* * * * *

Unfortunately, they weren't able to sleep well, for their bedroom was located right next to that of Fleur and Bill, and the walls were quite thin. If their little boy wasn't crying, they were able to hear the creaking of the bed springs. Ginny winced as she listened, knowing what Bill and Fleur must be doing. As for herself and Harry, they were simply lying in each other's arms, listening to the goings-on in the next room, unable to do anything else.

"Oh, for pity's sake, can't they stop it even for one night?" Ginny groused. "Even we don't do *it* that much!"

"Obviously not," Harry observed, answering the first part of her comment. "I think part of it has to do with the fact that Fleur is part Veela. It wouldn't surprise me if they're even more ... highly sexed than we are."

"That would be saying something, that's for sure," Ginny opined even as Harry tightened his arms around her, gently pressing her head close to him. "But I don't think we dare do it much any more, if what Mum said is any indication."

"Don't say that," he entreated. "We'll figure something, even if we can't do it the regular way."

The creaking of the bedsprings increased both in volume and frequency; Ginny closed her eyes, seeming to be in actual pain. "Just block it out, luv," Harry advised. "They'll stop eventually."

"Can't be soon enough for me," she retorted. "Fleur's pregnant, too; you'd think she'd need some sleep. Merlin knows I do, but how can I with *that* going on?"

"I can put a Silencing Charm on the wall if you like," Harry suggested, even then reaching for his wand, tucked just under his pillow.

"You'll probably have to, at this rate," Ginny opined. After that had been done, she breathed a sigh of relief. "Much better. Now maybe I can get some sleep ... and you can, too." She looked up at him and they shared a tender smile before sharing a lingering good-night kiss. "Sleep well, luv."

"You, too." With that, they both fell asleep.

Chapter 24: Holiday Visitors/Harry & Young James/Ginny Gives Birth

Chapter 24 of 27

Harry and Ginny invite Sirius's wife and son for the Christmas holidays and Harry has a talk with the boy about his father; Ginny gives birth the day afterward.

As things turned out, Ginny's personal Healer forbade her from leaving the house in the last month of her pregnancy, which just happened to fall during December (witches' pregnancies lasted a month longer than Muggle ones). The only thing Harry could think of to do so she could still see Rose and James and share in the holiday festivities was to ask them to come over to Grimmauld Place. It was time they saw it, anyway.

Rose readily agreed, especially since by right, she owned it, but chose to allow the Order to continue using it as their headquarters ... at least for the foreseeable future. For the holiday, however, Harry had asked them to vacate temporarily, promising that they would be able to meet Rose and James later on.

By the time Christmas rolled around, Ginny was unable to get up without help, and it was looking more and more like labour would have to be induced if it didn't start naturally soon. It was already past time for an ordinary twin delivery to have taken place, even if it was still well before her due date.

Harry told Rose to Apparate into the building, giving her the proper coordinates which would put her into the living room, where all was set up for Christmas...tree, presents, decorations and all, even mistletoe (mainly for himself and Ginny, and although Harry never *needed* an excuse to kiss her, it was nice to have one). It was around ten a.m. Christmas morning that Rose and James arrived, and there were hugs all around.

They brought gifts for their new friends per Harry's suggestion, just as he and Ginny had gifts for them ... a child-sized Invisibility Cloak from her and a new broomstick from Harry, the same brand he had had at that age but the newest model, a Nimbus Three Thousand. Young James did not have one of his own before this because of the tight money situation in his home. A Christmas brunch was served by Harry and young James, who got a real kick out of serving the ladies first...which was only as a gentleman should, Harry told him later.

They talked generalities over the brunch...which was eaten in a casual style, in the living room where each happened to be seated...such as how James was doing in school, what his magical aptitudes were and all that. However, Harry hoped he would be able to sit down with the boy alone and talk to him "man-to-man" about Sirius and the relationship they had had. After a time, Ginny became tired and needed to lie down; Rose helped her into the bedroom and kept an eye on her, the two ladies chewing the fat while their males talked elsewhere.

Naturally, young James had compiled a list of questions he wanted to ask Harry upon learning they would be spending the holidays with him and Ginny, and Harry (for the most part) was only too happy to answer them. Just the same, the conversation started with James saying, "Mum says you knew my dad, Mr. Potter."

"Harry, please ... and that's right, I did. I was about thirteen when I first met him."

"What was your initial relationship like?"

"Not good, I'm afraid. It had been widely believed that your dad had killed many people...the main reason he was put in prison...and betrayed his closest friends, my parents. Once I found that out, all I wanted to do was kill him for it. It didn't help matters that I'd learned he was my godfather shortly before that. Of course, I learned later that someone else had actually betrayed them ... but it was your dad who took the blame for it."

"That's not fair," small James protested.

"For sure...but that's the way life is," Harry replied, his voice a mixture of pain and bitterness. "To put it simply, your father was made a scapegoat."

"What's a scapegoat?"

"Basically, someone who takes the blame...and punishment...for what someone else did."

"Then that's why Dad couldn't be with me and Mum," James guessed.

"That's why," Harry confirmed. "To continue ... your dad told me later that he would have sooner died than betray his friends. Just the same, people thought your dad had killed this other, former, friend as well ... but the latter hid out in his Animagus form. You've heard of Animagi, haven't you?"

"Yeah. They're wizards or witches who can turn into animals."

"Right. Your dad could turn into a dog," Harry told the boy. "My dad could turn into a stag...that's a male deer ... and the former friend who ultimately betrayed my parents to the Dark Lord, his form was that of a rat. In his animal form, he belonged to one of my other friends for a long time. Thankfully he is now in prison, where he belongs. I even have a sister-in-law who can turn into a Persian cat."

"To get back to the subject, once your dad managed to explain himself to me, I had a change of heart about him and that was when we began to grow closer, ending up corresponding on a fairly regular basis, unable to see each other very often since he was in hiding, constantly on the run, after escaping from Azkaban. When we couldn't correspond or see each other, he would usually pop into my fireplace, usually while I was at school, and we would talk that way."

"Did he ever mention me or Mum?"

"No. I don't know exactly why, although I suspect that it was because your dad was a very private person. Even as close as he and I eventually became, he never told me *everything* about himself ... which was why it came as such a shock to me to find out that you existed and that he had married your mum shortly before going into Azkaban. Which reminds me...did she ever tell you that you have your father's smile? That's what I first noticed about you."

"Not that I recall," young James replied. "But your wife tells me that you're very good at Quidditch."

"Yes. I was Seeker on my House team for virtually the whole time I was in school; my wife was also on the team. She usually played Chaser and was, as I recall, quite

good, although not quite as good as I am. I was even Captain of the team in my sixth year. Why? Do you play Quidditch too?"

"Yeah. I'm the Chaser on my team," James told him. "But I'm not doing as well as I could. I think it's mainly because I have to use one of the House brooms, and they're neither new nor in the best of shape."

"Your dad was also a Chaser, if memory serves, although he once said that my dad was a Seeker like me and could usually beat him. And you don't have to worry about using House brooms anymore. Your new broom should work fine; I had one just like it for several years, until it got destroyed one day during a tough game in very bad weather. Your dad got me a new one, a Firebolt."

"A Firebolt? Wow! I'd love one of those, but Mum could never afford one!"

"You don't have to worry about that anymore. You'll have your dad's money to live on now, and later on, this house, if you so choose. Just the same, I think you're too young for a Firebolt right now; they're pretty tricky to use. You need to be a bit bigger. Maybe in a couple of years or so. The Nimbus is a good broom, and you should be able to get quite a bit of use out of it." For a time the boy was silent, seemingly unable to think of anything else to ask, so Harry decided to take a chance and ask him if he would be willing to have him in his life on a regular basis. "James, I'd like to ask you something, and I need a truthful answer."

"Go ahead," the boy encouraged.

"Your dad was very special to me...a combination father figure and big brother...and I would like to be that to you, if you're willing, since he cannot be here for you. I believe both he and your Mum would approve of my doing this, and it would be beneficial for both of us, both practically and emotionally. All that remains is what *you* think."

"I ... think I'd like that ... Harry. Is it all right to call you that? Mum always taught me to address my elders as Mr. or Mrs., things like that ... and at school, we call our teachers 'Professor.'"

"We did too," Harry recalled. "And yes, I would prefer your using my Christian name. 'Mr. Potter' sounds way too formal and stuffy. I always called your dad by his Christian name, by the way, in spite of the fact he was old enough to be my father. In fact, he was just a year younger than my dad."

There was a lot of other stuff that Harry would have liked to discuss with young James, but it was getting late, and besides, he wanted to check on Ginny, see how she was doing. "If you like, we can even begin corresponding via owl post, and you can ask me questions that way that you couldn't think of here. How would that be?"

"That would be great."

"Glad to hear it. And just for future reference, so you'll recognise her when you see her, I have a snowy-white owl with golden-brown eyes. Her name is Hedwig. Have you an owl of your own yet, James?"

"No. Mum doesn't think I'm old enough for one yet. I usually use one of the school owls to send her a post."

Harry made a mental note to look into the possibility of getting young James an owl of his own, since he had gotten Hedwig at the same age that James was now. Of course, he would have to discuss it with Rose first before taking any definite action, since he didn't want to go behind her back. "Tell you what. I'll ask your mum if I can get you an owl of your own and see what she says, all right? If she agrees, we can go pick one out together. How would that be?"

"That'd be fantastic," the boy replied fervently.

"Great. I'll ask her as soon as I can and get back to you. Now we'd better go see how our ladies are doing." Harry stood up and James was only a moment behind him; together, they headed for the door and down the hall to the downstairs bedroom, Harry keeping a brotherly hand on James's shoulder. He found Ginny still lying down and Rose sitting beside her, the women talking animatedly, although he sensed that Ginny was almost asleep.

"Well, Rose, your boy and I had a very nice talk. One thing I want to ask you, though...he said he doesn't have an owl of his own because you believe he's not old enough for one. I got *my* owl when I was his age; if I could handle it, I feel sure that James could. If you agree, I'd like to take him to get one at the first opportunity." He still kept a hand on the boy's shoulder, as if unwilling to let him go. "I also think Ginny needs to sleep, so you two better go now. It's been great having you, though. Let's get together again as soon as possible, okay? I'll owl you when."

"Thank you for a wonderful brunch and most thoughtful presents. I've needed a new wand for a long time. My old one is almost shot ... not to mention a new*Various Potions and their Uses* book, especially the edition that lists all the individual ingredients and what they do."

"Our pleasure, Rose. Now, about the owl ..." Harry's voice trailed off.

"I ... still think James is a bit young, but at the same time, I'm sure you know what you're talking about ... Harry. Tell you what: I'll consider it and let you know my decision within the next week or so."

"I hope so, because if you agree in time, I can get James an owl before he returns to school."

Once again there were hugs all around, and mother and son Apparated back home, along with their holiday gifts, leaving Harry alone with Ginny. He was more tired than he realised, so he decided to join Ginny in bed and get some sack time ... just sleeping this time...but he fully intended to get a picture of James and Rose together eventually, just as he had every intention of telling the Order all about them at the first opportunity.

* * * * *

Harry awoke to Ginny's moaning and thrashing, well able to imagine what was making her do this ... but he had to confirm it before taking any concrete action.

"Gin? What's wrong?"

Ginny was scarcely able to speak coherently, the contractions were coming so close together. "Harry ... I think ... the baby ..." That's all he was able to catch.

"Oh, Merlin," he muttered under his breath. "Just what I need." Unfortunately, there were just the two of them in the house, so it was up to him to get her to St. Mungo's ... and on the double, too!

"Hold on, luv. Try to relax ... I'll get you to St. Mungo's ..."

"I don't think there's time for that ... my water's broken ... the baby's coming ...*now!*"

"Gin, I've never delivered a baby in my life. I'm not a Healer. I don't know the first thing to do."

"You'd better ... learn fast, Mister. Seriously ... I'll try to ... talk you through it. But we must ... get ready ..."

Harry swallowed painfully, then squared his shoulders. This was just what he had been afraid would happen...but if he could beat Voldemort, he could certainly handle *this*. "All right. What do you need?"

"Towels ... hot water ... scissors ... twine or string ... then get me undressed ... at least the bottom half ..."

Harry didn't want to leave her, so he grabbed his wand and conjured up all the necessary items. He undressed her bottom half, then spread towels beneath her after

having her turn on her side temporarily, then on her back again. He used a couple of the towels for her to pull on so she didn't incapacitate his hands, which were needed for delivery of the baby.

He then put pillows behind her so that she was in a half-reclining position with her legs apart, gently cleaning there since he noted that her water had indeed broken. Even now he could see that the baby's head had crowned. It wouldn't be long, if his inexperienced eyes were any judge.

"Oh, Merlin, it hurts so much ... Harry ... oh, luv, help me ..."

He conjured up a painkilling potion and gave her some, which helped for a while...then the pains started coming hard, two minutes apart. She moaned and writhed, pulling hard on the towels, ripping and tearing at them ... then gave a piercing scream as the head broke through her opening. Harry felt her pain as if it were his own, fervently wishing they were already at St. Mungo's in the delivery room.

She settled down for a little while, then screamed again as the shoulders came out. She closed his eyes tightly and willed himself to ignore it as best he could, quickly washing his hands in the hot water to sterilise them before using a towel to gently grab hold of the baby and work it out. Within five minutes it was over, but it had taken six sweat- and pain-filled hours to reach this point, for the first baby (yes, she was indeed carrying twins, as it turned out) to be born.

After that, instinct seemed to take over, and he checked the baby's airway to make sure he was breathing (yes, it was a boy) ... and he already knew what his name would be: Sirius James, for his godfather and friend, and his father. The boy had red hair and freckles like Ginny and Harry's nose. His eyes weren't open yet, and Harry had no idea when they would be. He'd just have to keep an eye on him and check them when they were.

He then washed the baby in the hot water and vigorously rubbed him down, provoking a loud, lusty cry, then wrapped him in a towel upon severing and cauterising the umbilical cord with the lighted tip of his wand, laying him on the nearby overstuffed chair. It was too risky to place him on the bed since Ginny had begun moaning, writhing and thrashing around, obviously in the throes of labour with another baby.

"Harry ... Harry ..."

"I'm coming, luv ... hang on ..."

Upon returning to her, he noted that a second small head was crowning and pushing its way out into the world. He winced as she screamed once again, then settled down for a while. He gave her some more painkilling potion and waited for the next go-round...which came within the next five minutes. The shoulders of the next baby came out, provoking yet another piercing scream from Ginny's parched lips.

Harry conjured up some ice and let her suck on it for moisture, since she had said that was the best thing to have. Again, five minutes later, the second baby...a girl...was born. She was the one who looked like him, Harry noted ... a mop of black hair and all ... and when her eyes opened, it wouldn't surprise him if they were as green as his own. Another six hours had gone by, and it was now just past six a.m. All during the long hours of the delivery, Harry had had no sense of time passing, barely noticing that it had darkened enough to say, "*Lumos*," so they would go on and he could see what he was doing.

He did the same things with the second baby as he had with the first, making sure she could breathe, washing her and then vigorously rubbing her down (after magically vanishing the old water and replacing it with new hot water), then the umbilical cord bit. Finally, he wrapped his new daughter in a large towel and placed her next to Ginny, who had fallen into an exhausted sleep, her face and hair wet with perspiration, as were the clothes she was wearing.

Harry was none-too-fresh himself, but felt a great sense of pride and accomplishment in having personally delivered his children. He and Ginny had debated for weeks on what they would name a girl child, having decided early on what to name a boy, finally deciding on Elizabeth Molly, giving her her maternal grandmother's name as a middle name.

While Ginny was quiet and the babies asleep, he decided to wash her and clean her up, both inside and out. Within fifteen minutes of the first baby's birth, he had had to deliver the afterbirth before the other baby could be born (roughly twenty minutes apart, if he was any judge of time passing, since there had been no opportunity for him to check his watch at any time) ... then again after little Elizabeth had been born.

Once he had gotten Ginny and the babies prepared and settled, Harry had finally cleaned himself and the room up, changing into fresh clothes, then conjured up some pumpkin juice to refresh himself before falling onto the bed, totally and thoroughly exhausted, with his wife and children. He would inform everyone else of the births upon awakening.

* * * * *

Harry considered himself lucky that Gin and the babies were still asleep when he awakened, since he would need peace and quiet in order to be able to owl Molly. He told her to alert St. Mungo's and have a room ready, and that she and Arthur could be there if they wanted...Ron and Hermione, too...but no one else for the moment.

He had had a telephone installed at Grimmauld Place and called for a Muggle taxi, knowing he was going to need help in getting Gin and the babies to the hospital so they could be checked over. They seemed to be all right, but he had no way of knowing how much he had done wrong, how many mistakes he had made.

They were alive, at least, so he must have done *something* right. He had no idea how it was possible, since he had sent an owl to The Burrow barely half an hour ago...but Molly and Arthur Apparated in just the same, both talking at once, worriedly asking how Ginny and the babies were.

Harry just said they were fine, as far as he could tell, but that they needed expert attention which none of them could provide. Luckily the taxi arrived and blew its horn at that point; Harry carried Ginny out to it, holding her on his lap while the two new grandparents carried their grandchildren.

He was sure that neither Ron nor Hermione...much less Arthur or Molly or any of the other Weasleys...would ever believe that he had actually delivered his own children, but really didn't care at the moment. What mattered was that he knew he had and that he must have done at least a *few* things right.

* * * * *

Ron and Hermione met them in the emergency room of the hospital, and they talked as the Healers there checked Ginny and the babies; Arthur and Molly stayed with their daughter and grandchildren.

"Harry, mate, you've got to be kidding! How could *you* actually have delivered the babies?"

"It barely seems possible, I know, Ron, but I assure you that I did. Gin talked me through it."

Hermione simply beamed beside her husband, ecstatic at the thought of the new babies. "I can hardly wait to see them. I bet they're beautiful. What did you name them?"

"The first baby was a boy; I named him Sirius James. The second was a girl; I named her Elizabeth Molly."

"They sound lovely. Sirius would be so pleased ... just as I'm sure Molly will be," Hermione assured him. "Oh, guess what I just found out!"

"What?" Harry prompted, darting a surreptitious look at Ron, who looked pale as a ghost, knowing what Hermione was going to say and scarcely able to believe it...but it was true nonetheless. Right on the heels of his best mate's becoming a father, he had discovered his own impending fatherhood! Not that he was going to be able to say that, though. He left the telling of that news to his wife.

"I'm pregnant! Three months, to be exact!" she exclaimed happily.

"That's wonderful. Congratulations to you both!" Harry hugged both his friends fiercely, then stepped back and looked them over. He felt happier now than at almost any time in the last year or so. He had defeated Voldemort; he and his friends were in one piece; he had married Ginny; they had met who turned out to be Sirius's wife and son; he and Gin had just become the parents of two beautiful children ... and now this!

A short time later, a nurse came out to tell them they could see the babies and Ginny now. They were settled into their own private room, secured by Harry's name and the money behind it. The three headed through the double doors and into the lift, going up to the new floor which had recently been magically created...the sixth...which would be designated the maternity floor ... and they would be among the first to use it.

They entered to find Ginny sitting up in bed nursing one of the babies while Molly held the other, cuddling and crooning to her new granddaughter. He reiterated the babies' names to the new grandparents; upon hearing that her name was her granddaughter's middle name, Molly hugged the stuffing out of Harry.

He hugged her back, glad that he was able to make her happy for a change. "And I'm sure Sirius is very pleased that you named your son for him and your father, Harry. They're just beautiful, too...your boy looks like Ginny, brown eyes and all ... and your daughter like you...black hair, green eyes and all!"

Her exclamation brought Ginny's head up, and she noticed her husband's presence; he moved as quickly as he dared to her side to kiss her in greeting. "How are you feeling, luv?"

"Fine now," Ginny replied, "especially since you're here ... and *our babies* are here. Do you realise that our son looks like me and our daughter like you?"

"I've noticed." Harry smiled ... and for some strange reason was unable to *stop* smiling. This moment was one he'd never dreamed would ever come, yet it was here...and he was the happiest, proudest wizard in the world!

"You did a pretty good job delivering them, even without experience." Ginny praised him. "The Healers all said none of them could have done better." She smiled thoughtfully. "We've got to owl Rose as soon as possible, so she and James can come see the babies."

"I'll do that as soon as I can," her husband promised. "Meanwhile, you just rest and recover, luv. You've been through one beastly ordeal. Oh, did Hermione tell you that *she's* pregnant now?"

"Yes, just a few minutes ago. Isn't it great that we're all parents...or in Ron and Hermione's case, going to be? Who would ever have dreamed we could be so happy now after all we've been through?"

"It helped that we went through it together, that's all I can say," the proud and happy young new father remarked, sitting on the bed next to his wife, one arm around her and her head on his shoulder, even as she continued to nurse their new son. He stroked the baby's head with his free hand. "I could never have done it *without* you all, that's for sure."

Harry made a mental note to give Ginny a special thank-you, both in an emotional and physical sense, at the earliest opportunity, but for the time being told himself to simply enjoy one of the happiest moments of his life, surrounded by a wife and family...and two friends...he loved dearly.

He only wished his mum and dad could have been here to see their grandchildren, not to mention Sirius. He would have doted on his namesake, that was for sure, just as James and Lily surely would have doted on the children. The best he could hope for now, though, was to hopefully be able to tell them in a dream ... *all* of them, including Dumbledore.

Chapter 25: Publicity/Interview/Harry's Dream

Chapter 25 of 27

Considerable publicity ensues after the birth of Harry and Ginny's children; there's even an interview with Arthur and Molly. Then Harry has a dream which includes all his loved ones, including his parents, Sirius and Dumbledore.

A week later, an article came out in the *Daily Prophet* that "The Boy Who Lived," "The Chosen One" and "Slayer of the Dark Lord" had become a father...and of *twins*, no less. Harry didn't recall doing any sort of article for them; it had just sort of ... *appeared* one day. He could only have surmised that Molly and Arthur Weasley, the twins' proud grandparents, had done it. He couldn't fault them, really; he just wished they had seen fit to ask permission first.

The headlines went something like this:

"THE BOY WHO LIVED IS NOW A MAN ... AND A FATHER"

"THE CHOSEN ONE IS THE FATHER OF TWINS"

"THE SLAYER OF THE DARK LORD HAS BECOME A GIVER OF LIFE ... Harry Potter Becomes A Father"

The text of the article, which was basically an interview with Arthur and Molly Weasley, went like this:

"This is Kingsley Shacklebolt, reporter for the *Daily Prophet*, speaking with Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Weasley, who have recently become grandparents. Their daughter, Ginevra, otherwise known as 'Ginny,' is married to Harry Potter...aka The Boy Who Lived, aka The Chosen One, aka Slayer of the Dark Lord. Fraternal twins, a boy and a girl, were recently born to the young couple. I am here to find out the details.

KINGSLEY: Greetings, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Thank you for consenting to speak with me.

ARTHUR WEASLEY: Our pleasure, Kingsley. Now what would you like to know?

KINGSLEY: Just when were the twins born, and where? Any details you can give will be greatly appreciated.

MOLLY WEASLEY: From what we understand, the twins were born in the early morning hours of December 26, 2001. The boy was born at 5:45 a.m., the

girl at 6:05 a.m. Harry and Ginny were staying at his godfather's former home on Grimmauld Place in London for the Christmas holidays and had entertained some ... special guests ... earlier that evening, and he told us that after seeing them off, he joined Ginny in their bedroom. He woke up to find her in labour, and there was no way for him to get her to St. Mungo's in time.

KINGSLEY: So what happened after that?

MOLLY: Harry had to deliver the babies himself.

KINGSLEY: Your son-in-law is an Auror, correct?

ARTHUR: Yes.

KINGSLEY: He has no Healer's training, correct?

ARTHUR: Correct...but our daughter is a Healer. He said ... she talked him through it.

KINGSLEY: How long was she in labour, do you know?

MOLLY: Approximately twelve hours. Harry said he could not be sure, since he was unable to check his watch. All he remembers is that it started around 6 p.m. Christmas night and ended shortly after six a.m., the 26th.

KINGSLEY: Do you know what the children's names are, lengths and weights and all that?

MOLLY: Certainly, but we didn't find out until after we'd gotten them and Ginny to the hospital and got them checked out.

KINGSLEY: May I have that information?

MOLLY: The boy is named Sirius James. His length is 19 inches; weight, six pounds, fourteen ounces. The girl is named Elizabeth Molly. Her length is 16 inches; weight, five pounds, twelve ounces.

KINGSLEY: Can you describe them?

ARTHUR: Little Sirius has red hair and brown eyes; little Elizabeth has black hair and green eyes.

KINGSLEY: In essence, their son looks like his mother and their daughter like her father.

ARTHUR: Yes.

KINGSLEY: Is it true that the boy was named for your son-in-law's godfather, Sirius Black?

MOLLY: Yes; he and Sirius were very close.

KINGSLEY: What about your granddaughter's middle name? I understand it is the same as your Christian name, Mrs. Weasley.

MOLLY: Yes. 'Molly' is also my daughter's middle name. It's a tradition in our family to do such things for first-born children, to give them the same-sex parent's first name as their middle name.

KINGSLEY: How long had you known Harry before he became your son-in-law?

ARTHUR: Since he was eleven years old and became our son Ron's classmate and close friend at Hogwarts.

KINGSLEY: And it's true that he often stayed with you and your family for the summer?

ARTHUR: Yes. We believed it best for him, because his only ... relatives ... were not kind to him, to put it mildly. But we have promised him that we will not go into detail on that; Harry does not desire any more publicity than absolutely necessary, and we respect his wishes.

KINGSLEY: When did he and your daughter first begin ... seeing each other socially?

MOLLY: In Harry's sixth year and Ginny's fifth. It officially began the day of the Quidditch Cup match, which their House won, approximately May 15, 1997. They dated exclusively for the next five weeks.

KINGSLEY: What happened to change that?

ARTHUR: Oh, a lot of things, most of which I have been asked not to go into here, in respect for our children's wishes ... and we do consider Harry to be another son to us. What matters most to us is that they found each other again, have married, are happy together and have become parents.

KINGSLEY: I suppose I can understand that. Again, thank you for your time, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley ... and congratulations on your becoming grandparents.

WEASLEYS: Thank you.

Once Harry learned who had interviewed them, he requested that Kingsley Shacklebolt get in touch with him, which he did. He was kind of afraid at first, because he'd heard of Harry's temper and hoped he hadn't done or said anything to upset him. But it was nothing like that at all. When they met for their own interview, he didn't even mention the interview with the Weasleys; instead, he had questions of his own about an entirely different...but still quite personal...subject.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Shacklebolt," Harry stated politely, shaking hands when Kingsley first Apparated into the room.

"Kingsley. And it was a pleasure, Mr. Potter," Kingsley replied with a smile as they seated themselves in overstuffed chairs across from each other in the living room at Grimmauld Place. "What did you want to speak with me about?"

"Harry, please. I have some questions about a ... possible relative of yours."

"A *possible* relative?"

"Do you have any female relations named ... Rose?"

"Why, yes. My younger brother's daughter is named Rose. Why?"

"Have you ever met her? Can you describe her?"

"Many times. She's very beautiful, slender and petite, with a dusky complexion, long black hair and brown eyes. Why?"

"Was she ever ... romantically involved with anyone that you know of?"

"Naturally. As I said, she was ... is ... quite beautiful, even today."

"Could my ... godfather Sirius Black have been one of her ... suitors?"

Kingsley flinched with a mixture of shock and surprise at the name, and his reaction was not lost on Harry. "Yes. They were involved for quite some time. They were even ... engaged for a time before he was arrested and imprisoned in Azkaban."

"What did you think of him?"

"Despite his reputation, he seemed nice enough to me ... not to mention very much in love with Rose."

"Did her ... parents approve of him?"

"If they didn't, I didn't know about it. They always seemed friendly enough whenever I was in proximity. Why?"

"Just curious. What would you say if I told you that I have evidence which indicates that Rose and Sirius were not only married, but ... parents?"

Kingsley was stunned. "What? How can that be?"

"I don't know myself. Sirius never mentioned anything to me either, and as my in-laws have told you, he and I were quite close. However, I know that Rose has an eleven-year-old son named James, whom I have met and spent time with; he is the image of Sirius. I have even spoken to Rose recently, and she said they had been married barely a month before Sirius was arrested and sent to Azkaban."

"I even have a wedding picture of them and a copy of their marriage licence, if you wish to peruse them ... not to mention a copy of the boy's birth certificate, indicating that Sirius is his father." Before Kingsley could refuse, Harry handed over the documentation and allowed his guest to examine it.

For a long time there was silence. Then Kingsley looked up at Harry and their eyes locked. However, he spoke only one word: "Incredible."

"Yes, indeed. It's incredible ... but nonetheless true. Since my discovery, I have given Rose a large share of Sirius's estate, including this house here on Grimmauld Place, if only as an inheritance for James when he comes of age in six years. I figured it was the least I could do for them, to ease their financial burdens, since Rose has shouldered a lot of responsibility for many years, raising a son by herself, and deserves whatever help I can give her, if only for Sirius's sake."

"Have you a theory as to why the boy is named James?"

"My father, James Potter, was Sirius's closest friend. I can only assume that he named the boy for him, to honour their friendship."

Kingsley handed back the documentation. "Indeed. Most thoughtful of him."

"Sirius was a very thoughtful person," Harry recalled affectionately.

"Have you any further questions ... Harry?" Kingsley asked.

"No, thanks. I think you've answered all I had."

"In that case, I'll be on my way. It was nice meeting you ... and congratulations on your new children. You must be very proud and very happy."

Harry smiled in spite of himself. "Yes. Ginny and I are very proud and very happy ... and I'll be sure to tell her you offered congratulations."

Kingsley walked to the center of the living room. "If you have any other questions, send me an owl and I'll do my best to answer them. I must get back to work now."

"I'll keep that in mind ... Kingsley. Thank you again for your time." With that, Kingsley Apparated out of the room. Shortly thereafter, Harry did the same, returning to the flat he shared with Ginny and their children ... but this was only a temporary thing. He had discovered that Spinner's End was presently vacant and for sale, so he made inquiries and found out its asking price.

Rather dear (two hundred thousand pounds), but he had the money and then some, so it wasn't that much of a hardship. In fact, escrow had just closed the day the twins were born, although in all the hoopla following their birth, Harry had not had the chance to tell anyone that he now owned his family's ancestral home. Just wait until he did, though!

* * * * *

Like many times before, shortly after falling asleep, Harry began to dream. But the dream on this night was unlike the others: it did not involve Voldemort, and it was not a nightmare. Quite the contrary, in fact ... *In the dream, his parents James and Lily were alive, as were Sirius and Dumbledore. Even Rose and James were there, not to mention Molly and Arthur Weasley...and Ron and Hermione.*

They had all come over to Spinner's End to see his and Ginny's new children and congratulate them. The younger couple, friends of Harry's, simply observed the others, smiling affectionately in everyone else's direction, knowing that however important their own news was...that Hermione herself was now pregnant...this was Harry and Ginny's day to shine as new parents, and they should let them have it.

As Harry had surmised, James and Lily positively doted on their grandchildren, commenting many times on how much little Elizabeth resembled her daddy. "I bet she's going to be a real daddy's girl," Lily, still beautiful in her forties, laughed as she cuddled the child and made her coo happily. Harry joined her and basically did the same thing; Lily smiled knowingly at his actions. "See, James, I was right. Little Elizabeth is going to have her daddy positively twisted around her little finger, and he's going to spoil her rotten."

"Yes, dear, I noticed," James...essentially an older version of Harry...replied, smiling indulgently at his wife. "I'm sure he loves his boy just as much, though."

A moment later Sirius walked up, Rose and James on each side of him. He had an arm around each of them, and one could tell immediately that he and Rose were very much married and deeply in love ... and that Rose was pregnant again. He began doing basically the same thing as Harry and James, making baby Elizabeth coo with happiness at all the grown-up attention.

"I understand you're going to have another baby, Rose," Lily said, still cuddling baby Elizabeth.

Rose smiled at her, then looked up lovingly at her husband. "Yes. We're hoping for a daughter this time."

"Lucky thing that Harry and Ginny had twins, then, huh? Two kids from one pregnancy," Sirius smiled, laughing his unique barking laugh. "Seriously, though, I'll be happy with as many as Rose is willing to give me."

"I agree wholeheartedly," Molly Weasley put in, walking up to them and giving Lily a look which told her to hand over the baby immediately or else. But Lily smiled when she did it, since she knew that Molly's bark was often worse than her bite. "Arthur and I love our big family. I only wish we could have had at least one more daughter."

"Didn't you and James try for a daughter after Harry was born, Lily?" Molly asked.

"Oh yes, many times. It just never happened. We finally accepted the fact that Harry was not only the only child we'd ever have, but the only one we needed. He's given us more pride and joy than a dozen ordinary children could have!" Lily smiled at her son and gave him a loving hug.

"Thanks, Mum, but I'm not that special." Harry tried to shrug it off upon extricating himself from his mother's arms.

"You are to your father and me," Lily insisted. "And don't ever let me hear you say otherwise again, young man!"

"What's going on?" Ginny asked rhetorically, walking up to everyone, carrying baby Sirius. Spotting his namesake, she all but pushed the child at him. "Sirius, say hello to your namesake."

But before Sirius could speak, Dumbledore walked up and joined them. "I saw your children, Harry. Congratulations. Your daughter is the image of you."

"Thank you, sir." Harry smiled. "What do you think of my son, Sirius?"

"Looks just like Ginny," the older wizard smiled, touching an affectionately indulgent finger to the tiny boy's perfectly shaped nose and making him smile while still in his mother's arms.

This was when Rose spoke again. "Sirius, did you ever tell James that our son was named for him?"

James seemed to catch this, for he swung around and joined his friend. "You named your son for me, Padfoot? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Haven't had the chance," Sirius all but mumbled. "Just the same, I hope you're pleased that I did."

"That I am, my friend," James smiled. "I just would have preferred a little warning instead of having it sprung on me all at once."

"Sirius, aren't you going to say hello to your namesake?" Ginny's voice held impatience.

"Oh sorry, Gin. Got distracted. Where is he?" Sirius returned apologetically.

"Right here." He held out his arms; Ginny placed her small son in them and from then on, Sirius positively doted on the boy. He loved little Elizabeth, of course, but his special favourite was Harry's red-headed, brown-eyed son ... after Harry himself, that was.

"Oh, something I was wondering about, Harry," Dumbledore remarked, smiling knowingly at his favourite student as he placed an affectionate hand on his shoulder. "Do you and Ginny plan to have any more children?"

"Not at the moment, sir, but I'm open to the future. We might even end up having as many children as Molly did; who knows? For the time being, though, I'm content with two."

"Don't have children simply for the sake of having them, Harry. Every child should be meticulously planned and loved for the individuals they are. Just have as many as you feel you can handle, both emotionally and financially."

"Oh, I have every intention of loving my children, Dumbledore, you may be sure of that," Harry assured him, certain that he could never be happier than he was now, surrounded by all those he loved and all those who loved him best. Surely no man could ask for more, now or ever!

** * * * **

But strangely enough, even as happy as the dream was, Harry found himself unable to stop crying upon awakening. His mum had looked so beautiful, and she and his father were obviously still deeply in love, as was Sirius with Rose ... not to mention himself and Ginny. Best of all, however, had been seeing Dumbledore again. It was as if they had somehow all told him how happy they were for him and how pleased they were at his beautiful wife and children. How he wished it could all truly have been so, that they could have been granted the love and lives they deserved, instead of having had them cut so tragically short!

A short time later, Ginny awakened and observed her husband's shoulders shaking ... and was sure she had caught quiet sobs accompanying them. "Harry? What's the matter, luv? Why are you crying?"

"I ... had a dream," he confessed.

"A bad one?"

"No, quite the contrary. It was a very nice one. My mum and dad were there, Sirius was there, Ron and 'Mione were there, even ... Dumbledore was there." Harry's voice almost broke, but he made himself continue. "They ... positively doted on our kids. Mum even said once that she was sure little Elizabeth was going to be a 'daddy's girl,' as she put it. Rose and James were even there, and Rose was pregnant again. Sirius was even holding our son in his arms and ..."

This was when Harry's sobs overwhelmed him, and all Ginny could do was hold her husband in her arms and let him have his grief. It sounded like a lovely dream; what about it could possibly have provoked tears? It was fortunate that they were alone right now; Molly had taken the twins for the day, her first real chance to babysit, and she wanted it to last as long as possible.

Ginny could only surmise that since the dream showed all the loved ones Harry had lost being alive and well, showing happiness at his and Ginny's marriage and children, the emotional overload had been too much for him to endure all at once...especially in view of the tragic, undeniable fact that in real life, they were all gone.

Once he seemed cried out, she tried for more information. "It sounds like a lovely dream, beloved ... and I'm sure it means that they're all happy for us and dote on our children."

"It ... all seemed so *real*, Gin. Mum even hugged me and scolded me affectionately; said she didn't want me to ever put myself down in her hearing again. I mean, I smelled her *perfume*, felt the texture of her *dress*, for Merlin's sake! How could it have been so real, and yet just a dream?"

"I've heard that happens sometimes, when dreams are provoked by intense emotion," she returned soothingly, lovingly stroking his hair as his head rested on her breast.

"It was about as intense as you can get, then. I even felt ... Dumbledore put his hand on my shoulder while congratulating me on our children. It felt warm and strong, and he seemed to smell of ... sandalwood incense. And Sirius ... he looked so happy, so pleased to have a namesake. I even recall Dad asking him why he hadn't told him that he'd named his son for him; Sirius said he hadn't had a chance to tell him yet. Dad said he didn't mind; he just would have preferred to have had a ... bit of warning. It was all so wonderful, as if nothing bad had ever happened. As if everyone's life had been ... perfect."

"That's why you cried," she suddenly realised. "Oh, luv, I'm so sorry for your sake that it cannot be so, that it was just a dream ... and that in real life, they're all gone."

"It's not your fault, Gin. I guess I'm just so not used to having ... nice dreams that I don't know how to appreciate them."

"Of course you do," she dismissed. "It was simply a result of ... emotional overload, the result of seeing all your loved ones alive again, if only in a dream."

"You ... really think so?" Harry asked, lifting his still-wet eyes to face his wife's loving and compassionate gaze; she gently patted his cheeks dry with a tissue.

"I'm positive," she assured him. "Now go back to sleep, luv. You haven't had very much lately, you know."

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Around ten ... but don't worry about the twins. Mum's taken them for the day, so we can have a lie-in if we like. Just the same, we'd better get used to losing sleep, at least for a while. Mum says that babies sleep a lot, but also tend to wake up in the middle of the night screaming. And two babies are even tougher to raise at a time than one!" she exclaimed, a touch of anger in her voice, but not directed at him ... although in the mood Harry was in, he seemed to think so.

"Sorry," he mumbled, feeling tears fill his eyes again.

"Oh, luv, I meant nothing against you. You had no control over how many babies I was carrying. I was just expressing an opinion. Go to sleep, now." She stroked his head tenderly; after a time Ginny felt the weight on her breast increase, and knew that he had done so. She herself was not tired, but knew that Harry was not only tired but emotionally drained, what with the dream and all that had happened the last few days with the twins.

He had had no idea that raising children could be so tiring, especially babies. And to think they were only two weeks old! If he could be this tired after two weeks, what would he be like once they were grown...especially if he and Ginny had other children in the meantime? Harry was beginning to wonder if he would even be able to survive fatherhood at this rate, much less anything else having to do with raising children. Meanwhile, he had best get as much rest as possible, so as to actually look forward to the coming day instead of dread it.

Chapter 26: Harry and Young James's Day Together

Chapter 26 of 27

Sirius's wife grants Harry a day with the boy, young James; they have another talk about Sirius and Harry buys the boy his own owl.

Harry knew his day had definitely improved by the time he awakened that early afternoon. Ginny had told him that an owl from Rose had arrived, then handed him a small blue envelope with his name written on it in a smooth, flowing feminine hand. "This just arrived, luv. Maybe it's Rose's answer to your question about young James," she speculated.

"I kind of figured that," Harry returned dryly, sitting up in bed and bunching the covers around his lower body. "Let's see what she's got to say." He opened the envelope and drew out a single sheet of paper decorated with a long-stemmed blue rosebud on the left side of the page and the following at the top:

A NOTE FROM ROSE

Harry ...

I have thought it over and decided that you're right. You may buy James an owl. However, since he is due to return to school within the next two days, I suggest you do so right away. Please owl me back with the time you plan to pick up James. He's so excited; he can hardly wait. Thank you again for your generosity.

Rose Shacklebolt-Black

His grin widened with every passing moment; finally Ginny asked, "Good news?"

"The best. Rose says I can buy James his own owl ... but we have to do it right away because James is due to return to school in a couple of days. I'll have to be gone for a while with James; will you be all right with the babies? If I remember correctly, Molly is due to bring them back in a couple of hours."

"As long as you're not gone any longer than necessary," she gently admonished him before he got out of bed and began to dress. "Have a good time, and let me know what happens."

"Right," he said upon finishing. "I'm going to Apparate over to Rose's and see if she'll let me take James now. See you later...and kiss the babies for me." They kissed goodbye, and Harry was gone.

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When Harry arrived, Rose greeted him with a warm smile and he could see James practically bouncing on his toes in the background, he was so excited and eager. "Calm down, darling. Harry just got here. You'll be going soon enough."

"Come on, Mum. I've waited a long time for this," James complained.

"It's all right, Rose. I can understand how he feels," Harry soothed her. "Ready to go, James ... or need I ask?" He smiled and winked at the boy, who rushed over to his side. "I'm going to use Side-Along Apparition, James, since you're not old enough to do it yourself. That all right with you?" The boy nodded impatiently. "All right; hold on tightly to me. You're going to feel a strong squeezing sensation, but it'll only be for a few seconds, and then we'll be at the Owl Emporium."

With a final smile and nod in Rose's direction, James holding on tightly to Harry's right arm, they Disapparated out of the room.

* * * * *

A moment later, the two found themselves in Diagon Alley in front of the Owl Emporium; the door was open, and they could hear the hooting of several owls as they made their way to the door. Harry had to hang onto the boy's shoulder to keep him from running on ahead. "Best if you don't run on ahead. No sense frightening the owls."

Harry led the boy to where the owls for sale were caged; they examined several, including some that reminded Harry of his own Hedwig, and still others that reminded him

of the owls owned by the Weasleys...Errol, Hermes, even Pigwidgeon, Ron's owl. "Have you got any specific type of owl in mind, James?" Harry wondered as they checked out bird after bird.

"Nothing in particular ... although I think I would prefer a young one, so I'll be able to keep him or her as long as possible."

"Probably a good idea," Harry agreed. "How about this one? She looks just like your mum's owl." He gestured to a cage which held a small honey-coloured female owl.

"I think I'd prefer one that's a different colour so we can tell them apart," James said. "Like this one." He moved over to a medium-sized chocolate-brown bird in a large cage; James reached to stroke the bird's head. The owl pressed its head against the boy's hand, as if the choice had already been made ... which, as it turned out, it had. "Yes, I think I'll take this one, Harry."

"You sure?" The boy nodded determinedly. "Okay. We'd better tell the clerk." He motioned for the young witch behind the counter to join them. "We'd like to purchase this bird. How much is it?"

"It's a male bird, two years old," the clerk said. "Sweet disposition; doesn't bite. He is also the offspring of birds who set records for distance flying."

"How much is it?" Harry repeated.

"Oh, sorry. Ten Galleons for the bird. I also suggest a cage, water dish, treats ..."

"May we have the one the bird is in? My ... young friend here seems to like it," Harry noted upon seeing James examine the cage closely.

The clerk seemed reluctant for a while, then said, "Why not? Technically it's only for display, but it's also the only one we have like that. Three Galleons for the cage. Now, the water dish and the treats may be found down this way ..." The clerk gestured to the other end of the aisle they were in, then began to move that way. Harry told James where he was going and that he'd be right back. It took only a few minutes to choose the proper water dish for the cage and several varieties of owl treats. He was pleased to note that James had not moved from where his new owl was, not fond of the idea of possibly having to tell Rose he had lost her son in Diagon Alley ... which fortunately did not happen.

Harry and the clerk made their way back to where James was and picked up the cage with the bird, carrying it to the counter along with the water dish and the bags of treats and placing them there. It took several minutes for the items to be rung up; finally, the clerk said, "That comes to thirteen Galleons and ten Sickles."

Harry fished in his pocket for his gold and opened the bag after placing it on the counter, counting out the various coins. "There you go," he told the clerk upon finishing.

"Thank you, sir." She smiled. "Oh, one question, if I may. Just what is your relationship with the boy?"

"He's the son of a ... close friend of mine. I'm getting him his own owl. I asked his mother, my friend's wife, if I could do so, since my ... friend is unable to do so."

"Why is your ... friend unable to do so?"

"He ... died a few years ago," Harry replied quietly, giving the clerk a hard look, not liking to be reminded of that painful time.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Forgive me. I was just curious. It's very thoughtful of you to do this for the boy."

"I believe it's what my ... friend would want me to do," Harry remarked, gathering up his gold and the bag with the treats and water dish in it. James was carrying the bird and the cage. "Thank you for your help."

"You're very welcome, sir. Please come again."

"We probably will," Harry assured her, nonetheless glad to be out of there once they departed the store. Once they began to make their way out, he asked, "Have you thought of a name for your bird yet?"

"One possibility came right off, but it sounds a little weird when I try it," James confessed.

"Why? What is it?"

"Chocolate," came the reply.

"Yes, that does sound a little weird. How about 'Brownie' or something like that?" Harry suggested.

Since James couldn't seem to think of anything better, he went along with Harry's suggestion. "That could work," he agreed. As they passed Madam Puddifoot's tea shop, James asked, "Could we get a drink? I'm kinda thirsty."

"I suppose so," Harry agreed. "Just keep an eye on your owl and make sure not to leave him behind when we leave."

"No chance," James assured him. With that, they entered the tea shop and sat down at the nearest vacant table, Brownie's cage to the left of James's chair. Madam Puddifoot herself, a plump, middle-aged witch with black hair pulled back in a bun and pink robes, came over to wait on them.

"What would you gentlemen like today?" she asked with a smile.

"Butterbeer for me," Harry said. "What about you, James?"

"Make it two," James replied.

"Two butterbeers," Harry told her. She wrote down the order and bustled off to fill it.

While they waited, Harry decided to take this chance to speak further with Sirius's son. "Would you like to hear what your dad was like when he went to school? He told me a few stories of that time."

"Yeah, that'd be great," James replied with a smile. "I'd like to think that I'm not the only kid that ever got in trouble ... either at home or at school."

"Believe me, you're not," Harry assured him. "I've had my share, too ... more than my share, for that matter, but that's best left for another time. I want to tell you about your dad now." Just then, Madam Puddifoot brought their drinks. Once she was gone, Harry began.

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Once he finished, James looked surprised, to say the least. "I thought you said my dad was a nice guy. Doesn't sound like it, what he did to that other bloke."

"For the most part, your dad was a nice guy, James. One of the nicest I'd ever met. It's just at that point in time, he was what one might call 'young and foolish'. So were some of his friends ... among them my father, for whom you're named. I assure you, I was just as surprised as you when I first heard. When I asked your dad about it, he said he wasn't proud of what had happened, but that many times one acts cruelly toward others when they're young. Not that the chap didn't ask for it many times, for he was in Slytherin, but still ..."

Harry chuckled in spite of himself. "It's for sure that my mum...or rather, the one who became my mum...laid your dad and mine both out within an inch of their lives for doing it when she caught them tormenting the other bloke once!" Harry took a long swig of butterbeer, then asked, "Have you got a teacher you particularly dislike, James?"

James frowned thoughtfully, then shook his head. "No, not particularly. There are some I like better than others, though."

"Then consider yourself lucky. I had one so bad that I positively dreaded going to his class. Didn't help matters, either, that I didn't generally do well in it."

"Why would you dread going to his class? Was he ... unkind to you?"

"Yes, he was. Fortunately I wasn't the only one he was ... unkind to, but he seemed to take an especially intense dislike to me. I wondered why for a long time, then your dad told me it was because of how he and my dad had always treated him. As it turns out, this teacher was the very one your dad and mine had once tormented. Just the same, I think a lot of his dislike of me stemmed from the fact I was my father's son and resembled him so strongly."

"But why? You're not responsible for what your dad did."

"That was beside the point as far as this chap was concerned. He was definitely *not* one to forgive and forget. Let me warn you right now: don't cross a Slytherin if you can avoid it. They think nothing of hexing you simply because they don't like you ... so it's best not to give them a reason if you can help it. Might also be a good idea to learn some defensive spells to use just in case of emergency, though. I know a few; I'll teach them to you at the first opportunity. It also helps if you can cultivate the friendship of the head of the school as I did. Ever heard of Albus Dumbledore?"

"Yes; he was a great wizard. Did you know him?"

"Very well; he was one of my role models. He was also head of the school when I went there."

James looked up at the sadness in Harry's voice. "Why do you sound sad, Harry?"

"Dumbledore ... was killed a few years ago," Harry confessed quietly. "And the very teacher I mentioned was the one who ... killed him. The worst part of the whole thing was that Dumbledore had always trusted him, always defended him...even to me. I tried to stop him after it had happened, but he ... got away. To this day, they haven't found him, but if I ever do ... he'll be sorry." Harry's voice had taken on a hardness and coldness rarely found there, and it was not lost on young James.

"Because I'll kill him ... and what's more, enjoy doing it. Just the same, hate is a very bad thing, James. Always. Never forget that. Just the same, there are times you'll run into people that you will feel just such an emotion for, as I have ... and when I have, the hatred has been very, very mutual. And for what he has done to Dumbledore, this man has earned my undying hatred. I will ... hate him for as long as I live...and possibly beyond.

"I should not be burdening you with such things, but at the same time, you should be prepared to deal properly with such negative emotions when you begin to feel them ... and know how to channel them constructively. Your mum would likely be upset with me if she knew I'd said anything like this to you, so let's keep it between ourselves, all right?" Harry's voice had returned to its usual softness and gentleness. "If you begin to feel such things for someone, tell me, and we'll discuss how to deal with it. Fair enough?"

"Deal," James said; the two shook hands.

"I'd better get you home now; don't want your mum to worry. I've got to get home myself. Ginny is expecting me. Her mother took our kids for the day, but they're back home now, and she needs me to help her with them."

James smiled understandingly, and the pair stood up, leaving the empty mugs on the table to be cleared away later, heading out toward the nearest Portkey which would put them within walking distance of Rose's home. They then made their way there, and Rose met them at the door, as if she had known they were coming. Was she a Seer or something? Harry made a mental note to ask her at the first opportunity.

"Here's your boy back, Rose ... with his very own owl, which he picked out himself. And for future reference, we named him Brownie. I've got to go now. See you both later." With that, Harry Apparated back to his own home, making another mental note to tell Ginny about his having purchased Spinner's End so they could move in.

He found her nursing one of the babies in the living room rocking chair while the other slept nearby in his cradle. He touched her shoulder; she looked up and smiled tenderly and they kissed. "How did your time with James go, luv?" she asked.

"It was fine. We chose a young male, dark brown bird which we named Brownie. I also got a cage and all the necessary accoutrements to go with it. It cost over a dozen Galleons, but I think it'll be worth it."

He noted that little Elizabeth was finished, and so took her away from her mother, putting her over one shoulder to burp her while Ginny fixed her clothing, placing a small towel over his shoulder in case the baby spit up, something Molly had told her was best to do, especially with babies such as theirs.

"Did you already feed little Sirius?" Harry asked.

"Mum stayed a little while after bringing the babies back, and I let her feed him. I've decided that it's best if we alternate breast- and bottle-feeding just in case of emergencies. When they need to eat again, you can bottle-feed Elizabeth, and I'll breast-feed Sirius."

"You know we'll have to think about moving soon," Harry remarked even as he felt and heard little Elizabeth give a healthy *burp*, then her head became heavy on his shoulder as she drifted off to sleep. "Since the twins came, we're pretty cramped here. Which reminds me, there's something I did along those lines that you need to know."

"Like what?" Ginny prompted as she took little Elizabeth back and placed her in the double cradle alongside her brother, although it didn't look any larger than an ordinary cradle because it had been magically enlarged.

"You remember I told you about Spinner's End, my family's ancestral home?"

Ginny nodded.

"Well, I made inquiries and it was for sale, so ... I bought it. It's ours now."

Ginny was quiet for a time, acting as if she had been hit with a Stunning Spell...then said, "When did you do this?"

"Something over two weeks ago, just before the twins came," he revealed. "Escrow closed the day they were born. We need to furnish it, but it's ready for occupation otherwise. It's a big place, too, so we're going to need help. Might be a good idea to enlist everyone possible from your family. Maybe even get Ron and Hermione to help out, if not Rose and some people from the Order who aren't busy ... not to mention Fred and George. That is, if they're not too busy with their business."

"They'd better not be, or I'll hex them into the middle of next week," Ginny threatened softly. "Especially if they expect us to let them see their nephew and niece on anything resembling a regular basis." She was standing by the cradle, watching the babies sleep; Harry soon joined her there. For a time, they just marveled at the little miracles they had created with their love, then moved to sit on the nearby couch. Ginny curled up next to her husband, resting her head on his shoulder while he slid his arms around her and laced his fingers, resting them on her once-again slender waist.

"Are you upset about something, Gin? I don't generally hear you talk like that about Fred and George, even at your worst," Harry asked his wife.

"I guess I am," she confessed. "I got an owl from my Healer not too long ago. He said that we weren't to ... make love for at least six weeks after the babies were born. It's only been a little over two, and it seems like a century! How are we ever going to make it through another month at this rate?"

"A lot of necessary things aren't easy, luv. You should know that by now," Harry reminded her, almost infuriatingly calm. "Besides, I'm sure the Healer knows what he's talking about."

"He couldn't possibly have been married; otherwise he'd know what he's asking of us," she groused. "Since we've been together, we've hardly gone more than a day without making love, and now are expected to ... refrain from doing it for six weeks."

"Then all we can hope for is that you heal more quickly than normal, luv."

"How can you be so infuriatingly *calm* about it, Harry? Surely you know what it means for both of us."

"It takes longer than a few days for a woman's body to get over having children from what I understand. We'll just have to figure ... other ways to satisfy each other sexually in order to get through these next few weeks, that's all."

"Easier said than done, Mister," she shot back. "And if it's hard for me, it's got to be that much harder for you, being a man. Particularly ~~y~~oung man."

"Then we'll have to start thinking all the sooner on the subject in between the moving plans and taking care of the twins," came the reply.

"You can't possibly tell me that you aren't going to want us to join physically at some point, Harry. I know your sexual appetite too well for that."

"Of course I am; I never denied that. As I said, we'll just have to figure other ways to do it."

"If you like, I can ask Mum what she and Dad did in this kind of situation," Ginny offered.

In spite of himself, Harry felt himself flush at the thought of Ginny telling her mother about their sex life, but made himself say, "That might be a good idea. She's had seven children; she should be able to give us some pointers as to what to do."

* * * * *

And Molly did give pointers, some of which Harry had never heard of before ... but as the old Muggle saying went, "Don't knock it until you've tried it." But he was sure they would try virtually all her suggestions at least once over the next four weeks.

At least part of that time, however, he and Ginny were too busy preparing to move and recruiting everyone they could to help them with their move in between taking care of their children, Ginny's going back to work as a Healer and Harry resuming his work as an Auror to think about sex for very long at a stretch. But both knew that once they'd both gotten into the proper frame of mind, it was only a matter of time until they did ... and when they did, their old magic would almost literally explode between them all over again!

Chapter 27: Sensationalism/Ghostly Guardians

Chapter 27 of 27

Arthur Weasley becomes editor of the *Daily Prophet* and sacks Rita Skeeter for her sensationalism regarding Harry after the birth of his children. Shortly afterward Harry takes Ginny and the children to his parents' graves, unaware that they are being observed by the ghosts of same until they have a supernatural experience while there.

Meanwhile, some good news occurred in the lives of the Weasleys ... or more specifically, Arthur. The post of editor of the *Daily Prophet* had inexplicably fallen vacant, and he applied for it, sure that his experience at the Ministry would help ensure his being accepted. Just the same, there were many applicants, and it took so long for him to hear back that he was sure he had been passed over - then came the owl with the happy confirmation. He had been hired!

He and Molly had gone out to celebrate, then had given the joyous news to their whole family via owl post. There was too much on everybody's plate to do anything fancy, but they knew they would have to do something to mark such a momentous occasion at the earliest opportunity. Perhaps even a party at Spinner's End once Harry and Ginny had gotten settled in.

Since Rita Skeeter was still employed there, Arthur decided to put her on probation upon taking the post. If she sensationalised even once more, he vowed to sack her and enjoy doing it, especially if he warned her about doing it and she still did it. He had seen what her sensationalism had done to Harry and his friends and wanted to spare anyone else from both the physical and emotional fallout that it had always caused them.

As it turned out, once she'd heard of Harry and Ginny having twins, Rita found a way to twist things, even insinuating that the children were not his first...that he'd had one with Cho Chang ... that she had claimed they'd been intimate that Valentine's Day at Hogsmeade, when anyone with half a brain knew that Cho had been too much in love with Cedric Diggory to have ever been with anyone else, even Harry. If she'd had a child, it belonged to Cedric. With the scrupulously fair and honest Arthur Weasley in charge, this sort of trash would absolutely *not* be tolerated, especially since it could conceivably affect the happiness and reputation of the daughter he cherished and her husband, whom he loved like another son.

This was just the incentive Arthur needed. After writing a scathing denial and publishing it in the next day's "Letters" section, he sent Rita a Howler almost as scathing, declaring that if he had any thing to say about it, she would be blacklisted, unable to find work on any wizarding newspaper anywhere, even the tabloid of the wizarding world, *The Quibbler*.

The text of the denial went basically like this:

Re: Rita Skeeter article concerning Harry Potter having a child with another woman

(January 15, 2002...'Harry Potter A Father for the Third Time?')

"Former lover Cho Chang recently confessed to Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent, that she and Harry Potter were intimate on February 14, 1996 and that she gave birth to his son the following November. They had gone there on a date for Valentine's Day, and allegedly had sex shortly before their return to the castle ...")

This is, without a doubt, a total and unmitigated fabrication. My son-in-law, Harry, and my daughter, Ginevra, are very much in love. He has never had a sexual affair with Cho Chang or anyone else, and certainly has never had children by her or any woman other than my daughter, his lawfully wedded wife. Anyone with any sense would know that Cho was in love with Cedric Diggory; if she had a child, it was by him. I admit that Cho and Harry had indeed had a date on Valentine's Day 1996, but absolutely nothing sexual occurred, then or at any other time.

To quote my son-in-law, 'This story is pure rubbish. I love Ginny with every fibre of my being and would never cheat on her. The only physical thing I ever shared with Cho was one kiss ... and that's it. I never touched her otherwise. As my father-in-law has stated, she was still in love with Cedric Diggory when we dated, still mourning his death, and would not have been inclined to seek intimacy with anyone else in any case ... so if she had a child, it belonged to him, not me. My only children are the two I have with my wife.'

I frankly wouldn't put it past Rita to have misquoted Cho as well. I am totally and thoroughly sick of Rita's lies, sensationalism and innuendo, and wish to inform her categorically here and now that she is no longer employed by this publication...and that I intend to use every ounce of influence I have to see to it that she never finds employment at any other wizarding newspaper, either...even The Quibbler.

Arthur T. Weasley

Editor-in-Chief, Daily Prophet

KINGSLEY SHACKLEBOLT (quote):

"I recently spoke with one of Harry Potter's friends concerning the recent article, specifically his closest friend and brother-in-law, one Ronald Weasley, youngest son of the Prophet's editor-in-chief. The reactions of Ronald and his brothers can be summed up like this: 'Rubbish! Harry loves Ginny and their children. He would never cheat on her, and that's all there is to it.' "

Harry was especially pleased at Ron's taking up for him so quickly, a stark change from the time in his fourth year when Ron had literally been the first to assume that Harry had put his own name into the Goblet of Fire, despite the fact that he could not have done it himself due to the Age Line around the Goblet, which prevented anyone under seventeen from approaching it, placed there by Dumbledore himself.

In fact, Harry hadn't known a thing about it until Dumbledore had called out his name...and even then could scarcely believe it was really happening. Who could possibly have put his name into the Goblet? As he had told Ron, he hadn't asked for this to happen, that he had no idea whatsoever why or how it had come about ... that he didn't want 'eternal glory' or anything else associated with the Tournament. Unfortunately, Ron had been in no mood to listen to the voices of reason and had angrily brushed off Harry's attempt at an explanation with a surly oath, turning his back on him.

To top things off, shortly after it had happened and he had gone to join the other three champions, who had given him funny looks as if wondering what a fourth-year was doing there, not long afterward Dumbledore and several other faculty had burst in. The older wizard's eyes were blazing as he grabbed Harry by the shoulders. "Harry, did you put your name in the Goblet of Fire?"

He had truthfully said, "No, sir!"

"You didn't have an older student put it in for you?"

"No, sir!"

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Yes, sir!"

Just then Madame Maxime had approached and said, "But, of course, he is lying!"

It was Moody (the fake one, as it turned out) who had said, "The hell he is! The Goblet of Fire is an exceptionally powerful magical object. Only an exceptionally powerful Confundus Charm could have hoodwinked it ... magic way beyond the talents of a fourth-year!"

In the end, it was Crouch and his rules that had determined that Harry would have to compete, in spite of the fact he was underage. When Harry had heard this, he was positive that he was visibly trembling at the danger he would soon be placed in, especially when all the faculty present turned their eyes on him. Hermione, Ginny, Fred and George had been four of the few to believe in his integrity. Even Sirius had asked him point-blank if he had done it!

Fortunately, he had not questioned it after that, and that made Harry feel a little better. But it was Ron's defection that had hurt the most. The one person he had thought would stand by him, no matter what, would believe in him, no matter what, had instead been the first to believe the worst of him and had not spoken to him for weeks, but instead gone through intermediaries like Hermione and their other peers.

It hadn't helped matters, either, that there had also been lurid rumours flying around about him and Hermione being romantically involved during that time, because of Rita's sensationalism. Considering Ron's feelings for her, that could only have reinforced his negative feelings toward Harry. It had truly been one of the worst four-week periods of Harry's life, and he prayed nothing like that would ever happen again.

Harry also truly hoped that Ginny had not believed the rubbish in the article by that Skeeter cow, but instead, the scathing denial her father had written and the direct quote from him in regards to both the relationship he had had with Cho and the one he had with her. He had done everything he possibly could to assure her of his deep and abiding love for her and their children. If she didn't believe in him now, she never would.

It wasn't until they were alone in their room that night that he got a chance to ask her about it, feeling happy and relieved when she hugged and kissed him warmly and said, "Me believe rubbish like that? No one with the sense God gave a hippogriff would believe anything Rita Skeeter says. You've never given me reason not to trust you before, luv, and I have no reason to think you ever will."

"I'm glad to hear it. I was sure you would think the worst, but it came out so quickly, I had no chance to deny it. All I could do was go to your father, give him a quote to use in his denial and pray that you would believe me. Gin, my love, I state categorically, here and now, for the record, that the only thing physical I ever shared with Cho was a single kiss on Christmas Eve 1995. You are the only woman I have ever been sexually intimate with, the only one I *want* to be sexually intimate with, now or ever. If you can remember that and believe it in your heart, then no amount of filthy lies to the contrary will ever shake your faith in me and your knowledge of my love for you and our children."

And that was the last said on the matter . . . at least by them, either privately or publicly. The next thing they heard, Arthur had made good on his threat to sack Rita, blacklisting her so no other wizarding publication would touch her. Now maybe she had some idea of the damage she had done to both people's lives and reputations with her lies, slander and libel, her distortions, outright sensationalism and nasty innuendo.

She would be lucky to be able to go anywhere in the wizarding world now and not be ostracised ... and it was virtually impossible for either Harry or any others she had

wronged to feel any sympathy for her, for she had brought on her misfortune all by herself. Now that she was gone from the *Prophet* and Arthur was in charge, perhaps the paper would return to its former reputation for clarity and truth, instead of being turned almost into a second *Quibbler*. There had been so much tabloid-type rubbish in it over the last few years.

Harry frankly liked the *Quibbler* better these days; at least they had been willing to listen to him and publish his interview regarding his time with Voldemort and the first-hand account of the Dark Lord's rebirth. Only after a sold-out run of the *Quibbler* and the incident at the Department of Mysteries had the *Prophet* finally gotten its act together. Only then had the Powers That Be at the Ministry gotten their heads out of the sand and stopped denying everything Harry and Dumbledore said, stopped the lies, the slander, the name-calling.

But Harry had much better things to think about now...good health, a new family, a wife who loved him, a new home, a fulfilling career, loyal friends ... surely if a man had all that, he had everything. Because of these things, despite all of his losses and hardships, Harry had never felt luckier in his life than he did right now...and prayed that it would never change, if only for the sake of his own peace of mind.

Just the same, he fully intended to take Gin and the kids to where his parents were buried at the earliest opportunity and show them off, praying that they would somehow be able to see his family and how far he had come in the ensuing years. In the meantime, they had to continue with their moving plans, good times with their friends and his adopted family, their postgrad work, individual careers and raising their children. Surely as full a life as any couple could ask for, now or ever!

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Even with all the help they had, not to mention magic, it took the better part of a month for Harry and Ginny and their children to move into Spinner's End, but once they had finished, all were certain that it had never looked better, not even in its heyday when Harry's grandparents and James were alive. They even had some magic things, routine now, that would have been state-of-the-art then ... not to mention quite a few that Robert and Sarah Potter could never have imagined.

It was about a month after they had moved in that Harry remembered what he wanted to do...i.e. take Gin and the kids to see his parents' graves and show them off. They made sure to go on a day where it would be warm and sunny so the babies would not catch cold. By this time, Ginny had recovered from her pregnancy, so it was only a matter of time before she and Harry could resume their active sex life.

The Godric's Hollow churchyard was some distance away, so they decided to Apparate there; once they arrived, it took several minutes to find the obsidian stones in green grass in the shade of a flowering magnolia tree. "Here, Gin. They're here," Harry said, carrying baby Sirius while she carried baby Elizabeth. He brushed some leaves off the stones so the inscriptions could be read, kneeling in front of his father's stone, and Ginny knelt beside him. She was unable to help noting that there were witchcraft and wizarding symbols, such as crossed wands shooting sparks, next to each of their names to designate that the ones resting here were once members of the wizarding world. Both bore a smiling picture of the dearly departed as well.

James Potter's stone read as follows:

JAMES ROBERT POTTER

1959-1981

BELOVED HUSBAND OF LILY

BELOVED FATHER OF HARRY

BELOVED FRIEND OF SIRIUS BLACK

MURDERED BY THE DARK LORD IN THE PRIME OF HIS LIFE

REST IN PEACE, DEAR JAMES

Lily's read in a similar manner:

LILY GINEVRA EVANS POTTER

1960-1981

BELOVED WIFE OF JAMES

BELOVED MOTHER OF HARRY

BELOVED FRIEND OF MOLLY PREWETT WEASLEY

MURDERED BY THE DARK LORD IN THE PRIME OF HER LIFE

REST IN PEACE, SWEET LILY

Ginny's eyes widened upon seeing Harry's mother's middle name. "Oh, Merlin ... Harry, *look!*" She pointed at Lily's stone. He looked for a moment, then his own eyes widened.

"Oh my God."

"Did you know your mother's middle name was the same as my Christian name, Harry?"

"No, I had no idea," he revealed. "That's incredible."

"I wonder whose idea it was to do the separate lines?"

"I wouldn't put it past Molly and/or Sirius to have thought of it," Harry remarked. "I bet he even paid for it to be done."

"It wouldn't surprise me," Ginny agreed. "Well, don't you think it's time you made the introductions?"

They manoeuvred the babies so they were sitting on their laps; then Harry swallowed hard and began.

"Hello, Mum and Dad ... it's me, Harry. I've finally managed to get here. Not that I haven't meant to for a long time, but I've been very busy being an Auror, making sure that no one else is killed by a dark wizard as you were. You may be pleased to know that I killed Voldemort, so we don't have to worry about him any more. Which reminds me ... I've married a lovely girl, Mum, Dad.

"Her name is Ginny, and she's the sister of my ... best mate Ron, just a year younger than me. I ... love her very much. She also has red hair like you, Mum. We have two beautiful babies now, too, Mum and Dad. Twins...a boy and a girl. I named the boy for you and Sirius, Dad; hope you're pleased."

This was the point where Harry got choked up and had to stop speaking for a while, so Ginny filled in even as she put a comforting arm around him, holding baby Elizabeth with the other. He rested his head on her nearest shoulder, and she rested her cheek on his silky but unruly hair as they knelt on the warm grass; he soon slid one arm around her, holding little Sirius with his free arm.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Potter. This is Ginny ... your daughter-in-law. It's great to finally meet you. I have loved your son since I was ten years old ... but it wasn't until he was sixteen that he finally noticed me. Slow on the uptake, huh? But what matters is that *he noticed*. As Harry told you, we have two beautiful babies now...and are very happily married, just as you two were. You would have to have been to have such a handsome son ... a son surely born of the deepest love imaginable. A son that I love with all my heart, every fibre of my being...and will until the day I die. And on behalf of my children and myself, thank you both so very much for giving him life."

This was when Ginny herself got choked up and could no longer continue; by this time Harry was able to go on. "I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life right now, Mum, Dad ... but I still can't help missing you. I think I'll always miss you. I wish so much that you could be here, could play with your grandchildren ... and so Ginny and I could hug you, show you how much we love you ..." Harry's voice trailed off, and he once again rested his head on Ginny's shoulder for strength.

"You all right, luv?" Ginny asked, concerned, sensing her beloved's pain. "We can go if you like."

"No ... I want to stay here for a while. It's so beautiful and peaceful here. Like nothing could ever go wrong ..." He then straightened up and continued. "Oh ... guess what I found out, Dad, Mum. Sirius ... was married. Did you know that? His son even goes to Hogwarts like we did. He's even named after you, Dad ... and we've met Sirius's wife, a lovely lady named Rose. We have even become friends, and I'm now an unofficial godfather to young James, helping him as Sirius did me."

"I even bought him his own broomstick and an owl ... we named him Brownie. We're even going to correspond as Sirius and I did ... and I'll advise him as best I can. I've also given Rose Sirius's family home in London as an inheritance for James ... not to mention his money for James's care and education. I think it's what Sirius would want me to do. Hope you agree." Harry once again fell silent; a moment later, his eyes closed and a soft smile came onto his lips. "Thanks, Dad, Mum. I'm glad ... you approve."

"Harry?" Ginny asked, concerned. "What ... just happened?"

"It's hard to say, but I would almost swear that I heard Dad's voice in my ear ... whispering to me that he and Mum approved of what I was doing for Sirius's wife and son."

"Maybe you did," she suggested. "Can you tell me what he ... sounded like?"

"Like an ... older version of me. That's the best way I can describe it."

The young couple didn't realise it but they were being observed, and although the observers were not of this plane of existence, they were very real nonetheless. The ghostly figure of James Potter, wearing round-lensed glasses, his hair every bit as unruly as that of his son, stood a short distance away from where said son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren knelt, one arm around his wife, who stood at his side. Lily smiled in their direction. "They're a lovely couple, James. Just like us when we were that age. Harry chose well."

"And how," he agreed. "She's the image of you. You could almost be sisters."

"Except for the eyes," Lily pointed out. "My eyes are green. Hers are brown." She stole another gaze at her now-grown son as the young couple stood up and turned in their direction, holding the babies in their arms. "Harry's so handsome, James. Just like you at that age ... and their babies are beautiful. How I wish we could be there to hold them and cuddle them...our grandchildren."

"So do I ... but we have to trust that Harry and Ginny will be good parents and love their children every bit as much as we loved him. It's so sad that he was so abused by your sister and her husband. I wish I could hex them into the middle of the next century for that! Thank Merlin he's away from them now...*far* away...forever. I'm ... also happy that he's found such good and loyal friends, like Ron and Hermione. Just like Sirius and Remus were to us."

"And do you realize that Harry now owns your family's ancestral home?" Lily asked her husband. "Too bad we never had the chance to live there. You told me such ... lovely stories about it. Just the same, I'm glad that Harry and his family will be able to live there. And it's big enough, so maybe they'll ... even invite their friends Ron and Hermione to live with them. Especially since she's going to have a baby soon herself."

"Would you like me to suggest it?" James asked; at Lily's nod he closed his eyes and projected his voice out, across the distance separating him from his son and his family. "Done. Harry seemed somewhat disbelieving and surprised ... but promised to consider it."

"We'd better go now, luv. Remember our time here is limited ... only a few minutes every hour ..."

"I know. Why don't we look in on the babies tomorrow?" James suggested. "Spend some time with our grandchildren?"

"And if Ginny is there, I can ... advise her," Lily replied. "We'd better go now." With that, the ghostly couple vanished.

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By this time, Harry and Ginny were heading back up the road to Spinner's End, carrying the babies. "You know, something very strange happened a few minutes ago, Gin."

"Strange?"

"I swear ... I heard Dad again."

"What did he say?"

"That he and Mum think it's a good idea that we invite Ron and Hermione to ... move in with us."

Ginny's eyes widened as she shifted little Elizabeth in her arms. "That's strange ... but a good idea just the same, don't you think? After all, we have plenty of room. And since Hermione is pregnant now, I can help her ... and you'll be close by to help Ron through the rough parts."

They walked in silence for a while; then Harry suggested, "My feet are getting tired. Let's Apparate the rest of the way."

Ginny agreed wholeheartedly. "And let's owl Ron and Hermione once we get back home, tell them what we've decided and see what they think of our offer."

"But we'd better say it's just from us. Can you imagine the looks we'd get if I told them that ~~Dad~~ suggested I do it?"

"Yes, I can," Ginny smiled. "Well, let's get back to the house now. We've got to feed the babies, then after that, ourselves." With that, the couple Disapparated, each with a baby in tow, heading back to not only the Potters' ancestral home, but whatever destiny awaited them and their friends. A destiny they were no longer afraid to have their children share ... a destiny they were at least fairly sure that they would be able to share with the children for the majority of their lives.

However, neither was aware that James and Lily had been silently watching over their beloved son every moment of his life since their deaths, helping him wherever they could, and when they couldn't, directing him to those who could, such as Dumbledore and Sirius. And just as they had been there for their son, they would now be there for their grandchildren ... however many Harry and his wife ended up having, however his and Ginny's lives turned out.

Harry had had a very difficult life, certainly, and both James and Lily were sad about that, but it had been unavoidable. Fortunately, that was all behind him now. Harry's friends, wife, children and adopted family, the Weasleys, would be there to sustain him from now on, for as long as he lived...and if they had anything to say about it, that life would be a long and happy one ... just as long and happy as they could possibly make it!

