

No Greater Love

by jmlane57

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Ron's Sacrifice

Chapter 1 of 1

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The Second Wizarding War was going well ... if any war can be said to be going well. Both Good and Evil had their share of casualties, of course. Fortunately, Good had considerably less ... mainly because it had some of the best fighters in the wizarding business on their side: starting with Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, Kingsley Shacklebolt and various other Aurors in the Order of the Phoenix ... then the most experienced of the younger generation, among them one Harry James Potter and his friends Hermione Jane Granger, Ginevra Molly and Ronald Bilius Weasley.

Of course, there were yet others, not quite as competent but every bit as sincere in their dedication to Good...and most importantly, Harry's pet cause: destroying Voldemort. To name a few, including one-time members of Dumbledore's Army and Harry's former students: Luna Lovegood, Neville Longbottom, Michael Corner and Cho Chang ... not to mention Fred, George, Bill and Charlie Weasley. There were also certain younger members of the Order engaged in this battle, such as Nymphadora Tonks.

The Dark side had its share of competent, albeit deadly, fighters, however: among them Death Eaters such as one Lucius Malfoy, one of Voldemort's closest followers ... then dementors, soul-sucking fiends whose specialty was "kissing" their victims and draining their souls, leaving them worse than dead. Dementors had once guarded the wizarding prison, Azkaban, but of late had defected to the Dark side and could no longer be controlled by the Ministry of Magic. Next, there came werewolves, the worst of which was one Fenrir Greyback, all but a Death Eater himself. The best on the Good side was one Remus Lupin...a one-time Marauder, DADA teacher at Hogwarts and close friend of Harry's parents...who had been bitten by Greyback as a child.

But at the centre of the battle were Harry and Voldemort, both grimly determined to kill each other or die trying. Even the best of fighters eventually tired, however, and at that point no amount of Rejuvenation Spells could replenish their depleted reserves ... and the younger the fighters were, the faster they tired, especially in the wizarding world. Harry was one of these ... and despite numerous injuries...one a scalp wound, another in the left shoulder and still another in his right thigh...he refused to give in, unwilling to allow himself even a moment's rest.

No matter how his friends and the older members of the Order tried, Harry kept insisting, "We're too close to victory. I can't stop now!"

"You're badly hurt, luv. You *must* let me treat you!" Ginny insisted, close to tears at Harry's obstinacy and injured herself, but in a fairly minor way...a sprained left ankle and superficial cut on her right arm.

"There'll be time for that after the battle's over and Voldemort is dead," Harry returned stubbornly, hissing the comment through pain-tightened lips. Agony shot through him when he tried to put weight on his injured leg and re-opened the wound, necessitating a large dose of Blood Replenishment Potion and a few phoenix tears to replace his lost blood and repair said wound, at least temporarily.

Fortunately none of the other wounds had re-opened, but the leg wound was the one that most worried her, for it was located dangerously close to a major blood vessel leading to Harry's heart. A few centimeters closer and there would have been nothing she could have done to have kept him from bleeding to death. As it was, it was all she could do to keep his blood volume up to the proper level, and she doubted he could survive yet another serious wound, especially in a vital area.

"Not if you die first," Ginny shot back, tears of both anger and emotional anguish brimming in her soft brown eyes, unable to bear seeing her beloved in such pain. "Besides, you're exhausted. You haven't slept in almost 36 hours!"

"Gin, I can't afford to sleep. Just give me another Rejuvenation Spell."

Ginny glared at him through her tears. "You've already had four," she reminded him tartly. "They only last eight hours under the best of conditions...and you know as well as I do that the more you have put on you, the less time they're effective ... and even when they are, they're on people in far better shape than you. Pretty soon, even *your* body is going to cry, 'Enough!' and you're going to collapse!"

Harry's eyes hardened into living emeralds behind his glasses. "Stop your bloody arguing and give me another shot. Another eight hours should do it."

Ginny sighed with affectionate exasperation. "All right, Harry, but this is the last one you're going to get."

"Fine. With luck, it'll be the last one I need."

Ginny pointed her wand at her fiancé and muttered, *Rejuvo*, and Harry felt strength surge back into his body. At the same time, he knew she was right...the spells weren't lasting as long as they used to and eventually wouldn't work at all. He was all too aware of the fact that he was living on borrowed time, but if *he* was this tired, Voldemort and the older Death Eaters had to be even more so.

Even weakened, however, they were still forces to be reckoned with...and however much initial help Harry had, it would soon come down to just him and *Voldemortano y mano* (one on one). The ultimate responsibility for saving the wizarding world lay on the nearly-nineteen-year-old Harry's shoulders...the heaviest burden the young wizard had ever carried, but at the same time, a responsibility he did not take lightly.

Many lives rested on the outcome of this battle, not the least of which were those Harry held most dear ... among them Remus Lupin, his second godfather, who had taken over after Sirius's passing, as well as the entire Weasley clan, his adopted family, the ones who loved and cared for him as his own blood kin, the Dursleys, never had. He was fighting for the safety of them all...but most of all, for Ron, his adopted brother and closest, dearest friend; Ron's fiancée, Hermione Granger, another dear friend; then Ginny, Ron's sister, the love of his life, who had insisted on accompanying them, despite her entire family's (and Harry's) protests to the contrary. The more they said to stay behind, the more determined she was to go.

However, as it turned out, the latest Rejuvenation Spell began to wear off after only two hours. Harry once again felt weariness descend on him like a tangible weight on his shoulders, and he found it progressively more difficult to even hold up and point his wand, much less speak or cast spells. He was literally almost too weary to even think...and if Voldemort detected it, he would take advantage and act accordingly, as would any of the Death Eaters, dementors and werewolves.

Ginny and Hermione saw it coming, but were too busy protecting Harry's back even as other Order and D.A. members were protecting theirs. However, Ron noted it first of all and made a mental note to step in and assist his friend ... but fate, in the form of Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy, acted first, pointing their wands at the exhausted youth before them, ready to pick him off like the proverbial sitting duck.

They could sense Harry's bone-deep weariness, his physical and emotional pain...yet at the same time, his dogged determination to see this war finished and the Dark side vanquished, whatever the cost to himself. He had made an admirable effort, but at the same time, it was an effort doomed to failure. They, the Dark side, were just too strong for him, even with all the help he had. And now it was his time to die, albeit honourably and in such a way that Harry would forever be remembered as a martyred champion in the cause of Justice.

But what these smug, evil wizards didn't know was that another would die this day in Harry's place, and die every bit as honourably and be remembered just as long for the same reasons...but most of all, Ron Weasley would be remembered for the love and loyalty he had shown his friend, Harry Potter, his own fiancée, Hermione Granger, his sister, Ginny, and brothers Fred, George, Bill and Charlie, also battling in this war.

Harry mustered every last bit of strength he had (which wasn't much) and stood tall before his adversaries, determined to go down fighting even as he forced himself to lift his wand and think the *Avada Kedavra*. But even as Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy pointed their wands at him, preparing to destroy Harry once and for all, Ron knew what he had to do, even as he knew that his friend would die instantly if struck by two Killing Curses at once. Harry was needed and loved by far too many. He, Ron, could not allow him to be killed, whatever the cost to himself.

Had Hermione, Ginny and any of the other Weasley brothers present any inkling whatsoever of Ron's intentions, they'd likely have stopped him, whatever they had to do...but as it was, they were too busy fighting the dementors and Death Eaters to prevent it. It all happened too fast for anyone to be totally sure of the exact sequence of events. All most of them recalled was that Ron had run full-tilt straight toward Harry and yelled, "*Harry! Watch out!*"

Harry had fallen to the ground, the wind knocked out of him at the momentum of Ron's push, even as the immediate area was lit up with green light as the twin Killing Curses struck the young redheaded man full-on. Ron's last conscious thoughts were, "Goodbye, everyone. I loved you all ... Mum, Dad, Ginny, all my brothers ... but most of all, I loved you, my most precious and beloved Hermione. I'm so sorry to leave you, so sorry to cause you pain...but I could not allow Harry to be killed, whatever the cost to myself. You're the best friend I ever had, Harry. I love you, mate."

Harry caught his breath barely in time to look up and see his friend's body light up and hover in midair for a moment before falling heavily to the ground, lifeless, about ten feet away. Horror and grief filled him upon realising what had happened. "*Ron! No!*"

On the heels of his cry, Harry heard Ginny and Hermione scream as one, *Ron!*

Almost instantaneously, unprecedented strength borne of great love, murderous anger and unfathomable grief at the loss of his dearest friend filled Harry's weary, battered, pain-wracked body. Still lying prone on the ground on his belly, he noted Voldemort and Lucius smiling maliciously at the body before them. This prompted Harry to raise his wand (and retrieve Ron's, which he had dropped when his body hit the ground), then point both at each of them, and think *Avada Kedavra!* even as he yelled out through his tears, "You filthy, rotten, murdering bastards! You killed my best friend!"

"We were aiming for you, Potter," Voldemort returned with sadistic glee, the last words to leave his lips before the Killing Curse claimed him.

"Doesn't make any difference. And now I'm aiming for *you*, scum," Harry shot back, voice laced with hatred and contempt. "Prepare to die, both of you!"

With that, green light shot from Ron's wand to strike Lucius Malfoy square in the chest. He said with a gloating air, "Serves him right, taking the curses for you, Potter. At least that way, he's paid a sufficient price for being a blood traitor!" then screamed once and collapsed. Both Dark wizards were now every bit as lifeless as Ron was, twenty feet from where their victim lay.

Only when his two adversaries had fallen once and for all, did Harry manage to crawl on all fours to his friend's body and cradle it in his arms, holding it tightly against him, moving his glasses out of the way to bury his face in Ron's red hair and sob uncontrollably. "Ron, no! *No!* Why did you take those curses for me? Oh, Merlin, *why?* You

had to know you'd never survive them!"

Moments later, Ginny and Hermione dropped to their knees on each side of Harry, one arm around him and the other around Ron's body, tears streaming down their cheeks as well. Hermione's grief was especially heart-rending, as with unprecedented strength, she managed to pull his body out of Harry's arms and into her own. All nearest her saw her lips move but had no idea what she was saying, although Harry and Ginny had an inkling...her own personal, private farewell to the young man she loved and had planned to marry. Upon finishing, she simply kissed him one last time, then held him and sobbed uncontrollably.

As she did this, however, the other young couple simply sought each other's arms and grieved in their own way, burying their faces in each other's hair, still crying.

"Gin, why did he do it? *Why?* He had to know he'd never survive!"

"He loved you, Harry. He couldn't bear to see you die, even at the cost of his own life. If it had been me, I'd have done the same thing."

"No!" Harry held her tightly. "I've already lost Ron. I'm not going to lose you, too! Besides, Voldemort and Lucius are finished. I just need to find Snape now...and destroy him!"

"No, luv. Dumbledore wouldn't want that. You've already done what you were destined to do; you've destroyed Voldemort. That's what matters."

"Dumbledore is dead, Gin. He can't stop me. Besides, how do you know that I'm not destined to destroy Snape *and* Draco, for that matter? For all we know, they may be plotting to start a new Dark Order! I can't let that happen!"

His voice was so full of mixed anger, anguish and guilt that Ginny could only hold her beloved's head close and stroke his sweat- and blood-matted hair. "All right, luv. All right. Just let yourself rest and heal first. Please, if only for Ron's sake. Don't let him have died in vain. You must survive in order to do what you want to do...and for that to happen, you *must* let me help you!"

"All right, luv. All right. I will. Don't cry." Harry tried to touch her cheek, but couldn't quite make it, so Ginny raised it the rest of the way to her lips, kissed it, then held it to her cheek for a time.

While this went on, the mopping-up operations began. All dead bodies were carted away...or at least those from the Dark side. The ones who weren't killed or injured were captured, then eventually tried, sentenced and imprisoned while the injured on the Good side were levitated onto stretchers and taken to a field hospital not far away from the scene of the battle where Madam Pomfrey and several assistants awaited them. (There were dozens of injuries, but Ron was the only fatality.)

Madam Pomfrey personally looked after Harry and Ginny, treating their wounds and giving each a Sleeping Draught so they could catch up on their rest and allow themselves to heal, checking to make sure that all the other wounded had been properly tended to, then left them in the care of her equally competent assistants.

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Meanwhile, Hermione was inconsolable, holding Ron's hand and sobbing brokenheartedly, not even feeling Bill's strong arm around her. Of course, all the Weasley brothers were grieving for their lost sibling in their own way, but what they dreaded most was telling their parents, Arthur and Molly. They would be devastated at the loss of their youngest son, and Bill could well imagine how Harry must feel, having to see his best friend die before his eyes...and what's more, die to save him, just as his parents had done nearly 18 years ago.

He was also sure that Harry couldn't be looking forward to facing any of them with the news, and couldn't blame him. For the moment, though, he was out of it, as was Gin, which was what mattered. Every one of them had to rest and heal before they could take the next step...learning how to live without one of their own and determine how best to honour his memory.

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Fortunately, it was the following day, after Harry had awakened with Ginny holding his hand...her ankle and arm bandaged but her smile as bright as ever, if somewhat forced because it was what Ron would want...that Remus Lupin, somewhat the worse for wear himself...sporting a sling around his left arm and a bandage on his lower right leg...appeared and sat down on the side of Harry's bed. Remus's own smile was bright as ever, if somewhat subdued, and it made both Harry and Ginny feel better despite their sorrow.

"Harry, mate. How are you doing?" Remus reached to pat the young man's nearest hand with his free one.

"I've been better," Harry replied. "I assume you heard?"

"Yes," Remus returned somberly. "I'm so sorry, Harry. I know how close you and Ron were."

"I can't understand why he would do it, Moony. He had so much to live for. And as you might imagine, 'Mione is inconsolable. In fact, I don't think she's left his side since it happened."

"Can't blame her," Remus opined. "And I think I have some idea why he'd do it. Gin tells me that he couldn't bear to see you killed, and that was why he pushed you out of the way and threw himself in front of those Killing Curses. He knew you were ready to drop, and didn't want to see you picked off like a sitting duck."

"But, Moony, he was just as valuable as I was, if only emotionally. I mean, he has a family, he has me, he has 'Mione ..." Harry's voice trailed off, laced with unfathomable sorrow and regret.

"Well, he obviously thought you were *more* valuable," Remus remarked. "Don't feel guilty, mate. He wouldn't want you to."

"Bloody hell, Moony, he was my friend! How do you expect me to feel, knowing that he died to save me? He deserved to live as much as I did, if not more so. Besides, I long ago resigned myself to the possibility of dying...but it wasn't necessary for him to die, and no one's going to convince me otherwise."

"Then you're determined to wallow in guilt for the rest of your life," Remus returned, his tone reproachful. "For that, you deserve to have Ron come back and haunt you. You're doing his memory the gravest possible disservice by making it seem like he was wrong to save you!"

"Wasn't he?" Harry threw back.

"Of course not! You have people who love and need you here, Harry. Me, Gin, 'Mione ... to name just a few. And let us not forget the rest of the Weasleys."

"I'll be surprised if Arthur and Molly don't want to hex me into the middle of next year for being the cause of their son's death. And I can just imagine how Fred, George, Bill and Charlie must feel!"

"I don't think their feelings for you have changed one bit, mate. They've considered you family for far too long to change their tune overnight. You should know that as well as anyone, as long as you've known them!"

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I know them. I've known them almost as long as I knew your parents. That's not the kind of people they are."

"But they've got to be devastated...and what's more, they've got to know that I'm responsible for Ron's death!"

"Responsible? *You* didn't kill him. He *chose* to do what he did. If anyone's responsible for his death, it's him."

"Moony, you don't understand! It's because of me that he's dead! Just like Cedric in the Triwizard Tournament. Voldemort ordered Wormtail to kill him because Cedric stood between us."

"Don't I? Remember, I've lost people I loved, too. James, Lily, Sirius ..." Remus's voice trailed off, laced with pain at the memory of his lost friends.

Harry's eyes closed in pain at the memory of his parents, dying so young...and what's more, to save him, just as Ron did. And Sirius ... if he was to blame for anyone's death, it was his, because he had believed Kreacher's lies about Sirius having left Grimmauld Place when he was actually there, and fooled by that vision of him being tortured in the Department of Mysteries, planted by Voldemort, as it turned out.

"I essentially lured him there to be a sacrificial lamb for his Death Eater cousin, Bellatrix, Moony, because I was told later that once Sirius heard of me and my friends being there because of him, he actually did leave the house and came to join the fight...and she killed him not long afterward. I might as well have been the one to blast him through that veil!"

"I never heard anything more bloody ridiculous," Remus shot back. "Padfoot *chose* to come, Harry. You didn't *make* him come. He came because he loved you and wanted to help you."

"And got himself killed for his efforts," Harry returned glumly.

"He was a member of the Order, Harry. He knew the risks. Taking risks comes with the territory. Now, if you don't get off this ruddy guilt trip, and *right now*, Gin and I will both hex you into next year!" Harry took a look at Ginny and knew that she agreed with everything Remus was saying.

"All right, all right. I suppose I have been wallowing a bit...but can you really blame me? So many people have died because of me. How the bloody hell do you *expect* me to feel, carrying around that knowledge?"

"Virtually every one of them *chose* to sacrifice themselves for you, Harry. *They* didn't consider it a waste of their lives to give them for you; they loved you enough to *willingly* do so ... and given the choice, I'm sure they'd do it all over again, if it meant your staying alive."

"But they deserved to live as much as I do, every one of them! Are you going to deny that?"

"Of course not...but don't dishonour their memory or their sacrifice by disparaging yourself so. They ... and Ron ... obviously thought you worthy to sacrifice themselves for, so you must be."

"Then may I assume that if you had a choice between living or sacrificing yourself to save me, that you would do the same as they did, Moony?"

"Damn straight, mate," Remus smiled, giving Harry a thumbs-up.

"Fortunately, you don't have to do it this time around. For one thing, I wouldn't want to have to explain it to Tonks. It's enough that I'm going to be reminded of Ron every time I see 'Mione for a long time to come after this, without that."

"What did I tell you about hexing you if you continued to wallow in guilt?" Remus warned. "One would almost think you *enjoyed* it, the way you act!"

"*Enjoy* it? Are you mental? Of course I don't enjoy it! It's just that I'm sick and tired of always losing everyone I'm close to. It's getting so I'm afraid to make friends, much less make an honest woman of Gin as she deserves. I don't want any more people dying simply because they're close to me. It's been entirely too many to be a coincidence, you know."

Remus sighed, for once unable to refute Harry's statement. "But at the same time, you mustn't deny yourself the joys of friendship or love because of it, mate. Your parents weren't afraid; Padfoot wasn't afraid; your friends weren't afraid. You mustn't be, either."

"But, Moony..." Harry tried to argue.

"Listen to Remus, Harry. He's right," came a new voice. Molly! Harry's head turned to see her standing beside the bed, hands folded in front of her.

"Molly!" Harry exclaimed. "Do you know...?"

"Yes, I know, dear," Molly Weasley finished. "I'm devastated, of course, that my boy is dead, but I don't hold you responsible. You're no more responsible than I am." She sat down on the bed next to him, in front of Remus, drawing Harry into her arms to hug him fiercely, stroking his soft, unruly hair as his head lay on her shoulder. "Just the same, I know how devastated *you* must be, having had to watch your friend die. I'm so sorry."

Harry's own arms tightened around her. "Have you seen 'Mione yet?"

"Yes, dear. We stopped by the morgue on our way here. Poor love, I know she's exhausted, and I don't think she's stopped crying since it happened. We'll probably end up having to drug her or something so she can get some rest, at this rate."

"Which reminds me. Have you spoken to Bill, Charlie, Fred and George? How *do they* feel about what happened?"

"As I said, we're all devastated to lose Ron, but what matters is that we had him in our lives for nineteen years, and have a wealth of memories because of it...memories we will treasure for a lifetime. What's more, his brothers wanted me to assure you that they no more blame you for Ron's death than Arthur or I do. Ron chose to do what he did, and we respect his choice. It is for that reason as much as anything else that we choose to celebrate his life rather than mourn his death. You know as well as anyone that Ron loved life and always tried to live it to the fullest, just as his father, brothers, sister and I have. It's the Weasley way."

"Where is Arthur ... I mean, Mr. Weasley?"

"He's with Hermione and the boys, at the morgue, with Ron."

"Do you know when we're going to have ... the funeral yet?" Harry made himself say.

"Not yet, dear...but there's time enough for that. Once we know, we'll tell you. I'm sure you'll want to come." Harry hugged her tightly again to confirm that desire. "Fine, dear. We'll be expecting you. Lastly, when are you and Ginny going to get married? You know it's what Ron expected you to do. You can't let him down, especially not now."

"I still love Gin, Molly, you know that, but I'm just...not up to a wedding right now. Not until after ... the funeral, anyway." He reached for Ginny's nearest hand and brought it to his lips...the one with his mother's engagement ring on it...when Molly released him. "But when I am, I'll ... I mean, *we'll* ... let you know." He exchanged glances with Ginny, then looked back at Molly.

"I'm glad to hear it, dear. How are you feeling, by the way?"

"Physically, I think I'm on the mend. Emotionally, I couldn't say." Inexplicably, Harry found himself yawning, and Madam Pomfrey materialised as if on cue, insisting that her patient was still recovering and needed all possible rest.

"In that case, I'll go now," Molly said, standing up, along with Remus. "You take care of yourself, and we'll see you later. Meanwhile, treasure the memories of your friendship with Ron instead of beating yourself up over losing him. There was no way you could have stopped him, even if you had known what he was planning. You know how stubborn we Weasleys are; once we make up our minds about something, you can't change it."

"Thanks for everything, Molly. I could never repay you for all you've given me." Harry reached to squeeze her hand one last time.

"Thank *you*, dear." She reached to pat his cheek, then leaned down to kiss it, prompting a blush from the young man in the bed. "And thank you for being Ron's friend. He never had a better one."

"I've got to go, mate. I'm told I'm supposed to be getting my rest, too. But I'll come by again as soon as I can." Remus gave Harry a one-armed hug and Harry returned it.

"Thanks for coming, Moony. I appreciate it. And thanks for the heads-up. I'm sure it's what Padfoot would have said if he could be here."

"Damn right. Besides, it was the least I could do. What kind of surrogate godfather would I be if I didn't?" Remus teased with a smile. "See you later, Harry. Take care, Gin."

Ginny merely smiled and nodded in Remus's direction; then the latter disappeared, moving off to join Molly as they began a conversation.

Not long afterward, Madam Pomfrey gave both Ginny and Harry a stern look. "Don't stay too much longer, Miss Weasley. Your intended's been badly wounded and needs as much rest as he can get."

"I'm a Healer too, Nurse. Don't worry. If he needs anything, I can handle it."

The hungry looks Harry had been giving her told Ginny he wanted her to stay, but she didn't mention those; she simply did all she could to assure the older nurse that it would be all right to leave Harry in her hands, at least for now. Madam Pomfrey seemed hesitant to leave for a seeming eternity, but at last she turned to go. "If there's an emergency, though, you be sure to contact me."

"Don't worry, I will. Now go on and look after your other patients. This one's going to be fine. I'll see to it."

Madam Pomfrey gave them both a skeptical look but didn't argue further, simply took her leave. After she was gone, Harry pulled his fiancée into his arms and kissed her passionately. For a long time, the couple just sat and snogged happily; it wasn't until their kisses deepened and Harry's hand tried to slip under her jumper that Ginny gently stopped it in mid-caress.

"I wish I could, luv, but it's ... rather public here, to say the least."

"We can pull the curtain around, then put a Silencing Charm up. No one will hear us."

"Harry, are you trying to seduce me?" Ginny asked pointedly.

"What do you think?" he growled seductively, his free hand managing to make it under her jumper to stroke her bare back and prompting Ginny to shiver deliciously.

"Harry James Potter, you are such a bad, bad boy," she crooned wickedly. "All right, I'll stay."

"I assume you know that if you stay, you have to do what I say," he warned her.

"Only up to a point, but for the moment, I'll go along. What would you like me to do?"

"Undress for me."

"Harry!" Ginny blushed in spite of herself.

"Don't pretend modesty at this late date, little tigress. You know how much I love to have you undress for me."

Ginny sighed, knowing he was right. "All right, luv." With that, she began to undress for him, slowly, tantalisingly ... so much so that Harry's face began to take on a look of pain...and not physical pain, either. Harry wasn't sure how much longer he'd be able to stand it; in fact, he could almost literally feel himself getting harder by the minute. But finally, she was fully nude before him and spoke softly. "Harry ..."

"Dear God, Gin, you're beautiful." His sea-green eyes darkened with desire behind his glasses as they roamed hungrily over her, wanting her so much he could almost literally taste it.

"Which reminds me...how dressed are *you*?" she asked huskily. "Not that I'd mind undressing you, of course. Just wondering."

"The only coverings I've got are these blankets," he had to confess. "Couldn't very well keep my clothes on and have my wounds still get treated, you know."

"At least not the ones on your body," Ginny finished.

"It's all connected, Gin," he reminded her.

"I know," she smiled. *Oh, do I ever!* she thought wickedly before speaking again. "What do you want me to do now?"

"Get in bed with me," came the reply.

"Here I come, then, ready or not," she teased with a smile, walking toward the bed.

"Oh, I'm ready, believe me. I just hope *you* are." He lifted the blankets and waved one arm to invite her to slide under them as she approached.

"You have no idea, my love," she crooned as she did so, and when she did so, found herself turned beneath her lover, her legs open and his arousal pressing against her.

"I want you, Gin."

"And I want *you*, Harry."

"Then let's not waste any more time." He leaned down to kiss her passionately once again, and it went from there.

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Fortunately, the lovers woke early and were able to share another tenderly passionate interlude before Ginny had to get up and check on the others at the morgue. She left a note telling Harry where she was, that she would be back as soon as she could and to get as much rest as possible. Harry reached for her in his sleep and found only the note; he wasn't pleased, but what mattered was that she would eventually return.

It seemed strange that he would want Ginny so much such a short time after Ron's death; he would have to ask about that as soon as he could. Meanwhile, he could only

surmise that those who had survived such an horrendous ordeal as they had tended to re-affirm their survival by passionate lovemaking with the first person of the opposite sex available...and in Harry's case, it was Ginny. Of course, what made it even better was the love they bore each other, but that was only incidental in the total scheme of things.

The only interruption to his musings came about midday when Madam Pomfrey came to renew the bandages, smiling as she informed him that he was healing nicely but admonished him not to get into another war if he could help it. After all, there was only so much she could do. He assured her that he had no intention of doing so again. She gave him a skeptical look, but didn't argue with him, simply said that Ginny and Remus were waiting to see him; he said to let them in.

Madam Pomfrey nodded, and moments later Ginny and Remus entered. Ginny sat nearest to him on the left side of the bed, whereas Remus sat on the right. He simply smiled and waited patiently as the lovers greeted one another. "Why did you leave, Gin? I missed you," he whispered to Ginny against her lips as he kissed her in greeting.

"I know, luv, but I didn't want to have to explain what I was doing in your bed, so I wanted to make sure I was gone before Pomfrey came round. Don't worry, we'll be together again soon," she assured him.

Out loud, he remarked, "Your note said that you'd gone to see how Mione was."

"Yes. They finally managed to get her to rest, and Madam Pomfrey examined her. Guess what they found!"

"What?"

"She's pregnant! Obviously, it happened the last time she and Ron were together. So now she'll at least have something to live for ... and I can guess what she'll name a boy child!"

"Well, at least something good is going to come out of this," Harry commented. "Good to see you again, Moony. How do you feel?" Harry turned his attention to Remus.

"I'm on the mend, although I'm told I'll have to wear this sling for another week or so...but I should be all right before the next full moon." Remus winked and continued, "How are *you* feeling, mate?"

"Madam Pomfrey says I should be out of here in a few days," Harry told him. "From what I understand, that'll be just in time for ... Ron's funeral. Just got an owl from Molly earlier today. It's this Sunday morning at the Burrow."

Despite Molly's reassurance, Harry was still somewhat apprehensive about facing Mr. Weasley and the other Weasley brothers, but kept it to himself, making a mental note to simply play it by ear and make sure to tread lightly, not giving them any more reason to get after him than they already had.

Remus frowned at the lengthy silence on Harry's part. "You're not still blaming yourself for Ron's death, are you? Remember what I said yesterday, mate. That still goes." He exchanged glances with Ginny, who nodded in agreement.

"No, don't worry about that. Just the same, it'll take getting used to, the idea of Ron's being gone. Even at that, I think I'll always miss him."

"I know, mate...but if we work together, we should make it," Remus assured him with an encouraging smile. "Did you already owl Molly and tell her you'd be there?"

"Of course," Harry assured him. "In fact, Gin has already said she'd come and pick me up the day of the funeral; then we can Apparate to the Burrow from here. She's even bringing me my mourning robes." Harry took a breath, then said, "Are you going to be there, Moony?"

"You couldn't keep me away," Remus assured him. "Has anyone else been by to see you?"

"No, but I've gotten owls from several people, and they all said they'd be at the funeral. We'll renew acquaintances then," Harry told him. "Why does it always seem to take somebody dying for people to get together, Moony?"

"I don't know, mate. I don't know," Remus replied solemnly. "The only thing I know for sure is that that has got to change, whatever we have to do. Life is too short and uncertain to not get together for fellowship more often."

"Amen," Harry and Ginny said as one, soon exchanging looks that told Remus they really needed more time alone, so he tactfully excused himself. They smiled, wished him well and said they'd see him at the funeral.

"See you then, mates. Take care." With that, Remus took his leave.

"Well, we're finally alone." Ginny smiled provocatively.

"Finally," Harry agreed. "I don't think we have time to ... get together again, but how about snogging for a while, then planning our wedding?"

Ginny was stunned speechless for a while, then said, "You mean it?"

"Of course. This little bauble isn't exactly costume jewelry, you know." Harry raised her hand...the one with the ring on it...to his lips again and kissed it.

"I know, luv, but you said you weren't up to even talking about a wedding yet," she reminded him.

"That was then. This is now. So, are you willing?"

"Of course I am. No more talk now, Mister. We have better things to do with our lips."

Harry winked provocatively in response, and after that, no more speech was exchanged for a long time to come.

* * * * *

However, Ginny had decided to spend the night before the funeral with Harry, bringing both her overnight bag and his mourning robes with her when she Apparated in that evening. For the time they were together, Harry was able to forget...at least for a little while...what was due to transpire the next day. He was thankful and grateful to Ginny for taking his mind off it, if only temporarily.

The funeral was due to take place at nine a.m. the following morning, but Ginny had already informed Harry they would be awakening at least half an hour ahead to give themselves time to prepare. She had also brought her own mourning robes and plenty of handkerchiefs for both herself and Harry. Under ordinary circumstances, they would be able to use Drying Charms, but in this case, they were unlikely to feel up to doing so.

Harry didn't feel like eating anything when they arose the morning of the funeral, but Ginny had already decided that he was going to eat something, even if she had to hover over him with her wand at the ready the whole time. His stomach felt queasy with apprehension but he made himself eat, if only to avoid her hexing him. When it came time to Apparate to the Burrow, they made sure to check to see that they had everything they needed and that their mourning robes were clean.

Ginny held tightly onto Harry's arm and they were gone; a tight squeeze later, they were standing in the driveway of the Burrow. Already they could see people milling about outside, setting things up for the funeral. Bill and Charlie stopped what they were doing to greet their sister and almost-brother-in-law.

Harry's apprehension grew geometrically upon realising that Bill and Charlie had seen him, and nothing Ginny said changed it. The two oldest Weasley brothers hugged and kissed their sister, then turned to her companion. "Harry, mate. Good to see you. Glad to see you healed up so well." Then, to Harry's surprise, they hugged him too.

"Thanks, Bill, Charlie. It's still a shock, but Ginny's made it easier," Harry made himself say, doing all he could to keep the telltale quivering from his voice, which would betray his apprehension.

"I'm sure," Bill teased with a smile. "I'm so sorry you had to see it happen, mate. That must have been terribly hard for you."

"Extremely," Harry replied, still expecting the other shoe to drop...for either Bill, Charlie, Fred or George to hex him at any moment. "I still don't understand why he felt he had to do it, Bill. He had so much to live for, whereas I resigned myself to possibly dying some time ago."

"You have every bit as much to live for as he did, mate. Don't forget that the lady beside you, our sister, loves you and is expecting you to marry her eventually...as are we...so don't disappoint us. Otherwise, we *will* hex you, for sure. As Mum said, none of us blame you for Ron's death. He chose to do what he did because he loved you, and he didn't give his friendship easily. Anyone who became his friend had to earn it first...and you did. No matter how much you may blame yourself for his death, always keep in mind that you will always be family to us. It's what Ron would want, and Weasleys always keep their word."

"Thanks, mates," Harry returned, relief washing over him like a cool breeze once he realised that Bill and Charlie were sincere. Now all he had to worry about was Fred and George, even more talented magically than their older siblings because it was, literally, their business. "I appreciate it more than I can ever say." He looked around for Fred and George. "May I assume that that also goes for Fred and George?"

"Of course ... but why not just let them tell you themselves? In the meantime, we've got to finish setting things up. See you later, mate." With that, Bill and Charlie Apparated back to their former position and resumed their work. A short time later, Fred and George approached them, smiling sadly, but smiling nonetheless and each hugging both Harry and Ginny, then switching.

"Good to see you, mate, even under the circumstances," Fred remarked as he released Harry, then moved to hug Ginny and allowed George to replace him. "Just the same, this can't be easy for you."

"It's not...but thanks, Fred. I needed to hear that. How about you, George?"

"Hell, yes, mate! We've liked you far too long to stop now...and as our illustrious older brothers have already said, you'll always be family to us. Ron loved you and Ginny loves you; that's good enough for us."

"But don't you realise he's gone because of me?"

"We know only what he chose to do, mate, and we respect his choice. We'll miss him, of course, but that doesn't change our regard for you. You couldn't have stopped him, so it makes no sense to beat yourself up over it. Besides, you helped us get started in business. We're not going to forget that any time soon. Now we'd better let you get inside to Mum and Dad; otherwise they're likely to hex us for hogging you."

In order to reassure Harry and Ginny of their sincerity, Fred put an arm around Harry's shoulders and George around Ginny's, leading them up to the front door of the Burrow, where Molly was waiting. She was the first to greet the newcomers, naturally greeting her daughter first, then nearly smothered Harry in an almost-bone-crushing hug. In spite of himself, Harry felt tears of gratitude sting his eyes at the Weasleys' high regard for him despite the loss of one of their own because of him even as he hugged her back.

"So good to see you again, Harry dear. How are you feeling?" Molly asked upon releasing him.

"As well as can be expected, Molly. How about you?"

"The same," she replied, Harry noting that she and Arthur, as well as all the other Weasleys, were in their mourning robes. Charlie and Bill's wives were both far too pregnant to have been able to come to the funeral, making sure to have their husbands tell them all about the funeral when they returned. Fred and George's girlfriends Angelina Johnson and Katie Bell were also present, in mourning robes as well, their arms through those of their men, waiting until after the Weasleys had greeted him to approach Harry.

Once Molly moved away, Arthur approached them and hugged Ginny lovingly, only reluctantly releasing her before turning to Harry and doing the same. "Harry, my boy. So glad you could come. Ron would be pleased."

"It's the least I could do, Arthur. He was my friend; one of the best I ever had. Probably the best I'll ever have."

Only after Arthur had backed off did Angelina and Katie approach to offer their sympathies; Harry accepted their hugs gratefully. "We're so sorry about Ron, Harry. Fred and George told us how close the two of you were, and we can imagine how you must be hurting right now."

"Yes, I am. I think I always will...but everyone's sympathy and comfort helps immensely. Thanks, Ange, Kate."

The two young women smiled and nodded in his direction, moving to greet and hug Ginny even as Remus and Tonks approached. Harry and Remus exchanged smiles even as Tonks hugged Harry first, then Ginny.

"Wotcher, Harry. Good to see you. You're looking fit. So sorry about Ron...but we know why he did it, so please don't blame yourself anymore. We don't, none of us. We never have and never will."

"Thanks, Tonks. Good to see you, Moony." Harry released her and moved to hug his surrogate godfather; Remus almost smothered his godson upon returning the hug. Harry was glad to see that Remus no longer wore the sling and that his arm was once again fully functional.

"You too, Harry," Remus returned affectionately. "The funeral should start soon. I understand that Bill's going to give the eulogy, since he's Ron's oldest brother and knew him the longest other than Arthur and Molly."

"Glad to hear it. I don't think I'd be up to it, although it would have been nice to be asked."

"We know you wouldn't have been up to it, mate; that's why we didn't ask. It's enough that you're here. That's all any of us has a right to expect, after all you've been through." Remus then moved to hug Ginny and kiss her on the cheek.

Not long afterward, Arthur called to them. "Come on, you lot. The funeral's about to start and Bill's already waiting to speak."

This prompted the group, all in mourning robes, to hurry after the older wizard and take their seats in front of Bill. However, all that Harry really heard of Bill's speech were the first few words, "We are gathered here today to celebrate the life of one of our own, Ronald Bilius Weasley ..."

He would have to ask Gin what else was said at the earliest opportunity because he felt tears start as soon as Bill began speaking, and they began to come thick and fast even as he clutched Ginny's hand like a lifeline.

Even through her own tears, he could hear Ginny doing her best to comfort him and hold him in her arms, stroking his silky but always unruly hair upon removing his glasses so she could use the first of what would turn out to be many handkerchiefs to dry his tears. Harry only vaguely sensed his other friends who had come to pay their last respects but not had a chance to speak to him yet. It was all he could do, in fact, to sense Hermione near him, softly sobbing into a handkerchief of her own as Molly's plump arms encircled her; he almost envied her.

At least she was going to get something out of this...Ron's child. He would have only memories of the friend he had loved like the brother he had never had. What was worse, his last memory of Ron was his death. Why must that be so? Ron deserved so much better! If Harry had ever felt unworthy of someone's regard for him, he certainly

felt unworthy now ... probably always would, despite what anyone said.

For a long time to come, Harry knew that even the mere thought of Ron and all they had shared together was going to prompt tears for a long time to come; eight years of friendship wasn't easily forgotten...nor should it be. They had had their problems and disagreements, certainly, but then, all friends did. What mattered was that they made up...and ended up even closer as a result. It was frankly a wonder that Ginny didn't blame him for her favourite brother's death and want to hex him, too, but so far she had shown no inclination to do so ... and he frankly hoped she never did because he was going to need every ounce of warmth, love, comfort and compassion she (not to mention the other Weasleys) possessed in order to surmount his grief.

The funeral went on for another hour after Bill's eulogy finished. All that Harry was aware of, however, was Ginny's arms around him, her soft, sweet voice laced with sobs in his ear, still attempting to give comfort as well as receive it. After a time, he felt her pull him to his feet and lead him a short distance away. "Thought you might want to see where Ron is," she murmured softly. Hermione was kneeling at the grave when they arrived, but stood up at their approach and the trio of friends shared a three-way hug in their mutual grief for their respective friend, brother and betrothed.

Once they released each other, though, Harry knelt beside his friend's grave and Ginny knelt beside him. Hermione kissed the top of her friend's head, squeezed Ginny's hand, then turned to leave. This time Arthur was the one to lead her away, leaving Harry and Ginny alone to say their last goodbyes. Harry looked up and smiled through his tears at the words on the stone:

Ronald Bilius Weasley, 1980-1998

Beloved Son and Brother

Beloved Friend and Fiancé

Champion in the Cause of Justice

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

John 15:13, King James Bible

The Weasleys weren't conventionally religious, at least not in the Muggle sense, but the saying was too appropriate to leave out, so Harry wasn't surprised at its presence.

"Goodbye, my friend. Thank you for all you've done for me...but most of all, thank you for being my friend ... the best one I ever had. I love you, mate, and will never forget you, not for as long as I live." Harry's voice was thick with tears and grief, but Ginny could still make out his words.

"Goodbye, Ron. We may have had our disagreements, but I always loved you and looked up to you as a little sister should. You may have been a bit overprotective of me sometimes, but I know now that it was because you loved me, and I'll never forget that as long as I live. And don't worry, I'll take good care of Harry for you."

After that, they simply communed silently, each thinking their own thoughts of the sibling and friend they had loved and lost. Neither had any idea how long they remained there, but finally the cold wind that struck them brought them back to reality and Ginny knew it was time for them to leave. She again helped Harry to his feet and they slowly made their way back to the house. On the way they greeted the other friends mentioned earlier, accepting both hugs and heartfelt sympathies from one and all. All the same, Harry was glad to eventually get away from them and simply be alone with Ginny, in her arms, feeling her warmth close to him and her sweet voice crooning tender, soothing words to relax him, if only temporarily.

THREE MONTHS LATER The Burrow

At this point in time, February 1999...Valentine's Day, to be exact...the family was gathered for a happy occasion; in less than an hour, Harry and Ginny would be married. Since they were the closest to Fred and George, they chose them as dual best men and Hermione, now showing her pregnancy, as Ginny's attendant. To honour Ron's memory, the girls chose the colour of their dresses as pale pink, so it wouldn't clash with Ginny's red hair and still look good on Hermione.

Both Harry and Ginny had smiled sadly upon seeing that Hermione had added the wedding ring to her engagement ring, having heard from Molly that she considered herself Ron's wife, even if they hadn't gone through the official ceremony...and was now his widow. In fact, she had even consulted the Ministry of Magic, and it turned out they had lived together long enough (six months) for her to be considered his wife anyway ... at least in the wizarding world.

Common-law marriage was not recognised in the Muggle world, especially not the UK, and that was not acceptable to Hermione. She had considered Ron her husband right from the start and even told them that she would even hyphenate her name with his...be "Hermione Granger-Weasley" from now on, until and if she decided to officially marry, although all concerned doubted she would. In addition, she would see to it that her child had his or her father's name. In fact, it wouldn't surprise either of them if she used Ron's brothers, Harry and Arthur as father figures in the place of her absent common-law husband.

But that was neither here nor there, because Harry and Ginny would be legally married. She had vowed to make him hers from the moment she'd first realised she loved him...and vice versa. And now the day had come ... the happiest day of her life. Even at that, both would carry the heartache of Ron's loss with them every step of the way. Fred and George were great mates, but they were not, and never could be, Ron.

Ron was uniquely himself, and Harry had known that from the moment their friendship had first begun, the day they'd met on the Hogwarts Express in September 1991. He had great affection for Fred and George and always would, but Ron could never truly be replaced, not by anyone. He had also heard of the saying, "As long as one lives in the hearts one leaves behind, they can never die." One thing was for sure, Ron would live in his best friend's heart for as long as the latter lived.

Almost literally the next thing they knew, Harry and Ginny found themselves standing before the Head of the Ministry's Division of Marriage and Children in the garden of the Burrow, hands joined after they had exchanged rings. "Harry James Potter, do you take this woman, Ginevra Molly Weasley, to be your wife from this day forward, to love and cherish in sickness and in health, as long as you both shall live?"

"I do." Harry shot a tender smile in his bride's direction as he squeezed her hand.

"And do you, Ginevra Molly Weasley, take this man, Harry James Potter, to be your husband from this day forward, to love and cherish in sickness and in health, as long as you both shall live?"

"I do ... with all my heart." Ginny returned her beloved's smile with equal tenderness.

"Then by the power vested in me by the Ministry of Magic, I pronounce Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley husband and wife. Harry, you may kiss your bride."

That was all the encouragement Harry needed; they didn't come up for air for at least thirty seconds, not even hearing the cheers and applause going on around them. But even as the newly married couple turned to face the crowd around them, Ginny knew there was a secret she had just recently learned and would have to tell Harry about...but it could wait until they were alone. The others didn't need to know until after they'd returned from their honeymoon.

SEVEN MONTHS LATER St. Mungo's, September 1999

Harry could scarcely believe it was really true, but he was a father at last. And of a red-headed, brown-eyed baby son, too! And he already knew what he wanted to name him ... Sirius James Ronald Potter. Sirius for his beloved godfather, James for his father and Ronald for his dearest friend. He and Ginny had discussed names for hours on end upon learning of her pregnancy, especially names for a potential son...and now the potential had become the real.

He was sitting next to Ginny's bed, holding the newborn child, when she awakened and met his eyes, which prompted a loving smile upon seeing her husband and child beside her. "I named our son Sirius James Ronald, Gin," Harry informed her. "I hope that's all right with you."

"More than all right, beloved," she assured him. "Sirius would be pleased, just as I'm sure your dad and Ron are."

"And if I remember correctly, Hermione had her baby...no, babies...just a couple of months ago. *Twins*, no less...and identical boys at that, just like Fred and George! Can you imagine how Ron would react?"

"He would probably have passed out from shock," Ginny laughed. "Then upon coming to, hugged and kissed the stuffing out of both 'Mione and the babies!"

"Which reminds me ... just when did you find out you were pregnant, Gin?"

"Just before our wedding, but I waited to tell you until after our honeymoon. As it was, we were the only ones who knew for weeks afterward," she recalled. "It must have happened during one of the times we were alone while you were in hospital, if my calculations are correct."

"Another thing ... it was great of 'Mione to have named one of her boys for me and the other for Ron," Harry remarked even as he allowed his tiny son to grasp his thumb in a death grip, then leaned down to kiss the child on the forehead, looking at him with pure love. "I can hardly wait till the boys are old enough to understand so I can tell them about Ron ... among other things. I think young Harry and Ron Jr. will enjoy it, just as I think our Sirius will."

"I'm sure," Ginny agreed. "Now I think it's best if we let the others in before they magick the door open."

"Yeah, there is that," Harry had to agree, pointing to the door and thinking a nonverbal spell to open it, which allowed the Weasleys to stream in, led by Molly and Arthur, who were followed by Hermione, carrying one of her baby sons; Molly carried the other. Harry couldn't have said which was which at this point, though he probably would figure it out eventually. There were only two things he could wish for now...a daughter in due time ... and to have Ron back.

In the latter case, he would have to settle for being the best godfather he possibly could to his friend's sons, especially Ron Jr. (Hermione had made him and Ginny the boys' godparents), who, by an odd coincidence, had turned out to be a carbon copy of his father. Little Harry looked just like his brother, and if Harry's hunch was right, would be just as much a bookworm as his mother.

Meanwhile, even as the Weasleys began to ooh and ahh over little Sirius, cradled in Ginny's arms now, Harry was cradling Ron Jr. and tracing his features, identical to those of his father...and if only for a short time, was able to forget his sorrow and enjoy playing with the child. It would take considerable time before he would be able to do it for any longer. Until then, though, raising the boys should occupy them, raising them to be both the best people and wizards it was possible for them to be, just like their parents.