

Another Time, Another Place, Another Life

by madjh

Harry never wanted the notoriety that came with being 'The Boy Who Lived'. Forced to do unspeakable things in order to destroy Voldemort, Harry runs from the Wizarding world. 15 years later, he has a life of his own making... with no magic, but the past has a way of catching up with us all. **Not HBP Compliant**

Prologue: A Peaceful Life

Chapter 1 of 3

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A/N: Please be warned that this story contains non-consensual sex and other sexual situations – though not graphically described. The rape is central to the plot, and it is portrayed as a grievous event that affects the lives of all involved with the victim.

This story was begun prior to HBP and is canon compliant through OotP.

Sara lay atop a glacial boulder, basking in the rays of sun which had woven their way through the canopy. The cool, hard rock was unyielding beneath her back and was untouched by the gentle warmth which permeated the air. Her four-year-old son and husband were splashing in the creek, which trickled softly away from the waterfall. It had been a mile and a half hike down steep terrain to reach this small sliver of paradise. Water sprayed from a height of over a hundred feet only to land softly on the rocks and seep away down the valley. Tall, kudzu-covered trees shaded a wooden bridge which allowed the less daring to cross the creek. Large boulders lay strewn about the all but dry river bed, harkening back to an era when there were large floes of ice through the region. In the midst of the seemingly timeless place, Sara refused to dwell on the mile and a half that they would all have to trek back up the mountain in order to reach the car. For the moment she would simply enjoy the gurgle of the water, the swish of the trees and the warmth of the mid-June sunlight.

When she'd asked her eleven-year-old daughter how they should celebrate the child's birthday she'd cringed, waiting for the typical request of a birthday party filled with junk-food and other people's obnoxious children. She'd been pleasantly surprised when Rhea had simply asked to have the family spend the day at their favourite spot in the Blue Ridge Mountains. While the climb back up from the waterfall was strenuous, there was nothing like having a picnic in the field at the top, which overlooked a wide, lush valley. Harry and Morgan would be thoroughly drenched from hopping around in the creek, and Rhea would be grubby from her many treks into the surrounding forest. They would all be tired from the exertion of the hike, but there was always the satisfaction of accomplishment which lingered long after the end of these family outings in the woods.

All in all, life was good. Her husband, whom she'd met at college, worked part-time as a pharmacy technician and spent the rest of his time gardening and taking care of their kids. She'd finished her master's degree in elementary education not long after Rhea's second birthday. She loved her job as a third grade teacher at the local Catholic academy. Right now, she was especially thankful that school was out and teacher conferences were over for the year. She had three months to do nothing but enjoy her husband and children. Sara glanced over to the vegetation under the cliff to see her daughter was playing with something on the ground. Content that Harry

would keep Morgan from drowning and that Rhea wouldn't wander off too far, she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

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Rhea sat on a dry patch of dirt, amidst the forest's undergrowth, and waited with anticipation. She wasn't there long, when two black snakes slithered up beside her. They spoke to her in a soft hiss, telling her the secrets of the forest. She sat in a trance, listening and learning. She lowered her fingers to the ground and let one of the snakes slide across her palm. With long nails she scratched gently at dry scales left from a previous shedding. The snake hissed its relief as the irritating flakes fell from its sleek body. She stole a glance at her mother and noted that the older woman was still stretched out on the boulder, sunning herself. Her father was playing with Morgan, her little brother, and remained oblivious to his daughter's companions. And Rhea sat among the serpents, the only ones who truly understood her.

As much as she tried to fit in, Rhea was not like the other kids. When she'd decided not to play in the YMCA youth soccer league for the summer, she'd told her parents that it was just kids' stuff. The truth was, whenever she played, it seemed as though the soccer ball was glued to her feet and she never missed the goal. Not because she was so athletic or that she even tried so hard... it was almost... magical. No one wanted to be on her team because they never got a chance to kick the ball, and no one wanted to play against her because they couldn't win. Her parents had accepted the lie so she was spared passing another summer of sitting the bench while all her team members whispered behind her back. As much as she missed the sport – she did actually like playing when she got the chance – Rhea was looking forward to tinkering with her new chemistry set. She had almost three months before she started sixth grade. Three months of blessed peace before she had to go back to school and pretend there was nothing special about her. Three months without the pressing scrutiny of her teachers and fellow students.

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Harry lifted his giggling son out of the frigid water and set him up on the wooden bridge to dry off in the sun. The afternoon was waning. It was time to wake his slumbering wife and corral his errant daughter. The hike back up the mountain would be arduous, but he only had to think of the picnic that awaited them to lift his spirits. Not that they needed lifting. *Life couldn't get much sweeter*, he thought as he hoisted himself onto the large boulder that Sara had used as a makeshift tanning bed. Her eyelids fluttered gently and her mouth curved up at the corners. Sara's dreams were obviously pleasant, and Harry was loath to wake her, but then an insistent growl from his stomach brought him out of his momentary reverie. He leaned playfully over his wife and allowed the creek's ice-cold water to drip from his unkempt hair onto to her unsuspecting visage.

"Oh!" she gasped, and she swiped at the source of the offending moisture with one hand as she pushed up from the boulder with her other.

"Time to wake up, daydreamer," he said gently, smiling down at her. "It's time to climb the mountain!"

Chapter 1: The End of an Age

Chapter 2 of 3

Harry never wanted the notoriety that came with being ?The Boy Who Lived?. Forced to do unspeakable things in order to destroy Voldemort, Harry runs from the Wizarding world. 15 years later, he has a life of his own making... with no magic, but the past has a way of catching up with us all. **Not HBP Compliant**

August 1997

Harry sat alone in the library at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. It was well past midnight, and everyone else had gone to bed. Now seventeen years old, he'd been permitted to sit in on his first Order meeting. The meeting had begun slowly as the other members became used to his presence. Molly Weasley had remained tight-lipped the entire time; she had not allowed Ron or Hermione to attend but had been overruled as far as Harry was concerned. Since Sirius' death the previous year, Dumbledore had been very careful to keep Harry well informed. Barring him from the actual meetings had been a formality to appease Mrs. Weasley. Harry, for his part, had also remained silent throughout the meeting. He had keenly felt the absence of his godfather at the table and had not trusted himself to speak.

By Harry's estimation, very little of any worth had been discussed. Perhaps this had been due to his presence or, more likely, due to Mrs. Weasley's pointed looks at several members. Lupin, Tonks and Mundungus had sat with him on the right side of Dumbledore, who'd presided at the head of the table. Harry had felt their support but it hadn't been enough. Sirius should have been there too. Sirius would have looked Molly Weasley in the face while he discussed the issues at hand, daring her to silence him. When Snape spoke ambiguously about the Dark Lord's plans to regain a more youthful self, Sirius would have made several pointed remarks and forced him to be more specific. Instead, they were all left with the vague idea that Voldemort was planning something major, but no one was sure just what. As discussion of business had come to a close, many of the members rose and left immediately. A couple stayed behind to engage Harry in conversation but left when they found him unresponsive. He'd retreated to the library and had listened in solitude while the house quieted down.

Harry stood up and began to pace, his mind in a state of limbo. He couldn't focus his thoughts but neither could he sleep. Frustrated, he scanned the book titles that surrounded him. His eyes landed on a small leather-bound book and widened with amusement when he read the gold embossed letters: *Virgin Sacrifices, Rites and Rituals*. Grinning, he lifted it off the shelf and settled back into the chair to read. The morning light was drifting through the cracks in the shutters before he set the book down in revulsion. Childish delight in the taboo subject had caused him to begin reading, and morbid curiosity had seen him through to the last page. He felt a great relief in knowing that virgin sacrifices were a thing of bygone days. The descriptions in the book had been vivid, and each more disturbing than the last. The gory depiction of the ritualistic slaying of unicorns had been especially chilling. The sacrificial daggers made from their horns and infused with their blood were the weapon of choice for murdering virgins. Only in the home of a Dark wizarding family would there be such a foul book in the library...

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June 1998

Harry ran down the long corridor. He'd slipped away from the thick of the battle to find Ginny; he had to find her, had to save her. Another Death Eater awaited him at the end of the cellblock. Bellatrix Lestrange was standing there, wand at the ready, anticipating his next move. He duelled for endless moments, praying that he wouldn't be too late to save Ginny from whatever nefarious plans Voldemort had in store for the youngest Weasley. It was an even match; she sidestepped his stunning spells and he blocked her hexes. In desperation, he screamed out, "*Crucio!*" The witch before him attempted to shield herself and failed. She tried to throw off the curse, but this time was unsuccessful. Harry felt the power of hatred coursing through his veins as Bella writhed before him in agony. She was all that stood between him and a captive Ginny. He smiled broadly; there would be no interruptions. Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna would hold the other Death Eaters at bay. It was just him and Bella, and he'd repay her tenfold for Ginny's suffering and the death of Sirius. Sirius. Harry lifted his wand and broke off the Cruciatus Curse. Tears welled in the corners of his eyes as he realised what he'd done. "Forgive me, Sirius," he murmured as he stepped around Bella's limp form.

He pushed open the door to the cell and stared in horror at the sight before him. Ginny lay bound to a great stone table. Her eyes were closed but her lids fluttered, and she

was completely naked. A ledge on the wall contained several thick, drippy candles that were made of a dark, coarse wax. The scent which wafted from their smoke was cloying and intoxicating. On a small stand at the foot of the table lay a tray with a white dagger. The blade was round and spiralled to a sharp point, like the horn of a unicorn. Harry gasped in dismay and recalled the book he'd read the previous summer. His stomach clenched and he felt the bile rise to his throat as he recognized the scenario before him. By the twitching of her eyelids he knew that Voldemort had already conjoined his mind with hers. The Dark Lord would be in a nearby room, preparing himself for the sacrificial rites. The door slammed shut behind him and Harry knew without a doubt that there was no escape. He heard an ominous cackle in his head and suddenly his scar burned with a fiery intensity he had not felt in almost two years. If Voldemort succeeded in completing the ritual, the echo of Tom Riddle would be severed from Ginny, and her life force would be used to renew him to his former youth.

Harry looked to Ginny's form, and an idea began to take shape. He struggled to think of another way, but there was none. He could not hope to defeat Voldemort here, alone, with naught but his wand. In Ginny's mind, however, he would hold the advantage. She cared for him and her love would help fuel his power over the Dark Lord. Even the vestiges of Tom Riddle would not be enough to aid him. Though the idea of using Ginny's body and soul for such a purpose was repulsive to him, it was the only option left to him. Harry pushed aside the pain in his head and strode over to Ginny's side. He laid a hand on her cheek and caressed her mouth with his thumb. "I'm sorry, Gin," he whispered as he leaned down to press his mouth against her lips.

He ran the pads of his fingers down her torso and rested his hands on her thighs. As he stared at her nakedness, he felt the blood begin to pulse in his groin. He could do this; he had to. Harry lifted his robes, loosened his belt and hoisted himself on to the table. Perhaps it was better that she remained bound, what he had to do was bad enough without having to worry about her instinctually trying to fend him off. As he sank between her legs, he transcended his own existence and melded with hers, and Voldemort's. Their screams mingled in his head. Hers was one of agony; his were of unbridled fury. The fighting was intense as the two great powers waged war with the soul of a young girl as the battleground. Her spirit, though strong, began to fade and by the time Harry had bested Tom Riddle, he could hear her no more.

Harry came to on the cold stone floor by the sacrificial table. He looked up to see Ginny's limp and bloody form dangling over the edge. Voldemort had been defeated, but at a horrible cost.

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June 2013

"Ginny!"

Sara stroked her hands gently down her husband's sweat-slicked back. She was accustomed to his violent nightmares, though it had been several years since his last one. She eased him back down onto the bed and cuddled up next to him. His breathing gradually calmed as she soothed his brow. He fell back into a deep sleep and remained unaware that he'd disturbed his wife. Sara kissed the scar on his forehead and then rolled over and off the bed. She slipped silently from the room and padded down the hall. She stood a moment at the door of Rhea's bedroom and watched the rise and fall of her daughter's chest. Rhea would start middle school in the fall, and it seemed like this summer would be Sara's last chance to hold onto her baby girl before she became a woman. Children grew up far too fast. Sara poked her head into the next door down and grinned at the rumpled mess that was her son. She crept into the room and straightened his little body, untangled the covers from his legs and tucked him in. She stood in the hallway for a moment longer to listen to her children breathe. After taking in their soft snores, she snuck into the kitchen for a mug of hot chocolate.

Sara pulled the gourmet powder from the top shelf and spooned it into a mug of cold milk. She winced at the clink the ceramic made on the glass plate in the microwave. The piercing beeps cut through the silence as she tapped the number pad. She listened to the soft whir and waited for her nuked hot chocolate. Wandering into the living room, she curled up in the recliner and sipped her drink while gazing out into the night. Early in her marriage to Harry, she'd often wondered who Ginny was and why he called out her name in his sleep. The jealousy she bore for the other woman had gradually faded and was replaced with a mild curiosity. Harry had never given her a reason to doubt his love, and she'd respected his need to keep his past to himself. When they'd met in college, he'd told her that his parents had died and he'd been raised by an uncaring aunt and uncle. He'd said his past didn't matter, that he only cared about the future they would create together. He'd thrown himself wholeheartedly into their marriage and had become fully integrated into her family. Sara smiled as she remembered his British accent; it had long since faded, and he'd settled into the southern drawl which surrounded him.

What kept her awake now was not the old jealousy, but concern. She'd never told Harry about the nightmares, and he had never woken up. As the years passed, his dreams had become less frequent until they had died out altogether. Their son was four years old. Sara had not heard her husband scream out in his sleep since before Morgan was born. She was not one to believe in mystical things but Sara had an odd sense of foreboding. Something was about to happen ... she just didn't know what.

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Rhea tip-toed past her mother through the living room and into the front entranceway. She slowly twisted the knob and gingerly pulled open the heavy door. She was careful not to let it squeak as she cracked it open just far enough for her to squeeze through. She held the screen until it latched, preventing it from slamming shut. While her parents had never told her she couldn't go outside to watch the sunrise, she figured they wouldn't be overly pleased to be woken at such an early hour. She sat on the porch steps and watched as the sun crept over the distant mountains. As darkness changed to light, a myriad of colours filled the sky, and Rhea was overwhelmed by the magic of the world that surrounded her.

The early morning rays were soon at work, melting the dew from the grass. As the colours faded into blue, Rhea turned her thoughts to her mother. It wasn't unlike Mom to fall asleep in the chair, but Dad would collect her after a time and usher her off to bed. She wasn't given long to dwell on the sleeping habits of her parents as a great horned owl flew down and perched on the porch rail. The owl had reddish tufts of feathers and a very stately look about it. It held a letter in its beak, which it set down upon the rail. Nodding its head at her, it turned and took off, flying away towards the mountains. Rhea swallowed back her shock and reached for the letter, when another owl landed on the porch. This one was snowy-white and she also had a letter. Rhea picked up both letters and waited for the second owl to fly away, but the owl just stared at her with sad eyes.

Rhea looked down at the letters in her hand and gasped in amazement. They were both addressed to her! The squeaking of the hinges on the front door startled her, and she looked up to see her father stepping out onto the porch.

"Rhea, sweetie, what are you doing out here?" he asked softly.

"I came to watch the sunrise, Daddy," she murmured. "Two owls just delivered these," she said holding up the letters. "They both have my name on them."

Harry looked past his daughter to the snowy owl perched on the railing. His eyes widened in disbelief.

"Hedwig."

A/N: Snowy Owls have an average life expectancy of 15 years but can live up to 28 years in captivity. So, it is indeed plausible, even probable, for Hedwig to still be alive. ;)

Chapter 2: Separate Paths

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Another Time, Another Place, Another Life

Chapter 2: Separate Paths

August 1998

Neville slipped silently into the darkened room. It was long after visiting hours, and this particular patient's visitors were restricted to family only. The young woman lay perfectly still; her deathly pale face was framed by her long red hair, and her body was shrouded in white sheets. She had not opened her eyes since she'd been found, naked and bleeding, in the depths of Malfoy Manor. Harry had emerged from the dungeons victorious, but he had not remained to bask in his glory. While Neville, Ron, Hermione and the Order of the Phoenix battled the remaining Death Eaters, Harry had fled into the night never to be heard from again. A short while later, Professor Snape had appeared in the hall, carrying the limp form of Ginny Weasley wrapped in his great cloak.

For the first month, members of the Weasley family had kept a constant vigil by her side. As the weeks wore on, and as Ginny showed no outward improvement, their visits had thinned out a bit. Mrs. Weasley still sat with her daughter every morning, and her father and brothers took turns in the afternoon, but the nights now belonged to Neville. He'd always admired Ginny and now, as she lay unconscious, he felt drawn to her. He could almost feel the pain and anguish which seemed to emanate from her, and though there was much he didn't understand about her condition, he felt like his nightly vigils were necessary for her recovery. As an apprentice Healer, he was able to enter her ward without raising suspicion, and from there he'd been able to sneak into her room undetected. He would spend hours speaking to her softly while holding her hand and stroking her forehead as he had often seen his grandmother do for his parents when she thought no one was looking. Perhaps he imagined it, but she seemed comforted by his presence.

Neville crept to the foot of her bed and lifted the tablet that contained the Healer's notes on her condition. He'd passed his first round of examinations that morning and had been given his first degree Healer's Amulet. When he'd received his O.W.L.s after fifth year, he'd had a tough choice to make. His O.W.L. in Potions had been surprisingly high enough for him to continue on to the N.E.W.T level. He'd decided then to continue on with Potions so that he could become a Healer. When he'd passed this first round of examinations with flying colours, he'd felt a huge sense of pride over what he'd accomplished despite the difficulties he'd faced in his earlier schooling. He reached into the neck of his robes and pulled out the smooth moonstone which hung on a silver chain. He passed the amulet over the tablet and waited with anticipation as red letters appeared. "Restricted. Level 5 Password Required." Two weeks prior to this, Neville had been hiding behind the dressing curtain, lest he be discovered by Healer Palfreyman, and he'd overheard the password. He uttered it in a low voice and watched in amazement as the writing turned green.

Patient Name: *Ginevra Weasley*

Sex: *Female*

Age: *17*

Diagnosis: *Severe mental trauma caused by possession and physical, mental, and sexual assault.*

Neville felt horror and sheer disbelief creep through him, and his hands shook. No. Not that. Anything but that. Though it explained why she hadn't bounced back from her ordeal, Neville still found it incomprehensible that she had been raped. Harry had fled that night; what had he seen? What had the Death Eaters done to her? Though certain that he shouldn't, he glanced back at the tablet and continued to read.

Treatment: *Rest, Cheering Charms and Restorative Potions*

Healer's Notes: *Ginny made a complete physical recovery within hours of being treated for her injuries. Her family has been told that the cause of her current catatonic state is a result of mental trauma which stemmed from the battle she witnessed between one Harry Potter and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Due to her fragile mental status and issues of privacy, the nature of the attack on her person is being kept confidential.*

Her family didn't know... Neville pondered that for a moment and wondered if they should have been told, or if it was best that Ginny come to grips with it first and then explain when she was ready. Did anyone besides Ginny and Harry know exactly what had happened? Was Voldemort really gone?

An anti-conception potion was administered upon her arrival; her status is: not pregnant. It is likely that she has not suffered any lasting physical damage and will not have any trouble conceiving at a later date. Her current mental state has been deemed temporary. While she does not respond to family members, she appears to be completely aware of her surroundings. It is the opinion of this Healer that she is consciously maintaining her silence as a method of dealing with emotional trauma she has suffered...

Footsteps in the hall caused Neville to pause his reading of the chart. He was barely able to clear the tablet and scurry behind the curtain before the door creaked open.

"Ron!" Neville heard Hermione's voice in a stage whisper. "You know what Palfreyman said. It's best to let her sleep in peace at night."

"Bugger Palfreyman, those bloody Healers don't know anything. She's my sister, sod it, and I haven't been able to see her all week!"

"Look, I know you've been busy with your first week of training but you have Sunday afternoon free. We could come back then."

"No, Hermione," said Ron, solemnly. "I don't think we'll have time to stop by here on Sunday." Neville heard the rustling of paper.

"What is this?" asked Hermione, her voice laden with trepidation.

"You're a clever witch, read it." Neville's eyebrows rose up in shock at the sarcastic reply.

"Why, Ron?" she asked softly.

"I think you know the answer to that," he said, just as softly.

"How did you find out?"

There was long moment before Ron answered her. "I found that Muggle contraption you bought. You didn't exactly go to any great pains to hide it, and it didn't take much to figure out what it was used for. I can read too, you know."

Neville didn't know what had transpired but Ron sounded so angry and cold; it was frightening.

"You can read? Really?" came Hermione's retort, dripping with sarcasm. "And here I thought I was the one who did all your reading for you..."

"Look, Hermione," said Ron, still distant, though not quite so cold. "It's not that I don't want to marry you and have kids, I just don't want to do it right now." *Was she*

pregnant? How could Ron be so callous?

"We're too young! I've got three years of Auror training, and you still haven't figure out what you're going to do with your gazillion N.E.W.T.s yet... We're just kids, Hermione, how are we supposed to raise one?"

"Then why the Binding Parchment? Why get married?" she asked angrily. "Why not just tell me to get rid of it and be done with the whole thing?"

"Hermione!" gasped Ron. "Look, the baby didn't ask to be made at the wrong time, and I don't think we should punish him for it."

"Him?" she asked waspishly. "So you propose that we solve this by getting married on Sunday? What makes you think I would marry you?"

"I-I got you, you know" he stuttered. "It's the right thing to do."

"No," she ground out. "I will not subject my child to a father who doesn't love her!" Neville heard the clicking of her shoes against the tiles as she strode towards the door, and then they paused.

"Let go of me," she snapped.

"Shhh, Hermione, you'll disturb Ginny," whispered Ron frantically.

"Well, you should have thought of that before dragging me in here tonight," she huffed. "Why are we even discussing this here of all places? Now. Let. Me. Go!"

"No." Ron's voice was soft and firm. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I don't know what all the right words are or what the right *feelings* are." He paused as though searching for those elusive words. "I know that you're going to have a baby, and I know that marrying you is the right thing to do... Even though this really isn't how I imagined my life turning out, I also can't imagine letting you go off and have that baby by yourself; or worse, with someone else.... Hermione?" he added when she didn't respond right away.

"I'm sorry, Ron," she whispered. "I can't either."

Neville heard the slight shuffle of their feet as they made their way back over to Ginny's side and spent the rest of their visit in silence. He did his best to keep his breathing shallow and quiet so as not to be discovered. When the couple finally left, he gasped loudly for air. Drawing in deep breaths, Neville fell from behind the screen and found himself face to face with Ginny. She was sitting up in bed and staring at him with a look of amusement.

"I thought they'd never leave," she said, her voice gritty from months of disuse. "Still, I'd hate to be in their shoes. Mum's going to go ballistic when she finds out Ron got Hermione pregnant!"

"Ginny?" Neville stared at her in amazement. How long had she been awake? Why hadn't she spoken to her brother? She motioned for him to sit on the bed next to her. He eyed Ginny cautiously before sitting down and was very careful not to touch her. He wasn't sure of how to approach a woman who'd been... who'd gone through what she had. He sat very stiffly and kept his distance, waiting for her to make a move.

"I'm okay, Neville. I really am," she assured him.

"Yeah?" asked Neville doubtfully. "Do you remember anything?"

"I remember..." she started, then swallowed hard. "Everything, Neville, I remember everything."

Neville took a deep breath and contemplated his next question carefully. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Nooo, I don't want to tell anyone," she whispered, then took several shaky breaths and lowered her head into her hands. "I don't want to make it real," she mumbled.

"Ahh, Gin," murmured Neville. He laid a tentative hand on her knee. She jerked slightly but didn't move his hand away.

"It is real," he began gently. "Not talking about it isn't going to make it any less real. I'm willing to listen, if you're ready to talk."

"Does everyone know what what happened to me?" she stuttered.

Neville shook his head and reached for the tablet. After making the words appear, he handed it to her and let her read it for herself. She handed it back to him without a word and sat silently for several long minutes.

Her expression was stony and her voice flat when she spoke again. "You shouldn't have read that."

"No," affirmed Neville feeling ashamed. "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm glad you did."

Neville gave her a quizzical look. She was glad he knew what had been done to her? She looked at him with wide eyes that were begging for understanding. He closed his eyes and dipped his head; he wasn't sure how to proceed with her. How did one talk to a woman who'd been raped? He couldn't possibly understand her, but he could try...

"I think you need to explain that, Ginny. Why me? Why not someone else?" He returned his hand to its neutral resting place on her knee and waited for her to sort out her thoughts.

"Everyone else talks to me," she said finally. "They all sit there and talk and plead with me to open my eyes and talk back. They ask questions, but they don't know how horrible the answers are. They make me feel so guilty, they're so worried and I just sit there and don't even open my eyes for them."

She took a deep steadying breath before continuing, "You never talked, you just sat there. It's like they were here for their own comfort, and you were here for mine. Why, Neville? Why would you sit with *me*?"

Neville heard the uncertainty in her voice. She didn't know how incredible she was. He struggled for a moment to find the words. She needed to know; he needed to tell her.

"You're beautiful, Ginny," he began softly. He wrenched his gaze from his lap and forced himself to meet her eye. "You are beautiful. Inside and out. You are brave, loving and loyal. I think I have always admired you. I remember when I asked you to go to the Yule Ball with me and you said yes. I'd asked Hermione first because I was afraid you'd turn me down." He chuckled softly. "Seems I would have been better off if I'd just gone ahead with my first choice, huh? Anyway, I thought Harry would have asked you, I thought you'd go with him, but you didn't; you went with me."

Ginny looked at a spot on the wall over his shoulder with tears welling in her eyes. It was obvious she wanted to believe him, but she didn't; not yet. She brought her knees up to her chest, and Neville's hand slid passively to her foot. She folded her arms and buried her face. "He isn't coming back, is he?" she whispered.

"Voldemort?" asked Neville, bravely.

Ginny lifted her head and gave him a look of disgust. "Voldemort is dead, Neville," she said in a clear voice. "Harry used me to kill him."

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The Next Afternoon

Molly sat at the kitchen table with a cup of tea that was rapidly losing its warmth as it lay forgotten beside her. Ginny was awake; finally. She wouldn't speak of the battle between Voldemort and Harry or what had been done to her, she merely confirmed what they already knew: Voldemort was really gone. Molly had struggled not to press her daughter for more than she was willing to give. Ginny's grasp on her sanity seemed tenuous, and it tore at the very heart of Molly's soul to see her baby girl in so much pain. Neville Longbottom had shown up around lunchtime, and Ginny had asked to be alone with him. Despite the shock and hurt that churned within her, Molly had managed to speak kindly to the boy and leave them in peace. She had known that the Longbottom boy was a friend of Ron's, but she hadn't realised that he and Ginny knew each other well enough to visit like that.

She let out a tearful sigh; there was a lot that she, as a mother, should know but didn't. On her way to the bathroom early that morning, she'd heard Hermione's voice speaking in Ron's room. Had she spent the night? With Ron? Unable to help herself, Molly had quietly tapped the door with her wand and listened in on the rest of the conversation. She'd gasped when she finally comprehended what they were discussing. Ron had been planning an elopement, and Hermione was informing him that it wasn't necessary because she wasn't pregnant. Suddenly, Hermione having spent the night in Ron's room became inconsequential. Obviously the two of them had crossed that line a long time ago and were on to bigger sins. Too appalled to interfere, she'd stumbled blindly the rest of the way to the bathroom for her morning ablutions.

She'd been finishing up her breakfast, studiously avoiding looking at Ron who'd come down a bit late, when Arthur had Apparated into the kitchen. He'd had an early morning meeting with Albus Dumbledore and the Minister of Magic at the Ministry. She'd kept his breakfast warm and set it on the table as he'd sat down. She'd waited for him to tell her what he'd found out, but he just shook his head and said they'd still had no word. No one knew exactly what had transpired at Malfoy Manor, and no one knew where Harry was. Furthermore, Albus and the Minister both remained firm that Harry was not to be searched out. He'd Apparated straight to Amelia Bones' house that night and had demanded that he be allowed to leave the wizarding world. The Minister had helped him acquire Muggle credentials and Muggle money and had helped him leave the country, and that was all she would tell them. Molly hoped and prayed for an owl from him, but Harry, like the rest of her children, was destined to leave her in the dark.

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January 1999

"Are you sure?"

"I should be asking you that question. I'm not the girl you admired in school. I couldn't even finish school, and I'm not a girl... not anymore. Are you sure you want me? I've lost everything I had that was worth giving."

Ginny felt Neville's hands clasp her jaw and tilt her face up to his, forcing her to look him in the eye. "You. Are. Everything," he rumbled fiercely. "All I want is you, and I'm willing to wait."

Ginny blinked, trying to hold back the tears that prickled at the corners of her eyes. "I want this. I want you."

Neville leaned in until his forehead was touching hers and there was no place for her to look but in his eyes. "Then tonight we both get to make love for the first time."

The ceremony was simple as they forged their union over the anvil in Gretna Green. The bands glowed brightly as the priest blessed them, and Ginny felt the magic binding her to Neville as he slipped the ring on her finger. His eyes darkened with what she hoped was desire as she slipped the other band onto his hand. When he leaned in to kiss her, he paused and waited for her permission. When she murmured "Yes", he leaned in and gently touched his lips to hers. The chaste kiss burned through her, and she felt the tingling upon her lips long after he had lifted his head.

He whisked her off to a little cottage he'd rented in rural Dumfriesshire for their wedding night. This night was about them and their future together. Tomorrow would be soon enough for her to handle her family. Mum would be hurt, her father would be furious and she didn't even want to contemplate her brothers' reactions. She still hadn't spoken of the night Harry had fought Voldemort with any of them. She'd been released from the hospital a week after that night she'd spoken with Neville. She told him everything and he hadn't said anything. He'd held her when she'd finally cried, but hadn't wiped her tears or tried to shush her. He'd just let her be. The next morning, her mother had arrived to find her bathed and dressed and sitting up in bed eating breakfast. Her mother had surprised her by not asking any questions. She'd just hugged Ginny and cried a little as she told her how much she'd loved and missed her. Ginny felt the bitter weight of guilt settle in her stomach as she sat on the bed and watched Neville sort out their meagre luggage before summoning dinner. Her family deserved better than this, but she just couldn't find the strength or the words to explain to them that she'd changed. She wasn't the same person they'd raised and loved.

Neville sat beside her, but didn't touch her. "Gran's going to have my head, you know. I don't think I'll ever be able to make her see that this was the right thing to do. She'll feel cheated because she'll have wanted to be a part of my wedding. She did a wonderful job bringing me up; she deserves more respect than this. I love her, and I hate hurting her like this, but this is about us, Ginny. About what's right for us... and what's right for you."

She turned to look at him, and her breath caught at the look in his eyes. She had never seen him so determined. "A lot happened that night, Gin; it's going to take more than just a couple months for you to deal with it. Your family will be hurt because they love you. They may never understand, but they will forgive you *because they love you*."

Ginny sniffled embarrassingly but as she felt his arm slide around her shoulders, she leaned against him. He stroked her arm and nestled his head against hers. "Let them go for right now," he whispered into her hair. "Let them go, they'll still be there tomorrow." She turned her head slightly and accepted his kiss. He pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her waist. She found her back was bent at an odd angle and she didn't care. What he lacked in dexterity, he made up for with urgent desire. She felt her head swim, and she raised her hands up to his shoulders.

"Ginny! I'm sorry!" he gasped breaking away.

"What?" she mumbled, confused.

"I- I didn't mean to be so rough. I want to touch you so badly, but I can wait, Ginny; I can wait."

Ginny took in Neville's worried expression and sighed deeply. For one brief moment she'd forgotten about everything except his kiss. She wanted desperately to get back to the business of forgetting, but Neville's concern had to be dealt with. She pushed herself up from the bed and stood in front of him. Button by button she undid the front of her robes and let them fall open. She revelled in his heated gaze while the robes slipped from her shoulders and fell to the floor. She stepped up to the bed, stood between his legs and reached for his hands. She placed his hands on her hips and felt the warmth of his touch through the silky slip of an undergarment that she still wore. She heard him groan softly as he pulled her down on top of him and rolled her over to the middle of the bed.

The lengths of their bodies were pressed tightly together as his hands wandered to the edge of her slip. He took a fistful of material in each hand and drew the garment up over her body. His greedy fingers slipped inexpertly over her body, eliciting gasps of pleasure from her and moans of appreciation from him. He leaned back to look at her, and Ginny felt the flush of embarrassment creeping across her skin. He rolled off the bed and stripped the clothes quickly from his body, momentarily entangling his feet. When he righted himself, he reached over to the bedside table and turned back to her with a vial in his hand. His ears turned crimson as she drank in the sight of his nude body but he did not stop moving until he was kneeling on the bed beside her.

"You can stop me at any time."

"I know."

Neville nodded and handed her the vial. "I would love nothing more than to see you pregnant with my baby, but not right now."

Ginny gave him a tremulous smile as she drank the bitter liquid and tossed the vial aside. He made no further move towards her so she reached out for his arm and pulled

him down into the cradle of her body. She would spend the rest of her life loving him for the gentleness he showed her that night as he moved ever so slowly against her. As she felt the ecstasy build within her, she urged him on faster. Moments later they lay in a tangle of limbs, both trying desperately to catch their breath.

Ginny felt her heart skip a beat as she realised the beauty of what she'd just shared with her husband. Neville was her husband and he had just finished showing her how precious she was to him... The tears began to flow freely from her eyes, and she felt Neville pull her back in close and he held her tightly. He didn't ask her silly questions. He knew she had accepted him willingly and lovingly, and he knew that the tears had stemmed not from pain, but the release from pain. So he waited until her sobbing ceased and dried her eyes with the pads of his thumbs.

"You may not be ready to believe this," he whispered in a rough voice, "but I'll just keep telling you until you do. I love you."

Ginny burrowed her face against his chest and let him soothe her to sleep. She wasn't sure what she believed anymore. Perhaps he really could love her; maybe she even loved him back. The morning sun came too early, and with it came a loud knock on the door. Her brief respite from the real world had ended; it was time to start talking.

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June 2013

Harry stared in disbelief at the owl perched on the railing of his porch. He'd walked away from the wizarding world with naught but his wand fifteen years prior. It had been years since he'd even thought about magic, yet there was Hedwig, perched on the fence staring at him. Every memory, every feeling, all of who he was and who he had been, flooded his consciousness. He looked from Hedwig to his eleven-year-old daughter. Rhea was magical? How could he not have seen that? How could he have ever believed she wouldn't be? Harry fell back and propped himself against the house for support. His wife was not going to take this well.

Rhea held out the letters, a look of worry on her young face. He could take them from her; never share their contents with her. She need never know what she was; what he was. Harry bit back the awful urge to do just that. He couldn't do to his daughter what the Dursleys had tried to do to him so long ago. "They're addressed to you, aren't they?" he whispered. At her nod, he continued, "Then you'd better open them and take a look."

He waited for an interminable moment while she lifted the wax seal off the first letter and read through it carefully. As she set the first aside and began to read the second, Harry ground his teeth in frustration. He would have loved to snatch the letters from her and read them himself but he managed to contain his impatience. Rhea was one to consider things carefully. She would look up and tell him what the letters said when she was ready... and not a moment before.

"Daddy?" she asked, finally tilting her eyes up to meet his.

"Yes, Rhea?" he replied gently.

"Am I a witch?"

"Yes, you are."

"Are you a wizard?"

"Yes, I am."

She considered this a moment before saying wisely, "Mom doesn't know about this, does she?"

"No, Rhea, she doesn't."