

# Him Again

*by Apocalypticat*

Minerva hasn't been able to heal the grief inside her and Harry and Ginny are having their first child. But what if a certain deceased returns in a way that will push Minerva to the brink? ADMM with a twist!

## Death, Victory and Pain

*Chapter 1 of 2*

Minerva hasn't been able to heal the grief inside her and Harry and Ginny are having their first child. But what if a certain deceased returns in a way that will push Minerva to the brink? ADMM with a twist!

**A/N: I have two notes before posting this story. Firstly, I started writing this in 2005 and it is still ongoing. My writing style has improved (well, I think) since I began, and, as such, the first half of what's written is inferior to the second half. Secondly, AD/MM ahead. Don't say I didn't warn you! This chapter just serves as an introduction. Although I believe Severus and Albus had an arrangement, for the purposes of this story I am defecting to the other, less optimistic camp of thought.**

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Albus Dumbledore was numb with horror.

Through a green haze a body could be seen, plunging from the Astronomy Tower, a pathetic rag-doll dressed in robes and trailing a beard. A glowing skull filled his sight, laughing a serpent. The world seemed to shrink and fade into darkness; the Death Eaters and the Dark Mark vanished. His beloved Hogwarts was gone...no, it was he who was gone, leaving everything he cared about. Grief hit him, but he did not care about the body of an old man, nor the spirit that had vacated it; there was only the hand that had held the fatal wand...

*Severus...*

This couldn't be. It was utterly impossible; if someone had told him about it, he would have laughed out loud at the absurdity of it.

*Severus, no, you couldn't have.*

There was something wrong here; it couldn't have happened.

*That wasn't you.*

His soul shuddered; he recognised his own denial.

*Merlin, no...*

The closed mind. The raised wand.

*Why?*

Loathing, etched into features he had protected and cherished.

*Severus... please...*

He was sick with it, with the realisation...but no! Severus would never...

*... Don't betray me. Don't go back into the night.*

A harsh cry. A green flash, the after-image burnt into his spirit.

*Severus, my child, my dark one, my eyes on the enemy...*

Eyes on him. The pain. The agony of brutal acceptance. Then another thought: Harry. Harry's face swam before him, Harry angry, Harry bereaved, Harry guilty, Harry worried, Harry laughing...

He'd told Harry repeatedly to trust Severus. Repeatedly.

*Severus turning to Harry, wand raised...the dark words cried again...*

Had his mistake cost him that much? Had his mistake cost him his life, the whole of the wizarding world... had it cost him Harry... ? What had happened? He could imagine it all too clearly; it was terrifying in its clarity...he allowed himself to think the worst, because the worst had half happened...

*Harry angry. Harry running after Severus. Severus turning around, and...*

Avada Kedavra.

His mind boiled, but there was no release, no knuckles to bury into weeping eyes, no sound that he could make that could possibly come close to expressing the guilt and terror. Something broke, and at first he wondered if it was the invisible impact of his empty body on the earth, but what had broken was an inner conviction, a truth he had held onto. Mistakes are forgivable. Yet for his mistake, he deserved the worst.

Things were spreading out now. He was dissolving on the rushing wind, moving into darkness. Ahead, he could see a bright light, shaped oddly against oblivion. He realised that it was a phoenix. Then darkness again, and pulsating warmth... was this... ?

He'd wondered, occasionally, what happened after death. Now the images painted by others before him rose up within his mind. Darkness and heat. Flames and punishment.

*Despair.*

*Harry*, he thought. *Harry, my boy*. And then he thought of someone else, and another face came to him in the vacuum. The fear of what else Severus might have done pumped through him. He'd seen grim betrayal for faithful loyalty. What if what he'd interpreted as friendly rivalry had actually been bitter enmity?

*Merlin, no.*

He saw the raven hair and the green eyes. It was odd; how his two favourite people shared features.

*Minerva...*

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Years of frustration. Years of fear.

Victory.

A pale boy with messy black hair and green eyes older than the rest of his face, stood tall, beside the happy redheads, the bushy-haired girl, the strange old ex-Auror, the werewolf and the pink-haired woman, and so on... A whole collection of people, expressions relieved, triumphant, shaking hands and sipping wine, oblivious to the cameras flashing and the babble of excited voices.

There he is, the Boy-Who-Lived, the Man-Who-Destroyed-Him. There he is, standing by the pretty red-haired girl, looking dazed and happy. What does he think? How does he feel? His picture, with You-Know-Who at his feet. That girl, is she with him? Oh yes, she's the girlfriend, isn't she? She's Ginny Weasley...

Who's the tall redhead nearby, with the bushy-haired girl? Oh, that's them, those are his two best friends...yes, they were with him, they were there, they helped. Orders of Merlin for the pair of them. The boy's one of the Weasleys. See the dumpy witch over there...that's the mother...how does she feel, being the mother of a hero?

What about the thin, ragged man over there? Yes, that's the werewolf...he's with the wild-haired Auror...killed Fenrir Greyback, didn't he? Couldn't get a job because of anti-werewolf legislation under Fudge's government...no, never agreed with it either, of course now he'll be in great demand...

The man with the funny eye? One of the best Aurors ever, never doubted him, of course he'd be involved. Order of the Phoenix, yes? A bit funny, but just like Mr Weasley, bit odd but odd in a good way...

The rest of the kids...they were all there, too...see the girl with the big eyes? Daughter of the man who runs the Quibbler...fine magazine, wonderful publication, that. Dumbledore's Army...the Boy-Who-Lived, he started that. Another Order of Merlin winner, the boy over there...son of Frank and Alice Longbottom...whole family brave, must run in the blood. Grinning like a maniac; of course I don't blame him, I'd smile if I was him...

Who's the old bird in the corner? Her, sitting looking like someone's died. Looks ill, doesn't she? Oh, she was part of the Order of the Phoenix, can't understand why she wouldn't be...Headmistress of Hogwarts, yes, fine school, brilliant education here, look at all these brave youngsters they've turned out...Professor McGonagall, that's her. Wasted something frightful, hasn't she? Must be the stress, running a school during a war...

Look, they're all here, the whole Order of the Phoenix...started by Dumbledore, wasn't it? Died last year, didn't he, poor chap, never disagreed with a word he said, splendid man, mentor of the Boy-Who-Lived, y'know, should've been Minister...

Minerva McGonagall got to her feet with difficulty, leaning heavily on her walking stick. The hypocrisy of it all, the fact that the person who most deserved all this was absent and would remain absent...it was all getting to her. Ignoring the stares, she left the Great Hall, climbing up the nearest staircase blindly. She had a sudden urge to go up to the Astronomy tower and throw herself off.

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She sat, frozen, quill suspended over the thick parchment, eyes fixed on a point in time...in a happier past. Her thinking had stalled, like it did so often, these days. She had failed again. Anybody watching would know by the tense rigidity of her posture, the way she'd paled slightly. The realisation of this made her blink and attempt to surface.

It had been seven years. Seven years, for Merlin's sake! Six, since the turmoil had ended, and everybody, save her, had celebrated the long-awaited peace...peace which He'd never been able to enjoy. Six wonderful years, she thought. Six wonderful years that she should be grateful for. If she thought them wonderful, then perhaps she could convince herself that they were.

Seven years was more than enough for a person to pull themselves together.

She remembered the quill and attempted to focus on the letter to the school governors. Incurable men, they were; it was quite tedious writing to them. She searched for words...and realised that her quill was not scratching on the parchment, meaning that other sounds were reaching her.

His office was almost silent. She could not think of it as hers. There was the quiet ticking of the clock, the whisper of the wind outside the window... and that gentle snoring, that awful snoring from the wall behind her. The pressure to turn around was familiar but she suppressed the desire; it never did her any good when she looked.

She tried to block it out. She had spent the last seven years trying to do so, and she'd never yet succeeded. The snoring was very much like the memory of Him: constant, irrepressible, upsetting. It was the one final cruelty which had been done to her.

Once, she'd taken the picture down and stowed it in a corner, in a feeble effort to quieten the snoring. The guilt and agony of it had weighed her, so she'd put it back up again a mere couple of days later. The worst thing in the world would be to do an injustice to His memory in His office, whilst sitting in His chair with His job, with the residue of Him all around her.

He would stroll into her mind at the worst moments, either when memory was at its most vivid or when the Headmistress was engaged in other tasks externally more important than remembering. There was always the thought of the Mistake and the words she had failed to say to Him.

He was always strolling in and out of her mind, too. There was always the thought of Him, and His mistake, and what He'd done, and what she'd never told Him. Too much thinking of Him would result in an agitation of the hands, and tears, so she tried to direct her thoughts away, onto other subjects. Naming Him would be the worst error to make.

That snoring. She wanted to scream!

In the time after He'd gone, she'd waited, grief held at bay by the idea of speaking to Him, of telling Him... But her last comfort had been snatched away from her; snoring was all that was left...

There was a knock on the door.

The Headmistress came back to herself and put down her quill, grateful for the interruption. She could be Professor McGonagall again.

"Come in," she said.

Filius Flitwick opened the door nervously. His eyes found the thin, sharp woman at the desk instantly. The corners of the woman's mouth turned upwards slightly.

"Filius! What can I do for you?"

The small wizard walked into the room, clutching the papers to his chest. If a student had been present, they would have seen a different Flitwick to the one that taught them. Professor Flitwick was cheerful and exuberant and excitable; the Filius that entered the Headmistress's office was far more subdued. Nobody liked seeing the ruins of Minerva.

Seeing her sitting there, dull green eyes circled with weary darkness and black hair shot liberally with grey, Filius felt a distinct pang. He always felt miserable and confused whenever he entered this room. But he'd never been a close friend of Minerva's, and if neither Rolanda nor Poppy had solved the mystery, then he certainly would never know.

"Well, I'm a little confused by the new syllabus outlines for the sixth years," he said timidly, holding out the papers.

Minerva...or the ruins of Minerva...sighed. "You are not the only one, Filius. I was thinking that it could be sorted out in tonight's meeting. Both Pomona and Rolanda have already been to see me, just as confused by the school board's inability to write in plain English."

Filius nodded. Another time, he would have laughed. Still, he had some hope; he had news that should put a genuine smile on the witch's face. "Minerva, I have some good news!" he squeaked. "It was in the paper...Mrs Potter's having her baby!"

Minerva sat up, and for a moment, her wan face was transfigured with sudden joy. "That's wonderful, Filius! Harry must be pleased."

Filius nodded happily, but as he left the office, he saw her smile fade. A distant, painful look had come into her eyes. He went down the stairs feeling disappointed and wrong-footed...if the news that one of her old cubs was having a baby wasn't enough to cheer Minerva up, then what could?

Minerva found herself surrounded by the silence again. Her thin fingers twisted around the quill. In another world...in a world that was more perfect, perhaps...she would have been present at the birth. She could have cradled the soft pink form and been truly happy. Yet there was no such thing as a perfect world. After it had happened...that event which had destroyed Minerva McGonagall and replaced her with a biddable husk...she had known enough not to inflict her presence on others. The War had left the world in dire need of cheer and light...and she was neither, not anymore. Her brooding company and her inability to smile properly was hardly uplifting to either colleagues or friends. Her lips twisted. The staff was worried about her...had been ever since they had first noticed the change. Only now were they beginning to accept that it wasn't possible to change her back.

So she had drawn back from it all...even from poor Harry, as he had flailed around searching for a point of dependence and stability. Poor Harry, who wanted and needed another...another Him. She sighed when she realised the direction her thoughts were taking her.

Him again.

## Harry's Son

*Chapter 2 of 2*

The afterlife of Albus Dumbledore, the next generation, and a fateful collision.

**A/N: Thank you MMADfan! I'm rewriting quite a lot of this, so it will look different from how it is on the probboards and on ff.net. Here comes the twist!**

Darkness and warmth were all around him. He was compacted into a small space, squeezed, half-choked, unable to move. An indefinite time had passed, in which the

writhing darkness had done nothing but wetly embrace him to an invisible chest. Hell? There was no way of knowing, and all stereotypical ideas were inadequate; the warmth around him was soothing if mysterious. Whilst not pleasant, it was not wholly terrible either. There was only the sense of endless compression and the beat of something too distant to be concerned about...

Severus.

His mind shied away from it: from his death, from the betrayal. What did it matter, where he was now, when what had been still seared him? The darkness about seemed to thrash with his thoughts. A sudden image came, of Severus across his office desk, the form of his face distorted with the effort of keeping the misery in, the hollows of his eyes taut and grey. He had been such a sullen, unhappy boy...

The unseen writhing around him increased in its violence. The compression grew so that for one moment he did not have to think of anything...perhaps the memories would be squeezed from him...

Yet he did not want that; he did not want to forget the good with the bad *Hogwarts. Harry. Minerva...*

Surprise, and then the dark walls closed in...

He was being forced through a tunnel, shooting away into nothingness...

Light.

He was being overwhelmed with sensation, bared to colour and sound and air...

Albus's eyes stung as he struggled to adjust to the difference, besieged by light. A searing pain flared in his chest cavity; he realised he had taken a deep, gasping breath as though he had surfaced from water, but that was impossible; to be dead was to be breathless. A kaleidoscope of colours danced in his vision...peach, red, white, blue... His eardrums throbbed; noise crashed all around him, echoing and rebounding. This was it, this was the conclusion...

The afterlife? He imagined it to be nebulous and spiritual, but he was wrong; it was physical, painfully physical...

His eyes came into focus...and the vague blur of red and peach he could see sprang into clarity. It was then that Albus Dumbledore received what was quite possibly the greatest shock he'd ever had in his life...or death.

He had only occasionally contemplated an afterlife. He hadn't been able to come up with any clear idea of its nature, though his conviction that nothing ended at death eliminated any possible fear of it. His mind had surged towards Heaven and Hell only because they were generic, widely known ideas. The afterlife had always been a rather abstract, fuzzy concept. He had imagined, perhaps, that his life would be reviewed before any final destination.

He had not imagined an older-looking Ginny Weasley exposing one of her breasts to him.

In complete disbelief, he gaped at the woman above him in shock. Ginny Weasley. It was undoubtedly Ginny Weasley...she didn't look all that different...but certainly older and...and with one of her breasts...

Mortified, he shut his eyes. He had always liked to think of himself as a moral man...how could any kind of life review feature Ginny Weasley...? But no... this was proof! He was dreaming. This whole thing had been some sort of extended nightmare. How utterly ridiculous it was to think of Severus betraying him and himself being killed just when Harry needed him most...what a delusional idea! He was in bed, asleep at this very moment...and now he realised that he was dreaming, he could wake up...and be overly formal around the youngest Weasley for a brief period, but that was easily explained by Freud. Freud's writings about dreams could explain everything. The mixture of sherbet lemons and cheese before Harry's arrival had perhaps been unwise, and he would take care not to repeat the mistake. Reality would soon be reasserted.

His thoughts were accelerating in hope and desperation. It was just a nightmare...nothing real at all...he would wake up and go downstairs to breakfast, and joke with Minerva about how moody Severus was, and then speak to Harry about something or other...about the Horcrux, yes about the Horcrux undoubtedly...and Hagrid would say something about chimeraas being completely harmless and ask whether he could breed them at school...which he would say no to, of course...and then he had to go and see Rufus Scrimgeour about the...

He opened his eyes, to see his hand flailing above him, as if it had nothing to do with him at all. It was small and pink, and clenched tightly into a fist.

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Harry Potter took five long strides forwards, stopped, turned around and then took another five. He halted, about-turned and walked before repeating the process. His legs were beginning to ache and his feet were growing numb, but to be still was impossible; pacing was the only way to combat the fear prickling at his stomach. His hands were clasped together behind his back so that he could feel how clammy he had become. Ron was smiling encouragingly at him from the nearby sofa, but he was more annoyed by his friend's serenity than buoyed up, and ignored him.

"Harry," Ron said at last, after ten more minutes of frantic activity had passed. "She'll be okay."

Harry stopped and stared at him. Ron stared back, grinning.

Ron's long body was draped over the sofa in a careless manner, having flopped down into it and not moved since. The sumptuous red and gold outer robes he wore were spread down onto the floor, revealing the garish orange he wore underneath. Looking at it, Harry winced inwardly. Ron, Keeper for the now legendary Chudley Cannons, had literally walked straight off the pitch mid-game, right past his adoring fans, simply to sit and watch Harry pace a hole in the carpet. At exactly the time when Ron should have been saving the Quaffle, signing Chocolate Frog Cards of himself and laughing with his team-mates, here he was...

"Harry," Ron groaned. "Don't beat yourself up. If you hadn't told me, you know I would've killed you." He gave his friend a look of mock severity under his brows.

The bespectacled man's eyes looked at him uncomprehendingly before seeming to look beyond him to see something else. The unexpected popped out.

"I wish we'd had one earlier. Ginny wanted to, y'know. But I guess I needed time to ..." Harry's voice drifted off and the distant look in his eyes grew.

Ron shifted uneasily, caught by surprise. The sentence was finished by the silence that stretched between them: to live without the threat of death. To recover from all that had happened. Harry could see Ron's thoughts being played out across his face...there was that slight tightening of the lips that meant that Ron was thinking of the Second War, and that troubled look in his blue eyes that indicated that his friend was thinking of a time about a year after...

Harry had not thought about the Second War for quite a long time. It was inevitable that occasionally his mind would go back to it...whenever someone said, "When I was at Hogwarts..." Yet he always focussed on the enjoyable memories...those that were not evoked by the mention of a war of any kind. *Eating lunch with Ron and Hermione. Making cushions fly in Charms. Playing Quidditch.* It was at that point that he usually stopped thinking about Hogwarts...otherwise the memories would begin to descend into those with undeniably painful undercurrents. *Moaning in Potions about Snape. Meeting Sirius for the first time. Talking with Dumbledore.* If he remembered any more intensely... *Sirius falling through an archway. Snape's face twisted in hate. Dumbledore's body falling from the tower.* Memories that were scenes from a nightmare...and that didn't even count the final battle...

A year after it had all ended...that was when he'd finally broken down. That in itself was senseless; it was as if the experience and the knowledge of it was staggered, with the reaction so late that it was irrelevant. Immediately afterwards he had merely felt numb and completely disconnected from the dispassionate young face below the headline of the *Daily Prophet*. What did it matter that the photo had become famous or that the wand was aimed at the body of You-Know-Who? Nothing at all. He had had

nightmares of that face. If he tried to remember standing there, doing the deed, his mind blanked...he could only recall the crushing revelation that it was over, and that he had killed someone. The nightmare surrounded him, enclosed him with paper. *Harry Potter, Harry Potter, Harry Potter.* He had become sick of his name, sick of remembering, sick of thinking. What thoughts he had were disconnected. Two years had passed in which nothing was more than a snapshot or a haze of impressions: Ginny's worried face as he sank away from her, the daubed mouth of a reporter flapping out of time with the words he heard. He had needed Sirius and Dumbledore, and neither were there because of a man he'd failed to avenge their deaths upon.

That was the worst thought. Even now, long after he had recovered and withdrawn from the public eye, the fact that somewhere, a traitor to rival Pettigrew was still eating, drinking and breathing was enough to send a thrill of anger through him. Snape! Oh how he'd feverishly hunted... but Ron and Hermione had put a stop to that...and although he'd been angry at the time, it had saved him. They had brought him back, into a world where his wife stared hungrily at little children.

She had burst into tears at a restaurant because there had been a baby at the next table. He had still been blind from his inner death, but that was when he had first noticed the new tension in her, the new element of suppressed desire.

"A child?"

The brown eyes had welled. He had come back to being Harry, and Harry wanted a child too.

That thought brought him back to the present. His heart thumped. His child! Somewhere in the same building, his son was being born. He wanted to be with Ginny ~~needed~~ to be with Ginny... He resumed pacing.

"Harry," Ron said softly. Harry ignored him, throat tight.

"Merlin, I wish I was in there with her."

"She'll be all right, mate. She's as tough as..."

"Ron, they said the baby was getting 'stressed.' What does that mean?"

"Well," came Fred's voice suddenly. "I imagine being born would be a pretty stressful experience."

Harry spun around.

The twins were moving calmly across the room towards them, every step resulting in a slight clink that he strongly suspected was that of a purse bulging with Galleons. Both were clad in green dragon leather and dripped with medallions and other accessories. He wondered if they knew it was tasteless and if they did it deliberately.

"Don't you worry about our Ginny," George assured him.

"After being on the wrong end of her wand a few times, you soon cease worrying about her..."

"...It's more a question of worrying *for* the people who meet her..."

"...Believe me, Harry; me and George were terrified for you at the wedding..."

"...Still, we always knew you were pretty thick."

Harry grinned weakly at them, but he was too anxious to laugh. He opened his mouth to ask where the rest of the Weasleys were when the door at the opposite end of the waiting room was flung open with such force that it ricocheted off the wall, to nearly slam back into the frantic face of Hermione Granger. Hermione barely paused at this, however, and rushed into the room looking agonised.

"Harry!" she panted. "Is it...she hasn't...has she?"

Harry shook his head. Hermione slumped into a chair.

"I'm sorry," she gasped. "I was in the middle of a campaign meeting."

Harry opened his mouth to ask which campaign that had been, to think better of it and shut his mouth again. By now, Hermione had been involved in so many campaigns, it was hard to keep track. Every time Harry opened the paper, Hermione was usually featured somewhere...either in a photo where she waved her arms and shouted at some hapless bureaucrat, or as the author of an article that raged against obscure Ministry policies. She campaigned for house-elves, giants, werewolves, Muggles... Anybody whom Hermione deemed oppressed found their cause championed. Ron was often forced into playing a Quidditch match wearing a badge proclaiming his apparent support of S.P.E.W., or G.R.A. (Giant Rights Association: "bigger scale, bigger hearts") or S.P.A.W.L. (Society for the Prevention of Anti-Werewolf Legislation: "the Howling Shame of the Ministry") or any other society his wife headed. Being Ron, Harry reckoned, must be a precarious existence.

Hermione leaned forward and directed a raised eyebrow at Harry. He shook his head and turned to continue pacing...

A Healer emerged from the double-doors. As soon as he entered, both friends leapt to their feet and the twins gave him unconvincing looks of unconcern.

The Healer, a young man with a blonde thatch of hair, stopped, aware that he was mere feet away from some of the most famous people who had ever lived. There they were: Ron Weasley, Champion Quidditch player for the top-of-the-league Chudley Cannons, Hermione Granger, Deputy Head of the Department of Mysteries and President of so many organisations, Fred and George Weasley, founders of the wildly successful Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, and last of all, the pale man dressed in jet black...the youngest Chief Auror in three centuries and the Man-Who-Destroyed-The-Dark-Lord, Harry Potter. He had to suppress the urge to ask for autographs.

"Come this way," he said shortly.

Harry strode after the shorter wizard, heedless to all else. The inside of his mouth felt like it was coated with sandpaper. As they walked down the long corridor beyond the doors, he strained for the sound of a child crying. Yet there was just silence. Harry broke into a trot...the ward was in sight...

The door opened. For a moment, all that could be seen was white...the chalk-brightness of the walls, the scintillating dance of light over a tray of surgical instruments, the blaze of the sun outside. Then all eyes adjusted and found a flushed Ginny Weasley propped up against a pillow, eyes pooling and face lined with exhaustion. Harry froze, but then spotted the smile. She was more beautiful than he had ever seen her, radiant, glowing, exuding maternal waves.

The Healer stood back politely, and watched as all of the celebrities bounded over towards the bed, the Chief Auror in the lead. He saw the wife and mother, Ginny Weasley, an Auror in her own right, direct an expression of pride at the father, whilst her eyes remained fixed on something another Healer was dealing with in a basin across the room. He saw the tall, thin man's green eyes widen and follow her gaze...

Harry was mute with wonder. Something small and pink and vulnerable was being washed gently in a basin...something that was his and Ginny's, something they had created together. Their son.

Mr Potter, sir?" said the Healer timidly as the baby was swaddled in a blanket. "There are a few things..."

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Albus could not understand what was happening. The pink flailing hand had continued to reach into nothingness, as remote from his control as the sun or the forces of

physics. A burst of concentration would send it flying convulsively, with no precision or any semblance of aim. His alarm grew with the revelation of his own, suddenly crippling weakness...his magic was buried, reduced to spark: he had gone from being one of the most powerful wizards in the world to nothing, less than the most Squib-like eleven-year-old. Moreover, his body was small...small enough for gentle hands to pick him up, to lift him with ease... *Impossible*.

Faces swam above him as water sluiced down his new form. Voices were murmuring, cooing, clucking. He was being wrapped in something soft and warm, so that the unruly hand disappeared, bound against his side. Arms took him back to Ginny, and he looked up to see another unexpected face: that of Ronald Weasley... Albus stared at the long, freckled nose in utter bewilderment. What had happened? The afterlife seemed nothing more than Weasleyland, and any other time he would have found the idea amusing and said something to the effect that that was no great punishment... The voices became clearer and louder.

"...No, no...I don't mean to say that there's anything *obviously* wrong, sir. He may be perfectly all right...but generally speaking, when they don't cry, it's a bad sign. And he's a wee bit underweight..."

"Blimey!" Ron's lips flapped distantly. "So that's it! *I thought* it was a bit odd. I've always thought babies screamed their heads off."

"He's so sweet," Ginny said softly, looking down at him with an expression he couldn't remember anyone giving him since he'd been about five. "Aren't you? Look at those beautiful blue eyes..."

Albus felt himself go cold. His mind was nudging towards something...

Harry wanted to touch his son, needed to hold him. The sight of the small body had sent an array of images floating through his head: himself with a small boy on a bike, himself watching a tousled head bow on a moving swing, himself standing in Ollivander's shop, watching his son wave a wand. *His son*. He beamed and moved so that the baby could see him, heart distended. The child was suddenly in his arms, nestled against his robes, large eyes demanding protection, mouth a peaceful red smudge. He smiled and tried to crush the worry at the lack of sound emanating from the new-born lungs. Somehow the silence was more terrifying than the idea of any amount of screaming. He grinned more widely...no amount of worry could suppress the joy welling up inside him.

"Hello," he whispered, looking deeply in the vast blue eyes. "Hello. I'm Harry. I'm your daddy."

The sapphire irises shimmered. Tears finally began streaming down the infant cheeks.

The Healers stopped busying themselves with their instruments and stared. Fred and George's grins faded. Ron took a step backwards, and Hermione's hands went to her mouth. The blood in Ginny's cheeks fled. Her husband clasped the child more firmly, face carefully devoid of expression but the green eyes disturbed. Nobody spoke, and there was no sound but that of faint whimpers and the choking out of sorrow. The baby continued sobbing...sobbing in a way that neither of the Healers had ever heard before from a child...sobbing in the hopeless, shaking anguish of someone far older, and whose spirit was not new-born.