

Turned to Real Life

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Summary: It's hard to be a good boyfriend when your brother is dead, your best mate is shagging your sister, and you're worried about getting a good job. However, Ron will try his hardest. He will always try for Hermione no matter how powerless he feels. POST DH

* Chapter 1*: Nine hearts

I hope you enjoy this!

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Black cloaks, black shoes, white tables, and white chairs. The arrangement made his palms itch. Everything was so bland and neutral, and the atmosphere was dark and muffled with crying. It was wrong. He wouldn't want it like this. He would hate how everyone was and how everything was arranged. However, more than anything else, he would hate how each of them had to say something sweet and mature. Nothing about his brother Fred Weasley was sweet or mature.

"And his youngest brother, Ronald, would like to say a few words as well."

No, Fred would not want a funeral. He would want fireworks from his shop going off. He would want everyone to wear his or her comfortable clothes. He would want George and Angelina telling stories about all the pranks he pulled at Hogwarts. He would not want this.

"Ron."

"Huh?" he asked. Ron looked up from his hands. Everyone around him was staring. Hermione was gazing at him with an expression of worry and confusion. He had to turn away from her. Her heavy chocolate eyes always seemed so troubled. They had every since the battle. He looked to the front of the garden. His dad was at a podium. His blue eyes were soaked and swollen from tears. Ron couldn't look at him either. They had the same eyes. He didn't want to see in his dad what he must have looked like.

"Ron, it's your turn," Hermione whispered in his ear.

Ron swallowed hard. He nodded slightly and stood up. His palms itched so badly. He kept his head down as he walked past cousins, aunts, uncles, friends, and acquaintances to the podium. His dad squeezed his hand. "You can do it, son," he mumbled.

Ron finally looked at him. His dad had always been cheery and youthful. Now, he finally seemed his age. He walked away from him. Ron took a deep breath and clutched the wooden stand. Everyone was staring at him. The Burrow's tiny garden was over stuffed with chairs and people. The space was full of people who thought a traditional funeral was best for Fred. They didn't know anything. They weren't there.

"F-Fred was, um, my brother." He felt like a tit. Obviously, everyone knew that.

Though he didn't look a whole lot like his brother, they shared the typical Weasley characteristics. They were pale, freckly, and had bright red hair. Ron was taller than Fred was, but Fred had always had more muscle. He wasn't afraid to use his muscle on him either. Many times Fred had him in a headlock or the two playfully wrestled around. Yes, Ron may have been taller, but Fred was stronger. He was so much stronger than Ron could ever imagine.

He gazed at the front row. His remaining brothers, sister, parents, Harry, and Hermione were trying their best to smile and give their support. His mother was a wreck. Her face was so hollow and worn, and she gripped his dad's arm as if she was seconds away from collapsing. Bill, Charlie, and Percy sat straight and still. They were the oldest and were finally fulfilling their duties as the leaders of the family. They took care of everything these days. Ginny held on tightly to Harry like a girlfriend would to her boyfriend in a situation like this. Ron wasn't sure how he felt about it. He was glad that she had support, but it was from his best mate. He knew that Harry

snuck off to her room at night. He knew that they shared conversations, tears, and embraces. He hated it and loved it at the same time. Just as he felt overwhelmed to the point of insanity, Hermione nodded and extended her smile. A wave of warmth cracked through him. She was his saving grace. Ever since Hogwarts, she had been at his side. She was his girlfriend now. It was her job to help but she took it to another level, as she did with everything.

However, any warmth he felt vanished when he looked at George. He was on the end. He didn't smile. He didn't nod. He simply stared at him. Ron's heart beat sharply. Everyone was so careful around George. Even though they were all hurting and had all shed tears, no one was worse off than George was. He was the only one to lose his soul mate, his better half, his twin. George pretty much got to plan the funeral and everyone did what he asked. It had been his idea that each of them say something. Though everyone else took it seriously, Ron didn't bother to write anything. He could never tell people what Fred was like or what he believed in. He didn't know what Fred felt before he died or what he would want to say if he was there with them. All Ron knew was that Fred wouldn't want this, and George knew it, too. However, Ron licked his lips and started again.

"Fred was important to all of us. He had this light about him that made everyone laugh." He rubbed his neck. It wasn't good enough. "Fred died with a smile. He-he laughed as he went." Tightness developed in his throat. That night at Hogwarts was so clear and piercing in his memory. His eyes dampened. He couldn't believe it. Ron thought that he had cried all his tears away. He didn't want to lose it in front of his family. He didn't have a right to. "Fred will always be loved and remembered for making people happy and making people laugh. He made his life and career out of it. I-I'll miss him. We all will."

Ron walked away from the podium and took his seat next to Hermione. She took his hand into hers. He squeezed it. The rest of the funeral was quiet and teary.

It was everything Fred would hate.

Ron didn't want to stay for sandwiches and juice. He didn't want to mingle and make small talk with people. It was useless. Instead, he went to his room. He sat on the bed and flipped through a quidditch magazine mindlessly. Someone knocked on the door. Ron closed the magazine. "Yes?" he said. His voice was so soft and thin.

The door opened to reveal Hermione's face. "Can I come in?"

"Please." Ron pulled off his cloak and rubbed his face. She took a seat next to him and caressed his cheek. He shivered. They hadn't been a couple for very long. While they snogged each other before even making it official, Ron was still a bit shy around her, and her touches were new and delightful.

"Did you not want to talk to your relatives?" she asked.

He examined her. Her big brown eyes were beautiful, and her sadness did not take away from her loveliness. Her lips were so soft and full. He wanted to kiss her, but he wasn't sure if it was appropriate. "No, I'm tired of talking."

"Yes, I can understand that. Your speech was lovely, by the way," she added.

"No, it wasn't. It was shit, and I know it." Ron appreciated her sweetness, but it wasn't helping.

She put a hand on his knee. "Ron, it was perfect. I think he would have liked it, and I'm sure it made George feel good."

"Hermione, nothing can make George feel good, and Fred would have hated what I said. This whole thing is everything Fred thinks is boring." Ron didn't know how to make her understand.

She sighed. "Well, that may be, but it's what George wanted. For once he wanted to take something seriously."

"And that is fucking shit! George shouldn't have to change. No one should," Ron choked out. The tears were back.

Even Hermione's lip quivered. "Ron, I know this is hard, but things are different now."

"Don't you think that I know that? I see every second of the bloody day how things are different. I fucking hate it! I hate all of this!" He wiped his eyes but more tears fell. He was so tired of crying.

"Oh, Ron," Hermione breathed. She wrapped her arms around him. Ron fell into her embrace. It felt right. He felt at home. He held her back tightly. "I'm here, Ron. I'm right here with you. I love you."

The warm feeling returned. "I know you are. I love you, too." He held her even tighter. It was still a bit raw to tell her that he loved her. Though he knew he needed her more than anything, expressing his feelings to her wasn't easy. He held on to her until his eyes felt empty. He pulled away and wiped his nose on his sleeve. Hermione's eyes were red, and the tip of her nose was pink. She looked gorgeous. He wanted her. Without thinking, he kissed her but just as quickly pulled away. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

She smiled. "No, it's okay."

Ron rubbed his palms on his knees. He made everything awkward between them. She was his girlfriend now. For years, he had thought about snogging her and doing things to her body, but now he could barely press his lips against hers without feeling embarrassed. It had been different at Hogwarts. They thought that they were going to die. Every insecurity went out the window, and the two of them simply acted on impulse. He had never felt more alive. Kissing Hermione so passionately was amazing. Now, they were both alive and okay, but he could barely touch her.

"I justâ€œ;you look great," he said stupidly.

Hermione chuckled. "Well, thank you, but Ron, you don't need an excuse to kiss me. You can do it whenever you want to, for the most part."

Ron grinned. "Can I try again?" She licked her lips and nodded. He leaned forward and kissed her. Hermione pressed back and put a hand to his neck. It burned against his cold skin. He dragged his tongue across her lips. She moaned and parted them. He put a hand on her knee and licked inside of her mouth. It tasted so sweet. He moaned as well.

Snogging Hermione felt incredible and took his mind off everything. He loved the way she whimpered and how her nails lightly dug into his skin as he sucked on her tongue. He was hot and the room in his trousers decreased by the second. He wanted her badly. His hand went higher up her leg. He went just high enough to be under her dress. He wanted to reach more but fear set in. All they did was snog. Ron longed to touch her, but he didn't want to go too fast for her. Hermione nibbled on his bottom lip and placed her other hand on his hip. She deepened the kiss. It felt wicked. He didn't want it to stop.

There was a knock on the door. Hermione pulled away from him. Ron closed his eyes and sighed. He got up and answered the door. Harry was on the other side. "Sorry to interrupt but your mum needs help downstairs. The guests are leaving."

"I'll help," Hermione said. She got up and kissed Ron's cheek before leaving. He watched her walk down the stairs. Already he felt colder.

He and Harry stood in silence. There was so much between them. Ron looked at his best mate. Harry Potter was the savior of the Wizarding World. He had defeated Voldemort. His scar didn't hurt and people thanked him often, but he still slept with his wand under his pillow and Ron still saw him wipe the occasional tear from his eye. Nothing was better. The only difference now was that Ron had a death toll to add. He was scarred just like Harry.

"How are you?" Harry asked.

Ron shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

Harry nodded. "I liked how you brought up that Fred was laughing whenâ€œ;it happened. I think it made your dad smile."

Ron turned away from his bright green and all knowing eyes. Harry had seen it all. Harry always saw everything. "Thanks," Ron whispered.

"Are you going to be able to help in the kitchen?" he asked. Ron didn't understand it. Harry's voice was no more confident than it had been a few weeks ago. He wasn't healed either.

"Yeah, let's go," Ron mumbled. He had to get away from Harry. They didn't talk so much anymore and when they did it was always difficult.

Ron's brothers and Ginny were in the kitchen. His parents were still saying goodbye to guests. George was sitting on top of the kitchen counter. He lazily tossed stale bread into a bin. Bill, Charlie, and Percy cleaned and put up dishes. Ginny sat at the table and separated silverware. Harry took his seat next to her and put an arm around her. She turned to him and smiled sadly. They kissed.

Ron looked away. The two of them found comfort in each other while he could barely talk to Harry and every time he did talk to Ginny, they ended up fighting. Hermione walked into the kitchen with chairs. "Let me help you," he offered. He took the chairs from her and placed them against the wall.

"Thanks, there's a lot more," she said.

"I'll get them. Let's switch," George said. He didn't really give Hermione time to consider. He was out the door before anyone could speak.

"Did I say something wrong?" Hermione asked.

"No, I think George was looking for a good excuse to get out of the house," Bill told.

"I'm worried about him. Dad told me how off he's been. He's worse than mum," Charlie explained.

"Of course he is. You know how close they were," Ginny said.

"It doesn't matter. It's not healthy," Percy said.

"How the hell would you know?" Ron snapped. Percy gave him a look. Though he was okay with the family now, Ron was still hurt. He hadn't forgotten how distant Percy had been and how he had made their mother cry and their dad feel useless.

"Ron, come help me, please?" Hermione asked. Ron didn't take his eyes off Percy as he stood by Hermione and threw food away.

"Let's not fight today. Mum and Dad are barely holding on as it is and George needs us. We need each other." Bill folded his arms and gazed at everyone. He was the perfect oldest brother. He was being so strong for all of them as he put his new family with Fleur on hold for his old one. Ron felt terrible. Everything came at the wrong time.

"Bill is right. We're all shit right now, but we can't lose this. It's all we have left. No matter what anyone says about Fred, we all know that he wouldn't want us breaking up over something as ridiculous as his death." Charlie rolled his eyes and empathized on the ridiculous. Ron grinned. He was spot on. Ron was sure that Fred would say something similar to that. He grinned and Charlie returned his smile. Ron was so happy that he was around. He loved

Charlie dearly but rarely got to see him. It was cruel that it took the death of his brother to bring him back.

"Sorry, Percy," Ron said.

Percy gripped his shoulder. "It's okay, Ron."

For the rest of the evening, the group worked in silence. The Weasleys tried their best to stay focused and Hermione and Harry tried their best to help. It was almost too much for Ron to take.

Afterward, Ron, Hermione, Harry, and Ginny went up to his room to play Exploding Snaps. It was mundane but kept their minds clear. Ron watched Ginny. His baby sister was less of a baby now. She looked so much older than she was. She would turn seventeen soon and would start her last year at Hogwarts. However, there was nothing more that the school could teach her. She knew so much and had experienced much more than her teachers had. Ron had always tried to protect her. He felt it was his duty to look after her. However, he failed at it miserably. He could never keep her safe or at least not the way Harry could. As much as he felt weird about it, they were a good match. It didn't cure his sick feeling, though. Ginny was his sister and Harry was his best mate. There were things that he would no longer be privileged to because the couple would give it to each other.

"Ron, are you okay?" Hermione asked.

He turned to her. "Yeah, sorry."

Once again, there was a knock on his door. Ron didn't have to say anything. It opened. George walked in. More than anyone else, it hurt to look at George. He was Fred. "George, do you need something?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah, I need to talk to Ron," he answered.

Ron swallowed. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I just need to talk to you about something downstairs." George walked out and closed the door.

Ron looked to Hermione. She rubbed his arm. "Go see what he wants."

He stood up and left the room. George was in the sitting room. His arm was against the fireplace, and his head rested against it. His eyes were closed and he looked so lost and vacant. "George," Ron said.

George turned to him. If people didn't know the twins well, they were hard to tell apart, but Ron knew the slight difference. Fred's chin was a bit pointer than George's, and George was a tad bulkier. However, it didn't matter. The two of them were the same. "How are you?" he asked.

Ron didn't know what to say. "How are you?"

George chewed on his lip. "I'm glad that the funeral is over."

"Me too," Ron whispered.

George rubbed his neck. All the Weasley men shared a nervous twitch. "Thanks for what you said. You're the only one who said something that wasn't sappy. Fred would be proud."

Ron knew how hard it was for George to be strong, but he did it anyway. His older brother blew him away. George was being so wonderful. He wanted to tell him how much he appreciated him and how much he loved him, but he couldn't. Nothing seemed good enough. "Yeah, I hope so," Ron confessed.

George bit his lip and walked over to him. They sat on the couch. "Ron, I'm going to continue the joke shop."

Ron's jaw dropped. He figured George would sell the business. "Really?"

"Yeah, I just can't close it for good. Fred and I worked so hard to get it. It's been our dream since we were little kids. It would be wrong to close it just becauseâ€¦Fred is gone." George held his stomach. He looked as if he was fighting back tears or nausea.

Ron slowly reached out and put his hand on George's hand. "But maybe you should. If it's too much, then you should close it."

George shook his head. "I can't and I won't. Besides, it's in writing. Fred and I swore to it and signed a contract. We put in it that we wouldn't close the shop just because one of us died. It's funny really. It was his idea."

Ron didn't know what to say. "Okay, if you really want to."

"I do. It's a great business, and it's really the only thing that I know how to do. I've talked to Angelina. She wants to help and so does Lee." George smiled a bit. Lee Jordan was the twin's long time best friend and Angelina was Fred's ex-girlfriend. She was almost as torn up at the funeral as George was. The two of them had spent a lot of time together lately and found peace in each other.

"That's great. When are you starting it back up?" Ron asked.

"I dunno. It won't be right now. It could be in the next couple of weeks. That's why I need your help." George eyed him intently. Ron shrugged. "Well, it's Weasley's, so I want it to be owned by us. I can't do everything by myself and even with Angie and Lee I'll need help. I need a partner, and I was hoping that it would be you."

Ron simply looked at him. George wasn't smirking. He seemed serious. "What?"

He rolled his eyes. "Ron, I want you to be my business partner."

Ron stuttered nothing for several minutes. "But-but, you never trust me with anything. You and Fred have always taken the piss out of me. Why would you ask me this?"

"Because I need help. I don't know if you've realized, but Fred isn't here. I know we've always given you shit, but you're still my brother. I don't actually think you're a tit, Ron. I want and need your help," George urged.

Ron didn't know what to do. He didn't think that he could go back to the shop. "I-I don't know how."

"I can teach you. I know what I'm doing," George reassured.

"I know but why me?" Ron asked again.

George exhaled deeply. "I would only trust a Weasley to do this, and you're my baby brother. I think that it could be fun after a while. It won't be forever. I know you and Harry will end up going to camp or something. I just need help right now, and I'm sure you could use the money."

Ron hadn't thought about his future career plans. Everything seemed to be on hold. "I'm not sure about that."

George smiled. "Well, I'm sure about this. This isn't something that I randomly thought of. I've put a lot of time into it and after your speech; I know it's you that I want with me."

Ron felt the tightness again. "Okay," he said without really thinking. There was no way that he could turn down George.

George's brown eyes lit up. "Really, you're up to it? This has to be for real."

"It is, George. Anything that I can do to help, I'll do it. I'd be honored to work in the shop with you." Ron hoped that he looked convincing. He certainly didn't feel it.

"Thank you, Ron. You have no idea how much this means to me." Before Ron could even blink, George pulled him into a hug. It didn't last long, but Ron was able to hug him back. For a moment, the two of them let their guards down.

"I love you," Ron said before he could back out of it.

"I love you, too, Ron. I really do." George pulled away. He quickly wiped a tear and stood up. "We'll talk more later. Night."

"Night," Ron breathed as George scurried to his room. He let out a breath and rubbed his eyes. He hoped that he wasn't making a mistake. When he got back to his room, only Hermione was inside. She was sitting on his bed reading a comic.

She looked up at him. "They went to her room."

"Probably to shag," Ron said as he joined her on the bed.

She swatted his arm. "Don't be mean. What did George want?"

"He wants me to partner up with him at the shop. I told him that I would." Ron watched her carefully.

Her eyes grew. "He's going to open the shop?"

"Yeah, I'm shocked, too, but he said that it's what he wants and what Fred would want. I reckon it's for the best, then," Ron explained.

"And you're going to help?" she asked.

Ron rubbed his neck. "George wants me to. He said he needs me, so I'm gonna be there."

Hermione kissed his forehead. "I think it's great, Ron. It's wonderful of you to help him. You're incredible."

Her words brought him the life and comfort that he needed. He loved her so much. "So are you." He leaned forward and kissed her.

Hermione leaned back on the pillows. Ron propped himself on his elbow and placed a hand on her stomach. It burned to move places. She tangled her fingers in his hair and pulled on the strands. It made him moan, and it made his hand moved under her shirt. He traced her navel with a finger. He could feel her hairs stand up. She pulled away from his mouth and gave a choked cry. He stopped. "I'm sorry."

Hermione opened her eyes. She steadied her breathing. "It's okay. I liked it."

Ron shifted his legs. He had a full-grown stiffy. Hermione was smiling at him so brilliantly. Her slightly pink face was adorable and sexy at the same time. "Sorry, I'm just tired. I don't know what I'm doing." Embarrassment stained his face. He could feel his ears burning.

She chuckled, "It's okay. It's been a long day."

"Stay please; we can just lie here together." Ron didn't want her to go. He wanted to feel her warm body.

Hermione moved hair out of his eyes. "Okay."

Ron lay down on her chest and wrapped his arms around her waist. Hermione ran her fingers repeatedly through his hair. It felt good. His body finally relaxed. There was so much eating at him but Hermione made it better. She masked what he didn't want anyone to see.

However, he wasn't sure how long it would work. Everyday something new seemed to pull at him.

* * *

****I'll stop there! So, if you like it you must review so I'll know to continue it. I can't keep writing if no one is interested, so thanks for reading and review please! Cheers!

* Chapter 2*: Knights

Wow, cheers for the reviews! Thank you all so much!

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Even though their world had changed, life outside was still the same. Charlie and Percy had to get back to work. Bill had a wife at home, and George wanted to go back to his flat. Ron sat on the couch and watched his brothers hug and kiss their mother. She was so pale and quiet. He hated how she held on to George as if it would bring her closer to Fred. Now that the funeral was over and everything was back in place, life once again sat on his shoulders. He didn't know what he was going to do. He went upstairs with Hermione. He was tired of saying goodbye.

"Ron, have you seen my potions book?" Hermione asked.

"Maybe it's in Ginny's room," Ron suggested. He lay back on his bed and twisted his wand between his fingers.

"If it's not in my trunk, and it's not, it has to be in here. I've spent more time in here than anywhere else," she explained.

Ron watched her fiddle through his drawers. "You could always stay. Then you wouldn't have to worry about packing it." Hermione stopped looking and joined him on the bed. Ron sat up and took her hand. "I don't want you to go," he added quietly.

Hermione smiled and laced her fingers into his. "I'll only be home for a week or so. Then I'll be back. It's not forever."

Ron knew that. It's what she usually did when summer started, but this time was different. She had been his vessel of light, and he did not want to lose it. He didn't know how to explain that he felt a little colder without her. "I know it's not forever. I just...never mind."

Hermione took his chin in her hand and lifted his head. "Ron, you can talk to me."

Her eyes were beautiful and brown. Hermione was such a gorgeous person. He could not believe that they were finally together. "I'll miss you. I know it sounds stupid but I will."

"That's definitely not stupid. I'm going to miss you, too. I love being here with you, Ron." She moved closer to his face and pecked his lips.

"I love being with you, Hermione. Thank you so much for helping me through all of this," he said.

"It's what I'm supposed to do. You have to remember that." Hermione pulled away and sighed. "While we're on the subject, we do need to talk about something."

"What is it?" he asked, even though he already knew.

"I take it that you're not going back to school in September, right?" she asked.

Ron shook his head. The very thought of Hogwarts made him sick. "No. There's nothing for me there."

Hermione smiled sadly. "I understand that completely, but I am going back. I have to finish. I need to and I want to. I've spoken to McGonagall, and she said that I can come back."

No matter what Hermione would always be Hermione. He knew good and well that she would complete what she started. "That's great," was all he came up with.

"Ron, if it's too-"

"I think it's fantastic that you want to finish. You couldn't live with yourself if you didn't," he cut in.

A tear fell and she wiped it away. "Thank you. I really do want to finish."

Ron rubbed her cheek. "I want you to finish as well. You deserve to get your NEWTs."

"What will you do?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Work at the shop."

"And camp?" she added.

"Dunno, I haven't really thought about it. I've had a lot of other things on my mind," he mumbled.

"I know, Ron. With everything going on I know being an Auror is the last thing you're thinking about, but your future is still a part of your life and it's important." She squeezed his hand.

"So are you," he whispered.

Hermione grinned. "You don't have to worry about me. I'm staying right here." This time Ron leaned forward and kissed her. He held her tightly and moaned as he felt her tongue in his mouth. They snogged deeply while holding each other.

Even in his room in his house, it didn't fell like home. Being with Hermione was his only soft spot.

A while later Ron decided to go out to the garden while Hermione continued to search for her book. Harry was sitting in the grass. He did not want to disturb him, but it was rare to see him without Ginny these days. He walked up to him and cleared his throat. Harry hastily wiped his eyes and sniffed roughly. He turned around. "Hey, do you need something?"

"No, I just wanted to get out of the house. I didn't know you were out here," Ron said.

Harry stood and rubbed his eyes. "Yeah, it's nice out."

Ron examined him. His eyes were puffy his nose was red. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I'm just thinking, you know?" Harry answered. He wiped his nose again and looked away.

"Want to go for a walk? We can go out to the field," he suggested.

Harry looked as if he wanted to decline, but he answered with, "Sure."

They walked in silence. Ron picked up a stick and broke it in half. He gave an end to Harry. They both peeled and twisted the sticks in their hands. It was anything to keep their minds busy. They reached the end of Ron's property where he and his siblings used to play quidditch. They sat down under a large tree. It gave a great view of the pond. "Hermione is going back to school," Ron said after a while.

"I know. I knew she would," Harry answered.

"I just can't do it," Ron said.

"I can't either, and I don't want to. I'm going to a training camp. I don't need to finish Hogwarts to be an Auror." Harry took off his glasses and wiped them on his shirt.

"I don't know if I'm going to apply. I don't think there's a point," Ron said.

Harry looked to him. "Why is that? Please don't tell me it's because you're not good enough. We both know that's shit."

Ron smiled a bit. "It's not just that. There's so much going on now. George wants me to help in the shop."

"I know that, too, but he doesn't need your help forever. He knows you're coming to camp with me. You have to. It's what you want, isn't it?" Harry asked.

Ron rubbed his neck. He wanted many things. He simply didn't know which ones were most important to have. "I don't know, Harry. I want...I want...fuck, I don't know. I don't know anything anymore." His throat burned as he thought about Fred, but he didn't want to cry.

Once again, they were quiet. The only sounds came from nature and Ron picking at his stick.

"Ron, I'm sorry."

It was barely a whisper. Ron looked up. Harry was gazing at him. "What?"

His best mate shrugged. "I'm sorry for all of this."

"What do you have to be sorry for?" Ron asked.

Harry's chin trembled but he didn't shed a tear. "It's all my fault. Everything would be okay and Fred would still be alive if it wasn't for me."

Ron's jaw dropped. Harry's words stung his body. "Harry, I don't know what you're on about, but this isn't your fault. You're powerful but not that powerful."

He rolled his eyes. "Don't you get it? Fred died to save me. He and the others were in the war for me."

"We all were. We knew the dangers going in. Harry, Fred wasn't a child, and he wasn't stupid. He knew how dangerous it was, but he did it for you because we all needed you to make it." Ron didn't like how his voice was rather hoarse or how a large lump clogged his throat.

"I get all that, Ron, but it doesn't change anything. It was all for me. Teddy doesn't have parents, the Ministry lost one of its greatest Aurors, Hedwig is dead, my parents and their best friends are dead, and now you're without a brother. George lost his twin. I've learned to cope with the others, but I can't get over Fred. He was a part of Ginny and a part of you. Your parents must hate me." Harry held his knees and finally let his tears fall.

Ron had seen Harry break down before, but this was something a lot more intense. He was crying for him. It was so much worse. "They don't hate you. They love you and are proud of you. We all are."

"I never meant for you to suffer. Sometimes it's so hard to look at Ginny. I see her pain, and I put it there. It's written all over you, too. Everything I care about ends up hurting because of me," Harry said in a shaky voice. It seemed as if he had been holding back these thoughts for some time and hearing them only made Ron want to speak what he was feeling.

He couldn't take it anymore. He stood up and kicked at the tree. It hurt but he didn't care. "Fucking hell, Harry, will you stop

it? I feel bad enough. I don't need you blaming yourself. No one is mad at you. Ginny loves you so much. She needs your strength and...I do, too. I don't blame you. I blame them. We all blame them. THEY KILLED MY BROTHER! THEY TOOK FRED AWAY FROM US AND AWAY FROM GEORGE! I'll tell you one thing though; I'll blame you if you do this. We all feel terrible but don't pity us. Be here as you always have. Be here for Ginny. Be here for me." His tears finally came running down his face. He had never been one to cry but, every time Fred's name was mentioned it seemed as if it was all he could do.

Harry stood up. "I knew you were ready to give you life for me and I never wanted that, but it's almost worse that your brother was given up instead. You all mean so much to me. I just don't want your family and especially you to hate me. Hermione keeps telling me you don't, but I can understand if you do."

"I don't hate you. I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm scared, I'm fucking lost, I feel a lot of things right now, but hate isn't one of them. I don't hate you and I never have. I...I love you, Harry, and I'm thankful you're here with me. I'm sorry that I've never told you." Ron felt a bit dizzy. His chest ached with uncertainty and a bit of embarrassment.

Harry wiped his eyes. "I love you too, Ron. You're the only family that I have, and I'm worried that we're not okay. I know that I've been distant, but I just don't know what to say. I don't want you to look at me and see Fred's death. I didn't mean to, Ron. I didn't mean it."

Ron felt like he was going to collapse. He walked over to Harry and hugged him firmly. Harry held him back and used him as support, just as he had done for him those months ago in the forest when Ron had destroyed the locket. "You're my best mate, Harry. We're okay. I forgive you." He didn't even know that he was looking for an apology, but he felt better. The wall that wedged between them all summer started to crumble away.

Harry didn't say much more. Ron held him and let him cry his eyes dry. It felt good. For the first time in a long time, he felt like he was doing something right. When they finally got back to the house, they both were tired and quiet. Ginny and Hermione had taken the liberty of making dinner. "Are mum and dad eating?" he asked as they walked through the kitchen door.

"No, dad made a plate of sandwiches and took it to their room. We made enough just in case," Ginny answered.

"My book was under your bed by the way," Hermione said with a smile.

Ron shrugged. "I knew it was somewhere."

"When are you going home?" Harry asked her.

Hermione poured them juice and exhaled deeply. "Tomorrow, I have a lot of explaining to do. They're still pretty upset about the spell I put on them."

"It was for their own good," Ginny helped.

"Still, they're angry and they should be I guess." Hermione took her seat and rubbed her eyes.

Ron snuck a glance at Harry. He was frowning at Hermione. "Well, this smells good."

"It's not much. It's mostly leftovers from the funeral. No point in wasting food," Ginny said.

"Thanks, it looks great," Harry said to her. Ginny smiled and gave him a wink. They ate in silence mostly. Hermione tried to get more out of him and Harry, but they were both drained from their talk. Harry quickly excused himself and went to bed.

"What's wrong with him? What did you two talk about?" Hermione asked as soon as he was out of sight.

"He's okay. I mean, aren't we all like that?" Ron asked. He knew Hermione wouldn't buy it, but he didn't want to expose Harry's feelings to anyone. It was something between them.

"If Harry doesn't want us to know that's fine, but is he okay?" Ginny asked.

Ron looked at her. "Yes, Ginny, he's okay." When he finally made it up to bed, Harry was already asleep on his cot. He was surprised that he wasn't in Ginny's room. They always slept together. He stepped back out. "He's asleep."

Hermione patted his arm. "That's all right. I should probably get to bed."

"You sure? Harry isn't a heavy sleeper, but I know we can be quiet," Ron checked.

She slapped his arm gently. "There wouldn't be any need to be quiet if we just slept. Well, there is your snoring."

He took her arm and pulled her close. "That's enough woman." He kissed her.

Hermione stood on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his neck. He loved the feeling of her body pressed against his. She tasted so good. He moaned and held her waist tightly. She pulled away. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Write me as much as you can," he said.

She ran her fingers through his hair and kissed his nose. "I will. Hang in there without me. You, Ginny, and Harry need each other and give your parents my best."

"I want your best," Ron mumbled. He kissed her forehead.

She giggled, and he loved the way it echoed in his ears. "You do have my best." She gave him one more hug before pulling away. "Goodnight, Ron."

"Night, love," he breathed.

Hermione kissed his hand before walking down the staircase. Ron sighed and watched her leave. He opened the door to his room. Harry was sitting up in his cot. "Oh, sorry, did we wake you?" he asked.

Harry shook his head. "No, I wasn't asleep in the first place." Ron pulled his shoes and jeans off. He snuggled under his blanket and turned to Harry. "Thanks for earlier," he added.

"You don't have to thank me, Harry. I'm here for you," Ron said.

Harry lay back on his mattress. "When is she leaving?"

"Some time in the morning," Ron answered. They were quiet. "I didn't tell her or Ginny."

"Cheers," Harry whispered.

Ron rubbed his palms on his knees. "When do we need to start applying for camps?"

He could hear Harry shift. "I'm not sure. I would assume now, why?"

"Just saying, we should probably talk to Kingsley about it. If we're really going to do this, we should start, yeah?" Ron was sure that he could see Harry smile even though it was dark.

"Sounds good, Ron," Harry said. "Night."

"Goodnight, Harry," Ron said.

* * *

****Wow, I got a bit emotional writing this one, lol. I hoped you liked it. After reading this, please review and then you'll get the next part! Cheers.

* Chapter 3*: Like chess

Thank you all for the reviews! I really appreciate them. This will be the last chapter like this.
you'll know what I mean when you read it there are

things I just need to take care of before other things start happening, lol.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

The only sounds came from the clattering of silverware on the plates and the sipping of juice. Ron shifted in his chair and picked at his eggs. He wasn't hungry, but it was the first time that his mum had gotten out of bed to cook in a long time. He wanted to make her as happy as he could. "Mum, dad, we can clean up. Why don't you two wash up, yeah?" Ginny said, standing up and taking her and Harry's plate.

"Thank you, dear, but I need to straighten up. This house is still a mess from the funeral," his mum said. Her voice was still hollow and her face was pale.

"I need to go into the office today. I haven't returned any of the owls from the Ministry," his dad added, just as empty. Ron took a huge gulp of his juice. He wished Hermione were there to take his hand or say something comforting to his parents, but he was alone.

"Well, at least let us get the dishes," Harry said.

Ron wiped off the table as Harry and Ginny got the dishes. He listened as they talked in hushed voices. He couldn't stand it. Yes, things were better with him and Harry, but everything was still off. He left the kitchen without them even noticing. He lay on his bed and held his pillow. He felt as if he was waiting on something, but he didn't know what. There was a knock on the door. He got up to answer it. His parents were on the other side. He gripped the door handle and tried to breathe steadily. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No, dear, we just want to talk to you," his mum said. Ron nodded and opened the door wider. She looked around. "Oh, you really need to clean your room."

"I will. I just haven't gotten around to it yet," he answered. "Here, sit down." He shoved all the rubbish off his bed so his parents could sit. He sat on Harry's cot in front of them.

His dad rubbed his neck. "George told us about you opening the shop with him."

"I told him that he didn't have to if he wasn't ready. I thought it was a bad idea but he just—"

"Ronald, no one is upset with you. We think it's a brilliant idea," his mum said.

Ron rubbed his palms against his knees. They were itching again. "You—you do?"

His dad took his mum's hand and gripped it tightly. "Yes, if it's what George needs, then I think it's amazing that you'll be there

for him. George is trying his best to stay afloat, and you're helping him."

Ron didn't think that he deserved that much credit. He wasn't bringing Fred back to life, and he certainly wasn't taking George's pain away. "I guess," was all he could say.

"It's time that we all start trying a bit more. Your other brothers are back at work. Dad is going back to work soon, Ginny is going back to school, and I need to get her squared away. I also really need to clean this house, and you and Harry need to start planning for camps." His mum didn't look happy with her last addition. Ron knew that she didn't completely approve of him becoming an Auror now.

"Yeah, Harry and I talked about it. We need to get some advice from Kingsley," Ron told.

"I'll give him an owl if I don't see him at work. Maybe you two can come into work with me and see him," his dad said.

Ron tried his best to smile at him. "Thanks, dad."

"We're so proud of you, Ron. We are proud of you all. This is so hard and...and I-I just..." his mum trailed off. Fat tears rolled down her cheeks, and she wiped them quickly but more fell. Ron felt his heart sinking. He couldn't stand to see his mother cry.

His dad put an arm around her. "Molly, why don't you rest for a bit? I'll help you clean later."

"Okay, Arthur," she said. She got up, continuing to wipe her eyes.

Ron took her hand as she walked by him. He looked up into her wet, brown eyes. "I love you, mum. Things will be okay."

Her bottom lip quivered. "I know they will, Ronnie. I love you, too." She let go of his hand and walked out of his room.

His dad let out a heavy sigh. "I'm worried about her. When Ginny goes back to school and you're at camp, she'll be here alone while I'm at work."

"I don't have to go," Ron rushed.

"Of course you do. It's what you want, and it's what Molly wants for you," his dad said.

Ron looked away. He had no idea what he wanted anymore, so he didn't understand how everyone else knew. "Are you really happy that I'm helping George with the shop?"

His dad jerked his head. Ron got up and joined him on the bed. He had bags under his blue eyes. He looked so tired. "Ron, George is in such a rough place right now. If he asks for help, then he should get it."

"I know, dad. I just don't know what I'm supposed to do. I want to help George, I want to help mum, I- I want to help you, but I just don't know how." He hated the feeling of letting his parents down. He didn't like being a disappointment to them. He could feel the sorrow build, but he tried not to show it. He didn't deserve to feel miserable front of his dad.

"Ron, you are helping. You're helping George by helping him with the shop, and you helped him by giving that speech. It was beautiful. You're helping your mum and me by taking care of things and trying to live each day as best you can. You're doing so much more than you realize. I love you so much, Ron," his dad said.

Ron didn't know where all the emotion was coming from, and the fear was eating away at him. "I love you, too." He couldn't keep the tears back. He looked away. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. It's okay, Ron. I haven't stopped crying either," he said. He took his chin and turned him back. His dad's eyes were wet as well. "Fred was your brother. You have every right to hurt."

Ron nodded and sniffed. "I want to move on from this. I want to be strong for mum."

His dad smiled slightly. "You are being strong for her. Just keep trying, Ron. No one can ask for more. Work at the shop, go to camp, have fun with Harry, fool around with Hermione if you must, but you better be bloody careful every time."

Ron blushed and laughed a bit. "You don't have to worry about that one, dad."

"Good, that's one less thing that your mother and I have to worry about." He kissed his forehead. "I love you, son, and I'm here, okay? I lost one of my boys, but I still have five others to look out for and a daughter. She needs you, too, Ron. You have to talk to her."

"And say what? She's got Harry now," Ron mumbled.

"Don't be like that. She's your baby sister no matter who she dates," his dad said. "I don't want you two going separate ways because of this. Just promise me that you'll talk to her."

Ron sighed. "Yes, I'll talk to her."

"Alright, well, I have some things that I need to do. Keep an eye on your mother while I'm gone." He got up and left the room without another word.

Ron thought about what he was supposed to do now and decided to keep his word to his dad. He slowly got up and walked to Ginny's room on the second floor. He knocked on her door. Right away, she answered and frowned. "Is mum okay?"

"Yeah, um, she's resting. Dad went out," he answered.

"Okay, do you need to talk to Harry because he's in the shower--"

"I want to talk to you," he said quickly.

"About what?" she asked, a bit impatiently.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Can I come in, please?"

Ginny gave him a look before opening her door. He sat on her small bed and played with a loose string on her pillowcase. He didn't know where to start. She sat down next to him, but she didn't look at him or say anything. It was strange. Ginny usually had so much to say. It was hard to get her to shut up, but now things were different. Things were so different for everyone. "So, did you hear about me helping George open the shop?" he asked after some time.

"Yes," she said quietly.

"What do you think about it?" he asked.

She exhaled deeply and finally looked at him. She didn't seem upset, but there was something in her eyes that made him think that she didn't approve. "I think it's great that you're helping him."

"Yeah, and what do you think about him opening the shop?" Ron asked.

She shook her head. "I just don't want him getting in there and not being able to handle it. I'm afraid that he may break down, and we won't get him back this time."

"I know what you mean. Everyone is so glad that he's doing better, but I don't know if this is going to help much." Ron looked on her side table. There was a picture of their family that they took in Egypt. They all had a copy. He looked at his brothers and parents smiling and waving at him. So much had happened since then.

"Did you talk to George about it?" Ginny asked.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say. He asked for my help. I have to help him, Ginny," Ron said.

"I get it, Ron. I understand," she said with a small smile. "I guess since you'll be helping in the shop, you're not going back to school?"

"No, I have no business there anymore," he said.

She laughed. "Yeah, that's what Harry said. It'll just be me and Hermione, I reckon."

Ron grinned. "You two will be fine. I'm sure McGonagall will make an exception and have her be Head Girl. She'll take care of everything. She always does."

"I'm not worried about us so much. I'm worried about mum and dad. We won't be here to take care of things. I know they said that they're going to start trying more but still. You've seen how mum is." Ginny bit her lip. Ron knew that she didn't want to cry. She's wasn't the crying type.

"I don't have to go to camp. I can stay here," he said..

"Don't you even think about it, Ron. You're going to the bloody camp," she ordered.

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not like Harry. Training camps aren't going to be waiting for my application."

"Don't do that. Taking pity on yourself isn't going to solve anything," she said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I should be strong and confident like you," Ron snapped.

"Fuck off, Ron. You're not the only one in a bad place right now," she snapped back.

This was why he didn't want to talk to her. They always ended up fighting. He crossed his arms. "You could've fooled me. Everything seems to be going great for you."

She gawked at him. "What? You think things are going great? You think I'm just pissing around these days? Well, I hate to break it to you, but I'm not fine. Things are not great. I helped bury my big brother not too long ago. Perhaps you've forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten, Ginny. I fucking remember it every day. I'd talk to you about it, but you seem to be busy shagging my best mate!" Ron screamed. He hadn't meant to say it, but it erupted from him before he could stop it. The dirty truth was bitter on his tongue.

Ginny stood up. "Grow up, Ron! Harry is my boyfriend. I do enjoy spending time with him. We are trying to get through this. Just like you're getting through it with Hermione."

"What about us, then? When do we get to go through it? He's our brother!" Ron said.

"I don't know, Ron. When you find the time for me! When you're finished getting all your comfort from Hermione, then we can. I'm your sister. I need you!" Ginny wiped her eyes and breathed deeply. She put her hands on her hips. "I-I would like for you to be around," she said in a much quieter voice.

Ron rubbed his neck. "I am around, Ginny. I'm right here. I get the feeling sometimes thatâ€¢you don't need me anymore. You have Harry now."

Ginny sat next to him again. She touched his hand. "Ron, that's not true."

"I'm sorry. We just can't talk anymore without bloody arguing. Things seem to be falling apart all around us," Ron said softly.

She looked away. "I'm worried about going back to Hogwarts. I know people will look at me differently and say how sorry they are. They'll treat me like I'm fragile. I'm not fragile, but in a small way, I guess I am."

Ron gazed at her. She had a distant look in her eyes. "I understand that completely. I keep worrying about not being enough."

She nodded. "I miss Fred. I miss him so much."

Ron could feel the tightness in his throat again. "I miss him, too."

She kept her gaze on the carpet. "As much as all this hurts and as much as I miss Fred, I'm not sorry that you're still here." She looked at him. "I'm so thankful that I still have you. I don't know if I would have survived, losing you. You've always been my favorite brother."

Her words pierced through his skin and hit his heart. There were so heavy with emotion and meaning. He didn't know if he could live up to something so important. "Ginny, I—"

"I won't take it back. I mean it, Ron, and I always will. I love you. No one can change that." Ginny smiled at him again.

He returned her smile. "I love you, too, Ginny. I'm sorry."

"Ron, you have to stop apologizing for everything. This isn't your fault," Ginny said. Ron chuckled and leaned forward to hugged her.

The door opened. "I'm sorry. I was looking for you, Ron," Harry said.

Ron pulled away and looked up at him. "I just needed to have some words with my sister."

"Is everything okay?" Harry asked.

"Yes, we're okay," Ginny answered. "I think I'm going to clean up. I know mum said she'd do it, but I don't want her worrying about it."

While Ginny went to the kitchen, Harry and Ron went back up to his room. "Are you and Ginny alright?" he asked.

"Yes, Harry, we're okay," Ron said.

Harry nodded. "I don't want you to think that I'm trying to overstep any boundaries. I'm not."

Ron frowned at him. "You overheard our conversation?"

"You two were shouting. The walls are thin," he explained.

Ron felt heat on his neck. "I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't mean it like it sounded."

"No, I get it. It's not like she tells me everything, though, and I certainly don't tell her everything either," Harry said.

"Yeah, same with Hermione and me," Ron said.

Harry smiled a bit. "We're still okay?"

"Yes, we're fine," Ron said with a grin. "Oh, dad said we should come into work with him to talk to Kingsley. He'll help us with the applications."

"That's great. I wasn't sure where to start," Harry confessed. "I don't know if I'm ready to go back to the Ministry."

"Mate, if I have to be ready, so do you," Ron cheeked.

"You're right," Harry mumbled. He sighed and looked away. "Well, we should help Ginny. I feel like an arsehole for not helping."

Ron laughed. "You can clean my room for me."

"I wouldn't go that far," Harry said. He got up and headed for the door. "Are you coming?"

"Yeah, I'll be down in a minute," Ron said. Harry nodded and walked out of the room. Ron lay down on the floor and looked up at his drooping ceiling. Things were different all around him but the things that were still the same, kept him sane. He did not want to lose it.

He had to try.

* * *

****So, that's the last of the kind of "heart to heart and moping around" type of chapters. This story isn't just about Ron and moving on from Fred's death but I had to have some chapters in the beginning devoted to him and his family trying to live on. Let's face it, it's bloody terrible and they're going to hurt. :(but from here on it will be different. I mean, Fred's death will still be there but it won't be the main focus every time. Follow me? Well, thanks for reading and review!

Cheers!

* Chapter 4*: Imagine

Wow, I know it has been a few months and I'm sorry! I will try to update this story more often, promise! I'm glad people enjoy the story so I will continue it. :D

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter

"So, it's right down this hall and the first on your left," his dad said.

"You're not coming with us?" Ron asked.

He smiled. "I have a lot of work to do, unfortunately. When you're finished, just come by my office."

"Okay, thank you, Mr. Weasley," Harry said.

"Good luck, lads, not that you'll need it," he said. Before leaving, he gave Ron a hug and kissed him on his forehead. Ron smiled at him. His dad had been doing it ever since he went back to work. He figured it was so if anything happened, his dad knew that the last thing he did was kiss his children.

"See you in a bit," Ron said. His dad gave his arm a squeeze and walked away.

"It's nice seeing your dad back at work. It's good for him," Harry said.

"Yeah, I don't know how much longer he could have sat around the house. Everyone has been nice. At least, that's what Percy says." Ron was thankful that everyone led his or her ear and support, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to hear a billion times about how sorry people were or about how brave Fred had been.

"So, you ready to go?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, I guess," Ron breathed.

They began walking down the hall. Ron felt nervous flies in his stomach. He wished Hermione were there with him to squeeze his hand and tell him that he could do it. She would return to the Burrow that day. He couldn't wait to see her. They reached Kingsley office. His name was written in huge letters across the door. Ron rubbed his palms against his legs. He could not understand why he was so nervous. It was not as if he didn't know Kingsley. They had fought in the war together. Kingsley was even at Bill's wedding, but something was different. This wasn't a casual visit.

Harry raised his hand and took a breath. He knocked on the door.
"I admire your courage," Ron whispered.

Harry chuckled. "Thanks, but it's not courage. I feel like I'm going to bloody pass out, and I need to sit down." Ron looked at him and started laughing. However, he immediately stopped when Kingsley opened the door.

"Ah, you two came at a good time. I wasn't sure if I would have had to push back a meeting with the enforcement department. Come on in." Kingsley opened the door wider and gestured them in. Ron and Harry slowly entered his office. Ron's jaw dropped. It was a rather large room with newspaper clippings of death eaters he had captured on bulletin boards. He wondered if he would ever have such a nice office some day.

"Okay, so, why don't you two sit down," Kingsley said. Ron and Harry sat in chairs in front of his desk. Kingsley sat down, pulled out a piece of parchment, and dipped his quill. "So, let me just start off by saying thank you to you both once again. You have no idea what the elimination of Voldemort and the capture and deaths of some of his most powerful and loyal servants have done to the Ministry."

"Thank you, sir," they said together. Ron snuck a glance at Harry. He was smiling but Ron knew that he did not really believe in it. Yes, Voldemort was gone but the memories still haunted Harry.

"Also, Ron, my condolences about Fred. I don't think I got that chance to tell you at the funeral," Kingsley added softly.

Ron had prepared himself for the looks and the words when he came to the Ministry. Everyone knew the Weasley's as one big family. Now that they were short a member, it was as if the entire Wizarding World knew about it. Fred was a legend now but not for the reasons he would ever want to be. He swallowed the frustration. "Thank you."

Kingsley nodded. "Arthur tells me that you both want to apply to Auror training camps."

"That's right sir," Harry said.

Kingsley dipped his quill again. "Okay, Harry, tell me why. I'm sure at one point or another everyone wants to be an Auror, but if you're serious about it, why?"

Harry's eyes widened for a bit for being put on the spot. "Well, it's what I've always wanted to do. Ever since I heard about it, it's something that I have been interested in andâ€œ maybe it's just being blessed by my parents, but spells and battling, it's what I'm great at. I feel at home doing it, and I think I am capable of mastering the skills needed to be an Auror. To be honest, all the things that Aurors have to do, the dueling, escaping, capturing, hiding, I've been doing all these things since I was eleven years old, and even though I'm young, I have experience on my side. I-I defeated Voldemort."

Kingsley smiled but Harry did not return it. Ron knew he didn't like boasting himself. He shifted. It would be his turn next and

he had nothing so brilliant to say. "That's very honest and very true, Harry." He turned to him. "What about you? Why do you want to be an Auror?" It was a fair question. Many people had asked him the same thing. It was a question he even asked himself, but he didn't have a straight answer like Harry. His reasons were not as clear.

"I guess becauseâ€¢!" Ron trailed off. He felt like a tit again. He was such rubbish with words and finding something meaningful to say. He thought about Hermione and what she would tell him if she were there. He could hear her kind voice in his ear. She would tell him to be honest and say what the closet to his heart was. He sat up straighter and looked at Kingsley. "I don't want what happened to my family to happen to another family. I don't want what happened to Harry to happen to someone else. Those death eaters and dark wizardsâ€¢they kill. They hurt, they torture, and they destroy everything we hold dearest to us. I want to help stop that. I don't have a lot of experience on my side and I'm not the fastest or the strongest, but I know what it feels it to be in darkness. I have the passion for this. I have the history for this. I have been around the Ministry and everything that goes with it for as long as I can remember, and there's nothing I respect more than the Aurors who have kept our lives as safe as possible. I want to continue the tradition."

It felt nice getting it off his chest. He could not believe Hermione affected him without her even having to be around him. Kingsley grinned. "I'm glad you have so much respect for this field, both of you. I really like what you two have to say but just remember, experience and passion, sometimes that can go out the window. You will see death in this field. You will have to kill at some point. You could die. The friends you make may die."

Ron gripped his chair. He looked to Harry who glanced up at him at the same time. His body went cold for a second. He could not even allow himself to think about losing Harry. "Are you trying to talk us out of it?" he blurted.

Kingsley frowned. "Not at all. I'm trying to inform you about the facts. I mean, let's face it, you men have seen a lot more than some of the Aurors already on staff will ever see, but I don't want you to think that because Voldemort is gone the death tolls will decrease or things will be so much easier. That's not how it works. There's still a lot of cleaning up to do. I want you two to be aware of it."

"We're aware sir, and we still want this," Harry said.

"That's good to hear, Mr. Potter." Kingsley pulled out two very large folders from his desk. "Okay, well, you two need to take these with you and look them over."

"What are they?" Ron asked.

"They are packets containing more information about the program. There are applications to different training camps. So, when you're finished filling them out you can bring them back, and

I'll personally see to it that they get delivered," Kingsley explained.

Ron opened the folder. There were many schools that he had heard of but a lot more that he didn't even know existed. "How are these camps set up?"

"Well, it depends on where you go. There are camps all over the world. Some take as little as eight weeks and some take as much as eight months to complete. It really depends on the level of intensity and where you plan to base you work," Kingsley said.

"What if we wanted to stay here and base at this Ministry?" Harry asked.

"Then you might want to consider camps like Goldbard or Lambrick," Kingsley said.

"Isn't Lambrick the best training camp in Britain?" Ron asked.

"Well, I don't know about the best but Moody went there and so did Tonks and so did I," Kingsley said.

Harry smiled. "Sounds like the best to me."

"It's a very intense training facility and very selective, but please fill out the application. What happens is that you'll send in your application with a letter of recommendation and then if you are selected to have a practical exam. You will meet with an Auror who works at the camp. You will show the instructor some skills in a variety of different areas of magic as well as a written exam, then you will get either a letter of welcome or a letter of regard. Currently, to be honest, camps are sending more letters of the latter. We need top students to do top work. So, be prepared for some rejection." Kingsley looked to Harry and then settled his eyes on Ron.

"Thank you sir, we'll get these in as soon as possible," Ron said.

"You don't have to rush. Really think about what you want to say on your applications. This is a big career and life changing decision," Kingsley said, standing up. He held out his hand. Ron and Harry shook it.

"Thank you for seeing us," Ron said.

"Not a problem. It's nice to see young people interested in this and aren't afraid of the risks. This job is a major risk," Kingsley said.

Risk kept repeating in Ron's mind as they walked to his dad's office. He knew being an Auror would be hard, but he hated the word risk. He did not want to risk anything else. "That was intense," Harry said.

"Yeah, Kingsley doesn't hold back," Ron said.

"It doesn't change my mind. I still want it," Harry said.

"Me too, but I probably won't be as lucky as you," Ron confessed.

Harry grabbed his arm and stopped. "What do you mean by that?"

He shrugged. "Come on, Harry. No one would ever turn you away. You defeated Voldemort. You are the Chosen One. You're the reason we're all alive."

"Get off it, Ron! It's not that easy, and I'm not that great. You were there, too, and any camp would be happy to have you. Stop doing this to yourself." Harry sighed and rubbed his temples.

"Sorry," Ron mumbled.

"You're a hero, Ron, and what you said to Kingsley was amazing," Harry said with a smile.

"Thank Hermione. It was something she would say," Ron said.

Harry chuckled. "I'm sure you'll thank her enough for the both of us when she gets back."

"Too right you are, Potter," Ron said.

When they finally got home, Ron rushed into the house.

"She's not here yet," Ginny said from the couch.

Harry sat next to her and kissed her cheek. "What are you up to?"

Ginny sighed. "Mending books. I think this was Charlie's."

Ron sat on the arm of the couch. "You aren't getting any new ones?"

Ginny looked at him. "I don't know. Mum said that we need to do some shopping before I go back. I'll be the first kid in a while to go to seventh year and complete it."

Ron looked down. He felt a bit guilty for not going back. Not only because Hermione would be there alone, but also he knew that his mother wanted him to finish. "Well, you'll have to make us all proud."

"Oh, she'll make us proud," Harry whispered. He kissed her neck and she moaned slightly.

Ron gagged and stood up. "I'll be in my room. Wake me when it's time to eat." He pouted as he kicked off his shoes and settled under the blanket. It had been too long since he saw Hermione, and he missed her terribly. He thought about what would happen when she left for school and he went to camp. He would rarely see her. He wasn't sure if it was a risk he was willing to take. Ron's eyes drifted close and he tried to find peace.

Someone was shaking him. "Hmm?" Ron said. There wasn't an answer. "Hmm?" He tried again. There still wasn't an answer. He then felt something warm against his ear. Someone was kissing him. He opened his eyes.

"I thought that one would work."

Luckily, Ron was already lying down because his knees would have given out if he were standing up. "Am I dreaming?" The girl before him had bushy brown hair, a gorgeous pair of lips and kind chocolate eyes, but with his luck, it could have been anything.

She laughed. "No, you're not. Why are you being silly?"

Ron rubbed his eyes and sat up. "Well, you look like Hermione, but it's been so long since I've seen you that I could be suffering from withdrawal."

She laughed harder. "I'm back," she said softly.

Ron's heart melted. He took her arm and gently tugged her to him. She sat on his bed and he held on to her tightly, taking in her warm, sweet scent. "I missed you so bloody much," he said.

Hermione held him back just as tightly. "I missed you, too. Who knew a week and a half could feel so long." Ron didn't answer. He just kept holding her. She was right. The past week had felt like eternity. He didn't want to let her go. He let all his emotions pass through him and into her. "Ron, are you okay?"

He finally pulled away. He caressed her cheek with his thumb. "I'm a lot better now. I love you."

She smiled. "I love you, too."

The layer of coldness broke and warmth filled his body. Hermione had no idea what she did to him. "How was it?" he asked.

Hermione moved hair out of his face. "It was okay. We had a lot to talk about, but I think we are going to be okay. I'm happy to be back. How is everyone?"

"A bit better, I reckon. Dad is going back to work. He actually took Harry and me to see Kingsley about camps. Mum is doing better as well. Ginny and I are really trying," he explained.

She took his hand. "And you? You're really okay?"

He shrugged. "Don't have a choice, do I?"

Hermione traced his lips. "Well, I'm glad you were able to function without me."

His skin heated up. Aside from the emotional loss, physically Ron had been a wreck. He pulled on her shirt collar and brought their lips together. They both immediately moaned. Hermione tangled her fingers in his hair as he held onto her waist. He missed her body. It always made him feel alive. She deepened the kiss,

making Ron fall back against his pillows. She got on top of him. He squeezed her arse, making her whimper. He didn't know where the aggression was coming from. All he knew was that now he had Hermione, and he would not let himself get in the way. He held onto her waist securely and rolled over so he was on top.

Hermione pulled away from his mouth. "Oh, Ron, what is this?" she asked in excitement.

Ron blushed furiously. "Dunno, do you like it?"

She bit her lip and opened her legs. "I love it."

He smiled and settled between them. He kissed her again and slowly pushed into her. She arched her back and gripped his shoulders. He loved the feeling of her pushing into him. He was so turned on. He did it again, making her groan his name. Ron left her mouth and began kissing her neck. The heat of her skin only fired up his body more. There were so many things that he wanted to do. There were so many places that he wanted to see and explore. Hermione's body was a vast field of opportunity, and he wanted to please her. It felt good knowing that he made her happy. However, as good as it felt, uncertainty crept in. He wasn't sure what she wanted or how far he could go, so, as much as he wanted to continue, he stopped.

He pulled away. "Maybe we should stop. I'd hate for Harry or someone to walk in on us. We'd never live it down."

Ron was almost disappointed when Hermione gave a nod. "You're right. We should stop. You're mum is making lunch anyway." He moved off her and she crawled out of bed. "Are you coming?"

He had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. "In a minute." When Hermione closed the door behind her, he sighed and flopped against his bed. He hated that he didn't have the bollocks to touch his girlfriend, and he was a knob because he was even too embarrassed to ask. The last thing that he wanted was to push Hermione and ruin things for them. He did not want her to think that he would be with her what he was with Lavender. "I'm such a fucker," he mumbled to himself as he finished on his own what he and Hermione had started.

Ron finally came downstairs and into the kitchen. "It's about time. Your food is getting cold," his mum said.

He took his seat next to Hermione. Harry sat across from him and grinned. "So, you couldn't come down with Hermione?"

Ron tried his hardest not to blush. It was impossible. "Shut it."

"Ronald, be nice. Tell me how your meeting went with Kingsley," his mum said.

Ron smiled at her. It was nice to see her out of the bedroom room and looking a bit more alive. Things were not back to normal, but they were all trying. "It was fine. Kingsley had a lot to warn us

about. He gave us some packets to look over and applications to fill out."

"Yes, Harry showed us some of them. Do you know what school you want to go to?" Ginny asked.

Ron shrugged. Of course, he wanted to say Lambrick. "I dunno. I haven't really looked over them yet."

"Nothing is due yet. Ron and I have a lot of figuring out to do," Harry said.

"Yes, and speaking of which, Hermione, I'm taking Ginny to get her school supplies. Would you like to come?" his mum asked.

"That sounds great, Mrs. Weasley. There are a lot more books that I'll need this year," Hermione said, her eyes widening.

"But you just got here. Shouldn't you rest?" Ron asked, rubbing her shoulders.

She smiled at him sweetly. "I'm okay, Ron."

"Yeah, I'm sure she can take care of herself," Ginny said, rolling her eyes. Ron wanted to come back with something but held his tongue. He was too exhausted to argue. He spent the rest of his day with Harry in the yard. They threw the quaffle around and talked about their meeting with Kingsley. Of course, Harry mentioned repeatedly how he wanted to go to Lambrick. Ron knew that he would get in without any trouble. He didn't bring up his doubts. He didn't want Harry telling him not to worry. He had every reason in the world to worry. As night drew in, so did fatigue. They stopped for the day and Ron headed up to his room. He opened his door to find Hermione sitting on his bed playing cards.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked, walking in.

"Waiting for you, of course," she answered with a smile.

He slowly walked over to her and sat on the edge of the bed. He then noticed the cards. "What is this?"

"Solitaire," she said simply. "Don't worry, it's a Muggle game," she added when she saw his puzzled face.

Ron shrugged. "Whatever you say." He lay back against his pillow. "So, did you get all of your books?"

"Yes, I may need a new bag. I'm not sure how many books the one I have will hold," she said with a sigh. Ron chuckled. Hermione could complain all she wanted to about a heavy bag, but he knew that she was excited to have so much to learn.

Hermione cleared the cards off the bed and lay next to him. She ran her fingers through his hair over and over. Ron closed his eyes and shivered slightly. Every time she touched him, it felt

like a pulse of magic ran through him. "So, how did it go, for real?"

He took a breath. "Well, Kingsley surely didn't forget to give us the gruesome details. He told us how it's one of the biggest turnouts for camps the Ministry has had in some time. I guess everyone wants to be an Auror these days. He told us about the application processes and about the really good camps. He also told us that the best ones take quite some time to complete."

"That makes sense. They want people to be ready and fully educated," Hermione said.

"Yeah, it's justâ€;" he stopped, not really knowing what to say.

"It's just what?" Hermione asked. Ron shrugged. She cupped his chin in her hand and turned him to her. Ron looked into her big, warm eyes. He couldn't hide from her when he looked straight into her face. She was too powerful for him.

"You have to have a lot of skill and bravery. You have to be strong to be an Auror," he explained.

She didn't seem to understand. "Okay, that's the way it should be. Lives are at stake."

"That's exactly what I mean. You have to really be ready, and I don't know if I can take it. I don't think that I'll be good enough." He turned away from her. He didn't like admitting his failures to her.

"Ron, you don't honestly believe that do you? You're going to make a great Auror. You have already fought and won against Voldemort and death eaters. Over half the people you'll meet in camp won't be able to say that." She kissed his cheek softly.

When she pulled away, he put a finger to her mouth and traced her lips. "Actually, Harry did most of it. I just—"

"Don't start, Ron. I do not want to go through this again. It's not as if you just stood by. You were just as importantâ€;if not more important," Hermione cut in.

He laughed at her statement. "More important, eh? How exactly is that?"

She shrugged. "Well, if it weren't for you, neither Harry nor me would have been able to survive. We needed you to make it through. Plus, you took out some of your own death eaters. There's no denying that."

Her words made him feel a little better. "I also left, remember? I left you and Harry."

Hermione closed her eyes as if experiencing pain. "Ron, that wasn't because you wanted to, and I don't really want to talk about that."

He mentally kicked himself in the bollocks. He had upset her so much, and he hated himself everyday for letting her and Harry down. "Okay," he said quietly. They lay in silence for a bit.

"You know, you haven't told me you've missed me yet," she said with grin.

Ron returned it. "Really? I thought that I did this morning?"

"Mmm, I don't think so!" Hermione leaned forward and kissed him lightly.

"I missed you," he mumbled against her mouth. "I missed you so much."

"I love you, Ron," she said between kisses.

Ron stuck his tongue as deep as he could into her mouth, and she pulled on his hair. He tugged on the hems of her shirt before going under. He touched her soft, warm stomach. Hermione whimpered in his mouth. Already he felt on fire. He caressed her stomach all over, getting higher and high up. Ron was scared but passion won out. He reached the base of her bra and stopped. He wasn't sure if he could continue. Hermione groaned and kissed him deeper. He figured that it was his signal to keep going. He pulled away from her mouth to look at her. She slowly opened her eyes. Her face was pink and eyes were heavy lidded. She smiled. Ron swallowed hard. He moved his hand higher up until he could feel her breast. He cupped it in his hand. He moaned. It fit perfectly. He gently squeezed it and rubbed his palm across her nipple. Hermione jerked and gave a choked cry.

"Ron," she moaned, closing her eyes. He was sure that his heart was beating outside of his chest. He could feel sweat on his back. He wanted to pull her bra down. He wanted to feel her skin directly. Before he could even look at her to get some sort of confirmation, there was a knock on the door. Ron immediately jumped away from her, and Hermione pulled her shirt down. She sat up and fixed her hair. Her face was scarlet.

Ron sighed to himself and went to the door. Harry was on the other side. He smiled. "Can I come in?"

"I should rip your bollocks off now," Ron whispered.

Harry's smile only grew. "Why? What are you two doing?"

"Nothing at all, Harry. You can come in," Hermione said.

Harry lightly pushed passed Ron and came into the room. He sat on the cot and Ron went back to the bed. The three of them talked and caught up. It was nice. For once, they were the trio again and they were safe. However, as tightly as he held on to Hermione and as much as Harry made him laugh, there was an uneasiness that he felt. The idea of going to camp and facing more danger scared him. He was not sure if he really wanted to take the risk.

Ron felt as if he had taken enough risks to last a lifetime.

* * *

****So, I hope you lot enjoyed it! Thanks for reading and please REVIEW! Cheers!

* Chapter 5*: Serenity

Thank you all for the reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry potter

Ron rolled over in his bed and sighed. Sleep was never easy anymore, especially when Hermione's warm, soft body was not next to him. He tried to fluff up his pillow and readjust his legs but nothing helped. He couldn't get comfortable. There was a moaning sound. Ron opened his eyes and sat up. He looked over to Harry's cot. He moaned again. Ron felt his ears burn and he grinned. Harry knew better than to wank with him in the room. However, as Harry moaned again, he began to toss and turn. That was when Ron realized that he wasn't wanking. Harry was having a nightmare.

"No! No! Please, not themâ€¦not them! Take me! Take me! NOOOOO!" Harry screamed.

Ron leaped out of his bed and ran over to him. He sat on the edge of his cot and shook him. "Harry, Harry, wake up! You're having a nightmare."

It was as if Harry could not hear him. His eyes were closed and he continued to whimper and thrash about. "Ron! Ron!"

A chill went through him. Ron had no idea that Harry had nightmares involving him. He swallowed hard and gripped Harry's shoulders. "Harry! I'm here. Wake up, mate. It's only a dream. It's only a dream!"

Harry finally opened his eyes and stopped thrashing. He breathed heavily. "Ronâ€¦Ron."

Ron nodded frantically and put his hands on Harry's cheeks. His skin was piping hot. "Yes, Harry, it's me. It's Ron. I'm okay. You were just dreaming. Everything is okay."

Harry gripped his arms and licked his lips several times. He continued to breathe harshly. "Ronâ€¦Ronâ€¦I'm sorry. I was-I was."

"Sshh, it's okay. I know, you were dreaming, mate," he said. He picked up Harry's glasses from the side table and handed them to him.

Harry put them on and wiped his sweaty brow. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to wake you up."

He shrugged. "Ah, it's alright. I wasn't really asleep anyway. What were you dreaming about, Harry?"

Harry looked at him for a moment before turning away. He rubbed his forehead and closed his eyes. "N-nothing."

"It was more than nothing," Ron whispered.

Harry turned back to him. "I don't want to talk about it. I thought I was done with this shit. I'm just so fucking tired of it all."

He felt helpless. Right after the war, Harry had constant nightmares. They subsided as time went on but he still woke Ron up with a violent scream every once in a while. Harry never wanted to talk about it. This was the first time that Ron had heard anything while Harry dreamed. He now put the pieces together and could tell what the dreams involved. Ron understood. Even though Voldemort was dead, there was still fear that he might come back and take away the people they loved the most. Ron felt a bit of that fear every day.

He rubbed Harry's arm. "It will get better, mate. You have to give yourself some time."

Harry sniffed and rubbed his eyes. "You're right. I'm sorry. I have no business complaining."

"You're not complaining and even if you were, you have the right, okay?" Ron said. Harry shrugged and said nothing. "Hey, I'll make us some tea. Maybe it will help us get back to sleep, yeah?"

Harry smiled at him. "That sounds brilliant, thank you." He took his hand suddenly and squeezed it.

"I'm here, Harry. I'm okay," Ron whispered, squeezing back. Harry nodded in reassurance and let his hand go. Ron smiled gently and got out of his bed. He did not turn back to him as he left the room. He did not want to lose it in front of him. Ron walked downstairs and to the kitchen. The light was already on and his mum was sitting at the kitchen table. She gazed at a photo album and sobbed. He clutched the side of the wall and considered walking back upstairs. He didn't want to see her cry, but he didn't want her alone either.

"Mum," he said quietly, walking into the room.

His mum quickly wiped her eyes and looked up. "Oh, Ron, how long have you been there?"

"It's only been a second or two. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you," he said.

She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "It's quite alright. Come in, I could use some company," she said, pulling a chair out for him.

Ron took a deep breath and joined her at the table. He glanced at the album. Not surprisingly, she was looking at a page of Fred and George. Some were baby pictures. Others were from holidays. He gazed at his older twin brothers. They looked so happy and soâ€¦alive. Fred's brown eyes were bright and mischievous. "Couldn't sleep?" he asked, trying to break the silence.

She sighed. "Yes. I didn't want to wake your father up, so I came down here to look at some pictures, you?"

"Yeah, I'm going to make me and Harry some tea. It should help," Ron said.

She smiled. "That's sweet of you, dear. How is Harry?"

Ron knew there was no way that he could tell her the truth. "He's doing fine. He's excited about applying to camps."

"Of course he is. He is such a sweet boy. He is good for Ginny, Ron. He really is." She gave him a look.

Ron shifted. "I know he is."

"Okay, I just wanted to remind you of that. He's good for her, and she is good for him. It's the same with you and Hermione. She's precious, Ron, and she loves you so much." His mother flipped through another page of the book. "You two remind me of your father and I sometimes."

Ron chuckled. "Really?"

"Oh, yes, you're so much like your father. All you boys are. Fred, oh, so funny, just like Arthur." She traced Fred's smile on a picture. "Do you remember this one?"

Ron looked over at the photo. Fred and George were tugging on a teddy bear, and his mum was behind them holding him. "It's looks familiar but...not really. What is it from?"

His mother smiled tenderly. "Yes, well, you were only four at the time. This was your teddy. Your father took Fred and George to the shop to pick it up for you. It was for your birthday. They were fighting over who would give it to you. George won, but I helped Fred make a card to go with it to give to you. He wanted to do something special for you."

Ron felt a lump in his throat. "He never told me about that."

His mother took his hand. "He loved you very much, Ron. When you were born, they both took great responsibility to be good brothers, Fred especially. I guess it's because he technically

came before George, and he felt like the older of the two. He loved you, Ron, no matter how he showed otherwise."

"I know he loved me, mum. I loved him, too. I still do, I promise." Ron squeezed her hand back. They had not really spoken since it happened. He never knew what to say and she was not around much, but he knew it was important for her to know that he and Fred were okay and that they were friends as well as brothers before he died.

Large tears rolled down her cheeks. "I'm glad, dear. It's so good to hear that." She sobbed again and held the album close to her heart.

"Oh, mum!" Ron got up and wrapped his arms around his mother's shoulders. He held her tightly and tried to be a force of strength for her. He didn't cry. He refused to. She needed him to be strong, and he would be that for her. To make her better, Ron would be anything.

She pulled away. "Please, don't tell your father about me like this. I'm okay! I just!"

"I get it, mum. You just need a moment," Ron helped.

She rubbed his cheek and sniffed roughly. "You've grown up to be such a good man, Ronald. I'm so proud of you, and I love you so much."

"I love you, too," he whispered. He held his mother again and let her cry her eyes dry. He wished that he had the right words to tell her but he didn't. The best he could do was to be there for her.

A while later, Ron was able to make his tea and head back to his room. However, Harry was already back asleep. He held on to this pillow tightly and Ron saw the tip of his wand under the blanket. He set Harry's mug on the table, and got back into his bed and sipped his slowly. He watched Harry sleep a bit more peacefully but it hurt. He didn't like that visions of what happened still haunted his best friend and that Harry was worried about him all the time. He leaned against the headboard and tried to relax. It was not enough. He quietly left the bed and went to the second floor. He gently knocked on the door.

The vision before him was like a wave of serenity.

"Ron, what's wrong?" Hermione asked, rubbing her eyes.

"I'm sorry that I woke you. Did I wake Ginny, too?" he asked.

"No, she's asleep, like you should be. Are you alright?" she asked.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

She smiled. "Of course we can. Give me a moment." She went back into the room and came out with her robe and slippers. She

followed Ron downstairs and outside. The weather was still warm and peaceful. They sat by the pond.

"Want some? I just made it," Ron said, handing her the mug.

"Thank you," she said, taking a sip. He watched the water reflect her chocolate eyes. Her hair was so fluffy and messy. She was even more beautiful this way. "So, what are we doing up this late?" or early I guess is correct."

She handed him the mug back. Ron took a chug. "Harry is still having nightmares."

Hermione bit her lip. "What about?"

"I dunno, but he was talking about giving himself to someone and letting them go. He said my name a few times, as if he was looking for me," Ron explained. He usually didn't tell Hermione things like this, but he needed help to make Harry better.

Hermione had a pained expression on her face. "Harry feels so much on his shoulders. Even more than before. He's really worried about you, Ron. He's really worried about you and Ginny."

"What is he worried for? What does he tell you that he can't tell me?" Ron asked.

"The same things that you tell him and not me, I suppose. Ron, Voldemort is gone, but he left Harry with a lot to deal with. So many people died, and he feels responsible for it all. He doesn't want to hurt anyone else. You have no idea what you mean to him, and he's too afraid to tell you. He has always thought staying a step away will keep us safer, but I keep telling him it doesn't have to be that way. I'm concerned about him. You have to take care of him at the camp. You two must take care of each other," Hermione demanded.

"I'll try my best, Hermione. I promise. I just want to help," he said.

She moved closer to him, and Ron had to remind himself how to breathe. He couldn't figure out how he managed to go so long without her with him. "Just keep being there when he wakes up. It's really all you can do."

Ron put the mug down. "I'm sorry that I woke you up for this."

"No, it's okay. To be honest, I sort of felt like you would come by. I don't know how to explain it, but I was waiting for you. Does that sound mad?" Her voice was soft.

Ron put his forehead against hers. She smelled so good. "No, that's not mad. I know exactly what you mean." He closed the gap between them and brushed his lips softly against hers. He loved her lips. They were so supple. He sucked on her bottom one, making her moan. Hermione opened her mouth and let him explore her. It was amazing. She tasted amazing. The kiss was slow and gentle. He kept his hands on her legs and hers were on his neck.

She moaned and parted from his lips. She dragged her tongue down his cheek and kissed his jaw. Ron shivered and squeezed her thighs. Hermione sucked down to his neck and nibbled on his skin. "Hmm, Ron, your skin is so soft. I can't believe how soft your skin is."

He groaned at her sensuality. "Not as soft as yours." He tugged on her hair and brought their lips together again. He wasn't sure, but he had a feeling that he was addicted to Hermione's taste, her body, her sounds, and her overall presence. He automatically felt at home and safe when he was with her. He loved her so much, and he could never think clearly when he was against her body. "I want you," he mumbled against her lips. He knew they were outside and in the dark but he did not care.

To his surprise, Hermione moaned and bit on his bottom lip. "I want you too, Ron. I want you so badly." She lay back on the grass and opened her robe. Ron's body blanketed in heat and sweat. He had no idea that all she had on was a large t-shirt. Her slender, smooth legs looked delicious. He couldn't help himself; he pulled off his shirt and put it under her head for a pillow.

Hermione's eyes widened. She touched his stomach and traced a patch of freckles on his side. He blushed. He knew that he was not very muscular and he could probably blind people with his paleness, but she didn't seem to mind. In fact, she leaned forward and kissed his stomach. She sucked on his skin and prodded his navel with her tongue. She kept her eyes on his all the while. Ron whimpered and his heart felt like it would explode, along with another part of him. He couldn't believe Hermione's forwardness and how she seemed to be so confident when he felt so nervous.

"You are absolutely gorgeous, Ron," she whispered before kissing his skin again.

Ron let out a heavy breath and took her chin in his hand. He gently guided her back against the clothing. He settled on top of her, and she opened her legs. He traced her beautiful face. "I love you so much, Hermione. You have no idea what you do to me."

She kissed his hand. "I love you too, Ron. I'm so happy we're together." He leaned forward and kissed her. He lightly pushed into her, and Hermione cried out in his mouth. He could feel the heat from her. They snogged deeply and he continued to push gently against her. They moaned in unison and Ron grew harder and hotter by the minute. He ran his hand up her leg. He shook terribly but she did as well. He pulled from her mouth and kissed her neck.

Hermione's hands moved to his back. She lightly scraped her nails down his skin, making him moan. She moved around to his chest and rubbed her thumb gently across his nipple. Ron bit her neck and groaned. He pushed against her harder. Hermione arched her back. Ron's hand went higher. He brushed his fingers across her knickers. Hermione cried out and gripped his back. He stopped all

his movements. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry." He started to get up, but Hermione put a hand on his arm.

"Ron, wait, what are you doing?" she said.

He shrugged. "We should probably stopâ€¦right?"

She rubbed her knees. "Well, do you want to stop?"

He shook his head slowly. "No."

"Then why do we have to?" she asked.

There seemed to be irritation written on her face, and he could hear it in her voice. Ron didn't understand it. "W-well, I assumed you didn't want me to."

"Why?" Hermione asked. "Why would you assume that I don't want you to touch me?"

Embarrassment stained his face. He didn't want to talk about it. "I just thoughtâ€¦you'd want to take things slow and didn't want me toâ€¦me to..."

"You to what?" she asked gently.

Ron rubbed his neck. "Be with you how I was with Lavender. I'm not like that, and I don't want you to think that's how I see you."

Hermione gave him a look. "Is that what you're so afraid of? Ron, I don't think that at all. I know you, and I know how you feel about me. I love you and I love how patient and understanding you are, but there's something you should know. I want you just as badly as you want me, and I really want this. I will tell you if I think we are going too fast but until then, believe that I like whatever you're doing. I want you to touch me, Ron. I...need you to."

Ron had to use all his willpower not to explode in that moment. He was the luckiest man in the world. Hermione grinned at him so beautifully and her pink face was adorable. He chuckled. "Okay, can I try again?"

She kissed him lightly. "Yes," she said, settling back down.

Ron tried to keep from shaking, but it was difficult. He settled back between her legs, and ran his hand up her thigh. Hermione's leg shook, and she bit her lip. He got to the edge of her knickers. "It's okay," she breathed.

Ron leaned forward and kissed her. He touched her. The fabric of her knickers was incredibly damp. His heart raced. He pressed his fingers against it softly and moved back and forth. Hermione cried out and gripped his arm. "Oh, Ron," she moaned.

Ron kissed the tip of her nose. "Feel good?"

"Mmm-hmm," she moaned, as he pressed harder. The fabric became wetter and wetter. Ron licked his lips. He wanted to touch her. He was so achy with desire. With every fiber of his bravery, he slowly reached beneath. He automatically moaned. Hermione's middle was so warm and creamed. He rubbed his fingers against her as she whimpered lightly. "Rrrron, oh, yes," she cried.

"Merlin, Hermione," he panted. He had never touched a girl before, but he was not sure if Hermione was supposed to be so wet. She slicked his fingers like syrup on pancakes.

Ron rubbed his fingers everywhere. He tried not to be timid. He could see the pleasure going through Hermione. He wedged his thumb between her folds and touched her nerve. Hermione moaned loudly. She was flushed and beautiful. It felt so good to touch her finally. He put her clit between two fingers and rubbed it. Hermione groaned. She rocked her hips a bit, opened her mouth, and licked her lips repeatedly. It was not enough for Ron. He wanted her to lose it completely. He wanted to make her feel how she made him feel every second that he was with her. He rubbed her clit harder. He pressed against it repeatedly in a circle. Hermione shut her eyes and pressed her lips together tightly.

Ron shifted his hand and moved his fingers lower to her opening. He gently pushed in a finger. She opened her eyes and hissed. "Does it hurt?" he asked.

Hermione looked at him and shook her head. She opened her legs wider. She stared at him. He pumped his finger in and out of her hot, smooth inside. She was very tight and the pressure around his finger felt amazing. Hermione's entire face and neck flushed with color. He pumped slowly and deeply. Hermione's body was shaking so terribly. "Ah, Ron, I love you so much. That feels so good." Her legs were sweaty, and he could see sweat roll down her face.

He pumped faster and inserted a second finger. She bucked and scraped at his arms. "Is this okay?" he whispered.

"Yes, please, don't stop," Hermione demanded. She put her free hand on his wrist and guided his hand. She set the pace for him to pump his fingers inside of her. Ron bit his lip and watched her move him. She stopped and closed her eyes. He obeyed to her slow, deep pace. Hermione's moans grew louder as he went along. He went a little fast and a little harder. She pulled on his arm and brought their lips together. "Oh, Ron, yes, I'm; I'm." She couldn't finish. She gave a choked cry and tensed up. She cried out and came against his fingers. The muscle tensed around him. It was fantastic. He watched her whimper and shiver. All her feelings were because of him. He had made her orgasm.

She finally stopped shaking and Ron slowly removed his fingers, and it made her groan. He licked and sucked on them. Hermione watched him and moaned. "Hmm, Ron," she breathed.

He smirked and licked the last of her juices from his skin. "You're so beautiful, love." Hermione blushed and giggled. Ron watched her. He was so in love with her.

He crawled into bed not too much longer. He snuggled under his blanket and was finally able to sleep.

* * *

The next morning, he and Hermione were all smiles at the breakfast table. Ron tried to hide his smugness. The last thing he needed was Harry and Ginny whispering. He watched his mother make breakfast. "Do you need any help?" he asked.

She turned to him and grinned. "No, dear, I've got it."

He returned his smile. His dad walked into the kitchen. "Molly, Fleur wrote to you about lunch. Ron, you've got something, too." He handed him a letter.

Ron looked at the address. It was from George. He quickly opened it and read its contents.

Ron,

Can you come by the shop today? We need to get started on putting things together again. That is if you are still interested. Be there around noon if you are.

George

Ron read the letter over and over again. Though he remembered his promise to George, he did not expect it to happen so soon. He didn't know why he felt so scared. He looked to Hermione and smiled. She always kept his bad feelings away, but he knew there were some wounds that she would never be able to heal.

* * *

****So, I hope you enjoyed it! Aren't Ron and Hermione so sweet!
:D Thanks for reading and review!

Cheers!

* Chapter 6*: Brother's Keeper

Thank you all for the reviews!

Disclaimer: No Potter owning

"I don't know why I'm so nervous," Ron confessed, pacing around his bedroom.

Hermione stopped him and rubbed his arm. "It's understandable, but you told George that you would do this for him."

"I bloody know that, Hermione. It doesn't make this any easier," Ron snapped. Hermione frowned. He mentally kicked himself in the bollocks. All morning they had been so incredibly giddy. Now, all he felt was sickness. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be short with you. This isn't your fault."

She nodded. "Thank you, but no one is at fault here. The shop is a trigger for you, Ron and it is an intense one at that. Walking in there, I'm sure a lot of memories are going to fill your mind and some of them will probably hurt."

Ron shivered. "Love, why are you telling me this?"

Hermione took his hand and laced her fingers into his. It calmed him a little. "Because, I want you to be prepared and I don't want you to lose it in front of George. Normally, I would say it would be okay for you to show your grief, but he needs you to be strong today. As hard as it is going to be for you, think about how hard it is for George."

Automatically, Ron sucked up whatever sympathy he felt for himself. "Shit, Hermione, you're right. I didn't even think about that." He pulled on her arm and brought her close. He breathed in her scent and remembered how she had felt under him. "How do you know everything?"

She smiled and placed her arms around him. "I don't. I just know you've given a similar speech to Harry time and time again on many occasions."

Ron chuckled and led Hermione back until she hit the wall. He held her arms against it. "Please, don't talk about Harry while I'm doing this."

Hermione bit her lip and moaned slightly. She looked up at him. Her brown eyes were just as massive and open as they had been the night before when his fingers were inside her. "What exactly are you doing?"

"This," Ron whispered. He leaned down and kissed her softly. He placed his arms on her waist and pulled her as close to his body as possible. Something was a bit different now. He felt more confident and free when it came to touching her. Hermione must have felt it, too. She reached under his shirt and caressed his stomach. He moaned and deepened the kiss. He pushed against her. She whimpered and spread her legs. He wanted to touch her again. He wanted to feel her up, taste her, and do so much more. However, before he could make a move, she removed her hand and lightly pushed him away.

"Ron, you have to go," she breathed.

Ron opened his eyes and sighed. "I know."

She moved hair out of his eyes. "I'll be here when you get back. Give George my love."

"I will," Ron said. He leaned forward again, and she let him snog her for a few more minutes.

He left the room, hearing Hermione promising that things would be okay. He walked downstairs. His parents were on the couch and immediately looked up at him as if they had been waiting. "I'm going to head over to the shop."

His father stood up. "Okay, Ron. Take care of George while you're there and be careful." He then quickly hugged him.

"Okay, dad," Ron mumbled. He was not sure of what he was supposed to be careful of.

His mother was next to stand. "I'm so proud of you, Ronnie. Thank you for doing this. Give George a big hug for me."

"I will, mum," Ron breathed out as she squeezed him. She let go, wiping a tear away. He felt a bit sick again. His parents were acting as if he was going into battle and wouldn't return for ages. He gave them a small smile. "Bye." With that, he Apparated.

Ron stood outside the shop and simply stared at it. Everything looked the same. He rubbed his hands together and tried to pull himself together. After taking a breath, he walked up to the door and slowly entered. While everything on the outside looked the same, the inside was different from what he had remembered. It was quiet. It was so quiet that it was eerie. None of the lights was flashing, and he could even see dust on some of the merchandise. It was horrible. Everything about the place was dead on the inside. He had never seen the shop in such a state, and it truly meant that things were different and permanent.

Suddenly, his heart began to race. He could feel his hairs stand up and sweat covered his body. It was hard to breathe. He could hear the explosion and see Fred's body blasted right in front of his eyes. Ron grabbed at his chest and closed his eyes.

"Ron, are you okay?" He opened his eyes and jumped. George was standing in front of him with concern written all over his face. Ron tried to speak, but he could not get the words out. "Here, come sit over here," George said, taking his arm and leading him to the counter. He went behind it and poured him some water.
"Here."

Ron took it and chugged it down. He was surprised at how refreshing it felt. He licked his lips and was finally able to speak. "Thank you."

George nodded and patted his arm. "Yeah, I know it can be a little overwhelming being in here. How long has it been?"

Ron rubbed his neck and thought about it. "Sometime before Bill got married."

He gave a small smile. "Oh, that long, huh?"

"I'm sorry, George. I don't know what got into me. I justâ€œ!" Ron was not sure how to explain it. Hermione was right. The shop was doing something to him.

George came around and sat next to him. "Hey, you don't have to explain it to me. When I first came back in here, I went absolutely mental. There were pictures of Fred everywhere it seemed. I had to take them all down. People walking by saw me in here and they all wanted to come in and tell me how sorry they were. Some people still do. I hate it to be honest." He ran a hand through his short red hair and rubbed his eyes.

Ron felt incredibly weak. George was handling so much with strength, and he could barely walk into the door without help. He had to try harder. Ron wanted to try harder for his brother. "Well, I can understand that. I do get tired of people telling me how sorry they are, too."

George nodded and looked away. "So, do you really want to do this?"

Ron stood up. "Yes, I'm ready."

"I'm mostly just going to show you around today. I want you to know where everything is and what the products are. Of course, I will take care of most of the actual product making, but I want you to know the basics of what makes everything work. Down the line you can make your own contribution if you want to," George explained.

He chuckled. "I doubt that I'll ever be that good."

George smirked. "Oh, come on. You have the mischief gene in there somewhere. Fred and I used to think it skipped every other brother starting with Bill, but we always knew you had a bit in you as well. It's another reason why I want you here. I think we'll make a good team." Ron grinned. He had never thought that he was cool enough for George and Fred. He had always thought they saw him as another Percy. It was nice to know that they thought he had potential. George took him behind the register and to the back room. "This is where we keep a lot of our products that are on the shelves. We store everything in here. Upstairs there's another room but that's where we keep products that will come out later." George pulled sheets off boxes filled with different toys and potions.

"Wow," was all Ron could say. He looked around at all the supplies. He walked over to a box of love potion.

"Yeah, there's a lot of stuff that needs to be cleaned and restocked. I can't believe that I let all of this get so out of hand. Fred would kill me," George said quietly.

Ron looked over to him. He was leaning over one of the tables and staring at the boxes. Ron knew that he was having a moment. He wanted to leave him alone, but he wanted to help him. He walked over. "Listen, I'm sure that he understands. You're here now. If anything, I reckon he's more angry that you took the pictures down. Wasn't there a huge portrait of the two of you right at the entrance?"

George snorted. "Yeah, as soon as you walk in, there we are. It was the first one I took down."

"Well, I can help you put it back up when you're ready," Ron said.

He looked at him. Ron could see the gloss of tears in his eyes, but he didn't let one fall. "Thanks," he said softly.

Ron nodded. "Let's get started, yeah? It looks like there's a lot to do." For the next few hours, George went through the layout of the shop and some of the inventory. It was difficult for Ron. He could hear the whispers in his mind of what happened on the night that Fred was murdered and everything in the shop reminded him of Fred, but he remembered what Hermione had told him and he tried with everything he had to hold on to her words.

"Bloody hell, I need to change my shirt. I smell like dragon dung," George said.

Ron looked up from a stack of Puking Pastilles. "I didn't want to be the one to tell you."

"Fuck off little brother. Come on," George said. They walked upstairs and to a door that led to his flat. Ron held his hands tightly. Being in the shop was one thing, but being in the flat was another. He wasn't sure if he could stand it. However, he didn't have a choice. George opened the door and walked in. He took a breath and followed him in.

He had not spent much time in his place, but it looked the same. It was a small two bedroom flat and was usually covered in a mess of planning parchments and candy wrappers. It still was. "I'm sure you know where the kitchen. Grab whatever you want. I'm going to take a quick shower," George said.

"Okay, thanks," Ron whispered. He headed for the kitchen but as soon as he heard the bathroom door close, he left the flat. He closed the door and leaned against it. He had to give himself another moment. He had no idea how George did it. The first thing Ron had seen was the same picture that all the Weasley family members had on his table. It was of all nine of them from the trip to Egypt. It had easily become their trademark family portrait.

The flat felt like Fred, smelled like Fred, and was Fred. Ron had been waiting for him to come from the bedroom or kitchen and say hello to him or ask if he finally grew the bollocks to tell Hermione that he fancied her. "Pull yourself together, Ron. Stop

being so fucking scared. You're okay. You can go back and see Hermione after this. You will see Hermione. Hermione. Hermione. Hermione," he repeated aloud. He drew a long, slow breath. He gave himself a little nod and walked back in.

Luckily, the shower was still going. Ron saw the door to George's room wide open. He walked in. It was surprisingly clean. The bed was made and nothing looked like it had been touched in days. He walked out and froze. The door next to it led to Fred's room. Ron's palms itched. He didn't want to go in, but his legs would not move. He turned the knob slowly and opened the door. The room wasn't clean and neat like George's. It looked exactly as it had the last time Ron had seen it. He walked in. Fred's socks were on the floor. His work clothes were folded on a chair, and his desk had a piece of parchment with a quill lying on top. Ron figured George hadn't changed a thing and probably didn't want to.

A plate of food was on the side table, and the bed was unmade. Ron bent beside it. He could see grooves in the sheets where it looked as if someone had been sleeping in it recently. He pulled a ginger hair from the pillow. He wasn't sure if it was Fred's or George's. "Fred?" he asked stupidly to it. He saw the edge of a picture frame sticking out from under the pillow, so he pulled it out. It was a picture of Fred sleeping on the couch and George smearing jam on his feet. Ron has never seen it before. He reckoned it was recent. He laughed slightly, but the picture also made his heart hurt. He knew now that the hair belonged to George. He obviously slept and lived mostly in Fred's room. George also slept with a picture of his twin. It was a picture of his sleeping twin.

He held the picture in his arms and wished that he had the ability to go back in time and save Fred or at least push him out of the way and take his place. No matter how George had ever treated him in the past, his brother did not deserve this. The shower water turned off. Ron jumped and put the picture back under the pillow. He wiped his eyes and ran out of the room. He closed the door and went to the kitchen. He turned the cold water on and splashed his face.

"Ron?" George called.

He shut the water off. "Yeah, I'm in here."

"Did you find anything?" George asked.

Ron dried his eyes with the neck of his shirt. "I'm not that hungry really. I'm just thirsty."

George smirked. "Yeah, I can tell."

Ron looked at him. Any pain that George had, he hid well. He wasn't sure if he should tell that he had seen Fred's room or the picture. He decided against it. It was not his business. "So, we should probably talk business." He moved past him and back into the sitting room. He sat and ignored the picture on the table of his happy and whole family.

"Well, we can work a little bit every day or so. Right now I just want to get everything back out. I'll probably have you working at the front. Lee will be joining me in a couple of weeks or so, and Angelina is always around to help." George smiled as he said her name.

"How is she?" Ron asked, not really sure what the gleam in George's eye was for.

"Oh, she's okay. I mean she's better than she's been in a while," he explained, breaking his smile.

"That's good. She was completely gutted at the funeral. I think she really loved Fred," Ron said.

He gave him a look. "Yes, Ron, I know she was and I know that she did."

Ron rubbed his neck and turned away. "So, when do I start getting paid?" he asked, trying to lighten the mood.

It seemed to work. George rolled his eyes. "Don't worry. You are going to get your due. I need to organize some things first, and then we will work out a payment plan. How long do you want to work? I'll take you for as long as I can, but I know you and Harry are going to go to camp sometime in the fall, right?"

"I'm not sure. We just started filling out applications so who knows. I'll work for as long as I can. I'm still not sure if I'm going," Ron explained. Kingsley's speech still tore at him a bit. He wanted to be risk free for as long as possible.

"Oh, you're bloody going. I'm sure mum and dad are hoping that you'll be the next big success in the family, and you'll need something to keep you busy when Hermione goes back to school," George said.

Ron frowned. He didn't want to think about Hermione's absence. It was a terribly painful dread that he wanted to put off for as long as he could. "How do you know that she's going back?"

He shrugged. "Ron, I may not be there all the time, but I know what's going on. Of course Hermione is going back. How are you handling it?"

Ron rubbed his palms on his hands. "Whatever she wants to do is fine with me."

George sighed. "Look, I know that I usually take the piss out of anyone who wants to get all emotional butâ€œ;I'm trying here. I know it is not fine for you. You love her, and I'm sure you will miss her like mad. I-I can understand that much."

Ron swallowed the lump in his throat and thought about the picture under the pillow. "Yeah, I'll miss her. I'm fucking going to miss her a lot, but I can't tell her that. She's looking for any excuse from me to stay. I don't want her thinking that she

has to take care of me. I want her to finish, and she wants it as well. Besides, someone has to look out for Ginny."

"How is our little sister?" George asked with a smile.

"She's okay. She's getting ready to go back, too. She's definitely finishing. Ginny spends a lot of time with Harry, and I think it helps her a lot. He's been great with all of this. As great as he can be, I guess." It felt weird having to explain it all to George. His family had always been close but now it seemed as if George was sort of an outsider. It was funny. Ron had always thought of himself as the odd one out.

"That's brilliant. I'm glad they finally got together. They're good for each other," George said.

Ron laughed. "You sound like mum. She told me the same thing."

George's smile faded. "How is she and dad?"

Ron gazed at him. He knew it was difficult. Ever since Fred's death, Ron knew things were complicated between George and their parents. There was so much between the three of them and none of them knew what to say. "Dad went back to work, and mum is doing better. She said that you're welcome over for tea any time, and your room is ready if you ever want a break from all this."

George bit his lip and nodded. "Well, tell her I said thank you, but I'm okay here. I'll certainly stop by sometime though."

"Yeah, of course," Ron said, knowing George would not be stopping by anytime soon.

"Well, that's really all I wanted to do with you today. I'm kinda tired, but I'll write you again when I want to pick this back up." George stood up and quickly headed to the door.

"Sure," Ron said slowly. He got up as well and went to the door. He stood awkwardly. He wasn't sure of what to do. "W-well, I'll see you."

George rubbed his neck. "Yeah, thanks again for coming by."

Ron nodded and gave George one more look before deciding it would be best if he simply left. George shut the door in his face but, Ron was sure he hadn't left yet. He leaned against the door and closed his eyes. He could almost feel George on the other side. "I'm here for you," he said before Disapperating.

When he got back to the house, he was surprised to see many people in the kitchen. His parents, Hermione, Harry, Ginny, Bill, and Percy were all sitting. A pang hit his chest. "What's the matter?" he rushed.

His mother was the first to speak. "Nothing is wrong. We just want to know how it went with George today."

Ron grabbed himself a glass of water. "Bill, Percy, why are you two here?"

"Mum told us that you were going to see George today," Percy said.

He shrugged. "So, what's the big deal?"

"Ron, don't do this. How is he? You know that you're the first one to really speak to him in a long time," Bill snapped.

"Bill, you don't have to get angry with Ron about it," his dad said.

Bill sighed. "I'm not angry with, Ron. I just think it's rubbish that George doesn't really want to speak to anyone else. He knows that I and everyone else here are worried about him." He looked to Ron. "This is my only way of finding out how he's doing."

Ron blushed under all of the attention. He turned to Hermione. She nodded slightly and smiled gently. He exhaled. "He's seemed okay to me."

"Well, of course he's going to seem okay. What did he say?" Percy asked.

Irritation pricked his body. "He told me where the inventory charts are kept and how to repair filibusters."

He could see the collective frowns and hear the sighs coming from his family. His mother clutched her mug. "Ron, we want to know if he told you anything important."

Something snapped inside Ron's brain. He rolled his eyes. "Well, I'm sorry if that's not important enough, but it's the best I got. It's not as if I walked into the shop, and George spilled his guts. We talked about what I was there for. I didn't tell him to open up to me and tell me everything. Bloody hell, what do you want from me?"

"Ronald Weasley, don't talk to your mother like that. Can't you understand our concern?" his dad asked.

"I'm sorry and of course I can. Don't think you lot are the only ones who worry. I'm worried about George, too, but I didn't know my job was to be the bridge between him and the rest of the family. I'm there to help him in the shop. That is what he wants out of me, and it's what I'm going to do. I'm sorry, but if you're looking for anything else, you're asking the wrong person." Ron banged his glass on the counter and ran up to his room. He slammed the door and sat on the bed.

He ran his fingers through his hair repeatedly. He could not believe his family. He could not believe his parents and his brothers. "Maybe I should have told them," Ron said to no one. He thought about George living out of Fred's room, sleeping with his picture, and taking all the portraits out of the shop. They were things he was sure his family should have known, but a part of

him felt like it wasn't their business. It was George's way of dealing. It was the same with Harry's nightmares and he clutching his wand while he slept. It was the same with his mother looking and crying over old photos. Everyone had a different way of dealing and it just so happened that Ron witnessed it all.

There was a knock on the door. "Go away," Ron mumbled.

The door opened anyway. Hermione and Harry came in. He instantly felt a bit better seeing his best friends. "Do you really want us to leave?" Hermione asked.

He smiled. "Of course not."

She closed the door and sat next to him. He held her around the waist and smelled the sweetness of her hair. Harry sat in front of them on his cot. "Soâ€!"

"What the hell was that, Harry? How long have you all been waiting for me?" Ron asked.

"I don't know. I was in Ginny's room and then she comes in and says that Bill and Percy were here. I got Hermione and we went to see what was going on," Harry explained.

Hermione pulled away from him. "All anyone talked about was how George is keeping away from the family and how he only seems to want to talk to you."

"That's not my fault. I didn't do anything. He asked me to help him. Trust me, if he wants Bill, Percy, Ginny, or whoever to help him, that's fine, but he asked me. What does everyone expect from me?" Ron demanded. He put his face in his hands.

Hermione rubbed his back and lightly ran her nails across it. He shivered and his body eased. "Ron, please, calm down. Can't you understand where your family is right now? No one is upset that he chose you. They just want to help, too."

Ron looked up at her. She was smiling so sweetly and her touches were incredible. "Well, they need to talk to him and not me. I'm just a shopkeeper."

Harry gave a heavy sigh and both Ron and Hermione turned to him. Harry shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I have to disagree on this one. Ron, you are not just a shopkeeper. Don't you get it? George doesn't want to talk to anyone else. From what Ginny has told me, everyone else has already tried to reach out to him. George hasn't been around or has communicated with anyone since he went back to his flat. You are the only one he's talking to and probably the only one George wants to talk to. Honestly, you probably are the one who can get anything out of him. That's why everyone is acting this way."

"Harry, what are you saying?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. "I can understand where George is right now. He wants to cut himself off from everyone."

"Then why not with me as well?" Ron asked.

"Because, Ron, out of everyone, you aren't the one to push him. You don't like to talk about emotions and nag about how he should eat more or come by. Your speech wasn't full of tears and you are used to seeing George as the brother that took the piss out of you any chance he could get. That is what George wants. He wants someone who will keep him feeling normal. I understand that, too. That isâ€¢that's how I feel about you. You're relaxing, and you don't make me feel pressured." Harry suddenly turned very red.

Ron felt his own ears glow. "Oh, that's good."

Hermione smiled. "That was sweet of you, Harry."

Harry blushed harder. "I'm just saying. Ron, you sell yourself short all the time, but you really do have no idea how much you help people."

Ron shrugged. "I didn't..."

"Harry is right. It makes sense, Ron." She then grinned. "Of course, your emotional range comes in handy now."

Ron pinched her side. "You just wait, Granger."

She raised an eyebrow. "Should I be scared?"

He got lost in her chestnut eyes. "Maybe." He leaned forward and kissed her. He knew Harry was in the room, but he didn't care. He needed his fix before he lost it. Hermione put a warm hand against his cheek and depended the kiss.

"Should I leave now or?" Harry said loudly.

Hermione laughed against his mouth and pulled away. "Sorry, Harry."

"I'm not," Ron said. "You snog Ginny in front of me all the time regardless of the rules."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

Ron chuckled. "Where is she?"

"Damage control. After you stormed off, Bill got really upset. I think he feels the most helpless out of anyone. He's the oldest brother," Hermione explained.

"Well, what should I do then?" Ron said.

"You can't force George to talk to them, but maybe when you feel more comfortable you can talk to him about the situation," Harry said.

"I guess I can do that. It's justâ€¢I don't want to tell anyone anything that I don't think he wants people to know. I hate doing that," Ron said.

"And that's a good thing. Keeping George's confidence is great but remember that he has other brothers, a sister, and parents who are worried about him, too. That's all. Don't be mad at your family. They love him as well. It's all out of love," Hermione said.

Ron melted at her words. Somehow, she always knew what to say and how to say it to make it sound like complete truth. "Gods, Hermione, where have you been all my life?"

She laughed. "Waiting for you."

"Okay, I think I'll leave now," Harry said.

Ron hardly noticed him leave. He was once again lost in Hermione's eyes. They were in their own little world. "You know, what you said, it was true. I almost lost it at the shop but I kept it together, for George. Your advice always works. You know everything, baby."

She put her forehead against his. "Once again, I don't know everything. I just know you. I'm glad you were able to keep it together. Is George really okay?"

He considered telling her. She probably had something smart and loving to say about it, but George was his brother and he wanted to work it out for himself. "Yeah, he really was okay today."

"Good," she whispered. She leaned forward and this time Ron had no reason to hold back. He pushed his tongue into her mouth and snogged her deeply. She moaned and wrapped her arms around his neck. He held her around the waist. "I'm so thankful that you're okay. I'm so thankful that you made it out," Hermione mumbled against his lips.

"Me too. I'm thankful you made it out safely," Ron panted as he guided her back onto the bed. They snogged and clutched each other's bodies for support.

With everything that had happened, Ron was relieved that he had Hermione to come back to. He remembered thinking about pushing Fred out of the way and taking his place. As much as Ron wanted to have been able to save his brother, if it meant not having Hermione anymore, he was not sure it would have been worth it.

The revelation scared him but as he held Hermione's body and listened to her moan his name in his ear, he decided to forget about it, and enjoy the moment while he could.

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****So, that was a bit longer than I intended but I'm glad. I hope you all enjoyed it. I will say that Ron is NOT going to be the typically clueless and emotionally stiff character that he tends to be in other works. He's not like that at all to me so I hope everyone is okay with that.

Another thing, this is a R/Hr story at heart but he's going to have interactions and feelings with other characters. I think it's important to explore other relationships as well. That being said, Ron's relationship with George is really important in this story and I wanted to bring out some things that will be recurring themes for this story. The part with his family asking him about what happened is something I can relate to and I personally feel that by Ron being the one to help George at first, that there was this uncertainty with the rest of the family and I think it's real for them to have those feelings and ask those things of Ron. This chapter was a little emotional for me to write. Especially Ron going to George's flat.

On a happier note, I always love ending with something beautifully R/Hr. They are everything. :) So, thank you all for reading and REVIEW if you want the next chapter up! Cheers!

* Chapter 7*: Small steps

Thanks for the reviews! *big hugs*

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

"So, what are my strengths as a wizard?" Ron asked, scratching his head.

Harry looked up from his application. "Ah, well, you can make food disappear rather quickly without a spell."

Ron threw a pillow at him. "Harry, I'm serious."

He laughed. "Okay, you have very good tactical skills."

"I do?" Ron asked.

"Yes, you're quick on your feet, and you're really good with strategy. It's a reason why no one can beat you at chess," Hermione said sweetly. She rubbed his leg and winked at him. He smiled and suddenly felt a strong urge to kiss her. However, he held back. He had to get some work done. Summer was slipping faster and faster away from him and he and Harry had to start filling out applications for camps.

"So, we know your strengths. What are my weaknesses?" Harry asked.

"None," Ron breathed.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Please, not today, Ron."

"What? I'm being serious. You've always been great at everything," Ron said.

"That's not exactly true. Harry, you're not very good with potions, and you said yourself that Occlumency was something that you felt uncomfortable with, along with nonverbal spells," Hermione added.

"Potions? Well, I'm in the shit, then. If we're going by our grades at Hogwarts, then I might as well throw all these bloody applications away," Ron spat. He threw his quill down and rubbed his eyes. He hated sounding so whiny and pathetic, but he couldn't help it. He could list a dozen different weaknesses that he had but could barely think of one thing that he was good at or great at for that matter.

Hermione touched his shoulder. "Hey, what's wrong?"

He shrugged. "Nothing, I'm fine."

Harry got up from his cot and sat on the edge of his bed. "Mate, don't shut us out. What is the matter with you?"

Ron looked at Harry and into his brilliant green eyes. He knew that he could talk to Harry, so he didn't know why it was still a bit hard. "I just...I don't want to set myself up for failure."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Sweetheart, you're not going to fail at anything."

"You don't know that. I mean look at these questions. They want to know what I excel at and what contributions I can make. What the hell am I supposed to say? I can't think of anything," Ron confessed.

Harry shook his head. "Fucking hell, Ron, what is the matter with you?"

"Harry, calm down," Hermione whispered.

He stood up. "No, I won't calm down. Ron, when will you get over this?"

Ron looked away. He didn't like the tone in Harry's voice or the hurt in his expression. "Just forget it."

"No, I will not just forget it. Where have you been for the past seven years? Have you forgotten everything that we've been through? Have you forgotten everything that you've done?" Harry demanded. Ron didn't answer. He kept his gaze on the floor.
"Well, are you going to answer me?"

"Harry, stop it! This isn't helping!" Hermione snapped.

"Why don't you tell Ron that this isn't helping?" Harry walked over to where Ron was sitting. "Ron, look at me. I said look at me, damnit!" Ron bit his lip and looked up at him. Harry's face was completely flushed. Ron could feel anger and embarrassment curl up his back. "Ron, mate, you have got to stop this. You have to stop being so hard on yourself and pretending that you haven't done anything. You have no idea how much it hurts to see you sit here and say that you have no talents or strengths. It really bad, Ron. Don't act as if I did it all by myself. You and Hermione are the reason why I'm here. Stop pretending that it's not true."

Ron rubbed his neck. The truth was on his tongue but he could not say it. "I'm sorry," was all he was able to get out.

Harry snorted. "Yeah, I'm sure you are. I'm going to sleep in Ginny's room tonight." He got up, snatched his applications, and slammed the door behind him.

Ron ran his fingers through his hair and pulled a bit at the strands. "I guess you want to sleep in Ginny's room too, huh?"

"No," Hermione whispered.

Ron turned to her. She had tears in her eyes. He felt his heart drop and a terrible pressure pushed against his chest. Seeing Hermione cry and especially if it was his fault completely shattered him. "Please, Mione, don't do that. I'm sorry, okay. I'm sorry that I'm like this." He reached out and wiped a tear from her cheek.

Hermione took his hand and kissed his fingers. "Oh, Ron, I'm not mad at you. I just hate seeing you and Harry like this. You two are the most important people in my life and I don't like us notâ€œ;together. We're not together like we used to be."

"I know," Ron whispered. He certainly felt the slight chill between the three of them. They had gone through so much together and now it was hard to be normal around each other. "I didn't mean to make him so angry."

"I don't think he's really angry at you. He just doesn't like hearing you be so critical of yourself," she said. "I don't either, but it is harder for him. You've done so much for him and Harry loves you to pieces for it. I figure you being so dismissive of all the good deeds you've done makes Harry feel that you don't care about your friendship with him."

Ron gave her a look. "Are you serious?"

She nodded. "Harry and I do talk, Ron. He's around."

"I know that, Hermione. I just don't know why Harry would ever think that I believe our friendship doesn't matter. I meanâ€œ;it's everything to meâ€œ;and I-I." The truth rang in his ear but once again, he held back.

"Tell me, Ron. What is it?" Hermione asked.

Ron could not look into her eyes. He knew that if he did everything would spill out and he didn't want to go there. He never wanted to go there. "I don't know if I'm good enough to be an Auror. I know I was there and all but still. I'm sorry that I don't have loads of self confidence."

Hermione rubbed his back. "No one thinks that you should walk around declaring yourself king of the world, but you shouldn't think so low of yourself either. Ron, do you actually want to be an Auror?"

Ron finally looked at her. He knew the answer to that. "Yes, I do. It's what I have always wanted. I'm scared. That's all. It's a risk. It's a major risk, actually."

"I know. I think about it all the time. I think about you and Harry going out there. I get scared, too, but I believe in you. I believe in Harry and I believe in you two together. I think it is a good thing that you have fears. If you were completely mellow about it, then I don't think you would be as careful as I know you will be because you are so scared. However, you cannot let it control you, Ron. You're amazing, and you'll be fine. You are a fighter and fighters don't give up." She put her forehead against his and gently kissed his lips.

Ron melted against her mouth. Once again, he instantly felt better and more alive. There was no doubt in his mind. Hermione Granger was his soul mate. He pulled away. "I think I'd die without you," he said tenderly. He had not meant to say it out loud, but he couldn't help it. The emotion was too much.

Hermione's eyes widened. She took his hand and squeezed it. "Don't ever say that. I don't want to think about you not being here or not being okay." She traced his mouth.

Ron held her around the waist tightly. "I'm sorry. It just came out."

She fell against his chest and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Well, don't let it come out again. I mean it, Ronald. I just can't even begin to think about!"

"Sssh, it's okay. I'm sorry. I won't say that again," he cut in. He held her tighter and kissed the top of her head.

Hermione sniffed. "Oh, Ron, I love you so much. I know how you feel. I know it would happen to me if you've left for whatever reason. I can't be anything without you."

"Well, you don't have to worry. I'm not going anywhere. We are always going to be together." Ron was not confident about many things but the one thing he was positive about was that Hermione was his and now that he had her, he would never give her up for anything. He would never lose her or leave her.

Hermione pulled away. Her face was red and her eyes were wet. "Please, Ron, talk to Harry. I want the three of us always to be

together. It's important to me, and I know it's important to you. Please."

"Okay. I will; I promise. I want us to be a family again," he said. She smiled and kissed him again. She suddenly laughed. "What's so funny?" he asked with a smile. As much as Hermione's tears made him hurt, her laughter was a spike of happiness.

"Nothing. It's terrible timing, but I was thinking about what I said about you declaring yourself king of the world. I guess I wouldn't be too upset if you did. It's true." Hermione leaned over and kissed his neck.

Ron shivered and moaned. He gently tugged on her hair so that they were facing each other. "You think I'm king?"

She smirked while going under his shirt and running her fingers down his back. "I always have. You're my king, Ron." Her small fingers ran across his stomach.

Ron could feel the heat spread all over his body. He leaned forward and kissed her deeply, and she fell back against the bed. Ron got on top of her and pushed into her. She broke away from the kiss and pulled on his hair. She squeezed her thighs against his hips and rolled him over. "Fucking hell," he said in surprise.

Hermione sat on top of him. "What?" she asked innocently.

He wanted to tell her that he had no idea she was so strong or that he had never been more turned on by anything in his life, but she did not give him time. She pressed her mouth against his. He sucked on her tongue as her hands ran all over his body. She touched his upper thighs, and he jerked. She went higher and squeezed him. Ron broke out of the kiss and groaned. He grabbed her hand. "Hermione."

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing. It's justâ€œI don't know." He felt like such a tit.

She smiled. "Ron, I want to touch you like you touched me."

More and more blood rushed to his lower region. He looked into her brown eyes and saw the desire. He wanted her to touch him so badly but the bloody fear kicked in. He was so tired of always feeling so scared. "And I want you to."

She eased her hand out of his grip. "Then what's the problem?"

He rubbed his face. "I don't know." She chuckled. He removed his hands. "What is so bloody funny?"

Hermione licked her lips. "Well, here we are. I can clearly see how excited you are and how much you probably want me to touch you and yet you're holding back, probably worried about me thinking that you're forcing me to or something. I swear it, you're too sweet, Ron." She started laughing again.

Ron couldn't help it. He started to laugh as well. Hearing Hermione say it aloud made him realize how pathetically daft he was. "Shut it, Hermione. That's an order."

She gave him a look. "Order?"

He smirked and placed her hand back on him. She whimpered and bit her lip. "I am king, aren't I?"

She eased him back against the pillow and slowly unzipped his jeans. Ron watched in awe. He could feel his heart beat rapidly. Sweat trickled down his back. Hermione reached in and touched him. The instant her soft, warm hand came into contact with his hardness, he bucked. "Hmm, like that do you?" she asked.

"Fucking hell, Hermione," he answered.

She chuckled. "I guess that means yes." She took him out and stared at it. Her eyes were massive and so much color flushed her face.

Ron suddenly felt extremely self-conscious. He knew that he was the first bloke Hermione had ever been with, but he had no idea what she expected. He did not consider himself too small but he certainly could have been bigger. "Hermione?" he asked uncertain.

She broke out of her trance and blushed even harder. "Oh, I'm sorry. It's just...it is more than I imagined. It's just...wow...it's perfect."

Ron was sure his ears were melting off. "Um, thank you...I guess."

Hermione grinned and stroked him. He bucked again and gripped the sheets. She slowly and almost painfully pumped him in her hand. It felt incredible. The only other hand that had ever touched his cock had been his own, and he was certain that Hermione's was a lot better than his was. Every time she stroked him, waves of heat and pleasure coursed through him. "Oh, Ron," she moaned. She went a little faster and firmed her grip.

Ron moaned longingly. He could feel the pressure build and rush down his length. He wanted to cum so badly, but he tried to hold on for as long as he could. He wanted to enjoy Hermione for as long as he could, and he did not want to seem like such an immature and inexperienced boy that he couldn't hold it. "Baby, baby, M-mione, yes," he choked out. He opened his eyes.

Hermione was gazing at him so fiercely. She pumped even faster and looked at him. There was a craving in her eyes. She closed her eyes and licked his head. Ron could not hold it back. The moment her tongue touched his cock, he exploded. He cried out and came violently. He had never felt such an intense orgasm before. He whimpered and pulled on the sheets. "Fuck," he breathed. He opened his eyes. Hermione had white cream on her lips and a bit on her chin. His heart dropped. "I'm-I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to...um..."

Hermione sat up and slowly licked her lips. She wiped it off her chin and sucked it off her finger. "What are you sorry for?" she asked simply.

His jaw dropped. He had no words. "Where have you been all my life?" It was starting to become his standard question to her. Every time he thought that he had her figured out, she did something else that amazed him.

She giggled and kissed his forehead. "Waiting for you. Mmm, I take it that you liked it?"

"You're incredible. You do everything perfectly," he said, overwhelmed by Hermione's talents.

She helped put him back in his jeans. "And you are gorgeous. You're everything that I've always fantasized you'd be but better andâ€¦bigger." She blushed again and sucked on her finger once more.

Ron fell back against the pillow. "I can't believe you. Where was all of this years ago?"

She swatted his arm. "I wasn't with you years ago, and it's always been here. I've just been waiting for you. You're the only person that I could ever be like this with. It's always all been for you."

He pulled her down with him and held her close. "And everything I have is for you. You're the only person I want this from. I wish that we could have been like this ages ago."

"Well, we can make up for it now. That's the important thing." She kissed his neck again. "Hmm, what you did was the sexiest thing that I've ever seen. You're so good, Ron."

He raised her chin so her lips were close to his. "You're better. Bloody hell, you are perfection. Come here." She got on top of him again and smiled. She was so beautiful. "I don't think there's ever a time when I don't want to kiss you," Ron said before closing his mouth over hers.

He held her close and snogged her deeply. He was ready for round two.

* * *

Ron moved a box to the table and wiped his forehead. He was hot and bloody tired. There were so many products in storage, and George didn't trust his magic enough to simply use his wand to move things around. Ron didn't mind. He liked being hands on with his brother's supplies. He came from the back room and grabbed a rag from the front counter. He wiped his forehead and grinned. He

still couldn't get over what Hermione had done the night before and what they had done all night. They touched and explored each other for the first time and, it was marvelous. He was amazed that she had been so confident, gifted, and sexy. He had the most wonderful girlfriend in the world.

He looked around for the inventory charts and couldn't find them. "George?" he called. There was no answer. He walked upstairs to the storage room, figuring he was up there. However, he froze when he heard a moan. The storage room door was cracked open. He heard the moan again. It wasn't a bloke's voice. It was a female's. He walked a bit closer to the door and leaned against the wall. He could hear feet moving and soft panting. His curiosity won out. He had to know who was in the shop other than him and George.

Ron peeked in and had to cover his mouth to keep from gasping. It was a female's voice. In fact, the voice belonged to Angelina Johnson. She was against the wall and George was pressed against her, snogging the life out of her. George's hands were all over her and she seemed to be enjoying it. She moaned and pushed into him. Ron backed up and ran downstairs. He put his hand over his heart and tried to control his breathing. "George!" he screamed.

He was heard that time. George came out of the room and stood at the staircase. "What is it?"

Ron stared up at him. His brother seemed calm and actually, rather happy. George wasn't going to tell him. "I-I need to go home. I'm not feeling very well. Is that okay?"

He frowned and started walking down the stairs. "What's wrong? Did you get too hot back there?"

Ron walked backwards even though George was not anywhere near him. "Yeah, I just want to go lay down. I'm sorry. Can I leave?"

George stopped walking and rubbed his neck. "Are you sure that's what it is?"

He nodded. "Yeah, that's all."

George crossed his arms over his chest. "Okay, you can go. Get some rest, I reckon," he said softly.

Ron turned around and hurried out of the shop. He walked down the streets of Diagon Alley and tried to clear his mind. He tried to get the vision of Angelina and George out of his head. It made his palms itch. Angelina was Fred's girl. He didn't know why George was with her or how she could even allow it. He had to go home. His knees were minutes away from giving out. He walked into his house and sat on the couch. It was still rather early. Everyone was probably still asleep. He ran his fingers through his hair repeatedly and didn't know why he was so upset and terrified.

"Ron, are you okay? What are you doing here?"

He looked up. Ginny was standing by the fireplace with concern written all over her face. "I'm fine," he croaked.

"Then why do you look so upset?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he repeated.

She sighed and sat next to him on the couch. "Ron, I thought we agreed to be more open with each other."

He knew it probably was not his business to tell, but Ginny was his sister and George's as well. "When I was at the shopâ€œI saw George and Angelina."

"Okay," she said.

He rolled his eyes. "Ginny, I saw them snogging. They were all over each other."

He searched her eyes. They widened for a moment but then she grinned. "I was wondering when you'd catch them."

"What?" he asked.

She chuckled. "Well, I had a feeling that they were dating, but I wasn't sure. I figured if they were going to get caught by anyone it would be you."

Ron gazed at his sister as if she was a different species. "Wait, you knew about this?"

"Not exactly but I reckoned it would happen sooner or later," she said easily.

He shook his head. "And-and you're okay with it?"

She frowned. "Why wouldn't I be? Oh, Ron, please don't tell me you that got mad at him or said something mean."

"What? No, they didn't even see me. I went upstairs to find him, and I saw them. They have no idea, but that's not the point. Ginny, how is this okay?" Ron asked.

"What is your problem? This is a good thing," she said.

He stood up. "No, it's not. How is this a good thing? Angelina isâ€œFred's girlfriend. George can't date his brother's girl."

The irritation in Ginny's face faded. She sighed and closed her eyes. "Ron, Angelina isn't with Fred anymore. She hasn't been since he died."

"I know that, Ginny," Ron whispered. "But it's weird. How can they do this?"

Ginny gave him a look. "Ron, George has been in love with Angelina for years. Actually, he has probably been in love with her for as long as Fred has been. Fred just got to her first."

Ron sat back down. "What are you talking about?"

She smiled sadly. "Ron, you were constantly busy with Harry and Hermione while at Hogwarts, but other things did go on. George has always been crazy about her."

He rubbed his neck. "Did he tell you?"

"Not exactly, but I know my brother. He never told Angelina or Fred about it, but he was gutted. I mean he was happy for them but he wanted Angelina, too. I think she had some feelings for him as well and after Fred died, they both acted on them." Ginny explained.

Ron thought about it. "They were extra close at the funeral."

"You don't know the half of it. You didn't stick around long enough. They really clung to each other, and they helped each other," Ginny said. "Ron, they help each other. Why are you so angry?"

He shrugged. He felt guilty and stupid for what he was thinking, but he had to let it out. "Ginny, if George and Angelina are together then it meansâ€œit really means that Fred isn't coming back. He's not coming back for her." He stuffed his palms in his eyes and rubbed them roughly.

Ginny patted his arm. "I know what you mean. Sure, I've thought about them but I can't imagine what you must have felt, seeing them."

"It was awful, Gin," Ron confessed. He looked at his sister.

She didn't seem upset or mad at him. "I bet it, was but did George look happy?"

He sniffed and thought about it. He thought about how George did look very relaxed and happy, and how he was lighter when he came out of the room. George always smiled when he said her name.
"Yeah, he looked happy."

She shrugged. "Then we have no choice but to accept it. If George is happy, then that's all that matters. Ron, you can't be mad at him for wanting to move on."

"I'm not mad at him. It was just really strange. I had no idea that he fancied Angelina. Shit, you should be working with him. You know him better than I do," Ron said.

"Don't be this way. Besides, I think you can understand him. Think about Hermione. Could you continue to pretend that you don't want her?" Ginny asked.

A chill went through him. The years that he went through not having Hermione and thinking that she wanted Harry were the worst of his life. He could never imagine having to go through that again. "No, I couldn't. I want George to be happy, I really do. I

hate the idea of him being so alone. You're right. This is a good thing, but it's hard. I'm so used to seeing Fred with her. I wish you could be there with me, Ginny."

She hugged his arm and rested her head against it. Ron put his head on hers and closed his eyes. There was a certain strength that Ginny gave off and it calmed him. "I wish I could be there, too, but George asked you. I think he made the right decision. You have every right to feel a bit upset about this, but it's George's life and it's not as if it's easy for him or Angelina."

"What should I do?" he asked.

"Just keep doing your job. Don't bring it up. George will tell you about it when he's ready. It will be okay, Ron," Ginny reassured.

"I know. I just went barmy for a moment. It all feels too much sometimes," he said.

She pulled away. "It is too much, Ron. It's too much for all of us, but we have to deal with it. We have to deal with it together. You have to keep talking to us. You have to keep talking to me."

He smiled and tucked a thick and rich strand of red hair behind her ear. "That's another thing I'm working on."

"I know. I know you're used to keeping quite, but you don't have to be that way anymore. We're all changing and growing. You are, too. Let yourself." She turned away and sniffed. She wiped her eyes. "See, I'm changing too. I never used to cry."

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with it. I thought I couldn't cry anymore, but it keeps coming," Ron said. "Ginny, you're one of the strongest people I know. I admire that about you."

She smiled. "Thank you. I have no choice, especially dating Harry." Her smile faded. "Ron, what happened last night? He came to my room really upset."

He shrugged. "I don't know. There are still some issues we have to move past. I need to talk to him."

"So go do it. He's upstairs," Ginny said.

He stood up and held out his arms. Ginny hugged him. He loved his sister so much, and he was so thankful that she was okay. "Okay, thanks for listening to me and straightening me out."

She chuckled. "That's what I'm here for." She pulled away. "Ron, remember that Harry is here, too. He cares a lot about you. You're still his favorite Weasley," she with an eye roll.

Ron walked upstairs and to his room. He opened the door and saw Hermione and Harry talking on his cot. She turned to him. "Ron, what are you doing here?"

"George let me leave early. Um, I need to talk to Harry. If that's okay," he said.

She smiled. "Of course, I have some reading to do anyway." He noticed her give Harry's hand a squeeze before getting up. "I'll be in Ginny's room," she added before kissing Ron's lips gently. He smiled at her as she left the room.

"So, what's up?" Harry asked.

Ron walked over and sat next to him on his cot. He took a breath. "I'm sorry about last night. I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's okay. I shouldn't have yelled at you like that," he said.

"I think I understand it, though. It must get frustrating hearing me being so passive about everything," Ron said.

He nodded. "It does. I've never liked you being so hard on yourself, but it's even worse now. The fact that you feel so little about your accomplishments infuriates me. It makes me think that you find everything a big joke."

"I don't. It's not as if I don't care. I justâ€¦I wish I could have done more. There were so many things that I could have done differently," Ron said.

Harry gave him a look. "How do you think I feel? Every day I think about what I should have done differently. I think about how many times I fucked up and how it cost me or someone I love in some way."

"It's hard, Harry. I want to be an Auror. I want to go to the camp with you. I want it so much. I just don't want to be a disappointment." The truth was close again but he closed it up.

Harry shook his head. "How would you be a disappointment? Ron, you have done so much over the years. That's why this is all so upsetting. You know you have helped. You're a hero, Ron."

He could not take it anymore. "Yeah, I'm a hero who couldn't save his brother. A hero who left his best mates alone because I was too much of an arsehole to deal with it all. A hero who had to stand by and watch helplessly as you almost died."

"Ron," Harry started.

"No, you listen to me. Harry, I thought you were dead. We all did. For those few minutes, I thought you were gone. I saw your body and how lifeless it was. You have no idea how terrifying that was. It was the most painful experience of my life. Everything went away, and time stopped for me. I thought you were dead, mate. You have no idea what that felt like. You have no idea how much it hurt." Ron closed his eyes and tried to forget about that horrible moment, but it wouldn't leave him. His body hurt and he felt so cold.

"I'm sorry, Ron. I...I don't know," Harry whispered.

"Yeah, what I know is that I'm fucked no matter what I do. If I go to camp and we become Aurors, then I have to worry about losing you. If I don't go, then I still have to worry about losing you. All I can think about are the risks and what Kingsley said. I thought I was going to lose Hermione. I thought Bellatrix was going to kill her, but she didn't. She's still here, but I don't know if you will be. I don't know if I'll be enough to protect you. I wasn't before." Ron wanted to cave into himself. Everything in his life was so exhausting.

"Ron," Harry said. Ron looked up at him. "I know how you feel. You say I don't, but I do. Do you know how many times I was close to losing you and Hermione? Do you know how many times I wished that I wasn't friends with you two? I hated that you both loved me so much and were willing to die for me. That's a scary thing, Ron. I'm worried, too. I'm scared of losing you, too. I wonder if I'll be as lucky again, or if I'll mess up and you'll get hurt. Do you understand how much that terrifies me?"

"I understand it, Harry. I just don't want to let you down," he confessed.

Harry smiled. "You could never let me down. Having you at my side is all I need. I'll fight stronger and harder if you're there. When I think there's nothing left or that I should just give up, I think about you and Hermione and it gets me through it. I'm not invincible, Ron. I'm not perfect, and I don't expect anyone else to be. All I want is to go through this with you. I can't do it if you're not there. We have to do this together and take care of each other. Besides, Hermione would fry my bollocks if I didn't look after you."

Ron laughed and rubbed his neck. "Yeah, she keeps telling me that we have to be there for each other."

Harry nudged his arm. "And she's right. Ron, do your best and I will do mine. That is all that matters. We can do this if we work together, and if you believe in yourself. I know, it sounds stupid but I've heard it enough times to where it's finally starting to kick in."

"Probably because of Hermione. She says stuff like that all the time," Ron said.

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, your girlfriend is too smart for her own good."

Ron gazed at his friend and rubbed his palms on his knees. He had to say it. "Harry, I don't ever want to feel like that again. I want to help you as much as I can. I-I don't want to ever have to say goodbye to you."

Harry swallowed hard and his eyes misted in the slightest way, but he didn't shed a tear. "I don't want to say goodbye to you, either. That's why we have to believe in each other. We can do this, Ron." He held his hand out and Ron shook it. They gripped each other's hands but it turned into a hug.

Ron smiled and pulled away. "So, do you want to try and work on those applications again?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, the sooner we finished them the better."

Ron and Harry worked in unison. They helped each other discover their weaknesses and strengths. Ron was surprised. When he actually focused and stopped feeling so bad about himself, he realized he had quite a few strengths. Ron wasn't perfect but he was not exactly useless, either.

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****So, I hope you all liked it! Oh, there are so many different areas that I want to explore. Post DH is a vast field of opportunity. There are so many things that Ron felt and went through and I want to open up the door to as many as possible.

The action will pick up, I promise. There are just a lot of issues that I need to explore. I like it this way. I love writing from Ron's perspective and I enjoy writing him more sensitive and emotional. Too often, he is clueless and is written with very few feelings. I do not find him like that at all and especially after the second war. I hope you all agree! Oh, I guess as a side note, I also like writing Hermione on the more sexual and playful side. Too often, she is seen as this sort of bloodless prissy. I don't see her like that either, lol. There is a lot that she pint up for years and she can finally let it out. So, hehe.

So, thank you all for reading and please review if you want the next bit!

* Chapter 8*: Better days

Thank you readers for the reviews! They mean so much to me!

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Something was kicking him. Ron groaned. It kicked him again. He opened his eyes and looked around. Hermione was curled up at the edge of the mattress and her feet continuously kicked his ankles. He yawned and lightly shook her. "Baby," he whispered. She continued to kick him and a small whimper came from her. He put his mouth to her ear and shook her a bit harder. "Hermione, wake up."

She gasped and shot up. She grabbed her chest. "Ron, why did you do that?"

Ron moved around in the darkness and picked up his wand from the side table. He lit it so he could see her face. "You were obviously having some sort of bad dream."

She held her legs. "Oh, I'm sorry."

The tone of her voice instantly woke him up. He rubbed her back. "What happened?"

She shook her head. "It's nothing."

Ron could tell that she didn't want to talk about it, but he couldn't let it go. Hermione was different. If she was having problems in any way, then he had to know what was going on. He had to help her. Ever since becoming her boyfriend, he felt a new instinct come over him. There was a greater desire to help her and somehow he knew what she needed without him having to think about it too much. "Don't do that to me. I'm your boyfriend. I'm supposed to take care of you," he said.

She frowned. "You don't have to take care of me, Ron."

He rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean. Besides, you take care of me. Haven't you had this conversation with Harry? You don't have to be so strong all the time." He pressed his fingers into her neck and deeply massaged the skin. He knew how much she enjoyed the feeling.

Her body relaxed and she closed her eyes. "Mmm, that's lovely," she purred.

He smirked. "I'll continue if you tell me what's going on."

She sighed. "I don't want to worry you."

He took her chin in his hand and pulled her face to his. He saw how tired she was. "Love, it's too late for that. You've rubbed off on me. I'm always worried now."

His statement made her laugh. "Oh, hush it."

"Seriously, I'm here for you. I know that I'm having some issues right now, but it doesn't mean that I can't help you. I'm still your best friend, Hermione. Please, tell me whatever it is," he asked gently.

She gave him a look. "I bet you don't press Harry this much."

He shrugged and went back to massaging her neck. "Eh, Harry doesn't kick me when he has bad dreams, and he's not you."

Her brown eyes softened. She exhaled deeply. "I was having a dream about the war."

"Yeah, I have those sometimes, too. We all do," Ron said.

Hermione turned away. "I knowâ€¦but mine are really awful." She bit her lip.

"It's okay," he whispered.

She tucked hair behind her ears and put a hand on his knee. "My dream was aboutâ€¦what happened at the manor." Ron closed his eyes for a moment and tried to ignore the terrible chill that stung his spine. Hermione's screams echoed in his ears and the fear of losing her overwhelmed him. However, he fought it. There was no way that he would lose it in front of her. She was always so strong for him. He had to be the same for her. "See, I told you it was awful."

"Of course it is, but we can talk about it. It may help with the dreams. It may make them go away," Ron said.

Her lip trembled. "How do you know that?"

He rubbed his neck. "I talk more about Fred. It's helping a little."

She smiled sadly and sniffed. "I'm glad it's helping."

He took her hand and kissed it. "Yeah, me too. Now, continue."

Her eyes widened as she took a breath. "I was so scared, Ron, and it hurt so badly. She wouldn't stop. I didn't know if she was going to kill me or not." A tear escaped her eye. Ron held on with every bit of his will. He wanted her to stop talking, but he could not ask her to. He had to hold on. "I couldn't really think. Sometimes when I let myself go there again, I get that same feeling and I panic. I feel so stupid when I do."

He took both of her hands and squeezed them. "It's okay. You're not weak for feeling that way. The fucking bitch tortured you but still you said nothing. That makes you one of the strongest and bravest people I know."

She squeezed his hands back and scooted closer to him. "Actually, it makes me lucky. It makes me lucky because I probably would have died if you hadn't burst in. You saved me."

"Don't give me that much credit. I should have gotten to you sooner. I'm so sorry about that," he said. He had never felt as useless as when hearing Hermione scream in agony.

She touched his cheek. "Don't. You came at exactly the right time. You protected me. You are the reason why I'm here. Youâ€¦were willing to give up your life for mine." Her lip trembled again. "That's another reason why I was so scared. I knew they were going to come after you next."

Ron could see her about to break down. "Hermione—"

"No, let me finish. You told her to take you," Hermione pressed.

He nodded. "I know that I did and I don't regret it. Hermione, I would have done anything to keep you safe."

"Even die?" she asked.

Ron was not sure of what to say. He decided to go with the truth. "Of course I would die for you."

His statement only looked to trouble Hermione more. "So, you think that my life means more than yours?"

He didn't know why she was making it sound so terrible. To him nothing meant more than Hermione. "Well, yeah, I think it does."

She sighed deeply. "Ron..."

"Look, I really don't want to argue about this with you," he said. "You can disagree with me all you want to, but it won't change my mind. You're worth every risk, Hermione."

She whimpered again and let her tears fall. She grabbed her chest. "See, that's why I was so scared. If for some reason they let me go but took you insteadâ€¦and killed youâ€¦what was I supposed to do? There was so much going on, Ron. On top of helping Harry and worrying about my parents, I was always so worried that you would die. I know I almost died, but I would have if you had been killed. I would have lost everything." She cried harder. "Harry isn't the only one who worries about losing you all the time."

Ron held her. "Hey, hey, Hermione, it's okay. I'm here now. I'm here with you, and I'm safe. I'm safe because of you. I'm alive because of you."

"I'm just so worried that something else is going to happen. I'm trying so hard to keep everything together, but I'm still really scared." She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his neck.

He could feel her cold tears on his skin. He hated seeing her so upset, and he wanted desperately to take her pain away. "I'm really scared too, Hermione. We're all still really scared."

Hermione pulled away a bit and looked into his eyes. "What if something else happens?"

He gripped her shoulders. "Hermione, listen to me. Nothing is going to happen. I'm not going to let anything hurt you. I'm going to keep you safe, okay. I won't ever let anyone or anything harm you. I promise."

She sniffed. "Oh, Ronâ€¦"

"Do you believe me?" he asked.

She rubbed her eyes. "Yes, I believe you. It's not just me, though. You have to take care of yourself."

"I will. I am. I'm doing better, Hermione. I promise," he reassured.

Hermione nodded. "I'm sorry. I just get so overwhelmed about everything that's happened, and I think the worst sometimes."

"Why haven't you said anything? I feel like such a tit because I think that I'm the only one still completely terrified," Ron confessed.

She shook her head. "You're not. We both know Harry still worries, and I do, too. I don't want to be so weak and especially around you. You are trying so hard to be strong, Ron. I don't want to ruin your progress."

"Love, you don't ruin anything. It's better if I know you're worried, too. I won't feel so alone. Besides, you're a human like the rest of us. Granted, you're a really smart and bossy human, but a human none the less." He smirked.

She swatted his arm lightly and smiled. "You're lucky that I'm too tired to come back with something clever." She grew a little more serious. "I want us to be okay. I want us to make it. I need us to."

"And we will. We will together. Hermione, you're okay. I won't let anything touch youâ€¦except me of course." He wiped her tears away and kissed her forehead.

Hermione chuckled and held on to his wrist. "Good. Ron, I love you so much. I love you more than anything."

"I love you, too. Now, do you think you can go back to sleep? We have a big day tomorrow, and I know Ginny is going to want to start early." Ron fixed the blankets and fluffed Hermione's pillow for her.

"Yes, I'll be able to. Thank you," Hermione said. She lay back down, and he snuggled against her. "Hold me," she whispered.

"Of course, love." He wrapped his arms firmly around her stomach and moved as close to her as he could. He kissed her head. "I love you, and I'm right here." He repeated it until her breathing slowed and she was asleep, but for some reason he had to keep saying it. He kept saying it until his body relaxed and he too was able to go back to sleep.

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Ron gripped Hermione's hand and pulled her close. "You look really bloody good today," he whispered in her ear.

She chuckled. "Ron, you've told me this about eight times already."

"I know but I just wanted to remind you," he said with a wink. Hermione smiled up at him and gripped his hand tighter. Ron returned her smile. He was relieved that she had woken up in a better and happier state. He turned to Ginny and saw Harry's arms around her waist and his mouth against her neck. "Hey, tosser, what are you doing?"

Harry turned to him, but he didn't let go of Ginny. "I'm giving the birthday girl a birthday kiss."

Ron rolled his eyes. "I'm sure you already did that this morning."

Hermione swatted his arms. "Oh, Ronald, be nice."

"Yeah, it's my day and if I want my boyfriend to slobber all over me then that's what I'll get," Ginny said confidently.

Ron stuck his tongue out at her. "Whatever, can we at least get some food? I should probably eat before you lot go in for round two."

Harry laughed. "Where do you want to eat, love?"

Ginny looked around. "Let's go to that tea shop over there. I don't think I've been there before."

"That's probably because it's posh," Ron mumbled.

"Well, everything is on me today. Let's go." Harry bit on Ginny's earlobe and pulled her away. She giggled and the two of them walked ahead.

Ron sighed. "I guess it's too late to give them the talk, huh?"

Hermione stopped walking and sighed. "Ronald Weasley, Harry is eighteen and Ginny is now seventeen. I think we both know that they've already started sleeping together, and it's extremely too late for the talk. If anything, they can give us the talk." She blushed a bit.

Ron eyed her. Hermione had on an elegant white skirt and a nicely snug red shirt. She usually lived in jeans but for Ginny's birthday, she wanted to dress a bit fancier. He found her beautiful and sexy no matter what she wore, but he couldn't lie to himself and say that her outfit didn't do something special to him. "Hmm, we might need that talk sooner than we think," he whispered.

Her eyes widened. "What was that?"

He snapped out of his gaze. "Nothing, let's go eat." He laced his fingers into hers again and joined Harry and Ginny. They got a table right outside the shop. It was a beautiful and warm day in August. Ron watched Ginny sip her drink with a smile. She was so happy. He had not seen such happiness on her in a while and it

lifted his spirits greatly. "So, are you having a good birthday so far?"

She swallowed and nodded. "Yes, it's been a great day. It feels nice being outside and living a bit."

"I agree. We need to do this more often," Hermione said.

Harry looked between them. "Have any of you noticed people looking at us?"

"It's because of our natural beauty," Ron cheeked.

"No, Harry is right. I've noticed it, too," Hermione said.

"It still feels new. All of this does," Ginny said softly.

Ron tapped his water glass. He too had noticed people staring at them. He didn't exactly have God status like Harry did, but people certainly gave him looks. He wasn't used to being recognized either. "Well, let them stare. They should. My baby sister is a grownup now sort of," he said.

Ginny tore off a piece of her bread and chucked it in his water glass. "There goes your grownup right there." They laughed.

"Ginny, are you ready for your Apparation test?" Hermione asked.

She cringed. "I don't know. I reckon I am."

"Well, you better pass. It'll make all seven Weasley kids Apparation able," Ron said, forking out the soggy bread from his glass.

"She'll pass. She's brilliant," Harry said. He gazed at her and rubbed her cheek with his thumb. Ron couldn't help but to smile. Harry treated Ginny so fantastically and he seemed to love her so much. Ron also noticed how happy Harry was when they were together. He felt a bit guilty for being so stiff about their relationship. His mum and George had been right. Harry and Ginny were right for each other. The thought of George made Ron look up the street. They were not too far from the joke shop.

"Hey, are you okay?" Hermione asked.

He turned to her. "Yeah, I'm fine? Why?"

She rubbed his arm. "I don't know. You seemed to leave us for a moment."

"Just thinking," he mumbled.

"Ron, you know the joke shop is right up the street. Maybe you should invite George to eat with us," Ginny said. He looked at her. It was bizarre. Every once in a while Ginny said the exact thing that he was thinking. He had always felt close to her but sometimes he truly believed that it was more than that.

He smiled. "I was actually thinking the same thing."

"It's a good idea. George needs to get out and enjoy the air. I'll grab another chair for him," Harry said.

"What? Am I going alone?" Ron asked. "You should be the one to ask him, Ginny."

"It may be my birthday, but you know George. He'll probably like it better if you were the one," Ginny explained.

Ron couldn't find fault in her logic. He knew that she was right. "Okay, I'll be back." He gave Hermione a tender kiss before getting up.

"Hey, tosser, what are you doing?" Harry asked.

Ron chuckled and lightly shoved him on his way up the street. He felt a bit nervous. He had not really talked to George since he stormed out of the store. He considered knocking but he knew that George never locked the door. He turned the knob and sure enough, it was unlocked. "George?" he called, walking in.

George came from the back room. He had charts in his hands. "Ron, what are you doing here? Did I schedule you to work today?"

"Oh, no, I just wanted to come and see you," Ron said.

He nodded and put down the charts. "Really? Why? Is something wrong?"

"No. Everything is fine. Lookâ€¢you do know it's Ginny's birthday, right?" Ron asked.

George sighed. "Of course I know. Did she get my letter?"

"Yeah, she did. She liked whatever you had to say, I reckon," Ron told.

He smiled slightly. "That's good. Sorry that I couldn't come by. I've been busy."

"I know. That's actually why I'm here. We got a table down the street at a restaurant, and we were wondering if you wanted to join us. It's really nice outside." Ron studied his brother's face. He could see his eyes light up just a tad, but he shook his head.

"Oh, um, that sounds great, but I have so much work to do," George said.

Ron stuffed his hands into his pockets and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "George, I sort of know what you're trying to do but Ginny asked me. She wants to see you."

George rubbed his neck. "She does?"

There was such softness in his voice. Ron knew how much Ginny meant to George and how much he must have missed her. "Yeah, she does. We all do."

"We?" George asked.

"Yeah, well, Harry and Hermione are there too," Ron added.

"Ah, so, it's like a couples' lunch?" George asked. "And you want me to come?"

Ron shrugged. "It's not exactly like that but even if it was I-I guess you could bringâ€¢Angelina."

They were silent. George stared at him, and Ron stared right back. George gave up first and looked away. "I knew you saw something that day. That's why you were so eager to get out of here."

"George, I'm sorry. I acted like an arse butâ€¢I was surprised. Honestly. I'm sorry," Ron said quietly.

George shook his head. "No. You have no reason to be sorry. I shouldn't have been trying to hide it. Not from you anyway. Ron, I know I have a lot of explaining to do."

Ron could see the overwhelming pressure all over his brother's face. He couldn't stand it. "Don't worry about it. At least, don't worry about it today. We'll talk about it another time. I just wanted to see if you would like to eat with us."

"It's not that I don't to. I justâ€¢I can't right now, Ron." George turned away and rubbed his face.

Ron looked toward the door. An idea came to mind. "Did you get Ginny a present?"

"No," George whispered.

"Good. Just stay here, okay?" Ron said.

George gave him a look. "Okay."

Ron smiled and left the shop. He practically ran down to their table. They all looked to him. "Is he coming?" Harry asked.

"No, he can't leave the shop right now but he wants to see you, Ginny. He's got a surprise for you," Ron said.

Her eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Yeah, so come on," he said. She quickly got out of her chair and followed him back up the street. Ron once again opened the shop door.

George was still standing there. His face lifted when he saw Ginny. "Hey, Ginny."

"Hi, George," she said softly. "Ron told me that you had a surprise for me?"

George opened his mouth, but Ron cut in. "Yeah, he does. George told me that since it's your birthday, you can pick out whatever you want in here and it's yours for free."

Ginny and George looked to him. He hoped his blush was not that noticeable. "Is that true?" Ginny asked.

George nodded. "Yeah, of course. We can look around, and you can take whatever you want. It's the least I can do for not being able to be with you today. I've never missed your birthday before."

Ginny beamed and walked over to him. She held her arms out, and George slowly held her back. "It's okay, George. I know how busy you are. Thank you. This is a lovely idea," she said.

George smiled and closed his eyes. He held his sister tightly. "No problem, Ginny. I love you."

"I love you, too," she said, pulling away.

"Well, I'll leave you lot to it. We'll be at the restaurant for a while so there is no hurry. Take your time," Ron said, slowly inching to the door. George gave him a tender smile and slightly nodded. Ron did the same. As he left, he saw George take Ginny's hand and lead her around the shop. Ron felt on top of the world. He walked back to the table and sat. He took a big gulp of his drink and smacked his lips.

"So, what did George want?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing really. I could tell that he wanted to come, but it's still a bit weird for him. So, I thought it would be nice if he were able to spend time with Ginny, at least for a little while alone. He's always taken her birthday very seriously," Ron explained.

Harry smiled. "What's his surprise?"

"She gets whatever she wants from the store for free. I think she'll like it, but even more than that, she gets to see George. I see them both all the time. They need to spend some time with each other," Ron said.

Hermione leaned over and kissed his cheek. "That's wonderful. What you did was really nice, Ron."

"Well, my brothers and I fought and hated each other all the time when we were younger, but there was always one thing we all agreed on. Ginny. She's our baby sister, and we all love her. She makes us feel good." He felt his blush grow. "I know it sounds strange but—"

"No, it doesn't. I completely understand. Ginny makes me feel good, too. She just has this light about her," Harry said with a smile. He looked up toward the street.

"You really love her, don't you?" Ron asked.

Harry turned back to him. "Yeah. I really do."

Ron looked at his best mate and saw the seriousness in his eyes. "Okay. That's all that matters. I guess well I know that you dating her is the right thing. I fully support it."

Harry gave him a look. "Is this your official blessing?"

He shrugged and took another sip of his drink. "Don't make me take it back."

Harry chuckled. "Thanks, mate."

"Well, I don't think it's wise to tell Ginny that Ron's blessing was even needed," Hermione said. Ron looked at her and he could see the glossiness in her eyes. She was so emotional and always got choked up at tender moments, as she would say.

Ron chuckled. "Yeah, let's keep this between us."

Harry suddenly frowned. "Wait, I never gave my blessing for you to date Hermione."

"Oh, here we go," Hermione breathed.

"Well, that's different," Ron said.

"How? Hermione is just as much my sister as Ginny is yours," Harry said pointedly.

"Doesn't matter. See, I'm not afraid of you, but you should be afraid of me," Ron said.

"How about you both fear me and stop talking about this. Why do blokes get to do the blessing? Why can't Ginny and I do it?" Hermione asked.

"How about we all just bless each other? This is giving me a headache, and I still have to go with Ginny to take her test," Harry said.

Ron clicked his teeth. "That works for me."

"Harry, please remind her about the three D's," Hermione urged.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Those bloody words didn't help me."

She smiled at him. "Well, I'm sure she paid more attention than you ever did."

Ron was about to retort but Ginny came back to the table. Her face was flushed and she had the biggest smile on her face. "That was fantastic."

"What did you get?" Harry asked.

Ginny put a rather large bag on the table. "I got loads of stuff."

"See. I told you that he had a surprise," Ron said.

She grinned. "It's more than that though. I haven't talked to George in such a long time. I missed him. It was nice being with him."

Ron felt his spirits lift even more. "I'm glad you had a good time." He watched his sister open and reveal her gifts and he felt so lucky. Some much had been lost, but there were still great things in his life. He was finally starting to realize it. When they returned home, Ginny and Harry went straight off to her Apparation test. Ron and Hermione went up to his room. He pulled off his shoes and felt something on his neck. He looked up and saw Hermione gazing at him.

"What?" he asked.

She moved closer to him on the bed. "You are the most amazing person that I have ever known." She kissed him.

Ron pulled away and licked his lips. "What exactly did I do to deserve a kiss like that?"

She moved hair out of his eyes. "You are such a good brother and such a good friend. You justâ€¦drive me crazy."

He felt himself blush again. "Thank you. I learn how to be good from the best. Hermione, I learn so much from you. You're the amazing one. And for fuck sakeâ€¦have I told you how good you look today?"

She laughed and slipped her shoes off. She lay back on the bed. "You can remind me if you want to."

Ron bit his lip and got on top of her. He settled between her legs and kissed her neck. Her skin was so soft, and she smelled so good. "You look incredible. You have no idea how badly I wanted to put you on that table."

She moaned and pushed up into him. She pulled on his hair and brought their lips close. "There's nothing stopping you now." Ron kissed her roughly. He pushed his tongue in her mouth and snogged her with everything that he had. Hermione sighed and wrapped her arms around his waist. He tangled one hand in her hair and the other massaged her thigh. She whimpered and pushed into him again. He groaned and ran his hand higher. He knew she was okay with him touching her, but he always felt a bit better and more confident when she gave him some sort of sign that it was okay.

He kept moving his hand until he felt her knickers and the heat of her middle.

She broke out of the kiss. "Oh, Ron."

He licked her chin. "You're so beautiful, Hermione." He eased a finger under the fabric and touched her. She instantly cried out and he felt every bit of blood run down to his cock. She was so warm and smooth. He bit her neck and glided his fingers over her. She pushed against his touch.

"Yes, please," she panted. Ron slowly eased a finger inside her. She clawed at his arms and moaned.

Ron pushed his finger in and out of her. He loved how her eyes rolled back. "You like that?"

She focused her eyes on him. "You know I do." She took her hands and almost ripped open his jeans. She reached her hand in and gripped him. It was Ron's turn to let out a cry.

"Fuck, Hermione," he groaned.

"D-don't stop. Let's do this together," she panted. She stroked him again. Ron tried to concentrate on what he was doing, but it was difficult with Hermione's hand on him. He could feel the pressure travel to his lower stomach.

Someone knocked on the door. "Ron? Are you in there?"

"Shit," Ron breathed. He got off Hermione and zipped up his jeans.

Hermione sat up and straightened her clothes. "Well, aren't you going to answer?" she asked.

"Yeah, mum, I'm coming," he said with a horrible blush and a chuckle.

Hermione laughed from next to him. "Not quite. You should answer the door."

He shook his head. "I can't. Not like this."

She smirked. "That's right. I'll get it." She adjusted her knickers and headed to the door. Ron watched her arse all the while. He was still on fire.

She opened the door and sure enough, his mother was on the other side. She gave Hermione a look. "Oh, hello, Hermione." She looked past her and to him. He tried not to burn with embarrassment. She smiled. "Well, we're making Ginny a birthday dinner and a congratulations dessert. Would you two like to help if you're not busy?"

Ron rubbed his neck, but Hermione held it together. "That sounds wonderful, Mrs. Weasley. We'd love to help."

His mother nodded. "Yes, Ron?"

"Of course, mum," he mumbled.

She laughed slightly. "Well, we'll be downstairs when you're ready." She closed the door behind her.

Ron fell back on the bed. Hermione walked over and stood before him. "Do you think she knows?"

"Of course she does. She's my mum and she and dad are very well, let's just say that they're not shy to this sort of behavior," Ron explained. He shivered at the thought.

"I think it's great. Your parents are still very much in love with each other and they still want each other. We'll be like that," Hermione said gently.

He sat back up. "Only better because we won't have time to interrupt what our kids are doing. We'll be doing it ourselves." Hermione laughed. "Well, I'll meet you down there. I have to take care of this." He pointed to his stiffy.

Hermione got on her knees in front of him. "Or I could take care of it for you."

Ron's jaw dropped. She smiled at him so wickedly. "Sure. Let's go with your idea," he said. Hermione licked her lips and unzipped his jeans. She eased his cock out of his jeans and stroked it. Ron felt back once again and had to put the edge of a pillow in his mouth when he felt Hermione's warm mouth suction around his hardness. He moaned into it loudly. It was a glorious feeling and this time he did not hesitate to release.

He was in a daze for the rest of the evening and could not stop grinning. Hermione had a permanent blush as well. "So, did Ginny have a good time?" his dad asked.

"Yeah. We went walking around Diagon Alley and got lunch. I think she had a really good time," Ron explained. He had to avoid his father's eyes. He was smiling at him, and Ron didn't want to be completely obvious. He wasn't even shagging Hermione yet but already he couldn't hide his afterglow.

"That's great. I feel bad that we weren't able to do more for her," his mum said.

"I don't think she minds, Mrs. Weasley. Besides, Harry has been wonderful. He's taken good care of her," Hermione helped.

His mum beamed. "Harry is such a nice young man. I'm glad that he's showing her a great time and decided to go with her to her test. Ron, I also think it's great that you took her to see George."

"Well, I could tell how much he missed her," Ron added. The moment he said it, he realized it was a mistake.

Both of his parents shared a look before turning to him. "Oh, does he talk about her a lot?"

Ron was not sure if he could explain to his parents what he could to Hermione and Harry about Ginny. "W-well, not really but I know how much he cares about her. He was really happy to see her, and she was happy to see him."

His dad nodded. "Does he say anything about the rest of us?"

Ron was not sure of what to say. "Well...I mean...he misses all of you...all of us. I'm sure that if you two would have come, he would have wanted to see you as well." His parents didn't look convinced. He felt a bit of panic come over him. He wasn't sure of what to do.

"Mrs. Weasley, I don't think this is enough sugar," Hermione said suddenly. She scooped a large clump from the can and dumped it into the mix.

She gasped. "Oh, well, now that's too much, sweetheart. Here, let me help you." She turned from him and focused her attention to Hermione. His dad laughed and went back to his paper.

Ron mentally sighed and looked to Hermione. She felt his gaze and glanced up. She gave him a wink. Words could not describe what he felt for her. Hermione simply knew what he needed. He figured her being his girlfriend gave her new instinct as well.

It was nice cooking with his parents and the joyous feeling only grew when Harry and Ginny Apparated into the kitchen. Ginny had passed her test. The six of them sat at the table, ate, and talked as a family. Ron gazed around at his family and squeezed Hermione's hand that was entwined with his.

It was the first time in a long time that he and the people around him were okay and he wished the feeling could last forever. He knew it couldn't but it never hurt to wish.

* * *

****Yeah, I thought it was time for a "happier" chapter. Not all things are terrible and have gone to crap. I hope you all enjoyed it. Thanks for reading and REVIEW! :D

* Chapter 9*: Double edged

Thank you all for the reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron stepped out of the shower and got dressed. He looked himself over in the bathroom mirror and frowned. He was too bloody tall, pale, and skinny for his liking. He did not know why Hermione was so attracted to him or how he managed to keep her interested. He smiled at the thought of her and traced his finger over the small red sore spot on his groin. Hermione was a randy little witch. However, he did not have much room to talk. She had a similar sore spot on her inner thigh. They two of them had a lot of fun the night before. They were outside, alone, and completely all over each other. Ron moaned but shook the images out of his head. He had to get to work and did not have the time to take another cold shower due to thoughts of Hermione and her talented hands and mouth.

He went upstairs and opened the door to his room. "Shower is free," he said to Harry. He took his towel and rubbed it through his hair but stopped when he saw Harry. He was sitting on his bed and gazing at his feet. "Harry, are you okay?" Ron walked over to him and sat down.

Harry snapped out of his trance. "Huh? Yeah, sorry, I'm okay."

"The shower is free if you want to go next," he said again.

He nodded. "Good. I need to get dressed. I'm going to see Teddy today."

It clicked for Ron. "Oh, did Tonks's mum write you?"

"Yeah, Andromeda sent me a letter. She wants to catch up, and she wants me to see Teddy," Harry explained.

"That's great. He is your godson," Ron helped.

Harry smiled slightly. "I know he is."

"But," Ron added.

Harry shrugged. "It's just hard. She lost everyone in the war."

"Not everyone. She still has her grandson and you. You're a part of her family now and she's a part of yours." Ron didn't know what he was saying, but he had to try.

"She and Teddy are reminders of everything that happened and everyone who died. It hurts, Ron," Harry said softly.

"Harry, believe me. I understand. I have to go to work today. I have to see George and be in the shop Fred worked his whole life to start. It's hard every time I walk in there," Ron said.

Harry's smile grew. "But you do. You go in every time."

"Not without difficulty. You can do it, too. You know you can. Andromeda needs you and so does Teddy." Ron patted Harry's arm.

Harry didn't seem too calmed by his words. "Teddy. No matter what we all tried, his life was still ruined. He's just like me now. How am I supposed to be a good godfather to him? His parents were killed before he ever got the chance to know them. I'll have to tell him about them, like Sirius did for me."

"At least he'll be able to learn about him. Why is that so bad?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "It doesn't make the pain or loneliness go away. Actually, only being able to hear about them makes it worse."

Ron felt his heart drop. "I'm sure it can, mate. Harry, I have no idea what it was like for you, and I don't know what it will be like for Teddy. What I do know is that you'll face it and will be there for him to help him face it. You two aren't alone anymore, and it is not just Andromeda on her own. We are your family and Teddy's family. We'll always be here if you three need us." The statement was easy to say. Harry had unofficially become his brother years ago. It was simply common knowledge now.

"Thank you, Ron. I just don't want to fail at this," Harry confessed.

"You won't fail. Lupin and Tonks would not have entrusted you with their son if they didn't think you were right for it. They trust you and have every reason to. I won't trust anyone else to be my kids' godfather." Ron smiled.

It seemed to lighten Harry up a bit. "Is this an offer?"

"Well, I should probably make sure that I have a wife and that she's willing to have my kids first before I ask officially, but yeah," Ron said.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Please, I'm sure Hermione is ready for all that stuff now." Ron blushed a little. Harry stretched and rubbed his eyes again. "Well, I should probably get ready, then."

"You should," Ron said gently, patting his arm once more. Harry got up and got his clothes together. "Do you want me to go with you to see them?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I thought you had work?"

"I do but if you need me!" Ron started.

Harry grinned. "Thanks, but I'll be okay. Besides, as soon as I tell Ginny and Hermione that I am going, they'll want to go, too. You know how girls are when it comes to babies."

"You should hear my mother. She's just waiting for Bill to give her a grandchild. Ginny gets the baby loving from her I reckon, and Hermione thinks that anything small is adorable," Ron said.

Harry scratched his head. "I think that's something in the female gene actually." He gave another shrug and left the room.

Ron got up and finished getting ready. He felt terrible for Teddy and the Tonks family. It must have been horrible for them. Everyday Ron considered himself a bit luckier. He knew his parents and still had them in his life. The door to his room opened. "Is Harry ready?" Ginny asked.

He turned around. Ginny and Hermione wore matching smiles. "I take it Harry told you about going to see Teddy."

"On his way to the bathroom he asked if we wanted to go," Hermione said excitedly. She walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. He held her around the stomach and kissed her tenderly. She pulled away. "Hmm, you smell really good. Maybe I should have you for breakfast."

"That sounds excellent to me. I can be your breakfast in bed," he whispered. He kissed her again.

Ginny cleared her throat. "I'm still here."

Hermione pulled away from his mouth. "Sorry, Ginny."

"I'm not. You never seem to notice me when Harry's mouth is suctioned to your neck," he snapped.

Hermione swatted his arm lightly. "Be nice, Ronald." She sat next to Ginny on Harry's bed.

Ron sat in front of them on his bed. "Listen, you two have to take care of Harry today."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked.

"Well, he's feeling a bit depressed right now," he said.

"I can only imagine. It'll be hard for him to see Teddy and Andromeda," Hermione said.

Ginny sighed. "Did he say anything to you, Ron? Harry talks to me but not as openly as he must do with you."

Ron noticed her tone. He felt rather guilty for being Harry's main ear. "He's just worried about being a good godfather to him."

"Please, Harry will be the best. He has to be the godfather to our kids, Ron," Hermione said. She suddenly blushed and bit her lip, looking a bit uneasy. Ron reddened terribly as well. It was not as if Ron did not know that he wanted to be Hermione's husband and the father of her kids. In passing, the two of them had mentioned their future kids but never in front of anyone else before. It made the topic and idea more serious and more real. Sure, he knew he wanted a family and one with Hermione but it still made him a little nervous. It was an enviable future that was rather scary and exciting to think about.

Ginny chuckled. "Aww, that is so sweet. Mummy and daddy Weasley."

Ron and Hermione's blushes increased. "Shut up, Ginnyâ€œ; even though you're right." He turned to Hermione. She relaxed a bit. "Just take care of him. Take him somewhere fun afterward. I would do it myself, but I think I have to work all day."

"Don't worry, Ron. We will take care of Harry. He's in good hands," Hermione said, nudging Ginny in the ribs. Ginny laughed and nudged her back. Ron felt his heart lift. He was glad that Hermione and Ginny got along and that his sister and his girlfriend were friends. Ginny never liked Lavender too much but she easily opened her heart to Hermione and the two of them had always been friends. It made things a lot easier for him.

They talked for a while longer before Ginny left to finish getting ready. Hermione stayed behind. She came over and sat next to him. She sighed and rubbed her chest. "Look, Ron, I'm sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

She gave him a look. "You knowâ€œ;talking about the kids thing in front of Ginny."

He rubbed his neck. "Hermione, why would you apologize for that?"

She flushed again. "I don't mean to imply that we're having kids."

A spike of dread went through him. "We're not?"

"Oh, I-I mean we are, but not right now obviously," Hermione rushed.

"Oh, I understand but, it doesn't mean that we are not going to ever. You don't have to worry. It doesn't make me feel uncomfortable. I don't mind talking about it. Honestly, it felt good hearing you say it. It makes me even excited about our future," Ron explained.

Her eyes glossed over with tears. "Really? You're not one of those blokes who cringes at the thought of marriage and parenting?"

Ron laughed. "Well, I'm not going to lie and say it doesn't scare me a little. It does butâ€œ;I dunno. It's never been something that I've been afraid of experiencing. Maybe it's because I'm from a really big family, but I want those things and I want those things with you. I could only have those things successfully with you."

Hermione exhaled longingly "Oh, Ronald, where was all this years ago?"

He rolled his eyes. "Hiding like a bloody coward. It's out now."

She put her forehead against his. "I'm glad it is." She kissed his nose.

He put a hand to her cheek and rubbed it with his thumb. "Me too, and yes, Harry has to be the godfather."

She smiled. "I love you, Ron."

"I love you, too," he said before leaning forward and kissing her. They held each other tightly and moaned as the kiss became deeper and more passionate. All his worries vanished for those minutes he was with Hermione.

A snog before work always calmed his nerves.

When Ron got to the shop, George was sitting on the staircase and wiping the side of his head with a towel. "George."

He turned to him. "Hi. Give me a second. I need to reattach myself." He removed the towel and took the synthetic ear from the bag. He placed it on the side of his head and rubbed the edges in.

Ron shivered. He would never get used to George's fake ear or that he had a hole on the side of his face. "Does it still itch?"

"Yes, the fucking thing drives me mental sometimes, but I'm getting used to it," George said causally. Of course, he did not have a problem with it at all. George Weasley was a fan of all things eccentric and a tad bit gross.

"So, what are we doing today?" Ron asked.

George gave him a look. "Look, before we do anything, I really want to clear the air about Angelina. I'm sorry. I should have told you." He put his ear attaching kit away and walked over to him.

"Why?" Ron asked.

"We're partners. We're brothers. I dunno. I just don't want you to think that I'm hiding anything from you," George said.

"You've never cared before," Ron said.

George frowned. "I know, Ron. I realize that I was terrible to you."

"No, you weren't. You were my brother, George. You don't have to change for me," Ron reassured.

"Ron, please, stop being so bloody noble for a second. If you don't want me to act any differently, then you can't either. I know it bothered you, didn't it?" George demanded.

He sighed. "Yeah, it did."

"I'm sorry. We didn't mean to start snogging. We were working and then it happened," George said with a smile.

Ron returned it. "Yeah, I can understand. Hermione and I get that way sometimes."

He raised an eyebrow. "Hermione Granger?"

"Oh yeah," Ron breathed.

He smirked. "That's brilliant. For Angelina and I...it's not as if we just decided to get together. I'veâ€œI've loved her for a long time."

"Love?" Ron said rather hoarsely.

George blushed. "Yes, love."

Ron was trying to be as supportive as possible, but it was weighing on him. "But-but, really? You love her?"

"Yes, Ron, I do. She loves me, too," George said. "You seem upset."

"I'm not upset. It is justâ€œwell, what about Fred? Doesn't it get to you, at least a little?" He knew that he made a mistake with his statement, but he couldn't help himself. He was still incredibly confused about the entire situation.

George's blush disappeared. In fact, his face paled over. "What do you think I should do, Ron?"

"I don't know, George. I just want to know if you've thought about him," Ron said.

"Of course I've thought of him!" he hissed. "Every fucking time I see Angie, I think about Fred. Bloody shit, every fucking minute that I'm awake I think of him. I think about how I'm stealing my twin's girlfriend, and if Fred is fucking looking down at me and hating me. Yes! I always think about him. Does that make you feel better?" George stormed off.

Ron stood still, feeling like a tit. For the rest of the day they worked in silence. Ron didn't know what to say. In his head, it was easy for him to feel okay with everything but hearing it from George was something else entirely. George loving Angelina was a lot different from him just being interested in her or enjoying her company. However, Ron felt his stupidity catch up with him. He was being selfish and immature about it. He was acting as he usually did when something bothered him, and he did not want to be that way anymore. He took a deep breath and remembered what Ginny had said. He had to be open and accepting. He had no choice.

He left his work and walked over to George at the front of the store. "Hey, I'm sorry. I had no right to say those things."

"You were being honest, maybe you're right," George spat.

Ron grabbed his arm. "No, I'm not. George, I am really sorry, okay. I have no place to tell you what to do or accuse you of not

caring. I know that you think about Fred all the time. Ginny told me you fancied Angelina. I just didn't know that you loved her."

"Well, I do. I think I have since I met her but of course, Fred got to her first. Fred always got everything first," George gently said.

For the first time ever, Ron truly felt connected to George. For his entire life, he always felt many steps behind his brothers. He felt stupid for always feeling so jealous and a bit spiteful, but he couldn't help it. Ron couldn't believe that he wasn't the only one in the family to feel that way and especially George. He and Fred were the best of friends and always seemed to do everything together. Ron never noticed that George felt a step behind as well.

George rubbed his neck and continued. "I know it's wrong and I'm a bad brother to him for it, but it hurts too much to be without her, Ron. I can't pretend anymore. I don't feel as hollow when I'm with her. She makes me forget about how I want to die sometimes..." George immediately stopped talking and Ron gasped. "I'm sorry. Please, don't tell mum and dad I said that. I know they must be worried enough."

"George, I'm worried enough," Ron said in a shaky voice.

"Oh, fuck," he breathed. "Don't be. I shouldn't have said that. I would never do that. I justâ€¦think about it sometimes and I think about how it has to be better than this."

Ron shook his head. He would not allow his brain to process the idea of George not being around or doing something to end his life. "George, please, don't think that, ever."

George's eyes glossed over. "Ron, you have no idea what I feel sometimes."

"Then tell me! Let's work it out, but don'tâ€¦don't." Ron did not know what he was trying to say. He felt a tightness in his throat and his heart rate increased.

He felt arms wrap around him. He pulled his around George and held him back. He was taller than George was but George was stronger. He was so much stronger like Fred had been. George held him tightly. "I'm sorry, Ron."

"Please, George, you can't do that," Ron wheezed. "You can't leave us. You can't leave me. We won't make it. We need you." He felt a little lightheaded.

"I know. I won't leave, I promise. I'm sorry I said that. I'm sorry that I scared you," George whispered. He pulled away.

Ron rubbed his eyes. George was always full of life and confidence. He hated how darkness had taken his brother's spirit away. "George, please," he begged.

George gripped his shoulders. "Ron, listen to me. I think about it but that is all. I will never, ever do that. I will never be that selfish, and I won't let myself hurt you and our family. I don't want to cause you all any more pain. I think about it and then I stop."

"But why?" Ron asked.

"As much as I feel like wanting to die sometimes, I don't actually want to. I want to live." George rubbed his neck. "It's just really hard to sometimes. It really hurts, Ron, and it's why I want to be with Angelina. I need to be with her because I don't hurt as much when I'm with her. She really makes me want to live."

That was all Ron needed to hear. Any fear or doubt left him. If Angelina kept George feeling alive and made him want to live, then he would support their relationship. Bloody hell, he would convince Angelina to propose to George. "Okay, I think I understand."

"I'm sorry," George said again.

"Don't be. George, I think it's great if she makes you feel that way. I had no idea. That's my fault, and I don't think you are being a bad brother either. Fred would not want you to be alone and he wouldn't want you to feel this way. He would want you and Angelina to be happy. He loved you both so, I think he would find this perfect." Ron was scaring himself. The more he was around Hermione, he more he sounded like her.

George must have felt it, too. He chuckled and wiped the dampness from under his eyes. "I think you've been around Hermione too long, little brother."

Ron laughed. "I'd say not enough actually. George, I don't know how hard it's been for you. You're completely right about that, but I can understand what it feels like to want the girl of your dreams but watch her be with other people or think that she doesn't want you. I reckon we're both got lucky."

George smiled. "I do, too, but it's not like everything is a piece of piss. It's difficult sometimes and we talk about Fred a lot. Talking about Fred with Angelina feels good. She still loves him, and I'm glad. It wouldn't be right if she didn't."

"I don't think it would be right either. Listen, if you want to bring her around here and be close to her, it's okay with me," Ron said.

George nodded. "Okay, I would love to do that. It's still new for me. Besides, all we do is snog. It is a bit too scary thinking about other things. I'm not ready to go any further."

It was strange. Ron never thought he would be the one hearing these words from George. He was the older brother, but Ron was more of the support system for him. He wished that it didn't have to be that way, but he was accepting it. "How did it happen?"

"After the funeral. We stayed up all night talking at the flat. I had to Apparate back here. I couldn't take being in our old room for too much longer. I wrote her and she came over right away. We talked about Fred and then we started talking about each other. The next thing I knew, I was telling her that I loved her. Then, I kissed her. It felt right, Ron. I wouldn't be with her if it didn't," George said.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Ron said.

"Ron, can you not tell anyone in the family about this? I'm not ready for everyone to know," George said.

He frowned. His parents wanted to know every detail about George and now George wanted to make sure that they knew nothing. Ron was slowly feeling stretched and torn between two sides. He wanted to keep his brother's confidence, but he was tired of holding everything from his family. "George, maybe you should!"

"Please, Ron," George urged.

Ron sighed. He once again had no choice. "Fine, I won't tell anyone but George! I dunno. Are you ever going to talk to mum and dad or our brothers again?"

George turned away and walked around. "It's not like I'm leaving the family. I just need to be by myself right now. I feel bad enough and seeing all of their worried faces makes it worse. I need my own life. I hope you can respect that."

"I can, George. You don't have to worry," Ron said.

George turned back to him and smiled. "Thanks, Ron. I'm really sorry for scaring you and for not realizing what an amazing little brother you are sooner."

Ron shrugged. "Ah, it's okay. Most people take a while to realize my brilliance."

They laughed and went back to work. It was easier for Ron to function, but he kept getting chills. He could not stop thinking about the pain and loneliness George felt and what it made him think about. However, he pushed the thoughts away. He had to. When he got home, his dad was on the couch almost as if he was waiting for him.

"Hey, dad," Ron said slowly.

His father smiled. "Everything is okay, Ron. Come and sit down." Ron obeyed and sat next to him on the couch. His dad looked a lot better. There was more color to his face and his eyes were not as tired but the youthfulness was gone completely. Ron figured innocence was usually taken away when a father lost a son. "So, how was work?" he asked.

Ron thought about everything George had told him. He wanted to ask his father how to be a good brother in a situation like this

but he couldn't. He wanted to know how to keep George feeling like life was worth living, but he didn't have the permission to. So, he simply answered with, "It was okay."

His dad eyed him closely. "How was George today?"

"He was okay. He works all the time so I think he may actually give himself a break this weekend," Ron said.

His dad nodded. "That's good. Do you think that he may want to stop by for lunch sometime?"

"I don't know," Ron said softly.

His dad nodded again. "Well, I won't push it but it wouldn't hurt to ask him, Ron." Ron nodded. His dad sighed. "Ron, your mother asked me to talk to you about something."

"Is she okay?" Ron asked suddenly.

"Oh, yes, she's okay. I mean she's better. She actually wants me to talk to you about something that concerns you and Hermione," he said slowly.

Ron's heart rate picked up a bit. He didn't like where this was going. "Yeah?"

His father sighed yet again. "Ron, are you and Hermione having sex?"

He felt his heart explode. He blushed furiously. "Oh, no, of course not, dad."

His dad chuckled. "Of course not?"

"W-well, I just mean thatâ€¦n-no, we aren't," Ron stammered.

"Son, you're not in trouble or anything. Your mother just wants me to talk to you about being safe. I know that you know about sex, but I don't know if you fully understand about how to stay safe. I have my own ideas about what is going on between you two, but it's not really my business or your mother's. Don't tell her I said that, though," his dad said with a wink.

Ron relaxed a bit and grinned. "Don't worry. I have no desire to talk to mum about any of this."

"So, you're not?" his dad asked again.

"No, not yet," Ron said honestly.

"Okay, that's really good. I have had this nice little chat with all of your brothers but for some reason you and I just never got the chance. I reckon I should have put more aside to talk to you," his dad said.

"Oh, it's okay. I'm not completely clueless and you're busy a lot," Ron helped.

"It doesn't excuse anything. You're my baby boy and probably the most like me in many ways. So, if anyone needs this talk it would be you. Your granddad gave me this talk when I was thirteen," he confessed.

Ron laughed. "Really?"

His dad laughed. "Yes, he was a smart man. Anyway, it is important that you know how to take care of things when that time comes. I know you want to take care of Hermione and you'll want to do the right thing for her."

"Of course I do. I never push her to do anything. I told her that she is in control and we will go by her pace. I respect her, dad. You taught me to," Ron said.

His dad smiled brightly. "I know. You are a fine young man, Ron. I'm so proud of how you've been as a man."

"I have a lot more to learn," Ron confessed.

"Oh, you'll never stop learning, and I reckon you'll never truly feel one hundred percent. I'm still learning," he said. "Ron, you have to be careful. You have to be prepared. I can tell how much you love Hermione and how she makes you feel. You remind me so much of myself when I first got with your mother. It's scary but very exciting."

"I've never felt anything like this before, dad. I didn't know I was even capable of loving someone as deeply as I love Hermione. At least not to someone who wasn't related to me anyway. It's wicked," Ron said.

"Yes, it is. She loves you, too, Ron. It is all over her face how much she adores you. That's why I want to remind you to be safe and use protection. I know how emotions and desires can cloud judgment but if you love Hermione, you will always be a step ahead of that. It is a joint effort of course, but I'm holding you responsible. You have to do the right thing, every time," his dad said seriously.

"I will, dad. I promise," Ron answered back just as seriously.

"Now, I believe I should have this talk with Harry as well. Your mother already talked to Ginny, but I don't even really want to think about that," his dad said.

Ron shuddered. "You're not the only one." They shared a look of anguish.

"However, it has to happen. There are too many teenagers running around here and there has to be some order to the madness, even if it is too late," his dad said. "You, I, and Harry will go over how to make the potion you'll need. You don't already know how to make it do you?" His dad looked a bit uneasy.

"No, I don't know how," Ron said.

He relaxed a bit. "Good. There's still some hope."

They looked at each other and laughed. For a while, the two of them talked. It was nice. Ron loved his father very much and looked up to him greatly. He always felt comfortable talking to him. His dad had always been understanding and always tried his hardest to see Ron's point of view on something. More than ever, he considered himself one of the lucky ones. He had almost lost his father once, but he had survived. Harry's father was not as lucky and neither was Teddy's, but Ron still had his dad. The thought alone made him want to hug his dad and never let him go, but he contained his slight wave of panic and he was able to enjoy their time together.

About an hour later, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny walked through the door. Ron automatically stood up and quickly went over to Harry. "How did it go?" he asked. He checked Harry's face for his first real reaction.

Harry smiled slightly. "Ron, I'm fine and it went great. Teddy is already getting so much bigger."

"He's adorable and adores Harry," Ginny said, kissing Harry's cheek.

"That's good. I reckon it will make the bonding time easier, yeah?" Ron helped.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I supposed. Ah, I think I'm going to take a shower and go to bed. I'm really tired." He walked past them and up the stairs.

Ron looked at Hermione. She was watching Harry with a slight look of worry on her face. "Okay, what really happened?" Ron asked.

Hermione sighed. "Well, it did go great but Andromeda sort of had a moment and started crying. I think Harry felt bad about it. I know he wanted to cry too but of course, he wouldn't. Harry always has to be the strong one."

"Not just that. He probably doesn't think he deserves to cry in front of her," Ginny helped.

"I can understand that. I feel that way sometimes too and especially when I'm around George or mum and dad," Ron said softly.

Hermione gave him a kind smile and rubbed his arm. "I think we should give Harry some time."

"Yeah, I'll go check on him later," Ron said.

"How did it go?" Mr. Weasley asked, walking over to them.

"It was fine. We think Teddy will look the most like Tonks but Lupin's features are starting to come through," Ginny said.

His dad smiled and hugged Ginny tightly. "I'm sure Remus wouldn't be too happy about that. He wanted Ted to have all of Tonks's looks. I was the same with all of you."

"Oh, Mr. Weasley," Hermione said with a chuckle.

"It's true. I did not want to curse any of my children with my long nose. I wanted Molly's features to win out," he said.

"Well, I have mum's nose, so, not a total loss," Ginny said with a wink.

His dad shrugged. "Ah, but Ron and Bill weren't so fortunate. Percy got lucky though he has all of my other curses."

Ron laughed. "Dad, I've gotten over my nose ages ago. Besides, I don't mind looking like you." He smiled at his father and he returned it.

"Well, I'm glad it hasn't kept you from finding love. When I was younger, I thought it would. We both got lucky. Well, I should go check on your mother." He gripped Ron's shoulder and gave him a grin before walking off. Ron looked after him and felt a lump in his throat.

"Your father is incredibly sweet. You're just like him," Hermione said tenderly. They sat at the kitchen table.

"You really think so?" Ron asked.

"Of course, mum says it all the time. You're the most like dad," Ginny added.

He grinned. "Good. I want to be. I want my kids to feel as lucky as I do."

Hermione laced her fingers into his and kissed his neck. "I'm sure they will."

Ginny quickly wiped a tear from her eye. "I think so too, Ron. They'll be lucky, like we are. Going to see Teddy really made me realize how lucky we are. We're almost whole."

Ron bit his lip. There was a small black pit that had formed earlier in the day and it grew slowly. Sure, he was lucky. He had his parents and most of siblings and he still had a girlfriend and his best friend. However, as lucky as they were, they were still scarred. There was still something and someone terribly important missing. He thought about George and his missing ear. He thought about Angelina and how torn she must feel. Nothing came without a price.

"Yeah, almost," he said softly.

Their smiles vanished and the three of them closed their eyes and sat silently. Ron took a moment to remember Fred. He took a moment to remember his brother who had their father's rather

freckly fingers. It was one of the few traits Ron shared with Fred.

* * *

~~~Okay, so, this was another one of those multi-layered chapters. I hope you all enjoyed it.

I really wanted to add a bit about Teddy. I find his story incredibly touching and especially with Harry being his godfather. Oh, it's justâ€!\*sighs\* anyway, to keep myself from feelings too depressed, I added the R/Hr bit about kids and marriage. I don't know. I do not think it is weird for them to talk about it. It's what couples do when they're really in love. Plus, I do think that Ron is certainly a family man is rare because while he is scared, he's not stiff about the ideas of marriage and children. How could he be? He's a Weasley, lol. Anyway, I thought that was cute. Urgh! Ron/Hermione is sweet no matter what.

About Ron's reaction to George/Angelina. I mean, he's still a bit confused about that and Ron has never really been a bloke of caution so he lost it for a moment. I think it's natural but after hearing about how Angie helps George, of course he's okay with it. George needs that support system from Angelina. It's important and will be for this story.

Now, about Ron and his dad. I LOVE Mr. Weasley and I LOVE his relationship with Ron. They are so much alike and I think Ron really looks up to him. I had to give them a bonding moment. It's necessary for them to feel a bit closer.

So, I hope you all enjoyed it. Thanks for reading and please, review!

Cheers!

\* Chapter 10\*: Letters

Thank you all for the reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

"So, we're really doing this, then?" Ron asked.

Harry looked over his application. "Yeah, I think we are, mate."

"I don't know why you're both acting so nervous. You're just turning them in," Ginny said. "It's not even your application to Lambrick."

"Ginny, it doesn't matter. Goldbard is a great camp. Shit, they all are. Why wouldn't I be nervous?" Ron asked.

She gave him a look. "Well, you're not even turning them in yourself to start off with. Dad is doing it for you."

"Only because he offered to and has direct access to Kingsley," Ron spat.

"You know what? It doesn't matter. They're doing it, and that's all that matters. Besides, I'm a little nervous myself," Hermione confessed. Ron smiled at her.

"Yeah, I'm nervous, too," Harry said. Ron was going to open his mouth and say that he had nothing to worry about, but he remembered what Harry had told him and decided against it.

"Well, I'll give these to dad, be back," Ron said. He got up from his bed and went downstairs. His parents were in the kitchen sipping tea. "They're ready, dad. Thanks again to turning these in."

He took the letters. "You don't have to thank me, Ron. It's my job. I'll give them to Kingsley as soon as I get there."

His mum rubbed his arm. "Oh, my Ron is all grown up and getting a job."

"I already have a job, mum," Ron said.

She smiled. "Yes, but you know what I mean. I know that running the joke shop isn't your dream. That's George and...and Fred's baby." Her smile faded, but she held herself together. He could tell how difficult it was for her and he admired her strength.

"Speaking of the shop. Ron, when is the re-opening?" his dad asked, obviously trying to change the subject.

"Very soon. George, Angie, and I have been working like house elves trying to get everything done in time," he explained.

"Oh, Angelina is back?" his mum asked.

"Yes, she's been there for a week or so. Lee will come along soon as well," Ron said. He hoped that his parents wouldn't ask any more about Angelina. George still hadn't told them about his new relationship with her.

However, his mum simply raised an eyebrow. "That's nice."

Ron bounced on his heels and felt extremely uncomfortable. He hated that he was keeping secrets from his family about George. He knew that all they wanted to do was help. "Well, I think I'll go upstairs. It's one of my only days off so far!"

"Wait, here. Give this to Hermione. I forgot that it came for her this morning. It's from Hogwarts," his mum said.

Ron took the letter and felt a bit of panic. He nodded to his parents and rushed upstairs. He opened the door to his room but stopped. Hermione was sitting on his bed hugging one of his pillows. Harry and Ginny were on the cot. Harry had his arm wrapped around her waist and Ginny's head was against Harry's neck. Ron leaned against the wall and grinned. For so many years he had worried about the four of them, and he often wondered if things would ever work between them. He couldn't believe they were all alive and together and happy. He loved each one of them so much.

As if feeling his presence, Hermione looked up. "What are you doing over there?"

"Ah, I thought that if I stood here long enough, I'd hear something interesting about myself," he cheeked. He walked back over and sat next to her.

"Yeah, I was just telling them how you used to sing right before bed back at Hogwarts," Harry said with an eye roll. Ginny laughed.

"Is that so? I guess you're going to have to sing to me, Ron," Hermione said.

He gave her a look. "Ha! You wish. Speaking of Hogwarts, this came for you." He handed the letter to her.

Her eyes enlarged. "Well, what does it say?"

"I don't know, Hermione. I didn't open it," Ron said.

"For once," Ginny breathed. Hermione ripped open the letter and read it. The three of them watched, and he noticed her hands shake. Her face turned red, and her eyes grew in size. She put the letter down and exhaled deeply. Ron felt the panic grow. He hoped that she hadn't been denied to return at the last minute.

"Hermione," Harry said.

Hermione shook her head and grabbed at her chest. "I got it."

"You got what?" Ron rushed.

She stayed silent but handed the letter to him. Ron skimmed it. "Fucking hell."

"What is it?" Harry and Ginny said together.

Ron looked up from the letter. "They made Hermione Head Girl."

"What?" Harry said, snatching the letter.

Ginny smiled. "Hermione, that's excellent. I didn't know that you could still take the job."

Hermione continued to shake her head. "I didn't either. I thought that because I missed a year McGonagall wouldn't consider me, but she said in the letter that she always wanted it to be me. She thinks I'm capable. She wants me for the job."

"That's brilliant, Hermione," Harry said, getting up and giving her a hug.

She hugged him back and closed her eyes. "Thank you, Harry."

He pulled away. "See, I told you not to worry about it."

"This is great! We're in the same year, and you'll be Head Girl. This is going to be a fantastic year, Hermione," Ginny said, getting up and giving her a hug as well.

This time when Ginny let go and pulled away, Hermione had tears in her eyes. "Thank you, Ginny. I think we're going to have a great year, too."

Ron took her hand and squeezed it. "McGonagall is right. You deserve this more than anyone."

She beamed and wiped her tears away. "I just can't believe it."

"I can. We all can," Harry said. Hermione sniffed and read over the letter again. Ron watched her and felt his heart lift and expand. He was so proud of Hermione. He knew how much she wanted to be Head Girl and how much she was holding back.

"Hey, Harry, maybe you and I should tell mum and dad. I'm sure they'll want to cook a surprise dinner for her or something," Ginny said suddenly.

"Yeah, good idea. We can help," Harry said.

They stood up. Ginny smirked and took his hand. "Yes, we'll help but umâ€;there's something I need you to help me with first. It'sâ€;in my room."

Harry blushed and licked his lips. "Of course, anything."

Ron tore his eyes from Hermione and looked to Ginny and Harry. He frowned. He wasn't an idiot. He knew what they were talking about. He wanted to remind Harry about the rules, but he knew he had to start letting it go, too. "Merlin, you twoâ€;justâ€;beâ€;safe," he got out with difficulty.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Sure thing, dad."

"Yeah, your dad helped us out with that remember?" Harry cheeked.

Ron continued to glare at them while Ginny pulled Harry out of the room. He turned back to Hermione. She was still looking at the letter. "Hermione."

She looked up at him. "Yes?"

He rubbed her cheek. "I'm so proud of you."

Her lip trembled. "Really?"

"Of course I am, love. I knew you deserved to be Head Girl back in first year," he said.

She chuckled. "You don't think it's too nerdy or stupid? I know how you gave Percy a hard time for being Head Boy."

He rolled his eyes. "That's different. First, he's my brother. No matter what he does, I'll give him shit for it. Second, Percy could never be as cool as you when it comes to being an authority figure."

She laughed. "You think I'm cool?"

"Sure I do. I find your genius and bossiness extremely cool and enduring," he said.

She continued to laugh. Ron loved it. It was like a pretty and classic piece of music. "Well, I think this is pretty cool, too. I justâ€;ve wanted this for so long, and I can't believe I got it." Her eyes filled with tears again.

"I know, baby. You earned it. Do you thinkâ€;wellâ€;" he trailed off.

She eyed him closely. "Wellâ€;what?"

He shrugged. "Well, do you think that you'll be able to handle it? It's gonna be a little rough going back considering everything, yeah? I know you think that you can handle everything by yourself, but I don't want you to get overwhelmed." Her lightness faded and she looked away. Ron's heart dropped. He cursed himself. He was such an arsehole. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I shouldn't have said that. Please, ignore me."

She turned back to him. "No, you're right. I'm not upset, Ron."

He sighed. "I didn't mean for it to sound that way."

She put a finger to his mouth. "Ron, it's okay. I understand completely. I feel the same way. Even McGonagall does."

"What?" he said.

"She put it in the letter. She said that if I thought I was unable to fulfill the duties, then I didn't have to. She has a second choice if I can't do it. That's why she didn't send the badge. I have to answer her back with my decision. I want this more than anything, but I don't want to take it and not be able to handle it. I'm going to have my hands full enough with trying to get through NEWTS and dealing with the aftermath of the war. I

want to be able to focus and not get...not get too caught up in the past," Hermione explained.

"I don't want you to, either. What do you think, honestly?" Ron asked.

She looked over the letter once more. "I think that it will be a challenge for me, definitely. I also think that I want this too much to not at least try." She put the letter down and smiled at him.

"I'm with you no matter what you decide," he said.

Her smile faded a bit. "I also think that I wish you could be Head Boy and help me. No matter what happens there, it'll be hard because you won't be around."

Ron felt his smile fade as well. A chilling, painful sting ran through him. He didn't want to think about it. Not yet. "Well, that would never happen even if I was going back. Harry would be Head Boy."

Hermione rubbed his cheek. "Even so, it is going to be hard without you."

He pushed down the dread and terrible sadness. He wasn't ready to accept and go there yet. "Let's not worry about that right now. Hermione, you just found out that you're Head Girl. That's incredible. You are the most amazing person, love, and you are perfect for the job. I'm sure your parents will be thrilled to hear about it."

His words seemed to lift her spirits a bit. "Yes, I need to write them and explain everything. They still aren't sure if I'm going back."

"Oh, you are definitely going. You can't let your subordinates down," he said.

She chuckled. "Hmm, why do I like the sound of that?"

He put his forehead against hers. "Because you like having people under you. You are randy that way."

Hermione moaned and blushed furiously. "Well, maybe you're right. As far as authority goes, I like having people under me." She moved back on the bed and pulled on his shirt collar to bring him with her. He guided her back against the pillows and settled between her legs. "However, in terms of us, I like you being on top and me being under you."

It was Ron's turn to moan. He closed his eyes and let the pleasure of her words travel through him. "I don't mind that either." He opened his eyes. Hermione was gazing at him so beautifully. Everything about her was beautiful. He couldn't wait to see her badge pinned to her. A bit of sadness came over him again. He would never be able to wake up next to her in her

private room at Hogwarts and pin the badge to her school robe himself.

"Ron," she whispered.

He snapped out of his nightmare. "Yeah?"

Her lip trembled again. "You're thinking about it, too. Aren't you?"

Her brown eyes filled with tears. He didn't want her to cry. He didn't want her to worry and regret going back to school. He only wanted her to be happy and proud. "No. I was just wondering how much time we have before someone comes to check on us."

She let her tears fall, but she quickly wiped them away and grinned. "Why? What do you have in mind?"

He leaned down and kissed her lips gently. "I have a congratulations surprise for you myself."

She licked her lips and pushed up into him. "What is it?"

He kissed her lips again before moving down and kissing her jaw. He kissed her neck and sucked on her skin. He took in her scent and how soft her skin was. "I reckon you'll just have to find out."

Hermione whimpered and pushed up into him again. "Oh, Ron!" He ignored every bad feeling and focused on Hermione. He focused on her body and making her feel good. He sucked on her neck and moved down. He let his hands wander over her chest, and he cupped and squeezed her breast. She moaned and ran her fingers through his hair. Ron kept going. He reached the hem of her shirt and slowly pulled it up. He planted soft kisses all over her stomach. He felt the hairs on her skin prick. She kept moaning quietly and running her fingers through his hair.

He licked around her navel and prodded it. Hermione whimpered and pushed into his tongue. His hands went under her shirt. He looked up and stopped. Hermione opened her eyes and nodded. Ron went under her bra and gently pulled and pressed on her nipples. She cried out and put one of her hands move her mouth. Ron watched her in amazement, and his heat pounded roughly. It always did when he pleased her. He always worried if maybe he was going too fast or wasn't doing something right but. He licked further down until his tongue reached the edge of her jeans. He took one of his hands and put it on her thigh. He squeezed it.

"Y-yes, please, Ron," Hermione panted. He pulled his other hand away and slowly unbuttoned and zipped down her jeans. Hermione lifted her hips, and he pulled them off. He gazed at her magnificent legs and teasing white knickers. He bent down and kissed her inner thighs. Hermione shook and arched her back. "Oh, please, Ron, don't tease me," she moaned.

He slowly licked her inner thigh and kept his eyes on her. "What do you mean, love?"

She pounded her fist against the mattress. "Stop being so damn sexy and just do it."

He laughed. "See? You're a natural at giving orders. You'll make the perfect Head Girl."

She blushed. "Yes, and my first order is for you to stop teasing me. I want to feel your mouth, Ron. I need to."

Ron moaned and felt every bit of blood in his body rush down. Hermione Granger was too much. "Anything you say, Hermione." He kissed her inner thigh and moved his mouth closer and closer to her area. He got to her knickers and lightly kissed her middle through the fabric. She gave a quiet whimper. He couldn't take it anymore. He peeled back her knickers and pressed his tongue against her. Hermione pulled on his hair and groaned.

Ron loved the feeling and taste of her. She was so warm and smooth. He moved his tongue and lips over every inch of her. He held on to her thighs and moaned. "Mmm, I love this so much, Mione. You taste so good."

Hermione pulled on his strands so roughly that it hurt. "Oh, Ron, yes, I love this, too. I love you. I love the feeling of you." Her words steered him on. He gently sucked on her flesh and moved a finger to her opening. He slowly pushed it in and out of her. He looked up. She hand her fingers in her mouth to muffle her sounds, and her eyes were tightly shut. He would never get the chance to convince her to skive off a meeting so he could touch her out by the lake at Hogwarts. He would never be able to stare at her during potions class and think about wanting to drink her more than he wanted to drink water.

He moaned and pushed his finger inside her faster. He had to concentrate. He had to let it go. "Hermione," he mumbled against her.

"Yes, Ron, don't stop. Please, don't stop," Hermione cried out gently.

He removed his mouth from her. "I won't. I'll never stop, Hermione." She opened her eyes and stared at him. He stared at her right back and continued to pump his finger. He knew what he was trying to convey to her, and it had nothing to do with their current activity. "I'll never stop," he repeated.

She gripped his shoulder. "Good. I love you, Ron. I love you so much."

"I love you, too. You're everything," he whispered. He pumped his finger even faster. Hermione fell back against the pillow and shut her eyes again. She put a pillow over her mouth. She moaned louder and louder. Ron watched her. She would leave in less than a mouth. He didn't want to miss a beat of her while he still had her. Her moans grew in volume and her grip on his shoulder increased. She arched her back and finally screamed into the pillow. She rocked her hips and dug into his shoulder. Ron felt

her body close and contract around his finger. He pumped slower and let her orgasm course around him.

Finally, she stopped rocking her hips and eased her grip. She moved the pillow away from her face and took deep and shaky breaths. Ron smiled and slowly eased out his finger. Hermione moaned and sucked on her lip. He moved up to her and watched her collect herself. He licked his lips and his finger. There was so much that he wanted to say, but he held back. It wasn't time to go there. For now, he just wanted to be happy and enjoy his girlfriend and soul mate while he had the chance.

He wiped the sweat off her forehead. "So, did you like your surprise?"

She traced his mouth. "I loved it. Ron, about me going to school and you going to campâ€œ;I-I,"

He leaned over and kissed her. "Later. We can do this later."

She sighed. "Ron, I really think we should—"

"Later, Hermione, please," Ron interrupted.

She sat up and nodded. "Okay, you're right, later." He could tell by her tone that she didn't want to talk about it later. She wanted to get it over with. Ron respected it, but he couldn't. There was no way that he could get through it all without getting angry or panicking. He even feared that he might ask her to stay. He took her hand and kissed her fingers. Hermione watched him. "I think I'm going to go take a shower."

He stopped. "Why? Are you mad at me?"

She pulled her hand away. "No, I just need to. I think you know how sticky I am." She didn't give him time to answer. She slipped her clothes back on and left the room.

Ron fell back against the bed. He exhaled deeply and swore. Nothing came without consequence. He hated how he couldn't even talk to Hermione about her leaving because he was too scared of what it would mean. The bit of control he felt he had was slowly escaping him.

He put his arm over his eyes and tried to clear his mind.

\* \* \*

Not surprisingly, Ron's mum had thrown a party for Hermione the following weekend. Ron helped her set the table. "Mum, I don't know why you had to invite everyone," he mumbled.

"Hush now. This is big for Hermione and for everyone," she explained.

"I don't see how Hermione being Head Girl is big for Bill and Percy," he said.

His mother gave him a look. "Fine. This isn't only about her. I was just hoping to bring everyone together for dinner. It's been too long since we've all eaten together. I even invited George."

"Really?" he said.

"Yes. I don't know if he'll show, but I thought it would be nice to reach out," she said, unnecessarily rearranging the napkins.

Ron walked closer to her. "Mum, even if he doesn't show I know that he wants to. George just needs some time. He loves you and he misses you."

She took his hand. "Thank you, Ron."

"Well, my parents aren't coming. I just got their letter. They still have so much to catch up on after being away from work for so long. They said thanks for the invite, though," Hermione said, coming into the kitchen.

His mum frowned. "Oh, that's too bad. I was hoping to sit down with them and really talk. We're going to have to do that sooner or later. You're practically family, dear, and I know you'll be even more in time."

Hermione smiled and blushed. She looked to Ron and he smiled. Since the night of her finding out about the Head Girl position, the two of them silently agreed not to bring up the idea of leaving until they absolutely had to. Harry and Ginny came down the stairs. Both were flushed and extra smiley. Ron rolled his eyes. He knew that they were trying to squeeze in all their time together as well.

"Something smells excellent, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said.

"Yeah, I'm sure you think so," Ron mumbled. Harry ignored him. It wasn't long before dinner was ready and the rest of Ron's family arrived. His mother had been right. It was nice having everyone together. However, as he suspected, George was not present. It made the two empty chairs even more noticeable. Neither twin was present.

"You're going to love it, Hermione. If you enjoy responsibility, and I know you do, you're going to love it," Percy said.

"It's not just responsibility, though. You get to have your hands in everything. There were so many new things that I learned in that last year of Hogwarts just from being Head Boy," Bill added.

"I wonder who will be Head Boy this year. There's so much that could factor in everyone's favor," Ginny added.

"Well, the bloke better be ready. Hermione means absolute business," Ron said, winking at her.

Hermione beamed and blushed under all the attention. "I don't know. I'm just really excited. I should get my badge next week. My parents are really proud."

"We all are. You're brilliant, Hermione," Harry said.

"And it's nice that at least one of you is going back to represent the others. I'm sure the three of you have a lot of honors at Hogwarts," his dad said.

"Yes. I've thought about that, too," Hermione said.

"To be honest, I haven't really thought about Hogwarts until I got the letter about dinner tonight," Bill said.

They were all silent for a moment. Thinking about Hogwarts meant something heartbreaking for each of them. Ron shifted in his chair and looked down at his food. It was the awful silence that he had been dreading ever since his mum brought up the idea of them all getting together for dinner. It was harder to forget when his whole family was together. It was harder because it was easier to tell who was missing.

"Well, I just hope there aren't huge portraits of Ron all over the walls. I don't think I could stomach it," Ginny said suddenly.

"Ha! Wouldn't that be something?" Harry added.

"That would be lovely. I wouldn't mind it at all," Hermione said softly.

He wanted to kiss her so badly in that moment, but he held back.  
"Thanks."

"Okay, I have a confession," his dad said.

"What is it, Arthur?" his mum said a bit apprehensively.

"Well, Kingsley got a bit of mail today, and he shared some of it with me." He pulled two envelopes out of the pocket of his trousers. "They've got Ron and Harry's names on them."

Ron and Harry both snatched the letters at the same time. Ron looked at the address. It was from Goldbard. He swallowed hard.  
"They're here already?"

"I couldn't believe it myself, but I know the camps are eager to get fresh blood in. I've been waiting all day," his dad explained.

Ron looked at his name on the envelope. "Well, aren't you going to open it?" Bill asked.

Ron looked up. Harry was already staring at him. "Harry first."

"No, you," he said.

Ron shook his head. "Potter comes before Weasley."

Harry frowned. "That's not fair."

"Deal with it," Ron breathed.

Ginny rubbed Harry's arm and smiled tenderly. "Go on, love."

Harry took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay." He flipped the envelope over and tore off the fold. He pulled the letter out and took another breath. His shaky hands unfolded the letter and his eyes read on. The room was silent and Ron held his breath as Harry read. It only took a few minutes. He put the letter on the table and let out a breath.

"Well?" Ron croaked.

"I got in!" Harry said with a smile.

The room burst into cheers. Ginny planted a powerful snog against Harry's mouth. "I knew it!" she squeaked.

"Ron, open yours!" Hermione demanded excitedly.

Ron nodded and tore open the envelope. He opened his letter and read:

Dear Mr. Ronald Weasley,

We regret to inform you that your request to train at Goldbard's Academy has been denied. The staff feels that at this time you do not meet the needs of our facility. Feel free to reapply when your skills have been strengthened.

Regards,

Bruce Richardson

Ron's heart sank. He put the letter down. "Ron," Hermione said softly.

"I need to go lay down," he said.

"Ron, what does it say?" Harry asked.

Ron balled up the letter and tossed it to him. "What do you think it says?"

He left the room and ran up the stairs. He slammed his door and kicked his stack of comics. Of course, he didn't get in and of course Harry did. He had been stupid to think that a camp so prestige would want him. He wasn't good enough, and he never would never be. He continued to kick his things around. Someone knocked on his door. "Ron?"

"Leave me alone," Ron groaned.

The door opened anyway. It was Bill. "Ron, don't be this way."

"Be what way? Upset that those wankers rejected me? Upset that I'm a fucking tit and I can't do anything successfully?" Ron spat. He sat on his bed.

Bill closed the door and sat next to him. He pulled the ban out of his hair and let it flow freely. He ran a hand through the copper locks. "Did you know that my hair almost kept me from becoming an Curse Breaker?"

"I'm sure it did," Ron snapped. He turned to Bill. He looked serious. "Really?"

He nodded. "Yeah, they honestly didn't know if I would be a hard worker or responsible. Mum was right."

"Obviously not, Bill. They let you in," Ron said.

Bill sighed. "Ron, it's one camp. You couldn't have honestly expected to get into all of them."

"I know that but-butâ€œit just sets the tone. What if I don't get into any of them?" he asked.

"Ron, you will. Just because one school doesn't want you at this time, doesn't mean none of them will. You have to keep trying. Dad told me that you applied to a lot of camps. Goldbard is a really hard school to get into. It's nothing against you," Bill tried.

"Yes, that's why Harry got in," Ron said.

"Ron, you can't spend your whole life comparing yourself to Harry. It will drive you mad," Bill said.

"Wow, thanks for the advice," Ron mumbled.

"Damnit, Ron, I'mâ€œI'm just trying, okay? I'm your brother. Don't treat me this way," Bill said.

Ron looked at him. They looked a lot alike. When he was younger, Ron had always secretly wished that he could look just like him. They did have very similar features, but Bill was still better looking. He also wished that he could be as strong as was Charlie but he wasn't. He wanted to be smart like Percy but he could never be. He wanted the twins humor but didn't and he wanted some of Ginny's confidence, but he didn't have that either. Ron was always the odd Weasley out.

"I know. I'm sorry, Bill. It's justâ€œI got rejected. It's a big deal," Ron whispered.

Bill patted his back. "I know, Ron. It's not the end of the world, though. You have to keep trying," he said confidently.

Ron sighed. Bill still didn't understand. "Yeah, you're right."

He stood up. "Good, so, are you going to come back down?"

"Actually, I think I'm going to take a walk out in the field. I'll be back," Ron said.

Ron could tell Bill wanted to protest but he didn't. "Fine but come right back." He walked out of his room.

He sighed and Apparated. He took his wand out of his back pocket and tapped the door with a combination of twirls and hits. The handle twisted and unlocked. He eased into the shop and made his way up the stairs. He took a breath and knocked on the door. It wasn't incredibly late so he figured that he was still awake. The door opened. "Ron, is everything okay?" George asked.

"Yeah, everything is fine. Um, am I interrupting something?" he asked.

"No, come on in." George opened the door wider and let him in. Ron walked through and sat on the couch. "So, what's going on?"

"Nothing," Ron lied.

"George, you're out of milk. I'll get some whenâ€œoh, hi, Ron," Angelina said.

Ron blushed. "Hey, Angelina."

"Angie, what the hell do I need milk for?" George asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever, I'll bring some back."

"I didn't mean to bother you two. I can leave," Ron rushed.

"No, you're fine. I was just leaving," Angelina said. She walked over to George. "I'll be back later."

"Don't take too long," George whispered. He wrapped his arms around her waist.

She smiled. "I won't." She leaned up and kissed him. It was still a bit unnerving seeing his brother kiss Fred's ex, but it was getting easier.

George pulled away and sported a wide grin. "I love you."

"Love you, too," she said, pecking his lips once more. She turned to Ron. "Nice seeing you."

"You too," Ron said. She Apparated. George joined him on the couch. "So, I reckon things are going well?"

George's smile increased. "Yeah, things are great. She's amazing." Ron nodded. "So, what's really going on? I know I'm amazing and all, but I doubt you came over just to see my pretty face."

Ron rubbed his hands together. In all honesty, he didn't know why he went to George's. For some reason he felt as if it was just the right place to go. "You're right."

George nudged him. "I usually am, so tell me."

Ron took a breath. "You missed dinner."

"Yeah, I know. Did mum send you over?" George asked.

"No, she understands, I think. It was to celebrate Hermione becoming Head Girl," Ron started.

"Yeah, you told me mum might do something like that. She loves to throw dinners for everything and everyone," George said with a smile.

"Yeah, Bill and Percy came," Ron said.

George's smile faded. "Ohâ€!"

"It's okay. No one brought you up. They know that you need space," Ron reassured. "Anyway, dad had a surprise for Harry and me. Our letters from Goldbard came."

"Yeah?" George said intrigued.

Ron exhaled deeply and rubbed his palms on his knees. "Yes, they are pleased to inform Harry and regret to inform me. He got in. I didn't."

George was silent for a while. Ron closed his eyes and waited for him to say his words of encouragements. "Wow, that is a kick in the bullocks. Wait here." Ron opened his eyes. George got up and went into the kitchen. He came back with two shot glasses and a bottle of Fire Whiskey.

Ron burst into laughter. "Don't tell me that those are for me."

George grinned wickedly and sat the glasses and bottle in front of him. "You're eighteen and Hermione and mum aren't here." He popped open the bottle and poured. "So, what did everyone say?"

Ron watched George pour and felt guilty that his mouth watered greatly. "I didn't give anyone time to say anything. I went straight to my room. Bill came after me and told me to be strong and that it's just one camp."

"That sounds like Bill. He was the same way with me and Fred when we got turned down for our loan," George explained. He handed a glass to Ron. "You have drank this before, right?"

"A few times," Ron confessed. "Waitâ€;you got turned down?"

"Yeah, a few bloody times. For a while we didn't think that anyone would take us on. Bill kept telling us to be strong and that we'll get it eventually." He clicked his glass against Ron's.

Ron laughed. "Cheers. That's what Bill said to me." He shot down the whiskey. It burned his throat and made him cough. He felt like a tit.

George took his down easily and chuckled. "A few times, yeah?"

"Piss off," Ron said, wiping his mouth. "I knew that if I went downstairs everyone would have a similar speech. I justâ€¢I didn't need to hear it."

George poured him another. "Yeah, I understand. I appreciate our brother's effort, but that man has never failed at anything before in his life. Plus, it's gets annoying, everyone telling you to be optimistic all the time. It can actually bring you down. Why do you think that I like being alone so much now? Sometimes, I just want to feel bad to get it over with. Not everything is always so bloody great all the time." He took another shot.

Ron stared at him and took his. He controlled it going down his throat better but he still coughed. "Yeah, I know what you mean. That's why I came, actually. I knew that you wouldn't baby me. Harry got in, and Hermione is Head Girl. I don't want to hear how capable I am. I don't feel like it. I don't fucking feel like anything to be honest."

He started to pour himself another but George took his wrist. "Wait, slow down little brother."

"Sorry," Ron said. He could already feel a warmth in his stomach grow.

George grinned. "It's okay. I get what you mean. It must be hardâ€¢being around Harry and Hermione all the time. I noticed it back in school and at home. You keep it up well."

Ron rubbed his palms against his knees again. The annoying itchy feeling came back. He also felt the need to express himself. "Can I have another drink first?"

"A small one. I don't want you passing out or getting sick. I'm still supposed to be a responsible big brother," George said. He poured a bit of whiskey into his glass.

Ron took a sip. "It's not that I'm not happy for them. I justâ€¢I want to be good, too. Everyone is good at something. I want to be. I'm worried that I'll be stuck while everyone else is moving on. I'll be the kid that mum and dad have the least to brag about." He took the rest of his whiskey.

"Don't think that way. I know you don't want to hear it but you shouldn't," George said.

The warmth filled his body. He felt more relaxed than he had in a long time. "How can I not? All of you are successful. I don't have anything."

George frowned. "That's the alcohol talking."

"No, it's not. It's me. All my worst fears are coming true. Hermione is leaving. Harry will be moving on. Even Ginny is moving on. I'll be stuck. I don't want to be, George," Ron confessed. He felt a bit of pressure on his chest.

"You're not stuck, but I know how you feel." George poured himself another shot. "I worry that everyone will move on from Fred's death but me."

"No one has gone anywhere. We all think about him all the time. We all get so quiet and think about him," Ron said.

George took his shot. "Yeah, but every little thing reminds me of him. I miss him so fucking much, Ron. Iâ€œI ache for him. I don't even know if that's appropriate for me to feel but I do. I miss his presence, and I miss being able to talk to him and spend time with him. We wrestled all the time, but we didn't hug a whole lot. If I could see him again, the first thing I'd do is hug him and tell him how much I love him and how much of my life is empty now."

"Shit, George," Ron breathed. He figured that alcohol was making his brother more open as well.

"I worry that everyone else will heal, and I'll be stuck as the only Weasley who still has a hole in his heart." George put his glass down and rubbed his eyes.

"You won't be. George, you need to come back to the Burrow. You'll see how much we all miss Fred and how much we all miss you. No one has forgotten about either of you. I p-promise," Ron slurred. He felt so much emotion come over him at once and his usual filter dissolved.

"I know, Ron. I'm just not ready. I don't want to ruin anything for myself or anyone else," he said. He poured them another shot.

Ron took his down greedily. He felt the warmth in every part of his body. "George, you won't ruin anything. We all need you and want you around. I wish you would understand how much I wished you were back home with us. I love you, and I'm here for you. I want to help you." His head felt lighter but the rest of his body felt heavier with each word. He didn't know what was wrong with him.

George smiled. "I know all that, Ron. Just like I know that you are either pissed or you're getting there. Percy will be pleased. He's not the only lightweight."

Ron blushed and sat back against the cushion. "Whatever. I mean it, though."

"I know. I mean it too, Ron. You're not stuck," George said softly. "Here. Don't move and don't drink anymore."

Ron tried to focus his eyes on George as he walked away, but he realized that it was rather difficult. He closed his eyes and smacked his lips. "George. Where are you?"

"I'm here," he said, coming back into the room.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked. Things were choppy and didn't make a lot of sense.

"I'm writing mum and dad and letting them know that you're staying here tonight. There's no way I can let you go back drunk. They'll kill me," George said.

Ron laughed. "They just don't understand your coping style."

"Yeah, I reckon," George said. He threw him a pair of pajamas. "You can wear those. I bet they're a little too short but they'll do."

Ron nodded. "Thanks." He tried to unbutton his jeans. That too was a problem. However, he got it eventually.

"It's sent. I hope you're okay on the couch. I got you a pillow and blanket. For fuck sake, Ron," George said.

"Huh?" Ron asked. He opened his eyes and realized that his jeans were to his ankles. "Oh. Well, what is that for?"

George laughed. "Let me help you." He pulled off his shoes and his jeans for him. "Okay, one foot in each hole," he said. Ron obeyed and was able to get his feet in on his second try. "I hope you can do the rest," George said, pulling the pants up to his knees.

Ron giggled and lifted the pants over his arse. "Yeah, I got it. Thanks."

"Mmm-hmm," George said. He sat next to him.

Ron leaned against the couch and grinned. "You're a great big brother. The best one I have right now."

"I reckon that's more of the whiskey talking," George said.

"No, I mean it," Ron said.

George rubbed his neck. "I thought Charlie was your favorite."

Ron shrugged. "I came here, didn't I?"

George gazed at him intently. "Yeah, you did." They were silent for a while. "Ron, I'm really sorry that you didn't get in. I know you deserved to. You deserve everything you want." He leaned in closer. "And just between you and me, out of you, Harry, and Hermione, I'd trust my life with you before them."

"Now, that is the whiskey talking," Ron said. "But thank you. It's really hurts right now."

George nodded. "I know. It will for a while until you get into one. The, it'll get easier after that."

Ron lay against his pillow. "I hope so!" He trailed off and realized for the first time how tired he was.

George got up and moved the blanket over him. "Goodnight, Ron," he whispered.

"Are you going to sleep in Fred's room?" Ron asked before he could stop himself. Alcohol really made him say what was on his mind.

George swallowed hard. "Yeah, I will until Angie gets here."

Ron smiled. "Well, tell him I said goodnight."

He smiled back. "I will, Ron."

Ron closed his eyes and instantly went to sleep. He made the right choice going to George's.

\* \* \*

\*\*\*\*So, I know this was really long! Lol, I didn't intend on it being so long but once I started I couldn't stop. I really enjoyed this chapter. There were a lot of things that came out of it and a lot of issues and emotions that will arise later.

As far as Ron not getting into the camp. I'm not trying to just be mean to him or whatever. I love Ron so much but for this story these sorts of things have to happen, and like Bill said, just because this camp didn't accept him doesn't mean others won't.

As far as Ron getting drunk with George, lol. I really wanted that in here. It's something I always saw happening after finding out that Ron worked at the shop with George. They have a new sort of relationship now and really depend on each other in ways they haven't before. There's a new closeness that's really starting to open up and I think it was sweet of them to do it together. Plus, the idea of adorable/talkative/drunk Ron is too much for me to pass up, lol.

So, I hope everyone liked it and didn't mind the long chapter. Thanks for reading and please REVIEW!

CHEERS!

Thanks for the reviews and kind words! They mean a lot to me.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron opened the kitchen door and walked out into the yard. His mother was setting up for lunch. It was a beautiful summer's day and a perfect day for eating outside, but he knew that wasn't the reason. It was almost September and Ginny and Hermione were leaving soon. Most training camps also started in late September and early October. He figured that his mother was preparing for Harry's inevitable farewell also. Ron, of course, didn't think that he was going anywhere so there would be no need to cook a meal for him. He was sure that a good camp wouldn't accept him.

"The food is almost ready, sweetheart," his mum said, setting dishes. "I think I might have cooked a little too much, though. I hope you're hungry."

Ron grinned and walked over to the table. "I'm always hungry, mum. I'll finish whatever is left."

She laughed lightly and pinched his cheek. "You're still my boy, aren't you?"

"I'll always be," he said. He gave her a small hug and kissed her cheek.

His mother gazed at him in such a tender way. He could tell that she wanted to say something but whatever it was, she held it back. "I need to get more dishes."

"Do you need any help?" he asked.

"No, I'm alright, sweetheart," she said, rushing away. Ron watched her. She was doing so much better, but he knew that she still cried at night and lost her focus because she always thought about Fred.

"You know, you should probably get that eating condition checked out. It could be a serious thing that you are always hungry and never seem to get full," Hermione said. The bit of concern that he had felt vanished and his grin returned. He looked to the owner of the cheeky remark. She was sitting at the table casually reading a book. He couldn't understand how the vision of her reading could make him feel so incredible but it did. In fact, it always had.

He sat next to her and kissed the side of her mouth. "Do you think it could be life threatening?"

"I don't know. It can't be any worse than let's sayâ€¢a hangover," she said sharply, still not looking up from her book.

He sighed and put his forehead against her shoulder. "Oh, come on, Hermione. You can't still be mad at me for that. It was days ago."

She moved her shoulder and closed her book. She looked at him, and her expression was stern. "I was never mad."

"You yelled at me and hit my arm when I came back the next morning," he said. "I reckon that I'm still bruised."

She glared at him. "Well, you deserved it. You can't just leave without telling anyone. You can't just go off without telling me."

Ron rubbed his neck. "I know. We've already gone over this. Anyway, George sent a letter."

"Ronald Weasley, you know that doesn't make up for anything. I was worried about you. I had no idea what was going on or what you were feeling. Then the next day you pop back completely sick. You're lucky that I didn't tell your parents," she explained.

He blushed. It annoyed him how easily he had gotten pissed. George would never let him live it down. "He didn't have any potion for me, and I had to come back some time. I'm sorry."

"Ron, I already told you about that. Saying sorry doesn't change what you did." Her features softened. "You could have come to me. We could have talked about it."

"That's just it. I didn't want to talk about it, Hermione. Besides, I already knew what you were going to say. It's just it wasn't what I wanted or what I needed at the time," he said.

She frowned. "Oh, so, you didn't want or need me?"

"Don't say that. You know that's not what I mean. Hermione, you just don't understand, okay. You can't understand this," he said softly.

"So make me understand. I want to understand," she said just as softly.

Ron gazed at her. He knew that Hermione honestly wanted to understand and help him, but he couldn't think of the right words without sounding pathetic. "It doesn't matter. I won't do it again, I promise."

She took his hand. "Ron, we have to talk about this. We need to talk about these things. There's not much time left, and I don't want anything between us before I leave."

Pressure hit his shoulders. The thought of her leaving had been invading him mind more and more as the days counted down. He still refused to think about it. "I'm going to go find Harry and Ginny."

"Don't ignore me, Ron," she shot.

"I'm not ignoring you. We need to talk. I know," he said impatiently.

Hermione sighed in defeat. "Okay, go find them."

The tone to her voice made Ron want to kick himself. He hated how he was making Hermione so worried. He tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear and kissed her temple. "Do you know how much I love you?" he whispered in her ear.

He felt her shiver and her grip on his hand tightened. "You can't use your smooth talk to get out of trouble."

He nibbled on her earlobe. "Why, is it working?" She moaned softly. "You didn't answer my question, Hermione."

"No, it's-it's not working, and I think I know how much you love me," she whispered, leaning in more against his mouth.

He kissed all over her ear, forgetting that his mother could walk out any minute. It was getting easier for him to be affectionate to Hermione with other people around. It made it especially easy considering that they would be parting soon. "Well, let me reassure you. I love you more than anything else in my life, Hermione, and I want and need you more than anything. I'm really sorry that I left without telling you."

He pulled away. Hermione's face was pink and here eyes were a bit glossy. "I need you too, Ron. You are the most important part of my world. You keep my heart beating. That's why I'm so worried. I'm worried about you, love. You're too precious to me, and I'm scared for you."

The pressure against his shoulders increased. He felt incredibly guilty. He couldn't stand to Hermione like this, and he knew it was his fault. "Don't worry about me. You don't have to be scared for me."

"Ron," she breathed, grasping his arms.

He pulled out of her grip before he lost it. "I'm going to go find them."

He left the table and hurried down the field. Ron was worried as well. He was worried for himself and for his relationship with Hermione. He didn't know what he was going to do once she left. He didn't know if he was ever going to become an Auror. He had no backup plan and no path. It didn't take long to find Harry and Ginny. He heard movement from behind one of the trees near the pond. He braced himself. He wanted to leave but he also wanted to pull Harry off his sister. He was adapting to their relationship but he refused to stand by while his best mate was penetrating his baby sister almost right in front of him.

"If anyone has his or her kit out, put it away!" he shouted.

He heard Harry laugh. "What are you on about, mate?"

"Ron, just go away. No one wants you here!" Ginny called.

Ron rolled his eyes and turned the corner. Both were fully dressed but they were lying on the grass and tangled to each other. "I thought I'd be nice and tell you lot that the food is almost done but Harry, I see you've eaten already."

Harry grinned and kissed Ginny's neck. "Not quite."

Ginny closed her eyes and held Harry tighter. "Once my brother leaves you can."

"I guess it's too bloody unfortunate then because your brother isn't leaving until you two get up and come on," Ron shot.

Harry pulled away from Ginny. "Fine."

"You aren't actually going to listen to him, are you?" Ginny asked.

Harry shrugged and untangled his body. "It's the least I can do."

"Spoken like a true best mate," Ron said. He held his hand out for him.

Harry didn't take it. He got up and helped Ginny up. "Then again, I shouldn't have to owe Ron anything. I'm not the one who left out of nowhere."

Ron rubbed his eyes and sighed heavily. "I've already apologized a hundred bloody times. I'm sorry."

"I don't care that you left, Ron. I get it. It's Hermione that I'm talking about. She was really upset and rather offended that you didn't talk to her or at least warn her that you were going to sneak off for the entire night," Harry explained.

Ron frowned and stared off into the pond. "I know, but I didn't plan on leaving. It just happened, and I didn't sneak off. I told her how sorry I was as I told you."

"Doesn't matter. You know her by now. She stressed out enough," Ginny added.

"Leave me alone. I think I know how my girlfriend is, and I think I know that I fucked up. You just don't get it." He walked off without another word.

By the time Ron returned to the table, his mum was setting the rest of the food down. "Everything is ready and you're father should be here soon. Let's get started."

Ron took his seat next to Hermione. "Are we okay?"

She shrugged and didn't look at him. "I don't know, Ron." He turned away from her and stared at his plate.

"Everything looks great, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said. He kissed her cheek.

"Thank you, dear. I might have cooked too much," she said. She ruffled his hair. It made Ron feel a bit better. Harry was officially their adopted family. He was opening up more to the family, and they were opening up even more to him. Every day he looked more like a Weasley, according to his mother.

"I'm sure that whatever doesn't get finished, Ron will," Ginny said with a wink to him. They sat down and passed the food around. Ron noticed how slowly Hermione reacted to everything. He knew that she was deep in thought and he could practically feel the worry steam from her. He hated it.

"Hmm, something smells excellent," his dad said not too much later. He came through the back door and took off his cloak.

"Arthur, we were wondering when you'd get here," his mum said, getting up and giving him a gentle kiss.

"Sorry it took so long. The Ministry is really busy. It's more busy now than it has been in years," he explained.

"Well, you can talk about that later. It's important that you eat, Arthur," his mum said.

His dad took a seat right in front of him. He yawned and looked extremely tired. "Are you okay, dad?" Ron asked.

He waved a hand. "Yes, I'm fine. I was rather busy today. Kingsley and I had a lot of work to do. Molly, he'll be here any minute. I hope that's okay."

"Oh, the more the better. I made too much food," his mum said.

"Well, I'm not sure how long he plans to stay. He has some information that he wants to share," he said.

"Information about what?" Harry asked.

His dad opened his mouth but Kingsley Apparated at the same moment. "Sorry to interrupt your meal," he said.

"Oh, it's not a problem. Please, sit," his mum urged.

"I won't be long," Kingsley said, taking off his hat.

"I insist and I'll keep insisting until you accept," she said.

Kingsley smiled. "Okay, Molly." He took a seat and Ron tried not to feel nervous. Kingsley had always made him nervous. He was extremely professional and smart. He was well respected or in some cases feared by many. He was a man of confidence and talent, and Ron was incredibly intrigued by him.

"I don't know if Arthur told you but we've been exceedingly busy at the Ministry lately," Kingsley began.

"He started to but that can wait until after we eat, can't it?" his mum asked.

"I'm afraid it can't," Kingsley said.

Ron noticed that some of the light that had been in his mother's eyes faded. "Go on."

Kingsley took a breath. "Well, the fall of Voldemort has created an upset in the magical community."

"How can that be?" Harry asked.

"People are scared and anxious. People want to know when the first backlash is going to occur," Kingsley explained.

"Backlash?" Ron asked.

"You see, just because he's dead doesn't mean all of his followers are. There will be an uprising," his dad said.

Ron quickly snuck a glance at Harry. He raised his eyebrow. "When do you think this will happen?" Harry asked.

"We don't know. It could be years or it could be tomorrow," his dad said.

"That's why we've been so busy. We want to be prepared for it. We don't want to put anyone in a state of panic, but we can't just be blissfully ignorant either. It's quiet and safe as of now, but it won't always be this way," Kingsley said.

"Could there be another war?" Ginny asked.

"We don't know. All we can do is prepare. That's why I'm here," Kingsley said.

"Why? What can we do?" his mum asked.

Kingsley and his dad shared a look. His dad took her hand.  
"Molly, we could be at risk."

"At risk for what?" Ron asked. Hermione immediately touched his knee and squeezed it gently.

"Ron, it's nothing to worry about. What I mean is that our family's name is out there. Everyone knows where we stand, what we did, and who we have on our side." His father then looked to Harry.

Harry paled. "Am I putting everyone in danger again?" Ron hated the tone of his voice.

"You're not putting anyone in danger, Harry. That's not what he means," his mum snapped.

"Let me explain. No one is in danger. No one is coming after any of you. All we are doing is taking precaution. The Weasley family is one of the Ministry's greatest allies. You all have done and sacrifice so much in the two wars. It's not going unnoticed. The Ministry wants to give something back," Kingsley said.

"What we want back the Ministry can't give to us," Ginny said sternly. Ron knew what she was referring to. Everyone did.

"I understand your position. I can understand everyone's position. However, we need to be sharp and vigilant. We need to be ready and we need to be proactive. That means you too, Hermione," Kingsley said.

Hermione's eyes widened. "Sir?"

"If it's okay, I'd like to have a talk with you and your parents before you go back to school. We need to go over some safety issues," Kingsley said.

Her grip on Ron's knee increased. "I'll write them today."

Ron couldn't take it anymore. "Hold on. Are death eaters and dark wizards going to come looking for us? Are they going to come after Harry, Hermione, and the rest of us? Is that what this is all about? Is the Ministry trying to warn us or get us ready for battle again?"

"Ron, please," his dad said.

"No, Arthur, let Ron speak his mind," Kingsley said. He looked at him and Ron tried to keep his ground and his jaw set. "Ron, we're trying to help protect what you all have left. We want to protect your family, Hermione, and Harry, yes."

"How exactly is the Ministry supposed to do that? They've never been very successful," Harry shot.

"People can learn and change. We have no choice but to," his dad said. "I want to keep my family safe."

"This is just precaution. In the coming weeks officials will come out here to discuss safety plans for everyone. We've already spoken to Charlie. Bill and Percy will be instructed as well," Kingsley said.

"What about George? We're having the grand opening in a few days. If you all are insisting on protecting us, then I'd like some of that protection on the shop. It's everything he has left and he lives there. He probably needs protecting more than anyone else," Ron said. His parent's and Ginny beamed at him. He felt his face heat up. He didn't understand what he said to make everyone look at him.

"You are absolutely right and all of that will be taken care of in time. Like I said, this is just talk as of now. Nothing is being set up. I just wanted to let everyone know. The Ministry is

changing, and so is everyone who works there. We want things to be different this time around. We want to be an establishment that people can trust," Kingsley said. He eyed Harry and he nodded.

His mother tried to make the rest of lunch lighthearted and fun but everyone was trapped in his or her thoughts. Ron couldn't stop thinking about death eaters coming after his family and Hermione's family. He had been safe in his house for months, and he almost forgot that there were still dangers outside.

"Well, I really need to get back. Thank you for the meal. It was delicious, Molly," Kingsley said, getting up.

"Any time, Kingsley. Thank you for warning us," his mum said.

"We're not calling this a warning. It's just a precaution," his dad said.

"Arthur is right. Right now everything is hypothetical," Kingsley said. He walked over to Harry and shook his hand. He whispered something in Harry's ear and Harry nodded once more.

"Yes, sir," he breathed.

"Molly, may I wash my hands?" Kingsley asked.

"Yes, you know where the kitchen is," she said.

Ron quickly got out of his seat. "I'll be back," he said to Hermione.

"Okay, I'm going to help your mum clean up," she said, still paled. Ron wanted to comfort her, but he didn't know what to say. He gave her a small smile and walked to the kitchen.

"Sir," Ron said, closing the door behind him.

Kingsley turned off the water and dried his hands. "Ron."

He rubbed his palms against his thighs. "If you aren't too busy I'd like to talk to you for a moment."

Kingsley surveyed him. "Alright, I have a few more minutes to spare."

"Great," Ron said. He led them to the sitting room and sat on the couch. Kingsley sat next to him but Ron still felt his appearance completely intimidating. He didn't know where to begin or even what words to choose.

"Ron, does this have anything to do with what we were talking about earlier?" Kingsley asked, breaking him out of his trance.

"No, I honestly think that I understand that completely. Voldemort is gone, but he wasn't the only threat," he said.

Kingsley smiled slightly. "You're exactly right. I figured that you would understand."

"R-right, well, um, I actually have a few questions about Auror camps," he started.

Kingsley nodded. "Okay."

Ron didn't know how else to say it so he simply said what was on his mind. "I was wonderingâ€¢with your knowledge and experience, if you think that I'll get into a good camp."

"Why do you ask?" Kingsley said.

"Well, I didn't get into Goldbard. I know that it was a long shot and they can't accept everyone, but I was wondering with my school record if I ever stood a chance," Ron explained.

Kingsley looked at him. "I take it Harry got in, correct?"

"Yes, he did and while its great for him, I don't understand. I know he's the chosen one but we basically got the same marks on our OWLs and neither of us got our NEWTs," Ron said.

Kingsley sighed heavily. "Ron, I'll be honest with you because I don't want you to lose your head over this. Harry is probably going to get into any camp that he applies to. There are academes lining up to get an interview with him. Unless he pulls off his mask and reveals that he's the resurrected Voldemort himself, no camp is going to turn him down." Ron soaked in his words. It was something that he figured. He knew of Harry's reputation but hearing it from someone else put a new light on it. "Ron."

Ron looked up. "Sir," he said gently.

"It's unrealistic for you to compare your success against Harry's," Kingsley said.

It was the same thing that Bill had said. Ron knew he shouldn't but he couldn't help himself. "I know I shouldn't. I'm not."

"Ron, I've known your family for a very long time. I know how much talent and determination is here. I know how much magic and skill runs in your veins. It's something that you shouldn't take lightly," Kingsley said.

"I just don't know how I'm supposed to be successful. I don't have anything. I'm not going back to school. I didn't get great marks. I didn't kill Voldemort. I justâ€¢I don't know," he said. He didn't know why he was spilling everything out to Kingsley, but for some reason it was easy to talk to him. Kingsley wasn't family or a close friend. He knew that Kingsley wouldn't try to make him feel better. He would be honest.

"Ron, you've done a lot. You have something going for you that most of your competition doesn't have," Kingsley said. "Do you want to know what that is?" Ron looked at him and shook his head. "You have experience. You have been in war. You have seen true

evil up close. You've lost family due to it. Are these things that you put on your applications?"

"I didn't know that telling people I watched Harry kill Voldemort or watched my brother die was something to proudly put down," Ron mumbled.

"That's not what I mean, Ron. Yes, there's a section for awards, achievements, talents, whatever. Camp instructors read the same lines over and over again. You need to add something that will set you apart. To be honest Ron, while I always knew you had the enthusiasm to be an Auror, I wasn't sure if you had the will. That was until you came into my office and told me why you wanted it. When you explained how this war has changed you and about the darkness, I knew that this was something that you'd never quit on, and I saw the fire in your eyes. I saw it again today when you talked about protecting George and when you rudely questioned me."

Ron blushed. "I'm sorry about that. I just got angry."

Kingsley laughed. "Don't apologize. I like that. You have force and passion behind you, and you're very blunt. Those are qualities. Those are things that you have to make everyone else see. Tell them about what you've done. No one is expecting you to say that you single handedly killed Voldemort, but talk about what you've been through. Talk about what you've seen, the journey you went on. What this has done to you and your family. Those are the types of things that recruiters want to see. It's what they want to read and excites them."

"You mean like an essay?" Ron said.

"Personal touches like that can truly make a difference. Even if the application doesn't ask for one. It's what's going to set you apart and make up for the lack of NEWTs and high marking OWLs. Also, I think it's important that you talk more about your involvement in the things you did at Hogwarts. You aren't saying enough," Kingsley said.

"How do you know?" he asked.

Kingsley grinned. "I peek at things."

Ron smiled. "You looked at my application?"

"Well, your father might have taken a glance, and I might have been standing right there." Ron laughed. Kingsley's expression grew more serious. "Ron, I think you will make a fine Auror. We need more of your kind on the force. You have to stop holding back. You've done so much more than what you're saying. You can't expect to get the same treatment that Harry is. Harry has his own talents going for him. You need to find yours. You might have to work a little harder, but you'll get there and it will feel great when you finally do."

"You really think I have a shot?" Ron said.

"I wouldn't lie to you. I think you have a great chance. You've got a lot of potential, Ron. You really just have to give yourself a chance and show those recruiters that you deserve this. Tell them why they need you. Be more assertive. I had to be," Kingsley said.

"You?" he said in awe.

"Sometimes it takes a bit of muscle and a bit of noise to get people to take you seriously," Kingsley said.

Ron exhaled deeply and ran his fingers through his hair. "I didn't know it would take so much."

"It will take more than you'll ever be prepared for but, you'll get there. I have faith. You are your father's son and he's never quit a day in his life. He's still fighting, Ron," Kingsley said.

Ron chuckled. "Yeah, I'm starting to understand that."

Kingsley stood up. "Well, I should probably get going."

Ron stood up as well and shook his hand. "Thank you for talking to me. I don't know what I expected when I first started."

"You're still really young but you're getting there. You have to put more into it and believe in what you're doing. I know you can do it. Here," Kingsley pulled out an envelope. "This came to my office. It's a letter from Bakers."

Ron sighed and took the envelope. He stuffed it in his pocket. "Thank you, sir."

"Anytime. If you need help with anything let me know. It's important that we get the right people in to those camps," Kingsley said. He Apparated.

Ron went to his room and took the letter from his pocket. He swallowed hard and considered opening it. However, someone knocked on the door and he quickly stuffed it back in his pocket. "Yeah?"

The door opened and Hermione was on the other side. "May I come in?"

"Of course," he said. She walked over to him and sat. He put his fingers to the back of her neck and deeply massaged his fingertips in.

She closed her eyes and moaned. "I'll never get tired of this."

He smiled. "I'll never get tired of doing it. So, there was a lot to talk about at lunch, yeah?"

"There sure was. I wonder what Kingsley wants to talk to my parents about. I don't want to overwhelm them with everything. They're already scared and worried about me," Hermione said.

"He just wants to keep them safe. They are a part of our world even though they're Muggles," Ron said.

She opened her eyes and sighed. "I know, but I feel like I'm burdening them sometimes. It's hard bridging the gap between my two lives. I'm going to worry about them when I'm at school, too. I can't afford to have anything happen to them."

"Hey, come here," Ron said. He pulled her close and wrapped an arm around her waist. She snuggled against his neck. "You're stressing yourself out, Hermione. You have to take it easy and worry a bit less."

She laughed dryly. "You say it like it's a simple thing to do. I can't help it, Ron. I can't help it any more than you can. I'm worried about everything and you most of all."

"I told you not to," he pressed.

Hermione pulled away. "Well, you won't talk to me. What else am I supposed to do?"

Ron didn't know how to respond. The door opened. "Oh, sorry, am I interrupting?" Harry said.

"No, we're just talking. You can come in," Hermione said.

Harry slowly walked over and sat on his cot. "We're you two talking about what Kingsley said?"

"Sort of," Ron said. "What did Kingsley say to you after lunch?"

Harry exhaled deeply. "He wants to have a meeting with me. I already know what it's about. Apparently, defeating Voldemort isn't enough. There are statements the Ministry wants me to make and there's talk about guards and all these other things that I have to deal with now." He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"We've been in a fortress here. It won't last too much longer," Hermione said.

"Yeah, I know. It's all coming faster than I thought it would," Harry said.

"You'll be able to handle it, though. You always do," Ron said.

Harry looked up at him. "Yeah, and what about you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ron asked.

"When are you going to talk to Hermione and me about what's going on with you?" Harry asked.

Ron stared down at his hands. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want an apology. I want to know what's going on with you. It's about the camps, isn't it?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Ron said.

"Love," Hermione said. She lifted his chin.

He looked into her eyes and knew that he couldn't hold back anymore. "I'm worried that I won't get into a good one. I don't know if I'm enough."

"Please, not this again," Harry said.

"Harry, give Ron a moment," Hermione snapped. "Go on, Ron."

Ron nodded and sighed. "It's just...Hermione, I knew you'd get the badge. You were always destined to be Head Girl. Harry, of course you got into Goldbard. You're Harry bloody Potter. But I don't know what I'm destined for and seeing you two get everything made me jealous. I left because I didn't want to hear from you two about how special or capable I am. I get tired of hearing it but not seeing any results. I just wanted to get away for a while. That's all. I'm sorry."

"Ron, I'm no better than you are just because I got into Goldbard and you didn't," Harry said.

"I know that but...it's just hard. I want to be an Auror. I really do," Ron explained. "I just feel behind. Harry, I'm not like you. I'm not like you either, Hermione."

"Who ever asked you to be?" Harry said.

Hermione rubbed Ron's leg. "Ron did." Ron looked away. Sometimes he really didn't like it when she was right. "Sweetheart, you can't approach this thinking about how I or Harry would do it. If you want this, then you have to do it for yourself. You have to believe that what you have is good enough. It is good enough."

"That's what Bill and Kingsley said," Ron said with a smile.

"Well, they're right. You keep telling me not to worry, well, I'm telling you to start loving yourself. You have to give yourself a chance but whatever happens know that I'll still see you as the magnificent person that you are. Nothing has changed my views of you," Hermione said.

"She's right and it's one school, Ron." Harry said. "There are still plenty of more applications for us to fill out."

"I...I need some help," Ron said. "Kingsley said it would be great if I wrote an essay to go along with my application. Do you think you could help me?"

"An essay sounds fantastic! Of course I'll help you, Ron," Hermione said. She leaned forward and kissed him tenderly. "I'll do whatever I can to help you, but you have to talk to me. We have to keep talking."

"I'll help as well. We'll make sure to show all those recruits that they would be completely mental not to accept you. It's the truth," Harry said with a smile.

Ron grinned at his two best friends and felt a little bit better. Maybe he didn't have to do everything by himself. "Thanks," he said gently.

"You're not alone in this, Ron. We want you to succeed just as much as you do. No one is going anywhere," Hermione reassured.

"You will be," Ron whispered.

Hermione looked down and Harry's expression changed. The three of them sat in silence and really took in that in just a short time, the trio would lose a member and the most important one in Ron's opinion. She looked back up and quickly wiped the tear from her eye. "Yes, but, I'm not leaving today. Today, we can get started on your essay." Hermione pulled out pieces of parchment and the three of them thought about what Ron could write for his essay. Ron found it both embarrassing and uplifting. He couldn't lie to himself. He enjoyed his friends talking about his achievements and talents. It made him feel closer to them. It was a closeness that he hadn't felt before.

Later on that night, Ron slowly slipped out of Hermione's arms and out of bed. He walked past the sleeping Harry and Ginny who were snuggled in his cot and went downstairs to the bathroom. He sat on the edge of the tub and opened his letter from the Bakers Academy. It was not as pristine or popular as Goldbard but it was a training camp nonetheless. With shaky hands, he unfolded the letter and read.

Dear Mr. Ronald Weasley,

We regret to inform you that your request toâ€œ!"

Ron stopped reading and crumpled up the letter. He tore it into dozens of pieces and threw it in the bin. He rubbed his eyes and tried to control his breathing. He refused to let himself get upset. He refused to let his frustrated tears through. "It is just Bakers. It's just a stupid school," he repeated to himself.

He stared at the pieces of the letter in the bin. A fire burned inside him. He wanted to prove Bakers wrong. He wanted to prove Goldbard wrong. He wanted to prove himself wrong. He wanted to prove that he could do it and that he would become an Auror. Kingsley was right. Ron would have to fight for it and he was ready to. He got up, splashed his face with water, and headed back up to his room. He grabbed his essay and quills. He eyed Hermione as he did. He would show her. He would prove to her that she had nothing to worry about. He would be okay.

He went downstairs and into the kitchen. He sat at the table and wrote and re-wrote his essay. He didn't stop until he wrote something he was proud of.

Yes, Ron would prove to himself that he could be something special.

\* \* \*

\*\*\*\* Oh, I love you, Ronald Weasley!

So, as time goes on different elements will be brought in. I want to get as much R/Hr time as I can before she goes off to school but it's important to start bringing in some other sub-plots as well.

This chapter really focused in on how I think Ron's felt about getting into camps before he finally did. I don't think it wasn't as easy for him as it must have been for Harry. Yes, I know Ron was a major factor in the war. I understand his importance. I love Ron and Harry wouldn't be anywhere without him. But in all honestly, it's Harry, the hero \*sighs\* so I think it was easy for him to get into camps. It makes sense. For Ron, he has to put more into it. Nothing in Ron's life has even been simply given to him. He's had to fight and take every bit of it. It's what makes him so strong. It's no different here. Ron will get what he wants, but he'll have to work at it a bit harder. So, please don't flame me. I'm not being mean to Ron or trying to torture him or whatever. I love Ron. He's my favorite character and I find him purely amazing, but I want to be realistic, and I want him getting into camps and the camps he wants to really mean something. He will get there. I promise. I'm really treating the training camps process as I see people wanting to get into good universities. I reckon the same rules apply.

Well, I hope everyone enjoyed the chapter! Thanks for reading and if you want the next bit, review!

\* Chapter 12\*: In your arms

Thank you everyone for the reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron looked over the shelves for the hundredth time to make sure that they were over stuffed with merchandise. It had always been the twin's motto to make everything look as messy and destructive as possible while still maintaining order. "How is the love potion stand coming, Angie?" he asked.

"It's almost ready, boss," she called.

Ron looked up from his clipboard and cringed. "I thought I told you not to call me that. I'm not the boss. I just help out."

Angelina laughed. "I know you must enjoy the authority. Besides, your name is on the building."

Ron smirked and walked over to her. For some reason he couldn't allow himself to get too close to the love potions. He still had nightmares about his own fiasco over the tiny bottles of trouble. "My name may be on the building ,but I'm certainly not the boss. Your boyfriend does a good bloody job of reminding me of that. Anyway, I hate having authority. You must have me confused with Percy."

She rolled her eyes before growing more serious. "Is he coming?"

"Percy? Why would he come?" Ron asked.

She shrugged. "I dunno. It's the grand opening. Weasley Wizarding Wheezes and all. I thought the whole family might show up."

"Oh," Ron said. In all honestly he had been so busy with preparing for the big day that he hadn't even thought about asking George if he invited the family to come. "Well, I don't know. Has George said anything about it?"

"No, but George doesn't really tell me everything. I figured if anyone would know, then it would be you," she said.

"He hasn't mentioned anything. I'm leaving all that up to him. I'd love for the family to come, but I'm not going to push George to invite them. They might just show up anyway. Where is he?" Ron asked, looking around.

Angelina's face grew even graver. "He's still up at the flat. He told me that he was going to get ready but that was some time ago."

"You should probably go get him. He needs to go over these check lists before we get started," Ron said. He didn't understand the look in Angelina's eyes.

She bit her lip and looked away. "Maybe you should go. I don't think he wants to see me right now."

The itchy feeling in Ron's palms returned. He was just getting comfortable with George and Angelina's relationship. He didn't know if he was ready to really offer advice or go deeper into their lives. "Ahâ€¢are you twoâ€¢fighting or something?"

"No, it's nothing like that. I think he's stressed about today. It's the reopening, and I'm probably only adding to his stress." Her brown eyes were full of such concern and remorse. It was unreal. Angelina Johnson had always reminded him of the twins but in female form. However, since Fred's death she was less outspoken and strong. There was darkness in her eyes and a sad smile that bothered Ron. Everything and everyone was different now.

"I'll go get him," he said gently.

"Thanks, Ron. I'd go but I don't know what to say. I'm trying to hang on myself," she whispered.

He took her hand and squeezed it. He understood her pain completely. He had been busying himself so much lately so that he wouldn't have time to notice and realize that Fred wasn't there to help reopen the shop. "It's okay. Everything will be fine. He's probably just looking for his tie or something." She nodded and said nothing. He let go of her hand and left for the flat before the grief could grow.

He walked slowly up the stairs and held on to his clipboard for balanced. He hoped that George wasn't crumpled on the floor with tears streaming down. Ron wouldn't be able to deal with it. He knocked on the door. "George?" he called. There was no answer. He knocked again. There still wasn't an answer. He twisted the knob and surprisingly it opened.

He walked into the flat. He couldn't hear the shower running or clanging of dishes in the kitchen. "George?" he called again. There was still no answer.

He opened George's bedroom door, but he wasn't inside. He then opened the door to Fred's room and froze. George was lying on the bed fully dressed in his three-piece green suit. His eyes were closed and he was still. A rush of panic came over Ron. His breathing hitched. His brother was unbelievably still. It was almost hauntingly still. "George?" he croaked. He reached out and gently shook him. Like lightening George's eyes opened and he sat up. It made Ron jump. "Fucking hell, George!"

"Wa? Oh, s-sorry, Ron. I reckon I fell asleep," George said.

"Don't ever do that again! I thought you were—"

"You though I was what?" George asked curiously.

"It doesn't matter now. What are you still doing up here? I need you to check off these items. You do remember that the grand opening is today, right?" Ron examined George. He was rather pale and tired looking.

"Yes, Ron, I know what today is. I set the damn date myself," he snapped.

Ron frowned. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. It's justâ€¢what are you doing?"

George slipped his shoes on and laced them. "I was getting dressed and laid down for just a moment. I didn't get a lot of sleep last night. I didn't mean to fall asleep. Everything will still go off on time. You don't have to worry."

"George, you know I don't care about that. I'm justâ€œ;I'm worried about you. We don't have to do this now. You know that," Ron said gently.

"Of course we have to do this now. I want to do this now. I'm not going to push the opening back any longer. I have toâ€œ;I have to go on some time," George said.

Ron sat next to him. "Angelina thinks she's making you like this."

"She didn't do anything. I already told her that. It's just a stressful day. I have a lot on my mind." George got up and walked out of the room. Ron followed him.

"Well, I hate to put more on your plate but there's something that I have to ask," Ron started.

"What is it?" George asked.

Ron took a breath. "Did you invite the family?"

George's already paled face turned even more ashen. "No. I got a letter from mum and dad a couple of days ago. They wanted to know if I wanted them to come. I-I told them not today."

"Why?" Ron asked

George rubbed his neck. "There's a lot going on today, Ron."

"Yeah but you have help for that. Why don't you want them here? They are our family," Ron said.

"Please, I don't need this from you. You're supposed to be on my side," George snapped. He pushed past him and went into the kitchen.

"I am on your side, George but they are my family too. I work here and I want them to come. I want to show them all the work we've done. It's just mum, dad, and our brothers. I'm sure Ginny is coming anyway," Ron explained.

"That's different. Ginnyâ€œ;she's different. When she gets here it will be one thing but if Bill, Percy, mum, and dad come, it will be something else. I justâ€œ;" George leaned against the sink. "I just don't want to deal with it today. I want to get this over with and start the business again. I want today to be good."

"And you think that our family coming to support us will make it bad?" Ron asked.

George ran his fingers through his short hair and pulled on the strands a little. "Ron, you know that's not what I mean. Look, you don't understand."

"Then tell me," Ron urged. He walked over to him and leaned against the sink next to him.

George exhaled deeply. "I didn't put the portraits back up."

"I noticed," Ron answered.

"I know that a billion times today people are going to tell me how sorry they are or how brave they think I am. I'm going to hear over and over again about how great Fred is and how he's probably really proud that I decided to keep the shop open. Over and over again people are going to bring him up, as if I could ever possibly forget his absence and especially today. Look at me, Ron. We bought these suits together. We bought these suits and talked about how successful we were going to be with our shop. Our shop. Nowâ€œit's just my shop. I haven't forgotten. I could never forget even if I wanted to." He stopped and rubbed his eyes.

Ron swallowed hard. He didn't know what to say. "Are you avoiding Angelina?"

"Maybe a little. I love that she's here and I'm excited to be doing this with her but it's hard. Sometimes I thinkâ€œFred should be here to snog her and reopen the shop with her. Lee will be here in less than an hour. It's never just been the two of us together. I've never been by myself in anything before and dealing with the family and seeing them all by myself scares me. They remind me of everything. I'll be reminded even more than usual. I won't be able to focus with them all here. I want them to come too, Ron. I really do but not today. Can you understand that?" George looked at him with his big and gloomy brown eyes. It cut Ron open.

He nodded. "Yeah, I understand. Whatever you want to do I'll stand behind."

George smiled slightly. "Thanks, I appreciate it."

"Do you appreciate me enough to say that I'll never have to wear a suit like that?" Ron cheeked.

George laughed and shoved him. "You wish that you had the body and personality to pull this off, little brother. Come on. We have too much to do today."

As the time drew closer to the opening, Ron grew more and more excited. He had put so much time and effort into cleaning, fixing, and organizing. He was proud of his work. He looked at his watch and felt the butterflies zoom around in his stomach. He looked toward the main counter. Lee had arrived and he, George, and Angelina were going over charts and ordering procedures. It made him smile. It was great to see George interacting with his oldest and dearest friends. However, a small pit of sadness also grew. It was weird seeing the three of them together without Fred. The four of them had been a force together at Hogwarts. It suddenly made him think about Harry, Hermione, and Ginny. The four of them had also been a force while at school and they were going to be broken up. He shook his head. He had to focus.

Finally, the shop opened. Ron was surprised by how many people bustled in and roamed around. He couldn't lie to himself, he enjoyed helping people and giving orders a bit more than he thought he would. He rushed over to the register.

"We are already almost out of filibusters," he whispered in Lee's ear.

"There should be a couple of more cases in the back, mate," Lee said.

Ron nodded and quickly headed to the back room. However, he stopped dead in his tracks. George and Angelina were in the corner holding each other.

"I'm sorry, Angie. You know that I love you. I don't regret anything. I'm so sorry," George said softly.

"I don't regret anything either. I just want to help, George. This is hard for me, too. I feel the same way about Fred. I love you so much. Let me be here with you," Angelina sobbed.

Ron tripped back and out of the room. His heart began to race and his head spun. He didn't know how much more of them he could take. They made him think of too many awful things. Just as he felt his knees giving in, someone tapped his shoulder.

"Excuse me, but I was wondering where the love potions are. There's this boy that I really want to make mine."

Ron shook his head once more and tried to pull himself together. He turned around. "W-well, they're Hermione?"

Standing before him and looking as lovely as ever was Hermione. Immediately his body relaxed and an overwhelming sense of bliss came over him. He grabbed her and hugged her fiercely.  
"Hermione," he breathed.

She hugged him back. "Ron, are you okay?" She pulled away and touched his face. "You're burning up." Actually, Ron was sweating like a pig but he didn't care. He pulled her close and snogged her just as fiercely as he hugged her. She squeaked but responded with enthusiasm. Of course, she pulled away just as Ron was familiarizing himself with her taste. "Heavens, Ron, you are on the job."

He smiled. "Sorry it's just you have no idea how badly I needed to see you."

She touched his cheek again. There was worry all over her face.  
"Are you okay, sweetheart? You don't look so good."

"It's just hot and crowded. I've been working all morning," he rushed. He closed his eyes as her fingers gently touched his cheek and neck. She made him feel so good.

"Are you sure that's all?" she asked.

He opened his eyes. He knew that she wouldn't let it go but he couldn't talk about it now. "Later," he said gently.

She nodded and sighed. "I should be getting used to that word by now."

"Please, let's not do this. Please, Hermione, just, please," he mumbled over and over again. He pulled her close again.

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "What do you need from me? What can I do?"

He thought about the state that his brother was in. He thought about Angelina. He thought about his parents and about Hogwarts. There was a lot that he needed but there was only one that would help him now. "Tell me that you love me. You were still asleep when I got up. I haven't heard it today."

She grinned. "Oh, Ron, I love you. I love you so much. I'm here, okay. I love you, always."

"I love you too, Hermione. I'm so glad you came," he said. He held her tightly and put his forehead to hers. He was stressed beyond belief but Hermione's presence eased the weight on his shoulders.

She pulled away. "So, are you going to help me with my order? Like I said, there's this boy that I want to connect with."

Ron laughed and took her hand. He led her over the love potions. "Hmm, well, tell me about him."

She picked up a bottle and examined it. "Well, he's tall, ginger, rather pale, but freckly. He's got these giant blue eyes that I simply love gazing into and these big hands that I love to hold." She held his hand tighter.

"Well, it sounds like this bloke is only good in the bedroom department considering how you only described his physical features," Ron cheeked with a blush.

Hermione blushed as well. "I can't lie. He is very good with his hands but he's good with other parts of his body I'm sure. However, it's not just his looks. He's kind, smart, brave, and loyal. It's a relief too because he can also be lazy, sloppy, and moody at times."

"I'm sure he's not that moody," Ron said.

"You don't know him like I do. He's incredibly moody but he's also incredibly wonderful. I'm in love with him, and I want him more than anything else that I could possibly have. He's perfect," she said gently.

Ron knew she was being extra sweet to make him feel better and it was working. He looked into her eyes and saw everything that he needed. Every day he loved her more and every day she became that

much more important to his existence. "I don't think you need a potion to get him. I'm sure he's already yours forever."

They stared at each other for a while. Ron knew he had customers to tend to and he still needed to grab the filibusters but it all disappeared for a moment.

"There you two are. I can't believe you're over here," Harry said, breaking them out of their trance.

Ron looked to him. "Yeah, just helping out a customer."

Harry smiled. "Well, you can't play favorites. How are you doing?"

Ron shrugged. "I'm okay. I'm just tired. It's been a long day and I don't think the traffic is going to slow down."

"I don't either. I don't even think there were this many people the first time," Ginny said, coming over to them. "You okay, Ron?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm great, actually. It's nice to see this place alive again. It's a littleâ€œempty without Fred but that's to be expected. Have you seen George? I've already spoken to Lee," she asked.

Ron remembered leaving George and Angelina in the back room.  
"He'sâ€œaround I'm sure."

"We saw Angelina not too long ago. It's good that she's here," Harry said.

"Yeah, she's been a big help," Ron said. He looked down. He knew they were all staring at him and trying to get answers. He honestly didn't know what to say.

"Hey, there's the lot," a familiar voice said.

Ron turned around. Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood were walking over to them. "Luna!" Ginny practically screamed. She ran over to her and hugged her.

"Neville, what are you doing here?" Ron asked in shock. He held his hand out and Neville shook it.

"I had to be here today. I saw the notice in the paper," he explained.

"Neville and I sort of ran into each other on the way here," Luna said, giving everyone hugs.

"Oh, it's so good to see you two," Hermione urged.

"Yeah, it's been a while. We've sorta been hiding out at the Weasley's," Harry said.

"Yes, I think everyone is laying low, but I had to get out today," Neville said.

"Me too. Fresh air is good for the soul and sunlight is an old remedy as well," Luna added.

Ron looked at them and felt an odd sense of triumph and happiness. Neville seemed taller, leaner, and tougher, and Luna was still rather mad and airy but there was a new firmness to her. For the first time Ron could see that her feet were planted safely on the ground.

"Well, do you all want to go for lunch and catch up for a bit?" Neville asked.

"I'd love to but I'm working," Ron rushed.

"Oh, you go ahead," George said, walking past them with a box of filibusters.

"George, there's too much to do today," Ron said.

He rolled his eyes. "I think the three of us can handle it. You've been here all morning and most of the afternoon. Please, go enjoy your childhood before you become a working stiff like me. Hey, lot, no discounts unfortunately."

"Not even for family?" Ginny asked.

"Especially family," George said with a wink before walking off. Ron smiled at his brother.

"Well, that settles it then. Lets go get some food," Neville said.

It was nice walking around Diagon Alley with his friends. Ron had only been around his family, Hermione, and Harry for so long that he almost forgot there was another life with other people. He kept his hand tightly entwined with Hermione's as they walked and visited stores. He still felt a bit on edge and he needed her strength. They stopped at a teashop for lunch.

"So, are you three going back to school?" Neville asked.

"I am but they're not," Hermione answered.

"Yeah, I just don't see the reason to go back. I'm going to camp in the fall. I don't need any more education or whatever it is that seventh years do," Harry cheeked.

Hermione swatted his arm. "Hush it."

Neville laughed. "I don't blame you. What about you, Ron?"

Ron shrugged. "I probably wouldn't pass anyway, but I'm trying to go to Auror camp as well. I'm only working at the shop until I find a good place to train."

"That sounds lovely. I know you both will do well. I'm excited about going back to school. It's better than just sitting around," Luna said. Ron shifted in his seat. Luna had been through so much and he couldn't believe that she could still smile so widely and enjoy life so fully.

"I can't believe it but I'm excited about school as well and with Hermione being Head Girl it should be wicked," Ginny said.

"Oh, it's not as if I'm going to let you get away with whatever you want, Ginny," Hermione said. Ginny rolled her eyes.

"I took my make-up NEWTs at the start of summer. I really only did well in herbology and not too bad in defense. I'm going to Fleming Academy this fall," Neville explained.

"The Auror camp?" Ron asked amazed.

Neville smirked. "Yeah, it's based in Ireland and I really want to go there. Ireland has an amazing herbology workshop out in Waterford. So, I can get my badge and start an internship all at the same time."

"That's really ambitious, Neville," Harry said.

"I know but I have to be. I want to be an Auror but my passion is plants, so being an Auror will give me the money I'll need until I can find something to do in the herbology field," Neville explained.

"Maybe you should teach at Hogwarts," Ginny said.

"I'd love that. I don't want to be in Ireland forever. I would love to come back and teach," he said.

"Well, your plan sounds lovely. I'm so proud of you, Neville," Hermione said kindly.

"Me too. You've come a long way, Neville," Luna added, rubbing his arm. Neville's still rather chubby cheeks turned pink and he smiled big. Ron couldn't help but smile as well. He was proud of his friend. He was also the tiniest bit jealous. Neville already had his life planned out. He had been accepted into a training camp and knew what he was going to do. Ron never figured that someone like Neville would in the end be and have so much more than himself. It was a sobering testament.

After lunch everyone wanted to keep talking and shop around but Ron and Hermione decided to leave to be alone. They walked around the streets holding hands. It was a perfect way to spend the day in Ron's opinion. He wouldn't have too many more chances to be alone with her.

"So, it was nice seeing Neville and Luna, wasn't it?" she said.

"Yeah, I missed them," Ron confessed.

"Me too. We've been around each other only for so long that it's almost as if everyone else vanished," Hermione answered. She looked at him and smiled. "That's not completely tragic though. I don't mind."

He returned her smile. "I don't mind it either." They stopped and looked at each other for a while before walking again. Hermione moved closer to him and Ron wrapped his arms around her waist. They tried to stay as close together as they could. It was almost as if they were trying to become glued to each other.

Ron kissed the top of her head and took in the rich scent of her shampoo. "It's really great about Neville. I can't believe he's going to a camp."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

Ron shrugged. "It's not like that. Wellâ€¦ maybe it is, butâ€¦ I dunno. He's got everything together. Everything is working out for him. He has a plan and he's putting it into motion. It's great but it's weird."

She stopped walking and pulled away. "Why? Is it so hard to believe that Neville can be successful?"

"No, Hermione that's not what I'm saying. Neville is brilliant and of course he can be successful." Ron knew he was digging himself a bigger and bigger hole. He hadn't meant to sound like such an arse.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Then what are you saying?"

"I don't know. Neville hasn't always been the one to have everything work out for him and to see everything going for him now isâ€¦ surreal," he tried to explain.

"Now, is it weird because everything is working out for Neville, or is it weird because things are working out for him but not you?" she asked.

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know, Ron. You tell me," she said just as quietly. Ron didn't know how to respond. "Are you going to tell me about what happened to you earlier?"

He knew the question was going to come up. He really didn't have the strength to keep everything inside. "Hold on to me," he said. She opened her mouth but he put a finger to her lips. "Just do it, Granger." She chuckled and hugged him. He concentrated intensely. He took a breath and Apparated.

They were at the backyard of his house. "What are we doing here?" she asked.

He took her hand and led her down to the large tree that provided the only shade from the burning sun. "Come sit with me," he said. He sat down and she sat next to him. He leaned against the tree

and she lay back against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her stomach, and she held on to his arms.

She moaned softly. "This is so perfect, Ron. This has to be the best way to enjoy the day."

"Is it better than reading or studying for something?" he teased.

She lightly hit his arm. "Oh, leave me alone. There's nothing wrong with those things but yes, this is better."

"I agree," he said softly. He slowly moved his hands under her shirt and traced patterns on her stomach. She shivered and moaned again.

"Mmm, I like that. You're so good to me," she purred.

Ron felt a rush of blood move to his groin. "I do aim to please." They watched the pond water ripple and swish in the gentle breeze. Ron massaged Hermione's stomach and she continuously moaned and kissed his arms.

"Ron," she said after some time. "What happened this morning?"

He shook himself out of his heaven and decided to tell the truth. "George isn't doing as well as he wants everyone to believe."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"I didn't think he was going to make it today. He's hurting a lot. He misses Fred all the time but especially today it's almost beyond comprehension."

"That's understandable. I'm sure he feels a lot of pain because Fred isn't here and he probably feels a bit of guilt, too," Hermione said.

"That's not the only reason why he feels guilty," Ron said slowly.

"What else does he have to feel guilty about?" she asked curiously.

Ron thought about it. He knew that George didn't want his family to know about his relationship with Angelina yet, but he didn't know if the rule applied to Hermione. It didn't matter. He had to tell her. "Well, I know he feels guilty because he's dating Angie."

Hermione immediately sat up and turned to him. "George and Angelina are dating?"

"Yeah," he said slowly.

Her eyes grew. "What? When? How? Are you serious?"

Ron laughed. "I don't think I can answer all of that at one time."

"Sorry, I'm just...wow," she said.

"I know. I was shocked when I first found out. I think they started dating sometime around Fred's funeral," Ron said.

"I can see that. They were very clingy and seemed relaxed with each other. How did your parents take the news?" she asked.

Ron rubbed his neck. "They didn't. They don't know. No one knows expect me, Ginny, and I reckon Lee now. George said that he wasn't ready for everyone to know."

"But you told me," she said.

"I had to. Like I said, you're different," he said.

She smiled. "Well, thank you, Ron. I can see why George has been so stressed now. It must be hard to balance all of this. Is that why you were upset today? Was it because of George and Angelina?"

"Yes, but not for the reason you're thinking. I've gotten used to seeing them together. It's just...he's hurting so badly, but he won't talk to anyone. He tells me a little and he tells Angelina a little, but I know it's all building up. I think it's taking a toll of their relationship," Ron confessed.

"They are both hurting, Ron. Maybe they're just learning how to grieve together. I'm sure they feel apprehensive about honestly opening up to each other. Fred is still a part of their lives," Hermione said.

"I know but it worries me. George seems so lonely. He's really lonely inside, and I think it might be getting worse. Even Angelina sees it. They're having problems. I know they are. He won't open up to her or she's too afraid or something. It's a mess," he said.

She rubbed his arms. "I'm sorry, Ron. It must be hard for you. You're right in the middle of it."

Ron nodded. "It's nerve-racking. I want to help, but I don't know how. I still feel sort of weird around the two of them. I don't know. I just wish George would talk to her. She can probably help him more than I can. He needs to open up."

Hermione's face hardened a bit. "He's not the only one, Ron."

"What does that mean?" Ron asked but he was pretty sure he knew what she meant.

"We need to talk about it. I'll be leaving soon and we haven't even discussed it," she said softly.

The fear came back and the real reason for his panic returned. He had to get away. "I should go back and check on George," he said, getting up.

"No, Ron, don't do this! We need to talk," she said, getting up as well.

"I'm sorry. I need to go," he said. He Disapparated before she could stop him. The shop was shockingly empty when he opened the door. "George?" he called.

George poked his head out from the back room. "In here." George, Lee, and Angelina were giggling in the room and sipping drinks.

"Where is everyone?" Ron asked.

"We had to close up early. Almost all of the supply is gone," Lee said. He handed Ron a bottle.

"Cheers. What is this?" Ron asked.

"It's celebration of a wickedly successful day," Lee said.

Ron twisted the cap off and took a swig. The strong liquid made his stomach flip. "Ah, what is this?"

"Guinness. It's some of the best Muggle beer out there. I brought a whole case back with me," Lee said.

Ron took another drink but quickly handed it back to him. "I think I'll pass."

"I told you, Lee. Ron is a light weight," George said with a wink.

"Leave him alone," Angelina said. She smiled at George and he returned it. Ron couldn't understand it. Hours ago they looked ready to crack. He couldn't take it.

"George, can I talk to you for a minute?" Ron asked.

George followed him the front of the store. "Yes?"

"Um, I just wanted to say thanks for letting me have time off today," he said.

"It's no big deal. You earned it. Besides, your friends wanted to see you, and you looked as if you could use a break," George said.

"So did you," Ron said.

George raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I saw you and Angelina earlier. Where you two fighting?" he asked.

George sighed. "No. We weren't fighting. We were both really stressed, and I felt a bit overwhelmed. I haven't been talking to her lately, and she was worried about me. We worked it out. I had to tell her how scared I was about today and how guilty I felt about everything. She understood. I can't believe that she did

but she felt the same way. We just had to be honest with ourselves."

"That's great, George," Ron said.

"I'm glad we worked it out. I didn't want to admit to her that I wanted Fred here more than anything. She didn't want to admit the same thing. I was worried about making her feel bad, and I reckon she felt the same way. You're right, Ron. It's important to talk and Angelina is my girlfriend now. I can't keep shutting her out because I'm scared. That's not what a real man does." George looked at him in a curious way.

Ron understood right away. "I guess you're right," he said.

George patted his arm. "Look, we'll close up. You've done so much today. You get home and spend as much time with Hermione as you can. She's leaving soon."

"I know," Ron breathed. "Thanks, George."

"No problem, Ron," he answered. When he got back home, he went straight to his room. Hermione was sitting on his bed, hugging a pillow.

She looked up at him. Her eyes were red. "How's George?"

"He's okay. He and Angelina are okay. They actually had to close the shop early. We made a lot of profit today," Ron explained. He walked over to her and sat down. Up close he could tell that she had been crying. It was his fault. She wanted to talk and he didn't. He couldn't stand to see her in such a state because of him. He had to make it right. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I'm so sorry that I've been putting this off and walking away from you."

She sniffed and wiped her damp cheeks. "I don't know why you won't talk to me about this."

"It's hard. You have no idea how hard it is," he said.

"Tell me, Ron. Tell me what's hard," she sobbed.

He tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. She closed her eyes and leaned against his hand. It was amazing. He was so in love with her. "Today, when you saw me in the shop, I was having some sort of...thing. I couldn't breathe and my heart was racing like mad. I got really scared and really sweaty."

She rubbed his arm. "That sounds like a panic attack, Ron."

"Well, whatever it was, the name fits. It was awful," he explained.

"And all this was because of George and Angelina?" she asked.

"Not exactly. Yeah, I feel really bad for my brother and I feel bad for Angelina but-but seeing them and the loneliness that they must feel makes me makes me think about you leaving."

Hermione's shoulders fell slightly. "Oh, Ron."

"I almost had a panic attack today because I thought about you leaving. That really says something, Hermione. You have no idea what the thought of you leaving does to my mind and my body," he said.

Her lip trembled and she touched his face. "I'm sorry. I didn't know that I was causing you all of this."

He took her hand. "Don't be sorry. You didn't do anything wrong. Besides, you fixed me. Just as I felt ready to collapse, you came out of nowhere and made me better. Just seeing your face and hearing your voice made all of it go away. You are always there when I need you most. You make me feel so good, Hermione. You make every bad feeling and thought go away, and it's all going to end in less than two weeks. I'll be alone." He had to stop talking. A burning sensation hit his throat.

Hermione's eyes swelled with tears again. "Don't talk like that."

"Don't talk like what? You wanted to know the truth. You wanted to discuss this. Well, I am. I'm scared, Hermione. I'm scared of you leaving," he said.

"You have no reason to be scared," she said quietly.

"How can you say that? Baby, I need you. I function okay because I know you'll be there for me but you're going to leave and—"

"I know I'm leaving, okay? Damn it, Ron, do you think that you're the only one who is scared? I'm scared, too. I need you just as much as you need me. You keep my nightmares away and when I have time to sit and think about everything and I freeze up, somehow you always come around and hold me and make me feel safe. I only completely feel safe when I'm with you. God, why didn't you tell me anything of this before?" she said in a shaky voice.

"Because I didn't want you to feel guilty. I don't want you staying because of me. I want you to go back to school. I want you to finish, but I can't lie anymore and say that it doesn't bother me a little. It does. Seeing George and Angelina makes me remember just how much I'm going to miss you." He reached out and touched her face.

She took his hand and kissed his fingers. "I'm going to miss you, too, Ron. Everything good that I have in my life is wrapped up in you somehow. Telling me the truth doesn't make you a bad person. I feel bad for wanting to go sometimes. I feel selfish for leaving you and Harry and everyone. A part of me doesn't want to go."

"A part of me doesn't want you to go either, but I won't tell you not to. You have to go, Hermione. You have to go. I just—I love you so much. I love you, and it hurts to think of you not being around. You've been everywhere with me since the war, and I'm not ready to let you go. I want you all to myself, and I feel

terrible and pathetic for needing you so badly, but I can't help it. Everything about me is you. I'm not ready to just be me again." Ron let out a shaky breath. "I must sound like a nutter."

Hermione sobbed and wiped her tears away. "No, you don't. I understand what you mean. I feel the same way. I've always been so strong and independent but nowâ€¦sometimes all I want to do is be in your arms and shut the rest of the world out. I wake up thinking about you and how much I want you. I feel this incredible need for, you and I always get to have you. All that will change soon and I'm terrified. You think I'm so tough and ready, but I'm not. I don't know if I'm ready for this. I don't know how I'm going to cope with it."

Ron pulled her close. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he held her tightly. "You have to cope. You have to go. I'll never ask you not to go. You must go back to school. I know that you have to."

"I know. I want to go. I need to go back. Ron, I'm just so worried for you and for myself. I want you to make it. You have to handle this. Please," she said.

"I will. Pretending that you're not going to leave isn't going to make it easier. I have to start dealing with it. I'm sorry. It's just not easy. I'm not ready for it. I'm not ready to let you go. I don't want to let you go," he said, holding her tighter.

"Then don't. You don't have to let me go yet. I'm still here. I'm still here, Ron. Just because we're talking about me leaving doesn't mean that I'm leaving now. I'm here. I'm still all yours," she said.

"I just want to hold on to you forever," he said.

She smiled and leaned forward. She kissed his tenderly. Ron savored the kiss for as long as he could. She pulled away, looking beautiful and graceful. "You don't have to ask, Ron." She put her forehead against his and put her hands on either side of his cheeks. He looked into her eyes. They were so chestnut and wet. She looked gorgeous and smelled fantastic. Her body was warm and soft. He loved her so much, and he wanted her more than anything.

He leaned forward and kissed her roughly. She hugged his neck and moaned. Ron crushed their lips together and stuck his tongue as far as he could into her mouth. She pushed her hips against him and a surge of pressure and pleasure shot through him. She had a skirt on and he could feel how warm she was. He leaned her back against the bed and deepened the kiss. Hermione continued to moan. She opened her legs and he settled between them. He pushed into her powerfully. she broke out of the kiss and they both groaned.

Ron was steaming and incredibly hard. He sucked on her neck.  
"Hmm, Hermione, I fucking love you."

She pulled on his hair and brought their lips together again. "I love you, too, Ron. Oh, yes," she purred as his fingers ran up her shirt. He pulled away and took off his shirt. She quickly sat up and pulled hers off as well. He stared at her body and felt his skin heat up and drip with sweat. He growled and attacked her mouth again. Hermione whimpered and pushed up into his groin.

She bit and sucked on his lips. Ron's head was spinning. He squeezed her breasts and kissed all over her neck. She continued to moan as she dug her nails into his back. She thrusted up again. "Ron," she groaned.

It stirred him on more. His hands went to her thighs. She pulled on his hair again and brought their mouths together once more. Ron continued to push into her. He ran his hands higher until he reached her knickers. He deepened the kiss and slowly started to pull them down. His heart rate increased. Yes, he wanted to make love to her. He wanted to take her right there but the more he started to realize what he was doing, the more nervous and less sure he became. He stopped and pulled away.

Hermione propped herself on her elbows. She was flushed and out of breath. "Ron?"

He gazed at her. She was unbelievably sexy, and his cock had never been harder. However, something felt off, and he remembered what his father had said. He had to stay ahead of the passion. "Do you want to do this?" he asked.

He didn't have to say what. Hermione's face changed as she thought about it. "I want us to, Ron, but I don't think I want it like this. It would be for all the wrong reasons."

"I agree," he said softly. He moved completely off her. He handed her back her shirt and he slipped his on as well. They were out of breath and sweaty. Ron didn't know what to say. "I think I'm going to take a shower."

"Okay," Hermione said softly. He looked at her. She didn't seem upset. In fact, she was smiling a little. "I love you."

"I love you, too," Ron answered. He snogged her deeply before leaving the room.

Ron took a long cold shower. He thought about what had almost happened with Hermione. A part of him was angry for stopping it, but Hermione was right. He didn't want their first time to be out of sorrow and a need to stop crying. He wanted something special with Hermione. He wanted it to be full of happiness, but with her leaving, he didn't know if he would ever get the chance to become whole with her. After his shower, he went downstairs to make tea. His parents were in the kitchen.

"Ron, we didn't know you were here," his mother said. "We figured that you were still out with Harry and Ginny."

"Yeah, I just came back from the shop a while ago," he answered.

"How did it go?" his dad asked.

"It was mad. There were so many people there. We had to shut down early," he explained.

"That's excellent. How was George?" his mum asked.

Ron looked at his parents. He decided to be honest. "He had a few moments but he made it. He really missed Fred today. We all did."

"Oh, my dear boy. We wanted to be there, but we're respecting George's wishes," she said.

"Thanks for that. He wanted you two to be there, but he wasn't ready. Just give him some time," Ron said wisely. He understood his brother more and more with each day. He hadn't felt so close to a sibling before.

His mother smiled. "Of course, sweetheart. Here, this came for you." She handed him an envelope. It was from Restbridge Academy. "You don't have to read it now," she added.

"Ah, it's okay. I sent my application ages ago. I didn't even include my essay. It's a good school so I know I didn't get in," he said casually. He opened it to confirm his statement.

Dear Mr. Ronald Weasley,

We are pleased to inform you that your application and request to train at Restbridge Academy has been approved. The staff feels that your skill level is fit for our institution and we would be delighted to include you to our roster. Further instruction and information about our program has been attached to the letter.

Congratulations,

John Hall

Ron looked up from the letter. He couldn't really think or process. "Well, dear?" his mum asked.

"Iâ€¢I got in," he croaked.

"What was that?" his dad asked. Ron handed him the letter. He read it over and his blue eyes went massive. "Ron, you got in!"

"Ronnie!" his mother yelled. She ran over to him and gave him a bone-crushing hug.

"I got in," Ron repeated. "I got in to a good school."

His dad got up as well and joined in the hug. "I knew you could do it, son."

"I got in," Ron said for the third time.

"What's wrong? I heard screaming?" Hermione said, coming from the staircase.

His parents let him go. He turned to her. "I-I got into Restbridge."

She gasped before jumping into his arms. He couldn't exactly hold her. He was still in shock. She let him go and kissed his ferociously. She pulled away, blushing. She usually didn't show much affection to him in front of his parents. "Ron, this is fantastic."

He shook his head. "But I don't understand. Restbridge is a pretty good school, and I didn't even send in my essay to them. This was one of the first schools I applied to."

"That doesn't matter. I told you that you were good enough with what you had. The essay is just a bonus. Oh, Ron, this is lovely. I'm so proud of you!" Hermione said.

Ron smiled. He felt so warm. Even more than the letter, he loved that Hermione was proud of him. He read it over again. "I got in. I can't believe it."

"I can. You're incredible, Ron," his mum said. Ron couldn't stop smiling. "Oh, I'm going to make a big dinner for this."

"Mum, you don't have to cook for me," Ron said.

"Are you joking? Of course I do! This is worth celebrating," she said.

"It's best not to argue with her. We've proud of you, Ron. Let us be proud," his dad said.

Ron and Hermione went back out to the pond while his parents cooked. "I'm so proud of you. This is great, Ron," Hermione said as they sat under the tree again.

"Thanks. I'm just stunned. Restbridge is wicked. It's probably the best one I'm going to get accepted to. It's in my top five," Ron explained.

"What about Lambrick?" Hermione asked.

"Of course I'd go there, but I have to realistic," he answered.

She rolled her eyes. "You said the same thing about Restbridge and yet you go in and without your essay. This is a good sign. If you could pull this off without it, I can't even imagine who's going to accept you with it. Ron, you're amazing so talented. Things will work out for you." She leaned forward and kissed him tenderly.

Ron melted into her kiss. He pulled away. The moon lighted up her eyes and her skin glowed softly in the slight darkness. "You think so?"

"I know so. Just have some faith, love," she said.

He smiled and traced her mouth. "Look, I'm sorry about earlier. I didn't mean to; I didn't."

"It's okay. I didn't mean to either. We were both really upset and got a bit carried away. I'm not upset. I'm glad that we didn't," she said.

"Yeah, me too," he answered. He lost himself in her eyes.

"So, how do you want to celebrate your acceptance? I can't cook as well as your mum," Hermione said.

Ron thought about it. "I just want you. Let me hold you."

Hermione chuckled and licked her lips slowly. "I think I can do that."

Ron leaned against the tree again and Hermione settled against his chest. He held her close. They breathed in a steady rhythm to each other's. He held her tighter. "I love you, Hermione. You are mine to love."

She took one of his hands and kissed his fingers. He shivered as her tongue slicked the tips. "I'm always yours, love. I'm still here. I love you, Ron. I love you."

Ron closed his eyes and enjoyed the warm weather, the gentle breeze, and the buzz from his acceptance letter and the success from the store. However, they didn't seem as important anymore. He had Hermione and that was his greatest achievement.

\* \* \*

\*\*\*\* Aww, I really loved this chapter. I know it was another really long one but there's just much that I wanted to get into. I could go on and on about Ron and Hermione and her leaving but I decided to stop somewhere, lol. Besides, it's not over. There are some other things that they have to talk about and they will. I just wanted to open a bit of it in this chapter. I've read a lot of stories where Hermione leaving for school was a big deal to her and Ron but they handled it so well and were really okay with it. I didn't want to do that for my story. I want them to hurt, feel scared, and sad. They love each other more than anything and splitting up for their separate careers really gets to them. I see something so emotional and distressing about Hermione going back. However, it won't be all tears and angst. Ron and Hermione will handle it. They have the will, it's just right now it seems like the scariest thing that could ever happen. No worries, though. They will be okay.

Also, I like how Ron and George sort of mirror each other with their grief and the way they are handling their fears and their girlfriends. They both have a lot of issues that they have to

work on and grow from. Also, yay! Ron got into a camp! It's time the bloke finds some success, yeah? He deserves it.

Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed it! Thanks so much for reading and please don't forget to REVIEW!

CHEERS!

\* Chapter 13\*: Realign

Thanks for the reviews! I'm really sorry that it took so long to add this chapter. I've been really busy with boring career obstacles X(

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

"Thank you so much for this, sir," Ron said, reaching across the desk to shake Kingsley's hand.

"You don't have to thank me for this, Ron. I think that you deserve to go, so it's my pleasure to write your recommendation letter," he explained.

"I hope I can live up to what you said about me," Ron said.

Kingsley didn't seem to get the joke. He sighed. "Ron, do you want to go to Lambrick?"

"Of course I do," he said.

"Do you think that you deserve to go?" Kingsley asked.

He didn't know how to respond. "Sir?"

"Do you think that you deserve to go? It's a simple question and probably one that you will be asked if you make it to the next phase of acceptance." Kingsley eyed him closely.

Ron shifted in his seat. "Um, yeah, I think I do."

Kingsley frowned. "You think you do?"

"W-well I want to go. There's nothing I want more than to be able to train there," Ron tried to explain.

"Yes, I understand that part but I already asked if you wanted to go. I'm asking now if you think that you deserve it. Wanting something and deserving it are two different concepts," Kingsley said.

Ron rubbed his palms on his knees. He felt like such a tit. "I think I deserve-"

"You think?" Kingsley interrupted.

"I know I deserve to go," he said.

Kingsley raised an eyebrow. "What makes you so confident all of a sudden? Don't say that you deserve it just because I asked. You have to mean it and know why. I didn't mind at all writing your letter of recommendation because I think you deserve it, but it won't mean anything if you don't honestly think you do. Think about it, Ron. It's important."

"Yes, sir," Ron said. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. You didn't do anything wrong, but you really need to focus and understand what you're doing. How many camps have you been accepted to?" Kingsley asked.

"A good few. It's getting easier now," Ron said. It was the truth. His pile of rejection letters seemed to decrease as time went on, and his acceptance pile grew a little every day.

"That's great. I told you that it would get easier. I ask because as the deadline approaches, you'll have to choose a camp. No matter which one it is, you'll have to be ready for what's ahead. That takes confidence, Ron. There's no room for the weak," Kingsley explained.

"I'm not weak, sir," Ron shot, feeling a little offended. "I may not always be sure about things, but I know that I'm not weak. I wouldn't have made it through it all if I was."

Kingsley smiled. "Exactly."

Ron frowned in confusion but quickly smiled back. "Yes, sir. I understand."

"I think you are, too. Okay, I'll send your application with my letter this afternoon." Kingsley stood and Ron did as well. He walked him to the door of his office.

"Thank you. I know you don't want to be thanked but thanks anyway," Ron said.

"You're welcome, Ron. I have faith in your abilities. You need to as well," he said.

"I'm working on it. I promise," Ron urged.

Kingsley suddenly grew a little more serious. "I need you to pass on a message to George for me. I've tried owling him, but I guess he hasn't received my letters. Do you know anything about it?"

"No, I didn't know that you were writing him. Is something wrong?" Ron asked. He could already feel a bit of panic grow in his stomach.

"No, nothing is wrong. I just need to check in with him and talk to him about the new protection procedures. The Ministry is

taking this matter very seriously, and we need George's involvement and approval," Kingsley said.

"I'll be sure to tell him. I will see him today at work so I'll pass on the message," Ron said.

"Thank you. Tell George that we're not asking him to make a statement or anything. We just want to help," Kingsley said.

"Statement about what?" Ron asked intrigued.

"Just tell him to get a hold of me as soon as possible," Kingsley said sternly.

Ron figured that it was best not to ask any more questions.

When he got back to the house, Hermione was waiting for him in the kitchen. "How did it go? Did he say anything about your chances? Did you get to read the letter?" she asked rapidly.

He sat next to her. "Can't I get a nice healthy snog before the interrogation?"

She smiled. "Okay, but just this once." She leaned forward and kissed him softly. Ron sighed in relief and interlocked their fingers. She pulled away before he could go any further.

"Hmm, that's not right. I said a healthy snog. That was moreâ€¢unhealthy," he whined.

"Ronald Weasley, I'm not going to let you suck my face off right here in the kitchen. Your parents could come down any moment," she said, looking around.

"Why do you care? Just the other night you let me touch you under the table during dinner," Ron said with a smirk.

Hermione blushed furiously. "Correction, you tried to touch me during dinner, but I didn't let you."

He chuckled. "Yeah, that's right. You suddenly felt ill, and I had to go upstairs and check on you. You should get sick more often."

She swatted his arm. "No, that was a onetime thing. We can't act that way. It's disrespectful to your family."

"How is it disrespectful?" he asked.

"It's justâ€¢;" She put a hand to her chest and gazed into his eyes. "I don't want your parents to think that I'm someâ€¢whatever. I want them to like me."

Ron's jaw dropped. "Hermione, of course my parents like you. Actually, they love you. They always have. They don't see you as anything other than your bossy, book-wormy, beautiful self."

She groaned and covered her face. "Oh, you don't understand. It's different now. I'm not just Hermione, Ron's friend. I'm your girlfriend. There are different rules and different standards now. Especially since I'm a potential future family member."

He pulled her hands away and looked into her worrisome chocolate eyes. "Love, you have nothing to worry about. Are you forgetting who my parents are? Have they ever acted different toward you since we started dating?"

"No," she breathed.

"That's because nothing has changed. Hermione, I'm pretty sure that my parents knew we were going to get together even before we did. Seriously, I think they had a discussion about it and everything. They wanted us together. They wanted you for me. I probably would have been in serious trouble if I didn't bring you back here as my girlfriend," he said.

It made her laugh. "You think so?"

"Yes, I know so. You have nothing to worry about. Besides, even if there were issues it wouldn't make a difference to me. I'll be with you no matter what. You are mine and, no other opinion matters to me." He interlocked their fingers again.

"Oh, Ron," she whispered. "I can't imagine being without you."

"Then don't do it. We're always going to be together. So, you can forget about thinking that you're a potential family member. You will be. You're the only one. You know that." He pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her.

She held him back and moaned. "I know. I'm sorry that I'm like this today. I love you."

"It's okay. I love you, too," he whispered. He closed his eyes and blocked out the rest of the world. There were only days left until Hermione had to leave, and Ron felt the weight of it grow with each passing hour. Every second he had with her was precious to him.

She pulled away slowly and smiled at him. It took every bit of Ron's concentration to keep breathing. She literally took his breath away. "I think I changed my mind about the healthy snog."

"Come here," he said. He pulled on her wrist and she got up from her chair and straddled his lap.

"We could get in serious trouble. Your parents are right upstairs," she said in a shaky voice.

"Y-yeah, I know. We could easily get caught doing this," he answered. His voice was rather shaky as well and his heart raced.

"We don't even have Harry and Ginny for look-outs. They went out for the morning," Hermione said, rolling her middle against his crotch.

Ron held on to her hips and gasped. "Damn, we're sure to get caught then." He reached under her shirt and ran his nails down her back.

She whimpered. "Maybe I made a mistake by changing my mind."

"I don't think you did," he mumbled before kissing her.

They tried to keep their pants and groans quiet as they snogged. It was difficult. Hermione repeatedly grinded against him and he was hard, sweaty, and charged. He pulled away and sucked on her neck. "Hermione, I want you."

"I want you, too. Ron, I want it," she moaned against his ear.

He stopped and looked at her. "Do you want to go to my room?" He wasn't sure if she understood what he really meant.

He figured that she did. Her already crimson face grew darker. "Yes," she said softly.

His hands shook, and he felt airy. "O-okay." Hermione slowly got off him and held out her hand. Ron took it and grinned nervously. They walked to the staircase. Just as they made their climb to his room, his parents came out of their bedroom.

"Oh, dear, we didn't know you were home. I was just about to make a late breakfast," his mum said.

"Um, I'm not really that hungry. I-I ate while I was out," he lied.

"Well, at least tell us how it went with Kingsley," his dad added.

Ron opened his mouth, but he wasn't sure how to tell his parents that the last thing on his mind was food or training camps without being obvious about what he and Hermione were about to do. "Yes, I think that's a great idea. They'll be happy to hear the news. Besides, I don't think one bacon sandwich counts as breakfast, Ron," Hermione said with a wink.

He turned to her and mentally sighed in defeat. "Sure, I reckon you're right."

Ron tried not to seem sour at the table as his parents cooked. Hermione rubbed his arm. "It's okay. It's probably for the best anyway," she said in his ear.

"I guessâ€!" he answered.

"Well, how did it go?" his mum asked, looking up from her mixing bowl.

"His letter was brilliant. He made me sound a lot better than I am, but I reckon that's a good thing. He says that I have a good chance at getting in and that I deserve to," he explained.

"Of course you deserve to. I believe that whatever Kingsley said about you was accurate. He doesn't need to exaggerate, son," his dad said.

"Yes, dear, you know that I don't like it when you talk about yourself like that. We're proud of you," his mum added.

Ron blushed under the attention. "Sorry."

"So, how long will it be until you find out?" Hermione asked, obviously trying to change the subject.

"I don't know. It'll be a couple of weeks. Lambrick is really selective. I don't want to think about it too much, though. It will only make me worry," Ron said. Secretly, he knew that he would get up early every day to see if the letter from Lambrick had come for him.

"I think that's a good idea. You've got a lot of other things to occupy your time. When do you have to be at work today?" Hermione asked.

"Later on this afternoon. With four of us now things run smoothly," he explained.

His parents looked at him. "How is George doing?" his dad asked.

"He's okay. Business is even better now than it was when the store first opened, so he's really busy," Ron said.

The kitchen door opened and Harry and Ginny came in. Both were flushed and bright-eyed. He didn't want to think why. "Yes, just in time," Ginny said, taking a seat at the table.

"Yeah, I'm starving," Harry said, taking a seat as well.

"Why? Did you work up an appetite?" Ron asked.

Hermione jabbed him in the ribs. "Where did you two go?"

"To play quidditch. Harry's training me. I want to be ready before school starts. It's a good thing. I'm rusty," Ginny said.

"Don't listen to her. She's a natural. I can barely keep up with her," Harry said.

She blushed. "Harry, come on."

He took her hand and grinned. "Ginny, you are so brilliant. You should honestly consider quidditch as a profession," Harry said.

She beamed. "I just might."

"Heavens, Ginny, you don't honestly mean that do you?" his mum asked.

"Why not? Ginny is very good," his dad said.

"It's dangerous and time consuming. What if you want to settle down and start a family?" his mum asked. Ron looked at his mother. He didn't understand why she seemed so terrified of the idea.

Ginny laughed. "Mum, I haven't signed a contract or anything. It's only talk. Besides, it's possible to have a career and a family. I could retire early and I dunno write for the quidditch sports section of the paper or something. A lot of retirees do it. That's always been something I've wanted to do."

"Oh, I don't know," his mum said.

"Sounds like a great idea to me. I'm sure your kids and your husband will be proud no matter what you do," Harry said, gazing at Ginny. They stared at each as if they were the only two people in the world.

Ron smiled. He loved that his best mate and sister were happy together. It was easy to see that they were in love. It also made his insides hurt a little. They would be separating as well. He couldn't blame them for wanting to spend every moment together. They could talk, hold each other, and He didn't want to finish the thought. He didn't want to think about Harry violating his little sister, but something deep inside him felt a sense of jealousy. Harry knew Ginny in a way that Ron still did not know Hermione. He desperately wanted to be whole with her.

"Ron, Ron!" Hermione said, shaking his arm.

"Huh?" Ron blinked and shook his head. "Sorry, I, um, what was the question?" He looked around. Everyone was staring at him in a curious way.

"I asked if Kingsley told you anything about Ministry officials coming here. He didn't say anything to me when I handed in my application," Harry said.

"Um, no, he didn't say," Ron answered.

"I imagine it will be sometime soon. They're going to my house tomorrow," Hermione said.

"How do your parents feel about it?" his dad asked.

"They don't know what to feel really. I tried to explain, but it's hard. There's a language barrier between us. They don't fully understand all the terms and jobs," she answered.

"Well, I think it's nice that the Ministry wants to do something to better protect people," his mum said.

"What about the joke shop?" Ginny asked. "Has anyone come by to talk to George?"

Ron wasn't sure how to answer. He didn't know if he should tell his family that George had obviously been ignoring the Ministry's letters. "No," he said simply.

"That's absurd. George needs protecting. His shop needs protecting," his mum said.

"Molly, it's okay. I'm sure that they'll get in contact with him," his dad said.

"No, it's not okay. You heard what Kingsley said about our family. I want my boy safe. Two of my sons work there, and I want them to be protected!" his mum urged.

"Mum, we'll handle it. I think the Ministry knows how important it is," Ron tried. He hated seeing her so upset. It was George's fault for her constant anxiety.

She. "Maybe they need reminding. Maybe they need to remember what happened to—"

"Molly, I think that's enough," his dad said sternly.

His mum huffed and looked down. She sniffed. "I need to talk to George. I need to speak to my son. Ron, what time should I come by?"

"What?" Ron asked.

"What time should I come by the shop? I need to speak to George," she said again.

"Iâ€¦Iâ€¦don't know. I'mâ€¦I'm not sure if heâ€¦if he," he trailed off. He couldn't bring himself to say it.

"If what? You don't know if George wants me there? Is that what you're saying?" she snapped.

"Mum, calm down. It's not Ron's fault," Ginny said.

"I know it's not Ron's fault, but he's the only one who George talks to!" she screamed. "Ron, when is my son going to talk to me again? Is he mad at me? Does he not want to be apart of this family anymore? Does he blame us?"

"Mum, you know that's not true!" Ron said. He didn't know why but a ball of fury clogged his throat and his eyes stung. He didn't want to hear the thoughts that he had been thinking.

"Molly, you need to calm down," his dad demanded.

His mother stood up. "No! I will not calm down! Fred died but it's almost as if George died, too! He never comes over or writes. He never even bothers to give us any sign that he's alive. I understand why he wants his space, but I am his mother. I'm still supposed to be in his life and help take care of him. I should be there but the only person in this family that he talks to is Ron! He is my son! I lost one already, and I'm not about to

lose another. Ronald, tell me why he's doing this? Why does he hate us?"

"I don't know! I don't know any more than you do! I'm sorry that I'm the one he speaks to. I'd give anything to have it be you or dad or anyone else. I'm sorry!" Ron bellowed.

His mother eyes filled with tears. She pushed her chair back and hurried out of the room. His father stood up and looked after her for a moment before turning to him. "Ron, it's okay. Your mother is just upset. You didn't do anything wrong."

"No, it's not okay. She's right. I know that I'm doing a terrible job at trying to bring George back into the family again. I'm sorry, okay? I'm really sorry," he gently said. Tears stung his eyes but he didn't let them leak through. He was too angry at himself to let them.

"Oh, Ron," Hermione whispered. She took his hand but he snatched it back.

"I have to go to work," he breathed. He pulled away from the table and Apparated. He gave himself a moment before going into the shop. He tried to breathe and take in the natural excitement of Diagon Alley, but it didn't help. Ron opened the door and walked into the shop.

"Hey, Ron," Lee said from the register. You're here early."

"Where's George?" Ron asked rudely.

Lee's smile faded. "Oh, um, I think he's still up in the flat. Do you need me to go get him?"

"No, that's okay. Thanks," he said. He didn't want to see George honestly. He wanted to keep away from him for as long as possible. He went into the room behind the front counter to find his clipboard. He searched around violently but couldn't find it. He was so frustrated. Now, his mother was mad at him because George refused to be an active member of the family. Ron didn't understand how it was his fault that his brother was keeping them in the dark.

"What's with all the noise back here?"

Ron closed his eyes for a moment. "I'm looking for my clipboard."

"It's right here," George said.

"Huh?" Ron whipped around and saw his clip on the top shelf of the Puking Pastilles case. "Well, what in the bloody hell is it doing there?" He walked over and snatched it up.

George chuckled. "I dunno. You put it there."

"Whatever," he mumbled.

George looked at him more seriously. He put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Ron brushed his hand off. "Nothing. I need to get to work."

He tried walking out of the room, but George pulled on his arm. "You're not going anywhere until you tell me why you have a broomstick up your arse."

"Just leave me alone, George," Ron said.

He tried pulling his arm out of George's grasp, but he knew it was useless. George was so much stronger than he was, and George knew this. He smirked. "Ron, you may be taller but you know that you're no match for me."

The statement made a chill run down his spine. It was what Fred always said whenever he came out victorious in a wrestling match or when Ron had something he wanted and easily took it from him. George was so much like Fred at times and at the moment it only made his anger grow. "Fucking let go of me, George! I don't care how bloody strong you are. I'llâ€;I'llâ€;" Ron wasn't sure what he was trying to say, but he felt more like a tit as the moments went on and he had nothing to say.

George let him go. "Ron, what is the matter? Why are you acting like this? Didâ€;did you and Hermione get into a fight?"

He glared at George. He hadn't felt so angry in ages, and he didn't know where it was all coming from. "Don't assume that you know anything about my relationship with Hermione. You don't know anything. We aren't the ones with the problem."

Lee poked his head in. "Georgeâ€;oh, um, I have a question about the next shipment."

George kept his eyes on Ron. "Yeah, I'll be out in a second." Lee looked between the two of them for a moment and left. George sat on the edge of the table and crossed his arms over his chest. "Okay, tell me what happened."

"I got into an argument with mum," Ron said.

"What about?" George asked.

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on. What else would we have to talk about? Of course it was about you."

George finally looked away. "What did she say?"

"She's angry with me because you won't talk to her. Once again she asked when the family could come to the shop and once again I had to tell her that I didn't know. She wanted to come see you today, but I told her that you wanted to be left alone. She didn't like that too much," Ron explained.

George sighed. "Ron, I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? Are you taking the piss? That's all that you have to say to me? Well, thanks for that but your sorry isn't going to fix this," Ron shot.

"Will you stop it. Mum isn't mad at you," George said.

"How the fuck would you know? You never see her. Do you even remember what she looks like when she's angry or what she looks like at all?" Ron asked.

"Don't. Don't start that," George said intensely.

"Start what? Do you not want me to tell you how I feel? Fucking hell, George. Mum was so angry and miserable. She was in bloody tears. You put her in tears, and I had to take the blame for it! I always have to take the blame for everything you do or don't do!" Ron shouted.

George stood up. "Will you stop being so dramatic? What do you mean you always take the blame? What? Is being my brother a burden to you now?"

There were too many ways to answer, so he decided to go with what he was feeling. "Sometimes yes. It is a burden sometimes to be your brother when your actions make everyone mad at me."

George's features softened. "What are you talking about?"

"George, why didn't you tell me that Kingsley has been trying to get a hold of you?" Ron asked.

His eyes widened. "How do you know about that?"

"Because during my meeting with him he brought it up. Naturally, everyone thinks that I hold the key to all of your secrets. He wanted to know if you've been getting his letters. I didn't know what to say to him. Why didn't you tell me?" Ron asked again.

"I didn't think I had to," he answered.

"Do you know what it's about?" Ron asked.

George paced the room. "Yeah. It's about the Ministry and its magical protection."

"They've tried talking to you before, haven't they? Kingsley said something that makes me think that this isn't the first time you've ignored him." Ron watched his brother carefully. George exhaled deeply and rubbed his eyes. "George?" he said again.

George looked at him. "Yeah, it's not the first time. Right after Fred died I got loads of letters from the Ministry. Everyone wanted to tell me how sorry they were but how proud they were that my twin was brave and fought for good up until the very end. Those arseholes. They weren't there. They have no idea how Fred was at the end."

Memories flashed before Ron's eyes. The explosion boomed in his ears and made his head hurt. "I can understand why that would make you mad, but it doesn't sound that bad. People don't understand what it's like for you or for us. So, they say what they think is right even if it's wrong." A warm feeling came over him. It sounded like something Hermione would say. She would be proud of his growth.

"Yes, well, they were really fucking wrong. Kingsley wanted to set me up with my own personal escort like they used to do with Harry. There were all these promises and apologizes. It made me sick. It's like the Ministry wants to shower me with all this protection and support because they feel guilty," George said.

"No, they want to protect you. You could still be in danger. All of us could still be in danger," Ron said.

George rolled his eyes. "Oh, right. Who told you that? Was it Kingsley? If so then you can spare me the speech. I've already heard every stupid thing that he has to say."

"Hey, don't talk about Kingsley like that. He has been nothing but great through all this. He wants to help us, George. He wants to help keep our family safe," Ron said.

"He can't protect us, Ron. He can't keep our family safe!" George snapped. "What does he want to do? Does he want to keep our family from experiencing loss or heartache? It's too late for that. It's too late for the Ministry to help me."

Finally, Ron was beginning to understand George's rage but he had to try anyway. "That's not true. I told Kingsley—"

"You did what? What did you tell Kingsley?" George interrupted.

He shrugged. "I told him that I wanted you and the shop to be protected. I told him that I wanted the Ministry to help."

"How fucking dare you? You have no right to tell Kingsley anything about my shop or me. It's none of your bloody business!" George yelled.

Ron stared at him in almost shock. "None of my business? Are you serious? Of course this shop and you are my business! I work here. My brothers made this place. My bloody name is on the shop! My friends and my girlfriend and family come here. You're my brother, and you are my business, George," he said more gently.

George's eyes seemed to soften, but he didn't give up his ground. "Well, I created this shop. My name goes on the lease and all the bills. It's mine and I take care of myself. I can protect myself."

"Well, if you're so sure then tell that to mum and dad. Tell them, our brothers, and Ginny that you can take care of yourself and that you are fine. Tell them so that they can stop asking me. Tell them so that they can stop thinking that you hate them. Tell them so they'll stop being mad at me because I'm here and they're

not." Ron had to stop and close his eyes for a moment. The emotion was becoming too much.

"Ron, please, don't do that," George pleaded.

"I can't bloody help it! I don't want to be like this, but I don't know what else to do. You have no idea how hard this is. I hate being the only bridge between you and the rest of the world. It's too much pressure on me. Everyone thinks that I know so much or that I must do or say something special because you chose me out of everyone else," Ron explained.

"It's not like that. I didn't choose you over anyone. I just wanted you to help me. I just want your help," George said.

"And I want to help you. All I want to do is help you, but I don't know what for anymore. Help with what? Do you need help with the shop or with keeping your secrets?" he asked.

George shook his head and shrugged. "I don't get what you're saying, Ron."

He took a breath before he started. "George, I can't help but feel like you want me to keep your existence a secret. Like, you want me to help keep the fact that you're dating Angelina a secret. I have a feeling that you'll want me to lie to Kingsley and say that you haven't received his letters because that sounds better than you just ignoring him. You are still expecting me to keep telling mum and dad and our brothers that you need your space, but more and more I wonder if you even want to see them again. These are the type of things that you want me to help you with, George."

"No, that's not true. Ron, how can you say this to me? I'm not doing those things to you," George said.

"But you are. It may not be intentional, but you're making me do it. I care about you, George, and I respect your need to be alone, but it's so much more than that now. You're making me choose between you and our family," Ron said.

George sighed and looked down. "I'm sorry, Ron. I don't mean to. I don't want you to have to choose between anything."

"I don't want to either. You mean a lot to me, but they're my family, too. They're not just your parents, and they're not just your older brothers. I don't want to lie and hurt them anymore. It's ruining my relationship with them, and I'm tired of feeling guilty." Ron felt a bit selfish but he knew that he had to be honest. "I'm tired of mum wondering if you even love her anymore."

"Ron, of course I love mum. I love mum and dad and our family more than you realize. I thought I thought you understood," George said.

"I thought I did, too, but I don't. I don't understand how you can love them so much but keep them away, and I don't get how you

can't see that you need protecting. Sometimes, it's like you forget that we're all still here. We didn't die, George, and neither did you," Ron said. They were quiet for a while. Ron kept his eyes on George and his head spun. He couldn't believe that he was being so open about his feelings to George. For so long he had been scared but he had too much to lose now.

"But Fred did," George whispered finally. "Fred did die, so I don't see the point in the Ministry trying to protect me. The worse thing that could ever possibly happen to me already has. Kingsley feels bad and he wants to help save me but he can't. I've already lost the most precious thing that I have."

"No, you're still alive, George. Fred may be gone, but you're still living," Ron urged.

"You don't get it, Ron," George said. "Look how would you feel if Hermione died?"

"What?" he gasped.

"I'm sorry, but it's the only way to get through to you. How would you feel if Hermione died right now? What would go through your mind if you watched her die right in front of you? How would you feel afterward?" George asked.

Ron's hairs pricked and his stomach flipped. He wouldn't allow himself to think about it. He could already feel the terror and nausea come over him. "George, you can't say things like that to me."

"I know. That terribleness that you feel is how I feel, Ron. You don't understand. I do want to live. I have my friends, Angie, and my family, but I'm not going to lie and say that I don't have this emptiness inside me that will never go away. Fred is...was my life, and I lost him. I'm not afraid of death anymore because a part of me already feels like I've died. Protection would just be a waste of everyone's time. What else do I have to fear?" George asked.

"George, when you say things like that it really scares me," Ron quivered. "What am I supposed to do with what you just told me?"

"I'm not trying to scare you. I just want you to know. I don't need the Ministry here. I don't want added protection and Aurors all around me. I'm trying to go on with what is left of my life. All Kingsley's help will do is remind me. I don't want to be reminded any more than I already have to be," George explained.

"George, please. I get what you're saying, but it doesn't have to be that way. I reckon that I'm not as brave as you because I want you safe and I want the protection. You're my family and I care about my family," Ron said.

"So do I. That's why I'm keeping them away. Mum!" George squeezed his eyes shut for a second as if thinking about her made him hurt. "Ever since Fred's death, any time she'd look at me it was as if she was searching for him. She only sees me to see Fred

now. It must hurt her. I know it does. It hurts everyone, I figure. I look just bloody like him," George said darkly.

"It's not like that. She misses you. She wants her son back, and I'm not talking about Fred," Ron said. "You have to keep living. We all do. You're not the only one who lost him. Fred was her son. Fred was dad's son, and he was my brother. Why won't you let us miss him with you?"

"I can't. I'm sorry, Ron. I just can't do it right now," George said.

He shrugged in defeat. "Well, I'm sorry, too. Look, I'll honor your decision about secluding yourself, but I won't do this anymore. If you're not willing to make any effort, then I can't continue this. They're my family and when you hurt them I won't stand for it," Ron said.

"Ron," George tried. "It's hard for me."

Ron reached out and squeezed his arm. "I know it is. You have no idea how often I think about how hard it really is for you, but I can't continue making it even harder. What you're doing isn't solving anything. You can't get better this way, and I won't help you do this. I care too much about you and our family to."

"Ron," George tried again.

"I'm gonna go home. I only have a few days left with Hermione, and I'm going to spend them with her. I hope you can understand why I'm taking some time off," Ron said. He walked out of the room and out of the shop without another word.

Ron appeared just outside the kitchen door. He took a few deep breaths and tried to convince himself that what he did was the right thing. He had to let George take care of himself. He had to make him see that staying alone couldn't work anymore. By the time he finally got himself to believe it and walked into the house, he was exhausted. Harry, Ginny, and Hermione were waiting for him in the sitting room.

"Ron," Hermione gasped. She ran over and hugged his fiercely. "I didn't know if you were!"

"I'm okay. I went to work," he answered. He sat on the couch next to Ginny.

"Dad got really mad after you left. He and mum haven't left their room at all. I know she's sorry. Mum didn't mean to yell at you," Ginny explained.

"I know that she didn't. I understand why she got angry," Ron said.

"Did you tell George about it? Does he see what's going on?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, he does but I don't know. I honestly have no idea what is going on with him. It's something he has to figure out, though. I won't keep covering for him. Not when it's tearing up my relationship with everyone," Ron said.

"I'm really worried about him," Ginny breathed.

"Me too," Ron whispered.

Ron couldn't stand to sit and wonder for too much longer. He went up to his room and Hermione joined him. He watched her as she rearranged his comic collection. It was her way of dealing. He didn't mind. It gave him a great view of her. Everything about her figure was perfect, and it was all for him. George's words pierced his brain. He couldn't imagine her body in the ground and trapped in a tomb. The thought made his throat close and hot tears stung his eyes. "Oh, m-my god," he choked, grabbing at his throat.

"Ron, Ron, love? What's wrong?" Hermione said suddenly. She rushed over, wrapped her arms around him, and rubbed his back.

"Hermione, Hermione, please. Something's wrong," Ron panted. He hugged her back tightly as he found it harder and harder to get air into his lungs. His vision began to haze, and he felt as if he was choking to death and drowning at the same time.

"Ssh, just breathe. Come on, Ron. Breathe deeply and slowly," she said.

He shook his head as his body stiffened and his bones curled. "I-I can't. Oh-oh, hmm, I can't."

She kissed the top of his head and wiped the sweat off his brow. "Yes, you can. You can do it. You're okay. I'm okay. We're okay. Breathe with me. It's all that I want you to do. Just breathe," she repeated. She continued to hold him and rub his back. He tried to follow her instructions. It took awhile, but he finally found a rhythm to his breaths and his heart rate slowed. He took in her scent and managed to calm down. Hermione pulled away and wiped away the tears that had formed in his eyes. "Was that another one?"

"Yeah," Ron breathed, feeling exhausted. "I've never had this problem before."

"It's normal after experiencing a lot of traumatic events. Your body and your mind are still recovering. Don't worry. What triggered it? Was it George or your mum?" she asked.

He looked into her soft eyes and relaxed at the touch of her gentle hands on his face. "No, I thought for a second about what it would have been like if I had to bury you along with my brother."

"Oh, Ron," she whispered. "You shouldn't keep those thoughts in your mind for too long. It's not good for you."

"I know. I'm sorry. It's just there's no way that I would've been able to. Hermione, you are my everything. If you weren't here, I'd be just like George but worse. I need to have you. I'm too scared to think about life without you here helping me to breathe," Ron said.

Hermione's lip trembled, but she didn't cry. "Then don't think about it. I'm not going anywhere. You'll have me for as long as you want me."

"I want you always," Ron said. He put his forehead against hers.

"Then that's what you'll get. I'll always be here to help you breathe," she whispered.

"And I'll always be here to keep you safe," Ron answered.

She clutched his arms and licked her lips. "Good. I need you to keep me safe. I need you."

"You have me," Ron moaned. He moved forward and kissed her roughly. Thinking and talking about his love and devotion to Hermione always made him drunk with love and passion. She kissed him back just as roughly. The fire and need burned between them. Ron pulled out of the kiss and licked her bottom lip. He pushed past fear and said what was on his mind. "I want to be with every part of you."

"And I want you to," Hermione whimpered. They kissed harder and Ron's hands went to the hem of her shirt. There was a knock at the door. Hermione instantly jumped away.

Ron groaned. "Yes!" he called.

The door slowly opened. Harry poked his head through. "I'm really sorry to interrupt, but I think you need to talk to Ginny, Ron. She's in her room, and she won't say anything."

"What happened?" Ron asked.

"I don't know. She said that she had a headache and just went upstairs. She wouldn't let me in," Harry said.

Ron nodded. "Okay, I'll go talk to her."

He left the room and walked to Ginny's. He knocked on her door. "I just need to be alone, Harry," she called.

"It's me," Ron said softly.

There was a pause. "Come in."

He opened the door. Ginny was curled tightly on her bed, and she seemed to be crying. He walked over and sat next to her. "Hey, what's wrong?"

She looked up at him. "I'm sorry. I'm just so scared. I'll be leaving for school soon and everything is wrong. I don't know if I can go with the family this torn up."

Ron rubbed her arm. "Of course you can go. You have to. The family is okay."

She didn't seem convinced. "You don't have to pretend with me. I've seen George, and I've seen what's in his eyes. I'm scared for him. I don't want to lose George over this."

He looked at his sister. He didn't see the point in hiding from her. "Move over," he said. She uncurled herself and moved back so he could lie next to her. He faced her and moved hair out of her face. "I told George that I wouldn't keep his secrets anymore."

Her eyes widened. "What did he say?" Ginny asked.

"He didn't really. I think it hit him pretty hard, though. I hope it did. I'm worried, too," he said.

Ginny wiped her nose and scrubbed away her tears. "Ron, does he still love us?"

Her voice was soft, and she looked so much more delicate than he had ever seen her. "Ginny, George never stopped loving us, and he could never not love you. He loves you so much, and he probably misses you most of all," Ron explained. "This is nothing against you, Ginny. You're amazing."

She smiled and more tears came down. "Fucking hell, I'm so glad you're here, Ron. I'm so glad that you're here with us. I don't know what we'd all do without you. I-I don't know what I'd do without you." She moved against his chest and continued to sob.

Ron held on to his little sister and let her cry. He closed his eyes and felt better. Ginny meant the world to him, and he needed to help her. With so much going on, he had almost forgotten that he had other siblings who depended on him. Ron held on to her tighter and knew that Ginny was worth living for. There was so much in their family to live for and Ron only wished that George could see it.

\* \* \*

\*\*\*\* Oh, that was a really emotional one. Ron does want to help George but there's only so much he can take. George has to wake up and give in a little and Ron is just the person to help him see that without him even realizing it. Ron and George have been on the same page for a while now but I feel like with more outside factors coming in, their dynamic is bound to change. So, I wanted to start on that now.

As for R/Hr, grrr, so close but not yet, Lol, but don't worry. I have good things in store for them! So, I hope you all enjoyed it. Please REVIEW to get the next bit!

Cheers!

\* Chapter 14\*: Fortification

I want to say thank you to everyone who reviews and sticks with this story and me even though I have a terrible time schedule when it comes to updating this. I haven't given up on it and I honestly enjoy writing this one so much. Time has really been my enemy lately but I'm just about at a point where I can go back to my normal writing/updating schedule. So, yes, I will keep this story alive and updated as long as people are interested and give me feedback!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

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Ron took another large gulp of his juice. It was so hot outside that he could barely stand it. However, it didn't seem to faze Harry and Ginny. He watched as they ran around down the field. They were supposed to be going over quidditch drills but instead they chased and tackled each other to the ground. He put his glass down and observed as his best mate once again failed to catch his sister. Harry was a tough bloke, but he was no match for Ginny. She took him down more often than he could catch her. Ron was proud.

"Oi! Watch those hands, Harry!" Ron yelled as Harry finally pinned Ginny to the grass. He supported their relationship completely, but it didn't mean that he had to approve of their foreplay. Although, as much as it bothered him, it didn't really matter that they fooled around so much. Ginny would be leaving in only a few days. He looked around the yard. Hermione was still at her meeting with her parents and the Aurors. He wanted her back. She would be leaving as well, and he needed every moment that he could have with her.

Almost as if hearing the thoughts in his head, Hermione came out the backdoor of the house. Ron instantly got up. She walked over to him, looking rather pale and wide-eyed. "How did it go?" he asked.

She sighed deeply. "Can I have a healthy hug first?"

He wrapped his arms around her and held her as tightly as he could. He kissed the top of her head and breathed in the scent of her hair. She fit so perfectly against him. He never wanted to let her go. "Is this okay?" he asked.

She rested her head against his chest. "This is perfect."

There was something in her voice that bothered him. It was the only reason why he pulled away. He looked into her face and noticed that her eyes were wet. "Hey, what's wrong?"

She sniffed and turned away. "Nothing, I'm fine. I'm just a bit overwhelmed."

"Tell me about it. Maybe I can help," he said, taking her hand and leading her to the bench.

She sniffed again and rubbed her nose. "That's sweet, Ron, but there's nothing to solve. The Aurors, like I expected, completely confused and frightened my parents. They were already apprehensive about me going back to school and living in the wizarding world before the meeting. I can't imagine how I'm going to convince them to trust me now."

"What happened exactly? What did they say?" Ron asked.

"They explained about the danger and what the Ministry is trying to do for the wizarding and Muggle world post-second war, as it's being referred to. My dad had so many questions about it, and mumâ€;she's still upset about the Australia situation." Hermione quickly wiped away a tear.

Ron rubbed her back. He hated seeing her in such a state. He knew that she felt extremely guilty about putting a spell on her parents. "You did the right thing, love. You know that you had to do it to protect them. You did what was best for them."

"Yes, but she's my mum, and I'm her daughter. She still feels like she's the one that's supposed to do the protecting. She feels like she's useless to me now and with the added protection of the Ministry, I know that my parents must feel helpless. They're worried about me more than themselves. I just don't know what to do, Ron. I love my parents so much, and I need them," she sobbed.

"I know you do, Hermione. They know it, too. Iâ€;I'm sorry," Ron said. He didn't know what to say. His parents were magical as was the rest of his family. He never had to think about choosing what life he wanted to lead.

"Don't apologize. You didn't do anything wrong," Hermione said, wiping away more tears. "I just need to take a breather. There's a lot going on right now, and I need to calm down."

"Whatever I can do to help I'll do it. I don't like seeing you like this. I want to take all of this away from you." He touched her face and rubbed under her red, wet eyes. He would absorb all

her pain and take it himself if he was allowed to. Anything would be worth making Hermione happy.

She smiled and kissed his palm. "You do take it all away," she whispered. She leaned forward and kissed him softly. Ron wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. He deepened the kiss and hoped that she could feel his love. She must have. Her body relaxed and she moaned. Hermione pulled away slightly and traced his mouth. "You make me feel so much better, Ron. I'll always love you for it."

"Everything I have is for you. It's all here to make you better. I promise," he said tenderly.

Hermione gazed at him in a way that made his heart skip a beat and made every part of him tingle. "When you talk like that it makes me never want to leave your side. I fall in love with you all over again," she said. Ron swallowed the emotion in his throat. Hermione brought so much passion out of him. She was every feeling that he had. He didn't know what he was going to do when she left.

"You didn't tell us you were back," Harry said out of breath.

Hermione tore her eyes away from him. "Sorry, I just got here."

"Yeah, so don't harass her. I reckon you had plenty to do that kept you occupied," Ron shot.

Harry and Ginny rolled their eyes. "Well, that's your fault, Ron. You know that you shouldn't leave us alone for too long. I thought I told you that," Ginny cheeked.

Ron shivered but Hermione laughed. "I think it's lovely. You two look sweet out there together."

"Don't encourage them, Mione!" Ron whined.

"It's too late for that, Ron," Harry said with a laugh. He took off his glasses and wiped the sweat off his brow.

"Eh, we need to go take showers before we do anything else. If I smell half as bad as you do Harry, then it can't be good," Ginny said.

"Keep it one at a time in there," Ron ordered.

"Me first," Ginny rushed. She snogged Harry rather roughly and winked at Ron before heading back into the house.

Ron shook his head. "I swear she lives just to drive me mental. She's too grownup."

"Blimey, are you Ron or Arthur Weasley?" Harry asked.

"When it comes to Ginny, I'm not sure anymore, mate," Ron confessed.

Harry grinned at him before turning to Hermione. "So, how did it go?"

"It was fine. There was a lot of information that was rather overpowering but everything went okay overall," she answered.

Harry gave her a look. "Hermione, in September it will be seven years into our friendship. I think I know you well enough by now to realize when something isn't okay. What really happened?" He sat in the grass in front of them.

She shifted and gave Ron a look before starting. "My parents are fed up with the Wizarding World right now. All the dangers and protection is too much for them."

Harry nodded. "I figured they might feel that way. I can understand how hard it is to take everything."

"Me too," Hermione breathed.

"Are they unhappy with you coming back?" Harry asked.

"Not necessarily unhappy. They're more afraid for my safety than anything else," she said. "They don't want me to get hurt anymore."

Harry looked away for a moment as if seeing Hermione's parents right in front of him. "Do you want me to write them? Maybe I can help a little."

"I don't know, Harry. I don't see how you writing to them will make them feel better," Ron said. He was feeling out of the conversation and it annoyed him.

Hermione's eyes lit up slightly. "Actually, that's a great idea. Harry has exchanged a few letters with my parents before. It might give them a better piece of mind."

"Great. I'll write them this week. I can tell them some of what Kingsley told me about how the safety rates going up," Harry said.

"That would be fantastic. Thank you, Harry. It really means a lot," Hermione said, bending down and hugging him.

Ron rubbed his hands against his palms and tried not to feel pathetic. He had no idea that Harry was on speaking terms with the Grangers and that he could give them a piece of mind. Just as he was starting to believe that he was worth something, he had to be reminded that it was nothing in comparison to Harry. Harry always knew what to do, and Ron still felt a step behind.

He and Harry went to his room while Hermione went to Ginny's to change. Ron sat on his bed and watched as Harry got his clothes out. No matter what Harry was the hero that knew exactly how to save the day. There were so many questions that Ron wanted to ask about Hermione's parents. "I didn't know that you talked to her parents," Ron said after awhile.

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, but it's nothing constant or formal. In third year we started lettering each other."

"Why?" he asked.

Harry sat on his cot and chuckled somewhat. "They wanted to know who was the bloke their daughter was risking her life for." Ron must have looked as uneasy as he felt because Harry's expression changed. "They just wanted to know a bit about me. Hermione talked about me to them. She talked about you too though, so it doesn't matter." Ron's expression didn't change. Harry walked over and sat next to him. "We don't talk all the time, Ron. In fact, I don't think I've written them since the end of fifth year. It's no big deal."

"It sort of is a big deal, Harry. Why didn't you say anything? Don't you think it's something I should know?" Ron asked. He was angry, but he tried to hide it.

"No. Hermione brought it up one time at the Leaky Cauldron that her parents were really worried about her, and they couldn't understand how a young boy like myself was constantly getting into trouble. So, I offered to write them to introduce myself and tell them a little about me. I just thought it would help and maybe put a little more faith in me and in her," he explained.

Hearing Harry explain it out loud made it sound a lot better than what he was thinking in his head. Harry was a good friend. Ron knew that it was never Harry's intention to do more than help. Still, the familiar itch of paranoia was creeping up his spine. "That's sounds great. I justâ€œI dunno. I'm an arse," Ron finally said. He needed to get over himself and stop being so bloody suspicious.

Harry patted his arm. "You're not an arse, Ron. I can see where you're coming from. I'm sorry that I never told you. I really didn't think it was a big deal."

"You're right. I don't know what's wrong with me. It's not a big deal at all," Ron lied.

Harry looked as if he was going to say something else but there was a knock at the door. He got up and answered it. It was his mother. "Hello, Mrs. Weasley."

"Hello, dear, may I come in?" she asked.

"Of course," he said.

She stepped in and immediately locked her eyes on Ron. He didn't know what to say. They hadn't said much to each other since their argument at breakfast. Harry looked between them and cleared his throat. "Well, I'm going to go see if Ginny is out yet."

His mother finally exhaled when Harry closed the door behind him. "Sweetheart, can I talk to you?"

"Sure," Ron said softly.

She sat next to him. Ron could see how she still looked tired and hollow. It made his insides hurt. She took his hand. "Ron, I want to apologize. No, I need to apologize for yelling at you."

He shook his head. "It's okay."

"It's certainly not okay. It's never okay for me to yell at you like that. Nothing was your fault, but I took everything out on you. I'm so sorry, dear. It was wrong of me," she explained.

"I understand, mum. I really do get how frustrated you were. Just so you know, I did talk to him. I don't know if it did any good, but I told him everything," he said.

She smiled sadly. "That's wonderful but it shouldn't be up to you. You were right. It's not your fault or your decision. This is something between George and us. I shouldn't have made you think otherwise."

"But I am in this. You're my mum, and he's my brother. I should try to help," he urged.

"Oh, Ronnie," she breathed. She ruffled his hair. "You've always been a fighter, haven't you? You always want to go even if it's at the expense of yourself."

"Mum?" Ron asked confused.

"Hermione is leaving in just a couple of days, dear," she said.

A pang hit his chest. "I know."

"And instead of putting all your energy into spending time with her, you've been trying to patch the family together. Almost like it's your job," she explained.

"Well, it feels that way sometimes, and I think it is. Family is still important to me. That's never going to change," he said.

Tears swelled in her eyes. "I don't think it will either. You're too dedicated to let it. I love your dedication, Ron. I'm sorry for making you feel like I don't appreciate what you're doing for George. I don't know where he would be if you weren't here supporting him. It warms my heart that you two have grown so close."

Ron felt his neck heat up. He couldn't deny that it made him feel better about himself to hear his mum talk about him in such a way. "Even so, mum, he's your son. He should talk to you. I do like being there for him but I wish he'd talk to you, dad, Bill, or anyone. I really do think he wants to but he's scared. There are a lot of feelings going on inside him at once, and I know he feels exhausted by it all. He misses Fred so much." He stopped. His mother's eyes grew and tears slowly rolled down her cheeks.

She squeezed his hand. "Ron, has George ever talked to you about his life and how he feels about it?"

Ron knew what she meant. He could tell her about what George thought of added protection and how it was useless. He could tell her about Angelina and how she made George forget that he wanted to die sometimes. He could even tell her about how George practically lived in Fred's room at the flat. There was so much that he could and should have told her. However, as much as George's secrecy frustrated him, he was still his brother and he wanted to keep his private life between them. Plus, he knew what it would do to his mum. Ron didn't want her more devastated than she already was.

"He wants to live, mum. He still enjoys his life. It's just a lot harder now," he decided to say.

"That's what I thought," she whispered. "Oh, my little Georgie." She sniffed and wiped her eyes.

"He'll be okay. I'm trying my best to take care of him," Ron said.

"I know you are, Ron. I know that I can count on you to," she said. She was finally able to stop her tears and pull herself together. "I need to get out of your way. I'm sure you have a lot of better things to do. Do you lot have anything planned for today?"

"We'll probably go to Hogsmeade," he said.

"That sounds wonderful. You all deserve some fun." She stood up and Ron did as well.

He hugged her firmly. "I love you, mum."

"I love you, too, my dear. I'm so sorry for yelling at you," she repeated.

"It's okay, honestly. Things will work out, you'll see. I know things will get better," he assured.

She lightly pinched his cheek. "I believe you, dear. Be careful out there and watch out for you sister."

"We always are, mum, and I always do," he said.

Ron tried to keep a clear head as the four walked around Hogsmeade and visited shops, but it was difficult to focus on what was going on. The issue with his brother distracted him, and Hermione's overall attitude also kept him from fully enjoying the day. Every time he looked at her she seemed distant, and it was clear to him how worried she was. They stopped at a quidditch shop and decided to look around. Ron, Harry, and Ginny quickly scattered around the shop but Hermione stayed near the door with her attention on the floor. Ron put down the expensive keeper gloves he was eying and walked over to her.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She turned her gaze to him. "Yes, I'm fine. Go on and look around."

There was no way that he would leave her side now. "Hermione, we can go back if you want to."

"No. I don't want to go back. This is the last time that the four of us will be able to spend time together for a while," she said.

Ron moved his head in toward her. "Well, you're not exactly engaging with us."

She glared at him. "Oh, leave me alone, Ron! I'm not particularly interested in this store, so I want to wait here. It's not a crime. You don't have to be interested in every single aspect of my mood just because we're dating now. Go and have fun like you always do when we come here."

Ron wanted to tell her that it was hard to have fun when he knew the love of his life was in some sort of state, but he didn't want to anger her anymore than she already was. So, he sighed in defeat. "Okay, we won't be long."

Ron joined Harry and Ginny back at the seeker supply table. "What's wrong with Hermione?" Ginny asked, looking over to her. "Are you two in a fight?"

"No; well, I don't think we are," Ron said truthfully.

Ginny raised an eyebrow. "How do you not know for sure?"

"When it comes to us I'm never quite sure if we're arguing or if she's angry with me," he said.

Harry looked over at Hermione as well. "I don't think she's mad. She was like this before we left."

"I know. She's probably feels overstressed again," Ron answered.

"Blimey, the Aurors must have really said something to them. I wonder what they'll tell us, Ron," Ginny added. He shrugged and tried not to think about it. The last thing he wanted to do was be reminded of what evil still lurked around and wanted to hurt his family.

"Maybe we shouldn't talk about this right now. Let's hurry up and get some lunch. It's what we all need, yeah?" Harry said.

As Harry and Ginny went to the checkout line, Ron walked back over to Hermione who was still at the door. "After they're finished we're going to get some lunch," he said.

"That's sounds great," she said. She frowned slightly. "You didn't buy anything?"

"I'm not going to buy anything today. I'm saving up for something," he explained.

She raised an eyebrow. "For what?"

He grinned. "I guess you'll have to find out." He grew a little more serious. "Are you mad at me?"

She took his hand. "No, of course not. I'm sorry that I snapped at you like that. It was completely rude of me. If I'm mad at anyone it's me."

"Why?" he asked.

She sighed. "Because I know that I'm ruining the day."

"Why would you think that?" he asked.

"I don't feel very good today, but I need to. This is our last chance to be happy as a group," she said.

Ron was getting tired of her reminding him that they were about out of time together. "Hermione, if you're having a bad day that's not your fault. Harry and Ginny are fine. Look at them if you don't believe me. We're still having a good time."

"But you're not. You're worried about me," she said.

"Love, I worry about you everyday. I already told you that, and it's not only because I'm your boyfriend. I've always worried about you. Even when we were just friends I did. I've just never had the courage to speak up about it or show it before," he told.

"I'm sorry for saying that. I didn't mean it. I've always worried about you, too," she said with a small smile.

"Yeah, that's been bloody obvious," he cheeked.

She swatted his arm. "Hush it."

He took her hand between his. "Only because you asked so nicely." He kissed her fingers.

Hermione bit her lip as he slowly pressed his lips against her fingertips. "I'm sorry, Ron."

"Don't be. We're having a good day," he reassured.

She moved a little closer to him. "Do you still love me even though I worry all the time?"

"Always, Hermione. I love you exactly as you are. Although, a snog might make me love you a little more," he whispered.

She giggled and stood on her toes. She softly kissed him. Every time they kissed, everything around him vanished. It was the best feeling in the world.

"Do you think that you can wait until after we've had lunch to go in for dessert?" Ginny asked.

Hermione pulled away from him. "You know how much your brother likes his sweets. It's hard not to give him a little taste."

Ron and Harry laughed, but Ginny gagged and rushed out of the store. They went to the Three Broomsticks and grabbed a table. "Fucking hell, I can't believe I'll be back in school in just a few days," Ginny said, sipping her drink.

"I can. Summer went by entirely too fast," Harry said.

"I'm rather excited about going back. I really miss school," Hermione said.

"I would be excited too if I was Head Girl and had my own room and toilet," Ginny mumbled.

"That'll be nice, but it's more than that. There's still so much that I need to learn. I'm not finished with Hogwarts yet, and I don't want to say goodbye to it until I am," Hermione explained confidently. Ron felt a tingle run down from his chest to his groin. Hermione's self-confidence was one of her best and sexiest qualities.

"Well, I certainly don't share your passion. I'm ready to move on. I've never thought twice about going back," Harry said.

"I have," Ron confessed. Everyone looked at him. He rolled his eyes. "Is that so hard to believe?"

"Yes," Harry said.

"Ta, Harry. It's good to know what you really think of me," Ron shot.

Hermione took his hand. "Sweetheart, I don't think he means it like that. I didn't know you thought about going back either. Why?"

Ron reddened. "It's not because I love to learn or anything mental like that. It's just all I've known for a long time. A few months ago, I didn't think I was ready to move on and do even more traveling and be away from everyone for another long period of time. Hogwarts is something familiar."

"And what about now?" Hermione asked.

"I'm not so scared anymore," Ron answered.

Ginny smiled at him. "Well, I'm proud of you, Ron. I'm proud of all of us. We're all doing something worthwhile. I'll miss this though. It's been nice having you all around. It's helped me get through the horribleness."

"Yeah, I wouldn't have made it through everything without you lot," Harry said.

"Harry, don't make me cry," Hermione whispered.

"I don't mean to. I just want you all to know that no matter what happens, this is my home. All I have is right here," he added.

"Love," Ginny breathed. She caressed his cheek and kissed him softly.

A dark feeling of uncertainty hit Ron's chest. Everything was really coming to an end. "You won't be totally alone, mate. I'll be there with you."

"And you have no idea how thankful I am for that," Harry said.

"You two are lucky that a good majority of the people applying to camps are around our age. It's going to be strange for me. I'll go back, and I won't see people from my year nor will I'll be with my roommates. I'll be the oldest if not one of the oldest students there," Hermione said.

"That means that you'll have the most authority," Ron said with a wink.

"And the most experience which is a plus," Harry added in.

"It won't be that bad, Hermione. Luna and I will be there. I'll make sure that none of the blokes in my year chat you up," Ginny cheeked, smirking at Ron.

"Don't bring that up," Ron warned. It was another unnecessary worry that he possessed. He finally had Hermione, and he didn't want to lose her to some seventh year prick that was in her advanced potions class. "Anyway, you two need to take care of each other. So focus on that."

"Here we go again. Well, if Ginny and I need to take care of each other, which we will, you and Harry need to take care of each other while we're gone," Hermione ordered.

"There won't be nearly as much for us to do. We'll mostly be practicing for camp," Harry said.

"And working and taking care of the family," Ron muttered.

"That sounds like a lot to me, Ron," Hermione said with concern all over her face.

"Everything will be fine, Hermione. I'll keep an eye on your Weasley if you keep an eye on mine," Harry said, trying to lighten the mood. The rest of their conversation was light but Ron could see that there was still something bothering Hermione. He didn't take his eyes off her the entire time. When they got back to the burrow, Hermione went straight to his room claiming that she desperately needed to find something. Ron sat on his bed and watched as she fussed through his things.

"Have you seen my pajamas?" she asked.

"Which ones?" Ron said.

She sighed. "The striped ones. The pajamas that I always wear to bed. I've been looking for them for two days now. They're not in Ginny's room which means they must be in here. Everything I have gets lost in here somehow."

"Well, I haven't seen them, but I can help you look," Ron said, getting up.

"That's okay. I'll find them!" she snapped.

He frowned and touched her back as she dug through his trunk.  
"Hermione."

"Check your wardrobe. Maybe they got mixed up in there," she said, moving away from his hand.

"Hermione," Ron said again.

"What?" she spat. She stood and turned to him. Her eyes were glossy again.

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Mione, calm down. Let's talk about it."

"Talk about what? My pajamas are missing, and I want to find them," she said, quickly wiping her tears away.

"You know what I mean. It's been all over your face all day. I know that you're still upset about the meeting," he said.

She opened her mouth several times but nothing came out. He looked her in the eyes and knew that she couldn't get away from him. She put a hand to her chest and let out a shaky breath.  
"It's not just the meeting." She sat on his trunk, and he sat on the floor in front of her.

"I'm here," he said.

More tears feel down her cheeks. "My parents and I have been arguing ever since they got back home." She stopped and Ron nodded for her to continue. "Do you remember when your mum asked me to invite my parents over for lunch and I told her that they had to work?"

"Yeah," Ron said.

"I lied. I never asked them. I didn't want them here, and I don't think that they would have wanted to come if I had," she confessed.

Ron's jaw dropped. "What? Why not? What happened?"

"Ron, you don't understand. My parents are terrified of magic right now. They're so scared that I'm going to get hurt, and

they're angry with me for putting myself into these situations," she said.

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "But you're not doing it on purpose. You never have. It's justâ€;" It finally dawned on him. "Is that why you want Harry to write your parents? Does he try to explain things to them?"

Hermione covered her face with her hands. "Oh, Ron, I know what you must be thinking."

"No, it's fine. I think it's great," Ron said.

"You have to believe that it's nothing against you or anyone. They just feel comfortable talking to Harry. He comes from the Muggle world and there are things that he can explain to my parents. They need some comforting. They need reassurance from something that's familiar to them. All of this is new and overwhelming and talking to Harry put them at ease a little. That's what they told me," she explained.

"I get that. I told you that it's fine. Butâ€;why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"It started years ago. I didn't see the point in saying anything. It wasn't all the time. They only talked to exchange information. That's all," Hermione urged.

Ron knew that he was making Hermione feel guiltier but he wanted to know. "And what about now?"

"It will be the same deal. Harry is the one that brought it up. I hadn't been thinking about it at all. Please, don't be mad at me," she said.

"I'm not mad. I just feel like an arsehole because I can't do anything to help. You're my girlfriend and they're your parents but I can't help at all." Ron hated feeling so inadequate.

"You do help. You help me. Don't write that off. You help me so much, and you're exactly what I need," Hermione said.

"But they're your family and because of that they're like my family. I'm in love with you and I want to be a part of your life but I've never even really talked to your parents. You've been with my family for years over holidays and you've met my relatives but I've never even been in your room or seen pictures of your grandparents. It just makes me feel like an arse knowing that Harry has more of a relationship with your parents than I do," he confessed. He had to look away from her. He felt bad for pouring his emotions out to her but he couldn't stop himself.

"You're right," she whispered after sometime.

"I'm not trying to be right about anything. Nothing is your fault. I'm sorry for saying all of that," Ron said.

She left the trunk and sat next to him. "Don't, please. I understand what you're feeling. I want you to be a part of my world."

He tucked hair behind her ear and rubbed his thumb across her cheek. "Do you think I can be? I didn't know that all of this was causing trouble between you and your parents."

"Of course you can. Please, don't feel bad or blame yourself. There's a lot of tension right now, but it has nothing to do with you. My parents have nothing against you or your family. I think they're going to try more. In fact, they asked if you would like come over for dinner tomorrow," Hermione said.

Ron's eyes grew. "R-really?"

"Yes. They want to talk to you and get to know you better. You are dating their only young daughter, as my dad said," Hermione said with a slight eye roll.

He grinned but could feel the nervous flies invade his stomach already. "I reckon that's fair. Okay, yeah, that sounds wicked."

Hermione seemed to ease slightly. "Great. I'll write them first thing in the morning. Thanks, Ron. They're overprotective but they're good people."

He intertwined their fingers and pulled an arm around her waist. "I understand. I know what they're doing is out of love. If there's one thing that I've learned...from Fred's death it's that people get really mental when they want to protect what they have left."

"But we've never really had arguments before. We've always gotten along great. I guess being a witch doesn't keep me from dealing with parental issues like this," Hermione said.

"Magic can't protect us from a lot of things. I learned that, too," Ron said quietly.

She squeezed his hand. "How is George doing?"

He shook his head. "I dunno. I haven't seen him since I told him that I was taking time off. I keep wondering if I should check on him."

"You did the right thing, Ron. He'll be okay," she reassured.

He gazed at her. "And you'll be okay, too."

She smiled and put a finger to his bottom lip where she rubbed across it. "Yeah, I'll be okay. I'm better already thanks to you."

"I aim to please, Hermione," Ron said smoothly.

Her cheeks went pink. "Hmm, I could use a bit of pleasure right now."

Ron leaned forward and slowly kissed her. He held her as closely around the waist as he could and parted her lips with his tongue. Hermione moaned softly and tugged on the strands of hair that rested on the back of his neck. It was her way of telling him to go further. He did. He deepened the snog and guided her back to the floor. She quickly pulled off her jacket and put it under her head for comfort. Ron got on top of her and gently pushed against her. His body was on fire and every part of him that touched Hermione tingled. His body needed hers. It only functioned at its minimum without her touch.

Hermione squeaked and ran her hand down his back. She moved under his shirt and touched his skin. Ron moaned and pushed into her again. He wanted to touch her everywhere, but he was never sure if it was the right time. He decided to take a chance. He wouldn't have many more with her. He wedged his hand between them and pulled on the hem of her jeans. He couldn't believe that he could feel the heat radiating from her. It was incredible and made him want her that much more.

Ron pulled away from her mouth. "We can move this to the bed if you want to."

"Ron," she started.

"But we don't have to. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry," he quickly said. He felt like such a tit. He had horrible timing and would never understand the rules of sexuality.

She put a hand to his mouth. "I swear, Ron, you always assume the worst in these situations."

"What? You aren't mad?" he asked.

She chuckled. "No, I'm not mad. I didn't say or do anything to indicate that I was. Yes. I want to move this to the bed. It's a good idea. I was just wondering if someone would interrupt us this time. I was going to ask if we should wait a little longer until Harry and Ginny are for sure in her room."

Ron opened his mouth to tell her that he was almost positive that Harry and Ginny would stay in her room, but a knock cut him off. They both stared at the door. "You have to be taking the fucking bollocking piss," Ron said.

Hermione lightly pushed him away. "Everything happens for a reason."

"I don't really believe that," Ron said. He went to the door and sure enough Harry and Ginny were on the other side. "This better be really important."

Ginny pushed past him. "Of course it's important. I brought snaps. Hermione, that's perfect. That is exactly where we need to be."

"Sorry," Harry whispered, walking past him. The two of them joined Hermione and Ginny on the floor.

"We thought it would be a good idea to end our day playing a bit of cards. Are you two in?" Harry asked.

"Of course they're in. Besides, I'd make Ron play regardless. I could use some more money. I spent too bloody much today," Ginny said.

"Oh no. I'm not betting any money," Ron said, taking the cards.

"Are you scared?" Ginny asked.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Of what, you? Never. I just don't want to have to embarrass you in front of your boyfriend."

Harry laughed. "You probably shouldn't have gone there, mate."

"That's okay. I'll let my game do the talking," Ginny said.

"Maybe we should use something else besides money," Hermione suggested. Everyone looked at her. "I don't mind a bit of competition. How about chocolate frogs or something?"

"That's a brilliant idea, love. Hmm, you're so damn smart." He kissed her forehead. He was still wired from their snogging and the heat of her middle wouldn't leave him mind. One day, and hopefully soon, he would be able to experience it in its entirety.

"Don't get too comfortable over there. You're partners with Harry. It's boys versus girls tonight," Ginny said, moving over to Hermione.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Ron asked, taking a seat by Harry.

"Why wouldn't it be?" Hermione asked.

Ron and Harry shared a look. "Well, the last things that we want to see are two girls that we love crying in defeat."

Hermione gasped in disgust, but Ginny simply crossed her arms over her chest. "Then I reckon you're in luck because the only people who will be crying will be you two after Hermione and I snatch your bollocks right from under you, yeah, Hermione?"

Ron smiled at her. "She wouldn't do that to me."

Hermione smirked at him wickedly. "Sweetheart, you should know by now that I don't mind playing rough. If I have to destroy you, then I will."

"Ouch," Harry said under his breath.

Ginny patted her shoulder. "That's my mate."

"Just get the bloody cards ready," Ron pressed.

For the rest of the night the four of them play Exploding Snaps and made themselves ill with an overconsumption of chocolate. It was amazing in Ron's eyes. He hadn't remembered laughing so hard or enjoying himself so much in a very long time. It was nice to be with his best friends and sister without having to worry about anyone's safety or death eaters. They had been through so much together and in only a few days Hermione and Ginny would be leaving. It hurt Ron to think about it so he decided not to.

Ron just wanted to pretend for one night that everything was okay again.

\* \* \*

\*\*\*\* Hmm, I really enjoyed this one. There's a lot of material that leads to new ideas that will happen soon. The whole "Harry and the Grangers keeping in touch" is something that I thought of a few years back. I like to think Harry and Hermione's parents have talked a little. I mean she risks her life for him time and time again. I think Harry does have some explaining to do! Lol. Anyway, on that note, if you're wondering about why I didn't go into more detail about the situation with Hermione, Ron, and her parent's, don't worry. I've got something special planned for the next chapter so stay sharp!

Next, I don't think Hermione's parents are addressed enough in stories. I also don't think that they are always as open and okay with everything as they seem to be in a lot of works. As you'll find out, I see the Grangers as NORMAL parents trying to deal with a lot of things that they don't understand, and I have them behave and feel as I see my parents or parents acting in situations like these. Now, I honestly can't remember if in the books Hermione ever said that she pretty much kept her parents in the dark about her "adventures" over the years or not. If she did that's fine but for my story she has "briefed" them about what has happen to her. It works in this case. Anyway, I'm babbling now. REVIEW and you'll see what I mean, lol. Thanks for reading!

CHEERS!

\* Chapter 15\*: You and Me

Thanks for the reviews! No, your eyes aren't playing tricks. This is a LONG chapter...

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron sat on his bed eagerly and waited. He had no idea what was in store for him and the anticipation was killing him. "What's the plan?" Harry asked, pulling his shirt over his head.

"I dunno. All she told we was to be ready by the time she got back," Ron answered. He stood and looked himself over in the mirror. "I look like a tit, don't I?"

"For the fifteenth time, no, and why does it matter? You never care about how you look," Harry said.

Ron once again pulled down on his rather tight dark blue collared shirt and rubbed his palms down his somewhat wrinkled dark jeans that were a little short. "Bloody hell, Harry, do you ever listen to me? I've got that dinner tonight with Hermione's parents, and I don't want them to think that I'm an arsehole. These are the only decent Muggle clothes I have, but I look like a prick in them. Everything is either too short or too tight."

"I think you're overacting a bit. You don't look like a prick, and you've got nothing to worry about tonight. It's just dinner," Harry assured.

"That's easy for you to say. You knew my parents long before you started dating Ginny, so they already loved you and wanted you as a son. I'm not that lucky. I don't have ages of hero work backing me up," he whined.

Harry walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Mate, you need to calm down. I'm sure they will love you."

"Again, that's easy for you to say. I haven't met them like you have. I don't have years of letters between me and them," Ron said rather sharply.

Harry moved his hand away. "Are you still mad at me for that?"

"So what if I am? I know it has nothing to do with me, and I know you and Hermione didn't mean anything by it butâ€!" Ron stopped and shrugged.

"No, go ahead and finish," Harry said.

Ron could feel the growing awkwardness. He didn't want to bring the matter up, but it bothered him too much to ignore it. "When I meet them, I'll be known as Hermione's other best friend, and I know that I'll be measured up against you. They already have an idea about you, and I reckon it's a bloody good one. I won't be able to compete with it. She's my girlfriend, Harry, but I know they'll think you're better than me. Everyone does."

Harry frowned and shook his head slowly. "You know that's not true. Why is everything a competition in your eyes? You really make me angry when you say things like that, Ron."

"Well, you really make me angry when you pretend that I'm not right just to make the situation more comfortable for you. I'm

the one that has to deal with this, Harry. How do you think I feel?" he asked.

Harry didn't have time to answer. The door opened and Ginny, his mum, and his dad walked in. "We don't mean to disturb you, dear, but we wanted to see how you were doing," his mum said.

"I'm fine," Ron muttered through his teeth.

"Oh, you look so handsome. Doesn't he look handsome, Arthur?" his mum asked.

His dad grinned and patted him on the arm. "You look just like me when I first met the Prewetts'. I was twitchy and flustered as well."

"I am not twitchy or flustered. It's just really hot in here," Ron said, looking at his red face in the mirror and tugging on his collar.

"Dad, you're making it worse. Ron, he didn't mean it. You look fine," Ginny said. "You have nothing to worry about."

"That's what I tried to tell him, but he didn't listen," Harry said.

"Just remember to be polite and don't eat everything with your hands. Don't break any of their Muggle trinkets and use your napkin at all times," his mum ordered, fussing with his hair.  
"Dear me, I should have given you haircut."

"Mum, my hair is all right, and I think I know how to eat," Ron said, pulling away.

"Molly, her parents aren't going to care about his hair or table manners." His dad swung him around and stared him directly in the eyes. "Ron, all you need to remember is eye contact, a firm handshake, and conviction. Your granddad gave me a very hard time, so I want you to be prepared for whatever Mr. Granger has for you."

Ron's nerves increased. He thought of all the horror stories he had heard over the years about Muggles torturing each other with various electronics and weapons. "What do you mean what he has for me?"

His mum hit his dad's arm. "Arthur, don't scare him! Ron, sweetheart, your father only means that parents can be really protective of their kids. Your granddad was like that with me, and I'm sure Hermione's parents are the same with her. Especially since she's their only daughter. However, you're absolutely wonderful and they will love you." She gave him a sloppy kiss on the forehead.

"Okay, okay, let's give him some space to prepare. Let us know how it goes tonight, and see if you can get some plugs or toasters or toy car remotes from them, yeah?" his dad said, giving him a small hug.

"Arthur Weasley, our son will take no part in your Muggle trinket fascination!" his mother snapped. "Ron, I know you'll be on your best behavior tonight, and I also know that you'll make us proud. You're a fine young man." There were tears in her eyes now.

"Mum, it's just a dinner," Ron said.

She wiped her eyes. "I know but it's just oh my babies are growing up so fast. Where did the time go?" she wept.

Ron looked to his dad for help. He nodded and put his arms around her. "Come on, love. Lets make some tea and think back to when we used to feed Ron with his favorite little orange spoon."

"Oh, good idea, Arthur," his mum cried as they left the room.

Ron swore as soon as the door closed. "Shit."

"You might not want to show up with this," Ginny said, swiping off the bit of lipstick his mum left on his forehead with her palm.

"Cheers," he mumbled. "What is the matter with mum?"

"You know how sentimental she is. This is major for her. You're meeting your future in-laws," Ginny cheeked.

Ron groaned. "Damn, if I wasn't in the shit before before, then I am now. I must have been mental to want to do this."

Ginny laughed and sat next to Harry. "Ron, honestly, you'll be fine and you do look very nice. I didn't know you owned a collard shirt."

"I don't. I think this is Percy's or Bill's," Ron answered.

She nodded. "Interesting, well, it really makes you look posh and like you actually have some class."

"Piss off, Ginny. You're not helping!" Ron shot. "Can we talk about something else? What are you two doing today?"

Harry pulled on Ginny's arm and brought her to his lap. "Probably just lay in bed. We've been out all this week and!" He put his forehead against hers and ran his fingers through her hair. "I just want be close to you today."

Ginny took his hand and smiled. "That sounds good to me. Let's start that now." She leaned forward and kissed him deeply.

Ron looked away and sighed. "Can you take that somewhere else? I feel nauseous enough."

They snogged a while longer before finally pulling away. "Let's go to my room, babe," Ginny whispered, kissing his neck.

"H-have a good time, Ron," Harry breathed as she bit his neck. He lightly pushed her away and led her to the door. He gave him a smile. "Regardless of what you believe, you've already won, Ron. You've got Hermione now, and I don't think her parents will change that."

Ron couldn't help but smile. "Thanks, mate."

He spent the next half hour pacing and repeatedly adjusting and pulling on his clothes. He figured he would pass out from nervousness before he ever got the chance to leave the house. Then, there was a knock at the door. "Come in," he croaked.

Hermione came through in a white sundress and a jean jacket. Her hair was down, extremely fluffy, and she looked to have jewelry on. Ron stared at her in awe. He didn't know if he had actually died from his anxiety because what was in front of him was surely a goddess and not like any human he had ever seen.

She looked him up and down and put a hand to her chest. "Wow, you look so amazing, Ron."

"Sod that, look at you," Ron whispered. He walked over to her and placed his hands on her waist. "You're so beautiful. Bloody hell, I can't even think. I-Iâ€œ;I you're gorgeous."

She blushed slightly. "I take it that you like this. I bought it just for today. I never really get the chance to fix up and I want something special for today."

"Well, it's spot on. I feel like such a prat. You're an angel, and I look like dung," he said.

"Stop that. You look absolutely stunning in this shirt and these jeans. You look even taller and firmer. I love it," she said, kissing him softly. Ron kissed her back but only for a moment. All the blood had run to his groin after one look at her, and he knew he wouldn't be able to contain himself if the snog got more intense.

"So, what are we doing today?" he asked, pulling away.

"I have a few things planned, and we should probably get started," she answered.

"Okay, give me a minute. I need to get myself together," he said, moving his finger across her collarbone.

She shivered. "Okay, don't take too long."

"I'll be right down," he said. She left the room and Ron looked himself over one last time. He tried to relax. "You can do this," he said aloud. He suddenly grinned. "You have the most beautiful woman downstairs waiting for you so stop being such a tit and go," he again said aloud. He grabbed his watch and put it on as he ran downstairs.

They left the house and went out to the field. Ron saw a small red car parked on their rocky pathway. "Whose car is this?"

Hermione reached in her purse and pulled out a set of keys. "It's mine."

"I didn't know you had a car," Ron said.

"I got it recently. I passed my drivers' exam over the Christmas holiday during sixth year, and my parents wanted me to have this. I haven't had much of an opportunity to drive it and today will be perfect," she explained.

"Why didn't you tell me that you passed your drivers' exam? It's a big deal, right?" he asked.

"Well, we weren't exactly on speaking terms at the time were we?" she answered quietly. Ron looked away and felt like an arse. He tried to forget about how horrible he had been to her while with Lavender but something always seemed to remind him. "Anyway, you know now so get in."

He opened the door and climbed in. Terrible memories from his driving experience second year filled his mind, but he told himself that Hermione knew how to drive properly. He knew Muggles used streets, so he wouldn't have to worry about going into the air or landing in trees. "Why will we need the car? Can't you tell me anything?"

Hermione pulled over her seatbelt and he quickly did the same. She grinned at him. "If you must know, we're going to spend the day in the Muggle world. I have some activities that I'd like to experience with you before we go to my house for dinner. Now, will you just trust me and try to enjoy it?"

"Yeah, I will, sorry," Ron said.

Hermione started up the engine and put the car in drive. "Good. That's all I want you to do today. Well, that and at least try to seem like a regular, non magic teenager."

"That may be a little more complicated," Ron muttered.

It was a strange experience watching Hermione drive them into the Muggle world. He had never experienced regular Muggle life and like his dad he found it extraordinary. "I still don't understand these traffic lights," Ron said as they came to a stop. "It sounds like they work on spells to me."

"They don't. There are wires that work on pressure points in the ground that turn the lights, I promise. Muggles can create things without spells and potions. They have their own ways of magic," Hermione explained. When the light turned she made a left and parked in the lot of a diner. She turned the car off and looked at him. "I thought this would be the appropriate first stop. Give me your wand. I'll keep it in my purse."

"And you couldn't be more right. Let's eat," he said, unfastening his seatbelt and handing her his wand.

She put a hand on his arm. "Wait, just remember where we are. If you're anything like your dad, which I'm realizing that you are, you'll want to question and react to everything you see. So, remember that you're a Muggle and you see beepers on a daily bases."

Ron raised an eyebrow. "What's a beeper? Is it something you put on your head?"

Hermione sighed, "Never mind, let's just go."

After being seated and ordering drinks, Ron looked over the rather large menu in puzzlement. "What do I order?" he asked.

Hermione put her menu over her mouth to muffle her laughter. "Why do you sound so hysterical? It's not like Muggle food is any different from what you eat."

He blushed at his stupidity but also because he had made her laugh. Her laughter always brought a great sense of joy and pride out of him, and the very sound made his heart skip a beat. "Yeah, but being here is a little unnerving. Last time I was in a place like this it wasn't exactly a great experience, was it?"

"Point taken," she said. She looked over the menu. "Hmm, I think you'll be safe with the Full English. It will be a while until dinner, and I want you to have your strength," she said with a wink.

"What do you have in mind that will make me tired?" he asked with a smirk.

"You'll just have to find out," she said, smiling.

Ron melted at her beauty. She was so radiant. "I'm really going to miss you," he whispered. It came out of him before he could stop himself.

Her smile faded. "I'll miss you, too, so much." She reached across the table and took his hand. He held it firmly and they gazed at each other as if they were the only people in the restaurant, in the city, or in the whole world.

"So, what can I get for you, loves?" their waitress asked.

"I'll have porridge with a bit of cinnamon and a order of toast with marmalade. He'll have the English Breakfast with extra bacon," Hermione said sweetly.

"Yes, you know me too well," Ron said.

"I know you love your bacon," she answered.

During their breakfast Hermione tried to discreetly explain the concepts of deep fat fryers and electric stoves. Ron was in

complete wonderment as he shoveled forkfuls of heaven into his mouth. It was one of the best meals he had ever eaten. After breakfast she drove them to the mall. They held hands as they strolled around, visited stores, and watched people shop.

"Wow, I think Muggles are better off than we are. I can't imagine how much fun a computer game would have been when I was younger," Ron said as they came out of an electronic store.

"I don't know. I had those things, but I got bored and ended up reading or watching my dad work on schedules. I guess I wasn't exactly normal," she said.

"Being abnormal is part of your charm," he reassured.

"Hush that," she said, nudging him.

"I'm being serious. It's a good thing that you would rather read. Without your brains I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be able to walk around with you at a Muggle mall and watch people talk on their motor phones," Ron said.

Hermione chuckled. "It's mobile phone, Ronald, and thank you."

"Whatever, and you're welcome. I'm having a really good time," he said.

"But we haven't done much yet," she said.

"It doesn't matter. I'm with you, and it's all I really need. It's like I live for these moments now and you look so damn pretty today," he said.

Hermione stopped walking and took his other hand. "Do I not look pretty everyday?"

"You know what I mean. Fucking hell, if I didn't have manners I'd take you to the nearest toilet and snog you mad," he whispered.

Her cheeks went pink. "Public washing facilities can be crawling with germs. Haven't you been paying attention to the signs around here?"

He wrapped his arms around her. "All I've been paying attention to is the way your body moves in this dress. You really are trying to kill me, aren't you?"

"Me? You're the one that decided to dress like a prince today. The classy scholar is a good look for you," she said.

He looked around. "Is it okay if I kiss you right here?"

She traced his mouth. "There's something you should know about Muggles. If there's one thing that's expected and normal, it's teenagers snogging in public places."

"Maybe I should convert then," he said. Ron wasted no time pressing his mouth to hers.

She quickly pulled away. "However, I'm abnormal and I'd like for us to have a bit of decency, so, not right here."

He groaned and pulled away. "You're such a tease. What store are we going to now?"

"We've been here long enough. It's about time that we move on to the next activity," Hermione said. They left the mall and drove for about twenty minutes to a new building.

Ron read the sign that was outlined in neon green. "What's a bowling alley?"

Hermione parked the car and got out. "You'll see."

He opened the door for her and realized that it wasn't any sort of pottery shop. It was a large room that had people drinking, eating, and playing some sort of game. He scratched his head and watched people toss different colored balls down the floor and roll them into blocks. He was completely confused. He walked up to the counter where Hermione was. A guy greeted them. "How many today?"

"We're a party of two, and we'll need a two sets, please," Hermione said, handing him the money.

As the bloke got her change, Ron realized that many rows of shoes were behind him. "This is a shoe store as well?" he asked in her ear.

"No, we have to wear those. For bowling you have to use a special kind of shoe, and we rent them here," she explained quietly. "Here, we're lane four. Go find a ball you like, and I'll meet you over there."

"Okay," he said slowly. He walked over to the many racks of balls and picked one up. He was surprised by how heavy it was. He picked another one that was a little less heavy and also orange. He decided to go with it.

Hermione came back to their lane with their shoes and her ball. She watched him as he laced his up. "I'm surprised you're not phased that the shoes are used."

"It's just like everything else I own," Ron said. He watched the people around him play. "So, how do you avoid hitting the blocks?"

"They're called pins and you don't. You want to knock them down," she said.

He frowned. "I don't get it. Why is knocking the pins down good? What's the point of the game?"

"There are ten pins and you want to knock down as many as you can in as few turns, or frames, as possible. Here, watch me." She walked up to the line with her ball in her hands. She took a few

deep breaths before swinging it down the lane. She knocked down five pins. Ron was just about to ask if she needed a new ball and someone to pick up the pins, but the ball quickly returned on a belt. "Now, I get to go again. You get two attempts." She rolled the ball again and knocked down two more pins. "I'm not very good, but do you see what I mean?"

"I reckon, but do I need to set the pins up again?" he asked.

"No, they'll get set up again electronically," Hermione explained. Ron's eyes widened. "Just try it," she said. He sighed and grabbed his ball. She took his hand and showed him how to place his fingers in the dedicated holes. Ron felt ashamed at the thoughts that ran through his mind. She was just too sexy not to drool over.

"Alright, don't laugh," he said. He tried to imitate what Hermione and a few other people did. He lined himself to the center of the lane and took a deep breath. He swung back his ball, released, and watched it zip down the lane. He knocked down eight pins.

"Excellent! You're a natural!" Hermione cheered.

"I'm sure it's not this easy all the time," Ron assured. However, on his next turn he knocked down the other two pins giving himself a spare, according to Hermione. He brushed it off as beginners luck, but as time went on he realized that bowling was actually very easy. His spares turned into strikes and before he knew it he was only hitting spares and strikes.

"Wow, you should join a league!" Hermione said, hugging him and kissing his cheek as he made another tight spare.

"I think you're right. I'm not sure what bowling means to people here, but I really like it. It's nice to be good at something," Ron said.

"You're good at a lot of things. This is just one of them," she said softly. She licked her lips. "Is it wrong that I enjoy watching you bowl. I mean really enjoy it."

"I don't think so. You want to watch me some more? It's the last frame before I overwhelmingly become the victor of this game," he said.

She bit her lip and sat back down. "In this case I don't mind losing."

The second set played out the same as the first and by the final frame Ron felt on top of the world. However, at the realization that it was dinner time and they were headed to her house, his buzz dissipated. He was quiet the entire trip to her house. He chewed on his nails and kept his eyes out the window. Hermione pulled up to her house and parked the car. Ron let out a shaky breath and looked at their elegant looking home. "Ron, please stop looking like that. Everything will be okay," she said.

He turned to her. "I'm sorry. I want them to like me."

"They'll do more than that. They'll love you, Ron. Trust me," she said.

"I always trust you, Mione. It's me that I don't believe in. I don't want to say anything stupid," he said.

"You won't. Just be yourself. They're not looking for something wrong with you. They just want to meet you. Does it make you feel any better to know that I'm a little nervous as well?" she asked.

"Maybe," he breathed. "Then again they are your parents and have been for almost nineteen years."

She rubbed his knee. "Okay, well does it make you feel any better to know that regardless of how long they've been my parents, I'll always love you and want to be with you?"

"Yeah, that helps," he said.

They climbed out of the car and walked slowly to the door. Ron could hear his heartbeat in his ears, and his palms itched uncontrollably. He repeatedly rubbed them against his thighs, but all it did was make him sweat.

Hermione touched his hand. "Ron, you're fine. We're here together, and my parents aren't bad people."

"I know, love, I'm sorry. I'm sorry," he rushed. He took a few deep breaths and rolled his shoulders. "Okay, knock on the door."

She kissed his hand tenderly before letting it go. "Actually, we have a doorbell." Before Ron could ask what that was, she pressed her finger against some sort of button that lit up and less than five seconds later the door opened.

Ron knew right away that it was Hermione's dad. He looked exactly like her and had the same large brown eyes and thick brown hair. "Hermione, right on schedule," he said, giving her a hug.

"I told you that we'd be here on time." She pulled away. "Dad, this is Ron Weasley. Ron, this is my father, David Granger."

"Hello, Ron, it's nice to finally meet you," Mr. Granger said, holding out his hand.

Ron remembered what his father said about a firm handshake and eye contact. "Hello, sir. It's nice to meet you, too."

"Well, let's get inside. Your mum just took the crumble out of the oven," Mr. Granger said.

Walking into Hermione's house was like walking into Hogwarts for the first time. Everything looked new and shiny, and there were so many things that he wanted to touch and understand but he contained himself. He didn't want to draw too much attention to him being a wizard who knew very little about Muggle life.

"Abby, they're here. Go on and sit down. I'll go get her," Mr. Granger said before going into the kitchen.

Ron sat on the loveseat, and Hermione sat next to him. "So, what do you think?" she asked.

He looked around the posh room and let out a low whistle. "I don't understand why you never stayed here over the holidays." She lightly elbowed him in the ribs. "I'm only joking. Your dad seems nice," he answered.

"He is nice. I told you," she said.

Ron looked at the bowl on the coffee table. He picked up a small white box and opened it. There was a roll of string inside. "What is this?"

"It's called floss. You use it to get food from between your teeth. My parents are dentist, remember?" Hermione said. Ron quickly put it back and stood up as he heard her parents return.

"Hi, mum, do you need any help in there?" Hermione asked.

"No, everything is finished now," Mrs. Granger said. She gave Ron a once over and smiled slightly. "So, you must be Ron."

"Y-yes, I'm Ron Weasley," Ron said, holding out his hand.

She shook it. "Nice to meet you, Ron. I'm Abigail Granger." He smiled and hoped that his blush wasn't extreme. Hermione's mother was very pretty. She was small like her but had short blonde hair and light blue eyes. However, there was an elegance and confidence to her that reminded him so much of Hermione.

"It's nice to meet you as well," he said.

Mrs. Granger gave him a look that made his palms itch again. It wasn't mean exactly, but he could tell that she was judging him in some way and he found it horribly intimidating. He wanted to shout to her that he was good enough for her daughter, but he knew that it would have been too much. She finally looked away from him and smiled at Hermione. "Let's go and eat then. I don't want the food to get cold."

The dining room was just as posh and neat as the sitting room. Ron felt a little uncomfortable, but he tried his best to hide it. He sat next to Hermione and across from her parents. "I wasn't sure of what you liked, Ron, so I just made some of Hermione's favorites. I hope you have similar tastes," Mrs. Granger said.

"Oh, this is great, Mrs. Granger. Thank you," Ron said, eyeing the very healthy and small portions of vegetables, meat, and fruits. It was completely different from what his mother usually cooked. He took a shaky hand and grabbed the fruit bowl.

"So, how are things at home, Ron?" Mr. Granger asked.

"Okay, we're all getting ready for fall. We have to go back to living now," he answered.

Mr. Granger nodded. "What does that mean exactly?"

Ron felt heat rise on his neck. Hermione discreetly patted his thigh for support. "W-well, I mean summer is over soon and my sister, Harry, and I will be going back to school and-"

"Oh, so you are going back to school, then?" Mrs. Granger cut in.

"Mum, we've talked about this," Hermione said.

"I'm just going off what he said, dear," Mrs. Granger added.

Hermione frowned. "How could you? You didn't even let him finish."

"Hermione, I'm sure your mother didn't mean to cut Ron off," Mr. Granger said.

"It's fine," Ron said, "and what I meant to say was that my sister will be going back to school, but Harry and I won't. We're trying to get into a good Auror camp. I-I don't know if Hermione told you what an Auror is or if the ones that came really explained it butâ€¢!"

"Yes, it's like a police officer or some sort of military man, correct?" Mr. Granger tried.

"That's right, dad. They track down dark wizards and take them into custody," Hermione said.

Mrs. Granger took a sip of her tea and kept her eyes on Ron. "That sounds more like a bounty hunter to me. It also sounds really dangerous."

Ron rubbed his neck and felt Mrs. Granger's stare on him. "W-well, it is but, it's what I want to do. It's what I always wanted to do, and I think I'm up for it. I've been applying all summer and I've gotten in to some good academies."

"He just turned in his application to one of the most prestigious academies in Britain. I'm sure you'll get in. You've earned it," Hermione said with a warm smile. For a moment his anxiety faded. He looked into her eyes and everything was okay again. She still looked so pretty, and he wanted to kiss her.

"So, you don't need your seventh year for this type of occupation?" Mrs. Granger asked.

Ron quickly turned from Hermione and remembered where he was. "No, NEWTs are important but not required."

"So, why aren't you going back if they're important?" Mr. Granger asked.

It was a loaded question and one that Ron wasn't sure if he wanted to answer. He shifted in his seat. "Honestly, it would be a waste of time for me. I want to get into a good camp now and NEWTs aren't required to become an Auror NEWTs."

"But your sister is going back to school to earn her NEWTs?" Mr. Granger asked.

"Yes, she wants to finish and that's great for her, but I've gotten all I can from Hogwarts. I've been working all summer to save up some money and keep myself busy until fall. That's when I leave for camp," Ron explained.

Mr. Granger nodded slowly. "Hermione told us about that. You're working with your older brother."

"Yeah-yes, I'm helping George for a while at his joke shop. He needs it," Ron said. His stomach flipped and he was no longer hungry. He knew this part of the conversation would arise sooner or later.

"We're really sorry to hear about your loss. From what we've been told, you're really close to your siblings," Mrs. Granger said.

"Thank you and, yes, I think we are. It's taken a lot of adjustment, but we're getting better. It's another reason why I'm not going back. I just don't want to," Ron said. He didn't want to have to explain everything to them, but if it helped him look a little better to them then he would.

"I think I can understand your position some, Ron. That's why you have to understand ours. David and I are apprehensive about Hermione going back to Hogwarts," Mrs. Granger said.

"Mum, this has nothing to do with Ron," Hermione said.

Mrs. Granger put her hand up. "No, he has a right to hear our concerns, dear, and you heard him. Apparently NEWTs aren't required. I don't know why you made it seem as if they are."

"Mum, they're my A levels. If I don't get them, then I'll never be able to reach my full potential when it comes to getting a job. Plus, I want to go back. I want to go to school," Hermione urged.

"We understand that, sweetheart, but obviously going back is putting a lot of stress on people as Ron explained," Mr. Granger added.

Hermione opened her mouth several times but said nothing. Ron hated the look of defeat on her face, and it was because of him. He knew that he would say the wrong thing to her parents, but he didn't expect it to happen so early in the conversation. He cleared his throat. "Actually, you shouldn't go by what I say. I don't want to go back and even if I did I probably wouldn't do well. Hermione is different. She'll be the smartest student there, and it's in her nature to finish school."

"I think I know my own daughter, Ron, and what's in her nature," Mrs. Granger shot.

"So you should know that going back will be the best thing for her," Ron shot back, feeling his anger grow. He may have grown a lot over the summer, but his short temper would never change.

"What's best for Hermione is for her to be safe, and she may not be going back there," Mr. Granger said rather loudly. "Now, according to your wizarding government there are still killer wizards on the loose, and a lot of them don't take kindly to people like us and people like my daughter. I don't want her to get hurt again."

"I don't either, Mr. Granger, and I know that there are still dark wizards alive," Ron said.

"Then maybe you should talk to Hermione and explain to us why we should allow this to continue," Mrs. Granger said.

"You don't have to allow anything. I'm going regardless of what you think. We've already talked about this. Please, don't bring Ron into it," Hermione snapped.

"There's no need to get so upset, Hermione. We're just trying to look out for you and understand what's going on from your boyfriend's point of view. He is a wizard after all. Your friend Harry didn't seem to mind," Mrs. Granger said.

Ron looked at her and all his reserve faded. He would not stand to be compared to Harry in his girlfriend's house. "Listen, I don't want to sound rude, but I think what you're doing is unfair."

"What do you mean by that?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"Ron, it's okay," Hermione whispered.

"No, Hermione, it's not." He remembered what his father said about conviction and he mentally nodded. "I know I'm a wizard, but I don't know everything that goes on in the Wizarding World. I don't know what will happen when Hermione goes back to school, and I don't know how many death eaters are still roaming the streets. What I do know is that me not going back to Hogwarts has nothing to do with Hermione. She wants to go back and she should."

"Son, we understand your side. Now, understand ours. We only know this world. Everything magical and wizard kinds are facts that we've learned from Hermione. For eleven years she's been our little girl. We've taken care of her and have helped her make decisions, but the moment she got her letter everything changed. However, one thing that will always remain the same is our duty to protect her. We are her parents," Mr. Granger explained.

"I realize that," Ron said.

"I don't think you do. She's our daughter and our duty to her is paramount," Mrs. Granger said.

"So is mine! She's my girlfriend!" Ron snapped. Mr. and Mrs. Granger raised their eyebrows at him. He blushed furiously. "I'm-I'm sorry for yelling, but please don't tell me that I don't understand or don't care about Hermione's safety. It's all I care and think about. I know we haven't dated for very long but I've alwaysâ€œ; I've always loved her and since I was eleven I've only wanted her safe and okay. I worry about her going back to school too, and a big part of me doesn't want her to go, but I trust her judgment and I believe that she will be okay. This is what she's supposed to do, so I'm supporting her."

"Thank you, Ron," Hermione said. She looked at her parents. "I really do want to go back, and I'm old enough to take care of myself."

"I know you are, Hermione, and Ron, I'm glad that you love my daughter. She's all we have and that's why we're worried. We don't mean to be uptight, but it just doesn't feel right to us. Your world has been thrown at us and it's hard to keep up," Mr. Granger said.

"I know how you feel," Ron said. He took a breath. "My brother died in that school."

"Ron," Hermione started.

"You don't have to tell us everything," Mr. Granger added.

Ron shook his head. "No, it's fine," he reassured. "My brother died in that school, and some part of me will always hate it and not feel comfortable there, but Hermione and my little sister are going back. Two people that I love and would give my life for are attending. I'm really scared, but if there's one thing I've learned it's that giving into fear only makes things scarier. This is something that they want, and I have to get over my fear for them. They're moving on, and I'm not going to stop them. I'm certainly not forcing them to go, but I'm also not going to ask them to stay."

"That's noble, Ron. That also takes a lot of courage," Mr. Granger said.

"Than you, sir. I know that I'll never fully understand what it's like to be in your position, and I'll never pretend to." Ron took Hermione's hand and smiled at her for a moment. "However, your daughter is one of the bravest and smartest and most capable people I've ever met, Muggle or wizard. If I honestly thought she couldn't handle going back, then I'd say something, but if anyone can survive it's her. She's got a good head on her shoulders and that's because of what she's learned from you two. I had nothing to do with it. She was perfect when we met."

Mr. Granger grinned. "You mean all that about my daughter?"

"More than anything, sir. I don't want to come between what you've taught her here and what she's learning in my world. I just want her to be happy and safe. That's why I think she needs to go back. She won't be either of those things until she finishes. I love Hermione, and I wouldn't hide anything. I understand how much you love her, too," Ron said.

Mrs. Granger's features softened a little. "I'm so glad to hear you say that, Ron."

"He means it, mum. Ron loves me, and I love him. He's taken great care of me so far, but it's time that I take care of myself for a while. I can do it. You two have taught me how," Hermione said.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger shared a quick look. "Well, there's still so much that I have to say but this decision isn't in my hands. You both are grown up and if the choice has been made, then there's no need to continue right now. Besides, we should probably eat before everything gets stone cold," Mrs. Granger said.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger passed around the food as if the heated conversation had never happened. Ron looked to Hermione for answers, but she only winked and patted his thigh once more. It was her way of telling him that they had won this round.

For the rest of dinner the conversation was lighter and strayed away from school and work. Ron could tell that Mr. and Mrs. Granger were upset but they seemed more relaxed than when he first walked in, and they didn't act bitter toward him. It was a relief. Afterward, Ron and Hermione took their crumble upstairs so he could see her room. It was big and spotless. She had bookshelves over-stuffed with books and journals. She didn't have any posters on her cream walls but they were stuck with calendars and boards. He sat on her bed and looked around. "Wow, this is very cool."

"I hope that's a compliment," she said, taking pictures off her vanity.

"It is. I love your room," Ron said.

She sat next to him. "Thank you. It hasn't changed much since I left for Hogwarts the first time. I think my parents will let me take some of this stuff when I get my own flat."

"Just don't tell them that you're moving in with me," Ron breathed.

She ran her fingers over his cheek. "You have no idea how much I love you. I don't know what happened to me. I froze up and couldn't speak to them, but what you said and the way you said it just made me feel so good and so proud. No one stands up for me the way you do, and I think they appreciate that."

"I hope that I didn't upset them too much. I really do understand where they're coming from, but I won't take anyone talking to you that way. I think they're good people, and we can probably get along once this bloody school thing is behind us," he said.

She kissed his forehead. "I want them to get along with you."

"And I want them to like me. Maybe things will get better once you're in school and shit doesn't happen," he said.

"We can only hope. Here, these are my grandparents. Both my parents are only children, so I'm sorry to say that this is all I have in terms of relatives," Hermione said, showing him.

Ron looked at the pictures of her grandparents and smiled.  
"That's okay. I already feel closer to you by being here and meeting your parents. I'm glad that I came."

"Me too," Hermione said. They looked at each other for a while before closing the gap and kissing deeply. Ron left go of the frames and squeezed her upper thigh. She moaned lightly and slid his tongue between her lips. A strong urge to be inside her took over him, and he groaned in her mouth. There was a knock on the door.

Ron quickly pulled away. "Fuck, they heard something. Your dad is going to roast my bollocks with the plug fireplace, isn't he?"

Hermione laughed and adjusted herself. "My dad's not that violent. Come in."

The door opened her parents walked in. "We don't want to interrupt, but we want to say that we're happy that you came by, Ron. David and I talked about what you said. It was lovely and there were a lot of things that we hadn't considered before," Mrs. Granger said.

"I just want you to know that I love Hermione, and I want what's best for her, too," Ron said, standing up.

"We believe you, Ron, but you have to realized that we're not going to stop worrying about her and questioning things," Mr. Granger said.

"I appreciate it. I really do," Hermione said.

"We'd like to do this again. Next time you'll have to invite your parents. We sort of met your dad a few years ago. He seemed very eager to come by," Mrs. Granger said.

"Yeah, dad loves Muggles," Ron said. "I meanâ€um, he loves to learn about non magic customs and whatnot."

Mr. and Mrs. Granger gave each other a quick glance again. "Okay, that's nice to know. So, Hermione, are you going to leave the car here?"

"No, I'll bring it back in the morning. There's one more place I'd like to go to with Ron," Hermione said.

Ron gave her a look. "Where's that?"

They pulled up to a large building where people were constantly going in and out of. He saw a sign lit up and with different names on it. "Where are we?"

Hermione smiled big and got out of the car. Ron did as well. "We are at a movie cinema." Ron shrugged and looked around. She frowned slightly and rubbed her brow line. "It's like when we watched those projections in Snape's class or like a wizard camera that just continuously plays images. It's a place that shows movies. People act out stories that have been recorded and we watch them."

Ron scratched his head. "I think I've heard Dean talk about this before. Muggles get popcorn and pay to watch people perform for two hours."

She chuckled. "That is the general idea. Come on." She took his hand and led him inside. They went to a booth. "Two for Willy Wonka, please."

"What the bloody hell is that?" Ron asked as she handed him a ticket.

"It's an old movie that they're reviving here for the weekend, and it's one of the best classics out there. I think you'll like it. It involves a lot of chocolate and candy, and it's completely mental and funny. You know, like you," Hermione cheeked, her eyes lighting up.

"I'll take that as a compliment," he said.

"Okay, you wait here, and I'll get us some popcorn," she ordered. She walked off and Ron looked around the cinema. There were people of all ages standing in lines and talking. He saw a small booth by the loos and a couple sitting inside. He walked over to it and peeked at them. They looked to be taking pictures. They made different faces and laughed. After a minute they left the booth and two slides came out of a machine, which they took.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing to it.

"Oh, it's a picture booth. You get five different shots. They don't move of course, but it's something a lot of couples like to do because they give you two printouts," she explained.

He bit his lip and bounced on his heels. "You want to do it?"

Her eyes grew. "Do you?"

"I'm supposed to experience all that the Muggle world has to offer, right?" he said.

Hermione squeaked faintly. "That's right! Let's go." They climbed into the small booth, and she put the money in. "I won't lie to you. I've always wanted to do this, but I never thought I'd have a boyfriend or at least have one that would want to."

He slid his arm around her waist. "Well, you do and yes, I do."

She gazed at him lovingly. "I'm so damn lucky."

"In Merlin's name, a swear word. This must be my lucky night as well," he said.

She swatted his arm. "Oh, hush and get ready."

"What do I do?" he asked.

"When it counts down make a pose. The camera will flash then it will start again," she said.

Before Ron could ask any more questions, the timer counted down from three. He wasn't prepared for it so he didn't change his face. However, he got the rhythm of it and was able to take the rest. By the time it was over they were both worn out and teary from laughter. Hermione grabbed their printouts. The first was with Ron staring in confusion and Hermione smiling. The second was with Ron smiling and Hermione looking at him. The third was of both sticking out their tongue and crossing their eyes. The fourth was of them laughing, and the fifth was of Ron looking at Hermione who was still laughing.

"I'm taking mine with me to school. This is fantastic," Hermione said. "Let's go see the movie."

Ron didn't know what to expect, and he was actually a little frightened when the lights dimmed inside. However, after Hermione explained that it was all a part of the experience he relaxed. Watching the movie put him in a trance. Everything was loud and colorful and exciting. The characters were incredibly funny and all the candy and chocolate made his mouth water. He couldn't believe that it wasn't made by magic. Muggles were so much better off than he ever realized. He couldn't understand why some wizards thought Muggles were useless. It was obvious that cinemas were just as good if not better than any game of snaps.

They walked out of the theater hand in hand. "What did you think?" she asked.

"It was the best movie that I've ever seen!" Ron said.

"It's the only movie you've seen," she said, chuckling.

He shook his head. "Not for long. We're going to come here often. I want to come here, and I want to go bowling and to the mall and everywhere else. I love it here."

She beamed at him and brought him close. "I'm glad you do. This is a part of my life, too."

"I love your life. I love you so bloody much," he said before kissing her.

They drove back to his house and Hermione sighed. "I know everyone will want a full report."

Ron looked ahead to the yard and mentally nodded. He had been thinking about it all day, and he knew that the time was now. "I want to show you something before we go in. Follow me." He got out of the car and walked over to the shed. He pulled out his dad's old yard broom.

"We're not getting on that are we?" Hermione asked in terror.

"Don't worry. It's really slow, and we're not going too far," he said.

"Can't we just Apparate there or walk?" she asked.

"Will you trust me?" he asked.

She stomped her foot. "You know that's not fair!"

"I think it's plenty fair," Ron said with a laugh. "Would it make you feel any better to know that I'd never let anything bad happen to you?"

"A little," she said quietly.

"Okay, well, would it make you feel even better to know that I'd throw myself in the path of a dragon so you could safely get away?" he asked.

She gazed at him. "I'd hope that it would never come to that but, yes, it does."

"Then trust me. Get on," he said, mounting the broom. Hermione slid behind him and held on to him tightly. Ron kicked off the ground and flew in the opposite direction of the house. They flew for almost ten minutes before finally reaching their destination. He nosed down and landed on the plush grass of a hill. It was an open field with a small cliff. There were no houses or occupants around.

Hermione got off the broom and looked around. "Wow, it's lovely out here."

He took her hand. "Yeah, come over here." He guided her to a large oak tree and sat down. She took off her jacket and sat on it which in turned exposed her bare shoulders. The only thing that kept her dress up was a thin string that tired around her neck. She looked enchanting, and he wanted to make love to her and taste her skin everywhere. He wanted to so badly but he couldn't muster the courage to ask and also, there were more important things that he wanted to share with her.

"Have you been here before?" she asked.

Her words finally broke him out of his thoughts. "Yeah, I used to come here all the time."

"So, why haven't we come out here before?" she asked. "It's completely beautiful and peaceful."

Ron could feel his legs and hands shake. He couldn't believe what he was about to say. "Because this place has been a secret until now," he said quietly. Hermione raised an eyebrow. He continued. "From what I've been told no one really knows about this part of the land. Not even mum and dad. Bill, apparently, found this one night when he was trying to find a good place to work on some potions without burning and stinking up everything around him. Not too far off there's a cliff that leads to more land and another lake. So, you can imagine how upset mum and dad would be if they knew any of the kids played here."

"Then how do you know about this place?" Hermione asked.

He smiled. "Well, as the story goes, Bill told Charlie about it and they decided it would be safe to tell Percy. They wanted the twins to know as well, but Percy wouldn't pass the knowledge on so Bill told them. It had been going on for years, at night the five of them sneaking out here to fly, play quidditch, or whatever."

Her eyes widened. "At night? That's really dangerous!"

"I know and apparently Bill and Percy thought the same thing. That's why they didn't tell me. They didn't want me to get hurt or do something stupid. However, when I was eight Charlie woke me up one night, told me to get dressed, and wait for him in the backyard. I was really excited because I didn't see Charlie so much by that time. He was almost out of school and was already working with dragons. So, to see him in my room and for him to tell me to wait for him was amazing." Ron stopped and thought about that night and the pure rush that he felt.

"You really love Charlie, don't you?" Hermione asked with a smile.

"Yeah, I do. He's always been like a hero to me. So, I snuck outside and there he was on his broom. He told me that he wanted to take me somewhere special. I didn't need to hear anything else. I hopped on and sat in front of him and he let me steer the broom," Ron explained.

"Weren't you scared?" she asked.

"A little but Charlie held on to me, and I knew that he would keep me safe. I knew he wouldn't let anything bad happen. That's the type of bloke Charlie is. You feel safe with him. Anyway, we got here and Bill and the twins were already pissing around. Percy was, of course, reading against this very tree. He lost his head when he saw Charlie swoop down with me. Bill did, too, but Charlie explained that I deserved to experience this. The twins were all for it as well," Ron said.

"That was really nice of Charlie. Did they let you stay?" she asked.

"Yes, but I had to stay close to someone at all times. I didn't care, though. It was one of the best nights of my life. I was with my big brothers and, we were all having a wicked time at this beautiful place. When we got back to the house, Bill made us promise that we would keep this place between the six of us. He wanted it to be something that us brothers could use and experience only with each other. We all kept our word. Sometimes at night Bill and Charlie would back from wherever they were, and the six of us would come here. It's our place. This is our secret and our sanctuary," he explained.

Hermione shook her head in puzzlement. "So, why are you telling me about it? Why did you break the promise?"

Ron had been dreading this part. "Because the last time we were here was before Percy moved out. George, Fred, and I came out here and we talked about what was happening to our family and with Percy and dad's job and mum's fears and everything else. We swore that we would get Bill and Charlie out here and the five of us would figure things out."

"But you were at Sirius' house by then," Hermione said.

"I know. We came out here the night before we moved in over there. We promised that no matter what we'd get back out here. But it never happened. We never got the chance to come back out here again and we never will. We'll never be able to come here as brothers again," he said, grimly.

"Why? I'm sure if you asked your brothers they'd want to come," Hermione tried.

"Because the six of us made a pact, but there are only five of us now." Ron swallowed the lump in his throat and his eyes burned. "With Fred gone it just feels like everything's broken. That's why I'm telling you. I don't feel like we should all have to keep the promise because we're not all here."

"Oh, Ron!" she breathed. "I'm so sorry. I should have realized."

"It's not your fault. This place just brings so much out of me. I haven't been here in three years, but I can still feel and see and hear everything. This place has been a big part of my life and my family and I want to share it with you. I need to," Ron explained.

"I don't want you to think that you owe me for today. I treated you because I wanted to. I don't expect anything in return," Hermione assured.

"I know but I've been thinking about bringing you here for awhile now. Tonight is perfect. I'm also doing this because I want to," he said.

"Well, in that case I'm grateful. It's means a lot that you'd trust me with something as important as this. No one else honestly knows about it?" she asked.

"Not that I know of. Not even Harry or Ginny. This place was just supposed to be between us brothers. That's what makes it all so special. It's something that I have with my older brothers. It will always connect me to them and I want it to. I love them all so much. Even after all the shit they've given me over the years, they're my big brothers and I need them all. Going through everything with Ginny and learning how to be a good big brother has taught me to appreciate mine so much more. I look up to them," Ron said.

"And you do a good job. I know they're proud of you," Hermione said, tenderly.

"I'll never be as great as Bill though, or Charlie, shit, even Percy is a good big brother. Aside from his personal issues with things, he's always tried his hardest to look after the twins, Ginny, and me. George and-and Fredâ€œ;there's so much that I've never given them credit for. I don't even know if Fred knew how much I appreciated him. If only he knew how much I miss him. I miss him so much, Hermione, and I loved him. I know that I didn't show it all that much but I did. I still do," he said.

"He's knew, Ron. You don't have to worry about that. You can't keep questioning yourself or him. It's not a healthy way to live," she told.

"It's just so hard. I've never felt as safe as being out here with the five of them. I thought that as long as we were all together nothing could hurt us or break us a part. I felt a part of the group. I felt like I was a part of them and whatever it wasâ€œ;it was so much greater than myself. I've never felt that sort of sureness or safety ever again, and when Fred died I told myself that I would never be able to find it. I told myself that that sort of powerful energy and safety and love would be buried along with him but I was wrong. I was so wrong about that," he said.

"I don't understand," Hermione whispered.

He took her hand. "Hermione, being with you today has made me feel things that I haven't felt since I was out here with my brothers. For the first time in so long I felt that energy and love and safeness. I-Iâ€œ;" Tears clouded his eyes and the pressure was too great to keep them back. They slowly rolled down his cheeks. "I felt happy. I felt really happy and free, and there wasn't one care or worry in my head. I always worry or feel something bad no matter how small every day but not today. Today, I was so happy and it was all because of you."

Her own eyes damped. "Sweetheart, you don't have to give me so much credit."

"No, I mean it. Everything we did today was something new and exciting, and you opened my eyes to a world that I hardly knew, but I felt at home. I always feel at home and safe with you. You have no idea how much that means to me and how much a day like today is important for me to have. I thought it was over,

Hermione. I thought I would never feel like this again but you made me. I feel good. I feel so bloody good, and it's because of you. I owe you forever because of this." He finally stopped and cried. He cried in a way that he hadn't at Fred's funeral. He cried for everything that he had lost, but he also cried for everything that he had left.

All the emotion from the day and his life poured out of him. He felt raw and transparent but it was okay. He felt okay with it in Hermione's presence. She held him close and ran her nails up and down his back. "Ron, you can't begin to understand what your words are doing to me. All I wanted was for you to have a good time, and all I ever want is for you to feel safe and open with me. I'm glad that you do. I need you to. All I want to do is make you feel okay again."

He pulled away and sniffed. Her face was slightly red. "You do. Everything about you makes me feel good. You're so unbelievably kind and smart and beautiful and amazing. I scare myself because sometimes it's like I'm a ghost until I see you or until I hear your voice, and when you touch me and look at me like you're doing now, everything is so intense. That's why I never want to talk or think about you leaving. I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't want to sound like a nutter but-but it's like I have thisâ€;need for you. There's this sort of craving that I have for your presence."

A distant expression of alarm went across her face. "Ronâ€;"

He suddenly felt sick. "I know. I'm sorry I said that. It's stupid and weird and—"

She put a finger to his mouth. "No, it's not. I understand how you feel."

"You do?" he said.

She nodded. "Ron, you were right that day when I went to see my parents for the meeting. There was a lot more that went on."

"Tell me," he urged.

She took a deep breath. "After we talked to the Aurors, my parents got extremely upset. We had a huge argument over my safety and their role in my life. They gave me an option. They wanted me to come home. They wanted me to take a break and spend some time in the Muggle world. They wanted me home, and they wanted me to put the magic aside for awhile."

Ron's jaw dropped. "What does that mean? You can't put your magic aside. It's who you are. You can't change that. You can't just leave. You can't just forget everything you have here!" he said in panic.

"I know, Ron! Don't you think that I've told them that? That's why they were so angry with me. They think I'm choosing this life over the life I had with them before I found out I was a witch. It made me feel terrible," she said, tears clouding her eyes.

"Bloody hell, Hermione, I didn't know," he said.

"I thought things would get better but they didn't. I'm trying to understand them because they have every right to be worried, and they have every right to be mad. I understand why they want me back," she said.

He eyed her. "Do you agree with them? Do you do you think about leaving? Do you think about going home?"

She shrugged. "A few times I have. When I get really scared or I have a dream about Bellatrix or I think about how many times I really have come to dying, I do, but I chose to be in those situations. I didn't choose to be a witch. It was something that I always was. It's who I am, and I'm proud."

Ron smiled. "Honestly? You don't miss how things were?"

"On occasion I do. Sometimes I do think about how much more straightforward things were before all this, but I love being a witch. I love everything I am and what I've been through. I've learned so much and a lot about myself but it's more than that. I have met the most amazing people and have bonds that I never would have if I stayed in the Muggle world." She peered toward the cliff. "I met you and Harry and your family and our friends, and it's taken over my life. It's become my life."

"How did they take you saying that?" he asked.

"Not too well and I felt bad about it, but they needed to know. That's why that why I understand how you feel, Ron." She looked back to him. "I actually did think about taking some time off. There was so much going on, and I thought it would be best for me. a part of me thought it was okay to go back but even if I was ready to leave everything behind, you're here and I could never leave you. I need you too badly to go back to the Muggle world alone."

Ron blushed and could feel tightness in his chest. "Really?"

"Yes, I love my family and my parents. I do love everything that they've given me and have taught me, but I feel like my life is with you and as much as it scares me to say, you're more important. I know that I'm not supposed to pick a side, and I don't feel as if I have to. I told them that I could have both. I can have them and my life there and have my life here with you. I don't see why it can't be possible. However, if they'd make me choose, it's not a question. I'm staying here with you. You're everything to me, Ron, and my life would be empty without you. Everything would fade and blend into each other," she confessed.

He staggered breathed and his mind numbed. He couldn't think, only feel. "Hermione," he sighed.

She wiped her eyes. "I love my parents so much, and I want them in my life. I want us to still have the relationship that we used to, but if it means giving you up and giving up all the things

that we have and will have together, then I won't do it. I won't take any of it if I can't be with you. I did my best to tell them that."

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. For so long he had been afraid that there was something wrong with him or that he was selfish for wanting her as much as he did. "Is that why they didn't like me at first?"

"I tried to tell myself that they weren't going to hold a grudge, but I guess I was wrong, so maybe, but I promise that they didn't mean anything by it. After explaining all that to them they had to realize how special and important you are to me. That's why they wanted to meet you. They wanted to know whom the man was that made me try so hard and risk everything. And you know what? I think they liked what they saw. I really do." She smiled and kissed his hand.

Feeling her lips against his skin was like magic. Every part of him sparked. "I had no idea you did all this for me. I will never ask you to choose. I told you that."

"I know you wouldn't. That's why I love you so much. This is my decision, and I'm satisfied with it. We're together now, Ron. We survived it all, so I believe that there's nothing we can get through, together. Even us separating for awhile," she said.

"I'm scared, though," he whispered.

"I am, too. I'm really scared and I know that my heart will burst open, but we have to do this. I have to go to school for me and you have to go to camp for you. We'll be stronger individually and when we're finally together again, I don't think anything will be able to hurt us as a couple," she explained.

"Nothing or no one could ever come between us, Hermione. You're the only one I want," he reassured.

She chuckled. "What about all the girls with big personalities and even bigger tattoos that you'll meet at camp?"

He rolled his eyes. "It won't faze me. I don't care about tattoos, and I doubt anyone could have a bigger personality than you, love."

She gave him a look. "I hope that's a good thing."

"It is and anyway, what about some nerdy bloke from Ravenclaw or something who will be in your advanced potions class?" he asked, completely serious.

"I'll be too busy to notice anyone and besides, I already have the most wonderful, funny, strong, and gorgeous man ever. There's no need for me to even think about wasting my time. You're sexy, you're challenging, and you're mine," she said, pulling on his collar and bringing him close.

He rubbed her cheek. "And I always will be. I love you."

"I love you, too. Thank you for bringing me here," she said, pecking his lips.

"Thank you for our date today. It was perfect. You're perfect," he said, before kissing her again.

They kissed deeply and slowly. Ron held her as close as he could and let out every bit of himself into her. The emotion and intensity was overpowering. He pulled away, out of breath. "I can't believe there was a time when I was afraid to kiss you or tell you what you mean to me. It's all I ever want to do now."

"And I can't believe there was a time when we weren't together and didn't even have the opportunity to. We've come so far," she said.

"I know. It seems like ages ago. I just want to move forward. I really do," he said.

"And you will. We will. I don't think this place has to lose meaning to you. You're here now and everything is okay. Things can still be okay with people you love gone. You just have to hold on to what you still have. You have to do that, Ron," Hermione explained.

He held on to her firmly. "Then I will. I'm holding on to you, and I won't let go until I have to."

"I won't either. I won't leave until I have to. We have each other, sweetheart. We always will," she whispered.

She got in his lap and he leaned against the tree. They held each other and simply lost themselves in the beauty and quietness of nature. Ron closed his eyes as Hermione told him what they had to look forward to in the future. He grinned and felt safe and completely together.

It was the perfect ending to a perfect day.

\* \* \*

~~~~ Oh, I loved this one so much! It had everything that I've always wanted to put in a story and that's probably why it's the longest chapter I've ever written for a story, EVER! Lol. I wanted a really sweet and totally emotional/fluffy R/Hr chapter before Hermione went back to school and I love the way this turned out.

As far as Hermione's parents go, there's a lot of uncertainty and anger there and they do have a bit of apprehension toward Ron and magic in general but they're nice people and will at least try to understand. That's how I see it. They're normal parents with a witch as their only child. I don't see them being okay and open

with everything and I do see them as being a bit stiff or at least at first and probably Mrs. Granger more than Mr. Granger. I don't know why but it's always how I figured their personalities. I see Hermione's parents a little how I see mine, and there will be more of them in the future.

Now, for Ron's "secret place." It was something that I thought of as I was planning out their activities in the Muggle world. Since Hermione shared a bit of her world and her past with Ron, I thought it would be appropriate that Ron did the same. Plus, this place will have significance later. So, keep that in mind.

Lastly, I just have a couple of words about what I chose for them to do. I thought bowling would be really cute and I can easily see them pissing around and being flirty and having a good time and for some reason I've always thought that Ron would be a really talented and sexy bowler, lol. Now, as for them seeing Willy Wonka. I wanted to keep canon to the time period so picking a revival movie was safe in my eyes. Also, it's more of a shout out to Rupert Grint (Ron Weasley in the HP movies) I LOVE him so much and I remembered that rumor about him supposedly playing an Umpa Lumpa. So, I just wanted to add that, lol.

Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed it and I hope the longness didn't anger you. I already have my plan for the next chap and I will try my best to update as soon as possible! Thanks for reading and you must REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 16*: Hard to Say Goodbye

Thanks for the reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron sifted through Hermione's trunk in astonishment. "Are you really going to need all of these books? Some of them are from first year."

"I want to be as well prepared as possible. There's always more to learn. You don't just read a book once and declare that you know everything inside," she explained.

He shrugged. "Some people do."

She smiled at him. "Well, I'm not one of them. Will you hand me the Advanced Potions book? I want to read over it on the train."

He handed it to her and watched as she packed it away in her bag. It was the night before school started, and Hermione wanted to take everything out that she had packed and go through it again. "Do you mind taking a break?" he asked.

She sorted through old transfiguration notes. "I really want to get this finished. I didn't realize that I had so much, and I don't remember packing all this. I should have gone through it all yesterday."

"All the more reason why you need to take a break. Please?" he asked softly.

Hermione looked up at him and her features softened. "Well, since you asked so nicely." She got up from the floor and joined him on the bed. She lay down and Ron rested his head on her stomach as she repeatedly ran her fingers through his hair. It felt so good that he shivered.

"Are you ready?" he asked, loving the feeling of her small yet soft stomach.

"I think so, but I really don't have a choice but to be ready. As you would say," she answered.

He grinned. "I guess I've taught you well." He closed his eyes and listened to the rhythm of her body. It was the only thing that calmed him. All day he had been trying not to think about what he was going to lose. He would be strong for Hermione and for himself.

"What about you? Are you ready?" she asked.

He opened his eyes and looked up at her. "I think I am. I will be until tomorrow night, anyway. It's gonna be weird not seeing you before bed."

She frowned a little. "I was thinking about that, too. I can't imagine getting up and going to the Great Hall without seeing you or Harry or anyone else from our year." She put a hand to her forehead and groaned. "Is it too late to tell McGonagall that I'm not coming?"

He chuckled. "I reckon it's a little more than late for that, Ms. Head Girl. Besides, you'd still go even if there was still time."

Hermione lit up somewhat as he called her Head Girl. "I know I would. This is for the best. I'm certain that it is."

"I think it is, too. We both need to go on like we talked about last night. Once your gone I'll really have to start focusing on camps, if I'm going to do this," Ron said.

"Lambrick will send you that letter, Ron. I have no doubt about it," Hermione said.

"I'm not so sure. Even if they don't, there are other camps, I guess. I'm just upset that I'll probably start hearing about interviews and such once you're in school," he said.

"You can write to me about everything that happens. You know that I'll always answer you, and we can catch up during Hogsmeade visits," she assured.

"Yeah, but I'm sure the first one isn't for a long time. I'll have to wait for who knows how long before I get to see you again," Ron said, feeling a chill and dismay running through him.

Hermione looked away from him. "Sweetheart, please, I'm trying to get through this." Her voice was small and shaky. Ron knew that she was probably on the verge of tears, and the one thing that he definitely did not want to do was make her cry on their last night together.

"Okay, I'm sorry. Please, don't get upset," he pleaded.

"I'm trying not to but you insist on bringing things like that up," she shot.

"I know. I'm stupid. You can kick my arse if you want," he said.

She tapped him on the nose. "You're not stupid, and I would never do that."

Ron could tell that he was making her feel better, so he decided to press his luck. "You didn't seem to mind doing it when you attacked me in the tent. I still have scars from that."

Hermione laughed. "That's an unfair statistic. You deserved it! I only attack when the person deserves it. I don't simply go around conjuring birds to use as weapons." She laughed again and Ron felt his spirits lift. Her laughter was like music.

"We've come a long way since then, yeah?" he asked.

She took his hand and laced their fingers together. "Yes, we have. It makes me wish that we could go to school together even more. We've never had the chance to experience being a couple while at Hogwarts."

"According to Harry we always acted like an old married couple. So, I don't think much would be different if we went now. Well, except for extended hall patrols," Ron cheeked.

"Oh, there would be none of that. I wouldn't abuse our authority for mindless snogging," she said, sitting up straighter. However, her shoulders slowly began to hunch and she grinned.

"Wellâ€¦maybe sometimes, but only when you worked extremely hard that day."

"You'd do that for me?" he asked.

She ran a finger down his long nose. "And only for you."

Her statement made him glow with love all over. He couldn't believe how lucky he was. "You're a natural born trouble maker and you know it. You always went along with the plans, and bloody hell, you made them up most of the time," Ron said.

"I only ever wanted to keep us out of trouble or peril!" she defended. "It was never just for the fun of it. No, that was for you, Harry, and your brothers."

He chuckled, thinking about all the harmless mischief he had gotten himself into while attending school. "Yeah, well, it was fun. Looking past all the danger and the ridiculous amounts of course work, school was really great. A big part of me wishes that I were going back with you. I'd love to say that I'm snogging the Head Girl."

She tugged on his hair. "How very romantic."

"I'm only joking," he said, taking her hand. "Honestly though, it would be kind of nice to go back with you. You're the reason why I made it through for as long as I did."

"That's not true. You did it yourself. I only helped," she said.

He kissed the tip of each finger and gazed at her deeply. "And you'll never realize how much. I take you everywhere with me. Sometimes, it's like you come out of me when I need to say something or do something important."

She smiled at him sweetly and her cheeks went pink. "I'm always with you, Ron. That's part of what makes us special. We're a part of each other and we have been for so much longer than we realized. You're with me, too. I know every day I'll use a bit of you." She suddenly giggled wickedly. "And every night I'll wear you."

Ron frowned. "Excuse me?" She lifted his head so she could get up. Ron rose on his elbow and watched as Hermione reached inside her trunk. She pulled out a maroon hand-knitted jumper with a large R on the front. "Oi, that's mine!" he said, standing up.

"Well, it's mine now," she answered, putting it up to her chest and wiggling behind it.

"You didn't ask me for it," he said, though he honestly didn't care. It touched his heart so greatly because she wanted to have it.

"I didn't know that I had to. You get a new one every year and you know how drafty it gets in the castle at night. Plus, I just want something of yours..." Hermione blushed and shook her head. "Oh, I sound like such a twit saying that. It's stupid."

He walked over to her and took the jumper out of her hands. He carefully placed it over her head, and Hermione raised her arms to let him pull it on. They stared at each other as she pulled her hair out of her ponytail and let the thick brown locks fall around the collar of the jumper. It was entirely too long in the arms, and it went past her waist in terms of length but it looked perfect on her. His jumper seemed to swallow her in some way. It covered her almost completely, and he knew that it would keep her warm.

"What do you think?" she asked.

Ron cleared his tightening throat. "Perfect."

She grinned and brought the cuffs to her face. "Mmm, it smells so much like you. It smells like home."

Ron didn't know if he would be able stand too much longer. Seeing her in his jumper was doing something to him. She looked so beautiful and comfortable and in love. Most importantly, she looked happy and that's all Ron ever wanted Hermione to be. "I love you so much, Hermione."

She put a hand to her chest and bit her lip to stop the trembling. "I love you, too." He put a hand to her cheek and rubbed his thumb across it. Hermione leaned into his hand and sighed. "Hmm, I love your hands."

"And I love you in this jumper," he said, pulling away. "In fact, I love it so much that I'm taking it back."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "No, you're not. It's mine now and you can't have it."

He took a step toward her. "I reckon I can, and I will."

She backed up and hugged herself tightly. "I guess you'll have to take it from me."

He accepted her challenge. "Fine. You may be smarter but I'm faster. This won't take long," Ron said. He took another step toward her and Hermione squeaked. She turned around and quickly jumped over his bed. Ron chased after her. They laughed and giggled like children as they dodged the mess of Hermione's luggage and Ron's clutter. Just as she was about to jump over the bed again, he caught her by the arm of the jumper and grabbed her. He gently tackled her to the bed.

She laughed and kicked her feet. "That's not fair. There was interference with the jumper!"

"You said that you wanted it. You have to take everything that comes with it," he said, a little out of breath.

Hermione looked up at him with a red face. There was light in her eyes and innocence that he hadn't seen before. For so long he had believed that Hermione Granger was all business, but she could actually be a lot of fun when she opened up and felt comfortable. "If you really want to take it off, then you can. It's scorching in here, anyway." She lightly pushed him away.

Ron smirked and pulled the jumper off. Once again her skin was exposed in her t-shirt and shorts. He noticed the slight glisten of sweat on her legs and neck, and his eyes couldn't leave her chest as it rose with every breath. "D-did you get really hot in it?"

"Running around probably wasn't a good idea," she said softly.

"I think it was," he said honestly. His eyes finally pulled up to her face. She was smirking at him in such a sexy way. He finally realized that he was on top of her, practically straddling her.
"Am I hurting you?"

She shook her head slowly. "No, the weight feels really good."

He sucked in air and realized what she meant by that. He couldn't take it anymore. "Hermione," he whispered.

She moaned softly. "Yes?"

His heart raced. He knew what he wanted and what he wanted to do with her. He couldn't stay above the passion this time. "I really want you."

She rose on her elbows. "I want you, too. Ron!" She trailed off as she pushed up into him.

Ron gasped and bent down. He clasped their hands together and licked her mouth. Hermione captured his tongue and brought it into her mouth. They moaned together and she opened her legs. He settled against her and slowly pushed into her. She whimpered and dug into his back. Ron had to pull out of the kiss. He couldn't breathe. He was on fire and every part of him needed to touch her. He kissed her neck and nibbled on the skin. It was damp and smelled so good. He pushed into her again.

"Oh, Ron, that feels so good," she moaned, meeting his push with a thrust.

His hands went to her stomach. He reached under her shirt and felt her breasts. He loved the way they fit in his hands. He wanted to remind himself of how supple and warm they were.
"You're so bloody soft," he said against her neck.

Hermione pulled on his hair and brought their lips together. "And you're so hard. You're so very hard," she said, her voice dripping in lust. She reached down to his jeans and snaked her hand under. She gripped him and he groaned. She stoked him, and Ron bit his tongue to keep from crying out. He wanted to feel the pressure, but he wanted to feel it around his entire length. He wanted to be inside her as he came. The time was now. It had to be now.

"Hermione," he choked. He looked down at her. "Do-do you want to?"

She nodded frantically. "Yes, I want to."

He bent down and kisses her again. "I have some potion in my trunk."

"Okay," she said timidly.

Ron got off her and tripped over to his trunk. He was so nervous and his stomach flipped over and over again. He opened the lid and the worst sound imaginable flooded the room. There was as always a knock on the door.

"No!" he grumbled, slamming his fist against the lid.

Hermione fell back against the bed and covered her face. "You should probably get it."

"Whoever it is will go away," he mumbled. The knocking didn't stop though.

She sighed and answered the door herself. "Harry," she said.

"Go away, mate. We'll have plenty of time to talk tomorrow," Ron said, not bothering to look up.

"I'm not here for you," Harry said.

He looked up. "Then what do you want?"

Harry walked into the room sat on his cot. Hermione sat next to him. Ron noticed the look on his face and sat on his bed across from them. "Is everything okay? Is Ginny okay?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, she's fine. We're about to go to bed," Harry said.

Ron rolled his eyes. Noticing Harry's messier than usual hair and the red mark under his earlobe, he was able to figure out why his best mate was probably exhausted. He couldn't help but feel jealous. "I reckon there's only so much you can do in one night, right?" he said.

Hermione glared at him for a moment before turning back to Harry. She rubbed his back. "Ignore him. Now, what's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong. It's just..." Harry flushed slightly and looked down. "You're going to school tomorrow, and I wanted to say goodnight. It's my last opportunity for a while."

Hermione smiled at him affectionately. "Oh, Harry!"

His face turned a darker shade. "I know. I know. I never get like this but things are different now."

"You don't have to explain that to us. We understand you completely," Ron said.

Harry smiled at him before turning back to Hermione. "I've spent so much time with Ginny this summer, and I feel like I didn't see you or talk to you enough."

She took his hand. "Harry, you had every right to spend all the time you could with Ginny. I understand. I'm not upset, and we spent plenty of time together, honestly."

"I just don't want you to think that I've forgotten everything you've done for me. I wouldn't be here if it weren't you for," Harry said.

Hermione looked from Harry to Ron and sighed. "You two keep saying that as if I willed you on all these years. Don't you two understand that I've learned so much from the both of you? You have no reason to thank me. We were all in it together, and it was never a choice for me. I love you both more than anything. I should be thanking you two for saving me." Her eyes glossed over and her breathing quivered.

Harry placed a hand on her shoulder. "Don't do that. I didn't want to make you cry."

"It's not your fault. You know Hermione gets," Ron explained.

"Maybe I should have ended with a joke," Harry cheeked.

"Hush. I can't help it," she said, wiping her eyes. "Thanks for saying that, Harry. It means a lot to me."

"Yeah, it's really all I wanted. I wasn't trying to interruptâ€¢ whatever you two have going on here," Harry said, getting up.

Hermione wrapped her arms around him and held him tightly. "Good night, Harry. I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay," he said softly, holding her back just as tightly. Ron watched his two best friends and smiled. Usually a scene like this would bother him but that night it only made him feel better about what was to come. It was good to know that he wasn't the only one who felt uneasy about Hermione's absence.

After Harry left, Hermione joined Ron on his bed. She took a deep breath and rubbed her eyes. "You have to watch out for him, Ron. You know how stubborn Harry is, but he's going to need your help."

"I know. I'll do my best. I promise," he answered.

She looked at him with her heavy brown eyes. "I'm making the right decision."

"You are," he reassured. "You need to go back, and Harry and I need to stay here." He had been scared to say the words. It made the whole situation seem more permanent. Hermione was really going back to school and neither Ron nor Harry was going to join her. The Golden Trio was slowly starting to separate.

Hermione smiled sadly and rested her head on his shoulder. He wrapped his arm around her waist. "I'm a little tired myself. Is that okay?"

"Of course it's okay. We can go to sleep if you want," he said.

She looked up at him. "Are you sure? We started something earlier, but I don't really feel likeâ€¢!"

"You don't have to say anything. When it's supposed to happen it will. Plus, you wouldn't want to be really tired and whatnot tomorrow. It's your first day and all," he said.

She beamed. "I still can't believe I'm Head Girl."

"You can believe it just fine. You're overly qualified and you always have been," he said, moving things off the bed. He pulled the covers back for Hermione and fluffed her pillow as always.

"That's another thing I'll miss. It's so sweet that you do that for me," she said, settling in.

"I can always sneak away and do it for you and anything else you want," he cheered.

She gave him a look. "Let's not start anything we can't finish."

"You're the boss," he sighed, laying down and facing her.

She ran a finger down his neck and across his shoulder. "Can we meet somewhere in the middle of what we started?"

"What do you have in mind?" he asked.

Hermione sat up and pulled off her shirt and shorts. Ron felt himself begin to drool as her knickers and bra were in focus. "I still want to feel you," she said, "you make me feel so safe at night. Your body is like a shield. I want to have it against me."

He quickly took off his shirt and jeans. Hermione cuddled against his chest and placed her hand on his waist. Ron put an arm under her pillow and put the other around her shoulder. The two of them hugged closely and Ron leaned down so he could smell the sweet, flowery scent of her hair. He couldn't believe that he wouldn't be able to smell it regularly for almost a year. He squeezed his eyes shut and fought the urge to think about losing Hermione.

"Ron, you feel so good. I don't want to stop holding you," she whispered against his chest.

"Don't. For tonight let's pretend that we're back at Hogwarts. Um, I snuck down to your private room and after almost half an hour of begging and snogging and bribing, you finally let me sleep with you regardless of consequence."

Hermione chuckled a bit. "Okay, it's Friday night as well, so we can sleep in which I know you like."

Ron held her tighter and loved the feeling of her skin against his. Their bodies produced so much heat that they began to sweat. He didn't mind. It was perfect to him. "What are we going to do when we get up?"

"Well, we'll eat breakfast then take a walk around the court yard. We'll have to fit some studying in as well," she said.

Ron snorted. "Of course, even in our fantasy we must be studious. Don't you ever take a bloody break?"

She kicked his leg and laughed. "I thought sleeping in was our break. We're talking a walk, too, or do you just want to lay around all day and shovel chocolate frogs in our mouths?"

"Sounds spot on to me," he said with a chuckle. "You can't have a fantasy without chocolate frogs. It would be like a beautiful Saturday morning without any homework to do."

Hermione laughed and kicked him again. "You're such an arse sometimes, Ron."

"And you're such a book worm. What else is new? So, can we get back to the fantasy slash nightmare?" he asked.

She burst into laughter again and Ron joined her. For a while the two of them simply held each other close and came up with their perfect day as seventh years. It was enjoyable and took their minds off of what would happen in just a matter of hours. They fell asleep giggling and still holding each other.

* * *

The bright light hurt his eyelids. Ron slowly sat up and rubbed them. He moved his hand over the space next to him. It was empty. When the blurriness cleared, he noticed that his room was completely clean. All of Hermione's books and bags were gone and even some of his own clutter was put away. He got up and pulled on his clothes. He automatically felt blackness in his chest. It was September first. After going to the bathroom and brushing his teeth, Ron walked downstairs. Harry and his parents were at the table.

"It's about time you got up, dear. I was about to have Harry collect you," his mum said.

"Where's Hermione?" he asked, sitting next to Harry.

"She and Ginny went to Diagon Alley. Hermione wanted to pick up a couple of things and Ginny went along," Harry explained.

"But we should get going soon. I'm not sure if everything will run the same. I've heard Hogwarts will do a few things differently now," his dad explained.

Ron couldn't eat. He could barely speak. All he wanted to do was get the day over with, but he also cursed every minute that went by. "I'm going back to my room to change," he said. He left the table and practically ran upstairs. He sat on his bed and covered his face with his hands. He had to get through this.

He didn't know how long he had sat there but there was a knock on the door. "Yes?" he said.

It opened and Ginny walked through. "We're back. Hermione is changing into her uniform already."

"Oh, yeah, she always does," he said.

Ginny sat next to him and took a deep breath. He looked at his sister and felt his black pit grow. She was leaving, too. "Are you ready?" he asked.

She ran a hand through her long red hair. "Yes, but I'm a little scared. I don't know what's going to happen or what people are going to say."

He remembered what George had told him when he first started working at the shop. "They'll tell you how sorry they are for your loss but that you should feel honored to have such a brave brother. You'll get used to it after a while," he explained.

She shook her head. "I'll see it, Ron. I'll see where it happen."

A lump clogged his throat and a chill froze his spine. "It'll be okay. If it's even possible don't think about it too often. You'll never get through your course work."

Ginny nodded. "I know. That's what everyone keeps telling me. Fucking hell, Ron, I wish you were coming. I'd feel better if you were there."

"I'm sorry," he rushed. "Write me whenever you want to. I'll always answer you first, I promise."

She nodded again and looked down. His door opened. "Oh, I'm sorry," Hermione said.

"It's okay. I need to look over some stuff with mum again. I'll meet you two downstairs," Ginny said, quickly getting up and leaving.

Ron stood up as Hermione closed the door. He looked at her in her Hogwarts uniform and felt a sudden rush of nostalgia. He had to lighten the mood. "Now that we're dating, I reckon it's safe to confess that over the years seeing you in your Hogwarts uniform drove me mental. I would stare at you during class and think of all kinds of things to do to you."

She turned pink and walked over to him. "Well, I'd hate to add to your state but I'd thought you might like to pin this on me." She held up her Head Girl badge.

"You don't want to do the honors?" he asked.

"I'll have all year to do it. This way the first time can be special," she said.

The lump in Ron's throat grew and the weight of everything began to push down on him. "All right." He took the pin and slowly connected it to her collar. She watched him closely with a smile, and he could feel every bit of it. He didn't move away from her after pinning it. They continued to stare at each other.

"So do you have everything?" he asked.

"Yes, I got up really early and went over it all again. I'm all set. I'm ready to go back to school," she said.

"Without me," he said before he could stop himself.

Hermione frowned slightly. "Yes," she breathlessly whispered.

He couldn't hold back. He grabbed her and kissed her fiercely. Hermione held on to him and kissed him back with every force that she had. They snogged for hours it seemed. Ron couldn't tell her everything he was thinking, so he hoped his feeling would be enough. All he wanted was to be enough for her.

"Hermione! Ron! We have to go!" his mum called.

Hermione pulled away and her face and eyes were red. "Come on. I don't want to be late," she said.

Ron followed her out of the room and downstairs. Everyone seemed to be waiting on them. Ginny looked up from a letter. "I got a letter from Dean. He sent it last night but Eroll just brought it in. He's coming back."

Hermione smiled. "Really?"

"Yeah, he wants to finish up like you. Obviously, he didn't get the chance to take NEWTs last year," Ginny explained.

"That's amazing! It will be nice to see a familiar face from my year," Hermione said brightly.

"I'm excited to see him, too!" Ginny said. Ron and Harry shared a look. They silently agreed that Dean Thomas was now the luckiest man alive.

"Okay, Ginny, I'll take your trunk. Do you remember what we talked about?" his dad asked.

"Yes, I know how to Apparate to the train station, dad. I'll see you in second," Ginny answered.

Hermione automatically grabbed Ron's hand and winked. He smiled and let her take the lead. A second later he was at the platform. He saw kids and parents saying goodbye and running through the barrier to board the train. It was nice to see that everything was returning to some sort of normal and that time hadn't stopped. However, the reality of it all sank in. As they walked through the wall and saw the large scarlet train, he knew that it was time to say goodbye.

He watched Hermione hug his parents. "Thank you for letting me stay over this summer. I really appreciate it," she said.

"Hermione, you're always welcome at our house. You're a part of our family," his dad said.

"Arthur is right. You're like another daughter, dear. I can't thank you enough for helping our family and taking care of things. We love you. Have a good year," his mum said.

Hermione beamed. "I love you both, too. Thanks again."

Ginny was next. She looked at her parents and her lip trembled slightly. "Stay up and about, okay? Things get better every day."

"Oh, my baby girl," his mum cried. She wrapped her arms around Ginny and crushed her. "Please, be safe and write as often as you can. Please, Ginny, take care of yourself."

"I will, mum. I'll be fine," Ginny said.

His mother let go and his dad put a hand to her cheek. "I'm so proud of you, sweetheart. I love you."

"I love you, too. I love you both," Ginny said.

His mum continued to cry and his father held her. "I think I should take her back. Have a safe trip."

"I will. I'll write you this evening and let you know what's going on," Ginny told. His dad gave her a smile and walked back through the gate with their mother.

Ginny walked over to Ron and the others. The four of them looked at one another. They didn't know where to start. "Let's just get this over with," Ginny said. She hugged Ron. "Bye, Ron."

He held her back firmly. "Bye, Ginny. I know you'll take care of yourself."

"Yeah, I will. Take care of our family. I'm counting on you," she said.

"Don't worry, I will. Just remember what I said and be safe. Things are different but you never know," Ron babbled.

"I will, Ron," Ginny pressed.

It didn't seem like enough. Suddenly, it felt like there was so much that he wanted to tell her and explain to her. "I mean it. If anything happens to you I'll—"

"Ron, she'll be fine," Harry interrupted.

Ron pulled out of his thoughts and let her go. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I understand," Ginny said. She turned to Harry and the two of them shared an intense expression.

He pulled her close. "You know where to find me."

She traced his mouth. "And you know where to find me." She kissed him hard and Harry's body seemed to relax. Ron couldn't believe how strong they were being, but he realized that emotional and tearful goodbyes simply weren't them. Harry and Ginny were tough in a way that a lot of other people couldn't be.

He pulled away and smiled. "I love you so much, Ginny. This has been the best summer of my life because of you. Look out for yourself, be smart, and write me when you can."

"I love you, too, Harry. Thank you for helping me through all this. Take care of my brother," she said.

"I will," he answered.

Ginny kissed him again and back away. Her eyes were slightly misty, but Ron knew that she wouldn't let a single tear fall. "Well, I'm going to find Luna and a seat for us, Hermione."

"Okay, I'll be right there," Hermione answered.

"Bye, Harry. Bye, Ron. I'll see you soon," Ginny said. She waved to them and they waved back. Ron watched, with his heart in his throat, as his little sister boarded the train and disappeared.

Now, the three of them were left. Ron felt a bit woozy, and he didn't know what to say. "I guess I'll take over for Ginny. Get over here," Harry said to Hermione.

She laughed and hugged him. They held each other for a while and Hermione rubbed his back. "I love you, Harry."

"I love you, too, Hermione. You'll be great," Harry answered.

She pulled away and wiped away a tear. "Keep practicing your magic and try to stay out of trouble."

Harry grinned. "What do you mean? I hardly get into trouble."

She rolled her eyes and swatted his arm. "Well, keep Ron out of trouble then. I mean it. You better take care of him."

"I can take care of myself, Mione," Ron said softly.

She turned to him and her bottom lip trembled. "I know you can." Her voice broke and she wiped away more tears. "I'm sorry. I told myself that I wouldn't do this."

"It's okay," Harry reassured.

Ron thought his chest would cave in. "Come here."

She practically fell into his arms. He held her as closely as he could and she hugged him back. She was warm, soft, and sweet. She was everything a person needed to be and she was his. Hermione

was his girlfriend, and he had to let her go. It finally hit him and the wave swooshed through him with a powerful force. "I can't do this," Ron staggered breathed. "I can't say goodbye. Even if it's for a month, I can't do it."

She pulled away. "Oh, Ron, I'm going to miss you so much."

"I'm going to miss you, too. I can'tâ€œI can't," he said, feeling his emotion take over. He wanted her to stay. He didn't know how he would get through training and camp and work and everything else without her. He wanted her to stay.

Hermione gazed at him with big, watery eyes and asked, "Am I making the right decision?"

Ron wanted to say no. He knew that if he truly needed her, then she would stay. She would put her education and career on hold to help him through his grief. Hermione was one of the most selfless people he knew, and he loved her to death because of it. With one word she would stay and would have a smile on her face regardless of what she felt. For those reasons, he had to let her go. He wanted her to stay, but he needed her to be happy. Her happiness was and would always be more important than his own.

"Yes. You're making the right decision. You have to better yourself. You need to go. I need to let you go," Ron said.

She let out another batch of tears and sniffed. "I love you both so much. Take care of each other, and we'll see each other before you know it."

"Yeah, write to us," Harry said.

"Of course I will. I'll write you both all the time. Good luck with everything. It's going to be pretty busy really soon," she said.

Ron took her hand. "Look after my sister. I'm trusting you with her."

"I'll guard her with my life. Take care of George and your parents and yourself," Hermione said. She reluctantly let go of his hand and looked at her watch. "I've got about eight minutes before the train leaves."

"And you don't want to miss it. Go head," Harry said.

She hugged him again and kissed his cheek. "Goodbye."

"Bye," he whispered.

Hermione looked up at Ron. "I'm going to go."

"Okay, um, I just want to say that I'm so thankful for you. I never would have survived the summer without you with me. Wordsâ€œit's not enough to tell you. I just love you. I love you with everything that I am, and you better be bloody careful up there. Nothing can happen to you," he choked out.

Hermione nodded anxiously. "I will. I love you, Ron." She jumped into his arms and he held her. She kissed his ear and whispered, "Remember to breathe, Ron. Whenever you get scared just think about us. Think about our fantasy day and breathe."

"I love you," he sobbed.

"I love you, too. You're my world." Hermione pulled away as the final student ran to the train. She smiled at him and Harry then gasped and dug into her bag. "Oh! Come here, quick!"

"What? Did you forget something?" Harry asked.

"No. We were so caught up in the goodbyes that I forgot about my camera," Hermione said.

"Merlin, Hermione, seriously?" Ron said.

She pulled out what appeared to be a Muggle type of camera. "Yes, Ronald! I hardly have any pictures of the three of us. Now come on. I don't have a lot of time." Hermione held out the camera in front of them and Harry and Ron squeezed in on either side of her.

"What do I do? Is it like last time?" Ron asked.

"On three just smile," Harry said. "You'll see a flash."

Ron sighed and waited for Hermione's count. On three he did his best to smile earnestly. Hermione quickly took two more shots before putting the camera back in her bag. "Good. I'll develop them and send you both a copy when I'm able to. We need an updated trio photo," she cheered.

Ron chuckled. He missed her humor already. A whistle blew and he knew it was the warning signal. "You better go then," he said.

Hermione nodded. "Okay. Okay, I'm going. I'll see you two soon. Please, look out for each other."

"We will. Study hard or I guess for you just study normally," Harry said.

She put a hand on her hip "Very funny, Harry." She gave Ron a look. "You'll be okay?"

"Yeah, will you?" he asked.

"I'll be fine," she said. She gave him one last hug. "Goodbye, Ron."

Ron hated the way it sounded coming from her mouth, but he had to get through it. He had to say it back. "Bye, Hermione." He pulled away. "I'll see you."

"Yeah," she whispered. She pulled away from him and slowly walked backwards. Ron could feel every once on him wanting to bring her

back but he didn't. They both had to move forward. She kissed her hand and waved to them. "I love you both!" They waved back and smiled. Hermione gave them one final grin and a wave before boarding the train and disappearing.

Ron let out a low breath and felt all of his energy leave him. Harry stood by him and put a hand on his shoulder as the train whistled and began to move. Hermione didn't come out. She and Ginny did not run back into their arms. They were leaving. They were gone.

When the train was finally out of sight, Ron rubbed the tears that he had been holding back away.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked.

Ron opened his eyes and looked at the now empty train tracks. Everything felt new for some reason. "No, but hopefully I will be. Are you alright?"

"No, but I'll hope right along with you," he answered.

Ron and Harry shared a long look before heading back.

* * *

**** Yes, this was an emotional chapter. Wellâ€¢they ALL are but this one was extra special, lol. I could have done the parting a different way. I noticed that a lot of writers like to make the going of Hermione and Ginny really upbeat and sort of, "I'm leaving!" "Yes, you are. I'm being strong though. Everything is okay!" Well, that's fine but I'm in the other camp of writers. I think the parting should be really emotional for all of them. During the summer they were all a unit and sort of locked in to each other and now that Hermione and Ginny are leaving, the four of them are finally doing something for themselves post-war and it's a little scary.

Ron and Hermione have used each other as support for so long and even though they are very independent people and strong, the first real parting is difficult for them. I know she's only going to school and it's not like she's never see him again but for this first time, the fear is there and it's powerful. I really liked how they all handled the different goodbyes. I know I put a lot of detail into it but it's one of my favorite themes in all of the post-DH ideas. I love imaging how they all said goodbye when Hermione and Ginny left for school, and I'm pleased with how mine turned out.

Now, I'm a little worried at this point because I do have this as an R/Hr story but obviously Hermione isn't going to be around all the time anymoreâ€¢or at least for a while. So, I hope that I won't lose readers over this. I have this as R/Hr centric and not just Ron or General for a reason. Though she's at school, Ron is

still going to see her. They're going to write to each other, he's going to see her during visits and of course holidays, and some other times that I don't want to give away. Also, Ron has a lot coming to him and at the root of everything; Hermione is his reason for getting through it all. Yes, R/Hr may not be in every chap and other characters will come into play, but please don't think that the R/Hr is over. You would be horribly incorrect. Going to school and Auror camp is just part of this story. There are other things that the couple has to do together. So, I promise, R/Hr will always be force in this story, have faith!

Well, I hope you all enjoyed this. I certainly did. Thanks for reading and review!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 17*: Only time

Thanks for the reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

When Ron and Harry arrived back home, his parents were at the kitchen table sipping tea. His mum seemed calmer than before. "Did Ginny and Hermione make it through?" she asked.

"Yes, they were right on time," Harry answered.

"Ron, are you okay?" his dad asked.

Ron looked up from the crack in the wooden table that had been holding his attention. "Yeah, I'm fine."

His mum gave him a slight worried expression. "Do you want me to make you some lunch? You haven't eaten anything today."

"No, but thanks. I'm not really hungry. I want to go back to sleep for a while, but I'll make myself something later." He turned away from the worried looks and headed upstairs. He closed the door to his room and looked around. It was clean. It was uncharacteristically clean. He rarely cleaned his room unless threatened otherwise. The neatness was Hermione's doing. She liked everything to be tidy and put in a proper place.

Ron sat on his bed and gazed at the spot where Hermione would sleep so closely to him. He didn't know why he missed her so much already. She was still on the train. She was riding back to school where she would be and stay for almost a year. He let out a soft breath. It wasn't even a day later but already he could feel the weight of her absence. There was a knock to his door. "Yes," he answered gently.

Harry poked his head in. "Can I come in?"

He gestured a hand. "Sure. There's nothing to interrupt anymore."

Harry sat on his cot and looked around as well. "What do you think they're doing right now?"

"Hermione is no doubt going through every procedure and rule with the Head Boy and is preparing to make her first patrol around the train. I reckon she's polished and straightened her badge at least half a dozen times," Ron told. He could picture it so clearly in his mind, and it brought a smile to him.

Harry chuckled. "And Ginny is somewhere with Luna. She's probably talking about how she's not going to take any shit from the teachers this year or how she plans to completely devastate as a chaser this time around because she didn't get the chance to last year."

"Too bad for Luna. She'll have to sit there and listen to Ginny go on and on about quidditch strategy," Ron cheeked.

"And the Head Boy will want to resign even before the train makes it to Hogwarts. Hermione will have the bloke working harder than he ever has in his life," Harry added. Ron and Harry sat quietly while picturing the scenes in their minds. It didn't take long before both were laughing hysterically.

Ron was the first to stop. "I miss them, and I know I'll miss them more," he said out of breath.

Harry nodded. "Me too. You know what's weird though? I'm not sure if I'll end up missing Ginny or Hermione more."

"What are you talking about?" Ron asked confused.

Harry shrugged. "I don't want to sound like an arsehole, but I'm used to saying goodbye to Ginny. When we left last year, I didn't see her for a really long time. Before that, we had only been dating for a while but then sort of broke it off. Ginny and I are used to giving each other up, but it's not like that with Hermione and me. She's always been there. We've never really had to say goodbye." He looked away from Ron and held his hands together as if slightly embarrassed. "I don't want this to sound wrong, but I care about Hermione in a way that I've never cared about another girl, not even Ginny. Hermione has never left me, and she's always been on my side. I love her for that. She means the world to me."

Ron wasn't sure what he felt. He knew that Harry cared deeply about Hermione. Harry himself had said that he loved her like a sister, but this was different. Ron had never heard him express it in such a way before. For so long he assumed Harry's feelings for Hermione were romantic, and it had always terrified him. Even after their talk in the forest he wasn't sure. Now, seeing Harry's expression and hearing his words made him truly see what Harry felt and what he had always felt.

"That doesn't sound wrong. I think I understand. Hermione always gave you what you needed even when you didn't think you needed it. That's the way she is," Ron said.

"Yeah, I've said before that she's like a sister to me, and I still believe that. At least, that's what I think a sister would be like, Hermione," Harry answered.

Ron smiled. "Well, I have a sister, and that's what it's supposed to feel like. I'll always care about Ginny in a way that I'll never care about another girl. It doesn't mean that I love Hermione any less just like you don't love Ginny any less. It's just different."

Harry flopped back on his cot and rubbed his eyes. "Yes, different. My girlfriend is gone, again, and my pseudo sister is gone as well. It's really different."

Ron lay back on his bed as well. "Yeah, it is."

Ron mostly stayed in his room for the rest of the day. He tried to entertain himself with his comics, cards, and chess but it didn't help much. Harry offered a game of quidditch, but he didn't feel like playing. He knew that he was being a big tit for feeling so down so quickly, but he couldn't help it. He had no idea what was happening with Hermione and Ginny. He could barely concentrate during dinner because he wondered what was happening at the opening ceremony at Hogwarts. He was anxious and aggravated.

He went to bed early, but it was hard falling asleep. He was so used to having Hermione's body cuddled against his, and he could smell her hair on his pillow. He sighed heavily as he once again turned over and punched his pillow to flatten it.

"Ron, take some sleeping potion or something, fucking 'ell!" Harry groaned from his cot.

"Shut up. It's not my fault that I can't get to sleep," Ron shot.

"Then make some damn tea or go for a jog! Don't make me regret you not going back," Harry snapped.

Ron threw a pillow at him and got out of bed. He made sure to make as much noise as possible as he left the room. When he walked downstairs he saw his dad on the couch. He was simply watching the fire. "What are you doing up? Are you okay?" Ron asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. I'll be going to bed real soon." His dad gave him a once over and grinned. "Are you having trouble getting to sleep?"

"How could you tell?" Ron asked dully.

His dad raised a mug. "Here, have the rest of my tea. I've had too many cups."

"Cheers," Ron said, sitting next to him and taking a gulp.

"So, rough day?" his dad said.

"It's been okay," Ron answered, not looking at him.

His dad nodded. "I remembered when I first got the job in Muggle artifacts. I had to do some traveling, and I was away for quite some time. I had trouble sleeping for a while. I missed your mum and Bill so much. He was just a baby at the time, and his crying had actually begun to grow on me. I missed hearing him and your mum."

Ron looked at his dad. "Really?"

"Yeah, I was awful. I don't like goodbyes even if it's just for a little while," his dad answered.

"Neither do I," Ron said quietly.

"You get that from me. You get a lot from me. Including the ability to adapt after some time. It'll be bad for a while but then it will get better. The first time apart is the hardest, but it gets easier. You'll be okay," his dad assured, rubbing his back.

Ron didn't know why but his father's words actually made him feel better. "So, I'm not a complete prat for missing Hermione already and for worrying about Ginny on the first night?"

"If you're concerned that it makes you any less of a man or makes you less tough, then don't. It's natural and good that you miss them and worry. It means you care," his dad explained. He gazed into the fire again. "You really want to know why I'm awake?"

"Why?" Ron asked intrigued.

"Every year since Bill started school, I'd stay up on the first night you all went back. I stay up and keep the window open and an eye on the clock just to make sure you lot are okay. If for any reason something went wrong and any of you needed me, I wanted to be ready," his dad explained.

"I had no idea," Ron said.

"No one does. Molly thinks that I like to have a midnight tea or something." His dad chuckled. "I stay up just long enough to reassure myself that my children are safe and taken care of."

Ron felt a strong wave of love and gratitude toward his father. It seemed like whenever he thought his dad couldn't get any more amazing; he surprised him with something else. "That's great, dad. I appreciate it, and I know everyone else would, too, if they knew."

"Ah, it's not about appreciation. It's what a father does," his dad answered. "You all will always be my kids, no matter how old you get. I'm sure Ginny is fine right now. In fact, I know she

is. She is more than capable of taking care of herself, but it didn't stop me from doing this just like when you leave for camp, it won't stop me from doing this."

Ron grinned at his dad and hoped that he would grow up to be even half the man and father that he was. "Good. I wouldn't want you to." He suddenly stifled a huge yawn.

"I guess you're a lot more tired than you thought," his dad said.

"I reckon so. I think the tea did help," Ron answered, feeling the emotion from the day quickly drain him.

"Go on and head to bed. I'll be going to bed soon, too. I have to work tomorrow," his dad said.

"Me too. George has me working most of the day," Ron said, standing up.

"Give him our best," his dad said.

"I always do," Ron answered. He looked at his dad and saw the pair of blue eyes that were so similar to his. They were still tired and darker than they once were, but they were also full of experience, love, and kindness. "I love you, dad. Thanks for talking to me and telling me about this."

"It's not a problem. Like I said, it's my job. I love you, too, Ron. I love you so much," his dad answered.

Ron walked back into his room and took the pillow that was still on Harry's back. He climbed into bed and hugged it close. He was finally able to go to sleep.

Ron woke up the next day in a slightly better mood. However, as soon as he started dressing for work he thought about Hermione, and the feeling came back. He knew she was most likely in class. He could see her sitting straight in her chair and transcribing perfectly neat and terrifyingly accurate notes.

"Ron," Harry muttered from his bed.

Ron looked at his mate who was still half asleep in bed. Usually Harry was wide-awake and active by this time. Then again, he was usually wide-awake and active with Ginny. "Yeah?" he answered.

"Are you working a full day?" Harry asked.

"Most likely," Ron said.

Harry yawned. "Well, if I'm not here when you get back, I'll probably be in the field practicing. I need to brush up on some spells."

Ron rolled his eyes. If Harry needed practice on spells, then there was absolutely not hope for him. "Gotcha."

Though Ron was happy to get out of the house, he was also a little nervous about going to work. He hadn't seen or really talked to George since walking out on him, and he wasn't sure what to expect. He opened the door and Lee was at the main register. "Ah, nice to have you back, Ron. You've come just in time. With most of our business in school, we have a lot of back order claims to file."

"Can't wait to see it. Thank you for not starting without me," Ron said sarcastically. He looked around. "Where's George?"

"He's still upstairs. If you plan on going up there, be careful," Lee said with a wink. Ron frowned, not knowing what to make of his statement.

He walked upstairs and noticed that the door to George's flat was open. He also heard laughter. He slowly reached the top and peeked in. George and Angelina were sitting on the arm of the couch. George was pushing the side of his face to her mouth, and she continued to laugh and hit him.

"George! I'm not going to kiss that thing!" she said, laughing.

George rubbed his ear against her cheeks. "But doesn't it feel nice? It's just like my real ear but better! When I feel like changing my look, I can simply take it off."

"That's bloody sick and you know it. If that's supposed to be a turn on, know that it's not," Angelina said.

George smirked and tugged on his fake ear. "You can bite on it and see if that's appealing to you. It's a snug fit so you can pull on it and bite it pretty damn hard if you want."

Angelina pushed him away again but smiled. She took his hand. "I'd rather bite and pull on other parts of you that are real and naturally attached."

"So, the ear doesn't add to my sex appeal?" George asked.

She ran her finger across his cheek and traced a patch of freckles. "Nothing needs to be added, babe. You're already the sexiest man I know. I'm lucky to be dating such a stunning ginger."

Something in George's expression was lighter and happier than Ron had seen in months. "Love, stunning ginger is redundant." He then leaned in and kissed her. Ron had to look away. The scene seemed so similar to something he would have with Hermione. He cleared his throat. George and Angelina broke apart.

"Ron, hey," Angelina said, hopping off the couch.

"Hi. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," Ron said, coming into the flat.

"You weren't. I was just about to go across the street to pick up some cauldrons. We're almost out," she answered. She smiled at

George and lightly tugged on his ear. "There, now you can stop asking."

"And now my life is complete. You're amazing. Have I told you that?" George asked.

"A few times too many. See you in a minute," she answered, kissing him again. "See you boys downstairs," Angelina said as she walked out of the flat. George looked after her with a contented grin.

"I'm sorry that I interrupted," Ron said.

George came out of his trance. "It's just as well. We'll be opening soon." Ron nodded, not really sure what to say. George pushed himself back on the cushion of the couch and gestured Ron to join him. "I take it Ginny and Hermione made it okay yesterday."

"Yeah, they made it. I should get a letter from Hermione tonight. I hope I do," Ron answered.

George nodded. "I told Ginny to write me whenever she wanted to, but I don't know if she will."

"I'm sure she will. Why wouldn't she?" Ron asked.

George shrugged. "I dunno. I haven't been around much, so she probably doesn't know what to say to me."

"No one knows what to say to you, George," Ron said before he could stop himself.

The two of them looked at each other for a moment before looking away. They were quiet. "So how are you holding up?" George asked.

"I'm fine," Ron said.

"Hmm, okay. That's good I reckon. Now, how are you really holding up? You had to say goodbye to Hermione yesterday. I'm sure you weren't fine," George said.

Ron sighed and rubbed his neck. He didn't see the point in hiding from George. "It was actually really hard to say goodbye. I didn't want to let her go, but I had to. It's only been a day and already I feel the difference."

"It takes some getting used to. Look on the good side of things. You will get to see her again sometime, and I'm sure the sex will feel even better," George said, smirking.

Ron blushed. "Um, we're not having sex."

George raised an eyebrow. "Really? Oh..."

Ron shook his head. "It's not because we don't want to. We do. It's just we never got the chance. Something always happened or someone always wanted something."

"You don't have to explain it to me. It's not my business. I just thought you and Hermione were shagging by now. The few times I've seen you two together, you were all over each other. All the hand holding and smiling almost made me nauseous," George teased.

Ron smiled. "Yeah, it's great."

George returned his smile. "I agree. I like it, too."

George looked to be in such a good mood and Ron didn't want to ruin it. However, he had to know where they stood. "Listen, can we talk about how we left things?"

George held his hand up. "There's no need for that. You were being honest with me. I felt like the worlds biggest prat after you left, but I think I needed to."

"I wasn't trying to make you upset or anything," Ron added.

"I know. You were looking out for mum and the others. That's good. You really kicked my arse with what you said. That's good, too. I know I've been really difficult, but with you gone I've had a lot of time to think. I don't want to worry you or anyone else in the family more than I do naturally. I want to be around more. At least, I want to try to be around. I miss you all and I missed you being here with me. I'm sorry, Ron. I was being selfish," George explained.

Ron didn't know why George's apology made him feel so guilty. He almost regretted saying anything. He knew his brother was in severe pain and the last thing Ron wanted to do was gut George. "It's not necessary for you to apologize. It's enough that you said you'll try. That's all I or anyone else wants."

"Good. I don't want to make promises I can't keep, but I do want to make things right with mum," George said. He stood up and held out his hand. Ron stood up and shook it. "So, you're still here, then?" George asked.

"I made a promise, didn't I?" Ron asked with a smile.

Working actually helped Ron take his mind off Hermione. It was nice to fulfill mundane tasks and work with customers. However, every time he saw George sneak a kiss with Angelina or heard them laughing together, he felt a little sad. It was the first time since he was eleven that he didn't have Hermione's company on September first.

Ron yawned as he hassled to straighten the shelves later on that evening. He wanted to hurry and get home. He knew Hermione had written him and he was dying to know how Hogwarts was. "Alright, mates, I'm outta here. I have a meeting with a new supplier in the morning. They may be able to get us a better deal, and I

might be able to get it done before our contract is up," Lee said.

George gave him a high five. "Lee, I knew you were secretly a genius. Let me know as soon as something is set, yeah?"

"As soon as I know, you'll know. Bye guys," Lee said, walking out the door.

"That's really good news, George. You've been talking about switching suppliers for a while now," Ron said.

"Yeah, Lee is good with stuff like this. I learned all my negotiating techniques from him," George explained.

"That's not quite the right phrase to describe what you and Lee do," Angelina said, coming from the back. "Lee is the world's slickest talker. I don't see how he wasn't in Slythern."

"Oi, that's my best mate you're talking about," George said.

Angelina rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Well, I need to go as well."

George's composure changed. "Oh, you're not staying with me tonight?"

"I need to get back to my place. All my work is there. My vacation time is almost up, and I have to go back to the department tomorrow," she explained. "I thought I told you that."

"You did. I forgot. I'm sorry," George rushed.

She put a hand on his shoulder. "It's fine. Look, I'm still going to work here. I'll come on my days off, and I'll see you for lunch, okay?"

Ron could tell that George was trying his best to seem indifferent about it. "Yeah, sure, no worries. Have a good day tomorrow. Try not to work too hard."

Angelina laughed. "Are you joking? It's fall and the start of almost all major sporting events the Ministry keeps records on. I'll be completely daft by the end of the night." She kissed him softly. "I'll talk to you later. I love you."

"I love you, too," George answered.

Ron watched George as he watched Angelina leave. He knew exactly how he felt. Sometimes, getting through one day could seem longer than eternity. "You all right?"

George finally pulled his eyes away. "Angelina won't have too many days off for a while. This is a busy time of year for the games and sports department."

"You'll see her. No matter what they have to let her have a lunch break," Ron assured.

George nodded but still seemed disappointed. "I know!"

Ron rubbed his hands against his palms. He always felt so nervous when George was alone. It was the last thing that he needed. "Well, I'd hate to make this a pattern, but I'm going to leave, too. Unless you need me to do something."

"Actually, I do," George said. He reached into his back jeans pocket and pulled out an envelop. "Give this to mum and dad."

"What does it say?" Ron asked apprehensive.

"Just give it to them, Ron. I've been thinking a lot about what you said and they need to read it. Please?" George asked.

"Of course. I'll give it to them as soon as I get home," Ron said.

When he arrived back, his parents were in the sitting room. "How was work?" his mum asked.

"Long. There was a lot of inventory to do, and it's not exactly my favorite thing," Ron said, flopping in the chair. "Is Harry here?"

"He's upstairs. He's been out all day so right after reading his letter he went to bed," his dad said.

"Letter?" Ron asked.

His dad smiled. "From Ginny. You got one from Hermione." He handed it to him.

Ron didn't know why seeing Hermione's handwriting on the envelope excited and relieved him so greatly. It was almost like confirmation that she was in fact in school and hadn't simply disappeared. He pulled out the letter from George and handed it over. "From George."

"George? What does it say?" his mum asked.

"I dunno. I don't think it's bad. He really wants you both to read it," Ron explained. His parents didn't seem to be listening. They tore open the letter together.

Ron really wanted to know what the letter said, but he couldn't wait to read his own. He slipped to the kitchen. He quickly opened the letter. He instantly smiled at seeing his girlfriend's perfect, small, and neat handwriting.

Dear Ron,

As soon as I got on the train, I thought that my knees would cave in. For a moment I considered getting off but I kept it together, like I know you did. The ride back was nice. Ginny, Dean, Luna, and I talked a lot about what we thought would change at school and what we hoped would stay the same. I was scared. I didn't know what I expected to see when we arrived. Surprisingly, the

castle looks the same. In fact, the entire school is the same. I don't know why we all thought things would be and look so differently. Yes, there's something in the air and there are not as many Slytherns this year, but for the most part, things are the same. It's us who have changed and not the school. That's the difference, I believe. I figure McGonagall and the rest of the staff wants Hogwarts to function and feel as normal as possible because the rest of us are different. It was rather strange seeing and listening to McGonagall give the evening speech. I know she'll be a fine Headmistress, but she made me miss Dumbledore. Oh, I still miss him, Ron. I miss a lot of things already.

I'm sitting in my room right now, (It's actually very nice and spacious. I love it!) and I miss you. I hope that's not odd or slightly pathetic that already I miss you so much. I miss Harry as well. You should know that he's reached an even higher status here. If he wasn't famous before, he certainly is now. I even think in history class the first years will be talking about him and the war. It's not all Harry, though. You and I have also received sort of a status at Hogwarts. There are pictures of us and awards dedicated to us for our bravery and skill. I wish you could see it. You'd be proud of yourself. You're a legend now, sweetheart.

Speaking of legends, during McGonagall's speech we had a moment of silence for all the fallen. She made a special note out to Fred. I think that made Ginny really happy, but I could tell she was holding back tears. I was there for her. Luna and I both were. She's in good hands, Ron, so you don't have to worry. Now, I won't be able to look after her too often because there's so much work to do! McGonagall wasted no time informing me on all the meetings and procedures and jobs that I have to do. It's difficult and rather chaotic but in a good way, if that makes sense. I know you probably just laughed, rolled your eyes, or made some comment about me being a nutter so hush it, mister!

Well, I should probably stop writing. I have to get up early tomorrow, and I feel like I've already babbled on for long enough, but I could go on for days. It's so hard to find everything that I want to say. I wish I could just tell you to your face. I wish that I could kiss you goodnight and tell you that I love you in person, but I can't. This will have to suffice.

I love you, Ron, and I hope all is well. Please, don't hesitate to tell me anything when you write me back. I may be at school, but I still care and I want to help with whatever I can. I wrote this in Harry's letter but I'll tell you as well, I really hope that you're keeping up with your practicing. It's important that you're overly prepared for your interviews with the camps. They want you to be overly prepared. See, there I go again. I really need to stop writing. I still have to get this to the owlery!

Goodnight, Ron. I love you so much and I miss you. I really miss you. I look at my pictures of us and I smell your jumper, and it helps me remember that we're doing the right thing. I hope you're doing something to remind yourself of that as well. Take care and

give your family all my love. Well, give them a nice portion but remember to leave most of it for yourself.

Love Always,

Hermione

Ron stared at the letter and read over her words again and again. Each time he did, his heart lifted more and the warm feeling expanded. Hermione was okay. Ginny was okay. They were safe, and Hermione missed him as much as he missed her. "I love you so much," he said to the letter. He heard a muffling sound. It was a bit like crying. He jumped out of the chair and ran to his parents. His mum was sobbing and his dad was rubbing her back. "What's wrong? What did George say?"

His dad smiled. "Nothing is wrong."

His mum wiped her eyes and sniffed. "Oh, dear, I'm sorry. I'm fine. I'm great, actually. George's; he's inviting us to come by the shop. He's inviting the entire family to come by whenever we all can come together. He wants us to be there. He wants me to be there." She stopped talking and sobbed again.

His dad held her, but there wasn't one bit of anguish. "Thank you, Ron. Thank you for talking to him."

Ron opened his mouth, unsure of what to say. He didn't think it was his doing but maybe in some way it was. "No problem, dad." He sat back in the chair and his happiness only grew.

* * *

"Come on, Ron! We're gonna do it again!" Harry yelled.

Ron huffed and slowly got back up. He was hot, sweaty, irritated, and covered in dirt. Fall weather hadn't fully broken it, and being outside was a nightmare. "Harry, let's take a break. Stop being a tosser."

Harry was quite a few feet away from him but Ron knew that he was smirking. "Is that what you plan to tell the recruiters or a dark wizard? We can't stop. Not until you've pinned me again!"

"Urgh!" Ron groaned.

Ron and Harry were currently dueling in the yard. A week had gone by since Hermione and Ginny left for school, and the two spent all of their free time practicing and dueling. Ron confidence slowly dwindled each day. He knew that he wasn't a total amateur, but Harry was born to it.

"Ron!" Harry called.

"Alright, you fucker! Give me a moment!" Ron screamed. He had to pin Harry. He had to take him down but nonverbal spells were never his strong suit. However, he tried his best to focus and concentrate on what he wanted to do.

"Ready?" Harry called.

"Yeah! Let's go!" Ron answered. He took a deep breath and focused. As soon as he thought he had enough concentration, he was once again knocked down. "Fucking hell!" he bellowed, standing up once more and rubbing his sore bottom. "How many times are you going to knock me on my arse?"

"Until you get it! Look, nonverbal spells are really hard. I hate them, too, but I know it's going to be something we'll have to preform. So, come on. You can do it!" Harry coached. Ron rolled his eyes. The last thing he wanted was for Harry to tell him that he could do it. It only made him not able to do it more. "Ron, come on! We'll be out here all night until you!"

Harry suddenly stopped talking as he was shot and knocked down. Ron lowered his wand and let out a breath. He jogged over to Harry, who was laughing. "Shit, where did that come from?" he asked.

"I dunno. I just really wanted you to shut up then I felt the spell work. I used Stupefy," Ron explained, holding out a hand and helping him up.

Harry took off his glasses and wiped his brow. "I reckon it takes a lot of feeling for you to get the spell to work, eh?"

"I don't know. When I'm not concentrating on it and I just go on impulse, I can do magic well. It's when I have to think about it that I freeze up. I don't know how I'm supposed to explain that to any sort of recruiter," Ron said.

Harry patted his arm. "Don't worry. As long as you can do it, I doubt anyone will care where it comes from. Let's take a break. My arse really hurts from that fall."

"I don't feel sorry for you," Ron said.

Ron and Harry entered the kitchen door of the house and saw his parent's, Kingsley and another Auror at the table.

"What's going on?" Harry asked.

"We're going over some new protection strategies that the Ministry is thinking about," Kingsley said. "This is Gregory Miles. He works with me in the department."

"We saw that you two were practicing outside when they came, but we didn't want to disturb you," his mum said.

"So, what has the Ministry come up with?" Ron asked.

"Possible raids, more documentation about certain types of supplies, better security at Muggle access points, and a lot of other material that really can't be discussed at this point in time," Gregory said.

"What we're really trying to work on today is simple things around here that can be done. For example, at least for a while, we want to completely block your fireplace. Floo Powder is generating a revenue again, and I personally think this house should keep that transportation closed," Kingsley explained.

"That's not a problem. Everyone here can Apparate," his dad said.

"That's another thing. We want to set a barrier around the property again. Make it clear from anyone being able to pop in or out," Gregory added.

"Wait a minute. Everyone does think that we're going to get attacked again?" Ron asked.

"No. That's not what anyone thinks at all," Kingsley said.

"So, is this something that every house is going to do, then? I get that the Ministry wants to give us added protection, but you keep saying it's all for the time being. Why? What's happening right now that makes you want to do this?" Ron questioned.

While Gregory seemed more than offended at Ron's attitude, Kingsley gave a look of admiration. "Your feelings are sound, Ron, but I can assure you that it's just precaution. We don't want to take any chances. It hasn't even been a year yet, and we want to be prepared for a backlash as I said. I want this family to be prepared. You all are very important to the wizarding community, so if it feels like we're giving you more because you're in more danger, it's hypothetical but not completely untrue. However, it's not just that."

"Special treatment," Harry added.

"It's not exactly looked high upon at the Ministry, but it's Kingsley's decision," Gregory said.

"That's right. The Ministry better start getting used to that fact. He'll be minister in no time, once everything is in order again," his dad said, patting Kingsley on the arm.

"We appreciate it, Kingsley. We really do," his mum added.

"There's no need to thank me. It's my job." He looked to Ron. "Have you spoken to George? We can go by his flat after this."

Ron felt his face flush. Now, he had to tell his parents and two Aurors that his brother was ignoring them. "Yes, I've talked to him, but I didn't get a straight answer on what he wants to do, so I don't know. You'll have to ask him but if you want an answer now, for the time being he says no." He easily noticed the look of disappointment on everyone's face.

The Aurors left soon after and Ron showered and went to work before his family arrived. George was running around the shop in complete hysteria. Even though he had closed the shop early to clean, he still didn't think it was enough. "You really need to calm down," Ron said to him.

George didn't seem to be listening. "I am calm! I just want the place to look nice."

"It does look nice, and since when has the state of a room bothered you? Mum and dad walked by your room every day back at home and saw how dirty it was," Ron cheeked.

"Piss off. Actually, get over here," George ordered.

"Do you want me to polish something again?" Ron asked.

George looked at him seriously. "No, I want you to stay quiet about me and Angelina."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

"Iâ€œ;I still haven't told any of the family about us dating, and I really don't want today to be the day that I do," George said.

Ron frowned. "Why not? They're here for you and to see the shop. I don't think they'll get upset."

"Ron, please. I'm stressed out enough. I know they'll want to know why I haven't invited them yet, and I'll probably get a lecture. I really don't want another one to go with it," George explained.

"What could they possibly lecture you about?" Ron asked.

George looked down. "I don't know. Dating my twin's ex girlfriend."

Ron felt guilty again. "Does she know that you haven't told anyone?"

"Yes. She's sort of in the same place that I am. She said that she's fine with it. At least, I hope she is. Look, I know this makes me a dick, but I just can't do it today," George said. "One thing at a time."

Ron sighed and rubbed his neck. "Okay. Yeah, I won't say anything."

George let out a breath of relief. "Thanks."

There was a knock at the door. George took a deep and walked passed him to answer it. Harry, their parents, Bill, and Percy came through. Harry discreetly moved out of the way and George and their family looked at one another.

"Hi," George finally said, quietly.

Their mum wasted no time throwing her arms around him and hugging him tightly. Ron stiffened, ready to hear her sobs but to his surprise, she let him go and smiled. "It's so nice to see you, George. I'm glad you invited us."

George seemed to be taken aback by her calmness. "Yeah, s-sorry I haven't done it sooner."

"It's okay. We're here now," their dad said, hugging him as well. He took their mum's hand and walked deeper into the shop.

Bill and Percy both shook George's hand. "It looks great in here," Bill said, peering around.

"I might actually buy something. You know that has to mean something," Percy said.

George chuckled and relaxed somewhat. "Sorry, we don't sell legit office supplies."

"Ha ha, so give us the tour again," Percy said.

George smiled even wider. "Alright, let's start in the back. We have a new Bug Buttons line that we're starting."

Ron leaned against the counter and Harry joined him. "That wasn't so bad."

"George was preparing for the worst. I kind of was, too," Ron whispered.

"Yeah, I could hear your family talking before we came. Your mum wants to keep it together for him. She doesn't want to overwhelm him and neither does anyone else, so no tears or speeches today. They just want to be with him," Harry explained.

"I'm glad. He needs to feel comfortable, which I think he does. I'm so relieved that is finally happening. I didn't know if it would," Ron said, watching George interact with everyone. It brought a smile to him.

"Yeah, maybe change is a good thing," Harry said.

Everything was changing, more and more with each passing day. It was a scary feeling but Ron was almost accustomed to it now. Perhaps, he too was changing.

"Maybe!" Ron breathed. He nudged Harry and the two joined his family.

* * *

**** Yay! I love progress!George. I had a lot of him and Angelina in this chapter because their storyline is important to my plot

and as time moves on things with them are going to change and it effects Ron. Hmm, there's not a lot of explaining that I feel is necessary for this chapter, lol. I feel this one was pretty straightforward.

I'm glad this chapter is finished. Everything picks up from here on out. Change was a big theme for this chap because that's exactly what this story is doing now! So, if you want to find out what I meanâ€¢.REVIEW! Thanks for reading

CHEERS!

* Chapter 18*: Pathways

Thanks for the reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron yawned and took another bite of his toast. It was way too early to be awake and way too soon to be thinking about work. "Between offensive and defensive spells, which would you find to be the most useful in combat and why?" Harry asked.

Ron yawned again. It was also entirely too early to be thinking about Auror exam questions. "Dunno, whichever comes to mind first."

"Ron, you can't use that as an answer," Harry said from across the table.

"Why are we even doing this so early? I have to go to work soon," he answered.

"There's nothing wrong with extra practice and study time," Harry said, flipping through the practice questions.

Ron gawked at him. "Fucking hell, you sound like Hermione. No one said that you had to take over for her."

Harry threw a piece of bacon at him. "Sod off. I just want us to be ready."

"You've got nothing to worry about. Every letter you've received has been a yes. I reckon all you'll have to do at the interview is say you're name and you're in," Ron told in spite.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm not asking for it, Ron. I'm sorry. Is that what you want to hear?"

He looked away and felt like an arse. He knew that it wasn't Harry's fault. It was so close to choosing time, and he still hadn't heard back from his top choices. "You don't have to apologize. You're right. I'm just really nervous, that's all. Any

time I'm not at work, I'm here practicing and worrying about what I'm going to do. There's a lot going on right now and it doesn't help thatâ€;" he trailed off.

"You miss her?" Harry helped.

"Yeah," Ron said quietly. About two weeks had passed since Hermione left, and he felt as if the timing couldn't be worse. He needed her ideas and wisdom. Letters weren't enough.

Harry's expression eased. "I get it. I miss her, too. I miss her and Ginny a lot. I know things would be easier if they were here, but they're not. We have to do this on our own. It's just gonna be you and me for a while, mate. Get used to it."

Ron grinned at his best friend. He was so thankful to still have him around. Even though he really missed Hermione, he couldn't imagine where he would be without Harry. He had always been his main support system. "Do I have a choice?"

Harry returned his smile. "No, so answer the question."

He stuffed the piece of thrown bacon into his mouth and thought about his answer. "Um, I reckon defensive spells are more useful."

Before he could say why, his mum came through the front door with letters in her hand. "Errol, poor thing, had these right by the shed. Ron, there's one for you. It's from another camp, I think." He tried his best not to snatch the letter out of her hand.

"Is it from Lambrick?" Harry asked.

Ron looked at the school address. "No, it's from Paddock."

"Wow, that was fast," Harry said.

"Yeah, I know. It's probably because I didn't get in. I was mad to send it in the first place. It's a pretty nice school," Ron answered, not wanting to open it.

"Dear, you shouldn't make up their minds for them. Open it and see. I'll give you some room," his mum said, leaving.

"No need. I know what it says," Ron said, casually ripping open the envelope. He quickly read the opening sentence before stopping. His eyes widened.

"Oh, it's okay, Ron. You'll get into the next one," his mum said, rubbing his arm.

He shook his head slowly. "No, that's not it at all. I got in."

His mum gasped and Harry snatched the letter from him to read aloud. "Dear Mr. Ronald Weasley, we are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to Paddock Academy. Based on your academic achievement and glowing field experience, we are hereby bypassing our standard second trial and granting you full

acceptance provided that you attend your interview. Please, contact our offices immediately if you plan to attend our camp as we have several other candidates under consideration." Harry looked up from the letter. "Ron, this is incredible. You're not just accepted, but you're completely in."

"I don't have to take any exams," he said quietly.

"Sweetheart! This is fantastic!" his mum said, hugging him tightly.

Ron was in so much shock that he didn't think that he could speak. He hadn't expected to get into Paddock and he certainly didn't think they would want him so badly or so soon. "What am I gonna do?" he asked.

"What do you mean, dear? They want you," his mum said.

"Yes, but he hasn't received his letter from Lambrick yet," Harry added.

His mum scrunched her face in confusion. "Why does that matter? Paddock is a great school, and they want him now! Ronald, you should write them back and tell them that you're coming."

"Ron, I don't knowâ€;" Harry said, glancing over the letter again.

He looked between his mum and Harry. He didn't know what to do either, but he went with what he thought was right. "I don't know either, Harry. I mean I really want go to Lambrick but Paddock wants me now and it's one of my top choices. I'd be mental not to write them back and tell them I'm coming. I think I'm going to."

His mum squealed and kissed him hard on the cheek. "That's my boy! I need to write your father! He'll be so happy to know. Oh! There's so much to do!" She took the rest of the letters and talked to herself all the way to her room.

Ron read over the letter a few more times, feeling more excited and confident and proud. "They want me, and it's a great school."

"You're right. It's a really great school. Congratulations, Ron, I'm happy for you," Harry said.

He frowned. "You don't sound very happy."

"No, I am. It means a lot if they're not going to bother with a second trial. You should definitely write them back before someone else gets your place. You're lucky. You really don't need to go over these anymore," Harry said, scooping up the practice questions. He shook Ron's hand. "Really, Ron, this is huge. Go for it."

Ron studied Harry's face. He did seem happy for him but there was something else there that he couldn't quite read. However, he sort of felt like he knew what it was. Going to Paddock would

completely change everything. "Well, thanks. I'll write them tonight when I get back from work. I should probably get going."

"Okay, see you later," Harry said as he walked away without even a look back.

Ron could hardly concentrate while at work. He was too excited about going to Paddock. It was a great school, and it meant so much to him that they found his field experience glowing. All the other schools didn't matter. This one wanted him.

"Ron, I know you're academy bound now, but there's still work to do. Just because Paddock thinks your work is glowing doesn't mean I do!" George called from the register.

"Sorry. It's just this work is beneath me now. I have better uses for my glowing talents," Ron cheeked.

"Ha! Yeah, says you and maybe Hermione." George put a finger to his chin, mockingly. "Oh wait! How could she possibly know?"

"Fuck you, George!" Ron yelled, feeling embarrassed and regretting ever telling his brother that he was still a virgin.

"I can fuck, little brother. That's the beauty of it!" George said. Ron ran over to him and shoved him. George had no problem twisting his wrist and pulling him into a headlock. "Why do you bother doing this, ickle Ronniekins? I'm stronger than you are. I always have been, and I always will be." He used his other hand to tickle his sides.

Ron laughed, harder and harder until he ached. "Okay! Okay, okay, shit! I'm sorry. You win for fuck sake! Let me go!"

George finally released him with a look of satisfaction. Even though Ron was irritated and in slight pain, it was nice to see George happy and acting like his old self. "That never gets old."

"I'll get a lot bigger at camp. I'll be able to take you down soon enough," Ron assured, shoving him once more before going back to the aisles.

The front door opened. Ron had to look up. The store wasn't open for almost another hour. To his surprise, Bill walked in. He shook his head and pointed to the door. "You should really keep this locked if you're not open."

"Why? Customers know our hours. No one just walks in like you did. Plus, it's annoying. We have to constantly leave to get more supplies and no one wants to have to unlock the door every five minutes," George said, his mood already seeming to change for the worse.

"It's a small price to pay for safety. Not everyone will be so polite, George," Bill said.

Ron watched as George bit his lip, obviously trying to hold something back. "Is there something you need?"

Bill grinned. "Yes, I have something for you." As he walked over to George, he spotted Ron. "Congratulations, Ron. I heard that you got into Paddock. It's a very prestigious school."

"How do you know already?" Ron asked amazed.

"You know mum. She likes to spread good news around. She told dad and he told a few people at the job. News between the Ministry and the bank always travels fast. A co-worker told me. I'm really proud of you. I told you that your talents would shine through," Bill said.

Ron felt even more satisfied. Bill had always been successful in everything he did. A compliment from him went a long way. "So, you think I should go?"

"Of course you should go, Ron. I wouldn't think twice about it. You may not get another shot like this from any other school. Count your blessing and run with it," Bill advised. Ron nodded and knew for sure that he was going to send his letter back to Paddock.

Bill leaned over the counter and handed a letter to George. "It's your loan status."

George grabbed the letter from him. "How would you know that unless you opened it?"

Bill shrugged. "I may have taken a peak at a couple of sentences."

"Blood hell, Bill. Why did you go through my mail? There are owls that deliver, or I could have picked it up myself," George said.

"Hey, I work at the bank, and I happened to come across it," Bill defended.

"Your office is no where near the loan department. Why are you going through my stuff?" George asked.

"Because you're my little brother, and I was curious about how you're doing. I'm sorry, George. I'm just trying to help," Bill said.

"Well, I don't need your help. I've been doing all the reading and figuring myself for this long," George said with a frown as he read over the letter.

"I know and that's exactly why I'm here. If the news was bad I wouldn't bring it up, but it's not. George, why didn't you tell me that you're doing so well? You're two installments away from paying the bank back. Are you aware of your revenue figures?" Bill asked.

George shrugged. "Yes. I do look over the books."

"Then you should know that this place is gold. You're generating so much money here. Are you thinking about expanding? The bank would give you such a good deal for-"

"No. I don't want to," George interrupted.

Bill sighed. "George, you'd be out of your mind not to. With a split business you could make more money and bring in the revenue twice over. It's a great investment."

"Bill, I said no. I'm fine with where I am now," George said.

Bill hit his knuckles against the money register. "Yes, that's exactly my point. You're fine and that's all you're ever going to be if you don't look to the future. You can't just say no. Have you at least talked it over with your team? Does Ron even know?"

"No, he doesn't. At least he didn't. He's standing right there if you haven't noticed, Bill. He's not deaf, and he's not invisible!" George said rather loudly.

Bill suddenly turned to Ron. "Sorry, Ron."

Ron blushed at the sudden attention. "Oh, ah, it's okay!"

Bill was about to say something else but George cut in. "Listen, Bill, I appreciate you looking out for me and wanting to help, but this is my business. I don't want to change anything right now, and I'm not going to. I like where I am. I'm okay with fine. Fine is good enough for me." He crumpled the loan paper and threw it in the bin before hurrying to the back room.

Ron walked over to Bill who was still looking at the crumpled note. "Sorry, Ron, I wasn't trying to ignore you or anything."

"No, it's okay. I probably shouldn't have been listening in anyway. Um, I don't think it's a good idea to push him the way you did. He doesn't need it. He's doing great. Money isn't a problem for him," Ron said.

Bill gave him a look. "Is that what you think this is about?"

"Yeah, you're angry that he doesn't want to make more money," Ron said.

He frowned. "No, Ron, you don't understand at all. I couldn't care less if George doesn't want to make more money. This isn't about the money."

"Then what is this about?" Ron asked.

Bill glanced to the back room before looking back at him. He pulled Ron by the arm and further away from the register. "Let me explain something to you. I didn't look through his mail or come here to lecture him about money. I know that's not important to him. I'm simply trying to help him move on. I want him to expand and buy another shop so he can get out of this one every once in

a while. He needs to let go of some things here and start fresh on his own."

Ron didn't quite follow. "What do you mean by that?"

"George is stuck here. He spends every day either in this store or upstairs in his flat. He never leaves or takes a break. He's still here where everything is tied up in Fred," Bill explained. Ron had to close his eyes for a moment. Whenever he heard a family member say Fred's name, he could think of a memory connected to the voice. He suddenly thought about the time Bill had to pull sticky liquorish balls out of Fred's hair. Bill lectured Fred for twenty minutes about where to properly place the candy afterwards, and he did it all with a smile on his face and love in his voice.

"That's probably why he doesn't want to leave," Ron finally said.

"And that's exactly why he should," Bill answered. "I miss Fred, too. I miss him a great deal all the time, but I'm still living my life. George isn't, not really. Granted, he's better but as long as he stays buried here, he's not going to fully let go and move on. Starting a new shop in a new location with new people could help."

Bill's plan sounded like an excellent idea, but Ron knew that George wasn't ready. He didn't understand why Bill couldn't see it. "I don't know, Bill. It's not the same for him as it is for us. He needs stability right now. You heard him."

"Of course I heard him. I heard all the reasons why he's comfortable with where he is. He's fine with being smothered here. Well, I'm not going to stand by and let it happen, not after seeing him this way," Bill said.

"What are you talking about? You haven't been here. You don't know what it's been like for him. You've come to the shop twice since he gave you all the invitation," Ron said, feeling his annoyance grow. He thought he had been doing an okay job with helping George, but Bill made it seem as if he had been sitting on his arse the whole time.

"That's not by my doing, Ron. I would've been here in a second if he'd ask me to be," Bill shot.

"Let's not do this again. This isn't about me or you!" Ron shot back.

"Exactly! This is about George! This is about our brother, our brother, Ron! He's not just yours. You're not the only one that cares about him, worries about him, misses him, and would walk through fire for him because you love him so much. I'm only trying to help in the best way that I can. If he won't come to me, then this is what I have to do. He's my little brother, Ron. I'm not trying to harm him, and the last thing I want to do is ruin all the progress that he's made. I only want what's best for him, and I'm going to try to do everything I can, regardless if he thinks I'm an arse for it. Can you respect that?" Bill asked.

Ron looked at Bill and saw so much of himself in his features, even though they acted so differently. He didn't like that Bill was pushing George, but he could definitely understand it. The job of an older brother was hard and usually ended in someone getting frustrated and blamed. "Yeah, I can. I'm sorry, Bill. I really do understand what you're saying, and I agree to some extent, but I don't like making George feel overwhelmed."

Bill nodded. "I know how you feel. I don't either but sometimes you have to push and do things you don't want to in order to make situations better. I reckon he didn't tell you or anyone else because he doesn't want to hear what I told him, but I won't apologize for it. This is the only way I know how to help him. You have your way, but this is mine. Besides, someone is going to have to step in when you leave for Paddock."

Ron's stomach flipped. He hadn't thought about what accepting Paddock would mean to his time with George. "I guess you're right!"

George came from the back room. "I know you two are talking about me. You can stop now. Bill, I'm sorry for yelling at you."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sorry for looking through your mail. I've honestly never done it before, and you can have my bollocks if I do it again," Bill offered.

George shrugged and grinned. "Eh, I don't really want them, too freckly I reckon. Maybe Fleur can cook me a nice French meal or something."

"Oi, enough of that! I know what you're thinking," Bill said. He pulled the letter out of the bin and put his hand on George's shoulder. "I'm not trying to get on your bad side with all this. I guess this is my way of letting you know that I'm always here if you ever need anything. I want to help you because I love you. You still know that, right?"

"Yeah, I know it," George said quietly.

"Good," Bill said with a smile. He checked his watch. "Well, I should probably head back to work. Let me know if you want to talk about anything. Bye, Ron."

"Bye, Bill," Ron said.

As soon as he left the shop George let out a deep breath and put his face in his hands. "You okay?" Ron asked, walking over to him.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Bill is he's so bloody right and smart about everything, isn't he?" George asked.

"I don't think that will ever change about him. I believe him, though. He only wants to help." Ron looked at the letter. "Why didn't you tell me the shop was doing so well?"

George lowered his hands. "Because it doesn't matter. Ron, I'm not stupid. I know that I could make more money by expanding. It was always a possibility and always the plan. Maybe Bill forgot but Fred and I were going to open a second shop. A couple of years ago we came up with a new business plan and looked for locations in Hogsmeade. This isn't the first time that the idea has been brought up. Fred and I know-knew what we were doing."

"I remember you both talking about it, but it never came together," Ron added.

George leaned against the register and held his stomach. "No, it didn't. With all the chaos that happened with the death eaters, the Ministry, and it not being a good idea for students to visit Hogsmeade, we figured it wasn't a good time. Then, Fred died and the plan was ruined."

"It doesn't have to be. You can still do it," Ron said gently.

"No," George said strongly, "I can't, and you want to know why? The plan was for Fred and Angelina to look over this store and have the flat here, while Lee and I set up in Hogsmeade. The plan was to lease Fred's name as main owner here while I had the one there. The plan was for him and Angelina to live right above here and take in most of the business during summer and holidays, while Lee and I made most of the profit during the school months in Hogsmeade."

It all came together for Ron. "George!" he started.

"Now," George continued, "It's just me. I live here. I'm with Angie and there's no second shop. Lee has a one bedroom flat, and all the loans and deeds are in my name. Bill isn't thinking about that. Of course, to him it's all business. To him it's easy to move on and forget the promises that were made. It's not that fucking easy for me." George's brown eyes filled with tears and Ron could tell that he was trying not to let them fall. "When Fred died he didn't relieve me of everything we promised to each other. The bastard left me here to take care of it all myself. He's forcing me to break all my pacts with him, but I won't break this one. There shouldn't be two shops. There aren't two twins. It's just me." He wiped his eyes, but it wasn't fast enough to stop his tears. He hunched over the counter.

Ron swallowed the lump in his throat and rubbed George's back. He didn't say anything. He let George get his frustrated tears out. "He left me here to make all the decisions, Ron, but I can't. I need to ask him what to do."

Ron knew how he felt to some extent. He was going through the same thing with Hermione. It seemed like when he needed her guidance most, she, of course, wasn't there. "I get it. It's really hard. I don't want to say that I know what you should do because I don't. I'm in no position to know, but I think that no matter what you choose, he wouldn't be upset. This is your decision now."

George sniffed roughly. "It's not as if I haven't thought about it, but it's too much. I miss having a second brain and a second voice."

"Now that I understand. I feel like such a tit without Hermione. So much for being my own man, yeah?" Ron said. "To top off all the reasons why I miss her so much, my bloody hand is getting calloused, look." He showed his brother his tender right palm. It was mortifying but he knew that it would make him smile.

George's expression changed. He chuckled and wiped his eyes. "You're pathetic, little brother, and I certainly will not help you with that one."

"Yeah, consider yourself lucky. You still have your girlfriend around," Ron said.

George gazed at the floor. "I know I'm lucky, but it's not always enough. Some days I only miss Fred terribly, but other days I miss him so much that I can hardly stand it. It's like, looking in the mirror hurts because all I can see is him. I constantly remind myself of what I don't have. Angie sees it, too. I know she feels the same way."

"No, she doesn't. She misses Fred, but she's with you now because she loves you and wants to be with you. You should talk to her about this. You may not need her to make the choice for you, but at least hear what she has to say," Ron suggested.

George sighed. "There's so much that I have to do. Is it badâ€¢is it wrong that some days I hate Fred? I really hate him sometimes."

The statement was powerful and for the first time Ron felt as if someone shared his anger toward Fred. "No. I don't think it is. Sometimes, I feel like I hate him, too. Even though it wasn't his choice, he did leave us. He left you, and it makes me so angry at him. I wish that you didn't have to make all these decisions yourself."

"Me neither. When I feel overwhelmed like this, I get really mad. I'm a dick for yelling at Bill," George said.

"No, you're not. He understands where you're coming from a lot more than you think he does. It may help to talk to him as well. He knows a lot more than I do. A big brother might mean more to you in this case," Ron said.

George smiled. "But I'm so used to talking to you."

He returned it. "You can still talk to me."

"Yeah, for now at least. I'll miss you when you leave. You may be my little brother, but you're great and you seem to get some of my madness. I can't believe that I'm saying this, but you're a lot older than you seem, Ron. You're actually pretty bloody smart," George said.

Ron blushed. "You don't have to go that far."

"Percy should know about this. Being a Prefect for those years really turned you around. You two have so much in common these days, light weight," George teased.

Ron shoved him again. "No, honestly, you don't have to go that far!"

When Ron got back home, he was completely exhausted. All he wanted to do was write Paddock then go to sleep. It seemed as if too much had happened for one day. His mother was busy in the kitchen with dinner when he walked through the door.

"There's my boy or should I say man!" she said. She walked over to him and kissed him hard on the cheek. "I'm making all of your favorites, dear."

"You didn't have to do that, mum. You didn't have to tell everyone, either," Ron said.

"Why not? This is something that really needs to be celebrated! It's not everyday that a school practically begs you to join their camp," his mum said.

"They didn't beg me, and I can still lose my spot if I don't write them back," he corrected.

His mum's smile faded. "Then maybe you should write them. You are planning on going, aren't you?"

"Yes, of course I'm going. I just don't want to make a big deal out of it until I sent my letter in and they completely accept me." Ron couldn't quite look her in the eye. He did really want to go to Paddock, but for some reason his heart wasn't entirely in it. He knew that he was being a nutter. He would never get another chance at something like this. He felt closer to George now more than ever. They were both at a place where a good decision needed to be made, but it simply didn't feel right.

"Ron, have you written Paddock yet?" Harry asked, coming down the stairs.

"No, I just got here. I'm doing it now, before dinner," Ron answered, feeling bothered by all the talk about camp already. He sat at the table and Harry joined him. He still didn't look as happy for him as Ron thought he should.

"Your mum has been at it all day," he said.

"I can tell," Ron breathed, rubbing his eyes.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It was a really long day at work, and I have a lot on my mind. I'm tired," he answered.

"Well, I wouldn't head off to bed yet. Your mum might actually have a present or something to go with tea," Harry cheeked.

"You're taking the piss, right?" he asked.

"This is a big deal for her, too, Ron. She's really happy for you," Harry said.

Ron looked at him. "Unlike you, right?"

"Ron, I'm happy for you, really," Harry urged. They continued to look at each other as the kitchen door opened.

"Arthur! You're home early," his mum said.

"I requested some time so I could be here for the dinner," his dad said. He patted Ron's arm. "I'm so proud of you son."

"Thanks, dad," Ron tried to say cheerfully. The prouder people were, the sicker he felt for some reason. His dad sat across from them. "I don't want to side track the party, but I found these in Kingsley's office. He said I could take them. They're not technically supposed to go out until tomorrow morning." He pulled two envelopes from his cloak.

Ron took his and his heart skipped a beat. "Already?"

"The batch just arrived today," his dad said with a smile.

Ron looked at Harry who was smiling wide. "Lambrick," was all he was able to say.

"Arthur, why would you bring that in now? We're celebrating Paddock," his mum said.

"I know, Molly, but I thought the boys would want to see it as soon as possible. They've been waiting for so long," his dad said.

"Yeah, it's okay with me, Mrs. Weasley. This is the one I've been waiting for." Harry wasted no time ripping his letter open and skimming the contents. As suspected he gave a holler and raised his fist in the air. "YES! I made it through to the next phase!"

"Good work, Harry!" his dad said.

"Oh, my dear, that's excellent! I knew you'd make it!" his mum said, kissing him.

Ron grinned. "Congratulations, mate. Lambrick was waiting on you from day one."

Harry read over his letter. "The interview and skill assessment tests are at the end of the month. Sixty people got the letter but only forty are going to get fully accepted."

His dad let out a low whistle. "Lambrick is pretty selective. It really is an honor that you got accepted."

"Well, of course he did, Arthur. Harry is very good. I'm so proud of you, sweetheart. Now, we have two reasons to celebrate," his mum said cheerfully.

His dad held up a hand. "Well hold on, love. Ron hasn't opened his letter yet."

"Oh, right!" his mum said.

"And I'm not going to," Ron said at once.

"What? Of course you're going to open it," Harry said.

"Ron, you don't have to open it now if you don't want to," his dad said.

Ron shook his head. "No, I'm not going to open it at all. There's no point."

"Yes, there is. For all you know they've accepted you!" Harry shot.

Ron shrugged. "So what? Me and the other fifty-nine people will have to go the interview and exam. Harry, the school is really selective and even if I got through this stage, I'll never get any further."

"Don't give me that bullshit!" Harry spat.

"Harry James Potter, there is no need for that language in this house. If Ron doesn't want to open it, then it's his right. He's already gotten into a really good school. You should be happy for him," his mum said.

Harry opened his mouth several times but said nothing, "I'm sorry. I guess your right, Ron." Ron could tell that he didn't mean it, but he really didn't care. He had made up his mind. He was going to Paddock. Dinner was short and unbearably quiet. His mum tried to keep the conversation light but Harry hardly said anything, his dad looked incredibly guilty, and Ron's stomach was in knots. He excused himself the moment tea was over.

He sat on his bed and felt the unopened letter in his pocket. The door to his room burst opened. "Now that we're away from your mum, I can yell at you properly. Ron, open the dam letter."

"No, Harry, there's no point," Ron said, not looking up at him and feeling the envelope.

"What the fuck is your problem? You were excited when you sent it off and you spent the most time on that application. That's where you really want to go," Harry said.

"That doesn't mean anything. I'm not a kid anymore. I learned a long time ago that you don't always get what you want," Ron said.

"That speech doesn't work on me, Ron. That's a load of bollocks and you know it," Harry pressed.

"Why do you even care, Harry? You got in. You got what you wanted. I know that you'll do great at your interview. Shouldn't you write Ginny or something? Why are you more worried about what I'm doing?" he asked.

"Because! This is something that we're supposed to go through together, and I won't stand by and watch you make decisions that you'll regret," Harry said.

Ron finally looked up at him. "How could I regret going to a good school that personally wants me there? You said it yourself this morning."

"That was before Lambrick came," Harry said.

"Listen, I'm not like you, okay? I don't know for sure that Lambrick will want me," Ron said.

"Will you stop saying that all the time? I'm sorry that I am who I am, Ron, but don't act like I didn't work hard for what I have. I did. I gave everything to be where I am," Harry said.

"I know you did. That's not what I'm saying," Ron said.

"Then what are you saying?" Harry asked. "Please, explain it to me."

"I'm saying that I'm not like you. You keep telling me not to compare myself to you, but you're doing the same bloody thing. You're assuming that I got in. You're assuming that the letter says I'm in and that I'll get through the second trial because you will. This isn't school, Harry. I can't just follow you around anymore. We can't assume that we'll always be there with each other. You think that I got in because you want me to. Well, those recruiters aren't my best friends like you are. They weren't there with me every day since I was eleven like you were," Ron said.

Harry's eyes softened. "They don't have to be your best friend to know that you're worth it. You are worth it and if you don't open that letter and at least find out, you'll regret it."

"Maybe, but it won't be any worse than me opening it and finding out for sure that I wasn't worth it," Ron said.

"But what if you got in, Ron? That's the point," Harry said.

"It wouldn't change my mind. There would still be another phase to get through and if I go and don't make it, that's means I passed on a school that actually did want me. I don't want to take that chance. Sometimes, you just have to take what you can get. I'm happy with Paddock. It's where I need to go," Ron said. "So, if you honestly want to keep arguing about it or if you want to punch me, then let's just get it over with because I'm not going to move on this."

"I'm not going to do either of those things, Ron. If you really want to throw that letter away and never find out what they said, that's your decision, and you're right. I have been there with you since you were eleven, and I am your best friend. I know you better than anyone I reckon, and I know with everything that I am that even though you think Paddock is what you need, it's not what you want. That's all that's going to matter in the end. I'm just trying to help you, Ron," Harry said. He picked up some ink and parchment and left the room.

Ron lay back on his bed and closed his eyes. He didn't move at all for a long time.

Later that night Ron stayed up in bed and watched as Harry slept soundly next to him. He hated that he was right in a lot of ways. He knew that there was a reason why his stomach hadn't fully settled with Paddock. No matter, his letter was sealed and ready to be delivered the next morning.

He opened his side drawer and pulled out the pictures he and Hermione had taken at the cinema. He traced her smiling face and wished that he had her to help him. He wondered what she would say to him. He didn't have to think long. He knew exactly what she would say. The thought made him get out of bed and take the envelope that was under his pillow with him. He rushed to the bathroom and sat on the toilet. He lit his wand and opened the letter with shaky hands.

Dear Ronald B. Weasley,

The staff at Lambrick Auror Training Academy has accepted your request to attend our facility. Your application has been approved and we are pleased to inform you that you have progressed to our second trial of full acceptance. Sixty applicants, yourself included, have made it through the application process and will proceed to phase two. At the end of September there will be an interview with the senior advisor as well as two Aurors on the selection committee. There will also be a short written exam and field test. At the end of this phase, forty young men and women will be selected to join our camp and training beings in early October.

If you plan on continuing to the next trial, please respond to this letter as soon as possible. If you have any questions or for some reason have concerns with the scheduling, feel free to contact me straight away.

Congratulations and Good Luck,

Phillip Smith

President of Lambrick Auror Training Academy

Veteran Auror

Senior Advisor

Head of Selection Committee

Almost an hour went by before Ron put the letter down. His breathing was irregular and his head felt light. They accepted him. Lambrick had sent him the letter. They wanted him to go on to phase two. He ran a hand through his hair. The feeling was overpowering. He didn't know whether to scream or cry. He had to tell someone, but he didn't know what to say. All his bullshit didn't seem to stick anymore. His words from earlier meant nothing, but he had to make them. As he told Harry, he wouldn't change his mind. It would have to be good enough that he knew Lambrick selected him to phase two. He might have been one of the lucky sixty but he would never be one of the fortunate forty.

He went to bed soon after but was barely able to get any sleep. He put the picture of Hermione away. He didn't want to think about what she would say to him anymore.

* * *

He woke up the next morning very early in time to catch his dad before he went in to work. "Dad, can I go in with you today?"

"What for?" he asked.

Ron cleared his throat. "I want to give my acceptance letter to Kingsley. I'll feel safer with him sending it off."

"That's smart thinking. Look, I'm sorry for springing the letter from Lambrick on you. I didn't mean to give you extra pressure," his dad said.

"You didn't. I'm glad you gave it to me. At least I don't have to wonder if they ignored me completely. Maybe in a few years or so I'll open it," Ron joked, feeling the weight of his acceptance and his lie.

His dad grinned. "That sounds like a plan."

"So, you don't have a strong opinion on what I should do? Everyone else seems to." Ron wasn't sure if he really wanted to know what his dad thought, but his opinion was important to him.

His dad looked at him in a serious way. "I don't have the right answer for you. This is your life, Ron. I've never known you to back out of something just because it's uncertain, but Paddock is a really good school and if you'll be happy there, then you should pursue it. However, Lambrick may give you more if you decide to go there instead. All I know is that you've been making your own decisions for this long, and you've made it through them all. I'll support whatever you do and so will Harry," his dad said.

"He's really disappointed. I know he is," Ron said.

"No, he just wants you to fulfill all your potential. It's the same reason why you're mother is pushing you to go to Paddock. They both want what's best for you," his dad explained.

"But I don't even know what's best for me. How could they?" Ron asked.

"It's one of the mysteries of life, son," his dad cheeked. "If we're going to go we should do it. Come on."

Ron walked to Kingsley's office and quietly knocked on the door.
"Barb, I told you that I want those reports in an hour, not now!"

"Um, it's not Barb, sir. It's Ron Weasley," Ron said nervously.

"Oh, all right, come in!" Kinsley called.

Ron opened the door. Kinsley was sitting at his desk with piles of papers and folders surrounding him. "I'm sorry. I can come back later."

"No, now is as good of a time as ever. Sit down," Kingsley offered, moving papers off the chair in front of him with his wand. Ron sat down and rubbed his palms against his knees. He still wasn't sure what he was doing there. "So, what can I do you for? Arthur told me about Paddock, congratulations."

"Thank you, sir. That's actually while I'm here," Ron said.

"You want me to send the return letter for you?" Kingsley asked with a smile.

"Well, yeah, that tooâ€;" Ron said slowly.

Kingsley raised an eyebrow. "I'm a patient man, Ron, but on days like today it runs thin."

"Sorry, sir. Here," Ron said, handing him his letter from Lambrick.

Kingsley read over it and nodded. "This is excellent. I don't see what's wrong with it."

"Well, I only made it to the second trial," Ron started.

Kingsley chuckled. "You can't expect every school to give you a personal invitation. No one skips the second phase. They don't care how great you are. Paddock is prestigious, but Lambrick is one of the very best."

"I'm aware of that, sir. That's why I don't know what to do. Paddock wants me now but if I go to the second trial with Lambrick, then I'll lose my place. I'm not sure if it's worth it. Only forty move on," Ron said.

"I know. I went there remember? Ron, if you're asking me what you should do, then I can't and won't answer that for you. You'll

receive superior education at both academies. However, you said that you really wanted Lambrick, correct?" Kingsley asked.

"Yes sir. I want to go there more than anything, but it doesn't mean they'll let me in because of it. I just want to hear something real. I'm a little lost here. Actually, I'm really lost. I haven't told anyone I got in. They're all ready for me to go to Paddock," Ron confessed.

"I think the more important thing is if you're ready to go to Paddock," Kingsley said.

Ron could only shrug. "I don't know."

Kinsley looked over his acceptance letter again. "There will be three people there. Three people will decide if you're good enough. It's an unfair number and that's exactly how they want it. Kids from all over the area and surrounding areas applied, but only sixty were chosen. These other fifty-nine students are going to give that panel everything they have."

"What do you think, sir?" Ron asked.

"It'll be hard, Ron. Some of them will have better interviews than you and will perform the field exam better than you. On the other hand, some will be less fortunate. You'll be better than those. It's all about who you're up against and what you bring to your trial." Kingsley explained. "I don't want to promise you that you'll make it, but I won't tell you that it's impossible. I will say that it means a lot that you're one of the sixty. That's a big achievement, and it means that the recruiters see potential already."

Nothing he said was straightforward to Ron. It was making him feel even more confused. "Do you think it's enough to not hand in the letter to Paddock?"

Kingsley moved in closer to him. "I've always been a man of risks, Ron. I could have gone to other, safer schools but I didn't. I'm glad I didn't. I can't say the same for you but between you and me, I think you'll bring something to your interview that a lot of the others won't, not even Harry."

Ron frowned. He couldn't possibly think of what he had that could be better than Harry. "What's that, sir?"

Kingsley chuckled. "I'm not quite sure what it is, yet, but there's something about you that's curious, and I think the recruiters will see it. They'll want to push you and find out what it is that makes you so intriguing and strong. At least, if I was on the panel I would. You've got a lot in you, Ron, and it's something you were born with and makes you special."

Ron smiled and blushed. "I don't know, sir. I don't know if they'll see me the way you do."

"Then how about this. I'll keep your letter to Paddock. Take some time to think about it and get back to me. I'll send it off or give it back to you as soon as you give the word," Kingsley said.

"Thank you. I would really appreciate that," Ron said.

Kingsley held out his hand. "You'll figure out what to do, and you'll know it's the right choice when the time is right."

"How?" Ron asked.

"Well, when I sent my notice to Lambrick in I just felt it. I felt like I was making the first great decision of my life. You'll feel it, too, no matter what you choose, as long as it's right," Kingsley told.

Ron shook his hand and stood up. "I hope so, sir. I'll get back to you as soon as I feel it, I guess." He got up and walked to the door.

"Ron," Kingsley said. Ron turned around. "Just so you know, out of sheer loyalty to my school and out of pride to see one of my own there, I'm hoping that you'll choose Lambrick."

"Thanks for your honesty," Ron said with a smile.

When he got back home there were more letters on the table for him. One was from Ginny and the other was from Hermione. He read the one from Ginny first. "How is she doing?" his mum asked.

"She's okay. The course work is hard but she's making it through. The Head Boy is a good friend of hers. He's in Ravenclaw so between him, Luna, Hermione, and Dean she's doing all right. Quidditch practice started, too, so she's excited," Ron explained as he wrote her back.

"It's really sweet that you're keeping up with her," his mum said.

"I still have to look out for her, even if I'm not there," Ron answered.

"That's really great, dear. Paddock could use loyalty like that I'm sure," she said.

He looked up at her. "You really want me to go there, don't you?"

"I'll be proud no matter what you decide, but I personally think it's the right choice. They want you, Ron. It may not be worth the risk to turn them down. So much has been risked already," his mum said, her eyes slowly darkening.

He could tell that she wasn't just talking about camp anymore. "I know. I sent my letter in. I gave it to Kingsley."

She grinned. "I'm glad you did, Ron. It's an honorable school. You'll do really well."

He tried to return her smile, but it was hard considering that he was lying to her. "Thanks, mum."

"I'll make breakfast in a bit so don't eat yet. I want you to have as many full meals as you can before heading off to training," she said before walking away.

He finished his letter to Ginny and read Hermione's next. His bones eased and some of the pressure left him as he read her words. He bit his lip he read over a certain sentence over and over.

"The first Hogsmeade visit is the weekend following my birthday. McGonagall and the staff are trying to incorporate more visits this year to help build morale. I really hope you can make it. Ask George for the time off or demand it, I don't care. I want to see you, Ron."

His heart began to race. Her birthday was no more than a week away. He was hit with a wave of emotion, and he poured his heart out to her in his letter. He told her all about Paddock and Lambrick and told her that even a bludger to the head wouldn't keep him from seeing her.

All the stress from the past two days was enough to make him want to collapse but at the realization that he would see Hermione sooner than expected, he relaxed and his head cleared.

Things might have been changing but some things would always stay the same. Hermione would always make him feel better.

* * *

**** I love Ron so much. There are a vast number of layers to him and I love expanding on them. He's my favorite literally character of all time for so many reasons and some of the ideas I wrote in chapter are just a few of them.

I enjoy mirroring Ron and George. They have so much in common and they really are going through the same thing but in different situations. Bill and Harry are sort mirrors too in this chap, too. The way they're acting is important for Ron and George. Speaking of Bill, I adore him. It was nice to put him in this one. I like his relationship with his siblings.

So, as for Ron getting the time off to visit Hermione, I told you that she wasn't gone for good. However, you'll never find out if he sees her or what he does about camp unless you read and REVIEW lol!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 19*: Homecoming

Thanks for the reviews!

Okay, now that we're getting closer to training camp time, I reckon that I should clear things up. There is probably a canon way as to how Aurors are selected. I won't lie. I honestly don't remember if there's mention in the books as to how they're chosen, and I really don't care, lol. What I'm writing is how I see it, and how I've always seen it. It's more interesting in my opinion. So, in my version the Auror process is a combination of choosing a university/police academy type of deal. The less prestigious schools only require a first application then acceptance, some require a second interview then acceptance, and the most prestigious camps require an interview and additional tests. So, I've made an original hybrid idea as to how this whole thing is going to work.

I hope everyone is clear on this! ;)

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

* * *

"Are you sure that these aren't too dangerous?" the customer asked.

"We wouldn't sell them if they were. It's harmless and the rash clears up within a few hours," Ron assured.

The witch gazed at her cans of Spray On Rash! "Hugh really wants this for his birthday party, and I promised that I'd get him some, regrettably."

He could tell that the last thing she wanted was to have her son and his mates covered in fake rashes. "Wait right here." He left the counter and walked over to the shelf that held the cans. He shook one until the rattling ball stopped and pulled up his sleeve.

"You don't have to do that, sir," the witch said.

"It's not a problem. I'll prove to you that these are safe to use. You have a right to be concerned." He pressed down and sprayed the rash on his left forearm. He felt a slight tightness on his hairs. "See, it doesn't hurt or itch. We have the itching kind, but you're wise for not choosing it for ten-year-olds. This just feels like a bit of honey stuck to my skin."

The witch stared at his red, bumpy arm in awe. "May I?" Ron held his arm out to her and nodded. She touched the rash. "Curious, it's so smooth, but it doesn't look smooth."

"That's the brilliance of my brothers. It also doesn't smear or transfer to anything else. In a few hours the rash will lighten and disappear all together," he explained. "Come back later and see for yourself. I'm here till closing."

"I'd like that," the witch said.

"Okay, I'll leave your cans here under the register," he said sweetly.

The witch shook his hand. "You're a fine young man. Here, for your superior customer service." She reached into her purse and handed him a galleon.

His eyes widened. "Oh, no, I don't need this. I'm just trying to help. It's my job."

"I insist. You're a great salesman." She curled his fingers around the money and walked to the door.

As she opened it, George came through. "Have a good day. Did you find everything okay?" he asked.

"Yes, your brother was very helpful. In fact, I think that I'll add more to my order when I return. Don't let this young one get away," the witch said, giving Ron a wink before leaving. Ron couldn't help but feel a little taller.

"Wow, what did you do?" George asked, walking over to him.

Ron showed him his arm. "Assuring her that the rash won't eat through her son's skin. He and his mates want these for his birthday."

"Ah, yes, it took ages to get the right combination to work that issue out," George said. "Good work. Here's compensation." He handed him his check.

"Thank you," Ron breathed. "I need this."

"For something in particular?" George asked.

"Hermione. I can't show up tomorrow without a present. I might have missed her actual birthday, but I still want to get her something," he explained, going over the calculations in his mind to reassure himself that he had enough money.

"What are you getting her?" George asked.

Ron pulled a magazine out from under the register. He flipped through it until he found his marked page. "This."

George whistled. "Blimey."

"Yeah, I've been saving up all summer. I hope she likes it," Ron said.

"She will. She'll be mental not to. Damn, you're turning into the perfect boyfriend and salesman, aren't you?" George cheeked.

"Maybe the salesman but hold off on the boyfriend part. If I don't get to the shop and get it together, then I'll have nothing for tomorrow," he said.

George patted his shoulder. "Why don't you go and get it."

"I just took my lunch. I'll wait until we close up," Ron said.

"No, go. It's a really slow day, and Lee will be back from the bank in an hour or so. Go ahead and pick up her gift," George said.

Ron rubbed his neck. "Are you sure?"

"How long has it been since you've seen her?" George asked.

"Three weeks," he said weakly.

"Then, yeah, I'm very sure that you should go," George said with a smile.

Ron didn't need to be told anymore. "George, thank you, again! I don't know how long I'll be."

"Just go, for fuck sake," George ordered, practically pushing him out of the store.

Ron paced down the streets of Diagon Alley. He wanted everything to work out. He felt bad for not being with her on her birthday, and after so much time apart he didn't want to do anything that would make her unhappy. He finally found the shop and hurried in. About an hour and a half later, he left with his bag tightly in his grip. The smile would not leave.

When he got back to the shop, he was relieved to see Lee helping the customers. Sorry, Ron mouthed to him. Lee shrugged and went back to the counter. "Where's George?"

"Upstairs. He said that his stomach hurt, so he went to the toilet," Lee said. "Go check on him. He's been up there for a long time."

"Wah? He's your mate," Ron whined.

"And your brother. You've seen his arse more times than I have," Lee said.

Ron sighed and tucked Hermione's gift safely under the counter. He walked upstairs and knocked on the door. There was no answer. He twisted the knob to find it unlocked, so he walked in. He heard George moan. Ron rushed to his bedroom. The door was cracked. Just as he was about to call his name, he put a hand

over his mouth. He heard another moan, but it wasn't George's voice. It was Angelina's. Through the crack he could see their figures on the bed. With one flash of Angelina's bare leg, Ron knew to step away. He ran out of the room and down the stairs as quietly as he could.

"We'll have the new series out in a month or so," Lee told a customer as he walked him to the door.

When he came back, Ron punched his arm. "That's not funny."

"Hey!" Lee said, hitting him back. "What did I do?"

"Come on. What kind of joke is that?" Ron said.

Lee looked vacantly at him. "What are you on about? What did you see?"

"George and Angelina. Really, Lee? I know that he's my brother and she's really pretty and all, but I don't want to see them like that," he said.

Lee raised an eyebrow. "Angelina's here? Upstairs?"

Ron gave him a look. "Hold on. You didn't tell me to go up there so I couldn't see them?"

"See them what?" Lee asked. He suddenly pounded his fist on the counter. "That fucker! That little ginger prick! He's up there shagging Angie, isn't he?"

Ron felt his ears burn. "You didn't know?"

"No, Ron, I didn't even know that she was here. George rushed up there so fast that I thought he was going to shit his trousers. I didn't know that he was trying to get some midday fur. Ha! This is wicked. Wait till he comes back!" Lee began to laugh hysterically.

Ron started to laugh, too, but he also felt a tad uneasy. "Maybe he doesn't want us to know. He doesn't see Angelina that often anymore."

"Oh, the fucker wants us to know. I bet he didn't bother to lock the door," Lee said, wiping tears. "Come on, Ron. This is brilliant. He won't be able to get on us about using our time wisely ever again."

Ron looked back to the door of the flat. "I dunno. I don't reckon there's a smarter way to use your time."

"Why? How many times have you and Hermione shagged in here?" Lee asked.

He looked back to him. "We haven't."

"Ah, sorry. I meant to say, how many times did you two shag at Hogwarts?" Lee asked.

"It's none of your business," Ron said.

"Wow, that many?" Lee teased.

Ron felt heat on his neck. "No, that's not what I mean. It's justâ€;I meant that we haven'tâ€;at all."

Lee gave him a look. The same one that George had when he found out. "Oh, I see. That's cool."

"It is?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, every year you hold out is a second longer you'll be able to last once it happens." Lee's smile grew. "I remember when Fred told me about his first time. He said that he had to mentally list all the ingredients to the Living Death potion to keep from losing it."

Ron laughed. "That sounds awful."

"Well, the potion has a lot of parts to it. It worked for him, apparently," Lee said.

"I wish he could tell me that story," Ron said, more to himself than to Lee.

"I wish he could tell me anything. I'd love to hear his voice," Lee said. Ron looked at him. Even though there was a bit of sadness in his tone, Lee's expression wasn't. He was the only person who didn't seem to hurt when thinking about Fred. In fact, it made Lee happier. It was something that Ron held on to and found inspirational.

The door to the flat opened and George walked down the staircase casually, as if nothing was different. "Ah, you're back. Let's see it, then," George said to Ron. It was obvious that he was not going to tell them about his quickie with Angelina, and that's exactly why Ron and Lee burst into laughter again.

It was almost eight when Ron finally got home. Harry was asleep at the kitchen table. Exam questions were scattered around him. Ron lightly shook him. Harry stirred. "Hmm? Ginny?"

Ron had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. He got real close to Harry's ear. "No, babe, it's Malfoy. I've come to make you my half-blood bride."

"No! Fuck off, Ron," Harry muttered, swinging at his stomach. He sat up and rubbed his eyes while feeling around for his glasses.

Ron handed them to him. "Does Ginny know that you mistake me for her?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Leave me alone. I'm sorry, okay. You know that I'm blind without my glasses, and I think I was dreaming or something. I saw your arm and the freckles, so I thought that maybe I was back with her."

"I understand. It's been a long time," Ron said.

Harry nodded and started gathering his papers. "I didn't mean to fall asleep. I've been working on some of the sample essays. It's what I'm most worried about."

"You'll do fine. I think you're studying more for this than you did for years one through six at school," he cheered.

"This is actually really important to me. I mean school was, too, but this is my direct future. This is what I want," Harry said.

Ron saw the determination in his eyes. He envied Harry so much for being sure about what he wanted and what was best for him.
"I'm happy for you, Harry."

"Thanks. I just hope that it doesn't go to waste. My interview with Goldbard is in a couple of days, but I'm not going," Harry said.

"Why?" Ron asked.

"Because I really want to put all my energy and focus into the interview with Lambrick," Harry said.

"Really? You think it's worth the risk?" Ron asked.

Harry looked him right in the eyes. "Yes, it is. I don't want to settle for something that's not in my heart. I won't do my best at Goldbard if I know that I could be somewhere better, somewhere I want to go." His green eyes were so commanding, and it was hard for Ron to look away. He knew that Harry was trying to make a point, but he didn't want to give it to him.

"I guess..." was all he could say.

Harry finally looked away. "Why hasn't Paddock sent a confirmation letter yet? How are you supposed to know when to go?"

"Ohâ€um, I'm not sure. I think they're gonna wait until they have everyone selected before they send that letter. So, it could be awhile," Ron came up with. He still hadn't made up his mind about Paddock, and he still hadn't told anyone about Lambrick. It was stupid, but he was at a loss. Harry looked at him funny, but before Ron gave him time to figure out the truth, he changed the subject. "So, what's the plan for tomorrow?"

"Well," Harry started, "Ginny said that she's going to try and get out there as soon as the day starts. She'll be at the quidditch shop, and I'm supposed to meet her there."

"Hermione has something to turn into McGonagall in the morning. I don't know how long that will take. She told me to meet her," Ron said.

"We'll be at the teashop waiting. I don't know how long we'll stay though!" Harry said, his eyes seeming to wander over what he really had planned for his day with Ginny.

"Be safe," Ron mumbled.

"Always, mate, always," Harry reassured. He gathered a large portion of essays and got up. "I'm going to bed. I'll need all the rest that I can get for tomorrow."

"I'll pretend that I didn't hear that," Ron said, shoving him away. When Harry was out of sight, he picked up one of the practice essays. He sat at the table and thought about his answer before writing. Just in case he did have a change of heart, he wanted to be prepared.

* * *

The next morning Ron woke up earlier than he had all summer. He showered, shaved, and attempted to fix his hair. "Meeting the Grangers again?" Harry cheeked.

"Very funny. I want to look nice is all. She hasn't seen me in three weeks," Ron said.

Harry chuckled. "Her memory isn't that bad. I'm sure that she still knows what you look like."

"Yeah, but I'm treating today like her birthday, so things need to be in order," he said, dabbing himself with the only cologne he had.

"I'm sure the gift will be enough. That and the fact that she'll get to see you. You know Hermione. She's not like regular girls," Harry said.

The thought made him smile. "I know, and that's exactly why I want today to be perfect for her because she's not like other girls. Nothing about her is regular."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Ron? Are you in there? That was really profound."

"Ta, Harry, but you're right. I think it's this cologne that brought it out of me. It must have something in it," Ron said.

"Here, let me have some," Harry said, dabbing himself. "I want to be as sensitive as you." Ron hit his arm and continued to yank on his shirt that was still too small. "You can enlarge it, you know?"

"Hermione likes the way it fits on me. I'll put up with it for her," Ron said.

Harry gave him a once over. "Well, you look fine, and I'm sure Hermione will think even more than that. I'm going to head over there. Remember, the teashop."

"Gotcha," Ron said.

He took several deep breaths and tried to relax. It had been so long since he'd seen her, and his insides twisted at the thought of being around her again. He didn't know why he was nervous. All the feelings from their departure hid to the back of his mind, but today they climbed out and made his body react. He was desperate to see her, and he hoped that she missed him as much as he missed her. He feared that she didn't and that the longer they were apart, the more she wouldn't. However, it was too early in the day to get worked up over it. With one last look into the mirror, Ron grabbed Hermione's gift and went to Hogsmeade.

The streets were busier and louder than they had been all summer. As he stumbled around, he saw familiar faces from Hogwarts. When they caught his eye, they smiled, waved, or simply stared. It was like the beginning of summer all over again. He finally arrived at The Three Broomsticks. Hermione wasn't there. He checked his watch. It was still pretty earlyâ€¦

After forty-five minutes, his patience ran out. Ron looked around frantically. He searched the village for any sign of her. His eyes scanned the dozens of people talking and walking past him. He groaned in frustration and anxiousness. She had told him to meet her outside of The Three Broomsticks. She told him that it wouldn't take too long. He wanted to go looking for her, but he didn't want to miss her showing up either.

He knew that McGonagall love to get as much work done as possible, so she was probably making Hermione do other things. He only hoped that she had not gotten caught up at school to where she wouldn't make it or worse. He let the panic run through him for only a second before coming back to reality. Hermione was still his girlfriend and he knew that she loved him. There was no reason to worry about some slick tosser chatting her up.

He continued to rub his palms against his thighs roughly. He let out a shaky breath and realized for the first time that the rest of his body was shaking as well. He could feel his heart beating rapidly, and there was tightness in his throat and eyes. Ron didn't know how much longer he could hold on and wait. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and chewed on his lip.

He scanned the village again. He looked to the top of the hill and froze. Not too far away he saw her. For some reason he was paralyzed. He felt that if he moved in any way, she would disappear. Almost by magic, she stopped walking and looked in his direction. Their eyes connected. She began to move and Ron's legs finally moved also. He did not take his eyes off her. He walked faster and faster until he was running. She ran as well.

He kept running until she was right in his view. "Ron!" she cried, jumping into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. Ron held on to her tightly.

He couldn't speak. He smelled her skin and her hair. Her body was warm and so soft against his. Finally, it happened. The tears that he didn't know he had been holding back all morning and ever since the day she left came out of him. He sobbed into her hair all while holding on to her. He could hear Hermione bawling against his neck. They cried together and held each other.

Finally, after years it seemed, he pulled away and put her down. He put his hands against her cheeks and she clutched his arms. "Hermione, Hermione, baby." He didn't know what to say. The loneliness overwhelmed him. He didn't realize how much he had missed Hermione until she was right back in his arms.

She continued to cry. "Ron, you're here."

He sniffed and nodded. "I'm here." Never in his life had he been happier to be somewhere.

"I'm sorry that I took so long. I went as fast as I could. I wanted to be here sooner," she explained.

"I don't even remember anything up until this point. You came. That's all I care about." He rubbed his eyes dry. "I'm-I'm sorry. It's justâ€œI've missed you. I've missed you so much, Hermione."

She cried again. Her brown eyes were swollen with tears. "No, don't apologize. I've missed you too, Ron. I love you, and I've missed you. I really missed you, and I can't believe you're actually here. We're together again."

Ron held her closely. He didn't want to let her go. "I love you, too. I love you. I love you. I love you." He missed saying it to her and now he couldn't stop. She pulled away. He wiped the tears off her cheeks with his thumbs. She was so beautiful. If at all possible, Hermione was even more beautiful than she was before. He leaned down and kissed her.

They both instantly moaned. It was as if their time apart had heightened their senses and attraction to each other. It felt incredible. Ron pushed his tongue inside her mouth and remembered how wonderful she tasted. She held on to him and deepened the kiss. They snogged frantically in the middle of the street. Ron didn't care. He had his love, and he did not plan on letting her go just to make anyone feel a bit more comfortable. He would happily do whatever she wanted him to do to her right there in broad daylight.

However, Hermione pulled away. "Wait, let's get out of here. I don't care about spending my birthday in Hogsmeade. I just want to be alone with you. That's all I want. I need you."

"What's the plan?" Ron asked, tracing her mouth.

She kissed his finger as they went over her lips. "Let's go see Harry and Ginny for a bit."

"Okay, they're at the teashop," Ron said, not taking his eyes off her. He wrapped his arm around her waist as they walked down the

street. The feeling of having her back traveled all through his body. The warmth replaced the fear and sadness.

Through the window they could see Harry and Ginny at a table. They were sitting extremely close and were snogging each other dry. Ron didn't even mind. They walked in and he cleared his throat. The couple pulled away.

"We were just talking about you two," Harry said, wiping his mouth.

"Sure," Ron said.

Harry got out of the booth and gave Hermione a big hug. "It's so good to see you, Hermione."

"It's great to see you, too," Hermione answered, hugging Harry tighter.

Ron turned from them and focused his attention on Ginny. She simply stared up at him with a smirk. "So, are you going to bring your arse over here, or do I need to send a singing letter?" he asked.

"Very funny, Ron," Ginny said. She got up and froze in front of him for only a second before hugging him.

Ron closed his eyes and kissed the top of her head. After all they had been through and their time apart, he knew that the person in his arms was what he needed to protect most. It meant the world to him to see his little sister safe and smiling again. "You've been okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. How about you?" she asked against his chest.

"I'm fine. George is fine. Mum and dad are fine. We're all good," he said. They finally pulled away. Hermione and Harry were beaming at them.

"See there, Hermione? They really can get along," Harry said, putting an arm around her shoulder.

She laid her head on it. "I should have brought my camera."

"Shut it," Ron and Ginny said together.

The four of them sat and simply talked and joked with each other. It was almost as if they had never parted. Ron kept gazing at Hermione and ever so often she squeezed his knee. After they ate, Ron was more than ready to spend time alone with her.

"I think I've had more than enough," Ron said, rubbing his stomach.

"Some things never change," Ginny said. She turned to Harry. "How about you, babe?"

He looked at her in such a locked and deep way. He put a hand to her cheek. "The only thing that I'm still hungry for right now is you."

Ginny's face turned slightly red. "Hmm, my mouth was never watering for my breakfast."

"I'm going to pretend that I'm not hearing this," Ron breathed.

"Maybe we should leave them to it, then," Hermione said. He saw the gleam in her eyes.

"Good idea," he whispered. They stood up and it finally broke Harry and Ginny out of their gaze. "We're gonna go walk around for a while."

Harry gave him a look and stood up as well. "Sure you are." He gave Hermione a hug. "Have a good birthday. I love you."

"I love you, too. Keep practicing for your trial," she said.

"Bye, Ginny," Ron said, gently tugging on a piece of her long hair.

"Bye. Give everyone a big hug for me. Tell mum that I'm doing fine," she said.

"I will," Ron said. Hermione started to take his hand. "Wait a second," he said to her. He nudged Harry to walk over with him.

"What?" Harry asked.

"I know it's been a while since you've seen Ginny, so be careful with her. Be safe," he said.

"I already told you that we are, and I'm always careful. I take good care of her, Ron. You don't have to worry. You better be careful with my sister as well," Harry said with a wink.

"I will, but there's nothing to take care of," Ron said.

"You mean you two aren't gonna you know today?" Harry asked.

Ron looked back to Hermione for a moment. "No," he said regrettably. "We didn't talk about it, and I didn't bring potion or whatever. We're just gonna walk and probably go somewhere to snog for a few hours. I'm fine with that."

Harry nodded. "Oh, okay, um, great. Have fun and take breaks in between," he said with a smile.

Ron felt a rush of relief and appreciation for Harry. Only a true best mate wouldn't use the opportunity to take the piss out of him. "Yeah, sure." He and Hermione left the shop. "So, what do you want to do?" he asked.

"We can go back to my room. We can talk and be alone in there," she answered.

His jaw dropped. "Are you sure we can?"

"Yes, and no one will notice us, anyway. There's traffic coming in and out every second," Hermione said.

Nervous excitement formed in his stomach. "Lead the way."

She smiled and took his hand. They practically ran back to the carriages. They were able to get one to themselves. It was strange being on one again. History and memories filled his mind and it hit him. "We're going back to Hogwarts," he said.

She looked at him in a curious way for a whole minute before realizing. "Oh! Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry! We can turn around. We don't have to go. I-I forgot."

He felt like a tit. He was already ruining their perfect day. "No, it's fine. We don't have to go back. I'm okay."

She took his hand. "Are you sure? We can find someplace else. There's no need to go, if you're not ready."

"I'm ready. I have to get over it sometime. It's just a school. Ginny lives here, so I can stay for at least one evening," he reassured her and himself.

They pulled up and the castle was just as giant and old as it always had been. It looked exactly the same, and it brought a slight chill to him. She took his hand again. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah, lets go," he said. They slowly walked into the castle. The moment they stepped inside, Ron felt a gush of air leave his lungs. Everything had happened there. He could smell the smoke and hear the screams. He felt the heat and tasted the blood in his mouth. Worst of all, he could see the explosion and see his brother fall and become lifeless. He felt a panic attack coming on, but he forced himself to calm down. He wouldn't let it happen today.

"Ron," Hermione said.

"I'm okay. I'm getting through it," he said through gritted teeth. They stopped walking.

Hermione rubbed his back. "That's great, Ron, just breathe. I'm so proud of you. Ginny had a hard time walking in here the first time, too."

"It's weird. I'm half expecting Snape to find a reason to throw me in detention," he joked.

"I know what you mean. I miss him in a strange way. Is it even worth asking if you want to see our display? We have a whole area devoted to our years here and our work," she said.

It was bizarre to think about people passing by pictures of him and a summary of what he did. He didn't think that he was ready

for it. He didn't think that he deserved that yet. "No, not today."

"Okay, lets go to my room, then. It's actually below the first years rooms," she said. She led him down the familiar hallways and to the portrait hole. The Common Room was painfully the same.

"Fucking hell, has anything changed?" he asked.

"Not really," she said. They walked down the staircase and to the very bottom. There were two doors. "Each house has their own Head Boy and Head Girl rooms. It's a shame that they can't all be used. They're really nice." She tapped her wand on the knob a few times and it unlocked. She opened the door.

Ron was surprised. He expected the room to be small but it wasn't. It was almost the same size as the dorm rooms. It had its own side tables, wardrobe, and desk. The bed was large and there were no curtains covering the post. The room even came with its own bathroom.

"Bloody hell, I see why getting this job means so much to you," he said.

She swatted his arm. "Oh, you know that's not true. I feel a little out of place. It's so big and nice, and I'm alone in here. It's almost too big for one person."

Ron gazed at her. "There are two people in here now." She looked back to him. They stared at each other for a minute before pouncing again.

Ron held on to her waist and backed her against the wall. She pulled on his hair and whimpered as he pushed into her. He groaned. It felt so good to feel her again. He had been so bloodless, but now it was back and all of it gushed to his lower region. Hermione pulled out of the kiss and licked his neck. "You smell so good, Ron. I can't take it."

It made him push into her harder. "I'm glad you like it."

"Mmm, I love it," she answered. Her hands moved down his back and to his jeans.

He took her wrists. "That reminds me," he said. "I've got your present."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Go sit on the bed," he said. Hermione gave him a look but followed. Ron mentally prepared himself and sat next to her. He pulled the small box out of his pocket and handed it to her.

"Oh, Ron!" she said before opening it. She lifted the lid and gasped. He chewed on his lip as she pulled out a silver necklace with a small stone hanging from it, cupped by more silver.

Ron swallowed hard. "I saw the necklace, and knew that I wanted to get it for you. It's real. I just couldn't think of what to put inside it."

She studied it. "This material doesn't look familiar."

"Well, it's not exactly typical." He took another breath before explaining. "It's a piece of my Deluminator. I was able to grind some of the siding off and turn it into a stone-type charm. Then I had it added to the chain."

She stared at him in shock. "This is beautiful, Ron, but why make a gem from your Deluminator?"

"W-well, I couldn't think of anything at first and this just came to me. Like I said in the tent, I heard your voice say my name from it and the light came. At the time I wasn't sure what that feeling was, but I know now. It was love. It was all of your love and all of mine mixed together. It's what brought me back to you. It was how I found you," he explained. "When you're upset or scared, you tend to grab at your chest. So, I figured when you do it now, you'll remember that I'm with you and that our love will always allow me to find you."

Hermione's lip trembled and she began to cry. She held the necklace and sobbed. "Oh, I can't believe it."

His heart fell. "I'm sorry. I know it's really stupid, and it doesn't make any sense. I had some other ideas, and I should have picked one of them. I can still take it back."

She looked up at him and shook her head. "What? No. It's not stupid. I'm not crying because I don't like it." She sniffed. "Ron, this is the best gift anyone has ever given to me. It means so much and so much went into this. I completely understand. This is amazing. Please, help me put it on."

She handed him the chain and moved her hair to one side. Ron pulled the chain around her neck and connected it. He could smell her neck and it made his knees weak. "So, you like it?" Her tears and her words confused him. It didn't add up to him, but nothing girls did added up.

She felt the charm and wiped her tears. "Yes, I love it. It's perfect. You're so perfect, Ron."

He rubbed her cheek. "No, I'm not. I'm nothing compared to you."

She put her hand on his. "Yes, you are. You're everything. You're perfect for me, and you're everything to me. I love you so much."

"Happy birthday, Hermione," he whispered before kissing her.

She moved back against the pillows and Ron sucked and kissed all over her neck. She tasted so good. She moaned and ran her fingers through his hair. He never wanted to leave. Her body was his oasis. She pulled his face up to hers and licked his mouth. He parted his lips and they snogged deeply again. They snogged for

so long that Ron couldn't remember if they had ever left each other. He felt as if he hadn't left school and they were simply enjoying themselves as they always did. He broke from the kiss and traveled to her neck again. He wanted to taste her everywhere. He lifted her shirt and kissed around her naval. Hermione shook and let out a sharp breath.

"Ron," she gasped after some time.

"Yeah?" he said, sucking the skin around the top of her jeans.

"There is one other thing that I want for my birthday," she whispered.

"Anything. It's yours," he said; ready to hear her tell him to taste her.

She was silent for a moment. "Make love to me."

Ron stopped and looked up at her. It was the last thing he expected to hear. "What?"

She looked back down at him, and her eyes were set and serious. He knew that look. Whenever she came up with a crafty plan or began to write the greatest essay ever written for a class, her eyes were always set and serious. "I want you to make love to me," she said stronger.

He sat up. His heart beat ridiculously hard and his mind felt hazy. "A-are you sure?"

She nodded and sat up, too. "It would be for all the right reasons this time, and no one will knock on my door. We're completely alone without interruption."

He actually thought that his cock twitched in excitement, and he felt a little guilty for it. It was too good to be true.
"Hermione, we don't have to. We only should if you're sure and only if you're absolutely ready. You know that I have no problem with waiting. I'll wait for as long as you want. There's no rush to have sex because we're here now."

Hermione caressed his face. "I know. That's exactly why I'm sure, and that's exactly why I'm ready. Hearing you, once again, telling me that we don't have to and that you don't care when obviously you want to, is all the assurance I need. I want to, and I'm ready. I've thought about this ever since I came back. I want it, Ron."

Ron began to wheeze. He was lightheaded. He wanted to make love to Hermione more than anything. He always had. "I want it, too. I want you so badly." She slowly pulled off her shirt, exposing her breasts tucked inside a teal laced bra. His mouth watered.

"Fucking hellâ€œ;have-have they always been like that?"

She giggled slightly. "I think so, but you can find out for yourself. I've got the knickers to match, if you want to see."

He nodded frantically. "I do. I do want to see. I just thought this was your birthday weekend and not mine."

"You deserve a present, too. You got into Lambrick and Paddock," she said.

Ron had been so distracted by her body that he forgot about everything else. He didn't want to think about anything else. All he wanted was her. He moved closer to her. "Cheers," he breathed. He put his mouth to hers again.

They kissed slowly and gently, as they knew what they were building up to. However, it quickly sped up and got heated. Ron and Hermione groaned and clutched each other, pressing their bodies firmly against each other. They simultaneously worked each other's clothing. They unbuttoned their jeans, pulled off his shirt, and wiggled their legs free of denim, shoes, and socks in fluid motions. Ron finally pulled away from her, panting, and in nothing but his boxers. Hermione was out of breath as well. He couldn't take his eyes off her. She hadn't been lying to him. Her teal, lacy knickers matched her bra perfectly. He never wanted her so intensely before, and his fingers itched to rid her of the rest of her clothing. However, he didn't move. He wouldn't move unless she said it was okay. He was too afraid of not being able to stop once he started.

Ron found his fear and apprehension irritating. Harry got to do it. Fred had his chances when he was alive. Bloody hell, even George got it just that morning at work. He wanted it, too. He wanted to experience sex and all the bliss of it, but he was scared. He didn't know if blokes were supposed to be scared, but he certainly was. "Oh shit," he said, realizing his mistake. "I didn't bring potion. I didn't know that we were going to do this. I'm sorry, Hermione." He felt like a tit again. His dad warned him to always be prepared. He wasn't.

Hermione grinned shyly. "It's okay. Umâ€œI made some for you." He raised an eyebrow and she blushed terribly. "I told you, Ron, I've been thinking about this for a long time. Don't look at me like that."

"No, I think it's great. You're brilliant. You always think of everything," he said. She reached inside her side table and pulled out a tube of the clear liquid. Seeing it made him shake. It made him believe that it was actually going to happen.

"Make sure to drink all of it," she said.

"I will," he said, taking the tube. He tried to hide how unsteady his hands were. He popped the lid.

"Be careful. Don't spill any!" Hermione ordered.

"I'm not going to, alright? Just calm down or I will spill it!" he shot. He gripped the tube securely and chugged the potion down. It tasted terrible, like muddy pickle juice. He coughed a couple of times, but as soon as he thought it couldn't taste any worse, it was gone.

"Was it nasty?" she asked.

"Fucking hell, yeah," he answered.

She let out a breath of relief. "Good. It's supposed to be." He dropped the tube to the floor and looked back at her. They stared at each other rather awkwardly. Ron didn't know if there was something he was supposed to say or do first.

"Soâ€œ!" he said, nodding for no reason.

Hermione rubbed her charm and frowned at the mattress. "Right, you still want to?"

"Of course I do. Do you?" he asked.

"Yes, I still want to. I want to right now," she said. She reached behind her and unfastened her bra. She slowly pulled it off, and then lifted her hips so she could remove her knickers. In just a little over a minute she was completely naked in front of him. Ron surveyed every inch of her. He had seen her parts naked before but never all at one time. It was a difference experience. Her skin was so smooth and practically glowing. Her frame was small and slender, but she had all the plush that he could want. He didn't deserve her beauty. He didn't think that he would ever measure up to what she was.

"I'm the luckiest person in the world," he whispered.

She somewhat covered herself. "I'm nervous enough, Ron. Don't put me on such a pedestal."

"I'm not. You are absolutely beautiful. I mean it," he said, pulling her arms away.

"Thank you. You are, too," she said, looking down to his boxers.

He took her hint. He lifted himself and slowly pulled them off. He added it to their pile of clothes on the floor. His entire body heated over. He felt exposed in a way that he hadn't before. As she looked him over, he understood why she was so self-conscious. With the idea of sex hanging over them, being completely naked was overwhelming. However, no matter how timid he felt, he wanted her. He was more turned on than he had ever been, and Hermione was staring at how aroused he was. He almost wanted to apologize for being so hard.

"You still sure?" he asked. She didn't speak, only nodded. He lifted her chin and pulled her eyes to his. "I'll take care of you," he said as tenderly as he could. He wanted Hermione to believe him. He wanted her to believe that he would treat her body the way it was meant to be treated.

It seemed to help a little. "I know you will," she said in a quivering voice.

She lay back against the bed. He gazed at what lied before him, waiting for him, wanting him. He couldn't believe that there were so many times when he was unsure if they would make it and so many times when he thought that he would lose her. It was all in the past. He felt as if everything had built up to this moment. He felt as if his destiny was lying in front of him. It made his breath shallow and skin dampen in sweat.

He eased himself on top of her. He could feel her shudder as their skin connected. He was glad that he wasn't alone in that. He leaned down and kissed her. While they kissed, he rubbed his hands over different parts of her body. He reached her middle and used his fingertips to rub around and increase her wetness. He had no idea what he was supposed to do, but he figured that the wetter she was, the easier things would be. She moaned and dug her fingernails into his shoulders.

Once he felt that his fingers couldn't get any more slippery, he positioned himself between her legs and moved his erection against her. He was trembling so badly. He felt her opening and how warm and smooth she was. He wanted to be inside her. It was all he could focus on. Looking at her face, Ron noticed how large her eyes were and how wildly her chest heaved. She seemed terrified.

"Are you sure that you're ready for this?" he asked. Most of him hoped that she was, but a small part of him didn't want her to be.

She nodded. "Yes. I'm with you, Ron."

He spent a few moments looking into her eyes to make sure that she wasn't just trying to be brave for his sake. Once he was convinced that her feelings were genuine, he said, "I love you, Hermione."

She ran her hand along his cheek and said, "I love you, too, Ron." Then she smiled slightly. "You don't have to worry. I want this as much as you do. Go ahead."

His heart was in his throat now. It was happening. No one was going to knock on the door for something. He didn't have to go to work. They didn't have to hurry. It was just the two of them and nothing was stopping them but himself. He looked into her deep brown eyes and knew that he was ready. He wanted to feel her.

"I'll be watching your face for signs that this is too much, but please tell me how you're feeling and what to do, okay? I don't want to do anything that you don't want me to," he said.

She nodded. "I will. I promise."

Only then, did he actually begin maneuvering himself. Ron rubbed the head of his cock up and down her middle to coat himself with her juices. Then, he shifted his weight so he wouldn't crush her and began gradually pushing himself into her. However, something didn't feel right. He figured that he slicked himself too much because he was having a problem finding her entrance. He shook

and tried to concentrate on what was down there, but he was horribly nervous and shaky. He forgot what things looked like and where he was supposed to go.

"Need some help?" she asked.

"No. It's fine. I know what I'm doing," he lied. He closed his eyes and moved himself around but still couldn't find it.

"Ron!" Hermione said.

He blushed and sighed in mortified defeat. "Y-yeah, I'm sorry. I'm-I'm just really nervous and I can't well; I need your help."

She gave him a kind smile. "No, it's okay. I'm nervous, too. Here, let me have it." She took him in her hand and he moaned noisily. She loosened her grip. "Is everything okay?"

He took a deep breath and tried to calm down. He was already so heated and the last he wanted was to cum prematurely. "Yes, it's okay. Go on."

Once she guided him to her entrance, she let go and put her hands back on his shoulder. She breathed roughly and Ron could feel her heartbeat vibrating against his stomach. She nodded and bit her lip hard. "Okay."

Ron took it as his sign to move forward so, slowly, he pressed inward. His eyes never blinked and never left her face as he watched for any sign of discomfort as he went inside her. He felt her tense and cringe as if it was hurting, so he immediately backed off.

She shook her head. "No. No, don't stop. Don't stop."

"But you're too tense, Hermione. I can't get through this way," he said uncomfortably.

She groaned in frustration. "I know. I'm really sorry. I'll—"

"Don't apologize," he interrupted. It seemed unfair that she had to be sorry for him hurting her.

"Not now, Ron. I'm trying to think! Okay, I'll try to relax so you can get through better, but you can't stop like this. It'll only hurt more. Please, keep going," she said out of breath.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She nodded and kissed his collarbone. "Yes, I'm sure."

"Okay, but I want you to do it. This will be easier if you guide me in, I reckon. Put your hands on my hips and pull me in and push me away when you want to," he said.

Hermione seemed satisfied, even somewhat relieved and pleased, with the suggestion. "Okay, I can do that. That sounds like a

really good idea." She placed her sweaty hands on his hips and moved him. Little by little he slipped in and out of her, getting further and further with every second. She winced and gasped as he went deeper into her.

Ron closed his eyes and chewed on his lip. She was incredibly warm and tight. She hugged around him, and he felt a strong current in his groin, but he was not going to let anything harm Hermione, so he tried his best to control his natural urges to pump harder and faster. He stopped to let her catch her breath and get comfortable with him lodged halfway inside her.

"H-how are you doing?" he asked. He could feel a deeper, tighter entrance just beyond where he was, and he knew that's where it would really start to feel intense.

She let go of his hips and let out a shaky breath. "I-I'm okay. You can take over now." Her eyes were set and ready. He nodded. He bent down and gave her a ravenous kiss. He kissed her with everything he had as he pushed all the way in.

Hermione groaned loudly in his mouth and pulled out of the kiss. "Oh, Ron!" she cried, shutting her eyes.

He tried to speak, but all that came out was a choked breath. He couldn't describe the feeling of her. It was like a fiery blanket of wetness and pleasure. She suctioned him so snugly. It was unbelievable. However, as amazing as it felt, he knew that he was hurting her, and he couldn't completely enjoy it.

He kept pushing and when he was all the way in, she sucked in a big gulp of air and tapped his shoulder. Her eyes were watery and her face was crimson. "Wait," she breathed.

Ron stopped right away. He was honestly thankful for it because he felt like if he moved at all, he would cum right away. He had no idea that his conversation with Lee would come back to haunt him. He had to control it, or it would all be over. "You okay?" he asked, trying to settle down. He kissed her cheek to stop a tear from rolling down.

She opened her eyes. "Yes, I'm okay. I just need to catch my breath."

He felt so guilty, looking at her. He wished that she could feel what he did. He had to try something. He kissed her neck and put his hands on her breast. He sucked on her skin and rubbed his thumb over her nipple. She whimpered slightly, and Ron had to try harder not to let go. His idea must have been working. He felt her slowly relaxing around his him, and his urgency to cum had thankfully decided to leave him alone for a bit.

"That feels good," she whispered.

"Tell me when you want me to go again," he said, nibbling on her earlobe and caressing her breast.

She nodded. "I'm ready." He stopped and kissed her lips before moving gradually in and out of her. He pushed a little deeper with each thrust. Hermione squeaked and panted with almost every push, but her body relaxed more and more, and her middle increased with moisture and flooded him.

All the while, Ron immersed all his senses in his moments. He watched her face and her body get caught in the rapture of their lovemaking. He turned to watch his cock slide in and out of her, and he observed the muscles of her thighs flex around his body as she held him. He knew he would remember her aroma for the rest of his life, as well as the sounds of their moans and the moving of the bed. He felt the heat coming off of her and the sweat building on her skin as they glided in perfect harmony with each other.

He felt every bit of his body and soul flow into Hermione as he pushed, but he remembered to be slow and gentle. Her eyes were still watery and she hissed as he thrusted. His cock and his balls were now on fire, and he knew that he would reach his peak soon. Within just a few minutes he could feel his body again tensing and his orgasm began to grow like nothing he'd ever experienced before. It was way too soon. He tried to remember the ingredients to something but nothing popped in his head. He couldn't think or focus on anything that would prolong it. He had no choice.

He gazed at Hermione whose eyes were still closed. She was biting her lip unbelievably hard. "Hmm, H-Hermione."

She opened her eyes. They stared at each other in a powerful way, and it felt as if she was reading his mind. Just automatically, she seemed to understand. She nodded. "Yes, cum inside me, Ron. I want you to."

That was it. He couldn't hold it back anymore. In all his wildest fantasies, he never imagined hearing her say that would feel so extreme and perfect. He opened up and came inside her with explosive force. Ron clamped his eyes shut as the waves of pleasure enveloped him. The release was bright and hot and all his feeling drained from him and into her body. Hermione let out a mixture of a moan and a cry as he came. She scratched his arms and jerked her legs.

Finally, the feeling began to subside as Ron's thrusts grew less feverish, and Hermione's taut body began to relax again. When he finally stopped thrusting, he lay his head down on her shoulder and tried to catch his breath. He was exhausted. He had never worked so hard in his life. Their bodies were sweaty and stuck together. Hermione trembled and hugged him tightly. Their breaths shook in unison. He was afraid to look at her.

"I'm sorry," he said in a hoarse voice.

"Why?" she asked, just as raspy.

He didn't know where to begin. "I hurt you a lot andâ€;wellâ€;it was over before you could get anything out of it."

She tugged on his hair, and he looked up to her. She had a serious, yet loving expression. "Ron, please, don't apologize. That was the most beautiful thing that I have ever experienced, and everything I felt had to be there. No one could've done that better than you. You did everything right, and you took care of me like you promised. It was better than I could have ever pictured it to be."

An overflow of love and devotion washed over him. He leaned forward and kissed her. It felt different and tasted different. It was as if their kisses meant more and were more sensual. They kissed for days it seemed before he finally pulled away and off her. He settled next to her and leaned against the headboard. She propped herself on her elbow. She was beautiful and natural and his. He couldn't believe how in love he was.

He took her hand and kissed it. "So, you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay and I'm sore, but I'm supposed to be. I'm also really happy. I've never been this happy before," she said.

He melted against her beauty. "Neither have I."

They smiled at each other for a while before talking. They talked about anything and everything that they had missed out on while apart. There wasn't awkwardness anymore or a need to do it for a second time. He felt comfortable, and he was relieved to know that it didn't seem as if she regretted what they did.

Hermione finally stopped laughing and wiped her eyes. "Wow. He was really going to pretend as if nothing happened?"

"Yeah, he had a prat look on his face, but he honestly thought that he was going to get away with it. I don't reckon Lee will let him live it down," Ron told.

She rolled her eyes. "Men. Everything has to be turned into a joke. Even the most private of things."

He shrugged. "Nothing stays private between blokes like us."

She grew a little more serious. "Some things do. Like, where you're going to train."

He was expecting the conversation to arise sooner or later but for some small reason he hoped that in the heat of everything, she'd forget about it. "Yeahâ€|"

She moved closer to him. "Sweetheart, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I'm running out of time either way," he said.

"Why haven't you at least told someone? Why doesn't Harry know?" she asked.

"Because it'll only confuse me more. Mum is practically pushing me to Paddock. Bill thinks I should go as well. Harry thinks I

should go for Lambrick, and Kingsley doesn't have an answer at all. It's too stressful," Ron explained. "What do you think?"

"You can't ask me what to do," she said.

"But you know me. I want your opinion. What you think means so much to me. Please," he said gently.

She sighed and sat up, Ron's eyes followed down to her breasts. The stone of the necklace hung right above where her cleavage started and was snuggly protected between them. She cleared her throat. "Ron, I'm up here."

"Sorry," he said, returning to her face. "It's just that looks really good on you. I'm glad that I went with it."

She smirked. "Me too. Now, stop staring at my tits."

He blushed and laughed. "I can't believe you just said that."

"I'm full of surprises," she said, pulling a pillow over her chest. "Seriously, though, I don't know what you should do but if you want my honest opinion, then I think you should go for Lambrick."

He gaped at her. He was almost certain that she would suggest taking Paddock. "Why? I'd think you'd want me to go to Paddock since they already let me in."

She gave him a look. "Ron, you want to go to Lambrick. You're qualified and they accepted you to the next trial. I'm with Harry on this one."

He shook his head. "I don't know!"

"Listen, life is going to be full of risks. Sometimes you have to try, and even if you might fail you have to try. It's hard and it's scary, but it's supposed to be. That's the point. Why are you being so hard on yourself? I told you about this. You're more than ready for them," Hermione said.

He looked away. "I'm worried. I don't want to let anyone down. I don't want to let myself down. I want to go Lambrick. I want to go to the interview, but I'm so worried that I won't make it. I hate rejection. Lambrick may not want me. Paddock does. I may not want to go as badly, but they want me and as stupid and pathetic as it soundsâ€;I likeâ€;being wanted. All my life I've felt as if people didn't want me so when it does happenâ€;I want to hold on to it."

He felt vulnerable and bare, and it had nothing to do with his lack of clothing. He never told anyone about his issues with rejection. He felt selfish and wrong for it. However, he didn't want to keep it from Hermione any longer. After experiencing the most intimate thing in the world with her, keeping secrets from her didn't make sense.

"Oh, Ron, love, look at me." He slowly looked at her. She had such concern on her face. "People have always wanted you. You have such a distorted view of yourself and your worth. It worries me how low your self-esteem is."

He shrugged. "I'm working on it. I'm a lot better than I used to be."

"If you're worried that getting into Lambrick will be the deciding factor about your worth, then stop. Rejection happens to all of us, Ron. It's nothing against you, but I seriously doubt that they would. You have so much to offer that academy. You're the perfect candidate," she assured.

He snorted. "And why is that?"

She took his arm and traced over the light scars that had been there ever since getting attacked by the brains. "Because of these."

Ron was confused. "You think getting cursed is a good quality? I was stupid and made them come after me."

She swatted his arm. "No, Ron, that's not what I mean! That's not how it happened. I mean that these scars tell a story. They tell a story about the time you, in all your bravery, tricked a bunch of thick Slytherns, rode a thresher to the Ministry, and battled death eaters. It tells the story about how you didn't stop fighting. You got through it all. Your scars tell the story about how much courage and heart you have."

He looked down at the slightly pink and glazed scars. All they did was remind him of the mistakes he made. He never thought they were something to be proud of. "I guessâ€¢!"

She lifted his chin again. "No, you don't. You know. You know that you were brave. If only the recruiters could see your other scars. If only they could see your scars from first year, when you took on a life-sized chest board all by yourself or second year when you went into the forbidden forest to talk to the spiders, your deepest phobia."

"Hermioneâ€¢!" he began.

She held up a hand and continued. "Or third year, when you broke your leg but stood and told Sirius that if he was going to kill Harry, he'd have to kill you, too, or last year, when you defeated death eaters, dodged snatchers, traveled for months on the run, destroyed a horcrux, saved me from Bellatrix, and stood there by Voldemort himself." Hermione stopped talking and took a breath. "See, I could go on for so long about all the scars you have and how each one tells a story about how much Lambrick needs someone like you. Don't you understand, Ron?"

He couldn't deny that he felt his chest swell with pride. She wasn't even exaggerating. He had done all of those things, but it didn't seem like anything special to him. In Ron's eyes, it was simply what he was supposed to do. It was automatic. He would not

have been a good friend or a decent person if he hadn't done all of those things. "Maybe. It sounds great when you say it butâ€;"

"Tell me what you're really thinking," Hermione said.

Ron rubbed his neck. "What if it comes down to me and Harry? We're the same age. We went to the same school, got mostly the same marks, and went through all that stuff together. I have feelings that it'll come down to either him or me and of course they'll pick him."

"Ron, I'm not sure it works that way, but even so, it doesn't mean that it would automatically be him," she said.

He blinked deliberately. "I appreciate you being loyal and helpful, but let's be honest. No one would choose me over Harry. I wouldn't choose me over Harry. You'd have to be mental. He's everything."

Hermione shrugged slightly. "I'm sorry, but I don't agree. I'm not naïve. Harry is amazing and he's done more than a vast majority of people ever will. He defeated Voldemort, and it might not get any better than thatâ€;but."

"But what?" Ron said with a laugh. "You said it all right there."

"But," she said again, "he had to do all that. It was his destiny. Unfortunately, Harry didn't have much of a choice. You, on the other hand, did. You could have left any time, but you didn't. You risked your life repeatedly because you chose to. That's the difference. Harry can't really say that. You were there every step of the way by your own free will. That kind of determination and allegiance is something that no one else has, Ron. Be proud of that. That's going to impress the people at Lambrick. That's what impressed the people at Paddock."

Ron gazed at her and into her smile. He believed her words. There was no way that he couldn't. "I have a lot to think about."

"Yes, and you need to act as soon as possible. Don't put your life on hold just because you're scared. I understand, though. My first night back here was terrible. I missed you, I couldn't sleep, and I felt buried by everything that happened here." Hermione looked around the room. "For a second I wasn't sure if I'd last a week, but I knew I was better than that. I'm better than my fear."

"I'm glad you didn't. Even though I miss you so much when we're apart, I'm glad you're back here," he said.

"I am, too. I belong here. I know that I made the right decision now. It just feels right. It's like the best decision I've made in my entire life," she said.

Ron felt a chill. It was just like what Kingsley said. He longed to feel that. "You always know what to do."

"No, I don't. I simply trust myself and go for it. You need to do the same. Regardless of what you decide, I'll be proud. You've come so far, Ron, so don't give up on yourself yet. Do whatever you feel is going to push you the most and make you the happiest," she said.

He tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "You make me the happiest. Does that meanâ€?"

She swatted his arm. "Ronald Weasley, I will not hear that kind of talk. At least, not right now."

He smirked and brought her close again. She settled on his chest and he held her. He smelled her hair and ran his nails up and down her arm. It felt so good to hold her and hear what she had to say. He looked to her side table and noticed for the first time that there were pictures on it. One was of her, Harry, and himself taken second year in one frame, and next to it was of the three at the train station the day she left. "I didn't know that you got it developed."

She followed his gaze. "Oh! Yes, I almost forgot." She climbed out of bed and slipped her knickers and shirt back on. He noticed her wince slightly as she moved, and he noticed the bit of blood that was on him and in her knickers. He tried not to think about it. She told him that it was all a part of it. He hadn't made her bleed for no reason.

She pulled two envelopes out of her school bag. "It's just a letter and the picture. It came out great."

Ron picked up the one on her desk. He grinned and looked at the three of them at twelve and then eighteen. Even though they obviously looked older, they were still the same. Harry still had the kind grin yet intense and sad green eyes. Hermione still beamed beautifully and stood strong between them in an authoritative way, even though she was the only girl. And he still had too many freckles and a goofy smile because he was next to the people that changed his life and kept him alive year after year. People didn't get any better than Hermione Granger and Harry Potter. They were the essence of perfection and magic, so, it had to mean something if they thought he was worth it. It had to be fate if they thought he was ready.

He put the picture down and noticed Hermione staring at him. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing, you just had that look on your face. It's so passionate, and I've never seen anything like it. I still don't know what it means, but I'll figure it out one day. It makes me weak every time," she said.

It would take too much to explain that the look was her and Harry. He didn't have the words to describe what their friendship meant to him. So, he took her hand and pulled her to him. He'd let her figure it out. She sat on his lap and put her forehead to his. "I love you," he said.

"I love you, too. You make me so happy. I had the perfect birthday because of you," she said.

"I'm glad you did. I want you to be happy. It's all I want. I live to make you happy, love," he moaned.

She moaned as well and licked his mouth. "Oh, Ron, you do. You're wonderful. I can't get enough of you. I think that I've developed some sort of illness, but I'm not looking for a remedy," she cheeked.

"There's plenty of me to go around for the rest of our lives together," he said softly before kissing her. They whimpered in unison and fell back to the bed. They snogged deeply and boisterously. Their sounds echoed around her room and everything else disappeared. All that existed was their love.

However, the day slipped away faster than Ron could enjoy it. It started to get dark and students were returning. As much as he didn't want to, Ron had to pull away and get ready to go. Hermione watched fixatedly as he pulled his boxers and jeans back on. He took his time even though he felt embarrassed. After putting his socks and shoes on, he reached for his shirt.

"Wait," she said. She pulled on his belt loop and brought him close. Ron swallowed hard. She eyed him as she kissed his stomach and on his left side, where his tender spot was.

"Hmm, Mione," he moaned. He pulled on her hair. "Don't start what we can't finish."

She stopped. "Sorry, I've been waiting to do that for weeks."

"I can always stay the night. Then you won't have to stop," he offered.

"I wish you could, but I'm already risking it by letting you in here this late," she said, standing up.

He ran his fingers through her hair and took in every feature of her. He could still feel himself inside her, and it added to her beauty. "Kiss me," he said.

Without question she stood on her toes and pressed her mouth to his as hard as she could. He held her securely and lifted her off the ground. It almost felt like the very first time they kissed. They were so desperate then. They were desperate now. He had to leave her, again, and the revelation was heavy on his heart. He didn't want to. He wanted to make love to her again. He wanted to hold her, talk to her, and stay with her. He hadn't realized how off he was during the past three weeks and now that he was finally whole, he had to let her go.

"I don't want to go," he panted between kisses.

"I don't want you to go, either. Mmm, I love you so much. You feel so good. I still feel you," she said.

Ron groaned and held her tighter. He felt every bit of the emotion again. He had to stop. He had to let her go before he was too far gone. They pulled away from each other with difficulty, as if it burned to not feel the other's skin. He opened his eyes and backed away from her. "I have to go."

She nodded and rubbed the charm between her fingers. "I know you do. I have to stay."

It didn't hurt him as much to hear her say it, but it still affected him. She walked him to the door and he had to use all his might to open it. He looked at Hermione and what he was leaving. She was so gorgeous and flawless. He couldn't believe what they did in her bed. "Fuck, I hate to leave you here."

She gently pushed him over the threshold. "Go before I won't let you leave."

He bit his lip and took her hand. He kissed it with all his might. He wouldn't risk kissing her lips again. "I love you. I love you so much, and I'll write you. I'll tell you everything that happens and what I decide."

"You better. I'll write you back. I won't leave anything out, I promise. I'll let you know as soon as we can see each other again. I love you, Ron. I'm glad that we made love. I wanted it so much, and I'll think about it every day until we can do it again," she said.

He stagger breathed. "I will, too. You're beautiful, and there's no place I'd rather be than with you."

She tugged her hand away. "Oh, Ron, you're amazing. Thanks for the necklace. I'll never take it off. I swear that I won't."

He couldn't stop himself. He grabbed her and kissed her again. He kissed her until he was sure that he could pull away without doing it again. He was out of breath. He traced her mouth. "I love you, Hermione. You're the best girlfriend in the whole bloody world."

She sucked on his fingertips. "And you are the best boyfriend in the world. You're the best boyfriend and the best lover. You're mine, Ron. I'm never letting you go."

"Don't. Ever. I don't want to belong to anyone else," he whispered. He pulled away from her. "I have to go."

She leaned against the door and smiled. "Yes, you do. Bye, sweetheart."

"Bye, love. Take care of yourself and Ginny," he said.

"I always do. Take care of your family and Harry. Practice for your interview, rather you're sure if you're going to Paddock or not," she said.

He nodded and took in her perfection one last time before turning away. "Okay, bye." He began to walk up the staircase but in a panic ran back down. Hermione was still at the doorway. "Thanks for listening to me. I love you."

"I love you, too, but that's why I'm here. I'm still here for you, always," she said.

He smiled. "I know you are. I'll see you soon. Bye."

This time when he waved to her and walked away, he kept walking until he was out of the castle safely and past the threshold of the forest. So much went through his mind as he walked. He exhaled deeply before Apparating back home. It was pretty late and he figured everyone was asleep. However, Harry was up in his cot when he opened the door.

He looked up from his book. "Ah, I was wondering if you'd come back tonight."

"Of course I was. Sorry, we got caught up," Ron answered, kicking off his shoes and flopping on his bed. He was beyond tired at this point.

Harry nodded. "Ha, I figured that much." He gave him a look that he couldn't understand.

"What?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "Nothing."

He rolled his eyes. "Come on, what's that look for?"

Harry completely faced him. "I just know you, that's all."

"What does that mean?" he asked.

Harry shrugged again. "Um, I know this isn't any of my business but it happened, didn't it?"

Ron immediately blushed, and it was hard to hide his smile. He knew that he could talk to Harry about it, and he actually did want to tell him. "Yeah, it did."

Harry nodded and returned his smile. "Congratulations, mate."

Ron thought about his question and figured that there was no point in hiding. He had to know the truth. "Harry, well, shit, I don't really want to know and it's certainly not any of my business but...did Ginny cry the first time?"

Harry's smile faded. "Yeah, a lot."

Ron didn't know what he felt, but he was relieved and worse off at the same time. He was glad that he wasn't alone, but he didn't like the idea of Ginny crying and bleeding like Hermione had.

"Oh, good. I mean it's not good, but I thought that maybe I was

doing something wrong. I tried to be as slow and gentle as I could, but she still cried."

"I get it," Harry said. "There's nothing you could have done, though. No matter how gentle you were, she was going to cry. It happens to girls the first time."

"I know it's justâ€;I feltâ€;torn," Ron explained. "It felt really good but at the same time it didn't feel good at all because Hermione was crying. I knew I was hurting her, but she didn't want me to stop, so I didn't."

"I know what you mean. It was the same way with Ginny the first time. I kept asking her if she wanted me to stop or wait, but she told me not to." Harry's smile returned. "Well, it was more like an order not to stop. She put it like this; she said that I should feel relieved that it hurt her. That meant that I was her first."

"Yeah, Hermione said something like that, too. I reckon she's right. I'd rather be the one to hurt her in that way than some other bloke," he said.

"That's how I took it," Harry said. "We're lucky."

Ron nodded in agreement but felt like lucky didn't begin to describe what he was. "So, I reckon the worse is over then, right?"

"Yep, it should be better for her from now on. Well, it should be amazing for her from now onâ€;if you know what you're doing," he said with a wink.

Ron threw a pillow at him. "Fuck off." He pulled the letter out of his front pocket and threw it at his as well. "From Mione. It's got the picture of us that we took at the station."

"Great. I'll read it in the morning. I'm fucking tired," Harry said.

"Spare me the details," Ron said, pulling off his shirt to change for bed. He thought about his conversation with Hermione. "Hey, about the whole camp thingâ€;"

"Don't even bring it up. I'm sorry that I got so mad. I reckon a part of me really wants you there with me, but we'll be best friends no matter where we are. Ginny talked some sense into me," Harry said.

He smiled but it didn't make him feel any better like he thought it would. "Good." As he pulled his jeans off, he felt a lump in his back pocket. He pulled it out. It looked like a small pouch. He frowned and reached inside it. He gasped as he pulled out Hermione's lacy teal bra. There was a note stuck to it. He held the bra and read the note.

Ron,

No, you're not mad. I put the pouch in your pocket. I'm writing to you while you're in the loo. I jinxed the pouch to make everything fit. I thought you'd like something to remember me by. I have your jumper and a piece of your Deluminator, so I figure it's only fair that I give you something personal as well. I can tell that you like this, so it's yours. No, it's not to wear or show to everyone. It's just a small token. It's something for you to look at every once in a while to remind yourself of what's waiting for you. Thank you for the perfect day and don't be afraid to rise to your own potential. You're worth it. Harry and I believe in you.

I love you to pieces,

Hermione

He smelled her bra and could just taste her skin. His face went scarlet. The cheeky witch really was full of surprises. "Mate, what is that?" Harry asked.

"Oh, um, n-nothing," he tucked Hermione's bra safely in his drawer and continued to change for bed.

That night in bed, he went over everything that happened and what he had in store for him next. He read over Hermione's note time and time again and felt his confidence grow.

It was time to make a decision but first...he had to wank.

* * *

**** LOL! I fall in love with Ron more every day. Once more I feel like this chap is straightforward. Ron is coming into his own. He's realizing what a great salesman he is and it's affecting how he feels in other aspects of his life. He's feeling like a better boyfriend and after his talk with Hermione, maybe a better wizard.

Yay! They shagged! Lol. I really enjoyed writing it and hopefully you lot enjoyed reading it. I'm pleased with how their first time came out and Ron's feelings during it. I really didn't want this overly pleasurable and graphic first time. To me, it should be a bit embarrassing, scary, painful, and rather quick. It should be real. Yes, enjoyable, but realistic. As they do more, it'll be more but not for this first one.

I simply adore Hermione and her pep talk. A lot of Ron bashers like to claim that Hermione doesn't view Ron's achievements as much as Harry's but I disagree. I see her as over-protective of his accomplishments and I can just see her getting annoyed of everyone praising Harry and not her boyfriend, lol. More on Hermione, I love her character in this story. I think giving Ron her bra is canon. She wants to cheer him up and reassure him but

at the same time she's naÃ¯ve as to what giving Ron her bra is going to do to him! Lol

So, thanks for reading everyone! Ron's got some choices to make and I hope you all are there to see him through it. REVIEW! And you'll be able to.

CHEERS!

* Chapter 20*: Borderline

Thanks so much for all the wicked reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

"The staff at Lambrick Auror Training Academy has accepted your request to attend our facility. Your application has been approved and we are pleased to inform you that you have progressed to our second trial of full acceptance." Ron read this portion repeatedly. It's what he did every morning. He didn't know if he was more excited or anxious. Time was running out and he had to make a choice. He almost had all his bags packed for Paddock, but a sick feeling in his stomach kept him from sealing it all away. He was so angry with himself. There was a knock on the door. "Yeah?" he said in a somewhat raspy voice. He tucked the letter under his pillow.

"Sweetheart, it's almost time for work," his mum said, walking in and picking stuff off the floor.

"I know. I'm gonna leave in a minute," he answered. She sat next to him and let out a small sigh. "Are you okay?"

She rubbed her forehead. "Yes, I'm fine. There's a lot that we have to do before you go."

"Mum, I don't need anything special," he said.

"But you do. I'm so proud of you, Ron. You deserve something really special." She smiled.

Looking into her eyes made his chest hurt. His mother was doing so much better. She didn't cry as often and her expression wasn't as vacant. However, he could still easily see the sadness in her features. With Fred gone he knew that the rest of them had to be more, but he didn't feel as if he was. He was lying to her, and he wasn't nearly as happy as he knew she wanted him to be.
"Thanks."

"I am a little worried," she said. "Paddock hasn't sent anything back. I was thinking that maybe you could send them another letter, or I can find a way to reach an advisor directly."

He shook his head. "No, no, you don't need to do that. I already said that it might be awhile before I get another notice."

"I understand that but it's a bit odd that they haven't sent you anything at all. I'm only worried that your letter got lost during delivery," she explained.

Ron stood. "I don't think it did, but if you'd like I'll go by the Ministry in the morning and see if there's anyway of finding out. I'm off tomorrow."

She frowned slightly. "This isn't about what I'd like. This is about your future, and I'd think that you'd care about your status. It's your career, Ron. It's a lot of responsibility and it's very important."

Hearing her only made him feel more perplexed. He was well aware of how important it all was. It was why he was having such a difficult time making up his mind. He couldn't tell her that, though. All he could do was nod. "I'm sorry. I do care. I'm justâ€œI don't know."

"I'm not trying to worry you. I want you to have the best experience that you can at Paddock. You do want a great experience there, right?" she asked.

"Yeah. Of course," he muttered. She looked at him as if she was trying to read his thoughts. He turned from her gaze. "I should go. George hates it when I'm late. I'll see you tonight, mum." He left the room without really giving her time to answer.

As he walked the streets of Diagon Alley he tried to calm his nerves by thinking about Hermione. He bit his lip as his memory went over her body and the lacy teal underwear. He was in awe. He had thought about having sex with her for almost as long as he'd known her, but he never imagined that he would still feel it so powerfully afterwards. He wanted to do it again, and he wanted to give her some of what he felt. He had no idea when he would see her again, and it made him want to have sex with her that much more.

Ron opened the door to the shop and saw George and Bill leaning casually against the main register and chuckling. "What's going on?"

They turned to him. "Shit, I'm sorry, Ron. I probably should have written you or something. I don't reckon we're going to open today," George said.

"Why? Is something wrong?" he asked.

Bill laughed. "Not wrong exactly."

George rolled his eyes. "It's a bloody mess."

Ron looked around in confusion. "What is?"

George pointed upstairs. "That." He looked up and for the first time noticed that Percy and his dad were on the second level. Percy had a clipboard in his hand and was talking frantically.

"Perce, dad, Ron's here," Bill called.

"Good. We can really get started then!" Percy called back. They both came down. His dad didn't look nearly as alert as Percy did.

"What's going on?" Ron asked.

Percy puffed out his chest and grinned widely. "George has finally grown some sense and decided to add protection to the shop."

"Really?" Ron asked, looking to George.

He shrugged slightly. "Might as well. I was gonna have to do it some time."

"Exactly, it's the right thing to do," Bill said, clapping a hand on his back.

"That's great," Ron said sincerely. Though he was curious to know why George suddenly changed his mind.

"I agree, and it's also great that he picked me to help. I have a lot of ideas," Percy said.

"Hold on. I didn't pick you. Your bosses thought it would be a good idea. I'm already prepared to sack you. You want too much," George said.

Percy adjusted his glasses on his nose. "Sorry that I want you and Ron safe and sorry that I'm the best at what I do. Kingsley asked me to be here, and I glad that he did. Besides, I am your older brother so who better than me."

George rolled his eyes, though a small grin twitched his lips.
"Whatever."

"Boys, can we get on with this? I have to get back to work. George, let Percy work. He is the very best, and Percy listen to George. This is his shop," his dad said.

"Okay, dad," they said together.

"Right, well, I was thinking that the spell we have on the Burrow could be put here. No Apparating activity in or out," Percy started.

"That'll be a problem," Ron said. "What if visitors want to pop right into the flat, right George?" George glared at him and shook his head.

"That's my point exactly, Ron," Percy said, not understanding the tease. "Because you live right above your place of business, I

think it's essential to cover the entire building. Maybe even some sort of bewitchment at the doors."

"No, that's taking things too far. This is a joke shop. There's enough chaos already. I'm fine with the perimeter but no bewitchment on the doors. I want this place to still be fun and not have a constant reminder of how dangerous everything is. That's the point of this shop," George explained. He folded his arms and looked at the floor.

Ron turned his attention to Percy. He could see something in his expression. The war had changed him. He wasn't as closed off, and he seemed to have more patience. "Okay. We won't do that but can we at least put something around your flat door? You live there."

"Sure," George said. He smiled again. "If we can compromise, then I reckon that I don't have to fire you." He held out his hand.

Percy shook it. "Great. I'll get this back to the Ministry and a couple of people will come by. We'll finalize what you want as well as go over proper invasion protocol."

"Damn, I didn't realize there was so much. I don't remember anyone telling us at the bank about invasion protocol," Bill said.

"This is something that I recently designed all by myself. I think if anyone should try it out first, then it should be George," Percy said.

"I think that's wonderful, son," his dad said.

"Yeah, thanks," George said. Percy's chest inflated even more.

"Okay, I really need to get back to work. Percy, are you coming?" his dad asked while giving them all hugs.

"Actually, I need to talk to Ron for a moment," he said.

Ron frowned. "What did I do?"

"Nothing! Blimey, why do you always think that you're in trouble?" Bill asked.

"Because he usually is," George said with a laugh.

"Hey, leave him alone. If anyone is to blame, then it's you lot. I swear you're all bad influences," his dad cheeked before leaving the shop. "Bye boys."

"Bye dad," they all said together. As soon as he left, George grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him against one of the shelves.

"Oi, what the fuck?" Ron said, trying and failing to get out of his grasp.

"What do you know?" Bill asked.

Ron pulled on George's wrist and his heart beat faster in anger and uneasiness. "Know about what?"

"George, let him go. He's not going to talk if you hold him like that. You should know this by now," Percy said.

"Fine." George let him go, and they all stared intensely at him. Ron tried not to look intimidated as his three older brothers surrounded him. He wasn't a kid anymore. "So, tell us what you know."

"Know about what? I have no bloody idea what you're talking about," Ron said.

George rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on, Ron. Don't be a prat. I swear. I'll hit you."

"No, you won't. Maybe he really doesn't know," Percy said.

"Of course you'll take his side and baby him, Percy. You always do," George said.

"Hold on. I agree. Look at him. I don't think he has a clue," Bill said. "Ron does that weird thing with his eyes when he's trying to hide something. He's not doing it now."

"What are you talking about? What weird thing with my eyes?" Ron asked, touching his eyes as if puss was oozing from them.

George pulled his hands away and got real close to his face. "You honestly don't know what we're talking about?"

"No!" Ron said.

George squinted at him and then smirked. "Did you wank last night?"

Ron felt heat on his neck. He pushed at George. "No, you fucking git."

George continued to survey him. He laughed. "Ha! Bill, you're right. He does do a weird thing with his eyes when he's lying. Fine, he's telling the truth about the first part."

"Fuck off," Ron said, pushing the three away. "Will someone please tell me what's going on? What did I do?"

"You didn't do anything, Ron. We thought that you found out about your party," Percy said.

He raised an eyebrow. "My party?"

"Mum is throwing you a big going away party before you leave for Paddock," Bill said.

His jaw dropped. "Wa-what? She is? Why?"

"Because you're going to Paddock. It's a big deal," Percy said.

"Yeah, you're the only living Auror in the family. Well, you will be. There hasn't been a Weasley Auror for decades or whatever," George said.

Ron's cheeks flushed, and he felt an odd sense of accomplishment but dread at the same time. "I didn't know that."

"Dad plans to make a speech about it at your party, so you'll hear all about it," Bill said.

"I don't understand. If you were worried that I knew, then why are you telling me now?" Ron asked.

"We don't care if you know about your party. We thought that maybe you found out about something involved with it. If you did then everything would be spoiled, and I was prepared to kick your arse until you forgot about it," George said.

Ron rolled his eyes. "I only know what you've told me, but I wish that you hadn't said anything. I don't want a party."

"Why not? Don't you care?" Bill asked.

Ron sighed and looked at them. He almost wanted to tell them, but he didn't want anymore input. It would only confuse him more. "I do. I'm just not used to all this attention."

"Get over it because it's your time to take it. You deserve it, Ron. You need to realize that," Bill said softly.

"Yeah, I know. I don't need to hear it anymore," he answered.
"Why did you assume I knew something, anyway?"

"Harry. He told us that you've been acting really strange lately. We explained to him that for the most part you've always been a little mental, but apparently it's more than usual now," George said. "But now that I'm thinking about it, it could just be because you finally got your prick wet when you went to visit her."

"What? No. Shut up," Ron said unintelligibly.

Percy's blue eyes grew. "You and Hermione?"

"No, Perce, him and McGonagall. Yes, obviously, him and Hermione. Wow, it all makes sense. You did rather glide through the door," Bill said.

"Leave me alone. I'm going home," Ron said, trying to walk away.

George grabbed his arm. "Oh, not so fast little brother. There's so much to talk about."

Ron snatched his arm away. "No, there's not. I'm not going to talk about whatever did or didn't happen with Hermione. It's none of your business."

"We already know that it happened. It's all over your face. You even walk differently. It's a Weasley thing. All of us went through the gliding phase after the first time," Bill explained.

"Yeah, you should have seen Percy. The bloke couldn't keep him head from touching the ceiling," George said.

Percy blushed. "Be quiet. I wasn't that bad. Ron, you were safe, right?"

He didn't see the point in pretending. He didn't even want to.
"Yes, of course we were. I'm not stupid. I took the whole potion."

Bill clapped him on the arm. "You're a man now. I can't wait to tell Charlie."

"Don't do that. He'll be worse than George," Ron said.

"I resent that," George piped up.

"Exactly. He'll never forgive me if I don't let him know," Bill answered.

"Just wait until I see Ms. Hermione Granger. I've always known that there was more to her than all the bloody studying," George said.

"Believe me, there's a lot more to her. There's an endless amount to what she has and what she can do," Ron said, more to himself than to them as he thought about her body and her mouth. It got quiet and he looked up. They were grinning at him. "Oh, shit, don't tell her I said that. In fact, don't say anything to her at all. She'll never let me touch her again if she thinks that I'm telling everyone about what we do."

"Oh, so now it's what we do. Must be wild!" George said, bursting into laughter.

"Leave him alone, George. He's got a point. Maybe if you had a girlfriend, you'd know that they don't like their business put out everywhere," Percy said.

George stopped laughing and opened his mouth as if he wanted to retort, but he quickly closed it and peered down. "Very funny, Percy. You really are catching on quite well."

"Thanks, and on that realization I need to go. I have to talk to Kingsley and work out these charts," Percy said.

"I'll go with you. I have an assignment in Egypt in a few weeks. Bloody bastards won't give me a break," Bill said. He shook their hands and gave Ron's an extra squeeze. "Good work, Ron."

"You're clever," Ron said. "Thanks for helping, Percy. George and I both appreciate it."

"Yeah, yeah," George said.

"Of course. Family first," Percy said proudly.

When they left Ron hit George's arm. "You didn't have to tell them about me and Hermione."

"Please, you want them to know. I thought this would be a good way for you to still seem like a good guy. Plus, it will teach you to spy on Angie and me," George said, hitting him back.

"For the hundredth fucking time, Lee sent me up there," Ron said. "And I don't want everyone to know about me and Hermione. I've only told Harry."

"Of course you did. He's your best mate. That's why Bill's going to tell Charlie because that's his best mate. I'll tell Lee because he's my best mate, and Percy doesn't have any friends, so he won't tell anyone. I don't think word will get back to her. You'll have plenty of chances to give Hermione a reason to leave you," George said.

"I don't think I was that bad," Ron mumbled. "I mean it was bad but not that terrible."

"I'm only joking, Ron. It gets better over time. I reckon yours wasn't worse than mine. I was only sixteen, and it was in a closet at school," George said.

"You're not serious," Ron said.

He rubbed his neck. "This time I am. It was the night of the Yule Ball. I was really upset because Fred and Angelina were together, and he told me that while they danced to a slow song he kissed her and asked to date her."

Ron didn't know what to say. His own experience at the Yule Ball had been miserable. "Oh, um, sorry."

"Yeah, so was I. I was happy that Fred finally grew the bollocks to ask her, but I was gutted. Anyway, there was this girl there from Ravenclaw who fancied me since first year, and I found her afterwards. One thing led to another and we shagged. I was bad, and she was angry about it." George let out a breath. "I went back to the room and saw Fred and Angelina kissing goodnight, so I didn't tell him about it. I didn't want to ruin his evening. I never told him."

He felt like he had to say something. It all sounded so awful.
"My night was horrible, too."

George gave him a look. "Can't be any worse."

"Maybe," he started. "I had a date that I didn't want. I was embarrassed of those horrible robes, I was jealous about Harry still, and Hermione was with the quidditch hero himself all night. She looked beautiful and all I wanted to do was dance with her and tell her how pretty she was, but I acted like an arse and

made her upset and probably cry like I always did." He closed his eyes for a moment and thought about the night that he wished he could erase from his memory. "I wanted to kiss her so badly, but instead I had to watch some bloke who didn't deserve her touch her and make her smile. Viktor Krum got to dance with her and kiss her goodnight. Not me like it should have been."

"How long you've been holding this in?" George asked.

"Since it happened," he breathed. "I should have asked her and not been such a gutless prat. I should have told Krum that I wanted to dance with Hermione, and I should have just kissed her. I should have told her that I was in love with her because I was. If I had, maybe the shit with Cormac and Lavender never would have happened. I'll never forgive myself for what I put her through." The weight of his past mistakes pushed down on him and he leaned against the shelf.

"Hey, don't do that," George said. "I know how you feel better than anyone. Seeing Fred with Angelina was painful. All the time I wish that I would have had the nerve to say something to either of them, but I didn't. So much could be different if I had."

"But you have her now," Ron said.

"And you have Hermione. I'm sure she loved you even though you didn't ask her to the dance and even if you made her cry. She loved you then and she loves you now. Bollocks to whatever I say about you shagging. I'm jealous. You got to have your first time with the that girl you love, and she gave it to you first. That doesn't always happen," George said.

Ron smiled. "Yeah, I know how lucky I am. I love her, George. It's incredible."

"I know you love her. I love Angelina so much. That's why I gave in to the Ministry's help. I want to keep her safe," George said.

"When did you change your mind?" Ron asked.

"I don't know. I just remember lying down with Angie and thinking about how nothing in the world made me happier. I'd do anything to keep her safe. I thought about how if it had been me instead, I'd still want Fred to take care of her and keep her out of harms way. I'd be so angry with him if he didn't protect the shop just because he was depressed. I wouldn't want it, so I know he doesn't either. I want you and our family and everyone else to be safe here," George said.

"But it's not just about us. You have to be safe as well. If you don't care, then know that Angelina does," Ron said.

"And I'll do anything for her." George smiled. "I want her to see that I've trying and I'm doing everything I can to make something for myself. In the end it's for her. It's all for her."

"Yeah, I get that," Ron said quietly.

George nodded and looked at him curiously. "Are you gonna tell my why you really don't want a party?"

"No," Ron said.

"Okay, I'll respect that. We should probably restock, then. I can still do a late opening if we start now," George said. Ron felt a wave of appreciation toward him for not pressing the matter. They got to work and George didn't bring up the question again.

When he made it to the kitchen door later that night, he heard ruffling from around the garden. He gripped his wand firmly and slinked over to the noise. He raised his wand ready to fire, but it was only Harry. "Bloody bollocks! Watch where you're pointing that thing!"

"Bloody bollocks to you! Why are you out here making all this noise?" Ron asked.

Harry put a hand to his chest. In the moonlight and between their lit wands, he could see how sweaty Harry was. "I'm practicing."

"For what? You're death? You can't creep around out here, mate. I thought you were a death eater or something," Ron said.

"I can tell. You were ready to curse me. That's good," Harry said.

Ron shook his head at him. "Are you mental? Have you completely lost it?"

"I just wanted to do some night training. Who knows what the advisors at Lambrick are going to assign," he explained.

"Night training?" Ron asked.

"Every battle isn't going to happen during the day. I want to stay sharp. It's bloody hard, though. My night vision isn't that great," Harry said.

Ron laughed. "I guess the smart thing would be to take your glasses, and you'll easily be defeated."

"I'd like to see someone try," Harry said, taking them off to wipe.

Ron smirked and discreetly pointed his wand at Harry's glasses. "Accio glasses!" The glasses drifted out of Harry's hand and into his. "Hmm, that was almost too simple."

"Give them back," Harry said.

He shook his head. "No. You'll have to take them from me. Do you think a death eater will just hand them back?"

Harry strained his eyes and tried to snatch them, but he wasn't tall enough to reach his extended arm. "You made your point. Stop being a dick and give them to me."

"No," Ron said again.

Harry sighed and held up his wand. "Fine."

Ron held up his wand as well. "Are you serious? You're going to hex—"

"Stupefy!" Harry shouted. Ron lost his breath and was shot back. "That was almost too easy, Ron. Paddock may not appreciate that."

"Funny, you tosser. I still have your bloody glasses," Ron said, getting up.

"Well, that's next," Harry said. He raised his wand but this time he was ready.

"Protego!" Ron hollered. Whatever spell Harry casted at him simply deflected away. He felt a strong rush of victory, and he lowered the shield.

Harry gawked at him. "That was quick, Ron."

"Yeah?" Ron said. "How's this?" Before Harry even had time to move Ron held up his wand again and shouted, "Expelliarmus!" For some reason his focus was heightened in the dark.

Harry was thrown back and his wand was disarmed from him. He hit his head against the ground, and Ron finally figured it was safe to walk over to him. Wand still at the ready, he placed Harry's glasses on his chest. "There you go, mate."

Harry didn't even seem that upset. He put them back on. "Bloody hell you arsehole. That was really good."

"Eh, it was okay," he said, though he felt the rush expand. A slightly buzzing hit his ears.

"It was more than okay," Harry said, getting up. "That was brilliant. You were really fast. Night dueling may be your specialty. Paddock won't be enough for you, mate."

Ron blushed. "We'll see."

"Lambrick should see it," Harry urged.

"Maybe," he said gently. "So, did I hurt you?"

"You weren't that great," Harry answered, pushing him. "Let's go back inside. I think I've taken enough as a blind man."

"You're the one that always wants to practice," Ron said as they made their way inside.

* * *

Ron rolled to his stomach and read his Lambrick acceptance letter again. He had the words memorized now. Reciting them over in his mind didn't help anymore. He turned over again and ran his fingers through his hair. It was way too early for him to be awake on an off day, but he couldn't sleep. The only thing on his mind was Lambrick. He smiled as he thought about his mini duel with Harry. He felt guilty for being so proud of it and wanting to do it again. He figured that he would have many chances if he went to Lambrick. He wanted to duel and practice with the very best. He wanted something more like George did and like Hermione did. He wanted his own spot of glory. The more he thought about it, the more the answer kicked him in the bollocks. It was clear. He pulled out his acceptance letter from Paddock and read it again. There was no need to compare anymore. Only one letter made him feel anything close to what he did the night before.

He quietly got dressed and slipped out of the room without disturbing Harry. Luckily, his dad was not up yet so he was able to leave the house without anyone noticing. He walked to the edge of the perimeter and Apparated to the Ministry. Nervous flies swarmed his stomach as he made the journey to Kingsley's office. His palms itched and his stomach was in knots, but he knew what he had to do. He had to be smart and sensible. He had to make the right decision. Kingsley's door was open. As always he was buried under stacks of parchment and was furiously writing away.

Ron cleared his throat. "Sir?"

"Yes, Ron, come in," Kingsley said, not looking up. "I don't have a lot of time to chat today, I'm afraid."

"This won't take long." Ron stepped into his office and stood by his desk.

Kingsley finally looked up. "What can I help you with?"

Ron swallowed the rock of nerves. "Nothing, sir. I'm here to tell you that I wrote Lambrick, and I'd like for you to send it off for me." He pulled his confirmation letter out of his back pocket and handed it to him.

Kingsley stood. "You want to go to the next phase?"

"Yes sir," he answered.

"And you know that you won't be able to make your interview with Paddock if you go to the next phase, correct?" Kingsley asked.

He nodded. "Yes sir. I know what I'm giving up. This is what I want to do."

"I hope that it is, Ron. I hope you're doing this for you," Kingsley said.

"I am. I've had a lot of people tell me what they think, but this has to be about me. I want to push myself as far as I possibly

can. I want to be the best, and I want be taught by the best. I think I've earned it, sir." He looked Kingsley's directly in the eyes to show him that he was serious.

Kingsley eyed him for a moment before grinning. "You have earned it. All right, I'll send this off right away. Expect a confirmation notice sometime soon. It will tell you your day and time for the meeting."

Ron held out his hand. "Thank you, sir."

Kingsley shook it. "I didn't do anything. This was your decision. This has always been your achievement and your choice. You'll have to remember that if you want to be successful at Lambrick."

Ron already felt anticipation grow at the thought of training at Lambrick. "I will, sir. I won't take up any more of your time."

"Well, hold on," Kingsley said. "I do have one piece of advice."

"Yes?" Ron asked, ready to take whatever he would give him.

He folded his arms across his chest. "You should probably tell your parents. I get a letter from your mother telling me about your surprise going away party to Paddock."

Ron looked down. "Right away, sir."

Telling his parents seemed a lot harder than Kingsley made it sound. He didn't want them to be angry with him for lying, but he didn't want to keep it from them any longer. Especially since his whole body seemed lighter and stronger for making the decision. Nevertheless, any confidence he felt vanished as he opened the kitchen door. His mum, dad, and Harry were at the table.

"Good, you're back. What did Kingsley say?" his mum asked.

His eyes grew. "What?" He had no idea how she knew already.

"Didn't you see him this morning, dear?" she asked.

He rubbed his palms against his thighs. ""Yeah, but how did you know?"

She stopped cutting bacon and stared at him. They all did. "Sweetheart, you told me yesterday that you were going to talk to him about why your letter to Paddock was taking so long. Are you feeling okay?"

"Lack of food makes him thick in the mornings," Harry teased.

"You could have gone in with me, Ron. At least you would've been coherent when you spoke to him," his dad said with a wink.

Ron's insides jumbled and grasped at things to say, but he couldn't find anything. All he could think of was the truth and he decided to tell it. "I didn't talk to him about Paddock. We talked about Lambrick."

Harry's eyes seemed to light up at the name and his mum frowned.
"But why? Are you considering them as well?"

"Not considering, considered. I've already made my decision. I sent my letter in to Lambrick, and I told Kingsley not to send mine to Paddock," Ron said.

Harry got out of his chair. "That means you opened your letter. That means you go in?"

Ron rubbed his neck. "Yeah, I made it to the next phase."

"Ron, that's excellent! That's amazing!" his dad said, getting up and hugging him.

Harry made some sort of cheering noise and clapped him on the back. "I knew it! This is brilliant! I knew you'd make it!"

He couldn't help but to smile and feel even prouder. "Yeah. Whatever."

Harry's smile faded a little. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Yes, Ronald, why didn't you tell us?" his mum asked with no hint of happiness in her voice.

Ron rubbed his neck harder and shrugged. "I dunno. I didn't think I'd get in, and I was set on Paddock. I just decided to open it one night and after reading it all, I didn't know what to do."

"So, instead of coming to your family you lied?" she asked.

"Molly, he's telling us now," his dad said.

"No, Arthur, that doesn't matter. If our own son can't trust us enough to be honest then what kind of a family do we have here?" she asked.

Ron looked down. "I'm sorry, mum. I know I should have told you, but I was really confused and you made your point from the beginning that you wanted me to go to Paddock. It's all you've been talking about since I got the letter. I didn't want you to be disappointed."

"Disappointed? That's what you think I'd be? Ron, I was happy that you got into Paddock because you seemed happy. You've been talking about being an Auror for years, and I thought it was what you wanted. Are you saying it's my fault that you were confused?" she asked.

"No, that's not what I'm saying. I know it's not your fault. It's mine, but what was I supposed to say? You're throwing this big party for me and everyone is telling me all these different things. I had to make my own decision, and I didn't feel like I was. I do now," he said.

"Ron, how do you know about that?" his dad said, looking at Harry.

"I didn't say anything," Harry said.

"He didn't tell me, and it doesn't matter. Look, I'm sorry that I lied," he said. "Mum, I'm really sorry."

She walked over to him. "If Lambrick is what you want, then it's fine with me. I'm proud of you either way. I just want you to take everything that you can while it's here. I don't want any more heartache for you or for this family. It's all I was trying to do with your party and pushing you toward Paddock. I want this family whole again, but if we're lying to each other over simple things like this, then it won't happen."

"Molly, dear," his dad said.

"No, I've said my word. Ron, you're eighteen. You're an adult, and no one can make you do anything but you. I'm only here to help in whatever way that I can. I wish you and your brother would realize that," she said.

Ron's heart fell. "Mumâ€!"

She kissed his cheek. "I'm happy for you, dear. I'll take care of cancelling your party, don't worry." She patted his cheek before leaving the kitchen and walking up the stairs.

Ron moved to go after her but his dad touched his arm. "Let her be."

"I didn't mean to upset her," he said, feeling tightness in his chest.

"I know you didn't. She's just really sensitive about all this. She was already worried about you going to Paddock and now that you might go to Lambrick which is even more intense, she's terrified," his dad explained. "And it doesn't help that she's worried about keeping the family together."

"I can leave if you two want to talk," Harry said.

"No need. You're a part of our family, too. You both should know that Molly is going through a lot of stress. She's better than she was, but you know how she gets," his dad said.

Ron sat at the table and put his face in his hands. "I'm such an arsehole."

His dad pulled his hands away and gave him a stern expression. "Ron, I mean it. Don't you dare start this. Your mother and I are proud of you, and we both want you to go to your Lambrick trial. Don't let this change your mind. Do you understand me?"

He nodded. "Yes, I understand."

"Good. I'll check on her but then I have to leave." His dad went after her.

Ron groaned. "Fucking hell, Harry. Ow!"

Harry pulled his fist away from his arm and glared at him. "You might get away with lying to your parents and to your brothers and whoever else, but don't lie to me. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I know, damn it. I was fucking stupid, okay? I just didn't want anyone else telling me what I should do. I wanted to figure it out for myself and I did. I'm happy with my decision," he said.

Harry smiled again. "I'm happy with your decision, too. Shit, this is great. We have to much to still work on."

"I know but not now. I need to talk to my mum." Ron got up from the table and went directly to their room. He knocked on the door. His dad opened it. He didn't have to say anything. He nodded and turned back to her. "I'll see you later, dear. I love you."

"I love you, too," she said. His dad gave him shoulder a squeeze and walked past him.

He stood at the doorway and watched her on the bed. "Mum?"

"Yes, come in," she said, wiping her eyes.

Being his parent's room always made him feel like he was in different house. Their room was the biggest and had dark wooden floors and walls. Ron figured that it was the only original part of the house. Their bed was humongous and ancient. He remembered snuggling between them on the squishy mattress as a kid when he got scared from scary stories that his brothers told him. His parents always wrapped him in the blankets his great gran had knitted by hand and moved their bodies as closely as they could to him. It was the safest place in the world to him back then.

He sat next to her and looked around the room. There were pictures all over the walls, on the dressers, and the side tables of his family. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, great relatives, and their family scattered about. He couldn't move his eyes anywhere without seeing freckly faces, gingers, or older white haired wizards and witches. It made him smile. No matter what anyone thought of his family and no matter how he felt about it sometimes, he'd never wanted to be a part of another. He would lay down his life for every last one of them.

"Ron?" his mum said.

He finally looked at her. "I'm sorry that I wasn't honest with you."

"Oh, sweetheart, I may have overacted. Don't apologize," she said.

"No, I need to. I should have been up front about my doubts. I led everyone on. That's my fault. I don't want you to think that you made me uncomfortable," he explained.

"I wasn't trying to. I really thought it's what you wanted, and if you were unsure about it then I pushed you to let you know that you deserved to go. I don't want you to get hurt. If you don't make it through the next phase at Lambrick, then I don't want you to think that you're not good enough. You have no idea how great you are, Ron, but the world can be a harsh place and unfortunate things happen to good people," she said, her eyes watering.

"I know they do, mum. That's why I was scared to say anything or turn my letter in. I don't want any more bad news either, but I have to try anyway. I want to try," he said.

"And I want you to try. You deserve to go, and you're so capable. I want you to have everything you want in life. I always have, and I wish that I could have—"

"You've given me everything I've ever needed, mum. That's all that matters," he interrupted.

She sniffed and wiped her tears away. "That's sweet but I know that we were never able to give you all the things that you wanted. That matters, too. It matters to indulge your kids now and again. Oh, you all are grown up now, and it's given me time to think of everything I've done as a mother."

Hearing her question herself almost broke everything inside him. He had no idea how someone so amazing could question herself. "Mum, we all appreciate everything you've done for us. You and dad are the best parents that we could have. I'm thankful for you both. Harry, he's downstairs right now, and he can't tell his parents about Lambrick. Hermione is constantly wondering if she's devoting herself enough to the Muggle world because her parents are constantly on her about it. I'm the lucky one this time. I get to say that my parents are alive and are here for me no matter what. Mum, I love you." The tightness was at his eyes now, but he didn't let himself crumble. He would always be strong for her.

Her lip trembled and more tears fell. She took his hand and smiled. The war had made her body smaller and her skin lost its radiant glow, but her smile was still soft and her large brown eyes shined. They were Ginny's eyes. They were Charlie's eyes. They were Fred's eyes, and they were beautiful. Everything about his mum was beautiful. "I love you, too, Ron. You have no idea how much I love you and how much I still want to protect you from everything. You're such a man now, but I still want to keep you safe."

"I am safe, mum, and I always remember to be. No matter what being an Auror will make me stronger and more capable. I want to make people feel as safe as you've always made me feel. You don't have to worry because I'll always come back. I won't let anything else break up our family. I'll protect us. I want to be an Auror,

but in the end it's for us. It's for this family." He wiped her tear away and hoped that she believed him. He had never been so sure about anything before.

"Oh, Ron, oh my baby boy," she cried.

He hugged her tightly and let her get her frustrations and words out. All the while he rubbed her back and looked at the picture out front on her side table. It was the one taken of the nine of them during their vacation in Egypt. They were all smiling and waving at him happily. Ron smiled back. He would always protect them.

* * *

**** This chapter is dedicated to all the Ron Haters I've encountered over the years since joining the HP fandom years ago. This chapter is dedicated to everyone who says Ron didn't give a shit during the ball in GoF. This chapter is dedicated to everyone who thinks Ron's not smart enough or skilled enough to ever take Harry on. This chapter is dedicated to all the haters who have pm'd me to tell me that this story is complete rubbish because Ron would never be this caring or understanding or strong or kind or emotional or complex or layered. This is a big "FUCK YOU!" to people who take the piss out of Ron and say it would have been better off being him rather than Fred who died. This is you for, people. Don't mess with Ron. He. Is. King.

Thanks for reading!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 21*: No matter what

Thanks for the reviews and positive words on my latest author's note. I was simply fed up with the bullshit over this story and peoples ideas of Ron. I love him. I have a tattoo of a lion's paw crushing a spider on my foot just in his honor. I'm Team Weasley. Always and Forever.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

"Now, you know where to find us?" his mum asked for the thirty-seventh time.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yes, mum, we've been to Bill's house before. We know where it is."

"Honestly, Molly, we should go," his dad said, pulling on her arm.

She didn't budge. She looked between Ron and Harry again. "How about food?"

Harry frowned. "Yeahâ€¦ foodâ€¦ it's that green stuff that floats to the surface of the pond every few days, right?"

Ron scratched his head. "Yeah, I think you're right. We sprinkle dragon scales on it and then eat it, right?"

His dad laughed, and his mum huffed. "This isn't funny, boys."

"Mum, just relax. You're going to Bill's for two whole days. I think Harry and I can handle being here by ourselves," Ron reassured for the thirty-seventh time.

Harry patted her arm. "Mrs. Weasley, you and Mr. Weasley deserve a break. Let Bill take care of you. We'll be fine here."

"Yes, love, listen to them." His dad moved his mouth close to her ear. "Listen as the eighteen-year-olds explain that they will be able to eat and function for a weekend without you."

She pushed him away. "Arthur, leave me alone! I get it, okay? I justâ€¦ I haven't left any of my kids alone in the house for ages."

"It's good to rekindle old traditions," Ron said with a shrug. "Mum, everything will be okay. All we're going to do is practice and slug around like prats."

"I'm looking forward to it," Harry added.

She looked between them again and sighed. "Oh, fine. I trust you two. Come here." She pulled them both into a fierce, bone-crushing hug and kissed their heads. "If anything goes wrong, come over right away."

"We will, Mrs. Weasley," Harry choked out, pulling away.

"Bye, mum. Bye, dad," Ron said.

"Bye boys. Come on, dear," his dad said, pulling her over the threshold and down the path. She kept her eyes on them the entire way until they could Apparate off the property.

When they were finally gone, Ron shut the kitchen door and leaned against it. Harry sniggered and sat at the table. "Wow, I think that took almost an hour."

He groaned and sat on top of the table. "Leave it to mum to find something to worry about even when she's told not to. It's two days. Fucking hell."

Harry looked at the door. "I don't mind, really. It's nice having a mum to fuss over you. It feels good."

Ron watched him. Sometimes Harry's eyes traveled so far away, and he seemed to live a different life in his head. He figured that life involved his parents and his real family. Ron never knew what to say when the moment happened. He wasn't sure if there was anything to say. He figured that it was best to let his friend live a happy life, even if it was only in his mind. "Yes, it does, but it's better to have a stress free mum. Bill couldn't have picked a better time to ask them to visit."

Harry finally returned to the present. "I agree. You and your dad don't hear half the things I do when it's just her and me here. She always wants to know the facts and dates and feelings of everything. She actually asked me the other day if you and Hermione had ever gotten close in the house."

Ron cringed. "What did you tell her?"

"That I had no idea. Do you really think that I would tell your mum about you and Hermione? Anyway, I knew that she probably wanted to ask me things about Ginny next, so I told her that I had to practice. It was awful," he explained.

"Nice work," Ron said.

"It was more for me than it was for you. Telling your mum about all the things you and Hermione have done in your room and everywhere else would take hours," Harry cheeked.

Ron kicked his thigh. "That's not true. I wish it was, but it's not."

Harry stretched out his arms and smirked. "Well, maybe I'm speaking for myself."

Ron quickly stood. "Okay, I need to go to work."

Harry took an orange from the fruit bowl and squeezed it in his hands. "Let's see. There's the shower and the couch and my cot and her bedâ€!"

"I'm leaving now," Ron said. He started to walk out of the house, but Harry followed him.

"And against the shed and near the pond and on your school trunk--"

Ron finally stopped and turned around. "You're lying."

Harry raised an eyebrow and miserably failed to hold back a grin. "Am I?"

He walked a little closer to him. "Tell me that you did not shag my sister on top of my school trunk."

"Umm," Harry mocked. "Wait. You're right. We didn't."

He exhaled. "Good."

"Actually, Ginny sat on it with her back leaning against your bed, and I was on my knees in front of her. We didn't have sex that time but I did-

"Fuck you!" Ron said, picking up some dirt and chucking it at him. "Pack your bags and get the bloody hell out of my house!" Harry doubled over in laughter and Ron wanted nothing more than to punch him in the bollocks. However, hearing him laugh wholeheartedly was rare and, this time at least, it was more important to him than seeking revenge. "I really need to go. I don't want to know any more."

Harry caught his breath and stopped laughing. "Wait. Wait a second. You're right, I'm sorry. I made that up."

"Really?" Ron said.

He nodded. "Oh, yeah. We never had sex on the couch, just felt each other up a bunch of times."

"Urgh! You arsehole! I want you gone by the time I get back!" Ron said, turning away from him and practically running down the path.

Harry continued to laugh behind him. "But I was gonna have dinner ready for you!"

He didn't turn around, only gave him the finger before Apparating. He almost slammed the door shut when he made it to the shop. "What's your problem?" George asked.

"Harry. He's a prick," Ron said.

He shrugged. "I could have told you that."

Ron went behind the register and searched for his clipboard. "No. Honestly. Would you like to know all the places where he's shagged Ginny?"

George hissed. "Stop right there."

"Exactly. I'm going to have nightmares for a week. I don't know if I'll be able to step foot inside the house ever again," he whined.

George chuckled. "Well, you can't stay with me. I'm having guests. Well, just one." He looked ahead and Ron followed his gaze. Angelina was rearranging shelves.

"You're having her work?" he asked.

"Why not? Lee's off and she has the best set of hands in the world. Oi! Don't slack. Re-due those shelves!"

"Piss off, George! I can't believe that you're oh! Hi, Ron!" She dropped her stacks and paced over to them.

No matter how much time went by, Ron still felt a little shamefaced being around her. He constantly thought about fifth year and the quidditch disaster that he caused her. "Just so you know, I think it's shit that George is making you work."

She nudged George's arm. "I finally get a day off, and me makes me sweat."

"You love it, and I love seeing you work up a sweat," George said with a wink.

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever. So, Ron, I heard that you made it to the second trial. That's brilliant. Lambrick is a really impressive school, and they don't take just anyone. You must have a lot talent."

"Or a lot of memory charms," George breathed.

Ron chose to ignore him. "Thanks. I'm trying not to get too excited about it, though. The list still has to be narrowed down to forty."

"I'm sure you'll be great. If you get accepted then maybe we can have a real party," she said. She then looked at George. "And maybe I'll be invited."

He glanced at her for a second before looking down and rubbing his neck. "I know."

"I better get back to it," she said softly, squeezing his hand before walking away.

Ron raised his eyebrow, and George shook his head. He held up a finger. "Hey, babe? I'm gonna look for the payment stub. I think I left it upstairs."

"Okay!" she called.

He jerked his head and Ron followed his upstairs to the flat. "What was that about?" he asked, closing the door.

George sighed and went into the kitchen. "She wants to know when I'm going to tell everyone that we're dating. I reckon our grace period is over."

Ron sat on the couch. "I'm surprised that it lasted this long. I can't believe that you haven't told anyone yet."

He came back with a cloth sack. "I know. I'm the world's biggest arsehole for it. She thinks that I'm hiding her for the sake of hiding her now. That's not it. It's just not an easy thing to do."

"Yeah, but you have to. No one is going to care, and well, you don't have to worry about her fitting in or getting along with mum and dad. They already know what's it's going to be like," he said.

For a second George's face contorted into some sort of scowl but after a second he laughed, an honest laugh, like Harry had done earlier. "Bloody hell, you've got a point there. Mum and dad may forget that it's me and not Fred. He'd love that." He kept laughing, and Ron couldn't help but chuckle as well. It was the first time George laughed while speaking about Fred. There wasn't one trace of sadness. He stopped and rubbed his stomach. "I'm gonna miss your humor when you leave."

"Don't say that. I don't know when I'm leaving for anything," Ron said, not wanting to think about it. After being George's aid for so long, he didn't know how he was supposed to pack up and leave him. He didn't think it was right.

"You can't stay here forever, Ron. Even if you don't go to Lambrick, you'll be going to another school sometime in October," George explained.

"Yeah butâ€œ;I don't want to think about itâ€œ;" Ron didn't know how to explain it. It was different with George. With Hermione or Ginny or even Harry he could say how leaving would be difficult, but he couldn't tell George. He didn't know how to tell his older brother that he was afraid to leave him by himself.

George seemed to understand some of his discomfort. "You want to see what I got for you and Harry?" Ron perked up. "It's a present for your pre-acceptance. I reckon making the top sixty is worth a bit of celebration." He pulled a small bottle of Firewhiskey out of the sack.

Ron gaped. "George, you're not seriously giving this to me, are you?"

"But I am. I don't expect you and Harry to drink the whole bloody thing but have some. It's the only chance you'll get to without mum and dad being around. Here." He handed him the bottle.

He took it and felt so guilty for being excited to try some again. "Cheers."

George snatched the bottle back. "Hold on. I really don't want you two to end up in the hospital because you were stupid. We already know that you're a lightweight so don't start chugging it down. Stop when you think to yourself, I can take two more."

"Okay. Okay. Give me the bottle," Ron urged.

"Do you promise to be careful? You'll look out for yourself and Harry?" George asked.

"Yes, we'll be fine. I promise," he said.

George gave him a once over and put it back into the sack. "Okay. I trust you."

He handed the sack over and Ron clutched it in anticipation. "You're great for this."

"Thank you, but I'm not the originator. When Fred and I got the lease for this place, Charlie gave us a bottle," he explained.

Ron smiled wide. "I wish he was around more."

"Yeah, me too. I feel outnumbered. There's always been an equal balance of height versus brawn," George said, shoving him.

Ron shoved him back. "How many times am I gonna have to say it? I'm going to bulk up once I get to camp and then I'll be the alpha Weasley, possessing both height and brawn."

"You wish, little brother. I'll always have height where it counts," he said with a wink.

Ron gagged and shot up. "No more! No more sharing!"

That night Ron returned home in an unnaturally good mood, but it rapidly faded as he saw Harry, once again, at the kitchen table. "I thought I told you to be gone by now?"

He rolled his eyes. "That was hours ago. Are you still mad?"

Ron gave him a once over. "Do you at least have my dinner?"

"Yeah, here." Harry threw him a now soft banana from the fruit bowl.

"Delicious," Ron mumbled, walking to the staircase.

He grabbed his sleeve. "Wait. You can't get comfortable yet. We have night practice."

"Oh, come on. I'm tired," Ron said. "Can't we do this tomorrow night? I have something better for us to do."

"It'll have to wait," Harry said simply. He nudged his head to the door.

Ron scowled and almost slammed the sack on the table. He yanked off his jacket and marched outside. "I better get in with all this bloody practicing we're doing."

"That's the whole idea. Feel free to kick my arse when you're on the train to Lambrick," Harry said. He put his lit wand tip close to his workbook and squinted. "Okay, um, according to the book—"

Ron snorted. "According to the book? Mione? Is that you in there?"

Harry groaned. "Shut up! I'm beginning to understand her frustration with us. It's hard to do all this shit and have people listen to you."

"Stop nagging. That's only attractive when she does it," he said.

"Whatever. Like I said, according to the book it's important to always be able to produce your Patronus. It's more than just help

from dementors. It's your signature and sometimes the only way of identifying yourself," Harry explained.

"Can we skip that one? We both know how to do it, and mine gets annoying really fast." He wished that he had a powerful and larger than life Patronus. Instead, he had a Jack Russell terrier. It didn't make any sense to him. Everyone else's Patronus matched their personality or lifestyle in some way, but he had a small, yapping dog. Life was unfair.

"I don't know. We're probably going to be working with them since they put it in the book information. There's obviously something more that they want us to be able to do with them." Harry looked over the pages again as if it would provide answers.

He waved a hand. "Oh well. We don't know what exactly that is now, so lets not worry about it. I'm more concerned with actual battle tactics."

Harry threw the book down. "Yeah, you're right. Okay. Disarm me." Ron held up his wand, but Harry moved so fast that he couldn't catch him. Before he knew it his wand was on the ground and he was knocked back. "Come on, Ron."

"That's not bloody fair. You and the disarming spell are joined at the bloody waist," Ron said, getting up. He was already frustrated.

"No. Now you're wandless. Come at me!" Harry called.

"What are you talking about?" Ron asked.

"The book says that we should practice our basic skill of defense. We won't always have our wands on us," he explained.

"Ah, why didn't you say so?" Ron hunched down and charged at him. Harry held his wand tightly and braced himself, but he knew where to get him. With five older brothers, he knew how to wrestle. As their bodies connected, Ron curled his fingertips into Harry's ribs. He hollered and dropped his wand. They both fell to the ground, and Ron tried to make a grab for it, but Harry was still too fast. He was able to snatch it, but Ron pounced on him. He tackled him on his back but was hit once again. He flew back. It was harder in the dark and with magic against him.

Harry staggered to his feet, out of breath. He spit out a bit of blood. "I hit my jaw against the ground."

Ron winced as he pushed himself back up. He wiped his brow. "Who cares? Let me come at you again."

"You don't want to switch?" Harry asked.

"No. I'm taking it from you. I don't need magic." He backed up to where he was originally. Harry nodded and braced himself once more. Ron charged a little faster and harder but was still thrown back. He went again with no success. Again, but still came up

short, and once more, but only coming out with a bloody nose. He rested his hands on his knees and took in sharp breaths.

"What? Are you quitting on me?" Harry panted. He held his palm against his ribcage and sucked the blood from his lip.

Ron glared at him and dabbed his nose. He was tired, angry, embarrassed, and achy, but it didn't matter. He would spend all night trying. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? I'm ready." He rubbed his sore fingertips together, and Harry braced himself. Ron charged at him but this time he used his legs. He raised his knee and smashed it into Harry's hipbone. His shoulder dug into his neck and Harry completely toppled over. Ron used his lanky limbs to pin him down while he twisted Harry's wrist and yanked his wand away. He kicked himself back and when Harry found his footing and charged him, he pointed the wand to Harry's chest. They froze and stared at each other. The only sounds came from nature around them and their own shaky breathing.

The corner of Harry's mouth sported blood and he was sweaty and muddy. He eyed him in such a fierce way, and Ron held it. He could feel the swelling from his nose and his knees and ribs throbbed. What made it so bizarre was that it felt incredible. It was almost as if years of pent up aggression between the two of had finally come out. As they had dueled, they had released the old frustrations and disagreements.

Harry swiped his mouth. "You got it."

"Yeah," Ron breathed, "I did. You put up a good fight."

"So do you." Harry stood and held out his hand.

Ron took it and pulled himself up. He didn't know what to say.
"Are we done here?"

"Yeah. I should probably see if I'm missing any teeth," Harry cheeked.

Whatever happened between them outside didn't follow them into the house. Ron decided to save the whiskey until they were both in better health. Harry went to bed almost immediately after checking his mouth and taking a shower. Ron stayed up for a while and thought about how he hadn't given up. He didn't know why it was so important to prove himself to Harry. He never wanted to quit in front of him. He wanted to be as good as him and better. He wanted to prove to everyone at Lambrick that he could hold his own. He wanted to prove to himself that he could hold his own. His eyes drifted closed as the thought of making it to the top forty fogged his mind.

"AAAAHHHHHHH!" Ron shot up and felt for his wand on his side table. He toppled out of bed and rubbed his eyes. "AAAAHHHHHHH!" It was Harry's voice. He ran and tripped over to his cot. He was thrashing in bed with his eyes tightly shut, and he was drenched in sweat. Harry was clearly having another nightmare.

Ron dropped his wand and sat on the edge of the cot. He tried shaking him but Harry kept screaming. It was deafening and stiffened his muscles. He shook him harder. "Harry! Harry! Wake up! It's only a dream! Wake up!" He shook him forcefully, and Harry finally opened his eyes. There was barely any green visible. His eyes were almost black. "Harry?" Harry looked around frantically. He barely breathed and he paled more and more by the second. He opened his mouth, and a terrible sound exploded from his throat. "Shit. Let's get you to the toilet." Ron took his arm and draped it over his shoulder. He practically carried him to the bathroom. He lifted the seat just in time for Harry to spew violently into it.

Ron looked away. The sound itself was enough. He crouched beside him and rubbed his back. Harry continued to heave. "Come on, mate," he whispered.

After almost a minute of constant puking, Harry coughed and collapsed to the floor. Ron's heart began to race. He was so pale and clammy. "Harry. Come on. Say something. Talk to me." Harry didn't talk. He clutched his stomach and moaned. Ron didn't know what to do. He thought about what Hermione would do. He wished that she could be there or even his mum, anyone. There was no one. He had to do something. "I'll be right back, all right? I'll be right back. Don'tâ€¢don't do anything or go anywhere. Do you hear me? Nod if you understand me."

Harry coughed and nodded. He moaned once more and shivered. Ron didn't want to leave him, but he couldn't just watch him either. He rushed out of the bathroom and ran to his room. He grabbed a new shirt and jeans from his trunk. He then rushed to the kitchen and put the kettle on. He ran back to the bathroom and pulled off Harry's sweaty and puked on shirt and jeans. He grabbed all the towels in the bathroom and soaked them in cold water. Harry's body was limp and he barely moved. Stinging fright cracked through Ron's spine, and he could already feel the world disappearing. He dropped to his knees and patted his cheek. "Hey. Hey. Look at me, Harry! Look at me!"

He put Harry's head on his thigh and watched as Harry's eyes tried to find his. They finally settled. "R-Ron?"

"Yeah, it's Ron. I'm here. Do you need to throw up again?" Ron asked, feeling overflowed with relief that Harry was at least talking and somewhat coherent.

He shook his head. "N-no. I'm f-fine."

"You're not fine. You're bloody sick or something. Come on. Let me help you." Ron moved away from a moment and used the wet towels to cool him down. Harry shivered but wiped his face, neck, and chest with them. Ron then helped him to dry off and change into the fresh clothes. Harry wobbled and his skin was almost transparent. Ron wanted to take him to the hospital. He wanted to help him more. "Maybe you should see a healer."

Somehow the word jolted Harry. His eyes widened, and he grabbed his arm. "No! I'm fine. I don't need to see anyone. I'm-I'm not sick."

"Yes you bloody are. Look at you." Ron feared that Harry was still delirious. The bloke obviously hadn't remembered the last few minutes.

"No. Please. I just need some water. Please, trust me. I'm okay." Harry looked at him, and his eyes didn't roam. They stayed glued to him.

Ron was torn. He wanted to get him real help, but he had to honor what he wanted. "Fine. I won't take you, but if you start fading out again then I will. I fucking mean it."

"Okay. That's fair," Harry said. He tried to stand, and Ron helped him to his feet. Harry glanced around the bathroom. "Shit. I messed up in here."

"It's okay. I'll take care of it. Let's go to the kitchen." Ron slowly led him by the forearm. He sat him at the table and gave him a tall glass of cold water.

Harry chugged it down in almost one gulp and loudly exhaled when he was done. "That's feels so much better." He touched his face. "Where are my glasses?"

"Here." Ron pulled them from his pocket and handed them to him. Once Harry had them back on, he seemed to relax more. He rubbed his scar and stared at the table. Ron said nothing. He fixed their tea and let Harry search for the right words. However, he wasn't speaking or moving at all. "Harry."

"I don't want to talk about it," he said at once.

Ron sat next to him and pushed his tea toward him. "Normally I wouldn't care, but I won't let it go this time. What the hell happened to make youâ€œto make that happen to you? Does your scar hurt?"

"No, and that's the point. For me toâ€œhave a dream like that, I feel like it should." Harry took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes roughly.

Ron knew that he was trying to hold back tears. "Hey, talk to me. After all of that, I should know what's going on. What did you see? Why did you lose it like that?"

"Fucking hell, Ron. Please, don't make me talk about it! Don't make me think about it again. I just want to forget it. I don't want that ever happening again." He bit his lip hard and closed his eyes.

Ron could almost feel the intensity radiating off him. It was enough to make him want to back off but he couldn't. "â€œWas it me?"

Harry banged his hands on the table. "Yes, Ron. It was you. It's always you and Hermione and Ginny and everyone else but it was different this time. Usually you all are there and I have to save you or something or I'm watching you all being carried away but this timeâ€œI saw it happen. I saw it happen to each one of you."

"What did you see, Harry? It may help if you talk about it. Get it out of your head," Ron urged.

Harry chewed on his nails. "I-I was in the graveyard. I was jinxed to the ground. There were these death eaters holding me down and circling me. Then Voldemort appeared. He came with a line of people behind him, chained. It was you, Hermione, Ginny, your parents, Sirius, Lupin, Tonks, and Cedric. All of you were pale and chained and silent. Thenâ€œ; he stopped again.

Ron patted his knee for support though he wanted him to stop. He felt lightheaded. "It's okay."

"No, it's not. This is the point where I wake up usually, but I didn't. One by one I watched him tear you each to pieces. I couldn't move or help. I was stuck there watching him rip your skin off and you were all screaming. You were screaming at me, Ron. You wanted me to help everyone else first but I couldn't. Thenâ€œ;then my parents cameâ€œ;"

"Oh, Harry," Ron breathed.

"They came and stood behind me. They got the death eaters to let me go, but Voldemort killed my dad and threw my mum on the ground. I heard him murder my dad, but I watched him kill my mum. Then he turned the wand to meâ€œ;and I was thankful. I was happy that he was going to end my life because I didn't want to go on without the rest of you."

Ron had to look away. He rubbed his palms into his thighs over and over until they were numb. "I'm-I'm sorry."

"That's not how it ended," Harry whispered. His lip trembled and he rubbed his eyes again. "Fred showed up. As Voldemort pointed the wand at me, Fred showed up and stood between us. He took the curse. I watched him die. As soon as he died, all the screaming got louder. I saw everyone's body, but I was still alive. Voldemort just left before he could finish me off."

"Stop it!" Ron yelled. He shot up and stumbled back to the sink. He was so shaky and his heart panged.

"I'm sorry, Ron," Harry sobbed. "I've never had a dream like that before. It's never felt so real, and it's never been so gruesome. Voldemort is fucking dead, and he's been dead for months. When people see me, they want to thank me for making the world a safer place, but it's not safe for me. I still feel him, Ron. I can still feel him inside me sometimes. I defeated him, but he won't leave." He hung his head and pulled on his hair.

Ron's knees wanted to give out. He had no energy, and he wanted to block out everything to keep from feeling the pain but seeing

Harry, seeing the strongest and bravest person he knew crumple, made him push himself up and walk over to him. He kneeled beside him. "He didn't win. You did. He's gone, and you're still here. We all are. It's ridiculous to expect yourself to be over everything this soon. You've been dealing with this since you were a baby. You have to give yourself time."

He sniffed. "How much time? My meeting with Lambrick will be at the end of the month. If I get in, then I'll be at camp next month. I can't be weak like this. I'll never make it as a weak person."

"You're not weak. You couldn't be weak if you wanted to. Do you know how many people would have nuttered off by now? You haven't. You're still you. Voldemort isn't apart of you. He can't hurt you, and he can't hurt me or Hermione or Ginny or anyone else. You stopped him. He's not here, and he never will be again. What you feelâ€¦what you feel is guilt."

"Of course I feel guilt, Ron. Iâ€¦Fredâ€!" Harry stopped talking. He bit his lip again.

Ron's chest hurt more. "I know. I know how you feel. I getâ€¦I get these things sometimes. Hermione says that they're panic attacks."

Harry looked up at him. "What?"

His cheeks burned. He had never openly talked about it before. "It's like my throat closes up. My heart races really fast and I sweat and I can't breathe or move. My entire body stiffens, and I feel like I'm going to die. I get them when I think about Fred or Hermione dying or something really awful happening. I can't stop them that well, and I never know when one's coming. I've only been able to really manage when Hermione's around. I don't know what I'm supposed to do when I have another one, and she's not here."

Harry's body softened. "Fucking hell. Have you always had them? Do your parents know?"

"No. They started sometime this summer, and no. Only you and Hermione know. It's not something that I want to talk about. It's a weakness, and it's scary. I don't want anything else pulling me down, and I don't want anyone to worry about me. There's so much from the war that's still weighing me down," Ron explained.

"It's weighing the both of us down. Oh, god, that dream was so awful. It was so real." Harry's body shuddered, and he wilted.

Ron rubbed his back and tried to be strong for him. He had to be strong for him. "It's over now. I can't begin to know what that was like for you, but I can say that I'm still here. My parents are at Bill's. Hermione and Ginny are sleeping at Hogwarts and everyone else is-is already dead. They can't be hurt anymore. Fred and your parentsâ€¦Voldemort and death eaters can't hurt them anymore."

Harry nodded and rocked slightly. "I want my parents. I don't know them, but I miss them so badly, if that's even possible."

"It is possible and I know you do, mate. I had almost two decades with Fred, but somehow I'm learning more about him now than ever before. I hate it. I really fucking hate it."

Harry wiped his eyes and let out a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Ron. I'm so sorry that you lost your brother. If there were any way to bring him back, then I'd do it. I mean that. Your family doesn't deserve to feel loss like this."

"And I'm sorry that you lost your parents and your godfather. You deserve to have your family. I'd do anything to help bring them back." Ron spoke with deepness and honestly. So much pulsed through him at once.

Harry took a big gulp of his tea and slammed the mug down. "I can't watch you die anymore. I don't know how many more times I can take it."

Ron gripped his arm. "You'll take it until it's over. It's not going to be like this forever. I promise."

"But—"

"Swear to me right now, Harry. I bloody mean it. You're not gonna give up on me, ever," he interrupted.

Harry sighed. "Of course I'm not. I swear. I just want it to end."

"It will. It has to. We aren't meant to always be like this. Things get better in time. They already have," Ron assured.
"I'm sure things have gotten better right here on this table with you and Ginny, right?"

Saying her name seemed to lift Harry's spirits. He grinned a little. "Not on the table but in one of these chairs, not sure which."

Ron stood up. "Hopefully not this one."

Harry chuckled. "Um, I should help clean up in the bathroom."

"No. I got it. You go rest. It won't help if you end up passing out in the middle of it," he cheeked.

Harry's cheeks flushed and he stood. "Okay. I am really tired."

"I'll be there soon. Try and get some rest, yeah? I'll be down here if you need me again." Ron squeezed his shoulder.

Harry nodded. "Okay. Um, I usually only get one really bad dream a time, so I think we're safe."

"Glad to know, mate."

Harry still looked at him and shifted awkwardly. "Thanks."

"No problem." Ron held out his hand. Harry shook it before slowly walked to the stars. Ron stood still and thought about what to do. He cleaned the dishes and put them away. He pulled off his slightly soaked shirt that a bit of puke on it and folded it with the rest of the soaked and dirty towels in the bathroom. He could have used magic, but for some reason he wanted to use his hands. He wanted to feel like he was doing something, like he was helping. As he cleaned up the water and sick, his eyes began to burn and his chest hurt and collapsed. He trembled back against the wall and dug his fingernails into his kneecaps.

Harry's body was lying before him. It was still and pale. He looked dead. Ron thought he was. One minute he had been dreaming about outdoing him and dueling him, and in the next instance he thought that he was going to lose him forever. It was overwhelming. Harry's dream was devastating. His little sister, his girlfriend, his parents being ripped to shreds, and Fred taking the final hit flooded his mind. All of it crushed down on him. All of it compressed him. He choked on air, and his muscles contorted. He was having a panic attack. He tried to move, but he couldn't. Everything was evaporating, and he couldn't see as tears clouded his eyes. Something had to come through. He needed something before his heart and lungs exploded.

He needed Hermione. He needed her large brown eyes and bushy hair. He needed her soft tan skin and small hands. He needed her bossy, sharp voice and faint giggle. He needed to spend the morning with her, fussing over homework and walking around the quidditch pitch. He needed their perfect day together. He felt her warm embrace and smelled the honey of her hair. He saw himself making love to her, and he heard her say how much she loved him. She told him to breathe, so he did. He breathed Hermione in and exhaled her out. The more he breathed, the more he relaxed. He blinked and moved his legs. His heart slowed, and his airway seemed to open. He gasped loudly and put a hand over his chest. "Hmm, Hermione," he choked aloud. He closed his eyes and thought about her sitting right next to him, holding him and telling him to breathe. He listened to her, and the wave of terror past. He settled and breathed deeply for several minutes before cleaning again.

He felt certain clarity when he finally made it upstairs. He was exhausted, dizzy and sore all over, but he also felt safe. Somehow Hermione was there even though she wasn't. Harry was asleep on his stomach. His wand and glasses were next to his pillow, and his hand was under them, ready to take up just in case. Ron felt for him so profoundly. Maybe he wasn't as untouchable as he always thought.

* * *

Ron woke up the next morning and immediately turned to Harry's cot. He wasn't there. Their dueling and the chaos of Harry's nightmare and his attack made him body feel like total rubbish. He was still so tired, but he decided to get up. After fixing himself he walked downstairs. Harry was on the couch and playing some sort of game with muggle cards. He remembered Hermione doing something similar on his bed. He sat next to him. He wasn't sure of what to say. Harry looked a lot better but anything had to be an improvement from last night's state.

"How long have you been up?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "Few hours, I guess. I couldn't stay asleep."

Ron nodded. "So, you're feeling better, then?"

"Yeah. You could have left some of the mess for me to clean," he said.

"No, it was fine. I told you that. I didn't mind."

Harry kept his eyes on the cards and flipped them over. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine," he answered. So much had been said already. He wanted to get past wherever they were. "What are you playing?"

"Solitaire."

"Can I play?" he asked.

Harry finally looked up and grinned. "It's called solitaire for a reason, Ron."

"Ohâ€¦right," Ron mumbled. Harry chuckled and shook his head. "Fuck off. It's still early, and I have to find something to eat."

"Actually, I took care of that," Harry said, getting up. "Come on."

Ron followed him into the kitchen. There were two plates of food on the table. He eyed the bacon sandwiches and eggs in shock. "You cooked this?"

"Yeah," Harry said casually, sitting down.

Ron sat down as well and continued to stare at the meal that smelled brilliant. "You know how to cook?"

"Some. The Dursley's made me cook for them all the time, and anytime Dudley's friends stayed over I was the one cooking them breakfast. I actually know what I'm doing. I've perfected the art of not burning," Harry explained.

"Impressive. If I would have known that you were going to cook for me, then I would have worn something more formal," Ron cheeked.

Harry blushed and hit his arm. "Don't take the piss. We have to eat something and wellâ€;it's the least I can doâ€;after last night." He looked away and Ron went back to starting at his breakfast. He didn't want to talk about it again, and he knew that Harry didn't either. So, he grabbed his sandwich and took a gigantic bite out of it. It was, in fact, delicious. All through breakfast Ron tried not to think about the conversation that had happened there the night before.

They were straightening up in silence when a knock hit the kitchen door. Ron frowned and turned. His eyes widened as he looked out the window and saw Neville Longbottom standing outside. "What in the bloody hell?"

Harry opened the door. "Neville?"

He smiled and waved. "Hey guys. Ah, can I come in?"

"Yeah, come on in," Ron said. Neville strutted through the threshold in a very slick and expensive set of black robes. "What's the occasion?" he asked, gesturing him to sit down.

Neville took a seat. "I'm leaving today for Fleming. I just wanted to come by and see you two."

"No offense, but how do you know that I live here?" Ron asked. He looked around his house for a moment before turning back to him. If this had happened a few years ago, he would have felt self-conscious and worried about what Neville would think of his home, but things like that didn't matter to him anymore.

Neville chuckled. "Hermione told me. She wrote to me when she first got back to Hogwarts, and she gave me your address. I didn't know when to come, but I wanted to surprise you guys. Keep you on your toes."

"Yeah, well, we have to be when you're dressed like this," Harry cheeked.

Neville sat a little taller and pretended to fasten an imaginary tie before laughing again. "Yeah, I feel like a git in all this. My gran wouldn't stop fussing over the fit at the tailors. It's the dress code. They want us to show up in our best before dragging us to our worse, I reckon."

Ron stared, almost star struck, at him. It was so strange to see Neville so much taller and leaner and confident but somehow it fit perfectly. "Wow. So, your training starts today?"

"I'm not sure. They weren't specific about what we would be doing first. They just want us dressed for it," Neville explained.

"That's incredible. It's so brilliant that you're actually doing it. You're going to an Auror training camp." Harry shook his head in amazement. "I can't wait to have that feeling."

Neville clasped his hands and exhaled deeply. "It's a little scary. I never really planned for this to be my life, but it's

what I know I can do. I want to do this, and I think I might be pretty good."

"You'll be more than good, Neville. You'll be great," Ron said. Neville smiled at him and nodded slightly. For so long Ron had pushed him to act tougher and more outspoken, and just a few months ago they had taken down a death eater together. So many things had changed.

"Thanks. I hope so. I really need this job to work, so I can get into herbology. I'm dying to get into the workshop. Hermione has been helping me gain some references through the herbology department at Hogwarts," Neville explained.

Ron rolled his eyes but grinned. "Yeah, as soon as you set a goal for yourself, Hermione is there every step to help. Be careful, though. She'll check up on you and nag if you're not staying focused."

"I don't mind. It helps me feel connect to you lot. I won't have anyone in Ireland. I'm nervous about that, too, but excited. I've never been on my own. I'm doing all of this myself, but it's a good feeling, though. It's a really good feeling." Neville straightened his robe in a self-assured way. Ron could see the satisfaction and determination in his eyes. He wanted to feel that. It seemed as if everyone around him was having his or her moment.

"Be sure to let us know how things work out. Fleming is a great school," Harry said.

"Not as great as Lambrick. Hermione told me about your acceptance. You guys are lucky to be going there. It's amazing," Neville said.

"Well, we're not in yet but yeah, I'm really excited," Harry said.

"Our next trial is sometime this month, so we've been practicing," Ron said.

"Good. You'll need to. I had an interview and a field exam. It was horrible, and that's just for a small school like Fleming. I can only imagine all the things that you'll have to do and all the intensity you'll have at Lambrick," Neville explained.

Ron and Harry shared a look of concern before turning back to him. "Yeah!" Ron said slowly.

Neville continued to smile as if he hadn't noticed the impact of his statement. He looked at his sleek and expensive watch that matched his robes and quickly stood. "I need to go. I have to get back home and get my things together before my train leaves." He held out his hand to Harry. "Good luck with your trial and everything. I'll write once I settle."

Harry shook it. "Yeah, of course. Good luck to you, too. This is great, Neville. I'm proud of you."

"I'm proud of myself. I went to visit my parents and even though they probably had no idea what I was saying or who I was, I told them everything, and I'd like to think that they're proud of me, too," he said. He and Harry broke their gaze and stared off. Both grew the distant look in their eyes. Ron felt for them but warmth flowed into him. He was so thankful to have his mum and dad.

"Well, I reckon that the next time I see you, you'll be a Jr. Auror?" Ron asked, breaking the silence.

Neville brightened again, and his still slightly chubby cheeks reddened. "Yeah, maybe sometime during the holiday we'll both have time off and we can catch up."

"Definitely," Ron said, shaking his hand. "Take care of yourself."

"I will," Neville said. He opened the door and gave them one more wave. Even after everything, the bloke still had his boyish, clumsy smile. "I'll see you guys around. Remember, constant vigilance."

Ron and Harry laughed. "Bye, Neville," they said together. Neville winked and walked out of the door and down the path with a certain command in his step.

"Wow, that's Neville Longbottom," Harry said.

"Yeah, I was thinking that, too. So much has changed since we left Bill's wedding. It seems like that's when everything around us changed, but I still feel almost exactly the same," Ron said.

Harry gave him a look. "I don't know why you would. You're not." Ron raised an eyebrow and figured that he would elaborate but he didn't. "I also don't know why you were hiding this." Harry moved the sack from behind the fruit bowl, and pulled out the bottle of Firewhiskey.

"I tried to tell you about it last night. I told you that we had better things to do than bloody practice," Ron said, snatching it away.

Harry gazed at it. "You should have just come out and said it. Maybe we could have actually enjoyed it."

Ron shrugged. "Who says that we still can't?"

"But it's daytime," Harry said.

"So? Is there some rule that says you're only allowed to drink at night?"

Harry eyed the bottle and bounced on the heels of his feet. "No. There isn't."

Ron nodded and handed him the bottle. "Good answer. Now, my parents don't drink a lot but they do enjoy a nice evening every once in a while, so I know that they haveâ€;" He searched the cabinets and stood on his toes to reach the very top shelf. He felt and connected his hand with two shot glasses. "These were my granddad's. Dad likes to keep them hidden up here, but I reckon over the years he forgot that Bill and I are the tallest. We know all of his hiding spots. Pop the lid."

Harry quickly twisted the top off and Ron poured them a generous amount. The aroma of the strong alcohol burned his nose hairs. Excitement was everywhere. "I've only had a bit of this," Harry said.

"Yeah, well, this is what George and I got pissed on. He's the one that gave it to me," Ron said, holding his glass tightly.

"Of course it was him," Harry said. He eyed his drink. "It's pathetic that I've never really experienced this before."

"Yeah, this is what normal witches and wizards do when the parents are away," Ron cheeked.

"How much can you stand?" Harry asked.

"Um, I'm pretty good at holding this stuff in," he lied.

"Then lets go," Harry said. He raised his glass and Ron clinked his against it.

"Cheers," Ron breathed before shooting his down. He and Harry both cringed and coughed as the whiskey burned their throats. They looked at each other and started to laugh. "Another one?"

"I'm not stopping you," Harry said, holding up his glass.

The burning and coughing decreased as the amount of liquid poured was increased. After awhile they stopped using the glasses and simply sipped from the bottle. However, in the dizziness and hilarity of it all, Ron and Harry decided to play quidditch outside. They strapped their brooms between their legs and ran around the yard, tossing an old broken quaffle back and forth and never actually leaving the ground.

Harry ran across the yard in a zigzag pattern and tripped over his broom. He dropped the ball but acted as if it was still in his hands. "Oh and the brill'nt Harry James Potter amazes all with an impressive dis'pa of the Wonky Faint."

Ron literally stumbled over with laughter and let go of his broom. He crawled over to a tree and leaned against it. He was out of breath, sweaty, and happier than he'd ever been. "It's Wronski Feint ya twat."

"I know what it is!" Harry said, stumbling over to him and leaned against the tree as well. "Hermâ€;Herm-eye-oh-knee. Fucking 'ell, her name is hard to say, anyway, she called it that one time. I'll never forget it."

Ron sniggered. "Yeah, my girlfriend lacks prop-her knowings of quidditch. Strange but good. I like teachin' her things. It's sexy. She's sexy."

Harry crinkled his nose. "Eh, I'll take your word for it. Plus, it would be too hard to say her name all the time. I never realized how long her name is. It took me 'bout ten minutes to say it a while back."

Ron tried to concentrate on Harry to see if he was being serious, but his eyes wouldn't listen to him and the buzzing in his head made him focus more on the grass they were sitting on. "I like 'er name. Plus, when we're getting serious I think she likes me sayin' it. I call her other things, and I didn't know she'd let me, but she does. I like it. Fuck, I just really like Hermione. I mean I love her but I like her, too. You can love someone but not like them, you know."

"I know. People think that after all those years with the Dursley's that I'd hate them, but I don't. I think that I thought I used to, but I don't. At the end of stuff and other stuff, they're my family and I love them. I don't like them one bit, but I love them. How mental does that make me?" Harry asked.

Ron shrugged and pulled his broom closer to him. He held it like a pillow. "I dunno. I get it, kinda. When Percy left us, I didn't like him at all. When mum cried and dad was sad I wanted to hate him but I can't either. I loved him but didn't like him."

"Yeah, what's up with that?" Harry asked, scratching his head.
"That was wrong."

"Yeah, but it's done. I don't want to fight with him or anyone anymore. I want my family to be happy." The emotion spread through him and once again he felt the need to say everything that he felt.

Harry seemed to understand. He wobbled and faced him. "I want your family to be happy, too. I love your family like it's mine."

"It is yours. I don't mind sharing," Ron said, nodding. He didn't get why Harry didn't know that he wanted to share. He also didn't know why the tree was so comfy. He wanted to live outside.

Harry smiled. "Even your sister? Cuz I don't want her as my sister."

Ron shivered. "I know you don't. That's okay, I guess."

Harry moved closer to him. "I love Ginny, mate. I love your sister so fucking much."

"I love my sister, too," Ron said pointedly, hugging the broom tighter. He wished that he could hug Ginny. He missed her.

"No. No. No. This is different. I mean that I'm in love with her and not like when I thought I felt something real for Cho. I just think she was just the first girl to really make me hard or whatever but with Ginnyâ€¢she's everything, ya know? I love her so much. Like I can't think of a word it's so much, and I'll never want anything else. She's it. I know she is," Harry explained.

Ron smiled lazily. His best mate could be really sensitive when he wanted to be. "I see that. You showed me that she is."

"I swear that I'll never hurt her, and I'll always treat her right. I'm not gonna be some stupid bloke. She's everything I could think of wanting. I just want to give to her because all that she gives me. Fuck, I'm so thick. I never say all this to her. I hope she knows that I'd die for her," Harry said. He took off his glasses for a moment to wipe them against his palm.

"She does. Believe me. I know her a lot. She knows you care. Everyone does. Don't worry so much anymore," Ron assured. He looked around and felt sick for a moment. "Mmmkay, Harry, did you really do it with her in all those places?"

Harry laughed and clapped his hands. "Yes! I'm not lying! Everywhere I said is true. Probably here, too. Wherever we are. I'm sure we shagged here."

"Bloody hell. Where did you get so much time? I didn't know you did it so often," he said. It was sick that Harry did his sister but the bloke yearned it, he reckoned.

"Yeah, we found a way to. She's fiery and she brings it out of me. Whoa, I want her. Well, actually, we didn't do it so much at the start of the summer. I didn't want her to think that I was taking advantage of her and it didn't feel right. She was so sad all the time. Then, I just wanted to hold her and help her through it all. Not do anything else," Harry explained. "It was all about helping your family."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. I'm bloody jealous, as always. I wanted to be with Hermione all the time. Even though I was really sad, I would look at her and want to have sex, but I was too scared. I dunno. Maybe it's good that I was. We both grew up a lot." Ron thought about making love to her and how amazing it was.

"Yeah, you and Hermione are great. I can't remember if I've ever told you, but it's excellent that you two are together. You're prefect for each other," Harry said.

"Yeah, we are. She's my soul, Harry. She's my fucking life essence. If a dementor gave me a kiss, you'd see a tiny little Hermione being sucked out and ordering it to put her downâ€¢like this." Ron pulled out a blade of grass and demonstrated the entire process with facial expressions and sound effects.

Harry laughed. "Oh, I get it! That's really funny!"

"Yeah, I wish I could remember how I thought of it, anyway. I know this is really stupid and girly butâ€œI think about marrying her a lot. I think about having a wedding like Bill's and putting the ring on her and marrying her and having her as my wife. I wanna be her husband, and I want to tell people that I'm married and to her. That makes me a girl, right?" Ron put a hand over his face.

Harry pulled it away and almost lost balance. "I don't think that's girly. It fits. You and Hermione are practically married already. You two work out really well, and I want for you both to be okay and happy."

"We are okay, Harry. We're okay and you and Ginny are okay. Fucking hell, how did we pull that off?" Ron asked.

"I dunno but I'm glad we did. I can be happy now. I've got my Gin-knee. See how easy that was to say? And my best friends, so I'm fucking splendid," Harry said.

Ron laughed and looked at him. His eyes were so green in the sun. They weren't black like they had been. "Harry."

"Yup?" he answered.

Ron swallowed a lump of heaviness. "Don't ever scare me like that again. Last nightâ€œI didn't know what was wrong with you."

Harry groaned. "I know. I'm sorry."

"I was worried. I was so fucking scared that you were dying or something. What would I do if you died?" He shoved his broom away and cuddled against the tree.

"I don't know but I thought I was dead, too. I thought I would go," Harry said. "You and Hermione are always last ones. I always have to hear your screams the longest and watch you two be afraid. It's like my nightmares know what's most important. It's like they know that I'm nothing without my best friends. That I'd cave into nothing without you two."

"Harry, that's really bad if your nightmares know that shit," Ron confessed. He didn't want his nightmares learning how to read his mind.

"I know. Even with everything that's ever happened to me, I've never wanted to die before. I did last night. I actually wanted to be killed. I thought you were gone soâ€œwhy be here?" Harry pulled at the grass.

Ron felt something smack his hard across the face. It hurt and made him dizzier. "Yeah, I do. I see it in George, and I can understand it. It won't get to that point. Hermione and I will always be here. The three of us will always stay okay. We have to."

"Yeah, that's what she always tells me. I really love Hermione, Ron. I hope that's okay." Harry pulled out blades of grass and threw them into the air.

Ron caught one and wrapped it around his left ring finger. "It's fine. It wasn't always, but I get it now. I think you two should love each other. I hope it's okay that Ginny always comes first. If anything happens between you two, I'm holding you responsible. I wouldn't just die for Ginny, I'd kill for her, too."

Harry's eyes widened. "Okay. That's fine, but we'll be too busy shagging to fight."

Ron swung and missed Harry's arm. "You're a pervert. Why don't I know this already?"

"Years of having to play savior builds up. I want what I want now," Harry said, trying to stand up. He and Ron leaned on each other as they stood.

"Uh, well, I want to lay down," Ron said. The ground seemed so far below him, and a bubble expanded in his head.

"Yeah, let's go. There's too much air out here," Harry said. They slumped and giggled into the house and barely made it to his room. They collapsed to their beds and slept like stones.

Ron opened his eyes and could barely move. Everything throbbed. He groaned and looked around. It was dark and barely any light was in the room. He strained his eyes. He saw Harry sprawled out on his cot and snoring noisily. He wanted to get up and retrieve the whiskey bottle that had to be somewhere downstairs but he was simply too raw and fatigued to move.

The next morning he woke up and winced. "Bloody hell." His head still pounded, and his stomach was in knots. He rolled out of bed, and shook Harry who was still out cold. "Hey, get up. We have to clean before my parents get back."

Harry shifted and put a pillow over his head. "No. They'll be back tomorrow."

"It is tomorrow. It's morning," Ron said.

Harry opened his eyes and looked around. "Oh, bugger, did we sleep all night?"

"I think so. Now, come on," Ron said. "We need to find the bottle."

"Okay, I'm coming," he breathed. He sat up and shoved his glasses back on. "I feel like dragon shit."

"Yeah, me too." Ron stubbed his toe on Harry's trunk and swore. They two of them wobbled downstairs. Ron retrieved the mostly empty bottle and hid it under his mattress. Harry collected their brooms and helped him to clean up the mess that they had made in

the kitchen. Right as they were moving the turned over chairs into place, Ron's parents came through the door.

"See, Molly, they're okay," his dad said.

His mum came over and gave them both a squeeze. Ron tried not to throw up. "Oh, I'm glad you boys are still in one piece and cleaning!"

"Yeah, we wanted to surprise you, Mrs. Weasley," Harry mumbled. His skin was chalky and his eyes were bloodshot.

"Surprise," Ron wheezed.

She clasped her hands together and beamed. "Oh, my boys. My boys are so grown up now. It's good to know that we can trust you two to be alone."

"We told you, mum. All we did was practice and play cards. It was no big deal," Ron said, as the liquor swished and sizzled in his stomach.

She pinched his cheek. "You were right, Ron. I'm sorry. Well, I guess we can leave more often, can't we Arthur?"

"Yes, I think it's safe now," his dad said. Ron had to turn away. His dad could read through him so easily.

"Um, we're glad you had a good time," Harry helped.

"We did. It was a good rest. Come on, Molly. Lets search for that bracelet. It's probably in one of these bags," his dad said.

"I always pack too much, dear," she answered as they walked away and up the stairs.

As soon as they were out of sight Ron and Harry buckled to the chairs. "Do you think your dad knows?" Harry asked.

"Probably, but he won't say anything. We're still here, so I think we're good," Ron answered. He and Harry shared a smile before laughing. "It was a pretty good weekend."

"Yeah, might be the last good one we have for a while," Harry said. He yawned and laid his head on the table.

Ron looked at him and grinned. There was so much that had happened in such a short span of time. He couldn't imagine going through it all with anyone else. He wanted to express these things to him, but he was too drained. Instead, he pulled two apples from the fruit bowl and handed one to him. He laid his head on the table as well and the two slowly ate their breakfast and tried to work past their hangovers.

It was a weekend that Ron would never forget.

* * *

**** Ah! Okay, I'm guilty. I was completely thinking about myself when I wrote this chapter, lol. The only relationship that I can see myself valuing more than Ron/Hermione's relationship is Ron/Harry's friendship. It's the strongest in the series, in my opinion, and it is the core of Harry and everything that happened. I simply LOVE their friendship and how they interact with each other. It's such a simple relationship but at the same times it has all these layers to it. There's the obvious loyalty, love, and brotherhood, but there's also this strong competitive nature and a bit of resentment that each feels for the other. Harry has things that Ron wants, and Ron has things that Harry wants. There's so much undertone to them. Not to mention, I just love writing their dialog. They're so funny when they're simply talking with each other. I have a warm, snug place for Ron/Harry in my heart. I love writing them so much. I could write them more than I could write anything else. There's so much that can be touched upon.

Anyway, I wanted to write this because things are like () - this close to changing for them, and I wanted to establish where they are in terms of their friendship before they go off and do what they're gonna do, lol. I've wanted to have a great Ron/Harry chap in here for a while and this was the perfect opportunity to have one. Oh, and yeah, Drunk!Ron and Drunk!Harry are sexy. Just as Dueling!Ron and Dueling!Harry are sexy, too! Hehe!

One last thing, I adore Neville. I just want to hold him tight! Lol. So I had to give him a shot out in this chap. He's brilliant! Anyway, thanks for reading and you know to REVIEW! to get the rest!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 22*: Call my name

Thanks for the reviews, and sorry that this took so long!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Hey love,

To answer your last question, YES, I'm eating and getting enough sleep. I will say that Arithmancy is giving me a bit of trouble. It's a lot more difficult than I remember so sometimes I do stay up late to read. Defense Against the Dark Arts is going well. Professor Beardall is still here, and I think he'll be here at least until the Christmas holiday. McGonagall said that she hasn't settled on a permanent replacement, but Beardall is the

best for right now. I agree. You can tell that he's a veteran Auror. He knows vast amounts of material, and he doesn't hesitate to call on me. Then again, all the teachers often call me on. It's as if they think that I know everything there is to know because of what we went through. A part of me feels honored, but there's still so much that I want to learn. I can understand why Harry was always so annoyed here. I'm not here to be a celebrity, either.

Ginny is doing great. She's a lot like you, Ron. It's sweet how much she imitates you without realizing it. Dean likes to make fun of her for it, and of course she always comes back with something witty and rather crude. It's nice having a circle of friends who understand how I feel, at least to some degree. Ginny, Dean, and Luna are fantastic people, and I feel less alone when I'm around them. However, I can't lie and say that I'm always okay. Sometimes I miss you so much that my body hurts and when I have trouble getting to sleep, I wish with every part of my soul that you were laying next to me. It's daunting, but it's getting better. All in good time, right? I miss Harry as well. There's no company like you two. Don't tell him, but I actually miss fussing over him and how careless he is with his glasses or how he misplaces his quills. I can't wait to see you both again. When I write to him, I never bring up how much I miss him. Harry is such a strong person, and he takes absence in his stride. I wish I could as well as he can. No matter, the next visit will be early next month. I think we're going to have one at the beginning and end of every month. I don't have the exact dates, but I'll let you know as soon as possible. I hope we can be close again. I can't stop thinking about us making love. Did I tell you that Ginny knew right away that it happened? I couldn't get the "prat look off my face" as she puts it. I don't care, honestly. It's one of the most amazing things that I've ever been a part of. I could go on for days about it, but I don't want to get you all hot and bothered and not be able to help you cool down.

Well, I hope you and Harry are practicing and staying on top of things. It won't be too much longer that you're both at camp. I can't wait to hear about everything! Take care of each other and give your family my best as always. I love you so much, Ron, and you inspire me every day to do my best and to keep going.

Love you,

Hermione

- Oh! I forgot to say. My parents said that Crookshanks is doing a lot better, so I'll be able to bring him back with me when I come back from holiday. I miss my cat!

Love you, again, and probably more than I did four lines ago,

Hermione

"Letter from Hermione?" Harry asked.

Ron finally looked up from it and nodded. "Yeah."

He rolled his eyes. "Figures. You've got that prat look on your face."

"Leave me alone. I have nothing to prove to you," Ron said, folding the letter back into the envelope and placing it on his side table. He flopped back on his bed. He couldn't stop grinning. Every letter from Hermione made him feel wicked and like he was closer to her. He couldn't wait to see her again.

"Did she mention when the visit is?" Harry asked.

He rubbed his neck and pretended to be interested in the design of his pillowcase. "Noâ€¦not yet."

"I don't understand. She should know by now. In her last letter she said that she'd know by the next one she sent out," Harry told.

"Don't get on me for it. I'm not there," he said.

Harry shrugged and sat next to him. "Well, what did she say about it?"

He felt his cheeks flush and he babbled. "Um, w-well, she said thatâ€¦um, McGonagall still hadn't made up her mind."

Harry raised an eyebrow and searched his eyes. Ron wished that he could look straight at him but he couldn't. "You know what, Ron, it's a blessing and a curse that we've been friends for so long. I can tell when you're lying. You do this weird thing with your eyes."

"No I don't," he mumbled. Harry looked between him and the letter from Hermione and before Ron could move, Harry snatched it up at lightening speed. "Wait! Don't!"

"You git! This is the same letter that she sent you a couple of days ago! You're reading itâ€¦again?" Harry dropped the letter and laughed.

Ron blushed and picked it up. He neatly folded it once more and shoved him. "Piss off. It's my letter and I can do whatever I want with it."

"Yes, like read it one hundred times in two days. Merlin, do you have the words memorized?" he asked.

"Don't make me kick you out of my room. I'm sure that you've read Ginny's letter more than once. I justâ€¦Hermione always says the most amazing things. I can't help that." He grinned again.

Harry stopped laughing. "You'll see her soon enough, mate. Hopefully, in the next letter she sends you, she'll have some answers. You know, a new letter. One that you haven't read and done who knows what with."

"Are you trying to get kicked out of my room? It's working if you are," Ron said.

"I have no problem with sleeping in Ginny's room," Harry said with a smile.

He shivered. The day they got pissed was still fresh in his mind, along with the horrible truths his mate had revealed about his sex life with his sister. He still couldn't look at his trunk without feeling nausea. "No. You're never allowed back in there. Not a chance."

Harry rolled his eyes and opened his mouth, but there was a knock at his door. It opened and his mum's face was on the other side. "Time to eat, boys. Dad's here." Ron practically ran down the stairs. He was so hungry and with there only being four people in the house, his mum didn't cook as much as usual. When he made it to the kitchen, he saw his dad take off his hat and cloak. He looked incredibly tired.

"Long day?" Ron asked, sitting next to him.

He sighed and took off his glasses. "Yes. The Ministry is starting this new collective analysis for the entire building and every department. Things are spilling over to my desk, and I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with all the information."

"You'll work it out, dear. You're the most capable man I know," his mum said, kissing the top of his head and scooping a large spoonful of mash into his plate.

"The thing is, as busy as I am, Percy has even more to do. No matter what Kingsley had him doing, he was quick and assertive. That boy never runs out of steam. He's extraordinary. I wonder where he gets it?" his dad said.

His mum smiled and got the gleam in her eye that was only reserved for Percy. "Probably from my side. A Prewitt runs on air, as my mum always said."

"Where does Ron get his energy level from?" Harry asked with a smile.

His dad laughed. "He's a Weasley, no doubt. If we're really interested in something, then we can go for ages, but if not, we can only do it for so long before the fatigue and boredom takes over our minds and we're completely mental."

"Ah, that explains a lot," Ron said. "I felt like that every day in history class and divination and charms and potions and—"

"Ronald Weasley, I'm not going to believe that you slept through your entire education," his mum said.

He shook his head. "No. No, I didn't sleep. I paid attention and all. I just...um..."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Weasley, Hermione and I did our best to keep him awake," Harry said.

His mum smiled at him widely. "That's great, Harry. You're such a dear. Do you want some more steak?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yeah, you kept me awake when you weren't falling asleep yourself, you prat," he said under his breath to Harry.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about." Ron nudged his arm and made Harry drop his fork on the floor. He laughed as Harry swore and picked it off the floor. It was nice having a solid friendship with him again. It felt like when they first met and everything was easy and fun all the time.

"Well, I wanted to wait until you both had food in your systems before I gave these to you." His dad pulled two envelopes out of his coat and handed them over. "It's from Lambrick. Kingsley just receive them tonight."

"Finally, I was wondering when we'd get our meeting times," Harry said, tearing his open.

Ron wasn't as ready to look at his. Though he still felt right about his decision, it didn't mean that it was going to go through his way. He wasn't ready to leave the high he felt about getting accepted and deal with the fact that there was still time to be rejected. Nevertheless, he opened it and read the contents. "Shit," he breathed.

"Ron, language," his mum said.

He looked up. "Sorry, mum, but my interview is this Thursday. That's only a few days away."

"So is mine," Harry said.

"They're doing these in pools. There will be a few per day. I think they're arranging it by region," his dad said.

Harry looked over his letter. "What time is yours, Ron?"

"Eleven in the morning," he answered. His throat felt extremely dry for some reason and nervousness tore at his stomach. He fate would be decided at such an early time in the day.

"Mine is at eight. Why is it so early? Do you know if these are supposed to take a long time, Mr. Weasley?" Harry asked.

"Well, I'm not sure about the interview process but yours is early for a reason. After your done, we have some people to meet in the magical law enforcement department as well as some people in the Auror department," his dad explained.

Ron's eyes widened and his mum gasped a little. "Arthur, why for? All this is for Lambrick."

"No, it's more than that. I'd probably have to do this no matter who I interview with, right?" Harry said wryly.

"Sorry, son," his dad said.

"I don't get it. What exactly do they want?" Ron asked.

Harry sighed. "Everyone wants to keep an eye on me. Since I refused to have a guard, the Ministry wants to know every move that I make until they think it's safe for me to have an independent life."

"Harry, I don't think it's that simple," his dad said.

He shook his head. "No, it is. It is for them, at least. I'm still their poster boy. I'm sorry, may I be excused?"

His mum gazed at him sadly. "Of course you may, dear." Harry pushed his chair away from the table and grabbed his letter. He went up the stairs without another word.

Ron didn't know what to do. He had no idea what was going on.
"Dad, what happened? What does the Ministry want with Harry?"

"It's complicated. Harry's status has changed and the Ministry is very keen on keeping contact with him and keeping him well protected during this gray period of time. He refused to have a guard, so this is the consequence," his dad explained.

"Wellâ€¦can't he just say no?" his mum asked.

"It's not that simple, Molly. If Harry wants to be an Auror, then he must cooperate with what the Ministry wants from him," he said. "Plus, he has to show an example for other people. There's no better way to get wizards and witches trusting the Ministry again than by using Harry Potter trust in the organization."

Ron frowned. "That's terrible. Can't they see that Harry just wants to be normal and move on from this?"

"I'm sure they can, but it's not a choice," his dad said.

"How is it not a choice? It's his life. Dad, this is bollocks," Ron said.

"I agree," his mum said quietly. "He's still just a boy, and he's finally smiling and he's happy. Why can't he have a break?"

"I don't know, Molly. It's not up to me. Harry has sacrificed more than his share, but he's not done. He's knows that," his dad said. "It won't be like this forever but for right now, it's the way that it is."

Ron looked down at his food and suddenly his problems didn't seem that big. He went upstairs not too much longer and Harry was sitting on his cot, staring off. His expression was vacant but Ron knew that there was a lot going on inside. He had seen it. Helping Harry through his nightmare gave him a new appreciation for him. "Hey."

"Hey," Harry answered.

Ron sat on his bed and read over his letter. "So, they want us to wear comfortable clothing. Not a standard interview, I reckon."

"It's probably because of the field test," Harry said, still staring off.

"I don't feel prepared for it. Maybe the written exam and the interview but I don't know what's supposed to happen during the field test," Ron said.

"You'll be fine. We've been practicing every day, and you've got years of fighting behind you. Don't stress yourself out." Harry's tone was void of emotion, and his eyes seemed glued to the wall in front of him.

It cut Ron in the chest. No one deserved a better life than Harry and it seemed that with every bit of happiness he felt, he was dosed with a larger amount of responsibility. Ron would give anything to take his pain away and rid of him his complications. He was his best friend in the entire world, and he would do anything for him. "Come to the floor."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"Just come on," Ron said. He reached under his bed and pulled out his chessboard.

"I don't feel like playing," Harry said.

"I don't care what you feel like doing. Get down here," he ordered. Harry sighed but obeyed. He sat across from his and helped set up the pieces. Ron sat quietly and waited for Harry to start talking.

After all the pieces were set, Ron popped his knuckles and thought about his first move. "It's not that I don't understand it," Harry finally said. Ron looked up to him. He was holding a pawn in his hand tightly. "I appreciate what they want to do for me, but it seems pointless in a way."

"Why?" Ron asked.

He shook his head and kept his focus on his pawn. "I've been on my own my whole life. Even with the Dursley's I took care of myself. My parents died when I was one, so it's not like I had all this nurturing that I get now with your parents. I've learned to do things by myself."

"But you don't have to anymore. That's the point, isn't it?" Ron asked.

"No, it's not. Ever since finding out that I was this powerful wizard with all this shit in my life, I've been a tool for something else and something greater. I get that it's my life and I've accepted it, but it irritates me so much." Harry sighed again and finally dropped the piece.

Ron didn't understand it. He couldn't understand why Harry didn't want all his glory and accomplishments. "Then why are you still doing it? You defeated Voldemort. What more do you owe?"

"I don't know but I have to regardless. I've always had to. There's the life that I have with the Ministry and the rest of world. I'm Harry Potter to them. At the interview I'll Harry Potter, and when I talk with the defense department and with the Aurors I'll be that person, too. It's not all that I am, though. I like what I am here better," he said.

"And who's that?" Ron asked, making his first move.

Harry grinned. "Just me."

Ron returned his smile. "Well, just me, you've already made a bad choice with your first move."

"Have I really?" Harry asked, looking over the board. "That's not fair. I'm not a chess nerd like you. I don't already have the entire game figured out."

"Maybe you should invite Harry Potter to play. He might have a better chance," Ron cheeked. Harry glared at him for a moment before laughing. Ron joined him. It was a small victory over a larger battle that Harry was going through, but if Ron could take his mind off it for even a moment, he would. If he couldn't make himself feel better, he would at least help his friend.

* * *

Ron heard rustling. He opened his eyes slowly and felt the sting of the morning. Harry was at his cot, pulling on his shoes. Ron sat up. "What time is it?"

"Seven thirty. Your dad and me are about to leave," he said.

As soon as his mind focused he remember that it was his day for the trial. He had been practicing nonstop for the past few days but he still didn't feel prepared. "Maybe I'll see you there."

"Yeah, if not I'll be here when you get back. I'm hoping that the meetings won't take long," Harry said. He took off his glasses and wiped them off. He seemed completely okay without a hint of nerves.

"Are you ready?" Ron asked, pulling the covers off. He wouldn't be able to get back to sleep even if he wanted to.

"I bloody hope so. I couldn't eat more than a couple of pieces of toast. I'm nervous but mostly antsy to get in there and show them what I have," Harry answered.

He smiled at him. Harry was too bloody brave and ready sometimes. "Well, good luck, mate. I doubt that you'll need it but...good luck anyway."

"Thanks. Good luck to you, too. I hope it goes great," Harry said, getting out of bed and walking over to him. He held out his hand.

Ron shook it. "Yeah, me too."

"Okay, I'll off. See you later," Harry said.

When Harry left the room, Ron got out of bed and searched around for clean clothes. He was so shaky and worried. He wished more than ever that Hermione were there to give him a pep talk or calm him with her eyes. He sat on his bed and pulled out the pictures they took at the cinema from his table. He ran his finger over her beautiful face. He would try his hardest for her. He then pulled out her bra from under his mattress. He had too many nerves in his stomach to focus. He thought about her body and how she tasted. He laid back, reached down his boxers, and closed his eyes. He used his imagination and his hand to help relieve the nerves and pressure that he felt.

He actually felt better when he went downstairs. His mum was in the living room, looking through a photo album. "Sweetheart, I didn't expect you to be up so early."

"Yeah, well, Harry woke me up and I can't really get back to sleep," he said. He glanced down at the pictures. Once again, she was looking at pictures of Fred and George.

"Too wiggly, are you? That's good. It's always great to have a bit of nerves. It'll work in your favor," she said.

"I hope so. I really want today to go well," he said.

"It will, Ron. You'll be fine. You've been practicing so much and you're just naturally capable. They'll love you," she said, giving his hand a squeeze and smiling at him.

"Thanks mum," he said. It was great to see her smile again. He missed her being happy.

She gazed back at her pictures. "I have such talented kids. All of you are doing something important and all of you are doing different things. There's no mother prouder than me. My children. My boys." She touched a picture of Fred and George taken outside of the joke shop when it first opened. He wanted to tell her something to keep her from crying, but he knew that it was coming. He kissed her cheek and left her alone to miss her son.

Ron tried to occupy himself with quidditch magazines and comics. He even tried to clean his room but nothing helped. He had never felt more nervous in his life. It was like his first quidditch match in fifth year but a million times worse. The time drew down and he had to leave. His mum gave him the fiercest hug and the wettest kiss in the world but it wasn't enough.

He looked over his letter and followed the directors to where he was supposed to go. He was a bundle of terrible nerves on his way to the office. He was sweating extremely and his palms itched worse than they ever had. He didn't know what was supposed to happen, and he desperately wished that he'd run into Harry. He needed to know what to expect. He finally made it to room 433 on the forth floor. He knocked on the door. A woman answered. She was rather old and dressed in old gray robes that matched her short gray hair. He hoped that his interview wasn't with her. She looked old enough to have invented the Auror profession herself.

"Are you Ronald Weasley?" she croaked.

"Yeah- yes, umâ€œis this the interview?" he asked, looking around. There wasn't another person in sight in the room.

"No, dear, your written exam is in here. The rest of your trial will be elsewhere. Come in," she said opening the door wider. He stepped in and examined the tiny room. There was a small desk table inside with an empty cup of tea, a booklet, quill, and ink on it. He didn't understand how he was supposed to take a test under such conditions. He had held more at ease during Snape's exams. "Sit right there, dear. You have forty minutes to complete the exam."

"W-what? It's timed?" he asked, sitting down. The booklet was quite a few pages and easily contained sixty questions.

"Yes, just work on them as you see fit. I'll be back to collect your work, and I'll let you know what's next, okay?" She didn't give him time to answer. She closed the door behind her.

Ron stared at the booklet and flipped through the questions. Some of them were basic like how to properly perform a Patronus, but others where more difficult. Some questions asked about the history of the Auror profession along with several questions about different tactics and defensive spells that he'd never heard of before. A lot of the questions were multiple choice but most were short answer. He skipped around in panic then went straight to the back. There were two essay questions. One asked why he wanted to be an Auror and the other asked what the definition of sacrifice meant to him. He didn't know what to think of that question so he decided to answer the first one.

The door opened just as he was finishing his last few sentences. The old woman came in again. "Okay, dear, time is up."

"Okay, I'm finished," he said, getting up. The truth was that he had barely answered forty questions but he felt confident about his essay answer. He grabbed his exam. "Whom do I take this to?"

"You don't, dear. I'll take it for you. You need to move on to your next test," she explained.

Ron rubbed his neck. "All right, um, is it in here as well?"

She smiled. "No, dear." She walked over to the table and pointed to the teacup. "This will transport you to your next phase."

He stood very still. "Likeâ€¢a portkey? Are those even stillâ€¢?"

"Young man," she said, "this is your next trial. Do you plan to go or not?"

"R-right," he said. He walked over and stared at it for a moment before touching it.

He was immediately sucked in and dropped outside. He didn't recognize the area. It was some sort of forest. There were so many skinny green trees around him and the ground was covered in leaves and twigs up to his ankles. It was a large area and he felt horribly exposed. For whatever reason, he pulled his wand out of his pocket and held it tightly. He peered around. It was dead quiet. He wondered if there had been a mistake with the location.

Then, it happened. Something hot and painful hit his arm. He cried out and was shot back against the ground. He grabbed his shoulder and quickly stood up. He whipped around but still didn't see anyone. His heart began to race. He re-gripped his wand, but his hands were trembling too badly to feel it in his hand. Something had gone wrong. He had to get out. He tried to Apparate, but it didn't work. He tried to shake off the anxiety and attempted again but he wouldn't move. He was hit again, this time in the stomach. He yelped and was dropped to his knees, loosing his wand. An awful pain coiled his skin and hit his muscles. He knew then that this was a set up. Someone wanted to kill him. He held his stomach. He thought that he had been cut open but he was okay. He looked up to find his wand and saw someone in all black running toward him. He gasped and felt around for his wand, but he couldn't find it through all the leaves. "Come on! Come on!" he screamed in panic. He person was getting closer and his terror was clawing up his back.

The person growled and charged at him. Just as he was by his feet, Ron's index finger connected with his wand.

"Imâ€¢Impedimenta!" he bellowed. The person in front of him slowed down and Ron was able to scoot away and stand up. He kept backing up until he was against a tree, or what he thought was a tree. It was smaller than a tree and warmer and it was moving. He jumped away but not in time. Someone grabbed him by the throat and began to choke him. Ron tried to think of what spell he could use, but everything in his mind was blank. He thought about getting ambushed by the snatchers and what he had done then. He used all his might and heaved his elbow into the person's stomach. The person hunched over and let him go. Ron got a grip of his wand, but the other person was faster.

He was hit again with something and was raised and slammed against the ground. He hit his head on a branch and his eyes watered. He could hear the footsteps of people coming toward him, and he didn't know what to do. In desperation he raised his wand. "Protego!" It had been the right choice. A spell reflected off his shield and gave him time to stand up and readjust. Two

wizards were standing before him. One was tall, black, and burly. He was smirking at him in a sickly way. The other was shorter and had eyes so grey that they reminded him of Malfoy. They sneered at him, and Ron knew who they were. They were the dark wizards that Kingsley had warned his family about. They were there to kill him. Ron stood tall and let out a shaky breath. He wouldn't give in. He would fight the entire way. He wanted to prepare himself for whatever they would do, but they were entirely too fast.

He was hit again and thrown back. He raised himself as one disappeared and the other charged him. Ron raised his wand but the wizard with the grey eyes raised his sooner. "Expelliarmus!" His wand was knocked out of his hand and the wizard tackled him. He was incredibly heavy and strong and he jammed his wand under Ron's chin. He knew that this was it. This was the end of him. The moment he realized that he was about to be killed, he also realized that he couldn't let it happen. He refused to make his parents bury another son. He wouldn't make George suffer through closing the shop again. He wouldn't make Ginny miss any more school, and he would not leave Harry and Hermione again. His best mate needed him and his girlfriend needed him.

Ron growled and used all of his strength to fight the wizard that was on top of him. He was straddling him. Each thigh was securely glued to his thighs. So, he raised himself and kneed the wizard in the crotch. The moment the wizard was vulnerable and feeling the pain, Ron punched him across the face. The wizard rolled off him, and Ron was able to crawl to his wand and stand. The wizard turned around but he was ready for him now. "Levicorpus!" The wizard rose to the air by his ankle. Ron kept the wand on him while he ran over and grabbed his. He glared at the wizard who scoffed just as badly at him and thought about what he would do.

"Incarcerous!" someone behind him screamed. Thick ropes wrapped tightly around Ron, and he fell to the ground. He lost hold of his wand, and the wizard who was in the air was lowered and grabbed it. Now, the two stood before him with his wand and their own. Ron was trapped. He wouldn't get out of this one. His heart was in his throat and sweat covered his body. A terrible depression came over him. He would never see his family again. He would never get to hold Hermione and tell her how much he loved her again. He stared at the wizards. He was devastated, but he wouldn't die a coward.

The two wizards looked at him. The one who was black crossed his arms over his chest and turned at the other. "What do you think?"

The grey eyed one shrugged. "I don't know. I could go another round. He got me really bloody good in the bollocks. Maybe I should return the favor." The wizard kicked at his feet hard.

"Fuck you!" Ron said. He wouldn't be intimidated no matter what.

The other one laughed. "I think we've had enough. We still have three more to get through."

"Whatever," the grey eyed one said. He raised his wand at him. "Listen, we're going to let you go, okay? Don't do anything stupid. I won't go easy on you this time if you do."

Ron tried to move back even though the ropes gripped him tighter when he did. "Wa-what are you talking about?" He didn't understand what was going on. He didn't know why they would want to let him go if they were going to kill him.

"We're going to untie you. Then, I want you to walk over to that tree over there. There's a portkey. It will take you out of here and back to the office," the black wizard said. Ron shook his head. He didn't trust them. He couldn't trust people who had just tried to kill him.

"He's not going to listen. Kinds like him never do," the grey-eyed one said with a sigh. "I'll take him."

"Maybe I should," the other said with a small smile.

"No, it's fine. Go on," the grey eyed one said. He grabbed Ron by the feet and began to drag him.

"No!" Ron groaned. He tried to hold on to something but the wizard pulled him along so easily. His head bumped against the ground again and again and his wiggled as best as he could, but it was useless. He was pathetic and there was no way that he was going to get away. The wizard didn't talk. He simply kept dragging him until they reached a large tree. The teacup was there.

"See? Now, touch it and you'll be taken back," he said. He used his wand to unbind the ropes and dropped Ron's wand. He Apparated without a problem. Ron quickly took his wand and peered around. He didn't know what to expect. He didn't know if the wizards would come back or if he was trapped out in the forest forever. He looked at the portkey and decided to trust it. He had no choice.

Thankfully when he fell back, he was in the same office. The old woman was there, smiling. "Hello dear, they're ready for you now." Ron was so confused and exhausted that he simply nodded and followed her. Things couldn't get any worse. He was taken down the hall and to a large conference room. She opened the door for him. There were three men sitting behind a large wooden table. He gasped and his eyes grew. The two on the ends were the same wizards who had tried to kill him.

The oldest one in the middle looked up at him. He had light grey hair and a well-groomed beard. Though he looked old, his body was stout and strong. "Ronald Bilius Weasley?"

"Y-yes," he breathed. He didn't know if this was going to be a formal execution or some sort of game before they killed him.

"Come in and have a seat," he said. Ron slowly made his way over and sat. His chair was so far away from the table. He wasn't sure

if he was supposed to move up or not. He decided not to. "I'm Phillip Smith, head advisor at Lambrick Academy."

He perked up but wasn't sure if he was supposed to believe him. "Yes, sir, nice to meet you," he said, feeling even more confusion.

"I see that you've already met Richard Jones," Mr. Smith said, pointing to the black wizard, "and Alan Lewis," he said pointing to the wizard with the grey eyes. "They are my senior advisors at Lambrick Academy and helped to evaluate you during your field exam."

It all was suddenly very clear. He felt like the world's fattest sagging tit. "Ohâ€!"

Richard laughed. "We were wondering how long it would take you to touch the portkey. Some people do it right when we tell them the first time."

"And others, like you, have to be told multiple times," Alan said. Ron blushed and mentally hit himself. Not only had he embarrassed himself in front of the head advisor but also he had kicked a senior advisor in the bollocks.

He rubbed his neck and wished that he wasn't dirty and sweaty. "About that, sir, umâ€;I-"

"Why did you stand around after you got hit the first time?" Mr. Smith interrupted, looking at a piece of parchment.

"Sir?" Ron asked.

He looked up from it. "Mr. Weasley, I have a record of the entire battle. Someone took notes during the encounter. It says here that after you got hit the first time, you stood around. Why did you do that?"

Ron didn't know what to say. He couldn't even remember the battle, just the fright and the idea of never seeing Hermione again. "I-I tried to Apparate."

"So, your first instinct was to flee?" Mr. Smith asked.

He couldn't tell if Mr. Smith was upset about this fact or not. His old face was blank. "Well, yeah-yes, sir. I tried to leave."

Mr. Smith nodded and looked back at his notes. "Okay, then, after you were hit the second time, you were knocked down and Alan ran toward you. You used Impedimenta."

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

"Why? There are many defensive spells that could have disarmed him or you could have used an offensive spell to repel him away. Why did you use Impedimenta?" he asked.

Ron dug his palms into his jeans. He didn't know why, and he felt stupid for it. He could have easily used a disarming spell but everything had happened so fast. "Iâ€œI don't know. My main concern was slowing him down. I couldn't focus on anything else at the time."

"May I say something, sir? I didn't expect Impedimenta. Potentials usually always go for a disarming spell, and this really threw Alan off. It was pretty creative," Richard said.

Ron sat up a little straighter. "Thank you."

Richard raised an eyebrow. "I said creative, not good necessarily. It was elementary, but it got the job done."

"I want to move on to the moment where Alan captured you on the ground," Mr. Smith said, looking through his papers as if no one else was in the room. "Alan had you pinned down and you were disarmed. What was your response to that, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron felt his face melting off. He glanced at Alan. His jaw was tight and his grey eyes were narrow. "W-well, um, like you saidâ€œI didn't have my wand soâ€œI had to use other means."

"He kneed me in the groin, sir," Alan said, "and punched me in the face."

Ron tried his best to hold in his smile. He looked away from Alan and at Richard. He seemed to be holding back a smile as well. Mr. Smith didn't seem amused at all. "Mr. Weasley?"

He didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to explain that it was all he had left and what he always resorted to. He didn't know if he could tell the panel that years ago he had to learn how to fight with his fists because his brothers had always loved to use him as target practice. "Well, I didn't have anything else, sir, and just because I didn't have my wand didn't mean that I should have given up. I'll always have my own strength. I don't think Alan-er, Mr. Lewis was expecting me to use hand combat. A lot of wizards take that for granted, but I don't."

Mr. Smith turned to Alan. "Is that true?"

Alan finally turned his eyes away from Ron and looked at Mr. Smith. "Yes, sir, I didn't think that he was going to hit me. I miscalculated his strength."

"I did, too, sir. His lank is misleading. He's actually rather graceful on his feet and rather quick. I thought that he would be easy to keep down, but he got me in the stomach, and he has a lot of power behind him," Richard said. Ron hunched, feeling self-conscious. He knew that he was far too tall and skinny, but he didn't realize that everyone else thought the same thing.

Mr. Smith nodded. "Okay, I'll have to make a note of that. Richard, what is your lasting impression of the match?"

Richard focused his eyes on Ron. "His spells were novice and he had quite a few moments of panic. However, his speed was impressive as was his strength."

"Yes, and you Alan?" Mr. Smith asked.

Alan clicked his teeth. "He was sloppy. He flailed around a lot and wasted too much time thinking about what he was supposed to do and what we were going to do. Although, he caught us off guard several times with the unique spell arsenal, and he didn't give up or give in. He fought me all the way through and didn't trust us right away when it was over."

"He didn't trust us at all, Alan," Richard added.

"No, he didn't. He kept fighting us," Alan said.

Mr. Smith nodded. "Hmm, yes, I agree. Mr. Weasley, this was a simple evaluation. Mr. Jones and Mr. Lewis were not dueling at full capability. They wanted to test your natural responses, strengths, and weakness. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said, not wanting to think about how it would have gone if the two wizards had actually been trying.

"Looking over this, I agree that you have a lot to learn about defensive and offensive spells. You tended to stay with basic incantations, and you did waste valuable time thinking about what to do. You can't stand around and hope that something comes to you. That's how Aurors and their partners end up dead," he explained.

"I understand," Ron said, feeling incredibly thick.

"However, I also agree about your speed and strength. I like that you recognize that you're never truly defenseless, and you used your body. Also, using Impedimenta was a very wise choice for the situation and," he actually began to chuckle, "using brute force on Alan was also clever."

Ron grinned. "Thank you, sir."

"I was the most impressed by your use of Levicorpus. You were able to disarm Alan and keep an eye on him while taking his wand. It was a smart move, but you forgot to keep your guard up and Richard was able to attack you. Never let your guard down. Always keep your eyes and ears open." Mr. Smith closed his notes. "Okay, now, during your field exam I had time to look over your application again. I don't think Lambrick has ever had a Weasley before."

"No, sir, there aren't too many Aurors in my family," Ron said.

"I checked it out. You come from one of the oldest wizarding families in the United Kingdom. Almost all pure-bloods, correct?" he asked.

"Um, I guess, sir," Ron said.

"You didn't put that in your application," Mr. Smith said.

He shrugged. "I didn't think that it was important. It doesn't make me more or less capable than a Muggle born." He thought about Hermione and how she would have had Richard and Alan on their arses within seconds.

"A lot of people like to put facts like that in their applications. Some people even write essays about it," Alan said.

He shrugged again. "Well, I didn't. I don't think it really matters."

Mr. Smith smiled. "Interesting assessment. All right, you also said that you went to Hogwarts and was in Gryffindor. How was that experience?"

"Plentiful, sir. Hogwarts is a great school and I learned a lot. Being in Gryffindor really helped me as well." Ron wasn't sure of what to say. So many things had happened there, good and bad, and he didn't know what was important to say.

Mr. Smith only nodded. "It's not imperative for potentials to come from such a famous and prestigious school as yours, so I don't take it into much consideration. There are a lot of great, small schools that offer the same education. However, when we do get Hogwarts applicants they're mostly all from Gryffindor or Hufflepuff. Why do you think that is?"

It was such a bizarre question. "Um, I don't know. I guess because Gryffindors are supposed to be the bravest ones and Hufflepuff is the house of hard workers. You need both to be an Auror."

Mr. Smith scooted his chair closer. "I'm sure you're aware that we had another person from Hogwarts who was also in Gryffindor interview with us today, correct?"

"Yes," Ron said lowly. He knew this part was coming. "Harry Potter."

"He interviewed with us earlier this morning, and like him, you also didn't complete your seventh year," Mr. Smith said.

"NEWTs aren't required," Ron said defensively.

"No, they're not, but we want to know why you chose not to finish," Richard said.

"Mr. Weasley, we are well aware of who you are. We know that you, along with Mr. Potter defeated several death eaters and Voldemort at your school. You put that in your application, and we've read about it in the papers. We don't need to hear it all again, but I find it intriguing that you want to jump right into working for the Ministry. So, explain why," Mr. Smith said.

"Well, I think I'm ready for it. Going back to school won't help me," Ron said.

"Actually, learning advanced spells could certainly help you. It would have prepared you for today's field trial," Alan said.

"And it never hurts to learn more history and potions and magic. You missed quite a few questions on your written exam that would have been explained during your seventh year," Richard added.

Ron could feel his anger rise. He didn't need this from them. He had made up his mind about school. He knew that he had made the right decision. "That may be but I think that what I've learned during my previous six years at Hogwarts and everything I went through last year is enough to get me to camp. I plan to learn more at Lambrick and combined it with what I already know."

Mr. Smith nodded. "Yes, Mr. Weasley, I want to talk about that. You have vast field experience. You've gone through a lot at such a young age. I'm quite impressed with your accomplishments. Dodging snatchers, fighting dementors, dueling death eaters dark wizards, and being on the run and staying in hiding are very impressive feats that you've done. Many Aurors can't say that they've had that much experience. It's impressive work, and I'm very pleased."

"I'm glad, sir," Ron said, feeling good at something for the first time since the interview began. Maybe things would finally turn around.

"Nonetheless, while your field experience certainly gives you an edge and makes you better prepared, it's not a requirement. If every applicant needed to have a record like yours, then it would only be you and Mr. Potter getting interviews today," Mr. Smith said.

"We know that you and Mr. Potter are friends," Richard said.

"Yes, sir, we've been friends since we were eleven," Ron said, feeling his optimism fade.

"Well, I'll tell you as I told him, there are sixty applicants. You are one of them. Lambrick Academy doesn't have a policy to keep people together. In the past we've had best friends, brothers and sister, and twins apply, but it didn't mean that they were all accepted. We don't take groups. We only keep the best," Mr. Smith explained.

"Yes, sir. I understand that," Ron said. "I'm aware that Harry and I aren't being seen in the same light. We went through a lot of stuff together but he's who he is, and all I am is me." There was a twinge of something that he felt toward Harry in that moment. It was fiery and horrific.

"I'm not denouncing what you've done," Mr. Smith said, holding out his hands. "Kingsley wrote a glowing letter of recommendation for you. He's one of my brightest pupils and when he says

something, I pay attention. You do have many qualities that Lambrick could use."

"Thank you. There's a lot that I want to learn from Lambrick, and I think that I do have at least a basic feel for it," Ron said.
"I just wish that I could have finished the written exam. I'm not a quitter."

"Oh, Mr. Weasley, the written exam isn't meant to be completed," Mr. Smith said.

"It's not?" Ron asked.

"I didn't finish it. I didn't even get half of them," Richard said.

"Thenâ€¦then what's the point?" Ron wished that he would have known that sooner. He could have simply left it blank and relaxed for the forty minutes.

"We want to see what questions you'd answer if you'd answer any. Sometimes people only answer the questions pertaining to what they have the most knowledge about. Like you, you stuck to the tactical questions. You answered mostly all the ones about navigational strategies and scenarios. Is it an area that you're comfortable in?" Alan asked.

He didn't know what to say. He hadn't realized that he had.

"Iâ€¦well, I do feel comfortable with strategic maneuvers, and I guess that navigation is something that seems to come natural to me, yes."

"You see, Mr. Weasley, we want to know these kinds of things about our applicants, and that's what this test is designed for. It's not judged based on quantity of the questions but on the quality of what you answered. That's why I must say that I'm rather confused with your essay response," Mr. Smith said.

"Why sir?" Ron asked, feeling disappointment. Out of anything, he thought that his response to the essay question was his best.

"Well, you answered the question about why you deserve to go to Lambrick, and your response was similar to your essay that you handed in with your application," Mr. Smith said. "You wrote about how you've wanted to be an Auror since you were little and how you think you're brave and capable to handle it, but that's the response that everyone will say. Mr. Weasley, everyone at some time or another has wanted to be an Auror. It's a popular profession. People glorify it and think that it's cool and fun for whatever reason. You think that you're capable? Well, I hope that every applicant does. Your words were generic and uninspiring to me. I can't help but believe that's how you feel as well."

"It's not like that, sir," Ron said, feeling his blush return.

"That's what you wrote so that's what I believe," Mr. Smith said.

"Can I try it again? Maybe if I tell you--"

"If we gave everyone a second turn then the interviews would never end. What you put is what you're supposed to feel," Alan interrupted.

Ron rubbed his neck. He had blown it. He felt so dim. "But it really isn't what I feel. My feelings are anything but generic and uninspiring. I was just nervous about the time limit."

"Mr. Weasley, it's all right. The essays may or may not be answered. It's a small portion of a greater factor. However, when people do take the time to write as much as you did for one question, I tend to use that to base how the person is. It's something that you have to take into consideration, regardless on how much time you have. This is your life and the lives of others," Mr. Smith said.

"I should have realized that, sir," Ron said. His heart sank.

"Well, I think we can conclude this interview. Unless you have anything to add, Mr. Weasley?" Mr. Smith asked.

He couldn't believe that it was over already. There was so much that he wanted to talk about and explain. He wanted to defend himself and his work, but he didn't know how. He simply shook his head. He failed his interview, his field exam, and his written test. He didn't think that he could use any more humiliation.

"No, sir."

Alan and Richard stood but Mr. Smith kept his eyes on him. He took off his glasses and clasped his hands together. "What does sacrifice mean to you?"

"Sir?" Ron asked. Alan and Richard sat back down.

"Sacrifice, that was the other essay question. You didn't answer it, but I want you to know. What does sacrifice mean to you?" Mr. Smith repeated.

Ron wasn't sure of what to say. The question was just as cryptic said out loud as it was written on paper. "Well--"

"I don't need you to say what you think I want to hear, like you did for you other question. Just tell us, truthfully, what sacrifice means to you," Mr. Smith pressed. "What has it meant to you over the years and your journeys with Mr. Potter."

Ron thought about it. He thought about everything from going through the trap door in first year to burying his brother just a few months ago. "It means giving up the things that I have for some greater purpose. It means saying goodbye to my family and friends to help in a bigger cause that will keep them safe."

"So, surrendering yourself is the biggest sacrifice that you can make?" Mr. Smith asked.

"I don't really see it like that. Whenever I've had to put myself in danger, I never really thought about it. I just did it. Giving myself up is easy. It's what I leave behind that gets to me," he said.

Mr. Smith shook his head. "I don't understand."

Ron didn't know if he could explain it, but he had to try. He had to redeem himself somehow. "I'm really close to my family and anytime I had to do something dangerous, I thought about them. I also thought about my friends. Harry and my other friend who was with us, Hermione, they mean the world to me, and whenever I got scared I thought about them. Giving myself up, rather it means getting hurt or even dyingâ€œ is easy. I do it because it's for the greater good and the people I love are worth it."

He stopped rubbing his palms into his knees and simply saw Hermione's face. Seeing her made things so much easier and made words flow out of him without thinking about it. "Giving myself up isn't sacrifice. Getting hurt or dying isn't either. It's everything else that is. Sacrifice to me is leaving my parents, my siblings, and my friends alone. Sacrifice is hurting them or having them be afraid or die because I'm unable to do something. One of my brothers died a few months ago at Hogwarts. He was murdered. That was sacrifice. I wasn't quick enough and because of that he was sacrificed. I think sacrifice is all the good things you ruin if you don't give yourself up for them. Sacrifice to me isn't giving what you have up. It's more about what you leave them with if you don't do whatever you can for what's right." He looked up at the panel and hoped that they understood what he was trying to say. Then again, even if they didn't, he did and that meant a lot to him.

Mr. Smith nodded and smiled slightly. "That's good, Mr. Weasley, I think we can finish on that note."

Ron stood up and walked over to them. He didn't know why he felt better. "Thank you sir. Thanks, Mr. Jones and Mr. Lewis." They all shook his hand.

"It was nice meeting you, Ron," Richard said.

"Yes, it was a pleasure," Alan said, his eyes still harsh.

"You'll get a letter within a week or so with our final decision. Good luck, Mr. Weasley," Mr. Smith said.

Ron smiled and shook his hand again with conviction and strength that he could. The old showed him out and down the stairs. He didn't breathe once until he was out of the Ministry. He leaned against the wall and let out a deep breath. His head spun and he was extremely tired and emotionally drained. Before going back home, he stopped by the Leaky Cauldron and had a well-deserved pint.

He felt a little more loose and happy when he returned home. His parents and Harry were all at the table. He had never felt more

relieved to see his best mate. "Ronnie!" his mum said, rushing to him and hugging him. "We were wondering when you'd get back!"

"How did it go, son?" his dad asked.

His mum finally let him go, and he sat at the table. He rubbed his eyes and exhaled deeply. "It wasâ€œI don't even know."

"What did you think of the field exam?" Harry asked.

Ron looked up at him. Harry didn't look nearly as worn down as he felt. "Horrible."

"Yeah, it took me a couple of minutes to realize that it was a part of the test," he said.

"Oh, um, me tooâ€œ" Ron lied. "How did the written test go?"

"I skipped around a lot, and I only one of the essay questions, the first one," Harry said.

Ron smiled and felt glad that he wasn't the only one. "Yeah, what did they say about it?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. We didn't even really talk about my written exam. The whole interview was pretty short."

"That's why we were a little concerned about you. You've been gone for a really long time," his dad said.

Ron didn't know what to think. He didn't know if it was good or bad that his trial had taken so much longer than Harry's. "Oh, um, they had a lot of questions for me. I wish Kingsley would have warned us about the surprise attack."

"That's part of it, Ron. They wanted us caught off guard to see what we can really do. It was such a rush. I missed that kind of adrenaline," Harry said, his eyes wide.

"Yeah, I guess," he said. The more he looked at Harry and saw how great everything was for him, the more he felt nauseous. He was beginning to understand that his trial had not only gone wrong but terribly awful.

"Well, I'm just glad that you're both safe and home. How about I make lunch? I know you two must be hungry. Then, you can tell us all about it," his mum said.

Ron wasn't hungry, but he was too tired to argue. "Okay, I'm gonna go change." He went up to his room and sat on his bed. He went over everything that he had been through and how dreadful and confusing and embarrassing it all was.

Harry came into the room and sat next to him. "So, how did it go, really?"

Ron looked at him. "I honestly don't know. I wasn't prepared for any of it, and during the field test, I hit Alan in the bollocks and punched him. I reckon he has it out for me."

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, he was kind of an arsehole. Richard seemed nice though. I just can't believe how quick it all was. Once I realized that it was a part of the test, I sort of let them have it so they cut it short, and in the interview we mostly talked about the Ministry and how closely Lambrick works with the other Auror camps around Britain and other countries."

Ron chewed on his lip. His interview had been nothing like that. He didn't understand what it meant. "Soâ€¢what do you think?"

Harry shrugged and looked away. "Honestly, the way they talked to me, it was likeâ€¢like they already accepted me."

Ron tried to only feel happiness for his friend. "That's great."

Harry turned to him. "They didn't say that I was, though, and I still have to wait and get my letter, but it honestly went well. It was a lot better than I thought it would be. What about you?"

Ron wanted to roll his eyes and erase ever going to his trial. Mr. Smith had said that Lambrick didn't care about past experienced, but he reckoned there was always an automatic exception if you were Harry Potter, The Chosen One. There was no way that he was getting in. "I really don't know. I don't think any part of it went particularly well, but they didn't seem to flat out hate me. I guess we'll see."

They were silent. Ron hated the awkwardness between them. He knew that Harry wanted to act more excited but he wouldn't, and he wanted to show how terribly he felt but he couldn't. It felt just like the old days, when Harry had all the glory and Ron was left feeling like a pathetic git. Being Harry Potter's best friend was amazing, but sometimes it wasn't always the easiest thing to take on. Now was one of those times.

"So, um, how did your meetings go?" Ron asked to defrost some of the tension.

"Okay, I guess. Your dad was there with me and so was Kingsley. I got bloody tired of it really fast. I'm sick of all this, you know? Standing out all the time. I just want to go to Lambrick where hopefully I'll blend in." Harry got off his bed and walked over to his own. He began to change.

Ron lay back on his pillow and closed his eyes. Harry wanted to blend in so much, but they both knew that he was never going to. Ron, on the other hand, never stood out a day in his life, he didn't think that he ever would. He pulled out his letter from Hermione and read it again. He grinned slightly as she talked about how he inspired her and how much she missed him. He couldn't understand how he meant so much to her, but it kept him from wanting to break down. He read her letter again and again and tried to convince himself he was as special as she said he was.

He certainly didn't feel like it.

* * *

**** Oh, I love you, Ron! *hugs * I'm happy with how the trial came out. I wrote it a few different ways and this one fit the best. Obviously, there's tension with Harry and Ron during this. They want to be there for each other but its still a competition. It's like that old feeling from GoF is back a little. I hope this chapter didn't completely throw everyone off. Things are happening now and the pace is getting faster. There's no stopping them now! Lol.

Anyway, the R/Hr shipper in me is itching and wondering when Ron will see Hermione again. I put some cream on the itch and told it to be patient. It would get its fix sooner than it thinks.
Soâ€;yeahâ€;lol Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 23*: Break my fall

Thanks for the reviews! They mean so much to me!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron rushed through the door and pulled his sopping jacket off. He shook himself and moved the soggy ginger locks out of his face. He was drenched right down to his socks yet he had the widest smile on his face. "Ah, lovely day, isn't it?" he asked, walking over to George, Angelina, and Lee who were at the register talking.

All three looked at him. Lee gave him a once over. "Um, it's storming outside, mate."

"Yeah, I know," Ron said, turning around and looking at the dark grey sky and button sized raindrops that poured down from it.
"It's still quite nice."

George crossed his arms over his chest. "Did you take some of those Muggle drugs that dad told us about?"

"He better not have!" Angelina said.

"Yeah, unless he brought enough for all of us to try," Lee added.

Ron rolled his eyes and ran a hand through his dripping hair.
"No. I'm not on any drugs, fucking hell."

"Then," George said, "there's only one other reason why you would be this happy and this mental. Letter from Hermione, right?"

Hearing her name made his already giddy attitude giddier. "Yes, I got one from her this morning."

George grinned. "And you must be seeing her soon."

He couldn't stop himself from bouncing slightly. "Yes! Tomorrow! I get to see her first thing tomorrow!"

"That's great, Ron," Angelina said, giving his arm a pat. "Glad it isn't drugs."

Lee chuckled. "Let's hope you don't catch your death first."

"Yeah, come on upstairs. I'll get you some tea," George said.

"That's okay. I'll use a drying spell," Ron said.

"No, I'm not taking any chances. Come drink some hot tea. We've got some time before we open," George said. Ron sighed but decided not to argue with him. He was shivering like mad. "Besides, I need to show you the new taps that Percy had added to my door. You basically have to sacrifice a unicorn to get into my flat now."

"That's a good thing. I'm glad things are working out," Ron said. They entered his flat and he sat on the couch. George threw him a towel before going into the kitchen.

"I reckon. It's keeping Kingsley off my back, and Percy and Bill are leaving me alone, too," George said.

Ron pulled his clothes off and casted the charm on them. It took him a couple of tries before he saw any results. "And it's good for you." He buffed the water droplets off his skin and hair.

"I guess. Bloody hell, Ron, what are you doing in here?" George asked, giving him a mug.

"I've never been very good at this one. Hermione can do it in her sleep," Ron said, almost gulping down the steaming tea at once.

George shook his head and used his wand. He easily dried his clothes. "So, you can defeat dark wizards, but you can't dry your own clothes. I hope it's not a requirement at Lambrick."

He snatched his socks and jeans and pulled them back on. "Cheers, and leave me alone. I doubt anyone at Lambrick cares about what I can do."

"I guess that means you haven't heard anything?" George said.

"No, but I don't expect to. At least, not with anything good," he said, sliding his warm shirt back on.

"Are you still on that?" George asked.

"I've accepted the fact that I was a complete git at my trial. They take the best of each day and wane them out. There's no way that I was one of the best on my day," Ron explained, feeling his cheerful mood dissipating.

"Ron, you can't honestly think that it's all over for you. I'm sure you were great," George said.

"It's fine, really. I have another interview in a couple of days at Banes. I just have to keep going, and I have to be realistic," he said.

George gave him a look as if he wanted to say something but shrugged. "Okay, that's smart."

"Besides, it's the last thing on my mind right now. I get to see Hermione tomorrow, George. You should have seen me when I got her letter. I didn't honestly think that I would get to see her for awhile." His smile returned and he bit his lip as he thought about her neat handwriting and how she had casually spelled out that they would be reunited the very next day. She was such a tease.

"I think I can imagine what you looked like. It's probably what you look like now," George said, nudging him. "You're completely out of your mind, yeah?"

Ron chuckled. "I know. I can't help it. She just makes me so fucking happy. When I'm with her I forget, even for a little while, that I have a million things to do and worry about. No one else makes me like this. She's special that way, you know?"

"Yeah, I do," George said. "That woman you saw downstairs is the exact same way for me. The moment I see her smile and her gorgeous brown skin I justâ€¢!"

"Feel the world stop? Get excited and relaxed at the same time?" Ron helped.

George grinned. "Exactly."

Ron squeezed George's shoulder. "See? Not everything is gone."

He looked down and nodded. "I think I'm getting that."

Ron smiled at his brother and felt his good mood elevate. "Now, can I work or are there more remedies that you want me to take, mum?"

"Excuse me for looking out for you, little brother. I won't bother to do it again," George said, getting up.

"Don't be that way. I was taking the piss," Ron said.

"I think I may write to Hermione and tell her what you and Harry did instead of practicing last weekend," George said.

Ron hit his arm. "You better not! Or at least wait until after tomorrow."

"I wouldn't do that to you, Ron. Don't worry," George reassured. "Come on." Ron tried to concentrate all through his workday but all he could think about was Hermione and seeing her again. After everything with Lambrick, he needed someone who always made him feel assured even when he didn't think he was.

He returned home later that evening. His parents and Harry were eating pudding. "Ron, dear, I made you a plate," his mum said.

"George fed me, but I'll probably eat that later," he said.

She beamed. "I'm glad that he's taking such good care of you."

"That's one word for it," Ron said. He sat next to Harry and snatched his spoon out of his hand. He swallowed his gulp of pudding and moaned in delight.

"Oi!" Harry said, pushing his arm.

"Yes, Ronald, please," his mum said.

"Sorry, mum. It's really good," Ron said, getting up. "Cheers, Harry."

"Ronald Weasley, what is with you tonight?" his mum asked, cutting Harry another slice.

His dad laughed. "Molly, he's a boy in love. It's Hermione Day tomorrow." Ron blushed and climbed up the stairs to his room. He read over Hermione's letter again.

Harry came up not too much longer. "You're a prat, but I'll let it go."

"Thanks. I just wanted a little. Truth is, I'm not hungry at all," Ron said.

"Ready for tomorrow?" Harry asked, sitting on his cot. He was smiling wide as well.

"Yeah, it may be my last time that I get to see her before I leave for a camp," Ron said.

Harry pulled off his shoes. "You mean Lambrick, right?"

Ron wanted to roll his eyes or bring up how he was sure that he didn't get in, but it wasn't worth the effort. "Sure."

"Are you and Hermione going to be ready?" Harry asked.

Ron looked up from his letter. "What do you mean?"

He rolled his eyes. "Well, we're trying to do the group thing tomorrow, but I'm sure you and Hermione want time soâ€;"

"We'll be fine. We can stay with the plan," Ron said, blushing again. He had no idea if he and Hermione were going to shag again. He wanted to but he didn't want it to seem as if it was all he wanted to doâ€; though it was big part of it.

"Well, I'm sure Ginny and I will find enough to do to occupy ourselves. We'll meet you in the Common Room," Harry said.
"Blimey, that sounds weird to say."

"Just wait until you see it. It's bizarre how nothing has changed," Ron said.

"I'm not sure what I think about that," Harry said. "I'm sure it won't feel the same."

Ron shook his head. "It doesn't." He felt a heap of bad feeling come over him, but he rolled his off his shoulders. He refused to let it dampen his spirits.

* * *

The next day he woke up earlier than scheduled. He was pulling on his shoes when Harry finally opened his eyes. "Did I oversleep?"

"No, I just woke up early," Ron said.

"You don't know the meaning of that phrase," Harry mumbled, yawning and putting on his glasses. Ron went to the mirror and looked himself over. He had bought himself a collared shirt and jeans second hand. He still looked like a prat, but at least it was something newish. "I think Ginny might have some lipstick in her room."

"Fuck you. You know that I only get like this when I see Mione," Ron said, tugging on his forest green shirt.

Harry rolled out of bed and joined him at the mirror. "And every time it's for nothing. You could show up covered in dragon dung and she wouldn't care."

"Whatever. I want to look decent for my girlfriend, big deal. I should tell Ginny that you don't care about impressing her," Ron said.

"Oh, I impress her plenty," Harry said with a wiggling eyebrow.

Ron hit him. "Not that again."

"And this is my look, anyway. I can't change it," Harry said.

"What? The disheveled midget appearance?" Ron asked.

"Don't be jealous," Harry said, moving away and finding clothes.

"Yeah, that's the word exactly," Ron said. If he were jealous of anyone, then it was one of his brothers, like George or Charlie. They had so much more muscle than he had. He hated being so scrawny. Richard's words haunted him almost every hour. He wondered if Hermione minded that he was thin. He promised himself that no matter what camp he went to, he would gain weight and muscle and impress her with his brawn. The thought of her large brown eyes widening as he showed her his impressive biceps made him smile and anticipation came over him. "See you there," Ron said, giving Harry a wave before leaving the room.

"Ron, do you want some breakfast before you go?" his mum asked in the kitchen.

"No, we're all going to eat there," he said.

"Okay, love, have fun and give your sister a big hug for me. I miss my baby," she said.

"I will, mum. Have a good day," he said, kissing her cheek.

His mum squeezed his upper arm. "You too, dear, and be smart and safe with whatever you do."

He could see the importance and anxiousness in her eyes. He grinned. "Don't worry, mum. We'll be careful."

"That's my boy. Go have fun," she said. Ron gave her another reassuring smile before leaving the house and down the path.

Ron paced to The Three Broomsticks. Hermione had promised in her letter that nothing would keep her away. He was early, but it was okay. He wanted to surprise her. However, as he approached he realized that he hadn't been early enough. Bushy brown hair came into his view, and the straight and somewhat rigid figure was right in front of him. She had her back to him, and he could tell that she was clutching her necklace. She was shifting her weight between her feet, and he ogled how her arse looked in her jeans and the outline of her waist and breasts in her snug fitting blue jumper.

His body throbbed and pulled toward her. Every part of him jumped and begged his legs to move, but he controlled his urges. He cleared his throat. "Excuse me, sweetheart, but are you here alone?"

Her body froze for a moment but then it slumped and relaxed. She slowly turned around, and her cheeks turned pink. She smiled and clutched her necklace even tighter. Seeing her eyes made his knees weak, and his heart melted into a puddle as her smile warmed his entire body in the chilled air. He felt whole again and protected, and she hadn't even said a word. "Well, I'm waiting for my boyfriend, but he isn't here yet," she said.

He rubbed his neck. "What an arsehole. If he can't bother to show up on time, then he doesn't deserve you. He has no idea how lucky he is to be dating someone as amazing as you."

She put a hand on her hip. "Is this your way of coming on to me?"

He took a step forward. "Is it working?"

"Yes, you're quite handsome and very charming," she said, taking a step as well.

He took her soft hands in his and felt every hair prick. Being away from Hermione was horrible, but seeing her again after so long was wicked. There was something very magical and intense about it. It was like seeing her for the first time. "Thanks. You're decent, I reckon."

She laughed beautifully and looked up into his eyes. "Just decent?"

He swallowed hard. The feeling of loneliness washed over him, but it wasn't as strong as last time. It was easier to let it go. "Okay, I lied. You're fucking beautiful. You're sexy and fantastic and every other word that I can't think of."

She stood on her toes, and he bent down. He reached to kiss her, but she backed her head. "I don't even know you."

"You can get to know me later," he mumbled. He couldn't keep the game up anymore. If he didn't snog her, then his heart would explode. He pressed his lips against hers hard. Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck and deepened it. He sighed as she moaned. Her mouth was warm, and she tasted like pears. He brushed his tongue against her lips and she parted them. He held her firmly, and the room in his jeans shrunk.

She hugged his tongue with her lips for a second before pulling away. "Ron, I missed you."

"I missed you, too, Hermione. You have no idea how fucking happy I was to get your letter. I didn't think that I'd get this today. I was mental all day," he said, feeling his lips tingle and his brain float away from his body as he slowly recovered from their snog.

"How do you think I felt when I got the notice? You were on my mind all day yesterday. I couldn't concentrate one bit," she said passionately. She kept her arms around his neck, and she kissed around his mouth. "The only thing on my mind was you. You still are."

"Bloody hell, Mione. I love you so much, and you get prettier every time I see you. Is this a new shirt?" he asked, moving his eyes to her chest.

She blushed. "Yes, my mum sent it to me. I don't usually wear things like this."

"It's perfect," he said, still looking at her chest.

She smiled and lifted his chin. "I'm glad that you approve." She gave him the intellectual and confident eyes that had drew him in since he was eleven and the elegant smirk that would always keep him wanting her. She was the best part of his life and his reason for having the stiffest stiffy in his jeans. She pulled away a little more. "So, is Harry here? I haven't seen Ginny today. I came straight here after getting dressed."

"Dunno. He was just getting up when I left. I got up early," he said.

"You? Early?" she said in shock.

He shrugged. "Only for you, love. So, um, we have some time. They're going to meet us later."

Hermione looked around and nodded. "So, what do you want to do? There's so much that we can discuss."

He wasn't sure of what to say. He wanted to tell her in person about his trial. He wanted to tell her about his upcoming interview. He wanted to ask how school was for her and how her parents were doing. He truly wanted to catch up with his girlfriend. However, as he looked down at her body and at the stone of her necklace that rested on top of the soft, cushy breasts that were hidden under her teasing jumper, he knew that he needed to feel her again before he could get to anything else. Sex was the only thing that came to mind.

"Notâ€¢talk," he said, hoping that it didn't sound nearly as bad as he thought it did.

Her eyes widened even more and her pink cheeks turned red. He felt like a prick for a whole second before she gripped her necklace and said, "Good. I don't want to talk right now either." She took his hand and yanked him away. Ron's heart was in his throat the entire way there.

As soon as they made it to Hogwarts and into her room, Ron gently pushed her against the door, closing it and making her gasp. She stared at him as she kicked her shoes and socks off. He did the same, never taking his eyes off her. He ran up to her and kissed her roughly. He moaned and pushed himself into her. They groaned at the friction, and she pulled on his hair. "Hmm, Ron, you know I don't like you teasing me," she panted, as he continued to push into her and suck on her neck.

He licked her earlobe and pushed harder. "You're the tease. You should have warned me that you would look like this."

"I can say the same for you," she said, moving her hand down his shirt and under it. She ran her fingers across his stomach and moved up to his chest. "Green is such a good color for you."

"Thought I'd change it up," he said before kissing her again. He took her by the waist and turned her around. He led her back

against the bed, and she sat down on the edge. He pulled off his jacket and took the tube from the front pocket.

"How responsible," she said a bit shyly.

He blushed. "I like to be prepared." He popped the top off and chugged down the muddy pickle juice taste. He coughed and wiped his mouth.

Hermione chuckled and pulled her shirt off. "I should master the spell. Sorry to make you suffer."

"It's worth it," he breathed as he saw her black bra. His mouth watered, and he fell to his knees in front of her. He licked his lips and looked at her chest.

"See something you like?" she asked, wiggling a little.

He nodded, not taking his eyes off her skin. He leaned forward and kissed her chest. She let out a heavy sigh, as he licked the tops of her breasts. "You're so perfect," he whispered, placing his hands on her sides.

She moaned and fell back. He stayed on his knees and started to unbutton her jeans. She watched him and lifted herself. She bit her lip as he gawked her black knickers and her thin, smooth legs. He ran his hands up her thighs, and he could feel her shaking. "Ron, please."

"I've got you now. Just enjoy it," he said. He smirked at her before focusing on her legs again. He kissed her upper thigh and tugged on the sides of her knickers. She lifted her hips, and he pulled them off. He could feel himself twitch as he looked at her. He wanted to be inside her, but he swore to himself that he would make her lose it first in a more enjoyable and painless way. It was the only thing that was fair. He leaned forward and kissed her. Hermione automatically whimpered and placed her fingers in his hair. Ron closed his eyes. He didn't think. He let his mouth work her. He kissed, licked, and sucked her all over. He could hear himself pleasing her and the sounds blending with her moans and cries, oddly enough, turned him on even more.

More than anything he was happy that she was enjoying it. He wanted her to feel good. As the juices coated his tongue, he brought his fingers in. Hermione spread her legs wider to give him more room. "Oh, Ron, oh, oh, R-Ron," she breathlessly panted. He continued to pump his index and middle finger in and out of her. Her grip in his hair tightened, and she rolled her hips. He slid his tongue up her folds before gently sucking on the bulb of nerves. She pulled on his hair and hollered. He flicked his eyes up to her and felt every bit of heat cover his body. He loved her moaning his name. He couldn't wait until things were comfortable enough to where he could hear it, as he moved above her. Ron pumped his fingers harder, deeper, and faster. Hermione arched her back and groaned. "Oh, Ron, yes, Ron!"

Ron moved his eyes to her again. He cherished seeing her lose control. To everyone else she was perfectly put together and

stern. He was the only person who got to hear her cry out, flirt, and act like a naughty and sweet charmer. He was the luckiest person in the world. She cried out and jerked. Even more juice covered his fingers and tongue, and the room around his fingers constricted. He slowed his movements and finally stopped. Ron enjoyed the sensation of her orgasm around his fingers. He pulled them away and sucked every drop of her deliciousness off him.

Hermione lifted her lids and exposed her hazy eyes. They were full of satisfaction. She smiled and swiped the side of her mouth. Ron stood up and sucked on his bottom lip. She was beautiful, and he couldn't believe that she was with him. She was his girlfriend and his only. "You're unbelievable," he said.

She let out a shaky breath and moved further back on the bed. "I didn't do anything. You did. Now, get over here. It's an order."

He chuckled bashfully and slowly took off his shirt, jeans, and boxers. He climbed into the bed, and he could see her entire body trembling this time. He settled on top of her and felt the fear and nervousness again. "You ready?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes, it'll be better."

"Same rules, though," he said.

"Same rules," she repeated.

He could tell that she was still scared. He was, too. He wanted her to feel just as secure as last time. He wanted things to get better every time. "I love you."

She smiled. "I know you do. I love you, too."

He kissed her neck and nibbled his way along her collarbone and lightly bit her shoulder. Automatically, Hermione thrust her hips upward. He knew her anticipation was there. He could feel his own building. He buried his face in her neck, nibbling and sucking as he reached underneath her, sliding her hips up closer to him so he could wrap her thighs around his waist. He gripped himself and tried to concentrate. Slowly he pressed his hips forward, the tip of his cock barely grazing the outer parts of her. With her hands clutching his arse, her thighs pulling, pressing him deeper between her legs, she raised herself off the sheets to make him go inside of her.

She was ready and so was he. Ron kissed her and kept his eyes open as he gently pushed forward. An almost animalistic cry escaped her lips as his head slid inside. He moaned into her neck as her wonderfully hot insides engulfed him. "Ron!" she cried, shutting her eyes.

"Mmm, are you okay?" he asked, feeling his heart beating out of his chest. She was looser, and it allowed him to feel more and intensely. If at all possible, it felt better than last time, and he was in awe of it.

She opened her eyes. They were wet and he could see the slight pain in her features. "Y-yes, I'm fine."

"Does it hurt?" he asked, trying not to move, though he wanted nothing more than to furiously push inside her.

"Not as badly. Please, keep going," she said, nodding and kissing his chin.

"Okay," he said, kissing her again. With a lust and desire he could no longer contain, he pushed forward, moving himself all the way in. He let out a gasp, as her warmth hugged him once more. She winced and he knew that he was still hurting her, but he could see something else on her face. He kept his focus on her. Their eyes met and their lips locked into a snog so scorching that he felt as though they would light the bed on fire. Their tongues swirled around each other mouths, and Hermione's hands roamed his body. Their love, lust, and desire rose higher and higher in an all-consuming blaze of their absence of each other and their ever-growing relationship.

Ron moaned even louder as Hermione tightened herself around him. It felt so incredible, and his entire being fused to hers again. He gently pushed into her over and over, and the burning heat of her middle seared a path along the length of him. She continued to wince but ended with the same contented sigh, telling him that things were better. The sensations heightened with every movement of their bodies, and they worked together in a way that they hadn't the first time. He drove his hardness into her wetness and she thrust her pelvis upward to meet his every downward stroke. Ron could feel the wave move down, and he went a little faster. He tried to hold on. Hermione gripped his arms and dug her nails into his skin. "O-oh," she choked.

"Is this too much?" he asked, hoping that it wasn't. He didn't want to stop, but he would if it was too excessive.

"No. Keeping going," she sobbed. He nodded and kissed her again. The urgency of their lovemaking intensified as he felt the building of his impending orgasm. Another loud moan escaped his lips. He didn't mean to be so noisy, but he couldn't help it. Everything about her body made him feel good, and it was a goodness that he had missed while being apart from her. It was amazing, and he couldn't hold it back anymore.

He pulled out of the kiss. "Oh, oh, oh, Hermione! Hermione!"

"You sound so good, Ron. You sound so good," she moaned, practically digging into his arm.

Her words pushed him over the edge. He opened up and came. The burning intensity of passion and need exploded in ferocity out of him. He gave a choked cry, as he felt himself fill her up. Hermione's legs bucked, and she clamped their mouths together. She sobbed and met his thrust. Ron's body collapsed on top of her, as her quivering thighs release him from their hold. They were both so sweaty and warm. Lying on top of her, he felt the

unsteady pounding of her heart against his chest. He reluctantly parted his mouth from her so they could catch their breath.

His breathing shook as he kissed her neck. "Are you okay?" he asked again. He had gone harder, and he hoped that he hadn't done more harm to her than good.

She moved damp bangs out of his eyes and kissed the top of his head. "Yes, I'm okay. That was so much better. It still hurt, but it wasn't as painful. It was more like a good pain. Does that make sense?"

He looked up at her sweat-glistened skin that glowed and her lush lips that were moist. "No. Not one bit."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, trust me. You were great, and I loved you saying my name like that. You've never done that before."

"I've never felt that before. You're so good, baby," he said.

She tugged on his hair and he moved up. She traced his mouth. "Once again, you did it."

"No, you did. It was you that I felt. You're wonderful," he said in a husky voice. Every part of him pulsed to her body. He kissed her roughly again and stayed there. He didn't move away from her until he felt as if his jaw would fall off from snogging her so much. He pulled the sheet over his sweaty body and sat up. Hermione wiped sweat off her brow and did the same. They smiled at each other. Her skin was a deep ruby color and it made her black bra stand out even more.

She gripped her necklace and exhaled. "Do you think Harry and Ginny are waiting on us?"

"I don't know. I honestly hope not. I actually do want to talk to you," he said with a laugh.

She giggled. "Really? I assumed you only wanted my body."

"Eh, I'll take your mind, too, on occasion," he cheeked.

She laced their fingers together. "We can talk later on this evening."

"Will we have time?" Ron asked, loving how small her hand was compared to his.

"Yes, I told McGonagall in advance that you and Harry would be stopping by my room and that we would talk. She's fine with it," Hermione explained.

"Wow, she must really trust you," he said.

"She has every reason to. We have a good relationship, and I work hard for her. We'll be fine," she reassured.

He grinned at her. She was so responsible. "You work hard for everyone, Hermione. That's why she loves you."

"You work hard for people, too," she said, bringing his fingers to her lips and kissing them.

He shivered and moved closer to her to where their knees touched. He put his forehead against hers. "She doesn't love me, though."

"I do," Hermione whispered, pecking his lips. He kissed her back and felt everything around him stop and fade. "Ron," she said, pulling away.

"Yeah?" he answered, touching her shoulder.

"I really do love you and I want to spend so much time with you, but I miss my other best friend as well. I want to see Harry," she said.

Ron rolled his eyes and moved away. "He's a prat."

She swatted his arm. "He's not a prat. He's my best friend and yours. Now, come on. We need to get dressed. I'm sure that you want to see your sister."

"She's a prat, too," he answered, though he did want to see her.

Hermione moved off the bed and took her clothes into the bathroom. "She said something similar, but I know you both better than that. Get dressed, Ronald." She closed the door behind her and Ron sighed. He couldn't get the grin off his face. He missed Hermione bossing him around and calling him Ronald in the sharp, dictator way that she always did.

"Yes, Madame Granger. Anything you say!" he called, pulling his boxers back on.

The door opened and she came out fully dressed and pressed again. "Help me make the bed."

"Why?" Ron asked.

"If we come back here, I don't want my room in a state and wellâ€œ!" she trailed off, blushing again.

"What? It's no surprise that we shagged. I'm sure they're expecting to come back here smelling sex and brilliance," he teased.

She threw a pillow at him. "If you ever want to smell sex again, then I suggest you help me." He exhaled deeply but obeyed. "Oh, dear, now that you mention it." Hermione opened her purse and sprayed the room with her perfume.

"Mione, stop being paranoid. I was taking the piss," he said, crinkling his nose at the flowery scent.

"Still. The last thing I need is Ginny going on about something like this," she said.

"Got to keep your image up, yeah?" he asked.

Hermione looked at him and nodded. "Yes."

There was seriousness to her voice that he understood. In front of everyone else she had to be firm but to him she could loosen up. For Ron, he had to seem loose all the time. It was only in front of Hermione that he truly let himself feel as wound up as he was sometimes. "Fine, I get it." She grinned and they finished straightening her room. After tossing the tube in the bin, they headed out. Harry and Ginny were sitting on the couch in the Common Room. It was strange to see them in such a setting. He had been a sixth year and getting over his relationship with Lavender when they had been like that last.

"Harry!" Hermione said.

He stood up and held out his arms. "Hermione, how are you doing?"

She hugged him closely. "I'm fine. How have you been?" She let him go and kissed his cheek.

"I'm great," he said, smiling broadly. There was brightness in his eyes that he only seemed to get when he was around Hermione. Ron wanted to snort. Harry's hair was even messier than usual and there was an obvious red mark on his neck.

"Don't even think about saying something," Ginny said, walking over to him.

"What are you on about?" Ron said, feeling his perfect day getting even better at seeing his little sister.

She placed a hand on her hip. "I saw you looking at Harry. Yes, I bit him. Who cares?"

He pretended to gag. "I don't want to know. Please, no details. I don't understand why you and Harry think I care. You two are terrible."

She laughed. "So are you and Hermione, but you don't hear us talking." He opened his mouth, but she placed her arms around him.

Ron instantaneously held her back. After thinking that he would die during his field exam, he never wanted to miss an opportunity to hold her. "Missed you, Ginny."

"Missed you, too," she said, pulling away. She smiled at him, and it was beautiful.

"Mum misses her baby," he said with a chuckle.

"And I miss her. Are she and dad okay? George?" she asked.

"Everyone is fine. How are you?" he asked.

"It's been a good day so far," she answered.

"Hey, let's go eat. I'm starving," Harry said.

"I thought you already ate, mate?" Ron asked as he wrapped his arm around Hermione's waist. She swatted his arm again.

"Ronald, be nice," she said.

Harry simply rolled his eyes. "I have too much decently to respond to that."

"Yeah, there's no need to humor him," Ginny added, taking Harry's hand. Ron kicked at the back of her leg as they led the way out.

He truly felt at home. The four of them visited the quidditch shop like old times and stocked up on as much sweets as they could. It was amazing. He made his friends and sister laugh in a way he hadn't in a long time. They stopped for lunch at The Three Broomsticks. "Honestly, I thought I was going to chuck it smelled so bad," Ginny explained as they ate.

"Fucking hell, I remember reading about that potion a few years ago. It seemed really difficult," Ron said.

"It is. It's so meticulous and tricky that if you don't brew it properly the worst smell imaginable emerges, and that's exactly what happened," Hermione explained.

"I'm glad to be out of class. The worst thing I have to smell are Ron's socks, and I'm almost desensitized to it," Harry said.

"Piss off," Ron said. "Your side of the room is almost as dirty as mine."

"It's good to know that some things never change," Hermione said.

"Like Hogwarts. I can't believe how everything is the same, like nothing happened," Harry said lowly. Ron looked at him. Four times that day they had been stopped, and he had been asked if he was really Harry Potter and what life was like for him. Ron felt so badly for his friend. He couldn't even enjoy a day with his friends without being reminded of what he was; yet it was small price to pay in his eyes. Everything was in Harry's hands now. It was a power that no one else had.

"Ron," Hermione said, touching his shoulder.

"Huh?" he asked, looking at her.

She frowned. "Did you hear her? Ginny asked how you think your trial went."

"Oh, um, I dunno. I messed up a lot during my field test, and my interview was a nightmare," he explained.

"See what I mean?" Harry asked. "This is how he's been ever since."

"Ron, I'm sure you weren't that bad," Ginny said. "There's nothing wrong with being nervous."

"It wasn't just nerves. I didn't know what they wanted me to say during the interview and during the field test I was mental. I wasn't good. I know it," he said, feeling his cheeks burned. He didn't want to talk about it and especially on a good day.

Ginny didn't seem to understand that. "Why don't you let them decide? When will you find out?"

"Don't know. They said a week or so," he said.

"I check every day for the letter. I hate all this waiting," Harry said.

"Don't know why," Ron muttered.

"Sorry?" Harry asked.

"There's something I want to ask you, Harry," Hermione said, touching Ron's knee and squeezing it. It was her way of telling him to drop it.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Well, I've been thinking about you going to camp and about your strengths and weakness as a wizard," she started.

"Always a good thing to do," he mumbled.

"Hear me out. I've been thinking about your glasses a lot. Have you ever considered getting contacts?" she asked.

Ron raised an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"It's like a glasses lens that you put directly on your eyeball," Harry explained.

"Ew, that can't be too comfortable," Ginny said, sharing a look with Ron.

"No, they don't hurt. I only ask because your vision is so poor, and it would be terrible if you lost your glasses," Hermione said.

Harry looked down at his hands as if deep in thought. "I've never thought about it. I'd have to go to an optometrist. I don't think they have that stuff here."

"Definitely have never heard of that before," Ron said.

"If it doesn't hurt, then maybe you should consider it, Harry. Although, I love your glasses. They make you look really smart," Ginny said.

"Look smart? Am I not really incredibly smart on my own accord?" he asked.

She chuckled and kissed his shoulder. "You're a silent genius."

"Ha! That's brilliant!" Ron said.

"That's enough. I'm not trying to make fun of you, Harry. I just want you to know that if you want, I can call and help set up an appointment for you. We can go together sometime when you get time off from camp. It might be good to have them as a backup," she explained.

"Thanks. That sounds like a really good idea," Harry said, reaching across the table and giving her hand a squeeze. Ron felt his heart melting again. Hermione always knew what to say and do to turn things around. She was such a bloody genius.

"Hey, do you lot want to go see Hagrid?" Ginny asked.

Harry's eyes lit up. "Really? That's a great idea."

"Yeah, I'm done here. Fucking hell, let's go," Ron said, practically tripping over himself as he jumped out of his chair.

The four traveled down to his hut. It took looked exactly the same, down to the uncut grass that surrounded it. Hagrid was sitting on the sets and cutting carrots into a large pot when they arrived. Ron beamed. Seeing Hagrid always made him feel like a kid and added excitement to his stomach. Harry rushed to him and hugged him, looking younger and lighter himself. It was great to catch up with him. He had been such a positive force to them, and Ron would always appreciate how kind he was and how he talked about his family. They stayed with him until they could no longer stomach the tea and hard toffee.

Later that evening they returned to Hogwarts. Right as they walked in they ran into Professor McGonagall. Ron automatically let go of Hermione's hand and felt the need to tuck in his shirt. "Oh, Harry, Ron, you're still here."

"We're going to my room to talk for a little bit, Professor," Hermione said.

"That's fine, Ms. Granger. You should take them to see the display if they haven't already. It's nice to see you two. Are you doing well?" she asked.

"Yes, just fine," Harry said.

"Yeah, great," Ron said. He didn't know why he was so nervous around Professor McGonagall. He figured that they would always have that relationship.

She smiled slightly. "That's good to hear. Kingsley told me that you two are hopefules for Lambrick Academy. I wish you both luck."

"Thank you, Professor," they said together.

Ron exhaled and took Hermione's hand again. Ginny laughed. "Ron, you don't have to be a tit. She's not going to send you to detention. She's really great, actually."

"I know but stillâ€¢ some things never change remember?" he asked.

Harry looked between them. "Have you two seen the display?"

"Of course, it's hard to miss. It right by the corridor that leads to the Great Hall," Ginny said.

"Do you want to see it?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked to Ron. "Do you?"

Ron rubbed his neck. He wasn't sure if he wanted to, but he didn't have a good enough excuse for why he wasn't ready. Therefore, he shrugged and tried to seem indifferent. "It's fine with me."

They made their way over to the display. Ron didn't know why he was apprehensive. Sure enough as they turned the corner of the hallway, he saw a large glass cabinet. "Come on," Hermione said, leading them.

There were three wooden plaques on the top shelf with their names on it in gold letters. "For special services to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and to the Wizarding World," Harry said. Ron eyed the awards and felt pride swell in his chest. He then noticed Harry's name on certificates and trophies. He had been so brave and gave up his life for all of them. He was so proud of his best mate.

"You deserve this, mate," Ron said sincerely.

Harry looked at him. "So do you." They smiled and nodded at each other. "How did they get this?" He pointed to a picture of the three of them, which seemed to be taken at Bill's wedding.

"I gave it to McGonagall. She wrote me asking for one but didn't say why. Her showing me this was strange. I mean it's me. It's us," she explained. The three of them looked between each other before gazing at the picture on the second shelf and all that happened that day and the days after. So much had come between them. They had fought, bled, and cried so much. So much darkness had come over them, yet they were still here. They were standing right in front of all they had done. Words, newspaper clippings, and awards showed what had happened, but it wasn't enough. The display didn't begin to explain or show what they had been through for seven years and counting.

Like one unconscious decision between them, they moved closer to each other. Hermione wrapped her arms around Ron's waist and he rested his head on hers. Harry put an arm around Hermione's shoulder and leaned against her. They were like one force divided between three bodies and when they were together, they seemed to

move and think as one. So much emotion passed between the three of them and for a moment they couldn't be touched. Ron felt an overwhelming sensation to tell them how much he loved them, how grateful he felt, and how sorry he was.

"Um, lot?" Ginny said.

Her voice seemed to break the moment. Ron turned to her. She stood just a bit away from them. "Get over here," he said.

She eased a little and joined them. She placed her hand on the glass. "This is great. You three did so much."

"It wasn't just us, though," Harry said.

"Yes, they're making another one for the Hogwarts students. I know you'll be in it," Hermione assured.

She shook her head. "I don't care about that. It's nothing compared to what you all went through." She let out a shaky breath and her eyes misted somewhat. "I'm really proud of you three. We're all here and okay because of you, and I feel so fortunate to say that my friend, my boyfriend, and my brother are the people in here. The best magic in the world."

"Oh, Ginny," Hermione said, her bottom lip trembling.

Ron reached for her, but Harry got to her first. He put his hands to her cheeks and gazed at her deeply. He kissed her hard for a second then pulled away. "It's all for you."

She sniffed and chuckled. "Just for me?"

"Wellâ€;maybe not all for you, but a big portion," Ron said, trying to lighten the mood. He didn't like how gloomy and emotional things were turning.

She rolled her eyes and rubbed them. "There's another place that we should see."

"Ginny," Hermione started.

"What?" Harry asked.

Ginny kept her eyes on Ron. "I think we should see it together, Ron."

He knew what she was talking about. The darkness in her eyes said it all. He didn't want to go. He just wanted to enjoy his perfect day, but he knew that she felt a little out of place and wanted to share something with him, something that they would only really understand. He had to give it to her. "Okay."

"We don't have to do this today," Hermione said, touching his arm.

"Waitâ€;you meanâ€;where the explosion happened?" Harry asked, his eyes widening, too.

Ginny nodded. "I've been wanting to go but not without you lot. You're all here now. Please."

Hermione and Harry opened their mouths but Ron got his words out first. "Let's go." He held out his hand and Ginny took it. She nodded slightly and led the way. Ron tried to remember how to breathe as they made their way to the hallway. He hadn't planned on doing this now or ever. He never wanted to be there, but he felt like he had to and especially since Ginny asked. He could hear Harry and Hermione whispering next to them. He wanted them to shut up. He had to focus.

They turned the corner to the corridor and already Ron could feel the gust of the explosion. They stopped and Ginny gripped his hand harder. The wall had been replaced. The space was empty and looked like the other halls of the school. It didn't smell like dust or fire. There weren't screams and cries around him. He glanced at the floor. Fred's dead body was not there. Percy was not desperately trying to cover his lifeless frame.

Ginny let go of his hand and walked in further. She stood and peaked around, holding her stomach. Her large eyes roamed the space. Harry and Hermione walked in as well. Harry rubbed Ginny's arm. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm...okay," she breathed in a shaky voice. Hermione leaned against the wall and wiped a tear away. She seemed upset.

Ron let out a breath and came further down the hall. He was okay, too. It was just a hallway, another corridor. Death had been there, but he was fine. It was so much easier than he thought it would be. There was terrible pressure against his shoulders and he felt dizzy, but he was all right. He looked up from the floor again and at Hermione, Ginny, and Harry. Each seemed to be in their thoughts. Each had seen the best and worst that life had to offer.

Each had been so close to dying. Each could have been in the very spot that Fred was in. Each could have been a second too slow, like his brother had. He stared at each other them and the space around them. Each one of them could have been dead. He could have had to bury his girlfriend, his best mate, or his sister. Three people who kept his heart beating could have easily lost their lives, like Fred had. They still could. Any minute someone could throw a spell at them and murder them. Any second he could make a careless mistake and lose them forever.

Something powerful hit him in the chest and made his heart gallop. He clutched his stomach and wheezed but realized that he had no air in his lungs. Everything went black and his knees gave out. He collapsed to the ground and grabbed at his throat. "Ron!" someone yelled. He heaved and gasped but his body was too stiff to move and his brain was too icy to assemble.

"What's wrong? What's happening to him?" someone who sounded like Ginny said.

"Is this one them? Is this one of those things, Hermione!" a male voice said.

"Just back up! Give him some room. Ron, sweetheart, please, please, look at me!" a sweet yet commanding voice said.

He moved his eyes to where he thought the voice was, but everything was far too fuzzy for him to see. He had no air, and his heart was moments away from stopping. He was dying. He would die right where his brother had. "F-Fred," he choked out. It was the only thing his body and mind agreed on.

"Oh god!" a girl sobbed. "I'm so sorry, Ron."

"We have to do something. We can't let him stay like this!" a male said.

Someone touched his face. The hands were so cold and soft and shaky. "I've got it, Harry! He'll be fine. Justâ€¢please, give him room." The sweet voice was sobbing. "Ron, please, it's Hermione. Look at me. Focus on my voice. Follow me! I love you. You're okay. I'm okay. We're okay. Breathe with me. Remember how to do that? Breathe with me."

The phrase sounded familiar. Only one person said that to him. "Herm-Hermione?"

"Yes, baby, it's me. Breathe with me. Breathe. Deeply. In and out. You're okay. We are all okay. You're safe," she said. Someone pulled his jacket off and reached under his shirt. He shivered, as the cold hand seemed to clear his eyes. "Breathe, Ron."

Ron blinked several times and tried to follow Hermione's orders. He knew it was her voice and her hands. He felt her breathing and tried to do the same. He gasped as stinging cold air engulfed his lungs. It was refreshing and rejuvenated him. His heart started to pump at a slower rate, and he inhaled and let out a heavy breath. He gasped and found a rhythm again. He was able to breathe and his body unfroze. He choked and clutched Hermione's body. "Hermione, Hermione," he repeated as tears spilled out of him. His body was moving and breathing and his brain was finally catching up while his heart slowed down.

"Yes, I'm right here, Ron. You're okay. I'm okay. We're okay. Keep breathing. Don't stop. Don't ever stop breathing," she ordered. She kept rubbing his back and he kept his face against her chest.

After awhile, he could finally see more than the outline of her. He made out her blue jumper and brown hair. He wandered his eyes in wooziness. Ginny was sitting right next to them, hugging her legs tightly to her chest, her eyes red. Harry was further back, leaning against the wall, with one hand pulling on his hair and the other with his nails in his mouth. Ron closed his eyes and buried his face against Hermione's chest again. He didn't want to see them. He didn't want them to truly know about his problem.

"Ron, do you think you can stand up?" Hermione asked. He nodded, not wanting to speak. "Okay, let's get up and go to my room. Can you do that?" He nodded again and pulled away. She slowly helped him up and the four of them said nothing as they slowly walked back to her room. He sat on her bed and Hermione rushed to her sink. She drenched a towel in cold water and filled up a glass with the same. He gulped it down almost at once and placed the towel against his neck. His body was so achy. Looking at her, he saw how pale and shaken she was. It was so different from what he saw that morning when he met her at The Three Broomsticks, and it was his fault.

She placed her hand under his shirt again and rubbed his back.
"Better?"

"Yes. Thank you," he said quietly. He looked in front of them. Harry was sitting against her desk and Ginny was on the floor, staring at her shoes. He wanted to break the ice, but he didn't know what to say. Everything was different now. He couldn't pretend anymore like he had all summer.

"Was that a thing? A panic attack?" Harry asked finally.

"Yeah," Ron said.

"A really bad one," Hermione said in a shaky voice.

Ginny finally looked up. "Panic attack? Ron, I don't understand."

"I told you, Ginny. I told you yesterday that this wasn't the right time. Ron wasn't ready," Hermione snapped.

He placed a hand on her thigh. "It's okay. She doesn't know. It's not her fault." He looked at his sister and saw the confusion and horror. He was such an arsehole. "Ginny, I, um, what you sawâ€;it's happened before. It's happened a few times, since the funeral."

"You've collapsed like this before?" she asked.

"No. I haven't had that many but none have been like this. None have been thisâ€;extreme," he said.

"You've never said anything. Why didn't you tell the family?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I don't want anyone to know this about me."

"Hermione and Harry know," Ginny said, looking at them.

"Ginny," Harry started.

"It's not their business to tell. It's mine. Trust me, I don't want them to know either. I don't want anyone to look at me the way you are now," Ron said, feeling his voice trembling.

"Ron, it's okay," Hermione said in a soothing voice.

"No, it's not okay," Ginny said. "I still don't understand. Why are you having them now? Are you sure that you haven't had this your whole life?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Ron said.

"A panic attack isn't a disease or something you have to be born with. Some people have them their whole lives, but not in every case. Like I told him, it's something that happens sometimes to people who have been through a lot of trauma. It doesn't last forever, but it takes some time. You just need time, Ron," Hermione reassured, massaging his shoulders.

Harry sighed and took off his glasses. He rubbed his eyes. "I fucking hate that phrase. How much time do we all need to get over all of this?"

"You're not helping, Harry," Hermione said.

"No, he's right. I'm tired of this, too," Ron breathed. He rubbed his palms against his knees and felt the heaviness of everyone push down on him.

"What was it like?" Ginny asked quietly. "Were you in any pain?"

She seemed so afraid and in pain herself. He didn't want to add anymore. "No, it's not painful. My body just freezes up, and I can't breathe or see. My heart starts beating like mad and I get hot. It's uncomfortable."

"What makes you have them?" Ginny asked.

"Ginny, please. He probably doesn't want to talk about this right now," Hermione said.

"No, it's okay. I should have told her ages ago about this," Ron said. "Um, when I get really scared or worried it starts up. I try to stop it and sometimes I can but-but I wasn't strong enough this time. There was too much happening, and I didn't even realize what was going on until it was happening." He couldn't hold his grief in. He was too exhausted. He was in no way a stronger older brother. "I wanted to be there for you and I wasn't. I'm so sorry, Ginny."

She got up and rushed herself into his arms. She hugged him. "No, I'm sorry, Ron. I didn't know. I'm sorry that I made you go."

He pulled his arms around her. "You didn't. I wanted to go. I wanted to get it over with and move on. Please, don't be sorry. You did nothing wrong. You're the stronger one. You're so much stronger than I am."

She pulled away and her eyes were wet. "No, I'm not. You have no idea how fucking scared I just was." She fell back to the floor and ran her fingers through her long red hair.

"Ginny," Harry said, moving to the floor next to her. He put his arms around her.

"I didn't know what was wrong with you. I thought you were going to die," she said against Harry's chest.

"He wasn't going to die! He just needed to breathe. Ron's fine," Hermione pressed, rubbing his back harder. Ron didn't know what to do, and his palms were killing him. The terrible itch was back.

"Leave her alone, Hermione. She was bloody terrified and so was I," Harry said. Ron looked up at him. He was just as pale as Hermione as his eyes were as red as Ginny's. "When you told me about them, Ron, I didn't know what to think and seeing you like thatâ€œ; that was so awful."

"I know. I'm sorry," he said, hating himself for being such a coward. No one else had reacted the way he did.

"Don't apologize. I know what it feels like to be in a place like that. Remember?" Harry asked.

"I'm just so glad that you're okay," Ginny said, squeezing Ron's knee. "I'm sorry, Ron. I'm so sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," Ron said.

"What triggered it? Was it the room itself?" Hermione asked.

He shook his head. "Not really. It was you three."

Harry's eyes widened. "We made you like that?"

"No, that's not what I mean. I was fine until I thought about you three and howâ€œ;how it easily could have been any of you. Any one of you could have been in Fred's place," he explained.

"But we're here, sweetheart. We're right here with you. You have to stop this. You'll never get through moving on if you keep these ideas in your head," Hermione said.

"I try to let it go but sometimes I can't help it." He looked at the three of them. "I don't think any of you understand how much I need you all to be okay and to be here with me. You don't get it. I can't help this!" He got up and walked to her bathroom door. He rested his back against it.

"I understand," Harry said. "Just because I didn't react the way you did doesn't mean that I didn't feel it, and seeing you collapse brought it all came back. Every bad dream that I've ever had was right in front of me." He looked away.

Hermione wiped away another tear. "I can't think about it. It's too much for me."

Ginny ran her fingers through her hair again and stood up. "I don't want to talk about this. I'm really sorry."

Harry took her hand. "Hey, where are you going?"

"I need to get some air," she said.

"Ginny, you don't have to go," Ron said.

"I know but I really need fresh air, and I'll be heading to bed soon," she said.

"I'm coming with you," Harry said. He hugged Hermione. "Thank you for helping him," he whispered in her ear as if Ron wasn't there.

"Of course," she said, holding him back. "Bye. I'll write you."

He nodded and pulled away. "I'll see you back, Ron."

"Yeah," Ron said. He watched Ginny as she headed to the door.
"Ginny, are-are you going to say anything?"

She turned back to him. Her eyes were glossy. "I'm sorry, Ron."
She opened the door and walked out.

Harry sighed. "It'll be okay. I'm sure she's just shaken up.
She's fine, Ron."

Ron put his face in his hands as he heard the door close. He felt so awful. He had ruined his perfect day. "Harry's right. She's shaken up, that's all," Hermione said.

"I didn't mean for that to happen. I never wanted her or you or Harry to see me like that," he said. He heard sobbing. He pulled his hands away. Hermione was holding on to a pillow and crying.
"Please, don't. Not you, too."

"I'm sorry. That was the worst one. You've never been that far gone before. You said Fred's name. Did you know that?" she asked.

He tried to think back to what happened, but it was too muddled.
"I don't remember."

"I tried to tell her," she said.

He sat next to her on the bed. "Don't blame my sister. She didn't know, and I wanted to go. Fucking hell, Hermione, do you think that I want to be afraid all the time? I want to get over this. I wanted to be there for her like I'm supposed to be," he said.

She shook her head. "I don't think it should be at the expense of you."

"I do. She's worth it all to me," he said.

She frowned. "I've always loved that about, but it scares me so much. The thought of youâ€œ;the thought of youâ€œ;"

He pulled her into a hug. "I'll never leave you. I told you that. I am always going to be here to keep you safe. We're going to have a life together. Everything that was on those shelves, it's all for what we have to look forward to."

"You just wouldn't breathe, and your eyes were so blank and still. You were lifeless," she sobbed.

"Listen to me. You were right. I wasn't dying. I'm not dying. Not now. I've got too much to live for, like you." He wiped one of her tears away. "Hermione, during my trial, I thought that they were going to kill me, but I thought about you and all the things we have together and I fought them. I'll never stop fighting as long as I know that I have you to return to. Fucking hell, love, you save my life every time. You saved me again today. You give me life."

"Anything I can do, I'll do it. Ron, this is it right here. This is my life, and everything we shared today I want over and over with you. That plaque is only a summary of your perfection. You are so perfect, Ron, no matter what you say. Lambrick will see that, and I hope you do, too." She smiled and touched his mouth. "When our kids go here, they'll see that display and know that their dad is the bravest and most amazing wizard and person they'll ever know."

Hearing her say that brought out a new and energetic passion from him. He leaned forward and kissed her deeply. She kissed her back and placed her hands on his neck. They fell against the bed.
"Hermione, I'm having forever with you. I promise."

"Keep your promise. Always," she sighed. He pushed into her and felt all the yearning and love in the world for her. She had held him, coached him, and breathed with him. He had been born to meet her and have her. What they shared was deeper than a relationship. What they had was eternity. He groaned and deepened the kiss. His heart beat strongly, and he needed to feel her again.

He broke away. "Hermione, I want you. I just keep wanting you all the time."

She moved over a little to her side table. She kissed his neck as she pulled the drawer open and reached in. She pulled out another tube. "Have me, Ron. I'm yours every second of the day."

He snatched it from her hand and gulped it down as she unzipped his jeans. He tugged his shirt off and hers off. He pulled down his jeans and she wrenched her jeans and knickers off. He kissed all over her face. "I love you."

"I love you, too. I love you. I love you," she repeated.

He cut her words off with a kiss and pushed into her body again. He moaned and she gave a choked cry. He tried to be gentle but the pulse was everywhere and grew stronger. He went a little faster and a little harder, and he noticed how Hermione winced less and moaned louder with every thrust. He didn't have enough patience to hold on. He came inside her powerfully and cried out. Every bad feeling washed out of him again and her warmth replaced it with ecstasy. He stopped pushing and dropped to her chest again. They were sweaty and out of breathe once more.

"Are you okay?" he asked. No matter what, she was his first priority and he had to know if he hurt her too much.

She kissed his forehead. "That was wonderful. I'm fine. Are you okay?"

He looked up at her. Her face was red, and she looked serious even through the passion. "Right now I am," he answered.

She smiled and ran her hand across his damp forehead. "That's good. One day at a time."

He kissed her again. "One day at a time."

"Do you want to talk about it some more? I'm right here, Ron," she said.

He thought about it. He didn't feel the need to explain it to Hermione. He felt as if she already knew what he had to say, he wanted to salvage his day the best he could. "No. Not now."

"That's fine. We can talk about something else. Something lighter," she suggested.

"Yes, please," he said almost desperately.

They sat up in bed and once again caught up on the things that they couldn't talk about while with Harry and Ginny. Hermione told him about her parent's worries and her frustrations as Head Girl. It was nice to take the focus off him, and he liked helping her for a change. "I'm sure it will wear off," Ron said.

"I don't know. I don't think I'm righteous because of it all. I just want my education," she said.

He grinned. "Have you thought about what you want to do after you graduate?"

"I'm not sure. I enjoy the law a lot. There are so many things wrong with the wizard justice system," she explained. "That I learned last year."

He took her hand. "And you're just the person to straighten it all out."

She smiled. "Maybe. How about you, my future Auror? Are you ready for your next interview?"

"Yeah, I don't think it can be nearly as intense as Lambrick so if they throw me outside, I'll be prepared," Ron explained.

"I wish that I could be there when you get your letter from Lambrick," she said.

"Why? You know what my disappointed face looks like," he said.

She sighed. "Ronald."

"Harry got the spot. I know it, and it's okay. He deserves it," he said. It was true. He knew that Harry deserved to go to Lambrick more than anyone and seeing all his awards enforced the feeling.

"Do you talk to him like this?" she asked.

"Like what? Like I know he got in, yeah. Why not?" he asked.

She gave him a pained expression. "It's hurtful."

He crinkled his nose. "How is telling him that hurtful? I'd reckon he'd feel good about it."

"Ronald Weasley, nothing is that simple," she said. "Harry talks to me, too. He told me how he's not sure if all these camps want him because he has talent or because he's a big name and it will look good for their academy. It can't be a good feeling, and you saw him today. Everyone wanted to shake his hand and he was uncomfortable. You have to understand where he's coming from."

He rubbed his neck. He was always so torn between feeling happy, jealous, and angry with Harry these days. "Yeah, butâ€¦it's more harmless than not. He did defeat Voldemort. He can't ignore that."

"I know. I told him that. He can't keep fighting who he is, and he can't ignore how it affects other people, like you," she said. She eyed him. "Just like you can't hold it against him that he is who he is."

"I don't," he shot.

"Honestly? You've never snapped at him or complimented him a little too rudely?" she asked.

He couldn't hide from her. She knew him entirely too well. "Well, maybe sometimes but I don't mean to. I'm not trying to make him feel worse."

"I don't think you do either. You both have so much pent up still. I can see it. Let it go, please. You need each other," she said.

"We're fine. Really. Harry and I know where we stand," he assured.

"Will you still if he gets in and you don't or if you get in and he doesn't?" she asked.

He didn't know what to say. He honestly wasn't sure. "We'll always be mates, Mione."

"Exactly, nothing else matters, Ron. Remember those plaques when you get frustrated. You and Harry made all that happen. The three of us were a team," she said.

He nodded. "Yeah, you're right. You always are."

"It's not about being right. It's about what matters and what's important," she said. "You and Harry and me being there for each other matters. Your friendship with him is essential to who you are and to who he is and to who I am."

"Okay. Okay. Enough lecturing. I don't have that much time left. Can we just lay here together?" he asked.

"What do you want to talk about?" she asked.

"I don't want to talk. I just—I just want to listen to your heartbeat," he said, holding her and putting his head to her chest.

"Oh, Ron," she said with a heavy breath.

He looked up at her and frowned. "What?"

She smiled at him tenderly and touched his cheek. "That was the most romantic thing you've ever said to me."

"Really?" he said. He hadn't even been trying. It seemed as if anytime he did something right it was by accident. Life was bloody unfair.

"Yes, that was incredibly sweet, Ron. You're so sweet," she said.

"Always the tone of surprise, Hermione. I've always been a poet," he said with a wink.

She rolled her eyes and laughed. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and they closed their eyes. The only sounds came from their breathing and the soft moans that escaped them in the beauty of what they were doing. Unfortunately, Hermione didn't let him stay for too much longer. It was passed the time that he was supposed to leave. He quickly pulled his clothes on, and she rushed to find her knickers. "How did I lose them?"

"Are they in my pocket?" he asked with a smile.

"No, honestly, I can't find them," she said.

"They're probably tangled in the sheets. Don't worry. I don't reckon McGonagall will be doing a knickers check," he said.

"Urgh! You're right, and you really need to go. It's late," she said, opening the door for him.

"Wow, this is different from last time," he cheeked.

She clutched her necklace. "Oh, it's not like that. I'd love for you to stay but you know the rules."

"I get it. It's fine. Come here," he said.

She sighed and fell into his embrace. She held him firmly. "I love you, Ron. I had such a good time, despite what happened."

"Yeah, me too. I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't. Just move forward," she said. She got on her toes and kissed him. "Write me with news of anything."

"I will," he answered, kissing her again. The dread of leaving her was back. He was always okay until he had to physically walk away from her. "Um, don't be upset with Ginny, okay? It's not her fault."

"I know," Hermione said, pulling away. "I overreacted. I'll apologize, but you should write her. She's worried about you."

"I don't want her to be. I'm fine," he said.

"Then tell her that. Talk to your sister, Ron," she said.

He nodded. "Okay. When will I see you again?"

"I honestly don't know. The next visit isn't until the middle of the month. You'll probably be gone by then." She trailed off and looked away.

He could already feel his palms itch again. He hated the idea of it being months until he could hold her again. "We'll work something out. I'll let you know as soon as I get some sort of schedule."

"Please do. I'll do whatever I can to get the time," she said, taking his hands.

"So will I. I promise, I'm going to bloody see you soon no matter what." He pulled her into a fierce hug.

She held him back. "I love you. I love you so much."

"I love you, too. Thank you for everything today. You're so amazing, Hermione." He pulled away and kissed her forehead. "I love you."

"I love you," she said gently. She reached up and kissed him softly. "You should go."

"Yeah, I'll see you. I swear," he said, walking over the threshold.

Hermione leaned against the door again and waved to him. "Bye, Ron."

He waved back. "Bye, Hermione. We'll see each other, okay?"

She nodded and bit her lip that was trembling slightly. "I know we will."

He gave her a nod and walked up the staircase. He couldn't walk back down again. He honestly didn't know if he would see Hermione for a while, but he couldn't think about it. His day was supposed to be perfect. The house was dark when he got home. It was so late. Harry was asleep when he got back. Ron was grateful. He slipped off his clothes and pulled on his pajamas.

"Ron?" Harry breathed.

Ron grabbed at his chest. "Fucking bollocks! Don't do that."

"Sorry," Harry said, lighting his wand.

Ron sat on the edge of his cot. "How's Ginny?"

"Scared and upset with herself. She thinks it's her fault," he explained.

"It's not. It probably would have happened no matter when I went and no matter who asked me to go. She didn't do anything," Ron said.

Harry nodded. "I know. I told her that, but you don't get it. You didn't have to watch yourself go through that. You scared us all. You scared me so much."

He rubbed his neck. He didn't know how to take the fact that he could terrify Harry so greatly. "I didn't mean to. I didn't even feel it coming on. There was no warning this time."

Harry dug his palms into his eyes. "I'm so happy that Hermione was there. She knew exactly what to do."

"She always does," Ron said with a smile.

Harry didn't seem as happy. "Yeah, and I don't. What happens if she's not there and it's just you and me?"

"I don't know, Harry, but I honestly don't want to think about it. It's over now. I just want to go to sleep. I'm sorry that you had to see me like that. I'll do whatever I can to make sure it doesn't happen again," he said, getting up to go to his bed.

Harry grabbed his wrist and held it securely. "That's not what I'm saying. I just want to know how to help you. Hermione isn't the only one who needs you to breathe, Ron. Ginny and I need you, too."

Ron felt the pressure soak into his skin. "I know you both do. I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere. I lost it once. It won't happen again." He pulled away from Harry and went to his own bed. Harry turned out his light and didn't say anything else. Ron took deep breaths and tried to relax. He had to pull himself together. He had too many people counting on him to be brave and well put together. He had no time to feel anything else but certainty. His perfect day had gotten away from him. Nothing good came to him without a price. His heart began to race, but he held it

together. He ignored the looks of horror on Hermione, Harry, and Ginny's faces.

He had to do something to calm him. He waved his hand over the floor next to his bed and reached into his jacket pocket. He pulled out Hermione's black knickers. He smirked and automatically felt himself relax somewhat. She would kill him when she found out that he stole them, but that was okay. He stuffed them under his mattress to join her bra. His day hadn't been completely terrible. He got to see Hermione, make love to her twice, and listen to her steady heartbeat. He quietly chuckled as he thought about her scurrying to find her knickers. It was the only image that calmed him down.

Hermione was the best part of his life.

* * *

****Wow, so, a very layered chapter. It started off so well but you lot should know by now in this story, Ron's going to get knocked down a few times so he can learn to stand stronger. The panic attack in this one was really extreme, I know, and there's a reason for that. At this point in the story, it's important that Hermione, Harry, and Ginny know about them and what happens to Ron during one. It's also important that he freaked out so badly when thinking about the three of them. You'll realize why later. That scene will be key later on the story. Ron's panic attacks are of great importance in this story. It's my own little thing that I tagged on post-DH. It works for him, I think, and you'll see why.

Okay, I realized something as I first drafted this chapter, I can't write Hagrid to save my life, lol. There's a reason why I don't attempt to touch his character. I honestly can't write him in conversation for too long. I referenced the books and I talked to a mate of mine who can write Hagrid beautifully in fiction, but it just aint me, lol. I suck at it and I make him into such a twat, so, I had to cut that whole part out, but I did want it known that they went to see him. Someone requested it and I thought it was a brilliant idea. Maybe down the line I'll try again but not for this chapter, lol.

Also, I know this was very-Ron's feelings for Hermione-based. First, I just love how he loves her. Second, at this point in the story, it's important that his feelings for her are brought up in their entirety. There is literally so much about to happen and things have to be established. His feelings for her is the base of this story and everything always comes back to her. Not just their relationship, though. Like, the thing with Ginny, the thing with Harry, the thing with George and Angelina, ALL of it is important and has to come out right now! Lol, so, just follow my madness as best as you can.

Fucking hell, I feel as if I have so much to explain but I don't want to without giving things away. So, just read on and hopefully you'll get your answers. If not, let me know and I'll make a note. Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

P.S- I'll tell you lot in advanced because I always want to keep my lovely R/Hr shippers up to date. NO, this is not the last time Ron and Hermione will see each other for a long time. Don't worry!

* Chapter 24*: Done all wrong

Thanks for the reviews! You all are great! I'm sorry this took a while. I found myself at a crossroads during this chapter. It took a long time for me to find my way with where I want things to go, but I think I made the right decision. :)

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter- I hope you all enjoyed Deathly Hallows! I sure as bloody hell did. GO RON AND RON/HERMIONE!

* * *

Ron walked through the kitchen door and let out a sigh of relief. His mum looked up from her breakfast. "How did it go?"

He grinned and leaned against the door. "Good. I had to take an academic test and a really short skills exam. It was nothing like Lambrick's exam. They just wanted to see me perform different kinds of magic."

She poured him a cup of coffee and patted the chair next to her. "Come tell me about it, sweetheart."

Ron yawned as he sat next to her and almost gulped down the entire mug of steaming, bitter liquid. "Cheers. It wasn't anything too hard. They wanted to see me use offensive and defensive spells. Summon my Patronus and things like that. I had an interview after that. I was a lot more prepared. I just remembered everything I did wrong from Lambrick and tried not to repeat it."

"Ronald Weasley, I'm sure that you didn't do anything wrong at your interview with Lambrick," his mum said, rubbing his back.

He wanted to roll his eyes and tell her that everyone's optimism was driving him mad, but he held it in. "I dunno. I'll know any day now. I reckon I might have gotten into Banes, though. They actually seemed to like me and were impressed with my application. So, that's a good thing. I'll know about that in a few days as well." His mum was quiet, and she gave him a worried look. "What?"

She took his hand in between hers. "Ron, I haven't heard you talk much about where you plan to go if you don't get into your first choice. In fact, you hardly talk about other camps at all. You are thinking about more than just Lambrick, right?"

He rubbed his free hand into his thigh. The truth was that he hadn't been thinking about it. Lambrick was so clear in his mind, even though he knew that he would be rejected. He just couldn't bring himself to plan to go anywhere else. He had no other path in front of him. "Yeah, I am. I'm considering Banes for sure. I have backups, and I'm ready for whatever happens. Don't worry, mum."

"It's not that I don't have faith in you getting into Lambrick, dear. I just want you to know what your options are and where you plan to go. You're an adult now and you have to make difficult adult decisions. This is certainly one of them," she explained.

He pulled his hand away from her. Hearing her lecture made him nervous. "I know, mum, and I'm fine. I have a plan."

She didn't seem convinced. Her look of worry only increased. "I know you're fine, Ron. It's just that you spend so much time taking care of other people that I worry if you're remembering to take care of yourself. I know this entire process has been stressful for you. I'm here if you need to talk."

He got out of the chair. He couldn't take it anymore. If he sat any longer, then he would spill everything about how worried and stressed and terrified he really was. "I know you're here, but there's nothing to talk about. I'm fine. No stress."

"Ron," she began.

"Listen, I'm tired. I reckon I'm just gonna take a nap," he cut in.

She sighed a little. "Okay, dear, but take this. It's from Ginny." She handed him a letter and went back to her breakfast.

Ron held the letter tightly in his hand and felt guilt seep into his skin. He wanted to reassure his mum that he really had personal direction and that he really was okay, but it was a lie. He wanted to tell her about his horrible panic attack at Hogwarts and how he had no idea about what academy to go to, but the last thing he wanted to do was make her more upset and anxious than she already was. She had enough to deal with from losing one son and having the twin so distant. He refused to be another issue in her life.

So instead, he walked into the sitting room and sat on the couch. He peered at Ginny's name on the letter and felt uneasy about what she had to say. He had written to her, telling her that he was all right, but he knew that she didn't believe him. He felt like such a tit for losing it in front of her. Out of everyone in his life, Ginny's belief that he was strong mattered most. After all, she was his little sister, and he was always supposed to protect her and make her feel safe. Regardless, he opened the letter and read.

Ron,

Thanks for your letter. I wasn't sure where we would be after the last visit. It's good to know that you're doing better. I was worried. However, if you honestly think that telling me that your panic attacks aren't a big deal and that what I saw will never happen again is reassuring, then you're even more mental than I've always believed.

I had to leave when I did not so much because I was scared, but because you didn't tell me. I was so bloody angry. I can understand why you don't want anyone to know. I can even understand why you would feel more comfortable with only Harry and Hermione knowing, but this is obviously something that is a huge deal and it doesn't just affect you. Ron, I thought you were going to die. Do you understand what that felt like for me? I just lost a brother, and then I had to watch another fall to his knees and almost suffocate to death. I don't care how hard it is for you. You CANNOT keep things like panic attacks away from your family. We are your true family, Ron. We lost Fred and the last thing this family needs is you pretending everything is fine when it's not. If you think that you're protecting us, then stop it.

What if you have one in front of mum and dad? What if you have one in front of George? Do you honestly want them to think that you're dying, too, all to make you feel a little more comfortable? I'm sorry if I'm overreacting right now. I probably am, but I'm tired of feeling like we're a second family to you. We all love you so much, and we want to help you just as much as you help us. Please, stop keeping things from me. I'm already going through it with George and even with Harry. You have to be honest with me. I can handle it. I'm a lot tougher than you obviously think I am.

I'm not going to say anything, but telling is something you should consider doing in the future. We need you, but you need us as well. I'd like to think that I could be more than just a little sister to you. I see you as more than just my big brother. Please, take care of yourself.

I love you (and give mum a kiss for me),

Ginny

He folded the letter and clamped a hand over his face. If he didn't feel like an idiot before, then he certainly did now. He couldn't believe that Ginny would feel as if he considered her part of his second family. It was because he loved them all so

much that he was keeping everything from them. He couldn't tell his parents or his brothers about his panic attacks. He couldn't worry them all any more. He would simply have to not have one ever again. He would have to learn to stop them before they ever came over him. Ginny would understand in time. He stuffed the letter into his pocket and lay on his stomach. He was too tired to think of yet another solution to yet another problem.

Someone was shaking him. He groaned. "Wah?"

"Get up. You can't nap all day," Harry said.

Ron opened his eyes and groaned again. "Why not? There's nothing wrong with sleep. Especially when there's nothing else to do." He slowly sat up and rubbed his eyes. He still felt exhausted. "How's Teddy doing?"

Harry smiled. "He's fine and Andromeda is doing fine. She told me that I should visit the Dursley's."

"Seriously? Do you want to?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't seen them in ages. I may stop by before I leave for camp. They are my familyâ€¢technically."

The guilty feeling returned. Even Harry was a better family member to the Dursley's and they had done nothing but treat him horribly. "That's good, I reckon."

"Anyway, enough about that." Harry tapped his legs so Ron would move over to let him sit. "How was your interview?"

"It went well. I think I got in. I'll know in a few days," he answered. Harry nodded and looked at him closely. Ron had to hold back his eye roll. Harry always seemed to have a bit more trouble in his eyes now. Ron figured that he was expecting him to have an episode at any time. He hated it. "So, is that the only reason why you woke me up?"

A bit of color flushed Harry's cheeks. "Well, not exactly. I went by Kingsley's office after I saw Teddy because I wanted to ask him about the meeting I'm supposed to have with some Aurors tomorrow. He gave me this." He pulled a letter from his jeans pocket. He handed it to him, and Ron swallowed hard. The envelope was white with gold swirls. It was from Lambrick. It seemed like years went by before he could speak.

"Have you opened it?" he asked.

"No. I wanted to wait until I got back," Harry said.

Ron looked up at him. He didn't know what to say, and Harry almost looked as if he was waiting on permission to open it. "Well, you're here now." He handed it back to him. Harry opened his mouth, but the stairs creaked and his mum came down.

"Oh, Harry you're back. How's what's wrong?" she asked, looking between them.

Harry held up his letter. "Kingsley said it just came in. It's my letter from Lambrick."

She rushed over to them. "Oh, that's fantastic! Are you going to open it?" Harry gave Ron a quick glance before nodding. "Yeah, I will." Ron watched as his shaky hands tore open the envelope. It only took a minute for Harry to get down the page, and judging by the blush on his face and the widening of his eyes; Ron knew what the letter said. He'd always known what it would say.

"Oh my...I got in!" Harry screamed, raising his fist. "I've been accepted! I'm going to Lambrick!" He jumped to his feet and there was volume and happiness to his voice that Ron had never heard before.

His mum put her arms around Harry tightly and kissed him hard on the cheek. "Harry, dear, I'm so proud of you! I knew you'd get in! This is fantastic!" She kissed him again before pulling away.

Ron grinned at his best mate and for a moment he only felt happiness and excitement. If anyone deserved to go to Lambrick, then it was Harry. He clapped him on the back. "Congratulations, mate, you deserve this."

Harry's face was completely flushed, and his eyes were actually a little glossy. He read over his letter again. "Thanks. I just..."

His mum patted his arm. "It's okay, dear. Take your time. Sit down."

Harry sat and took deep breaths. He kept reading the letter in his unsteady hands. "I got in. They want me there in a week. I start training in a week." Ron listened but could only look at the torn envelope on the floor. He didn't know what else to do.

"A week? That's soon, dear," his mum said.

Harry wiggled in his seat. "I know! It's incredibly soon." He ran a hand through his hair and bit his lip hard. Ron could tell that Harry wanted to jump around and probably swear to infinity, but he always wanted to seem well-mannered in front of his mum.

She smiled again and gave his arm a tight squeeze. "We'll be sure to have you prepared by then. So, Harry, did Kingsley give you Ron's letter or will he be sending it?"

Ron closed his eyes. It was what he had been wondering ever since he saw Harry's letter. He already had an idea of the answer, though. "Oh, well, um, he didn't have Ron's letter," Harry said quietly.

"Why not? Did you ask?" His mum's tone was rather sharp.

"Yes, I did. As soon as he gave me mine, I asked about Ron's but he didn't have it," Harry said. Some of the joy in his voice was gone.

"But I don't understand," his mum said.

Ron heaved a heavy sigh. "He doesn't have my letter because Lambrick didn't send it yet. They're giving out acceptance letters first. Rejection letters will probably go out in a day or so." Each word felt heavy on his tongue, and it hurt a little to say it all. It was a reality that he told himself he was prepared for, but it hit him with a force that was unbelievable.

"Ron, that may not be true," Harry said. Ron moved his eyes to him and his expression told Ron that he didn't quite believe himself.

He snorted. "Really? Do you have a better explanation? They said a week, and I doubt Lambrick is the type of place that does anything late. We got our pre-acceptance letters and our schedules at the same time. It wouldn't make sense for us to get our acceptance or rejection letters at different times. This is the only thing that fits."

His mum shook her head. "Ron."

He stood up. "No, it's okay. It makes sense that Kingsley would have Harry's letter. I mean they accepted him. They want him. My rejection letter is probably on its way here, or they didn't bother to write it at all because I did so horribly at my trial." He bit his lip to stop babbling. His heart started to beat faster, and a sick feeling in his stomach began to churn.

Harry touched his arm. "Ron, please, don't start this."

Ron snatched his arm away. "Start what? Being honest? Come on. We knew that it couldn't be both of us going. I'm over the whole bloody thing. Really."

His mum looked worried again. "Ron, there's no need to talk that way. Harry's right. You can't jump to conclusions without knowing all the details. I know you're upset but—"

"I'm not upset. I knew it would be this way. I was prepared for this. Harry, congratulations, honestly. You were destined to go there." He turned away from them and stuck his hands deep into his pockets. "I'm going for a walk."

Harry grabbed his arm, but his mum put hers on Harry's shoulder. "Harry, let Ron go for a walk." Ron turned to her, and she gave him a warm smile. "Be safe, dear. I'll be here when you get back."

He looked at her and felt a rush of appreciation. He nodded. "Thanks." He quickly left the house and walked down the path. He didn't know where he was going, but he had to get away. He did his best to walk in a straight line, but his knees kept wobbling.

He stopped by the edge of the pond and put his hands on his knees. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths.

"It's okay," he said aloud, trying to convince himself that it was. It was just one camp. It was just one camp that was great. It was just the one camp of his dreams, and deep down, the camp he thought that he would be going to. Ron had experienced so much disappointment in his life, so he didn't know why this hurt so badly. Maybe it was because he though the selection process was unfair. Maybe it was because he gave up so much for it and had tried harder than he had ever tried for anything. However, he knew the number one reason was because he truly felt like he belonged there. Nothing else would compare to Lambrick. Anywhere else he would go to would only be second rate.

Ron needed to talk to someone. He couldn't bother Harry, and he knew that his parents would only console him and tell him everything was okay. He considered George, but he didn't want to whine to his brother. He had no right to. He wished that he could talk to Hermione. She would have something smart and loving to say. She would make him feel better and kiss him gently afterward. Unfortunately, he didn't have her. Suddenly, a feeling hit him and he knew where he had to go.

He Apparated and appeared in front of Gringott's bank. He looked up at the tall building and shivered a little. The escape from the vault still haunted him, and he swore that he was still pulling money out of his arse. The memory of him, Harry, and Hermione breaking out made him shudder but also brought a small grin to him. As horrible as the event had been, the three of them had concurred. He gave the building a once over before walking in. He knew where he needed to go, and he ignored the expressions from familiar bankers who had questioned him, asking about how a trio of teenagers had managed to flee their unbreakable security system.

Ron finally made it to the door and gazed at the plaque in the center of it that read William A. Weasley. He remembered when Bill finally got his own office. His mum had cried, and his dad had never seemed so proud of his first-born. Thinking about how proud his parents had been of Bill's success made him almost turn around, but he stopped himself. He knocked and hoped that Bill was there. He was hardly ever in his office.

It only took a second before Bill's face was on the other side. He frowned slightly. "Ron, I didn't expect you. Is everything okay?"

He didn't know why he had an urge to collapse against him. He felt so heavy, and he was tired of standing. "Can I come in, please?" he said weakly.

Bill opened the door wider. "Of course, come in." He led him in and Ron leaned against the door. Bill sat on the edge of his large desk. "What's going on? Do you need some water? You're flushed."

Ron didn't know where to start. He looked around his office and at the artifacts he had collected over the years from different countries. There was a picture of Fleur on his desk and one of their parents. He couldn't look at it for too long. He couldn't look at anything for too long without feeling like a failure compared to his oldest brother. He could never and would never measure up to Bill. As the oldest and the youngest siblings, they were supposed to have a special connection, but all Ron felt was the reality of his mistakes.

"Ron, what's wrong? Did something happen? Is it George?" Bill asked. He walked over to him and touched his arm.

He shook it off. "No. George is fine. It's not about him or anyone. It's, ah, me."

"Then what's wrong with you? You're starting to scare me here," Bill said gently.

Ron looked at him. Hardly anyone ever noticed his scar anymore. Bill went on with his life as if he was never touched by darkness. As if he had never been tainted by all the horribleness he had experienced. It was something that Ron thought he could never do. He was nothing like him. Bill was the perfect brother, son, friend, employee, and probably husband. Ron knew nothing about how to be any of those things. "Sorry, I don't mean to. I don't want to scare anyone. I'm so bloody tired of doing that." He rubbed his eyes and felt sick again.

"Ron, please," Bill said.

He looked at him again and exhaled deeply. "It's about Lambrick. Iâ€¢I didn't get in."

Bill's body relaxed a little, but his face gloomed. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Ron. Did you get your letter today?"

"No, but Harry got his," Ron said. "He got in."

Bill gave him a look. "So, that doesn't mean anything."

"I'm not fucking thick," Ron shot. "We would have gotten them at the same time if we both got in. They're handing out acceptance letters first."

"It doesn't always work that way, Ron. Maybe they just-

"Bill," Ron said faintly, "I didn't come here for you tell me that I shouldn't worry or that Lambrick wants me. Don't hold my hand. I came here for your professional help, so don't treat me like a child."

He sighed and simply gazed at him for a while. "Okay, I won't baby you. What can I do?"

Ron shrugged. "I need to know what to do now."

"What do you mean? Do you not want to be an Auror anymore?" Bill asked.

"No, I do. I just don't know where to go. I thought I was more prepared, but I guess I'm not," he said.

"Do you have other camps lined up?" Bill asked.

"Yes, but I thought I'd get into Lambrick, so I didn't really go through any of them. I didn't exactly plan everything out like I told mum and dad. I was stupid and thought that this would work out for me. Now that it hasn't, I have no time to go through everything again. I have to make a decision. Paddock was my number one choice before Lambrick and I let it go. I fucked up and I." Ron couldn't keep going. He didn't know what to do or what to say in front of Bill. He felt like a tit. Bill would have had five backup plans. Then again, he would have gotten into Lambrick. Bill had never failed before in his life. Ron wished that he could be more like him.

"Ron, calm down. What you need to do first is breathe. It will be all right," Bill said, patting his arm.

Ron nodded. "I know. I know it will." His palms itched and he wished more than anything that Hermione were there. He rubbed his palms harder and his face flushed. He must have looked mental.

"I'm sorry. I just, um!" He hung his head as he felt frustration, defeat, and embarrassment sting his eyes. "Um!"

He stopped talking as strong arms pulled around him. Ron sniffed and wiped his hot tears away. "It's okay, Ron," Bill said softly.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know where else to go. I don't know what to do. I need help," Ron said, leaning his head against Bill's shoulder. As pathetic as it was, it felt good at the same time. He felt safe in his arms, and it was nice to let go. Ron spent so much time putting up his wall of strength and taking care of George that he forgot how good it felt to let go and be cared for by an older brother.

"Hey, you don't need to apologize. I'm here for you. You know that. When have I ever turned you away?" Bill asked, rubbing his back.

Ron sniffed again. He thought about all the times the twins had messed with him and he ran to Bill's aid. He thought about how many times Bill had played chess with him while he was too sick to go outside. He thought about how Bill had welcomed him into his home when he left Harry and Hermione at the tent. There was a reason why Ron always went back to Bill, but he wasn't sure why it was. "Never."

"Exactly, so there's no reason why I would now. I'll help in whatever way I can. That's why I'm here, Ron." Bill pulled away and smiled slightly. "You know what? This will be easy. I thought you had come here with something a lot more dramatic."

"Like what?" Ron asked. He couldn't think of anything that was worse than this.

Bill smirked. "Well, with that look on your face, I thought you were going to tell me that you got Hermione pregnant, and that you two wanted to hide out at my house until the baby was born."

Ron laughed and automatically felt a little better. "Bloody hell, if that was the case then we wouldn't bother coming to you for help. I'm sure Mr. Granger would find me wherever I went and roast my bollocks. I can't believe that's what you thought."

Bill shrugged. "I have a wild imagination, I reckon. Now, come sit down and we'll think of something. This doesn't have to be the end of everything. It's one setback."

Ron sat in front of his desk and took another deep breath. He was relaxing a little, but he still didn't know what to do. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"No, now is fine. You're here, Ron. Let's work through this, yeah?" Bill said with a wink. Ron smiled and nodded. Bill took out a fresh piece of parchment and dipped his quill. "Okay, do you have an idea of what your next camp of choice is?"

"Paddock would have been-"

"There's not point thinking about that now, Ron. Stick to what's happening in the present," Bill insisted.

Ron rubbed his neck and cleared his throat. "Yeah, right, sorry. Well, besides that one, I have a few that would be great, but I don't know for sure which one."

"It might help to make a list and write what's brilliant and not so great about each. We can do that, and I can dig into my resources at the Ministry and see what I can find," Bill said. "However, you might be better off talking to Kingsley or another Auror about this. There's only so much that I know."

"Yeah but I just can't take listening to Kingsley or someone else tell me how unprepared I am. I'd rather hear it from you," Ron said lowly.

"I get it," Bill said, "but I'm not going to lecture you. I'm sure you're giving yourself a hard enough time as it is."

"I guess," Ron mumbled. "How should I make this list? I don't have all the camp names in memory."

Bill gave him a look. "Listen, I don't want you to feel any worse but we should keep this as professional and organized as possible. How about tomorrow we do this? You can bring your stuff here or we can meet at my house or even back at the Burrow."

He didn't want to prolong his grief and worry any longer, but he had no other ideas. "Okay, I reckon, but, um..."

"We can go get lunch instead today. It's time for my break anyway," Bill said.

Ron's body relaxed even more. He was glad that he didn't have to explain why he didn't want to go home yet. "Yeah. That would be nice. I'm starving."

The two walked around Diagon Alley and got sandwiches. Ron couldn't remember the last time he had spent time alone with Bill, but he didn't feel nearly as out of place as he thought he would. While so much like Percy, there was casualness to Bill that calmed him. "Thanks for this," he said, swallowing another bite of his second bacon sandwich.

"No problem. I didn't want you to fall over. You really had me worried," Bill said.

"Sorry. I honestly have been preparing myself ever since the trial to take the bad news, so I didn't expect it to hurt this much. I really wanted to go. It's my dream," Ron said.

"It still can be. Being an Auror is the real goal. You can still be one and a great one at that. I understand how badly you must feel, and I'm not going to tell you that it will all be better tomorrow. It won't be for awhile, but you can still have the career you want. You got into some really good camps, and you can still base at the Ministry," Bill explained. "It's not like you'll be training at some tosser shack."

Ron picked at his bread. "I know but it's hard. I meanâ€œI don't know."

Bill poked Ron's arm with his fork. "I think you do. What's on your mind?"

"Well...what am I supposed to tell Hermione?" he asked quietly. It was all he had been thinking about. He had no idea how he was supposed to stand there while Hermione congratulated Harry and then gave him a look of pity.

Bill's features softened. "Is that what you're seriously worried about?"

Ron shrugged. "You don't get it, Bill."

"Yeah, I do," he answered.

"How could you? What do you know about failure or having to prove yourself to everyone all the bloody time? I have a girlfriend who's perfect at everything she does. I have to prove to her that I'm worth her time, and I have to prove it to her parents as well. What could you possibly know about complicated relationships?" Ron directed his questions at Bill, but he felt as if he was asking the whole world.

Bill frowned slightly. "I don't know why you think things are so easy for me. I know plenty about complicated relationships."

"Is that so?" Ron shot, rolling his eyes.

He glared at him. "Yes, it is. Do you want to know why?"

"I'm listening," Ron said.

Bill tapped his fingers on the table, as if he was considering his words. "When-when Greyback attacked me, it was really hard for Fleur and me for a while. I was so mucked up and in pain all the time, and I treated her like shit."

Hearing Greyback's name contracted his muscles and froze every part of his skin. Though he and Neville had done the right thing, it was still difficult to accept that he had killed someone. The thought took him to a dark place, no matter how justified he was in the act. He had to break the feeling. "Why?" Ron asked.

He shook his head and looked down at his food. "Because I was scared that she wouldn't want me anymore, so I tried to keep a step away just in case. I thought she would get tired of taking care of me or seeing this terrible scar on my face."

Ron rubbed his neck. "It's not terrible!"

Bill chuckled. "You don't have to be sweet, Ron. I know how hideous it is. I see it every day, and I remember what happened every day."

He was in shock. Bill never seemed bothered by his scar. "Oh. I thought that—"

"I had forgotten about it? No. Even I'm not that mellow. I'm not perfect like you think I am, Ron, but that's not even the point here. The point is, I can manage to let it go and accept it, and it's all because of Fleur. No matter how horrible it got and no matter how mean I became sometimes, she stayed by me. She didn't care about my mood, and she doesn't care about my scar. Our relationship goes so much deeper than superficial things like that," Bill explained.

"That's great, Bill," Ron said.

"Yes, it is. Fleur is a beautiful woman inside and out, and I was always certain about wanting to marry her. She's a great person, and she loves me because of who I am, not what I look like. It's the same for Hermione. She loves you for who you are and because you try so hard. She's not going to care what camp you go to, Ron, and you don't have to prove yourself to her. She's not going to look at you any differently," Bill said.

"Maybe but I don't want her to worry or feel sorry for me. I just want to be great for her," Ron said.

"I understand but she already thinks your great. For what reason I don't know," Bill teased, "but she does and I think everyone knows by now that Hermione is going to worry no matter what the situation is. She's completely in love with you, Ron, and it's

not her that you need to worry about feeling sorry for you. You seem to be doing that enough by yourself."

Ron blushed and felt pathetic. "I don't mean to."

"I know you don't. It's difficult but you have to remember to be strong and give yourself some credit. You know what you're going to tell Hermione? You're going to tell her that you didn't get into Lambrick but that you have other camps lined up. Tell her that you're still going to a really good training facility. That's all you have to do. As your best friend and as your girlfriend, she'll be okay with that. She has to be, Ron. That's how a relationship works," Bill said. "You take the bad with the good."

Ron rubbed his face. Bill made everything sound so easy. It was more than that, but he didn't know how to explain to him. He wasn't even sure if Bill would get it. "I reckon you're right."

Bill gave him a look. "It's not just her though, is it? What about Harry?"

Ron didn't know what to say. "Of course he got in."

"Does that bother you?" Bill asked.

Ron wished that Bill wasn't so blunt and intuitive. It was hard to hide from him. "â€¢Some."

"Do you not think it's fair?" Bill asked.

"I'm not a twat. Of course it's fair. He deserves to go. It's justâ€¢I can't help but think that maybe if we hadn't gone through all that stuff together then I would have had a better chance," Ron said. The guilt was back, and he felt like such an arsehole. "Look, I don't want to talk about it anymore. Please, can we move on to something else?"

Bill continued to give him a look but he nodded. "Okay, we can do that." The rest of their day together Ron tried not to feel a pit in his stomach but it was impossible. He was still horribly worn out.

"You didn't have to escort me home," Ron said as he and Bill walked the path back to the house.

"I'm not escorting you. I want to see mum," Bill said.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Whatever." They walked through the kitchen door. As promised, his mum was sitting at the table. She stood and smiled as soon as they came in.

"Bill," she said, giving him a hug and kiss.

"Hi, just wanted to stop by on my lunch break," he said, pulling away.

"How long is your break, dear?" she asked a little concerned.

He waved a hand. "I'll be fine. They can't afford to sack me."

She chuckled and took Ron's hand. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm better," he answered as best as he could. "I'll let you two talk. Bill said he wanted to." He gave him a look, hoping that he would know to keep their conversations between them.

He nodded. "Yes, mum, Fleur is already going mental over Christmas ideas and I need your help..."

Ron slowly walked up the staircase to his room. He was sure that his mum was probably asking questions about what they had talked about. He opened the door to his room, and the pit got a little bigger. Harry was sitting on his cot reading over his letter.

He looked up. "Hey," he said quietly, "did you enjoy your walk?" His voice was full of concern.

"It was fine, yeah. I went to see Bill. He's here now," Ron answered.

"Hmm. What did you two talk about?" Harry asked.

He walked over to his bed and sat. "Just some stuff."

Harry gave him a look. "Like Lambrick or me, perhaps?"

Ron didn't meet his eyes. "I just wanted to have a conversation with my brother, Harry."

Harry sighed. "Ron, I'm not an idiot. Are youâ€¦are you mad at me?"

"No, of course I'm not. Fucking hell, don't talk to me like this," Ron said.

Harry folded his arms over his chest. "Like what? You're the one who's upset, Ron. You stormed off."

"Leave me alone, Harry," Ron said, turning away from him. He felt like a prick. He was mad at Harry, but he had no reason to be. He didn't know what was wrong with him. He would die for Harry without a second thought, but something so basic as being happy of his success was too hard. "Listen, I really am proud of you. I'm sorry if I didn't make it seem that way earlier. I'm just disappointed in myself. That's all." He turned back to him and shrugged.

Harry gave him a sympathetic look. "It's okay, Ron, but I don't know why you've made up your mind about Lambrick. It's too early to tell, and I'm choosing to believe that you got in. They would be mad not to accept you."

Ron tried his best to smile. He wanted to believe Harry's words but he didn't. "Yeah, we'll see." He got out of his bed and sat next to Harry. He would keep his promise to Hermione. He would be

supportive. He had to be. "So, what exactly does the letter say?" Harry's eyes lightened a little as he began discussing what Lambrick had wrote to him. Ron smiled and tried to find happiness in his best mate's excitement.

* * *

Ron sat at the table and poured himself some cereal. He felt less tired than he did the day before, but he was still so out of it. "Ron, is that all you're eating?" his mum asked.

"Yeah, I'm not really that hungry," he answered. She gave him a worried look. "Mum, I don't need a full plate of breakfast every morning. Besides, I should probably start cutting back. All the food won't be good for my training. Bill told me that yesterday."

She seemed to brighten a little. "I think it's sweet that he took you to lunch. He said that he's taking you out again today."

Ron nodded. "Yeah, um, I reckon it's to cheer me up."

"He's a great brother. He doesn't feel like he does enough for you all sometimes," she said. Ron shrugged and didn't look at her. He didn't exactly want to tell her that Bill was going to help him decide what camp to consider because he was incapable of doing it all himself.

"Yeah," was all he said.

His mum put her hand on his shoulder. "Ron, about yesterday, I think we should talk about it."

"I don't really want to," he said honestly.

She gave him a look. "Sweetheart, I can't imagine what you must be feeling and I'm not dismissing it, but right now I'm talking about Harry."

A pang hit his chest. "Oh."

"It's not like that, Ron, but there's no right way to put this. I'm not ignoring anything you feel, but I'm hoping that you're not giving Harry a hard time because he got in," she said.

"Mum, he's my best friend. I'm not giving him a hard time," he said, feeling put out.

"Maybe not on purpose, but after you left he didn't even want to look at his letter. He felt that guilty," she said.

Ron didn't know what to say. He felt mad at himself for not being able to control his emotions better and at his mum for caring more about Harry's feelings than his own. "Well, I'm sorry. I

don't mean to upset Harry so much. I should know my place," he snapped.

His mother looked at him firmly and gripped his chin her hand. She pulled his gaze to her face. "Now, you listen to me, Ronald Weasley. I am not belittling your feelings. You know that you're my son and I love you more than anything, but Harry doesn't have parents. He doesn't have family outside of what's in this house. He's alone, Ron. This is all he has and Lambrick means a lot to him."

"Mum," he started.

"No. Let me finish. Ron, no matter what happens, no matter what disappointment you run into, you have me and your father and your brothers and your sister. Harry doesn't have those things. We're here for him, but I know that it must not feel the same. As selfless as you've always been, I'm asking you to do it just one more time. For him, please." She gave his chin a squeeze before letting it go.

She was right. He was angry and disappointed but it couldn't matter. Not now. "Okay, I'm sorry. Iâ€¢!" He stopped talking when he heard the stairs creak, and Harry walked into the kitchen.

"Good morning," Harry said, giving Ron a small smile before sitting across from him.

"Harry, dear, what do you want?" his mum asked, automatically changing her mood.

"I'll just have eggs," Harry answered.

"No, dear, I mean for your party," his mum said.

"Mrs. Weasley, I don't need a party. I don't need anything special," Harry said with a blush.

"Oh, sweetheart, of course you're having a party. You deserve one. It's not every day that something like this happens. It's good news. This house can always use some of that," she said.

Harry smiled at her affectionately. "Thanks, Mrs. Weasley."

"Of course, dear." She kissed his forehead and gave his cheek a pat.

Ron actually grinned. His mum was right. Any happiness that Harry received was worth anything else. He lightly hit his arm. "I say bacon sandwiches. That's always a good thing to have at parties."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yeah, and you'll eat them all."

His dad came through the kitchen door with mail and boots in his hands. "Molly, I have to get to the yard today. All this rain is really doing something to the moss."

He laid the mail on the table. Ron looked up just as he sat the stack down and noticed a familiar looking envelop. It was white with golden swirls, just as Harry's had been. "Dad, did you look at the mail?"

"No, just brought it in. Why?" he asked. Ron reached out and snatched the letter. As he suspected, it had his name on it. It was from Lambrick. His heart sank as he stared at it.

"Ron, is that it?" Harry asked.

He didn't look up from it, only nodded. "Yeah." It went quiet. His hands were trembling, and the pit in his stomach returned. He didn't want to read the words and truly find out that he had failed.

"Are you going to open it?" his dad asked.

"When he's ready, Arthur," his mum said.

He continued to stare at the letter. He didn't want to read it. He knew what it said, but he had to move on. It was just a camp. It was one failure. "No, I'll open it," he said quietly, almost as a whisper. He slowly opened the envelope and read.

Ron couldn't breathe. He dropped the letter and felt bile in his throat. His eyes stung and his stomach flipped. His mum rushed over and put a hand on his arm. "Ron, sweetheart."

"I've got in," he wheezed, "I've been accepted."

* * *

****I think I'll stop there, hehe. Okay, this chapter bugged the rubbish out of me, lol. I wish you lot could have seen me while I wrote this, lol. Now, I know some of you wanted him not to get in to Lambrick, and I'm a little shaky right now because I hope I don't have a lot of eye rolls and sharp breaths being thrown at me now. Here are my thoughts.

Okay, I want to be completely honest with everyone. When I first started outlining and planning and writing this story, I didn't plan on it turning out like this. I had him just going to Paddock or something. I really want him to find his own way and build his career and confidence away from Harry. I really like that idea. However, the further I went, the more I realized that it's just not something that I can do. Ron needs to go to Lambrick. He has to be pushed there and you know what, he needs to be pushed by Harry. So, yes, he got into Lambrick and it's where he's going. HOWEVER Ron's space is important, and he'll certainly get it there. I don't want to give it all away so, you'll see what I mean when they get there, I promise. Plus, I want Ron to have the best and be trained by the best. I think he earned it, and I think he would get in. He has a lot to offer.

So, I hope not too many people are disappointed or pissed off. Don't worry, Ron will find his own voice away from Harry while at Lambrick. It's not just going to be like at Hogwarts where Harry is blah blah and Ron is at his heels. Come on, it's me, ROSE, it's ALWAYS been about Ron to me and it ALWAYS will be in my stories. It just works better this way not only in terms of the Auror experience but the timeline of this story and other forces that will be occurring while they're there. Finally, it's not just going to be those two there. I'm not just going to have Ron and Harry get up and work throughout the day together with the trainers. Other people got in and will have voices in this story. Trust me, Ron will have PLENTY to occupy himself with and to push and pull on him as well.

Note: Everything that happened before Ron got his letter is important. His feelings about himself. His talk with Bill, and his talk with his mum. Another note: I didn't have Ron receive his letter a day later just because. There's a reason it happened this way. There's always method to my madness! So, stay tuned! Thanks for reading and review!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 25*: Tribute

Thanks for the reviews! Yes, I knowâ€œtook ages, you want to strangle me, you want to take my toys awayâ€œI'm sorry! Lol.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Dear Ronald Bilius Weasley,

After much consideration and evaluating your application, field exam, written test, and your interview, the staff and I are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to Lambrick Auror Training Academy. You, along with thirty-nine other young men and women, will embark on the educational and vigorous training program that has kept Lambrick one of the top training camps in the United Kingdom for over a hundred years.

Attached to this letter is the location, date, and time in which you need to arrive to our training facility, and the list of necessary items that you need to bring to camp. We also require a statement from the next of kin in case of emergency and any relevant medical history and information.

If you have decided to discontinue the program or if you need further explanation, please respond to this letter as soon as possible. If not, then the staff and I will see you soon.

Congratulations and Welcome to Lambrick,

Phillip Smith

President of Lambrick Auror Training Academy

Veteran Auror

Senior Advisor

"Reading it again?" Harry asked.

"Just want to make sure there aren't any buts that I missed," Ron mumbled.

Harry snatched the letter out of his hand. "There aren't. You're in mate, accept it."

"I've accepted it, and even if I didn't I have no choice. Mum has been on about our party for two days now," he said.

"Yeah, I've never seen her so frantic before," Harry said. "I wonder what she's doing down there."

"It must be big. I never thought I'd say this, but I'm tired of looking at my Chudley Cannons posters. I want to go downstairs," Ron said, flopping back on his bed. Ever since he received his acceptance letter, his mum had been on a furious mission to throw him and Harry the best going away party ever. However, he was more nervous than excited. He would be at Lambrick in less than a week. The thought suddenly made him smile. He had actually gotten in. They wanted him. "Do you think it means something that I got mine late? Likeâ€¦ maybe they weren't sure about me?"

Harry sighed. "We've been over this a hundred times. It doesn't matter. Maybe they only send out a few per day. Either way, you're going. Please, shut up about it. You're worse than Hermione."

Ron rose. "What do you mean by that?"

"You want to analyze everything that happens to you now. Fucking hell, forget the fact that you're going to one of best Auror training camps in the country. Let's make lists of why you got your letter a whole day after I got mine. Do you want a fresh quill for that, Ms. Granger?" He started to laugh.

Ron got out of bed and walked over to him. "First, I will never be as mental as Hermione is to do things like that. Second, I'm the only one who's allowed to take the mickey out of how mental she is." He punched him in the arm, but Harry caught his wrist.

"Oh, you'll have to do better than that, trainee," he said, twisting his arm.

"You don't want to go there, mate," Ron said through gritted teeth. He attempted to put Harry in a headlock. Harry grabbed his side and before he knew it, the two were wrestling on the floor.

There was a knock on the door and his mum came through. "Boys! What are you doing?"

"Oh, err, just practicing, mum," he said, getting off Harry and helping him to his feet.

"Yeah, hand-to-hand combat," Harry added, straightening his glasses.

His mum folded her arms across her chest. "Well, can't it wait? I don't want you two getting hurt before your party."

"We've been up here all day. When can we go downstairs? We don't need anything extreme," Ron said.

"Ronald Weasley, I'm not doing anything extreme. Your father and I really want this to be great for the both of you. We're so proud of you boys, and you'll be leaving us soon," she said.

"I appreciate it, Mrs. Weasley. The only time I've ever had parties thrown for me have been when you've thrown them," Harry said.

She pinched his cheek. "And I'm more than happy to do it, Harry. Why don't you two come downstairs then? Everything is almost finished." She handed Ron a letter. "This one is from your great Uncle Simon. It's pretty thick."

"Great. That's probably because he took the time to write out his entire life story and his many adventures in America, again. He always forgets that I've heard about him losing three fingers in a duel against a hinkypunk," Ron said.

"Regardless, I'm expecting you to write him a thank you letter. Just because you're academy bound doesn't mean that you no longer have to be grateful," she said.

He folded the letter and put it in his back pocket. "I am grateful, but you wrote to basically every blood relative that I have. Do you know how many letters are stacked on my bed that I haven't read yet?"

"Maybe if you stopped reading Hermione's so many times, you'd get to them," Harry said under his breath. Ron nudged him. He couldn't help that her letter had been four brilliant pages front and back, telling him how proud she was and how she planned to ravish him unconscious when she got the chance. It was now his favorite reading material.

"Either way, I want you to answer them, Ronald, or at least as many as you can before you leave," his mum said.

"All right. All right." He stopped talking as they reached the kitchen. The table had been stretched and many chairs were jumbled together around it. There was a large gold banner with the words, Congratulations, Ron and Harry, in blocked, glittery blue and green letters that hung above the door. There were also

smaller banners stuck to the walls and to the chairs around the table.

"Wow, this is amazing, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, kissing her cheek.

"Thank you, dear. We'd have more space outside, but the weather has been terrible. I don't want to risk the rain," she explained.

"It's fine here, mum. I like the banner," Ron said with a chuckle.

"I tried to get a blue and green as close to your eye colors as possible, and I made your favorites for tonight. Ron, you can have all the bacon sandwiches and Shepherd's Pie that you fancy. Harry, there's a huge plate of mash and roast just for you." She beamed at them and held her hands together.

Ron grinned at his mother. For so many years he had misunderstood her strong will and strictness, but he appreciated those aspects of her now. He was quickly realizing that she was the kindest and most thoughtful woman in the world for those very reasons.

"Thanks. I'm sure it will be great, but you didn't have to use the good dishes."

She waved a hand. "Of course I did. Your gran gave them to me for special occasions, and it doesn't get any more special than my son going off to Lambrick."

"Do you need any help?" Harry asked.

"No, just freshen up for dinner. It's almost ready, and people will probably start arriving soon," she said.

His dad walked into the room. "Molly, have you seen my cards?"

"Not since this morning. Did you check your drawer?" she asked, cutting more strawberries for the pudding.

"Dad, what do you need cards for?" Ron asked with a slight groan.

"I told you. I've prepared a speech, and I wrote down all the important facts on cards. I don't want to forget anything," he said.

"Mr. Weasley, I think I saw a stack of cards on the sink in the bathroom," Harry said.

"Merlin's beard, I hope they're all there. Thank you, Harry," he said.

"Anytime," Harry said, obviously trying to hold back his laughter.

"Boys, I mean it. Go get dressed," his mum said, shooing them away. Ron and Harry went back to his room.

"What are we supposed to wear?" Harry asked, looking through his side of the wardrobe.

"I don't know. Put on something that's not wrinkled or stained." Ron pulled on his green collared shirt. "Bloody hell, I can't believe dad is going to make a speech."

"I'm actually keen on hearing it. Your family history is interesting," Harry said.

"Yeah? Then you can read the letter from my great Uncle Simon. I know the story of his three missing fingers," Ron said.

Harry looked at him curiously. "Are you really not happy about the party? I thought you'd be excited about everything."

"I reckon it hasn't hit me yet. Don't get me wrong. I'm really excited about going, and I know the party will be great. I guess I just prepared myself for the worst for so long that it's taking some adjusting to things going right. Does that make sense?" he asked.

"I know exactly what you mean," Harry said. "It's hard to believe that things can be great, but they are, Ron, and you have to hold on to it while you can, yeah?"

He nodded. "I hear you."

"Good. Well, this is the best I can do. I'm going to see if your mum will let me help with something. I can't sit on my arse anymore," Harry said.

"I'll be right there," Ron said.

When Harry closed the door behind him, Ron sat on his bed and rubbed his palms into his knees. Yes, part of the reason why he felt off was because he was still totally shocked that he got his letter, but he knew there was more to it. There was a bit of emptiness that he felt. He had talked to almost all his relatives about his achievement, and his brothers would be at his party to congratulate him. However, Ginny wouldn't be there, Charlie wouldn't be there, Hermione wouldn't be there, and Fred would never get the chance to smile at him and say he was proud. While he could deal with Ginny, Charlie, and Hermione, Fred's absence hit him hard. Ever since his death, it seemed as if the happiest moments of Ron's life were when he missed his brother the most.

He shut his eyes tightly and sniffed. He had to pull himself together. He was going to Lambrick and his parents had worked incredibly hard to put a party together for him. He owed them his happiness, and he owed it to himself. He wiped away the few tears and sniffed again. He stood up and shook off the sadness before going downstairs.

Percy was in the kitchen when he made it down. He was talking to their parents and Harry. "Ron," he said, giving him a small hug.

"Hey," Ron said, hugging him back. The more affectionate and mellow Percy was something he was still getting used to. "You're early."

"Actually, he's on time," his dad said, smiling widely at him.

"Bill should be here soon. I had to stop by the bank after work. He was finishing up," Percy said.

"Perfect. I don't want the food to get cold. I think I might have made too much, considering who's coming," his mum said quietly.

Percy touched her arm. "I think he'll be here."

"I hope so sweetheart, but even if he's not that's okay. I sent the letter. It's all I can do," she said. Ron didn't have to ask to know whom they were referring to. He had been wondering himself if George was coming.

The kitchen door opened and Bill and Fleur walked through. "Bill, dear," his mum said.

"Sorry, Fleur lost an earring and the whole world was put on hold until we found it," Bill said, taking her coat.

"Leave mez alone Billy. Oh, Ron, Harry! So proud!" Fleur practically ran over to Harry and kissed all over his face before pulling him into a hug.

"Thanks," Harry said with a blush.

She walked over to Ron and touched his face. Her long hair was still so silvery and looked to be made of silk. No matter what, Fleur would always be incredibly beautiful, and he would always feel a little embarrassed about asking her to the Yule Ball. She kissed his cheeks and his forehead and pecked his lips. "Billy told me and I waz so happy! So proud, Ron!" she said with a wink.

"Um, yeah, t-thanks," he said, feeling his entire face flush.

She ran a hand through his hair before turning away. "Molly, it iz so pretty in here."

"I hope you don't expect me to kiss you like that," Bill said.

"I think you should leave it to the French," Ron answered.

"Oh, we really need to start," his mum said. "There's so much food."

"Molly, everything looks and smells delicious. I think we'll be okay," his dad said.

"Mum, why are there so many chairs?" Ron asked as he took a seat next to Harry. "Who all did you invite?"

"You know mum," Bill immediately said, sitting next to Fleur on the other side.

Percy sat on the other side of Harry. "It's wonderful in here."

"She's been at it all day. You should have seen this incredible woman in action," his dad said, giving her a gentle kiss before taking his seat.

"Oh, it wasn't too much and like I keep saying, only the best for my boys. I'm so proud of you Ron and you Harry," she said.

His dad smiled. "Yes, I think we all are."

"Thank you," Harry said.

"Yeah, thanks," Ron added, feeling some of the emptiness fading. Being around his family and seeing their smiles lightened his mood, and it helped that they were all celebrating his success.

Bill checked his watch then whispered something in Fleur's ear. She giggled and nodded. "I'll be right back," he said, getting up and leaving out the door.

"Wait, where are you going?" Ron asked.

"You're so nosy, Ron," Percy said. Ron shrugged and looked around the table for his bacon sandwiches. He found it and started piling the breaded spectaculairs onto his plate.

"Don't start yet, dear," his mum said.

"I'm not. I'm just preparing. What are we waiting on anyway?" he asked. The door opened.

"Guess what I picked up by the bins outside?" Bill asked.

"Must be your lucky day, Bill. Damn, did you all start eating without me?"

Ron dropped his sandwiches and looked up. Standing next to Bill was Charlie with a duffle bag in his hand. "Of course not, Charlie, we were waiting for you." His mum got up and gave him a tight hug.

His dad was quick to follow. "It's so good to see you." He took his bag for him.

"Good to be home," Charlie answered.

"Glad you could made it," Percy said.

"Yeah, well, couldn't miss this. Hey Harry, Ron, congratulations to you both," Charlie said. Ron didn't know why he was temporarily frozen. He hadn't seen him since he left after the funeral. Ron had written to him about being accepted, but Charlie never mentioned coming back to see him.

"Thanks, Charlie. It's really nice to see you again," Harry said, giving him a handshake.

Charlie gave Ron a look. "Are you just going to sit there?" He held out his hand. Ron got up and tripped over to him. He pounced and wrapped his arms around him. He held him firmly. Charlie chuckled and patted his back. "Blimey, did you miss me that much?"

"Yes, I did," Ron said before he could stop himself. He didn't let go of him.

Charlie gripped his shoulder. "Hey, I was only gone for a minute. Come on, it's your party."

"Yeah, um, sorry," Ron said, finally pulling away. He smiled at his brother and felt some of weight on his shoulders lift from him. Charlie always had that effect on him.

He grinned and lightly nicked his chin. "So, Lambrick, eh? That's pretty amazing, Ronnie."

"Thanks," Ron said. He suddenly wished that they were alone. There was so much that he wanted to tell him.

"Come on boys. The food," his mum said.

Charlie took a seat next to Bill. He leaned over and kissed Fleur's cheeks. "Always nice to see you."

"You too," she answered politely.

"Son, how did you get away? We didn't think you'd make it," his dad said.

"With brute force. We're so busy right now, and they've been working me bloody dry," Charlie said. "But I told them that I had to go to my little brother's party. It's not every day that a Weasley gets accepted to Lambrick Academy." He suddenly turned to Bill. "Did you hear when I mentioned how amazing that was?"

"Yes, I was standing right there, and I couldn't agree more. Very impressive," Bill said.

"Good. However, I only have a couple of days off then I have to get back to Muntenia," Charlie said.

"That's okay. It's great that you're here," his dad said.

"Yeah, I appreciate it. I had no idea," Ron said. He wanted to tell him that it meant the world to him that he had taken time off just to come to his party, but he held it in.

They began to pass the food around, and there was yet another knock at the door. "I'll get it," his dad said. He opened it and George came through with Angelina close behind him. "George," he said in almost shock.

"Hi everyone." George's eyes grew when he spotted Charlie. "I didn't think they'd let you out. You're really here." Ron knew

that he was probably just as excited to see Charlie as he was. George and Fred had always looked up to him.

"You're here, too. That's excellent," Charlie said with a smile.

Their mum stood and walked over to George. "George, I'm glad you could make it. Angelina, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley. It's good to see you. You too, lot," she said in a slightly shaky voice.

George paled a little and gripped her hand. "There's no way I'd miss Ron's party, and I thought it would be good to bring Angelina." He stopped suddenly and looked to Ron. Ron knew what he was searching for. George needed validation that even if his news were taken poorly, he'd have someone on his side. Ron nodded faintly and gave him a small smile. George exhaled and looked at their mum, then at everyone. "I really wanted to bring Angelina and tell you all that we're-we're dating now."

"We have been for a while," Angelina added. "We were just waiting for the right time to tell everyone."

The room got quiet and George gripped Angelina's hand even tighter. "Actually, I was waiting for the right time. I don't want to keep everyone in the dark anymore," he said with a bit more confidence. George was so pale that his freckles looked like bruises on his skin.

Their dad sat up straighter. "That's great news."

"Thanks dad," George breathed. He stared at their mum. "We're really happy, mum."

She put a hand to her heart and swallowed. "That's wonderful to hear, dear. I'm glad you found someone." She took Angelina's hand. "I've always liked you, sweetheart. You're good for my boy."

Angelina seemed to relax a little. "Thank you, Mrs. Weasley."

"Here, take a seat," Ron said, pulling out the chairs next to him.

"Thanks," George said. He kissed their mum's cheek and squeezed their dad's shoulder before taking a seat next to him.

"Nice of you to join us," Percy said.

"Yeah, I'm glad you could come," Ron said. "You too, Angelina."

"I'm glad we came as well," she said. "Haven't seen you in a while, Charlie. How are the dragons?"

He shrugged. "Big. How's the sporting department?"

"Busy," she said.

"Tell me about it," Percy said. "I think every department is up to its neck."

"Uh, we did not come here to talk about work. I don't want to think about that tonight," Bill said.

"That's right. Everyone, raise your glass. I'd like to propose a toast," his dad said. He raised his glass and so did everyone else. "To Ron and Harry for staying true and having the talent and perseverance to not only make it into Lambrick, but also to become the best Aurors our world has ever seen. To Ron and Harry."

"To Ron and Harry," everyone repeated.

Ron blushed and clinked his glass against George's then Harry's. "Cheers," he said. He couldn't help but feel a swell of pride fill him.

Bill cleared his throat. "I think it would be sporting if young masters Ronald and Harry said a few words. What do you think, Charles?"

Charlie put his forehead to Bill's shoulder and sniggered. "I think that would be splendid, William."

"No," Ron said flatly.

"Oh, I think it's a great idea," his mum said.

"Mrs. Weasley, I'm rubbish with speeches," Harry said, gripping his glass.

"But you've slain dragons," George said.

"And pure evil," Angelina added.

"In that case Harry should go but not me," Ron said.

"No, you're both going. It's happening. I don't care what you say," Bill said.

He opened his mouth but Charlie cut in first. "Oh, come on. I think a speech would be great."

Ron exhaled deeply. He couldn't say no to Charlie. "Fine, but Harry's going first."

"What? Why am I always first?" Harry asked.

He shrugged. "It's your birthright. Potter comes before Weasley."

His dad chuckled softly. "Excellent, Ron."

Harry glared at him but sighed. "Okay. I'll go." He stood and everyone clapped. George even whistled a couple of times. Ron looked up at his best mate and could feel his uneasiness radiating off him and soaking into his own skin. "Um, I just want

to say thank you to everyone for coming tonight and for...supporting Ron and me. I'm really grateful that you all have allowed me to be here and to be a part of this family. Ah...I plan to do my best at Lambrick. I'll work really hard, and I'll keep Ron out of trouble...that's all." He sat back down and poured himself more wine.

George clapped loudly. "That was touching, Harry. You deserve to have your name in history books."

"Lovely," his mum said.

"I liked it," Fleur said, giving him another beautiful smile. Harry only shook his head and took a nice gulp of his wine.

"You might want to slow down," Percy said.

"Okay, Ron, your turn," Charlie said.

"I'm going," he mumbled. He stood up and rubbed his neck. He looked at everyone and tried to find something intelligent to say. His mind turned to Hermione, and he thought about her letter and how she had written page after page. He smiled a little. "Like Harry, I want to thank everyone for coming. It hasn't really hit me yet. Lambrick is a big deal and it's what I've always wanted, so I know it will. Um, I told mum this a while back, but I reckon you all should hear it. Going isn't just about me. It's about all of us. I'm doing this for our family." He sat back down but quickly rose his glass. "And for Hermione. It's for her, too." His brothers snorted and rolled their eyes.

Harry laughed. "Of course. It's always about Hermione."

"He's a boy in love," his dad said.

"Hey, I think his speech was well put. Very nicely done, Ron. I'm sure Hermione will appreciate it," Charlie said.

"Thanks. I agree," Ron said confidently.

"Speaking of Hermione, see, Percy, I told you that you should have invited that girl. George and Bill brought dates," his dad said.

"Dad," Percy groaned.

"Wait, what girl?" George asked. "Like a real girl? Percy knows and talks to an actual female?"

"Yes, what girl?" his mum repeated.

Percy's cheeks went pink. "There is no girl. Dad is talking about a co-worker of mine."

"She's more than a co-worker, son. Believe me, I know," his dad said.

"Here we go," Ron whispered in Harry's ear.

"I know the Weasley sparkle anywhere," his dad continued.

"Sorry? The Weasley sparkle?" Angelina asked.

"It's something all Weasley men get when we see the one, as dad puts it," Bill explained. "I have it." He kissed the top of Fleur's head tenderly.

"Oh, Bill," Fleur said with a heavy sigh.

Harry burst into laughter. "What? Seriously? Ron, why do you always keep these stories from me? I thought we were mates?"

Ron kicked his leg. "Because dad just makes them up to embarrass us. Bill, that's dust that you have in your eyes."

"I'm not so sure, Ron. I've seen the sparkle in your eyes. You only get it when Hermione is around," his mum said.

"Aww, Ronniekins," George teased.

"That's right, Molly. The sparkle is real, and Percy has it for this young lady. He goes out of his way to make sure that her folders are in alphabetical order when she gets them. He even created an entire color coding system for her," his dad continued while grinning at Percy. Ron and the others sniggered.

"Percy, you animal," Ron said.

"Iz so romantic," Fleur said, fluttering her eyelashes.

Percy pointed out his chin. "Organization is important."

"Oh, Percy, please, who is she? Is she a girl version of you?" George asked.

"George," Angelina hissed.

Charlie laughed. "Yeah, has to be, right? My little brother only associates with the finest."

"For the record her name is Audrey, and if like me you mean dignified and mature then yes. She's a lot like me," Percy said. He grinned a little. "She's also kind, intelligent, and extremely beautiful."

"Why didn't you invite her? She sounds lovely," his mum asked.

Percy looked down at his hands. "Becauseâ€¢I meanâ€¢we eat lunch together and sometimes go for drinks after work, but that's all. I don't want to jump to something major like inviting her here to meet my entire immediate family. She'd have to meet all my outrageous brothers, and I'm not emotionally stable enough to do that yet. She's probably not either."

"Ha! Good one, Percy," Angelina said.

Charlie gasped and mockingly put a hand over his mouth.
"Outrageous? Are we outrageous?"

"I think there's a better fitting word. George, what would you use?" Bill asked.

George put a finger to his chin. "Let's seeâ€;there's handsome, charming, brilliant, clever, Merlin's special vessels of magic—"

"My point exactly," Percy interrupted. They all started laughing again.

"Percy, I'm proud of you. I didn't think anyone would replace ole Penelope," George said.

Angelina tugged on his ear. "Be nice."

Percy rolled his eyes. "Very clever."

"Okay, maybe it's just my Head Boy mathematics kicking inâ€!" Bill said.

"Not the Head Boy mathematics. Bloody hell, are you still using that?" George asked.

"Language," his mum said sharply.

"Don't be jealous, George," Percy teased.

Bill raised a hand. "No, hear me out. So, I have a wife, Percy has a girlfriendâ€;sort of. George is dating the lovely Angelina Johnson."

She giggled. "Thanks."

He winked at her. "Ron is practically married to Hermione, and Ginny is dating Chosen himself."

"And Chosen is proud of it," Harry said.

His dad clapped him on the back. "That's what I like to hear, son."

"What are you getting at?" Percy asked.

Bill twitched a smile. "Well, I'm saying every Weasley kid is paired off, except for my apparently repulsive younger brother Charlie here."

"Billy!" Fleur said. George, Ron, and Harry burst into laughter. Even Ron's dad covered up his chuckles with a cough.

"You are so very wise, Bill," Charlie muttered, punching his arm.

"I don't think it's funny," Percy said.

"I think it's the funniest thing in the world. Charlie has always been the one taking his dragons to the dances," George said.
"Even Ron has a steady relationship, big brother."

"Oi, what's that supposed to mean?" Ron asked, giving George's arm a shove.

"Nothing at all. It's just you were rather clueless until Fred and I gave you that book," George said.

"That doesn't matter. I didn't even need your book. Hermione and I always had each other." Ron cheeks flushed slightly and everyone looked at him for a moment. He didn't care. He was proud of how in love he and Hermione were.

"See, it's the sparkle!" his dad said, toasting him with his glass.

"That's so sweet of you to say, Ron," his mum said.

"It's the truth," he mumbled.

"You should hear him, Mrs. Weasley. He has nothing but the deepest sensitively when he talks about Hermione. You should read his poetry," Harry said.

"Oh, you're having a laugh! Harry, you have to let me see them," George said.

"No, he has to let all of us see them," Charlie corrected.

"Nose down. I don't write Hermione poems. Harry, you must have me confused with Ginny. She's the one that has poetry for you. Besides, weren't we talking about Charlie?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, I think the only thing that could trump Ron's poetry is Charlie's lackluster love life," George said.

"Give my boy a break. He's a busy man, that's all," his dad said.

Charlie waved a hand. "I don't care about what George has to say, or what math Bill has come up with. No, I don't have the sparkle yet. Then again." He got up from his chair and moved behind their mum's chair. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and kissed her cheek. "I haven't found a woman who matches up to my mother. I only want the very best."

"Oh, Charlie," his mum said, blushing slightly. She gripped his forearms, and he kissed her on the cheek again.

George rolled his eyes and Bill put a hand over his face. "I swear it, Charlie, you are such a mummy's boy."

"He always has been. Even as a baby he didn't want anyone to feed him but Molly," his dad said.

Percy snorted. "I'm sure he still feels that way."

"You know," George said, "I never realized how much you look like mum, Charlie. I think you might look even more like mum than Ginny does. Ron, what do you think?"

Ron squinted and moved his face closer. "Yes, I see it. Blimey, it explains a lot. It must be weird for girls to see some big, strong bloke who is a spitting image of his mummy."

"Leave my Charlie alone," his mum said. "He can be my little boy for the rest of his life if he wants to."

"Yeah, leave me alone. It's nice to know that this is what I have to come home to," Charlie said, moving away from her and taking his seat. "I may not even tell you lot what I plan to do now."

"No, don't tell them, Charlie," Bill said.

"Do what?" Harry asked.

Charlie smiled. "I'm getting a tattoo."

"Ew, no way," Fleur said. "An earring iz better."

"What! No, no earring. Charlie, you're not getting a tattoo," their mum said.

"Actually, I think he is," Bill said.

"Really? Where?" his dad asked.

"Arthur Weasley!" his mum said.

"You don't have one already?" Angelina asked.

"Contrary to popular belief, I don't. I reckon some of my burns sort of count, but I'm getting a real one. Either on my bicep or my back or my abs or on my chest, right here." Charlie lifted his shirt and circled the spot on his incredibly freckly and chiseled torso. Ron automatically took a large bite of roast. He would grow more muscle and someday soon be able to carry Hermione from the front door of their flat to their bedroom without having to take a breath.

"What's the tattoo going to be?" Percy asked, cringing a little but also looking intrigued.

"Not sure yet but probably a dragon. I want something really wicked, and I want it to have ginger hair," Charlie said.

"You can't be serious," George said.

"Actually, I think he is," Bill repeated. "He told me about it last week, and I still haven't been able to talk him out of it."

"What? It's no different from Bill having an earring. I think it's brilliant. What could be more amazing than a ginger dragon breathing fire on my skin? I can't exactly get a Hungarian

Horntail. Ginny said Harry already has that one covered," Charlie said.

"Harry does not have a tattoo," Ron said for probably the hundredth time.

"Ron's right. Ginny made that up. I'm not that brave," Harry said.

"Can we please not talk about tattoos at the dinner table? We're doing more talking than eating and we're supposed to be congratulating, Ron and Harry, not terrorizing them," his mum said.

"Okay, I won't bring it up again until it gets closer to the time that I'm going to get it." Charlie chuckled and put his elbows on the table so he could move a little closer to them. "So, spill, what exactly do they want you to bring to camp?"

Ron was happy that the conversation changed focuses. It was great to talk and laugh as an entire family, but he couldn't help but notice the empty chairs. He tried not to think about it for too long. His mum was smiling, George was comfortable with Angelina, and Charlie was sitting right across from him. There was a lot to be thankful for, even though the table wasn't completely full. Right when Ron thought he couldn't eat anymore, his mum brought out the pudding and biscuits. He stuffed his face as much as he could. He wanted to enjoy all his favorite desserts while he had the chance.

"One bite at a time, Ron," Harry said.

"What? Too much?" he asked, opening his mouth and showing Harry his soggy, half-chewed mixture of strawberry and cream.

Harry frowned and smashed his fork against the rest of his pudding. "Cheers."

"Aww, look at Lambrick's finest," George said. "The standard of maturity must be incredibly high for a duo such as yourselves to be going."

"Yeah, I would be nervous if I saw them standing in front of me," Charlie said, yawning slightly.

"Tired dear?" his mum asked.

"Some. I had a long day," he answered.

"I hope you're staying here," she said.

"Of course. Bill, are you staying, too?" Charlie asked.

"What? Why would I stay?" he asked.

"Because we can sleep in our old room. How often do we get to bunk? It will be like old times. Just for tonight, please?" he said, tugging on Bill's sleeve.

"Charlie, I have a big warm bed and Fleur at home. Why would I ever choose to bunk with you?" Bill asked with a grin.

"I think it iz sweet. Come on, Bill," Fleur said. Bill gave her a look. She gripped his chin and nodded.

He sighed. "Fine. It could be fun, I reckon."

"It will be completely fun. Percy, George, you two should stay the night, too. We can cook breakfast in the morning and play quidditch afterwards," Charlie said. "Harry, seeker against seeker."

"I'll be ready at any time," Harry said.

"Oh, that's such a great idea!" his mum said, her eyes watering slightly.

"All the boys in the house again," his dad said with a smile.

Ron immediately glanced at George. He was apparently the only one who remembered that George shared his room with Fred. He watched George grip Angelina's knee. "Sure, that sounds great."

"I think I still have clothes here," Percy said.

"This is wonderful! I'll get fresh towels to you boys before I go to bed. Such a great idea, Charlie sweetheart," his mum said.

He shrugged. "It's why I'm the favorite."

Bill snorted. "Wouldn't take it that far."

"Speaking of favorites. Guys," Percy said, getting up.

"Right," Bill said, getting up as well. George and Charlie did also. The four of them stood near the door. Charlie whispered something in George's ear, and he slipped out. The rest blocked Ron's view of him.

"What's going on?" Ron asked. They all smiled at him.

"Well, a few years back you let it be known that you were serious about wanting to be an Auror. Ever since then, we've all thought about what to get you for when you made it to a camp," Percy explained.

Charlie put a hand on Bill's shoulder. "We thought about what you'd need that mum and dad haven't already supplied you with or what Hermione hasn't already given you multiple times."

"Charles Weasley," his mum said.

"Sorry, mum," Charlie said with a laugh.

"Moving on, Lambrick is the best of the best, and you'll need the best there," Percy said.

"That's right. Making it into Lambrick pretty such sealed our thoughts. It was clear what you would need when you headed over there," Bill said.

"Now, we already know that you're going to perform wickedly and fight wickedly," Charlie said.

The door opened and Ron could hear George come back in. "So, other than a trusty wand, a worn pair of trainers, and a steel coupling of bollocks," George said from behind them. "Every Auror in training needs one of these." The other brothers moved out the way, and George emerged with a shiny new Firebolt in his hands.

"A top of the line broom," Charlie said, bouncing on his heals.

"We figured you'll need to fly with the best as well," Percy said. Everyone else gasped, but Ron forgot how to breathe. His brain turned off and everything around him slowed down. He got tunnel vision and all he could see was the broom in George's hand.

"Oh, look at his face," Charlie said in Bill's ear.

"Ron?" his dad asked.

Ron moved his lips and after a while his brain turned back on. "That's for me?" he asked hoarsely. It didn't make sense to him. He couldn't own a Firebolt. Not even Malfoy owned a Firebolt.

"I hope so. We've only been saving up for the past couple of years to buy this for you," Percy said.

"What?" Ron asked. Things still didn't make sense. Nothing was straightforward except for the new smell of the broom and the finishing polish that made it shimmer.

"Maybe you should go check it out," Harry said, practically pulling him out of his seat and helping him up.

Bill smiled. "A few years ago we all talked about something special we wanted to do for you, for when you finally got into a camp. It's what you've always wanted to do and to actually achieve the goal is extraordinary. However, we weren't sure what to get at first, but this seemed right."

"Yeah, you've wanted a Firebolt since you could say Firebolt, and now is the best time for you to have one," Charlie said.

"Here. Hold it. It's yours," George said with a chuckle. He handed it over to him, and Ron took it in his shaky hands.

He felt the smooth black handle and gaped at the top of the line bristles. It made him weak in the knees. He had never owned something so expensive and new before. It felt incredible to hold, and he shook with excitement. It was almost like the broom

was made for his body. He already felt a connection to it. He looked at Harry. "It's like yours."

"But this one is even better. I think they've updated the bristle density since I got mine. You've literally got the best on the market," he said with a wink.

Ron turned back to his brothers, who were still looking at him smiles. "You didn't have to do this."

"But we wanted to," Percy said.

"This must have cost a fortune," Ron breathed.

"Like I said, we've had time to think about this. For two years we put a little money in a collection every month or so and let it grow in the bank. It's fine, Ron. No one went hungry, and everything was worth it," Bill said.

"Fred helped. Um, for as long as he was able to," George said quietly.

Bill touched his shoulder. "That's right. All five of us bought this for you."

Ron didn't know what to say. He went over all the things he had done in the past two years. He couldn't believe that on top of everything, his brothers had been saving up to buy him a broom. "Thank you so much. I can't believe you gambled on me getting into a good camp."

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Of course you'd get into a good camp. Ronnie, you're our baby brother, and you deserve everything that you're getting. Good things were meant to come to you, and we've always believed in you. You're an amazing little prat, you know?"

"An amazing little prat, with an amazingly big future," Percy said warmly.

"Perfectly said, Perce," Bill said.

"Can't find fault in that statement," George said, putting a hand on Percy's shoulder.

Ron gazed at his four older brothers and found himself speechless. Suddenly, the broom wasn't so special. His brothers' journey to get it for him was. He wanted to tell them that he loved them all more than his own life, and over the years each had shaped him to be a better brother and a better man. He wanted to tell them that he would use his broom and skill to protect them and keep them from hurting ever again. He wanted to tell them that his greatest hope had always been to be a part of their brotherhood. However, he couldn't find the words. Instead he whispered a, "Thanks. This means a lot to me. So much more than- than I know how to say."

He sat with this broom between his legs. He wasn't even hungry anymore. He couldn't believe it. He actually trembled as he held

his new broom. He couldn't wait to tell Hermione about it. He wanted to take her on a fly with it. "Your broom is wicked, Ron. I'm so jealous of you," Angelina said. "You'll have to let me borrow it sometime."

"Good luck. I reckon he'll sleep with it," Harry said.

"Mmm, I reckon you're right," Ron said. His brothers all took their seats, and he fought the urge to give each of them a hug.

"I think this is a good time to move on to my own speech for Ron and for Harry." His dad stood and moved his glasses down his nose some. He cleared his throat and pulled the cards out of his pocket. While his other brothers started snickering again, Ron closed his eyes and held on to his broom. He could almost feel his brothers' love on the wood. Something intense came over him. It was happiness.

After his dad's speech, the party finally broke up. Ron watched as George said goodbye to Angelina. He kissed her, and she thanked their mum for a lovely dinner. More weight lifted from his shoulders. It was one less thing that he had to worry about when he left. Ron and Harry slugged to bed after their second tea with his family. Harry sat on his cot and kicked off his shoes. "That was completely brilliant. Your family is so funny."

"Yeah, they're a bunch of nutters," Ron said.

"That's rich. You were right with the madness. I haven't seen you like that for a long time," Harry said.

"I haven't felt like that for a long time. The party was great. I feel like a git for dreading it," Ron said, changing clothes. He was tired but still too antsy over his broom to go to bed yet.

"I reckon getting a Firebolt helps, yeah?" Harry said with a smile.

"I think I actually got a little hard when I first held it. Did you know they were getting it for me?" he asked. He sat on his bed and outlined the shape of the bristles.

"I've always known about it," he said casually. "It was the surprise that they were worried you found out about."

"Fucking hell, I should kill you!" Ron said, throwing a pillow at him.

Harry threw it back. "Why? You should have seen your face. A surprise was the best way to go. Damn, your brothers are great. Your whole family is incredible. You have no idea how lucky you are, Ron." His smile suddenly vanished, and he looked away.

"You okay?" Ron asked; though he already knew that he wasn't.

"Yeah, I'm fine, but being around all your family really made me miss mine today. I wish that I could tell Sirius that I got into Lambrick. I wish-I wish I could tell my parents that I'm going to

be an Auror." Harry quickly took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Sorry. I don't need to do this right now. I hate it when I do this." He sniffed but he wasn't quick enough to stop his watery eyes.

"Mate," Ron said softly. He got up and sat next to him. He put a hand on his shoulder. "You don't have to hide or apologize to me. You have every right to whatever it is that you're feeling."

"Nine times out of ten I can deal with it, but on days like these I miss my parents so fucking badly and I miss Sirius. It really hurts." Harry wiped his eyes and put his glasses back on. "It's pathetic. I have Petunia as my next of kin on my emergency sheet for Lambrick, but she doesn't even know what an Auror is, and I doubt she'd even care if I got hurt."

"I don't think that's true," Ron said, using his wand to move a tissue from under his bed and over to them. He handed it to Harry, and he blew his nose.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled.

"Yeah," Ron said, rubbing his back. He couldn't let himself believe that Harry's family wouldn't care if he were injured. Harry's safety was far too important for anyone not to care about.

"I know you get jealous of me, Ron, because of all the attention I get. Please, you have to understand, I would give all of it away forever to get even just one night of what you got at the party and what you get every day of your life." Harry looked him fiercely in the eyes. "You have a whole family that loves you and writes to you when you achieve something. You have real parents that smile every time you walk in the room, a sister that admires you, and brothers that would do anything for you. That's the attention worth having. You have to know that."

Ron turned away from Harry. His honest green eyes were overpowering. It was the same speech that his mum had given him, but hearing it from Harry was so much worse. He knew that they were right, and every moment he had his family he realized it a little more. "Yeah, I think I'm understanding that," Ron said. He rubbed Harry's back again and felt so badly for his friend. He wanted to take his pain away. He wanted his love and loyalty to be enough to fill all the deep holes in Harry's heart, but he knew it wasn't. Nothing could fill the void of dead family members. "I can't begin to know what it's like to not have parents, but I get some of your pain. I kept looking at the seat next to George. Fred should have been here tonight."

"See, this is why I didn't want to say anything. I don't want to make you think about it but feel bad for me. I don't deserve it. I'm sorry," Harry said.

"It's okay. It's been on my mind all day, and it's part of the reason why I haven't been as joyous about all this as I should be. I know it's not the same as having your parents and Sirius,

but you know that I'll always be your family, Harry. That's for life, I promise." Ron gave him a smile and squeezed his shoulder.

Harry smiled back and wiped his nose with his sleeve. "Thanks. I'm really glad that we're going to Lambrick together, Ron. This is exactly what I wanted. It's one really good thing in my life."

"Mine too," he answered. "So, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay. I really did have a good time at the party. Your family is all I have, and it means the world to me," Harry said.

"Like I said when we were pissed, I don't mind sharing," Ron checked. "Hey, I was gonna go outside and test the broom. Do you want to come?"

"Actually," Harry breathed, "I want to go to sleep. I ate way too much, and I'm two seconds away from passing out."

Ron chuckled. "All right. I reckon I'll have to show you up another time. I'll be in the yard if you need anythingâ€œif you're sure you're okay."

"Ron, I'm fine. Go brush up on your skills. You'll need to for tomorrow," Harry said.

"Funny, Potter," Ron said as he took his broom and left the room. On his way downstairs, he stopped on the fourth floor and knocked on George's door. "It's me. George?"

He answered right away and looked a little anxious. "Yes?"

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm trying out the new broom," Ron said. "You know, the broom you didn't tell me about."

"Get over it, Ron. You loved being surprised. Let me know how it works out for you," George said. "So, is that all?"

"Well, that and to see if you were still here. I wasn't sure if you'd actually stay the night in here," Ron he. He looked past George and into the room. It was almost too much.

George rubbed his neck. "Yeah, I've been thinking about that, too. I'm gonna try. For Charlie and for mum if nothing else."

"Okay, good, but if for whatever reason you can't, let me know before you leave. I'll think of something to tell everyone," Ron said.

"You don't have to do that, Ron," George said.

He shrugged. "I completely understand if it would be too much for you to be in here. It's not a problem. You shouldn't have to be pushed into something like this. Bringing Angelina tonight was a big step. That was good of you, George," Ron said.

"You think so? Angelina was really happy about it, and everyone seemed okay. Mum was okay," George said.

"She was more than okay. Everyone is happy for you. I told you. They're on your side." Speaking to George had easily become second nature to Ron. He loved that he didn't have to think anymore. He knew what George needed to hear.

Ron got outside and sat near the pond. He held his jacket tighter around him and watched the moonlight reflect off the polish on his broom. He couldn't stop smiling at it. He couldn't believe that it was his and that his brothers had been so kind to get him one. He was lucky. He had the greatest family in the world, but he would leave them soon. He would leave his dad, mum, and George soon. The thought made his palms itch a little. He wondered who would understand when George didn't feel like talking, and when he stood completely still and stared off, he was just trying to numb himself. Ron wondered who would be the brother to George that he desperately needed when he left.

"Oi, what are you doing out here?" Charlie said from behind him. Ron shook off the thoughts and grinned. Charlie quickly made it over to him with his usual strong strut.

"What does it look like? I want to test the broom out," Ron said.

"Reckon we had the same idea. Bill fell asleep, the knob. I guess that's what married life does to you," he said, sitting next to him and laying out his broom and quaffle.

Ron chuckled. "Do you always bring your quidditch gear with you?"

"Why wouldn't I? I'm always ready for a match. We'll all have to play tomorrow. I mean that. No more whining from you. You'll have the best broom out of all of us now," Charlie said.

"Thanks again for it. It's the best present I've ever gotten," he said.

"It was no problem for us. I've always wanted to get you one, so it's great for me as well. It was great for all of us." He sighed. "I just wish Fred could have put his word in about it. He would have loved the look on your face tonight, along with hearing that Percy has a girlfriend."

Ron looked toward the water. Once again, a memory tied to voice of someone saying Fred's name. He suddenly thought about the summer before his fourth year, and the night Charlie had shown Fred and George how to properly ricochet a bludger off their bats. Ron had sat in awe and simply watched. "Yeah, me too. I really missed him today."

"I really miss him a lot of days. Being back here is a little hard. You know what I mean?" Charlie asked.

Ron looked back at him. He was frowning and absentmindedly pulling at the laces on his trainers. His firm arms and broad shoulders seemed so alert, but there was something soft in his dark brown eyes that Ron understood. "I do."

"I thought you would. It's still nice to be back. I missed you lot. I was hoping that Ginny would find a way to sneak back and see us. I miss the little biscuit," he said with a wide, kind smile. For some reason, Charlie was the only sibling that got away with giving them all nicknames. Ronnie only sounded cool when it came out of his mouth.

"She's not a little biscuit anymore. She's grown up a lot. Even from the last time you saw her. It's kinda hard to get used to," Ron said. He couldn't wait to show Ginny his broom either. He'd let her ride it for as long as she wanted to. He knew that she desperately wanted one.

"I know how you feel. Imagine how I felt when Bill told me that you finally grew into your bollocks and gave Hermione the shag you've been wanking over since you were twelve," Charlie said.

Ron blushed and nudged him. "Piss off."

He laughed. "No, I think it's bloody great. She's good for you, and she gets along with our family so there are no complaints here. Bill also told me that you've taken good care of Ginny, and mum and dad, and George over the summer. That's bloody great, too."

Ron rubbed his neck. "I've been trying. Dad's been a big help."

"He's the greatest, isn't he?" Charlie said.

"Yeah, he is. He's taught me a lot in such a small amount of time. He's helped me get through to mum. She's doing so much better," Ron said proudly.

"I can tell. You have no idea how hard it was for me to let her go the day I left after the funeral. I was worried, but I knew that she was in good hands," Charlie said. "I reckon George must be, too. He looks healthier. I don't know if it's just because he finally got with Angelina or what, but he looks better."

"It's been the hardest with him and it still is," Ron said. "Angelina has been a huge factor, but there's still something really big in him that hasn't began to heal." He stopped before he said too much. None of his usual filters worked with Charlie. He felt completely open with him. The block was just so easy to talk to.

"I know, but I don't think it will ever heal. Fred's gone and we're all going to hurt a bit everyday for the rest our lives. George most of all," Charlie said quietly.

"I wish I could do more for him," Ron said.

Charlie moved a little closer to him. "Listen, Ronnie, I know I haven't been around much like I should be, but it doesn't mean that I don't keep up with what's going on. I know that you and George have gotten really close, and you've kept him above water. Don't dismiss that. He's your brother, and you've done nothing

but taken great care of him. It doesn't get any better than that."

Ron let out a shaky breath. "I'm worried about leaving him."

"I know you are. I was worried when I left. For a while I kept thinking that he would crumble, and I wouldn't be around to help put him back together and stand him up right, but you have to remember that George is a lot stronger than he lets on and our family is so big and so full of love. He won't be alone," Charlie said.

"I know. It's just really hard," he confessed.

"Life is really hard, Ron, but you have to keep going. George is, mum is, and you can. Go forward to the next phase of your life. I am." Charlie suddenly laughed. "I didn't want to say it at dinner because I didn't want to put George out, but my dragon tattoo, I'm really getting it for Fred."

"What?" Ron said.

He grinned. "I'm going to have my own Fred dragon permanently inked on my skin. It's my way of keeping him with me, and it'll help remind me of what's important. Bill said that it's important that we all find our outlets for this grieving period. I reckon this is mine."

"It's a brilliant idea, and I think George will want to hear that. You should tell him. I guess my outlet has been Hermione. She's in my blood now, Charlie. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her," Ron said with a smile. He wanted everyone to know about how incredible Hermione was.

He rubbed his neck. "That's deep, Ron, but it's really great, too. I reckon that I love her even more now. I'm going to give her the biggest hug the next time I see her. I'm glad that she makes you feel like this. I'm happy for all my sibling and their significant others."

"We were just taking the piss," Ron said.

"I know. It's fine, really. I miss being teased by you lot. Besides, I should be so lucky to be teased by the great Auror himself, Ronald Billius Weasley," Charlie said.

"Eh, that sounds strange," he said.

"Get used to it," Charlie said, nudging him. "Fucking hell, Ron, I am so damn proud of you for making it to Lambrick. What you're doing is beyond brave."

Ron gave him a look. "Brave? You're the brave one. I'm going to a training camp. It's nothing compared to what you do on a daily basis."

Charlie gave him a look. "What? You think I'm brave because I handle dragons, and I've probably been burned more times than

I've been kissed? No, that doesn't mean anything. It's dangerous, but it's nothing compared to what you, Harry, and Hermione have done."

"I dunno," Ron said, "we never went looking for the danger though. At least, not intentionally we didn't. The danger sort of found its way to Harry."

"Look, Harry is tough and the bloke is completely loaded with spine. I'm sure his bollocks are probably from here to Germany, but you're the bravest person I know," he said.

"Charlie," Ron started.

"No, I mean it. I wouldn't just buff your cock, Ron. I'm being sincere. Since you were eleven, you've battled more evil and have conquered more enemies than anyone in our family. You've always stood up and went for it, no matter how dangerous." His expression grew more serious. "Do you have any idea how many times I've literally been shaken with fear because I was always so scared that you'd get yourself killed or seriously hurt?"

"But I didn't, Charlie," Ron defended. One thing that he knew he had always done right was protect himself when he needed to. Harry and Hermione depended on him too much for him to be careless.

"That's exactly my point," Charlie said. "You've always pulled through. You've always been brave and just proceeded for the greater good. That's real talent and real courage. I can't say that I've done anything close to what you've been through." He smiled widely again.

"Maybe, but I've always thought that what you do is heroic. I always will," Ron said.

"Well, cheers. I love what I do. I just want you to know something." Charlie looked him square in the eyes. "I may be the older brother, but I look up to you. You show me how to treat fear and how to be a good friend. You inspire me so greatly, Ron, and you're my hero. To hell with what The Daily Prophet says. I think the true hero is my baby brother right here. I'm honored to say that." He lightly nicked his chin again.

Ron swallowed hard and gazed at him. His throat burned a little, and his head felt light. For Charlie to say that he inspired him and that he was a hero made him feel so much taller and stronger. For as long as he could remember, Ron had always considered Charlie the strongest man in the world and the most fearless. He couldn't believe that even he had doubts and looked to him for strength. It almost took his breath away. "Charlie," he breathed.

"Hey, don't get weepy on me," Charlie said with a wink.

"I'm not," Ron said, clearing his throat. "It's just, um, you saying that means a lot. I'm so fucking happy that you're here. You make the bad things...not feel so bad."

"Come here, Ronnie," Charlie said. He put an arm around his shoulder. "I really love you, you know. I'm always here, no matter where I am."

Ron gripped his arm. He couldn't deny the warmth that covered his body and gave him a comforting tingle. "I know. I love you, too, Charlie and I'm going to make you proud there."

Charlie let him go. "You already do make me proud. I know you'll be an amazing Auror. There is one thing that you haven't impressed me with yet though." He stood and picked up his broom. "Let's see what you've got."

Ron quickly got up and took hold of his broom with excitement. "Not a problem. I was the best before. A Firebolt is only going to make me invincible."

Charlie snorted and mounted his broom. "Please, I'm still the one with the record at Hogwarts."

"Oh, how prestige. I'm going to Lambrick," he cheered, mounting his broom as well. "Bloody hell, that feels good to say. I'm going to Lambrick, and I'm going with a Firebolt."

"Stop talking and get in the air, prat," Charlie said before taking into the night sky. Ron gripped the handle and beamed. He took to the air with a speed he never thought was possible. He was on his Firebolt and was playing quidditch with the person who had taught him how to fly. Even for a moment, everything was perfect.

Ron didn't return to the house until he and Charlie were both too exhausted and frozen to fly. He went to George's room again. He knocked softly but there was no answer. A part of him was sure that George was gone. However, when he quietly opened the door, he saw George lying on his bed. The room was messy and covered with sketching and broken flasks like it always was, but both beds were made. Ron watched as George slept on top of the covers on his lower bunk. It made him smile. He crept in and pulled the blanket off Fred's bed. He closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of his brother for a moment before placing the blanket over George. He backed up and watched him stir as he snuggled into it.

Ron closed the door and leaned against it. A pleasant smile came across his face and his heart felt lighter. George was trying. He was getting better. He walked downstairs and sat at the kitchen table. He looked around. It was mostly clean but the banners were still up. Ron sat and clutched his broom as he looked at the party his parents and brothers had created. Ginny hadn't been there, Fred hadn't been there, and Hermione hadn't been there but it was still okay. He still enjoyed it, and everyone was still happy. Maybe Charlie was right. Maybe things would really be okay. He got up and pulled a scrap piece of parchment and quill from a drawer. He began to write:

Hermione, you have the smile of a magnificent flower.

You make me so bloody hot that I have to take many a shower.

Not the tallest tree, not even the highest sodding tower

Will keep me anyway from you and all your power.

"Fuck it," he said aloud. He balled the parchment and tossed it in the bin before heading up to bed. He may have been a great brother, a brave friend, a caring son, and even a talented Auror in training, but he would never be a poet.

* * *

***** HAHA! Oh, Ron Weasley... Anyway, as you can see, this chapter was very Weasley, lol, and I loved writing it. I wanted one really detailed, family orientated chapter before Ron left. I wanted the whole family together and I wanted them all to have a voice and what better setting, yeah? Well, if you didn't notice, I happen to have a very soft spot for Charlie. I love the bloke, his look, his personality, and his relationships with everyone, particularly Ron. I find it fascinating because it's the least shown out of all his connections to his brothers, however, I think there's a strong bond and an understanding and love that they have for each other and I enjoy writing them together. I also loved how everyone just gushed over Ron. I love people gushing over Ron, hehe. He deserves it and I truly think it helped increase his esteem some. He really needs that before he heads off. Also, I know Ron wasn't crazy excited and mental about Lambrick in this chapter, but I didn't think it was the chapter for that. Don't worry though, he'll pep up. You'll see. ;)

Just as a reminder because I know that if I don't say it then someone will ask, YES, Ron will see Hermione before he leaves but that's all the information I'm giving. You'll have to just trust me and wait and see! So, I hope everyone enjoyed this. I sure did. Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 26*: Bridges

Thanks for the reviews everyone and HAPPY NEW YEAR! Now, I want to briefly address how I'm handling the whole Auror situation so we're all on the same page. I'm sure that how I'm designing the process isn't even close to how JK envisions it and how it actually happens. I won't lie and say that while reading the books I got a firm grasp on the whole thing nor did I really put much effort into finding out. I'm trying to stay canon for the story as a whole, but this is

still my fan fiction and Ron becoming an Auror is shiny new territory for me. I'm excited and I want to write it a particular way. So, I hope that's cleared up. It's important that it is because once Ron leaves it's sort of my free reign to be creative and invent my own little world for a while and JK's outline won't really be a factor for me.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

* * *

"Ron?"

"Hmm?" he said, opening his eyes.

Charlie and Harry shared a look. "Did you hear anything we just said, mate?" Harry asked.

Ron moved his forehead from his broom and stood straight. "Um, yeah, the whole thing."

Charlie rolled his eyes. "You're hopeless, Ron. You've been leaning on your broom with your eyes closed, again."

"Wa? I have not and what do you mean by again?" he asked, using his jacket sleeve to once again polish the handle tip.

"You didn't let it go all through breakfast. I'm pretty sure you slept with it and did who knows what else. Does your arsehole hurt?" Charlie asked with a chuckle.

Ron scowled at him and blushed a little. "You're disgusting. Just because I love my broom doesn't mean I'm shagging it. You're the last person who has any room to say anything about this."

"He's only had it one night, and he's excited. I'm sure it will wear off. Ron's fine," Harry said, giving him a grin.

Ron returned it and leaned against the tree. "Thanks." He closed his eyes and hugged his broom close to his chest so it wouldn't get too cold in the fall air.

"Well, once Bill and Percy get back with their brooms, I reckon we can do two teams of three. I'll take Percy and George," Charlie explained.

"Is George playing?" Harry asked. Ron opened his eyes and waited for an answer as well. Right after breakfast George had gone back upstairs without a word. Ron could tell that he tried his best to seem happy at the table, but Ron knew him too well now not to notice the strain in George's features.

"When I told him we were going to play, he said that he'd be down later." Charlie looked toward the house and at the window where George's room was. "Have you talked to him, Ron?"

"Not since breakfast. Mornings are usually the hardest for George. He likes his space," Ron explained. He looked toward the window as well. "He'll be down." He hoped that it was true. Ron only had a few days until he left. He needed George to open up. He needed to know that George would keep trying.

"I can't play for too long. I have work to catch up on later today," Percy said as he and Bill strolled up from the path.

"Even five minutes of your undivided attention is precious, Percy," Charlie said, ruffling his hair.

"Good because I can give you just about five minutes," he said with a slight smile. He dropped his broom and let out a heavy sigh while folding his arms over his chest. "Where's George?"

"He'll be here. He just needs a moment," Ron said.

"We offered to go by his flat and get his broom, but he said that he'll just use your old one. He said that it wouldn't matter which broom he'd use," Bill said in a low voice. They all went silent.

"...Maybe because he thinks he's that good. George always boasted when he was on the team. I couldn't get him to shut up," Harry said after some time.

Ron chuckled a little but they all knew that wasn't the reason. George hadn't even really brought up quidditch since Fred died. Quidditch was just another thing that they always did and talked about together. He put his forehead to his broom again and swayed. He wanted to see if George was all right, but he knew his brother needed time.

"See what I mean, Bill? Look at your little brother. We've made a monster," Charlie said.

"Hmm?" Ron said again, looking up. Bill and Charlie were smirking at him. "Oi, fuck off. I know you're jealous because I now have the best broom in the whole bloody world, but it's your fault. You gave it to me. Let me enjoy it."

"Let's just hope it wears off before you see Hermione again. She might get jealous," Harry teased.

"No, I think she'll appreciate my care. My broom is a lot like her," he said. He closed his eyes once more as she came into his mind. Even his Daydream Hermione deserved his complete attention.

"Is this appropriate for us to hear?" Percy asked. "There can only be so many reasons why Hermione is like a broomstick."

Charlie burst into laughter. "That's exactly what I said."

"What is wrong with you lot? Do you not get out enough? That's obviously not what I meant." He moved his broom away from him a little to get a proper look at it. "I just mean that my Fireboltâ€œit's smart, dependable, sexy, smooth, and perfect, just like her. It's the Hermione Granger of broomsticks." He lost himself in the perfection of his girlfriend and his broom so deeply that he actual gave the handle a little peck.

Harry cleared his throat and patted Ron's shoulder. "And this, mates, is why I say Ron is a poet. If that wasn't the most sensitive and thought-out lyric than I don't know what ever could be."

Everything started laughing and Ron shoved him. "Piss off. Really. All of you."

"What's so funny?" George asked from behind them. They all turned to him.

"Hey, you ready?" Charlie asked, walking over to him and squeezing his upper arm.

George nodded and met Ron's eyes for only a second before looking down. "Yeah, I told you I'd play. I'm here." Ron looked at Bill and Percy, both seemed as if they wanted to say something caring and concerning, things Ron knew that George didn't want to hear.

"Well, you're on Charlie and Percy's team, George. I reckon it's not completely fair seeing as I know all your moves. Being your captain and all," Harry said with arrogance.

George looked up and smiled. "Barely, Potter. We got sacked on the same day."

"No matter. I was still in charge, and you were still sort of my bitch," Harry said casually. Ron and his brothers snorted quietly and didn't meet George's eyes.

George gaped at him. "You little chosen twat. I should hook those glasses to your bollocks. See how good you play then."

Harry cupped his ear. "Oh, sorry, can't hear you too well. There's too much glory on my side."

"Ah! This is what I like to hear. Competitive repartee before a game always enhances the experience. Let's get at it because someone loses a genital," Charlie said, mounting his broom.

George mounted his and gave Harry a fiery expression. "In the air, Potter. This is going to be fun." He zoomed off.

Ron scooped up a ball and grinned at his best mate as he mounted his broom as well. "Thanks for that."

He shrugged. "No problem." He took to the sky. Harry was a silent genius in his own right.

Even though Ron and Harry's brooms were the faster, Charlie played with a swiftness that they couldn't compete with. He coordinated with George and Percy and by the time Harry finally accepted their lost, Ron was exhausted. They flew to the ground and sat in the grass. Ron collapsed against it, with his broom tightly in hand.

"Round two?" Charlie asked, rubbing his hands together.

Percy groaned and wiped sweat off his brow with his sleeve. "Oh, no. I'll never get anything finished tonight if I play again." He clutched his stomach and coughed a little.

"Pathetic," George said. "Percy, for someone so small you're really out of shape."

"I'm not small. I'm right in the middle of my percentile!" Percy said.

"I don't think it matters. I'm in fairly good shape, but I'll draw for now. Sorry," Harry said, taking off his glasses to wipe them.

Bill kicked Charlie's shoe. "No one has as much energy as you do, Charlie. We all have lives."

"Yeah, we all have lives, and Percy has something close to it," George added, winking at him.

Percy gave him a look. "Good one, teammate."

Ron gently giggled at his brothers banter. He was tired but he felt a certain energy course through him. Quidditch always made him excited, but he realized that he was so close to getting sweaty and fatigued while training at Lambrick. He still couldn't believe it was happening. He rose to his elbows and watched Bill pull out his hair tie. His long hair flowed in the slight wind.
"Mum wants to give me a haircut before I leave."

"Oh, no, don't let her!" George groaned.

"Might be a good idea. It's in your eyes now," Percy said. "Are you getting one, Harry?"

"Definitely not," he said.

"Yeah, he has an image to maintain," Ron cheeked.

"I'll get one, too," Charlie said. He ran his fingers through his already rather short ginger hair.

"I don't get it. You always whine when mum cuts your hair, but you always ask for it," Percy said.

"It makes mum happy and the whining is all a part of it. She knows it and I know it," Charlie said with a wide smile and a shrug. "We should all get one."

"Never. I love my hair. Besides, Fleur likes something to pull on," Bill said, raising an eyebrow.

"We really don't need to hear this," Ron said in disgust and jealousy. He missed Hermione tugging on his hair as he snogged her deeply or was between her thighs.

"I don't mind, actually. What else does Fleur like to do?" George asked.

Bill punched his arm. "You prick!"

"Ow, fuck, I was just taking the piss. I don't care what she does. I have my own seductress," George said, rubbing his arm.

"You know, I don't think this is very fair. All of you get to talk about your women, yet I'm banned from saying anything about mine," Harry said.

"That's because you're not dating a woman," Bill said promptly.
"You're dating our sister."

"Baby sister, I might add. So, don't even go there," Charlie said.

"Maybe we should just change the subject," Percy quickly said as Harry opened his mouth. "How exactly are you two getting to the academy?"

"We're supposed to take the Muggle train to Newport. It's the only you're allowed to get to a training camp as a trainee. I wonder why that is?" Harry asked.

"I think it's to get exposed to blending and dodging in and out of the two worlds. A lot of wizards have no idea about Muggle customs, and I'm sure a lot of dark wizards don't either. It's sort of likeâ€; hiding in plain sight and getting a good vantage point," Ron explained, pulling the leaves out the bristles of his broom. He looked up and everyone was staring at him. "What?"

"That was very well said," Bill said.

He shrugged. "I reckonâ€;"

Charlie crawled over to him and dug his fingers into his shoulders. "Listen to my Ronnie here. Already a smart little Auror."

"Leave me alone. I'm going inside now," he said. He picked up his broom and ignored the collective snickers and jokes from the blokes behind him.

Later that day Ron and Harry decided to go through their lists again. Ron shifted through his trunk. "Fucking hell, I don't know where my good cauldron is. What are we going to need those for?"

"I dunno. I reckon we're not just going to learn how to fight," Harry said, folding his shirts.

"Great. It'll be like school all over again. I'll need Hermione there then. I reckon she has my good cauldron, too," he said, suddenly feeling a bit overwhelmed. If he wasn't feeling excited about going to Lambrick, then he was worried instead. He had no idea what to expect.

"So, she's not coming?" Harry asked.

Ron slammed down the top of his trunk and sat on it. He rubbed his hands into his thighs and sighed. "No, she's not. We just couldn't find the time."

"Neither could Ginny and me," he said quietly. "I guess we'll see them...later."

Ron snorted. "Yeah, whenever the bleeding hell that is." It frustrated him and hurt him that he wouldn't see Hermione before he left for camp. It was the biggest moment of his life, and she wouldn't be there for him. He was finally moving on from feeling the saddening strain of their long distance relationship to the frustrating one. "I don't see how you and Ginny do this."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

He shrugged. "This. Being apart. I'm gutted and I saw her not too long ago. You and Ginny had to go ages in the past. Even now you're okay. I don't get it."

"It's not something to get, Ron. It's not like we don't miss each other. I miss Ginny so much all the time, but it's different with us. We're not like you two," Harry said.

Ron frowned a little. "What do you mean by that?"

"I don't know. It's just something I noticed over the summer. Your relationship is justâ€¦different," he said. Ron still looked at him in confusion, but Harry didn't seem too sure himself. He cleared his throat. "Anyway, I wanted to ask you something. It's about the medical information slip."

Ron already knew what he wanted to ask. "What about it?"

"Well," he said slowly, "I was wondering if you were going to put something down about your panic attacks."

Ron got up and went over to his bed to ruffle through his old papers, socks, and candy wrappers. "No, I'm not."

"Why not?" Harry asked.

"Because," he said sharply, "it's not something so severe that I need to tell them. I'll be fine. I don't think anything will happen there that will trigger one but even if it does, I'll handle it."

"What? Like you handled the one at the castle?" Harry asked.

Ron glared at him. He had no right to talk about it. He didn't understand it at all. "That's not fair. That was where I saw my brother die. So, unless they're going to bring him back from the grave just to kill him again, I don't think I'll pass out."

"I don't mean it like that," Harry said gently. "We just think it might be important that they know. Just in case something happens, they'll know how to help you."

"Wait, what do you mean we?" he asked.

"Hermione and I have been writing to each other about it and—"

"You talk to Hermione about me? I didn't know I was so interesting," Ron said. He didn't like the idea of them discussing him alone. It had always made him uneasy and he figured it always would.

Harry shook his head slightly and rolled his eyes. "Don't be an arse, Ron. Hermione isn't just your girlfriend. She's my best friend and has been for just as long as she's been yours. Yes, we talk about you and about a lot of other things. This is one of them. We want you to be all right. That's all."

Ron rubbed his eyes and tried to calm down. "I will be all right, I promise. I'll handle it. Too many people already know, and I already have enough against me. The last thing I need is to go there and have people worry that I won't be able to handle the intensity."

"Fine. I won't bring it up again," Harry said, holding up his hands. "If you're sure—!"

"I'm sure," Ron rushed, throwing his jeans on the floor. In all honestly, he had thought about adding it. He wasn't sure if he would be able to control his attacks on his own. However, he refused to be a victim of something else. Lambrick was his one chance to be something all on his own. Nothing would hold him back. Not even himself.

There was a knock on his door. "Boys? I've got your towels. Molly thinks it's important to have new, clean towels while training to duel against dark wizards." His dad came in and handed them to Harry.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, dropping whatever irritation he had.

His dad must have felt the tension in the air. "Do you two have everything? We can go by the shop tomorrow."

"I need a cauldron," Ron mumbled. He couldn't look his dad in the eye. So many times he had considered telling him about his attacks but he didn't find the nerve. He certainly couldn't tell him now.

"Ron," his dad said. He looked up at him. "Everyone else is in the kitchen. Tea is almost ready. Why don't you get Percy? I

think he's still in his room." He didn't want to leave. His dad and Harry had a strong relationship and he didn't want Harry telling him. Harry swore that he wouldn't, and Ron had no reason not to trust him. So, he nodded slightly and left the room.

As he walked to Percy's room, he felt the weight grow heavier on him. He needed to speak to Hermione. There seemed to be so many things that he had to do before he left, and he needed to know if she felt just as stressed as he did. He knocked on the door and tried to focus on something else. If he thought about his horrible luck and not being able to see Hermione for too long, then he would break something. It only took two seconds. As always, Percy answered straight away. "Tea is almost ready," Ron said.

"Okay, I'll be right there. I have to go back home after that, though," Percy answered.

Ron looked at him but didn't know what to say. Now that they were alone, he didn't know how to act around him. Percy was a changed person, but there was still a wall between them. He turned to leave. "Right, okay."

"Hold on, come in for a minute," Percy said, opening the door wider. Ron looked around before taking a step inside his room. It was most likely the cleanest room in the entire house. On his large wooden desk sat stacks of parchment and quills. His floor was still spotless, and his bed was uncomfortably made and evenly folded.

Ron closed the door behind him and leaned against it. "So, what's going on?"

"Well, I know that we all got you the broom as your present, but I got you something else." Percy opened the top drawer to his desk and pulled out a thin, black diary. He smiled widely and handed it to him.

Ron took it and flipped through the blank pages. "Wow, a diary."

Percy's smile faded. "It's not a diary, Ron. It's a method journal. You may find yourself inspired, and you might come up with some great tactical formations. It'll help to write them down and possibly show them to your advisors. Those sort of things will impress them and will keep you in their thoughts."

"Oh," Ron said, pepping up. "Wicked, I might actually use this then. Cheers."

"I hope you do. You did so well on that portion of your exam," he said, giving him somewhat of mischievousness in his eyes.

Ron raised an eyebrow. "How did you know that?" He knew Percy was brilliant, but he didn't think he was actually clairvoyant.

"I have my ways. I work closely with Kingsley and he knows Phillip Smith. Kingsley might have asked a few questionsâ€;then I

might have asked him a couple," he smiled again and looked so much like their dad.

Ron chuckled and rubbed his neck. "I really did well?"

"Exceptionally was the exact word. I didn't get much out of him, but you really impressed them with your answers," Percy said.

He felt a swell of pride. That had been the only part of his entire trial that he was confident about. Tactics was something he didn't have to think about or fret over. It came as naturally to him as flying must have come to Harry. "That's really good, I reckon. Thanks for the journal. I hope I get a chance to use it."

"Let me know how it goes," Percy said. "Soâ€œ;do you have everything else that you need?"

"Just about," Ron answered awkwardly. It was quiet in Percy's room. It was the cleanest and the quietest, and it made Ron sort of feel like he was on trial.

"Good," Percy said slowly. They nodded and looked at each other in silence. Ron shook his head and felt his cheeks burn, and Percy frowned a little and rubbed his hands tightly together like he always did when he felt unconfident. "Listen, I'll just get to it. There's something I want to talk to you about."

Ron was started to hate that phrase and hearing from Percy couldn't have meant anything good. Talks with Percy had never gone right in the past. They either ended with them walking away from each other in fury, or Percy telling him to stay away from Harry. "Yeah?"

Percy sat on the edge of his desk. "I wasn't sure if I'd get a chance to ever really apologize to you. I know things haven't always been easy for you and me." Ron thought it was an understatement. His relationship with Percy was the most complicated out of all his siblings. Things were always difficult, and he didn't understand why. "But I want you know to that I've changed a lot since Fred died."

Ron bit his lip hard and balled his fists. Like with all his siblings, a memory connected to sound of Fred's name, but unlike his other siblings, the memory wasn't random or happy. What Ron saw was one of the main reasons why it was hard to be around Percy now. What Ron saw was the event that had changed all of their lives. Fred's body blasted away and hit the ground right in front of him. He saw Percy fling his body over him. He saw Percy try to protect Fred who wouldn't need protecting anymore. "We don't have to do this," he said softly.

"Believe me, I don't really want to, but I need to tell you that I'm trying to be different. I'm going to here for our family when you're gone. I'm going to do right by them this time." Percy suddenly looked down. "I'm not going to be such a fucker."

Ron's eyes widened. He had never heard Percy say any more than damn before. While he and his brothers had always teased him

about it, Ron had actually always found it a little remarkable. He slowly reached out and touched Percy's arm for a second. "Hey, like you said, you're going to change. You have changed. That's all that matters. What's happening now matters."

"I know I've mucked up in the past. I've done and said a lot of terrible things." He let out a sigh. "I hurt our brothers, and Ginny, and dad and mum so much. I'll never forgive myself for that. I was just really ambitious. I really wanted to be something."

"You don't have to explain it to me. I don't like what you didm but I reckon now I kind of understand why. I can understand that need you had," he said. With everything that had happened during his camp process, he could relate to wanting to be stripped of everything so he could be seen for the first time.

"Good because while I regret so much of what I did, one thing I'll never take back is wanting to take care of you and wanting you to be okay. No matter what I said or did, I only wanted to protect you. I wanted you to know that someone was looking out for you and I still do. I'm just sorry that I showed it in the way that I did," Percy said.

"It's okay, Percy, and I appreciate it," Ron said. Percy had fussed over him for as long as he could remember. He was almost as serious about it as his mum was.

"I'm glad. I know you don't want hear this, but I see a lot of myself in you. I mean I'm nothing like you because you also easily made friends like everyone else but-"

"What are you talking about? You've always been the golden child." Ron was sure that Percy was obviously off his broomstick. Everyone and everything loved Percy. He was the most perfectly neat and capable wizard.

Percy laughed dryly. "No, I make a good impression with people but making friends is different. What you have with Harry is something I've never experienced with anyone, and always seeing you over the years with your roommates and with Hermione, you act so effortlessly. I-I can't."

Ron didn't know what to say. Can't and Percy were two things that never went together. "Percy, umâ€;"

"It doesn't matter now. All I mean is that even though we're different, I've always felt as if I could sort of understand your position. See, I wanted to leave here and make something for myself. I needed something that was mine because it's hard to feel a part of things. Sometimes, even in a big family." He stopped talking and stared at him, as if he wanted him to finish.

"...Yeah, it's like you're just always a step behind," Ron filled in for him. Percy nodded and Ron looked down at his hands. He couldn't pretend that he didn't know how Percy felt. It wasn't until recently that he even realized that his family truly needed him. Slowly, Ron began to understand why things were intense and

frustrating when Percy was involved. There had always been an annoying habit of being able to relate to him. There was a shared loneliness between them. Ron had always wanted to be like his other big brothers, yet it was Percy who always treated him with the most care and tried to make sure that he was noticed.

Percy nodded. "I guess that's why I've always been so overprotective of you. When you go to Lambrick, I don't want you to worry about being forgotten. I know that look you get sometimes, Ron. You don't have to think that way."

"I know, Percy. I'm trying really hard not to, I swear," he said. A part of him was a little afraid that while he was gone, they'd find a way to grow even closer and hear even better. He knew it was stupid, but years of insecurity wasn't easily broken. "But...if you're worried, you don't have to be either. No one is mad at you. You shouldn't be so hard on yourself. I'm trying not to be hard on myself," Ron said. "I'm not mad at you. You're my brother and that's never going to change. I'll let it go if you do."

"I'm trying really hard to," he said, staring off. Ron wanted to say or do something more. He felt a little guilty for being so tough on him in the past.

"I'll see you downstairs, yeah?" he said. Percy nodded but didn't meet his eyes.

Ron tried to absorb as much fun as he could with his brothers, as they once again talked and laughed as a family. As promised, Charlie sat with him and also got a haircut. However, as the day slowly faded they had to split up. Once again, Bill, Charlie, Percy, and George had to leave. It was eerie and Ron couldn't help but think of the day they all left after the funeral. Charlie gave him all hugs. He gave Ron an extra tight one and told him to write him with all the details about Lambrick. Ron watched as his mum hugged George. She hugged him fiercely but she didn't cry, and George actually looked happy to hug her back. It was one small glimpse at how much his family had grown and healed since summer began, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to leave it. He didn't want to miss anything else. He had spent almost all his teen years going on other journeys instead of taking care of his family.

That night, Ron sat on his bed and read over his acceptance letter. Lambrick was what he wanted. He was proud and ready to leave and start something for himself. Everything would be okay when he left. No one would cry, get hurt, get possessed, runaway, or die. His heartbeat picked up a little and he let out quick, shaky breaths. He put a hand to his chest and forced himself to breathe easier. He was okay. His family was okay. Everything was fine and safe.

"Shower is free," Harry said, coming into the room. Ron jumped a little. "Ron, what's wrong?" He ran over to him and clutched his upper arms.

Ron repeatedly shook his head. "I'm fine. I was just...I'm fine."

Harry sat next to him. Water dripped from his dark locks and splashed Ron's hand. It felt good. He was burning up. "Hey, I didn't mean to upset you earlier. I wasn't trying to make you feel bad or stupid. It was wrong of me to imply anything. I just worry about you a lot. I can't help it."

"No, I understand. Trust me, I understand more than you think." Ron rubbed his chest and slowly stood. He grabbed his Cannons shirt and maroon pajamas. "I better go before dad gets in there." He rushed out of the room and into the bathroom. He threw his clothes on the floor and slammed his back against the door. He hit his head against it and closed his eyes. He slid down and rubbed his face over and over.

Just yesterday he had missed Fred terribly and wished with every part of him that he would walk through the door. Now, he was furious with him. Ron hated his brother for dying right in front of him and for making him panic at every little possibility that something might go wrong. It was a powerful feeling, to love and hate Fred so much at one time.

* * *

"Alright, we are out of Bruise Remover Paste and U-No-Poo," Ron said to George as he went over the inventory.

"Blimey, that's shit, isn't it?" George said with a grin as he walked over and pulled the clipboard out of Ron's hand.

"Give that back. I want to get this finished," he said, snatching it back and holding it high. George might have been stronger, but Ron's height came in handy once in a while.

"And we will. It's not even due for a week. Fucking hell," George said. He sat on the floor in front of the staircase and laid his head on the second step.

Ron watched him and smiled. George and Fred had always known how to make a home anywhere. "I just want to get as much done today as I can. It's my last day working for a while."

He looked up at him. "I know it is and I appreciate you wanting to help so much today, even though you came ridiculously early. You really are a responsible adult now. I failed you so horribly, and I'm ashamed of what you've become."

"Piss off. I'm not that responsible, but I'm here to help," Ron said. He may have been able to relate to Percy, but he certainly didn't want to be known as a conscientious prat like him either.

"You have helped, little brother. Don't worry about that," George said. He stood and patted his shoulder. "So, you really ready?"

"Yeah, I think I am. Have no choice. I leave the day after tomorrow," he said. He twitched a grin and his toes even tingled a little. George nodded and turned away. Ron wanted to say something. He and George had put off the conversation for as long as they could, but he was really leaving now. There seemed to be so much to say. "Listen, George."

"Ron, I know what you're going to say. Can we skip it, please?" George asked.

"I'm not going to lecture you," Ron said.

George pushed past him and paced in front of the counter. "There's no reason why you would need to. I'll be fine. I'm just going to do what I've been doing all summer. I'm going to work and try to keep Angelina and me together. It's all I can do."

"That's fine, but don't forget that you have more than just Angelina. Everyone wants to be here for you. It won't hurt to let them," Ron said. All summer he had been the one person to take George's side and let him be, but it wasn't enough anymore. He wouldn't be able to check up on him or explain his behavior to their family. He had to have things in order now.

"I know and I'm doing the best I can. I'm really trying, Ron. I'm great," George said. He turned away from him, and Ron had a feeling deep in his stomach that George wasn't great. He had to say something. He had to get George to understand that he saw all the pain still inside him. He didn't have to hide it from him.

"I know about the picture, George," Ron said.

George turned back around. "What?"

Ron regretted his words right away. He knew that George wouldn't take it the right way. He was one the few people George sincerely trusted. "I-I know about the picture in Fred's room. The one you sleep with." He had no choice but to continue.

George blushed and was quiet for a moment. "You've you went searching through his room?"

"No, I didn't. It was the first day I worked here. I saw the open door, and I went in. I noticed the edge of the frame under his pillow," Ron explained.

He rubbed his neck. "So. It's a picture. It's nothing to tell Merlin about. I'm sure you take a picture of Hermione into the shower."

"Don't bring her into this," Ron shot.

"What were you even doing in his room without my permission in the first bloody place?" George asked.

"Permission?" Ron asked, a little breathlessly. "I didn't know that I needed permission to go into my brother's room."

"Well, you do," George snapped. "It might be Fred's room, but it's my flat so everything in there belongs to me. I have things a certain way. I don't need you or anyone else touching things and moving things and fucking everything up!"

"I-I wasn't trying to move anything or fuck anything up. I just wanted to feel a little closer to him," he said softly. "It was hard being upstairs the first time, okay? I'm sorry. I justâ€œI saw it and I realized why it was there. I understand."

"No, you don't. There's no way that you could ever understand, but you're not supposed to." George chewed on his lip. "It's my thing. My room. My picture. My twin."

Ron wished that he had something to hold on to. He didn't know if he could leave George anymore. "George, I know he is, but this is exactly what I'm talking about. I know you're not as great as you're saying. Just listen to yourself. I'm not trying to ruin anything you've made for yourself to feel better."

"Then what do you want, Ron? Why are you doing this now?" George asked.

"I'm afraid to leave you here," he said honestly. "As ready as I am to go, I won't be able to unless I know that you'll be okay and that you won'tâ€œlose yourself in that picture." He wasn't sure what he was saying, but he hoped that George understood.

"I won't, Ron. I haven't all summer, and I won't just because you're gone. I really appreciate you caring so much, but you don't have to be concerned. I'm still here. I'm fucking here, aren't I?" George walked away from him. Ron opened his mouth but realized that he had nothing to say.

For the rest of the day Ron couldn't really concentrate. What happened wasn't how he wanted to spend his last day at the shop with his brother. George didn't say much to him, and it only increased his anxiety. He needed Hermione. He knew that he had to be a man and stand without her, but he couldn't ignore how good she made him feel and how much stronger he felt with her. He didn't even want to ignore it. He was devastated that he wouldn't be able to see her before he left. Ron didn't know how he would manage not knowing when he could get to hold Hermione again.

Ron watched George as he assisted their last customer for the evening. He heard laughter and he turned his attention to Angelina and Lee. They were giggling and picking up dropped Canary Creams from the floor. If he couldn't reach his brother, then he would reach his friends. He walked over to them. "I need to ask you two a favor."

"I'm not going to help straighten your section again. I have to get home. I have a date," Lee said as he mended an open box with his wand.

"No, it's not that." He looked back to George to take sure he was still busy. "I need you both to take care of George while I'm gone."

"Oh, Ron, you know that we will. That's sweet," Angelina said casually.

"No, I mean it. You can't just ask him if he's all right. You really need to look after him. It means understanding when he doesn't feel like talking but not letting him go silent for too long. Giving him space in the morning. Carrying on his jokes when he starts them. All that. You have to keep him normal." There was so much that went in to helping George that Ron hadn't even noticed he did. He had spent all summer learning how. He had no idea how anyone else would simply pick it up.

Lee put a hand on his shoulder and looked at him seriously. "You don't have to worry, mate. George is my best friend. I won't let him slip away."

"Neither will I. I know how much you care for him and how much he leans on you. I'll do my best to keep him up, I promise. You can trust us with your brother," she said with a kind smile.

He wanted so badly to believe her. George's recovery had become a rather large part of his life, and leaving him was a little like leaving a part of himself behind. It felt very similar to parting from Hermione. "I know I can. I wouldn't leave if I couldn't. Now, I also really need you two to encourage him to talk to our family. It's important that he opens up to them more. I can't be the bridge anymore."

"We will, Ron. I want George to keep progressing, too," Lee said. "Really, calm down. You're going to make yourself pass out."

Ron had to time to explain that he had been down that road already. Not even Hermione could say that. "Yeahâ€¦ anyway, and don't hesitate to write to me and tell me if anything changes. I need to know, and I'll never let it go if you don't and something happens. You have the address, right?"

Angelina put a hand over her mouth as she giggled. "Yes, Ron, we have everything we need from you. It'll be okay. George is going to be fine. He's surrounded by people who love him. We all want the best for him. Remember that."

The floor door opened and Ron left them before George noticed anything. He put his stuff away and straightened his section of the aisle for the last time. He made sure everything was perfect. The shop was his as well, and he wanted it in good shape before he left. "Alright, big boy, better say goodbye now," Lee said, patting his shoulder.

Ron smiled and shook his hand. "Wish me luck, yeah?"

"My sweet dear, you'll need a bollocking lot more than that," Lee said.

Angelina nudged him. "Be quiet, Lee. You are such an arsehole." Angelina kissed Ron's cheek and ruffled his hair. "You'll be great."

"Cheers. I reckon I'll see you two later," Ron said. Despite of all his worry, he was happy that George still had his mates. He knew better than anyone that nothing was ever completely lost as long as a person had his friends. He walked near to the front door where George was, looking out the window and standing completely still. His brown eyes were so far away. "George?"

He came a live a little as he turned to him. "Are you leaving?"

"Yeah. Um, I'm really sorry about earlier," Ron said.

"Don't apologize. You're just being a good brother. I'm sorry that I torn into your bollocks." George talked as if he wasn't really there.

"Okay, well, I'll come by the morning I leave, so I can say goodbye," Ron said.

"That sounds great. It's been nice working with you, Ronnienkins," George said, sticking out his hand and giving him the wooden smile he had adopted months ago. Ron had no choice but to shake it and let it go.

Ron left the shop not too much longer and walked down to The Leaky Cauldron. He would miss getting a drink after a shift. He sat at a table and ran his fingers through his shorter hair. He had everything ready. All his affairs were for the most part in order. The only parts that were unfinished were George and Hermione. He took a healthy gulp of his pint and tried to remember that he was going to Lambrick. It was one the best Aurors camps and he had been accepted. They wanted his tactical talent.

"Excuse me?" someone said. Ron turned around. A girl who looked a little younger than him was standing very close to his chair. She was short, pretty, and had a mass of blonde hair.

"Yes?" he asked, not recognizing her.

She blushed. "My dad and I have a table nearby, and we couldn't help but notice you. You were in the paper awhile back, and you own that joke shop. It's Ron Weasley, right?"

Ron tried to smile and keep himself from flushing. It was the most mental thing in the world that he got recognized. After the war, there had been a write up about Harry, Hermione, and himself, but somehow people still remembered what he looked like. He reckoned the ginger hair and freckles helped. They were apparently traits that only a Weasley had. "Yes, I'm Ron Weasley, but I don't own the shop. My brother does. I'm just a shopkeeper."

She blushed harder and clapped. "Oh, that's excellent. It's so nice to meet you. I'm Cassie. Um, I just have a couple of questions, if you're not too busy."

He laughed genuinely. Someone actually wanted to interview him. "Okay. Won't hurt, I reckon."

She bounced on the heels of her shoes and cleared her throat. "Well, how is Harry Potter doing? Is he recovering well from everything? So much must be going through his mind daily. Does he need anyone to talk to? Also, how are you doing? I know you didn't defeat Voldemort, but I know your brother died. That must be hard. You and Harry Potter must be going through a lot together, actually. What's that like?"

Ron's smile slowly faded and died. A spike of anger and annoyance shot through him. Cassie talked so casually, as if what he and Harry had been through was the equivalent to failing a potion's exam. He also should have known that she wanted information about Harry. Everyone wanted their hands on him. "Harry is fine, and I'm fine. We have all the people we need to talk to, but thanks for the concern. I'll make sure he hears of it." He took one last chug of his drink before dropping his money on the table and getting up. He ignored Cassie's pleas for him to come back and to finish their conversation. He went home and went immediately to sleep.

Ron yawned and rubbed his eyes as he made his climb back up the stairs. For as long as he could remember, he had woken up at around the same time every night for a wee. No matter what he did or didn't eat or drink beforehand, he had to go, and it annoyed him to no end. He quietly opened the door to his room and padded over to his bed but saw something at the window that made him stop. A small white bird continuously hit itself against the window. He looked at Harry who was still sound asleep and didn't stir to the slight tap that hit against the glass.

He walked over to the window and realized that it wasn't a real bird. It was a note shaped like a bird and magically jinxed to fly. There was something incredibly familiar about it that made him feel like he wasn't in any immediate danger. He cracked his window open, and the bird quickly flew it. It zoomed around his head, and Ron snatched it from the air. He glimpsed at Harry, but he was still gently snorting. His attention returned to the paper bird. It stopped flapping its wings, and the folds weakened. It simply became parchment again.

He peeked outside the window, but there was no one there. So, with shaky hands he opened the letter and his eyes widened.

Ron gasped and almost dropped the piece of paper.

* * *

**** A) If you haven't noticed, this is definitely a character-based story. I care more about telling the interworking feelings and motives behind these people than anything else. B) Percy is one of my favorite characters in the entire HP series, and I love the Ron/Percy dynamic. C) Hmm, wonder what's up with that bird and what it has to say! If you want to find out REVIEW! I'm really itching to post it so! Thanks for reading!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 27*: Human nature

Thanks for the reviews! They were really incredible, so I worked very hard to update sooner! :)

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron gasped and almost dropped the piece of paper. He couldn't believe it. He recognized the neat and small handwriting right away.

This is Hermione Jean Granger, I promise! I have no time to explain everything in this letter, but it's important that you understand that I'm a friend and not a foe trying to trick you. Please, come to the tree near the shed. I didn't want to get too close to the house just incase someone was in the kitchen. Hurry up! I'll be waiting!

Ron swallowed hard and crumpled the note in his hand. His heart began to race, and he was confused as all bloody hell. It was Hermione's handwriting and the unique way of being incredibly bossy, even through a letter, was something only she could achieve. However, there was no reason why she would be at his house now. That would mean that she snuck out of Hogwarts and risked expulsion and upsetting McGonagall. Things had changed, but he doubted they had changed that much. No matter, even if there was a slim chance that it was Hermione, it was well worth the risk. His need for her was too great for ideas such as danger and disembowelment to mean anything.

So, he quickly pulled on his pajamas and shirt, slipped into his shoes, and quietly kneeled in front of Harry's trunk. He lit his wand and rustled through it until he found his invisibility cloak. Ron may have been desperate, but he wasn't completely thick. He looked up at Harry and was relieved that the bloke was such a heavy sleeper. Ron put it over his shoulder and traveled as quickly and quietly down the staircase as possible. He cursed every squeak and stopped by the loo to swallow a bit of toothpaste. Before opening the kitchen door, Ron looked over the note again. It was Hermione. It had to be. The bird was her creation. It was something that he felt. He slipped the cloak over himself and padded over to the shed. It was difficult. He had to hunch low because he was far too big for the cloak.

Total shock made Ron stop in almost mid step. His heart skipped a beat, and he let out a shaky breath. Sure enough, Hermione was leaning against the shed with a small bag next to her. She clutched her necklace in one hand and had her wand lit in the other, all while moving her thighs back and forth. Even in the coldness of night, he felt extremely warm. She really had come to see him. She had snuck out, jeopardized everything, and came all the way to his house for him. If she wasn't the most amazing woman in the world, then his name was not Ronald Billius Weasley. Hermione was living proof that magic was real.

Ron slowly pulled the cloak off and lit his wand. "Hermione?"

Hermione jumped and turned around. "Sweetheart, you came." Ron wanted to hug her or at least tell her hi, but suddenly a bit of his senses came to him. It was too good to be true. He pointed his wand at her. "R-Ron?" she asked, raising her wand a little.

"Prove to me that you're Hermione Jean Granger. Say something or do something to convince me." He knew that his words weren't nearly as strong and intimidating enough, but he was an Auror in training after all. It didn't help that the thought of dueling someone who looked liked Hermione was rather awkward.

She frowned and stomped her foot. "Urgh! I shouldn't be upset! This is good. I'm glad you're keeping your guard up. Umâ€œoh! I know. Hogsmeade, third year, our first time there."

"Go on," he said, stepping closer as the day instantly flooded his brain.

"You had some chocolate on the corner of your mouth, and I tried to wipe it away with my thumb." She giggled. "However, right as I moved my finger to your mouth, you stuck out your tongue to lick the spot away I guess. You licked my finger instead."

Ron gradually lowered his wand and slowly walked over to her. He didn't need to hear anymore. Then again, she had him at the bird tapping against his window. "Yeah," he continued for her, "I tried to think of something clever to say. Tastes the same, I said to you. That only made it worse."

"Maybe for you. It made me really hot," she said, walking closer. "After that we blushed, we giggled, then we cleared our throats and kept walking. I'll never forget that day."

"It's my favorite visit we had together. We were alone. I finally had you all to myself," he said. They were right in front of each other. Ron didn't know what to do first.

Hermione jumped into his arms. "Oh, Ron! I'm so glad that you came. I'm sorry. I know it's too inappropriately late for me to show up here, but I had no other choice! I had to get the timing perfect. Sleeping with you all summer made me realize that your bladder's internal clock is set for you to go pee this late in the night. It was always so irritating for me, and you might want to get that checked out, but it worked for this occasion! I knew

you'd be up, and I hoped you wouldn't be too sleepy to notice my note. I didn't want to use an owl and risk it making noise or drawing attention, so I thought the bird would be better and--"

"Mione," he said weakly, trying his best to hold on to her. He couldn't keep up with her words. He was too dazed.

She didn't stop. "I know. I know. What I'm doing is against every school rule. All day I've been battling with myself. I finally made up my mind that I would be an adult and live with the situation but I couldn't. I can't! I wasn't there when you got your first acceptance letter from Lambrick. I wasn't there for your trial. I wasn't even there for your party. I haven't been here for you during the most important steps of your adult life, and there's no way that I could miss this. I refused to be away from you a minute longer! I couldn't take it. I wouldn't put up with it. I just--"

"Hermione," Ron said again, putting her down. He put a finger to her lips. "Just slow down for a moment." She kissed his finger before letting out a heavy breath. He looked her over and felt the rhythm of his heart and the pacing of his breath finally synchronize. He felt his back straighten and gravity stopped pressing on him so tremendously. Hermione looked at him in worry, as if she had to justify wanting to be with him. As if he would be mad for any reason that she came in the dead of night just for him. Ron was gob smacked by the notion. "Love, we're meant to be together, and we were meant to be together right now. I know it. Even being out here with you for thirty seconds..."

She nodded and her bottom lip trembled. "I know. I feel it, too. I feel it running all through my body. It's why I'm here. I couldn't get to sleep. Something kept pulling me to do this. I couldn't be away from you anymore. My body just refused to accept the idea." She moved her hands from his arms and down to his sides. She placed her head against his chest, and Ron held her. She rejuvenated him and mended everything that was wrong with him. "I couldn't stand the idea of not seeing you at least one more time before you left. The thought was too scary, and it hurt so much."

"It's been hurting me as well. You have no idea how badly I've been aching, and it's made me so mad. I've been so angry, Hermione." He breathed in the scent of her hair and rubbed her back. He couldn't believe that she was there with him. He actually had exactly what he wanted.

"You don't have to hurt or feel angry anymore. I'm here now." She gripped his back so hard that he could feel her pinch his skin, even through his shirt. "Ron, I'm sorry that it's late and that I didn't tell you. I just made up my mind less than an hour ago. I had to use one of the secret passages out of the castle, and everything had to be set perfectly. Everything had to work. I was so worried that something would go wrong, and I wouldn't get to see you." Her voice broke.

Ron pulled away a little and gazed at her. "Baby, nothing went wrong. You're here, and you're safe with me." He rubbed under her slightly watery eyes. "I've got you now."

Her expression finally dissolved of its worry. She seemed to fold and melt, and he could see the gleam in her eyes. She gave a high-pitched cry before jumping into his arms again and kissing him so violently that his knees buckled. He held her as filmy as he could as he sank to the ground. He put his back against the cold, damp earth and held on to Hermione's hips as she snogged the breath out of him.

"Seeâ€œ; I told youâ€œ; I'd ravish you," she panted between furious kisses and lashings of her fiery tongue.

Ron could only groan and clutch her arse. "I never doubted you."

She kissed him deeper and harder, and her hands moved up his torso and to his hair. She pulled on the strands for a moment before breaking out of the kiss. She raised an eyebrow. "Your hair is shorter."

Ron tried to knock himself out of the trance of being handled by his girlfriend's talented mouth. "Ah, yeah, mum just cut it."

She scooted herself down his legs. "Well, sit up and let me see."

"Wa? Can't we do this later? I was enjoying the ravishing!" he whined. He reached for her.

She swatted his hand away. "There will be plenty of time for that."

"There will?" he asked.

"Yes. I don't plan on leaving tonight. I brought a traveling bag. I hope it's okay," she said.

He felt like screaming in delight. "Of course it's bloody okay!" He moved in to kiss her again, but she pulled away.

"I want to see your hair first. Now," she ordered. Ron exhaled and rolled his eyes as he sat up. Hermione examined his head and ran her fingers through his hair, making him shiver. "Wow."

"What do you think?" he asked with a smile. More blood pushed down past his groin as Hermione continued to play with his hair while straddling his lap. The littlest things she did made him hard. Nothing else was more attractive to him than Hermione. He wasn't sure if he was really even turned on by anything else. Everything that made him hot involved her in some way.

"It looks great, and it's finally out of your eyes. Gives me a better view of your face and your jaw line. You're even sexier now. Hmm, my sexy little Auror," she said, tugging on a strand.

He popped his hips so she'd get a feel of his hardness. "I reckon it's sexy big Auror right about now, yeah?"

She blushed and ran a finger down his nose in the way that drove him mental. He disliked how long his nose was, but Hermione somehow made him apperceive it when she made the gesture. "You're rude," she said.

"Am not. I'm just honest. I'm getting bigger and bigger as we speak," he said, popping his hips again.

She pinched his arm. "Stop that."

"Why? You like it?" he asked. She didn't answer him, only started snogging him again. He held her in his lap and once again let her command his mouth. He loved the feeling of her desire. A breeze swept over them, and he felt her shiver in the slightest. He stopped. "Let's get you inside. You're risking enough. Don't want you to get sick as well."

She wiped her mouth and opened her eyes. "Yes, right, good thinking."

The two got up, and he lit his wand. "I'll get that for you," he said, taking her bag.

"Thanks," she said. "So, how do you want to do this?"

"I've got the cloak. You can use it. If nothing else, I'll just say that I wanted some air. No one is awake though. He handed her the cloak and smiled as she began to put it over herself. "You really want to do this? You could get expelled, you know?"

She shrugged. "I shouldn't get caught, but some things are worth it. This is where I need to be."

It was a testament of their relationship and how much Hermione had changed over the years. Ron never thought he'd see the day. He bent down and kissed her before she put the cloak completely over herself. Everyone still seemed to be asleep when they walked through the door. They went up the stairs in unison so the steps creaked at the same time. As they made the climb, he had an idea. He turned on the third floor and opened the door to Percy's room. Once he thought she was in, he closed the door, locked it, and put up a silencing charm.

Hermione pulled off the cloak. "What are we doing in here?"

"I reckon we can talk for a little while longer before going to sleep," he said.

"Do you just want to sleep in here?" she asked.

"No, I'd like to be in my room just incase Harry," Ron rubbed his neck, "needs something." After Harry's horrible nightmare, Ron made a promise to himself to be at his side whenever he could. He didn't want him to go through anything like that alone.

She gave him a curious look but didn't press the matter. "Okay. That's fine."

"Anyway, it's not like Percy will be coming in here any time soon, right?" he said, leaning against the wall. She sat on the bed and rubbed her eyes. She was in jeans and a jumper, but she looked unbelievably tempting. He wanted her badly. "So, how long can you stay?"

"Well, even though I just made up my mind tonight, I've sort of been planning this for a few days. You see, I've been getting more and more sickly and McGonagall knows it," she said with a smirk.

"You clever witch. I can't believe you're slipping McGonagall one," Ron said. If she didn't stop surprising him, then he would have to reconsider if she was in fact the real Hermione.

She gave a guilty expression. "I had no choice and it worked. She even suggested that I take a day off and stay in bed. So, I think it will be okay if I miss my morning classes and go back for the afternoon classes or even just make dinner. I don't have any real Head Girl duties tomorrow, and I'm caught up on all my work."

"You did all this for me?" he asked gently.

"Of course I did, Ron. I told you. I had to see you," Hermione said sweetly. "But don't get too conceited. I'm here to see Harry as well. I have to be here for him and even more since Ginny can't be." She groaned and put a hand over her face. "She's going to hex me when I tell her I did this and didn't bring her along, but I couldn't risk it. I know she really wants to see Harry and you, butâ€¢wellâ€¢I have to be here more. I know it isn't true, and it's probably really selfish of meâ€¢!"

Ron could only grin. Hermione once again felt as if she had to justify herself. It was mental. He nudged her to come over, and she did right away. He rubbed her shoulders. "I don't think it's selfish. It's understandable why you just left but even if it's not, I don't care. I've wanted to see you so badly, and you're here. I've really only needed you. I reckon that makes me just as bad."

She looked up at him and smiled beautifully. "Either way, at least I get to say this to your face. Congratulations, Ron. I knew you'd get into Lambrick. They need you just as much as you need them. I'm so proud of you." She then rose on her toes and kissed him tenderly. It was so light that he hardly felt her lips, but it was powerful enough to make his knees weak. She pulled away and brushed her thumb over his mouth.

He didn't know what to say or what to do. Everything faded away and his entire being was in front of him. He knew that he was deeply in love with Hermione, but in that moment every feeling that he had for her grew and showed itself completely. The problems with George disappeared. The fear of losing his family evaporated, and the uncertainty of his future of Lambrick flew away. In that moment he was alive because Hermione was. She was all he knew and all that he had to look forward to. He squeezed

her arms. "Hermione, I love you so much. Oh my godâ€¢;you're everything to me."

She put a hand to his chest. "I love you, too. You're going to be okay, and I'll be wherever you are in some way or another. You don't have to worry." She took his hand and put it to her chest. "You feel that? We're alive in the same pace. Our hearts are beating as a unit."

"They always have to," he whispered.

"They will," she reassured.

"I'm scared, Hermione," he said honestly. "I don't know how I'm supposed to do this."

"It's all right to be scared. This is new and it is terrifying I'm sure, but you'll make it. You'll figure it out, and you'll be fine. You're a hero, Ron. Heroes take the bad and turn it into power. Just take all your fear and turn it into something beautiful." She pressed her hand harder against his chest, and it felt so good.

He pressed his a little harder against hers. "I already have the most beautiful thing in the world," he said, "I just need to know that you'll stay with me no matter what happens."

"Ron, there's no letting you go now. Nothing and no one could ever make me walk away from you. You have me forever." She pulled their hands down and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Forever, babe."

He clutched her waist and felt the warmth and reassurance wash over him. If he could always have Hermione, then everything else could be manageable. He would truly make it. He leaned down and kissed her. Her lips were soft and warm and only for him. His love for her morphed and his passion and heat took over and blended. He moaned and felt every inch of his skin dampen and turn to fire.

"Fucking hell," he mumbled against her mouth, "give me your tongue. I want to taste it."

She whimpered and scratched her nails into his neck. "I willâ€¢;if you give me your cock. I want to feel it." He snorted and pulled away. Hermione blushed terribly. "Umâ€¢;"

"You just said cock. Hermione Granger just said cock. Bleeding Merlin," he said with a chuckle.

She pointed her chin in the air and put her hands on her hips. "Yes, well, I guess I did. Got caught up in the moment."

"No complaints here," he said.

She licked her lips. "Good. Then are you going to give it to me or not?"

He bit his lip and eased down his pajamas a little. He took her hand and snaked it under his boxers. He gripped himself with her hand and leaned his head against the door. "All yours."

She groaned. "Ron!" She kissed him deeply and parted her lips so he could take over her mouth. They snogged heavily, and he hugged her tongue with his lips as she steadily stroked him. His chest heaved roughly and every touch of her hand on him sent sparks all through his body. He could feel the pressure in his feet, but he wanted so much more. When Hermione was involved, he wanted everything. The passion and fire melted his mind, and animal sensations took over.

He broke out of the kiss and licked her mouth. "I really want to fuck you." It was the only thought that had gone through his mind for several minutes, but he hadn't expected it to become audible. He immediately opened his eyes and pulled away.

Hermione was slightly frozen. She took her hand off him. Her brown eyes were wide, and her cheeks were pink. She clutched her necklace, and Ron was ready for her to slap him or call him tasteless. "Really?" she asked. "Do you mean that?"

He was puzzled by her question. He couldn't tell if she was offended or not, but he decided to be honest. "Yeah, I did."

"Then say it again," she said quietly.

Ron's skin was boiling so extremely that he thought his sweat would catch on fire. "I really want to fuck you, Hermione. I want to make you cum like I do. You have no idea how often I think about it."

She closed her eyes for a moment and let out an unstable breath. "Actually, I do. I want that, too. I really!" She trailed off and cleared her throat. "I really want to get fucked by you."

He was now completely sure that the goddess in front of him wasn't Hermione Granger. He was still dreaming and simply couldn't wake up. "You-you just said fucked. Hermione Granger just said fucked."

She giggled wickedly. "You said that already, Ronald, and you should give me more credit. I survived a war. I can branch out to say at least a couple of swear words every now and again. Also!" She reached down his pajamas and rubbed her thumb over the moistened head of him. She then put her finger to her lips and sucked the juice off her finger. "You'd be surprised what you could get me to do, when you're deserving."

Ron was officially done. Hermione wasn't taking the piss. If she could play, then he would certainly rise to her occasion. He had to stop being such a spineless git. "Am I deserving now?"

She nodded her head slowly. "Definitely."

He looked over the room and pondered his options. He suddenly smirked. This would be fun. "Move over to the desk." She squeaked

a little and backed up until her arse hit the desk. He shook his head. "Oh no, Ms. Granger. This is my night, and we're going to do this the right way. Turn around and put your hands on the desk."

She gasped. "Ronald Weasley." He merely shook his head again and twisted his finger. She obeyed and pressed her palms flat on the wood. She laughed, almost nervously. "So, is this what a Lambrick trainee does? Take his girlfriend against his brother's working table?"

He reached around to her front and unzipped her jeans. He pulled them down and revealed her beautiful thighs and arse hidden behind light blue knickers. "Dunno, but if not then I'll start the tradition tonight." He rubbed his fingers over the band of her knickers. "Wait, I need to get potion."

She turned her head back. "No need. I've been practicing the verbal spell, and I've got it down now. I put it on me before I left."

"You naughty woman. So, you came here determined to get a shag out of me? What if I refused?" he asked. Though in no way on Earth or on any other planet for that matter would he ever refuse to have sex with Hermione.

"Please, just look at yourself, sweetheart. Like you could say no, even if you wanted to. You need this." She wiggled her arse against his groin.

He moaned and placed a hand on her back. "Bloody hell, I didn't know cheek was a NEWTs course."

"It's not, but I've been around you long enough," she said.

"Shut it," he said, nudging her shoulder. She faced ahead, and Ron took a deep breath before pushing his pajamas down. "Honestly though, same rules."

"Same rules," she repeated, sliding her knickers to her ankles and moving her legs apart. Ron wanted to take a picture of the masterpiece in front of him. He had fantasized for ages about what he was about to do, and he had always told himself that it would only just be a dream. He had been so sure that he would never get to this point with Hermione. Now, he had it. She was all his.

He moved her hair to one side and kindly kissed her neck as he gripped himself and guided it to her middle. He pushed himself against her center, and it slid easily in. They groaned in harmony. Ron didn't stop until he felt her cheeks against his hips. He let himself rest there for a few moments. A strong tingle covered his body, and it was not easy to breathe because she felt so incredible. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yes, this is fine," she said breathlessly. "You don't have to worry anymore. Although, I love that you ask."

He moved his fingers under her shirt and down her rather sweaty back. "Of course, I love you."

"I love you, too," she said in a throaty voice. "You're the love of my life."

"You are my life, Mione," he said softly. He pulled back, just leaving the head in. Hermione sharply drew a breath as he moaned. He slowly stroked her for few minutes, filling her back up on his him. The feeling was amazing. It was as if magic itself made Hermione's body especially for him. He fit so perfectly, and felt so good. He held her hips and began thrusting faster, giving her nice long, deep strokes.

Hermione's arms shook, and she tapped her fingers against the desk. "Oh, yes, Ron, you feel so good." Her voice was light, and she actually seemed to be enjoying it. She squeezed his cock on the out strokes with her muscles and gave him space as he went in. It was better than the previous time, and even better than the time before that. He wasn't hurting Hermione, and the new and somewhat naughty position only heightened the enjoyment. Having sex with Hermione wasn't just pleasurable this time; it was fun as well.

"Hmm, Hermione," he groaned. He thrust repeatedly into her and went harder with every stroke. She moaned louder each time he pushed. It felt so electrifying to have her warm, smooth insides hug his length. He could feel the pressure reach past his groin. She continuously whimpered and moaned and it sounded brilliant. He gripped her hips and pushed totally in.

Hermione suddenly made a weird, strangled noise. He slowed down. "Am I hurting you?" he asked.

She shook her head frantically. "No, no, no, please, keep going like you were! I'm fine."

"But you're in painâ€¦right?" he asked. Ron was a bloke. For him the feeling was either good or not good enough. On the other hand, girls seemed to have entire novels full of different sensations, pleasures, and pains that they felt during sex. Nothing about females was straightforward.

She turned back to him. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were hazy. "No, I'm. It's justâ€¦you're hitting itâ€¦and it feels so wonderful, so wonderful. Please, as you were." Her voice was slurred, and she looked completely mental. Ron had an idea what it was, but he was still confused. It didn't matter. Hermione told him to keep going. He minded her wishes and returned to his pace. He went as deeply as he could and held on with everything that he had. He was already there, but he wanted her to feel it. He wanted her to lose it.

Hermione hit her fists against the desk and her legs quaked terribly. "Oh, wow! Oh, wow! Yes, yes, you're doing it! Iâ€¦Iâ€¦I think I'm cumming. You're making me cum!" She arched her back. "Ron!" she shrieked. She suddenly jolted and froze for a moment. He actually felt her muscle tighten. She let out a choked cry

and rocked her lips. "Ron, Ron, Ron!" He felt her warm insides contract and squeeze him. She was cumming extremely hard. He could feel her pulsing against him, and it was a great sensation. He had finally done it.

He was so distracted by her orgasm that he hardly realized that he had reached his peak. The pressure overflowed down past his groin, and he couldn't hold on. The feeling of Hermione squeezing around him, and the sounds of their moans together made him explode. "Oh f-huck, Hermione," he breathed. Ron groaned loudly as he took one last deep thrust and came. He let out a harsh breath and jerked as the pressure left him and filled her instead.

He continued to push until he felt himself empty. He crumpled on her back, and they desperately breathed together. He clamped his hands over hers and they intertwined their fingers. The feeling of her clinching around him and dousing him in a wet heat was the most satisfying experience of his life. His legs couldn't stand anymore. He pulled out of her and settled to the floor. He weakly eased his pajamas up, and Hermione sat between his legs. She laid her back against his chest and together they pulled her knickers and jeans back up.

She was shaking terribly and every breath was a wheeze. He kissed the top of her head and rested his hands on her small stomach. He licked his lips and tried to think of something to say but he was empty and clear.

He heard Hermione sob. "What's wrong?" he asked in a raspy voice.

She sat up and looked at him. She seemed just as worn out as he was, but she didn't seem upset. She wiped her eyes. "Nothing is wrong. I've just never felt anything so satisfying and powerful before, and I'm a little overwhelmed by it. Ron, there's no doubt in my mind that you're the most extraordinary lover. It's another thing that comes naturally to you."

He rubbed his neck. It was probably the best complicate a guy could receive, but he wasn't sure if he'd earned it yet. "I don't know about that."

"I mean it. Some women wait their whole lives but never experience what I just did." She traced a patch of freckles on his cheek and looked at him seriously. "No other man could do that for me."

For a second his bliss disappeared and a cold, agonizing pain throbbed against his chest. His mind could only imagine some greasy arsehole touching Hermione for a moment. The thought was vile, and he refused to let the depression hurt him ever again. "I don't want another man to do it for you."

"I don't either," she said. "I think my heart would give out if I had to deal with another man's touches."

"Mine, too," he said softly. There was a time in his life when he thought he'd have to accept that she would never be his. He told

himself that he could handle Hermione kissing and laughing with someone else. Now, he didn't know how he had survived it. It had to be him feeling her and keeping her secrets safe. No one else knew how to take care of her. He closed his eyes.

"Sweetheart, it's okay. It's something you'll never have to be concerned about," she said, shaking him somewhat.

"I know. I know. It's you and me," he said, opening his eyes again.

"That's right. It's just us." She kissed him and rested against his chest again. "Hmm, I'm exhausted."

"So am I. Are you ready to head up to my room?" he asked.

"Sure. I need to change first," she said, sluggishly crawling away from him. He watched her as she kicked off her shoes and took off her jeans. "Do you have to do that?"

"Do what?" he asked, ogling her perfection.

She pulled a t-shirt and pajamas from her bag. "Watch me like that. You look like an Azkaban prisoner."

"Well, they might throw me in prison for what I'm thinking right now," he said.

"You're not deserving right now so forget it." She quickly pulled her shirt off and unsnapped her bra.

"Sweet Merlin, wait, give me a moment with those," he said, reaching out.

"Ronald Weasley, they're not toys!" she snapped, pulling her shirt over her head and slipping into her pajamas.

"You obviously don't know how the male mind works," he said, getting up.

"I don't think I want to learn either. Are you sure it's okay to sleep in your room? I know what I'll tell your parents in the morning, but Harry is going to wake up and see me in your bed," she said.

"He'll be fine. I think Harry has built up a tolerance to us. He's learned to expect the unexpected. Here." He handled her the cloak, and she once again put it over her. He straightened Percy's desk and grinned. One day he'd tell him about what they did in his room. He opened the door and led Hermione out. They eased back into his room, and Harry was still asleep.

She took the cloak off, and he put it back in Harry's trunk. They snuggled in his bed and under the blanket. Hermione rested her head against his chest, and he put an arm around her waist. He kissed her forehead. "I love you."

"Love you, too," she said softly.

Ron closed his eyes and smiled. It was the best night of sleep he ever got.

* * *

Ron rubbed his eyes and moved his hand over the space next to him. It was empty. He sat up and looked around the room. Hermione wasn't there and neither was Harry. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. It had all been a dream. He should have known that!

"I looked through them, and I realized that it was all your work. I hope you don't mind me keeping it," Harry said as he and Hermione came into the room.

She laughed and rubbed his arm. "Yes, that's fine. I made new notes, and they might come in handy for you." She looked at Ron. "You're awake."

A wave of relief washed over him. "And you're still here. Sorry, didn't mean to sleep so late."

"You didn't. It's still rather early," she said. She sat on his bed and kissed his forehead.

Harry sat on his cot and smirked. "You can imagine my surprise when I woke up and saw Hermione. At first I thought you had taken polyjuice, Ron."

"Never again," he mumbled, massaging Hermione's neck.

"Then I saw you behind her and figured that some crazy plan must have been involved. I shouldn't have been surprised. With you two anything goes," Harry said with a slight frown.

Hermione slapped his knee. "Leave me alone. Ron, he's been giving me hell all morning."

"He's just jealous," Ron said. "How long have you been awake?"

"About an hour. I got dressed and finally found the courage to go downstairs. Your parents were eating breakfast. I told them that I came early this morning. They didn't seem to mind. They said that they understood," Hermione said.

"Yeah, well, they would. They snuck out all the time, according to dad," Ron said. He yawned and stretched. "You still heading to the Dursleys' today, Harry?"

"Yes, I'm about to go now. I asked Hermione, and I hope you can hold out as well. Let's get lunch or something when I get back. We can go out and do something while Hermione's here." Harry smiled at her, and she returned it.

"Sounds brilliant. Don't forget the tickets," Ron said.

"I won't. It's my main reason for going," Harry muttered.

"I think it's more than that, Harry. It's wonderful that you're going to spend some time with them. They're your family. It'll feel good, trust me," she said.

Harry smiled at her again then turned to Ron. "She's great, yeah?"

"The best," he answered, kissing her arm.

"Oh, you boys!" Hermione said, looking timid.

"Well, I'm going to go," he said a little gloomily. "Wish me luck and stay out of trouble, at least until I get back."

"Good luck, mate, but I won't make any promises," Ron said.

"Oh, he doesn't need luck, and we'll be fine. Have a good time," Hermione said.

When Harry left the room, Ron laid his head on her thigh. "Now that he's gone..."

"You can shower and get dressed," she finished for him, moving his head.

"Want to join me?" he asked, looking up.

She patted his head. "Sorry, I'm already clean."

"I can dirty you up some," he said, wiggling an eyebrow.

She tugged on his hair. "Inappropriate, Ronald."

"It wasn't last night. Last night I was a deserving Lambrick trainee," he said with a pout.

"And this morning you're just a Lambrick trainee. Now go," she ordered, pointing to the door.

He groaned. "Fine, bossy woman." He rolled out of bed and bent down for his clothes.

"And hurry up," she said, smacking his arse.

"Ow! Fucking hell!" Ron said, quickly turning around and rubbing his bottom. He suddenly grinned. "Do that again."

She growled. "Ronald Weasley!"

"Okay. Okay, I'm going. Keep your knickers on for now," he said. She threw a pillow at him, but he ran out of the room just in time. He took as speedy of a shower as he could. His stomach was in knots, and he wanted to get back to Hermione as soon as he could. He would have some alone time with her finally. After

brushing his teeth he opened the door. His mum was on the other side.

"Mum! Fuc-err- sweaty Merlin, you scared me," he said, putting a hand to his chest.

She grinned. "Sorry dear. It's nice that Hermione came early this morning to see you and Harry, isn't it?"

There was something in her brown eyes that told him that she didn't quite believe Hermione's story, but he tried his best to keep up with it. He remembered what George, Harry, and Bill had said about his eyes. He looked down and cleared his throat.

"Yeah, it was a surprise."

"Hmm, I sure it was. Must have pretty early. You know Arthur is up before the birds are," she said.

"It was early. Don't remember what time it was. Just let her in and went back to sleep," he answered.

His mum chuckled a bit and lightly tapped his cheek. "Oh, I remember being your age and being with Arthur as his girlfriend. It can be intense."

"Very," he answered, not really sure where she was going.

"Well, I'll leave you two to it, but I should tell you what I told Ginny. Respect your siblings spaces," she said.

Ron's eyes widened. "What?"

"Percy's door was open when I got up," she explained. "I open his window in the morning so fresh air can circulate. I do that in all the rooms that aren't occupied."

Ron had been so sure that he closed the door. He wasn't sure how much she knew. "I know that. It's justâ€;"

"Ron, it's all right. Just be respectable and be careful," she said.

"I always am, mum," he answered.

"That's my boy." She kissed his cheek and walked off. Ron watched his mum and felt the tiniest of tugs on his heart. He was going to miss her so much. He blocked out the feeling and remembered what was in his room. He practically tripped up the staircase as he ran back up. Hermione was still there, going through his luggage. He stood at the doorway and watched her nose through his things.

"I can get you to fit in my trunk, I think," he said, walking in and closing the door.

She looked up for a moment before thumbing through his clothes.
"Believe me, I've considered it. I'm just making sure you have

everything. You leave tomorrow and it would be awful if you left something behind."

He joined her on the bed and kicked his bag to the floor. He took her hands. "Don't worry. Mum and me have gone over everything at least four times. I'm all set."

She sighed. "You're really going. You are going to train at Lambrick Academy."

It sounded brilliant coming out of her mouth, and Ron felt a bit taller. "I know. I'm seriously doing this."

Hermione rubbed his thigh. "I'm so proud of you, Ron."

"Thanks." He leaned in and kissed her.

Hermione kissed him back for only a moment before moving down to his jaw. "Mmm, I've missed your after shower smell. It's so tasty."

"We can take another one. Offer still stands," he said faintly as she sucked on his neck. Their previous night was still imprinted on him, and he would have no problem going at it again.

She pulled away. "Someday," she said, touching his face. Hermione was so beautiful, and he was still in a bit of shock that she was with him.

He put his forehead to hers. "I want to kiss you again."

"I'm yours all day," she answered.

He snogged her intensely and pulled on her arm. He settled back against his mattress, and Hermione eased on top of him. He spread his legs, and she fit herself flawlessly on top of him. She deepened the kiss and tangled her fingers in his hair. He clutched her back and whimpered weakly as her weight pushed against him. She felt amazing. It had been ages since they had snogged in his bed. He didn't realize how much he had missed it.

She parted from his mouth and grinned. "This is nice."

He tucked hair behind her ear and outlined her small but lush mouth. "This is perfect."

Her lips stretched against his finger. "What do you want to do while we have time alone?"

"Just this. The only place I want to be is right here with you, and holding you is the greatest thing that I could be doing," he said honestly.

"Oh, Ron," she said airily. "You can be completely romantic sometimes."

Once again, he hadn't tried to be romantic. It was the truth, and it simply came out of him like it always did. Regardless, he

decided to act as if he had done it on purpose. "Always the tone of surprise. I've had time to come up with some material. Now, come back," he said.

She laid her head against his chest and held on to his shoulders. He held her closely and closed his eyes. It was his last day before going to Lambrick, and he was spending it in the way he always hoped that he would. Hermione was soft, warm, and she smelled so fantastic. He kissed the top of her head, and she kissed his collarbone. For a while they merely laid and held each other. The only sounds came from their slow, calm breaths and Hermione's random fits of giggles when Ron tickled her side. It was better than anything he had done all summer.

"Ron?" Hermione finally said.

"Yes, baby?" He opened his eyes and slightly shook his head. He had actually begun to doze off because he was so comfortable.

"Do you remember the first time you told me that you love me? It was the night I helped fix your paper, in sixth year." she explained.

He looked off to the side as that night flashed across his eyes.
"Yeah, back when I was dating Lavender."

"Right. Why did you say it?" she asked.

He tugged on her hair so she would look at him. "What?"

"Well, I've always wondered why you just said it. I know you worked hard on your essay but that sort of came out of nowhere, and especially considering the situation you were in. It's been on my mind for ages. That's all." She moved her eyes away from his and traced her finger over his shirt.

He raised her chin. "Hey, I didn't just say it because I was grateful, and I didn't even care about my situation. I said it because I meant it. No, I didn't plan on it coming out, but it felt right when it did. I didn't regret it."

"Honestly?" she asked quietly.

He frowned a little and sat up. Hermione moved off him and sat in front of him. "Hermione, has this really been bothering you?"

She clutched her necklace. "Not bothering me so much. That's not the proper word for it, but for years I had thought about you saying it to me and then you did. When you had a girlfriend no doubt. It felt so good and so complicated. It took every bit of will that I had not to say it back. It meant the world to me, and it still does. I've just always wondered if it's meant anything to you."

He laced their fingers together. "It meant the world to me, too. For years I had wanted to say it, but I didn't have the nerve. That night you were brilliant and kind as always, and it finally came out. It felt natural. I haven't forgotten that night, and I

never will. Never doubt that. Every time I've ever told you that I loved you, I meant it. I don't take that phrase casually."

She took their joined hands and placed them against her chest. "I don't either."

"With that, I have a question for you," he said.

She sniffed and rolled her eyes. "Oh, I'm afraid to hear it."

"It's not bad. I just want to know if you remember the first time you kissed me?" he asked.

"I think the whole school remembers the first time, Ron," she answered with a smirk. "Of course, it hasn't even been a year yet."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Not during the war. I'm talking about a couple of years before that." She gave him a curious look. "Well," he continued, "it was the day of my first quidditch match in fifth year."

She chuckled. "That's right, but I just kissed your cheek. I didn't think that counted."

"It bloody well counts. It was all I could think of for the rest of the day and several days after that. It was small, I know, but it's still one of my favorites. You kissed me and wished me luck. It couldn't have been any better," he said, remembering how she had looked at him with certainty before walking off in all her beauty.

She squeezed his hands. "I'm glad you liked it. I did, too. I would have loved to kiss you before and after every quidditch match."

"Even if we lost?" he asked.

She leaned forward and pecked his mouth. "Even more if you lost."

"How kind of you. I'd love for you to kiss me every morning I wake up at camp. That will certainly make my days better. Who knows what they're going to make me do. Don't want to die of exhaustion my first day, yeah?" he said with a grin. She didn't return it. In fact, her expression turned grave. "That was dumb to say. I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay. It'sâ€œoh, I really didn't want to bring this up," she said.

"Don't do that. Say whatever it is. We're together now. We can talk," he said.

She exhaled deeply. "Ron, I'm so proud of you and I'm excited for you, but I'm rather, well, rather fearful as well. I don't know what going to happen to you there, and I'm scared. A part of me sort of doesn't want you to go. I won't be able to sneak up there and make sure you're safe."

"Hermione," he said.

"I'm being honest. I know you think that you have to protect everyone in your life, but you have to realize that you're not the only one who feels that way about people. I have to protect you, and I won't be able to while you're there," she said. "You are really going to have to watch yourself. Lambrick won't do it for you."

"I know. I've been thinking about it a lot. I'll be fine. I have to be no matter what. I have you to get back to," he said, kissing the tips of her fingers.

"Exactly. Just keep that in your mind no matter what you're going through." She suddenly smiled. "It isn't quite all bad. I'm very pleased to tell all the girls at school that I'm dating a sexy and talented Auror in training. My boyfriend is going to be best academy in the country."

He blushed a little. "I'm sure no one is impressed. They probably think that you're referring to Harry."

She hit his arm. "Stop that! You'd be surprised. You have a little following at Hogwarts. Ask Ginny. Although, I'm sure she'll lie about it. She hates it. She gets it worse than I do because she's your sister."

He leaned back against his headboard. He didn't believe her for a second. "Yes. I'm sure all the girls drop their knickers over my freckles and ginger hair. I did read in Witch Weekly that tall and gangly was in this year." Hermione bit her lip and twisted his nipple painfully through his shirt. He yelled and yanked her hand away. "Ow! Bloody fucking hell! Watch the nips, love!"

"Serves you right, Ronald Weasley! You are absolutely gorgeous, and I'm tired of hearing you say otherwise," she shot. "How would you feel if I said that I hated my frizzy hair and horribly boring brown eyes, or if I told you that I can't stand how square my hips are?"

He crinkled his nose. He truly hoped that she wasn't being serious. "I'd say that you were even more mental than I always thought you were. You're perfect."

"Exactly! So, don't assume that other people don't find you attractive just because you don't. Besides, I'm sure there will be girls at Lambrick who will end up fancying you," she said.

"I highly doubt that. Even so, it won't matter obviously. You know that, right?" he asked. Hermione pointed her chin a little and nodded. He wanted to roll his eyes. He couldn't believe that she was insecure in any way. Not only could no other girl compete with Hermione, but also at Lambrick he was going to be concerned with staying alive and being on top. Girls would be the last thought that crossed his mind. "Hermione?"

"Yes, I know. I'm not worried. Nonetheless, it would be wise to politely correct any girl who tries to chat you up," she said.

He snorted and pulled on her arm to bring her close. "Aww, you're so adorable."

"I mean it," she said, getting back in his lap.

"What? Do you want me to tattoo the words Hermione's Property to my forehead? I will if it will make you feel better," he said, kissing her neck.

"No, that's okay," she said lightly, moving her body closer against his.

"Or I can write it on my arse or my cock. Your favorite, right?" he asked, nibbling on her supple skin.

She moaned. "I don't want anything damaging that amazing muscle." She pulled on his hair and brought their mouths together. "My amazing muscle, I mean," she mumbled before biting on his lower lip.

He flinched and squeezed her breasts. "Yes, all yours, Mione. Fuck, every piece of me is yours. No matter where I go or who's there, I'm taken."

"I love hearing you say that," she said, brushing her tongue over his teeth.

He opened his mouth. "I'll say it always, but you have to say it as well. I want to hear you say that those eyes, that hair, and those extraordinary hips that you have are mine. They're fucking mine."

She whimpered. "Do I have to say the swear?"

"Yes," he said, running his fingers over her stomach.

She sighed. "Okay. My eyes, my hair, my hips, and everything else that I have are yours. They're fucking yours."

"Hmm, fifty points to Gryffindor, Ms. Granger," he said before snogging her heavily. This time, she laid back and Ron pinned her hands to the mattress. He attacked her mouth and pushed into her roughly.

"Right there, Ron," she panted, breaking out of the kiss.

"S-Still got the spell down?" he asked.

"It lasts twenty-four hours. So, it's still in effect," she said.

He raised himself and took off his shirt. "Good."

Her eyes widened and her cheeks flushed. "Why, Ron, what do you have in mind?"

"You'll see. It's another tradition I'm starting for Lambrick trainees." He bent down and it wasn't long until the sounds of zippers and jeans hitting the floor turned into deep moans and quiet cries of pleasure.

Ron reached into his draw and pulled out a handful of chocolate frogs. He lay back on the floor and tore off the wrapper of one and stuffed the delicious treat into his mouth. "We're supposed to save our appetite," Hermione said from the bed.

He moved his eyes to his flushed and thoroughly sexed girlfriend. "Like a few pieces of chocolate could spoil my appetite. Besides, shagging makes me hungry."

She ran a hand through her extremely messy hair. "You've got a point. It's important to eat afterwards. Give me one."

He tossed her one and smirked. "What? You read that in some book?"

"Actually, I did. It wasn't in some disgusting filth magazine. It was a health book," she said.

"Sure it was," he said. She threw the wrapper at him, and he closed his eyes. When he opened them, his Firebolt was in his vision. It was under his bed where he always kept it. "How could I forget?" he said. He pulled it out and stood up. "Here it is."

She got out and took it. She ran her hand down the shiny black wood. "You're right. It is beautiful."

"I know. I usually give it a nice buff in the morning. Care to go for a fly?" he asked.

"Definitely not," she rushed.

"It will be great, and I'm a decent flyer. You won't fall, I promise," he assured. The idea of going for a fly on his Firebolt with Hermione instantly became his number one goal.

She shook her head. "No. I'm sorry. Maybe someday we can but not now. You can take me for a fly when you complete the Lambrick program."

He groaned. "Wa? That's forever from now."

"It's something to look forward to, I guess," she said. She sat back on the bed and ran her fingers over the bristles.

Ron couldn't believe it. He was pleasantly spent but seeing Hermione holding his broom was actually making him hard again. If she didn't stop, then he'd have to find the strength for a round three.

"Did he explain to you how you're just like it yet?" Harry said from behind them.

Ron turned back to him. "You're back already?"

He walked into the room and gave him a look. "Nice to see you, too."

"Harry, what are you talking about?" Hermione asked.

He opened his mouth but Ron snatched the broom from her. "He doesn't mean anything. He's a nutter. You know that." He put the broom back under his bed and sat on his bed next to her. Harry let out a heavy breath and sat on his cot. Ron gave him a once over. He seemed okay.

"How did it go?" Hermione asked.

He shrugged. "It was okay. A little awkward but I knew it would be. We talked about Lambrick and what Dudley's doing with his A levels." He pulled two tickets out his jacket pocket and handed one to Ron. "Here. We're officially Lambrick bound."

"Thanks, mate," Ron said, looking over his train ticket. It made excited flies sworn in his stomach. He was ready to go.

"Are you glad that you went to see them?" she asked.

Harry actually smiled a little. "I think I am. It's nice to know that they're doing all right. Petunia told me to write her, and Dudley has asked about me a lot."

"See, I told you. They care about you. Family is hard to ignore, no matter the state its in," Ron said.

"Yeah, I reckon you're right," he said. "So, um, I think it's fairly safe to assume that you two have worked up an appetite while I was gone. Ready to go eat?"

"Bloody yes," Ron said, getting up and putting on his trainers.

Hermione got up as well and crossed her arms over her chest.
"What does that mean, Harry?"

He rolled his eyes. "Come on, how long have we all been friends? I know you two better than anything, and it's easy to guess your relationship activities. Trust me, Ginny and I have perfected the art."

"Oi, you tosser!" Ron said, punching his arm.

Hermione slapped his arm. "Ron, don't hit your friend! Harry, you can hush up."

"Whatever. Lets just eat before you go in for round two," he said.

"Round three, Harry," Ron corrected.

Hermione hit both their arms. "You boys are insufferable!" She pushed past them and stomped down the staircase. Ron and Harry snickered and followed her down and out of the house.

The three of them walked around Diagon Alley and randomly visited shops. Ron laughed and teased Hermione with Harry like they had done for years. The three of them were going in different directions but during their time together, it was just like old times and they were a complete unit. They stopped for lunch, and Ron ordered as much food as he could. He wanted all his favorites before he adapted to the Lambrick food system.

"I'm going to miss these little fuckers," Ron said through a stuffed mouth as he downed his third bacon sandwich.

"I wonder what food we'll get there. Bark and grass, maybe?" Harry asked.

"I highly doubt that. You'll be in intense training. I'm sure they'll cover all of the food groups. If anything say goodbye to the sweets," Hermione said, handing Ron a napkin.

He threw it down without using it. "I'm taking some with me. I'll need some form of chocolate or liquorish."

"You're pathetic, Ron," Harry said.

"And you're shorter than me. Piss off," he answered.

"It's good to know that you two are embarking on this next chapter of your lives like adults," she said.

Harry reached across the table and gave her hand a squeeze.
"We're fine. Stop worrying so much."

"You might as well tell her to stop breathing," Ron muttered.

She pinched his other nipple. "Don't be mean."

"Ow! You have to stop doing that!" he whined.

"Ah, nipple pinching. I've seen it all now," Harry said with a raised eyebrow.

"Don't make me pinch you next," she warned.

"Just make sure you leave my chest area alone," he said, putting his hands to his chest.

"Yeah, and a lot of other areas as well," Ron said.

"How about you leave me alone because I curse you both and make you pinch each other. How does that sound?" she asked.

Ron and Harry shared a look. "Must be a NEWT thing," Harry said.

"Some kinky seventh year course, I reckon," Ron added. They started laughing, and Ron kissed Hermione's cheek. She started laughing as well. They didn't stop for a long time it seemed.

"Where to next?" Hermione asked as they walked the streets again.

Ron looked at her and then Harry. It had been on his mind for days, and they were all together. It had to be now. He'd never get the courage again, and it was his last opportunity.

"Actually, there is one place that I want to go to. Come on, I'll take us." He pulled Hermione closer to her. She and Harry both looked at him curiously, but Hermione took Harry's hand. Ron mentally nodded and Apparated them.

When they arrived, the setting automatically faded the happiness that he felt. "Oh, Ron," Hermione said softly. He scanned around and let out a quivering breath.

"Ron?" Harry said.

"Come on," he said gently. He walked them past the stone plots and flowers and down to his family's section. The large English Elm came into his view. He stopped. "Do you mind waiting here? I want to talk to him alone."

"Of course," Hermione said as her eyes swelled with tears. However, she didn't let them far.

He began to walk off but Harry gripped his wrist. "We'll be right here, if you need us."

"Yeah, I know. Thanks," he said. Harry let him go, and Ron slowly walked past the many graves in their section.

He kneeled down and sat in front of the newest addition. The tombstone was a beautiful dark green marble, and it was the best that money could buy. Everyone in his family had put their money together for his plot. He read the inscription carved into the marble:

Frederick Gideon Weasley

April 1st 1978 - May 2nd 1998

Beloved Son, Brother, Friend, and Hero

His strength, courage, and laughter will always be cherished

"Hi, Fred," Ron said delicately. "I know, umâ€;that I haven't come to visit you much. Well, at all really. I've justâ€;fuck it. I've been scared, okay? I'm two seconds away from losing my bollocks now. I brought Harry and Hermione with me though, so I think I'll make it." His palms itched and he felt the exact same way he had during Fred's funeral. The words were shit. He had to do better.

"Anyway, um, I really needed to come see you before I left. I'm sure you know already, but I got into Lambrick. I'm leaving tomorrow. I think I might be ready." He dug his palms into his thighs. It still wasn't what he wanted to say. "That's not really why I'm here though. I don't want to talk about me. I want to let you know how things are going."

He took a deep breath and ignored the date in which Fred was born and then died. The numbers added up to something far too small. He was taken too soon. Ron cleared his throat. "Things have changed a lot since you were here last. The Chudley Canons finally traded Marshall. I reckon Pete's Potions is going out of business and things are quiet. There hasn't been any real danger popping anywhere. It's safe, for now anyway. The family hasn't really changed though. Well, besides Percy sort of getting a real girlfriend."

Ron closed his eyes and imagined Fred's expression of shock. He chuckled. "Yeah, I know. It's mad, yeah? Can't wait to meet her. She has to be something special."

He plucked away dead leaves that covered the grass around Fred's grave. "Percy is coming around a lot. He's involved with the family, and he promised me that he'll be around more and won't be such a prick. I believe him. Bill's the same. He still has the earring and the hair, and Fleur hasn't left him yet. He's been great and really helpful. Did you know that Charlie came to my party, Fred? He said that he's really proud of me and that he's going to get a tattoo in your honor. I know. It's a brilliant idea."

Ron knew he was mental for talking as if Fred was right next to him, but it helped. He focused on his brother's name on the grave. "Ginny. Bloody hell, what can I tell you about our little sister? She's grown up. She's back at school, and she's doing great. She's so much better, Fred, I swear. I've done everything I could to keep her safe, however, she's still shagging Harry. I can't change that, but he's been a gentleman from what I know. So, I let it go." He stopped talking and pushed his palms into his eye sockets. He wouldn't cry. He would be strong.

"Mum and dad are better. Dad's been the best man in the whole world, really. He doesn't smile as much anymore, but he tries to be happy. Mum says that he's going to get another promotion. I'll let you know how that goes. Our dad is amazing. I want to be just like him when I grow up, you know? He's helped me take care of mum-oh- how is she doing?" He let out a breath and rubbed his neck.

"Well, she gets out of bed now. She talks, laughs, and tries to make each day count. I mean she's still out of it, and I think she always sort of will be. She cries a lot and looks at pictures of you. She told me a story about you making me a card when I was four. I'm sure you remember. Thanks for that by the way. Um, anyway, she's better. I've given her all the light and strength that I could. She'll be okay, I think. We're all sort of looking out for her and passively holding her hand." The hardest part clogged his throat.

Ron moved closer to the marble and over the ground that covered Fred's casket. "George. He's-he's lost without you, Fred. I know you've been watching over him so I'm sure you know more than I do, but he's truly lost a half of himself. It frightens me how empty he is. Now, I don't mean to upset you. It isn't entirely bad. He's come a long way since you died. I wasn't sure he

would survive, but he did and he's still here. I've sort of taken over for you this summer. I couldn't be you, but I tried my best to mend that hole in his heart. It hasn't been easy."

He sniffed and felt his eyes sting. "There were so many times when I thought he'd lose it. I wasn't sure if he'd ever talk to the family again. I wasn't even sure if he'd keep himself from hurting himself. Yet, the bastard proved me wrong. He proved us all wrong. Fucking hell, I see why you two were so close. It's not just because you were twins. George is amazing, and I've learned so much about you, Fred. I wish I knew half these things when you were alive. Maybe I would have...anyway, I've done my best to care for George, protect him, and keep him up. He's leaned on me, and I've supported him even if it took the air out of me."

Ron put his hand on the grass and pulled on the blades. "I've taken care of your twin, Fred. I've taken care of him as if he was my own twin. I'd kill anyone who ever hurt George in any way. He's too special to hurt, and he has so much more feeling than I thought he did. I learned that."

He let out another sigh. "I've also learned to accept him and Angelina. I stuck up for you, you know, when I first found out about them. However, they're good for each other. She's has kept George alive in ways I haven't been able to. She loves him so much and he loves her, too, but it doesn't stop them for thinking about you or loving you. I know that. I've seen it and heard it. They still think about you, Fred. We all do. I hope you don't worry about that. There's not one moment that goes by when one of us, if not all of us, are thinking about you. We laugh, cry, hurt, and rejoice you, Fred. You're famous now. Yeah, it's not in the way you want, I know, but no one could ever forget you."

"Lets seeâ€¢the shop, it's doing fantastically. I didn't know you two were so well off. Bill thinks George should open a second shop, but he's not ready. I reckon he's still hoping you'll come back. I-I do, too...sometimes." His hand moved to the tombstone. It was horribly cold, and it stung his skin. He didn't move it though. "Lee has been great. He's the only one who can talk about you without it seeming painful. I'm glad. He makes me feel like there's still hope."

Ron looked down at his legs but quickly looked right back up. He could almost hear Fred against his ear. "Oh, me? You want to know how I'm doing? Umâ€¢I'mâ€¢okay. I'm a lot better than I was. I'm trying really hard to love myself more. It's just tough at times. I've got some problems that I can't control. Um, you'll be the only family that knows besides Ginny but I have these things called panic attacks. I got them after you died. I get so scared and nervous and it takes over me. I'm going to control it and put a stop to it. It's constantly on my mind, but I can't let everyone know how worried I am about them or how much they hurt and depress me. Ginny, Hermione, and Harry had to see the worst of them."

He rubbed his neck. "Harry? Oh, he's still Harry, I reckon. He's even more famous than before, but I can see how it wears him out.

We've sort of had it rough this summer. I don't think we ever really got over what happened while we were on the run. We're better though. I'd die for the bloke, and I know he'd die for me. It's just there's this stuff in the middle that complicated. I know we'll work through it. We have to. We're going to Lambrick after all, and he's my best friend in the whole world."

He suddenly smiled wide. "No, I haven't forgotten Hermione. Fred, I don't know how much you loved Angelina, but if it's anything close to what I feel for Hermione then I shouldn't have to explain it. I would have gone to sleep and never woken up if it wasn't for her, Fred. She's everything that I want and need in life. I'm going to marry her someday. I know I am. You can take the piss all you want, but I'm going to be the husband and father of her children like I know I'm supposed to be. It's incredible." He laughed. "Yes, the sex is wicked, too. Everything about Hermione is perfect and I'm going to miss her even more when I leave, but I realized something."

He swallowed hard and fought the ball of fire in his throat. "As much as we all hurt, we're all okay, too. Our brothers, our sister, our parents, and our friends are okay. I'm all right and I'm in love and through it all, it's made me realize how much I love you. I know that I probably didn't say it enough when you were alive, but I love you so bloody much Fred, and it still hurts so damn badly that you're gone. I miss you like mad. I've learned a lot about sacrifice and love and loyalty this summer, and you know what? Even though I'm okay, if I could go back, I'd do anything to save you. I'd take your place if I had to. I'd give up my life to bring you back."

He turned his head and looked at Hermione. She was leaning on Harry's shoulder and holding his hand. She was also staring directly at him. She smiled and he returned it. "Even if it meant giving up the one thing that I want more than everything else in the whole fucking world." He turned back to the grave. "I'd do it because you're my family. I'd do it because George needs you and nothing is more important to me than family. That's sacrifice."

He couldn't hold it in anymore. His tears finally came down. "I'm so sorry that I couldn't save you, Fred, and I'm so sorry that I can't bring you back. I want you to know that I'm fighting for you. I'm staying strong for you. I'll make sure that no other twin will have his better half taken away. I'll protect George, Ginny, Bill, Percy, Charlie, mum, and dad. I'll do it all because you're not here to. Every day I'll remember you and what happened to you. Those trainers at Lambrick won't be able to keep me down. Nothing they throw at me could ever hurt or be as scary or be as hard as living without you."

He wiped his eyes and tried to control his breathing. "I hate you sometimes, Fred. I hate that you're not here with George and with your shop and our family like you're supposed to. It's mean but you should know it. I hate you and-and I love you and miss you so bloody much. I love you. I really love you."

He traced every letter and number on his tombstone. "I'm okay and so is our family. I'll keep them safe, I promise. I'll still look

after George, but you can't stop. Please, look after him even more when I leave. Let him know that you haven't left him. Let him know that you're always with him. I know that you'll always be with me."

He backed away and stood up. "I feel like there's so much more that I should tell you, but I just can't think of it. I promise, when I get time off I'll come visit you and I'll let you know everything that's going on with camp and everyone else." He didn't know what was wrong with him. He knew Fred was under the grass and under the dirt, but he wanted to get him out. He wanted to save him. His legs started to shake, but he closed his eyes and fought it. It wouldn't happen now.

Something warm closed around his hand. He opened his eyes. It was Hermione. She was rather pale and her eyes were red. "Are you okay, love?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," he said gently, squeezing her hand and feeling better.

Harry gripped his shoulder. "I think he heard every word, Ron."

"Yeah, I do to," Ron sobbed, wiping his eyes.

"Are you ready to go back?" Harry asked.

Ron nodded. "Oh, wait a second." He kneeled in front of Fred's grave and got real close to it. He outlined the letters that spelled out his name. "Thanks for the broom, big brother. It's brilliant. I love you, always." He kissed his hand and put it against the letters. He smiled. "Yes, I had a wank over it. Don't tell our brothers," he whispered. He slowly got back up and gazed at Fred's grave for a minute. "I think I can leave now."

When they got back to the house, Ron could tell that Hermione and Harry wanted to keep everything light and cheerful for him, but Ron honestly didn't mind the sadness and hurt this time. He was proud and relieved that he had finally gone to Fred's grave. It was a mark on how he could keep himself together. Not to mention, he actually felt as if he had been around Fred and it was a great feeling. Ron held on to Hermione as tightly as he could as they and Harry simply talked about anything and everything in his room. Somehow the three of them found a way to sit on his bed together. It was as if they needed to all be close to function. Ron believed it whole-heartedly.

"Are you sure that neither of you want me to go over your things again? It won't help to recheck the lists," Hermione said.

"Maybe not, but we've already done that loads of times. There's no way that I'm taking all my stuff out again," Harry said.

Hermione clicked her teeth and moved her head to the side so she could see Ron's face. "What about you?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, of course I want you to get off me so we can go through all my clothes and shit. That's exactly how I'd

like to spend the rest of my day with you. You did that this morning, and you actually want to do it again? Merlin, you're even more mental than I thought."

She frowned and hit his nose. "Fine. I won't offer my help again. Not to you either, Harry." She kicked his knee.

"Ow!" Harry whined, rubbing his knee.

"I told you mate, she's a violent one," Ron said.

"I am not violent. I just won't put up with you two messing with me. I refuse to. We're not school children anymore," she said.

Ron looked at Harry and he nodded. He rose to his knees and put his hands on Hermione's ankles. "Yes, that's exactly right. We're mature adults now."

Ron moved his arms over Hermione and started tickling her stomach. "Very mature adults."

Hermione's eyes widened and she immediately started laughing. "No! No! You two swore that you'd-ah-never do this again!" Ron snickered as she wiggled and giggled. Her face flushed and her legs kicked but failed to get out of Harry's grasp. "Okay! Okay! You both win! I give up!"

Harry let go of her, and Ron stopped tickling her. Hermione huffed and got out of the bed. She straightened her shirt and cleared her throat. She gave them a horrible glare but it didn't stick. She sat on Harry's bed and threw one of his pillows at them. "You both are horrible," she said. "You have no idea how difficult it is to be the only girl."

"Life is just unfair, isn't it?" Ron asked Harry.

"Completely. I pity you, Hermione. I really do," Harry said. They started laughing again and Hermione folded her arms over her chest and glared at them again. It was just like old times.

However, as great as their day was, it quickly slipped past them and Hermione had to get back to school. The three of them slowly walked down the path. Hermione pulled out of the tight grip of Ron's hand, and he handed her back her bag. "Well, this is it again," she said.

Ron was more angry than sad that she had to leave. Saying goodbye to her was really starting to hit his temper, but he held it back. "Yeah," was all he could say.

"Thanks for coming, Hermione. It was brilliant that you did this," Harry said.

"Brilliant isn't good enough. It was fucking extraordinary. I really appreciate it. We really needed to see you," Ron said.

She smiled beautifully. "You don't have to thank me, and I needed to be here just as much as you two think you needed me to be

here. You two are my boys. No, you're my men. There are no two people that I love on this Earth more, and I am so very proud of you both."

Harry took her hand and pulled her into a close hug. "I'm so glad that I got to see you. I'm going to try as hard as I can there. I love you."

"I know you will," she said, rubbing his back. "I'm glad that I got to see you, too. I love you so much, Harry." She pulled away and kissed her cheek. "Remember that you have nothing to prove to anyone. Keep your patience. You're Harry Potter, but you're so much more. The people that matter know that already."

He looked at her affectionately and nodded. "I'll remember."

"I'm sorry that I couldn't bring Ginny with me," she said.

"It's alright. I understand. She will, too, don't worry," he answered, giving her hand a squeeze.

Hermione nodded and turned to Ron. He simply smiled at her. "This has been one of the greatest days of my life because of you."

She fell into his embrace. "I just showed up, love. You made the magic happen."

He cupped her chin. "I wish I could take you with me."

"I know. So do I," she whispered. She stood on her toes and kissed him deeply. He kissed her back with everything he had. Hermione was his energy, and he would need that energy to get through everything that was to come.

He pulled away. "I love you."

"I love you, Ron," she said. "You'll be fine. Just remember to breathe and remember all the good things that you have in your life."

"I will, I promise," he said.

She stepped away from him and looked between them. "Write me when you first get the chance. I want full details."

"Of course, Hermione. I reckon we know how this works by now. Give Ginny a big hug for me. Tell her that I love her and I'll write her," Harry said.

"I will," she answered. She looked back at Ron.

"Continue to take of her," he said.

"As always. Take care of each other. Don't let the competition get to you. You need each other," she said.

"We need you, Hermione," Ron said.

She grinned. "I'm here, Ron. I'm here for you both." She took their hands and kissed both their palms. "Okay, I have to go."

"Bye," Harry said.

"Bye, Hermione," Ron said.

She clutched her necklace and sniffed. "Bye. I'll see you both soon. I mean that. It's still the three of us, okay?" She gave them one more smile and then Disapparated. Ron stood still and looked at the spot that once had Hermione there.

"Ron, you okay?" Harry asked.

He nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. I just want to stay out here a bit longer."

"Sure," Harry said. He patted his arm and walked back to the house.

Ron was thankful that Harry hadn't asked anything more. There was no way to explain that he was almost glued to the ground. It was mental but for some reason his body simply wouldn't move. He didn't know what he was waiting on, but he knew that he couldn't miss it.

There was a pop and Hermione was back in front of him. He finally let his breath out and swept her into his arms. She hugged him back fiercely. "Oh! I wasn't ready. I wasn't ready, Ron."

"I know. I wasn't either," he breathed, feeling overwhelmed by his connection to her.

She pulled away a little and caressed his face. "I love you more than anything else, sweetheart. Please, take care of yourself. Be safe and be smart."

"I will. I'll think about you everyday, I swear. You're my whole world, Hermione." He kissed her powerfully and they both moaned. They ravished each other's mouths for centuries it seemed, but his arms started to shake. He couldn't hold her anymore. He put her down and slowly parted from her mouth.

They were both out of breath. Hermione put a hand to his chest, and he put one to hers. "This is the greatest power we have, Ron."

"And it's never going away. Thank you for sending the bird," he said.

"Thank you for answering it," she said. She took his hand and kissed his fingertips. "You'll be great there. I know you will. There's nothing you can't overcome, Ron, and I'm sure if Fred was here he'd say the same thing."

"I'm doing it for him," he said strongly.

"I know you are, baby. You're the greatest man I know because of that. You're my greatest man," she said, pulling him close.

"You are the only woman I see or want to see. I'm taken," he said, licking her lower lip and squeezing her arse.

"Good. Remember that I'm just as much yours. You've always had me. You're the first thing I think about when I wake up and my last thought before I go to sleep. I love you, Ronald Weasley. Always." She kissed him deeply for a moment but pulled away. "Be the sexy and fierce Auror that you were born to be. Make your girlfriend proud."

"I'll do my best, love." He ran his fingers through her hair and kissed her again. "We'll work something out. I'll see you somehow."

"I believe it, but focus on learning. No matter what you'll come back to me. No matter what." She kissed him one more time, then left his embrace and backed up. He took in her figure and felt their love travel between them and the space. "I have to go now."

"I know you do. I have to go, too," he said softly. "I love you, Hermione."

She put a hand to her chest, and he nodded and put one to his. "I love you, too, Ron. Hold on to that."

"Every moment," he said.

She clutched her necklace with one hand and waved at him with the others. "I'll see you."

"Yes, real soon," he said, making himself believe it. She blew him a kiss and Disapparated again. This time, he didn't feel stuck to the ground. He knew that she was really gone. He backed up and finally turned around and walked back to the house. Although saying goodbye to Hermione was getting easier, the weight of her absence seemed to grow heavier.

Later that night, he and Harry both went through all their things again. They worked in quietness. Ron started to feel the impact of leaving for Lambrick again, but it was fine. He still tasted Hermione. She was on his clothes and on his skin, and it comforted him. He looked up at Harry who was folding socks. It was just them now, at least for a while. Harry looked calm as he eased his flasks back into his trunk, but Ron knew him well enough to understand that there was something brooding.

When they left things would be different. Harry wouldn't be just Harry anymore, and it wouldn't be as simple as them being best mates. He owed it to their friendship and to his friendship with Hermione to keep things normal, even for one more night. He stopped packing and sat on his bed. "Hey, Harry?"

"Yeah?" he asked, not looking up.

"Do you remember in third year when Dean brought that Muggle smut magazine with him?" he asked.

Harry stopped and looked up. "Of course I do. He brought a Playboy. Seamus nicked it like a prat."

Ron rubbed his neck and blushed. "Actually, he was really telling the truth. Seamus didn't take it; I did."

Harry's eyes widened. He sat on his bed. "Are you serious? Dean was on Seamus' arse all year."

"I know but I couldn't bloody tell him! It's just...well...I'd never seen anything like it. Fred and George had stuff like that, but they never let me see them. So, I nicked it right before class one day when you lot was all out of the room. After I saw some of the girls, there was no way that I could give it back." He chuckled and felt his ears burning horribly.

Harry looked at him smugly. "Wow, you git. So...do you still have it?"

"No. When we left for Grimmauld the first time, I was going through my stuff and Fred saw it in my trunk and took it. It's been on me for ages now, and I really need this off my chest," Ron said. Harry laughed and shook his head. "You're turn. Don't leave me here like an arsehole."

"I'm thinking..." Harry started. He rubbed his chin and blushed a little himself. "Alright. In sixth year I got a look at Katie Bell's tits."

"You're making that up," Ron said.

"No, I'm serious. I went to the practice tent so I could book a training session, and she was in there changing back into her regular clothes. I reckon she had gone for a quickie fly around the pitch." Harry smirked. "Anyway, I walked in, and she screamed and made me swear that I'd never say anything."

Ron's jaw dropped. "I can't believe it."

"She had a bra on so it's not like I really saw anything but still. It was interesting and rather...enjoyable," Harry said.

Ron started laughing. He dug into his side table and pulled out chocolate frogs. He sat on the floor, and Harry sat in front of him. Ron tossed some to him and stuffed one in his mouth as well. "That's brilliant! Give me another one," he demanded.

Harry bit the head off one and shook his head. "No way. It's your turn."

Ron groaned and tried to think of something. "Oh, fucking hell! Shit. Shit, I've got a good one! So, this one time in McGonagall's class..."

Ron and Harry stayed up as late as they could telling each other secrets from their years at Hogwarts. Some made each other gag or cringe, but most of them made each other laugh. Ron was still tingling from his amazing time with Hermione and going to Fred's grave for the first time, but he was also happy at being able to talk to Harry smoothly. Ron was going to Lambrick. He was an Auror in training. He would learn how to fight, defend, and even kill. However, on his last free day, he was simply Ron. He was a son, brother, best friend, and boyfriend.

They were all the things that he needed to be.

* * *

**** I hope you all enjoyed this. It was such a pleasure to write. It's probably my favorite chapter in this story so far. Thanks for reading and REVIEW! Much love everyone. Ron is King!

* Chapter 28*: Meeting the pressure

Thanks for the reviews! It's been awhile. I know with this story there's been a lot of that, and it's really bloody unfair because I love writing this. It's so dear to my heart, and there's not a chance ever that I'll abandon it. Anyway, all I can do is move on and try harder.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron knocked on Kingsley's door, but it was already partially open. "Sir?"

"Come in, Ron," he answered. Ron walked in and as always Kingsley was at his desk scribbling away on something that was no doubt important. He dipped his quill in the ink jar and looked up. He chuckled a little. "You don't have to stand there so timidly. You can sit if you want. I don't breathe fire. At least not on my good days."

"Sorry," Ron mumbled with a bit of a blush. It didn't matter how many times he visited Kingsley's office. The man would always be high authority to him.

"It's quite all right." Kingsley took off his cap and rubbed his bald head for a second. "So, what can I do you for?"

"I'm leaving today," Ron began.

"Yes. This I know," Kingsley said, "what time does your train leave?"

"Later in the evening," he answered, his eyes widening a little. "I just wanted to stop by and show my gratitude."

"You don't have to, Ron," Kingsley said, holding up his hands. "But you're welcome nonetheless. I know this is when I'm supposed to wish you good luck, but that's the last thing you'll need. Be as smart, patient, and sensible there as you have been here. Work off your talent and not your luck."

"I plan to. I've worked really hard to get here. Not just during my trial but over the past several years. It's like I've been building up for this," Ron said.

Kingsley nodded. "I'm glad you think so. Keep that idea in your head there. Those trainers won't remind you."

"Yeahâ€¢that's another reason why I'm here," he said slowly. "Do you have any advice for me? Maybe something I should be ready for?"

"Like inside information?" Kingsley asked. Ron nodded in hopefulness. "Then I can't be of service to you. Sorry."

"Oh, right," he said, deflating a little.

Kingsley shook his head. "I swear you young wizards and witches are so spoiled these days. I was thankful that the officials told me where the camp was when I got my letter from Lambrick."

"I really hate unwanted surprises. That's all," Ron said.

"Well, what I can tell you is that you'll be pushed in ways you haven't before. It won't all be physical either. No, what you'll be put through will be a well balanced lesson," Kingsley said.

Ron sighed and figured that in this case being well balanced wouldn't be a good thing. "So, I should be ready for an overall physical and emotional and magical and non magical arse kicking? Is that what you're getting at."

"For the most part," Kingsley said with a shrug. "I definitely got mine handed to me, and I'm a fairly large man."

Ron didn't want to imagine what could happen to him if someone as big as Kingsley got his bollocks taken in. "Thanks for the information."

He started laughing again. "Ron, you'll be great. It's all a part of the process, and when it's over you'll be a better wizard and a better man."

"I hope so. I hope all my parts still work also," Ron said. He stood up and held out his hand. "Well, I have another place to go. Thanks again and not just for helping me. I appreciate you keeping an eye on my family."

"It's my job, Ron," Kingsley said, shaking his hand. "I'll continue to as well. I know you're worried, but the best thing that you can do for them is concentrate on your training. Your mind needs to be clear."

"I know. I'm doing my best. Please, don't keep me in the dark if something comes up. It's probably not my place to know but—"

"Stop rambling and take a breath," Kingsley said. Ron stopped talking and closed his eyes for a moment. He inhaled and exhaled deeply and felt a little better. He had officially run out of time, yet he felt as if there was still so much to get in order.

"Better?"

"Yes. Cheers," Ron said.

Kingsley came from behind his desk and put a hand on his shoulder. "Everything will be fine here. If something dire happens, then you will be contacted. That has nothing to do with me. It's Lambrick's policy. You won't be kept in the dark, alright?"

"Yes," Ron said.

"Besides, when you're finished with training and you pass your final tests you'll be an Auror yourself. You'll be working here, and you'll have privileged information. No one is going to go out of their way to keep things from you while you're there. Do you understand?" Kingsley asked.

His words helped to slow down the ball of nerves that was constantly growing in his stomach. "I do."

"Good. Now, stop worrying and let me get back to work. You're starting to turn into your mother with all the fussing," Kingsley said.

He rolled his eyes. "I'm already there." He went to the door and looked back. "Is it okay if I write you sometime? Just to let you know how I'm doing?" Over the summer his relationship with Kingsley had grown into something Ron greatly respected and counted on. He didn't want to lose it.

"Sure," Kingsley said with a nod. "I'd love to hear how things are going. Have a good time, Ron. It won't all be hardships. Have some fun there also."

"I will. I'll see you later." He gave Kingsley a grin before leaving his office.

Ron yawned as he worked his way down Diagon Alley. It was still early, but he wasn't able to stay asleep. Now that he had said his goodbyes to Bill, Percy, and Kingsley, there was only one more stop to make before going back home. He tapped his wand against the door to the joke shop and slipped it. George was usually getting up to prepare for the day, but the store was quiet and empty.

He walked upstairs to his flat and knocked on the door. "George?" There was no answer. Ron knocked again and called his name several times. It didn't make sense. George followed the same routine every day. There was no reason why he wouldn't be up to answer unless he didn't want to talk to him. "Oi, don't be a dickhead," Ron said to the door.

He put his ear against it but couldn't hear anything. "I could just come in if I wanted to. I know the bloody taps. Percy's unicorn sacrifice, remember?" There was still no response. He removed his ear from the door and put his back against it instead. He had a strange feeling in his stomach, and for reason he knew that George could hear him. He was mostly likely leaning against the other side of the door.

"Listen, I just want to say goodbye because I'm leaving in a few hours. I don't want to make this hard. I know you're going to be okay, and I'm glad. I only want to hear you wish me luck, and I only want to tell you that I've had a lot of fun and I'll miss it. That's all." He moved off the door and once again put his ear to it. He could have sworn that he heard George breathe. "Fine. I'll go then. I'll write you when I can, okay?" He waited another minute but the door didn't open. He put his hand against it. "Love you, George," he said quietly before leaving.

He returned home and his parents were in the kitchen sipping tea and looking through a photo album. "More pictures of the twins?" he asked, closing the door behind him.

His dad looked up and smiled. "Not quite."

"Oh, Ronnie, do you remember this?" his mum asked with watery eyes. She held up the album and pointed to a picture of him when he was eleven.

"Urgh, mum, put that away! I looked like the world's biggest prat that day," he said. She pulled out the chair next to her and he sat down. His parents were in fact gazing at pictures of him as a child. He hadn't looked at the photo album in ages, and he had forgotten that he had his own section.

"Arthur, look how handsome he is in his robes. His first day at Hogwarts," his mum said.

"Yes, he looks just as I did at that age," his dad said, running his finger over Ron's younger and goofier face.

Ron stuck out his tongue. "I hope you didn't look like that. My haircut was awful and my robes were dingy. I looked like an arse."

"Language, Ronald Weasley, and you certainly did not. You were adorable. You still are," she said, pinching his cheek.

"Mum," he breathed, moving away.

"Yes, Molly, Lambrick trainees aren't adorable. They're dangerous and burly," his dad said.

"Exactly. Here, turn to something else," Ron said. He made the mistake of going backward instead of forward.

His mum slapped his hand away. "My Merlin! Look at this one! You and Ginny at my cousin Sarah's Valentine's Day ball."

Ron put his hands over his face and let the memory ooze through his mind. He was eight and Ginny was seven. They had been forced to dress in similar pink and red clothing and slow dance together all night. All while their older relatives took pictures and pinched their cheeks. Neither one of them ever mentioned it, nor did Hermione and Harry know of their shared nightmare. "Mum, can we please not talk about that one? I still hear the song A Witch Just Knows in my head whenever I see anything heart shaped."

"But you two were the best part of the night," she said. "I'd love for you two to do that again for me sometime." The idea made Ron shiver, and his stomach almost flipped completely over.

"How about you and I go over the plans for next Valentine's Day, dear? For now let's find something that Ron can stomach, yeah?" his dad said.

"Thanks," Ron said.

His dad gave him a mischievous grin. "Don't thank me yet. I'd like to see you and Ginny on the dance floor once again myself."

"But I don't have much from your later years, and I barely have anything after you turned fifteen," she said softly.

Ron watched as she flipped through the empty pages. He stared at his lost years. He had done so many other things during those times, things that were dangerous and life threatening and even illegal. He had gotten so used to risking his life with Harry and Hermione, but taking two moments to pose for his mum's camera seemed foreign to him. He glanced up at his parents. They too gazed at the empty pages. "Well, it's not like there's been a lot of change. I still look the same. Just taller, I reckon."

His mum didn't smile. "That's not the point, dear." Ron didn't know what to say, and there was no time to think of the right words.

"So where did you go to so early? I expected you and Harry to troll down at the latest possible hour that you could manage," his dad suddenly said. "Harry is still in bed."

His mum seemed to pep up a little. She closed the photo album and gave him a curious expression. "Yes, where did you go?"

Ron sent his dad a thank you with his eyes before answering. "I went to see Bill and Percy. I wanted to say goodbye to them, and since I was already at the Ministry I talked to Kingsley."

"Hmm, what did he have to say about Lambrick?" his dad asked.

"Just that I should be prepared to lose a few inches." He rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath again. If Hermione's mouth were against his ear, then she would tell him to relax and remember that he was well prepared. He tried to make the same feeling work with only her voice in his head.

His dad slid him his mug of tea. "Drink this, son. It might help, but you don't need help. You'll be fine."

"Yeah, I know," Ron said, gulping it down.

His mum rubbed his arm. "I'm glad you went to see them. They're going to miss you. Did you talk to George?"

"He wasn't awake. I reckon I'll just have to see him when I get time away," Ron answered. His parents frowned a little, but he waved it off. "It's not a big deal. I spent almost every day all summer with him, and I technically said goodbye on my last day at the shop. We're fine." He wanted to believe his words but he didn't. He needed to see George before he left, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"If you're sure, sweetheart," his mum said.

He looked at them and moved his finger around the brim of the mug repeatedly. "While we're on the subject of George, I need you two to do something for me after I leave."

His mum sat straighter in her chair. "What is it?"

"I need you to look out for George," he said plainly. "I mean you always do, but I really need you to now. He doesn't have to know that you are. In fact, it would be better if you didn't tell him but just stop by more often and write to him. He needs that."

His dad nodded and smiled. "Yes, Ron."

"And be patient with him," Ron continued. "He wants to be here and he wants to talk, but it's something that has to feel right. Sometimes it's important for him to know that someone is listening, even if you have nothing to say and even if he doesn't really address you. Also, remind him that you support him with Angelina. He's so worried that—"

"Ron, love, I think we know how to support and care for our son. We've been parents for awhile now," his mum said, putting a hand over his so he wouldn't break the mug.

Ron stopped. "Yeah, of course you have. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. I think this is wonderful. George means a lot to you, and you've come to understand him very well," she said.

"I need to know that I can leave him here," he said.

"Ron, you can. He's not alone. He'll be fine, and you'll be fine," his dad assure.

Ron took in his parent's words and their expressions. Their faces had changed so much since Fred died. They were older, thinner, and stiffer. However, their eyes and their smiles were the same. "What about you two? Will you two be fine?" he asked seriously.

His mum took his hand and held it tightly. His dad put a hand over hers. "We are going to be more than fine," she said. "Knowing that you'll be off training and doing what you love will make us feel better than we have in a very long time."

"I know I must sound like prat right now," Ron said.

"No, you sound like our son. You sound just like Bill did before he left after the funeral. We'll take care of each other like you've taken care of us all summer. You don't have to worry about your parents. We may be old, but we're sturdy," his dad said with a wink.

"Please, Arthur, speak for yourself. I'm still a young and beautiful flower," his mum said, touching her red hair.

Ron chuckled. "Yeah, you are mum. And dad you're a young and strong dragon."

"Ah, that's my boy. Only a Weasley can give a compliment like that," his dad answered. He grew a little more serious. "Honestly, though, we're both very proud of you. This day means a lot to you, but it means a lot to us as well."

"You've grown up so much. I'm not at all shocked by what you've become," his mum said.

Ron pulled his hand away and felt the ball of feeling creep into his chest. "All I've ever really wanted to do was make you two proud of me. I want to prove that I'm worth something."

His dad frowned at him. "Why would you ever think that we don't already know what you're worth? You've always made us proud."

He shrugged and looked down. "I don't know."

His mum raised his chin. "Ronald Weasley, you make me and your father so very proud. You always have. Even before you went off to Hogwarts. We've always loved you with all of our hearts, and you've always been my perfect baby boy. You'll always be my perfect baby boy. Fighting evil and going to Lambrick has very little to do with it."

Years of questioning and apprehension seemed to boil down to one instance. His fears crawled out of him as his parent's words took over. It felt so good to silence the remainder of the locket that echoed in his ears. "I've tried so hard this summer to help. I really am doing this to help."

"We know you are, and you have helped, Ron. You've helped put this family back together in your own special way. I know it. I watched you handle things with Harry and your sister and your brothers all summer," his dad said.

His mum leaned against his dad's shoulder. "So have I."

Ron felt his blush return. "Just doing my job. I have to help you lot."

His dad smiled widely. "We won't fall apart when you leave. You've helped put things back together, and you set a good example for your siblings. You're the heart of this family, Ron, and we won't let you down. We know you won't let us down."

Ron sucked in a huge gulp of air. His body was overrun with different sensations and the vast feeling of love and accomplishment was overwhelming. His parents got up and embraced him. They both hugged him securely, and Ron cherished the moment with every ounce of his spirit. During the small span of time, there weren't any other siblings or outside forces alive. It was simply Ron with his parents, and they were their own little family.

He walked back to his room sometime later. Harry was sitting up in bed and reading over his letters. "You're finally awake," Ron said.

"Couldn't sleep all day," he answered. "I can't believe you're up."

"I had some stuff to deal with. Breakfast is being made," Ron said. He pulled out his bags and pondered if he should go through it all one more time.

"Mmm, I can't wait to get down whatever your mum makes. It will be the last good meal for a while," Harry said. He began to pull out his things so Ron decided to follow his lead. "You feel alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Ron lied. "How about you?"

"Good. Mostly anxious to get there and see everyone," Harry said calmly. Ron believed completely that he was okay. The bloke felt the most at ease under pressure.

"So am I. There's going to be fucking forty of us," Ron said. He unzipped his bag and took out the only two pictures he would take with him. One was of his family. It was the nine of them in Egypt. For some reason he couldn't imagine leaving it behind. The second was of him and Hermione at the cinema photo booth. He grinned and rubbed his finger over her stationary smiles. He'd give anything to have five minutes with her before he left, but his luck wouldn't strike twice.

"Did you read over the instructions on how to send our luggage ahead?" Harry asked.

"Yeah but if you're doing it then send mine. I don't want to muck it up," Ron said, securely putting the pictures away.

"Actually, I was going to have your dad do it. He's done it loads of times," Harry said.

"Yeahâ€¢whatever," Ron answered.

Harry walked over and sat next to him. "Are you okay?"

He shrugged. "I'm fine. It's just hitting me. We're leaving today."

"I know. I'm ready to go. We knew that we couldn't stay here all summer, yeah? I'll go see if your dad is busy." Harry took his letter and left the room.

Ron flopped back on his mattress and put a pillow over his face. He was so nervous. He knew this day would come, but it didn't make the nerves any smaller. It wasn't like leaving for school. He was excited to embark on the next phase of his life, but he still wasn't completely sure if he was ready. He pulled Hermione's black knickers from under his mattress and spun his around his finger. He thought about their night against Percy's desk, and it calmed him a little. However, at the sound of Harry's footsteps he swiftly stuffed the knickers back and pretended to fix his bed.

All afternoon Ron tried to tame the nervous energy. After his dad sent their trunks, luggage, and brooms ahead, Ron and Harry went to the yard to toss the broken quaffle around. It was the only thing that kept his stomach from jumping. He hated dealing with nerves. However, the day past by him and before Ron knew it, he was at the train station, and he had to say goodbye to his parents.

"That's us," Harry said, pointing to their train. Ron roamed his eyes around the crowds of people. He had hoped that George would stop by but he hadn't. He really wouldn't get the chance to say goodbye. Harry looked at Ron's parents. "Thanks for everything you've done for me this summer. You gave me everything I needed."

"Oh, Harry, dear, you don't have to thank us," his mum said, giving him a bone crushing hug. "You are a part of our family. Don't ever forget that. We love you as our own son. Write to us."

"I love you both, too, and I will," Harry said, hugging her back and closing his eyes. It didn't look like he wanted to let her go.

"I think your parents are as proud of you as we are right now. I'm sure Sirius is rooting for you as well," his dad said, holding out his hand.

Harry's eyes softened a little. "I hope so." He looked at his hand for a second but quickly gave him a hug.

His dad chuckled and hugged him back. "Give them everything you've got, Harry."

"I will. Thank you for all your help, Mr. Weasley," Harry said. He pulled away. "I'm not very good with this, but even though I wish my parents were here to see me off, I don't feel bad about it being you two instead. You really mean a lot to me."

"And you mean a lot to us. We'll see you soon, dear," his mum said.

Harry gave them a smile before turning to Ron. "I'll go check in on our seats."

"I'll be right there," Ron answered. He walked off and once again Ron was left alone with his parents. He didn't know how to begin to tell them goodbye, but he didn't have to. For the second time his parents pulled their arms around him and hugged him as one. He closed his eyes, took in their scents, and felt like a kid again tucked safely between them in their bed.

"I love you both so much," he said to them.

His mum pulled away first. Her eyes were slightly glossy. "I love you, Ron. You're going to great. Don't second-guess yourself. Believe in what you can do."

"I will, mum. Please, keep your head up. Things are getting better, and they'll keep getting better. I promise," he said.

She put her hands against his face. "I know they will, sweetheart. I'll be fine. Take care of yourself and Harry. We'll take care of George." She kissed his forehead and gave him another hug.

"I'll write when I can," he said, kissing her cheek before letting go.

He then turned to at his dad. He didn't know what he was going to do without his wisdom and understanding. He hoped that he could be the man there that his father would be. "Dad," he began.

His dad pulled him into a hug and kissed the top of his head. "I know, Ron, and you're welcome. You'll be fine. No, you'll be great. A father has never been more proud than I am at this moment."

Ron held him back firmly. "I'm going to fight for what we still have. I swear that I will. Please, take care of mum."

"I will. Don't worry," his dad said. Ron pulled away and felt a little woozy. He had never had to give them a proper goodbye before.

Ron picked up his bag but his mother suddenly gasped. "Wait! That's right." She fumbled in her purse, and Ron was hit with a major case of déjà vu. She pulled out a small, old camera.

"Molly," his dad said with a groan.

"Don't start with me, Arthur. It's Ron going away to camp. This has to be documented!" she snapped.

Ron laughed and loved how he and Hermione were so much like them.
"It's fine. I've got a few minutes."

"Okay, sweetie, pose for me," she said. He rubbed his neck and had no idea what that meant. So, he simply smiled and gave her the thumbs up.

His dad snorted. "That's intimidating."

"Leave him alone, Arthur. I think it's brilliant. Give me a bigger smile," she ordered.

"Mum, I'm going off to a training camp, not to a quidditch match," Ron answered though he smiled anyway. His mum wasn't listening. She kept clicking. "Okay, I think I better go," Ron said. He grabbed his bags and looked at his parents. "I'm really going to miss you."

"We're going to miss you too, Ron, but we'll see you before you know it. Oh, my little boy," his mum said, tearing up.

His dad put an arm around her. "He's a man now, Molly. He's our little man."

Ron smiled. "That's right. Take care of each other, yeah? I love you two so much." He waved at them and they waved back.

"I'll keep the window open tonight, Ron," his dad said.

"Thanks," he said softly. His mum looked between them curiously. "Okay, well, I'll see you soon." He gave them one more smile before walking away to the train. He decided not to look back. It was his first journey as an adult, and he wanted to prove that he could handle it without that last ounce of reassurance.

Someone tapped his shoulder. He turned around thinking it was his mum wanting another picture. "George?" he said, almost in a gasp.

George stood before him. He was a bit red in the face. "Yeah, I'm cutting it close. I know. I Apparated right next to a Muggle, but he was more or less senile so I think I'm safe."

"What are you doing here?" Ron asked. The pressure that had been crushing his shoulders all day slowly disappeared at the sight of him.

George shrugged. "Well, I had to see you off, didn't I?"

"But I thoughtâ€¦ maybe you didn't!"

He waved a hand. "No. I woke up a little late is all. Of course I'm here. I have to wish you luck." Ron merely stared at him, and George looked away guiltily. It confirmed that he had been

standing on the other side of the door. They were quiet and a thick layer of awkwardness fell over them. It wasn't what Ron wanted.

"Well, I'm glad you're here. Thanks," he said.

"I have to be here. It's a big moment for you, and I know you're going to kick everyone's arseâ€; while you get yours handed to you," George teased.

"Don't remind me," Ron said.

George blushed even harder and cleared his throat. "Anyway, um, I've had a great summer with you, and I'll miss you. Don't tell anyone I said that. I'll deny it."

Ron knew that George was trying to be strong. He couldn't ask for anything more. "Only if you don't tell anyone that I'm going to miss you also." He held out his hand and George shook it. "Just keep living. Don't give up."

"I don't plan to, Ron. Don't give up either. We bothâ€; have to keep going," he said.

"Yeah we do." Ron wanted to say something meaningful, but he was too preoccupied and eager to come up with anything significant. "So, keep me updated with things andâ€;.and always use protection."

George burst into laughter. "Sound advice, little brother. You're an Auror already."

"Fuck off," Ron muttered. It was strange. Saying goodbye to George was hard, and he knew that they both felt the tightness. However, for whatever reason they weren't taking it there. He figured that they didn't have to anymore.

George looked around and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I'm shit with this stuff, Ron."

"It's fine," he assured. "I am ,too."

George sighed. "I want you to know that you really have been grew thought. Be great there as well, and don't think that you have to become someone else to please some prick that knows nothing about you. You'reâ€;you're really fantastic the way you are."

"You think so?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, I do, and I'll beat up anyone who tells you differently. I mean obviously you're a knob, but in a good way. Don't lose the knobness," he said.

Ron rolled his eyes. "I'll try not to." He heard people getting on the train behind him. He didn't want to leave George but going to Fred's grave and listening to his parents gave him a new confidence about it. He didn't have to do it all alone. "I have to go."

"Yes, I know." George quickly tugged on his arm and hugged him. "I probably would have died sometime this summer without your help. I couldn't have done everything without you." He spoke so quietly and let go of his so rapidly that Ron wasn't sure if anything had actually happened. It was like George had told him a secret that he wasn't supposed to remember.

He swallowed the lump of feeling. "I didn't do anything, George. You willed yourself, but you're my brother so of course I was there for you. Keep trying. That's all you have to do."

There was so much in George's eyes, but Ron knew that he wouldn't say any of it. However, he didn't need to. They were at a point where they just understood. "Well, get out of here. It would be bollocks if you were late on your first night."

"Yeah, can't have that," Ron said. "Take care of yourself."

"I will. Give them hell, Ronniekins. You've earned the right to do that," George said. Ron nodded and once again grabbed his bags. "Wait, Ron. Iâ€;um."

Ron had an idea of what he wanted to say. "I know, George. You, too. A lot."

George grinned and rubbed his neck. "Good. Oh, tell Harry not to show everyone up on the first day, yeah? Let him ease into it, the blind twat."

"I will but you know how he is. Chosen and everything," Ron teased. "I'll see you."

"Fred's proud of you, and he wishes you luck," George said with a sad smile. "I can feel him a lot today. It's a twin thing."

Ron told himself that he would be as strong as George was being in the moment. "Well, let him know that I'm thankful." George nodded and saluted him. Ron watched him walk away to a safe place where he could pop away. Ron let out a deep breath and looked around him. There was no one left. He had to go.

He found Harry on the train and sat next to him. "Ready?" Harry asked.

Ron cracked his knuckles and looked out the window. "Yes, I think I am."

They were mostly quiet during the trip. His stomach was a ball of furious energy, and he was afraid that he'd get violently sick if he opened his mouth. Harry kept asking his questions of what he thought was in store for them, but he didn't know. All Ron knew was that he had to prove himself. He had to show everyone that he deserved to train. His family was counting on him. Hermione was counting on him. He was counting on himself.

The train arrived to Newport, and they followed their directions past the bridge where the magical barrier between the Muggle

world and Lambrick Academy was located. They argued, joked, and navigated in the setting sun. Ron felt nothing but pure excitement and happiness for the first time. The longer they walked, the more he was ready to train and become something special with Harry.

"Finally, here's the marker," Ron said, pointing to stone carving near a tree. They looked ahead of them to the grassy hill and dirt path.

"Ready?" Harry asked.

Ron adjusted his pack on his shoulder. "Yes," he said confidently.

They walked down the grassy path and just over hill they saw it. There was a tall, wiry black gate that stretched across the entire length of a piece of land. Beyond that he could see a small lake on the edge of the empty plain. They walked a little further and figures molded into their visions. These figures were standing near the gate, outside the gate, and were walking through it. "This has to be it."

They reached the gate and got into one of the three lines. Ron looked around at everyone but didn't recognize anyone. He didn't expect to. He and Harry most likely took the Hogwarts spots. Harry was in front of him and he took a step, as it was his turn. A tall, large wizard in black robes and a black wizarding hat held up his hand. He had a clipboard in one hand and a quill in the other. He pointed at Harry. "Name?" Ron and Harry shared a look. "Name," the wizard said again.

"Ah, Harry Potter," Harry said, gripping his wand. The wizard frowned at him and lifted his bangs. Harry stepped away. "Oi."

The wizard laughed. "Of course you are. What's your Patronus?"

"Why is that important?" Ron asked.

"Because no one gets into the camp without one," the wizard answered. "So, what is it?"

"It's a stag," Harry said impatiently.

The wizard looked at his clipboard. "Alright, lets see it." Harry held out his wand and produced his Patronus. It was incredibly bright, and Harry let it walk around and blind all their eyes. A few people behind Ron whispered and pointed to it. Harry grinned in satisfaction and settled it back into his wand. The wizard nodded. "Okay, sign here." He handed Harry a long red quill.

Harry signed his name. "What now?"

The wizard looked at his sheet. "Join the group on the right."

"Thank you," he said. He picked up his bag and gave Ron a wink before walking through the gate.

The wizard turned to him. "Name."

"Ronald Weasley," he answered.

"Weasley, eh? The joke shop bloke?" the wizard asked. Ron nodded.
"My son goes to your shop sometimes."

"Yeah? What does he usually get?" Ron asked.

"And your Patronus?" he asked as if his last statement had meant nothing.

"Oh, um, a Jack Russell," Ron said, almost in shame.

"Well, we don't have all day. Let's see it," the wizard ordered.

Ron sighed and held out his wand. He wanted it to be impressive on his first try. He went over the list of things that always made his Patronus work and settled on his default. No matter what it was the one happy thought and feeling that never changed. In fact, it only made him happier every time he went back to it. He thought back to his second year when Harry had come back from the chamber with Ginny and said that she was alive and okay. His little sister had been saved. Her skeleton was still in her body.

The relief and sheer bliss from the moment incased him and he bellowed, "Expecto Patronum!" The little yapping dog exploded from his wand and nipped about. Ron let it bark and run around for a moment before taming it and bringing it back into his wand. He'd never understand his animal, and he cringed when someone behind him laughed.

The wizard didn't seem impressed by it either. He handed him the red quill. "Sign here."

"Should I join the group on the right?" Ron asked as he wrote his name.

The wizard looked at his clipboard. "No, join the group on the left."

"What?" Ron asked.

"I said join the group on the left. Not everyone is sorted into the same section. They'll explain more when you get in," the wizard said, pointing behind him.

Ron grabbed his bag and slowly walked in. The property of the camp finally appeared. It was a lot smaller than he thought it would be. The grassy land was mostly flat with very few pockets of trees. There were many dark wooden cabins around the grounds and a large, old grey building behind the cabins. It only seemed to be five or six stories tall. He turned his attention to the people around him. There were two large groups of wizards and witches standing in front of three wizards that he recognized. One was Phillip Smith and the other two were Alan Lewis and Richard Jones, the two Aurors who he thought had wanted to kill him during his trial.

He spotted Harry and they locked eyes. He nudged him to join him, but Ron reluctantly shook his head and joined the other group. Harry frowned at him, and he shrugged. Looking around him, most of the wizards looked to be his age. He also realized that even within the two large groups there were only four girls and only one in his section. Ron readjusted the bag on his arm once more and rocked on his heels. He could hear several different accents. There weren't only wizards from the surrounding area there.

When the last of the trainees came through the gate, it closed and sealed itself. Phillip held up his hands, and it immediately got quiet. "Alright trainees! Let us begin. First, I want to welcome you all to Lambrick Academy."

Someone started clapping and they all joined in. A few people even whistled. Phillip smiled but held up his hands again. "Yes, yes, congratulations to each and every one of you. You forty were chosen because you proved to be the very best of the selection. Here you will be tested not only in combat but also in a variety of other areas. Being an Auror isn't just about dueling. It's about intelligence and strategy. It's about having the ability to adapt. It's about your aptitude to use potions and the tools and the surroundings at your feet to save others and complete the mission safely."

Phillip paced and seemed to eye each one of them down. He was old but there was something extremely intimidating and almost scary about him. "While there are forty of you now, by the end of the program we expect less than half to graduate. Maybe even significantly less than half. Some of you will leave on your own accord because this place isn't for everyone, but most of you will be cut from the program." Ron looked around at the collective gasped and groans. He looked back at Harry who was already looking at him. They told each other with their eyes that they wouldn't be one of those people.

"I'm telling you this now because we cannot afford to waste time and resources on people that are not fit for the challenge," Phillip said. "As you come along in your training, you will be tested at various skills. You will have four major evaluations, and we will decide at each stage who is right to continue the program. Are there any questions so far?" Ron knew that no one would be brave enough to raise his or her hand. Apparently at any moment any one of them could get cut.

Phillip nodded. "As I suspected. So, as you know I am the head of this academy. I graduated from Lambrick and spent over thirty years as an Auror working in countries all around the world. My specialties include defensive dueling, Legilimency, and navigational techniques. I am also the head advisor here, so my door will be open if you have matters to discuss with me or inquirers or grim personal affairs to tend to."

He stepped back and ushered to Richard and Alan. "However, for the majority of your time here, you will follow directly under the authority of your section leaders and advisors. Aurors Richard Jones and Alan Lewis graduated from this program four

years ago, and they have been chosen to lead you. They are highly trained and skilled Aurors in all the areas you will be exploring." He stepped further away and the two stepped forward.

Alan moved in front of Ron's group, and Richard stood in front of Harry's. Ron's heart beat quicker as he dreaded the words that sure to come next. "As Phillip said, we will be your overall section leaders and head advisors. You will train and be taught by other Aurors, but for the most part we will lead the teams. I'm Alan Lewis, and I will be head of the East Wing. That's you lot." Ron wanted desperately to find whoever it was that dealt his fate. He had kicked his section leader in the bollocks and punched him in the face. It was a perfect way to start things off. Life was bloody unfair to him.

"And that means that you lot are stuck with me. I'm Richard Jones, head of West Wing," Richard said. "Now, you forty have been divided into two sections of twenty. Each section has a part of this camp, and you will live in the cabins in groups of four."

"You see that building behind you?" Alan said, pointing to the building behind him. "It's the original Lambrick Academy headquarters. It has classrooms, living spaces, training spaces, and office rooms inside. It has all the things that you haven't earned to see yet. This academy, like all prestigious training camps, is not just for trainees. It's a safe house for Aurors and other important magical figures. You as novice will never set foot in that building until you've earned it."

"Precisely. You'll be out here. You'll sleep in the cabins and eat in the lunch cabin and train in the cabins and out here in the wilderness. Later in the program you'll have a chance to prove if you deserve a bed inside. I can already tell that most of you will never even see a curtain in there," Richard explained. Ron didn't like the serious and dark tone in his voice. If more than half of them were going to be dismissed, then there was no telling what more the advisors would want from them. All he knew was that he wanted a bed. He needed to step foot inside.

"You should keep Richard's words in mind. This is a prestigious training camp. The people to your left and the people to your right are all here for your spot. You all got here for different reasons, but you all want to achieve the same end result." Alan spoke as seriously and darkly as Richard had, but Alan's words hit Ron a little harder. He had to amaze him and show that he wasn't such a tit. "However, even with that idea in your mind, you have to also remember that respect is another part to being a great Auror."

"Spot on," Richard said. He smiled and put a hand on Alan's shoulder. "Four years ago Alan and I were here. We were in the same section, and we couldn't stand each other. This bloke always tried but failed to outperform me." A few people laughed.

"Watch it," Alan said with a small grin. He eased Richard's hand off his shoulder. "And you're wrong. You copied everything I did but never quite made it look as good."

"Gentlemen, I think we're off task here," Phillip smoothly said.

"Right. Sorry. So, somehow we both made it through to the end, and somehow we ended up as partners when we got to the Ministry. He saved my life on our first night out during an assignment, and now I don't go anywhere without him," Richard said.

"I'm glad you got that part of the story right," Alan said. He turned to them and all his humor disappeared. "We're not saying that everyone here will become your friend. We're not even saying that you have to make friends, but it's important that you don't overstep each other. You will treat each person here as your equal because you never know. The person you hate now just might end up saving your life one day."

Richard and Alan stepped back and Phillip took his spot again. "Thank you Mr. Jones and Mr. Lewis. As they said, not everyone gets a room inside. You forty have each been assigned a cabin number and bed. I'd find it wise to get as much sleep as you can. Tomorrow starts your first day of training, and I will explain more about the program and the timeline. Good luck everyone and welcome to Lambrick. Your first meeting is adjourned."

The moment Phillip walked back toward the building, the property was bombarded with talking from everyone. Alan whistled loudly. "Form a line in front of your section leader to find your cabin number!"

Ron looked at Harry and he looked right back. They had no time to say goodbye or even say when they might see each other again. They simply nodded to each other. They would have to do things on their own for now. Ron got in line and when it was his turn, he tried not to look Alan in the eye. "Name?" Alan asked.

"Ron Weasley," he answered. He noticed Alan's finger stop skimming the parchment for a moment.

He moved his eyes up. "You're in cabin two," he said.

"Thank you," Ron breathed, adjusting his bag for probably the hundredth time on his shoulder.

He pushed past wizards as he made his way to his small, dark wooden cabin. He walked up the four stairs and twisted the metal knob. The room was horribly tiny. The walls, ceiling, and floor were all made of wood. The beds were small, thin cots and they hardly gave any space for walking. There was only one window, and it didn't have a curtain. Ron put his bag next to the bed that had his trunk under it and broom on top of it. He felt overwhelmed and anxious about everything. Being so tall, he also felt a bit claustrophobic in the shoebox of a space.

"Hi, I'm Roger Johnson."

"Fucking bollocks!" Ron said, grabbing at his chest. He whipped his head to the left. A skinny and pale-faced bloke with light

brown hair emerged from under his bed. "I didn't know anyone was in here."

Roger chuckled and held out his hand. "Sorry, I tend to sneak up on people. I'm easy to overlook."

Ron shook it. "I reckon you are. I'm Ron Weasley."

"Nice to meet you," Roger said. He sat on his bed and thumbed through his bag. Ron thought he might break because he was so thin. "So, they certainly knew how to scare us all away."

"Yeah. Alan especially," Ron said.

Roger kicked off his shoes and put them at the foot of his bed. "And we get to spend the next few months with him. Life is beautiful that way."

Ron only raised an eyebrow. He couldn't tell if Roger was trying to be funny or not. "Sure is!"

Their door opened and two more blokes walked in. One was short and stocky with blond hair and the other was tall and built with almost wavy thick brown hair. Ron and Roger stood up.

The short one looked around and clapped his hands. "So, roommates, eh? Let's just hope the window works. I'm not sure how much air we're going to get in here." His accent was very thick and Irish. "I'm Conor Neary."

Roger waved. "Roger Johnson."

"Ron Weasley," Ron said.

"Weasley? I think I know you. You and Harry Potter," the taller one said. "You're both here."

Ron just looked at him. It was an obvious observation, but he didn't want to be a prick his first night. "Yes, we are."

"Well, that's fine. I don't mind competition. I'm Jack Turner," he said.

"You and Harry Potter came together?" Roger asked in awe.

Ron looked down as they stared at him. He knew he'd have to deal with the tag sooner or later. He just didn't think it would be his first day there. "Yes, we did. We went to school together, and he's my best mate. Yes, I was there when it happened, but I'm sure you've read all about it. It doesn't matter though. I'm here like all you blokes. Nothing more."

"Ah, no need to explain anything to me, mate. I hardly ever read the papers anyway. I'm a Muggle born, so I'd rather watch the telly," Conor said, holding out his hand to him. Ron smiled and shook it.

"Same here. Well, not the telly part. I was just curious," Roger said. "I went to a small wizarding school, and we didn't get a lot of news."

Jack shrugged and put his things on the bed across from Ron's. "Sorry if I brought up a sore subject. I was just stating facts. I know of your reputation, but I don't mind it." He sat on the bed. "I also know about what you've been through and what you lost. I'm sorry about your brother."

"Yes, me too," Roger said. Conor didn't say anything, just stared off curiously.

Ron felt a bit of heat on his cheeks. Jack may have known a lot of things, but he certainly did not know about what he'd been through or what he lost. He didn't like some complete stranger saying how sorry he was as if he understood. It still didn't feel comfortable. He held it in though. "Thank you," Ron said quietly.

Jack nodded and cleared his throat. "Anyway, I've planned to be an Auror and train here since I was six and a half. My grandfather trained here, and I'm not going to let him down."

"That's brilliant. Do whatever you want. I'm not going to stop anyone. I just want to concentrate on myself," Ron said. Already he could tell that he and Jack wouldn't get on so well. There was something about the bloke and his bloody hair that bothered him.

"What about Harry Potter?" Jack asked.

"There's not much I can do from here. He's in west, right?" Ron said. "Harry is here to train just like everyone else, but whatever issues you have you should talk to him about. I'm not his owl."

"I plan to talk to him if I have to," Jack said, almost like a challenge. Ron brushed it off and began to take things out of his trunk. It was way too early to let Jack get to him.

There was a knock on their door. Ron looked up as Jack answered it. A girl came in, and it was the same girl Ron had glimpsed at during Phillip's speech. She was small like Ginny, but with her cloak off her shoulders he could tell that she was shapely. She had shoulder length, choppy black hair and her skin was on the fairer side. She didn't look like she should have been training at Lambrick. For whatever reason, she seemed more like an indoor girl to Ron.

"Hi," she said, waving and giving them all a big smile. "I'm Olivia Young."

"Are you living with us?" Roger asked in somewhat of a high-pitched voice.

She raised an eyebrow. "I reckon you'd like that, yes?" Conor and Ron snorted and Roger blushed.

"Just curious," he mumbled.

"Well, sorry, but no. I'm the only girl in this section, and I'm supposed to go around and introduce myself. There are three girls in west, and we're all rooming together. I guess this is what they always do with the girls. Just toss us all in one spot so we won't cause a fuss," she said, rolling her eyes.

"You don't seem fussy to me. It's very nice to meet you, Olivia. I'm Jack Turner." Jack held out his hand and was all of a sudden a gentleman.

She gave his hand one shake. "Pleasure."

Conor pointed to himself. "I'm Conor Neary. I reckon you already met Roger Johnson, and that's Ron Weasley."

"Hi," he said to her.

"Hey," she said as she gave him a strange look. He simply went back to unpacking, but it was so stuffy in the room. He needed fresh air.

"Excuse me," he said. He rushed out of the cabin and leaned against the wood. The fresh, crisp air was like water to him.

The door opened and Olivia stepped out. She frowned. "I'm sorry, but you said your name was Weasley?"

"Yeah. Ron Weasley," he answered, pushing himself off the wood. He suddenly wondered how many people had read the article about him. It was weird getting so much attention, and he wasn't sure if he liked it.

She ran a hand through her dark locks and stared at the ground. "I've heard that name before."

"Probably from the paper like everyone else," Ron said. He didn't know if she would ask about Harry or apologize for Fred's murder first.

"No. That's not it. I mean of course I read about you but before thatâ€œoh I know!" She stared at him, and he was able to get a good look at her. Her skin was very clear and a bit pale. Her eyes were strikingly blue, and her had a small mole on the left side of her nose. There was something spiritual about Olivia that he couldn't quite figure out. She, like Roger, didn't quite look like she belonged. Then again, he knew that his ginger hair and freckles put him right beside them. "Do you have a brotherâ€œhis name isâ€œWilliam?" she suddenly asked.

Ron had to remind himself of what she was talking about. "Huh? Oh, yeah, I do. We just call him Bill. Why? Do you know him?"

She sighed in relief. "Thank Merlin. I'm not mental after all. No, I don't know him, but I know of him. See, my parents are both healers, and they were consulting at St. Mungo's when he was brought in. They took care of his caseâ€œyou knowâ€œthe werewolf bite and all."

"Oh," he said. "Interesting situation, I reckon."

She shook her head and groaned. "I'm sorry. That was rude, and I didn't mean it like that. What I'm getting at is that I was there one of the days when your family was at the hospital. Sorry, I don't mean to bring that up. Is he okay?"

Ron had to laugh. Unlike Jack, Olivia seemed sincere. "It's okay. He's fine, great actually. He got married, and he's completely healthy. He likes really rare meat now, but his wife is French so it's not a huge adjustment. "

"Oh, that's good to hear! I'm glad to hear it," she said, shaking his upper arm. He didn't know what to say. He just grinned. "Well, I should go. You're only stop number two." She held out her hand. "It was nice meeting you, Ron."

"You too, Olivia," he said honestly. She gave him a smile and walked off.

Ron took a few more breaths of fresh air before going back inside. He sat down and once again continued unpacking. He knew that he had brought too much. "Have fun out there?" Jack asked.

"Sorry?" Ron asked.

Conor sat on his bed. "She's well fit, yeah?"

"Ahâ€;" Ron said in mild confusion.

Conor gave him a look and nudged him. "You're not that smooth. Olivia, we mean. She's fit."

"Oh, um, yeah, I suppose," Ron said.

"You suppose?" Roger said. "I'm sure you got a good look at her or at least parts of her when you two talked outside just now."

"I wasn't really paying attention to all that, and we didn't exactly talk. She asked one question, and I answered it," he said.

"Are you blind orâ€;" Jack said, giving him a once over.

Ron rolled his eyes. "No, but I am seeing someone. I have a girlfriend."

"I'm sure everyone has a girlfriend," Jack said.

"No, I mean I have a real relationship with mine," he said proudly.

Conor nudged his shoulder once more. "Is it serious?"

Ron thought about the hundreds of ways he could answer how serious he and Hermione were. "Very," he decided on with a nod. "So, you guys go ahead."

"Like any of us will have time to chat her up," Conor said, returning to his bed.

"Mmm. Her lips are like the color of cherries," Roger said.

"And she's short which is good for me. Blimey, I didn't get a chance to look at the other girls. I wonder what they're like," Conor said.

"Similar to Olivia, meaning that they're totally out of your league," Jack answered. Ron only half listened. He looked through his bag and took out the picture of him and Hermione. Already he wished she were there. There was so much that he wanted to tell her. He put it and the picture of his family on top of his small side desk.

Everyone sort of fell into a silence after they all finished packing. They would have plenty of time to get to know each other, and Ron was rather tired. His nervous energy was finally depleting. He twisted his wand between his fingers and wondered how Harry was doing. He was most like getting attacked with questions and writing dozens of autographs. Then again, he could have been in the corner fending it all off or impressing people with his Patronus again. He looked around at his new roommates. Jack was shining his wristwatch, Conor was writing a letter, and Roger was flipping through a magazine.

Conor stopped writing and put a picture of him and a young girl who looked just like him on his desk. "Who's that?" Roger asked.

"My younger sister Kaitlin," he said. He smiled but there was a distance in his eyes and a deep tone to his voice.

Ron wondered if she was still alive. Over the months he had learned subtle ways to ask difficult questions. "I have a younger sister named Ginny. She's still in school."

"So is Kate," Conor said lightly. He ran his hand over her stationary face. "She's a Muggle though, so it's just a regular school."

"It's interesting that she's not a witch as well. Usually it's the older siblings that are skipped in Muggle born families," Jack said.

"Obviously not all the time," Conor mumbled. Ron found it amazing that Jack couldn't see how the subject of Conor's sister was hard for him, but maybe he was just super sensitive to sibling matters now.

"I'm an only child," Roger quickly said. "I've never been exposed to all that sharing and caring."

"I have an older brother who tried and failed to graduate from here two years ago," Jack said. "I won't end up the same way."

Ron knew that it was his time to share, but he was almost positive that everyone at camp knew about him. "I'm one of seven. No one in my family has ever gone here, and sharing and caring is all I know."

Conor pepped up a little. "Seven is a big number."

"Six boys and one girl makes it feel even bigger. I'm the second youngest," he explained.

"I reckon you're used to cramp spaces then?" Roger asked.

Ron kicked off his shoes and settled back on his flat pillow. "You have no bloody idea." He closed his eyes and somehow his body shut down without him realizing and he fell asleep.

There was a loud intake of breath, and it shook Ron awake. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. Jack's mouth was wide open, and his terrible snores flooded the room. He groaned and slipped his shoes back on. Everyone was asleep and now that he wasn't, he didn't know how they had managed it. There was a bad smell in the room, and the moonlight shined through the naked window. He needed fresh air again.

He took his wand and carefully slipped out of the room. "Lumos," he said. He walked around the grounds and grinned. He was finally at Lambrick. He knew he needed to be in bed, but he wasn't so tired anymore. He knew his dad was up by the fire, and it comforted him. Ron walked across the grassy field near the west section. He was stunned when he saw Harry leaning against a cabin.

Ron smirked and hid by a tree. "Wingardium Leviosa," he said, pointing at Harry's glasses. They immediately left his face and Harry jumped for them. He whipped out his wand, and turned around. Ron moved a little closer. "Oi, Harry, over here."

Harry looked in his direction and squinted. He put a hand to his chest. "Ron, you fucking bastard." He jogged over to him. "Don't do that! I thought you were—"

"A dark wizard?" Ron cheeked.

He rolled his eyes and hit his arm. "Piss off. What are you doing out here?"

"Same reason you're out there, I reckon. It's hard to sleep in there," Ron said.

"I know. It really makes me appreciate your room and my old cot. What we have is bullshit." Harry rubbed his hands together and pulled his cloak tighter around him. "So, how are your roommates?"

"Two of them are okay but there's this one bloke—Jack Turner. I don't know. He's decent but a prick," Ron explained. It was a strange conversation to have with Harry. They had always lived together and met the same people at the same time.

"There's one okay person in my cabin. His name is Eric. He's the only one who didn't look at me like I had two heads. Fucking hell." Harry shook his head slowly and seemed rather angry.

"Hey, it will wear off. After a few days they'll get used to you. I'm actually getting some of it myself. Not for the same reasons though. Fredâ€œ!" Ron said.

"We're just here to train, Ron," Harry said. "They don't know anything about us, but they know everything about us."

He was so thankful that Harry was there with him and that they were best friends. Harry understood him in ways that no one else on Earth ever would. "I know but what can we do? We knew this would happen, yeah?"

"Yes, we did. I won't let it bother me. I don't care if I'm Harry Potter," Harry said.

Ron patted his arm. "And I don't care if I'm a Weasley. We're here to kick arse and we will."

"We might have to kick each other's arse along the way too," he said, looking at him apprehensively.

He wasn't sure how to respond. It wasn't just that he and Harry were competing for the same spot. They were in separate sections. It made the competitiveness to their relationship even more apparent. "Like I haven't done that already," Ron said, trying to lighten the mood.

It seemed to work. "If you say so, prick," Harry said. "We should get to bed. Who knows when we'll have to get up tomorrow?"

"You've got a point there. Um, I'll see you around?" Ron asked. It was an honest question. It was a small camp, but something told him that it would be just big enough to separate them for a long time.

"Of course. I'll see you tomorrow I'm sure. We'll have to cross paths once in a while." He held out his hand. "We can still make this work."

Ron shook it and knew that it wouldn't be that simple. "Yeah. I'll see you." They dropped hands and looked at each other. "Goodnight, Harry."

"Night," he answered. He turned and walked back to his cabin. It was unnerving. It was almost like a small goodbye. Though they were both at Lambrick, they were heading in different directions.

Ron turned and walked back to his cabin in the opposite direction. He was on his own. He understood it and a part of him greatly appreciated it. He needed to test himself and find his own path. He and Harry would be mates no matter what. He knew that, but Ron couldn't be his sidekick anymore. He turned out his light and crept back into the room. Jack was still snoring. Ron

got in bed and pointed his wand at him. "Muffliato," he said quietly, pointing his wand at Jack.

He laid back just as Jack snored loudly and sat up. He waved his hands in front of his ears. "Damn flies!" Ron stuffed his palm in his mouth and tried not to laugh out loud.

He knew that he would have to be strong and push himself to make it through the program, but on his last night of freedom he just wanted to shut Jack up.

* * *

** Ah, this was a refreshing turn for me. I love having a new setting and new hands stirring the pot. So I'll just say now: people are never what they seem. I won't tell you what this has to deal with; but keep it in mind! ;) Thanks for reading and review! Ron's on his way now!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 29*: Beginning olympics

Thanks for the reviews! I know it's been so long since I've posted anything but there was a family tragedy recently and I've had to deal with it. It seems like if one thing settles then something else pops up. * sighs * however, as I've said in the past, I'll never stop writing my stories. Now, I want to clear this up for everyone. Ron and Harry are in different sections because they need time apart to really grow and find themselves as individuals. Ron, Harry, and Hermione have been one unit for ages and there comes a time when they simply have to break off into their own lives. Even more so for the Dream Team. This is Ron's story and his chance to see himself as RON and just Ron. Same goes for Harry. Although he's the savior, he's never really done things by himself. This is his chance as well. However, obviously Ron/Harry means the world to me and I love them together, so it's not like Ron and Harry will never see each other or learn together or train together or help each other. You'll have to keep reading and see how the story develops.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

* * *

"YOU ALL HAVE EXACTLY FIVE MINTUES TO GET DRESSED, GRAB YOUR BROOMS, AND GET YOUR ARSES OUT HERE!"

Ron quickly shot up and felt around in the fairly dark air. "Wa? Wuzz happening?"

"What you do you think, Ron?" Jack, who was already tying his trainers, casually asked. "Training starts now."

"YOU NOW HAVE FOUR AND A HALF MINUTES," Alan's voice bellowed.

"Fucking hell," Ron groaned. He rolled out of bed and pulled off his shirt. His eyes burned, his head felt light, and he was almost positive that he shut his eyes no more than two minutes ago.

"What time is it?" Conor asked, scampering around for his other sock.

"Almost six. It's prime time. See you lot out there." Jack eased his broom over his shoulder and walked outside.

"I think I might hate that lad and his perfect hair," Conor said. He took his shoe and threw it at Roger's still sleeping body.
"Oi! Get the fuck up. Alan is going to have your arse, yeah?"

"Mmm, I'm coming," Roger mumbled. He slowly rose and pushed off the thin blanket to reveal his nude body.

Ron and Conor both shielded their eyes. "Put your shorts on!"
Conor whined. "It's way too early to see bollocks!"

"I can't believe you slept with your prick out, Roger. There are three other blokes in here," Ron said, trying to block out the image of the pale bollocks as he changed.

"What's the problem? We all have penises, and this is how I always sleep. It helps me fall asleep faster." Roger climbed out of the bed and widely bent over for his clothes.

"That's it. I'm gone," Ron rushed. He snatched up his broom and swiftly went outside.

There was barely any daylight, and he shivered in his jumper as soft rain sprinkled down on him. Alan and Richard stood at the front of their two forming groups. Alan put his wand tip back to his throat. "ONE MINTUE!" Ron looked around to the west group. He could just make out Harry's mass of dark hair behind other students. He stared at him for a moment and as expected, Harry felt his gaze and looked up. He grinned and pointed to his watch. Ron rolled his eyes and made a wanking gesture with his hand. It made Harry laugh. He gave him a nod, and Ron nodded back.

"I wonder what we're doing," Conor said from behind him. He rubbed his eyes and ran a hand through his blond locks.

"I dunno. Am I thick to suggest a massive game of quidditch?" Ron asked. Conor snickered.

"Quidditch? Sounds fun. You've definitely got the broom for it," Olivia said, walking over to them with her broom clutched in hand. She leaned her face against it and yawned.

"Cheers. My brothers recently got it for me. You play?" Ron asked her. Her face was washed out, and her hair was in a horribly messy ponytail.

She stifled a yawn. "Not too much but with this many people it could be interesting. Do you play?"

"I did in school. I was the keeper for two years," he said. He debated if he should tell them that he wasn't always good and that Harry had been the captain. He decided to keep his mouth shut.

"Ah, how impressive," Olivia said with a smile. She nudged Conor's shoulder. "What about you? Do you play quidditch?"

Something about Conor's face changed in the slightest. He got the curious, almost distant look in his eyes again. "No. Not a fan. Rather play football." Olivia must have sensed his discomfort but before she could get another word in, Alan's voice once again boomed throughout the space.

"ALRIGHT LOT!" He tapped his wand against his throat to take off the spell. "Okay, now that you're all here and alert we can get started. So, welcome to your first day of training. I hope you all got a good rest because you'll need it. Every day will start at this time and every day will start this way. Richard."

Richard slapped his hands together and rubbed them. "To be an Auror, you have to be quick. You have to be skilled, intelligent, cunning, and many other adjectives that I'm sure you read in the brochure. However, it won't mean much if you're not in proper shape. I don't care how many spells you can cast in a minute. If you're not physically fit, then you'll never get anywhere. Dueling involves so much more than simply using your wand hand. You use every part of your body."

"That's right," Alan said. "In that respect, we're not so different from the Muggles. Conditioning is the first major step to any sort of training program, and the most basic but also most important part to any foundation of conditioning is running. That's what you lot will do now."

Richard beamed and his brown eyes grew as if he had something spectacular up his sleeves. "Around the perimeter of this property is a dirt path. Every day, starting today, you will run four laps around the entire pathway that surrounds the camp." Many people, included Roger and Olivia, groaned or knocked their brooms against their foreheads in frustration. However, as

demanding as it sounded, Ron wasn't too bothered. No matter how annoying he sometimes found his extremely long and lean legs, he knew that he ran well with them.

"You might as well stop whining now because it's going to happen regardless," Alan said sharply. "There's more to it, too. You're not just going to take a nice little stroll around the grounds. No, you lots are going to run with your brooms over your shoulders. Like this." Alan swung his broom across his shoulders and held it with both hands on either side of his head.

"And if you drop it ladies and gentlemen, then you get to pick it up and start over," Richard added. "Now, if and when you complete your four laps, then you get to move on to part two."

"Part two?" Conor whispered in Ron's ear.

"After your four laps are finished, you're going to jog down to the patch of land behind the main building. There you will mount your broom and fly eight laps around the property," Alan explained. "Quick and coordinated flying is another basic and important conditioning technique for Aurors."

"So, you'll fly a lap, touch down, then go back into the air and do it again." Richard demonstrated hopping off his broom and fluently getting back on.

"If any of you have ever played on a quidditch team, then this drill shouldn't be unfamiliar to you. Quidditch players adopted this procedure from Aurors," Alan said. Ron wished with all of his might that he was standing next to Harry. He wanted to thank him for the hours of seemingly pointless flying drills where they did almost the exact same thing. "Now, are there any questions?"

Ron had quite a few and his first involved when he would have time for a wee. "Yes, Roger Johnson," Alan said. Ron turned back and Roger lowered his hand.

"Um, what if we need to use the toilet?" he asked. Ron joined quite a few people in laughter. The bloke would certainly make his training experience interesting.

Alan raised an eyebrow. "Well, there are plenty of bushes and nice, wet leaves to use. Are we clear?"

"Yes," Roger said gloomily.

"Okay, if there aren't any more relevant questions, then we'll get started." Richard stood in front of his group. "West wing, we'll head out this way. East, follow Alan in the opposite direction. Take a few moments to stretch before we'll begin."

Ron put his broom down and rolled his shoulders. He lifted each leg and held on to his ankle, hoping that he'd be able to do well on his first day. Jack walked over to him. "I stretched earlier this morning. I had a feeling that we'd have to run."

"Aren't you clever," Conor said, popping his knuckles.

"It certainly wouldn't hurt to do a bit more, Jack. Your muscles will thank you later for it," Olivia said as she bent over and touched her toes.

He gave her a once over and smirked. "I appreciate the advice, but I think I'm fine. Nice technique."

"Thanks. I worked on it all summer," she said a bit sarcastically. Ron covered up his snort by clearing his throat.

"I really wish I would have gone to the toilet last night," Roger mumbled.

"Oh, it's not that bad. At least you can whip it out mid run. I have to find a place to squat," Olivia said.

Conor's eyes widened. "You're a delicate flower, aren't you?"

"Completely," she answered with a wink.

"Alright, let's go!" Alan said. Before Ron had a chance to prepare himself, both Alan and Richard started jogging and their groups started moving.

"Here we go," Conor breathed. Ron took a deep breath and followed his group. They were all quiet as they jogged. Alan stayed at the front and reminded them of how to keep their breathing and pacing in sync. Ron tried to keep everything steady as he jogged. He knew that if he ran too quickly, then he would have no stamina by the time he had to fly.

"This isn't a race," Alan said. "I don't care if you finish first or dead last. It's about your technique. It's about coordination. It's about fighting the elements and your body's natural urges to slow down and rest. There will be no time for that when you're up against a dark wizard or when your unit needs you to take lead." Alan turned around and jogged backwards as if he'd been doing it his whole life. "Over time you'll learn how far you can push yourself. You'll know when you can go faster, and you won't have to think and worry about overdoing it. Go at your own paces now. I'll keep in place and watch over you." He moved out of the way and slowed down. Everyone either started running faster or slowed down.

Their group broke up and pockets of people made their way around the property. Ron kept his focus but took in the scenery as well. The greenness of the flat land, the calm water from the rain and lake, and the gray sky was actually very consoling. For the first time in years, he was at peace all by himself. It was a beautiful place, and he knew that Hermione would love it. It would be the perfect place for her to read and lose herself in one of her books. He grinned as he thought about her. He wondered what she was doing and if she felt as relaxed as he did.

During Ron's second lap, he decided to jog a little faster. He started passing his fellow trainees without much problem. He gave Roger a sympathetic look, as it was obvious that he was

struggling. His face was beet red, he breathed harshly, and his broom looked to be close to falling off his shoulders. "Come on, Roger. You can do it," Ron said as he passed him.

"I'm going!" Roger wheezed in the distance. Ron readjusted his own broom on his shoulders and kept going.

"Weasley, how did I know that this would be easy for you?" Alan asked as he caught up to him and started jogging in place with him. Ron wasn't sure how to answer. Alan sounded satisfied, but his face was hard to read.

"I don't know. I reckon my lank isn't always a disadvantage," Ron said, thinking about what Alan and Richard had said about him during his interview. He instantly regretted it. It came out a lot ruder than he intended it to.

Though, Alan only smirked. "Yes, well, keep it up." He slowed down and it gave Ron incentive to go faster. People from west passed him in the opposite direction, but Ron didn't bother looking for Harry. He had concentrate on himself. By the end of his third lap, the scenery wasn't as stunning anymore. He had a stitch in his side and his ears stung. He was sweaty and cold at the same time, and his throat was extremely dry.

"Ron," Jack said as he paced up to him out of breath. "What lap are you on?"

"Fourth," Ron rasped.

"Ah, me too. I didn't know you were a runner," he said.

Ron cleared his throat and caught his broom before it slipped off. "I'm not..."

"It's okay if you are. You don't have to be modest. I ran every morning back home. It's good for your endurance, and I think it's prepared me for this." Jack's face was flushed and he was sweaty, but somehow his hair was still perfect. Magic must have kept it in place.

"Yeah, um, it's probably best that we don't talk. We need to save our breath, yeah?" It was just one reason why Ron didn't want to speak to Jack.

"Fine by me. See you down there." Jack ran ahead and jogged faster than Ron knew he'd be able to catch up to. He wanted to grab his stomach, but he couldn't let go of his broom. As soon as he past the starting point, he ran down to the patch of land. Alan and Richard were already down there coaching the trainees that were flying, Jack included.

Ron dropped his broom and put his hands on his knees. He had to catch his breath. "Weasley, what are you doing?" Alan asked.

"One minute," Ron panted. He needed to recuperate. He felt like he was going to collapse.

"There are no breaks in training. You flourished through the first part, so don't let this be your downfall. Go now and start flying," Alan ordered. Ron groaned a little. His head hurt, he had to pee, and he was incredibly hungry and knackered. It wasn't raining anymore, but the ground was soggy and his broom was slick. "You want to start all over?"

"No. I'm going." Ron rubbed his hands together and mounted his broom. He took to the sky without much preparation. Flying around the property took a different kind of skill and one that he wasn't nearly as proficient with. Navigating around the property in the sky was a lot harder, and the cold air was harsh on his ears. His broom flew fast and steadily, but Ron still wasn't quite used to its power. He touched down after a lap and wobbled off.

"There you are, Potter. I was beginning to worry," Richard said with a smirk as Harry jogged down to them.

"I'll make up it for it here," he said confidently. He swiftly wiped off his glasses and took to the sky on his Firebolt with much more grace than Ron had.

"Wow! That's what I'm bloody talking about!" Richard said. "Harry bloody Potter."

It was all the motivation Ron needed. He mounted his broom and raced to the sky again. He had outrun Harry, but it was obvious that Harry was the better flier. Somehow Harry was able to not only catch up, but also get a lap ahead of him. Harry flew with a speed that was incredible. Ron knew it wasn't a race, but he needed to keep up with him. Harry pushed him without even realizing. Ron was able to make up time and catch up to him by their sixth lap. Ron flew on pure will. He had no strength and every limb was on fire, but it didn't matter. He had to keep up.

They touched down together on lap seven and gave each other a quick glance. Ron swung his legs over his broom, and Harry simply hopped on his and took to the sky. "Fucking hell," Ron breathed. He zoomed into the sky and saw Harry's back in front of him. He willed his broom to go faster, but he was losing balance. He didn't want to risk falling off. Harry pushed at full speed during the last turn, and Ron knew it was pointless.

Harry touched down and moments later Ron did as well. Harry got off his broom, completely out of breath, and dropped it. He rested his hands on his knees and spit. Ron leaned against his broom and convinced himself that everything wasn't really spinning and that he wasn't seconds away from dying. "Thatâ€'was great," Harry croaked.

"Y-yeah," Ron mumbled. He was angry that he hadn't beaten Harry, but it had been rather fun at the same time.

Alan and Richard walked over to them. "Well, I think it's apparent who the competitors of the groups are. We told you that this wasn't a race," Alan said.

"There's nothing wrong with a bit of a rivalry, Alan," Richard eased in. "That was fantastic. Potter, I'm not at all surprised. You're flying skills are natural and extraordinary."

"Thank you, Sir," Harry said with a smile.

Richard held up a hand. "On the other hand, I was less impressed with your pacing while you ran. You tired yourself out, and I saw it again as you flew. You have to know when to slow down. I know you want to be the best, but you have to use your head, too. Take a page from Weasley's book."

Ron suddenly had a bit more energy. He stopped leaning against his broom and tried not to look smug. "I agree, but he was sloppy in the air," Alan said. "Weasley, you really need to work on your handle and your confidence while flying. You're holding yourself back. You hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you," Ron said, feeling his energy deflate. There was no impressing him.

"Okay, go wash and head to the front. We have another group meeting before the training day starts," Alan said.

Ron bit his lip to keep from groaning again. He was ready to eat and take a long nap. His body was tired and in pain, and he had completely forgotten that all they had done was warm up. They still had a full day of training to complete. Ron and Harry took their brooms and practically limped back up the path.

"That was a really good go, Harry," Ron said.

"Thanks. I'm rubbish with the running," he said. His glasses slipped down his sweaty nose, and he used a finger to push them back up.

"Exact opposite for me. I knew Firebolts were fast, but it was like it kept going faster without an end to it. Bloody Merlin, I feel like my chest is caving in." Ron rubbed his ribs and moved up to his chest.

"I think I should have taken Hermione's contacts offer before coming here. I need to get some string or something," Harry said. Ron snorted and Harry pushed him. "Fuck off. I'm too tired to hit you."

"Oh, look, they're talking," whispered a ginger girl to someone as she and a couple others jogged down to the flying area.

Ron frowned. "Was she talking about us?"

"Yeah," Harry breathed. "That was Charlotte. All the girls in west had to go around and introduce themselves because there are so few of them. When she came to my cabin, all she wanted to do was ask me questions."

"Oh, sorry," Ron said, feeling a bit awkward.

"It's fine," he said with a shrug. "She was nice about it, but she was really curious about me and you and everything about my life."

Ron knew that Harry was trying to keep his tone indifferent, but it didn't work too well. "In time, Harry," he finally said as they made it back to the main grounds.

Harry swung his broom over his shoulder. He looked annoyed, but Ron knew that he wouldn't say anything about how he felt. Now that they were at camp and things had officially started, he was Harry Potter again. Everything rolled off his shoulders, and he was completely stoic and capable of handling anything. "I know. It doesn't really bother me. Ginny and I had a long talk about this the last time we were together. What else should we expect, yeah?"

Ron didn't know what to tell him. Harry's words were true, but he didn't want to believe that they would always have a stigma. For years Ron had wanted to be the center of attention, but he was quickly realizing that it wasn't always great. Especially since their fame wasn't completely positive. Voldemort might have been defeated, but many innocent people had died in the process. It wasn't something to really boost about.

"Nothing, I reckon," Ron said. "Look, just keep your head on. Ginny's smart so I'm sure whatever she said is right."

Harry got the thick smile he always did when Ginny was brought into the conversation. "I'm going to write her tonight. I'm sure she'd love it out here."

"I was thinking the same thing about Hermione," Ron said with a smile as well. They were quiet for a moment as Ron was sure they were both thinking about their girlfriends. A bit of pressure started to push at his chest, and he had to focus again. "So, I'll see you later?" he quickly asked. He held out his hand and Harry shook it.

"Yeah. Kick some arse today," Harry said as he turned from him and headed to his cabin.

Ron finally made it back to his cabin without collapsing. He took out his clothes for the day and sat. It felt so good. Every part of him was already starting to ache and stiffen up, and his stomach growled loudly. He was beyond tired to the point where he could feel the sleepiness under his eyes, and he actually felt a little nauseous. Ron had no idea how he would do this every day.

The door opened and Jack came through bringing in a powerful scent of soap. "Impressive work out there." He rubbed his towel over his damp hair and threw it on the bed.

"Cheers," Ron mumbled. Now that Jack was back, Ron needed to get out as soon as he could.

"Did you and Harry Potter plan to keep up with each other?" Jack asked.

"No," Ron dully stated. He was cranky and the last thing he needed was Jack making him more irritated. "Harry and I didn't plan it. We've been mates for years, and I reckon over time we've learned to do things in a similar way. I don't know. It doesn't matter. You finished before both of us."

"Obviously that didn't make a difference," Jack muttered.

Ron rolled his eyes. "What do you want from me, Jack? What's the problem?"

"Nothing is the problem," Jack said smoothly. "I just wish you would be honest about your business here with him. You know they're not going to take all of us, and there's not going to be an equal distribution between the sections."

"So what are you getting at?" he asked.

"I'm getting at the fact that you and Harry Potter are sort of a packaged deal. Everyone knows that. You both being here is going to keep someone else from getting a spot in the main house. This is supposed to be based on skill and fairness," Jack explained.

"And what? You think Harry and I being here isn't fair? You think we haven't earned it?" Ron asked. He could feel the anger building. Jack had no right. He had no idea what they had been through and everything they had given up for Lambrick.

"No. I'm merely saying that you can stop with the act," he said. "Be a man, Ron, and be an honest man. You playing the good guy or the naïve guy won't get you far here. I'm not going to let anyone's status come before my ability and passion. I have to be an Auror." Jack walked up to him and looked at him with vigor.

Jack was a big guy, but Ron wasn't afraid. With everything he had seen in his life, Jack was the last thing he ever had to fear.
"Then be an Auror and stop worrying about what I'm doing and what Harry's doing. We just got here. You don't know us, and we don't know you. Trust me, nothing has been handed to me. I've earned my place, and I'm fighting just as hard as you are. I have to be an Auror, too. I've got too much depending on this."

"That's great and I wish you all the luck in the world, but don't think that I won't step on and over you if I have to. I know what you've done for our world and I'm thankful, but I'm not going to let it blindsight me," Jack said.

"Good. Do whatever you have to do. I will as well." Ron grabbed his clothes. "And I don't need your fucking luck either. I can do this on my own."

During his shower Ron tried to enjoy the soap and water. However, the water had barely any heat to it, and all the blokes around him were whispering to each other. He was sure of what they were discussing. He gained a new respect for Harry in the duration of his wash. In only a day, Ron was ready to curse their heads off. He didn't know how his mate had put up with it since he was

eleven. His legs felt like they were moments away from breaking off and his chest burned horribly by the time he was dressed and standing back at the main grounds. He yawned and rubbed his stomach.

Conor eventually joined him. "How'd you do?"

"Okay, but I'm bloody paying for it now," Ron said.

"Yeah, I feel bad for Roger. I think he's still flying," he said. After a while more people started to join their groups. Olivia and Jack also joined them but Roger was still nowhere to be found. Ron needed something to lean on, but he instantly tried to stand straighter as Richard came back along with Philip Smith. Everyone stood a little taller then and pretended not to be in severe pain.

Richard held up his hands and everyone quieted down. "While some of your fellow trainees finish up, we'd like to get started for the day. Now, I just want to say that your overall performance was quite poor. While some of you did admirably, most of you either tried to outperform others and forgot about yourselves, or you simply gave up. I don't care if this is the first time you've done this sort of drill. I never want to see sloppiness like that again. None of you will continue in the program with work like that."

Even though he was weary and in pain, Ron wanted to try again. Alan's critique on his flying repeated in his mind, and he didn't want to give him a reason to fault his abilities. He didn't want to give Jack the satisfaction either. Phillip stepped forward and nodded. "Trainees, I know this morning was a bit rough for you all, but it's something that you'll have to push through and master. You're not just running for physical conditioning. It's also a mental preparation. You will see and experience many horrors as an Auror, and working through your pain and weakness now as you run will help tremendously."

Alan came back up the path with a group of panting and sweating trainees. Ron suddenly understood Conor's grief. Roger looked awful, like he had spent a night in Azkaban. The group quickly joined their sections and Alan took a spot near the front. He whispered something in Richard's ear and he nodded.

"At this point in time, I'll leave the training information to your advisors, but I want to personally discuss more about the program and time schedule." Phillip walked in front of the two groups, and Ron found his fluidity intriguing. He knew that at any moment, the bloke could most likely take down a group of dark wizards on his own.

"Now," he continued, "the training program, as you know, roughly extends from October to February, depending on the number of trainees that are excused along the way. In March, the committee and I will make our final cuts and decisions for graduating trainees. After graduation, in late March or early April, you all will have your final placement tests at the Ministry where you will either be hired directly there or referred somewhere else."

It seemed like so much to learn and accomplish in such a short amount of time. There would be no room for error. Ron had to do everything right the first time. He kept going over all the things he'd had to do and perfect in his mind as Phillip spoke, but his brain slowly began to freeze all his thoughts and one question repeated. Ron wondered when he would get to see his family and talk to Hermione again.

"Moving on," Phillip seemed to say loudly. Ron jumped out of his thoughts of Hermione and shook his head. "As I mentioned there will be necessary cuts along the way, but December is our first major ejection of trainees. This will be when we'll cut you lot almost by half and when the staying majority will be integrated. Alan."

"Yes, what he means is that at some point during this program we will integrate the sections," Alan explained. "After the first major cut, there won't be west and east wings. You all will learn and compete with each other." There was a bit of chatter, and Ron felt a bit nervous himself. He would have no idea about the talent on the other section until he saw it right in front of him. There was too much room for him to be overlooked.

"Now, now, don't get too excited yet," Alan added. "Until that time comes you will interact with your section for the majority of the time. Nonetheless, there will be lessons and dueling that both houses will participate in together along the way, so you all can learn from one another and get to know each other a little better."

"That sounds brilliant," Jack said from behind him. Ron knew exactly whom Jack wanted to test and duel against.

Richard raised his hand. "Listen, trainees, there is something important that will go into effect at Lambrick starting this year. It's a new policy created by the Ministry."

"Right, so, usually your training would be straight from October to February with no breaks. You train six days a week from start to finish. That's why the training program is only around five months long." Phillip actually looked as if he was suppressing an eye roll. "However, it's been decided that given the recent war and the downfall of Voldemort, you all will receive a short recess in December. You will be allowed to go home while we evaluate your work and make the first official ejection. You are also being allowed two excuses to leave the camp."

Ron couldn't hold back his heavy exhale of breath and many other trainees made soft cheers. Phillip did not seem pleased. "This is just for a trial bases. You may be the only group of Lambrick trainees that will be allowed these gifts, but the Ministry wants to extend a sign of promise to everyone. We understand that the pressure can get extreme and during this transition in the magical community, having a level head and heart is important."

"Still, don't assume that the program will be any less intense than it's ever been," Richard said. "Your passes will be for no

more than a few hours, and they should be used carefully and in extreme cases of emergency. You have to ask your head advisor for the pass and if we feel you haven't earned it, then you won't be allowed to leave. Prove to us that you deserve those few hours."

"Exactly, Richard, and on that note I want to adjourn this meeting with one final word about your training program. Yes, you will be trained and tested on dueling, navigating, health, and other various means of wand work. However, trainees as well as the general public forget the other side to the job." Phillip chuckled a little. "There is a less adventurous side to being an Auror that you will learn. It's called office work."

"Let me tell you lot, you won't always be out capturing wizards," Alan added. "Sometimes and most of the time, you'll file, you'll research, and you'll prepare. When I first became an Auror, I thought I'd be battling death eaters and dark wizards every day. Well, I didn't get my first real assignment until about two months in. During that time, I was learning about other areas, helping to map out routes for other Aurors on assignments, and filing paperwork on captured wizards."

"It may not seem like fun, but it's very important and sometimes more important. So, you will learn how to work as well as fight. Keep that in mind as you go along," Phillip said. "Well, I'll end this meeting. Please, eat and regroup because your training has only started. Good luck." Phillip walked off and Alan and Richard moved in front of their assigned groups.

"Alright lot," Alan said, "there's breakfast in the east dining cabin. Eat, take a moment to shower if you haven't, and be ready for the day's lesson in about twenty minutes."

He walked off without another word and everyone quickly scurried to the cabin. Twenty minutes wasn't enough time for Ron or at least enough time to get second helpings. The dining cabin looked a lot like their housing cabin. It was one large room with tables and chairs and three large food bars. One held meats; another held fruits, dairy, and vegetables, and the last held breads. There was also a beverage bar with water, milk, and a couple of different kinds of juices. Ron tried his best to get a nice portion of from each food bar and a tall glass of water.

"Remember trainees that you only get twenty minutes for everything," Alan said at the door. "Whatever you don't finish gets thrown in the bin. This isn't the time to enjoy the different flavors from our gourmet selection. This is the time to replenish."

Ron sat down his tray and looked at his plate. Everything looked bland and there weren't any real smells exciting his nose. However, he felt hungrier than he ever had. Even hungrier than when he, Harry, and Hermione were on the run and had nothing but puny fish to eat. He took a forkful of his bland sausage and welcomed it like an old friend.

Conor sat across from him. "Fucking hell."

"Don't I know it," Ron mumbled.

"I'm afraid to ask what we'll do after this. Last time I asked something like that we ran for ten ages." Conor cut his dry looking egg and took some into his mouth. "Hmm, just like my dad's."

Ron laughed at Conor's face that slowly paled the longer he chewed. "I don't want to get used to this rubbish."

"Maybe it will be for the better. Then when we go home, real food will replace sex," Conor said. Ron thought about it, but he was skeptical that anything could top any sex he'd experience with Hermione. Conor smirked. "Hit a nerve, did I?"

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

"Come on now, mate. I mentioned shagging and you turned to soggy shit. Thinking about your girl?" he asked.

"Possibly," Ron answered, feeling his ears heat up. "I love food, but I think I'll take Hermione."

"Hey, you two did really well," Olivia said, sitting next to Conor. She was the only female in the cabin, and Ron couldn't help but notice. She brought a sweeter and lighter smell into the room now that she was clean.

"Maybe you forgot what I looked like out there. I was horrible. I got winded before I even got a nice pace," Conor said.

"I saw you. You weren't too bad. You were better than me anyway. I reckon no one expects me to do well, and that's why I have to pick my arse off the floor and try harder." Olivia popped a handful of grapes into her mouth and pulled her dark and rather damp hair into a ponytail. She looked at Ron. "You were great."

"Yeah, Ron, if I would have known that you and Jack wanted to be partners through this, then I would have taken his bed. Mine is right next to yours," Conor said.

"Oi, piss off," Ron said. "First, I wasn't that impressive and second, Jack finished before me. You wouldn't know that talking to him though. He thinks I'm doing everything to personally make his life harder."

"He's an arsehole," Conor said.

"No, he's just trying to find his place here," Olivia corrected.

Conor smiled at her. "What? You fancy him?"

She rolled her eyes. "Of course, if I defend a bloke then I must like him. I swear all male brains are interconnected and badly connected at that."

Ron snickered. The comment sounded familiar to him. "Has anyone seen Roger?"

"I think he's skiving on breakfast to shower and rest his legs a little. I hope he's okay. It's not even like I can go see. We have to leave soon," Conor said. With that they quickly ate and tried to savor any flavor and fullness from their meals as they could.

In the blink of an eye, Alan was back in the cabin. "Alright, drop your forks and follow me." Ron took one last gulp of water and followed his group out of the dining hall. He actually felt a little relieved to see Roger join their group again. They walked down past the living quarters to yet another small group of cabins. If he never had to see a cabin again, then he could die satisfied with life.

Alan pointed to the line of cabins. "There are east's training cabins. Each cabin teaches a different area of the Auror profession and is equipped to do so. West has the exact replicas of everything here. No section has an advantage in terms of time spent on an area or information given. Just because you're split up doesn't mean that one section is better than the other. Any questions?"

Jack raised his hand but didn't bother waiting to be called on. "So, we are going to train with west sometime before the merge?"

"That is correct, Turner," Alan said. "There are a few lessons that Richard and I will teach together in a larger cabin fit for both sections. Also, we will have lessons where other professionals will assist in teaching or teach you the area of specialty. So, lets get started."

Ron thought that Alan would lead them inside a cabin but instead he took them out in the field. The day was finally awake, and the sun was out and shining over them. In spite of this, there wasn't much warmth in the air, and he was once again shivered. "Okay," Alan said, standing in front of them. He looked all of them down and was silent. Ron wasn't sure what the lesson was supposed to be, but he stood as straight as he could and kept silent as well.

"Alright, if you were going to throw a curse at me, show me how you'd do it. Don't actually say the spell; just get in the stance you'd take. Don't think about it. Just do it," Alan finally said. Ron looked around at everyone point his or her wands out. He tried not to think about what was right. He just pretended that a snatcher was in front of him, and he held out his wand as he always did.

Alan walked down their formation. "You're thinking about it. I know that's not natural," he said to someone as he past him. He looked Jack up and down. "Nice." He then stepped back. "Roger Johnson and Weasley, come here."

Ron mentally groaned and joined Roger at the front of the group by Alan. He didn't like looking at everyone head-on, and he saw Jack's slight eye roll. "Make your stances again," Alan said. Ron and Roger held out their wands again. "You see lot, these are proper stances. See how the arms are outstretched and the

shoulders are back and even. Notice the slight twist of their wrists. They are already prepared to strike and make another quick maneuver."

Alan stood right next to Roger. "Have you had much experience dueling?"

"Not particularly, Sir. Just what I've learned in school, and on my own," he answered.

Alan smiled. "You're a natural then." He walked over to Ron and he already knew what he was going to ask. "What about you, Weasley?"

He didn't know how to answer. Alan knew and so did everyone else. Ron was angry, and had no idea what this was for. "Yes, Sir. I've had some experience dueling."

"So, experience fuels you. I can see that." Alan stood between them. "Well, while they're both great stances, I knew from the moment I saw them raise their arms that they would both have the same end result."

Before Ron even realized it, Alan raised his fists and slammed them both very hard on his and Roger's forearms. Roger and Ron both dropped their wands in surprise. "You see lot, what Weasley and Johnson demonstrated here is that it doesn't matter how much natural ability or practice you've had. If you don't plant your feet and keep your guard up at all times, then you're vulnerable." Alan looked at both of them fiercely. "Do not ever let me see your weakness. You keep your position and keep a firm grip on your wand. A dark wizard will pick up on it, and he will not hesitate. Get back in line."

"Yes, Sir," they said together. Ron felt like a tit, but he would never be caught off guard again. Whatever Alan was trying to do to his spirit, he would not let him.

"Okay, consider today you're first and only review day. I want to make sure that everyone knows how to keep a firm grip as well as basic formation lines," Alan explained.

All day Alan had them practicing stances and using basic spells to try to disarm each other. He constantly shook them, and hit their arms and legs to get them to drop their wands. It annoyed Ron and his instinct to tell Alan to piss off danced on his tongue. However, he found a way to hold it in and by the end of the day, his brain was as tired as the rest of him.

It was dark by the time Ron got his tray for dinner. He didn't even really feel like eating. He was so tired and his back hurt from such a long session of constantly standing and dropping to the ground to pick up his wand. He finished up early and headed back to his cabin. He didn't see Harry, but he knew that he would see him in the morning. Roger was in his bed rubbing his knees.

"You alright?" Ron asked as he sat in the bed and took in the small amount of cushion that it provided.

"Yes, I survived," he mumbled. He rubbed his palms over his kneecaps and sighed. "I know everyone thinks that I'm the weakest person here now. I'm not usually such a prat. I guess I'm just out of shape. Being small doesn't automatically mean that I'm fit."

"You don't have anything to prove or explain to me. I'm not that much bigger than you, and I know what people are saying about me, too," Ron said.

Roger sat up and looked at him. "If it means anything, I honestly don't care about all that stuff. I don't think you're looking for a free pass. You need to be here and sweat just like everyone else."

Ron grinned slightly at him. Roger wasn't just mental. There was something about him that Ron understood and appreciated. "Thanks. It's true, honestly."

He nodded. "I figured. Before I left, my dad told me that I'd have to toughen up here if this was what I wanted. I think I have the skill, but I need to be stronger."

"So do I," Ron said softly, though he was talking more to himself than to Roger. Conor and Jack came back sometime later, but Ron didn't really feel like talking to them. So much had happened in one day, and he needed space and time to think.

Ron left the cabin and took in the fresh, cool air of the night. He was exhausted with every fiber of his being. He felt overwhelmed and a bit discouraged. Even though he was finally at Lambrick training, he didn't feel sure about it. He leaned against the wall of his house and folded his arms over his chest.

He saw Olivia stretching not too far in front of him by a tree. She was dressed in her running clothes. He frowned and walked up to her. "Oi, what are you doing?"

She rolled her shoulders. "Well, I was horrible today and tomorrow I want to do better."

"You're going to run it now?" he asked in shock.

"Oh, definitely not," she said, shaking her head. "I'm going to walk the path a couple of times. If you feel bad now, then just wait until you wake up tomorrow. Stretching out the muscles now will make them less stiff in the morning. You have to keep the blood circulating."

"Are you some kind of medical person?" he asked.

She smirked. "No, but my parents are both healers. I told you that."

"Oh, right," he said, rubbing his neck.

She chuckled. "It's fine. Are you going to join me?"

"No. I don't even know how I'm standing now," he quickly answered.

"Alright. See you in the morning," she said before jogging over to the start of the path. Ron plainly stared at her as if she was from another world. The last thing he wanted to do was walk any further than back to his bed, but he couldn't move away.

"Hold on," he said. He went over to her. "I'm coming, too."

"You don't have to," she said, putting her hair back into a ponytail. Even pulled back, it shined in the light of the evening.

"No, I probably should," Ron said. "I don't want Alan to have a reason to critique me again."

Olivia hissed as she stretched out her legs. "Sorry, but I think he's always going to have something to say. It's his job. Come on."

They walked the path in silence. Ron worked on keeping his legs moving. They hurt but slowly they started to loosen up a little. He rubbed his palms together and swallowed. He didn't know what to say to her. He was never the best at this sort of thing, and it didn't help that he was drained and slightly barmy.

"So, what a day, yeah?" Olivia eventually said.

"That's one way to put it," he answered.

"I just can't believe Alan said that this would be our easiest day. You think it's a wind up?" she asked.

"No. If there's one thing I'm realizing about him, then it's that he has no reason to lie. If he says it's shit, then it's shit," he said.

"He's a tough bloke," she said. "I was talking to some of the other people in our section. Alan has brilliant credentials."

Ron looked at her and figured it would be okay to talk to her. "I don't think he likes me too much."

"I told you, Ron, it's his job," she said.

"No, really, I don't think he personally wants me here," he urged. They turned around the bend in the path and a gust of breeze blew right through his jumper.

"Don't take it personally," Olivia said gently. "He's an Auror, and he only wants the best. He was the same way with Roger. If he's pushing you a lot, then it probably means that he really believes in you." The phrase sounded so familiar. It was wise and almost kind. However, it wasn't from the gorgeous mouth that he loved, so it didn't feel as good to hear.

"I dunno," he mumbled.

"Just don't think about it too much. It'll do your brain in. You don't want to end up like Jack who has to probably aim his pee better than everyone else," Olivia said.

Ron snorted. "You don't like him? You were defending him earlier."

"I don't even know him, but I know guys like him. He's talented but obviously insecure. It's annoying, but I don't think he means to be so rude," she said.

"You just have an analysis on everyone, right?" he asked.

"I call it spot on intuition," she answered with a grin.

He rolled his eyes. "Maybe you should work in the mental ward at St. Mungo's."

"Ha, my parents would love that," she said.

"They want you to work at a hospital?" he asked.

"For as long as I can remember, but it doesn't matter. I want to be an Auror, and I always have. Medicine isn't for me. I want to bloody be here." She spoke with a bit of edginess in her voice. He could tell that it was probably an issue for her, and he didn't want to get in her business.

"We can talk about something else," he said.

"Good idea," she breathed.

He decided to go with a safe question. "Ah, you got any brothers or sisters?"

"No. My parents barely had enough time to have me," she answered.
"Is this when I get to ask a question?"

"Sure," he said.

She pulled the sleeves on her jumper further down on her hands and looked at him. "Who's Hermione?"

"Sorry?" he asked, a bit taken aback.

Olivia's cheeks flushed. "When I sat next to you at breakfast, you mentioned something about someone named Hermione to Conor. I'm assuming that's your other friend, and the one from the article as well."

"Yeah, she is," Ron said slowly. It felt weird to hear a complete stranger talk about Hermione. Ever since he was eleven, he, Hermione, and Harry had sort of lived in the same world with the same people. Everyone already knew each other. It was as if he somehow forgot that there were other people in the world, and ways other than through war that they would be known.

"We don't have to talk about her. I'm just trying to come up with something to say. I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head again. "I talk too much."

Just like before, Ron swiftly understood that he was acting like a knob. Olivia just wanted to talk like regular people did. He could put his guard down, and he didn't need to protect Hermione's name. No one was after her. "No, it's okay. I don't mind. I'm the one that should be sorry. Yes, it's the same Hermione. She's my girlfriend."

"Where is she?" Olivia asked.

"In school," he said.

She raised an eyebrow. "She's younger than you?"

"No. Actually, she's quite a few months older than me," he said. "It's just that we didn't get to attend our seventh year at Hogwarts because of everything, but she wanted to go back."

"She wanted to go back to school?" Olivia asked in shock.

He nodded and chuckled. "Yeah. She's the kind of person who finishes what she starts, and she's a bloody genius so it makes sense that she would."

"Must be tough, being away from her," Olivia softly said.

He wasn't quite comfortable telling Olivia that being away from Hermione hurt his insides sometimes, but lying about his feelings didn't seem right either. "I'm still getting used to it," he decided to say. He missed Hermione so much, and talking about her made him miss her more. However, it also made him feel closer to her. Saying her name and talking about her made her feel more real to him.

"So, you two are pretty close?" she asked.

He shook his head slightly to break himself out of his thoughts. "Yes, we are. She's my best friend, and we've been through a lot together." He tried to think of a word or phrase to describe what they had. It was always so difficult. "It's perfect."

Olivia smiled widely. "I'm happy for you, Ron. With everything you've been through, I reckon it's great to have someone you can trust."

All he could do was smile and nod again. It felt different talking about Hermione with another girl. He didn't have to explain so much. "So um, what about you? Are you with anyone?"

"Oh, no," she said, waving a hand. "I've never really been the type. My mum says that I'm too stubborn to be in a serious relationship. She's probably right. Plus, I moved around a lot growing up. It's kind of hard to chat someone up when you're constantly on the go."

"The only place I've ever really been to is Egypt," he said.

"I haven't been there, but I've been to a lot of other places. Sometimes it was fun and sometimes it wasn't," she said with a shrug.

Ron didn't know what to say once again. It seemed as if every topic was raw for Olivia. "Well, ah, I reckon I should tell Roger that you're not looking for anyone. He can stop trying."

She laughed and her face lightened up somewhat. "Yes, please, take care of that for me. I'm here to train." She looked down timidly before connecting her eyes to his again. "So, I have to ask, how's Harry?"

"In what way do you mean?" he asked, feeling a little let down. He was hoping that the conversation wouldn't turn into her wanting all the gory details of what happened between Harry and Voldemort.

"I mean how is he? Aside from all the glamour and what I've read in the papers over the years." Olivia scrunched her nose and shook her head. "He seems very quiet. I didn't expect that."

Ron's shoulders slouched in relief. "Oh, um, well, he isâ€¢most of the time. I reckon The Daily Prophet makes him seem a lot more interesting than he is."

"Harry Potter isn't interesting?" she asked.

"He's okay. He doesn't have the best jokes, but he cooks better than he entertains," he cheeked.

Olivia laughed. "He cooks as well? He really does deserve all the glory then. Sounds like a great guy."

"He is," Ron said honestly. "You just have to get over who Harry is to really know who he is. If that even makes sense."

"A little," she answered. "You're a really lucky guy, Ron. You still have your life after all this. My parents worked on so many people, and a lot were severely hurt or eventually died." Ron looked away from her and rubbed his palms into his thighs. For a second his heart raced, but he resisted the panic. "That was a stupid thing to say," Olivia quickly whispered.

"It's alright," he said just as quietly. "I am lucky and I realize that. Things are great, but I know they're not as great as they could be and sometimes it makes it worse." Suddenly, Ron wasn't talking to Olivia. He was simply expressing his words to darkness of the air. There was a sense of freedom and clarity on the path that he didn't feel anywhere else. "Sometimes I just feel like I'll never be completely happy, and I know that I never will be. It makes me even more fearful of losing what I still have." Ron snapped back and realized what he had said. He blushed furiously and cleared his throat. "Sorry. I didn't mean to justâ€¢spill all that out to you."

She touched his arm for a second. "It's okay. Sometimes it's good to let all that stuff out."

"Yeah, but I don't know. I don't even know you," he said sheepishly.

Olivia shrugged. "It can be harder to talk to people you know and are really close to than it is to a stranger, but I hope we won't always be strangers."

"I don't think we will," he said confidently. They turned over the last bend of the path and were back at the starting point again. "We should get some sleep. I learned my lesson this morning."

"Yeah, good idea. Thanks for walking with me," she said.

"No problem. Goodnight," he said. He walked back to his cabin and glanced at Olivia as she made her way to the only girls cabin on the property. He smiled and walked back into his room.

Ron did have to go to sleep, but he knew that he had writing to do. He wrote Ginny first as promised and spent a lot of time thinking of what he wanted to say to Hermione. Somehow his walk and conversation with Olivia inspired him. After finishing, he looked over his letter:

Hey Hermione,

I hope things worked out for you and that you were able to sneak back without a problem. I still can't get over how brilliant that was. How are classes and how are you doing? I feel like we spend so much time talking about me. I don't want you to think that I'm not thinking about you or hoping that everything turns out okay for you. I do. I mean I am now. I always am. Well, you get what I mean. You know I'm terrible at this sort of thing, Hermione.

So, when we first got here they split us up into different sections, east and west. I'm in east, and Harry is in west. It was a shock at first, and it still sort of is. I'm a little disappointed but at the same time relieved. I feel like there's some unwanted pressure off my back. I hope that doesn't make me a bad friend. Anyway, it's the first night after training, and I'm tired and sore as all bloody hell. They made us run around the property and fly around the property till we about passed out early this morning. I did okay. I did really well with the running but not as great with the flying. Of course, Harry was a lot better at me. We sort of raced each other. It was fun, but I really wanted to beat him. I will someday soon.

I have to share a small room with three other blokes. Two of them are okay, Conor and Roger. Conor is really funny and Roger is a sort of mental, but I like him. There's another guy, Jack, who thinks I want everyone kissing my arse. For some reason he reminds me of Cormac McLaggen. You remember that arsehole, right? Anyhow, after all the running, we got to "eat," which was

bullocks. You were right. There wasn't one piece of chocolate in sight. You know too bloody much, Hermione.

Our actual training started after breakfast. It was a review day where we worked on keeping a proper stance and keeping a hold of our wands. This was also okay, but my trainer made me look like an arse. Alan, he's so hard on me. He told me I had a great stance but purposely made me drop my wand to show that I didn't have a good grip to everyone. Earlier this morning, the other trainer told Harry that he should pace his running like I do, but of course Alan said that I was a sloppy flyer. I don't get it. I know I kneed him in the bollocks, but I don't think it's a reason for him to want to go after me. It just doesn't seem right, and it's getting to me.

I know you want all the details so you can write them down, but there really isn't much to say. Lambrick is almost on its own island, and it's beautiful for a while. Everything is green and quiet. You'd love it. I thought about you while I jogged, and it made me do better. I really want you here with me. I know being an Auror has never really interested you, but I know you'd be great out here. On that subject, there are only four girls here and only one in my section. Her name is Olivia. She's really nice. We talked about you and Harry. It's strange, Hermione. Everyone knows us but doesn't know us at all. I honestly don't like being known. I feel like I have to defend everything because people don't understand. We were in our own world, you, Harry, and me but that's gone now. I'm not sure how I feel about it either.

Well, I should probably finish this up. I know you're going to write me back saying how I didn't give you enough detail, but I'm too tired to recount the day. I swear my next letter will be better. Plus, Harry is writing to you, so maybe he'll add better details. I honestly do hope that things are okay with you. I'm all right here, and I think I'll stay all right. I miss you so much, and I can't wait to see you. We get a break over the Christmas holiday and two passes throughout the duration we're here. Of course I'll use them to see you, and maybe we can work out other ways to meet as well. I know what you're thinking but trust me. I told you; nothing will keep me from seeing you.

I love you and I'm remembering to breathe,

Ron

Ron folded his letter and put it in his side drawer. He grinned as he settled under the covers and thought about her response to his letter. Even after such a long and hard day, Hermione was still able to make him better. She didn't even need to be there to do it.

* * *

**Okay, there are a few things that I want to explain. First, I know this chapter seemed a little long and detailed. It won't always be this way. I really just needed everyone to get a clear picture of camp and how the days will operate. I won't always go into detail about showering and eating and whatnot. Second, while Ron is away at camp and Hermione is in school, it's not like they won't see each other. I have things planned outside of the short holiday and two passes he's given. You'll see. Third, and most importantly, while Lambrick is a major plotline and Ron being an Auror is crucial, it's not the entire story. I'm not going to have dozens of chapters of Ron at Lambrick, and the story won't end when he leaves. So, don't worry about that. Well, I hope you all enjoyed this after a long break of nothing. Really sorry about that. Thanks for reading and review!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 30*: Hit the floor

WOW! Thanks for all the reviews! They mean a lot to me.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron,

I reckon I'm supposed to keep you updated on the shop and me, or at least that's what Angelina lectured about a few days ago. I really don't know what to say about myself right now, so I'll talk about the shop and maybe something will come up. The business is doing okay. It's a bit slow and quiet, but it always is this time of year. It's giving me more time off, which is all right. Though, I like staying busy. It keeps my mind off things and sometimes I get real nutters who walk in at night. You remember all that, right? There was this fat bloke who came in a couple of nights back looking for something to make him vomit. He said that he wanted to fake being sick so he could take his wife out. Now, trust me when I say this, the woman on his arm was at least twenty years younger than he was, and I didn't see a ring on her finger like I did on his. I gave him a bottle of Ginger Pale and Passion Fruit Puke. That way, he'll look nice and pale and he'll throw up, but the thing is, I gave him the twenty-four hour Passion Fruit Puke instead of the one-hour and I gave him the extra strength bottle. He was too busy snogging to even notice, too. So, I don't think the bloody, cheating bastard will be enjoying his woman too much longer. Ron, you should have seen me. It took everything I had not to laugh right in front of his sweaty, greasy face.

Anyway, I went by the house last week. It was nice. It was just mum, dad, and me talking and catching up. It's never just been the three of us before. I knew they were being strong for me, but I also knew that mum wanted to talk about Fred. I left before she

could get the chance to. Well, I hope things are going okay for you and that you haven't gotten yourself into too much trouble. I know you must be learning loads of things, and you most likely look like a prat trying to perform the new moves. It's fine. You're the best prat out there. Remember that, little brother.

Write back whenever you have some free time, and remind Harry that all his Lambrick groupies mean nothing. He's dating our sister, and he better keep his hands clean if he wants to keep his prick intact. I may send him some laced chocolates as a warning.

George

Ron smiled and read the last few of lines over again. He was relieved that George was okay and was also talking to their family more, but George wasn't as covert as he thought he was. Even though they were only words, Ron could almost hear George's tone and could almost see the look in his eyes. He knew his older brother far too well.

"You okay?" Conor asked from his bed.

He looked up from the letter. "Huh?"

Conor put down his football magazine. "You randomly got a terrible look on your face. Did you get bad news?"

"Oh, um, no. I reckon I'm still knackered is all," Ron said.

"Yeah, it doesn't even seem like we got a break today," Conor said. It was true. It was Sunday and their only off day of the entire week. Ron couldn't believe that a week had gone by, and he was still in one piece. The morning runs and the daylong wand and combat-training sessions took so much out of him, yet he was surviving.

"That's probably because we still had to run this morning. I don't think we'll ever get a break from that," Ron said. He looked through his drawer for a quill. "Conor, do you have a quill I can borrow? I need to write my brother back sometime tonight."

"Sure. I brought plenty." He handed him a quill. "Is that who the letter is from?"

"Yeah, my brother, George," Ron said.

Conor nodded slowly. "Is that the one?"

"Yes," Ron finished before he could get another word out.

"Sorry. I didn't mean for it to sound that way," he mumbled.

"No problem," Ron reassured. He smiled at him and nodded to give it extra weight. It was almost a week that Ron had lived with his new roommates, but all of them still acted weird when anything remotely close to his family was brought up. "He's doing okay,

you know? I'm not sure what the current rumors in the tabloids are, but he's fine and his shop is doing great."

"I believe you, mate," Conor said. "Trust me, I don't know what the rumors are. I don't pay attention to all that shit. If you say he's fine, then it's brilliant. It's not my business."

"Good," Ron said. "You're probably one of the only people here who doesn't want to know everything."

Conor's face hardened somewhat. "Yeah, well, like I said, it's not my business. Everyone deserves privacy, and I don't think being a part of a magical community should change that." He slightly shook his head and went back to looking at his magazine. Ron found him very curious. Conor seemed like such a playful and easygoing bloke. However, sometimes his voice would grow so serious and his eyes would tell a different story. Out of all his roommates, Conor probably talked the most but the least about himself. Ron wanted to know more about him, but he wasn't one to push.

The door to their cabin opened and Roger walked through, panting and bringing in a strong odor of sweat. He dragged over to his bed and flopped down. He wiped sweat off his forehead and brushed dirt off his jeans. "Thatâ€¢'wasâ€¢'the last timeâ€¢'thatâ€¢'I work out with Jack," he said in between wheezes.

"Fucking hell, what did he have you do?" Conor asked.

Roger kicked off his shoes and stretched his skinny legs. "We ran and stretched and did these horrible jumping exercises. Basically everything but skin baby dragons."

"I don't know why you asked him for help in the first place," Ron said. "He probably made most of those exercises up on the spot."

"Ron's right," Conor added. "You know any opportunity he gets to show off his talent and his bloody hair the lad takes."

"But I didn't really ask him for help," Roger said. "He more or less came up to me after dinner and asked if I wanted to join him. I thought he could help me. Jack's amazing at all the physical stuff, and I'm a tit under water. Alan knows it, too." Roger frowned and pulled his shirt off. He used it to wipe the sweat off his chest and back. He was extremely bony to Ron, and it still amazed him that Roger was training to be an Auror.

"That's not true, Roger. You're not a tit," Conor said.

Roger rolled his eyes. "Yes, I am. According to Alan, anyway. No matter what I do, it's wrong. The grip I have on my wand isn't strong enough. I run too awkwardly. I'm great with my offensive spells, but my assurance isn't there." He through his shirt down and rested his face in his hands. "Just something every bloody time."

Conor looked to Ron for support, but Ron didn't know what to say. Roger's words weren't an exaggeration. He got almost as much shit

from Alan as Ron did. They were the targets of cabin two, but he didn't know why. It was something that bonded them, and it was another reason why Ron felt closer to Roger than to anyone else in the cabin. "Was he like that during your trial?" Ron asked.

"No, and that's what does my head in," he answered. "He seemed to be impressed with my ability during the field test. He and Richard both did, but the moment I get here it's like none of it mattered."

"I must have caught Alan on one of his better days because he didn't seem unimpressed with my field test," Conor said. "Then again, he didn't seem impressed either. Hmm. How was he during yours, Ron?"

"Um, more or less the same," Ron said. His theory that Alan's behavior had to do with their previous performances was no longer valid, and he wasn't ready to tell them about his horrible field test or that he had received his letter a day late. He had to change the subject. "Well, next time you want to train or get extra exercise, then you should probably try things at your own pace."

"What? You think it's too much to depend on others here?" Roger asked rather coldly.

"No," Ron said, "I just don't think that Jack is the right person you should try to train with."

"I agree. You need someone who's more like you," Conor said.

Roger grinned and batted his eyelashes like a twat. "Oh, like Ron has?" Conor snorted, but Ron didn't find it clever.

"Fuck off," he mumbled. "I told you that wasn't funny."

"Ouch. I think you hit something, Roger," Conor said.

"I think I did, too. What's the matter, Ron?" Roger asked.

Ron ignored him and decided to write George back later. He had to get out of the room. "I'll leave you two alone to giggle and act like knobs." He got out of bed, eased on his trainers, and pulled a jumper over his head.

"Ouch. Once again you hit something," Conor said while laughing. Ron gave them both the finger and opened the cabin door. He disregarded the look from Roger as he walked outside.

Ron leaned against the side of the cabin and rubbed his hands together. It was rather chilly, but he was getting used to the night air. "Twats," he said under his breath, referring to his roommates. Soon enough, the reason for their teasing came into his view. Olivia came into his line of vision and tied her hair back while walking over to the starting line of the path. Ron pushed himself off the wall and walked over to her. "Oi!" he said.

She turned to him and stretched her arms. "Oi," she answered with exaggeration. "Is that how you greet everyone?"

"Just about," Ron said, stretching as well.

Olivia bent over and touched her toes. "Mmm, and here I thought I was special. You ready?"

"Yeah. Let's go," he said and for the seventh night in a row, they walked the path together. While they hadn't exchanged the exact words, Ron had a feeling that it was something they would do for awhile. After their first walk, he found himself outside his cabin and Olivia on her way to the path the very next night. Before he knew it, they were walking around the path the following night and the night after.

Ron thought about Roger's behavior and rolled his eyes in the slight darkness. He was starting to understand why girls always got so frustrated with blokes. Not everything was about sex between girls and guys. It simply felt good to let go of the struggles of the day on the path and stay in shape at the same time. It helped that Olivia was good company. Most of the time they didn't talk, only walked and kicked rocks that came in front of them.

"I wonder what we'll work on tomorrow," Olivia said after some time. Whenever they did talk, she was usually the one to start the conversation.

"I don't know," he said. "Everyone is in agreement that last week was our warm-up. I actually hope we do something different."

"So do I. It's been a little boring. I'm ready for some action," she said, picking up a twig and breaking it into little pieces.

Ron admired the gesture. "But action doesn't always equal out to be something better."

"Spoken like a true hero." She looked at him sideways and smiled. "Not everyone has had as much adventure as you, Ron. I doubt even Alan or Richard has."

He rubbed his neck and shrugged. "Maybe not, but it doesn't mean anything."

"Of course it does. Look, we may all be equal trainees here, but there's no denying that you and Harry are special people. You're the reason why we're all still able to come here. Be proud." Her smile grew and she nudged his arm with her elbow.

He couldn't help up smile a bit himself. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," she said. They continued to walk in silence. Ron thought about what she said, and it made him think of Roger.

"Hey, do you think that you could talk to Roger?" he asked.

"Depends on what it's about," she said.

"He's been having sort of a hard time," he explained. "Alan is always giving him trouble, and I'm sure he's feeling really discouraged and probably weak."

The kindness in Olivia's face disappeared. "Right, so, you think that I'll be able to relate to that because I'm also having a hard time and I'm weak?"

"Huh?" he asked in confusion.

"Or maybe it's because I'm a girl," she continued, "and my innate emotion, sensitivity, and motherly nature can make him feel better. Honestly, Ron?" She started jogging ahead.

Ron stared at her back in puzzlement for a moment and tried to piece together what had just happened. "Olivia, wait!" He started running and easily caught up to her. He touched her shoulder. "What in the bloody hell is your problem?"

She stopped jogging but walked at a quick pace and didn't look at him. "Why would you ask me something like that?"

"Because Roger needs it," he said. "I don't want him to feel like this. The bloke is trying."

"But that's not what I'm talking about." She finally stopped and put her hands on her hips. "Why are you asking me? You're his roommate, and he's got three others. Plus, there's a whole wing full of people. Why am I the one singled out again? I know I'm the only girl in this section, but it doesn't mean that I'm the mum for everyone."

Her implications gave Ron a headache. He had no idea how his question had opened up so much for her. "What? Olivia, I don't know what I said to make you think all that, but that's not what I'm trying to say."

"Oh, really?" she said.

"Yes. Listen, I don't want you to speak to him because you're a girl," he said. "I reckoned that after all that great stuff you just said to me, you could find something to say to lift him up a little. You seem to be good at it. If it had been Conor or any other bloke, then I'd ask him the same thing. I promise, it's nothing more than that. I'm sorry."

Olivia's cheeks flushed, and she slapped a hand to her face. "Ron, you're right," she groaned. "Don't apologize. I'm sorry, and I'm a fucking idiot. My dad always says that my impulsiveness and hot temper will get me into trouble."

Ron relaxed. "It's okay."

"No, it's not. You didn't deserve that. It's just thatâ€¦Roger really isn't the only one having some issues, and you and Harry aren't the only people who have things to prove." She started walking again and he joined her. "I knew coming in that things

would be tough for me, but seeing so few girls really puts things into perspective. It's really make or break at every little turn. I have to be perfect with everything, and I'm stressing a bit."

"Don't bother explaining," he said. "Believe me, I get it. It's fine, honestly."

She bit her lip and looked at him uneasily. "Really?"

"Yes," he said, holding out his hand.

She shook it and sighed heavily. "Good. I don't mind talking to Roger. He's sweet and I want him to do well, too. At least for now."

The once again started walking and fell into a silence. Ron smirked. "You know, I only barely see you as a girl."

"Sorry?" Olivia asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Like you said, coming to Lambrick when you know you'll be in such a small minority takes a lot courage and possibly a huge pair of bollocks. I wouldn't be too surprised if you had some." He burst into laughter the moment she gasped.

"You arsehole!" she screamed. He started jogging down the path and Olivia tried her best to catch him.

After their walk, Ron and Olivia parted and he made his way back to his cabin. Jack was walking toward it as well from the opposite direction. "Ron, what are you doing out here?" he asked.

Ron sighed and stopped just outside the door. "Just finished my walk. You know that."

Jack was blotchy, but he didn't look nearly as sweaty as Roger had. "Ah, that's right. You do it with Olivia, right?"

"If walking is what you're referring to," Ron said. "I'm gonna go inside now."

"Wait, I want to ask you something." Jack pulled him by the arm and practically dragged him away from the cabin. Ron yanked his arm away and forced himself not to swear at him.

"What do you want?" Ron asked. He and Jack didn't get on, and Ron did everything he could not to have to talk to him or be around him when he didn't have to. Nonetheless, Jack insisted on talking and bothering him.

Jack smiled a little. "I want to know what your plan is."

"My plan?" Ron repeated.

"With Olivia," he said.

Ron was already tired of talking to him. "I don't have a plan with her."

Jack snorted. "Ron, I thought we talked about this. You don't have to pretend with me. I think it's good strategy."

Ron simply looked at him. Jack was obviously some sort of nutter.
"Jack, I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about!" He looked around and pulled Ron even further away from the cabin. "I'm talking about you getting close to Olivia so you can spot her weaknesses."

"What? Are you taking the piss right now?" Ron asked.

"No, I'm not. I'm not thick either," Jack said. "Look, I don't think it's by accident that you're going out for walks every night with the only girl here, and it just so happens that this girl fancies you. You're taking advantage of it." Jack's words sounded horrible. When Conor and Roger teased him, Ron knew that they were just having a laugh but Jack's accusation made him feel sick. It was just so wrong.

"I'm not taking advantage of anything, and you couldn't be more wrong about Olivia and what I'm doing and what we're doing." Ron took a breath and tried to think of the plainest words in the English language. "I have a girlfriend, and Olivia doesn't fancy me."

"Ron, come on. Let's talk from guy to guy," Jack said.

"Fucking hell, I'm not listening to this." Ron started walking off but Jack took his wrist. "You better stop grabbing me, Jack," he warned, snatching his arm away.

Jack merely pulled away and looked almost bored. Ron knew that Jack didn't take him seriously. "Ron, it's obvious that you're upset about me finding out. It's okay because I'm not going to tell anyone."

"Bloody hell, Jack, there's nothing to tell!" Ron said. "Yes, we go on walks, but that's it. It's for training, and she's my friend. What's the big bloody deal?"

"Nothing at all, Ron," Jack said smoothly. "I'm complimenting you. I'm not judging you. I didn't think that you'd stop with the champion routine. It's nice to see that you plan to play dirty. I'd do the same thing."

"That's the difference between you and me because I'm not doing it. I'm not exploiting Olivia. She's helping me," Ron said.

"Come on, Ron," Jack said. He peered around again even though they were alone and had been the whole time. "Look, I love my mum and my gran and my female friends and whatever, but let's be frank. There's no way that Olivia or any of the girls here will be as tough or as capable as us men."

Ron gaped at him. He automatically thought of Hermione, Ginny, his mum, and Tonks. They were some of the bravest, most

proficient, and toughest people he knew. "You're a fucking bastard."

"Don't get all upset," Jack said, holding up his hand. "I'm being honest, and you know it. I'm not saying that women can't be Aurors. There are a few greats ones, but they'll never be as good as the male Aurors. So, my question is why you would choose to train with Olivia if you honestly want extra practice. I mean—"

"What?" Ron interrupted. "I should train with you? Roger and I should follow your lead and do your extraordinary exercises?"

"Actually, yes. Alan has complimented me a few times, and I see how it's going for you two. I'm sure my ways are a lot more beneficial than walking," Jack said.

Ron wanted to laugh but Jack appeared completely serious. "Look, that may have worked on Roger, but you don't fool me," he said. "I know you're trying to discourage him, and I know you're trying to make yourself look good in process."

"It's a competition," Jack said casually.

"I know," Ron said. "I know we're all here wanting the same thing, and I know we're all here wanting the same spot but not every fucking minute is a contest. Not everyone is trying to see how they can ruin someone else every second of every day like you seem to be doing."

"It's all about survival, Ron," Jack said. "I'll do whatever I need to do. I guess that's another difference between us. I'm willing to fight and I used to think that you were, too. After everything you've previously done."

"Don't say another word about me. You have absolutely no idea what you're talking about or what I've done. Shut up." Ron took a step toward him, but Jack stood his ground.

Jack took a step closer. "I'm not afraid to say what's on my mind. I'm not easily intimidated."

"I'm not either," Ron said. "Jack, you know what I think all this is? I think you're jealous and a little paranoid. Olivia doesn't give you the attention that you expect her to, and though you're stronger than Roger, you know Alan thinks that he has better cursing skills. As for me, well, you made it clear on the first day what you think."

Jack looked away from him and shook his head. "You're thick."

"Not as thick as you're hoping I am. You want to get inside my head, but it's not going to work," Ron said with a grin. "You're right. I know a lot about strategy, and I see yours as clearly as I see the bloody trees behind us. It's like in chess. You're trying to group together and get rid of the inconspicuous pieces now so you won't have them on the board when they grow into a threat later, but all you're going to end up doing is getting yourself into the shit if you don't stop."

Jack glared at him for a while but said nothing. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. It's the last time I reach out and try to be nice to you." He walked past him and up to the cabin. Ron followed him in. Roger and Conor were laughing but stopped as soon as they walked in.

Roger looked between them. "Is something wrong?"

"Not at all," Jack said, sitting on his bed.

Roger nodded. "Good. Um, thanks for the help tonight, but I don't think I'll be training with you again, Jack."

"It's fine. Not too many people can handle it," Jack said. Ron sat on his and once again fought the urge to swear at him. He pulled off his shoes and picked up George's letter. He reached into his side desk for the quill and touched the picture of himself and Hermione instead. He took it out and looked it over. He smiled and ran his finger over Hermione's beautiful and confident face.

Ron looked up. "Hey, Jack."

"What?" he asked stiffly.

"You see this girl?" Ron said, pointing to Hermione. "This is my girlfriend. You keep forgetting I have one, but I reckon a face will help you to remember. Anyway, I know that on any day at any time she could kick your arse, and she's never tried one of your exercises."

Conor and Roger started laughing, and Jack balled his fists. Ron knew that he wasn't going to do anything, so he put the picture back and started writing to George.

* * *

"YOU ALL HAVE EXACTLY FIVE MINTUES TO GET DRESSED, GRAB YOUR BROOMS, AND GET YOUR ARSES OUT HERE!"

Ron yawned and slowly opened his lids. He took a minute to wrap his head around the earliness before sitting up and rubbing his eyes. Conor and Roger were up as well and getting dressed. After a week, the shock of Alan's booming voice had faded. "Where's Jack?" Ron asked as he swung his legs over his bed and pulled his running clothes from his trunk.

"YOU NOW HAVE THREE AND A HALF MINUTES," Adam's voice boomed.

"He's been gone for awhile. I'm a light sleeper, and I heard him leave a while ago," Conor said.

"You must have really torn into his bollocks, Ron. What was all that about last night?" Roger asked. Ron opened his mouth to answer with some modified version of the truth, but Alan's voice boomed once again with the one-minute warning.

"I'll tell you later tonight. We should probably go before we're late," he answered.

Alan and Richard no longer spoke before the two groups took off. They only reminded everyone to stretch and pace their breathings before leading the groups down their destined paths. Although going into the third lap still pained Ron, he was getting better with his stamina and he wasn't in as much pain. As always, he passed by Roger, giving him a word of encouragement and saw the back of Jack head as he easily outran him. Ron didn't mind. He knew that his running skills was in good shape and would improve in time. However, he was still winded by the time he reached the flying pitch, and he still wasn't adjusting to the speed of his broom.

"Weasley, give me something today," Alan said as Ron paced down to the starting position.

"I will," Ron assured as he mounted his broom.

"I hope so because you won't have your flying partner today. Potter is already in the air," Alan said.

Ron froze right as he was about to kick off. He looked back to Alan. "Sir?"

"Potter is already in the air," Alan said with a small grin.

"That's because he's Harry bloody Potter, and he's in west. No one in west disappoints, Alan," Richard said right against his ear.

Alan shoved him away. "Weasley, stop gawking and get to it. It's okay. You're not competing with him."

"Right. Sorry." Ron shook it off and kicked off. He took off at an impressive and reckless speed. He couldn't believe that Harry had actually gotten ahead of him as far as the running was concerned. All week Ron had managed to beat him there. He hoped that he wasn't spilling back so soon.

He flew his eight laps and touched down. He let out a shaky breath and wiped his forehead. Alan walked over to him and clapped his back. "See, that's better. I can tell that you're thinking about what you're doing. It's still not where I think you should be on a Firebolt, but it's better." His grey eyes were so stern, but his voice was softer and genuine. Ron wanted to believe that Alan didn't have it out for him. No matter how much Alan acted like a git, Ron wanted to make him proud.

"Thank you, sir," he said.

Ron grabbed his broom and walked past Harry who was finished and talking to Richard, but it wasn't long before Harry caught up to him and tapped his shoulder. "Oi," he said.

"Hey," Ron said.

"Can we slow down a minute?" Harry asked. They stopped walking and Harry dropped his broom and put his hands on his knees. He was terribly out of breath, and his face was completely red. Every coal strand of hair wilted in sweatiness.

"Are you all right?" Ron asked.

He nodded and wheezed. "Yeah, I just feel like I'm going to shit out my stomach."

Ron looked at him in confusion. "I don't know why. You were great. I didn't even see you in the air."

Harry let out a huge wad of spit and stood straight. He truly looked like he would fall over. "That's why. I ran almost the whole way. It's why I got down there so fast."

"Why would you run the whole way? You can't do that," Ron said.

"I know but I had to. I had to prove to Richard that the pass had been worth it and that I didn't lose any energy. He's really angry that I ran the whole way, but I finished." Harry nudged his head forward and they started walking.

"What pass?" Ron asked.

Harry looked at him smugly. "I saw Ginny yesterday."

"What?" Ron gasped. "She came here?"

"No, you git, I went to see her at Hogwarts," he said.

Ron shook his head in disbelief. "But how?"

"With a pass," Harry said incredulously. "Don't you remember the speech we got last week? We get two passes to leave here."

"Yeah, but I didn't think I dunno," Ron said with a shrug.

"That they were real? Well, they are and they work," Harry said. "Shit, let's stop again." Ron held his broom for him as Harry bent over and dry heaved.

"Maybe you should go to the medical cabin," Ron said.

"No, I'm fine," Harry said weakly. "Today is the last day that I run the whole way at that speed. I'm not ready for it. I'll keep my slow pace. I'm no distance runner like you."

Ron wanted to care more for Harry's condition, but he was much more interested in him using one of his passes. "Okay, well, tell me how it worked."

"What, the running?" Harry panted.

"No, you anus, the pass," Ron said. "You can't just tell me that you got away from here and not tell me how."

Harry stood and grinned. "No regard for my safety or health?"

"I've seen you in far worse conditions," he said, returning the smile.

Harry wiped his forehead again and took a deep breath. "Fair enough. Well, I've really wanted to get out of my bloody cabin and away from some of these people. Ginny and I have been writing to each other madly, and I really needed to see her. Fuck, I've needed to do a lot of things involving her."

"I've got a broom in each hand, Harry. Keep that in mind," Ron eased in.

Harry chuckled and nodded. "Right. So, Friday I wrote her asking when she had some free time. She told me Sunday was good and since it's our only off day, it was perfect for me. She informed McGonagall, and I went to Richard's office and asked for the pass."

"Did he want to know why?" Ron asked in amazement.

"No, it's part of the policy. We have a right to handle our affairs with discretion. The only thing Richard needed to know was where I had to go," Harry said.

"I can't believe he just let you leave," Ron said. It seemed like the most radical idea in the world. Lambrick had a way of making it seem as if it was the place in the universe.

"He didn't just let me leave," Harry said. "There were a few rules he told me first. I couldn't come back intoxicated by any means in any way. I couldn't bring anyone back. I couldn't tell anyone where I was coming from or where it was located, and I had to fill out some protection form."

"How much time did you get?" Ron asked.

"About three hours," he said. "I earned those three hours, too, Ron. I know it seems like Richard loves me, but it's not like that. He puts so much more on me than a lot of the other people in my section, and he has no problem picking at every little thing I do wrong."

"I believe you, Harry. It's how it's always been. Besides, I think Alan is sort of the same way with me and a couple of other people in my section," Ron said. "So what did you do?"

Harry laughed and scratched his head. "Well, I'll leave a few details out for you but we mostly walked around the grounds and talked. All I've wanted to do is hold her and laugh with her again. I missed her taking the piss out of me, and there's

nothing better than her punching me in the arm for pointing out all her freckles."

Ron grinned but it quickly faded. He kicked at the ground and shrugged. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Some of Harry's happiness faded as well. "I couldn't. It's not like I didn't want to or that I didn't want you to come with me. I never see you except for in the mornings, and I didn't even think it would happen until after we were finished running on Sunday." Harry looked down. "Things are harder now."

"I know they are," he said. They went silent and felt the weight of their slightly strained friendship.

"I'm really sorry, Ron," Harry said.

"It's fine," Ron lied. "Um, how's Ginny doing?"

"She's great and as sexy as ever," Harry said with a prat look on his face. "Apparently, quidditch practice has been going well and the captain has been asking her to help him run the sessions. It's good for her."

"It's amazing for her. So, how's Hermione?" Ron asked with a heavy heart. "Did you see her?" Harry nodded. "Well, how was she?" Ron asked. "How did she look? Did-did she ask about me?" Harry burst into laughter, and Ron jabbed him in the side with one of the Firebolts. "Piss off!"

"Aww, Ron," Harry teased.

"I mean it, Harry," he warned.

"Okay, fine," he said. "Yes, I saw Hermione. She's fine and she looked fine and of course she asked about you. I told her and Ginny that you were all right. If it makes you feel any better, she seemed rather disappointed to see me without you. She didn't know I was coming, and she thought you were with me."

"It does make me feel better," Ron said honestly. "Fucking hell, I can't believe you saw Hermione. I haven't been able to write to her as much as I'd like to. I don't know. It feels like it's been ages."

"Then go see her," Harry suggested. "Use a pass."

"No, Alan would never allow it," Ron said.

"Ron, he really can't tell you no," Harry said. "You heard Phillip. They're ours to use when we need to. Yes, we're supposed to use them for emergencies, but it's our decision. You've earned it, and Alan won't be able to deny it."

"How would you know?" Ron asked. "You're over in west doing Merlin knows what."

"Ron, it's been tough and I don't see you much, but it doesn't mean I don't keep an ear out," he said, giving his arm a pat. "We're still here together, and you're my only true ally. I can't trust anyone else. Nothing's changed." Ron smiled a little and nodded. It was like he and Harry were on separate parts of the world, but they were still a unit no matter what.

"Okay," Ron said.

"Please, just think about it," Harry said. "There's a Hogsmeade visit this month, and it'll be worth it."

"It's always worth it if Hermione is involved, Harry," Ron corrected. "Of course I'm going to ask Alan for pass. I just hope he gives it to me. I want to see her so badly."

"I know you do, mate," Harry said, taking his broom from him. "Go see her. She misses you."

"I'll do my best to get to her," Ron said.

"Good. Well, have a good training day, then," Harry said, holding out his hand.

"You, too, and don't die on your way to the shower, eh?" Ron said, shaking his hand. "You're no good to me deceased."

"I'll see what I can do." Harry started walking away but stopped and turned around. "Ginny doesn't want me telling you this, but she said that it's weird playing quidditch without you."

Ron grinned. "I'll forget you said that."

"Cheers," Harry said, once again walking away.

Ron walked back to his cabin in a better mood. He couldn't believe that Harry had gone to see Ginny, and he couldn't believe that there was a chance that he could see Hermione almost as easily. He needed to write her and ask about her schedule. He felt like an arse for not knowing more about it to begin with. It was Ron's fault and he knew it. He had two parents and five siblings and random relatives that wanted to know everything. It took a toll on him.

After his shower, Ron went to the dining cabin. It was apparent that everyone wanted to stay with his or her cabin mates except for Jack and Olivia. She usually sat at Ron's table or by the blokes from cabin one, and Jack always sat with cabin four which housed four tall and burly blokes who looked just like him. Ron got his food and sat across from Conor and Olivia. As always, he was welcomed by the sweet and light scent of what had to be Olivia's shampoo.

"Have either of you thought about using your passes yet?" Ron asked.

"No, and I don't plan to," Olivia said.

"Why not?" Conor asked.

She picked at her egg. "Because I don't want to see my parents, and it would be a tease to see my mates for only a couple of hours. I need to stay focused."

"You're a lunatic. I'm need to get out of here as soon as possible," Conor said. "I'm trying to hold on to them for as long as I can, but I don't know how long I'll last. I want to just use them back-to-back because I need to see my sister. I really, really do." There was almost a panic to his voice.

"Is she okay?" Olivia asked.

"Yeah, yeah, she's fine," he quickly said. He suddenly became very interested in his slices of banana. "We're really close and I miss her a lot, yeah?"

Ron knew there was more to the story. There was something in Conor's features that was familiar, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. "I get it. I miss my sister, too. It's actually the reason why I brought it up. I think I may use one soon."

"Already?" Olivia asked.

"Yeah, well, at Hogwarts they offer visits to the Hogsmeade village, and it might be my only chance to see my sister and my girlfriend for a while," he said.

"That sounds nice," she said.

"I haven't heard of anyone using them yet," Conor said.

"Using what?" Roger said with a heavy breath, sitting next to Ron. He looked horrible but at least he didn't look close to passing out like he usually did.

"How did it go?" Ron asked.

"Not great but it's the best I've done so far." Roger didn't seem happy, and he picked at his orange. "What are we talking about?"

"Our passes. Have you heard about anyone being able to use one yet?" Conor asked.

"No, and I wonder if we can trade or sell them for things. I could really use different soap or some string candy," Roger said. Ron, Olivia, and Conor just looked at him strangely.

"Okayâ€;" Ron said slowly. "Anyway, I know of someone who's used one. Harry did to see my sister Ginny and he-"

"Your sister?" Roger said.

"Yeah, he'sâ€;sort ofâ€;well no, he is dating her," he said.

"Harry Potter is dating your little sister?" Conor asked.

"He has for a while now," Ron said.

"Bloody hell, he's everywhere in your life," Roger said. "Harry Potter is really a part of your life."

"Is that a bad thing?" Ron asked.

"No, it's justâ€¢he's Harry Potter," Roger said.

"Yeah, I heard that the first time," he said.

"I think what Roger means is that it's interesting to hear it," Olivia said. "We don't know Harry like you do. To us he's always been the Chosen One. The one from the papers and posters."

"Yeah, I'm sorry, Ron," Roger said. "It's just a bit of a shock to be around him and to live with someone who's so close to him. That's all. I didn't mean anything bad by it."

"It's all right. I understand," Ron said, trying to brush it off. It was something he had to get used to. "Let's just eat while we have the chance." Ron tried to eat, but he could feel their eyes on him. He ignored it with everything he had.

As they walked to the field to begin their training day, Ron tried to clear his mind. He liked to have an open and empty mentality before they started a session. Alan took them out past the training cabins and to the field once more. Ron assumed that it meant that they would have another week of wand work. "Form a line," Alan said, stepping in front of them. Everyone got into formation and stood as still as possible. He looked down their line. "Okay, now, hold out your wands."

Ron was ready this time. All week he had practiced and learned how to hold and be prepared for a disarming. He held his out with might, and he made sure that he balanced out his weight equally on both legs. Alan nodded. "Good, now, bring them to me." No one moved or said a word. Alan touched the whistle that he wore around his neck by a piece of string. He put it to his lips and blew hard. Ron and everyone else cringed. They all hated his whistle. It was magically enhanced to sound atrocious and uncomfortably loud. "Maybe you didn't hear me. Bring me your wands. Now."

People finally began to move. Everyone swiftly ran up to him, but Ron unhurriedly made his way. He was the last one to reach him. Alan outstretched his hand, but Ron kept his grip on his wand. He didn't want to give it away. He always wanted to be prepared, and his field test would forever make Ron not completely trust Alan. "This isn't a trick or a test, Weasley. I admire your reluctance, but it's not needed here," Alan said. Ron stared directly at him and attempted to read him, but he couldn't. He halfheartedly handed it over and got back in line.

Alan pulled a crumpled black bag out of his back pocket and eased all of their wands into it. Ron gulped and felt a chill. It wasn't from the cold weather. He was worried that he would never see his wand again. Alan tied a knot on the bag and sat it on the

ground. He then walked closer to them and crossed his arms over his chest. "Now what?"

Once again everyone was silent but not for long. A bloke from cabin one raised his hand. "Sir, what do you mean?"

"I mean now what?" Alan repeated. "I took your wands. You are all wand less. How do you plan to disarm an attacker? How do you plan to curse an opponent?"

"I reckon we can't, sir," the same bloke said.

"You might be correct, Mr. Harris!" Alan walked in front of him and without warning pushed him so hard that he fell back and hit the ground. Ron instinctively wanted to go over to Alan and push him back, but he held his ground. "Huh, that's curious. I didn't have my wand, but I was able to get you on your arse. I'd call that an offensive spell. What about you?" He held out his hand and helped him up.

"Yes, sir," he mumbled in embarrassment. Alan cracked his knuckles then quickly tried to push him down again, however, he was quicker and was able to shove his hands away.

"Ha! That right there seemed like a defensive attack to me. Very good, Mr. Harris," Alan said. He stepped back and grinned at all of them. "Well, if you haven't guessed it, today we are going to start your hand-to-hand combat training. It involves no wands and no magic, but it takes every bit of your muscle and speed." Ron's body calmed. It was music to his ears. It was finally something that he really thought he could do.

"I remember all of your field tests, and I remember all the field tests from the trainees in west," Alan said. "Almost ninety-five percent of you depended solely on your wands. Granted, you lot was great. That's why you're here, but it can't be a crutch. Just because you're magical doesn't mean that your wand is your only lifeline. Wizards and witches get lazy because they do everything with their wands. They forgot that they have hands and feet and heads. Well, you won't be like that. You'll never have an excuse to give up because as long as you can move your body, you have a weapon and it's the most reliable one you can have in your arsenal."

Alan walked back over to the bag of wands. "Your wands will be useless for a while. I want to build your bodies and condition them to fight. It will make you all sturdier and more poised. Then, we will put magic to it. That's the difference between an Auror and a wizard with great wand skills. You'll be able to use every piece of yourself and maximize it with your magic. You'll be able to defend yourself if your wand gets discarded or if you're being held down by someone."

Alan scanned their group and Ron noticed that he gazed a second or two longer at certain people. He wondered if they were the people he expected to do better or worse. All he knew was that he was one of them. "Now, hand-to-hand combat is my specialty. I know many styles and many techniques of combat. It's what I got

my honor in when I graduated from here, and it's what keeps me alive and keeps me useful at work. It doesn't have to be the same for everyone here, but it does have to be something that you can perform well on. I know a basic outline of what each of you can do in the area and all of you can improve."

A wizard walked past the cabins and into the field with them. He was tall and built and dressed in the same dark and professional manner like Alan, but he looked a lot younger than him. He shook Alan's hand. "Alan."

"Brian," Alan said. "Lot, this is Brian Taylor. He graduated from Lambrick last year. He's a rookie, and he's here to help me demonstrate some of the moves you'll be learning today. I'll pair you all up based on where I think you are ability wise. It doesn't matter the size or sex for that matter. Ms. Young?"

"Yes, sir?" Olivia said a little nervously.

"I won't be giving you extra care," Alan said.

"I would hope not, sir," she said, her cheeks turning pink. A pang hit Ron's chest at her embarrassment.

"And I hope that none of you guys will either," Alan said. "She's a trainee just like you, and she has to learn. A dark wizard won't care if she's female. He'll break her neck if he can. Help her to make sure that doesn't happen."

"And don't assume that every person you fight against will be male," Brian added. "One of the most notorious death eaters of all time was female. Bellatrix Lestrange was defeated in the second war by a witch named Molly Weasley."

Ron's entire body flushed hot red and a wide smile stretched across his entire face. He couldn't help himself. "That was my mum, Mr. Taylor." People around him started whispering, and Ron made sure to take a peek at Jack who was conveniently looking away.

"Sorry?" Brian said.

Alan chuckled. "This is Ronald Weasley, Brian. Molly's son."

"Oh," Brian said in shock. "How remarkable."

Conor nudged Ron in the side. "Your mum is cool, Ron."

"I know. She's the best," Ron said. He could only imagine the look on her face if she knew that people at camp were talking about her. She deserved the attention, and he couldn't wait to tell his mum and dad the story.

"That's enough talking," Alan said. "When I call a pair, find a spot. You're going to need a lot of room for this."

Ron felt extremely smug as they were put in groups of two. People looked at him, but he didn't care. For the first time he welcomed

the attention. It was for his mum, and it was for her taking down Bellatrix. The dreadful bitch had ruined so much for Harry and Neville's families, and she had tortured Hermione and tried to kill Ginny. She was one person that Ron would happily bring back to life so he could have a go at her himself. "Turner and Weasley," Alan said.

"What?" Ron said, breaking out of his thoughts. He looked up and noticed that everyone was paired up but himself and Jack. A pit formed in his stomach, and Jack didn't look happy either.

"Pair up, Weasley. Your show is over," Alan said. Ron tried not to reveal his discontent as he walked over to Jack and they found a spot to work.

"I guess everyone in your family is a hero," Jack said.

"My mum is off limits, Jack," Ron said. "You say one thing about her, and I'll make sure that every wand in Alan's bag is shoved up your arse sideways."

"I'm really scared," Jack muttered.

"Alright," Alan said. "What I want to start with is a basic attack that will knock your partner to the ground. It's a rushing technique, and it's the easiest way to get an opponent down."

Brian stood straight and held his body out as if he was pointing his wand at Alan. "Okay, pay attention to where the weak points are. The neck, the chest, the space right under the last rib, his groin area, right at his kneecap, and his shin are the places you want to attack." Alan pointed to each spot as he worked his way down.

"You never want to go at someone straight on. Turn your body a little to the side. It will keep your eyes clear, your speed fast, and you'll get more power in the rush." Alan backed up and Brian braced himself. Alan quickly charged at him but abruptly stopped and froze. "See how I rushed him? My body is sided and my vantage point is open. In this position, I don't have to worry about injuring myself. Now, for the real thing." Alan rushed him again and pushed his elbow right under Brian's rib. Brian hit the ground fast with and with a terrible thud, but Alan kept his stance.

"You see?" Alan said as if nothing had happened. "I kept my body at a slight angle, and I was able to weaken him by getting under that rib." He helped Brian up. "However, if you're on the receiving end, there are ways to help defend yourself. If the person is smaller than you, then it's a little easier but size doesn't have to be the deciding factor if you have technique. You simply have to remember!"

"Hand-to-hand combat might end up being my specialty, too," Jack whispered. "I don't know why we're paired. I've trained with my brother and my father for years."

"That's great. I haven't trained yet we are partners. What does that tell you?" Ron asked sarcastically.

"That Alan is going by height and not by weight and muscles," Alan said with a grin. Ron shook his head and looked back toward Alan.

"So, I want you each to take turns rushing and defending the rush," Alan said. "Don't be afraid to hit hard and don't complain if you fall on your arse." He blew his whistle. "Start."

"Do you want to rush or be rushed?" Jack asked. Ron gave him a once over. He wasn't afraid of Jack in the slightest, but he was big and probably had a lot of power behind him.

"I'll be rushed," Ron said.

"I was hoping you'd say that," Jack said. He started backing up and Ron exhaled and braced himself. He knew it would hurt either way. Jack growled and charged at him. Ron tried with all his might to stand his ground, but Jack's weight was like a brick wall crashing into him. He fell back and felt air leave his lungs as Jack's knee hit his stomach.

"Good work, Turner," Alan said as he walked over to them. "You angle your body well, and you found Ron's weak point without any difficulty."

"Yes, this is too easy, sir," Jack said with confidence.

"Well, hold on there," Alan said. "Weasley, get up." Ron quickly stood and brushed the leaves off his jeans. "It's your turn."

"Yes, sir," Ron said. He backed up and could already feel where it would be particularly sore on his side. Jack braced himself and Ron surveyed his body and decided his vantage point. He took another deep breath and rushed Jack. He kicked his knee right to the side of Jack's knee, and it easily brought him to the ground. Ron wobbled but was able to keep his footing. Jack's eyes grew in surprise, but he scurried to his feet.

"Yes! That's it, Weasley," Alan said. "Now, Turner, you used your size. It's a good advantage that you have, but you can't depend on it every time. It got the best of you just now. I bet you a thousand galleons that Weasley had a strategy and not a bit of it involved his size."

"I did, sir," Ron said. "I noticed how taught Jack's stomach was and how shallow he breathed. So, I reckoned he'd assume I'd go for his upper half."

"Exactly. Exactly. Keep that thought process up, Weasley," Alan said. "Jack, just because this may seem barbaric doesn't mean that you shouldn't use your brains. Take a few more turns."

Jack scowled at Ron the moment Alan moved on to Olivia and Conor, and he shook his head. "You were lucky."

"No, I was smart," Ron answered. "Let's go again." Back and forth Ron and Jack rushed each other. Each time it got a little more powerful and violent. It also hurt a little more every time Ron hit the ground. By the time Alan blew his whistle, Ron felt lightheaded from gasping in pain so many times.

"Listen up!" Alan ordered. "It's good to see that you think about your technique a little more each time you rush. However, if you're being rushed you really have to have an immediate reaction time. Don't let the stun of the hit take your focus away. Now, we have to build on it. This time, I want the rusher to follow through and land on the ground with the person being rushed. From a laying position, I want you to take turns pinning each other with both wrists and ankles on the ground. Where the rushing is more of an offensive attack, pinning is all about defensive."

With Brian's aid, Alan showed them different ways to defend themselves while on the ground. It seemed similar to what Ron and Harry had practiced and it seemed similar to what Ron had experienced during his field exam. He took all this into consideration as he and Jack once again faced each other.

"Come at me, Weasley," Jack said. Ron didn't hesitate. He was sore and tired, but it didn't matter. He rushed Jack and got him to the ground. It was different on the grass and leaves and twigs. Jack's weight was heavier, and he gripped Ron's arms. He got him on his side and pinned down one of his shoulders. "I told you, Weasley," Jack said through gritted teeth, "I trained with my brother." Ron used his free arm to hit Jack in the bend of his elbow. He used every bit of his leg muscle to heave Jack's thigh off him. He was able to turn him over and pin him.

Alan blew his whistle. "Weasley and Turner, switch position! Harris and Robinson, do the same!"

"Get off me," Jack said, pushing Ron away.

Ron got up and felt a throb in his arm. "What can I say? I trained with my brother, too, I guess. All five of them."

"Piss off. Let's go again," Jack said. This time Jack rushed him, but it ended with the same result. Jack was severe and he hit hard, but Ron pinned him almost every time. Where Ron lacked in mass, he made up in vantage points. Jack seriously used his muscle and nothing else.

Alan blew his whistle again. "Okay! That's enough. I see that you lot has the gist of rushing and pinning. Now, the techniques you learned and the weaknesses you discovered will be put to the test. Brian, I'll let you take lead on this one."

"Right," Brian said. "Obviously, in most cases wands will be involved or some sort of valuable object or maybe even a person that you're combating with or for. Using what you just learned, we want to see how you fair with one-on-one fighting."

"It's something that simply can't be taught," Alan said. "Every one of you will have a different style and pace, but we can help

you find out what that is if you're not sure. Also, this is a lesson that's built on a learning curve. So, each pair will have a couple of rounds of fighting and then Brian and I will access your strengths and weakness in a final round. Yes, everyone will get to see. You'll learn different techniques that may help you."

"The only rule is no biting or any sort of damage to the eyes," Brian said. "Though you may need to use these techniques in a real life situation, it's not something that you'll be taught at this stage in your training. So, someone from each group needs to come collect a rock. It's not a weapon. It's what one of you will be holding by the end of the round."

Jack walked off to get the stone. It gave Ron a chance to collect himself. Sure, he could pin Jack, but keeping him down and taking something from him was different. He had barely pulled it off with Harry. "On my go," Alan said.

"Here. You hold on to it," Jack said. He gave Ron the heavy and smooth brown rock. It was the size of his fist.

"Okay, three, two, one!" Alan blew his whistle and Ron found himself on the ground within a second. Jack snatched the rock away, and Ron fought to get it back. He had been right. Keeping Jack down was hard, and it didn't help that the bloke was trying to prove something. Right as Ron had a hold of it, Jack hit him in the jaw and got it back. He stood and held up the stone.

"You fucker!" Ron said.

Alan blew his whistle. "Time! You've got ten seconds to stand and find your footing."

Ron darted up and touched his jaw. "You punched me."

"It was a tap. Get over it," Jack said. Alan blew his whistle again and Ron got Jack to the ground, however, Jack had learned Ron's moves and he was ready for him. He hit him and though Ron hit him back, Jack once again got the rock. Yet, when Jack started to stand up, Ron hit his shin and was able to take him down. He yanked the rock away and wiggled out of his grasp.

Alan blew his whistle. "Time! Bring it in, lot." Jack slammed his fists on the ground before getting up. He was flushed and wheezed a little. Ron eased himself up. The whole right side of his body hurt. He had never taken such an arse kicking before. "Okay, I hope you learned a bit more and have an idea of what works for you. This is only the first day, so we will go over this many times. Nothing substitutes for experience, but today I want to see where you are. Now, I'll just go down the pairs. Let's start with Harris and Robinson."

One after another the pairs went. Ron took in everything he saw and paid close attention to how the smaller blokes handled themselves. Alan gave people their strengths and weaknesses, and Ron tried to memorize the whole lot. All the while, his muscles throbbed and he could feel Jack's eyes on him. It was finally their turn. Ron knew that he would have to really protect

himself. Jack was out for his bollocks. "Okay, you have one minute to retrieve the rock," Alan said, putting the rock in between them on the ground. "When I call time, that's it. On my go. One, two, three!"

He blew his whistle and Ron and Jack rushed for the rock. Jack was the first to it. He snatched it up, and Ron tried to get it away. He could feel everyone's eyes on him, and Jack must have felt the intensity as well. He was loud and punched without mercy. He hit Ron on his right hip where it was already sore and on the jaw where it was already a little swollen. He still had the rock in his hand and Ron knew his time was probably about up. He knew he was going to lose the round if he didn't do something. He tried to remember the advice Alan had given the others but all it did was make him freeze up. So, he stopped thinking about it.

The moment he stopped thinking, Ron remembered all the years he had wrestled with his brothers. He remembered defending himself against snatchers. He remembered the most important rule of chess. Everything was about surprise. Everything was about exposing weak spots. Everything was about hiding in plain sight. He let his body go somewhat limp so that Jack had him completely pinned to the ground. The moment Ron felt every part of himself on the ground and the moment he saw in Jack's eyes that he assumed he had won, Ron lifted his neck and head-butted him.

Jack howled and dropped the rock. Ron elbowed him in the stomach and pushed him away with every bit of his upper body strength. He dodge rolled and picked up the rock before straining to a standing position. "Time!" Alan yelled before blowing his whistle.

Ron threw the rock on the ground and sucked away the blood that was escaping his lip. He was aching and burning from head to toe, but it felt incredible. Jack just looked at him, almost in shock as he stood. "Well," Brian said. Ron finally turned away from Jack and looked at the instructors. Brian's eyes were large again, and he was smiling wide. Alan was even grinning.

"Good work to the both of you," Alan said. "Okay, Jack, let's start with you. Offensively, you're spot on. You know how to use your weight and your muscle in all the right places, and your quick as bloody hell, but I'm concerned with your defense. I told you, being big doesn't mean being better. Even being big and fast doesn't make you better. We'll work on your weak spots and keeping your mind 360."

"That goes for all the bigger guys out here," Brian said. "You have to keep your mind 360. That means always being aware of your weak spots, where the force of your muscles is going, and how your opponent will exploit it. Sometimes the bigger you are, the less attention you give in fighting and the easier it is for you to be taken down."

"Yes, sir," Jack said in obvious disappointment.

"Now, Weasley," Alan said. He looked at him and shook his head. "What can I say, your combat was great. You need to clean up your

recovery and make it quicker, but offensively and defensively you were remarkable."

"T-thank you, sir," Ron weakly said.

"You see lot, Weasley is the only one I saw today give up control to gain control," Alan said. "You can tell that he trusts his skill and his strength and that he sees the weakness in his opponent and how to utilize it. He always keeps his mind 360, and there's a patience and strategy to his combat that I didn't see a lot of you have."

"Not to mention, that head-butt was wicked, Weasley," Brian said with a chuckle. "He's a prime example of a wizard who isn't lazy. He knew he was down and he improvised. It was creative and effective. That's something that will keep you and your unit alive. Very impressive."

"Thank you, sir," Ron said again. He was sure that his face was moments away from melting off because of his ultra blush.

"Okay, you two can join the line," Alan said. "Brian and I will demonstrate more techniques and tell you lot a bit more of the art of hand-to-hand combat and how Lambrick Aurors use it. We will continue this type of practice tomorrow."

Ron and Jack rejoined their group. Ron noticed the looks he got but he didn't care. He felt amazing. "Nice job, Ron. I could hug you for taking Jack down like that," Conor said in his ear. "But I might just hit you. You made all of us look like prats. I'm Irish, and I don't even fight like that."

"Ha, cheers," Ron said with a laugh. He tried to pay attention to Alan and Brain, but his mind was elsewhere. Every part of him that wasn't sore was dancing and cheering, and he had never felt such a personal bliss before.

It was dark and well into the night before Alan and Brian finally ended the day. Ron had to get back to the cabin and write to Hermione first before he did anything else. He wanted to know when he could see her and tell her about what had happened and how extraordinary he felt. "Weasley," Alan said.

"Sir?" Ron said, slowing down so Alan could catch up.

"I don't want today to get to your head. You're far from graduating," Alan said, looking stern.

"I know, sir. It's just one day out of a thousand, right?" Ron attempted not to sound annoyed.

"Precisely," Alan said, "but it doesn't mean that what I said isn't true or that your performance wasn't great. I knew this was something that you would be comfortable with, and I'm very pleased with your level of aptitude. I hope that you will apply the same level of confidence and skill to every aspect of your training, even if you're uncomfortable with it."

"I'm trying, sir," Ron said.

"No," Alan said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I don't want you to try. I want you to do. If you keep doing it like you did today, then I think you will really be something here." He held out his hand. "So, good work."

"Thank you," Ron said, shaking his hand. Alan nodded and kept walking up the trail. Ron stopped walking and closed his eyes to take the feeling in. It wasn't perfect, but it was something from Alan. Ron rolled his shoulders and groaned as he started walking back to his cabin again. He was horribly exhausted, hungry, and in awful pain, but for the first time since he arrived to Lambrick he felt as if he belonged there. He was finally starting to understand what Hermione had meant when she spoke about returning to Hogwarts and what Kingsley had meant when he spoke about applying to Auror academies.

For Ron, choosing to go to Lambrick was the first really great decision of his life.

* * *

**** Yay Ron! This particular training day is really important for Ron and that's why it's so long and descriptive. Plus, I just love writing Fighting!Ron. There's something so sexy about it, lol. So, for anyone who's forgotten, I am ROSE and RHr is always on my mind. This is their story as well as Ron's story. Keep that in mind for the next chapterâ€œ! Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 31*: The night shift

Thanks for the reviews! I get more and more excited about this story as it goes along! Okay, I'll apologize in advanced for how LONG this chapter is. I guessâ€œ;I justâ€œ;bloody fuck itâ€œ;it's just gotta be this way! lol

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron tried to free his neck, but the grip around it was too firm. One of Ron's arms was unbounded, but the other was securely held behind his back. He was being choked and if he didn't act fast, then he was going to loose all consciousness and possibly his life. More importantly, the lives in his of unit would also be lost. That's what he kept telling himself, so he had to break free. He tensed his muscles, slouched his back for momentum, and

ran backwards as powerfully and as speedily as he could. Ben had no choice but to move his feet back as well. Ron kept running until Ben hit the tree. It was all he needed. Ben loosened his grip due of the crash, and Ron was able to use his free arm and elbow him in the stomach. He let go of him, and Ron immediately turned him around and slammed him against the tree. Ron held both of Ben's arms behind his back so his wrists were at the middle of his spine, and he used his other hand to hold the side of his face against the bark.

"Very nice, Weasley and Harris!" Alan said. "Harris, you did a fine job capturing and binding Weasley from the rear. I like seeing you so balanced and grounded. A little goes a long way."

"Thank youâ€;sir," he panted. Ron reckoned that it was hard for him to speak with his cheek smashed against a tree, but he wasn't going to let him go just yet.

Alan turned to Ron. "Weasley, you have his wrists pinned in the proper location, so he's won't be able to easily free himself. That's only if you keep your grip, though. I also like how you've been paying attention to what I've been telling you. You're finally cleaning up your reaction time. It's not as sloppy, and you move a lot faster."

"Yes, sir," Ron said. "I can usually stay a few steps ahead in my mind, but sometimes my body doesn't want to move."

"I'll break that out of you one way or another," Alan said.
"Okay, Mr. Harris, how do you plan to get out of this?"

Ben attempted to move. "If I had my wand—"

"You don't have your wand," Alan stated. "That's the whole point. Again, tell me how you're going to free yourself using only what you were born with?" Ben squirmed against Ron's hold, but he couldn't free himself. Ron felt a bit badly for him, but at the same time proud that he was doing such a good job. They had been working on hand-to-hand combat for over a week, and it came naturally to him.

"I don't know, sir," he finally said.

"Switch places," Alan ordered. Ron let go of him and put himself against the tree. Ben lifted his arms and held them against his spine while pressing his face against the bark. "Weasley, how do you plan to get out of this?"

"The same way he put me in this position, sir," Ron answered.

"All right. Show us," Alan said. Ron went over his options. Ben's body was almost fully against his, and he was heavy. He couldn't move much and the only room he had was at his feet. He could feel the space between his heels and Ben's legs. So, he lifted his right leg and kicked his heel as hard as he could against Ben's shin. His body bucked in natural reaction, and Ron finally had room to move. He pushed himself off the tree with his knees and

ran backwards again. Before he knew it, he was looking up at the sky and a body was under his.

"Yes!" Alan said, slapping his hands together. Ben let him go, and Ron got off of him and helped him up. "You see, Harris, that's exactly what this lesson is about. Escaping this scenario is critical because when your arms are no longer in use, you'll have to find other means. You have to think about the person who has you and how you can gain back control. Try it again." Alan patted Ron's shoulder before moving on to the next pair. He blew his whistle and waved to someone. "Oi, Johnson! Stop letting him take advantage of you! Push at the knees!"

"I want to do it right this time," Ben said.

"Sure. Let's start from the first position." Ron backed up and Ben turned around. Once again Ben charged him and got him around the neck. Ron backed him up against the tree and pinned him. "Can you feel your wiggle room?" he asked.

"I've got some space on the left side," Ben said.

"Use it. I'll hold you here all day, so you better fight me," Ron said. He pressed Ben as forcefully as he could but once the strong knock to the shin hit him, his body tensed and he lost his grip. Ben was able to back up and knock him on his arse. Ron hit the ground with a solid thud. They heard Alan's whistle.

"That's it, Harris!" he yelled from across the field.

Ben got up and helped Ron to his feet. "Cheers."

"No problem," Ron said, rubbing his sore tailbone.

He snickered. "You want to take a break?"

"Sounds brilliant. We should probably keep busy in some way so Alan won't blow his whistle at us." Ron sat in the cold, wet grass and attempted to touch his toes.

Ben joined him on the ground and rolled his shoulders. He was shorter than Ron but had a bit more muscle. His brown skin was dark and his hair was cut very short, almost to the scalp. "I gotta say. I didn't expect this when we paired up today."

Ron had to keep himself from rolling his eyes. "What - do you have ginger jokes too, or is it about my size this time? I know I'm one of the smaller blokes out here, but I can hold my own."

"That's not it at all," Ben said. "I'm just shocked that you're as helpful as you're being. I'd think someone like you would be a dickhead."

"Someone like me?" he asked.

"Do you really have to ask that?" Ben said incredulously. "You've battled death eaters, fought alongside Harry Potter, and saw Lord Voldemort up close. I expect you to boost every chance you get

about how great you are, but you're actually helpful. It's either the world's smartest plan or too bloody kind for words."

"Oh," Ron slowly said. He didn't want to blush, but his skin was far too pale to hide it. "No, I'm not like that. Believe it or not, but those aren't the things that I want to brag about. Even if I did, it would get me nowhere to act like a dickhead. The last thing I need to do is make enemies here."

"That sounds fair. Well, I know we've been out here kicking each other's arses all day, but I haven't properly introduced myself." He held out his hand. "I'm Ben Harris from cabin one."

Ron shook his hand. "Hi, Ben. I'm Ron Weasley from cabin two." They started stretching again, and Ron observed his fellow trainees pin each other to trees or knock each other to the ground. It was all he saw day after day and though it was cool, he missed enjoying the outdoors for what it was. The novelty of Lambrick was wearing off and a small and heavy feeling began to grow in his chest and take its place. He watched as Jack pinned his partner against a tree way harder than was necessary. Ron shook his head.

"What is it?" Ben asked.

"Nothing. I was just looking at Jack." Ron lay on the ground and pushed his shoulders against it repeatedly to pop his back. He finally heard the crack and moaned in relief. "He's a prick."

"He is a bit of git sometimes," Ben said, "but I reckon he's not all that bad."

"You don't have to live with him," Ron said. Ever since he won against Jack during their first combat lesson, Jack had become more short-tempered and arrogant. Ron didn't stand for it at all, and it was almost impossible for them to go one night without arguing about something.

"I've talked to him a few times, and we get on," Ben said. "He's under a lot of pressure from what I've heard. His granddad trained at some prestigious academy in Italy, his dad trained here, and his older brother trained here but didn't graduate or something."

"That doesn't mean that he has to be a prick," Ron said. "It's not just me. He likes to give one of my roommates a hard time."

"You mean Roger?" Ben asked with a chuckle. "He isn't that good."

Ron frowned and stood up. "He tries and he's actually very good when we're doing things that aren't as physically demanding. We should get back to it."

Ben stood as well. "Look, I know he's your friend, but you have to be honest."

"I am being honest," Ron shot.

He held up his hands. "All right. Here, try and get out of the hold."

Ron once again put himself against the tree, and Ben held his hands tightly behind him. He tried to push and free his wrists, but Ben's grip was too tight and it hurt the more he struggled. "I'm not getting out of this, mate."

Ben let him go. "Good. So, what do you think about Olivia?"

"Let's switch," Ron said. Ben tried to get free and Ron searched around their section until he spotted her. She was holding a bloke down on the ground with her knee right under his shoulder blade. "She's great."

"Yeah, she is," Ben said in a heavy breath. "Okay, my bollocks hurt. You can let me go."

"Right. Sorry," Ron said, backing away.

Ben turned around. "Are you twoâ€¢!"

"No," Ron said without delay. "I'm being honest about that, too."

"I ask because I saw you two walking the trail the other night, and when she sits at my table she sometimes brings you up," Ben said.

"We do walk the trail, but it's only walking." Ron said. "People have been walking for centuries."

"Walking, huh. No shagging going on?" Ben asked.

Ron's eyes widened. "What?"

"Ron, we may all be training as hard as we can here, but it doesn't mean that we're not blokes. She's the only girl in our section, and she's attractive," he said. Ron could barely comprehend what Ben was saying. Though, he wasn't completely thick. He understood what some of the guys saw in Olivia. She was good-looking and not typical, but it didn't register for Ron in the same way. He already had the very best.

"It's not like that for me," Ron said. "She's my friend and nothing more. Besides, I'm trying my hardest now to get on Alan's good side so he'll let me see my girlfriend. She's the only girl I'm thinking about out here."

"I didn't know you had a girlfriend," Ben said, shaking his head.

"I do. I love her, and I don't plan on losing her over a bloody rumor," Ron said. "Feel free to spread that around."

"Sorry, man, really," he said. "I didn't know."

"It's fine," Ron said with a frustrated shrug. He hoped the impression that he had something going with Olivia wasn't going around the entire camp. The last thing he needed was for it to

get back to Harry. "We should do the three sequences together and end with the tree lock."

Ron focused on not getting too worked over what Ben had said as they continued to train. However, as the evening drew on it became difficult to concentrate on anything. It was dark now and usually by this time they were dismissed for dinner and bed, but they were still working. Ron was hungry, sore, sweaty, and completely knackered. He still had letters to answer, but at this rate he doubted that he'd get to them. Alan finally blew his whistle and held up his hands. "Time! Gather over here."

Ron lifted his knee off Ben and helped him up. "It's about bloody time."

"I agree," Ben wheezed. "We've been out here for ages." They almost had to limp over to Alan and Brian. Everyone was out of breath and dirty.

"I'm almost pleased with what I've seen today," Alan said. "You lots are taking hand combat seriously. On the other hand, so many of you still aren't thinking as capable bodies. You're thinking like feeble wizards, and you have to stop that. We've been out here all day. Are you ready to head back?"

"Yes, sir," they said in one collected breath.

Alan grinned. "That's too bad. The next phase of your training starts now. Follow me." Ron had to bite his lip to keep from swearing. He couldn't believe it.

"What? Are you all surprised? Welcome to Lambrick Academy," Brian sarcastically said. He and Alan let the group and everyone slumped behind them. Ron put his hands on his sides as he walked and made an effort to conjure some energy. Alan and Brian led them deeper into the field, and Ron heard a familiar voice. When they passed a group of large trees, he saw the entire west section gathered around Richard and another Auror.

"And here they are," Richard said.

"Join west," Alan said as he and Brian went to the front. Everyone from west turned around. Harry caught his eye and grinned. While their groups integrated, Ron made a beeline straight for him. Ron could already feel some of his energy returning. Harry had that affect on him.

"Hey," Harry said.

"Hi," Ron answered. Harry appeared just as exhausted as Ron felt. He was grimy and ashen, and his wild dark hair stuck out like weeds.

Harry's smile grew as he surveyed him. "You look terrible. Is that mud in your hair?"

"You don't look that much better. Is that blood on the back of your jeans?" Ron asked.

Harry nudged him. "Aren't you clever."

"I'd say that I try, but it's a gift, really," Ron said. They stifled their sniggering and nodded at each other. It was rare that they got time to talk, and Ron actually missed him a little.

"All right!" Alan said. "Settle down so we can get started. As we told you at the start of the program, at times Richard and I teach together and integrate the sections. This is one of those times."

"So far you've learned different techniques involving hand-to-hand combat," Richard said, "and now it's time to put it to use with your wands." He held up a black bag that obviously had west's wands inside. Alan had the same black bag that held east's wands.

"Yes," Harry said quietly. "I miss my wand. I bloody work with my wand."

"It hasn't been so bad," Ron said.

"What Alan and I will show you is how to put together what you've learned about proper wand handling, hand combat, and spell work," Richard said. "Dueling is one, fluid dance that you'll have to learn."

"And it's one that you'll begin to learn at night," Alan added. "Dueling can have a completely different feel and effect when it's done at night, and night training will greatly improve your skills overall. For the next phase, you'll continue to practice your dueling during the day within your section, but at night we'll meet as one group and build on it."

"We will continue this training in the advanced stage after the merge, but for now we want to expose you to it and get you comfortable because darkness is a tool Aurors use more often than not," Richard said. "Form two lines and retrieve your wands. I know you lovelies have missed using them in practice."

Ron rejoined his group to get his wand. He was a bit nervous. It was the first time that both groups would see each other perform, but something told him that it wasn't the only reason. He mentally shrugged it off to focus. "Let's see it all together now, Weasley," Alan said as he handed him his wand.

"Yes, sir," Ron breathed. He got back into formation.

"Are you all right? You look peaky," Harry said as they stood together.

"I think I have a right to be. This is something new," Ron said.

"You were good at this when we practiced," Harry said in his ear. "You'll be fine."

"I know," Ron mumbled.

"All right. We're going to start off with a basic disarming spell and an offensive attack," Richard said. Everyone backed up as Alan walked backwards and moved away from him. Alan held up his wand and so did Richard. "Expelliarmus!" Alan's wand was knocked out of his hand and before he had time to react, Richard rushed him and pushed him to the ground. A tiny sound invaded Ron's ears, but he rubbed his neck and ignored it.

Richard helped Alan to his feet. "See? It works the same way," Richard said. "It may seem a little jarring at first because it's harder to see your opponent, but you'll have to learn to trust your instincts and training."

"That's right," Alan added. "Trust is a key component you'll utilize as an Auror. You won't have time to second-guess yourself, and you won't have time to fumble around in the dark. That's what we're going to start building on tonight. So, partner up and preferably with someone from the other section." Ron and Harry stuck together. His stomach slowly knotted, but he didn't know why. He had practiced a couple of times training at night, but this was different. He was at camp. They had never been out so late training and though there was light coming from various wands, it was extremely dark.

"I want one person from each pair to form a line back here and the other partner form a line with Alan," Richard said. Their groups split up, and Alan went down Harry's line and took all of their wands. He sat them on the ground at the halfway point between the two rows.

"Okay, for the disarmed trainees, I want you to run to your wand, grab it, and rush your partner like you've practiced doing before," Alan said. "For the armed people, your task is simple. Stop your partner with an attack. Dodging spells and making charges are very important bases of Auror dueling. It combines hand-to-hand combat, wand skill, and immediate action. On my whistle."

Ron gripped his wand securely and kept his eyes on Harry. Harry bent down and looked ready to charge him. Alan blew his whistle and everyone from the other side started to run toward his line. Every person in Ron's line threw spells at their partners. The loudness and the bright light from the spells caught him off guard. Harry charged him, growling, but Ron was frozen. Before he knew it, he was on the ground and his wand was in Harry's hand.

Harry got off him and pulled him up. "Ron, what was that? Why didn't you stop me?"

"Iâ€;" he started.

Richard blew his whistle. "Reform the lines!"

"Weasley! What are you doing?" Alan yelled as he jogged over to them.

"Sir?" he asked. He felt dazed, and it was tough to center on what had just happened. Things seemed loud and smoky all of a sudden.

Alan stood next to Harry and both stared at him curiously. "Wake up, Weasley!"

Ron rubbed his face and bounced on his heels. "Yes, sir. I'm here."

Alan looked between them. "I know you and Potter are friends, but it doesn't mean that you should let your guard down. Don't let him take you. Fight him!"

"Yes, sir, I will. I'm sorry," Ron said.

"Stop being sorry. Just don't do it again. I'll split you two up if I have to," Alan said. "This isn't time for friendship."

"He's right, Ron," Harry said when Alan walked away. "You can't go easy on me. It's the last thing they need to see from us."

"I'm not going easy on you," Ron said. "Let's go again. I reckon I wasn't ready. I'll be ready this time." He rolled his neck and saw Olivia gazing at him. The look was familiar to him, and he turned away.

Harry backed up and put his wand in between them. Ron wanted to shake whatever it was off, but it proved to be a lot more difficult the more they rushed each other. While he was able to stop Harry, every time a surge of terror went through him and he had to fight off the stiffness and block out the random booms in his ears. By the end of their night, Ron felt so ridged that he could hardly move. He walked back to the main east grounds with his head down. He had no idea why he had performed so horribly. He kept telling himself that nothing was different.

Alan touched his shoulder. "I want a word."

Ron knew by his tone that he was irritated. "Yes, sir."

Alan pulled him aside crossed him arms over his chest. "What was that out there?"

"I don't know, sir," he said.

"Bullshit," Alan spat. "I haven't seen you so frightened since your field exam, but at least then there was some energy and confidence along with the fear. You were a dead pixie tonight. What happened?"

Ron rubbed his neck and shrugged. He wasn't afraid of the dark, he wasn't afraid of dueling, and he wasn't afraid of spells, but somehow the combination had put him in a state. There was something about the loudness and the lights and the violence that cut into his spine, but he couldn't explain it to Alan. "I honestly have no idea, sir. I reckon I'm just tired."

"Everyone is tired," Alan dully said. "You're nothing special and if you can't work with a bit of sleep in your eyes, then you should leave."

"It won't happen again. I swear," Ron said. He felt like such a tit. He had made so much progress with Alan.

"I don't need you to swear," Alan said. "I need you to bring your skill to the sessions. You perform combat in the daytime without an issue. Do it now. Do it in front of me and Richard and Potter and whoever else has got you like this."

It wasn't the people that bothered Ron, but he had nothing else to say. "I will, sir."

"Good. I expect more from you, and you will give me better." Alan brushed past him and Ron waited for him to disappear before leaning against the tree and rubbing his eyes. He took several deep breaths to calm himself.

He returned to his cabin and sat on his bed. Hermione's letter was on his pillow, and he needed to answer her. He then looked at the stack of letters next to it. There was one from his parents, Ginny, Bill, Charlie, Percy, George, and his great Uncle Simon. The small pit in his chest began to spin and grow, but he shrugged off the whispers in his ears. He decided to leave the cabin and sit on the stairs. The fresh air was welcoming and he slightly rocked back and forth.

"Ron?" Roger said.

He stopped rocking. "Yeah?"

"Are you okay?" he asked, sitting next to him.

For whatever reason he didn't want to lie to him. "Not exactly. I really messed up today."

"It's understandable. Alan pushed us at least two extra hours before we integrated," Roger said.

"It doesn't matter." He thought about what Alan had said.
"Everyone is tired."

"You shouldn't be so hard on yourself," Roger said. "Alan may have pointed you out, but you weren't the only one having issues tonight. You've been almost perfect with everything we've done. I know that you think you're a genius, but you deserve some room every once in a while, yeah?"

"Cheers," Ron said. It sounded like something he would say. "I guess you're right."

"I usually am," Roger said. He patted Ron's arm before getting up and heading back inside. Ron rubbed his hands together. Roger was right. It was only the first day. The pit in his chest and the whispers in his ears didn't matter. He would get a good night's sleep and try harder the next day. He would be fit to answer

Hermione and everyone else, and he would work at a better capacity. He was sure of it.

Over the next week, the level of their training intensified. They fought harder and longer and because they were finally allowed to use their wands and spells, it much more aggressive and intricate. Ron was able to find a bit of a rhythm and during their day training he got better with his technique. Every night they integrated and did nothing but practice spells and dueling, and each time he had to fight his fear and fight losing his focus. It didn't help that Alan kept a close eye on him.

One night during their training, Ron was once again trying to find his pacing. He was dueling against Harry and had to keep from being disarmed. Ron ran and hid behind a tree. He gazed around. People were weary and some sported cut lips or bloody noses. The integration of the two sections made everyone competitive, but all he wanted to do was not lose his head. He could see Ben dueling with one of the girls from west. Everyone was improving. He had to as well. He peeked around the bark and dodged a spell that went right past his face. He ducked and charged out, but Harry was ready. He hit Ron with a spell and knocked his wand out of his hand while blasting him back.

Alan's whistle blew. "Time! Stop where you are and gather to the front!"

Ron got to his feet, and Harry gave him his wand. "That was pretty good. I don't see how you avoided that spell. You were fast."

"It was bloody shit," Ron muttered. He was taut and too much was going on in his head. He felt on the edge of something, but he didn't know what.

"We will be here all night if you can't learn to loosen up and trust what you know," Alan said. "It's clear that some of you are still uncomfortable, but you have to get over it. You have to move." Ron didn't look, but he could feel Alan's eyes on him.

"It's not about trust for everyone," Richard added with a grim expression. "Some of you are relying too heavily on your wands, and some of you have apparently forgotten that you're wizards all together because you don't bother to use it at all. It's pathetic!"

"Be aware that we don't have to bring any of you back in January," Alan said. "If none of you can pick up the material, then all of you will be cut. Do you all understand?"

"Yes, sir," they all said in unison. Ron and Harry shared a look. The only thing worse than getting cut from the program would be to be a part of the first elimination.

"It may not even be worth it, but we're going to close tonight's session with an introduction to a new element that we will begin working on," Richard said. "It's an offensive tool and a defensive maneuver. It may also give you or your opponent an

advantage in night dueling. Make room for me and Brian." Everyone backed up as Richard and Brian took their paces away from each other. "All right, pay attention to what happens. Brian, charge me." Ron watched closely as Richard held up his wand. Brian ran toward him and opened his mouth. However, Richard speedily rose higher. "Incendio!" he cried as he drew his wand in front of him. Right before Brian's path, a blazing fire appeared and blocked him from Richard.

"We're going to start working around fire, ladies and gentleman!" Alan said.

"Wow," Harry's voice faintly said. Other people around them whispered to each other, but Ron didn't hear it so well. He eyed the flames that lit up the field. Suddenly, he couldn't see Harry or anyone in particular. Dueling was all around him. People were being thrown back. Fires were roaring, and it was so loud. It was dark and loud and fiery and hot. The whispers grew and turned into whimpers. The pit in his chest swirled and rose in his throat until finally a piercing crash erupted, and a wall blasted right before his eyes.

"Ron?" Harry said. "Are you okay?"

He opened his mouth, but he couldn't speak. He simply shook his head and tripped backwards. He rushed back as rapidly as he could until he was behind a tree and away from all the noise and fire. He had been fighting the memories, but it was too much now. He began to panic. He had no air and his heart raced. He put his arm against the bark and rested his forehead against it. He could feel the attack swallowing him whole, but he refused let it happen. He put a hand to his chest and tried to calm down before it took him over. "Come on," he whispered aloud. He felt sick so he bent over. He attempted to throw up but nothing came out.

"Fucking hell, everything is fine. Come on!"

"Weasley!" Alan bellowed. Ron jumped and stood straight.

"Weasley, what are you doing? Once Again, what the hell are you doing? The training session isn't over! With fire there are safety precautions that you have to learn!"

"I-I know, sir," Ron said. He was lightheaded and he wanted to dry heave again, but he bit his tongue. Seeing Alan and hearing his voice was a small blessing. It helped die down the panic.

"Then get the bloody fuck back out here! You're the last person who needs to skive a demonstration." Alan yanked on Ron's collar and shoved him away from the tree.

Harry was at the very edge of their group and hurried over. "Are you okay, Ron?"

"Potter, rejoined the group," Alan ordered as he walked away. Harry didn't listen. He kept his eyes on Ron.

"I'm fine," Ron muttered.

Harry shook his head. "Ron, I think-"

"No," he said. He didn't want to talk about it and especially not around everyone. At the end of Richard's demonstration and introduction to the element, they were dismissed for the night. Ron wasn't hungry and he was too wired to go to sleep. He couldn't believe that he had been pushed so far as to almost having a panic attack. He thought that he was over them.

As he walked back to his cabin, Harry caught up to him. "Now are you going to tell me what that was about?"

"It was nothing, Harry," he said. "You should be going the opposite way."

Harry took his wrist and for the second time he was dragged over to the side. "It wasn't nothing, Ron."

"I needed a bit of air," he said, pulling his arm away. Ron knew that Harry didn't believe him, and the irritation and slight disappointment in his eyes confirmed it.

"Why are you bothering to lie to me?" Harry asked. "I know you well enough to see that something more was going on. It's the same something that's been going on all week and every since we started this new training. What's the matter, mate?"

Ron wanted to tell him, but he had no clue why everything was unexpectedly so hard. They were training to become Aurors. Ron didn't have time to panic, and he didn't want Harry's time to be taken up by worrying about him. "Nothing, Harry," he said. "I'm okay. I'm just really tired."

"Ron, you can't do this shit with me. I'm your best mate, and I want to help." Harry glanced around and stood closer to him. "I've seen you like this before. Did you have an attack? Did something scare you?"

Hearing it out loud made it more real and problematic. Harry also made him sound disgustingly weak. It made him furious. "Never bring that up while we're here."

"Ron," Harry started.

"No, there's nothing to discuss!" Ron said through gritted teeth. He closed his eyes for a moment. "I'm a different person here, Harry. No one here knows about what has been going on with me, and I want it to stay that way. So, don't bring it up. I'm fine."

Harry's shoulders slumped somewhat, and his eyes became grave in a way that Ron hadn't seen since early on in the summer. "You saying that tells me that you're obviously not fine." Sometimes, Harry had a way of looking straight through Ron and right into his thoughts and feelings. Most of the time it worked in their favor, but now he was merely too close. His eyes knew too much, just like before.

"You don't know everything, Harry," Ron said, regardless of what he felt. He turned away from him and went back to his cabin.

Everyone was inside and they stopped talking the moment he walked in. Ron sat on his bed. He looked at the letters that were still unanswered on his table. Ever since they new training had started, Ron had neglected to finish a note to anyone. However, the worst were the two letters from Hermione that were unopened.

"Today was another rough one, yeah?" Conor said. "I think my bollocks have shrunken somewhat."

"At least the people from west are sweating as much as we are," Roger added. "I wonder how long we'll be doing this."

"For as long as it takes," Jack said. "Like Alan and Richard said, some are really struggling and this is only the beginning. I think they may start plucking out the dead weight because what we're doing now takes real skill. People can't go on luck and spring action anymore."

Ron moved his eyes up and sure enough Jack was looking at him. "If you have something to say to me, then say it. Don't be a twat and talk around it."

"It's interesting that you think I'm talking about you, Ron, but since we're on the subject, I do have a question," Jack said. "What happened tonight? Alan wasn't the only one who saw you scare off."

"I didn't scare off," Ron said, standing up.

"Yeah, Jack, sod off or something. It's been a harsh couple of weeks," Roger said.

"What?" Jack asked in mock innocence. "I'm simply asking how Ron's doing and especially since he's been Alan's shining example up until now. I thought you were experienced from all your past encounters and especially at Hogwarts."

Ron ran over to him. Conor made it just in time to block him, but Ron's arm was long enough to push at Jack's chest. "Bring that up again. I really want to you keep talking like you know one fucking thing about what happened. Go on!"

"All right, that's enough!" Conor said. He put his hands against Ron's arms and lightly pushed him away. "Ron, take a walk and get some air."

Jack simply stood unfazed. "What is with you, Ron?"

"You have no right to say anything!" Ron said. "You have no bloody idea." His anger faded and something heavier replaced it. He left their room and stormed off to the meal cabin before it came out of him. He bumped right into Olivia.

"Sorry," she said, rubbing her head.

"It's all right," he rushed. "Ah, can we start a little early, meaning now?"

"Did you eat already?" she asked.

"No, but I'm not that hungry," he said.

She gave him a once over. "Um, I guess." She tied her hair back and they walked to the trail. They were quiet as they stretched. He hadn't been meeting with her lately, but it usually made him feel okay. He wanted to feel anything other than what he was at the moment. They began to walk the path, and it was a different kind of darkness that surrounded them. Lights from spells and noises from blasts didn't taint it. People weren't falling to the ground. "Ron?"

"Huh?" he said, looking up.

"Did I do something?" she asked.

He waited for her to go further into detail, but she didn't.
"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm surprised you want to walk with me tonight," she said.

"Yeah, ah, I know I haven't been showing up," he said awkwardly.

"You don't need to apologize. This is a requirement or anything," she said. "I just want to know if I did something."

"No. You didn't do anything." He picked up a stick and broke it into pieces as they walked. "I've been tired."

"Ron, I've never been the type of person to hide behind a difficult subject," she said. "If you acting weirdly has anything to do with what people are saying about us-"

"There's no need to say that," Ron said with a cringe. "It's rubbish. I don't care what people are saying, and since it's not true it definitely doesn't matter."

"I agree," she said, "but I thought that maybe you didn't want to be around me too much because of it. I think it's childish that evidently men and women can't be friends. That's all this is, Ron."

"I know that," he said. "It's the last thing you have to remind me of, and it's what I've been telling everyone."

Olivia didn't seem satisfied. "So, as your friend, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." He hoped to Merlin that it was something about Quidditch or why it only seemed to rain when they needed to ride their brooms.

"What happened to you tonight?" she asked. "During the fire demonstration, you got strange and left the group."

"I don't know, but I'm okay." He hoped that out of anyone, Olivia would be the one to let it go. It was why he wanted to walk with her, but he was wrong.

"I'm glad to hear that. You've been different every since we started the night training, and tonight it seemed to come to a head," she said.

"I'm really exhausted, and I haven't adjusted to the longer training days yet. That's all," he explained. They were quiet for a while and Ron hoped that she would drop it.

"Um, I can understand you being tired, but I don't know," she said. She touched his arm and stopped them. "Ron, my parents work with other healers on a lot of trauma patients."

"Okay," he said. He was starting to feel uncomfortable with the way she spoke and how she kept her blue eyes so fixated on him.

Olivia chewed on her lip and clasped her hands together. "I'm sorry for bringing this up, but I've seen something like what happened to you before." She let out a breath. "Ron, do you know anything about anxiety or maybe panic or anxiety attacks?" A pang hit his chest. There was no way that he was so transparent. If Olivia knew, then there was no telling who else did. Alan, Richard, and Phillip could have all known. She took his hand. "I see."

Feeling her touch made something split inside him. He pulled his hand away. "Don't do that."

"I'm sorry. Your reaction just—"

He backed up and shook his head. "Look, I don't appreciate you assuming things about me. We don't know each other very well."

She took a step toward him. "I know."

"No, you don't," he said. "You can't act like you understand things about me and especially things like that."

"I'm not judging you," she assured. "I'm going by what I've learned."

"Yeah, I get that you know a lot from what you're parents have taught you, but it has nothing to do with me," he said. "I'm not one of the things you know."

She blushed. "Ron, I'm sorry. I don't mean to offend you."

"Well, you are," he snapped. "You're standing here trying to tell me what's going on with me based on what you've seen from other people or read in some book. It doesn't make sense so leave it alone, yeah?"

"There's no need to be mean or raise your voice," she said. "I just wanted to see if I could help you."

He was fed up with people wanting to help him. He wondered how many people looked at him and thought that he needed saving. "You can't do anything because there's nothing to help."

"You don't have to act like such a bloke," she said. "I'm not blind, Ron."

"And I'm not your boyfriend, so you don't have to figure me out or take care of me," he shot back at her. "I already have a girlfriend for all that."

Olivia looked down and her cheeks flushed even darker. "Forget it, then. I'll fuck off." She turned away and jogged down the path. Ron watched her but didn't follow.

* * *

Dear Ron,

I'm really happy that you were finally able to answer my letters. I know that you've most likely been extremely busy, so I understand why it's taken a while. Still, I've been worried because I haven't heard from you and even though you wrote me back, you didn't say much. "Everything is fine" doesn't quite settle with me. I hope that when we see each other we can really talk about how camp is going for you. I won't lie. I did try to get information out of Harry, but he's the most loyal to you so he told me nothing. The only thing he did say was that training was getting rather severe and challenging and that I should be patient. That's what I'm trying to do as best as I can. It just so happens that you're not the only one feeling the demand. NEWT coursework, on top of Head Girl duty, on top of regular life is becoming a lot to carry at one time. I wrote to my parents about it. Of course, they told me to come home if it gets too taxing for me, but I'm not going to give up.

However, an upside is that I'm finding some relief in Ginny. Before you get all perverted, hear me out. She's doing very well with Quidditch, and I love watching her play. You should see her and the attention she's getting. She thinks it's mostly because of her involvement in the war and with Harry, but it's all because of her talent. I know she wants to tell you about it. She misses you, and so do I. I feel for the first time since we went our separate ways that we're totally apart. We talk so little, but I know it's not anyone's fault. We knew it would be like this sometime, but I feel so far away from you. I can't say enough how strange it was to see Harry here with Ginny and only look at their happiness. I was glad for them, but I hated it a little. Don't tell either that I mentioned this. I don't want them to think that I don't care about their happiness, but I want my own. I want you, Ron.

I hope that our plan will work out. Remember to be honest and firm with Alan. They're your passes for whenever you want to use

them. If it works out, then I guess I'll see you in front of The Three Broomsticks on Saturday. I shouldn't be late for any reason. I do have some work to do for most of the day, but I told McGonagall and a few other professors that you were coming and would have a limited time to stay. If anything comes up either way, please, write to me. I really enjoy hearing from you.

I love you so much, and I'm proud of you,

Hermione

Ron put the letter in his lap and closed his eyes. He could feel the pressure on his shoulders dig into his skin. He cherished every letter he got from her. Hermione's words were extremely sweet as always, but he knew her far too well. He could hear every sigh and see every tremble of her bottom lip as she wrote the letter. She was upset and let down. She wrote to him, but he didn't write back fast enough or in the way that she wanted him to. He honestly wanted to give her more in his responses, but all he felt daily was uncertainty and a deep loneliness that didn't seem to have an origin. By this time, he was sure that it had less to do with training and more to do with something that he couldn't recognize. He had been at Lambrick for almost a month and what had started off as exciting and testing had faded into something he almost hated.

"Ron."

He looked up at Roger who was right inside the door. "Hi," he rasped.

He sat next to him. "Are you coming to lunch today?"

"I'm not that hungry," he said. In fact, he had barely been hungry for several days. "I need to talk to Alan."

"Is that from Hermione?" Roger asked, pointing to the letter.

"Yes. Hopefully I can see her tomorrow," he said. It was beyond all comprehension how badly he needed Hermione.

"You could use a soft spot right now, I reckon," Roger said, patting his arm. "I hope you're able to go."

"I have to go," he said. "I don't care if it's still too early to use one."

"Don't listen to anyone here, Ron," Roger said. "You have someone who's dying to see you, and she happens to be the love of your life. You should be put away if you don't use a pass now."

Ron chuckled a little and was once again reminded of how much he appreciated Roger. "Thanks. I guess I should get it over with."

"Good luck. I'll see you at practice," Roger said. Ron took a few more moments to wrap his mind around what he would say before leaving for Alan's cabin. The door was open, and Alan was behind his desk. It was the same kind and quality as every other cabin,

but it was where he planned out lessons and discussed with other instructors on campus.

Ron knocked on the doorframe. "Sir?"

He looked up from his papers. "Yes, Weasley?"

"May I speak to you for a moment?" Ron asked. Alan nodded and motioned him. Ron took a seat in front of his desk and played with a loose string on the hem of his t-shirt. The two hadn't got on so well since his almost attack, and it was awkward to be alone with him.

"Yes?" Alan said.

Ron refused to lose his nerve. They were his passes to use, and he needed to see Hermione's kind eyes and warm smile. "I was wondering if I could use a day pass."

"You want to use a pass?" Alan repeated.

"Yes, sir," he said a bit more confidently. "They are mine."

"I know that, Weasley," Alan said. "I was there with Phillip when the news of these new passes was announced."

"Well, I'd like to use one." Ron sat straight in his chair and kept his eyes on Alan to let him know that he was serious.

Alan actually sat back in his chair and clicked his teeth with his tongue. "You know, Weasley, I don't have much authority when it comes to the passes, but I do have a right to say if the person is deserving when he asks."

"Does this mean that you're not going to let me use one, sir?" he tensely asked.

"I didn't say that," Alan said. "I won't rebuff the impression you've made when it comes to your running, your use of strategy, and your hand-to-hand combat. You're one of my most capable trainees."

"I appreciate you saying that," Ron said.

He held up his hand. "I'm also not going to be dishonest and say that you've been remarkable these past couple of weeks because we both know that's not true. In fact, you've dropped tremendously as far as ability goes. A couple of days of adjustment I empathize with but going on this long without improvement is a predicament."

Ron just wanted to take his pass and go. He didn't need Alan to tell him what he already knew. "I agree, sir."

"So why the rub?" he asked. "After what you've already accomplished in your private life, I thought you would always be someone to contend with, but with your current performance rate I can't help but think that I was mistaken."

"Sir, I can be better," Ron said, ignoring the panging feeling.
"You weren't mistaken."

"Better isn't where someone like you should be. You should be well beyond better by now." Alan sat up. "Is there something that you need to tell me? I can see the fear you have when we train at night and in certain conditions. If there's something I or any of the trainers need to know, then you should let it be known."

For a second Ron considered telling Alan that he couldn't get passed his fright and apprehension most days. Then again, he knew that if he told about his panic attacks then he would be one of the first to be cut. Any weakness was an excuse to get sacked.
"There's nothing, sir. I'm not doing my best because I'm not pushing as hard as I can. It'll stop, and I'll be where I was."

Alan studied him and Ron hoped that he saw something worth keeping around. "All right. I'll let you use a pass. I think you deserve it, and it might do you some good to take in some different air."

Ron let out a breath of relief. "Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me yet, Weasley," he said. "Now, let's talk about when you want to use your pass and about the conditions and regulations we have about leaving Lambrick." Like Harry had said, Ron had to fill out a protection form requiring his complete disclosure about the camp. Alan went over the rules of departing the academy, and Ron signed his name on his exit slip.

"I'll give this back to you before you leave tomorrow," Alan said. "You'll still have to participate in the morning routine and the afternoon training but since it's one of our shorter days, you can leave afterwards. You'll have three hours, and for the first pass we allow a thirty-minute grace period that should cover any last minute debacles. If you're later than that, then don't bother returning at all."

"I'll be back on time," Ron said, getting up and going to the door.

"One more thing, Weasley," Alan said, standing as well. "As we told you during your interview, you and Potter both being here doesn't mean anything. If he can perform under all the pressure he's under, then he'll move on. If you fail to meet the challenge, then you'll be dropped without a second thought. You're dismissed." He closed the door in his face, and Ron simply stared at it. On his list of things he didn't need reminding of, Alan telling him that Harry was better suited to be an Auror was certainly at the top.

Saturday came and the happiness and excitement that had been missing in his heart returned. He thought about Hermione all day and how seeing her would make his problems disappear. He fought harder knowing that Alan wanted him gone and that he would have Hermione soon, but he still froze during practice. Alan blew his whistle to signal their end of the session. Ron got off the

ground and picked up his wand. He was dazed like he usually was at the end the training period, but it didn't matter. He had to shower and possibly eat a little before taking his pass and going to Hogsmeade.

"Weasley!" Alan called. Ron ran over to him. "Here's your pass."

"Oh," Ron said, taking it. "I thoughtâ€!"

"No, your time starts now," he said, walking away. He had to fix up somehow, but it would take away his precious time. He spotted Harry following his group back to west. They weren't partners anymore and they weren't exactly talking, but Ron wanted to tell him about leaving. Nevertheless, he didn't have the time. He hurried through his shower and realized that he had no time to cleanly shave the stubble off his face. His thirty-minute grace period was almost over and he had to go. He stuffed his slip into his jacket pocket and ran past the main grounds. He took the same route he and Harry had taken when they arrived to Lambrick and waited until he was to the statue before Apparating.

Ron stood outside The Three Broomsticks and peered around at the bustle of people crowding the village. It was different from what he had quickly grown accustom to at Lambrick. The air wasn't as fresh, and the ground wasn't all grass. People were laughing, snogging, eating, shopping, and having a good time. There weren't constant dueling going on, and no one was in formation or in plain, dirty shirts. It was great, but it didn't put a smile on his face. He checked his watch. Hermione had said that she would be on time, but she was late. Every second she wasn't there was a second wasted of his free period, and he tried his hardest not to get angry. A minute turned into five and almost ten. Ron closed his eyes. He literally didn't have time.

Abruptly, someone grabbed his arms and squeezed them. "I am so sorry that I'm late!" Ron opened his eyes and his heart skipped several beats. Hermione was in front of him. She was frowning, shaking her head, and clutching his arms. She was fuming but was also the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. She was bundled up in jeans and a jacket, but she might as well have been naked, sweaty, and plastered to his body. He had no words to describe the sensation and his body loosened and reacted so extremely that it was a bit unnerving. He wanted to hug her, kiss her, say something loving, or even go down on her right there in the street, but once more he was immobile.

"Remember how I told you that I wouldn't be held up?" she asked. "Well, of course, right as I was leaving a couple of professors wanted to go over the new point docking system with me. I told them that my boyfriend from out of town was coming and that he was on a schedule, but of course they didn't care. No one ever does." She finally stopped talking and huffed.

Seeing her eyes helped things to connect in his brain. "It's okay," he finally breathed. "I'm sorry you got held up, but you're here now. Can I have a hug, please?"

Hermione groaned and slapped a hand to her forehead. "Yes, of course! I'm sorry. I've been blabbing and wasting time, and you've just been standing here. Of course, baby, come here." She wrapped her arms around his neck and Ron held on to her for dear life. He buried his nose in her hair, and he took in the sweet smell of it. Her body fit perfectly against his, and she felt so warm and soft and right. A bit of peace washed over him, and he closed his eyes to take in the moment. "I'm having a really horrible day, and this is exactly what I need to make it right," she said against his neck. "I missed you so much, Ron."

"I missed you, too," he whispered. He held her tighter and took her off the ground a little. "I really did miss you. Say my name again."

"Ron, I'm so glad you're here," she said, kissing his neck. "I love you, Ron. Oh, Ron, oh, Ron." He didn't want to let her go. He didn't want to go back to Lambrick, and he didn't want to move, but he did so he could see her face. He put his hand against her cheek, and she kissed the side of it. He loved her so much, and it felt excellent to see her. Her brown eyes were so big, and her lips were begging to be kissed.

He cupped her face and pressed his mouth to hers. She made a sound due to the forcefulness, but she responded eagerly. She parted her lips, and Ron took complete control of her mouth, her tongue, and her taste. The blood rushed back through his body and filled gaps that had been empty for ages. He moaned longingly at the incredibleness, and it took all his willpower to part from her and not take her against the nearest wall. He opened his eyes and expected to find all the answers he needed and all the feelings he had been missing out on. It scared him a little because it wasn't there when he gazed back into her eyes. The loneliness didn't instantly fade like he assumed it would. It didn't make sense to him. Seeing her had always made him whole again.

She licked her lips. "That was an amazing kiss."

"I'm glad you liked it," he said, tracing her mouth. He decided to forget his problems all together. "So, are we going to see Ginny before we start?"

"She's still in practice," Hermione said. "She said that she'd try to get out early if she could, but they have a big match coming it."

"It's okay. If she can't make it, then I'll see her next time." He shrugged and told himself that it didn't matter.

She held on to her necklace and rubbed it. "I can tell you're disappointed."

"It's fine. I'll see her soon, and it gives me more time with you." He put his hands on her waist and brought her closer. "This is why I'm here. You wanted me, so you've got me."

Her cheeks turned faintly pink, and he felt her shiver. She rose and kissed him again. "You're scratchy."

"Sorry. I didn't have time for a proper shave," he said.

"I'm not complaining. I like the stubble, and it suits you." She ran a finger across his jaw. "You look older with it, and you look stronger too."

He put the back of his hand to her forehead "Are you sick?"

She moved it away. "Stop it. I'm serious."

"Obviously not," he said. "I barely had any time to get ready. I know I'm a knob right now."

"You certainly do not look like a knob," she said. "You're firmer. I can see it and feel it. You're even sexier now."

He rubbed his neck and felt heat on his face. "It hasn't quite been a month yet. I'm sure I look the same."

"You're so modest," she said. "Fine, since you don't want to talk about your body, what do you want to do?"

"Do?" He laughed. "Not only do I like my bollocks where they are, but I know that it would be far too rude to answer with Y-O-U."

She gasped and hit his arm. "You're certainly right! Urgh, is that something you learned at camp?"

"No. That's an original," he said. More of his old self kicked in as he teased Hermione, and it felt good.

"Then find better material," she said. She glared at him, but he could tell that she wasn't that upset. He decided to press his luck.

"I'm sorry. Let me at least explain," he said. "Forgetting the fact that I haven't seen you in almost a month, I haven't wanked in almost as long."

Her eyes widened for a moment, but she turned her head away from him and stuck out her chin. "That's definitely not my problem, but it's certainly an over share."

"I'm being honest with you," he said. "The last time I came was with you."

Hermione swallowed hard, and she went completely pink. "You shouldn't talk like that."

"Why, because it's rude?" he asked. She tried to hit him, but his reflexes were far too sharp.

"No," she said in a hushed voice. "I told you. You look amazing and when you talk about things like that, it's almost too much."

He took her hands and kissed each fingertip. "I don't have as much self control. I'm not gifted with my own room like you are."

"What are you implying?" she asked, shivering again.

"You don't have to be shy. I know every night you can't get enough of Imaginary Ron," he teased.

She tapped his nose. "Hush it before I don't invite you back to my room."

"Why would we go there?" he asked.

"I guess you'll have to find out," she said, "but I'll give you a hint. I put the spell on me right before I came here."

"Smart lady." He put his arms around her waist and touched the curve of her arse. "It'll take too long to get back to your room."

She squeaked as he gave her cheeks a light squeeze. "Well, we're not doing it here."

So much of his energy and joy returned, and he wanted to enjoy it to the fullest. He looked around and at the pub across the street from them and a brilliant idea came to mind. "We'll go there," he said, pointing to it.

She followed his finger and gaped at him. "You must be mad. We can't be in there."

"Yes we can," he said, taking her hand and pulling her toward the pub. "Live dangerously with me. I'm an Auror in training, so you can trust me."

"I do trust you," she said, dragging her feet. "I've also lived with plenty of danger already."

"Then this should be sorted," he said. They walked in and Ron went up to the tender behind the bar. "Excuse me, sir? My girlfriend spilled her drink on me. Is there somewhere I can wash?"

"Yes. Down the hall and to the left," he said, pointing to the hallway.

Ron had to keep a straight face as he saw Hermione glare at him out of the corner of his eye. "Thank you." Ron took Hermione hand and led her back.

She snatched her hand away. "I can't believe you said that."

"I needed to say something," he said. They walked down a narrow corridor and he saw the door to the loo. He put his hand on it.

"I'm not doing anything in a dirty toilet," she whispered.

"I'd never ask you to, but I know the storage room is always by the loo." Sure enough, there was another door across the hall from it that had to be their destination. He glanced around before opening it and quickly pushing Hermione and himself in. He locked the door and put up a silencing charm. "We at least need to hear what's going on out there."

"I can't believe I came in here with you," she said, looking around. "I have principle."

"You also have a need to be bad sometimes," he said. "That's why we're brilliant together." Along each wall of the small room were stacked boxes and cases containing liquors, napkins, meats, and other pub materials. It was dimly lit, stale smelling, and a bit dusty but for some reason it seemed perfect. It was different and fun. He looked at Hermione. "What do you think?"

She crinkled her nose. "Convince me."

"I accept your challenge," he said. "Just give me a minute and your jacket." She looked at him inquisitively and handed it to him. Ron searched the room to see what he could use. He removed a couple of crates off a small and round brown table and dragged it out of the corner. Luckily, it was about to his waist. He found another box about the same height and pushed it behind it.

"I love watching you work with your hands and muscles," she said.

"The Muggle way isn't so bad for some things." He turned to her and winked before getting back to it. He raised his wand to the table and said, "Scourgify" to clean up the dust and stains. He did the same to the crates. He balled her jacket on the crate for a pillow, and he took his off his own and put it on the table for cushion. "Come look."

She smiled at him shyly and walked over. "You made me a little bed."

"I did my best," he said.

She studied it for a moment before sitting on the table. "This will do. Is the door locked?"

"Yes, and the silence charm is only one way." Ron guided her back on the table and her head rested on the box. Her head and torso seemed to fit comfortably, but her legs dangled off the edge. "Is this all right for you?"

She groaned and put a face over her hand. "Don't ask me that. None of this is all right for me but we're here, aren't we?" She uncovered her face and rubbed her foot against his leg. "This is fine, and I want it so it honestly doesn't matter."

Ron leaned over and kissed her. He unfastened her jeans and slid them over her trainers and off her body completely. He moved his fingertips over her smooth thighs. "I miss your body so much there."

Hermione's body trembled as he brushed his fingers over her inner thighs. "Is that all you miss?"

"No, but when you're laying in your knickers like this, I can't really think about anything else. You're bloody delicious," he said.

She moaned softly and thrust her hips. "Then stop admiring and take a bite. We don't have all day, Ronald Weasley."

"As you wish." He started to unzip his jeans.

Hermione put her foot over his hand to stop him. "Um, sweetheart, how are we going to do this?"

"Again, trust me," he said calmly. "Lift your hips." She followed suit and he took her knickers off. He then finished unzipping his jeans and pulled down his boxers. He stepped as close to the boxes as he could and put her legs against his chest so they were vertical.

"Ron," she stagger breathed, as her eyes grew enormous.

"Always the tone of surprise," he said. He grabbed one leg with each hand and lifted them higher, opening them wider at the same time, so that he was able to push himself into her. He felt himself going in, and her body warmly swallowed his length.

Hermione automatically cried out "Oh my god, Ron! Where you always like this? You're so big."

"Mmm, I-I think so. I'm glad you like it, Mione." He got a better hold of her legs and slipped into her until he felt his hips touch her skin. Hermione arched her back and gasped. Looking down, he could see their parts connect, and it made him want to push and slick them together. He began to pump, and he watched her. Her eyes were closed, her lips were parted, and her face was flushed. He wanted to enjoy every bit of the most beautiful and sexy woman in the world, but he didn't have time. He started fucking her hard yet slowly, drawing back then pushing into her again, feeling the whole length of him slipping deeper, clasped by her wetness.

"Yes, Ron," she moaned. She curled her fingers over the edge of the table that shook as he pushed again and again. The sound of their bodies coming together grew louder and more urgent the longer he went. His mind cleared, and all he felt and knew was Hermione's body. He closed his eyes as the pleasure flooded through him, and he let out a throaty groan as he buried his cock and his feelings into her. "R-Ron," she panted as he continued to push. "Someone's coming."

"I know. I'm cumming too. Fucking hell," he wheezed. His vision returned to her, and he saw her frowning at the door.

She rose to her elbows and shook her head. "No, no, I mean someone is coming here. I can hear someone outside the door."

Ron slowed almost to a stop, but he didn't quit completely. He merely circled his hips and kept the build up between them going all while trying to concentrate of what she was talking about. Well-ah-I don't hear anything, and they can't hear us, and the door is locked."

She sucked in breath and cried out again in obvious pleasure. "I-I don't know, Ron."

He stopped moving. "Do you want me to stop? I will."

"I don't want you to stop, Ron." She looked at the door then quickly back at him as if she was formulating a plan. "Okay, just go as fast as you can so we can finish. Then, you can give me my clothes back and we can disapparate out of here."

Ron gazed at her in awe. "Bloody hell, are you always such a bossy boss? Only you can turn things as enjoyable as sex and orgasms into a bloody coursework assignment." She dug her heel into his nipple, and he slapped her foot. "Ow! Watch the nips!"

"And you watch your mouth!" she said. "Stop complaining and get on with it before I take you out of me and leave you here to masturbate."

"That'd mean you'd leave yourself to wank too!" he said.

"At least I have a hot shower or a warm bed to choose from," she said.

He raised his fist. "Ha! I knew it!"

"Ronald Bilius Weasley, make us cum, now!" she barked, slamming her fists against the table.

"Okay!" He re-gripped and went faster. He tried to hold on as long as he could, but knowing that they were close to getting caught made things more intense. Hermione moaned and whined without any sort of filter. It was amazing. She squirmed under him and gave a loud and strangled cry. Her body shook, and she tightly shut her eyes. She came and contracted around him. It heightened his state, and he felt the pulse inflate until he wrenched a groan from his lips. His released powerfully and the force doubled him over. His hips jerked but he continued thrusting into her until his movements slowed and stopped. He let go of her legs and put his hands on either side of her. He leaned over her and snogged her fiercely. All he felt was liberation and satisfaction. Not an ounce of hollowness circled around his chest and he wasn't afraid of anything. He broke away from her mouth and slipped from her.

Hermione whimpered as he withdrew, and she wiped sweat off her brow. "I guess we both needed something wild. That was incredible."

"Mmm-hmm. Bloody hell, you're good," he mumbled, nibbling on her neck.

"I'm good?" she said, running her fingers through his hair. "How much do I owe you better not follow that statement."

"Of course not. You'd never charge me," he said.

She pushed him away. "Give me my clothes, rude little boy." He laughed and picked up her jeans.

"Oi, give me the other crate so I can stack it with the rest," someone from outside said.

"Bloody Merlin's right bollock!" Ron said. "Here, quick!" He threw Hermione her clothes, and she scurried to put them on. Ron pulled up his jeans and fastened them. He made sure that he had their wands before grabbing her and Disapparating. They appeared by The Three Broomsticks and laughed hysterically for a minute.

Hermione was the first to stop. She discreetly ran her hands over her arse. "Do you have my knickers?"

"No," he said out of breath. "I gave them to you."

All her amusement faded. "Then I must have dropped them!"

"Hermione, it's not like they have your name on them," he said. "And you'll be fine not wearing any just this once."

"It doesn't matter!" she said, pacing. "Some stranger is going to find them in there and pick them up."

"And throw them away. I'm sure we're not the first people to shag in there. Don't worry so much," he said. "It'll be a great story someday."

"This isn't funny. It's indecent," she said. "It's the second pair I've lost."

"Not finishing would have been indecent," he said, checking his watch. "I'll buy you a new bag of knickers or whatever they come if you'll stop worrying so much."

"If it were up to you, then I wouldn't wear any." She stomped her foot and rubbed her temples. "All right, fine. I'll worry later. Do you want to eat?"

"Do you have to ask?" he said. He took her hand and smiled. "Let's find a nice spot. You can catch me up and take your mind off the rebellious knickers." As they walked around Hogsmeade, Ron listened to Hermione go on about her schoolwork and her duties. He wanted to know everything he had missed, and he knew that she needed someone to simply listen to her and care. He liked being her ear, and he also liked not being the focus. The last thing he wanted to do was talk about himself. He would listen to Hermione explain why Ancient Runes was her most challenging class and why the first year Gryffindors were the most deviant of the bunch a million time before he discussed camp. When they settled in a teashop, Ron's appetite came back

with a force. The idea of eating real food with actual seasoning was unbelievable.

"I think it's an entitlement issue," he said as they ate. "A lot of good things have come out of Gryffindor lately, so the midgets think they're special. You should let them."

"That's not proper," Hermione said. "They have so much energy. Were we that jumpy at that age?"

"You've always been an old woman but for the rest of us-ow!" Ron lifted his leg and rubbed his shin.

"That's what you get for being mean," she said.

He pouted a little and moved his legs out of her path. "I almost forgot how violent you are." He took a huge bite of his forth bacon sandwich. "Bloody hell, I missed these little fuckers."

Hermione rested her chin on her fist and smiled at him. "How was your training today?"

"The same as every day," he muttered between chews.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, but what does that mean?"

He wiped his mouth. "It's like I told you in the letter. I wake up. I run and fly. I shower and eat. Then, we day train and work on spells and at night we train again and duel. I eat dinner, go on my walk, then go to sleep."

"You go on walks?" she asked. "By yourself?"

"No, with Olivia from my section," he said, rubbing his neck. "It's nothing special. It's to clear our heads and get a bit more exercise. We don't talk most of the time."

Hermione stirred her straw in her glass. "That's nice. I'm glad you're getting extra exercise. Is there anything else?"

"That's my whole day," he said. The uneaten half of his sandwich was no longer appealing.

Hermione sighed. "Ron, that doesn't tell me anything. I get your schedule, but I want to know how it is for you. We've spent this whole time talking about me."

"That's because what's going on with you is interesting," he said. While he was with Hermione, he had almost forgotten how much things had changed at camp. The loneliness hadn't gone away, but he felt better and he wanted to stay better. "There isn't anything to tell that I haven't explained. We're working on hand combat and night dueling."

"Okay," she breathed. "Will you at least tell me how things are with your roommates?"

"Conor is fine, and Roger is really great. Jack's a prick, but I already told you that." He stuck his finger in the puddle of grease on his plate and sucked the bit off his finger.

"And how's Harry doing?" she asked.

He shrugged. "He's doing well."

"I guess working with him has been nice," she said.

Ron didn't know what to say. He was surprised that Harry hadn't written to Hermione first thing and told her everything. "Yeah. It has." Hermione covered her face. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she dully said. "You can't say more than two words to me but whatever."

"Are you mad or something?" He already knew the answer, but he wanted confirmation.

"Yes. Ron, we're finally together and I thought this would be the time for me to find out more about how your time is going," she said. "Instead, you're giving the same things you wrote to me in your letters."

"What do you want from me?" he asked. "I told you that there wasn't much to tell."

She shook her head. "There's plenty to tell. I want to know how you are, and I want to know what you do during your days. I want to know how you're handling keeping in touch with your family. Just things, Ron."

"I told you how I am, and I told you the things that matter. Why does this have to be an exam?" He could feel himself getting angry, but he tried to stay calm. "Hermione, I came here for you. I only want to be here with you and forget about Lambrick for a few hours."

"I can understand that, Ron, but understand me, too," she said. "It's not like tomorrow I can walk up to your room or I call you later tonight on the phone. This is the only time and the perfect time to find out how things are."

"But it's not because there's nothing to tell," he said for what seemed like the hundredth time. "This is a waste of our time. Nothing has changed. I train. It's hard and most of the time it's not that great. That's the end of the story."

"That's not fair," she said, sitting back in her chair. "You asked me to tell you about school, and I told you everything. I didn't want to relive it all, but I did it for you because you're not around to experience it with me. That's how long distance relationships work, Ron."

"Don't lecture me about how our relationship works," he said. "I'm doing my job."

"Well, it sort of seems like you need a reminder," she shot.

He pushed his plate away. "Yes, of course, and you know exactly how everything should be because it's easy for you."

"How is it easy for me?" she asked.

"You're at school," he said. "It's what you're good at, and it's what you've always done. You can go on for ages about it. I can't do that with Lambrick."

"Oh, I see," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. "So because I'm at a school and not a prestigious training camp, my life is ridiculously simple."

"That's not what I mean," he said, rubbing his face. "You're putting words in my mouth."

"Then correct me," she said coldly.

"I just mean that it's different for me at camp." Thinking about it made the heavy feelings come back. He wanted to explain it to her, but he didn't know how. "It's not like when I was at home. It's another world, and it's something that you simply can't understand unless you're there."

"See," she said, "this is exactly the type of thing I want to know so I can understand why it's hard to talk about. I can obviously tell that something has changed for you and that something is wrong."

"What do you mean?" he asked with a shrug.

She looked at him with concern and touched his hand. "I'm away, but it doesn't mean I don't know you anymore. I knew something was up when I got that last letter from you, and when I first saw you today I knew my feelings were right. Talking about camp makes it worse, doesn't it?" Hermione was right, but he didn't want her to be. If he couldn't understand it, then it wasn't right for someone else to.

He slowly moved his hand away. "I don't want to do this with you. Can't we forget it and enjoy our time, please?"

"I would love to enjoy our time, Ron," she said, "but I don't know how we're supposed to if we're not open with each other. You can't shut me out but expect me to know the right things to say. It's not how it works."

"Stop telling me how this works!" he snapped. "You're acting like I'm a horrible boyfriend. I'm trying my best, but you want everything in perfect inscription. Fucking hell, Hermione."

She quickly looked around before leaning over the table. "Listen to me," she said tensely, "I don't know how you talk to your camp friends, but you won't talk to me this way. I'm not telling you how to do anything, but I have a say in how our relationship

should be. I don't need you to write an essay but when I ask you how you are, I'd like honesty."

"I am honest," he said. "I just don't have time or the energy to go into all the details. If I tell you that I'm all right, then believe it. You don't need to worry yourself."

"How dare you?" she asked in a frustrated whisper. "I may not have all the current experience that you have, but I've been through hell and back as well. Don't assume that I can't handle it. It's patronizing."

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry. You're right and I'm wrong. I'll do better next time. Now, can we move on?"

She held up her hands. "There's no talking to you. I guess because I'm not Roger or Conor or Olivia I can't fathom anything about you anymore. Maybe you should go on one of your walks tonight and tell Olivia all about this."

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"I think it's interesting that the one detail you do give me is that you go for walks with some girl night after night," she said.

He was so shocked that he didn't know how to respond. "I told you because it's a part of my day, and I thought it'd be something you would want to know. If you were doing extra hours of studying with some bloke at night, then I'd want to know."

"Then it's great for you because I'm not," she said. "I'm studying alone or I'm doing something for a teacher or I'm working on my Head Girl duties or I'm with Ginny trying to keep her together."

"Don't bring my sister into this like she's a burden to you," he said rather loudly.

She reddened. "She's not a burden but telling her over and over again that you're okay when I don't even know for sure definitely is. Trying to fill in the blanks for her because you don't write to her is. How about you be a brother to the sister you care about so much. She needs you during this difficult time."

"You have no idea what you're talking about," he said. "You can correct me as a friend and as a boyfriend, but you have no right to critique me as a brother."

Her eyes glossed over. "Listen to yourself. I don't have a right? What am I to you now, Ron? Am I just the girl you shag every now and then while you're off training?"

"Don't say that!" he said in hurt and astonishment. "I would've lost my bloody will if I couldn't see you today, and it has nothing to do with sex. Why do I even need to say this? You know that I fucking love you more than anything."

"I love you, too!" she cried. "That's why I want to know what's wrong with you. Stop making me feel bad for it!"

"Excuse me," a waitress said, swiftly walking over to their table. "I'll have to ask you two to leave if you can't keep it down."

Hermione paled. "I'm so sorry. We'll be quiet." The waitress nodded and walked away. Hermione wiped under her eyes.
"Maybe maybe it wasn't such a good idea for you to come today."

"Yeah, maybe not," he muttered. He couldn't believe how quickly things had turned. They hadn't had a real fight since they started dating, and it felt worse than anything he had experienced before. "Do you think I should leave?"

Her bottom lip trembled and she sniffed. "I think you should."

"Okay," he whispered. He stood and dropped his money on the table. She didn't look at him, and he didn't know what to say. He felt awful. He knew he was wrong, and that she only wanted to help. He didn't know what was wrong with him, and he hated himself for making her upset and for ruining her day. He walked over to her and tenderly kissed the top of her head. She sniffed again and made a slight noise. He left the shop without another word.

He didn't know where to go as he walked around Hogsmeade. He still had some time, and he was no mood to go back early. He didn't know what was happening to him. He was fucking up every aspect of his life, and he didn't feel like himself. The whispers and whimpers returned and the pit in his chest grew. He wanted to ignore it. He thought that ignoring it would help, but all it did was make him lie to Harry, ruin his bond with Olivia, and disappoint Alan. Worst of all, it made him hurt Hermione. They had fought because of him. He had actually walked out on her, and it was the one thing he had promise never to do again since repairing his friendship with her in third year.

It wasn't worth it. The terror and the feelings he didn't want to admit to weren't worth losing Hermione in any way. No matter how powerless and afraid the truth made him feel, he'd do it for her and he had to tell her that. He practically ran back to the teashop, hoping that she was there. He stopped as soon as he got to the building. Hermione was outside, holding her necklace and looking around. Their eyes met and they walked up to each other. They stared at one another. "I'm-I'm sorry," he finally rasped.

Hermione let out a whimper and jumped into his arms. "I'm sorry, too. Oh my god, Ron."

"Don't apologize," he said, holding her tightly. "This has nothing to do with you."

"Yes, it does," she said. She pulled away, and her eyes were red and wet. "I've been really worried about you and not being there for you is making me upset with this whole situation and myself. I have so much going on, and I'm out of my mind right now!"

He put a finger to her lips. "Shh. Let me go first this time," he said. He looked around. "Come here." He took her hand and led her further down the street until they reached a split in the road. He found a large tree away from most of the noise and people that overlooked the other part of the village. They sat down and he stared at his hands. He didn't know where to begin, but being so close to Hermione helped thaw out in his mind. "This isn't your fault, and hurting you isn't going to make it go away."

"What are you talking about, Ron?" she asked.

"You, Harry, and basically everyone at the bloody camp is right about me," he said. "There is something wrong. I haven't been sleeping well and up until today I haven't really been all that hungry. My performances during the sessions have been shit, and it seems like no matter what I do, I can't shake off this horribleâ€;" He thought of the right word to describe what pushed him so low to ground. "This horrible depression that I have."

Hermione's jaw dropped, and she scooted next to him "What? When did it start?"

"I want to say when we started the new training, but I think I've felt this way for a while, just not as much," he explained. "When I first got to Lambrick, I enjoyed it. Then we started hand combat, which I'm really good at, and I loved being there more but right after that, day-by-day, I started to feel empty. I didn't know what to say to anyone."

"Even me?" she asked. "I'd never try to push you if I knew."

"I know, but I just don't feel any energy to write, and I feel like I have nothing to say. It's not only you. I haven't really written to anyone for a while." He took her hand and kissed it. "But I do want to be here with you, Hermione. Not just physically, but I want to tell you everything. I just freeze up all the time. I hate being at Lambrick now, Hermione. Every day I fucking hate it, so I never want to talk about it."

She ran her pointer finger over his mouth. "Ron, I think it's normal to feel animosity and especially if you're having a bit a trouble."

"That's not all." He rubbed his neck. "I sorta had a panic attack during one of our night sessions. We were being introduced to fire, and I lost it. People saw me and my trainer thought I was trying to skive, but I wasn't. All these feelings and sounds came out of nowhere and it messed up me up. They still won't leave." He saw the fear all over her face, but he could tell that she was trying to hide it.

"What are they of?" she asked.

"I don't know, but it's loud and hot and there are all these explosions. I think I'm going mental or something." He didn't meet her eyes for fear that she did think he was mad.

Hermione was quiet for a while, and then she lifted his chin. She gazed at him as if she understood something that he didn't. "Ron, when you hear these things and when you have these memories, what are memories of?"

He uttered incoherent sounds for a moment. "H-Hogwarts, I think."

"And why do you think that is?" she asked. "What do you think this is really all about that you aren't allowing yourself to deal with?" He uttered nothing again, and the pit in his chest grew and once again climbed up his throat. The whispers turned into whimpers and eventually the sounds became cries. The fire and the spells and the loudness exploded and the wall was destroyed. There was a body with ginger hair, freckles, and a subtle smile permanently marked on his face.

"Fred," he croaked. "I miss Fred, Hermione. I miss my brother so much."

She nodded. "I know you do," she said in a shaky voice.

"No, you don't understand. Oh, fuck." He rubbed his eyes roughly and rocked. The harsh reality hit him without warning. "He's dead, and he's never coming back. I'm never going to be able to talk to him or see him again. He's buried in the ground, and my family can't be nine anymore. I just can't believe he's dead." The frustration and the horror and the sadness took him over. It was too much, and he didn't think he'd live another second through it, but Hermione's arms wrapped around him and he collapsed against her chest. It was comfortable, and she smelled so good. He let go against her and stopped shrugging off the feelings. It was destroying him, and he couldn't ignore it. Letting the anguish out was incredible.

"I don't think you've been honest with yourself, Ron," she softly said. "You're still not letting yourself grieve his death."

"I thought I did," he sobbed. "I thought I was over this."

"This isn't something that you quickly pass and heal from. It takes time." She rubbed his back and rocked with him. "You've been strong for so long for everyone, but it doesn't mean that you have to always be so strong for yourself. This is tearing you up because you're not dealing with it."

"I'm not sure how," he confessed. "It's never been this bad before. I thought it would get better over time."

"Look at me," she said. He pulled away, and she wiped the tears from his eyes along with some of her own. "I think it does it better, but you haven't been taking care of yourself to let it. Ron, I think from what you described what you're feeling isn't all that strange. For the first time you're really on your own and you're homesick. That's natural and something everyone feels."

He sniffed and used the back of his sleeve to wipe his nose. "I do miss them, but it feels so much more than that."

"That's because it is." She looked a little apprehensive. "I hope you don't mind, but I've been reading books on loss. The first major change for someone in mourning is usually the hardest. Adjusting can be uncomfortable, and it's bringing these feelings out of you. It probably doesn't help that the night training is an apparent trigger for you."

He felt weak for not being able to escape his panic. "What am I supposed to do? I go so stiff, and I can't think about anything else."

"I don't know," she said. "I do know that ignoring it is only making it worse. You can't ignore missing Fred, and you can't pretend that the trigger isn't there. I guess you'll have to work through it just like you worked through being at the shop or in George's flat."

"That was different," he said. "I would get scared, but I'd think about you and it would get better." He noticed Hermione slightly smile. "But at the same time, George was always with me. I reckon I didn't realize it, but he helped me not feel so terrible." He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I thought it just went away, but I was wrong. I've been around my family ever since Fred died, and that's why I was okay."

She rubbed his back again. "Not having them is a lot of handle, but you have to learn to handle it by yourself."

"There's always something. I've gotten a letter from everyone in my family but Fred, and I think it's why I don't want to write anyone," he said. "It does me in so badly because I know I'm not going to see his handwriting addressed to me ever again. It fucking hurts so much."

"Then let it hurt, sweetheart," she said. "Feel it and move on. Stop trying to make it not exists."

"It's not easy, Hermione," he said. "When people bring him up, I brush it off and say it's okay. I never have any time to myself to feel anything but constant bloody vigilance. I don't have you or my family or even Harry, really."

She stopped rubbing his back and frowned a little. "That's your doing, Ron," she said. "You need him, and I can tell you that he honestly needs you. Let him be there for you. He's your family, too."

"So are you." She was so smart and so pretty and he loved her so much. "Bloody hell, I've missed you so much. I'm so sorry that I yelled at you and said those stupid things. You understand me better than I do."

"But I don't," she said with a sad smile. "This is something you should talk to your family about or at least someone you feel really comfortable with in your family. You can't forget about them."

"I could never forget them. It's why I'm like this," he said.

"No. I mean don't forget that they can help you. They feel exactly what you do, and they can help more than I or Harry or anyone can," she said.

"I just don't want them to start thinking that I can't handle it. I feel weak for being like this," he said.

"I can understand." She put a finger to her neck. "Sometimes, the smallest thing makes me think about Bellatrix, and I get so scared."

A pang hit his heart. "What do you do?" he asked.

"I try to remember to breath, and I tell myself that it's over. It can't hurt me any more than it already has." She looked gloomily. "The worst has already happened. All we're feeling now is what's left of bad memories."

Ron thought about the war, which was something he always avoided doing. So much had happened, and there was so much fire and pain still there. "I really miss Fred, and constantly training for darkness makes me miss him more."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of if training sometimes scares you," she said. "You don't always have to be tough."

"I feel like I do," he said.

She rubbed his cheek and kissed his forehead. "Well, I think that's more of a male thing than a Ron thing. A man's penis is measure by his toughness."

He pinched her side. "Oi, what about you? Don't think that your feelings don't matter. They do, and I feel like a sagging tit for making it seem otherwise."

"I've mostly just been worried about you and Harry," she said. "Ginny and I both are, and I don't now how to help while you're away. It's why I pushed so much for you to tell me things. I want to keep doing enough for you."

"That's the last thing you need to worry about," he said with a small grin. "You've been the only positive thought in my head. I need to change, not you. I don't want to be one of the first people dropped, so I'm not taking care of myself."

"You really want to stay?" she asked. "Even with everything going on?"

"Yes. No matter how mad it gets, I know this is want I want. I just don't feel it so much right now," he said. "Everyone is getting better, and I need to as well."

"I know they must say that you're all the same and are at the same level, but you're different from them, Ron," she said.

"I'm trying not to be," he said. "Everyone there is looking for me to be an arse so I'll get myself cut for acting superior."

"It's not about being superior or being an arse, Ron," she said. "It's truthful. You've done and seen things that most of them never will. It's a different experience for both you and Harry. You can't compare yourself to them."

"I'll trying not to, but it's an issue there and I don't need anymore of those," he said. "I don't want my problem to be the reason I'm cut or the reason why I break the best relationship of my life." He looked at her with confidence. "I'm not going to lose you over this."

"Ron, I'm not going anywhere," she said. "It doesn't matter if we have a fight or if things get hard. We can handle it, if we keep talking to each other. We have to keep communicating no matter how difficult it may seem. School hasn't changed the fact that you're first in my life."

"And you're the first in mine, honestly." He cleared his throat.
"Um, I'm sorry for bringing up Olivia."

"Don't apologize. I'm glad you told me." She shook her head and rubbed her brow. "I was obnoxiously immature and out of line because, well, I'm a little jealous."

"You have no reason to be," he said. "She's only a friend, and I'm not stupid. I know what I've got."

"I'm not worried about that. It's just that I'll never see you there. It's big, important part of your life that I'm missing out on. She sees you in a way that I never will, and I guess I feel a little possessive about it." She smirked and put a hand on his knee. "I always feel a little possessive when it comes to you."

He grinned. "I don't mind that at all."

"Good and besides, going on walks sounds lovely," she said. "I'd love to do that with you."

"I always think about you on the trail, and I talk about you," he said. "I'm not hiding our relationship, and I feel the same way. You're in your seventh year and you're Head Girl. I wish I could be there every time you yell at the midgets, and I wish I could see Ginny play."

"I know she wants to you watch her, but what she needs is a word from you and some reassurance," she said.

"I think I understand how George feels now. This is what we talked about all summer." It was so easy to tell George what to do, but doing it himself was impossible.

"Exactly, so, take your own advice," she said. "It's good advice, Ron. You're a smart man."

"And you're a smart woman," he said. "Bloody hell." Some of the weight on his shoulders faded the longer he talked, but there still seemed to be so much to dissolve.

"Do you feel a little better?" she asked, sitting between his legs.

"I don't know. Maybe. It's always easier in the beginning," he said. "It'll help if we're okay. Are we?"

"I think so," she said. "I think we both needed to get some frustration out."

"So, you're not mad at me?" he asked.

"On some level I'll always be mad at you," she said with a smile. "It might take a decade for you to break even. I still haven't forgiven you for the things you said about me in first year."

He chuckled and felt good familiarity once more. "I was an immature and clueless prat back then."

"And what about the next year or year after that? You're still making fun of me this year," she said.

"But now I'm a clever and charming prat," he said.

"You're not that charming," she mumbled.

"But I am that sexy, right? You said so yourself, or do you really think I'm hideous?" he asked. She laughed and lay against his chest. He held her closely and kissed the top of her head. "I love you."

"I know you do. I love you, too," she said.

"I don't have much time left. Can we just sit here?" he asked. "I promise that I'll get my head on, but right now I want to be here with you."

"Of course," she said. "I want to be here with you, too." They sat in silence and watched as people continued to shop and carry about. Ron held on to Hermione and all her perfection as firmly as he could. He felt drained and the loneliness was still there, but he tried to take Hermione's advice and not ignore it. He kept his hands on her body and tried to be strong.

The evening flew by, and his time vanished. He had to get back. She hugged him tightly, and they kissed. "I still had a good time today."

"So did I, and the next time it will all be great," he said.

"It's okay, Ron. I just want you to take care of yourself and write to your family," she said.

"I will, and I'll write to you. I promise," he said. "If I write, then you can't stress yourself out so much. It's okay if everything isn't perfect, if you can believe that."

She pinched his arm. "There you go being mean again."

"It's part of my charm." Out of habit he looked at his watch again. He sighed. "Bloody hell, I have to go, but I'll see you soon. I'll work something out. I make sure we see each other."

"I trust you," she said. "Now, talk to Harry when you get back. One of these days you'll both believe me when I say that you need each other."

"I need you," he said. He pulled her to him and kissed her once more. He needed a good taste of her to hold him over. "Hmm, I love you so much, Hermione. You save me every bloody time."

"You save yourself, Ron," she said, licking his bottom lip. "I'm just help. It's okay to need help." She suddenly reddened. "It's also okay to shag in a storage room, as long as you clean up first and put up the necessary spells. Thank you for that."

"I thought this wasn't just about sex?" he said.

"Maybe not for you, but it's certainly for me," she said with a wink. "Nothing substitutes your bits. How much did today cost?"

"You cheeky woman," he gasped. "You're the rude one, and I'm far too expensive for you."

"Ah, I'll keep that in mind for next time," she said, giving him one last hug.

"I don't want to leave," he said.

"And I don't want you to, but you have to," she said. "I'll see you soon, Ron, and I'm still so proud of you."

"That means a lot to me when you say that," he said gently. He kissed her hands. "I have to go."

She nodded and took a step back. "Bye, love."

"Bye," he said. He gave her a small wave and Apparated.

After returning to camp and checking back in with Alan, Ron went back to his cabin. He was glad that it was empty because he wanted a moment to himself. He set his wand on his side table and stared at the drawer. So much had happened and was still happening. Being away from Lambrick had been refreshing, but it didn't take away the heaviness. He opened his drawer and pulled out the picture of his family. He traced his finger over Fred's face and felt a strong surge of grief. The pit of emptiness grew, but he tried to be strong. He bit his lip and closed his eyes as the sadness incased him. He let it pass through him before putting it picture back. It would be his way of working through it.

He lay back on his bed and pulled a wad of fabric out of his back pocket. He unraveled the white knickers and smirked, thinking about Hermione and his ongoing collecting game. He wanted her in his bed with him. She had somehow seen through his armor and had helped him. He had acted like a dickhead, but she stayed around. It was just like what Bill had told him. Ron had known since they started dating that their relationship was the real thing, but their fight and their conversation was another testament as to how close they were and to how much he needed her.

He needed Hermione, but it slowly becoming obvious that he'd need a lot more to survive it all.

* * *

**** So, as I said, this was a long chapter. I'm certainly not going to make this a habit but this one needed to be. I know I keep saying this, but this is definitely one of my favorite chapters so far if not my favorite. It's shows a different side to the grieving process. Even with everything happening to Ron at Lambrick, he can't escape what's happened to his family and how it's changed him. There are things that are still healing and will continue to heal. Ron has so many beautiful emotions, and there's just so much to this bloke to work with! As for the R/Hr, within their relationship there are still things they need to shift through and it's not always 100% with them. They're growing, changing, and branching off. It affects them, yet they are always able to work it out because they're so connected and in love. Now, the storage room sceneâ€œheheâ€œI've been dying to put that in a long story and it fit so well here. Anyway, enough blabbing. I hope you lot enjoyed. Thanks for reading and REVIEW! OH! One more thing, though this is Ron's story and it's about his journey from what's happened, it doesn't mean that Hermione and Harry aren't affected or that I won't bring their issues into this story. Keep that in mind.

CHEERS!

* Chapter 32*: Until we bleed

Thanks for the reviews and kind words! It's been too long! I switched internet service providers, and it was a bloody mess. All this time without Internet drove me mental, but it's given me time to write and prepare, so it wasn't all bad. Now, I've been getting some repeating thoughts/reviews about Ron's condition and certain aspects of Lambrick that involve it. I will make a statement now and say, "Don't worry, I

have a plan. Nothing is being ignored." Lol, okay, it's not much of a statement, but I do want everyone to know that I'm keeping all this in mind and my chaos does have order. Just keep reading and find out. Certain things will happen at certain times and new things will emerge and be handled because of it. So, have faith.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

* * *

Charlie,

I know I haven't been writing, but I've been busy. You can understand what that's like. Things are difficult and stressful, but I have some time to finally catch up with everyone. So, how are you? I hope the dragons have been treating you nicely and you don't have another burn story for me. It's not because I get tired of hearing them or that I even care that you get burned. I just can't bloody stand that tosser look on your face every time. I swear that you train them to get you in just the right spot so you can strut around like a sodding hero or something. George backs me up on my theory, too. You should know that I told one of my roommates that you work with dragons, and I think he's still sitting across the room with his mouth open. It was actually really funny. He's a Muggle born and I reckon there are still things about our world that he can't believe.

As for me, I don't know what to say. I'm not doing as well as I want to be. I'm having some problems being here and being away from our family has been a lot harder than I thought it'd be. I really miss you lot, and I miss Fred so much more now than I did right after he died. We're working on hand combat with more intricate spell work and fire and we're doing it all at night. It's a lot at one time, and it's bringing things out of me that I can't stop. I know this probably doesn't make sense, but the new training, along with being away, is making me think about the night Fred died and how everything went to bloody shit afterward. It seems to be coming out of nowhere, and I feel a little lost and in the shit. It's why I'm writing to you. I need your help, Charlie. I need to know what to do.

How do you handle being away? I know you've been doing it for ages, but its gotta feel different now, right? I hope that I'm not mental for feeling this way. If you could tell me that you sometimes feel scared as well, then I don't think I'd feel as bad or like a tit. If you're wondering, I haven't told anyone else about this yet, but I know that I need to tell you first. I really need your strength for this one, and I trust you.

Write me back when you're not too busy or burnt,

Ron

- One more thing, did you get your tattoo?

Ron tapped his quill on the edge of his desk and considered writing a new letter again. Nothing he wrote worked and his words couldn't get across what he was trying to say. Then again, he honestly didn't know what he was trying to say. He wanted help from his family, but he didn't want them to know how deeply things went with him. He took Hermione's advice, but he had to keep a distance. It was the only way he would stay afloat and protect them. He scrutinized over his words to make sure they didn't appear too desperate.

When he had decided to write to someone, his mind had automatically gone to Charlie. He knew that out of anyone, Charlie would be the one to listen to him the best and would not get too bossy or overwhelming. The last thing Ron needed was for someone to panic and call a family meeting on his behalf. He concluded that the letter would have to be good enough. He sealed it in an envelope and lay back on his bed while he passed his wand between his fingers.

His visit with Hermione the day before was still on his mind. It was so much, but he had to deal with it. He had to find a way to make things better for himself so he wouldn't hurt her again. He casually moved his eyes to his roommates. Jack wasn't there. On Sundays he mostly always kept his time with the blokes of cabin four. Roger was sitting upright in his bed, in nothing but his boxer shorts, playing with one of his many stringy puzzles that he brought with him. Conor was laying back in his bed reading a Muggle magazine and glancing at the picture of him and his sister every once in a while. It was how their Sunday nights always were.

His Sunday nights at Hogwarts had been different, and Ron and his four mates usually did something when they had the chance. Seamus always nicked things from the kitchen for them to share. Dean always told the best stories, and Ron enjoyed nothing more than to argue with him about football versus quidditch. Of course, Neville always played the neutral friend and tried to change the subject to something they could all agree on, and Harry would always be at Ron's side, laughing and whispering jokes in his ear that only the two of them would understand. As the years progressed their time together grew into something that Ron found himself needing, and the five of them became a family. Nothing touched them and difficult subjects like Voldemort and absent parents disappeared under the heap of discussion about favorite sports teams and the girls in each house with the biggest tits.

No matter how many dark memories Hogwarts held, some of the best moments of his life were hidden behind the walls. He missed his friends and though times had been hard, things seemed so much simpler back then when it came to dealing with people. He had no idea if the guys in his cabin would end up being the people he left Lambrick with enriched with friendship. He didn't even know if they would all be around long enough to find out. Nothing was permanent anymore. The thought made him get out of bed and slip his shoes on.

It was black and breezy outside, but he rubbed his arms and jogged down the path. He kept running until he saw a small figure with black hair and fair skin walking ahead. It never failed that Olivia would be on the trail. He didn't know what to say, but he knew that something had to be done. He stepped in line with her.

"Oi," he said.

She didn't jump, and she didn't look at him. "Oi." They kept walking and her posture and expression made it very clear that oi was all she planned on saying to him.

"I was able to see Hermione yesterday," he said, figuring that leading in with an easy topic would get her talking. "So, if you did want to use a pass I'm living proof that Alan gives them out."

"That's nice," she said in an uninterested tone. "Well, I hope you had a good time. If you'll excuse me." She pushed him away and started walking faster.

Ron watched her but he couldn't let her get away. He wouldn't ruin something that had potential to be one of the most important things he'd gain at Lambrick. "You can run off all night if you want to, Olivia, but there's only so many places you go!"

She stopped and turned around. "Is that some sort of threat?"

"No," he said, taking a few steps toward her. "I'm, um, unsuccessfully trying to say that I'm an arsehole, and I want to apologize." He rubbed his neck. "It's something you learn about me if you haven't already guessed it. When I'm angry, I say really stupid things that I don't mean."

"That's good to know," she said. She turned again.

"Will you stop? I don't want it to end like this." He touched her shoulder and was relieved that she didn't walk off or push him again. "Olivia, I'm sorry. You were right. I'm having a hard time, but I shouldn't take it out on you."

"No, you shouldn't," she said. "Those things you said weren't fair."

"I know and I'm such a bloody twat for bringing any of it up," he said. "I feel bad. It was all my fault."

Olivia's expression softened, and she shook her head. "It wasn't. It might have been rude, but you were right. I didn't have a place to talk to you about that stuff. I'm naturally noisy, I guess. My parents always say that it'll get me into trouble. They're right."

"Even if that was true and I don't think that it is, I still had no right to yell at you," he said. "You're the last person I should put all this on."

"Ron, I don't want to be your girlfriend. I just want to be your friend. I enjoyed how we were. I like you," she said gently and with a shrug. "I don't know why saying that has to mean something that it doesn't or why it has to be something wrong."

"It's not. I like you, too," he said. "It's why I need you to forgive me, so we can go back."

"And I need you to understand that I'm not trying to collapse whatever tower you've built for yourself," she said. "When a friend of mine is in trouble, I want to help."

"I think I understand that better than anyone, but there's some shit that I haven't worked out yet," he said. "It's got nothing to do with anything here. It's stuff from before and stuff I have to find a way to work through on my own."

"Then just tell me that," she said. "Don't make me think that you're believing the bullshit about me wanted to shag you, and don't make me feel like some slag for caring about you."

Ron's jaw dropped. He had no idea that his words had transferred to mean so much to her. The deepness of a girl's mind went so much further than a bloke's did. It was mad. "Blimey, that was definitely not what I was trying to say, but I'm so sorry for making you feel that. I don't have too many friends that are girls for a reason, I reckon."

"Hmm, I can't imagine why," she said with slight humor in her voice. "Okay, so, what were you honestly trying to say?"

"I don't know. I guess I was trying to get you away. When you brought up the whole anxiety thing, I got angry because I've already had the conversation with someone before." His statement was ambiguous enough not to give anything away, but he wasn't sure where he wanted to go from there. He decided to say what was already at his tongue. "I don't have a real issue with it or not so much anymore. My matter is something else that's less extreme." He kept his eyes on her and hoped that she believed him. He wanted Olivia's friendship and her company, but he realized that he didn't want to be completely honest with her yet.

She stared intensely at him, but he kept his ground. "Then that's good, Ron," she finally said. "I'm glad that whatever is going on isn't too bad, but I still want to be here for you. You don't have to be alone, if that's what you're worried about."

He wanted to believe her but he couldn't completely. She made it sound so easy just as Hermione had. "I know and I'll work on it. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," she said. "I honestly just want to help."

"I appreciate it, but I'm okay," he said. "Are you okay?"

"I feel a little better, sure," she said. They kept their eyes on each other and grinned.

He looked down and rubbed his neck. "So, ah, is it too late to join you tonight?"

"It's a free trail, and I think there's room for you," she said. They started walking but there was a new awkward silence. Ron couldn't believe that they had already had two arguments since becoming friends. He would probably never learn with girls.

She stopped and touched his arm. "Ron, I don't want things to be weird between us now."

"Bloody hell, neither do I," he breathed. "This is mental."

"Good. I glad you feel it." She chewed on her bottom lip and bounced on her feet. "Alright, the thing is, know that I'm here if you ever want to talk or whatever. I'm not gonna push anything on you, but I'll always be interested in listening."

"I will. Cheers," he said. He didn't know what else to say. "Just remember what I said about me being an arsehole."

She laughed. "Believe me, I haven't forgotten and I don't think I will any time soon. You said something about being a bloody twat, too, right?" Ron rolled his eyes, and they shook hands. They started to walk the trail again and the familiar and soothing silence fell between them once more.

The next morning Ron rolled over in his bed and put his pillow over his face. It did nothing. He growled softly and sat up. He scowled at the others that were still asleep as he fastened on his watch. He didn't have to be up for another forty-five minutes, but like many mornings, he couldn't stay asleep. He shivered as he pulled off his clothes and dressed for the morning's run, and he grabbed his letter and broom before slipping outside. The sky was cloudy and the air was cold and rainy. He dropped his letter off at the mailing cabin and gorged down a banana before heading to the starting point of the trail. He stretched his arms, legs, and shoulders and even took the time to grip all the way down his Firebolt to get his fingers circulated with blood and loose for his fly. It all felt very routine and the slight hatred he felt grew with every second of it.

"Weasley," Alan's voice said from behind him. "You're up early. Are you trying to make up for yesterday?"

Ron almost considered saying yes, but he had nothing to apologize for. He had earned his time and seeing Hermione was never a mistake. "Not today, sir. I couldn't stay asleep."

"It happens," Alan said. "The sleep schedule of an Auror always changes, and you should get used to not having one. You're allowed to sleep when your shift is absolutely finished, but even then you could be wrote in. Sleep will end up becoming more or less your mistress."

Sleeping had always been one of Ron's favorite things to do, so he didn't know what it meant when Alan's warning didn't bother him too much. "I'll keep that in mind."

"I'm telling you now because your exhaustion has been a problem for you so far," Alan said. "It's something you'll need to work through and take care of."

"I will, sir," Ron said. "I'm handling it now."

"Don't tell me. Show me." Alan walked off and Ron re-gripped his broom. He would show him. Even with the pit in his chest circling, he would show him.

As he ran that morning, he pushed himself further than he usually did. It was time that he stepped up his capabilities, and the harder he ran, the more things faded. Running was easier and his broom was like a pillow on his shoulders. He still felt the burn and ache, but it felt good. He closed his eyes and picked up speed on his third lap. Running the trail was his favorite part of the entire day. He didn't think about anything but his breathing. He didn't hear anything but his feet hitting the ground. He didn't see anything but the trees, and he didn't feel anything but the strain in his legs, arms, and chest. In those minutes he was alive because he was running, and he could do anything because he had the endurance.

He made it down to the trail and mounted his broom. "Beautiful running, Weasley," Richard said. "I saw you from all the way over here."

"Thank you, sir." Ron appreciated the words, but his high was starting to wear off. He needed to keep the momentum. As he flew, he tried to get into the same mind frame as when he ran, but it wasn't there. He was better at controlling his broom and the speed wasn't as much of a shock, but it wasn't where he should have been. He still had so far to go. He touched down after his eight lap and wiped the sweat out of his eyes. He had to lean against his broom to catch his breath and focus. He had to get through the day.

Alan blew his whistle. "Weasley!"

Ron quickly stood straight and jogged over to him. He was ready for Alan to tell him to do the laps again. "Sir?"

He simply looked at him in silence for a moment. "You did better this morning. I have no reason to critique your running, and you're confidence on the Firebolt is improving. That's good. You've got plenty of time to regroup, and I think you should take the time to." He walked away without another word, and Ron shook his head in confusion. He never knew what Alan was trying to say, and his compliments were always backhanded in some way. He shrugged it off and walked back up the path. He was considering a short nap before their training day started. He definitely needed one.

Harry walked right past him without so much as a nod as Ron made it to the start of the hill. "Harry," he said. Harry didn't turn around. Ron watched as he disappeared to the starting position with a heavy heart. Ron needed to shower or at least change shirts and the slight mist of rain made him shudder in the coolness, but it didn't matter. He sat and rubbed his hands together. He would wait for Harry instead.

It didn't take long. Whenever Harry was on his broom, he might as well have been breathing or spelling his name. He was flushed yet more relaxed in a way when he came back over the hill. "Harry," Ron said again, standing up.

He stopped. "What?" Ron wasn't sure if he and Harry were in a serious argument but something was off. He couldn't stand the blankness in Harry's face and the dullness of his voice. It felt unnatural for them to be truly at odds, and it was like a bludger to the head.

"Can I talk to you?" Ron asked.

"I have to shower," Harry said, "and I'm hungry, and it's probably gonna start to really rain soon—"

"Can you forget it this one time? I need to talk to you. Please." He didn't want to beg him, but he would if need be. Harry gave him a once over and dropped his broom. He sat beside it, and Ron did the same. He searched the ground for a stick, and he broke it in half and offered an end to him. Harry reluctantly took it, and it was Ron's cue. "I finally took your advice. I talked to Alan, and I saw Hermione yesterday. We spent the day in Hogsmeade." He was surprised when Harry grinned a little.

"That's brilliant," he said. "I told you Alan would let you go."

"Yeah, thanks," Ron said. "I didn't see Ginny. She was at practice."

"She always is," Harry said, his grin growing. "I think some of Wood's air is still in the practice tent. She must've inhaled the lot of it. I'm fairly sure that she's going to become co-captain."

"Most likely." Ron broke and peeled his end of the stick. Talking about Ginny was uncomplicated for them, but it wasn't what he needed to say. "It was great seeing Hermione, but we got into a huge fight because of me. I acted like a wanker."

"Did you make up?" he asked.

"Yeah. We made up and we talked. We talked for a long time," Ron said.

There was something in Harry's face that Ron didn't quite understand. He seemed almost annoyed. "About what?"

"Everything," he said. "We talked about school for her and everything that's been going on with me. She made me feel a little better about what's been going on."

"She always does," Harry mumbled.

Ron rubbed his neck. He didn't understand his tone either.

"Listen, that night." He looked around. People were constantly walking down the starting point or walking back from it. People stared for a moment as they past by them in awe-struck, but no one really seemed to be listening in. "That night I had a panic attack."

"I know you did," Harry bleakly said. "The second I saw your face I knew you were having one. I've seen it before, remember?"

"Right," Ron said. He looked down and felt embarrassed. "I can't seem to get it, can I?"

Harry exhaled deeply. "You know, Ron," he quickly said. "No one thinks you're a tit or anything because of it. You're not the only one who is having problems. You just can't hide it as well as other people."

"What are you talking about?" Ron asked.

Harry's frown increased. "When you strongly feel something, it damn near hangs off your skin. It's not like that for a lot of people. It's not like that for Hermione really or Ginny or me. I certainly don't have that."

"Harryâ€;" Ron slowly said. "Mate, if you're trying to say somethingâ€;"

"I'm saying that I may not be able to always show everything, but it doesn't mean there's nothing going on," he said.

"Iâ€;I didn't say that there wasn't," Ron said.

"You sure as hell fucking act like it," Harry spat.

"Where is this coming from?" Ron asked. "I asked you to stay so we could talk. I know you're here, and when have I ever acted like you don't feel anything?"

"Just now, Ron. Sure, you asked me to stay so we could talk, but you only want to talk about how Hermione worked everything out for you. Did it ever occur to you that maybe I wouldn't think you were a tit for having an attack?" Harry started to dig his end of the stick into the soggy grass, and he glared at it as if it were an enemy.

Seeing Harry so emotional took Ron aback. "I dunno. I guess not."

"Of course not," Harry mumbled again, standing up. "I need to get ready for the day session." Harry walked off but he didn't bother going after him.

By the time Ron showered and ate there was no time to rest. He would have to push himself through both the day and night training on the last bit of energy that he had and on top of the regular heaviness that he felt, whatever was going on between him and Harry pushed his shoulders even more toward the ground. He couldn't let it get to him. He had to keep himself above it all.

"Alright," Alan said when they made it to the practice field. "Today I want to go over what we've learned so far. Before now, I've partnered each of you with someone of a similar height or build so you could get comfortable with your skills, but I want to mix things up. Taking you out of your comfort zone will be the most sufficient way to truly test your strengths and see where you're still deficient."

"Not only will the people you detain be of a different sex, but he or she will be of a different build most of the time," Brian added. "It's why we accept all trainees of all kinds. One person's disadvantage is another's strong point." Roger raised his hand.

"Yes, Johnson," Alan said.

"What if you don't have any strong points?" Everyone looked at him, and Ron noticed how upset and serious Roger was. He was usually the one to ask random or awkward questions but nothing like this.

Brian raised an eyebrow at Alan and Alan crossed his arms over his chest. "Well, Johnson, if a person doesn't have any strong points, then he won't last too much longer will he?"

Roger looked down. "No, sir."

"Shall we get started with the pairs?" Alan said. Ron kept his eyes on Roger. He wanted to say something to him. "Neary and Weasley."

Ron moved his eyes away from Roger and remembered where he was. Conor grinned and walked over to him. "We haven't been partners before."

"I reckon I've been too tall for you, eh?" Ron said with a smile.

Conor rolled his eyes. "You're a sodder. Maybe I've been too strong for you. Let's take it from the beginning, yeah?" Training with Conor was a lot more challenging than Ron had anticipated. He was much shorter and faster in a way that Ron hadn't expected him to be. Conor pinned him and knocked him on his arse time and time again, but he welcomed the challenge. It took his mind off everything.

Ron bent down and rushed Conor. He kept a crouching position as he aimed for his stomach and thighs. However, right as their bodies made contact, Conor was able to grab him around the waist. He hoisted him with his upper body strength and his knees, and Ron's back crashed against the wet ground. He groaned in pain and rubbed the back of his head.

"Bloody hell, Conor," Ron said in part amazement and part aggravation. Conor stared down at him in a strange way. There was something dark and slightly baffling in his expression. It was almost like he hadn't expected himself to have so much might.

"Neary," Brian said, running over to them. "That was excellent. That lift is exactly what Alan was talking about when he said using a different advantage. I haven't seen you lift anyone yet. Although, keep that in your arsenal for now. We'll have a session dedicated specifically to lifting. This isn't the environment we want you lot to be practicing lifts in."

"Yeah, sorry, sir," Conor said, shaking his head and helping Ron up. Brian patted his shoulder and kept rotating around their section. "Sorry if I got you, Ron."

"You bloody got me, but that's all right." Ron could feel the throb in his back move up his spine and to his head. "I didn't know you were so good at this. Have you had any experience with hand combat before?"

"Not really," Conor said softly. "I reckon I picked it up here."

Ron gave him a look. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," he quickly said, rubbing his palm over his short blond locks. "I guess I didn't expect all this fighting. It's a bit strange for me."

"It comes with the job," Ron said. "We're always going to be fighting someone."

Conor's discomfort seemed to grow. "I know." Ron didn't know what to make of it. The only words Jack knew were ones about training and even Roger, who had a hard time, talked about being an Auror like it was the key to life. However, Conor rarely muttered a word about it when they didn't have to, and it astonished Ron that he wasn't more comfortable with something that he was a natural at.

"Have long have you wanted to be an Auror?" Ron asked.

Conor shrugged. "Long time."

"Neary and Weasley, this isn't the time to be socializing!" Alan bellowed. "How many dark wizards will take time out to ask you your favorite color when their wands are to your necks?"

"None, sir!" they yelled back together.

"Then I suggest you get back to it!" he screamed. Ron and Conor quickly got back to practicing, but Conor no longer pushed him with much trouble. In fact, he barely went through the motions. Alan broken them up and led the group to the center of the property to join west when it got dark. Ron's nerves began to jump and his stomach flipped. He tried to keep his breathing steady, and he told himself that he would be all right. Their

groups merged and Ron searched around for Harry but he couldn't find him.

"We're going to continue what we've been practicing," Richard said. "Remember, the sooner you become comfortable with these new elements, the easier it will be to work with it. Pair up and we'll come around and assess your work."

Ron searched around for Harry again. He knew that Harry was mad at him, but he didn't think that Harry was angry enough to avoid practice all together. He kept his lit wand close to his face but still didn't see him anywhere. "If you don't have a partner, then we can join up."

Ron turned around. He had seen the bloke before. He was black, somewhat tall, and lanky like himself. "Okay. You from west?"

"Yes. I'm Eric Hill," he said.

"Ron Weasley," Ron said. "I think I've heard of you before. Is Harry your roommate?"

"His bed is next to mine," Eric said. "You didn't have to introduce yourself. I know who you are."

"Everyone does," Ron said with a bit of sarcasm. "Have you seen Harry by any chance?"

"He hasn't been around since lunch," Eric said.

"Lunch? He wasn't at afternoon practice?" he asked.

"Not today," Eric said, as if it wasn't a big deal.

Ron scanned around frantically for his mate. "How is he gone? Should we tell someone?"

"It's not like he's never missed a session before. I'm sure Richard knows about it." Eric gave him a look. "You don't know about this?"

"No idea," Ron said. His heartbeat started to pick up. He had no idea that Harry was skiving on sessions or why he even wanted to. "We don't get to talk much anymore." Eric nodded and Alan walked up to them.

"Weasley, you are one bugger who likes to talk, aren't you?" Alan asked.

"No, sir," Ron hastily said.

"It's all right. I understand," Alan said. "How about tomorrow morning you fly an extra three laps and talk to yourself, just to get it all out."

Ron gripped his wand very hard and told himself not to tell Alan to fuck off or suck a cock. "Yes, sir. That sounds great."

"Excellent. Get back to work." Alan grinned and walked away.

"That's bollocks," Eric said. "He's harsh."

"Especially if your name is Weasley," he mumbled. "Let's do this." His mood didn't improve as he and Eric dueled. Everything was loud and hot but Ron did everything he could to ignore the memories all night. He knew that he was supposed to work through them and he tried to keep Hermione's words in his ear, but it was simply too much.

Once again there was fire between him and Eric. He used his jeans to get the mud off his hands, and he wiped the sweat off his forehead with his shirt collar. He was tired and dazed beyond belief. "Come on, Ron," he whispered to himself. "You're not going to see Fred's body on the other side."

"There's only one way out!" Eric shouted from the other side. It was all he needed. Ron mustered up his bit of courage and swallowed the bile that was in his throat. He jumped from the other side but stopped. Eric tackled him to the ground, but Ron didn't care. "Oi, what are you doing?" Eric asked, getting on his feet.

Ron got up to and kept his gaze. Harry was walking down to where Richard and Alan were at the front. His shoulders were slouched and even from so far away Ron could tell that he was upset. Richard and Alan met him half way and Richard pointed to his wrist. Harry shrugged and said something. Richard looked to yell at him and Alan pointed to Harry and then the group. Harry yelled right back at them.

"Damn, I see," Eric said.

"Do you know something about that?" Ron asked him. His feet wanted to move to Harry's aid but his better judgment told them to wait.

"Nothing at all but Harry knows better than to talk back to Richard. He has a zero tolerance policy on it," Eric said.

"And Harry has a zero tolerance policy on people yelling at him." Ron grinned slightly. "He may seem quiet, but he always stands up for himself."

"No offense to him but he's definitely not quiet at night," Eric said. "Last night was bloody mad."

Ron turned away from Harry. "Why? What happened?"

"He had one of his nightmares again. It woke us all up," Eric said.

"Nightmares?" Ron said, his eyes widening. "How do you-I mean-huh?"

Eric rolled his eyes. "I know you and Harry are best mates, but I'm sleeping next to the bloke now. It's unfortunately my business, too, rather he wants to admit it or not."

"If Harry says it's not your business, then it's not," Ron shot.

"I'm not asking for it to be, Ron," he said. "It just is."

Ron's palms started to itch, and the anxiety he already felt increased. "Have you told anyone else about this?"

"What?" Eric asked. "Never. It stays in our cabin."

"Good. Keep it there and don't carelessly bring it up to anyone like you did just now." Ron turned his attention back to Harry who was talking solely to Richard. "It's not something to chat about. Show him some respect."

"You don't have to talk me like I'm an idiot," Eric said. "I do have respect for Harry. He and I get on fine and that's exactly why I brought it up. I figured you'd have a lot of experience with this and would give me some advice, but you're bloody acting like you don't know anything. That's not showing respect to him."

"I think I know how to respect my friend," Ron said. "Let's run it again before Alan adds another three laps tomorrow or—"

"Everyone, gather to the front!" Alan ordered. "We have another demonstration to show you before we end tonight!"

"I want to show you lot what a duel using all our components might look like," Richard said. He shot his stare quickly in Harry's direction. "Mr. Potter, will you help me with this one?" Ron's heart skipped a beat, but Harry didn't look at all surprised that his name had been called. Ron guessed that it was his punishment for yelling at Richard.

"Of course, sir," Harry said. He walked up to the front and faced Richard. People around Ron whispered and talked in sharp, hushed voices. It was all about Harry and it made his stomach flip again.

Richard grinned but it wasn't in his usual playful way. He appeared to be just as angry as Harry was. "From the top, Potter." He raised his wand and so did Harry. Richard opened his mouth but Harry struck his wand faster than Ron had ever seen him.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry shouted. Richard's wand was knocked out of hand, and Harry licked his lips to say another spell. It was a mistake. In a spit second, Richard was able to scoop up his wand and rush into Harry's stomach. He was knocked back. Ron started to walk forward but he reminded himself that it was just a demonstration. Richard held down Harry, and he wiggled under him. They wrestled and Harry was able to free his elbow. He shoved him in the stomach and rolled away.

"Yes!" Ron said aloud. He couldn't help himself.

Harry scurried to his feet with his wand but Richard was faster. He once again rushed him. This time he hit Harry at the legs. He fell straight back again and Richard rolled him over. He yanked his hands behind his back and held them in the middle of his spine. He was able to wrench Harry's wand away and run back. "Incarcerous!" he shouted, pointing and twisted his wand to Harry's wrists. Ropes tied tightly around them, and Harry tried to break free of them. "Incendio!" he shouted next. A blazing fire erupted around Harry, and Ron had to look away. He repeated over and over that it was just a demonstration, and he fought the urge to jump on Richard and beat him to a bloody pulp. It all seemed so wrong. Anyone beating Harry was wrong, and he felt exposed for some reason.

"Now that, ladies and gentlemen, is why it's always important to pay attention and to practice," Richard said, barely out of breath. "Outside of this camp is the real world and there won't be any second tries." He put out the fire and untied Harry.

"Isn't that right, Mr. Potter?"

Harry was flushed and shaky and it pained Ron to look at him. He clenched his fists at his side. "Yes, sir."

"You did all right, Potter, but you know you could have done better," Alan said. "There's no room for second-guessing and there's no time to sit around on your arse. You can join the group now." Harry kept his head down and rejoined them. Ron felt awful as he watched him for the remainder of the session.

During dinner all Ron could think about was Harry. He felt like a tit for being so self-centered. There was clearly so much going on with his mate, and he had no idea what it was. "Ron," Olivia said in his ear.

He jumped a little and dropped his fork. "Yeah, what?"

She hissed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I'm finished and it doesn't look like you're eating anymore. Do you want to get out of here?"

"Great idea. Let's go walking." Ron made sure to annunciate and look at Conor and Roger as he spoke, for the two gave him the smug looks they always did. They cleared their plates and headed to the trail. Ron was a bundle of nerves, but he didn't know what to say.

"So, today was interesting," Olivia said.

"Yepâ€¢!" Ron said.

"Do you think Harry is okay? Richard putting him on the spot like that wasn't right." Olivia was looking at him with her light and curious blue eyes. He didn't see the point in hiding his concern. She might have had good advice.

"It wasn't. I wanted to rip his bollocks off for doing that to Harry, and I don't know if he's okay," Ron said.

"It must be hard for you two," she said.

"Sorta," he said. "Harry and I, we've always been around each other and almost in each other's minds a lot of the time. It's not really like that here."

"I guess this is a test. This could be good for building your friendship with him," she said.

"But there's nothing to build or test," Ron said. "He's my best mate." He thought about his words and he wanted to kick his own arse. He had been so stupid. "I need to find him and talk to him."

"How? You're not going to see him again till morning," she said.

"I need to find him now," he said. "I'm sure he's in his cabin."

"Ron," Olivia said, stopping them. "you can't just go to the other section whenever you want to. It's a violation."

"I don't care about bloody violations , " he said. "When a friend of mine is in trouble, I want to help."

She put a hand on her hip and smirked. "What prat told you that?"

"She's not a prat. She's my friend," he said with a smile.
"Hopefully the next time I see you won't be with my exit slip."
He turned the other way and jogged all the way down the path. He was under the impression that west had the identical format as east. He kept walking until he saw the housing cabins. He peered around and saw other trainees but none noticed him. He went up to what he thought was cabin three but the door opened. Ron dodged out of the way and slammed himself against the side of the cabin.

Richard came out. "You understand don't you, Potter?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said. "I'm sorry for my behavior, and I'm sorry that it took so long."

"We'll have to let them know that you're here to train. This isn't a part of our agreement," Richard said. "I can't stand the politics behind all this."

"Neither can I, sir. I just want to be here," Harry said in a defeated tone.

"Well, Alan was right when he said you did okay tonight," Richard said. "I swear the disarming spell is your bloody bread and butter."

Harry didn't seem too pleased. "It's gotten me out of trouble a few times."

"This I know," Richard said. "Goodnight, Potter."

"Night, sir." Harry closed the door and Ron stayed glued to the side until he couldn't hear Richard's footsteps anymore. He ran up to the door and repeatedly knocked. The door opened again. "Sir-Ron!" Harry's eyes widened and he pulled him in. "What in the bloody hell are you doing here?"

"I came to see you," Ron said, looking around. Everything about Harry's cabin was identical to his.

"Why? You can't be over here. What couldn't wait until tomorrow?" he asked.

"I dunno. I figured that maybe you wouldn't want to talk. Maybe you'd just walk off again," Ron said.

Harry rolled his eyes and sat on his bed. "I really don't need this right now."

"Too bad. I'm here now," Ron said.

"You can't stay. My roommates will be back from dinner soon," Harry said.

"Then let's go somewhere," Ron said.

Harry kneaded his temples. He was pale and his eyes were bloodshot. "I don't want to talk to you."

Ron had the feeling that he was being hit with a bludger again, but he tried not to show it. "Harry, since when have I ever cared what you've felt like doing? We can sit here and wait until your mates get back so we can all talk as a group, or you can go somewhere with me and talk in private. Either way, you're gonna have to listen to my beautiful voice a bit longer."

Harry burst into laughter and Ron chuckled as well. "Fucking Merlin, Ron, you're such a sod."

"It's one of my better qualities. So, what will it be?" Ron asked.

Harry looked around. "Fine. There's a spot I sometimes go to. It's quiet."

"I'll follow you out, mate," Ron said. Harry led him out of the cabin and behind it. They kept walking until they were deeper into the field with the trees. There was a spot under one and next to a bush where the leaves had been moved and the grass looked dry and plush, most likely kept that way by magic.

"One of Hermione's tricks?" Ron asked as they sat.

"One of many," Harry said. They stared off into the darkness and Ron searched for the right words to start with. "If you're here to talk about what happened tonight, then there's no need. It's not the first time Richard's called me out during a session. It's just the first time he's done it in front of both sections."

"It doesn't make it right," Ron said.

"Maybe, but it does make it not matter," Harry said. "I told you that he doesn't love me. He has no problem doing it. Besides, I talked back to him earlier and he has a zero tolerance policy."

It was exactly what Eric had said and it annoyed him. "I saw you yell at him. I also saw you show up late. Where were you?"

Harry sighed once more and took off his glasses. He closed his eyes and leaned against the bark. "I was at the Ministry."

Ron started blankly at him for several moments. "You were where?"

"At the Ministry," Harry repeated. "I had another meeting with officials from law enforcement as well as the Auror department. They want to know how I'm doing, and they want to update me on how they're doing. Like I banging care."

"W-what? Since when?" Ron asked. Harry spoke as if he was talking about the sun setting. It didn't make sense.

"Since always. You know I've gone a few times over the summer," Harry said.

"That was holiday. I didn't think that you were allowed to leave here to go to meetings," Ron said.

Harry finally opened his eyes. "It's not like I want to go, Ron, and it only started a couple of weeks ago. We talk about the same thing. Everyone thinks they owe me something or that I might end the bliss that the world is feeling right now if I'm not given full attention."

"I don't see why you still have to," Ron said. "You're in training."

"Doesn't matter. The label gets permanently stuck to you when you defeat a dark lord, I reckon," Harry said. "Instead of my fucking lightening bolt, it's Ministry's Hope and Terror scarred on my forehead."

Some of Harry's aggression started to make sense to him. "So, Richard and Alan were upset because you went?"

"No, they were upset because I was gone for so long," Harry said. "Since Lambrick is a direct branch of the Ministry, they set the whole thing up. They knew I'd have to leave sometimes, but it's getting in the way of my training. I told them. I told everyone. I want to be here."

"You didn't tell me," Ron said.

Harry rested against the bark and crossed his arms over his chest. "I didn't think it was anything to tell."

He was being extremely nonchalant and knobbish. It drove Ron mental, and his need to be tactful and patient no longer

mattered. "Like your nightmares are nothing to tell?" Harry opened his eyes and sat up. "Your mate Eric likes to talk."

Harry sighed and put his glasses back on. "Oh, is that what all this is for? You coming over and wanting to talk, it's so we can talk about my dream?"

"I didn't know you were still having them, Harry," Ron said. "I had to find out from a bloke I'd never spent more than an hour with before."

"Stop it, Ron," Harry breathed. "I don't need to hear this from you tonight."

"I think you do," Ron said. "I can't believe you've been keeping this to yourself."

"Alright, fine!" Harry snapped. "You want to know what happened? Eric had to wake me up because apparently I was thrashing about, and I was making whimpering sounds that woke him and everyone up. I opened my eyes and all three of my roommates were staring at me like I was some sort of freak or like I wasn't who I was supposed to be. I told them it was nothing, and I went back to sleep. That's what happened."

Ron's heart dropped and his palms started to inch again. All of his problems didn't seem to matter so much anymore. "Harry, why didn't you tell me? Eric told me that it's happened a few times," he said. He thought about Harry's outburst from earlier and it made more sense. "It's not something I can see. You have to tell me for me to be able to help you."

"Help me? How can you help a dream? Anyway, I didn't see a point," Harry said.

Ron threw his hands up. "Right, there's not a bleeding point in telling your best mate that you're having problems."

"Spot on, Ron," Harry said cynically. "We must be twins because you don't see a point in telling me anything about your panic attacks or what the hell is going on with you during the night sessions, yeah?"

"It-it's not the same," Ron said dumbly.

"Oh, right, of course. You not trusting me isn't the same—"

"How can you say that!" Ron said. "I trust you more than anyone. I know that it was rough at the beginning of summer, but it got better."

"And then things changed again," Harry said.

"Nothing's changed. I'm the same person I was before we left," Ron said. "But it doesn't even matter because this isn't about me. It's about you."

"It's about the both of us, Ron, and it's what you keep bloody forgetting along with everything else!" Harry said.

Harry's yelling and broken thoughts and attitude took its toll on Ron. "What is this, Harry?" Ron demanded. "Why are you all of a sudden criticizing me? What the hell have I done to you? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the fact that I don't know what the fuck to do anymore!" Harry practically shouted. "You want me to tell you all about my meetings and the my dreams but you won't say one damn thing to me about what's going on with you."

Ron moved his eyes away from Harry. His various roles like brother, son, peacemaker, friend, hero, boyfriend, trainee, and everything else were blending together and growing thin and he had to stop it. "That's not fair."

"How's it not fair?" Harry asked.

"Because," Ron started, "I don't know what's going on with me, alright? I'm trying to bloody figure it out myself."

"I get that, Ron," Harry said more calmly. "What I don't get is how things are still apparently clear enough to talk to Hermione. You told her everything."

"You're mad at me for talking to her?" he asked. "Do I need written permission from you, too?"

"You know that's not me what I'm trying to say," Harry said.

"Then what the bloody fuck are you trying to say because I'm confused. I thought you'd be happy that I got a chance to see her and maybe work things out," Ron said.

"I am happy, Ron," Harry said. "I'm honestly glad that she was there for you and was able to help you."

"But what?" Ron said.

Harry mumbled nothing for a moment. "It's just that she's the only one you talk to about what's going on," he said, looking sheepish. "She's the only one you trust to help you through your attacks, and she's the only person you think will understand."

Ron's ears began to burn. It sounded a lot like jealousy. "That's not true," he awkwardly said.

Harry blushed tremendously hard. "It is to me. I don't know what I'm supposed to do anymore or where I should stand."

"We haven't forgotten about you, Harry. You're supposed to stand besides us, like always," Ron said.

"Not like always. Ever since the battle ended, in some ways you've treated me like everyone else," Harry said. "Like I'm just the bloke who defeated Voldemort and I'm either too mental to

talk to or I'm too into myself to notice things. Like I don't feel a fucking thing that matters anymore."

"That couldn't be any further from the truth," Ron said. "I know how things are for you. It's why I'm here now. I saw you today and I knew something was wrong. I'm trying to help because I want to."

"That's exactly how I feel," Harry urged. "Why can't you assume that I might be able to understand what you're going through? You can talk to me, and I'll understand better than you obviously think I will. The three of us went through the war together."

"It's more than that," Ron said. "This isn't Hermione's fault."

"I know it's not her fault. Do you think I like feeling this?" Harry asked. "I hate it."

Ron could easily understand how Harry felt. It was how he had felt for years and on some level still did. It was painful and confusing and he didn't wish it on anyone, let alone his best friend. "I'm sorry."

"I don't need you to be sorry," Harry said. "I want you to not get on my bollocks for not telling you everything. You talk so much shit to everyone, but the rules never apply to you."

"Don't lecture me about rules, Harry," Ron said. "If you think that keeping things from me is some sort of punishment or your way of getting back at me then—"

"Forget it." Harry stood up. "I don't have time to listen to this or to you right now. I've got too much going on."

"You're not the only one," Ron said, getting up as well. "But at least I'm trying to make the time now. I know I messed up. I'm not bloody perfect, and I'm fucking trying because I need you here with me, Harry." Harry yawned and it snapped something in Ron. He pushed him and he tripped back and hit the tree. "Don't you bloody do that! I may not have been the best bloody friend to you lately but, I still mean everything I've ever said. Fucking Richard and Lambrick and Hermione hasn't changed any of it!"

Harry steadied himself and for a moment Ron thought he had come to his right mind, but a second later Harry's palms were against his chest and he was knocked to the ground. "You don't get to pick and choose whenever the time is convenient for you, Ron. I've been trying but you told me not to bring it up. You bloody told me that you could handle everything yourself. I'm bloody here, too."

Harry walked off but Ron stayed on the ground. He was sure that he'd rush Harry to the dirt if he stood up. After a minute or so he got up and snuck back as quickly as he could back to his cabin. Nothing had gone as planned. The last time he and Harry had ever shown any real violence toward each other had been in the tent, during one of the worst periods of his life; they were

past all that and the animosity shouldn't have been there but it was.

In some ways he knew that Harry was right. Hermione had become his beacon in every aspect of his life, but she couldn't be everything for him. He needed his trainers, his family, and he needed Harry.

* * *

Ron gazed at the picture of his family. Everyone beamed and waved at him as if they didn't have a care in the world. He smiled sadly and focused his eyes on Fred. Even through the photo Ron could tell that he was planning something, and it most likely involved scaring him or getting him into trouble somehow. Ron never thought that he would miss Fred's harsh words or tricks, but he'd give anything to have Footsie Fungus waiting for him when he got out of bed. The door to the cabin opened, and Ron quickly put the picture away and sniffed.

"Hi, Ron," Roger said.

"Hi." Ron pretended to straighten his bed, and he grabbed his towel and buffed his hair that was already dry.

"No lunch today?" Roger asked.

"I'm not hungry." He noticed a large package under his arm.
"What's that?"

"Package from home," Roger said. He sat on the edge of Ron's bed.
"I saw this when I was in the mail room. I hope you don't mind
that I grabbed it for you."

"Cheers." Ron's spirits somewhat improved when he saw Charlie's handwriting and his name on the envelope. He wanted to open it, but Roger was still staring at him. "What's in the box?"

"It's not a box. It's better than that." Roger unwrapped his package and revealed a chessboard case. "It's my chess set that mum finally remember to send to me. I've been waiting on this."

"Wizard's?" Ron asked in slight astonishment. He hadn't played a game of chess in ages.

"Nah, I prefer the straight game. Why? Do you play?" Roger asked.

"Yeah, I do," he said. "I love chess. I'm just surprised to see someone else with a set. May I?"

"Of course." Roger offered the board to Ron.

He took it and examined the oak board and deep wooden pieces. His fingers itched to become familiar with the set. "This is brilliant."

"She's my baby. We should play sometime," Roger said. "I'm pretty good."

"So am I," Ron said.

"Sorted. Maybe this Sunday we will. If we're still here," he added like an afterthought.

"We'll still be here, Roger. Don't worry so much," Ron said.

His practically snatched the set from him. "I'm not worried. I'm prepared. Well, I'll let you get to your letter."

"Thanks." Ron waited until the door shut before he opened his letter. Charlie's letters were short and heavy handed with ink, and the familiarity made him feel better already.

Ronnie,

It's good to hear from you. I understand being too busy to write, but I'm the only one who gets to use that excuse. Stop being an anus and make the time, at least for mum. By the way, I'm doing fine. We got a few baby Short-Snouts imported from Russia, and they've kept us busy. The females aren't too bad but the males will burn you to a crisp edge if you're not careful. Speaking of burns, remind me to shove your Firebolt up your arse sideways when I see you again. Every burn I have is honest, and I'd never tempt a dragon to burn me. I'm gutted, really. You and George must be jealous because my bollocks are the size of fully-grown Wyvern dragon balls and put together your cocks barely cover one of the Short-Snout's toenails, but that's enough for now.

I'm glad you trust me enough to tell me what's been happening with you there. You don't have to worry. You have baby-brother confidentiality and whatever you say or write stays between us until you tell me otherwise. I'm sorry that you've been feeling so miserable, and I'd give anything to take it away because I know what it feels like. The first night back at my flat was the worst. Bill's the only one I've told about this, but I lost it harder than I did when we buried Fred. Being away is tough, and it will only get worse before it gets better. This probably isn't what you want to hear, but it's the truth. You're definitely not mental for being scared either, Ronnie. I was scared and sometimes I still am. I get scared for no reason or I worry about you and the family when I know there's nothing to worry about.

Being away now is different because I know that everyone is in a state and me not being around makes us even less full than we are without Fred. I feel guilty sometimes, and if it weren't for dad's reassurance I probably would still be at the Burrow trying to help out. I love the dragons but it doesn't mean bollocks compared to our family. I'd give it up in a second, but I think that's how I'm dealing with being gone. I want to be back at home, but I need to be here. Being here takes my mind off things,

and it helps me to move on. I train dragons, I go to the pub with my mates, I play quidditch, and I write to Bill whenever a wicked or stupid and dangerous idea goes off in my head. It's simple but it's what I've always done. It's keeping me together to keep at it.

I don't think it's strange that certain things make you think of Fred. Nasty jokes I hear or certain quidditch moves or knobs I see around the job make me think of him at the most random times. Most of the time it's manageable, but sometimes I can't fucking stand it and I want to break whatever's closest to me because it's too much. It's all a part of the healing process, I reckon. Unfortunately, I don't have any answers, and I don't think there's a right or wrong thing to do to get better, Ron, but I think that you need to keep at it with your training. Even if it's hard, keep at it. Let it break you down and make you bleed but don't let it take hold of you. You need to be there and you need to push through it to make yourself feel better. I've always thought that sweat was the cure, so I might be the wrong person to ask.

What I can say is that you're strong even though you don't feel it and nothing you're experiencing is wrong or without reason, so stop being so hard on yourself. Another thing I can say is to remember the people you have around you. I know Hermione isn't there but Harry is. Talk to him, take the piss out of him, train with him, do whatever but keep him close. You'll need your mate now more than ever. I love the lot of you, but I wouldn't be sitting here writing to you tonight if it wasn't for Bill. He's my best mate in the whole bloody world, even if he is a whipped, little married man now. You can tell him I called him that if you wanna. Of course, don't forget that you have us. We're all here for you, and we all want to help in whatever way we can. We lost Fred, too, and we miss him just like you do. He was your older brother and my younger brother. It doesn't get any closer than that.

I hope this helps. I really do. I'm shit with words and writing, but I want to give you whatever strength you need from me. I'd cut my heart out and send it with the post if I could, Ronnie. Remember that.

Talk to you soon,

Charles Keith Weasley (aren't I posh?)

- And just to answer you, don't you worry your tender little head about my tattoo. You'll find out when the time is right.

Ron read the letter over a few more times before he folded it up and put it in his side table. He was glad to know that he wasn't alone in feeling off, but he felt bad, too. Charlie thought that he had the whole story but he didn't. His words had given him reassurance, but they were still in vain.

As east joined the west section that night for yet again another group training, Ron told himself that he would keep his head on. He would push himself to get better. It was his only option. He

looked around and spotted Harry. The two of them hadn't so much as looked at each other since their argument in the woods. Ron didn't know what was happening to them. It had been days ago, but he still felt angry and confused and a little betrayed. He knew that it was his fault as well, but he was far too stubborn to admit it.

"The trainers and I hope that this has been a growing experience for you lot," Richard began. "We know that it's been difficult but most of you have improved and when we introduce this again after the recess, you'll be a step ahead. Tonight, we want to test everything you've learned. We're almost finished with this portion of your training, and it's important that you constantly keep the material fresh in your mind."

"We're going to partner you up with a member of the opposite section based on performance, experience, and skill," Alan said. "So, when we call your name and your partner's name, find a spot. It'll be like during your hand-to-hand combat test."

"That's right," Richard said. "Everyone will get to see what the other trainees are bringing to the table, and you might actually learn something. So, pay attention. The pairs are as follows." Ron gripped his wand very tightly and closed his eyes. He needed to control himself, and he refused to lose it in front of everyone. He couldn't afford to do it again. He focused on his breathing. "Potter from west and Weasley from east," Richard said. Ron opened his eyes and almost dropped his wand. They had to be joking. Richard actually had a small grin on his face.

Ron looked around for Harry, and he was already walking toward him. Ron met him somewhere in the middle. He didn't know what to say. Part of him wanted to apologize and part of him wanted to hit him. "How long do you think they've been waiting to do this?" he found himself asking without realizing it.

Harry shrugged. "Dunno. Ages. It's bloody stupid."

"Yeah," Ron said.

"Especially since I'm gonna kick your arse," Harry said.

"How's that? You'll be on the ground before your wand gets anywhere near me. You bloody prick." Ron turned away from him and Harry did the same. One by one the pairs dueled. Ron was so enraged that he could barely focus on what the trainees were doing. Nothing would please him more than to get his knuckles into Harry's gut. He didn't know where all the fury was coming from, and he saw the same rage in Harry's features and in the way his fingers tapped on his wand in anticipation.

"Young, don't be afraid to utilize your size. If you can trap him with your speed, then do it. You two are dismissed," Alan said. Olivia and her partner got back in line. She shot him a quick smile and he returned it and nodded in approval. She was a good fighter and whatever impression she was trying to make on him wasn't necessary. He wasn't like Jack and some of the other

blokes. He knew that she could be just as great if not better than the lot of the guys.

"Potter, Weasley, you're next," Richard said. Ron snapped backed to the task at hand. Harry, who had been standing next to him in total silence, started to walk forward to the front of the group. He adjusted his glasses, and Ron rolled his shoulders. "Okay, the rules are the same. You've got three minutes to duel. It's a free spar but try to employ everything you've learned up until this point."

"No biting and no eye gouging," Alan added. "When I blow my whistle you'll start and when I blow it again, the round is over. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," they said together. Ron planted his feet and raised his wand. Harry did the same. Harry glowered at him with an intensity that might have intimidated other people, but Ron was too angry at the specky git to care.

"All right, on three. One, two!" Ron watched Harry's right hand, and he knew exactly what kind of spell he was going to use. He knew the bloke far too well, but Ron was far too irate and distracted and rigid to beat him in his condition. He had to work fast and exploit Harry's weakness as quickly as he could if he wanted a chance. "Three!" Alan blew his whistle and Harry jolted his wand, but Ron was ready.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

"Flipendo!"

Ron was raised in the air and flipped back. He hit the ground hard on his back, but he had still managed to keep his wand in his hand. He looked straight ahead and grinned. Though he was on the ground and Harry was standing, Harry was pointing his wand to his glasses that were above his head. Ron scurried to his feet.

"Accio glasses!" he cried. They zoomed over and Ron snatched them from the air. It was low but if they'd learned anything, then it was to expose the opponent to his disadvantage. Harry squinted and pointed his wand at him. Ron was ready. Harry would most likely try to disarm him.

"Bombarda!" An explosion went off next to where Ron was standing. He fell back again and the noise and debris so close to him made him freeze up. He forgot where he was and before he knew it, Harry was rushing him and was twisting his wand out of his hand. Ron's heart raced and the sounds got extremely loud in his ear, but he couldn't let it stop him. He forced himself to concentrate. Harry twisted his arm and Ron knew that he was trying to get it behind his back. He head butted Harry and got him away. He forgot about using his wand and simply tackled him. He tried to get Harry's arms pinned, but Harry was fast and he was able to punch him in the stomach. Ron lost his air and gasped. He punched Harry in the jaw. The two tossed and rolled around in the grass.

"You're a prick!" Ron growled.

Harry rolled him over and punched him repeatedly in the stomach.
"Me! You're the one who took my fucking glasses, you tosser!"

"Urgh! It's your greatest bloody weakness, specky!" Ron wheezed,
punching his face again.

Harry groaned and cupped his jaw. "Grr! Then...I reckon I
should've brought the sun out and given you a nice burn,
freckly!"

Ron growled and turned them over. His stomach was in pain, but
the furiousness dulled it. He punched Harry again. "Enough with
the 'ah ginger jokes' and how dare you blast that spell near
me? How fucking dare you! You know I can't take that!"

Harry's expression was getting harder to see because his face was
red and dirty. He grabbed Ron's wrists and tugged on them. "I
don't know anything, Ron," he mumbled in obvious pain. "It's your
fucking fault that I don't!"

"How many fucking times do I have to say it sorry? I'm sorry for
being a tosser!" Ron grunted and popped his hips. Harry fell to
the side, and Ron bustled out of his hold.

He searched around for his wand, but Harry elbowed him in the
side and threw his wand further away. The pain he felt
intensified, like something snapped and lit a fire in his chest
and stomach. "And I'm sorry for being a prick, you fucking
tosser!" Harry grumbled. They started rolling around and punching
each other again and right as Ron pulled his arm back for a left
hook, he felt powerful arms pulling him away from Harry.

"That's enough!" Alan shouted. When Ron's fury settled, he saw
Harry in front of him being held by Alan. He was filthy and his
mouth was bloody. He also noticed that everyone was staring at
them. "What the fuck is the matter with you two? We said duel,
not kill each other!" Ron opened his mouth, but the moment he
tried to push words out he winced. His abdomen was in
excruciating pain and something felt out of place. He breathed
harshly and in spurts and if Richard let him go then he would
probably collapse.

"Let's assess," Richard said coolly.

Alan gaped at him. "This is no time for joking, Rich."

"Who's joking? I'm not condoning this, but it's worth assessing,"
Richard said.

"Sir,-err-I think I need to see a healer." Harry groaned and
touched his mouth.

"That sounds like a personal problem, Potter," Richard said. He
let Ron go but Alan kept his grip on Harry. "Since you spoke
first, Potter, we'll start with you. Alan."

Alan looked at him incredulously but sighed. "Fine. Um, Potter, great use of bombarda. It was an excellent choice of an offensive-oh forget this! They shouldn't be here right now. Brian, escort them to the medical cabin. We'll be there soon. If either of them take another swing, restrain him and write him up!"

He pushed Harry away, and Brian quickly took his arm and helped him off. Ron wanted to say that he needed help walking as well, but he wouldn't tempt his already doomed fate. He limped behind them and looked back at Olivia who was pale faced and had a hand over her mouth. He'd probably never see her again or get the chance to play chess against Roger. All the way to the cabin Brian scowled them for their fight and their behavior. It was hard for Ron to listen to him. He was in severe pain and the adrenaline was crashing around him and making his head hurt.

They went into the east wing's cabin and Ron sat on one of the cots. "Stay there, Weasley," Brian said to him. He escorted Harry to the old and short nurse that was reading what looked to be a romance novel called, "A Witches Pride, A Woman's Lie" behind the desk.

"My dear, what happened?" she asked, pulling Harry's hand away from his face.

"Their dueling went awry," Brian said.

"I think my jaw or something is broken," Harry said. The nurse patted his head and gave him a cup. He let out a gentle whimper as he spit out a large wad of blood.

"My word, every year I get a lot in here for fighting," the nurse said. She used her wand to rid him of the blood and mud on his face. She then touched his jaw and moved his head around. Harry shut his eyes and balled his fists as he whimpered again. "You'd think with all the violence in the world and during your real training that you'd want to keep it safe. Especially you, Mr. Potter. Aren't you tired of unnecessary violence? Voldemort is dead, young man, you don't have to keep fighting." Harry opened his eyes and looked at her in a pained way. Ron didn't care if she was healing him. She had no right to talk to him in such a way. She knew nothing.

"Harry's aware that he's dead. He's the one that snuffed him, so you don't have to remind him," Ron said. "Just make Harry better."

The three of them turned to him. "Weasley, I thought I told you to wait there," Brian said.

Ron stood up and cringed. "I am waiting here, but you didn't say that I couldn't talk." He wobbled as every breath was like glass scraping his insides. "I don't mean any disrespect, but I think a broken rib might be worth looking at, too."

"Oh, dear, come over here, Mr. Weasley." The nurse took his arm and helped him down on one of the cots closer to her desk. She

lifted his shirt and starting touching his stomach. He slammed his fists on the cot and cried out when she touched tender ones. "Oh, yes, little fractures for sure."

"Is that all, Madame Campbell?" Brian asked.

She surveyed them both. "Besides minor cuts and scraps, Mr. Potter has a broken jaw, and Mr. Weasley has these few fractured ribs that need tending to. It shouldn't be anything more extensive than cleaning, mending, and giving them something for potential concussions for precaution."

"All right. I need to get back to Alan and Richard and let them know that these two dimwits are going to pull through," Brian said.

She wiggled her finger at him. "Now, now, Mr. Taylor, the name calling is needless. You were in here plenty of times last year, and Alan and Richard found themselves in here at least once. Fighting each other, I'm sure. Boys, I swear it." Ron tried not to smirk as Brian flushed and left the cabin. "The kit I need is in the west medical cabin. I trust that you won't be fighting again when I return?"

"No," Harry mumbled.

"Too sore," Ron answered. She sighed and patted his head before leaving. Ron tried to sit up but the throbbing pressure on his abdomen was outrageous. He winced again and gritted his teeth.

"Does it really hurt?" Harry asked.

Ron turned his head in his direction. Harry's face was clear, but he was still spitting in his cup. There was mud in his hair and on his clothes and neck, but even under it all Ron could tell that he was truly concerned. He wanted to roll his eyes or ignore him, but he frankly wasn't mad at him anymore. Whatever fury he had been either left on the field or was being spit out in Harry's cup. "Only when I move. You?"

Harry shrugged and spit again. "Yeah, but it's not like I don't know what my own blood tastes like." He nodded and so did Ron. "Thanks for saying something to her. I didn't know what to do."

"It's fine," Ron said. "She doesn't know you, and she shouldn't have opened her mouth about it."

Harry nodded again and rubbed his eyes. "Do you still have my glasses?"

"Oh, yeah." With difficulty Ron reached into his pocket and pulled them out. They were cracked and broken in the middle. "Shit." He eased his wand out as well and pointed it to them. "Oculus Reparo." He gently tossed them to Harry. "Sorry about that."

"S'all right." Harry put them on, and his body relaxed somewhat. He took in his surroundings before settling on Ron. "Bloody hell, you look terrible."

"We must be twins," Ron muttered. They went silent again and Ron stared at his hands that were shaking. "Harry, I don't know what that was but I'm sorry, honestly. About the glasses and busting you up. I lost my mind tonight."

"Eh, it was clever and I reckon having some cracked ribs isn't the best thing in the world. I lost it, too." He spit again and rubbed his jaw. He groaned. "Do you think we're getting sacked?"

"Most likely," Ron breathed. He closed his eyes and kept as still as possible. Madame Campbell came back and tended to Ron first. Ron cried out again when he felt his bones move and almost snap back into place. He was given potion for his headache and a bit of cream and bandaging for his scraps and cuts. Richard and Alan came storming in right as she finished up Harry.

"Good evening, gentleman. These two lads are as good as new again," Madame Campbell said.

"Thank you, Madame. We appreciate it, and I'm sure they do as well," Alan said.

"They can stay overnight if they wish," she said. "They might need a good night's sleep after this."

"They'll be fine with us," Alan quickly said. Ron gulped. The way Alan and Richard were looking at them made him think that they'd end up right back on the cots needing medical attention.

"Potter, come with me," Richard said.

Harry quickly hopped off the cot. "Thank you, Madame Campbell." He followed Richard out of the cabin.

Alan waited a few minutes before walking over to him. "Weasley, are you ready to go?" Ron wanted to say no. He didn't want to be anywhere alone with Alan under the circumstances.

"Yes, sir," he said. He slowly stood up and was no longer happy that it didn't hurt to breathe. "Thank you, Madame."

She patted his head again. "Of course, dear. Though I hope I don't have to see you in here again."

Alan kept his arms to his sides and was quiet as they walked. Ron couldn't stand it. He'd rather Alan yell at him or have a go at him. Anything would be better than the silence. "Sir," Ron eventually said. "I know I'm probably on my way to get my walking papers, but I just want you to know that I'm sorry. I let you down, and I didn't keep to my word. I'm usually always a man of my word, and I apologize if I defaced you as an instructor or Lambrick as an academy."

Alan looked at him. "Is that all?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

He shook his head. "You amaze me, Weasley. You embarrassed yourself and Potter tonight. You cracked some ribs and injured your mate. You could be thrown out, but you want to let me know that you're sorry for letting me down?"

Ron had a feeling that Alan was taking the piss out of him, but he was done with letting his anger take the lead. It only ended in broken bones. "Yes, I am."

"I'll take note of it," Alan said. They made it to Alan's cabin and Ron's stomach started to hurt again. Alan opened the door and Richard and Harry were both inside. Harry was sitting in front of the desk and Richard was sitting on the edge. "Chair, Weasley," Alan ordered.

Ron sat next to Harry but didn't make eye contact. He knew that they were in enough trouble together. Alan sat behind the desk and clicked his teeth with his tongue. "I don't think I need to tell you both that your behavior tonight was not only immature but utterly stupid. Turning your assessment duel into an actual street brawl was not what we had in mind."

"Yes, sir," they said together.

"Saying that isn't good enough," Richard said. "After you two were escorted, it was easy to tell that the other trainees were distracted and any performance they gave us wasn't as good as it could've been. You not only destroyed your own test but the tests of others."

"When we decided to pick both of you for the program, we weren't sure if there would be any problems, however, you both proved to us that you could work here together regardless of having such a familiar and intertwined history," Alan said.

"That was until tonight," Richard said. "I don't know what got into either of you, but that sort of behavior is not tolerated. Lambrick Academy is not a holiday. It's not a personal recreation. It's not a place for blokes to disburse whatever aggression or unsettled scores they have with each other. This is a learning facility and a preparation for the Auror career path."

"We know that, sir," Harry said.

"Do you, Potter?" Richard asked. "Your behavior lately tells me otherwise. Forgetting that you cracked Weasley's ribs tonight, you've been insubordinate for quiet some time. This is not your personal stage to show off who you are and what you can do."

"He wasn't showing off, sir," Ron said.

"Excuse me?" Richard asked.

Alan held up his hand. "No, Richard, you should let Weasley talk. All he wants to do these days is talk. What'd you say Mr. Potter is doing?"

Ron rubbed his neck, and he could feel Harry's eyes sneaking glances at him. He had to defend him, even if it meant getting kicked out. "W-well, I just mean that he's going through a lot with the Ministry and everything—"

"That's not your concern, Weasley," Richard said.

"Actually, with all due respect, it is," Ron said. He cleared his throat. "But that's not the main point because I only mean that on top of all that and me provoking him, it wasn't all Harry tonight. We both got a bit carried away, but we didn't mean it. Battles, uh, they can get intense."

"I think I can tell the difference between intense battles and personal vendettas, Weasley," Richard snapped. "We asked you two to demonstrate the hand combat, spell use, and the offense and defense maneuvers we taught you. We didn't say to roll around on the ground and punch each other like you're back in school. You're both adults and should know better."

Harry raised his hand. "Sir, if I may say?"

"What is it?" Richard asked.

"I want to first say that no stress I'm under excuses my behavior. I know that," Harry said. "I also want you both to know that Ron and I didn't mean to disrupt the flow of the session tonight. Ron's right, we did get carried away and maybe the fight was personal, but it wasn't our intention. Right, Ron?"

"Right," he promptly said. "We both want to be here, and we know that we have a lot to learn."

"You're absolutely right that you do," Alan said. "No one ignores what you've accomplished already. It's real and it's remarkable, but you wouldn't have applied if you didn't have things to improve on. You're not perfect, and you're not ready yet."

"There's enough attention and commotion regarding you two," Richard said. "Lashing out like this only makes it harder for yourselves and for everyone else. We don't need celebrities here, and we don't want them. We need men who have experience and who are open and can bring something to this camp and to the other trainees."

"We know, sir, and we're very sorry. It won't happen again," Harry said.

"You're bloody right it won't happen again," Alan said. "This won't be the last time the sections meet, and if you both make it to the merge it'll be even more close quartered. You'll have to handle it, or you'll be thrown out. We'll have no problem doing it."

"We know, sir," Harry said.

"Then re-learn it!" Alan snapped. "Listen to me, you're going to work when you're angry. You're going to work when you're stressed or scared or exhausted or are having problems at home. For any other job it might be okay to let it fester but when you're an Auror and lives are at risk, you literally can't afford to. You have to shut it off and put it in the back of your mind. You have to stay professional."

"At this point we have full right to cut you both from the program for being everything but professional," Richard said.

Ron finally looked at Harry, and he was looking right back at him. They had arrived together, and they would leave together.
"We understand, sir," Ron said.

"However," Alan said, "we're not going to." Ron's jaw dropped and Harry's eyes widened.

"Sir?" Harry croaked.

"Although we don't tolerate uneducated fighting, we recognize that camp life can get heated," Alan said, almost like he couldn't stand his words. "It wouldn't be fair if we let every trainee go for fighting. Every year blokes end up in the medical cabin with some sort of injury they got from a brawl. It's your first offense and based on your past performances, it wouldn't be a sound judgment call to let you both go tonight."

Ron couldn't believe what he was hearing. He'd been preparing himself to explain to his parents why he was home early, and the letter he'd write to Hermione was already forming in his mind.
"We can stay?"

"For now, but know that this is the last and final warning for both of you." Richard looked at Harry. "There is a zero tolerance policy for attitude problems." He then looked at Ron. "And there is a zero tolerance policy for distraction. Put your bollocks back in your shorts and get to work. You can start tomorrow morning with an additional four running and flying laps and tomorrow night with five laps of both running and flying before you're dismissed for the evening. In fact, make it for the rest of the week."

"Yes, sir," Ron and Harry said together. It sounded awful, but it was better than the alternative.

"We'll have to make a note of this to Phillip," Alan said. "He reviews all slips that we write up. For your sake this better be the only one he has to read. Richard, you can accompany Potter back if you want. I need a word with Weasley."

Harry quickly stood up. "Sorry and thank you, sir," he said to Alan. He gave Ron a sympathetic look and followed Richard out of the cabin.

Ron rubbed his palms into his knees. "I'm really sorry for what happened, sir. I know I've said that I'll get better and, well, this probably wasn't the best way to show it."

"No, it wasn't. It was juvenile and idiotic and pathetic." Alan said. "On the other hand, your apology from earlier tells me that you might actually be sincere about all this. I can tell when someone is trying to pull one over me, and I don't think you are."

"I'm not, sir. I mean it," Ron said, sitting up straighter.

"I know you do," Alan said, "and I must admit that your performance tonight was the best I've seen since we started the new training."

"Sir?" Ron asked. He could hardly remember the events of the fight. Only the pain in his ribs and random words like prick and tosser stayed with him.

"Weasley, I dismissed you and Potter because I didn't want you in my sight. It wasn't because I had nothing to add," Alan said. "You taking Potter's glasses was sharp. You exposed an obvious weakness that I know a lot of others would've overlooked. Not to mention, you were alive tonight. I saw some blood flushed in your skin and some fire in your eyes. Your anger or whatever happened with Potter lit a jinx under your arse because you worked hard and you fought hard."

"But it wasn't organized," Ron said.

"You don't have to tell me that, but even the way you and Potter used hand combat showed some technique and force," he said. "It wasn't pretty, but it's what I've wanted to see this whole time."

Ron didn't know what to say. "Thank you, sir, but I wouldn't be lying if I said I did it on purpose."

"It's not always about carefully calculated designs, Weasley," Alan said. "Sometimes, the best battles are won on pure impulse and cock juice."

Ron blinked several times. "Cock juice, sir?"

Alan chuckled slightly. "If you graduate from Lambrick, then you'll learn all about it. The only reason it's not brought up now is because Phillip thinks it's disrespectful to our female trainees. The point is that I know you have a head full of strategy but trust your instincts as well. Potter isn't always going to be around to make you face whatever's going on. You have to bring it out yourself."

"I know, sir," Ron said. "Iâ€œ;this is the first time that I've ever really had to do things on my own. I've always had my mates, and I come from a big family. It's been a little difficult." He hadn't meant to say anything to him, but he couldn't help himself. He wanted to utilize the people around him, and his fight with Harry had broken a bit of his apprehension.

He was surprised when Alan grinned. "Lambrick is a learning experience for the body and the mind. It's what Phillip told me when I said something similar to what you just said. I have three older sisters, and I barely knew how to zip up my own jacket before I came here."

"Really?" Ron asked.

"Honestly," Alan said. "Leaving home is one of the hardest things I've ever done, but that's what so great about this place. It gives you a chance to grow up. Even you have some growing up still left to do, Weasley. Don't be afraid to do it, and don't be afraid to take everything you can from here. Being tough means that you understand your weaknesses."

Alan's words hit Ron directly in the chest. "Yes, sir, I definitely need to do that better. I really need to be here."

"Then be here. Take your feelings and use them to be here more. Nothing here is for certain. Earn your place and don't sabotage your potential," Alan said. He held out his hand. "Do you understand?"

Ron shook it. "Yes, I do."

Later that night, Ron lay in his bed and twisted his wand between his fingers. He wasn't sure if it was the fighting, the potion, or the news that he could stay, but he felt more relaxed than he had in weeks. "I can't believe you're still here, Ron," Conor said with a smirk.

"Neither can I," Ron mumbled.

"I can. Alan would be mental to send you away, even if you are a bit of a nutter," Roger cheeked. "I'm just glad that I went before you and Harry let loose on each other. What was that?"

"I have no idea," Ron said. "We've never had a go like that."

"Ho-hum," Jack said with a yawn. "That's all well and good but novelty only lasts for so long. I'd take this as a lucky night and move on."

"Can't you ever piss off?" Conor asked.

"Not when a person is impeding the learning of others to have a tiff with his boyfriend," Jack said.

Ron actually snorted. He was ecstatic that he wasn't leaving Lambrick and even Jack couldn't take the feeling away. "We'll try to keep it down for you next time, mate. Wouldn't want to ruffle up that gorgeous hair of yours."

"You're a fucker, Ron," Jack said, standing up. "I'm getting sick of you."

"And I'm getting bored of your moaning and complaining about me. I'm still here, Jack, get bloody used to it." He got out of bed and tied on his trainers. "Roger, can I borrow your chess set? I swear that I'll bring it back tonight in one piece."

Once again, Ron left the cabin and snuck as swiftly as he could over to west. It was quiet and no one was in sight. He knocked rapidly on Harry's door and Eric answered. "Ron?"

"Is Harry here? It's an emergency," Ron said. "You don't have to worry, I'm not going to hit him or anything. It's just an emergency."

Eric gave him a look. "An emergency that requires chess? That's a new one." He dipped his head into the room. "Oi, Harry, Ron's here and it's an emergency."

Harry came to the door. "Are you mental? We just got our bollocks kicked in. Do you want it again?"

"I reckon I'm an addict for pain," Ron said, looking around. "Can we talk?"

"Like we talked last time?" Harry asked.

"No, I brought chess this time," he said, holding up the case.

Harry shook his head. "It's official. You are mental."

"Probably," Ron said. "Come on, unless you're scared."

Harry gave him a once over. "Of you? Never. Hold on." He went back into the cabin and came out with his jacket and wand. "Same place." When they got to Harry's spot, he held both their wands as Ron set up the chessboard. "Who's set is this?"

"Roger, my roommate. He made me regret not bringing mine. Okay, we're ready. You're white," Ron said. He rubbed his fingertips and scanned over the board. "How's your jaw?"

"About as great as your ribs," Harry answered. He moved a bishop and looked at him. "It's fine."

Ron picked up a pawn but didn't move it. The chess game didn't matter. "Harry, I'm sorry."

"I told you that my jaw is fine," Harry said.

"No, I mean it. Not just for the fight but the other stuff," he said. "I should've just apologized the first time. We almost got sacked for this shit. It's not right, and I know we fought because I've been a tosser."

"Don't do that, Ron," Harry said. "It's not all your fault. I've been a prick, and I know it. To you and Richard and everyone here. I made that fight happen, too. I just have so much going on."

"So do I, and I guess you were right," Ron said. "Talking to you has gotten harder lately."

"Because of the sections?" Harry asked, moving another piece.

"I don't think so," Ron said. He played his piece and reexamined the board. He and Harry always played chess the same way. Harry was quick to defend his pawns and the weak sides of the queen, and Ron slowly attacked his way through the barrier. Ron knew all of Harry's defenses, and Harry knew that sooner or later Ron would make the final check. "You know me better than anyone else in my life," Ron quietly said. "You just look at me and you know things. My dad and Hermione and Percy sometimes see what I'm trying to keep away, but you always bloody know what's going on."

"Does that bother you about me?" Harry asked.

"Sometimes. When all that's going on are bad things, I can't stand it. We used to have more balance," Ron said. "We've got so much dark stuff in our friendship, and I don't want to add to it. It's why I don't want to tell you things, and I know it's why you've kept your nightmares to yourself. There's so much awfulness between us, Harry."

"Don't you think I know that?" Harry asked. "We've been best friends for ages, and we've gone through everything together, but it's like things are finally catching up to us and the lighter stuff is harder to see now."

"It's why I've been going to Hermione with everything," Ron said. "It's not just you. I think I've been keeping my family away for the same reason. I can open up to Hermione better than I can open up to my brothers because there's not a related death for us to deal with. I don't know if that makes sense!"

"It does," Harry said, taking his turn. "What about with me?"

He shrugged. "As great as my relationship is with her, she doesn't see me like you do and it makes it easier to talk to her." He quickly moved another piece. "I know that sounds horrible."

"It's no worse than what I'm feeling," Harry said. "You have no idea how guilty and weird I feel for being angry and jealous."

"Actually, I do," Ron said. "I used-I still feel that way sometimes."

"But I'm not telling anyone anything," he said.

"Not even Ginny?" Ron asked.

"No, and I feel like a prick but us being a couple and us going through the war doesn't erase everything," Harry said. "It's still hard for me to open up to her. I'm trying, though."

"You can tell me if you want to," Ron said. "I'll listen and I'll open up more or whatever I need to do because we can't keep

fighting and we can't stop being friends. I cannot go through all this without you."

Harry let out a shaky breath and held on firmly to a knight piece. "The last dream I had."

"I'm here, mate," Ron said.

"It was just me and Voldemort, for once. Everything around us was dark," he explained. "He held up his wand, and I held up my empty hand. There was nothing I could do." Harry dropped the piece on the board and covered his face. "It doesn't matter that he's dead. Just because someone's dead doesn't mean that the memory dies, too."

Ron beat down the ball in his throat. "I know, mate. It's like the memory gets stronger at times."

He began to tell Harry about his panic attack, his grief over Fred, and how much the night training boggled his mind. Harry told him about his meetings with the Ministry officials and the pressure he felt in west wing. After a while, the conversation moved on to their roommates and what they thought was going on back at Hogwarts. The chessboard was forgotten, but Ron didn't mind. He was talking to Harry for the first time since arriving at Lambrick, and it soothed the gaps and the loneliness that hurt him so badly. It wasn't everything, but it was all he needed at the time.

They finally headed back to Harry's cabin sometime after midnight, and both walked with a bit more ease. "We'll have to do this again, yeah?" Harry said.

"The chess or the trip to the medical cabin?" Ron asked.

"Both are fine, I s'pose," Harry said, stifling a yawn.

"I might just have to tell mum to send my set, then." Ron said. He looked around and rubbed his neck. "I should probably get back. With my luck Alan will do bed checks."

"I have to bribe my roommates with something to keep them quiet about this," Harry said.

"Like what?" Ron asked.

Harry pulled a small bag out of his jacket pocket. "Theses."

Ron snatched the bag. "Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans? How do you have theses?"

"I made a stop after my last meeting," he said with a shrug.

"You slick git. I'm taking some," Ron said. He tore the bag open and took a handful.

"Watch it. Those have to last," Harry said, snatching it back.

Ron moaned as he stuffed most of them into his mouth. "Hmm, pecan, spinach, and hair, I think."

Harry smiled but it quickly faded. "Listen, um, you're not going to tell Hermione about all this, are you?"

"Are you mad?" he asked. "I'm comfortable with one arsehole. She'd be sure to tear me a new one if I told her about our fight."

"I mean about the other stuff," Harry said. "I don't want her to think that I don't want her to be happy with you."

"Oh. No, I won't tell her anything," Ron said. He thought about the letter that Hermione had sent him and her words about her jealousy of Harry's relationship with Ginny.

"I'm really glad for you and Hermione," Harry urged.

"I know you are, Harry. Don't worry," Ron said. They looked at each other awkwardly and bounced on their heels. "Well, I'm gonna go."

"A few more for the journey back?" Harry asked, holding out the bag.

Ron took a few. "Cheers and thanks for the coming out and risking expulsion again or whatever it's call here."

"Yeah, well, even if I wouldn't have come out here, you would've ended up playing alone," Harry said. "Playing with yourself is what you do best, freckly."

"Funny, specky," Ron said, throwing what he was sure to be a soap flavored bean at his head.

He ran back to his cabin and everyone was asleep and snoring. He eased the chessboard under Roger's cot before changing. He took off his shirt and touched the bruise that was forming on his stomach. He bit his lip to keep from laughing. It was almost comical. He could picture the headlines talking about how the heroes of Hogwarts had rolled around and fought like animals. He could even see the horrified looks on Hermione and his mum and most likely the amused ones on his siblings and his dad.

He took the picture of his family out of his desk and touched Fred's grinning face. "You'd love to hear this, huh?" he whispered. "...Unless you already know," he said even quieter.

* * *

****This chapter was inspired by two little words a mate of mine said. "Moody Harry." I swear it, lol. What I had originally planned for this chapter was a lot different but this works so

much better. I needed to bring some of Harry's attitude back. Up until this point, he's been this mostly mellow and quiet bloke, but he's fiery as bloody hell and he's a bit of knob sometimes. I love it, lol, and it won't be the last of it. Urgh, there's just so much but things have to come in their time. Anyway, enough blabbing. I hope you lot enjoyed this. Any R/H is heaven for me and stupid/stubborn/immature/fighting!R/H makes me weak in the knees. So, thanks for reading and review! We're moving ahead and moving on up!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 33*: All I have to give

I'm blushing and giggly over the reviews. I'm really happy that you lot enjoys this. It's what it's all about for me!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

"Time!" Alan said, blowing his whistle.

Ron jumped back on his feet and shook the mushy leaves out of his hair and off his jumper. "Good go, eh?"

Conor got up as well and wiped the mud off his face with his sleeve. "Bloody spectacular." He handed Ron back his wand. "I love sparring in heavy rain." Conor frowned and his blond hair appeared almost brown because of all the dirt. It made Ron grin. They two joined the rest of their section, and Ron looked up at the sky.

"At least it calmed down. It's barely misting now," he said. It was a soggy evening, but Ron was in high spirits. He didn't even mind that he was wet and filthy, still had a full night of training, or that his tailbone was annoyingly sore. It was Saturday and his last day of the torturous punishment of extra running and flying laps. It had been the longest and most excruciating week of his life, but it was almost over. By the end of the night, he would be aching, wheezing, and possibly throwing up, but at least it would be the last of it.

"That was a good show today, despite the weather," Alan said. "You'll work all over the world and in all kinds of conditions as Aurors. Rain, mud, snow, storms, extreme heat, all these things you'll have to get accustomed to because it will never be an excuse for not completing a mission."

"My last assignment had me out in the bloody desert before I came here to assist Alan," Brian said.

"And you go back after your shift here, right?" Alan asked with a slight grin.

Brian looked as if he wanted to roll his eyes, but he knew better than to disrespect Alan. "Yes, sir."

"You're lucky. I can't wait to get back to work," Alan said.

Roger raised his hand. "When do you go back, sir?"

"After graduation," he answered. "You lots aren't the only ones being tested here. Aurors have evaluations every year and this is mine this year."

"It's an honor when an Auror is asked to be a section leader for an academy," Brian added. "It usually means some sort of promotion or at least a raise in pay. It'd be wise to pay attention to everything you learn here. It could be one of you leading a section in the years to come."

"So, your future as an Auror depends on how well you teach us?" Roger asked.

"That's right, Johnson," Alan said drearily. Ron rubbed his neck. He had thought that Alan and Richard acted like arses just because they had power, but it made a lot more sense that their futures were tied with everyone's progress. It gave Ron an added incentive to work hard.

"Is that the same for you?" Ron asked, addressing Brian. He wanted to know if he would have to worry about coming back to Lambrick only after a year out.

Brian opened his mouth, but Alan laughed loudly. "Ha! Oh, no, no. Rookies are merely lapdogs. We drew names out a hat to see who would help us with the bitch work." Ron burst into laughter and so did the rest of the section.

"Thanks, Alan," Brian mumbled, flushing somewhat.

Alan patted his arm. "Mind you, it won't last forever. Some of these people will work for you next year, but you and them will all be under me. It's the cycle of things." He chuckled once more but quickly shook his head. "That's enough. I'm starting to act like Richard. Anyway, we're terribly off topic, and we don't have time for it because tonight is your one-on-one evaluation with Brian and me. We're going to take you to the field and test you on everything you've learned." Ron's heart skipped a beat, and he and Conor exchanged anxious glances. They had received no sort of warning or clue at all that this would happen now.

"We've been telling you this whole time to go over the lessons and to keep what you've learned fresh," Brian said. "Tonight will test how much you've retained and progressed. It's also an assessment to see who should stay in the program at this point."

"I thought the elimination was during the December holiday," Jack said, without raising his hand.

"It is, Mr. Turner," Alan said. "Don't be alarmed. It's not as if we're pitching half of you tonight. We meant it when we said that the major ejection was in December, but Phillip also told you the very first night here that we'd have four evaluations. This is one of them and small cuts will be made. Besides, if you don't have the material now, then there's no point in continuing in the program. Everything is cumulative." Ron didn't know what to think, but he knew that he wasn't getting cut yet. His performance was getting better and though it was still weak, he knew that he could make up for it in the other areas that they'd learned. However, he didn't know what Alan had in store for them, and his nerves knew how to get the better of him at the worst times.

"We figured the best way to do this is in alphabetical order. There's no ranking system and no biases," Alan said. "Also know that Richard is using the same system over in west. No side has an advantage in any way. So, wait here and we'll come back and let you know who's next. Brian." Brian quickly pulled out a scroll from his cloak and handed it to him. Alan opened it. "Mr. Alden, you're first."

Everyone was quiet as the three of them walked off to the more open part of the field behind the trees. The moment they were out of sight, everyone started to talk and move about. "Fucking hell," Conor said. "I didn't know we'd have this tonight."

"I think that's the point," Roger said, as he and Olivia came over. "I'm in big trouble."

"No, you're not," she said. "It's based on everything we've done."

"That's my problem!" Roger said. "Tonight's the night. The final night of my life."

"Stop talking like that! You're making me nervous." Olivia pulled out her hair tie and ran her fingers through her dark locks before tying it again.

"Trying to posh up?" Jack asked.

"No," she said shortly. "It's a nervous twitch."

"Ah. Too bad for you. I'm not nervous at all," he said. "It's been quite easy so far."

"Except for when Ron laid you out," Conor said. Ron grinned and Jack pretended as if he hadn't heard anything.

"I imagine you must be a little nervous too, Ron," Jack said.

"Why is that?" Ron asked. He wished to Merlin that they could partner for their test. He really wanted another go at Jack.

Jack smiled. "Because Ron, you and Potter have been awfully busy all week with the extra laps. I reckon it took its toll. You seemed a bit out of it today."

Ron wasn't just out of it. He was completely mental and physically drained, but he was running on pure will now, and he wouldn't stop until his name was added to the merging group. "It's really none of your business how I'm doing, Jack, but I'm fine. Thanks for the concern."

"Anytime, mate," he said mockingly. "It's good to know that even heroes can be punished for acting obtuse."

"Obtuse?" Conor asked. "Who the hell uses a word like obtuse?"

"It's the best word to describe actions like the ones Ron and Harry took on each other," Jack said.

"Maybe you should just keep walking," Olivia said. "I know it's hard for you to tear your eyes away from Ron, but Alan mentioned yesterday that your recovery time is still a bit too slow. Go work it out before it's your turn, and you're left with no one to blame."

Jack shook his head. "Do you really think-"

"Now, Jack," she ordered, "or I'll lay you out myself. I'm sure it'll be a whole lot more embarrassing for you than for me." He scowled at her and blushed. He lifted his chin and walked off without a word.

Ron's smile only grew. "Where did that come from?"

"It was brilliant, Olivia," Roger said.

"I was tired of him talking bollocks, and one of his mates called one of my roommates a pair of tits the other day. I hate stuff like that. I justâ€¢urgh!" She flopped on the ground and split open her legs. She reached and touched each ankle and then reached forward and stretched as far as she could, all while mumbling oaths and promises to rid the world of chauvinistic men.

"Wow," Roger said, turning his head to the side. "You're pretty flexible, and I mean that in the most nonsexist way."

"Shut up," she said, but Roger and Conor continued to watch her with slightly open mouths.

Ben quickly ran over to them. "So, is everyone ready to have their arses handed to them?" Ron doubted that he cared. He started watching Olivia like the others. Ron rolled his eyes and wanted to laugh. He moved away from them and attempted to clear his mind. He wouldn't get cut, and he wouldn't mess up. He had to do well.

One by one the trainees left with Alan and Brian, and the suspense started to kill him. Ron gave Roger a pat on the back and reassurance when it was his turn, but he knew that it wasn't good enough for him. Ron sat on the ground and flipped his wand between his fingers. He closed his eyes and went over everything

as if it was a written exam. He went over how to plant his feet, how to lock someone's wrists, how to use Incendio properly, and how to use certain offensive and defensive spells. He switched hands and moved his wand between his other fingers. It acted as his vessel to remember things.

"That's one way to review," Olivia said, sitting next to him.

He opened his eyes and sort of came out of his educational daze. "I don't reckon there's a point in trying to duel with someone now."

"I agree. Alan's right. It's either we know it or we don't." Olivia let out a breath and rubbed her shoulder. In the maneuver dried flakes of mud from her neck came off and landed on her leg. Ron considered telling her but, he knew that she wouldn't care. Things like that never bothered her.

"Are you worried?" he asked.

"Sort of," she said.

"You have no reason to be," he said. "You've got talent."

"It's not always about skill, Ron," she said. "There are four girls, and three of them are in the other section. It puts me at a disadvantage." She once again retied her hair.

"Hey, it doesn't matter how many girls are where," he said. "Alan's sensible, and he wouldn't get rid of you based on unfair odds. You're bloody great and everyone wants you here."

She rolled her eyes. "We all know why."

"That's not what I mean. Okay, maybe it is for some people butâ€œ!" He rubbed his palms against his thighs. He had no idea what to say to her. "People want you here because you're brilliant, and you bring a lot to our section. You wouldn't be here if it wasn't true. Trust me."

"You want me to trust you?" she asked.

He smirked. "Yes, trust me. Do you think you can do that?"

She stared at him for a moment then slowly grinned. "I can give it a go."

He nudged her shoulder with his. "Good."

Alan came back from the field. "Weasley, you're next."

Olivia touched his hand for a moment. "Good luck and remember to duel, not street brawl."

"You're so bloody clever." He stood up and swallowed hard, and he did his best to show Alan no sign of fear as he followed him back into the field where Brian was.

There wasn't anything set up in the field. The only props were a clipboard in Alan's hand and a bag by his feet. "Mr. Weasley, are you aware that this is your first official evaluation and that it will only be based on skills taught from the day you arrived up until today?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

"Do you feel as if Brian or myself have given you or any other trainee an advantage for tonight's test?" he asked.

"No, sir," he said.

"Will you sign here, please?" Alan asked, giving him the clipboard. "It's a statement of everything I just said and that you understand it. It's standard procedure. Occasionally, people like to challenge the decision of who gets pulled from the program and say that the ruling was unfair."

Ron took the quill and tried not to shake as he signed the form.
"I understand."

"Okay, we'll get started," Alan said. "This examination is broken up into four parts. First, I'm going to ask you to fire as many verbal offensive and defensive spells that you can in a minute. It's to test what you know spell wise and how fast you can perform, and you'll do it twice. Second, you'll have a two-minute duel with Brian using only hand-to-hand combat. Are you with me so far?"

"Yes, I understand." It didn't seem too bad so far. Ron didn't know every spell in the book, but he figured he might be able to get a decent amount and especially since he got to go twice.

"Good," Alan said. "After that, you'll have a three-minute round of dueling. You'll be disarmed and Brian will have a wand. You'll have to get it back and restrain Brian in whatever way you see fit. Lastly, you'll duel with Brian, and you'll both have wands. In this round, you must use Incendio and disarm Brian by the end of the three minutes."

Ron's confidence plummeted. "O-okay, sir."

"Do you have any questions?" Alan asked.

"One," he said, pulling off his jumper. "For the spell firing, am I supposed to use the same spells for both rounds?"

"You can do whatever you want to, Weasley," Alan said. "This is your examination and your display." Ron tried to read him, but he got nothing from his blank expression. He reckoned it'd be best to think of different ones. Hermione always said that quality was better than quantity. He thought about her, and he felt a little more confident and a bit tingly. He could do it. He could make them both proud. "Alright, stand clear and raise your wand. Keep it pointed straight ahead, and you'll go on my whistle."

Ron raised his wand and held it steady. Alan blew his whistle and right as Ron thought of his first spell, Brian shot a spell right over his head. Ron dropped his wand and whipped his head at them. "Oi!"

"What are you doing, Weasley? The clock is ticking!" Alan said. Ron had no time to react or tell them that they were mental. He grabbed his wand and started to fire his spells while Brian fired his all around him. By the end of the two minutes, he was sure that he and Brian had killed all the living animal life in the field. Alan didn't speak, only wrote things on the clipboard.

When it was time for the hand-to-hand combat, Ron felt a lot more prepared. Brian was bigger but they were basically the same height. Ron had watched Brian help train over the weeks, and he had a good idea of where to strike. He rubbed his fingertips and crouched a little. He quickly scanned over Brian's entire body and braced himself for his left side. Alan blew his whistle and the two rushed each other. Ron realized within two seconds that a year as an Auror made a huge difference. Fighting him was nothing like dueling any of the trainees.

Brian knew exactly where Ron was going to strike, and Ron had to over think to stay ahead. It was extraordinary. He finally felt like he was being challenged in the area. Brian held on to his wrists and slammed him on the grass. His cheekbone hit the ground hard, but he ignored the sharp sting. Ron wiggled but had nowhere to go. He scraped his trainers into the mud and dragged his body forward. Brian's hand lifted for only a millisecond to re-grip, and Ron seized the opportunity. He growled and clawed his wrists free. He flipped over and kicked Brian in the stomach. Brian ripped his shirt as he fell backward and managed to get one last swing at his face before hitting the ground.

Alan's whistle blew. "End of round!" Brian got to his feet and didn't look too beaten. However, Ron felt every part of his face and chest swell. Brian held out his hand, but Ron didn't take it. He got up by himself.

"Do you need a moment?" Brian asked. "I saw that fall you took."

"No. I'm fine." Ron touched his cheek and spat out blood. His t-shirt was ripped down the middle, so he tore the rest off and wiped inside his mouth and the side of his face with it. It was painful, but it wouldn't stop him. He threw the shirt down and got back into position.

"You can't be serious," Brian said.

"I'm ready," Ron said, looking at Alan.

Alan rubbed his brow and grinned. "You're fine, Weasley?"

"I'm waiting on Mr. Taylor," he said.

Alan's grin widened. "Well, there aren't any rules on examination attire. I think he's ready, Brian." He tossed him his wand and put his whistle to his lips. "Remember, regain and restrain."

He blew his whistle and once again they rushed each other. Brian's rough hands chafed his skin, but it rather worked to his advantage. It was harder for Brian to grip him, and Ron felt no restrictions to his arms. Brian hit him with a spell and Ron fell back. Brian grabbed him and pushed his face against a tree, but Ron kicked his shin and rushed backwards until they were both in the grass. The rustled on the ground, and Brian's strength kept Ron from getting the wand.

Ron heard Alan's whistle again. "No! That can't be three minutes!" Ron said.

"Welcome to real dueling, Weasley," Brian said, getting off him. Ron rose to his feet and spat out more blood. Something was burning on his back, and he most likely had scratches and cuts. Brian finally looked a bit worn and out of breath. Ron watched Alan as he continued to write things down in silence. Ron hated it. Alan's silent treatment was the worst.

"Alright, last round," Alan said. He walked over to Ron. "Remember, we've only been testing you on what you've learned so far. Brian's only used the hand combat and spells that a person at your stage should know how to work with. This last round won't be any different."

"I'm not scared, sir," Ron said. "I told you. I'm working on it."

"Don't tell me. Show me." Alan squeezed his shoulder and walked over to Brian. He whispered something in his ear and Brian nodded. Ron's heart skipped a beat. He didn't know what it meant or what Brian was now ready to do. He tried not to let it get to him but it did. It didn't help that he was concerned about the last round. He beat down the sounds and fears that Fred was going to die in front of him again. It wasn't possible, and he kept telling himself that.

"Wands at the ready," Alan said. He blew his whistle and Brian shot him quick with a spell. Ron had faired with Brian so far, but he was no match with him when they were truly allowed to use magic. Brian disarmed him and blasted him time and time again.

"Incendio!" Brian bellowed. An incredibly large fire, larger than one Ron had ever seen casted at Lambrick, appeared right before him and Brian threw another spell. Ron clambered to his wand and dodged behind a tree. He put a hand to his chest and tried to control his breathing as Brian constantly threw spells. Ron could feel the hotness of the flames. He didn't know what to do, and he shook horribly.

He had to find a way out. It was only a test. It was only an assessment. He could hear the flames crackling, and he thought about the blast. He shook his head and thought about something else. He thought about kissing Hermione before bed, but it wasn't enough. He thought about his brothers giving him his Firebolt, but it didn't help. Ron was terrified and frozen. Suddenly, Harry came into his mind. He thought about Harry battling the Basilisk

and fighting off dementors and defeating Voldemort. He remembered all the family Harry had lost and how he had given his life to protect them. He thought about Harry's nightmares but how the bloke still managed to laugh and take the piss out of him.

"Harry," Ron breathed aloud. "You did it. I can do it. I can do it." He swallowed hard again and gave himself a nod. He came from behind the tree and raised his wand. The flames were loud and horrible, and Ron's legs wobbled but he wouldn't run again. Fred was buried in the ground and though the fact was heartbreaking, it helped Ron relax.

Ron aimed for the flames and when he saw Brian's wand move toward them as well, he whipped around and pointed next to Brian.

"Confringo Maxima!" The ground next to Brian exploded and made him fly back and lose his wand. The blast was so fierce that even Alan hurried out of the way to avoid the debris. It was thunderous, and it made Ron's hairs stand on end. He felt sick and he waited to hear Percy's scream or see Fred's body. Neither happened and he was okay. Ron shook it off and focused on his task. He licked his lips and pointed to the fire. "Finite Incantatem!" As soon as the flames started to die out, he jumped over and ran to Brian. Brian was still looking for his wand but rushed him anyway as Ron drew closer. Everything hit him at once and for a moment he thought everything would be lost. "Incendio!" Brian's body stopped just as the fires flamed in front of him.

Ron slowly walked backwards but didn't take his eyes off the flames or lower his wand. The fire and the noise and the debris surrounded him, but he wasn't panicking and he was still alive. He heard Alan's whistle blow faintly behind him, but there were too many other things going on for it to really register. Alan touched his shoulder and Ron jumped away. "Weasley," he said.

Ron wanted to say something suddenly his throat was clogged and ready to burst. "Canâ€œ! Iâ€œ!"

"Go ahead. The exam is over." Alan pushed him in the right direction. "We're keeping it all behind those bushes back there. I'll take care of this."

Ron mistakenly ran over to the bushes. He already felt nauseous and moving so fast again made him spew hard. He rid himself of the nerves, the fear, and the adrenaline, and he kept throwing up until he sure half of his intestines were gone. He gradually rose and actually felt a little better. He shivered and wished that he had a shirt again. He noticed for the first time how chilly it was, and he must have looked like a prat. He walked over to Alan and Brian.

Brian had his arms crossed, and he was frowning a little.
"Weasleyâ€œ!"

"Not yet, Taylor. Everyone will get their feedback on the same day." Alan handed him a small yellow tablet. "It's a Ridium tablet. Chew and swallow. It'll help with the nausea and the nerves."

"Thank you. I'm sorry about that." Ron chewed it down and wince every time his cheek muscles moved.

"You weren't the first tonight. A lot of trainees spill it the first time. Come here." Alan took his wrist and pulled him over. He looked over his chest, stomach, and back then gently touched his face. Ron hissed. "Is it just this side?"

"Yes," Ron said.

Alan raised his wand. "Episkey." For the second time Ron groaned as it felt like a bone was snapped back into place. He rubbed his cheek, and it felt better. "You're all banged up, Weasley, but it's mostly superficial. You can get some healing soap for your shower and some bandages at the medical cabin."

"I'm fine, sir," he mumbled.

"Of course you are. Real Aurors get real injuries, but it's mandatory that I care to an extent." Alan reached in his bag and pulled out a small bottle of water and a towel. "Drink and wipe yourself off."

Ron chugged the water and it felt like life returning to his slowly deflating body. "Bloody hell."

"Yes. Water is really good at times like these," Alan said. "Like I said, sleep will become your mistress but water will be your wife. Now, I want you to go back and wait by the start of the trail with your broom. You and Potter still have laps tonight."

Ron rubbed his face. He was shaky all over. His throat was raw, and every part of him felt moments away from falling off. He wanted to say no, but he couldn't. He had survived the worst night of dueling in his life. He could and would keep going.
"Yes, sir."

"Here's your jumper," Brian said, handing it at him. "I thought you could use a bit more relief," he whispered before pushing him off in the right direction. Ron wasn't sure what he grumbled as he left the field and put his jumper back on.

He had survived but he didn't know how well. He was too numb and weary to feel any sort of achievement. He wanted Hermione so badly. He wanted to listen to her heartbeat and feel her fingers in his hair as they went over his examination. After getting his broom, he fell back on the ground. He felt something in the arm of his jumper, and he pulled out another tablet. Brian must have slipped it to him when he threw his jumper at him, but Ron didn't question it for too long. He popped it in his mouth and more of the weariness went away. In fact, he moaned a bit in pleasure and closed his eyes.

"Ron?"

"Hmm?" Ron opened his eyes and felt even better than he did right after he took the tablet. He adjusted to the darkness, and Harry

was standing before him. Some of his energy returned as well.
"Harry."

"Hi." Harry slumped down next to him with his broom and let out an exaggerated breath. "How was your test?"

"I don't even know where to begin," he said. "Exhausting. Chaotic. Barmy."

"Nice word drop. It more or less was like that for me," Harry said. "I will say that I think I did the worst with disarming without my wand and probably the best with the last round."

"I probably did the worst with that round and the best with the hand combat." Ron lay back down. He wanted to tell Harry more, but he was still a bit out of it. "I can't believe we still have to run."

"I don't want to think about it." Harry lay back as well and Ron drifted off again before he had time to say another word.

Someone was kicking Ron, and he whined and opened his eyes. He instantly nudged Harry and stood up when he saw Alan and Richard looking down on him. It was like a horrible nightmare. "Sorry to wake you two," Richard said.

"We had no idea that it was naptime. Is it naptime, Potter?" Alan asked.

"No, sir," Harry said, stifling a yawn as best as he could.

"Well, lads, your trail awaits," Richard said. "Taking your appraisal exam wasn't going to keep you from this, and I'm sure you both could use more exercise."

"Yes, sir," they said together.

"Make sure to go the medical cabin when you're done," Alan said. "Tomorrow is a new day and tonight won't be an excuse for anyone. Nothing has changed."

Ron and Harry hoisted their brooms over their shoulders and started to jog the trail. Ron didn't know how he still had energy but he did. The aching and burning that he felt didn't slow him down, and his strength shocked him. He glanced at Harry and felt a heavy sense of gratitude for him. "So, you go first," Ron said. "I still have to get my head around what happened to me."

Harry chuckled. "Sure. First of all, I didn't bloody know spells would get shot at my head as I performed, and I lost so much time!"

As they jogged, Harry explained in detail how his examination had gone. Ron cringed when Harry said that he took a hard blow to his lower back, and he laughed when Harry talked about the reinforcements he put on his glasses. "I'm so glad Hermione sent me those enchantments," Harry said as they crossed into their third lap. "That's about it. What about you?"

Ron still wasn't sure how to explain it, but part of keeping his relationship with Harry on good terms was being honest and open with him. "It was stressful, really. My first round went okay. I got my cheek cracked and my shirt ripped." He lifted his jumper and sort of twisted so Harry could see his back.

"Bloody hell," Harry breathed.

"I know, but I didn't care. I tore the damn thing off and kept going," Ron said. "Anyway, I didn't get a chance to get Brian's wand in the third round, so I was angry and the last one!" He actually stopped jogging but kept his broom on his shoulders.

Harry stopped as well but glanced around. "If Alan or Richard is watching..."

"I don't care. They can give me another five laps," Ron said. "I want to have a real conversation about this."

Harry nodded. "When Richard told me what the fourth round would be like, I thought of you. Were you worried about the fire?"

"Yeah, and for good reason," Ron said.

"Did you!"

"No," Ron said. "I just felt over stimulated and really scared, but I kept moving. Then I hid behind a tree and I started to feel it again. I didn't think I'd be able to move." He rubbed his neck and looked at Harry. "I thought of anything I could to get my legs working. Hermione, my brothers, everything."

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "I wish I could've been there."

"Don't be sorry. You kinda were, and I got through it," he said.

Harry looked a little taken aback. "What'd you mean?"

"I just randomly started thinking about the stuff you've been through over the years," Ron said. "I thought about all the darkness in your life, but how you're still here and you're okay and you're somehow still dating my little sister."

"Piss off," Harry said, shoving him.

"I mean it," Ron urged. "I don't think I would've gotten out of it without your help. I reckon you just bloody inspired me, thanks."

Harry smiled and let out a sigh. He shook his head. "I don't know what to say, Ron. It means a lot to me that I can still help you. I'm glad I was there for you, and this is exactly why I'm happy we're here together."

"So am I," Ron said.

"Do you think it'll be enough?" Harry asked.

"I know I couldn't have done any better," Ron said.

"Then that's all that really matters," Harry said. "Let's keep moving." He and Ron continued to run. "You're lucky that I'm touched by what you said," Harry said. "I don't think it's that hard to believe that Ginny and I are still together."

"Shut it," Ron said.

"I'm serious," he said. "Sometimes we can't get enough of each other. We even have to put protection charms on our letters because they get so heated."

"Ew, fuck off!" Ron said. "Harry the Inspiration is gone, and Harry the Perverted Twat is back." Harry side kicked him, and Ron swung him broom at him. They laughed and talked about anything but their trials for the rest of their punishment. They shook hands and parted ways when they returned to the start of the track and Ron dashed to the medical cabin.

He opened the door and Madame Campbell was once again reading a romance novel. She put it down as soon as he closed the door.
"Ah, Mr. Weasley, you're probably my last one tonight."

"I had extra laps to run and fly," he said, hopping on a cot.

She came over with her wand kit. "What do we have?"

"Alan fixed my cheek. I think I cracked it or something. I also have some cuts and stuff on my back and chest." He took off his jumper and was a little surprised by how blotchy and beaten his skin was.

"Oh, my," she said. "Let's tend to the majors first." He was relieved to find out that his worst injury had been his cheek. She rubbed sealing cream over his cuts and dabbed him with a potion to make his skin less chafed. She asked how much Ridiom he had been given, and he lied and told her one tablet. "Take one now," she said, "and one right before you go to sleep."

"Okay. Thank you." He popped one in his mouth and went back to his cabin feeling fairly lightheaded and tranquil. "Good evening, gentlemen," he said when he went in.

"Wow, was your run that good?" Roger asked.

"Or maybe his examination was," Conor said.

"Let's not talk about it," Jack said with a frown. "We're roommates, but this is still a competition. No one should be going around and telling everyone how well he did. It's not good strategy."

Ron rolled his eyes and flopped on his bed. He pulled out his picture of Hermione and traced her face in the different poses. He hoped that he'd made her proud. He traced her mouth and tingled again at the thought of her. He wondered what Hermione

was doing "At least it's over," he said, giving her mouth one more trace before putting the picture back. "It was hard, but it's over now." He clapped his hands at the relief. Nothing was better than getting over something hard. He only wished it could happen as quickly in other areas of his life.

"I wonder what we'll do now," Roger said. "I'm assuming that they'll introduce one more thing before the merge. It'll probably be something mental."

"So little optimism," Jack said. "It's not healthy."

"Shut up, Jack," Ron said, sitting up. All three of them looked at him.

"I'm sorry, was I talking to you?" Jack asked.

"No, but you were talking to Roger, and he's my friend," he said. He looked at Roger. "Jack's a sod, but he has a point. You've got to quit thinking that you're shit or you will be. You're the coolest bloke here, so stop acting like you aren't."

Roger blushed a little. "Um, thanks?"

"No problem," Ron said, feeling proud. "I should go shower." He got out fresh clothes and hurried out of the cabin. He decided to take his other tablet so he could go straight to sleep when he got back, but the moment he chewed it down was the moment he felt a burst of energy and the hairs on his skin pricked. The water felt like splashes of coolness and sex on him. He ran his hands all over his body, and he could feel his growing muscles pushing against his stomach and arms. He couldn't wait to show Hermione. He moaned as she flooded his mind, and he spent an extra five minutes taking care of very important business.

When he returned to the cabin for the second time, he was even more lightheaded, giggly, and totally ecstatic. "Hey, guys!"

"Merlin, Ron, do you have to yell?" Conor asked.

He giggled. "Sorry."

"Alright, come on, Ron. We can play a game before bed," Roger said. "The board's ready."

"Oh, yeah! This will be so fucking wicked!" Ron ran over to Roger's bed and jumped in. It felt so cushiony. "I enjoy playing chess with you, you know. The only person who's ever been able to beat me is my oldest brother, and it's nice to have competition."

"Um, thank you, again," Roger said. "You're black this time."

"No. I mean it," Ron said. He was overcome with emotion and joy. He enjoyed Roger as a friend, and he wanted him to know.

"Ron, are you feeling okay?" Conor asked.

"And you," Ron said, pointing at Conor. "You're cool, too. You remind me of my mate, who's also my sister's ex boyfriend. His name is Dean Thomas, and you remind me of him sometimes. Ha, it's funny because his best friend, Seamus, is Irish and you're Irish. Isn't that funny?" The more Ron thought about it, the more hilarious it became. He started to giggle, and he wished that he could tell Harry and Dean and Ginny and Seamus how funny it all was.

"Did you do something in the shower, mate?" Roger asked.

"No. No. Wait. What do you mean by that?" Ron asked. He started giggling again and picked up a pawn. He wasn't sure what to do with it. "Is it my turn?"

"Ronâ€œ;look at me," Jack said.

Ron sighed and turned to him. "You just annoy me, Jack. I can't say you're cool because you annoy me. I don't hate youâ€œ;wellâ€œ;I hate your hair, and how perfect it is all the timeâ€œ;" He rubbed his neck and sighed again. Jack bent down and cupped Ron's chin. He got real close to his face and put a hand to Ron's forehead. "Watch it," Ron said, moving away.

"Oh my god, Ron," Jack said with a groan.

"What?" Roger asked.

"Weasley's zonked," Jack said.

"What?" Ron said. "I am not!"

"Yes, you are! Look how flushed he is," Jack said.

Roger grabbed him and moved his finger in front of Ron's face. "You're right, Jack. Look at his pupils."

"Get off me!" Ron said. He had no idea what they were talking about. His wank had been extraordinary, but it wasn't toxic. At least, he hoped that it wasn't.

"Are you bleeding serious?" Conor asked and it yanked Ron out of his suspicions of toxic wanking syndrome. "I didn't know wizards could get high."

"Not in the same way as Muggles," Roger said.

"I am not!" Ron said. "I don't do drugs. Magical or Muggle. Fucking hell. Can we just play this game thing or whatever we're doing?"

"Ron, what did you take?" Conor asked in amusement.

"I didn't take anything!" Ron said.

"You're obviously lying," Jack said. "This is bloody great. So, you're a hero and a user. How clichÃ©."

"That's enough, Jack," Roger said. "Let me think." He clutched Ron's shoulders very hard, and Ron was amazed at his strength. He was such a small bloke. "Ron, you honestly didn't take anything tonight? We won't care."

"I honestly didn't. I swear." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Fuck. Fuck, am I in trouble? Is something bad gonna happen to me?" he asked in a panic. "Are they gonna send me to Azkaban?"

"No, just calm down," Roger said. "If he honestly didn't take anythingâ€¢!"

"He must have," Jack said. "He must've gotten something from somebody."

Roger looked around then slapped his forehead. "Of course. Ron, think hard. How many of those tablets did you have tonight? The yellow ones."

"Mmm, four?" Ron said.

"There you have it," Roger said. He sat back and seemed relieved about something. "I thought it might have been something serious."

"Oh, Weasley, you're an idiot," Jack said. "How did you even get four?"

"Why does it matter?" Ron asked. "They were given to me. I didn't think they were dangerous."

"They're not," Jack said. "Alan should've given you one and Campbell no more than two. I reckon you must have grabbed another or something when she wasn't looking." Ron wanted to tell them that Brian had given him an extra one, but he didn't want to be a snitch.

"You see, Ron, three's a generous dosage for one person," Roger said. "Three calms you down and gives you a nice feeling as you go to sleep. It's for your muscles and mental relaxation mostly. It also energizes you in the morning, but any more than that can get you intoxicated."

"Don't you read, Ron, or remember anything from potions or herbology?" Jack asked. "Kava shrub is in Ridium, and it's an intoxicant. I'm sure your teachers went over that during your sixth and seventh year."

"I was a bit distracted my sixth year, and I didn't go to my seventh year," Ron said. He rubbed his face and noticed that it no longer felt like a face. "Fucking Merlin's beard. Mum and Hermione are gonna rip my bollocks off. They'll grab one each and rip them right off!"

"No one's going to grab or rip anything," Jack said. "You'll be fine. You'll just have to ride it out." He reached under his bed and gave him a bottle of water and what looked like a sugar

quill. "Here. This will help mask some of the effects of the shrub."

"How do you know so much about this?" Conor asked.

Jack shrugged. "My older brother is an idiot, too."

"You take care of him when he was zonked?" Roger asked with a slight smile.

"Something like that," he mumbled. He got into his bed and put a pillow over his head. "Keep it down, will ya? Some of us like to rest in the evenings."

"Thanks, Jack," Ron said.

"It's my one good deed," Jack said. "Don't expect my help or my candy the next time." Ron drank the water and sucked on the quill for a few minutes. It tasted delicious, and it actually helped him to think more clearly. He started to giggle again, and he sort of remembered what to do with his chess piece. However, he, Roger, and Conor spent most of the night talking and saying things extra loudly to disturb Jack.

Ron woke up the next morning feeling particularly refreshed. He checked his watch and was only up about fifteen minutes early. He turned his head and Roger was smirking at him. "Not a word," Ron whispered. It all came back to him and how he was the biggest tit in the world. He wasn't sure how he had gotten back into his bed, but he didn't want to ask.

"What? You were very entertaining last night," Roger said. "Well, until you had to go to the toilet for a wee. I had to help you out a little and that wasn't too entertaining." He got out of bed and Ron turned away just in time to miss his naked arse and bollocks.

"Cheers, but I don't want to talk about it. I'm an idiot like Jack said." Ron looked over to his cot and he was still asleep along with Conor. Roger walked over, thankfully dressed, and sat next to him.

"It was nice of him to help you. I wonder what that was all about," Roger whispered.

"Dunno." Ron yawned and changed into his running clothes. He was thankful that he would only have to do the usual number of laps again. He grabbed his broom and frowned at it. It was exceedingly dirty and shabby, and he felt ashamed of its state.

"You could probably charge by the lap to ride that," Roger said.
"Not too many people have Firebolts out here."

"No. No one rides it," Ron said. It meant too much to him, and he didn't know if he could trust anyone enough with something so special. "I'll meet you out there."

During the morning drill, Ron forgot about his embarrassing time with the Ridium and instead thought about his examination. He didn't know how or when Alan would announce how they'd done. He had been so scared, but at the same time he had used a strength that he didn't know he had anymore. He had felt like he did during the war and even before then. Ron wasn't naïve. He knew that the journey for the horcruxes and the final war battle had changed him. He used to run on pure spirit, and it always kept his head up, but that was before Fred's death and before the reality of loss and terror became real to him. It didn't matter. He must've been gaining it back. He had survived the fire and the blast, and he was still alive. It made him wonder what else he could do and what else was hiding from the old days.

After their morning session, Ron took a shower and decided to clean his broom. Even if it would get dirty the next day, he still wanted it look nice when it could. He left the cabin and thought of a good place to sit. On Sundays trainees were always out and about, and he wanted someplace quiet to tend to his broom.

He started to walk the path of the trail and to a spot just beyond a cluster of skinny trees. The field had plusher grass and gave a decent view of the lake at the edge of the property. He past it many times on his evening walks, and he had always wanted to sit there. The closer he got to it, the better he made out a familiar figure. Olivia was lying on her stomach on a large quilt blanket. For some reason he should've known that she would have already been there. "Oi," he said.

She jumped a little and grabbed at her chest. "Oi, don't do that!"

"Sorry," he said with a chuckle. "I didn't think anyone would be out here."

"I always come out here on Sundays." She gave him a once over.
"Nice shirt. Is it some kind of joke or something?"

"Nose down. I'll have you know that they're sixth in league!" he shot. "They've never been better."

She looked like she wanted to laugh, but she covered her mouth and cleared her throat. "Right, the Chudley Canons are wonderful. Um, you can join me, if you want."

"You sure?" he asked. "I don't want to disturb you."

"It's no problem." She moved over and Ron sat down. The spot gave a brilliant view.

"So, when do you think they'll tell us how we did?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "The sooner, the better. With my performance, it could probably go either way."

"Was it that bad?" he asked.

"No, but I felt like anything I did still wasn't strong enough. Brian's a big guy," she said.

"He is. Going against him was a lot harder than I thought it would be," he said.

"At least Alan gave us a Ridium." She smiled widely. "Or four to some people." He gaped at her. "I might've ran into Roger on the trail."

"Shit," he said.

"Don't worry. It's not a big deal. I just wish I could've seen it," she said.

"Leave me alone," he said. "It was my first and last time." She snickered and flipped through her magazine. "What are you reading?"

"It's some catalog my parents sent me," she said. "They're hoping what I want for my birthday is in here."

"Your birthday is coming up?" he asked.

"It already past. It was October twenty-second," she said.

"Why didn't you say anything?" he asked.

"Because it doesn't matter," she said with a shrug. "Besides, it's not like I could've had a cake or anything. I've never been too big on my birthday and my parentsâ€¦well, they're not too big on birthdays either." She looked back to her magazine.

He could tell that she was trying to act like it didn't matter, and she wasn't very good at it. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. It's no big deal," she said.

It was probably a huge deal, but he didn't want to bring it up again. "How old does this make you?" he asked instead.

"Nineteen. I'm starting to feel it, too," she said.

"Yeah, you're a real old toad." He put his broom in his lap and started to buff it. "You didn't want to read in your room?"

"No, the fresh air is nice, and my roommates are mental. I'd never get any peace in here. Four girls sharing one space is too much," she said.

"Try six, no, make that seven blokes sharing one bathroom," he said.

She cringed. "Ah, you win." She looked down at his broom. "Can I ask why you're cleaning your broom? It'll get mucked up again tomorrow."

"I've been working it really hard lately, and I feel guilty," he said. He ran his fingers down the handle and got goose bumps at the exquisiteness.

"You feel guilty?" she asked.

"All the extra laps and whatnot," he said. "It's supposed to be used for pleasure, not punishment."

She stared at him blankly. "It's a broom."

"No, it's far from that." He raised it on its bristles so it stood tall and proud in front of him. "This is the most incredible and luxurious thing I've ever gotten. I'm not the best on it, but it's not the broom's fault. I mean it's a work of art. It's beautiful."

Olivia burst into laughter. "Really? A work of art?"

"Yes, it is," he said, putting it down again and almost holding it. He didn't feel ashamed of his love for it. "I've always wanted a Firebolt, but I never thought I'd get one. All my brothers, including Fred," he added quietly, "saved up and bought it for me. It's the last thing that they all did for me, and it means everything." He looked at her and he knew that he was blushing all over, but he wanted her to know about how much his broom meant to him. If he was going to grow and get better, he had to start talking and letting people in to some degree.

The humor in Olivia's face vanished, and she touched the handle of it. He watched as she slid her finger down the curve of the handle. "That's wonderful, Ron, and this really is a beautiful broom. I'll let you get to it."

"Thanks." He continued to clean his broom, and Olivia continued to read. They stayed in a calm silence and were perfectly okay with just enjoying each other's company.

Ron yawned as he cleaned the bristles. He was still tired and slightly out of it. "You mind if I lay back?" Olivia shook her head, and he lay back on her blanket. He took off his jumper and used it as a pillow. It was comfortable and he let out a light sigh as he looked up at the sky. He moved his eyes to Olivia and noticed that her jeans were rolled up and her shoes were off. Her left foot had a sock on it, but her right was bare and her toes were painted a dark purple. It was strange and he wanted to ask her about it, but things got a little too relaxed and before he knew it, his eyes drifted close and he fell asleep.

A cold breeze went up his shirt and Ron immediately sat up. "Wazzgoinon?" He rubbed his eyes and looked around. He was still outside and on the blanket with Olivia, but now she was sitting up and writing things in a notebook. "Why'd you let me sleep?"

"I didn't really let you sleep. It just happened." She stopped writing and grinned. "Anyway, I didn't have the heart to wake you. You're like a little ginger Pigmy Puff when you're asleep."

He rolled his eyes. "Bugger off!"

"I'm serious," she said with a laugh. "You've spent all this time doing the tough-Auror thing that I've never noticed how adorable your freckles are. You've got a nice little patch right on your cheek. Is it heart shaped?" She poked his face and he took her arm.

"Again, bugger off! I'll push you right into the lake. I bloody swear it," he said. She kept laughing and he couldn't help himself. He started laughing as well. "You're a prat."

"Okay, in all honestly you were down for no more than three minutes," she said. "I was going to kick you or something, but the wind got to you first. Not joking about the freckles, though."

"Ha," he said. He rubbed his arms as the chill got to him. He looked up and Olivia wasn't fast enough to look away without him noticing.

She flushed and chewed on her lip. "I'm sorry! I don't mean to stare."

"It's all right," he said. He looked at the marks on his arm and rubbed them.

"It's not. My dad says that my eyes don't work properly. I think he's right," she said.

"No, really, it's okay," he said. "You're the first person here to notice them."

"Or maybe the first to not be smooth about noticing them," she said. Her blush only flushed darker. "You don't have to talk about it or anything."

"It's fine, Olivia. I don't mind," he said. Hermione had told him many times not to be ashamed and after his performance the night before, he didn't feel as pathetic about them. "I got them during my fifth year at Hogwarts. Well, I didn't get them at Hogwarts. I got them at the Ministry."

"I remember that from the papers," she said. "The mission you lot went on."

"Exactly," he said. "Well, there was this room that had these weird brains in them. I was under some sort of spell or something because I brought them right to me without any sort of regard for myself. They wrapped their tentacles around my arms and stung me."

She frowned a little. "Do you mind?" she asked, holding out her hand.

"I guess not. They don't hurt or anything." He gave her his right arm, and she gently touched his faint pink scars with her

fingertips. She looked to inspect them almost like the healer had when he first got them examined.

"I bet these hurt a lot when you got them. They look like curse burns," she said.

"That's because they are," he said, "I don't really remember it happening. There was a terrible shot of pain, but I reckon the shock kept me from experiencing the whole thing. They'll never go away, so I'll always remember it to some degree."

"That's awful," she said.

"Not really. I just try not to look at them or think about them. Most of the times it works," he said. "I was told that they're a mark of my bravery, but I'm still trying to get myself to believe that. I'm not quite there yet."

"I understand." She peered toward the water and went quiet. Her hair flowed in the breeze, and it gave off a nice smell. The mystical sensation that he sometimes felt when looking at her came back. "I have a curse burn, too." She looked back at him and seemed almost lost.

He didn't know what she wanted or what he was supposed to say or do. "You can trust me," he found himself saying without thinking about it.

She gave him a look and planted her left foot flat on the blanket. She took off her sock, and Ron had to bite his tongue to keep from making a noise. Right in the center of her foot was a terrible burn that was the size of a rock. It was red and slick, and Ron could almost see to the tendons underneath it. The jagged skin around it was pink like the scars on his arms, and there were tiny pink dots all around her foot like they had been sprinkled on. It was ghastly. "What happened?" he asked, looking up at her. "Did someone do this to you?"

Olivia's blush was completely gone. In fact, she was paler than usual. "Just me," she barely whispered. Ron shook his head in confusion. "I've always wanted to be an Auror, Ron. Ever since I can remember, I've watched my parents work with Aurors and I've listened to their brilliant mission stories. I've always wanted that life. Of course, my parents think it's too dangerous and sporadic but I don't care. It's all I want."

She looked down at her foot and reached out but didn't touch it. "When I was thirteen, my parents and I spent some time in Switzerland because they had a conference or a consult or something. I was so angry with them because they'd hadn't let me leave my hospital room all night."

"Were you sick?" Ron asked.

"No, but it was the best place to put me while they were upstairs in a meeting," she said. "I eventually left and went upstairs to look around. By their office room was a table full of the things the Aurors had brought back from their mission. It was brilliant,

Ron. There were weapons and strange money and potion vials. Well, I picked one up, and I didn't know it was jinxed. The moment it came into contact with bare skin, it reacted. It burned me, and I dropped it right on my foot. The potion inside ate through my shoe and my sock and my skin. It almost got to the muscle, but my parents got to me before it did that."

"Bloody hell," he said. The hairs on his skin rose, and he honestly got a chill.

"My situation was a little like yours. The shock knocked me out, but I got to experience enough of the pain." She shivered and shook her head. "My parents and the burn healing specialist tried for ages, but there was nothing they could do. It's always going to look like this. The muscle was repaired and I was able to completely use my foot again, but the skin is ruined."

"I'm so sorry, Olivia," he said. The scars on his arm no longer seemed relevant.

"You can imagine how much my parents rejoiced for me when I told them that I still wanted to be an Auror," she said. "Like this would stop me. If anything, it makes me want to become an Auror more."

Ron looked at her burn, and he hated it. It was horrible and ugly on someone who was so great. "Why?"

"Because that bottle could have ended up in a someone else's hand, and it could've been a lot worse. I was lucky but someone else may not have been. It could have been someone's kid or husbandâ€!"

"Or brother," Ron said.

"Precisely," she said. "I hate this thing on my foot so much, but it's sobering. It's why I'm here. It's why we're all here, Ron." She looked at him, and he stared right back at her. Her words were exactly how he felt. No matter how scared or unsure he was, he kept going to save what was left. Fred's death wasn't just a tragedy. It was a reminder of why he couldn't stop. He slowly reached his hand out and she nodded. He touched the burn, and it was as smooth as it looked.

"Does it still hurt?" he asked.

"Every once in a while I get these things called phantom spasms," she said. "It's because I saw it and felt the experience so it's mostly my mind playing a trick on me, but yes, it hurts a lot when I get them. It's not too often, and I try not to complain. I'm not using it as an excuse, and it's why I haven't told anyone here."

He traced his finger around the edge of her burn, and she wiggled her toes. He was most likely tickling her so he stopped. "I won't tell anyone."

"I know," she said, "I can trust you." She grinned weakly and he knew how uneasy she probably was. Painful memories were hard to talk about, and he appreciated her trust so much. He wanted to tell her, but he didn't know how. He suddenly got an idea.

"Come on," he said, getting up. "Get your shoes on."

"Why?" she asked, quickly putting her sock and shoes back on.

"I want you to have a go on the Firebolt," he said.

Her eyes widened. "What? You can't be serious."

"You're a good flier. You don't have to be scared," he said.

"I'm not afraid of the broom, Ron," she said. "It's just... I know how special it is to you." She was right. He hadn't let anyone ride his broom yet. It was too special, and he didn't know if he could trust anyone enough.

"I still want you to," he said. "Call it my late present to you. It's the least I can do." He figured that if he were ever going to start trusting new people, then Olivia would be the first.

"You don't have to," she said, though she looked excited.

"I want to. Now, come on before I go back to my senses," he said.
"I know you want to ride it."

She slowly took the broom from him and beamed. It felt a little strange seeing someone else hold his broom, but somehow he knew that it was in good hands with her. "I'll only do a lap or two."

"It's fine. Have fun," he said. Olivia squeaked and put her hair in a ponytail. "Watch the first takeoff. It'll be a lot faster than you think it'll be."

"Okay," she said. She mounted the broom and gave a rather thrilled yet slightly terrified scream noise as she went into the air. Ron watched with his heart in his throat, but she managed on it. He sat back down and watched her go out of his line of vision. He grinned and once more lay back on the blanket.

Later that day Ron returned to his cabin with a letter from Ginny. He missed his sister so much and he ripped impatiently at the envelope to get to her words.

Ron,

I almost didn't believe it when Pig dropped off a letter from you. I thought your hands had forgotten all about how to write and only knew how to curse people's legs off or whatever it is that you're learning at camp. It's good to hear from you, anyway. I wish you were here so I could tell you to your face, but I reckon this will have to do. Okay, ready? I MADE QUIDDITCH CAPTAIN! Well, it's really co-captain, but it's still bloody amazing! Malcolm pulled me to the side the other day after practice and asked if I wanted to help him. You should've seen my

face when I told him yes. This means so much to me, Ron. Quidditch this year has been great, and I've never played this well before. I really think this is something I could do as a career when I graduate. It really takes my mind off everything, and it feels so good when I help my team score. It's the number one thing I have to look forward to here. School is hard and boring, but quidditch makes up for it. I wrote Charlie about it, and I could almost hear him giggling like a prat through the letter. I even wrote George about it, and he said he's really happy for me and wants to see me play sometime. I hope he does.

So, how are you? Harry told me that your latest type of training is pretty difficult and strenuous on everyone. I'm sure you're handling it, but if you're not then I hope you're not acting like a dumb guy and pretending everything is all right. I swear Hermione and I get so angry when we read things from you and Harry saying, "I'm fine" or "everything is good." Don't forget who we are, Ron. Hermione's got more patience, but I'm about ready to punch you both in the bollocks. I'll try my best to restrain myself when I see you, and in seriousness I really do hope that you're all right. I think about you being up there by yourself and dealing with it all on top of what's going on with you. It worries me at times, and I wish I could do more. I know you're a tough guy, Ron, but you're still my brother so I'm entitled to be concerned. I told Harry to keep an eye on you as best as he could. I hope you're keeping an eye on him as well and an eye on any dimwit who gives him a look.

Well, I hope you write me back soon. I pass by the awards case with your pictures in it, and I constantly hear people whispering around me about the war and Harry and Fred and it all becomes so much and a bit lonely at times. I'm not asking for you to feel sorry for me. I just want you to know that sometimes I wish you were here with me. Yes, that's correct, I miss you. Weird, right, but don't let it get to your head.

Ginny

He laughed. Hermione was right. Ginny did act like him sometimes, and he appreciated that her letter wasn't heavy with concern. From what Hermione had told him, Ginny was still upset with him for being distant. He decided to write her back right away and open up to her. He owed her that much. The door opened and Conor came in.

He rubbed his stomach. "Stay away from the beef steak," he groaned, lying on his bed.

"I'm already on it, mate. I like to eat things that I can actually identify," Ron said. "I have no idea what's in that rubbish."

Conor groaned again and belched. "Bleeding hell. How did you go about asking Alan for a pass?"

"I just did it. I told him that I wanted to use one and that they were mine to use," Ron said. "I reckon Alan will always sign off

as long as you've performed well and you have. It'll be easy for you."

"I dunno," Conor said. He rubbed his stomach again. "I know we're all supposed to be quiet about our exams, but it's not that grave for me. I'd threw up right after my test was over. I was way too overzealous, and it got to me by the end." Ron stopped writing and looked at him. "I'm a dirty twat. I know."

"You're not." Ron couldn't believe that someone else had gotten sick. He thought Alan had just been trying to make him feel more secure. "I did, too."

"Are you serious?" Conor asked. Ron nodded and he let out a breath. "Fucking hell, I thought I'd be the only one."

"I reckon we both just worked too hard. I won't say anything, if you won't," Ron said.

"No worries here. Shit, that makes me feel a little better about asking Alan," he said. "I might do it tomorrow."

"You want to get back to your sister?" Ron asked.

Conor looked at the ceiling and held his hands very tightly.
"Yeah."

"I'm writing to mine now," Ron said.

"That's good. You should write to your sister as often as you can." Conor actually smiled a little and picked up his picture of him and his sister. "I think I write to Kaitlin too much. She's probably sick of me."

"Ginny's probably sick of me because I don't write enough," Ron said.

"Are you close to yours?" he asked.

Ron thought about it. "It's complicated to explain. We disagree a lot, and it wasn't really until recently that we got on well, but I think we've always been. She'll always be the most important person in the room, even if we're not on good terms."

"I think it's like that for all older brothers and younger sisters," Conor said. "Kate's three years younger than me, so you can imagine all the stuff we've fought over. It doesn't matter. She's everything to me."

Ron couldn't believe how much Conor was talking. He never talked about anything related to his family. "What about your parents?"

It made him smile more. "They're great, too. They ownâ€;owned a pub, and we'd help them run it."

"That sounds like fun," Ron said.

"Yeah, it was," Conor said. His smile faded. "Magic can really change things, can't it?"

Ron didn't know what he meant by that. "I guess." Conor nodded and put the picture back. He turned on his side and faced away from him. Ron wanted to say something else about it, but he decided against it. He went back to his letter and wrote a page and a half longer than he originally planned to.

* * *

On Monday Ron woke up with a new goal. He had to truly believe that he could not only survive what was to come, but that he could fight it as well. As he ran and flew that morning, he tried to build his up confidence and power. He had no idea what type of training they would do next, and he wanted to keep his body and mind at the same level it had been the night of his assessment. After their laps, Alan and Richard had both sections meet at the start of the trail. Ron searched around west for Harry. When he caught his eye, Harry laughed and shook his head. Ron rolled his eyes. He knew it had been a mistake to tell him about his night with the Ridium.

Alan blew his whistle. "Alright, trainees, settle down! Settle down! We've got a lot of information for you lot this morning. First, I know I can speak for all the trainers here that we were rather impressed with the overall performances of everyone during the examinations. So many of you outperformed yourselves and rose to the occasion. However, it made the gap between the excelling and the not excelling pretty clear."

"So," Richard said, slapping his hands together and rubbing them. "If you can see me and you're hearing my voice right now, then congratulations. You lot have passed the examination and will continue on through December."

There was a collective cheer among them. Five fives were passed around, and Ron let out a contented sigh. He nodded at Harry again, and Harry gave him a thumbs up. They were one step closer. Ron scanned his section. He saw Ben congratulating Jack, and Olivia clapping Conor on the back. Roger caught his eyes and Ron grinned at him. In spite of this, Roger barely changed his face. He didn't seem too relieved.

"Yes. Yes. You all should be proud of yourselves. We ended up only losing two from each section," Richard said. "On the other hand, the margin is a blessing and a curse because it's going to make the elimination in December even steeper."

"That's right and to talk more about that is Mr. Smith, so give him your full attention," Alan said.

Phillip Smith and two new Aurors came out of a cabin. Ron always got a little nervous when he saw Phillip. He could still remember

how unimpressed he had been during his interview. "Good morning, trainees."

"Good morning, sir," they said together.

"I want to congratulate you all as well for making it this far. It's a feat," he said. "Mr. Lewis and Mr. Johnson gave gone over all their notes and comments with me, and throughout the week you'll each have a meeting with your leader, along with the section assistant, to go over your examination. I will be attending these meetings as well." Ron's palms started to itch. He hardly wanted to speak with Alan, and he knew that he would be even harder on him with Phillip around.

"It's very important that you know where you stand at this point because like Mr. Johnson said, this was only a small cut and the next one will be a lot more significant," Phillip said. "The examination will also be a lot more advanced and especially with the new unit you'll be starting today. As a result, from today, up until you leave in December, you will learn about navigational strategies, tactical approaches, and combat mapping."

"Bugger, the boring stuff," someone behind him mumbled. Ron's heartbeat picked up a bit, and he tried not to look as thrilled as he felt. What Phillip had said didn't sound boring at all. It sounded like his way to the merging group.

"Lambrick is pleased to have Mr. Williams and Mr. Low here to assist in some of the lessons," Phillip said, gesturing the Aurors standing next to him. "They are both veteran and published Aurors who have years of experience with this section of the Auror profession. I also will combine the sections and teach a few lessons myself. It's what I have my honors in, and it's the area I consult for at the Ministry of Magic's Auror department." Some of Ron's delight wilted. Having Phillip sit in on his assessment was one thing, but being taught by him would be something else entirely.

"This is a highly layered and often difficult unit for trainees, and it is of great importance that you gain an aptitude for it, but more on that later," Phillip said. "I will end this meeting by saying that if you think this part of the training is the one to sleep through, then you're sadly mistaken. This is the time to prove yourself, so do it."

He and the two Aurors walked off, but the grounds didn't disrupt into chatting like it usually did after one of his meetings. Everyone was startled by the seriousness of the new unit and that Phillip himself would teach them. "All right, you heard Mr. Smith," Alan said. "New unit and new rules. After your morning exercise, you'll eat, get dressed, and grab your school gear."

"If you wondered why we made you bring silly things like quills and parchment and notebooks to an Auror camp, then you'll get your answer now," Richard said. "During the day you'll have academic training, and in the evening you'll have field practice. As we advance in the program, we expect you to do more. So, grab you stuff, your broom, and head back out here."

Everyone hurried back to their cabin, and Ron and his mates scrambled for the things they never thought they'd have to use. Ron grabbed his school bag and tossed random things into it. He was shaky and eager. "This is the one part I can honestly say I wasn't happy to get to," Jack said.

"Me neither. Not a big fan of school," Conor said.

"I don't mind it. I just don't want Phillip teaching me," Roger said. "The man is scary. Ron, what do you think?"

"Huh?" Ron looked up from his bag. They were all looking at him. "Oh, um, I'm actually really excited. Not about Phillip teaching us so much, but I'm ready for this. I'll meet you lot outside."

Alan led their group and for a moment Ron thought that they were going to the field again, but he led them to a large cabin and opened the door. "Welcome to your new classroom."

It was like every other cabin on the property; only it was large and huge bookshelves full of books on either side, five long tables, a teacher's desk, and writing boards behind it. "This is where you'll be educated during the day," Alan said. "Take a seat while I set up."

Ron chose to sit in the third row. Roger sat beside him and Conor on Roger's other side. "Congratulations to everyone," Olivia said, walking up to their table. "I'm glad we all made it."

"So am I. Sit down," Ron said. She sat next to him and started to pull out her stuff. "See, I told you that you could trust me. You'll still here."

She beamed. "I guess I am. I can't believe we're in a classroom. Were you a good student?"

"Not at all. The only reason I passed each year was because of Hermione," he said. He suddenly grinned at the thought of her face if she could see him sitting in a classroom. It would be her dream come true. "What about you?"

"With two pristine healers as parents? What'd you think they made me do while they were will patients?" Olivia opened a worn glasses case. She took out a pair of dark purple glasses and put them on.

Ron's jaw dropped. "I didn't know you wore glasses."

She groaned. "I don't. They're for when I have to read things that are far away and sometimes for small print."

He snorted and covered his mouth. "Uh-huh."

"I mean it," she said. "Don't take the piss."

"I'm not. They look good on you," he said. "They're really adorable and bring out the color of your eyes."

"Shut it," she hissed.

"I'm serious. You've been so busy being frameless and doing the whole tough-Auror thing that I hardly realized how big your eyes are. Is that a spec of shimmering gold in the middle of the dazzling blue iris?" He tried to poke her frames, but she slapped his hand away.

"I'm gonna punch you in the face," she said, glaring at him.

"Oi, that wouldn't be fair to me," he said. "I can't exactly punch you in the face, can I? Reckon I'd break your glasses."

She shook her head and grinned at him. "You're an arsehole."

"I'm even now is what I am," he said, smiling back.

Ben tapped the vacant spot next to Olivia. "Hey," he said, smirking like a prat. "Can I sit next to you?" He was so obvious that Ron winced, but Olivia either ignored it or didn't see it.

"Sure, Ben. There's no assigned seating." She moved her stuff over.

"Okay, lot, or shall I say class now," Alan said, leaning against the desk. "Welcome to your first day of Navigational Studies. You will be in this classroom every day from now on. You can come early on the weekdays to catch up, and the classroom will also be open on Sundays if you want a quiet place to study."

There was a knock on the door, but it opened before Alan had a chance to do anything. "Is it time?"

"Yes, Mr. Low, come on in," Alan said. "Class, this is John Low. He's here to help during the unit." Ron recognized him right away. He was one of the Aurors that stood next to Phillip at the meeting, but with a closer look Ron was sure that he'd checked out one of his books before at Hogwarts. His long black ponytail and thick black glasses were hard to forget.

"Thank you, Brian," Mr. Low said. "As he and Phillip have told you, I'm an Auror. Well, I'm retired now. I trained at an academy in China, and I was based in Hong Kong for fifteen years. Then, I left active duty and became a teacher and what have you." Mr. Low spoke vividly with his hands, and he never kept him eye contact on one person for too long. "I've written four books on combat mapping and a couple on offensive tactics. I've traveled all over the world teaching at various schools and training facilities, so trust that I will give you all a proper education in this area."

"Mr. Low will be your head instructor during these lessons," Brian said.

"Please, they can call me John," he said. "This is going to be complex enough without extra formalities." He paced around the room. "Now, I spoke to Brian and I studied all the exams taken by this section during your trial pertaining to this unit. I have an

idea of where each of you reside and where the curve begins. It's very important that every last one of you learns based on your individual knowledge of the craft."

"That's right," Alan said. "This is a hefty unit and even after the merge we will build on it. Therefore, in the beginning we will teach you all at the same intensity, but as we build the workload will become more individualized."

"This is the foundation for every Auror department in the world," John said. "No matter how big or small the division, it starts with navigation and tactics. No Auror leaves for a mission without knowing the where, when, and how of the assignment, and there is never a mission without a plan or a journey without a destination. You have to think ahead, before, and during when it comes to strategy and mapping." John's words inflated in Ron's chest, and he started to feel hot. It was how he always approached chess or began to work out a problem that required leveled thinking.

"It's vital that you all grasp the material and find a personal level of proficiently," Alan said. "Up until this point it's been fieldwork and physical learning, but you will be given written tests and projects during this unit as well. Aurors aren't just bodily forces. We're well educated, too. Be aware of that."

"Nicely put, Alan," John said. "One thing I like to educate is that this profession isn't just about going after the bad guy and using might to save the day. What we're doing here is just as important, if not more so. Anyway, let's just get started, and we can fill in more as we go along." Alan stood against the wall and gestured John to have the floor. "Okay, well, let's start with the basics and a history lesson on Navigation Studies within the Auror profession."

Everyone took out their quills and began to take notes, and for the first time ever Ron paid attention and made sure he copied down as much as he could. John talked about different central figures in the history of mapping and tactics, and he went through some of the earliest and most fundamental procedures Aurors used when going into a mission. All through the lecture John would randomly hold out his hands and make them repeat that coordinates were their friends. Ron found him and the information fascinating. His eyes barely left John and his hand barely left his quill during the entire lesson.

"Okay, tomorrow we will review what I lecture about today and build on it with different levels of mapping." John put his glasses on top of his head and smiled. "I can feel the knowledge churning in this room already. What will you remember as you go to sleep tonight?"

"Coordinates are our friends," they all said together. John jumped up and down and made them all laugh. "Too sharp! Get out of here, lot!"

Ron packed up his stuff and nudged Roger. "Give me a second." He excused himself by everyone and walked up to John. "Mr. Low, sir?"

"You can call me John," he said, packing up his books as well.

"Alright. John, I'm Ron Weasley. I just want to introduce myself." Ron held out his hand and gave him a firm handshake, like his dad had taught him.

John took off his glasses and bit the tip. "Yes, Weasley. I've heard, or read, a lot about you. It's good to see you in the flesh."

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

"I also remember you distinctly from your exam," John said. "Your work was exceptional."

Ron cursed his ginger roots once more as his face went scarlet. "Thank you, sir. It's really the only section I completed."

"Lucky for you. It's the only section I cared to read," John said. "If it wasn't a stroke of fortune, then I will be very eager to see what ideas you'll bring to this class."

"I'll do my best, sir," he said. "When you talked about thinking ahead, before, and during when it comes to strategy and mapping, I felt really comfortable."

John raised his fist for a moment and patted his arm. "That's what I like to hear, Ron. Do you mind if I call you Ron?"

"Not at all, sir," he said. He shook his hand again. "Well, it was really nice meeting you, and it was a great class."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Ron, and we'll have to play chess sometimes," John said. "I've got Wizard's Chess in case you don't have a board."

"How do you know I play?" Ron asked in awe.

"When you've been around the world as much as I have, you meet a lot of people," he said. "Minerva Mcgonagall is an old friend and when I told her I had a Hogwarts student, she filled me in."

Ron wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.
"I've grown up a lot since being in her class."

John laughed. "Not to worry. All can be forgiven right now if you've remembered one thing."

"Coordinates are our friends," Ron said confidently. John gave him a mock bow and sent him on. Ron felt damn near amazing as he joined his section for their evening training, and he couldn't wait for the next class session to start.

"So, lot, the reason why we had you bring your brooms is because they go along with this new unit," Alan said. "Along with learning navigational strategies, you'll also learn how to navigate and fight on your broom."

"Wow," Conor said.

"It's not often that you're have to fight in the air," Brian added, "but it does happen and you'll need to know how to properly manage yourself when you're airborne."

"It'll be a little jarring at first, but we'll gradually develop your skills with each lesson," Alan said. "It's another reason why we have you fly those laps every morning. You'll have to know how to duel on your broom, navigate on your broom, and even use your broom in combat."

"Today, we'll start with basic defenses with your broom," Brian said. "It'll be a lot like the combat we've taught you so far. You'll begin with just your broom and then we'll add magic to it."

For the rest of the evening, they worked with their brooms and it was a lot more difficult than the combat they had learned with just their own bodies. However, it wasn't the main thing on Ron's mind. He had to get back to his room so he could write to Hermione. He wanted to tell her that he was still at Lambrick and would possibly make it to the merge if he tried hard enough. As soon as Alan blew his whistle to end the training day, Ron sprinted back to the room.

He was sweaty and his head hurt from knocking himself with his broom, but it didn't matter. He pulled material out of his school bag and wrote his letter to her.

Hey Love,

How are you? It hasn't been that long since I was at Hogwarts, so I know things are really starting to pick up this time of year. I hope that you're remembering to take a break every once and a while and that not everything has to be perfect on the first try. You can allow yourself at least a couple of turns before it's shining and flawless. (It's true. I swear). I also hope that you're not doing all the head duties, though I'm sure you want to and love bossing everyone around. Tell the prat that I'll come after him and shove his Head Boy badge up his arse sideways if he's not giving you time to eat and rest. I'll be there in a heartbeat to kick his arse and then take a nice shower in your private toilet, with you in the shower with me, of course.

So, how am I? I'm actually doing a lot better. I'm sure Harry got a letter out before me so you'll probably get it from him first, but I had my first examination and I made it through. It was based on everything we're learned so far but broken up into four parts. It was scary and really hard, but I actually made it through. There was a moment when I thought I would lose it during my fourth round, but I did it. I really did it, Hermione, and it feels so good. We've started a new unit. It's Navigational

Studies. It's all about tactics and mapping and routing and things like that, and it's the most interesting subject I've ever studied. I actually enjoyed the lecture today, and I took notes. Yes, it's true. I paid attention and wrote legible notes. Are you proud of me? Our teacher is an Auror named John Low. He's wicked and I'm almost sure we used one of his books before, right? He looks so familiar and the name is in my head for some reason. Do you mind looking into it for me?

Other than that, camp life is all right. I think I might be starting to grow on Alan, and I'm getting along better with my roommates. We're starting to open up to each other, and it's nice that it's not always so quiet in the room. We get on well. I've also gotten to know Olivia better, too. I think you'd like her, Hermione. Honestly. She's pretty cool, and she's a good mate.

As for Harry and I, we're fine. We sneak out of our cabins and catch up every few nights. Don't worry. We won't get caught. I reckon we need it, and it's helped us a lot. He's still a prat and whatever, but it's been great. I've grown even more respect for him. He still has to go through so much, yet he's still here. It's unbelievable, and I'm really glad he's here with me. You were right, as always, I do think we need each other more than we're willing to say. When I got Ginny's letter, she brought his name up a bunch of times. I know she really misses him. He misses her, too, so you can tell her that. He talks about her too much, I reckon. Harry misses you a lot as well. He's got so many tricks that he learned from you, and he gets this look on his face when he talks about you. I can't even blame him. I'm sure I look like a mental when I talk about you. Fucking hell, we all need to see each other again. I need to see you again.

I know I've been saying things are better, but I'm still not all the way there because you're not here. I miss you so much that it does my head in, Hermione. So many things happen here that I wish you could be a part of, and you not being around when the things do happen sort of puts it all at a distance for me. I know that you would blow everyone away with your talent, and I could brag and point and snog you while every other bloke is left wanking. (Hopefully not with you in their heads. I'd kill the lot). I miss talking to you as well. When I'm alone or I'm running or just looking at the sky and it's peaceful, I think about you and what you're up to. I think about how the posture of your body looks and what the tone of your voice could be. When I do this, I start to feel all tingly, and I start craving you so badly. Bloody Merlin, the holiday isn't going to come fast enough. Writing to you is the only way I can be with you, but it's not enough. You know I'm addicted to you, Hermione, and I'm starting to get a rash because I haven't had you in so long. Patronizing, right? Well, it's a letter so I can say whatever I want to and not feel your slap.

That gives me an idea. I guess writing has its advantages. I can say whatever I want and not get hit. In that case, it's not just talking to you or seeing your face that I miss. I miss your body, too. I miss looking at your arse in those little knickers you wear and at the necklace snuggled between your lush breasts. See, I would've written lush tits, but I thought it'd be too

inappropriate. I also miss how creamy you get when I lick your earlobe. I miss you pulling on my hair when I bite you, and I definitely miss the way your lips really hug my cock when you suck me off. Yeah, I miss all those things as well. I wanked the other night thinking about the way you shake when I run my hands all over you, and I'm fairly sure that I broke a few records for quite a few things. I'm also fairly sure that the shower space could use a proper cleaning. I'm came pretty hard, Hermione, and it was just with Dream Hermione. I can't wait to see what will happen when I get the real thing again. How's that for courtesy?

Your love,

Ron

- Um, do you know anything about the Kava shrub? A friend of mine asked about it.

Ron sealed his letter in an envelope and put it safely in his drawer. He couldn't wait to get her letter back. He got his clothes out for his shower and looked at his school bag. He wanted to eat and unwind, but if he wanted to excel there was something more important that he had to do. Ron sat on the bed and pulled his notes out. He'd have time later to relax.

Now, he had to study.

* * *

*** Yes, a lot when on in this chapter, I know. There's so much that I could say but I'll keep it brief. GO RON! There's a reason why every time a Ron Basher says something vile, Ron Fans come back with a thick middle finger. It's because we know how special the man is. Go Ron! Okay, that's all. Well, that and "Ron, you naughty boy! :P Thanks for reading and review!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 34*: Changes

Thanks for the reviews! So, I want to make a point in saying that I haven't forgotten that I told you lot that Ron being at camp wasn't the whole story, but it is a large and important part of it. There are things that he needs to learn and experience at camp and I'm going to write them, lol. However, the holiday will come soon. I've got a lot planned for Ron and his loved ones. ;)

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

* * *

"When Dante led himself and his comrades into Leuven, they stayed on the northern path as designed." John took his chalk and scribbled more lines and circles on the board. The dust got all over his hands and face, but it didn't bother him at all. John had told them that chalk was the best way to teach, but no one seemed to understand why that was. "However, after seeing the numbers that Nimcoll had surrounding himself at his camp, Dante sent for aid. He had the new formation of men come from the north while Dante led his troops westbound." John drew all over the map of Leuven and sneezed as the dust once again got all over his face. He stepped back as if his drawing was a work of art. He faced the class. "Now, can anyone tell me why? Why would Dante come in westbound when they were so outnumbered?"

Ron peered around at his section. Most were still trying to copy John's original scribble. He suddenly wanted to kick himself in the bollocks for all the years he had taken the piss out of Hermione for raising her hand when other people didn't. He raised his hand. John nodded in his direction. "Yes, Ron?"

"Well—"

"Nope. I won't have that," John said. "You know what to do. You can't only speak navigation. You have to show it." Ron sighed and ignored Olivia's and Roger's snickering as he went up to the front of the room. "Show us, Ron."

He took the chalk and everyone stared at him like they were ready to learn something from him. It was eerie so he turned to the board. Even though it was a horrible mess, somehow his brain was able to comprehend it. It was like a story to him. It was like spaces on a chessboard and every line or circle or dot was a small piece played. "Well," he continued, "Nimcoll must've known that Aurors would attack from the north. There was a lot of activity there, and there were too many places to hide and use for cover. So, he put his numbers north. They were ready for an army and a fight, and it's what they got."

Ron added to John's mess and drew his own lines and circles. He didn't have to think about it. Somehow his fingers knew where to go and what to do. "On the other hand, westbound is all empty space. That's why he set up his private camp there. It was only Nimcoll and his personal, small convoy. It was the best position to be in just in case they had to flee, and that's exactly why Dante had his fleet attack from that end." He looked at the class. "Dark wizards are offensive fighters. They come to you. However, being at camp had them in the defense, and it was the perfect position for Dante. They came out and Nimcoll was out of his element. As a result, while Dante and his army attacked here." Ron made a huge circle around the area and started drawing

again. "His reinforcements attacked Nimcoll's main numbers. Nimcoll didn't stand a chance, and his open space became his downfall. It was too easy for the Aurors to capture them all on their weak side."

He put the chalk down and looked away from the board. The haze faded and he realized that he was in a room full of people again. Everyone was still staring at him, but they were also copying down his additions. It was too weird. "At least, that's my take on it."

John put his chalky hands on either side of Ron's face. "Oh, no, no. Don't take it back now, Ron. That was brilliant." He let him go and jumped up and down in excitement. "Everyone, your classmate just walked you through Dante's Offense. The phrase was birthed in 1739 after he successfully brought down Nimcoll and his fleet who had escaped capture for fifteen years. It's a basic offense that you as Aurors will see and use in your lifetime. Thank you so much, Ron."

"You're welcome, John," Ron said.

He went back to his seat and Conor raised hand. "I don't understand. If Nimcoll knew that westbound was open, then why would he strategically set up his private camp there?" he asked. "It might've been open space, but I'm sure a lot of places were open. Why'd he choose westbound?"

"Excellent and challenging question, Conor," John said. "It's important to not only understand the tactics behind the Auror but behind the enemy as well." He gestured to Ron. "Ron, it probably isn't fair to ask you this. It starts a new section, but do you think you can take a guess as to why?"

Ron felt himself blush as everyone once again looked at him. He studied the board and went over all the details they had been given about Nimcoll, Leuven, and the mission. "I think I have an idea." John offered him the chalk and once more Ron went up to the front. "I'll need more space."

John clapped his hands and bounced on his heels. "Erase or extend whatever you need to. No map is a permanent design."

Ron took the chalk again. He glimpsed to the very back of the room where Alan sat. He nodded and motioned a hand. Ron took the cue and erased most of John's work. He licked his lips and started drawing his own map of Leuven. He then focused his eyes on Conor. "As I understand it, Nimcollâ€!"

For the remainder of the class, Ron stayed at the front and assisted John with the lecture. Even when he wasn't sure of an answer or he didn't want to answer, John made him help and speak. It was a bit embarrassing, but Ron didn't mind too much. In fact, he enjoyed the attention and he liked helping people understand. By the end of class, he was just as dusted with chalk as John was. He sneezed as he packed up his bag.

"It's all over your face," Olivia said. She swiped his cheek with her palm and showed him the white dust.

"Occupational hazard for pets," Roger said.

"Shut up," Ron said. "I'm not his pet. I was helping out."

"Helping, eh? You certainly didn't take over the class. That's for sure," Olivia said.

"Ron, can I have a word?" John asked.

"And there he goes again," Roger cheeked.

"I'll meet you two prats out there," Ron said. He put his bag over his shoulder and walked up to John.

"That was excellent teaching, Ron," he said.

"I was just helping out," Ron said again.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," John assured. "Sometimes I forget how advanced this can all be and especially for young people. You seem to understand both sides, so I appreciate you being able to assist the others. This camp is about education first and foremost."

"You're welcome then, sir-I mean, John." Ron rubbed his neck. "I like being up here with you. I've never caught on this quickly before with coursework."

"You're a natural," John said. "It's only the first week, but I can see that you'll be one of my brightest."

Brightest. It was a thing that Ron had never considered himself to be. Hermione was the brightest. Bill and Percy were the brightest but not himself. "There's still plenty for me to learn."

"Yes, there is. You're a bit shaky with your confidence, but you have no reason to be. I wouldn't be telling you this if I didn't mean it. I don't think it helps students to stay in a false sense of security, but nothing is false with you, Ron." He reached into his bag and pulled out a very long and slender red quill. "Here, I want you to have this. It's an authentic mapping quill. The tip is perfect for drawing and making straight lines. It's been magically enforced like wands are. Each quill is formed to the person who uses it. So, when you take it out of the package, it'll fit to your hand and stay steady after the first use. It's also self inking."

"Thank you, John," he said in awe. "This is brilliant, but why do I get one?"

John chuckled and cupped his face for a moment. "You're not used to this, are you?"

"Not really," he said.

"Let me explain how this works," John said. "Great students get rewarded for great deeds. I planned on giving this to the student who I thought improved the most at the end of the unit, but I want to give one to you at this point. I think you'll need a proper quill. It hasn't been a week, but you successfully explained Dante's Offense and you cracked into the mind of Nimcoll, one of the most notorious dark wizards in history. You've more than earned this."

Ron took the wrapped quill. He felt like a tit, but he couldn't help it. Receiving praise for being a great student just wasn't something that happened to him. Neither was getting yet another expensive and lavish gift. "I really appreciate this and I'll use it often, but even if this material comes naturally, I'm still going to work hard."

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you, Ron," John said. "A true Auror never stays around for the glory. He moves on to the next mission."

"I understand that, too, John. I'll see you tomorrow." Ron joined his section out in the field for another long night of broom handling. It wasn't nearly as easy as mapping or navigation was, but Ron preferred doing active learning. He dropped his bag with the rest of the heap and swung his broom over his shoulders.

"Today I want to combine broom attacks with hand combat," Alan said. "It's important that you're always thinking and you're always prepared on either side. You might come down for a landing and find yourself right back on your arse, or you may be on the offensive end and have to produce an attack there."

"We're going to partner everyone up, but first we'll demonstrate what we're looking for in your maneuvers," Brian added. "Alan, where do you want me?"

"Take the aerial defense," he said. "I want to talk them through what will happen." Brian got on his broom and flew into the air. "Now, trainees, it's critical to note that you won't always attack straight on. This tactic is usually reserved for heavily active areas or when there are high numbers on your side and low numbers on theirs."

Brian started to come down again and Alan braced himself. "Stay firm, watch the angle in which your opponent comes down, and be ready for the hit." He stepped back as Brian zoomed to the ground. He landed sideways so he could swing his leg off and go right into an attack with his broom. Brian held his broom across his stomach like a shield as Alan tried to get him around the abdomen.

"See how Brian protected himself?" Alan asked. "However, if you move fast enough you can use that counter. Brian, hop off again." Brian repeated his movement and when he swung his leg off and held up his broom, Alan grabbed it and yanked it forward. He head-butted Brian and twisted the broom out of his hands. He then swept his broom handle at his knees so Brian fell back. Alan

stuck the broom handle against his chest. Ron's jaw dropped in amazement. He wanted to try the move badly. He knew that his Firebolt could handle it, and it would look sexy doing it.

"There's plenty of room to try different things," Alan said, helping Brian up. "If you're in the defensive, it'll be central to keep your mind on what your legs are doing and how you land. For the offensive people on the ground, speed and power is necessary. Remember that. Brian and I will come around and watch each of you take a turn. The partners are: Johnson and Weasley!"

"Let's get a good spot," Ron said to him.

"I'm not sure any spot will be good for me," Roger said.

"Mate, come on," he said.

"Sorry. I'm anxious about tomorrow," Roger said. "I'll have to listen to Alan and Brian demolish my test, and Phillip will be there."

There were many reasons why Ron loved being a Weasley, and it starting with W was one of them. He was always last in line. "You'll be fine. You're great with wand work, and you're bloody smart."

"That's about it," Roger said. "It's like I'm a head with no body."

"Then show them more with your body," he said. "Every day is a new opportunity to show people what you can do. Start today. Do you want to go in the air or stay on the ground?"

"I'll start here," Roger said.

Ron patted his arm. "I expect you to kick my arse when I come down. Don't go easy on me because we're friends."

"I wish I could say that I had enough skill to hold back," Roger said with a slight grin. Ron got into the air, and the wind swept right against his skin as he climbed higher. It was refreshing. He gave Roger a few seconds to formulate his move. Ron wanted him to do well. The bloke had so much heart. If Roger wouldn't push himself, then Ron would have to do it.

He came back down and turned a bit to the side like Brian had done. He touched down and swung his leg over and braced himself. Roger yanked his broom with a strong force, but Ron tugged the handle back and got Roger on the ground with ease. Roger pounded his fists against the grass and got up. "Shit!"

"You've got to come at me, Roger," Ron said. "Don't let me have it."

"I'm not doing it on purpose!" he said. "Let's switch."

"Yes, why don't you switch," Alan said, walking up to them.
"Maybe you'll get more of an edge that way, Johnson."

"Yes, sir," Roger said. He mounted his broom and took to the sky.

"I don't think his aerial attack is going to amount to anything," Alan said.

Ron gaped at him. "Sir?"

"Why do you think he asked to switch already, or why do you think he hasn't come down yet?" he asked. "He thinks he can invent a plan up there that will require the least amount of force and the most amount of broom."

"I don't think you should talk about a trainee this way or at least not to me," Ron said. He knew that Alan had his personal opinions, but Ron didn't want to hear them and especially about people he knew.

"I'm not doing it to be a prick," Alan said. "I'm saying it because it's something we both know. You can't pretend that you don't already know how he'll attack or how feebly it'll be."

Ron hated that he was right. "He just needs some encouragement."

"But what he doesn't need is you holding his hand. It does him no good to lick his wounds for him," he said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ron muttered.

Alan shoved him a little and hit him upside the head. "Don't insult me, trainee. I saw you, and you're lucky that I don't tear into your bollocks and kick your arse for it. You give it to him and make him sweat. He has to learn. Bleed him dry if you have to, but don't you ever fucking go soft. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said. All his life his dad had taught him and his brothers the difference between defending themselves and showing off. Ron was used to fighting bigger and stronger people, but going against someone weaker than him didn't seem right. Ron didn't think that it was his job to hurt and possibly embarrass people, and he felt uncomfortable with the idea. Roger came back down and Ron had to get over what made him uncomfortable. He braced himself and as soon as Roger touched the ground, Ron yanked on his broom and hit Roger across the face. He got him on the ground and placed the tip of his broom against his throat. It had been simple, and it made him a little nauseous.

"Nicely handled, Weasley," Alan said. Roger slowly got up and rubbed his jaw where Ron had hit him. "Johnson, what I can I say?"

"I know, sir," he said.

"Obviously you don't," Alan said. "Your flying was good, your touchdown was graceful, even when you took the offensive the

first time and got Weasley's broom it was clean, but you have to follow through with an attack. You have to fight him."

"I will, sir," Roger said. His already pale skin ashen more.

"We'll go again, Roger," Ron said.

"No, you won't," Alan said. "I'm going to work with Johnson. Find Brian and go over aerial touchdowns with him. I still think your landing could use some work. You waste too much time getting off your broom. Go." Ron gave Roger a look before going off and finding Brian. For the rest of the night, he saw Alan push and yell at Roger. Ron knew it was for his own good, but it felt wrong.

When the training day was over, Roger was always a different person. He was able to lock all his troubles away and return to the room with positive energy. Ron apologized for punching him, but Roger merely shrugged it off. They sat on his bed and played chess like they did almost every night after their meal. "Check," Roger said. "So, what do you think Mr. Low's test will be like at the end of the week?"

"Don't you mean John?" Ron asked with a laugh, moving a bishop.

Roger shivered. "I don't like that at all. I think I'm the only one who prefers having superiors stay superior. If they're just like us, then I don't want to listen as much."

"I know exactly what you mean. I keep having to correct myself," Ron said. "It usually doesn't bother me so much, but he's actually really brilliant. I want to respect him. Bloody bollocks."

"Yep, go ahead and move that knight my way," Roger said with confidence.

"Piss off," Ron said, reluctantly moving it. "I dunno. I reckon it'll be decent."

"That's right. You're the pet," Roger said. "It's amazing how much stuff you know already. Is it a class they offer at Hogwarts?"

"No and that what's doing my head in," Ron said. "I've always felt comfortable with this stuff but even leaning about the history and understanding the major figures is coming together for me. I don't see how. I always slept during history class, and I got low marks on things all the time."

"I'm sure your girlfriend liked that," Roger said. "She loves school, right?"

"A little too much, I reckon. It can't be normal." Ron stopped mid move and thought about Hermione. The tingly sensation returned. "She always helped me, but we weren't together yet. If we had been, then she probably would've banned me from even looking at her until I got my grades up."

"Sounds like a great girl," he said.

"She is but she's not afraid of a bit of roughness and tough love. I need that sometimes," he said. "Hermione's really nice, and when it's not school related she's not nearly as mental."

"My dad's like that," Roger said. "He's an academic and he's really serious about it, but he's more relaxed with everything else. I reckon I got my brains from him."

"What about your mum?" Ron asked.

"My dad says I'm a bit airy like her, but I don't think I get much from her other than that," he said. "She's an artist and she loves her art. We usually leave it at that."

"Does she not want you here?" Ron asked.

"I don't think she cares," Roger said. "She told me that she supports whatever I want to do."

It didn't sound too bad but Roger's expression and his voice told him otherwise. "That good then."

"Bad move, Ron," Roger said, taking a piece. "It's not really supporting me, is it? She backs me up, but she doesn't know what she's backing up. My dad tries, but he's like me. He just wants me to tough up more."

"I didn't mean to bring this up," Ron said. Roger was so open and blunt and his honesty was too commanding at times.

"It doesn't bother me. It's my life," he said. "My parents are great, but at the end of the day I'm not reading their letters for guidance on this. This is my own thing."

"Being on your own can be good," Ron said.

"I agree," Roger said. "I'll make it through this, and I'll be all the better for it because I did it myself. Checkmate." Roger held out his hand and looked smugly at him. Ron didn't even care that he had lost. He shook his hand.

The door opened and Jack came back in. "Ah, that was another successful evening exercise." Ron rolled his eyes and gathered the pieces together. The bloke may have helped him once, but he was still an arse. "Roger, you really should consider joining me again."

"For fuck sake, don't bring that up," Ron said. "No one in this cabin is going to join you."

"Weasley, I don't think I was talking to you," Jack said. He sat on his bed and addressed Roger. "I'm sure Alan told you how desperately you need to improve, but you should know that you're not the only one. I told Olivia before I came back here that she

should join me, too." Roger glared at him and Ron knew that Jack had hit something. It was no secret that Roger fancied her.

"Don't insult, Olivia," he said.

"Let it go," Ron said. "This is what he wants."

"No," Roger said, looking at Jack. "Jack, I'm bloody tired of you slithering in whenever someone has a bit of trouble. Whatever insecurities you have shouldn't be taken out on anyone here. Just stop being such a twat!"

"Excuse me?" Jack said.

Roger cleared his throat and stuck his chest out a little. "I don't like to make a lot of noise, but I'm sick of this shit. We all get our arses kicked day after day and this time should be when we don't have to continue it. This is when we rest. Leave me alone. Leave Ron alone, and leave Olivia alone."

"Or what?" Jack asked.

"Or I'll make sure that nice hair of yours is permanently jinxed to your bollocks in the morning. I don't need my fist to do that," Roger said.

Ron burst into laughter and almost doubled over. He couldn't believe what he had just heard. Jack looked at him blankly for a moment, but he actually started to chuckle a bit himself. "Bloody hell, Roger."

"Don't think I won't," he said. He glared at him once again and Jack pretended to fix his bed.

Ron finally stopped laughing and wiped the tears from his eyes. "On that threat, I reckon I'll nip out. Jack, I'd watch myself if I were you."

"Shut up, Weasley," he mumbled.

Ron patted Roger's shoulder. "Nice one, mate. Jinx to bollocks. That's a good one." He left the cabin, still chuckling, and walked over to the start of the trail. He didn't see Olivia and he looked around for her.

"Oi," she said from behind him.

"Oi," he answered.

"I hope you weren't waiting long," she said. "I had to rant to Charlotte about Jack's stupidity."

"I heard all about it," he said. "Roger let him have it, though."

"Roger?" she asked.

"Yeah. It was brilliant." After they stretched they started walking the trail. Though they were still under the silent

agreement that they didn't necessarily need to speak, he wanted to talk to her. "I'm starting to think that Jack annoys people just to see if they'll do anything about it."

"I certainly wanted to," she said. "I know I wasn't all that great today. This broom work is tricky."

"It is and I have a feeling that what we're doing now isn't even close to where Alan wants us to be," he said. Olivia chewed on her lip and eyed him closely. He was starting to pick up on her habits, and she always chewed on her lip when she was trying not to say what was on her mind. "Go ahead."

"Okay," she said as if she had been holding her breath. "I saw Alan yell at you and hit you or whatever."

"I'm fine," he quickly said.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, we all know you're big and strong. I just mean, why did he do it?"

"Oh. He was angry about how I was handling being partners with Roger," he said. "He thought I was holding back."

"Were you?" she asked.

He rubbed his neck. "I dunno. Maybe a little."

"Ronâ€¢!"

"I know. I know. It's really not like me to, but I couldn't help it," he said.

"You better start helping it. It won't make him improve," she said.

"You don't have to tell me that," he said. "I know. I won't do it again."

"Does he know about it?" she asked.

"Of course not," he said.

"Good. Roger's sweet and he looks up to you," she said.

"Looks up to me?" he asked.

"Yes. It's not too much of a shock," she said. "You've done a lot already, and you're doing well here. Not to mention, today I think you gave John something new to wank over."

"Shut up," he said, blushing. "Roger is also doing well in class."

"I'm not trying to embarrass you, but the point is that Roger sort of depends on you," she said. "You're like a brother to him, and the encouragement you give him is something he likes."

"It's not big deal. I just want to help," he said. "I understand what he feels. Sometimes all I need is one reassurance from one of my brothers to get me by."

"You're lucky. Not all of us have big brothers," she said. "Some people only have themselves in their corner." Ron could only nod. He had complained all his life about how big his family was and about all his siblings, but he didn't know what he'd actually do or what he would be like if he had been an only child. The thought was a little scary.

When he got back to his room, the hostility was gone. Both Roger and Jack were studying the new material from John's class. Ron got out his work. Every night he went over his notes and recopied them. It was something he always watched Hermione do and now he valued the technique. It truly helped him learn the material better. He took out the quill that John had given him and unwrapped it. He put it in his right hand, and he felt it mesh a little to fit his grip. The quill was smooth and it felt so good in against his fingers. He started to rewrite his notes on but stopped. He got into his trunk and took out the thin, black method journal that Percy had given him. He hadn't used it once and he figured now would a good time.

He opened it to the first page and started writing Dante's Offense. The moment the ink touched the page, the date and time appeared in the top corner and Dante's Offense appeared right across the top. He smirked. It had to be something added by Percy. He recopied all his notes and discovered that John hadn't been exaggerating about the quill. He could draw in a fluid motion, and he actually had a good time writing his notes. Everything was so well organized in his journal, and he felt a strong appreciation for it and for Percy. He took out a blank slip of parchment. It had always been Percy to start conversations between them, but with one look at Roger and with his discussion with Olivia, Ron knew some things had to change.

Hey Percy,

I hope you're not too busy when you get this. I don't want to disturb whatever it is that you're doing. In dad's last letter he mentioned something about some new job that you got. How many bloody jobs can you have at the Ministry, Percy? Bloody hell. Anyway, I'm all right so you don't have to worry. I just want to thank you for the journal. I used it for the first time tonight, and it's really good. I know you must've added the charm for the date, time, and title, right? It's too ordered and too neat for it not to be your doing. I appreciate it a lot, and I might need another one before all this is over for navigation because I'll probably end up mapping and drawing everyday. I'm doing well in the unit, by the way. My instructor, John Low, is really great and he thinks I'm one of the brightest. The brightest. Me. It was strange but it felt really good to hear that.

Percy, I know the twins and I always, well, we still give you shit for being such a bloody genius or whatever, but I think I sort of get a bit of it. I really want to work hard and show what I know. Obviously, you're still a nutter for knowing as much as

you know, but I respect it better now. George may never understand you, but I think I'm really starting to. Speaking of George, I hope you're making time to see him like you said you would. He may act like he doesn't want you around but he does. It's really important that you're there for him and mum and dad.

Well, I should probably go to sleep. Once again, thanks for the journal. It means a lot to me, and it's exactly what I need for this unit.

Ron

Ron rubbed his palm into his thigh. It wasn't good enough. He scratched out the last part and started over.

Speaking of George, I hope you're making time to see him like you said you would. He may act like he doesn't want you around but he does. It's really important that you're there for him and mum and dad. You're a great person to have supporting them, and I know they'll probably be a lot better than I am at telling you how much your encouragement means to them. I honestly love the journal, and it's exactly what I need here. You just knew that I would need it, so you got it for me. That means a lot to me. When I get back home, I'll show you what I've added to it and what I've learned. You're going to have to tell me more about this Audrey person in exchange. If she really is your girlfriend, then you should invite her over or something during Christmas. Girls like to be invited to things and even if you aren't dating her, I'm sure she'd like the invite.

Thanks Percy,

Ron

- Sorry about the stuff I scratched out. Just ignore it.

They were the words he wanted to say and something deep in him knew that they were the words Percy wanted to hear. The cabin door opened and Conor came in. His face was red and his eyes were blotchy. It hadn't been the way Ron expected him to return after using one of his passes. He sat up. "Are you okay?"

"Huh?" Conor asked. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Ron and Roger shared a look. "Did you have a nice time at home?"

It got even more confusing when Conor gave a huge smile. "I did. I got to see my parents and Kaitlin. I had a great time." He sniffed and sat on his bed.

Even Jack gave him a look of concern. "Are you sure? You look like you've beenâ€!"

"Oh, no," Conor quickly said. "I ran into this bush thing on the way back here that I'm allergic to. I have bad allergies." Ron didn't believe him and it seemed like Roger and Jack didn't either. Conor must've sensed it. "I need to shower. I'm fine, really." He hurriedly grabbed his clothes and left the room.

"Should we do something?" Roger asked as soon as he was out of the room.

"No. Let the man be," Jack said. "If it's our business, then he'll tell us."

"Since when do you care about what business is yours?" Ron asked.

"Look, Weasley, he went to see his family and he came back like this," he said. "I think the least we can do is shut up about it."

Ron wanted to retort, but he agreed with him. He sealed his envelope to Percy and lay back against the pillow. He wasn't sure how he felt about the strange feeling in his chest. He had gotten so used to his roommates behaving the same way but in one day he had seen Roger stand up to Jack, he had seen Conor show some true emotion, and Jack had not act like a complete arsehole. That, on top of him working hard with his studies and receiving praise for his academics, was beginning to boggle his mind. Everything was breaking away from its normal behavior, and once again it felt like things were changing faster than he could keep up with.

* * *

The end of the week finally came, and Ron had never been more relieved. With all the new adjustments, he couldn't wait until he could simply relax in bed and take it all in. During lunch he, Roger, Olivia, and Conor talked about their favorite family holidays. The four of them talking in the meal cabin was luckily one thing that was staying the same. "Come on, Ron. That's the only one you talk about," Roger said.

"It's the only one I have," Ron said. "My family doesn't travel much. We can't, well, we just don't. Egypt is the best I have."

"How old were you when you went?" Conor asked. After coming back from his shower, Conor acted as if nothing had happened and they all wordlessly agreed not to bring it up again.

"Thirteen. All nine of us were there and we were in the paper and everything because my dad won a drawing," he said. "I got a picture of it."

"That's right. I've seen you look at it few times before," Roger said.

"So have I," Conor said.

"I haven't," Olivia said, looking a bit put out. "Can I see it?"

Ron wasn't sure if he was comfortable with the idea, but he realized that there was nothing to hide. "Okay. It's in the cabin."

"Lets go. It'll only take a second," she said, getting up. He didn't have much of a choice. He got up as well.

"How fortunate," Roger breathed. Conor laughed and Ron threw his half-eaten sandwich at him.

On the way there, they bumped into Ben. "I was just looking for you, Olivia," he said.

"Can it wait till class?" she asked.

Ben looked between them. "Sure," he said lowly. Ron wanted to tell her that he could show her later. It was clear that Ben wanted to talk to her, but she had already started walking again. Ron opened the door, and they went over to his bed and sat down.

"It's actually clean in here," she said.

"It's not my choice. Jack and Roger have a thing about clutter, so if I don't clean up my space one of them will." He took a deep breath before opening his drawer and showing her the picture of his family. "Here we are," he said.

"Wow," she said, taking it. Ron stared at her while she examined the faces of his parents, Ginny, and his brothers. He felt so exposed to her, and it made him a little nervous. What she had in her hands had become sacred to him. "I can't believe you're thirteen. You were tall even then."

"It runs in the family," he said.

"Who is everyone?" she asked.

"These are my parents, Arthur and Molly," he said, pointing to them. "This is my oldest brother Bill. That's Charlie there, Percy, Fred and George, and Ginny. I'm right here, of course."

"Which one is Fred?" she asked. She suddenly cringed and closed her eyes. "I'm so sorry. That was really stupid. My parents always say that my mouth has a mind of its own."

"It's okay," he said. He pointed to Fred who waved and smirked mischievously at him. "This is Fred," he said softly. She touched his face, and his heart skipped a beat. She wasn't a complete stranger, but it was still almost wrong to have someone who didn't already know everything about Fred look at him and touch his picture. Olivia would never meet him or understand him or even hear him say hello to her. He would forever be a legend to her. He swallowed the emotion and blinked away the sting in his eyes.

"They really are identical," she said. "How could you ever tell them apart?"

"It's not as hard as people think. When you've been around them long enough it's easyâ€;or, it would've been easy to tell them apart by little things," he said.

She looked at him closely, and he wanted her to understand that he was trying his best to talk about Fred to her. She moved her eyes back to the photo. "Who have you always gotten along with best?"

"Probably Bill or Charlie," he said. "It could be because they're the oldest, but it's most likely because I've been around them the least. I spent almost all my time growing up with the twins, Percy, and Ginny. It was always them that I fought with."

"Physically or verbally?" she asked.

He laughed. "Both. I reckon if we're going by those standards, then I've gotten a long with Bill the best. Charlie's had more go's at me than Bill."

"Hmm, Bill looks like he'd be the least violent. He's gorgeous," she said.

He rolled his eyes. "Everyone thinks so."

"You look the most like him," she said.

"Um, thanks?" he said a bit awkwardly.

Her cheeks stained pink and she groaned. "No, that came out wrong. I mean that you, Bill, and Percy look alike. You three look like your dad, and I guess that meansâ€;Charlie?"

"Yep," he said.

"Right. Charlie, Fred and George, and Ginny look like your mum. Your sister almost looks exactly like your mum," she said.

"She acts like her, too. She's brilliant," he said.

"Aww, you love your sister," she teased.

"I'm not afraid to admit that," he said. "I know Ginny drives me mental on purpose, but she's the number one person in my life. I mean she has to be. She's my little sister."

"It's refreshing to hear that from a guy," she said.

"It doesn't matter that I'm a guy," Ron said. "She's my family."

"Are you all really close?" she asked.

"We are. We're all so different and we fight, but sometimes it's like we all breathe at the same time." He looked at his family and remembered that everything he was going through was for them. He missed them so much, but he had to leave for them.

She handed the picture back to him. "Maybe sometime I'll get to meet them. The whole ginger family."

"Oi, whole gingers families can't be that rare," he said, opening his drawer again. He gently put the picture back.

"Is that her, Ron?" Olivia asked. Ron turned to her and followed her gaze.

"Yeah, that's my girlfriend." He took out the cinema picture. The picture of his family was more sacred but handing over the photos of him and Hermione was a little harder. It was him, totally normal, and he was with Hermione. It was special and he wasn't sure if she'd understand what it meant to him, but he handed it over anyway. "This is Hermione Granger."

Olivia frowned. "You aren't moving. Was this taken with a Muggle camera?"

"Sort of. We went to this place called a cinema," he said. "I don't know if you've heard about it, but you watch someone's life or whatever on a big screen. It's fake, though."

"I've heard of those, but I've never been to one. One of my friends is a half Muggle, and she goes all the time with her Muggle friends," she said.

"It's really wicked," he said. "You should go with them next time and try to find one called Willy Wonka."

"Willy Wonka? That shouldn't be too hard to remember," she said. She smiled at the poses and so did Ron. He could hear Hermione's laughter in the tiny booth, and it was a cute yet elegant sound. "She's pretty and she looks really kind."

"These Muggle pictures don't do her justice," he said. He gazed at the fifth pose; where he was looking at her while she smiled. It was his favorite. "Hermione's more than pretty, and she's incredibly kind. She might have her moments, but that's usually because I'm acting like a knob to her. She's!" He tried to find the right word to describe her. "Hermione is really patient and especially with me."

"Do you still really miss her?" Olivia asked.

"Of course, but it's getting a little easier." It was true. It was yet another change that he was adjusting to. He was almost used to the loneliness and the slight pang in his chest. He didn't now how he felt about it.

"I think that's a good thing," she said. "It's probably making your relationship stronger with her, and when you do see her again it'll be great. How long have you been with her?"

"Six months," he said. "It may not sound like very much time, but it's felt like a lot longer."

She gave him a curious look. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"For us it's good," he said. "Hermione and I, we've had a relationship of sorts for almost as long as we've known each other. It's kind of an inside joke between us now, but we're happy that we're finally at this point."

"I can tell." Olivia moved her finger over his different posed faces. "From the way you've always talked about her, I could tell that she meant a great deal to you but seeing you in these picturesâ€¢you just look so happy."

"That's because of her. I love her," he said. "Hermione makes me happy."

"That's beautiful but it's not what I mean," Olivia said. "You really look different, almost younger."

He shrugged. "This wasn't that long ago."

"It seems like it. You're not as worn." She kept her eyes fixated on him. "I bet you were a different person in these pictures."

He didn't understand what she was trying to say. "I was with my girlfriend on a date. The way I am here shouldn't be how I am with her."

"You don't think you should be happy here?" Olivia asked. "Ron, I'm not suggesting that it should be at the same level, but I wish you could find some sort of happiness here. You deserve to smile a lot more and not be so worn all the time. I'm only saying that I'd hate to think that this is just a place of gloom until we get our badges."

He looked at himself with Hermione. Things had been different then. He couldn't tell Olivia that coming to Lambrick had stripped him of all familiarity and that he was slowly building himself up again. He couldn't tell her that the loss of Fred had never felt heavier than it did at camp or that the aloneness and panic were constant adversaries he battled. He knew what he couldn't tell her, but he had to say something. As their friendship grew, it was getting harder to resist being honest with her.

"I'm trying," he finally said. "It's not as bad as it was, and I feel a lot better here than I did. I used to be certain things, and I think they're coming back. I do like it here, and it's getting better."

"That's wonderful," she said with a smile. "As long as it gets better."

"It is, really," he said, "and it nice having you and Roger and Conor around in this section. You lot being around makes things a lot easier."

"I know what you mean. I didn't expect to really find any friends here." Olivia handed him back the picture. "Well, I give you and Hermione and all the other people here who are in serious relationships credit. I don't think I could ever been in a real, committed relationship and especially for so long. My parents say I jump interests too often. I think they're right."

"Maybe you should stop listening to your parents," he said.

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"I'm sure they're all right, but they apparently like to tell you things that aren't true," he said.

"Is that so?" she asked. "You haven't known me for as long as they have."

"It doesn't matter. Look, you could probably have a boyfriend if you wanted one. Lots of blokes here fancy you." He starting laughing. "Ben can't get enough of you," he cheeked.

She cringed again. "That's really funny. Honestly, Ben's great but I know what he's feeling. A lot of guys think they fancy me because I'm the only person around here with a chest. Once we merge and hopefully there are more girls, the ratio will even out. I won't be nearly as popular."

"You've got to stop saying that," he said. "Not every bloke is a wanker. A lot are but not all. You can trust my word, and there's more to you than that. You're really great, Olivia."

"You think I'm great?" she asked.

"Why wouldn't I?" he asked. "I'm sure that if Ben fancies you, then it's because of everything you are. Not justâ€¦wellâ€¦you know." He hoped that she believed him. If she had gone to Hogwarts, then he would've tried setting Dean up with her. It would've saved Harry and Ginny ages, and Ron wouldn't have had to hate Dean on principle.

"Well, thank you, but I'm not looking for a boyfriend. Ben should move on." She chewed on her lip. "So, we should probably get back. It's almost class time."

"I gotta get my stuff. I'll meet you there," he said.

Olivia nodded and got off the bed. "Thanks for showing me a bit of your life."

"No problem. It was kinda nice," he said. She looked like she wanted to say something more, but she opened the door and walked out. He pondered it for only a second but once again looked at the picture of him and Hermione. She probably would've had something better to say to Olivia, but then again she was a girl and understood all the mental ways that girls thought. "I'll see you soon," he said aloud before putting it back.

They went to John's class and all the tables had been removed and individual desks were put in their place. Alan joined John at the front. "Take a seat," he said. "Today you will have your placement exam, so I hope you've been preparing." There were a few groans around the room. No one had known that their first exam would be the one to rank them.

"I know this is alarming, but as we said this unit is very intricate," John said. "I don't want any one of you in a place where you are not suited. What is advanced for one may be remedial for someone else. This will tell me how to teach you as individuals, which is important considering that this is still a competition."

Ron got out his quill and extra parchment. Out of all the tests he had taken since he was eleven, this was the first time that he wasn't dreading it. Roger raised his hand. "Can we leave when we're done?"

"You might need the whole period," John said. Ron and Olivia exchanged glances. Alan reached into the teacher's desk and pulled out stacks of thick exams. He waved his wand and they floated and dropped on their desks. Ron at once understood. It almost looked like the exam he had taken during his trial. There were multiple choice questions, fill in the blank, essay, and diagrams to complete.

"This should look a bit familiar to you," Alan said. "Part of your trial exam is in here. What you've learned so far has been added, and we want to see how much you already know beyond what we asked you the first time."

"Yes, the actual questions are important," John said, "but at the end of the day that's memorization. It's the diagrams I'm mostly concerned about. Read the directions carefully and give me your interpretations. This is a closed book exam, and when you're finished you can bring your test up and pick up your weekend assignment. It's over map coordination. You'll get one every Saturday, and it'll be due the following Monday."

"Don't worry about late grades," Alan added. "Turn it in on time or pack your bags and leave."

Ron sighed. Some of the bliss he had for the unit faded. He felt like he was back in McGonagall's or Snape's class. He decided to do the diagrams first, and he was relieved that the first question asked about Dante's Offense. He used his new quill to track and point the offensive and defensives lines. He took his test slowly and tried to think of everything before he marked an answer. He used Hermione's strategy and only answered the questions he was absolutely sure about before going back and rethinking unconfident answers. He was actually one of the last finished but sometime told him that was for the better. He mentally snogged Hermione and thanked her for the years of making him study with her in the library. He had learned so much from her.

He turned his test in and picked up his assignment from John.
"Thank you," he said.

"What did you think?" John whispered.

He shrugged. "Coordinates are my friends?"

"Great answer," John said. "I'll see you Monday."

It was misty and almost dark by the time they were all finished with their exams. Everyone, including Ron, was cranky and wanted to rest. "Shake it off, trainees," Alan said. "You only had one exam today, but after tonight you can make it two. It's time for a little pop field test."

"Banging bollocks," Conor breathed behind him.

"I also want to see everyone's progress," Alan said. "On my whistle, you'll fly, touch down, and fly again. Just like during the morning drill. When you hear my double whistle, I want you to fly, touch down, and defend. There are eighteen of you, so we'll go nine at a time. I want the same partners you've been working with, so gather and decide who's going when. You have one minute."

"I want to stay on the ground," Roger said to Ron. His voice was shaky but his jaw was set and he looked determined.

"Come at me," Ron said. "I know you can." All week he had been trying to help Roger. He was improving, and it had to mean something.

"Get ready," Alan said, putting his whistle to his lips. He blew it and Ron and his set went into the air. He hated flying when there was a lot of moisture in the air. It was cold and harsh on his skin. Alan kept blowing his whistle, and Ron didn't know how much more he could take. He got off his broom and finally heard Alan's double whistle. He mounted his broom and got as high as he could in the air before zooming back down. He touched down sideways and Roger was a lot faster at yanking his broom away. He fought to keep it, but Ron was able to get him on the ground and push the broom under his chin.

Ala blew his whistle. "First set, get up! Change positions."

Roger heaved himself off the damp grass. "I'll get it."

"Then get it," Ron said. Roger mounted his broom and headed for the sky. Alan kept making them drill over and over and even longer than his set had gone. He finally whistled twice. Roger came back and Ron prepared himself. He flew down gracefully and landed, but the moment he was off his broom Ron could tell how tired he was. It didn't take much for Ron to take his broom and get him on the ground.

Alan blew his whistle hard. "Stop! Everyone just bloody stop!" He marched over to them and yanked Roger to his feet. "Johnson, what are we doing out here?"

"Learning offensive and defensive maneuvers with our brooms," Roger said.

"Correct and what position are you in right now?" Alan asked.

"Defensive," Roger said.

"What was that!" Alan yelled.

Roger gripped his broom. "Defensive, sir."

"Exactly!" he said. "So, when Weasley's standing here waiting on you, you should be ready to defend yourself, yeah? Everyone else here is doing something to defend himself or herself. They're doing it to protect their lives and the lives of their unit from dark wizards, but what the hell are you doing?"

Roger grimaced. Ron could tell that he was being strong, but he also saw the frustrated tears in his eyes. Roger didn't let them fall. "Not defending myself, sir."

"Right again, Johnson!" Alan practically spat. "If this had been a real mission, you and your comrades would be dead. People would be without their husbands or mums or brothers because of you." Ron felt a spike of anger, but he told himself to keep calm.

"I'm sorry, sir," Roger said faintly.

"I don't need your sorry," Alan said. "Do you plan on just apologizing to the father of the son you got killed because you couldn't keep your strength up? No, I don't want your sorry. I want you to push it." He snatched Roger's broom and threw it on the ground. "Let's go. Push it."

"Sir?" Roger asked.

Alan pushed Roger so hard that he almost fell over. "Bloody push it!" Roger looked at him in almost horror and his face flushed. "Don't stare at me. Push it!" He shoved Roger again, and he fell to the ground.

"Oh, come on," Ron said.

Alan turned to him. "Do you have something to say, Weasley?"

Ron bit his lip and told himself to stay under control. He couldn't let his temper get to him. This was Lambrick. Things were supposed to be brutal. "No, sir."

"That's what I thought," Alan said. Roger got back up again, but Alan merely pushed him down again. "I can do this all day, Johnson." He kicked Roger's feet, and Ron could no longer take it.

"Oi! There's no need to do that!" he shouted. "That's not teaching anymore. You're justâ€¦you're just being a prick."

He heard gasps and he knew that he was in trouble, but some things were more important than staying on Alan's good side. He had to do what was right. Alan raised an eyebrow at him. "You're calling me a prick?"

Ron wanted to take it back, but it was too late to back down. "Yes. When you just push and kick people like that, you're a prick."

"It's fine, Ron," Roger said. "I'm fine."

"No, let Weasley talk. I've learned that Weasley is a big talker," Alan said. He walked up to him, but Ron kept his ground. "Go on, Weasley. You got more?"

Ron knew that he was being tested. He balled his fists. "No, sir."

"What was that?" Alan asked.

"No, sir," he said louder. "I don't have more."

Alan shook his head. "I think you're lying. I think you have more." Alan pushed him, and Ron bit his lip so hard that he thought he'd draw blood. He told himself to calm down, and he ignored the familiar voice that usually told him to strike back. Alan had already hit him earlier that week. He didn't know how much more he could stand.

"Stop it," he said calmly.

"I'm sorry. I don't take orders from trainees." Alan pushed him again but Ron was ready. Something snapped and he grabbed Alan's arm at lightening speed and twisted it. He shoved him away, and Alan fell to the ground.

"I said fucking stop it!" he bellowed. He was fuming and things in his brain dissolved. Alan got to his feet and the rush subsided. Ron came to his senses, and he realized that he had just signed his walking papers.

"Weasley," Alan said, scowling at him.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you attacked me first," Ron said. "You were out of order with me and with Roger."

"I don't think this is the time to—"

"It's okay, Brian," Alan said. He kept glaring at Ron, and Ron kept standing straight. His heart beat out of his chest, but he couldn't take it back now. Alan's scowl gradually faded. He turned to Roger. "Did you see that? That, what Weasley just did, was pushing it. He's not the type of person who will go down without a fight, even if he knows his arse is on the line."

Alan turned his attention to the whole section. "Being an Auror isn't about doing what's comfortable or what's popular or what's easy. Sometimes, you'll be hated and feared and people won't like

you because you have to do a shit thing. What's right isn't always what's admired, and Weasley isn't afraid to test that. It's a truth that's in him, and he uses it."

Ron didn't know what Alan was talking about. All he could understand was the buzzing in his ears. "What Weasley did tonight is what I need out of all of you," Alan continued. "All of you let me stand here and push Johnson around because you were scared. If one of your fellow comrades is captured behind enemy lines, you can't stand by and do nothing. Fear is bollocks when you're an Auror. You either use it to push harder or throw it away. Do you all understand me?"

"Yes, sir," they all said together. Ron let out a heavy breath. The adrenaline ran to his head again and he suddenly got a headache.

"Johnson, go to my office. I'm not through with you yet," Alan said. "Weasley, I admire your courage, but now you'll have to pay for it. I want fifteen laps around this area on your broom, and tomorrow you're more than welcome to tack on another ten flying laps as well. It'll be right after you give me five additional running laps, of course."

"Yes, sir," Ron said. He mounted his broom with clumsy hands and stared his fly. He couldn't believe that he had pushed Alan or that his violence had been used to demonstrate something good. It was almost too much, and he didn't know what world he was living in anymore. By the time he was finished with his fifteenth lap, the night session was over and Brian was the only one waiting for him. He clutched his stomach and leaned against his broom for support. Everything was spinning.

"I hope those laps gave you some energy, Weasley," he said. "It's your evaluation tonight. Follow me."

It was the worst possible timing. Ron was not only filthy, exhausted, and a bit out of his mind, but now he would have to explain to Phillip why he had attacked his section leader. It would be another spot on his record and another step closer to him not making it to the merge. He and Brian entered Alan's cabin, and Alan and Phillip were both talking behind his desk.

"Weasley, so nice of you to join us," Alan said.

Ron wiped his clammy hand on his shirt before offering it to Phillip. "Good evening, sir. I'm sorry that I kept you waiting. I-"

"No need, Weasley," Alan said. "I already told Phillip that you owed me extra laps for being tardy to the night session."

"You have to be more punctual, Mr. Weasley," Phillip said. "This is not a place of leisure."

"A-ah, yes...it won't happen again." He looked at Alan but he pretended not to see him.

"I say we get to it. It's late," Alan said. He got out his clipboard and took out his notes. "We devised the evaluation on two tiers. First is a practical and technical base scoring out of sixty points between all four parts of the exam, and the second is a comprehensive score, which is Brian's personal recommendation and mine. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said. He licked his lips that were horribly salty and closed his legs as much as he could to stop the sweat from dripping down his thighs. He was cold and sweaty and uncomfortable in every way. It was a bit difficult to focus.

"Good. Out of a possible sixty, your base score was fifty-one," Alan said.

"Fifty-one?" he asked. He had no idea what the number meant. All he knew was that it was more than half but less than perfect.

"We like for the trainees to achieve a forty-five or higher but even forty-five to forty-seven is not what we want," Phillip said. "So, a fifty-one is a solid total. It's not the best but it is one of the better scores received in your section."

Ron breathed a little easier. "That's good to know."

"That's great to know, Mr. Weasley," Phillip said. "I couldn't be there but I looked over all the notes that both Mr. Lewis and Mr. Taylor took. You did a nice job."

"Your first part of the exam went the same as everyone else's," Alan said. "You did better the second time around, and you knew more offensive than defensive spells."

"It's under both our recommendation that you study more spell wise," Brian said. "Your speed is satisfactory but we want more variety."

"I told you that during your trial," Phillip said.

Ron's cheeks flushed. "I remember, sir. I'll work on it."

"Your second and third legs of the exam were more to standard," Alan said. "I don't know how to tell you this, Weasley, but your hand combat is phenomenal. You scored perfect marks. Your speed, your strength, and your technique are ideal. It didn't matter in the end that you didn't retrieve Brian's wand in the third round. You're proficient and that's obvious."

"I agree," Brian said. "Mr. Smith, if Weasley makes it through to graduation, I would highly suggest an honor in this area. He had me working very hard, and none of the other trainees gave as much as Weasley did."

"We shall see, Mr. Taylor," Phillip said. "I had a feeling that this part of your training might not be much of a struggle, Mr. Weasley. I knew from your trial that you had some skill in this area."

Ron's entire face felt like it was melting off. It didn't help that he was already sweating his bollocks off. "Thank you, sir, and thank you Mr. Lewis and Mr. Taylor."

"However, the last section of the exam gave you the most trouble," Alan said. "You even ran off and hid during a part of it. That's an absolute failure in my eyes."

Ron's delight automatically disappeared. This was the part he had been afraid of. "Mine too, sir."

"You running away is the difference between you and your mission mates going to bed to rest and going to rest in a coffin," Alan said. Ron tasted bile in his throat. The idea of anyone dying because of him and his fear was too much to stomach.

"Reading and hearing this about you did raise a concern for me," Phillip said. "Mr. Weasley, you strike me as a brave young man."

"I am," he said. "I just lost it."

"You can't afford to, and it wasn't your only time. Incendio is a basic spell that you'll encounter many times as an Auror," Alan said.

"I know, sir. I know I messed up when I hid, but I came back. I found my strength and finished," he said confidently. He had done the best he could, and it was all he had to give. It wasn't everything, but it was something.

"That's really the only thing that saved you, Weasley," Brian said. "When you came from behind that tree, you were a different person. You fought me and you used your skill and the use of Confringo was especially well executed. If it had been a real battle, then I think that would've been the factor that tipped in your favor."

"What was going through your mind when you casted that spell?" Phillip asked. "In fact, what went through your mind over the course of the whole evaluation?"

Everything had happened so fast and so much had passed through him. He didn't know what kind of answer Phillip was looking for so he went with the truth. "With the spells I mostly focused on things I knew would work, even if they were simple. I tried not to think about Brian's spells at my head. During the hand combat I mostly thought ahead to what Brian would do next. I'm never in the moment when I fight. I'm always two moves ahead. For the last part I thoughtâ€!"

He didn't want to tell them about Fred or Harry or his vision of what had happened in the corridor at Hogwarts. Those things were intimate and private and only for him. They were the things that kept him going, and he had to keep them hidden and protected. "I thought about the consequences of not completing the task, and right before I used Confringo I asked myself what would get Brian the farthest away from me while keeping him off guard."

Phillip looked at him as if he didn't believe him. Ron wanted to look away but he didn't. "Fair enough." Phillip started taking his own notes and Ron let out a breath of relief. "Mr. Taylor, what is your comprehensive evaluation?"

"I think Weasley is physically where he should be," Brian said. "He's strong and fast and aggressive. I think it's his mental state that vastly needs to improve."

Phillip took more notes. "And you, Mr. Lewis."

"I agree with Brian," Alan said. "If this were a fight to the finish, then Weasley would win. He can run, he can duel, and he can stand up for himself and others." Ron cleared his throat and sat up straighter. "But I think his greatest weakness is himself. It's why he still can't fly at the level where he should and why he hides and takes too much time to perform a spell. You have to be healthy in the mind and the body. They work together."

Ron felt weight on his shoulders, but he shook it off. He didn't know what was still so wrong with him, but he would fix it no matter what it took. "I will add this, Mr. Smith," Alan said. "Brian is saying that hand combat is where Weasley's name should be kept in the running for, but I'd like to add navigation. Mr. Low says he's one the brightest."

Phillip smiled a little. "Yes, John's mentioned this to me as well. Mr. Weasley, I want to see this brightness myself. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said. He was overwhelmed with questions and emotions.

"Alright. I must be going." Phillip stood and shook Alan's and Ron's hands. "It was a pleasure sitting in on your meeting."

"Thank you for joining us, sir, and I'm sorry for the tardiness," Ron said.

"Considering this your only warning. You won't be late when I teach," Phillip said.

"I'll walk you out, Mr. Smith," Brian said.

Ron sat back down in his chair when they were gone. He looked at Alan. "You didn't tell him?"

"If I had you'd be dismissed from the program," Alan said. "I don't want that. I did what I did to show Johnson and you and the others that things get ugly. It's not time for weakness or friendship or fright. It's time for right and wrong. Dead or alive."

"I understand that, sir," Ron said.

"I know you do but Johnson doesn't. I had to show him somehow. It's tough and mean and probably unfair but it's the only way to shake people out of it sometimes," Alan said. "It shook you."

"It did." Ron wanted to hate Alan but he couldn't. He was right and his methods always had reason. "Can I ask you something now that my evaluation is officially over?"

"Sure," Alan said.

"What did you whisper to Brian before the fourth part of the test?" he asked.

Alan nodded. "I figured it be this question. I told him to maximize Incendio as much as he could. I wanted to see how you'd fair."

Ron balled his fists again. If Alan only knew how wrong he had been to request that. "And how did I?"

"As expected," he said. "You cowered but rose to the challenge. You improved and it's what I needed to see. I would've had Brian set ten fires as tall as the tops of the trees all around you if I needed to, and I would've had you tied down right in the middle of it all. Do you know why?"

"Because you needed me to push," Ron said. "I had to show you what type of man I was. Just like tonight."

"Welcome to Lambrick Academy, Ron," Alan said. "That's why you're here, and it's why I'm here. You're dismissed."

Ron left Alan's office with a new sense of clarity. He knew where he stood and where he needed to improve. He was still so sweaty and hungry and drowsy but he went to the mailing cabin to see if anyone had written him. He got weak in the knees when he saw Hermione's name on an envelope. He didn't make it to his cabin. He found the first open spot in the grass and collapsed. He lit his wand, ripped opened the envelope, and clutched her letter.

Dear Ron,

I know it took a lot longer for me to get back to you than it usually does, but I had to attempt to write this a few times before I settled on the right words. First and foremost, I want to tell you a little story. The morning I got your letter, I was at breakfast. I got the owl, I saw your name, and as usual I was excited and anxious. I generally find the strength to hold out until lunch, but I've really missed you lately and I couldn't wait. I took it with me to the morning Prefect meeting and read it right before it started. Yes, I read it in front of the while Prefect class as well as many professors and McGonagall herself. Now, let me explain something. I ALWAYS start the morning meetings with a progress report. Therefore, I got to stand up and talk to everyone about progress and decency and leadership while all your words were swimming in my head. I had to look McGonagall in the eye and talk about professionalism while all I could think about was you masturbating in a shower and moaning my name. I was completely flustered and hot and wet and unpleasantly distracted.

HOW DARE YOU RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY? I can't believe you would be so merciless and vulgar and teasing. I seriously had to start this letter over six times because of how shocked and bewildered I am that you would ever write that to me or that you even knew how to. Mind you, it was an excellent read. You have a real talent for it, but it doesn't excuse how immature it was. I don't know where to start with that letter. You had so much vulgarity written that it's hard to sift through it all. I guess I'll start with the lesser of the evil. You're addicted to me? Am I supposed to feel badly? I don't. Do you have any idea how many times I've read that last paragraph? I read it before bed and in between classes. Ginny almost caught me reading it during dinner yesterday, and it was awkward. I think I've grown some sort of obsession with it, and if you got a rash then I must have a brain infection because randomly throughout the day I think about you and everything else dies out. I think that's worse, so I pity you not. Ron, you know you're sexy and perfect and you know how easily turned on you make me. You CANNOT talk about licking me or biting me or cumming in my mouth or losing it to the thought of me, and you definitely CANNOT talk about doing anything with your hands to me while we're apart! It's simply not fair and it's the exactly opposite of courtesy, cheeky boy. What's the point of telling me all that if you know I can't be there to reacquaint you with all those things? You must have wanted to go mad and I did. You got this round, but you haven't won the whole battle. That's a threat, and I don't have to be an Auror in training to know how to use mighty force.

Just in case you're laughing right now, I've got something else to tell you. Maybe it slipped your mind, but you do have to come back to me sometime. I have a very good memory, so I won't forget about this. Prepare yourself for many slaps and a lot of making up to do. Whenever I want you and in whatever way I want you, you better deliver it to me. You might miss me and crave me now, but by the time I'm finished with you you'll be numb, out of your mind, and hopefully unable to write your smut ever again. I'll own you body everyday, mister. Sound patronizing? I don't care. You owe me and you deserve so much more than that! You're fortunate that I'll be requiring your body on a regular bases when we're reunited. I almost considered not letting you see my knickers or my bras that you love so much over your holiday, but I can't lie to you and I don't deserve to be punished. I still plan to ravish you and all your bits, but it doesn't mean that you're not in trouble! I'll end this lecture asking you again, HOW DARE YOU, and, YOU ARE ABSOLUTELY HORRIBLE AND UNFAIR. I really mean it!

Putting all that aside, schoolwork is getting incredibly hectic. You're right about that. I'm trying my best to take breaks but these are my NEWT's, Ron. Now is the appropriate time to possibly lose a little sleep over my studies. Don't worry, though, I am sleeping and eating and Ginny makes sure that I don't spend all my free time in the library. She's great with keeping me clear of that. You're also going to get another jab for talking about Nathan. He's a great Head Boy and we do equal shares of work. So, forget about shoving anything inside him(you're so rude) and forget about showering with me(that would mean that you're deserving). I'm glad things are going better for you at camp.

It's great to hear that you're getting along with your roommates and you're finding friendships in them and with Olivia. Maybe I can meet her sometime. I mean that. I'd really like to. Of course, nothing makes me happier than to hear that you and Harry are all right. I'm nervous that you two are slipping out after hours, but in this case I'll allow it. You two need to be the best of friends, and if sneaking away is how you do it then fine.

I told Ginny that Harry really missed her and I think it touched her greatly. She misses him like mad even though she won't say, and Harry's letters are always full of Ginny so I get the idea. I miss him as well. There's so much that I always want to tell him and show him but I can't. I can't wait until I can see him. We can be a family again. On the subject of family, Ginny sort of had a moment. I caught her crying in the girls' toilet. She said it was nothing, but I know it was because of Fred. In defense class we talked about the war and he was mentioned. It got to her. I tried my best to comfort her, but I knew what she really needed was you. You have no idea how much she loves you, Ron. It's incredible. I really don't want to tie this letter down with specifics on that. It's something we should talk about face to face when I have you pinned down. Just know that I comforted her, and she's all right. She'll be better when she sees you and Harry again.

I'm reading over your letter right now to make sure I'm not forgetting anything and Ronald Weasley, I seriously have never felt more violent toward you. John Low is a celebrity and a prodigy in the history and defensive fields of magic. Yes, you've studied him before in history class and defense class and even charms and potions class. I gave you one of his books to study with during our OWL's. You told me that you read the whole thing cover to cover! He's one of the best in the field of navigation and mapping and he's critically acclaimed. I can't believe you get to work with him. I have his entire collection. You better listen to whatever he says and take his advice. You're so lucky. Would it be too much to send me an autograph? It would go perfectly with my collection. While I'm boggled that you forgot all about Mr. Low, I'm not surprised that you're doing well in this area. I've watched you and I've known you for years. This is your life and your specialty, Ron. I know you must feel amazing when you learn the material so quickly and you probably get a bit embarrassed by liking it so much or by knowing so much, but please don't be ashamed or afraid of that, sweetheart. It's what you're great at so let yourself excel. It doesn't matter what other people say or think. You can be smart and still be you. You're still you, Ron, but I guess with a bit of genius tucked in your pocket. How lovely? You're my little academic. I can picture you sitting at your desk taking notes and being a gentleman scholar. I see you following Mr. Low with your big, beautiful blue eyes, and it's so sexy and sweet. Though, I honestly can't see you taking legible notes. You'll have to prove it to me, but it's really wonderful that you're keeping up with this section. Of course, this is the best time of your life right now, and I'll never get to see it. You'll have to reenact it for me when we meet up. It's sort of a fantasy of mine to see you actually engaged in coursework, and I think I deserve the treat after what you've put me through with your letter.

I might be angry with you right now, but I'm also proud of you, Ron. It's never something you have to ask from me. I'm proud of where you're going and what you've been through. You making it through your evaluation is something I knew you would do. You're powerful, Ron, and even when you struggle you keep it up. I never doubt you. I know you get scared and you panic and you feel alone and you don't know what to say or what to do, but you always find a way to get through. You dig yourself out, and that's something Lambrick isn't teaching you. You arrived there with that gift. Remember that every time you're uncertain. That light can't be taken away from you. Oh, there's still so much I want to say but I honestly can't write forever. I mostly just wanted to yell at you but I also want you to know how much I love and miss you. Jokes and perverted nature aside, I miss you so much, love. It doesn't feel as intense because I guess I'm getting used to your absence, but I don't like it either way. I want to feel your arms around me again, and I want to hear your voice. I made a calendar especially for you. It's nothing too extravagant. It's basically a regular calendar but it has your name in big and colorful letters at the end. You might think it's silly, but it helps me. I mark off every day until I get my Ron back. That's right. You're mine, and I have a few things planned for us. I can't wait to do them with you. See, you're not even here but somehow I know you're smiling right now and you probably have something sexual in mind. Unfortunately, I wasn't talking about that this time. That's for later or before. You know what, it doesn't matter. I'm not going to turn into you.

Right, before I forget, the Kava shrub. It's a plant found in the wild, and it's used in many forms of pain and mental relief tablets and creams. It works directly in the nervous system, and it's an intoxicant. If you have too much of it, then you can become easily inebriated. We talked about that during sixth year remember? We're also going over it this year. Tell your friend to be careful. I'd hate to think that people are using it recreationally there.

I should end this soon, and if you're expecting me to go into this last paragraph telling you all these sexual things then forget it. I have more class than that. You like to tell, but I'm more of a showing type of woman. I'll let your mind wonder over what I plan to do in the hot bubble bath I'm going to make for myself in the Prefects' bathroom. I'll just leave it to your imagination for why my fingers have been so sore the past few days and why they'll be really sore when I'm through tonight. You'll have to guess what I looked like today in my new blue and white knickers and bra set or exactly how snuggled I'll be in only your jumper when I got to bed tonight. I hope that's okay with you.

Though I'm highly angry with you, I love you,

Hermione

- One more thing, this doesn't take away from anything I said earlier, but do you think you could go into a bit more detail

about what you and Dream Hermione do? It doesn't mean you're not in trouble. I'm just curious.

Curious, mad, and in love with you,

Hermione

Ron laughed and used the back of his sleeve to wipe the few joyful tears away. He didn't know how she did it. He had felt so overwhelmed and confused minutes ago but her letter had found him at the perfect time. She had made him feel so good and slightly aroused with just a letter. He loved her so bloody much and he couldn't wait to see her. Even though he was now nervous about what she had planned for them and how many time she would in fact slap him, he didn't mind. It had been worth reading her reaction, and he had no problem telling her what Dream Hermione liked to do.

He made it back to his cabin and froze the moment he stepped inside. Roger was packing up his trunk and his others bag was on his bed that had been undressed. "What are you doing?" Ron blurted.

Roger jumped and turned around. "Shit, Ron, I thought you'd be at dinner."

"What are you doing?" he asked again, shutting the door and walking over to him.

"What does it look like?" he asked gravely. "I'm leaving."

Ron stuttered incoherently for several moments. "D-did Alan cut you?"

"No, but it's only a matter of time before he does," Roger said.

"That's a bullshit reason to leave," Ron said. "You're here which means he doesn't want you gone."

Roger sighed and stopped packing. "Ron, I was horrible tonight."

"It's one time," he said.

"No, it's not. I've been horrible since I got here," Roger said. "Even the first day we ran Alan and Richard had a talk about me. Alan told me that tonight. The only reason why I made it to the final forty is because I'm great with my wand and with the academic stuff, and it's the only reason why I'm still here."

"You can build on it," Ron said. "You can't just give up."

"I'm not just giving up!" Roger said. "Ron, I've thought about this, and I've been thinking about this for weeks. I can't keep up. I have the skill and brains but not the strength. I know that even if I stayed until the merge, I'd be let go then. What I have isn't enough. We both know that."

"Rogerâ€!" Ron said. Roger's words were logical, but it didn't connect in Ron's mind. Roger couldn't leave. He was a good guy and he was something familiar to Ron. If he left, then things would change.

"I'd rather leave now on my terms," Roger said. "It'll give me a chance to figure out what I'm gonna do next and hopefully me leaving will give someone else who deserves it a second chance."

"You deserve a chance," Ron said.

"Stop it. Don't you think I want to be here?" he asked. He stomped his foot and rubbed his brow. "I don't want this, and I'm not proud of it. I want to stay here, and it's why I bloody fought this hard. It's why I applied and it's why I came, but tonight really made me realize something that I noticed a long time ago. Lambrick isn't the place for me. It's too much, and I'll never get to the level I'm supposed to be at. I'm not mad at Alan for what he did. He helped me see that."

Ron turned away from him and rubbed his neck. "That's bollocks."

"Then look at me and sincerely tell me you that don't think I'm right," he said.

He turned back to him and Roger stared at him in the fixated way that Olivia had. Ron had no idea when they had gained the power to make him not want to lie to them. "I guess you're right."

"You don't guess. You know," he said. "I appreciate you standing up for me tonight. No one's ever had my back like that but you, me, Alan, Philip, and everyone here knows that this isn't the place for me. Phillip actually pulled me aside during my evaluation the other day and gave me a list of camps that would start at the beginning of the year. Don't you think that means something?" Roger sat on his bed and let out a shaky breath. "I'm not a quitter, but I can't do this. My dad told me that I had to toughen up and this is my way of doing so. It's my choice, and I have to face it alone."

Ron sat beside him. He had no energy to stand. "What will you do?"

"I dunno," he said. "Enjoy the last bit of the year. Do some research and reapply to other camps. I still want to be Auror, Ron. I just can't become one here. I gave this a try, but it didn't work out." He made it sound so effortless. Major changes were never supposed to be effortless.

Ron felt a small pit in his chest. He had to make things not feel so final. "But you're the coolest bloke here. I'm not even zonked and I'm saying it."

Roger chuckled faintly. "I can still be cool. I left you my address on your bed. We can write and go to the pub sometime after this is all over. I know you'll make it all the way through."

"I don't know," Ron said.

"Hey, you're not like me," Roger said. "You have everything going for you. You're a bloody hero already, and you can push back. Don't stop doing it now because things are different."

Ron rubbed his palms into his knees. He didn't know what to say. He was gutted, and he didn't want Roger to go. "When are you leaving?"

"Now," Roger said. "Alan and Phillip know. I just had to get my stuff."

"You weren't going to say goodbye?" Ron asked.

"It's not like that," Roger said. "I didn't come here making an impact, so I don't want to leave making one. I don't like goodbyes or causing a scene. I left everyone notes. That's my thing. I even wrote Jack. He's a twat, but I think there may be more to him. There's always more to people."

"Fucking hell, what are Conor and I supposed to do on our own with him?" Ron asked.

"Threaten his hair. I think it's his weakness. I'll even give you the spell to actually glue his hair to his bollocks if you need it," Roger said. He pulled a letter out of his pocket. "I have one for Olivia. It's short but she's been my goddess here, so I had to say something. Give it to her for me?"

"Of course," Ron said, taking it.

Roger stood up and Ron did as well. "I'm really glad I got to know you and that we were in the same cabin, Ron. You're a good friend, and you've helped me out a lot here."

"Same to you," Ron said. "I'd have anyone else in this section go but you. I really bloody wish you were staying."

"So do I," Roger said. He looked around the room with a pained expression. "Trust me, if I even had a sliver of confidence that I was making it to the merge then I'd stay, but I know that if I don't leave then over the holiday I'd get the letter telling me not to come back here. That will feel so much worse, and I'd rather avoid it all together."

"I understand," Ron said.

"I'm glad you do. I don't regret coming here, but I do wish I'd been better prepared." He held out his hand to him. "You all right with this?"

Ron shook it and clasped it firmly. Roger was pale and knobby and skinny, but he squeezed his hand back with a force that Ron couldn't believe. "No, but I have to be," Ron said. "I'll also have to go back to not losing in chess."

"Oi, we we'll play sometime, and I'll be more than happy to beat you." He took his bag and trunk and Ron walked him to the door. What was happening wasn't right. It was all too fast and unplanned. "Let me know how the whole navigation thing goes for you."

"I will," Ron said. Roger opened the door. "Roger," he quickly added. "You've really been a great friend to me here. I know you think I'm tougher than you, but you're wrong. Your strength has helped me so much, and I'd never be brave enough to do this. I think this sort of strength is why you made it. Not everyone has your courage."

Roger smiled. "Thanks, mate. I'm glad I could help someone like you, and maybe next time you see me I'll be able to push back." He walked out of the cabin, and Ron didn't know what to do with himself.

"What should I tell people?" he asked.

Roger shrugged. "Tell them I moved on. Things changed for me."

"It's that simple?" he asked.

"Sometimes it has to be," Roger said. He waved at him. "Bye, Ron. Keep your head up."

"Bye, Roger, and I will," he said. "You do the same." He watched Roger walk down the path and past the gate. He waited for him to come back and tell him that it had been a joke but he didn't. Ron closed the door and slumped to his bed. He was gone. Ron wouldn't see him in the mornings or hear him ask blunt and embarrassing questions throughout the day. His chess mate was gone and Roger's powerful and kind reassurance wouldn't give Ron an added boost anymore. He was no longer hungry and he felt a bit too tired to write back to Hermione right away. He stayed in bed and read over her letter instead.

It wasn't long before Jack and Conor came back. "Is Roger still with Alan?" Conor asked, sitting on his bed. "Bloody hell. He wasn't that bad. I thought you'd be in more trouble than him, Ron."

"He's not with Alan," Ron said. "He's gone. He left the program."

"What?" Conor asked, his eyes growing. "Are you taking the piss?"

"No. I watched him pack and leave," Ron said.

"But why?" Conor asked.

Ron shrugged. "I think you know."

Conor shook his head. "Why didn't he find us? He could've at least said goodbye."

"He wanted to leave quietly," Ron said. "He couldn't be here anymore, and it made more sense for him to just go his own way."

"But he wasn't that bad," Conor said. "Tonight was shit, but he's all right."

"All right isn't good, enough," Jack said.

"I'm already on the edge, Jack," Ron said. "It would be really smart if you didn't say anything stupid about him."

"I'm not going to," Jack said. "Roger's a nice guy and all, but he couldn't handle it."

"Especially not with you on his arse every day," Conor said.

"Don't blame me. If I was too much for him, then he never stood a chance here," Jack said. "You have to be strong in everyway here."

"So, you were just trying to help him? How convenient," Conor said.

"It doesn't matter what I was or wasn't trying to do. This camp is for the fittest," Jack said. "Cabin one lost one and so did cabin three. We've joined them."

Conor rolled his eyes and picked up the note on his pillow.
"What's this?"

"A note from Roger. You've got one too, Jack, and I've got one to give to Olivia." Ron rubbed his neck as they opened them. He felt so out of it, and he needed something. He just wasn't sure what. They were quiet for the rest of the evening. Ron took his shower and started his letter to Hermione, but he had to stop. The words weren't what he wanted to say. Ron looked at the empty cot. Roger was living proof of what Lambrick would do to a person if he weren't ready. He thought about Brian's word and how he wasn't mentally healthy. It made him nauseous, and his need for something grew and burst. He put his trainers and jumper on and he let his legs guide him.

He walked all the way across the property into west and found himself knocking on cabin three. The door opened and the vision before him blanketed him with relief, but for the first time it wasn't Hermione's presence that gave him the automatic feeling of home. It was a change. "Ron?" Harry said. He noticed his face and grew more serious. "Are you all right, mate?"

"You up for a walk?" he asked.

"Sure. I'll get my shoes." Harry immediately came back and stuffed his feet into his trainers. "Let's go."

As they walked, Ron felt a bit of the pressure leave him. He thought it was okay to start talking. "Some really bad stuff happened tonight. I know it's late andâ€!"

"I'm listening, Ron," Harry said. "Here." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a handful of flavored beans. "Last bit of it."

"Cheers." Ron popped a couple in his mouth. "Cherry and pond water, I think."

"I reckon this is some sort of hot pepper. Bloody hell." Harry coughed and fanned his mouth. It made Ron laugh. Harry nudged him. "Don't mind me. Go on with what you were saying. I'm here." The phrase meant so much to him, and it was more than he could tell Harry. He took a deep breath and started. Ron told Harry everything about Alan and his evaluation and Brian's words and Roger leaving, and Harry stood by him and walked with him and listened.

Everything around Ron was changing, and it was so much to keep up with. The only thing that had remained constant was Harry being by his side and listening to him and being his best mate. He needed that one constant to keep going, and something told him that before long Harry's friendship would be the only thing at Lambrick that would stay the same.

* * *

****I really enjoyed this chapter. There are a lot of things shifting in Ron's world right now, but they're things that have to shift for him. He's really growing up and out and nothing is certain anymore. Roger leaving was sad for me but it had to be this way. Him leaving is going to bring something out of Ron. Also, having this really profound moment with Harry is also important for him for a few reasons. Okay, enough out of me, lol. I hope you lot enjoyed this. A lot will happen between now and Ron leaving for his holiday and it'll be squeezed into so little time, so stay tuned! Oh, and isn't Hermione just adorable? She doesn't have Ron's act for writing smut, but she's cute when she tries, lol. Thanks for reading and review!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 35*: Somewhere I belong

Thanks for the amazing reviews! They make me so happy! I also want to thank Kristy for being brilliant and thorough. (thanks love) Anyway, if any of you went to the London premiere of DH2 I hope you had a good time. I'm going to the NY premiere and I'm really excited! The movie is almost here!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

"I would keep the lines together and attack the weak end," Jack said. "It's all about force and strength in numbers. One clean ambush and one clear victory is my approach to this." Ron rolled his eyes and shook his head. He bit on the side of his quill so he wouldn't make any noise.

"You're doing it again," Olivia said in his ear.

"He's gonna get us all killed," he whispered.

"What was that, Weasley?" Jack asked, turning around.

"Turner," Alan said from the back of the class.

"No, it's acceptable behavior," John said. "The developing stage is always passionate and enriched with ideas, Alan; you know this. Now, Jack, please continue."

Jack fully turned around in his chair and faced Ron. "Do you have something to say about my plan, Weasley?"

Ron rubbed his neck and looked at John. "Answer the man, Ron," he said. "Otherwise, stop squirming and let him finish."

"I can't let him finish!" Ron blurted. "His idea will get us all captured and executed. One ambush for this type of mission is out of the question."

"Why is that?" Jack asked. "It's a flawless plan, and waylaying with our entire flank is our best scenario."

Ron got out of his chair and snatched both his and Jack's maps. He went up to the board and pointed at John's drawn map. "Are you looking at the same map as I am? Because I thought we all got the same schematic but what you're proposing is outrageous. If we storm in as one unit, then it gives us no room for mistakes. We have to plan for error."

"Who says we'd make a mistake?" Jack asked. "We would have had a week to scout and learn their behavior."

"Life says we'd make a mistake," Ron said. "We may be magical but it doesn't mean that we're perfect. People are unpredictable and sometimes behaviors can change. No, we need to send pockets out." He took the chalk and squiggled all over John's map. "Here and here and even here for extra muscle. These are the places where we put out main lines."

Jack got up as well and snatched his map out of Ron's hand. He erased a lot of his work on the board. "You're mental. We'd be too thinned out and too outnumbered."

"Rather some of ours get the heat than the whole unit," Ron said. "They'll expect a flank ambush here but not a ripple trap. It's risky but it's a necessary risk. The sacrifice will pay off this way."

Jack groaned. "John, will you tell Weasley that I'm right? His idea is too dangerous and excessive."

John moved his eyes between them. "Ron, Jack does have a point. A single ambush is ideal, and we would have the upper hand with our numbers!"

"Ha!" Jack said.

John raised a hand. "However, Jack, you evidently didn't hear Ron when he explained the fundamental rule that risk is necessary. I said one ambush is ideal. One ambush could be safer for the unit, but a ripple trap." John beamed at Ron. "And my boy, great use of the term, a ripple trap is more effective in this case. It's more dangerous and time consuming but it would be the choice if it were mine to make. You might leave bloody but you'd get the job done. Sacrifices must be made."

Ron looked at Jack smugly. "That's what I had to say, Jack." Jack pushed past him and took his seat. Ron took his seat too and stretched his legs out under the table. They were drawing closer to the end of the first half of training, and their studies in navigation were becoming more involved. John had separated their assignments and tests, but they still learned together as one class. Ron found it a bit awkward, but he never minded correcting Jack when he was obviously wrong.

"Students," John said at the end of class, "come get your exams and below my comments is the date and time in which I want to go over your mapping project. Please, feel free to come see me if you have any questions regarding your exam score. I need you lot to rationalize your reasoning better. Most of the time it's not either right or wrong, it's how you justify it and what else?"

"Coordinates are our friends," the class droned.

Ron packed up his bag and waited until everyone else was in line before he joined at the very end. When it was his turn to retrieve his test, John hid it behind his back. "Make an estimation," John said.

Ron studied John's face. "Out of the fifty I'll say um forty-seven."

"Why?" John asked.

"I spent too much time on my oceanic navigation chart, and I had to rush through the question about hideaways in the desert," he said. "I know the desert question was worth more points. So, yeah, I'll go with forty-seven."

"Close," John said, handing it back. "I gave you a forty-six. You know better."

"Damn," Ron breathed. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be lazy, Ron," John said. "Do the work. Get a perfect score. Set an example."

"Yes, John, I will," Ron said.

"Good," he said. "You can make it up to me by giving me something worthwhile during our meeting about your project. You have so many interesting ideas here in class, and I want it all put together for your presentation."

"I'm working on it," Ron said.

"That's all I need to hear," John said. "Keep up the great work." Great work was constantly something he did during class, but it always ended the moment he returned to Alan's teachings and night training. Coursework wasn't the only thing getting more elaborate. Broom navigation was brutal, and Alan and Brian taught with a more ferocious and louder approach.

Ron clutched his broom and squinted. It was raining heavily and frosting over into sleet. Alan didn't let them to use any charms or spells to protect themselves. He told them that they should be grateful that he allowed them to bring their jumpers to practice. Ron tilted his broom forward a little. Seeing through sleet was difficult but seeing through sleet while being high in the air on a broom was worse. It didn't matter; he had to pull it together. He steered right and kept flying until he was sure he had the right spot. He zoomed down and found his target about ten paces too far to the left. Ron corrected himself but he knew that he was in trouble.

He turned his broom to the side and took one of his hands off the handle. He felt his wand in his pocket and touched down, but he was too unsteady and too far off. He was blasted back off of his broom and he hit the mushy grass with a splat. He flinched as Jack shoved his broom into his stomach very hard. "I thought you had more synchronization, Weasley."

"Shut up," Ron said, pushing the broom out of the way and standing up. Ron might've been the better student, but he couldn't touch Jack's wand and broom skill.

"Or what?" you'll tell John on me?" Jack asked.

Ron growled. "Fuck off, Jacky boy!"

"I bloody told you not to call me that," Jack said, stepping closer to him.

"Oi!" Brian said. "Turner and Weasley! What are you doing? Why aren't you drilling? Do you want to continue this session once everyone else is finished?"

"No, sir!" they said together.

"Then get to it!" he shouted back.

Jack backed up and got into the air. Ron shivered and got his wand ready. He didn't know why but Roger's absence made the two of them more hostile toward each other. There was a new intensity

and rivalry between them. It made him furious to think that Roger wasn't there when a tosser like Jack still strutted around annoying people. So he tried not to think about it. Instead, he braced himself and kept his eyes on the sky. The freezing water hit his face repeatedly and it hurt, but he couldn't let it bother him. He saw the outline of Jack's figure so he stepped back. He came down at exactly the right spot and he was a lot more steady and accurate on his broom. His landing was hard, and Ron aimed his wand at Jack's broom to stop it. However, Jack swept it forward and ran right into him. He clipped Ron's legs making him fall backwards.

"Expelliarmus!" Ron shouted when he hit the ground. Jack's wand flung out of his hand and Ron hopped back up and ran at him. Jack shielded himself with his broom and got Ron away.

"You'll have to do better than that, Weasley," Jack said.

Ron wanted to retort but Alan's whistle blew. "Join me!" he shouted.

Ron picked up his broom and joined the line with the rest of his section. Alan shook his head at all of them. The rain was pouring down on him as well but he acted as if it wasn't there. Brian wasn't bothered by it either. "Do you think a dark wizard will care if it's sleeting? Do you think it'll make him give up? Huh?"

"No, sir!" they said.

"Then why in the bloody hell should I care and why should you give up?" he asked. "I don't care if the killing curse is raining from the sky. You can't go limp and lose your guard. You have to see what you're doing and fight through the discomfort." Olivia, who was standing next to him, trembled violently and hugged her drenched jumper.

"You okay?" Ron asked her.

"I'm fine," she quickly said in a wavering voice. He could tell that she wasn't. She was horribly pale and her lips were off color and trembling. She rolled her eyes. "If you're keeping an eye on me because I don't have a penis, then pretend that I do."

"Right. Sorry," he said.

"Weasley," Alan said, walking over to them.

Ron mentally groaned. "Yes, sir?"

"You've been so busy talking to Young that I'm sure neither of you heard one word I said about concentration, did you?" he asked.

"We did, sir," she said. "We weren't talking."

Alan snatched her arm and yanked her to him. "Don't lie to me, Young."

She winced somewhat. "We-we were talking, sir."

"Fancy that I have eyes and ears that work." He pushed her away and she got back in line. A piercing fury charged through Ron, and he told himself to stay calm and not attack Alan. It didn't matter where they were, things like that were never okay and it wasn't something he could or wanted to get used to. Conor was standing on the other side of Olivia, and he glared at Alan like he wanted to curse him. He even gripped his wand tighter.

"I'm sorry, sir," Ron said. "I started it."

"And I should've stayed quiet. I'm sorry, too," she said.

"Excellent, you two can be sorry and lead the section in target drills," Alan said. The section grumbled but he blew his whistle. "Oi, I didn't ask for your personal feelings! I told you to drill. Nine then eight, now!" Brian picked up many white disks with red targets on them. He tossed them into the air and they flew around and stopped at different locations and heights around the field. They were jinxed to move back and forth and up and down. Nine people mounted their brooms and got into the air while the other eight waited on the side.

Ron, Olivia, and Conor stood on the sidelines. "I'm sorry, Olivia," Ron said.

"It's fine," she said angrily.

"Are you okay?" Conor asked.

"Fucking hell, I'm fine!" she said. She took out her hair tie and her soppy black strands stuck to her face. "I'm not going to break out here. We're all wet and cold and sore."

"I'm talking about Alan hurting you," Conor said.

"He didn't hurt me, and I don't remember you asking Ben if he was okay when Alan hit him upside the head yesterday," she said.

"Ben's a bloke!" Conor said.

"So? I'm an Auror in training!" she shouted. "I'm not going to burst into tears or complain when someone's mean to me. Urgh, just leave me alone!" She stormed off without another word.

"Bleeding Christ," Conor said.

"I know how you feel, but she's right," Ron said.

"It doesn't matter. A man should never put his hands on a woman. I-I don't care. It shouldn't happen," he said. He got the distant and almost sad look in his eyes again.

Ron didn't know what to say. He understood Conor's anger, but he was taking it almost as a personal attack. "He wasn't actually trying to hurt her, Conor. You do know that, right?"

"Right," he muttered. "It's all for this stupid training." He shook his head and walked off as well.

For almost an hour Alan had them taking turns flying down and hitting the moving targets with spells while staying on their brooms. It was hard to steer and aim in the coldness and the wetness but Alan didn't care. By the time they were dismissed, Ron couldn't feel his fingers and his was shaking so badly that his teeth banged together. Olivia immediately ran over to the nearest bush and threw up. Ron wanted to help her but he told himself that she would be fine. It was all a part of training. The sleet finally let up as his whole section stood in line at the medical cabin and waiting to receive their healing potion. It was the only way to ensure that they wouldn't develop a horrible flu, or worse, over the next few days.

"Ron," Olivia said weakly, "I don't think I'll be able to walk tonight. I justâ€œI need to lay down."

"It's okay. You should take care of yourself. I'm almost too tired to eat. I'll probably lie down, too," he said. She nodded and trembled again, keeping her head down as if it were too heavy to hold. "You've got something in your hair." He plucked out a twig that was tangled in her strands and saw that it had a bit of her sick on it.

"Oh, shit," she said, slapping it out of his hand. "I didn't get a chance to tie my hair back before I lost it behind that bush. I'm sorry that you had to touch it."

"It doesn't bother me," he said with a shrug.

"Is it everywhere?" she asked.

"Not everywhere. Maybe a little on your edges in the front," he said. She wrinkled her face in disgust and sluggishly tied her hair back. He had never seen her so rundown before. "Here, get in front of me."

"Ron, I'm fine," she said.

"I'm aware. Now get in front of me," he said.

She sighed and cut in front of him. "Cheers."

"Don't mention it," he said.

The potion made him feel incredibly lethargic. He could hardly move during his shower and when he got back to his cabin he slumped on his bed and sprawled out. Conor came back in shortly after. "I can't find the girls cabin anywhere. Do you know where it is?"

"No and I think that's the idea," Ron said.

"I'm not a pervert," he said. "I just want to make sure Olivia's all right."

"She's fine, Conor, really. Alan didn't hurt her," he said.

"It doesn't matter. I need to hear it from her mouth." Conor took out parchment to most likely write his sister. "When I was partners with her and we had to duel, I basically just let her go at me. I can't help it. That rubbish does my head in."

"Mine too," Ron said, "but you're not hurting her just to be a prick. You're helping her train â€" there's a difference. Growing up my dad always told my brothers and I that he'd rather we castrate ourselves than hit a girl. It doesn't matter what she does, what she says, or how angry she makes us, it's never an option. However, I reckon battling a dark witch is an exception."

"It's still something I'm getting used to," Conor said. "My dad was a bit more lenient with the blokes at his pub, but if there were ever couples in an argument he'd ring a taxi for the girl before it got too out of control."

Ron stared at him blankly. "Ring a taxi?"

Some of Conor's seriousness faded. "I forgot. You're an ignorant pureblood."

"Piss off," Ron said.

"Ring a taxi. It's likeâ€!calling the Knight Bus, yeah? You use a telephone—"

"I know what that is!" Ron said proudly.

"Good lad," he said. "So, you use the telephone and ring a taxi. It's a service like the Knight Bus. The car takes you wherever you want to go in the area, and you pay the person driving you. These services are all over the world."

"Wicked," Ron said. "See, I get it. Carry on."

"Anyway," Conor said, chuckling. "He'd ring a taxi for the girl and cut the bloke off. Our pub wasn't just some place to get pissed. It was a real business."

"What do your parents do now?" Ron asked.

He turned back to his letter and didn't meet his eyes. "They're retired so they mostly keep an eye on Kate. Blimey, if it would've been Kate that Alan grabbed, I probably would have killed him." Since Roger's departure, the two of them started talking more and Conor opened up somewhat to him, but there was still so much about Conor that Ron didn't know and a small part of him was a bit afraid to find out.

"We don't have to worry about it tonight. It's over," Ron said.

"Yeah, right," Conor said.

He went back to his letter, and Ron closed his eyes. It had been such a productive day in class but he had a horrible night of

field training. He had gone from getting top marks on his exam to falling on his arse in the mud. His body and his spirit were trying to keep up with the highs and lows, but it was difficult. He turned his head and looked at Roger's empty cot. He felt a bit of weight on his shoulders. He missed the bloke and things weren't the same without him. There was a certain light that Roger had brought into their cabin, and Ron had only realized after he was gone that things were a little darker. Nonetheless, looking at Roger's cot did give Ron more energy. Roger was great, but Ron didn't want to end up like him. He had to pull through and he would. His need for Lambrick outweighed his displeasure of it.

The next morning Olivia showed up to the morning drill looking refreshed and ready as always. "You seem better," he said.

"I feel better," she said. "It was a bad night, you know?"

"I understand completely," he said. "Look, if you see Conor, let him ask you if you're okay and don't get upset. He really had a hard time dealing with Alan's behavior toward you."

"Are you taking the piss?" she asked. "That's sweet but obnoxious. The constant worry is the only thing I don't miss about Roger."

"But you miss everything else?" he asked.

"Yes," she said with a small grin. "I might not have fancied him, but I liked him. I still do and at least he wasn't aggressive about his need to protect me like Conor is."

"He doesn't mean any harm," Ron said. "So, will you do it? For me, please?"

She softened and exhaled lightly. "Okay."

"Thank you. Trust me, it'll be quick and it'll allow him to focus for the rest of the day," he said. "He's really brilliant with this stuff, but it won't mean anything if he's not there mentally."

"Merlin, Ron," she said as her cheeks stained pink. "Are you ever not doing something nice for someone?" She was looking at him almost awestruck.

He felt heat on his face as well. "I'm not that nice," he mumbled. "He's my roommate. I know him, and I want him to do well. Just do it before I break your glasses or something," he swiftly added.

"Ah, there's the arsehole I know," she said. "I was beginning to worry."

"I don't like you," he said, laughing.

During his run, Ron put what happened the night before out of his mind. It was a new day and a new opportunity to do well. He had

John's class next and stepping in there was always like entering another world where he was a different Ron. He was gifted, right, he easily understood things, and the teacher was proud of him. He was like a Ravenclaw and he could love to learn and reading and studying weren't extremely boring. It was everything he never felt at Hogwarts, and it was a remarkable feeling. He would need the feeling to last for as long as it could because during the night session Ron once again felt like himself. Things were tougher and more painful, but there was almost a thirst to prove himself and an energy during the field training that he lived for. The energy made his body move even when he felt like giving up, and, when he worked hard enough, it made him block out all the bad thoughts in his head. The days and the nights of Lambrick were his existence, and he needed the push from both to keep himself grounded.

He ran faster and closed his eyes. He knew the trail better than he knew the layout to his house now. He got to the flying pitch and mounted his broom. Jack was already in the air, but Ron didn't mind. Every day he caught up to him a little more. The one good thing about the broom navigation was that it was making Ron more steady and accurate with his Firebolt. He was finishing his laps sooner, and his recovery time was cleaning up. He touched down after his eighth lap but he didn't hear anything from Alan or Richard. Both were gone and Brian and the trainer from west were there. He swung his broom over his shoulder as he walked to the top of the hill where he'd wait for Harry like he always did.

Harry was already there along with Alan and Richard. Richard was the first to see him. "Weasley, come down here."

Ron promptly ran over to them. "Sir?" He was addressing Alan and Richard but he looked at Harry.

Harry looked straight back at him. "I'm sorry about this, Ron."

His heartbeat picked up as he thought of who it could be. Charlie was most likely because he worked with dragons, but his dad and Percy worked at the Ministry so that was also a possibility. He then thought about George. He was better but he was still in pain. Ron suddenly panicked and stiffened. Ginny and Hermione were both at Hogwarts where something terrible literally happened every year. He put a hand to his chest. "Which one? Who is it, Harry?"

"What?" Alan asked.

Harry recognized what he was getting at. He put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. "No, no â€“ the family is okay. Don't worry, they're fine."

"Bloody hell," Ron said in a deep breath. "That's good."

Alan gave them both curious looks. "Weasley, this isn't about your family. This is about you and Potter."

"Yes, once again about Potter," Richard added.

"I'm sorry, sir," Harry said. "I didn't know this was happening today, and Mr. Lewis, I'm sorry that they're including Ron this time."

"Who's including me in what?" Ron asked.

Alan rolled his eyes. "You and Potter have to leave and go meet some people at the Ministry for an interview."

"An interview?" he asked.

"Some developing paper wants to do a write-up on us," Harry said.

Ron gaped at him. "Are-are you serious?"

"You're damn right he's bloody serious," Richard said. "We got the owl this morning and you two have to go. It's over our heads as it's the Ministry's decision." Harry didn't look pleased and neither did Alan and Richard, but Ron was actually a little eager.

"When do we go?" he asked.

"Now, Weasley," Alan said. "You're excused for the afternoon."

"What?" he said, snapping out of his excitement a little. "What about John's class?"

"It's politics, Weasley. All bloody politics," Richard said. "You and Potter have obligations not only to yourselves and this camp but to the Ministry."

"Yes. No one cares if you miss lessons or fall behind. There's a bigger picture, and it's bigger than saving lives," Alan said sarcastically.

Ron looked at Harry. He simply shrugged. "I'm hoping this doesn't take long. Sometimes the interviews are really short."

"I don't want to hear any more of this," Alan said. "Rich, do you think you can escort them? You have experience doing this with Potter, and I can't let the rookies cover the pitch by themselves."

"Yeah, you go ahead," Richard said, gripping Alan's shoulder for a moment. "It's okay, Alan." Alan looked at him and nodded and for a moment Ron saw a bit of their real friendship and he understood. Richard reassured Alan like Harry had reassured him. Ron knew that outside of Lambrick their friendship probably went a lot deeper than they let be known there. Ron understood that as well. It was for the protection of it and for their individual sanity. Lambrick had also changed the way he and Harry were friends to each other, but it didn't mean that the bond wasn't there.

"Come on, boys," Richard said, leading the way.

"What is the write-up about?" Ron asked as they walked to Richard's cabin.

"I don't know," Harry said. "I never do. I get the notice and sometimes I can say no but most of the time I have to go. It's all part of the deal."

Ron saw the irritation on Harry's face and heard the dullness in his voice. "How many times have you actually done this?"

"Are we counting whole interviews or just pictures?" Harry asked.

"Never mind, mate," Ron said, obviously getting his answer.

"I don't mean to be a prick," he said. "I really hate missing lessons."

"So do I," Ron said.

They got to Richard's cabin and, much like when he used a pass, he and Harry had to sign forms saying what they would and would not disclose about Lambrick during the interview. "Now, Weasley, this isn't a social gathering and this isn't a short holiday. I will escort you and Potter to the interview room, and I will fetch you and escort you and Potter back here."

"Well, my brother and my dad work at the Min-"

"No, Weasley. To the interview room and back," Richard said.

"Can I at least take a showe-"

"To the interview room and back, Weasley," Richard repeated.

"But Harry and I are mucked up," he said.

"It's how they want you. It clearly said so in the notice," Richard said. Ron didn't understand; he was dirty and he knew that he and Harry didn't smell too great. He also didn't know why he couldn't nip to his dad's office or Percy's, and he wanted to know when he'd be able to eat. Nothing sounded too appealing anymore. He'd rather just stay at camp.

"You have to go with it, Ron," Harry said. He stood up. "Can we leave our brooms here, sir?"

"Yes, Potter. I'll keep them locked here." Richard checked his watch. "We'd better go."

Ron followed behind Harry and Richard as they walked beyond the gate and out of Lambrick. Harry and Richard talked in hushed and heated voices about Harry once again having to leave and how they both wanted it to stop. While they did, Ron took in the scenery. Being out of camp was like someone taking off a mask off of him. Things simply looked and felt and sounded differently. They passed by the barrier and apparated to the Ministry. They used the Visitors' Entrance, making Ron feel out of place. Everyone was fixed up and clean and talking casually. There was so much

color and easiness and normalcy. Lambrick Academy was like being away from the real world and the longer he was there, the more he felt disconnected from everything outside of it.

They went to the second floor and Ron searched around frantically hoping that he'd run into his dad or Percy. He didn't. All he got were stares and people saying Harry's name. They made it to a conference room, and Richard knocked on the door. It opened right away and a young looking bloke answered. "Oh, you're here!" he said in a somewhat high voice. Somehow his voice matched his light green robes perfectly, and Ron could just make out the curly dark hair under his hat. He held out his hand but Richard blocked him.

"Where's your clearance?" he asked the man.

He pulled a tag out of his robes and handed it to him. Richard examined it. He tapped the tip of his wand to it and nothing happened. "Alright. You know the rules."

"Yes, sir," the man said.

"I'll be back and Potter and Weasley should still be here in this same condition. We had to pull them out of training for this," Richard said.

"Yes, and we are very honored to have them, sir," the man said.

Richard nodded at him skeptically and closed the door right in his face. He pulled Ron and Harry to the side. "Remember what you agreed not to reveal."

"Yes, sir," they said together.

Richard eyed Harry. "As always Potter, if something doesn't feel right, get yourself and Weasley out and head to the main desk on this floor. They'll notify me right away, and I'll be here to get you."

"I will, sir. Thank you," Harry said.

"Thank you, sir," Ron said as well.

"Okay, have a good bloody interview," Richard muttered before walking off.

"Why wouldn't something feel right?" Ron asked.

"Some people only want to gawk and poke around," Harry said.
"It's not why we're here."

"Right," Ron said. "You ready?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Always." He opened the door and the two walked in. The man who had answered the door wasn't alone inside. There was a woman who was also young looking and had curly brown hair, but she wore pale orange robes instead of green. The two

looked a bit like twins. They both stood up and walked right over to them and shook their hands.

"Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley," the man said. "I'm Frank Pinkster and this is my sister Millie. We work for the Ministry but we've decided to start our own independent newspaper called The Enchanted Dispatch and—"

Ron started to laugh but he tried his best to make it seem like a cough. "I'm sorry. Continue."

"Thank you," Frank said. "So, our first issue is due soon. Our parents are executives in the Journalism Department and they're assisting us," he said happily. "For our first exclusive we want to interview you two for a segment called "Civilian Soldiers".

"Isn't that captivating?" Millie, whose voice was even higher than Frank's, asked. "It's going to be a short exposé on what living through the war was like for you two, how you're living now, and, of course, how your training is going at Lambrick. It should really draw readers in."

Ron and Harry shared a look. "Hold on," Harry said. "Usually these interviews are just about how I feel the Ministry is doing now. I didn't know that you wanted to do an exposé."

"Maybe my sister used the wrong word," Frank said, eyeing her. "We know you are both busy with training, so we're only asking for a small portion of your experiences."

"But why only us?" Ron said.

"Exactly, if this is a segment on what happened during the war then you have to know that there were a lot of people involved," Harry said. "Hermione Granger should definitely be here with us. We all worked together." Ron's spirits lifted. He would tell them about every waking moment of his life if it meant that Hermione could join them.

"Gentlemen," Millie said. "You must trust us. We're professionals and we took all of this into consideration. We thought about Ms. Granger and quite a few other people, but you two are what we want for the first edition. It's called "Civilian Soldiers" and that's exactly what you are."

"We want to interview the boys who fought all the way through and became men who are continuing to fight even though the war ended," Frank said. "Regardless of what you've accomplished, you are both still fighting and are still training so you can once again go out and risk your lives for the people you love. That's the story everyone wants to hear." Frank pulled two chairs out and gestured to them. "Please, sit." Ron and Harry once again shared a look before sitting down.

"Outstanding," Millie said. She went over to a tray and brought back a plate of meat sandwiches and fruit. "We don't want you gentlemen to go hungry here."

"Brilliant," Ron said. He lined up grapes across the top of his sandwich and smashed another sandwich on top of it before taking a large bite. "Mmm." He tugged on Harry's shirt. "Is this flavoring that I taste?"

"Can't be," Harry said, chomping on his own sandwich. "I think we're both mental because I'm almost sure that there's honey in this bread. Thank you, Millie."

She blushed. "No problem, gentlemen. I want you well fed before we start, and we have to do introductions anyway." Ron and Harry continued to eat their sandwiches in ecstasy while Frank and Millie talked. Ron ate an additional four fruit and meat sandwiches and drank two full glass of pumpkin juice before he was satisfied. He was surprised his stomach was holding so much.

"Shall we get started?" Frank asked.

"Yes, thank you," Harry said, looking full himself.

"Cheers," Ron added.

"Great." Frank beamed and sat up straighter in his chair. He looked to Millie. "Do you want to do the introduction?"

"Of course," she said. She started writing. "We sit here with the youthful soldiers, Harry and Ron-oh, do you mind if we use first names? It'll be more intimate."

"Sure," Ron said.

"Outstanding," she said. "We sit here with the youthful soldiers, Harry and Ron, who, without a doubt, are visibly disheveled and somnolent from a full morning of arduous training, yet there is a tranquility and an almost stoic air about them that is both inspirational and, dare I say, sexually engaging." She looked up from her parchment, clearly pleased with herself.

"That was wonderful, Millie," Frank said. "Very true words."

"Um, yeah," Ron said. "Nice work."

"I definitely never would've thought to put those words together," Harry said. "Especially about us."

"Especially that last bit about us," Ron said quietly out of the corner of his mouth.

Frank and Millie didn't seem to be listening. Frank simply got out his quill. "Me next," he said excitedly. "So, we are Frank and Millie Pinkster personally interviewing Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley for "Civilian Soldiers", the first exclusive for The Enchanted Dispatch." Ron had to once again stop himself from laughing at the absurd title.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "Uh, nervous."

"Don't be. We won't bite," Frank said, winking at him. Ron swallowed hard and attempted to smile at him. For awhile Frank and Millie asked them very general questions about themselves, the war, and Lambrick. It wasn't anything different from what Ron had experienced right after the war had ended when they did an interview for the Daily Prophet.

"Now," Frank said. "We're doing this a bit out of order because we wanted to save the in-depth and personal questions for when you felt more comfortable. How are you feeling at this point?"

"Good," Harry said.

"I'm all right," Ron said.

"Beautiful," Frank said, gazing right at him. "Well, I'd like to start with you, Harry. If that's okay with you, Ron?"

"Yes, please â€“ Harry first," Ron rushed. He had no idea what would be asked, and he wanted time to prepare his answers. He looked at Millie who slowly winked at him and bit her lip. Ron quickly decided to keep his eyes on Harry's ear. It was the only thing he knew wouldn't wink at him.

"Beautiful," Frank said. He began to write. "I'm sitting in front of Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived. The Chosen One. The Man of the Hour, although, with his wild black hair, somewhat small physique and a pair of old, almost hideously round framed glasses, I can't help but mismatch the famous scar and legend to the fit, yet nonetheless ordinary, body. No matter, we must proceed." Frank skimmed down the piece of parchment with his questions written out, and his Quick-Quotes Quill turned a page as well. "Harry, when would you say it all started for you?"

"When did what start?" Harry asked.

"The action," Millie said. "When did things start happening for you?" Ron frowned at the question. It was stupid and obvious.

Harry didn't seem to mind, but Ron was sure that he had been asked at least a million times before. "When I was one. That's when the 'action' technically started, but I'm sure eleven is the more appropriate answer so I'll go with that."

Frank wrote vigorously as did his quick quill wrote vigorously as well. "And how old are you now?"

"Eighteen," Harry said.

"So, whether the action truly started when you were one or when you were eleven, it's safe to say that you've been fighting your whole life, yes?" Frank asked.

Harry nodded. "I guess it is."

"What about now? Are you still fighting now?" he asked.

Harry shook his head. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"I mean the war is over, yet you're still fighting," he asked.
"Why is that?"

"I'm not fighting anymore, really," Harry said. "I'm at camp to learn how to be an Auror. It's what everybody's doing there."

"But you're not everybody, are you? You're Harry Potter," Frank said. "That brings me to my next question: do you currently feel differently than from when the war ended?"

Some of Harry's indifference crumbled. "Of course."

"How exactly? How did you feel, let's say, seven months ago as compared to now?" Frank asked.

"I don't know," he said. "Better. I feel safer. Seven months ago there was a lot of pressure and fear and uncertainty. I feel more secure currently."

"And you didn't feel safe and secure seven months ago?" Frank asked.

"Obviously he didn't," Ron said. "Voldemort wasn't dead seven months ago."

"Ron," Harry said.

"No, that question wasn't necessary! Tell us something we don't know," Ron said. "Ask him something he hasn't answered a hundred times."

"Ron, you have to understand that this is for a newspaper," Millie said. "We have to be accurate and most of the time redundant. Can we continue?" Ron nodded but said nothing.

"As I was saying, Harry, if you feel safer and more secure then why are you becoming an Auror?" Frank asked. "You've already risked your life for almost ten years, and you weren't even contracted to do so," Frank said. "Why are you once again putting yourself in harms away?"

"I've always wanted to be an Auror," Harry said. "Voldemort hasn't changed that. Just because he's dead doesn't mean there's still not evil forces in our world. I would be naïve to think that was true. As for risking my life, it's a small price to pay and, well, it's something I'm used to doing. I don't need a contract. It's my choice."

"How very noble. Harry speaks with a nobility and force," Frank said, writing everything as he spoke. "Then, you're saying that this fighting edge--"

"Great phrase," Millie said.

"Thank you," Frank said. "This fighting edge and this bravery you have is something you've always possessed? Whether you're in

school or at home or at camp, you're always on the edge and ready?"

"I guess," Harry said. "Lambrick is teaching me to be even more ready."

"How is Lambrick going? Why type of things are you learning?" Frank asked.

"I can't really give you specifics," he said.

"Classified. We understand," Millie said.

"I can say that it's challenging and it's hard work but I'm enjoying it," he said.

"It was a good choice of academy?" Frank asked.

"Yes, it was," Harry said, "and I'm glad that Ron is there with me."

"Of course, mate," Ron said. "So am I."

"Harry and Ron share a verbal exchange and an expression that can only be described as kind with a hint of adherence," Millie said. "It's brief yet potent, almost an inside joke that no one else will ever comprehend." Ron wanted to roll his eyes but he was afraid that Millie would translate it into words he'd never heard of before.

"That's definitely going into the next draft, Millie," Frank said. "Harry, I really only have one last question for you personally: if you had to explain where you were, where you are, and where you're going, what would you say?"

Harry's eyes got bigger and he let out a low breath. "Wow. Okay, I think I was this personâ€!"

"Boy, you should say boy," Millie said.

"Okay," Harry said sharply. "I was this boy who knew what he had to do but wasn't quite sure how to do it, but with what I learned and with the help of my friends and family and teachers and mentors, I was able to do what needed to be done."

"Defeating Voldemort?" Frank asked. "That's what you mean?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Defeating Voldemort was what I had to do, and I did it." Everyone always gazed at Harry in admiration when he talked about defeating Voldemort, but Ron was sure that he was one of the only few people who saw how Harry's confident voice never matched his disoriented expression. He could understand why Harry didn't boast about Voldemort's death. It didn't return the lives that had been lost, and it would never give him back the years that he spent in fear.

Ron had to help him move along with the question. "What about now? It's different now."

Harry seemed to come out of his daze. "You're right. Now I'm trying to rebuild my life and move on. Things are better and a little easier and less chaotic, but nothing's been forgotten and I'm still trying to establish myself for myself."

"Where are you going?" Frank said.

"Where am I going?" Harry asked. "I'm going to become an Auror. I know that I'll be a stronger person and I'll use all my experience to help people and myself and the ones I care about. I'm going to be ready, and I'm going to find my life away from the one I was given to lead all these years. That's where I'm going."

"Beautiful, Harry, thank you," Frank said.

Harry sat back in his chair and eased up. "You're welcome."

Millie turned to Ron. "See, that wasn't too bad. Are you ready for me?"

"Sure," Ron slowly said. "I'm ready for your interview, yes." Harry's questions hadn't been too difficult. Ron was sure he could dig out some good answers to the same ones.

"I'm interviewing the best friend, Ron Weasley," Millie said as she wrote. "The man who stood by Harry Potter throughout the years of servitude and provided him the much needed support and guidance that one can only find in a best mate. His hair is flaming and his freckle volume is massive, but one must assume that these features also do not coincide with the person under them."

"Bloody hell," Ron breathed.

"We'll cut that out," Millie said, winking at him. "Ron, you're eighteen as well?"

"Yes," he said.

"And when did the action start for you?" she asked.

"When I met Harry, I reckon," he said. "So, eleven, like he said."

"Your life had been pretty quiet and normal up until then?" she asked.

"Yeah, it was," he said. Looking back on it, his life before Hogwarts had been so normal that he couldn't believe he had been a part of it. The only battles he ever fought had been with his brothers over who was next in line for a shower. The only times he had ever been asked to step up had been when his parents made him tell who broke their dishes, and the only time he had bled was when one of the twins punched him in the face for annoying them. Before Ron met Harry, the worst troubles of his life had been his poverty, his fear of spiders, and his worry that he

would never be really loved by his mum. The child Ron had been was nothing like the man he was now, and he was proud of it.

"Are you having a moment?" Frank asked.

"No. There's no need to write this down," Ron said.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked. "I guess this was a good question for you."

"That's what this expose is all about," Millie said. "The truth."

"No, you've got it all wrong," Ron said. "Things were normal, but I'm not complaining that things changed. I was only thinking about how much I've changed. It's got little to do with Harry."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"I'm just saying that it's not like Harry dragged me along and I never got my perfect, normal life back," he said. "We instantly became mates, and I was there with him every year because I wanted to be. It was the right thing to do, and my normal life before him didn't mean anything anymore."

"That's interesting. You talk about being there for him and doing what was right," Millie said. "You and Harry had many grave experiences that put you in mortal peril. While for Harry it might have been more of a destiny to fulfill, you were more or less simply there with him without any sort of binding to it. Is that something you always felt or had in you?"

"It was the right thing to do," he repeated.

Millie and Frank shared a look and she started writing again. "Are you saying that people who didn't help were not doing the right thing then? Do you think risking your life is something necessary for all people?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying," he said. "It's not as if I walked into every situation thinking whether or not it would get me killed. I merely told myself that it was something Harry needed, and it was something I needed to do for the protection of our world and for my loved ones. Harry's my best friend, and it's natural that we would go through everything major in our lives together. It just so happens that, for us, everything major put us in mortal peril." Harry actually grinned a little, and Ron found himself smiling. It had truly felt a little cool to say that. Ron may have once been normal but he was gradually accepting that he really wasn't anymore, and it was almost an okay fact.

Millie laughed. "So, you were basically born this self-confident and equipped?"

"I'm not saying that either," Ron said. "I was unsure many times throughout the whole thing." He thought about walking out on Harry and Hermione in the tent and how it was still one of his

most shameful moments. "There were a few times I thought about giving up and I almost did."

"But you didn't," Harry said right away. "You always came back."

"Yeah, I did," he said. "So, I guess I was born with some of it but I had to learn and let a lot of it grow too."

"You're a man of nature and nurture. Outstanding," she said. "Okay, Ron, you talk about going through it all because it was an obligation to your friendship with Harry and to protect your loved ones. What about now? Why do you want to be an Auror?"

This was an easy question for him. "It's also something that I've always wanted. I too think that there's still evil in the world. Actually, I know there is and I want to protect people from it."

"People like your family?" she asked.

"Exactly," he said.

"Speaking of your family," she said. "I know it's very big and very important. The Wizarding World has come to know the Weasleys as a sort of beacon for love and strength within a family. I know you have a sister at Hogwarts and your mum defeated Bellatrix Lestrange. You even have a father and brother who work here at the Ministry. My question is, how do you cope with being at Lambrick and being away from them amidst the tragedy?"

"The tragedy?" he asked.

"One of your brothers was killed during the second war. In fact, your sister continues to attend Hogwarts. It must be hard for you," she said.

"You don't have to answer that, Ron," Harry shot. "Listen, Millie, you can't talk about Ron's sister or his brother. It's not required for this."

"It's because of the tragedy of Fred's death that I'm there," Ron found himself saying. "Everyone you just mentioned in my family is someone who isn't invincible, and I'm learning to be an Auror at Lambrick so that I can protect them." He felt the weight on his shoulders, but he would gladly carry it for the rest of his life. "I'm never going to lose another family member in that way again. It being hard doesn't matter and thinking about their safety is how I cope."

"That's very brave of you, Ron," Frank said.

"It's not brave," he said. "They're my family. This is what you don't understand about Harry and me: Harry didn't do all the things he did because he thought about how brave he was and realized that it was enough to get him through it; he did it because it was the right thing to do. He had friends and a family and my little sister â€“his girlfriend â€“ to protect. It's the same for me."

"What exactly is the same, Ron?" Millie asked. "How is your fate like Harry's? Is it something you think he bestowed upon you?"

Ron rubbed his neck as he thought about it. "What you think he gave me aren't things I got from him. Yeah, my life was okay before I met Harry and when I did meet him it got harder, but it also got better because I had a real friend. I was there for him and he was there for me because it's what friends do. It wasn't all danger for us. We have a friendship outside of the obligation."

"And this is what you think people don't understand?" Millie asked.

"It's part of it," he said. "The war is over and things are safer but they're not perfect. I'm going to be an Auror and risk my life because it's what I'm supposed to do. My family, Harry, and Hermione Granger â€“ who, for whatever mental reason, isn't good enough to be here â€“ are people I love and have to keep protecting. It's not about my bravery or my life, it's about them. That's what it's always been like for the both of us, and that's what people don't understand."

"That's very–"

"I'm not finished," Ron said. "People also don't seem to understand that the deaths of everyone lost in the warâ€“ not just my brother â€“ means something to me and to Harry, and they should mean something to everyone. This exposé may be about Harry and me, but we weren't the only people there; not for a second."

"Ron's right," Harry said. "It started with my parents and it might have ended with me and Voldemort but there's so much in between that made Ron and me able to be here. We want everyone who reads this to know that. I'll never take all the credit for Voldemort's defeat. I barely want anything to do with it."

Frank put his quill down and clasped his hands together. "That's very beautiful, gentlemen, and it's what we want for this segment. "Civilian Soldiers" is spot on to what you are and you saying all this enhances that. You've been protecting our world since you were kids, and you're still doing it. You've got families and friends and girlfriends and things that keep you normal, but there is nothing normal about you two as men."

"We have a very important question to ask that will end this interview," Millie asked. "While you two have been in camp, a lot has been going on with the real Aurors and the capturing of a lot of influential wizards who helped Voldemort in his quest. Do you plan on going to any of their hearings?" Ron felt a chill, even though he wasn't cold in the slightest. He looked at Harry and was glad that he seemed just as perplexed as he felt. It sounded like such a radical idea.

"I don't know," Harry said. "It's not something I've really been thinking about."

"Really?" Frank said. "It's never interested you to watch the men and women who have helped make your life so difficult and challenging be put to justice?"

"It has but I haven't planned on going to any of their trials," Harry said. "The last thing I want to do is make a spectacle."

"Spectacle? Why is that?" Millie asked. "Would it do too much to your mental state to be around them so soon after the war?"

"Oi, you can't ask him stuff like that!" Ron said.

"It's a question," Millie said.

"It doesn't matter," Ron said. "Harry's mental state has nothing to do with you. That's too personal. If he wants to go, then he'll go. That's all you need to know."

"And what about you, Ron?" Frank asked. "Do you have any inquiries on the men and women who have been involved in all this?"

"I don't know," he said.

"What about your brother, George?" Millie asked. "The surviving twin? Do you think it could be something you'd want for him, possibly finding out what happened to his brother?" Ron all of a sudden felt nauseous. He didn't know what to think.

"I think we're finished here," Harry said. "You aren't allowed to ask Ron another bloody question about his brother, or I swear I'll make sure that your paper never sees the light of day."

"I'm sorry, Harry and Ron," Millie said. "That will of course be taken out."

"Don't you dare go near him," Ron suddenly said.

"Pardon?" Frank asked.

Ron's brain stopped throbbing and he was able to form thoughts again. "My brother George. Don't go near him or ask him anything about this."

"Ron, this expose is only on you and Harry, and I told you that I won't be adding that last part," Millie said.

"Has anyone been to the shop to ask him about this?" Ron demanded.

"I'm not sure, Ron," Frank said.

"Find out. Find out and if anyone plans on talking to him then tell them that they'll have to get through me first," Ron said, standing up.

"Ron, calm down," Harry said. "We'll leave."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "If I find out that anyone has been asking George about going to trials and about Fred then I'll bloody—"

"Ron, don't worry," Millie said, looking a bit frightened. "No one here is going to ask him, okay? Frank, I think we can finish up on our own." Frank and Millie only had a few more questions after that. They took a few pictures and shook their hands but left soon after, looking as if they were afraid Ron would curse them to bits. He didn't mind that so much.

The moment they left the room, Harry took his glasses off and rubbed his face. Ron rested his head against the table. "Fucking hell, I can't believe you do this all the time," Ron said

"This is one of the better interviews I've had," he said. "Sometimes people want full detail of what Voldemort looked like when he died or they want to know if I have a void in my heart now that he's gone."

"Are you serious?" he asked.

Harry nodded. "Mate, I told you, people are out of their mind about this."

Ron shook his head. "You're amazing, Harry. I'm sorry that I ever wanted this. I don't see how you do it."

"You get used to it," he said. "The paper should be out in a week or so. It's the last thing Frank muttered before they left."

"I don't want a copy," Ron said.

"Everyone in your family gets one. You'll see it whether you want to or not," Harry said. Ron shrugged and closed his eyes. He had thought that the interview would give him time to recuperate but instead he felt exceptionally knackered. He actually missed his usual fatigue from dueling. "Hermione should've been here," Harry said.

Ron opened his eyes and sat up. "I know. She deserves a whole bloody edition all to herself, and they would've loved everything she had to say." He groaned and kicked the leg of the chair in front of him. "I fucking want her, Harry."

"And I want your little sister — my girlfriend," Harry said with a smile. "I can't believe you introduced Ginny like that. How angry do you think she'll be when she reads that?"

"Fucking hell, I don't want to think about it," Ron said. "Do you think they'll cut that out?"

"No. You mentioned me having a girlfriend, and you mentioned that it's your sister. I'm sure Frank is tossing off to the beautiful news right now," Harry said.

"Bollocks," he said.

"Bollocks is right. I'll be the one who'll have to hear about it from Ginny," Harry said. "I should've thrown in something about Hermione to make it even, but she's already been called a scarlet woman. I reckon that's enough."

"Oh well. They can both lecture me. I'll take it. I just miss the lot," he said.

Harry patted his arm. "I think they'll like what you said. You're great at this stuff, Ron."

"I'm not. I couldn't stay calm," he said. "You're a lot better. Besides, I just said what was true. I didn't exaggerate or anything. I meant every word. I told you that."

"Thanks," Harry said.

"Don't thank me," Ron said. "I'm not thanking you."

"Good. I don't want you to. I felt weird enough with Frank and Millie," he said.

"You?" Ron asked. "Do you know how many times they winked at me? Millie and Frank?"

"I think they fancy you," Harry said. "I reckon they love gingers, and they probably would've shagged you as a set on this table if you would've asked." Ron shuddered and covered his face. "It's a price you pay for fame," Harry added. "Don't worry, I won't tell Hermione about your new love triangle."

"Sod off, Harry! I'm finally famous, and I get a couple of mentals in too bright robes wanting to shag me." He rubbed his neck. "I mean for fuck sake, The Enchanted Dispatch?"

Harry burst into laughter. "Our edition will be their only edition."

"I hope so," he said. "Fillie and Millie or Frank and Mank should return to their regular jobs."

"What? You didn't love this?" Harry asked in mock surprise.

"Not like I thought I would," Ron said. "Best part was the sandwiches."

"We've still got half a plate." Harry slid the plate over to them. He lifted one. "To a mental bloody interview that wasn't really that bad. In fact, it was dripping in what can only be described as beautiful."

Ron tapped Harry's sandwich with his. "Yeah, and we missed training for it. That's always an outstanding bonus." They started eating again and once more Ron made many meat and fruit sandwiches.

"Hey, Ron," Harry said. "Do you ever think about going to the trials?"

He swallowed his large wad of food. "Do you?"

"I do but I didn't want to tell them that," Harry said. "I think I might go to a couple down the line. It sort of feels like something I'll have to do. What about you?"

"I honestly don't know," he said. "I mean it's probably a good thing to do, but it won't give me any sort of closure. I know that." Ron started to feel a little nervous and a bit more weight on his shoulders, but he was alone with Harry and he trusted him completely. He was the only person he could tell. "I do think about the other thing, though."

"What?" Harry asked.

"What I'd do if I found anyone who was involved in blowing up that wall next to Fred," Ron.

Harry paled a little. "What would you do?"

"I promised myself that I'd never allow myself to find out," Ron said, "I don't know what I'd do, and I don't want George thinking about it and finding out either. Truthfully, Harry, being at Lambrick really takes me to another place, and I sometimes feel off to other things. When they started talking about the trials, it's like everything with George came back at once and it's why I went mental. I don't know what that means."

"I don't either," Harry said. "Sometimes I can't help but sort of shut out other things while at camp. It's like—"

"You're living a different life?" Ron added.

"Exactly," Harry said. "It's strange."

"Yeah, I'm ready for holiday but it's like how will I adjust to not hearing Alan's whistle?" Ron asked.

"Or Richard's sarcasm?" Harry said. They both started laughing softly. "It doesn't matter because I want to go back to your house, Ron. I'm ready. I have to get back there."

"Me too," Ron said. "I really do."

There was a knock on the door and Richard come in. "Are you two ready?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said. "It didn't take all day. That's good."

"That's great, Potter," Richard said. "I see that you two have been spending your free time eating." He pointed to the empty plate that only had a few sandwich crumbs left.

"Sir," Ron said.

"It's best not to lie to him, Ron," Harry said.

"Too right you are, Potter," Richard said. "Well, my lovelies, you two will be able to join your sections for the night session. I'd hate for you to disturb class right now so while you wait you can burn off some of that delicious meal by giving me a few running laps. What d'ya think?"

"Yes, sir," they said in heavy and gloomy voices. They got back to Lambrick and Richard had them start at the beginning of the trail in Ron's section.

"How many, sir?" Ron asked.

"Until I say stop. Is that a good number?" Richard asked.

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

He had already felt dingy, but once he started running laps in his sweat stained and sticky clothes, he felt worse. Ron couldn't believe that earlier that day he had been interviewed for a paper. He thought about how the interview had gone. It was surreal to talk about the things he never thought about. He had never thought about why he did the things he did. He never thought about why he was the way he was. All he had been doing since the war ended was trying to regain what he thought he'd lost. He didn't consider that he was in fact gaining new traits, but he must have been. Richard finally let them stop and Ron felt moments away from regurgitating all his sandwiches. He was cold yet burning up at the same time, and he could feel the sweat trickle down his bollocks. It only got worse when he started the night session. It was ghastly and painful. It was routine and horrible, yet he sort of felt at home with it.

At dinner, Ron was a bit too full to eat and it was another thing that he couldn't believe. "Are you really not going to tell us what happened?" Ben asked.

"I did. Harry and I had an interview thing. It was nothing special," Ron said.

"You should've seen John," Conor said. "I thought he would burst into tears when his pet didn't show up."

"Pet?" Ron asked.

"Roger gave you the name. You remember," he said. "It's sorta stuck."

"Well, bugger to all of you," he said. "Trust me, I won't go to the next one. I felt so off at the night session."

"You performed like you were, too," Olivia said. "You even got mud clots in your hair or something." He leaned his head forward and scratched his scalp enthusiastically. Flecks of mud fell in her lap. "Oi, back up, you dick!" she said, pushing him away.

He laughed but with one look at Ben he stopped. Ben was almost glaring at him. Olivia must have noticed. "Are you okay, Ben?"

"Huh? Yes, I'm fine," he said, shooting a glance at Ron.

Ron was too exhausted for his drama. "Conor, can I use your notes? I'm not really hungry, and I need to catch up."

"Sure. All my stuff is on my bed," he said.

"Cheers," he said. He got Conor's notes but he didn't start studying with them right away. He opened his drawer and took out the picture of his family. It was all for them. It wasn't about bravery. He looked at the twins. Ron wanted to think that he wouldn't know what he'd do if he ever found out who was more or less responsible for Fred's death, but a tiny and searing and dark part of him knew. He remembered that feeling he had when Fred first died and Hermione had to hold him down to keep him from doing something stupid. It had been the most severe and blackest form of rage and hate that he'd ever had. It had been a need to hurt and even kill.

He thought about Conor's temper and what he had said about Alan. Ron understood it. He liked to think that he would want to seek justice because it was the right thing, but that darkness in him knew that he would want to kill whoever it was. The thought made him queasy and he told himself that wasn't who he was. He had to do something. He took out a sheet of parchment and decided to write. He wrote to the only person who had pounded in his mind since being asked the question about the trials.

George,

I hope you're doing okay. It's been awhile since we've talked, but I reckon you've been busy. I understand. I just, well, I honestly don't know why I'm writing to you right now. I'll be seeing you soon so it's not like there's a lot to tell you. I really just want to talk to you, even if it's through writing. I guess the only thing that's worth mentioning is that I got to leave camp today for awhile with Harry. Some new independent newspaper with a bullshit name wanted to interview us. I won't give you any details because it'll take too much writing, and you'll be sent a copy sometime next week, but I do want to say now that if there's some rubbish about Fred in there or about you, please, don't take it seriously. Reporters love a good story, you know that. I hate to bring Fred up in this way but we don't talk about him that much anymore. I don't know why, but something in me is saying that you're thinking being here has erased it all for me. It hasn't, George. I think about him all the time, and I think about you too. I don't want to press anything, but I want you to know that. Even if you don't need me to tell you, I'm telling you. I'm still here for you, George and if anything you read bothers you, please tell me and I'll take care of it. Tell me and tell Bill or mum or dad or whoever. Just don't keep it to yourself if you don't like what it says.

I hope the shop is still going strong. I reckon it is with the holiday coming up. I've been doing shameless plugs for it here so expect a lot of trainees there. I wouldn't mind compensation for the referrals either. In fact, just get the check ready for me. Okay, that's all I wanted to say. So, I'll let you get back to

whatever it is that you're doing. Tell Angelina and Lee I said hi and when I get back we'll catch up. I mean it. I'll be there for you George, but I hope you've been better at talking to other people too. I know it's hard to believe but Angelina and Lee don't have to be your only friends that you can trust. I'm learning that myself.

Ron

Ron sealed the envelope. George was fine. He knew that, so he didn't know why there was randomly a pit in his chest. It was as if he was on one side of a door, and George was staying quiet on the other side again. Ron let out a deep breath and closed his eyes to help the feeling pass. It was almost like he could sense George and all the bad emotions that were running through him, but that was a twin thing. He must've been far more tired than he thought. He took a few more deep breaths and got back to studying. He went from writing a letter to his brother to copying notes about defensive tactics and mapping. He stopped and looked at the two very different yet important documents in front of him. It actually made him feel a little better.

He'd never call himself a civilian solider out loud, but he might have been.

* * *

Olivia took off her glasses and groused loudly as they all filed out of John's class. "Those maps were frustrating. Is John trying to drive us mad?"

"I think so," Ron said through a yawn. "We were in there way too long."

"Brilliant, even the pet thought it was rubbish today," Conor said. They all stopped and stood around rather awkwardly in the dark waiting for Alan.

"Where is he?" Ben asked. "I thought he'd meet us out here."

"I say we go to the field and keep our guards up," Jack said, heaving his broom over his shoulder and keeping his wand at the ready.

"Why?" Ben asked. "He might've had to nip somewhere for a moment. He'll probably be back, and I don't want to do another two hours of extra target practice for not following orders."

"You don't think it's odd that Alan left the class early or that we stayed later?" Jack asked. "It's dark out here now, and Alan always talks about being punctual." He looked at Ron.

"Something's going on." Ron kept his gaze on him, and together they exchanged thoughts and put the pieces together.

"Bloody hell," Ron said. "You're right."

"I can be sometimes, Weasley," Jack said.

"Fuck. What do we do?" Conor asked.

"Let's go to the field and keep our wands ready," Ron said. He and Jack led the group to the field. Sure enough, there was no longer open space when they arrived. Instead, they found a massive and lengthy obstacle course that extended all the way to the other side of the field. As they moved closer, it reminded Ron a lot of the maze that was used in the Triwizard Tournament. It was deep and there were three entrances, but it wasn't made of plant. The maze was black and the walls were made of stone, wood, brick, and what looked like glass in some places.

"Bleeding hell," Conor said. "What is this?"

"It's a maze, Neary. Can't you tell?" Jack asked.

"I've never seen a maze like this before," Ben said. "Then again, we are at Lambrick Academy. What do we do?"

"We go through," Ron and Jack said together.

"Are you two taking the piss?" someone from cabin three asked.

"Why else would this be here?" Jack asked. "This is undoubtedly another test."

"Yeah. Alan doesn't want us to wait around for instruction," Ron added. "When has he ever done that?"

"Where do we start?" Olivia asked. He could see the bit of alarm in her eyes.

"Let's take this middle one and stay toward the center," Ron said.

"No. We'll veer left and take this first one," Jack said. "The center is an obvious trap."

Ron rubbed his face in frustration. "Jack, you always want to approach from the center."

"Not in this case," Jack said. "This is a maze probably designed by Alan and John. They want to know what we've learned. Staying left will keep us from making too many turns, and it'll keep us on the offensive edge in case there's something in there wanting to attack us. If we're in the center, then we're vulnerable."

"I get that," Ron said, "but you have to trust me. This maze is really big, and I know that the further we go in, the more it spreads out on the sides." Jack didn't look convinced, and Ron knew that he would never get him to listen to him. "I'm going straight in through this middle one. You and everyone else can take whatever path you want."

"I'm going with you, Ron," Conor said.

"Me too," Olivia said. Ben stood next to her and nodded, and a few other people joined them. The rest of the section stayed by Jack. Ron felt heat on his neck. People had apparently decided that it was either he or Jack worth listening to.

"I'll see you on the other side, Weasley," Jack said. He went through the first entrance and his group followed.

Ron's energy returned and it spiked shots of confidence and power through him. He would have to be the leader. It was the right thing to do. "We're making the right decision," Ron said. "Keep your wands lit and let's go." They all walked in and discovered that the maze was a lot more intimidating from the outside. The ground was still just grass and dirt, and there wasn't a ceiling. It was literally a maze with the halls made of different material. He told himself that this would be okay. He opened his mouth to tell everyone else as well but a horrific booming noise erupted not too far away from them. Someone screamed and before he knew it, all the walls around them were shaking and breaking and looking like they might cave in.

"Run!" Ron bellowed. He started running and everyone followed him. He had no idea where he was going, but he stayed toward the center. The smoke and loudness cut right into his spine and made him feel like he would pass out, but he had to keep it together for his group. There was no time to panic. People were counting on him. He kept his lip bit and reminded himself to stay toward the center and to make as few right turns as possible because the direct path was the most effective. They kept running but stopped when they reached a dead end.

"Shit! We need to turn around again," Conor said.

Ron's heart dropped. It didn't make sense. He had stirred them wrong a few times, but he was sure about the path now. He looked at the wall; something didn't seem right. He went over their path in his mind and the few times they had reached a dead end. He then considered that there were three entrances, and that they hadn't run into the other group. It didn't make sense. "No. No, this has to be right."

"How can it be right?" someone asked. "There's a bloody wall."

There was another crash and Ron jumped. He heard voices in his head, but he shook his head and he slapped the side of his face to focus. "No, no â€“ wait!" he said. Everything was smoky and piercing, but he had to get through it for the group. He touched the wall that was made of brick.

"Ron, you're really shaking," Olivia said.

"I'm fine," he said. He was dizzy and his heart raced, but it didn't matter. The wall was made of brick, and it was a beautiful thing. "No, this is the way out."

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"Think about it." He closed his eyes to see it in his mind, and he put his other hand against the brick and moved them both around as if he was writing on John's board and the maze was there. "Every wall that's led to a dead end has been made of wood. Every adjacent wall that's lead to another path has been stone. All the walls that take us further left are glass, but this is the only fully brick wall we've seen. Before, the brick has always been combined with the wood just before we'd reach a dead in." It was perfect logic, but his group stared at him vacantly.

"What does that mean, Ron?" Conor asked.

"It means that this is one of two complete brick walls in this whole maze," he said. "You're right, Ben. This is a Lambrick maze. There's probably one brick wall way out with Jack's team but this is ours. This is the end of the maze. Trust me. We're here."

"We trust you," Olivia said right away. "Tell us how we get out."

Confringo came to his mind first, but he didn't know if he'd be able to take it and he wouldn't risk it. "Let's use Reducto," he said, stepping back. "Everyone form a line and on three we'll blast this." He raised his hand. It was the way out. He knew it. "One, two, three!" He lowered his hand and everyone shouted the charm. The wall was blasted away and, sure enough, he saw instructors further down in the field. They were from both east and west. His group all ran out to them, but Ron didn't see any trainees from their section or from west.

"Oi, those are mine!" Alan said, walking over to meet them. Brian was there, John was there, as was Richard, his section helper, and the navigational teacher from west. Even Phillip Smith was there. It was if they had all been standing around talking and not expecting them to show up. "What are you lot doing here?" Alan asked in what had to be amazement.

"We got through the maze, sir," Ron said. He felt overwhelmed by what he had accomplished, but he was still shaken up. He put his hands on his knees and told himself not to pass out again.

"What?" Richard asked. "No one from my section is here yet."

"No one from anywhere is here, Richard," John said.

"Were we supposed to stay in the maze or wait somewhere?" Conor asked.

"This is Lambrick Academy, trainee," Phillip said. "No one stays or waits for anything. No, you were supposed to get out. Mind you, we didn't expect anyone this soon."

"Let alone a whole group," Brian said. "Who led you?"

Everyone looked at him and Olivia nudged his arm. "I did, sir," Ron said.

"Ron, I should've known," John said with a huge smile.

Ron didn't know what to say or what he was supposed to feel but pride was the first emotion he could identify. "I justâ€¢the wall patterns."

"Sorry?" John said.

"The wall patterns," Ron said in a stronger voice. "That's what everything was based on, wasn't it?"

Phillip looked at him in a curious way. "It's exceptional that you caught on to that â€" and so quickly."

"The simplest answer is usually the correct one, sir," Ron said.

Alan actually smiled at Richard and put a hand on his shoulder. "Ron bloody Weasley." Ron blushed and rubbed his neck.

Richard brushed his hand off. "Whatever. Congratulations. You'll get your money."

"Money? This isn't a betting arena, young sirs," Phillip said.

"Sorry, Mr. Smith," Richard said. "Great. A couple of my lot is coming out now."

"Go meet them," Phillip said. "The kids will start coming out in more pockets now. We can get started. "You east trainees, take a breather and join us at the front." He and the other instructors walked off and Ron let out a contented sigh.

Ben clapped him on the back. "Ron, you're a damn genius. Do you realize that you led us to the end before anyone else in the camp?"

"I did," Ron said. He had nothing else. There was nothing to rationalize or brush off. He pushed himself and he had been successful. He kept his fears at bay and he did what he told himself to do. He had never felt more powerful in his life.

"Thanks," Ben said. "I'm glad I stuck with you." A few other people from his section patted his arm and told him thanks before joining at the front. Conor and Olivia both stayed behind and smirked at him.

"What?" Ron asked.

"I wish Roger could've seen this," Conor said. "Not just you making everyone take it up the arse by being the first here, but because you beat Jack."

"That alone is worth going through the maze again," Olivia said. "Ron, I'm sure you just showed everyone here that you're a real contender. I don't know whether I should be happy for you or eager to plot my plan to sabotage you."

Ron laughed and blushed even more. "Let's go with the first one for now and join the group." It was half an hour before more people from west came through their maze. Ron saw Harry slowly making it over, so he joined him. Harry's skin was almost white and he looked horrible. "Are you okay?" Ron asked him at once.

Harry took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "That maze was horrible, Ron. I wasn't prepared for that." It hit Ron hard in the chest. He had been so happy for himself that he hadn't thought about how going through another maze would effect Harry.

He clutched both his shoulders. "It's over now, and it's not like last time. It's never going to be like that again. I promise."

"I know," Harry said. "I'll be ready for the next one."

"Of course you'll be ready," Ron said. "There's nothing that you can't make yourself ready for, Harry. You're living in the now, remember?"

Harry cracked a grin and rolled his eyes. "Yes, and the now is beautiful."

"I was thinking outstanding was the word," Ron said.

Harry laughed and Ron slowly winked at him. Harry pushed him. "You're a bloody prat. That's really scary. Don't do it again."

"At least I don't mean it. It's been a week, but I'm still having nightmares about Frank and Millie," Ron said. Harry seemed in a better mood, so Ron went back to feeling proud of himself. Jack's group finally burst through the wall after that, and it was almost an hour before everyone was out and joined at the front.

Phillip held up his hands to silence everyone. "What you all just completed was a Warkshaw Maze. It's designed specifically for Auror training camps, and it's what has been used at Lambrick since its inception. It's effective. It always changes and it will launch the next phase of your navigational field training with me."

"You will still have your afternoon class, and you will still have broom navigation training," Richard said. "Phillip's section of teaching will be added on to it, and your night will end with his lessons. We're approaching the end of the first half, and it's time you lot experienced what a full day of training is really like there." Ron and Harry shared a look; they thought that they had already been doing that.

"We're also going to combine the sections and combine the instructors," Alan said. "This is a big unit and we need to teach you all as one camp."

"Yes, but we want you to teach each other as well," Phillip said. "It's a competition but no Auror does every job alone. We will use this maze, smaller versions of it, and other obstacles as well to establish team building and to find where the leadership

rises in the bunch we have this year. I can see, however, that some leaders have already emerged." Phillip moved his eyes to Ron for a moment and he nodded to him. He would keep his word to Phillip and show him. He would show everyone and himself.

Phillip dismissed them shortly after and Alan pulled him over to the side. "Great work tonight," he said.

"Thank you, sir," Ron said.

"You're really making a name for yourself with all this," Alan said. "However, I also know where this sort of praise and attention can lead to. Don't let it all get to your head. Don't think you can't mess up, and don't think everyone here loves you."

"I don't, sir," Ron said. "I know this is just one thing out of a million. Like you always tell me."

"You're right, and I'll keep bloody telling you so you'll keep your head on," Alan said.

"I do have my head on," he said. "I'm not gonna wank over this tonight before I go to sleep. I'm still fighting, sir." He suddenly thought about "Civilian Soldiers." "I'm still fighting," he repeated as an afterthought.

Ron went to the mailing cabin before he headed to dinner. As scheduled, his copy of The Enchanted Dispatch was there. On the front page were Frank and Millie. He opened it and the exposé was on the second page. There was a picture of him and Harry standing in front of the door looking dreadfully dirty. There was one of Harry shaking hands awkwardly with Frank, and there was one of him shaking hands with Millie and looking slightly bored. He wanted to throw it away, but his curiosity would make him read it. There was a letter attached asking for his immediate feedback, but he had another letter as well. Looking at it made his heart skip a beat. The envelope had his name written on it in very neat and crisp lettering. At first he thought it was Hermione's. It was practically her handwriting but he checked the name. The last name was Granger but the woman's name was Abigail instead of Hermione.

Once again, he didn't make it to his cabin. He collapsed to the ground and felt bile rise to his lips. There was no other reason why her mum would write to him. Hermione had been seriously injured or killed. His world began to disappear, and he only needed to read the first few words to reassure himself before he let his heart stop so he could die right there in the grass. He could hardly get the letter open because he was so worried, but the first few words were just as neat as the letters on the envelope and they didn't speak of Hermione's state.

Good evening Ron Weasley,

This is Abigail Granger, Hermione's mother. I'm sure you remember, but it never hurts to add the formality. I hope you don't mind that I'm writing to you. Hermione gave me the address,

and she told me when to send this so you'd have some free time to read it. I expect your training is going well. Hermione mentions it sometimes in her letters, and she says that you're an extraordinary cadet. That's great to hear. She also told me that you have a short holiday coming up. That should be nice, and it's essentially why I'm writing to you. I was wondering and hoping that, for the first few days or so, you could spend your holiday with our family at our home. I know Hermione always goes with you to your house, but this year David and I would fancy for you to spend some time with us. We still have so much to learn about each other and for once it would be nice to treat you because your family always treats my daughter. Of course, you and Hermione are more than welcome to spend the majority of your resting period at your house. That's fine. I'm only asking that the four of us share some time together in light of all that's happened, both good and bad. I've been writing to your parents, as I'm sure you know, and they think it's a lovely idea. I hope you do, too. Hermione is a part of your family, and it's time you become a part of ours.

Please, write back at your earliest convenience and let me know what you think and what your schedule will be like. If you're wondering, we have a spare bedroom for you so it's no trouble, and of course I'll make a favorite dish of yours for the holiday. You simply have to tell me what it is and if you have any food allergies. I don't know the biological differences, but I'm assuming wizards can be allergic to things too. No matter. Have a nice night, Ron, and I trust to see you soon.

Sincerely,

Abigail Granger

Ron put the letter down. Hermione was alive and okay. The Grangers just wanted to see him. They wanted him to stay over and get to know him. He looked at the letter in his right hand and the newspaper in the other. The Wizarding World wanted to know more about him, but so did Hermione's mum. It was an easy decision. He went to his room and wrote Hermione's mother back as quickly as he could. There was nothing to think about. He wanted to spend time at her house and with her parents. He wanted to be a part of their family.

He was a civilian soldier, and he was a part of the first edition to a new paper. He had led his team out of the maze first, and the leaders at Lambrick Academy were finally seeing him as his own person, and there was an increasing chance that he'd make it to the merge. However, nothing made him feel more proud than reading that Hermione's parents wanted to make him a part of their family and that they wanted to get to know him.

It didn't matter where he was or what he did. His greatest point of happiness always returned to Hermione.

* * *

**** Every time I think that I've reached my limit to how much I love Ron, I think about what he's been through and what he did for everyone in the books and I love him more. Ron is a type of character who is bottomless. There's just so much to him that unfortunately we didn't get to explore and see because it wasn't exactly his story in the books. To me it's really important that his character is discovered because the series wouldn't have been as remarkable without him. It would've been a body with no heart and no blood running through its veins. So, to hell with the people who think he's simple and bumbling. Ron has done so much for me as a reader and a writer and telling a bit of his story, or at least my version of it, is the least I can do. I hope you enjoyed this because I really, really did. Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 36*: What doesn't kill

No, you're not mental. I updated. I'm SO sorry for the wait. As I said in my other updated story, I've had some scheduling conflicts but it's all be cleared up now. :) You're also not mental for thinking this is a LONG chapter. It IS even for me. (wipes sweat off forehead). I know I always say "I won't have a chapter be this long again" but this time I really mean it, lol. I just had to get everything in this one so I hope you don't mind too much. Well, thanks for the lovely reviews and I hope everyone enjoyed DH2. Kolves and Yates did their very best to ruin things for me(as always) but I was able to stomach it and enjoy myself...for the most part...

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

* * *

Ron looked around and tried to remember where he was. It was incredibly dark in the vast, quiet prairie land, and he easily got lost within the trees, tall grass, and the occasional fireball or spell that was thrown at him out of nowhere. He closed his eyes and mentally went over his route. He knew that he was wasting time, but he was knackered and his memory for where things were was failing him. He heard a crackle so he opened his eyes: everything around him was dissolving. The trees and grass faded and all the greenness turned to black.

"Fucking bollocks," Ron breathed. He had taken too long and, before he knew it, the prairie land was completely gone and the black walls of the maze once again surrounded him. He turned around to find the entrance was right in front of him. He didn't want to leave but he had no choice.

Phillip Smith was waiting for him with his arms crossed over his chest and a slight frown on his face. Phillip wasn't as tall as Ron and he looked very well into his years with his grey hair, but the man was still hefty and it was easy to see his muscles under his black robes. His physique wasn't the only thing intimidating about him. On the first night of Phillip's training he had shown up clean-shaven and Ron understood why: he was a lot more frightening when his entire face was shown.

"Mr. Weasley," he said.

"I know, sir," Ron said. "I didn't finish."

"I can see that," he said. "Why didn't you finish?"

There was no point in lying to Phillip. He had a way of seeing through everything. "The maze was confusing and I got distracted a bunch of times."

Phillip didn't seem to care. "Do you not think distractions will occur during a real battle?"

"Umâ€;" Ron knew what he wanted to say but he got distracted again. His fellow trainees from both sections were all around him going through mazes or flying around targets or dueling in the field. It was rather baffling. They had always learned and performed together, but Phillip believed in individual education and experience. No two people were ever doing the same thing and the vast field was now always crowded. Ron, of course, was completing a field maze. It was simulated to mimic an actual battle zone, and, when Phillip had one-on-one time with him, he was keen on making Ron go through as many simulations as possible.

"Mr. Weasley?" Phillip said.

"Yes, Mr. Smith?" Ron asked, shaking his head slightly.

Phillip's frown increased. "Trainee, are you aware that the end of the first half draws near?"

"Yes, sir, and I'm very sorry for being unfocused," he said.

"The only person you should be apologizing to is yourself," Phillip said. "You breezed through the other Warkshaw Mazes, and I figured they were wasting both of our time. I gave you the level five because it's the most advanced and I thought you could handle it."

"I can, sir," Ron said. "I guess I'm having an off night."

"Then correct it because, even though this is just a simulation, it's exactly how it will be during a real scouting mission," Phillip said. "Do you know how many of these level fives I have out here?" Ron shook his head. "Three and that's including the one you're using. That means that you are one of three people in the entire camp that I and the other trainers believe are advanced enough to use these simulations. Additionally, it is also the belief that you, Mr. Weasley, may in fact be the most advanced when it comes to this branch of the Auror profession."

Ron didn't know what to say. He was proud but he also felt a little uneasy. He knew that Phillip was not trying to compliment him, he was trying to warn him about what was expected of him. Everyone was putting so much pressure on him to perform well and it was taking a bit of the fun out of navigation. "Yes, sir," he said. "I understand."

"Good. Now, I'll let you try one more time before I have you go on to moving targets." Phillip took out a map and put it under Ron's nose. "You have one minute to study this. What is your objective when looking at a map?"

"Coordinates and open spaces," Ron said absentmindedly. He studied the map and tried desperately to commit it to memory line by line.

All too soon, Phillip pulled the map away and walked up to the entrance of the maze. He tapped his wand on the side and the maze shook and reformed. It wasn't as big as the first Warkshaw Maze Ron had led a small group of his section through, but it was more advanced. "The path has been changed. So, go in and keep your nerve. Breathe and remember your coordinates."

Ron nodded. "Yes, sir." He took a deep breath and cleared his eyes of dust particles and sweat before going back in. It was difficult to sift through but Phillip's words about him being the best gave him a bit more energy and focus. He made it out on the other side just as the walls had started to turn black.

At the end of the session, Phillip gathered everyone around him and held up his hands for silence. "Trainees, you're getting too close to the merge selection to start drifting now. The new training program that you're enduring on top of everything else in your schedule may seem like a lot, but it'll be nothing compared to the workload you'll have as Aurors. So, get some rest and tomorrow review the things you've learned this week and be ready for Monday."

Ron yawned and swung his broom over his shoulder. He was happy that when he woke up the next morning it would be Sunday. He would still be busy but he at least wouldn't have field practice. He would spend the free time thinking about getting back to Hermione and his family. Someone tapped his shoulder. "Ron," Harry said.

"What happened to you?" Ron asked, giving him a once-over. Harry's lip was busted and he was a bit wobbly.

"Target practice," he said with a grin. "It was fun." It was eerie seeing Harry smile when he was bloody and dirty. He looked like a nutter.

"Lucky," Ron mumbled.

"Not so much," he said, wiping his mouth. "I got knocked in the head and they think I might have a mild concussion. The potion I gotta take will have me wonky tomorrow. At least it's Sunday. Are you going to rest up? You look peaky."

"I feel peaky," Ron said, yawning again, "but I have some coursework to do and I have to study for an exam on Monday, so there's no time."

"An exam? Our teacher didn't schedule us one," Harry said.

Ron shrugged and rubbed his neck. "Well, you know, I'm in the advanced section of my class, and I have a lot more tests and work to do."

Harry smirked and it made more blood trickle from his lip. "Ah, the price you pay for being gifted. Hermione would be proud. I reckon Percy and Bill as well."

"I don't see how the lot did this year after year and for multiple subjects," Ron said. "Especially Bill. I think he took even more classes than Hermione as an N.E.W.T. student." He yawned once more. "Well, I need to get some sleep mate, and you should hurry up and get your potion. You really are no good to me dead."

Harry laughed and wobbled as he did. "By the way, I got a letter from Ginny today and she said that when she writes to you again she plans to yell at you some more."

"Bloody hell," Ron said. "I don't know how many times I'm gonna have to apologize for that bit in the exposÃ©."

"Until you erase it from every paper sold, I reckon," Harry said. "She might send you a Howler."

"If she does then I'll go for a wee and send that to her," Ron said.

Harry punched his arm. "Oi, that's my girlfriend you want to send your disgusting urine to, wanker."

Ron punched him back. "She was my sister before she was your girlfriend. I can send her whatever I want. G'night, anus."

After the morning drill the next day, Ron changed and headed for John's cabin. He rubbed his eyes and kept yawning and shivering the whole way there. The weather was cold and windy, but he enjoyed the serenity of it. Lambrick was a beautiful place sometimes. He opened the door to the cabin and was surprised to see Jack inside working on a map. Ron had never gone to the cabin

so early on a Sunday before, but he now assumed it was where Jack always went because he was never in the cabin.

"Good morning, Ron," John said, looking up from his journal. His shiny black hair that was usually tied in a long braid hung loose around his head. It made him look even cooler than he already did.

"Morning," Ron said. He put his bag on the table in front of Jack and walked up to John's desk. "I've got a lot of work to do."

"Don't let me stop you. Here." John poured him a cup of steaming tea and offered him a napkin full of what looked like biscuits.

"Is this for me?" Ron asked, his mouth watering.

"There's nothing wrong with a little indulgence, and I always reward the early and punctual," John said, gesturing to the breakfast station on his desk. "It's usually just Jack and myself enjoying the treat, so it's nice to share. You're welcome to take as much as you like."

"Thank you, John. This is gorgeous," Ron said. He added a bit of sugar to his tea before taking his delicious treat over to a table. He took a large gulp of the tea and didn't even care that it was scorching going down. He then stuffed two biscuits in his mouth at once. It tasted so sweet and fulfilling. Real flavoring and real food were things he desperately missed.

"Good morning, Weasley," Jack said unexpectedly.

Ron turned to him and put a hand over his mouth so the crumbs wouldn't fall out. "Morning," he muttered.

"I'm surprised to see you here so early," he said. Ron didn't know what to say to him at first. It was far too early for Jack to look so well rested, especially after their morning drill. His tan skin wasn't dirty or calloused, his dark brown hair was as wavy and perfect as ever, and even his clothes were pressed. If Jack weren't such a twat then Ron would've admired him for keeping himself so well put together.

"I've got work," Ron finally said. "I reckon you do as well?"

"I'm always here this early on Sundays," he said. "My Sunday nights are for exercising but my Sunday mornings are for studying. I have to keep a schedule so I don't fall behind on anything. It can be easy to fall behind here."

"Is that something your brother warned you about?" Ron asked.

Jack frowned and took a sip of his tea as if he had something foul on his tongue. "No. He didn't warn me of anything before I came here, but I probably would've have listened if he had." Ron raised an eyebrow. Jack constantly bragged about his Auror father and grandfather but when it came to his brother he hardly said a word. The only thing Ron knew about him was that he had failed to

graduate from Lambrick. "Anyway," Jack said, waving a hand, "I'll let you get to it."

"Yeah," Ron slowly said, turning back around. He took out his notes and his last exam. He recopied the questions and thought of new answers that would suffice. He could hear Hermione's voice in his head telling him that variety was essential for adequate studying.

"Damn," Jack breathed for what had to be the tenth time.

"Are you having a problem with your map, Jack?" John asked.

"No, John. I'm fine," Jack said. Ron heard him brutally scratch something out so he turned around.

"What are you working on?" he asked.

"It doesn't concern you," Jack said.

"I'm not concerned. I'm just curious," Ron said. "Besides, you're being loud and it's distracting me, so maybe it is my concern."

Jack sighed and rubbed his face. "It's for my presentation. I'm using latitude and longitude to form a maze but I can't get decent connections." He seemed so disappointed in himself that, as much as Ron didn't want to care he did.

"D'you mind if I look?" he asked.

"I don't need your help, Weasley," Jack said.

Ron snuck a glance at John and saw that he was nose deep in his journal. He turned back to Jack. "Do you always have to be a fucking prick?" he whispered. "Let me take a look. I'm not going to destroy your map."

"You're a bloody twat, Ron. Here." He pushed his map across the table.

Ron studied it and immediately saw what was wrong. "Give me your quill."

"What?" Jack asked.

"I'm not going to do the work for you, but I've got a suggestion. You can ignore it once I'm done if you want. Just give me your quill." He held out his hand and Jack reluctantly handed it to him. Ron scratched out the centerline on his map and drew a new one a finger's space over to the right. He then drew a circle in the middle of his map and connected the new centerline to another that he drew coming from the left side.

"What are you doing?" Jack asked.

"I moved your center over so you can be a little more lenient with your coordinates," Ron said.

Jack blinked several times. "Why?"

Ron pointed to Jack's map. "You have to remember that a maze with only one exit is a one-bodied structure. It doesn't matter how big or difficult. So, you'll want to make your core even for all four directions and—"

"It wasn't center before?" Jack rudely asked.

Ron held his tongue for a moment. "No; that's why I moved it. It's center now so it'll be easier to find connections with your coordinates. Once you have an even core, you can play around with your lines and branch out the maze. Nothing outside of the midpoint is going to match up completely, but it's not supposed to. You have the right idea, you just need to modify your radius and relax. Does that make sense?" He handed the map back to him.

Jack's dark eyes moved over the map for what seemed like ages before he looked up. "It actually does. I've been trying to make everything match up and it hasn't worked. Thanks."

"Count this as the one time I do something nice for you." Jack rolled his eyes and got back to his work. Ron turned around as well and continued to recopy his notes. For awhile it was completely quiet inside the cabin. He and Jack tackled their assignments while John wrote in his journal. The atmosphere was peaceful and Ron was able to write, read, and make correlations in his mind all at the same time. There was a strength and satisfaction that he felt, and he figured that it was the same feeling that Hermione, Bill, and Percy had when they worked hard with their studies. It made him smile thinking that he was sharing something special with them.

After an hour or so, Jack packed up his bag and left but it was another hour after that before Ron had at last completed his Monday assignments. He dropped his quill and stretched, groaning longingly as he felt his back pop. "Are you surviving, Ron?" John asked.

"Yes, sir," Ron said. "I'm unfortunately more awake too."

John closed his journal and chuckled. "I would hope so. Navigation shouldn't put anyone to sleep. Did you finish your work?"

"Just about," he said. "I'll pick it up again later in the day."

"Splendid," John said. "I have something planned for the two of us. Can I join you?"

Ron already knew what it was. "It's your classroom," he said with a smirk. John got up and brought over his case that held his chessboard inside. "I'm black this time," Ron said.

Playing chess with John was both thrilling and nerve-wracking. John was an expert and he used schemes and maneuvers that Ron had never encountered before. "Why are you letting me see what you're thinking?" John asked.

"I'm not," Ron said in frustration. He had never beaten John before and it looked as if his losing record would hold once again. "Then again, I'm not proficient with Occlumency, so you might be right."

"Witty but untrue," he said. "You're making moves that clearly tell me what you're going to do next. Why do you always do that?"

"It's the way I play," Ron said as he watched one of his bishops get taken out.

"Correction: it's the way you let yourself play," John said, taking off his thick black glasses to wipe them.

"I've been playing the same way for over ten years!" Ron snapped as he realized that he was cornered on the board. "It's never given me a problem."

"That's laziness, Ron," John calmly said. "It's not proper playing, and I won't apologize for challenging your comfort zone." He cornered Ron's king and Ron groaned. "Don't whine. We're going again."

"But you've already beaten me twice," he said.

"That's the attitude that will get your unit into major trouble during a real mission," John said seriously. "It's exactly what Phillip is trying to break out of you and everyone else. You have to clear your mind and think. You have to approach each attempt with new eyes."

Ron roughly dug his palms into his thighs. "It's just so much pressure," he said, no longer talking about chess. "I know this stuff, but there's so much of it and it's more than I thought I'd ever comprehend. It's hard to figure out when I should use which skill or strategy for a situation."

"You didn't seem to have an issue helping Jack today," John said.

"That's different. He was doing a straightforward maze and it wasn't my project," he said. "It's easy to be objective when it's not about you, you know that."

"I do, but I also know that being objective is possible when it's personal. How's your project coming along?" John asked. "An entire tracking route is rather ambitious."

"I'll get it finished," Ron said. "It's the only thing I want to do a presentation on."

"I can't wait. May I ask if you've thought of the pursuer?" John asked.

"Yes," he said. "I'm going to use Snatchers."

"Fascinating," John said, clasping his hands together. "A colleague of mine is a historian and he's writing a book about

Snatchers and how they played a significant role in the war. What about the subject?"

Ron rubbed his neck. "Me."

"You're using yourself as the person in hiding?" John asked.

"Well, I've had personal experience with Snatchers so I know how they think and how they move," he said. "I'm also using some of my own route and hideaways. I hope that's okay."

John's eyes widened. "Of course it's okay, Ron. I think it's incredible that you'll be sharing your experience." Incredible wasn't the word that Ron would use. When he thought about dodging the Snatchers on his own after leaving Harry and Hermione, he always felt sick and a bit of shame and hatred for himself. Nonetheless, it was something real and powerful, and the route was something he knew well.

"Ron?" John asked.

"Sorry," Ron quickly said, breaking out of his thoughts. "I probably won't tell the class it's about me of course!"

"I think you should," John said. "It would mean so much to everyone to know someone who's dealt with something like this. It might inspire them as future Aurors," John said. "It might also inspire you." Ron didn't know what to say. It was one of the darkest spots in his life and he didn't know if he wanted other people to see it in its entirety. However, it was also a part of his past that he wanted to let go of, and talking about it could help. He and John played chess two more times and Ron lost both matches, but he had gotten closer every time. It had to mean something and he believed that.

He left John's cabin and checked to see if anyone had sent him a letter. He smiled widely and almost giggled like a prat when he saw a letter from Hermione. He loved their new system: he wrote to her a lot more often and she always promptly wrote him back. It was the way it should've been from the beginning and he was proud that they had finally reached that point. He sat on the steps in front of his cabin and opened it.

Hi Love,

I don't have much time to talk. I have to chaperone a detention while the professors have a staff meeting about the holiday and the kids staying over the duration. A lot of the parents and families want new protection systems and whatnot put into place because no one wants to take any chances at Hogwarts anymore. It's understandable but it's a lot for us. I have so many letters and forms to send out. Did you know that I broke my bag again today because of all the letters I have to keep a hold of? Well, you weren't there so you couldn't possibly have an idea but you know now. There's just too much in it and it's old and ghastly. In any case, I'm rambling. I'm not writing to you so I can complain about my bag, I'm doing this so I can remind you of the plan. I got my parents' letter back this morning so I need to

give you the final itinerary so you can let us know if everything is still in order.

The plan: First, Ginny and I will meet you and Harry at the train station. Second, you will come to my house and we'll spend the first three days with my family. Lastly, we'll go to your house after that and spend the rest of your holiday there. I will go back to my house on Christmas day to spend some time with my family and you're more than welcome to join me. I hope you do. You have no idea how excited I am to spend some time with you at my house and show you more of my world. It's just one of FIVE events that I have in store for us (by 'us', I mean you and me, if you're wondering). My parents are only a part of the first event and I promise that they will be wonderful. This was their idea and I know they really want to get to know you better. They care about you, Ron, and they support our relationship. Oh, I should tell you, it's just going to be us four there I'm sad to say. My grandparents can't make it over so it'll be very intimate. Don't be scared or nervous. My dad won't torture you like you think he will, and my mum is opening up so she'll be fine to talk to.

Also, spare bedroom means SPARE, Ron. You're so cheeky but it won't work. You have to pass by my parent's room to get to mine. So whatever thoughts you have, forget them. Leave the plans for our sexual encounters up to me. Oh, I just thought about seeing you and my heart honestly skipped a beat. I'm really excited, sweetheart. I'll be seeing you very soon and everyday I grow madder thinking about it. People are starting to notice but it doesn't bother me. You're worth the whispers. However, don't make the mistake and think that my excitement has clouded my memory. I still plan to punish you. I haven't forgiven you and I haven't stopped reading that last paragraph. I also haven't stopped reading your exposÃ©. I know you don't want me to ever bring it up but I can't help it. You and Harry were horribly dirty in those pictures but your words were astounding. Everyone I've shown it to loves it and Dean won't stop laughing about you calling Ginny your little sister and Harry's girlfriend. She's really furious so beware at the train station. I'll do my best to keep her at bay because if you and Harry weren't inspirational before than you are now. I honestly don't care that I wasn't in it, Ron. I turn down most of the offers I get for interviews because I'm focusing on school now. So stop worrying. Besides, the article was about my two favorite men in the whole word and you both deserved to have the exposÃ© be all about you. However, we should definitely go over Millie's more than flattering compliments. I'm not sure if the phrase 'sexually engaging' and her talking about your 'flaming hair' is critical description or appropriate journalism. I'd like to see her credentials as a professional so I can know that she's not just some hot and bothered tart. I hope that's not too harsh. I can understand her fascination but there's only one woman who's allowed to ogle your sexiness up close and that's me.

Well, I have to go. As soon as I send this off I'll be waiting for your response. We need to finalize everything. Oh, Ron, I can't wait to see you. I miss you so much and my heart will finally be able to beat properly when we're reunited.

By the way, Crookshanks will be at my house, and you'd better be nice to him.

I love you,

Hermione

Ron bit his lip in anticipation and edginess. He was so close to seeing his family and he was closer to seeing Hermione. He was more ready than ever to go back. He wondered if anything or anyone had changed. There was no reason to believe so since he was the one who had left. Everyone else merely went on living his or her lives. He suddenly thought about George. Ron wasn't sure if he wanted George to be the same or not, and he was worried that George still hadn't answered his last letter. He made himself stop worrying. George had never been a big writer and, regardless, Ron would see for himself soon enough.

Monday came a lot faster than Ron would've liked and by the time he got to Phillip's portion of the training, he was yawning and sluggish again. Their days were so long and overstuffed with training that now, from the early morning to the dark of night, he was using his brain and his body to become a better wizard. It was so much more strenuous and stressful than ever before.

Ron yawned as Phillip used his wand to draw on the gigantic floating board next to him. Phillip preferred to teach both sections outside because he believed in an open atmosphere, and he also believed that teaching and learning was verbal and auditory, so he had them simply sitting in the grass and listening to him. Phillip explained the finer points of being covert while scouting and Ron's eyes drooped closed and his head nodded off. The lecture was important but he was still so tired.

"Wake up," Olivia said, poking him in the side.

"I'm awake," he said, opening his eyes and raising his head.

"It doesn't look like it," she whispered. "Alan will take a large bite out of your bum if he finds you dosing off."

"I'm not dosing but even if I am I can't help it," he said.

"What the f*** you have no self control?" she asked.

"Just piss off and leave me alone," he shot.

"I will when you wake up," she shot back. "If Alan sees you sleeping then we'll all get in trouble. You're not the only one who's tired."

"I'm sure I'm the only one tired of you being on my bloody bollocks," he said harshly.

She rolled her eyes. "You're not a victim, Ron. Stop acting like one."

Conor poked him in his other side. "Oi, can you two love bunnies end the tiff until Phillip's lecture is over? I can't do extra laps tonight."

"We're not love bunnies," she said. "Ron's an arse and I'm being considerate."

Jack whipped his head around. "Consider this: shut the fuck up." He gave them the finger and glared.

Conor balled up a few wet leaves, spit on them, and threw them at him. "Shove this up your arse, Jacky boy." Jack's jaw dropped and he turned around without another word.

Ron couldn't help it. He snorted and covered his mouth so his laughter wouldn't be so loud. Olivia actually started to snicker as well. "Shh," she said in his ear. "We have to be quiet."

"I'm trying," he whispered back. He nudged her shoulder with his shoulder. "Sorry for being an arse."

"It's okay. I'm bitchy when I'm worn-out," she said, nudging him back. "I'm sorry too."

"Ronald Weasley," Phillip suddenly said. All of Ron's humor and tiredness disappeared. Everyone looked at him.

"Yes, sir?" he said loudly. He was most likely in trouble and he wasn't prepared for a public de-bollocking.

"Come up here," Phillip said. He got up and both Conor and Olivia gave him worried glances. He saw Jack's smirk and Harry's nod in support as he walked up and next to Phillip and the other instructors. It was strange being in front of the entire camp, yet he felt at home in front of them. All the trainees looked like him: they were all dressed in plain shirts, they were all filthy, and they were all knackered and slightly mental. It was their way of life.

"Sir?" Ron said.

"Just wait there," Phillip said. He called eight other names including Jack and Eric from west. The nine of them stood awkwardly in front of their fellow trainees. Ron didn't know if they were supposed to attack them or tell on them or what.

"Tonight is the start of a new section of field training," Alan said. "It's team building and it will go through everything you've learned since you've arrived here."

"The new section will prepare you lot for the upcoming evaluation," Richard added. "It'll be different from any sort of test or evaluation that you've had previously."

"That's quite correct, gentlemen," Phillip said. "For your last evaluation of the first half, we don't want to keep you in the dark. We want you all to practice and learn from each other like you would if you were real Aurors. For this reason, you're going

to start working in teams and these nine up here are the team leaders. They will head the groups for the remainder of the field practice with me, and they'll lead their groups during the evaluation. It's also up to them to decide who leads what leg of the exam."

Ron felt his heart drop. It was too much pressure. He was trying his hardest to keep himself together but now he was expected to lead an entire group to victory. He knew that he was smart when it came to navigation, but it didn't merit him a spot as a leader. He wanted to protest but he wouldn't. Everything was on his shoulders now. "We realize that group dynamics are important, so we've split you up based on skill and your strengths and weakness as individuals," Phillip said. "When you hear your name and number, join that group. Weasley is one. Grace is two and so forth." By the time Phillip was finished assigning the groups, Ron was grouped with Conor, Harry, and a girl from west.

"All right, we'll give you a few minutes to introduce yourself if you haven't already, and then we'll get started with tonight's lesson," Richard said.

Ron and his group gathered over to the side. "I'm Conor Neary," Conor said, shaking hands with Harry and the girl.

"I'm Harry Potter," Harry said.

"I'm Charlotte Clark, but everyone calls me either Letty or CeeCee," she said, shaking Ron's hand and then Conor's. She was pale with short and curly ginger hair but had very few freckles on her skin. Her green eyes were humongous and she was rather tall for a girl. Ron was sure that he'd seen her before. He gave her a once-over and finally recognized her: she was the girl who had gone mental when she saw him talking to Harry their first day of morning drills.

"Okay, Letty," he said. "I'm Ron Weasley."

"I know, and I don't know why you and Harry bother to ever introduce yourselves," she said.

"It's courtesy," Harry said.

She gave him a look. "So is understanding that everyone knows who you are." She shook her head and turned to Ron. "Do you think putting the gingers together was a joke on their part?"

He looked around. "Bloody hell," he said, chuckling. "We're the only ones, aren't we?"

"I told CeeCee that your family should adopt her," Harry said. "Her siblings are blondes."

"It is suspicious," she said with a grin.

"I have a ginger cousin," Conor said. "I'm not too keen on him."

"Oi!" Harry said. "That's not funny."

"Sorry, Mr. Harry Potter," Conor said, sarcastically, bowing to him.

Ron laughed and felt some of the pressure disappear. The dynamic of his group seemed okay so far. "All right, we should probably plan or something, yeah?"

"Plan what? We're obviously gonna go through another maze," Conor said. "You'll get us out."

Harry patted Ron's shoulder. "Yeah, Ron's a genius. I taught him everything he knows."

Ron blushed under the attention. "I reckon I'm good."

"You're more than good. Even I've heard about you," Letty said. "Olivia says that you're really gifted in this area."

"You talk to Olivia?" he asked.

"Of course. She's my roommate," she said. "She and I are good mates. She tells me a lot of things."

"Wicked," he said.

"Attention, trainees! We're going to begin now," Phillip said. "Each group will have their own Warkshaw Maze to navigate through. Your team leader will head the mission and, once you've completed the maze, we have stations set up to test your abilities on everything you've been practicing. This is how it'll be for the remainder of the first half, so stay sharp. Team leaders, keep an eye on your partners and what may benefit your team most during the examination."

Ron and his group waited in front of the first maze. He was a little nervous but he knew that he had to get through it. It helped that Harry was in his group. "The most important thing to remember when we're in there is to stay calm and take in all of our surroundings." He passed the map around so they could see what the maze would look like on the inside.

"I don't like these simulations," Conor said. "I go from the field to a bloody mountainside in half a second. It's daunting."

"That's the idea, Conor," Letty said. "I wonder if this is going to be a regular maze or a simulation or if we'll have to do any spells in there. I love spell work."

"Oh yeah?" Ron said.

"It's actually a little disturbing," Harry under his breath.

"Well, if things get mental in there, feel free to take charge. I may be the leader but it doesn't mean that I'm the boss or that I know everything," Ron said.

"Groups ready!" Phillip said. "Begin."

Ron looked at Harry and he nodded. "Let's go, mate," Harry said. Ron dropped the map and led them into the maze. Everything was dark. It seemed like a regular maze but the moment they started walking, the more things changed. The maze started to turn into a field and, if Ron wasn't mistaken, things were moving and changing all around him. He put his hand on the wall for support but it disappeared.

"Shit, where do we go? What's happening?" Conor asked.

"The maze is trying to make us disoriented," Harry said. Ron studied the ever-changing field around them. He had gone through so many simulations that he could tell that they were in a level four. He could get them out, he just needed to focus and be clever. The word automatically turned his mind to Hermione and he knew what to do.

"Hold on," Ron said. He opened his palm flat and laid his wand on top of it. "Point me," he said. His wand spun a few times before stopping. The tip pointed to the left of where they were. "North is this way. Come on." As laborious as all of Ron's maze training was, it made him well prepared for a less confusing maze such as this one. It didn't take long before they were out on the other side.

However, Ron's good feeling didn't last. The rest of the night was a lot more difficult. They had to fly, work with moving targets, and duel with members from the other groups. It was exhausting, and it was a lot harder to be the leader when he wasn't always sure of what to do. Many times he and Harry argued over what they should do, and Letty had easily become overbearing and was eager to throw spells. By the time it was all over, their group was the fourth to finish.

"Tonight wasn't a race," Phillip said at the end of the night, "it was about cooperation and dexterity. You have to learn to work together and feed off each other's strengths. We'll do this again tomorrow, so you'd better get used to each other." Ron wiped the sweat off his brow and grabbed his broom. He was irritated and sore.

"I'll see you boys tomorrow," Letty stiffly said, walking away.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Conor said. "We made it through. Besides, it wasn't a race, like Phillip said." He shook Harry's hand. "It was nice to finally meet you."

"Night, Conor," Harry said. When Conor was out of sight Harry let out a heavy breath. "You okay?"

"Are you okay?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Harry said in a raspy voice. "Tired."

"Me too. This was just so bloody much, Harry," Ron said. "I meanâ€¢group leader? Are they taking the piss? Why aren't you group leader?"

"I'm not angry about it," he said. "The last thing I need is for people to think that Lambrick is kissing my arse. No, you make a good leader."

"You don't make a very good listener," Ron said.

Harry shrugged. "I'll support you in whatever you decide, but when you're wrong, you're wrong mate. I can't help that. Nice use of the Four-Point Spell though. I wonder where you learned thatâ€¢!"

"A really clever girl taught it to some specky git and I reckon I picked it up," Ron said.

He laughed. "Well, the specky git is proud of what the freckly prat has accomplished tonight. I'll see you." Harry walked off and Ron made his way back to his cabin.

John caught up to him. "Ron, do you have a minute?"

"Um, sure," Ron said.

John's usual cheerful and excited expression wasn't on his face. "Good work tonight but I'm a little surprised that your group was fourth to finish. You had a level four maze but your personal training mazes are level fives," John said. "Is this regression?"

"No, not at all," Ron quickly said. "It wasn't just a maze. There were other legsâ€¢"

"But you were still the leader," John said. "I helped select the groups, and I thought it would be a great idea if you led one."

"Iâ€¢I'm not perfect at everything," Ron said quietly.

"It's not about perfection and you know that. It's just like when you play chess, Ron," John said. "You have to approach each part with a new pair of eyes, but you have to keep the same focus and knowledge at the same time."

Ron hated disappointing John, but there was only so much procedure that he could keep crammed in his mind and only so much pressure that he could hold on his shoulders. He almost missed the old days when people didn't expect anything out of him. "It's not a race, sir," he said at last.

John shook his head. "No, but it is a challenge. Your slacking and not having confidence will bleed through to other parts of your training and to other parts of your life," he said. "I've been in this business for a long time and I can tell you now that it doesn't matter if you're doing a scouting mission or if you're bringing down dark wizards or if you're simply filing paperwork and doing map charts; it's all about self-belief and aptitude.

You have to do your very best at all times and you can't be afraid to be something that you haven't been before."

"I understand," Ron breathed.

"Good because, whether you like it or not, for the rest of your life people are going to depend on you for leadership, and not just for a maze or for proper mapping techniques," John said. "You're always going to be asked to lead and you'll have to do it. It doesn't matter if it's uncomfortable. Start living in that realization, Ron." He squeezed his arm and walked away.

Frustrated and overwhelmed, Ron rubbed the tears out of his eyes. There was so much pressing down on him and it was as if everyone was looking at him and expecting him to be and to perform to perfection. All he had wanted was for people to think he could be worth something, but now it was almost like they were expecting too much. He took deep breaths and shook his head. He knew what John, Phillip, and the other instructors expected out of him, and he knew what his group members needed out of him. He even knew what Hermione and her parents wanted to see from him. Everyone had an idea of what he was and what he should be. Everyone except for himself.

* * *

"Threeâ€¢twoâ€¢one," Ron mumbled from under his pillow.

"YOU ALL HAVE EXACTLY FIVE MINTUES TO GET DRESSED, GRAB YOUR BROOMS, AND GET YOUR ARSES OUT HERE!" Alan's voice bellowed.

Ron pushed the pillow off his face and sat up. He yawned and rubbed his eyes. "You have no right to be tired, Weasley. You kept me up half the night with your snoring."

"Fuck off, Jack," he said, swinging his legs over the bed. "It's too damn early. Let's wait at least until we've had some food in us before we start arguing."

"I think the both of you need to get sacked. You both keep me up with all your rows," Conor said. Ron threw his pillow at him and Jack left the cabin.

"YOU NOW HAVE THREE AND A HALF MINUTES!" Alan screamed.

"Doesn't he know that none of us sleep anymore?" Conor asked. His blonde hair was sticking out like blades of grass and his tired slump made him look even shorter than he already was. "We're always up before his wake-up call."

"Maybe screaming at us gets him off," Ron said

"We won't have to put up with it for much longer. At least for a little while." Conor got dressed and grabbed his broom. "You ready for your presentation today?"

"I have no choice," Ron said, changing into his running attire.

"Don't complain," Conor said. "I was one of the first to go."

"You were fine," Ron said with a huge yawn. Conor grumbled something and left the cabin.

"TWO MINTUES!" Alan screamed.

"I'm bloody coming," Ron said. He took off his shirt and looked at his torso and back in the tiny mirror on their wall. There were a couple of cuts that were healing and a few bruises that were fading. Most of his wounds had come from hands or brooms but some were from rough edges of tree bark, sharp rocks on the ground and walls shards. December had finally come and their holiday was so close that Ron could count the days on his fingers. He was sure that Hermione wanted to see him with a clean and scar-free body but she wouldn't get it. He touched his abs and flexed the muscle in his arms and chest. It wasn't anything special, but it was more than what he had arrived with. He hoped that it would make up for his injuries. He went outside right as Alan gave them the thirty-second whistle warning. He was beyond ready to go home.

During his run, he went over his presentation. He was tense but he kept telling himself that the only person whose opinion mattered was John's. He had never put so much effort into an assignment before and he wanted it to be perfect. He wanted it to be as perfect as one of Hermione's essays or Percy's protection drafts or Bill's work in Egypt. Perfection was never something Ron had cared about wanting before, but he wanted it now.

He mounted his broom just as Jack was landing for what had to be his first or second lap. "Hi, mate," Ron said cheerfully. Jack rolled his eyes and flew into the air. Ron bit his lip and tried to keep up with him. His Firebolt was easy to manage and the speeds and altitude wasn't a problem. However, as Ron had improved, so did Jack and he was still able to beat him. "Good go," Jack said with a smirk as he touched down on his eighth lap and Ron mounted for his seventh. Ron swore under his breath and took to the sky.

When he landed, Alan was waiting on him. His grey eyes were filled with that had to be annoyance. "Are you trying to compete with Turner?"

"Yes. He's really good," Ron said honestly.

"He's obviously a distraction for you as well," Alan said. "If you would've spent less time trying to outfly him and more time trying to outfly your previous performance, then you might've had him."

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

"I suggest you take the days we have left to remember that you came here for you," he said. "Doing your best will allow you to outperform others. It's not about what theyâ€"."

"I know, sir," Ron said. He hadn't meant to speak out of turn but it just came out of him. Everyone always had a speech for him.

Alan glared at him and grabbed his arm. "Well, Weasley, since you know so much, how about you give me another six laps. Enforce what you apparently already know." He pushed him away.

"Yes, right away, sir." Ron swung his leg over his broom and once again flew into the air. By the time Ron was finished, Harry was doing his flying laps. It took the bloke no time to complete his eight. Ron waited at the top of the hill and Harry joined him soon after.

"Why'd you take so long?" Harry asked.

"I interrupted one of Alan's speeches about how everything I do right could easily be a fluke but everything I do wrong is typical of me and it's the end of the sodding world," Ron said.

"Mate, you know he's just trying to help you," Harry said.

"I know but I've heard it all before. I've heard everything before," Ron said. They started walking and Ron tried not to feel angry. "Did Ginny write you back?"

"She still doesn't know if Charlie is coming before or after you come back from Hermione's," Harry said.

"Bollocks. I was hoping that she'd tell you because maybe she wanted to surprise me," Ron said.

"Sorry to disappoint you," Harry said. "I've got some good news. After I read Ginny's letter I read Hermione's and she still can't stop talking about you staying with her."

"Three days with the Grangers," Ron said with a huge smile.

"That also means three day where Ginny and I can—"

"It's never too early for an arse kicking, Harry," Ron said.

He rolled his eyes. "I was just going to say three days where we can sleep together in the same bed. We're gonna extend my cot."

"Just clean up before I get there," Ron said, cringing. "I mean it."

"I'll make a small effort," he said. They got to the starting point and Harry nudged him. "Good luck on your presentation. It won't be that bad. Mine went well."

"That's because you're you. People would line up just to hear you describe what you eat in the morning," Ron said. "It also helps

that analyzing the maze from the Triwizard Tournament is a brilliant topic and I'm sure you got extra credit because you won, tosser."

"You're such a dildo sometimes, Ron," Harry said. "I'll take all that as you being nervous."

"Maybe I am nervous," he mumbled. "What's a dildo?"

Harry snorted. "Um, ask Hermione. Anyway, you'll be fine and either way it'll be over once it's over." He went back to his section, and Ron watched him. He wished that he had Harry's calmness when it came to high-stress situations. Ron's palms began to itch but he brushed the feeling off and went to the mailing cabin. There was still nothing from George and it made his palms itch more.

He was a bundle of nerves through everyone's presentations in John's class and when it was his turn, Ron thought that his heart would burst. "You've got it, Ron," Conor said. Ron nodded and went up to the front. He secured his board to the stand and gulped as everyone stared at him.

"Uh, my presentation involves analyzing the route of a tracking mission." He cleared his extremely dry throat. "This is actually the layout of my route and the tracking done on me when I escaped some Snatchers."

"Snatchers?" Conor said, paling a little. "You got away from Snatchers?" There were a few gasps throughout the room.

"Neary, it's not your turn to talk," Alan said.

"Um, yeah, I did," Ron said. He looked at John and he nodded.

"Continue," John said.

"Right," Ron said. He started to sweat and he looked around the room then settled on Olivia. She crossed her eyes and pretended to pick her nose. He grinned slightly and somehow it calmed him down a little. He turned back to the board. It was his personal journey and, like John had told him, it was honest and from the heart. He could do this. "Around this time last year, I found myself having to dodge Snatchers..."

Ron took them over the path of his escape and talked a little about his journey with Harry and Hermione. So much of it was sacred to him that he didn't go into much detail, but he told enough to explain the danger and significance of it. The longer he talked, the more comfortable he felt. After a while, it was like he was in his own world. It was just him and the board and his journey. He thought about Hermione and Harry and all that the three of them had been through. It made giving a presentation so much easier.

It was strange â€“ he was opening up about one of the hardest times in his life to people he had only known for a few months, yet it felt comfortable and almost intimate. Any one of them

could end up saving his life one day and he wanted to open up about himself and how his weeks alone had helped shape him. However, it was more than that. Hearing himself talk about his experience and seeing it on the board made him feel more capable. He had gone through so much more than the people listening to him and it made him feel experienced and powerful and even a bit like a hero.

When it was over, he put the chalk down and received a loud and long applause from everyone. He sat down and the brick that had been in his stomach for days was finally gone.

"That was great, Ron," Olivia said after the class period was over.

"I agree," he said rather proudly, "but I'm glad it's over. Thanks for the help."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said innocently, "but you're welcome. I know I'm not supposed to feel this as a fellow competitor but I like seeing you do well."

"Well, as a fellow competitor it's a mutual feeling," he said.

Conor poked him in the arm with his quill. "You were good, Ron."

"Thanks," Ron said. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay. I'm sorry that I interrupted you," Conor said. "I just hate Snatchers. I'm a Muggle-born and all."

"It's understandable," Ron said. "Hermione's Muggle-born. It's a tough subject."

"Yeah, still, good job," Conor muttered.

Their class once again lined up for their graded exams and Ron stood at the back. "Ron," John said. "Great work."

"Thank you, John," he said. "Public speaking isn't one of my strong points."

"You seemed fine to me," John said. "You did a really fantastic job. I learned a lot and I think you touched a few people; that's most important." He picked up Ron's test and held it behind his back as always. "Your guess?"

Ron studied his face. "Umâ€!"

"Don't be shy," John said. "Tell me what you think you deserve."

He rubbed his neck. "Well, out of the fifty, I think I gotâ€;fifty."

"And why is that?" John asked.

"I wasn't lazy. I knew the material, and I didn't rush," he said.

John beamed and handed it to him. "Spot on. Excellent students get excellent marks."

Ron let out a sigh of relief. "I studied really hard for this and it feels good to be rewarded."

"I'm sure it does but you can't stick around for the glory. You have to move on from this and from your presentation. Go to your field training and learn something new," John said.

It was cold and a bit snowy out in the field as Alan and Brian had them practice with brooms and moving targets. By Phillip's part of the lesson, Ron was sweaty and uncomfortable but he ignored it and listened to the lecture. "One of the most important things an Auror has to do every time he's on a mission is secure the area," Phillip said. "There are traps that wizards like to leave to Aurors when they're in a jinxed house but, after some experience, it's easy to tell what they are." He went on talking and used the board to draw animations of jinxed hideouts and properties.

Olivia shivered violently next to him. "Where's your jumper?" Ron asked.

"In the other part of the field," she said. "I took it off to fix a tear but I dropped it. I can't ask Alan if I can go get it."

"Take mine." He pulled his off and handed it to her.

"No, I'm fine," she said.

"Really. I actually feel a lot more comfortable now with some air getting to me," he said. He offered it to her again and she took it.

"Cheers," she said with a shiver, putting it on. "You can take it back whenever."

"I'm fine," he assured.

"So, let's form your groups so you can all see some of these traps for yourselves using the mazes," Phillip said.

On that cue, Ron got up and walked over to where his group always met. "How was your speech?" Harry asked right away when he made it over.

"Brilliant," Ron said. "I wish you and Mione could've been there."

"So do I," Harry said. Conor and Letty came over.

"Great, another simulation tonight," Conor said.

"Do you really have to whine again?" Letty asked.

"Can we not argue?" Ron asked. His group had worked together every night for what seemed like ages. During the actual drills

they were better at getting along, but Conor still complained too much for Letty, and Letty talked too much for everyone. "We should go over our strategy."

"What strategy? We don't know what's in there," Harry said. "Our best bet is to stay guarded and go in."

"That's a terrible idea," Ron said. "That sort of impulse is what dark wizards are going to be counting on. No, we need to secure one area at a time and in this case we should stick together. Without any sort of background on our location, it would be suicide to split up." Harry, Letty, and Conor just looked at him like they always did when he rambled on.

"All right," Harry said. "Fucking hell, Ron."

"Shut up," Ron said, blushing a little.

"I agree with Harry," Conor said. "I've only known you since October but even for me it's weird to hear you so bossy and to see you soâ€!"

"Uptight?" Harry added.

Conor grinned. "Good word."

"Fuck off, both of you," Ron said.

"He's right. We should get ready," Letty said. "We're too close to the end for Phillip and the others to think we care more about talking than working." The maze was unlike anything they had experienced before because it was in fact not a maze. When they got inside, it turned into a sort of safe house that had two floors.

"Let's work in a circle," Ron whispered.

"Why are you whispering?" Letty asked. "Are there people in here?"

"I don't know, Letty, but if this was the real thing do you think we'd be screaming at the top of our lungs?" Ron asked.

"Both of you shut up so we can go," Harry said. Ron led them around the first floor of the house and up to the second floor. They worked slowly and tediously, but it was worth it â€“ they didn't run into any traps and their group was the first to finish.

That night, Ron stuffed as much bland meat and vegetables into his mouth as he could. "I can't wait to eat real food again," he said.

"I plan to eat while I'm in the shower and while I sleep," Conor said.

"I hope you two at least plan to exercise over holiday," Olivia said, getting up. "Ron, lets make it early tonight because I've got some stuff to do. Here's your jumper, thanks."

"Uh-huh," he mumbled through his food. She walked away and he gulped down his second glass of water and smacked his lips.

"I don't see how you do it," Ben said with a heavy sigh. He picked at a scab on his muscular arm and the pink flesh underneath it stood out on his dark brown skin.

"Do what?" Ron said.

"Olivia," he said.

"You should let it go, man," Conor said, shaking his head.

"I can't. She's brilliant and she's better than the girls back home," Ben said. "I really fancy her but you knowâ€;" He looked up at Ron.

Ron rolled his eyes. "I don't understand you, mate, or why you have a grudge against me. She and I are just friends. I mean, fucking hell â€“ I'm going home soon to be with my girlfriend who I plan to slobber all over every chance I get. Olivia: friend. Hermione: girlfriend. It's simple really."

"Honestly, you should listen to him, Ben," Conor said. He started to laugh. "One time, Ron was wanking in the shower and all I could hear was 'err-my-knee. Err-my-knee.'"

Ron reached across the table and punched him. "Piss off! That was one time and I thought I was alone in there."

"It's a public shower cabin," Conor said, "with all the blokes in this section, why would it ever be empty? It doesn't bloody matter either way. The point is, Ben, that you're the only person standing in the way of you and Olivia."

"Blimey, thanks mate," Ben said sarcastically.

"No, he's right," Ron said. "I think she actually fancies you but she reckons that you only want her because she's the only girl here."

"That's not true," Ben said.

"Then tell her. Write her a sodding poem or something and send it to her over holiday," Conor said. "I dunno. Girls like that, yeah Ron?"

"I have no idea," Ron said. "I've never written a poem to Hermione and I doubt Harry's written one to my sister. I doubt Olivia likes poems though. She'd probably think you were being sexiest and assume she liked them because she's female."

"So, I should send her something blokes enjoy, likeâ€; Quidditch tickets?" Ben asked. They all burst into laughter and, for the

rest of their meal, they tried to think of gifts that weren't sexiest but could be considered romantic.

It was hard to walk with Olivia that night. All he could think about was Ben and Conor trying to think of feminine yet masculine things to send her. He looked at her and chuckled again. "What?" she asked once more.

"Nothing," he said.

She groaned and kicked the ground. "I should punch you in the face, Ron. I hate it when people do that. I like to know things."

"I swear it's nothing serious," he said. He wanted to laugh harder because her slight pout made her look like a six year old but he kept it in.

"Whatever," she muttered. "Anyway, Charlotte told me that you were great tonight. You, Harry, and Conor were bothersome again but still good."

"Well, tell Letty that she was just as annoying," Ron said. "She talks way too much."

"I know, but I can't exactly fault her," Olivia said. "She's a bit like me when it comes to talking."

"You're not annoying though," he said.

"Thank you," she said with a smile.

"Yeah," he answered. "So, what are your plans for the holiday?"

"I plan to sleep and enjoy my bed every night," she said. "My parents said that they're taking time off to be with me, so I'll probably be with them and catch up with a couple of my mates if they're in town."

"That sounds really quiet," Ron said.

"My holidays always are," she said. "What about you?"

"The exact opposite for the most part," he said. "I'm spending some time with Hermione and her parents, then I'm going home to be with my family. I think all my brothers are coming."

"That's brilliant. It should be fun," she said.

"I can't wait. I hope it's fun and loud and barmy and amazing," he said. His palms started to itch and he felt a small pit in his chest but he swallowed it down. Olivia was his friend and he trusted her. "It'll be the first time since Fred's funeral that we're all together."

Olivia nodded. "Are you nervous?"

"A little," he said honestly.

"That's normal I'm sure," she said. "You'll get through it."

"I know I will," he said. "I'm won't let anything ruin me being with them. I need a break from this place and it might be nice to go back to the usual things that I worry about."

"I'm ready to go home too," she said. "It'll be nice to be a civilian again."

"Don't you dare," he warned.

"Of course I won't be a 'civilian soldier', like you," she said.

"Bugger off," he said through gritted teeth.

"I won't have a freckle volume that's massive or anything but I can make things decent," she said. He tried to push her but she dodged out of the way. "You forget that I train here as well. You have to be faster than that."

"What do you think I can't catch you?" he asked.

"Not really," she said. She picked up some leaves and threw them at him before taking off.

"Oi!" he yelled, chasing after her.

Ron stopped by the mailing cabin before he returned to his cabin to check if George had answered him. The strong feeling of dread was still at the base of his spine even though he had no reason to believe that there was anything wrong. There wasn't a note from George but there was one from Roger. He quickly ran back to his cabin and sat on the edge of the stairs. He and Roger had only exchanged one letter and the last time he heard from him he was still unsure about what he would do career-wise.

Hello,

I hope my timing is right. It hasn't been that long since I've been there so I know that final evaluations should be soon. I reckon you're nervous but I'm sure you'll be fine. Conor says that you're a prophet with navigation. I know I can't be told all the details because I'm not privileged anymore, but if the test is based on progression and cumulative stuff, then you're sure to pass through to the merge. I'll bet my arm on it because money is too unreliable.

So, I'm writing to you because I have good news: I got into Tibmock Academy. It starts in January and it's an eight-month training process. It may seem awful, but the training days aren't as long as Lambrick's and everything is slowed down a little more. I think a slower pace and a more one-on-one approach is what I need. It's obviously not as extreme, but it'll work for me. I was surprised to find out that Alan wrote me a letter of recommendation. It was all about my wand work but it still meant something. The staff is impressed by how long I stayed at Lambrick. It's a remarkable achievement apparently. My dad isn't as impressed. He's rather skeptical about my future and he

doesn't know if I'll pull through this time. I'll show him that I can be tough. I won't fail again. Of course, my mum supports me. It's all she has to say.

Well, that's all I wanted to tell you. I hope you and Conor are okay and Jack isn't too much of a knob. I also hope that Olivia is all right. I'm sure she's wonderful. I miss watching her perform and I quite miss all the torture of training. It wasn't fun but it was okay, if that makes any sense. Anyway, I'm sure Ben's with her now but I'll always have hope. Hope is a good thing, Ron, and you should use it as much as you can.

Roger

Ron folded the letter back up. He was happy for Roger and amazed that the bloke still had an effect on him. He felt a bit stronger and clearer headed; he would need to be for the evaluation.

The last Saturday before the holiday finally came and it was also the day of their exam. It was all Ron could think about. He would have to lead himself and three others through it all. He knew that the pressure and the eyes would be on him. He didn't know what to expect and all day he was shaken with nerves. That night, Alan brought his section to the middle field to join west and all the instructors were waiting on them. There were a lot more Aurors there that Ron didn't recognize but he knew they would play an important part to the night.

"Gather into your groups," Phillip said.

Harry and Letty hurried over to them. "This is it," she said, bouncing on the heels of her feet.

"Your attention needs to be up here!" Alan said. "We must get started because tonight is going to be a long one. As you are hopefully aware, tonight is your final examination before the end of the first half. It's the last time you'll be able to show us what you know and what you're getting better at before the merging process."

"After tonight, there's no second chance," Richard said. "You either bring your best now or leave the field. There won't be any handholding during this examination."

"What Mr. Jones and Mr. Lewis are trying to say is that, because this is the examination that lays the foundation for who makes it past the first major ejection and who doesn't, we want you all to know that it won't be easy," Phillip said. "The exam will be broken up into sections and each leg will cover something you've learned. The reason why I've brought first-year Aurors here tonight is because it won't be your section leaders and session assistance that test you. It'll be them."

"Bollocks," Conor breathed.

"With this sort of exam it does you no good to be tested by familiars. That's not how it's going to be on the job and it won't keep an edge in you," Richard said. "Mr. Smith, Mr. Lewis,

the section assistants, and myself will have our own way of watching you. We'll always have an eye on what you're doing and when we deliberate it'll be based on what we saw. Keep in mind that the Aurors will only use the techniques that you lot should know by this point."

"So, as I told you," Phillip said, "group leaders, it will be your job to guide the group through the entire examination. However, I also expect you to let all group members lead at some point. How you decide is purely up to you. You must also complete each section as a unit. You're only as strong as your weakest teammate so help each other but don't coddle each other. Are there any questions?"

Ron wished that Roger was around to ask something embarrassing to lighten the mood but no one spoke and all Ron felt was his pounding heart. "All right, we'll get started," Alan said. "When your group is called, you'll follow Mr. Smith out and the rest of you can wait here."

"Good luck everyone. Without further ado, group one, you're first," Phillip said. "Bring your brooms." Ron gasped. It didn't make sense. His name was Weasley so there was no reason why he should've been first.

"Come on, Ron," Letty said, pushing him forward. He swallowed hard and slowly started to walk. They followed Phillip past the trees and into the field by the east section where he went over the testing procedure and they signed the fairness agreement like before the last evaluation. Ron couldn't focus and he desperately tried to get his head on. He looked around but the field was empty. He didn't understand.

"Okay group one, follow the instructions placed at the given points. You'll understand what I mean when you see them," Phillip said. "Also, if there is any sort of real emergency during this exam, cast a Periculum Charm straight into the air."

"Why would there be an emergency?" Conor asked.

"It's just a precaution, Mr. Neary," Phillip said. "Things can sometimes get intense but you must remember that it is an exam. There's a start and there will be a finish. Mr. Weasley?"

Ron swallowed the wad of nerves. "Sir?"

"You all must finish together or you can't complete the evaluation," he said.

"Yes, sir," he said. "All four of us must cross the finish."

"Exactly. You may begin. Good luck." Phillip took a step back and pulled a black cloth off a stump nearby. There was a teacup sitting on it â€“ the same one used at his trial. "This will take you to your first leg." Ron and Harry shared a look. Phillip gestured his hand to the cup. "You've already started, group one. Go."

"Uh, right," Ron said. He and his teammates stepped forward to the cup. He didn't know what to expect and he felt a bit panicky. "You'll see Hermione on Monday," he whispered. "Hermione. Hermione. Hermione."

"Sorry?" Letty asked.

"N-nothing. Let's go," Ron said. They all reached out to touch it and were quickly sucked in. He was pulled at the hips and he tried kicking his feet so he'd stay upward. However, he landed with a thud like everyone else. He got up and looked around. He couldn't believe it. It was so dark outside but he could tell that they were in the same forest that he fought Alan and Richard in during his trial. The ground was covered in frozen leaves and twigs and there were many tall and skinny trees all around them.

"Am I mental or have I been here before?" Conor asked, lighting his wand.

"You have. We all have," Harry said, lighting his as well.

"Guys, look," Letty said. "Lumos Maxima." The tip of her wand burned brightly and on another tree stump was an envelope. It was incredibly quiet in the forest and Ron whipped his head around in all directions. He didn't know if it was a trap or not.

"Do we read it, Ron?" Conor asked.

Hearing someone say his name brought him back to his senses. He was team leader and he had to start acting like one. "Yes. Phillip said they'd be instructions."

"Then you open it," Letty said. They all backed up as he inched forward. He turned back to Harry and he nodded.

Ron picked it up and closed his eyes but he was okay. So with shaky hands he opened it. "Group one, take these coordinates and fly to your next destination. The location is where your examination will officially begin." Ron studied at the map. It was a nice distance on their broom but he had a feeling that the message was a bit of a red herring. He looked straight up at Harry. "I want you to lead us there."

"Me?" Harry asked.

"You're the best flier in this group," Ron said. "This is your leg and you'll be great."

"Okay, I'll lead us. Give me the map," Harry said. Ron gave it to him and Harry's confidence and eagerness gave Ron more air to breathe. Thing started to turn in his head and make sense.

"I have a feeling that when we come down it'll go straight into combat. It'll be just like field practice," Ron said. "So, Conor, I want you to take over if that happens. I've watched you since October and you're brilliant with body dueling. That meansâ€!" He closed his eyes and tried to put himself in the mind frame of Phillip and the instructors. He had to think like them and stay

two paces ahead of himself. It was the only way to decode the exam. "That means that we'll probably have to duel with magic right after. Letty, you'll take over then."

"No problem," she said.

"Good," he said, nodding. "I reckon they'll be some sort of maze at the end. Phillip said that this exam has a start and a finish, just like a maze." Ron bit his lip and grinned. "It's almost like he was giving us a hint about the order. Yeah, I'll lead us out."

"That sounds like a really good plan," Conor said. "We're with you."

Ron started to pace. "Now, we have to remember that while we are working together, they want to see what we can all do as individuals. Work hard. We'll get through this just like we've done every night during practice."

"I think it's also important to remember that this is just a test and no matter what happens, it's not real." Harry looked at all of them but he kept his gaze the longest on Ron.

Ron told him with his eyes that he understood. "Right. We'd better go. Harry, are you ready?"

"Yes." Harry swallowed hard but he looked okay. Fear was something the bloke fed on and, for once, it didn't bother Ron. He needed to see Harry's power and take some for himself. They mounted their brooms and flew into the air. They followed behind Harry, who flew with an intelligence and grace on his Firebolt that Ron admired. He had been smart to give this leg to Harry; he was born to fly. However, the air got darker and colder, and soon it was hard to see through the fog that had suddenly appeared.

"Stay sharp!" Harry said.

Ron gripped his handle, and within the blink of an eye something fast and solid zoomed past his head. He ducked just in time.
"What was that?" he yelled.

"I think we're under attack! Moving targets!" Harry said. Soon enough, there were many almost Quaffle-like balls whooshing around them. They spat out jets of blue light that stung terribly.

Ron was startled, but he remembered dueling in the air with Tonks so he had an idea of how to react. He steered left and outstretched his wand to a ball that came right for him.
"Reducto!" The ball was blasted but more came at him. Harry zipped around a lot faster than the rest of them and he was able to blast several at a time.

"I see an open path!" Harry shouted. He zoomed down and Ron waved a hand in the air so Conor and Letty could see him. He had to make sure they got down first.

"Oi! Follow Harry!" he screamed. When he saw two figures zoom down, he flew down fast and hard. The closer they got to ground,

the easier it was to see figures in black cloaks almost waiting for them. "Get ready and remember how to land!" he said.

He turned his broom to the side and tried to make a harsh landing but the wizards didn't attack them. They all swiftly held out their wands and shouted, "Expelliarmus!" All four of their wands were thrown from their hands and the wizards ran toward them in a rush.

"Conor!" Ron said before he was hit hard. He had turned and braced himself with his broom for the hit so he hadn't landed too hard. The wizard got on top of him and held down his wrists but Ron let himself to limp before headbutting him. He was able to get to a kneeling position and see Conor handling his wizard, but Ron's leg was yanked and, once again, he was on the ground. His face collided with the ground and the wizard pulled on his hair before smashing his face against the earth again.

Ron had to find a way out but his wrists were held in the center of his back. The wizard was the strongest and largest person Ron had ever encountered, so trying to outmuscle him was pointless. Therefore, he pushed his face even more into the dirt and lifted his torso so he could get leverage with his feet. He kicked and dug into the ground until he was able to wriggle out of the man's grasp. He kicked him in the face and stood up, and the wizard quickly rose as well. He punched Ron in the face but Ron kept his footing and rushed his stomach, forcing him against a tree. He and the wizard took turns hitting and pushing, and getting each other on the ground and against the bark.

Ron heard Letty's scream but he couldn't let it distract him. If he couldn't get himself out, then he would be no good to her. Ron was pushed head first against a tree and his hands were snatched behind his back. He bit the inside of his cheek so hard that he broke the skin and could taste the metallic fluid of blood. The pain in his mouth throbbed and he was sure that he was broken and bruised in other places, but it didn't matter. What mattered was getting through to the next leg. The wizard was so heavy and violent that trying to find a vantage point was useless. He'd have to sacrifice himself to get out. He scraped his cheek against the bark and gradually turned it so he was facing the tree, his nose smashed against it. He groaned in pain but it was the only way.

"Urgh!" he screamed as he used his forehead to make some space. He started to run backwards as forcefully as he could so the wizard had no choice but to move his feet back. Ron kept running and finally kicked his legs up, throwing his head back so they would fall. The impact hurt, but at least Ron was free. He ran off and smacked right into Conor.

"Ron!" Conor said. He was muddy and had a horrible cut on his neck but he seemed okay. "I was looking for you! Here's your wand. Finish him off and come find me." He ran off without another word. Ron spit out blood and wiped his mouth before heading back. The wizard came from behind a tree and tripped him. He took his wand but Ron twisted his wrist and snatched it back. He punched him across the face and got him to the ground. He

turned him on his stomach and yanked his arms to the middle of his spine.

He pointed his wand at his wrists. "Incarcerous." Ropes bound the wizard and he tied them around his feet as well. The wizard wriggled trying to free himself but it was useless. Ron slowly backed up and caught his breath as he watched the man struggle. When he thought it was safe to leave, he turned around and searched for his mates. Harry got out of the grasp of a wizard and used a Petrificus Totalus Charm to stop him. "Harry!" Ron screamed but he instantly regretted it. He touched his face, feeling the damage the bark had done to him.

Harry limped over to him. "You okay?" he asked out of breath.

"Just a scratch. You?" Ron asked. Harry winced. He unzipped his jeans with shaky hands and pulled down his boxer shorts a little at the side. There was a horrible gash on his hip. "For fuck's sake, Harry."

"I'm fine, I just fell on a sharp rock pretty hard. I can still run and fight," he said.

"Do you want to try to-"

"No! I've had worse. Let's just find the others," Harry said, zipping back up. "I think there's only one for each of us." Ron and Harry searched around the forest and, once again, he heard Letty scream. They ran over to the sound and hid behind a tree. Letty was fighting a wizard. He pulled on her hair and held her back to his stomach. She elbowed him, then punched him. She looked around for her wand, but the wizard grabbed her again and backhanded her across the face. Ron's better senses left him and he ran out. Harry ran out as well, quickly followed by Conor, who came running out from the other side.

"Let her go!" Conor shouted. He had both his and what had to be Letty's wand in his hand. Ron and Harry also held up their wands. "I said let her FUCKING go!" Conor seemed livid and slightly mad. The situation was awful but Ron needed to remind him that it was only a test. He didn't want Conor to actually murder the man.

"No," the wizard said. "If she's not strong enough then I don't have to let her go. You'll have to move on without her." He pulled on her hair again and held her around the waist so his wand tip was right at her chin. Ron felt sick watching her being handled by him.

"I'm going to give you to the count of fucking three!" Conor screamed, walking toward him.

"Ron," Harry said.

"I know, I'll take care of it," Ron said. He kept his wand and his gaze pointed on the wizard but he walked over to Conor. "Let me take care of this," he said in his ear.

"No! You said that I could lead," Conor said.

"And you have mate, but I'm the group leader and I said to let me finish this off," he said.

Conor groaned. "I can take him, Ron."

"I know, but let me," he said. Conor sighed and stepped away. Ron turned his focus to Letty. She was dirty, her face was red and blotchy, and she kept flinching in what had to be pain. He had to help her but he couldn't without the wizard knowing. He wished that he knew how to speak to her without words but he didn't know her well enough. In fact, they had very little in common other than being ginger. At once something hit him and he bit back the fear.

"Letty, it's gonna be okay," he said. The wizard looked at him curiously and pushed his wand right against her chin.

"You might as well sound the retreat," the wizard said. "You can't finish the leg without her and I won't let you have her." Letty started to tremble and whimper.

Ron tried not to listen. He had to focus. "Letty, listen to me."

She winced. "Ron."

"Just listen to me." He had to choose his words carefully. "I know this is shit right now. Gingers are always finding bad luck, yeah? There's so much that we can't stand very well." His teammates and the wizard all stared at him like he was mental, but Ron kept his wand up and his eyes on Letty. "Some things are too much for us, Letty. Things that burn...like the sun." Letty frowned at him but she suddenly sighed and nodded a little. Ron nodded too and licked his lips.

The wizard gripped his wand. "Try something, boy." He held his wand right to Letty's throat and braced himself. In that moment, Ron knew that every part of the wizard was stiff and ready for an offensive spell. It was exactly what Ron was hoping for.

He pointed his wand right at the side of the wizard. "Incendio!" he cried.

Letty jumped out of the way when the wizard let her go and snatched his wand. "Incendio!" she bellowed. A wild fire lit around the wizard and Conor rapidly handed Letty back her wand.

"Go ahead and collect the brooms," Ron said to them, increasing the volume of the fire. The three kept moving and Ron ran backwards. He kept the wizard's wand pointed at him until he felt it safe to drop it and run after his team.

"That was brilliant, Ron," Letty said.

"I'm glad you caught on," he said.

"Me too because none of us did," Conor said.

"That was the idea," Ron said. They walked quickly and he reminded them of what they learned during their simulation mazes. He kept them on a straight path and used as many covers as possible. The field started to look familiar and if he weren't mental then he would reckon that they were back at Lambrick somewhere. "Oi, I thinkâ€œ Something hot hit him right in the stomach. He fell backwards and clutched his stomach. He saw everyone spread out as they were once again under attack. Letty didn't have to be told; she rushed straight in and started firing spells. He jumped back up and the four of them started dueling the wizards. Ron threw a spell at his wizard and hid behind a tree to catch his breath.

He jumped out again but Letty ran over. She raised her wand to the wizard. "Stupefy!" He fell back and Letty grabbed his hand and started running.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I don't think we're supposed to win this one, Ron," she said. "The other wizards disappeared." She let him go when they saw Harry and Conor.

"Alright, let's take a second to check ourselves," he said.

"I'm okay," Conor said. The cut on his neck was no longer bleeding and the scratches on his face and arms seemed superficial. His filthy white shirt was ripped but Ron didn't see any blood.

"I'm okay too," Letty said. She had a handprint on her face and her nose was swollen, but she looked all right.

"I'm still fine, Ron," Harry said. "It's not bleeding that much anymore." Harry was muddy from head to toe and his lip was busted, but even if he were seconds away from death, he wouldn't say he was hurt.

Ron wiped the side of his face with his sleeve and ignored the blood. His mouth hurt, his face stung, and his head and legs were throbbing, but if his team was okay then so was he. "Good. Let's move and talk. I'm sure the last leg is up ahead."

"What'd you reckon it'll be?" Harry asked. "Some sort of maze?"

"I dunno," he said. "Whether it's a hideout maze or a simulation or whatever, check for redundancies or things that don't belong. Anything could be a trap or a clue." They kept running through the forest but Letty suddenly stopped and wobbled. "I got you," Ron said, swiftly catching her before she fell. He helped her sit in the grass. "What's wrong?"

She sucked in air. "It'sâ€œit's my back."

"Can I look?" he asked. She nodded. He lifted her jumper a little and saw a deep slash on her lower back.

"Bleeding Christ, Letty," Conor said.

"I think I got it during the last leg, but I'm fine," she said. Her face was incredibly pale and she appeared moments away from drifting off, but her green eyes were full of determination.

"You're really bleeding, CeeCee," Harry said.

"Look, it's no worse than anything you blokes have. So, if you're keeping an eye on me because I don't have a penis, then pretend that I do have one." She looked at Ron and smiled a little.

He smiled back and understood. "Okay." He felt around the top of the sleeve of his knitted jumper for a hole and, when he found it, he pulled hard on it, ripping the sleeve off. "Lift." Letty pulled up her jumper and he wrapped and tied his sleeve around her waist to act as a sort of bandage. "It's the best I can do. Let's go."

They started running again and at long last they reached what had to be the last leg of the exam. As he had expected, it was a maze. It was just like the very first maze he had guided a part of his section through but it was bigger, darker, and almost uglier in a way. "Here we are," Ron said with a heavy heart. "It should be over after this. We just have to get through this last leg. I'll lead us through."

"We know you will," Harry said. "We're so close, Ron."

Ron took a deep breath. He had to stay calm and think. There were three entrances, so he guided them through the middle one. It was dark, and he was surprised that the maze wasn't a simulation. All the walls were black stone and there was a ceiling and stone floor. They lit their wands and walked slowly on the narrow path where everything was still black and stone. It was like nothing he had experienced and he honestly didn't know where they were or what to do.

"Ron, we've been in here for ages," Letty said. "Where are we?"

"Give me a minute," he said. He clawed through every bit of strategic training in his head but nothing was coming to mind to assist them.

"Ron," Conor said.

"Shut up!" Ron said. His heart began to race. He had to come up with something but none of his old tactics were working. He sat down and put his hands over his face. He rocked to some extent and pulled out every bit of information about navigation and mazes that he had learned since starting the new unit. Mazes were all about coordinates. It was important to keep center and use the most direct path. The midpoint rarely changed in standard mazes, it was everything else that was different. He had followed the laws, yet they weren't at the end.

He randomly thought about playing chess against John and what he would do if he kept losing when his trusted maneuvers no longer worked. John would tell him to approach every situation and game

with new eyes; he couldn't show his moves; he had to think ahead and find new solutions to old problems; new solutions were risky but risk was necessary. The idea was the fundamental rule of completing a mission. "Wait," he said, standing up. He rubbed his neck as his argument with Jack over the very first maze came back to haunt him. "We're going back."

"Back?" Harry asked. "We can't start again."

"We have to," Ron said. "We came through the wrong side. We have to veer left."

"What? But you always say that staying in the middle is best," Conor said.

"I know â€“ and it is, but not for this maze. This is a standard maze. There's one true start and one true finish. The left entrance is our only way out. Staying left keeps us out of a vulnerable position and we won't make too many turns."

"I don't know, Ron," Letty said. "We've always stayed center."

"That's the point: we can't rest on the familiar," Ron said. "It's what we've been taught from day one. Being an Auror is about taking risks and there's no bigger risk than this. It's new and different, which has to mean something. I can just feel it," he said, placing a hand over his heart. "Please, trust me." If he truly wanted to lead them then he had to be prepared to make tough decisions and step out of his comfort zone. He had to lead them even if he wasn't sure of himself.

"Let's go left then," Harry said. "If you can feel it then that's really all I need."

Letty and Conor shared a look. "Okay," they said together.

Ron felt a rush of appreciation for Harry and for his team. "Good. I know we're making the right decision. Now, we can't all leave at one time or the maze will start to dissolve, so you three go ahead and I'll wait one minute to be safe before leaving." They quickly ran back from where they came, giving Ron a chance to regroup. He had to trust his instincts. He retraced his steps and was relieved to see them waiting for him back at the maze's start at the left entrance. He led them back through for what seemed like ages, until, finally, they turned a corner and saw a door. It was a black and wooden with a large gold handle.

"Let's blast it," Letty said.

"No, I'll open it," Ron said.

"Open it?" she asked. "Why?"

"I don't think the door is meant to be the trap," he said. He took a deep breath and told himself that it was all a test. He reached out for the handle.

"Ron," Harry suddenly said.

Ron turned back to him. For the first time all night, Harry looked terrified. "I'm just gonna open it," Ron assured him. He slowly turned the handle and led them into a large room. It was a dusty and dingy sitting room. There were random pieces of ugly furniture, boxes, and other bits and bobs covered by spider webs.

"What is this place?" Letty asked.

"I think it's a hideout," Harry said. "I also think it's jinxed."

"Me too," Ron said. "Let's secure the area and then figure out what we're going to do." The four of them searched around and delicately looked through things for hidden traps or wizards in disguise. When Ron thought they were finished, he walked closer to the stone wall opposite the door. He was almost positive that it was the way out. He touched the wall to find it was rather warm. He remembered studying about the jinxes put on walls to make them exploded bigger and louder when a spell hit them. Dark wizards used them as a distraction to Aurors and, sometimes, they were easy to distinguish because the jinx left a warm impression on the stone.

"This is the way out," he said, backing up. "I think we shouldâ€"" Letty raised her wand and pointed it right at the wall. "No, don't!"

"Confringo Maxima!" Letty bellowed.

For a split second, Ron and Harry locked eyes; Conor was right in front of the wall. Harry ran and pushed him out of the way, throwing a Protego Charm in front of Conor right as Letty's spell hit the wall. The wall blasted open and crumbled, and Harry's body was thrown through it and outside. "Harry!" Letty yelled. She ran after him as the cold night air hit Ron. They were back at Lambrick. He could see the trainers further down into the field, but his vision went blurry and it was hard to hear.

He took a few steps out of the maze and saw Harry's limp body on the ground. A loud ringing pierced in his ears and it felt like his brain was spinning in his head. His heart galloped and his lungs closed up. Harry's body was on the grass. He was dead. He was dead just like Fred had died; only Ron wouldn't make it to the funeral. He refused to bury his very best friend in the entire world. He would have to be buried with him. His knees gave in and he fell to the ground. He couldn't see or hear, and every muscle seized up and pulsated.

"I'm fine! Get the fuck off me!" someone's voice said. Someone touched Ron but the hand was quickly removed. "No, don't touch him. Don't touch him. I've got him." Ron couldn't understand why the voice sounded like Harry's; Harry was dead. "No, no, no â€" don't do this, mate. Don't do this. I'm okay. Everything is fine. Umâ€!"

Ron wanted Harry's voice to go away. He felt like he was going to vomit but he was too stiff to heave. He couldn't breathe and the

dizziness increased with every fraction of a breath he was able to produce. He tried to look around but everything had a black fuzziness around it. "Harâ€;Fredâ€;Harr..." Ron choked out. He had no air in his lungs and his rapidly beating heart made finding breath even harder.

"Ron, stop it! It's me â€“ it's Harry. I'm okay and so are you. You've gotta calm down, mate, and breathe," Harry's voice said. "No! No one is getting anyone. I've got it. He needs room and some bloody water or something."

Ron felt stinging tears in his eyes. Harry's voice was all around him but it wasn't real. His best mate was dead and so was his brother. He started to suffocate and he knew it would be over soon. He pictured Hermione in his mind but suddenly he didn't know who she was; he didn't know anything. All of a sudden, something strong and hot touched his hand, gripping it tightly. "Ron, do you feel this? If you can feel it then hold my hand back. It's my hand, Ron. I'm okay and I'm proving it by squeezing your hand. Squeeze mine and have every grasp equal a breath. Come on, please? Please, if it's the last thing you do for meâ€;"

Ron could handle the request. He owed it to Harry even if he wasn't real. He tried to remember what squeezing a hand felt like and he weakly attempted it. He did it a few more times and tried to get his breathing to connect. "That's right, keep going. Can you feel it?" Ron faintly nodded. "That's because it's real, Ron. I'm here, and I'm real and you're real and my hand is real. What you're feeling on the inside and what you're thinking and seeing isn't true. We're not at Hogwarts, Ron. We're at Lambrick and Fred's not here. It's just you and me. I'm alive. Look at me. Look at me."

Ron blinked several times and dragged his gaze to where he thought the voice was coming from. His vision was hazy, but he could see Harry's glasses and his scar right in front of him. Soon, all of Harry's face came into view. He was bloody and pale but he looked alive. "Har..."

"Yes, it's me. See?" Harry squeezed his hand. "This is real, mate. You have to breathe because all of this out here is real."

The joy and sorrow hit him at once. "What about Fred?" he asked.

"He's not here, mate. It's just you and me," Harry said. "Breathe and keep holding my hand as tightly as you can." Ron obeyed. He breathed and squeezed Harry's hand. Harry kept talking to him and Ron ultimately concluded that he wasn't dead. After awhile his heart and lungs started to work properly, and his brain began to thaw.

"Harry," Ron said.

"I'm right here. Give me that water," Harry demanded from someone. He took the cap off the bottle and put it to Ron's lips. "Drink it, mate." Ron swallowed almost all the cold water at once. It tasted so good and it felt so good going down his

throat. It cooled him down almost instantaneously. He moaned softly.

"Is everyone okay?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, you and me are okay and so are Conor and Letty. We're done. The maze is over. It's all over, mate." Harry cupped some cold water in his hand and patted it on Ron's face. He shivered but he enjoyed the feeling. He was back in reality and he knew where he was. He was painfully exhausted and drained. The attack had been his worst one yet. As the realization of what had happened oozed inside his mind, the horror of what was around him almost made his heart gallop again. Phillip, Alan, Richard, Conor, and Letty were all staring at him; they now knew. He'd had his worst panic attack to date in front of his fellow trainees and the people who would decide his future as an Auror.

He put his hands over his face. "Oh, fuck." It wasn't appropriate but it was his first honest response.

"It doesn't even matter. You're okay," Harry said rubbing his arm. Hands touched his shoulders and Harry slapped them away. "Don't touch him."

"Calm down, Potter. We're gonna help him up," Alan said. He and Richard helped Ron to a standing position

"Take him and Mr. Potter to your cabin, Alan," Phillip said.
"I'll be right there."

"I've got him," Harry said, practically snatching Ron away. "Come on, Ron."

"Fucking hell, Harry," Ron breathed.

"I know. It's okay," Harry said. On the walk there, Ron wasn't sure what was happening. Harry kept a firm grip on his upper arm and it was the only thing that kept him sane. His memory was clearing up and he was remembering more and more of what happened: he'd had an attack and everyone had seen it. He would not only fail his exam, but he was also sure that he would be thrown out of camp.

However, when they got to the cabin, Alan and Richard treated him with care. They gave him more water and a towel, and they let him sit and catch his breath. For a moment, Ron thought that it might have been all right but Phillip came storming in and went behind Alan's desk, looking outraged. "Are you all right, Mr. Weasley? We can take you to the medical cabin."

Ron did want to lie down. His chest was on fire, his head was killing him, and his cuts and bruises from dueling were starting to ache, but he knew that he had shown enough weakness. "I'm fine, sir."

"Are you aware of what happened to you tonight?" Phillip asked. Ron nodded. "Do you think you could walk us through the experience?"

Ron didn't know what to say. "I can try," he said gently. "We-we reached the end of the maze and, when the wall blew up, Harry was blasted through it. I thought he was dead." It hurt so badly to say the words.

There was no sympathy on Phillips face. "But it was a bit more than that, wasn't it?"

There was no point in trying to hide it anymore. Phillip obviously already knew. "Yes, sir. I had a panic attack."

"Are you aware of what that is?" Phillip asked.

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

Phillip nodded and turned to Harry. "And you, Mr. Potter? Are you aware of what a panic attack is?"

"Yes, sir," he said.

Phillip clasped his hands together and looked between them. "I had a feeling that you both would. Judging by your intervention, Mr. Potter, and your demeanor right now, Mr. Weasley, I would say that it's something you both know well. Am I wrong?"

"No, sir," they said together.

"It's something I've had...for awhile," Ron said.

Phillip picked up a quill and tapped the tip against the desk. "Alan, did you know?"

"Not at all, sir," Alan said.

"Richard?" Phillip asked.

"No, sir. Weasley has never said anything about it and neither has Potter," Richard said.

"Hold on," Ron said, "before any of you say whatever you have to say, please Harry shouldn't be here for it. He was just helping me. He didn't do anything wrong."

"Weasley, you're in no position to tell anyone what they should or shouldn't do!" Alan snapped. "You violated the basic rule of this academy!"

"Mr. Lewis," Phillip said, "no one disagrees with you. Weasley did violate the rules and the matter will be dealt with momentarily. However, he does have a point. What we discuss isn't Mr. Potter's concern."

"It is my concern," Harry said. "Ron's my friend."

"Shut up, Potter," Richard said. "Sir, I agree that this is Potter's concern but for different reasons. He violated the rules, too."

"Not exactly, Mr. Jones," Phillip said. "Potter may have withheld information when he could have said something, but, in the end, it's Ron's condition and it was his medical slip to fill out. So, Richard, you and Potter may go to the west medical cabin to get his head injury checked out."

Harry wiped away the trickle of blood that was on his forehead.
"I can't leave yet."

"Harry, it's okay," Ron said. "Just go. I'll see you soon." Harry didn't look like he would get up, so Richard practically pulled him up and dragged him out of the room.

"Alan, will you attend to the procedure while I speak with Mr. Weasley?" Phillip asked.

"Sir, he's one of mine and he put this over my head," Alan said angrily.

"I understand that but I'm pulling rank this time," Phillip said. "This is a matter for myself and Weasley. Now, go see to it." Ron couldn't look at him but he knew that Alan was glaring at him. He said nothing as he stormed out of the cabin.

Phillip was quiet as he stared at him. Ron could only study his own palms that wouldn't stop itching. A part of him hoped that Phillip would tell him to leave so he wouldn't have to deal with the stress anymore. "Mr. Weasley, I'm going to ask you two very simple questions and I want your complete honesty."

Ron slowly looked up. "Okay, sir."

Phillip peered right at him with his fierce hazel eyes, and Ron was sure that he was reading his mind. "How long have you had panic attacks?"

"Since this summer," he said with shame. "They started right after my brother died."

"So you were well aware of them when you received your medical slip?" Phillip asked. Ron nodded. "That leads me to my next question: why didn't you tell anyone or write it down on your medical slip?"

"Because I didn't want it to disqualify me," he said.

Phillip gave him an incredulous look. "Mr. Weasley, how unprofessional and naïve do you think I am? I have been in this profession for over thirty years and have seen Aurors come and go from all walks of life. Do you truly believe that you're the only person who's ever had to deal with anxiety, or post-traumatic stress, or any other sort of emotional or physical trauma?"

It sounded almost laughable coming from Phillip but Ron hadn't made the connection in his head before. "I guess not, sir."

"We ask for that information, not to punish, but to help," Phillip said. "We may be an Auror training camp but we're still decent human beings. We wouldn't revoke our decision based on what you put on your slip. That information is only seen by me, the nurse, and your section leader so we can accommodate whenever necessary, and so people like Alan can know what's happening to you when you suddenly fall out and can't breathe."

"I understand," Ron said. He felt like such a tit. He should've listened to Harry.

"Then why didn't you inform us?" he asked. "Why did you have us believing false information about yourself? We don't need to know your entire personal history, but certain information is imperative for us to know."

"Iâ€œI don't know, sir," Ron said. "I guess I thought I was over it and it wouldn't happen anymore. All I can say, Mr. Smith, is that I hope you don't look down on Harry for this. He told me that I should inform you but I didn't, and I told him never to bring it up. This is my fault and my responsibility. I'm the one who lied."

"Yes, you are. I must say that I'm rather surprised that you did, especially considering how you got here," Phillip said.

"Sir?" Ron asked in confusion.

"Mr. Weasley, when you received your letter a day late, did it startle you?" Phillip asked. Ron nodded. He had a feeling where the conversation would lead. "You should've been," Phillip said. "You're a smart young man and I'm sure the theories you had in your mind were, in fact, correct. Everyone gets his or her acceptance or rejection letters on the same day. It keeps things fair."

Ron's palms itched again. He knew that he hadn't been mental for being worried. "I figured, sir."

"I'm going to tell you something that's privileged information," Phillip said, leaning his elbows on the desk. "When we are deciding who to accept, we match hopefuls of similar statures, abilities, and backgrounds and decide which is more fit for our program. I'll tell you now that your acceptance took awhile to decide. It's why your letter was late."

Ron rubbed his neck and he felt his face completely flush. "I understand, sir. I always figured that Alan—"

"Alan?" Phillip asked. "No. No, he and Richard are a part of the selection committee but at the end of it all it's my decision. The two of them fancied your acceptance. I was the one who needed convincing."

The words were like a punch to his stomach. "Why were you so unsure about me?"

"I can tell that you're offended but it's not for the right reason," Phillip said. "We talked about your strengths during your last evaluation, and you have a lot of qualities that are essential for an Auror. However, what I saw in you that afternoon during your interview is the same thing I see now in front of me. The number one thing an Auror has to have is compassion."

Ron gaped at him. He knew he wasn't the best at everything but he knew that he was caring. "I have compassion, sir."

Phillip got up and pulled his chair over to Ron's, keeping his eyes fixated on him. "I believe you, Mr. Weasley," he said. "During your trial, you spoke so boldly about protecting your family and I've watched you lead your team with confidence over these past few weeks. Even talking about Mr. Potter just now brought a fire out of you, but you don't have any of compassion for yourself."

Ron rubbed his neck. "It's not like I hate myself, sir."

"I don't think you do," Phillip said, "but you evidently don't care enough to see that you need to help yourself. There's a fine line between selflessness and carelessness, and it's what can get you seriously hurt as an Auror. That's why I didn't want to bring you here at first. Your skill and potential will never amount to anything if you don't take care of yourself."

"I thought I had everything under control, " Ron said quietly.

"You were wrong, Mr. Weasley," Phillip said. "You've been dishonest and you disrespected your section leader. I'll have to mark this down on your record."

Ron nodded and rubbed his palms into his thighs. "Should I pack, sir?"

"There's no need," Phillip said. "You'll be leaving on Monday and, over the holiday, the staff and I will weigh everything that's happened and make our decision. I will say this, Mr. Weasley: you have a lot of heart but you have to apply it to yourself as well. I've seen men wither away as Aurors because they buried their own struggles into the back of their minds or a bottle of whiskey."

"I would never do that," Ron said with force. "Listen, sir, I want to be a respectable Auror and I want to train here. I know I may not do the things I need to in order to take care of myself, but it doesn't mean that I want to wither away. Just please, tell me what happens now?"

Phillip got up again and let out a steady breath. "This isn't something I can simply give you laps for. What happens now is that you take the time you have left here to think about what you want out of this experience and if your actions correlate to those wants. Your future is entirely up to you, and if you don't care then I certainly won't."

There was a knock and the door opened. "Sir?" Alan said

"Great. Mr. Weasley and I are finished here," Phillip said, moving his chair back. "It would be for the best if you kept the events of tonight to yourself, Mr. Weasley, and continue on as usual. You're finished for the night."

"What about my exam?" Ron said, getting up.

"That is also over," Phillip said seriously.

A pang hit Ron's heart. "Thank you, Mr. Smith." He walked out with Alan in total silence and he hated it. "Aren't you going to say anything, sir?"

"What is there to say, Weasley?" Alan asked. "You withheld important information that you obviously thought we weren't mature enough to handle."

"Iâ€¢I won't tell you I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I know you don't want to hear it."

"You're damn right," Alan said. They walked right past the living quarters.

"Where are we going, sir?" Ron asked.

"To a holding cabin," Alan said. "It's standard procedure that in the event a trainee faces mortal peril or any sort of mental or physical crisis that the next of kin is notified."

"What?" Ron said in a gasp.

"You see, Weasley, there are rules here that everyone must follow," Alan said bitterly. "You won't be allowed to leave, but you must inform your family of what happened."

"No. No, sir. I can't do that," Ron said.

Alan gave him a look. "Are you really going to tell me again about what you can and can't do? He's already here." Ron felt himself panicking again as they approached the cabin. "Go on. Afterward, go to see Madame Campbell so she can tend to your wounds and give you something for your nerves." Alan walked away without saying anything else to him. Ron gawked at the door and shook. He stomped his foot and groaned. He didn't need this on top of everything. The situation was the last thing he had ever expected to happen.

He reached his hand out and touched the knob. He didn't want to open it, but seeing as he was in enough trouble, he opened the door. His next of kin instantly stood up from his chair.

"Ron?"

He had been the first person Ron had thought of to notify, and, for whatever deep reason, he was the only one Ron felt comfortable with enough to share embarrassing and complicated things.

Ron closed the door behind him and walked up to him. "Hi, Bill."

Bill clutched his upper arms. "Holy Merlin, what happened to you? You look horrible."

"Huh?" Ron looked down at his jumper that was torn and filthy. His hands were muddy, and there was blood on his knuckles and under his fingernails. He was sure that his face looked just as horrific, and he forgot that, to people outside of Lambrick, the vision could be alarming. "Oh, um, I'm fine. I was dueling, but that isn't why you're here."

Bill relaxed a little and sat down, as did Ron. Bill looked the same except that he was somewhat pale and there were bags under his blue eyes. If Ron hadn't been so boggled down from everything that had happened, he could bask in the feeling of seeing his brother. He had missed him. "Then why am I here, Ron? I was at home havingâ€"" Bill cleared his throat. "I was at home with Fleur and I got an urgent owl from Phillip Smith. I wasn't given much detail other than that I had to follow the instructions to get here. When I did, your section leader told me that you'd had a panic attack during your field exam. He talked me through it as if I had some bloody knowledge about itâ€""

"Billâ€!"

"Ron, if you really had a panic attack then I need to get you out of here and take you home so we can really talk about this. Those types of attacks are serious," Bill said.

"I know they're serious but I'm not leaving. I'll be out of here Monday," Ron said.

"It doesn't matter, Ron. This is nothing to take lightly," he said.

"I know, Bill!" Ron practically shouted. He was tired of repeating the same story. "I know how to handle this. This isn't the first time I've had one. I've had them since Fred died, and the more I think about it, the more I'm sure that the first time I had one was when I first walked into the joke shop to work with George. It started then, I just never told anyone."

Bill was quiet for awhile. "Wait, you mean to tell me that you've gone all summer with this condition and you haven't told anyone?"

"It's not a condition and I didn't want anyone to know," Ron said. He could see the anger in Bill's face but Ron had some of his own. Everyone was mad at him and pulling him in different directions. He had no time to breathe. "It's not as straightforward as you think it is. Do you think I could honestly tell mum or George about this? I wanted to handle it on my own and I thought it was taken care of. I was fine but a really horrible thing happened tonight. I panicked, but Harry helped me."

"Harry?" Bill asked. "I thought you said you hadn't told anyone?"

"Well, I didn't but he knows," Ron said.

Bill clicked his teeth with his tongue and nodded. "Let me guess: Hermione knows about it too, yeah?"

Ron slammed his fist on the table. "Don't you ever say her name like that. This isn't her fault and it's not Harry's either. I'm the one who told them. It was my decision." It had been the same thing he said to Ginny and he couldn't help but feel like a neglectful brother.

Bill let out a harsh breath and shook his head. "Right. You have emotional trauma that's occurred since our mutual brother died but it's only necessary to tell your friends."

"It's not like that," Ron said. "I was going to tell you lot down the line when I was out of camp and things were better. I just wasn't ready to tell you now. I hate that you had to find out like this."

"So do I, Ron," Bill said. "I hate that you're sitting here so nonchalantly while I find out that my little brother has been going through a dark time in his life alone. I hate that you're putting your trust in only Harry and Hermione when you and I and the rest of the family lost Fred together. If this started because of his death, then why haven't you said anything? We need to help each other, Ron. Why are you replacing us with their confidence?" There was a hurt in Bill's voice that made Ron feel dizzy again.

"Our family is everything to me, and my friends will never replace anything. Fuck you for saying that," Ron said, slamming his fist on the table again. "You have no idea what I've been through tonight, and you're not supposed to come in here and make me feel worse than I already do. I don't need this from you, Bill." He rubbed his face roughly and closed his eyes. "This isn't what I want. This isn't how things are supposed to be." He wasn't just talking about his test; Ron was referring to how everything had changed and morphed into something he couldn't always understand or control. They were silent for awhile.

"Why am I your next of kin?" Bill asked softly. "If you don't like how I'm reacting to this, then why did you write my name? Why didn't you put Dad's or George's or Charlie's? I figured he'd be the first one you'd want here."

Ron shrugged. "If something ever seriously happened to me, there's no way I would ask Dad to come. I wouldn't put him through that again with another son. George has had enough stress without me adding to it, and Charlie's great butâ€œfor things like this, I want you here," he explained. "You're the one I go to when I'm in trouble. I'm sorry that I hurt you by not telling you sooner, but don't think it's because I don't trust you. I do. It's why I put your name down."

Bill's body relaxed even more and his features softened. "What happened exactly?"

"I can't give you details, but during my exam a wall exploded and Harry fell through it. It reminded me of what happened to Fred and I panicked," Ron said.

"Is Harry okay?" Bill asked.

"Yeah, he's fine," Ron said.

"What happens when you have these attacks?" Bill asked. "I don't know much about them."

"It's like I can't breathe, and my heart races, and my body freezes up," he said. "I think really awful things and it's hard to see or hear. Everything hurts. It sorta feels like I'm dying."

Bill paled even more and it made the scar across his face more noticeable. "Is it always thinking about Fred that makes you like this?"

"Not always," he mumbled. "Sometimes it's thinking about Hermione or Harry dying, and sometimes it's thinking about the family and someone getting hurt. It just comes out of me Bill, but you have to understand that it's not all the time and a few times I've been able to stop it. It's not debilitating, and I'm not in any real danger. It's just a thing in my head."

Bill ran his fingers through his disheveled ginger hair. "My god Ron, I can't believe you've been going through all this. I don't even know what to think right now. No one else honestly knows but Harry and Hermione?"

"It's not something I wanted to share with everyone," Ron said. He couldn't tell Bill that Ginny knew. He wouldn't put that guilt on her as well.

"Including your instructors?" Bill asked. "Why didn't you tell them?"

"For the same reason: I don't want anyone to know," Ron said.

"But they could've helped you here," Bill said. "I'm sure they've dealt with this multiple times. In the Auror profession this is bound to be something frequent."

Ron wanted to roll his eyes. Bill understood Phillip's logic perfectly but, then again, Bill was a lot smarter than he was.
"I'm realizing that now," he said dully.

"Are you in trouble?" Bill asked.

"I don't know. Probably, but they won't tell me anything. I reckon when they send me my letter over the holiday it'll say everything I need to know," Ron said.

Bill rubbed his neck. "What do you want me to tell everyone when I get home? They don't know I'm here yet."

"Keep it that way," Ron swiftly said. "I don't want you to tell them anything."

Bill's jaw dropped. "Ron, you must be having a laugh. I can't just pretend that this didn't happen."

"You don't have to," Ron quickly assured. "In front of me you can say and do whatever you want, but you can't tell the family. Please? I'm begging you. I'll tell them when the time is right for me, but not now. I can't take on any more stress and I don't want to be responsible for ruining Christmas because of the shit with me. Please, Bill, please don't tell."

"Damn it, Ron," Bill breathed.

"I know, and I swear that I'll tell them but not now. Please," Ron pleaded, grabbing his arm.

"You don't have to beg," Bill said, pulling his arm away. "If you don't want me to tell, then I won't. You're an adult and the choice is yours, but I refuse to be a part of your secret for long. It's not healthy and it won't help you. You and George, with your fucking secretsâ€""

"George?" Ron asked, raising an eyebrow. "What's going on with him?"

"Nothing," Bill quickly said. "I just mean in general George has been secretive for months now and I don't want you to be the same way." Ron didn't believe him but he wouldn't push it. He was too drained to demand more information out of him. "I'll have to tell Fleur that you got a nasty head injury or something. She's worried too."

"Thank you," Ron said.

"Don't thank me, Ron," Bill said darkly. "I don't like lying to my wife, and, as your oldest brother, I should stick with my judgment to help you and say something, but you trusted me enough to put my name down so I'll honor your trust." He brushed his hair back and Ron saw the red mark on his neck.

"I'm sorry that I interrupted yourâ€'whatever with Fleur," Ron said.

Bill cracked a smile for the first time. "It's okay. We needed to stop. We both have to get up early in the morning. Besides, we had more than enough fun during my lunch break."

"Too much information, I reckon," Ron said, cringing.

Bill nudged him. "Jealousy isn't becoming on you, Ron." He sighed. "Well, aside from all this, I guess I can tell you in person that I picked up Hermione's Christmas present. It was a little more than you thought it would cost, but I have the receipts and I replaced the money in your vault. The gift is in your wardrobe."

"Cheers," Ron said in a breath of relief. "That's one thing I won't have to worry about."

"So what happens to you now?" Bill asked.

"Hopefully I get to sleep sometime," Ron said. "I just need a few hours where there's nothing going on in my head."

"I understand," Bill said. "You've been through a lot."

"I'm really sorry about all this, Bill," Ron said.

"So am I," Bill said. "I didn't mean to get spiteful but it makes me angry when you don't have enough faith in your family or in me. I don't like knowing that you've been going through this fear and pain about Fred without our family. We're all we have, Ron."

"I know and you have to believe, even if it sounds mental, that I've been keeping it all to myself because I care so much about our family and I want to protect you lot," he said. "It's not because of a lack in faith in you. It's about me. I'm sorry."

Bill looked as if he wanted to say something more but he just nodded and stood up. "I can't stay here long. They mostly just wanted to inform me and let me see you for a few minutes."

Ron got up as well. "Right. Everything about Lambrick is guarded."

Bill nodded again and suddenly all his hardness vanished. "Get over here." Ron slowly walked around the table. Bill growled and punched him hard in the arm.

"Bollocking hell!" Ron said.

"I'm sorry, but sometimes Charlie's way is the best way to let people know how you feel," Bill said. "All I knew was that you had fallen out, Ron. Before Alan told me about the panic attack, there was a moment when I didn't know if you were alive or dead. You bloody scared me, Ron. You can't ever scare me like that again. Not ever again."

"I'm sorry," Ron said, rubbing his arm. "I'm okay, Bill. I've just had a lot on my shoulders here. Lambrick's a really difficult place to be sometimes and there's mountains of things going on at once." He rubbed his face roughly again. "It's been really hard but I'm okay. I'm just!" He didn't know how to finish. His emotions and the pressure were pounding against his eyes and throat. "Fuck, I don't want to do this right now. I don't want to do this."

He bit his lip and let out a harsh and unsteady breath before Bill pulled him into a hug. Ron didn't know what to do. He had gotten used to punches and kicks and throws and spells, but a hug was something else. He kept his arms at his side and let out another breath. "I don't care if you're a trainee. You're still my little brother." Bill held him tighter and Ron couldn't hold it back. The hot and stubborn tears squeaked out. He was angry

and overwhelmed and confused and so bloody happy that Bill was there. He didn't have to be a solider or a trainee for a moment. Once more he could simply be a younger brother in need of support.

He let his emotions out against Bill's collar as Bill stood silently and gave him space to lean. It was exactly what Ron needed. He eventually pulled away and rubbed his eyes, sniffing. "I'm gonna work this out, Bill," he said in a stuffy voice. "I promise."

"I hope so, Ron," he said. He pulled his jacket sleeve over his hand and swiped away the bit of snot from under Ron's nose. "Blimey, have you not been taught how to fix yourself yet?"

Ron blushed. "I think that's for after the merge."

"Well, I reckon I'll see you when you get back from the Granger's house," Bill said. "Everyone's really eager to see you. Normally I'd say Mum or Dad want to see you most, but Ginny is going mental about it. She keeps talking about you."

Hearing that Ginny really wanted to see him gave him a burst of positive feeling. "I want to see her too. Thanks for everything, Bill. For coming and for understanding!"

"I don't really understand it, Ron," Bill said. "Even if I read a hundred books on this I won't understand it or why you want to keep this to yourself for now, but I'll honor your wishes. You're my brother, so I have no choice." He walked to the door and gave him a once-over. "You look unbelievably grown up, Ron. You've changed a lot and you look like a proper man now. In that interview you did you sounded like a man as well. I just hope you start acting like one." He gave him a nod and left the cabin.

Ron exhaled deeply. Bill now knew and he didn't know what it would mean. He headed to the medical cabin and Madame Campbell went over him from top to bottom. She tended to his wounds and gave him a healing potion that he wasn't allowed to drink until he was in bed. He was afraid to go into his cabin but found neither Jack nor Conor inside. Then he remembered that there was still a full night of evaluations and that he and Harry were the only ones to be dismissed early. He changed out of his torn clothes and got into bed.

He took out his picture of Hermione. He didn't want to, but he'd have to tell her. He looked at her smiling face and drank his potion. Almost immediately, he felt more relaxed and he wasn't shaking with nerves. He also felt incredibly sleepy. He could barely pull the covers over him and didn't have the energy to put her picture away. He fell asleep with it loosely in his grip.

* * *

Someone was shaking him ruthlessly. "Go away," Ron groaned.

"Get up, Weasley." The voice woke him up a bit more. He opened his eyes and yelped at seeing Alan standing over him. "Wake up."

"Is he getting sacked?" Conor asked from his bed.

"Go back to sleep Neary, or start your laps early," Alan snapped.

"I'll take the sleep," Conor said with a yawn.

"Sir, what's going on?" Ron asked.

"Get dressed and meet me outside. You're not running this morning," Alan said. He shook his head before leaving.

Ron slowly sat up. He was groggy and his face hurt. He looked around to find both Conor and Jack looking at him. He didn't know how much they knew. "Hey," he said stupidly.

"That's all you have to say?" Jack asked. "After what happened last night? I came in here expecting details but you were dead asleep. We couldn't wake you up."

Ron looked at Conor. He had seen and heard everything; he must've told. "I told Jack that you and Harry busting through that wall wasn't a big deal but he won't believe me."

"I didn't see it, Neary. No one did," Jack said. "The instructors told us that the exams were put on hold for a few minutes and we all figured something happened with you lot."

"Letty and I told everyone about the accident," Conor said to Ron. "You and Harry going through the wall, and then having to get fixed up." Conor's eyes widened a little and he nodded.

"Yeah," Ron said, feeling massive gratitude for him. "Campbell fixed us up."

"Whatever, Weasley. A little too much realness obviously freaked you out. Getting hurt is a part of the job," Jack said.

"Thank you for that bit of wisdom," Ron said. He got out of bed and realized he was still holding Hermione's picture. He put it away and looked at himself in the mirror. "Bollocking shit wank." He had pink scratches and red chaffing all over his face. It almost looked as if he had washed it with glass. He looked horrible, but he had no time to care. He slipped into his clothes and headed to the toilet so he could brush his teeth and get a few moments alone where he wasn't in trouble. He was appalled to see the early time on his watch.

Alan was at the start of the trail waiting for him. Some people quietly teased Alan because he appeared rather harmless. He had a kind face, light hair, and he wasn't the tallest of blokes, but Ron knew his unflinching grey eyes well, and he knew how much muscle Alan had in his body and personality. Ron was always the target of Alan's fury, so he didn't understand why Alan had

wanted him to come to Lambrick. "Are we going to your cabin, sir?" Ron asked.

"No, I want to talk to you right here," Alan shot. "I want you standing right in front of me when I tell you that I'm extremely disappointed in you. Phillip may be head here but you're my trainee and you lied to me."

"I'm—"

"Don't talk," Alan said, holding up a hand. "I don't claim to be the best at everything but one thing I do pride myself on is honesty. It's what keeps you alive as an Auror. Honesty is what my Auror partnership with Richard is based on. It's the underlying duty as an Auror. We have to be able to trust each other Ron, and we don't. You looked me in the eye and told me that there was nothing you needed to tell me."

"I know I did," Ron said.

"That was a lie," he continued. "I bloody knew during the fire training that there was something going on. When you hid behind that tree, I knew then but I didn't think it was this serious."

"It's not, sir," Ron said.

"Bollocks! Yes, it is!" Alan yelled. "What if you had been on a mission with Harry, and he didn't know you had panic attacks and you had one right in front of a group of dark wizards? Do you think they'd wait around while Harry tried to figure out what was wrong? No, you would both be dead!"

"Don't bring Harry into this!" Ron shouted back. "You know nothing about my friendship with him and you have no right to put that scenario in my head right now! I'm aware that it could be the difference between life and death, sir. It's never slipped my mind."

"Then start acting like you know something, Weasley!" Alan said. "If you ever become an Auror, full disclosure is something you'll have to use. There's no bloody way in hell I'm going to let you put other people at risk because your head is too far up your arse. Do you understand me, Weasley?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

"Bloody hell, you really make me sick sometimes, Ron," Alan said quietly. There was something new in his eyes and voice that Ron didn't recognize. "You could easily be one of the bloody best out here but you're still not letting yourself. It's like you're not trying; like you don't want to be here. You're not pushing it. You're too weak."

"Stop it, sir," Ron said just as quietly. "I am pushing it. You can say whatever you want to but I'm not going to back down. I'm not Roger. I'll keep getting back up, because I want to be here and this is where I belong. That tactic won't work on me."

"If you end up coming back here then I'd love for you to start showing me instead of doing all this talking, because I'm tired of your bullshit," Alan said. "I don't want to see you anywhere near the trail this morning. Conditioning drills are for full fledged trainees and you're not anymore."

Ron swallowed the bile in his throat. "Does that mean I shouldn't bother keeping things packed over the holiday, sir?"

"It means that you have a lot of work to do," Alan said before he walked away. Ron didn't know what to do with himself so he went to the only place where bad things couldn't touch him.

He walked into John's cabin. "Ron, welcome," John said. "Tea and biscuits?"

"Yes, please," he said. He took his treat and pulled up a chair right in front of John's desk.

"I'm surprised you're here," John said. "I heard you took quite a fall last night at the end of the maze."

"Yeah, the wall got blasted," Ron mumbled. "I'm all right, but Alan is letting me have the morning to get my head on."

"Rejuvenation is important and at least you got through the maze," John said. "You know, when you lot leave tomorrow I'll also be leaving. My shift here is over and I must get back to work."

"Oh," Ron said, feeling a sense of loss. He didn't know why he'd assumed John would sort of hang around forever.

"Don't sound so heartbroken," John said with a small grin. "It doesn't mean you won't be a great student anymore."

"There's no way I'll do as well in any other section. I'm home here," Ron said.

"But you also have to leave home to build your own life, don't you?" John asked. "You'll approach every new lesson, subject matter, and instructor with new eyes. I have faith that you'll come back, Ron, so be ready to see things differently."

"I'll try, John," Ron said, though he wanted to tell him that it was easier said than done.

"No, you will. You will because you're extremely intelligent, you're patient, and you have leadership and drive," John said. "A fall won't change that, and neither will the future."

Ron already missed the way John spoke to him. "I learned so much in this class and, for the first time ever, I don't want the learning to end. It's like I have a voice in this room and I know things that I didn't know I knew."

John laughed. "I'm glad that I was able to convert another brute. I learned quite a bit from you as well, Ron. You've been the brightest, most inventive, and most complicated student I've had in a long time. It's good to know that this generation of heroes isn't all dim."

Ron smiled. "Some of us are okay."

"Well, since you're here I guess there's one last thing to do," John said. He pulled his chess bag out from under his desk. "One more for the road", as the Muggles say." Ron felt far too drained to play, but he did. Chess took his mind off everything bad that was happening to him. As they played, he talked with John about his new book and subjects in navigation. It was perfect and, for a moment, Ron forgot about his panic attack. The tiredness left him, and he played harder and quicker than he ever had.

After three games, Ron let go of everything in his life and played for himself and all the things he was good at.

"Checkmate," he said, almost out of breath.

John didn't look upset. He smiled widely. "Great job, son. This is what I've been waiting on since I met you. Minerva told me that you were an outstanding player."

Ron beamed. "Thank you, sir."

"Here's your parting gift." John reached into his bag. "A signed book for a Ms. Hermione Granger and this." He handed Ron a jar. "I'm a man of precaution and I always keep a couple of these in my bag. Put this cream on your face and in a few hours your scars should fade. I know as men we like to hold onto our wounds, but yours are just frightful."

Ron laughed. "Cheers. I should go." He shook John's hand. "It's been a pleasure. Hopefully I'll see you around."

"You will, Ron. Great minds always find the same circles," John said. "Now, before you walk out that doorâ€"

"Coordinates will always be my friend, sir," Ron said.

John smiled. "Splendid."

Ron went back to his cabin where Olivia was sitting on the bottom step. When she saw him she rushed over and grabbed his upper arms. "Ron, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, gripping her arms as well. It was nice to hear a voice that wasn't dripping in disappointment, shock, or anger.

"I was so worried," she said, letting him go. "Last night Charlotte said that you and Harry had an accident with a wall. I looked all over for you this morning but I couldn't find you."

"We got blasted through but we're all right," he said. "We were a bit mental afterward, so we left early and we got some potion and

went to sleep. Alan wanted me to skive the drill today to make sure I wouldn't fall out."

She sighed in relief and chewed on her lip. "That's good. I thought something horrible had happened."

Ron couldn't really look at her. Lying to her wasn't easy, but they still weren't at the point where he could tell her everything. "I'm probably just gonna lay around most of the day."

"That's great. You should," she said. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I've been going mental."

"I'm okay," he said. "I'm glad you came to check on me."

She touched his hand for just a second. "Get some rest and feel better."

"Can I ask you something first?" he said. She nodded. "Did you add your curse burn to your medical slip?"

"Yes," she said. "I didn't want to but just in case, you know? Why?"

"No reason," he said. "I was ah...I had a dream about feet and the question just sort of came to me."

She gave him a look. "Okay. I'll see you tomorrow, Ron."

Ron went back into the cabin and lay on his bed, but he couldn't get to sleep. He left again and went over to Harry's cabin, but he wasn't inside. Something told him that Harry was close, so he went to his spot in the trees. Sure enough, Harry was there and he stood up the moment they saw each other. "Ron, fucking hell. I didn't know if you were still here. I didn't see you at practice." They walked up to each other.

"Alan didn't want me there," Ron said.

"He did look furious this morning, but CeeCee and Conor have been brilliant," Harry said. "They made up some story about what happened."

"I know," Ron said. He flopped down in the grass. "I've got so much to tell you, Harry." He went over everything that Phillip and Alan had said, and even about Bill. The only thing he didn't bring up was why Phillip had sent his letter a day late. It wasn't something he was ready to share with Harry yet.

"I can't believe Bill knows," Harry said.

"He'll keep it quite. I trust him," Ron said.

"Well, Richard wouldn't tell me anything," Harry said. "I spent half the night sleeping and the other half thinking we'd be dismissed this morning."

"Are you in trouble?" Ron asked.

"Sorta. Richard let me have it last night and today during the drill. It's on my record," Harry said. "According to him, my friend had a serious condition that I should've disclosed. It's a matter of safety and I don't care about that apparently."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Ron said. "You warned me and I didn't listen. You were right."

"I don't care about that, Ron," Harry said. "I'm just glad you're all right."

"And I'm glad you're all right," Ron said. He started to rock. "It was gruesome, Harry. I thought!"

"I've got some bruising, a terrible cut on my head, and a headache," Harry said. "I'm fine."

Ron merely stared at him. "You took the blast for Conor."

He shrugged. "It was an impulse. He thanked me this morning but he didn't need to. CeeCee's gutted. I told her a hundred times it wasn't her fault before she stopped crying. I'm sorry too though. I should've known putting myself in that position would do that to you."

"It's not CeeCee's fault or yours," Ron said. "Besides, you helped me."

"I wasn't as good as Hermione," he said. He let out a shaky breath and his eyes grew. "You were even worse than the first time I saw you have one. I didn't know what to do." Ron hated that the horror of his attacks was something Harry and Hermione had to personally fight through with him. He didn't want to burden them anymore.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "You helped me and I'm glad you were the one to do it. I wouldn't have made it without you."

"You would've made it. You always have to make it." Harry massaged his temples. "It's the worst feeling in the world not being able to help your best mate who's right in front of you and can't breathe. You said and did some really scary things, Ron."

"I'm sorry," Ron said, "but it's over now and I'm better. I'm gonna sleep the whole day." He stood up. "Look, I can't stay. Alan will probably be looking for me soon. I just wanted to make sure you were still around."

"I am," Harry said. "You'd better not go anywhere either."

Ron nodded and frowned. "Harry, I need you to promise me something."

Harry shook his head. "Ron, don't!"

"I need you to keep this to yourself," he said. "You can't tell Ginny when you see her and you can't tell Hermione."

"Ron, that's asking too much," Harry said. "Ginny's my girlfriend and your sister, and Hermione's my best friend and yours. I can't keep this from them and I don't want to."

"I know, but you have to," Ron said.

"No, you have to tell them!" Harry said. "They already know you have these so it won't be an issue like it was with Bill."

"They're also expecting us to come back happy and ready to relax with them," Ron said. "I'm going to tell them both but I don't want it to be the first conversation I have with them. I want to talk to my sister without her worrying about me and I need to enjoy some time with Hermione before I ruin it with my problems like always."

"Ron," Harry groaned. "With Ginny it might be a little easier but with Hermioneâ€!"

"I understand. She's your best friend but she's my best friend and my girlfriend. It's harder for me," Ron said. "I'm going to tell her, I promise, but I want to be with her and not have bad things touch us for once. I just need to hold Hermione for five fucking minutes and feel normal."

At the word 'normal', Harry's expression changed. "Okay," he said right away. "When you do tell them, they'll kick my bollocks in."

"I'll take the fault," Ron said, "and, if I need to, I'll buy you new bollocks."

"You'd better," Harry said holding out his hand.

Ron shook his hand and squeezed it very hard. It wasn't enough to convey his feelings about what happened between them the night before, but it was all he had. "Thanks for the lot of it. I'll see tomorrow morning."

"Exactly. Remember that, Ron: no matter what happened or what's gonna happen, we're leaving for home tomorrow," Harry said.

Ron tried to remember Harry's words as he walked back to his section. He would see Hermione, and he would get his five minutes with her and more. He checked the mailing cabin but there was still nothing from George. Ron told himself it was okay. He had so much on his plate and he didn't need to add to it by worrying. He returned to his cabin and applied the cream to his face. It was awfully cold and it pricked his skin somewhat. He lay back against his cot and used every bit of his might to push Lambrick out of his mind as he went to sleep.

He wanted to sleep the day away so he could wake up and return to Hermione.

* * *

****I know... A LOT happened in this chapter and rather than explain everything, I'll just tell you lot to keeping reading and find out how things unfold. Now, as this is a R/Hr story at the core, I will tell all my mad/brilliant R/Hr shippers that YES Ron is going back to Hermione in the next chapter. I know some people have been itching because Ron and Hermione have been a part for a while but that's the reality of Ron being at camp and Hermione being at school. Besides, it'll only make their reunion all the better. :) Anyway, thanks for reading and REVIEW! The next chapter will be up soon and I think you all will enjoy it. :D

CHEERS!

* Chapter 37*: Starts with one

Thanks for all the amazing reviews. Honestly, it means so much that you lot are enjoying Ron's journey. :)

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron opened his eyes and sat up. Conor and Jack were both asleep and through the tiny window of their cabin he could see a sliver of morning light. He snatched his watch from his side table. The time was a little after five. It was a little after five on Monday morning. He felt a small grin at his lips. It was Monday and the day that he got to leave and see Hermione. He quickly reached into the drawer and pulled out her picture. Her stationary face smiled at him and he felt a strong pull toward the picture. He would see that smile up close in a matter of hours. He would see, and smell, and touch, and hear, and taste every piece of her in a matter of hours.

He hastily got out of bed and started collecting this things, putting them into piles. He tried not to be loud but he honestly didn't care if he woke anyone up. Conor and Jack would be able to go home and sleep in their beds soon enough. He started to get frustrated, so he pointed his wand at all of his rubbish. "Pack!" he said. His clothes, papers, and coursework started to move and settle into his trunk. While his things packed themselves, he took out new clothes and his shower supplies. He surveyed himself in the mirror; thanks to John's cream, his face wasn't scarred anymore. He had a couple of red spots but with his pale complexion it wouldn't seem out of place.

He hurried to the mailing cabin to send his trunk and broom ahead of time to Hermione's house before heading to the showers. The cabin was empty like he expected it to be. It was unbelievably early but there was no way that he could sleep any longer. He

took the time to thoroughly wash his hair and shave, and during his indulgence he thought about getting back to civilization. All he had done yesterday was sleep and think about the disaster that had happened during his exam. It worried and angered him, but he refused to let it bother him today. Even if it would be his last day at Lambrick, he wouldn't let himself dwell on that possibility. He promised himself that he would have at least one nice and stress-free day for himself and Hermione. No matter how often he messed things up, he knew that he deserved that much and so did she.

Ron put on his only t-shirt that wasn't stained or ripped, and pulled his blue jumper over it. He put on somewhat acceptable jeans and attempted to flatten his hair. It was longer now and more unkempt, but it still wasn't as bad as Harry's. By the time he was finished vigorously brushing his teeth and checking over his few scars and bruises, he felt relatively normal again. Conor and Jack were both awake when he returned to the cabin.

"Weasley," Jack said. Most of his belongings were already neatly folded into his trunk and bags.

"Jack," Ron answered.

"It's a good day, yeah?" he asked.

"It's a great day," Ron said. Jack's pleasantness caught him off guard but he decided to tempt the situation. "I can't wait to go home. You?"

"I've been ready for days," Jack answered. He gave Ron a nod and then left the room with his shower supplies.

"Blimey," Conor said. "I think that's the first time he's ever started a conversation without saying something twatty."

"I reckon his excitement to leave has stalled his need to be a dick," Ron said. "And there's no point in arguing today, especially since we might not see each other again." Conor shrugged and returned to his own packing. Ron sat on his bed and delicately wrapped a shirt around the picture of his family. He took a moment to study their faces. He couldn't wait to see them, but he also couldn't deny that a strange pang hit his chest every time he thought about them. It was the same sensation that hit him when he thought about George. Something just felt off but he told himself not to worry about it just yet. He would get his three days of peace.

He glanced up and Conor at once turned away. It was obvious that the bloke had been staring at him, and Ron didn't know what to say. They hadn't talked about their assessment or about his panic attack. He was content with not bringing it up, but he knew that he owed something to Conor for keeping things quiet. "So€;" Ron said. "You ready to get back to Kate?"

"Bleeding bollocks I am," Conor said. "I'm gonna give her the biggest hug in the world and I don't reckon I'll leave my parent's side for the entire thirteen days that I'm with them.

What 'bout you? Ready to seeâ€?" Conor closed his eyes and pretended to wank. "Err-my-knee. Err-my-knee."

Ron threw his pillow at him and forced himself not to bounce around or giggle like a prat. "You're a knob but yes, I'm ready. You have no bloody idea how much. I can actually feel myself getting pissed just off the anticipation, but it's not just her though. I'm ready to see my parents, and Ginny, and my brothers too." The atmosphere in the room changed when he said the word 'brothers'. Conor looked down and Ron felt a bit of pressure on his shoulders. He needed to get rid of it. "Conor."

"You don't have to say anything, Ron," he said.

Ron sat on his bed and rubbed his neck. "I feel like I do. I owe you an explanation or something. What happened to me affected all of us, at least grading wise. I'm surprised you haven't told anyone about what actually happened."

"Why would I?" he asked. "Yeah, the instructors told Letty and me that we should keep it to ourselves, but I never had any intention of saying anything or demanding that you bring it up. Whatever happened was something between you and Harry, and it was a lot bigger than our exam or that wall. It's not my place to say anything, especially since your brother was somehow involved." Conor made everything sound so easy and Ron only hoped that in time the instructors would feel a little of what Conor did now.

"I'm sorry," Ron said.

"Don't apologize," he said. "You're human. I know a lot of people here have forgotten that, but I haven't. You don't always have to be the bloody hero. I reckon the only things I'll ask is if you're okay and if you'll be here in thirteen days?"

Ron pressed his palms into his thighs and looked straight into Conor's eyes. He didn't want to lie and he didn't want to leave Lambrick, possibly for the last time, with pressure on his back. "I'm okay," he said. "What happened is something I've been dealing with for awhile and I'll keep dealing with it. As for your second question, I really don't know if I'll be here in thirteen days. I fucked up because I didn't tell the instructors about what's going on with me. We'll have to wait and see."

"Well, either way, I thought you were brilliant," Conor said. "If Phillip and Alan can find some way to understand your reasoning, then you should come back. You were a bloody beast out there, Ron."

Ron blushed. "Cheers and umâ€;thanks for not pushing me for information. Not just this time, but all the times you've given me space."

"I hate to deflate your prick but I'm not just like this with you. I've never been that keen on any of the famous wizarding bullshit," Conor said indifferently. "To me it doesn't matter what you've done in the past; you deserve your privacy. Besidesâ€;" His face grew more serious and the darkness in his

eyes returned, "you've never pushed me about my family and my life. We all came here with demons, Ron, but it doesn't mean that we have to show them to everyone."

In that moment, Ron felt closer to Conor than he had since they met in October. Conor understood that Ron had suspicions about his past, and now Conor knew that Ron wasn't as solid as everyone at Lambrick assumed he was. However, the knowledge wasn't anything the two particularly wanted to talk about with each other. Ron appreciated that they could be mates and only share the lighthearted and encouraging moments with each other. On the other hand, Ron had a feeling that if he or Conor ever felt like divulging more then it would be okay. Everything about their friendship was straightforward and Ron preferred it that way. He may have lost Roger, but he was thankful that Conor had stuck around.

After Ron finished packing, he attempted to eat breakfast but he could hardly get a banana down. He was too restless to eat, so he spent most of his morning chewing his nails on the steps of his cabin. All he could think about was Hermione. One of his daydreams about bathing in a tub full of chocolate ice cream with her was rudely interrupted when he heard Alan's whistle. He instinctively tensed his muscles and ran over to the sound. His section, along with west, formed a group by the start of the running trail. Phillip and the other instructors were there as well. Some of Ron's thrill and blissful fog disappeared. He could still see Alan's disappointed eyes and hear Phillip's stern voice lecturing him about his lack of compassion. It didn't matter how extraordinary the vision of a chocolate-covered Hermione was; it couldn't totally erase his memory.

Phillip held his hands up to settle everyone's chatter.
"Trainees, I know you are all impatient to get home but business must be taken care of here first. I want to remind everyone that your holiday spans from today to two Sundays from now. That gives you thirteen days of leisure, after which we expect you back on the first Sunday of the New Year."

"Mr. Smith, if I may?" Alan asked. Phillip nodded and gestured a hand. Alan cleared his throat and twisted his wand in his hands like he usually did when he was upset about something. "I'd like to correct Mr. Smith and say that we don't actually expect any of you lot back. While you all rest and reunite with your families, we will be going over your field assessment from Saturday, along with your overall performance and progression from October to the present."

"That's correct. Thank you, Alan," Phillip said, giving him a somewhat fierce expression before turning back to them. "Because your field exam was so close to the holiday, you won't find out how you performed until after the merge. Consequently, if you don't make it through to the next stagethen that should suffice as an answer regarding how you faired during this program."

"When will we know if we made it, sir?" someone asked.

"Everyone will receive either an extension or dismissal letter near the end of the holiday duration," Richard answered. "So don't get too comfortable at home, but it would also be wise to get used to the idea of not coming back. It's an Auror code to plan for the worst but pack a small suitcase full of optimism just in case." Ron shifted his weight between his feet. Alan seemed angrier than usual and the humorous grin that was usually on Richard's smooth brown face was now gone. Both the section leaders spoke with a darkness that Ron couldn't help but feel responsible for.

"However, however," Phillip said, waving his hands. "Neither myself nor the instructors want to burden you all during what should be a nice relaxation for you. Yes, it's true that when the holiday is over some of you won't return, and those that do will start a tougher and more demanding half of training. Nevertheless, I am proud of each of you for making it this far and for trudging through the exam last Saturday. I wish you all a very pleasant holiday and a very Happy Christmas. Til next time." Phillip gave them a little bow and everyone clapped for him. Ron wanted to run up to him and ask about his possibilities of coming back, but he wouldn't aggravate Phillip more than he probably already had.

Richard escorted his section back to west while Alan had their section gather around himself and Brian. "So, lot â€“ formalities: you must all leave today and, if you are asked to come back, return by the specified date and time. If you don't, then you forfeit your place here. You are not allowed to discuss the exams, the training, or anything related to Lambrick Academy to anyone. I don't care if it's your mum, your girlfriend, our your Great Aunt Fanny."

Ben snorted and Alan gave him a look. "Sorry, sir," he immediately said.

"Moving on," Alan continued, "before each of you leave you must sign a waiver saying that you understand everything you were told by myself and the other instructors involving the holiday and leaving procedures. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," they all said together.

"That being said," Alan said in a much softer voice. "It's been a pleasure working with all of you. I've seen a lot of you grow up and dig deeper than I'm sure you've dug in your whole lives. I pushed you and most of you pushed back. It's impressive."

"I agree," Brian said. "It wasn't that long ago that I was in the place you lot are in now. It's harsh but you've rose to the occasion. I'm sure choosing who makes it to the merge will be difficult."

"It will be," Alan said. "I'll be assisting Phillip on plucking out people from this section. After the merge there won't be an east anymore, but it doesn't mean that you won't be my lot. I only want the best, the brightest, and the most honest people going through and merging with west to form one unit of

trainees." For a second Alan looked right at Ron and he felt a strong kick to the stomach. "Remember that when you get either your acceptance or rejection letter, I also hope that you all have a nice holiday. You're dismissed to leave the camp or to wait until it's your time to go."

"Be safe everyone," Brian said with a small smile.

Everyone cheered and scurried to their cabins but Ron's focus was on Alan. He knew that he needed to keep his distance but he couldn't get his legs to agree with his brain. He ran over to him and tapped his arm. "Mr. Lewis, sir?"

"What is it, Weasley?" Alan said.

The disapproval in his voice cut into him but he swallowed the feeling. "I know I shouldn't say this but I will: I'm sorry for lying to you, and for disrespecting you as a leader and as an advisor by keeping my panic attacks a secret. It was stupid and a horrible mistake on my part. I also want you to know that, whether I get a rejection or an acceptance letter from you, I've appreciated everything you've taught me here and I respect the decisions you've made regarding all of us and our training."

Alan didn't seem impressed. "Is this some sort of bribe?"

"No, sir," Ron said, shaking his head. "It's just me being honest. Have a good holiday, Mr. Lewis." He swallowed the unsettling feeling again and walked away from him. Ron needed to be a man; to show Alan, as well as himself, that he could own up to his mistakes and accept his fate with dignity. It was difficult but it was necessary. Ron returned to his cabin where both Jack and Conor were gathering their things.

"You two heading off?" he asked.

"There's no point in sitting on my hands here. I have a lot to do when I get home," Jack said.

"Already?" Conor asked. "What about resting?"

Jack grimaced as if resting went against his creed. "Turners are very busy people. Like all the Muggles say: 'I'll rest when I'm dead.'" Ron snorted and Jack turned to him. "Ah, Weasley."

"Ah, Turner," Ron said mockingly.

Jack just about marched over to him but Ron stood his ground. Jack would never intimidate him like he greatly tried to. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I hope that you come back. I want to compete against the very best and I don't reckon anything will be more fulfilling than beating one of Hogwart's finest."

"Is that a threat or a compliment, Jacky boy?" Ron asked.

"Call it a friendly challenge," he said, petting his perfectly wavy brown hair. "See you later, Weasley. Neary, have a good

holiday." Jack took his things and left the cabin. Ron grinned and shook his head. Jack was a genuine piece of work.

"Remember what I said about him not being a twat?" Conor asked.
"I reckon that's no longer true."

"At least the bloke is consistent," Ron said unfazed.

Conor heaved his bag over his shoulder and walked over to him.
"He's also a cocksucker. Not all Muggles use that phrase." He held out his hand. "I'm not sure if Jack meant it, but I hope that you come back."

"Me too. I know you'll be back so get some rest, eh?" Ron said, shaking his hand. "Say hi to Kaitlin for me."

"I'll do that," he answered. "Say hi to Ginny for me. I hope you're able to spend some real time with her. I'm sure she'll appreciate it, and it might do you some good, yeah? I'll see you." He patted Ron's arm and left the cabin. Ron sat on the steps and watched both Jack and Conor leave past the gate, away from Lambrick. The two were so different but both had become a part of his daily routine. It was rather strange to think about not seeing them anymore. He flipped his wand between his fingers and tried to find his high spirit again. He was going to be reunited with Hermione soon, and it was the only thing that mattered to him at the moment.

Sometime later, Ben walked up to him and hit his shoulder. "I'm finally getting out of here."

"Lucky bastard. Have a nice holiday," Ron said.

"Yeah. I'm ready to start partying, to celebrate either my return or a great run while it lasted," he said.

"That's one way of looking at it," Ron said. "You should hurry to that then."

"I will. I just need to say goodbye to Olivia first. I have to find her." Ben looked around as if he planned on staying at the camp until he saw her face.

"Can I make a suggestion?" Ron asked. Ben gave him a curious look but nodded. "You should give her a hug when you say goodbye."

"What?" Ben asked.

"A hug. You remember what that is?" Ron cheeked. "It doesn't have to be big or anything. Just give her a hug and tell her that you hope to see her soon. Women like hugs. I figured that out over the summer. Some girls even fancy a hug more than a snog. Olivia might enjoy it and take the gesture as something more."

Ben scratched his head as if the idea seemed a bit too radical for him. "But a hug is so simple!"

"I know, mate," Ron breathed. "It's free too."

"Okay," Ben said. "I'll give it a go. You're all right, Ron."

"I've always tried to be," he said with a shrug. "Good luck." Ron once again flipped his wand between his fingers. He reclined against the steps and closed his eyes. He knew that he should've cared more about what leaving Lambrick would mean and what everyone knowing about his attacks would entail, but he couldn't. He was so content on leaving and being with his family that everything else faded into the back of his mind. He just wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

"Oi," a voice said.

He grinned but didn't open his eyes. "Oi."

"Can I sit with you?"

"Uh-huh." Ron shifted over and turned his head. He opened his eyes and choppy black hair, blue eyes, and a face with a mole on the left side of its nose came into his vision. "Hi."

"Hi," Olivia said. "I'm surprised you're still here."

"I'm waiting on Harry," he said. "He has to get our train tickets from his aunt so I reckon he's waiting for her letter. When are you leaving?"

"Now," she said. "My parents are meeting me. I've just been doing my round of goodbyes and you're my last stop."

"Last? I didn't know I was so special," he said sarcastically.

She nudged his shoulder. "It's not my fault. Girls love to linger with goodbyes and Ben had a lot to say. He even gave me a hug."

"Is that so?" Ron asked.

"You can stop with the tone," Olivia said. "I know he fancies me and I'm sure he'll send me something over holiday. He asked for my address."

"You shouldn't be too hard on him," he said. "He's a good guy."

"I know he is," she mumbled. "He's great and I might fancy him as well. I dunno. It doesn't really matter though." She took her hair tie out and let her locks run free before tying it back and chewing on her lip.

"What's going on?" he asked.

She looked at him, almost nervously, and groaned. "This is stupid."

"What is?" he asked, sitting up. "Just tell me."

"I got you something," she said. She reached inside her bag and pulled out a Quidditch magazine. "I picked this one because

there's a spread just on the Chudley Canons. I know it must've been hard to keep up with them while you were here, so now you can find out all their latest over holiday."

"Wicked," Ron said, taking the magazine and flipping through its pages. He hadn't seen anything Quidditch related in ages it seemed. "This is brilliantâ€;but I didn't get you anything."

"It's okay," she said, waving a hand. "I didn't do this to get a gift back. I just wanted to be nice. Call it an early Christmas gift and my way of thanking you for letting me have a go on your broom."

"Cheers," he said. "I'll definitely read it, and I've got thirteen days to do it." He rubbed his neck. "I swear I'll get you something."

"It's fine," she said with a laugh. "Honestly. I'll take something else though." He raised his eyebrows and she frowned a little. "I'll take your word that we'll both come back."

Ron didn't know what to say. He wanted to be able to tell Olivia with confidence that they would both return and continue their training, but he couldn't. "We'll both come back," he said.

She nodded. "I trust you, Ron. So I'll be holding you to that." Ron once again had no words. He suddenly thought about not getting his acceptance letter when she did, or him showing up and her not being there. He didn't know why the scenarios bothered him so much. Olivia must have been able to read his mind because her frown increased and her cheeks turned pink. She cleared her throat and stood. "Well, I should go."

"â€;Yeah," Ron finally said, shaking out of his thoughts. "I'm sorry. I'm a little mental right now."

"You're always mental," she said, rolling her eyes. "Have a good holiday. Enjoy your family and Hermione and Harry as much as you can. You deserve to be happy."

"So do you." He got up and walked over to her. "I hope you find some sort of middle ground with your parents."

She rolled her eyes again. "Yeah, sure." Ron wasn't sure quite sure what to do so he held out his hand. She glanced at it for a second before shaking it. "Bye, Ron."

"Bye, Olivia. We'll both come back," he said.

"I know we will." She gradually pulled her hand out of his grasp and readjusted the bag on her arm. "See you." She bit her lip and turned away from him. He walked backwards and took his place once again on the steps. He hoped to Merlin that it wouldn't be the last time he'd see her. Olivia was easily becoming the closest friend he would wind up making at Lambrick.

The morning droned on and Ron started to grow impatient. He swore under his breath and cursed every giddy git he saw happily skipping away from Lambrick. "Ron, mate, I'm sorry."

"What the bloody fuck kept you?" Ron asked, shooting up at the sight of Harry.

Harry dropped his bags and rubbed his temples. His seemed irritated and it looked as if he had made no attempt to fix himself up for Ginny. His sister deserved better. "CeeCee wouldn't let me go," he groaned.

"Sorry?" Ron asked.

"She kept telling me over and over that I had to tell you that she apologizes for what she did," he said.

"Oh," Ron said. "She doesn't need to do that."

"I told her that. I also told her that she didn't need to come over here and beg for your forgiveness," Harry said. "She's still a little shaken up but she wants you to know that she's glad you were our leader. You took care of her or whatever and she appreciates it."

Ron shrugged. "It was my job to take care of her."

Harry took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Anyway, it wasn't just her. Petunia had trouble getting the tickets because there was some sort of mix-up regarding the scheduling. We now have almost no time before the train leaves."

"Well buggering bollocks, Harry. Let's go!" Ron said. He charged back into his room and gave it a quick scan. All four beds were empty and the room was bare. So much had happened in the space. He thought about meeting Roger, eating smuggled-in candy with Conor, and even Jack helping him through his high. So much had happened in the cabin in so little time.

"Ron, we have to go!" Harry shouted. Ron grabbed his bag and left the room for the last time. He and Harry rushed to Richard to fill out a leaving slip then hurried past the gate and up the path. They kept walking until they saw the tree that had a stone carving nearby. It signified their safety point, so they apparated to the train station.

Seeing regular people talking and laughing excited Ron. He eagerly showed his ticket to the conductor and found his seat on the train across from Harry. "I can't believe we made it," Ron said, whipping his head around to all the Muggles.

"I can't believe we're going back," Harry said, his bright green eyes gleaming with exhilaration. "Thirteen days without Lambrick. At least I'm hoping it's only thirteen days!"

Ron nodded. "I don't really want to think about it, Harry. I don't want to think about Lambrick or talk about it for as long as I can. Is that okay with you?"

"Of course," Harry said. "What's happened at Lambrick from the very beginning til today is something that can stay between us for the most part; the good and the bad."

Ron instantly understood what Harry was thinking. There was just too much that had happened between them and to them to share with everyone. Some things had to remain amongst them only. "I know, mate. That's how I want it." They shook hands but then suddenly started giggling like prats. "We're going home, Harry."

"Stop saying that," Harry said. "I'll end up exploding right here."

"I hope you mean 'explode' as in body parts will be everywhere," Ron said. "That I won't mind cleaning up, but if you're talking about tossing in your trousers then you're on your own, mate."

"I won't toss off here," he assured. "I have a girlfriend for that."

"You anus!" Ron said, kicking his leg. The two of them started laughing and spent the rest of the train ride talking about home and getting back to their girlfriends. Already, Ron felt some of the air clear between them. They were simply best mates again. People weren't constantly staring at them or expecting them to be brutal to each other because they were competing for the same prize. Ron almost didn't want to leave the comfortable setting, but when the train finally stopped, he shot out of his seat. He was so barmy with excitement and nerves that he could hardly walk.

"You got everything, Ron?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," he answered, feeling under his jumper to make sure that his wand was in his back pocket. "Um, just to remind you aboutâ€œ"

"I know," Harry said. "I won't say anything to Ginny or to Hermione. It's your story to tell."

"Thanks," Ron said.

Harry smirked. "Besides, I'll be too busy shagging to think about talking. Unless it's dirty."

Ron pretended to throw up. "For fuck's sake, Harry, I almost forgot how perverted you are. If only your kiddie fans knew. If only the papers and the parents and the instructors knew."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm off duty for thirteen days. This is me." The two got off the train and struggled to maneuver around the loads of people getting on or off the trains. Ron bumped into people and inched his way through crowds. He was used to Lambrick's organized chaos and a small part of him wanted Alan to blow his whistle so everyone would stand in a line and shut up. His eyes searched for bushy brown hair or pale freckly skin, but he didn't see either.

Suddenly, Harry ran ahead with his arms outstretched. He dropped his bags and was bombarded by a small body with a mane of ginger hair. Harry kissed Ginny with a force that Ron hadn't seen before. Harry held her securely and she hooked her thighs around his waist and her arms around his neck. He broke away from her mouth. "Ginny! Ginny, I love you!"

"I love you too, Harry!" Ginny practically cried. She kissed him again but rapidly pulled away. She tangled her fingers in his hair. "Harry! Harry, babe, I fucking missed you!"

"Ginny, I missed you too!" Harry practically cried back. "I missed you so bloody much!" The two of them started snogging again and moaning all while holding each other. People walked by and gave them disproving looks, but the two didn't seem to care. Ron would've considered cursing his eyeballs out of their sockets but just then another figure came into view.

He walked slowly up to it as the figure walked slowly towards him. He felt his heart beat harder. His skin started to tingle and a wave of clarity and comfort washed over him as Hermione presented herself right in front of him. Her hair was down and perfectly wild. She was wearing her necklace and she had on nice fitting jeans with a blue fitted jumper that made blood return to his body. If he wasn't imagining it then he was sure that he could even smell her hair and the sweetness of her neck. Hermione was pure magic, and she almost didn't seem real.

She smiled beautifully at him for a moment before turning to Harry and Ginny who were still panting, whispering how much they loved and missed each other, and snogging in the middle of the station. "Curious. For once it's not us acting hysterical," Hermione said. "Maybe we're evolving."

"Or maybe they're devolving," he said, dropping his bag. They gazed at each other once again and Ron didn't know what to do first. An overwhelming feeling of love and ecstasy took control of him and he started to tremble. His breathing came out unsteadily and his body started to throb. He gradually reached out and touched her face. Her cheek was so soft and unharmed and clean. Hermione instantly closed her eyes and moved into his touch. It made him shiver and feel weak in the knees. It was such a simple touch and a tiny response, but it was enough to make him feel alive again. He hadn't even realized that he had been so numb.

"Hermione," he whispered.

"I know," she said softly, opening her eyes. They were so brown and big, and he adored them. He loved Hermione so much and he had missed her more than he could bear to tell her. A part of him had died while he had been away from her, but she was already breathing life back into it. There was so much on his tongue but he couldn't bring himself to say any of it. All he could do was pull her into a hug. He closed his eyes and smelled her flower scented hair. He kissed the top of her head and held her so tightly that he heard her suck in air. He felt Hermione hug him

back with every bit of strength that she had. She rose on her feet so he could get closer to her neck. He breathed deeply and roughly against her. Hermione said nothing. She merely held onto him and kissed his shoulder.

He let every bad feeling and every bit of pain he had experienced at Lambrick leave his body so it could be replaced with Hermione's love. He knew it was all in his head, but he swore that he could feel it physically happening. He didn't let her go for hours it seemed. He didn't want to. Now that he had her, he never wanted to leave her side. However, she was the first to break away. She cupped his face and put her forehead against his. Ron held onto her waist so she could keep her grip on him. He was out of breath and sweaty, but so was she. Her face was flushed and she was breathing so hard that it made him dizzy. All they had done was hug but for all he knew they had spent the last five hours shagging. Her hands went to his neck and she dug her nails into the skin. He liked it. He felt more connected to her this way. He returned the favor by securing his thumbs through the loops of her jeans and clutching her arse.

Hermione opened her eyes and peered right into his. The gaze was commanding and made him forget where he was. She opened and closed her mouth several times but all she let out was air. "Ron," she finally said, "I love you."

The words inflated inside his body and mended things he didn't know were broken. He felt even dizzier and almost drunk with love and need. "I love you too," he said in a heavy breath, "but I can't begin to tell you how much or how badly I've been bloody aching for you."

"I know," she whispered, tracing his mouth. "It's too much."

Feeling her fingers on his lips sent a strong signal directly to his cock. For ages it had only felt the urge to release pee or throb in pain from getting knocked into by knees or broomsticks. "I need to kiss you," he said.

She nodded frantically. "Please." His lips wasted no time finding hers and, all of a sudden, his body became fully aware and functional. He squeezed her bum and sighed as her mouth crushed against his. Her lips were supple and full, and his mouth tingled in the excitement of being useful again.

It was his turn to pull away first. They were out of breath once more. "I wanna use my tongue this time."

"Then use it," she ordered. Once again he wasted no time. He parted her lips with his tongue as she grasped his shoulders. She whimpered and he moaned as he tasted the warm wetness of her mouth. Her flavor was minty and he stuck his tongue as deeply as he could into her mouth to taste more of it. More signals touched below his groin and all around his body. The desire hit him harder than he had expected it to, and all of his better senses started to fade away.

Hermione must've caught on to what was happening because she moved away from him and licked her lips. "Ron."

"Yeah," he breathed. "Maybe we should take a break from saying hello for a minute." Hermione detached herself from him and he put her down. They smiled at each other and right away held hands. Ron's tunnel vision disappeared and he noticed for the first time that Harry and Ginny were staring at them as if they were nutters.

"Finished, yeah?" Harry asked with a smirk.

"I hope so," Ginny said, crinkling her nose. "Something tells me that I should've put the Prophylactic Charm on me before viewing that."

"I agree." Harry looked below his jeans and nodded. "Hmm, I reckon I need new shorts."

Hermione gasped and blushed. She let go of Ron's hand and ran up to Harry. She slapped his arm. "Harry James Potter!"

"Ah, there's that name again," he said with a laugh. He took her hand and the two grinned at each other before hugging.

Ginny casually walked up to him and placed her hands on her hips. "Your little sister â€“ Harry's girlfriend?"

Ron wanted to roll his eyes. Everyone had told him that she had been dying to see him, but he knew that she'd never show that side to him. He also knew that he was seconds away from getting his bollocks kicked in, but he didn't care what Ginny did to him. He couldn't explain it, but seeing her gave him a profound feeling of relief that he couldn't fathom. However, there was also something to her that bothered him a little. It wasn't the hickies that were forming under her ear or on her neck due to Harry's prat mouth. There was something dark in her eyes; something low about her posture; something even pale about her skin that plagued Ron. It was most likely his usual madness over everything and nothing serious.

"You can kick my arse if you want to," he said, trying to rid himself of the feeling.

"I should," she said. "You deserve it but I made a promise to Hermione andâ€¦wellâ€¦I don't want to beat you up right now." She fell into his arms and he held her back firmly. The hug was different from the one with Hermione. With Hermione Ron could let himself go and feed into whatever strength she had, but with Ginny Ron had to be the strong one. He had to be her anchor and force every last bit of his will into her so she could feel protected.

"You've been okay?" he asked against her hair.

"I've been fine. You?" she asked against his chest. He nodded. "Are you gonna come back to the house?"

"Of course I am," he said. "I'll only be at Hermione's for three days. Why?" He let her go and saw that her eyes were wet. He held onto her shoulders. "Ginny?"

She waved a hand and sniffed. "Shut up. These aren't tears. I'm just barmy from seeing you and Harry again."

He didn't believe her. He tugged on a lock of her hair. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, Ron," she said. "I'm fine. Stop worrying all the time. You're away from camp so you can go back to being oblivious." She moved away from him and back to Harry who was snickering and talking with Hermione. Ron picked up his bag and joined them.

Hermione laughed and hugged Harry's arm. "Okay," she said cheerfully. "We'll see you two in a few days."

"Don't make a mess in my room," Ron said.

"Oh, Ron, honestly," Hermione said. She kissed Harry's cheek and gave him another hug. "It's great to see you, Harry. We'll catch up soon."

"Yeah. Take care of Ron," Harry said with a wide smile.

Hermione gave Ron a once-over. "I plan to." Ron blushed and bit his lip.

Ginny didn't hug Ron but she did punch his arm. "I'll have more for you later."

"Ow!" he whined. "Nice welcome back gift, you prat."

"Oi, shut it," Harry said seriously. "Ginny's a lot of things right now but a prat isn't one of them." The two got close again and Ron gagged.

"Just leave already," he said. Harry and Ginny kept giggling and snogging as they walked very closely so they could apparate away together. "Fucking hell," Ron breathed when the two disappeared. He turned to Hermione who was grinning at him. "What?"

"You and Harry look different," she said.

"What d'ya think?" he asked, standing as straight as he could.

"About Harry's transformation or yours?" she asked. She was teasing him and he had missed her playfulness. He shrugged and got closer to her. "Well," she continued, "Harry looks good. You are breathtaking."

He smirked. "Breathtaking? Well, thank you, Ms. Granger. I'd return the compliment but you always look breathtaking. I fancy the word delicious best though."

Hermione's cheeks flushed and she took his hand again. "Come on, let's get you home."

They two walked until they could apparate and appeared down the block from her house. They rushed down the street and up to her door. Hermione took out her key to unlock it and Ron scratched his scalp in frustration. He loved Muggles but he wished they could use magic to lock and unlock things. It was a lot faster. The moment Hermione opened the door, she pulled them in and he dropped his bag.

He looked around. "Are your parents here?" he whispered.

She shook her head. "No. They won't be back untilâ€""

Like lightening he took her by the shoulders and slammed her against the door. She closed it with her body and felt around the door until she connected to the lock. She swiftly locked it and that's when Ron lost all composure. He attacked her mouth and roamed his hands all over her body. He groaned and pushed into her with extreme force. Hermione responded with a gasp and matched his enthusiasm and roughness. He refamiliarized himself with her mouth and everything about her tongue and her lips that he was addicted to. His hands went down and underneath her jumper. He touched her soft and warm stomach before moving his hands up until they connected with the handfuls of lushness that were her tits.

He groaned harder and pushed into her again. Everything about Hermione was warm, silky, dirtless, uninjured, and his. His body had gotten so used to the cold, the hard, the muck, and the bare, but Hermione was nothing like that. His heart practically beat out of his chest as Hermione's touches and sounds turned him on even more, giving him so much more energy. There was blood in his body and craving in his spirit again. He felt like a regular bloke again â€“ one who wanted to shag his beloved girlfriend with every bit of love and devotion that he could muster.

Every time Hermione tried to push herself off the wall, he pushed her back against it. He nibbled and bit on her lips as she panted against his mouth. She untangled her fingers from his hair and moved to his stomach. She snaked her hands under his jumper and felt around his abs and chest. "My god, Ronâ€I can feel your muscles. You're so sexy."

"I've got another muscle for you to feel," he said. He pushed into her and moved her up the door. She whimpered and pinched him. He took a break from her mouth and moved to her neck. She smelled a bit like coconut and her skin tasted like it as well. It was too much for him. He sucked on her neck and bit it before moving down further. He kissed her collarbone. "Fucking hell, Hermione. I just want to eat you up." He got on his knees and looked up at her. Her chest heaved irregularly and her face was gorgeously flushed. Her eyes were glued to his as he unzipped her jeans and pulled them down. Her legs shook and he felt his cock twitch at the sight of her light blue knickers. His mouth watered and he dragged his eyes back to her. "I wanna take a bite out of you right now, 'Mione."

She rested her head against the door and placed a hand on his shoulder. He leaned in and lightly kissed the fabric. Every part of Hermione was trembling and he loved it. He kissed her inner thighs and moved closer and closer to her skin. He licked right along her panty line and could feel the delicate skin that wasn't covered by the material. Hermione cried out and pulled on his hair. "Ron, wait."

He immediately stopped and looked at her. He was in disbelief and a spike of panic seized through him. His need for her was almost unbearable but he worried that their time apart had weakened her need for him. "Do you not want me to?"

Hermione put a hand to her chest and gripped her necklace. "It's not like that, Ron. I want you to. Believe me, I do, but it'll have to wait."

"Why?" he asked. He glanced at her knickers that he desperately wanted to rip off.

"Because," she said, tugging on his hair. He knew that it was his cue to stand up. He reluctantly left her knickers and stood. She pulled her jeans back on and then put a hand against his chest to keep him at bay. He pushed against her hand but not too hard. "My parents may not be here now but they will be eventually. I want to have some time to talk to you and be with you before they get here. It would be awful if we started getting serious and they showed up."

Ron stopped pushing against her hand. He was very hard, somewhat achy, and hornier than he had ever felt in his life, but it wasn't worth getting his bollocks thrown into a microwag or whatever it was that Muggles used to warm food. "Yeahâ€¦your dad and all."

"It's not just about getting caught, sweetheart." She suddenly yanked on his shirt and spun him around so he hit the door. She rose on her feet and gripped his collar. She licked his mouth and made him moan loudly. "I'd hate to stop once we've started."

He could feel pressure pounding against him, but for once he enjoyed it. It was the kind of pressure that only came from Hermione when she was seducing him. "Bloody hell, we can be quick. I know for a fact that it'll take me no time, and I'm stronger now so I can probably give you one really fast."

Hermione swallowed hard as if she was considering it but she shook her head. "No. We won't sacrifice a good time just to get one in."

"Butâ€""

She put a finger to his lips. "That's an order, Ron. Besides, I told you that you would still be punished. We do things when I say, okay?"

Ron pouted a little but nodded. "Fine. Then can I kiss you?"

"Why do you keep asking me?" she said with a laugh.

"I dunno," he said, gripping her sides and kissing her forehead.
"It's polite to ask?"

"Well, yes, you can," she said. "I'd enjoy that very much." Ron attacked her mouth again. "Ron," she panted between kisses. "We have to get your bag upstairs. Your broom and trunk are in your room."

"We may be in a Muggle home but we're still magical beings, love," Ron said. He took his wand out of his back pocket and flicked it at his luggage. His bag rose to the air and he flicked his wand again to send it upstairs.

Hermione wrenched her face away from his so she could watch his things move upstairs. "That's impressive nonverbal work."

He licked under her bottom lip. "I've finally learned a few things." They held each other, and felt around each other, and kissed each other as they tripped, little by little, up the stairs. Hermione had her back to everything so Ron kept an eye open for her. They finally made it to the top.

"As you know," Hermione breathed out, "there's the bathroom. There's my room and my parents room." They stumbled down the hall and Hermione backed herself against a door. "This is your room."

"It's brilliant," Ron mumbled as he started kissing her neck again. Hermione squeaked and struggled to get the door open. Once she did, she pulled them in and pushed him to the bed. "Change your mind?" he asked.

"No, this is where it ends," she said breathlessly. She smoothed her hair down and wiped her mouth. She closed the door and stood against it. Ron looked around. The room was bigger than his space in the cabin, and the bed was a good size and spongy. There was a large window and a nice flow of heat that kept the room comfortable. There were also bits and bobs around the room that had to be Muggle trinkets and he wanted to poke around at them.

"This is fantastic," he said.

"I'm glad you approve," she said. "Now, you'll be sharing my bathroom because my parents have theirs built into their room. If this blanket isn't enough let me know and I'll get you another one or if you need an extra pillow!" She trailed off and gripped her necklace. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

Ron sat on the very edge of the bed. His dug his hands into the comforter and arched his feet like he had been trained to so he could pounce more accurately. He felt like he was in an aggressive stance, ready to rush, but his target was now Hermione. He couldn't help himself. She was just so lovely, and real, and his again. "You have no idea how much restraint it's taking me not to jump you. You're doing my head in."

Hermione gave him a sexy smirk. "Well, you'll just have to keep using that restraint." She walked over to him and sat with his leg between her thighs. She caressed his face and he closed his eyes. It felt so good to have her touch him. It wasn't a shove or punch or yank; her touch was something tender and wanted. "Do you know why that is?" she asked. He shook his head and ran his nails up and down her thigh. "Look at me, Ron." He opened his eyes. There was something mischievous yet serious about her expression.

"I don't know why, baby," he said almost drunkenly.

She traced his mouth and tugged on his bottom lip. "It's because you're being punished for what you wrote. I told you that I'd get you. So for the next thirteen days, Ronald Bilious Weasley, you will be my property." Ron moaned and popped his hips. He had no room in his shorts and he felt like he was going to burst. "That means," she continued gently, "that when I want you, how I want you, and for however long I want you, I'll get you. No complaining and no questions asked. Is that understood?"

He nodded crazily and choked out a breath. "Yes, Hermione, that's understood. You can use me right now if you want." He took her hand and placed it against his solid muscle. "I'm in desperate need to be used." Hermione bit her lip and gazed down at her hand. He knew that she was trying to be aggressive, and he wanted her to be, but there was only so much friction he could take.

She squeezed him through his jeans. "It has to be fast."

"It will be," he breathed. "You'll barely have to touch me. I just need to deflate a little. I'm completely out of my mind right now."

She got off him and he scooted back on the bed until he hit the headboard. She circled her legs around his waist and unzipped his jeans. "When are you not out of your mind, love?" she asked. She reached inside the open area of his boxers and pulled his muscle out. He let out a harsh breath and placed his forehead against her shoulder. Her touch made him harder and balmier, but it felt good too. He shut his eyes and clasped her sides as she firmed her grip and stroked him. "You're so big in my hand, Ron," she said, kissing his ear. "You have no idea how often I've fantasized about seeing this and feeling it again. I've been hungry for you."

He couldn't respond to her. He couldn't convey how wonderful her hand felt or how on fire he was from hearing her words. Hermione repeatedly kissed his head and pumped him quickly in her hand. All he could do was pant like mad and grip her sides. Sparks of fire and energy flared all over his body, and it didn't take long before the pleasant buildup pushed against him and burst from his cock. "Ohâ€œ!o-oh." He came with a deep moan and bit her shirt. He gave a violent shudder and jerked his hips. In an instant his entire body was tense and blazing, but after a few moments he loosened up and the heat passed through him. He opened his eyes and watched his cum trickle down his cock, getting a little on her hand as she continued to stroke him empty. A bit of the

pressure left his body and he finally felt well enough to talk and walk.

"Amazing," Hermione whispered. "I could watch you do that all day." She pulled away and stood. She sucked on her finger and smirked. "Do you feel better, sweetheart?"

"Loads," he said, leaning against the wall. "Your hand feels so much better than mine. Thank you." The ache was gone and the madness seemed clear from his mind. He grinned and zipped up his pants.

"I imagine you'll be wanting to clean up?" she said.

He frowned, feeling uncomfortable gooeyness in his pants.
"Definitely. Are you gonna do it for me?"

"I like to use my property but I never said anything about putting them away," she said, placing her hands on her hips.

"You cheeky woman," he said. "Will you at least escort me to the toilet?"

"That I can do," she said. Ron held onto Hermione's clean hand as they walked to the bathroom. He suspected that neither of them was ready to be apart for too long. Hermione washed her hands as he looked through his bag for clean shorts. "I'll make us some lunch," she said. "There isn't anything in particular you're craving, is there?"

"No, anything is fine," he said. Hermione leaned against the doorway and crossed her arms over her chest. The sight was a gift. He had missed her simple mannerisms that made her brilliant and totally Hermione. "Uh-oh. I know that look."

"I was just thinking about your body," she said with a mild blush. "You look bigger and you feel biggerâ€œ"

"Well, I did learn this brilliant cock exercise a few weeks ago," he said with a wink.

She gently kicked his leg. "You've always been big in that area, cheek boy. I was talking about your physique. You're bigger and stronger; I want to see for myself."

"As you wish," Ron said. He started to pull his jumper off but then stopped. He had almost forgotten that he wasn't around someone who had watched him take beatings day after day.
"Umâ€œI've got some bruises and stuff."

"Are you hurt?" she asked, placing a hand to her chest.

"No. They're all healing. I'm fine," he said. She nodded and bit her finger apprehensively. Ron felt somewhat nervous himself. He pulled his jumper off and then his shirt. He dropped them to the floor and Hermione's eyes widened.

"You got these from camp?" she asked.

"Yeah but I'm fine. We duel a lot there," he said. She reached out and touched a bruise on his upper stomach that he had received just two nights ago during his examination. It hurt, but he swallowed the feeling of pain. It wasn't the time to ruin everything yet. Hermione continued to examine his torso, arms, and back as if he was a school project and it made him uneasy. He didn't want her to worry any more than she already did and he didn't want to talk about his wounds. "I'm okay," he said again.

"I believe you," she said. "I know this is a part of training but seeing you like this still bothers me. You understand, right?"

"I do," he said. "I can tell you though that they always look a lot worse than how I got them. Most of the time it's bumping into trees or hitting rocks on the ground or coming into contact with fingernails and knuckles. It's never anything too dangerous."

"That's good to hear," she said. She kissed a small cut on his chest just above his heart. She was being so affectionate and brave, and her reaction made him love her so much more. "It's not all bad. Besides the marksâ€;you'reâ€;well, you're spectacular." She moved away to get a good look at him. "You've always been beautiful to me, and every time you leave and come back you become even more beautiful." She shook her head. "You're so fit, Ron. I can't believe I'm dating such a well-fit Auror in training. We don't seem to match."

"Oi, none of that," he said, taking both her hands and pulling her close. "We match perfectly and you know it. I'm glad you approve though."

"I more than approve," she said, getting on her toes and kissing him.

He kissed her back but only for a moment. He had kissed her so many times already since they met up, and he was a little concerned about what she thought of it. "I hope I'm not acting in a way that makes you think that something's changed about me. All the sex stuff or not, I love you and I'm happy that I'm back with you, Hermione."

She didn't seem upset at all. In fact, she kissed him again. "You're so sweet, Ron, but I know all that. I love you too and I'm glad you're with me again. I just think that we've both been sexually frustrated and in heat and anguish for so long that we have to get all this out so we canâ€;"

"Function normally?" he offered.

She nodded. "Exactly. I don't mind it though. It's fun being like this."

"It's fun feeling it too." He kissed her deeply again and she held onto his neck.

She pulled away. "Mmm, well, I'll let you finish getting dressed. I'll be right downstairs. Don't take too long."

"I won't," he said. He kissed her again. "I love you."

"I love you," she said against his mouth. She slowly pulled away and walked out of the room.

Ron waited until she was downstairs before he closed the door and leaned against it. He rubbed his face and steadied his breathing. None of what was happening seemed real. He checked his watch. If he had been at Lambrick, then he would've been in John's class learning about Auror tactics and pondering what harsh lessons Alan and Phillip had in store for them. Instead, he was in a private toilet, looking at some sort of Muggle radio, and feeling relaxed from a good wank courtesy of Hermione's hand. It was surreal but he enjoyed the vast contrast. He washed his face and gave his bits a rub down. He put on new clothes and looked at himself in the mirror. He knew that he was still mental, but he could've sworn that his eyes were lighter and his shoulders didn't look as hunched over. He just seemed happier.

"Ron!" Hermione called. "It's ready."

"I'm coming!" he said. He put his bag in his room and hurried down the stairs. Ron walked into the sitting room and saw two plates on the coffee table. "I don't believe it." Ron sat on the couch next to Hermione and looked at his plate of beans on toast with what appeared to be cheese on top of it.

Hermione looked rather pleased with herself as she poured them juice. "Don't get too excited. I made this earlier today. I've just been keeping it warm until you got here. If it's notâ€!"

Ron didn't give her time to finish. He forgot about using a fork and forced as much down his throat as possible. The flavors and heat and tastiness greeted him like old friends. He moaned in delight as his tongue and stomach danced in joy. "This is fucking ace!"

"Ronald, manners," Hermione said, dabbing the side of his mouth with a napkin. "Stop eating so fast. You'll get heartburn or choke."

"But there's never enough time to eat," he said, stuffing more into his mouth.

She pulled his plate away and raised his glass of juice. "Baby, you're not on a schedule anymore. You can enjoy your meal and savor the taste without risking your life, all at the same time."

He felt a little like a tit. "Sorry." He gulped down his juice and used the napkin to wipe his mouth. He took a small forkful of beans.

She rubbed his back. "There you go â€" one bite at a time. It's just like how your mummy and daddy taught you."

"Shut it," he said, poking her in the side. Hermione explained the different items in the room, such as the TV and computer,

while they ate. Ron did a better job of eating and he kept his eyes on Hermione as often as he could. He didn't want to miss a beat of her. He had a heightened sense of awareness for her and, as an Auror trainee, he felt more equipped to study her movements.

After they were finished, Ron reflexively cleared their mess onto one plate and got up. "I can do it, sweetheart. You're the guest," Hermione said, touching his arm.

"I don't mind," he said, sitting back down.

She grinned affectionately at him. "I know you don't but at least for today let me pamper you. You work so hard all the time."

"So do you," he said. "I'm no more important than you are."

"You are to me," she said. She put a finger to his mouth. "Before you start arguing, remember that this is my house so it's my ruling." She got into a kneeling position on the floor and unlaced his trainers. Ron lifted his feet so she could pull his shoes off and place them together under the coffee table. She grinned. "Just stretch out and make a space for me."

He rubbed his neck. He wasn't used to all the coddling and her kindness made him blush. "I can do that." She kissed him and he pulled on her shirt collar and made her kiss him three more times. "Come right back," he said.

"Yes, sir," she said. He gave her arse a smack as she turned around and walked away.

Ron rested against the plush cushion of the couch. Hermione's house smelled clean and welcoming, and it was quiet and toasty. He was so relaxed and full and happy. He started to check his watch again but remembered that he didn't have to. He took it off and stuffed it into his pocket. "Hey, 'Mione, where's your barmy cat?"

"He's not barmy!" she said. "And he's asleep in my room. I think he knows you're here. He hasn't wanted to come out from under my bed all day."

"Smart kitty," he muttered.

"You ready for me?" she asked, coming back into the room.

He moved over and patted the spot next to him. "Kept it warm for you." Hermione cuddled next to him. "Thanks for lunch."

"Of course," she said, holding onto him. "I don't mind feeding my big, strong man. I told you that I'd do anything for you when you were deserving."

"Am I still deserving?" he asked. She nodded so he kissed her head. "Can we just lay here for a few minutes then?"

"We can just lay here for as long as you want," she said. Hermione shifted so she was lying on top of him. Ron opened his legs and wrapped his arms loosely around her back. Hermione laid her face against his chest and held onto his upper arms. "Is this okay?"

Her body was soft and warm, and fit perfectly against him. He could feel her stomach moving when she breathed and her heartbeat against him. He put his nose against her hair and could smell the pretty scent of it. It was familiar and it all felt like peace. "This is perfect, Hermione," he said quietly, kissing her head again. "This is perfect and it's mine." He abruptly felt an overwhelming rush of appreciation for what he had. Hermione was in his arms again, and he was away from all the people he had lied to and disappointed. Hermione was against his body and she was safe, and happy, and in love with him. "Fucking hell," he breathed in a shaky breath. He held her as closely as he could and tried to calm down. He would've used an Unforgivable on anyone who attempted to pull her away from him in that moment.

Hermione lifted her head and put a hand to his face. "Ron, it's okay; just breathe. We're together again. For thirteen days this right here can be the only thing that exists to us. You have me again."

"I don't want to let you go," he said.

"Then don't," she said. "For days I've been eager to talk to you and go over everything we've missed in each other's lives, but all I really want do is hold you and feel you against me. We have time to be best friends to each other, but right now we can just be boyfriend and girlfriend and hold each other."

"It's all I want," he said.

"Then it's what you'll get." She caressed his cheek. "I'll give you whatever you want, Ron."

Ron looked into her face. There was so much that he wanted. He wanted to stay away from Lambrick for as long as he could, but he wanted to return for the merge just as badly. He wanted Conor to have a great time with his family, and he wanted Olivia to not feel alone with her parents. He wanted Ginny to tell him what was wrong with her, and he wanted Bill to forgive him, and George to explain why he never wrote him back. He wanted so much but there was only one thing that he knew he needed in that moment.

"Kiss me and tell me that you love me," he said gently. "Tell me that I'm a good person."

"Sweetheart," she said. "I love you so much, more than anything else in my life, and you're the best person I know. You're everything a man needs to be. You are everything." She bent down and kissed him. He kissed her back and believed her words. He felt so much emotion and pressure on him but Hermione was slowly pulling him out of the hole. She broke away and put her forehead to his.

He caught his breath and let the heaviness pass. "I'm okay," he said.

"I know you are," she said.

"No one is going to take you away from me," he said.

"No one is going to try to," she said.

"I mean it. I will fucking killâ€¢"

"Shh." She put a finger to his lips. "Ron, listen to me: you are not at Lambrick Academy anymore. No one is going to test you and no one is going to take anything away from you. You don't have to fight and you don't have to keep your guard up right now. Relax. You're safe with me."

It was all he needed to hear. He relaxed like she told him to and closed his eyes. He loosened his grip on Hermione and she wiggled around until she settled in a comfortable position. They didn't talk or move much. Ron lazily rubbed her back and she moved her head every once in a while to kiss his neck. He let his body completely collapse and rest as he let his mind wander off. He couldn't feel anything but Hermione on top of him, and he didn't hear any small voices or concerns in his head. The only thing in his ear was the sound of Hermione's breathing. He felt so tranquil and secure that he hardly felt like himself anymore. It seemed as if his body and his mind didn't have a beginning or an end. He was too wrapped up in all the goodness of Hermione to tell.

"Did you hear that?" Hermione asked some time later.

"Hmm? What?" Ron asked, opening his eyes.

Hermione raised her head. She seemed just as dazed as he felt. She yawned and stuck her ear out. "That. It sounded like an engine. I think my parents are pulling up in their car."

"Already?" he asked, stifling a yawn.

She gave him a look. "What do you mean 'already'? We've been laying here for at least a couple of hours."

"What? You're having a laugh." Ron reached into his back pocket for his watch and saw that, sure enough, it had been over two hours since they'd finished eating. "Butâ€¢itâ€¢it didn't feel that long. I don't even reckon I was asleep."

She sat up. "That's the type of magic we create when we're together for too long." He took her hand and kissed it. However, he suddenly realized what Hermione had said.

"Wait, your parents are back?" he asked.

"Ron, calm down," she said. "I'm a little surprised that they took so long. They said they'd get off early today."

"Maybe your dad wanted to buy a spade or something," he mumbled, rubbing his neck. "In case I anger him or touch you the wrong way."

Hermione laughed. "Ron, I don't know where you get these ideas from but my father isn't like that. He's a pacifist."

"Well, what do I do?" he asked.

"You don't have to do anything," she said. "I already talked to them and they know that you just want to rest today. No heavy questions and no interviews. They just want you to be here."

"But I've been here with you without them being here," he said.

"They know that too. They know we've been here alone," Hermione said. She frowned a little. "They know we have sex too."

"Bloody Merlin's bollocks, 'Mione," he groaned, sitting up.

"What? Your parents know and it's not like it's a crime. They can accept it as long as we're safe and smart," she said. "The point is that you have nothing to worry about. I came from them. That makes them okay, right?"

He shrugged and nodded. "Yeah, I guess."

"They're the ones that invited you anyway," she said. Ron opened his mouth to say something else but the door opened and Mr. and Mrs. Granger came through. Ron immediately stood up and flattened his hair.

"Mum, Dad," Hermione said.

"We're sorry that we're late," Mr. Granger said, setting bags on the floor. "We got off early but your mother wanted to go shopping."

"We need supplies, David," Mrs. Granger said. Ron couldn't help but notice that the way she said 'David' was exactly how Hermione said 'Ronald'.

"That's okay. Ron and I were resting," Hermione said, gesturing to Ron. All three of them looked at him and Ron felt his face and ears burn. Being a ginger was inconvenient at times.

"Ah, hello," he said, walking over to them. "It's nice to see you both again. Thank you for inviting me for the holiday."

He waited for them to ask him what he had been up to with their only daughter or what his experiences at Lambrick had been like, but Mr. Granger only outstretched his hand. "It's nice to see you again too, Ron. We're happy to have you here." Ron shook his hand back. He even smiled a little. Mr. Granger had Hermione's eyes exactly and the exact same hair texture and color. He was tall, and strong, and rather scary, but there was something nice in his face; it was the same something that Hermione had. "I'll go put these bags in the kitchen for you, Abby."

He walked away and left Ron with Mrs. Granger and Hermione. Being with her mum was a little harder. She was much more intimidating and Ron felt guilty because he found her very pretty. Her blonde hair was a little longer now, past her shoulders, and she too was wearing a rather nice fitting jumper. He quickly returned his vision to her face, and her small nose, and light blue eyes.

"Mrs. Granger," he said, "it's nice to see you again."

She shook his hand as well. "You too, Ron. David and I did do a lot of shopping but most of it's for the next couple of days. I hope you don't mind if we have takeaway tonight."

"Takeaway?" he asked.

Hermione touched her mum's arm. "Mum, the magical community doesn't have that service."

"Oh, that's right. There's such a large barrier between our worlds," Mrs. Granger said, shaking her head. "Well, takeaway is likeâ€¦picking up food that a restaurant has prepared for you and bringing it home to eat."

"That sounds brilliant," he said.

"We don't eat it that often but I thought we could try the new Thai place that opened up near the bank," Mrs. Granger said. She looked directly into his eyes like Hermione always did when she wanted to make sure he was paying attention to her. "Have you had Thai before?"

"No, but I'm not picky about food," he said. "I'll eatâ€¦well, all food is good."

Mrs. Granger smiled. "Lovely. I'll order some a bit later."

"If you and Mr. Granger need help putting things away I can help," he said. "I'm â€" I'm helpful," he said awkwardly.

Mrs. Granger chuckled slightly and covered her mouth. Ron blushed even harder and grinned himself. "That's very kind of you but we can take care of it. I know you must be awfully exhausted from the train ride and everything. Just rest today. We can be more formal tomorrow. Is that okay?"

"That's fine, Mrs. Granger," he said.

"Hermione, did you get him settled in?" she asked.

"Yes," Hermione answered.

"Did you show him where the towels are and about the blankets and pillows?" she asked.

"I will, Mum," Hermione said.

Mrs. Granger nodded. "Alright. Make yourself at home, Ron." When she was in the kitchen with Mr. Granger, Ron sat back on the

couch and let out a low breath. Hermione sat next to him and rubbed his neck.

She kissed his ear. "That wasn't so bad," she whispered.

He shook his head and leaned his ear against her mouth more. "No, it wasn't. That was actually okay."

"See? Sometimes things can be okay, Ron," she said. "Things can be easy."

He looked at her and smiled. "Yeah, reckon I'm still adjusting to that."

Hermione had told him that her parents would be easier to get along with that day and she was right. They went about their evening like normal and left Ron and Hermione alone on the couch to snuggle close and watch TV. Ron was fascinated by everything he saw. TV programs and movies and news channels were captivating, but Ron liked commercials the best. He loved the random ads for things like trainers, toothpaste, dieting pills, and food. Seeing commercials for sweets and food was his favorite part of TV.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger came back into the room later that evening with the Thai food. Ron and Hermione moved to the floor and she attempted to show him how to pick up the noodles with his chopsticks.

"No â€“ no, it's like this," Hermione said with a laugh as she once again placed the sticks properly between his fingers.

"This is stupid," he said in frustration. "My hands are too big and these fuc â€“ these sticks are pointless. Why can't I use my fork?"

"It's part of the experience," she said.

"Well, I'll leave these to the bloo â€“ I'll just use my fork," he said, throwing his chopsticks down. He had to keep his swearing to a bare minimum around the Grangers, a task that was as realistic as pissing unicorn sperm from his prick.

"How is it?" Mrs. Granger said, sitting on the couch. Mr. Granger joined them with their plates.

"This Chicken Curry is excellent, Mum," Hermione said. "It's better than at the old place."

"My shrimp soup is rather delightful as well," Mr. Granger said. "You want to try some?"

"Sure," Hermione said. She brought her plate up to Mr. Granger and scooped out some of her food. They laughed as they tried to feed each other. Ron smiled. He loved seeing Hermione happy with her dad and something told him that they were a lot closer than he had always believed.

"How's yours, Ron?" Mrs. Granger asked.

Ron moved his eyes away and focused on her. "These pork sticks are delicious. It's spicy though. I don't think I've ever had food this hot before."

"It takes some getting used to," she said.

"I'm already used to it," Ron said, taking another huge bite of his pork.

Hermione once again took her place next to him. "It's nice to see you eating at a normal pace."

"Just for you," he cheeked. He suddenly yawned which made Hermione do the same and, in turn, both her parents followed suit.

Mrs. Granger put a hand to her chest. "I swear those are contagious." She yawned again.

"Did you have a long day?" Hermione asked.

"You have no idea, love," she answered. "We had some kids from a primary school come to the office on a trip. We had to give them all a free teeth cleaning."

"Kids are so wiggly," Mr. Granger said, "and they like to bite a little too much. I don't ever remember you biting so much, Hermione." He looked at Ron. "So, Ron, I've always wondered, if your world doesn't have dentists then how do you keep teeth in proper order? What about soda rot and tooth decay?"

"Dad," Hermione groaned. "No one wants to hear about tooth decay while they eat Thai."

"She's right, David," Mrs. Granger said.

"It's a valid question, dear," he said.

"It's fine," Ron said. "Um, we use spells and potions and creams. My brother Percy chipped a tooth once when I threw a book at him. Mum used a spell to place the end right back on."

"That's fascinating," Mr. Granger said, scooting closer to the edge of the couch cushion. "We have our own ways of mending broken teeth, but your way is so much faster and inexpensive and probably less painful. Your dad seems very keen on our ways but your lifestyle is just as interesting to me as well."

"I guess," Ron said. "But magic doesn't fix everything. Sometimes there's nothing even wizards can do to change something that's been broken or lost." Hermione at once started rubbing his leg.

"That's right. Life has certain rules that all people must follow, no matter what you're born as," Mr. Granger said. They all were quiet for a moment.

"Well, you didn't get bit hard enough to need stitches this time at least, right?" Hermione asked. "Dad, tell Ron about the time you almost got your finger bitten off." Mrs. Granger gently chuckled again and Mr. Granger frowned.

"I'd actually like to hear about this," Ron said, pepping up. He interlocked his fingers with Hermione's and listened as Mr. Granger told him the gruesome story.

For awhile, Mr. and Mrs. Granger explained the details of being a dentist. Ron was amazed by how people would pay to have someone stick a tool in their mouth and drill their teeth. Hermione often complained about wizard customs but the job of a dentist was truly barbaric. He couldn't have done it, and the stories were quite horrible but he enjoyed listening to them and watching Hermione interact with her parents. So much of her life was spent watching him with his family, and he wanted to feel just as connected to her life. He could see the slight differences in her when she spoke to them. She was a bit more stiff and passive, but there was a cheerful tone in her voice and a smile on her face that he'd never seen before. He quite enjoyed it.

"Well, David, how about you and I go up to bed and let them spend some time together. It's late," Mrs. Granger said. She got up and Ron started to collect their plates but Mrs. Granger took them. "You're the guest, Ron. Thank you but I've got it. Tomorrow I'll make a nice breakfast and we can talk some more. How's that?"

"That sounds great," he said.

Mr. Granger got up and touched Hermione's head. "I'm glad you two enjoyed dinner."

"Thanks, Dad," she said.

When he left the room, Ron and Hermione returned to the couch. Ron wrapped his arms around her waist and she rested her head on his chest. "You don't plan on letting me go, do you?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Not even if you asked me to," he said. He puckered his lips and Hermione rose up to press hers against his mouth. He let out a contented sigh and held her tighter. Hermione pulled away and he slowly opened his eyes. He loved that the first things he saw were her gorgeous eyes and kind smile. "Do you want me to let you go?"

She shook her head. "No. My heart just started beating normally a couple of hours ago. I don't want to ruin it." They simply gazed at each other for awhile but Hermione finally moved her eyes away and nudged her head towards the TV. "You fancy some more TV?"

"Yeah, find a program that'll show that burger commercial again," he said. "For McDillon's."

She burst into laughter. "That's McDonald's and I can't make the commercial appear. You'll just have to wait and hope that one of these channels I turn to shows it."

"Bollocks," he said.

"Language," she said, lightly tapping his thigh. Much to Ron's disappointment, he didn't see another commercial for McDonald's, but Hermione did turn to a station that had a show of people training their dogs to jump over walls and run through rings of fire. Ron found it so bizarre and hilarious that by the end of the night his eyes were watery and his stomach was sore from all the laughter. Muggles had the best forms of entertainment.

They finally headed upstairs and Hermione showed him where the towels were before leaving to say goodnight to her parents. Ron went into the bathroom and changed into his pajamas. He touched the few bruises on his stomach that still hurt but told himself to forget about them. The Thai spices were still sizzling in his mouth so he brushed his teeth and decided to wash his face simply because he could use real soap and hot water again. He looked at the clock. He would be knee-deep in Phillip's training had he been at Lambrick, and it was most likely why he felt a nervous energy charging through him. He tried to turn it off. He was off duty now, like Harry had said. He thought about Harry and what he was doing, but Ginny automatically came to mind so he splashed his face with cold water. He didn't want to give himself nightmares over his best mate and little sister's midnight activities.

There was a knock on the door and Hermione was on the other side when he answered it. She quickly closed the door behind her.
"This is dangerous," he said, looking around as if Mr. Granger was hiding in the room with them.

"I know, but I wanted to say goodnight to you," she said.

"I was gonna come to your room," he said.

"That's the thing," she said. "It's late and I'm officially dressed for bed so I don't think my parents want you in my room. They know we have sex but it doesn't mean that they'reâ€""

"I get it," he said. He gave her a once-over. She had on pale blue shorts and a white t-shirt. It had been ages since he'd seen her dressed for bed; it was a minor detail but he had missed it so much. "This is a good look for you."

"I might change," she said, pushing herself off the door. "I hope you don't mind that I took a shirt from your bag."

"You can take whatever you want," he said.

She placed her arms around his neck. "Did you have a good day?"

"I had the best fucking day of my life," he said.

"Honestly?" she asked. "I really wanted your first day back to be as relaxed and empty of activities as possible."

"It was perfect; all the relaxation was perfect, lunch and dinner were perfect, and so were your parents," he said.

"I'm glad. They're trying," she said. "We still have a lot to work out, but this is their way of taking the first major step forward."

"I appreciate it. I'm trying too," he said. He wrapped his arms around her waist. "You know what's been the most perfect about today?"

"What?" she asked.

"You," he said with a smirk.

She rolled her eyes. "Aww, how sweet. Is charm something they teach you?"

"No, I was born with it, 'Mione. Some things just can't be taught," he said. "You're either blessed with the gift or you're a tosser."

He pressed his lips against hers before she could say something cheeky to him. He tightened his grip on her waist and she once again dug her nails into his neck. He sighed and slipped his tongue between her lips. Hermione moaned softly and tugged on the strands of hair that tickled the back of his neck. It felt good, and it tasted good, and his body reacted to the sensations. He turned them around and guided her back against the sink counter. She bit his bottom lip which he took as his cue to grab her arse and lift her onto the counter.

He knew that the last thing he needed was for Hermione's parents to hear them or suspect that they were in the loo together, but he couldn't help himself. It had been so long since he was alone with Hermione at night and the simple custom was enough to make him feel like he was living another, happier life. Hermione spread her legs and Ron pulled her as close to his body as he could. She wrapped her legs around his waist and he leaned over a little so he could place more of his pelvis against her. For a moment, he truly thought that they would shag right on the counter and he was both terrified and excited about the idea.

However, Hermione pulled her mouth away and placed a hand against his chest. "Wait, Ron."

"I know," he breathed. "We can't do this here."

"No, we can't," she said, kissing him again. "I just wanted to say goodnight."

"Good bloody night," he chuckled, kissing her chin. He groaned and closed his eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked, cupping his chin.

He opened his eyes. "I'm gonna sound like a tit for saying this, but I'm gonna miss you. I wish we could sleep together."

"You're not aâ€¢that's fine to say, Ron," Hermione said. "I'll miss you too and there's nothing that I want more than to be able to sleep with you, but my parents are a lot more conservative than yours. It would never work."

"I know," he muttered.

"Look, we'll have to be careful while we're here but once we get back to your house and everything is clear, you can do whatever you like," she said.

He ran his fingers across her stomach. "Can I tie you to the bed so you can't move while I have my way with you?"

She blushed. "Ronald Bilius Weasley! That's rude and I'd be doing the tying anyway. You're the one on punishment." She gave him a light push and grinned. "I'm going to sleep now."

He backed up and let her hop off. She gave him another small kiss. "I'll see you in the morning. I love you."

"I love you too," he said. She smiled and quickly left the bathroom. Ron sighed and splashed his face with water again.

He returned to his room and sat on the bed. It was quiet in the big, warm space, and he didn't really know what to do with himself. He was tired but not tired at the same time. He wanted to see Hermione again yet he wouldn't risk it. It was almost worse than being at Lambrick. At least at camp there was no possible way of getting to her, but now she was right down the hall from him but he couldn't touch her. He needed her badly and already he felt himself missing her. He knew he was mental and he had to get over himself.

He flopped back against the mattress and a part of him felt a strong urge to go walking around the neighborhood, but there wasn't enough going on in his head to justify the need. He was content and he had to embrace the easiness. He had promised himself that he would. There was a knock on his door. Ron smirked once again. He knew that Hermione couldn't get enough of him. He answered the door and gripped the handle. "Mr. Granger?"

"Hello, Ron," he said, walking into the room. "I just wanted to make sure that you have everything you need before I go to bed."

"Yeah, I'm all set," he said.

"That's good," Mr. Granger said. "As you know, our bedroom is right across the hall if you need anything, and Hermione's is right next to that." Ron nodded but for some reason he felt like there was more to his statement.

"Thank you, sir," he said.

Mr. Granger nodded. "Well, goodnight."

"Mr. Granger," Ron quickly said. He didn't know what was wrong with him. He knew that he should keep his mouth shut but Lambrick had conditioned him too well for Ron to hold his tongue just on fear alone. He had learned at Lambrick that if you give superior people respect and reasons to trust you, they'll in return respect you and treat you with decency.

Ron rubbed his neck. "Umâ€œ;H â€œ" Hermione told me that you and Mrs. Granger know that she and I areâ€œ;umâ€œ;"

"Sexually active?" Mr. Granger said.

Ron wanted to cringe but he held his ground. "Yes, sir. I just, ahâ€œ;I want you to know that I had 'the talk' with my dad. It was long and detailed and serious, and we went over everything. I know all aboutâ€œ;umâ€œ;"

"Proper precaution and safe birth control use?" Mr. Granger added.

Ron did cringe a little that time. "Yes, sir. I justâ€œ;" He let out a deep breath and looked at him. "I know I probably shouldn't be saying this, but it's important that you know that we're always safe and we're always careful and smart about things."

Mr. Granger didn't speak. He merely folded his arms over his chest and set his jaw. Ron was still in one piece, so he decided to keep going. "I guess what's really important to you is that I'm safe and I'm careful and smart about things. Well, I am. I never push Hermione and I never try to do things that she doesn't want to do. If she says no, or to stop, or to wait, then I do it right away. I have nothing but the utmost respect for your daughter and for her trust and her body. S â€œ sex is a part of our relationship but it's not all of our relationship. It's not even the most important part. She's what's most important, not me or anything I feel or want."

He hoped that Mr. Granger believed him. Ron had never felt so grown up and responsible before. He was embarrassed and nervous and frightened, but he was honest and he felt like a man. Bill had said that he hoped Ron could act like one and he was up for the challenge.

Mr. Granger sighed and nodded. "It takes a lot of courage to say what you just said to me. I appreciate your words but I will be honest with you, Ron. Hermione is my baby. She's my only child and she's my daughter. It doesn't matter that she's nineteen or that she's some sort of heroine wizard fighter in your world. The way I feel about her now is the same way I felt about her when she was delivered that beautiful Wednesday afternoon nineteen years ago, and it's the same way I'll feel about her when she's 60 and a grandmother."

Mr. Granger put a hand on Ron's shoulder and gripped it hard. "Hermione's my precious gift. She's smart and capable and strong, just like her mum, but she's still my gift. I'll never feel comfortable knowing that you're having sex with her and are doing

things with her. That's my right as a father and your burden as a male who's sexually attracted to her."

"I understand, sir," Ron said. He honestly did understand. It was how he sort of viewed Harry's relationship with Ginny.

"Good, because I want you to know something," he said.

Ron cleared his throat. "Yes, sir?"

"I'm not an intimidator or a violent man, Ron, and I don't believe in threats," Mr. Granger said. "However, if you were to ever force anything or harm my little girl in any way," His grip on Ron's shoulder tightened, "if you were to disrespect her, or forget that you're the luckiest son-of-a-bitch in the world because she loves you and trusts you, then it won't matter how much magic runs in your veins or how much you say you love her or how desperately she begs me not to hurt you. At the end of the day, you'll still be buried six feet below my house. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said in a rather high-pitched voice.

Mr. Granger smiled and let go of his shoulder. "I'm glad to hear that. This means that we're sorted. Goodnight." When he closed the door behind him, Ron let out a deep breath. He rubbed his shaky hands against his thighs and told himself not to throw up. He still had his bollocks, and he and Mr. Granger were now at a total understanding of each other. He had actually expected things to go a lot worse. He could handle being buried under the Granger's house if he mistreated Hermione. He figured that he'd deserve a lot more than that if he ever did hurt her. Ron got back into bed and twisted his wand between his fingers. He wanted to play with the things around the room but he didn't want to bother anyone in case he broke something. Instead, he decided to go to sleep like everyone else in the house was doing.

He settled against the bed and soon realized that it was almost too comfortable. He shoved one of the pillows away and flattened another as much as he could before lying against it. It took a few attempts before he found a spot that worked for him. He cut off the light and closed his eyes. It was late, but he would still be training if he were back at camp. He was so used to not sleeping that it was rather hard to drift off, but before long he finally felt a blanket of comfort and sleepiness fold over him and he fell asleep.

Ron felt something touch his shoulder but he merely turned his head toward whatever it was. He snuggled his face against the pillow more before once again feeling a pressure to his shoulder. It took another two taps before Ron recognized that he was awake and something was shaking him. He slowly opened his eyes but he couldn't tell if he was dreaming or not. Hermione was standing before him in only a large and ripped white t-shirt that he was sure was his. She had her wand lit and lying on the floor, and in the light he saw that her legs were bare and that she wasn't wearing a bra. He sat up a little. "Hermione?"

Her chest rose and fell erratically and she balled her fists. Her hair was all over the place and there was something hot and intense about her gaze. "I want to use you again." Her voice was faint but full of need.

Ron was no longer tired and he knew that he wasn't dreaming. Even in his wildest fantasies he could never get Dream Hermione to sound so brilliant. He sat up completely. "I'll do whatever you want."

Hermione bit her lip hard and moved her legs against the mattress. "Touch me."

Ron scooted closer to her and spread his legs so she could be between him. He lifted her shirt and started kissing all over her stomach while his hands moved around her slender and soft legs. Hermione made a faint noise and kept her hands on his shoulders. Ron dragged his tongue around her skin and loved that he felt her tremble and the hairs stick up on her thighs and stomach. He kissed around her naval as his hands went around to her arse. He squeezed her cheeks and bit her stomach. He moved his mouth lower and hunched down so he could kiss around the area of her knickers. Hermione pulled on his hair and he stopped. She was teasing him again. She had to know that all he wanted to do was taste her and make her feel good.

She nudged her head and he took it as his cue to scoot back. She got into bed with him and sat on her knees. "Again," she said. Ron sat on his knees as well and placed all of his weight on his arms. He rested his palms flat on the mattress and started to kiss her neck.

"You always smell so delicious, Hermione," he said. He snuck one of his hands up her shirt and felt around the flesh of her nipples. She whimpered and gripped his knees. He lifted her shirt and bent down so he could lick her nipples completely stiff before sucking them soft again.

"Ron," she breathed. She pulled on his hair and brought his face to hers. "You make me feel so good. I had to remind myself every day that you make me feel this way so I could manage being without you. I told myself that someday you would make me feel like this again."

"It's what I was made to do, Hermione," he said. He could feel the lightheadedness and the madness again. "Everything I have and everything I can do is useless unless I can give it to you somehow." Hermione cupped his face and kissed him. They held each other and kissed hard and passionately. Hermione's hand went to his shorts. She gripped him and broke away from the kiss.

"You're really hard," she whispered.

"This is how you make me," he said, nibbling on her lips.

"Please," she said. "I need this in me." She squeezed him and made him jolt. Ron considered it for a moment. He had no idea what time it was or if Hermione's parents were awake. For all he

knew they were listening from the other side of the wall or had bugged the room like Hermione had explained to him during their fourth year. He thought about Mr. Granger's warning to him as well but somehow none of it mattered. Hermione wanted him and he wanted her just as badly. Satisfying both of their cravings would've been worth a de-bollocking. He'd just have to find a way to magically glue them back on.

"Okay," he finally said. "Do we need potion or something?"

"I said the charm before I came," she said.

He clicked his teeth with his tongue. "Once again you assumed that I'd be willing to shag you."

"And once again we both know that you can't resist me," she said. She wiggled her bum before moving away from him. He was surprised when she lay on her side facing away from him, but he didn't question it. It was a new position and he loved surprises. He moved up behind her and pulled down his shorts as she slid off her knickers. "We have to be quiet."

"I know," he said. He didn't know why he was shaking but he was. Hermione lifted her leg a little and he lifted it into his thigh. He gripped himself and bit his lip before slowly moving into her. He let out a deep breath and pressed his lips together. Hermione gasped and whimpered into the pillow. Ron couldn't describe the feeling. It was like every part of him was on fire and raw and open to her. Hermione's velvety warmth greeted him and hugged around his once again aching muscle.

He had almost forgotten what it felt like to be whole with her but it was all swiftly coming back to him. "Oh, Ron," she whimpered.

He kept pushing until his pelvis hit her backside. "Fucking hell, I missed this so much." He shifted a little so Hermione was more on her stomach and he was above her. Hermione gripped the sheets and panted with each slow and deep push that he made into her body. Ron watched her body move and he made himself concentrate. He wanted their first time together since his return to be good and long lasting. He tried not to make too much noise but the bed moved a little with his movements. All his senses were in high alert and his ears were ready to hear any sign of outside movement.

"Harder," Hermione said out of nowhere.

Ron looked down at her. He wasn't sure if he had actually heard her right or if it had been a noise from her pleasure. "You want me to go harder?"

"Yes," she wheezed. "I want it harder. I've â€œ I've missed you terribly and my body has been burning to feel you again. I want to feel every part of you and I want to feel every bit of power that you have." She looked back as much as she could. "Please, Ronâ€œ take me. Just take me as hard as you can. Give it all to me and let loose on me. I want to feel like I'm something else with

you. Like my bones are breaking and I'm forming into something different, not even human."

Ron didn't know what to say. He even stopped moving. Hermione's words were commanding, and he had never heard her sound so fervent and mental and intoxicated before. He had worried that his new desires were unique, but Hermione seemed to feel it as well. She was just as high and addicted as he was and her needs were just as strong. "You want me to let go?" he asked. She nodded and pushed against him. "You want it hardâ€¢and mental?"

She whimpered and shook. "Yes, please." His heart raced and he couldn't believe what she was saying to him. It was almost too good to be true but it didn't matter to him. Hermione wanted him and he was allowed to have her. He didn't have to share her or take her in small doses or hide her. She was in his room and they were the only two people that existed.

He pulled out of her and flipped her on her back. They only looked at each other for a moment before pouncing. They started kissing each other more forcefully. Ron tore at her shirt and got it off before she yanked his over his head. Ron didn't know what had happened to them during their time apart, but something wild and primal was bursting from them now. Their bodies became nourishment for the other and they attacked each other as if it was their only way to keep from hurting or starving. Ron was boiling and damp and charged up, and he loved that he could feel Hermione's force as well. There was nothing weak about her and he felt lucky to be with a woman who was strong and knew what she wanted.

Ron broke away long enough to grab his wand from the side table and point it at the door to put up a silencing and locking charm on. They were loud now, growling almost, and panting like the dogs he had seen on the TV program. Hermione bit his nipple and he hissed. "Ow! Watch the nips, love!"

"It was right in my face teasing me," she said, flicking it with her fingers. "It's so pink."

He chuckled. "I'll tell it not to be so pink next time." He started kissing her again. "You ready?" he asked against her mouth. She nodded. "Okay. Get on the floor."

"What?" she said.

"I can't really do this in the bed. I need something stable under us," he said.

She looked as if he was asking too much of her. "But I don't want to leave you." She rubbed her face. "I must sound stupid but I don't want to leave this bed without you."

He held onto her wrists and pulled her hands away from her face. "I don't think you sound stupid. I understand. Every moment we were apart today bothered me. I was anxious and I didn't even know why, but you don't have to worry. I'm yours for thirteen days and we don't have to be apart anymore."

"You promise?" she asked.

"I swear to you," he said, kissing her fingertips. "I'm not leaving you again. Now, I'll be right there in a second. Just get on the floor and on your knees like you were when we first started. Do it now." Hermione nodded and he moved away. She slid off the bed. She got on the floor and to her knees. She rested her head on the floor and raised her backside up. Ron stayed on the bed for a moment to collect himself. He felt energy and lust like never before, and he could feel his love for Hermione practically swelling inside his body and making him mental. It was overwhelming and the best feeling he had ever had.

Ron almost fell to the floor and got behind her. He marveled at the sight before him. Her skin was tan and glistening with sweat. "Ronâ€¢take me," she whispered. "Give me what I want."

Ron nodded and licked his lips. Hermione would be okay. He had to get used to the idea that Hermione was as mental about sex and as horny as he was. He had no problem accepting the idea that a woman like Hermione possessed such a mighty urge for pleasure, but he was still in a bit of shock that all her raging passion was for him. He was the luckiest son-of-a-bitch in the world, and he didn't need Mr. Granger to tell him that. It was something he had known since he was eleven. He ran a finger down the length of her spine and then mounted her. He gave her one long and hard stroke and didn't stop until he was completely inside her. Hermione cried out loudly and stretched out her arms. Ron gripped her waist and let out a choked moan. There were no words to say, only feelings to let out.

Over and over, he pushed himself into her and pulled her back against him. He held on to her hips and went harder and faster than he'd ever gone before. Hermione's body opened up a new world of sensations to him that he wouldn't have felt before had he not let himself go. As he watched Hermione, his worries about her gradually vanished. She wasn't in pain or uncomfortable with his powerful desire. Her mouth was widely open and she continuously whined and moaned. She had given so much to him in less than a day, so he needed to give more back to her.

"Arch your back a little," he found himself saying. He didn't know why but he needed her to do so. She repositioned right away and more room opened up to him. He got a better grip on her and was able to move in a little deeper.

"Wowâ€¢myâ€¢wow!" she cried, slammed her fists on the floor. He knew she was completely out of her mind but he wanted to push her even further. He reached around to her groin and started rubbing her clit with two fingers. She responded immediately. She shook and started to scream. "Oh, yes, Ron! Don't stop doing that!"

"I'll never bloody stop," he breathed. "You. Me. Never stop." He closed his eyes and let out a throttled moan. Hermione cried and whimpered over and over as Ron moved his pelvis and his hand in a perfect rhythm that he didn't know he possessed. He didn't feel weary or confused or unsure of himself. He knew exactly what to

do and how to move to take them both to the edge. He didn't know where the sudden skill had come from, but he embraced it.

Ron kept watching Hermione as he fucked her and he tried to hold out but the pressure was too much. Nothing he tried was able to hold his orgasm back and, with a powerful force, he came first, burying himself deeply into her. Something fell inside him and shattered in the head of his cock. He gave a strong thrust and he must've knocked against something inside Hermione because she gave a holler and jerked. He kept his eyes open so he could watch as they both came around and inside each other. He felt like he was suffocating because he was so hot and sticky, but it was perfect.

Hermione shook and whined for several minutes before she crumpled to the floor and onto her side. She held her hand firmly against her pussy and clamped her legs together. Ron lay beside her and watched her shake and bite her lip as she gently moaned. "What are you doing?" he rasped.

She kept her eyes closed and smiled. "I'm still pulsating," she breathed, "and I can feel your cum in me. It feels good." He blushed and moved damp locks out of her face. They were both breathless. He closed his eyes and told his heart to slow down.

"Ron!"

"Yeah?"

"Are you sure you're only doing Auror training at Lambrick?"

"I honestly don't know," he said.

Hermione gulped down air. "I don't either, but there must be some sort of correlation between Auror training and sexual fitness preparation. You're a god. How'd you know to rub!"

"Dunno," he said.

"And how'd you know it was best if I!"

"No idea," he said. He faced her and she dragged her eyes to him. They grinned at each other sheepishly and started laughing. "Come here," he said. She groaned as she rose a little and slid herself over to him. Ron held his arm out so she could rest her head against his armpit. He held her and she traced her fingers around his torso. Her scorching stickiness made him even more hot and sticky, but he didn't want it any other way. He loved the way that they smelled together and how their breathing moved in line with each other. He even loved how they were covered in each other's fluids. They were so connected and it was a physical and emotional union that he had missed. For awhile they were quiet, the only sounds coming from his sharp intakes of breath as she felt around his stomach and tickled him.

"So, this really happened?" she asked after some time.

"Yeah. The evidence is everywhere," he said. "Did I do good?"

"You did incredibly," she said. She held onto her necklace with one hand and put the back of her other hand to her forehead. "I cannot believe that I just had the most ridiculously passionate sex this world has ever seen on the floor of the guest room of my parent's house."

"We did it a bit on the bed as well," he added. "Can't forget that."

She grinned at him mischievously. "No, we can't. That's where the fun began," she said. "I also can't forget that I did all this with a wizard. A very attractive and talented ginger wizard who's training to be a dark wizard catcher." She let out a heavy breath. "I still can't believe I'm a witch sometimes."

"Sorry?" he said. Hermione sat up and he did as well. His eyes mindlessly went to her chest. The jewel of her necklace was beautifully protected between her tits â€“ her tits that were like two pretty and lush bags of magic.

"Ron, I'm up here," she said.

"I know where you are," he said. "I was just admiring yourâ€œcollection of goods." She cleared her throat and crossed her arms over her chest. He looked at her face. "Sorry. Continue."

She rolled her eyes and grinned. "I just mean that sometimes it still doesn't seem real."

"Why not?" he asked. "You've been a witch for eight years."

"Because for about eleven whole years I was led to believe that magic wasn't real," she said. "For ten years I kept to myself or close by my parents. My magic was my studies." She frowned a little. "I'm not like you, Ron. Before I went to Hogwarts, I never had many friends. I just wasn't good at making them and I had nothing in common with anyone. I had accepted the idea that I'd never have a thriving social life or anything really outside of academics and my future career path."

Ron rubbed his neck. She was giving him an honesty that she hadn't before and her story made him hurt a little. Her story also reminded him a lot of what Percy had told him about himself. "I'm sorry," she suddenly said. "You don't need to hear this right now. It's inappropriate pillow talk."

"It's okay," he quickly said, touching her knee. "You can tell me anything whenever you like. I'm sorry for being quiet. I just don't like hearing you talk about your childhood like this."

"It was how it was," she said simply.

"But you were only a kid," he said. "There would've been plenty of time to make friends."

"Not for me," she said. "Kids can be mean and stupid. Especially to a girl with frizzy hair and beaver teeth who ironically has dentists for parents." She fiddled with her necklace. "Getting that letter and realizing that magic was real was the best thing that could've ever happened to me, because now I'm here with you and I have a great life. This gift was given to me and I don't ever want it to be taken away. I work so hard and so diligently so I don't lose this."

He knew that she was feeling overwhelmed from being back with him. It was how he had felt when they were on the couch together. She was opening up and telling him everything because she was scared of losing him. He had to be strong for her and reassure her that she had nothing to fear. He took her hands and intertwined their fingers. "Look, it doesn't matter what some ten-year-old wankers said to you. I was like that once and I can tell you now that it's just thick boy behavior. At that age, if it's not a frog belching dragon dung then it's not cool or worth us being nice to. As for the girls, well, I've learned that girls are just bitches sometimes. It's a gene that some females are born with or something."

Hermione laughed. "You sound like Ginny."

"She's the one that gave me permission to say that," he said. "The bottom line is that it's their loss. I'm sorry that you felt alone, but they're the ones that won't ever get to talk to you or hang around you or see your magic or have the most ridiculously passionate sex this world has ever seen on the floor of the guest room of your parent's house."

She sniffed and wiped a tear from her eye. "I guess that last part is true at least."

"It's all true and you're not the only one who's thankful that you got introduced to magic. We found each other because you did," he said. "And I reckon you made the best friends that you could ever make at Hogwarts. Harry and I wouldn't have been anything without you and if I could I'd find every person who ever took the Mickey out of you or was mean to you and kick his or her arse. I know some tricks now."

She laughed again and wiped away more tears. "That's sweet, Ron, but it was worth it. Experiencing so little just so I could give it all to you and to Harry was worth it."

"And it's something you won't ever have to go through again," he said. "Even if you wanted to, you can't get rid of Harry and me now. Well, if you really wanted to then I reckon we could make Harry bugger off every now and then, but I'm staying here. I promise."

She put her forehead against his. "I miss this so much when you're away. I miss hearing you say something and me just trusting it. When I'm at school I keep my guard up and I try my best to prepare for the worst, but I don't have to do that with you. I know that I can close my eyes and relax when you're around. I miss you making me feel safer."

"And I miss making you feel safer," he said, running his hands through her hair. "I wish I could do more for you when we're apart. I know it's hard. I feel it too. Sometimes I get so frantic and unsure, but when I'm with you I just know things and I know how to be. I'm not like this around anyone else. There's nothing I feel more capable of than loving you and making you okay. I love you, Hermione. I can't bloody say it enough."

"I don't think there is an enough, Ron." She kissed him and he kissed her back. For awhile they simply kissed slowly and tenderly, and when their jaws became sore they talked about random and rather strange things they had missed about each other.

Ron chuckled after Hermione told him that she had missed the way his top lip curled when he said 'apple juice' and yawned.
"Tired?" she asked.

"No, I'm fine," he quickly said as a reflex. He was beyond exhausted but working through fatigue was something he knew how to do expertly.

Hermione saw right though it. "Ron, I'm not your drill sergeant. It's okay if you're tired. You're a civilian again."

"Yeah, right!" he said, rubbing his neck.

"Besides, it's almost three in the morning," she said. "I think we should both get some sleep. I've got things planned for us and I need you to be well rested."

"Do I get to know what these plans are?" he asked.

"Of course not," she said. She kissed his forehead and stood up. Ron watched as she slid her knickers and shirt back on.

"Why'd you pick that shirt?" he asked. "It's probably my worst one. I wore it all the time during training."

"That's exactly why I chose it," she said. "This has your battle history attached to it. Wearing it makes me feel secure."

He raised an eyebrow. He'd never completely understand Hermione or the mind of a woman for that matter. "You know, you could just stay in here and sneak out in a couple of hours," he said, putting his clothes back on as well.

"That won't work," she said. "There's no telling when my parents might get up."

He shrugged. "It was worth a try."

"I told you to leave the schemes to me," she said, poking at his chest.

"I have no problem doing that. I'll probably stare at the floor and think about what we did until I drift off," he said.

"Whatever works for you, sweetheart." She kissed him tenderly. "I love you."

"I love you too. Thanks for the shag," he said.

"Oh, you make me sound like some sort of lady of the night," she said, frowning and crossing her arms over her chest.

"I'm sorry," he said with a shrug. "You can thank me then for the shag. As long as you're my only costumer then I reckon being a slag won't be so bad. It's a bonus that I'll get paid doing something I love and doing someone I love."

"You're vile. Go back to camp and learn some manners," she said. She gave his nipple a pinch before easing out of his room. Ron watched her return to her room before closing the door.

He fell back on his bed and went over everything that had happened on the mattress and on the floor. He and Hermione were stepping into new territory of their relationship, and he was excited to see where it would lead. He settled under the blanket and this time he didn't mind how comfortable it was. He was knackered and it would take very little time for him to fall asleep. He felt relaxed and happy knowing that he wouldn't be woken up by Alan's whistle in just a few hours. Instead, he would be woken up, hopefully, to the sound of Hermione's laughter and maybe the smell of her mum's cooking. It would be pleasant and safe and normal. He had already gotten his one easy day with Hermione and he was ready to make it two in a row. He realized that being away from camp meant that the concept of 'easy' was something he could obtain.

He closed his eyes and moaned in the sheer bliss of his current situation. It was taking some adjusting to, but Ron was glad to be a civilian again.

* * *

**** (sighs and smiles) It's good to get back to R/Hr! It's even better now that Ron and Hermione are growing up in their relationship with each other. It's going to open doors for them as a couple and open doors for me as a writer. Thanks for reading and REVIEW! This the only the beginning... :)

CHEERS!

* Chapter 38*: Come together

WOW, WOW! Thank you lot for the amazing reviews!
Honestly, all the Ron Love gives me hope for our
future. :P

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron pulled the pillow from under his head, dropping it onto his face. He lay as still as possible but there wasn't a morsel of sleepiness left in his system. He was fully awake; the morning had started. It could only mean one thing.

"Threeâ€¢twoâ€¢one," he mumbled against his pillow. He tensed his muscles in preparation of Alan's piercing whistle and booming voice but he didn't hear either. "Threeâ€¢twoâ€¢one," he said again. He still heard nothing. He wondered if he had overslept but Conor would wake him up. "Oi, Conor?" Ron said, opening his eyes. He pushed the pillow off his face. "What time isâ€¢?" He trailed off as his eyes focused to his surroundings.

He wasn't in his cabin. He was in a large Muggle bedroom. He slapped a hand over his face and rubbed his eyes. He was still at the Grangers' house, but, apparently, he still wasn't over the shock of it. "Get your bloody head on, Ron," he said aloud as he slid the comforter off. He sat up completely, swinging his legs over the bed. Everything was quiet and, for the first time in months, he wasn't shivering. He glanced at the clock and was surprised by how late in the morning it was. He didn't know that he was still capable of sleeping in. Then again, he had been rather worn-out by the time he had finally drifted off. A broad grin spread across his face as he gazed at the floor. He and Hermione had done a lot of great things on it.

"Hermione," he said. Since he was at the Grangers' house, it meant that she was there too. He quickly went through his bag, searching for his toothbrush. When his hand connected to it, he grabbed his towel and quietly raced to the bathroom. The door was open and empty inside, but he stopped just before the threshold. He heard voices from downstairs that belonged to the Grangers. His stomach growled when a whiff of something delicious tickled his nose. He wanted whatever was downstairs but he wouldn't get it if he stood around like a prat.

As he brushed his teeth, his mind started to wander off to Lambrick again. He spit out his toothpaste, almost like the action would relieve him of the thought as well. He washed his face next, then rubbed his towel over his head. He looked at himself in the mirror. He appeared as well rested as he felt, but he didn't know if it was due to the comfortable bed, uninterrupted sleep, or Hermione's body. He decided that a healthy combination of the three was his cure. He left the toilet but hesitated at the top of the stairs. He suddenly became nervous but he knew that he had no reason to be. He had to do something to get out of his state, so he closed his eyes and did what he usually did when he felt too frozen to move: he thought about Hermione.

"She's right downstairs, you tit," he said. "Hermione is downstairs waiting for you. Hermione. Hermione. Hermione." He let

the edginess drain out of him while the feeling of comfort took ahold of him. There was nothing to worry about; all he had to do was be there.

He walked downstairs and into the kitchen. Mrs. Granger was at the table, pouring milk into a bowl of eggs while she read what looked to be a cookbook. She was doing both things, almost simultaneously, and Ron no longer wondered where Hermione got the talent. "Mrs. Granger?"

She looked up. "Good morning, Ron." She stopped pouring and closed the book. "How did you sleep?"

"Brilliantly," he said, walking further into the kitchen. The smells of bacon, toast, and fruit caused his stomach to growl again. "I'm sorry for oversleeping."

"You didn't," she said, going to the stove. "David and I only got up a little while ago. Hermione's always awake at this hour."

"So am I," he said. "It's why I'm surprised that I'm just now getting up." He rubbed his neck and watched her put the eggs on. "Do you need any help?"

"Not with this, but if you fancy lending a hand then I'd appreciate you taking the juice glasses into the dining room," she said.

"I can do that." He picked up the four large glasses and held them securely in his arms. He walked carefully to the dining room. He set the glasses in the same spots they had been in when he ate dinner with the Grangers the last time he had come by.

"Mum, I don't think we haveâ€!"

Ron set the last glass down and looked up. Hermione was standing just inside the doorway. She grinned and blushed, which caused him to grin and blush too. Now that the fire and ache had passed, how they had acted the day before made them a little shy.

"Hermione," he said. He was thankful that she was wearing a t-shirt and pajama pants. He didn't know if he would've been able to take seeing her in his ripped shirt again.

She walked over to him. "Hi," she said. She giggled a little, making her cheeks turn even pinker. "How'd you sleep?"

"Like a baby dragon," he said. "I got a lot worked out last night. I feel very well rested."

She placed her arms around his neck. "Ah, well, that's good to know. I slept rather peacefully myself."

"Hmm, think there's a connection?" he asked. He gave her a small kiss before wrapping his arms around her and sighing against her hair. Her body felt so good against his. "Good morning, love."

"Good morning," she said, holding him tighter.

He pulled away and put a hand to her face. She put her hand on top of his. He wanted to tell her how much he loved her, how much last night had meant to him, and how perfect his day already felt, but the words weren't there. All he could do was gaze into her eyes. However, something told him that she could understand what he was feeling. "I like this."

"Me too," she said. He rubbed her cheek before kissing her forehead.

"Hermione?" Mrs. Granger said.

Hermione closed her eyes and moved away from him. "Yes, Mum?"

"Are you going to finish your statement?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Hermione went into the kitchen. "I was saying that I don't think we have any light bulbs left. They weren't in the drawer."

"That's wonderful," Mrs. Granger breathed. She began to angrily butter bread.

"I can pick some up today after Ron and I come back fromâ€¢!"
Hermione stopped talking.

"No â€“ please continue," Ron cheeked.

"You're not clever," Hermione said. She touched her mum's arm.
"I'll get some."

"Thank you, dear," Mrs. Granger said. "Can you take this bowl to the table? It's hot, so place it on a mat. I don't want to ruin the tablecloth."

"I know, Mum," Hermione said, taking the bowl of muffins.

"Ron, do you want to take this plate in there as well?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"Sure." He had to bite his lip very hard so he wouldn't smash his face against the plate and shovel the sausages down. When he reached the dining room table, Mr. Granger came in through the other entrance.

"Ron," he said.

"Mr. Granger." Considering what had happened the night before, it was a little hard to look him straight in the eyes. Ron didn't want Mr. Granger seeing right through him and finding out that Ron had shagged his precious 'gift' very feverishly on the floor of his guest room. "Did you get a good night's sleep?"

"Indeed," Mr. Granger said. "Abigail and I work almost every day so taking this time off was a good decision."

"I think we all needed a good night's sleep," Hermione said. Her voice was almost teasing but Ron attempted not to blush again. He

refused to get his bollocks torn off on only his second day. Mr. Granger looked between them before walking into the kitchen to help Mrs. Granger.

Ron sat in the chair next to Hermione. "Ron, you have to relax," she said.

"I'm trying," he said. "Believe it or not, but this is the first I've ever shagged a man's daughter while staying across the hall from him."

She rubbed his thigh. "He's not a mind reader, Ron. He doesn't know and neither does my mum. We're okay. Last night was great."

"It was more than great," he said. "I just want to make sure that I'm around for the next time."

"Weasleys are so overdramatic sometimes," she said, straightening the tablecloth.

"Oi, we're not overdramatic," he said. "When we sense danger, we react to it. It's a defense mechanism. It's how we stay alive and procreate as well as we do."

"Oh, Ron," she groaned. "The only thing you need to defend yourself against right now is your self-induced paranoia. I've read that it can be very incapacitating."

"Blimey, what an excellent analysis, Ms. Granger," he said sarcastically. "I didn't know Mental Healing was an N.E.W.T. course."

She hit his arm. "You're rude."

"And you read too much," he said. "What else is new?" They bickered in hushed voices for a few more minutes until her mum and dad came into the room with the rest of breakfast. After everything was set, they started passing the food around. All Ron wanted to do was sink his teeth into the bacon and muffins, but he told himself to be polite and not act like the starving monster he was.

"So, Ron," Mrs. Granger said.

Ron stopped spreading jam on his toast. "Yes?" He had spoken to the Grangers enough times to know that 'so, Ron' at the table was always followed by a question he didn't particularly want to answer.

"You said that you're usually up at this time," Mrs. Granger said. "What would you be doing if you were at camp?"

Ron checked his watch. "I'd be in class."

"You attend classes at the training camp?" Mr. Granger asked.

"Yes. We have field training and classroom lessons," he said. "I can't really go into specifics."

"Are you afraid we might spread the word around?" Mr. Granger asked.

"No, but none of us are allowed to talk about camp," he said. "It's policy to keep the Aurors and their teachings out of the hands of dark wizards. We all had to sign waivers. I reckon if we go against what we agreed to, then we might become seriously ill or drop dead." He started to chuckle but neither of Hermione's parents even crackled a smile.

"Is that a common practice in your world?" Mrs. Granger asked.
"Killing people if they breach a contract?"

"Mum, maybe we should talk about something else?" Hermione said.

"I wasn't serious about the death thing," Ron promptly added. "I mean that sort of magic exists, but I don't think they used it on us. At least, I hope not." He scratched his head. "I-I've never asked. Maybe I should find out."

"Ron," Hermione said, touching his arm. "We're going to talk about something else now."

"Right," he said, spreading jam on his toast again.

"So, Ron," Mr. Granger said.

All through breakfast the Grangers asked him random questions about his life, his family, and his hopes for the future. Mrs. Granger had not lied when she said that they would be more formal today. Hermione helped out as much as she could, but Ron left the table feeling more stressed than when he first walked down the stairs. He took a shower and let the warm water ease his grief. He popped his back, cracked his neck, toes, and knuckles, and stretched under the showerhead like he did every morning. It always helped to loosen him up while preparing him for the day to come.

When he was finished getting dressed, he opened the door. Hermione was on the other side with a bag in her hand. "Were you spying on me?" he asked.

"Don't flatter yourself," she said.

"So watching my naked body under the water does nothing for you?" he asked.

"I didn't say that," she said. "Trust me, if I had spied on you, I would've ended up joining you. There's only so much I can hold back. I was simply waiting for my turn."

"It's all yours," he said, bowing a little.

"Did you make a mess in the shower?" she asked, walking in.

"No â€œ at least nothing that hasn't already been washed down the drain," he said.

"You're rude," she said, giving his arse a light pat before closing the door in his face.

Ron didn't feel nearly as comfortable as Hermione had waiting outside the door, so he stood like a prat outside of her bedroom. Luckily, her parents didn't come back upstairs, so he didn't have to rush away. He looked out the window and watched an elderly man walk his dog. Ron wondered if the dog knew how to jump through hoops of fire like the ones on TV.

The bathroom door opened and Hermione came out, running her fingers through her damp hair. "Need something?"

He could smell her shampoo and body wash, and he felt a pull toward her. "I found it," he said.

"Aww, there's that charm again," Hermione said, pinching his cheek. They went into her room. The cream walls, packed bookshelves, and large bed welcomed him. He sat on the bed, closely watching her as she dried her hair. His attention totally narrowed to her when she started applying lotion to her arms, neck, face, hands, and feet. She worked slowly and meticulously; he felt himself growing hard just watching her touch herself.

"You have no idea what you're doing to me right now," he said.

"It's only lotion, Ron. Don't get any ideas," she said as she continued to apply more on herself.

"I've already got three ideas in mind," he said. "You're the star in all of them. I'm a supporting cast member."

She shook her head. "You're too quick for me sometimes."

"And you're too amazing for me sometimes," he said. He heard a terrible purring as Crookshanks pawed into her room. He was still fat and a ghastly ginger puffball with beady eyes. Hermione picked him up as if he was something to cherish.

"How's my boy?" she asked, scratching his head and kissing him. He purred and nuzzled her face. Ron wasn't impressed.

"Bollocks," he mumbled.

"Are you jealous?" she asked.

"No need to be. I'm sure you'd pet me like that if I asked," he said.

"But Crookshanks doesn't have to ask," she said. "I give him whatever he wants: I feed him whenever he wants; I bathe him whenever he wants." I even let him sleep with me whenever he wants." She sat Crookshanks at the foot of her bed and gave him another kiss and rub down.

"Oi, that's enough!" Ron said.

She laughed. "I thought you said he was all right?"

"He is. He's all right to do whatever he wants except take all your snogs," Ron said. "I'm the only ginger who gets to have you."

"Oh, so you are jealous," she said with a grin. She stroked Crookshanks before getting into the bed. "Don't worry. He's the only ginger kitty I touch. You're the only ginger—"

"Cock?" Ron said. She gasped. "I mean like the animal. What were you not making a joke about kitties and cocks?"

"You're vile," she said.

"But you love me," he said.

Ron lay against her headboard and Hermione put her back to him and snuggled against him. Crookshanks stayed at the foot of the bed, eying him as he swung his tail around. He reminded Ron of McGonagall with the way he almost glared at him before giving Hermione a much softer gaze. Ron rolled his eyes even animals didn't think he was good enough for her.

For awhile they simply flirted and talked. Ron had almost forgotten how easy it was to enjoy being inactive. He kept his nose to Hermione's scalp so he could constantly smell her hair. He strengthened his grip on her while intertwining his limbs with hers. His legs were so much longer and his feet looked like miniature boats next to hers. His hands covered hers and he saw that even her tan skin looked a little funny next to his pale and freckly complexion. Everything about them was opposite. It made them perfect.

"Are you ever going to tell me what we're doing today?" he asked sometime later.

"No," she answered. "You'll have to find out. It won't be long now."

"The suspense is killing me," he said.

"Aren't Aurors supposed to be patient people?" she asked.

"Yes. It's a good thing that I'm not one yet," he said.

"You will be though," she said. "Once you get back to camp, you'll be well on your way." Ron moved his eyes from their hands to the floor. He wasn't sure if he would go back to camp. "I know you're being quiet because you don't think you're going back, but I have faith in you. They need you."

Ron bit his lip. Her words were sweet and encouraging but he almost couldn't take them. She didn't know about his lies or what had happened. A small, yet loud, part of him screamed at him to tell her but he ignored the plea. It wasn't the time. He would get his three days with her. "I reckon we'll find out," he said.

Hermione moved off him and turned around so they were facing each other. "While we're on the subject of campâ€!"

"I don't want to talk about that place right now," he quickly said.

She put a finger to his lips. "I said 'while we're on the subject of camp'. I didn't say let's talk about camp."

He gave her finger a peck before pulling it away. "What does that mean then, Ms. Know-It-All?"

She tapped his nose. "Let me show you." She crawled to the foot of the bed and Crookshanks leapt off, hopping onto her desk. Hermione bent over the bed and started rustling through her trunk. Ron stared at her bum and the way her jeans fit her in all the right ways. "I can feel your eyes on me," she said.

"You're lucky that's all I have on you right now," he said.

She turned her head around. "Don't you have any manners?"

"Somewhere around here," he said, reaching out to touch her. She slapped his hand away. "Ow! I almost forgot how violent you are."

"Yes, I'm sure I'm right up there with the people who gave you those bruises on your body," she said.

"That's different," he said. "They're teaching me something. You're just unkind."

Hermione closed her trunk and sat on the bed again. "I'm teaching you something too. It's called decency." She had a hand behind her back and a smile on her face. He was reminded of Mr. Low.

"I've played this game before," he said, sitting up. "What's back there?"

"Well, it's something that I've wanted to talk to you about for ages now. You have a lot of explaining to do, mister." She showed her hand. A newspaper was in it. Ron rolled his eyes as he read The Enchanted Dispatch and saw Frank and Millie's faces on the cover.

"Bloody hell," he breathed, "I told you to burn that."

She scooted closer to him. "Why would I burn it? This is a great read."

"It's bollocks and you know it." He snatched the newspaper out of her hand, flipping to their exposÃ©. "Harry and I look like a couple of nutters. I hate this picture. I hate this whole thing."

"Why?" she asked. "Your interview was wonderful and so was Harry's."

"Yeah, well, they left out the part where Harry and I told them that you should've been there with us," he said. "They also

forgot to add the bit about me telling them off for asking stupid questions."

"No one wants to read about that stuff, Ron," Hermione said.
"What people wanted to read about was Harry's journey and you as a family man."

"A family man?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "The things you said about your family, as well as your duty to Harry as if he's your brother, were sweet."

"I wasn't trying to be," he said. "I was just being honest. I thought that doing this interview would be fun, but it wasn't." He peered at Harry's bored expression. "I don't see how Harry does this all the time."

"I don't either," she said. "You should see how annoyed I get when I write people back telling them that I don't want to do an interview. Harry must possess a patience that we don't have. It helps that he's done this a billion times. Anyway, it's not really the article that I want to talk about." She pointed to Millie. "Do you want to explain this woman to me?"

"Fucking bollocks, 'Mione," he whined. "She's a barmy news reporter. That's all."

"A barmy news reporter that apparently fancies you," she said. She jabbed her finger to her picture again. "Just look at her."

"I bloody know; I was there," he said. "It was weird, okay? She winked at me and did this thing with her lip, but it was the least of my problems during the interview."

"What do you mean?" she asked, tensing a little. "Did she chat you up?"

"No â€“ nothing like that." Ron rubbed his neck. "It's justâ€¦Frank was even worse than she was."

"Frank?" she asked. "Her brother?" She pointed to him. "This man."

"Yes," he said. "He winked at me too. A few times, actually. He said something about 'biting' and it got weirder. Ask Harry about it. He thinks that they both fancied me and, well, probably wanted a go at me."

Hermione's cheeks flushed. "Wow."

"'Wow' doesn't cover it," he said. "How do you think I felt? I was sitting across from both of them. Do you have any idea how weird it is to have twins â€“ a woman and a bloke no less â€“ eyeing you likeâ€¦like you're a piece of meat? I felt violated." He shuddered and was surprised when Hermione covered her mouth and snorted. "Shut it!" he said.

She burst into laughter. "Oh, sweetheart."

"Don't even start," he said. "Harry didn't give me too hard of a time. If you do, then you'll have to admit that he's better than you are."

"I'm not going to give you a hard time," she said. "I feel a little better now. I guess you just have that effect on everyone. I understand it."

"Well, I don't," he said. "I've never had a bloke act that way around me before."

"Maybe you've just never noticed," she said. She gripped her necklace very hard. "I don't know. I'm finding this rather sexy. Your sex appeal has no borders. You attract all kinds of people."

He gaped at her. "You're mental and you should keep your knickers on. It's never gonna happen. Especially not for free."

She laughed again. "That's right. You're a lady of the night!"

"I reckon that's man of the night," he said, "and you still owe me for yesterday."

"I don't have any money to spare," she said. "Catch me next week."

He rose to his knees, shaking his head. "It doesn't work that way, love. I reckon I'll have to catch you now."

"Now?" she asked, moving back.

"That's right." He moved over but Hermione got off the bed. He slid off as well, moving in front of the door.

Hermione swallowed hard. "Ron, listen: my parents are right downstairs."

"Good," he said, stepping toward her. "It'll take them a few seconds to get up here then. You'll be mine by the time they open the door." He took another step toward her, which caused Hermione to run to her desk. He chased after her and snatched her arm. She wiggled but he got her to the floor.

He held her down. "Say you're mine." He started tickling her.

"Never!" she gasped between laughs. "I â€“ ah â€“ I won't give up."

"Your loss," he said. He tickled the side of her stomach.

"O-okayâ€¦okay," she breathed, as her body tensed. "You win. I'm yours."

He stopped tickling her and wiped her tears of laughter away. "You're damn right you are. You're all mine."

"And you're all mine," she said. "Not Millie's or Frank's but mine."

"You're damn right about that too." He looked into her eyes and then her gorgeous mouth.

"Are you going to kiss me or are you going to just stare at me all day?" she asked.

He frowned. "You're so bossy." He leaned down, pressing his mouth against hers. His lips instantly parted so she could take command. He wrapped his arms around her waist, swiftly flipping them over so he was against the hard floor. He gripped her hips while she tangled her fingers in his hair. Everything tasted good and felt good.

He broke away. "Sodding hell."

"What is it now?" she asked.

"Can you tell kitty over there to stop purring?" he asked.

"He's a cat, Ronald," she said. "What else is he supposed to do?"

"I know he's doing it on purpose," he said. "He's trying to distract me."

She rolled her eyes. "Right. It's good to know that you're still a thirteen-year-old boy in a lot of ways. Look, how about you stop thinking about my kitty and—"

"Start thinking about your pussy?" he asked. She gasped. "What was that not the joke you were going for?"

"How dare you?" she asked, hitting his arm.

It was his turn to burst into laughter. "I'm sorry. That was just too perfect. Can I try again?"

"Say you're sorry first," she said, tracing his mouth.

"I'm really sorry," he said. "May I please kiss you again? I won't let anything distract me."

She sighed. "I guess."

His lips found hers again and they merely snogged on her floor. During this time, Ron forgot about Crookshanks, his awkward breakfast, and everything else that wasn't Hermione. They finally stopped when their jaws began to ache, and Hermione got out her deck of cards and taught him how to play Muggle card games such as Spades and War. Ron didn't see the point to them. Nothing blew up or lit on fire. In his eyes, calling a game 'war' wasn't really justified if no one actually got hurt.

After lunch, Hermione told him to sit on her bed while she paced in front of him. "All right, our second event that I have planned will start very soon, so there's something I have to do."

"Okay," he said. "Are you gonna be able to stand still long enough to do it?"

"Right. Sorry," she said. She gave him a look of apprehension. "I have to give you your Christmas gift now. It's the only way my event can take place."

"Oh," he said, sitting up. "Let's see it."

"It's not that simple, Ron," she said. "I was so sure about it when I ordered it but now I don't know. You might hate it."

"I could never hate anything you'd give to me as a gift," he said. "Come on, don't be shy. It's only me."

She nodded. "Fine." She reached into her trunk, pulling out a large box with blue and white wrapping paper. He could tell by the way she lifted the box that it was heavy. She sat it next to him on the bed. "Go on then."

He tore the paper off and pulled off the tape that held the box closed. He pulled out a heavy black carrying bag. "What's in the bag?"

"Open it and see!" she practically snapped. She bit her lip and squeezed her necklace.

Ron gave her a look before slowly opening the bag. "Fucking hell." He pulled out a heavy orange ball that he recognized as a bowling ball. It had a blue squiggly line across it. He then pulled out bowling shoes that were also orange with blue squiggly lines. He studied them in awe before turning his attention to her.

Hermione appeared to be moments away from heaving up her lunch. "This is probably the tackiest gift in the world, but I know how much you love bowling. I thought it would be nice if you have your own ball and shoes and even your own bag to keep them in." She sat down next to him and traced the blue line on the ball. "It's hard to tell when you're holding it like this, but the line is in the shape of an 'R'. It's just abstract; the same goes for your shoes. I picked orange because it's your favorite color, blue because of your eyes, and I'm completely embarrassed." She covered her face with her hands and groaned. "I got this for you months ago without thinking."

Ron sat the ball on the floor and pulled her hands away. Her face was pink and she looked horribly worried. He had no idea why.

"Mione, I don't know what your problem is. This is fantastic."

"You're just being nice," she said.

"No, I'm not," he said. "I do love bowling and I love orange and I happen to have blue eyes. This is excellent. I won't have to worry about using used things anymore. I've got new stuff, and you know how I feel about new stuff."

"I just wanted to give you something unique," she said, looking down.

"And this is," he said, lifting her chin. "I love my shoes and my ball and my bag. I never thought I'd get something like this, but at the same time, it's exactly something I want. Thank you."

"You mean it?" she asked gently.

"I mean it," he said. "Come here." She moved closer to him and he kissed her forehead. "You're really cute, you know that?"

"Hush," she muttered. "I feel even more embarrassed because I overreacted."

"You should be used to that by now," he said. "You think too much."

She slapped his arm. "Don't make me drop that ball on your foot."

"There's the violence again," he said. "So does this mean we're going bowling?"

She nodded. "Yes. Get your coat and meet me downstairs. We're taking the car."

"Wicked!" he said, shooting up. He put his ball and shoes back into the bag and went downstairs. Mr. and Mrs. Granger were on the couch, thumbing through papers that were all over the coffee table and their laps. He didn't want to disturb them but he had to say something. "Hard work is never done?"

"Unfortunately, no," Mrs. Granger said, looking up. "Ah, I see Hermione finally found the courage to give that to you."

"I blo â€“ I love it," he said. "Bowling is great. We don't have a wizard sport like this."

"I never had an aptitude for it," Mrs. Granger said.

"Neither have I," Mr. Granger said. "I'm more of a cricket man myself."

"One of my friends is Muggle-born and he enjoys cricket too," Ron said. "He prefers football though."

"So do most people," Mr. Granger said.

"I dunno," Ron said.

"Impressive. Your second day here and already you two are disagreeing on sports," Mrs. Granger said.

"We're not disagreeing yet," Mr. Granger said. "Ron hasn't been properly educated."

"You'll have to educate him later, Dad," Hermione said, coming into the room. "We have to go."

"Check the air pressure in the left rear before you go," Mr. Granger said. "I don't want you driving on a flat."

"I checked it this morning and it's fine," Hermione said.

"Check it again," her dad said. "Before you came back home for holiday, I had your car tuned up and the mechanic said that the left rear rim is a little dodgy."

"Okay," she said. "I'll check it again."

"Also, Hermione, don't forget to pick up some light bulbs," Mrs. Granger said.

Hermione held on to her necklace. "I won't."

"Make sure they're Halogen and make sure they're 42 watt," she said.

"I know, Mum," Hermione said tensely. "You told me that this morning and again during lunch."

"Well, I'm just reminding you," she said.

"Exactly. There's nothing wrong with double-checking, Hermione," Mr. Granger said. "Excuse us for keeping you on top of things."

"All right! I'm sorry," she said. She rubbed her brow and shook her head. "I will check the left rear tire before we drive off, and right after bowling, I will stop by Tesco and pick up a pack of Halogen 42 watt bulbs. Is there anything else?"

"No, just be safe on the road and have fun," Mrs. Granger said.

Hermione nodded and took Ron's hand. "Come on, Ron." She opened the door. "We'll be back later."

She closed the door behind them and leaned against it. She let out a shaky breath before rubbing her eyes. Hermione had looked like she was ready to burst inside but her parents hadn't noticed at all. It didn't make sense to Ron. He always assumed that she'd want her parents to be overanalyzing and persistent like she was, but seeing her reaction told him differently. She seemed stressed, almost unable to breathe, and he could practically feel her emotions pouring out of her. It wasn't right. A part of him wanted to run back into the house and demand that her parents apologize to her.

"Are you all right?" he asked instead.

"I'm fine," she said. "Fresh air is nice. I'm glad we're out of the house."

"Hey," he said, taking her hand. "If you were to check the wrong tire or buy the wrong light bulb, I'd still think you were perfect."

She smiled weakly. "Thanks but I will check the right tire and buy the right light bulbs anyway. Come on."

After Hermione checked the tire, they got into the car and drove away. She was quiet while she drove. He decided to stay quiet too so she could clear her mind and get her head on. He didn't mind. He watched the traffic lights change and watched the Muggles go about their day. He found everything so fascinating. He told himself that maybe one day he'd learn to drive properly so he and his dad could experience the Muggle city together. This time however, he would stay on the street and out of the air.

They pulled up to the building with the neon green lights. Ron felt excitement popping around his insides. "I missed this place."

"I'm sure you haven't thought about it again," Hermione said.

"Shows how much you know about me," he said.

They went inside. As Hermione paid for their game, Ron found their lane. He watched everyone around him bowl and drink and talk like it was an everyday thing. The atmosphere was casual. He appreciated it. He took out his bowling ball then put his new shoes on. Hermione sat next to him. "How do they fit?"

He stood up and walked around. "Comfortably. These are brilliant." He held up his ball and posed like a prat. "What d'ya think?"

She chuckled. "I think I should've brought my camera. You're adorable."

"Adorable?" he said, crinkling his nose.

"I meant handsome and intimidating," she said.

"That's better," he said. The pins for their lane set themselves. He was once again in awe of the Muggle technology.

"Do you remember what to do and how to play?" she asked.

All Ron had done since getting into the car was think about what Hermione had taught him when it came to bowling. He knew exactly what to do "I reckon I need some help remembering where to stick my fingers."

Hermione blushed and shook her head. She got up and walked over to him. "You put your ring finger here," she helped him slip his finger in, "your middle finger here!"

"Like this?" he asked, slowly pushing his middle finger into the hole.

"Yes," she breathed, "and your thumb in this last one." She eased his thumb in and licked her lips. "You are so bad, Ronald Weasley."

"And you're so good, Hermione Granger," he said. "Don't tell me that you're not thinking the same thing as me."

"But I'm not. I'm not manic like you are," she said. She backed up and nudged her head. "Go on."

"Right," he said. "Let's see if I've still got it." Ron moved back, holding his hand up. He found his center and looked at the pins down the lane. He let out a deep breath, trying his best to shut everything else out. It was similar to what he did when he had to hit a moving target. It was all about steadiness and force. He swung his arm back and released the ball. The ball zoomed down so fast that the orange made it look like the ball was on fire. It hit the pins hard, knocking eight of them down before one swung and caused itself, and the final pin, to fall over.

Hermione jumped out of her seat and clapped. "You really are a natural!"

"I reckon the ball and shoes helped," he said. "Plus, I had a good teacher."

She beamed. "Happy Christmas."

As they played, Ron's game increased. He watched the man next to their lane curve and spin his ball. Ron mimicked his movements. It was a little harder but after awhile he became good at that as well. He had apparently done so well that the manager gave him free bag of crisps and a beer. Ron shoveled down the crisps but he slowly drank the beer. It was cold and foamy and it tasted all right. He offered some to Hermione, but she shrugged and told him that she was the designated driver. He had no idea what that meant.

By their third set, Ron was purely trying to help Hermione improve her game. He got behind her and held on to her wrist as she released the ball. His goal was to keep her arm straight but most of the time she threw gutter balls. However, neither seemed to care. They both laughed and high-fived whenever she knocked down more than five at a time. Ron only checked his watch and thought about Lambrick twice the whole time; he was improving as well. Their last set finally ended. Ron was once again victorious. They both left the alley red-faced and giggly. "That was so much fun, Hermione!"

She unlocked his door and held it open for him. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. I had a lot of fun too."

"But I demolished you," he said, getting in the car.

"I got better," she said. "I got to show you off too."

"Oh, so I'm just your centerpiece?" he asked.

"Well, of course," she said sarcastically. "I told you that I owned you. What else would I do if not put you on display?"

"Bring your cheeky arse over here." He pulled on her coat, bringing her mouth to his. She pulled away but he yanked her back, making her kiss him three more times.

"Is this some new tick you have?" she asked against his mouth.
"Some sort of Lambrick tradition?"

"Exactly," he said. He fastened his seatbelt.

She closed the door and got in on the other side. "We've got to stop by the store first."

"Before we go back to your house?" he asked.

"Before the second half of the event starts," she said with a wicked grin.

"What's going on in that brain of yours, babe?" he asked.

"If I told you then it wouldn't be a surprise, would it?" she asked. "Just sit tight and trust me."

Hermione drove them to some sort of retail store to get the light bulbs. Ron looked around, touching everything he saw. He pulled at plugs and turned knobs that made the lamps burn brighter. He ended up breaking a bulb but he hastily looked around before sticking the tip of his wand, which was in his back pocket and under his jumper, at the bulb and mending it. He then hurried to the front to join Hermione at the register. They got back into the car and Hermione sighed, looking at her watch.

"I know that face," he said. "What's wrong?"

"We're way ahead of schedule," she said. "I overestimated how long the three sets would take along with the traffic that we would run into. I should've known better. It's late in the evening and rush hour is over."

He merely stared at her. "Through all that babble you're saying?"

"I'm saying that we have a lot of time to kill," she said. "I don't fancy going back home to wait, but we can't just sit here or walk about. It's cold."

"Then let's go somewhere indoors," he said.

"Where?" she asked. "We can't spoil our appetites by going somewhere for tea. I don't believe you want to sit at the library either."

"How about?" He searched his mind for someplace that was warm and somewhat entertaining. "Let's go to the joke shop."

"Your joke shop?" she asked.

"It's not really mine," he said, "but yeah. There's plenty to entertain us there, but if we do get bored, we can at least sit

on George's couch and wait until it's time to go. I want to see him anyway."

"All right. That sounds like a plan," Hermione said. "I'll drive to the library and park the car there. We'll apparate to Diagon Alley."

"You're the boss," he said. As Hermione drove, Ron readied himself to see George. He had been thinking about him constantly. Now, he had a perfect excuse to see him. He was nervous. He had no idea what he would say to him, but he knew it would all be worth it the moment he saw George's face and saw firsthand that he was all right. When they parked, Hermione hurried him to a spot where they couldn't be seen and apparated them.

They appeared in Diagon Alley and familiar sceneries, smells, and sounds bombarded his senses. They held hands as they walked the magical streets. Ron couldn't help but feel more comfortable. He loved the Muggle world but this was his life. He took his wand out of his pocket, flipping it between his fingers simply because he could. There was a loose button on his coat; he mended it with his wand and smiled.

"Feels nice, doesn't it?" Hermione asked.

He blushed. "Yeah." They walked down the street and reached the joke shop. Ron's smile vanished. It was late but there were no customers inside. Ron didn't see any lights on or people inside. He wrapped his fingers around the handle but it was locked.

"Maybe it's closed," she said.

"No - not at this hour and not today," he said.

"You don't know that," she said.

"I do," he said. "I used to work here, remember?"

"Well, maybe he changed his hours," she said.

"He wouldn't do that," he said, shaking his head. "He sticks to the same schedule. It's a part of his process. Besides, he'd tell me if he changed the hours. It's-it's something he'd tell me."

"All right but none of that changes the fact that no one's in there," she said.

"He's probably sick or something. He's most likely in bed." Ron put his wand tip against the door, making the necessary taps to open it.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked, yanking on his arm.

"Calm down," he said. "I'm not breaking in. George gave me the taps. My name is on the sign for fuck's sake." After he added the last tap, he opened the door. Hermione merely stood outside and peeked in. He rolled his eyes. "You won't be sent to Azkaban for walking into the Weasley joke shop, accompanied by a Weasley, who

has the key to get in, and works at the shop that's owned by his older brother, and--"

"Okay! Okay!" she shot. "You've made your point." She walked in with him. Other than the fact that the shop was completely empty, it looked the same. Some shelves were overstocked while others were almost bare. The smell of chocolate and fake vomit hit his nose as random sounds from squeaky bugs and self-moving toys hit his ears. It was exactly how he had left it; the realization calmed him. "Ron?" Hermione said, taking his hand.

"We're okay," he said, holding hers tightly. "George is probably upstairs." He led her up the zigzag stairs to George's flat door. He could see light from under it.

He loudly knocked on it. "George? It's me, Ron." He knocked again. "Hermione and I just want a place to sit for awhile." He stopped knocking and waited for an answer. There was nothing. He knocked again. "George? Really, it's me. You remember your brother, yeah?" He waited again but there was still no answer. He let go of Hermione's hand then banged both of his against the door. "George! Open the bloody door, you dickhead!"

"Ron," Hermione said, touching his arm. "Maybe he isn't here. It's why the joke shop is closed."

"Butâ€¦but it doesn't make sense," he said. "Even if he's not here, Lee works here too and so does Angelina. George never closes the shop unless it's an emergency. I know him. I know his schedule." He knocked again. "He should be here." He felt a pang in his chest. He suddenly felt very nervous. He had no reason to think that something had happened to George. Ginny would've told him or he would've received a letter from someone. Then again, it was a good chance that no one in his family knew. He thought about Ginny's demeanor. He thought about how Bill had said George was acting secretive. He rubbed his neck. "Fuck."

"Ron, don't worry," Hermione said. "I know you understand George and his schedule, but you have to remember that you've been at camp since October. It's late December now. Maybe his schedule changed or maybe he's having a date night with Angelina and he doesn't want to leave Lee with everything. Maybe the three of them are doing something together like you and I and Harry do sometimes."

"But--"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I don't want you finding some sort of reason why I'm wrong. You have no reason to worry. I won't let you make yourself sick over this. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," he said. "Can I peek in just to check?"

"Okay," she said. "I need to use the bathroom anyway."

Ron knocked one more time. When there was no answer, he tapped the door and made the required wand tip shifts to open it. "Damn it, Percy," he muttered as it took almost a whole minute before

he could get the door open. "George?" he called, walking in. He closed the door, waiting for an answer, but once again there wasn't one. He moved his eyes around to find anything that didn't belong, like he had been trained to do, but nothing was out of order. George's flat was messy but had random clean areas that were most likely Angelina's doing.

"I don't think he's here," Hermione said.

"He's not. I guess you're right," he said in defeat. "Do you know where the toilet is?"

"I have been in here once before," she said.

"You have?" he asked.

"Yes. When the shop first opened. We weren't dating yet," she said.

"Oh, well, okay," he said. "I'll get us some water." When Hermione closed the door to the bathroom, Ron made a line straight for George's room. He opened it but George wasn't inside. It was, as always, neat and appeared as if it hadn't been lived in. He closed the door, giving up. He went into the kitchen to get a tall glass of water.

Ron sat on the couch, taking a large gulp of water. The picture of his family was on the table. He would see them soon; his heart pounded hard at the thought of it. He couldn't wait to hug his mum and receive a kiss on the head from his dad. Ron wasn't embarrassed by his parents' affection like he used to be. Now, it was something he treasured. He thought about seeing Ginny again and his brothers. He was more than ready for the loudness again.

"I love this picture," Hermione said.

"You're not the only one," he said.

She sat next to him and held on to one side of it. "Ginny keeps this in her school bag."

"Really?" he asked.

She nodded. "I saw it in there once and every once in a while I catch her pulling it out to look at it during class."

"It really means something to all of us," he said. "When we originally took it and got all the copies, it was great but it didn't mean nearly as much. It's something unspoken between us now."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I don't know how to explain it," he said. He gazed at his family. "It's another family member now: a sibling to us kids and another child to my parents. It's almost like, if we all keep it close to us and love it enough, then we'll be able to trick

ourselves into believing that this still exists. Like there are still nine of us."

He let go of his grip on the picture. "It doesn't work though. Sure, for a few seconds it's easy to feel this moment, but the instant my eyes find Fred's face, it disappears. I'm sure it's like that for Ginny too and for the rest of my family. We can lie to ourselves all we want but there's only eight of us now. Fred's copy of this picture is lost for all we know."

Ron looked down and rubbed his palms against his thighs. Hermione may not have watched him take beatings night after night. She also may not have known his skills in terms of combat and tactics, but she still understood him. She knew the other sides of him: the boyfriend, the best friend, and the Weasley who had lost his brother to evil. He couldn't hide from her. She could see his pain.

She set the picture back on the table and took his hand. "I don't think the picture is lost. I'm sure George has it someplace special. It's probably in a place that only he and Fred can understand the significance of. I also don't think it's bad that everyone wants to trick themselves into believing that there are still nine of you. You're always going to be a family of nine, Ron. Even if there are only eight of you living."

Hearing her say that there were only 'eight' of them living made the pit in his chest swirl and grow. He rubbed his eyes and rocked. "I'm sorry."

"Don't you ever apologize," she said. "The only person you have to talk to like this at camp is Harry. It must be difficult since he's not around all the time. You can be open with me and tell and show me anything because we're together again."

He stopped rocking and moved his face so he could look at her. She was smiling sadly at him and the tip of her nose was pink. Her eyes were even a little glossy. She was sad but again she was so beautiful in her sadness. "I love you," he said.

"I love you too," she said.

He sniffed and blinked hard to keep the pressure in his eyes at bay. "I want to kiss you."

"I think that would be all right," she said. He leaned over and kissed her. Hermione turned so she was facing him more. Ron gripped her upper thighs. He pushed his tongue past her teeth and moaned. He deepened the kiss, loving how Hermione's nails dug into his neck. She held on to his shoulders. Ron turned as well so they were facing each other. They kissed harder and faster and heat began to crawl up his legs. Hermione moved her hands to his arms, breaking away from his mouth. "Ron."

"Please, don't tell me to stop," he said, kissing her again.

She let him lick the roof of her mouth before she tugged on his hair to stop the kiss again. "I won't," she said out of breath.

"I only want a second to take my coat off." He parted just long enough to let her concentrate on taking it off. Ron took his off too and his jumper as well before kissing her hard again, causing her to fall back against the couch. "This is your brother's couch and your brother's flat," she said as she scooted up to rest her head against the arm of the couch.

"I know. It was also my brother's working table," he said before his lips found hers again. She spread her legs and he pushed against her. She whimpered, tangling her fingers in his hair. Ron knew that George could come back at any moment but he needed this with Hermione. She was the only person "the only thing" that could stop his pain in its tracks. Also, a part of him did want George to find them. He'd rather George beat him up than ignore him. Ron pushed into her again and ran a hand down under her jumper. He traced patterns around her stomach before moving up and touching her chest. "Fucking hell," he breathed against her lips as his hand perfectly cupped her. He got under her bra and rubbed his finger around her nipple.

Hermione cried out, pressing down on his face so she could get more access to his mouth. She started nibbling on his bottom lip and biting it harder each time he touched her nipple. He tugged on it with two fingers, causing Hermione to bite his lip so hard that it made him flinch. "Ow!" he groaned, pulled away. He moved his tongue over the sore spot and felt a tiny hole where it was bleeding a little. He touched his lip. "Bloody hell."

"I-I'm sorry," she said. She paled and the two of them remained quiet. "Is it bleeding?" she eventually asked.

"A bit," he said.

"Let me see," she said. Ron leaned down. Hermione put her hand on his chin. She gently took his bottom lip into her mouth and sucked on it, slowly and tenderly. Ron shivered, closing his eyes. He couldn't believe what she was doing but he didn't want her to stop. However, she did. He opened his eyes. She was already gazing at him. "How's that?" she whispered.

Ron was at a loss for words. He didn't know why, but in an instant he felt closer to her. They had to be after sharing something like that. "It feels a lot better," he said.

"Good. I'm really sorry," she said again, rubbing her thumb across his mouth.

"Don't be," he said. "I'm not." He kissed her thumb and she smiled.

"You know, we've spent enough time here," she said. "We can go now."

"Yeah, I figured," he said. He got off her and pulled his jumper back on.

"At least George didn't catch us," she said, putting her coat back on.

"I sort of wanted him to," he said. Hermione gave him a look. There was so much going on in his head; he had to get some of it off his chest. "I wrote to him right after the exposÃ© came out. I told him that if anything in there bothered him to let me know."

"Why would something in the article bother him?" she asked.

"Becauseâ€¦Millie and Frank started asking me whether I thought going to trials of the death eaters captured would help me deal with Fred's death or if George going would help him," he said.

"That's awful," she said.

"I know. I lost my head. I basically told them to fuck off and to leave George alone. I had no idea if any of that would be in the final draft," he said. "Anyway, I wrote George that night, but I never received a letter back. I wanted to come here so I could talk to him."

"Sweetheart," she said. "You know George doesn't fancy writing letters. He probably didn't want to talk about it in a letter anyway. I'm not saying that it was right of him not to send you anything back, but I am saying that him not being here now doesn't necessarily correlate to him not writing you."

He nodded and shrugged. "I get all that. When I see him in a couple of days I'm sure he'll tell me that I'm a git for worrying. Then he'll explain why he didn't write back."

"Exactly," she said. "So don't fret. Things can be easy, Ron."

"I'm still learning that," he said.

She kissed his forehead. "I need the bathroom again. Then we can go."

"Again?" he asked. "Are you trying to break a record?"

She blushed and hit him. "It's not like that. You know getting close makes meâ€¦hot."

"Ah," he said. "Did I get your knickers in a sticky little twist?"

"Something like that," she said. She went to the bathroom while Ron finished the water and put the glass back exactly where he found it. He sat back on the couch. Hermione was right. He had no reason to worry. George was fine. He had checked his room and it was just the way he left it. Ron suddenly got up and walked to George's room again. He was so thick that he had forgotten that George didn't sleep in his room at all. He lived in Fred's.

Ron turned to Fred's door, opening it, but almost collapsed against it. He let out a harsh breath. The room was even messier than the last time Ron had seen it. Fred's work clothes that had always been folded neatly on a chair were now on the floor. There

were pieces of parchment all over the desk. Quills and empty inkbottles were on the floor as well. Clothes were everywhere but what bothered Ron the most was that the bed was spotless. It was uncomfortably neat like Percy's bed. Ron didn't know what it meant. He ran over and felt under the pillow. The picture wasn't there. He heard water coming from the bathroom sink, so he quickly left the room and closed the door. He sat on the couch and tried to put the pieces together. George had trashed the room but the bed was made. It could've meant that George still slept in the bed but it also could've meant that he never entered it anymore. He needed to talk to George and find out what was going on.

"Ron?" He looked up. Hermione was standing near him with concern written all over her face. "Ron, what's wrong?" He had two choices: he could tell her about Fred's room and then end up her telling her about his panic attack while he was on the subject, or he could keep his mouth shut and give them the three days of peace that he had promised himself they'd have.

"I was just thinking about Fred," he said. "I reckon it's kinda gutting me."

"Oh, love," she said, sitting next to him. "I have something planned that might cheer you up."

He looked into her face and her gorgeous eyes. He wasn't lying to her. He was thinking about Fred. He would eventually tell her the rest. It simply wasn't the time yet. "You cheer me up."

"Well, call it a corresponding item that will cheer you up then." She took his hand and pulled him up with her. "You ready?"

He looked around the flat. His heart skipped a beat when he looked at the hall leading to Fred's room. "I'm ready."

Hermione drove for quite some time. Ron chewed on his nails and stared out the window. Taking them to George's had been a mistake. He didn't need anything else on his shoulders or any more reminders of the darkness that lurked outside of his pleasant bubble with Hermione. He told himself repeatedly to keep his head on. He'd throw himself in front of one of the cars driving behind them before he'd ruin whatever Hermione had planned.

She finally parked in front of a very vast building. It looked almost like a palace with its silver and gold stones. He got out of the car and read the large gold letters across the front of the building. "Aquarium?" he said. "Seamus told me about these places."

"I bet he didn't tell you anything about this place," she said. "It's new and it's supposed to be fantastic. It's rather late so it shouldn't be too crowded." She dug into her purse and pulled out a couple of tickets.

"Merlin, 'Mione," he said.

"It wasn't too much," she said, "and it's not like I ever buy anything. I want to show you this. You told me about that dragon showroom you went to while you were in Egypt. This is the Muggle equivalent. Only, it's not as hazardous." She took his hand.
"Let's go."

After they got past the guards, Hermione picked up a map and the two of them strolled about. Ron's jaw dropped at all the things he saw. There were large tanks built into the walls and ceilings that were full of different fish and underwater life. There were sharks, turtles, and peculiar fish swimming everywhere. Everything was so colorful and he felt like one of the kids who were taking a tour of the place. He gasped and pointed and stuck his hand up to where a jellyfish's tentacle was. He had never seen anything like it. It was a lot more impressive than the dragon showroom. He could actually touch the cold glass and see all the life in the water. There was something calming about seeing the large and small fish living together in such a huge tank. Somehow, seeing it all made his problems not seem as big. He didn't know why, but he rather liked that feeling.

They walked under a pathway where the walls and ceiling above them were all a big tank. He ducked, even though he knew nothing would fall on him. Hermione chuckled. "You don't have to do that. Once again, we're perfectly safe."

"I don't see how all of this isn't held up by magic," he said.

"I told you that Muggles have their own ways," she said. "People don't need actual magic to create things that are beautiful and special."

"I know," he said. He randomly thought about what Conor would say to him. "I guess I'm just an ignorant pure-blood."

She laughed again. "I'll get that out of you one way or another." They sat down on a bench near a tank full of sea turtles. Hermione stretched her arms and sighed. "So, what's been your favorite part?"

"I dunno," he said. "Maybe the eating area that's surrounded by tanks so it's like you're eating underwater, or maybe the blokes actually swimming in the tanks with the fish, or maybe the girls dressed up like mermaids."

"Yes, well, their outfits were rather skimpy," Hermione said, sticking out her chin.

He rolled his eyes. "Not because of their tits, Hermione. I just think it's funny because, once again, the Muggle idea of a magical creature couldn't be more off base. Mermaids have never looked like that."

"Oh," she said, touching her necklace. "Well, you have to understand that parents would rather have their daughters dress like Ariel from "The Little Mermaid" than for them to be anatomically correct and have their daughters dress like subhuman creatures."

"Who's Ariel?" he asked.

"Never mind," she breathed. He shrugged and started looking into one of the tanks again. The water was so blue and clear. He wanted to swim in it. He wanted to feel the freshness of the water and get lost in the deepness of it. He envied the fish a little. He wanted a life where he could stay with his family and friends while never having to worry about anything more complicated than getting food or shitting in a place where no one was swimming. "Ron?"

"Hmm?" he said.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You've been a bit distant since we left George's flat."

"I'm fine," he said.

"Are you still worried about him?" she asked.

"No," he lied.

She nodded. "Then are you upset because of the other thing?" He looked at her blankly. She glanced around before taking his hand and moving in closer to him. "If what I did to your lip made you uncomfortable—"

"Stop," he said. "That didn't make me uncomfortable. I liked it a lot. I wouldn't lie to you."

"I liked it too," she said. "I don't know what came over me. I just feel so much closer to you, and I want to be more open to things. I guess I'm a little self-conscious."

"You don't have to be," he said. "I'm still me, Hermione. I know the things you like and want to try are the things I like and want to try too." She nodded, sitting up a little straighter. Ron felt his heart beat out of his chest at the same time as his knees went weak.

"W-why are you staring at me like that?" she asked.

Ron shook his head and tried to find the words to describe what he felt. "The colors from the tanks: the greens, the blues, the oranges, the yellows, the reds — all of them are reflecting off your face in the most incredible way. You're so damn pretty, Hermione."

Pinkness stained her cheeks. "You think I'm pretty?"

"In this moment it's the only word that fits," he said.

She smiled and wiped a tear from her eye. "I don't know why but hearing that from you sounds so good. You call me a lot of flattering things, but there's something about you calling me 'pretty' at a time like this that's unbelievably romantic." She

took his hand and interlocked their fingers. "I missed you so much, Ron."

"I missed you too." He leaned over and gave her a kiss before they sat back and watched the fish in the tanks. They didn't speak but they also didn't let go of each other's hands. Ron wanted their time at the aquarium to last forever, but it wasn't long before Hermione told them that they had to return to her house.

All the plates were set and dinner was already on the dining room table by the time they returned. Just like during his first dinner with them, the meal consisted of leanly cut meat and many vegetables and baked fruits. Ron was less shy about taking extra helpings and most of the dinner conversation centered on their day, along with what Ron's family had planned for the holiday. It was enjoyable and there wasn't any arguing, though he could feel tension in the room. He noticed how short Hermione was toward her parents and how Mr. and Mrs. Granger gave her extra long looks. Ron wanted to care more but his own mind was throbbing with ideas of why Fred's room was a mess.

After his second helping of pudding, he and Hermione went back upstairs to his room. She sat on his bed while he closed the door. "I'm sorry about dinner."

"What d'ya mean?" he asked, sitting on the floor in front of her. He unlaced her trainers and took them off. He then pulled off her socks and started rubbing her feet.

"You don't have to do that," she said.

"I don't mind," he said. He kneaded his fingertips into her heels. She moaned and closed her eyes.

"That feels lovely," she said.

"Then I won't stop," he said. "Keep talking."

"Dinner," she said. "Couldn't you feel the intensity in the room?"

"A little," he said. "Are they still upset about the tire and bulbs? You did as they asked."

"It's more than that and it's been this way since I came back," she said. "They always want one thing. I want something else. They need things at certain times, but it's usually at a different time than what I'm thinking of. It's hard to reason with them sometimes because the three of us are almost just alike. It doesn't help that they still treat me like I'm ten. A lot has happened to me away from them, but because they don't understand, they don't think any of it is important."

"Maybe if you tried explaining it to them they'd care more," he said, outlining her foot with his fingers. "You should try talking to your dad first. I know how much he loves you and I've seen you two together. You're close, aren't you?"

"We kind of are," she said gently. "It's always been easier with him. I think it's because I'm even more similar to my mum than to him. There's calmness to him that neither my mum nor I have. He's more relaxed, like you."

"Well, I hope they come around because I didn't like seeing you that way when we left. I've seen you like that before around them," he said. "You're different here."

"The situation is different here, Ron," she said. "I told you that there are things my parents and I still need to work out. We're slowly getting there, but it's far from being resolved. We all love each other. It's the way we show it that's different. Not all families are like yours."

"So I'm realizing," he said. He rubbed between her toes and loved that she wiggled them against his touch. "I can always find a magical way to get them to treat you better. When people interact with you, they should only be allowed to make you happier. If not, then I should be able to lock them up."

"You're so overprotective of me," she said with a grin.

"I reckon that's another thing me and your dad have in common," he said.

Hermione moved to the floor. She wrapped her legs around his waist while putting her forehead to his. "Did you have another good day?"

"I had another fucking perfect day," he said. He pecked her lips.

"What about your gift?" she asked. He sighed heavily but she cupped his chin and stared right into his face. "I mean it."

"I loved it," he said. "It's gonna stay at the foot of the bed so I can get it whenever I want. I can't wait to get home to show everyone." He looked at his trunk that was near the wall. "I've got something for you too."

"I don't want my gift right now," she said. "I only gave you yours because we needed it tonight."

"It's fine, Hermione," he said. "It's not all of your gift. You'll still get the big thing on Christmas. Besides, I need to give you something right now. I feel like an arsehole."

"Ron," she said.

"I'm doing it." He got out of her grasp and crawled over to his trunk. Hermione reached out and smacked his arse. "Bloody hell, woman!"

"You got me right before we walked into the house," she said.
"That's justice."

He opened his trunk and moved his things around. "There's a fine line between justice and vengeance."

"Is that something your drill instructor taught you?" she asked.

He grabbed a book and shut his trunk. "No, that's something John taught me." He crawled back over to her and gave her the book. "Happy Christmas."

Hermione looked at the cover of the green book. "This is by John Low."

"I'm aware," he said.

"But I have all his books," she said, looking up. "Is this new?"

"It's being released to the public in January," he said, "but if you're 'in the circle' as he says then you can get an advanced copy. Open it."

She lifted the front cover and gasped. "To Ms. Hermione Granger, I hope you find this book as enjoyable as it was for me to write it. Maybe someday we can meet and discuss it. John Low."

"He wrote all that?" Ron asked, taking a peek. "Blimey, I just told him the 'to Ms. Hermione Granger' part. Figures he'd go above and beyond. He's like that."

Hermione held the book tightly in her arms. Her eyes watered. "This is extraordinary. John Low signed this for me. He wants to meet me. Do you think that part was sincere?"

"John doesn't lie," he said. "He always says what he means."

"I can't believe you call him 'John'," she said. "Oh, Ron, this is amazing. I love it!" She hugged him and kissed him hard. "Thank you! I can't wait to read it or maybe I should have it framed or something."

"Read it," he said. "He'd be offended if you thought so highly of him that you wouldn't educate yourself."

"Fair enough," she said. "I'll read it." She flipped through the pages and put her nose close to it. "This smells so good. I can't wait. I can't believe such a world famous wizard has taught you and you have a great relationship with him. You'll have to tell me all about working with him."

"I tell you what I can," he said. "I'm glad you like it."

"I love it," she said. "I know you must be excited about getting back and working with him."

"Well, he won't be there," he said. "His shift is over so I'll have some new teacher and a new topic. There's no telling if I will be going back anyway."

"Of course you're going back, Ron," she said. "Why wouldn't you?"

"Because no one's spot is for certain," Ron said.

"That doesn't mean they wouldn't want you to come back," she said. "They need someone like you there. You have to know that by now."

Ron could already feel some of his happiness fading. He had to stop it. "I really don't want to talk about it right now."

"We're not talking about anything, Ron," she said. "I'm simply telling you that I know you'll be asked to come back."

"All bloody right!" he said. "Thanks for the support. Can we drop it now?"

"Why are getting angry with me?" she asked. "Do you not want me to believe in you?"

"That's not what I'm saying," he said.

"Then what are you saying?" she asked.

"I'm saying that it's only my second bloody day of being away from there, Hermione," he said rather tensely. "I don't want to talk about Lambrick or my chances of getting an extension letter. Not now. You said we had time to talk about all this."

"We do have time," she said, "but I didn't think that we would just ignore the subject altogether."

"We're not ignoring anything," he said. "We're just delaying for a while. I just want to be here in the moment with you. I don't care about anything else."

Hermione set the book down. He could see the alarm all over her face. "We've had a discussion like this once before."

"I know," he said, trying not to think about their argument in the teashop. "It's why I don't want to have it again. I don't want us to fight, Hermione."

"I don't either, Ron," she said, "but when you talk like this I can't help but worry. You sound almost like you did before in the cafÃ© and—"

"Why are you doing this?" he asked. "Is this really what you want? We've been having such a good time. Do you want to end it?"

"Of course not," she said. "I just want to make sure you're okay and that we're okay. So many things can happen while we're apart, Ron. I don't want any unknowns hurting us down the line."

"Nothing is going to hurt us. I promise," he said. "We're fine. I'm fine. I'll keep being fine as long as you let me breathe."

"Let you breathe?" she asked gently.

"I told you, Lambrick is a hard place to live in. It's hard to breathe there sometimes," he said. "The longer I have to heal from there, the easier it'll be to talk about it later. You can understand that, right?"

She nodded and was quiet for a few seconds. "Yes, I can."

"Then just let me only think about you for now," he said, touching her hand. "I only want this to exist."

"I understand that, Ron," she said. "There's nothing I want more than to honestly forget about the world for these thirteen days. However, that can only work if we're open to each other."

Ron didn't know what was happening or what she could see or understand just by being around him. "You don't think I'm being open with you?" he asked.

"I don't know. I don't want to sound typical though and just assume the worst." She kissed his forehead and stood up. "I'm going to take a shower and get ready for bed." Ron got up and ran after her. He touched her shoulder before she could open the door.

"Are you mad at me?" he asked.

She turned to him. "No. I'm just concerned. I have been since we left George's flat. There's something but I don't know what. What's going on with you?"

Ron looked into her eyes. He wanted more than anything to tell her the truth about George and Fred's room and about Lambrick, but he didn't have the strength to ruin everything yet. "I'm just tired," he said.

She shook her head. "That's what I thought." She opened the door and left his room. Ron shut the door and lay on the bed. He couldn't believe how quickly he had fucked things up. He had to set it right, and he had to get himself together. He turned his head. John's book was still on the floor. He picked it up, reading his note to Hermione. He tried to draw strength from it.

Battling Aurors and trudging through a level five Warkshaw Maze was a piece of piss compared to trying to be a decent boyfriend.

* * *

The next morning Ron woke up early to apologize, but Hermione had already gone downstairs. All through breakfast he tried to get her attention when her parents weren't talking to him, but she hardly said anything. During his shower, he told himself that he wouldn't rest until he made her understand. It was his last day at the Grangers, and he had to make things right with her before they left for his house. As soon as he slipped his jeans and

shirt on, he went straight to her room. He didn't even bother drying off and putting on his socks. He knocked on her door. "Hermione?" He knocked again and she answered.

"You're loud, Ron," she said.

He closed the door behind him and first noticed Crookshanks sitting in her bed, almost glaring at him once again as he swung his tail. Ron ignored the intimidating gesture. "You hardly said anything to me at breakfast."

"I guess I was tired," she said as she folding clothes into her trunk. Ron sighed and walked over to her. He took her arm but she snatched it away. "You're wet and dripping everywhere. Did you even bother to dry off?"

"I bloody don't care about that right now," he said. "I'm sorry, okay?"

"Sorry for what?" she asked.

"For being an arse," he said. "For being short with you last night; for yelling and being mean; for basically being the world's dirtiest twat. I'm sorry."

"It's not that simple, Ron," Hermione said. "The way you acted was just like the last time. I didn't want every last piece of information, I just wanted to talk and see what was going on."

"I know," he said.

"Then why didn't you talk to me?" she asked, slamming her jeans on the bed. She almost hit Crookshanks but he dodged out of the way. "Oh, sorry!" she said, cringing a little. She turned back to Ron. "If you know so much then why didn't you say anything?"

Ron hated that she sounded so much like his instructors. "Because you were right," he said. "Again you were bloody right. I've had so much going on in my head. I was already worried about how my last test had gone at Lambrick and if I would be asked to come back. I've been worried about Ginny because she looks off. I got even more worried about George than I've been for weeks now after going to his flat."

"We can talk about all that," she said.

"But I don't want to," he said. He ran his fingers through his damp hair. "I promised myself before I left my cabin that I would make these first three days stress-free and peaceful. All I want is to be with you and forget about anything that doesn't evolve around us."

"Ron—"

"I understand that it sounds awful and selfish, but for once I don't care," he said. "We've spent our whole lives doing things for the bloody cause while being apart from each other. Now that we're together, I just want us to do something for us one time. I

want something easy and fun." He took her hands. "I've watched you with your parents and I hate that uncertainty you have around them. I'd do anything to take it away, but I know if I start going on about all the shit with me then you'll just get worse."

"But I've told you, Ron," she said, letting his hands go. "I'm here with you for the good and the bad."

"Knowing that doesn't make this any less complicated, Hermione," he said. "Iâ€œI just wanted three days. I know that I have to tell you what's been going on, and I will, but I really just wanted three days of easiness with you. I don't see how that's so hard to understand."

"I do understand it, Ron," she said. "It's just hard to keep it in mind when I see the man that I love in obvious pain. The way you feel about me is exactly how I feel about you. I want you to be happy and the way you looked at George's before we left scared me. I sort of lost my head, and I guess I overreacted last night. I told you that we had time to talk. I still mean it. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," he said, feeling even more like a twat. "I should've told you what I wanted and what was in my head. I'm the one that should be sorry, and I am." He took her hands once more. "I can be better than this, I swear. Please, forgive me?"

Hermione looked up at him as if she was seriously contemplating it. She sighed. "I don't want to be mad at you, Ron. I want those three days too. I forgive you, but you have to be here with me."

"I don't want to be anywhere else," he said. He held her tightly. "I'm so sorry."

"Me too," she said, hugging him back. She pulled away and frowned. The front of her shirt was wet and so was her face. "You really didn't dry off, did you?"

"I literally jumped out of the shower and put my clothes on," he said. "Sorry for that too."

"It's okay," she said. "I know a few drying spells. Besides, I love your after-shower smell. I've missed it a lot." She sniffed his shirt and then moved up to his neck. He shivered as her warm lips touched his cold skin. She moved up to his jaw and then his cheek. When she got close to his mouth, he moved his head, pressing his lips against hers.

He held on to her. She gripped his shoulders. He backed her up slowly until she hit the wall. He pressed his lips harder against hers. She rose up so he wouldn't have to bend down so much.
"Ron," she panted. "I want you."

"Have me," he said.

"I can't," she said. "Not now." She put a hand against his chest and backed him up. "I have to go shopping with my mum," she said, almost in frustration.

Ron's heart dropped. "How long are you gonna be gone?"

"I don't know. She apparently didn't get all that she needed the other day and she wants to talk," she said. "I'm hoping it won't take too long. We'll be leaving very soon. I just came up here to put some of my clothes away."

"All right," he said.

"I'm coming right back," she said. "I promise."

Ron told her to keep to her word before she left with her mum. He went up to his room, dried off properly, and sat on his bed. It was strange. At Lambrick, free time was a luxury. Now, it was driving him mental. For a second, he actually wished that he were back at camp, learning new tactics or dueling during one of Alan or Phillip's classes. At least then he would have no choice but to not think about anything else. He rolled his shoulders. Things with Hermione were mended but he didn't know how long they would stay that way.

"Ron?" Mr. Granger said, knocking on his open door.

"Yes, Mr. Granger?" he said.

"I'll be in my study if you need anything," he said. "It's the room on the other side of the kitchen."

"Thank you," he said. When he walked back downstairs, Ron laid back on his bed. He needed to do something to clear his mind, but he didn't have a full night of Auror training or a nice walk around a trail to help him. He had to improvise. He opened his trunk and dug around in it. He wasn't sure what he was looking for so he started looking through his bag. He pulled out the Quidditch magazine that Olivia had gotten for him. Seeing it made him smile. He had almost forgotten about it. He could almost hear her voice telling him to stop acting like a victim and do something worthwhile.

He chuckled and sat on the floor. He started reading it and engrossed himself in the new defensive stance the Canons were taking along with the new line of Quidditch products that would be available sometime next year. He read page after page and felt some of the pressure on his shoulders leaving him. Before he knew it, he was finished with the entire magazine. He actually felt a little better. "Thank you," he said to the magazine as if Olivia would be able to hear him. He hoped that she was doing all right. He'd have to make the time to get her something in return. He once again had nothing to do so he decided to go downstairs and watch TV.

However, as soon as he walked into the room and looked at the screen, he realized that he didn't want to watch TV. He turned the other way and went past the kitchen. He knocked on the wooden door that was cracked open. "Mr. Granger?"

"Come in, Ron," Mr. Granger said. "Do you need anything?"

"Not really." Ron walked into the rather small room. It didn't look like any other room in the house: it was a lot less posh, the walls were made of some sort of wooden paneling as was the floor, there was a rather hideous grey and green area rug on the floor, and a large window that showed their backyard with a black curtain covering it. The only things inside were a large old wooden desk, two chairs, and a wall cabinet full of books and goblets. There were boxes in the corner but Ron couldn't see what was in them.

"You can sit down," Mr. Granger said, pointing to the chair by the wall. Ron sat down, which made Mr. Granger laugh a little. "You're welcome to move closer. I don't have any weapons."

"Right, sorry." Ron scooted his chair closer.

"Welcome to my lion's den," he said. "This is where I go to get away from the madness."

"The madness?" Ron asked.

"Two females and one male in a house," he said. "It gets tricky sometimes."

"I can't say that I understand," Ron said. "Seven blokes and two females shared my house at one point."

"Tough trade," Mr. Granger said. He took some sort of tool and cranked it into whatever the contraption in front of him was.

"What is that you're working on?" Ron asked.

"Oh, this?" he asked. "This is a um!" He scratched his head. "Did Hermione explain the computer to you?"

"Yes," Ron said. "I did notice that the keys?"

"That's right," he said, nodding.

"The keys here are sort of like the keyboard that goes to the computer," Ron said. "I reckon they're related somehow?"

"Excellent deduction," Mr. Granger said. "This is a typewriter. Before computers people used these to write letters and produce other forms of written word. With the new technology, things like these are rather obsolete, but that's not why I have it."

"Then why do you have it?" Ron asked.

"I want to put it back together," Mr. Granger said. He showed Ron what looked to be a diagram of the typewriter.

"Seems complex," he said.

"It is," Mr. Granger said. "I found this in parts at an auction years ago. I've been putting it back together ever since. The process is slow but it's coming together. When it's finished, I'll be able to roll a sheet of paper down this compartment." He

Showed Ron where the paper would go and then how to roll it. "Then I'll be able to fix the ink cartridge and start typing. When I push down on one of these letters, it'll appear on the paper."

"That sounds cool," Ron said.

"Cool," Mr. Granger said. "I never heard that word to describe what I'm doing. Abby thinks I'm obsessive. Hermione worries about my carpal tunnel. I enjoy it. You see all those boxes?" he asked. Ron nodded. "They're full of things I've put together over the years. I even made that shelf that has the goblets on it."

"Wow," Ron said.

"I'm a hands-on type of person," Mr. Granger said. "I think it's partially why I became a dentist. I need to do things with my hands. When I'm idle, I just feel out of place. Like—"

"You're wasting your time?" Ron asked.

"Yes, that's the idea exactly," Mr. Granger said.

"I feel that way too sometimes," he said. "I get this nervous energy and I need to do something. It's been like this for the past couple of years or so."

"I think it's your manhood taking form," Mr. Granger said. "My dad always told me that there would be a time in every boy's life when he'd simply have to start 'doing' something. That's when he'd know he was turning into a man."

"Do you believe that?" Ron asked.

"I believe my dad was slyly trying to tell me to stop being lazy, but I can understand," Mr. Granger said. "Do wizards have anything like typewriters?"

"No," Ron said. "We have things that make words for us, like quills or certain types of parchments, but nothing like this." He looked at the diagram and then back at the typewriter. Ron didn't see how Mr. Granger was doing it all by hand. "The detail of this is incredible. I couldn't imagine putting this together without magic. Just like I don't see how someone carved the aquarium Hermione and I went to and put those tanks in there. I still don't understand how the ball return thing at the bowling alley works."

Ron put the paper down and rubbed his neck. "I've been a wizard all my life. I've seen all kinds of magic, but what you're doing here and the objects I've been exposed to in these three days are the most amazing things I've ever seen."

"It's surprising to hear you say that," Mr. Granger said. "From what Abigail and I understand, Muggles aren't held too highly in your world."

"Can you excuse my language?" Ron asked.

"In the lion's den, I can give it a go," Mr. Granger said.

"Well, as to what you said about Muggles, I say fuck those pure-blooded wankers, sir," Ron said. "I'm a pure-blood and I don't care. No one in my family cares either. Most wizards embrace Muggles. We have a lot of half-bloods and Muggle-borns in our world. It's just that the louder wizards are also the ones that have the issues."

"Like Lord Voldemort?" Mr. Granger said.

Hearing Mr. Granger talk so indifferently about Voldemort was eerie, but the fucker was dead. Ron wouldn't honor his life by feeling too uncomfortable. "Exactly," he said. "Luckily for everyone, my mate Harry took care of him."

"I heard you and my daughter had a bit to do with it," Mr. Granger said with a small smile.

"Yeah, maybe," Ron said, smiling as well. "The point is that I'm proud to say that I'm dating a Muggle-born. I'm glad that I can come here and spend time with you all. Hermione teaches me so much about your world, just like she discovers more about mine. I want to learn as much as I can so that one day I can really feel a part of both."

"You don't think magic will automatically make Hermione happier?" Mr. Granger asked. "You don't believe that our world is just a part of her old life?"

"No," he said. "Hermione having magic in her life might make things easier or go faster in some ways for her, but it won't make her happier. If any magical person tells you otherwise then he's lying. I know firsthand that magic can't make bad things go away."

Ron thought about George and the state of Fred's room but he tried to block it out. "Besides, when it comes to Hermione's happiness, it's a job for me and not my magic."

Mr. Granger clasped his hands together and gave him a firm look. "That's what I wanted to hear. I'm glad her happiness is a priority to you. I noticed you two were different today at breakfast." He peered right at him. Mr. Granger's eyes were so dark and large and identical to Hermione's. Ron couldn't lie to him.

"We got into an argument last night, but it was my fault and I apologized as soon as I could this morning," Ron said, almost in a trance. "I always do my best to make her happy, Mr. Granger. I've also never asked her to make some sort of choice between her magic and her life with you and Mrs. Granger. You two don't have to worry. She wants both. I want her to have both."

Mr. Granger gave him a slow once-over as if he was sizing him up. Ron sat as still as he could. He wanted Mr. Granger to trust him.

Ron would do anything he could to prove that Hermione was safe with him. Mr. Granger nodded. "You're okay, Ron."

"That's all I need to hear from you, sir," Ron said.

He looked back to his typewriter. "I usually like to do this alone but would you like to help? I can tell you about these and how they helped further our world along."

"I'd like that," Ron said, rolling up his sleeves.

"Okay, I'm on G5 on the diagram," Mr. Granger said.

For the rest of their time together, Ron helped Mr. Granger gradually put his typewriter back together. The work was so meticulous and tedious, but it didn't bother Ron. He enjoyed putting the pieces together and working with his hands. He listened to Mr. Granger's explanations about the different types of typewriters and how he had used one at University. He even talked about how he found electrical typewriters vile and how, when he retired, he wanted to write a book using one of the typewriters he'd fixed. Ron found it all fascinating. For the first time since he'd arrived, he felt like Mr. Granger was talking to him and not at him. He didn't know if Mr. Granger would ever completely have faith in him, but he had a feeling that he'd at least respect him a little more.

Hermione and Mrs. Granger came back sometime later that evening. Hermione beamed when she saw the two of them working together. Ron was happy to see her a bit more relaxed. Hermione and Mr. and Mrs. Granger told him to stay out of the kitchen while they prepared dinner. Ron felt like a prick, but Hermione had given him the remote and told him to keep himself busy. He mindlessly flipped through the channels and raised his fist in triumph when he came across another McDonald's commercial. He gazed at the beautiful burgers being randomly tossed and flipped into thin air. He wanted to try one, but when Hermione escorted him to the dining room, everything changed.

There was a feast on the table including his personal favorites that Mrs. Granger had cooked: bacon sandwiches and Sheppard's Pie. He sat down and his mouth watered at all the food. Olivia would kill him if she knew that he wasn't sticking to the Lambrick diet or exercising the food off, but he would just keep his deviations to himself. Ron got one helping of everything and took two helpings of bacon sandwiches and Sheppard's Pie.

"You're going to eat all that?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"I told you his stomach is a black hole," Hermione said.

"I'm a growing Weasley," Ron said as he scooped mash onto his plate.

"And he worked up an appetite," Mr. Granger said.

"I'm sorry David dragged you into his lair," Mrs. Granger.

"I came to him," Ron said, "and I wanted to help. I learned a lot about typewriters."

"Is that so?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," he said. "I learned that since the 1700s people have been getting patents for different designs of typewriters. I learned that Mr. Granger loaned his typewriter to his mates in dentistry school. I also learned that electrical typewriters were designed by the Devil and are operated by the damned."

"Oh, Dad, honestly!" Hermione said.

"David, please," Mrs. Granger said. "Keep your opinions to yourself."

"There's no harm in educating the boy," Mr. Granger said.

"Well, next time ask me before you start telling him things like that," Hermione said. "My dad's biased on a lot of issues."

Ron shrugged. "All right."

"Let's just talk about something else," Mrs. Granger said. "So, Ron, are you ready for tomorrow? I'm sure you're excited about going home."

Ron swallowed his mouthful of bacon and took a drink of water.
"Yeah, it's been a long time. I've enjoyed resting here though."

"Can you not rest at home?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"Mum," Hermione said.

"I get what she means," Ron said. "I can rest. It's just that there's a big difference between resting with four people in one house and resting with twelve people."

"Twelve?" Mr. Granger asked.

"Yeah," Ron said. "I think all my brothers are coming and some of them might bring someone. Then of course there's me, and Hermione, and Harry, and my sister, and my parents."

"That's unbelievable," Mrs. Granger said. "I don't see how your mum does it."

"She has a lot of help," Ron said. "She's also one of the toughest people in the world so she functions well under pressure."

"Well, Abigail and I can't wait until we can actually enjoy some time with your parents," Mr. Granger said. "They're always busy or we are. One of these days we'll get it together."

"I'm sure you will. They really want to spend some time with you two," Ron said. "They love Hermione so I reckon they want to know where she comes from." He touched Hermione's leg and smiled at

her. "I always tell them it's someplace nice, but they want to see for themselves."

"You'll have to give them our best when you go back. We hope you'll be joining us again sometime on Christmas," Mrs. Granger said.

"I'll be here," he said. "I'd love to come by as many times as I can before my holiday is over."

"When do you find out if you've made it through to the second half?" Mrs. Granger asked. "Hermione said you'll get a letter?"

"Yes, but I don't know when," Ron said. "Knowing Lambrick, they'll wait until a couple of days before."

"What happens if you don't get a letter back?" Mr. Ganger asked. Ron didn't know what to say. Both he and Mrs. Granger looked at him for an answer. Even Hermione was staring at him.

"Iâ€¢I don't know," he said honestly. "I have no idea what my plan is if I don't make it through."

"But you shouldn't really worry about that, Ron. You're going back," Hermione said, rubbing his arm. "You're going to make it through and to the end."

"I hope so," he said.

"I have a question," Mrs. Granger said. "You're only at camp for a few months but this profession is extremely dangerous. Won't you need more time?"

"Yeah, and I'll get it," Ron said. "Camps can be for as short as a few months to a year or so, but the training doesn't stop there. If I graduate from Lambrick, I'll only be a Junior Auror."

"What's that?" Mr. Granger asked.

"It means that I'll have my badge, but I'm still not fully trained," he said. "I'll have to find placement somewhere. If I end up working for the Ministry, then I'm required to do another six months or so of training with the Aurors on staff." He sighed and thought about all that he would have to learn and go through once Lambrick was over. "I'll learn how the Auror Department runs as well as special skills that only Junior Aurors are taught. Even after that, the first year or two on the job is mostly all learning and extra practice on the field and behind the desk. I'll be on probation most of the time. My missions and tasks will be restricted, and I won't be able to do anything life-threatening without guidance from a superior. The process of becoming a full-fledged Auror who goes on real missions and is depended on can take up to a few years."

"That's a long commitment," Mrs. Granger said.

"I didn't realize there was so much involved," Hermione said. "I never knew any of that."

"Yeah, well, people think becoming an Auror is this glamorous thing but it's not," he said. "There's nothing about being an Auror that's glamorous, but it's what I want. I'll get through it. It doesn't matter how long it takes."

"I think that's commendable, Ron," Mr. Granger said. "There's nothing really glamorous about being a dentist either."

"What about you, Hermione?" Mrs. Granger said. "Ron and Harry are becoming Aurors. What do you think you want to do?"

"I'm still not sure, Mum," Hermione said. "In the spring all seventh years are required to take a Career Choice course. I want to keep all my options open, but I'm leaning towards something within the Ministry and probably something in law."

"You want to make the world a better place too?" he asked her.

She smiled. "In my own way."

"Well, Ron, I actually have a few more questions about Auror camps," Mr. Granger said.

"I'll do my best to answer, sir," Ron said. Mostly all they talked about during dinner was camp and the process of becoming an Auror. Ron had known that this conversation would come up, and he did his best to be honest and open with them. He could tell that the Grangers still didn't approve of his career path, but it really didn't matter to him. He had worked too damn hard to give up. Even if Lambrick didn't ask for his return, it was something he still wanted to become.

Dinner, at last, ended. While Hermione and Mr. Granger cleared the dining room, Ron helped Mrs. Granger in the kitchen. "By the time we're finished cleaning up, the cake should be done. You like chocolate, right?" she asked.

"It's my favorite," he said.

"Lovely," she said. She went over to the sink and filled it with soapy water. "Being an Auror sounds risky."

"It is risky," he said.

"And you want a family someday?" she said.

Ron wasn't sure what she was asking, but he decided to be honest again. "With Hermione, yes."

"Have you thought about what you plan to do if something happens to you when you attain this family?" she asked. Ron brought over the glasses and dropped a couple in the sink.

"You mean like if I get killed?" he asked.

Mrs. Granger started scrubbing vigorously. "Among other things."

"No, I haven't planned for that yet," he said.

"Well maybe you should," she said. She looked at him harshly.
"While I was out with Hermione, we talked about a lot of things.
You were one of them. She loves you to a very powerful degree."

"I know that," he said.

"And she needs you," she said. "I've always tried to teach her to stand on her own two feet and care for herself—"

"She does," he said.

"—but she needs you. I don't think you understand the responsibility that brings," Mrs. Granger said. "If something were to ever happen to you, I have very little confidence that she'd recover. When Hermione feels deeply for something, she never lets it go. We both know that."

"What are you suggesting?" he asked. "Do you think I should find some safe job behind a desk?"

"No," she said. "I think before you become this 'fully-fledged Auror' you need to have a talk with her. If you two are as serious as you say you are—"

"There's no 'if', Mrs. Granger," Ron said with intensity.
"Hermione's it for me."

"Then you should already know this!" she shot. "You'll have to have 'that talk' with her. Before you ever start thinking about a family and having her put every last bit of herself into you, you better make sure she understands what she's getting into and what you're getting into."

"She knows what me being an Auror could mean," he said.

"That's not good enough," Mrs. Granger said, slamming something down in the sink. "She'll need to know what you being an Auror will mean. She'll need to understand it before she ever becomes your wife or the mother of your children or — ow!" Mrs. Granger pulled her hand out of the sink. There was a piece of glass sticking out of her pointer finger. She let the water drain out. Ron carefully took out the piece of broken glass that used to be a cup. "Damn it," she said.

"It's okay," he said. "I can fix it." He gathered all the pieces together and looked at her finger. "I should get that out."

"No," she said. "I'll use some tweezers."

"I can get it, Mrs. Granger," he said. "At camp these sorts of things happen all the time. We've learned to take care of it. Just hold still."

"Ron," she said.

"You can trust me," he said. Mrs. Granger looked at him apprehensively but stuck her finger out anyway. Ron held on to her fingertip with one hand while he slowly and gently pulled out the piece of glass. He snatched a napkin off the rack on the counter and wrapped it around her finger. "There." He then pulled his wand out of his back pocket and pointed it at the broken glass. "Reparo." It instantly fixed itself. He put more dish soap in the sink and filled it with warm water again. He looked at Mrs. Granger. She gazed right back at him. "I told you that I could be helpful."

She moved her light blue eyes over him. Unlike when Mr. Granger had sized him up, Ron had a feeling that Mrs. Granger was looking for good in him, instead of what was wrong with him. "You're really trying, aren't you?" she asked.

"I am," he said.

"Well, excuse me for not being as relaxed as my husband, but my only daughter â€“ the person I love more than anyone in the whole world â€“ has put her entire life into your hands," Mrs. Granger said. She squeezed her cut finger and looked devastatingly worried like Hermione did sometimes. It cut right into him. "My baby's life is in the hands of an eighteen-year-old wizard, who I barely know, and who wants to become an Auror who basically risks his life every time he clocks into work. That terrifies me, Ron, and it's going to take me a little more time to get used to all this."

"I respect that, Mrs. Granger," he said, shutting the water off. "I just hope that you can respect the fact that I don't plan on going anywhere. I don't care if I have to fight off a hundred dark wizards with only my fists; I'm always going to come home to Hermione and, someday, our kids. You'll have plenty of time to get used to what I want and to me. I know your daughter depends on me. It's why I'm doing everything I can to become a good Auror."

"Mum, are you okay?" Hermione asked, walking into the kitchen. She looked between her and Ron.

"I'm fine," Mrs. Granger said. "I broke a glass and cut my hand but Ron assisted me. Can you two take care of the kitchen? I'm going to have David bandage my finger." She left without another word. Hermione touched his arm.

"What happened?" she asked.

Ron shrugged. "We were just talking about me being an Auror. It's all right. I think I understand both your parents a little better now."

After Ron and Hermione finished cleaning the kitchen, Mrs. Granger took the cake out of the oven and Mr. Granger asked them all to the living room. He took something called a videocassette out of the chest and placed it into the thing that Hermione had told him was a VCR. "Hermione, come here," Mr. Granger said. She left the floor and took a seat in between him and Mrs. Granger.

"Dad, which one is this?" she asked.

"What's happening?" Ron asked from the floor.

"Well, you've been introduced to a lot of Muggle things these past few days, but I've saved the best for last," Mr. Granger said. "I want to show you the best thing that's ever been a part of the Muggle world." He outstretched his hand across the back of the couch and Mrs. Granger outstretched hers. They interlocked their fingers. Mr. Granger used his free hand to push some button on the remote. The TV flickered and before Ron's eyes he saw a much younger looking Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Mrs. Granger, whose blonde hair was well down her back, was lying in what appeared to be a hospital bed and she was holding a baby who already had a small mass of brown hair.

"Is thatâ€?"

"That is Hermione Jean Granger, born on September 19th 1979," Mrs. Granger said.

"On a sunny Wednesday afternoon," Mr. Granger said. "The time was 1:14 PM, right Abby?"

"That's right," Mrs. Granger said. "She wasn't late or premature. She came exactly on time."

"I can't believe I had so much hair, even then," Hermione said, putting her hands over her face. "I've seen this a hundred times but it still gets to me. I was fat too."

"Shut up," Ron said, scooting closer to the screen. He reached out and touched the TV. He looked at baby Hermione sleeping in Mrs. Granger's arms. She was bundled up in a yellow blanket and her hair was all over the place. "You're beautiful." He turned around and looked at the three of them. "Is there more?"

Mr. Granger played many tapes showing Hermione as a child. Hermione grumbled and tried to hide between her parents, but they teased her and made her watch and explain things to Ron. It was the first time he had seen all three of them interacting happily together. Ron watched Hermione take her first step and eat all by herself. He listened to her say simple words like 'toy' and 'mine' and he watched her take her first trip to the dentist. He gazed at the screen as she put her first tooth under her pillow, and he viewed her reading her very first book alongside her dad on the couch. There was so much about Hermione's life that Ron had never known, but he was somehow viewing it and getting a second chance to get to know her. It was magic at its best.

He realized that Hermione had always been bossy and vocal about what she wanted. She was stubborn about learning how to ride a bike, and she took to swimming very easily. Her hair had always been wild and dark brown, and her love of carrots wasn't random but something she had always enjoyed. Ron also discovered that her favorite animal growing up had been a penguin, and there was nothing she disliked more than spilling juice on her Cinderella

blanket. Ron watched the younger Hermione with her parents. They all seemed so much lighter and happier together. Magic hadn't changed them yet, and fear and danger hadn't drifted them apart.

"This is one you probably recognize, Ron," Mr. Granger said. He put a tape in and Hermione was standing by the front door in her Hogwarts uniform. She had her trunk next to her and Hogwarts, A History in her arms.

"That's from first year," Ron said. "Is this the first day?"

"Yes, right before we took her to the train station," Mrs. Granger said. Ron laughed.

"Hush, Ronald," Hermione said.

"No â€“ no I get to laugh at this one!" Ron said. "I know this Hermione. This Hermione invited herself into my compartment," he looked back at her, "and changed my life." She smiled and winked at him. "Are there any more?" he asked, taking another bite of cake as he watched eleven-year-old Hermione go over everything in her trunk for the second time.

"I'm afraid it mostly ends here," Mr. Granger said. "We never really found time again to record anything."

"Her new life began the moment she left that day," Mrs. Granger said, gazing at the Hermione on the screen.

Hermione looked between her parents. All the humor left her face and she held on to her necklace. She looked at the screen then back between them. "I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"It's okay, sweetheart," her dad said, kissing the top of her head.

Mrs. Granger took her hand and kissed it. "We'll record something again."

"We will," Hermione said. "I promise."

Ron didn't know what to do. A heavy pressure pushed down on him. Magic may have separated their worlds, but he understood this scenario well. It was just like when his mum had flipped through her photo album and ran out of pictures of him. Their mutual journey to fight evil had taken so much of their lives away. Hermione's pages were just as blank as his were, but even more so. Mr. Granger may have been threatening, and Mrs. Granger may not have accepted him yet, but they deserved better than this. All of the Grangers did.

Ron and Hermione went back up to her room sometime later. "You okay?" he asked, closing the door.

Hermione sat on the bed and nodded. "We haven't watched those tapes in a long time. I think it got all of us a little emotional."

"They love you, Hermione," he said.

"I know they do," she said. "I love them too - so much. No matter what, they're my parents. I want things to get better so we can make new videos."

He sat next to her and massaged her neck. "I'm sure they want that too. I didn't know that you were such a cute kid. You've been holding out on me."

She crinkled her nose. "You saw my teeth."

"They're fixed now," he said with a shrug.

"Wow, how sweet," she muttered.

"Oh, you know what I mean!" he said in irritation. "It doesn't matter. I saw a lot of other things too." He smiled at her. "You have no idea what seeing those moments from your life did to me. I feel like I know more about you."

She pulled his hand again and held it. "I'm glad. There's still so much we can learn about each other, Ron."

"And we will," he said. "I learned a lot about your parents in just three days, blimey."

"Are you and my mum okay?" she asked. "When I was helping Dad, he said that you two bonded, but I couldn't read what happened with you and her in the kitchen."

"I promise that we're okay," he said. "She's just really worried about you and she doesn't want me hurting you. We've got some ways to go, I reckon. It wasn't all bad though. She's been fair to me. If there's one thing I've learned at Lambrick, it's that people treat you a certain way when they want to make sure you're good enough. It's nothing I can't handle."

"Oh, Ron," she said, putting her forehead against his. "I'm so glad you came."

"I'm so glad they invited me," he said. Hermione moved forward a little but just as quickly stopped. He put a finger to her jaw line. "You wanna kiss me?" he asked.

"Yes," she said with a nod.

"Why didn't you?" he asked. "It's not like I don't want you to."

"I know," she said. "I just don't want you to think that I have this uncontrollable need to stop all your sentences with a kiss."

"Why not?" he asked, tucking hair behind her ear. "I do it to you."

"But one of us needs to be decent," she said. "I always want us to kiss, but we should be mature about it, right? Ronald?"

"I'm waiting for you to stop talking so you can look at my lips and realize how much you want to kiss them," he said. "I'd do the taking, but I'm being a gentleman today."

She suddenly kissed him and sighed against his mouth. She pulled away. "I need to pack my books."

"Books?" he asked, slowly opening his eyes. "Why? You'll be back after I leave."

"I need to catch up on some reading at your house," she said, standing up. "School is mad right now. I can't fall behind."

"How are you doing there?" he asked.

"Better," she said, collecting books into a pile. "The busier I am, the easier it is for me to function. Classes are hard and my Head Girl duties keep me busy. It all helps me deal with...with the staring." She shook her head. "People still stare at me, Ron. It's so stupid."

He stood up and touched her shoulder. Hermione always rambled when she had a lot on her mind. "Hey, people still stare at me too. I wish I could be there with you, but I'm glad you have distractions. I've got some as well. We're both surviving."

"Ginny and Dean and Luna help a lot," she said.

"Good," he said. "You shouldn't be alone." He put his forehead to hers again. He moved in to kiss her but there was a knock on her door. Ron quickly moved away from her.

"Yes?" Hermione said.

The door opened and Mr. and Mrs. Granger came in. "We just wanted to say goodnight."

"Goodnight," Ron said. "Thank you for showing me all those videos. They really mean a lot to me."

"We're glad you enjoyed them," Mr. Granger said. "We wanted to make sure you understood a little bit about our daughter."

"Thank you, Dad," Hermione said. She walked over and gave him a hug. She then hugged her mum. "Thank you too."

Mrs. Granger kissed her forehead and smiled at her affectionately. "I know you'll both be heading out early tomorrow, but we can have one last breakfast before you take off."

"That sounds great," Ron said.

Mrs. Granger nodded, but she kept her eyes on Hermione. "Good night, sweetheart."

"Goodnight, Mum," she said. Mrs. Granger closed the door and Hermione leaned against it with a grin. "We should call it an early night."

"Yeah," he said. "I have no idea what's going on tomorrow. All I know is that the prats better have cleaned up."

"Like you don't miss Harry already," she said.

"Oi, I never miss Harry," Ron said.

She rolled her eyes. "Right. Just kiss me so I can send you off to bed."

"You're so bossy." He kissed her deeply for a few seconds but then she pulled away.

"I love you and I'll see you in the morning," she said.

"Love you too," he said. "Feel free to enter my sex dream."

She slapped his chest. "You'd better ask Frank to do that."

"You're unkind," he said.

"And you're too randy for your own good," she said. "Now go to bed."

"All right, all right." He walked to the door. He grabbed himself and stuck out his tongue.

She threw a pillow at him. "You're rude!"

Ron chuckled all the way down to his room. He closed the door and changed for bed. He went through his things and pulled out the picture of his family. Tomorrow, he would leave Hermione's family and return to his own. He was desperate to see them, but already there were problems with three of his siblings. He didn't want the pressure but he would have no choice but to work it out. He cut off the light and easily settled in the bed. He had gone through so much in three days: he had gotten over his Lambrick habits, shagged Hermione on a floor, learned about the Muggle world, Hermione's parents had sized him up, and he had even taken his first trip to an aquarium and fought with Hermione within the same evening. There had been so much intensity but at the same time so much love, easiness, and serenity. It hadn't been simple, but he had gotten what he came to the Granger's house for.

Ron turned over and yawned. No matter what happened next, he'd at least had his three days of peace.

* * *

**** I'd like to believe that Hermione actually has relationships with her parents and that they're real people. I also tend to think that everyone is human so there's no such thing as "straight forward." Anyway, I hope you lot enjoyed this chapter. Once again, just keep reading and see what happens. There's too much I could say. :P

One more thing: this 'Fistful of Weasley' is dedicated to all the Ron Bashers/Haters that STILL want to argue that Ron isn't good enough for Hermione and that she's better off with other people. Like, certain blokes with green eyes or even blokes who have the last name Weasley but aren't Ron :/. Please, take all the HP books and shove them up your arses sideways. Maybe you'll absorb the material better and finally realize that there's only ONE Knight in Hermione's castle and that's RONALD BILIUS WEASLEY! Hello- her name is HERMIONE - duh, lol. Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 39*: It's been awhile

Thank you all for the AMAZING reviews! You lot are brilliant! :D

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron woke up very early the next morning to pack up his things. His time with the Grangers was slipping away but his reunion with his own family was quickly approaching. He was anxious to see them again, but he was incredibly tense too. Ron had no reason to be nervous about seeing his family, which he reminded himself over and over as he pulled out his clothes for the day.

During his shower, Ron cracked and popped his joints to help ease some of his nerves. He also took deep breaths, reminding himself that his brothers, parents, and Ginny were awaiting his return. They would all be together and things would be okay. Additionally, Ron knew that, no matter what happened, he would have Hermione and Harry at his side. The three of them would be a unit again. That alone always gave him strength.

His stomach grumbled as he brushed his teeth and put his clothes on. He couldn't wait to eat Mrs. Granger's cooking. It was one thing that he'd miss about staying at Hermione's house. He had enjoyed himself, exploring new things and learning so much about her family. Ron smiled, thinking about all that he had seen on the videotapes. He opened the door and his smile widened. "Were you spying on me again?" he asked.

"Again?" Hermione asked. "I didn't spy the first time." She nudged him back into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

"This is dangerous," he said.

"I just wanted to say good morning," she said, hooking her arms around his neck.

"G'morning," he said, holding her close. "I reckon I shouldn't be surprised that you're dressed already."

"I've been awake for ages," she said. "I'm too excited about going to your house to stay asleep."

He kissed her forehead. "Me too."

"Are you ready to go back?" Hermione asked.

"As long as you're coming with me, I will be," he said.

"Of course I'm coming with you." She rose up, kissing him. He kissed her back while his hands moved lower to her bum. They parted, grinning at each other. Ron knew that it would be wise for them to part now, but the look in her eyes told him that they wouldn't. However, that was more than fine with him. He kissed her, gripping her arse this time and pushing her against him. Hermione made a faint noise before backing him up against the sink counter.

She slipped her tongue into his mouth, making him sigh and feel more relaxed. A healthy snog from Hermione was proving to be the best way to cure his anxiety. He eased her tongue between his lips, sucking on it as he pulled her against him more. She moaned softly, tangling her fingers in his hair. His heart began to beat faster and the bit of chill he had from his shower was gone now. Hermione left his mouth, finding his earlobe and licking it. Ron shuddered and stuck his thumbs through the belt loops of her jeans. Her soft lips kissed the rim of his ear then pressed against the tender spot at the back of his jaw. She nibbled on the area, causing blood to rush down to his groin. "H-Hermione," he said. "You know we can't do this."

"I do," she said against his skin, "but I can't stop. I truly believe that I'm addicted to your after-shower smell. It's likeâ€œsex and happiness."

Ron moaned, stomping his foot. "I-I'm glad you enjoy it, but honestlyâ€œ!" He gently pushed her away, "you can't touch me."

Hermione looked at him as if his words had hurt her. She gripped her necklace. "Why not?"

"It's not like that, Hermione," he said. "You know that area is one of my, um, special places. I love you kissing it and everything but you're making me bloody hot. More than that â€œ you've made me hard already."

Her body seemed to relax. "Oh, well, what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing at all, unless you're staying in 'the House of Granger,'" he said with exaggeration. "I'm sure your dad will come up here any second to check up on me."

"I thought you two bonded?" she asked.

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, 'Mione, we bonded. That doesn't mean that he still wouldn't mind taking one of his dentistry tools to my prick."

Hermione put a hand over her mouth as she chuckled. "You're so funny, Ron, and so very paranoid." She opened the door, peeking out.

Ron took the opportunity to playfully kick the back of her leg. "I'll admit that I'm paranoid this time, but every bloke has a right to be when his goods are on the line."

Hermione closed the door again. "Well, your goods are in the clear. I can hear my parents downstairs talking about shipments of mouth mirrors. That'll keep them occupied until we go downstairs. Besides, what I want won't take long anyway."

"W-what you want?" he asked.

She ran a finger down the front of his shirt. "You said that I made you hard, so I want to relieve you."

"Butâ€!" Ron looked around. He knew that her parents weren't in the room with them, however, it couldn't hurt to check. "What about the rules?"

"Let's forget about them right now," Hermione said with a shrug.

He rubbed his neck, shaking his head. "Who are you and what've you done with Hermione Granger? The woman I know never saysâ€""

"Shh," Hermione said, placing her mouth just against his. "Stop being cheeky and listen to me: your goods are safe. My parents aren't coming up here, and I will do as I please because you are still mine and I want to use you."

Ron closed his eyes, nodding. He didn't need any more convincing. "What do you want me to do?"

"Just stay quiet," she said before kissing him again. She pulled away then started kissing his tender area. He leaned back a little. Her tongue licked over the spot repeatedly, making him clutch the edge of the counter. Hermione's hands went to his jeans where they unbuttoned, then unzipped, his fly. She bit his neck as she eased him out of the opening of his boxers. Ron let out a heavy breath but told himself not to make another sound.

"You are gorgeous, Ronald Weasley," she whispered against his ear. He wanted to say something back but he wouldn't risk it. Instead, he pushed into her hand and kissed the side of her face.

Hermione slid her grip back and forth on his muscle, at the same time snogging his neck. Ron chewed on his bottom lip, keeping his eyes closed. Looking at her would only make him want to snog her, speak to her, or take her against the wall. None of those options were smart in their current state. Hermione's parents were right downstairs. At any moment, they could come to the door where they would be able to hear everything. Hermione hadn't put a locking or silencing charm on the room. The risky situation scared her but also excited her him. Ron couldn't stop himself from moaning longingly as she wanked him faster and her supple lips spread over his neck more. A strong current began pounding against his cock.

"You have to be quiet, love," Hermione said against his neck.

"M'sorry," he panted. "It feels so good."

"Are you close?" she asked, kissing his earlobe.

"Very," he said with a nod. "I'm gonna cum."

She whimpered gently as she kissed his jaw. "Good. I want you to right into my mouth."

"Wha?" he began, but before he could ask a coherent question, Hermione sank to her knees, pulling his jeans down with her. He gave a muffled, choked cry as she swallowed his cock, taking it down her throat in one smooth swoop. Ron banged one fist against the sink while he stuffed the knuckles from the other into his mouth. He watched, almost dazed, as her lips stretched around his muscle. She closed her eyes as she sucked on him, appearing content and focused.

Hermione's mouth was so warm, wet, and talented. Ron had never expected her to make this move. It was all too much and after only a few deep swallows, he came with a faint groan. Hermione opened her eyes, taking him down her throat and nursing the last few drops from him with a moan. When she was done, she licked away the last traces of his seed, leaving Ron clean and damp. She stood and wiped her mouth. "There," she said in a cheerful tone, "I cleaned you up this time."

"Iâ€;youâ€;b-bloodyâ€;" He trailed off as he realized that he had forgotten the English language.

Hermione put him back into his trousers, zipping him up. "How about you finish packing and think of something to say? I need to freshen up." Ron could only nod. He opened the door and peeked out before hurrying to his room.

He was silent as he once again went through all his belongings. Hermione had sucked him off many times before, but never so assertively and never so seductively. Ron bit his lip, thinking about her taking all of him into her mouth. It was her finest blowjob to date, but he doubted that was a compliment a woman wanted to hear. Ron heard a terrible purring so he turned around. Crookshanks jumped on his bed. Ron stared at him whereas Crookshanks merely waved his tail and meowed.

"What?" Ron asked. "You wanna claw me to death?" The cat made another noise, waving its tail again. He eyed Ron as if sizing him up. Ron decided to take a chance. He patted the spot next to him. "Come on then." Crookshanks slowly pawed over to him, rubbing his head against Ron's thigh. Ron scratched his ears. "Oh, so now you want to be nice to me?" he asked. "Is it because you know what Hermione did to me in the loo?" Ron scratched Crookshanks' stomach, making him purr.

"I don't believe it," Hermione said. He looked up. She was at the door, almost in tears.

"Keep your knickers on," he said. "Kitty here is blackmailing me. He knows what you did. I reckon he'll tell your parents if I don't pet him every time I see him now. He's a smart little sod."

"Oh!" she said in obvious irritation. "I guess you finally found something to say. Too bad it's vile."

"I've got more too," Ron said. "I reckon there's more to these N.E.W.T. classes than you're telling me. You're the one who needs to do some explaining."

"I guess that means you enjoyed yourself." Hermione bent down, holding out her hand. Crookshanks raced over to her and she picked him up. "However, your hypothesis is faulty. I wasn't taught that, you just bring it out of me." She kissed her cat's head and scratched his ear. "You ready for breakfast?"

Ron avoided Mr. Granger's eyes as much as he could at the table. He answered questions and engaged in conversation while keeping his gaze fixated on his food. Ron knew that it wasn't the right way to act on his last day, but he didn't want to return home without his bollocks. Afterwards, Ron offered to help clean up but once again, Mrs. Granger told him that it was okay. He went upstairs with Hermione instead, telling himself that one day Mrs. Granger would trust him.

He and Hermione packed up the last of her things before bringing all of their stuff downstairs. She did one last sweep of her room while he stood against the wall. "Got your library?" he asked.

"It's not a library," she said. "I'm only bringing the essentials. I told you that I wanted to study."

"Whatever you say, love," he mumbled. Hermione zipped up her last bag so he pushed himself off the wall and took her hand. "Come here." He sat on her bed and she sat on his lap. He rested his head against her chest.

"You okay?" she asked, running her fingers repeatedly through his hair.

"I'm fine," he said. "I just want one last quiet moment alone with you so I can listen to your heartbeat."

"Oh, Ron," she said, "I love you."

"I love you too," he said.

She kissed the top of his head. "Everything is going to be all right."

"I know," he said. "I just wanna listen." He held her around the waist, closing his eyes. They went quiet. Hermione kissed his head as he let the rhythm of her heart soothe him. He wanted to stay in the moment but a voice in the back of his mind kept telling him that he had to go. They went downstairs and said their goodbyes to the Grangers. Hermione hugged her parents, reassuring them that she would be safe.

Ron shook Mr. Granger's hand. "Thank you for having me, sir. I had a great time."

"It was a pleasure, Ron," he said. "I hope to see you sometime on Christmas."

"I'll be here, sir," he answered. He looked at Mrs. Granger. She wore an expression that he couldn't read. "Thank you, Mrs. Granger," he said in a softer voice, holding out his hand.

She shook it. "You're welcome, Ron. Have a good time with your family. I'm glad we finally did this."

"Me too." Ron could see that something was on her mind, but he would have to find out what it was on a different day.

"Mum, Dad," Hermione said. "I'll see you both in a few days. Come on, Ron." She and Ron stepped back and made sure that they had ahold of all of their stuff. She looked at him. He gave the Grangers one more smile before turning back to her. Ron and Hermione nodded to each other before vanishing a second later.

They appeared on the dirt path leading to his house. Ron could see the Burrow right up ahead. His heart skipped a beat. "Fucking hell, we're here," he said.

"And everyone is waiting for you," Hermione said. With a flick of her wand, all of their belongings rose into the air and flew down the path. She took his hand and the two of them made their way down to the Burrow.

"Hermione?" he said.

"Yes?" she answered.

"What's a dildo?"

"Excuse me?" she asked in a high-pitched voice, yanking her hand away from his and dropping her jaw.

Ron shrugged. "What's a dildo?"

She gasped, slapping a hand to her cheek. "Where on Earth did you hear that word?"

"Um, Harry called me that back at camp," Ron said. "He said to ask you what it was." Hermione's face went scarlet as her eyes grew in what seemed to be horror. "I figured it was some sort of Muggle thing," he continued. "Is it like an illness or something?"

She slowly shook her head. "No, it most certainly is not an illness, Ronald Weasley. I will murder Harry James Potter for calling you such a thing."

"But what is it? What's a dildo," he asked impatiently, "and why do you wanna kill Harry for calling me a dildo?"

"Stop saying that word!" she snapped, clamping her hands over her ears. Her reaction was so outrageous that Ron assumed a dildo had to be some sort of weapon or something. "I'll-I'll tell you what it is later," she said, lowering her hands. "Just, please, do not say that word again. Do you hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you," he said. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," she said, calming a little and taking his hand again. "It's that boy I used to call my best friend's fault."

They reached the front door of the house. Ron let out a deep breath before turning the knob and walking in. Surprisingly, there wasn't anyone inside. "Hello?" he said. He and Hermione brought their bags in but there still wasn't an answer. He peered around the empty living room. The quiet made his chest hurt. He got a terrible feeling of déjà vu and suddenly found it hard to breathe. "Hermione, no one's here."

"It's okay," she said, rubbing his arm. "Everyone knew that you would arrive today. Let's check the kitchen." They walked into the kitchen where he immediately heard chatting and laughter. The voices were coming from the backyard so he opened the kitchen door and rushed out. He saw several ginger people a ways down, sitting in chairs around a long table. He quickly began walking toward them.

His mum's voice was the first he heard clearly. "I still don't understand why he has to â€“ oh, my boy!"

"Mum!" Ron said. His mother just about dropped her mug and ran over to him. She gave him a bone-crushing hug. He hugged her back, lifting her a bit off the ground. "Mum," he said again.

"Oh, Ronnienkins, my baby!" she cried, squeezing him firmly. He sucked in air but didn't mind that she was cutting off his air supply. For a moment, she didn't seem real, but as long as he held on to her, she was. Her protection and love was all around him again. Ron could hear and feel her crying against his chest, so he patted her back.

"I'm home, Mum," he said. "I'm okay."

"My dear boy," she wept.

"Molly, I think it's safe to let him go," his dad said.

"Oh all right, but only for a minute." She finally let him go, wiping her eyes. Ron wiped away a tear that she'd miss.

He looked at his dad who was standing next to her. "Dad."

"Welcome home, Ron," he said. He pulled him into a hug. Ron practically collapsed against him. It wasn't until his dad's arms were around him that Ron realized how much he had missed him. He had missed his father's wisdom, and kindness, and proper guidance.

"I'm happy to be back," Ron said.

His dad kissed his head before letting him go. He ruffled his hair. "Blimey, you've gained a bit of weight."

"Not too much," Ron muttered.

"Yes you have," his mum said, pinching his cheek. "Look at my baby boy. He's so grown up. I bet you've had to stretch out all your jeans."

"He's being modest," his dad said. "Weasleys are modest people."

"Ha, that's an interesting lie to tell, Arthur," his mum said. She gave Hermione a hug. "Nice to see you, dear. Was Ron a good houseguest? I hope he remembered to use a napkin. The boy gets such sticky fingers."

"Mum," Ron groaned. "I was fine and so were my fingers."

"He really was great, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said. "He and my parents got along well."

"Oh, there's my boy," his mum said, hugging him again. "Well, come on. Everyone's here and we've all been waiting for you to arrive. We've just started tea."

The four of them walked down to the table. Percy and Charlie stood up. Percy was the first over. He smiled. "Hello, Hermione."

"Hi, Percy," she said with a wave.

He then shook Ron's hand. "Ron, welcome back."

"Thanks," Ron said. "It's good to see you."

Charlie moved Percy out of the way. "What kind of a welcome is that?" He pulled Ron into a firm squeeze that reminded him of his mum's hug. Charlie picked him up then set him back down again. He nickered his chin. "Hey, Ronnie!"

"Hi, Charlie," Ron said. He felt as if his heart were about to burst. Charlie's extremely freckled face and enthusiastic brown eyes were making Ron feel giddy. "When did you get here?"

"Yesterday," Charlie said. "Hermione, get over here and hug me." She blushed and gave him a hug. He held her back tightly. "Ron told me that you've been taking good care of him. Thank you. It means a lot to me."

"It's no trouble," she said. "Besides, we take care of each other," she added, smiling at Ron.

"How sweet," Charlie said with a laugh before turning to Ron. "Bloody buggering hell."

"Charles Weasley," his mum said.

"Sorry, Mum, but look at him." Charlie shook his head, rubbing his neck. "The boy has gotten big." He pinched Ron's stomach rather hard.

"Ow!" Ron said, slapping his hand away.

"He's even got some muscle too!" Charlie said. "Bill, come look at your baby brother."

Bill stood up and walked over to him. He was the only person that didn't add to Ron's good feeling. Bill stared right at him with knowing eyes. "Nice to have you both back. Ron." He held out his hand. Ron slowly reached out, shaking it.

"It's good to see you," Ron said. Bill knew everything. No matter how hard Ron had tried to block out all the memories of Lambrick, looking at Bill made him relive them all again.

Bill let his hand go and smiled. "You have gotten bigger. The pictures in the Dispatch didn't do you or Harry justice."

"Speaking of Harry," Ron said, looking around, "where's Ginny?"

Charlie's enthusiasm went somber. "Down there with her boyfriend. He's been showing us some moves that he's learned. Ginny's his assistant or whatever."

"What?" Ron asked, pushing past Bill and Charlie. He couldn't think of any partnered move that didn't require physical force. He walked down further into the yard then suddenly stopped.

Harry and Ginny were far apart, facing each other. She giggled and jumped up and down. "Again! Again!" she screamed.

"All right, get ready," Harry said. Ron watched as Harry planted his feet, bending down a little. He turned himself to the side and balled his fists.

"Harry bloody Potter!" Ron shouted. "Are you about to rush her?"

Harry jumped, turning to him. "Ron? When did you get here?"

"Answer the bloody question!" Ron said, marching over to them.

"Ronald Weasley!" his mum called. "You and Charlie need to learn to control your language."

Ron didn't answer her. He pushed Harry. "What the fuck are you doing? You're rushing my baby sister?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Calm down. I've done it a few times already. She wants me to and she likes it."

"No one 'likes' to be rushed," he said. "It's supposed to disarm and disarray."

"I know what the move is supposed to do," Harry said. "How thick do you think I am? I'm obviously not trying to hurt her and I'm not using any real force. I'm being careful."

"I don't care," Ron said. "You do not rush my sister."

Ginny jogged over to them. She hit Ron's arm. "Your sister is right here and I say shut up. He's not giving it all to me so I'm fine. Besides, I'm a Quidditch captain now. I take lots of beatings. I don't mind a little pain." She winked at Harry. "Especially from Harry."

"Oi!" Ron said with a cringe.

Ginny giggled again and pushed Ron. "Get out of the way so we can do this." She backed up and so did Harry. "Hermione!" Ginny called, "you should have Ron rush you. It's wicked! Come on, Harry."

Ron walked back, standing alongside his family and Hermione. "Is this dangerous, Ron?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, but if you know what you're doing, then no," Ron said. "They've been at it all day?"

"Not all day," Percy said, looking anxiously at Harry and Ginny, "just since we came outside. Charlie wanted to see some moves and it turned into this. Harry said he'd be careful."

"He'd better be," Charlie said. "I'll shove those glasses up his arâ€" bum sideways if he's not."

"So will I," Bill said.

"Me too," Ron said.

"But not before my turn," his dad said, crossing his arms over his chest and looking firm.

"Oh, boys," his mum said. "Meeting violence with more violence doesn't solve anything."

"That's what I tell Ron all the time, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said.

Harry planted his feet again then glanced at the line of Weasleys. He gave them the thumbs up but no one responded to it. "It's fine, Harry!" Ginny said. Harry nodded. He got into position again and rushed her. Right away Ron could tell that Harry wasn't going to hurt her. He barely ran at her and his back wasn't stiff like it was supposed to be. He rushed into her straight on, instead of sideways like he was supposed to. Harry held Ginny around the back as they collided, keeping the power in his knees so they didn't hit the ground too hard. Ginny laughed and Harry laughed with her. He kissed her forehead before rolling off of her.

"That wasn't too bad," Hermione said.

"It doesn't matter. I'm not giving that a go on you," Ron said.
"Harry and Ginny are nutters."

"I think it's why they're perfect for each other," his mum said.
"Only they can enjoy something like that." When the couple joined them, his mum instantly pulled Ginny into her arms.

"Mum, I'm okay," Ginny said.

"I'll feel better when we're all sitting down for tea," she answered. Ron grinned at all the familiarity. His family was all around him, giving him an energy that he couldn't describe.

"Let's wait on that," Ron said. "Harry, how about you rush someone who's not going to giggle and ask for more?" He took off his coat, handing it to Hermione. "Will you hold this for me?"

"Keep that on," his mum said. "It's rather cold out here. You haven't taken any sort of warming potion."

"I don't need it, Mum," Ron said.

"How could you?"

"Molly, he's training to be an Auror," his dad said. "I'm sure he's faced far worse conditions." He gave Ron a nod, making him smile.

"What do you say, Harry?" Ron asked.

Harry looked at everyone. "I didn't hurt her."

"No one is trying to punish you, dear," his mum said. "We can stop this now."

"Yeah, sorry, mate," Ron said. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Ronald," Hermione said.

"Showdown," Bill whispered in Charlie's ear.

Harry narrowed his eyes for a moment. "It's fine. Let's go."

"Boys," Hermione said. She touched Ron's arm. "You just got here. Don't you think it's a little soon to be beating up your best mate?"

"Let the boys rumble," Charlie said, pulling Ginny out of their mum's embrace and into his own. "I want to see what they've got and I want to keep Harry's hands off my little biscuit." He kissed the top of Ginny's head.

"Little biscuit is tired of everyone treating her like a child," Ginny said, hugging Charlie back anyway.

"Yeah, I wasn't being serious, Harry," Ron said. "Besides, I haven't done anything physical in days."

"I highly doubt that," Ginny said. "Haven't you been with Hermione?"

"Ginevra Molly Weasley!" his mum said. All his siblings laughed while Ron and Hermione blushed.

"Thanks, Ginny," Harry said.

"Anytime, babe," she said with a grin.

"All right, we're doing this!" Ron said.

He kicked dirt in Ginny's direction before stepping out into the open field with Harry. It felt a little strange. He hadn't really thought about his training in days, but now he was going to perform one of the first things he'd learned â€“ in front of his family no less. Ron got into position, deciding that he wouldn't go easy on him. Ron nodded to Harry. He rubbed his fingertips together in response. At once, they ran toward each other. Ron pushed the side of his hip into him but Harry had trained and learned as much as Ron had. Harry held his ground, trying to wobble him off his feet. He was strong, quick, and swift, but Ron had vastly improved since their nights of practicing before going to Lambrick. Hand combat was something he could now do with his eyes closed. Ron heaved himself forward, getting Harry on the ground. They tackled each other for a bit before Ron got Harry on his face, pressing his knee into Harry's spine. He yanked Harry's arms behind his back.

"Got him!" Ron said. He heard some clapping from his family.

Harry groaned, pushing him away. He adjusted his glasses and stood up, wiping dirt off his face. "I didn't know you were trying to show off for your family."

"I'm just doing what I was taught," Ron said innocently. "How about you stop holding back? No one is gonna care if you're rough now. I can only imagine Richard's face if he knew you were being soft."

"You prick," Harry said with a chuckle. "All right, let's add our wands for flavor."

"Sounds good," Ron said. He and Harry stood away from each other, holding up their wands. Ron nodded to Harry and they once again attacked each other.

Ron didn't understand why, but he felt a sense of peace as he dueled with Harry. It was the first time in months that they weren't told to break each other or else. They could help each other up, make mistakes, and laugh with each other as they sparred. His family cheered them on while Hermione gazed at them in a way that told Ron that she was battling between liking and worrying about them striking each other. Nonetheless, it wasn't too long before his mum demanded that they stop and sit down.

Ron and Harry tried their best to explain the maneuvers they had made and why they were necessary, all while keeping in mind the contracts they had signed. Ron found it difficult to talk about Alan's ideas on defense without really talking about Alan or his defensive mindset. Harry put it best when he said that at Lambrick, they spent all day exercising and using offensive and defensive spells along with combat to better themselves as future Aurors. It only got more difficult when he and Harry were asked to talk about their lives at camp. Apparently his family had wanted to wait until Ron got there before demanding information. He couldn't really tell them about his schedule or what he did on a daily basis, so he briefly summarized a day in his life and talked a little about the people in his wing. By the end of the long-winded conversation, Ron was flustered and had a dull ache in the back of his head.

"We really should go inside," his mum said sometime later. "I've got a lot to cook for dinner tonight and Ron needs to get settled in."

"He's been settled for three days, Mum," Bill said. "He didn't come here straight from the train."

"He hasn't been settled here for three days." She reached across the table, rubbing Ron's cheek that was red due to Harry's elbow.

"Mum, I'm fine," Ron said. He had missed his mum but her worry was already starting to stress him out. "Bill's right. All I did at Hermione's house was relax."

"Is that really all you did?" Percy asked. Everyone gawked at him, causing him to blush madly. "No â€“ no I'm not being boorish. I just meant that it's a Muggle home."

"Percy's right," his dad said. "I want full details on everything."

"Mr. Weasley," Hermione said kindly, "we've had this discussion before. I gave you detailed lists on the things in my house."

"Exactly, Dad," Charlie said with a laugh, "let's try not to act like complete pure-bloods here."

"You know Dad can't help himself," Bill said. "He still wants to interrogate Fleur's second cousin's husband because he's a Muggle."

"I'm curious is all," his dad mumbled.

"Where is Fleur, Bill?" Hermione asked.

He sighed, looking grim. "She's spending the holiday in France with her family. She left two days ago and she won't be back for quite some time."

"William here has lost his way," Charlie said.

"I'm sure he'll live," Ginny muttered.

"You don't understand, Ginny," Bill said. "Fleur's my wife. She's like the half of me that knows how to function, and think, and enjoy things."

"I understand that, son," his dad said. He put an arm around their mum, kissing the top of her head. She in turn kissed his cheek. Ron grinned at his parents. Their affection toward each other was what he was used to seeing. Mr. and Mrs. Granger had acted nothing like that. Everyone at the table started talking about different things. Ron tried to stay engaged but he was distracted. He hadn't forgotten for a moment that George wasn't present, and Ron didn't know how much longer he could go on not knowing where George was.

"Oi! The bell is not at my flat!"

Ron's head shot up at the voice. Almost like his thoughts had been read, George was suddenly walking down to their table. Ron immediately stood up, clumsily running over to him. "George," he said. He gave his brother a once-over. He was paler than usual and he looked as if he had lost a bit of weight, but otherwise he looked all right. More importantly, he looked alive.

"Hi, Ron," George said, patting his arm. "Did you just get here?"

For weeks Ron had told himself that seeing George would provide him with the relief that he desperately needed, but it wasn't there. In fact, he felt a tiny pit whirl in his chest. George's tone was void of its former animation, and there was something dark that Ron could almost see seeping from him. Ron didn't know if he had gone mental, but somehow he was sure that he could sense George's feelings. They weren't pleasant. "George," he said again stupidly.

George rubbed his neck, moving his eyes away from him. "That's my name. Has been all my life." He walked past him and down to the table.

"What did you say again, dear?" his mum asked.

"I said the bell is not at my flat," George said, sitting down next to Ginny. "I told you that I didn't take it with me." He looked down the table, waving to Hermione. "Hello, Hermione."

"Hi, George," she said. Ron sat next to her. Hermione instantly laced their fingers together.

"I was so sure that it'd be there," his mum said. "It must be in the attic then."

"It's not. I checked," his dad said.

George shrugged. "I reckon it's lost." Everyone went quiet. Ron took the opportunity to examine his family. No one appeared to be as alarmed as he felt. They must've grown used to George's state or were just too afraid to accept that something was wrong.

"We can get a new one," Percy said to finally break the silence.

"You can't just 'get a new one'," George mumbled. "Anyway, it's only a stupid bell, so who cares."

"It's not a stupid bell, George," Ginny said angrily. He shrugged again, picking at his nails. Ron could understand Ginny's state. The bell they were referring to was one that George and Fred had made years ago to add to the Christmas tree. It was designed so the two of them could pull it apart from each side of the bell handle, causing a puff of red and green smoke to appear and an out of tune Christmas jingle to play. It had been a part of their Christmas tradition for as long as Ron had been alive.

"Well, maybe I'll take a look up there," Charlie said. He poured a cup of tea, sliding it across the table to George. "Sorry that we made you go home to find it, George. You missed quite the show from the Auror gods here. I got weak in the knees."

George laughed and, to Ron, it seemed genuine. "Blimey, I wish I could've seen that."

"You can," Charlie said. "Get up, Ron. You and me."

"You and me what?" Ron asked distractedly.

"Let's do that rush thing â€“ but I don't want you going easy on me," he said.

"Oh, no â€“ no that's not a good idea," Ron said. He looked around to everyone. "I'm sure Harry didn't tell you this, but you really shouldn't be mucking around with any of the things we showed you."

"Thanks, Minister," George said.

"He's just being responsible," Percy said.

"What's the harm?" Charlie asked. "Harry did it to Ginny."

"I didn't use full force though," Harry said. "Ron's right. It could be dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Charlie asked with a laugh. "Ron, I'm twice the size of you and Harry."

"But Harry and I have been in training," Ron said. "We know how to take the hit. I could really hurt you. You're a civilian."

"You've challenged his ego now," Ginny said. "We should all cover our heads."

"Nice one, Ginny," George said, giving her a high-five.

"The both of you, be quiet," Charlie said. "Ron, I'll be fine. I'm sure it's not that bad. If you can knock me on my bumâ€¢ then I'll let George fart in my face."

"Charles Keith!" his mum said. "You do not make bets like that withâ€¢"

"I'd fancy watching that," Bill said, raising his hand.

"William Arthur!" his mum said.

"You have to do it now, Ron," George said. "I'd like to give Charlie a stinky lovely."

"George Fabian!"

"You are all outrageously immature," Percy said.

"Percy Ignatius!"

"What â€¢ I'm on your side, Mum," Percy said.

"Oh, sorry, dear," his mum said, shaking her head. She closed her eyes, placing a hand over her face. "Arthur, please â€¢ talk to your children."

Their dad didn't appear to be nearly as upset as their mother was. He tried his best not to smile but it didn't work.

"Children, stop making your mother barmy."

She shook her head at him. "That was very compelling, sweetheart. Thank you."

"What?" his dad asked, obviously not grasping what he'd done wrong. Ron understood his dad's confusion. He had been in the same situation numerous times with Hermione over the years.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I really do think we should go back inside. I want enough time to have dinner ready for this evening."

"Okay," Charlie said. "We'll get back to this later, Ron." Ron rolled his eyes. When they all went back inside, Ron helped Hermione move her things into Ginny's room before going up to his

bedroom. He walked in. His clutter and Chudley Canons items greeted him nicely. He dropped his bag, diving into his bed.

"How I've missed you so." Ron hugged his pillows and comforter then moaned, digging his nose into his linens. "Hello, gorgeous," he said, kissing one of the C's on his blanket. "Daddy's home."

"Stop it or I might get jealous," Hermione said. He sat up, remembering that he wasn't alone. He pulled on her hand to bring her next to him. She sat down and let out a deep sigh. "So, that's one way to welcome family back."

"Weasleys are different than most families," he said.

"I have come to understand that," she said. "At least everyone is here and doing well."

"Except for George," he said without thinking. "Am I going mad? I couldn't have been the only one to notice how he was."

"I doubt you were, Ron, but you've got to stop doing this regardless," she said, gripping his knee.

"Doing what?" he asked, moving her hand away. "Caring about my brother?"

"That's not what I'm saying," she said tensely. "Look, I know you love your brother, but so does everyone else here. They've been here with him the whole time. They know things about him now that you don't."

"Ta, Hermione," Ron said with a frown.

She sighed harshly, rubbing her temple. "I'm not the enemy here, Ron. I'm just trying to help you. You're here now, and you'll finally get a chance to talk to George. You'll find out everything for yourself when the time comes. I'm only suggesting that you at least enjoy the fact that he's here now, talking and engaging with your family. Can't that be enough?"

Ron rubbed his palms into his thighs. He still couldn't get the mess of Fred's room out of his mind, but George was right downstairs, laughing with their parents. Even if George had been in a horrible state, he didn't seem to be now. George was safe. "You're right," Ron breathed. "It is enough that he's here." He placed her hand back on his knee. "I'm sorry. I just worry about him."

"I know you do, but you have to let your mind rest," she said. "You don't want to make yourself sick over issues that aren't for certain. You're with your family again so you can be happy."

He looked at her and smiled. He touched her face, feeling a bit of comfort wash over him. He was so bloody lucky to have her with him. "I've already been happy and with family. I've been with you."

She sighed, putting her forehead to his. "I love it when you say things like that. I just love you so much." She kissed him. "Believe me, I care and worry about George too. I worry about your whole family, but you most of all." She kissed him again and he pushed his tongue deeply into her mouth. She dug her nails into his neck. "You're first for me, Ron," she whispered against his mouth. "I honestly just don't want you going into a state. I'm too overprotective to allow you, or anyone else, to do that to yourself."

Ron moaned, loving the effect that her words were having on him. "I don't mind. I like hearing that I come first for you." He kissed her harder, clutching her sides. At long last, they were in his room and in his bed snogging. The accustomed heat he felt from the situation came back with a force.

Hermione broke away. "I'll be honest," she panted, "seeing you duel like that was brilliant. I was nervous at first, but you were so skilled and powerful. Every move you made was sexy."

"Sexy?" he asked. Never once did his instructors tell him to make sure that his maneuvers were 'sexy'. Nevertheless, it was okay when Hermione said it.

She nodded. "Yes. You might need to reconsider showing me your techniques. I think I want you to crush me."

He snorted. "You mean rush you."

"Whatever," she said, waving a hand.

They kissed deeper and harder. It was his turn to break away. "Actually," he said, "'crush' might be a better term for what I have in mind." He leaned her forward, causing her to fall back to the bed. He stayed at her side as he kissed her. Ron touched her stomach, making up his mind that he would sneak it under her jumper. There was suddenly a knock on the door. Ron rose from her mouth. "You can't be bloody serious."

"Technically," Harry said, walking in, "I'm not interrupting. The door is wide open, mates, but I reckon you took that detail as a personal challenge."

"Harry," Hermione said, sitting up and wiping her mouth.

He smiled at her. "Hi."

"Why are you still here?" Ron asked.

"I was the unlucky one chosen to tell you two to come downstairs as soon as you could," Harry said. "I walked as slowly as possible up the stairs. I guess I can pretend that I got lost and try again."

"Sounds goo--"

"That won't be necessary," Hermione said, stopping Ron's words and standing up. "We're on our way."

Ron got up as well, keeping his eyes on Harry. "Some thing never sodding change. I reckon you counted the seconds until you could interrupt us."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Right â€“ it's all I live for."

Ron, Hermione, and Harry joined Ron's family in the kitchen. Everyone crowded around the table, asking Ron and Hermione questions about their time at her house. Ron showed them his bowling gear and talked about their time there. He told them about the Thai takeaway he had eaten, the aquarium Hermione had taken him to, and the typewriter he had helped Mr. Granger fix. His dad was eager to learn how the ball return was operated, along with how her parents were able to show Ron the videos on their TV. Ron enjoyed reliving his time with the Grangers. It made him feel important, knowing things about Muggle life.

More than anything else, he enjoyed listening to Hermione explain the Muggle processes to his family. Watching her, he heard the difference in her tone and saw the changes in her body language. She was looser, more cheery, and she wasn't afraid to be sarcastic or her usual bossy self. Nothing made Ron prouder than knowing that his home brought her some sort of peace. Hermione and Harry went back and forth as they explained the mechanics behind the VCR and radio alarm clock that were in her house repeatedly to his dad until his mum made them change the subject. Percy took the opportunity to turn the focus on himself. He droned on about his dozens of jobs at the Ministry and how important each one of them was. Charlie and Ginny took turns yawning, making his mum scowl and his dad laugh. Ron kept sneaking glances at George who was sitting right next to him, but George merely avoided his eyes. It made Ron nervous, but he told himself not to worry. He was home again and all of his family was around him.

Ron sat back in his chair, as Percy talked about designing a whole new system for department memos, and poked Hermione in the side. She gave him a look. He pointed to her legs then patted his lap. She shook her head but he did it again. Hermione sighed, turning to the side. She put her legs in his lap, and he massaged her lower legs, making her close her eyes.

"So, Hermione," his mum said.

"Yes?" she said promptly, sitting as tall as she could while he kept her legs in his grasp.

"Ginny's told us that you're doing well as Head Girl," his mum said.

"She's fantastic, Mum," Ginny said. "I don't understand how she does it all."

"It's not too difficult," Hermione said. "It's all about staying organized."

"That's right," Percy said. "Organization is what got me through that year as Head Boy. What about you, Bill?"

He shrugged. "I purely stayed smooth and people listened to me."

"Sorry?" Harry asked with a laugh. "What does that even mean?"

"It means nothing, Harry," Charlie said. "Only blokes with ponytails say things like that."

"Oi, don't judge my hair," Bill said, nudging Charlie's shoulder. "You're just jealous because you're already balding."

"I am not, you git," he said, touching the top of his head.

"Boys, honestly!" his mum said before lecturing them all on how to behave.

George leaned over to Ron. "Welcome home, little brother," he said in his ear.

Ron turned to him. George was smirking at him, so he grinned. "Yeah, it's good to be back."

They talked right up until dinnertime. Ron's mum laid down a mouth-watering heap of largely portioned food, buttery goodness, and sweet desserts. Ron chomped down a massive bite of beef, loving how thick and chewy it was. "Mum," he said. "I've missed this."

"Welcome home, love," she said with a wink.

"I'd tell you to eat up but you and Harry look like you're being well-fed at Lambrick," his dad said.

"I wouldn't use the phrase 'well-fed', Mr. Weasley," Harry said. "What we get is probably good for us, but it doesn't taste, or smell, or look that way."

"You might as well throw 'feel' in there too, Harry," Ron said. "My meat slices are usually rather hard and flaky."

"I don't want to hear that," his mum said.

"It's evidently paying off," Bill said. "I'm sure Lambrick has their rules in place for a reason." Bill, who was sitting right across from Ron, shot a glance at him. Ron quickly moved his attention back to his food.

"Regardless," his mum said. "While you're here, I'll feed you the right way." She looked at Harry who was sitting next to her. "I've already started on this boy." She gave him a tender smile.

"I've been appreciating it, Mrs. Weasley," he said kindly, kissing her cheek.

"See, Percy?" his dad said. "Your mum is keen on feeding the boyfriends and girlfriends. Audrey won't be any trouble."

"Oh, yes, Audrey," his mum said. "Is she coming by on Christmas?"

"This is the actual female that Percy knows, right?" George asked.

"Don't worry," Bill said. "She's real. I've seen her."

"She fit?" Charlie asked.

"Be quiet!" Percy said, blushing under the attention. "Of course she's real. Yes, she's 'fit' but no, she's not coming."

"You can't say that until you've asked her, Perce," Bill said, patting his arm.

"I did ask her when we went out the other night," he said.

"Like a date?" Ginny asked.

"Something like that," Percy said, puffing out his chest a little. "In any case, I asked, but she has to work all day, poor thing. She works harder than I do."

"Then you two must be made for each other," Charlie said. "It's too bad though. I thought I'd get to meet her before I go back."

"When do you go back?" Ron asked.

"Day after Christmas," Charlie said disappointedly. "I worked double shifts and traded a lot of hours with people to get all this time off, but that's as far as I can extend my holiday."

"It's good enough, Charlie," Ginny said, grinning at him. "We miss you over holiday."

He tugged on a lock of her hair. "I missed you lot too. Especially you, biscuit."

"Oh, I love having all of the family together," his mum said.

George took a rather loud slurp of his drink and picked at his food. "You okay?" Ron asked quietly.

"I'm fine, Ron," he answered dully.

"Well, while I have you all here," his mum said, "I guess we should talk about what we're actually going to do on Christmas. Ron, I didn't want to have this discussion until you got here. Your thoughts?"

"Um, I don't care," Ron said. "I'd be fine with just sitting around and eating. Hermione and I are going to her house first thing but we'll be back."

"Sitting and eating, right," his mum said. "Does anyone else have any ideas?"

"I'm rather keen on sitting around and eating too," his dad said.

"Arthur," she breathed.

"I'm being honest," he said. "We're all here and just being together should be enough, Molly." His mum and dad shared an intense stare that made Ron's palms itch. He started kneading his hands into Hermione's legs.

"It is enough, but I thought we could do something more than the usual," she said. "George, what do you think?"

"I fancy the sitting and eating idea," he said.

His mum gave him a look of apprehension. "But I was thinking we could do something extra special this year."

George dropped his fork, turning to her. "Extra special for what?"

"George, don't talk that way," Bill said.

"Talk what way?" he asked. He looked around the table. "Why is everybody staring at me?"

"We're not staring at you, son," his dad said. "Your mum just wanted your opinion."

"Well, I don't have one," he said. "I planned on just showing up and doing whatever had already been decided."

"All right," his mum said, holding out her hands. "That's fine. Do you at least know if Angelina and Lee are coming?"

"Angie is coming and Lee will definitely not be here," George said.

"Definitely not?" Percy asked. "Is he all right?"

"Bloody hell!" George said, hitting the table with his open palm. "What is with all of these questions? I answer one thing just to be asked something else! Why?"

"George," Ron said, touching his arm. "It's all right." He looked around the table. "Obviously no one has an idea on what we're doing, so maybe we should just play it by ear, yeah?" Everyone nodded and said some variation of yes. Ron turned back to George. "Yeah?"

He nodded and seemed calmer. "Okay, Ron."

"So," Ron said, "let's talk about something else then." He waited for his mum or dad to strike up the next bit of conversation, but they merely studied their food like everyone else. Ron couldn't believe it. He didn't know what to do. By instinct, he looked to Charlie. Ron pleaded with his eyes for his brother to lighten the mood. Charlie must've understood.

"Bill, Percy: are either of you staying tonight?" Charlie asked.

"I can't," Bill said. "I have to work in the morning. The bank is always hectic this time of year and goblins don't care about family holidays."

"I'm staying," Percy said.

"Good," Charlie said. "You can help me search the attic for the bell."

"I told you that it was lost," George said.

"Then we'll find it, George," Charlie said.

"Whatever," he mumbled. "You're the only one who cares about it anyway."

"That's not true," his dad said. "We all care about it."

George snorted. "All right. I reckon I'm the only one who doesn't care about the bell."

"George, stop it," Ginny said softly. "Stop saying that."

George looked up at her and paled. "I'm sorry, Ginny." He rubbed his eyes. "Maybe I should go home."

"Ron just got here," his mum said. "We're all having dinner together, George. You have to be here too."

"It's fine," Ron quickly said. It was clear that George was feeling under pressure, and the air was thickening with complication to the point that Ron could barely breathe. It had to end somehow. "If George needs to go back home then it's okay with me. I'll see him later."

"No, mum's right," Bill said, keeping his focus on George. "George, we can talk about the bell or not, but you shouldn't leave. We're a family and familiesâ€"

"Please spare me the inspirational pep talk, big brother," George said. "I don't bloody need it right now."

"There's no need for you to talk to him that way," Percy said.

"Oh, and what do you suggest?" George asked. "Should I ignore him? Or not show up to his wedding? Or just be a complete arsehole and assume I'm better than him? Because that's what you've done?"

"George," Ron said in shock.

"George Weasley," his dad said strongly, pounding his fist on the table. "You will not talk to either of your brothers that way ever. Do you understand me?" George was silent and simply looked at him. "George," his dad said again as his neck turned red. Ron

swallowed hard. That only happened when his dad was either stressed or extremely angry about something.

"Yes, sir," George finally said. All his fury seemed to melt away. "Bill, Percy: I'm sorry. Mum, I'm sorry too. I-I reckon I should just apologize to everyone at this table. I'm really sorry." He rubbed his temples. "I'm just not having a very good day."

"It's okay, George," his mum said. "We all have bad days. Let's just be here with each other and make the night better."

"Okay," George said.

Ron patted his arm. "Maybe you and I should help Charlie and Percy look for the bell tonight."

"Can we forget about the bell?" George asked, covering his face. "My night won't get better until we stop talking about it. It's not in the attic. You won't find it."

"It's just lost, George," Charlie said.

"No, it's not," George said. "It's it's broken and it has been for ages." Ron's heart dropped. He practically clawed his nails into Hermione's legs but she didn't move them. He was thankful. Her legs were the only things keeping him sane.

"W-what?" Ginny asked. "How can it be broken?"

"Please, Ginny, don't sound that way," George said quietly.

"What happened?" she asked. She ran a hand through her hair, pulling at the strands like she always did when she was upset. Ron felt a heavy weight press down on his shoulders.

"I was rearranging things," George said, picking at his food with his fingers. "I took the bell with me when I moved into the flat, like you thought I did, Mum. I kept it in a certain place. When I was moving stuff around awhile back, it fell and shattered. I just threw it away. I've been delaying telling you lot because I didn't want to upset anyone."

"No one would get upset, George," Bill said. "We can try to fix it."

"No you can't fix it!" George said almost hysterically. "The bell was destroyed so it's over. We're all just going to have to find a new tradition." He shook his head. "I don't even want it fixed. Fred and I made it together so that we both open it and make it work. Why would I open it by myself? It's a twin toy and there's only me now." More of Ron's air left his lungs. George's words hit him so hard that they hurt. He felt slightly dizzy. He wanted to say something to him, but nothing would be right.

"George," his mum said gently, "we wanted to have the bell just so it could be added to the tree. I'd never ask you to use it. I just wanted I just wanted another piece of Fred with us on

Christmas." His name was finally out in the open, causing Ron's hands to shake. Throughout day he had thought about how all eight of them were together, making it even easier to notice that the ninth person was missing. He jumped as he felt something warm and small touch his arm. It was Hermione's hand. Ron held it securely between his as he swiftly found more air to breathe.

George's features softened. "I understand, Mum, and I'm so sorry that I broke the bell. If you really want another piece of Fred here, then I'll bring something from the flat that's his. The bell was both of ours."

"I wasn't implyingâ€""

"I know," George said, getting up. "Look, I'm gonna go. Iâ€;I'm just really tired." Hearing George say that hurt Ron even more. He understood what the phrase meant. He used it all the time when he was too unsure or scared or hurt to say what he really felt. "I'll be back in a couple of days though and I'll stay over." George patted Ron's shoulder. "I'm glad you're back. Hermione, it's good to see you."

"It's great to see you too," she said, touching his hand as he walked past her.

"Bill, Percy, Dad: I'm really sorry." He kissed their mum on the cheek. "I'm sorry, Mum."

"It's okay, dear," she said, rubbing his cheek with her thumb. "I love you."

"I love you too," he said. He went to the door and gave them all a fast wave. "See you lot later."

Once George was gone, Ron's mum automatically let out a shaky breath. His dad quickly scooted his chair across the table and next to hers. He held her around the waist, letting her bury her face in his chest. "It's okay, Molly," he said.

"How exactly is this okay?" Ron asked hoarsely. "I should go after him."

"No, Ron," Bill said. "George isn't even going home."

"Where's he going?" Harry asked.

"To Angelina's," Percy said. "He spends a lot of time there. She writes to us to let us know."

"Butâ€;what?" Ron asked. It didn't make sense. He couldn't understand how Bill and Percy knew where George was headed when he didn't.

"Ron, George's behavior tonight wasn't new," his dad said. "He's had outbursts like this for a couple of weeks."

"We shouldn't expect any differently," Charlie said. His freckled face and brown eyes were empty of everything Ron had seen when he

first arrived. "The only day George and Fred celebrated more than their birthday was Christmas. George is gutted, but it's normal."

"Exactly," Bill said.

"That didn't seem normal to me," Ginny said.

"It is," Bill reassured.

"Oh, my boy," his mum said.

"He'll be all right," his dad said, stroking her hair and kissing her head. Ron knew that he was being strong for their mum, but his grief was just as visible. "Our boy is okay."

Bill got out of his seat and kneeled beside their parents. "Dad, why don't you and Mum go upstairs and rest? The kids and I will clean up. I'll bring you some pudding in a bit, yeah?"

His mum sniffed, wiping her eyes. "Ronnie just got here."

"I'm fine," Ron said, hurriedly standing up. "I'm not really hungry anymore anyway. Mum, I'm here now and I'm not going anywhere. You and Dad should go rest."

"Okay," she sobbed.

"Come on, Molly," his dad said, helping her up. He slowly walked with her out of the room and up the stairs.

As soon as they were out of sight, Bill sat down, sighing.
"Harry, Hermione: I'm sorry you had to be a part of this."

"Don't be sorry," Hermione said.

"Yeah, we want to help in any way we can," Harry said. "We care about this family too."

"I think the best thing we can do right now is to keep the house as clean and orderly as possible for Mum and Dad," Ginny said.
"Clutter hassles Mum, and when she's stressed, it stresses Dad."

"We can do that," Charlie said. "No problem."

"What about George?" Ron asked. He couldn't believe that he had to ask in the first place. "I'm all for helping Mum and Dad, but he's the one that walked out to fucking Merlin knows where."

"He's at Angelina's, Ron," Percy said. "We told you. He's been like this for awhile. He has good days and bad days."

"It can't be that simple," Ron said.

"Actually, it is," Ginny said. "A couple of days ago was a great day for George."

"He even took a fly with Ginny and me," Harry said.

"I believe that as Christmas draws closer, his bad days will become more constant and worsen. It's completely normal though," Percy said. "He lost his twin and he's really feeling it now."

Ron shook his head. Everyone was talking about George as if they had him figured out but it wasn't right. It didn't feel right to him. "What are we supposed to do then?"

"The only thing we can do for him is to be here and to remind George that he's a part of this family, no matter how much he tries to distance himself," Bill said. "I'm his oldest brother, which is why I'm not letting him get away with anything. None of you should either, get it?"

"Yes, Bill," they all said together.

"Okay," Ron said in defeat. The pit in his chest wasn't going away, but he didn't have anything else to offer. "What should we do now?"

Bill studied the table as if it were a complex word problem he had to solve. "Charlie, go outside and shrink the table so it'll fit back into the shed. When you're done, I'll want you to take care of the trash in here. Hermione and Ginny, I want you two to put the leftover food away. Percy, Ron, Harry: wash the dishes and put them away. I'll take some pudding to Mum and Dad and take care of them for a bit."

"All right, come on everyone," Charlie said. "We've got our orders."

Everyone got up and did exactly as Bill had asked. Ron was in awe of him. Ron thought his insides would burst but Bill was unruffled, smart, and quick on his feet. He was everything an oldest brother was supposed to be. No one really talked as they worked. Ron didn't think that there was anything to say anyway. He felt as if he had walked into a different Weasley family — one that he wasn't really a part of. Ron hated not knowing what was going on with everyone, and he felt helpless when it came to George. If Ron knew where Angelina lived then he would've gone to her flat to make sure George was there.

When Ron was finished washing the dishes, he sat on the couch, rubbing his face. He didn't know what to think or what to do with himself. "Can I sit with you?"

"Please," he said.

Hermione sat next to him, massaging his neck. "Are you okay?"

"It's not me you should be worried about," he said.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Why are you sorry?" he asked.

She frowned, gripping her necklace very hard. "Maybe you should've come straight here when you left camp."

"Don't ever say that," he said, feeling his heart drop even lower in his chest. "Going to your house was the best thing I could've done. I wanted those three days." He touched her face. "Please, don't regret my staying with you. I needed you. I still do."

"You have me, Ron," she whispered. He leaned in, kissing her.

It wasn't much longer until Harry, Ginny, Charlie, and Percy joined them in the room. They all sat quietly, waiting for their next assignment. Ron felt guilty, but he couldn't lie to himself well enough to believe that it wasn't nice to simply be told what to do. At last, Bill came downstairs. He stood in front of the fire, pulling his hair tie out. He ran his fingers through his hair as if the free locks would provide answers. It was horrible timing, but Ron suddenly thought about Olivia. Freeing hair was her nervous twitch as well.

"How are Mum and Dad?" Ginny asked.

"They're okay," Bill said in a heavy breath. "Mum was rather upset but Dad calmed her down. They're both just going to go to sleep. I told them that we cleaned up. It seemed to make them happier."

"Good. It'll be one less thing they have to think about before they go to bed," Hermione said.

"Right. Well, unfortunately, I must go home," Bill said, glaring into the air. "I wish I didn't, but I have to work almost all day tomorrow. I won't get back here for a couple of days. Please, if anything happens with Mum and Dad or George before then, let me know. Try to get me at work and at home, okay?"

"We understand, Bill," Percy said.

Bill nodded. "We'll all be fine. So will George." Ginny got up, giving him a big hug like she didn't want him to go. Ron didn't either. He'd trade places with Bill in an instant so he'd be the one to leave and Bill could stay and help everyone. "It's all right, Ginny," Bill said, rubbing her back and kissing the top of her head. She didn't let him go. He looked up. "Charlie, I'm leaving you in charge."

"I know, Bill," Charlie said. "I'll take care of things. Go get some rest." He held out his hand.

"I'll try," he said, shaking Charlie's hand. He pulled Ginny away, smiling at her. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she said with a nod.

"Good." Bill looked at all of them. "I'll see you lot later." He left through the front door and Ron's throat burned.

"Bill, wait," Ron said, running after him. He ran out of the house and to Bill. Ron gazed at him. It was dark, but he could make out Bill's face and the scar that slashed right across it.

"I-I'm sorry." Ron was sorry for many things: he kept his panic attacks a secret, he hadn't been much help tonight, and he had left their family. Ron only hoped that Bill understood because he couldn't say any of it.

Bill was quiet for a few moments. "I'm sorry too," he said. "I am really glad that you're here. We'll talk more later, all right?"

"But I need to know if we're okay," Ron quickly said. "Even with all this going on, I know you haven't forgotten anything. I haven't either."

"We're okay, Ron," Bill said.

"Don't lie to me," Ron said.

"I'm not," he assured. He gave him a small hug. "I don't have time to hold major grudges. We're good, and I'll see you in a couple of days." He let him go, ruffling his hair. "It's not all bad, Ron. It's just a bad night. Have some fun, yeah?"

"I'll try," he said. Ron watched Bill walk down the path and disapparate. He went back inside. "Bill's gone."

"Well, I think I'm going to go to bed too," Percy said, standing up and looking lost. "I'm tired."

"I'm actually gonna nip to a couple of shops," Charlie said. "The house is running out of a few things. I want to lighten Mum's errands as much as possible."

"That sounds great, Charlie," Ginny said. "Mum was just saying the other day that she needed to go shopping."

He tugged on a piece of her hair. "Now she won't have to."

While Percy helped Charlie create a list of needed supplies, Ron, Hermione, Harry, and Ginny went up to his room. Ron sat on his bed and Hermione sat next to him. She rubbed his thigh. "What's on your mind, sweetheart?"

"What do you think?" he asked dully.

"Percy and Bill were telling the truth," Ginny said. "George isn't always like this."

"Honestly, he was laughing and joking and having a good time the other day," Harry said.

"He wasn't like that tonight," Ron shot. "I think that matters more. He was really upset but I'm hoping that it was mostly because of the bell."

"Your mum explained what it was to me this morning," Harry said. "I'm sorry it's gone."

"So am I," Ginny said. She leaned against Harry's chest. He held her tightly, kissing her head. She sniffed and rubbed her eyes.

"Don't cry," Ron said softly. He wouldn't survive having to watch her lose it too.

"I'm not," she said.

"But I'm right here with you, just in case you do," Harry said.

"I'm not going to cry," she said in a stronger voice. "I'm just."

"You're tired?" Ron asked. It wasn't what he meant but he was learning that it was a Weasley code. They were 'tired' when they really just had so much on their minds that they couldn't put the thoughts into words.

Ginny's brown eyes locked on his and she nodded. "I am."

"Me too," Ron said. He was glad that she understood.

"I'm rather tired myself," Hermione said.

Harry nodded. "Yeah." They all went quiet. The four of them had waited so long to finally be reunited so they could talk and have fun with each other, but Ron figured that it could wait a little longer.

"Is it okay if we all sleep in here?" Ginny asked. "I want to be near everyone in this room tonight."

"Whatever you want, Ginny," Harry said.

Hermione grinned. "That sounds lovely."

The situation was perfect and it was most likely Ron's one chance to cheer Ginny up. "As long as you and Harry can keep it down," he said. "You're not alone in here anymore."

"Us?" Ginny asked, lightening up a bit. "You're the one who moans names in your sleep."

She had taken his bait so Ron decided to push it further. "What?" he said. He looked at Hermione and then Harry. "Which one told you that?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah, I would so I can tell either him or her to bugger off," Ron said. He gestured in Harry's direction. "It was you, wasn't it?" Ron barely had to connect eyes with Harry for him to understand what he was trying to do.

"Oi, don't be a wanker," Harry said, throwing a pillow at him.

"You're the wanker, you wanker," Ron shot, throwing the pillow back at him.

"Stop calling my boyfriend a wanker, twat," Ginny said, brightening even more.

"It's good to know that the maturity level has stayed the same," Hermione said. "Harry, speaking of maturity level." She threw another pillow right at his face.

"Ow! What was that for?" Harry asked.

"You know what that was for!" she said. "It's for what you called Ron."

"What are you on about?" he asked.

Hermione blushed. "Don't act thick. You called him aâ€œ;a dildo."

"Are you mad?" Harry asked. "I didn'tâ€œ;oh." He looked at Ron, dropping his jaw. "You actually asked her?"

"This morning," Ron said. He had completely forgotten about it but he couldn't be more thankful for Hermione's superb memory now. He'd take any opportunity to take their minds off of what had happened downstairs.

"What's a dildo?" Ginny asked.

"You don't know what a dildo is either?" Ron asked. She shook her head. "Harry hasn't called you one?"

"I'd never call her a dildo!" Harry said.

"Can you all please stop saying 'dildo'?" Hermione asked. "It's making me nauseous."

"Just tell me what it is already," Ron said.

"Yeah, I'm curious myself," Ginny said.

"Go on then, Harry," Hermione said.

"Aw, whaâ€œ?" he asked. "Why do I have to?"

"Because you're the one that called Ron one but didn't bother explaining it to him," Hermione said. "I'm not going to clean up your mess. So, explain it to Ron and Ginny. Right now."

"Butâ€œ""

"Do it, Harry James Potter!" Hermione ordered.

Harry sighed, scratching his head. "All right, fine," he breathed. He looked between Ginny and Ron, his expression full of embarrassment. "A dildo isâ€œ;wait. Please, Hermione, don't make me do this. It's really awkward."

"You should've thought about that before you called your best mate one," Hermione said coldly. "Do it in the name of our friendship."

"You just had to go there," Harry said, shaking his head. "You know I'm not going to say no now." He licked his lips and took a deep breath. "So, it's likeâ€;it's a Muggle toy that's in the shape of aâ€;penis. It's not real, but they can look real. I reckon they can even feel pretty much like the real thing â€" meaning theâ€;curves of aâ€;penis and everything."

"Go on," Hermione said.

"Bloody hell," Harry breathed as his face flushed to the darkest shade of red Ron had ever seen. He picked at his cuticles. "They come in different shapes and sizes and colors, and some come with straps and others areâ€;I reckon 'handheld' is the term."

Ron shrugged, still not understanding. "What kind of toy is that? Why would you give one to your kid?"

"Are you taking the piss right now?" Harry asked, honestly seeming gobsmacked.

Hermione looked at Ron in disgust, gasping and putting a hand to her chest. "No â€" no, sweetheart. It's not for children. Oh, no â€" no, no. It's an adult toy. Use your head and think about why someone would want a toy in the shape of a penis."

Ron shook his head for a few seconds but then put the pieces together. "You mean â€" girls shag themselves with it?"

"Wicked," Ginny said.

"Ginny!" Hermione said.

"What? That sounds clever, especially if you're single," she said with a shrug.

"They're not just for singles," Hermione said. "They're not even just for women. Males can use them too, and so can couples â€" heterosexual and homosexual."

"Ah," Ginny said, nodding. "Now the strap ones make more sense."

Ron stood up. "Hold on. You mean to tell me that Harry called me something that girls strap on to shag each other with and that blokes use to give each other one up the arse?"

"Well, when you say it like thatâ€;" Harry didn't get his last word out. He and Ginny both burst into laughter.

"Harry, babe," Ginny said through her laughter, "you have to show me some of these."

"Right, because I keep three of them in my pocket at all times," Harry said, putting his head on her shoulder as he laughed. "I have a green one, a pink one, and a black one."

"Maybe Seamus has one. He's kinky," Ginny said.

"Oi, this isn't funny!" Ron said.

"I agree. It's vile," Hermione said, scrunching her nose. Harry and Ginny kept laughing, so Ron got up and brutally punched Harry's arm.

Harry automatically stopped laughing and stood. "Ow! That really bloody hurt."

"Yeah, Ron," Ginny said, punching his arm.

"Ow!" Ron said, rubbing his arm.

Hermione stood up, glaring at Ginny. She reached out and jabbed her shoulder. "There â€“ now it's even. Can we all stop fighting violence with more violence like your mum said?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry, Ron," Harry said, holding out his hand.

Ron slapped it away. "We'll be even when I find something equally horrible to call you."

"We really shouldn't be calling each other anything," Hermione said. "Sleep is a good idea right now. Besides, Harry and I have to get up early tomorrow."

"For what?" Harry asked.

She placed a hand on her hip, rolling her eyes. "I swear your memory is as bad as your comparisons of people and toys. I've told you at least a dozen times through letters. When I saw you at the train station I reminded you again that your appointment with the optometrist is tomorrow. I called the office this morning at my house to confirm the date and time."

"Bleeding bollocks," Harry grumbled.

"You can swear like an Auror in training all you want but we're still going," she said, getting out her pajamas. "If you're a good boy then maybe I'll buy you an ice cream afterwards."

"Sorted," Harry said happily. "Thank you."

"That better be all you buy him," Ron mumbled, suddenly feeling put out.

"Don't start that, Ron," Hermione said. "We won't be gone long."

After they all got dressed for bed, Ron and Hermione settled in his bed whereas Harry and Ginny got into Harry's slightly extended cot. Ron extinguished the light. "Goodnight Hermione, goodnight Ginny, have the worst bloody night of your life, Harry, you dickhead."

"Ronald," Hermione breathed.

"Actually, according to the rules of a dildo," Harry said, "you're the dickhead." He and Ginny started to snort and snicker again. Right as Ron opened his mouth, Hermione pressed her lips against his.

"Let it go, sweetheart," she whispered.

"I will if you kiss me again," he said.

"Oi, you're not being quiet," Harry said.

"Just like that, 'Mione," Ron moaned. "You're taking me there!"

"That's it - I'm leaving," Ginny said.

"He's obviously not being serious!" Hermione said, slapping Ron's chest while quickly tapping his crotch with her other hand. "Let's all just stay quiet, not joke about anything, and go to sleep." She kissed Ron. "I love you."

"I love you too," he said.

"Do you love me?" Ginny asked.

"Yes," Ron said.

"What about me?" Harry asked.

"I hate you," Ron said.

"That's cruel," Harry said. "I can feel my heart breaking."

"That's actually my foot kicking against your breastplate," Ron said.

"How about you both shut up before I leave â€“ and you know I'm not joking about that!" Hermione snapped.

"Yes ma'am," Ron and Harry said together.

"Wow, how'd you do that?" Ginny asked.

"Years of practice," Hermione said. "I'll show you one day." Ron wanted to retort but he wouldn't risk Hermione getting out of his bed. Instead, he put his stomach to her back, hanging his arm over her hip. He snuggled against her, taking in the scent of her hair. He was once again sleeping in his bed with Hermione cuddled against him. Though it was all he had wanted for months, too much was going on in his head to allow him to fully enjoy it. Try as he may, he simply couldn't get to sleep.

Ron turned over on his back, wiping his forehead. He was sweating for no real reason, and he was the only one in his room apparently not asleep. He turned his head to Hermione. She was still facing away from him but he could tell that she was sleeping peacefully. Her body moved slowly and steadily. Ron could hear the faint breaths coming from her. He kissed the back

of her head before quietly slipping out of bed. He scooted his pillow next to her so it touched her back. He knew that she liked to sleep with their bodies touching somehow, but it was the best he could do until he came back.

He padded over to the door but stopped. He looked at Harry and Ginny in their cot. Ginny was curled up, almost in a ball, with her head against Harry's chest. He slept with his head laying on hers and his arm draped over her shoulder. It looked uncomfortable to Ron but he knew that it worked for them. It was Harry's way of keeping her safe and her way of letting herself be vulnerable to him. No matter how annoying they were sometimes together, Ron didn't want Harry or Ginny with anyone else.

He went downstairs to make a cup of tea but saw his Mum sitting on the couch, staring into the fire. Ron simply stood still, watching her. She looked so small and almost lost, like George had. He had left his mum â€" had stopped taking care of her â€" so now he had no idea how she was doing. She seemed strong, but he knew that people could 'seem' like anything. The only upside was that she wasn't crying or gazing hopelessly into pictures of the twins.

"Mum?" he said softly.

She jumped a little. "Oh, Ron."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I really need to work on that."

"That's all right, dear," she said. "Come sit." He sat next to her on the couch. Being so close and alone with her, he finally noticed how washed out her skin was and how exhausted she seemed. Her brown eyes were heavy with feeling and the weight from the emotion in them added to Ron's shoulders. "Couldn't sleep?" she asked.

"Not really," he said. "I was gonna make some tea."

"Have mine," she said, gesturing to it. "I thought I wanted some but I really just wanted to sit here. Your father is asleep but he needs to be. He has to work tomorrow."

Ron took a sip of the tea. It felt good going down his throat that was aching for some reason. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm sorry that I got upset earlier."

"Don't be," he said. "I understand."

"Your brother has beenâ€;in his own world for awhile," she said. "He has really come around but there's still so much pushing him down. Fred is pushing him down."

Ron took another sip of tea, staring into the fire. He was relieved to know that other people noticed how much weight George seemed to be carrying. "Do you think he broke the bell on purpose?"

She was quiet for awhile. "I'm choosing to believe that he didn't." Ron nodded, not feeling as optimistic as she was. He had seen Fred's room. Ron wouldn't be surprised if George broke it while trashing the place. "Oh, Ron, I didn't want any of this on your first day back. I wanted everything to be pleasant. I wanted to hear all about your time at Lambrick, and at the Grangers, and if you had a good time."

"I had a great time," Ron said, stepping out of his thoughts. It was her time, not his. "Mr. and Mrs. Granger were nice to me and they showed me a lot of their world. I really think they want to build a relationship with me and with our family."

"Yes, your dad and I have been talking to them briefly through letters," his mum said. "I'm glad they like you. They should. You're a good influence on their daughter."

"I'm the good influence?" he asked.

"Don't sound so surprised," she said. "You rub off on her in a lot of different ways and that's how it's supposed to be in a relationship." She sighed. "Knowing you were treated well at her house is one less thing I have to worry about now."

"You also don't have to worry about how things went today," he said. "I told you, Mum, I don't need a party or a big dinner or anything special to enjoy myself. I'm a simple person. I just want my family. It's what I got, so I had a great day."

She beamed, taking his hand. "That's what your father told me you'd say."

"He's a genius," Ron said with a smile.

"So are you," she said. "You're so smart and you've gotten to be so handsome." She pinched his cheek. "I have the most handsome sons. All of you are precious." Her moment of happiness quickly faded. Ron had to give it back to her.

"Mum," he said, squeezing her hand, "George is going to be okay. He'll be back, and what we do on Christmas won't even matter because we'll all be together again. All we need is us."

"I know, dear," she said, sitting back against the cushion. "It's why I can't let anything break us apart." She closed her eyes for a moment and sighed. Ron looked at her before taking another sip of tea. She suddenly smiled. "You may be eighteen, but you've given me that look since you were a baby. I figure it still means the same thing."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Are you too proud to cozy up with your mother or is it against some sort of camp policy to get close to mummy?" she asked.

Ron chuckled and blushed. His mum was so fiery, and he hated that she'd lost some of it during the war. He'd give anything to get

it all back for her. "I'm not too proud, and if it is a code, then I'll have to break it. Can I?"

"That's something you'll never have to ask me, dear," his mum said. "I'll always want to hold my baby boy." Ron scooted back, resting his head against her shoulder. She wrapped her arms around him, kissing his head. "I love you, Ron. I'm so happy you're back."

"I'm glad I'm back too," he said, closing his eyes, "and I love you, Mum." He nestled his face more into her. "I'm home and I'm not going anywhere," he whispered. He took in the warm smell of her and the good feeling of her protection and love. Ron found himself yawning and getting rather sleepy. He liked that he didn't have to be a tough trainee, or a dutiful brother, or even a selfless friend and boyfriend in the moment. He only wanted to be a son, and he wanted his mum to take care of him and keep his bad thoughts and nightmares away like she had done when he was younger.

* * *

Ron stretched his arm out, touching the space next to him. When he didn't feel anything, he opened his eyes. Hermione's space was empty. For a second, he panicked, but then he remembered that she had an appointment with Harry. He turned his head to the side to confirm it. Harry's cot was empty. Ginny was most likely back in her room. Ron sat up, yawning. He looked at his watch on his side table. "Fucking hell," he said. It was the earliest that he had woken up in days.

He started to scratch his legs. The pajamas he had on were itchy, so he rolled out of bed, crawling over to his bag that had his Lambrick stuff in it along with his more comfortable shorts. He dug around before pulling out his Quidditch magazine from Olivia. He stared at it for awhile. He abruptly put it away, taking out his running clothes and his severely beaten trainers instead. He grabbed his broom then headed to the toilet to pee and brush his teeth.

When he got downstairs, both his mum and Percy were sitting at the kitchen table. Percy was the first to notice him. "What's that all over your shirt?"

Ron peered down at it, tugging at his shirt so he could get a better look. "Sweat, mud, puke, and probably a few other things you don't want to know about."

"It smells, dear," his mum said.

"I don't notice anymore. It's what I always wear," he said. He sat at the table. His mum looked better. At the time that they parted, she had still seemed troubled, but there was something lighter about her now.

"I'm surprised you're up this early," Percy said.

"Camp habit," Ron said. "I'm actually awake a lot earlier than this when I'm there."

"Why are you up now?" she asked.

"I figured I'd run and go for a fly around the property," he said. "I haven't been watching what I eat so the least I can do is keep exercising. I shouldn't stop training just because I don't have an instructor in front of me."

"That is exactly the mentality you should be having, Ron," Percy said, patting his arm. "I'm proud of you."

Ron shrugged and took a banana from the fruit bowl on the table.
"What are you two doing up?"

"I'm usually up this early," his mum said. "After your father wakes up, it's hard for me to go back to sleep. Once I'm awake there's no hope for me."

"Same goes for me," Percy said. "I got up to get some water and I've been wide awake ever since."

"I, luckily, can't say the same thing," Ron said, stuffing almost the entire banana into his mouth at once.

"I think it's a Prewitt trait," his mum said. She looked at Percy and grinned, pinching his cheek. "You look more like your father, but I've always said that you take more after my side of the family. You probably act the most like my family."

He smiled as well. "Thanks for this blessed trait, Mum."

"I only give you the best, Percy," she said. They kept smiling at each other. Ron could tell that their happiness was sincere. Ron had seen how much his mum had missed Percy while he was away from them, and it was obvious that Percy needed her more than he would say. Ron wanted them to be close to each other so he gently got up so as not to disturb their moment too much.

"I'll be back later," he said.

"You don't want a jumper or anything?" she asked.

"I'll be fine in this, Mum," he said, going out through the kitchen door. He swung his broom over his shoulder, walking down the dirt path and away from their house. The circle around the property wasn't anything compared to the trail at Lambrick so he decided to run eight laps around it. He stretched his legs, arms, neck, and shoulders, and he heightened his energy level by jumping in place. When he thought he was ready, he gripped his broom on his shoulders and took off.

Right away Ron could feel the strain from not exercising, but he didn't let the burn get to him. Ron kept a running pace, feeling

appreciative when he started to ache. The physical pain was something he could force himself to overcome. Ron told himself over and over that he could fight off the burn and fatigue. The more he ran, the better he felt, and the more he started to believe that he would be okay. If he was okay, then he could help his family get better as well. He could help George, Bill, Ginny, his parents, and everyone else who depended on him. People were always going to depend on him, so he always had to be ready. It was something John had told him but that Ron now believed in wholeheartedly.

Ron closed his eyes around his fifth lap. He had worked so hard to forget about Lambrick, but what he had learned there was preparing him for more than just being an Auror. It was preparing him to be a man, a better person, to the people that loved him most. Ron couldn't allow himself to forget everything. If he did, then he would let everyone down, including himself. He stopped after his eighth lap, dropping his broom. Ron placed his hands on his knees, spitting several times. He dry heaved and kneaded the stitches in his sides. Ron was throbbing and his chest, throat, and ears burned, but he still had ten flying laps to do. He made himself believe that Alan was in his ear, blowing his whistle and telling him that he expected better from him. Ron pretended as if Jack was mounting for his first lap beside him, with his perfect hair flowing in the wind. He acted as if he could see Harry coming up the trail to begin his laps as well. Ron had to show Alan that he was worth it. He needed to finally show Harry and Jack that he could fly just as well as they could. He mounted his Firebolt and took to the sky.

Every touch down and mount felt as if Ron was scraping off parts of his lungs, but it didn't stop him. He flew and navigated around the property until all ten laps were completed. Ron touched down for the final time, collapsing to the ground. He lay limply, letting the burn and pulsations take over his body. He even felt as if the grass was spinning under him. Ron had most likely overworked himself but he had survived. He had pushed himself and succeeded in his task. He grinned, wiping his brow. It didn't matter that Alan, Jack, and Harry hadn't been there to see it. Ron knew what he had accomplished. It was enough to make him feel like he was in control of something.

Ron went back inside to take an extremely hot shower where the water soothed his aching muscles. He lathered himself up with soap, massaging his fingertips into his skin. As he washed his hair, he dropped his head, allowing the water to run down his face. Ron stood directly under the showerhead so the beads of water hit his scalp first. It sent a tingle to his toes and he moaned. Ron pressed his hands against the wall in front of him. "You're okay, Ron," he said. "You're fine, so you have to help everyone else become fine too. Just be here with them and do what they need you to do. Be who they need you to be. The price of that doesn't matter. Nothing else can matter." He repeated his new promise to himself a few times before he finished rinsing his hair and got out of the shower.

Ron scrubbed his head with a towel, slipping on his shorts and jeans back in his room. He searched around for socks, feeling raw

but otherwise peaceful. Ron kneeled down and started looking through his bag. Hermione's was right next to his. He knew his socks weren't in there but other things were. He rummaged through her clean clothes. The woman packed fifteen of everything to be on the safe side. Ron pulled out a plain tan bra. It wasn't the most impressive one in her bag so he reckoned that it was the one she would miss the least.

"Hello, gorgeous," he said, stuffing it under his running clothes. He knew that he was a prick "most likely barmy" but he had to even up his knickers-to-bra ratio. He snickered and finally found a pair of socks.

There was a knock at his door. "Come in," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. You said I could come in."

"You can," Ron said, standing up.

Ginny closed the door behind her then sat on his bed. Her mane of ginger hair was so long now that her upper arms were almost completely lost under it. She smirked at him. "That's right. You're Mr. Muscle now so you get off on showing women your limbs."

He rolled his eyes, throwing a dirty sock at her. "Correction: I only get off on showing one woman and that's Hermione. I don't care what you see because you're not a 'woman', you're my little sister." He pulled on his Canons shirt before sitting next to her.

"Like I haven't heard that already from my four other brothers," she said. "You lot are gonna have to come to terms with me one of these days. I'm seventeen now. I survived a war. I'm a Quidditch captain for fuck's sake. I'm a woman who has tits. I jiggle them all the time in my boyfriend's face when we shag."

"Oi!" Ron said, throwing his towel at her face. "If you want Harry to live, then you'll never say that again. Actually, if you want to live, then you'll never put yourself, tits, and shagging in the same sentence. You're vile."

"And you've been hanging around Hermione for too long. 'Vile'?" Ginny asked with a laugh.

Ron shoved her and smiled. "Shut it, prat." He picked up the towel, buffing it on her face once more.

"Ew, it's all warm and wet!" she said, snatching it away. "I don't want to know where this was." He did it again as she hit his arms. "Okay! Okay, you win! I won't say those words in the same sentence again."

Ron threw the towel on the ground. "You're too easy."

"You're a git," Ginny said, hitting him.

He tugged on a thick lock of her hair. "Have you seen Charlie today? I went to his room but he's not there."

"He went into work with Dad," she said. "I reckon he's going to follow him around today and help him. Charlie said it's because he always enjoyed doing it as a kid, but I think he just wants to keep an eye on him. We've got Mum covered so Charlie doesn't want Dad to be alone."

"That sounds more like him," Ron said. "I'm glad he's here." Though things were rocky, Charlie was the constant light that everyone seemed to need. The bloke was just so good at making people smile and feel good.

"Me too," she said. "I'm glad you all are here." She looked down, fiddling with the hole in her jeans. Ginny was another family member that 'seemed' to be okay but Ron was still bothered by her. He at last had her alone so he needed to seize the opportunity. Everyone had told him that Ginny had missed him but he knew that she was too tough to make the first vulnerable move. He'd make it for her. Ron would do anything and everything for Ginny.

"Soâ€¦Harry and Hermione must've left rather early," he said.

"They did," she said. "You're such a heavy sleeper, Ron. Harry said 'dildo' about five times but you never stirred."

"He's a prick," he said.

"Yeah," she chuckled, "but he's funny too."

"He really is," Ron said. "He's funny and disgusting and happy here. It's nothing like how he is at camp. I reckon it's something you bring out of him."

"I can't take all the credit," she said. "I'm not blind. I know how much he loves me, but there's nothing compared to how he is with you and Hermione."

"Ginnyâ€""

"It's okay," she said, nodding. "I'm glad someone makes him like that. I'm happy for all three of you."

It wasn't the direction Ron was going for, but he could steer it. "It doesn't mean he's not mad about you," he said.

"I understand," Ginny said, gazing at the cot as if she could see Harry on it. "He's been really amazing. I can tell that he's opening up more to me. I know his feelings. I just hope he knows mine."

"He does," Ron said. "He talks about you a lot at camp. He always gets this prat look on his face when he does too."

She bit her lip, rubbing her legs together. "How's he doing there?"

"Brilliantly. You don't have to worry about him," Ron said. "He does well in just about everything they give us to do. Harry hasn't changed at all in that way."

"I didn't really mean like that," she said. "He's Harry bloody Potter so I know he's doing well with all the training. I guess I mean with the other stuff."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well," she said. "Like when I read that exposÃ©, your part was really great but Harry'sâ€œit sort of hurt to read. I just want to make sure he's doing okay. We talk, but there's only so much that we share with each other." She looked at him. "I'm not asking for the world, Ron. I just want to make sure that he's staying okay." She stared right at him. He knew that she wanted honesty.

"He's fine," Ron said. "I was sitting right next to him as he said all that stuff for the write-up. He took everything well and he usually always does. Harry has his moments, but he pulls through. I'd say that I'm taking care of him, but Harry does most of the work."

"All right," she said, "I trust you." Ron wasn't sure how he felt about her saying those words. There was still a lot that she didn't know but it wasn't the time or his place to tell her. He had to change the subject.

"So can I ask you the same thing about Hermione?" he said. "How is she doing at school?"

"Hermione's different from the way she is here too," Ginny said. "I mean, the Hermione you've always known at school is more or less the same one that walks the halls now, but she's a little different."

Ron wasn't sure if he wanted to know what that meant, but he had to find out anyway. "How?" he asked.

"She'sâ€œquieter," Ginny said. "She's stiffer and just less relaxed in a lot of ways. In class, she's tense, a lot of the times in the Great Hall she's on edge, and even in the library she's uptight. Hermione always keeps herself busy too."

"She told me," he said. "Her Head Girl duties are mental."

"It's not just that," Ginny said, shaking her head. "She does loads of other things all the time. Yes, she's got her duties and N.E.W.T.s, which are horrible enough, but she's also a role model, heroine, friend, and a pseudo sister for me I reckon." Ginny let out a breath. "She's just all over the place."

Ron felt a bit more weight touch his shoulders. He knew that Hermione kept busy, but he didn't like the idea of her exhausting herself. "Does she ever seem not tense?"

"When she's talking about you," Ginny said with a smile, "or Harry. When she does something exceptionally well in class she gets excited, and Dean makes her laugh a lot. When she, Dean, Luna, and I find time to ourselves and talk, then Hermione's brilliant." Ginny patted his hand. "She's stiff but she's all right, Ron. She has good days and bad days."

Ron was already so sick of people saying that. It didn't mean anything to him. "Are you taking care of her?" he asked.

"I do my best to pull her out of the rubbish every once in a while," Ginny said. "Don't worry about Hermione. She's fine."

"So what about you?" he asked. "Are you doing fine at school?" He had meant to be smoother but he needed to stop his worrying over Hermione. He'd never function if he didn't.

Ginny's humor faded. "I try to be," she said. "It's hard because I hate school. The only reason why I'm still there is because I get to play Quidditch."

"Why do you hate it?" he asked. Ron had millions of reasons why he hated school, but Ginny had never expressed the same ill will.

"It's boring, cramped, and people still stare at me and want to talk about what happened," she said. She gazed at the floor, her eyes widening more and more. "It's not even the class work that angers me, it's the classroom and having eyes on me; it's walking the stupid corridors and hearing those' small sounds in my ear." She shook her head. "I know I'm mental."

Ron's heart began to beat faster. He didn't know what to say, so he decided to be honest. "You're not mental," he said, "I hear those sounds too. I hear them all the time."

"Really?" she asked. "I thought I was alone."

"You're never alone, Ginny," Ron said, taking her hand.

She held his back. "Well, I think George hears them too then," she said. "It has to be why this time of year has been so hard on him."

There was a question burning on his tongue and he hoped that she would answer it. "Ginny," he said softly, "what's going on with George?"

She looked straight at him again. "I don't know."

He nodded. "What's going on with you?"

"I don't know," she said again. "I came back here and Mum and Dad weren't as cheerful, and George was acting really distant again. It started to worry me. It still does. I haven't felt this anxious in months and it's doing my head in." She ran her fingers through her hair, tugging on the strands and sighing. "I hate this, Ron. All this emotion and anxiety' I don't want this to be me anymore."

Ginny looked like she was close to tears. Ron had to do something. He wanted to hold her and tell her that everything would be okay, but it wasn't what she wanted. More emotion would only drive Ginny away. He thought about what she needed from him and about the things that made her happy. It couldn't be about him right now. Everything Ron had in the world was for Ginny in the moment. "Then let's bugger those things right now. How about we toss the old Quaffle around?" he asked. He quickly stood and picked up his broom. "You can ride this."

Ginny rubbed her eyes. "W-what?"

"I know you want to and I finally have the chance to let you," he said. "Take it."

"I don't know, Ron," she said, taking the Firebolt anyway.

"Come on, it's a Firebolt," he said.

"I've been on Harry's before," she said.

"Mine is lighter and faster," Ron said. "Just try it out."

She smiled widely, looking excited. "Okay. That sounds brilliant."

Ron went downstairs with her, feeling better. He was way too sore to fly around again, but if it would make Ginny feel better then he'd do it all day. He warned her of the speed and sensitive steering on his broom, but she adapted with no trouble. Hermione hadn't exaggerated. Ginny was fantastic in the air. There was an easiness and pleasure in her features that Ron hadn't seen in ages. They flew for awhile, then Ron got his magazine and showed it to her. Ron and Ginny forgot about flying and simply sat on the couch. They flipped through the magazine, reading the articles together and discussing everything they saw and wanted to buy. Ron enjoyed spending time with Ginny alone. Conor had been right. It was good for the both of them to spend time with each other and just be brother and sister.

Harry and Hermione came back later that afternoon. Hermione explained how Harry had unsuccessfully learned to put in contacts properly. Harry said that he preferred his glasses anyway. He tossed his contacts in the bin, but Hermione said that some good had come out of the trip. She now knew Harry's current vision so she could magically get his glasses adjusted. Ron noticed how giggly and close Harry and Hermione acted toward each other. They had most likely strolled around the Muggle world together, talking about things that Ron would never be privileged to know. It made his stomach hurt. He trusted them, but he'd never feel completely comfortable knowing that they did and talked about things without him.

The four of them spent most of the day in Ron's room. Hermione and Ginny talked about school, the professors, Ginny's Quidditch team, and Hogwarts in general. Ron and Harry stayed quiet and listened attentively. He and Harry hadn't been the only ones to

leave the comfort of home. Their girlfriends were in the middle of their own journey. Ron barely moved his eyes away from Hermione as she went on in-depth about her coursework and duties to the school. Her brow was pursed but she didn't show her stiffness. It didn't matter. Ron knew it was there.

During dinner that night, Ron made himself clear his mind as Charlie told them all fascinating stories about his work with dragons. It eased the tension in Ron's shoulders. Charlie was just so animated. He had everybody in tears of laughter when he discussed how a rookie on his shift had to help nurse a baby dragon born into captivity. There was joy around the table that Ron hadn't felt the night before. Looking to the empty chair on his left, he couldn't help but to wonder if that was due to George's absence that the atmosphere was lighter. However, he refused to accept that any part of his current happiness was due to that.

Ron loved and worried about George; there was no reason for Ron to feel relieved that George wasn't there, putting everyone in a state. He repeated the idea in his head, fighting down the conflicting voice that kept telling him he actually was thankful that the chair on his left was empty.

Following dinner, Ron cleaned his room after receiving a lecture from Hermione about proper hygiene. He grumbled as he cleaned out his trunk. Ron came across his journal. Picking it up, his mind instantly jumped to one idea. He got up and went to Percy's room. The door was cracked. "Percy?"

"Come in, Ron."

Ron opened the door. Percy was packing his bag. "You leaving?"

"Regrettably," Percy said. "I have to work tomorrow, but I'll be back when I get off. Why? Do you need something?"

"I just wanted to show you something but if you're busyâ€""

"No, I want to see it," Percy said, motioning for him to come in. He sat on his bed. Ron sat next to him. He took a glimpse at Percy's working table but only for a second. He couldn't think about shagging Hermione against it now. "Ron?"

"Sorry," he said, shaking his head. Ron handed him his journal. "I want to show you this. Open it."

"Am I allowed to see what's in here?" Percy asked. "I don't want to break any rules." Ron wanted to laugh but he held it back. He could see the apparent curiosity in Percy's blue eyes, but it would never be enough to make Percy want to break rules. His brother had more self-control than any ten people put together.

"I reckon it'll be okay," Ron said. "I'm not showing everyone but you bought this for me, so you should see it."

"Thank you," Percy said, at once opening the journal.
"Remarkable," he said, flipping through the pages. "I didn't think you'd fill so much of this up already."

"I didn't either," Ron said. "I honestly didn't think that I'd use it at all but I'll need another soon."

"I'll always get them for you. Just let me know when you need one," Percy said as he read through Ron's notes. "Are these your original annotations?"

"Yes," Ron said. "I take what I learn in class and rewrite the notes based on what I would do differently, or I at least try to come up with different ways to achieve the same result." He turned to a page that had one of his defensive plays on it. "See, I make a lot of drawings of my ideas because sometimes it's easier than finding the right words."

"I can see that," Percy said. He moved his fingers around the outline of a hideaway Ron had created to prepare himself for an exam. Percy smiled at him. "This is brilliant, Ron," he said. "I thought you were impressive when you talked about exercising this morning, but this is so much more than that. I'm glad you've been able to use this. I can tell just by the detail you added that this area of your training means a lot to you."

"It does," Ron said. "Navigational Studies is complicated, tremendously in-depth, and tedious, but it's the best thing that's happened to me since going to Lambrick. I love it, Percy. I love everything about it and I'm great at it." He rubbed his neck. "Actually, I'm the best at it."

Percy patted his back. "That's a good feeling, isn't it?" Ron shrugged. "You don't have to be embarrassed or think you're arrogant because you know you're the best. It's good to recognize your talents." He flipped through the journal once more, shaking his head before handing it back to Ron. "And you seem to have a vast amount of talent."

Ron turned to the first page, gazing at his notes over Dante's Offense. "I never thought I'd be good at something like this."

"Which is why it probably means even more to you, right?" Percy asked. "This is your 'one thing'. It's something that's unlike everything else — something special."

Ron simply looked at Percy. It was another one of those times when Ron felt like he didn't have to find the right words to explain things to him. They just understood each other. "It is special to me. I don't want to lose it."

"You won't," Percy said casually. "You'll fill up this journal and the next one and every one after that because this skill is something that's in you, Ron. It's something that you'll keep with you always, even if you never become an Auror or use navigation for whatever reason." He stood up and continued packing. "It's why I got the journal for you, Ron. It can be something just for you that always makes you feel intelligent and

better than the rest. I think it's important to feel that way every now and then. It's healthy."

Ron stood up too, watching as Percy perfectly folded his shirts and trousers into his bag. Everything about his life was so neat and structured and textbook. Ron wondered what Percy's 'one thing' was because, to Ron, Percy's 'one thing' was everything. "Do you have something like this?" he asked.

"Nothing as exciting as a tactics journal," Percy cheeked, "but there are certain things I keep in my life to remind myself of the good parts of me. Organization and punctuality are at the top of the list. As you can see, I use them all the time." He adjusted his glasses on his nose and zipped up his bag.

"Percy," Ron said. Percy stopped, looking at him. Ron needed to say something. He didn't want his brother to think that he had to clean every spec of dirt in existence be a good person. "Iâ€œI know George didn't mean what he said to you at dinner."

Percy's shoulders slumped. "He didn't have to mean them, Ron. They're true."

"But they're not the only truths anymore," he swiftly said. "You've got a lot of good parts to you. Everyone knows that, including Bill and George." Percy leaned against his desk. He let out a shaky breath before reaching under his glasses and rubbing his eyes. The act hit Ron hard in the chest. Hermione had done the exact same thing the night her parents got on her about tires and light bulbs. There had been something distressed about Hermione then, and Ron felt it from Percy now.

Ron figured that he knew what to say. "You know, I think if you would've just thrown your clothes into the bag, you'd still be a good brother and son."

Percy stopped rubbing his face, slowly grinning at him. "Thank you, but I'm still going to fold my clothes neatly into my bag."

"I reckoned you'd say that," Ron said. He nudged Percy's shoulder. Percy nudged him back with his.

"Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay at camp?" Percy asked.

"I'm surviving it," he said honestly. "Are you okay here?"

"I'm getting better," Percy said. "I'll honestly be happier once the holiday is over."

Ron nodded. "I think everyone will."

Ron eventually left Percy's room and went back to his own. Hermione was the only one inside. She was lying on his bed, reading John's new book. He bit his lip as he viewed her in all

her gorgeousness. Ron wanted to spend the rest of his life walking in on her reading, watching her become more beautiful with every sentence she read. "I can feel your eyes on me," Hermione said, turning another page.

"You're lucky that's all you feel," he said, closing his door. He sat on the edge of his bed. "The prats?"

"Are in Ginny's room for the night," she said. "They were rather giggly, so I don't think they'll be out anytime soon." She put her bookmark in, then closed the book. "I think it's just you and me tonight, Ron."

"Thank bloody Merlin," Ron said, climbing into the bed with her. Hermione opened her legs so Ron could get between them and rest his head on her stomach. He ran his fingertips over her smooth legs that weren't covered by her shorts as she played with his hair. "I like this."

"Me too," she said. "It's been a long time since we've done this."

"Well, we have the rest of my holiday to make up for lost time," he said, kissing her thigh.

Hermione made zigzag patterns on his scalp, causing him to get goose bumps. "I missed you while you were away," she said.

"I was talking to Percy," Ron said. "I wanted to show him my tactics journal."

"Was he impressed?" she asked.

"He was, which is saying a lot," he said.

"I think it's sweet that this is a part of your life that you can share with him," she said. "It's something you two can always have together. He cares about you so much, Ron. You should see the way he looks at you."

"He's always been the most protective of me," Ron said. He turned a little so he could look up at her. "You two are a lot alike."

"I'll take that as a compliment," she said. "I really admire Percy. I always have."

"That better be all you feel for him," he mumbled.

Hermione rolled her eyes, tapping his nose. "Hush, Ronald. I can find interests in your brothers. I think everyone in this family has wonderful qualities. All you should care about is which Weasley male I get into bed with."

"Fancy that -- you're in bed with me right now," Ron said.

"Curious," she said, putting a finger to her chin. "What could that suggest?"

He sat up, taking one of her hands. He kissed her fingertips. "I reckon it suggests that I'm the lucky Weasley."

She gave him a look. "Why are you trying to be charming?"

"It's not something I have to try. I'm just being honest," Ron said. "I can't tell you enough how much you've helped me in John's class."

"I'm glad I could help you, sweetheart," she said.

He held his hand against hers, taking in the differences in size and color. "Yeah, all the nagging was worth it," he said.

She pinched his nipple. "I don't nag. I instruct."

"Ow! Watch the nips, love!" Ron whined. "Well, if you don't nag, then I don't swear. I merely disburse colorful words and phrases."

"You're such an arse," she said, hitting him.

He took her wrist. "Tsk, tsk, Ms. Granger. I'll have to take fifty points away from Gryffindor for that insult."

"You can't," Hermione said. "You're not the Head Boy or a professor. You have no power over me."

"Is that right?" He pushed her back against his pillows, straddling her. She tried to get out of his grasp, but all she did was rub against him so much that it made him rather stiff in the trousers and caused her to become rather flushed. Ron put his forehead against hers. They were both a little out of breath. He gazed at Hermione and she stared right back at him. She stopped wiggling but he didn't let her go.

"Ron," she said.

"Uh-huh?" he asked.

She licked her lips, pushing up against his body. "I want to use you again."

He ran his thumb over her lips. "I was hoping you'd say that," he said before kissing her with bruising force. Hermione moaned, wrapping her arms around his neck. Ron hugged her waist, deepening their kiss. He brushed his tongue against her lips, which she parted. She tasted so good. Ron groaned, feeling more alive by the second. They kept kissing each other, holding on to each other's bodies closely. Eventually, they parted for air. Ron tried to control his breathing. He could see a deep yearning in Hermione's eyes.

"I'll give you anything you want," he said, almost in a daze.

"Just give me you," she whispered, tugging on the hem of his shirt. He fully cooperated as she pulled it off. Hermione pressed her lips up against his again, her tongue pushing itself into his

mouth, pulling his entire body tightly against her once more. "Ron," she panted against his lips, "I love your body so much. You make me mental every time I see you. Mental and terribly wet."

He groaned in her mouth before breaking out of the kiss. "Fucking hell, 'Mione. I want to feel for myself." She gently pushed him away, wasting no time lifting and pulling off her shirt, revealing her clear, tan skin. His eyes roamed all over her torso and at her delicious breasts tucked inside her bra. "You are so damn beautiful." He wanted to touch her â€" taste her â€" but an annoying voice kept prodding in the back of his mind. "Are you sure that Harry and Ginny will stay away?"

She laughed gently. "Do you really want to know how I know for certain?"

"Nope," he rushed. "Don't kill the mood. I was just checking." He reached over to his side table, grabbing her wand and handing it to her. "Take care of the spells, will you?" He then got out of bed and went over to Harry's trunk. He opened it. Right under his jeans were tubes of Prophylactic Potion. Ron popped the stopper off one, drinking the horrible brew down. He retched at the taste of muddy pickle juice.

"You didn't have to steal from Harry, Ron," Hermione said. "I could've said the spell."

"I know, but this is one less shag I have to worry about Harry having with my sister," he said. He dropped the empty tube and stopper right on top of Harry's jeans before closing the trunk lid and walking back over to Hermione.

Hermione shook her head, smirking. "You are such a good friend."

"When the friend is putting his hands on my sister, there's room for me to act like a dick," he said.

"Speaking of dick," Hermione said, peeking down at his jeans.

Ron gasped. "You cheeky witch."

"What â€" were you not making another play on words?" she asked.

"Oh, you need to leave that kind of banter to the professionals," he said.

"Just take your trousers off and sex me up," Hermione demanded.

"Bloody hell," he said, unzipping his fly and kicking his jeans off. "I don't know if I should feel more irritated at your bossiness or cheapened by the way you commanded that."

"Feel both if it gets you over here faster," she said, moving the sheets away and laying back on the mattress.

Ron walked over to her, examining the slender and supple body that she was offering to him. "You're rather eager tonight," he said.

"That's because you're standing in front of me with all your goods right in my face," Hermione said. "You know what your body does to me. I have a serious condition, Ron. I just keep wanting you all the time."

He climbed back into bed, straddling her once more. Hermione's voice was throaty and he was finding it harder to breathe as the air shallowly left his lungs. Ron tugged at her shorts. She lifted her hips so he could pull them off. His mouth watered as her knickers came into his line of vision, teasing him. "Your condition can't be any worse than mine. You're so fucking incredible that I would eat these knickers right off of you and probably enjoy every fiber."

Hermione whimpered, making a grab at him. She kissed him, and this time it was her tongue in his mouth. It felt as if she was searching him, demanding to know him again and all the things she had missed from their time apart. Hermione yanked on his hair to move his mouth away. "Ronâ€;you â€" you don't have to eat my knickers. You can feast on me."

He let out a low breath, slowly licking his lips. "You have no idea how badly I've been wanting to."

She kissed his cheek. "I won't make you wait any longer," she whispered in his ear. He gave her a rough kiss before licking his way to her stomach. Hermione opened her legs and bent her knees. Ron moved himself down, never taking his eyes off her as he kissed her wobbly inner thighs. He needed to taste her, so he wasted no time sliding off her knickers. Viewing her, Ron's heart beat so much faster and he felt light-headed. His stiff muscle throbbed as his skin went up in flames. Ron leaned forward, kissing her flesh delicately. Hermione gave a choked cry, curving her back. "Ronâ€;yes," she panted.

Ron completely lost himself while he ate her out, slowly and with care. His lips, tongue, and fingers worked her in a way they had craved to for months. Ron moaned as he tasted her, her slickness turning him on even more. While one hand worked her, the other stayed on her chest, gently squeezing her breasts. Hermione continuously rolled her hips, making him eat her even deeper. After Ron started licking her nerve and moving a finger inside her, Hermione took his hand, sucking on two of his fingers. It made him shake. Even as Ron was pleasing her, Hermione was making him harder and hotter.

Hermione's soft cries and chanting of his name made him work harder. He moved his tongue all over her, pumping his finger in as far as he could. Ron needed to please her. He had to give Hermione something back for being the best part of his life. Hermione panted his name over and over until finally she clamped her thighs against his head, arching her back so high that he heard her bones pop. "Ron, Ron, Ron," she repeated breathlessly.

She bit his finger, pulling on his hair; however, he didn't stop until she stopped jerking.

He looked up at her, slurping her juices from his lips. Hermione was flushed and slightly sweaty. The maddening look she usually had after an orgasm was there. Ron wiped his mouth, kissing her thighs again. "I love making you cum, Hermione, and I know you're the only person I ever want to hear saying my name like that."

"Your wish is granted," she breathed, dabbing her forehead with the back of her hand. "Come here." He scooted back on top of her. She caressed his face. "Was that better than my knickers?"

"I've never had your knickers before, so I can't answer definitely but I'm sure it is," he said. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

She let out a deep breath and shivered. "Mmm, the real thing is always better than a fantasy. I can still feel your tongue and your fingers when I shake. It feels so good."

"Girls are lucky," he said, kissing her neck. "You lot have so many brilliant tricks to keep the orgasms alive."

"There's a universal trick that men and women can use," she said.

"What's that?" he asked, kissing her jaw.

"Well." She moved away so he could see her eyes. "We could just keep giving them to each other. I want to use you again. I want more."

"More, Ms. Granger?" he asked. Tasting her had made him harder than his Firebolt, so he was more than ready.

"I guess I'm as greedy as I am bossy, right?" she asked.

"Not even close," he cheeked.

She pouted a little. "You're rude."

"And you're getting my boxer shorts wet," he said.

"Then maybe you should slip them off," she said, tugging at his waistband.

He pushed her hand away. "But then my prick would be on you. That's even more rude, yeah?" She narrowed her eyes and he smirked.

"Only if you have it just laying against me," she said. "The polite thing to do would be to place it somewhere where it can't cause any trouble."

"Hmm, any ideas?" he asked before kissing her. Together they pulled on his shorts and he eventually got them off. He stuck his tongue as far as he could into her mouth as their bodies fully touched each other. Hermione whimpered, hugging his neck. She

gave him a stroke. Ron cried out against her mouth. He was so hard and sensitive that he could barely think. "You ready?" he asked with a moan.

"Ready," she whispered. Ron lifted a little more, taking a hold of himself. He stared at her. Her desires were written all over her face and they had to mimic his own. She wanted him just as badly as he wanted her. The realization cleared his mind. They were together, happy, and moments away from having sex. Ron knew what he wanted and he hoped that she did too. He slowly bent down, kissing her again, and with a gradual push, he entered her body. Hermione threw her head back, moaning and scraping her nails against his arms. "Oh, Ron," she moaned.

"S-so good," he panted as he moved his entire muscle into her. He held still for a moment to let the feeling of her insides connect to every bit of him. All the pressure he had felt over the last couple of days faded away. It was only then that Ron began to move. He pushed slowly and gently into her body. They passionately snogged while Hermione ran her fingertips up and down his back. He kept his fingers twisted in her damp, wild hair, loving that they had the time and privacy to touch each other and take things slow.

Ron knew what was expected of him as a young bloke. He was supposed to fancy rough, quick, and adventurous shags nine out of ten times. He was expected to be dominant, thinking about getting himself off as much as possible; however, Ron didn't feel attached to that frame of mind. He truthfully preferred being able to watch Hermione's eyes, whisper things to her, and kiss her tenderly as they had sex. Ron enjoyed feeling her hands move all around him, and he needed to savor every moment that he was inside her body. Her pleasure was what was important to him and getting her to understand that with his body was always his goal. Mad shags were brilliant, but it wasn't the kind of sex his mind eventually settled on when he thought about Hermione.

Ron pushed deeply into her, making Hermione rise off the bed a little. He kissed the hollow of her neck, loving the salty taste of her sweat. "I love you so much," he rasped. "This feels so good with you, Hermione. I bloody love you."

"I love you too, Ron," she whispered in a feeble breath. Hermione lifted his chin so their foreheads touched. "I-I feel like I'm something else with you again. I love you. I love you. I love you." He kissed her, quickening his pace somewhat. His bed rocked, their moans were loud, and the sound of his muscle thrusting back and forth into her was profound, but they were in their own world so it didn't matter. Nothing existed but them.

With every push Hermione grew creamier, helping her body to open up more to him. The pressure was pounding at him. He felt smothered and so sticky in their heat and fluids. "Mmm, 'Mione," he breathed. She must've understood his plea. Hermione pushed her hips up, curling her legs around his waist so he could go even deeper inside her. She put a hand on the back of his head, kissing him. The combination of her mouth and warm vastness was too great now â€" he couldn't hold on anymore.

Ron moaned longingly against her lips, cumming powerfully and feeling the waves of heat. He began to shake as he filled her up with himself. Ron kept pushing until he felt Hermione's strong jerk again and she cried out against his lips. He stopped moving, kissing her again for a few moments before moving off her body. Hermione instantly snuggled against him. He couldn't describe the bliss and serenity that he felt as he held her. Ron felt vacant of all his grief. All his feelings and thoughts were currently about the brunette who was still trying to catch her breath. All he knew right now was Hermione, but that was how he wanted it.

She smiled up at him. "That was so beautiful."

"I wanted it to be," he said.

They interlocked their fingers. "You have the most incredible hands I've ever seen, Ron," she said, kissing them. "I'm totally in love with them. They're like, my obsession."

"You don't think they're too big?" he asked.

"I don't think any part of you is too big, or too long, or too gangly, or any of that nonsense," she said. "Your hands are perfect: gentle and rough in all the right ways and at all the right moments."

He grinned, feeling heat on his face. He knew none of that was true but he liked hearing her say it anyway. "Thank you."

"Are you blushing?" Hermione asked.

"Shut it," he said. "I can't help it. I'm ginger."

"I think it's more than that," she said, tracing the freckles on his jaw line.

"You know it's more than that," he said. "Youâ€¢;you always say things that make me blush."

"Aww. You're so cute, Ron," she said.

"I'm not cute," he said. "I'm manly." He moved down, pecking her slightly clammy arms. Every inch of their bodies were sweltering and drenched in their sex and sweat, but it never bothered them. Ron could still remember when he was too afraid to kiss Hermione without asking, but now his saliva was all over her naked body. They had come such a long way. "Hermione?"

"Yes, love?" she said.

"I've really missed having sex with you," he said. "I hope you understand what I mean by that."

"I do," she said with a nod. "I've really missed having sex with you too. It's been hard, only doing it once every few weeks or few months and then having to be quick. It's not exactly how I pictured our sex life beginning."

"Me neither," he said with a heavy heart. "I would've done it to you for hours if I could â€“ all day if you wanted me to." He kissed her shoulder while she ran her fingers through his hair.

"Doâ€¢; do you regret us not waiting?" she asked quietly.

He sat up. "Waiting on what?"

She sat up as well, hugging one of his pillows. "Waiting on me to get out of school. We could've held out until that time. Then we wouldn't have to go so long without it or feel rushed like I know we sometimes do now." She gripped her necklace, gazing at him. "I want you to be honest with me, Ronald."

He stared straight at her but didn't need to give himself a moment to think. He knew his honest answer already. "I don't regret us not waiting at all. I love what we share now. Yeah, it's hard and I miss your body so much that I ache sometimes, but it's worth it. What we just did proves that it's worth it."

"You mean that?" she asked.

"I swear to you," he said, taking her hand and placing it against his chest. "Every time we've ever gotten serious has been incredible. In the spare room, in here, in the storage room, those times in your room â€“ bloody hell, in Percy's room." She laughed and blushed. "I'd never lie about that," Ron continued. "There's not a day that goes by when I don't think about one of those times. "

"You're sweet, Ron," she said.

"I'm also typical," he confessed with a shrug. "Forgetting all the 'sweet' things I just said, I don't reckon I honestly could've lasted until your graduation. I would've just cut my prick and bollocks off months ago."

"Hmm," Hermione said. "I have to agree with you there. Well, I don't have those 'items' but I would've had to do something to myself before I jammed a quill through my eye or something. You are just too wonderful not to shag when the opportunity presents itself."

"How romantic," he said.

She cringed. "I know. I'm as bad as you."

"No you're not," he said, kissing her head. "You want to know something else that assures me that we didn't make a mistake by not waiting?"

"What's that?" she asked.

"Our first time is still the single greatest moment of my life," he said. Hermione gasped. She put a hand to her mouth as her eyes filled with tears. "W-what did I do?" he quickly asked in alarm. "Did I say something wrong?"

She shook her head frantically and let her tears fall. "No â€“ no youâ€;you didn't say anything wrong." She began to sob gently.

He rubbed her arms. "Tell me what's going on. I'm right here."

"That's just it, Ron," she wept. "You are here and you saidâ€;you said the one thing that I've kept in my mind for months." She sniffed. "I've been so worried that maybe you regretted us starting this so early, but then I think about our first time and I know we made the right choice." More tears rolled down her cheeks. "Ron, our first time means more to me than anything else. I'm glad that we didn't have sex right at the beginning of our relationship, and I'm actually truly thankful that we always got interrupted or felt too unsure to do it."

She sniffed roughly, rubbing her eyes. "Ron, I'm grateful because when we finally did it, it was at the perfect time, in the perfect place, and in the perfect moment. I think about that afternoon almost every day, sweetheart. We never would've been able to match that. I know it."

"I know it too, 'Mione," he said, finally realizing that she wasn't upset. "I don't mean to sound like a prick, but I honestly think that it's the best gift I could've given you. I also needed you in that way more than anything else at the time. It was everything I've ever wanted. It was just perfect."

"So were you," she said, looking at him lovingly. "You took care of me."

He wiped the tears off her face. "It's my job to take care of you. Besides, you took care of me too." He kissed her cheeks where the patterns of her tears were. "You don't have to worry, Hermione. I think we're doing this the right way." He thought back to what he had told her dad. "Sex isn't all of our relationship but I reckon that it is an important part."

"I agree," she said. "It's something that needs to be nurtured, improved, and enjoyed like every other part to us. As long as we keep things honest and safe and healthy, then I think we can have a strong and fun sexual relationship."

"We have so far," he said smugly. "I think we're rather brilliant for people our age, or it could just be because I enjoy shagging you so much."

"Ronald," she said blushing. "Oh, wellâ€;I guess saying that is okay. I enjoy having sex with you too. I mean I really, really enjoy it."

She looked a little worried but he rolled his eyes. "'Mione, you can enjoy all the wicked and wonderful shagging in the world with me and still be beautiful, brilliant, and bossy. My bits won't change you."

She hit him. "Stop being mean. I'm not ashamed or anything. Especially with a boyfriend such as yourself."

"Right, I'm your centerpiece," he said.

"Exactly, my man of the night," she teased.

"Oi," he said. He started tickling her, pushing her back against his bed. He got on top of her again, holding her down. He caressed her face. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she said, "and I feel a lot better. I'm glad I got that off my chest."

He envied her courage to talk about the things that scared her the most. "I'm always here for you, love," he said. "It kills me when I make you cry."

"Those were happy tears," she said. "Not every time has to be because of something bad. Things can be easy, Ron. Even here they can be."

Her words healed him and made him feel stronger. Hermione simply made him better. Ron put his forehead to hers. "Have I ever told you that you're in my blood?"

"No. Have I ever told you that you're the reason my heart beats?" she asked quietly, touching his face.

"I love you," he said. "You can't understand how much."

"Make me understand," she whispered. "I want you again."

They started snogging. Ron reached on his side table. He slipped her wand in her hand. "Gotta be safe," he said. "Don't know how much time we have left with the potion."

"Smart man," she said. She quickly put the charm on herself before dropping her wand to the floor. Ron took command of her mouth, once again burying himself inside her body. They did it over and over until they were too tired and too empty to move.

The only part of Ron's life that wasn't heavy fell asleep sticky, boiling, and happy against his chest. Ron held on to Hermione, kissing the top of her head.

Ron had to make so many aspects of his life better, but Hermione was the one thing that was already perfect.

* * *

**** Welcome home, Ron! *sighs* I bloody love R/Hr. I mean I REALLY do, lol. So I just want to say that I've always believed that the Weasleys are a real family. Not everything is sunshine daisies for them. However, it doesn't mean the love isn't there. They're...they're just...normal and I enjoy writing them all as

such. Well, I hope you enjoyed this. I did and there's still so much coming up for everyone. Stay tuned for that! Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 40*: What's golden

Thanks to everyone for the reviews! All the kind words make me work so much harder, and I'm so happy people enjoy my work! *hugs all*

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron moved a bishop and studied the chessboard. He gazed at the pieces blocking his next counterattack, trying to find some way around the trap. Ron made a note of his current situation in his journal before making another bold move. There was a knock on his door. "Come in," he said.

"You busy?"

Ron looked up in surprise. "George?"

George grinned but still didn't enter his room. "Hi. Can I?"

"Sure," Ron said, motioning for him to come in. George closed the door behind him and sat in front of Ron on the floor. "Did you just get here?"

"A couple of minutes ago," George said. Ron nodded, not really knowing what to say. It was Christmas Eve but it honestly didn't feel like it to Ron. Usually his family would be gathered together, struggling not to open presents early. That wasn't the case this year. Right after breakfast, everyone scattered around the house, doing his or her own thing.

"So," Ron finally said, "are you staying tonight?"

"Yes," George said. "It'll be good if I'm already here for tomorrow."

"Sounds smart," Ron said. George started picking at mud on his trainers, giving Ron a good chance to examine him. George looked better than he had the last time Ron had seen him. His skin wasn't as pale and his eyes weren't as dark, but George's expression was still rather vacant. Also, Ron was now completely sure that he hadn't been mental when he first saw George; he truly appeared as if he had lost a bit of weight. George looked up, making Ron quickly look back to his chessboard.

George cleared his throat. "What are you doing?"

"Playing chess," Ron said.

"Right," George slowly said. "By yourself?"

"Yeah, well, umâ€!" Ron rubbed his neck. He needed to think of a way to explain himself without sounding like a nutter. "I'm trying as many different moves as possible to achieve the same result. I've realized that I don't utilize the board and all the pieces as much as I should. I thought writing my steps down would help."

"Soâ€! you're turning a game into a school assignment?" George asked, seeming gobsmacked. He kicked Ron's leg. "Percy? Did you take Polyjuice and commandeer Ron's body?"

"Bugger off," Ron mumbled as he blushed. "I'm trying to make myself a better player. What I'm doing is something I learned at camp to improve my technique."

"And apparently to improve your chances of getting Hermione to shag you," George said. "She's the only one who'd care if you became a better chess player."

"I'm not doing this for her," Ron said. "Besides, I don't really need to become a better player to get her to shag me."

"You freckly little knob," George said, knocking over a pawn with his knuckles. "I should tell Hermione you said that."

"No â€" no," Ron rushed. "I just meant that chess doesn't have to bring her and I together. Weâ€;wellâ€;we just do it when we want to." George gaped at him, shaking his head. "Don't go spreading that around either," Ron added. "Hermione will tear my prick off and make me fuck myself with it if she thinks I'm telling everyone about our sex life."

"Oh, so it went from 'what we do' to being a 'life'?" George asked. "Must be bloody wild!"

"Have I told you to fuck off yet?" Ron asked in irritation.

George laughed. "Don't worry, little brother. I won't tell Hermione or anyone that you talk about your 'sex life' like a slick git." He looked around his room. "Speaking of Hermione, where are her and the other third of the Golden Trio?"

"They went to the glasses shop in Diagon Alley to get Harry's lenses adjusted," Ron said. "The bloke's eyesight is just getting worse every year."

"Well, there are side effects to being The Chosen One, you know," George said. "Poor visionâ€!"

"Knobby knees," Ron added.

"Inability to tell a good jokeâ€!"

"Awkwardness on a dance floorâ€!" Ron scratched his head. "Bloody hell, how is he dating our sister again?"

"I thought you'd know," George said. "Must be those dashing green eyes or the way he holds himself so proudly." He started to laugh again and Ron joined him. George appeared to be genuinely enjoying himself, making Ron's feelings for him even more complex. He wanted to joke around and have a good time with George, but he couldn't forget what had happened at the dinner table, or Fred's room, or the fact that George never wrote him back. However, Ron decided to put it all on hold and enjoy the casual atmosphere with him while he could.

"So, how has your holiday gone so far, Ron?" George asked. "I know we haven't really had a chance to talk yet."

"It's been brilliant," he said. "This break is exactly what I needed."

"The Grangers treated you okay?" George asked.

"Yes, they were brilliant and spending that time with Hermione was incredible," Ron said. "Being with her makes me realize how badly I need to get away from Lambrick every now and again. That place takes the air right out of me sometimes." Ron was speaking to George with a frankness he hadn't used with anyone else so far but he couldn't help it. The closeness Ron had shared with George over the summer hadn't gone away simply because Ron left.

"I can imagine," George said with less humor in his voice. "I'm sure being yelled at and getting kicked in the bollocks every day takes its toll."

Ron waited for him to continue. When George didn't, Ron said, "You're not going to ask me any more questions about it?"

"Hadn't planned on it," George said with a shrug. "You said the other day that camp was okay and you look okay. So, I'm gonna assume you're all right. If you honestly want me to know more then you can bring it up. It's not my place to make you talk about things that you don't want to. You're on holiday."

Ron felt a heavy flow of appreciation course through him. He had almost forgotten how uncomplicated it was to talk to George.

"Thank you for saying that. Not a lot of people seem to understand that idea."

"Not a lot of people have been in situations like ours, Ron," George said.

"Right," he said. Ron picked up a knight, squeezing it in his hand. "So, um, how have you been?"

"All right," George said. "I'm still here."

"Yeah," Ron said. He squeezed the knight harder, trying to draw courage from it. "I hear you close the shop more often."

"Yeah, well," he said, looking away, "I've been really busy and I need time off. The holidays are always the worst but this year it's tearing my arsehole apart. I don't feel comfortable letting Angelina or Lee handle the shop when I'm not working, so it's best if I just close it completely until I'm ready to work again."

"That makes sense," Ron said. He was itching to ask George why he hadn't bothered to write him about this new development but he had to hold it back. "You three all right?"

"Yeah," George said. "I spend a lot of time at Angie's these days. We're doing okay. Lee's not around much."

"Why is that?" Ron asked. He kept his eyes on George but George wouldn't look up at him.

George rubbed his neck, shrugging. "He's a busy bloke, I reckon." Ron knew that George wasn't being completely honest. He knew all of George's ticks and defensive gestures by heart; however, Ron wouldn't push anything. It wasn't the right way to reach George.

"Does that mean that he's not coming tomorrow?" Ron asked.

"No," George said, knocking another chess piece over. "It's probably for the best. I don't want Mum's hands to fall off with everything she has to cook or whatever."

Ron's head started to hurt. He had to bring up something that was bothering him about George or he would pass out. "George, about dinner the other night?"

"I had a really bad day," George quickly said. "That's all. I have bad days sometimes."

Ron rolled his eyes. "It seemed a little more than that."

"It wasn't," George said. "I just made myself sick thinking about the right way to tell you lot about the bell. That, on top of the other shit that ruined my day, was too much. I apologized to Percy again. I apologized to Bill, Dad, and bloody damn near everyone a second time already."

George finally looked up at him. "I'm sorry to you too, Ron. I didn't mean to spoil your party."

"Don't apologize," Ron said. "I didn't care about any of that. I was just worried about you."

"I'm fine," George said. "I went to Angie's, I got my head on, and I felt better. I feel even better today."

Ron wanted to believe George. He wanted to believe that things could truly get better and easier over time. "Okay. If you say so."

"I do," George said, giving Ron's shoulder a gentle punch. He looked around the room again. "Hey, can I see your bowling ball?"

"Um, alright." Ron crawled over to the bag by his trunk. He slid it over to George.

George took out the ball. "Hermione is amazing for getting this for you."

"I know," Ron said with a smile. "She was embarrassed and concerned that I wouldn't like it."

"She thinks too much," George said.

"So I've been telling her for almost ten years now," Ron said.

George traced the 'R' on the ball before setting it down. He flicked his wand at it, causing the ball to rise and spin slowly in the air. George gazed at the ball as if he could see something in it. "Fred and I used to go bowling."

Ron didn't know what to say. It was the last thing he had expected George to say. When Ron had showed his gear to everyone, George had simply sat and stared. "Really?" he asked.

George nodded. "After we left Hogwarts. When we weren't working on the shop, we just pissed around and enjoyed ourselves in the Muggle world." He reached out and pressed his finger against the ball so that he was always touching it as it spun. "One day we went to this pastry shop and started talking to a group of kids our age. They were so impressed with our card 'tricks' that they invited us to go to an alley with them. Fred and I went completely out of our minds. We were amazed with how the pins were knocked down and the idea behind the ball return."

"The way the machine sets up the pins is bloody ridiculous as well," Ron said.

"I know," George said with a chuckle. "Muggles are incredible. Anyway, we had such a good time that we went back quite often on our own. We got pretty good too. Your ball is a lot heavier than the ones I'd use though. The lighter ones helped me curve better."

"I'm not too bad with curves, but I tend to stick with the straight, hard tosses," Ron said. "Who was better?"

"Me, but I'm biased," George said, tapping his wand to the ball so that it'd spin faster. "Fred had a bit more power with his throws but I had more skill."

Ron stared at the ball too, feeling absolutely taken aback. Bowling was something he had automatically found skill with and enjoyed greatly. Little did he know that Fred and George had felt the same way. It made Ron wonder what else he had in common with them. "How come you've never said anything?" Ron asked.

"I haven't gone in a long time," George said, "and I never thought anyone else in our family would become a bowler."

"But why didn't you say anything when I brought it up the other night?" Ron asked. "I mean, learning something like this means a lot."

George finally looked away from the spinning ball. "Why?"

Ron couldn't believe that his feelings needed explaining. "Because it's something you and Fred did that I enjoy too. There's not a whole lot that the three of us have in common so this makes me feel good. You and I should go sometime."

"No, I think my bowling days are over," George said dully.

"George," Ron said.

"Really, Ron, it's fine," George said. He tapped the ball with his wand, letting it fall into his arms. He put it back into the bag.

Ron had overstepped his place so he needed to steer the conversation in another direction. "You can try my shoes on if you want."

"I doubt they'd fit," George said, pulling them out. "They're wicked though. Hermione has good taste." He laughed again. "The shoes really make bowling an exceptional game. They're like a good joke all by themselves. That's what Fred always said. It's our favorite Muggle sport."

"It's probably mine too," Ron said softly. George looked down and Ron swallowed hard. "George."

"Hmm?" he asked.

"Look at me," Ron said. George slowly looked up at him. "Are you sure you're okay? You can talk to me if you want. It's still me, George. I'm not going anywhere."

George gazed at him. "For now you're not," he said quietly.

"Sorry?" Ron asked.

George shook his head, rubbing his face. "Nothing. I'm fine, Ron, really."

"George."

"Look, I'm gonna go unpack my stuff and see what everyone is up to." George got up, quickly heading to the door. He touched the knob but didn't open it. "I'm really glad you're back, Ron." He gave Ron a small smile before leaving and closing the door behind him. Ron merely stared at the door, hoping that George would come back. He didn't.

As the day went on, Ron realized that George had changed a lot more than Ron had expected him to during their time apart. Before, Ron could tell what George was thinking, but now his mood jumped so much that Ron couldn't figure him out. Every time Ron

wanted to talk to him, George was busy speaking with Charlie or helping their mum with one of her projects. Ron had assumed he'd get plenty of opportunities to really talk to George; now he was questioning if he'd ever get the chance.

However, regardless of how little progress Ron made with George, he appeared to have improved his relationship with their family. During dinner, he was much more talkative and calm. He and Percy got along and even Bill and their mum seemed more relaxed. The Christmas Eve dinner Ron shared with his family was just as he'd hoped it would be. They didn't talk about his time at camp or about what they would do the next day during Christmas. His family purely enjoyed each other and the food his parents had cooked. Charlie pulled out his copy of the Enchanted Dispatch, but for the first time Ron wasn't too embarrassed to talk about the interview. Then again, he did his best to ignore the furtive grins from Harry and Hermione when Frank and Millie were brought up.

Afterwards, their mother ushered all the men out into the yard so she, Hermione, and Ginny could work on the last of the decorations for the house. Ron and the rest of the guys all rather stood around, twiddling their thumbs in the backyard until Harry came back with a broken Quaffle from the shed. They positioned themselves in a large circle, throwing it to each other. "This is outrageous," Percy said, lightly tossing the ball to Harry.

He caught it, throwing it to Charlie next. "Sexist is a better word. That's what Ginny muttered before she closed the door anyway."

"Mum just doesn't trust us men," Charlie said, pitching the ball to Ron's dad.

"Ouch. I'm not as young as I used to be, Charles," his dad said with a laugh as he passed it back to him.

"Sorry, Dad," Charlie said, also chuckling. He passed it to him gentler this time.

"I don't think we should be too hard on them," their dad said, catching the Quaffle. "Molly wants things neat and pretty. What do any of us know about those things, eh?" He passed the Quaffle to George.

George caught it with one hand. "I'm not complaining. Are you, Bill?" He threw the ball to him.

"Actually, I am," Bill said, catching it. "I could've made a contribution. Fleur trusts me."

"Fleur's biased," Ron said. "Of course she says she doesn't mind your input. You're shagging her." Everyone laughed at his comment.

"Oi, that's my wife you're talking about!" Bill threw the ball right at Ron's chest.

Ron caught it hard against the chest but his improved reflexes kept him from dropping it. "Ow. Trying to kill me, yeah?"

"No, I'm trying to get you to shut up about Fleur," Bill said.

"He was only having a laugh," Percy said.

"Yes, calm down, son," Mr. Weasley said. "Though, Ron, you shouldn't talk like that. Even if it is true."

"Sorry, Dad. Bill," Ron muttered.

"I'm not so sure that Ron's theory is true, Mr. Weasley," Harry said. "I mean your wife is inside, and Ronâ€œI didn't exactly see Hermione rushing to your defense." Everyone chuckled and snorted at Harry cheek. Ron merely glared.

"You really need to hurry up and marry into the Weasley family, Harry," Charlie said. "You were born to be one of us."

"Cheers," Harry said, standing a bit taller.

"Someone give me the Quaffle so I can break Harry's glasses," Ron said.

"Oi, let's toss like men out here, yeah?" Charlie said.

George gave Charlie a look. "Toss like men? Is that something you and your mates do in front of the dragons?"

"You nasty little prick!" Charlie said.

"Boys, honestly," their dad said. "No wonder you always put your mother in a state."

"I'm being decent, Dad," Percy piped up.

"Me too," Bill said. "Perce and I are always the decent ones."

"Right, the Head Boys," George muttered.

"Maybe we should get back to the subject at hand," Charlie said. "We were all in agreement that the women of this house are being unfair. They assume that we would have no artist input or patience. That's not true. More to the point, who's to say they automatically know what they're doing, right?"

Ron chuckled. "You sound like a mate of mine, Charlie. This girl named Olivia in my section at camp would feel the exact same way. In fact, she'd probably mess everything up on purpose just to prove a point."

"Olivia, eh?" George asked.

"Yeah," Ron said, thinking about her. "She's a good friend. She was the only girl in my wing."

"It must be weird," Charlie said. "Harry said there's only three in his. So four girls around a group of starved and deranged blokes."

"It's not that weird," Harry said. "No one thinks about doing anything other than surviving at Lambrick."

"Maybe not for blokes like you and Ron who are happily taken," Bill said. "I remember what it was like at Hogwarts."

"Lambrick is nothing like Hogwarts," Ron said in annoyance. "Anyway, Olivia doesn't care about the attention she gets because she's one of the only females. She's better than that."

"Okay, Ron," Charlie said with a slight grin. "We can stop talking about her if you want."

"I'd like that," he muttered. They kept passing the ball to each other, talking about how unjust women could be. When the Quaffle was passed to Charlie again, he held it in his arms.

"I think we should take this opportunity to finish what we started, Ron." Charlie tossed the ball to Bill. "We've got unfinished business."

It only took a couple of seconds for Ron to figure out what he was talking about. "Oh, let it go, Charlie. I'm too full anyway."

"You've never worked on a full stomach?" Bill asked.

"Never," Ron said. "They kept us away from food as much as they could."

"I hope you're exaggerating," Percy said.

"He's not," Harry breathed.

"Perfect time to work it off then," Charlie said.

"Butâ€œ"

"Do it, Ron," George said. "It's perfect timing for me. I had a nice helping of corn."

"You're disgusting," Percy said.

"Dad," Ron whined, "talk to Charlie."

His dad sighed. "Charlie, if Ron doesn't feel comfortable demonstrating his moves on you, then you have to respect that."

"Come on, Ronnie," Charlie said. "I'll be fine. Please?" He bounced on the heels of his feet.

Ron rubbed his neck, sighing. He was never good at saying no to Charlie and the fact still held. Ron looked at Harry. He only shrugged. "Maybe you should just do it so he'll get over it."

"Spoken like a true hero," George said.

Ron frowned. "Okay," he said slowly. "Everyone spread out." Their group broke up, spreading out into the backyard. Ron walked backwards, and Charlie did the same. "I'm going to rush you, Charlie. Do you remember what that is?"

"Yes, of course," he said, rubbing his hands together. "What should I do?"

"Stand as still as you can and brace yourself," Ron answered.

"Gotcha," Charlie said. He looked at him almost smugly.

Ron let out another sigh and considered going easy on him. The thought didn't stay long. He would give Charlie what he wanted and show his family that his time at Lambrick had been well spent. He examined Charlie. His brother was huge — even bigger than Alan — but Ron had the advantage of knowing him personally and how he moved. Charlie began all his movements on his right side, making him overcompensate by being extra stiff on his left. So, Ron would attack him from the right side. "You ready?" he asked. Charlie nodded, bracing himself.

Ron raised his shoulders a bit before rushing toward him. He turned to the side and hollered as he ran into Charlie. As expected, Charlie had been ready for a blow to the left side. Ron's elbow, shoulder, and hip slammed into his right side, causing Charlie to lose balance and fall back hard. He was a big guy so his arse and head hit the ground with a nasty thud.

"In the name of Merlin's left bollock!" George shouted. Everyone ran over to where Ron was standing and Charlie was lying before him.

"Blimey," their dad said. "Charlie?"

Charlie rolled over to his side, groaning. "Fffffucking dragon dung," he grumbled, rubbing his tailbone.

"Did you break anything?" Percy asked. "Ron!"

Ron rubbed his neck. He had known that it would end like this, but he still felt a little remorseful. "You okay, Charlie?" Charlie sat up, massaging his head. He looked at him, almost in shock, for a few moments. Ron felt guiltier. He hadn't truly meant to injure Charlie but a part of Ron had wanted to get him on the ground. Charlie had always been stronger and more powerful than him. Ron wanted to challenge his might. He also wanted to show his new muscle in front of all his brothers who had beaten him up and taken the piss out of him over the years.

Charlie frowned but chuckled. "You knocked me on my arse, Ron. How do you think I feel?"

"He did warn you, Charlie," Bill said. Ron held out his hand.

Charlie smiled, slapping his hand away. "You weren't that impressive, prat." He rubbed his tailbone again as he slowly got up. "Actually, I feel like the world's biggest prat right now. My baby brother Ronnie here just knocked me on my arse. That was mental."

"He's not just your baby brother anymore," Harry said, putting a hand on Ron's shoulder and grinning at him. "He's a professional now. Ron has skill."

"Thanks, mate," Ron said, grinning back.

"Oi, Dream Team, do you think you can save the snog session for later?" George asked. "I'm sure Hermione and Ginny will want to watch anyway. Let's just get back to the Quaffle ¢ after Charlie brings his face over to me first."

"Oh, bollocks," Charlie said in repulsion.

"Hi guys!" a female voice said from the kitchen door. Ron smiled as he instantly recognized the voice, but taking one look at George made that smile fade. George didn't look relieved or happy. In fact, he seemed a bit horror stricken. Angelina came down to them.

"Angelina!" Charlie said. "Come here. I haven't seen you in ages." He hugged her then she went around, giving the rest of them a squeeze.

"Remarkable," she said after pulling away from Harry. "You two have certainly been working at camp."

"They're trying to catch up with me and George," Charlie said.

"Did you just get in?" their dad asked.

"Yes, Mr. Weasley. Work is finally over. I'm ready to relax for a day," Angelina said. "I'm all settled in your room, George."

"You're in my room?" George asked quietly.

"Your mum said it was okay," Angelina said. "Is it still okay, Mr. Weasley?"

"It is," he said. "You two basically live together anyway. It's fine."

"That's great." George smiled weakly. "I'm glad you're finally here."

"I told you that I would be," she said, taking his hand and holding it loosely. They gave each other a look that pulled at Ron's heart. He had seen it many times before, like when Ron had caught them talking about Fred the first day the joke shop reopened.

George looked away from her, rubbing his neck. "Um, we're just out here tossing the Quaffle around."

"I know," she said. "I'm actually going to go back inside and help the girls. I just wanted to let you know I was here."

"Well, I know," he said dully. "I'll see you in a bit."

"Okay." She let his hand go, giving him a tiny kiss on the cheek. "See you lot later." Ron kept his eyes on George as he watched her go back inside. There was a longing in his eyes but there was also something colder there too. It didn't make sense to Ron. Angelina had always been George's one excuse to be happy.

"George?" Ron asked.

"I'm fine, Ron," George said, turning to the group. "Let's just get back to it."

"You can go inside if you want," their dad said. "I'm sure Molly won't mind."

"No, I'm out here with you lot," George said. "I'll go back in when we all can. Besides, it's not like I won't see Angie later. Let's just go." Bill and Charlie shared a look before Bill tossed the ball to Harry. Harry passed it to George.

He held it for a couple of seconds before throwing it back to Percy and sitting in the grass. "Actually, I'm just gonna sit and watch. I don't really feel like throwing anyway."

"Maybe youâ€""

"Over here, Percy," Ron quickly said, trying his best to eye him in the slight darkness. He wanted Percy to understand that he couldn't push George any further. They had to give him time. He nodded slightly, passing it to him. For the rest of their time, George sat in the grass, staring at his shoes while they continued to talk. George's mood didn't improve when they were allowed back in to see the Christmas decorations. All through dessert, George and Angelina acted as if they didn't particularly feel comfortable around each other. Ron didn't understand what was happening. He wanted to talk to one of them, but the couple shut themselves up in George's room as soon as they got the chance.

Later that night, Ron stood in front of the bathroom door, waiting for his turn. He wanted to sleep and get his head on so he could enjoy whatever his family would do on Christmas, along with his bit of time at the Grangers. He was very excited to see them again. The door opened; Harry was on the other side. "Sorry, I was able to wipe myself. Better luck next time."

"You're a knob," Ron said. "This is my house. I shouldn't be waiting for you anyway."

"But I'm the guest. That's means you're supposed to wait," Harry said. He leaned against the door. "So, I didn't want to say this in front of Charlie, but you were brilliant when you knocked him

on his arse. I reckon it felt good. Especially in front of everyone."

Ron grinned mischievously, feeling safe talking to Harry. His mate always understood him. "Yeah, it was. I wasn't trying to hurt him though. Well, maybe a tiny bit. I put all the weight on my legs so he'd get the full blast."

Harry snickered. "You're a dick. We're never supposed to do that to someone who isn't fully trained."

"You won't say anything, yeah?" Ron asked, looking around. "You have to promise."

"I promise," Harry said, holding up his hands. "I never tell anyone anything unless you say it's okay."

"You mean that?" Ron asked.

"You know I do," Harry said. "I just wanted to add that your technique was great. You weren't even trying but I know it would've impressed Alan."

"Ta, Harry," Ron said. For a second he felt a pang to get back to Lambrick to improve his technique even more.

"Ron," Harry said in a more serious tone. "If I ask you something, will you tell me the truth?"

Ron's palms started to itch. There was so much going on in Ron's head. He had no idea what Harry knew but Ron knew that he would have no choice but to explain whatever it was. Harry was looking right at him, and every day their bond seemed to grow a little stronger. It was harder than ever before to keep things from Harry. "Yes," he said slowly.

"Do you know what's going on with George and Angelina?" Harry asked.

It was the last thing Ron had expected Harry to ask. "What do you mean?"

He rolled his eyes. "Don't be thick. It's obvious that something is off about them by the way they've been treating each other. Plus, you've given them that look all night. I know that look. You're thinking about something complicated when that expression is on your face. What's going on?"

Ron wished that he wasn't so transparent. "Iâ€œI honestly don't know, Harry," Ron said. "I'm as confused as you are. I thought Angelina would be the first thing to make George happy. All I can assume is that they're both stressed out about tomorrow. It's understandable."

Harry nodded. "Are you stressed about tomorrow?"

"I'm fine," Ron said.

"Ron," Harry said, "is that really the answer you want to give me?"

Ron rubbed his palms into his thighs. "Okay, maybe I am a little uneasy but mostly for George and my parents. I don't know how they'll be tomorrow. It's why I want us to do nothing special. Just sit around and have a good time like we did at dinner tonight. We'll have to take care of them."

"But who's gonna take care of you?" Harry asked.

"I don't need anyone to take care of me," Ron said.

"Well, I know Hermione will regardless," Harry said. "I'll be around too if you need an extra hand."

"What about my sister?" he asked.

"That's why I was born with two hands," Harry said simply.

"Thanks," Ron said. He wouldn't admit it to Hermione, but she had been right. Ron had missed Harry a little. "Hearing that helps."

"Anytime, mate," Harry said. "Um, Ron, I hate to bring this up but have you thought aboutâ€¢"

"Not yet," Ron rushed, already knowing what Harry was trying to get at. "If we can get through tomorrow, then I'll probably tell them but I'm not ready yet. I haven't forgotten about it though. I also hope that you haven't forgotten about your promise. You've been joined at Ginny's hip, and you and 'Mione have been together a lot soâ€¢!"

"Don't worry, Ron," Harry said. "I made a promise to you. I plan on keeping it." He pushed Ron's shoulder. "Stop talking about Hermione and I like that too. It's irritating and you know it's stupid."

"Yeah, sorry," Ron mumbled, feeling a blush coming on. "Old habits."

"Break them," Harry said.

Ron nodded. "Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"I really need to go for a wee," Ron said.

"Oh, right, sorry," Harry said, getting out of the way of the door. "I'll be in Ginny's room tonight, just so you know."

"Brilliant," Ron said. "Be careful with my sister."

"Always, mate, always. You be careful with mine too." He held out his hand. Ron shook it.

"Charlie's right," Ron said. "This is kinda formal. Maybe we should try something else."

"Eric does this knuckle bump thing. Wanna try?" Harry asked. Ron nodded, mimicking when Harry held out his fist. Harry knocked his knuckles against Ron's. "What d'ya think?"

"Hmm, I reckon we should hold out for something else, mate," Ron said, feeling like a prat. "Night."

Later that night, Ron tried not to toss and turn while lying next to Hermione. He just had too much on his mind to fall asleep. He touched his chest, easily feeling a layer of sweat on his skin. He had to do something before he melted to nothing but bone. Ron pulled the blanket off and started to get out of bed. "Ron?" Hermione said. "Are you leaving?" She sounded half asleep but there was worry in her voice.

"I'm really hot," he said. "I'm gonna get some cold water. I'll be right back."

Hermione turned over. He couldn't see her that well but, from the light coming through the window, he could make out her eyes and the outline of her nose and mouth. "Okay. Will you be back?"

"Of course, love," he said, rubbing her arm. "I just need some water. Do you want anything?"

"No, I'm okay," she said with a yawn. "Be careful."

"I will." He bent down, softly kissing her lips. "I'm sorry I woke you."

"It's fine," she said. "I just really love you."

He chuckled quietly at her deliriousness. "I know you do, babe. I love you too." He kissed her again. "I'm gonna go downstairs."

"'Kay," she said with a nod, hugging his pillow. He slipped out of the bed and put his shirt back on.

Ron walked downstairs and to the kitchen. The light in the room was already on. He stopped before walking in, putting his hand on the wall. The vision before him was familiar. He had walked in on his parent gazing sadly at the Weasley photo album before, but this time it was his dad, not his mum, who seemed lost in the pictures. Ron didn't want to move. He didn't even want to see what was in front of him. He wasn't sure if he could handle his dad's pain, but he refused to let him be alone.

He walked in. "Dad?"

Mr. Weasley looked up. "Oh, Ron. I didn't think anyone else was up."

"I got hot. I just wanted some water." Ron walked further in, standing next to his father.

As he expected, his dad was looking at pictures of the twins. Only, he was looking at later photos of them.

"I wasâ€œI was just looking at Fred," his dad said.

"Can I join you?" Ron asked. His dad nodded. Ron sat next to him. His dad had bags under his blue eyes. Ron was also fairly sure that more of his hair was gone. He seemed so much older than when Ron left. It was certainly no mistake that he was quieter. "You okay?"

"Yes. I'm just trying to get myself ready for tomorrow," he said. He turned to a page that had a picture of Fred and George opening the door to their flat for the first time.

"This helps you?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, it does," his dad said. "I won't see Fred tomorrow, so I thought I'd get as much of him tonight as I could." His dad rubbed the side of his face while he flipped through the twin's section of the album. "It's not enough though."

"I don't think anything can be," Ron said, looking at the pictures as well. He knew that nothing would ever be enough to make eight an okay number. They were a family of nine.

"I justâ€œ I just have to get all of this out before tomorrow," his dad said. "Molly has worked so hard. I can't let her down. I can't let George down either. This is for him too."

"He knows, dad," Ron said.

"I wish he acted like he did," his dad said. He took his glasses off, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I wish he knew how much I love him."

"Dad, he knows," Ron said, touching his arm. "George knows how much everyone loves him, and how much we all want tomorrow to work for him. He'll be okay. So will Mum."

"But I don't know if I will be, Ron," his dad said. "I love all my children more than life itself. I would do anything for each and every one of you, but I don't know if I'll be able to do anything but think about Fred tomorrow. I don't know if George will be able to understand that as his father I'd give him all my happiness if I could, but I still want Fred in my arms."

Ron felt his heart in his throat. He had never seen his dad so upset â€œ not even at Fred's funeral. He seemed lost and confused and unsure, like Ron was so often. His dad looked and sounded just like him in that moment. It wasn't right. His dad was supposed to be cheerful and strong. "Dad, it's okay. No one expects you to be a hero tomorrow."

"I do," his dad said. "I'm the father, Ron, and the husband."

His words could've been straight from Ron's heart. "I understand."

"No, you don't, but you shouldn't be able to," his dad said. "I shouldn't be talking to you like this in the first place. It's not your job to hear things like this. I'm sorry."

Ron felt somewhat irritated. He didn't know why people wanted to treat him differently. "And whose job is it, Bill's?"

"Ron, he's older," his dad said.

"So what?" Ron asked. "You're my dad too. I may not be as old and experienced and mature but I can understand some of what you feel. I feel it too. I'mâ€œI'm a bit scared about tomorrow, and if you are then I don't think it's a bad thing. I'm sure Bill would say the same."

Ron pulled the album in front of himself more. He pointed to a picture of Fred inside the joke shop. "I love all my brothers, but it doesn't mean that I won't have my thoughts on him for most of my Christmas."

His dad's bottom lip trembled as he looked at the picture of Fred. He looked away right as a tear tore its way down his cheek. "I'm sorry. I must be really tired."

Ron knew it was a lie. He additionally no longer wondered where they all got the 'tired' idea. Ron was just like his father in many ways, right down to looking away and feeling guilty whenever weak emotion came to the surface. Ron thought about how strong his dad had always been for him as well as what he had told Ron in a similar situation months ago. "Don't apologize," Ron said. "It's okay, Dad." Ron rubbed his arm, making his dad look at him. "Fred was your son. You have every right to hurt."

More tears rolled down his dad's cheeks. "Damn it, Ron, you have such a big heart. I'm so proud that you're my son. I love you."

"I love you too, Dad, but everything I have I got from you." He put his arms around his dad, giving him a hug. He patted his back as his dad let his wall down. Ron knew how hard it was; he found his dad even stronger for being able to. His sadness and pain and fear clawed at Ron's insides, but he had to push through it. His dad needed him to be an anchor so he would be. Ron stayed at his dad's side, gazing at pictures with him until his dad's eyes were dry and he felt well enough to go back to bed.

Ron stayed at the table. He felt a wave of sorrow and fury hit him at the same time. Fred's absence was the reason for everything. Ron felt overwhelmed by hating his brother for dying and missing him so much that he wanted to curl up on the floor and fade away all at once. He felt panic scratch up his back. He had to do something and fast. Ron quickly splashed cold water on his face then hurried back up the stairs to his room.

He felt some of the panic disappear at seeing Hermione still snuggled up in his bed. He walked over to her, kneeling in front of her. He didn't want to wake her but the panic was still there. He gently shook her. "Hermione? Hermione?"

"Hmm?" she asked, slowly opening her eyes. "What is it?" Ron didn't know what to say so he merely kept his eyes on her. When Hermione's gaze focused, she immediately sat up, rubbing her eyes. "Ron, what's wrong."

"I'm," he said, "I don't mean to wake you."

"It's okay," she said, scooting back so he could get in. "Just tell me what's wrong and what you need."

He sat next to her while she rubbed his back. Her touches gave him chills. "Iâ€¢; Iâ€¢;"

"What do you want me to do, love?" she asked.

He looked at her. "Can â€¢ can I put my head against your chest and just listen to your heart as I go to sleep? I just want to hear it."

She nodded. "Of course, Ron. Come here." She lay down. He put one arm under them and put his head to her chest. He closed his eyes, taking in the smell of her, the softness of her, and the love of her. Her heartbeat sounded so powerful, and it made his panic subside.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"Ron, what's going on?" she asked. "What happened downstairs?"

He had no energy for anything other than the whole truth. "I was thinking about Fred and it hurt."

"Oh, Ron," Hermione said, rubbing his arm. "I'll be with you all day tomorrow to help you through it."

"I know," he said. "I'm glad you are. I'm so glad you're okay and that you're with me." He held on to her, listening to her heart. It was the only thing keeping his head on but it was all he needed.

* * *

Ron exhaled, automatically moving his hand over the space next to him. He felt warm softness so he figured it was okay to open his eyes. Hermione was sitting up in bed next to him, reading John's book. Ron stayed quiet, taking in the good feeling of her presence and the prettiness of her appearance. There was something so pure and gentle about the way Hermione looked in the morning that touched Ron's heart. Her hair was always madder, her body was more relaxed than it would ever be for the rest of the day, and for a few moments her expression was clear of any concern or exasperation.

"Is that little tick something you're going to do every morning?" she asked.

"Only when we're sleeping together," he said. "Feeling your body or not tells me if I'm going to start the day right."

She set her book down, giving him a look. "There's that charm again."

"Something that can't be taught," he cheeked, sitting up. "Good morning, Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas to you too, Ron." She leaned over, kissing his forehead. "I've always wanted to do this."

"What?" he asked.

"Wake up next to you on Christmas," she said with a grin. "I know it's a small thing but it means a lot to me."

"It means a lot to the both of us," he said, leaning over and kissing her arm.

She ran her fingers through his hair. "Are you feeling better?"

"Lots," he said. "I reckon I made myself sick last night thinking about everything but I'm actually glad I did. I don't feel as nervous now. I think I'll be able to enjoy the day more with my family."

"That's so good to hear, sweetheart," she said.

"First, of course," he said, "we should get ready and go to your house."

"Actually, I have something that comes even before that," Hermione said, getting out of bed.

"Are you gonna tell me what that is?" he asked. She shook her head, giving him a wicked grin. She walked over to her trunk. Ron felt his morning stiffy get even stiffer. "Bloody hell," he breathed. "You know, I've always wanted to wake up on Christmas morning and see you in nothing but your knickers and my jumper."

She wiggled her legs as she hugged his jumper. "This is what I usually wear to bed at school."

"Brilliant," he said. She bent over to look through her things. Ron tilted his head so he could get a better look of her body swallowed by his huge scarlet jumper. It was massive on her but still showed enough of her to drive him mad. "Your legs are so fucking gorgeous, 'Mione."

"Thank you," she said. "I've known them for ages and we get on well so I keep them with me."

"Ha, another one of your clever jokes," Ron said. "George would be pleased." He instantly started rubbing his palms into his

thighs. "Hermione, um, when you lot were putting up the decorations, how was Angelina?"

Hermione closed her trunk and sat back on the bed with him. "She was quite quiet. Yes, that's the word I'd use. I could tell there was a lot going on in her mind, and I think everyone could tell something was static between her and George. Why? Do you know what's happening?"

"No," Ron said. "I'm surprised actually."

"Are you worried about them?" she asked.

"I reckon I am but I don't know if I should be," he said. "Everyone has been saying that George's behavior is normal and that this is how he is. For all I know he and Angelina have been like this for awhile. I hope not though." Ron absentmindedly found Hermione's knee, squeezing it. "She's always been the one person who makes George happy, no matter what. She's the one constant soft spot he can fall back on. I don't want him to lose that."

He let out a breath, clutching Hermione's knee more. There were small yet important similarities between George's relationship with Angelina and Ron's with Hermione. He believed in them and very much wanted George and Angelina to work out because of how much Ron believed in him and Hermione. "Ron?" Hermione said.

"What? Sorry," he said, shaking his head to rid his thoughts.

She gave him a worried expression. "You're doing it again."

"I know," he said. "I'm okay though. I'm sure whatever is going on between them will be all right. Probably better once today is over."

"Well," Hermione said, "I've got something that might make you feel a little better now. It's another Christmas gift."

"You didn't have to get me something else," Ron said. "The bowling stuff is fine."

"Fine isn't what I was going for. You honestly couldn't have believed that it was all I'd get for you," Hermione said.

"Hermione," Ron said.

"If it makes you feel any better," she swiftly added, "this cost me little to nothing to put together, and it's something from both my parents and me." She picked up a small black box from the floor, handing it to him. "Stop pouting and open it."

Ron took it. He looked at her for a moment before taking off the lid. He pulled out the bit of wrapping paper and picked up the dark wooden frame. He let out a shaky breath, feeling a stinging sensation in his eyes and lightheaded. Everything seemed to slow down. "Why when how did you get this?"

"When I first got home, I thumbed through a box of pictures I had in my room. Some were from this day and this one caught my eye," Hermione explained. "I guess when I took it and got the pictures developed, I didn't think too much of it, but I feel it means a lot more now."

Ron didn't know what to say. The picture was taken inside his dad's tent at the Quidditch World Cup. His 14-year-old self was building a house of cards with Exploding Snaps. Right as he placed a card on top of the house, it exploded, causing him to turn his head and laugh with Fred who was sitting right beside him at the table. It was a memory Ron hadn't thought of in years, yet looking at the picture brought it back with a commanding force.

"There aren't too many pictures of only you and Fred, but there were a few I could've chosen from," Hermione said. "I thought this one was the loveliest. You both look so happy here."

"We were," Ron whispered. "Fred loved when the cards blew up in my face. I reckon he knew it would happen this time because I could hear him snickering in my ear as I placed it. He started laughing the moment the card exploded. I couldn't help but to laugh too." Ron ran his finger over his brother's face. Over and over Fred turned to him and laughed. "You've had this the whole time?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "I didn't take too many pictures over the course of that trip. After everything that happened, I guess I just got my copies and put them away. It was only when I got home this holiday that I looked through them all again." She reached out and touched Ron's face in the photo and then Fred's. "I knew the second I saw this that I couldn't keep it. It should be home with you."

Ron looked up at her, holding the picture closely in his arms. "This means the world to me. Thank you so much."

She smiled, rubbing his arm. "The frame is made out of wood from an English Elm. I thought that would give it more of a personal touch." Ron nodded at the heavy significance. "My parents actually came up with the idea of putting it in a special casing like this. My mum got the wood and my dad put the frame together. I told them how special I wanted this to be for you, and they took over from there."

"Bloody hell, Hermione," Ron whispered. "I love you so much. You're perfect."

"I'm not," she said, shaking her head. "I just know you. I want you to be happy, Ron, even on a hard day."

"I am," he said, taking her hand. "I'll always be happy as long as I have you." Ron and Hermione simply held hands as they looked at his picture for a few minutes; however, they eventually got up to get ready. When Ron was finished fixing up, he went downstairs. His parents, Bill, and Percy were at the table.

"Good morning," he said to them. "Happy Christmas." He went around and gave them all hugs.

"Happy Christmas, dear," his mum said. "You look nice."

"He has to," his dad said. "Grangers this morning, right?"

"Yeah," Ron said, sitting next to Percy. "Sleep well, Dad?"

He smiled. "Yes," he said with a nod. "I'm feeling good today."

Ron smiled too. "I'm glad." They gave each other a look that only they could understand. "Where's everyone else?"

"They're Weasleys," Bill said. "I'm sure Charlie, Ginny, and George will try to stay asleep for as long as possible. Harry and Angelina have probably been forbidden from getting up."

"Even on Christmas," Percy said with a laugh.

"What are you lot doing up then?" Ron asked.

"Well, we've come to the decision that we will just lounge around and be casual today," their mum said. "Everyone likes that idea. George especially."

"It'll be for the best, Molly," their dad said. "We can spend this year doing nothing, which will be fantastic. Next year we'll try for something more."

"Dad's right," Bill said. "We should ease back into the spirit."

"What's that in your hand, Ron?" Percy asked.

He smiled broadly. "Hermione's other gift to me." He put it on the table so everyone could see.

His mum gasped and was the first to touch it. "Oh, my boys! Where did she get this?"

"She took some pictures from the trip and had them in a box in her room," Ron said. "The frame is from an English Elm." They all looked at him. He nodded. "I know. Hermione is bloody wonderful."

His mum didn't even seem to mind his swear. "Yes, she is."

"This picture is what's wonderful," Mr. Weasley said.

"Blimey, they laugh just like you, Dad," Bill said.

"But Fred looks more like Mum doing it," Percy said. All four of them gazed at the picture as if they were trying to live in the moment. Ron wanted them to. He wanted his family to believe in the joy of the picture for as long as possible.

"Good morning," Hermione said, walking into the kitchen. "Happy Christmas, everyone."

His parents looked at her for a second before getting up together and giving her a hug. Hermione seemed a little startled at first but she hugged them back, closing her eyes. His mum was the first to pull away. "Thank you for giving that picture to Ron. It's such a special gift."

"It was my pleasure," Hermione said. "I've got more. I'd be happy to bring them back with me. If anyone sees one they would like, you're more than welcome to have it."

"That would be wonderful, Hermione," Mr. Weasley said.

"We're really glad you're able to spend Christmas with us," Percy said.

Hermione's cheeks went pink under all the attention, but Ron could tell that she was enjoying it. "There's honestly no better way I can think of spending Christmas." She looked at Ron but all he could do was smile at her. His heart felt lighter; every bit of his love for her grew. Hermione had always been a part of his family but he knew that one day he would make it official. Ron wouldn't settle for anything less.

Ron and Hermione held hands as they walked down the path and apparated to the street of her house. He put his arm around her waist. "My family really loves you."

"I really love them," she said. "I'd do anything to help."

"You do help," he said. He stopped walking, gazing down at her. "You know that someday I'll make you mine, right?"

She took his hands, interlocking his fingers with hers. "I thought I was already yours?"

"I mean formally," he said.

She beamed and nodded. "I do."

"You do?" he asked. "Blimey, I haven't even asked yet and the ceremony hasn't begun. I haven't even told Harry that he's my best man yet."

"Hush," she said, hitting his chest before pulling him toward her. He leaned down, kissing her. It didn't matter that they were outside in the cold. He couldn't feel anything but her mouth.

He pulled away, putting his forehead to hers. "You make me feel so many things at once. I never know what to do with myself."

"Don't worry, we'll find time to ourselves today. I'll help you sort it all out," she said, tracing his mouth.

"You promise?" he asked.

"I wouldn't lie to you," she said. "Come on." She tugged on his hand, leading him to her house.

Stepping into the Granger's house again gave him a peace that he hadn't felt in days. Ron felt guilty but it was nice to get away from the stress at his own home. With Hermione's family, Ron knew that all he would ever have to do was be there. They ate some Christmas pie, then Ron watched as Hermione opened gifts from her parents and from some of her relatives. Her parents were extra cheery and closer with each other than he had seen them previously. Christmas had a way of helping everyone breathe a little easier and, during those few hours with Hermione's family, Ron felt nothing but a sense of ease.

Before they left, Hermione went upstairs to get her pictures. Mrs. Granger packed some dessert for Ron to take back with him. "I hope you two enjoy the rest of your Christmas," she said.

"We will," Ron said. "My family just wants to keep things simple today."

"That's probably for the best," Mr. Granger said. "You shouldn't feel forced back into the spirit of things. You have time for that."

"Yes, that's exactly what my dad and brother said," Ron said. "Um, I haven't had a chance to thank you both yet for the frame. I really love it and it means a lot to my family as well."

"Hermione told us how much the picture would mean to you. We thought making an elegant, significant frame to border it would be better than trying to find you some superficial gift that you may forget about in a week or so," Mr. Granger said. "We were more than happy to help and creating things is something I love to do. You know that."

"I agree with, David," Mrs. Granger said. "I had some ideas of possible gifts for you but this seemed right. Hermione also said that your brother is buried under an elm?"

Ron swallowed the emotion in his throat. If he was ever going to get closer to the Grangers, then he had to open up. "He is. It was my brother George's idea. It makes the frame mean even more to me." The feeling was pushing against Ron's face. Even though he didn't want to lose his nerve in front of the Grangers, he couldn't stop a tear from squeezing out. He hastily wiped it away. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, son," Mr. Granger said, gripping his shoulder. "Grieving isn't something you need to excuse for anyone, okay?"

"Okay," Ron said, nodding.

"Are you all right, Ron?" Hermione asked, walking into the room with her box of pictures.

"I'm fine," he said. "We were just talking about the picture." He wiped away another tear as it rolled down his cheek. "We can go."

They went to the front door. Hermione hugged her parents. "Happy Christmas. I love you two. I'll be back in a few days."

"We'll see you then, Hermione. Be safe," Mr. Granger said. He shook Ron's hand. "Have a Happy Christmas, Ron. Take it easy with your family."

"I will, Mr. Granger," Ron said. "Thank you again so much for making the frame."

Ron turned to Mrs. Granger. She held out her hand. "It was nice seeing you again, Ron. Next Christmas I hope your family and ours can get together."

"So do I," Ron said. He looked at her hand. He knew that she was still uneasy about him but he had to start convincing her that he was okay. He took a cue from his parents, leaning in and giving her a small hug.

"Oh," Mrs. Granger said in humor but also in shock. She hugged him back, patting his shoulder. "You're a sweet boy, Ron."

He pulled away and knew that he was blushing. "Thank you for having me over again and for the dessert. Happy Christmas."

Ron could still feel heat on his neck as he and Hermione walked back down the path to his house. He peeked at Hermione. She was grinning at him. "You really are a sweet boy."

"Do you think that was too much?" he asked.

"No. It was perfect," she said. "You caught my mum off guard which is a good thing in my opinion. She usually always knows what's going to happen in any moment."

"Hmm, that sounds like someone I know," Ron teased.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You're so witty."

"You should really let me take the box for you," Ron said.

"Your chivalry is charming but I want to carry it," she said. "It can be my gift to your whole family. I'm quite excited to go through them with everyone."

"Have I mentioned how bloody wonderful you are?" Ron asked as he opened the front door. He was a little surprised that no one was on the couch. "We're back," he said, putting the tin of desserts down. He walked into the kitchen but no one was there either.

"Maybe they're outside again," Hermione said, placing the box of pictures on the table.

Ron opened the kitchen door, peering out. The table wasn't out there and neither was anyone. "No."

"I'll go upstairs and see what Harry knows," Hermione said. She went upstairs whereas Ron started to feel a prickly sensation on the back of his neck. He couldn't hear anything and the mugs from

his parents and brothers were still on the table. "Ron," Hermione said, entering the kitchen. "No one's upstairs."

Ron put a hand to his chest, breathing deeply and roughly. There were protective charms put all around his house but it didn't mean that everyone was completely safe. There were ways around the barriers. If someone was smart and tried hard enough, they could get in and take his entire family. "Hermione," he choked out, "where's my family?" He stared to wheeze out shallow breaths as his heart beat harder. What was happening was his greatest fear. The panic scraped its way under his skin and into his chest. "Hermione," he choked out again.

Hermione rushed to him, clutching his arms. She guided him to a chair and sat him down. She sat in front of him, putting her hands on his face. "Ron, listen to me: calm down and breathe, okay?" She put one of his hands to her chest. "Breathe like I am. It's okay."

Ron pressed his hand against her chest more, trying to calm down. "Where are they?"

"I don't know," she said, "but you have to stay calm. Maybe they all went out."

"And didn't tell me?" he said.

"We've been gone for a few hours," she said. "A lot can change in that time."

"Yeah, like someone coming, taking them, and hurting them," he said, feeling his panic grow. "If something happened to them I'll never forgive myself. I won't survive it, Hermione."

Hermione shook him. "Ronald, what you're feeling right now is only extreme nerves. Your family is fine. This is just a misunderstanding. Do you hear me? Answer me!"

He nodded, rubbing his face. "I hear you."

"Good," she said. "Now I want you to stay here. I'm going to look around and see if anything seems off okay? Afterward, we'll wait for a bit. If they don't come back soon, then we'll go to Ministry, alright?"

"Okay," he whispered.

"Where's the Weasley clock?" she asked. "It'll tell us if anyone is in any trouble."

"Mum had Dad pack it away the night before Fred's funeral," Ron said. "It gutted her and I haven't seen it since."

"That's okay," she said. "I'll still look around." She kissed his forehead. "It's all right." She walked off; Ron rocked in his chair. He knew that he was overreacting. His family had probably gone to a shop or something. He kept telling himself that but it didn't get rid of the pit in his chest. He didn't know what he'd

do if he suddenly had no siblings or parents. He wouldn't survive one day, even with Hermione at his side.

Ron stood up and went to the sink. He splashed himself with cold water like he had done the night before. He had to leave the kitchen. He was tired of looking at the four mugs that belonged to his parents and brothers. He sat on the couch, closing his eyes and rubbing his neck. When he opened them, he saw a piece of parchment on the table. He snatched it up, recognizing Bill's neat cursive. "Hermione!"

She came running down the stairs. "What?"

"You were right," Ron said as he read the note. "They did go out." He bit his lip, feeling relieved that everyone was okay but not feeling any happier about the situation.

"Where are they?" she asked, sitting next to him.

He gripped the paper in his hand. "They've gone to Fred's grave sight. Apparently, George came out of his room and practically demanded that they all go. They want us to meet them there."

Hermione gasped gently, touching his thigh. "Oh, Ron."

"We have to go," he said.

"Of course," she said. She shook her head, rubbing her temples. "So, um, I want to change into something more appropriate. I'll just nip home for a minute and fix up."

"Yeah, I-I should change too," he said. He stood up; so did Hermione.

She gave him a hug. "See, they're okay. I'll be right back."

"Don't take too long," he said, holding her.

"I won't, love," she said, pulling away. "I'll be back really soon. I'll hold your hand and we'll go together. I'll be with you while you're with your family, okay?"

He put his forehead to hers but didn't let her go. "I love you."

"I know you do," she said. "I love you too."

"You have to come back to me," he said.

"I will, Ron. I'm not going to leave you." She kissed him. "I'll be right here."

"You promise?" he asked.

"I swear." She kissed him again.

He held on to her tighter. He couldn't explain it but a heavy need for her took over his body and, through his devastation and

fear, he felt a burn for her. "Mmm, 'Mione," he whispered. He eased his tongue into her mouth, kissing her deeper. She sighed lightly, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Hermione broke away, out of breath. "Ron, you have to let me go. I'll be right back."

"Okay, okay," he said. He let go of her waist. She slowly peeled herself away from him. Hermione kissed his hand before nodding and hurrying out of the front door. Ron watched her run down the path and apparate before walking slowly to his room. His mind was bare and his body was numb as he went into his room and to his wardrobe. He pulled out his black robes that he hadn't worn since he gave his speech in the yard of his house. The similar blankness covered him again. Ron felt as if he was once more putting on clothes whose sole purpose was to remind him that nothing would ever be the same. His shirt and pants fit him a little snugger but he couldn't even find triumph in the reality of his weight gain.

Ron had no idea why he never once considered that someone would want to visit Fred's grave on Christmas. The idea had always seemed too extreme for him. He also wondered why George had only now told everyone. Ron thought about the state of his family members. He needed to be with them. He needed to be there to comfort his parents, hold Ginny's hand if she wanted him to, and give George his support. Ron had been so busy enjoying his time at the Grangers that he let himself forget how much his family was still grieving. He once again felt guilty.

Ron sat in front of the wardrobe, putting on his shiny black shoes. He pulled out the gift bag at the bottom. It was Hermione's present. He decided days ago that he would wait until later in the evening to give it to her. Now he wasn't so sure. He wasn't sure about anything. "Ron?" He stood up. Hermione was wearing a black dress that touched right at her knees and short-heeled shoes. There was a plain black bracelet on her right wrist, and she was wearing black earrings. Ron got a chill. It was exactly what she had worn on the day of Fred's funeral. The only detail that told him he wasn't dreaming of the day was the necklace she wore that he had given her for her birthday. Hermione was clutching onto it as if it gave her strength.

"Hi," he said. It was stupid but he didn't know what else to say.

"I got ready as quickly as I could," she said. "My parents asked all these questions but I told them I didn't have time to explain anything." She started to pull some of her hair back in a black pin but she kept fumbling. "Oh, I need a mirror."

"Let me help you," he said, walking over to her.

"I can do it," she said.

"No, I want to help," he said. "Just tell me what to do."

She turned around so he could pin her hair back. "Take this chunk of hair and slide it between the pin. Then just clip it. My hair

is annoyingly thick so it may not all go in smoothly." He nodded, running his fingertips through her hair to comb it back. Hermione shivered. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm not sure. I'm honestly not feeling much of anything," he said, collecting her hair. "I didn't think this would happen."

"Neither did I," she said. "I haven't heard one word of this since I got here. Ginny hasn't spoken about going to the site."

"I don't think she knew," Ron said. "I don't think anyone knew. I reckon it was something last minute that George came up with."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know," he said in truth. He eased her hair in, forcing the clip together. "There."

Hermione turned around, patting her hair. "Thank you."

Now that some of her hair was pulled back, Ron could see her neck, shoulders, and her jaw clearly. His body pulled toward her like it had the day of the funeral. "You're so beautiful."

"So are you," she said, touching his face. She grabbed her purse and cloak. "We should go."

"Wait, come here," Ron said, taking her hand and leading her to his bed. "Sit here. I want to give you your Christmas gift."

"We don't have to do this now," she said.

"I want to," Ron said strongly. "Please?" She nodded. He picked up the bag from the side of the bed, handing it to her. "Happy Christmas."

She grinned slightly and took out the tissue paper. She pulled out a brown briefcase made of dragon hide. "Oh, wow. This is beautiful."

"The hide is from a Snort Snout," Ron said. "It's got a lot of compartments, and it's water, fire, and basically anything proof. The shoulder strap has got extra cushion in it, and I also had an enforcement charm added to the bag so it won't break." He pointed to the gold buckle on the front. "I reckon we have a lot in common when it comes to gifts because I had your name engraved. See?"

Hermione moved her finger over the 'Hermione Granger' written across the buckle. She looked at it in awe, shaking her head. "How did you know I needed a new bag?"

"You told me," Ron said. "In one of your letters you said that your old bag was ghastly and kept breaking."

"I can't believe you remember that," she said gently. "It was such a minor thing in that letter."

"I think everything you write in your letters to me is important," Ron said. "So, after reading that part, I thought you could use something new. It'll be good for when you get a job at the Ministry as well. It's not just for school stuff."

"I wasn't trying to imply anything when I told you," she said.

"I know you weren't trying to imply anything," he assured. "It just worked out so well, and it was the best idea I had. Do you like it?"

"I love it," Hermione said, checking out the compartments of the bag. "This is so professional and so elegant."

"Like you," he added smoothly. "There's one more thing too." He lifted the top flap. There was a small square mirror on the underside of it. Ron pulled it out of its holder then put it in her hand. "Rub your finger across it." She gave him a look before doing so. When she touched the mirror, small letters appeared across the glass that read: No Matter What, You're Perfect.

"Sweetheart," she whispered in a gasp.

"There's nothing wrong with being reminded of the truth every now and then," he said. "I know you get overwhelmed and unsure at Hogwarts but I never doubt you. This is the best I can do without physically being there to tell you."

Her eyes glossed over. "This is beautiful," she said, "and it all must've cost a fortune. I know dragon hide is very expensive and this mirrorâ€""

"Shh," he said, putting a finger to her lips. "Don't worry about how much this cost. It doesn't matter. It wasn't too bad but even if it were, I wouldn't care. All I did over the summer was work. I barely bought more than a couple of shirts and candy. It's good to buy you nice things. I want to."

"It's not important to me that you do," she said.

"Maybe not, but it's important to me that I do sometimes," he said. "I want to indulge you."

"Well, this is gorgeous," she said. "I love it, especially the mirror. You're so romantic, Ron. You also understand me so well. I'll definitely need this when I go back to school. You're simply perfection."

"No," he said, "but I am yours." He leaned forward, kissing her. He wanted to deepen it and touch her but he knew that his family was waiting for them. He had to be with them. "I think we should go now."

They walked downstairs and left the house. Hermione held his hand as they went down the path. She nodded to him. "I'm here for you."

"I know," he said. He gave her hand an extra firm grasp then apparated them.

They appeared at the grave sight. Once again, Ron felt every bit of happiness and life leave his body â€“ almost like there were a hundred Dementors circling around him. "Ron," Hermione said softly, squeezing his hand. He looked in her direction. Further down the property he could see a group of gingers. His stomach flipped.

"Let's go," he said in barely a breath. They slowly walked past many stone plots and even a few people hunching near graves. They kept walking but they didn't even make it to the last English Elm before someone grabbed him.

"Ron!" Ginny said, jumping into his arms. He let go of Hermione's hand, at once hugging his sister back. She was shaking so badly that Ron could barely hold her.

"I'm here," he said. He pulled her away to look at her. Her face was dry but her eyes were red. Her face was almost ghost white.
"You okay?"

"It's not me," she said. "It's George."

"What is going on, Ginny?" Ron asked.

"We didn't plan for this, Ron," Percy said, walking over to him with Harry and their dad. All three of them looked as pale and miserable as Ginny, but Percy was the only one with wet eyes.
"George just came downstairs and said that we should come here. We couldn't say no."

"We've been here since you left. George doesn't want to leave though," Harry said. "He hasn't moved in hours." Ron walked past them. George was kneeling in front of Fred's grave, crying and mumbling things that Ron couldn't make out. Angelina was beside him, but he acted as if she wasn't there. Bill was behind George, and their mother was crying and being held by Charlie. He walked over to Charlie and his mum first.

"Mum?" he said.

"Ron, dear," she sobbed.

"I'm so sorry that I wasn't already here," Ron said.

"It's okay, Ron," Charlie said, whose eyes were wet like Percy's.
"We knew you'd be here. All we've done is stand around like this. We each talked to Fred a little but George hasn't moved at all."

"Oh, my boy," their mum said, hugging Charlie closer. "I tried talking to him but he doesn't want to see me. He doesn't want to see anyone butâ€“but Fred." She let out another strong batch of tears. Charlie held her tighter, kissing the top of her head.

"It's okay, Mum," Charlie repeated. Ron could see how much pain Charlie was in at seeing their mum in such a state. He never

cried unless she did. That was true even when they were younger. Ron at last turned to George.

He was rocking and shaking his head. "I'm so sorry, Fred," George sobbed. "If I would've known last Christmas would be our last together then I would have done something special. I'm sorry that I didn't. I'm so sorry, Fred." He touched Fred's tombstone.

"George," Angelina said, touching his arm. "Sweetheart."

He brushed her hand away. "Leave me alone."

"George," Bill said, taking his arm next, "you have to get up. You can't stay out here like this."

"No!" George shouted, pushing him away. "I'm not leaving him! I want to fucking stay here with my twin. He's mine. I have to be here with him. I can't leave him." Bill tried to take his arm again but George punched him. "Back the fuck up!" Ron gasped. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He couldn't believe what was happening and how George was acting in front of everyone. George gazed back at the grave. "I'm not leaving."

Bill stood up, rubbing his face angrily. He looked right at Ron. Ron could tell that he was horribly stressed. He shrugged. "I don't know what to do," he said in barely a whisper. Ron was lost for words. Bill was always supposed to know things. He was the eldest, and the smartest, and the calmest. If Bill didn't know, then Ron didn't know who was supposed to.

"Bill," Charlie said, walking over to them. "Mum's really fucking losing it. Dad had to take her. I just it's almost too much."

"I know, Charlie," Bill said. Percy, Harry, and Hermione came over while Ginny went to join their parents and Angelina by George's side.

Everything was different from how Ron imagined it would be. This wasn't how his family was. They weren't supposed to suffer like this anymore. "Why is this all happening?" Ron asked.

"I asked Angelina when we first got here if George said anything about wanting to do this," Harry said. "She said he didn't. He literally got up and said he wanted to come here. He was upset before we left, but nothing like this."

"I didn't think it would be this bad," Charlie said, running his hand over his short hair. "I feel bloody stupid for not seeing this coming."

"Don't," Hermione said. "You can never predict how someone will react to something like this."

"But he's my little brother," Charlie said.

"Hermione's right," Bill said. "No one knew. We wanted to make George happy, and we all wanted to come and be with Fred. It's just that we've been here for hours. We can't stay here."

"Especially with Mum and George like this," Percy said, looking at them. "I know Dad is trying but there's only so much he'll be able to control. Look at Ginny. She's being strong like Dad, but it must be killing her." He sniffed, rubbing his red eyes. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Percy," Charlie said, pulling him on his arm and into a hug. Ron watched Charlie hold on to a weeping Percy before looking at Bill. He was peering off at the rest of their family, still looking lost. Ron then followed his gaze. His parents were talking to George but he wasn't paying attention to them. Angelina looked sick and Ginny was holding her stomach, staring at George.

Ron felt sick himself. He hadn't expected this. It felt as if Fred had just died again and the seven of them were sitting in the kitchen, staring off and trying not to cry because they could hear George going mental with tears in the bathroom. He didn't think that his family would shut down or that George would lose his head again. Ron had spent his time eating biscuits and laughing while his family cried in the cold. It wasn't right. People were always going to depend on him. Ron had to do better and be better.

Ron took a glance at his friends. Harry was also staring at Ginny like he wanted to sweep her off her feet and take her away. Hermione must have noticed because she took Harry's hand into hers. They both appeared devastated but they would be all right. His family, on the other hand, needed Ron's help. "I have to do something," he said.

"I know," Bill said. "Charlie, you and Iâ€""

"No," Ron said, "I have to do something."

"What are you talking about, Ronnie?" Charlie asked.

He looked at all of them. "Percy, you're right. There is only so much Dad can take. He can't stay here looking at George like this and neither can Mum or Ginny. You lot have to go with them."

"What do you mean 'you lot'?" Harry asked. "What about you?"

"I'll stay here with George and bring him back," Ron said.

"No, we're not going to leave you here with him," Percy said.

"You're not leaving me here with him," Ron said. "I'm choosing to stay with my brother."

"Then we'll stay with you," Hermione said.

"No, this is something I have to do alone," Ron said.

"He's not only your responsibility, Ron," Bill said.

"Maybe not, but you said it yourself: you don't know what to do. He won't listen to you, or Mum and Dad, or even Angelina. Let me try. I think I can talk to him." Ron looked back at George who was still crying and talking to the grave.

"Ron," Bill said, "we're a family."

"I know," Ron said. "So let me take care of our brother."

"Ron, I'll stay here with you," Charlie said. Ron considered the idea for a second. He could always use Charlie's strength but right now he had to depend on only his own.

"I don't need you to, Charlie," Ron said, almost regrettably. "I need you to get Ginny out of here. I need you to take care of our sister. Percy, I need you to go back to the Burrow and get some food for everyone to eat. Bill, I need you to let Percy bring it and everyone back to your house."

"My house? Why?" Bill asked.

Ron paced, thinking about his plan. It was always important to approach a situation with new eyes. "Because I think taking George to a new location after this will be a good thing. Being away from our house and all those memories will help him to not feel so overwhelmed." Bill, Charlie, and Percy all shared a look as if they didn't believe him.

Ron rolled his eyes, stomping his foot in frustration. "Fucking hell, you lot. Look, I know I'm the youngest brother but I'm still a brother. I also know that I haven't done much to help since I got home and I'm sorry, but if there's one thing I know then it's George. I'll bring him back. I promise. You've just got to get everyone out of here and inside someplace warm. You've got to trust me."

"I don't know," Percy said. "This doesn't all need to be on you."

"Why not if I can help?" Ron asked. He looked at Bill. "Please, trust me. Let me help."

Bill looked right at him with uncertainty. "Damn it, Ron."

"I know," Ron said, nodding.

"No â€“ you don't," Bill said. "This isn't something you should be doing alone." Ron rubbed his face in frustration. He needed someone to believe in him. Ron removed his hands, looking at Charlie. The two of them locked eyes and, once more, Ron pleaded to him for support.

Charlie seemed to understand because he nodded slightly, touching Bill's elbow. "Perhaps we should let Ron stay here with George."

"Charlie?" Bill asked.

"We've all tried, Bill. George won't listen to us," he said. "Maybe Ronnie can reach him. He has in the past."

Bill shook his head, rubbing his neck. "I don't like this."

"No one does," Charlie said, "but George is our little brother and we have to do something for him. We also can't let Ginny and Mum and Dad stay out here for too much longer." Bill gazed at Charlie as if there was some secret code written on his face that only they could understand.

"Bill," Percy said, "are you actually considering this?"

"I don't want to but I've got nothing else, Perce. Do you?" he asked. Percy opened his mouth a few times but ultimately shook his head. "Then we're doing what Ron said," Bill said, not appearing pleased with the idea. "So, go back to the house and grab as much stuff as you can. Charlie, let's get Mum, and Dad, and Ginny, and Angelina out of there. Harry, Hermione, you two come to the tree, and we'll all go together." His brothers walked off but Harry and Hermione stayed with Ron. Charlie turned back, giving Ron a nod and a smile. Ron returned the gesture, loving Charlie more than he ever had in his life.

"We can stay with you, Ron," Hermione said.

"Yeah, we'll be here for you," Harry said.

"I know, mate," Ron said, "but my sister needs you more. I know you want to be there for her too. Just promise me that when she comes to you, you'll hold her as tightly as you can and you'll make her safe. We'll be even then."

"I will," Harry said.

"Hermione," Ron said. "I'll need your help taking care of my family while I'm here. Can you do that?"

"Ron," Hermione said, "I promised you that I wouldn't leave you."

"You're not leaving me," Ron said. "Helping them helps me."

She wiped her eyes, nodding. "Okay." She kissed him. "Come back to me," she said against his lips.

"I'll be right there," Ron said, letting her go. He looked at Harry. Harry nodded and they shared a hug. "I'm okay, Harry."

"I know you are," he said. "We'll be waiting on you. Come on, Hermione." She took his hand, giving Ron a sad smile before walking off.

Ron turned his back to everyone so he could rub his eyes dry. "You're fine, Ron. Take care of George. Take care of your family. Be a man." He let out a couple of deep breaths before walking over.

He kneeled down beside Angelina who was still trying to talk to George. "George," she said.

"Leave me alone," George answered.

Ron cleared his throat. "Angelina?"

"I'm not going with everyone," she said. "He's my boyfriend and I love him," she said loudly so George would hear.

"I know you do so let me help," Ron said. He took her hand, helping her up. "I'll bring your boyfriend back to you. Just go with my family and be ready for George, okay? You know I can help."

She rubbed her face in frustration before looking at George. "I'm sorry, Ron. I shouldn't haveâ€"

"It's fine," Ron said. "You did what he wanted, which is what I would've done. I'll bring him to Bill's. Trust me."

She sighed. "I'll be waiting for him." She walked over and joined the others. Everyone looked at him as if they didn't quite believe him. He'd show them otherwise. He might've left for camp but it hadn't changed his duty to them. It was all for them to begin with.

"Ron," his mum said, "you should let your father and I stay with you and George."

"It's okay, Mum," he said, hugging her and then his dad. "I'll probably have more luck with George alone."

"Ron," his dad said.

"We'll be all right," Ron said. "He just needs some time." He looked at Ginny and gave her a small smile. "We'll be there at Bill's soon."

"If anything should come up, come get me," Bill said.

"I will," Ron said. "You lot should go. It's getting cold out here." Ron took a step back and in pockets his family started vanishing. Hermione held her necklace before becoming the last one to disapparate with Harry.

Ron nodded. "Okay." He turned to George. Helping him was the most important thing he would ever have to do. He couldn't let everyone down. He walked right up to George.

"Go away," George mumbled.

Ron lightly touched his shoulder. "Hey, it's me."

"I don't care," George said. "I'm not leaving."

"I'm not going to ask you to," Ron said. "I just want to sit next to you. Can I?" George gave him something of a nod and shrug. Ron sat on the cold, soggy grass next to him. He peered at the dark green marble plot.

Frederick Gideon Weasley

April 1st 1978 - May 2nd 1998

Beloved Son, Brother, Friend, and Hero

His strength, courage, and laughter will always be cherished

Ron could feel tightness in his throat again. He missed Fred so much. "I'm still not leaving," George said. "I don't care that you're sitting now. So you can go too."

"I'm not going anywhere," Ron said, "and I'm not going to ask you to leave. I'll ask if you'll let me stay though."

George didn't look away from the grave but he did nod. "Okay." He ran his fingers across Fred's name. "It's our first Christmas apart. Did you know that?"

"I do know that," Ron said. "It's like that for all of us."

"It's not the same," George harshly said. "Fred and I woke up together on this day. It's our second favorite holiday, next to our birthday." He outlined the year that Fred was born. "This morning I woke up without him and I hated it. I hated myself. "I'm so sorry, Fred," George sobbed. "If I would've known last Christmas would be our last together then I would have done something special. I'm sorry that I didn't. I'm so sorry, Fred." George started crying again. Ron simply watched him. It was the exact phrase he had said only minutes ago. His brother kept repeating his apology â€" almost as if he didn't notice what he was doing. It was unnerving. George hadn't been so upset since Fred first died. It told Ron that George's pain had been hiding dormant in his body this whole time. The realization was painful to accept.

"Why are we here today, George?" Ron asked.

"Because I want to be with my brother," George sobbed. "I told myself that I'd stay away but I couldn't. If he can't be here with me, then I had to come to him." He traced his finger over the date that Fred died. "I'm sorry. I know that I'm ruining Christmas. It's exactly why I shouldn't be here. If I had died and Fred was here, he wouldn't be like this today."

"I don't think that's true," Ron said. He could picture Fred sobbing and clutching George's grave in his mind. It was eerie that it was so easy to envision.

"Of course it's true!" George said angrily. "Fred was always the better twin. He was smarter, funnier, faster, strongerâ€'just better. He was better at being a brother and a son. He was better at being a storeowner. He was better at being a boyfriend to Angelina. He was the better person, yet I'm here alive and he's rotting in his coffin." George rocked himself. "I'm so sorry, Fred. I'm so sorry."

Ron felt his body seize up. He'd never been ignorant to George's pain, but for whatever reason he didn't think that it ran so deeply. Ron was petrified but he couldn't ask for help. He had to swallow his terror to help George, no matter how difficult it was. "George," he said quietly, "you can't apologize for being alive."

George finally looked at him. The brownness of his eyes was barely visible through the puffiness and the tears. He didn't look like George Weasley — merely a hollow shell of who he used to be. "Why not?" He shook his head, scrubbing under his nose. "You know how I said some days I don't want to live, Ron? It's like that today. I don't want to be alive right now. I'd rather be buried with him than live without him like this."

Ron's heart dropped while his body shook. Hearing George like this was dreadful and too much to process. Yet Ron understood. It was precisely how he had felt during his panic attack when he thought Harry had died. The pain was excruciating and sickening but it had passed for him, however, it would never pass for George. He felt it daily and the awareness was enough to make Ron want to use Avada Kedavra on every last dark witch and wizard he came into contact with.

Ron fought through the hatred and reached out, touching George's hand. George pulled it away. It didn't stop Ron. "I know," Ron said. "I know you want to be but you can't. You're alive. You'll get through today and this rough patch, okay?"

"I don't want to get through it, Ron!" George said, punching the ground. "Don't you get it? I—I want it to have been me." He looked at Fred's grave. "He is a hero. He is beloved, and he will be cherished. He's the best person in the whole bloody world and he should be here. We should be together. We're twins. You can't split up twins, Ron. You can't kill one but not the other. It leaves you empty and mental."

George gazed at Ron like he had been hit in the head with a Bludger. "Why didn't they take me too? Why did he die? Why wasn't Fred being my twin and my love for him enough to keep him alive? We're magical fucking beings, Ron. Why couldn't magic fix this?" George massaged the side of his head until his ear became loose. He ripped it off, throwing it on the ground. "Magic fixed me! I have a fucking hole on the side of my head but I'm fine. I'm fine, but Fred isn't. Why, Ron? Why can't I fix this?" He started wailing again. Ron's chest felt moments away from collapsing. He didn't have answers to any of George's questions. In fact, he asked the same ones often. Ron felt nauseous and dizzy but he had to do better. He had to keep it together for George. Ron didn't save Fred back at Hogwarts so he had to save George in front of his grave now.

"George, look at me," Ron whispered. George looked up at him. His pale, freckly face was so blotchy and swollen. "I want you to know something: if I knew any magic to fix this then I'd try it, no matter what. If I knew that sacrificing myself would somehow bring Fred back, then I would've done it already without a second thought. If I could, I would go back to that night and save him."

I'd save you both, even if it meant giving up my life. I'd do it for you and for him."

Ron looked at the grave. His lip trembled but he didn't let his tears out. "However, there's nothing. Being wizards doesn't mean we can cheat death. If anything, it makes us worse off than Muggles because we know magic can heal almost anything but that." He touched Fred's grave, tracing over the word 'strength'. "So dying or even wanting to die won't do any good. I have to live, George, no matter how often I think of ways I could've pushed Fred out of the way and taken his place. It also means that you have to live too. You have to live, even though your twin brother doesn't anymore. You can't do everything together, George."

George merely stared at him for a few seconds before choking and falling into Ron's arms. Ron held him securely as George bawled loudly. "Fucking hell, Ron," he sobbed. "I just want this feeling to go away."

"I know, George," Ron said as a few tears came out of his eyes. "I'm doing everything in my power to help. I'll do anything but let you sit here and hope that you fade away to be with him. It's not time. You have to stay here."

George buried his head against Ron's chest. "I miss him more than anything, Ron. I love him so bloody much. It's not fair. He was my twin and my soul mate, Ron. You have no idea what it's like to lose your fucking soul."

"You're right, I don't," Ron said, "but I know what's it's like to lose a brother. I know what it's like to see it happen and not be able to change it. I understand what he meant to you, but Fred meant something to me too. Even if we never talked about it, I know how special he was to me. He still is."

Ron pulled him away. "George, I want you to know something else: I can't be your soul mate, and I can't be your twin. I probably can't even begin to help you feel any better, but I can swear to you that there isn't a single person on this earth who cares about anyone more than I care about you right now. I'm gonna protect you, and I'm going to sit here with you for as long as you want."

George sniffed roughly, peering at the grave. "I'm not ready to leave yet."

"Then we won't," Ron said. "I'll sit here with you, and I'll be quiet. You can say or not say whatever you want to me or to Fred. If anyone tries to come here and fuck up what we're doing, then I'll care of it. It's whatever you want, George."

"I wanna just sit here," George said.

"Then let's sit here," Ron said simply.

George sat back in front of Fred's plot, staring at it. "Ron?"

"Yeah?" Ron said.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me, George," Ron said. "I should've been here when you first got here."

George nodded slightly. "Ron." He opened his mouth but didn't say anything. It looked as if he was almost too afraid to say the words. "Iâ€œI love you."

"I love you too, George," Ron said, patting his arm.

"Fred loved you as well. I hope you haven't forgotten," George said.

"I haven't," Ron said, shaking his head and thinking about his picture with Fred. "I haven't forgotten anything when it comes to Fred." George sniffed and lay on the cold ground in front of Fred's plot. He kept his eyes closed. Ron merely watched him, trying to keep himself together. It was incredible hard and a bit painful but Ron knew he could be strong for his brother.

They stayed out there for ages it seemed. The chill of the wind got colder and the sky went dark before George finally felt well enough to leave Fred's grave. Ron was freezing, exhausted, and hungry, but it didn't matter. George put his fingers to Fred's name. "I'll be back, Forge. I hope you had a Happy Christmas. I love you so much." He stood up and sniffed. "You can say something if you want to."

Ron nodded. "I do." He took George's spot in front of the grave. There was so much that he wanted to say but he knew that he had to keep it short. "We all missed you today, Fred. I hope you're all right, wherever you are. Happy Christmas, big brother. I love you." He kissed his hand then placed it on Fred's grave. He closed his eyes, giving himself a minute to grieve and love his brother. Ron rose to his feet. "You ready to go to Bill's?"

George nodded. "Yeah, but I don't know if I can talk to everyone right now. I'm still calming down."

"Then you won't have to talk," Ron said. "You can just rest. I'll talk to the family. Trust me." He took George's wrist and George nodded. A second later, Ron apparated them to the cottage. The flow of the seawater was the first thing to hit Ron. He could see almost all the lights in Bill's house lit. "Ready?"

"Let's go," George said. They treaded through the sand and to the front door.

"You open it when you're ready," Ron said. George nodded, obviously taking a few moments to gather himself. "No matter what, George, everyone in there loves you and only wants you to be okay. They're worried. That's all."

"That's the problem, Ron," George said. Out of nowhere, he started crying again. "Fuck. Fuck. I can't do this."

"I'll help you," Ron said. He opened the door. Everyone was crowded in Bill's tiny living room and kitchen.

"George," Angelina said, standing up.

"Give us a minute," Ron promptly said. He took George's wrist, hurriedly leading him upstairs. Ron opened the door to Bill's room and was relieved that it was empty and clean. George sat on the bed, repeatedly wiping away the tears that came down. Ron searched through Bill's wardrobe, pulling out the biggest jumper he could find. "Here. You've been outside all day. You need to warm up and get comfortable." George pulled his cloak off and his button up shirt. Ron handed him the jumper then got off his knees to help George with his shoes.

"I can do it, Ron," George said. He kicked his shoes off then lay back in the bed. Ron grabbed the knitted blanket from the foot of it, putting it over George. He got in the bed from the other side, sitting up next to him. George turned away from him. He hugged a pillow, sobbing gently. "You don't have to stay in here with me. Everyone is downstairs."

"George, there's no other place I need to be right now," Ron said. "I'm going to stay here with you. I told you that I would. Just try to get some sleep. You'll stay here tonight."

"What about you?" George asked. "And Angelina?"

"Neither of us will go anywhere," Ron said. "Just relax and breathe." George nodded, holding the pillow tighter. "Wait â€“ take this." Ron draped his arm over George's torso. George held on to it, clutching it almost for dear life.

"Thank you," George said.

"I'm here for you," Ron said. He was silent as George wept and sniffed and held on to his arm. Ron scanned the room. There was a small table under the window that held pictures of Fleur's family and some of his own. There were a few pictures of Bill with Charlie at various ages and one of them as young kids sticking their tongues out. The photo attached to it was one that had to be taken recently of the exact pose with their tongues out. However, the picture that struck Ron was the one out in front. It was the Egypt picture. All nine of his family members smiled and waved at them. Ron could only hope that he was making them proud. He looked at Fred, hoping that he was okay with the way Ron was taking care of his twin.

Ron stared at the picture until George's grip on him loosened and Ron couldn't hear his sobs anymore. "George?" he whispered. He heard nothing so he slowly and gently pulled his arm away. George didn't stir. Ron got on the other side of him and looked down at him. George was asleep but the look on his face told Ron that it was anything but peaceful. He didn't want to leave his sight but he had to get back to his family. He picked up the picture of the nine of them and eased it between George's arms before tiptoeing out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

As he walked downstairs, he told himself to keep things together. Everyone would be looking at him now for answers. He went down the rest of the staircase and everyone stood up. "How is he?" his dad asked.

"He's sleeping," Ron said. "I think he'll be asleep for the rest of the night."

"You've been gone for a long time, Ron," Hermione said, getting up from her chair and walking over to him. She hugged him. "You're freezing."

"I'm fine," Ron said, hugging her back but only for a second. "I know we were there for ages but George wasn't ready to leave. I wasn't going to force him to move."

"Come here, dear," his mum said from the kitchen. She poured him a cup of steaming tea.

Ron grabbed it, almost gulping it down at once. "Thank you. Are you okay?"

"I'm better now that you two are back," she said. Her face was dry and she looked less miserable. It was the first positive thing Ron had seen in hours.

"We all tried to eat a little," Ginny said, "but we were just worried about you guys."

"What happened out there?" Bill asked.

Ron looked at Hermione standing next to him first, then to Angelina and his brothers in the living room, before finally turning to his parents, Ginny, and Harry in the kitchen. People he loved, who wanted answers, surrounded him, but his loyalty was to the person upstairs sleeping. "George mostly talked to Fred's grave and cried. He kept saying that he wanted to be as close to his twin as possible because they've never been apart on Christmas."

"So what did you do?" Harry asked.

"I let him be close to Fred," Ron said with a shrug. "I told George that we would stay for a long as he wanted. I told him that I was there for him, and I told him that no matter what we would have to leave. He couldn't be with Fred just yet."

"Oh, George," Angelina said in a shaky breath.

"No, it's okay," Ron said, holding up his hands. "For some reason I think hearing that made George feel better." Ron knew that they could never truly understand. What had happened at the grave was something only he, George, and Fred would ever comprehend.

"Well, we're glad you're both back, Ronnie," Charlie said. "Thank you for bringing him back."

"I told you lot that I would," Ron said, setting the mug down. Now that George was all right, Ron felt it was okay to voice his own needs. "Why didn't any of you tell me that George was like this? He's obviously been this way for a while."

"What are you talking about, Ron?" Percy asked. "We told you everything."

"No, you didn't," Ron said. "None of you ever bothered to mention in a letter that George was having bad days, worse days â€“ whatever the bloody hell you're calling them."

"Ronald," his dad said.

"I'm sorry, Dad, but I mean it," Ron said. "Angelina, I told you to write to me the moment George started changing."

"Ron," she started, "it's not that simple."

"Of course it is," Ron said. "He's my brother and your boyfriend."

"Ron," Mrs. Weasley said, "don't get angry at her. It's not her fault."

"Then whose idea was it?" Ron asked heatedly.

His mum stood up from her chair, sighing. "It was mine."

"W â€“ what?" he asked.

"I suggested to everyone that we allow you to only concentrate on your work at Lambrick," she said. "I asked for everyone to use caution in their letters to you."

His jaw dropped. "What? Iâ€“I don't believe you, Mum!"

"Don't talk to your mother that way, Ronald," his dad said. "We did what we thought was best for you."

"Best for me?" Ron asked.

"Yes, best for you," his dad said. "We all saw how stressed you were over the summer about getting into a good camp but you got into one of the best. We all wanted you to break away a little and focus on Lambrick. You're always fighting, son. You deserve a break from something."

Ron didn't know what to say. He didn't like that he could understand where they were coming from. "How I've spent my time has always been my choice."

"And George is a part of our family," his mum said. "We've all been taking care of him, watching out for him. There was no need to write to you every time he had a fit, Ron."

"But-"

"There are eight of us, Ron," Bill said strongly. "We're a family, and one day you and George will realize that. We were trying to protect you and keep your head on so you could concentrate at camp. We have good reason to want you clearheaded. Don't you think?" Bill looked at him with knowing eyes again. Ron knew that he couldn't come back with anything. Bill was right, everyone was right, but Ron didn't want them to be.

Ron looked at Charlie, hoping for a better answer. "Charlie?" he asked.

He rubbed his neck, shrugging. "You've been doing so well, Ron. I didn't want anything to jeopardize your camp experience."

Ron gaped at him before turning to Ginny. She quickly moved her eyes away from him. "Bloody hell," Ron said. "I'm so tired of everyone talking like this. I'm a Weasley like everyone else here â€“ nothing more. You don't have to treat me differently. Being at camp and all the shit that's happened, like being featured in the bloody Enchanted Dispatch, hasn't changed my priorities. I'm one of you."

"We know that you're one of us, Ron," his mum said. "However, everything has already been done and I don't take it back. I'll protect all of my children in the best ways that I can." She eyed Ron fiercely, telling him that the conversation was over. There was nothing he could do, so he just shrugged and shook his head. They all went quiet for a while.

"So," Ginny said, "what do we do?"

"I told George that he could stay in your room," Ron said. "I hope that's all right, Bill."

"It is," he said.

"Then I'm staying with him," Angelina said.

"I don't want to leave my son," his dad said. "Molly and I will stay here too."

"That's fine," Bill said. "Angelina, you can stay with George in my room. Dad and Mum, you two can take the other room upstairs."

"Thank you, dear," his mum said.

"I'm staying too, but I don't need a bed," Ron said. "I'll sleep in the hall by your room, Bill. In case George needs anything."

"The rest of us will go back to the Burrow," Charlie said. "We can clean up the house and tomorrow Percy and I can go to the Ministry and let them know why you won't be in, Dad."

"I'd really appreciate that, boys," his dad said.

"Well, Ron and I can go back home now and get some clothes for you two," Ginny said to their parents. "Angelina, I'll get your bags from George's room as well."

"I'm going with you," Harry said.

"I will too," Hermione said.

The four of them quickly gathered together outside and apparated back to the Burrow. Ron and Ginny went to their parents' room to pack while Hermione and Harry waited in Ron's room. Ron got a bag for their dad as Ginny worked on their mum's bag. "Did Mum ask you not to tell me anything too?"

"Yes," she said. "Fuck ¢ fucking hell."

He suddenly heard a muffled cry so he dropped the bag, turning around. "Ginny?"

She repeatedly shook her head, running her fingers through her hair. "I tried, Ron. I really did. I came back from Hogwarts and saw how grim things were. I tried to make it better. Everyone was stressed and busy and hurting and I couldn't do anything." She started shaking. Ron walked over to her.

"Ginny, you ¢ you don't have to do this," he said. "Please, don't cry."

"I don't want to!" she sobbed. "I hate crying. I hate feeling useless but I do. I'm so scared for George. What if he does something?"

"He's not going to do anything," Ron said, clutching her arms. "He just had a really bad day."

"That's bullshit!" Ginny said. "I'm not thick. How is he going to be okay? I mean he barely even talks to Angelina anymore. You have no idea how surprised I was when George actually came back with you, Ron."

Ron thought about her words. He couldn't imagine what would've happened if he hadn't been there. "I told you I'd bring him back."

"I know you did," she said. "While George is alone with you, he's okay. I ¢ I just ¢" She trailed off as she covered her face. Her knees gave in but Ron quickly caught her.

"I got you," he said, holding her.

"I'm sorry, Ron," Ginny said against her chest. "I didn't know what to say to you when you came back. I just missed you so fucking much, and I'm so glad you're here. I really needed you here. I love you, Ron. I really love you and I'm sorry for letting George get like this."

Ron held her firmly. He could feel and hear her crying. She shook and wept right against him. He closed his eyes. Watching his parents cry was awful, sitting next to George as he broke down was brutal, but nothing was more agonizing than Ginny's misery and hearing her apologize to him. She was his little sister, and

she was his greatest responsibility. It was his job to do everything in his power to protect her and make her feel safe. He hadn't done that at all. All he had done was shift the pressure onto her shoulders. Nothing was worth that.

"Don't ever apologize," he said, kissing the top of her head. "You didn't do anything wrong. I'm here and I'm going to stay here for you and for George and our family. I'm here now, Ginny. Come here." He guided her to the bed and let her sit on his lap. He once again stayed silent as a family member cried against him.

She finally pulled away, wiping her tears. "Thanks for letting me get all that out."

"It's my job," Ron said, moving hair out of her face.

She sniffed, getting up and taking the bags. "I'm gonna get George and Angelina's bags before heading back. Wait a couple of minutes before you come. I don't want Harry to see me like this."

Ron wanted to tell her that Harry was her boyfriend and wouldn't care but he could understand her reasoning behind her decision. "Yeah," he said.

Ginny nodded. "Thank you and thank you for being here."

"Where else would I go?" Ron said gently. "My family is here. You're here."

Ron walked Ginny down the path and watched her apparate before slowly walking up to his room. Hermione and Harry were sitting on his bed talking when he went in. "Where's Ginny?" Harry asked, standing up.

"She went ahead to the cottage," Ron said. He went to his trunk, lazily pulling clothes out but he wasn't sure what he was looking for.

"Why? I could've gone with her," he said.

"She just needs a couple of minutes, Harry," Ron said. He threw a pair of jeans down, slamming his trunk closed. "Are you two gonna be all right here tonight?"

"We'll be fine," Hermione said. "I doubt we'll sleep much anyway. We'll probably spend the whole night talking with your brothers or something. Everyone was in a daze when we got to Bill's, Ron."

"Even more so when you came back with George, I reckon," Harry said. "That was amazing of you, Ron."

"He's my brother," Ron said.

"So just be there for your brother and the rest of your family," Hermione said. "Harry and I will be fine." She smiled at him so Ron nodded. His friends sat back on his bed, talking about the day. Ron didn't really listen. All he could think about was how

things might've turned out differently today if he never would have left for camp.

The stupid article was the cause of everyone treating him differently. Wanting to become an Auror was the reason why Mrs. Granger would never accept him. His dreams were why George had been alone, Ginny had felt helpless, and his parents and brothers were lost. Ron had left the people he loved more than anything because he wanted something for himself. He told himself that it was for them, yet it was tearing them up. It wouldn't matter how strong or fast or talented or smart Lambrick made him. It would be for nothing if he couldn't share the wealth with his family.

Ron suddenly knew what he had to do. It had only been a whisper before but now it boomed in his ears like the sound of Alan's whistle. "I can't go back," he said.

Hermione and Harry stopped talking. "That's okay," Hermione said, "but you should at least say goodnight before coming back here."

"No, that's not what I mean," he said. "Iâ€¢I can't go back to Lambrick. Even if I get the letter and make it to the merge, I can't go back."

"What?" Harry asked, standing up. "Why?"

Ron opened and closed his mouth several times before he could find the right words. "I â€" I think my family is falling apart. I need to help them. I need to be here with them."

"Ron," Hermione said, standing up as well, "you are here with them."

"Not in the way I should be," Ron said. "I've only been here for four days and I've already seen some of the worst shit that's ever happened with my family. Especially today. George was terrible."

"Everyone was like that, sweetheart," Hermione said, "including you."

"None of us were like him," he said, shaking his head. "George was different. He was so much worse. He wanted to die today."

"Do you think George would ever take something like that seriously?" Harry asked.

"No," Ron said, "but just going on today, I can't say that with full confidence. What the hell does that say about George or about me or the state of my family?"

Harry looked at Hermione before looking back at him. "Ron, I know you're upset and I know you must be really scared right now. You have every right to be, butâ€¢I don't think that's a good enough reason to want to quit."

Ron stared at Harry as if he was mental. "Did someone stun you today? Were you not present at the grave and at Bill's? George

and my family are in a state. There isn't a better reason than that."

"I don't think that's what Harry is trying to say," Hermione said.

"Then what is Harry trying to say?" Ron asked.

Harry sighed. "I only mean that today was awful but it'll get better. George will get better."

"And the process will go by even faster if I'm around," Ron said.

Harry got the look on face like he always did when he was struggling for words. "See, thisâ€¦this is exactly why your mum wanted to keep things from you."

Ron felt a pang in his chest. "You agree with them?"

"In this case, yes," Harry said. "I'd think you would too." Harry gave him the same knowing eyes that Bill did but Ron looked away.

"Whatever, Harry," Ron breathed. "Think what you want but I'm not going back."

"That's a stupid decision," Harry said, shaking his head.

"You can just fuck off then, Harry," Ron said intensely.

"Ron, Harry, please," Hermione said, putting her hands up. "Let's not fight."

"What â€“ do you think Ron quitting is a good idea?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, what do you think?" Ron asked.

"Does my opinion really matter right now?" she asked.

"Yes," Ron and Harry said together.

Hermione looked between them, gripping her necklace. "Iâ€¦I think everyone is a little over-stimulated today and is saying things that they don't really mean. I think some sleep would help us all."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I mean what I say. I don't understand how Ron sitting next to George and holding his hand is going to help him. It's not what he needs."

"How the hell would you know what he needs?" Ron spat. The devastation from earlier was blinding with his newly found anger toward Harry. "He's my brother, not yours; but you're right: it's not what he needs, because what he needs he'll never get again! What he needs is buried in the ground. Fred is dead, Harry. George is never going to see him again. Not when he's thirty, not when he's a granddad, not even when he's a hundred and fifty. Never fucking again! You have no idea what that's like!"

"I don't?" Harry asked, looking astounded. "Are you telling me that I don't understand death? I have no bloody idea what it means to have someone you love ripped away from you to the point where you don't care if you open the door and a bloody Death Eater is on the other side? Are you honestly asking me this?"

"Stop it!" Hermione said. "Both of you need to calm down."

"All I'm saying, Ron," Harry quickly added, "is that quitting to take care of George won't make him better or you. He has to stand up and realize that he needs help before anyone will be able to reach him. I know that for a fact. I also know that if you don't go back and you waste the best opportunity of your life, then you'll never forgive yourself. You'll resent things, Ron. I don't want you to feel that way. You have to understand that."

"And you have to understand that the best opportunity of my life doesn't mean shit compared to my family," Ron said. "I'm a part of a family, Harry. I'm one part of something much greater." He went over to his trunk, pulling out the picture of his family. He set it on Harry's cot, pointing to it. "Every single person in this picture is someone I love so much more than myself. This morning when I came back and you all were gone, I nearly lost my mind. I am absolutely nothing without my family."

Ron gazed at the people smiling and waving up at him before turning back to his friends. "So, Harry, if you're asking me if I'm willing to give up my spot for George, then the answer is yes. I can go to camp later, but my family may not be here later. It's for them, Harry, but you can't understand that."

Harry looked down and sighed. "I'm so sick of you saying that, Ron. You can't keep throwing that in my face."

"I'm not. I'm just being honest," Ron said. "I'd think because you're dating my sister that you would understand."

"Don't you dare bring Ginny into this," Harry said intensely. "I love her, and I'll do anything for her, but this isn't about Ginny or George or anyone else but you."

Ron shook his head at Harry's thickness. "Unbelievable. You â€“ you didn't understand this a year ago but you apparently still don't get it. Of course this is about them. Family is the most important thing to me and nothing comes before them. Everything is easier for you. You can do whatever you want, whenever you want to do it."

Harry gaped at him. "That's right. My life is just so fucking simple. I can run freely."

"That's not what he means," Hermione said.

"Oh, it is," Harry said darkly. "I'm just a bloody orphan, yeah? What do I know about family or loyalty or pain or duty? I don't know shit about sacrifice."

"Harry," Hermione said.

"It's okay," Harry said. There was fury all over his face. Ron knew it matched his own. "Ron's right. I haven't changed since we talked about this before in the tent but apparently neither have you, Ron. You're once again going to run off because you're scared and because you don't have faith in people."

Ron felt his face and neck flush. He knew how cowardice his leaving had been. He didn't need Harry taking the piss, especially in front of Hermione. "You self-righteous bastard," he nearly growled, taking a step toward him.

"Ron," Hermione said, taking his arm.

He snatched it away. "You think you know everything. You think because you saved the bloody world that you get to continue telling people what to do but you actually don't. I don't have to listen to you, and you definitely don't get to tell me a fucking thing when it comes to my family!"

"That's enough!" Hermione said, pushing both him and Harry away from each other. "Nowâ€œ; I â€œ I want you both to stop talking and breathe. We can't do this."

Ron didn't listen to Hermione. He only had words and eyes for Harry. "I reckon the only reason why you want me to go back in the first place is so I can fall into your shadow," Ron said menacingly. "It must've really tore into your bollocks knowing that I made a name for myself in east section. Well, I'm not your sidekick anymore, Harry. I have my own bloody life now."

Harry's fury thinned out. He simply looked at him with a pained expression. He was quiet as he shook his head. "Fuck you, Ron," he said softly. He pushed past him, walking out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Hermione looked after him with tears in her eyes then back to Ron a couple of times. She touched Ron's arm. "Don't leave, Ron. Harry, wait!" She opened the door, running after him. Ron buckled to the floor and rocked, running his fingers through his hair. He had said all the right words to cut into Harry's chest, but he deserved it. Harry had to deserve it because he didn't get it. Ron kept telling himself that, but the pain and shame touched his heart anyway. Ron didn't want to care about Harry's feelings at the moment but he did with all his heart.

Hermione came back in soon after and closed the door. She sat next to Ron, wiping her eyes. "He went back to Bill's. He's really upset."

"He doesn't get it," Ron said.

"You both said some really horrible things that I know neither of you meant," she said. "I can't believe that happened."

"He doesn't get it."

"Ron," Hermione said, turning his face so he'd look at her. "You two really hurt each other. We have to fix this."

"He doesn't understand, Hermione," Ron said. "Even if I didn't mean those things and even if I wanted to go back to Lambrick, I can't."

"But Harryâ€""

"I can't worry about him right now!" Ron almost screamed.
"Please, just tell me that you can understand."

Hermione sniffed, looking pained. "I - I think I do," she said with a nod. "I was going to stay here for you so I can understand you wanting to stay here for your family; however, I also understand Harry's position. You can't stay mad at him and you need to apologize to him. He just really cares about you and he doesn't mean to be insensitive. Harry only wants you to get all the things in life that you deserve and have worked so hard for. I do too."

"But none of that matters anymore," Ron said, "especially after today. When Tom Riddle took Ginny and when Dad was attacked, I felt absolutely useless to my family. Now, Fred is gone and my family needs help again. I wanted to make George better today."

"You did, Ron," Hermione said, rubbing his arm. "You do so much more than you think you do. You stayed out in the cold for hours with him then brought him back to your family. You did everything."

Ron gazed at her. Her touch was soft and her smile was kind. He felt a bit of warmth reach inside of him. "George told me that I don't know what it's like to lose my soul mate and feel like my soul is gone. I don't." Ron took her hand, squeezing it. "His words terrified me but I could understand his pain. If it had been you then I don't know how I would've survived this Christmas without you. I certainly wouldn't have wanted to."

"Oh, Ron," Hermione said. "You have no reason to think about that because I'm here."

"You are," he whispered. "Fred isn't though." He stared at the floor, sitting very still. He tried not to think about what he had said to Harry. So much had happened that day and ever since he got home. It was all slowly starting to hit him. George's words came back to him. "Why did Fred have to die?"

"I don't know."

"Why does my family have to hurt so much?" he asked next.

"I don't know," she said again, softer this time.

He let out a shaky breath. "Why do the people we love leave us?"

Hermione shook her head. "Iâ€"I don't know," she said in hardly a whisper.

He looked up; they gazed at each other. Everything around him was crumbling but Hermione was still there. The emotion from the realization hit him tremendously, along with his love and need for her. "Hermione, just stay with me," he said.

"I could never go anywhere else," she said.

He scooted closer to her. "I'm so sorry that I said those things to Harry."

"I know you are, but you have to tell him that," she said, moving closer to him. "I love you both and I need the three of us to always be together."

Ron touched her cheek. He wanted to say something meaningful but all he had was the bare truth. "I missed you."

"I missed you too," she whispered, placing her hand over his. They were so close. He could feel her heat and smell the sweetness of her skin. It might not have been the right time but he didn't care. Ron looked at her lips for a moment before leaning forward and kissing her. The moment his lips touched hers, some of his iciness thawed out, turning into fire. Ron raided her mouth, tangling his fingers in her hair. Hermione sighed as she pulled the hair clip out so her locks could run freely. She repositioned herself in Ron's lap, concealing her tongue in his mouth. He held her tightly around the waist. He knew that they were both upset, but for some reason he also knew that the only thing that made them hurt less was getting closer to each other.

The bad feelings from moments ago were gone, leaving Ron to only feel Hermione. The thought of having her made his heart race and his skin dampen. Suddenly, Hermione broke away from his mouth, gasping. "Ron, I know you're feeling really vulnerable right at the moment and I don't want to take advantage of you. We don't have to do this right now."

"You're not taking advantage of me," he said, out of breath. "I want you. I've wanted you all day. I've wanted you since I came back from camp. I've wanted you while I was at camp, over the summer, when we first started dating â€" even before that time. I think I've wanted you in some way since I was eleven, Hermione."

Hermione face went scarlet, and her eyes widened. He could see her need. He wanted her to act on it. "Okay," she said after some time. "Let's get off the floor then." They started kissing frantically again while they got off the floor. Ron bent down so he wouldn't have to break the kiss. They made it to the bed. Ron helped her lay down on it. He took off his robes, tearing at his button up. He got it off and both of them kicked off their shoes. He kissed her harder as he settled on top of her. Hermione lifted her body, pressing herself against him as closely as she could.

Ron accepted her invitation and held her tighter. Touching her made his skin burn, his blood rush below his trousers, the air leave his lungs, and his head spin. There was a heat that was

slowly smothering Ron and driving him mad but he welcomed it. Hermione was his; she always would be. She kissed him deeper, making Ron almost groan. The fire, pressure, and love were there but it wasn't enough. Ron needed to feel Hermione's smooth skin become damp as he touched and kissed it. He needed her small fingers to dig, scratch, and tug on him as he pleased her. He needed to feel her wetness engulf him, making him remember that there was goodness in a world of so much pain.

He wrenched his mouth away from her. "I need you," he said.

"Anything," she whispered against his mouth.

"I need your body so badly right now," he said. "I need to feel something different â€“ anything â€“ from what I'm feeling now. I need something good."

"Have my body, Ron," Hermione said with passion. "It's yours. Do whatever you need to do to make yourself better."

"I justâ€¦I want to be inside you," he said, making himself dizzier. "I just need something else and I have to have it with you. I want to become something else."

She nodded, seeming to understand his desperation. "Then be inside me. Take me in any way you want."

Ron gazed at Hermione. She had offered herself without question and with total trust and fervor. He couldn't ask for anything more. He bent down, kissing her again. His hands went under her dress. He tried to touch her thighs but there was some sort of hosiery covering them. He couldn't tell where it started so he started ripping at it madly. "'Mione," he whined, "Iâ€œI can't get this off."

"Wait, stop," she said against his mouth as she put her hands on his. "Let me help you take my tights off." She rose up, pulling them down as Ron unbuckled his belt and zipped down the fly. Hermione kicked out of her tights then Ron slipped her knickers off. Feeling her bare thighs made him moan. More blood and heat coursed through him. He kissed her again, settling between her legs. She pulled down his trousers and his shorts, then brushed her palm against his muscle.

"Oh, fuck," he panted. He put his forehead against hers. He was trembling terribly and could barely breathe. He looked at her flushed face. "Do you need your wand?"

She shook her head but didn't seem pleased. "No. This morning I thought that late tonight we'd get some time to ourselves, so I put the spell on me before we left for my house." She frowned a little. "Iâ€œI thought since it was Christmas, we could go outside and make love under the moonlight or something equally sugary that I dreamed up."

Ron felt a strong pang at his chest. He had completely forgotten that it was Christmas. "I would've really liked that. I'm sorry."

"Me too," she said. He couldn't give himself time to mourn the lost moment. He bent down, kissing her as he gripped himself. He found her center then eased inside her. They gasped as their bodies connected. Hermione's smooth, warm, creamy insides coated his body in the comfort he had been missing all day. He pushed into her, slowly and with force. They panted unsteadily against each other's mouths as Hermione grasped the back of his shirt and Ron braced his arms on either side of her head.

He kept his eyes closed as he pushed into her. Her body felt so good. It was keeping him from feeling everything that had happened to him and was happening to everyone he cared about. "Hermione," he said against her lips, "I wanna feel more of you."

"Feel more," she said in a gasp. "Go deeper." She licked his mouth, bending her legs and parting them more. Ron thrust his hips deeper and a little more powerfully. He began to moan as he let Hermione snog him madly. Ron took control of her body whereas she took control of his mind, heart, and spirit. Her body was his oasis. All the feeling and pressure from the days of his holiday made the pound of pleasure and fire hit the head of his cock a lot sooner than he thought it would.

"Oh, oh," he panted out of nowhere. "'Mione" Hermione."

"Cum inside me, Ron," she whispered gently. "Give it all to me." He opened his eyes. Hers were open as well. Hermione was gazing at him with her beautiful brown eyes. He was the luckiest man in the world because they were eyes of his girlfriend " his soul mate. Everything else didn't have to matter as much because all he had ever wanted was below him, telling him to fill her up with himself. Ron couldn't take it anymore. He put his mouth to her neck, cumming hard inside her. He bit her neck severely as the emotions flushed out of him.

Hermione flinched, wincing. "Ow " ow," she whimpered.

When Ron felt the waves pass through him and the weight fell off his shoulders, he finally stopped his movements and detached his mouth from her. He opened his eyes, slowly coming to his senses. He was out of breath and sweating horribly. He felt so raw and exposed. He looked at the blotchy red spot where Hermione's neck and shoulder came together. Horror struck him. "I'm sorry," he said, realizing what he had done. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I don't know what got into me. I barely had control of myself. I'm so sorry, Hermione."

Hermione kept her eyes on him as she rubbed the spot. She winced again. "It's okay. It doesn't bother me."

"I hurt you," he said, "I know I did."

"But I liked it," she said as pinkness stained her cheeks. "I know you weren't trying to actually harm me. You just lost yourself. I get that. I felt everything you did in that moment, even more than when we were having sex, and I liked feeling that emotion from you." She traced his mouth. "It's okay, Ron. I hope it doesn't make you feel uncomfortable because I enjoyed it."

"It doesn't," he said in a heavy breath. "I liked it when you bit my lip and you sucked the blood away. Fucking hell, Hermione, am I scaring you at all right now?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not scared. You're making me love you more. I think we're getting closer every day, Ron."

He exhaled unstably, putting his forehead to hers. There would never be enough words to explain his love for her. "When everything else around me is rubbish, somehow you're always still amazing. Whether I'm here or at camp or anywhere, somehow you make things better for me. You always tell me that you love me."

"It's because I do, sweetheart," she said. "I know your family and friends love you but I was made for you. It's why I'm always going to be here. I think what we just did proves that." Ron nodded and sniffed. A tear hit Hermione's cheek then rolled down. She jumped, wiping it away.

"Are you crying?" he asked.

"No, you are," she said. Ron touched his face. Sure enough, his cheeks were wet. More tears came down, hitting Hermione's face. He cried but she wiped the tears away. He cherished the closeness, and it was enough to make him kiss her deeply and stay in her body for a few more minutes.

Ron and Hermione eventually returned to Bill's after she covered up her sore spot with a sweater. Angelina informed him that she had gone in to check on George many times but he stayed asleep. His family sat around for awhile but his parents ultimately went up to bed. Bill then decided that they should all try to get some sleep. Ron held Hermione tightly, kissing her before letting her go. He also gave his brothers hugs and gave Ginny an extra tight squeeze. The only person Ron didn't say a word to was Harry. Ron couldn't look at him without feeling terribly, but there was nothing he could do at the moment.

"Are you sure this is okay for you?" Bill asked, handing him a pillow and a knitted blanket.

"Yes. It'll be like sleeping back at Lambrick," Ron said. "The floor is fine." Even if it wasn't, he was so knackered from the day and relaxed from his time with Hermione that he could fall asleep anywhere.

Bill nodded, not looking convinced. "All right. Listen, I know you're angry, but I don't take it back either."

"Yeah, I reckoned," Ron said. "I can understand why you lot kept this from me. I just don't like it."

"It's hard being on the other side, isn't it?" Bill asked. Ron could only nod. "Well, all I want you to do right now is relax, Ron. George is asleep and everyone is accounted for. Take a moment. I'll be downstairs if you need anything."

"Goodnight, Bill," Ron said. He laid the blanket out and sat on it. He held his pillow, thinking about what had happened with Hermione and how incredible it was. He then thought about his fight with Harry, Ginny's tears, and everything that had happened at the grave sight. It was all too much.

"Ron," Angelina said. He looked up at her. She had a mug in each hand. "Can I sit with you?"

"Sure," he said. She sat next to him, handing him a mug. "Thanks. You gonna stay up for awhile?"

"Just for a bit before I go in there with him," she said. She took a sip of her tea, looking at him. "How did you do it?"

"What?" he asked.

"How do you always know what to say to George or how to make him feel better?" she asked.

Ron rubbed his neck, thinking about a good answer. "Honestly, I don't know. I don't even really think about what I'm doing. I just do it. I reckon being around him so much over the summer helped. Angelina, I knew something was wrong the whole time I was away. I felt George and what he was going through."

She smiled a little, brightening up her pretty face and smooth, brown skin. "You sound like Fred, you know? He always talked about 'feeling' George. They always said it was a twin thing."

"It is a twin thing," Ron said. "I don't know why it's happening to me or why it's not happening to you."

Angelina peered into her mug. "George and I haven't been getting on that well for awhile. These past few weeks have been really hard. He gets so angry and quiet and mean. He stays at my flat a lot, but sometimes it's like he doesn't want to be there. I guess he feels as if he doesn't have anywhere else to go though."

"Where's Lee?" Ron asked. "I can't believe I haven't even seen him once."

She sighed. "Can I tell you something, Ron?"

"Anything," he rushed. "You can trust me."

"Okay, well," she said slowly, "Lee hasn't been around because George told him not to come around for awhile. Not to the flat or the shop or around your family."

"Why?" Ron asked. George and Lee were best mates like he and Harry were. It would never matter how furious Ron was with him. He'd never tell Harry to stay away from his family.

"They got into a huge row," Angelina said. "It was a fight about a week ago, and it was about Fred. You know how much the twins loved Christmas so for the holiday Lee wanted to come out with something special in Fred's honor. It sounded sweet and really

fun, but George lost it. He said that he'd never want to make a profit from Fred's death. Lee tried to tell him that it wasn't what he wanted to do but George wouldn't hear of it."

"Have you or Lee tried to—"

"Of course we have, Ron," she said, "but George is a stubborn Weasley."

"I'm sorry," Ron said sheepishly. "I wish I could've been here to say something to him."

"I'm not blaming you," she said. "I'm not blaming anyone. This whole situation is fucked up and what I hate the most is that George is still shutting me out. He still believes that I can't understand." She rubbed her eyes but Ron knew that she wouldn't cry. Angelina was tough in every way. For as long as Ron had known her, she had been as bold and loud and daring as the twins. In secret, Ron had always fancied her a little during his school days. She was very attractive, feisty, and she loved sports. Ron could easily understand why both Fred and George had fallen for her, but he couldn't understand why George was pushing her away now.

"It's really hard for him, Angelina," he said.

"Well, it's hard for me too, Ron," she said. "I know George feels torn because Fred dated me first and, well, we were technically still together when he died." She frowned, running her fingers through her long, braided hair.

"Was it difficult for you?" Ron asked. "Dating George right after it happened?"

She looked at him. "Do you worry that it wasn't?"

Ron didn't know if it was because he was drained or because they were sitting so closely or because George was sleeping in the room behind them, but Ron wanted to be open with her. "Sometimes. I'll be honest: when I first found out about you and George, I didn't like it."

Angelina didn't seem upset by his words. "I don't think George did either. Ron, I know it must seem strange and it must make you and the others uneasy that I'm with George now, but my feelings have always been complicated."

"Why?" he asked, feeling very intrigued.

"Because," she said, "I've honestly always fancied the both of them. Growing up with them was fantastic and there was so much about them that I was keen on. When Fred asked me to be his girlfriend, I eagerly said yes, but it didn't mean that I suddenly forgot what I felt for George."

"I reckon I thought that!"

"George was something spontaneous?" she asked. "No â€“ no my feelings are deeper than that. I know what it feels like to be torn. I was with Fred but a part of me wanted George very badly. I sort of knew that he had feelings for me too. We almost addressed it once but it could never happen. Then when Fred died, I was destroyed. I cared about your brother a lot, Ron. How could I not? Fred was such an amazing person and he was so special."

"Then where does George fit in?" Ron asked, missing Fred more as she talked about him.

"I clung on to Lee and George after it happened but more to George than anything else," she said, staring off as if she was envisioning George with her. "He needed me and I needed him. Then, one night while we were talking about Fred, we started talking about each other and we kissed. We snogged a lot."

Ron blushed. "Yeah, um, George sorta told me about that."

"Yes," she said with a smile. "I knew then that my feelings for George were real and always had been. I wanted to be with him because I had wanted to be with him for years. I never pushed this relationship. I've always told George that we could take it slow and just be friends, but he wants this too."

Angelina leaned her head against the door as if it would make her feel closer to George. "I can tell you that what I feel for George now is something I never felt with Fred. Me fancying the both of them was never because they were identical. It wasn't a twin thing and it doesn't make being with George easier because I've already been with Fred. There are things about Fred that I wanted in my life, just like there are things about George that I can't live without now."

Ron leaned his head against the door too. Hearing her words was making him feel better about her relationship with George. "Do you at least miss Fred?"

"I miss Fred every day, Ron," Angelina said, touching his hand. "Sometimes the ache is actually good but sometimes I can hardly stand up. It's what makes all this so beautifully complicated. I think I can always care for Fred but know that it'll never be as deeply as I care for George. I also think that I can be completely in love with George and be devoted to him, but still miss Fred and what I shared with him."

She exhaled, circling the rim of her mug. "I love them both. I was with Fred first and I gave things to him first but it doesn't mean that things don't feel right now with George. I'm not upset that we're together. I want to be with him, even though I know what brought us together."

Angelina's words gave Ron a headache. It was awfully complicated and he hardly understood. He had a deeper respect for her now because he couldn't believe that one person could feel so much. However, all that mattered to Ron was that she had said that she wanted to be with George. "So you really love him and you want to be with him, honestly?"

"More than anything," she said.

"Then you can't give up," Ron said. "Even if George pushes you away or tells you to fuck off or says something mean and hurtful, you can't leave. George loves you more than anything and he needs you. He doesn't like saying the things that he needs, but it doesn't mean they're insignificant to him."

"I don't know, Ron," she said, shaking her head.

"I do," Ron said quickly, touching her hand this time. "Trust me, you're the reason why he's stayed alive for this long. His heart probably would've given out months ago if it weren't for you. He's just worried that you don't really want him or that he's betraying Fred."

"We've had those discussions before," she said. "He knows that none of it's true."

"Tell him again," Ron said strongly. "Remind him and show him and do whatever you have to, because he loves you and he always wants to be with you."

She gave him a onceâ€œover. "Did George tell you this?"

"Some of it," Ron said. "The other parts I just know because he's my brother. Look, you have to give him another chance. He can be better than this. It's just difficult right now."

"It's difficult for me too, Ron," Angelina said. "I don't plan on leaving though just because it is."

"Good," Ron said, looking straight at her so she could see how serious he was. "Listen to me: George depends on you more than he depends on air, Angelina. You have him now, probably forever. So, if you ever betray him or leave him without good reason, or hurt him in any way â€" no matter how small â€" then I'll have no choice but to hurt you â€" severely. No offense, but he's my brother."

Angelina didn't seem intimidated. Conversely, she seemed rather pleased. She smiled. "I think that's fair."

"Then we're sorted," Ron said. He gave her a nod, sipping more of his tea. "He'll get through this."

"I know," she said. "One of the reasons why I love George so much is because he's so strong."

"I feel the same way about him," Ron said. "He just needs time." He and Angelina sipped tea for awhile longer but then she finally decided to go inside. Ron slipped in Bill's room just to get a peek at George. He was still asleep with the picture in his arms. Ron touched George's shoulder for a moment, hoping that he was at least dreaming something pleasant.

"Thank you, Ron," Angelina whispered. "For everything."

"Yeah. I'll be right outside," he whispered back. She gave him a hug and he hugged her back. "We'll all get through this," he said in her ear. Ron eased back outside, lying down in his bed on the floor.

It didn't take long before his eyes drooped closed and he was finally void of all thoughts.

* * *

**** So, I could go all day on this long chapter but there's only a couple things that I want to point out. First, I believe that grief is a real thing. It doesn't matter if you're the biggest jokester in the world, PAIN HURTS. It's ugly and it makes you nothing like yourself. George has a right to grieve and be ugly. He lost his twin. Everyone has a right to be ugly and mourn Fred. Second, what I love the most about Ron is how I can want to kiss him and strangle him at the same time. He's perfectly imperfect and that's why he's real. Well, I hope you lot enjoyed this chapter - as much as one can. I enjoyed it. :) Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 41*: Ricochet

I know you lot must think that your eyes are deceiving you, but this chapter really is as short as you believe it is.(or at least shorter, lol) Please, read my author's note at the end for extra information about this special chapter.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

* * *

When Ron woke up on Boxing Day, he cracked his stiff neck, groaning all the way to the loo. He took a wee, washed his face, and gargled with a fusion of toothpaste and water. Ron spit out the mixture, wishing that the memories from yesterday would've fallen down the drain as well. He took a risk and decided to look into Bill's room. Both George and Angelina were asleep. George was still on the edge of the bed with the picture of their family close by. Angelina was lying right next to him, her arm draping

over his side. Even in her sleep, she seemed to be trying to reach for George. Ron then checked on his parents. His mum was bundled against his dad whereas he was holding her, almost in a protective way. Ron rested his head on the doorframe. They'd deserved a better Christmas. It wasn't fair that they hadn't been able to somehow enjoy the day. Ron tried not to feel angry at why everything had been ruined.

After putting on his shoes and cloak, Ron went downstairs. Bill was asleep on the couch. His brother's limbs were far too long for the small, posh couch that Fleur must've purchased. He could almost picture Bill's face when he first saw it, frowning and crinkling his nose at the floral pattern, but quickly changing his expression and pretending to like it because Fleur did. His oldest brother had deserved a better Christmas as well. Ron swallowed his anger, easing out the front door and walking out onto the beach.

Ron went to the clifftop right near the cottage, sitting in the sand. The spot gave him a gorgeous view of the crisp sea and orange sky that were still waking up. He shivered as the wind blew cold, salty sprinkles of mist on his face. Ron massaged his fingers into the sand, going over everything that had happened. It wasn't fair. Their Christmas had started off so well but had so easily taken a turn for the worst. Ron felt drained and, the more he thought about his Christmas, the more upset he became. He had gotten George back to their family safely but so much else had happened afterward. His fight with Harry and giving up on his dreams of Lambrick were two of those things. Ron rolled his neck, closing his eyes. It wasn't the time to feel bitter. It was a new day, providing a new chance for things to work out.

"Can I sit with you?"

Ron jumped but almost instantly felt warmth and peace blanket him. "Please." He opened his eyes as Hermione sat next to him. "Hi."

"Good morning," she said. Ron didn't quite believe she was real so he pulled her into a hug. She smelled real, felt real, and her bushy hair that tickled his face was certainly real. Hermione was a goddess. In the back of Ron's mind, he knew that he'd needed to see her and, somehow, here she was.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, pulling away. Even a few seconds in Hermione's presence made him feel a little less disoriented.

"I don't know," she said, honestly seeming perplexed. "I woke really early. Everyone was still asleep, so I just decided to come here. I walked around for a bit, waiting. Something told me you would wake up and come out here. You love the beach in the morning."

"You know me so well," he said kissing her temple. "I haven't been awake long. Everyone else is asleep."

"How did it go last night?" Hermione asked. Her thick strands blew in the mild wind as the morning light hit her face at just the right angle.

"You are absolutely gorgeous, Hermione," he said.

She grinned shyly, leaning over and kissing him. "Thank you, but that's not the answer I was looking for."

"Right," he said, trying to focus. "Fine, I guess. I stayed up and talked to Angelina about George while the others went to sleep. I woke up with a knot in my neck."

"That's not as impressive as what I woke up with," Hermione said. She pulled the collar back on her cloak and jumper to reveal a bite mark on her shoulder, the color of a deep ruby. It was bigger and bolder than Ron had remembered.

"Bloody hell," he said, touching it. "Does it hurt?"

"It's rather sore," Hermione said.

He cringed. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," she said casually. "I wasn't upset about it last night and I'm still not. I don't regret anything we did."

"I don't either," he said. "I needed it." This time, he leaned in, kissing her. As Hermione's mouth opened up to him, Ron thought about his moments of desperate passion with her that had led to him leaving to mark on her shoulder. His palms suddenly began to itch as he remembered why he had needed her body so badly. Ron pulled away. "Um, how was everything last night at the Burrow?"

Hermione licked her lips, blinking as if she was coming out of a daze. "Sorry?"

He chuckled, swiping a bit of saliva off of her bottom lip. "Last night, Hermione Granger; how did it go?"

"Oh, right." she said. "It went as I expected. We all sat around, sipping tea and talking about everything that had happened. We talked about your parents, George, and you. Percy was somewhat of a mess."

"Just like yesterday," Ron said. "I've never seen him so sensitive."

"It makes sense," Hermione said. "He's been estranged for so long. He must feel really helpless. Charlie took care of him though. He effortlessly fell into the role of the eldest. He took care of all of us."

Ron nodded, feeling a little better. However, there were still stitches in his sides. "What about Ginny? Was she okay?"

"She clung to Charlie for most of the night," she said. "I've never seen her so exhausted. Ginny went to sleep in your parents' room before the night was even over."

"She did that a lot when she was younger," Ron said, drawing random shapes in the sand. Hermione dug her finger in too, causing them to cross and overlap each other's designs. "When we were mean to her or excluded her, Ginny always slept with Mum and Dad that night. Dad even told me that Ginny slept with them many nights of the week during my first year at Hogwarts."

"She really misses you when you're away, Ron. Ginny tries so hard to seem impervious to everything but she's not. After seeing her these past few days with everyone, I think her greatest weakness is the love she has for her brothers, especially you." Hermione smiled as if telling him this would bring him comfort. It did, to a point, but there was another side to it. Seeing Ginny's vulnerability had gutted him last night.

Ron swallowed the burning feeling. "Yeah, I'm learning that." He stopped drawing, incapable of beating down the last question knocking against his chest. "A-and how's Harry?" He looked at Hermione so he could catch her first, and therefore honest, reaction. "Is he okay?"

Hermione frowned, causing her eyebrows to form an almost straight line. "After everyone went to bed, he and I stayed up and talked. We talked about how worried we are about your family, about Ginny, and we talked about your fight."

"What did he say?" Ron asked.

"He's furious, Ron," Hermione said. "He's also hurt and shocked that all that happened. Frankly, so am I. I'm not sure where to go from here; it's not easy being in the middle."

"I don't want you to be," he said.

"Well, neither of you made it seem that way last night," she said in a bit of a stiff tone. "He's my best friend; like a brother to me. You're my best friend too and the love of my life." Things were so much more complicated with Ron dating Hermione. Ron couldn't even row with Harry in the same way anymore. He had to constantly think as a friend and boyfriend. "I'm sorry for the lot of it," he said.

"It's not me you need to apologize to," Hermione said. "Harry's upset but he's also your best friend of seven years. He knows how you are when you're angry." She looked away, appearing very unsettled. "I love you, Ron, but you have a startling ability to genuinely hurt people with your words."

Ron rubbed his palms into his thighs. Hermione knew firsthand how thick and harsh he could be. Ron was still certain that he'd made Hermione cry more than he'd made her laugh over the years. "It's not something I'm proud of."

"I'm only telling you so that you can work on it," she said, rubbing his back. "It's not all on you though. I gave Harry a similar lecture. He didn't take the right approach to getting his point across. Bringing up your absence last Christmas was inappropriate as well."

"Things haven't been that heated in ages," Ron said.

"We all had a troubling time yesterday. Emotions were completely unstable. It got the best of you two," Hermione said. "However, I think that you two have been best friends long enough to know what's real and what isn't. Just talk to him." Ron nodded, digging in the sand again. He knew that he had to make things right with Harry. "Ron?" she said. "Have you thought anymore about your decision?"

Ron dug into the sand more manically. Lambrick had been a source of constant debate in his mind since declaring that he wouldn't go. In no way was quitting something he wanted, but he was sure that it was something he needed to do. "I don't think I'm gonna change my mind."

Hermione closed her eyes for a second, seeming almost disappointed. "Okay," she said. "I can accept that."

"Really?" he asked, not believing her. A part of him didn't want her to, hoping instead that she would slap him, saying that he'd be foolish not to return.

"I won't pretend that it doesn't frustrate me that you're not going back," she said. "Of course I want you to go; but it's your choice. You didn't try to stop me from going back to school. By the same right, I can't stop you from staying at home. Besides, you're doing it for a noble reason."

Hermione scooted closer to him, placing her chin on his shoulder. "Your nobility is why I'm so in love with you, sweetheart." She looked straight at him, giving him a tender smile that told Ron how sincere she was. Hermione had been his constant light through everything. She hadn't deserved a dreary Christmas either. All of a sudden, a rush of guilt flowed through Ron. She was always so open and clear with him. It made gazing at her difficult because of what was still on his shoulders.

"I have to tell you something," Ron said before he lost his nerve.

"Tell me what?" she asked, moving away.

Ron could feel his heartbeat picking up speed. He didn't want to speak anymore but he had no choice now. He had to tell her, and Hermione was gazing at him too closely for him to back out now. "Please, promise me that you'll keep being understanding."

Hermione's hand disappeared under her cloak. He knew that she was squeezing her necklace. "Ron," she said, "you can't expect me to merely make that promise when I have no idea what's going on. Just tell me what happened."

Ron hated that he had to deal with this now. It wasn't how he'd planned to tell her. He didn't even know how to start. "Umâ€;" he said. The setting and atmosphere didn't feel right. His heart started to beat faster with every breath he took.

"Ron?" Hermione whispered. "Tell me."

"All right," he said. He licked his lips, trying to choose his words carefully. He felt like he was in a bad dream. "I-Iâ€;I hadâ€;I had a panic attack."

Hermione immediately reached out, touching his hand. "Oh, Ron," she said. "Did it happen this morning?" Ron shook his head, wishing that he could say yes. "Last night?" He shook his head again, despising that he had to say no. Hermione's concern turned into confusion. "I don't understand. When did it happen?"

Ron started to feel nervous at the realization that he had to tell her. It felt as though the incident had occurred months ago, but now it was still fresh in his memory. Hermione was still gazing at him, waiting for an answer. Ron had to give it to her. "It happenedâ€;two days before I met you at the train station."

Her eyes grew. "You mean you had an attack at Lambrick?"

He could finally nod; he hated having to now. "I did. It was the night of my examination, in front of my group, the section leaders, and Mr. Smith."

Hermione gasped. "A full-on attack? What - why?"

Ron was relieved but slightly boggled that she seemed more worried than upset. "It was the worst one I've ever had," he said, looking at his hands. "It was during the last part of the test. It was Harry, two other people, and myself in a group. A wall got blasted; Harry went through it. Iâ€;I thought he died. I couldn't control myself, and I lost it in front of everyone. Harry was all right though. He talked me through it like you always do, and I got better."

Ron could barely hear Hermione breathing and, out of the corner of his eye, he could see that she wasn't moving. He figured it was her way of telling him to go on. He told her about everything from the section leaders' initial reactions to Alan yelling at him the next day. Ron even told her about Conor and Letty not telling anyone about what happened. Once he finished, he expected to feel liberated, but he didn't. Ron at last plucked up the courage to look at Hermione. Her expression was hard to read. "So you're not sure if you'll be asked to come back?"

"No," he said simply.

"Does this explain why you got so upset when we talked about your return in my room?"

"Yes," he said just as simply. He watched her closely for a reaction; there was nothing.

It was Hermione's turn to turn away from him. She kept her eyes forward to the water. "If I'm understanding this correctly, all this happened before we met up. You and Harry have just been keeping it to yourselves?"

"I asked Harry not to tell you or Ginny," Ron said.

"Why?" she asked. There was something severe in her tone that frightened him.

"Because I wanted to be the one to tell the story," he said.

"Then why didn't you?"

"I-I just did," he said.

Hermione finally looked at him, making Ron no longer guess what she was feeling. He could practically smell the fury seeping out of her. "Don't talk to me as if I'm dim. Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

In every scenario Ron had conjured of telling her, the worse case always involved her uttering those words. "Well, I—"

"Whatever you're about to say," she swiftly added, "make sure it's the truth."

There was such intensity in her voice that Ron felt overpowered by it. "O-okay," he said. "I didn't tell you sooner for the exact reason I gave you when we made up at your house: I just wanted three days with you." Hermione pursed her lips, looking at her hands. She picked at the dirt under her nails. The constant clicking sounds started to do his head in. Ron wanted to speak but he didn't want her blowing up at him. He figured that she was doing her best to stay calm.

"All right," she said through gritted teeth, "I can possibly give you that, however, if you didn't want to tell me at my house then why didn't you tell me when we first got to yours? We were at the Burrow for days. Why didn't you tell me then?"

It was a fair question, but Ron didn't have an answer. He was too distracted, worried that she was imagining him under her nails as she continued to pick at them viciously. "It just never seemed like the right time."

Hermione, at long last, stopped picking. "The right time?" she asked. "How about the morning before we went to your house? Or the night after that? Christmas Eve would've been a great choice too. Any of those times would've worked, Ron. Instead, you thought lying to me seemed right."

"Hold on," Ron said, shaking his head. He most likely deserved a de-bollocking but now Hermione was saying things that simply weren't true. "I didn't lie to you. I always planned to tell you. It was when that I was unsure of."

The color in Hermione's face drained. She put a hand to her chest, rubbing it as if it ached. "How can you sit here and say that you didn't lie to me?" she asked. "The night we fought, you looked me in the eyes, telling me that you were okay and that there was nothing going on. I think that having a horrible fit of anxiety in front of everyone because you thought our mutual best friend had died is not 'nothing'. I think that you possibly getting shut out of Auror training camp because of it is not 'nothing'."

She clumsily stood up, looking panicked. "Oh god," she breathed. "I can't believe how many times over these past few days you've looked right at me, giving me that smile and saying that you would never lie to me. You'd tell me that I could trust you and then you'd kiss me. How - how could you betray my trust in such an intimate way?"

"W-what?" he whispered, standing up. Hermione appeared sick. Looking at her made him feel rather nauseous himself. Ron had expected her to be livid â€“ not hurt. "Betray your trust? Hermione, this is me you're talking about. I would never do that to you."

"That's what I thought too, Ron!" she said rather loudly, stomping her foot. "But you did! How you can stand there pretending like what happened isn't a big deal?"

"It's a huge bloody deal," he said. "It's why it was so hard for me to tell you. It's why I asked you to understand. You have to understand that-

"NO!" Hermione shouted. Ron stopped talking, biting his lip. Hermione actually seemed surprised that she could get her voice to blare so piercingly. "No," she said in a much quieter tone. "You have no right to tell me that I need to be more understanding. All I've done since I started dating you is try to understand how you feel and why you do the things you do. I've always done my best to defend you, and I try to empathize and stay by your side. So don't you ever dare try to lecture me, Ron!"

"I wasn't going to," he said, feeling taken aback by all her rage. "I was just going to say that you have to understand that finding a right time to tell you about this was really hard for me."

"But lying to my face isn't?" she asked. "What does that say about our relationship?"

Ron took in a sharp breath. He couldn't process what she was asking. "Hermione, this has nothing to do with our relationship. I just didn't want to tell you about another bloody panic attack I had. I hate them. I hate having to share the burden with you and Harry. I just wanted to be with you and be relaxed teenagers for once."

She rolled her eyes. "That's not a good enough excuse."

It was his turn to feel fury. Hermione had no right to belittle his dream of sharing a few moments of happiness with her. "I didn't know I needed an excuse to want to be happy with you. What are you saying about our relationship now?"

She hit his arm. "Oh, don't turn this around and make it seem as if I don't care about our state! This isn't about our happiness, and you can't just assume that everything will either make us completely happy or completely miserable. No- this is about what's right. You're not the only one who has things they want to hide, Ron."

Hermione took a few steps back, facing the ocean, her expression no longer calm in the morning light as it had been before. It was his fault. She didn't deserve this.

"Contrary to everyone's belief, I'm not perfect," she said. "I get angry and scared and sometimes I just want to disappear, but I don't because I have you." She turned to him. "You've always been my way of seeing through the darkness in my life. It's why it's so important for us to be healthy. If we're okay, then other things won't be as painful."

"I think that too, Hermione," Ron said, walking closer to her. "You're the only thing I have that isn't broken."

She groaned. "We shouldn't have to do this, Ron. We've had this discussion â€“ at the cafÃ© and in my roomâ€;I thought you listened."

"I did," he said, nodding. "Please - don't turn this into something bigger than it is."

"I'm not doing anything â€“ this is not my fault," she said. "You could've just told me but you didn't. You talk so much about keeping things simple, yet you're the one always complicating matters. You intentionally lied about something very important. You made Harry lie about it too. You didn't have to do that."

Hermione sounded so disappointed in him. It ate away at Ron's insides. He had to make her understand that he had only wanted to keep her happy. "You make me sound like some sort of monster. It's not fair. I have panic attacks, Hermione. I've never dealt with this before. Talking about it is difficult for me. You can never know what it's like because I can barely make sense of it myself."

"I know that I can't," she said. "That's why you have to explain it to me â€“ so that I can help. You don't know what it's like to have parents like mine, orâ€;be tortured by Bellatrix, or to be Head Girl at Hogwarts. Nonetheless, I've told you so you can begin to understand and help me."

She made everything sound so easy, but Ron didn't understand how. Everyone around him seemed to perfectly comprehend the right things to do. He hated being so behind. "Iâ€;I honestly don't know what to say, Hermione. I told you when I felt ready. You

said the very first day we were together that we had time to be best friends. You said—"

"Stop using that as some sort of shield!" Hermione quickly snapped. "Stop turning my statement into something ugly. You knew what I meant! Our friendship never ended, Ron. That's not what I was implying."

"Then what the hell do you want from me because I took that statement to heart!" he shot back. "I know we're friends, and I wanted to protect you, Hermione. It's my job as your boyfriend. How can you be mad at me for that?" Ron hadn't meant to raise his voice but he couldn't help himself.

"I'm not!" she said just as loud. "What I'm mad at is that you've apparently forgotten that the night we became friends was the night you saved me from being killed by a mountain troll. It's never going to matter what else we are to each other. That friendship we sealed should always be enough to make you want to be honest with me."

"Fine!" he said in frustration. "I mucked up, all right? I should've just dealt with the issue first. I'm sorry." He reached out to take her hand. Hermione rapidly snatched her arm back.

"Don't touch me!"

Ron felt his stomach churn. "What â€“ I'm so bad that I can't even hold your hand now?"

Hermione looked at him with what seemed like genuine confusion. "I don't know," she whispered. Tears started to fall down her cheeks as she repeatedly ran her fingers through her hair.

Some of Ron's air left him. He hadn't meant to make her cry. He didn't mean to be so thick and blind. "Listen, I'm sorry. You're right, and I apologize. I'm really sorry, Hermione."

"That's just it, Ron: you're always sorry. You think you can do whatever you want and give an excuse later because the people you're lying to love you and will just automatically brush it off â€“ just like right now. You apologize like this is simple. It's not. Not this time." She took a few deep breaths, moving her head from side to side. "Iâ€œI can't go through this again with you. I don't want this. I can't do it." She kept shaking her head, inhaling and exhaling.

A terrible ringing hit Ron's ears. He even felt lightheaded. "W – what can you not do? What do you not want? What are you talking about, Hermione? You – you can't argue with me? You can't stand here next to me? You don't want to talk to me anymore? I mean what?"

"Stop it," Hermione sobbed.

"Is that it?" Ron asked in a weak voice. His legs were shaking but he did his best to stand. "Answer me."

"I can't take your dishonesty. It's too much."

He got close to her, taking her hands. She winced but didn't pull away. "Hermione, I'm so sorry," he said, feeling tightness in his throat. "I lied; I shouldn't have. I'm so bloody sorry for hurting you. I can be better than this. You know I can. You just have to let me try."

"Please - stop talking," she wept, trying to pull away.

Ron didn't let her. "No. You have to hear me. You can't do this right now."

"I didn't do anything!" she said, finally snatching herself free from him. "You did this, but it doesn't make sense. I thought we got closer."

"We did - we are," he said, feeling a terrible pain in his chest. Hermione sounded defeated, like she was surrendering. Ron was fearful of what she ready to give up.

Hermione didn't seem to be listening. She was gazing at the ground. "Last nightâ€œ; I thought we finally-

"Last night was everything, Hermione," he rushed, taking her arms again. "Everything I told you was the truth. I swear to you. Look - look, I may have messed up and lied but you can't start lying now. Last night, Hermione. Last night you told me that you wouldn't leave me and that you would always be here."

"Damn it, Ron, that's not fair," she said, trying to pull away again.

"But it's the truth," he choked out. "Hermione, I'm bloody sorry. I've never lied to you about anything else. I know I really fucked up but you can't leave. I need you. I love you so much, and I need you here with me. I'm sorry."

Hermione once again got out of his hold and backed up. Her eyes were swollen with tears. "I know what I said but you've been lying to my face for days. If you can't honor your word, then how can I honor mine?" In an instant, things around him started to slow down and disappear. The beach dried up, the sun darkened, and the sand below started to sink him.

"Hermioneâ€œ;" he said in barely a breath. "What are you doing? What's happening to us?"

"I don't know," she whispered. "I think I need to go home."

"You can't," he said, walking up to her.

She backed up more, holding out her hands. "I can do whatever I want, Ron! You always seem to. Just - just stay back and don't touch me. I need to go and be away from you for awhile. Please, leave me alone right now."

"I-I don't know how to leave you alone," he said honestly. "I'm not supposed to."

"You're also not supposed to lie to me â€“ not like this," she said. She buffed her face dry with the back of her sleeve. "I'm leaving now. Don't follow. Please - don't follow."

"Hermione?" he asked in alarm. She shook her head, vanishing within a second. Ron sank to his knees, feeling unsure of the world around him. The queasiness crawled up his throat, causing him to dry heave a few times. Ron stayed in the sand, letting himself calm down before standing up. He had to go after her. Ron dusted the sand off his clothes, turning around to pick up his wand that had fallen out of his pocket.

Shell Cottage came into view. He suddenly remembered where he was. Ron turned back, looking at the drawings he and Hermione had made. He kept glancing from the cottage to their art. For all he knew, Hermione was talking herself into breaking up with him. She probably hated him for being a liar. If he didn't act, then he could lose her. Ron could end up permanently damaging the most precious relationship of his life. Ron would lose his light and the softest spot of his existence. Ron then looked back to the house. His family was in there. His brothers and parents were inside hurting. He swallowed the lump in his throat. "Bleeding bugger," he sobbed, digging his palms into his eyes. He knew what he had to do. His argument with Hermione couldn't matter right now. Ron's feelings from last night hadn't changed. His family would always come first, even if it meant uncertainty with Hermione. Ron forgot about their art little by little, walking back to the house, hating himself and feeling bitterness toward the people inside.

It wasn't their fault but he couldn't help his feelings. He allowed himself to resent everyone's gloom, and he didn't stop himself from finally letting his hatred for the twins out. He hated George for being so miserable; he hated Fred for making him and everyone else that way. Ron permitted his feelings to envelop him. They overtook until he reached the front door. He hastily wiped his eyes, reminding himself of what he already knew: he was one part of something much greater.

When Ron went inside, Bill was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping tea. He put his mug down. "Are you all right? I looked out the window and saw you and Hermione."

Ron had no energy to think of smart things to say. "No - I'm not all right." Bill poured another cup. "I don't want any tea."

"It's not just tea," Bill said. "It's a recipe Fleur's second cousin's husband gave to her. It's a Muggle thing. It's tea, lemon, and a bit of Irish rum. It's supposed to calm your nerves."

"Fine," Ron said. He sat down, taking a small sip. "It's bitter."

"You'll get used to it," Bill said. "Everyone is still asleep, in case you're wondering." He took a sip of his tea. "Ron, what happened outside?"

Once again, Ron didn't have any energy to think of something to say. The truth was already there. "We got into a really horrible fight because I lied to her about something. We've never argued like that before. At least not since we started dating."

Bill nodded. "Listen, Ron, I'm here if you want to talk, and I won't ask for specifics. I know a lot about arguing with the woman you love." Ron didn't even have to think about it. With everything going on, help was something he desperately needed now. He looked at Bill, feeling grateful that he was the one next to him.

"Hermione walked away from me," Ron rasped. "She told me to leave her alone. I don't know if she'll ever trust me again, and I know fuck all right now, Bill. I never meant to hurt her. It's the last thing I'd ever want to do. I'm literally sick over this. Is that normal?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Bill breathed. "I've been so slow and off since Fleur left. It's the first time we've really been apart sinceâ€¦well, since I got my face ripped open." He touched the gash that was on his cheek. "It's really put me in a state. I feel like a prat for getting stomach aches because I miss her so much."

"Bollocks," Ron said. "That's how I feel about Hermione now."

"Just wait until you're married. Everything is heightened." Bill twisted his wedding ring on his finger. "The rows are ghastly, but eventually we remember what we vowed to each other. We remember everything we are and will always be. I'mâ€¦not the greatest husband, Ron. I work too late sometimes. I get irritated. I say stupid things, and I don't always tell her the truth when I should; however, I know that, no matter what happens, we made a promise. We haven't been married for that long so we have time to get things right."

Ron stared at the ring and what it symbolized for Bill and Fleur. He reckoned that Hermione's necklace was sort of like their symbol. "I told Hermione that I'd always do my best for her. I told her that I would be the man she needed. I haven't though."

"So try again," Bill said. "You made the promise. It's not always about getting it right the first time." He smirked. "Let me tell you something about women: when they run off, most of the time they want you to chase after them. They want to know if you're truly dedicated. Hermione probably wants to know if you'll keep fighting for her."

"Always," Ron said, sitting up straighter. "Why can't she just tell me that?"

"That's another thing about women: sadly, they assume blokes can read between the lines," Bill said. "If Hermione is upset because

she doesn't trust you, then you have to earn her trust. I have to earn Fleur's back a lot."

Ron let out a low whistle. "Bollocking wank, Bill."

"Perfect phrase," he said, patting his forearm. "It's overwhelming, I know. That's how love is though."

"That I already knew," Ron said. Knowing Bill made mistakes gave him a bit of relief, however, every breath Ron took hurt. He couldn't stop thinking about Hermione and what was happening to them. A door upstairs opened. Angelina came down with her bag.

"Good morning," she said.

"Morning," Bill said. "Fancy tea?"

"I'm all right," she said. "I'm actually going to go home for awhile."

"You're more than welcome to stay," Bill said.

"I appreciate that but I've put off enough work," she said.

"What about George?" Ron asked.

"George just got up. I told him about what I had to do," she said. "He's okay, Ron. I'll be back later."

"We'll probably be going to the Burrow soon," Bill said.

"I'll check there first then," she said. "Thank you for letting me stay here last night."

Bill stood up, giving her a hug and kissing her cheeks. "You're always welcome."

Ron stood, giving her a hug too. "You'll be back?"

"Of course." She gave his arm a squeeze. "George looks a lot better today already. It's good news. I'll see you two later." Angelina left out of the front door then Ron turned to Bill.

"I'll see how he's doing," Ron said. He tried to chuck all other thoughts out of his mind as he went upstairs. He knew that he had to be devoted to George right now, even if his body was throbbing for Hermione. He tapped on the door that was slightly cracked, telling himself to focus on one problem at a time. "George?"

"Yeah, Ron?" George said. Ron walked in. George was sitting on the bed, staring at his shoes.

"Angelina just left," Ron said.

"She had to," George said. "She's really far behind on her work. You can sit."

Ron sat beside him. "So how are you?"

George shrugged. His face was still chalky and his eyes were rather puffy, but he looked all right. "I'm better," George said in a hollow voice. "I got a lot of sleep but I still feel exhausted."

"I know what that feels like," Ron said. "At camp Iâ€;" He trailed off, unable to finish the statement. "I just get it." They both went quiet. Once again, it was only the two of them and Ron didn't know what to say. It wasn't too long ago that he had hated George and wanted to blame him. Now, Ron was relieved that George was sitting next to him and wasn't crying. "Are you really feeling better?" Ron asked.

"I could never be as bad as I was yesterday." George rubbed his neck. "And about thatâ€;um, I want to thank you for helping me."

"You don't have to thank me, George," Ron said.

"I do," he said. "As horrible as I felt, I was almost able to handle it because you were there. Iâ€;I reckon my body was prepared to give out yesterday but it didn't. I'll never be able to repay you for that." Seeing how genuine and grateful George felt made Ron feel revolted for ever hating him. It wasn't George's fault. He hadn't asked to spend Christmas without his twin.

"Don't think about repaying me," Ron said. "Just get better."

"Yeah, get better," George mumbled. "Ever since I got up, I've been thinking about yesterday and the past few weeks. Nothing's gotten better. I'm just lucky that Angelina hasn't left me. Things haven't been easy."

Thinking about George and Angelina's relationship made it harder for Ron not to think about Hermione. He hurt so much. He could already feel air leave his lungs again. Ron had to change the subject. "George, can I ask you something?" Ron tried to find the right words. "You said these past few weeks have been hard. Is that why you never answered the letter I sent you? The one about the exposÃ©?" It probably wasn't a fair time to ask, but Ron needed to take his mind away from what had happened on the beach.

George was quiet for awhile. "I â€" I didn't know what to say. Honestly, your section made me a little sick, Ron. All that talk about sacrificing yourself and about how our family is pushing on through the 'tragedy'â€;I hated it." George confirmed everything Ron had been afraid of concerning the article. He regretted ever speaking to Millie and Frank.

"I'm sorry, George," he said. "I didn't expect those types of questions."

"I'm not blaming you," George said. "I get reporters wanting to do interviews more often than you think. People want to talk about our family, the shop, Fred; it's too much." He began rubbing his hands together, shaking his head. "I can't handle as much anymore."

"Why not?" Ron asked. "What's been going on with you? Angelina told me about your fight with Lee. I know you've been in a state." Ron didn't want to lie to George. He had done enough lying already. "I've seen Fred's room."

"What?" George asked, gaping at him. "When were you at my flat?"

"It was days ago," Ron said, holding out his hands in defense. "'Mione and I needed a place to rest until we went to the aquarium. When I didn't see anyone in the joke shop, I got worried. We went up to your flat!"

"What did you do in there?" George demanded. "Did she see it too?"

"We were only in there for a few minutes," Ron assured. "She was in the bathroom when I went into Fred's room. I didn't tell her or anyone about it. What happened?"

"Fucking hell, Ron!" George said, punching his arm. "That wasn't for you to see. It's my business."

"But I did see it, so it's mine now too," Ron shot back.
"George?"

"Don't say my name like that," he said. "You don't understand." George looked forward at the Egypt picture placed back on Bill's table. "A couple of weeks ago, I was looking for the bell in Fred's wardrobe. I found it, so I opened it. As soon as I heard the music and saw the smoke, something came over me. I wasn't sad. I was beside myself. I was so angry that I was able to open it without Fred."

"You broke it on purpose?" Ron asked quietly.

"You can be mad me if you want but I felt like I needed to," George said. "I needed to make myself feel better. Sometimes I just hate everything, Ron. I can't eat or sleep or move. There's just a heaviness on top of me." George's words, and even the way he said them, made the hairs on Ron's neck stand on end. He knew the feelings behind the statement well.

"I understand."

"You don't," George said.

"I do," Ron said. "At Lambrick, I went through a really horrible phase like that. I was depressed every second of the day. I never wanted to get up. I never ate. I hardly slept. Everything about my life and my surroundings, I hated. I missed our family and Fred so much that I felt like I was suffocating. I had no air to breathe." Ron couldn't believe that he was being this honest with George. However, it felt good to tell.

"Why are you telling me this, Ron?" George asked gently.

"I'm not trying to upset you or guilt you," Ron said. "I just want you to know that I'm here." Ron thought about what he was saying to George. He could feel pressure on his shoulders and a pit in his chest. He looked into George's eyes, finally knowing for certain what he had to do. Ron fought through the stinging in his eyes as the reality sank in. "And I'll keep being here, George. I won't leave."

"We can't stay in this room forever, Ron," he said indifferently.

"That's not what I mean," Ron said. He swallowed hard, telling himself that he was doing the right thing. "I mean that I won't go back to Lambrick. I'll stay here."

George only stared at him as if he hadn't heard him. "Sorry?"

Ron didn't want to have to repeat it. "I won't go back to Lambrick," he said, feeling sharp jabs to his chest and stomach. "All you have to do is tell me not to; even just nod, and I'll stay. I'll go back to working in the shop. I'll help you if you need me to." Once again, George merely stared. Ron could hear the beating of his heart in his ears. He hated the silence.

"You'd really do that?" George finally asked.

Ron nodded, swallowing his anguish. "You're my brother, George. I'd do anything."

"But what about getting your badge or completing with Harry?" George asked.

Ron knew that George wasn't purposely digging into his spine but the words wounded him regardless. "I can get my badge later, and Harry will understand."

"What about Hermione?"

Ron fought down the sickness again. Ron wanted to be with her right now, apologizing and setting things right. Except, he couldn't. The realization pained him but it couldn't matter now. "I'd like to think that she'll support me no matter what I do." George was gazing at him as if he was considering it. Ron prepared himself for the answer.

"George?" someone said.

George's instantly stood up. "What are you doing here?"

Ron stood up as well, turning toward the voice. He couldn't believe who was standing in the doorway. "Lee?"

Lee Jordan, the last person Ron had ever expected to see, nodded. "Hiya, Ron."

"What are you doing here?" George repeated.

"Bill let me in," Lee said, stepping into the room.

"How did you know I'd be here?" George asked. "I thought I told you to bugger off."

"I know you did," Lee said, seeing unfazed by the comment, "but I got an owl from Angelina not too long ago."

George crossed his arms over his chest. "What did she tell you?"

"What I already knew, George. She said that I needed to come see you straightaway." He sighed. "I should've already been here though. I should've been with you and Fred."

George looked away from him. "I don't have time for this. I'm talking to my brother right now."

"I can leave, I reckon," Ron said, uncertain of what was going on.

"No need," Lee said. "George and I will be leaving as soon as he gets his bag."

"Are you taking the piss?" George asked. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Actually, you are," Lee said smoothly. "We need to talk - right now."

George rolled his eyes. "You've always been off your broomstick but today I think you've outdone yourself. I'm not in the mood to talk."

"Precisely my point," Lee said. "I know you must feel like regurgitated Hippogriff shit right now. That's exactly why I want you to come with me." Lee scratched his chin as he looked around the room. "Hmm, this space is a wee bit small, but we can make due."

"For what?" George asked, raising an eyebrow.

"George, I know you don't want to come with me," Lee said. "I'm fully prepared to duel you right here over the matter. However, after I'm finished cursing your bollocks to where your real ear used to be, we're still going to leave the cottage."

Ron was startled when George burst into laughter. He scrubbed tears out of his eyes, pushing Lee. "You're a tosser. I hate you."

"I can accept that," Lee said with a shrug. "So, what will it be, Weasley?" Ron looked between them, feeling bewildered. Despite what'd happened between George and Lee, they were conversing like they usually did. Within a minute, Lee had made George sincerely laugh like he always used to. George turned to Ron like he was asking permission. Ron wanted to finish their conversation but things had to be about what George wanted.

"Go if you want, George," Ron said. "I'll see you later."

"Are you sure?"

Ron wasn't sure of anything, but he didn't want to keep George from whatever could possibly brighten his day. "I'm sure."

"It won't be long, Ron," Lee said. "George?"

He rubbed his neck, grinning a little but also seeming hesitant. "Um, fine, I guess. Where are we going?"

"Don't worry about that," Lee said, patting his arm. "Which bag is yours?" George pointed to it; Lee picked it up. "Come on, we've got a schedule to keep." Lee led Ron and George out of the room and downstairs.

Bill was waiting at the landing. "George?"

"I'm all right, Bill," George said. "I'm just gonna go wherever with Lee for a bit. Tell Mum and Dad and everyone that I'll be back later." He gave Bill's elbow a squeeze. Bill must've understood the gesture.

"Okay," he said.

George nodded to Ron. "We'll finish talking when I get back, I promise. Lee, I'll meet you outside." He gave them a tiny smile then walked out of the house.

As soon as he was out the door, Bill grabbed Lee's arm, pulling him close. "I don't know what you've got planned!"

"I'm just going to take him out into the fresh air," Lee said, looking between him and Ron. "He'll be back no later than tomorrow morning. I heard what happened, and I want to clear his head a little. I have to do something for him because I wasn't here yesterday."

"Take care of him," Ron said. He was worried, but if Lee would make George smile and laugh like he had upstairs, then Ron was more than happy to let Lee take him.

"Yes, please do," Bill said. "George is not all there right now. He's in your care, Lee."

"I know," Lee said, looking serious. "He's my best mate; I'll look after him. George will return to the Burrow soon, I swear. I'm doing this for him."

Bill slowly let him go. "All right." Ron and Bill watched as Lee left with George and apparated on the beach. Ron wanted to scream at the top of his lungs. His whole life was depending on George's answer, and now he had to wait.

"What do you think they'll do?" Ron eventually asked.

"Dunno," Bill said. "I didn't know if I was more anxious or relieved to see Lee at the door. Maybe he can give George something that we can't."

"Possibly. Sometimes things are easier with friends." Ron sat on the couch. He covered his face, trying to clear his mind. He thought about the spark he had seen between George and Lee. It made Ron miss his own best friends.

Their parents came downstairs not too long after George's departure. Once Bill had explained why George left, Ron immediately apologized to his parents. Ron still felt unnerved by them keeping things from him, but the reason for Hermione's tears on the beach kept reminding him that he didn't have a reason to be upset. He hugged his parents, trying to draw strength from them. Ron honestly felt his energy draining every second that he wasn't setting things right with Harry, getting an answer from George, or apologizing to Hermione.

"So," Bill said, "what do you all want to do?"

"I guess there's no point in staying here," their mum said. "We should get back home. I'm sure Ginny and your brothers are waiting for answers. Oh, I hope George is okay. I wanted to see him this morning."

"He'll be all right, Molly," their dad said. "You know how much Lee cares about George. I'm sure a few hours of helping him to feel normal is best."

"Dad's right," Ron said. "I usually ask Harry for a game of chess or Quidditch when I want to get things out of my head." Ron would do almost anything for that now.

"What about just talking it out?" she asked, looking at all of them in puzzlement.

"When guys are together, we try to talk about real things as little as possible," Bill said.

Their mum rubbed her brow, frowning. "You'd think after living in a house with seven males, I'd understand that. You lot are still able to surprise me."

Mr. Weasley kissed the top of her head, grinning at her. "You're so lovely, my darling."

"Are you trying to be funny, Arthur Weasley?" she asked, placing a hand on her hip and smiling a bit herself.

"I haven't the foggiest idea what you're talking about," he swiftly said. "Let's get you home, eh? I'll get our bags."

"I'll meet you lot outside," Ron said. He left out the front door, squinting at the light beaming down on him. Watching his parents banter had been refreshing but, at the same time, the knot in his stomach twisted. Ron had to go back to the Burrow. As much as he wanted to find Hermione, he had to tend to his family first. Ron swallowed the last bit of resentment. It wouldn't be his family's fault if Ron lost her. He only had himself to blame.

The four of them returned to the Burrow, where Bill and their parents updated everyone while Ron took a shower. He tried to scrub all the turmoil, fear, and incense from his body while Hermione's words and the idea of not going back to Lambrick filled his mind. It made Ron scrub harder but he found no relief. After stepping out, he wrapped a towel around his waist, running his fingers through his hair. He was cleaner, but the state of relaxation he usually felt after a shower wasn't there.

He opened the door to find Ginny on the other side. "Do you need something?"

"Just my turn in there," she said, holding up her shower bag. Ginny looked well-rested. There was even some color and brightness to her face again. Ron was awestruck by the vast improvement of her state; he thought Ginny was beautiful. "Ron?"

"Sorry," he said, shaking his head. "It's just, um, you look a lot better today."

She grinned. "I feel better today. Judging by the way everyone is talking, I reckon we all are, including George. I'm so bloody happy Christmas is over."

"Me too," he said.

"It's curious that Hermione left this morning though," Ginny said. "She said that she had stuff to do for awhile?" Ginny was looking right at him as if she knew something was up.

Ron didn't know if he could answer her. He was so tired of explaining things. "Yeah," was all he could say.

She nodded. "Harry's been curious as well. He has been since last night."

"Yeah," he said again. Ron hadn't seen him yet and the strain was building up so much that he could hardly stand it. "Well, take your turn. I should probably put some clothes on, yeah?"

"I've got a pair of old knickers," she cheeked. Ron reached under his towel, swiping dampness from his arsecheek then rubbing Ginny's arm. She gasped, slapping his hand away. "You're such a wanker, Ron!" She pushed him out of the way, slamming the bathroom door shut behind her. Ron smirked, feeling happy for the first time since Hermione sat next to him in the sand.

However, the good feeling didn't last as Ron walked up the stairs to his room. For a second, Ron considered knocking, but it was his room and he hadn't been the only one to shout things. He walked in. Harry was sitting on his cot, cleaning the bristles of his broom. He stopped working for a second but didn't look up. Ron closed the door, going over to his trunk. He took out fresh clothes, disliking how the only sound came from Harry's bristle comb.

Ron went to the other side of his bed and changed. He tried to think of something to say but he wasn't sure how to start. Ron

didn't even know if Hermione had told Harry about their fight. After slipping on his shirt, Ron sat on his bed. He looked around, feeling a pang because Hermione's bags were gone. However, sitting on his bed was worse. It wasn't too long ago that they were both on it, moaning and feeling a searing love like never before. Ron slid to the floor to watch Harry polish his foot straps. The bloke was working as if Ron had never entered the room. Ron didn't know if he should've felt more annoyed or impressed at how well Harry ignored him.

Ron couldn't stand it any longer. He got up, reaching into his trunk. "Here," he said, tossing a jar of polish on Harry's cot. "That's made specially for brooms like ours. You can add it to the bristles and it won't alter the velocity." He sat back on the floor, hoping that the jar would be enough to start a conversation. Harry stared at it for a few moments before getting up and walking over to him.

"Get up," he said. Ron gave him a look but slowly stood. In an instant, Ron was on the floor again. Harry had punched him incredibly hard in the stomach at a wicked speed, causing Ron to lose air and his balance. "Let me tell you something, Ron," Harry swiftly said, rubbing his knuckles. "You know fuck all when it comes to my feelings on family. I may not have six siblings and two loving parents, but I know what family is. It's not always about blood. The Dursleys are my blood, but I'd never put them at the top of my list as far as family goes."

Harry looked at Ron as if he expected him to retort or punch him back. Ron truthfully didn't feel like doing either. He nudged his head, signaling for Harry to go on. "I had a family, Ron," Harry said. "Sirius was mine but then he died, leaving me alone again." He got a hardened look in his eyes, telling Ron that Harry was fighting through bad memories. "But you know what? I survived because I had family even before him. I had you and Hermione and your family."

"I know that, Harry," Ron said.

"Obviously not, you dickhead!" Harry shot. "I may not be one of the nine, but your family has always meant the world to me. You lot are all I have, and Hermione has always been like my sister. I don't share hair color or skin complexions with any of you, but it's all still sacred to me."

"Then why can't you understand what I'm doing?" Ron asked. "If George is like your brother, then why are you against me helping him?"

"I'm not against you helping him," Harry said. "I'm against you not believing in the people around you that can help him." His aggression lessened. "I get it, Ron. I know what it's like to feel as if you're the only person who can make certain things disappear for the people you care about."

"This is different, Harry," Ron said, sitting up. "Look, I know I said some really terrible things last night. I knew that saying all that rubbish would get to you. I was mad and overwhelmed and

I wanted you to shut up. You should've been on my side instead of acting like a prick. You â€“ you said that shit about me leavingâ€!"

Harry sat on his cot. "I know," he said in a calmer voice. "That wasn't right, and I knew it. You just make me so angry sometimes, Ron. I don't want you going back to Lambrick for my ego. I want you to go because you deserve to be there. If I'm selfish for any reason, then it's for wanting you there with me - not for me."

Ron rubbed his palms into his thighs. "I can understand that. It's not as if I don't want to go back, Harry. I simply can't. I have a duty. We can argue about it for the next five hours, but it won't change anything. I'm sorry. I â€“ I really want to back with you. It's merely not an option, and it bloody hurts that it's not. It hurts a lot." Voicing his feelings about quitting Lambrick made it seem more real. He wouldn't see Olivia or Conor again, Alan's whistle wouldn't boom in his ear, and Jack's perfect hair wouldn't bother him. Ron wouldn't run the trail or push himself until he threw up. He wouldn't make it to the merge. Ron swallowed the lump in his throat. "It hurts a lot," he repeated. He looked up at Harry, hoping that he'd understand.

Harry sighed. "I really hate this."

"Me too," Ron mumbled.

"Wellâ€;if this is honestly your duty, then I'll support you," Harry said. "You've always supported me through every idea and obligation I had. I have to do the same."

"That's all I wanted to hear last night," Ron said, feeling a flush of relief. "You're my best mate. I need your support because I may not get it from other people. I wish I could've said this last night. I'm sorry for saying all that stuff about family and Ginny. That was stupid." He rubbed his neck. "I also want you to know that I've never regretted being at your side all these years. I'd do it again without question."

Harry nodded. "And I reckon I'm sorry that I dismissed what you were saying and the importance of it," Harry said. "I'm really bloody sorry for talking about last Christmas in front of Hermione. That was wrong." Ron swallowed another thick lump. He was glad that he and Harry were working things out, but it only made Ron think about how he still hadn't spoken to Hermione.

Ron cleared his throat. "We can be sorted if you help me up." He held out his hand. Harry got up, holding onto his wrist. The moment Harry started to pull him up, Ron yanked on his arm, bringing him to the floor. He elbowed Harry callously in the spine as he fell on his face. "You're the dickhead, dickhead."

Harry groaned, rubbing his back and sitting on the floor. He glared. "You bastard." He massaged his spine. "All right, I might've deserved that a little."

"Try a lot," Ron said, holding out his hand. Harry shook it, hitting him in the arm again. They sat next to each other, leaning against Ron's bed.

"Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"Are we okay?"

"I think so."

"Then will you tell me the real reason why Hermione left?" Harry asked. "She didn't say much but she was clearly upset. She wasn't too happy with me either. So, you told her about what happened, didn't you?" Ron looked at him apprehensively. "I'm done fighting with you, Ron," Harry said. "You can talk to me."

Ron felt so much appreciation for Harry that, for a moment, it masked the sickness and pain he felt. Fighting with Hermione was nothing like fighting with Harry. No matter what happened when he and Harry argued, somehow Ron knew that they would always find a way to be friends again. It was something he'd felt since he was eleven. "It was horrible, Harry!" Ron began to tell him all about his argument with Hermione while Harry sat in silence. Ron didn't mind. He liked having Harry there to listen to him again. In spite of this, the more Ron talked about Hermione's tears and her words, the sicker and more ashamed he felt.

"I worry more often about me being a normal bloke and fucking everything up for us than I worry about Death Eaters or horrible accidents forcing Hermione and I apart," Ron said. "However, I reckon the former scares me more. Is it terrible that I'd rather have a force of evil break us up than her leaving me because I'm a tit?"

"I think it's easier to accept things that can't be controlled than to admit you mucked up," Harry said.

"I definitely did that," Ron said. "You should've seen her, Harry. I've never made her cry like that before." He shuddered, thinking about the expression on Hermione's face when she accused him of betraying her. "She looked at me as if she didn't know me anymore; like I took advantage of her."

"I saw a bit of it," Harry said, looking grim. "When she did speak to me, I noticed right away that there was something different in her eyes. It was more than her usual overly worried look. It really got to me."

"At least you didn't have to see the makings of it." Ron picked up a chocolate frog, throwing it across the room in anger. "I'm so bloody thick! You told me to just tell her; I should have. I should've learned from not telling Phillip and Alan, but I didn't. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"I don't either, Ron," Harry said. "Why have you suddenly become afraid of what Hermione can take? You know she's stronger than both of us."

"I do," Ron said. "One of the reasons why Hermione is so brilliant is because of how strong she is. It's justâ€œ I've always been worried that one act of my stupidity will push her away for good."

"You can't think that drastically all the time, Ron," Harry said.

"But it's right, innit?" Ron asked. "This time, I think I hurt her too much. She doesn't trust me. If she can't trust me, then she won't stay with me. Fuck, Harry â€“ what in the bloody hell can I be without Hermione?"

"Ron, mate," Harry said, touching his arm, "just calm down."

Ron was trying to, but he had done so much to his friends because of his thickness and anger. They didn't deserve it. "I hurt her, Harry, just like I did to you last night. I've been trying so hard to be here for my family but it's been impossible to concentrate because I know my best friends hate me."

"Oi," Harry said. "I don't hate you, Ron. I just hate the way you act sometimes. As for Hermione, she lives for you. I don't think it matters what you do; she'll always love you more than anything."

"I need to go to her," Ron said. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I can't lose her over this or anything ever. I have to do something."

"I agree," Harry said. "I'm not keen on seeing her like this, and I don't like her being mad at me too. She and I had a really good talk last night; I missed that with her. Then again, I reckon you should give her some space. You know her. Hermione needs to think. I'm sure she's appreciating the time you're giving her." He gave Ron a faint smile, relieving a bit of Ron's anxiety. He would never have the words to express how much he needed Harry's friendship.

"Thanks, Harry," Ron said. There was a knock on the door. Ginny came in after a few taps with two plates balanced on her arms.

"Let me get those," Harry said, automatically getting up. He kissed her as he took the plates.

"Cheers, babe," she said. "Dad and I made breakfast from last night's dinner. I thought you two might be hungry."

Harry handed a plate to Ron. He knew he had to eat, but he didn't feel that hungry. "Thank you."

Ginny nodded, sitting in front of Ron and next to Harry. "Are we okay up here?"

Ron looked at Harry. Harry nodded. "We're good," Harry said.
"Just had some stuff to sort out."

"Ron?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah, we're all right," Ron said.

"I'm glad. Although, does this mean that things aren't all right with Hermione?" Ginny asked. "I told Mum and Dad that she went home to take care of things, but that's not the truth, is it?" She looked between the two of them then rolled her eyes. "I know you three saved our world and all, but there's some quality in us regular people too. Maybe I can help. If it's got something to do with Hermione personally, I might even be able to offer advice, as shocking as that sounds."

"You're such a prat, Ginny," Ron said, throwing a piece of his bread at her.

She dipped it in Harry's gravy before chewing on it and throwing it back at him. "And you and Harry both have penises. That means you're emotionally handicapped by default."

"Hold on," Harry said. "I think I'm all right."

"Yes, a real bleeding heart," she said with a smirk. "That's certainly the main reason why I'm dating you." They gazed at each other, smirking.

Ron pouted, feeling jealous of their closeness at the moment. He cleared his throat. "Hermione, yeah? Isn't that who we're talking about?"

Ginny pulled her gaze from Harry. "Of course. So how about you tell me what's going on? All of what's going on." She looked straight at Ron again. He had to be honest.

"It's about Lambrick," Ron said. Harry gave him a nod, signaling him to continue. Ron took another deep breath and, for the second time that day, went into detail about what had happened to him at Lambrick and why Hermione had left. Ginny sat and didn't say a word throughout the duration of it. When Ron was finished, he braced himself, ready to hear her shout or even hit him. "Ginny?" he asked, after he couldn't stand her silence any longer. Hearing her own name appeared to take her out her trance.

Ginny ran her fingers through her hair, pulling on the strands.
"Are you okay?"

"Not really," Ron said.

"When will you find out Mr. Smith's decision about all this?" she asked.

Ron was surprised by how gentle her voice was. "When we get our letters."

Ginny slipped her hand into Harry's. "I couldn't imagine having to see Harry like that and think about Fred on top of it. It must've been awful."

"It was," he said quietly, looking at Ginny and Harry's intertwined fingers.

Before he knew it, a waterfall of ginger hair obscured his vision; Ginny was hugging him tightly. "I'm sorry, Ron."

"It's not your fault, Ginny. It's why I didn't tell Bill that you know. This isn't your fault." Ron squeezed her back, closing his eyes. It was nice to have someone instinctively on his side. He felt a deep love and gratitude for Ginny. They were cruel to each other and didn't get on all the time, but Ron knew bonds between older brothers and younger sisters were impossible to break.

She finally let him go, taking her place next to Harry. "Well, I can understand why Hermione's furious. You usually tell her everything, Ron. You too, Harry."

"I asked him not to," Ron said. "I didn't want to worry either of you."

"That's a bullshit answer. It's patronizing to boot," Ginny said. "Hermione's your girlfriend and your best friend."

"I know," he said. "So are you mad? I was sort of expecting you to hit me."

"I'm not a bitch all the time," she said offhandedly. "Yes, this is something I would've liked to know sooner, but I'm surprised you're telling me in the first place. You like your secrets."

"It's not like that," he muttered. "I don't 'like' any of this. I'm sorry."

"We're brother and sister, Ron," Ginny said. "It doesn't matter what we do or don't tell one another; we're stuck with each other. You should save your apologies for Hermione."

"What about me?" Harry asked.

She looked at him, hitting his thigh softly. "I'm mad at you, but I respect you too. Ron asked for your word and you gave it to him. I've also been dating you long enough to accept certain things because my brother is your best mate." She then looked at Ron. "And because your best mate is my boyfriend. It's just frustrating sometimes."

Harry smiled at her affectionately, tucking hair behind her ear. "Ginny?"

"Hmm?" she asked.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you too, Harry." She leaned forward, kissing him.

Ron looked away. "Should I bugger off or something?"

Ginny pulled away from Harry, throwing another bit of food at him. "Yes! You should bugger off to Hermione's and apologize. Tell her you're a twat. Get on your knees, lick her feet, and beg her to forgive you and come back."

"She'd probably kick him in the face," Harry said.

"Well, he deserves it," Ginny said. "For someone so great at strategy, you're a bloody knob in terms of thinking ahead when it comes to your actions. You can't lie to Hermione. You can't make Harry lie for you either. You've got to stop being such a tosspot."

"Ah! There's that bitchiness we all crave," Ron said sarcastically.

Ginny reached over, punching him hard on the arm. "You're damn right. You're a great person but you're also horribly thick. Just think about it, yeah?"

Ron soon left the two so they could be alone. He walked through the yard, thinking about everything happening around him. For now, George was taken care of and Charlie, Bill, and Percy had decided to stay at the Burrow to help out. His family was okay for the moment. Ron felt it was all right to leave them for awhile. He had given Hermione enough time; Ron had to set things right.

He apparated to Hermione's street. Ron slowly walked down the block with his hands deep in his pockets. He didn't know what to expect but it couldn't matter. Ron saw a car parked out front, making his stomach flip. For all he knew, Mr. Granger was waiting inside with one of those Muggle guns that could take someone's head off in one shot. Ron raised his fist, knocking on the door. It didn't take long before it opened. Mrs. Granger was on the other side. "Ron." Her voice was sharp. She wore the same expression that she had when she talked about him becoming an Auror.

Ron felt his knees shake but he had to stay firm. "Mrs. Granger," he said, "is, um, Hermione here?"

"She is," she said, placing a hand on her hip, "but I can tell you now that she doesn't want to see you."

"But you haven't even told her that I'm here," Ron said.

"She's told me if you came by that she doesn't want to see you," Mrs. Granger said.

A pang hit his chest. "Please, I want to—"

"No. You need to respect her wishes," Mrs. Granger promptly said, looking and sounding exactly like Hermione. "I don't know what

happened between you and Hermione, Ron. I just know that she's very upset. I don't like seeing my daughter like this."

"I know that, Mrs. Granger," Ron said, trying to control his irritation. "She's also my girlfriend, and I don't like seeing her like this either. I have to talk to her."

Mrs. Granger shook her head. "Not now, Ron. She doesn't want to see you. I'll be sure to tell her you came by, but it'll be for the best if you just go home. I'd appreciate it if you didn't try to sneak in by doing that apparating trick either."

"I'd never do that, Mrs. Granger," he said, blushing furiously.

She gave him a once-over. "I'm sorry, Ron. I know you mean well, but not tonight." Mrs. Granger said nothing else as she closed the door in Ron's face. He stood there for several seconds, hoping she'd open it again. She didn't.

Ron eventually stepped away from the door. He looked up at the window of what must be Hermione's room. The curtain was drawn but he could see a yellow glow of light behind it. She had to be in there. A part of him did want to apparate into her bedroom, but he wouldn't.

Ron gazed at the glow of Hermione's light as if he could see her or touch her. What was happening was because of him. Ron put a hand to his chest, rubbing it like she had done. "I'm so sorry, Hermione," he whispered aloud. He wanted to believe that she could see or hear him in some way. Ron rubbed his eyes as he walked down the street. He didn't disapparate; he didn't want to go home. Ron simply kept walking down street after street in the cold, getting lost in the Muggle world.

Ron thought about the conversation he'd had with Bill and about the promise Ron had made months ago. So much had happened since then: training at Lambrick, dealing with George, and his family sinking into an emotional chaos that somehow wasn't letting up. All of the trouble Ron was going through had clouded his mind, making him forget his pledge that, no matter what, he would always try his hardest for Hermione. She had been so brave when she jumped into his arms, kissing him in the Room of Requirement. The very least he could do was to be brave as well and tell her about the things that scared him.

He picked up a twig, breaking it into small pieces. Alan, Phillip, Mr. and Mrs. Granger, and even Kingsley; all had told him at one point that Ron would have to be more. Ron had promised to all of them that he would, but something had been lost along the way. He had to find it to get Hermione back. Ron rubbed his chest. It was genuinely aching now and he knew why. There was nothing closer to his heart than Hermione. His greatest duty was to his family and he loved them dearly, but Hermione was the keeper of everything soft in his life.

Ron apparated to Bill's cottage. He walked through the sand and to the clifftop. "Lumos," he said. He sat down as the tip of his wand gave him extra light. The sound of the waving ocean was

peaceful, and the salty sprinkles that hit his face were revitalizing, but what grabbed his attention were the drawings he and Hermione had made that morning. They were barely visible, but they were clear enough to reach inside his chest and touch his heart. Ron would soon return to the Burrow. He would help his family and stay with George if asked to, but Ron couldn't lie to himself. He knew that he would do all of it soulless if he couldn't have Hermione.

Ron felt rather guilty. He didn't think that he had to choose who he loved and needed more, but in the back of his mind he at least knew who he wanted more. Everyone was entitled to having a special reason for getting up in the morning.

Hermione was his.

* * *

**** Okay, the reason why this chapter is so short(ER) is because it's actually one chapter split in to two parts. My beta and I did some talking and it was decided that I would cut it off here. It's a bit of a cliffhanger(which I don't usually do) and it's a nice way to end this moment in Ron's life. I'm rather excited about doing this. Now, before anyone starts throwing things at me, I can tell you know that it won't take as long as it usually does for me to update with the next part. I PROMISE. So besides all that, I hope you all were able to enjoy this chapter. The R/Hr made my chest ache too but I'm a firm believer in falling on your face so you'll learn how to walk properly. I promise that I just don't get off on torturing Ron or anything. I love him more than anything so it's while I putting him through the fire - so he CAN rise above and become a better and find his own strength and wisdom. This is his life(in my world) and he has to live and learn. Nothing is perfect or evenly put into piles. You have to work sometimes to make things right. Ron's great at that. :)

So, if you're wondering about R/Hr, where George went, what happens next for the Weasleys, or what could possibly happen with Lambrick, then stay tuned! I promise, promise that the next chapter will be up very soon! Well, thanks for reading and REIVEW for the next bit!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 42*: Maintenance

THANK YOU ALL for the reviews! I giggled and bounced and did all that giddy stuff, lol. I'm glad the split was okay for everyone. So, because this was the

dominating idea behind almost every review, I'll address it up front. I'm talking of course about Hermione. Now, I'm not going to recoil about anything. I will, however, say that I'm actually happy/relieved that you all felt so strongly about her reaction. It's what I wanted. Here's why: I'd like to think that even though Hermione is above average when it comes to basically everything, she's still human. Hermione's been almost perfect for Ron in every way up until this point in this story, but she's not literally perfection. Ron has made mistakes and has acted out of turn. So has Harry. And George. And basically everyone in this story, lol. Well, Hermione's a real person too, living a real life, and I set her at the same standard.

I know she's 'Hermione Granger' but even a woman of her stature has a breaking point when she's upset - just like Ron, Harry, ect. Hermione's had her 'moments' in the books and it's something I believed in then and it's something I want to explore further now to open up her character. If you've read my other works, then you know that it's the times when Hermione is 'less than perfect' that I find the most enduring about her. As this story moves forward, she's going to be changing and growing up and learning things about herself, just like everyone else in this story. She and Ron are a lot alike. Sometimes you want to hug them and other times you want to strangle them.

I reckon what I'm trying to say is that I haven't forgotten about Hermione as a person - a young woman, madly in love, who gets overly stressed and has a temper at times and gets confused and doesn't have all the answers or exactly the right things to say, even if she wants to. Ron and Hermione's relationship is real, the good and bad parts about it. Ron has so much raw emotion and so does Hermione. I think it's nice to see her a bit more human. It means that she can always learn and improve herself. *shrugs* I digress.

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After Ron took his shower the next morning, he just sat in the loo, thinking. He would go to Hermione's once more and try to talk to her. He would try everyday until she listened; however, Ron, as always, couldn't worry about that yet. He could hear his family talking downstairs; he needed to join them. He went downstairs to find everyone in the kitchen, talking and eating breakfast.

"I've got your plate, Ron," Charlie said.

"Cheers," he said, sitting next to Harry at the table.

"Should I make something for Hermione? Will she be back this morning?" Charlie asked, frowning a little.

Ron merely shook his head. "No. She's still busy." He smashed his eggs into tiny pieces before taking a forkful.

"I hope George will be back this morning," their mum said.

"Lee said he would be," Bill said. "I'm actually not as worried as I was. George looked better seeing Lee yesterday. I hope he's having a good time."

"Speaking of time, Dad," Percy said, "I sent off another owl this morning to the Ministry for you. You're clear for a couple more days. Everyone is being more than understanding. Charlie, I wasn't exactly sure who to address it to, but I sent an extra letter to the Romanian extension in the Magical Creatures and Training Department on your behalf. I hope it helps."

"Thank you so much, Percy," Charlie said, looking pleased.
"You're brilliant."

"Can you send a letter to McGonagall so I can have a few extra days too?" Ginny asked.

Percy grinned at her. "My writing isn't that persuasive."

"I don't know," Mr. Weasley said. "You're quite convincing, son. Must be a Weasley trait."

"No, persuasion is a Prewitt characteristic," Mrs. Weasley said. "Weasleys are poor at it." Ron looked up from his food, observing his family as they continued to talk and tease each other. Everyone looked as if they had something heavy on their shoulders, but there was a sense of ease around the table that made Ron feel a little better. The kitchen door opened, causing everyone to stop what he or she was doing.

"George," Mrs. Weasley said. Their parents got up, pulling George into a firm embrace. Ron could tell that their mum wanted to cry, but she didn't. She kissed his cheek. "It's so good to see you, dear."

"Hi, Mum," George said.

"How are you feeling this morning?" their dad asked, kissing his head.

"Better," George said. Ron studied George carefully. He was actually inclined to believe him. George's eyes didn't look as dark, and there was less gloom in his voice. Everyone stood up, giving George a hug. Percy's was the tightest. After he finally let him go, George rubbed his neck, keeping his gaze constantly moving around the room. "Um, can we go to living room? I want to talk to you all."

"Of course," their mum said. Harry gave Ron a look before the two got up and piled into the next room with everyone else. Ron sat

in one of the chairs while George stood in front of them all at the fireplace. This wasn't George's usual way of speaking, and Ron's heart started to beat faster. He couldn't help but wonder if what was happening had anything to do with his proposal to stay or not.

"What's going on, George?" Charlie asked, sitting on the arm of the couch.

George looked around at everyone before his eyes settled on Ron. Ron wasn't sure what he wanted, but something told him to nod, so he did. It must've been what George needed because he licked his lips, clearing this throat. "Well, ah, I know everyone's really worried," he said, "but I honestly feel better today. I feel better than I did yesterday and definitely more so than the day before that."

"That's great," Ron said.

"Yeah. Um, I want to really start this off by apologizing..."

"Don't you dare," their mother said strongly. "You can do anything but that."

"No, Mum, I should," George said.

"We understand, George," Bill said.

"No - you don't," George said with a bit of aggravation.
"I've ruined Christmas."

"You didn't ruin Christmas, son," their dad said.

"Dad's right," Ginny said. "You felt terrible. We all did."

"Can you lot just let me feel what I feel?" George asked in a raised voice. He ran his fingers through his hair, pacing. "Look, I appreciate everyone being nice and supportive, but it won't change what I think. None of you may feel like I ruined Christmas, but I do. I was overcome with all this shit. I'm sorry for scaring all of you. I just wasn't ready to be there and on that day."

"Then why did we go?" Bill asked. "We didn't have to."

"Because," George said, "I wanted to be with Fred. I didn't plan for us to go to the cemetery but I felt like I needed to. I felt like it was something I had to do. That's not right."

"What are you saying?" their mum asked. "George, talk to us."

George gazed at their mum for a few moments before leaning against the side of the fireplace. "I feel okay today. I don't feel great, but I don't feel bad. Yesterday, I went out with Lee and Angelina. We left the city and just pissed around. It's why I feel good today."

"That's wonderful, George," Bill said. "I'm glad the fresh air was nice for you." George gave him a look that Ron instantly understood. George's statement wasn't meant to be encouraging. There was something else that would follow it.

"It was more than that, Bill," George said. "It was the first time in seven months that I did something that wasn't routine. I've gone to the same five or so places since Fred died. Yesterday was the very first time that I saw people I didn't already know or who didn't already know me."

"And that made you feel better?" their mum asked.

George flushed a little, opening his mouth several times. "Well, umâ€¢yeah. It did. You seeâ€¢Lee, Angie, and I did a lot of talking and we've come up with an idea that might help us all." He let out a breath, hugging his stomach. Ron could tell George's words were probably heavy on his shoulders. Ron wanted to take the pressure off and say what George wouldn't be able to.

"You want to leave again?" Ron asked.

"Of course not," their mum said.

"Let George tell us what he means," Percy said.

"That's actually exactly what I mean," George said, nodding to Ron. "The three of us have decided to take a trip together. We're going to do some traveling. Hopefully get lost in different places we've never been to before."

"Wellâ€¢that sounds all right," their dad said. "When are you going and when will you be back?"

George rubbed his neck. "That's the thingâ€¢we're leaving todayâ€¢and I don't know when I'm coming back." Silence swept over the room. Ron's heart, already beating at a frantic pace, started to gallop. He surveyed everyone. They seemed stunned, bothered, or boggled. Ron didn't know what he felt, thought it seemed to be a combination of the three.

"Today?" Ginny asked, at long last breaking the silence.

"Don't you think that's kind of sudden?" Percy asked.

"No," George quickly said. "It's been seven months."

"You know that's not what he means, George," their dad said. "He means don't you think it's sudden that you came up with the idea last night and you want to go through with it today? What about the shop?"

"I'll close the business for awhile," George said. "I'll be financially stable."

"What about us?" their mum asked. "We're not very stable. Two days ago we were as far away from stable as it gets."

"Mum -" Charlie said.

She shook her head. "No, I don't understand this. It doesn't make sense. You were recently on the verge, George. I don't see how leaving will help."

"It's because I'm here that I was on the verge in the first place," George said.

"So we made you like this?" their mum asked heatedly.

"Molly," their dad said. "You have to let George explain."

"I'm waiting for him to explain, Arthur!" she said. "George, sweetheart, if you want to take a holiday then that's great, but I don't know if now is the right time; And I don't understand how we're the problem."

"You're not the problem; Fred is!" George practically shouted. He rubbed his face roughly, taking several deep breaths.

"You can't blame Fred," Ginny said quietly. "He's not here."

George lowered his hands. "Of course he's here, Ginny. He's everywhere. That's what I'm talking about." He sat on the floor in front of them, rocking slightly. "Fred is everywhere I go. He's in this house, my flat, the joke shop, the Ministry, the paper, and the bloody sandwich shop I used to always go to. He's even in the mirror when I look into it."

"Oh, George," their mum said.

"I don't mean that to sound horrible," George said. "It's justâ€œ too much. Yesterday, Fred wasn't anywhere. I was happy."

"But why?" Ron asked. He wanted so much to understand his brother's pain.

George looked at him. "Because I didn't have to remember him. Ron, you were gobsmacked when I told you I wanted to start the shop up again. You had every right to be. I â€œ I think I messed up, jumping back into it so fast. I just wanted to move on and make everything like it was. I didn't want anything to change. I still wanted to live as if Fred hadn't died. I'm paying for it now."

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to keep him close to you," their dad said.

"No, there isn't, but it's not what I need right now," George said. "Bill, you asked me once if I wanted to expand the business. I didn't because Fred wouldn't be there."

"This isn't the same," Bill said, shaking his head. "I wanted you to break away. I don't want you to leave. I didn't want Lee and Angelina to make you feel like you have to go."

"There's the rub," George said. "They didn't make me feel anything. The idea for the tripâ€œinitially started with me." He stood up again. "I've been in a state for months. I'm sure it's normal, maybe even appropriate, but it's doing something to this family and I don't want that."

"No, you're not hurting this family," their dad said. "We all lost Fred. We should be grieving."

"But not like this," George said. "I know I worry you lot so much. I know you've all cried and sacrificed and put up with so much for me. I appreciate and love you all for it, but I can't handle doing this to you anymore. I don't want to see it. I need to get away. Going away means you lot can stop worrying, and I can stop messing up."

Their dad gripped their mum's shoulder while she sobbed in her chair. "Georgie," she said, "you're not messing up. You can't blame yourself for missing Fred. You can't feel badly because your family worries and grieves. It's how these things work. I knowâ€œwe've never had to deal with it but I'd like to think we're doing okay." Ron couldn't stand to hear the misery in her voice and see the pain in her face. He wanted to do something but this was out of his hands. Harry was sitting on the floor in front of him, so Ron kept his focus on knuckle of Harry's thumb. For whatever reason, it kept him sane.

George sniffed, rubbing his eyes before his tears could fall. "I'm not doing okay, Mum. I haven't been for awhile. I'm sorry, but it's the truth. I know I should be missing Fred, but it's not what I honestly feel right now. I've kept his room the same. I use his wand sometimes, and I even order double desserts like a nutter. Doing that stuff isn't me missing Fred. It's me trying to be the both of us." Ron was amazed by how honest George was being. His brother talked with a pained expression, but his words were flowing out of him like they had been cramped up in his mouth, aching to be released. Ron took the meaning of George's words in, drawing strength from them.

"Is that why you want to leave?" Ron asked.

George nodded. "Yes, Ron, it is. When I was talking everything out and hearing myself yesterday, I realized that I wasn't well."

"That's why we're here," their dad said. "So you don't feel so sick."

"I know. I'm thankful, but it's not what I need," George said. "I justâ€œ I need to slowly let myself be here in this life, post-Fred. Everything in my existence is part his and part mine, even my best mates. I bloody sound and look and move just like him. We're identical but - but there aren't two of us anymore."

"Oh, god," Ginny sobbed from the couch. Percy put an arm around her. "George, I hate you saying that! It's not right."

"I know it's not," George said in a quivering voice, "but it's the truth. I'm telling you lot the truth now. I can't act like a

twin anymore. I have to only be me, but I've realized that I don't know how. It's terrifying. I need to learn to be George â€“ not 'Fred and George'."

"Then let us help you," their mum said.

George shook his head, finally letting his tears fall. "I wish you could, Mum, but you can't. It's why I have to get away. I don't just see Fred in my surroundings and me, I see Fred in each and every one of you." He looked at Ginny, grinning at her a little. "We've been a family of nine since Ginny was born. That's seventeen years. It's impossible to not think of a memory of him when I talk to you lot or see you or hug you or even smell you. Fred is everywhere in us. I love that he is, but it's not what I need right now."

"Then what is it that you need, son?" their dad asked. "Just tell us and we'll help you get it."

George shrugged, looking down at his hands. "I need to just see me. I need to be a person that's of my own making. I need to get away and forget about Fred for awhile now, so that I can miss him properly and so that life won't hurt as much later. I rushed into living again and it's only made me not want to anymore." He shut his eyes, paling completely. "Fred and I shared our life, but unfortunately, I have to make a new one without him." He opened his eyes, buffing his face so roughly it looked like he would take some of his freckles off. "Someone really great told me that I can't do everything with him. By that right, I can't pretend that Fred can still do things with me." George looked at Ron. Ron grinned slightly, giving him a nod. Once more, there was no other person in the world that cared about anyone as much as Ron cared about George in that moment.

"I can't stop living," George continued. "So this is my first step." He took a deep breath. "I love you all more than anything. I'm so grateful that you all have been here for me since that night at Hogwarts. I wouldn't be here without you, and I want desperately to truly be with you all again. It's why I need to take a holiday. I need to find myself, and I need my friends to help me this time. Angelina and Lee wanted to be here, but this is something I had to tell you lot myself."

"And this wasn't their idea?" Bill asked, looking somewhat unsettled.

"It was," George said, "but it's mine as well. Bill, I need to start fresh. Nothing comes before our family, but I think, in order to start building my new life, I need to go with them to start rebuilding. That way, I can come back and be a part of this family. I'll be able to help you lot as you all help me. I want to be here, so I need to go." He shrugged, clearing his throat. "That's really all I have to say. When we're done talking, I am going to leave with them. I want to have everyone's approval before I go though. I need to make sure we're all okay."

Again, silence swept over them. Ron was at a loss for words. George looked at him once more but, for the first time, Ron

didn't have an answer for him. The realization of that fact hit Ron hard. He wanted George to get better, but what he was asking for wasn't easy.

"Okay," their dad said after awhile.

"Arthur Weasley," their mum said.

"Molly Weasley," he said in a deep, intense tone, "our son is asking for our support." He gave her a look that Ron didn't understand, and he could tell that his mother was rather taken aback by her husband. His dad got up from the arm of the chair and walked over to George. "My greatest fear regarding Fred's passing has always been that I'd lose you too," he said. "I think I have in a lot of ways. If going away means that you can bring all of my son back, then you should go. I need my George back."

George nodded as his bottom lip trembled. "I'll find him again, Dad. He'll come back." He practically fell into his dad's arms like Ron had when he first returned home. His father hugged George tightly. "I'll come back, Dad."

"I know you will," his father said. "You're a Weasley." He kissed the top of his head before letting him go and sitting back on the chair. Ron watched his father, silently thanking him. All Ron wanted to do was help George but he was actually relieved that he hadn't had to be the first person to speak.

Charlie stood up next. "I think you should go too." He looked to everyone else. "I reckon I'll be honest. I initially didn't want to go back to Romania after Fred's funeral but, when I got there, I felt relieved." It was a bold statement. Ron was torn because hearing Charlie say this calmed him.

Ginny sniffed, drying her eyes with her sleeve. "Yeah, um, I felt the same thing when I unpacked my stuff at Hogwarts this year. I was upset, but I was glad that I was there." She looked around the room before settling her gaze on Ron. He could see in her eyes that she was quietly trying to apologize for her confession, almost like she was ashamed of it. She had no reason to be. Ron knew, only then, that he had to be honest and speak from the heart as well. It would be the only way to silence the whispers in his head.

"Um," Ron said, rubbing his palms into his thighs. "I was happy when I left for Lambrick because I got to get away. I missed everyone but I was glad to be somewhere else." He tensed a little, almost expecting to have things thrown at him, but no one said anything. No one seemed upset. Ginny smiled at him a little. Charlie gave him a nod before looking back at George.

"I reckon what some of us are trying to say is that we can understand you wanting to get away," Charlie said. "Bill told me the night before we buried Fred that we'd all have our own ways of grieving." He looked at Bill. "That's something I've kept close to my heart ever since, big brother. I believe that, and I know for some of us in this room, properly grieving means getting

away for awhile. Some people can live in the memories and feel comfortable, but not all of us."

Charlie walked over to George, placing his hands firmly on his upper arms. "I had no idea you felt so sick. I'm sorry. I support your decision, George. I think it's a good idea. In fact, I think you should go and keep going for as long as you need to."

George smiled tenderly at him. "Thanks, Charlie."

"I support your decision too, George," Ginny said. "I just want you to get better. I want to get to the point where we can miss Fred together. I love you."

"I love you too, Ginny," George said. "Thank you." He turned to Ron. "What about you?"

George looked at him as if he was searching through his body, needing to find Ron's honest opinion. He didn't know what to say at first. He did want to make sure George was being taken care of, but then Ron remembered what he had told Harry and Hermione: he was merely one part of something much greater. What his dad, Charlie, and Ginny had already expressed was so much greater than any of their individual feelings. What George wanted to do was for the health of their family, and his plan would have nothing to do with Ron. It was a sobering realization, but it was also soothing. Maybe everything couldn't, and didn't, have to be all up to Ron. Maybe he could let go.

"Yeah, George," Ron at last said. "If you think that going will help, then go. It's always been your choice. Of course I'll honor your decision."

George seemed to relax a little. "Percy? Bill?"

Percy and Bill shared a glance. Bill made a very slight motion with his head, causing Percy to nod. "Do you really care about my opinion, George?" There wasn't sarcasm or spite in his voice.

George rubbed his neck. "You're my brother, Percy."

Percy nodded, his neck flushing. He got up, taking off his glasses as he walked over to George. "When I left home, I didn't feel relief. I needed to get away, but there was no happiness. My deepest regret is that I wasn't here for you or for Fred during the last part of his life. I hate that the day I apologized to him was the day he died - almost the exact moment that it happened. I'll never forgive myself for that." Ron felt a horrible chill pass over him. He could smell the smoke and hear the blast, but he fought through it. He would be brave like everyone else was being.

George gave him a pained expression. "I've forgiven you, Percy. I know Fred forgave you too. You don't have to worry about that."

Percy pinched the bridge of his nose as if it would control his emotions. "I want to start over, George. I want to be the older

brother that I should've been this whole time. So go and come back. We'll try again."

George nodded. "I'd like that. Thank you, Percy."

"I love you very much, George," Percy said.

"I know. The both of us love you too," George said. Percy squeezed George's arm then sat back down on the couch. Ginny put her head on his shoulder while Percy wrapped an arm around her. George smiled at them and then looked to the left. "Bill?" he said.

Bill crossed his arms over his chest. He gave George a once-over, looking firm. "We're a family, George."

"I know, Bill," George said.

"Good. It's what I've been saying these past few months and I'll keep saying it," Bill said. "I want us to be a family, and to do that, we need you. If you truly believe that going on this holiday with your friends will make you feel like a part of our family again, then you should definitely go. As long as you're safe and smart about things, then I'll support anything you want to do. I just want you feel like one of us again."

"It's what I want too, Bill," George said, looking relieved.

George turned to his parents, growing more somber as he looked at their mum. "Mum?"

She merely stared at him for a few moments before walking over to him. She didn't seem happy as she looked at everyone before turning to George. "I wish that I could be as open to this as everyone has been so far. Everyone has their grieving process and, as Charlie said, some people want to live in the memories. I'm one of those people. I want us all to stay together. I want to take care of you but, as your mother, I have to know when that's not enough."

She stood tall and let her tears fall. "You're my boy, George. I just want to hold you and take your pain away, but I can't. It's not enough."

"I'm so sorry," George said, taking her hand. "I really wish it was."

"Don't apologize," she said. "Fred was one of my babies but he was and still is your twin. We can't mourn in the same way. You're a grown man. I can't just kiss it better anymore." She put her hands on either side of his face. "I'll give my blessing only if you promise a few things."

"Anything, Mum," George said, holding on to her wrists.

"You have to promise me that you'll write to us," she said. "You have to promise that you won't forget what you have waiting for you here. You also have to swear that you'll come back. I lost

one of my twin boys to evil. I refuse to lose the other to misery."

George choked as more tears streamed down. "I'll come back, Mum. You're not gonna lose me. You'll always have one of your twin boys."

"Okay," she sobbed. "Then I'll let you go. I don't want to, but I'll let you. I love you so much, George."

"I love you too, Mum," George said. "I'm so sorry. I promise that you'll never have to let your Georgie go again." He pulled her into a hug. They simply held each other for awhile. Ron could only watch, feeling a powerful love and seeing an astonishing beauty in what was happening. Ron suddenly felt a strong connection to his mother. He could understand her feelings and how hard it was for her to let each of them go. It was extraordinary and inspiring. She finally released George and sat back with Mr. Weasley.

George rubbed his neck, smiling a little and looking lighter. "Harry, I'm not going to be a prat and forget about you. You're damn near a Weasley anyway. What do you think?"

Harry looked a little taken aback at first, but he cleared his throat. "I think you're one of the bravest people I know, George. I hope neither you nor anyone else starts to think that you're running away, because you're not. You know what you need to do to make yourself stronger. You're great for taking the challenge on and being honest about it. I believe in this. I understand it."

George nodded. "Thanks, mate." He looked around the room. "Where's the Head Girl? I'm sure Hermione has brilliant advice for me or some sort of list of essentials I should take with me."

Ron felt a pang in his chest. Not once during this meeting had Ron forgotten that Hermione wasn't there to sit by his side or offer George kind words. "She, um, she had some stuff to do at home," Ron said. "But I know you have her love and support as well. Hermioneâ€¢she'd understand you doing thisâ€¢leavingâ€¢" He looked down at his hands. Hermione had left him yesterday, and George was leaving him now. So much of Ron's life seemed to slowly be slipping through his fingers. He had to realize what he could grab a hold of.

George let out a heavy breath, rubbing his hands together. "Okay then," he breathed. "Well, um, I guess this means I'm going. Lee and Angelina are waiting for me back at her flat."

"Do you need anything from us before you leave?" their mum asked.

"Just be here when I come back down from my room," George said. "I've got some things to pack, and I want do it by myself." He looked at everyone again before walking out and going upstairs.

"Oh, Arthur, is this really happening?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"I think it is, dear," Mr. Weasley said, kissing the top of her head. "I also think it has to for our son."

Ron's palms itched so much that they stung. If he sat any longer, his head was going to cave in. "I'll be right back," he muttered, getting up and running up the stairs. George had said that he wanted to pack alone, but Ron couldn't honor that wish. He had to talk to him. He knocked on the door. "George? It's me."

"Come in."

Ron stepped inside the cluttered room. George was throwing random clothes and papers into it, helping Ron realize that this wasn't a dream. He didn't know what to say but he had to start somewhere. Ron couldn't let George go like this. "So you're really leaving, eh?"

"I reckon I am," George said. "I'm happy the whole family is behind me. I was so scared to tell you lot. I thought someone would hate me or that Mum would at least strap me down."

"We all want you to get better, George," Ron said. "And Mum well, I reckon she'll be more okay with this after awhile." Ron already wanted to start over. What he was saying wasn't enough. "You're really going to be all right leaving?"

George finally stopped rustling around and sat on his bed. "I think so. It's always been an idea in the back of my mind, but after yesterday, I knew this had to be done."

"What happened yesterday?" Ron asked.

"You."

"Me?" Ron asked, feeling a blow to the stomach.

"It's not what you think, Ron." George said. "I haven't forgotten what you asked me. It's been on my mind every minute since you brought it up and, to be honest, I was about ready to take you up on it before Lee came. That's exactly why I need to go."

"But why if you want me to stay?" Ron asked, sitting next to him.

"Because I'm your older brother, Ron," George said. "It - it doesn't matter who dies or who's feeling overwhelmed or anything. At the end of the day, I'm supposed to help take care of you. Asking you to stay wouldn't have been that. That'd be you taking care of me."

"I don't mind," Ron quickly said.

"I know you don't. You're a stubborn little knob, Ron," George said, nudging him. "I know you'd stay for me, but I can't ask you to. The duty you feel to Ginny is the same one I feel to you and her. I haven't done anything remotely close to being a big brother in ages. It's another reason why I have to get better. For now, if all I can do as your brother is tell you 'no', then I will. No, Ron. You can't stay here just for me."

"But what if you help again like you did on Christmas?"

"Then I'll have to try and face it myself," George said. "My twin died, Ron. For the rest of my life, I'll have to do a lot of things alone."

Ron swallowed down the jagged reality. "I hate that."

"You and me both," George said. "I think there'll be a few things that I'll hate about life from now on, but one thing I refuse to do is delay your future as an Auror. I know that nothing is going to make you happier than going back to Lambrick, kicking Harry's arse, and getting even bigger so Hermione will swoon over you."

Ron chuckled. "I do want those things," he said. "Especially the last."

"Then get them," George said. "Don't let me be your excuse as to why you can't. We've been through a lot and you've done so much for me. Let me do something for you for once. Let me prove that I can use what I gained. Besides, I won't be entirely alone. I'll have my girlfriend and my best mate. You can understand how much that is, can't you?"

Ron knew exactly how much that was. "Yeah, I can. Angelina is really in love with you, George, and you're lucky to have a friend like Lee."

"I know," George said, smiling. "They're still behind me, even though I've been shit to them. I've gotta start my process by making it up to them first."

George was speaking words out loud that Ron was too afraid to even feel. "I understand that too," Ron whispered. "Don't lose them, George. Promise me you won't."

"I promise," he said. "Now will you promise me something?" George reached inside his bag, pulling out his article of the Enchanted Dispatch. "Will you hold on to my copy? I'm not ready to keep it with me, but one day we'll laugh over those photos."

"You git," Ron said, taking it from him. "I'll hold onto this if you take your Egypt picture with you."

George smirked, reaching into his bag. He pulled out the framed photo. Ron looked at everyone smiling and waving up at them. George ran his finger across it. "I take this with me everywhere, Ron. It's the one thing I don't mind remembering."

After George had all his things packed, the lot of them walked outside with George and gave him final hugs. Percy, Ginny, and Mrs. Weasley's hugs were the longest. George once again promised to them that he would write and that things would get better. Ron's heart was in his throat. He supported George's decision but he felt so anxious about it actually happening. "Bye you lot. I love you all so much. Thank you for letting me do this." He kissed his hand then waved to them before walking down the path.

Ron started to feel nervous and panicked as George made his way past the protective barriers.

Ron once again couldn't stay still. "George!" he called, running after him.

He caught up and George stopped. "Yeah?"

Ron wasn't sure of what to say, so he decided to be honest, like George had been. "I just want you to know that sometimes it's like I know Legilimens when it comes to you. Somehow, I just know what's going on with you. I hope you don't mind that I think it's Fred's doing. I reckon it's his way of letting me keep an eye on you."

George's expression softened. He looked up toward the sky, closing his eyes. "Thank you for telling me that. It sounds like something he'd do. It's probably why we've been so close lately. Bloody hell, even beyond the grave Fred is showing off his tricks."

"That's our brother." Ron pulled George into a hug. "Please, take care of yourself. Be safe and write to me."

"I will," George said, giving him a firm squeeze before pulling away. "Go back to camp, Ron. I'll kick your bollocks in if I find out you didn't. Your little rushing stunt won't work on me."

Ron laughed. "I'm not afraid of you anymore."

"You will be, little brother." George ruffled his hair. "I have to go."

"Right. I'll see you," he said. "Say hi to Lee and Angelina for me."

George nodded, rubbing his neck. "Later, yeah?" Ron nodded, giving him a little wave. George took a deep breath, smiling before vanishing into thin air. Ron took a step back. He didn't know how to explain what he felt. George was the one to leave but Ron still felt relief, and for the first time, he didn't feel guilty about it. A massive weight was lifted from his shoulders. What was happening was necessary. It was completely out of his control and it wasn't him directly helping his brother, but it still felt right.

Ron walked back to his house. His mum was standing outside of the door. "Is he okay?" she asked.

"I think he will be," Ron said. He dug his hands deep into his pockets. "Listen, Mum, I know how hard this was for you. I didn't want George to go either. I wanted to keep protecting him, taking his beatings for him..."

"But you can't," she said in a heavy breath. "I know it's a difficult notion for you to accept, but I'm glad. It's why our family is so special. I'm proud that we all have a hard time accepting ideas like that when it comes to one another. There's

just so much love in us, dear, and sometimes love means taking a step back and realizing what is and isn't in your power."

Her words were so wise. They filled Ron up and gave him so much optimism for their family's future. "You know, Mum, I know you think that I'm exactly like Dad, but I don't reckon that's true. I'm realizing how much I'm like you. I'm a Prewitt too."

She beamed, pulling him into a big hug. "You're my boy, aren't you?"

"Always, Mum," he said, hugging her back.

As everyone took a part in cleaning the kitchen, Ron noticed how much easier it was to breathe. Everyone talked about George and how good the trip would be for him, and Ron could tell that they were sincere. His siblings and parents still wore expressions of worry and apprehension, but they all seemed to be standing a little taller and walking a little straighter. George's words and departure had given his family something it hadn't had in seven months: hope.

Ron went up to his room some time later. He pulled out his navigation journal. It was a bittersweet feeling. Even if he didn't have something holding him back, there was no guarantee that Lambrick would give him an extension letter anyway. Harry may have forgiven him, but Phillip hadn't. Charlie came into his room with his traveling bag. "I'm gonna nip back home," he said.

"You're leaving?" Ron asked, dropping his journal.

Charlie sat next to him. "Yeah. It's bollocks but I should. Now that George is gone and Mum seems all right, I have to get back." Charlie's declaration about leaving gave Ron the opposite feeling than George's had. Charlie had, without a doubt, been the legs under their family over the course of his stay. Ron didn't know how they would walk without him.

"O-okay," Ron said. "Um, I'm really glad you were able to come. You kept things from turning to complete goblin piss and standing up for George today was brilliant." He rubbed his neck. "Standing up for me too the other day was brilliant as well. Thanks for that."

Charlie waved a hand. "Don't thank me. I was just being a Weasley." He grew more serious. "Honesty though, I reckon I should be the one thanking you. I'm glad you were here. You're even stronger than I thought."

"Because I knocked you on your arse?" Ron teased.

"You weren't that impressive, you cheeky little fucker." Charlie rolled his eyes. "I mean it though. You've really grown up. I'm so proud of you, Ronnie."

"It's good that I can still make you proud," Ron said in truth.
"It's been really hard."

"Yeah, but you're handling it. You always do," he said. "Come here." He wrapped an arm around his neck, pulling him into a side hug. "Keep your head on, yeah?"

"I will," Ron said, patting his back. "Keep your skin on, yeah? You have to be safe."

"I always am," Charlie said, pulling away. "Before I go, there's something I want you to do for me." He opened his bag, taking out a quill and the Dispatch newspaper. "Will you autograph this for me?"

"Fucking hell," Ron groaned, pushing it away.

"I mean it," he said with a laugh. "This is one of my treasures now. I've shown it to all my mates. The ladies love it too. Please?"

Ron couldn't tell if Charlie was taking the piss, but he couldn't say no to him. "Buggering twat fuck, Charlie." He yanked the paper out of his hand, signing below his part of the exposÃ©. "You're a prat."

"And you're a star, Ron," Charlie said, giving him a nip across the chin. "Keep doing what you said in here. Give 'em hell at Lambrick."

Ron nodded, wishing he could give him an assertive answer.
"Yeah."

"All right. I really have to go." Charlie kissed the top of Ron's head like their dad always did. "Write to me if you need anything or just want to talk. I'm here for you."

"I know you are, and I will. Bye Charlie," Ron said.

Charlie got up, walking to the door. "Do you think George is gonna be okay?" Charlie looked at if as if he truly believed that Ron had the answer.

Ron decided to be honest with him. "I think he will. It's something I can just feel."

The day pushed on. By the evening, Ron was ready to give Hermione's another go. After seeing what bravery could do for George and his family, Ron wanted to try harder than ever before. George's words about honesty and what he needed and wanted kept repeating in Ron's mind. He told Ginny and Harry that he wouldn't come back without her; Ron believed it. Hermione was what he wanted. He had to go get her. Ron felt a certain boldness as he walked the dirt path. His family had given him a new energy and confidence that Ron knew he would need. He apparated and was pleased when he didn't see any cars parked in front of Hermione's house.

Ron went straight to the door, knocking. There was no answer so he knocked again. Ron did it repeatedly, then stomped his foot in frustration. He had every reason to believe that Hermione had

gone somewhere with her parents. It was night, so they easily could've gone out to eat, however, something told him that she was inside. There was just something in him that wouldn't let him leave. Ron knocked loudly again and, when there was still no answer, he looked at the small button near the door. He pressed it over and over, not stopping. For all Ron knew, Hermione's parents were inside, loading their guns because he was being so bothersome, but he didn't care. Not even a gunshot would keep Ron away this time. Ron missed Hermione. He wanted Hermione. He had to get Hermione back.

Finally, a window opened. "Stop pressing the bell!" The voice caused his heart to skip a beat. Ron backed up, peering at the window. Hermione's head was poking out and her bushy hair was everywhere; his fingers itched to run through it.

"Hermione," he said, almost breathlessly.

It was dark but he could tell that she wasn't pleased to see him. "Stop knocking and ringing and go away!" she said in an irritated, hushed voice.

"No," Ron said. "I've been away. I'm not gonna be anymore." He felt awkward, speaking loudly and craning his neck. "I came by yesterday."

"I know you did," Hermione said. "My mum told you to go home but I guess you need reminding: go home." She started to lower her window. Ron knew he had to do something.

He started jumping up and down, raising his arms. "No!" he shouted. "Don't go again. Just let me talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to you!" she said. "And stop being so noisy!"

He ignored her request, squinting to see her better instead. Hermione's face was far away but somehow he knew that, if he were looking right at her, he'd be able to tell that her expression wasn't as harsh as her voice. "'Mione, please, don't tell me to leave again."

"I can tell you whatever I want," Hermione said. "So go!"

"I won't leave. If you don't want me around you, then I'll just talk to you this way." He looked around before jumping up and down again. "I'll shout at the top of my lungs, saying everything I need to!"

Hermione looked around the neighborhood, waving her hands at him. "Shh!" she said. "Stop yelling like a mad man."

"I don't care what anyone around us thinks," he said. "I'll stand here all night and talk to you, even if you won't listen."

"Urgh! We're not Romeo and Juliet."

Ron searched his memory but nothing was coming to mind. "Who are they? Did they go to Hogwarts?"

"Never mind," she groaned. "Ron â€“ please - go home. I don't want to talk about this."

"Then we won't," Ron said. "We can talk about something else."

"Like what?" she asked.

"George," he said in a quieter voice. "He left today." Ron walked closer to her house so he could see her better. "He might be away for awhile." Hermione merely looked at him in silence for a few moments.

"Meet me at the door," she said before pulling her head back in and shutting the window. Ron scurried over to the front door, rubbing his palms against his thighs. The door opened before he could adjust the collar on his coat. Looking at Hermione in the light made his body pull toward her. She was wearing the same jeans and jumper she had worn when she met him at the train station. She looked so beautiful and he wanted to hold her close, but he knew he couldn't touch her. What made Hermione even more tempting was that she was still wearing her necklace â€“ their promise. "Well?" she said with a shrug. "Are you going to say anything?"

Ron shook out of his thoughts. "Can I come in?" She nodded, opening the door wider for him. "Are your parents here?"

"No. They have a dinner meeting tonight with some colleagues," she said. "They just left." Ron nodded. He looked into her eyes, trying to read her. She quickly moved her gaze away. "Sit on the couch. I'll make tea." Ron obeyed her order. While she made tea, Ron tried to think of the right words to say, however, he quickly dismissed the idea. Finding the right words at the right time was why he was in this rubbish in the first place. No â€“ he had to do something different this time.

Hermione came back, handing him a cup. She sat as close to the opposite end of the couch as possible. Ron couldn't stand it; it didn't seem right that the two of them always had a hard time keeping their hands off each other but now, Hermione didn't want to touch him at all. Ron hated it but he knew that it was because of him that she no longer wanted his hands on her. It was his fault that she had cried. Ron peered at her face again. Her eyes weren't puffy or wet, but there was a deep sadness that he only saw when he hurt her. It was another ability he wasn't proud of.

"You're really trying my patience," Hermione said.

"Sorry?" Ron said, breaking out of his thoughts.

"Outside you kept saying how all you wanted to do was talk," she said. "You're not talking now. I should just make you leave."

"No," he quickly said. "I do want to talk." He was already fucking up. He had to do better.

"Then tell me what's going on with George," Hermione said, taking a sip of her tea. Ron took a drink of his as well then told her immediately about what had happened after she left: Lee coming for George, Ron making up with Harry, and George's talk with their family before he left. It felt so good to talk to her. Hermione kept her gaze on him, giving him all of her attention. She was making his knees weak and his skin heat up, but he pushed through it.

"All we can do is hope and wait now," Ron finished.

Hermione set her teacup down. "This is probably for the best, and at least he'll have his friends. I'm really happy he's doing this for himself and that your family is accepting it. You must be anxious though."

"I am," Ron said, "but I really do think he needs this. I'm proud of him."

"Me too," she said. "I wish I could've said goodbye to him or at least to Charlie. I'll have to write to the both of them sometime to make it up to them." She sighed. "Thank you for telling me. I guess you can leave now."

"Wha?" he asked, feeling taken aback.

Hermione stuck her chin out. "You updated me and I appreciate it." Her voice was sharp and void of everything that made it soft. This wasn't his Hermione. This was a version of her that Ron had caused to grow. He had to do better. She got up, heading for the door. He followed her. Hermione opened the door but Ron slapped his hand to it, slamming it shut.

"No!" he said.

Hermione jumped. "Ronald! this is my house."

Ron rolled his eyes. The woman was stubborn and proud but he knew that she didn't honestly want him to go. He'd been with her long enough to know what was real. "I don't care," he said. "You can't make me leave."

She tried to open the door again but Ron had his full weight against it. Hermione finally gave up, huffing. "You know what Ron? You may be stronger and quicker, but I'm not intimidated. You're not the only one who's skilled with a wand."

"You can curse my bollocks off if you want," Ron said, shrugging. "I still won't leave. Y-you left me yesterday, Hermione."

Hermione gave a pained expression. "I know I did, Ron." Her voice was dripping with regret but he was actually thankful for it.

"So how about the both of us just stay put?" he asked.

"Can it really be that simple?" Hermione gave him the same look that Charlie had earlier. She gazed at him as if she truly believed that Ron had the answer.

He decided to be honest with her as well. "I'm making it that simple." Ron put his hands on her shoulders, backing her up until she hit the wall. He outstretched his arms, placing his palms on either side of her and spreading his legs.

Hermione's cheeks flushed. She swallowed hard. "W-what are you doing?"

He leaned in toward her face. "I'm gonna talk to you. I'm going to look right at you when I do. I'll look straight into your eyes and tell you the truth, like you deserve. Do you hear me?" Hermione's chest heaved as she let out a shaky breath.

"I hear you," she said breathlessly. "I won't walk away this time. I promise." Ron could feel something pulse between them. It was hot, powerful, and it made him dizzy. It also felt so incredible that he could hardly stand it. Hermione was mad at him and hurting, but something amazing was coming out of her and flowing into him. He tried not to get pissed on it.

Ron gazed into her brown eyes, deciding the best thing to do would be to stop thinking and simply say what was closest to his heart - what was honest. "You were right about everything," he said. "I did lie right to your face. I betrayed your trust, and I took advantage of the fact that you have full confidence in me. I couldn't admit it at first because I didn't want to believe that I was capable of doing like that to you, but I reckon I am. Accepting it isn't easy."

"How do you think I feel?" Hermione asked. "This isn't about you panic attacks. It's more basic than that. It's about how my boyfriend can look me in the eyes as he makes love to me, telling me that I'm his world and that I can always trust him, all while he keeps things from me."

Ron wanted to cover his face or look away but he owed her his attention. He had to be a man and accept his mistakes. He kept looking right at her. "It was never like that, Hermione. Lying to you wasn't and isn't something I'd ever want to do."

"Then why did you?" she asked.

"I didn't think that it would turn out like this," he said. "I didn't think that you would want to break up with me."

"I don't want to break up with you, Ron. I never did," Hermione said. "Thinking about it now, I realize that I might've not made that point very clear, but I want you know right now that it was never a thought that crossed my mind. I wouldn't be able to stand something like that. I was just angry. I was really hurt."

"And you left," he said.

She let out a deep breath. "I know. I must've hurt you."

Ron swallowed the lump in his throat. "You did," he said honestly.

She nodded, looking pained again. "All day I've been thinking about it and, the more I go over my actions, the sicker I get," she said. "The way I spoke to you and how I left things was horribly insensitive. It probably wasn't right. No â€œ I know it wasn't right to blow up like that. I was wrong for being so hostile. What happened on the beach isn't me."

Ron couldn't lie to himself. A part of him had wanted to hear Hermione's apology but it wasn't making him feel any better. "And lying to you isn't me. Don't you understand now?"

"I don't know," she said. "I just feel so disgusted with myself. I hope I didn't discourage you from ever talking to me. That's not what I wanted you to think."

"Mione, stop it," Ron said, unable to take her words any longer.

"What?" she asked. "I need to apologize before this goes any further because it's tearing me up. I'm sorry. I justâ€œI made a horrible decision."

"Hermione," Ron said in a stronger voice. "We both made horrible decisions. I honestly didn't think that all this would hurt you so much."

"How could you not?" she asked, hitting her head against the wall. "You made up your mind that you would keep this from me while you told me that I could confide in you and show you all my insecurities. That doesn't make any sense."

"I know it doesn't," Ron said. "I can see it so clearly now but at the time I-I thought I was protecting you."

She rubbed her temple in frustration. "I was the first person you told about your attacks. I've held you numerous times, talking you through them. I don't care if it's the first day of holiday or our wedding night; I want to know how you are, the good and the bad."

"It's not as easy to keep that in mind when I have to see that look on your face," he said. "There were so many times I wanted to tell you, but I didn't want to spoil anything â€œ and I know you don't think it spoils anything, but it does," he rushed in before she could interrupt him. "Things have always been so hard and complicated for us. I've hurt you so many times as friends. As your boyfriend, I wanted to be different."

"You're not the same person I met on the train when we were eleven, Ron," Hermione said. "You're different. As my boyfriend you've been different."

He shook his head. "Not in the way I want to be," he said. "Right from the beginning of our relationship, all you did was take care of me. You held me, helped me eat â€œ hell, you even cleaned my

room, Hermione. You've given me so much, and you've done so much more than I could ever do for you. I can't match it."

"Why do you think everything is a competition?" Hermione asked.
"I didn't do those things because I needed to prove something. I did them because I love you and I wanted to help you through your grief. It wasn't a burden. It was my job."

"And my job is to make sure I keep things happy for us because I love you," Ron said. "My bloody panic attacks are anything but simple. I just didn't want to muck things up and once again ruin the day by talking about them."

"So you think I can't handle them?" she asked.

"No, I know you can," Ron said. "I'm the one who doesn't want to." She shook her head, peering down. "I know what you're thinking."

"Oh? What's that?" she asked shortly.

"That I can't be in denial about them," he said. "Well, I understand that, but I hate talking about it because of what it does to you, regardless of how it can benefit me. You get scared and you hurt. I don't think anything is worth that." Ron wanted to touch her face but he didn't. "I don't want you to worry more than you already do. Your parents, school, Harry, my family; everything makes you so stiff and anxious. I don't want to add to it."

Hermione's expression softened. He almost wished that she didn't look at him so gorgeously. Her expression, along with the coconut he could smell on her neck, overwhelmed him. "That's not fair to me, Ron," she finally said. "Yes, I have things in my life that cause me stress, but it doesn't mean that I can't handle what's going on with you."

"But they're my attacks," Ron said. "Regardless of what you can handle, I don't want them interfering. That's why I did what I did: to keep things simple for as long as possible. I promise though that I was going to tell you. I just wanted to see you happy first."

"Ron, don't you think we've been happy since you told me about them the first time?" she asked. "Have you not enjoyed our time together since you had one at Hogwarts?"

"Of course," he said.

"Then why couldn't you think that now?" she asked. "You can't honestly believe that telling me about something like that will make me mad at you or feel burdened. We could've talked about it then moved on."

"I've been too angry at myself to talk about it!" he said in irritation. "I really fucked things up at Lambrick. I let them down, Hermione, and I didn't want to let you down too. I hate being a disappointment more than anything else in the world."

Hermione reached out but didn't touch him. She put her hand down. "Ron, I would never feel disappointed for what happened to you."

"I thought you were when you Bill's," he said.

Hermione looked down, shaking her head. "No, the only disappointment I felt was toward myself. Toward you, I was angry." She looked back up at him. "And you know what angers me now?" she asked loudly. "The fact that I'm hearing you say that it was a burden to me to help you while you grieved or that talking about your panic attacks somehow makes me think less of you. How can you assume any of that with the way you treat people?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked, feeling confused.

"Ronald, you stayed at a cemetery, in the cold, the entire day on Christmas so that George could cry," she said. "You risked your life year after year so that Harry could progress. You were going to delay your career so that you could help your family. How is what I'm doing so special when you've done the exact same thing all your life?"

Ron wasn't sure of what to say. "I-I don't know."

"I don't either, Ron," Hermione said. "It's why this is so confusing and frustrating. I don't know who you are because everything you stand for, everything you do, you seem to dislike other people doing. You want to take other's pain, but you can't give yours back." Ron opened his mouth but Hermione put a finger to his lips. "Don't give me your excuses." Her finger burned against his mouth. Blood rushed through his body. "Say something real to me, Ron." Her eyes dampened.

Ron didn't feel connected to his body anymore. He felt nauseous again and as though his chest might cave in. This was the woman he loved, standing right in front of him, hurting because of him. If Ron couldn't tell her the truth then he didn't deserve to be with her. "It's not that I don't want people to care or that I can't give away my pain." Ron chewed on his lip, keeping his eyes on her. He had to be open. Ron had to be brave like George. His discussion with Phillip was coming back to haunt him but he had to deal with it. "I'm just now starting to feel worth something, Hermione. All my life I've been unsure of what I could be, but I've slowly been finding my way. However, there are still days when I don't know if the person I am is the person I want to be."

Ron let out a deep breath. "I get frustrated and uncomfortable when people worry and work so hard for me. I try not to feel like a burden but sometimes I do. I know I have good in me. I've done great things, but I'm still fighting that voice that I've had all my life. Seven months versus eighteen years is tough." Hermione gripped her necklace, gasping with a trembling breath. She reached out but didn't make contact with him again. "You can touch me if you want to," he whispered.

"I don't want to touch you," she said just as quietly. "I want - I want to hit you. I want to slap you, and I want to beat you up." She started to hit his arms then his chest. She sobbed as she punched him until she collapsed against his chest. He didn't hesitate. Ron encircled his arms around her. "Oh, Ron!"

Ron held her tighter, feeling devastated, raw, and relieved all at the same time. "I don't want to be like this anymore. It's not good for me," he said. "I don't want to hurt you or anyone. I hate lying, but the truth is so bloody hard." He buried his face in her hair, letting her frustrated tears out.

"It doesn't mean it's not the right thing," she said.

"I get so sick of the right thing sometimes, Hermione," Ron said, pulling away and backing up. "I just wanted to spend these thirteen days with you in peace and for what happened at camp to go away. I wanted everything to disappear but you. I found myself hating George and resenting my family because I wanted all the fucking sadness to go away so I could be with, and only concentrate on, you."

"We cling to the things that make us happy, Ron," Hermione said. "It's natural to feel that way."

"This isn't some bloody coursework for Charms, Hermione!" Ron shot. "This is my life. I bloody knew something would be off when I got home. It's why I was so desperate to make things right with you. I just love you so bloody much, and I want to make you happy. I hate that I have to divide myself. I can't give you everything all the time so when we are together, I want every moment to be special."

Hermione pushed herself off the wall. "Don't you think I can relate to that?" she asked. "I didn't want you to come to my house and see the troubles I was having with my parents. I don't like you knowing how frightened I feel sometimes at school, and I hate that you have to watch me cry so much. I want to make you happy too."

Hermione's face went scarlet. "Sometimes, I let myself fall so deeply into my desires that I want nothing more than to strip naked, letting you control me and do anything and everything you want to do to me." Her eyes were massive as she bit her bottom lip hard. Ron felt all his blood flow below his trousers as a ringing pierced his ears. There was so much tension in the room that he could smell it. The pulse between them was powerful, causing him to sweat.

"I want that so desperately sometimes that my body shakes," she said in a husky voice. "You have no idea how jealous and angry I feel towards Harry on occasion because he sees you more than I do. It's hard, Ron, and it's been clawing at me, but the fact is that this is our life. You can't ignore it or lie about it. When you do those things, I...I can't help but question if you really want a serious relationship like this."

Ron felt the air leave his lungs as a tide of rage and devastation overtook him. His talk with Bill hadn't prepared him for Hermione's words. He couldn't understand what she was saying. It was the most outrageous thing he had ever heard. Ron found himself rushing to Hermione, grasping her arms and roughly guiding her back against the wall. "No!" he practically growled. "You can hate me for lying, being stupid, being an arsehole, or a bad boyfriend, but I will not accept you thinking that I lied because I don't love you or that this isn't what I want." His eyes started to sting and water but he fought through it. "What about you, huh? What about what you want? All those things you said before you left!"

"I didn't mean that I didn't want us, Ron!" she shouted. "I mean that I didn't want this! What I didn't want was this fighting and this pain. I left because it hurt to look at you!"

"Well, I'm bloody here now, and I'm gonna make you look at me." He cupped her cheeks with his hands. "Look and listen to me right now: almost every move I make is motivated by how much I love you and want you, Hermione. I know I broke your heart. If you wanted, I'd dig inside my chest and give you mine."

She clutched his wrists, shaking her head. "Those are just words, Ron."

"But they're all I have!" he said frantically. "I know you can't see it, but I have this love for you that's more commanding than anything in my life. It's even more powerful than the love I have for my family. It blinds me, makes me numb to everything that isn't you. That's why I didn't tell you. It was never about deceiving you. I never wanted you to walk away."

"I didn't want to, Ron," she said. "Iâ€œI don't know what to say."

Ron put his forehead to hers. "Then let me talk. I'm so sorry, Hermione. I can't show you, but I thought we felt the same thing. Can't you feel it?"

Hermione started sobbing again. "Ronâ€œ"

"Can you feel it?" he asked. He took her hand, placing it to his chest. "My heart is beating so bloody fast. It's because of you. I would give everything up to go back and fix this. I love you. You're all the good in my life. I love you. I love you. Can't you feel it?"

She placed her other hand against his chest. "Y-yes, I can. I can feel it. I believe you, Ron. I - I've just been so angry, but I've missed you so much."

"I missed you too," he said. "I thought you hated me."

"I could never hate you," she said, putting a hand to his cheek. It was another touch that burned him. "I love you more than anything in my life, and I'd give everything up to go back too. I'm sorry, Ron. I just couldn't take stand there anymore."

"I never wanted this to happen," he said. "I'm so sorry, Hermione. I'm bloody thick but we can't be over because of it. I'll fight for you. I'll do whatever I have to do to win you back and get you to believe in me because I refuse to let this end."

"I don't want this to end, Ron," Hermione said. "I want us to be open with each other."

"I know. I'll be better. I can be more than this. Please." Ron gulped down as much air as he could. "Let me try again. I'll be more open. I'll be anything you need."

"I only want you to be yourself, Ron. I love you," she said. "I need you."

"You have me," Ron said. "You always will. Please - come back with me, Hermione. I know you feel bad for walking away. We can both start this over by going back together."

She peered right into his eyes, staying silent. "I want to go back with you. I'm just worried that—"

"- This won't happen again," he said. "You mean too much to me. I'm so sorry, Hermione. I love you." He leaned his face forward, kissing her. He sighed heavily as she instantly opened her mouth. Ron dug his tongue in, sticking it as far in as he could, absorbing the flavor of her. Hermione whimpered, yanking on his hair. Ron was hot - almost suffocating as they kissed furiously. Hermione felt so good. She gave him a peace and fire that could only come from her. Ron felt pissed off his need for her. His hands went to her shirt. He lifted it a little so he could touch her skin.

Abruptly, Hermione pushed him away. "Wait," she said out of breath. "Iâ€¢I don't want you to do that. I'm â€¢ I'm sorry."

Ron's ears burned as a pang hit his heart. "Okay," he said, equally out of breath. "That's fine. Um, we can just go back to my house. All that's important to me is bringing you back."

She nodded, not meeting his eyes. "Good. So, I'll get my stuff, write a note to my parents, and then we can go." She walked past him and up the stairs. Ron waited by the door in slight confusion. He told his body to calm down and stop throbbing. Ron was so steamy and achy, but he wouldn't ruin things already by getting ahead of himself. He couldn't help but feel a little uneasy though. However, it wasn't the fact that Hermione had stopped him, but the way she had told him 'no' that bothered Ron.

Hermione came down the stairs with her bags and the note to her parents. "Ron, I want to say something before we go."

"Yeah?" he said.

"We hurt each other, Ron," she said quietly. "I don't want to walk out of this house only to do this again. I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want you to hurt me."

"Then let's not do that," Ron said. "Let's go back to the Burrow and find ourselves." He took her bags for her, and Hermione wiped her eyes.

When they made it back to his house, Harry was the only person in the living room. "Hermione," he said, getting up from the couch and giving her a hug. "I'm glad you came back."

"Me too, Harry." She kissed his cheek before letting go.

Harry sat back on the couch. "Are you two all right? I've been mental."

"We're okay," she said, sitting next to him.

Ron decided to sit on the floor in front of them. "Where is everyone?"

"Your mum and dad are asleep," Harry said. "Bill and Percy went home, and Ginny is in her room. She wanted to give the three of us time."

"How sweet of her," Hermione said, taking off her cloak. Ron didn't know why the pit that whirled in his chest was still there. He had Hermione back, but something still felt off.

"Are the three of us really okay?" he asked. Harry and Hermione both looked at him.

"You know we are," Harry said.

"Ron," Hermione said, "we just made up. The three of us will be all right."

Ron looked between his two best friends. He wanted to prove to them that he could be better. Only hours ago, George had been in the same spot that Ron was in now. He had to be brave as well. "I hope so," Ron said. "Being with George these past few days really made me realize some things about myself: he was an arsehole to his best friends, just like I have with you two; he did it because he was scared of his feelings, just like I am."

"What are you afraid of?" Hermione asked.

"How important you two are to me," Ron said quietly. He could feel heat on his neck. "I realized over this holiday that as much as I love my family, they can't give me all the things I need to be happy. That's something only you two can do." He looked at Harry before settling his eyes on Hermione. "I know I fuck up and say stupid things, but I don't mean to push either of you away. I want you two most in my life. I'm numb without this friendship we have. How I feel about it scares me because I don't know what I'll do if I lose it." Ron looked down at his hands, blushing furiously and feeling bare in front of them. He could feel both sets of eyes on him.

"You know, I was really jealous when George said he was going to take a holiday with Angelina and Lee," Harry said. "It's all I've wanted to do with you lot sinceâ€;always." Ron looked up at him. "You're not alone, Ron," Harry said. "I feel the same way. Why do you think I was always so quick to try to stop you and Hermione from continuing on with me?"

"I'm sure all three of us are envious of their holiday, Harry," Hermione said. "It's something I desperately wish I could do with you two." She held on to her necklace. "I mean it when I say that you two are the most important people in my life. We justâ€;we've never had a chance to sit down. We've been constantly going since we were eleven. I love my life and what I have with you two, but I do envy Angelina right now and what she gets to have with her two best friends."

"I'm sorry," Harry said gently, frowning.

Hermione put her hand on his. "Don't be, Harry. We're all still here."

Ron looked between them again, feeling a new promise forming in his mind. "We'll get that holiday," he said. "Someday. Whether it's when Hermione graduates, or after we get settled into jobs, or five years from now, the three of us will take time off from everything. We'll just sit down and breathe. I promise you both that right now." Ron knew it was a heavy promise to make but he would gladly do it. So much of their entire childhood and friendship was wrapped up in dark paper, but Ron knew that one day they would burst from that and start over â€" like George was doing with his friendships.

"I believe you," Harry said.

Hermione smiled a little. "Me too."

"Good," Ron said, smiling as well. The three of them stayed for awhile longer but Hermione was eager to get to bed. She gave Ron's hand a squeeze, telling him that she wanted to sleep in Ginny's room. Ron didn't mind but already he felt a bit of distance from her. He was afraid that Hermione still felt uncomfortable around him.

Ron turned over in his bed once again. It was awfully late, but he simply couldn't get to sleep. Harry's deep snores were only agitating him more. Ron fumbled over his side table in the dark. His hand connected to his wand and to the picture next to it. He lit his wand so he could view the image of him and Fred. Ron grinned, not only because of how fantastic it was, but because Hermione had given it to him. He was so happy that she was back with him but something felt off. What they were now wouldn't be good enough. They deserved better.

Ron suddenly got out of bed, slipping a shirt and jumper on. He eased into his shoes then snatched the extra knitted quilt off Harry's cot. Ron put his wand in his back pocket, tiptoeing down the creaky staircase. He tried not to think. He wanted everything to feel and be natural and completely honest. When he got to the

second floor, he stood in front of Ginny's room. He didn't give himself time to think about it.

Ron knocked on the door as lightly as he could. He wasn't sure if it was loud enough but he didn't want to wake Ginny up. He knocked again, wiggling the handle. It took a few tries but the door finally opened. Ron was pleased when he saw bushy hair.

"What is it?" Hermione said.

"Did I wake you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I've just been laying awake - unlike Ginny."

"Yeah, Harry's out as well," Ron said. "Well, I was hoping that you'd want to go on a walk with me since neither one of us can sleep. We can talk again."

She gave him a look. "It's late. It's cold."

"I brought you my jumper and a quilt," he said, showing her. "I know a fairly good warming spell too. A few of us used it at camp when we thought Alan wouldn't notice." He tried a smile but Hermione didn't look amused. "We don't have to."

"No, I'll walk with you," she said, taking the jumper. "Just give me a minute." She closed the door, and Ron felt a small moment of triumph. Hermione came back moments later with jeans and his jumper on. "Let's go."

They quietly walked down the stairs and outside through the kitchen door. Hermione held her hands out while Ron cast the spell on her palms. She rubbed them together. Ron did the same, instantly feeling the warming effect expand throughout his body. After lighting their wands, they started to walk through the yard in total silence, barely brushing shoulders. Ron couldn't stand it. Things were not instantly falling into place. Ron remembered what his mum had told him about control. He had no power over how George spent his holiday, but Ron could manage his relationship with Hermione. He could put the pieces back together that he had broken.

"Do you know why we're out here?" he suddenly asked. Hermione shook her head. "We're here because you said once that you wanted to go out for a night walk with me, like I do at camp."

"And you decided now was the right time?" she asked.

"Now is as good a time as ever," he mumbled.

They kept walking. Hermione finally looked at him. "So, this is what you did there every night? With your friend Olivia?"

"Yes, with her," Ron said, looking right back at her.

"What would you two do as you walked?" she asked.

"What we're doing now," Ron said. "Sometimes we'd stay quiet. Other times we'd talked about camp related things or our families or whatever. We talked about you a lot."

"Oh?" Hermione asked, sounding unconvinced.

"Please - don't sound so surprised," Ron said, rolling his eyes. "I always talk about you and my walks with Olivia are only just that."

"What about what we're doing now?" Hermione asked. "Is this just a walk?"

"I don't want it to be," Ron said. "I want this to be the beginning of something. I can tell that you're still really upset."

"I forgave you, Ron," she said. "I didn't forget."

"I don't want you to forget," he said. "I just to make things right. I want you to be able to look at me and trust me. I want you to feel safe." Ron stopped walking. "Can I take you somewhere?"

Hermione looked at him skeptically but nodded. "Okay." He held her hand loosely as he led her through the Burrow's backyard to the large tree that shaded a good portion of their small pond. He laid down the quilt, motioning for her to sit on it.

Ron sat next to her, peering out at the cold dark water. "I'm fairly certain that this is the exact spot where I touched you for the first time."

"It is," Hermione said. "I loved that night. I'll never forget it."

"I loved it too," he said, looking at her. His jumper wonderfully swallowed up her body. It looked perfect on her, especially with the way her dark hair seemed even browner against the maroon. There was just enough light from their wands and the moon that he could see her. "I was so scared and unsure of what I was doing but you seemed so certain and excited," he said as the memory of that warm and sweaty night filled his mind. "You helped me to relax, and then I just did what I've always wanted to do. I didn't just touch you, Hermione. I let myself be closer to you in a way I hadn't before."

She laughed faintly, smelling the collar of the jumper. "That night was the first time I honestly didn't care how I came across to you. It was just about being with you and feeling good. I stayed awake in my cot, waiting for you to come get me. I don't know how, but I knew you'd knock on the door. Sort of like tonight."

Ron moved closer to her. He took her hand, looking right into her eyes. "I can almost see it in front of me. You came because of me here."

"I came for you here," she said, opening her hand more for him. "You made me feel so incredible. Not just because you felt me up, but because you brought me out here and told me what was happening with you." She moved her hand away, balling it into a fist. "Why did that go away?" There was such sadness in her voice and it made his chest ache.

"Because every day I've loved you more. I've grown more afraid of losing you because of the things I do or say," he said.

"Ron," she said, "your panic attacks can't break us up. Only you and I have that power. Once again, I feel so awful because I should've told you that yesterday. I'm sorry."

"I reckon it's easier for the both of us to realize what should've happened after the fact," Ron said. "Things are just so bloody hard to see sometimes."

"It probably doesn't help that I think you've lost sight of the fact that we're friends," Hermione said.

"I haven't," he said. "I just told you and Harry—"

"About our friendship as a trio," she said. "I'm talking about you and me. Ron, you've been my best friend since I was twelve. I've always worried about losing you. I still do, more so now that you're my boyfriend." She ran her finger down his nose, making him shake and close his eyes. "You're still so beautiful, Ron. I understand your fear, but I think it's different for me because I know that, no matter what, we're friends. Girlfriends and boyfriends break up all the time, but best friends are without end. It's why I believe in us so much – because we're best friends first."

"But it's always been different, Hermione," he said, opening his eyes. "My relationship with you isn't like the one I have with Harry. It isn't as straightforward."

"Neither is mine with you as opposed to mine with Harry," she said. "It's hard for me to see you as my friend when I love you as something so much more, but I have to so that I can talk to you about certain things. You have to do the same. You can't let seven months of dating overshadow seven years of friendship." Finally, Hermione's words made sense to him. There weren't any tears or loud voices or worries about George's state in Bill's bedroom to distract Ron. He could see, hear, and understand Hermione clearly.

"I think I've forgotten that as my best friend you already know my secrets," Ron said. "I guess I've been trying to see you almost like two different people."

"I'm not, Ron," Hermione said, this time taking his hand. "I'm both. I can be your friend and your lover. I can be Hermione and 'Mione." She smiled. "I can be your boss and your baby."

He laughed, squeezing her hand. "I want you to be. I always have. I just wanted us to be okay. We need to be okay now."

"Then let's make ourselves okay," she said. "We've gotten so close over this holiday, Ron, but I know we can get even closer if we're completely open with each other." She sat on her knees, facing him. "Look me in the eyes and tell me exactly what you're going through right now. Be honest."

"I know I can't be me without you, Hermione," he said. "I can barely breathe with the way you're staring at me but it feels so good. This is the best I've felt in almost two days. I need you, and I have to be your man in every way. I don't care what it takes."

"Do you want to know what's going on with me?" she asked. He nodded. "I feel anxious about where we go from here, but I feel excited and even warmer from what you just said. I want to do my best to be understanding, Ron. Is that something you want from me?"

"Yes," Ron said. "I want you listen to me and give me a chance to explain things. You have to give me a chance. You can't just walk away."

She nodded. "Okay. I will, and I want you to be my man. It's all I wanted. Just be my honest man."

"I will," Ron said. "I won't say that I'll try. I'll just do what I have to, even if it's hard or scary. George is doing it for himself, Angelina, and for my family. I can do it for you. Anything for you, Hermione."

She placed her hands on his shoulders, putting her forehead to his. "Do you love me?"

"More than anyone or anything," he said automatically.

"Do you want me?" she asked.

"Every bloody second of the day," he said, getting on his knees too.

"How much do you need me?" she whispered.

"You're in my blood, 'Mione," he said. "It's physically impossible for me to live without you."

"Ron?"

"Yes?"

"I love, want, and need you more than I could ever say," Hermione said. "I know that I let you down, and I need to make it up to you. I have to have you."

"Done," he said. "I am completely yours. Anything you want, I'll give it to you right now."

"Touch me like you did the first time we were here," she said.
"Make me yours again."

Ron wasted no time. He pulled off his jumper then leaned forward, pressing his lips firmly against hers. He was relieved when Hermione didn't push him away. Hermione slipped her lips around his tongue, tugging on it. Ron eased her back against the blanket, his hands going to her jeans. He worked on zipping down her fly then popping the button of her jeans apart. Ron pulled on them as Hermione helped kick them down to her ankles. He touched her bare, smooth thighs. His hands felt like they were melting right against her body. The spell was making Hermione's skin unbelievably warm. Ron groaned in her mouth as he felt blood rush through him again. He settled between her legs, breaking out of the kiss.

He gave himself a moment to catch his breath. "You sure?" he asked. Ron didn't want to scare her again.

"Please," Hermione panted. "I need you to touch me." Ron started to feel lightheaded again. She seemed confident and passionate, just like before. He once again allowed himself to feel comforted by her reassurance. Ron kissed her feverishly, gliding his hand up her trembling thighs. He placed his hand flat against her knickers, loving how the heat from her covered his hand like a glove. Ron put his mouth over hers, letting Hermione control their snog as he coasted his hand underneath, touching her slightly wet flesh.

Ron had to break away again. "Bloody hell," he moaned. She was even hotter there. He could feel her heat reach all the way to his toes. Hermione whimpered, licking and sucking on his bottom lip. He began to caress her nerve with his thumb. The more he massaged it, the more lubrication slicked his fingers. He kissed her forehead as he slid a first and second finger into her. Hermione arched her back, choking out air against his lips. The pulse that had charged between them at her house was building again. One end was in his body and the other was in hers. He pumped his fingers into her, slowly and deeply. Hermione continuously panted as he kept kissing her face and neck.

Ron's heart was beating out of his chest. He regretted putting the warming spell on himself because now he could hardly breathe through the heat. Hermione's insides were gushing around him. Suddenly, she held on to his wrist, making him go faster and harder. "L-like that," she whimpered. "Please."

"Anything, Hermione." Ron kissed her again, raising his arm so he could keep the speed up. He pressed his thumb on her clit, rubbing it as he worked. The new speed and added touch had Hermione whining stunningly and rolling her hips. It didn't take long before she cried out, clamping her thighs around his hand. He stared at her as she lay back on the quilt, losing herself in her pleasure. He could feel the pulse around his fingers. He bit his lip at her sexiness.

Hermione eventually calmed down and settled. She opened her eyes, instantly taking the jumper off. "I can hardly breathe, Ron." Her face was flushed.

"Me neither," he said. Ron pulled his fingers away, sucking on them. "I want you to know something. This is horrible timing but I have to say it. I hated you leaving me yesterday but now I think it might've been necessary. I can admit that now. I realized today that sometimes you have to let people leave for things to get better."

Some of Hermione's bliss seemed to fade. "I still regret doing it. I hated leaving too, and it was the hardest thing I've ever done."

Ron rested next her, kissing her temple. "So was not going after you the second you left."

Hermione faced him, propping herself up on her elbow. "What's going through your mind?"

"How I don't want to be anywhere else in the world right now," Ron said. He put his hand to her chest. Her heart was beating fast but steady. "You're my best friend, Hermione. That's the person I fell in love with. I'm sorry for forgetting."

"And I'm sorry that you had an attack, Ron," Hermione said. "I haven't had the chance to say that yet, or that I'm so incredibly happy you're okay."

"I feel even better now," he said, smiling at her.

"Ron, I want you do something else for me," she said, tracing his mouth.

"Anything," he rasped.

"Take me," she said. "In this spot. I want you to be like you were during our first time." She reached down for his jeans, pulling at the zipper. "I want it really slow," she whispered. "I want it gentle. I want you to let me guide you in, and I want you to whisper my name when you're close."

Ron moaned, reaching for her wand. He gave it to her so she could place the spell on her stomach. "I'll do all those things. I'll make you feel safe. You'll be able to feel how much I love you. I'll make this as sweet as I possibly can, like I did then." He put their jumpers under her head as a pillow then looked around the darkness. They were outside, in the cold, with barely any light, but somehow the setting was perfect. He moved damp hair out of her face. She was smiling at him, looking as if she trusted him. It was all Ron wanted. "I love you, Hermione."

"I love you too, Ron," she said. He leaned down, kissing her. They worked on getting their shoes and the lower half of their clothes off before Ron settled on top of her. He gazed at her: his best friend, girlfriend, and soul mate were all before him, offering herself to him once more. This time yesterday Ron hadn't

been sure if he would ever get to hold her hand again, but now Hermione was inviting him inside her body. She was the most beautiful and amazing person he'd ever seen. He refused to let her down.

Ron eased his mouth over her as he gently moved into her. They gave each other deep, slow kisses as he glided repeatedly into her. Ron and Hermione gasped, panted, and moaned as they touched each other all over, tugging on hair, gripping shirts, tracing patterns on arms, and sucking on skin. Ron kissed all over her neck and face as he gave her everything she wanted. Hermione began to sob the longer it went on, but this time he knew it wasn't because of pain. She was crying because he was allowing her to feel him wholly again. Ron knew it because he could feel the bliss too. Ron kissed her a little harder, going a little faster. He found himself apologizing to her again, mixing in how much he loved and needed her. Hermione did the same, making the night fill up with their breathless whispers. They came within moments of each other. Ron let the heat smother him whole to the point where he thought he would pass out.

They continued to hold each other afterwards. Ron kissed Hermione's tears away as she moved soppy hair off his forehead. Even though Ron was lying down, he felt taller, lighter, and not as pushed to the ground. There was so much he wanted to say but he didn't have the words yet. He simply grinned at her. Hermione returned the smile. "What are you thinking about?" she asked.

For once, a jumbled mess of confusion, fear, and worry weren't pounding inside his skull, making the pit in his chest whirl. There was one thing - the idea closest to his heart - that Ron decided to tell her. It was something he had learned from George and could now accept as his own truth.

"That everything has to start with you," Ron said to her.

* * *

**** Squees over Progress!R/Hr lol. There's a lot I could say about this chapter. The whole situation with George is something I took from personal experience, and I thought for his character, in this time, it was something he and his family could really benefit from. George leaving gives everyone a chance to find themselves individually, and Ron really needed to see that not everything was in his control or even needed to be. Well, as always, I'm writing too much. I really hope you lot enjoyed this chapter. :) Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 43*: The space between

Thank you all so much for the reviews! Some of them
REALLY made my smile/giggle in excitement/amusement.
I justâ€œ;you know who you are, lol ;)

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron zipped up his trousers then pulled his jumper back over his head. He leaned against the door of the shed, gazing down at Hermione. She was on the floor next to the grimy wall, panting, with her jeans still off. "Are you okay?" Ron asked.

She nodded, looking up at him. Her flushed face had an expression of satisfaction and slight bewilderment cast upon it. "Yes," she said faintly. "I â€“ I just can't get enough. Nothing is too much," she slurred. "Neverâ€œ;enoughâ€œ;of you, Ron." Hermione kept shaking her head, widening her eyes as if overcome by her own passion.

Ron took in every slight variation of her expression, feeling rather touched by her wild fervor. "Do you want there to be enough of me?" he asked quietly.

"Not in the slightest. I like this craving; thisâ€œ;" Her eyes moved around as if she were searching for the right word. "This insatiable nature I have toward you. I love the way it makes me feel. No â€“ there's no such thing as 'enough Ron', and I'll be happy to defy anyone who possesses a different philosophy." He chuckled, picking up her jeans and handing them to her. He felt hot and slightly intoxicated because of her words. Hermione grinned. "Aww, I made you blush," she said as she lifted her hips to dress herself again.

"I can't help it," he said. "Here, let me help you." He walked over to her, holding onto her wrists and pulling her up with one haul.

"Wow," Hermione said.

"I'm stronger than I look, 'Mione," he said, zipping her jeans up for her.

"Yes, I know you are," she said. She gazed at him softly, yet intensely. Ron placed his hands on her hips, guiding her backwards and lifting her once more onto the edge of a dodgy shelf in the overcrowded shed behind the Burrow.

"What's going through your mind?" Ron asked, wrapping his arms around her.

"How much I love you," Hermione said, tracing his mouth, "and how badly I need you."

"I reckon I saw a bit of that a few seconds ago," he said, kissing her forehead.

She grinned but shook her head. "Really, Ron."

"I know," he said, growing more serious. "I love you too. I love you so much, Hermione." He put his mouth to hers, kissing her deeply. Hermione hugged his neck, sighing and wrapping her legs around his waist.

A similar moment of heat and passion was how their tryst in the shed had started. One kiss had led to a moan, which in turn led to Ron pushing most of his dad's random Muggle items off the ledge to make room for Hermione. It hadn't been the ideal setting as everything in the shed was dingy and unstable. In fact, he'd refused to drop his trousers until Hermione was sure that there weren't any spiders crawling about; however, once Ron had put his mouth to Hermione, tasting her and feeling her need, everything else had disappeared. It'd been so rowdy in the room as things clattered and Hermione's enthusiastic cries bounced off the walls, adding to the noise. The madness, however, hadn't bothered Ron. He thoroughly enjoyed the difference in her along with how vocal she was. Hermione was tame in every aspect of her life except for when it came to him touching her; he loved that about her. He also knew how much trust it took for her to completely let herself go for him.

Ron finally broke away to catch his breath. Hermione put a hand to his chest. "We should probably go back inside," she said.

"Yeah, right," Ron said. He backed up so she could hop off the ledge. He looked around at the mess they'd made in his dad's shed. "Maybe we should clean up first."

Hermione blushed, grinning again. "Great idea."

Ron picked up one of the Muggle trinkets off the floor.
"Hermione, what's this?"

"That's a blender," she said. "You pour different beverages in it to mix together or different foods to reduce them to a drink or paste."

"Wicked," he said, placing it back on the shelf. "And this?"

"A staple gun," she said.

"Curious. What about this?"

Hermione took the bottle of blue liquid out of his hand. "This is dishwasher fluid."

"Fluid?" Ron asked.

"Yes, um..." Hermione rubbed her brow, frowning. "I'll tell you what: how about tonight I go over all three of these items for you in more detail? I'll make tea and everything."

Ron chuckled. "How kind of you. It'll be like a Muggle Studies lesson."

"I miss that class sometimes, you know?" Hermione said. She bent over, retying her shoes. Ron eyed her closely, biting his lip as the curve of her bum pushed against her jeans. She looked up, catching him in a daze. "Can I help you, sir?" she asked, placing a hand on her hip.

"You already did," he said casually. "I reckon I should thank you for the shag."

Hermione walked over to him, shaking her head. "There goes that phrase again. You've got to stop saying that, especially around here. I can't imagine how mortifying it would be if your dad found out we used his sanctuary for this. You can't tell anyone."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Well, I had planned to sit my parents, sister, and Harry down tonight and go into full detail with charts and fancy drawings about everything we did in here, but since you asked so nicely!"

"Hush," Hermione said, cutting him off with a kiss. "You ready to go back?"

"After you," he said. Hermione took his hand, leading him out of the shed. Ron walked a little slower than her so he could watch her move. She kept looking back at him, grinning. Ron had a reason to grin too.

Over the past few days since making up with Hermione, the two of them had turned a new leaf in their relationship by talking more openly. Ron voiced the troubling thoughts and feelings he'd had building inside for months whereas Hermione brought up the more difficult, pressuring times she'd experienced since returning to Hogwarts. The couple took things even further by expressing the questions and insecurities they'd always had about their romantic relationship. It was a raw feeling to expose things that Ron had barely allowed himself to think about on his darkest of days, but he knew that it was necessary for their relationship.

"Wait," Ron said as soon as they reached the house. He backed Hermione up against the side of it, kissing her again. She fully accepted his snog and parted her lips, letting him take over. Being more open and talking more expressively had also unleashed a new honesty and openness regarding their sexual relationship. He needed to seize every moment he could with Hermione while he still had her. There was a mutual hunger that was amplifying between them.

Right before he broke away, Ron gave her bottom lip a bite. The action made Hermione moan. She slowly opened her eyes as if she'd been stupefied. "What was all that for?"

"Dunno," he said, brushing her hair off her shoulder. "I reckon I needed a bit more before going back inside. You're not the only person who's inshaâ€?"

"Insatiable," Hermione said.

"Right," he said, rubbing his neck. "Merlin, how do you know so many words?"

"It's called reading and learning," she said, gliding her finger down his nose.

"Must be some posh new N.E.W.T course," Ron muttered. "Let's go in." They walked back into the house through the kitchen door. His mum was sitting at the table, going back and forth between two letters with her quill.

She looked up. "Did you two have a nice walk?"

"It was lovely, Mrs. Weasley," Hermione said, holding her hands behind her back. Ron smirked at how fluently she changed from a sexual dragon to Madame Morality.

Ron looked over his mum's shoulder. "Who are you writing to?"

"Well, this one is for your Great Uncle Simon," she said. "I haven't written to him in quite some time. This other one is for George. I want to get this to him before he leaves the country." His mum sighed, reading over her words for what Ron reckoned was not the first time.

"I'm sure he'll appreciate it before going abroad," Ron said, attempting not to worry. It wasn't just the subject of Hermione that Ron was seeking to improve. He was trying as hard as he could not to feel as if everything in his family was his responsibility. Since George's departure, Ron had taken a step back as his family continued to gradually put itself back together. It was difficult, but all he could do was his best and believe that George was managing with his mates. Ron rubbed his mum's arms. "He's okay, Mum."

"I know, dear," she said. "George is fine."

"Is there anything we can do for you, Mrs. Weasley?" Hermione asked, looking a bit concerned.

She shook her head. "I'm quite all right, Hermione, but thank you. I'm still adjusting is all. Go on and enjoy the day. We're lucky to have the sun out this time of year."

Ron wrapped his arms fully around his mum, kissing her on the cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too, Ronnie. I'm fine." She kissed his cheek. "Go have fun." His mum gave his hand a squeeze. Ron nodded, feeling it was safe to leave her in the kitchen alone. He held Hermione's hand as they went up to his room.

Hermione stopped on the second floor, walking them over to Ginny's room. "Are you worried about George?"

Ron rubbed his neck, knowing that honesty was best. "Yes," he said, leaning against Ginny's door. "I'm more concerned about Mum though. I can't wait until Dad gets home from work. He's barely

left her side all week, and he's the only person who can instantly make her smile and feel better. I don't think Mum would've survived all this without my dad." Ron looked down, sighing. Even with his family's few improvements, nothing was perfect or even a whole lot better. Still, everyone was trying and things were at least endurable.

Hermione lifted his chin, gazing at him. "That's what happens when the man you love is also your husband. He's your whole world. You're nothing without him."

Ron could feel himself getting lost in Hermione's eyes. He interlaced their fingers, never taking his eyes off her. "Well, I'm sure as her husband, my dad's main reason for living is to make my mum happy. She's his wife and everything has to start with her." He put Hermione's hand to his lips, kindly applying pressure.

Hermione bit her lip, softly bouncing on her heels. She drew her hand away. "You make me feel so good, Ron," she whispered.

"It's all I want to do," he said. He pushed himself off the wall, backing her against it this time. Ron instantly put his mouth to hers, kissing and holding her firmly. He already wanted to touch and kiss her all over again. His days with her were winding down. Now that there weren't so many issues weighing down on him, Ron desperately wanted to make his time with Hermione count.

"R-Ron," she said against his mouth, "I don't want to disturb Ginny."

Ron licked her upper lip. "She's still in my room, remember?" He broke away, knocking on the door. When Ron didn't hear anything, he turned the knob and backed Hermione into the room. He swiftly turned them around, pushing her against the door. Ron started kissing all over her neck, sucking on her throat.

Hermione tangled her fingers in his hair. "In here?"

Ron was vaguely irritated at her courtesy. "I know for a fact that Ginny has let Harry put his gitty little hands all over her in my room."

"You do?" Hermione asked.

"Your other best friend isn't as civilized as you seem to think he is," Ron said, thinking back to all the repulsive confessions Harry had made to Ron regarding his sex life with Ginny. "It doesn't even matter though. I reckon we both need this now." Before Hermione could object, Ron pressed his lips against hers again. She didn't push him away or protest when he then unbuttoned her jeans, wedging his knee between her legs so she'd part them, nor did she complain when Ron crept his hand under her knickers, bringing her once again to the edge and covering her mouth so she wouldn't make too much noise as she came.

Ron and Hermione were both flushed and smirking like nutters when he opened the door to his room. "Oi, you have to be cheating,"

Ginny said to Harry as they were sitting on the floor playing Snaps. Harry shook his head. Ginny threw a card at him. "Fine, take it, prat."

"I love watching you pout in defeat," Harry said, picking up the card. "Your cheeks puff out a little and it makes your freckles look bigger."

Ginny kicked his leg. "Are you taking the piss?"

"Most likely," Harry said, gently kicking her back. Ginny crawled over to his side but, right before she could kiss him, Ron slammed the door, clearing his throat. Neither Harry nor Ginny jumped and she kissed Harry anyway.

"It's about time," Harry said. "You two have been gone for ages." He gave them both a once-over. "Where's the Quaffle?" Ron assumed that Harry was talking to Ginny but he kept looking between him and Hermione. Ron turned to Hermione but she looked just as confused.

"Quaffle?" Ron asked.

Harry and Ginny instantly stood up. "Yes, the Quaffle," Ginny said with exaggeration. "The ball that Chasers pass to each other and Keepers block in Quidditch. It's the item that Harry was going to get for us to toss around until you two offered to go instead. It's the only reason why you two went to the shed in the first place - to retrieveâ€œ the Quaffle."

Hermione gasped, placing a hand over her mouth. "That's right!" Ron searched his memory then suddenly it all came back to him.

"Yeah! That's it, innit?" Ron asked. "On the way back I was wondering why we were there in the first place. Fancy that." He shrugged. "Um, sorry mate."

Harry looked at them incredulously. "You're sorry? The sun wasn't even out when you two left. What were you doing in there?"

"Harry," Hermione groaned.

Ginny rolled her eyes, placing a hand on her hip. "What else would Ron and Hermione do in a cramped little shed together? They obviously got one off."

"Again?" Harry asked in a gasp.

"Shut up, the both of you!" Hermione demanded as her face went scarlet.

Harry paced, running his fingers through his hair. "I can't believe it happened again. It's got to be the sixteenth time in what - three days?"

"Shut up, Harry!" Hermione said.

Ron crinkled his nose. "Sixteen is a bit much, Harry. I'd said it's more like—"

"Shut up, Ron!" Hermione ordered, hitting his arm.

"Ow!" Ron said. "What are you getting mad at me for?"

"Yeah, are you actually denying it, Hermione?" Ginny asked. "We all know that you and Ron have been going at it like Hippogriffs in heat."

"Be quiet, Ginny!" Hermione stomped her foot, covering her face and groaning.

Harry walked up to her, pulling her hands away. "I thought you wanted everyone to be more open? Are you honesty going to lie to me? You'd put this on our friendship?" Ron knew Harry well enough to tell that he was taking the Mickey, but the bloke was brilliant at acting serious.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said as her aggression faded, obviously not seeing his humor. "That's not fair."

"Now you know how it feels to be put on the spot," Harry said with a shrug.

"Oi, you're a prick!" Ron said. "Leave her alone." Hermione looked to Ron for help but he merely shrugged as well. "They're both gits but I'm not denying anything, love," he said. "Especially not to them."

Hermione gripped her necklace, sighing in defeat. "Fine! Alright! M-maybeâ€¦maybe Ron and I did—"

"—have an incredible shag in the shed," Ron finished with. He looked to Harry and Ginny. "Big bloody deal. At least we were safe about it."

While Ginny started laughing, Harry threw his hands up.
"Buggering hell, mates."

Hermione stuck her chin out, straightening her jumper. "I'll apologize for forgetting the ball but I will not apologize for what we did instead. Ron and I are of age, we're consenting, and we're in love."

"No one wants you to apologize, Hermione," Ron said.

"I reckon a break inbetween courses is what we're after," Ginny said.

"Oh, it's not as if we hurt anyone!" Hermione said. "We had intercourse. It's what our species has been doing for eons!"

Ron cringed at how brainy she made shagging sound. "Bloody hell, 'Mione. Do you have to say it like that?"

"What do you prefer her to say?" Ginny asked. "'Ron and I exchanged some vaginal secretions and seminal fluids', perhaps?"

"No â€“ that's bleeding worse!" Ron said, cringing again. "You're making it sound like we brewed a potion for Slughorn's class. 'Mione, can't you just say that we shagged and left sticky messes in our trousers?'"

"I don't need to hear anymore of this rubbish," Harry said, squirming as well. "I just hope I can forget about this conversation and be able to sleep â€œthree weeks from now. Yeah, that's reasonable. I want the ball too."

"I'll go get it," Ron said.

"I'll go with you," Hermione said.

"NO!" Harry and Ginny said together.

"I'll go get it - and I reckon I'll manage without having to take anyone's kit out," Harry said. He shook his head, chuckling. "You two are what dreams and nightmares are made of, you know that?" He pushed past Ron and patted Hermione's shoulder before leaving the room.

Hermione rubbed her brow, flushing an even darker shade. "I'm going to take a shower." She kissed Ron's cheek then shuffled out of the room.

Ginny crossed her arms over her chest and smirked. She looked so much like George that it did Ron's head in. "You're quite the wizard, eh?" she asked.

"I don't think you're nearly as cute as Harry does," Ron said, lying on the floor by the cards. "I also don't give a shit what you two think, though I should hex you both for embarrassing Hermione like that."

"Stop it, Ron, you're frightening me," Ginny said sarcastically, sitting beside his head.

"Good," he muttered. "Besides, you and Harry are rich for taking the piss."

"I'm well aware," Ginny said. "You have no idea how many times Harry and I--"

Ron reached up, roughly yanking on her hair. "Shut up! Fucking hell!"

"Ow!" Ginny slapped his hand then shoved him. "What - can't take it, big brother?"

He sat up, feeling a gust of anger come out of nowhere. "No - I just can't take you sometimes. You're like an itch in the bollocks that won't leave."

"You're a fucking twat, Ron," she said, frowning at him and appearing just as angry.

Ron frowned as well. "Well, you're a bloody wanker, Ginny!" He turned away from her at the same time that she turned away from him. He took his wand out of his pocket, flipping it between his fingers. Sometimes, the tiniest thing Ginny said or did set him off. Ron couldn't help but feel as if she antagonized him simply to cause him grief. They were quiet as their hostility passed over them.

"Mum's writing a letter to George," Ron said when he was calm enough to speak.

"She said at breakfast that she would." Ginny finally looked at him. "Is she okay?"

"I think so." Ron reached over to his side table, taking out a couple of chocolate frogs from the drawer. He handed one to her. "I know Mum is worried about him."

"Of course she is," Ginny said, biting the head off the frog. "So am I."

Ron could tell how hard it was for Ginny to admit her worry. He admired her strength. "Me too, but he'll be all right. George isn't alone, and he's doing this to get his life back. I'm sure he's happier already."

"Do you think he misses us?" she asked in a gentler voice.

"More than anything," Ron said, completely facing her. "You know what this is like, being away. He's doing what he has to for himself and our family though. We all are."

Ginny nodded, eating the rest of her frog. "Yeahâ€'rightâ€'" She ran her fingers through her hair, tugging on the strands.

Any enmity Ron felt was now gone. No matter what, Ginny was his sister. "I didn't hurt you, did I?" he said.

She rubbed her eyes dry. "Don't flatter yourself, Ron. You're not that strong, and you didn't hurt me. I'm just thinking about our brother."

"So am I," he said, rubbing her back, "but he'll be fine. Will you be okay?"

"I'm all right," Ginny said, leaning back into his hand. "You?"

"I'll honestly feel better after you punch me for pulling on your hair the way I did," he said.

Ginny sniffled, giving his arm a strong jab. "Better?"

"A little," he said. He gave her the rest of his frog. "I'm sorry."

"Me too," she said, popping the chocolate into her mouth.

"See? I've got the Quaffle while also having as much seminal fluid in me as I did when I left," Harry said when he entered the room. "I reckon I am rather special sometimes." Ron and Ginny looked at each other before bursting into laughter.

As soon as Hermione came back from her shower, Harry and Ginny apologized (after receiving a threat from Ron) and the four of them tossed the Quaffle gently around his room. Throughout the afternoon, they talked about anything and everything that they could. Ron used Harry to demonstrate some of his updated chess skills, Ginny talked about the new Quidditch practice schedule she had created, and Hermione went into detail about how the last part of term at Hogwarts would be the most crucial. As they talked, Ginny and Hermione magically spun Ron's bowling ball while Harry tried on Ron's bowling shoes and tripped over himself. Ron inhaled deeply, absorbing himself in the pleasant atmosphere that their relaxed attitudes produced, and he found it a little easier not to feel his usual worry, anger, and bit of sadness. On the other hand, Ron couldn't help but notice a slight desperation in everyone's discussion and eye contact. It was Friday. Soon, Ron and Harry would receive their letters from Lambrick. Not too much longer after that, Hermione and Ginny would have to go back to school.

Ron kissed the top of Hermione's head as she sat in his lap, talking to them about the upcoming Careers Seminar at Hogwarts. He did his best to only concentrate on her words and not stray too far into his thoughts about camp. His relationship with Lambrick was the only part of his life that was completely uncontrollable at this point. No amount of good laughs with Harry, progressions with his family, or honest conversation with Hermione had been able to untwist the burning rope that snaked around Ron's spine. At any moment he would find out where his future would lie.

At the dinner table, Ron once more did everything he could not to let his concerns overwhelm him. It helped that Hermione sat close beside him and that his dad somehow knew all the right things to say to make his mum laugh and brighten up a little. It was obvious that she was still rather upset about George, but she was trying. It gave Ron added incentive to try as well.

Later that night, Ron took the Quaffle back to the shed. Once he got inside, he found himself getting lost amongst all the Muggle toys and trinkets. Ron wanted to take Hermione up on her promise so she could explain some of the things to him, but he knew that would most likely end with her on her knees in front of him or Ron bending Hermione over the small table in the corner. Ron quickly left the shed - before his imagination could take over and convince him that another shag in the shed would be worth Hermione's embarrassment and Harry's teasing. "Ron," a voice said.

"Bill?" Ron answered as a very tall and lanky ginger walked over to him. Bill lit his wand, giving them both a bit more light.
"What are you doing here?"

"I just came by to talk to Mum and Dad and say hello to everyone," Bill said. He smirked. "What were you doing in there?"

"Nothing. Just returning the Quaffle," Ron said.

"Am I gonna have to look you in the eyes and ask again?" Bill asked, raising Ron's chin.

Ron brushed his hand away. "You're so bloody witty. Do I look happy and relaxed right now?"

Bill gave him a quick survey. "Not particularly."

"Then you can get that prat look off your face," Ron said. "My hands are clean."

Bill laughed. "All right, Ron. I'll let it go this time. Anyway, I didn't come over here to give you a hard time. I actually wanted to speak with you before going back home."

"About?" Ron asked.

Bill nudged his head. "Let's walk." Ron nodded and walked beside him as they wandered around the Burrow's garden. "Dad said that he changed the locking taps on the house?"

"Right when he came home," Ron said. "The Magical Law Enforcement Department has apparently set up a new schedule for when Ministry employees should update their protection spells. It's another one of Percy's ideas. He's sticking his nose in almost every department these days."

"He's extraordinary, that Percy," Bill said with a wide smile and admiration in his voice.

"You should tell him that," Ron said. "You know he wants to grow up to be just like you, yeah?"

"He doesn't need to be like me," Bill said. "Percy's brilliant just as he is, and he's the smartest person I know. I've been telling him that for ages - since he was about seven, I believe."

"Well, none of us really like to listen to you, William," Ron said.

Bill shoved him. "Shut up, Ronald." He grew a bit more serious. "So I reckon you probably already know what I want to talk to you aboutâ€!"

Ron nodded. "I think so. Can we sit down for this?" They found a spot in the grass. Bill created a small fire which burned orange and blue, brightening up the darkness around them. Ron watched the creation in awe. "I don't see how you make these so perfectly."

"It's called reading and learning," Bill said, using the tip of his wand to move the fire further away from them and lower to the ground.

Having heard the exact same cheek from Hermione in almost the exact same tone, Ron stuck out his tongue, groaning. "Urgh! Honestly? Is that something all seventh years learn to say in their posh N.E.W.T classes?"

"Keep your hair on, Ron," Bill said. "I'm not going to lecture you about school. I want to talk to you about something we should've discussed already."

Ron rubbed his palms into his thighs. When he was alone with Bill, there was no escaping his thoughts and fears about camp. "Lambrick, yeah?"

"Sort of," Bill said. "Ron, look at me." Ron dragged his gaze to Bill. His oldest brother gave him the same look of concern that he'd seen in the cabin the night of his panic attack. "I know that a lot has happened since you came back, so we haven't had a chance to talk about your attacksâ€;but I need to know how you're feeling about them and if you've thought about telling anyone. I haven't forgotten anything."

"I haven't either, Bill," Ron said. "I knew we'd have this talk, but I don't know what you want me to say. How do I feel about them? I hate them. Have I thought about telling the family? Yes, but I'm not going to. Not now."

"Ron," Bill breathed, "did you learn nothing from everything George said to the family?"

"I learned a lot," Ron said with intensity. "More than you'll ever understand."

"Calm down, Ron," Bill said. "I'm only asking because you clearly saw how scared George was to tell us something so drastic, but we were all there for him. No one was angry or disappointed. We're a family; we want to help each other in any way we can." Ron cracked his knuckles as he stared into the fire. He knew all of these things. In truth, he'd given himself time every day since George's departure to imagine himself standing in front of his family, telling them about the demon that had been tormenting him for the past seven months; however, when Ron thought about explaining the origin of his fear and having to look at people like his mum, Charlie, and George, he immediately turned down the idea.

"I know, Bill," Ron said. "I've honestly thought about it more than I have in the past. The idea isn't as hard to come to terms with now, but I'm still not there yet. Even if I was, I can't do it now - not with George and Charlie gone, and not during this holiday with everyone still trying to recover from Christmas."

Bill sighed, shaking his head. "Damn it, Ron. It really bothers me to hear you say things like that. I understand why you don't

want to talk about it now, but what's your excuse going to be later on?"

Ron shrugged. "I don't know. I'm sorry, Bill. I â€“ I don't mean to disappoint you."

"You don't disappoint me," Bill said, nudging Ron's shoulder with his own. "I'm just concerned. It's all I've ever been."

"Are you still going to keep your word?" he asked.

"Of course," Bill said, not looking pleased with himself. "You can trust me, Ron. Believe me, I've wanted to say something; convince you to tell everyone, or at least lead you into talking about it, but I haven't. Do you want to know one of the reasons why?"

"I guess," Ron said, giving Bill a curious look.

"Well, I haven't wanted to put you under any more stress," Bill said. "I thought you wereâ€¦going to maybe have one sometime here. I thought everything with the family, George, and your fight with Hermione might've taken you to that point."

"Ta, Bill," Ron mumbled, feeling a horrible blush. Ron knew that he wasn't the strongest person, but he was at least stronger than everyone apparently thought he was.

"I'm sorry, but I'm being honest with you," Bill said. "I don't want you to believe that I think you're weak. I just don't have much to go on when it comes to these things."

"It's okay," Ron said. "I reckon it's my fault that you don't. I haven't told you much."

"No, you haven't," Bill said in a serious tone.

Ron stared ahead to the fire again. It sustained its flames, glowing almost as if it had a personality and heart. It was impressive and mighty. Ron wanted to take the flame and put it inside his chest so he could feed off it, finding the courage to tell the people he loved his hardest truth. "I promise, Bill: I will tell everyone," Ron said. "The thought has never left me. I reckonâ€¦I reckon I'm just not as 'ready' as George is; not yet anyway. I will be though. That's all I can give you right now." He looked at Bill. "I'm sorry. Please, try to understand me. George found his moment. Let me find mine."

Bill gave him a once-over, still not looking happy but at least not appearing angry either. "I can do that," Bill said. "I want you to feel comfortable telling everyone because this is your life. Just know that when you do, I'll stand right beside you if you want. You won't have to do it alone."

"I'd really like that, Bill," Ron said, grinning, "but I know that it'll be something I'll have to do alone. It's only when you're standing alone that you realize how much it'll take to knock you down."

Bill raised an eyebrow. "Where in the hell did you get that insight?"

Ron blushed harder. "It's something Alan always told us during field training."

"Well, it's a brilliant concept," Bill said. "You should be getting your letter from him soon, right?"

"Within the next couple of days," Ron said. "I'm trying not to think about it too much. It'sâ€œit's stuff like that - agonizing over things and continuously worrying - that can put me in a state."

Bill nodded. "Oh, I see. It's probably good that you're not then."

"Yeah," Ron said, feeling a bit raw and guilty about letting Bill see his vulnerability. He knew that he had no reason to. Ron thought about what he and Hermione were constantly talking about: how he needed to realize that it was okay to share his pressure with his family. Ron still wasn't at that point, but his brother had done so much for him over the years that the least he could do was be more honest with Bill and give him some sort of hope.

"I want you to know something," Ron said. "You don't have to feel alone in thisâ€œthing with me anymore. Iâ€œI told Ginny."

Bill's eyes widened. "Ginny? About what happened at Lambrick?" Ron nodded, feeling sick for a moment. He wasn't sure how Bill would react. "How did she take it?"

"She was really worried because it happened. She got upset because I didn't tell her sooner, but she was mostly just happy that I was okay," Ron said.

Bill merely stared at him, evidently stunned. "Blimey. Well, I think it's great that you're starting to open up about this, even if it's in small doses."

"Doesn't really feel that way," Ron said honestly. "The only thing I don't like more than having my brother worry about me is having my little sister worry, but I can't change what's been done. I just have to move on, and that's what I'm doing, Bill. I just need time."

"You'll get it from me, Ron," Bill said. "I'm proud of you. I know it must've been difficult. Does this mean that I can possibly talk to her about it?"

"Let me tell her that I told you first," Ron said. "Then you can, but that's only if you don't give her a hard time because she didn't tell you that she knew."

Bill rolled his eyes. "I helped feed Ginny when she was a baby. I even used to wash her bloody hair. I think I know how to treat our little sister. All right, Ron?"

"Just saying," he mumbled.

"I appreciate your solid advice." Bill stood up. "I should get back home."

Ron stood up as well. "Thanks for coming by. Mum had a rough day."

"So I was told," Bill said. "She'll be all right. She's already looking a little better. So are you." Ron shrugged. "Let me know when you get your letter, yeah? It won't matter to me either way."

"I wish I could say the same," Ron said.

Bill gave him a pat on the arm. "When you do go back, I hope Alan teaches you something about optimism. I don't know much about these attacks you have, but I reckon having more positivity in your life would help."

"Thank you, Hermione," Ron muttered. "She tells me the exact same thing."

"Of course she does," Bill said smoothly. "That's not a seventh year thing though. That's something Head Boys and Head Girls are told to enforce to the regulars."

"Bugger off!" Ron said.

Bill chuckled, giving him a mock bow. "Goodnight, Ron." He turned around and began walking up the dirt path. Ron sat back in the grass, staring at the fire once more. Bill wouldn't say it, but Ron knew that he was disappointed. One day, Ron would surprise Bill and show him how strong he really could be.

Ron eventually went back into the house. His dad was hunched over something at the kitchen table. He jumped, turning around when Ron closed the door. "Merlin, Ron, you gave me a turn. I didn't know you were out there."

"Sorry, Dad," Ron said. "I was just sitting in the garden. What are you doing?" He sat beside him.

His dad looked around before revealing a small silver bracelet with an orange stone in the middle. "I'm fixing this for your mum." He put his wand tip to the bracelet, mending its few chipped parts.

"Where did you get it?" Ron asked.

His dad grinned. "It's a funny little story, really. Years ago, she saw this bracelet in the window of a shop and immediately got that look in her eyes that she gets when she fancies something, you know?" Ron nodded. "Well, I saved up all month to buy it for her."

His dad put the bracelet close to his face to examine it. "As soon as I bought this, I took it to work to show a few of my colleagues. That was a mistake because I lost the damn thing somehow. I swear, I spent all night using every spell I knew to find it, but nothing turned up." His dad then used a polishing spell to shine the jewel. "It just so happens that today I went through some old boxes from my last office and there it was, grinning at me."

His dad handed the bracelet to Ron. "I think it'll be a nice surprise when she wakes up and sees it next to her robe," he said. "It's dated, but she'll like it."

"I think she will too. It's beautiful," Ron said, handing it back to him. "You know Mum's not too keen on jewelry though."

"Which makes the woman incredibly difficult to shop for," his dad said, shaking his head. "I've prepared myself to hear her tell me off about how I shouldn't have wasted money on this but, well, technically I didn't buy it^{at least} not recently."

Ron laughed. It sounded like something he would say himself. "I'm sure Mum will love to hear that."

His dad shrugged. "Probably not, but no matter - I'm giving this to her regardless. I'm sure telling her the story behind it will have her giggling for awhile. That's what I'm after."

Ron looked at the bracelet, easily imagining his mum fussing as she put it on but then instantly loving it. "I think it's brilliant how you always know what to do to make Mum feel better."

"I won't boast and say that it's something that happened overnight," his dad said. "I've literally had decades of practice and have gone through a lot of trial and error. I've merely been lucky that your mother is so patient."

Ron picked up the bracelet again, envisioning himself giving something like it to Hermione. "I hope someday it'll get to the point where I just instantly know what to do or say to make Hermione happy. Sometimes I'm not always sure. It bothers me."

"Well, Ron, you're both still young and have so much to learn about each other," his dad said. "It's going to take some time. Besides, you'll never get to a point where everything will instantly fall into place every time. Even now I'm not always so sure of what move to make, but I know enough to take certain risks."

"Risks and Hermione aren't things I like to put together," Ron said. His dad gave him a smile. He still looked so tired and the brightness he once had in his eyes was still gone, however, his smile was real and familiar. Ron was happy to see it.

"Risk comes with the territory, Ron," his dad said. "Now, I haven't been a boyfriend for about thirty years or so, but I can

at least tell you that in a marriage, risk is usually necessary for survival. So is learning from mistakes."

"That's a concept I'm actually a bit more familiar with," Ron said in a heavy breath.

"You needn't worry. I think I know Hermione well enough now to see that she's a lot like Molly," his dad said. "She'll keep you sharp. She'll allow you to discover what works and what doesn't work for your relationship. It all just takes time, Ron."

Mr. Weasley held the bracelet away from his face. "Ah, I believe it's nearly perfect now." He placed it in the small red box that was also on the table. "So how are you two doing, if I may ask? I know that I haven't really been able to talk to you since you got home but—"

"It's okay, Dad. We're talking now," Ron assured. "Um, Hermione and I are fine. We've got into a pretty nasty fight the other day, but we worked it out. We're trying to go back - or move forward, I reckon."

"That's great, son," his dad said. "I like hearing that you two are all right. I'm really glad she's been here for you."

"Me too," Ron said. "She, uh—she's even more important to me than I thought. I just um—" Ron wasn't sure what he wanted to say so he tried not to think. Ron wanted what was honest to come out of him. "Dad, do you think it's okay when the person you're in love with becomes your entire reason for waking up everyday? Like, even if she's not the first person in your life to matter to you, you still, I dunno—care for her the most?" Ron studied his dad's expression; it seemed he was trying to decode what Ron was saying.

His dad looked at him intensely. "Let me tell you something, Ron: I love my family more than anything. You lot are my world; however, the first thing I think about when I wake up is the most beautiful and amazingly spectacular woman I've ever met. While I'm at the Ministry, up to my trousers in work, or I'm having a terrible day, I think about your mum. Even when I come home every day, the first person I want to see is my wife."

Mr. Weasley stared off, looking as though his mind was in another world. "Your mother is my reason, and I don't think that's any sort of problem. She's supposed to be." He ruffled Ron's hair. "You've got centuries of Weasley blood in you, Ron. There's nothing more dedicated or passionate than a Weasley male in love. You've got the spark. What you're feeling doesn't make you any less of a friend or brother or son. I will warn you though—"

"What?" Ron asked, tensing a bit.

"Your emotions toward Hermione are only going to intensify when you get older," his dad said. "It's a blessing and a curse really, being a Weasley."

Ron laughed, relaxing once more. "I'll take on that challenge. I reckon it's Hermione who'll have to suffer through it."

"Which is why patience is the best thing you can ask of her," his dad said. "You'll become a little madder but you'll find a balance."

Ron laughed again; his dad joined him. It had been so long since the two of them were able to genuinely laugh together. "I welcome your warnings, Dad," Ron said, through his laughter. "I'll let you know when I start to feel the change. I might need advice."

"It's what I'm here for, Ron," his dad said, patting his back. "I would've joined you outside if I knew you were out there."

"I wasn't for very long," Ron said. "I was just thinking."

"Possibly about getting your letter?" his dad asked.

Ron nodded, his amusement automatically diminishing. George's absence was a double-edged sword. While George's well-being was no longer a constant thought in Ron's mind, the gaps had promptly been filled with thoughts regarding his status at Lambrick. "Any day now!"

His dad's humor faded as well. "What do you think it'll say?"

Ron shook his head. "I honestly don't know." He moved his focus away from his father, rubbing his neck and feeling uneasy. Ron didn't want to talk about Lambrick and ruin the moment he was having with his dad, but Hermione's voice entered his mind, telling Ron that he wasn't ruining anything. Her voice was loud but it wasn't easy for him to understand at the same time.

"I know that look," his dad said.

"What?" Ron asked. "What look?"

"That one," he said, pointing to Ron's face. "The first time I saw it was when you were three. I asked you where my glasses were. You gave me that same look and showed me your hand. You had broken them. It's been fifteen years, but that look hasn't changed at all. It's the expression you get when you're trying to hide that you feel guilty or ashamed about something."

Ron wanted to roll his eyes. If there was one thing that he'd learned over the past few months, it was how transparent he was. It annoyed him. His dad was looking at him intently. Ron wanted to be open. George had been honest, making their dad proud, and Ron needed to do the same. "I guess," Ron began, "until just recently, I was feeling rather lost about the whole camp thing."

His dad's eyes widened. "Why?"

"Becauseâ€œI sorta felt like I should stay here with the family," Ron said.

"Oh, Ron," his dad said. He pulled his chair closer to him.

"I know what you're going to say," Ron quickly added. "I know that I should go back, and I really want to, but nothing in front of me has been clear lately. I've been worried about fucking everything up."

"Ron—"

"I know," he said, unable to control the words that seemed to be bleeding out of him. "I'm sorry for the swear."

"This isn't about the swear," his dad said. He touched Ron's cheek, directing his face to his. "You should know that the uncertainty you're feeling is something everyone is dealing with right now. No, it's not the same situation, but it doesn't mean that the pressure isn't there. Your brothers, Ginny, your mum, and I feel that same weight."

Ron frowned. "Knowing that doesn't make me feel any better, Dad."

"Maybe not," his dad said, "but I think it's important to help you realize that you're not the only person who feels like this. We all have to find our individual paths again. It's not something that will happen simply because you stay home and don't look for yours. If this has come about because of George—"

"It wasn't just about George," Ron said. "I'd thought about it for awhile. I just — I just want to do what's right. What's the right thing, Dad?" His words were sincere. Ron had been trying so hard over his holiday to navigate through all the confusion. Just once he wanted to be led in a direction and not have to think about it.

"Ron, son," his dad said, shaking his head. "I'd give anything to be able to tell you what's 'right' but I can't. That's what makes life so bloody hard."

Ron's shoulders slumped. "What can you tell me then?"

"Well, as an understanding person, all I can tell you is to do what you honestly think is best," his dad said. "Only you know what will make you feel the most comfortable. I don't think a decision like this should be taken lightly. It'll impact your future dramatically."

Ron's shoulders slumped even further down at the generic response. "Yeah."

"However," his dad added in a stronger voice, "as a Weasley, I can tell you that not going back because you think that you have to stay here probably wouldn't be the smartest decision you've ever made."

Hearing that actually made Ron laugh. He hadn't expected to hear it. "You sound like Harry," he said in surprise. "When we talked about me staying, he basically said that I was a stupid prat."

"That's because you two have been best mates since you laid eyes on one another," his dad said. "He's always going to be the most open and blunt with you. Now, do you want me to tell you what I think as your father?"

Ron nodded again, narrowing all of his attention to him. "Yes, please."

"As your father," his dad said, "I'm pulling rank on this one." He gripped Ron's shoulders very hard. "Ron, I love you, and I'm very touched that you would stay at home to help. On the other hand, I'm also veryâ€œ; I guess angry that you'd ever consider it."

"Wha - why?" Ron asked softly.

"Because, Ron," his dad said in a raised voice, "you're only eighteen! It's not your job to stay at home and pick up all the pieces, especially now that you're making a name for yourself."

"But-"

"No - no 'buts', Ronald Bilius Weasley," his dad said, shaking him gently. "We're all okay. We're not perfect, but we're managing. You'd better take your arse back to Lambrick. If I have to strap you to a broom and fly you there myself, then I'll do it. Is that understood?" Ron was taken aback by his dad's force but, for whatever reason, it also caused some of the heaviness on Ron's shoulders to crumble. "Ron? Did you hear me?"

"Yes, sir, I heard you," Ron said. He loved his father more with every firm word that was said to him.

"Good lad," his dad said, letting him go. "I mean it, Ronald. I'm a believer in letting your kids make their own choices, but this time I have to step in. I think you would be making a huge mistake if you stayed here. If your path is unclear, then I'll guide you a little. I don't have all the right answers, but I know you well enough to take a risk and say that your life starts again at Lambrick. You can trust me on that, Ron."

His dad's words meant so much and hit Ron so powerfully. He wanted to go back to camp so badly and hearing his dad telling him that he should only amplified his desire. He didn't know why his dad's reassurance meant more than George's, but he didn't question it. "I do trust you," Ron said. "Thank youâ€œ;for yelling at me."

His dad chuckled. "It's not usually my style. I reserve it for special occasions."

"I'm glad this was one of those occasions, Dad. I really needed to hear you say all that." He suddenly got a vision of his dad blowing a whistle right in Ron's ear as he bellowed out how bloody thick Ron was. Ron rather enjoyed the idea.

"There you are, Ron," Ginny said, coming into the kitchen.
"Hermione sent me to find you. I reckon she thought you got lost
in the world somewhere."

"I haven't gone anywhere," Ron said. "I've just been talking. Is
she okay?"

"She's fine," Ginny said. "She and Harry are busy bickering over
the state of his trunk right now. I was happy to leave. I'm
surprised you're still up, Dad." She gave him a hug.

Their dad held her tightly tightly, closing his eyes. "I'm
putting something together for your mother. I'll have to show it
to you. Hmm. How are you, love?"

"I'm great," she said, sitting on the other side of him. "What
were you two talking about when I walked in?"

"Hairy armpits, calluses, weird stains in trousers — you know,
manly stuff," Ron said.

She rolled her eyes. "Lovely."

"But before that, we were talking about Ron going back to
Lambrick," their dad said. "Which he is going to do! go back..."
Mr. Weasley raised an eyebrow and Ron nodded vigorously.

"I'm glad I missed that conversation," Ginny said, clearly not
noticing the moment between Ron and their dad. "Hearing Ron and
Harry talk about going back to Lambrick makes me think about
going back to Hogwarts. It won't be too much longer now." She
sighed. "Bugger."

"At least you're almost done," Ron said.

"It won't feel that way once I'm back there, walking those dreary
corridors." She pouted a little. "You're lucky, Ron. You'll be
going back to fresh air."

"It's not exactly fresh when your nose is constantly in the dirt,
or broken so all you can smell is your own blood," Ron said.

"Oh, listen to you two complain," their dad said, looking between
them and beaming. "You both have grown up so much, it's
remarkable. I remember when you two used to complain about the
water not being hot enough when you took baths together. You
loved bath time."

"Merlin, Dad!" Ron said, hissing as if a spell had just burned
him.

"Horrible, Dad. Just horrible!" Ginny said, recoiling as well.
"We expect those kinds of comments from Mum but I thought you
cared a bit more about our state of mind." Ron and Ginny looked
at each other for a split second before shivering and averting
their eyes.

Their dad chuckled, rubbing his neck. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to embarrass you. It's just daunting. Here you are going back to your last year at Hogwarts, Ginny, and Ron, you're getting even closer to becoming an Auror. I just want to know where I've been when all this happened."

"You've been right here," Ginny said.

Their dad's expression suddenly turned grim. "It hasn't felt that way lately. Not to me, and I'm sure not to either of you."

"That's not true, Dad," Ron said. "We've all been off but we've all still been here."

"Ron's right," Ginny said. "You don't have to worry, Dad. You've got nothing to explain."

Their dad brushed hair off her shoulder, giving Ginny a tender smile that was reserved only for her. "You look and sound just like your mum," he said. He sighed. "I'm sorry. I just haven't been in the greatest of shape lately. Nonetheless, I want you both to know that I'm striving to gain my form again. I'm your father. That should never be unclear to any of you kids, okay?"

"Okay," Ron and Ginny said together.

Their dad took Ginny's hand, kissing it. "You're my baby girl, Ginny."

She grinned. "Always, Dad."

Their dad then kissed the top of Ron's head. "And you're my baby boy, Ron."

Ron smiled too. "Always, Dad."

He looked between them again. "You two are my youngest and also my busiest. So much has happened to you both. I don't like the feeling that I haven't spent enough time with you. When you two come home, I want to do something - just the three of us, while we're all still together."

"I'd love that, Dad," Ginny said.

"So would I," Ron said. "We'll do that, I promise." He leaned against their dad's shoulder; Ginny did the same on the other side. Their dad put his arms around them, kissing the top of their heads.

"We love you so much, Dad," Ginny said.

"Everything we have is because of you and Mum," Ron added. "Ginny and I are just so bloody lucky to have both. Eh, Ginny?"

"Eh, Ron," she whispered.

"No, your Mum and I are the lucky ones," their dad said, hugging them a little tighter. Ron felt more of the pressure leave his

shoulders as he closed his eyes. It didn't matter what his dad thought of himself, he was still everything Ron wanted to become someday.

* * *

After Ron got dressed the next morning, he walked down to Ginny's room, knocking on the door. It only took a second before Hermione opened it. He let the sight of her grace, confidence, and beauty flow through him, giving him the much needed power that he craved in the morning. "Good morning," she said.

"Morning," he said, taking her hand and guiding her out of the room. "Did you sleep well?"

"It was all right," she said. "How about you?"

He shrugged. "I got by. I missed you though."

"I missed you too," Hermione said, "but I had things to do with your sister." Ron raised an eyebrow; she hit his arm. "You â€" are - vile!"

"What?" he asked, chuckling. "I didn't say anything!"

"You didn't have to," she said. "I know that look."

Ron waved a hand. "Everyone apparently knows all of my buggering looks. Soâ€¦what did you do with my sister?"

"Nothing that concerns you right now, cheeky boy," she said.

Ron grinned mischievously. He laced their fingers together, pulling her into a hug. Ron loved how Hermione had to rise on her feet to nuzzle her nose against his neck.

She pulled away, looking him in the eyes. "I love you."

Ron stared right back into hers. "I know," he said. "I love you too." Since making up, they'd found a time every day to exchange the small phrase while looking deeply into each other's eyes. Ron thought it was necessary. Things between them were mending and growing, but that one confession of love had been a constant since they'd become a couple. Ron needed that to be in the back of their minds always â€" no matter what else happened.

Ron glided his finger over her mouth. Her lips were so soft, and touching them sent sparks all the way to his feet. "Can I kiss you?"

Hermione's face brightened. "I think that would be all right." Ron cupped her cheek, leaning down and pressing his mouth against hers. She tightened her arms around his neck, forcing him to

deepen the kiss. The taste of her mouth caused Ron's knees to weaken. He walked back until Hermione's body hit the wall.

She instantly broke away, putting her forehead to his. "Your after-shower smell is driving me mad again," she said. "I've never been drunk before, but it has to feel like this. I wish I could take your scent with me everywhere."

"You can fuse me to your back and carry me around," Ron said, clutching her hips.

"Great plan! though there are a few flaws we'll have to work out first," Hermione said. She reached under his shirt and traced the faint outline of his abs. Hermione leaned her head back, closing her eyes. Ron only felt it fair to reach under her shirt as well, touching the soft skin of her stomach. "Mmm," she moaned. "I love your hands so much."

"They're yours," Ron said, gliding his finger over her navel.

She opened her eyes. "Always?"

"I won't settle for anything less." He put his forehead to hers again, placing his hand over her necklace. "Not for anything less," he repeated. Hermione put her hand on top of his and merely looked up at him.

Ron heard a throat being cleared. He turned his head toward the noise. "Fancy that - it's 'The Boy Who Lived to Annoy His Best Mates'. You're right on schedule."

Harry walked down the stairs, rolling his eyes. "More like 'The Boy Who Lived to Unfortunately Stumble Upon His Randy Best Mates Day After Day'."

"Mine is less wordy," Ron said.

"Mine is more accurate," Harry said.

Hermione gently pushed Ron away then lowered her shirt. "How about 'Hermione, the Woman Who Wished Ron and Harry Were More Mature'?"

"Mine is still shorter," Ron said with a shrug.

"I don't even want to play this game," Harry said, scratching his head. "I just want some breakfast. I know the three of us are close, but I honestly don't want to develop some sort of horrible curse where I'm just automatically led to wherever you two are going at it."

"Trust me, we don't want that either," Ron said. "Anyway, I reckon you mean 'gift' instead of 'curse'. Nothing involving Hermione and I is a curse."

"Let's just go downstairs," Hermione said, moving off the wall. "We can forget about name titles and curses - at least until after we've had nourishment. Sorry, Harry."

"I'm not," Ron said.

"It's all right," Harry said to Hermione, evidently ignoring Ron.
"How did you sleep last night?"

"It was okay. Thank you," she said with a smile. "I had a peculiar dream about field hockey. Do you want to hear about it?"

"Sounds interesting," Harry said. The two of them began walking down the rest of the staircase, talking about whatever field hockey was. Ron followed behind them, pouting slightly and wanting to trip Harry down the stairs.

His parents and Ginny were already at the table. "Ron, look at what your father got for me," Mrs. Weasley said, holding out her arm so he could see the silver bracelet.

"Isn't the stone lovely, Ron?" Ginny asked with a knowing smile.

Ron took their mum's wrist, pretending to be surprised. "This is nice, Mum. Great work, Dad."

"Isn't your father sweet?" their mum asked, kissing their dad.
"It's gorgeous, Arthur."

"I thought you'd like it, dear," their dad said cheerfully, caressing her cheek.

"I don't usually wear jewelry, and I know we could've used that money for something else," their mum said.

"Molly!" their dad said.

"But," she said, holding up her hands in defense, "I'm still going to wear this everyday."

"Good. I like indulging you, even if it is almost ten years late," Mr. Weasley said. Mrs. Weasley wrapped her arms around his neck, smiling up at him.

Hermione leaned over to Ron. "I really love your parents," she whispered in his ear.

"Me too," he said to her, taking her hand.

"Oh, Ron," Mrs. Weasley said, obviously realizing where she was and letting go of her husband. "A letter came for you this morning." She pulled an envelope out of the side pocket of her apron.

"Lambrick?" Ron and Harry asked together.

"No, nothing yet," she said. "It's from your friend Neville."

"Neville?" Ron asked, taking the letter from him.

"Fantastic. He finally got around to writing to you," Hermione said. "He said that he would."

"I got one from him about a week ago," Harry said. "He's apparently doing well."

"I'm happy for him," Ginny said. "He's been through a lot and he deserves good things."

The last thing he'd expected was to get a letter from Neville, but seeing his handwriting brought back a flood of memories from Ron's days in the dorm at Hogwarts. Ron liked that most of the memories were pleasant. He tore the envelope open and took the letter out.

Hiya Ron,

I know it's been months since we've talked in any sort of way. I apologize for that, mate, but camp has been hell. I'm sure you understand what I mean. I've really been getting my arse kicked over the past few months, but I'm thoroughly enjoying it. It's no worse than what I endured at Hogwarts last year, and these trainers don't scare me nearly as much as Snape used to. Last time I spoke to Hermione, she told me that your holiday from Lambrick was about to start. You and Harry are lucky blokes for getting a holiday. Do you want to know what I did on Christmas? Well, I dueled one of the trainers until I broke my arm. If you're laughing and thinking 'typical Neville' then bugger off. It's the first major bone break I've had since coming here. I reckon I'm getting sharper every day.

Being at Fleming has really taught me things about myself, but it's also enforced feelings that I already had. I'm the only person here who has firsthand experience with battling in a war, and I'm definitely the only one here who was at Hogwarts during it all. So, naturally, people want to know about what happened and how Harry's doing and how I was able to survive. It's strange talking about it in hindsight, however, it's actually rather wicked to describe the things I did with you lot, along with it being embarrassing from time to time. It's not too bad though. I'm proud of everything we accomplished. In case you're wondering, yes, I am glad that I decided to take this route career-wise, but it's still not my passion. As soon as my training is over, I'm going to get a job then quickly settle into the Herbology internship out here in Ireland. I don't care if people think I'm mental - it's the life I want for myself and nothing is going to stop me from pursuing it.

Anyway, the main reason I'm writing to you is because there's something I think I've wanted to tell you for a few years now, but I've never found the time nor the nerve to tell it. Fleming has been teaching me a lot about nerve and how to not let it control you. I reckon this will be a good exercise for that theory.

To start off with, there's a bloke here who's having a rough time. He's really shy, sort of hesitant about his magic, and, well, he's a lot like me, or at least how I was. I talk to him a

lot about not being so scared and believing in himself. It's made me think a lot about my friendship with you. To be honest, Ron, being friends with you wasn't always easy when we were younger. Thinking about it, you remind me a lot of my trainers here; but I appreciate it. I actually want to thank you for the way things were. You kicked my arse, Ron. You made me stand up for myself, and you told me not to take rubbish from people like Snape or Malfoy and his brutes. It was hard. I can admit that now. I always watched you and Harry being tough blokes and I reckon I imitated that until I didn't have to mimic it anymore. I'm certainly not mimicking anything now. I don't mean to sound like a tit, but I know part of the reason why I'm doing all right here is because I had a mate like you to harden me some. My Gran always fussed over me so she rather taught me the opposite. Dean, Seamus, and Harry helped me out too, but you were the only tosser who made me want to ball my fists and punch something (you, most of the time). I hope that doesn't sound like a dickhead thing to say. I mean that as a genuine compliment. Writing is just no good but it's all I've got. Basically, I'm thanking you for not holding my hand through everything. It's something I'm greatly appreciating now.

Well, that's really all I wanted to say to you. I've been thinking a lot about the five of us mates lately and I've known that I've needed to get in touch with you. I'm still going to be here for a few months. I'm sure your training at Lambrick is far from over as well, but after we've got our badges, we should meet up and have a pint. You, me, and Harry can swap camp stories and be impressed with each other's scars. I've got a couple that will twist your broomstick. They're rather brilliant! I'm not sure what Dean and Seamus have planned for when they graduate from Hogwarts, but they should be at the pub with us too. I don't know if they'll have scars to share but, knowing them, they'll at least have good stories.

Write me back only when you've got time, Ron. I know firsthand how busy Auror training can be. Um, let's seeâ€¦ I reckon I want you to tell Ginny I said hello, keep kicking arse with Harry, and be sweet to Hermione. I swear she gets more brilliant every year. So, I look forward to meeting up again. I miss the old lot, but it'll be worth it when we've made it to the end. It's all about the journey. That's something else I've been learning.

Thanks for the help, Ron,

Neville Longbottom

Ron clutched Neville's letter in his hands, reading over the words time and time again and letting the good feeling fill him up. "Ron?" Hermione asked. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," he said. "This wasâ€¦this was everything I needed to hear right now." He handed her the note.

Hermione's eyes zoomed down the page. She put a hand to her chest, beaming as her eyes reached the bottom. "Oh, Ron, this is beautiful. Neville really admires you."

"I used to be the person he's talking about," Ron said.

"You still are," she said, rubbing his arm. "You're even more than that now. You should keep this with you, Ron."

"It's not going anywhere," he said, folding it and placing it in his pocket.

There was a knock at the kitchen door. Ginny opened it to reveal Percy. "Percy," their dad said. "I thought you had to work today."

"I am working," Percy said rather energetically and with a flushed face. "I took an extended break period to come here."

"Is something wrong?" their mum asked, instantly holding Mr. Weasley's hand.

"No, Mum, it's not like that," Percy said. He took his glasses off, wiping his forehead with the back of his sleeve. The bloke was genuinely sweating.

"Well, why don't you sit down and tell us all about it, Percy," Ginny said, pulling out a chair for him.

He shook his head. "Can't sit down. This isn't about me. It's about Ron and Harry."

"What about us?" Harry asked, sharing a look with Ron.

"Yeahâ€œ;are we in trouble?" Ron asked. Hermione's hand gripped his knee; he put his hand over hers.

"No," Percy said with a smile. He leaned against the kitchen door. "Here's the situation: Audrey interacts with many different departments, as do I, so we're able to keep each other informed. As it turns out—"

"You're rambling, son," their dad said.

Percy cleared his throat. "Right. I'll get to the point. She heard from someone in the Auror Department that Lambrick was sending out their letters this morning. I spoke to Kingsley and he was able to slip me these." He reached into his cloak, taking out two envelopes. They were white with gold swirls. Ron's heart skipped a few beats as his breathing staggered.

"Isâ€œ;is that what I think it is?" Harry asked faintly.

Percy nodded, looking smug. "Yes. It's your letter from Lambrick. They're being sent to all the trainees this morning. Here is yours." He handed one to Harry. "And yours, Ron."

Ron looked at the envelope in Percy's freckled hand. For whatever reason, he couldn't move his arm to grab it. "Thank you," Hermione said, taking the envelope for him.

"Percy?" Mrs. Weasley said. "You were allowed to take these?"

Percy blushed a deeper red. "Without a doubt, Mum. Kingsley wouldn't have given them to me if couldn't. I checked over the distribution schedule twice. Ron and Harry are getting their letters at the same time as everyone else. I haven't opened them or altered them in any way. I just figured that they'd want them as soon as they could get them. I'm sorry if I--"

"No, don't apologize," Harry said. "This is what we've been waiting for. Thank you."

"Yeahâ€;" was all Ron could say. He was still staring at the gold swirls on the envelope. He'd been imagining what this moment would be like for twelve days, but nothing had prepared him for the intense nervousness and madness that he was feeling now. Ron was so dizzy that his head didn't feel connected to the rest of his body. As he stared at the swirls, Ron suddenly didn't want Lambrick to exist or for the letters to be real; he just wanted to run up to his room. Ron wouldn't though. He was scared and the situation was difficult to swallow, but that was exactly why he would stay in his chair.

"You two obviously don't have to open them right now," Mrs. Weasley said.

"I am," Harry said.

"Harry," Ginny said.

"What?" He looked around at everyone. "I'm sorry. I'm really nervous but I've been waiting twelve days for this. No matter what happens, tomorrow is the thirteenth day. I need to know if I should get to bed early or if I should start looking into other camps." Harry started to open his letter with shaky hands. He looked up at Ron. "Ron?"

"Potter comes before Weasley, mate," Ron said weakly. Harry continued to open his letter as Ron simply stared at him in awe. Harry Potter would always be the bravest person that Ron knew.

Harry took out the letter, breathing unsteadily as he unfolded the parchment. Hermione gripped Ron's hand as the room went silent. Harry began reading his letter. Ron wished that he could see through the parchment or that Harry wasn't so great at being stoic. His green eyes finally reached the bottom and he swallowed hard. Harry frowned, letting out another breath. "Babe?" Ginny asked.

Harry looked at her as if he was lost. Then, abruptly, he grabbed Ginny's face, kissing her harder than Ron had ever seen. Ginny squeaked but then rather melted against his lips. Harry eventually let her go, his face flushing a deep red. He looked at everyone before settling his eyes on Ron. Harry nodded, smiling. "I got my extension. I'm going back."

Mrs. Weasley screamed then yanked Harry out of his seat. She gave him a bone-crushing hug, kissing his cheek. "Oh, Harry, sweetheart! I'm so proud of you!"

"Congratulations, Harry! Splendid work," Mr. Weasley said. Everyone took his or her turn hugging and congratulating Harry.

Hermione gave Harry a big hug, kissing all over his cheeks and forehead. "I'm so proud of you, Harry! I knew you could do it. Oh, this is so wonderful."

"Thank you, Hermione - and everyone," Harry said, looking truly overwhelmed.

Ron was the only one who hadn't gotten up. He was more than proud and happy for his best mate, but his legs honestly couldn't move. "Fantastic work, mate," Ron said. "Richard would've been daft if he hadn't told Phillip that you should return. They need you there."

"Thanks." Harry sat back down. He read over his letter again. Ron's heart beat for Harry in this moment. His mate seemed so much younger and more carefree than he had in ages. There wasn't reluctance in his smile, nor a history of pain, evil, and blood behind his eyes. Harry looked truly happy and normal. Ron only wished that he could give Harry an extension letter everyday so he'd stay that way. "I can't believe this is real," Harry said.

"Yes, you can," Ginny said, kissing his ear. "You were born to be an Auror, love. Of course they'd want you back. I'm so proud of you."

Ron's palms began to itch so badly that they burned. His letter was smirking up at him on the table. The congratulations and praises died, and the room got quiet again. Ron was focused on the swirls, but he knew that everyone was staring at him. He rubbed his neck. "Um, I reckon it would be stupid if I didn't open mine now, eh?"

"Don't feel pressured into doing it," Hermione said.

"It's a little late for that," Ron mumbled.

"I'm sorry, Ron, but I had to know. You don't have to open yours," Harry said.

Ron looked around at everyone. These people were his family and best friends. They wouldn't care either way. They would love him no matter what. He slowly reached out, picking up the letter. He knew he was mental, but the envelope was so heavy that Ron could barely hold it. Everyone else would still be proud of him, but Ron didn't know if he would be. He stared at the handwriting on the envelope. It was Phillip's. All of a sudden, Ron felt sick for ever thinking that he couldn't go back and for trying to forget about his experiences at Lambrick. A wave of memories from his months at camp swelled in his body, and he couldn't believe that he'd ever been ready to give them all up. Lambrick was what Ron wanted, needed, and had to have. If they turned him down, then his path would be erased. His heart started to beat faster and he was finding it a bit hard to breath.

"Ron," Hermione said. He turned to her. She nodded, rubbing his thigh. "It's okay. Do you want to go into the next room? I can go with you."

"Yes, son - you don't have to open this here and now," Mr. Weasley said.

Ron opened his mouth to tell them yes, but then he looked at Mr. Smith's handwriting again. For whatever reason, it made Ron think about how Phillip probably would've liked George as a trainee because he was strong, brave, and blunt. George had told their whole family about the drastic change he'd wanted to take in his life. He hadn't faulted or cowered away. Ron closed his eyes for a moment, thinking about his brother. The more he thought about George, the stronger he felt. He could do this. He had talked about sex with Mr. Granger, stayed by his brother's side at a cemetery, and found his way back to Hermione. This was just a letter. It couldn't defeat him.

"No, I'm fine," Ron said. He didn't give himself time to think. He quickly ripped the envelope open, taking out the letter before the sickness in his stomach could rise.

Dear Ronald Bilius Weasley,

The staff and I at Lambrick Academy have reviewed and discussed the field examinations and individual records of all trainees currently enrolled in the Auror training program. After much deliberation and assessment of your enrollment, I am pleased to inform you that you have been granted an extension and have progressed to the merging stage of the program. Tomorrow, you and the other accepted young men and women will return to Lambrick Academy and will begin the second half of the program where you will continue the educational and vigorous training that has kept Lambrick one of the top Auror Training Institutions in the United Kingdom for over one hundred years.

Attached to this letter, please find the following:

1. The date and time you need to arrive to our training facility
2. A Muggle train and/or bus ticket that has been personalized to your current location
3. Instructions on where to go upon your arrival
4. An updated list of required items necessary for the remainder of your training

Any trainee not present at the specified time without just cause will be automatically withdrawn from the program. If you have decided to discontinue your participation in the program or if you need further explanations or accommodations, please respond to this letter immediately. I will be more than happy to answer any questions, and I urge you to prepare yourself for tomorrow's return.

Congratulations, and welcome back to Lambrick Academy.

Sincerely,

Phillip Smith

President of Lambrick Auror Training Academy

Veteran Auror

Senior Advisor

Ron wheezed as he read the last sentence over and over again. Everything around him faded; he couldn't even feel the chair he was sitting on. Ron was simply eyeballs and a hand holding his extension letter. Phillip was asking him to return. Alan and Richard hadn't convinced Phillip to chuck him in a bin. Ron would return to the place that made him feel lower than dung but stronger than a bolt of lightening all at the same time. He had fought so hard, had made so many mistakes, and had shed so much blood and tears at Lambrick. Now, he was being granted an opportunity to improve. Ron's dream was alive, and he was one step closer to achieving it. He gazed at Phillip's signature. Phillip Smith wanted him back. Ron hadn't disappointed him or Alan enough to make them stop believing in him. No one had apparently stopped believing in him just because of his panic attacks.

At the realization, something heavy and powerful came over Ron; a fiery ball burst in his throat. His vision became blurry. Ron covered his face, rocking as the tears he had been holding back for twelve days finally came out. They were the tears of everything that had happened the night of his exam and all the pain he had endured; of everything he had experienced over his holiday. It all intertwined, morphing into something fierce. It was all so much but it all felt so good. Ron wanted to bathe in the pleasurable feeling and rub it all over his body. It was something so intense and foreign that he could barely recognize it. What Ron was feeling was pride.

Ron finally sniffled, rubbing his eyes. Everyone was staring at him but, for once, Ron didn't mind if they saw him cry. He looked at his parents, siblings, and Harry before turning to Hermione. He locked his gaze onto her brown eyes.

"Iâ€œ;I made it to the merge," he said to her in barely a whisper.

* * *

**** :) - This is really all I have to sum up my feelings for this chapter. If it felt short(ER) hmmm I wonder why that could be...? hehe. Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 44*: Stripped

I'm SO, SO sorry for the delay. I've had a few of my own "Turned to Real Life" moments lately but I'm back!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

"I've made it to the merge," Ron said again. He couldn't believe what he was saying nor the words in his letter. His mum gave another shriek of excitement but Ron could barely hear her over his own thoughts of shock and happiness. He then turned to Harry. "I've been granted an extension, Harry. I'm going back with you. I made it."

The phrase 'made it' caused more emotion to come out of Ron. He suddenly had feeling in his legs. Ron clumsily got up from the table, showing the letter to his parents.

"Mum, Dad, look," he said in a nasally voice. "I made it." His dad took the letter, reading over it whereas his mum's eyes swelled with tears.

"I'm so, so proud of you, sweetheart. I'm so proud of my baby!" She pulled him into a hug. His dad was quick to join in.

"This is incredible, Ron," his dad said. "We're so bloody happy for you and so very proud." Ron shut his eyes, letting them squeeze the air right out of him before they pulled away. Both of his parents looked at him as if he'd done something amazing. Ron knew that he had.

He looked at Percy. "Percy!"

"Congratulations, Ron," Percy said, pulling him into a hug. "This is excellent news the best, really."

Ron gripped Percy's shoulder then let go. He didn't know how much longer he could stand. Ginny got up from her seat, dabbing under her eyes. "You're amazing, big brother," she said.

"Thank you," he whispered. Ron couldn't help but to believe her words. He'd made it to the merge.

Ginny kissed his cheek before pulling him into a hug. "You're amazing," she repeated.

Ron could only nod as he slowly tried to walk back to his seat. His parents and siblings were talking and cheering, but he couldn't really focus.

Harry and Hermione were standing by Ron's chair. Harry smirked. "I told you, Ron. I told you from day one that Lambrick needs you. I'm so proud of you, mate."

"We're going back, Harry," Ron said. "I reckon they haven't found a way to split us up yet."

"I'd like to see them try." Harry held out his hand.

Ron rolled his eyes. "That's a bit too formal for this." He yanked on Harry's arm, hauling him into a hug.

Harry chuckled, patting his back. "Congratulations, mate."

"Congratulations, Harry," Ron said. He let Harry go, wiping his eyes that wouldn't stop leaking. "Fucking bloody hell. Oh ä€ sorry, Mum."

"I'll allow that language right now. You've earned it," Mrs. Weasley said. "Oh, this is so fantastic! We have to do something."

"They leave tomorrow, Molly," Mr. Weasley said.

"Come here, Harry," Ginny said, pulling Harry close and kissing him. People started talking and moving again, but Ron's focus was on Hermione. She was simply gazing at him.

Ron nudged his head; Hermione followed him out of the kitchen. He leaned against the wall while Hermione wrapped her arms around his stomach. He draped his around her shoulders, holding her tightly. He swayed with her, closing his eyes and letting the powerful feeling of pride inflate his chest. "I made it," he said.

"You did," she said. "Saying I'm proud of you isn't enough. Saying I love you isn't either, but it's all I have. I am so very proud of you, and I love you." She looked up at him, smiling with glistening eyes. "Ginny is right: you're amazing. Harry's right too: Lambrick needs you. Oh god, you're everything."

Ron cupped her chin, lifting it so he could kiss her. He let all of his emotions flow into her body, mixing with hers before returning to his body.

Ron kissed Hermione deeper, moaning and loving how warm and inviting her mouth was. He pulled away before the dizziness became too much.

"I made it." It was such a small, unassuming phrase, but it was his future now.

"I know," Hermione said against his mouth.

"They want me back."

"Of course they do."

"I'm proud of myself."

"So am I. So is everyone here," Hermione said.

Ron tangled his fingers in her hair, kissing her again. "Mmm," he moaned. "I want you so badly. I feel really bloody good right now. I know that having you will just enhance everything I'm feeling."

"Ron!"

"I can't help it," he rushed. "I'm so bloody excited right now. Let me take you right here...against this wall."

"Oh, Ron," Hermione whimpered, tugging on the collar of his shirt.

"Ron!" Mrs. Weasley called. Hearing his mum's voice caused some of the blinding lust to seep out of his body. Hermione pulled away from him, opening her eyes and wiping her mouth. More of Ron's senses slowly came back. He remembered where he was and realized that fucking Hermione against the wall probably wasn't the best idea right now.

Ron pulled down his shirt, trying his best to walk normally back into the kitchen with Hermione. Everyone was grinning at them.

"Hate to interrupt," his mum said, still wiping tears from her eyes, "but this obviously calls for a celebration! I know we just had breakfast but we need to do something for you two. We're all so proud of you both. We should celebrate while we can."

"Actually, Mum and Dad, can Hermione and I talk to you?" Ginny asked. She gave Hermione a look that Ron didn't understand.

"Right. Excellent, Ginny," Hermione said, nodding. "We should talk in private."

"Okay," Mrs. Weasley said, looking between them.

The four of them left the kitchen but Ron was too hot, too excited, and too zonked to think clearly to be curious as to what they were up to.

"This is outstanding you two," Percy said. "This is such a great honor."

"Thank you for bringing the letters, Percy," Harry said.

"I need some air," Ron quickly said.

He got up from the table, almost running out of the kitchen door. The cold, crisp winter air hit Ron's body with a pleasurable force. He'd been finding it difficult to breathe in his house, but now fresh air expanded his lungs. Ron placed his hands on his thighs, attempting not to shake or burst into tears. The door opened again.

"How are you doing, Ron?" Percy asked.

"Iâ€;I honestly don't know," Ron said. He hung his head for a moment. "Fucking thank you for bringing me my letter."

"It was my pleasure," he said. "It's not all I brought you though." He reached inside his pocket, taking out two small black journals bundled together. "I thought you might need these."

Seeing the journals made Ron's fingers itch. He greedily took them. "You bought them already?"

"Awhile back," Percy said nonchalantly. "I knew you'd make it, Ron. This is your 'one thing'. I actually had more confidence that you'd get in before Harry. Don't ask me why â€“ maybe I'm biased."

Ron chuckled. "Your secret is safe with me."

Percy smiled, patting his arm. "I hate to do this, but I really have to get back to work. I'm late enough as it is. I just had to do this now."

"You? Late?" Ron asked.

"There's a first time for everything," Percy said, straightening his cloak, though it was already perfect. "In any case, seeing your face in this moment is worth it." He gave Ron a hug.
"Congratulations, Ron. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, Percy. Thank you for the journals too," Ron said hugging him back. "I'll fill them up."

"That's what I want to hear," Percy said. "So if I don't see you again tonight, please, stop by the Ministry tomorrow before you go."

"I will," Ron said. Percy gave him another smile, then quickly walked the dirt path.

Ron stood and watched his brother, giving himself a few moments to love Percy dearly because of his persistence. He eventually went back inside. Ron sat next to Hermione and was surprised when she sat in his lap, holding him closely. He laid his head against her chest.

"So what's the plan?" Ron asked.

"We're going to do a nice big brunch tomorrow morning," Mrs. Weasley said. "It'll just be the six of us most likely, but it'll still be nice. I just hope we have time."

"According to the time on our train tickets," Harry said, looking through the supplement sheets that came with their letters, "we don't go back until tomorrow evening."

"Oh, why did they wait until the day before?" Mrs. Weasley asked, rubbing her brow.

"To keep everyone on their toes," Mr. Weasley said. "An Auror's schedule is never certain. You always have to be ready to go."

"Well, we need to go through the lists and see what I need to pick up from the shops," Mrs. Weasley said. "How about packing? Have you boys started?"

"I've been packed for three days," Harry said. Everyone looked at him. He shrugged. "What?" he mumbled. "I wanted to be prepared."

"I haven't packed anything," Ron said. He didn't know what was wrong with him. Ron had thought about going back to Lambrick, but not once had he thought about what he would have to do if he'd actually been accepted. Concepts such as 'repack' and 'restock' had never seemed like things to consider.

"Then go through your belongings and please make a list for me," Mrs. Weasley said. "We don't have much time."

"Why not?" Harry asked.

"Don't worry about it," Ginny said.

Ron looked through his lists of materials. "All right, I understand most of the things on this list, but why do we suddenly need to bring our dress robes and grooming supplies?"

"Grooming supplies?" Hermione asked, looking at his list.

"Yeah, it says 'proper dress robes and grooming supplies'," Ron said, pointing to the sentence.

"Maybe you're going to learn how to dance?" Ginny proposed.
"Maybe it's an important Auror thing."

"With eight blokes to every one girl?" Harry asked.

"We don't know who made it, Harry," Ron said. "There's definitely going to be less guys, and who knows aboutâ€;yeahâ€;" He couldn't finish his statement. Not only had he not thought about packing lately, but he also hadn't thought about who would make it to the merge with him.

"Curious," Hermione said, somewhat stiffly, "I guess you'll find out soon enough why you'll need to properly groom." Ron looked up at her. She was holding her necklace, almost glaring at his list of supplies.

The rest of Ron's morning and most of the afternoon went by in a frenzy. He and Harry went over all the things they would need while Ron also repacked his trunk and bags. He was still overwhelmed by the heavy emotion; as real as it all was, Ron almost couldn't believe it. Folding his worn training clothes into his trunk didn't quite feel real. Tossing his running trainers back into his bag didn't seem a part of his reality either. Ron pulled Neville's letter out of his back pocket, smiling. He put it between the first two pages of his old tactics

journal. Ron definitely wanted to take it with him and would probably need it now more than ever.

"It's great to see you packing so fast," Harry said out of nowhere.

"Why?" Ron asked, searching around his room for more underwear.

"After everything that's happened, it's nice to see you excited about camp again," Harry said.

Ron sat on his bed, looking at Harry who was across from him on the cot. He understood what Harry meant. Just yesterday, Ron had needed a last bit of validation from his dad to let him know that leaving would be okay. Now, the mere thought of resisting what was in his extension letter made Ron want to throw up.

"Honestly," Ron said, "reading that letter was like nothing I've ever experienced before. It's too much to think about; reading Phillip's words, feeling that happiness, then throwing it away." He rubbed his neck. "It's like I forgot everything that made Lambrick so great, but just reading that letter brought it all back. Thank you, Harry."

"For what?" he asked.

"For being a fucker and never being nice about my decision to stay here," Ron said.

"In this case, I will gladly be a fucker." Harry laughed before getting up and sitting next to him. "We're going back, Ron."

"I know, mate," Ron said excitedly.

"Aww, aren't our little Aurors so sweet?" Ginny asked as she and Hermione came into the room.

"How's the packing coming along?" Hermione asked.

"I'm about finished," Ron said.

"Excellent, because I'm going to need you and Harry to finish up here, then shower and get changed," Hermione said.

"Not necessarily together," Ginny cheeked.

"Why?" Harry asked. "What aren't you two telling us?"

Ginny looked at Hermione. Hermione nodded, clearing her throat. "Before I left Hogwarts for the holiday, I devised a specialâ€¢ double-date night, if you will, for the four of us. Ginny and I have been putting the finishing touches on it over the past couple of days."

Ron and Harry shared an incredulous look. "Okayâ€¢!" they said slowly. A double-date night sounded all right, but what Ron really wanted to do with Hermione was something he couldn't perform in front of his sister and best mate.

"What do you need us to do?" Harry asked.

"Just finish packing, no rush," Hermione said.

"Neither of you are going to tell us what's going on, are you?" Harry asked, looking between them.

Ginny shook her head. "No fun that way. Hermione?"

"Yes, we should get things together." Hermione kissed both Ron and Harry on the tops of their heads. "I'm so proud of you two." She and Ginny both giggled mischievously then left the room.

Ron rubbed his neck, feeling horribly confused. "What just happened?"

"I dunno," Harry said. "Knowing those two, a double-date could be anything."

Ron and Harry continued to pack, contemplating what activities they could be participating in soon and sharing their thoughts as to why they would need dress robes at Lambrick.

As Ron tried to find space in his trunk, he took out his Quidditch magazine, gazing at it for a moment. He thought about Olivia and Conor and what their letters had said, but quickly shook his head. Ron could save all those ideas for the train ride back tomorrow.

While his mum and dad were out getting his and Harry's bits that they'd need for their return to camp, Ron took the opportunity to write to his brothers. The more he wrote about his entrance to the merging stage, the more real Lambrick became. Ron wrote to George, thanking him repeatedly for telling him to go back. He didn't know when he would see his brother again; it scared him a little. Ron told himself though that they would both be better when they met up again.

When it was Ron's turn in the shower, he put a silencing charm on the room before stepping under the hot water. He was finally alone - finally able to let his fiery energy out. Ron lowered his head, allowing the water to splash against his scalp first. He would soon return to quick, cold showers. He would go back to having no free time or proper meat seasoning, and would once again be woken up by Alan's whistle, forcing himself to push until his legs were moments away from breaking. Yes, Ron had made it to the merge and back to this way of life. He was one of the more skillful and promising trainees at camp. For twelve days he hadn't been sure of where his place was in the world. As a brother, friend, son, and boyfriend, Ron had struggled and been so unsure. Little did he know that his place as a trainee at Lambrick Academy had been secure. It was almost too ridiculous for him to accept, but it also felt so fucking good.

Ron leaned his head against the wall, allowing the pleasure of the water and of his acceptance to flood through him. He moaned as his hand unconsciously found his stiff muscle. Panting deeply,

he let himself be loud as he surrendered to the pressure and groaned longingly when the tension eventually released from him. Ron opened his eyes, grinning like a prat. He felt wicked and calm, but also slightly annoyed that he would have to back to wanking in the dead of night when everyone was asleep.

It wasn't until the early evening that Hermione and Ginny came back up to Ron's room to take them out. After receiving another tight squeeze from his parents, Ron, Hermione, Harry, and Ginny left the Burrow.

"Why are we out here? Where are we going?" Ron asked.

Hermione took his hand. "Follow me, love."

They went out into the field where Ron saw Hermione's small red car. It made him think back to their first real date when Hermione had taken him out into the Muggle world. The girls were silent as the four of them got in.

"Where are we going, 'Mione?" Ron asked for what had to be the twenty-fourth time.

"You'll see, Ron," Hermione said. "Trust me." She adjusted her mirror, looking to the backseat and at Harry and Ginny. "Are you two all right back there?"

"Brilliant," Harry said. "I've never seen you drive before. This should be good."

"It's going to be hard to keep your eyes on the road, Harry," Ginny said.

"Why?" he asked with a shrug.

Ginny placed her hands on his cheeks. "Because we're a Muggle couple tonight, and from what I understand, Muggles snog in the backseats of their cars."

"You cheeky woman," Harry said, licking his lips.

"Come and get me, Mr. Auror," Ginny said. She plastered her face to Harry then the two started kissing heavily.

Ron honked Hermione's horn. "Oi! You're not the only ones in this car!"

"Oh, let them have their fun," Hermione said. "I think they've earned it."

"Butâ€;but we haven't even snogged in the backseat," he said, "and this is your bloody car." He opened his mouth again but heard a horrible giggle from Ginny. Ron refused to look at what was happening.

Hermione cleared her throat, leaning over to him. "Trust me, you'll forget all about this later."

"Yeah?" Ron asked softly. Hermione nodded, winking at him. "All right, I'll trust you." Ron put on his seatbelt before turning up the volume on the car radio to drown out the disgusting sounds that Ginny and Harry were making. He kept shifting his vision from Hermione to the darkening streets, loving how beautiful both of them were.

The first place the four of them went to was some sort of Italian restaurant. Ron ordered spaghetti with extra meatballs and laughed as he attempted to feed Hermione one of the large wads of meat. Harry and Ginny took the Mickey out of them but Ron enjoyed cleaning Hermione's mouth with a napkin as she gazed at him fixatedly.

While they ate, Hermione and Harry tried as discreetly as they could to explain the Muggle tools and items around them. Ron and Ginny were both in awe as they watched someone from the next table use a form of medicine called an inhaler. It was a genius concept and convinced him even more that Muggles were smarter and more inventive than wizards in a lot of ways. When they weren't discussing Muggle trinkets, the four of them talked about Lambrick. For the first time, Ron wasn't hesitant. The three people around him knew what the place was capable of turning him into, but they all seemed to believe in him completely. He had, for whatever reason, been granted a second chance at Lambrick. Ron didn't want to disrespect the opportunity already by not being open about the place.

After their dessert, Hermione took them to a place that Ron recognized. His heart skipped a beat in anticipation as they pulled up to a large building that was busy with people.

"I haven't been to the cinema since I was eight or so," Harry said. "It was for Dudley's birthday; I didn't even get any popcorn."

"Well, you're not with that twat tonight, Harry," Ginny said, getting out and taking his hand. "You can have all the popcorn you want. That stuff tastes good, right?"

"You get used to it," Ron said. "What are we seeing? Willy Wonka again?"

"No," Hermione said, taking a newspaper out of her purse. "Let's go inside."

They walked into the lobby of the cinema. Ron glanced at the picture booth. His body warmed over and he looked at Hermione, giving her a secret smile.

"I took it with me, you know," he said. "I kept it right next to my bed."

"I took mine with me to Hogwarts," Hermione said, smiling as well. "I looked at it every day."

"Looked at what?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," Hermione said, shaking her head. "So the movie we're seeing tonight is called *Titanic*. It came out last Christmas but they're reviving it this year for the holiday season. It was a major blockbuster and the main actors, Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, are apparently very good."

"*Titanic*?" Harry asked. "Is it about the actual one? Waitâ€¢is this a documentary?"

"Yes and no," Hermione said. "My mum and dad told me a little about the film. It's supposed to be historical, so it'll be somewhat educational, but it sounds as if it's mostly dramatized and is more of a love story."

"Love story?" Harry groaned.

"Don't worry," Hermione said, waving a hand. "It's supposed to have a lot of action and people screaming in it, so you boys should be kept entertained."

"Excuse my ignorance," Ron said, raising his hand, "but I don't know who Leonardo and Kate are or why people will be screaming if this is a love story."

"Yeah, what's a *Titanic*?" Ginny asked, crinkling her nose. "Some sort of instrument?"

Harry covered his mouth as he snorted. "We're dating pure-bloods, Hermione. You have to remember that."

Hermione rubbed her temple. "That's right. I honestly forgot how thick the barrier is sometimes. I bet they can name the original twelve goblins who fought in the Kuvand Duel of 1214, but they don't know who lost the American Revolutionary War."

"The what?" Ron asked.

"The war that ended with America becoming its own free nation. That would be our country who lost, Ron," Harry said. "Inâ€¢1783 or something, right?"

Hermione beamed at him. "Harry!"

He shrugged. "I paid attentionâ€¢sometimes."

She gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I'm impressed."

"Oi, this isn't exactly fair!" Ron said, pushing Harry away from her. "Ginny and I can't help where we come from."

"Yeah, and besides, I can only name about eight of those goblins," Ginny said.

"It's not important, Ginny," Harry said, putting an arm around her. "All you and Ron need to know is that the movie we're seeing is based on a really big ship that sank in the early 1900s. Can we just get our popcorn and find out how this thing is, Hermione?"

"Sure. I'll get our tickets," Hermione said.

Their theater was relatively empty so the four of them were able to get great seats right in the middle. Ron sat between Hermione and Harry, continuously asking why people did the things they did. The movie wasn't nearly as funny or entertaining as Willy Wonka, but it had its moments. He hadn't expected the main actress to get naked or the main actor to die.

When the movie was over, Ron left the cinema feeling relatively sad, embarrassed, and enraged by how the lower class people had been treated. If his family had been on the ship then they would've all drowned while people like the Malfoys got life vests and made it to safety.

"What did you think?" Hermione asked, sniffling. The tip of her nose was pink. Ron had found Hermione adorable when she'd tried so hard not to cry as Jack sank to the bottom of the ocean, leaving Rose forever.

"It was too emotional," Harry said indifferently, "and too bloody long."

"I just can't believe that was a real thing that happened," Ron said, shaking his head. "Falling into that water must've instantly frozen your bollocks into 'bollock-icicles'."

"I found the film rather romantic," Hermione said, pointing out her chin. "Still, it wasn't as historical as I thought it would be, and I didn't buy the idea that Rose could close her eyes and not chop Jack's whole arm off with that axe."

"I was hoping she would've," Ron said with a laugh.

"Me too," Harry said, nudging Ron's arm and snickering as well. "That would've made the movie more interesting - Jack running around with a nub."

"A bloody nub," Ron corrected.

"What did my head in was her throwing the necklace into the ocean at the end," Ginny said. "That was thick. I also don't understand why Rose had to take her tits out. She was the only person in that whole movie to get naked. I don't think it was a coincidence that she was ginger. What do you think?"

"I understand your point," Hermione said. "Boys?"

Ron blushed as he turned to Harry. He rubbed his neck while Harry fiddled with his coat sleeve. "Wellâ€!" Ron began.

"Yeah...we - we weren't really complaining about that bit," Harry said. "I meanâ€! it was art, yeah?"

"Exactly," Ron piped up. "Rose was simplyâ€!using her body as a vessel for Jack to express his gift. It was artistic and tasteful."

"And probably the best part of that whole film," Harry quickly muttered.

Hermione and Ginny gasped before hitting their arms, lecturing Ron and Harry about sexism. The girls eventually stopped when their arms got tired. Hermione exhaled deeply, brushing her hair off her shoulders. "All right, I think Ginny and I have made our point. We can move on to the next activity."

"You're still not going to tell us anything, are you?" Harry asked.

"No, Mr. Artistic," Ginny mumbled, crossing her arms over her chest.

Harry gave her a look. "Are you upset?"

"Don't flatter yourself," Ginny said, turning her face away from him. "I just think I should remind you that she isn't the only ginger woman in the world with tits."

"Aww, now you're just being bloody precious," Harry teased. "You know that there's only one pair of ginger tits I care about."

"Can you not say 'ginger tits'?" Ron asked. "It sounds weird, and it's making my stomach hurt."

Harry wrapped an arm around Ginny's waist. "Hermione, what's happening now?" Ron ate the last bit of popcorn out of his tub then sucked the butter off his fingers and bottom lip. He looked up to find Hermione staring at him almost manically.

"Hermione?" Harry asked.

Hermione blinked several times, shaking her head. "Oh, I'm so sorry. It's only that Ron just did something really incredible with his mouth. I momentarily lost focus."

"Yuck!" Ginny groaned. "Do you have to say things like that?"

Hermione pointed out her chin again but didn't look embarrassed this time. "I can't exactly help it, Ginny. Your brother is the sexiest thing to walk the Earth or any planet for that matter. I guess, as you lot always say, he 'does my head in'."

Ron smirked at Hermione, taking her hand. "I can do in other parts that you have, if you want me to."

"That's it," Harry said. "I'm going to the car." He took Ginny's hand, walking off.

Hermione appeared smug. "Ha. I think that frightened them more than the movie did."

"They deserve it," Ron said, kissing her. "Are you mad too? Because I'm not really into gingers' tits!"

She laughed. "So what kind are you into?"

"Yours," he said smoothly.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "How charming."

"It's a gift."

The couple soon joined Harry and Ginny in the car, and Hermione drove them away. It was late now and Ron couldn't think of any other activity the four of them could do together in the Muggle world.

"Last stop," Hermione said.

It was another building that Ron recognized: a hotel. "What are we doing here?" he asked.

"What do you think, Ron?" Ginny asked. "We're staying here for the night."

"But I didn't bring any clothes," Harry said.

"Yes you did," Ginny said. Hermione opened the boot and took out two bags. Ginny shoved one against Harry's chest. "All packed. Here's yours, Ron."

Ron was confused as he caught his bag, opening it and seeing his clothes inside. "What in the bloody hell?"

"I told you," Hermione said, "Ginny and I have been going over details for a few days. It's all worked out: we've got your clothes, we booked two rooms next to each other, and everything is paid for."

"But—"

"Let's just go inside," Ginny said.

Ron and Harry once again shared a look but decided not to test their girlfriends any further. The hotel wasn't very big but their rooms were on a high enough floor that they needed to use a Muggle lift to get there. After Harry showed Ron how the buttons worked, he pushed almost all of them. Before Ron could push a large red button that said 'Do Not Press', Hermione snatched his hand away. Soon, the door opened to their floor.

"What's that?" Ginny asked as they passed a large see-through box that had different types of sweets lined up inside.

"It's a vending machine," Harry said. "You put money in it, push the button that corresponds to the item you want, and the machine drops it down that slot there."

"What?" Ron asked. "Show us."

"I'll do it," Hermione said. She took coins out of her purse, putting them into the machine. She pushed a button and, sure

enough, the machine moved and the thing holding the candy bar dropped it.

Ron and Ginny looked at each other, bursting into laughter.

"That's brilliant!" Ginny said.

"It's just like magic," Ron said.

"It's called technology," Hermione said, tossing the candy bar to Ron. "Come on, Harry and I should show you how to use the room keys."

Once Ron and Ginny had perfected the art of using the cards to get into their rooms, the couples went into their separate rooms to unpack their things, then settled in Ron and Hermione's room for awhile to watch television.

Ron sat on the bed with Hermione between his legs while Harry and Ginny sat on the floor. The four of them talked over the program they watched, once again about anything and everything that they could. Ron took in every bit of conversation and animation from his friends and sister. There was no longer any time to ponder what their final day together would feel like, because it was here. Ron and Harry were leaving the next day for Lambrick. The four of them were a team, but soon they would be broken up. The longer Ron enjoyed this amazing day with Hermione, Ginny, and Harry, the less he felt ready to go back to Lambrick.

When Ginny started to repeatedly fake yawn, she and Harry left for their room. Ron knew what they would be up to all night, but he tried not to think about it. The task became easier once Hermione pulled a bowl of peach slices from her bag. After putting a silencing charm around their room, the two ate one after the other on their bed, giving each other suggestive eyes as juice dripped down their chins and fingers. "Last one," Ron said as he took the final slice out of the bowl.

"You can have it," Hermione said.

"We can share." He put an end in his mouth. "'ere," he said as best as he could, "tayg dah udder inn."

Hermione tilted her head to the side. "Is it strange that I understood that?"

She crawled up, putting her hands on either side of his waist and smirking before she put the other end of the peach into her mouth. They kept their eyes opened. Ron raised an eyebrow as he bit his end off, making sure to kiss her before he pulled away completely.

Hermione blushed, chewing her end. She put a hand over her mouth. "Very smooth."

"I reckon I'm an expert at this sort of thing," he said.

"I'm not surprised," she said. "Anything involving food and your mouth has to come naturally to you."

"Blimey - another brilliant line from Hermione Granger." He lightly kicked her thigh as she took her spot back between his legs. She lay on his stomach, resting her elbows on either side of his waist. Hermione lifted his shirt, tickling him. He sniggered like a prat. "'Mione!"

"What's the matter?" she asked innocently.

Hermione lifted his shirt again and Ron automatically reached out. This time though, she didn't tickle him. She pressed her lips against his stomach, kissing his navel. The simple, sensual touch caused Ron to shiver. Hermione kept her eyes on him as she kissed his stomach, grinning as her tongue lightly traced slick patterns around his freckles. It felt unbelievable. Then again, everything about their day together had been unbelievable. Ron could hardly believe that earlier that day had wanted to simply shag her against a wall. The idea was almost laughable now. Nothing compared to this.

Hermione stopped, leaving one last kiss right above the button of his trousers. "Did you like that?"

He opened his mouth but only a squeaky whimper came out. Ron cleared his throat. "Y-yeah."

"Good." She sat up, taking one of his hands. "At least you've been able to enjoy something tonight. I didn't think Titanic would turn out like that."

"It was all right, Hermione," Ron said. "Just really bloody sad, is all."

"I think we were more moved by it than Harry and Ginny were," she said.

"That's because they're prats," Ron said.

"I think I'll side with you this time," she said. "I mean, what Jack did for Rose was astounding. Don't you think so?"

"I do," he said.

Hermione looked away, almost shyly. "You think you would do that for me?"

"I'd never have to worry about it," he said. "We're magical so we'd just apparate away or use some sort of floating or warming spell. Then again, we'd probably be able to fix the hole in the first place, yeah?" Hermione huffed, gently slapping his hand while he laughed. "Ow! I was just having a laugh," he said, taking her wrist and kissing her hand. "Of course I'd do that for you. It wouldn't even be something I'd have to think about. Would you refuse to get in the boat with your mum for me?"

"Every single time," Hermione said. "If I didn't, it would feel like I'd drowned in that icy cold water anyway." She looked at him with a serious expression. "Do you know what I mean?"

"More than you think I do." They were silent as they stared at each other.

Hermione was the first to move her gaze. She peered down at his hand that she was holding. "So you're leaving tomorrow!"

Her words sounded so heavy; they certainly felt heavy on Ron's shoulders. It had been a subject they knew they would have to address, but for whatever reason, he had disconnected it from his mind. Even if he'd always known that his thirteen days would eventually end, Ron never let himself think about what the reality of it would actually mean. He figured that it had to do, in part, with the fact that he hadn't known if he'd return to camp. Now that he knew he would, there was no escaping the fact that he'd have to leave her, and soon.

"Ron?"

"Yeah," he breathed, finally breaking out of his thoughts. "Tomorrow! What are you gonna do?" She shrugged, squeezing his hand tightly. Ron figured that it was her way of telling him that she needed more from him, so he squeezed her hand tightly back. "Hermione?"

"Yes," she said. "Um, I'll probably stay one more day at your house, then go home."

Ron didn't like that there wasn't much enthusiasm in her voice. He felt for her so deeply. He could understand how difficult it could be sometimes to go back home. "Are you ready?"

"I think so."

He watched her tan hand massage each one of his pale fingers, as if they were giving her air to breathe. Ron knew how much she depended on him; he greatly wanted to be the man she needed him to be.

"Hermione," he said, "I can go back to your house in the morning and—"

"No," Hermione swiftly said, finally letting his hand go, shaking her head. "There's nothing for you to say or apologize to them for."

"But I can't exactly leave with your mum still thinking I'm an arsehole," he said.

"She doesn't," Hermione assured. "I told you, I talked to them when I visited the other day."

"I don't know, 'Mione!" he said.

"Well, I do," Hermione said. "I know my parents. Besides, I'm the one who needs to talk to them more about this. I'm the one who showed up there in tears and demanded that my mum tell you to go away. No - this is something that I have to do. They're still adjusting to me being in a relationship so I already know what they're going to ask me."

Ron didn't know what to say. Hermione seemed so sure, but he wasn't; and the last thing he wanted was for all of his progress with the Grangers to slip through his fingers because of one fight. "I just want things to be okay."

"Things are already okay, Ron," Hermione said. "My parents have been together for a long time. They know that people fight and make up." She gripped her necklace, sighing. "Actually, the more I think about it, the more I believe that going home is what I need right now. I love your family, but being at home will give me a chance to think in the quiet. There's a lot that I need to go over."

"About what?" he asked.

"Me," she said simply.

Ron frowned. "What about you?"

Hermione massaged her temple, looking pained. "That's the thing, Ron; I'm not sure where to start. I think I've learned more from spending these past few days at the Burrow than I have all term at Hogwarts."

Ron didn't know what she meant by that. He knew that his house hadn't provided anyone with the highest level of peace, but it was still his home. "Um; I reckon;"

"I'm not complaining or saying it's a bad thing," she quickly said, touching his thigh. "What I mean is that seeing you with your family made me realize that I need to do a better job as a daughter to my parents."

"Oh," he said, feeling a bit better. The last thing he wanted to do was get into a row with her over his family. "You do fine as their daughter, Hermione."

"I don't think I do," she said, looking grim. "There's still all this tension between us; I need to do a better job of easing it away. I know it's not all my responsibility, but I have to start it since I'm the one between the two worlds."

"You didn't choose to be," he said.

"I know, but I am," she said. "They're my family, Ron. Nothing is going to change that. I know this is going to sound strange, but that's something watching you with your family has really shown me. It's a good thing."

"I'm glad we could help you," he said in earnest. "It's good to know that something positive came out of all that happened. I

know how important it is to have family on your side, so I think it's wonderful that you want to make things better with yours."

"Not just with them though, Ron," Hermione said.

She opened her mouth but didn't say anything. In an instant, she appeared lost and stripped of the confidence and order that usually held her composure together.

A chill wrapped itself around Ron's spine as his chest began to ache. When Hermione hurt, Ron hurt. The connection between them was as simple and as powerful as that. He took her hand, squeezing it firmly. "Talk to me. I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere. I'm all yours." Hermione looked down at their hands, squeezing his back. "That's right," he said. "I'm right here."

She let out an unsteady breath, placing his hand against her chest and holding on to his arm. "It's not just with them that I know I need to work harder," she said. She kissed his knuckles, keeping her eyes on him. "Ron, that fight we had was our first major row since becoming a couple."

Since making up, the two of them had talked about many things concerning their relationship, but they had only spoken briefly about their fight. Ron reckoned it was because it had still been too raw, but he knew that they needed to address it so that they could bury the event for good.

"I know," he said. "I'd forgotten that we could argue like that."

"I don't like the way I handled it," she said. "Not the day we fought or the night we made up."

His shoulders slumped. "You â€“ you didn't?"

"No, that's not what I mean," she said, holding his arm tighter. "What we did under the tree was beautiful."

"Then what are you talking about?" he asked.

"I'm not sure how to explain itâ€;" she said. "I don't want this to come out wrong, but I've been thinking a lot about your brother lately â€“ about George leaving. I wasn't there, but I can almost see his face and hear his voice. George left because he couldn't be in denial about himself anymore."

Ron shook his head, not understanding what she meant. "Yes, he left. What are you talking about doing?"

"I'm talking about doing what's right," she said. "I survived a war, Ron. I survived a torture, almost getting killed numerous times, being on the run, battling Death Eaters, and a number of other things that people three times our age will never have to face."

Hermione let his arm go, hugging her stomach but still keeping her eyes on him. She looked a bit stronger but he could see the

uncertainty in her features. "I've accomplished a lot, and I feel so much older than I did even a year ago; however, our fight, George, and your family in general made me realize that I still have some learning to do and some adjustments to make. I'm smart and mature enough to admit that, especially to you."

Ron could hear the slight disappointment in her voice. After almost a decade of knowing her, he knew that admitting her mistakes and acknowledging her weakness was difficult for her. The two of them were so different yet so alike at the same time. She was exposing parts of herself to him that were still hard for her to show. Ron knew what that was like firsthand. Listening and watching as Hermione opened up to him made Ron fall even deeper in love with her.

"You are so beautiful, Hermione."

Her eyes watered but she rubbed them dry. "I'm not looking for a compliment right now, sweetheart."

"I know." Ron readjusted his body so that his legs encircled her. He placed his hands on her sides. "I'm not saying it just to compliment you. Yeah, you're beautiful as all bloody hell, but I mean that you're beautiful because you're talking to me like this. What makes it even more amazing is that I understand."

"You do?"

"Absolutely," he said. "I reckon that this holiday and all the stress we've been under has stripped us both down. I've been thinking a lot about George too. Perhaps we do need to try what he and Angelina are doing. Maybe it's not enough that we just talk more. Maybe we need to rebuild ourselves a little."

She nodded, letting out a shaky breath. "I completely agree. When I go back home, it'll give me time to think about how to be a better girlfriend to you."

"You're already incredible, 'Mione," he said, putting his forehead to hers, clutching her sides. He curled his legs around her tighter, letting his fingers massage her lower back.

Hermione whimpered gently at his touch. "But I can be better," she whispered. "I haven't always followed through on my advice, and there's still some things I know I need to let go of. You want to be better and so do I. I want to be better the next time we see each other. It's something that needs to happen."

"I need to be better too," he said. "I need it for us."

She cupped his cheek, running her thumb over his mouth. Her soft touch tickled his skin, making him shiver again. "Do you remember before I left for Hogwarts, when I told you that our time apart would help us become stronger individuals?"

"Yes," he breathed, his chest heaving as Hermione moved her pointer finger across his jaw then down his throat. Blood started to flow further down his body.

"I still think it's true," she said, moving her finger under his jumper, gliding it back and forth across his collarbone. He closed his eyes. Her touches were so delicate yet she knew exactly where to press and how much pressure to use to cause his mind to cave in and his body to relax, even as he lost control. "I hate not being with you, Ron," Hermione continued, "but it forces me to be a stronger person. George left your family so you can all be stronger when he comes back. I think that'll happen with us. I'm sorry if all this sounds wrong."

"Don't apologize," he said, finally opening his eyes. "I understand your feelings. All I ever want to do is be with you but when I'm back at camp, I'll have to dig deeper because I won't have you. I'll have to make changes and push harder; but if I make myself stronger, then when I have you again, I can help us be stronger." Ron felt more and more pressure leave his shoulders as he let his feelings out to her. He didn't understand how saying things like this could make him feel better, but it did.

"I think this is going to be the biggest test for us as individuals," she said, looking a little better as well. "You'll be enduring your last stretch of training while I'll be preparing for the end of term. I'll have no choice but to, as Ginny tells me, 'stop being so uptight'. Do you think I'm too uptight?"

Ron didn't know what to say. He pulled back a little. He felt horribly uncomfortable picking at Hermione when he could already see how hard she was being on herself. "I love you, Hermione. Who you are is the person I've always wanted to be with."

"That doesn't mean that you can't tell me what you think. Be honest." Hermione looked right at him. Ron knew what he had to do. He had to be honest. Hermione was his best friend and girlfriend. If he couldn't be honest with her, then he couldn't be honest with anyone.

He rubbed his neck. "Well, I'd never use the word 'uptight', " he said. "Sometimes thoughâ€¢you get so tense and worked up by over-thinking everything. I get that but stillâ€¢I think it makes you more stressed. It's like when you walked away from meâ€¢I - I'm sorry."

Hermione bit her lip very hard. "D- don't apologize. I need to hear this from you, just like you've heard everything from me. It's just thatâ€¢all this is still new to me in some ways."

"I know," he said. "We've talked about that."

"Not just concerning seeing you as my boyfriendâ€¢" Hermione scooted further back so she could sit up straight. "I'm not naïve. I know I have a reputation for being very well put together. It's a lot of pressure, but I enjoy it. Being flawless in my studies is what I do."

"Your 'one thing'?" Ron asked, thinking about Percy.

"Precisely," Hermione said. "But what we have takes a different kind of skill and emotion. I can't analyze it like I do the other parts of my life. Like you said, this 'isn't some bloody coursework for Charms'."

"I'm a wanker," he said.

"No, you were right about that, Ron," she said. "You're the only person I've ever been in love with or wanted. This vulnerability is something I've only shown to you. I'm not even this sensitive with my parents. I want to work on loosening up some, and not seeing things as either right or wrong all the time; like when we fight."

Hermione's eyes watered again. She pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes like Percy sometimes did when he tried to control his emotions. She sniffled, rubbing her nose. "Sorry."

"There's nothing to apologize for." He pulled his sleeve over his hand, wiping under her nose for her. "I'll be right back." Ron looked around for tissues. When he couldn't find any, he went into the loo to grab toilet paper. "This is all I could find," he said, handing her some.

"Thank you," she said. She blew her nose, while he rubbed her arm.

"Better?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes." She cleared her throat. "You're so sweet, Ron." He shrugged. "As I was saying," she said. "I justâ€¢you told me that sometimes you don't know if the person you are is the person you want to be, but I wish that more people were like you, Ron."

He gaped at her. "Why would you ever want that?"

"Why wouldn't I?" she asked. "You talk about me being beautiful but you come from the most beautiful family I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. You come from so much love and loyalty and connection. Harry and I joke sometimes about how we wish that we were Weasleys." She suddenly laughed. "Although, that would make it rather complicated for us to be dating."

"I reckon there would be a few things to work out," he said, "at least before we started shagging." A tear fell down her cheek; Ron wiped it away before it could reach her jaw line.

"I mean it though," she said, taking his hand and kissing his fingertips. "I love my family and who I am, but I learn so much from you and where you've come from. How you are, Ronâ€¢the way you love, protect, and honor peopleâ€¢I have no words. I told you that you have an ability to really hurt people with the things you say."

"I don't mean to."

"I know," she said, "but you also have an ability to almost heal people by the way you treat them." Hermione got a bewildered look in her eyes again. "My parents never raised me to be particularly religious, but sometimes I truly believe that God is real because of how you love people and how you make me feel so good." Ron's chest heaved as a ringing hit his ears. He didn't know what to do with himself as his heart began to beat faster and everything around him started to dim and fade. Hermione looked at him apprehensively. "Ron, talk to me."

He rubbed his neck, shaking his head. "I- I don't know what to say. In seven months you've told me a lot of loving and amazing things but I almost don't know to handle this. It's hitting me so hard right here." He took her hand, placing it against his chest. "I'm a simple bloke, Hermione. Yeah, all my life I've wanted a lot of rubbish, but now there are only a few things that I know I really need. One of those things is making you feel happy and safe. Hearing that I do, and so extremely, it just!"

Ron rubbed his hands together, shuddering as a wave of passion flooded through him. "Oh, bloody hell. It's like I can shoot magic right out of my fingertips. Like nothing can hurt or scare me. What makes this even more extreme is that you recognize that I'm like this because of my family. I need for you and my family to love each other because you, my family, and Harry: you lot are the reasons I'm alive and why I'll never give up."

The pleasurable feeling expanded; he needed to touch Hermione. He put his hands on her face and his forehead against hers. Hermione moaned as her face flushed. "Ron!"

"I know," he wheezed. "I just love you so bloody much. I feel like I can just melt right into you and live inside you always. Your words and your feelings mean everything to me, but all of this started because I wanted to hide myself from you. You must be anxious about me going back and what might happen."

"I am," she said. "I want you to be okay. If you need to get the words out, then write to me. It's not the same as speaking but it's all we have. Talk to me or to Harry. Please, talk to him."

"I will," he said. "I'll talk, and I'll work on myself."

"And I'll work on myself," she said. "We both need to realize that our relationship still needs work in places."

"Yeah, I've wanted it to be perfect so badly," Ron said, "but it's not."

"Because we're both going to make mistakes," Hermione said.

"And you want to know something?" he asked. "I reckon I actually feel okay knowing that I'm gonna mess up and that you will too." Ron thought back to what his dad had told him about trial and error and taking time for things to fall into place. "It means we can always get better and not worry so much about getting things right the first time." He laughed. "Bloody hell, we're not even in our twenties yet and we're having this conversation."

Hermione laughed as well. "I think about that a lot too. We've put so much on ourselves but it's what I love about us. We don't want to settle. It's why we're together, Ron: we push each other. I think our fight helped break a casing I had over our relationship."

The more Hermione spoke, the more air Ron felt he had in his lungs. "Can I be honest with you?" he asked.

"Always."

"I feel closer to you right now than I have in twelve days," he said. "Talking about our faults is actually making me love us more. Lambrick teaches you that it's only considered a weakness if you don't acknowledge it. I think that's what we need to do."

"I want you to know something else," Ron said. "Even though we're talking about all these changes, the end I have in sight for us is still the same as it's always been." He shook his head at her. "When we were making up and you said that you weren't sure if I wanted a serious relationship, I didn't know what to do. You made me so bloody angry; it hurt more than when you left."

Hermione cheeks stained red. "I'm sorry. I saw that in your eyes. You hardly looked like yourself."

"That's because it didn't make sense to me. It's not about serious or casual for me," he said. "I know I'm eighteen, but I'm not a casual bloke when it comes to feelings. I can't throw around words like 'want', 'love', or 'need'. They're too heavy and important for me to disrespect them."

Ron gripped her knees, sliding her close to him. He traced her mouth. "I reckon, to answer your question, that yes, I want a serious relationship with you - but not once have I ever thought that anything about us wasn't serious to begin with. Our friendship has always been intense. I want that also for our relationship. I bloody crave our intensity." He was taken aback when Hermione threw her head back and chuckled. "Was that funny?"

"No - not at all," she said, blushing extremely. "I'm so sorry. I'm not trying to be rude." She groaned. "Oh, this is horrible timing, but you're just so powerful and sexy. You never cease to amaze me; how much force you have. You belong at Lambrick. You're such a knight, Ron, but you're a king too." She put her lips right against his but didn't add any pressure. "You're my knight, my king, and my Ron."

He blushed as well, letting her words swell in his body, causing everything else in his life to disappear. "Always," he said simply. The air around them was so thick and hot that he could hardly stand it. He slipped his tongue out; Hermione kissed the tip of it, making him groan. "I'm yours, and you're bloody mine."

Hermione whimpered again, applying full pressure against his lips now. She instantly opened her mouth as his tongue slicked across her teeth. He moaned, loving the taste of peaches in her mouth.

He held her firmly, feeling lighter, stronger, and more in love than ever before. In this moment, not even going back to Lambrick meant anything to him. He and Hermione were going to become even stronger as a couple. They were going to try and do their very best. Ron was never going to lose the softest part of his existence. It was such a calming feeling; it was all he needed.

Hermione broke away, panting and grasping his upper arms. "I want to start everything with you" right now. I want to show you what I can't find words to say."

"Then show me," he said drunkenly. He kissed her heavily, arching his hands over her arse. Hermione rose up, readjusting herself in his lap. She curled all her limps around him as he kept holding her, kissing her deeper and faster.

"Hmm," Hermione said, breaking away. "R-Ron?" She tried pulling away.

"What are you doing?" he asked, snogging her once more.

"I need to get up," she said between kisses.

"No. I'm not letting go."

"You'll never let go, Jack?"

Ron stopped kissing her as he realized the joke she was making.
"Bugger off," he said, biting her lip rather hard.

"Ow!" she said, hitting his arm.

"You loved it," he said.

"That's not the point," she said, sticking out her chin. "Really, I have to get up."

"But—"

"I'll be right back, I promise." She kissed him again.

Ron sighed. "Fine." He let her out of his clutches and she backed up off the bed. "Where are you going?"

"Just to the bathroom," she said. "Stay here."

"And do what?" he asked.

"Well, if you want to speed things along then I guess you can take your clothes off."

"Done." He immediately started to peel his socks off and jeans off.

"I'll be right back, mad boy." She picked up her bag, taking it into the loo with her. "No peeking," she said before closing the door.

Ron didn't know what to expect. After he was down to nothing but his shorts, he crept to the door, putting his ear against it.

"Go away, Ronald!" Hermione said from the other side.

"Aw, wha-?" he asked. "How did you know?"

"Because I know you," she said. "Get back in the bed. I'm almost finished."

"I miss you," he said pathetically, climbing back into bed. "I'm getting withdrawals."

"I'll make it up to you," she said.

Ron rubbed his palms against his thighs, mentally telling his body and heart to calm down. He didn't know what was in Hermione's bag, and for a moment, he thought that maybe she'd want to get kinky and use one of those strappy dildos on him. He shivered at the frightening image.

"Okay. Are you ready?"

"Always."

The door slowly opened. Hermione came out wearing her robe with her hair pinned up. Ron sat up straighter. "Incredible," she said, her eyes widening.

"Huh?"

She grinned, nudged her head in his direction. "You."

Ron looked at himself, remembering that he was only in his boxers. "Oh, um, right." He honestly didn't care what he looked like. Hermione was obviously hiding something under her robe, and every second he grew more curious and stiff. "So what's going on?"

Hermione walked closer to the bed until her legs touched it. She didn't take her robe off, only kept looking at him in a teasing way with a bit of nervousness. "This is a test to your memory, Ron. Do you remember what I wrote to you in my last letter before we met up?" Ron scrunched his face up a little. He wracked his mind but nothing was coming to him - so much had happened since she wrote that letter.

"Um...do I get a hint?" he asked. "I'm sorry."

She laughed a little. "It's all right. It was a while ago. Let's see: I told you something about certain events I had planned for us!"

Ron looked off to the side then suddenly it hit him. "Oh! Yeah!" he said, remembering her words about the plans she had made. "Yeah - yeah!"

She smiled wide then skimmed her fingers over his toes, causing him to jerk. "Do you remember how many events I told you I had planned?"

Ron wanted to tell Hermione that this was no time for tests. Teasing him was only driving him more mental; he was moments away from grabbing her if she didn't stop, however, he decided to play along for her. He looked off to the side again to think about it. "Umâ€œf-five. Five, right?"

Hermione nodded. "Good work, Ron. I did say five events. The first was going to my house. The second was taking you bowling and to the aquarium. Third was the movie and being in this hotel is event number four."

"Wâ€œhat's five?" he asked, curling his fingers into the blanket.

The humor in Hermione's face faded. She swallowed rather hard, clutching her robe. "What I've got under here. Do you want to see?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes, please."

Hermione took a step back. "Okay," she said quietly.

She slowly pulled the ties off her robe, easing it off her shoulders. When it fell to the floor in a heap, four out of Ron's five senses stopped working. He couldn't smell, taste, touch or hear anything. Every function in his body stopped, devoting itself solely to looking at Hermione. All that covered her body were frilly lace knickers and a matching bra, both light pink with small white patterns on them. He'd never seen her wear something so posh and sexy before. Her underwear suctioned right against her like it was a second skin, making every inch of her curves noticeable.

Ron didn't know how to respond. He opened his mouth but his jaw merely stayed unhinged. He could feel drool start to collect in his mouth. Hermione held on to one of her elbows. Having one of her arms go across her stomach made her breasts bunch together more, which only made it harder for Ron to speak.

"Ron?" she asked. "Are â€œ are you going say anything?"

She was looking at him, almost like she was troubled. He knew then that he had to fight his mental state to say something to her.

"Uh," he wheezed, sounding like a nutter. "I â€œ I don't know whatâ€œto sayâ€œtoâ€œthis. Iâ€œI didn't even know you wore pink like thisâ€œ!"

She blushed. "Well, I don't, but I wanted to do something special for this moment. This is the fifth event: me."

Ron's chest heaved roughly. An overwhelming dizziness came over him. It was all too incredible to be real. So much heartache and

hard times had come into his life since starting his holiday. It seemed unreal that it could end like this, with Hermione looking so amazingly sexy and beautiful that his body ached and his toes curled.

"Y-you?" he asked.

"Yes, me," she said. "You said that things had to start with me for you. Well, tonight I want to start with you. I want to make you feel good. I want your last night with me to be about voraciousness. I'll do anything you'd like."

"I'm that deserving?" he asked.

"Very much so."

Ron studied Hermione's body. Everything about her was flawless. Looking around at their surroundings, Ron could think of a dozen things to do; however, there was only one thing that stood out in his mind - one detail that had to be addressed to make everything even more perfect. "Anything I want?"

"This is your night, Ron," she said, her words slurring.

He could see the total trust and devotion in her eyes. It was such a commanding expression for a woman in frilly pink knickers. Then again, it was Hermione, so he knew that it was real and intense. It didn't matter if she made mistakes, overanalyzed, angered or hurt him sometimes; Ron would always think that Hermione was perfect because, at the end of all things, Hermione did what she thought was right and what was out of love. That was his definition of perfection.

"Ron?" Hermione said after a prolonged moment of silence.

"Take your hair down," he requested right away. "Don't try to tame it. Let it be wild." Hermione gave him a curious look but then pulled the pins of her hair. Her bushy, dark brown locks fell around her shoulders.

"How's this?" she asked, shaking her hair and running her fingers through it.

"Perfect," he whispered, noticing for the first time how much his chest ached because of how fast his heart was beating. "I love your hair so much, Hermione. Just the way it is. Come on the bed. Get on top of me."

Hermione crawled on the bed, kissing up his legs, stomach, and chest as she climbed her way up his body, finally straddling him. Ron moaned, flinching. The weight of her felt amazing. He was so heated, dizzy, and drunk. Ron wanted her so bloody badly. He leaned back, resting on the headboard so he could look at her. Her bra made her tits look fuller and, somehow, the color made her skin look even smoother while bringing out the brown of her eyes and hair. Ron touched her stomach, loving how it was soft and not uncomfortably small.

He let out a low breath as his eyes wandered over her chest. The jewel of her necklace was snug between her tits. He licked his lips and sat up, kissing the lush outline of her bust. Hermione moaned, placing her hands on his shoulders, kissing the top of his head. Every part of her that touched him seemed to melt right through his skin. It was as if someone had slipped him a potion, causing his skin to become hypersensitive to touch.

"You're so gorgeous I can't breathe, 'Mione. If you want proof that there's a God, just look at yourself. I've never seen anyone or anything so beautiful before." He pulled away, running his hands up and down her arms. "I honestly don't know what to say. Just tell me what you have planned. I can't think."

Hermione scooted into his lap, causing Ron to moan again. He had to calm down before he came simply because of her sitting on him in her pink frills. She placed her arms around his neck, kissing his ear. "I want to take you tonight, Ron," she said into it. "I want to do it this time."

He nodded frantically. "Please?" He fell back onto the pillows, putting a hand to his chest, breathing harshly. Ron felt so hot and so scatterbrained; it was like the time he'd taken too much Ridium, only better because the feelings were real and Hermione was with him. He opened his eyes - which he hadn't realized were closed. Hermione was flushed and breathing hard, but she didn't look nearly as ready as he was. He studied her face, instantly recognizing the expression.

"Are you scared?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," she said, groaning. "This is so stupid. I'm trying not to be but I can't help it."

"Talk to me."

"It's just thatâ€;I've never been on top before. I'm nervous. I want it to be good for you."

"Love," he said, sitting up and tucking hair behind her ear. "You're always amazing. Nothing you do could be bad. It's me. I'm your Ron. I already feel so incredible because of the day we've had together, and our talk, and the way you look."

"Ronâ€;"

"Don't even try to tell me that you're not a goddess," he said. "I mean it. I hate to be rude but you're so fucking sexy with your tits out like this and your arse in these little kinky pink knickers. I reckon I could snog your bra and get one off."

Hermione laughed, shaking her head. "I'm glad you approve- but I'm a bit concerned about your mental state."

"So am I," Ron said honestly. "I get what you're feeling though, believe me, but you honestly don't have to worry. There's no way that I couldn't enjoy you doing something like this. Yeah?"

She nodded, licking her lips. "Yes."

Hermione lifted her hips to take her knickers off. Ron did the same with his shorts. She still seemed so nervous; he could feel and see her shaking. Ron had to be better for her.

"Tell me about our perfect day together."

She dropped their clothes over the bed. "What?"

"Do you remember our perfect day?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Then tell me about it."

He felt her warmth and slickness against his groin but he couldn't focus on it just yet. He wanted to help Hermione feel less tense.

Hermione smiled faintly as she took his hard muscle in her hand, stroking it. His stomach flinched as he let out a strangled cry. "We're back at Hogwarts," she said. "It's Friday night."

"Yeah," he breathed, pushing up into her hand. "I snuck out of the dorm to see you. After a lot of kissing and begging, you finally let me into your room to sleep." Ron moaned again as her grip tightened.

"We made a deal," she said. "I said it would be okay if we slept in only if we did some studying the next day."

"Right," Ron said. "That's when our fantasy turned into a nightmare."

"Exactly," she said, rolling her eyes. "First, we'll eat breakfast, then take a walk around the courtyard."

"Eating chocolate frogs and taking the piss out of Harry and Ginny," he said.

"You'll be doing that alone," she said. She finally stopped stroking him, placing her palms on either side of his waist. "I'll be too busy watching your eyes turn a bit lighter - the way that they do when you're outside. As we study, I'll watch them grow a bit darker again, making me feel even more attracted to you because your eyes tell me exactly what you're feeling."

"And I'll only be pretending to study. Really, I'll be thinking about when I'll be able to be alone with you again," he said. "When I'll be able to hold you, make you laugh, and talk to you without interruption - like now."

"Like now." Hermione's body relaxed. She reached behind her back but Ron reached out, touching her arm to stop her.

"Wait â€“ don't take your bra off."

She raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

He rubbed his neck. It all made perfect sense in his mind but he didn't know how to explain it to her. "It's not that I don't want to see you or anything, but you spent money on this; I like you showing it off to me. I reckon you could've just been naked under your robe, but you had this on. Let's take advantage of it."

He skipped his fingers over the lacey fabric of her bra. "I hope I don't sound like a tit for saying this, but I like this color against your skin. It makes every bloody part of you stand out. You're absolutely incredible with your clothes off butâ€œI don't know. Sometimes I really like seeing you in just your knickers and bra. It keeps me wondering about what's underneath it all."

"You know what's underneath," she said.

"Yeah," he said with a shrug, "but I still like the tease. You're always going to be a bit of a mystery to me, 'Mione. I'm always going to love chasing after you."

She blushed furiously, looking more comfortable and confident with every breath she took. "Have I mentioned that Lambrick needs someone like you; someone who's always up for a good chase?"

He shrugged, stroking his chin. "I reckon I don't mind hearing it again."

Hermione laughed once more, her face lighting up, making her even more beautiful. "You are nothing but charm, Ronald Bilius Weasley."

"It's a gift and a curse."

She rolled her eyes then looked down for a moment. "Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm ready."

"I'm all yours," he said, lying back again. Hermione lifted herself, taking hold of him. She was still shaking. "It's just me, Hermione," he said. "You don't have to think so much."

"I know," she whispered. Hermione took a breath, keeping her eyes on him as she slowly and smoothly slid down on him. "Oh â€œ oh - wow."

Ron's muscles seized as she incased him. He'd been deep inside her before but nothing like this. There was nothing for him to push into. Every bit of his cock was inside of Hermione. "Mmm, 'Mione."

"This feels so good." She leaned forward, placing her forehead against his. Ron pecked her lips, running his fingers through her hair. Hermione closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, they were wet. "I'm going to miss you, Ron. So much."

"I'm gonna miss you too," he said. "I know we have to part and it'll be good for us, but I still don't want to. My place is always going to be by your side. I love you, Hermione. I love you more than anything."

"I love you too," she said. "You're my whole world, Ron, and I'm so proud of you."

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Start moving, please? I need to feel this."

"Anything you want." Hermione kissed him deeply as she held his arms against the pillow. When she began to move, Ron lost complete touch with reality. All he knew and had was Hermione. They were the only two people who existed.

Hermione being on top was a vastly different experience: he concentrated less, she had complete control of his body, and Ron could watch every moment of her pleasure. Hermione moved slowly but with force. There was bewilderment, love, and bliss in her expression. It was as if his body was giving her something that nothing else could. Everything she felt, he could feel. It heightened his own feelings. The longer they went, the more Ron loved and appreciated her. Everything Hermione did in her life, she committed to completely, and this was no different. He knew that she was committed to trying harder and becoming better - tonight was her beginning. He didn't have the words to tell her how much it meant to him that she wanted to start things right with him first, so he used his body instead, pushing up to meet her thrusts.

Hermione leaned forward, clasping their hands together. They kissed weakly as they panted against each other's lips. Ron watched sweat and flush paint her skin. It was fantastic against the pinkness of her bra. Ron wanted to frame this night, holding it forever. It was like a new first time for them. He never thought that one change could mean so much, stripping them of everything, giving them something new. Ron held on for as long as he could but the build up became too much for him. He let himself go, and Hermione followed almost instantly after. Ron suspected that she had probably waited for him, wanting things to start with him. When she collapsed onto his chest, he held her tightly, telling her not to pull away yet. They kept kissing and holding each other, not wanting to part until they absolutely had to.

"You are so incredible, Hermione," Ron said in a throaty voice. "I'm so bloody glad that we didn't wait until after you graduated. We wouldn't have been able to do this. You wouldn't have been able to give this to me tonight. You're giving me exactly what I want before I have to go."

She caressed his face, moving soppy hair off his forehead. "I guess some parts of our relationship don't need adjusting."

Ron kissed her gently, letting every good feeling overtake him. "This is the most important relationship of my life. Thank you for being here with me."

"Where else would I go?" she asked. Neither tried to answer that question. Hermione finally pulled away, turning off the light and laying close to him. She rested her head on his arm; he held her closely. He felt melted against her but it was what he wanted. He was so relaxed, happy, hopeful, and intoxicated with Hermione. "I love you," he whispered before he went to sleep.

Later on in the night, Ron awoke to a horrible stomach grumble. Hermione was breathing deeply as she rested on his chest. He could barely see her in the dark but he knew that she looked unbelievably pretty, peaceful, and satisfied. His stomach growled loudly again. Ron had to eat something before his stomach woke her up. He wished that he could just stay asleep and enjoy the moment, but shagging always made him terribly hungry.

Ron did his best to stay silent as he gradually slid away from Hermione's body. He swiftly pushed a pillow against her in his place. She took to it right away, snuggling her face against it, making a faint noise. He folded the blanket over her body then tiptoed to the Muggle money that was on the table. He wanted candy from the vending machine thing that was down the hall from them. After putting on his pajamas and shirt, he eased the door open, making sure to take his key before slipping out. The hall was quiet and empty as he walked down. He wasn't sure what he wanted to eat but he needed to hurry before Hermione woke up. Ron went down to the vending machine; to his surprise, Ginny was already there with a small bag.

"You sneaky girl."

"Ron, what are you doing up?" she said, turning to him and putting a hand to her chest.

He showed her his money. "I reckon we had the same idea."

"Brilliant." Ginny moved her long hair to one side of her neck. Red oval shaped marks were on her neck and under her jaw. He told himself to let it go for tonight, and yell at Harry later for constantly marking his little sister. "I know what you're looking at."

"Not tonight," Ron said. "It's been too good of a day to fuss over it. Um, can I just have some of your candy so I don't waste Hermione's money?"

"Go ahead. I don't want all of this," Ginny said, handing him her plastic bag. "I just love watching the machine work more than anything else." She popped a sour ball in her mouth then sat on the floor against the wall.

Ron sat next to her, taking a small box of Smarties out and popping four in his mouth at one time. "Muggles are wicked."

"They really are," Ginny said through her sour ball. She nudged him. "Did you have a nice night?"

"It was amazing," Ron said. "I don't think there are words to describe how much fun I had today. What about you?"

"It's probably been my favorite day since I came home."

Ron watched his sister eat her candy, noticing for the first time that she was wearing Harry's pajamas and shirt. "Did Harry treat you okay?"

Ron didn't know why he suddenly asked but he needed to know. Even if he already knew the answer, he wanted to hear it from her mouth. He'd rather Ginny not be touched by anyone, but since she was, Ron needed to know that she was all right.

Ginny didn't roll her eyes or say something cheeky like he had expected her to. She looked at him seriously. "Yes, Harry treated me just fine," she said. "What about Hermione? Did she make you happy?"

"Very," Ron said.

Ginny nodded, looking away. "Good. I can't say enough how relieved I am that you two made up, but I'm happier that she apologized and wanted to make things right with you. She's my friend but you're my brother. She hurt you and I didn't like seeing you that way. It's not allowed and she has a bloody duty to set things right."

He grinned. "Cheers."

She nodded. "Of course." She took out some sort of rope candy and tore it in half, giving him an end. "Are you ready to go back to camp?"

"I think I have to be," Ron said, stuffing more candy into his mouth.

Ginny took her time to eat hers. "You're really going back to Lambrick, Ron. I'm so bloody excited for you. This is such an accomplishment. You do realize that, right?"

"I'm still taking it in," he said.

Ginny nodded as she continued to eat her candy. She looked so much more relaxed and well-rested than when he first saw her at the train station. He knew that she wasn't completely healed though. None of them would be for awhile; it was something Ron had to accept and grow from.

"You can take the piss but I'm going to miss you, Ginny."

"I'll miss you too," Ginny said quietly.

"Will you be all right?"

"I think I will be this time," she said. "I'm doing better. We all are." She smiled. "Besides, knowing that you're going back to Lambrick automatically makes me happier. No one deserves this more than you."

"What about Harry?" he asked.

She looked him right in the eyes. "No one deserves this more than you," she repeated.

"Come here." He raised his arm; she leaned her head against him while he rested his head against hers.

"You're going to be okay there, right Ron?" Ginny asked.

"I'll be fine."

"And your panic attacks?"

"I won't let them stop me," he said. "What about you? What about your worries at home and at school?"

"They can't take control of me," Ginny said. "I've seen the worst that pain can do to a person over this holiday, but I've also seen what bravery can do. I'll be okay. If George can, then anyone can."

"I'll be thinking about that every day I'm at camp," he said. "If our big brother can do it, then I certainly can."

Ginny looked up at him. "Do you think George is happy right now?"

She gazed at him in the extreme way that he found her doing more often now. It was Ginny's look for when she was opening up to him, expecting total honesty and strength back from him. Ron would gladly give it to her. He'd give his little sister anything that she needed from him.

"I honestly think he is," Ron said. "I'm sure he's with Angelina and Lee right now, probably laughing, trying to feel the moment as he slowly puts himself back together. I reckon he's safe, less stressed, and happy."

"I think so too," she said. "I'm so bloody proud of all my brothers. You lot are tossers a lot of the time but I'm glad I have you lot."

"Well, even if you are a pain more often than not, I'm sure all of us feel the same way about you," he said, digging into her candy bag.

"What a way to ruin the moment, Ronald."

"You started with the insults, Ginevra."

He threw a piece of chocolate at her; she threw it right back. They stayed in the hall for awhile, simply eating candy and

enjoying the silence until they felt too full and tired to eat anymore.

It took Ron a couple of tries, but he was able to open the door and slip as quietly as he could into the room; however, Hermione's wand was lit and she was sitting up in bed, reading a book, still in her pink frills.

She looked up. "Ron."

"Did I wake you?" he asked, pulling his shirt off and crawling into bed with her.

"No. I got up to use the loo and decided to stay awake. I thought you'd gone down to get some candy," she said.

"I did," he said. "Ginny was getting some too. We talked for a bit."

Hermione chuckled. "You two are so much alike."

"Don't insult me," he cheeked. He leaned his head against the wall behind them to get a good look at her. Hermione did the same, facing him. He grinned. "Hi."

"Hi," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Great," he said honestly. "You?"

"Fantastic," she said. She took his hand, tracing the freckle patterns on it. "You know, I was thinking about Titanic again."

"And how they should've added more life boats?" he asked.

"Well, that too. It was an arrogant and impractical decision to make," Hermione said. "What I was really thinking about though was how much I enjoyed Rose's character and related to her in way."

"She was brilliant," Ron said. "It was bollocks that Jack didn't survive, but I reckon it was necessary for Rose to."

"I agree," she said. "She was brave, strong, unsure but confident, and so beautiful and intelligent." She suddenly looked down.

"I know that look," he said, raising her chin. "What are you embarrassed about?"

"I'm not really embarrassed," she said. "It's just silly."

"Tell me."

"Well, I was thinking about how, all through the movie, I realized how much I fancied the name 'Rose'. It fit the character so well, and it's a perfect name for a beautiful ginger woman. Do you like the name?"

"I'm keen on it, yeah," he said. "Why?"

Hermione blushed. "We should keep that name in mind. One day we might be able to use it."

Ron chuckled, blushing a bit himself. "Sorted. If we ever have a ginger girl, then the first name we'll consider is Rose. Deal?" He held out his hand.

She shook his hand. "Deal; although I'm sure we'll forget about this by then."

"We'll see," he said. "If it's meant to happen, then I'm sure it will. We've got some time to decide, yeah?"

"I'm sure a few more days, at least," Hermione teased.

"Blimey, you are getting so good at these feisty little jokes," Ron said. "Mmm. You're making me mental again."

"Again? You mean you weren't already—"

He cut her cheek off with a kiss. Hermione sighed against his mouth, scooting back so he could settle on top of her. In just a day, Ron would be away from her - for who knew how long. He wanted to be close to Hermione for as long as he could. As he kissed Hermione, holding her close, Ron couldn't help but think about the movie Titanic and the similarities between Jack and Rose and him and Hermione.

At the thought of 'Rose', Ron imagined calling a little ginger girl by that name, having her look up at him with his blue eyes and Hermione's elegant smile.

It was a rather extraordinary image.

* * *

The next morning, Ron and Hermione got up, took showers, and tried to prepare for their upcoming departure. They brushed their teeth in the loo, watching each other in the mirror. Hermione spit her toothpaste out, swishing water around her mouth. Ron brushed his hand over her arse as she bent over the sink.

"Watch it," she said, knocking her hip against his.

"Ah ken helf id."

"Sorry?" she asked.

Ron spit out his rinse then wiped his mouth. "I said I can't help it. Only you can make spitting toothpaste look erotic."

"And only you would want spitting toothpaste to be erotic," she said, shaking her head at him. "You missed a spot." She wiped a bit of toothpaste off the corner of his mouth.

"You're so helpful," he said, pulling her close. "Can I repay you somehow?" He leaned down, kissing her neck.

Hermione shivered. "R-Ronâ€¢what are you doing?"

"Nothing." He lifted her up, placing her on the sink counter. He ran his palms up and down her thighs.

Hermione looked right at him, placing her hands on his shoulders. "What's going through your mind?"

"How I've wanted to shag you in a loo since being at your parents' house," he said. "I reckon it's something I'm going to have to do before I leave today."

"Hmm," Hermione said as her cheeks went pink. "Where will you find a loo or a girl willing to let you shag her in it?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," he said before placing his mouth against hers.

"Wait," Hermione said. "I need my wand."

"Not this time," he said. "While you were in the shower, I drank a tube of potion you brought with you. We've still got plenty of time."

"How clever," she said. "But what made you think that I'd even agree to this?"

Ron placed her hand against his fly. She zipped his jeans down, not taking her eyes off him all the while. "Well, I happen to know about the insatiable craving you have for me. I truly believe now that I could probably have you whenever I wanted."

"What a bold statement," Hermione said, lifting up so he could take her jeans off. "Someone's rather confident today."

"And this person is also right," Ron said. "So how about you stop pretending that this isn't happening and take your knickers off."

"How bossy," she said, obeying his order.

"I learn from the best," he said with a wink. She laughed, hitting his chest. He took her arm, laughing too as he fulfilled the fantasy he'd had for thirteen days.

It wasn't as easy as he thought it would've been. Hermione's hands keep falling into the sink, and he kept getting distracted as he glanced up at the mirror, seeing himself shagging her; however, they laughed like prats the whole way through and continued to banter about who wanted this fantasy more. Sex with Hermione last night had been about intensity and promise. Today, Ron needed something else with her. He needed fun and easiness.

Ron would need to be as relaxed as possible before parting from her and going back to Lambrick.

He wished that he could've stayed another day at the hotel but the four of them eventually packed up all their bags and went back to the Burrow. Ron noticed how giggly and close Ginny and Harry were. It didn't bother him at all. In fact, he was thankful.

When they returned and walked the dirt path to the house, the realization finally started to hit Ron. He was leaving today to go back to camp. He would be leaving Hermione and his family behind once more. Ron knew that it was the right decision and that things would be okay, but he still felt a bit uneasy about it. He tried not to let it ruin his day and it helped that, as promised, his mum had made a huge brunch for the six of them. They talked about Ron and Harry leaving, and what was to possibly come of them. Ron looked everyone in the eye as he spoke. He felt nervous and unsure, but one thing he honestly didn't feel was the heavy sadness that he thought he would. He didn't know what it meant, but he hoped that it signaled that he was already becoming a stronger person.

After their brunch, Ron and Harry decided to leave the Burrow so they could say their goodbyes. Harry left to see Teddy and the Dursleys while Ron had to find his brothers.

Ron went to the Ministry first. After speaking with Percy, Ron traveled to the fourth floor and into the Auror Department. His heart skipped a beat as he watched people talk in their offices and walk around the floor. He desperately hoped that he and Harry would be on this floor one day, talking around their desks about missions. Ron stopped at a door, knocking hard.

"Yes?"

Ron turned the knob, entering. "Sir?"

Kingsley looked up from his work. "Ah, Ron, I was wondering if you would have time to stop by."

"I'm leaving today, sir," he said.

"This I know," Kingsley said. "Come in and sit down." He gestured to the chair in front of him. Ron grinned, closing the door behind him and taking a seat.

It was a strange feeling, but Ron had honestly missed Kingsley. He could appreciate him so much more now. How Kingsley acted, spoke, and presented himself were easily recognizable as traits picked up from Lambrick. He was the only living person Ron personally knew who had survived it all. Seeing Kingsley and hearing his voice made Ron's dream of graduating from camp feel a little more attainable.

At last, Ron was able to talk openly about the program. Kingsley had been through it all and knew all of the secrets. He gave Ron a power and focus that he had missed from camp. He almost wanted

to take the bloke with him. "So do you think John might come here sometime and work as a liaison?" Ron asked.

"John's a busy man," Kingsley said. "But he does come here when he can. If you make it through to the end and get a job here, then I'm sure you'll run into him."

It didn't even bother Ron that Kingsley had said 'if' and not 'when'. Kingsley was brutally honest; Ron admired the quality. "So, sir, what should I expect?"

Kingsley put his elbows on the desk and leaned forward a bit, almost reminding Ron of Phillip Smith. "Do you remember what the first half felt like?"

"Yes," Ron said, nodding.

"Well, take those memories, imagine doing it all over again blindfolded and in nothing but your socks, and you won't even be close to how things are going to be," Kingsley said.

"Ahâ€œ;thank you?" Ron mumbled.

Kingsley laughed a little. "What do you expect me so say, Ron? It's not as if I can give you the answers or make some sort of accurate analogy. All I can say is that it's going to be harder than anything you've ever had to do."

"I respect that opinion, sir," Ron said, "however, I reckon I've already experienced some of the hardest things I've ever had to since returning home."

Kingsley grew a little more serious. "Arthur tells me stories. I admire all of you for making it through this; George especially."

"We all feel the same way," Ron said. "He's been our guide. I know he'll be mine at Lambrick."

"I think that's brilliant, Ron," Kingsley said. "Admiring people is important; it gives you strength. I will say this though: if you want to survive and compete against the best at Lambrick, you're going to have to do more than that."

"Sir?" Ron asked.

"Ron, you know by now that if you can't stand on your own two feet then the trainers at Lambrick will eat you alive," Kingsley said. "You've seen it, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said, thinking about Roger.

"Well, you'll have to know how to depend on your own strength if you want to make it," Kingsley said. "Sometimes you're not always going to have those moments to think back. You'll need something automatic - something deeper."

"Like what?" Ron asked. Any tips he could receive on how to make it through to the end, he would gladly take.

"You'll need yourself, Ron," Kingsley said. "Because it's all the trainers are going to care about. They'll strip you bare to see what you can create. I told Harry the same thing a week ago when he came to see me. You've got to be there for yourself. You've always done things for the greater good, but you'll need more than that, especially since this is a real competition now. Being selfish isn't always a bad thing." Hearing Kingsley says this went against everything Ron believed in. He wondered what was going to happen to him when he arrived, and if he was ready to do all the things Kingsley was telling him that he had to do.

Ron left the Ministry, apparating to Shell Cottage next. Bill answered the door right away. "Ron, are you leaving already?"

"In a bit," Ron said. "I just came to say goodbye."

"Come in," Bill said, opening the door wider. "I'm sorry. I reckon I lost track of time. I'm trying to clean up. Fleur is finally coming back tonight."

"That's brilliant," Ron said, sitting on the couch. "You must be going mad."

"I barely slept last night," Bill said, sitting next to him. He wiped his forehead then took out his hair tie, letting his ginger locks run freely around his head. "You ready?"

"I'm not so sure anymore," Ron said honestly. "I don't know what to expect. I honestly don't feel too much of anything."

"You're still in shock," Bill said. "You've been home all this time and suddenly you're leaving. It probably won't hit you until you're on the train or maybe even until you arrive. How's Mum taking it?"

"She's been all right," Ron said. "Everyone has been."

"Hermione?" Bill said.

Ron felt a small tug at his heart. "She's okay. We have to do this."

"I'm glad you're able to see that," Bill said. "It's important for relationships to grow. I reckon I've been doing a lot of that since Fleur left. It's actually got me thinking."

"About?" Ron asked.

"George and what he's doing for himself," Bill said. "I want something like that too for me and Fleur. I think, when she comes back, I'll ask her if she wants to go on a short holiday with me. No work, no relatives; just me and her."

"That sounds so wicked, Bill," Ron said. He couldn't wait until the day that he could ask the same from Hermione. "Are you two having problems or something?"

"Not at all," Bill said. "But we've both been so busy for ages and all the pressure I've been under has really gotten to me."

"The stuff with George?" Ron asked.

"Not just him, Ron," Bill said. "You know, we're sort of the same. As the oldest brother, I have to take care of everyone but as the youngest brother you feel as if you have to because everyone has always taken care of you."

"I'm trying, Bill," Ron muttered.

"I'm not giving you a hard time about it," Bill said. "I just want you to know that I've always understood why." He looked at his wedding band, twisting it on his finger. "Fleur asked me if I wanted to go with her for a few days, you know? I had to say no though. I didn't want to be away from you lot for even one hour during this holiday."

"Ah," Ron said. "I don't mean to sound like an arsehole but I'm glad you were always here."

"Oh, me too," Bill said. "I know I made the right decision, but now that everyone's at least stable, I want to take a step back and just be with me wife. I want to have fun andâ€œhave a lot of amazing shags."

Ron laughed. "Yeah, I reckon we are alike. That's all I want with Hermione more often than I'm willing to tell her."

Bill smirked. "You'd be surprised how up for it woman are. They're just better at hiding it." He grew a bit more serious. "I want to grieve with her a bit too."

"Grieve?" Ron asked.

"Yes," Bill said. "We're all still grieving, Ron, and I want some time to myself so I can, then move on, and get better. I've been doing things, keeping myself busy and helping everyone else. I haven't had a chance to break dishes and scream and swear at the top of my lungs. On Christmas, I sort of envied George when he broke down. I wanted to do it too. I know that sounds terrible—"

"It doesn't," Ron quickly said. "I felt the same way."

"See?" Bill said. "You're never as alone as you think."

Ron wanted to roll his eyes. His eldest brother was always just so bloody wise. "I'm realizing that. I'm really trying, Bill. It's just not always easy."

"Not for any of us, Ron," Bill said. "I know everyone has this idea that I've had everything easy in life, but it's not true. Being the perfect student for seven years wasn't always fun. My job at the bank has never been easy, and being a decent husband, dutiful eldest son, and dependable eldest brother to six siblings certainly hasn't been the smoothest of broom rides."

"Bloody hell, Bill," Ron said, rubbing his neck and cringing.

"It's a different perspective, eh?" Bill said, nudging him in the shoulder. "I'm not looking for sympathy. It's my life, and I love it regardless. Besides, how could you see it my way? You and Charlie have always been my reason for constant headaches."

"Us?" Ron asked.

"Don't act so surprised," Bill said, giving him a look. "If I wasn't worrying about you getting your head cursed off by Death Eaters, then I was worrying about Charlie getting his head burned off or breaking his neck while he preformed one of his 'most dangerous stunts' that he likes to do all the time."

Ron laughed, loving that he was somewhat like Charlie but also like Bill. Ron had always found the least in common with his eldest brothers. It felt good to know that he'd been wrong. Ron was enjoying being wrong a lot more often now. "I reckon we like to keep you agile."

"Yeah, well, that's why I'm keen on leaving for a few days," Bill said. "It'll most likely be after Ginny goes back to school. I want to be here in case she needs me."

"That's brilliant, Bill," Ron said, feeling more relieved.

"I told you that I know how to care for our sister," he said. He checked his watch. "You should probably get back home, Ron. I'd hate for you to miss your train. I'm about ready to suggest that you leave early."

"No, I want these last few moments," Ron said. He stood up, holding out his hand. "Thank you forâ€œ;being my dependable eldest brother, I reckon."

Bill shook his hand firmly. "It's why I'm here, Ron - for anything."

"I know," Ron said, understanding what he meant. "I'll get there, Bill. I'll tell the family."

"I'm holding you to that, Ron." Bill smiled. "I'm so proud of you. I told everyone at work about you going back. I can't wait to see how this turns out."

"Neither can I," Ron said. "I hope you enjoy that holiday with Fleur and, um, be safe."

"Always," Bill said. He walked Ron to the door.

"Bill?" Ron said. "Can I ask you something?" He nodded, giving him a curious look. Ron cleared his throat. "You told me the night I had my attack that you hoped I would start acting like a man. Do - do you think I have?"

Bill gave him a once-over. "Will my opinion change how you feel about yourself?"

Ron frowned, not understanding his question. "Bill?"

"It's okay, Ron," Bill said, patting his shoulder. "I reckon you've still got some growing up to do. I'm sure going back to Lambrick will help."

When Ron left Bill's, he walked down the beach, letting the sea lightly spray him with salty water and sand get into his trainers. He looked up at the clifftop. So much had happened there, in Bill's house, Hermione's, and at the Burrow in thirteen days. So many things had changed, stayed the same, or gotten better or worse. Ron needed to go home, but there was something more important that he wanted to do first. He apparated and appeared in the one place that could instantly drain him of all his happiness. Ron stuck his hands deep into his pockets as he walked past the stone plots and made it to the last English Elm.

He kneeled before the dark green marble, brushing a few leaves off his brother's plot. "Hi, Fred," he said. "We talked a little on Christmas but we really didn't talk, did we? I was mostly concerned about getting your twin back home."

Ron swallowed the lump in his throat as he let out a shaky breath. "We've got a lot to catch up on, eh? I told you before I left for Lambrick the first time that I would tell you everything that'd happened to me when I got the chance. It's late, but I finally have the chance. Before I do though, there's something I want to show you." He reached inside his cloak, pulling out the framed picture of him and Fred. He held it in front of Fred's plot as if he could see it. Ron knew he was a nutter, but this was his way of grieving. He wouldn't feel ashamed of it. "Yeah, it's brilliant, isn't it? Hermione gave it to me for Christmas. I remember this day perfectly. Weâ€¢!"

Ron spent time talking to Fred about all he'd experienced since leaving for camp the first time. He told him everything about Lambrick, his instructors, the people he'd met, and the things he'd done. Ron told Fred about his recent panic attacks, the Grangers, George, their family, Harry, and even about watching the movie Titanic. There was an honesty that simply flowed out of Ron as he gazed at his brother's grave, imaging Fred listening to him and understanding him. He'd never had that relationship with Fred when he was alive, but Ron liked to think that in death maybe he could develop a closeness to his brother that he hadn't felt before.

Ron finally stood up from Fred's grave, feeling slightly exhausted and miserable, but also lighter and more relaxed. Ron promised his brother that he would visit him again and that George would be okay. He kissed his hand than touched Fred's grave. He closed his eyes, feeling a bit of warmth in the cold, bleak cemetery. Ron believed that George was okay, and even though he and Fred couldn't do everything together anymore, Ron wanted to think that Fred was okay too, wherever he was. If George and Fred could still be all right after everything, then nothing should've been able to stop Ron. He disapparated back home, knowing that he wouldn't let anything stand in his way.

When he walked through the kitchen door of the Burrow, his parents were at the table, sipping tea and talking. "There you are, Ron," his dad said.

"I had a lot of stops to make," Ron said, sitting next to his mum at the table.

She touched his cheek. "Are you all right? Your eyes are wet and your face is a little red."

"Oh," he said, hastily wiping his face. "I'm okay. I just, um, I saw Fred before I came back here."

His mum smiled sadly at him. "It's good to hear you say that, Ron. I'm sure he appreciated you going to see him."

"I didn't want to leave him out," Ron said. His palms itched. He would be leaving incredibly soon but he still felt as if there was so much he wanted to tell his parents. Their past thirteen days had been so hard and heartbreaking, and it had hollowed them out. Ron needed for them to get better. He needed his dad's eyes to not look so tired, and he needed his mum's smile to brighten her face again. "Are you two going to be okay?"

"In what way do you mean, dear?" his mum asked.

"I just want to know if you two are feeling better now and if you're going to be okay," Ron said. "I'm going to be thinking about you everyday. We've been through a lot since I got home. I know you don't want me to worry about it so much, and I'll try, but I can't help myself." He shrugged. "I'm a Weasley and a Prewitt."

Ron was surprised when his dad chuckled a little. "You're one stubborn and amazing lad, Ron," he said. "Molly?"

"He gets the amazing from my side," his mum said, beaming at Ron.

His parents gazed at him as if he'd done something right again, but Ron wasn't sure what he'd done this time. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Ron, son," his dad said, "we're going to be okay. Every day we'll find the strength to make us even more okay than the day before."

"'Okay' is good?" Ron said.

His mum touched his cheek. "'Okay' isn't what I want but it's the best way to describe how we are as a family right now, and it's more than fine for now. Your father and I and this family will make it, Ron. You have to trust us."

"I do," Ron said.

"Now, I'll ask you the same thing," his mum said. "Ron, are you going to be okay at Lambrick?"

Ron didn't want to lie to her so he gave himself time to think about it. "I think as long as the family is getting healthier and George lets us know where he is every once in awhile, then I think I'll be all right. Lambrick's a scary place but I know that it's not the scariest thing I've encountered in my life."

"Oh, my boy," his mum said, taking his hand. "You're so grown up and you've learned and accomplished so much. No mother is prouder than I am."

"No parents are prouder than we are, Molly," his dad said. He reached across the table, nipping Ron's chin like Charlie always did. The gesture touched Ron deeply. "Ron, we want this opportunity for you. The only job you should worry about having right now is going to Lambrick. So go do it. Be an Auror, Ron. Excel in everything they throw at you, even if it takes you multiple tries."

His dad looked around before moving closer in. "Don't be afraid to kick a bloke in the bollocks."

"Arthur Weasley!" his mum said, hitting her arm.

Ron and his dad both laughed. "What?" his dad asked. "I've always said to take the shot if you can get it."

"I do, Dad," Ron said. "More often than I should."

"Can I at least suggest that you don't do that to Harry?" his mum asked.

Ron couldn't exactly tell her that he'd already broken Harry's nose at camp, so he merely shrugged. "I won't make any promises."

"Well, one thing you should promise is that you won't become afraid to come to us," his dad said. "You can write to us about anything. I don't care how many merges you make it through, we're still your parents. It's still our job, above anyone else's, to help you. You understand?" His dad looked at Ron with the same light blue eyes that he had. His mum gazed at him too, her brown eyes matching Ginny's exactly.

Ron knew that they were his parents and would always love him and try to understand. For a moment, he considered telling them about his attacks. He wanted to get the weight off his shoulders for good but he simply couldn't do it. Ron was getting better but he still wasn't where he needed to be. Ron still needed time. "I understand," he said instead. "I love you two so much."

"We love you, sweetheart," his mum said.

She kissed his cheek while his dad reached over again, ruffling his hair. Ron could only smile at them. One day he would stand before them, telling them the darkest spot in his life. It just wouldn't be today.

Ron slowly walked up the staircase to his room, realizing that in just a few hours he would be going back to Lambrick and finding a new place to call his room. He opened the door. Harry and Hermione were on his cot, sitting closely and talking. They both turned around.

"Ron," Hermione said.

"Hi," he said. He sat on his bed across from them. Ron and Hermione locked gazes for a moment, grinning softly at one another. "So," Ron said, "you all finished, Harry?"

"Yeah," he said in a heavy breath. "You?"

"There's no one left," he mumbled.

Ron rubbed his neck. This was always the hardest part for him. When the three of them were together, they were a force that breathed in the same rhythm. Breaking up always made Ron feel like they were losing some of their air supply.

"Is someone going to say something?" Hermione asked after awhile.

"Like what?" Harry said.

She gripped her necklace. "I don't know. You two are about to embark on your second half at Lambrick. That could be worth talking about."

"I'm honestly not really thinking about that right now," Harry said. "I reckon I'm saving that for the train ride. Right now I justâ€œI don't know." He frowned, looking down at his hands.

"You want to be in this moment," Ron said. "We're not going to have this for a long time."

"Yeah," Harry said, looking at him. "That's it exactly."

"I'm not going back to Lambrick but I can understand," she said. "I'll be going back to Hogwarts, once again, without you two. I'll see our pictures and hear our stories, but you won't be there. It's hard."

"So is being at camp without you," Ron said.

"Being away is hard for all of us," Harry said, "but it won't always be like this. We have a purpose for what we're doing. We're getting to some new point. Life can't always be about us splitting up."

"It won't be," Hermione said. "You and Ron will graduate and so will Ginny and I. Then we won't have to say goodbye all the time. That's why I wanted last night to mean something to the both of you. It can be like that after all this."

"It meant everything, Hermione," Harry said. "It's the most fun I've had in a long time."

"You're bloody incredible for making all that happen for us," Ron said. "Thank you so much."

"You don't have to thank me," she said. "It was something I wanted to do. You two have worked so hard and have achieved so much. You're in a place that not everyone can go to. Ron, come here." He instantly got up, sitting on the other side of Hermione. She looked at him then Harry, taking both of their hands. "I'll tell you both this for the rest of our lives: you two are my men. I'm so proud and honored that I have such fine Aurors-in-training as my best friends."

Harry gazed at her in the deep, tender way that Ron only saw Hermione bring out of him. "I want to make you proud, Hermione," Harry said. "You're the reason I'm still here. I want to show you that I'll always be around because of the things you've taught me." He then blushed, clearing his throat. "I love you, Hermione." Harry looked at Ron. "Ron, I love Hermione." Harry looked at Ron almost as if he was daring Ron to tell him that he wasn't allowed to.

"I know you do, mate," Ron said.

"I love you too, Harry." Hermione pulled him into a big hug and Harry closed his eyes.

Ron watched as his two best friends embraced. He didn't feel uncomfortable or upset. He felt touched. They appeared closer in a way that Ron had been too distracted by other things to realize. Ron had Ginny, so he knew how important a brother and sister relationship was to Harry and Hermione. They needed each other in ways that they didn't need Ron. As on edge as that made him sometimes, he didn't want to do anything to mess that up. His best mates deserved better than that.

They pulled away from each other. Hermione sniffling, resting back against Ron's chest. He immediately circled an arm around her waist while she took Harry's hand again.

"I love you too, Hermione," Ron said. "I love you both."

The three of them sat in silence again. No it couldn't and wouldn't always be like this for them. The three of them would get stronger as people and would come back together to become a stronger trio. They'd be a trio that could and would spend real time together and not feel the pressures of time or duty. Someday they could rebuild their small family together, making it better.

"Someday yeah?" Ron asked, hoping they'd understand.

"Someday," Hermione and Harry said together.

Ron grinned, taking in the moment of being around his best friends.

The day skipped ahead of Ron and he couldn't catch up to it. Before he knew it, the time on his train ticket almost matched the time on his watch. He had officially run out of time to be

with his family and enjoy peaceful moments with his friends. His parents gave Ron and Harry bone-crushing hugs and words of encouragement. Harry gave them a genuine smile, expressing his love and appreciation for them. When Ron finally let go of his mum, she kissed his cheek, swallowing hard. She would hold back her tears for him, so Ron decided to hold back his apprehension. His family would be okay. Everyone was getting better. As Ron, Hermione, Harry, and Ginny walked the dirt path, Ron turned around, looking at his house. He promised himself that he'd have his badge the next time he'd see it. It was a heavy promise, but Ron was up to the challenge.

The four of them apparated to the train station. It was just as loud and crowded as it had been when Hermione and Ginny had picked them up.

"Where are we, Harry?" Ron asked.

Harry squinted as he searched around the platform. "Down there," he said, pointing.

"We don't have a lot of time," Hermione said.

"Blame the prats," Ron said, gesturing to Ginny and Harry. "They wouldn't stop dry humping in Ginny's room."

"Oi," Harry said.

"He's just jealous, babe," Ginny said, hitting Ron. "Well, as always I'll start this off. Hermione, you take my man and I'll take yours." Ginny reached on her toes as much as she could to wrap her arms around Ron's neck. "Take care of yourself, yeah?"

"I will if you do," he said, holding her as tightly as he could. "Please, be okay."

"I will be," she said, letting go. "I'm stronger than I look, Ron. I know I have my moments, but I'm still strong."

Ron smiled, touching her face for a moment before tugging on a strand of her hair. "You sound like me."

"You're not that special, brother," she said, grinning at him and looking like George. "Write to me, Ron."

"As soon as I can spare a moment," he said. "Pay attention in class. I say that only so you can make good enough grades to stay Quidditch captain."

"Trust me, that's my only goal," Ginny said. She tapped Hermione's shoulder. She was still in an embrace with Harry.

"I know. I'm hurrying," Hermione said, letting go. "It's just that this is the last time we could possibly see them before they graduate, Ginny."

"It won't be that long," Ron said, feeling another pang hit his chest.

"Yeah, we'll let you two know as soon as we get some sort of schedule," Harry said.

"I really don't care about your schedule right now," Ginny said, grabbing Harry's collar.

He smirked like a prat, grasping her hips. "Um, can you two look after my bags for a moment?"

"You're taking the piss," Ron dully said.

"It'll just be for a second," Ginny said, pulling Harry's hand and getting lost somewhere in the crowd.

"Curious," Hermione said, "I thought we were the—"

"Nope. They've always been worse than us," Ron said. He looked at her; she looked right back up at him. Suddenly, he didn't want to move. "Hermione?"

"I'm right here, Ron," she said.

He touched her cheek. "I - I think I'm scared."

"So am I," she said. "What you're leaving for now and what I'll be leaving for soon is going to impact everything in our lives. I think we should be scared."

"It's just so many bloody changes," he said, rubbing his face in frustration.

"You know what's never going to change?" she asked, pulling his hands away from his face.

"What?"

"Us being there for each other," she said. "It doesn't matter what else happens, we'll always have each other." Hermione rose on her feet, holding onto his neck. Ron closed his eyes, trying to block out everything that wasn't Hermione's touch or smell. So much had happened in thirteen days but they were still together, holding each other - like they always would.

It gave Ron a comfort that he desperately needed. "That's what I need, Hermione. I need you."

"You have me," she whispered.

"I'll write, I promise," Ron said. "I'll think about you all the time as I make myself stronger. I'll bloody fight for you, Hermione. I'll make you proud."

"You already do," she said. "Just continue to let yourself feel and not be so hard on yourself, sweetheart. I'll think about you too - you'll always be on my mind as I make myself better."

He intertwined their fingers, memorizing every curve of her hands. "I promise that we'll see each other soon. I'll make it work somehow."

"I know you will," she said, looking a bit worried. "I trust you." Ron couldn't take it anymore. He bent down, kissing her. They held each other and nothing else existed. It was like being on Hermione's couch with her again. Or the night they had sex, slowly and gently on his bed. Or even last night, when they'd talked and Hermione had taken him for the first time in her pink frills. Ron absorbed every bit of the memories and sensations. He would need them.

Hermione finally pulled away. "I love you, Ron, and things will improve for all of us. Remember that if you can't breathe."

"I'll try as bloody hard as I can," he said. "I love you, Hermione. I promise that I'll be the man you need, whether I'm standing right next to you or countries away."

She nodded, touching his chest. "I can feel it."

"You're my fucking everything, 'Mione."

"Ron," Harry said, tapping his shoulder. "Sorry, but we really have to go."

Ron groaned slightly in frustration as he noticed once again that people surrounded them. He needed more time. Something had to give him more time with Hermione.

"Oh! Wait!" Hermione said. "I forgot, again."

"Forgot what?" Ginny asked.

"This," Hermione said, pulling a camera out of her bag. Ron, Harry, and Ginny groaned. "Hush and stand around me," she ordered. "We don't have a lot of time, but I want two."

"Two?" Ron asked. "Bloody hell, 'Mione."

"Hush, Ronald!" Hermione said. "Okay, I want one with me, Harry, Ron, and Ginny standing in that order right now. Come on! Come on!" The four of them bunched together as Hermione held her camera out. "On three. One, two, three." Ron did his best to smile, but he felt awkward.

"Can we go now?" Harry asked.

"No!" Hermione said, flushing and appearing stressed. "Just one more."

"Right, I'm sure they'll be able to tell their trainers that they deserve a late pass because they had to take one more," Ginny said.

"Oi," Ron said, realizing that these pictures meant more to Hermione than she'd say. "Hermione did everything for us yesterday. The least we can do is stand for a bloody picture."

Hermione stood a little taller. "Thank you, Ron."

"Anything for you, love," he said. "How should we pose in this one?"

"Right," Hermione said. "Umâ€;me, you, Ginny, Harry." Ron felt a bit better about this pose. He encircled his arms around Hermione and, right as she said three, he kissed her quickly on the side of the mouth. "Ronald!"

He laughed. "Sorry, I couldn't help myself."

"If that doesn't come out rightâ€;"

"It'll be fine, Hermione," Ginny said in irritation. "Send Ron a Howler over it tomorrow. The boys have to go."

"Oh, all right," Hermione muttered. She and Ginny walked Ron and Harry over to their train.

"Take care of each other," Ginny said.

"We will if you two do," Harry said.

"We promise," Hermione said. "Be safe boys."

"Ron?" Harry said.

"I know, Harry. I'm coming," Ron said. He kissed Hermione once more then pulled on Ginny's hair. "We'll be back and we'll be bloody Aurors, yeah?"

"Of course you will," Ginny said. "Harry?"

"I know," Harry said, gazing at her. "I'll never be too far either. Bye you two. We'll see you soon."

Harry practically had to drag Ron away and into the train. Ron felt horribly sick and uncomfortable in his own skin. Something didn't feel right. He began to itch and fidget in his seat.

"What's the matter with you?" Harry asked.

"This isn't right, Harry," Ron said, almost feeling the need to vomit.

"What â€" you don't want to go back?" he asked incredulously.

"It's not like that," Ron said. "Look, just save my seat and don't let this train leave without me."

"Where the fuck are you going?" Harry asked.

"I don't feel so good," Ron said.

He got out of his seat, swiftly leaving the train. He checked his watch. He knew that he had no time left so he recklessly searched around. He wouldn't be able to go back until the sickness disappeared.

"Ron?"

He closed his eyes, turning around. When he saw bushy hair, he at once felt relief. "Hermione." They walked up to each other, holding each other tightly. "I was bloody nauseous."

"I was too," she said. "Something just wouldn't let me disapparate." He shivered at how good it felt to hear that. When Ron wasn't okay, Hermione wasn't okay. Their connection was as simple and as powerful as that.

"Thank you for these thirteen days, Hermione," he said against her hair. "No matter what they were like, I'm glad I had them with you. I'm glad you gave me five events, three days of rest, and however number of times we kissed and talked and had each other."

"You're welcome," she said, pulling away. "Thank you for allowing me to see your family for what it really is and inspiring me to get better." She opened her mouth again exactly as the train's whistle blew.

"Bollocking twat!" Ron said stomping his foot. "I â€“ I have to go."

"I know," she said.

Ron cupped her face, giving her one last hard, powerful kiss. "I'm your bloody knight, Hermione. I'm gonna show everyone in that fucking camp what I can do."

She smiled, giving his arse a light smack. "Then go do it. Show them what a powerful and sexy knight such as yourself can accomplish. Kick their bollocks in."

"Hermione Granger just said bollocks," Ron said. "I reckon the world can explode now."

"Hush and go," she said, pushing him away.

He kissed her hand. "Bye, Hermione."

"Bye, Ron," she said. "Take care of Harry and let him take care of you. I love you."

"I love you too and I will. You do the same with Ginny."

Ron waved to her before running back on the train. He got one last glimpse of her smile and bushy hair and the sickness completely vanished. He made it back to his seat across from Harry.

"Were you able to get one in?" Harry asked, smirking.

"Even I'm not that great," Ron said.

"Are you two all right?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. We're fine," he said with confidence.

The train finally started to move and left the station. Ron watched the city pass him by, signaling that he was once again leaving everything behind. He stared down at his ticket. He was going back to Lambrick without the people still at the Burrow, the Ministry, or Bill's cottage. Ron looked up at Harry who was cleaning his glasses. Well, Ron wouldn't be completely alone. It seemed as if nothing could keep him and Harry from being side-by-side.

"Harry?"

He looked up. "Yeah?"

Ron wasn't sure what he was trying to say so he tried not to think about it. He wanted to be honest. "We're going back to Lambrick together."

"We are," Harry said.

Ron nodded. "We made it to the merge. There isn't an east or west anymore."

"Exactly," Harry said. "We're all competing for those same few spots. You and me â€“ competing."

Ron didn't know what that would mean for them. "I know there's going to be people watching us, waiting for us to show any weakness toward each other."

"I've been thinking about this since October," Harry said darkly.

"I'll tell you now, I'll fight you for a spotâ€¦but I'd rather I didn't have to," Ron said. "If there are only two chairs at the end, then I want our arses in them. Fucking hell, if the one chair is big enough then we can share."

Harry chuckled a little but Ron could easily see the seriousness in his features. "It's not going to be that simple, Ron. We've been best mates for seven years, fighting evil together for just as long. I'm dating your sister, and I more or less live in your house. People know these things. There are targets already on our backs, Ron, but showing up together is going to make them bigger."

Some of Ron's sickness came back. "Everyone is gonna hope that we'll break."

"They don't know you, me, or what we've been through," Harry said. "The best are going to make it to the end. That means you and me." He held out his hand. "You and me, Ron. We promised a

couple of girls awhile back that we'd stay as we are. I'd like to think that I'm a man of my word. You?"

Ron grinned at him, shaking his hand firmly back. "Let's make it to chairs one and two, eh?"

They nodded to each other, swearing right then and there that they'd stay as they were. Ron knew that he and Harry would always be mates but he didn't know how Lambrick would once again push them as a duo. He also didn't know what the other trainees would do to possibly sabotage them.

Ron had learned that even simple things such as Christmas morning, typewriters, and honesty could sometimes be incredibly difficult. He had no idea how he would fare at the one place that prided itself for how tough it was. Ron thought about his family and Hermione. He'd prove to them that he could be better regardless of what happened at camp. Hermione's voice came into his mind, kindly telling him that things could be easy. Ron looked up at Harry who was staring out the window, completely lost in the scenery that passed by.

Ron's holiday had taught him that, yes, things could be easy but, more often than not, they wouldn't be.

* * *

**** I think it important to remember that life only moves forward and you can't change the speed. Nothing in real life is perfect and that's what makes life so beautiful. If nothing came without struggle, then nothing could ever be appreciated or cherished. My story, in this time, is about being reborn from the ashes of grief/loss/ hatred/uncertainty/death/tears ect. and using elements such as love/trust/devotion/family/friendship/courage ect. to find one's way and become something more. I don't mean to get all philosophical and spiritual but I can't help but feel that, not just for Ron, but also for everyone who survived. This is Ron's story. His deliverance. However, I've never forgotten about his friends and family. They make mistakes too. They still have to learn things about themselves and they have to improve and find themselves - Post-Everything.

As for R/Hr: it's not always going to be 'right' or 'on time' or 'as expected' but it IS going to BE and that 'be' will always BE something more â€“ something special and perfect in it's own way. Everything is one day at a time. It could seem as a lot to expect from a couple of teenagers but, because this is Ron and Hermione we're talking about, I think it's possible. In fact, I know it's destiny.

Ron&Hermione Always: The Good. The Bad. The Ugly. The Beautiful.

Anyway, so, I really hope you lot enjoyed this chapter! It was so much bloody fun to write! Thanks for reading and REVIEW! It's time for LAMBRICK people! :P

CHEERS!

* Chapter 45*: Reunion

Thank you all for the reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

As the sky turned dark and the train brought Ron and Harry closer and closer to their destination, the two of them, with difficulty, swallowed their concern and suspicion over how the other trainees would perceive them. They had advanced to the merge; that alone was enough reason to smile, feel accomplished, and enjoy the peaceful moment that they were in.

Their conversation turned from mutiny to curiosity over the new lessons they would learn and who would teach them. Ron's worry and slight dread subsided as he spoke to Harry animatedly, whereas Harry relaxed in his seat, nodding vigorously to all the ideas Ron came up with regarding their stay at Lambrick. The more they talked, the better Ron felt. He knew things wouldn't be easy but he had to accept that reality. It would be the only way he'd survive.

By the time they arrived to the Newport train station, Ron's plan to not fret had worked. He felt exactly as he had the first time he'd arrived: ecstatic, excited, and completely out of his mind with nervousness. He got off the train then collected his bags. He looked around the station, practically feeling the presence of Lambrick. Ron's heart skipped a beat as everything gradually started to hit him. He was really back. It hadn't been a dream. After so much uncertainty and regret, Ron was finally back where he wanted and needed to be. He felt a stinging sensation around his eyes but he no longer felt comfortable letting the emotion go. Ron was a trainee again.

"We're finally here," Harry said, somewhat breathlessly. "You got everything, mate?"

Ron knew that he did, but he took a moment to think about it. He wasn't at the Burrow or Hermione's anymore. He was back at camp. Ron would be treated differently, causing him to act differently. This was his second chance - his last chance - to prove himself in front of his instructors. To do so, Ron would need courage, strength, intellect, speed, and heart. He would be pushed, and he needed the power to push back hard. He would need to be a person he'd promised Hermione, his family, and himself that he'd be. Yes, these were the things that Ron needed to have with him when he walked through the gates of Lambrick Academy, however, judging

by the way Ron's body was already calming down a bit at seeing the determination in Harry's expression and hearing the care in his voice, something told Ron that what he would probably need the most was his best mate at his side. It was just the two of them again. They had to make it to chairs one and two.

"I got everything," Ron said. "You?"

Harry nodded, exhaling deeply. "I think so. We're gonna do this, yeah?"

"We have to," Ron said. "I mean that, Harry. Lambrick is a big deal but it's not bigger than giant chessboards, Death Eaters, and possessed lockets. You get what I'm saying?" Ron hoped that Harry did. He wanted to be honest with Harry, but he didn't have the words right now to tell Harry how strong their friendship was and always had to be. To his relief, Harry nodded, grinning a little.

"I understand, Ron," he said. "Nothing could ever be bigger than all that, not even this place. We're both here, so let's be here. This is just another bloody thing we have to do to get what we want." Harry held out his hand to Ron. "Um, go Dream Team?"

Ron laughed, shaking his hand firmly. "I thought you hated labels?"

"I do, but if it'll boost our morale!" Harry said with a shrug.

Ron shrugged as well. "Go bloody Dream Team then."

Harry gave him a nod then took another deep breath. He pulled out his extension letter, skimming over it. "We're supposed to go to the gate. Do you remember how to get there?"

"Yeah, it's this way, come on," Ron said.

He mentally nodded to himself, then led them away from the station. Just as before, they followed the directions past the bridge where the magical barrier between the Muggle world and Lambrick Academy was located. Ron's heart beat a little faster with each step he took while his stomach knotted. He told himself to calm down. He was in the merge; no one could take that away from him. Then again, he knew that he wasn't entirely worried for himself. Ron began to wonder who would be joining him and Harry in the integrated group.

"Who do you reckon made it with us?" Ron asked as they continued to walk to the gate.

"I dunno," Harry said. "I've been thinking about it all day. There are a couple of people from my section who I know had to have made it, then there's a few who I hope never to see again."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Ron said, his mind jumping straight to a git with perfectly wavy hair. "Um, do you think Letty made it?"

"Most likely," Harry said, taking the map from Ron and looking over it. "She was one of the best in my section."

Ron rubbed his neck. "Hmm," was all he could say.

"I reckon we'll find out soon enough. There's the marker," Harry said, pointing to the stone carving near a tree. He stopped, adjusting his bag on his shoulder. "Are you ready? Things will be different again when we walk over that hill."

Ron gripped the handle of his bag. Though he had gone through so much change already, it was never something that Ron was very good at accepting. He knew, however, that it was necessary: it was how George was going to get better; it was also how he and Hermione would grow stronger.

"Yeah, I'm ready," Ron said confidently. "Let's go."

They walked over the grassy hill. Ron looked straight ahead, seeing it. The tall, wiry black gate that stretched across the entire length of Lambrick's property was there, only this time there wasn't a line of people waiting on the outside of it. Just beyond that, he could see Lambrick Headquarters. Seeing the building sent a whomping sensation right to Ron's head, like he'd been hit with a bludger.

"Fucking hell," he breathed. "We're really here."

Passion and excitement flourished in his body. He couldn't believe that he'd been ready to give all this away, even if it would've been for his family. Ron could already feel his hands callusing and his muscles growing firmer. No matter how much Ron had suffered through or hated Lambrick at times, nothing else in his life gave him this level of ruggedness and grit.

When they arrived at the gate, they once again had to produce their Patronus then sign in. Ron didn't really have to think about anything to produce his yappy and energetic Jack Russell. Happiness was practically dripping from him. As his dog disappeared around his ankles, Ron signed his name on the arrival sheet. Looking at his short and hasty signature from October made him grin. So much had happened since then. He remembered having to split up with Harry then find his way over to the east section, but Ron wouldn't have to do that this time. He walked past the gate to find Harry waiting for him. Harry smiled at him; Ron smiled back. They merely nodded at each other before walking into Lambrick Academy â€“ together this time. There were no words to describe what doing this meant, but Ron knew that they didn't need them.

Their instructions told them to wait right in front of the training building. Ron peered around the grassland. He gazed at all the pockets of trees he had leaned against due to fatigue or nausea. Ron studied the awful dark wooden cabins that he was more than ready to never set foot into again.

Harry nudged him. "Ron."

Ron looked ahead to the old square building that was made from grey stone. He had seen the six-story construction every day during his first stay, but he was finally going to go inside.

There were people standing outside the building with bags at their feet. The crowd was a lot smaller than Ron had thought it would be. He checked his watch. There wasn't a lot of time left before the gates would close. Ron looked around but didn't see any of the instructors or trainees that he had been hoping to see. "Where's Phillip?" he asked Harry.

"Dunno. I reckon he's probably watching us somewhere, waiting to make a grand entrance," Harry said. He squinted head. "Ah, I think I see Eric. I'll be right back."

"I'll be here," Ron said.

Harry walked into the crowd; eyes seemed to follow him. Ron saw the same eyes look back at him, but he wouldn't let it bother him. Ron took a survey of the group of people, letting their chatter and various accents excite him more. There were people from his section that he recognized. He dropped his bags, bouncing on his heels. Ron stopped, however, when he heard an arrogant guffaw coming from the front of the group. His eyes searched around the crowd until he saw the top of someone's head. The hair was wavy, dark brown, and more perfect than Percy's bed back at the Burrow.

A short and stocky bloke with blond hair casually stood next to him. "Nah, your eyes aren't pulling your plonker. Jacky boy, the cocksucker, is back. So is his sodding hair."

"Conor!" Ron said. He held out his hand. Conor shook it, yanking him into a one-armed hug. "It's so great to see you, mate."

"Yeah, you too," Conor said. "I knew they wouldn't be able to turn you down, Ron. Beasts never stay dead."

Ron chuckled, feeling some of his worry settle. Conor was one of the people Ron had fervently hoped would return. "Ta. I reckon I can say the same about you, eh?"

Conor shrugged, not looking too happy. "I reckon. I'm here again."

Ron wasn't sure how to take the comment. It sounded as if Conor wasn't excited to be back. Ron shook off the feeling. Of course the bloke wanted to be back. Everyone that was standing around the building was there because he or she wanted to be.

"Did you have a nice holiday?" Ron asked, wanting to change to subject.

Conor's discomfort only seemed to increase. "It was fine. Yours?"

"Same," Ron muttered.

The two looked at each other for a moment then moved their gazes away. 'Fine' didn't begin to describe Ron's holiday. He was sure the same went for Conor. Though, he also knew that they wouldn't press the matter with each other.

"So," Conor said, clearing his throat. "I reckon Harry is here?"

"'Course," Ron said. "He's talking to a mate from west - I mean 'the group'."

"No, you were right the first time," Conor said. "Haven't you noticed that we're all still more or less in our sections? It's not even a conscious decision on our part. We've been conditioned to keep to our own. Speaking of which, I should tell Ben you're here."

"Ben?" Ron said, grinning.

"Yeah, he's here," Conor said.

He patted Ron's arm then walked away. Ron felt a bit more weight leave his shoulders. Ron was one of the taller people at camp, so he could see over most people's heads. He kept looking around but didn't see who he wanted to see. The time kept ticking forward while less and less trainees added to the group. He searched around the entire crowd of people again, picking at his nails. Ron was sure that the gates would seal any moment now. A small pit began to form in his chest; he couldn't help but lose some of his bliss.

"Oi."

Ron stopped fidgeting, closing his eyes. A smile spread across his face as he turned around, finally relaxing.

"Oi," he breathed.

Olivia Young stood in front of him with her bags at her feet and a hand on her hip. She was smirking at him. Ron felt the pit in his chest disappear. He could finally admit to himself that, most of all, he'd been worried about her not showing up.

"I'm surprised you're here, Weasley," she said sarcastically.

"Not as surprised as I am to see you back, Young," Ron cheeked. "I reckon they'll let any 'ole bugger in here these days." They stepped toward each other.

Olivia wiggled in place for a second. "Congratulations, Ron! It's so fantastic to see you again."

"Congratulations to you too," Ron said. "I'm really glad you're here."

"So am I," she said. She took her hair tie out, letting her choppy black locks flow around her face. "I can't believe I'm here. I can't believe we're both here at Lambrick again."

"I told you that we would both come back," he said, picking up the scent of her hair.

"Yeah, you did. I reckon I really can trust you now." She chewed on the side of her lip, holding out her hand to him.

Ron merely stared at her hand thickly for a moment. Something didn't seem right. "We're friends, right?"

She gave him a curious look, lowering her hand. "Yes. I hope so."

He shrugged. "Well, that's a bit formal, yeah? I mean we're bloody back at Lambrick Academy. We've made it to the fucking merge!"

Olivia laughed, nodding. "I guess you're right. We've made it to the bloody fucking merge!"

She stepped forward as Ron held out his arms. She embraced him around the shoulders while Ron hugged her upper back, giving her shoulder blade a pat. They pulled away; Olivia's cheeks were faintly pink. She looked down, shaking her head.

Ron couldn't help but to laugh. "You're too easy to read. Just tell me."

"It's nothing justâ€¦well, I don't want you to take the piss or interpret this the wrong way butâ€¦" Olivia looked down once again then back up at him, snapping her hair tie on her wrist. "I dunnoâ€¦Iâ€œI think I missed you a little over the holiday. I know that's-"

"No â€œ no, it's fine," Ron rushed. "I, ah, I think I felt the same way about you."

His statement was true. He'd thought about her a few times over his break. Olivia was a good mate; Ron enjoyed her company. Olivia's face flushed a bit more as she bounced on her heels again.

"Olivia!" Ben said as he and Conor came over to them. Ron might've been imagining it but, for a moment, Olivia's happiness seemed to fade.

"Hi, Ben, Conor!" she said, immediately smiling wide. Conor shook her hand whereas Ben gave her a hug.

"I'm glad you lot are back," she said.

"Yeah, it's really good to see you," Ben said, eying her closely. He gave her a smile that brightened up his dark brown skin. He then quickly turned to Ron. "You too," he said, almost as an afterthought.

Ron didn't take offense to it. He was just relieved to have everyone back. "Same here." He couldn't believe who surrounded him. These were the people he had gotten to know the best and had wanted to see the most. He felt so lucky and excited to have them

back in his life but he didn't know how to tell them that. Ron rubbed his neck. "Wow, we're some of the best, eh?" Conor opened his mouth but a haughty throat clearing interrupted him.

Jack Turner walked over, crossing his arms over his chest. "Fancy that - it's like a little east reunion."

"Hello Jack," they all grumbled.

Jack smiled, straightening his jumper then touching his flawless hair that Ron was already fed up with. "Congratulations to you all."

"You too, mate," Ben said, patting his arm. He was the only one of them who got on with Jack.

"Conor, it's nice to see you," Jack said. "Olivia, it's always a pleasure."

Ron could tell that she was suppressing an eye roll. "I'm sure," she said.

"And Weasley," Jack said.

Ron sighed. Jack had certainly been one of the people he wouldn't have minded never seeing again. Yet, at the same time, knowing that he would be competing against Jack gave Ron more incentive to improve. "And Turner," he droned.

"You and Potter; I had a feeling it'd be too tempting for them to keep you away," Jack said.

"What about me?" Harry said, appearing suddenly and standing next to Ron.

Ron smirked. "Please - continue, Jack."

Jack looked between the two of them. "Nothing at all," he said, straightening his jumper again. "I was only voicing an opinion. Everyone knows you two are here."

"We all know that we're all here," Conor said.

"I get what he means," Ben said. "I was one of the first people to arrive. Everyone has been talking about you two lads and which one would show up."

"Well the both of us are here now, so the whispering can stop," Harry said, staring at Jack boldly even though he was a lot smaller than him.

"You're more than welcome to pass that information along, Jack," Ron added, loving that he could feel some of his old fire coming back.

It only took about another five minutes before the last stragglers walked through the black gates and they sealed themselves. It was rather dark now; everyone had his or her wand

lit. The doors to the main building at last opened. Their group went silent. Ron's heart skipped a beat as Phillip Smith, Alan Lewis, and Richard Jones walked out. His palms started to itch, and he felt a little dizzy. Ron was really back. The awareness, anticipation, and nervousness began to smother him.

Phillip smiled. Seeing his grey hair and hefty physique under his black robes made Ron think back to the night of his examination. He shook off the feeling. Phillip had asked him to return so none of that mattered anymore.

"Before we get started this evening," Phillip said, "I first want to welcome you all back to Lambrick Academy. Congratulations trainees!"

Everyone clapped and cheered. Ron closed his eyes. Everyone standing around him felt the same exhilaration and sense of accomplishment that he did. It was an uplifting sensation.

Phillip raised his hands to quiet everyone down. "Yes, yes, the staff and I did not take our selections flippantly. Year after year, choosing who makes it to the merging stage is always one of the toughest decisions that has to be made. We only want to expose the very best to our magic, and we only want the most capable to trudge through the vigorous obstacles needed to become an Auror."

Phillip began to pace in front of their group, staring each of them down. "We started off with sixty applicants before narrowing it down to the final forty. Now, there are only twenty-three of you left."

"Did he say twenty-three?" Conor whispered.

"Yes, Mr. Neary," Phillip said, "you heard that right. You twenty-three are who we wanted to continue to this second half because of your physical, magical, and intellectual proficiencies. Nonetheless, don't expect the people to the left and right of you to be here on the final day. By the end of this term, we expect to cut twenty-three in half, if not considerably more."

"That's right, boys and girls," Richard said, his dark eyes gleaming as a look of humor spread across his brown face. "You've made it to the merge but you haven't really 'made it' anywhere. You're almost back at square one again. It's a new day, a new half, and new challenges will determine who will make it to the final group in a few months. None of you have a guaranteed spot. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," they all said at once. Ron felt the hair on his arms stand on end. Suddenly, making it to the merge didn't seem like such a great accomplishment.

"To add on to that," Alan said "Ron's heart skipped another fifteen beats at hearing his voice" "we want to make it clear that you lot should remember what 'merge' means. There are twelve of you here from Richard's old group and eleven of you from mine.

That doesn't mean anything though because you all will be living and learning as an integrated unit. Make sure that you have that notion locked in your brains before we head inside."

Ron, Olivia, and Conor all exchanged the same look. They knew damn well that there would be animosity within the one group. Ron also knew that no matter what, he and his camp mates from east would belong to Alan, just as the trainees from west belonged to Richard.

"Very well put, gentlemen," Phillip said, nodding to them. "I've been head advisor here long enough to know that you all will have your biases, but it's important to know that we won't." He pointed to the building behind him. "It's even more essential to know that once you step foot into this building, you lot are officially merged. Back in October, you were told about this training facility and the respect you will have for it. The respect begins now with you lot respecting each other. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," they all said.

Phillip's demeanor softened a little. "All right, grab your bags and let's take a tour." Everyone quickly hoisted their things over their shoulders then formed a line to walk inside the building.

Ron was taken aback by what he saw. Lambrick Headquarters on the outside was nothing like the inside. While the building did look rather ancient, everything about it was spectacular. The floors were a beautiful, rich wood. The walls were made of dark wood as well. The staircases were grand and marble, the vast amount of windows all had cream and red curtains, and there were even a few fireplaces in various common rooms, which had comfortable looking furniture inside. It was like a very large, posh house or boarding school. Phillip spoke about the history of the building as he led them around the classrooms, living spaces, offices, and canteens. The building was warm, had a nice, fresh smell to it, and amplified a sense of comfort. This was going to be a welcomed change from the drafty and cramped cabins Ron had grown accustomed to. The best part about the building was the huge training room in the middle of the first floor. It was big enough to run, fly, and duel inside. He couldn't wait to step inside.

Phillip ushered them back to the front door, clasping his hands together. "All right, my office and living space is on the third floor. If you have any personal inquiries that only I can address, feel free to come see me. It's the first door on the left. Otherwise, I am going to turn things over to your section leaders. Goodnight everyone, and welcome back." He gave them a bow then walked up the staircase.

Once Phillip was out of sight, Alan cross his arms over his chest while Richard gave them all a wicked grin. "Nice place, eh?" Richard asked. Ron wasn't sure if it was a rhetorical question or not, so he didn't respond. "Do you pickles care to see where you'll be staying?" Once more, everyone was silent.

"Your superior asked you a question!" Alan barked.

"Yes, sir!" they all promptly responded.

"Let's get to it then," Richard said. Their group followed Richard and Alan through a narrow corridor. They traveled down a small staircase to a poorly lit and musty section of the house. There were no windows, paintings, or furniture in this hallway, only six wooden doors. The corridor wasn't fresh and welcoming like the rest of the building: the dirty, chipped walls were painted pea green and there was mold in the corners of the ceiling. Even the grey floor, which was made of concrete, seemed to be slickened with wetness and dirt. Everything about the hall was moist, cold, and stale. It was like being in the dungeons at Hogwarts â€“ only worse.

Richard inhaled and exhaled deeply as if the smell of the spicy mildew was appealing. "Welcome to Trainee Ruins. This is where you lot will be staying until we feel you're ready to experience the fruits of Lambrick Headquarters."

Jack raised his hand, appearing alarmed. "Excuse me, sir?"

"What is it, Turner?" Alan asked.

"I thought we had earned our place," Jack said. "What is this?"

"Is this bloke taking the piss?" Harry asked in Ron's ear. Ron could only shake his head. He was beyond horrified and had no words to describe what dire straits they were now in.

"You have earned your place," Richard said. "You've made it inside, however, none of us ever said anything about what you would get once you secured a spot in here."

"Let me explain something to you lot," Alan said. "There are twenty-three of you. That's still far too many in our eyes. For most of you, the tour you received tonight will be the closest you'll ever come to experiencing this facility in its entirety. Trainee Ruins is your new home. It's where Richard and I stayed until we earned a real room upstairs â€“ same for Mr. Smith and every person who has trained here. It's now where you lot will live until you've shown us that you deserve extras."

"By 'extras','' Richard chimed in, "we mean things like warmth, proximity, and real toilets." He looked around at all of them. "Oh, I can see you all are still confused. Well, let me put it to you bluntly: you lot are only allowed to sleep in this building and visit Mr. Smith if you need to. Other than that, you will still eat, train, wash, and even piss out in the cabins." Ron's shoulders slumped; he could hear a few sighs and groans around him.

"Don't whine as if you deserve better," Alan said intensely. "We're only allowing you to sleep in here because sleep is a basic necessity but also because fatigue is a weakness. We want you lot to remember the weakness you still have to overcome and how basic you still are as trainees. Just like before though, you

will be granted an opportunity to prove that you deserve to leave Trainee Ruins. Yes?"

"Yes, sir," all the trainees said.

Alan nodded to Jack. "Does that answer your question, Turner?"

"Yes, sir," he said.

"Good. I think it's fitting now for you to apologize to Mr. Jones for your rudeness," Alan said.

"Yes, sir," Jack said. He turned to Richard. "Mr. Jones, I'm sorry for my outburst."

"Duly noted, Turner," Richard said. "Moving on, because you lot are merged, we will be integrating the new room assignments—"

"Can I say something first, Rich?" Alan asked him.

Richard shrugged. "Sure."

Alan stepped forward, glaring at the group with his stern and fairly cold grey eyes. "I want to make something very clear: you lot will be living in this corridor and in bedrooms one through six. That means all twenty of you blokes and you three women will be living together. It's extremely important that you remember why you're here. There will be a curfew for when we expect you lot to be in your rooms. Richard and I are located on the second floor but it'll take us no time to get down here."

"I reckon what Alan is politely trying to say is that Trainee Ruins is governed by the three F's: no fussing, no fighting, and no fornicating," Richard said smoothly. "So control your urges and keep your genitals in your trousers. A few moments of groping won't be worth your exit slip. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," everyone said.

Ron didn't know why but his face felt awfully warm. He couldn't imagine anyone trying to get away with shagging at Lambrick or why a person would even want to. Then again, if he had to live across from Hermione but was never allowed to touch her, then he'd probably be one of the daft blokes who got chucked out for trying to sneak into the girls' room at night.

"Thank you for that, Richard," Alan said, scrunching up his face a little. "So, as discussed earlier, we've integrated your new living space, putting four people in each room. Richard is going to call out your names and your room numbers. Everything you've sent ahead has already been placed in your rooms. Get settled in quickly because it's almost lights out. Your training begins in the morning."

"Young, Grace, Clark: I'm sure you ladies already know you're roommates," Richard said, looking to his clipboard. "You'll be in room six. It's at the end of the hall on the right. The rest of the groups are as followsâ€¢!"

"I'll see you blokes later," Olivia said, heaving her bags over her shoulders.

"Try your best not to fuss, fight, or fornicate, eh?" Ben said with a smirk.

"Oh, you're really clever," Olivia said sarcastically, hitting his leg with her bag. "I'd say the same to you but I heard that you and Conor—"

"Oi, don't bring me into this," Conor said.

She laughed. "All right, I'm done. Goodnight." She gave them an exaggerated curtsey then walked down the hall.

"She's cool," Harry said, looking after her.

"Yeah, she is," Ron said.

"Turner and Weasley," Richard said, "you'll be in room four: first door on the right."

Conor snorted loudly. "Ha! You're with Jack again, Ron!"

"You're taking the bollocking piss," Ron groaned as his worst nightmare came to life. "N-no â€“ no. Conor â€“ you're in room four with me - not him." He wasn't sure if he could live with Jack again, listening to his stories about his pristine family or watching as he straightened all his training clothes the night before. Ron moved his eyes to Jack; Jack glared right back at him.

"Hill and Potter," Richard continued, "you two will also be in room four." Jack's glare faded as the corridor went considerably quiet. Ron looked at Harry. Harry's gaze found his for a second.

Harry cleared his throat. "Sir? Did you say that I was in room four?"

"Yes, I did, Potter," Richard said. "You'll be in there with Hill, Turner, and Weasley." Ron was taken aback. He was very pleased and excited that he would share a room with Harry, but he couldn't believe that they were even allowed to be roommates because of their close relationship. Ron knew that enough attention was already on them, so he wasn't sure if Alan and Richard were purposely trying to add more tension to the group. He decided to act indifferent about the situation. He and Harry would get a chance to be relieved later.

"Is that going to be a problem, Potter?" Alan asked.

"No, sir," Harry quickly said. "Just looking for clarification."

"Well, now that you're clarified, how about you four get unpacked before lights out?" Alan said.

"Come on then," Ron said, walking across the hall and opening the door to their new room. The moment he stepped inside, Ron missed his old cabin. The walls, ceiling, and floor were mirror images of the hallway. Even the chill and moistness was in the room. Their old metal cots had only one small pillow and a very thin blanket. There was also one tiny window but it didn't look as if it opened. Everything about the room was dank and tatty. Ron rubbed his nose, hoping that he'd never get used to the slight sour odor of the room.

"This is worse than I thought it would be," Eric Hill said as he dumped his stuff on one of the beds. Eric was one of the few people from west who Ron sort of knew. They'd trained numerous times together during field practice because they were both tall and fairly lanky. Eric was black, had a somewhat hardened exterior, but was decent enough. All Ron really knew about him was that he was moderately good mates with Harry and had been one of the only people from west to treat Harry like a human and not an object.

"I think it's worse than everyone thought it would be, Eric," Harry said, placing his things on the bed across from him. Ron put his stuff on the cot next to Harry's. "I feel like we've been demoted."

"I reckon that's how they want us to feel," Ron said. He didn't want to sit on the bed. He felt dirty in the room, and he was thoroughly disappointed. Ron didn't know what he had expected but it wasn't this.

"According to Richard and Alan," Jack said as he rushed in, discarding his things on the bed next to Eric's, "they thought it'd be best to just fuse and pinch existing room assignments together."

"You actually questioned them about their order?" Ron asked, feeling even more annoyance push against his back. "What a sagging tit you are."

"Piss the fuck off!" Jack shot. "I just wanted to know how, out of all the combinations, you and Potter end up together."

"Oi, we're in here too, Jack," Eric said.

"Yes, but we're not the issue," Jack said.

"And Ron and I are?" Harry said, getting up from his bed. "How can you think that? You barely know me, and I certainly don't know anything about you."

"I'm Jack Turner," Jack said irritably. "I used to live in cabin two with Weasley. I'm not trying to be a nag but I want to make sure things are fair. I worked hard to get here."

"We all worked hard to get here, Jack," Eric said. "Calm down."

"I can't-"

"I mean it!" Eric said in a louder voice. He touched Jack's forearm for a moment. "I get your side but the bottom line is that we're all in here now. This is how it's going to be until we get new rooms upstairs. The most we can do now is shut up and take it. We're only sleeping in here. It doesn't mean anything else."

Eric flopped back on his bed. Ron was surprised when Jack sighed but then began unpacking. Ron had no idea that Eric was one of the select few who Jack actually listened to. If Eric could keep Jack quiet then Ron could come to greatly appreciate Eric's company. Ron looked back at his own bags. He didn't want to unpack his treasured items only to get the smell and dampness on them. Right as Ron unlocked his trunk, there was a knock on the door.

"I'll get it," Harry said. "CeeCee?" he said when he opened the door.

"Hi," she said. "Can I speak to Ron please?"

"Me?" Ron asked, getting up and turning around.

Letty nodded. "It'll only take moment. We have a few more minutes until bed."

Harry gave Ron a curious look but Ron merely shrugged.
"Umâ€œ;okayâ€œ;?"

He followed her outside and away from his room. Letty twisted one of her short, curly ginger locks between her fingers, appearing rather nervous. Ron didn't feel too great either. He hadn't been near Charlotte Clark since his attack. Ron couldn't fight back the memories of that night when she was standing right in front of him. Ron blushed. "Soâ€œ;you wanted something?"

Letty blushed as well, her pale skin flushing just as badly as his did. "Oh, yes, um, I guess a congratulations is in order first."

"Thank you," he said. "The same to you."

She nodded. "I was a little surprised when I got my letterâ€œ;mostly because of how things went the night of our exam."

Ron looked around before taking her elbow, pulling them more down the hall. "Hey, we don't have to talk about it. It's over now, Letty."

Letty sighed, shaking her head. "Not for me. I thought about it almost every day over holiday. Thirteen days, Ron, but I still remember everything."

"So do I," he said with a heavy heart. It was strange. While he'd been away, his holiday had felt unbelievably long. Now that Ron was back, thirteen days felt like they'd been thirteen seconds. "But it's not your fault; it never was. It was an accident - a

lack of proper communication. We're both back, so it must mean something. Our overall performance meant more than that one moment."

"I know all that, Ron, but I want to apologize anyway," Letty said, looking at him with her humongous green eyes. "I've wanted to ever since it happened, but I couldn't find the nerve. I have it now."

"Letty, it's fine," he said, "but if apologizing makes you feel better then all right. I forgive you. It really is okay."

Letty's posture relaxed a bit. "What about you? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said. "Thank you for asking." Ron didn't know why but he actually found a bit of comfort in the fact that Letty had been so bothered by the ordeal. It made Ron feel less pathetic and less alone.

"I'm glad. Conor and I agreed to keep our mouths shut and we still will," Letty said. "I had to say something though before we all start this up again. I'm truly very sorry for what happened to you and Harry. I'm also very glad that you were our leader that night. You took good care of me, Ron. You took care of all of us."

"I was just doing my job," Ron said with a shrug, "but you're welcome. We're okay, Letty. You don't have to be worry or be afraid of me. I'm fine."

"Brilliant," Letty said, calming even more. "Well, I'll see you in the morning?"

"Yeah, night," Ron said. She patted his arm then went back to her room. Ron waited until she closed the door before returning to his room.

"Is everything all right?" Harry asked.

"Yes. We just had some stuff to sort out from last time," Ron said. "Letty was unclear about someâ€¡stuff." He gave Harry a look that he hoped his mate would understand. Harry stared at him for a few moments but then nodded. Ron returned to his bed then finally unpacked.

A few minutes later, Richard and Alan banged on all their doors, making them all step out into the corridor again. They lectured the group about getting a good night's sleep and about how lights out meant 'lights out'. Ron was still horribly uncomfortable and annoyed, but he also felt somewhat tranquil as Richard and Alan yelled at them and they all responded reflexively. Ron didn't know what was wrong with him but he had missed the automatic obedience that they had to give to the instructors. Ron didn't have to think about what answer to give, how to behave, or what was right. It was either 'do it or leave' at Lambrick. He trusted that no matter how much Alan and Richard acted like dickheads, they only wanted what was best for them.

After their lecture, everyone returned to their rooms. Conor gave Ron a few words of encouragement through his laughter before closing his door across the hall. Ron sat on his bed. He took the last few items out of his bag: his picture of Hermione from the cinema, his copy of the Egypt picture, and the photo of him and Fred that he'd received for Christmas.

Ron studied the three very different photos. He wondered what Hermione was doing and how his parents and siblings were feeling. Ron hoped with everything inside of him that they were okay and were thinking about him. It'd only been a few hours but already he felt far away from them. Ron wasn't at their side to protect them; they wouldn't be around the next morning to talk to. He was on the way to finding his own path away from his loved ones - as were they, without him. Ron gently placed the picture of him and Fred and of his family in the drawer that was connected to the table by his bedside. He then clutched the picture of himself and Hermione at the cinema. He looked at the five different poses, feeling warmth in his chest.

Hermione was mostly likely reading on his bed, waiting until the last possible moment before she had to return to Ginny's room. Ron could picture her snuggling with one of his pillows as she wore his Weasley jumper. "Goodnight, love," he said softly before placing her picture in his drawer as well. Ron changed out of his clothes then got settled into his stiff yet lumpy cot. Jack was lying with a pillow over his head, and Eric already looked to be asleep. Ron turned to Harry who was staring off at the floor. Ron had a feeling that he was thinking about what was back at the Burrow as well â€“ Ginny.

"Lights out, Harry?"

Harry blinked several times then turned to him. "Yeah, night, Ron." He got under his blanket; Ron did the same. They gave each other a nod before Harry extinguished the light.

Ron closed his eyes, telling his body to loosen up. It seemed as if so much had happened since getting off the train and most of it had unfortunately not been what he'd imagined. Nevertheless, not everything had turned to dung, and no matter what, he'd made it to the merge. That meant that Ron had been strong and talented enough in the eyes of Phillip, Richard, and Alan.

Ron might've been at the bottom again, but he would climb his way to the top once more.

* * *

"YOU ALL HAVE EXACTLY FORTY-FIVE SECONDS TO GET YOUR ARSES OUT HERE!"

Ron shot up in bed as a horrible screeching boomed in his ear. He wasn't sure where he was or what reality he was in.

"YOU NOW HAVE THIRTY SECONDS!"

"Wha-?" Ron rasped, rubbing his eyes while he literally fell out of bed. He jumped as he heard fists pound against the door. Everything around him was dark.

"It's time, Weasley," Jack said, looking disheveled and pale as he left the room.

"Noâ€;no b-bloody 'ay," Ron whined. "We jus wen to 'eep." He looked around for his watch but couldn't find it.

"It doesn't matter, Ron," Harry said, snatching up his glasses. "We have fifteen seconds." He took Ron's wrist, practically wrenching him out of the room.

Ron held himself as he shivered violently. It seemed as if he'd only just found a decent spot on his lumpy cot five minutes ago. There was no bloody way that it was time to get up already. As he continued to shiver, he placed a hand on the wall for support. Ron couldn't understand why it was so bleeding cold in the corridor. He was miserable: his eyes burned, his stomach growled, and his head felt wonky. Alan blew his whistle again as the section helpers banged on everyone's door. The noise only added to Ron's madness.

"TIME!" Alan bellowed.

Ron jumped again, loosing balance. He fell back against the wall. Nothing was working properly for him. It was far too early and too fucking cold. Ron looked around the group. Everyone was standing around in his or her pajamas or just their underwear. The whole lot of them were shivering, yawning, and squirming. Alan, Richard, Brian, and the section aid from west, Pete, were the only ones bright-eyed and smiling.

"Good morning, trainees!" Richard said loudly. He blew hard on Alan's whistle. The atrocious screech echoed throughout the tiny hallway, making them all flinch. He laughed. "I've always wanted to do that!"

"Yes, now it's over," Alan said with a grin as he gently shoved Richard away. "This is mine."

Richard held up his hands in defense. "Sorry, mate. The floor is yours. Oi - why aren't you lot in formation? Shall we try this little wake-up call again?"

"No, sir!" they all said. Ron and his group scurried into two straight lines on either side of the corridor. He rolled his shoulders back, mentally telling his teeth not to chatter. Alan took a laid-back stroll up and down their hall, twirling his whistle on his finger. Unlike Richard whose physical dominance and outspoken nature clearly showed his authority, Alan's command was in the way he stared everyone down and held himself. It didn't matter that he wasn't the tallest, had light and neat hair, or possessed a rather kind face; Alan Lewis captured

everyone's attention in a way that was both intimidating and impressive.

"Blimey, you lot look pa-thet-tic," Alan said, clicking his teeth with his tongue. "I reckon none of you thought it'd be wise to keep your same sleeping schedules over your holiday, eh?"

"We can only assume that's because none of them believed they'd be coming back," Richard said. "They wouldn't be that blatantly daft."

Ron and Harry exchanged a quick glance then attempted not to look guilty. Ron was already sick of the new banter that Richard and Alan were clearly keen on using against them.

"Not a good enough excuse," Alan said. "I almost want to chuck all of you out and rethink our selections. What's done is done though, so I suggest you all wipe the sleep out of your eyes and wake up. You're not civilians anymore. Training starts now." Ron couldn't believe it. His brain wasn't awake enough to prepare for the day. He would have to fight on pure will, which Ron wasn't sure he had at the moment.

"I can tell that you lot weren't expecting to start so early," Richard said, peering around at everyone. "That's unfortunate. You'll be getting up at this time every day for the remainder of your stay here because we've added more to your morning exercise. You've made it to the second half, so no longer will we go easy on you."

Ron closed his eyes for a moment, clenching his jaw. There hadn't been one minute of any day during the last half when he'd thought the trainers had gone easy on them.

"Some aspects haven't changed," Alan said. "Every morning you'll head down to the trail and run, carrying your broom on your shoulders. You'll then head to the pitch for your flying drills, just like before. Now, however, you'll have six laps on the trail instead of four and you must sprint the last two. We've also advanced your flying laps from eight to ten. Are you lot with me so far?"

"Yes, sir," they all said in heavy voices, dripping in horror and spite.

"After that lovelies," Richard said cheerfully, "you'll pair up with whoever else is finished and will then engage in an informal duel. Alan and I, with the help of our section aids, will be watching. If you don't perform to standard, then you'll have another running and flying lap to do before you try again. You'll keep at it until we feel you're sufficient. If you continuously fail to improve, then you'll simply spend the whole day at target practice. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," they all said in even heavier voices.

Ron could barely comprehend what he was hearing. It all seemed so brutal. He had missed the hard work but Ron wasn't sure if he

could pull this off. He had to believe that he could though. The intensity was why Ron was there. He wasn't a civilian anymore.

"Are there any questions?" Alan asked.

"How long do we have to duel, and how should we duel?" someone asked.

"You'll be expected to use a mixture of magic and hand combat," Alan said. "As for how long until we say stop. If one of you performs poorly then both people will have to go do the laps again. You'll work as a unit."

"Phillip informed you all of this last night but we'll enforce it again," Richard said. "Yes, the people around you are all here for the spot you desire. This is a genuine competition now. You all got here for different reasons, but you all want to achieve the same end."

"This idea doesn't change the fact that you lot will be training together now though," Alan said. "As an Auror, you'll have to build relationships. Whether you intimately care for your partners or not, they are the people you will be working with. They're who you'll be risking your life for and be saved by. By the end of this experience, you may find yourself closer to your camp mates than to your family. You all will eat, train, bleed, and even breathe together."

"That leaves us to one last thing: your attire," Richard said. "Up until this point, you've been allowed to wear whatever you want to train in, but no longer. Now that you're in the merge, you'll need proper exercise kits. Gentlemen?" Brian and Pete started passing out bags to everyone. Brian threw one at Ron. He opened the bag then pulled out black clothing.

"You all have been appointed three black t-shirts, pairs of trousers, and jumpers," Richard said. "This will become your second skin soon enough. It's what you'll wear when you exercise, train in the field, study in the classroom, and eat in the cabins. The only time you're allowed to not wear your kits is on Sundays and when you're dismissed for the night."

"Black is what Aurors wear," Alan said. "It's time you lot start looking the part. This isn't just about proper wear though. You lot will live under the idea of 'one camp, one force'. With these new kits, you all are the same body type, sex, and race to us. So, if you want to stand out, you'll have to do so with your abilities. Let your magic, intellect, power, and leadership make you unique."

"The plainness of your wardrobe represents what we see on the outside," Richard said. "Let your actions remind us of why you're here. Let your actions remind yourselves of why you're here. One last thing about your kits: if you're ever not wearing them when you should be, then you'll be asked to leave Lambrick Academy. It's just a pair of trousers and a shirt. If you can't respect that, then you have no business here. If you understand, then tell me: yes, sir!"

"Yes, sir!" everyone shouted as loudly as they could.

"Good," Alan said with a nod. "You now have two minutes to change and get your brooms and, if you haven't already, your wands." He suddenly blew his whistle.

Ron knew that he wouldn't have time to go back to his room to change, so he simply started taking his clothes off. He didn't care what the others thought. There was a bit of energy in him now that was clawing through his weariness. Harry started stripping as well, then many others joined them. The entire floor quickly became cluttered with pajamas, which they kicked into their respected rooms. Everything fit Ron loosely, but he hoped that he'd grow into them.

Richard chuckled as he walked up and down the hall. "Merlin, I reckon some of you people have never heard of sunlight."

"With all due respect, sir," Letty said, hastily pulling up her trousers. "I can't speak for everyone, but some of us can't exactly lay out in the sunlight all day."

Richard snorted. "That's true, Clark. All right, fair enough." He then laughed, clapping his hand. "Did you get it, Alan? I said 'fair' enough."

Alan shook his head. "You're too loony in morning. Thirty seconds, trainees."

"I'll get our brooms," Ron said to Harry. He rushed back into the room, snatching up their Firebolts. He made it out just as Alan blew his whistle.

"All right!" Alan said. "I want you all to head out of the building. Weasley, a word?" Ron's heart skipped a beat as everyone else followed Richard down the hall.

"Sir?" Ron asked, walking over to him. He had no idea what Alan would want to talk to him about already. Ron reckoned it would have something to do with the last time they spoke. He could still hear Alan's harsh words in his ear about him being too weak to train.

Alan crossed his arms over his chest, giving him a once-over. Ron stared right back at him as firmly as he could. He was still out of it but he couldn't show that to Alan, especially on his first morning back.

"What was that a few seconds ago?" Alan finally asked.

"A few seconds ago, sir?" Ron couldn't think of what he'd done. He hoped that he hadn't given Alan a look or made some sort of rude gesture and not noticed.

"When you got your and Potter's brooms," Alan said. "Why did you do that? Did I ask you to get Potter's broom for him?"

Ron frowned for a moment, but in time understood what Alan was talking about. "No, sir," he said.

"Then what would spark that action?" Alan asked. His grey eyes pierced straight into Ron's body. "Why did you collect his broom?"

Ron couldn't believe that this was what Alan wanted to talk to him about. There were far more important things for them to discuss, but Alan was acting as if they didn't have a history together. It irritated Ron a little. "I justâ€œ; did it."

"You just 'did it'?" Alan asked, overstressing his words. "That's not a good enough answer, Weasley. Why did you grab his broom but not Turner's, Hill's, or anyone else's?"

"B-because his bed is right next to mine and we're—"

"—mates?" Alan asked. He made the word sound like some sort of fault but Ron wouldn't put up with it. The trainers could modify almost everything about him, but one thing Ron refused to let them touch was his friendship with Harry.

"Yes, sir," Ron said confidently. "Harry and I are mates. We always have been. Coming back here hasn't changed that."

"Nor has it apparently changed the way you speak to authority," Alan said coldly. "Listen, Weasley: you and Potter are here because you earned your spots as individuals â€œ not as a duo. You two are roommates because of how the names were drawn and how the numbers fell into place â€œ not because you're a duo. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Ron opened and closed his mouth a few times. He honestly didn't get what the big bloody deal was. "I guess so, sir."

"Let me clear it up for you," Alan said with a bit more intensity. He stepped even closer to Ron. "Potter is a big boy. He can fetch his own damn broom. You are to give him no special treatment just as I expect him to treat you like he treats everyone else."

"But, sir," Ron said, wishing that his brain would completely wake up so he'd know when to stop talking, "you said that we might end up becoming closer to our camp mates than with our own families. Harry and I are already at that point. What do you suggest we do?" Something about Alan's expression boggled Ron. For a moment he appeared to be very angry, but then, for a split second, Alan almost seemed humored or impressed by Ron's remark.

"I suggest you let him earn his place," Alan said, returning to his rather severe demeanor. "I don't care who he defeated. He's a trainee just like all the others here. Let Potter prove to me that he can get up, change, and grab his broom by himself. If he can't, then he should leave today."

"No â€“ no, no, sir, I'm sorry," Ron rushed, shaking his head. "He can get his own broom just fine. I had a lapse in judgment. It won't happen again."

"Already, Weasley!"

"I know, sir," Ron mumbled, feeling like a tit. He would have to do better than this if he wanted to earn his place. "Iâ€œI'm better than this, sir." It was something Ron had told Hermione after disappointing her during their fight. He hated how already he had to tell Alan the same thing.

Alan merely stared at him, but Ron couldn't tell what he was thinking. "Get downstairs," Alan said in a softer voice. "Maybe the fresh air will clear your head and help you remember how we do things here." Ron swiftly ran down the hall. He repeated in his mind that he wouldn't fuck up again that day.

When Ron rejoined his group, Harry gave him a look; Ron only shook his head. It wasn't the time to talk to Harry. He had to get his head on now.

As they walked to the trail then stretched, Richard and Alan reminded them of how to breathe and keep pace as they jogged. Ron massaged his legs, trying to regain that brief moment of energy from earlier. So much had already happened and he'd hadn't even been awake for two hours.

As soon as Alan blew his whistle, the group paced the trail. Ron stayed toward the back with Jack and some of the more skilled runners because Ron knew that he'd want to pull ahead around the middle of his second lap. He was excited about running again. It was one of the areas of training where he'd always felt comfortable and able. When the second lap came ahead, people started to spread out. Ron took bigger strides, moving faster. Jack shot straight ahead of the group. Ron wanted desperately to run after him, but he wouldn't risk it. He could already feel the burn and stitches in his sides from not running every day like he should have.

The wind was bitter, and the ground was horribly wet. Ron's legs felt heavier than they'd ever felt before. As he frantically tried to keep air circulating in his lungs, his ears began to ache. He couldn't stop though. In fact, Ron ran a littler faster. He felt his broom slipping off his shoulders but he quickly caught it. Ron didn't know what was wrong with him. Running was his element but he didn't feel the bliss; his body didn't transcend like it used to. He actually felt frustrated tears in his eyes as the pain almost made him stop around his fourth lap. Ron slowed down a little, regripping his broom. He was still doing better than a lot of his camp mates, but he wasn't performing to his personal standard.

"Don't be a soft cock, Weasley. Fucking move."

Ron looked up. The voice had barely been a whisper but it had been forceful in his ear. He gazed ahead, seeing slightly disheveled wavy brown hair. Jack was the only one close enough to

have whispered in his ear. That didn't make sense though, so Ron was sure that he'd imagined the whole thing. Jack gracefully turned around, running backwards with his broom over his shoulder. His eyes barely connected with Ron's before he turned back around, running further down the trail.

Ron licked his lips then quickened his pace, feeling a bit more energy. He didn't know why Jack wanted to help him but it didn't matter. Jack was right. Ron knew that he couldn't quit already. He was back where he wanted and needed to be. Things would be hard, but they were supposed to be. Ron passed into his fifth lap and ran as fast as he could. Every muscle throbbed and every bit of skin felt swollen from the harsh wind whipping across it. By the time Ron made it to the pitch, he was sobbing and shaking but he couldn't quit.

"Weasley!" Alan screamed.

"I'm going, sir!" Ron shouted. He scrubbed the tears and snot off his face with the back of his sleeve then zoomed into the air. His hands felt stiff, and he couldn't get comfortable on his broom. Every time Ron touched down, he wobbled and pain surged up his spine. By his sixth lap, Harry was mounting his broom. It gave Ron motivation to work harder. If Harry were able to catch up to him - or worse, finish his laps first - then Ron would leave Lambrick on his own accord. Ron tried to clear his mind as he flew. He reminded himself that he had already broken in his broom. They had an intimate and instinctive relationship now. All Ron had to do was gently steer; his Firebolt would do the rest.

Ron dry heaved when he finally touched down after his final lap. He wanted to keep trying until something came up but he couldn't waste too much time.

"Harris!" Brian shouted. "You and Weasley can duel. Find a spot and then begin."

Ron looked around for Ben. He saw the bloke get up from the grass, wiping his mouth. Ron envied his ability to puke. Ben tripped over to him. "R-ready?" he croaked. Ron could barely nod. They both took unstable steps backward then weakly held up their wands.

Alan blew his whistle. "Oi! Harris and Weasley: what in the bloody hell kind of standoff is that? Take your extra laps and try again!"

Ben groaned, covering his face. "No â€“ no, not againâ€!"

"We'd better go," Ron wheezed, feeling his heart drop to the bottom of his trainers. He sluggishly swung his broom over his shoulders then tugged on Ben's jumper. The two ran side by side, talking about how they would improve their dueling stances. It was difficult to speak and run at the same time, but Ron had make sure that they got it together.

When Ron hopped off his broom at the end of his extra flying lap, he was thankful that the brick finally burst in his throat. He

turned away from Ben, letting his sickness out. It was so violent that he almost lost balance but once it was over, Ron felt better. He wiped his mouth, grinning a little. He felt dazed and tingly. The pain had transcended into something that was now making him feel rather wonky. "Fuckin' 'ell, I feel better," Ron said.

Ben chuckled, looking mental. "Wicked! Let's try again, yeah?"

He and Ron found a clear space in the grass. Ben held up his wand; Ron did the same. Ben quickly shot a spell, disarming Ron. He came rushing at him. Ron did his best to brace himself. Ben was bigger than he was but Ron was stronger with combat. He held his own then got Ben on the ground. Ron was able to grab his wand before Ben got up. For several minutes they knocked each other over, blasted each other away, and beat each other up with their fists and wands.

Alan finally blew his whistle twice, signaling that they were finished. "Harris and Weasley: time!"

Ron barely made it to the sidelines before he collapsed. He was sweating from head to toe, he had puke on his trainers, and his lip was busted. Every part of him was limp, pulsating, and twitching. Ron felt like he was dying; every breath he wheezed out felt as if a piece of glass was scraping against his chest. The excruciating pain and thick nausea was worse now than it'd been the first time Ron had exercised at Lambrick. He didn't feel like himself. Ron lay on his stomach, rubbing his face against the cold, wet grass that he immediately treated as a lover.

"Hermione," Ron softly groaned. "I fucking love you." He closed his eyes. Slowly, her figure came into his mind. He thought of her on top of him, wearing her frilly pink and white knickers and bra. He saw her large brown eyes and kind smile. Ron could feel her bushy hair, taste her mouth, and smell the coconut on her neck. Ron heard her whimpers as they shagged; her sounds of pleasure grew louder and louder in his ear. He moaned, clutching the grass as if it was her waist. He could practically feel her. "Thank you," he whispered. Hermione was breathing life into him as his memory of their last date played out in his mind. Ron wouldn't pass out or die. He had to make it so he could someday return to her as a better man. Ron feebly sat up to find Ben gaping at him.

"Um...do I want to know what that was?"

Ron shook his head. His connection to Hermione was something that no combination of words would ever be able to explain.

"Nah. It's something between my girlfriend and me. Don't worry about it. I just, uh, I didn't know I was so out of shape."

"Same," Ben said hoarsely. "I feel like dung that got ran over by the Knight Bus twice, but only after getting chewed up and spit out by a Horntail."

"Lucky bastard," Ron breathed, cracking his taut neck.

Little by little, people joined them on the grass. Harry crawled over to Ron with his glasses askew on his face. Jack and Eric, some of the first to finish, were amongst the few who looked somewhat alive. After the last groups finished dueling, the instructors stood before them.

"I honestly can't believe this is the group that made it to the merge," Richard said, looking completely disappointed. "I swear that was some of the poorest running, flying, and dueling I've ever seen. Some of you did worse today than you did at the beginning of the first half."

"We don't know if it's the shock of being back, the extended drills, or the early hour," Alan said, "but this will not happen again! We will discontinue the lessons and field training all together and simply have you lot exercise from dawn till dusk for the next few months if we have to. Would you fancy that?"

"No, sir!" people said, almost desperately.

"Then get your bloody heads on and get over the pain!" Alan barked. "This was only the morning exercise. You lot still have a full day and night of training. Welcome back to Lambrick Academy, trainees."

"Mummy isn't going to sweetly wake you up with tea anymore," Richard added. "You're here to train and push yourselves. Consider this your only day to fall out and throw up every few seconds. Tomorrow morning we're going to do the same thing and we better not see a pathetic excuse for a combat unit like we do right now. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," they all rasped.

"Now get up and shake it off," Richard said. "There won't be any heading to the medical cabins today. Go down to the start of the trail. Wipe the puke off your mouths and retie your trainers. Phillip has another announcement."

They all pitifully got up, attempting to look a little less like death. It didn't help that they were all wearing black. Ron wobbled all the way down the path but did his best to keep himself up. Phillip Smith was waiting for them at the start of the trail. Ron and the rest of the trainees stood in a crooked formation.

"What did you chaps do to them?" Phillip asked Alan and Richard with a bit of humor in his voice.

"Nothing they shouldn't have expected, sir," Alan said, jabbing a few people back so the line was straighter.

"They're a sorry bunch, sir, but we'll beat them into shape," Richard added.

Phillip chuckled, shaking his head. "Good morning, trainees."

"Good morning, sir," they all droned.

"Welcome to your first day back," Phillip said. "You lot may not feel it but you certainly look a little more like Aurors. Wearing the black and sweating and bleeding like you are is all a part of the process. It's what you'll have to deal with for the remainder of your stay here, as well as when you become official Aurors."

"It's what we keep telling them, sir," Alan said. "It's never going to end. If they truly want to be Aurors, then they'll suck it all up and realize that this is their new lifestyle." Ron desperately wanted Alan to shut up. He felt awful enough.

"Very true, Mr. Lewis," Phillip said, nodding. "Before they can get to that lifestyle though, they have to learn how the rest of their stay at Lambrick will progress. Sections aids Brian and Pete, will you two get the cabin set up?" The distractions that the section helpers created as they walked away gave Ron a chance to pop his back and plant his feet better. The throbbing pain was turning into a deep ache as his muscles were slowly seizing up.

"Firstly, trainees," Phillip continued with, "be aware that there are still two major evaluations left where you will be tested cumulatively. That means it covers the material you learned during the first half, as well as what you'll learn over the next few months. Your new unit starts today. This is a crucial and extensive section of your training, so we will be spending a lot of time and resources to get you through it."

"Mr. Smith, sir?" someone said from behind their line. The voice was smooth and womanly.

Phillip waved her over. "Yes, Melanie, come over." A woman in a pale orange dress and matching jacket walked over and stood next to Phillip. She was rather thin and didn't look too much older than Alan and Richard. She had light brown skin and incredibly short black hair that barely touched her ears. The woman's posh and daintiness made her seem out of place at Lambrick. Phillip took her hands, kissing her cheeks. "Good morning."

"Good morning, sir," she said. "Alan, Richard."

"Good morning," Alan said.

"Morning," Richard said, grinning widely.

"Trainees," Phillip said, "this is Healer Melanie Yule. She will be your instructor for this new unit, which we refer to simply as: health."

Melanie nodded adamantly, raising a finger as if she wanted someone to call on her. "An Auror has to be aware of the physical condition of his or her body," she said. "You'll have to learn how to aid yourself and the others in your unit because you won't always have time to apparate to a hospital. I will teach you all basic yet vital skills that Aurors use to keep themselves alive during missions."

"Yes, bodily needs are important, but this unit extends beyond physical wellbeing," Phillip said. He suddenly grew very serious. "The life of an Auror is challenging on the body but is severe and even sadistic at times on the mind and spirit. If you truly want to succeed, then you'll have to be mentally and emotionally fit as well. We have a few exceptionally talented, accomplished, and seasoned mental Healers arriving soon. You each will be assigned one to start meeting with next week."

Ron felt as if the wind got knocked out of him. He looked to Harry who was pale and wide-eyed. No way was this actually happening.

Jack raised his hand. "Pardon me, Mr. Smith, but did you say that we have to meet with these Healers? As in therapy sessions?"

Hearing the word 'therapy' made Ron's stomach flip. His pain subsided for a moment as horror seeped into his pores.

"No, these aren't therapy sessions in the general sense of the idea. We are not implying anything about anyone's mental health as it stands," Phillip said. "While we will require you to meet with your Healer at least once a week, what actually happens within the meetings is entirely up to you."

There was chatter within in the trainee line. No one appeared particularly keen on the idea of speaking with mental Healers. Ron was relieved that he wasn't alone, however, he wasn't sure if anyone else felt as if their heart was seconds away from exploding.

"Trainees, not everything about becoming an Auror is accomplished through sweat. Training mentally is just as important, if not more so," Richard said strongly. "No one thinks you're mental but this job and even this training can certainly make you feel that way sometimes. That's why Lambrick has always included this in its curriculum."

"Richard is right," Melanie piped in. "Almost every Auror you'll ever meet will say that he or she has seen a mental Healer at least once over the course of their career."

"You lot must understand what you're truly getting into while you're relatively safe at camp," Alan said. "It'll be different on a real battle field. A lot of stressful and sometimes terrifying actions have to go into capturing dark wizards."

"I can tell you right now that your training will get harder and darker because that's the life of an Auror," Phillip said. "We need to make sure you're ready in your mind as well as in your body."

"So we can end up getting chucked out over our emotional states?" Ron gasped when he recognized the moody voice as his own. He hadn't meant to speak but the shock and slight panic was far too heavy on him. This was the last thing he'd ever expected to come about during his training. Ron wanted to forget about his demons, not talk about them with total strangers. Phillip, Alan, and

Richard all looked at him. Ron was sure that Harry, Letty, and Conor's eyes were on him too. Phillip shook his head, keeping his eyes on Ron.

"I should make this clear: the Healers are not here to invade and correct your lives," Phillip said, looking at each of them closely for a moment. "We also don't plan on giving anyone an exit slip over what's discussed in your private sessions. We purely want to grant you lot an opportunity each week to gather your thoughts with a professional in the area of mental fitness. Your fears and apprehensions are natural. I get the same reactions to this every year."

"My first few sessions were a bit weird but they truly paid off in the end," Alan said boldly. "This will be your private time to step away from training and clear your minds. It's nothing embarrassing, and it's not about weakness. It's simply your chance to recuperate. We encourage it."

"And we're enforcing it," Phillip said, "however, if you have any honest discrepancies after your first meeting, come talk to me. This is a delicate subject so I will accommodate. You won't ever be judged or tested over your sessions, and it's completely free. This is one of the extras Lambrick offers you, so utilize the Healers. A lot of Aurors do and wind up becoming stronger and more capable wizards."

Ron raised his hand. The instructors made everything sound so simple but nothing about Lambrick was ever simple. "Yes, Weasley?" Phillip said.

"How long are the mental Healers going to be here?" he asked.

"For the duration of the program," Phillip said. "As I said, you have free range over your appointment schedule, as long as it doesn't coincide with your training. Your individual Healers will go into more detail about all this. You've been divided by surname. After you lot have had a chance to wash and eat, they should be here."

"Today is the only day we'll be starting class and field practice late," Richard said. "It's important that you all get a chance to meet your Healers. So get changed and eat some breakfast. I'll only remind you once that you have to use the cabin showers and you better be wearing your blacks when you come back out."

"You're dismissed," Phillip said.

Everyone practically ran back toward the main house but Ron ran after Phillip. "Mr. Smith, sir?"

Phillip touched Melanie's arm. "Wait for me by the cabin."

"Yes, sir," she said.

Ron bounced on the heels of his feet as he waited for her to walk away. "I really need to talk to you, sir."

"What's on your mind, son?" he asked.

Ron wasn't sure what to say so he decided not to think and blurt out the first thing that came to mind. "I have discrepancies over meeting with the Healer."

"But you haven't had a meeting yet," Phillip said, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't need to, sir," Ron said, rubbing his neck. "I know this sort of thing is important but—"

"Weasley, please don't assume that making it to the merge has expunged your record," Phillip said. "I was going to talk about this with you during our meeting over your evaluation score but I'll tell you a little now: you're one of the people who I believe will truly benefit from this."

Ron's palms itched as his face flushed. It was all starting to make sense. Yes, Phillip had wanted him back but he obviously thought Ron was a mental who needed saving from a stranger - it wasn't fair. Ron hadn't even told his parents but now he was expected to tell a complete stranger about his anxiety - it wasn't right. All of this was on Ron's tongue but suddenly being honest didn't seem like a good idea. "I don't know, sir," he mumbled.

"Well, you're giving it a chance anyway, Weasley," Phillip said. "You'll meet politely with your Healer today like everyone else here."

"Am I required to talk about it?" Ron asked.

"Certainly not," Phillip said, shaking his head. "The only thing I'm going to require in your case is that you have more than one session with your Healer a week. It's one boundary I'll cross because I think it needs to be crossed for you. I want to help you."

"But—"

"If you truly don't want to speak to your Healer, then you're more than welcome to walk right through those black gates and never have to worry about meeting him or her ever," Phillip swiftly added.

Ron bit his lip, feeling a pang hit his chest. He was trapped.
"O-kay, sir. I understand."

"Excellent," Phillip said, patting his arm. "Go change and get some food in you. You'll need it for the rest of the day."

Phillip left his side; Ron just rather stared off. He didn't know what to do. He didn't want to meet with the Healer, but he didn't want to get chucked out either. Ron was completely powerless in this situation; he had no choice but to take it. Within a day, his triumphant return to Lambrick had turned to rubbish.

During his shower, Ron listened as most of the blokes shared his feelings about the Healers. No one wanted to talk about their feelings and everyone was suspicious of what was to come about. Conor looked especially miserable. Ron could only imagine the things he was bottling up, hoping that he'd never have to share.

Ron changed into a clean kit right in the shower cabin. It was awkward but he had no choice now since his room was all the way in Trainee Ruins. Ron was sure that by the time they were allowed to shower inside, all the blokes would be able to recognize each other by the hair on their bollocks.

"Oi, wanna walk for a minute before we eat?" Harry asked.

"Please," Ron said rather anxiously. They put their stuff back in their room then walked around the property.

Harry picked up a soggy stick, snapping it in half and offering him an end. "How are you so far?"

Ron happily took the twig, breaking it into tiny pieces. His entire body throbbed and felt bloated. His skin was irritated, his throat was dry, his ears were stinging, and his chest, head, and stomach ached terribly. All Ron wanted to do was sleep for several days straight.

"I feel like bloody shit, Harry, but we both know it's not because of the morning drill."

"Yeah, I'm not feeling too great either," Harry said, fiercely chucking his twig. "Iâ€¢I don't want to talk to some stranger. I do enough of that when I have to do the bloody interviews."

"I don't want this either, Harry," Ron said, looking at him. "What the fuck am I supposed to talk about: my attacks? Fred? The bloody weather?"

"I dunno," Harry said, kicking the ground. "I'm as much in the shit as you are. Am I supposed to talk about my parents? Voldemort? Being a bloody savior? Plus, you know it takes a lot for me to trust people. I don't like the idea of having to walk into a situation and trust someone I never met."

"We have to get out of this," Ron said in a panic.

"We can't."

"Then what the hell do we do?"

"We meet the person," Harry said as if it was the easiest thing in the world. "It's all we can do. You heard the instructors. We just have to introduce ourselves and create a schedule."

Ron groaned. "I had no idea we'd have to do this."

"No one did," Harry said. "We have to though. We won't make it here if we don't."

Ron gave him a look. "What are you gonna talk to your Healer about?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I'd like to keep things strictly about what happens to me during training."

"Yeah, well, I'd rather not talk about anything," Ron said. "That's what I have mates for ¯ to talk about real things with. Then again, I'm apparently not supposed to act friendly toward you. Alan gave me a bollocking for getting your broom for you."

"Are you having a laugh?"

"No," Ron said. "It's not just the other trainees, Harry. Even our instructors are going to be on us. I just¯" He stopped walking, covering his face with his hands. "This day is turning out to be the exact opposite of what I had in mind. Fucking hell."

"It's okay," Harry said, patting his arm. "At least we won't have to see the Healers again until next week, yeah? By then we'll have a better handle on the new morning exercise; we might not feel so mucked up. We'll take this one day at a time, Ron."

Some of Ron's panic subsided. He lowered his hands, gaping at Harry. "Bloody hell, mate."

"What?" Harry asked.

"You sounded exactly like 'Mione just now," he said with a grin.

Harry beamed. "Hermione's wisdom has a way of getting into your skin, yeah?"

"Definitely," Ron said, thinking about her for a moment.

"Uh-oh, you're getting that prat look on your face," Harry said with a frown. "We should get to the canteen before you start wanking."

"Piss off!" Ron said. "Besides, I'm too knackered to get one off."

He and Harry joined the other trainees in the large meal cabin located in the center of Lambrick. The food was just as bland and dismal as ever, and as Ron had expected, mostly everyone sat by their mates from their old sections. Jack was one of few to sit with people from west while Harry and Letty joined Ron's table as if they'd always been a part of east.

"I can't believe we have to do this," Conor said through his teeth, sitting on the other side of Ron. "It's bullshit."

"It's not bullshit," Olivia said from across the table. "This will be good for us. A lot of Aurors benefit from this type of thing. I had a feeling that we'd do this. I just didn't know it'd be so soon."

Letty poked Olivia in the arm with her fork. "How did you know?"

"My parents have to work with mental Healers all the time when it comes to treating Aurors," Olivia explained. "Everything is intertwined."

"Do you know who's here?" Harry asked.

"No," she said. "It's not as if I know everyone and everything about this field, but I've been around it."

Ben, who was sitting on the other side of Olivia, gave her a curious look. "Have you been counseled?"

"Oi," Ron said, feeling a spike of exasperation and discomfort. "That's not really your business, eh Ben?"

Ben looked sheepish. "Oh, shit - I'm sorry, Olivia."

"It's okay. I'm not offended," Olivia said softly. She chewed on the side of her lip, prodding her cold egg. "When I was thirteen I had a few sessions. It was nothing to fuss over." She shared a look with Letty then flashed her eyes to Ron for a moment. He figured that her counseling sessions probably occurred after she received the curse burn on her foot.

"Well, either way," Letty said, nudging Olivia's shoulder with her own, "if it gets us closer to those final spots then we should do it. I mean it's only talking."

"That's exactly right, Charlotte," Olivia said, giving her a smile.

"Urgh, Olivia, you know I hate you calling me that," Letty said, poking her again. "Anyway, I honestly don't think this will be too bad. It's not as if we're required to tell the Healers anything too personal."

"I reckon the Healer is dying to talk to you, Harry," Ben cheeked.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Who isn't?"

"I really don't know why that is," Ron said, scrunching his nose. "You're hardly interesting at all. In fact, just looking at you makes me dozy."

"Sod off you dildo," Harry said. "At least I won't blind my Healer with my abnormally white skin."

"Oi! Now that's just unkind and racist, I reckon," Ron said. He hit Harry's arm. Harry hit his back while they laughed like prats. Taking the piss out of Harry was calming Ron a little. He eventually looked back to the group; everyone was gazing at them as if they couldn't quite believe them.

"What?" Ron asked.

"You two are wicked," Ben said with a huge smile.

"Are you blushing, Olivia?" Conor asked.

Olivia's entire face was pink. She shook her head, groaning. "Leave me alone, Conor! This is my one time to be a git and feel awestruck. I meanâ€;it's brilliant seeing them like this. Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, taking the piss out of each other. Only, I don't know what dildo means."

Conor snorted, smirking. "Well, it's a—"

"—don't you bloody dare, you anus!" Ron said. He threw one of his stiff pieces of bacon at Conor, and their whole table rather burst into ease and laughter.

As their break went on, more and more people were called to take their turn with a Healer. Ron got to watch as people like Letty, Ben, and Conor swallowed hard then slowly followed an instructor out of the meal cabin. Once again, Ron was glad that his name was so far down the alphabet.

"Weasley?" Richard said, poking his head in with a clipboard in hand.

Ron stood up. "Sir?"

"You're next."

Ron forced down his bit of nerves before following Richard outside and past a line of cabins. He kept his hands deep in his pockets, trying to clear his mind and remembering Harry's words on the matter and even Olivia and Letty's opinions. "Okay, you're in the cabin over there," Richard said, pointing to the building. "We're telling everyone to bear in mind that this is just a meeting â€" nothing invasive. If you do happen to feel uneasy about anything you experience, come talk to either me or Alan, understood?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said, looking off toward the cabin.

Richard gave him a once-over. "You nervous, Weasley?" Ron nodded. "I was too my first time, but I quickly learned that it was only as uncomfortable as I made it. These people are here to help. No one wants to hurt you or anything, all right?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

Richard smiled faintly, squeezing his shoulder. "You'll be okay. You may return to the canteen or head back to the Ruins when you're done, but don't forget that we have a full day of training ahead. It'd be wise to get your academic gear together for the classroom portion." With that, Richard gave him a nod then walked off. Ron opened his mouth but realized that he would be the biggest twat in the world if he said that he didn't want to go in alone.

Ron slowly walked over to the cabin, then purely stared at it. He knew that he was thick for fearing what was on the other side of

the door but he couldn't help it. Harry and Hermione were the people he talked to. His parents and his siblings were the people who were supposed to know him â€“ not some stranger. For a brief moment, the weight of everything that had happened since returning to Lambrick pressed down on him, but Ron quickly told himself that this wasn't his fault. Lambrick hadn't created this whole thing just so he would be forced to talk about his panic attacks. Ron knew the words were true but they were still hard to believe.

"You made it to the merge," Ron said aloud. "They want you here, and they want you to improve. This is only a meeting. It's just a 'hello' you fucking knob who apparently can take down a werewolf but not knock on a bloody door." Ron immediately pounded on the door before he insulted himself any further. He bounced on the heels of his feet, making himself focus on what he thought Hermione was doing at the moment. It helped to calm him down.

The door opened. Ron froze and stopped picturing his beloved girlfriend reading in only her knickers as she ate a chocolate covered banana. A man gave him a rather warm smile. "Come on in," the Healer said.

"Okay," Ron said thickly. He closed the door behind him but didn't take his hand off the knob. In the room there was only the Healer's desk, a smaller desk, a wooden chair, and a comfortable looking couch. The space was horribly bare, offering no distractions.

"You are more than welcome to sit down," the Healer said, sitting behind his desk.

"Oh, um, right," Ron said. He walked more into the room, weighing his two seating options. He felt as if this was a test, so he chose the less comfortable wooden chair to sit in. He scooted it right in front of the Healer's desk. The man before Ron looked to be in his forties or so. He had clear tan skin, sandy hair, and rather large hazel eyes. He was sitting casually in his chair and didn't seem too threatening. He wasn't even dressed in Healer robes. He simply wore a brown jumper and black trousers.

Ron was tired of the man just looking at him so he rubbed his palms into his thighs, focusing on his hands that were still rather red and blotchy. "Hi."

"Hello," the Healer said, sitting up in his chair. "You're Ronald Weasley?"

"Yes, but I just go by Ron," Ron said.

The Healer nodded. "All right, Ron, it's nice to meet you. I'm Steven Nelson. You can call me Steven or Mr. Nelson." His voice seemed to fill up the entire room. He spoke kindly but there was something intense about the way he pronounced his words, as if each one of them was important. He spoke the same way Hermione did when she was reciting things she'd learned from her books.

"Okayâ€¢Mr. Nelson," Ron finally said.

Mr. Nelson nodded. "You can relax, Ron. I know that the idea may seem impossible but there's really nothing for you to think about too hard today. This is just an informal meeting. I'm not even going to ask how you're doing."

"You don't care?" Ron asked.

"Oh, I do," Mr. Nelson said, "but I'm not going to put any pressure on you to answer even the most basic of questions such as: are you in any physical pain?"

"Well, I am," Ron mumbled. "It's been a rough morning."

Mr. Nelson nodded, smiling. "Yes, so I've heard." He sat back in his chair again, flipping his quill between his fingers like Ron did with his wand. For whatever reason, Ron focused on the action and felt a bit more relaxed. "So, Ron, I honestly just want to talk about myself today. I work, officially, at St. Mungo's. I've been there for fifteen years and for the last fourteen I've specialized in counseling Aurors."

"Why Aurors?" Ron asked.

"Because my father was one so I personally witnessed and experienced what this profession can do to a person," Mr. Nelson said effortlessly. His bluntness was a bit overwhelming. Ron wouldn't dare ask what Mr. Nelson had witnessed or experienced.

Instead, Ron took a glance at Mr. Nelson's hand, noticing the ring in his finger. "Are you married?"

"Yes," Mr. Nelson said cheerfully. "About fifteen years now. I have two daughters and a son as well."

"That's great," Ron said. He didn't know why but his mind suddenly turned to his imaginary daughter whose name was Rose and had blue eyes and Hermione's smile. He was such a tit for thinking about 'her' but he couldn't help himself. The vision also made him miss Hermione more than he already did. Ron cleared his throat, rubbing his palms on his thighs. He was trying not to be awkward but he didn't know what else to say. "Soâ€;is that all about you?"

"I think that's all," Mr. Nelson said. "Well, that and this is my fourth year coming to Lambrick to do this. I guess that's something."

Ron nodded. "Soâ€;if you work with Aurors, then why are you here with us?"

"Because you lot will become Aurors one day," Mr. Nelson said. "It would be nice to build a solid foundation before you're thrown to the dragons, which you will be. That's why I'm here. My job is only to give you the cushion you'll need to soften the blow. Does that make sense?" When Alan, Richard, or even Phillip asked if Ron understood something, it always seemed backhanded, as if they wouldn't accept anything other than a firm 'yes'. Mr.

Nelson's tone wasn't like that. It sounded as if he genuinely cared if Ron understood what was happening.

"Yeah, I reckon it does," Ron said.

"I'm glad to hear that," Mr. Nelson said. He thumbed through a folder. "Anything you say or do in this room is strictly between you and me. As long as the matter doesn't threaten your life or the lives of others, I'm bound by magic and law to keep it in confidence." He signed a piece of parchment then slid it across the desk to Ron.

Ron picked it up, reading over the confidentiality clause.
"Should I sign this?"

"Only if you understand what I'm saying and agree to the terms," Mr. Nelson said. Ron didn't really want to agree but he signed his name anyway. "Thank you," he said, placing the clause back into the folder. "Now, there is one formality that I have to discuss with you today."

Just by the tone of his voice, Ron knew what he was referring to.
"Yes, sir?"

Mr. Nelson sat up in his chair. "I was informed that you experience panic attacks and that you had one here. Mr. Smith briefed me on what happened and also told me that you neglected to mention your state on your medical form."

Ron rubbed his neck. This was what he'd been dreading since the announcement of the Healers had been given, but even more so, this was what he'd been dreading since he started having attacks. Somehow, in the back of Ron's mind, he always knew that he'd have to talk about them with someone — just not here and now.

"Yeah!"

Mr. Nelson kept his gaze on Ron but it didn't feel as if Mr. Nelson was digging into him or even trying to see something. "Well, just so you know upfront, I have been advised to get you to possibly open up about them." He flipped his quill again, shrugging. "Whether we do or not is totally up to you though."

Ron blinked several times, scooting to the very edge of his chair. "You mean you're not going to question me about them? I won't be forced to explain anything?"

"You're of age, Ron," Mr. Nelson said. "You can't be 'forced' to do anything. Yes, I'd really like to talk about your heightened moments of anxiety so I can help but that'll only be after you say it's okay. Does this surprise you?"

"Yes, it does," Ron said honestly. "I thought I dunno. My attacks are the only thing that seems relevant for this."

"That's not the case at all, Ron," Mr. Nelson said. "Your anxiety is only one piece of a much greater puzzle: you. Everything about you is relevant because it all comes together to create the person you are and the Auror you want to become."

"I reckon that's true," Ron said.

"It's very true," Mr. Nelson said. "We can just talk about camp, your friendships, your love life, or how you fancy sugar with your tea - it doesn't matter. I only need three things from you: punctually, that you do actually speak, and that you don't hold things back from me because you're afraid of what I'll think. I'm a stranger so I have no expectations of you, Ron. You have nothing to prove to me."

The weight that had been pressing against Ron lessened its force. Even though he didn't want to be there, Mr. Nelson's words were comforting. "Okay, sir," Ron said.

"Fantastic, Ron," Mr. Nelson said. "So about the scheduling: for these first few weeks everyone is required to meet on Sundays with an additional two weekdays. We're going in alphabetical order and your days fall on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Will that work for you?"

"I guess," Ron said.

"Great." Mr. Nelson wrote quickly yet neatly on his parchment. "Would you rather meet in the afternoons during your lunch break or during your dinner?"

"Dinner would be good," Ron swiftly said. He'd rather put off talking for as long as possible.

"Please know that you're more than welcome to bring work or your food in here with you," Mr. Nelson said. "There's no reason why you shouldn't be allowed to get your assignments completed or eat. I'll do the same. I'm a big eater."

Ron grinned a little. Mr. Nelson was hardly a large man but neither was Ron, and he probably ate more than all of his brothers combined. "That sounds good."

Mr. Nelson finished writing then stood up. "Well, Ron, I guess I will see you next week then."

"W-waitâ€¦that's it?" Ron asked. "I can go?"

"I told you that you wouldn't have to think too much today," Mr. Nelson said, leaning against his desk. "This was just about scheduling your meetings. We have a bit of time if you do want to talk."

"No â€“ no that's all right," Ron said, quickly standing up from his chair.

Mr. Nelson chuckled, holding out his hand. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Ron."

He shook it. "You too, Mr. Nelson, thank you," Ron said.

As Ron headed back to the Ruins to get his classroom supplies, he was slightly unsure of what just happened. His meeting had been awkward and strange but it hadn't been painful or even all that scary. Mr. Nelson seemed all right; Ron loved the idea that he wouldn't have to talk about Fred and his panic attacks. This wouldn't stop him from keeping up his guard though. Ron reckoned that the mental healing would be incredibly important but he also knew that there were bigger things happening at Lambrick that had to come first. He couldn't afford to expose all his weakness or put complete faith in a stranger and pour his heart out to him. That required vulnerability, and Ron always had to be strong and ready at Lambrick.

It wasn't too much longer after Ron's turn that everyone came back to the meal cabin to wait for the next part of their training. The same blokes who had complained in the shower about the Healers now seemed all right. Ron was relieved to know that things had gone okay for Harry and almost all his mates except for Conor. Conor's expression was now harsh, and he spoke shortly to everyone. Ron wanted to know what was wrong but he wouldn't push the matter. It simply wasn't how their friendship was.

Richard and Alan eventually came into the cabin. "I hope you lot had an okay experience with your Healers," Richard said. "Now that you all are into a schedule, we can continue with training. It won't be like this ever again. You'll finish with the morning drill then shower and eat. The days will be longer and so will the nights."

"The time you'll spend in the classroom and in the field will be extended because there's a lot more to learn and practice," Alan said. "Let's get to it. Your new classroom is in the cabin right next to this building. Ms. Yule is already waiting, so grab your supplies and lets go."

Ron didn't know what to expect from the health unit, but he knew that it would never match what he had in Mr. Low's class. He wanted to go back to his glory days of getting chalk everywhere with John, but he couldn't. All Ron could do was move forward. They entered the cabin. Melanie Yule was at the front, tightly holding her wand.

"Good afternoon," she said. "Take a seat wherever you like." Ron sat between Harry and Olivia at a table; Ben, Conor, and Letty sat in front of them.

"We haven't done this in awhile," Harry said.

"Yeah, don't forget to wake me up before Trelawney walks over," Ron cheeked.

"This may not be too bad," Olivia said. She put on her glasses. Ron snorted. "I have no issues with punching you in the face," she added offhandedly.

"Neither do I," Letty said. "I think she looks adorable in her glasses."

"Please don't ever say that again," Olivia said.

"You better not be taking the piss, Ron," Harry said. "Wearing glasses only means you can't see."

"Spot on. I don't understand why anything more is attached to having poor vision," Olivia said.

"Maybe because poor vision means you read too much," Ben said, giving her a smile. "Which suggests that you're too smart for your own good."

"I don't know about that," Ron said. "My girlfriend has read more books than anyone in existence but her vision is perfect."

"You think everything about Hermione is perfect, Ron," Harry said with a laugh. Ron shrugged.

"Should I break up the happy family or can we learn to be quite?" Richard asked, walking to the edge of Ron's table.

"Yes, sir," they all said at once, dropping their smiles and dipping their quills. When Richard walked away, Ron drew a picture of a girl holding a giant pair of glasses on Olivia's paper. She crossed it out, hastily scribbling 'fuck off' on Ron's notebook.

Melanie Yule held up her finger, clearing her throat. "All right class, we should get started. As Phillip Smith told you, my name is Melanie Yule. You can call me Ms. Yule." She took off her jacket then wrote her name on the board using her wand. Ron missed John's style already. "I recently transferred to St. Mungo's. I've been a Healer for six years, and my focus area is immediate first aid and nutrition. I mostly tend to and educate witches and wizards in high-risk occupations. This includes animal trainers, athletes in contact sports, and of course Aurors."

"You're very lucky to have Ms. Yule here," Alan said from the back of the room. "She's already one of the most talented specialists in her area, and she has field experience."

"In fact, she is an aid to the Aurors who work at the Ministry," Richard said, grinning at her.

"Thank you, gentlemen, but that's not what's important," Ms. Yule said, softly smiling. "What's crucial is that you trainees learn that being magical doesn't mean you're impervious to pain or deterioration. Aurors tend to believe that pure will alone will heal them. That's not the case. If you're bleeding profusely, catch some sort of foreign disease, or if you haven't eaten in three days, your body won't care how many generations of magic is behind it. That's what's most important." Ms. Yule looked as if she could be blown over by the wind but, when she spoke about healing, there was a fire in her that made her look so much bigger and stronger.

"I completely agree," Richard said. Harry nudged Ron and he nodded. It was obvious that Richard fancied her.

"Over the course of this unit, you will learn and be tested over various quick spells, procedures, and potions that Aurors carry in their arsenals," Ms. Yule said. "You'll also learn a bit about nutrition as well as techniques to keep your bodies able. They'll involve both magical and more basic Muggle practices. In the Healing profession, we like to be open-minded to all methods of recovery."

"Like your dad wanting stitches," Harry said in Ron's ear. Ron had to bite his lip to keep from laughing at the memory of his mum scolding his dad for even mentioning the idea.

"This class does involve book work, but you will also have hands-on lessons," Ms. Yule continued. "Some of the procedures require a lot of space to practice and we will be brewing potions as well. I've learned from my own field experience that it's one thing to read a technique in a book but it's another to actually have to perform it on someone." Olivia raised her hand. "Yes, Ms.?"

"Young," Olivia said. "I was just wondering if the quick spells we'll be learning are going to center on orthopedic healing."

Ms. Yule beamed at her. "You're Scott's daughter, aren't you?" Olivia's shoulders slumped a little. She nodded. "Well, yes, the quick spells will be focusing on musculoskeletal healing but that's why you'll also learn about different potions and herbs to cover the other areas. That's actually how I want to begin this unit."

Ms. Yule reached into her bag, pulling out several photographs. She placed a few on the edge of each table. Harry passed some of the pictures down their table.

"Bloody hell," Ron said as he looked at a bloke who was missing a foot. A few people in their classroom made noises of disgust. All the pictures were of people missing various body parts.

"Trainees?" Richard warned.

"It's okay, Richard," Ms. Yule said. "These are rather gruesome. Class, what you're looking at are severances that were the results of people splinching. This incident is something that's a real problem in the Auror profession because Aurors tend to apparate in the heat of a battle or during extreme levels of stress, anger, or confusion - which can lead to this."

"During one of my first field missions," Alan said, "a partner and I apparated out of an intense battle. When we appeared at our base, he was missing a chunk of his stomach."

"As you all know, not all splinching is severe but sometimes it can be," Ms. Yule said. "Today we're going to talk about remedies to use if a significant splinch does occur, as well as some after-care potions and treatments to take." Ron slowly raised his

hand. "Yes, Mr. Weasley?" For a moment he wanted to ask her how she already knew his name, but then Ron remembered that almost everyone knew his name now.

"Will we be talking about Dittany?" he asked.

"Why, yes, we are," Ms. Yule said. "Have you had experience with the plant?"

Ron rubbed his neck, glancing at Harry. He looked grim but nodded. "Yes, I have," Ron said. "I had some used on me when I, umâ€œsplinched a good portion of my arm last year." Ron had to stop talking. The memory of the chaos at the Ministry flooded into his mind, along with everything that happened directly after he got splinched. The pain, rage, and evil from the locket touched him for a moment.

"Our friend healed him with it," Harry quickly added. "She said it's rather rare. Is that true?"

"Yes, Dittany isn't a common house plant to say the least," Ms. Yule said, taking her focus off Ron and putting it on Harry. She began to talk about Dittany and other plants and potions used to help treat splinch wounds. Ron's moment of darkness faded. He looked at Harry who was writing down everything Ms. Yule said. Ron wanted to thank his mate for understanding what he'd needed without Ron having to say anything.

For the rest of their class period, they took notes and listened to Ms. Yule's lecture. While the subject was interesting, Ron couldn't help but feel a familiar boredom that he'd always get in his classes at Hogwarts. Health didn't grab Ron's attention like navigation had, and Ms. Yule's teaching style was lot more traditional than John's had been. Ron already knew that this would be a harder unit. There was so much information that he didn't know and Potions had never been a strong subject for him. By the time they were packing up, Ron was yawning. His entire body was taunt and standing up made him groan.

"Thank you for your attention today," Ms. Yule said. "I know this seems rather dull, but learning medicine always starts out this way. I promise it'll become a bit more exciting, and you might even come to like the things you learn here. Having the skills to take care of yourself and others is a good feeling. Have a nice evening." Richard stayed in the cabin while Alan ushered them all outside. Ron stifled yet another yawn. He still had hours of field training to get through.

"All right, lot," Alan said, "we're heading to the main field. Don't expect an early tea because we'll be training well into the night. Let's go."

They followed Alan out into the training field; Ron found himself smiling. He had missed the trees, the grass, the fresh air, and the vast greenness of everything. Ron could hear people dueling, firing spells, and shouting about not giving up all around him. Ron had sweated and bled so much out here, but this was what he'd been waiting for.

"While we're waiting for Richard and the sections aids," Alan said, "I'll brief you lot on what you'll be learning out here. As you know, we correspond your field practice to the unit in which you're training. So, we'll be putting you through more intense physical, mental, and emotional challenges. The further we move into your training, the harsher field practice will be."

"Before we get to that point though," Richard said loudly as he and the section aids joined Alan in front of their line, "we need to refine your wand work and hand combat." Brian and Pete laid very large, yet thin, black mats on the ground as Richard continued, "Just watching you buggers today let me know that there's still a lot of weakness in this group when it comes to the physicality of dueling. That can't be the case if you want to progress in this program."

"Exactly," Alan said. "We're building onto what you already know. You have a solid foundation, so now we're adding on to it. You'll be learning advanced magic and more intricate moves for your combat. This evening we'll be starting with a new combative maneuver."

Richard looked between Brian and Pete. "Hmmâ€¦Pete, why don't you help me with this one, yeah?"

"Yes, sir," Pete said.

Because Pete had been the aid for west, Ron didn't know much about him. He wasn't as tall or burly as Brian and his shaggy blond hair made him look a bit like a knob. According to Harry though, the bloke was quick and rather callous when it came to dueling.

Richard stood with his heels to one of the mats. Pete took a few paces back, facing him. Ron didn't know what they were doing, but judging by their stances, it looked as if they were going to rush each other.

"That's far enough. Come at me," Richard said.

Pete angled himself before rushing Richard. Ron couldn't understand why Richard wasn't bracing himself. When Pete's body connected to his, Richard bent down at a rapid speed, clutching Pete by the waist. He bowed his knees, easily lifting Pete into the air. He arched back, dropping Pete hard on the mat. Even with the bit of cushion, it looked painful.

Richard helped Pete up, not looking fazed by what he'd done. "We're going to start this unit with lifts," he said. "It may not seem like much but you'd be surprised how much time you save when you can get a person down this way. There are a few key lifts you'll be required to master but there are just some wicked ones that you're free to try once you've safely learned how to do them."

"Young," Alan said.

Olivia cleared her throat. "Yes, sir?"

"Male or female, you're the smallest person in this group," he said.

Her cheeks stained pink. "I'm aware, sir."

"I was the smallest bloke in my group," Alan said. "When we got to the lifting portion of training, I was a little worried. I shouldn't have been. If you're trained properly and you remember certain rules, you'll be able to lift almost anyone in this lineup."

"There's so much more that goes into this maneuver than upper body strength," Richard said. "That's what you'll learn. We'll start today's lesson with the most important aspect of lifting: finding power in your feet."

Richard, Alan, and the section aids used each other to demonstrate how and how not to stand when performing a stationary lift. Every time one of them hit a mat, Ron cringed a little. Their group was finally allowed to try very basic grabs and lifts on each other. Ron's body was already sore and stiff that slamming against the mat was excruciating. Lifting people was a lot harder than it looked as well. There was so much Ron had to be aware of so he wouldn't lose his balance or break anything. Extending his arms, bending his knees, arching his feet, and keeping his shoulders straight took a certain level of concentration that he hadn't had to use before.

It only became more difficult when the trainers made them duel with each other then end with some sort of lift. When the darkness of night finally fell upon them, they were still dueling and lifting. Ron's stomach growled, his tailbone throbbed, and his head pounded as they practiced in the dark field for hours. By the time they were finally dismissed, it was well into the night; Ron hardly felt connected to his body.

Ron stuffed down all his food at dinner. He was so hungry that he didn't care how tasteless his meat slices were. Ron wanted to chew faster but his jaw hurt from when he'd landed wrong on his face.

"What a bloody day," Harry breathed, sluggishly eating his carrots.

"And it's only the first," Letty said. "We'll be doing the exact same thing tomorrow. Merlin, the days are so much longer."

"I don't even want to tell you what time it is right now," Ben said. "Bloody hell, I forgot that we have to go back to the Ruins tonightâ€¦every night."

"I actually didn't think the field training was that bad," Conor said.

"That's because you're a natural at this," Ron said, rubbing his eyes. "I remember that from the first half."

"You weren't too bad either, Ron," Olivia said. "You're a lot stronger than you look."

"Cheers," he mumbled.

"No, that's a compliment," she said. "I am too and so is Alan. That's what he was getting at today."

"Well, I won't be able to get anything tomorrow if I don't rest for at least a couple minutes." Ron got up from the table, stuffing his last bit of bread into his mouth. "I'll see you lot in the morning." He tapped Harry's shoulder with his tray then walked over to the bins.

"Oi, wait up," Olivia said. He waited for her then the two walked out, heading back to the Ruins. "So, what's your opinion on the new half?"

"It's either going to make me the strongest bloke in the world or kill me," he said. "You?"

"I don't think anything was more awful than the two sprinting laps we had to do this morning," Olivia said. "Everything else was manageable."

"I really miss John's teaching," Ron said.

"Of course you do, pet," she teased, rolling her eyes. "Ms. Yule is all right though."

"It helps that you know a lot," he said. "It might also help that she knows your dad."

"Everyone in the medical field knows my parents," she said, frowning. "It doesn't matter to me. I told you that. This is what I want." Olivia gazed at him. Her light blue eyes were practically glowing with intensity.

"I know it is," he said. He needed to change the subject. "So, um, how was your holiday?"

"Uneventful," she said. "My parents had to work a lot – big surprise. I mostly stayed at home or spent time with my mates. How was yours?"

"Eventful," Ron said. "It was brilliant and not-so-brilliant at the same time."

She nodded. "Your family?"

"Survived."

"Hermione?"

"Was amazing," he said. "I needed to see her even more than I thought I did."

Olivia smiled wide, patting his arm. "I'm happy for you, Ron. Oh, you'll never guess who came by to see me." He raised an eyebrow. "Ben."

"Harris?" he asked.

She laughed. "It was quite a surprise. He wrote to me, asking if I ever wanted to meet up. I told him yes, not really thinking he was serious, but he showed up to my house one day. It wasâ€¦interesting."

"That's wicked," Ron said.

"I reckon," she said. "I had a nice time with him. He was sweet."

"Are you dating him now?" he asked.

"No," she promptly said. "I still don't want a boyfriend, and I hope he understands that. I don't know though. He's been treating me differently today, and he's been exceedingly nice to me ever since you called him out at breakfast."

"Sorry about that," Ron said, rubbing his neck. "I justâ€œ;all this mental stuff is really personal. People shouldn't just ask things like that."

"It's okay," she said. "I appreciated and understood why you did it."

"Good," he said, nodding.

They walked the rest of the way to the main house in silence. The smell of their corridor smacked Ron in the face as soon as they reached the entrance. "I fucking hate this place."

"Me too," she said. "After a few days of getting used to the new training, I think I'll start walking the trail again at night. I have to stay away from here for as long as I can."

"I'll join you," Ron said. Olivia yawned, rubbing her eyes. The gesture made Ron remember something. "I'm such a tit. Wait here."

"Okayâ€;" she said slowly. Ron rushed into his room then searched around his trunk. He pulled out a small gift bag then came back out into the hallway.

"Here," he said, handing it to her.

"What's this?"

"Your very late Christmas present," he said.

"I told you that you didn't have to get me anything, Ron," she said, chewing on the side of her lip.

"I know but I wanted to," he said. "It's nothing too much and I swore that I would. Besides, the Quidditch magazine you gave me really came in handy over my holiday." Olivia nodded but just

looked at the bag as if she was afraid of it. "Just open the damn thing." She sighed then reached in. Olivia pulled out a glasses case that was made of dark purple velvet. "See? It's nothing too posh," Ron said. "The black one you have looks older than this building; I'm sick of looking at it."

She laughed, running her fingers over the velvet. "Wow, thank you."

"You're welcome," he said. "Harry had to get his glasses tapped over the holiday; that's when I got the idea. I went to a shop and saw a whole bunch of these. I know your favorite color is purple so I picked this one."

Olivia gave him a look. "How do you know that? I've never told you."

"It wasn't exactly hard to guess," he said. "Your glasses are purple and you wear purple socks sometimes and nail polish â€“ only dark shades though."

She chewed on the side of her lip. "You're very perceptive, Ron."

He shrugged. "I reckon it's something I picked up over the years of playing chess."

Olivia looked at her glasses case then to the floor. Ron couldn't read her expression. "Well, thank you again," she said gently. "I, um, I think I'm gonna go to bed."

"Me too," he said. "I want to be more awake when Brian or Pete starts pounding on the door." He opened his door. "Goodnight, Olivia."

"Yeah, you too," she said with a grin. She slowly walked to her door then paused a moment before walking in.

When Ron went inside his room, he pulled off his kit then almost melted into his comfortable pajamas. He fell back on his bed, letting out a heavy breath. His body was still so achy and stiff. He knew the next day he'd feel even worse. Ron flipped his wand between his fingers, thinking about his day. He had cried, puked, sweated, bled, and even bruised all within a matter of hours. He felt completely worn and raw. Everything was so much tougher and scarier in a lot of ways. Ron had never expected the merging stage to be so vicious, yet he had survived. He had survived the extra laps, the lifts, the lecture on health, and the Healer.

Ron bit his lip. The counseling would definitely be the hardest to get through. He still couldn't believe that he had to meet with a professional. The only upside was that he wouldn't have to talk about his attacks. Keeping his head as far away from them would allow Ron to keep surviving. Mr. Nelson would have to understand that.

The door opened and Jack came in. "Sleepy already, Weasley?"

"There's no bloody way you're not," Ron said, sitting up. "I saw you yawn a few times today."

"Wasn't me," he said. Jack laid his running clothes out neatly on the top of his trunk. Ron didn't know what to say to him. He hadn't forgotten that Jack had helped him on the trail but Ron couldn't thank him. Jack looked in his direction, making Ron turn away.

"You know, Weasley," Jack said, "I don't mind stepping on people who are obviously weaker than me to get to the end because I only want to compete against the best. The best can't be quitters. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yeah, that makes sense," Ron said.

"The best can't be soft cocks either, Weasley. You should keep that in mind." Jack picked up his shower gear then left the room.

Ron couldn't tell if Jack had insulted or complimented him just now. The only thing he did know was that, as much as Jack was a wanker, he was also one of the best. It was why Ron loathed and liked that Jack had made it; it was also why Ron always wanted to run and fly at Jack's pace. He was starting to think that Jack might've honestly felt the same way about him and wasn't simply talking to be an arse.

Harry came back soon after, collapsing on his bed. Ron rolled over on his side, turning to him. "Still alive, Harry?"

"For now," Harry breathed. He kicked off his shoes, laughing. "I feel bloody horrible."

"So do I," Ron said. "I'm fucking tired as all bloody hell too, but I'm almost too sore to fall asleep. It's not exactly lights out yet either."

"Get your board out or something then," Harry said as she changed out of his kit. "We can play a game or something."

"You want to play chess?" Ron asked. "Mate, you're bad enough when you're completely focused. I'll probably take your bollocks tonight."

"It's a little late for a de-bollocking; that happened sometime during the morning exercise," Harry said in shame. "Just do it."

"All right," Ron said. He pulled his chess case out of his trunk then sat on Harry's bed. "You're white." Ron set up the pieces absentmindedly as he went over the entire game in his head.

"Bloody hell, mate," Harry said.

"Wha-?"

"You looked liked Hermione just now," Harry teased. "You were all intellectual."

"Oi, I can be smart by my own accord," Ron said.

"Right," Harry said. "Can you also read more books than anyone else in existence and still have 'perfect vision'?" He laughed. "You're such a prat."

"Sod off," Ron said. "I enjoy complimenting my girlfriend. I never hear you praising Ginny. I should kick your arse for that. She's a Weasley for fuck's sake."

"I can start complimenting her now," Harry said. "Should I start with her personality or her body?"

"Shut it," Ron muttered.

"Let's begin with the body!"

"I bloody mean it, you prick!" Ron threw a few pawns at him. In turn Harry threw his pieces at Ron. The two insulted and hit each other more than they played, but Ron didn't care. For the first time since arriving to Lambrick, they were alone and allowed to be best mates again.

Acting like a prat with Harry didn't take away Ron's physical pain or erase his anxiety over what was to come, but it made him okay.

After a day like today: 'okay' was just fine with Ron.

* * *

***** WELCOME BACK, RON AND HARRY! :) I hope you lot enjoyed this chapter! We're certainly at a new stage in the story and in Ron's life. Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 46*: The otherside

I got quite a few reviews asking how long I plan to take this story out and if I'll include certain things or not, so I want to make a 'sort of' formal statement. The pace of this story is really going to pick up because there are a few 'things' I want to also cover in this story that go beyond what's happening now. So, to answer the question of how long do I plan to take this story: Well, until I need to end one story to begin another. Cryptic, I know, but it's the best I've got without being a spoiling git.

Just know that this story isn't going to be hundreds of chapters or anything. I only have so much patience, lol. I really hope this helps answer some questions. If not, feel free to send me a pm! I'd hate to give spoilers to people who don't want them.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

* * *

"Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Does this look right?"

"No."

"Wha-? How do you know that?"

"Because yours looks just like mine, Ron, and I know I'm doing this wrong."

"Bleeding arse fuck."

Ron stopped stirring his potion to read over the directions again. The liquid in his cauldron was supposed to be a very rich green but his was an ugly yellow. He had no idea what was wrong with his batch, and he was trying with everything he had not to throw his cauldron against the wall and give up.

Ron looked around the potions cabin. Everyone was standing up, hovering over their cauldron as they tried to successfully brew a Blood-Replenishing Potion.

It was Saturday - almost a week since he'd returned to Lambrick and started this new unit - but Ron still wasn't used to the new atmosphere. Every day he walked into Ms. Yule's class feeling as though he was back at Hogwarts. Ron had always hated Potions class and that hatred was affecting his learning abilities now.

Ron knew that he had to get over the feeling and fast. He needed to do well in the class so he could move on in training. It was proving difficult though. He felt out of place with everything that was going on, but he didn't know why.

Ron placed his elbows on the table, flipping through his book.

"Maybe we're missing something."

"That's not possible," Harry said as he continued to stir his potion that was also yellow. "We went over the instructions a hundred times. I'll probably have dreams about the ingredients tonight."

Ron chuckled. "I'll wake up to go for a wee and you'll be writing the list of ingredients on the wall or something. You'll be half asleep and looking mad."

Harry laughed as well. "And I'll most likely be mumbling something about needing to make things green. Bloody hell - feel free to shake me when this happens, yeah?"

"I'll do something even better," Ron said, "a nice kick in the bollocks."

"You're a prat," Harry said, closing Ron's book on his hand. Ron wanted to retaliate, but Ms. Yule wasn't too far in front of them and Alan and Richard were in the back of the room talking.

The only upside to the class was that Ron got to work alongside Harry. He wasn't any better at making potions than Ron was and Ron felt like less of a tit when he saw Harry boggled as well.

"All right, class," Ms. Yule said, raising a finger like she always did when she wanted their attention. "Our time is running out so fill an entire vial with a sample of your potion and turn that in to me along with your write-up. It'll be easier for me to understand why the potion turned out the way it did when I know exactly how you brewed it."

"Shit," Harry breathed. "There's no way we can turn these in."

"We have to," Ron said. "Let's just finish the write-up. I'm sure that'll be worth more points than the actual potion."

He and Harry quickly wrote down their steps as people began to form a line to turn in their vials. Ron signed his name as neatly as he could on his vial and write-up, then hurried in line. As they turned in their potions, Ms. Yule handed back their graded assignments. Ron took his coursework, glaring at all the marks on his paper.

"Fucking hell, I can't catch a break in this class," he mumbled as he walked over to the table and started stuffing his things into his bag.

"I didn't do well either," Harry said. "We have an exam on Monday over all of this too."

"We'll have to study all tomorrow then," Ron said. Harry groaned. "I know, mate, but we have no choice."

Harry frowned, shoving his papers and empty vials into his bag. "I wish Hermione was here to help us understand this."

Ron leaned against the wall, letting out a heavy breath. "You and me both, Harry."

"You two look peaky," Letty said, grabbing her bag from next to Ron's.

"That's because this class is maddening," Harry said.

"Olivia and I are going to form a small study group and look over the material for Monday's exam tomorrow," Letty said. "Do you want to join us?"

"I need all the help I can get," Ron said. "I'll join."

"Me too," Harry said. "Olivia is really good with this material."

"She grew up around all this so she knows what she's talking about," Letty said. "I keep telling her that this is something she could fall back on."

"She'd never do that," Ron said. "She may answer all of Ms. Yule's questions and get every potion right, but she doesn't love this. Being an Auror is what she loves."

"So she always says," Letty said, smiling at him. "Well, we're going to start tomorrow after breakfast so meet us in our room."

"Sorted," Harry said.

"Okay, lot," Richard said, waving a hand at them, "let's head out to the field."

Ron popped his back and knuckles as his group followed the instructors out of the classroom. He kept rolling his neck, trying to rid himself of the mild lethargy he always obtained during health class. He would need to be totally alert for another long night of field practice. Their group was still learning lifts combined with advanced magic and it was the most physically demanding section of training that Ron had ever encountered.

Ron put his bag in the pile with everyone else's as he repeatedly told himself that he would perform better out here. Field training was the heart of Lambrick Academy, so Ron had to get his head on and perform to standard.

"Verprico!"

Ron was disarmed and suddenly his right hand felt extremely heavy. An awful burning sensation started to accumulate in his fingers then gradually moved up his arm. Before he had time to recuperate and go for his wand, he was rushed. Ron received a swift, sturdy knee to the groin then was scratched ferociously across the face. He fell backwards as the worst pain a bloke can feel began to overpower him.

He got into the fetal position as fire throbbed in his bollocks before spreading to his abdomen. Ron started to feel nauseous. The pain was almost entirely in his stomach now. He wanted to tear his stomach out to rid himself of the painful sickness, but he couldn't. Ron had to get over the pain and focus.

He looked up at his partner and the reason for his discomfort. Michelle Grace gave him a nasty smile as if she was pleased with

herself. Ron had always heard rumors about her technique can but this was the first time that he had personally encountered her brutality. Michelle was unbelievably quick and fought callously. Ron could only guess that her dueling skills were why she was still around because there wasn't much else that was good about her. Michelle's personality didn't seem to bother most of the blokes though. No "when she was talked about, the subject matter revolved around how she was blonde, tall, thin, and had a rather large chest. Ron never took part in those discussions. He wasn't impressed by her, and he didn't understand how anyone could overlook her terrible character long enough to find interest in her in the first place.

Ron touched his face, feeling welts. Some of the skin on his cheek had been broken and drops of blood were on his fingertips.

"Fucking hell, Michelle."

"Sorry, Weasley," Michelle said " though she didn't look sorry at all, "but no body part is off-limits."

Ron rolled his eyes as he rose to his feet. He had a deep ache in his lower half but he had to push through it. "I don't care that you got my bollocks. I'm angry that you almost ripped my face off." He touched his cheek again, feeling rough, swollen skin. "Have you ever thought about cutting down those claws you have?"

"Are you mad?" she asked with a harsh laugh. "These are my weapons. I depend on them more than I depend on my wand." She licked one of her fingernails.

Ron crinkled his nose, feeling sick again.

"Aww, am I scaring you?" Michelle asked.

"Shut up and let's do a lift," Ron quickly said, pulling off his jumper.

"Fine by me." She pulled hers off too. "Don't be such a coward this time. Come at me like you've got something in your trousers. I know you do - I felt it as I kneed you."

Ron blushed as he felt a spike of anger. He had never trained with anyone like Michelle before, but he had to ignore the discomfort.

"Ready?" he asked.

Michelle nodded. "Come and get me."

They started running toward each other. As soon as Ron came into contact with her, he bent down, grabbing her waist. He lifted her, arched his back, and pinned her down on the mat nearest to them. Michelle grunted, trying to get away but Ron straddled her and was able to keep her wrists pinned. She might've been faster, but Ron was stronger.

"You should've kept your legs rigid, Michelle," Ron said, fighting against her strength. "It would've made this more difficult for me."

Michelle kept struggling under him but unexpectedly stopped. She smiled strangely. "Maybe I kept my legs loose on purpose."

"Huh?" Ron asked.

Michelle giggled. "I kinda like you being on top of me like this."

Ron immediately started backing off of her, as though she had shocked him with a spell. "Wait a -"

His words were cut off as Michelle got out of his grip, flipping Ron over on his stomach. She held his wrists together and pressed them to the middle of his spine. She put her mouth right to his ear. "Never let your guard down, Weasley."

Alan blew his whistle. "Grace! Weasley!" He jogged over to them. Michelle let go of Ron. "Weasley, what happened to you?"

Ron rubbed his neck; he felt confused and somewhat violated. "I don't know, sir."

"Well, from where I was standing, it looked like you got distracted and Grace completely overpowered you," Alan said. "What do I always tell you?"

"Focus is key to survival," Ron said, standing up.

"Exactly," Alan said. "If you can't keep your head on and push through the distractions, then you'll wind up dead. It's that simple. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

Alan nodded then turned to Michelle. "Good work, Grace. If Weasley keeps giving you vantage points, then take them."

Michelle laughed. "I plan to, sir."

When Alan walked away, Michelle gave Ron another sickening smile. She was nasty and deserved to get laid out, but Ron didn't truly want to severely hurt her. He would, however, be less cautious. Along with getting used to Ms. Yule's class and the extended field practices, Ron was still adjusting to the idea of using real physical force against his female campmates.

As the night progressed, Ron fought dirtier with Michelle. She brought a furious energy out of him that Ron actually appreciated. He knew that dueling was always more ugly than not, so fighting against her helped him find his inner malice. This side of him wasn't something that Ron was particularly proud of, but it was a part of him that would be necessary to survive as an Auror.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, Alan blew his whistle.
"Gather lot!"

Ron limped over to the instructors. He was more than happy to be finished. He was knackered, sore, and the side of his face felt like it was falling off.

"You're not excused yet, trainees," Alan said as Ron sighed to himself, "we want to introduce you to another crucial pinning tactic. It's very effective but also quite dangerous if you're not careful."

"We've been telling you lot all week that lifts and pins take complete awareness because it's not just your opponent's body that is at risk," Richard said. "This move, however, is strictly offensive. Alan and I will show you the proper way to perform The Throat Clutch."

"We call it that because you will be taking your opponent by the throat and using all the force in your hand to bring them down," Alan said. "The throat is one of the most sensitive and obvious vantage points to attack, so pay close attention." Richard and Alan faced each other.

"Using your dominant hand," Richard said, "you'll take your thumb and middle finger and place them to the person's neck â€" like this." Richard demonstrated on Alan. "Stay around the top of the throat and move your fingers back until you feel a pulse, yes?"

"Yes, sir," all the trainees said.

"Once you can feel it, squeeze. Ready, Alan?" Richard asked. Alan nodded. Richard then squeezed his neck, causing Alan to sharply take in air while his knees buckled.

"There's a pressure point you want to touch," Richard said, appearing completely unfazed by what he was doing. "Once you see or feel this weakness from your opponent, you're in control. Always keep your fingers firm so you can make proper judgments." He let Alan go.

Alan coughed as he rubbed his throat. "Being on the receiving end of this can be quite daunting," he rasped, "so we'll teach you how to adapt to this situation. For now, just know that it does hurt." He and Richard got back into position.

"As I've got him with my middle finger and thumb, I will also use my index finger to push against his jaw. Does anyone know why this is important?"

Ron found himself quickly raising his hand.

"Yes, Weasley?" Richard said.

"Because the pressure against his jaw will make him lift his head," Ron said. "He'll be completely vulnerable."

"Very good," Richard said with a nod. "So, as Weasley said, holding Alan like this will make him angle his head. Once this happens, I'll squeeze harder and will be able to cut the strength right out of his legs à€" watch."

Richard squeezed Alan's throat again while also pushing against his jaw. Alan's legs lost all tension and he collapsed to his knees. Richard let him go; Alan started coughing again.

Ron was taken aback by what he was seeing. The Throat Clutch must have been intense because he had never seen Alan react to a maneuver in such a way. Ron felt nervous about practicing this new technique.

Richard helped Alan up. "So, did you see how I was able to get him down?" Richard asked. "It's all about proper placement of where you apply pressure."

"This procedure is most effective against moving targets," Alan said. "We'll demonstrate how The Clutch looks when it's used against a charging opponent." Alan walked backwards away from Richard.

"All right, trainees," Richard said. "Watch my stance and my hand placement as Alan comes at me. Go ahead, Alan!"

Alan rapidly came running at Richard. When they made contact, Richard grabbed Alan by the throat, effortlessly slamming him back on the mat. Ron bit his lip hard, cringing at how painful it looked.

"Did you see how fast Alan went down?" Richard asked. "This is a great offensive strategy to get your opponent on the ground relatively quickly."

Alan stood up, lightly shaking and looking dazed. "So," he breathed, "tonight you're only going to practice The Clutch from a stationary position. Next week we'll build on it, combining other maneuvers as well as spells to make this even more useful, but it's really important that you learn proper placement of your hands first."

"Clark, Neary," Richard said, "come up here."

Letty promptly walked over to him, but Conor didn't move.

"Neary?" Alan asked. "Did you hear him?"

"Yes, sir," Conor said, looking uneasy.

"Then move your arse," Alan demanded.

"Y-yes, sir." Conor left the lineup and walked over to them. It was getting rather dark outside, but Ron had enough light to notice that there was something off about Conor's expression.

"All right, Clark, I'm going demonstrate the maneuver on you," Richard said.

Letty's eyes grew wide as she swallowed hard. "O-okay, sir. What should I do?"

"Just run at me like you would if you were rushing," he said.

"Is this going to hurt?"

"Yes," Alan said bluntly, "but you'll survive."

Letty took a deep breath, then started backing away from Richard. As she moved, Conor started chewing on his nails, growing more and more pale. Ron was reminded of the night of their examination and how mental Conor had been when the wizard had captured Letty.

"Go on, Clark!" Richard said.

Letty ran right at him. Ron held his breath as Richard clutched her throat, slamming her on the ground as if she were no heavier than a broomstick. Letty hit the mat hard, letting out a horrible sound as her head smacked against the mat.

Conor immediately looked away, closing his eyes and balling his fists. Ron had to stop himself from walking over to him. It looked as if Conor was moments away from puking or having a panic attack.

"Neary?" Alan asked. "Neary!"

"Sir?" Conor said in an unsteady voice, not turning around.

"What the hell are you doing, trainee?" Richard helped Letty up then whipped Conor around by the shoulder. "You have to watch this."

"I-I am, sir," Conor said, his voice cracking.

"It doesn't look that way," Richard said. "Clark, are you all right?"

"Yes, sir," she wheezed, coughing and rubbing her throat.

"Did that hurt?" Richard asked.

"Very much so, sir," she said, "but I can now understand why it's effective."

"Good," Richard said, patting her arm. "It's important for you to recognize that."

Conor didn't seem relieved. In fact, he looked even more terrified.

"Now that you lot have been introduced to The Clutch, we want you to start practicing it safely and correctly," Alan said. "Neary and Clark will demonstrate on each other first, then you'll break off into pairs."

"Neary?" Richard said.

Conor didn't answer at first. He merely kept his eyes on the ground. "Yes, sir?"

"I want you to go first."

Conor finally glanced up, appearing distracted. "Sir?"

Richard sighed. "I said you're going first. I want you to practice The Clutch."

"Who am I practicing on?"

"Clark, of course!" Alan said. "What is your problem?"

Whatever color was left in Conor's face completely disappeared. "Wha-?"

"Neary, are you purposely testing my patience?" Alan asked, walking a little closer to him.

"No, sir," Conor said, shaking his head.

"Then get yourself together," Alan said. "Focus."

Ron's palms started to itch. He had never seen so much emotion out of Conor before, nor had Ron seen him draw so much attention to himself. Conor was always laid-back and hardly made any noise at camp. Ron wasn't used to this sort of behavior from him.

"I'm sorry, sir," Conor said. "I don't think I'm ready for this."

"You're ready, Neary," Richard said. "I'll walk you through all the steps. So, I want you to first place your fingers on Clark's throat like I demonstrated. Do it now."

Conor ran his fingers through his hair then walked over to her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Conor," Letty said.

"Neary," Richard said. "What are you doing? She's okay."

"I just wanted to make sure, sir," Conor mumbled. He slowly raised his hand, placing his fingers to her throat. The moment he touched her, Ron saw all the tension in Conor's muscles retract.

"No - Neary," Richard said, "for this to work, you need to apply pressure. You have to clutch her throat to bring her down. Use more force until you can feel her pulse."

Conor nodded, licking his lips. He didn't move though. He simply held his hand on Letty's throat.

"Neary!" Alan said.

Conor let her go, exhaling deeply. "Can't she go first?"

"No - you're first," Alan said. "Perform the movement that Richard taught you."

"But-

"There are not 'buts', Neary," Richard said. "You have to learn this. You're exceptional with lifts and pins, so I know you can do this."

"Just do it, Conor," Letty said, blushing.

Conor nodded. "Fine." He raised his hand to her throat again. Ron watched the pained expression on his face increase as he applied pressure. Letty's knees buckled, causing Conor to gasp and let her go. He tripped backwards, appearing horrified.

"Neary!"

"I'm sorry, but I can't do this," Conor said, shaking his head.
"Let me try on someone else."

Richard gaped at him. "Neary, are you-"

"- hold on," Alan said, touching Richard's arm. He gave Conor a once-over. "You want a different partner?" Conor nodded. "How about Grace?"

"No, sir," Conor said.

"Young?"

"No, sir," Conor repeated.

"Then how about Potter or Harris?"

"All right," he said.

"So what you're saying is that you don't want to perform this maneuver on your female campmates?" Alan asked. "You don't want to help them learn?"

"It's not like that, sir," Conor said.

"Then how is it, Neary?" Richard asked. "We told everyone the very first day of training that the men and women of this camp will be treated equally. You all are here to learn the same skills."

Conor rubbed his face, bouncing on his feet. "I understand."

"Then stop worrying about being a gentleman and help yourself and Clark learn how to fight!" Richard said loudly. "Do you plan to politely ask a dark witch to-"

"- none of the girls here are dark witches," Conor hurriedly said. "I'm not going to treat them like they are."

Richard merely stared at Conor as though he couldn't believe his words.

"How else do you plan on learning, Neary?"

"In a way that doesn't require me to be vicious like this." Conor's face flushed. "I don't feel comfortable choking and pinning her to the ground."

"Welcome to the Auror profession, Neary!" Alan barked at him. "It's rarely about comfort and it's usually ugly. The things you'll have to do as an Auror will be unfair and cruel at times. It's something you must accept. Do you understand me?"

"I do, sir, but I'm not changing my mind," Conor said boldly. "Give me another partner or ask someone else to do this."

Alan crossed his arms over his chest, walking straight up to Conor. "Are you giving me an order, Neary?"

Conor didn't back down or look afraid. Ron knew for certain that Conor was mental, but Ron also admired how brave he was being.

Conor shrugged. "I'm simply telling you what I will and won't do, sir."

"I'll make a note of that," Alan said, glaring at him. "Well, here's what I'm telling you: either perform the move or get off the field and run for the rest of the session."

Ron was sure that Conor would come to his senses now. They probably had hours of practice left and there was no way that he would willingly choose to run.

Conor looked between the instructors and Letty. "I'll take the laps." He walked over to the pile of bags to grab his.

"Unbelievable, Neary," Richard said.

Alan didn't say anything, but Ron knew him well enough to detect the slight change in his expression. He appeared to be more curious than angry now.

"Taylor," Alan eventually said, "go with Neary and make sure that he runs every lap."

"Yes, sir," Brian said.

Ron watched, completely gobsmacked, as Conor walked away with Brian. He knew that Conor was really sensitive about dueling with the girls but Ron was beginning to suspect that there was more going on. Whatever it was, it was enough to make Conor defy the instructors when he was usually the one to stop confrontation and keep things light.

"Does anyone want to join him?" Richard asked.

"No, sir," the remaining trainees said.

"Good," Richard said, "because what Neary is failing to understand is that we're not teaching you these exercises simply to show you new forms of violence. We're teaching you how to survive. This is how it'll be during a real duel, only you won't get step-by-step instructions or second chances."

"You have to learn how to attack and defend yourself against all types of people," Alan said. "We don't discriminate, which means that you will all learn the same way. You lot should know this already."

"Alan, we've wasted enough time," Richard said, sounding irritated. "It's Neary's problem, not the group's. Hill, I want you to partner with Clark."

Eric joined Richard at the front and the group was once again showed how to properly use The Throat Clutch. Ron tried to concentrate and learn every detail. Once they were finally allowed to practice, he did his best to remember the steps and safely pin people down, however, his mind was elsewhere. All Ron could think about was Conor and what it was about this type of training that bothered him so much.

When they were finally dismissed for dinner, Ron barely put any food on his tray. He was hungry but his throat was raw from repeatedly getting squeezed. The constant loss of oxygen had also made him dizzy while giving him a bad headache. Ron sat next to Harry, sluggishly biting into his meat slice.

Harry looked at him, wincing. "Merlin, Ron, Michelle really mucked up your face."

"She's inhuman," Ron said, peering over to one of the west tables where Michelle was sitting.

"And mad," Ben said. "I hate partnering with her."

"At least you don't have to live with her," Letty said. "I can't begin to describe what that's like."

"So don't try," Olivia said, scowling at Michelle. "She's a skinny, sadistic banshee." She turned her focus to Ron. "Maybe you should go to the medical cabin."

"I'm fine," Ron said, though his scratches still throbbed. He touched his tender cheek, knowing that his face looked ghastly. "It probably looks a lot worse than it feels. It's a ginger thing, eh, Letty?"

Letty chuckled a little. "Spot on." She grew a bit more serious. "So are we going to talk about what happened tonight with Conor?"

"What is there to talk about?" Ben asked. "He completely lost it."

"It's not that simple," Ron said.

"Ron's right," Olivia said. "Conor has always been hesitant when it comes to practicing with the girls. At first I found it obnoxious, but I'm not so sure anymore."

"But he has to know that he'll never make it here if he can't step out of his comfort zone," Harry said.

Ron looked around at everyone. He understood where they were coming from but there was something about the situation that he was taking personally. Ron understood what it was like to have something inside of you that wouldn't allow you to do certain things.

"Maybe we shouldn't talk about this," Ron said. "I'm sure Conor knows that he could get chucked out, but it's his life, yeah?"

Ron felt satisfied when his mates nodded or gave some variation of 'yes'. They continued to eat and talk about other things. The longer Ron sat, the less appetizing his food appeared. He just wanted to lie down and clear his mind.

He opened his mouth to tell Harry that he was leaving, but to his surprise, Conor came into the cabin and sat right next to him on the bench.

"Conor?" Ron said.

Conor was panting, flushed, and sweating through his kit. "Oi," he breathed.

"Blimey," Ben said. "I'm surprised you're still here, man."

"Soâ€;am I," Conor said, gulping down air. "I jogged about fifty sodding laps. I reckon I left some of my guts on the trail. We'll find out tomorrow."

"You'll be here tomorrow?" Olivia asked.

He nodded. "I got a nasty bollocking from Alan and Richard and I'll be at target practice all day and night tomorrow, but other than that, I'm still here." He rubbed his face, panting even heavier.

Ron slid his glass of water over to him. "Here, mate."

"Cheers." Conor chugged the water down then slammed the glass on the table.

Letty cleared her throat. "Are you feeling better then, Conor?"

"Yeah, water is a blessing," he said.

"I was referring to tonight's demonstration," she said.

"I never had a problem with the lesson," Conor said with a shrug. "I just didn't want to practice it on you. I have principles."

"Do you have to say it like that?" Harry asked. "You make it sound like the rest of us don't."

"That's not what he means," Ron said, nudging Harry's arm.

"I agree with Harry," Ben said. "I'm sure all the blokes here feel the same way you do, Conor, but we have to have thick skin for this type of thing."

"Thank you, Richard Jr.," Conor said sarcastically.

"You don't have to be a dick," Ben said. "I'm only saying that you shouldn't treat the girls like they're your little sister or something."

Conor gripped Ron's glass tightly in his hand. "Don't ever - talk about my sister."

"What is with you today?" Ben said, obviously not seeing how tense Conor was. "All I said was that your-"

In a flash, Conor threw the glass against the wall. He tried to grab Ben but Ron was able to take Conor's shoulders and hold him back.

"Conor!" Ron said, using all of his strength to keep him back.

"What the fuck is your problem?" Ben asked, standing up.

"You keep your goddamned mouth shut!" Conor said, still trying to grab him.

Ron shared a look of disbelief with Olivia. She shook her head, vaguely shrugging. Ron didn't know what was happening but he had to get Conor away.

"Conor, Conor," he said, pulling him further back. "Let's take a walk, yeah? It's okay."

"What is going on here?" Brian asked, walking into the cabin and over to their table.

"I was practicing a spell and it hit my glass, sir," Olivia swiftly said. She took her wand out of her pocket and repaired the glass.

Ron mentally thanked her for being brilliant. "Yeah, and Conor isn't feeling too well so we're going to get some air. Come on, Conor." Ron pulled Conor out of the cabin before Brian or anyone else had a chance to stop them.

Conor pulled out of Ron's hold as they walked back to the Ruins. "I'm so fucking tired of everyone's fucking mouth!" Conor growled. "Bleeding Christ!"

"I know, mate," Ron said. He couldn't believe who he was walking next to. This wasn't the Conor he knew. "Ben didn't mean anything by it though."

"I don't give a buggering hell," Conor said, kicking the ground.
"No one talks about my little sister, Ron. I mean that."

"Believe me, I understand," Ron said. "I'd have no problem ripping the bollocks off any person who talked about mine."

Conor looked at him as if he suddenly remembered that Ron had a sister. "Even Harry?" he asked.

"Especially Harry," Ron said. "I'm the hardest on him when it comes to her."

Conor nodded, moving his gaze away. He dug his hands into his pockets. "I fucking hate this place, Ron. People just won't leave me alone here. Am I mad for not wanting to participate in this shit?"

"I don't think so," Ron said, "but you have to keep reminding yourself that you're not hurting people for the sake of being an arsehole. It's about learning and improving your skills. We're trying to become Aurors, Conor. This is the life we'll have."

"Well, if this life means that I have to beat up girls, then I don't want it," Conor said. "How bloody dare Ben bring up my sister? I meanâ€¦if Kaitlinâ€¦" Conor shuddered, staring off toward the ground.

Ron didn't know what to do. His friendship with Conor didn't require them to explain things to each other or divulge heavy truths, but he could tell that Conor was going through something painful. Ron wanted to help, even if it pushed the boundaries of their silent agreement.

"Can I ask you something?"

"I guess," Conor mumbled.

Ron had to choose his words carefully. He didn't want to lose Conor's trust or cause him to attack again, but there was a question burning in his brain. "Why does the idea of using force against the girls bother you so much?"

"Because it's wrong to hurt them."

"Right," Ron said, "and, um, does it also bother you because maybeâ€¦there's a girl in your personal life whoâ€¦ gets hurt?"

Conor didn't look at him - only nodded. "Sorta," he said in barely a whisper.

Ron nodded. The pieces were coming together so he decided to test his luck one more time. "Is it your sister?"

Conor instantly stopped walking. "I don't want to talk about this."

"We don't have to," Ron quickly said, receiving his answer.

Conor continued to shake his head as he trembled. "I'm not going there, Ron."

"I'm not going to ask you to, Conor," Ron said, gripping his arms to help him calm down. "I don't want to pry into your life, but just remember that I have a little sister too and she means the bloody world to me. If you ever want to talk—"

"— I don't, but thanks," Conor said. He snatched himself out of Ron's hold then continued walking to the main building.

Ron didn't follow him. Whatever was going on with Conor was apparently a lot darker than Ron had thought.

After telling his mates back at in the meal cabin that Conor was simply having a bad day, he returned to his room that was thankfully empty.

Ron was finally able to look at his face in the tiny mirror on the wall. He had four pink scratches that started at his brow and stretched all the way across to his mouth. They were swollen and slightly crusted with blood. Ron tripped back until his legs touched his bed. He flopped back on it, dropping a pillow on his face. He screamed into it, hoping that doing so would shake off the terrible feeling he had.

Nothing had gone particularly well this week: his friend was in a state, his performances were off, and he still wasn't back in sync with camp life.

Ron wasn't in the comfort of home anymore; he needed to get over that fact.

He changed into his pajamas then climbed into bed. He pulled out his copy of the Egypt picture, focusing solely on Ginny. Ron had just received a letter from her the day before so he knew that she was okay. There wasn't anyone hurting her. Then again, there was only so much that Ron knew about Ginny's current situation.

He thought back to his second year at Hogwarts when Ginny had been possessed without him ever suspecting it. Ron suddenly felt a surge of panic flourish inside him but he gripped the picture, tightly shutting his eyes. He told himself to calm down and breathe. He opened his eyes when the moment passed, then put the picture away. Ron was obviously far too tense to think about anything clearly.

Ron covered himself completely with his blanket then put his pillow over his head again. He hoped that getting to bed earlier would help him focus better the next day. There was just so much going on, but Ron had to get himself together.

Everything had to be about survival.

* * *

By the following Tuesday, Ron had a bit more energy. He had survived an entire week of the new training and that accomplishment alone gave him more power.

During the morning exercise, Ron went over his entire day in his mind to help him focus and prepare. Running felt more natural so he was able to concentrate on things besides his breathing and keeping his broom on his shoulders.

Ron got bumped into by a figure that quickly ran to the front of the group; it was Jack. The bloke ran so gracefully that Ron could hardly tell if his feet touched the ground at all. Watching him made Ron take bigger strides but he wasn't on Jack's level yet. That didn't matter to him. Ron had promised himself months ago that he would eventually outrun Jack; he planned on keeping that promise to himself.

While Ron's fitness was improving, he was still out of it by the time he completed his flying laps and had to duel. Alan made him and his partner run and fly an additional two laps before their dueling was finally sufficient.

Ron collapsed to the ground afterwards but didn't throw up. He took off his jumper, wiping his face with it. He thought about how Hermione always crinkled her nose when she said the word 'dingy' and how soft her toes were.

This was his new routine: whenever Ron completed the morning exercise, he recuperated and calmed himself down by thinking about the things he loved about Hermione. Ron had an endless list so he knew that he would have something new to think about every day.

"Thinking about Hermione?" Harry asked, sitting next to him.

"How could you tell?"

"The prat look on your face." Harry took his glasses off then scrubbed his incredibly flushed face.

Ron smirked. "You know me too well. I was just—"

"—I don't need to know this," Harry said, raising his hand in front of Ron's face.

"I'm telling you anyway," Ron said, brushing his hand away. "I was thinking about how Hermione has tan feet but the skin between her toes is a lot paler." He started giggling like a tit. "It's actually quite funny but really cute as well. Sometimes I just want to smear chocolate sauce on her toes and eat 'em up because they're so damn cute, you know?"

Harry stared at him vacantly for awhile. "No," he said dully. "Not at all."

Ron stopped giggling and cleared his throat. "Yeah, guess not."

"I'm not too keen on tan feet anyway," Harry said. "I like them pale, freckly, and with green polish on the toes."

"I'm glad you added that last bit," Ron said. "For a moment there I thought you were talking about me."

Harry punched his arm. "Don't flatter yourself. You're definitely not your sister."

"A fact I happily accept," Ron said. "I didn't know Ginny fancied green."

"It's her favorite color," Harry said.

"Is it really?" Ron asked. "Huh. Makes perfect sense, I reckon."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"I don't think it's a coincidence that apparently Ginny's favorite color is green and your eyes are greener than a frog's arse," Ron said. "My sister needs to be more original."

"Leave her alone!" Harry said. "Besides, Ginny must get her originality from you. Why do you like orange so much?"

"I don't have to dignify that with a response," Ron muttered, grabbing his broom and standing up.

Harry got up as well, laughing. "Admit it, you tosser."

"I'm sorry, I can't hear you all the way down there, midget," Ron said, patting Harry's head. Ron loved that no matter how famous Harry would get or how much he would achieve in life, Ron would always be taller than him. It was a small victory that he'd been holding onto since he was eleven.

"Urgh!" Harry groaned. "You know I bloody hate it when you do that!"

"Then grow a little so I won't have to," Ron said.

They two of them continued to take the piss out of each other all the way back to the Ruins and didn't stop until they were in the shower cabin.

Throughout breakfast, Ron and his mates talked about the health exam they had taken the day before. Ben and Conor had mumbled apologies to each other last Sunday so they were now talking again; however, it was easy to feel a new tension between them. Conor was keen on acting as if nothing had happened though. He was back to his usual quiet and calm demeanor, but Ron knew better. He noticed how Conor was a little more tense and smiled a little less now.

Ron wouldn't make it his business. Conor was keeping something buried deep in his chest — just like he was. It wasn't his place to pry.

Alan walked into the cabin and over to their table. Everyone sat up straighter. "Clark, Neary, Potter, Weasley," he said, "remember that it's your group's turn for assessment following practice tonight. Head straight to my cabin after you're dismissed from the field."

"Yes, sir," the four of them said.

Ron waited until Alan was out of the room before swearing.
"Merlin's hairy bollocks."

"We'll be all right," Letty said, not appearing concerned.

"Yeah," Ben said. "You're just getting feedback."

"Just?" Conor said.

"What's the problem?" Olivia asked. "You lot have already made it to the merge so it's not like meeting with Phillip will decided your fate. The exam is over."

Ron opened his mouth but realized that he had nothing to come back with. "Damn. I reckon you're right."

"I can be sometimes," she said, rolling her eyes.

Ron shrugged then returned to his food. He mentally told himself that this would just be feedback and he wouldn't get chucked out. If Phillip didn't want him there, then Ron would've never received his extension letter in the first place.

Harry tapped Ron's thigh. "You okay?"

"I'm all right," Ron said. "I knew this would happen sooner or later."

"Right. Just remember that I'll be there with you," Harry said quietly. "What happened at the end doesn't matter. You were a great leader."

Ron grinned at him. He wanted to tell Harry how much his support meant to him but Ron couldn't in front of everyone. He knew that they had to maintain a level of indifference towards each other. "Thanks," he said instead.

In Ms. Yule's class, Ron attempted to pay attention to the lesson, but he was far too distracted. He kept thinking about what they would learn in field practice, how his evaluation would fair, and what would happen during his meeting with Mr. Nelson.

Ron drew mazes and hypothetical maps in his tactics journal, wishing that he could just receive his Auror's badge already.

"Mr. Weasley?"

"Huh?" Ron said, looking up from his drawings. Everyone was staring at him - including Ms. Yule.

She pointed to the board behind her; it was covered with a list of ingredients for what Ron was sure was a very important potion. "For this type of cooling potion, which herb would be best to keep the body at a stable temperature?" she asked.

Ron rubbed his neck as he peered at all of the options. He had absolutely no idea. "Um, I'm not sure, Ms. Yule."

"We've been going over these herbs all day, Mr. Weasley," Ms. Yule said.

Ron's ears burned. "I honestly don't know, Ms. Yule. I'm sorry."

Ms. Yule nodded, looking disappointed. "Well, how about you close whatever book you have in your hands and pay attention so you can learn the correct answer?"

"Yes, Ms. Yule." He shut his tactics journal then pulled his notes in front of him.

For the rest of her class, Ron, with difficulty, focused his attention completely on the lesson at hand. Nothing else could matter to him at the moment.

"All right, make sure to have those assignments ready for Thursday," Ms. Yule said at the end of their academic session. "Before you leave, pick up your graded work and have a safe night of training. Mr. Weasley, can you stay behind for a moment?"

Ron nodded and waited by his seat. He knew that he was about to receive a bollocking.

After everyone else got their things and left the cabin, Ms. Yule walked over to him. "So, Mr. Weasley," she said a heavy breath, "it's clear that you had some trouble listening today."

"I'm really sorry, Ms. Yule," Ron said. "My attention just left me for a moment, but it won't happen again."

"I hope not," she said. "This material is very important. I understand that it's not as exciting as field training and I'm also not expecting anyone to want a career in medicine by the end of this, but I do need all of you here to learn ways of properly taking care of yourselves and others. Do you understand?"

"I do," Ron said, feeling like a tit. Ms. Yule spoke calmly to him but he could hear the slight frustration in her tone. "I know this is important. I just I've never been good with this sort of stuff."

"That's fine," Ms. Yule said, touching his upper arm. "That's why I'm the teacher and you're the student. I'll help you learn the

material. I simply need you to give your best effort and attention. You're a bright young man, Mr. Weasley."

Ron shrugged. "Not with potions."

"Well, you may not be as bad as you think â€“ here." She handed him his exam.

Ron was surprised as he skimmed through it and saw that he got about three quarters of the answers right. "Wow."

"See? You did all right," she said. "In your case I think it's a matter of second-guessing yourself too often."

"There's a lot of material," he said.

"Yes, I know," she said. "I'll work harder at breaking explanations down more during lecture, but you have to meet me halfway by paying attention and asking questions when you're confused."

"Okay," Ron said, nodding. "I can do that."

She smiled. "Good. Now go on. Your instructors hate tardiness, especially Richard."

"Thank you, Ms. Yule." Ron grabbed his things then hurried out of the cabin. He wanted to tell Olivia, Letty, and Harry that their long day of studying had paid off, but the moment he stepped outside, he saw Alan waiting by the door.

"Weasley."

Ron's bit of excitement vanished. "Sir?"

"You know what I'm about to say, yes?"

He nodded. "I need to pay more attention in class."

"Spot on," Alan said. "It's not only disrespectful toward Ms. Yule but it's also a reflection on me when one of my former east trainees can't stay awake long enough to learn a simple cooling potion."

"I understand, sir," Ron said.

"I'm glad," Alan said, "because I won't tolerate this behavior. I know how attentive and how good of a student you are, so I expect much more from you."

"But, sirâ€!" Ron said, "this isn't like Mr. Low's class."

"Not an excuse, Weasley," Alan said, shaking his head. "You have to adjust and move on. You've been slow ever since you got here and every day I get a little more frustrated with you."

"I'm sorry, sir." He rubbed his face in irritation. "I just..." He let out a deep breath, realizing that honesty was best. "I guess a part of me is still at home with my family."

Some of Alan's fury faded. He nodded. "Yes, well, it seems to be that way for a few people. It's exactly why I was against the idea of a holiday in the first place; however, we can't change what's been done."

Alan gripped Ron's shoulders very tightly. "Shake off the lag and focus. Yes?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said, looking straight into Alan's stern grey eyes. He needed to draw strength from them.

Alan let him go. "Go join your group."

Ron nodded, then jogged to the field. He thought that he had been mad for thinking he'd been off at camp but Alan apparently saw it too. Knowing he wasn't alone in the thought gave Ron some relief; however, it worried him because he didn't know what to do to get rid of the feeling.

During field practice, Ron and his campmates were still learning how to execute different lifts, along with more advanced disarming spells and jinxes. Time and time again, Ron found himself being slammed on a mat or straining his back as he flipped people over. It was horrible, and it didn't help that Alan and Richard were finally allowing them to practice the Throat Clutch with movement and spells.

When Alan blew his whistle later on that evening, Ron and the rest of the group formed a line. Ron placed his hands on his knees, gasping for air. He was incredibly dizzy, and his throat and arms felt like they were on fire.

"Nice work tonight," Richard said. "It's good to finally see you lot loosen up with these lifts and especially with the Clutch. I know it hurts, but pain is a part of the job. Your discomfort is only going to increase tonight because we're going to introduce a new move. Find a different partner and spread out."

Ron looked around then caught Harry's eye. He nodded and Harry walked over to him. "Wanna pair up?" Ron asked.

"Sounds good," Harry said.

"That's not exactly fair, is it?" Jack asked as he and his partner stood not too far from them.

Ron was keen on ignoring him but Harry apparently didn't share the same idea.

"What's not fair?" Harry asked.

"You two being partners," Jack said. "If it were up to me then you would never be allowed to pair up. We're supposed to be

challenging and pushing each other to find out who's the best. You two will just end up wanking each other off or something."

"You're a fucking git, Jack," Harry said, stepping toward him.

Ron grabbed Harry's arm, tugging him back. "Let it go, Harry." He looked at Jack. "While we're on the subject of wanking, why don't you go suck a cock, Jacky boy, and I mean the biggest one you can find so we won't have to hear your shit." Ron pulled Harry away and found a new spot away from Jack.

Harry let out a harsh sigh. "There's just something about that arsehole that gets under my skin, Ron. I swear, one of these days I'm going to curse all of his hair off."

"You'll have to wait in line for that," Ron said. "Honestly though, you'll get used to him and soon you'll almost be able to completely ignore him."

"That day won't come soon enough," Harry said. "He's such a prick."

"Yeah, but I'm starting to think that it's more of an act or something," Ron said.

Alan blew his whistle twice to gather their attention. Ron focused hard as the instructors showed them how to combine an intricate armhold to use along with the Throat Clutch. As the instructors spoke and demonstrated the different parts to the move, Ron flipped his wand between his fingers and hardly took his eyes off them. He didn't know what it was about hand combat that he connected to so easily, but he was able concentrate on everything and practice the moves in his head. He only wished that he could apply this same skill to Ms. Yule's class.

"All right," Richard said. "Practice this on each other and remember to incorporate the new offensive spells we've introduced. The instructors will come around to check your progress. Potter, Weasley - a word."

Ron and Harry shared a look before jogging over to Richard and Alan.

"Yes, sir?" they asked together.

"Weasley, join Hill," Richard said. "Potter, I want you to partner with Turner."

"Did we do something wrong, sir?" Harry asked.

"We asked you to find different partners but obviously you two misunderstood," Alan said.

"But Harry and I haven't been partners today," Ron said.

"But you were partners yesterday and quite a few times last week," Richard said. "You're in a merged group so you need to practice with different people."

Ron rolled his eyes and picked at his muddy jumper.

"Did you just roll your eyes at me, Weasley?" Richard asked.

Ron froze, realizing his mistake. It was a minor slip but it would cost him. He looked at Richard who was glaring at him. Ron knew that he would get into even more trouble if he lied. "Yes, I did, sir."

Richard laughed, clasping his hands together. "Ha! Well, since you apparently already know how to proficiently perform this new move, you can spend the rest of the night on the trail. How does that sound?"

Ron swallowed hard but stood as tall as he could as his heart dropped. "T-that sounds brilliant, sir."

"Great," Richard said, giving his shoulder a forceful shove. "Pete! Take Weasley to the trail and make sure he runs all of his laps. If he stops, make him start over."

Harry gave Ron a small look of sympathy.

"You're dismissed, Weasley," Alan said harshly. "Potter, you can partner with Brian for the night. Break up and get to your individual assignments."

"Yes, sir," they droned together.

Ron turned his back on his campmates and followed Pete away from the main field. He was shaking with annoyance; he felt so incredibly stupid. Ron didn't know why his head still wasn't on but he needed to do something before he got chucked out.

Pete barely gave him any time to stretch before roughly pushing him to the trail.

Ron paced the trail, keeping his knees high and his arms in a fluid motion. The air was cool but Ron was sweating horribly. He sniffled, wiping the frustrated tears that came out of his eyes. He was in pain, embarrassed, and angry. The more Ron ran, the more enraged he became. He began to roar.

Ron wasn't being the person he needed to be at Lambrick. He knew things would be hard but it wasn't even the work that was getting to him. Ron was the sole reason for everything he was feeling. It wasn't right. He didn't want to return to Hermione like this; he didn't want to return to George like this either.

His pain, confusion, and anger eventually mixed and intensified. Something powerful came over him. Ron suddenly didn't feel connected to himself. He was absolutely alone and at the very bottom of the earth. Ron wasn't sure what was happening to him but he felt as if the world was pushing him to the ground, trying to pound him into the dirt.

Ron needed to do something. He had to overcome this moment and push through to the other side. He closed his eyes. Brown hair and large dark eyes came into his mind. He saw a kind smile, smelled coconut, tasted sweetness, and heard a soft yet bossy voice speak to him. He could feel Hermione's lips against his ear, whispering gently that he was her knight and was a good person.

Ron ran faster, taking bigger strides. He knew that he needed to pace himself because he had a full night of running but he couldn't stop. He had a surge of energy now. Ron ran faster and harder for ages. The burning pain intensified but he didn't stop. He had to prove to himself that he could do something right; he had to push himself and survive.

Ron didn't falter in his running, and eventually, he burst through his moment of darkness and weakness.

He finally slowed down, gasping for air as he felt his arms and legs again. He felt connected to himself and like Ron once more.

Ron rubbed his tears and snot away, grinning a little. He returned to a normal pace, feeling a bit more confident in his abilities. He wasn't sure what he had just gone through but he felt lighter, almost as if a part of him was now gone. Ron wasn't sure what that part was but he hoped that being rid of it would help him focus and remember why he had returned to Lambrick.

He was sure that he had lost half his body weight by the time he was told to stop running. He had never sweated so much in his life. Ron desperately needed a shower, however, he and his group had to meet with Philip and the other instructors for their evaluation.

Ron held his stomach and wheezed as he waited for his group outside of the meal cabin. He had trudged through hell so Ron couldn't collapse now.

"You all right, Ron?" Harry asked, quickly walking over to him with Conor and Letty.

"I've survived," Ron breathed.

"It's brutal, innit?" Conor asked. Ron could only nod.

"Well, I'd tell you to rest up a bit but we should probably go," Letty said.

"Yeah, I'll be fine," Ron said. He didn't know if that was true or not but he had to believe that it was.

"Wait," Harry said. He ran into the canteen then came back out with a glass of water. "Drink this first, mate. You're no good to me dead."

"M'fanks," Ron said. He drank the whole glass down within a matter of seconds.

Harry returned the glass and, when he came back, Conor said, "Let's just get this over with, yeah?" Ron and the others followed his lead. The walk gave Ron a bit more time to calm down and gather himself. He was still shaking a little from what he had experienced on the trail.

Before they reached Alan's cabin door, he stopped. "I want to tell you lot something before we go in there."

"What?" Conor asked.

Ron eyed each of them. "No matter what, I was the group leader. I gave you all your sections, and it was my job to get us through to the end."

"What are you saying?" Harry asked.

"I just want us to be prepared for whatever happens in there," Ron said.

"You're kind, Ron," Letty said, "but we should go in there and hear what they think."

"Right," Ron said, rubbing his neck. "Let's go in."

Ron wrapped his hand around the knob, then opened the door. Phillip, Richard, and Alan were all behind a wooden desk. There were four chairs in front of it. Phillip gestured his hand to the chairs.

"Good evening. Come have a seat."

Ron mentally took a deep breath as he and his mates sat in front of the three instructors. He could do this — Ron knew that he could.

"How are you all feeling tonight?" Phillip asked.

"Fine, sir," they all seemed to say in slightly shaky voices. Ron tried to sweat a little less and breathe more evenly, but it was impossible. It was difficult to hide the fact that he'd been running all night.

"Well, as you trainees are aware," Phillip said, "this week we're meeting with the groups from the last examination for assessments. You're the first group we're meeting with, so it's important that you keep the conversation we have private."

"Yes, sir," the four of them said.

"Now, we will address the group first but your in-depth evaluation will be with me and your original section leader," Phillip said.

"Is that when we'll find out our actual grade, sir?" Harry asked.

"You won't be receiving an actual grade this time, Potter," Alan said.

"Your last examination was so intricate and grand that the most effective way to assess it is simply to collect notes and discuss," Phillip said. "We did have a base level that we needed everyone to perform to in order to pass to the merge."

"I'm sure you lot can guess that since you're here, you performed at the base level," Richard said.

"Your group didn't just touch the level though," Phillip said. "You performed exceptionally well and received some of the highest praise out of all nine groups. Congratulations."

Ron let out a heavy breath as his group members squirmed in excitement. He placed his hands over his face, resting his elbows on his knees. A weight lifted from his shoulders, and his discomfort subsided for a moment. Ron couldn't believe that, after everything, they had still done well and were one of the best. The confidence he had gained on the trail grew inside of him.

"You seem surprised, Weasley," Alan said.

Ron quickly uncovered his face. "I'm relieved, sir. I had a really good group."

"That's something we all agree on," Richard said. "The Aurors that helped with the examination said that you all had a very strong team dynamic. That's vital in our profession. We do group missions all the time and you have to be synchronized with each other."

Phillip flipped through his notes. "I was also told and saw a bit for myself that you each took the lead at a point but still helped and listened to each other. That's also crucial. You work faster and smarter that way. The only real issues with your group were lack of focus during certain situations and sloppiness during your dueling."

Phillip put the folder down, resting his elbows on the table. He stared them all down. "Of course, while your group did have great dynamic, there was an obvious lack of communication at certain moments - particularly at the end of the exam."

Some of Ron's bliss faded. He knew that things were too good to be true.

"I actually have a question about that, sir," Letty said. She looked at Ron for a second before turning back to Phillip. "I'm certainly not complaining, but I'm actually a little surprised that we did so well, considering that we didn't complete the exam."

"Yes, we can't ignore what happened during the last part of the maze," Phillip said.

"I take full responsibility for that, sir," Ron said. "That had nothing to do with my group members."

"But you can't take full responsibility in a group, Weasley," Alan said. "One camp, one force."

"Who's responsible at this point doesn't matter because you did technically finish," Richard said. "The exam ended when the final wall was shattered, Clark. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," they all said. Ron didn't believe it though. He knew that they probably would've received even higher praises if he would have just kept himself together or informed his group that he was prone to weakness when it came to explosions.

"Before we conclude the group section," Phillip said. "I first want to hear a brief peer evaluation from everyone so you all can understand what you need to work on."

"You were group leader Weasley, so you go first," Alan said.

Ron's eyes widened. He sat up straighter, clearing his throat. He hadn't planned on talking about his mates right in front of them. He didn't feel as if it was his place to judge other people either, and his mind was already jumbled with other thoughts. Ron felt his face flush horribly as he looked at his group members. He decided to start with the person sitting closest to him.

"Well, Letty - um, Charlotte, was really great with her spell work," Ron said. "She was quick and used a variety of different tactics that saved our group a lot of the time."

"What could she work on?" Alan asked.

Ron rubbed his neck. "Um, well, if I had to say one thingâ€¦then she should slow down and listen more."

"All right," Phillip said. "Do you hear that, Ms. Clark?"

"Yes, sir," Letty said.

"What about Mr. Neary?" Phillip asked.

"Conor excelled during the hand combat and aided everyone quite well," Ron said. "I'd sayâ€¦he really needs to work on his temper though and learn to focus and take a step back when he's in an intense situation." Ron felt like a prick for saying this but he had to be honest.

"Well put, Weasley," Richard said. "Neary?"

Conor shifted in his chair. "Yes, sir."

"And Mr. Potter?" Phillip asked.

"Harry was great too," Ron said. "He was a really good team player. He did well during the flying, combat, and dueling portions, and he improvised."

"What were some of his faults during the exam?" Phillip asked.

Ron looked down as he went over the night in his mind. He tried to think of something substantial but he honestly couldn't find anything. Ron looked at Harry then uneasily at the instructors. He knew he was going to sound like a sagging tit but he couldn't just make something up. "There wasn't anything major."

Letty gaped at him. "Are you serious?"

"Weasley, a critique works both ways," Alan said. "You give the good and bad details."

"There was nothing 'bad' though," Ron said. "Harry was rather impatient during the navigation through the woods but that was really the only thing."

"Mr. Weasley, this isn't a fair assessment," Phillip said.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I honestly can't think of anything," Ron said.

Richard rolled his eyes. "I know where this is going. Potter, if I were to ask you right now how Weasley was as a group leader, what would you say?"

Harry scratched his head, moving around in his seat for a few seconds. He looked to the instructors. "Well, Ron was a great leader. He was smart, quick, and kept us moving. He was helpful and proficient throughout the sections," "Harry paused for a moment" "and despite what happened in the maze, I can't find any major faults in his performance."

"I'm sorry, but this isn't right!" Letty said, stomping her foot. "I think I worked just as hard as Ron and Harry did!"

Phillip nodded, not appearing too pleased. "Clark, Neary, will you two wait outside for a moment? I'll let you know when it's time for your individual evaluations."

Letty and Conor quickly got up. Ron felt guilty as they left the room. He knew he and Harry were in trouble but he was confused. Everyone was acting as if he and Harry had done something horrible.

"What exactly did we do wrong, sir?" Harry asked.

"Apparently nothing," Phillip said. "That's the problem. I wanted your honest opinions and evaluations of each other. It's how you learn and grow."

"I was being honest, sir," Ron said.

"So you truly believe that Clark and Neary were weaker teammates than Potter?" Alan asked.

"No, sir," Ron said.

"That's what you implied when you failed to properly critique Potter," Alan said.

"Should I make something up?" Ron asked in slight irritation. His bliss from earlier was completely gone now; all he felt were his throbbing muscles and the sweat on his bollocks.

"Mr. Weasley," Phillip said tensely. "You should know that receiving a high praise doesn't mean you've made it to the end. You've still got a long way to go before you have a right to talk to your section leader like that."

"I think all Ron is trying to say is that we don't understand what we did wrong," Harry said. "I thought Clark and Neary were excellent teammates, so I don't see how my opinion of Ron takes away from anything they did."

"It doesn't take away from their performances, Mr. Potter," Phillip said, "but it certainly isn't right for the group dynamic. It also won't help you or Mr. Weasley learn how to improve."

Ron raised his hand like a knob. "Can I say something?"

"You may," Phillip said.

He wasn't sure of what to say so he chose to speak with honesty. "I truly mean no disrespect when I say this, but you know our history. You allowed us both to be here and be in the same group. What else did you expect from us?"

Ron waited for Phillip to yell at him or throw something, but he merely folded his hands together, eyeing them both. "The section leaders and myself are very aware of your relationship," he said. "You two clearly work extremely well together and bring out an energy that I find inspiring. I'm not degrading that."

"However," Phillip said with a bit more power. "I did expect you two to understand that you still have a lot to learn if you truly want to be Aurors. I thought you two would be able to look beyond your history and know that a proper critique can only enhance your performances later on."

"I think what Mr. Smith is trying to say is that we expected you two to be fair and mature about this," Alan said. "There's more than just your friendship at stake here."

"That's what Alan and I need for you two to understand during field practice," Richard said. "This biased nature you two have isn't helpful."

Ron opened his mouth to speak but Harry beat him to it.

"It's not fair to look at it that way, sir," Harry said. "I've been battling evil with Ron since I was eleven. Now, we can work without speaking and we just know what the other needs. I understand that we're not Aurors yet but Ron and I already know how to work as a team because of our friendship. We were

synchronized the whole time during our evaluation. I don't see how believing that can keep me from learning."

"I agree," Ron said, feeling thankful that Harry was at his side. "I don't think Harry is perfect but that night he was everything I needed in a teammate. We're learning that the people around us could wind up saving our lives one day, but Harry and I have already saved each other's lives - on many occasions. This is who we are andâ€œI really don't know what we're supposed to do if that makes others uncomfortable."

Ron was sure that he and Harry had gone too far but he couldn't help himself. He knew that everyone at camp was competing for the same spot and wore the same clothes, but Ron never forgot for a moment that he and Harry were different. They had already achieved the level of commitment that the instructors were trying to spark in everyone else. Ron was still adjusting to the idea of acting less friendly toward Harry but he would never belittle their friendship for a job â€œ not even one as an Auror.

Phillip nodded, writing something down in his notebook. "I certainly appreciate your honesty. I realize that you two already came here with something bigger on your shoulders, but this is still an equal opportunity facility; keep that in mind as you continue through your training."

"Yes, sir," Ron and Harry said together.

"All right, you two can wait outside," Phillip said.

Ron and Harry didn't look at each other as they walked out of the cabin but he could tell what Harry was thinking. They had stood up for their friendship and they knew that it would be worth whatever came next.

Letty glared at her shoes in silence as they waited for their personal assessments. Ron felt badly but he didn't know what to say to her.

Ron was the last person from his group to speak alone with the instructors. Phillip and Alan told him about his excellence as a group leader, along with how well he aided his team members. Of course, Alan was quick to point out how Ron was still careless with his recovery time, how he lacked a strong sense of command, and how he needed to use a wider array of defensive spells.

"That brings us to the maze," Phillip said sometime later. "You were the first person to decipher it out of all nine groups. That's quite an accomplishment."

"Thank you, sir," Ron said, feeling proud and rather gobsmacked. He wished that he could tell Mr. Low.

"Mr. Low always said that you were one of the brightest in navigation and you certainly proved yourself to be," Alan said - as if reading his mind.

"Before we conclude, Mr. Weasley," Phillip said, "I want to draw your attention to the fact that we haven't dismissed your dishonesty. You made it to the merge because, despite your lack of honesty, you were one of the best trainees in terms of performance during the first half. Mr. Lewis has given me a full report."

"I told him about your strengths and weaknesses, Weasley," Alan said. "A part of me honestly didn't know if you could handle this new half but I think you've earned the chance to prove yourself."

Hearing this made Ron's spirit lift. "I will prove myself, sir." He meant the statement with everything inside of him. Ron had already proven to himself that he could push through his weakness on the trail. He just needed to show everyone else now.

"That's good to hear, Mr. Weasley," Phillip said, "because you already have two write-ups and I must say that your sometimes disrespectful behavior isn't the kind I look for in a graduate."

Ron swallowed hard, digging his nails into his thighs. "Just tell me what I can do, sir."

"Work harder," Phillip said simply. "You know that your session with Mr. Nelson is tonight, yes?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

"Then start proving your worth by showing up on time," Phillip said. "This is not the place for little boys to play around, Mr. Weasley. Do the things you need to do."

"I will, sir," Ron said, nodding vigorously.

"You're dismissed," Phillip said.

Ron left Phillip and Alan feeling proud of how he had performed during his evaluation, but also hating himself a little for constantly sabotaging his chances at graduating. He wasn't being the trainee that he needed to be. Ron felt stronger in a lot of ways than he had during the first half but he wasn't showing it. He had to show what going through his holiday with his family and Hermione had done for him.

Ron was nothing but nerves as he walked to Mr. Nelson's cabin. He had so much on his mind but he had to focus on his meeting right now. Ron remembered that Mr. Nelson had told him that he didn't have to talk about his panic attacks or anything serious. He hoped that was still true.

Ron stopped in front of the cabin. He stared at the door, telling himself that it was only a door. Once Ron believed that, he knocked.

It didn't take long before the door opened. Mr. Nelson smiled warmly at him. "Ah, good evening, Ron."

"Good evening, sir," Ron said. He didn't want to be there but it was something he needed to do to prove himself.

"You didn't bring your dinner," Mr. Nelson said.

"I'm not hungry," Ron lied.

"Okay, fair enough. Come in." Mr. Nelson said. Ron walked into the room. Once again, he chose the wooden chair and set it in front of Mr. Nelson's desk. He was dressed in a jumper and trousers again, and he was sitting back in his chair like he had the last time. Ron took these small familiars as good signs.

Mr. Nelson gave him a once-over. "You look like hell."

"I feel like it too," Ron said. Mr. Nelson nodded but said nothing. Ron had a feeling that Mr. Nelson wanted him to explain himself but he couldn't. All Ron wanted to do was go to sleep so he could wake up the next day and work harder.

"Do you want to talk about your night?" Mr. Nelson asked.

"Not really," Ron said honestly.

"Okay, well, if you don't mind then I'm going to eat my dinner," Mr. Nelson said.

"It's fine with me, Mr. Nelson," Ron said.

He nodded, then pulled some sort of wrapped sandwich out of his bag. The smell of chicken and spices filled up the room, causing Ron's stomach to growl loudly. Mr. Nelson laughed.

"I'm sorry," Ron said, blushing and patting his stomach.

"No need to apologize," Mr. Nelson said. "Here - I won't tell anyone if you won't." He ripped an end of his wrap off then placed it on a napkin before offering it to Ron.

"Thank you, but I'm all right, Mr. Nelson," Ron said. His stomach growled again.

"Your stomach appears to believe otherwise," Mr. Nelson said.
"Look, I promise that this isn't a test. I won't be able to read into your deepest desires if you eat this."

After hearing how ridiculous his apprehension sounded, Ron took the food. "Cheers."

"Cheers," Mr. Nelson said. He raised his wrap before taking a large bite. Ron stuffed most of his bit into his mouth at once. He couldn't help but moan at the delicious flavors. He forgot how amazing real food could be. He hunched, sitting back in his chair.

Mr. Nelson covered his mouth as he chuckled. "So that's what you look like when you're relaxed, yes?"

"Food does this to me," Ron said.

"Me too," Mr. Nelson said. "My wife made this. She's a really good cook."

"I reckon so," Ron said. He sucked the sauce and flavoring off his lips until he felt as if he was going to break the skin. Mr. Nelson finished up his food as well. Ron didn't know what to do. Mr. Nelson just looked at him in total silence. It made his palms itch. Ron began to rub them against his thighs.

"Ron," Mr. Nelson said. "I told you that I wouldn't push you to talk about any particular thing but it is necessary for us to converse."

"I know, sir," Ron said. He rubbed his palms harder into his knees. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right," Mr. Nelson said, holding his hands out. "You don't always have to apologize. This is your first session; it's natural to be nervous. I have something that might help."

He started rustling through his large briefcase. Ron tensed even more. He had no idea what Mr. Nelson had that he thought could loosen Ron up.

"I noticed during our first meeting that you fidget," Mr. Nelson said.

"I do?" Ron said, rubbing his neck. "Is that some sort of medical problem?"

"Certainly not," Mr. Nelson said, finally pulling something from his bag. "In my experience I find that people like to focus on something tangible when they feel mentally or emotionally under pressure. It's human nature to want to touch and manipulate something when we feel like we're not in control of ourselves."

Ron nodded slowly, trying to understand what he was saying.
"Yeah, I reckon."

"I have my own trick," Mr. Nelson said. He picked up his quill, smoothly flipping it between his fingers. "I make sure to take a few quills with me everywhere I go so I can do this. It's silly, but it calms me down and helps me to focus. I've been doing it since I was a kid."

"Yeah, me too," Ron said, relaxing a little. "Only I use my wand."

"Impressive. Well, I'm hoping this may be an entertaining tool for you to use." He placed a small, circular blue object in front of Ron on the desk. It had a white string somehow wrapped around the center of it.

Ron picked it up, studying it. "What is this?"

"It's called a Yo-Yo," Mr. Nelson said. "It's a Muggle toy."

"Oh, wicked," Ron said, suddenly feeling excited. "How does it work?"

"Let me show you." Mr. Nelson took it back. He placed a looped piece of string around his middle finger then flicked the Yo-Yo. Ron's jaw dropped as the toy unraveled but quickly wound up again when Mr. Nelson tugged on the string.

"Bloody hell," Ron breathed. He waited impatiently as Mr. Nelson wound the Yo-Yo back up and handed it to him.

Ron put the string around his finger then flicked his wrist. The toy fell but didn't come back up.

"Remember to tug to bring it back," Mr. Nelson said.

"Oh, right." Ron tried again and was able to bring the Yo-yo back. He laughed. It was such a simple idea but was completely brilliant. He couldn't wait to show his dad or even Harry. He wondered if Harry owned one. Ron's smile widened as he thought about Hermione and if she had one. He couldn't imagine her playing with one, but it was funny to think about.

"Now that is a very wide, genuine smile," Mr. Nelson said. "Do you like the Yo-Yo?"

"This is great, Mr. Nelson. Thank you," Ron said. "I love Muggle things. This is just another example of why they're so amazing."

"I'm glad you like it, Ron, and I agree," Mr. Nelson said. "My mother is a Muggle, so I was lucky and got to experience both worlds growing up."

"My girlfriend is lucky too," Ron said. "She's a Muggle-born so she's basically the most equipped person on the planet. She can live in both worlds effortlessly."

"Girlfriend?" Mr. Nelson asked with a grin.

Ron finally stopped playing with his Yo-Yo. "Oh, yeah. Her name is Hermione Granger."

"Ah," Mr. Nelson said. "I remember reading about her in the Hogwarts follow-up."

"Right," Ron said. He suddenly remembered the world outside of Lambrick. "I reckon you already know everything about me then, eh?"

"Not at all," Mr. Nelson said. "The newspapers tell me that you have a large family, you're eighteen, and you and Hermione Granger helped Harry Potter bring down Lord Voldemort. I also know that you unfortunately lost one of your brothers. Those are just facts though. They won't tell me anything until you give them meaning."

Ron flicked his Yo-Yo again. He was starting to feel uncomfortable so he decided to be honest, hoping it would help. "Mr. Nelson, I've had a really bad night but I don't want to talk about it - especially right now. Is that okay?"

"It's more than okay," Mr. Nelson said. "I know that people tend to think sessions like these are only for talking about bad days, but they're not. Yes, it's very important to address those issues but they're not the only subjects worth talking about. We can discuss your good days or the things that make you smile."

He chuckled again. "You were in a pure moment of delight a few seconds ago when you talked about your girlfriend. If you want, you can talk about her."

Ron gave him a look. He didn't believe things could be that easy. "You'll just sit here and listen to me go on about my girlfriend?"

"It's literally my job to listen, Ron," Mr. Nelson said.

"What would I have to say about her?"

"You don't 'have' to say anything," Mr. Nelson said. "Tell me only what you're comforting sharing. This is all about you, Ron and your level of trust and comfort."

Ron stared down at his Yo-Yo, thinking things over. There was no way that he would get away with being silent the whole time, so he would have to speak eventually. Mr. Nelson was a Healer so Ron knew that he wouldn't go around telling people about Hermione. He would just listen.

"Okay," Ron eventually said. "I can talk about how I met her, I guess."

"That sounds great," Mr. Nelson said.

"Um, can I talk about my best mate too?" Ron asked. "I mean my girlfriend is my best friend, but I have another one and I met them the same day."

"Are you referring to Harry Potter?"

Ron nodded. "Yes, sir. Harry Potter and Hermione Granger make me smile and are almost always a part of my good days. So, if I have to talk about anything, I'd like to talk about them."

Mr. Nelson grinned widely, sitting back in his chair. Ron felt a bit more relief when he watched Mr. Nelson put all his papers away and simply flip his quill.

Ron relaxed a bit more too and started flicking his Yo-Yo. This was something he could do and it would be his first real step in proving his worth.

"Well, it was the first day of term and of course my family was late getting to the platform!"

For the duration of Ron's session, he talked about meeting Harry and Hermione. Mr. Nelson was quiet most of the time unless he chuckled or made a comment about adolescent boys. Ron found himself laughing a lot as well.

Talking about meeting his best mates to a stranger gave Ron a freedom to be more open about his personal feelings toward them, but listening to himself talk about the way he'd treated Hermione made him feel like a sagging tit. Ron wished with everything inside of him that he could apparate to her and apologize for being such a rude little fucker.

By the end of the meeting, Ron felt better than he had all day.

Mr. Nelson walked him to the door. "You're one lucky man, Ron," he said.

"I know," Ron said. "Hermione is really patient with me."

"I think most women possess a certain level of patience that us men will never have," Mr. Nelson said. He sighed. "So, you survived your first session, yes?"

"Just about, sir," Ron said, nodding. "Thank you for not pressuring me. I actually feel better."

"I figured you would," Mr. Nelson said. "Sometimes, all it takes are a few warm memories to clear out some of the darkness we tend to feel day-to-day."

"Like producing a Patronus?" Ron said.

"Smart way of putting it." Mr. Nelson opened the door. "I'll see you Thursday - and please bring something to eat."

"I will Mr. Nelson. Thank you again for the Yo-Yo." He shook Mr. Nelson's hand then left his cabin.

Ron walked back to the Ruins, feeling slightly more okay about meeting with the Healer. If all he had to do was talk about his friends, then Ron could weather through it.

He groaned as he stepped on a sharp rock and the pain shot straight up his leg. Though his mood had improved, Ron was still horribly knackered and sore. He couldn't wait to get back to the main house so he could go to sleep.

Ron opened the door to his room. Harry looked up from his letter. "How did it go?"

"Okay," Ron said. He wanted to go into more detail but Jack was also in the room, folding his kit neatly at the end of his bed.

Ron peeled off his damp, smelly blacks. He needed to take a shower but he was far too tired.

"I was just telling Potter that I found it interesting that you two were split up today," Jack said. "I guess I wasn't alone in my feelings."

"Shut up," Harry said. "That was hours ago."

"Yes, please," Ron said. "I'm far too bloody tired for this. We can exchange insults all day tomorrow but not now."

For once Ron's mind was clear; he didn't want anything to ruin that. He looked around for his pajamas but he couldn't find them.

"I'm not trying to start anything," Jack said. "I was simply voicing an opinion."

"Well no one wants to hear it, yeah?" Harry said. "Fucking hell. I thought I was over meeting people like you but I guess nothing really changes does it?"

"What - you think being a hero gives you an entitlement, Potter?" Jack asked. "Blimey, do you have a lot to learn."

"Oi, that's enough," Ron said. He hated being the mediator between people. He was usually the one two seconds away from jumping the other bloke; he preferred that role. Jack and Harry didn't seem to be listening to him.

Harry got up from his bed then walked over to Jack. "Don't talk to me like you understand my life."

"I can talk however I want to," Jack said. "I appreciate what you've done, but I won't kiss your arse. There's nothing more important to me than making it to the end here. If taking the piss out of you because you couldn't partner with your boyfriend Weasley gets me to the-"

Harry growled as he jumped at Jack. Before Jack could take a swing at him, Ron leaped over his bed, yanking Harry away from Jack.

"Fucking stop this!" Ron yelled. He outstretched his arms, placing a hand against Jack and Harry's chests. For once, he was thankful for his lank because he was able to keep them apart this way. He looked between the two of them.

"I can't take this bullshit tonight!" Ron screamed. "It's been too long of a fucking day and the last thing we need is to make living in this bloody room any more unbearable than it already is."

He removed his hand from Harry's chest. "Harry, mate, ignore this fucker. He obviously gets off on making everyone around him feel as miserable as he is."

Ron then pushed Jack away. "Jack, I fucking swear to Merlin that I'll rip your hair right off your head then shove it up your arse sideways if you don't leave Harry alone. I still remember Roger's spell so don't think it won't happen."

Ron hastily went back to his bed, grabbing some paper, an inkbottle, and a couple of quills. He yanked his blanket off his bed then rushed to the door.

"You've only got your shorts on, Ron," Harry said.

"Like anyone on this floor hasn't seen me in less," he mumbled as he opened the door and walked out into the hall. He shuffled a ways down the corridor and sat against the wall. He stretched out his legs, sighing deeply. He was exhausted but he needed to talk.

Ron dipped his quill and began to write.

Hi Hermione,

I hope you're doing okay. I remembered that you had a big Charms exam yesterday so all during my morning run I kept repeating that you would do well and that I loved you. It was my way of wishing you luck (even though you don't need it). I'm sure that you'll get your test back with absolutely no marks on it. In fact, you'll probably be asked to take over as Professor Granger. Blimey, that sounds sexy as all bloody hell. I'd come back to Hogwarts just so I could see you in your robes and have you call on me, saying, "Yes, Mr. Weasley?" I reckon that I would be asking for many late night tutoring sessions, but once McGonagall realized that I was randomly making high marks, she'd have to investigate and would wind up barging into your office, finding you climaxing on top of your desk while my head is under your skirt. I reckon we would both get chucked out then, eh? It'd be worth it though. If you're laughing, good. That was my goal. If you're frowning and calling me vile, then good because that was my goal too.

Speaking of goals, how's Ginny the Quidditch star? I always need to ask you because if I ask her then she'll give me the standard Weasley answer of 'fine'. I really hope that you're not telling her that I ask you all the time how she's doing. I trust Ginny's word. I just don't trust her word, if that makes sense.

Anyway, I'm doing all right if you're wondering. Yes, my potions class is still rather boring and hard, but I did all right on my exam. I think you would be proud of my score. As far as field training goes, I haven't always had chances to prove myself but I know I can do it. I found out today that the group I was in with Harry did really well on our examination. We were some of the best according to the instructors. Hearing that really made me feel good. I'm glad that I got to share the feeling with Harry. Well, we haven't really been able to share anything yet. We're still masking our friendship a bit but apparently it's still not good enough. We're just too much for people at times. I don't know whether to be more confused, angry, or hurt. I mean Harry is like my brother but even closer in a lot of ways. I hate that we have to be like this. It really does hurt sometimes, Hermione, and I feel like a prick because I have to choose between my friendship and myself. I hate that they can't be the same thing here at Lambrick.

So, I want to ask you something, and I hope you're able to answer it. Have you ever felt like you were watching yourself go through life but you weren't really a part of it? I'm sure that's not a clear question and I apologize if it doesn't make sense. I'm not really stopping to think as I write this. I just need to get the feelings out of me before I feel too embarrassed and change my mind about them. I want to be open and honest with you and this is the best way I know how.

Being back here has been like nothing I ever expected it to be. Everything is so much more complicated and longer and more painful. I feel so tired and sore throughout the day and night. I reckon it's doing something to my mind. It's been so hard to focus on things and adjusting has been difficult. I know you hate this phrase, but I really know fuck-all right now. I've been angry and distracted and I've felt so slow.

I had a moment today when the pressure of everything almost made my chest cave in, but you came into my mind (like always) and helped me through it. I really felt as if something finally pulled itself off me. I've been able to breathe a little easier, despite all the other rubbish. Thank you so much for that, love. I owe you everything.

Well, I reckon I should stop writing soon. It's almost lights out and my instructors are very keen on treating us like little bloody children. I plan on writing you a proper letter tomorrow with more information about how things are going and about Harry and anything else I think is important. I just really wanted to get these thoughts out now before I lost my head. So, expect to do a lot of reading when you get my envelope (but I'm sure you won't mind that).

I forgot, you're probably wondering how my meeting with Mr. Nelson went, right? Well, it was all right. He gave me a Yo-Yo. It's blue and bloody wicked. Do you have one? Anyway, I told him about the first time I met you and Harry. He got a real laugh out of that. I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing, but I know for sure that I was such a knob to you. You must have an inner desire for knobs or something because after listening to myself, I don't see why you stayed interested. I'm just bloody glad you did. I wouldn't have made it this past week without you, Hermione. I really mean that. I feel you so powerfully and it's a fucking good sensation. I get so dizzy and warm and relaxed and hard when the sensation hits me. All it takes is one small thought of your pink frills or the sound of your voice or the smell of your neck or even the curve of your smile and I'm there. I bloody love it.

I just love you so bloody much and I think about you constantly here. I miss you a lot and every night I imagine something involving the two of us so I can at least fall asleep in a good mood. I know that sounds incredibly prattish, but I don't care. I don't care about anything but getting back to you as a better man.

If I can time this right, then you'll get this by breakfast in a couple of days. If you do happen to read this over your food, eat a nice, juicy sausage for me. I miss those buggers.

Oh, one more thing, this may sound strange but can you check Ginny's feet the next time you're around her and see if she's wearing green polish? A specky git told me she wears green but I can't see Ginny doing that. You don't wear toenail polish, do you? I've never seen you wear any. It's not a problem, but I can't really nibble on your little wiggles if they're painted, yeah?

Okay, I'm going to stop writing now. I'm sure you've got better things to do than read my hysteria. I'm slowly turning into the Mad Ginger Wizard.

I love you so much,

Ron

Ron read over his letter a few times with a smile. He could almost see and hear Hermione's reactions to some of the things he wrote; it calmed him down.

He wobbled to a standing position and walked back to his room. He felt like dragon dung but he also felt better.

Ron had lost a part of himself on the trail but tomorrow he would start replacing it with something much stronger and better focused.

* * *

*** Oh, dozy! Ron melts my heart, lol. Things are certainly shifting and pulling toward 'something' I reckon we'll just have to see what that is. Also, I got a rather hysterical pm from a reader fearing that Ron was never going to see Hermione again. All I have to say is, "What do you lot take me for?" It's me â€“ ROSE. I know I'm mad but I reckon you all know me by now, LOL There's always something up my sleeve. (insert wicked laughter) Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 47*: Fighter

YES, I updated! It's been weeks I know. Suffice it to say that October hasn't been my month. All I can do is hope that things will get better. Watching the

"Lego House" video repeatedly has really helped too.
I mean it's got Ed Sheeran in it(a ginger I love) and
Rupert Grint in it(a ginger I worship)

Thank you all for the reviews and the kind words. Most importantly, thank you for sticking around with me. It must get tough, lol. Speaking of 'tough,' I'm finding it very difficult to swallow the idea that JK Rowling considered killing off Ron at one point. I don't know whether to cry or scream (I've done both). I'm just glad the woman came to her senses.

I've already had an 'encounter' with a Ron Basher today regarding this topic though. She's my mate's girlfriend so I have to at least tolerate her but today she kept going on about how this is 'proof' that Ron isn't a significant character and how even JK didn't care about the R/Hr relationship or Ron's contribution to Harry. I couldn't stand it so I tipped over her coffee cup and it landed in her lap. It felt brilliant! :)

No matter what comes out now, Ron lived. He and Harry are most likely Auror partners and he IS Hermione's husband and the father of her children. Hmmâ€œ;must mean something, eh?

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

* * *

Ms. Yule's light brown eyes inspected the assignment in haste, but her face was calm and her body was absolutely still.

Ron sat in front of her desk, tapping his foot on the floor. Ms. Yule was too bloody poised for his liking. He would've preferred that she laugh if he wrote something stupid or at least nod if he did something correctly; however, she merely examined Ron's work as if he weren't in the room.

After what felt like days of sitting in total silence, she looked up. "Well, Mr. Weasley, this is definitely an improvement."

"It is?" Ron sat up straighter, scooting to the very edge of his seat.

Ms. Yule gave him a pretty, delicate smile. "I can tell that you've been thinking a lot more about the details behind the potions."

"I have," he said proudly. "I've been taking more time to understand their purpose, then remembering what ingredients correspond to them."

"Yes, that's the key to this discipline. Once you understand the function then it's a matter of memorization and putting the components together." She gathered his papers, checking the things that he had done right. "You're also doing fairly well in

the other areas of this class, like deciding when to apply certain aids."

"I think that's because I'm good with tactics and working in real life scenarios," he said.

"Yes, most Aurors are," Ms. Yule said with a nod, "but it's necessary for you to be sufficient in all areas of the health unit."

"I'm trying."

"I can certainly tell," she said. "It seems that doing these additional practices is helping you, yes?"

"Very much so, Ms. Yule," Ron said. "I've been rewriting my notes as well to help keep information fresh in my mind."

"Excellent," she said. "Using a variety of study tools is what you need. In all honesty though, I still believe you can do better. Still, you're making progress though; that's a start."

Hearing this added more weight to his shoulders, while at the same time, made him feel more capable. "I really want to improve in this class," he said.

"I believe you can, Mr. Weasley," she said, touching his hand.
"Just keep working."

Ron grinned, believing her words. "Thank you, Ms. Yule. I'll see you tomorrow." He gathered his papers then left her cabin.

Ron ran through the pouring rain to the mailing cabin. Though he was soaked through his trousers, he felt all right. He knew that he would never become a master in health studies, but he could at least stop being a tit and try harder. He'd been back at Lambrick for two weeks, and it was obvious that every day he would have to push through something extremely difficult. It would be worth it in the end though when he received his badge. That was Ron's goal: he wasn't going to leave camp without it.

Once he entered the cabin, he hurried over to his slot. While there still wasn't anything from Hermione, his heart skipped a beat when he saw a letter from George - the first he'd received since George had left for his holiday.

Ron dashed back to Headquarters, closing the front door with his foot. The trainees were always supposed to immediately return to the Ruins but Ron wanted some privacy as he read. With complete disregard for his dripping wet clothes, he opened the envelope right in the foyer.

Hi Ron,

I know it's been awhile since we've talked, but I'm actually just now getting some time to myself. We went straight to Spain after I left the house and we spent a lot of time there doing absolutely nothing yet everything at the same time. We stayed in

the magical community in Barcelona, but mostly explored the Muggle world there and in Madrid and a few other cities. It was so hot, exciting, and beautiful. I don't reckon I've ever seen so many colors before. The food was incredible too. I'm sure I have a sagging arse now because I ate so much.

After that, we went to Italy and Angelina fell completely in love with the culture and landscape. Lee and I practically had to use the Imperius Curse on her to get her to leave. Before we left the country though, she and I did the whole romantic thing in Venice with candles, food and wine. We just talked and enjoyed each other. We've never really done that before and I loved every second of it. She felt like my girlfriend and, for once, I felt like her boyfriend - not just this ginger prick making her life miserable.

So that brings us to New Zealand where we are now. I'm bloody excited to be here! We only just arrived and I'm horribly knackered, but I need to write you, Mum and Dad, and Ginny first before I go to sleep. I'll write to our big brothers later on in the day when I'm more awake. I don't know how long we'll stay here but I reckon our last leg of the journey will take us somewhere in America. Lee has some family there so I hope we get a nice tour of the States.

I'm sure you probably want to know how long I'll be traveling, yeah? I've been thinking about it myself but I honestly don't know. I'm having fun and I'm experiencing so many new things, but I can't help but think about Fred and wish with everything inside of me that he were here. I know I have to find myself and let him go while I'm on holiday, but it's been really hard. I miss him so much and my body still aches, especially when I encounter something that I know he would've loved or made a wicked joke out of. I guess my progress has been slow but at least I'm sort of getting somewhere new. No, I'm not healed or great, and I'm not over my grief, but I don't feel like I want to die, and for the first time in a long time, I feel something other than pain. I have a connection with my best mate again. I don't feel as guilty talking to Lee and making inside jokes with him that Fred will never be a part of. I'm also feeling closer to Angie. I can talk to her, compliment her, kiss her, and even shag her and not feel like a traitor. I reckon my guilt is the first thing that's sort of fading. I'm hoping the pain, fear, and longing will ease up next.

Well, enough about me: how are you? I'm sure you're getting your bollocks kicked in at camp and I hope you're enjoying it. You cross my mind a lot, Ronnienkins, and I just have a feeling that though things are hard, you're getting through it. You're getting so close to the end and you better not give up or give in. You've come too far for that, Ron.

I reckon I'll be back home before you graduate (yes, you ARE graduating) so when I see you again we'll have a lot of catching up to do. I do want to catch up with you and the family. I miss you lot. It's been hard doing all of this with my mates and not you all, but maybe one day we can take one big family holiday. I

hope so. There is a life outside of all the bullshit. I didn't think there was, but there is.

Well, I should go. I have more letters to write and I've already dozed off with the quill in my hand twice. Tell Harry I said hi and punch him in the arm for me. He's still a Chosen git. Oh, while we're on the subject of your best mate, did you know that your other one sent me a letter? It wasn't very long, but it was powerful and smart and full of all these kind, inspiring words that only a person like Hermione would know how to write - or spell for that matter. I didn't expect to get anything from her but I'm glad I did. She really is a keeper Ron; I honestly love the little know-it-all. I hope you two are doing okay. A bloke needs his girlfriend and his best mate. I wouldn't be anywhere without mine. Well, I also wouldn't be anywhere without you and our family. Don't think I've forgotten that. Every night I look at the Egypt picture and I remember how important it is for me to get back to the Burrow.

Write me back when you get the time. I'm not sure when I'll answer, but I promise that I will. I'm getting a bit stronger, Ron. I reckon you would be proud.

George

Ron smiled widely as he felt warmth encompass his body. George's words gave him the reassurance that he'd desperately needed. It'd been incredibly difficult to let him go and Ron had been so uneasy about George being away from their family, but he was doing okay. George was joking, exploring, and trying to live again.

Ron opened his mouth but quickly shut it. While in his blissful state, he'd forgotten where he was. He wasn't at home so he couldn't share the news with his family. He would, unfortunately, have to wait. Ron folded the letter back into the envelope.

He sighed, then made his way back to the Ruins. He kept telling himself that things wouldn't always be like this. One day, he would be able to leave.

The cold, foul, and moist atmosphere slapped him in the face as he walked down the short flight of stairs.

"Blimey, Ron," Harry said. He was standing outside of their room with Olivia.

"It's raining bollocks," Ron said, pulling off his sopping jumper. "I think it's letting up though." He balled it up then threw it through the open door of his room. His jumper hit Eric in the face right as he was walking out.

"Oi!" Eric said.

"M'sorry," Ron said, attempting to mask his laughter.

"We'll be sorted if you put this back on and cover up that hideous shirt," he said.

"Not again!" Harry breathed.

"Piss off, Eric," Ron said. "The Canons are having a great season."

"A great season for them is dismal by every other team's standards," he said. "Drop those fuckers, Ron." Eric gave his shirt a look of disgust before walking down the corridor. Ron flipped him off, mouthing 'fuck you'.

"How manly of you," Olivia said dully.

"Eric is a Tornados fan," Harry said to her.

"Bugger the Tornados and Eric," Ron grumbled. "It's Sunday; I don't have to put up with anybody's rubbish today." He looked around. "Oi, where's the other ginger?"

"In our room," Olivia said. "She doesn't want to be around you two."

"Still?" Harry asked in apparent disbelief. "It's been almost a week. When is CeeCee going to realize that what happened during the assessment was nothing personal?"

"I don't know, but can you honestly say that it wasn't?" Olivia asked.

"Yes," Ron said simply. "It was about Harry and me - no one else."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to give either of you a bollocking," Olivia said. "Listening to Charlotte complain about it has been enough. Just remember that we're all here for the same spot and things are tense. I can understand how intimidated she probably felt in that room with you two."

Harry raised an eyebrow at her. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying," she said calmly, "that you two can't be oblivious of your status here as 'the duo', nor what that means for the rest of us. There's still a lot of whispering going on when you two are out of earshot."

Ron and Harry shared a look, telling each other with their eyes that they would have to find time to talk.

"Well, tell the whispering lot to sod off," Ron tried to say as indifferently as possible. "I'm sure there are more exciting things to talk about." He leaned against the wall but just as quickly stood up straight and hissed.

"You hurt?" Harry asked.

"Just really sore; look." Ron lifted his shirt, showing them his back.

"Merlin, Ronâ€!" Olivia said.

"How is it?" he asked. "It didn't look too bad in the shower."

"It looks horrible now, mate," Harry said.

"What happened to you?" Olivia asked. "It looks like you got clawed." Ron flinched when he felt her fingertips on his tender skin.

"That's because I did," he said, turning back around. "I dueled with Michelle this morning."

"She really cut into you," Harry said, looking a bit disturbed.

Olivia stomped her foot. "Urgh! She's such a vicious bitch! I swear she uses some sort of reinforcement charm on her nails."

"I reckon they're effective though," Harry said.

"Her nails should be illegal," Olivia said, balling her fists. "Or maybe I should just curse her fingers off."

Ron and Harry laughed. "Wicked, but I'm fairly sure you'll get chucked out for that," Ron said.

"If not sent to Azkaban," Harry added.

"Besides, I'm actually getting used to it," Ron said. "As pathetic as that sounds."

"Yeah - what is this, the third time she's messed you up?" Harry asked.

"What can I say?" Ron said with a shrug. "Everyone here adores me." He started to rest against the wall again but swiftly remembered that he couldn't.

"Maybe you should go to the nurse," Harry said.

"I was just there yesterday for my leg," Ron said. "I can't go back already."

"I've got some ointment that might help. Hold on." Olivia went down the hall to her room and soon came back with a small jar and a towel. "Lift."

Ron turned around, raising his shirt again. He groaned in slight pain as she dried off his back then recoiled as she applied the cream. "Fucking hell that burns!"

"Keep your hair on," she said, dabbing all over his back. "It has a cooling agent."

"Yeah, I can feel it," he said, shivering a little. "It's nice."

"Good," she said. After a few more daubs, she stopped. "Okay. Now as the cream begins to heal your cuts, your back will probably stiffen up some but it won't last."

"Cheers," Ron said with a smile.

Olivia smiled back. "Of course." She handed him the jar. "Why don't you keep this? I've got plenty and you'll probably need it more than I will."

Harry snorted so Ron swiftly snatched off his glasses, dropping them to the floor. "Damn it, Ron!" Harry whined, searching around the floor for them. "You're a dirty, bleeding twat!"

"Dirty and bleeding?" Ron asked. "Shit, that's quite an achievement. With that, I reckon I'll go change. I've got my session in a bit."

He stepped over Harry and walked into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. As Ron dried off and put on fresh clothes, he tried to mentally prepare himself to see Mr. Nelson again.

"You're not funny, Ron," Harry said, storming into the room.

"Really? I can think of a couple of people who would disagree with you."

"Hermione and your mum don't count," Harry said, sitting on his bed. "They're required to laugh with you while the rest of us laugh at you."

"Now who's being a manky wanker?" Ron asked, throwing his towel at Harry.

"That's not what I said. I called you a dirty, bleeding twat."

Ron sat next to him. "Oh, well, I reckon you can be 'The Boy Who Lived to Become a Twat and a Wanker' then," he said with a laugh.

Harry elbowed him in the side, laughing as well. "I hate you so much."

"Yeah, keep telling yourself that, mate." Ron said, letting out a heavy breath.

"Thinking about the session?"

"Of course," Ron said. "I'm trying to stay relaxed though."

"That's a good thing," Harry said. "I clear my mind as much as possible before I go."

"You're lucky yours isn't until tonight," Ron said.

"Not really. I was hoping to go over my health notes tonight."

"Speaking of health," Ron said, "Ms. Yule looked over my work. She says I'm getting better."

"That's great," Harry said with a smile.

"It really is - but that wasn't even the best part of my morning." Ron pointed to the letter on his bed. "That's from George."

"Yeah? How's he doing?"

"Okay," Ron said. "He's been to Spain, Italy, and he's in New Zealand now. Lee and Angelina are showing him a good time. According to George, he's progressing."

"That's really good news," Harry said. "Ginny and I have been talking about him a lot lately in our letters."

"George told me to give you something, you know," Ron said.

"What is it?"

Ron punched Harry on the arm.

"Ow! You dickhead!" Harry said, hitting him back. "What was that for?"

"He told me to tell you 'hi', hit you, and to let you know that you're still a Chosen git."

Harry rolled his eyes. "How am I supposed to know that's from George?"

Ron then hit Harry again, this time lower on his arm.

"Ow!"

"That's how you know the first one was from him," Ron said. "My punches feel like that, and instead of being Chosen, I still think you're a specky git."

"Well you're a stained dildo," Harry said, shoving him off the bed. "Bugger off."

"Gladly." Ron stood up then slid on his dry trainers.

"Ron?"

"Hmm?"

Harry gave him a nod. "Have a good session, yeah?"

"I'll try to, mate. See you later."

The door to Conor's room opened just as Ron stepped out of his own.

"Haven't seen you since breakfast," Ron said. "You all right?"

"Fine," Conor said. "Are you busy?"

"I have to meet with the Healer soon. Why?"

Conor held up a letter. "Got a note from Roger."

"Brilliant!" Ron said. He followed Conor into his messy room across the hall. He was the only one inside. "How's Roger doing?" Ron asked, sitting on the edge of Conor's bed.

"Training is rough, but he's doing well," Conor said. "He hopes we're okay and that Jack isn't getting to us."

"The bloke tries to so hard," Ron said.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Jack wanked to the idea of people cowering at his feet," Conor said. "Go on and read the letter. Roger brings you up a few times."

Ron read it over with a smirk. Roger had such an interesting use of language. "I feel like a tit. I haven't had a chance to write him lately."

"You know Roger," Conor said. "He understands what it's like here, and he's the most patient lad in the world. I wish he was still around."

"So do I," Ron said. He looked up; Conor was reading another letter. Judging by the intensity in his expression, Ron had a feeling who it was from.

"Is that from your sister?" he asked.

"Yeah," he said softly.

"How's she doing?"

"Okay."

"I just got a letter from my brother George."

"How's he doing?"

"Surviving."

Conor nodded, looking to his side table. He gazed at the picture of himself with his sister. They had the same kind eyes, blonde hair, and happy smiles. "Surviving is all any of us seem to do anymore."

"It's a start, eh?" Ron asked.

"Not really." Conor returned his focus to his letter. "It's strange how easily and how much things can change," he said. "I went from being a normal bloke to a wizard in one moment. I reckon Kaitlin should've been given the magical gene or whatever. She's the adventurous one."

"You think boring people shouldn't be magical?" Ron asked.

"That's not what I'm saying. I just wish there was some sort of criteria," Conor said. "I'm sure my sister would make a great witch."

Ron didn't know what to say. Every day, Conor became a bit more reserved, yet he was opening up more to Ron without him having to ask. It was as if Conor was losing faith in the world yet trusting him more at the same time. Ron wasn't sure of what he'd done to deserve Conor's trust and he wasn't sure if he wanted so much responsibility, but Ron cared about him and would take the weight if he had to.

"Has it ever been an issue that you're the only magical person in your family?" Ron asked.

"Not at all," Conor said. "It took a bit for my parents to believe it was all real, but once they did, they were proud of me and very encouraging. Kateâ€¦well, she was jealous for awhile of course, but she didn't change. She was really happy for me. We're just too close for things like that to put a distance between us."

"What do she and your family think about you being here?"

Conor's expression hardened. "They worry about the dangers, but they know this is what I want so they're supportive."

Ron closely studied Conor's face. "Andâ€¦this really is what you want?"

He looked down, clutching his letter tightly. "Of course."

For whatever reason, Ron didn't believe him.

Conor cleared his throat. "Well, um, you should get going, yeah?"

"I probably should." Ron got up, giving Conor's shoulder a squeeze. "Thanks for showing me Roger's letter."

Conor didn't say anything - only nodded and kept his gaze on his sister's letter.

Ron walked out of Headquarters and to the trail that would lead to Mr. Nelson's cabin. He paused, thinking about Conor and what was really wrong with him. He knew that he had to focus on his own progress and state of mind, but Ron couldn't just ignore his friends when they were in a state. As tough as Ron wanted to appear to people, his sensitivity was a very powerful trait that he had. He considered his compassion to be a very good thing, but sometimes the level of it worried him.

In spite of everything going on in Ron's head, he told himself to relax.

"Oi," someone said from behind him.

"Oi," Ron said, turning around to Olivia.

"Are you heading to your session?"

"Yeah," Ron said. "I just wanted a moment to get my head on. What are you doing?"

"I've got my session soon so I thought I'd take a quick walk first," she said. "I'll do anything to keep out of the Ruins for as long as possible."

"Sounds smart," he said.

"I can be sometimes," she said. "So, how's your back?"

"It's all right," he said. "It's starting to feel stiff, which I reckon is a good sign. Thanks for the cream."

"It's not a problem," she said. "As I said, I have more and it doesn't take much to make it."

"You made it?" He laughed. "Ha! Of course you did. You're the Medical Miracle."

"Shut up, Ron!" she said, hitting his arm. "I have no problems with punching you in the face."

Ron held up his hands in defense. "Now if you do that then I'll need you to whip me up something for my bruises."

"Bugger off!" she said with a laugh, hitting him again. "Remind me never to do anything nice for you if this is how you'll behave."

"Oh, you know I'm just taking the piss," he said. "It's brilliant that you know so much."

Olivia only shrugged.

"You shouldn't be so indifferent." Ron grew a bit more serious. "I mean that. Ms. Yule says I'm doing better, and I know you're a big reason why. I appreciate your help."

"Don't give me any credit, Ron," Olivia said. "You're okay with the material. You just have to focus and push yourself."

"I know, but still," he said. "You could be taking advantage of this but instead you're helping me - and Harry for that matter. Thank you so much for that."

Olivia chewed on the side of her lip as her cheeks turned faintly pink. "You're both very welcome, but I don't mind helping. You two are good guys. Besides, it's the least I can do consideringâ€;" She trailed off, but Ron had an idea of what she was getting at.

"I hope you don't think that you owe us something."

"I don't, but it's still really nice knowing that I can help you two in some way," Olivia said. She chuckled. "You're a sod sometimes, Ron, but I never forget that you've sacrificed everything for our world. I'm sorry if I don't make that clear enough."

"That's the thing though, Olivia," he said, "I'm glad that you don't. The gratitude that people feel toward me now makes me uncomfortable, but it's never like that with you."

"Well that's good to hear," she said with a smile. "I really want things between us to be simple."

"They are."

Olivia nodded. "Then, can I be honest with you?"

"Um, I guess," he said.

"Well, when people talk about you and Harry, I don't always tell them to sod off," Olivia said. "Sometimes I just roll my eyes or walk away, but I do stand up for you two when I hear something outrageous. You and Harry just want to be Aurors like everybody else."

Ron smiled. "Yeah, we do. Thanks."

"We're friends, yeah?" she said with a wink. "Have a good session, Ron." She gave his arm a pat before jogging away.

Ron looked after her for a few moments before walking in the opposite direction.

When Ron opened the cabin door, Mr. Nelson was behind his desk.
"Good afternoon, Ron."

"Hello, Mr. Nelson." Ron pulled the wooden chair up to his desk and sat.

It was Ron's third time meeting with him, and though it was still rather uncomfortable and he still didn't want to be there, Ron was starting to accept that this would be a part of his life for awhile.

"How are you today?" Mr. Nelson asked as he furiously wrote a letter.

"All right," Ron said. "Drill this morning was awful but it usually is on Sundays. I, um, got a letter from my brother."

Mr. Nelson looked up, smiling. "You have so many brothers, Ron. Which one are you referring to?"

"Oh, um, Georgeâ€¢theâ€¢twin," Ron said awkwardly.

Mr. Nelson nodded. "How is he?"

"Surviving," Ron said. He rubbed his neck, hoping that he hadn't told Mr. Nelson too much. He needed to change the subject. "So, uh, how are your kids?"

Mr. Nelson laughed. "They're great, thank you. My wife is doing well too. I'm actually writing to her now about something she needs to pick up for our son. I should've sent this ages ago but I'm awful with writing letters."

"I am too," Ron said. "Is your son the youngest?"

"He is," Mr. Nelson said, his smile growing wider. "My wife's parents spoil him, so my mum balances it out by taking my daughters out a lot. They love spending time with her in the Muggle world. I think sometimes they wish that they were Muggle-born."

Ron chuckled but quickly grew more serious. He had things that he wanted to say but he wasn't sure if he could. Ron decided to take a chance. "I have a mate here who's Muggle-born. He says that it's never been a problem for his family."

"Do you not believe him?" Mr. Nelson asked.

"What makes you think that?"

"I'm not really thinking anything, Ron," Mr. Nelson said, sitting back in his chair, "but you did bring it up, and there was a change in your tone and expression. You must feel at least a little bit skeptical."

Ron merely gaped at him.

"Don't look so surprised," Mr. Nelson said. "I'm a mental Healer; it's my job to notice small details and shifts in attitude."

Ron rubbed his neck, regretting that he had said anything at all. He didn't want to divulge everything he knew about Conor.

"Ron, these past few sessions have been fairly light in terms of discussion," Mr. Nelson said, "but it doesn't mean that we can't talk about heavier issues. I'm not taking notes, and I don't know the person in question. Be open with me."

Ron shifted in his chair as he tried to read Mr. Nelson. He wanted to find a reason not to trust him, but he simply couldn't.

"Well, it's not that I don't believe my mate," Ron said after a prolonged silence, "it's just that he's always talking about how close and perfect his family is. I - I know it's not really like that. Something is going on with him, and it's bothering me."

"Why don't you talk to him about it?"

"Because that's not how we are," Ron said. "We don't share our rubbish with each other. We've always enjoyed that, but now it's like the rules are changing. He's sort of opening up and I'm

asking more questions. He knows some stuff about me so I reckon he wants me to know a bit about his family."

"And family means a lot to him?" Mr. Nelson asked.

"It's his whole life," Ron said. "I reckon that's a big reason why we understand each other so well. We both have little sisters who we would give our lives for and our families mean everything to us. I just think his life isn't as perfect as he wants everyone to believe and it's affecting him a lot."

"Family can a difficult subject for some people to talk about, Ron," Mr. Nelson said. "Especially if the truth doesn't match their desires."

"But whatever is going on seems to be a lot worse than just 'difficult,'" Ron said.

Mr. Nelson sat up straighter in his chair. "What do you mean?"

Ron wasn't sure of what he meant, but he had to get the words out before they smothered him. "Well, everything we do in practice these days is about getting us used to pain and really hurting each other. I don't know why, but I keep connecting physical pain to my mate's life."

"You mean physical abuse?" Mr. Nelson asked.

Ron nodded. "Yes."

"Do you think that something's happening within his family?" Mr. Nelson asked.

"I don't know," Ron said, feeling a little nauseous. "I hope not. It makes me sick to think that there might be. Stuff like thatâ€œI honestly can't believe it can happen."

"Well it does, Ron," Mr. Nelson said grimly. "We always hear about the things dark wizards and witches do to people, but it's not just them. Even the happiest of families on the outside can have something much darker happening on the inside."

Ron wasn't a trained Healer but he could see a change in Mr. Nelson's features and hear the low tone his voice took. Ron wanted to ask him something that had been on his mind since the day he met him, but he knew that he couldn't.

"Yes, Ron?" Mr. Nelson asked out of nowhere.

"I - I didn't say anything, sir," Ron said, shaking his head. He wasn't sure if he liked that Mr. Nelson was so good at his job.

"You didn't have to," Mr. Nelson said seriously. "Do you want to ask me something?"

"It's not appropriate," Ron quickly said.

"Why not?"

"Because it's serious," Ron said. "I don't talk about things that are major, so it wouldn't be fair if I asked you to."

"You're right; it wouldn't be," Mr. Nelson said, "but what would be even more unjust is if we didn't talk about what was on your mind. It doesn't matter what else is going on or what the subject matter is - this is why I'm here."

Ron was taken aback by his response. "O-okay."

Mr. Nelson merely looked at him for a few moments as if contemplating something. "How about this, Ron: you can ask me a serious question and I'll answer honestly. In return, I get to ask you one and you have to answer honestly."

Ron had a feeling that he would say that. "I don't know, sir."

"I'm not finished," Mr. Nelson said, holding up a finger. "Just so you'll start trusting that I'm honestly not trying to force you to talk about your anxiety, I won't ask you a question regarding your panic attacks."

"Really?" Ron asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You have my word," Mr. Nelson said with a nod. "So, do we have a deal?"

Ron clutched the seat of his chair tightly as he thought about his answer. "Yes," he said apprehensively.

"Then ask away."

Ron had not expected Mr. Nelson to be so obliging. He already wanted to back out of his agreement but he couldn't, so he tried to think of the most polite way to ask.

"When we first met," he said slowly, "you told me that you saw and experienced what being an Auror can do to a person. What did you mean by that?"

Mr. Nelson didn't respond right away.

"That's fair to ask," he came around to say. He cleared his throat. "Well, Ron, my father became an Auror around your age and also got married rather young. He had a great life with my mother but by the time I was born, he was not the man my mum told me he used to be."

"What do you mean, sir?" Ron asked, almost not wanting to hear the answer.

Mr. Nelson looked right into Ron's eyes. "Ron, my father was very abusive in every sense of the word. He was towards my mother, siblings, me, and even his friends; however, his self destruction was the most brutal. Through living with him, I learned firsthand what evil really was."

Ron swallowed hard as his throat constricted. He didn't know Mr. Nelson, but hearing his words touched deeply inside of him. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Nelson."

"You don't need to be," he said. "When I finally left that house, I promised myself that I would find a way to help Aurors work through - or at least contain - their darkness. It's what I do now. I also work with families to help them cope or sometimes escape if necessary."

Mr. Nelson started flipping his quill between his fingers and gave Ron a sad smile. "I guess in the end, I became a Healer so that I could keep families from having to go through terror and pain like I had to with mine. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, I-I understand."

Mr. Nelson nodded. "I'm glad you do, Ron."

Mr. Nelson had been so brave and honest with him; Ron had to do the same. "Soâ€¢what's your question?" he asked.

Ron figured that he would be asked something about Harry or his time on the run last year.

"How did you handle yourself the night after your brother died?"

Ron's eyes grew wide while his breathing staggered. He was completely gobsmacked. This wasn't what he'd expected, and Ron actually felt a little angry to be asked something so severe.

"Bloody hell, that's a really serious and personal question, Mr. Nelson."

"So was yours," Mr. Nelson said casually. "We had a deal, Ron."

Ron knocked his knees together as he began to feel a bit of queasiness and panic stir inside of him. He hadn't allowed himself to think about that night in ages.

"Ron?"

Ron finally looked up. He wanted to run away or possibly even throw up, but he had to keep to his word. Ron needed to prove to himself that he could be brave. George was being brave; Ron could too.

"H-how did I handle myself?" he asked in a raspy voice. Mr. Nelson nodded. "Iâ€¢I didn't."

"Sorry?" Mr. Nelson asked.

Ron knew this answer wouldn't be good enough. He let out a deep breath, thinking back to the darkest night of his life. He didn't know if he was strong enough to speak, but he wanted to find out.

"Right after the war officially ended," he said, "so much happened. A lot of people came from the Ministry and St. Mungo's.

They gathered bodies, tended to those who were hurt, and arrested people." He stopped talking. All of Ron's senses were assaulted with the memory of that time. It all began to push down on him.

"Continue," Mr. Nelson said gently.

Ron nodded, licking his lips. "Well, Harry, Hermione, and I were shoved to the front of everything. We sort of got cleaned up and maybe spent almost a whole day at Hogwarts answering so many bloody questions and making so many stupid statements for the press. I completely numbed myself. I didn't feel or think about anything."

"When did you get a chance to meet up with your family?"

"Sometime later in the night," Ron said. "I finally found them in the Great Hall. My parents; they were signing Fred's body over to St. Mungo's. After that was done, we all went home."

Ron began to rock in his chair as a thick, fiery lump formed in his throat. "It was so strange. We all stood around the kitchen table in total silence. I remember my mum was the first to speak. She whispered 'we're home'. That's when my brother George ran off to the loo and locked himself in. We could hear him;screaming and throwing things around. My brothers tried to get him to come out but he wouldn't. Then, little by little, everyone else started to lose it. Thenâ€;fuck. Mr. Nelson, I can't do this."

"Yes, you can, Ron," Mr. Nelson said.

Ron shook his head frantically. "No â€“ it's too much."

"But it's already happened and you survived," he said strongly. "Just say the words, Ron. You're safe. You may not feel it, but I promise that you are. Let the words go."

Mr. Nelson made it sound so easy but it wasn't. Nothing about what happened that night in the kitchen made any sense to Ron.

Ron's heartbeat started to pick up but he told himself to calm down. All he had to do was get the words out. Nothing was going to hurt him, and he wouldn't be randomly thrust back to that time. It was over now.

"W-when my little sister started crying, that's when it finally hit me," Ron said. "I looked around at my family, realizing that we weren't whole anymore. Someone was missing."

Ron stopped again, gritting his teeth for a moment. "My-my brother was dead. He was never going to walk through the door again. I remember tripping back against the wall and collapsing to the floor. I cried harder than I ever had in my life; I even had a fit. I started punching the wall andâ€;"

Ron stopped once more to rub his knuckles. They were practically throbbing at the memory. "I punched it so hard that I broke my hand, but I didn't care. I just kept doing it. That's when Hermione sat next to me. She tried to reach out but I didn't want

her touching me. I kept pushing her away and - and I think I even told her to fuck off. I can't believe I did that."

"All sense of self is abandoned in moments like that, Ron," Mr. Nelson said. "I'm sure she understood."

"I reckon she did too because she didn't fuck off," Ron said. "She just kept trying and eventually she got ahold of me and I stopped resisting. I let her hold me, and I lost myself even more. I screamed, cried, and shook so badly, but she didn't move."

Ron closed his eyes so he could picture everything clearly in his mind. Talking about this was so hard, exhausting, and terrifying, but this part of the memory was something he wanted to embrace.

"I think Hermione might've said something to me, but all I focused on was her smell." Ron rubbed his neck. "I dug my nose right into her shirt and inhaled as much as I could. Is that weird, Mr. Nelson?"

He shook his head. "Sometimes small details are what keep us alive during moments of great pain. Do you remember the scent?"

"I'll never forget it. It was a mixture of sweat, dirt, and blood probably, but there was something really sweet and warm about it. A part of her scent in that moment was something I'd smelled on her since I was eleven. I then remembered that Hermione was my girlfriend and that we'd kissed. For one whole second I was really happy, but then I remembered again that Fred was dead. So I just kept crying and shaking and screaming and dying a little."

Ron sniffled, rubbing his eyes. "I reckon your reason for becoming a Healer is the same reason that I want to be an Auror: I want to keep families from having to go through a night like I had to with mine; I want to help keep darkness from splitting up families. Does that make sense?"

Mr. Nelson got up from behind his desk and leaned against it in front of Ron. "Yes, it makes perfect sense, Ron," he said, gripping his shoulder.

"Good," Ron mumbled, letting out a heavy breath.

"So, how do you feel after telling me all of that?"

"Overwhelmed," Ron said honestly. "It's hitting me really hard because it sounds so awful, but what makes it worse is that the way I described it barely covers what actually happened." He sniffled roughly again.

"It's okay, Ron," Mr. Nelson said soothingly. "Just take it easy. We've talked a lot today." He pulled a few tissues out of his bag then handed them to Ron.

"Thank you, Mr. Nelson," Ron said, blowing his nose.

"No, thank you, Ron," he said. "You opened an extremely heavy door for me to peer through. I'm glad you trust me, at least a little. I'm also very proud of you."

"I'm actually a little proud of me too," Ron sobbed.

Mr. Nelson gave Ron a small smile, then just let him relax and gather himself for the remainder of their session.

Ron felt horribly exposed and was in slight pain. He missed his family and he wanted to be in Hermione's arms again, however, Ron was at Lambrick and only had himself right now. He had to progress and push through it all on his own. Somehow, he knew that he could. The night Ron had been told to run for the duration of field practice was the night he'd lost a part of himself. More and more, Ron was beginning to understand that the part had been his self-doubt.

When Ron left Mr. Nelson's cabin and started making his way back to the Ruins, he felt a little lighter and taller. The words and memories had hurt, but he had survived. He pulled George's letter from his back pocket, reading over it again. He couldn't help but feel a little closer to his older brother as he realized that they were both in similar situations. Both were struggling yet getting better and were somehow trying to find themselves again. Things weren't perfect for George, and Ron's situation was far from ideal, but they were both progressing.

Most importantly, they were both trying to prove that they could move on from that night.

The next morning during drill, Ron ran with a greater speed and power.

He felt something push past his shoulders but he didn't bother looking up; Ron knew it was Jack. He still had no idea what the gesture was supposed to mean, but feeling it always made Ron run a little faster. He was finally back to his old pace; now Ron wanted to push himself even further.

Ron arrived to the pitch, then quickly mounted his broom. He took a moment to catch his breath before departing. The air was cold and wet, and he felt a cramp in his leg, but he couldn't stop. He flew his ten laps faster than he ever had and he felt the consequence of it when he hopped off his broom. Ron placed his hands on his knees, fighting through the horrible chest pain he felt with every breath.

"Weasley, partner with Grace!" Brian ordered from the sidelines.

Ron slowly rose, turning around. "Y-yes, sir!" As he jogged over to Michelle, he could've sworn that the scratches on his back panged.

Michelle pulled off her jumper, then tied her long blonde hair back. The expression on her face told Ron that she was most likely excited about getting another chance to maim him. Ron couldn't let that happen. He'd have to do something differently

because every time he dueled with her, she always got him on his stomach.

"Ready, Weasley?" she asked with a wicked grin.

Ron wasn't sure of what to do. Michelle was always so eager and prepared; she was clearly the better dueler. He studied her body as if it were a puzzle that needed to be deciphered. Ron could hear Mr. Low's voice telling him to approach her with new eyes.

"Weasley?" Michelle asked impatiently. "Come on!"

Ron raised his wand. He would try a new tactic. "Let's go."

Michelle nodded, then backed away from him. He watched as she stiffened her body. Right as she threw her first spell, Ron gripped his wand very tightly, lowering his hand. He was suddenly hit hard and flew back.

He landed on his side, but due to his preparation, he still had a hold of his wand; however, Ron pretended to look around for it.

Just as he had expected, Michelle ran toward him so she could take better aim, but Ron was ready for her. As she came within reaching distance, she raised her arm to fire again.

Ron leapt into the air, rushing her. He rammed his head into her stomach while holding her around the waist and was able to slam her down to the ground.

She groaned in pain, arching her back. Michelle kicked him hard as the two fought and rolled around in the grass. She was strong and quick, but Ron was able to overpower her. He knew that he was hurting her, but he had to push through.

Michelle hit him hard across the face, then fired a spell that burned him and sent Ron back. She lifted up her wand hand, taking a second to gather herself.

This was the moment of vulnerability that Ron had been waiting for. He'd merely had to tire her out first to find it.

"Expelliarmus!" Ron shouted.

Michelle was disarmed, but he knew that it wouldn't faze her. She raised her arm as if she was going to strike him with her nails.

He pointed his wand straight at her. "Manus Mortis!"

"AHH!" Michelle hollered as she shook violently. She dropped her arms to her sides as if her hands were too heavy to hold up.

He watched as she attempted to move her hands but the spell wouldn't allow her to; they were dead to her.

Ron rushed Michelle again, flipping her onto her stomach. He dug his knee right into her spine, snatching her wrists back.

He heard a whistle.

"Weasley, Grace!" Alan shouted. "You two are done!"

Ron quickly got off of Michelle, helping her up. He performed the counter-curse then she immediately shoved him before storming away. Ron rubbed his neck, smirking. He felt a bit like a prick but also like a contender now. He'd never beaten her or had completed a duel on his first try before. That had to mean something.

When they were dismissed to shower and eat, Alan pulled Ron to the side.

"That was smart dueling I saw from you today, Weasley," Alan said.

"Thank you, sir," Ron said.

"You know that's not what I want to hear," he said sternly.

"Sorry, sir," Ron rushed. "What I meant to say was that I knew I had to try something different with Michelle. She's so fast, and she's a much better dueler than I am. My only option was to exhaust her to gain the upper hand."

"Wise decision," Alan said with a nod. "It's vital to recognize your weakness but to find a way to overcome it. Your offensive spell was also very interesting."

Ron couldn't help but to grin. "Michelle's hands are her weapons, sir. What better way to defeat her then by rendering them useless?"

Alan made a noise that sounded like a laugh. He patted his arm.
"Welcome back, Weasley."

"I'm here to stay this time, sir," Ron said with confidence.

"Don't tell me â€“ just keep proving it," Alan said. "You're dismissed."

Ron felt amazing as he showered and got changed. Granted, it was only one duel during one morning exercise, but it'd been the first time in ages that Ron's body and mind had worked together to accomplish something. He felt a power and strength that he hadn't in awhile and he would do everything he could to keep the feeling up.

After breakfast, Ron checked the mail cabin. He felt weak in the knees as he saw an envelope with Hermione's name on it.

He hurried to the nearest dry place where he could sit and tore open the envelope.

Hello Mad Ginger Wizard,

I'm sorry that it's taken me awhile to write you back but I didn't want to have to rush. So, last time I wrote to you, I said that things had gotten mad here. Well, it's worse. The younger students are so rowdy and are STILL in holiday mode. As for the seventh yearsâ€¦well, they're starting to unravel as well because it's our last few months here. I, of course, am not unraveling. There's still so much learning and work that needs to be done. I did very well on my Charms exam, by the way. I studied for ages and it paid off. Thank you for asking and keeping that in your mind during your exercise. You're very sweet.

Now, my cheeky boy, I decided to be cautious and read your letter out in a vacant corridor. I'm glad I did, too. All those things you said about 'Professor Granger' made me blush and randomly spasm. Yes, I do think you're vile, but I did laugh a great deal. I also felt incredibly hot and bothered all day because of what you wrote - again. You're too sexy, Ron, and you're incredibly talented at writing things like that. Your words did make me think though (and not just about your mouth and tongue).

Sometimes I do consider becoming a professor, but as much as I'd love to teach and talk about interesting subjects, I think it would be too stationary for me. I may not want to become an Auror or a Quidditch player, but I do understand what you, Harry, and Ginny feel. I think I've been through too much to have such a stationary job. Plus, it would be too difficult with you around. Some poor student would end up getting her essay graded incorrectly because I got distracted with your tongue inside of me. Wow, I'm turning into you, Ron. I'm starting to consider sex before work. Remind me to punish you for that later.

Moving along, Ginny is honestly doing okay. I think she's finally adjusting to being back here. She's putting all of her focus on Quidditch. Dean told me that she's unofficially taken over as Head Captain. When Ginny told me herself, I'm fairly sure she had tears in her eyes. I know this part of the tale won't be in her version to you but I thought you would like to know how much this means to her. It's lovely to her smile. She misses you and Harry a lot though. Just the other night she stayed in my room and we talked about you two all night (get that look off your face and that idea out of your head, Ronald Bilius Weasley â€“ all Ginny and I did was TALK). Oh, and since we're on the subject of Harry, how is he doing?

It really breaks my heart to hear that you and Harry are having such a difficult time together. I don't believe you have to choose between anything though, Ron. Yes, I completely understand your position, but I can also see the other side. Your trainers want you two to push each other and discover new things. They probably also want you to open up to other people. As for your camp mates, it's probably daunting to see you two together. You and Harry have no idea how commanding you are as a pair, and you two can carry on full conversations without words. Having that, along with the advantage of everything you've accomplished, probably puts a lot of pressure on them. Now, I hope you don't think I'm agreeing with how things are going. I just want you to understand so you don't get so upset at everyone. You said that you used to tell Harry that people simply had to get used to him. Well, I'm telling you now that people simply have to get used to

you two together. I know it hurts, love, but you can do it. You and Harry have been through hell and back together; you'll make it through this.

Just continue taking pride in the fact that you did well on your exam with him. I'm still so happy for you both, and I'm proud of you for improving in your health class and especially with your potions. I'm trudging through Potions class myself, but I know we'll both make it.

Ron, you have to keep telling yourself that you'll make it through this. You said things at camp are complicated, strenuous, and painful, but it's all to better your skills, endurance, and state of mind. All these struggles will mold you into the remarkable Auror that you're destined to become. I know it's not always easy to think that way though. I've been feeling tired and somewhat angry myself. Being out of your element and comfort zone can really muddle with your mind, but you're the strongest and the most capable person I know, sweetheart. Take everything you accomplished during your first half and apply it now. You might be distracted and, dare I say, feel as though you know 'fuck-all', but you can't stop now.

Now, I know this may seem absurd to suggest, but maybe you should talk about the disconnection you feel with your mental Healer. I can't say enough how incredible it is that Lambrick offers this service. Mr. Nelson sounds nice and sincere, so you should at least think about telling him. Oh, that reminds me, I got the biggest smile on my face when I read your bit about the Yo-Yo. I never owned one, but that's because I'm not the most coordinated when it comes to those types of toys. You, however, are probably already a natural. You're so cute, Ron, and I can't wait to see what tricks you've learned (take that in any way you wish). I am a little embarrassed that you talk about me in your sessions though. I cringe thinking about how I was at twelve. I'm curious to know what you've been telling him, and I hope that you haven't been describing yourself as a 'knob'. You were certainly not. Yes, you were rude and impulsive, but you were nice, funny, loyal, and very brave. Those things were what I had a desire for, along with your freckles, blue eyes, and ginger hair, of course. It's superficial but it's honest.

Since we're talking about honesty, I want you to know that I absolutely understand what it feels like to almost watch your life happen at a distance. There's no need to feel weird for telling me. I felt that all the time during our hunt last year. Often I couldn't concentrate or feel a connection to my body. It's really scary but it's not a permanent sensation. My advice would be to take a moment to close your eyes and breathe. Remind yourself of where you are, what you're doing, and most importantly, why you're doing certain things. It's crucial that you do this for yourself, but it means so much to me that you use me as a guide. I love you so much, and I'm glad that you can always feel it. You don't owe me anything, Ron. It's my job and honor to help you.

I feel that same power when I think about you. Quite often I take out the mirror you made me for Christmas. I imagine you

whispering the words in my ear, and I feel stronger. I also think about what we talked about the night in the hotel and how liberating it was. When I recall that, along with that look you had when I was on top of you, I just feel so good. I feel safe and capable of anything. I'm able to remind myself to loosen up and that everything I'm doing is to help me become a better person for when I return to you.

I could go on for pages about this but I never know how much free time you have and I don't want to take up all of it. I'm actually glad that your trainers give you a curfew. You need the rest, Ronald. Just from reading your 'dozy letter' I can tell how tired you are. Don't worry, the letter made sense and I enjoyed reading it. You're precious when you're in a state.

I love you too, Ron, so very much. I miss you every day and there's always something that makes me think of you. I don't believe that you're 'prattish' for envisioning us before going to sleep. It's something I do often in the bed, shower, and bath as well (take that as you will). Lovely: I suddenly got a vision of washing your back. I can just see your muscles and feel your soft skin under my hands. I hear your moans, smell your body, and I can practically taste your mouth, Ron. I promise that there will be a day when we can do that, then just lay in our big bed and talk as we kiss each other's fingers or whatever we feel like doing. I'll be able to wake up next to you and tell you that I love you. I live for that day, Ron.

I'm looking over your letters now to see if I missed anything. Yes, you asked about Ginny's toes, didn't you? That's such a curious topic for you and Harry. I fancy knowing why you two were talking about our feet in the first place, but if you truly want to know, yes, Ginny does wear green polish. How could you not know that it's her favorite color, Ron? Anyhow, no, I don't wear polish myself. On very special occasions I might, but I don't have the patience or time to just wear it simply because. Now, I don't know if you were being serious or if it was an affect of your fatigue, but 'little wiggles' is the most adorable thing you've ever said. I even wrote it down and dated it for evidence. If you're grumbling, good. If you're threatening to get me even better.

Okay, that's enough teasing. I hope you're having a good day and that you and Harry are all right. Just remember what I said about staying focused and remembering why you're there. There's nothing you can't do, Ron. You're powerful, intelligent, and beautiful. You'll make it. I believe in you, and I'll be cheering you on always.

Oh, I almost forgot to tell you that I wrote to George recently. It wasn't much, but I wanted to let him know how proud I was of him and how I hoped he was all right. I love George, and I think it's important that he knows how many people are rooting for him. What do you think?

Loving you to pieces,

Professor Granger

Ron moaned in pleasure as he read the letter over and over again. His state of joy increased as Hermione's words filled him up, mending and soothing his holes and wounds.

"I bloody love you, 'Mione," he whispered as he ran his fingertips over the letter. Ron wanted to run to her and thank her for giving him exactly what he needed. He wanted to take her into his arms so he could kiss her, touch her, and tell her how desperately in love with her he was.

As Ron read over certain parts of her note though, he found himself wanting to lift up her skirt and pull down her knickers more than anything else. His mouth watered as he thought about massaging her clit with his tongue and washing her thighs during a hot shower.

Ron tightly shut his eyes and shook his head, but it was too late. He was already hard and tingly, but he had no time to get one off.

Ron stood up, holding his letter in front of his crotch area as he walked to health class.

"You have all been practicing sufficiently with your mannequins, so now I want to see you lot use your skills on each other," Ms. Yule said to the class. "It's important that everyone can see, feel, and comprehend what CRP will be like on an actual person."

She pointed to the board on which she had drawn out a diagram of the procedure. "The rescuer in each pair will visually perform a full resuscitation on the ailing partner. This means two full breaths and chest compressions. I'll be walking around to assist and answer questions. You may begin."

Ron looked down at his partner who he was supposed to be saving. Harry was lying on the mat, looking uncomfortable as he stared up at him. Ron felt awkward as well. When Ms. Yule had told them at the start of class that they would be practicing the Muggle technique of CPR, Ron had envisioned himself doing something with a computer.

Ron glanced around the cabin; everyone was in pairs practicing the procedure. It all looked so strange and somewhat brutal to him.

"This is something Muggles do to save each other?" Ron asked Harry.

"It really does work," he said.

"Mr. Weasley," Ms. Yule said, walking over to them. "Do you have a question?"

"No, Ms. Yule," Ron said. "I'm about to start."

"Okay, so hold his head," she said.

"All right." Ron got into position at Harry's side. He pinched Harry's nose shut with his index and pointer finger, then gently lifted Harry's chin to keep his head tilted.

"Good, Mr. Weasley," Ms. Yule said. "Keep going."

"Yes, Ms. Yule," Ron said. He waited until she was assisting another pair before taking his hands off Harry. He sighed. "You know, if I'd known that we would have to do this, then I would've picked a different partner."

"Like who?" Harry asked. "There are only three girls in here and Ben, Conor, and Jack were quick to pick them."

"Yeah, well, Letty didn't seem too happy to be partnered with Conor," Ron said.

Harry shrugged. "I reckon he's not her type. Look â€“ will you just do it? My arse is starting to hurt from laying here like this."

"Don't rush me!" Ron whined. "I justâ€;why can't Hermione be my partner?"

"Because we're supposed to be learning how to save each other from cardiac arrest if we can't use magic," Harry said. "I reckon all you would do to Hermione on this mat is shag her."

"Oi!" Ron said, hitting Harry's arm. "Well, that may be true - but I'd try this on her a few times at least before we got to that."

"Whatever. Let's just get this over with!"

"Fine!" Ron said. He was thankful that his erection had gone away only a few minutes into the class period. It would've been too disturbing to have one while performing this procedure on Harry.

"You better not get any ideas," Ron mumbled.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I prefer my gingers without bollocks, believe it or not."

"I'm just saying," Ron said. "You've already mistaken me for Ginny once."

"I have never done that!"

"Yes you have," Ron said. "It was the weekend my parents went to Bill's. I came back from work and woke you up at the kitchen table. You called me Ginny."

"Fucking shove your wand up your arse sideways, Ron," Harry said, punching Ron's thigh.

He sat up, quickly looking around. "That was one time, all right? I was half asleep, saw freckles, and assumed it was her. Trust me, you're not as great as you apparently believe I think you

are. Besides, if anything, I should be telling you not to get any ideas. You're the one making a fuss over this."

"I am definitely not a member of your fan club, Harry."

"Then shut up and save me already," Harry said. "The more you complain, the harder this is going to get."

"All right, all right!" Ron grumbled. "Just go back to playing dead."

Harry lay back, closing his eyes. Ron looked down at him, putting his hands into position. He slowly lowered himself, placing his mouth to Harry's. Ron pretended to exhale two full breaths into him, then pulled away. He then felt around Harry's ribs until he felt the notch. Once Ron was sure about the placement, he added just a bit of pressure.

Ron tried the technique out a few times before trading places with Harry.

He took his spot on the mat. While Harry got himself situated, Ron turned his head to the left. Not too far away, Olivia was performing chest compressions on Ben. She looked almost bored as she pretended to save his life. Olivia glanced up, noticing Ron. She crossed her eyes, pretending to doze off.

Ron laughed rather loudly which caused her to blush.

"Mr. Weasley?"

"Sorry, Ms. Yule," Ron promptly said.

Olivia went back to saving Ben whereas Ron pretended that he couldn't breathe.

Their entire class period was devoted to CPR and other techniques that Muggles used. By the time they were finished, Ron's body was sore and he felt closer to Harry than he would've liked to.

"If I'm ever actually unable to breath, Harry, I reckon it would be better if you just let me stay unconscious," Ron said as they grabbed their bags then sat back on the floor. "CPR is mental, and I'm sure those chest compressions really hurt when you're doing them for real."

"Make sure you put that in writing first," Harry said. "I'll need something to help explain to Hermione and your family why it's apparently better for me to just let you die if you can't breathe."

"Sorted," Ron said. "I mean, fucking hell, Muggles are brilliant but I reckon all these procedures are just acts they use to feel each other up. Like with the CPR - you're practically snogging the person. And what if you're performing it on a girl? You'd have to press all on her tits."

"I'm sure she'd forgive you once you got her breathing again," Harry said, shrugging.

"Maybe," Ron said. "And just last night Conor told me about this thing Muggles do to stop each other from choking. It's called the helmdick maneuver and—"

"— I reckon you mean the Heimlich Maneuver," Harry said with a laugh.

"Whatever," Ron mumbled. "Anyway, you supposedly hold someone around the stomach, then act like you're giving them one up the arse."

Harry laughed again. "I've actually seen that one performed on Dudley once when he was choking on his third helping of steak. The techniques do save lives."

"Well, I'm sure people have also gotten off with them," Ron said.

"No, I reckon that's just you, man," Harry said. "Only you could turn the Heimlich Maneuver into something sexual."

"Hmm. You might be right," Ron said. "'Mione's letter must've done something to me because all I've been thinking about since reading it is apparating to her and shagging her right on a table in the Great Hall."

"See — that counts as an overshare."

"And I mean really giving it to her, Harry," Ron said, rubbing his hands together. "Fucking her to the point where every intelligent word she knows is gone and all she can do is cry out my name and whine about how she wants more in French."

Harry let out a deep sigh, placing his hands over his face. "I know I'm going to regret asking this butâ€¢French?"

"She knows a little," Ron said, biting his lip. "When she was younger, she had a French neighbor who taught her a bit of the language. I'd love to hear her use it as—"

"—one more word and I'll choke the life out of you myself," Harry warned. "And no â€“ I won't use CPR or the Heimlich to save you."

Ron rubbed his neck. "Sorry, mate. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I wasn't planning on eating dinner tonight anyway," Harry said. "Actually," he said in a more serious voice, "it doesn't matter how nauseous you make me or what you put in writing; I'd try to save you regardless."

"I know, mate," Ron said with a small smile.

Ms. Yule stood in front of their class. "Well, you all performed excellent today," she said. "I know these practices might seem somewhat rudimentary and even crude, but they're effective in

situations when you can't use magical aid. As Aurors, you have to adapt and that means embracing Muggle techniques."

The door to the cabin opened and Alan and Richard walked in. Everyone sat up a little straighter. The instructors had been absent for the entire lesson.

"For your assignment tonight," Ms. Yule continued with, "I want a full page of writing over what you learned today about the maneuvers and if you have any questions or concerns. You're dismissed for the evening."

"Before you lot get up though," Richard said. "We have a couple of announcements. First, tonight each of you will have a physical examination with the nurse. Lambrick Academy requires this every January so each of you can understand your fitness level and where you are healthwise."

"And because we only have two nurses on staff," Alan said, "you'll be dismissed in the pairs you're in now."

"The second thing we want you to do is write down the full name and address of a person who you would invite as your guest to a formal party," Richard said. "You can do that right here."

Ben raised his hand. "Are we going somewhere, sir?"

"No, Harris, you're not going anywhere," Richard said. "We just need the information. It doesn't matter who it is as long as he or she can act in an appropriate manner and the person is at least thirteen years of age."

"We'll give you a few minutes to complete this," Alan said. "When you're done, give your slip to Ms. Yule. She'll also call out the order for the pairs to take the physical."

"What should we do after the examination is over, sir?" Harry asked.

"Come to the main field," Alan said. He handed Ms. Yule a slip of paper then left the cabin with Richard.

"Well this is the easiest assignment they've ever given us," Ron said as he took out a quill and parchment. He wrote down Hermione's name and information.

"What do you think this is for?" Harry asked as he wrote down Ginny's name.

"I dunno," Ron said. "I can't see why anyone here would want to throw us a party." He was slightly excited at the idea of possibly getting a chance to see Hermione, but he wouldn't get his hopes up. For all Ron knew, Alan and Richard just wanted to find out who was important in their lives and use the knowledge later in a test.

"Maybe it has something to do with them wanting us to bring proper grooming supplies and our dress robes," Conor said, scooting over to them. "Can I borrow a quill from either of you?"

"Here, take mine," Ron said. "I'm already finished."

"I reckon you've written 'Hermione Granger' so many times that it just appears on your parchment, eh?" Conor asked.

"Something like that," Ron said with a smirk.

"And you're inviting Ron's little sister, Harry?" Conor asked.

"She happens to be my girlfriend as well, you know," Harry said.

Conor shrugged. "She was Ron's sister long before she was your girlfriend, mate."

Ron clapped Conor's shoulder, squeezing it firmly. "You're a brilliant man, Mr. Neary."

"The both of you can piss off," Harry said, "and yes - I'm inviting Ginny. Who are you writing down, Conor?"

"I dunno," he said. "I don't even know what this is for. I'd hate to give them information about a person without asking permission first."

"Why don't you invite your sister?" Ron suggested. "You'll be able to spend some real time with her if this really is for a party."

Conor looked away. "No, I - I'd never do that to her."

Ron frowned as Conor began drawing lines on his paper. Ron had no idea what Conor had meant. He then turned to Harry who was also giving Conor a curious expression. The two shared a look, then turned in their slips.

When Ms. Yule started to call out the pairs, Ron took the time to begin his essay. It wasn't enough that he was doing extra practices. He had to also keep up with his coursework.

By the time their names were called, Ron had finished his essay and they were the last to leave the classroom.

"Do you know what's going on with Conor?" Harry asked as they made their way to the nurse's cabin. "I don't know him as well as you do but he's changed, yeah?"

Ron didn't know what to say to Harry. Keeping Conor's confidence was extremely important to him but Harry was his best mate. "I honestly don't know," Ron said. "I think something's going on with his family or at least with his sister."

"I figured that much," Harry said. "I hope he's all right. He's a good bloke."

"Yeah, he is," Ron said. Harry didn't say anything else, which made Ron smile a little. He appreciated how Harry didn't push things or demand to know more about Conor. Harry was great at respecting people's privacy.

"So what do you think we'll have to do during the exam?" Ron asked.

"I don't know. I got checkups when I lived with the Dursleys but I don't know the magical equivalent," Harry said. "I just hope it doesn't take too long. It's already dark out here."

"Then let's hope there isn't a vision portion to the physical," Ron said. "You'd probably get chucked out tonight."

"Only after you received your exit slip because they couldn't find a way to tone down your horrendously white skin."

"You're being racist again."

"And you're being a fucker."

Ron turned to Harry to say something else, but before he could even open his mouth, he felt a sharp blow to the back of the head and instantly fell the ground. He tried to get up but he was so stunned that he couldn't move, think, or see clearly.

"What wasâ€?"

"NOOO!" Harry bellowed.

Ron jumped, blinking several times. When his vision cleared, he saw Harry in front of him being grabbed by two figures in black cloaks.

"We'll take this one," one of the figures grunted as he struggled to hold Harry. "You two take him."

"No â€“ no!" Ron began to crawl away but he was soon snatched up by two figures.

"Let him go! Let him go!" Harry yelled as he wriggled but failed to get out of the grasp of the men.

"HARRY!" Ron screamed. He dug his feet into the ground and was somehow able to fight off the men. He began running toward Harry but didn't make it far before he was hit in the back with a spell. He fell to his knees but it didn't stop him. He had to get to Harry. Ron began crawling and clawing his way through the cold, wet earth as the figures began dragging him back by his feet.

"NO â€“ NO!" Ron shouted, plowing his fingers into the grass.
"Let me fucking go â€“ HARRY!"

"RON!" Harry screamed as the figures yanked him away.

"Wait - I'm coming!" Ron began to panic as it was getting harder and harder to see Harry. He could hear his protests but Harry was too far away now to make out.

Ron's own body was still being hauled through the mud and leaves. He clutched the grass but it was too slippery to keep a hold of. He felt around himself for his wand but he couldn't find it.

"Harry! Harry!" Ron screamed hysterically.

The men finally stopped dragging him. One of them ferociously yanked on Ron's hair, forcing him to stand up. Ron tried to fight him off but the other punched him in the stomach, then in the face. Ron tensed as the pain surged all the way down to his toes.

He was hit again in the head and actually fell back against one of the figures. The man held on to him forcefully while the other stood in front of Ron.

"No!" Ron yelled. He fought as hard as he could, but the man holding him was so much stronger. It was incredibly difficult to see. All Ron could make out was the slight pale skin of the man's face and hands.

Ron didn't know what to do or think. Harry was nowhere in sight, and Ron was probably moments away from being murdered. It pained him to imagine his family going through another funeral and George having to come back from his holiday early to help bury him.

He fought, wiggled, and kicked, but he was trapped.

The black hooded figure raised his wand, pointing it right at Ron's face.

Ron didn't close his eyes or cower. "I love you, Hermione," he whispered.

"Oculus Caecus!" the man shouted.

Ron screeched as a searing pain stung his eyes. It felt as if his eyeballs were melting right into their sockets. He spasmed as the pain amplified, then just as quickly faded.

Ron opened his eyes but could barely see more than a black fog. He blinked several times but his vision didn't improve. All he could see was black smoke. The spell had practically blinded him.

Ron was hit with another spell that caused him to collapse to his knees. He felt himself being lifted into the air. He once again swung his limbs and hollered, but it was of no use.

Ron didn't know how long he was in the air, but before he knew it, he was dropped to the floor. His feet suddenly felt glued to the floor. Ron tried to stand up, but he was literally stuck in place. His arms were free, however, so he swung them around aimlessly.

Ron heard a door slam, which was his only indication that he was in a room and not outside anymore. Judging by the feel of the floor and the slight wooden smell in the air, Ron figured he was in a cabin.

The only improvement was that there was light in the room and it made the black fog in his vision not as thick. He could still barely see anything though.

Ron was able to somehow rise to a kneeling position but he was swiftly knocked down as he received another blow to the head.

He groaned, swinging his arms, but couldn't come into contact with anything.

"Show yourself!" Ron demanded. He whipped his head around the smoky blackness but couldn't see anything. His heart raced as every muscle in his body throbbed. He was still alive so he had to keep fighting.

"ARRHHH!" Ron screamed as he felt something fiery hit his back. The sensation touched him again as Ron tried, but failed, to move away. He felt around his jeans again for his wand.

"No need," said a deep voice. "I've got it."

"I'm sure he won't need these either. Incarcerous!"

Ron's arms slammed together behind his back and became bound. The more he struggled against the ropes, the tighter they became.

It was obvious now that the men planned to torture him. Ron tried to remember everything he had learned about what to do from a bound position, but nothing would work in this situation. He was completely powerless.

"What the fuck do you want?" Ron shouted. "Where's Harry?"

"He's in the next room," a man said very close to his ear. "Can't you hear him?"

Ron moved away, trying to pry himself off the floor, but he stopped when he heard a horrifying shriek that belonged to Harry. It was high-pitched and piercing, almost like Harry was being mutilated.

"NO - NO! HARRY! HARRY!" Ron screamed. He pulled against the ropes but they only constricted more; Ron fought against his bind to the floor, but he couldn't move. Harry's cries echoed around the room, growing stronger every second.

Ron began to convulse and he felt nausea in his stomach and frustrated tears in his eyes. "Let him go! Let him go!"

"Now why would we do that, darling?" the voice by Ron's ear asked. His breath was hot and putrid. "We've been after him for ages now."

Harry screamed again; Ron screamed with him. Ron had to do something before they killed him.

"NO! Fucking stop it! Let him go!" he shouted. "Youâ€¢ you don't want him!"

"We don't?" the other man asked. He sounded further away but Ron could tell that he was still close by. "Why is that?"

Ron didn't know what to say.

"I asked you a question!" the man barked. Ron was hit hard across the face again. He pathetically fell to the floor. He wanted to be strong and show them that he wasn't afraid, but the truth was that Ron didn't have his wand, his hands were tied, his legs were bound, and he was practically blind. He had no idea where he was or who he was with. Ron was defenseless and felt nothing but terror and confusion.

He was most likely seconds away from hearing his best mate's last torturous scream, but Ron had nothing to help him with. He hadn't even felt this powerless when Bellatrix had tortured Hermione. It couldn't matter though. There was no way in hell that Ron could give up without trying everything.

"B-because he doesn't have anything!" Ron finally shouted. Harry began screaming again. "Stop it! You have to STOP this! Justâ€¢whatever you want, take it from me! Let him go and take me instead!"

"Take you instead?" the person closest to him asked. He wrenched Ron's head back by his hair then slowly kissed his neck.

Ron recoiled, retching as the man's mouth burned him.

"Stop teasing him," the other man said dully. "You know he's not our target."

"Neither is Harry!" Ron screamed. Harry let out another horrible shriek. Ron wasn't doing enough. He had to try a different tactic. "Fucking let him go or you'll regret it!"

"We'll regret it?"

"Yes! If you keep hurting him then I will find a way out of these binds and rip each of you apart," Ron said wildly. "I fucking swear to Merlin I will if you don't let him go!"

Ron quickly received another hit, falling to his side. The foot-binding spell was apparently taken off him because he could suddenly move, but before Ron could stand, he was slammed to his stomach. One of the wizards straddled him.

Ron began to panic again as his heart skipped a beat. "Get the fuck off of me!"

The wizard leaned down to his ear. Ron could tell by his breath that it was the one who'd been closest to him earlier. "I'll only

tell you this once: we don't want you and we honestly don't want Potter â€" yet. My associates and I have come here for something else. If you're a good little boy," he said, kissing Ron's neck again, "then we might let you both live."

The wizard got off Ron, then lifted him. In an instant, Ron was in a kneeling position and his ankles were bound to the floor; he felt like a shackled dragon.

The room went quiet. Ron could feel their eyes on him. He bit his lip, telling himself to stop trembling and whimpering so much. They were looking for him to be weak and he was. The binds were so tight that Ron's feet and hands started going numb. His back felt like it was on fire, his head and stomach pounded, and he felt horribly queasy because there was a bit of the wizard's saliva on his neck.

They already had his body and most of his mind, but Ron couldn't let them take his will as well. He refused to give them everything.

Ron strained his ear to hear Harry, but all he heard were sobs. He wasn't sure if they were Harry's or his own though. Ron thought about everything he had gone through the past few days. Things had been getting so much better. Ron had been improving and was finding himself again. He couldn't believe that it might end like this. He might never get the chance to show his family George's letter, or invite Hermione to the formal party, or graduate with Harry from Lambrick.

Conor had been right: it was strange how easily and how much things could change.

Someone kneeled in front of Ron, taking him out of his thoughts. He didn't recoil this time. In fact, he strained to see the person, but all he could make out was a dark outline of a body.

"Now," the deep voice calmly said. "Are you going to cooperate or should I give my associate a few moments alone with you to teach you how to be a good boy first?"

Ron snorted then hawked spit in the person's face. "Go to hell!"

Ron received a harsh punch to the stomach. He bent over, inhaling sharply as all the wind was knocked out of him.

The man in front of Ron grabbed him by the jaw, tugging him forward. It was strange how Ron could barely see but he could practically taste the sweat from the bloke's face. He could smell his must, hear him panting, and even feel his body heat. Not being able to see was somehow strengthening his other senses.

"Is that really how you want to behave when your friend is in the other room?"

Ron didn't know what to do. He knew that it probably wasn't smart to cooperate with the men, but if he at least heard them out, then it would give him time to figure out how to get to Harry.

Ron tried to keep his mind from thinking as to why he couldn't hear him anymore.

"Just tell me what you want," Ron said through gritted teeth.

The man let his jaw go, then backed up.

"I'm going to ask you one simple question," the man said. "Where is the Auror Phillip Smith?"

"W-who?" Ron asked.

The man behind Ron hit him upside the head. "Don't give us that shit! We're in Lambrick Academy. There's no way you don't know who he is!"

Ron couldn't believe what he was hearing. Out of all the things he'd thought the men would want, Mr. Smith had never once crossed his mind.

"I don't know," he said.

"Wrong answer - Coarto Maxima!"

Ron suddenly gave a holler as he felt his entire body tightly compress. All his muscles felt as if they were imploding while his chest and stomach caved in.

The man took the spell off, stomping his foot. "Tell us!"

"I don't know!" Ron screamed. Even if he wanted to tell them, he honestly had no idea where Phillip was.

"Then tell us about the protection spell used on Lambrick's Headquarters!" the man behind Ron demanded.

Ron actually knew the answer to that. During their tour of the building, Phillip had taught them how to lock all the windows and doors with a very powerful security charm.

Ron's mind went in a hundred different directions as his heart raced.

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere," the wizard in front of Ron said. "Tell us about the taps. Tell us how to get to Phillip Smith!"

"I-I don't know," Ron said thickly. "I'm just a trainee here."

"Wrong answer!"

The wizard used the horrible spell on him again, but Ron tried harder not to react. He wondered if this was what Harry had gone through earlier and whether he had told and survived or had been killed.

"Tell us how to get to Phillip Smith and inside Headquarters!"

The spell was once again lifted from him. Ron wheezed, gulping down air.

He weighed his options: he could tell, hoping that someone would discover the men before they reached the building, or he could take his chances and stay silent. The wizards were most likely former Death Eaters wanting to kill Phillip while taking all the information he had regarding the other Ministry Aurors from Headquarters.

That would mean that if they did succeed, more lives would be put in danger. Ron didn't know what to do; he was lost.

Abruptly, the wizard behind him yanked on his hair, bringing Ron's ear right to the man's lips. "Tell us about the charm or we'll kill Potter."

"NOOO!" Ron screamed, trying and failing to get out of his binds.

"Then tell us what we want!"

Ron heard the other wizard walk away then knock on something that was most likely a door. "Get ready!"

"No â€“ no - please, okay, okay!" Ron cried. "I'll tell you. Just don't kill him. Don't hurt him anymore."

"You'll tell us where Smith is?"

"YES!"

"And how to get into Lambrick!"

"Yes - yes, I'll tell you! Just let him go!"

Ron knew that he had no business trusting them but he wouldn't have been able to live with himself if he let Harry die. He'd already been through something like that once; Ron didn't know if he could do it again. Harry was his best mate in the whole world. He was like â€“ no, he was a brother to him, and the person Ron felt the most connected to and open with. They'd been best friends since the day they met, and Harry had always been someone Ron looked up to - no matter how much Ron sometimes felt annoyed, jealous, or angry in regards to him.

"O-okay," Ron panted.

Nothing was tighter than Ron's friendship with Harry, and throughout their seven years of friendship, they had fought through everything together and had somehow made it through.

Ron couldn't think of a better Auror partner than Harry. The bloke was just such a good person and was so incredibly strong. Harry had fought against evil all his life and never gave up. Harry always made Ron want to be a better person and had taught him what it meant to persevere.

Ron suddenly realized what was happening: the Death Eaters wanted what he and Harry had been working so hard to protect; they wanted to destroy and kill the good that was left in their world; the men wanted to take away the one thing that Ron and Harry had been holding on to from the very beginning: hope.

If Ron told them what they wanted, then he might have been able to save Harry: his mate; his sister's boyfriend; his girlfriend's best friend; his family's dark-haired Weasley, and their world's savior.

Ron could tell and possibly save one person.

If he made this decision, however, he would also be jeopardizing the lives of many others. Ron would be giving darkness the fuel it needed to begin a new reign of terror then everything Harry stood for and had scarified would be in vein.

Harry had already died for their world once, but if Ron told, then he would be killing everything Harry had protected.

"Well?" the wizard asked.

Ron had a choice: he could save the person he'd planned on asking to be the best man at his wedding someday, or he could do the right thing for the greater good.

Ron felt his entire world collapse as he came to terms with what had to be done. He couldn't believe it but it was his only option. Some things were more important and had greater significance than what was happening in Ron's world or what he wanted. Sometimes, sacrifices had to be made. That was something he'd discovered as a kid when he first learned to play chess; it was a rule Ron had lived by ever since.

Even though Ron couldn't see, he looked up to where he thought the man was in front of him. "Iâ€¢I don't know where Phillip is or how to get into Lambrick."

"You're a liar!" the man behind him yelled.

"You do realize that there's a bounty on Potter's head, don't you?"

Ron shut his eyes tightly as his entire body froze. He tried to think of a way out of this. He desperately wanted to save Harry, but he was tied down and couldn't see. He couldn't approach this situation with new eyes. All Ron had was a decision - a choice between what to save and what to sacrifice.

Ron thought about Harry but then thought about all the letters in each of his campmate's side tables. There were addresses from parents, siblings, friends, and girlfriends scattered in all of their bedrooms. He had to weigh in their lives too. Ron also needed to consider the letters in his own room. There were addresses from his home, brothers, and Hermione. They could find out where she was at Hogwartsâ€¢or Ginny for that matter.

The thought pushed roughly against Ron's chest; his decision became clear.

He licked his lips, swallowing hard. "I don't know where Phillip Smith is or how to get into Lambrick."

"Is that really your answer?"

"Yes," Ron said in a stronger voice, though he felt disgusted with himself.

The wizard walked away while the other got up as well, letting Ron go. Ron hung his head in defeat, hating himself and what he had done. He began to sob as he heard a door open.

Ron had no idea if Ginny or Hermione would ever forgive him. He didn't know if his family, their mates, or the whole bloody wizarding world would come to understand why he had chosen what he did.

All Ron knew was that his life would never be the same. He fought against his binds and started to scream, shake, and wail as the awareness of his decision took him over. He had let Harry die. To uphold what they believed in, Ron had sacrificed his very best mate. It was everything Ron had feared having to do since he was eleven. Panic and pain enveloped him.

It seemed as if only minutes ago they had been laughing and taking the piss out of each other. Ron could never be that way with anyone else. He would never feel that kind of relaxed happiness again.

"I'm s-so sorry," Ron quietly cried. "Please forgive me, Harry. Please know that I love you," he sobbed, "and that I'm so fucking sorry."

Ron had no idea if Harry could hear him but he at least hoped that Harry could feel his words somehow. This could've been the last time Ron ever got to speak to Harry in some way while they were both alive.

At the word 'alive', Ron considered his own fate. He had no reason to believe that he wouldn't be slain next. The only thing Ron could wish for now was that Harry would understand Ron's reason for not cooperating. Ron wasn't sure if he could die knowing that Harry hated him.

He heard footsteps coming toward him. Though Ron's hands were weak, he still had enough energy left to ball his fists. Even if this was the end, Ron would always keep fighting.

He was a bit surprised when he was taken out of his ankle binds and hoisted into the air. Ron was so unbelievably drained and sore that he could barely move, but he still tried to wriggle away. He heard another door open; the fresh cold air told him that he was outside again.

Ron grunted, moving his head from side to side. The men holding him were completely silent.

"Where are you taking me?" Ron demanded.

They didn't respond.

After a few minutes, Ron was once again dropped to the ground, but he could tell that he was still outside.

Ron tried to scurry to his feet, but it was difficult considering that his hands were still bound.

"Hold on, Weasley," a familiar voice said.

Ron instantly froze. "M-Mr. Lewis? HELP! These Death Eaters are—"

"— I know, Weasley," Alan said calmly. "Is he severely hurt?"

"What?" Ron asked.

"It was more of a mental beating than anything else with this one," the man who had kissed his neck said.

"All right," Alan said. "Thank you for your help tonight."

"Of course," the other man said.

"W-what the fuck?" Ron asked in total bewilderment. Alan had always been tough, but Ron had never taken him to be a Death Eater.

Ron realized that his only chance of survival would be to run. He fought to his feet but was quickly grabbed.

"No — not again!" he screamed.

"Weasley!" Alan said, grasping his upper arms. "Weasley, just calm down. It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to untie you and fix your eyes."

"No! Don't touch me!" Ron yelled as he fought to get away.

"Weasley â€œ RON!" Alan said loudly.

For whatever reason, hearing Alan say his name calmed him. It'd been so long since someone had called him by his name, and it actually felt good to hear.

"Sir?" he sobbed.

"Yes, you're safe," Alan said, rubbing his arm. "I'm going to fix your eyes first, okay?"

"O-okay."

"Just close your eyes and stay still."

Ron obeyed then felt Alan tap his head with the tip of his wand. The horrible sting returned as his eyes once again burned. Ron gave a holler but the pain didn't last.

He felt Alan's fingertips massage his eyelids. "All right, slowly open your eyes."

Ron was scared but he did as he was told and gradually raised his eyelids. The first thing he saw was Alan's grey eyes and the tall skinny trees behind him. Ron couldn't believe that his vision was completely restored.

He peered around his surroundings. He was somewhere in the field at Lambrick.

"S-sir?" Ron asked again.

"I know," Alan said with a nod. "I'll explain everything but first I need to untie you." He pointed his wand at Ron's wrists and the ropes loosened.

As soon as Ron was free, he lifted his hand to punch Alan, but Alan was too fast for him.

"Enough, Weasley!" he said, holding firmly onto his wrist. "It's over; you can stop fighting." He pulled something out of his back pocket then pushed it against Ron's chest. It was Ron's wand.

"Here -- take this and know that I'm not lying. If I wanted to kill you, I wouldn't give this back to you."

Ron held his wand tightly in his hand but didn't take his eyes off of Alan. He was incredibly on edge and totally confused, but somehow Ron believed Alan's words. Even if Alan was a bastard, he wasn't stupid. He'd never willingly give Ron an advantage.

"Tell me what the hell is going on, sir," Ron said darkly.

"I will once we join the others," Alan said.

"O-others?"

"Just follow me," Alan said, holding on to Ron's upper arm.

Ron was so out of it that he simply let Alan lead him. He honestly couldn't think of anything else to do. As they got closer to the main practice field, Ron began to hear familiar voices.

He yanked himself out of Alan's hold then sprinted to the field. A rush of relief flourished inside of him as he saw all of his campmates alive and okay. Some were sitting in the grass while others were pacing. He saw Conor looking mad and shaken, Ben's face was rather bloody, and Ron was surprised to see Letty sobbing.

However, everything faded away as he saw a dark-haired bloke in glasses leaning against a tree.

It was Harry - alive.

"Harry!" Ron said loudly. Harry looked up and the two ran toward each other.

Ron didn't know what to do once Harry was right in front of him. He was pale, dirty, and his lip was cut. There was a tan stain on his black jumper that Ron knew was puke, and there were leaves sticking out of his hair. In spite of Harry's horrible state though, he was alive.

It didn't seem real to Ron. Only moments ago he had thought that he would never see his best mate again. Ron had watched him being dragged away and had heard his agonizing screams repeatedly. He had been so sure that he'd gotten Harry killed, yet he was, standing right in front of him.

Ron's hands itched to take hold of him. He didn't know whether to hug Harry or shake him to find out if he was real. Everything Ron had experienced in the cabin, along with the pain, confusion, and trauma he had endured, collapsed on top of him.

"Iâ€œ;I thought you were dead, Harry," Ron wheezed. It was the only thing he could say that, in some way, summed up everything that had happened.

Harry's bottom lip trembled. He slowly reached out, touching Ron's arm. "They told me that they were going to kill you, Ron."

Ron nodded, gripping Harry's hand very tightly. "They told me the same thing."

They simply gazed at each other, telling themselves with their eyes what their words and bodies couldn't at the moment. Ron didn't let go of him; Harry didn't try to pull away.

It didn't matter where they were or who was watching; Ron needed this moment with his best mate. He would curse anyone who tried to break them up.

"All right, trainees!" Alan said. "I know you lot are confused, exhausted, and probably want to see the nurse, but your training night isn't over. Gather yourselves and join me and Richard."

Ron and Harry didn't move right away. It was only when Harry nodded that Ron felt it was okay to let him go. The two walked over to where Alan and Richard were standing.

Ron still felt on edge so he kept his wand firmly in hand and his shoulder touching Harry's. He would be prepared this time for an ambush.

"If you hear your name, stand next to Alan," Richard said. "Turner, Grace, Potter, Clark, Alden, Hill, and Weasley."

Ron and Harry stayed shoulder-to-shoulder as they stood with the others by Alan. Ron didn't know if he was in trouble or not. His group wasn't even half the size of the other.

"Now, if you're not standing next to Alan," Richard said, "it's because you did not pass tonight's hostage simulation. The objective was to—"

"—hold on," Conor said, almost out of breath, "you mean all this was a test?"

"Yes, Neary," Alan said. "If you had let Richard finish then he would've told you that tonight marked the beginning of your survival training during a hostage situation."

Ron gaped at his instructors. He couldn't believe that they had purposely put them through something so horrible and terrifying. Ron had been forced to make the toughest and most painful decision of his life — and, apparently, it'd been for nothing.

"So what was all that talk about a damn physical?" Ben rudely asked.

"Trainees!" Richard said loudly. "None of you will get anything answered if you don't shut up and let us explain. No, Harris, there was never any physical. We told you that to bring you to the capturing site in pairs. You had to be caught off-guard for this to work."

"You see trainees," Alan said, "this is a very difficult and crucial part of your training. As Aurors, you won't always be the one doing the capturing. Sometimes, unfortunately, you'll be the one detained. It's vital that you lot know how to handle yourselves in a hostage situation."

"But those wizards, sir," Olivia said in a nasally voice. She was incredible pale and her eyes were extremely puffy.

"They were Aurors, Young. I can assure you that none of you were in any real danger," Alan said.

"The force they used was certainly real, sir," Olivia said.

"Yes, it was," Alan said. "And it's supposed to be. Trainees, every single one of the Aurors helping with the simulation has had experience in hostage situations. The way they behaved and treated you was taken from a real encounter."

Ron shivered as he thought about the bloke who'd kissed his neck. He didn't know that enduring things like that would be a part of the job description.

"That brings us back to tonight's drill," Richard said. "The objective was to not reveal Phillip's whereabouts or the security taps. Your goal was to—"

"—let the person in the next room die?" Harry asked loudly.

"To make sacrifices," Richard said coolly. "While on missions as an Auror, you'll always have to remember that one life is never

worth the mission or jeopardizing the safety of an entire group. I know that fact is cruel and unfair, but it's the reality."

"If you're not standing next to me," Alan said, "that means you gave up and gave in to the Aurors demands. That's unacceptable in our profession. Even if it means giving up your life or the life of a colleague, you never negotiate with dark wizards. From tonight on, you'll learn how to properly adapt in hostage situations."

Ron looked at his small group. Out of the twenty-three of them, only seven had sacrificed the person in the next room. Ron didn't feel as if he should've been proud that he was in the minority. People like Jack and Michelle surrounded him while Olivia and Conor were in the other group. Ron certainly didn't feel as if he'd 'passed' anything. He then turned his focus to Harry; because they were standing next to each other, that meant that Harry had given up Ron's life too. Knowing that made Ron feel even more nauseous than he already had.

"Now Alan and I know how difficult tonight was for all of you," Richard said gravely. "This is real, ladies and gentlemen. Expect brutality and pain through this because everything about this part of training is ugly. That's why we begin during the health unit and build until the very end of your stay here. We also begin this training now so that you can talk to your mental Healers about—"

"No!" Harry yelled.

Everyone, including Ron, dropped their jaws at his sudden outburst.

Harry balled his fists, glaring right at the instructors. "How can all of this be a part of our training? You tortured people!"

"No one was tortured tonight, Potter," Richard said. "The spells used on all of you are spells you'll learn further along in your training."

"B-but the screaming," Ron said. "I heard—I heard someone mutilating Harry."

Harry shook his head. "I—I wasn't mutilated. I thought those screams were coming from you."

"I heard them too," Letty said, "but it was Conor's voice."

"Richard and I are going to go over everything you lot encountered in full detail, but just know for now that the sounds you all heard were created by a person using the Voice Echoing Charm," Alan explained. "Once again, we—"

"—this is bullshit!" Harry yelled again, stomping his foot. "You—you can't do this to us! You can't have us believing that our mates are being tortured to see who's strong enough to keep their mouths shut."

"Potter," Richard warned. "Because this is the first night and I understand how daunting all of this is, I'm being patient, however, you will not disrupt while myself or Alan is speaking again."

Harry merely rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry, sir, but it's hard to respect either of you when you can casually stand here and tell us that what happened tonight was only a simple simulation."

"Potter!"

"No â€“ let him speak," Alan said, touching Richard's arm. "Go on, Potter."

Ron looked between Alan and Harry. He bounced on the heels of his feet, feeling anxious. Everything Harry was saying was what Ron was thinking; he simply didn't have Harry's energy to say them.

Harry let out a breath. "What I'm trying to say, sir," he said in a calmer voice, "is that this goes beyond a simple drill. I don't think it's right."

"And why is that?" Alan asked. "Do you not think this kind of thing happens in real life?"

"No, I certainly do know that this happens in real life," Harry said. "It's why I don't think it's fair that you just threw this at us. It's not something you can just pass or fail or expect someone to get over."

"I completely agree with you, Potter. There's nothing about being captured and beaten that's 'fair', but it comes with the job," Alan said, "It's why you and your campmates will learn and practice with this numerous times."

"It's not right," Harry said, shaking his head. "You don't know what you're doing."

"Excuse me, Potter?" Alan asked, taking a step toward him. "I'm already an Auror. You've only just begun your second half of training."

"That doesn't bloody matter!" Harry screamed at him. "You have no idea how much responsibility it requires to accept the fact that someone's life was lost because of you. You - youâ€;" he backed up, snatching his glasses off and rubbing his face.

Ron wanted to do something for him. He could practically feel how badly Harry was hurting. Harry was usually a master at containing his feelings, so when he did lose it, it was incredibly hard to watch.

"The anger and betrayal that you and probably everyone in this field feels tonight is something you'll have to deal with because this part of your training is essential," Richard said. "This is Lambrick Academy; at this institution we believe in exposing you lot to all parts of the Auror profession â€“ including the dark and cruel portions."

Richard focused solely on Harry. "Potter, this issue is something you'll have to cope with as an Auror, so you should learn to accept it."

Harry stopped rubbing his face and glared at Richard. Ron had seen Harry angry on several occasions, but it was rare to see this much aggression in his features.

"This issue, sir, is something I've been coping with and accepting all of my life," Harry said in an intense yet shaky voice. "Tonight wasn't the first time I've thought that I'd lose my friend because of a decision I'd made. That feeling and responsibility isn't something that should be played with, sir."

Harry looked back at Ron for a moment, then walked away from the group. Ron wasn't sure of what to do, but before he knew it, his legs started moving.

"Let him go, Weasley," Richard said.

Ron shook his head. "No," was all he said.

He ran after Harry, not caring about where his defiance would lead.

"Harry! Slow down!" Ron said as he caught up to Harry. "We should go back."

Harry just kept walking to Headquarters. "I fucking can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I have to go to the bloody Ministry tonight for another bloody interview! It's why they let me walk off."

Harry snatched open the door to the main building and the two returned to the Ruins.

Ron's jaw dropped. "Are you taking the piss? Now? After everything that's happened? Can't you just say no?"

"Of course I can't bloody say no!" Harry snapped. "I got the stupid letter today at lunch. All day Richard's tried to get me out of it, but it's someone from the Prophet. I have to do it. Brian is escorting me."

"Bloody hell. I - I'm really sorry, Harry," Ron said, opening their bedroom door for him.

Harry yanked off his clothes, quickly changing into a dry kit. "Me too. I'm fucking tired and hungry and my fucking head is fucking killing me! I need to go see the nurse. It doesn't matter though. Nothing I want ever bloody matters!"

He flopped on his bed, rocking a little.

Ron sat next to him. Harry was practically smoking with anger and emotion. "Mate!"

"You shouldn't even been in here with me, Ron," Harry said, not looking at him. "Richard and Alan are explaining the details. You should be there to hear them."

"I don't give a shit right now," Ron said. "I don't want to leave you unless I have to."

Harry still didn't look at him. He merely picked at the mud on his palms. "Well, I don't think the trainers will care about your loyalty to me."

There was coldness in Harry's tone that Ron hadn't expected.

"Are you mad at me?" Ron asked.

"Why would I be mad at you?" Harry asked.

Ron rubbed his neck, shrugging. "I dunno. I mean we were in the same group tonight, Harry!" He trailed off, unable to finish his sentence.

Harry finally turned to him. "Of course I'm not mad at you for that, Ron. I didn't save you either."

"Then why aren't you really talking to me?" Ron asked. "Don't tell me it's because of the interview either. I know it's more than that. You were so angry at Richard and Alan."

"And you weren't?" Harry asked.

"I was," Ron said, "but not in the same way that you were. I know that look you had, Harry. Just bloody talk to me. I thought our friendship was over tonight."

Ron's words must've reached Harry because his demeanor finally changed. His expression softened as he let out an unsteady breath.

"I got beat on, Ron," Harry said. "And they used some horrible spells on me."

"The same thing happened to me, mate," Ron said quietly. "I was tied up. I couldn't see, and one of the Aurors was all over me. I hated it."

"I still hate it," Harry said. He sighed. "Ron, I've never liked all the bloody labels people give me about how strong and powerful I am. I'm not this bloody 'chosen' machine who can just do everything all the time."

"I know that, Harry," Ron said.

Harry nodded. "But even so, I've always tried to remind myself that I can at least do some things, and that I can make a difference and be strong when I need to be."

"You do, mate."

"Not tonight," Harry said gently. "Tonight was the first time in a long time that I remembered just how powerless and weak I could be."

It was Ron's turn to look away. "I felt that way too. I couldn't move or do anything at all to help you."

"I'm not talking about that kind of weakness, Ron," Harry said. "I mean, I - I had to defeat Voldemort. I sacrificed everything to do it, but even though he's dead, I still found myself powerless against evil tonight and I had to sacrifice you. You have no idea what that felt like and how fucking gutted it made me feel."

Harry got up and began pacing the room. "No matter what I do, someone I care about will have to be sacrificed. Iâ€¢I thought I got you killed, Ron. Everything between us and with Hermione, Ginny, and your family was just gone in a split second and I had no control."

He kicked the metal railing of Ron's bed. "I still don't have a fucking life of my own that I can control. That's what angers me, Ron, and it's what Alan and Richard will never bloody understand. When will all the lives of the people who died in the war start to mean something?"

Ron shot up from the bed. He grabbed Harry's arms, shaking him a little. It killed Ron to see Harry so doubtful and in such agony. Ron was in pain too. He was physically hurt, mentally frozen, and emotionally drained, but this time he'd have to be the strong one. It didn't matter how scared, angry, or confused Ron was; Harry was still alive and this time Ron would save him â€" no matter what.

"Oi, don't ever fucking talk like that," Ron said intensely. "All those lives mean something now, you know that. I may not have been 'chosen', but I stood by you and I saw what all that shit did to you. I get it, Harry, and tonight I felt it. I made the hardest decision of my life, but I survived it. So did you."

Ron finally let him go. "And you know was else I think? I reckon that whoever created the simulation tonight chose us to pair up because they wanted to see how we would react. They wanted to know if we could look past our friendship."

"I thought the same thing," Harry said. "There's no way someone wouldn't capitalize on an opportunity to test us like this."

"But it didn't even bloody matter because we did do the right thing," Ron said. "We showed every fucker here that we could be mates and do the right thing at the same time. It bloody hurt so fucking much to let you go, Harry, and I honestly hated myself for doing it. I'm realizing now though that being in that group of seven should mean something because we were strong enough to

act like the Aurors that we'll need to be. Can't you see that, mate?"

Harry rubbed his eyes but he wasn't able to keep his tears away. "I guess. It's just too bloody much right now. I can't even give myself time to take all this in because I have to go."

"I know, mate," Ron said, patting Harry's arm. Ron wanted to break down himself but he couldn't. "Remember during my panic attack, when you kept telling me that it wasn't real? Well, I'm telling you now that even though tonight was awful, it wasn't real. We're both still here, Harry."

Harry sniffled, rubbing under his nose with the back of his sleeve. "Blimey, Ron - how are you being so bloody smart and insightful right now?"

Ron smiled a little. "I've got this mate who teaches me things. Granted, he can't see three paces in front of him, but-

"- bugger off," Harry said, lightly pushing him away. He sniffled again and rubbed his eyes, but this time he couldn't control himself. Harry began to cry - and this time Ron was sure that the sobs belonged to him. "I'm sorry. I'm never like this."

Watching Harry cry seemed almost unnatural to Ron. He was the bravest person Ron knew and it still amazed him how vulnerable Harry could be. He was such a hero, but Ron knew firsthand that even saviors needed a moment to be normal.

"I know you're not, Harry. You just need a second." Ron pulled Harry into a hug. He didn't speak as Harry let his grief out right on Ron's shoulder.

Ron hated to see Harry in so much pain but he was actually thankful for it. After believing for a time that he would never see Harry again, Ron would gladly take his sorrow.

The room was quiet for several minutes except for Harry's sobs.

He eventually stopped though and continued getting ready.

"I'll wait for you at the shower cabin," Ron said.

Harry pulled on his cloak. His eyes were puffy but at least they were dry. "I'll probably be gone awhile."

"I don't care," Ron said with a shrug. "Just go there, yeah?"

Harry gave him a once-over but nodded. "All right. I should probably go."

"And I should probably find Alan or Richard," Ron said grimly.

The two left Headquarters and walked to the trail. Harry let out a breath. "I'll see you, yeah?"

"I'll be there, Harry," Ron said.

Harry looked at him anxiously. "Ronâ€¢I don'tâ€¢"

"Don't worry about it," Ron said. "Anytime."

Harry just kept looking at him, but nodded. "Okay. Well, um, I'll see you." He gave Ron a wave then started walking up the hill and toward the black gates.

Ron merely stared after him, feeling in awe of everything that was happening.

Tonight should have destroyed him, but somehow Ron was standing tall.

Ron had survived.

* * *

**** As Ronpert said beautifully in the CoS movie: "Heart of a lion this one." :) Well, I hope you all enjoyed this. Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 48*: What if

Thank you all for the lovely reviews!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron touched down to the grass after his tenth flying lap. He dropped his broom before placing his hands on his knees to catch his breath, wheezing as he rubbed the stitches in his side and trying not to lose balance.

Richard casually walked over to him. "You were very consistent throughout those ten laps."

"Yes, sir," Ron breathed.

"Do you know what I want you to do now?"

Ron picked up his broom, standing up straight. "Yes, sir. You want me to be consistent throughout my next set of laps."

"Correct, Weasley," Richard said, "but not before you have another go around the trail, of course. It's your last day so

really impress me. Show me that your insubordination has taught you something."

"Yes, sir. Right away." Ron swung his broom over his shoulders then ran back to the trail to begin his supplement laps.

It'd been a week since the first horrific night of hostage survival training; every morning since then Ron had run and flown an additional five laps. It was his punishment for not following Richard's order and going after Harry instead. While the extra drills were strenuous and sometimes left him dizzy, Ron didn't regret telling Richard 'no'. It helped that he was starting to see and feel a real change in his physical fitness. Even if the task was difficult, Ron was always able to complete his additional laps, and his speed and power seemed to improve a little more each day. Being insubordinate wasn't something he strived for, but at least the act was putting Ron in the best shape of his life.

After his laps and a round of dueling with Brian, Ron hurried to the showers and washed his sweaty, reeking body as fast as he could. He was always the last person to complete the drill, so he rarely got a chance to eat anything before class.

By the time Ron was back in his room and getting his coursework together, he knew that, once again, he'd have to hold out until dinner to eat. Ron sat on his bed, running his fingers through his damp hair. "Come on, Ron," he said to himself aloud. "It's your last day of this." He took several deep breaths, telling himself repeatedly that he would be fine.

The door opened. "Ron?"

"Hmm?"

"Thought I'd find you in here," Harry said. He walked over and sat next to him. "Why haven't you come to breakfast?"

"I just got changed a minute ago," Ron said. "I have no time to eat again."

Harry frowned, looking guilty. He'd only received a nasty bollocking from Richard and Alan and two days of extra drills.

"Ron!"

"Don't start that again, mate," Ron warned.

"I'm sorry," Harry said anyway.

"Do I need to start throwing punches? I've told you a hundred times not to be sorry," Ron said. "I ran after you because I wanted to, and I'd do it again. The extra laps are okay, and I'm really not that hungry."

Harry snorted. "Ron, you're always hungry."

"Things can change."

"Not that."

"Well it doesn't really matter either way, does it?" Ron said.
"At least I didn't get written up this time."

"That's true," Harry said. "I guess you're right, but I brought you this anyway." He pulled a couple of sandwiches and a banana from his school bag.

Ron's eyes widened. "You took this?" Harry nodded. "You could get in serious trouble, Harry."

Harry only shrugged. "Over the years at the Dursleys, I learned how to sneak food fairly well. Besides, getting caught doesn't matter. You have to eat, Ron. Take it."

"Cheers," Ron said. His stomach growled loudly the second he touched his breakfast. He and Harry both laughed.

"I reckon you're more hungry than you thought, eh?" Harry asked.

"You know me too well," Ron said, taking a huge bite of his sandwich.

"Better than I'd like to sometimes." Harry stood up. "I'll meet you in class."

"Wait â€“ Harry," Ron said.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for this. I needed it."

"I know you did, mate," Harry said. He gave him a nod before leaving the room.

Ron grinned while he finished his breakfast. He felt good but it had little to do with curing his hunger. He and Harry had always been close, but something had grown stronger between them since they'd sacrificed each other. Ron couldn't explain why but somehow the simulation had helped them understand each other better, and Ron had never appreciated Harry more in his life.

During health class, Ron tried to put all of his focus into Ms. Yule's lesson. Paying attention and understanding the material was getting easier (thanks to Olivia and the supplemental work) but Ron still couldn't help but to feel distracted. He always found himself thinking heavily about Hermione in health class. Ron always wanted to know what she was doing and if she was giving herself moments to relax. He also hoped that Hermione was looking after Ginny and making sure that she was paying attention. If Ginny was anything like him during class time, then she would need someone constantly nudging her awake.

"So," Ms. Yule said, breaking Ron out of his thoughts. "Does anyone have an idea of what would work best against this type of curse?"

Ron automatically looked at Olivia, who was sitting next to him, but for once she didn't appear to know the answer. He then glanced around the room; nobody raised their hands.

Ms. Yule sighed, not looking pleased. "This is something you'll have to know, trainees. Dark wizards are notorious for leaving powerful, poisonous plants around their hideaways to trap Aurors. Using the correct aid will be vital to completing the mission as well as ensuring a speedy recovery."

Ron read over the board and considered everything Ms. Yule had told them about the cursed plants and the rashes they caused. He had an idea of what the answer was, but he didn't want to sound like a tit if he was wrong. Ron kept looking around the room until a soft, loving voice told him to be brave and give it a go. He slowly raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Weasley?"

Ron cleared his throat. "W-well, umâ€¢ Aloe Vera is used quite often for rashes, but since these are cursed plants that also cause horrible sickness and body contortions, you'll need something stronger but within the same family. Adding a bit of Zinto Root to the Aloe to create Aloe Septvera would probably work best."

"Blimey, Ron," Conor said.

"What?" Ron asked. He looked around the room again; everyone was gawking at him as if he'd just revealed that he had both sets of sex organs or something. Ron blushed horribly, wishing that he'd kept his mouth shut.

"Um, that's just a guess thoughâ€¢"

"No â€" no, Mr. Weasley," Ms. Yule said quite excitedly. "Aloe Septvera is the exact remedy you would want to use, and you gave a phenomenal analysis. Do you have experience using the aid?"

Ron felt his blush reach his neck. "Sort of. My brother uses Aloe Septvera as an ingredient in one of his stronger variants of Spray On Rash so the buyer doesn't get sick if too much is used at once." Harry snickered softly next to him; a few other people in the class laughed as well.

Ms. Yule gave him a delicate smile, chuckling a little herself. "That's very clever of your brother, Mr. Weasley. Great work."

"Thank you, Ms. Yule," Ron said, feeling rather proud of himself.

"All right, as your classmate explained to youâ€¢"

As everyone took notes over what he had explained about Aloe Septvera, Ron couldn't help but to feel a little smug. He mentally thanked Hermione for giving him the courage to raise his hand, and George for taking the time over the summer to show him how he created his products.

"I'm very proud of your performance, Mr. Weasley," Ms. Yule said after she had dismissed their class. Her words made Ron feel so good, though he tried not to show it too much.

"It really is because of my brother that I knew that answer."

"Actually, it's because you were able to understand the function of the remedy that you knew the right answer," she corrected.

"It's not just today that you've impressed me, Mr. Weasley. You're really starting to tap into your potential, which is what I'm trying to help everyone do. It's all about learning and feeling more comfortable."

"I'm certainly starting to feel more comfortable, Ms. Yule," Ron said. "I know I don't talk much but I really am learning."

"I can see that, Mr. Weasley," she said. "Keep up the good work."

"I will, Ms. Yule. See you tomorrow."

Ron left the classroom with a certain optimism that only Ms. Yule's encouraging words could produce. Though it wasn't the same praise that Mr. Low had always given him, her words meant a lot to Ron because he had to work harder and fall on his face more often to achieve a level of 'good work' from her.

While Ron caught up to his camp mates in the main field, he told himself to clear his mind â€“ even of his recent success in Ms. Yule's class. He never knew what to expect from field practice anymore. If they weren't learning how to handle themselves during hostage situations, then they were practicing ferocious spells and rough hand combat. Ron had quickly discovered that it was best to approach each night of training with his mind completely blank and his guard firmly up.

Alan blew his whistle. "All right, lot - gather it in!" Everyone staggered to their feet and panted as they jogged over to where Alan and Richard were standing. Ron and his campmates created the straightest line that they possibly could, but it was difficult considering that they'd been dueling for hours and it was incredibly dark and cold outside now.

"It's good to see you lot stepping out of your usual offensive methods of attacking," Alan said. "Variation is very important in a duel; especially if you find yourself having to track the same wizard multiple times."

"That's right," Richard said. "Though Aurors strive to complete their missions on the first go, quite often it'll take several raids. Don't think that's an excuse though. You will always fight as hard as you can to bring the person in, and you'll use every tool that you have."

"Tonight, Richard and I will teach you another powerful offensive spell that will help aid you in capturing wizards," Alan said. "Because this spell is extremely hard to block, it's preferred over other stunning spells such as Stupefy and Desamendria. So,

I'm first going to teach you lot the proper way to hold your wand for this spell."

"First," Alan said, "bend your arm while keeping your wrist straight. Then, make a tight, quick wrist flick. For the spell to work, it's essential that you keep your flick crisp and sharp. Try the movement out now."

Ron watched Alan, trying to mimic his moves exactly. He'd learned years ago that one of his biggest issues with performing spells was proper wand movement.

"The next important detail is pronunciation," Alan said. "Everything about this spell requires precision. So, repeat after me: *Flagrantia Sanguis*." Alan made them repeat the spell over and over while Richard went down the line and listened closely as they all said the spell.

"Okay, now, we're going to show you lot how the spell should be properly executed," Alan said. "Pay close attention to how I flick my wand and pronounce the incantation."

"Before we begin though, you lot must understand that this is a very powerful stunning spell and probably unlike anything you've seen or used in the past," Richard said. "In fact, its distant cousin is the *Cruciatus Curse*." Ron gaped at Richard for a moment before sharing a look of horror with Harry.

"However," Richard said loudly. "This is not an illegal spell, nor is it derived from dark magic. This is a tool Aurors use in duels all the time." He eyed them all down but focused on Harry the longest. "Do you lot understand?"

"Yes, sir," they all said.

"Then we can continue with the demonstration." Richard backed away from Alan. He let out a deep breath, rolling his shoulders back. "I'm ready."

Alan nodded. "All right. Trainees, watch me." He narrowed his eyes as if deep in concentration then flicked his wand at Richard. "*Flagrantia Sanguis!*"

Richard made a horrible noise as if choking and screaming at the same time. His entire body froze, then crumpled to the ground. He grunted and wheezed for a few moments before going limp and quiet. The hairs on the back of Ron's neck stood on end. He unconsciously shifted a little closer to Harry. It was absolutely quiet as Alan helped Richard up and patted him on the arm.

"I'm all right, Alan," Richard panted.

Ron didn't believe him. He certainly didn't look all right.

Harry raised one hand while gripping his hair with the other. "And this is something you want us to practice on each other?"

"Yes, Potter," Alan said. "You have to learn how the spell feels so you can appreciate its use. In addition, the more you're exposed to the spell, the easier it'll be to recover from it. I know this looks quite frightening and painful - it is. It hurts to receive as well as to perform."

"But it's something every Auror needs to become comfortable with," Richard said. "This is such a commonly used spell that it'll be impossible to avoid in your career, understood?"

"Yes, sir," they all said in rather shaky and apprehensive voices.

"Good," Richard said. "What I want you to do now is grab a different partner and find an open space. Alan and I are going to demonstrate the spell a few more times before we have you lot practice with it."

Ron and Harry turned to each other. Ron wanted desperately to learn the spell with him. Harry was the only person he completely trusted with something so painful and dangerous, but they both knew that they couldn't pair up. Everyone was always waiting for them to partner up so they could be told off and split up.

"Good luck, Ron," Harry said before walking away from him.

"You too," Ron said quietly. He looked around, then spotted Conor. "Do you want to be partners?" he asked, walking up to him.

"I bloody guess," Conor said. Unlike everyone else who appeared uneasy and somewhat scared, Conor simply looked angry.

"Are you all right?" Ron asked.

Conor gave him a look. "What the hell do you think, Ron? We have to torture each other, yet again." He turned away from Ron, focusing on Alan and Richard before Ron had a chance to say anything to him.

When they were finally allowed to try the spell out on each other, Ron was so nervous that he wasn't sure if he'd be able to hold his wand properly.

Conor swallowed hard. "Um, do you have a preference, mate?"

Ron certainly was not keen on feeling the power of the spell, but he didn't fancy performing it either. He ultimately decided that it would be worse to inflict terrible pain on Conor than to receive it from him.

"I'll take the defensive position first," Ron said.

"O-oh, okay," Conor said as if he'd wanted to receive first. "Let's try this out then."

Ron nodded, then started backing away from him. "I'll rush you to add a bit of pressure to this."

"Aren't we under enough pressure already?"

"We have to learn, mate." Ron was anxious but he couldn't let the nerves control him. Fear hadn't stopped him from doing the right thing and sacrificing Harry's life, so he couldn't let it overpower him with this new spell. "Ready?"

Conor nodded. "Go ahead!"

Ron took a deep breath, then rushed Conor. As he saw Conor raise his wand, Ron tried to brace himself for what would happen next; however, no amount of preparation was enough to fend off the powerful sensation that suddenly assaulted him. Ron abruptly stopped, gasping. Every part of his body seized up as he felt a fiery pain tear straight through his skin, muscles, bones, and right to his organs. Ron collapsed to his knees, choking, as the pain became so unbearable that he could hardly see. He had never felt anything so painful before.

All Ron could focus on was the damage that was being done to his body; it seemed he could hear his heartbeat right next to his ear. Ron vaguely heard, saw, and felt something near him, but it was quite some time before the pain subsided and he was able to make things out, feeling the cool breeze against his skin again.

"Ron - Ron, are you okay?" Conor asked. "Ron? Talk to me, mate!"

Ron remained still, wincing, until the sensation completely faded and his limbs loosened up. He blinked away tears. "F-fuck," was all he could say.

"I'm sorry, Ron," Conor breathed. "You okay?"

"Give me a minute," Ron panted. His brain was working properly but his body felt detached. He told his legs and arms to move and, after awhile, they did. He slowly sat up, feeling absolutely exhausted. "I reckon you performed the spell correctly."

Conor paled, looking nauseous. "I guess I did." Ron rested for a few more moments before Conor helped him up to a standing position. "Do you want to keep going?"

"We have to keep going, Conor," Ron said. He didn't want to receive the spell again or perform it on Conor but he knew it was necessary for their training. Ron kept trying to tell himself that as he constantly felt the indescribable pain or inflicted it. By the end of their training session, the majority of the trainees left limping and wheezing- Ron amongst them.

Dinner that night was uncomfortably quiet. Ron's body was throbbing, and he felt mentally spent. No one around him said anything.

Conor unexpectedly got up from the table and didn't bother to clear his tray. Ron watched him walk off before turning back to the people around him. Ben, Olivia, and Letty were all quiet and

looked wretched. He then turned to Harry. He was staring into his mash as if he wanted to fall asleep on it.

Ron couldn't take it anymore. He got up as well, but not before nudging Harry with his arm. Ron didn't even have to say anything for Harry to nod and mumble "okay".

He returned to the Ruins but didn't go to his room. Instead, Ron knocked on Conor's door.

"Go away!"

"It's me," Ron said.

"That's brilliant, Ron. Go away."

"Stop being a bloody wanker, Conor!"

The door opened. "What do you want, Ron?" Conor asked. "I had another exciting and fun day of training, and I'd like to say my prayers before blissfully falling asleep." He attempted to close the door but Ron kept it open with his foot.

"Just let me in for a minute then, yeah?"

"Bloody hell! You don't give up do you?"

"I thought you knew that already," Ron said, grinning a little.

Conor smiled a bit as well and rolled his eyes. "Fine. Come in."

"Cheers." Ron took a seat on his bed; Conor sat next to him. "I won't take long. I just wanted to see how you were doing."

"How do you think?" Conor rubbed his face irritably with his hands. "I thought we stayed away from talking about this stuff, Ron."

"We do," Ron said. "But I can't help it, okay? I bloody care; even if I'm not supposed to. I know that practice tonight messed with you, Conor. It got to me too. I feelâ€;awful."

Conor lowered his hands. "Why aren't you talking to Harry about this?"

"He wasn't my partner tonight."

Conor let out a low sigh and was quiet for a few seconds. "Every time I think things can't get any worse, they do. I really hated tonight, Ron. They warned us about this new training, but I honestly didn't think it would get this bad."

"I don't reckon anyone did," Ron said.

"It isn't right!" Conor said angrily. "We're all still recovering from our first night of hostage training. I can't say enough how dim things got after you and Harry left, but it's like Alan and Richard don't care. They just want to make us suffer."

"It doesn't go that far, Conor," Ron said. "I hate that we have to do these things to each other, but I can understand why they're making us."

Conor shook his head, staring at him vacantly. "How can you be so accepting and calm about all this? A week ago, they made you give up your best mate's life. Where are your bollocks, man?"

Ron balled his fists, trying desperately not to lash out. He didn't need any reminders about what he'd done. Though the simulation had made him stronger, Ron had almost had two panic attacks since that night just from thinking about pseudo Harry's screams.

"My bollocks are right here," Ron said intensely. "I'm certainly not calm or happy about any of this, but I believe that it all has purpose."

"So it does get to you?"

"Of course it does, Conor! I don't want you to think for a second that how I'm being is something natural. It's taken me years and so much out of me now to find the strength to push through all this. Lettingâ€¦letting Harry go certainly wasn't easy."

"I just couldn't do it, Ron," Conor said.

"A lot of people couldn't," Ron said. "B-butâ€¦but maybe somedayâ€¦"

"I'll gain enough strength to sacrifice my mate's life?" Conor asked. "I don't reckon I ever want to be that strong then."

"Then what else do you plan to do as an Auror, Conor?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. I wonder about that all the time. If this is how I am now, then I honestly don't know what the bleeding fuck my plan is going to be. I- I'm not so sure I can do this shit anymore."

"What are you saying?" Ron asked, feeling uneasy.

"Nothing really," Conor muttered, looking away. "I guess I just feel a little unprepared. I didn't learn any of these things at the wizarding school I went to. Maybe I would be feeling differently about all this if I'd gone to Hogwarts or something. I might've ended up more like you and Harry, which is apparently a very good thing."

Ron laughed. "You definitely would've been in Gryffindor, mate."

"Possibly," Conor said. "I could've found out."

"Found out what?"

"What house I'd be in," Conor said. He rubbed his hands together, appearing nervous. "I've never told anyone this before but I got the letter from Hogwarts when I turned eleven."

Ron's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah," Conor said, nodding. "I got the acceptance letter and even a personal note from Dumbledore telling me how coming into my magic would be a fun and challenging experience for me."

Ron couldn't believe what he was hearing. "So why didn't you go?"

"I didn't want to," Conor said as if it was the simplest answer in the world. "I mean, I found out how prestigious and extraordinary Hogwarts was, and I certainly fancied the idea of going!"

"But?"

"But I would've had to leave my family," Conor said. "My parents tried to get me to change my mind but I didn't. I ended up going to a really small magical school closer to home that didn't require me to live there."

Ron was completely gobsmacked by what Conor was telling him. Family meant everything to Ron too, but when he'd received his letter, Ron had been more than ready to leave home.

"Blimey," Ron said. "That's, um, well, that's the first time I've ever heard of a person willingly rejecting Hogwarts."

Conor chuckled. "I'm a mental, I know, but I don't regret it. I would've ended up getting murdered there sooner or later, right?" He instantly slapped himself, shaking his head. "Bollocking hell, Ron, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"It's all right. I knew what you meant. Hogwarts was well, still is a rather dangerous place. Every time I get a letter from Hermione or Ginny, I just feel so relieved."

"I know what you mean," Conor said. "If it weren't for the letters from home, I don't reckon I would've made it this far."

"But you have, Conor, and obviously without Hogwarts," Ron said. "There's a reason I didn't go back this year. All the stuff we're doing here are things I could only learn from Alan and Richard. I reckon you can say the same thing - even about your family, yeah?"

"I guess," Conor said, shrugging. "I just get sick of all this darkness."

"So do I," Ron said. He thought about something Mr. Nelson had told him. "It gets really bad sometimes, but we have to learn to move past it or at least contain it."

Conor once again looked at him vacantly. "Are you sure you're eighteen, Ron?"

Ron shoved him, blushing. "Fuck off! I justâ€œI reckon I've grown up a lot since I got my letter from Hogwarts. There are some things I saw, and some things that happened to me, that made me likeâ€œthis."

Conor's expression turned grim. "You don't have to explain. I understand, and I do appreciate you checking on me. It's just really hard for me to talk to people here."

"Believe me - I get it," Ron said, feeling the full weight of Conor's words. "Well, I won't keep you," he said, standing up.

"I'll probably feel better in the morning," Conor said. "At least until Richard and Alan make us practice lighting each other on fire or something."

"I can only imagine," Ron said. He held out his hand. "Stay with it, all right? We're gonna get through this."

"Yeah, we will," Conor said in a defeated tone. Ron gave him a look of reassurance before leaving for his own room.

Ron sat on his bed, thinking about what Conor had told him. He thought that talking to Conor would've made him feel better, but Ron was only more confused and somewhat nervous for a reason.

He opened his drawer, pulling out Percy's unopened letter. He hoped that reading words from his brother would help rid him of some of the misery he felt.

Dear Ron,

I hope you're excelling in your training. I know the situations you are put in must be intricate and straining, but it's important to remember that everything you're doing now is something you'll encounter as an Auror. That's all I'm going to say on the matter though. I don't want to bombard this letter with a lecture on what you need to do because I'm sure you are handling yourself very well. You made it to the merge, Ron. That fact alone will always mean that you have the capacity, intellect, and potential to be a great Auror.

Now, before I get into the core reason behind this letter, I want to share a few things with you. First, Mum and Dad are doing all right, which I am very certain you want to know. Since Ginny left for school, Bill and I have been visiting them regularly. I also try to stop by Dad's office whenever I have free time. They are still not quite there, and I know they're still worried about George being away, but their current state is nowhere near how it was during your Christmas holiday. That is great news! I actually received a letter from George not too long ago. I was a bit surprised that he wrote so much to me. He told me all about his holiday and how he's doing better; I'm sure you got the same note, of course. I was very moved by George's words because they were so inspiring. I'm so proud of him, Ron, and I told him exactly that when I wrote him back. I've also been writing to Ginny and Charlie to keep up with them and to tell them about

what's going on with me. I still have a long way to go, Ron, but I am getting somewhere. Communication is essential for my progress.

Well, I guess now is the right time to move on to the main reason behind this letter: I must admit that why I'm writing to you has been brought on for selfish reasons. I'm unfortunately a little lost in my life right now, and I could use your help. It's about Audrey. She and I are starting to cross into a different vicinity of our relationship. I'm almost certain that we're finally becoming something more. I certainly want it be something more, but I don't know what to do to take us there.

It is embarrassing to have to ask you this, but I feel so ill-equipped and foolish when it comes to this sort of thing. I've never been in this position - I've never fancied anyone so much before. I can't ask Dad because he'll just go into a five page essay about the 'Weasley sparkle'; I can't ask George because he'll end up writing a five page letter just taking the Mickey out of me; I can't ask Bill because he and Fleur never really had to transition from friendship to a proper relationship. You are the only person who's had to make that move. You and Hermione went from a deep friendship to a loving relationship, and I'm eager to take detailed notes on how you achieved that.

You may not realize this, Ron, but I value your relationship with Hermione very highly (actually, I think a lot of people do). You two are quite extraordinary and you work so well together. Can you give me any instructive tips on how you've made things work? You are brilliant at charming Hermione, making her laugh, and keeping her happy and interested. How do you do it? Are there any appropriate jokes you can pass along or clean, playful gestures that I can use on Audrey? I want to be more than just her friend, so I think I need to make her see me as a man who can make her life interesting. I guess I'm mostly worried that she thinks I'm dull, and that's another reason why I want your help. You're not boring, and Hermione never appears bored around you so I'm sure you have some wisdom to share. A chart, pros/cons list, or a constructive response would be very much appreciated.

Thank you in advance,

Percy

Ron wiped the tears of laughter out of his eyes as he read over Percy's letter again. He hoped that his brother wasn't being serious about charts and analysis. Even Percy couldn't have been that in love and obsessed with organization. Ron focused on the parts where Percy had mentioned his relationship with Hermione. Reading those things made Ron feel good while also making him miss Hermione more. It had been so long since he'd seen her. Being away from her for such an extensive amount of time should have been illegal.

Ron took out a fresh piece of parchment and a quill. He wasn't in the greatest of moods to give encouraging words and advice, but as Ron started writing about his relationship with Hermione, he began to feel better.

It didn't matter what was happening around him or how distant he was from her, Hermione always made him better.

* * *

Throughout the week, Alan and Richard exposed them all to harsher and more intricate spells and means of attacking. Every day the unit grew tougher and Ron felt so emotionally and mentally drained that, by the end of the night, he hardly felt like doing much of anything. He kept telling himself to push through the tension, but it was difficult. While his body was handling the brutality, Ron's nerves started to increase, and he found himself shaking and having to tell himself to calm down and breathe on several occasions.

He was thankful that he was at least still improving in Ms. Yule's class and that his body was going through another growth spurt. Ron wasn't necessarily getting taller, but he was starting to gain weight and grow proper muscles in new places.

During the morning drills, Ron was able to run faster and take bigger strides. He was finally starting to make his way to the front of the group and was running with the people who'd always passed him by. It was a great feeling and helped to calm his nerves.

After a particularly successful morning duel, Ron helped up his partner and shook his hand.

"Good go, Eric," Ron said.

"You too," he said. "I think we might've actually impressed Alan today."

"I reckon we're about to find out," Ron muttered as Alan walked over to them.

"Sir," they said together.

"That was strong dueling from the both of you," Alan said. "Your maturity has really progressed over these past few weeks. Of course, Hill, you're still not utilizing enough defensive spells. Weasley, I reckon I'll go to my grave telling you to clean up your recovery time."

"Yes, sir," Ron and Eric said together.

"You're dismissed."

Ron gave Eric a pat on the arm then ran down to the trail. He desperately needed a shower and food, but that wasn't the reason why he was hurrying. Ron rushed to the shower cabin; Harry was leaning against the side of it, staring off. Ron bit his lip to

keep from laughing as he raised his wand, pointing it at Harry's glasses.

"Wingard-

"- Expelliarmus!" Harry said at once, pointing his wand at Ron and disarming him.

"Fucking hell, Harry!" Ron whined. "You know you're not allowed to use that spell against anyone â€“ ever. It's simply too unfair."

"So is trying to take a blind man's glasses away, you sod," Harry said. He handed Ron back his wand. "You're lucky that I'm in a good mood. I could just break this."

"And I could just break your jaw - again," Ron said. "Are you really in a good mood?"

"No."

"Wanna walk?"

"Yes."

They started walking the trail away from the crowded camp. "How was the drill?" Harry asked.

"Pretty good," Ron said. "I had a brilliant duel against Eric, and I almost caught up to Jack during the run. One of these days it's going to happen, I just know it."

"I know it is too. You're getting really bloody fast, Ron. I'm beginning to suspect that you're on steroids."

Ron scrunched up his nose. "What's that?"

Harry frowned. "Oh, that's right â€“ 'the barrier' as Hermione calls it. Well, it's aâ€¢umâ€¢just ask her."

"Is that a wise suggestion?"

"It's not something you stick up your arse this time - I promise," Harry said. They both burst into laughter.

"So," Ron said when he finally stopped giggling. "How was your interview?"

Harry sighed, losing all the humor in his expression. "Not worth missing a practice for. It was a reporter from the Prophet again."

"What the hell do they all want?" Ron asked. "They have to know you're busy."

"All the more reason to bombard me with meetings and interviews," Harry said dully. "Everyone wants to keep a close eye on their favorite little savior."

Ron rubbed his neck. "That's wrong, Harry."

"How do you think I feel?" Harry asked. "I understand why people are interested, and most of the time I even feel good knowing that I'm giving people peace of mind, but sometimes I really just want to tell everyone to fuck off. I'm trying to build my own life now â€“ away from my title."

"I know you are, mate. You have every right to get upset about having to do more of these interviews."

"It's not even the interviews themselves that bother me. It's what happens during them. If people aren't gawking then they're poking at me to make sure I'm real because apparently I've been in hiding for too long."

"You're not in hiding," Ron said. "You're just training â€“ well, I reckon this place is a bit confining. I'm starting to forget what civilization looks like. I can't imagine running into someone who isn't wearing all black or bloodstained boxer shorts."

Harry laughed loudly again, which Ron was proud of. "Those people do exist, Ron. I saw them today at the Ministry. There's a lot going on, actually, and it's probably why I keep getting owls. A lot of dark wizards are getting caught or are coming out of concealment. There are loads of trials being set."

"And Ministry officials want your opinion on it all?" Ron asked.

"Among other things," Harry said. "I told them though that I'm not going to any trial while I'm here. For once, I want my life to be about me."

Ron grinned at his best mate as he thought back to what Kingsley had told him before he left for Lambrick. He had said that a bit of selfishness was a good thing to have. Ron was beginning to understand that concept.

"Well, I'll back you up no matter what happens. Just let me know when you need me."

"I will," Harry said, nudging him with his shoulder. "You ready to eat then?"

"I'm fucking starving."

"Wait," Harry said, stopping. "Let me see your hands."

"Bloody hell, Harry."

"I mean it," Harry said. Ron sighed then held up his hands that were slightly shaking. "Ronâ€!"

"I'm bloody fine," Ron said, digging his hands into his pockets. "It's from hunger."

"Rubbish," Harry said. "Look, I'm not going to beat on your bollocks but I'm also not going to stop keeping an eye on you."

"I really am all right, Harry," Ron said. "I've had a good morning. I justâ€¢I can't exactly turn it off, but I think it'll go away now that you're back. I was a little worried that you'd end up strangling someone or setting the whole Ministry on fire."

Harry cringed. "I'm not that mad, am I?"

"Mate, you've always been completely off your broomstick," Ron said. "I've just never told you because I don't find your fits intimidating."

"Yet, you're telling me now," Harry said, stroking his chin. "Hmm. That must mean something. Well, I have considered doing both of those things on several occasions, but I'd at least get your dad and Percy out first."

"How kind of you. No wonder you're a hero."

Ron and Harry talked and laughed as much as they could all the way to the canteen. His few moments of true friendship with Harry were as necessary to his survival now as breathing was. Ron tried his best to enjoy his breakfast with his mates because he would need to relax before the training day officially started. Unfortunately, some of his happiness faded when Alan and Richard entered the cabin. Everyone went quiet and sat up straighter.

"This won't take long, trainees," Richard said. "We simply need to inform you lot of very important events coming up. The first is only within the next few days - it's your third evaluation." Ron gripped his fork tightly. He couldn't believe that it was going to happen already.

"You've been training all month in this unit; it's time to test your skills and development," Richard explained. "The reason why we have the third examination so early is because as your training becomes more specialized and cumulative, it will become harder to go back and learn the skills you should've already perfected."

"Everything you're learning in this unit will continue on in the next," Alan explained. "So it's important that you lot learn where you stand now before the training load increases exponentially. Are there any questions so far?"

Ron raised his hand. "Will you be cutting people after the evaluation?"

"If we must, yes," Alan said. "Only the best can advance. If the best is twenty-three then that's how many we'll take. If the best is four then we'll be happy with that number too."

"Starting today, we'll be going over combative material that you've learned since October, and we'll be putting off hostage survival training because that will not be a part of your

examination," Richard said. Ron felt a bit of relief; that was the best news he'd heard in ages.

"As for the second event," Alan said, "it follows the examination and is a vital part of your training. If you want to make it to that event, then I suggest you work as hard and as smart as you can. Now, continue on with your breakfast."

Once the instructors left the room, the entire cabin exploded into conversation.

"I can't bloody believe we're having an evaluation already," Ben said.

"What do you mean by 'already'?" Letty asked. "We've been in this unit for ages. It's about time."

"What do you think, Ron?" Harry asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I keep going back to what Alan said. What do they have planned following the evaluation?"

"A bollocking; a million galleons; a baby," Conor said. "It could be anything with these people."

"We probably shouldn't focus on that too much," Olivia said. "It'll be a miracle if we can get through the evaluation first, yeah?"

"I guess you're right," Ron said. Everyone nodded in agreement.

Not focusing on what had been planned following the assessment proved to be an easy task for Ron since all he did over the next few days was train and review. Ms. Yule went over everything they had learned in the health unit; during field practice the instructors and the aids made the trainees perform almost every defensive and offensive attack they'd ever learned. Ron rarely found the time to even breathe properly. He felt like a mental and was ready to get the examination over with. Ron greatly wanted to feel like a real person again.

When the day of the exam finally came, Ron was more anxious than anything else. His entire body was tense and his mind was cramped with potion ingredients and facts about the human body. Right after breakfast, Alan and Richard instructed them to go to main field for their last practice before the evaluation began.

"You all right?" Harry asked as he and Ron walked to the field.

"I'm fine, Harry. You?"

"Okay. I just want to be done with this. If I make it through tonight, I'm using a pass."

"I'll join you, mate. I've been missing Hermione so badly that I've got a rash."

"That's too bad. Be sure to use Aloe Septvera on the sensitive areas."

Ron hit him. "You're a twat."

"And Hermione has a lot more influence on you than you realize," Harry said with a pratish smile. "Just wait until I tell her how far you've come in class."

"Do that and I'll - Conor?" Ron and Harry stopped right in front of the mailing cabin. Conor was standing outside of it, clutching a letter in one hand while rubbing his face with the other. They shared a quick look before walking closer to him. "Conor?"

He jumped, hastily wiping his eyes. "Fucking hell â€“ don't sneak up on me like that!"

"Are you all right, mate?" Harry asked.

"M'fine," he said in a nasally voice.

"Who's that from?" Ron asked.

"No one â€“ don't worry about it!" he shot. "Urgh! We should get to practice." Conor stuffed the letter into his back pocket then scurried off.

"Ron?"

"I honestly have no idea, Harry. I'llâ€¦I'll talk to him." Ron let out a heavy breath as they caught up to Conor. Ron felt bad for him and he wanted to know what was going on so he could help, but he simply didn't have the time. Ron had to focus on the night ahead.

"We're having this last review session a bit earlier than usual because your evaluation will take the whole day and most of the night to complete," Richard said. "Your test over the health unit will take place in Ms. Yule's classroom shortly following this practice, then your field evaluation will follow."

"Mr. Neary?" Alan asked. "Are you listening to the valuable information your instructor is giving you?"

Conor looked up from his trainers. "Yes, sir. There will be a health test then a field exam."

Alan nodded but didn't look pleased. "This morning Richard and I want to go over a few lifts and pins first because that seems to be the weakest area for a lot of you. Young, Turner: you'll help demonstrate."

"Kick his bollocks in, Olivia," Ron said under his breath.

"All right, Turner: I want you to pin Young using a knee lift, then follow through with a binding spell," Alan said. "Young, from that position I want you to show me how you would overcome the disadvantage. Trainees, make sure you pay attention to your

campmates and to the instructions that Richard and I give them. You two may begin."

Jack and Olivia backed away from each other then rushed one another. Though Olivia disarmed Jack, he was able to crouch down and lift her up using the strength in his legs and knees. He threw her down incredibly hard; Ron had to look away for a moment. He couldn't help but to take the move personally. Olivia fought as hard as she could, but Jack was able to get her on her back and straddle her.

Ron heard a faint noise from his left. He glanced at Conor who looked to be seconds away from exploding. His fists were clenched and a short spark flew out of the tip of his wand.

"Conor," Ron whispered.

"Shut up, Ron," he mumbled.

Jack held on to Olivia's wrists, then pinned them above her head.

"Okay, good," Richard said. "Use a binding spell."

"Yes, sir." Jack pointed his wand at Olivia's wrists; she hissed as they locked together.

"See how Turner used an invisible bind?" Alan said. "While it's a little harder to be accurate when casting the spell, it creates a psychological—"

"—get your fucking hands off of her!"

Out of nowhere, Conor ran up to Jack, punching him in the face. He pushed him off of Olivia. "A-are you all right?" he asked a bit hysterically.

"Oi!" Jack drew his fist back to punch Conor but Ron speedily rushed Jack to the ground before he could.

"Don't even think about it!" Ron said through gritted teeth.

"Neary! Turner! Weasley!" Alan bellowed, blowing his whistle. He snatched Ron off of Jack while Richard grabbed Conor by the arm.

"What is the meaning of this?" Richard demanded.

"I didn't do anything, sir!" Jack said. "Conor and Weasley attacked me!"

"You were going to hit him!" Ron said.

"I had every right!"

"So did I!"

Alan blew his whistle again. "ENOUGH!" He let Ron go, then stood between him and Jack. "Turner, take the binds off Young. Neary, explain yourself."

Conor was completely red and shaken. "I don't know, sir."

"Bullshit, Neary!" Richard said. "We are more than fed up with your outbursts."

"He's a mental, sir!" Jack said. "He should be assessed or locked up!"

"Shut up, Jack!" Ron and Olivia said together.

"That's enough, trainees!" Richard demanded.

"Fuck off, Jacky boy!" Conor yelled in total disregard. "You don't know anything!"

"I know you're mad and apparently can't tell the difference between Young and your sister!"

"YOU FUCKING COCKSUCKER!" Conor growled, then rushed Jack to the ground; the two started throwing punches. Ron leaped into the brawl as well and tried to pry them apart. It only took a second before he felt strong arms pulling him away. Richard separated him from Conor.

"Brian, take Weasley and Neary to a holding cabin!" Alan demanded as he hauled Jack away from them. "Pete, take Turner to a separate one!"

"I was defending myself!" Jack yelled.

"And I was kicking your arse!" Conor said, still trying to grab him.

Alan blew his whistle once more. "One more word out of any of you three and you'll all receive your exit slips. Move on!"

Ron got himself out of Richard's grasp, then roared in fury as he followed Brian to a holding cell. He didn't have the strength to look back and see the worried eyes of Harry and Olivia.

Brian escorted them to a cabin, then pushed them inside. "Wait here and don't even think about leaving." He slammed the door behind him.

"Fuck!" Conor screamed, kicking the door.

Ron was trembling badly, but this time it was from rage. "What the hell just happened, Conor?"

"I don't know!"

"Well you'd better start knowing because we're about to get chucked out!"

Conor rolled his eyes. "I don't give a sodding fuck about that, Ron."

Ron ran up to Conor, pinning him against a wall. "I give a sodding fuck, all right? It's not just your bollocks on the line here!"

Conor pushed him away. "I didn't ask you to help me. That was your choice."

"Yes, it was," Ron said. "I didn't want Jack to punch your face in - which is what he was going to do if I hadn't stopped him. I didn't mind doing it but now I need to bloody know why it happened."

Conor groaned, stomping his foot. "You know why, Ron. That stuff with Olivia—"

"No â€“ no. I won't let you use that excuse again," Ron said, shaking his head. "It's not going to work this time because you were gutted even before we started practicing. Tell me what's going on, mate."

"Nothing is going on! I just hate having to watch that shit!"

"Stop talking to me like I'm thick, Conor!" Ron demanded. "It's more than that, and it's obviously bad enough to risk your place here."

Conor paced around the room. "It honestly doesn't matter."

Ron grabbed his arm to keep him from moving. "How could it not matter? This is your life!"

"This is not my life!" Conor snatched his arm back. "Not â€“ at – all!" He kicked and punched the wall.

Watching him reminded Ron of himself the night after Fred's death. The small connection was the only thing that calmed him down. "Conor," he said in a softer voice. "What did that letter say?"

"I don't want to talk about it. Just go away."

"I can't, mate. Please – what is going on? What happened to you?"

"It's not me, Ron! It was never me!" Conor kicked the wall again then banged his back against it. He slid down, sobbing. Ron sat next to him and reached out; Conor recoiled. "Don't bloody touch me – fuck off!"

He had never seen Conor so broken down before. His powerful emotions were reaching deeply inside of Ron. "Conor, mate, I'm not going anywhere so you might as talk to me."

"Iâ€¦ I can't."

"Why not?"

"B–because I don't understand what's happening! I'll never fucking understand how this could happen."

"How what could happen?" Ron asked. Conor said nothing. "You can trust me, Conor. I'll never tell anyone your business" just like I know you'll never tell anyone about the panic attack I had."

Conor looked at him as if Ron had forgotten that fact. "You were thinking about your brother in that moment, right? When Harry fell through?"

Ron figured that Conor needed him to open up a little so he could feel comfortable doing the same. Ron swallowed his nerves, nodding. "I was. My brother Fredâ€;he died in almost the exact same way that Harry was blasted through that wall. I couldn't handle seeing it or the thought of losing Harry like that." They were quiet for a few minutes before Conor finally let out a shaky breath.

"I-I'm not like the rest of you here," he said quietly. "Being an Auror has never been my dream. I always thought that I would work at my parent's pub then take over the business when they retired. That was my life and my dream, Ron."

"What happened?" Ron asked.

"What do you think? I found out that I was a sodding wizard and everything in my life changed." He banged his head against the wall. "I just wanted to forget about the whole thing, but my family wanted me to embrace the new part of me." Conor sounded so regretful about being a wizard. It didn't make sense to Ron; he wondered if it was something all Muggle-borns went through.

"Is that another reason why you didn't want to go to Hogwarts?" he asked. "You didn't want to learn magic?"

"It's not that I didn't want to learn; I just didn't want to give up my life to do it," Conor said. "It happened regardless. I was always busy learning magic and spending time with my new magical friends. I started drifting away from my family a little."

"I'm sure your family understood, Conor," Ron said. "I don't know what it's like to be a Muggle-born, but from what I've learned over the years, it's natural to feel a separation."

Conor shook his head. "That's not a good enough excuse, Ron. I let my parents down. Iâ€;I let Kaitlin down." He rubbed his eyes again, sniffling roughly. "The letter I got today was from my dad. She's not doing too well again, and it's all my fault."

"Conorâ€;"

"You don't get it, Ron!" Conor said, standing up. "I justâ€;"

"What?" Ron asked loudly.

"It's â€"it's all my fault," he said again. "Iâ€;last spring one of my bloody wizard mates asked me if I wanted to go a Quidditch match with him that was out of the country. My parents thought it would be good for me to get away so, like an idiot, I said yes. I

just left my family behind, even though all this shit with the war was going on."

He began pacing right in front of Ron. "I had absolutely no idea that people from the Ministry wanted me to register as a Muggle-born or that Snatchers were looking for me. A couple went to my house while I was away and my parents were at the pub. They didn't find me; but they found Kaitlin out on her walk."

Ron's heart started beating faster while a light ringing noise invaded his ears. "Did; did they—"

"—hurt her?" Conor whispered, looking as though he was in severe pain. "Ron, when you did your tracking project on Snatchers, you left out important details. They didn't just maim and kidnap people. Those Snatchers; those monsters!" His chest rose and fell jaggedly as tears ran down his cheeks. "Sure, they beat her up pretty badly, but even after they were done torturing Kaitlin; they; they did the worse thing a man can do to a woman."

Ron suddenly felt sick. His eyes began to sting as his throat felt like it was closing in. "C-Conor!"

Conor sank to the floor, rocking himself. "My parents had no way of contacting me so I didn't find out until I got home - three days after the fact - that my little sister, the most important person in my entire life, had been beaten and; hurt in that way while I was watching a fucking Quidditch match. The bloody Snatchers used those goddamn invisible binds on Kaitlin because they wanted to frighten her even more as they..." He stopped talking to rub his eyes, but more tears poured down.

"She was only fourteen, Ron," he sobbed. "It doesn't even matter that she 'fully recovered' as the sodding Healers told us because she's different now. Kaitlin is always so scared, and she never leaves the house. She hates being touched and; and she's fucking terrified of my magic. My parents closed their pub so they could take care of her full time, but she's still so messed up."

Ron didn't know what to say to him. He had never heard anything so awful in all his life. His chest started to ache as a mix of anger, horror, and nausea took him over. He couldn't imagine the pain that Conor and his family were going through, and Ron had no idea how Conor had been able to go on for so long like this.

"I'm; I'm so sorry, Conor."

"Sorry doesn't do anything in this case, Ron," Conor said darkly. "I wasn't there for Kaitlin, so now I have to fix things. I promised her that I would find the people who hurt her and throw them in prison or kill them whatever happens first. That's why I'm here trying to become an Auror. I want to capture those animals because it's the only thing I can do to help my family."

Ron understood Conor's plan exactly but he knew firsthand why it wouldn't work. He didn't want to lecture him, but Ron felt a duty to Conor as a friend. "Conor, listen to me!"

"Don't try to tell me that you understand what I'm going through."

"I don't know what you're going through, mate," Ron said. "My sister, thank Merlin, has never gone through anything like that, but I know what it's like to feel helpless. When Ginny was only eleven, she was possessed and almost died. I couldn't help her at all. In fact, I had to stand by and wait for Harry to save her."

"But she's okay, right?"

"Yes, she is."

"Then you really can't talk to me about this."

"I get that, Conor, but I understand the darkness and hatred that must you feel. When my brother died right in front of me; all I wanted to do was punish and kill. I still feel that way sometimes, and it scares me."

"It scares me too, Ron," Conor said. "Before all this happened, I was never an aggressive person but it's just in me now, along with this agonizing need to fix things."

"I've got that need as well and it almost kept me from coming back here. I told my brother that I would stay at home with him and our family."

"So why didn't you?"

"Because I learned that it wouldn't have changed anything. It wouldn't have fixed my family, taken my brother's pain away, or magically given me the power to bring Fred back to life. Do you get what I'm saying?"

Conor ran his fingers through his hair, shaking his head. "I have to do something, Ron!"

"And you should," Ron said. "If you want to find the fuckers who hurt your sister, then I say do it, but you can't become an Auror just because you believe it's the only way to help your family. You can't be here only for your sister. If you think it's what she wants, then know that it's not. You don't have to be an Auror to be the big brother that she needs right now."

Conor gazed at him, looking incredibly lost. "How can you know that?"

"Because I have a sibling who lost a part of himself," Ron said slowly. "It wasn't in the same way, but I think the pain is just as extreme. I don't know Kaitlin but I reckon what she needs is for you to be happy and to support her and be patient with her, because even if you did find the Snatchers, it wouldn't change what happened."

Ron got up and tripped back against the wall. His heart was beating horribly fast now. "N-no matter how much magic we have, it can't change what's already been ripped away from us."

Conor opened his mouth but the door opened and stopped his words. "Neary, Weasley," Alan said as he and Richard walked into the cabin. Ron patted Conor's arm and stood firmly beside him.

"We just finished speaking to Turner," Richard said shortly.

"If I may say, sir," Conor breathed, rubbing his eyes once more. "This is my fault, and while Jack did provoke me, Ron didn't do anything. He was just trying to keep me out of harm's way, and he did attempt to break up the fight. I even pushed Ron away so I could keep hitting Jack."

"We appreciate your honesty, Neary," Alan said. He then sighed, shaking his head at Ron. "How many times have we been in this situation, Weasley?"

"I don't know, sir," Ron said.

"Did you learn nothing from the last time?" Richard asked.

"I certainly did, sir butâ€;" Ron cleared his throat, standing straighter, "but this is who I am. I'll always sacrifice myself for someone else. It's what you're teaching us do, sir. I just already know how to."

For the second time, Alan's expression boggled Ron. He looked furious but then seemed fairly impressed a split-second later. It quickly faded though. "Well, Weasley," he said, "we also appreciate your honesty, but the two of you will still have a disciplinary hearing."

"You're not chucking us out?" Ron asked.

"Not at the moment, Weasley," Richard said. "We have an entire day of evaluations to get through and we mustn't waste time on immature behavior. And truthfully, we understand how stressful this leg of your training can be."

"Don't think for a second though that we're forgetting about what happened," Alan said. "Examination or not, Neary, I want to talk to you right now. Weasley, wipe your face then get your bag. The health exam will be soon."

"What about field practice?" Ron asked. He was relieved that he wasn't getting chucked out â€" yet â€" but he still really wanted to review.

"You lost that privilege," Alan said. "Wait by Ms. Yule's cabin until everyone else arrives." He snatched Conor by the arm, dragging him away.

Ron opened his mouth but didn't know what to say. All he could do was look after the three of them. He stomped his foot, rubbing

his face roughly. His palms itched and he wanted to talk to someone, but he couldn't. Ron started to badly shake and it became harder to breathe. He balled his fists, forcing himself out of the cabin. As he took deep breaths, he told himself that he couldn't panic. All Ron could do was take things one at a time and relax.

Ron got his school bag from his room, then sat in front of Ms. Yule's cabin. He did everything he could to clear his mind but all Ron could think about was what had happened to Conor's sister. He'd always assumed that something horrible had happened, but he had no idea how gruesome the truth actually was. So much about Conor's behavior and tendencies made sense now, and Ron felt like a prick for not trying to reach out to him sooner. He didn't regret the things he'd told Conor, but he certainly understood why Conor was doing this. Ron had no idea what he would be doing right now if it'd happened to Ginny; the thought made him panic again.

"Stop it, Ron," he said aloud. "She's safe. She's at school. Hermione is taking care of her." Ron had to repeat this to himself numerous times before he started believing it. His nerves became easier to control once he saw his campmates and the instructors walking toward the cabin. Harry and Olivia both gave him expressions of relief; he nodded to them.

Ms. Yule opened the door and, as they all took their seats, Olivia brushed by Ron, squeezing his hand for a second. "I'm glad you're still here," she quickly whispered.

"Me too," he said.

Harry took a seat next to him. "We have to talk."

"I know, mate, but we can't right now," Ron said regrettably. "It'll have to wait; everything has to wait." He said this more to himself than to Harry.

"All right," Ms. Yule said as she passed out the exams. "You will have the full afternoon to complete the health exam. It has a written, practical, and potions portion so each section will be timed."

The cabin door opened and Alan walked in with Conor closely behind him. He took a seat in the back of room, giving Ron a half smile. Despite everything, he looked all right and somewhat calm. Ron told himself to be calm too. Unlike Conor, he actually did want to be there, so he couldn't let the current situation stop him. He'd come too far to let everything go now. Ron had to be selfish and let his life be about him. Ron told himself these things as he shut his mind off to everything else.

Ron flipped his wand between his fingers whereas his eyes roamed over his test. He wasn't a health genius but he knew enough to pass. Ron opened his test, gasping quietly. The first essay question was over a very complicated procedure that aided someone who had been splinched. It seemed as if years had gone by since they'd studied those remedies.

Ron quickly peered around the room before settling on Olivia. She looked completely relaxed as she steadily wrote her answers. She suddenly glanced up, catching his stare. She gave him a faint smile and nodded before turning back to her test. Ron looked down at his own test. He could do this; it was just a bloody exam.

There were questions covering everything they'd learned during the health unit. There were subjects on potions, procedures, nutrition, and even a section devoted entirely on why Aurors needed to be familiar with health. Some questions Ron simply didn't know the answer to, but the vast majority involved concepts that he was at least somewhat familiar with.

Right after the written portion, Ms. Yule took them over to the next cabin for their practical test. They had to perform magical and Muggle techniques on each other as well as make a variety of potions. Ron felt a bit more comfortable in these areas, and he did everything he could to remember what Ms. Yule had taught him. He broke every potion down and deciphered the function before adding the ingredients he thought were best.

By the time the health section of the evaluation was complete, it was already getting dark outside and Ron was knackered.

"I hope you all have a safe and successful night of field evaluation, and I just want to say that it's been a pleasure working with all of you," Ms. Yule said. "I wish you all the best of luck during your training and your careers. I hope to see you all again."

Ron walked up to her desk, holding out his hand. "It was really nice to meet you, Ms. Yule. I learned a lot in your class."

She shook his hand firmly, which surprised Ron because she was such a small person. "The pleasure was all mine, Ron. I love seeing students realize that they can achieve more. This doesn't have to be scary."

"I think I learned that," Ron said. "The test wasn't all that bad."

"I'm glad to hear it," Ms. Yule said. "I can't wait to grade your exam. I add a full page of comments so you'll know exactly what you did correctly and what still needs improving."

"Thank you."

"You're very welcome," Ms. Yule said. "Now hurry along to the next phase of your exam. You don't want to be late."

"All right," Ron said. "Thank you, Ms. Yule, and good night."

"Good night, Mr. Weasley."

Ron went to the door but turned around, giving her a wave and a smile. She grinned delicately at him, waving a little. He left her class for the final time feeling like he'd accomplished

something. It hadn't been a fun or easy experience, but Ron certainly knew more now than when he first entered her class. That meant a lot to him.

"So, for your field portion, we've divided you all into pairs," Richard said. "The format will be very similar to your first major examination. There will be a series of timed duels incorporating different combative maneuvers."

"And while you will be working with someone else, by no means are you a team," Alan said. "If one partner displays the necessary skills, then that person alone will move forward. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," they all said.

"The pairs are as follows: Grace and Weasley."

"Fucking bollocking shit wank!" Ron said under his breath. The last thing he needed was to duel with Michelle when his future at Lambrick was already in the shit.

"Find your partner and spread out," Alan said. "We'll let you know when it's your turn with either myself or Richard."

Ron took a deep breath as he made his way over to Michelle. He looked around for Conor and found him talking to Brian who was most likely going to be his partner because there were twenty-three of them. Ron would've gladly taken him over Michelle.

"Ready, Weasley?" she asked.

"I reckon," he muttered. "I'd really like to keep my face on tonight."

"I won't make any promises," she said. "I also hope that you saved some energy after your stupid bollock brawl with Neary and Turner." Michelle turned away from him then began stretching. Ron took the time to go over everything he knew about hand combat as well as quick offensive spells. He kept getting distracted as he thought about Conor, but he shook his head to clear his thoughts. For ages, it seemed his mind bounced from dueling with Michelle to what happened to Conor's sister. It was a horrible assault on his mind.

His heart skipped a beat when Richard finally called his name. He and Michelle followed him past the main field. Ron had never been evaluated solely by Richard before. Being from West, Michelle already knew what Richard was looking for and how he assessed. It put extra pressure on Ron. The only way he would make it through this was if he took down Michelle in multiple rounds.

That notion proved difficult even within the first round of dueling. Both he and Michelle fought with so much hostility and energy; Ron could feel the negative force building between them. Michelle was everything Ron didn't believe in, and he knew that his good nature bothered her tremendously. Their dueling

reflected that, but Ron couldn't help but feel a pleasant rush as he fought against her.

He staggered to his feet, touching the gash on his face after another intense round. His face and body were throbbing, but he had to push through it. He studied Michelle, whose long blonde hair was covered in leaves and twigs. She too looked exhausted, sore, and a little like a nutter. She spit out blood, narrowing her eyes at him.

Richard was grinning slightly as he made notes in his notebook. "All right, Grace, Weasley: using an assortment of maneuvers and spells, I want you to disarm each other in as few moves as possible. The round will immediately stop once one of you accomplishes this. You cannot use a disarming spell or more than five exchanges."

"Yes, sir," Ron and Michelle said together.

"Shake hands," Richard said.

"Your cock is mine, Weasley," Michelle said as she gripped Ron's hand.

"You'll have to get past my girlfriend first," Ron said, shaking her hand tightly, "and she's a lot tougher than you."

As Michelle backed up, she appeared happier. Ron knew why. Offense was her strongest position; he could already see all the ideas forming in her head. She licked her lips slowly as she cracked her knuckles. Ron rubbed his palms against his thighs, telling himself to relax and focus. He could beat her if he put his mind to it. He thought about the objective and the best way to execute it.

"Wands at the ready," Richard said. Ron and Michelle raised their wands. She gave him a cold smile; he merely shook his head. "Three, two, one!"

"Flagrantia Sanguis!" Michelle bellowed.

Ron instantly tensed, slumping to the ground. He could barely think as the pain of the spell took him over, but since they'd had so much practice with the spell, Ron was able to resist the urge to cramp his body. He could hear Michelle running towards him; he had to do something. Ron used every bit of his muscles to speed up his recovery so he could at least point his wand at the ground right in front of him.

"Incendio Maxima!" he cried.

Michelle stopped; a bright, large blaze appeared between them. Ron crawled back as the fire roared and distant sounds echoed in his ears. He wobbled to his feet, leaning against a tree. This wasn't the time for an attack. The heavy feeling intensified as he thought about what the Snatchers had done to Conor's sister. There was so much darkness in their world and so much had been lost.

Ron put a hand to his chest. Not everything was dark. At least Conor's sister was alive. George was alive too and was getting better. Even Harry, who Ron thought he'd never see again after giving him up to the Aurors, was doing all right. "Come on, Ron," he said. "You're fine. Breathe."

He was finally able to find his breathing and calm down, but Michelle was already coming after him again. Ron's brain was still a little too boggled for him to think of a proper spell but somehow his body knew what to do. Right as Michelle was in reach, his hand connected with her throat. He felt her pulse, pinched the nerve, and slammed her back on the ground. In an instant, she dropped her wand; Ron flipped her over.

"Incarcerous!" he said, covering her arms and legs with ropes. "Mobilicorpus!" he said next. Michelle squeaked as her body rose to the air and she floated horizontally a few feet off the ground.

"Oh, you bloody ginger prick â€“ put me down!" Michelle demanded, shaking her body as much as she could.

"Grace!" Richard called. "You know struggling is only going to make the binds tighter! Weasley, help her down. The round is over."

"Yes, sir," Ron said. Once he got her down and out of the binds, Michelle violently pushed him.

"What type of duel are we doing next, sir?" Michelle asked irritably.

"There aren't anymore rounds; you two are finished with your exam. Go see the nurse if need be or head straight to the start of the trail."

Michelle gaped at him. "But, sir."

"You'll find out how you faired during your assessment, Grace," Richard said. "You know the procedure by now; go."

"Yes, sir," she said in a defeated tone before hurrying off.

"Thank you, sir," Ron said, shaking Richard's hand.

"That was nice work, Weasley," Richard said.

Ron tried to show no emotion. "Yes, sir."

It wasn't until Ron was completely away from Richard that he dropped his bag and clapped his hands together. He swore loudly then let out several deep breaths. His dueling hadn't been perfect, but Ron knew that he had done all right. Richard's comment was all the validation he needed.

After everyone's evaluation, Alan and Richard met them at the start of the running trail. Everyone in Ron's lineup looked as beat up as he felt.

"I'm actually quite surprised by some of the performances I saw tonight," Alan said. "I won't say if that's a good or a bad thing yet. Now, Richard and myself will go over our notes with Mr. Smith and make our decisions."

"What you lot should do now is get a good night's sleep so you'll be ready for drill in the morning," Richard said. "Your evaluation may be over, but training never stops. You're dismissed."

"Neary, follow Richard and I," Alan said.

Ron grabbed Conor's arm before he could walk off. He thought that they would finally have a chance to really talk. "What do they want?" Ron asked.

"Probably to give me another bollocking," Conor said, shrugging. "I'll see you in a bit. Good night, Ron."

"Good night, mate," Ron said. Conor gave him a small smile and patted his arm before quickly catching up to Alan and Richard. Ron rubbed his neck; he truly admired Conor's strength.

All through dinner Ron kept looking over his shoulder, hoping that Conor would come back before their mealtime was over; he didn't. When Ron returned to the Ruins, he decided to stay up and wait for him. After lights out, Ron snuck out of his room and sat on the cold, wet floor. He raised his chessboard a few centimeters off the ground and yawned as he shifted the pieces around. He moved a knight and found himself grinning.

Despite everything that had happened that day, Ron had a strong feeling that he was going to make it to the next section. This had been the most brutal and strenuous leg of training, but somehow Ron had found confidence by the end.

He didn't know what that meant, and as he tried to figure it out, he dropped his knight and fell asleep.

* * *

**** I hope you lot enjoyed this chapter. There's a lot I could say but I'll sum things up with: life is never just about one thing, you know? Anyway, thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 49*: The way I am

(Ducks the tomatoes and fists thrown) I know it's been a long time. It's honestly quite a surprise to me as well. All I can say is that during this 'break' of sorts I was able to catch up with writing this story. So, thank you all for the reviews and support. I really appreciate you lot sticking it out with me.
Sends out virtual love

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

* * *

A gentle hand was shaking him.

"Ron?" the female voice said.

"Hmm?"

"Ron, wake up," she said, shaking him again.

Ron moaned. "H'mione?"

He lifted his head, but instead of seeing gorgeous chocolate eyes and bushy brown hair like Ron had assumed he would, he was greeted with striking blue eyes and choppy black hair that looked rather silky. The girl in front of him had a somewhat pale face and a mole on the left side of her nose.

"Olivia?" he said.

She chewed on the side of her lip as her cheeks went pink.

"Sorry, Ron. I don't mean to bother you."

"No, it's okay." Ron sat up, rubbing his neck. "I justâ€¢I thought you were someone else."

"Rightâ€¢" Olivia said.

He cleared his throat then looked around the empty corridor.

"What time is it? Have I missed drill?

"No, it's still quite early. I was on my way to the toilets when I noticed you. Did you sleep out here?"

"It wasn't my intention to." Ron took the levitation charm off his chessboard then carefully put it back into his case. "I wanted to stay up and wait for Conor so I could talk to him."

"You're better off waiting until breakfast," she said, standing up. "I'm sure Alan and Richard don't want any of us hanging about

the corridors during lights out. Here, let me help you." She took his chess bag then outstretched a hand to help him up.

"Cheers." Now that Ron was awake and off the floor, he couldn't believe that he had been able to fall asleep in the cold, dank corridor. He stretched, groaning. Ron was incredibly sore but he reckoned that had more to do with his many rounds of furious dueling with Michelle than from sleeping against a stone wall.

"Oi, what are you two doing out here?" Brian asked, walking briskly over to them.

"I was on my way to the loo, sir," Olivia said.

"And I just came back from there," Ron said.

"Well, you'll have to hold it, Young. It's time for everyone to get up," Brian said.

Olivia frowned, checking her watch. "We've still got time, sir."

"Not today you don't," Brian said with a grin.

Ron and Olivia shared a look. Before either of them could question Brian further, they heard the shrill screech of Alan's whistle. He and Richard began yelling for everyone to get up, and Brian and Pete started banging on doors. Ron pulled on Olivia's elbow and got them out of the path of the loud, irritating wakeup call.

Yawning, half-asleep trainees opened their doors and shuffled out into the corridor. "R-Ron?" Harry asked, exhaling loudly as he, Eric, and Jack came out of their room. "What are you doing out here already?"

"I'll tell you later, mate," Ron said, searching the crowd for Conor.

"Good morning, trainees!" Richard merrily said once their group was in two straight lines on either side of the corridor.

"Good morning, sir," they all droned as lively as they could.

"Now," Richard said, "before you lot start groaning, let me assure you that we've only woken you up to inform you of a very important development that's occurred at Lambrick Academy. Alan, if you will?"

"Last night," Alan picked up with, "the section leaders, along with the aids, met with Mr. Smith to discuss the evaluations. After much consideration and heavy debate, we devised a list of the trainees who we want to continue in the program."

"And very early this morning, we dismissed those who didn't make the list," Richard said. "Five of your fellow trainees are gone - making you lot the top eighteen."

"So, congratulations, everyone," Alan said. "If you're standing here right now, then you've made it to the next phase!"

There was a rupture of applause and cheers throughout the hall. Ron let out a deep breath of relief as his shoulders slumped in relaxation. He shook Harry's hand, laughing as the realization hit him. Ron had made it through the most challenging and vicious part of training yet. His duels with Michelle and all the bloody laps had actually paid off.

"Congratulations, Ron!" Olivia said.

"You too, Olivia."

Ron felt amazing and was glad to see Ben and Letty celebrating as well. Michelle gave him a mocked curtsey; Ron merely nodded to her. He then studied their smaller group. There were ten people from the original west section and only eight from east. Ron stood on his toes, inspecting the corridor for a short bloke with blonde hair but he didn't see him.

"Ron?" Olivia asked, tugging on his shirtsleeve. "Where's Conor?"

"I dunno," Ron said. "I don't see him." His heart started to beat a little faster as he looked at Olivia. "I don't see him," he said again.

"Maybe he went to the toilet," Harry said.

"No â€“ no that can't be it," Ron said impatiently. "Heâ€¢'heâ€¢!"

"That's bloody awful about Conor," Ben said, walking over to them.

"What is?" Olivia asked.

"That he didn't make it," Ben said softly.

Ron felt a pang in his chest. "How do you know that? Who the fucking hell told you?"

Ben shrugged. "One of Conor's roommates said that he never came back after dinner. They must've chucked him last night."

"Oh, no! Conorâ€¢!" Olivia groaned, putting a hand over her mouth.

"Stop that!" Ron said irritably. "We know fuck-all about Conor right now, all right? I'll go find out for sure. Conor's hereâ€¢;he has to be."

Ron ran back into his room to put on a jumper and some trainers. Alan and Richard were telling the group something but he wasn't interested in it. Ron shut them out, ignored the whispers in his head, and brushed off what Ben had said. His mind was set purely on finding Conor, who was obviously still at Lambrick. He was simplyâ€¢;missing. Yes â€“ that had to be the answer because there was no fucking way that Conor would get chucked out. He couldn't â€“ not now.

"Weasley?" Alan asked, poking his head into the room.

"Sir," Ron said as he dug his feet into his shoes. "I was just coming to look for you."

"Good; Richard and I need to speak with you."

Ron froze. He had forgotten all about his meeting with them. He mentally groaned in frustration. "But, sir, I really need to—"

"—now, Weasley."

Ron bit his lip, nodding. "Right away, sir." He followed Alan and Richard down the corridor. His campmates were celebrating their mutual victory, but Ron didn't feel a part of it at all.

They left Headquarters and stood right outside the door. Both Alan and Richard stared fiercely at him with their hands crossed over their chests. Ron couldn't help but to think back to his childhood; this was how the twins would always appear just before tackling him to the ground.

"You know why we're out here, don't you?" Richard asked.

"Yes, sir," Ron said, shivering in the misty weather. "This is about the fight I got into yesterday."

"Not just yesterday, Weasley, but all the time," Alan said. "Yes, you and Turner are still here, which means that we believe your roles during the confrontation weren't as extreme as was Neary's."

"And you proved last night during your examination that you possess the necessary skills needed to continue on," Richard said. "We wouldn't have added your name to the list if we didn't believe that; however, Weasley, we did have a discussion about your temper and how it's disruptive, reckless, and juvenile."

Ron clenched his jaw; he hated being lectured about his temper. He knew that he had one, and he tried as bloody hard as he could to keep it under control. As a kid, his parents and even Bill would lecture him on the matter. Ron didn't need his camp instructors doing the same thing. "I'm sorry, sir," he said.

"I don't think you are, Weasley," Alan said boldly. "I've worked with you since October, and that attitude you have is just as blatant as ever. Now, I do appreciate your compassion, but I won't tolerate your disrespect or your need to throw your fists at everything. We know you're a war hero; you can stop showing off."

Ron's ears started burning; he hid his balled fists behind his back. "I'm not showing off, sir. I just don't like seeing my mates getting beat on."

"Who does?" Richard asked. "We all have moments where we really want to de-bollock someone or call bullshit on a matter, but it

doesn't mean that we should. You've got to have some tact to go along with that defensive nature you have if you want to be a real Auror. Yes, Weasley?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said.

Alan raised an eyebrow at him. "I don't know, Weasley. You're nodding and saying yes, but I don't think you're hearing us. Look, everyone here is capable of taking care of themselves. They wouldn't be in the program if they couldn't. That means that you don't need to jump in every time something happens. You've got to control yourself and not take things personally. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir." He'd heard all this before; hearing it again only made him feel more like a tit. Ron didn't know what was the matter with him.

"We respect your fire, Weasley," Richard said. "You'll need it to survive here, but you've got to manage it and learn when to let it out. You don't have to fight every battle; especially if they're not yours."

"But sometimes they are," Ron said. He wasn't sure how to explain his actions but he had to try. Ron looked to Alan. "Sir, I felt like I needed to stick up for Roger that day during field practice."

"I know you did, Weasley," Alan said, nodding.

"And the night Harry and I foughtâ€¦well, yeah, that was stupid," Ron said, rubbing his neck, "but going after him the night of our first hostage simulation and keeping Jack from hurting Conor were things I had to do. I thought being an Auror was all about fighting for justice?"

"It most certainly is, but there's a big difference between battling a dark wizard and pulling a campmate off another during a heated training session, Weasley," Richard said. "Being an Auror doesn't entail acting out on every little unmerited detail. You have to think, take a bloody second to breathe, and let things go every now and again. Your temper and impulsive behavior will harm you more than it will help if you're not careful."

Ron didn't know what to think. He knew his instructors were probably right and he wanted to absorb their advice, but it was difficult. There were some things about him that didn't appear as if they'd ever go away, and Ron didn't know who he would be if they did suddenly disappear.

"I understand what you're saying, sir," he said, regardless of his feelings.

"Good, because this is your last chance," Alan said. "If I have to pry you off of someone or tell you to shut up and stay out of it one more time, then the next discussion we'll be having will be in regards to your exit slip. Is that understood?"

Ron kept his fists balled so he wouldn't start ripping his hair out. "Yes, sir."

"Do you have any more questions?" Alan asked.

Ron already felt irate, embarrassed, and defeated. It would probably be for the best if he kept his mouth shut, but he had to know. "Actually, yes. Um, w-where's Conor?"

"I told you that we dismissed five people," Richard said indifferently. "Mr. Neary was one of them."

Ron's heart dropped to the bottom of his trainers. There was a ringing in his ear and an annoying throb against his temple. "B-but," he said breathlessly, "he was just defending himself yesterday. Conor thought Olivia was being severely hurt."

"It's really none of your business, Weasley," Alan said, "but Mr. Neary's dismissal wasn't solely based on the fight."

Ron couldn't believe what he was hearing; it wasn't making sense. "Then what was it based on? Conor was brilliant at a lot of things. He was a really great person and was helpful and smart and-andâ€œ!" He closed his eyes, swiftly realizing what he was doing. Ron let out a defeated breath, "and I need toâ€œ;I need to stay out of it."

"Very good, Weasley. You're already getting better," Richard said. Ron ran his fingers through his hair, pulling at the strands a bit.

"Weasley," Alan said, touching his shoulder. "It's important to remember that no one's place here is guaranteed. The only thing you can do is the very best you can for yourself. Protecting Conor didn't keep him here, and if you do something similar for someone else, then it'll take you out of the program. So, I suggest you enjoy the fact that you're still here and make better choices. You're dismissed."

Alan and Richard walked away; Ron stared after them. He wanted to shout out why Conor had acted the way he did but he couldn't. Ron was powerless. He was also cold and slightly wet, despite the fact that his skin was burning and he felt a fire blazing inside of him. He walked back into the building and made his way to his room.

Ron couldn't believe that Conor was gone. After everything they had gone through yesterday, it didn't make sense that it would end now. He had only just found out about who Conor really was; Ron couldn't just forget it all and move on. He was Ron's mate and Ron wanted to help him. Conor and his family had already been through so much; getting chucked out would probably only make things worse.

Ron touched the knob on his door but didn't feel the strength to turn it. He'd had no idea that his brief moment last night with Conor would be the end of things. Ron hadn't even had a chance to tell him a proper goodbye.

Ron opened the door; Harry and Jack were inside. "Are you all right, mate?" Harry asked, standing up from his bed.

"I'm fine. They just wanted to talk to me about the fight," Ron said.

"I'm glad that I didn't get punished for the idiocy of you and Neary," Jack said.

Ron ignored the stinging infuriation and rolled his neck. He focused his attention on Harry. "I'm still here, but I need to watch it."

"And you will," Harry said, nodding. "So did they say anything about Conor?"

Ron wasn't sure if he could say it because he still couldn't quite believe it. "Y-yes. They, um, Conor's gone."

Harry's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"I wouldn't make this up. They said it wasn't only because of the fight, but I don't know if I believe them."

"I wouldn't be surprised if it was because of the fight," Jack said. "It's a shame too."

"Bloody hell, Jack! We're trying to talk here," Harry said.

"No, let him finish," Ron said, staring right at Jack. "Why is it a shame? Did you want to try to get another hit in this morning?"

"No," Jack said simply. "Other than the fight that he started, I've never had any ill will towards him. Conor was all right. It's a shame that he can't still be here."

For some reason, Jack's words made Ron feel sick. "Well, if you would have just kept your fucking mouth shut about his sister, then maybe he would still be here."

"Ron," Harry said.

"You can't blame me for Conor's shortcomings," Jack said. "He could've held himself together but he didn't. He chose to act like an animal, so he was put down."

"How dare you talk about him like that?" Ron said, walking over to him. "After all those times he kept me from kicking your arse, I'd think you'd be praising him."

"I leave the cock buffering to you, Weasley," Jack said dully. "You're the one who acts like you're taking it up the arse from Potter. You're also the one who latched onto Roger and Conor. If only your girlfriend - or maybe even your other girlfriend Olivia knew you were a-"

"ARGH!" Ron raised his wand, leaping in Jack's direction. Harry yanked him back at rapid speed and threw a protection charm in front of Jack.

"Get the fuck out of here, Jack!" Harry yelled.

"You fucking wanker!" Jack said from the other side of the spell. "You're mental, just like Conor. You'll be out of here by this time tomorrow!"

"Fuck you!" Ron shouted.

"Get OUT, Turner!" Harry demanded. Jack shook his head at Ron then scurried out of the room.

Harry flung a locking charm at the door before letting Ron go. Ron growled, kicking Harry's bed. He was fuming and couldn't see straight. "Ronâ€!"

"I know. I bloody know, Harry!"

"If you know, then why did you attack him?" Harry asked. "It's not as if Jack and the other fuckers here haven't made that joke about us before."

"I don't care about that!" Ron rushed. "He was talking about Hermione and-"

"-and what? You had to beat him up?" Harry asked. "Call me a tit, Ron, but that sounds exactly like what Conor was saying yesterday about his sister."

"And I fucking understand why." Ron roughly rubbed his face. "Jack just gets under your skin in a way that makes you mental."

"But you told me that you were used to it. I thought you were over his bullshit?"

"Well, I guess I'm not, Harry," Ron muttered. "I reckon Jack saying things about Conor and Roger and us shagging and me cheating on Hermione with Olivia is all a bit too much to handle right now."

Ron sat on Harry's bed. His hands were badly shaking. "We're close because we've been best mates for seven years, Harry; Roger and Conor were my first roommates and we got on well; I spend time with Olivia because she's a really good friend, and I would curse my own heart out before I ever betrayed Hermione like that."

"Ron," Harry said, sitting next to him, "you don't have to explain anything to me; I know. I also know that you're not this upset because of Jack. This is about Conor."

"Harry..."

"I get that you're angry," Harry added, "but you can't keep lashing out at every little remark that gets under your skin."

Ron didn't like how Harry was sounding so much like the instructors. "You don't understand, Harry. You don't get what Conor has been going through or why things happened the way they did."

"So tell me."

"No! I mean it won't make a difference," Ron quickly said. "Conor is gone, and it's rubbish that he is." He stood up. "Why do I even need to tell you this? You should understand that I'm upset and that Jack is trying to get me thrown out."

"I do, Ron," Harry said. "That's why I'm trying to get you to calm down and not curse Jack or anyone else who says the wrong thing to you. Bloody hell, you just got a pardon and already you're jeopardizing it. It's not honoring Conor in any way. It's just thick."

"Piss off, Harry!" Ron shot. "I don't need you to lecture me. I'm sorry if I'm a little tense right now but it seems as if the trainees from my original cabin are getting picked off one by one."

"And you'll be next if you don't get your head out of your arse!" Harry shouted, standing up as well. "Your bad temper is always getting you into trouble. One of these days, you won't be so lucky."

Ron laughed. "That's rich coming from you. I can name at least five separate occasions each year at Hogwarts when you've lost your head. I can name a few instances here too. The only difference between you and me is that I'm always the one to get the bollocking while you get off with a lighthearted sermon."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't give me that shit, Harry," Ron said. "You and I both know that you always get pardoned for your behavior because you're you. It's been that way since we were eleven and it still reigns true even here. You'll always be able to do whatever you want and never have to answer to anyone or suffer any real consequences."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "That's one of the dumbest things I've ever heard, Ron, which is really saying something coming from you."

"Ah, good one, mate," Ron said darkly. "Well, call it stupid, but we both know that if you would've jumped into the fight too, I'd still be the only one in real trouble now. I may have a temper but I also have common sense. From day one there's been a name permanently inked at the top of everyone's list. That's yours."

Harry's chest rose and fell jaggedly; he glared at Ron for awhile. "You know what, Ron? Sometimes I forget how much of a fucking arsehole you can be, but then you say rubbish like that, and I remember why I can't stand you sometimes. You want to beat

up every person here and get chucked out? Fine - go ahead, because as you say, it won't affect me at all."

Harry grabbed his running gear then left the room, slamming the door behind him. Ron didn't know what to do, but he knew that he couldn't go after Harry. He was too angry, devastated, and slightly shocked to think or speak clearly.

During the morning drill, Ron tried his best not to let his troubling thoughts affect his running and flying abilities, but it did. Though he no longer had extra laps, he was still one of the last to finish the entire exercise.

Ron didn't even have time to settle after breakfast and his shower because he had to meet with Mr. Nelson. It was the worst bloody day to see him. There was so much that Ron could say, but he didn't want to utter a word to his mental Healer. Ron needed to find a way to get in touch with Conor; he had to talk to Harry; Ron even wanted to check the mailing cabin and see if any letters from his family had come. Ron simply had to have a word with everyone except for Mr. Nelson, which made everything all the more bollocks because Ron was required to talk to him.

On the way to Mr. Nelson's cabin, Ron told himself to relax and clear his mind, but his hands were still shaking and his nerves were all over the place. He knocked on the door but didn't bother waiting for an answer before walking in. Ron pulled the wooden chair up to Mr. Nelson's desk and flopped down on it.

Mr. Nelson looked Ron over as if his body language was telling him everything he needed to know. "Good afternoon, Ron," he said calmly.

"Hi," Ron said. He had to focus on the floor because he couldn't stand Mr. Nelson's gaze. "Look, um, I really don't feel like talking. I've had it rough today."

"That could be all the more reason to talk," Mr. Nelson said, "however, I won't push you tell me what's bothering you. I will say though that we have to engage in some sort of conversation."

"Why?" Ron asked in frustration. "If these sessions are supposed to be about me, then why can't I decide if I talk or not? It isn't fair - none of this is fair!"

Mr. Nelson sat back in his chair, flipping his quill smoothly between his fingers. "None of what is fair, Ron?"

Ron had said too much. Now Mr. Nelson had something to question him about and constantly pick at until he spilled everything. He'd have to start talking about his fight with Harry, which would turn into the horrible things Jack had said. Then, Ron would be forced to divulge the real reason why he was so angry and gutted. If he did that, then he'd have to talk about Conor leaving and why now was the worst bloody time for that to happen. There was too much between them to speak of. Ron knew all about Conor's family and what had happened to his sister. His sister

Kaitlin had been tortured and raped by Snatchers when she was only fourteen.

All of a sudden, Ron thought about Ginny at fourteen and made the mistake of letting his mind wander. He envisioned himself battling Death Eaters at the Ministry with Harry, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, and Neville. He thought about getting attacked by the brains and letting Ginny out of his sight. The Death Eaters could have easily taken her and used her as bait. They could've done the same things to her as the Snatchers had done to Kaitlin. Lucius bloody Malfoy and the sadistic bitch Bellatrix could have tortured Ginny together just to get what they wanted out of Harry.

"G-Ginny," Ron rasped, stumbling out of his chair. He tripped backwards until his legs hit the couch. He collapsed onto it, clutching the cushion. Ron couldn't breathe; his heart was racing and he felt his whole body seize up. Nothing around him was clear, but everything was heightened and extreme. Ron was burning up; he knew he wouldn't survive.

"Ron - Ron!"

"G-Ginny," Ron choked out. "I - I can't."

"Ron, listen to me: you are not dying. You're just having a panic attack." Mr. Nelson spoke clearly in his ear and was gripping his shoulder very hard. His firm grip was the only thing that was keeping Ron from blacking out.

Ron tried to breathe but there was no air; he kept blinking but he couldn't see anything. There was only black fog and the fear that he was moments away from dying.

"Ron, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth," Mr. Nelson told him. "Concentrate on your breathing. Hear and feel yourself doing it. Inhale your strength and knowledge of what's real, then exhale your fears. Let the panic slip right out of you."

"Iâ€¦I can't," Ron wheezed.

"Yes, you can. Inhale and count to five, then let it go. Let it go, Ron. All you have to do is concentrate, breathe, and count. You can do it."

Ron attempted to follow Mr. Nelson's instructions. He tried to focus and remember how to breathe. He'd been inhaling for as long as he'd been alive; there was no reason to think that he couldn't now. Ron breathed in through his nose.

"Good. Now count to five, then let it go," Mr. Nelson instructed. "It's only breathing and they're just numbers. You can handle it." Ron told himself that five wasn't that big of a number. He counted in his head, then exhaled. "Good job, Ron. Now, keep doing that until your fear is gone. It's that simple. Tell yourself so."

Ron nodded, then repeated the process. He performed the breathe-and-count exercise and used all of his strength to do it. Ron was able to convince himself that he wasn't going to die and that Ginny was okay. He did this for hours it seemed, but finally reached the point where he could hear and feel his breaths evening out and his heart slowing down. Fresh air entered him as the polluted lot left him. He was finally able to somehow release all the dirty air that contained the things that were making him panic.

At long last, Ron could see and his muscles relaxed. He couldn't believe that he'd had an attack in front of Mr. Nelson. He was a complete stranger and an authority figure. For some reason, however, Ron wasn't scared. In fact, all he felt at the moment was thirst. "M-Mr. Nelson?"

"It's okay. You did very well, Ron." Mr. Nelson got up but quickly came back with a bottle of water.

Ron drank it down fast and squeezed the bottle in his hand. He moaned. The water tasted so good and the cold liquid healed his body. Ron wiped his mouth and was unsure of what to say. "U-umâ€¢thank you."

"You did everything, Ron," Mr. Nelson said. "You concentrated, counted and breathed."

Ron gulped down the last bit of his water. He felt horribly flushed and bare. He peeked at Mr. Nelson who was giving him a deep look. It wasn't pity, exactly - like how others had looked at him afterwards. Mr. Nelson purely looked concerned. Ron was at a loss. He hadn't planned on having an attack in front of his Mental Healer, but now that he had, Ron actually felt a weight lift from his shoulders. His anxiety had once again been exposed but in front of the right person this time; Ron couldn't deny that. He also couldn't deny that he'd known for awhile that this would happen again. Ron's nerves had simply been too chaotic for him to hold everything in.

"Is there something you want to say, Ron?" Mr. Nelson asked.

There were many different ways that Ron could've answered; he chose what was closest to his heart. "I'm not mad," he said quietly.

Mr. Nelson shook his head. "No, I don't believe you are."

"Iâ€¢I don't know why this is happening to me, Mr. Nelson. Why me?"

"Do you want to know what I think?" Mr. Nelson asked.

"Yes, please," Ron said in earnest.

"I believe that you've developed a heightened sensitivity to danger, Ron. The moment that the life of someone you care deeply about is threatened or is linked to peril in any way, you have these attacks."

"But why?" Ron asked. "Why now?"

"Because you witnessed your brother's death, which was extremely traumatic and has strained your mind and body a great deal," Mr. Nelson said. "There is no standard way of coping with that type of anxiety. In your case, Ron, your mind has found a way to defend itself against that kind of pain. Any time you reach a level of distress that's similar to what you experienced the night your brother died, your mind shuts your body down. Believe it or not, it is a form of protection."

Ron rubbed his eyes and was surprised when he felt wetness on his fingertips. He sniffled, wiping under his nose with his sleeve.
"M'sorry."

"Don't be." Mr. Nelson used his wand to levitate tissues over to him.

"It's justâ€œ; hearing it all explained like that is overwhelming - but good too."

"Good?"

"I mean, it's not good that this is happening to me. I just mean thatâ€œ; for so long I've thought that I was alone and mad and weak," Ron said. "You make it sound like what's happening to me is something with an origin. You know - something that can be explained, something normalâ€œ; something that might go away."

"Oh, Ron," Mr. Nelson said. "A dozen people can all experience the same traumatic event but only one may develop anxiety attacks afterwards. It doesn't mean that one person is weaker or abnormal, nor does it mean the people who don't develop them are better off. You most certainly are normal, and this type of anxiety can be managed if not totally expunged in time. You simply have to make an effort."

A part of Ron wasn't sure if he could. He didn't want to talk about his pain and fears; he certainly didn't want to divulge the images and sounds that drove him to the breaking point. Ron knew though that he would keep shaking, having outbursts, and panicking if he didn't. Ron would lose himself to the heavy darkness on his shoulders just like Conor had. He couldn't let that happen.

Ron looked at his Healer. Mr. Nelson was there to help him and nothing else. He'd talked Ron through an attack and had explained why all of this had started in his head. Ron needed to start trusting people other than Hermione and Harry with this. Ron had to be honest and put his faith in someone else so he could get better.

"Mr. Nelson, can I tell you about my day so far?" Ron asked.

"Of course you can, Ron. This is your time."

Ron nodded, rubbing his itching palms into his knees. "Um, can I sit here?"

"Sure," Mr. Nelson said. "Would you like me to go back to my desk?"

"No," Ron whispered, shaking his head. "Stay."

Mr. Nelson scooted back a little, resting his arm on the couch. Ron completely faced him and took a deep breath. There was so much going on in his head; the best thing to do was to get it out.

Without disclosing his name, Ron talked about Conor's dismissal and a bit about what had happened to his family. He discussed the fight he'd had with Harry and what had triggered him to have the attack in the first place. Ron even talked about how he'd been shaking so badly lately that it was sometimes hard to hold his wand, and how he'd developed a habit of clenching his jaw which gave him headaches.

Ron had never talked to anyone about these things before; letting everything go made him feel less tense. It wasn't easy though, and he couldn't help but feel guilty because Mr. Nelson now knew things about him that his family, best mate, and girlfriend didn't even know.

Before he left the cabin, Mr. Nelson told him that they could begin talking more in depth about his panic attacks and Fred if he wanted to. Ron wasn't sure if he was ready, but something told him that he needed to be. He'd been silent long enough.

Ron stopped by the mailing cabin and smiled when he picked up a thick envelope from his parents. He leaned against the side of the building, opening it. His parents usually sent him separate letters and his mother's was always on top.

Hello sweetheart,

I hope you're doing all right and that you're keeping warm. Your father and brothers have assured me that you learned how to keep warm out there ages ago, but I still worry. I have a right to as your mother. I can only imagine how cold and wet the weather gets, and I can only assume that cloaks and warming charms aren't necessities to your trainers. Regardless of the fact, I'd still like for you to keep as bundled up as possible. Let me know in your letter back if you'd fancy me sending you long pajamas and thicker quilts. I'll be more than happy to make something for you, Ron.

Listen to me! You're in Auror training and I'm writing to you about long pajamas! I guess I'm still adjusting to all this. It wasn't too long ago that I wrote Ginny a similar letter. You both are just so grown up now and are doing so well independently. I'm so very proud of you and all that you're doing, Ron. I simply wish that I could see you more often. Before you know it, you'll be nineteen and a Lambrick graduate (I have full confidence in this). Time is going by so fast, sweetheart, yet I feel as if

there's so much still to do as a family. Speaking of family, Percy and Bill are so very sweet. They stop by the house a lot, and on days when Arthur works overtime, one of them spends the afternoon with me. Even Fleur, the dear, comes by a lot more often. Your brothers must worry about me, and maybe I've given them reason to, but I am doing much better. I've been exchanging letters with George, I've cleaned the attic, and I've kept Fred's plot looking nice. It feels good to do things again. I'm sure you can understand that.

Well, I won't take up too much more of your time. I know you're busy and you've probably got strict policies regarding the time you're permitted to read letters from home. I was going to send you fudge but I remembered that sending food is prohibited. That still seems odd to me. You are my youngest son. As your mother, I should be allowed to send you food - especially since I have no idea if you're eating properly. Oh, Ronnie dear, I digress.

I love you so very much,

Mum

Ron chuckled softly as he opened his dad's letter next.

Hi son,

I just peeked over at your mum's letter and it appears as if she's determined to write you a novel. I, on the other hand, will keep things brief. I know you, like me, can only read a letter that's not from your beloved for so long. I take no offense; I understand. I just want to let you know that your dear ol' parents are doing okay. Bill and Percy come by the house often to keep your mum company because, whether she admits it or not, she gets lonely. As for me, I can't seem to escape work. The Ministry has been busy due to all the capturing of Death Eaters and dark wizards. I've attached a few articles for you and Harry to read. These people have given the Auror and Magical Law Enforcement Department hell for years. Finally bringing them into custody is a big win for the good guys. We're getting somewhere, Ron. You, Harry, and Hermione have done so much. It's time the older crowd follows your lead.

I've been talking to Kingsley a lot about becoming an Auror. Merlin, Ron, I have so much respect for you and everything you go through. I can't imagine how many pairs of bollocks you've kicked in (don't tell your mother I'm cheering you on about this) and how much you and Harry are learning. I hope you two are all right. I remember being restless at your age with my best mate. I can only imagine how it's going for you two. It must get dark sometimes. Just remember to look after each other and keep things as light as you can.

Speaking of keeping things 'light', I must tell you this: I've been mailing Mr. Granger (the Muggle way) for a couple of weeks now and the other day we went to a Muggle shop for coffee â€“ can I just say that I love Muggle shops? Anyway, we talked about getting a chance to really spend some time together, and we decided that Valentine's Day would be the best time to do so. It

would be a great atmosphere to discuss things, and as husbands it's always good to surprise the wives. I'm sure your mother and Mrs. Granger would love to have a nice dinner and relax. Now, I'm not sure if Mr. Granger plans to tell Hermione, but I had to tell you. Don't worry either; I won't bring any embarrassing photos or anything. It'll just be a nice time to finally meet our future in-laws, and talk as parents about where you and Hermione are and how we feel about it. Plus, I'm hoping they'll invite us back to their house so I can see how they work their dishwasher.

Blimey, I've written more than Molly. She's laughing at me right now, you know? I better conclude this. Well, I can't wait to see you, Ron. I'm sure you're just as big as Charlie now. I'll keep you updated on the Valentine's Day idea and anything else that develops at work. Stay safe, strong, and write to me if you ever need anything.

I love you, my boy,

Dad

Ron held his parents' letters in either hand. He glanced back and forth between them and was overcome with emotion. He was relieved that they were okay and were putting their lives back together. Though nervous, he was also excited about his parents spending a day with the Grangers. His mum and dad were trying so hard and were being the best parents that anyone could ever bloody ask for, but Ron couldn't write them back yet. They wouldn't admire him so much if they knew that he had gotten into trouble again. His mum would be disappointed to find out that he was losing his temper and fighting, and his dad would be disheartened to hear that he had once again pushed Harry away.

Ron had to do better for them. He had to give them something worth talking about in his return letter. Yes, he'd made it to the next phase, but he wanted to have more to say to them. Ron needed to let his parents know that he was improving, he and Harry were closer than ever, and that his level of stress wasn't affecting him. Though none of that was true right now, it would be.

He read over their last lines of affection, hope, and praise. Ron loved his parents so fucking much; their letters had been exactly what he needed at the time. Though he was far away and felt a bit of disconnection to them because of how incased he was in Lambrick, they had somehow known how to make him feel better. Ron read their letters a second time and felt more capable. His mum and dad were taking care of themselves. He had to start doing the same - honestly this time.

Ron spent most of his Sunday writing in his tactics journal and cleaning his broom outside. He couldn't stand the thought of being across the hall from Conor's room and not seeing him inside. It pained him to think about how abruptly things had ended between them. At least with Roger Ron had been able to say goodbye. This time, there was no warning. He had no idea what Conor was doing right now or where he was. All Ron could hope was that he was at home or at least someplace safe.

Ron couldn't even stay in the canteen for dinner for too long. It was bad enough that Conor's seat was vacant; Harry completely ignoring him made things worse. Ron left before finishing his meal and decided to go to bed. He tried to fall asleep but he couldn't.

Ron sighed irritably; he needed to do something to help clear his mind. He slipped his trainers on then left the room. He walked down the corridor, knocking on the last door. It only took a couple of seconds before it opened.

"Ron?" Olivia said; she hadn't been at dinner either.

"Hi," he said quietly. "Um, I know you're probably not up for it tonight but—"

"— a walk sounds brilliant." She closed the door behind her then hastily guided them out of the building. Once they were outside, Olivia squatted and took out her hair tie. She ran her fingers through the black locks that flowed around her face.

Ron kneeled beside her. "Are you okay?"

Olivia finally uncovered her face. "I'm fine," she said. "I just needed to get out of there. The Ruins can be really smothering sometimes."

"I agree. That's why I had to get away, you know?"

Olivia nodded as she kept her focus on him. "I know exactly what you mean."

"Come on," Ron said, helping her up.

They were quiet as they walked the trail, which Ron didn't mind. This was what he had wanted. For whatever reason, he gained some sort of peace on the trail and Olivia often helped him reach a level of calm that he couldn't on his own.

"I can't believe this," Olivia whispered after ages of walking in silence.

"What?" he asked.

"What do you think? Conorâ€¢being gone. Charlotte keeps telling me that I shouldn't be as upset as I am. I guess I'm just not as strong as she is."

"I don't think that's true," Ron said. "Letty didn't spend as much time with him as you did."

"Are you upset?" she asked.

"Of course I am, Olivia. I'm fucking gutted. Conor and I have been good mates since we started here. I wish things were different."

"Me too. I'm really going to miss him," Olivia said. "I don't know though. He could be happy about this."

He gave her a look. "What makes you think that?"

She shrugged. "For the last few weeks that Conor was here, every time I talked to him, it seemed like he didn't want to be hereâ€" like he hated everything."

Ron rubbed his neck; he couldn't tell Olivia the truth. "Wellâ€; even if he did, I'm sure he didn't expect to get chucked out. Conor didn't deserve that."

"I don't think he did either, Ron," Olivia said. "Fucking hellâ€; I can't help but feel responsible. I should've assured him more that Jack wasn't hurting me."

"It wasn't your fault," Ron said, wishing that he could tell her why. "Conorâ€; he was already in a state. What happened during that last practice was just the end of it."

She stopped walking. "Urgh! This frustrates me more than anything else. I hate it when bad things happen to good people."

Ron nodded, feeling a little better. "Or even worse: when good fortune finds bad people."

"There's just so few of us left â€" especially from the east. Our little pack is breaking up." Olivia let out an unsteady breath as she rubbed her face.

Ron touched her hand for a moment. "Oi, we're still here, so is Ben andâ€;"

"Jack?" she said with a small grin.

He rolled his eyes. "I thought you said pack â€" not pricks."

Olivia laughed. "I wouldn't be that upset if he were next." She grew a little more serious. "I have to tell you, Ron, I thought you would be chucked after the fight."

"You're not the only one," he said.

"I'm really glad that you're still here."

"So am I."

She looked him right in the eyes, snapping her hair tie on her wrist. "Do you think we'll both make it to the end?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I hope so."

"So do I," Olivia said. "It's all just so much sometimes. Fucking hell, Ronâ€;"

"I know." Ron pulled her into a hug; she hugged him back. He told himself to be strong for her and for himself. It was nice though

to see someone as gutted as he was. He hated that Conor was gone, but it was good that Olivia was still around. Ron closed his eyes, breathing in fresh air and letting out the miserable bits.

"Did you hear that?" he suddenly asked, pulling away.

Olivia opened her eyes. "Hear what?"

Ron put a finger to his lips, looking around the darkness. It had been faint but he was sure that he heard it. "That," he said. "Did you hear it?" Olivia leaned her head in and stood very still. Ron heard the noise again.

"I heard it," she said. "It sounds likeâ€¢"

"A person," he said. "Let's go." They walked further down the trail and the sound grew louder. It was a female voice, and she sounded like she was in pain. "Letty's at dinner so that must be Michelle. I think she's over there by those trees."

Olivia didn't appear too worried. "I don't think we should bother her."

"I know she's not the greatest person but if she's in trouble then we should help."

"Ronâ€¢"

Ron didn't listen to her. He followed the sound of Michelle's moans of pain and didn't stop until the noise was right at his ear. He walked from behind a tree and froze. Ron stood there in total shock and awe as he watched two figures go at it against a tree. Michelle's body moved up with each thrust that the bloke attached to her gave, and she moaned and whimpered repeatedly.

Ron felt a tug on his arm. Olivia yanked him away then stood before him, smirking, with her hands on her hips.

"S-she's umâ€¢she'sâ€¢all right," Ron said as his entire face and neck flushed.

"Uh-huh," Olivia said. "Michelle seems to be a lot more than just 'all right' to me though. Who's she with?" Ron gaped at her. "She's my roommate, Ron," Olivia added. "I know about her activities."

"Alden, I think," he said. "I didn't know they were dating."

Olivia laughed but quickly covered her mouth. "Aww, that's adorable, Ron! You must be the only person left who still thinks you need a relationship to shag."

"Piss off," he mumbled. "I justâ€¢really?"

"I'm not surprised," Olivia said. "Michelle is very open about the fact that she can get what she wants â€" even here."

"Richard and Alan warned us though," Ron said. "I meanâ€¢they're shagging against a bloody tree and they're not exactly being discreet about it."

"They warned us not to feel each other up in the Ruins. Technically, Michelle and Alden aren't in the Ruins."

"You're on their side?"

"Never," Olivia said, waving a hand. "I have absolutely no respect for Michelle, and Alden is a real piece of work. It's none of my business though and it'll keep Michelle nice and docile when she comes back to the room."

Ron chuckled, rubbing his neck. "You're terrible."

"And you never cease to amaze me, Ron. I can't believe you're embarrassed."

"Leave me alone," Ron said. He opened his mouth but Michelle gave another high-pitched whimper. It made him feel hot, and his ears started to burn. Now more than ever, Ron desperately wanted to get back to Hermione.

"Ron?" Olivia asked.

"Huh?"

"Are you planning on joining them or something?"

"Whaâ€¢?!" he asked. "Are you mad? No â€“ never."

"Then how about we continue walking," Olivia said. "I don't fancy sticking around for the powerful conclusion." She nudged her head, then the two began walking the trail again.

They returned to the Ruins not too much later. Ron walked Olivia to her door. He cleared his throat. "Well, uh, that wasâ€¢educational," he said. "I don't reckon I'll be looking at either of them the same way again."

"I'm just glad that I didn't go back there with you," she said.

"You're cruel for not stopping me."

"Oi, I tried to and I didn't know for sure. You're the one who had to be Noble Weasley and rescue her."

Ron lightly pushed her arm. "I'm going to bed, you prat."

"Sweet dreams."

When Ron slipped back into his bed again, he laughed a little before closing his eyes and was finally able to fall asleep.

* * *

The next morning during drill, Ron promised himself that he would perform better than he had the previous day. He was still angry and upset, but he had to stop letting his emotions take control of him. He felt something hard knock against his shoulder and it almost made him lose balance.

Ron looked up to see Jack running ahead of him with grace and power. Watching him made Ron's blood boil. Jack was such a bloody prick but he always seemed to get the upper hand. Ron remembered the days of hand combat training; he would lay Jack right on his arse with ease. Those had been glorious times, and he, Conor, and Roger had spent many nights laughing and joking about it.

Ron started running faster and taking bigger strides. Roger and Conor were some of the first friends he'd ever had without help from family or making them with Harry and Hermione. They were his mates, and they were both gone now. Roger was probably the coolest bloke Ron had ever met, and his connection with Conor had gotten him through a lot. It wasn't fair that they weren't still around. It wasn't right that tossers like Jack talked badly about them after being dismissed.

Ron gritted his teeth, growling a little. He picked up speed, doubling the length of his strides. He'd never run so fast before. Ron felt the burn in his legs and chest, but it didn't stop him. He kept running because good-natured people did still exist in the world and they deserved to have someone fight for them. Ron couldn't give Roger the confidence and physical strength that he needed; he also couldn't relieve the Neary family of their pain; but Ron could at least run and try as hard as he possibly could so that he would make it through Lambrick and prove that good, decent blokes still had a say in things.

Ron growled again, lifting his knees more. He zoomed to the front of the group and found himself running alongside Jack. He looked at Ron in puzzlement, then started running faster. Ron kept up with his speed regardless of the extreme pain and slight dizziness. Every time Jack kicked up his pace, Ron mirrored his movement. They ran all six laps together and finished at the same time.

"B-bloodyâ€¢'ell, Weasley," Jack panted when they reached the flying pitch.

Ron gulped down air, clutching his stomach that felt moments away from oozing out of his arsehole. "I'mâ€¢I'm not a mental, Jack," he breathed. "I'm not a soft cock either." Ron limped on his broom, then flew into the air. He felt lifeless on his broom, but he couldn't slow down now. He flew all ten laps then dueled, using the fire that had been burning him for days.

After Ron was finished, he stood on the sidelines and tried not to topple over.

"Weasley," Alan said, walking over to him.

"Sir?" Ron asked. He clutched his broom for support.

"I've never seen you work so hard before." Alan's tone was indifferent but there was something in his expression that told Ron he meant his words.

"I-I'm trying," Ron said. "I'm still trying, sir."

"You're also listening," Alan said. "Yesterday, Richard and I told you about channeling your frustration and letting it out at the proper moment. It's good to see you doing that."

"Sir?"

"I don't believe that you would've pushed yourself to keep up with the front of the group if you hadn't had a shit few days beforehand," Alan said. "We've had this discussion before, Weasley. Power has little to do with physical strength." Alan pushed him, but Ron was able to keep balance and quickly brush his hand away. Ron might have been wobbly and completely exhausted, but he couldn't let Alan take advantage of him. He'd had enough.

Alan didn't seem upset. In fact, he smiled. "Do you understand now, Weasley?"

Ron peered at him and tried to read him. Slowly and steadily, he put the pieces together. "Yes, sir," he said, grinning a little. "I understand." Ron swung his broom over his shoulder then made his way down the hill.

After taking a shower and changing into fresh clothes, Ron took out the cinema picture of him and Hermione from his drawer. It seemed as if he'd taken those pictures with her so long ago. Ron hardly recognized the bloke sitting next to Hermione, and he found himself envying how happy and calm he appeared in the photos. Ron couldn't help but feel as if he'd taken his life for granted. Things had never been easy, but at least before coming to Lambrick he'd had time to breathe.

"Ron?"

Ron turned toward the door; Harry was standing just outside of it. "Hey," Ron rasped.

"Are you busy?" Harry asked. Ron shook his head, shrugging. Harry closed the door then sat next to him on the bed. They were quiet for awhile. "Can I see that?"

"Sure." Ron handed the picture to him.

Harry looked over it, smirking. "You two are so barmy."

"If barmy is a synonym for brilliant then cheers," Ron said. "Bloody hell, I can't believe it's only been a month since I've seen her. It feels like so much longer."

"I know what you mean," Harry said. "When I read a letter from Hermione, it's like she's right there next to me, but once I'm done reading, she's gone again."

Ron swallowed hard, nodding. "Are you still going to use a pass soon?"

"Yeah, I'm just not sure when. I reckon I should find out what the new unit is before I ask Richard for time off. What about you?"

"I'm not sure. I wanted to leave on Valentine's Day, but Eric told me that he'd asked for time that day and Richard told him that no one is going to be allowed to leave on the fourteenth."

"That's bollocks," Harry breathed. "But I reckon they want us to get used to spending holidays away from our girlfriends or whatever. It's what we'll encounter as Aurors." Ron nodded in agreement, then they once again went quiet. Ron could only stand it for so long.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry." Ron looked up at him. "I'm really, really sorry for everything."

"So am I," Harry said quietly. He went back to looking at the picture. "It's funny; I planned to come in here, yell at you, and possibly hit you before trying to work it out. I don't feel like doing any of that anymore though. Ron, all I want to do is let you know that I'm sorry for not taking how upset you were seriously. I can honestly say that I didn't care at the time."

"I don't blame you," Ron said. "I acted like such a fucker to you. I said stupid, horrible things that—"

"—were most likely true."

"No, Harry!"

Harry smiled sadly at him. "I don't really think you're stupid, Ron, and those thoughts didn't come out of nowhere. You've thought about it; and so have I. It's why I got so angry."

Harry let out a breath, shaking his head. "I'm not naïve; I notice how I'm treated in comparison to other people and how people talk to me here. You could be right about the trainers' attitudes about me. It doesn't mean that I'm not trying as hard as I can though or that I'm looking for handouts. I want to earn my place."

"I know that." Ron couldn't look at Hermione's face in the picture anymore because he felt so guilty. "Even if you are looked at differently, I know that you don't want to be. Harry, I said all of that stuff because I wanted to get to you. Hermione told me once that when I get really angry and I argue with

people, somehow I know just what to say to really get at them. She's right. I hate that she's right because that makes me a rubbish friend."

"Ron, you've been my best mate for seven years," Harry said. "I know you. You're not a rubbish friend, and I understand how you argue by now. I didn't help the matter by taking the piss out of you. Calling you thick was my way of getting to you."

"Yeah, you know I hate it when people call me that," Ron muttered. "We both acted like fuckers, I reckon."

"I really try to stay calm, Ron, but sometimes I just want to punch you in the face. I want you to shut up and get off my bollocks because I'm not asking for any of this."

"Well, sometimes I just want to kick you in the bollocks, Harry. I want you to shut up and realize that you're 'chosen' and always will be - no matter how much you ignore it. It's always going to be your title and you're going to get special treatment sometimes. I'm only human so I'm going to get angry, and pretending it's not happening is only going to make it worse."

"So, you're always going to blame me?" Harry asked.

"No, I just took it out on you this time because I'm an arsehole," Ron said, shrugging. "I'm sorry for that, Harry. You've always been the one stable thing I have here; I don't want to fuck that up."

"Neither do I, Ron," Harry said. "That's why you have to control yourself, and it's why I gave you a hard time yesterday. I don't want to wake up and find out that you got chucked out the night before."

Ron let out a low breath. "It's just really awful, Harry. When I was alone in east, Conor was there to help me. We were really good mates and he's the only trainee other than you who I trusted to talk about my panic attacks with. I hate that he's gone; especially!"

"What happened when you talked to him in the cabin, Ron?"

"Iâ€œI can't tell you, Harry. Just know that Conor felt like he had an important purpose here. I can't imagine what he's feeling now that he's no longer able to pursue it. I justâ€œI didn't even get a chance to say goodbye. I hate that."

"I can understand, but it's not like you'll never be able to see him again," Harry said. "I'm sure he'll send you a letter sometime."

"I reckonâ€œ"

"Listen, Ron, I'm not suggesting that Conor leaving shouldn't matter. All I'm saying is that exploding on people won't bring him back, mate. Trust me, I've been there."

Ron gave Harry a once-over. The bloke knew what he was talking about; Ron had to stop pushing him away because he did. "Harry?" he said.

"Yes?"

"If you still want to punch me in the face, you can. I probably deserve it. I mean, I'll kick your arse once you're done, of course, but if you want to get the hit in, I won't stop you."

Harry laughed. "Let's at least wait until we've eaten something before we do that."

"Sorted." Ron held out his hand. "I really need us to be okay, Harry. Are we?"

"We're good," Harry said, shaking his hand. He handed Ron back his picture. "I reckon Hermione would be proud of us. We're getting better at apologizing in a 'timely manner' as she'd say."

"Are you mad? She would have my bollocks if she knew that I was still acting like this."

"I thought you enjoyed her having your bollocks?"

"Gently cupped in her hands, yes," Ron said. "Tearing them off to wear as earrings, no."

"Ugh. That'd be one ugly pair of earrings."

"I couldn't agree more, mate," Ron said, patting Harry on the shoulder.

When they went to breakfast, Ron made a better effort to enjoy himself. It was hard though; he kept glancing at the empty seat on his left. Ron had been so sure that Conor would make it to the end. His absence was something that would take Ron awhile to get used to, and it would serve as a reminder that Ron had to do better regarding his own placement.

Alan, Richard, and Mr. Smith entered the meal cabin. Everyone sat up straight and gave them their full attention.

"Good morning, trainees," Mr. Smith said. "I first want to congratulate you all for passing through to this next stage of your training. I know it hasn't been easy, but with the third evaluation completed, you are certainly closer to reaching your goal."

"You lot still have a long way to go though," Alan said. "There is one major exam left that you will take at the end of your sixth and final unit here."

"That's right, Mr. Lewis. Today marks the first of your training in area five," Mr. Smith said. "We call this unit Special Skills because it incorporates everything you'll need to know in order to endure and succeed during a mission. This includes using

stealth while traveling, magical disguises, special tactics, and advanced wandless and nonverbal spells."

"You'll certainly discover how cumulative the different units have become in this unit," Richard said. "Everything you've learned since October will be important for Special Skills."

"Of course, there can't be better teachers to assist you through this section than the people who have tested and shaped you up from the very beginning." Mr. Smith gestured to Alan and Richard. "Trainees, Mr. Lewis and Mr. Jones will be your instructors for unit five."

Ron and Harry shared a quick look, then Ron began rubbing his palms into his thighs. He wasn't sure how he felt about Alan and Richard being his teachers. They would show no mercy and they already knew everyone's strengths and weakness.

"Don't hide your tears of joy on our behalf," Richard said. "Alan and I have been waiting for this moment for a long time. Special Skills happens to be what I got my honor in. I'm excited to work with you lot."

Mr. Smith chuckled softly. "Well, trainees, continue on with your breakfast and good luck with the rest of your day of training. Once more, congratulations." He patted both Alan and Richard on the shoulders before leaving the canteen.

Once he was out of sight, Richard clapped his hands together. "All right, chew and swallow what's already in your mouth or on your fork, then get your academics. Class starts soon and I don't tolerate tardiness."

"In fact, just gather all your belongings and head to the gate if you plan on being late for class," Alan added.

"Oh, shit," Ron breathed. He gulped down the rest of his water then scurried from his seat and out of the canteen with everyone else. He hurried to his room and chatted briskly with Harry about their new unit. Though they had to be taught by their section leaders, Ron was excited to learn Special Skills. This was the section of training he had heard the most about and was anxious to be a part of.

The group quickly joined Alan and Richard in their new classroom. It was a large cabin with a writing board on every wall. Ron's right hand started hurting already; he was sure that he was going to be taking a lot of notes.

"Take a seat anywhere," Alan said, leaning against the front desk next to Richard. "Much like during your health unit, you will be spending all of your morning and most of the afternoon in here. There is a lot to cover and only so much time to do so. So pay attention, ask questions, and give us your best effort."

"Yes, sir," all the trainees said together.

"Now, while this will be your hardest and most in-depth unit yet, I'm hoping that we can start to have some fun now," Richard said with a smile. "Being an Auror isn't all doom, blood, and gloom. We do enjoy ourselves and our work, and being an Auror is the coolest profession in my eyes. There are some wicked things you'll learn that you'll certainly be able to impress your girlfriends or boyfriends with." Everyone laughed even Alan.

"Before you lot can start showing off your new magic tricks though," Alan said, raising his hands. "You have to learn the new tactics and skills. So, take out a fresh piece of parchment because today we're going to talk about magical disguises and one of the oldest forms of concealing outfits that Aurors use."

Alan made a series of taps on one of the boards with the tip of his wand; words and diagrams gradually appeared. As Ron instantly recognized the ingredients and descriptions, a horrible taste invaded his mouth.

"We're going to start this unit off discussing the origin and function of Polyjuice Potion," Alan said.

Ron and Harry glanced at each other but swiftly turned away so they wouldn't burst into laughter. He couldn't believe that the bugger had once more found its way into his life. Ron was sure that he would go to his grave with the nasty concoction in his system.

While Alan and Richard lectured, Ron thought back to second year and watching Hermione brew Polyjuice calmly and proficiently. He'd known then that there was something incredibly special about her and that he would crave it his whole life. Ron remembered all the things he had learned from Hermione about the potion and everything they and Harry had gone through with it. Polyjuice was their potion and it would be disrespectful to their mutual friend and his love for Hermione if he didn't pay attention and get full marks in this area.

Ron and Harry raised their hands often during the lecture and talked about their experiences with the brew. Ron felt informed and rather cool as he explained his knowledge to the class. Ron had Hermione to thank for that; he desperately wished that she could've been in the cabin with them, smiling and cheering them on.

It was near dark by the time they arrived to field training, but for once Ron wasn't tired. He was still on edge from thinking about Hermione and Polyjuice.

"Because this is the Special Skills unit, we're going to be incorporating a lot of new magic while advancing spells you already know," Alan said. "Up until this point, you've been working with a lot of physical tactics and strategies, but it's time to really start focusing on your magic. Field practice will now be heavily dedicated to learning and progressing your spell work."

"Tonight, we're going to start with one of my favorite spells and one that you all should be familiar with: the Patronus Charm," Richard said. "As you know, this spell is not only used against dark creatures but it is an effective tool of communication and identification. As Aurors, you'll always need to be ready to produce your guardian as powerfully as you can."

"While it's not necessary for you to produce one that is corporal," Alan said, "advancing the strength of your Patronus as much as you can is vital. So, spread out and we'll begin."

Ron shared a grin with Harry before they spread out in the field. Once again, he wanted to laugh because they were going over something he felt okay doing. Ron knew that he shouldn't get too at ease since it was the first day of the new unit, but he couldn't help but feel a burst of confidence. All night they worked on strengthening their Patronuses; Ron was heavily reminded of his days in Dumbledore's Army.

He still didn't understand why his was a small yapping dog. As always, Harry's stag gracefully walked around and lit up the field; his wasn't the only one that was impressive though. Richard's Patronus was a large falcon, and Alan's fierce mongoose was quite extraordinary. Both Jack's ram and Michelle's scorpion seemed spot on with their personalities, and Ron found himself rather taken aback by Olivia's. She too had a corporal Patronus: it was a bold raven. It flew around her body in a protective way and peered at her as if they were carrying on a conversation. Ron found himself smiling as he watched them.

Once field training was over, Alan and Richard led them back to the meal cabin. Mr. Smith was waiting for them. They all lined up in formation; Ron tried not to feel nervous. Phillip had a wide smile on his face, which for some reason made him uneasy.

"I have one last announcement to give you lot today," Phillip said. "As Mr. Lewis and Mr. Jones told you when you first moved into the Ruins, you have to earn the extras that Lambrick Academy offers. By making it to the fifth phase of your training, you've earned one of those extras."

"It wasn't too long ago that we told you an important event would follow the third evolution; it takes place in only two days," Alan said. "Wednesday night, the Auror Department at the Ministry is hosting an Auror ball in conjunction with Lambrick Academy. You trainees will attend and will get to meet some of the Aurors in the department as well as other officials from the Ministry. That's why it was mandatory that you brought your dress robes."

"You'll socialize, get your names out there, tour the department, and learn the formal side of our profession," Richard said. "We have these balls quite often for recreational and political reasons."

"These gentlemen had you all write down the name of someone you would have as your guest to a formal party for a reason," Phillip said. "This morning I sent owls to all the guests you selected

and told them about the party, what the appropriate attire is, and when to arrive at the Ministry."

Ron's eyes grew wide. He could hardly breathe as he raised his trembling hand. "Y-you mean we get to spend the whole evening with the person whose name we wrote down?"

"That's correct, Mr. Weasley," Phillip said, still smiling. "You and your guest will attend the ball through its duration."

"Oh, Merlin," Ron breathed, rubbing his face. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. This couldn't be real. He'd been dreaming and aching for weeks to get five minutes with Hermione. He couldn't believe that he was going to be granted an entire evening with her.

"We do want you all to have fun with your guests and the people there, but by no means is this your opportunity to rebel or lose yourselves," Phillip said. "You are still representing Lambrick and my reputation will be on the line. This may be a night of relaxation and achievement, but I won't hesitate to dismiss any of you for ill behavior."

"We're informing you lot of this tonight in case any of you need to send urgent owls to your guests or gather your grooming supplies," Alan said. "As trainees, you will look your best and act the part. You'll still have morning drill on Wednesday, but we'll allow you the rest of the afternoon to get yourselves ready. Are there any questions?"

Harry raised his hand. "What if our date is in school on Wednesday?"

"That's another extra you're entitled to, Mr. Potter," Phillip said. "An official Lambrick seal will pardon your guest. Of course, if any inconveniences do occur, I will promptly let you know. As of now though, I received confirmations from almost everyone on the list. Well, if there aren't any more questions, then you're excused to wash and eat. On Wednesday, the section leaders and I will give you more information."

Ron could barely walk straight to the canteen. He wasn't even hungry anymore. All he could think about was spending an evening with Hermione. He wouldn't have to rush or keep checking his watch. He'd be able to take in her sounds and smells for as long as he fancied. Ron could touch her, talk to her, and gaze at her for hours. It seemed too good to be true - especially now when everything in his life appeared to be some sort of test.

Late that night, Ron and Harry snuck out of the Ruins and into the shower cabin like they sometimes did to talk. They talked for hours it seemed about finally getting a chance to spend real time with Hermione and Ginny without having to use a pass. Wednesday night would be exactly what they needed. The two of them had been through hell and their girlfriends would be their much-needed relief. Ron only wished that he had been told the good news sooner. He would've been able to turn his yapping dog into a fully-grown lion.

After they finally returned to their beds, Ron fell asleep with his cinema picture in his hand. It wouldn't be long until he was clutching the real thing.

* * *

***** Bloody hell how I've missed writing this Ron! lol. So, I know some things happened in this chapter that are rather disheartening. Trust me, I feel it too BUT if this story has shown anything then it's that things happen for a reason and EVERYTHING comes back in one way or another, promise. Nowâ€œ;who's that I see? It's got likeâ€œ; bushy brown hair I think. Hmmâ€œ;what could it mean? Thanks for reading and REVIEW! I can guarantee this chapter will be sooner than you think! :)

CHEERS!

* Chapter 50*: Shadow to light

Thank you all for the wonderful reviews! As promised, there's the chapter!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

It was damn near impossible for Ron to concentrate over the next two days. All he could think about was meeting up with Hermione. Ron couldn't wait to show her off; he knew that she would be the most amazing and gorgeous fucking person there. Finally, after months of talking about her, he would be able to introduce his campmates to the love of his life and one of the main reasons why he was fighting as hard as he was.

After they were dismissed Wednesday afternoon, Ron took a long shower in an attempt to erase every speck of mud, sweat, and blood off of his body. He then shaved, leaving a bit of stubble because Hermione fancied it, and even took the time to carefully comb his hair.

"I don't think I've ever seen you fuss so much in the mirror, Ron," Harry said as he changed into his dress robes.

"Leave me alone. I'm only giving a shit for Hermione's sake," Ron said. "She's going to look like a goddess and I don't want her having to haul a troll around all night."

"I didn't know you were a romantic, Ron," Eric said with a laugh as he too got ready.

"You have no idea, mate," Harry said. "Ron writes poetry for his girlfriend."

"Will you fuck off with the bloody poetry?" Ron threw his comb at Harry then started dabbing himself with cologne. As he did, he noticed the calluses on his palms and his chewed down fingernails; he hoped it wouldn't bother Hermione too much.

"Bugger," Ron breathed.

"What is it now?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," he said. "It's justâ€œthese trousers are tighter than I remember."

"So are mine," Eric said. "It doesn't bother me though. Tight fitting trousers make your cock look bigger."

"Smooth," Harry mumbled.

"It's true," Eric said as he buffed his shoes.

"See, Harry?" Ron said, gesturing to Eric. "Some blokes actually attempt to fix up for their girlfriends."

"I fix up," Harry said, "but there's no point in trying to do anything with my hair, and I can't exactly polish up my scar to make it more presentable. This is my look; I haven't had any complaints from Ginny so far."

Ron rolled his eyes, feeling disgusted. "You're a dirty twat."

"At least I'm not a stained dildo." Harry threw Ron's comb back at him.

The door opened and Jack came in. He was already dressed, and his hair was even more wavy and perfect than usual. "Richard said to put these on. We pin them to our lapels."

Ron took a small silver pin from him. It was in the shape of a shield and had a green jewel in the middle. "What's this for?"

"It's a sign of our status," Jack said. "We get a blue jewel if we graduate and a red one after a year of service."

"How do you know all of this?" Ron asked.

"My dad and grandfather are both Aurors who graduated from here, remember?"

"That's right," Eric said. "He's your date tonight, yeah?"

"He's not my date," Jack mumbled. "He's my guest. I don't have a girlfriend or a sibling worth bringing. Asking one of my mates who knows nothing about this would also be a waste of time. My dad was the best choice. He'll be able to introduce me to a lot of people."

"I reckon that's smart," Harry said.

"Yes, it is," Jack said, sticking out his chin arrogantly. "I'm glad he's coming."

Ron shook his head, then continued getting ready. He had a hard time believing that anyone could be happy about having their dad as their date.

Once the blokes cleared each other of bogies and embarrassing stains, they waited in the foyer with the rest of the group. Ron's nerves started to go wonky again but this time it was from anticipation. He still couldn't believe that he was going to see Hermione. Everyone around him was just as wound up, which only increased his excitement. It was rather bittersweet though. Ron wished that Conor was around to enjoy one of the first extras Lambrick had to offer.

"You lot look sharp," Ben said.

"Cheers," Ron said.

"Ron is desperately hoping that his girlfriend will think the same thing," Harry teased.

"While this four-eyed git couldn't care less about his girlfriend's opinion," Ron said. "My poor sister deserves better."

"Well, I won't have to wait long for my date's opinion," Ben said.

"How's that?" Harry asked.

Ben smiled. "Because she's already here. I'm going with Olivia."

"You asked her?" Ron asked.

"Actually, she asked me," Ben smugly said. "Neither one of us had anyone in particular who we wanted to write down on those slips that night, so she suggested that we go to the party together if the time ever came."

"That's brilliant," Ron said.

"I know, mate. There may be hope for us yet," Ben said, looking down the corridor towards the Ruins. Ron turned around too and waited for the girls. Ten minutes became fifteen, which turned into about twenty.

Richard paced in front of them; Ron had never seen him so impatient. "Alan, what's taking Grace, Young, and Clark so long?"

"They're girls, Rich," Alan said calmly. "They need a bit more time. We're still ahead of schedule, don't worry."

Richard checked his watch. "I don't understand how you can be so at ease."

"I grew up with three older sisters," Alan said, shrugging.

"I'm with Richard," Ron whispered to Harry. "I wanted a few minutes before Hermione arrived to get myself together; it looks like I won't be able to now."

"What do you need to get yourself together for?" he asked.

"Mate, I haven't seen her in over a month," Ron said. "I haven't talked to her, touched her, or caught so much as a whiff of her hair. I'll need a minute or two to get my head on so I don't jump Hermione the moment I see her."

"Ah, I see your point."

"I mean it. I might end up shagging her right on the floor," Ron continued. "I may not even care about making sure we use protection. If I don't get those two minutes, then Hermione could wind up returning to Hogwarts tonight with Ronald Jr. or sweet baby Rose in her stomach."

"Sweet baby Rose?" Harry asked, scrunching up his face.

Ron blushed, rubbing his neck. "Uh â€“ nothing. It-it's nothing."

It wasn't too much longer before Olivia, Letty, and Michelle finally emerged from the Ruins. The group then followed the instructors into a large room where Mr. Smith was waiting for them. He gave a speech about proper etiquette, but Ron didn't pay any attention to him. Instead, he thought about if he would hug or compliment Hermione first when he saw her. After the lecture, Phillip sprinkled a powder into two large fireplaces against a wall. Then, in small groups, they stepped into the green flames.

When Ron opened his eyes and stepped out, he was somewhere in the Ministry, most likely in the Auror Department.

"All right, remember your manners and have fun tonight," Phillip said once everyone was through. "You've earned this evening of relaxation but don't forget to socialize and introduce yourself to people. An Auror is never really off duty."

Ron rubbed his hands together, letting out a nervous breath as they walked down the long corridor leading to the ballroom. It'd been so long since he was in regular society and talked to people who weren't in a state of constant vigilance.

"Blimey," Ron breathed once they reached the room. Everything was lit up and looked so posh. Soft music was playing, and there were small round tables scattered about the room; some even had food and drinks on them. People from the Ministry and their guests were already on the floor talking and dancing. Ron instinctively brushed off his trousers but remembered that he wasn't in his dirty blacks.

"Feel weird?" Harry asked in his ear.

"Yeah. Where are all the wet leaves and mud?" Ron asked. He was dressed like everyone else, but he didn't quite feel like everyone else.

"We're away from camp, Ron. None of that is here." They shared a look. "Come on," Harry said. "Let's meet a few officials before the girls get here."

The two took off their cloaks and began introducing themselves to people. Ron was as polite as he could be and looked every person he met in the eye while shaking their hand firmly. Some of the people were complete strangers while others he was at least vaguely familiar with. Kingsley was there and even introduced Ron and Harry to a few of his colleagues. Ron knew that his face was red but he handled himself assertively. He had to make an effort because these were the people he would hopefully be working with in the future.

Ron felt a rush from meeting important figures but he also felt a little uneasy. While he was introducing himself for the first time to the Aurors, officials, and their guests, a lot of them already knew his name and had background information on him. People congratulated Ron, praised him for his brave efforts, and gave their condolences regarding Fred. He took it all as gracefully as he could, but Ron found himself putting up a front to everyone like he had right after the war. Though it'd been months since Fred's death, Ron still wasn't totally comfortable with people thanking him for his brother's sacrifice.

Ron took a break and stood against a wall. He checked his watch, wondering when their guests would start arriving. He really needed to see his girlfriend and sister.

"Tired already?" Olivia asked.

Ron turned to her. "No, I was just..."

Olivia had taken off her cloak so he was finally able to get a good look at her. She was wearing a navy blue dress that had dark purple trim. Her hair was down and curly, and there was a purple flower tucked behind her ear. Though Olivia didn't act girly, this look on her didn't seem out of place. In fact, it matched her features well.

Olivia softly chuckled after they were silent for a few moments. "Didn't know there was a girl under all that mud, did you?"

"I'm sorry," Ron rushed, rubbing his neck. "You look...you look really great."

She blushed. "Thank you. It's nice to wear real clothes for once. You look great too."

"Cheers."

Harry came over to them, sighing. "There doesn't seem to be a whole lot of point in introducing myself. People are coming up to me to talk."

"What else did you expect, Harry?" Olivia asked.

"The guests are starting to arrive," Ben said, walking over.
"You'll never guess who I just saw greet Richard with a kiss."

"Who?" Harry asked.

"See for yourself." Ben nudged his head; Ron followed the gesture. Richard had his arm firmly around Ms. Yule's waist and gave her a kiss on the forehead as they talked to Phillip.

"I bloody knew it!" Harry said. "He was far too invested in her class and too impatient tonight."

"At least someone's girlfriend is here," Ron mumbled. He looked around the room for Hermione but saw Jack instead standing next to a man who had to be his father; they had the same hair and burly build. Jack's dad was speaking right in his ear and Jack seemed incredibly uncomfortable.

"Letty's guest is here," Ben said, pointing to her. Letty was holding hands with a dark-haired girl and looked quite happy to see her.

"I thought you said her siblings were blondes, Harry?" Ron said.

"That's not her sister, Ron," Olivia said. "That's her girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?" Ron asked, crinkling his nose. He opened his mouth to ask what she meant, but his question was answered when he saw Letty hug the girl then give her a long, firm kiss on the mouth.

Ron's jaw dropped; he shared a look with both Harry and Ben.
"Girlfriend," they all said together.

"Wow," Harry said. "I-I had no idea."

Ron peeked over at the girls again. "It's brilliant even magical."

"Is it just me or did Letty suddenly become a wee bit cooler than she was before?"

"You blokes are hopeless!" Olivia said, hitting all three of them on the arm. "You really need to get out more."

"How about we go introduce ourselves to Letty's girlfriend, yeah?" Ben took Olivia's hand and swiftly led her across the floor.

"I reckon we now know why CeeCee wasn't keen on giving Conor CPR," Harry said with a laugh. "I'm gonna get something to drink before heading back onto the floor."

"I'm staying here," Ron said. "I'm sure Hermione and Ginny will be here soon." Harry gave him a nod then got lost in the crowd that was slowly growing in number.

Ron stayed by the entrance of the hall. He dug his hands deeply into his pockets, trying very hard not to get frustrated. The party was really picking up now as more people were arriving and more of Ron's campmates were reunited with siblings, friends, and girlfriends. He considered grabbing a drink but he didn't want to miss Hermione.

"Excuse me, sir; I'm looking for my boyfriend, Ronald Weasley. He's a Lambrick trainee and I can't seem to find him anywhere. At first I thought you might have been him. He's ginger like yourself, has similar dress robes, and is just as dashing. The only difference is that I don't recall him ever being as burly as you are, sir."

Ron closed his eyes as the words just spoken to him filled him up. His heart skipped a few beats while the rest of his body relaxed. Ron turned around; the breathtaking woman before him was wearing a dark brown cocktail dress that outlined her shape perfectly and was just low-cut enough to tease him. Her large, dark eyes seemed even bigger than usual because her brown hair was pinned up and completely out of her face. Never in Ron's life had he remembered her neck looking so delicious or her ears and jaw more gorgeous.

Ron knew that he had to do something but he was in a state. His hands were tingling, his body was throbbing, and he felt like he'd been hit hard in the head. The music and chatter around him muted; all the lights and people faded; all that existed was the woman before him who he'd been missing so much that it hurt.

"I-Iâ€¢I saw that bloke you're talking about earlier," Ron said after ages of silence. "I think a giant bird snatched him up and took him somewhere."

Hermione laughed faintly, taking a step toward him; Ron did the same. "Well, that's unfortunate news," she said.

"Why is that?" Ron asked, taking her hand and interlocking their fingers. He couldn't believe that one touch could make him feel so good.

"Because I love him dearly," Hermione said, taking his other hand, "and I've missed him so much that I think—"

Ron couldn't take it anymore. He grabbed hold of her, kissing her hard. He moaned as she deeply sighed, wrapping her arms around his neck. Ron lifted her slightly off the ground, and Hermione parted her lips so he could taste her. He hated being away from her, but the charge that he felt every time they were reunited was so bloody powerful and intoxicating. As she dug her nails into his neck in just the way that he liked, he clutched her waist. He didn't want to let her go. Hermione was so soft, smelled so good, and was all his. Ron couldn't believe that he was actually back in her arms.

After many pleasurable centuries of kissing (at least that's how long it felt in Ron's mind), he pulled away and put her down. Hermione looked dazed and was a little out of breath.
"Congratulations on this accomplishment, Ron," she said, placing a hand to his chest. "I'm so proud of you, and I've missed you."

"Thank you. I've missed you too, Hermione." He pecked her lips.
"I love you, and I'm so glad you're here."

"You should have seen me when I got the letter," Hermione said.
"I don't think I've ever been so happy before. Mmm, I love you, Ron." She kissed him. "And you look absolutely gorgeous."

"I'm gorgeous? Hermione, you look bloody fantastic."

"Really?" She looked down at her dress. "I was told in Mr. Smith's letter that neutral colors would be best. I wasn't quite sure what style to pick, so I chose something conservative. I hope this is all right."

"You look like perfection," Ron said. "No one in here holds a candle to you."

"Except for you," she said, giving him a slow once-over. "You've certainly grown."

"You have no idea. I've grown at least a few centimeters since you've arrived."

Hermione giggled as her cheeks went pink. "You're so raunchy, Ronald!" and you've got lipstick on you." She pulled a tissue from her purse, then wiped his mouth with it.

"Bloody hell, 'Mione," Ron whined, moving away.

"Stop fussing, Ronald. I doubt you want to walk around here with lipstick on. It might not go over well with the Aurors." Hermione finished wiping his mouth; Ron found himself laughing. "What's so funny?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said. "You just have no idea how much I've missed you and your ways."

She raised an eyebrow. "That'd better be a compliment."

"Oh, it most certainly is," he said, caressing her face.

"Yours hands have gotten rough."

Ron instantly stopped touching her. "I'm sorry; it's a work hazard."

Hermione took his hand, kissing his palm. "It doesn't bother me. I think it's a good thing. It shows your effort." Ron grinned, loving her even more.

"This is the bloke I was telling you about, Ginny," Harry said. Ron and Hermione turned to him. He and Ginny were smirking like prats at them.

"This is Ron?" Ginny asked, placing a hand on her hip. "Well, I must admit that I was expecting someone much more impressive."

"So was I," Ron said, feeling his level of happiness rising. "Harry said that he had a stunning ginger girlfriend namedâ€œWinny or something. You certainly don't match that description. Then again, I'm not keen on ginger tits."

"Ah, that's good to know," Ginny said with a laugh. "Maybe I don't find you remarkable because I don't fancy ginger pricks."

"Pricks, eh?" Ron asked. "If I knew you better, then I might take that as your way of insulting me."

"It's a good thing that you don't know me then."

"It's also good to know that the maturity level between you two has stayed the same," Hermione said, shaking her head at them. She then squeaked and jumped into Harry's arms. "Congratulations, Harry! Oh, I've missed you so much. It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too, Hermione," Harry said cheerfully. "How have you been?"

"Great; I'm feeling wonderful right now." She let him go, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "You look very handsome tonight."

"Thanks. You look really pretty," Harry said.

"I told Hermione that she had nothing to worry about," Ginny said. "She thought her attire might jeopardize things for you two."

"You worry too much, Hermione," Harry said.

"Oh, no I don't!" Hermione said, waving a hand. "Making it this far in your training is remarkable. You and Ron have worked so hard and have been through so much. The officials should only focus on your achievement, not Ginny and me."

"What does that mean?" Ron asked.

"Ginny and I are reflections of your lives," Hermione said.
"Birds of a feather, Ron."

"Okayâ€œI have no idea what you're talking about, Hermione," he said, "but if anyone has a problem with you or Ginny then I'll just stick my wand up their arse sideways. Is that what you mean?"

"Not even in the slightest, sweetheart," Hermione said, sighing heavily.

"Well, I understand what you mean, Hermione. I'll make a greater effort." Ginny turned to Ron. "Hi, Ron," she said politely with a smile.

"Hi," Ron said. He opened his mouth to say something else, but a strong urge came over him. Ron pulled Ginny into a tight, secure hug.

"Oh," Ginny said, chuckling. "What's this for?" Ron didn't answer; he simply continued hugging her. "Ron?" she asked, patting his back.

He pulled away. Ginny seemed amused and slightly startled as well. She also appeared to be happy and unharmed. Ron turned to Hermione and Harry. "Would you two mind if she and I took a walk for a few minutes?"

"Is something wrong?" Harry asked.

"No," Ron said. "I just...I need to talk to my sister."

"That's fine, Ron. You two go ahead," Hermione said. She took Harry's hand. "Let's go meet some people."

"Sure," Harry said.

Ron gave him a reassuring nod as he took Ginny's hand then led her out of the room and down the corridor.

"So what's really going on?" Ginny asked.

Ron stopped walking when they reached a large cabinet full of trophies and certificates. He figured it would block anyone from easily seeing them. He took his suit jacket off, laying it down. "Here," he said.

"Thank you," she said, sitting down on it.

He sat next to her. "I was taking the piss before; you look great."

"Cheers," Ginny said. "This dress isn't mine, of course. I had to borrow it from a mate. I don't think I've ever worn anything so new and expensive before. I hope I don't ruin it." Ron nodded but said nothing. "Ron, what's going on? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"So why are we here right now? What do you want to talk about?"

Ron rubbed his hands into his thighs. He hadn't planned on saying anything to her about this but now Ron knew that he had to. He'd already been worried about her; finding out about Conor's sister certainly hadn't improved his state. Ron's panic attack in Mr. Nelson's cabin was all the proof he needed to know that he had to tell her.

"All right; I have to tell you something, but it's not about me. It's about a mate of mine from camp," Ron said.

"Is he here?" Ginny asked.

"No. He, umâ€¢he got dismissed," Ron said quietly. Before the devastation and anger could take him over, Ron swiftly added, "but that's not the point. I want to tell you something about him that only you are gonna know."

"I'm listening, Ron," she said.

Ron took a deep breath before divulging into what had happened to Conor's family. He had promised Conor that he wouldn't tell anyone, but this was something he simply couldn't keep from Ginny. Ron could only hope that Conor would understand. Something told him that he would; they were both big brothers just trying to protect their little sisters.

"Oh my god," Ginny said, once Ron was finished. She held her stomach, shaking her head. "And they have no clue who did it?"

"No," Ron said. "I reckon they're just supposed to move on and forget about it."

"That's so awfulâ€¢and sickening. I mean, I've heard stories about what the Snatchers would sometimes do but nothing ever like that. You said she was fourteen when it happened?"

"Yeah. The things they did were horrible enough, but that detail really, really makes me sick."

"And enraged," Ginny said through gritted teeth. "I hope they're found. I'd personally love to cut their dicks off with a rusty fork."

"I don't think anyone would have a problem with that."

Ginny let out a heavy breath. "I'm really sorry to hear about what happened to your friend's sisterâ€¢but why exactly do you want me to know about it?"

Ron didn't know what to say at first. He wasn't sure how to explain the total fear he sometimes felt for her life. "Well, Conor and I got on well, and one of the main reasons why was because we both have sisters. I dunnoâ€¢finding out that stuff just made meâ€¢it made me really worry about you."

"Ron, I'm safe," she said, placing a hand on his. "I'm at school, and I know how to take care of myself. Kaitlin unfortunately had no way of fighting back against the Snatchers."

"It's not just about Snatchers, Ginny," Ron said. "There are other dangers and other people out there who could hurt you. Some blokes in general are just bad guys."

"Well, Ron, I don't get too close to any of the blokes at school. Harry is the only guy who gets close to me and he'd never hurt me."

"I know he wouldn't. Iâ€!" Ron squeezed her hand. "You know that bad things happen, Ginny. I told you about Conor because I need you to always be careful. If anything were to ever happen to you, I'd fucking lose it. I'm just trying to look after you in the best way that I can while I'm away. I know that you can take care of yourself but I'm never going to stop looking after you. I hope you can understand that."

Ginny rubbed her eyes, sniffling gently. "I understand, Ron. I'm glad that you're still looking after me. It means a lot to me and, umâ€!"

"What?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "It's stupid but I'm a little surprised that you said all that. I thought that Hermioneâ€;you knowâ€;had it all from you."

Ron was gobsmacked; he felt bad for giving Ginny the impression that all of his affection was only for Hermione. "Ginnyâ€;" Ron remembered something Conor had told Harry as they discussed him bringing Ginny to the party. "Ginny, I was your brother long before I was Hermione's boyfriend or even knew her. I love her, but you're still my sister. That's never going to change."

"I know that. I justâ€;"

"No need to explain," Ron said. He had to make her feel better. "Sometimes it is hard to remember important facts when you're constantly daydreaming about Quidditch. I know â€" I've lived that miserable life."

Ginny laughed. "It does get rough at times." She perked up a little. "So, I should expect you to be overprotective and barmy for the rest of our lives?"

"I thought you already knew that?" he said, tugging on a lock of her hair. Ron stood up, holding out his hand. "Come on. I didn't want to keep you, I just wanted to talk."

She got up and brushed off his cloak before handing it back to him. "I'm happy that we did. I'll always be careful, Ron. I promise."

"I trust you," he said.

She stood on her toes, hugging him. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Always, Ginny," he said, giving her another long and firm hold before returning to the party.

With the heavy weight off his shoulders, Ron was able to loosen up and completely enjoy himself. He didn't feel pressure to act a certain way or constantly keep his guard up. He felt like 'Ron' -

which he hadn't in over a month. He was with his girlfriend, best mate, and sister; he loved that he could simply enjoy himself with them like he used to.

Ron and Harry introduced the girls to their instructors and some of their campmates. He enjoyed watching Hermione as she politely spoke to everyone. Ron could tell that some people were in awe of her because of her involvement in the war, and Hermione handled the attention elegantly. The only thing that embarrassed him was the line 'Ron talks about you all the time', which almost all of his campmates started the conversation off with. He didn't mind Hermione knowing that he praised her, but Ron didn't want her to think that all he did at camp was talk about her.

Ron also danced with Hermione and Ginny. While Ron and Hermione closely embraced and whispered things to each other as they danced, he and Ginny took the piss out of each other and swore that they would never tell their mum that they danced. She would most likely disown them for not taking pictures.

Ron did remember to take breaks and socialize. He and Harry introduced themselves to as many Ministry officials as they could. Everyone was interested in speaking to Harry; Ron felt bad for him as he was repeatedly pulled away from Ginny to speak for ages to department heads. The night was supposed to be about all eighteen trainees but no one could deny that Harry was at the top of everyone's list.

Even though Harry received a lot of interest, Ron and even Hermione found themselves at the center of things. A lot of people were keen on speaking to the 'Golden Trio', and Ron couldn't help but notice the jealous and angry looks from his campmates. Even Jack's father seemed upset. He felt even more like a fucker for fighting with Harry about the attention he received. Ron had gotten so used to being just another trainee at Lambrick that he'd almost forgotten about his elevated status outside of camp. His two worlds were clashing together, and he wasn't sure what repercussions would come from it.

"Look, Ron, there's Frank and Millie," Harry said when they finally sat down again.

"You're taking the piss." Ron followed Harry's gaze to discover that, sadly, he wasn't joking. Frank and Millie Pinkster were at the entrance; they were wearing matching tan robes and their brown hair was even curlier than Ron remembered. "Bollocking shit wank," he muttered.

"They look even more ridiculous in person," Ginny said. "You should go talk to them, Ron."

"What? No!" Ron said. He shivered, thinking about the winks, bitten lips, and strange words he had received from them.

"Why not?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, Ron, why not?" Hermione asked.

Ron wasn't sure of what to say. The truth was that he'd been avoiding certain people - like Jack and Michelle - because those gits would ruin his night with Hermione. He was sure that Frank and Millie would too. "B-becauseâ€!"

"'Because' is a subordinate conjunction, Ronald," Hermione quickly said, eyeing Frank and Millie fiercely. "I say we go have a word with Milli and Vanilli."

"That's Millie and Frank, babe," Ron said.

"Close enough," she said irritably.

"Come on, Ron. Introduce them to Hermione," Harry said, smiling like a prat again.

"What about you, dickhead?" Ron said. "Last time I checked, you had a date too."

"And his date has already been introduced to a thousand people," Ginny said. "We deserve a break, eh, Harry?"

"You're the genius in this relationship," he said, leaning over and kissing her.

"Ugh! Fine â€" we'll go. If nothing more than to get away from you two troll nipples." He took Hermione's hand. "Let's go then."

Ron and Hermione made their way over to Frank and Millie who were talking animatedly to each other. He didn't know what to say to them, and he felt more and more awkward as they approached.

Ron cleared his throat. "Um, excuse me?" Frank and Millie both turned around. Ron wasn't sure if he wanted to run away or stay and laugh at their madness more. "Hi. You probably don't remember me, but I'm-"

"Ronald Weasley," Frank said. "From our very beautiful first edition."

Ron rubbed his neck. "U-uh, yeah. Being in your piece was veryâ€;moving. I really like to read theâ€;theâ€;"

"Enchanted Dispatch?" Millie asked, biting her lip.

Ron started laughing but quickly covered it up with a cough. "Y-yes, all the time." As both Frank and Millie gazed at him strangely, Ron once again felt violated. He tugged on Hermione's hand. "Anyway, I wanted to introduce you both to-"

"I'm Ron's girlfriend, Hermione Granger," Hermione said loudly. "I actually asked him to introduce me to you two. I purchased a copy of your first edition and I was very impressed with the detail you took when interviewing Ron and Harry."

"Well, Ron and Harry were beautiful to talk to," Frank said, winking at him.

"And they are very outstanding young men," Millie added.

"Um, thank you," Ron said. He felt uncomfortably hot, and he needed to move away before his ears melted off.

"Yes, 'beautiful' and 'outstanding' are words I'd used to describe Ron as well," Hermione said. "You two should consider doing a follow-up piece on him sometime."

"'Mione," Ron mumbled from the side of his mouth. He didn't know what she was playing at.

"How exquisite! It's definitely something we'll consider," Millie said. "Maybe we—"

"—might I suggest something if you do?" Hermione promptly asked.

Frank and Millie shared a look. "Of course," Frank said.

"Great," Hermione said sweetly. "Now, this is just my humble opinion, but for your next exposé, it might be better to start things off with a hard-hitting fact or a bold picture of where Ron is in his life. These would be suitable alternatives to the outrageous adjectives you two used to compose a physical description of him, which I have to say, wasn't accurate. As journalists, you should proofread, yes?"

"I beg your pardon?" Millie asked.

"While I concur that Ron is 'sexually engaging,'" Hermione said as if Millie hadn't said anything. "I don't agree with the notion that his 'flaming' hair and 'massive freckle volume' contradicts with the power and strength he possesses. If anything, those features enhance who Ron is."

Hermione suddenly put her hands on Ron's cheeks, kissing him. She then pulled away before he had time to react. Hermione nodded to Frank and Millie. "Wouldn't you two agree?" she asked.

Ron, Frank, and Millie all gaped at Hermione who stood confidently with an innocent smile and an intense look in her eyes. Frank and Millie continued to merely stare at her so she gave them a curtsey.

"Well, it was a pleasure meeting you two." She took Ron's hand, leading him away. She let him go when they were back at their table.

Ron was at a loss for words. "You are so fucking sexy and unbloody-believable. Is that why you wanted to meet them â€“ to tell them all that?"

"Let's just say that I don't think they'll be making any more passes at you," Hermione said, holding her head up high. "It's like I said: I'm the only one who's allowed to make suggestive comments about your appearance, and absolutely no one is allowed to talk negatively about your hair and freckles."

Ron's heart was beating out of his chest. Sometimes, Hermione did things that touched him so profoundly and reinforced his belief that she was the person he was meant to be with. Ron would marry Hermione Jean Granger; nothing less would do. "How have I been managing so long without you?" he asked.

"Dismally, I suppose," she teased. "Well, that certainly felt good and empowering to do. Is there anyone else who's been giving you trouble?"

Ron automatically thought about Michelle, but he had no idea what Hermione would do to her. As much as he'd love to watch her take Michelle down right on the floor, he didn't want to get Hermione chucked out of the party. "No. For the most part, people are all right."

"That's a good thing," Hermione said. She looked around. "Where are Harry and Ginny?"

"I reckon all three of you had an agenda for wanting me to introduce you to Frank and Millie," Ron said. "Harry and Ginny have been trying to get rid of us all night."

"Oh, I see," she said.

"Don't take it personally," he said with a shrug. "They're prats who don't know good company when they've got it. This just means that we get to spend some time alone - sort of." He held Hermione close, kissing right under her jaw.

"You probably shouldn't do that," she whispered, leaning into his mouth.

"Why not? I'm hungry." Ron bit her skin.

Hermione whimpered, lightly pushing him away. "How about you go get us a drink?"

"You love to torture me, don't you?"

"It is my reason for living. Now go," she said.

"You're the boss." Ron kissed her cheek; she discreetly pinched his arse. "Ow! You cheeky woman!"

"Sorryâ€¢I slip sometimes."

Ron shook his head at her and laughed as he made his way across the crowded floor. He noticed Jack standing with his dad as he talked to a few Aurors. It was strange; Jack's dad hadn't left his side once or let Jack talk to officials on his own.

As Ron poured Hermione a small glass of champagne, he thought about what spell he could cast on the different refreshment bowls so everyone would think that it was a few hours earlier than it really was.

"Oi."

"Oi." Ron looked up at Olivia. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Yes. I'm having a great time," she said, pouring herself some water. She took a large gulp of it and coughed.

"Maybe you should slow down," he said with a laugh. He handed her a napkin.

"Thanks," she said. "I'm still a little nervous. These officials will have a major say in my career."

"I know, but you've got to relax. These people are all right."

"That's easy for you to say. You know some of them already and you're a war hero."

Ron rolled his eyes. She sounded so much like himself complaining about Harry. "Where's Ben?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said indifferently. "I think he's mingling or something. I should probably go find him."

"Hold on," Ron said. "I was going to bring this back to Hermione. Why don't you come with me so you can finally meet her?"

"O-oh, that's okay," she rushed. "I'm sure I'll get a chance to later. You two need to spend as much time as you can alone."

Ron raised an eyebrow at her. Olivia seemed so flustered and he had no idea why. She was usually the bold and confident one in the group. "It'll only take a second," he said. "She's really nice, I promise."

"I don't doubt that she's nice," Olivia said. "I'm sure she's wonderful. I justâ€"

"What?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Nothingâ€; I'm being mental."

"Yeah, you are. Now, I'm taking you over whether you like it or not. I talk about you enough to Hermione; I'm sure she'll want a face to match the name."

Olivia's cheeks went pink. "Y-you talk about me to her?"

"Of course," Ron said. "Come on." He took her wrist, leading her back across the floor. "Here's your drink, love," he said, handing the glass to Hermione.

"Thank you, Ron," she said.

Ron let Olivia's wrist go. "Olivia, I'd like you meet my girlfriend, Hermione Granger. Hermione, this is Olivia Young, the friend I told you about."

"Hello, Olivia. It's nice to finally meet you," Hermione said, holding out her hand.

"It's great to meet you too," Olivia said, shaking her hand and biting the side of her lip. "Um, Ron talks about you all the time."

"Bloody hell," Ron mumbled.

Hermione laughed, nodding. "Yes, so I've been told quite a few times tonight. I can't help but wonder if it's all he does at camp."

"I swear that it's not," Ron said. "I do set aside some time to actually train."

"But even then you sometimes say things about her," Olivia said.

"Cheers, Olivia," he said sarcastically.

"Ronald Weasley!" Hermione said, massaging her temple.

"It's fine, Hermione," Olivia assured. "It's always good things."

"Well, Ron mentions you often in his letters. Good things as well," Hermione said.

"Oh, that's good to know," Olivia said strangely.

Hermione must have understood because she quickly added, "So, it's definitely necessary that I congratulate you on making it this far in the program. It's a major achievement, Olivia."

"Thank you very much," Olivia said, relaxing a bit. "I've worked extremely hard."

"And being one of only three female trainees left is remarkable," Hermione said.

"Yes. It gets stressful, but this profession is dominated by men so I can't let it get to me," Olivia said. "It's actually an added incentive to excel. I refuse to believe that we live in a man's world, and the Ministry could use more strong and intelligent young women."

Hermione's eyes lit up; she stood a little taller. "I honestly couldn't agree more." The two smiled at each other; Ron grinned as well. He didn't know why, but it was extremely important to him that Hermione and Olivia got along.

"Since we're on the subject, I just want to say that I think everything you went through and achieved during the war is incredible," Olivia said. "I'm so glad that I can tell you in person that you've been a guide for me, Hermione."

"Oh, thank you, Olivia," Hermione said, looking taken aback. "It's great to know that I was helpful to you. I was just doing what I had to do."

"Hermione practices her modesty in front of the mirror," Ron cheeked. Hermione pinched his hand. "Ow, Hermione," he said, chuckling.

"It's what you deserve," Hermione said, squeezing his thumb before letting go. She looked to Olivia. "You'll have to excuse, Ron."

"Trust me, I understand," Olivia said.

"Do he and Harry ever give you trouble?" Hermione asked.

"Sometimes, but I do my best to keep them in line," Olivia said, smirking at Ron.

"Oi!" he said.

"That's good," Hermione said, ignoring him. "They can get rowdy, so it's always important to remind them of their place. A few taps to the nose should do it."

"I'll remember that," Olivia said.

"That's enough!" Ron said. "If I knew that this would turn into a bollock bashing then I would've asked Harry to join us so we could tag team properly." Hermione and Olivia laughed.

"You know we're just teasing, sweetheart," Hermione said.

"You'd better be," he mumbled, wrapping an arm around her.

"Do you think you can forgive me?" Hermione asked.

"I dunno yet." Ron pecked her lips, squeezing her side. "Okayâ€œI reckon I can."

"I'm relieved to hear that," Hermione said, giving him a gorgeous smile.

"Well, um, I should probably go find Ben," Olivia said. "You two don't have a lot of time together so I won't hold you up any longer."

Ron and Hermione broke out of their moment. "All right. It was a pleasure meeting you, Olivia," Hermione said, shaking her hand again.

"Likewise, Hermione. Hopefully we can meet up again," Olivia said. "Ron, I'll see you later."

"See you," he said.

Olivia didn't leave though; she gave Hermione a once-over, pulling on her earlobe. "You look lovely in that dress, Hermione," she said.

"Thank you," Hermione said quietly. "You look great as well." Olivia nodded then quickly walked off.

Hermione looked after her, clutching her necklace. "Olivia is really sweet," she said.

"Yeah, she's brilliant," Ron said.

"She's also gorgeous and very endowed," Hermione said. He merely shrugged. "Are you saying that she's not?" she asked.

"No â€œ I meanâ€œ; I've never really thought about it before, but I reckonâ€œ; well, yes, she is. It doesn't mean anything to me though." Ron rubbed his neck. "Besides, eighteen hours a day, six days a week, we're all wearing baggy, muddy kits. Everyone looks the same. W-why are we having this conversation anyway?"

"We're not. I'm sorry," Hermione said, taking a few sips of her champagne. "She's great, and I can see why you two get along so well. You act a lot alike."

"Really? Hmm." Ron was starting to feel uneasy by Hermione's demeanor. "Doâ€œ;do you not like her, Hermione?"

"It's nothing like that, Ron. I like Olivia, really. I guessâ€œ;I just thought I sensed something with her."

"Regarding what?" he asked. Hermione gave him a look, causing Ron to roll his eyes. He knew what she was referring to. "Look, I don't know what you thought you sensed, but Olivia doesn't fancy me," he said. "I'm just her mate, and I can assure you that she's never given me a reason to think otherwise."

Hermione groaned, nodding vigorously. "I know, I know! You're absolutely right. I'm simply being annoyingly overprotective. I mean, you're the most attractive and likable trainee in the program. I could understand ifâ€œ!"

Ron cut her words off with a kiss. "Hermione, the only thing that needs to be understood is that I'm yours. All of my campmates know that, so we're sorted. I'm the luckiest person here and it has nothing to do with making it to the next phase of the program. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you," Hermione said, putting a hand to his cheek.
"I'm sorry, Ron."

"It's okay. I love you; that's all that matters." Ron looked into her dark brown eyes; she stared right back at him. Even though Ron knew that he had to behave himself, the heat and desire took hold of him. "Hermione?"

"Ron?"

"Would you like to umâ€œ;take a tour of the department? Just you and me?"

"I'd love a tour," she said, licking her lips. Ron sat her drink down on the nearest table then took her hand, leading her out of the ballroom.

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"Oh, oh, Ron!"

"Just like that, 'Mione! Back into me hard like that!"

"Moreâ€¢moreâ€¢more - please!"

Ron gripped Hermione's hips, thrusting into her deeper. In return, Hermione pushed back into him with incredible strength. "Mmm," Ron moaned. "You feel so fucking good."

"Thenâ€¢t-take me, Ron." Hermione turned back to him, looking drunk and mental. Ron bit his lip, pushing into her harder. She knocked her fists against the doorframe and hung her head, moaning and whimpering as quietly as she could.

If Ron weren't so blinded by heat and passion, then he probably would've been laughing at their situation. He and Hermione had toured the department...for about three minutes. They'd walked the halls and found a dark, vacant corridor far away from the ballroom that led to a small storage room filled with old desks and chairs. The moment they had reached the entryway, something in them snapped. Ron found himself backing Hermione against the nearest wall as she dug her tongue deeply into his mouth.

It hadn't taken more than a few deep kisses and some frantic words of reassurance before Hermione had allowed Ron to hike up her dress, slip off her knickers, and shag her from behind right in the doorframe.

Ron watched Hermione's back that was gorgeously arched as he fucked her. He was aware that the consequences would be severe if they got caught, but he couldn't help himself. He'd only had memories and his hand for over a month. A bloke could only suffer for so long.

"R-Ronâ€¢Ron, I'm cumming," Hermione panted. "Oh my â€" Ron. I'm about to cum!"

Ron stopped. Hermione was already being loud; he knew that once she let go, people in Australia would be able to hear her. He quickly took her knickers out of his breast pocket. "Here; sh-shove this in your mouth," he said.

"But I want you to cum inside of me," she whined.

Ron blushed, moaning as he gave a powerful thrust. "Don't worry, I'm going to. I promise. I'm talking about your knickers. They'll muffle your sounds."

"O-oh, good thinking," she said, taking them. "Mmm, you're so smart, baby. So smartâ€¢and so, so damn big and sexy."

Ron loved how Hermione's tone and vocabulary changed when they got serious. It was as if his touches turned her into a wilder, madder version of herself. "Do as I say," he demanded, "because I'm not going to stop again until I fulfill my promise."

Hermione moaned longingly. "Yes, Mr. Auror, sir." She stuffed her knickers into her mouth. Ron took a deep breath before he began thrusting so hard that it made him dizzy. For a second, he worried that he was hurting Hermione, but she slapped her hands against the frame, pushing back into him. Her hunger matched his.

Hermione started crying out but the cotton muffled her sounds. She began to shake, then suddenly jerked, tensing her body. Ron felt her hot, wet pulse suction around his cock as she came, but he didn't stop. He kept thrusting until the pressure became too much and he exploded.

"Oh, Hermione! fff-uck!" He bit his lip, moaning as quietly as he could. He hadn't cum so brilliantly or so much in over a month; the power overwhelmed him. Ron toppled over, holding on to Hermione as tightly as he could. She pulled on his hair, and he tripped in his trousers and shorts that were still at his ankles. The two stumbled out of the doorframe and backed against a wall in the storage room. Then, slowly, they crumpled to the floor. He wasn't sure if it was his head or the room that was spinning.

Ron and Hermione kept holding and tugging on each other until they were both free of the pressure. She then turned around, sitting in his lap; her knickers were sticking out of her mouth. Ron bit the band and pulled them out with his teeth, never taking his eyes off of her. Hermione whimpered faintly.

Ron kissed the middle part of her knickers then handed them back to her. "Like that?" he asked hoarsely. Hermione only nodded, pouting a little.

"I can do other things with my mouth," he said. "Wanna see?" Hermione nodded again, so he placed his mouth to her. The kiss was hot, wet, and desperate.

They eventually broke for air; Ron rested his forehead against hers. "Did you enjoy your tour?" he asked, twisting a loose strand of her hair around his finger.

"Y-yes," she said in an unsteady voice. "It was fantastic."

"You're fantastic," he said, licking her bottom lip, "and you taste so bloody good."

"You smell so good, Ron," she said, kissing his neck. She pulled away, grinning mischievously at him. "Did this really just happen?"

"If by 'this' you mean disregard everything my camp instructors told me in order to christen my future place of employment with our bodily fluids, then yes," Ron said. "Thank you for living dangerously with me, Head Girl."

"I've been living dangerously with you since we were first years at Hogwarts." She put a hand to her cheek, groaning. "I'm bad, aren't I?"

"Oh, absolutely," he said calmly. "It's all right though; a bit of anarchy is good for the soul."

"Is that a Lambrick motto?" Hermione asked, brushing hair out of his face.

"No, that's a Weasley motto," he corrected. Ron stretched out his arms. "Blimey, I reckon that was some of the best shagging we've ever done."

Hermione looked quite pleased with herself. "I agree."

He circled his arms around her waist. "Hermione, you're really shaking."

"Well, that was also some of the hardest shagging we've ever done."

"Did I hurt you?"

"Not at all," she said. "It was justâ€œextraordinary." Ron still wasn't convinced. Hermione rolled her eyes, cupping his chin. "Sweetheart, I'm fine. I would've told you if it was too much. My body is still calming down, that's all. Don't you trust me?"

"Always," he said.

"Then know that I'm quite all right," she said. "Head Girls enjoy it rough too."

Ron's ears burned; Hermione would never stop surprising him. "Brilliant. So, um, why do you think we were brave enough to do this? Because we haven't seen each other in ages?"

"Maybe." Hermione smirked, running her finger down his nose. "Or it could be because you've become a god. I mean, you've always been extra special, but I'm convinced now that you've completely converted beyond being a mere mortal."

Ron rubbed his neck, laughing and blushing madly. "Ta, 'Mione."

"I just love making you blush, Ron," Hermione said, giggling. "So, do you remember when we talked about your Auror training correlating to your sexual performance?"

"Definitely. It was during one of the greatest moments of my life." Ron thought back to the night he and Hermione shagged in the guest room of her parent's house.

"Mine too. Anyhow, I think that's a proven theory now."

Ron laughed. "Well, if it is, how do we explain your performance? You just get feistier and hotter every time we fuck like barmy hippogriffs."

"Ronald Weasley!"

"I mean â€œ every time we fuck like sophisticated doves," he quickly said.

"That'sâ€œ better," she said. "Hmm, I don't know how to answer your question, Ron. I guess the closer I get to graduation, the more spirit I gain."

"Curious," he said. "I can't wait to see what happens once you're out of school and have the job of your dreams. I'll probably pull a muscle in my cock."

Hermione rubbed his upper thighs. "We wouldn't want that. I've missed it."

"And it has missed you and all of your silky perfection," he said, popping his hips.

Ron leaned in, kissing her again. They kept snogging until they started panting and feeling the heat again. Hermione looked, sounded, tasted, smelled, and felt so bloody good. Ron was greedy and felt drunk off of her; he couldn't stop though. He was addicted and obsessed with everything Hermione was giving him. Ron wanted to stay connected with her for as long as possible. She was everything he needed to be alive right now.

"Ready to tour again?" Ron asked against her mouth.

Hermione broke away, then started sucking on his earlobe. "There's no way that you're up for it again already."

"Don't ever doubt me, Hermione." He shivered as her warm tongue outline his ear. "And feel just how 'up' I am." Ron took her hand, placing it on his cock which was as stiff as a broom handle.

Hermione gasped, gripping his muscle. "My, my, Ronald Weasley. You certainly are spectacular tonight."

"I am in rare form," he said. "We should take advantage of it."

Hermione blushed, looking at him shyly. "I'd rather have you take advantage of me."

Ron popped his hips again, moaning. "My, my, Hermione Granger. Aren't we saucy tonight."

"Saucy and mad for you." She kissed his ear then whispered, "Fuck me again, Ron."

"Did you just say-"

"-yes, and I won't be repeating it," she said pointedly.

Ron grinned, taking her hand. "I bet I can make you. In fact, I bet I can make you beg me to fuck you harderâ€œat least twice before you cum again."

Hermione looked off to the side for a moment before nodding. "All right; you're on, Ronald. So, if you win?"

"If I win then the next time we meet upâ€œyou have to greet me with a huge bag of chocolate frogs," he said. "I miss those buggers."

"Sounds reasonable; and if I win?"

"Well, you won't - but if for some miraculous reason you do, then-"

"- then the next time we meet up, you have to greet me with one of your training shirts," Hermione said.

Ron scrunched up his face. "What? Another one?"

"I've got one from your first half. Now I need one from your second." She spoke as if her logic made perfect sense.

"But why?" he asked. "They're bloody disgusting."

"To you they're disgusting," Hermione said. "To me they're quite beautiful, and I feel good wearing them." She gave Ron a smile and a deep look as if she expected him to understand her; he didn't.

"Whatever you want, dippy woman." He held out his hand. "It's a bet."

"Let the best witch win," she said, shaking his hand. Ron and Hermione got up. She peeked out into the corridor to make sure it was clear before he backed her up against the wall. Ron lifted and held Hermione securely against it as she wrapped her legs around his thighs. "You got me?" she asked.

"I'm stronger than I look, Hermione. Let me show you how strong." Ron placed his mouth over hers and their bet commenced.

Much to Ron's pleasure, he was able to make Hermione beg for it three times. He considered her a fair sport though, and their sex was so hot that Ron promised to give her a shirt anyway. When it came to shagging, Ron believed that every person involved should win.

They returned to the party and got drinks to hopefully cool down their flushed bodies. They then sat across from Harry and Ginny as calm and collectively as possible. Ron could tell from the prat looks on Harry and Ginny's faces though that the two knew something was up.

"Did you two have a nice stroll?" Harry asked.

"Yes, we did," Ron said.

"I hope that you were careful," Harry said. "Certain activities can be dangerous to do in a corridor like running."

"Or shagging," Ginny said under her breath. She and Harry started snickering; Ron glared at them. The prats seemed to grab every opportunity that they could to take the piss and embarrass Hermione; it wasn't right. He was the only one allowed to get under her skin. Ron opened his mouth to speak.

"Yes, those activities can be dangerous, so it's a good thing that Ron and I only did one of them," Hermione said with attitude. "And I can assure you that we were safe both times."

Ron, Harry, and Ginny all gaped at her; Hermione kept her expression fierce and her chin slightly pointed out.

"Um, Hermione, love," Ron asked, "are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I just don't understand what's so funny," she said. "I haven't seen you in ages, and I've missed you in every way that a woman can miss her boyfriend. It's not something I'm ashamed of nor is it something I'll hide."

Hermione gestured to Harry and Ginny. "They should feel good knowing that we were safe, didn't get caught, and were able to completely connect once more."

"Twice more," Ron corrected, ignoring the sounds of disgust from Harry and Ginny.

Hermione smiled, raising her glass. "I'll drink to that."

Ron grinned, tapping his glass to hers. "Cheers."

For the rest of the night, Ron kept his body as close to Hermione's as possible. He kissed her neck, shoulder, hand, or cheek when he could, and ran his fingertips up and down her back as they walked around or sat and talked to people. Ron wanted to take advantage of his one night off with her; he wanted to show everyone that he was the lucky bloke who got to be with the most beautiful girl in the room.

Not to mention if Ron did find work at the Ministry, he would behave in the same manner with Hermione when they went to formal engagements. He reckoned it was best for people to find out as soon as they could how in love with her he was.

"You should probably slow down, sweetheart," Hermione said as Ron stuffed yet another triangular shaped sandwich into his mouth.

"M'ory," Ron said through his food. He swallowed hard. "I'm just really hungry."

"Well, I guess you have earned at least one night of stuffing your face," she said.

"It's not all I want to do though, so I'll stop." He gulped down his water then sat back in his chair, scooting it as close to Hermione's as he could. Ron held her hand between his while she hooked her ankle around his calf.

"Better?" she asked.

"Loads," Ron said, winking at her. He peered out into the crowd: Harry was speaking to Richard and a couple of other Aurors while Ginny stood not too far from him, laughing at something Kingsley was telling her. Ron smiled; the two just seemed to naturally fit into the power couple role. He then looked around for Olivia but didn't see her anywhere. In fact, he'd barely seen her all night.

"I'm really proud of you, Ron," Hermione said, breaking him out of his thoughts. "You have no idea how much. All of this is going to become a regular part of your life once you get your badge. It's exciting."

"Thank you. I was just thinking about that actually," he said. "I can't wait to bring you to these things andâ€!"

"What?"

Ron shrugged, feeling a bit nervous. "You knowâ€;not have to introduce you as my girlfriend."

Hermione clutched her necklace. "I'm glad I wasn't the only one thinking about that."

"Definitely not." He moved himself even closer to her so that their shoulders touched. "I know this night is supposed to be about me but I still want to know how you're doing. How's school?"

"Very busy," Hermione said.

"Are you taking care of yourself?"

"I am, but I can honestly say that finding time to slow down hasn't been easy. Ginny's been a big help though, as have Dean and Luna. I take breaks and I truly try to relax."

"That's brilliant, Hermione," Ron said, kissing her shoulder. "I know it's tough, but as long as you're trying that's all that matters. I'm putting forth more of an effort with my mental Healer. I reckon I'll really start talking to him about me."

"That's excellent, Ron," Hermione said. "I'm glad that we're both trying like we said we would. I've also been writing more openly to my parents. We're getting stronger, I can tell. My dad told me that he's been writing to yours a lot."

"Yeah, my dad mentioned that." Ron wanted to ask Hermione if she knew about the Valentine's Day surprise but he held back. If she didn't know, then it would be a happy surprise for her too. "I reckon everyone is moving forward."

"You sound like Professor McGonagall," Hermione said. "The Career Seminar starts soon, and she keeps telling the seventh years that we have to move forward. I'm a bit anxious."

"Why?" Ron asked.

"Because this is the time when I really need to start thinking about what I want to do, where I want to find work or intern, and how I want to narrow my focus during these last few months of school." Hermione sighed. "Watching you go through this process has really made me admire your strength, Ron. You dove right in and have succeeded wonderfully so far."

"I wouldn't put it quite like that, Hermione," Ron said. "You and Harry were there for me during my application process and fought like hell to get me to believe in myself. Getting to this point hasn't been easy for me, you know that. I'm not always the strongest trainee on the field, and I still get so bloody scared sometimes."

"How do you push through it?" Hermione asked, appearing genuinely interested.

"How do you think, love? I mean, I do use every bit of strength that I have but once that's gone, you're the first thing that comes to my mind. I think about you, Harry, and my family. I remember what it's all for and something just comes out of me."

Ron looked her right in the eyes. "I swore that I would come back to you stronger and with my badge; that promise alone gets me through a lot of terrible shit that happens at Lambrick. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you; do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you," Hermione softly said.

"Good; I want you to always remember that," he said. "I also want you to know that I'm here if you ever need anything. It's tricky now with us apart, but once I'm free from that bloody place, I'll help you in whatever way that I can with your career choice - just like you've helped me. I know you'll do fine because you're the most capable person I've ever met, but I'll still help if you need me to."

"Thank you, Ron. That means so much to me."

"Of course. I'd do anything for you, Hermione."

Hermione's cheeks went pink as she let out a shaky breath. "I honestly don't know what I would've done if I couldn't come tonight. I needed this with you so badly, and I'm already thinking about when we can see each other again."

"Me too," Ron said. "It's bollocks that I have to tell you this, but I won't be able to make it to Hogsmeade on Valentine's Day. I'm sorry."

"It's all right," Hermione said, though Ron could see the slight disappointment in her eyes. "That was just wishful thinking. You'll still receive a gift from me that day."

"So will you. I swear, Hermione, I'll work something out. I get the time, and I'll come see you."

"I know you will, Ron. I understand how this works by now. It's okay."

Her assurance didn't make him feel any better. "It won't be like this forever," he said.

"I know it won't, sweetheart," Hermione said. "That day will be here sooner than we know it; we'll have to be ready."

"I've been ready for years now," Ron said, grinning. Hermione smiled back and they were quite for a few moments.

"What are you thinking about right now?" she asked.

"How I've just gone through one of the toughest periods of my life since Fred died," he said without much hesitation. "I haven't always known what to do or what was happening to me, but it's different right now. I'm here, happy, and although there's all this stuff around meâ€œall I want to do is kiss you."

Hermione put her forehead to his, squeezing his hand. "I think that would be okay. I want to feel every moment of it, so go slow."

"Aurors-in-training enjoy it slow too," he cheeked. Ron gently pressed his lips to hers but pulled away as he heard someone tapping their glass.

"If I may have your attention, please," Kingsley said, making his way to the center of the room with Phillip Smith. Ron reflexively sat up straight and put his arms at his side.

"First, I want to thank everyone for coming tonight," Kingsley said. "The support that the Auror Department continuously receives is very much appreciated. Our sector has been quite busy lately to say the least, and we've enjoyed this night of leisure. We're also honored that the staff of Lambrick Academy and their cadets were able to attend our engagement." People started clapping as Kingsley gestured to Phillip.

Phillip bowed then held up his glass. "Yes, thank you. I can safely speak for my staff and the trainees when I say that we have also appreciated your continuous support. The top eighteen cadets here have certainly proven themselves thus far in the program, and I'm very proud of all of them. Now, as the conclusion of our banquet approaches, I'd like for the trainees to come forth and introduce themselves for the last time. So, cadets, if you will please join me."

As everyone started clapping again, Ron felt horribly nervous for the first time all night. "Go on, sweetheart," Hermione whispered

in his ear. Ron swallowed hard, looking at her. "Don't worry; you'll be great." She winked, then kissed his hand.

Ron nodded before quickly making his way to the center of the floor with the others. He stood next to Harry who told him with his eyes to relax. Ron let out a deep breath; this was a part of his job that he'd have to get used to.

The trainees formed one long line, then began introducing themselves. It wasn't until halfway down the group that Ron realized that he was last in line. He peered out into the crowd: Hermione and Ginny were standing together with an arm around each other. They carefully waved at him, beaming. Ron faintly smiled back.

Once Harry began talking, Ron felt his heart in his throat. There were so many important people in the room who would stare and listen closely as he spoke. He didn't know what was best to say to them. Suddenly, people began clapping; he looked to the side. Harry's mouth wasn't moving anymore, which meant that it was his turn. Phillip gestured to Ron, so he took a step forward.

All of his campmates were staring at him. So were Alan, Richard, Kingsley, and Phillip. Everyone in the crowd had their eyes on him. Once again, Ron peered out to Hermione and Ginny: they were holding each other now, looking excited. He knew that they were happy and proud of him. Ron was glad that they were. Unknowingly, Hermione and Ginny had taught him so much over the years about how to treat women and how to be a decent bloke. He wanted to continue being the man that they needed and were proud of.

Ron cleared his throat. "Good evening, everyone. I'm Ronald Weasley. I'm eighteen years old, and I can confidently say that I want to be an Auror. I've always dreamed of being in a room like this with people like you, and it means so much to me that Mr. Smith, Mr. Lewis, and Mr. Jones have given me the opportunity to do so. It hasn't been easy and I know that it's only going to get harder, but I'm up for the challenge because I feel comfortable here. I want to continue the great work that all the Aurors and department heads have started, and I'll prove one day that my name is one that people can trust. The war may be over, but there's still work to do. Thank you."

Ron stepped back in line and finally exhaled. Everyone clapped and he could distinctly hear Hermione and Ginny's cheers.

Harry patted him on the arm. "Well done, mate," he said. Ron couldn't respond because he was at a loss for words. All he knew was that he had never been so proud of himself before and he was more determined than ever to make it.

The final song started and people came onto the dance floor. Ron stayed put as Hermione walked straight to him. She put a hand to her chest. "Your words were so beautiful, Ron."

"Thank you," he said, actually believing her. "Are you crying?"

"Hush, I can't help it," Hermione said, dabbing her eyes. "Ginny and I did the best that we could, but once you started speaking, we lost it. We're so proud of you, Ron. You've grown up so much and you deserve this. I'm glad you feel comfortable here. You were born to do this." She sniffled as more of her tears fell.

Ron swallowed his own strong emotions as he wiped more of her tears away. "Come on, Hermione. It's okay."

"I know," she sobbed. "You and Harry are just so wonderful. You're my men, and I love you both more than anything else in my life. You have no idea how proud I felt watching you two speak."

"Actually, I think I might have," Ron said quietly. He kissed her forehead. "Let's dance, yeah?"

He took her by the waist while she wrapped her arms around his neck. They began slowly swaying to the music. "Feel better?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I just felt a little overwhelmed."

"So did I."

Hermione shook her head. "You're fascinating, Ron. You get so nervous when you have to speak like that but the moment you do, you captivate everyone's attention. I believed your words; I know everyone else did too." She closed her eyes. "Hmm, this is a nice song."

"So how about you take a spin for me?" he said, smirking.

"Oh no - definitely not," she said, looking startled.

"Please? When was the last time we danced together like this?"

"Bill and Fleur's wedding."

"Exactly - ages ago," he said. "We weren't even dating then, and Vicky Krum still had his eyes on you." Hermione laughed. "It's time that I gave you a proper spin."

"Oh, Ron!"

"I won't take no for an answer, Hermione. You might as well comply now."

She sighed. "Fine, I'll do it."

Ron extended his arm, then raised it. Hermione held on to his fingers as she slowly spun around. He then smoothly pulled her back into his arms. "See?" he said. "That wasn't so bad, eh?"

Hermione blushed. "You're such a knight, Ron."

"I reckon that makes you my queen then," he said, smirking.

"There goes that charm again."

"I can't control it, Hermione. It's a gift and a curse."

"Well, as much as I love the title, I think I'd rather take the role of princess tonight." Hermione pointed her chin out. "I mean, I'm still young."

Ron laughed. "All right; you're my princess and I'm your noble and devoted knight who's sworn to protect you from boring slow dances and Bulgarian Seekers with unibrows."

Hermione hit his arm. "You're so rude!"

"And you love it; admit it."

"I'll never, so just hush and dance with me."

"You're the boss," Ron said. He held Hermione closely again; she rested her head on his chest. He took in the smell of her hair and warmth of her body. This was his last dance and moment with her before they had to part again for who knew how long. He wanted to live in every second of their time together.

Ron looked around the room; Harry and Ginny were dancing not too far away. She caught his gaze, then smiled and nodded to him. He mimicked her gesture before enveloping himself entirely in Hermione. His moment with Ginny was brief, but it'd been powerful and they'd exchanged so much that they could never say out loud. Ron felt incredible; he loved that his connection with Ginny was something that could only be understood by brothers and sisters, and people like Conor and Kaitlin.

When the song ended, all of the lights came back up and people began gathering their things. Ron reluctantly pulled away from Hermione but didn't let her go. He merely kept gazing at her while she stared at him. Though Ron had spent hours with Hermione, it now felt as if only minutes had passed since she'd arrived. His evening with her and Ginny had been the best moments of his year so far; he didn't want any of it to end. Ron knew, however, that he had to let them go. The sooner he got back to work, the sooner he could return home.

"You ready?" he asked Hermione.

"Yes," she said softly.

They walked over to Ginny and Harry. Ron gave his sister a long, firm hug. "I really loved your speech," Ginny said.

"I'm glad," Ron said, kissing the top of her head. He pulled away, tugging on a strand of her hair. "Take care of yourself and remember what I told you, yeah?"

"I will. You take care of yourself too." Ginny squeezed his hand. "I love you, Ron, and I'm so bloody proud of you. If Mum and Dad and our brothers were here, I know they'd be just as proud. I'm sure Fred was grinning during your speech."

Ron swiftly rubbed his eyes. "I hope so, Ginny. I really, really do."

"See, Hermione? They always start off behaving like Fire crabs, but they eventually find a way back to decency," Harry said. He had an arm around Hermione's shoulder, and she was hugging his waist. "That's our Weasleys."

"I guess you're right, Harry," Hermione said. "I wish I could've brought my camera. They're so lovely when they're not being unbelievably vile and immature."

"Stop talking before I get you both!" Ron said. He pulled Hermione away from Harry and found some clear space for them. He kissed her with everything that he had. "Thank you for coming," Ron said once he finally broke away.

"It was my pleasure, Ron," Hermione said, looking slightly dazed. "Thank you for inviting me." She ran her fingers through his hair. "I had a wonderful time tonight."

"So did I. I love you so much, Hermione."

"I love you too, Ron." She leaned up, kissing him again. Ron savored every taste and every second that she had her mouth to his. When Hermione pulled away, she caressed his cheek.

Ron didn't want to ruin the moment, but his need to ruffle Hermione was too overpowering at times. "Thanks for the shag too, 'Mione. Actually - I reckon I should thank you twice. Next time we'll double that for sure â€“ if not triple."

Hermione pushed him away. "Oh! You're so horny, Ron!"

"Only for you, love," Ron smoothly said. "Soâ€¢is that a yes?"

"That's a 'you'll be lucky if I even let you touch my knickers next time'."

"Ouch," he said, touching his chest. "You abuse me so badly."

"Just you wait, sweetheart," Hermione said wickedly.

"Hermione," Ginny said, tapping her shoulder. "Sorry, but I don't want to miss McGonagall's curfew."

"Since when do you care about things like that?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Since Quidditch captains are under a strict disciplinary policy," Ginny droned. "Don't you remember?"

"Oh â€“ I almost forgot!" Hermione suddenly said very loudly. She dug into her purse then took out two envelopes and handed them to Ron and Harry. "Please don't open it until you're back at camp."

"What is it?" Harry asked, trying to see through it.

"Hopefully a list of all offensive and defensive spells and how to use them," Ron said.

"Sorry, not this time," Hermione said. "Don't worry though; this is something good."

"But your definition of good is a lot different than mine and Harry's, love," Ron said. "Good to you is an Ancient Runes textbook; good to us is season tickets to all of Ireland's home games."

"I'd settle for a large bag of Whizbees," Harry said, shrugging.

"Listen to you two," Ginny said, placing a hand on her hip. "Your best mate gives you a present and you're already taking the piss. This, Hermione, is why I don't make an effort with them. They're just a couple of ginger pricks."

"Oi, I'm not ginger," Harry said.

"But you are a prick," Ginny said, chuckling.

"Leave my mate alone," Ron said. "In fact, aren't you supposed to be leaving?"

"Yes, that's right. Thank you for reminding me." Ginny pushed Ron out of the way and kissed Harry. "I love you, Harry."

"I love you too," Harry said. "Write to me soon, yeah? I want to know how that new thrust move I showed you tonight works out."

"I hope that's Quidditch related," Ron muttered.

"Oh, Ron, take it easy." Hermione pulled on his tie, kissing him. "Write me."

"But I don't have a new thrust move," he said.

"I wouldn't say that," she whispered.

"You cheeky woman," Ron said, shaking his head.

"I'm full of surprises," Hermione said. She pecked his lips again before squeezing his hand and finally pulling away. "I love you, mad ginger wizard."

"Love you too, Professor Granger," he said, grinning. "I'll see you."

"Soon, I'm sure," she said. Hermione linked arms with Ginny, then sighed. "Keep working hard and looking after each other."

"We will if you two do the same," Ron said.

"Don't worry, Ron, Hermione is in good hands," Ginny said.

"I don't doubt that at all," Harry said, smiling widely.

Hermione put a hand to her chest. "Oh, we should probably go, Ginny. Come on. Bye guys, we love you."

"Bye," Ron and Harry said together.

He and Harry watched them walk down the hall and into a room where their Portkey was most likely located. Though Ron could already feel a difference now that Hermione was gone, he wasn't incredibly sad or upset. She had to go back to Hogwarts; Ron needed to return to the Ruins and get some sleep because they still had drill in the morning. This was their life for now. Ron and Hermione had to accept it and push through to the other side where there weren't as many goodbyes.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Ron breathed. "Are you?"

"I'm okay," he said. "I had a really good night with them."

"Me too," Ron said. "Hey, Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Congratulations, mate."

Harry clapped him on the back. "You too, Ron."

"Did you two enjoy yourselves tonight?"

Ron and Harry turned around. Kingsley was standing before them with a slight smile. "We did, sir," Harry said. "We met some really great people here."

"And these really great people met you," he said. "You two handled yourselves very well. Lambrick has matured you. That's easy to see."

"It's been tough though, sir," Ron said.

Kingsley laughed. "Of course it has, Ron. You making it this far proves that you can handle the pressure, but you've still got a long way to go before you're invited to these functions as a regular guest. Remember that, but also remember how good it felt tonight. This department needs more strong minds and bodies."

"We'll be here, sir," Harry said confidently.

"Then let's see it happen, Harry," Kingsley said. "I'd be happy to see it happen for the both of you."

"Kingsley, friend," Phillip said, walking over and shaking his hand.

"Good evening, Phillip," Kingsley said. "I was just telling these two that there's still quite a journey to take but that they should enjoy the small victories along the way."

"Smart man you are, Kingsley," Phillip said. "It was great seeing you tonight but unfortunately, we must get back. These young men have an early start tomorrow."

"Hmm, sometimes I do miss those morning drills," Kingsley said, laughing.

"I'm sure you're saying that with all sincerity, sir," Ron cheeked, shaking his hand.

"It was nice seeing you again, sir," Harry said, shaking Kingsley's hand next.

"Always a pleasure." Kingsley gave them a little bow.

"Come on Weasley, Potter," Phillip said.

"Oh, Ron," Kingsley said. "Your father told me to tell you tonight that the Valentine's Days surprise is official. Now what that entails, I do not know!"

Ron chuckled. "That's all right, sir. When you see him, can you tell him I said that's brilliant and that I'm okay? I can't really think of anything else right now."

"I will, Ron, and I'm sure he'd be happy with just that reassurance," Kingsley said. "Goodnight."

Ron and Harry followed Phillip out of the ballroom and down the corridor to the fireplace.

When they arrived back at Headquarters, Phillip, Alan, and Richard told them how proud they were of their behavior and mannerisms during the party. Ron couldn't help but to feel smug. He'd shagged Hermione twice without receiving so much as a curious look from anyone. They'd come a hell of a long way since their first time.

In the showering cabin, all the blokes talked about spending the evening with their girlfriends or mates. Ron kept quiet mostly, and thought about how hot and silky Hermione had felt as she came. The only person who said absolutely nothing was Jack. Ron didn't blame him. The bloke had been a statue all night.

Ron finished up his shower then returned to Headquarters with a smile. He thought about his amazing night with Hermione, Ginny, and Harry. It had felt like old times and he couldn't wait to have another day with them. Ron was so close; he couldn't stop now. He smiled even wider when he thought about how beautiful Hermione had looked, and how sexy and incredible she was when she'd told Frank and Millie off. It amazed him that girls like that existed â€“ let alone that he was dating one.

Ron walked down the staircase leading to the Ruins but stopped; Ben and Olivia were at her door. He leaned in to kiss her, and she closed the gap between them. She pulled away after only a few seconds, then Ben whispered something in her ear. Olivia smiled, shrugging. Ben then went into his room while she sighed and kept

standing outside of hers. Olivia looked happy but Ron knew her well enough now to know that something was going on in her mind.

"Oi," Ron said, walking down the corridor.

She looked up. "Oh, hi, Ron. Um, you must have seen what just happened."

"It's none of my business. I'm happy for you though."

"There's nothing to congratulate. We're still just friends," Olivia said.

"Okay," Ron said. He rubbed his neck. "Hey, um, I would've asked you for a dance or something but I couldn't find you after I introduced you to Hermione."

Olivia took the flower out of her hair, nodding. "Ben and I spent a lot of time socializing. I looked for you a couple of times but it was just so crowded. It's all right; you needed that time with her. I haven't seen you so happy since those pictures you showed me, and I didn't even know that Harry was capable of laughing like that."

"Yeah, my sister Ginny brings the nutter out of him," Ron said. He didn't know why but he felt like he needed to say something to her. "I'm, um, sorry, Olivia."

"Don't be," she said, waving a hand. "We both had a really good time. I guess I'm just feeling a little down because I really missed Conor tonight. He would've loved a night off, and I'm sure he would've brought his sister."

Ron had to look away for a moment. "Yeahâ€¢I'm sure he would've too. I thought about him a few times. I really wish he could've been with us."

"Me too," Olivia said. "Well, I should get changed."

"All right. I reckon I'll see you in the morning."

"Yes â€“ I'll be back in my mud," she said, taking off her heels.

"You really did look great tonight," Ron said. "I liked that flower in your hair."

Olivia gripped the handle on her door very tightly. "Thank you, Ron. I'll see you in the morning." She went into her room and closed the door without another word.

Ron rubbed his neck and frowned as he stared at her door for a few seconds. He eventually gave up on his thoughts, then returned to his room. He sat on his bed and pulled Hermione's gift out of the pocket of his trousers. Ron studied the envelope, wondering what she could possibly fit inside of it. He trusted her word that it was something good though, so he opened it. There was a letter inside.

Hello, mad ginger wizard,

I thought you could use a couple of new pictures to keep in your drawer. Anytime you feel lost, look at them. You've got people rooting for you, sweetheart. Ginny and I love you and Harry so much. You two are our men and we can't wait to see you. The four of us will have that day again, Ron. We just have to get there first.

Love,

Professor Granger

Ron took out the two photos. He burst into laughter at the first one. It was taken the day he and Harry had left for Lambrick. The four of them were standing in the middle of the busy train station, and Ron was standing awkwardly between Harry and Ginny. He shook his head and looked at the second one.

"Bloody Merlin," he whispered. In this one, he was standing next to Hermione while Ginny and Harry were rightfully standing next to each other. Hermione's smile was gorgeous, and both Harry and Ginny looked incredibly happy. What touched Ron's heart though was that, in the pose, he quickly leaned over and kissed Hermione on the side of her mouth as she took the picture. There was a mischievous and loving look on his face as he kissed her and for an instant, she was shocked but her expression quickly morphed into happiness. Over and over again, he kissed her and she gasped, then smiled.

The picture was of the four of them as they truly were. They were all natural and alive in the moment that Hermione took the picture. Ron clutched it securely in his hand. He missed Hermione already but he would be all right. They would return to each other soon, then would be able to take all the pictures that they wanted. For now, Ron would have to settle for these and he was happy to do so.

He smirked, touching Hermione's face. She went from shocked to joyful in an instant, and Ron had never looked happier as he surprised her with a kiss.

It was how they were as a couple; it was how they would always be.

* * *

**** (lets out a contented breath) Ron/Hermione are so close to my heart so it felt good to 'go home' in this chapter. I hope you lot enjoyed it. I did. :) Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 51*: Turning tables

I reckon we're all in agreement that it's been too bloody long. All I can say is sorry and that 'I've been busy' doesn't begin to cover it (sighs). Now there's something I want to let out before this chapter begins. Over the past few months I've gotten reviews and pms asking how long I plan to carry out this story and how many chapters are left. While I'm still not ready to divulge answers for either of those, I will say that this chapter marks the beginning of the end of Turned to Real Life. Yes, we've finally reached that point and it's time that the ball rolls down the hill and over the finish line.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

* * *

Ron relished every breath, every second of contact, and every kiss as they made their way to the room. They were snogging and inching down the longest bloody corridor in the world that only seemed to grow longer with every shuffle they made. He had to beat down the desire to simply push her against the nearest wall or lay her on the floor and take her there. Just as Ron was about to consider doing the former, they finally reached the wooden door to her room.

She took one of her hands off his neck, wrapping it instead around the knob. As soon as she opened the door, Ron guided her inside then rapidly whipped her around, pressing her against the door and closing it.

"O-oh, Ron!" she panted.

With that one uttering of his name, Ron became dizzy in a whirl of passion. All he knew were the delicate lips pressing against his and the breathless moans that were being spurred on by his advances. "I want you so bloody much, Hermione," Ron said in one desperate gust of air.

Hermione gazed up at him with her big, beautiful, brown eyes that he'd missed staring into. Her face, which was already an adorable shade of pink, turned darker. "I'm all yours," she said in a quiet, yet firm, voice.

Ron exhaled harshly then pressed his mouth to hers. She kissed him back, slipping her tongue between his lips. They moaned in unison while yanking off each other's coats. Ron then moved his

hands up her shirt, gently squeezing her breasts. She whimpered, encouraging him to continue kneading his palms into her bust whilst bending down and sucking her neck. All the while, Hermione repeatedly ran her hands through his hair. She tangled her fingers in the strands, tugging on them every time he bit her. Each time Ron increased the pressure of his bite, Hermione pulled on his hair that much harder.

Ron could only stand this for so long. Soon, he found himself grabbing her waist and pulling her away from the door. As they made their way to the bed, Ron kept his mouth to hers and Hermione's hands snaked to his trousers. Once she unfastened the button and zipped down the fly, she broke out of the kiss. Hermione gave him a fierce look, causing him to gulp; she then dropped to her knees in front of him.

Ron let out a choked cry. He gripped her shoulder as she freed him from his boxers and her warm, wet mouth encased him. He closed his eyes, moaning longingly as Hermione licked and sucked his cock. He'd missed her mouth on him so fucking much; the intense pleasure sent sparks straight through his body.

"Fucking hell â€“ yes!" Ron groaned as she swallowed him again. His legs were badly trembling; he was moments away from toppling over.

As if Hermione could read his mind, she stopped and stood back up. She licked her lips, staring innocently at him. Ron knew that she was teasing him and the woman was too bloody good at it. He sprung himself toward her, holding her in his arms and tripping them both back against her bed. Hermione fell back on it; Ron moved on top of her. They intertwined themselves together then resumed their wild snogging. Their sounds seemed to ricochet off the walls while their movements heated up the room. This moment was what Ron wanted more than anything else. His hands went to her jeans.

"Wait," Hermione whispered, placing a hand on his wrist.

Though Ron was confused, he stopped. "I thought you put the spell on?"

"I did."

"Then, um, what are we waiting for?" he asked stupidly.

"Well, I have a plan."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Bugger your plans. We don't need one for this. All you have to do is take your jeans and knickers off, then I can stick Mr. Happy inside of you."

Hermione gasped, hitting his arm. "Ronald Weasley! That is not only vile but totally insensitive."

"I'm sorry," he groaned, hanging his head. "I didn't mean for it to come out like that. I'mâ€œI'm bloody mental right now, all right? I just want you so damn badly." Ron started kissing all

over her neck. "I want to shag you till we cum all around each other."

"O-oh, Ron!" Hermione whined in an unsteady voice.

"Still too insensitive?" he asked, kissing her jaw.

"N-no. I quite enjoyed that one. I want you too, Ron. You have no idea how much. It's why you need to hold on for a moment." She tugged on his hair so he'd stop.

Ron sighed, nodding. "All right. What's the plan then?"

"Undress to your shorts then lay back. This won't take long," she said.

Ron nodded once more. He got off of her so she could leave the bed. "There," he breathed once he added his trousers to the pile of clothes on the floor. Hermione stood at the foot of the bed, her eyes wandering meticulously over his body. Ron's face heated up but he didn't feel too embarrassed. Yes, he was still gangly and thinner than he would've liked, but he'd bulked up some and finally had muscles that he was proud of. "You okay?" he asked, grinning shyly.

Hermione held on to her necklace, seeming dazed. "I-I'm fineâ€¦but you are astounding, Ron. B-bloody hellâ€¦"

"Bloody hell?" Ron repeated. "Wow, that's impressive, Hermione."

"Not as impressive as you," she whispered. She pointedly looked down, furrowing her brow. It was a classic Hermione Granger expression that Ron had seen at least a million times since he'd known her; over the years he'd learned what it meant and how to get rid of it.

"Hey," he said, "are you going to get your bum over here or am I gonna have to come get you? No offense, but I don't have all day."

Hermione looked up. For a moment she appeared alarmed but as soon as she saw his playful smirk and he winked at her, she stuck out her chin and smiled, all traces of insecurity quickly vanishing. "Well well, someone's bossy," she said.

"I learned from the best," he muttered. She slapped his foot.
"Ow!"

"Serves you right!" Hermione narrowed her eyes. "You'd better watch yourself." Before Ron could reply, she started to undress. She took off her shoes, socks, then her jumper and jeans. Once she was standing in nothing but her underwear, Ron bit his lip hard and was sure that his cock jerked. The knickers and bra she was wearing were orange. In fact, it looked to be the same shade that the Chudley Canons used. Ron sat with his mouth wide open and drool dripping from his lip.

Hermione ran her fingers through her hair then wiggled in place.
"Do you like it?"

Ron wasn't sure if he could speak but he had to try. "N-no," he wheezed. "Iâ€¢I fucking worship it. I bloody worship you, Hermione." She blushed, whimpering softly. Then, gradually, she crawled into the bed and on top of him. Ron shuddered under her as he studied the masterpiece that was her body. He still couldn't believe sometimes that he was with her.

"Ron?" she said.

"Yes?"

"I think it's important to clarify that I'll be doing the worshipping today." Hermione leaned down, kissing his ear. "You're the birthday boy," she whispered into it. She started kissing and nibbling on his earlobe; Ron moaned, popping his hips. "I'm going to praise every bit of your gorgeous body," she continued against his jaw. "Then, I will be the one to shag you until we cum all around each other."

Ron threw his head back, digging his nails into his scalp "Please â€“ please 'Mione!"

Hermione didn't waste another second after his plea; she lowered her lips to his. She seemed to move her mouth and hands over every inch of his body, making Ron so hard and mad that he thought he'd pass out, before finally taking off the rest of her clothes and sliding herself down on his cock. Ron clutched her waist whereas Hermione dug her hands into the sheets. They shagged fervently; everything was so loud, deep, and steamy. Ron came moaning her name, basking in the hot pressure that he hadn't felt in ages. Hermione crumpled on top of him once her own heat had become too much to hold back. They held each other, gasping for air, as they tried to find their way back to the world.

When Ron and Hermione were sure that it was safe to let each other go, they started putting their underwear back on. He got back into his boxers then sat up in bed, taking in every detail of her as she dressed. "All done," she said, fastening her bra. Ron took her wrist, bringing her back to the bed. Hermione sat between his legs; she rested the side of her head against his chest while he circled an arm around her.

He kissed the top of her head, loving the smell of honey in her hair. "I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart," she said. "Mmm, that felt so incredible."

"I'd say that was exceptional, and I never use that word because it's one of yours."

Hermione chuckled, tracing the freckles on his arm. "You're justified in using it."

"The underwear was a lovely addition too," Ron said, using his free hand to massage her thigh. "You know how much I love that color."

"That's precisely why I chose it. I thought it would be another nice gift for you." She looked up at him. "Have I told you happy birthday yet?"

"A few times, but I don't mind hearing it again."

"Happy birthday, Ron," Hermione said, caressing his cheek. "You're finally nineteen. You're so grown up."

"Says the woman who'll be twenty this year. Blimey, I can't believe I'm dating such an old person."

She jabbed his chest. "You're rude!"

"And you love it," he said smoothly.

"I don't actually, but I'll let it slide because it's your special day."

"Just like you let me slide into you earlier?"

"Ronald Weasley!" Hermione said, giggling. "You're so raunchy."

"I can't help it. I've been saving all this up for a whole month."

"I'm flattered."

"And I'm fortunate. I got the three P's of turning nineteen."

"The three P's?"

Ron knew that he was pressing his luck, but he couldn't help himself. "Yeah â€“ pancakes, presents, and pussy." Hermione sharply gasped then brutally pinched his nipple and crawled away from him. "Aw, come back," he said as he laughed. He reached out for her but Hermione shoved his hand away.

"Absolutely not! You â€“ are â€“ appalling!" Hermione was glaring manically at him with her cheeks slightly puffed out. She was scary looking but mostly cute as all hell.

Ron tried to stop snickering. "I'm really sorry, love. I'm just having a laugh. I miss this, that's all."

She didn't appear convinced. "Miss what?" she asked, stiffly.

"Ruffling you," he said, shrugging.

"Ah, so you're finally admitting that you find sport in it?"

"I thought I told you that third year?" Ron said. Hermione didn't laugh. "Oh, honestly, Hermione, I'm sorry. I won't be vile anymore. Just come back to me, please?" He pouted.

Hermione's demeanor finally softened. "Don't pout."

"Why? Am I too old for it?"

"That's one of the reasons. The other is that it's terribly sexy and unfair to use against me. I should just bite your lip off."

"I deserve it," he said, reaching out for her again. Hermione merely stared at his hand for a few seconds before taking it and getting back into his lap. "Still love me?"

"Always," she said, "but that doesn't mean you can't get into trouble."

"I know," he said. He kissed her temple, sighing in the comfort of having her close. Hermione went back to running her fingers over his arm.

"Are you sure that this is all you want to do?" she asked. "We could go back to Hogsmeade."

"I'm sure, Hermione. I enjoyed my breakfast with you and Ginny and the walk we took around the village afterwards. All that was great but being here with you now is what I've really wanted. It's all I need."

Hermione looked up at him, giving him a tender expression. "I understand. It's how I felt when you came here for my birthday last year."

"Then you should know that you have no reason to worry. Besides, the gift certificate to that robe shop you gave me is enough to keep me happy for weeks."

"I'm really glad you like it. I know it's rather practical but you'll need a proper wardrobe once you start working." She sighed. "I just want to do everything I can to make sure that our time together today is perfect for you."

Ron wanted to roll his eyes, but he didn't out of respect for her. Hermione had changed a lot over the years but the woman would always overanalyze to a degree. It boggled and even annoyed him at times, but it was simply who she was. Plus, he was touched that she was fussing over his birthday so much. "Well you can stop worrying about that too then because just having you makes my day perfect," Ron said. "We could be boiling in a cauldron full of goblin snot right now and it wouldn't be all bad because we'd be together."

Hermione gently laughed. "Grotesque — but romantic."

"See? I can be vile and charming. I'm the best of both worlds."

"Hmm. I'm one lucky woman." Hermione pecked his lips. "While I have you, I suppose I can personally thank you for the roses and chocolate on Valentine's Day."

"You're welcome. I really wish I could've given you more."

"That was plenty, Ron," she said. "Valrhona chocolates are my favorite and out of all the bouquets I saw, I honestly believe that mine was amongst the biggest. I was beaming all day; I could tell that a lot of the girls were quite jealous and baffled."

"Baffled? Why?" Ron asked. "Don't people know we're together?"

"Yes, but considering who you are—"

"— who I am?"

"Well, you're dangerous and—"

"— dangerous?" Ron said incredulously. "Hermione, you know I'd never hurt you."

Hermione placed a finger to his lips. "Sweetheart, calm down and let me explain, okay?" Ron nodded. "I don't mean 'dangerous' as in I have to fear for my safety when I'm around you. It's a different kind."

"There's another kind of dangerous?" Ron asked, raising an eyebrow.

She rubbed her cheek, frowning. "It's well—it's a girl thing. Some women like the idea of being with a man who's a bit rough and has got a wild side. You're an Auror-in-training, Ron. That alone makes you fit the description. Even if you're the sweetest person in the world, you're still learning how to capture and even critically injure people."

"Bad people," he said in defense.

"I know, but the occupation does come with certain ideologies; you know that. Anyway, the point is that you're seen as somewhat of a rough and rigid bloke, so the fact that you sent me chocolate hearts and beautiful roses makes you mysterious and even more attractive."

Ron scrunched up his nose, trying very hard to follow her logic. All it did was give him a headache. "Girls are completely mental. Who has the time to think about all that? See, blokes are simple. If a girl is fit and can make the guy laugh, then she's already got her foot in the door."

"I'll make a note of that and pass it around to all of the female students."

"Please do," Ron mumbled. "I'm still really enjoying your gift. I listen to it a lot. It's fucking brilliant, Hermione." He lifted her chin so he could look into her eyes. "I truly needed that, especially at Lambrick."

Hermione put her hand on his. "Anything for you, Ron." She leaned forward, kissing him. They held their lips together as an energy passed pleasurable between them. When she pulled away, Hermione

turned so she completely faced him. Ron tried not to ogle her breasts that were wonderfully tucked into her orange bra.

"Ron?"

"Hmm?" he asked, quickly moving his gaze to her face.

She took his hand, looking serious. "How are things going for you there?"

Ron figured that they'd talk at least a little about camp; he also knew that he needed to be honest. "I'm all right. We've been in the same unit for over a month now and it's insane. Everything is always so intense and Iâ€œ!" He had to stop. Ron's instinct was urging him to shut up.

"If you don't want to talk about it that's okay," Hermione said.

"No, I do." He rubbed his neck. "I just don't know how to explain it. It'sâ€œ; sometimes at camp I feel so detached."

"In what way?"

"I'm not sure exactly. We work to the extreme every day and I have to be a certain kind of person while I'm training." Ron stared off toward the floor. "Sometimes it's like the only things I can recognize are stuff like the sound of my instructor's whistle, or the feel of muddy grass and wet leaves on my face, or even the bloody smell of my running trainers." He looked back at her; she didn't appear worried or confused.

"I think I understand," Hermione said after a prolonged silence.

"Do you really?" he asked skeptically.

"Yes, I do. For me, sometimes I think all I touch are books. I spend so time talking to professors and planning with McGonagall that occasionally I forget that I'm still a student." She shook her head, clutching her necklace. "There are nights when I can't fall asleep until I've looked over every class note I made that day. It soothes me."

Ron could tell how strongly she felt about this by her tone and expression. "What do you think it means?" he asked.

"I think it means that we're putting every bit of ourselves into our passions," Hermione said. "We were the same way when we hunted the Horcruxes. The only difference is that what we're doing now is totally for ourselves so it feels a little..."

"Strange?" Ron offered.

"Exactly," she said. "We just have to remember our goals, and I must say that I'm not so sure of mine anymore. The Career Seminar is really quite extraordinary. It's been making me consider a lot of things."

"Are you still thinking about Law Enforcement?"

"Yes, but I've also been doing a great deal of research into the Magical Creatures Department."

Ron grinned. "That sounds brilliant too."

Hermione smiled a bit herself. "I know. It's always been a passion of mine. Oh! I don't know what I want."

"But you don't need to know what you want right now," he said, rubbing her arms. "You've got some months before graduation, and even then you have time."

"I'm just starting to really feel the pressure now."

"I get that, but you've got to remember to breathe and that you're the only person who can tell you what and when as far as your career. I'm gonna stand behind you no matter what you choose."

Hermione nodded, taking deep breaths. "Thank you, Ron."

"Of course," he said. "I love you, Hermione, and no matter what you decide, you'll be excellent. You fine right now and you'll continue to be. Just keep your options open."

"I am. What do you think about it though?"

"It's a huge department and there are tons of interesting things to do in it. I think it's a wicked idea. It's a subject you've always nagged—"

"— sorry?"

"Talked about," Ron swiftly said. "Why don't you write a letter to Charlie? He'll be able to give you some great information, or at least names of people to contact."

Hermione's eyes widened. "That's a fantastic idea!"

He shrugged. "I have them from time to time. Do you still have his address?"

"Yes. When would be a proper time to write him? I don't want to disturb him."

"Charlie won't care; he's the friendliest bloke I know. I'm sure any time would be good. Besides, he adores you."

Hermione's cheeks went pink. "And I adore him. He's great. You two act alike."

"That's the best compliment I've ever received," Ron said.

"I'm partial to you though," she said, placing her forehead to his. "You've always been my favorite Weasley."

Ron traced her mouth, feeling his heart beat faster. "Now you're just being biased."

She lightly licked his finger. "Would it bother you if I was?"

"No." They leaned forward, kissing tenderly. "Mmm, damn."

"What?"

"Your lips are so bloody soft," he whispered. "I love feeling them."

Hermione grinned gorgeously. "Well, it is your birthday. You can feel them for as long as you want."

"You promise?"

"You have my word."

Ron leaned in again, pressing his mouth harder to hers this time. He wrapped his arms around her waist and was able to turn and guide her back against the mattress, settling on top of her. Hermione made a faint noise while rubbing her hands all over his back and arms. Everything felt so good and so his.

They kept snogging and caressing each other until the wave of heat washed over them and Ron made his way inside of her again. He went slowly, savoring every touch, sound, smell, feel, and taste. Even after they were finished, they stayed connected and continued to kiss and run their hands all over one another.

To Ron, every time they got close was like another chance. Hermione was granting him to learn things about her. He seized each opportunity. Ron's love and passion for Hermione had grown so tremendously while being away from her. There was nothing he wanted more than to return to her for good. Ron was having such an amazing time and he didn't want it to end. However, as the minutes ticked on, reality started to close in on him. It wasn't too long before his time was up and he had to leave.

Ron reluctantly pulled away from her so he could dress. Hermione watched him while closely holding a pillow. "Don't forget your shirt," she said as he put his jumper on.

"That's yours. We had a deal, remember? You got me chocolate and I had to bring you one of my training shirts."

Her eyes lit up. "I can't believe you remembered!"

"Always the tone of surprise," he said, smirking.

Hermione giggled as she put the shirt on. "Thank you, Ron. What do you think?" It was torn, stained, and awfully big on her, but it also looked absolutely perfect on her body.

"C'mere," he said. She walked over and he put his arms around her. They were quiet for awhile. "I wish I didn't have to leave."

"I wish I could go with you," she said, holding him firmly. "Valentine's Day was okay butâ€œ but this day is different." She looked up at him. He could see the love, happiness, and pain in her expression. It mirrored what he felt. "Ronâ€œ"

"I know," he whispered, "but just this once, let's not say it."

"What do you want to do then? What should we say?"

"How about justâ€œI love you?" He softly kissed her lips. "I love you, Hermione."

"I love you too, Ron; so much." They kissed again, giving each other one last taste.

Hermione walked him to the door and opened it. Ron took her hands while his eyes roamed over her body. He needed to take in all that he could get. "Th-thank you for this morning," he managed to say, "and, um, keep an eye on Ginny."

"I will," she said, kissing his fingertips. "You and Harry look after each other, okay?"

"We always do." Ron hated having to do it, but he pulled his hands away from her.

Hermione automatically held herself, swallowing hard. "Happy birthday, sweetheart. I hope you have a good day."

"I will," he said. He waved at her, and she gently waved back. Ron gave her one more smile, then turned around and headed down the corridor.

As he made his way out of the castle, he tried with everything he had to erase the small pit in his chest. No matter what, Ron had gotten a chance to see Hermione, and even if it was for only a few hours, it'd been worth what he was feeling now. "This won't be forever," he told himself aloud. He said it repeatedly until he believed it and the anguish was gone.

Once he'd returned to Lambrick and checked in, Ron headed straight for Mr. Nelson's cabin. It was bollocks that he had to attend a session on his birthday, but it didn't upset him too much. After two months, Ron was actually starting to like his time with his mental Healer. He just didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

He knocked on the door twice before walking in like he always did. Mr. Nelson looked up from his work. "Hello, Ron. How was the birthday trip?"

"Perfect," Ron said, walking right over to the couch. Mr. Nelson joined him. "I'm so relieved that I got to see her today. I really needed to."

"I bet," Mr. Nelson said. "Well, you're all smiley, which is always a good thing. You left this here last time, by the way." He handed back his Yo-Yo.

"Thank you!" Ron said. "I've been looking for this."

"Happy birthday," Mr. Nelson said, patting his arm. "So, do you want to talk about your morning with Hermione? We can if you're in the birthday spirit."

Ron thought about it for a moment. He'd have no problem spending his whole session talking about his breakfast with Ginny and Hermione, or the wicked gift she'd given him, but the truth was that he needed to talk about the things in his head that kept him from working as hard as he could. "Actually, I think I'd rather continue from where we left off last time."

"That's completely fine. Whatever you want, Ron. This is your time."

Ron and Mr. Nelson then began to discuss his panic attacks and Fred again. Ron always felt so exposed when he went into detail about his fears but it was something he had to do. He trusted Mr. Nelson and knew that this was the right move. It might've been his birthday, but Ron still had work that needed to be done.

"I just felt so powerless," Ron said. "I was standing right there and saw everything but I couldn't do anything to stop itâ€¦or to bring him back. I wanted to kill Death Eaters and destroy everyone in the castle who I believed to be evil because I thought it would somehow give me another chance to save him."

He paused, quickly flicking his Yo-Yo again. He let it dangle for a few second before tugging it back up into his palm. He didn't know why, but doing so kept him sane as he talked. "Nothing I did worked though. I was helpless," he continued with, "and every time I have an attack, I'm reminded of how every bit of strength and knowledge I have can easily be ripped from me, rendering me useless. I have no control when it happens and that's the worst part. It's likeâ€¦being blinded and bound then getting tossed over a waterfall or something."

Ron cleared his throat, shaking his head. "But I'm sure that doesn't make any sense."

"Why do you always do that, Ron?"

"Sir?"

"You brush off your feelings and assume that what you say or think is wrong or strange," Mr. Nelson said calmly. "We've been meeting for weeks now and every time you go to a vulnerable place and reveal something profound, you recant. Why?"

Ron rubbed his neck, shrugging. "I dunno. It's a reflex, I guess. I, umâ€¦if I say my ideas or feelings are rubbish then I don't have to hear someone else say it. It's easier to take coming from me. I've been doing it all my life."

"Well it isn't something you have to keep doing," Mr. Nelson said. "Your thoughts and feelings are your own, Ron. You don't

need to excuse them. Also, what you said certainly made sense." He exhaled heavily. "Though it wasn't the same situation as yours, as a boy I too often felt powerless. Whenever my father got into one of his states, it was as if my entire world was being violently shaken. I never knew if this time would be the one when he finally hurt my family so severely that things could never be repaired."

It amazed Ron at how effortlessly Mr. Nelson talked about his past. It helped him feel more capable. "I get that way during my attacks," he said quietly. "It doesn't matter what triggers it or who I'm thinking about at the time. I get this feeling that 'this is it', you know?"

"I definitely do," Mr. Nelson said, nodding, "but you're learning how to find yourself during the attacks, and you're working through them. You are gaining some of that power back."

"It's not the only thing I want to gain back," Ron said before he could stop himself.

"What do you mean?" Mr. Nelson asked.

Ron wrapped the Yo-Yo string tightly around his finger. He'd never told anyone this before. "Iâ€œI think I lost a part of myself that night. I don't know which part but I know for sure that it was taken from me when Fred died. I do understand that I'll never be the same but this is a different feeling."

"In what way?"

"I-I feel separated from the person I was before I went back into Hogwarts with Harry and Hermione that night," Ron said. "The bloke I see in pictures or think about when I hear stories about my pastâ€œhe doesn't seem like me. For so long I believed I hadn't changed, but I was lying to myself because I was too stupid and scared to admit that I don't know who that Ron is anymore. I need to get that part of me back so I can feel like me â€œ the old me â€œ again. How do I do that, Mr. Nelson?"

Mr. Nelson shook his head. "I don't know, Ron. I wish I could tell you that there's a solution or even small steps you can take but I can't. I can't tell you how to get that part back because I honestly don't believe you can."

"Wh-why not?"

"Because I think the part of you that was taken away that night was your innocence."

Ron gave him a look. "My innocence? I was eighteen when it happened. I'd fought Death Eaters and had seen a lot of terrible things. I certainly wasn't innocent."

"No - you're not understanding me," Mr. Nelson said. "I don't mean in terms of age or experience. I'm talking about a different kind of innocence." Ron merely shrugged, hoping that the

alternate meaning of 'innocence' would be a lot easier to understand than the other form of 'dangerous'.

Mr. Nelson sat up straighter. "Okay, Ron, before that night you had been in situations where the people you love were in mortal danger, yes?"

"That's right."

"So, you told me that your sister was possessed and almost died; your father was attacked but survived; your brothers sustained permanent scars from their assaults but are thriving; and even though your best friends had been put in peril time and time again, they made it through."

Ron didn't like where this was going. "Are you saying that those incidences don't mean anything because they survived?"

"Not at all. I'm simply stating that they weren't the same as what happened that night. Up until that point, your family and friends have always recovered from their brushes with mortality. No matter how frightened and worried you got, you knew in your mind that things would be okay because they were still alive."

Ron rubbed his neck, nodding. "I reckon that's true."

"But you couldn't do that with Fred," Mr. Nelson said gently. "He died, and that night was the first time you had to personally deal with true loss. When your brother didn't recover, it shattered the illusion that the ones you love will always be okay. From that moment, you began to view the world differently. Does that make sense?"

He swallowed hard, letting out a shaky breath. "I-I don't know."

"Well, since the war, have you ever felt older than the people around you or felt an overpowering need to make connections and find peace with loved ones?"

Ron looked up at Mr. Nelson; he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Yes," he whispered.

"That's part of it, Ron. You witnessed your brother's life being taken away. An experience like that has lasting effects. That night took away your naïve view on death that the majority of people have. In doing so, it made you grow up a lot faster and harsher than you were prepared for. That's why you feel as if a piece of you is missing."

Ron rubbed his face, feeling overwhelmed. He tried not to feel anger towards Fred for dying and making him like this. Ron wished that he were back in Hermione's bed with her. "So what do I do?" he asked.

"You adapt," Mr. Nelson said as if it was the easiest concept in the world. "You embrace the person you are. You're still you, Ron, just different. I think what'll also help is if you talked about this with someone who's got experience in the area."

"You mean like Harry?" Ron asked.

"You speak very highly of him and he's someone you can trust here. Now I know you don't want to cloud your friendship with too much, but you should utilize his experiences and share your own. You'd be surprised at how normal and safe it can make you feel. I'm sure Harry would love to have someone to talk to about it. Just give it some thought, all right?"

Even though Mr. Nelson was telling him to do something, it didn't feel like a command. It was one of the things Ron enjoyed most about him. "Okay, I can do that."

"Excellent, Ron," he said with a smile. He then checked his watch. "Well, I'm afraid we're about out of time." The two of them stood up.

"Thank you, Mr. Nelson," Ron said.

"It's my pleasure, Ron. Thank you for once again opening up. I really think it's helping you."

"I'm trying, sir."

"I know, and that's all I'll ever ask of you." Mr. Nelson shook his hand. "So, what do you plan to do for the rest of your day?"

Ron let out a gloomy sigh. "What any bloke who was spending his birthday at Lambrick Academy would do à€" wallow in self-pity."

Mr. Nelson burst into laughter. "Well try not to wallow too low to the ground, eh? I'll see you next week, Ron."

Ron left the cabin feeling devastated but also informed. He hated the idea of never feeling like the person he used to be, but it made sense why he couldn't. In fact, the more he thought about Mr. Nelson's explanation, the more Ron wasn't sure if he even wanted to be the same person. Fred was gone and their family would never be nine again. The bloke Ron used to be probably couldn't handle that idea, but maybe with time, the new person he was could.

He went into the mailing cabin, smiling widely as he saw a small box from his parents. Due to Lambrick's strict mailing policy, Ron had told his family members to send his gifts to Ginny so he could at least see them on his birthday. He'd have to wait until he got home before he could actually keep them with him. They were still allowed to send cards though, and Ron knew that inside the package were one from his parents, siblings, and family members who were still trying to get details about Lambrick out of him. He was older now, but Ron still got giddy when he received birthday cards. He loved knowing that people were thinking about him.

Ron kept his eyes on the box as he walked out of the room. He collided with something solid, which caused him to drop his gift. "Oi - watch where you're going, Weasley!" Jack groaned.

"Sorry," Ron mumbled.

"Maybe you should borrow Potter's glasses," Alden said, chuckling. He snatched up the package before Ron could get to it. "What's this?" Ron balled his fists, telling himself to stay calm. Nick Alden was a tall, burly bloke who Ron had never gotten along with since their days in the east section together, but over the past month, Alden had turned from being a prick to a total fucking wanker toward him.

"Give that back," Ron said as calmly as he could.

"Why?" Alden asked. "What's in it? Who's it from?"

"None of your fucking business so just give it back or—"

"â€“ or what? You gonna fight me, ginger?" Alden asked. "You think Alan would approve?"

Ron could feel his ears burning. Everyone at camp knew damn well that he was on his last leg due to his temper. He was sure that Alden was purposely trying to set him off so he'd retaliate and get chucked out. "Justâ€‘just give me my mail back, Alden, then the three of us can go our separate ways."

Alden smiled. "What a hero you are. Is that another thing Potter taught you when you were on your knees in front of him?"

"Nick, seriously, let's just go," Jack said, nudging him.

Alden looked at Jack for a moment then shoved Ron's box right against his chest. "There you go, bitch." He pushed past Ron and into the mail cabin. Jack said nothing and followed him inside.

Ron stood as still as he could but he couldn't stop shaking. His body throbbed to rush back inside and kick Alden's arse. Ron had to use his breathe-and-count technique in order to stop himself from doing so. He couldn't fight right now; he had to save his fury for the proper moment. When he felt calm enough to walk, he tightly clutched his box and made his way back to the Ruins. Ron felt like such a fucking tit for not retaliating but an annoying voice in his head told him he'd done the right thing. He couldn't let fuckers like Alden ruin his birthday.

It was easier to relax once he opened the door to his room and saw Harry. "Blimey, I didn't know you knew how to read," Ron said.

Harry laughed, looking up from his notes. "Might as well make use of the glasses, eh? I'm just trying to remember how to perform some transfiguration spells. I hate nonverbals."

"Me too," Ron breathed as he sat next to him on the bed.

Harry gave him a once-over. "I gotta say, Ron, I didn't expect you to look so miserable after spending the morning with Hermione."

"It's not her fault. I had an amazing time with her. I didn't want to leave."

"Did you have a bad session then?"

"No. It's justâ€; I ran into Alden before I came back here."

Harry rolled her eyes. "He's such a twat, Ron. Don't pay him any attention."

"I'm doing my best, Harry!" Ron said in frustration. "He tried to start something with me. I don't know what his fucking problem is."

"He's threatened by you, Ron, and things are getting extremely tense around here. Everyone seems to be fighting these days. Really, don't indulge him." Harry nudged him. "Leave that to Michelle."

Ron stuck out his tongue. "Ugh, I still can't believe they're shagging. Can we talk about something else?"

"Yeah. What's in the box?"

"Most likely my cards from everyone."

"Must be nice." Though Harry was giving him a kind smile, Ron knew him well enough to hear the change in his voice. Harry would always have a bit of a disconnection to birthdays because of what he'd endured on his year after year with the Dursley's.

"I dunno. You tell me," Ron said. He reached into his coat pocket then handed Harry two letters. "I reckon Hermione's is full of advice and inspiring words, and my sister's is full ofâ€;well, you knowâ€;Ginny stuff."

Harry snorted. "You always talk about Ginny in such a touching way."

"Normally I'd hit you for putting my sister's name and the word 'touching' in the same sentence, but I feel bad that you couldn't have breakfast with us today."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, me too, but at least you three had a good time. I'm glad you finally used your pass."

"Too bad it's my last."

"That's all right. We won't be here too much longer. And anyway, don't think about that right now. It's your birthday, yeah?"

Ron smiled. "I reckon you're right." He went to the door, checking up and down the corridor before closing and locking the door.

Harry appeared startled. "Um, you do know that I can't be a Hermione substitute, right?"

Ron looked at him in disgust as he sat back down. "I'll let that cheek go because I'm in a good mood today and I want to share these with you." He reached inside his pocket again then pulled out a tiny bag of fruity Whizbees.

Harry's jaw dropped. "A-are those what I think they are?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said. "So let's eat them as fast as we can and read through some of these cards. My uncles always send me mad or perverted ones â€“ sometimes both."

Harry quickly helped him open the box. "You're brilliant sometimes, Ron."

"What do you mean 'sometimes'? I drip brilliance every second of the day."

"Oh, is that what you're dripping? I thought it was pixie semen."

"I'm nineteen now, Mr. Potter. I won't indulge you in such childish behavior."

Harry laughed hard again, clapping a hand on his back. "Happy birthday, mate."

"Thanks, Harry," Ron said, grinning.

Ron and Harry spent the afternoon reading through his cards and taking the piss as they ate Whizbees and floated a few inches off the bed. It wasn't his ideal birthday, but at least with Harry around he was able to go to bed laughing.

Ron's humor vanished the next morning though when Alan's screeching whistle woke him up. He had to set aside his happiness of being a year older and his fantasies of Hermione to focus on his training that had become another life of his entirely over the past month.

Ever since they'd returned from the Auror ball, the atmosphere around Lambrick had shifted. It was as if a foreign intensity had swept over the academy. They were all different people once the training day began. Ron and his campmates were battling harder than they ever had before. There were more fights and less friendly conversation and there also seemed to be an added viciousness to the way everyone behaved. The ball had shown them what their lives could be like if they made it all the way through the program; over the weeks, the constant reminder of that life had driven them all mental.

Ron was trying his best to stay above his aggression, but it was difficult with constantly seeing people he disliked and trudging through the challenging subject matter of unit five. Early on he'd discovered that he was quite comfortable with stealth and covert operations, but mastering the various Auror disguises kicked his bollocks in. Even the health unit, which he'd passed with average marks, hadn't been this complex. There were loads of camouflages, both magical and Muggle, and intricate physical

transformations that Alan and Richard tested them over daily. It all required a heavy use of advanced magic, and Ron found himself failing some of the lessons.

Today was proving to be another one of those days. They were practicing with one of the voice echoing charms that the Aurors had used during their first night of hostage training. The nonverbal spell he had to use was difficult to execute.

Ron put his wand tip to his throat, taking a deep breath. He concentrated on the spell as hard as he could, but for the fourth time he felt a horrible jab of pain in his neck. He coughed then peered around the classroom at his campmates: some appeared to be handling this just fine while others were struggling like himself. That fact didn't make him feel any better though. Ron wanted to do well.

"Have you gotten it to work, Weasley?" Alan asked as he walked over to him.

"N-not quite yet," Ron rasped.

"Does it hurt when you perform the spell?"

Ron wanted to lie but he couldn't. "Yes, sir."

"That means your concentration is off. If it were a matter of not knowing the spell, then you wouldn't be feeling anything at all. You have to focus, Weasley."

"I am, sir," Ron said, "but it's apparently not enough."

"So make it enough," Alan said. "All month you've struggled with these types of spells, which doesn't surprise me all too much. Stop thinking about how hard this is and simply let your skills guide you."

"I will, sir," Ron mumbled. Alan looked doubtfully at him then walked away. Ron let out a long, irritated breath. He told himself that he could perform the stupid fucking spell then tried again. He groaned as his throat throbbed for the fifth time. "Dammit!" he breathed in defeat.

Ron left class feeling frustrated but also eager to get to field practice. It was the only place where he could truly let out his grief over fucking up during class and anger over people who bothered him. As always, the instructors had them pair up and duel using an arrangement of new offensive and defensive spells as well as different blocking and maneuvering techniques. The sophisticated spellwork that Ron had to use during practice was just as intricate as the magic they used in class, but at least on the field Ron felt comfortable. Even if it was tough or he got injured, dueling was simply something he enjoyed doing.

While Ron dueled with Harry, he told himself that he would be better at nineteen than he'd been at eighteen. Ron would be stronger, kinder, smarter, and just overall better in every aspect of his life. This was his year to really do something for

his family and mates. He thought about these things so extremely that it interfered with his dueling. He was surprised when he was hit with a spell and fell back on his arse. Alan blew his whistle, causing Ron to mentally groan.

"I want you lot in formation right now!" Alan barked. The tone of his voice told Ron that he was furious (and luckily not just at him) so he quickly got up and formed a line with the rest of the group. Richard and the section hands stood in place while Alan walked slowly down their line.

"What the hell are you lot doing tonight, huh?" Alan asked. "It certainly isn't dueling. I've seen better tactics from garden gnomes." He stared each one of them down. "What is with you all today â€“ better yet, what has been going on with you lot for the past several days? You all have been dueling like shit! I'll tell you right now that it won't be enough here, let alone in a real battle. I've seen what each of you can do and I know it's a lot more than what you've been giving us."

Everyone in the line stayed quiet and still. Ron could feel the air around them thickening. Alan's words were harsh but he knew that they were true. Ron just wanted to make it to the end so bloody badly; the desire sometimes messed him up. That had to be true for everyone else as well.

"Nothing?" Alan asked. "Not one of you has an explanation as to why this group is performing below standard? That's too bad. It would be a shame if you were all cut now because you couldn't concentrate." Ron squirmed a little. He didn't need to hear these things now - or ever.

"Alan and I won't be there to hold your hands when you're battling a dark wizard," Richard said, walking over and standing next to Alan. "We're trying to teach and prepare you lot for what's to come once you're out of here - the key phrase being 'once you're out of here'. You're still Lambrick trainees and the most important thing in your life should be your training here â€“ not the dream that comes after this. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," they all said.

"And while we're on the subject, there's something else we've been noticing," Richard said. "Get into the pairs you were just in." Everyone scurried and stood next to their partner. Richard crossed his arms over his chest as he studied the couples. "Mm-hm. There are nine pairs out here, and curiously enough, almost all of you are partnered with someone from your original section. At first Alan and I just thought it was a fluke but many nights in a row is excessive."

Ron carefully looked around, not at all surprised by this detail. Over the past couple of weeks, a rivalry between the original sections had formed somehow. There was a subtle division between the old east and west trainees that Ron and Harry tried desperately to stay out of. They weren't Gryffindors fighting Slytherins out here. They just wanted to graduate.

"Clark!" Richard barked.

Letty jumped, blushing furiously. "Yes, sir?"

"Why do you think everyone is keen on partnering up like this?" he asked.

Letty looked around as if she was expecting to get help. "W-well, sir," she said, "I guessâ€œ I believe everyone just wants to stay with their own."

"Stay with their own?" Alan repeated. "Is that true, lot?" There was a collective murmur and head nod. "Well that's rubbish, trainees, because there is no east and west anymore. We told you that this was now one camp and one voice."

"We understand the rivalry, but all the fighting and separation out here is bullshit," Richard said. "When you get your badges, it's not going to have an east or west on it, just your name and what branch you belong to. You all have to work together."

"They know this already, Richard," Alan grumbled. "Just like they know that they have to give their all out here every night." He blew his whistle. "All right, change of plans. I want all of you to pair up with someone you weren't in a section with. You lot are going to give us ten-tens right now before we go any further tonight."

Ron wanted to rip his hair out. Ten-tens meant that they had to duel for ten minutes, ten times, without stopping for more than a breather in between rounds. It was unbelievably harsh and usually how they ended practice because they were allowed to see the nurse or collapse in the grass right afterwards.

"Before that happens though," Richard added. "I reckon we should have a quick assessment. You lot have been so dozy lately that you need to remind Alan and I of why you're here."

"Excellent idea, Richard," Alan said. "You'll go in pairs in front of the group."

Jack raised his hand, appearing anxious. "Sir, do â€œ do you plan to eliminate anyone tonight over these assessments?"

"I don't know, Turner," Alan said casually. "If you lot are going to continue to slack, then maybe."

"You all have exactly ten seconds to find a new partner," Richard said. "Potter, Weasley: since you two are already set, you can go first." Ron gasped and automatically opened his mouth but hastily closed it before he blurted out something idiotic like 'no'.

"Come on," Richard said. "Everyone else, clear a space and put up a protection charm."

Harry swiftly brushed his elbow across Ron's arm, then the two started walking forward and over to Alan and Richard. "Give us the best three minutes you've got," Alan said.

"Yes, sir," Ron and Harry said together.

"Shake hands then get into position."

The two faced each other. Ron didn't need to hear Harry's voice to know what he was saying, just as Harry already knew what Ron was thinking. They had to kick each other's arse as hard as they could because it wasn't guaranteed that both would make it all the way through. They then firmly shook hands, adding to their telepathic conversation that even though they were fighting against one another, they still wanted each other to do well.

Once they started walking in opposite directions, Ron forced everything out of his mind. He knew keeping too much in his head had been his problem earlier. He couldn't think about Hermione and family, what being nineteen meant, or even about graduation. All Ron could concentrate on was his duel against Harry. The bloke was so damn quick and could disarm and block spells expertly. Ron was in better shape though and had a leg up when it came to offense. He'd need to use those advantages to get through this.

They finally stopped and turned towards each other. Raising their wands, they took the proper dueling stance. Everything around them was quiet. Ron could feel everyone's eyes on them. Harry nodded to him; he nodded back. Yes, Harry was fast and strong, but he had no imagination. Ron, on the other hand, knew that he could improvise. It was one of the strengths Richard had told him he'd always possessed as they went over his last evaluation.

"On my whistle," Alan said. "One, two!"

As soon as Alan blew his whistle, Ron dodged the disarming spell he knew that Harry would use. Still having a hold of his wand, he shot back to his feet, pointing his wand at Harry who was pointing his at him. Ron knew that Harry wouldn't budge; he would have to catch him off guard to draw him closer. "Deprimo!" Ron bellowed at one of the trees nearest Harry. A large chunk of bark blasted from the middle of the tree, spraying Harry.

It occupied him long enough for Ron to run towards him and take better aim. He blasted Harry back but before he had time to think, Harry shouted, "Tudiculo!" Ron was lifted into the air then promptly slammed back to the ground. "Inlubrico!" he cried out next. The spell yanked Ron back through the grass and further away from him.

Over and over they threw spells at each other, giving each other everything they had. Ron knew that diversity was essential and Harry was making him pull out every bit of magic he possessed. The two knew each other inside and out, so speed and quantity was key.

Ron felt wonky as he dueled Harry. It was similar to how he felt when he'd taken too many Ridium tablets. Ron knew that he was his equal and that they would always bring the best out in each other. Even if Harry beat him tonight, Ron knew that he'd

performed to standard, however, he refused to let that happen. Ron couldn't let Harry take this away from him.

Harry hit him with yet another spell that sent Ron on his back. His head hit the ground so hard that he saw stars. As his wand fell out of hand, he heard Harry barreling towards him. Ron felt too dazed to speak and he couldn't get up; he had to do something. He felt around for his wand, finally connecting his fingers with the smooth wood. Then, in an instant, Harry was on the ground right in front of him, his face planted in the grass and his wand mere centimeters away from his thumb. Ron couldn't move. He was gobsmacked that the nonverbal tripping jinx he used had actually worked.

Alan blew his whistle. "Time!"

Hearing Alan's voice took Ron out of the trance he'd been in for the past three minutes. Harry slowly lifted his head; his nose was bloody but he didn't look upset. They simply stared at each other, shaking and breathing roughly. Ron didn't know how Harry felt, but he had never dueled so hard before. He wobbled to his feet then helped Harry up. As he wiped the blood from his nose, Ron rubbed his head, hissing. He could feel a knot back there and the slick substance of blood. He was so muddy and felt horribly banged up. The only upside was that Harry didn't look any better.

"Potter, Weasley," Alan said as he and Richard came over.

Harry and Ron stood as straight as their rickety bodies would allow. "Sir?" they wheezed together. Alan and Richard shared a quick look.

"That was very well done," Richard said without a hint of sarcasm. "Potter, you have to broaden your arrangement and Weasley, you need to put more focus behind your aimingâ€¦but other than that, I liked what I saw. You were quick, agile, and sturdy. Alan?"

He nodded. "My grievances match yours exactly and I agree that they performed remarkably. They had an intelligent, strong round. It's obvious that they're listening and understanding. It's just a matter of keeping that type of concentration and aptitude consistent."

Alan blew his whistle again. "You see, lot, this is the type of power we want to see from all of you every time you come out here. If you can fight like this, none of you will have any problem making it to the final exam. You two can get back in line. Good work - you were impressive."

"Thank you, sir," Ron and Harry said together. Ron tried his hardest not to beam like a twat. He knew he'd done well and his instructors agreed. Ron had redeemed himself, at least for one night.

While they limped back to the group, Ron couldn't help but notice the intense scowls from his campmates. They were the same expressions he'd seen at the Auror ball when he and Harry had

spoken to eager department heads. He tried not to think about it too much though. Ron couldn't help who he was; he didn't want to feel guilty because he'd survived a war and had learned things from it either.

Through the remainder of field practice, Ron muscled through the ache and daze, fighting as hard as he could. He didn't think about anything but the magic he needed to perform and for the first time, he fought only for himself and what he knew he deserved. Once they were dismissed for the night, Alan ushered him to the side.

"Sir?" Ron asked.

"I just want to quickly address something interesting that happened tonight," Alan said. "The last spell you used during your assessment with Potter was a nonverbal."

"I know, sir."

"Then you should also be aware that it takes the same concentration and force to perform the charms you're learning in class, right?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said. "It's just over the summer I was able to do a few nonverbal spells but that was only during combat. I think that with a lot of practice I can do it when the stakes are high—"

"—but they won't always be, Weasley," Alan said. "You can't expect someone to light a fire under your arse every time you need to get something accomplished. Bring it out of yourself simply because. That's the difference between skill and luck. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Ron said, nodding.

"Good. Now make sure to get your head checked before lights out."

"I will, sir. Goodnight."

"Wait," Alan said. He looked seriously at him. "Are you going to put forth more effort at nineteen?"

Ron's eyes widened. "How'd you know?"

Alan sighed. "You wrote it down on your application, Weasley."

"O-oh, right. Um, yes, sir. I definitely will."

"I'll be waiting to see it tomorrow," Alan said before walking away. Ron rubbed his neck, chuckling softly to himself for a few moments before he too walked back towards camp. He first went to see Madame Campbell who healed the back of his head and gave him a mild pain potion. He then took a long shower, letting the cold water revive him.

This time last year he'd been on the run with Harry and Hermione, Fred had still been alive, and Voldemort was terrorizing their world. Now, he was at Auror training camp with Harry, Hermione was his girlfriend, and both Fred and Voldemort were dead. Now was the first time in nineteen years that the world in front of Ron was drastically different. It was terrifying in some ways and thrilling in others. He may have not felt much older but he certainly felt more aware. It was a different kind of consciousness than the one he'd gained from Fred's death. This feeling could only grow from a period of severe self-doubt followed by intense revitalization.

Ron slowly walked to the meal cabin, spotting Harry who was leaning against the side of it. Once he saw Ron, he walked over to him.

"Hi," Harry said.

"Hey."

"You hungry?"

"Not really."

"Neither am I. Let's walk." They didn't speak as they made their way around the property. "How's your head?" Harry asked after awhile.

"Better," Ron answered. "How's your nose?"

"Not broken." Harry looked at him. "We did all right tonight, eh?"

"Yeah. You really kicked my arse."

"You kicked mine just as hard. I reckon Richard and Alan enjoyed seeing that. Something tells me that they've finally accepted us."

Ron snorted. "I dunno about that but I think they at least respect us dueling together. They're about the only ones too. Did you see the way everyone looked at us afterwards?"

"People are always looking at me, Ron."

"Well this wasn't in shock and awe," Ron said. "I think we put a lot of people off."

Harry shrugged. "There's nothing we can do about that. We've paid our dues."

"I know. I justâ€¦I just want to scream sometimes because it's not as glamorous as these buggers seem to think. People we loved died so that we can be here right now and we still are so fucked up sometimes."

Harry gave him a powerful expression. "I'm the last person you'll ever need to explain that to, Ron. There is absolutely no one

else who understands what you feel better than I do." They looked away from each other, then continued to stroll in silence.

"I'm really glad I decided to come back here," Ron said softly after another prolonged silence.

"I am too," Harry said. They nodded to each other, then just kept walking. They didn't talk much as they seemed to pass over inch of the property, but they didn't have to. At this stage of their friendship, words were hardly necessary.

When they finally returned to the Ruins, they discussed their dueling rounds and things they needed to improve on. Jack came into the room not too long after carrying a large bag. "Where are your kits?" he promptly asked.

"Sorry?" Ron asked in confusion.

"Your kits, Weasley. Where are they?"

"Why do you care?" Harry asked. "Do you want to borrow them?"

"For fuck's sake!" Jack said. He emptied the bag onto Harry's bed; torn black trousers, shirts, and jumpers fell out.

Ron immediately shot up from his own cot. "What in the bloody hell?" He ran over to his trunk where he kept his blacks but couldn't find them. His heart skipped a painful beat as he suddenly felt sick. "H-Harry?"

"Mine are gone too," Harry said, slamming his trunk closed.

"I guess I was right," Jack said simply.

"You bastard!" Harry shouted. "What did you do?"

"Before either of you get hasty, just know that I found these," Jack said.

"Bullshit!" Ron said, stomping his foot. "How did you even know they were ours?"

"I'm an Auror-in-training," Jack said. "It's my job to put the pieces together."

Harry shared a look with Ron, then the two closed in on Jack. Ron knew that he shouldn't fight but this might've been an excellent exception. "So someone told you that they stole and mangled our clothes?" Harry asked.

Jack glanced between the two of them, obviously detecting danger. "No," he said, "but I can't think of two better people to sabotage than you and Weasley - especially after tonight."

"Jackâ€œstop dicking around," Ron muttered through gritted teeth. "I honestly don't want to believe that you'd sink so bloody low as to do something like this, but if you did then I reckon we'll have to sort you out right now."

Jack's body tensed but he stared dully at him. "You don't scare me, Weasley, and I already told you that I found these."

"Where exactly?" Harry asked, appearing equally ready to strike.

"In the showers - but that shouldn't really matter, Potter. All you should be caring about right now is fixing them," Jack said. "Fucking hell, you two need to set your priorities straight."

"No. The only thing we need to do right now is find out who did this." Harry glanced at Ron again. "What d'you think?"

"I don't know," Ron said, giving Jack a once-over.

Jack let out a heavy sigh. "You two are bloody idiots. If I truly wanted to scare you or get you chucked out, do you honestly believe that I'd steal these, cut them all up, then walk around the corridors with them just to bring them back? You're not worth the effort."

Harry scratched his head as if he was considering Jack's words. "Does that mean that you know who did this at least? The person could do it to someone else, Jack, including you."

"I told you, Potter, it could've been anyone," Jack said. "Despite what news journalists and Ministry workers tell you, not everyone thinks you're special."

Harry took another step toward him but Ron held out his hand. "Wait," he said. He focused on Jack. "You honestly just found these?"

"Yes, Weasley."

"Then maybe we should go to Alan and Richard right now and show them these," Harry said.

"And say what?" Jack asked. "That you were irresponsible with your Lambrick issued kits? That you didn't have the brains to lock up your things like they told us to the day we moved in here? Count your blessings, Potter, and learn from your mistakes."

Ron hated to admit it, but Jack was right. Alan and Richard had no problem dismissing someone for not wearing their blacks to drill. They certainly wouldn't care about this. "Fuck, he's right, Harry," Ron said.

"Urgh!" Harry groaned. "Dammit, Jack! You need to say who did this. You owe us."

"Ha! I don't owe you anything, Potter," Jack said. "I happened to come across these and I figured you might want them back, that's all. If I actually gave a shit, then I'd say you owe me." He headed for the door.

"If you honestly don't give a shit, why did you bother giving these back?" Ron asked.

Jack rolled his eyes. "It's like I told you from the beginning, Weasley: when I beat you and Potter, I want to know that it was because I was better, not due to some stupid technicality. I've got no problem stepping on weaker people, but the strongest should be allowed to work." He grew more serious. "Thisâ€¢this was just unfair." The expression on Jack's face was the first one Ron had ever seen that seemed to have feeling behind it. He certainly didn't trust Jack, but he believed him right now.

"Thanks," Ron said.

"Yeah, Turner â€¢ really," Harry added.

Jack yawned as if he was bored. "Don't bother with that. Just use a reliable repairing spell on your kits and start locking your shit up because I won't be doing this next time. You'll deserve to get chucked out if this happens again, which I'm sure it will." He shook his head at them before leaving the room.

Ron and Harry sat on his bed, gazing at their destroyed kits. "Know any spells?" Harry asked.

"There's one my mum used on our clothes when they'd get really worn," Ron said.

After teaching the spell to Harry, they quietly repaired their kits. Ron felt extremely violated as he repaired the damage to his trousers. "I can't believe someone here wants to us gone so badly that they'd do this," he said. "Why the fuck is this happening? What the hell did we do?"

"We showed up and tried our best," Harry answered darkly. "Shit, I understood that things had gotten extreme, but not this much."

"Me neither. I know we bother people but I guess I thought these fuckers would have more bloody decency. This is something I could see Malfoy doing."

Harry rolled his eyes. "He's too much of a coward. He'd pay someone else to do it."

Ron didn't know how to respond. He was so gobsmacked by this that he felt a certain amount of separation from it. He'd worked extremely hard tonight and he couldn't believe that tomorrow morning it could've all been over due to someone else's actions. "Who do you think did it?"

"I dunno," Harry breathed. "I've been receiving animosity from most of these people from day one. We don't lock the door when we leave, and it's not much of a stretch to figure out where we put our gear. Eric and Jack have the easiest access but Eric and I are mates, and for some mad reason I honestly don't think Jack did it. What about you?"

"There are a few people I have in mind but I reckon it really doesn't matter," Ron said. "I fucking hate it, but there's nothing we can do. Even if we find out who did this, we have no proof and the person would just deny it. We'd just have to be more careful from now on and not trust anyone." He let out a shaky breath.

"It's all right, Ron."

"No, it's not. If we would've had to go to Alan and Richard, everything would've been over."

"Maybe not," Harry said. "I know they said that they'd chuck people out but maybe not in our circumstance. Besides, it'd only be our first real offense since we fought."

"That's not true for me, Harry," Ron mumbled. "Sure, maybe Alan and Richard would understand, but in the end it would still be our fault."

"Ron!"

"I'm serious. That's what they'd say before giving me the slip. It wouldn't be my first real offense in awhile. It wouldn't have been the first time I really fucked up here. They told me the last time that this was it; they wouldn't take any more chances with me."

"Will you stop it?" Harry demanded. "We're in this together, Ron. Whatever they'd give you I would receive too, and if for whatever fucked up reason that didn't happen, I'd leave anyway."

"Why the hell would you do that?"

"Because I am someone you can trust, Ron," Harry said, "and I hate that people can't look past their own fucking jealousy long enough to understand that our world needs people like you â€“ like us â€“ fighting for it."

Even though Ron was distraught over this, he found himself smiling slightly at his best friend. "Thanks, mate."

"Don't thank me, Ron. This shouldn't even be happening. Let's just finish up then lock these away."

Ron went to sleep that night with his wand in hand and his trunk moved over to the side of his bed. He still felt a little nauseous. He had to accept what he couldn't control, but this was too much. Ron knew that he wasn't the nicest person but he'd never do this to someone; he knew that he didn't deserve it either. He turned over in his cot, glancing at Harry. It was bad enough that someone had come after him but going after Harry was just ridiculous. He'd saved their world for fuck's sake.

Ron flipped back over on his back, telling himself that he'd do a better job of taking care of them. The final stretch of camp was bringing the monster out of everyone so he'd have to stay on guard even more than before. Ron hated that he had to because he

didn't like the way it made him feel. It was vital though, and he was old enough to understand that good didn't always triumph over evil.

Ron woke up the next morning relieved to find his kits safely in his trunk. He and Harry quickly got dressed and were some of the first outside. "Ready for today?" Ron asked.

"Gotta be," Harry said as he began to stretch.

Olivia and Ben walked over to them. "Did you hear about Alden?" Olivia asked.

"Hear what?" Harry asked.

"He got dismissed," Ben said. "Late last night Alan and Richard came into the room and told him to pack up his things. They didn't say anything else and neither did he."

"How do you know that?" Ron asked. He certainly wasn't upset about the wanker leaving, but it seemed random.

"Because he's my roommate, Ron. I saw everything," Ben said. "I was hoping Jack might know more. They got on."

Ron and Harry shared a look. Ron wasn't sure if he could believe what his mind was putting together. "Um, I'll go see," he said. He jogged over to where Jack was stretching. "Alden's gone. Did you know that?"

Jack remained quiet for awhile. "No, I didn't," he finally said, popping his back.

Ron studied his face but couldn't read him. "Yeah, um, apparently it happened late last night."

Jack shrugged. "That's too bad."

"He was your mate though, right?"

"I don't have any mates here, Weasley," Jack quietly said. "This is Auror training camp, not a supper party. It's a shame that Alden's gone but I guess he must've done something to get himself sacked."

Ron frowned. "You're unbelievable, Jack."

"Just fuck off, Weasley!" Jack spat. "It's like I told you: this place is only for the best. It's for the people who deserve to be here." He glared at Ron and only turned away when the sound of Alan's whistle signified the beginning of their drill.

Ron stayed at the front of the pack like he had been doing for weeks now. He'd finally found his pace and making fast, long strides didn't take much effort. As he and Jack ran neck-and-neck, he wanted to say something to him but he didn't know what. Everything was hypothetical and the bloke was still a bloody

bastard. All Ron could do right now was take the good fortune and keep his focus on what was ahead.

Harry joined him on the sidelines of the pitch after he'd finished his flying laps. "People have been whispering all morning about Alden," he said, wiping his sweaty forehead. "What did Jack tell you?"

"Nothing. He acted as if he didn't know or care," Ron said.

Harry took off his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. "That doesn't make sense. If Jack told and Alden got sacked for it, then Richard and Alan would've said something to us."

"Maybe he got done in for something else then, I dunno. Nothing is ever like it fucking seems anymore," Ron said. He and Harry kept to themselves and discussed possible reasons why Alden would get chucked out while waiting for drill to end. Nothing was adding up.

"All right, lot," Richard said once everyone had completed the exercise. "Before we dismiss you we have an announcement. Now while yesterday you had an impromptu assessment, today you're having a real evaluation. You've been training in this unit for over a month and it's important that you know where you stand at this point." Jack raised his hand.

"No, Turner," Alan droned, "we don't plan to eliminate anyone after this test." Jack slowly lowered his hand. "This isn't a major evaluation but it's still a necessary exam. During class time you'll be tested over a variety of different stealth and disguising tactics. Afterwards, you will go through several rounds of dueling with a section helper showing us your use of advanced combat. This is a test of progress, understood?"

"Yes, sir," they all said.

"All right. You're dismissed."

Ron was anxious about the test, but he was more fired up and ready to prove himself than anything else. Despite how fucked up and vicious it was, Alden or whoever had stolen his clothes couldn't have picked a better time to do so. His dueling with Harry had already given him a burst of energy and confidence; the blatant sabotage had only heightened his need to excel.

Ron focused with all of his might during the written portion and demonstrating disguises, but there was still so much that he didn't know and couldn't master. It would be no surprise to him if he failed the section. His only saving grace was the dueling out in the fields against Brian. He took in all the advice he'd received from his instructors and Harry, then pushed himself with the same amount of forced he'd used last night. He had to forget about Alden, the sabotage, and everything else in order to fight. He had to act selfishly like Kingsley had advised him months ago. Ron understood the idea perfectly now and instantly noticed how much better it helped him concentrate. Ron ended his exam bloody, sore, and sprained, but also proud.

"I guess last night woke you all up," Richard said later that night when everyone had completed their evaluation. "You all stepped up and worked incredibly hard today. We know it's been a long month and, quite frankly, we are tired of some of this bullshit too. Before we let you get fixed up and eat, there's one more matter of business that we need to take care of. Follow us."

Ron softly groaned as he wobbled with the rest of his group back to Headquarters. He didn't know if he could take another test or bloody surprise duel. All he wanted to do was return to his creaky cot and sleep. They walked into the building but instead of heading downstairs, they went down a corridor on the first floor that couldn't be any more different from the Ruins. It looked exactly like the rest of the building with its rich wooden floor, dark wooden walls, and a cream and red curtain on the large window located at the end.

"So, as we've been telling you lot, when you proved yourself you'd be rewarded with Lambrick's extras," Alan said. "Tonight, you're receiving another one."

"As of right now, you are all free from the Ruins and now live on this floor," Richard said with a smile. There was a moment of total silence as everyone began to comprehend what that mean. Then, suddenly, the floor burst with applause and cheers. Ron got weak in the knees; he couldn't believe what he was hearing. He thought he'd be in the Ruins until his last day of camp.

"Now, now," Alan said, waving his hands, "before you lot start roaming about, there are some details you need to know. First, you're keeping the same roommates and room numbers, which means that the rules regarding the men and women on this floor still apply. Also, because you lot actually live here now, the layout of your training day has changed."

"You'll still have morning drill outside," Richard said, "but after that, we'll come back in here and go to the training room located on this floor for class and field practice."

"Can we take real showers now, sir?" Michelle asked.

"Yes, Grace, you can," Richard said, chuckling. "The boys' loo is on the north side of the wing and the girls' is on the south. As you know, there's also a canteen in the building that you'll eat in." Ron moaned slightly; he couldn't help himself. The idea of eating his tasteless meat slice without rain leaking from the roof or cold sweeping in through the wood was practically too much to accept.

"One more thing," Alan said seriously. "As you were told your first day at Lambrick, being here is a privilege. Other people use this Headquarters, so respect the space and history. Don't treat this place like it's your flat; see it as your gran's house."

"It's been a long night so we'll dismiss you now. Tomorrow after drill we'll take another tour before the lesson day begins,"

Richard said. "Your belongings have already been moved in, so goodnight and congratulations."

As soon as Richard and Alan walked down the corridor, everyone scurried into their new rooms. Eric was the first to reach the knob on their door but Ron, Harry, and Jack all pushed against him and the four burst through together.

"Bleeding Merlin," Ron breathed. The room mirrored the corridor and came with four beds that actually looked like beds. They had pillows, sheets, and blankets. "It's not cold in here, lot," he added.

Harry jumped into his bed. "I don't believe it â€“ a real mattress."

Eric took a whiff of his pillow. "Mmm, clean. There's no mold, runoff water, or bugs anywhere. We even have a real bloody window."

Jack simply sat on his bed, looking through the drawer of his side table. "My stuff is in here and in the same order. I guess they just took the tables from our old room and put it in here so they wouldn't have to go through anything."

"You're mad," Eric said, shaking his head. "We just got the best news in two months and you're talking about tables. We can eat and shower like human beings now."

Jack didn't seem impressed. "It's a fluffy pillow and hot water; it doesn't change much. We still have to train and earn our spot in the end."

"Don't you ever take a break?" Ron asked before he could stop himself. Everyone looked at him. He hadn't meant to sound harsh or anything; it was a real question.

Jack merely stuck out his chin. "Breaks are for the weak, Weasley. I can sleep in a big bed and take hot showers after I get my badge."

"Too bad Alden had to screw up his chance. He'd love all this," Eric said.

"He didn't have to do anything," Harry said. "Whatever happened was by his choice."

"That's right. Only the best should be here," Ron said. He looked at Jack for a second before going through his drawer too. His pictures and letters were all still there as was his tactics journals. While Harry, Eric, and Jack left to shower and eat, Ron decided to change into his pajamas and lay down. Now that he was out of the Ruins, he knew for sure that tomorrow he'd be able to wash himself properly.

Ron studied his new room, feeling closer to his goal than ever before. He had proven himself and had moved up in training. Regardless of how crippling his panics attacks were, how much his

temper got him into trouble, or even how badly people tried to get him chucked out, he was still around and well on his way.

He considered going over his evaluation but Ron was in too good of a mood to go there right now. He was alone and only had a brief window of opportunity to relax. Ron hurriedly got into his trunk, pulling out his Valentine's gift from Hermione. He nestled into his bed, already loving how warm and comfortable it was, and put the headphones over his ears. He then opened the letter he'd received with it.

Happy Valentine's Day, Ron,

I would give anything to be with you right now, if only to tell you how much I adore you and how gorgeous your smile is. You mean everything to me, and while I can't hold you and tell you why in person, I'm hoping that this gift will suffice for now. Make sure to read and follow the instructions and if all else fails, ask Harry for help. He knows about cassette players. Have a wonderful day, Ron, and I'll see you soon.

Loving you to pieces,

Hermione

Ron kissed her letter. "Love you too," he whispered. Hermione was so brilliant and Muggles had the best bloody gadgets in the world. He placed the cassette player on his chest, then hit the play button. Even after a hundred times of listening to it, his heart still skipped a beat and his body heated up when he heard her voice.

"Hello, Ron," she said. "I struggled for ages over what to get you, then late one night it came to me as I was thinking about you. You see, I love everything about you, sweetheart, and you have no idea how special I think you are. As I thought about that, it randomly hit me that this could be a fun and unique way to tell you, along with making a great gift. In addition, it's something that you can always refer to when you're feeling down. So, with a bit of magic and patience, I have devised a list of twenty reasons why I love you that I plan to divulge in full detail. All I want you to do is lay back, close your eyes, and listen. You can stop the tape now so you can get situated."

Ron laughed out loud. "Bloody hell, you're bossy even when you're giving me a present," he mumbled as if she could hear him.

"Reason number one!" Hermione said after a short pause.

Ron kept a smile on his face as Hermione spoke. Listening through the headphones made him feel as if she was right beside him. Her voice helped to ease the pain he'd endured over the past couple of days, and he found himself relaxing and giggling as she said things that made him blush and feel tingly. No one had a girlfriend like his.

Tomorrow he knew that he'd once again have to harden himself to the world, but for right now he could be as tender as he wanted

to. Ron fell asleep that night during his second run of listening to Hermione's tape with absolutely nothing on his mind.

* * *

**** Our guy is really growing up, eh? :) I'm so bloody proud of him and I love writing about him so, so very much. Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 52*: Merely sequences change

Thank you all for the lovely reviews! They mean so much! Oh, and if you follow 'Love By Another Name', yes, I plan to update that soon!

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

Ron woke up early the next morning feeling refreshed and calm. He wasn't sure if it had been Hermione's voice or the comfortable bed that had made him sleep so brilliantly but he wouldn't question it. He put away his cassette player, changed into his blacks, thoroughly stretched, then plucked soggy leaves from the bristles of his broom all before Alan's whistle decimated the peacefully quiet corridor.

As Ron made his way outside he told himself that nothing would take his focus away. He had to stay sharp and ahead of himself if he wanted to build off of the momentum he'd gained over the past couple of days. Ron also had to make sure that he didn't give anyone another opportunity to fuck with him and Harry. He had to be totally aware of his surroundings, leaving nothing to chance.

Jack stood near Ron as he began to stretch. He didn't say anything or even look in his direction. Ron hadn't expected him to but for whatever reason he felt the need to exchange something other than an insult with him.

"Uhâ€œ;good morning," Ron awkwardly said.

"Morning, Weasley." Jack glanced at him for a second before stretching his legs. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah, it was nice."

"Good because you'll need the energy to keep up with the front pack today. You honestly have to be the scrawniest bloke out here."

Ron didn't mind Jack's jab. In fact, he welcomed it. Now that their brief pleasantry was over, they could go back to mildly hating each other.

"I reckon we'll see who's the bigger man after I kick your arse on the trail," Ron said.

"I'm scared, Weasley â€“ really."

"All right, lot!" Alan said. "Let's go!" He blew his whistle then Ron and Jack sprinted for the trail. They were quiet and hardly looked at one another throughout their exercise, but they kept in sync while pushing each other with their strength and speed. By the time they'd finished their round of dueling, Ron felt as though they had worked well together even though that hadn't been either of their intentions.

After the drill, all of the trainees eagerly went inside to shower and eat in their new canteen. The food was still rubbish but at least they had warmth, dryness, and proper tables to sit at. During breakfast Ron, Olivia, Letty, and Ben tried to figure out what their last unit might be and who would teach them. Their sixth leg of training would be their last. Ron was eager to get through it so he could take the final test and hopefully graduate. He kept trying to engage Harry in the conversation but he simply stared off and picked at his food.

"You all right?" Ron quietly asked.

Harry nodded. "Fine. I'm just not that hungry." Ron opened his mouth to say something else but Phillip Smith walked into the room with Alan and Richard. Everyone got quiet and unconsciously sat up straighter.

"Good morning, trainees," Mr. Smith said.

"Good morning, sir," they all answered.

"I first want to congratulate all of you on getting through unit five," Mr. Smith said. "I also want to say how pleased I am that you lot are finally getting the chance to experience this incredible building and everything it has to offer. This will be your home during unit six, which begins today. Following this unit is your final cumulative exam. That will be your last chance to prove to us what you can do before the staff and I create our list of graduates."

Ron closed his eyes for a moment. He had to get his name on that list. He would either make it to graduation or die trying to get there.

"Now, unit six is in my opinion the most important section of your training because the subject matter is what you'll encounter every day on the job," Mr. Smith said. "Up until this point you have been trained to handle yourselves as Aurors on the battlefield, but during this last leg, you'll discover the other side of this profession. You'll learn about the mountains of

paperwork that is involved before and after completing a mission. You'll also study how the Auror Department operates, the legal system, researching strategies, and receiving and executing assignments."

"That last part is what Alan and I will teach you in great detail during field practice," Richard said with a smirk.

"But in the classroom you lot will be working with me," Mr. Smith said. "I've always found it important to finish the academic portion of Lambrick Academy with the trainees. It helps me to see how far you've come and what still needs to be worked on before the final examination. So finish up your meals and then we'll take another tour of the building before class begins."

Once the instructors left, Ron peered down at his food, no longer feeling hungry. Having Alan and Richard as his teachers had been stressful enough but now the head of Lambrick Academy - the sole person who could say if he passed or failed - would be instructing him.

"I wasn't expecting that," Ben said from across the table. "Mr. Smith? Our teacher?"

"He's taught us before," Letty said.

"Not like this," Ron said, shaking his head. "The classroom is different from field practice; you know that."

"It doesn't help that this is the last unit," Olivia added. "We won't get another chance to impress him after this." She gave Ron a worried look while snapping her hair tie on her wrist. Everyone around the table went quiet as well.

"Then I reckon we'll all have to push it, won't we?" Harry asked in a sharp tone. "What's done is done." He let out a harsh breath then continued to pick at his food. Ron knew that something was wrong but he had no time to deal with it right now. The most he could do was back him up.

"Harry's right," Ron said. "Let's just go and get it over with, yeah?" He gulped down the rest of his water then headed for his room.

Ron packed his academic gear into his bag and right as he was about to place his quills inside, he dropped them all over the floor. He swore as he kneeled down to grab them. While outstretching his hand, Ron noticed how badly he was shaking. No matter how hard he tried, his nerves always got to him. He couldn't let that happen now though. Ron clamped his hands together, closing his eyes and letting out deep breaths. He could handle this and anything the instructors threw at him. He just needed to believe in himself.

Ron's hand instinctively went to his drawer where his pictures and letters were, but he didn't open it. He was the one who had to get through Mr. Smith's class and whatever would happen during field practice; he was also the one who would have to survive

unit six and take the final exam. As much as Ron loved and depended on Hermione and his family, he couldn't lean on them this time. The person Ron needed more than anyone else to get him through this was himself.

He stood up, heaving his bag over his shoulder. Ron was older now and could see more clearly. It was time that he looked inward for direction and strength.

Mr. Smith's tour of the building ended with showing them the classroom they would be working in on the first floor. "Take a seat anywhere," he said. The room was a lot like ones they'd used in the cabins, only it was warm, dry, and didn't smell of wood and wet earth. Mr. Smith stood at the front of the class while Alan and Richard sat in the back of the room.

Ron sat between Harry and Olivia and took out his quill and parchment. He sat as straight as he could while keeping his eyes to the front. Ron wouldn't fail in this unit nor would he give anyone a reason to believe that he wasn't worth taking to the end.

"Continuing on from our earlier discussion," Mr. Smith said once they were all seated, "this section will cover a vast range of subjects you will encounter daily as an Auror. Some of the areas I teach, such as mission logs, capture ratios, and Law Enforcement debriefings are things I will only give a brief overview of because they will be a part of your specialized training once you've obtained work."

Mr. Smith began to pace around the room and seemed to stare them all down. "After thirty years in this profession, I can guarantee you that it is imperative to learn in this classroom because once you start your specialized training with department heads and Aurors on staff, you won't get a chance to go back over the material you neglected because you found it slow or uninteresting."

"If I may add, sir," Alan said, raising his hand. "Putting skill and need aside, the people that train you once you've been hired somewhere will push you to the very edge simply because you'll be getting paid to train. They won't waste the department's money and resources on Junior Aurors who thought they were too good to learn how to file and sign paperwork correctly during camp."

"That is absolutely correct," Mr. Smith said. "I'll tell you lot right now that most of you will spend the majority of your early career only doing what you'll learn in this classroom. It may get repetitive at times but I won't accept less than one hundred percent out of each of you. Only well-rounded men and women graduate from Lambrick Academy. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," they all said.

"Excellent." Mr. Smith went to the writing board. "Now, take out your quills because today we're going to start with the most basic outline of the legal system Aurors are bound to, then build from there."

Ron inked his quill then closely followed Mr. Smith's lecture. He taught with a wisdom and patience that easily kept Ron's attention. This wasn't like History of Magic where it took a poke from Hermione's quill every five minutes to keep him awake. What Ron was learning now was something that would affect him every time he went into work. When he glanced around the room, he saw that his campmates were just as intrigued. Even Alan and Richard seemed to be absorbing everything that Mr. Smith taught. It was only their first day in the unit, but already Ron could tell that it would be intense.

By the end of lecture, Ron's hand was cramped from taking so many notes. He had no time to work it out though because Richard and Alan promptly ushered them across the hall and through a set of double doors. Ron placed his bag down against the wall as he surveyed the gigantic training room that he was sure had been magically extended. The floor was of a squishy black material that Ron hoped would feel a lot better to fall on than wet grass, and the ceiling was so high that he had to completely crane his neck to see the top of.

Alan blew his whistle, causing everyone to flinch. The atrocious sound bounced right off the walls and into their ears. Ron was surprised when Alan laughed. "I'm ecstatic that we're finally training in here," he said. "So, welcome to unit six field practice. During this section we will teach you new combative strategies, but the majority of your training will be a continuation from where we left off last unit."

"This is the last leg before the final exam and you find yourself looking for work," Richard said. "You have to be spot on and the skills you've learned since your first night here have to be impeccably clean and sharp. You've encountered everything from proper dueling stances and hostage survival, to advanced combat. We'll continue building on these subjects while evolving your magical abilities."

"The classroom portion of this unit may seem slow at times but what you'll be doing in this room and outside when necessary won't be," Alan said. "Expect even longer working hours from here on out. Richard, the sections aids, and myself won't stop until we feel as if we have a powerful and intelligent group of contenders who can adapt and thrive in any situation. I sincerely hope that none of you will want to stop until you feel it for yourself. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir," they all said. Ron felt a tingling sensation in his feet and hands. All he'd been hearing since breakfast was how this was the last unit before the end, along with how vital it was that everyone stepped up through this final stretch of training. Ron wanted to prove to the trainers and trainees that he wasn't afraid of this. He needed to prove to himself that he could stay above it all.

"All right, lot," Alan said. "We're going to begin with ten-tens. This will be how we start off every practice session so get a

partner and find a space. Don't worry, this room has protection charms around it so your spells won't rebound and hit anyone."

Ron looked around before settling on Olivia. "Wanna be partners?" he asked, walking up to her.

"Sounds good," she said, bouncing on the heels of her feet. "All of this is kind of exciting, eh?" Her lively behavior was rather infectious.

"Yeah, it's mad," Ron said, chuckling.

Olivia peered around the room. "Is he okay?" She nudged her head in Harry's direction.

"Harry's fine," Ron said, though he was sure that wasn't true. "I reckon he's still worn out from last night's exam."

"Hmm. You're probably right," Olivia said. "So, ready to test out the floor? I reckon you'll be seeing a lot more of the ground than I will."

"What a prick thing to say."

"Don't have a prick, but I certainly don't need one to kick your arse."

Ron laughed, loving that he could talk this way with a girl.

"Just get your wand out, Young." Olivia smirked as she shook his hand. She then started walking backwards; Ron did the same. Round after round they dueled. Even though Olivia was small, she had a force and cleverness to her style of combat that always kept Ron on his toes. It was almost two hours before everyone completed their ten-tens and Alan and Richard added on a new tier to their combat.

Despite the fact that Ron was sweaty and throbbing, he felt good and was ready to practice more comprehensive dueling. He'd missed incorporating his broom, hand combat, and navigation. Tonight though, Alan and Richard put them through their longest night of training ever. They were given new spells to utilize and blocking techniques to master. It was exhausting in every way. Ron found himself dazed by the end. He was in great shape but he needed time to get used to the new pace.

It took all of Ron's strength to wash himself afterwards. During dinner, he could hardly hold his fork. He peeked at Harry who was pale, still, and staring into his water glass every few minutes. He'd been like this all day but Ron had no idea why.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Ben asked as if reading Ron's mind.

Harry nodded but didn't look up from his plate. "I'm fine. I'm just tired." He gave a yawn that Ron could tell was fake and stretched. "I think I'm gonna go to bed." Harry gathered his things then stood up. He swiftly brushed his elbow over Ron's arm before walking away. Ron knew that was Harry's way of telling him not to worry, but Hermione had been Ron's girlfriend for far too

long now for him not to have picked up some of her habits such as worrying when told not to.

Ron stared after Harry for a moment before looking back to the group; they all seemed puzzled. "Actually, I'm quite knackered myself. I should get to bed too. See you lot tomorrow." He quickly cleaned up then rushed back to the room. Ron burst through the door, wanting to talk to Harry, but both Jack and Eric were inside as well. He wanted to tell them to bugger off but he couldn't. Instead, he sat on the edge of Harry's bed.

"Are you really okay?" he quietly asked.

Harry took the pillow off his head. He peeked across the room then nodded. "I'm all right. It's just been a long day."

Ron had to bite his lip to keep himself from calling bullshit. Getting Harry to open up was difficult enough at times â€“ with people around it would be impossible. Ron would have to swallow the need to help his best mate until he could find a proper time when he could devote his attention entirely on their friendship. It was necessary but complete bollocks. "Okay. Well, let me know if you need anything, yeah?"

"I will, Ron. Thanks." Harry patted his arm then put the pillow back over his head. Ron had no choice but to leave him be. He changed, then got into his own bed where he started going over the notes he'd taken during class. It was a lot of information that Ron was certain they'd be tested over soon. He wanted to be prepared and make a good impression on his first test. Unfortunately, his zeal rapidly became overpowered by his fatigue. It wasn't long before Ron fell asleep with his notes in his lap.

"AHHH!"

Ron jumped so violently that he fell off the bed, hitting his head against the edge of his table. He ignored the pain and shock though as he felt around for his wand. When Ron connected to it, he lit the tip, adding light to the other lit wands. The only wand that wasn't lit was Harry's; he was also the only one mumbling and thrashing.

"H-Harry?" Eric asked with a loud yawn.

"Wuz wrong wit' 'em," Jack croaked, rubbing his eyes.

Ron staggered to his feet, running over to Harry's bedside. He was squirming and sweating horribly. Ron felt a pang in his chest as he watched his mate struggle through his dream. "Mumph," Harry moaned. "Sisssss â€“ n-no."

"What the fuck?" Jack whispered.

"Shut up, Jack!" Ron swallowed his fear then began patting Harry's face while gently shaking him. "Harry, mate â€“ mate? Wake up! Wake up, Harry. It's me Ron!" After a few more attempts at waking him, Harry at last opened his eyes and stopped

thrashing. His eyes widened in what looked to be fear before recognizing Ron.

"R-Ron?" he wheezed.

Ron relaxed a little at hearing Harry's normal voice. "Yes, it's me. You're okay, Harry." Ron picked up Harry's glasses and put them on his face for him. "Everything's all right, mate. You were just having a nightmare."

Harry groaned, covering his face with his hands. "Fucking hell, Ron."

"I know, but you're okay now. You're safe." Ron gripped Harry's shoulder.

"What the hell were you on before you went to sleep, Potter?" Jack asked.

Ron looked up, abruptly remembering where he was and that they weren't alone. Harry looked up too, turning even paler. "I—"

"—don't, Harry." Ron glared at Jack, feeling a strong surge of anger. He had to remind himself that Harry was his main concern at the moment — not rearranging Jack's face. Ron walked over to where he and Eric were standing. "First, Jack, I reckon you should count yourself lucky because my last good nerve is the only thing keeping me from ripping your face off right now."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Please, I—"

"—be quite for once in your bloody life, Jack!" Eric ordered, shoving him. He then looked to Ron. "Is Harry all right? I've seen him do this before and—"

"—I know, but he's okay," Ron said. He looked back at Harry who was rocking in place with his hands still over his face. Ron had to do something for him. "Harry just needs some air." He brushed past them and pulled a t-shirt from his rucksack. "I can count on you two to keep this to yourselves, right?"

"Of course, Ron," Eric said.

"Jack?" Ron asked.

Jack looked at Eric then Harry before sighing. "Sure — whatever."

"Thank you," Ron said sincerely. "We'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" Eric asked.

Ron didn't answer. He took Harry by the arm, helping him up. "Come on, mate. I've got you." Harry didn't protest; he let Ron lead him down the corridor to the lounge located on the first floor. Ron guided Harry over to a couch not too far from the fireplace and handed him the shirt.

"Here. The one you've got on is soaked."

Harry took it, keeping his eyes on the floor. "Thanks." Neither of them said a word as he changed. Once Harry was finished, he propped his legs up, resting his elbows on his knees. Ron continued to wait patiently at the other end. It seemed as if ages had gone by before Harry let out an audible breath. "I'm sorry," he rasped. An apology was the last thing Ron had expected. It broke his heart to think that Harry believed he needed to give one.

"Why are you sorry?" Ron asked.

"Why do you think? I woke everyone up; I'm the reason we're out here after curfew; I just gave Jack another reason to give us shit â€œ I dunno, you pick one."

"First of all, reasons one and two don't mean anything to me," Ron said. "As for Jack, I'm hoping that fucker says something so that I can partner with him during field practice and kick his bollocks in. No woman or man will want him after that."

Harry actually chuckled a little. He wiped his forehead on his sleeve that was slightly too long for his arm. "How bad was I?"

Ron shrugged. "I've seen worse."

"I-I just don't get it. I haven't had a nightmare like this in months. I thought it was finally over. I thought I'd recovered. I thought—"

" - Harry, realize who you're talking to here. I honestly get it, remember?"

"Right." Harry sniffled while rubbing under his nose. "I've been doing so well, Ron. I promise."

"I believe you. I reckon all the strain we've been under lately got to you though."

A flash of fury crossed over Harry's expression. "I can handle the training, Ron," he spat. Ron wasn't offended by Harry's attitude; it was something he'd had to deal with since they were twelve. Harry got like this when he believed someone was challenging his strength and trying to find his weakness. When he was younger, Ron referred to it as Harry's 'hero mode' but as they grew up and the stakes got higher, Ron began understanding that it was just how Harry survived and kept himself from crumbling under all the weight of his life.

"I know you can handle it, Harry," Ron calmly said, "but that doesn't mean you don't get exhausted or overworked sometimes. I've watched you today."

"I've been fine."

"So look me in the face and tell me that."

Harry slowly looked up at him. They both knew that whatever came out of his mouth next would have to be the truth because it was impossible to lie to each other this way. They had learned through arguing, dueling, bleeding together, and working apart how to respect and care for one another as well as how to pick up on subtle changes in tone and body language that other people would miss. Ron knew Harry better than he knew anything else in the world. There was no way that Ron was going to let him hide from him now â€“ not after all Harry had done for him.

"Harryâ€!"

"I know," Harry whispered. "I guessâ€; I guess I've been feeling off all day. I bloody knew something wasn't right with me but I didn't think anything of it. I didn't know it would turn into this."

"What exactly did you feel?"

"I don't know. I just feltâ€; bad. I get that way sometimes. Out of nowhere I just feel really awful, but it usually goes away after awhile. It didn't today though. It just got worse, then â€“ fuck."

Ron could see the anger and pain that Harry was feeling. It was so extreme that he was sure he could feel it too. "What was the dream about?" Ron asked. Harry bit his lip, looking around. "It's just you and me in here," he added. "No one is going to bother us or hear you. Trust me." At the phrase 'trust me', Harry turned back to him.

"Ronâ€!"

"It's all right. I'm not going anywhere," Ron said. He felt guilty for pushing Harry but Ron knew firsthand that he needed to get everything out about this now. If Harry didn't, it would be the only thing he'd focus on the next day, which would keep him from performing to standard.

"Okay," he breathed after a prolonged silence. He rubbed his hands together, gazing into the fire. "There was smoke and, umâ€; bodies around me. I had the Elder Wand, and I was pointing it at Voldemort. Somehow thoughâ€; he made me turn it on myself. I-I pointed the wand right at my chest. He had complete control of me, Ron. I had nothing and no one. It justâ€; it felt so real. It was so unbelievably real to me."

Ron felt the hairs on his neck and arms stand on end. He fought the urge to recoil because he had to be strong for his mate who, in spite of what most people believed, still had shadows in his life that scared him. "It wasn't real though, Harry. It never will be because you beat him. You did what no one else could do."

Harry cracked a smile, but in an instant it was gone. "Then why am I still waking up like this after ten months?"

It seemed like more of a tragic statement than a question. This time last year, Harry had been discovering Horcruxes, Voldemort

had been his greatest threat, and he had been having nightmares. Now, the locket and diadem were long gone, Voldemort was nothing more than a terrible memory, but Harry was still having nightmares. Harry's life was so dramatically different in some ways while other parts of his past were still traumatizing him. There was so much to work through; Ron understood that better than anyone.

He thought about Harry's statement and for whatever reason Mr. Nelson came to mind. "Because being a hero doesn't make you indestructible," Ron found himself saying. "You've gone through more shit than most people will ever understand. Timeâ€;it doesn't always make things better, mate. It mostly just makes things a hell of a lot worse before anything changes."

Harry rubbed his face. "I'll never make it as an Auror if I keep this up."

"Don't believe that," Ron said. "Besides, it might not ever completely go away."

"Why the hell would you tell me that?"

"Because it's the truth, but it doesn't have to mean the end of the world. You justâ€;you have to give yourself a chance to work it out. It's not real, Harry, and no matter how bad it gets, it never will be. You have to remember that, okay?"

"I'm really trying, Ron," Harry urged. "I justâ€;it's fucking ridiculous! I've beaten him and a lot of his followers. Why can't I just beat this too?"

Ron shrugged. "I dunno. I'm still trying to figure that out myself."

Harry simply gazed at him. "I don't know why you've always been considered my sidekick, Ron." He shook his head, staring down at his hands. "You're a lot better than me." Harry's words deeply touched Ron. A year ago he probably would have relished hearing something like this. Now, it only made his chest ache.

"I don't think that's true," Ron said softly. "It's just that everyone has always demanded perfection from you, and I think you buy in to it sometimes. You're a lot like Hermione in that way." He and Harry looked away from each other and got quiet again. Ron started messing at a hole in his pajamas, thinking about Harry's dream and what he'd discussed with Mr. Nelson recently.

"Can I ask you something, Harry?"

Harry looked at him apprehensively. "I guess."

Ron didn't know how to start or what he even wanted to say exactly. "A-after-" he cleared his throat. "I know this is gonna sound random but, um, after you saw what happened to Cedric, did you feelâ€;different?" Harry's eyes widened. He seemed completely gobsmacked that Ron had asked the question. Ron was a little surprised himself that he'd gotten the words out. They'd never

talked about this before and Ron was sure it was bad timing, but he couldn't hold it all back anymore.

Harry merely stared at him while absentmindedly picking at his nails. "I-Iâ€¢'well, yeah â€" of course. Why?"

"I'm sorry, Harry. I don't mean to upset you I justâ€¢;discussing all this with you is making me think about things. I talk about Fred and the war a lot during my sessions, and you're the only person I know and trust who's been through something similar to what I'm going through now."

Harry relaxed a little as if understanding what Ron was trying to get at. "Cedric wasn't my brother though."

"I know, but you've seen it â€" death. Not just with him either but people like Sirius and Dumbledore. You talk about me being the better one? How the hell have you managed all these years? How do you even know who you are?"

The little color that had returned to Harry's face disappeared again. He swallowed hard, looking pained. "Iâ€¢;I've always tried to find something positive."

Ron's jaw dropped. "What the fuck could be good about watching someone die?"

"Nothing â€" but that's not what I mean." Harry took off his glasses, pressing his fingertips against his eyes. "You, me, and Hermione got closer as friends after Cedric's death; the term following Sirius' murder, I somehow made my to Ginny; after Dumbledore died, we finally found those bloody Horcruxes and beat Voldemort."

Harry paused to let out a low breath. "I manage all the death by finding something positive that happens afterwards, no matter how small, and I hold onto and believe in it. I have to tell myself that the good thing wouldn't have happened otherwise."

Ron was in awe by what he was hearing. "And does that work?"

"Most days. It's how I survived that rip â€" that feeling that something inside of me was destroyed. I have to believe that a part of me died when they did but that something else was put in its place â€" something I couldn't have gained any other way." Harry looked right at him. Ron could see how desperately Harry needed to believe his words.

"Iâ€¢;I felt that rip too when Fred died," Ron whispered. "I don't know what's been put in its place though."

"You may not know for a long time, Ron," Harry said. "You have to believe it's there though. You have to hold onto it and move forward because you're never going to be the person you were before it happened again."

Hearing that for the second time made Ron accept the idea. It hurt, but it was reality. "It's all so much."

"It is," Harry said with a sigh. "If all else fails though, just remember that you've got people in your life to back you up," Harry said. "It's what I've always told myself about you, Hermione, Ginny, and your family."

A grin tugged at Ron's mouth. "We'll always be here for you, mate. I wish Sirius could be here for you as well."

Harry looked into the fire, smiling sadly. "Me too. I wish Fred was here for you."

Ron rubbed his neck, gazing into the fire as well. "So do I."

The two of them kept their focus on the flames but Ron glanced at Harry every once in awhile. He looked better and a bit calmer. Ron was glad that he'd been able to help. It made him feel as if they were back in his room simply talking through their doubts and confusions. It wasn't that simple anymore though. They weren't in his room, the conversation wasn't over mere doubts, and no amount of good humor would erase the pit that Ron knew was in both of their chests.

He wanted so badly to keep things light for himself and the people he cared about, but they had all gone through so much that a dark fog had crept into their lives. Ron closed his eyes, sitting completely still as he thought about who had died over the course of the Second War. It was overwhelming but it hadn't been in vain.

He suddenly opened his eyes. Fred's death hadn't been for nothing and the pain that Ron felt certainly had meaning. Harry was right: Cedric wasn't his brother so he didn't exactly know how Ron felt. Even though Hermione was the smartest witch Ron knew, he was certain that she could never fully understand the loneliness and depression that comes from losing a close family member. The only people who could grasp something like that were his parents and siblings.

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Over the next week, Ron tried his hardest to block out a repeating whisper in his head that demanded him to do something he'd been avoiding for almost a year. He couldn't go there right now because there was far too much to do. It didn't take Ron long to figure out why the instructors saved this unit for last. Mr. Smith gave daily tests over the material and his lectures were extremely long and detailed.

Alan and Richard's field practice was also more severe. They'd increased the training time by an hour and a half and it had only taken a few days before someone dropped out of the program. Ron could honestly understand the urge. Sometimes he was so knackered that he dozed off during his shower or skived dinner to get extra rest. He worried about losing focus along with the weight he'd worked so bloody hard to gain. Ron refused to give up though. He had to believe that no one deserved a badge more than he did in order to keep fighting.

"Ron!" Letty shouted. She pointed her wand at him, hitting him with a levitation spell that flung him back on his feet. Ron used the momentum, whipping his wand at Eric. He was able to stun but not disarm him. Ron seriously needed to clean up his recovery time and use stronger spells.

Eric once again threw a spell at him that Ron couldn't deflect. He was knocked back but was able to snatch up his wand and prepare himself for Eric who was closing in on him.

"Expelliarmus!" Ron said. The spell hit Eric, disarming him. Ron then hastily followed up with a repelling charm before looking around for his partner.

"Shit," Ron breathed as he saw a struggling Letty under Jack. The bloke always loved to use his size against the girls because they were too agile for him otherwise. "Relashio!" Ron shouted. Jack was yanked away from Letty and as he slid back Ron added, "Incarcerous!" Ropes appeared and tightened themselves around Jack.

Ron paced over to Letty, helping her up. "You okay?"

She felt inside her mouth then pulled out a bloody finger. "Dammit!" she groaned. "Petrificus Totalus!" she bellowed at Jack. He automatically stopped fighting the ropes and froze. Letty then spit out her blood by his feet. Ron gaped at her. She cleared her throat, tucking short ginger strands behind her ear. "For good measure."

"I'm not complaining," Ron said. "You're really quick, Letty."

"I've had loads of practice before coming here."

Ron tried not to smile but he only had so much self-control. "Uh-huh. So, um, did you have loads of practice with your girlfriend?"

"Actually, yes. Tracyâ€;" Letty trailed off while giving him a once-over. She then rolled her eyes, punching him. "Urgh! Bugger off, Ron! I know what you mean!"

Ron burst into laughter. "I'm sorry, Letty. I couldn't help myself."

"You're such a bloke!"

"What? I think it's brilliant. I 'practice' with my girlfriend all the time too." Letty continued to hit him while he continued to laugh.

Eric walked over to them and stared down at Jack's frozen body. "Blimey. Remind me never to anger a ginger again."

"You're on your own, mate," Ron said.

"Exactly. If you take the piss then you deserve it." Letty gave a gloomy sigh before taking the spell off Jack.

Alan blew his whistle. "Everyone to the front!" Ron, Letty, Eric, and an embarrassed-looking Jack joined in formation with the other groups. They'd had another long and grueling night and everyone was panting, sweating, and shaking. "That was a good run tonight," Alan said. "Dueling in pairs takes a different level of focus and coordination and we'll keep at it until you lot can work together with your eyes closed."

"You'll normally carry out your missions with at least one other person," Richard added. "It'll be years before any of you get to do anything alone, so it's important that you learn how to feed off one another and where to pick up slack."

Michelle raised her hand. "What if we just do things better alone though? I mean, we can't all be Weasley and Potter." Ron could feel people's eyes on him but he kept his nerve and counted in his head. It only took a few counts to five for the spike of rage to die down.

"Well, Grace, I'd say that if you want to make it as a successful Auror, you'd better hope you're able to duel like them when you're on assignment with someone," Richard said. "There's room for individual success in our profession but at the core it's always one team. Having a united front is crucial. Don't you agree, Potter?"

Everyone looked down to the end of line where Harry was standing. He looked startled for a moment but quickly nodded. "Definitely, sir. You'll always need backup and someone on your team you can trust to defend you or take over when necessary." He gestured to Ron. "I know for a fact that sometimes the person at your side can mean the difference between life and death for you."

"Does that answer your question, Grace?" Alan asked.

Michelle crossed her arms over her chest. "Yes, sir."

Ron glanced down the line, sharing a small grin with Harry. Since they'd started dueling in pairs, the two of them had only been allowed to partner up once before Alan and Richard discreetly ushered them to the side and told them to practice with others for the majority of this section of training. Ron didn't want to be a prick but he knew that he and Harry working together against others was a bit unfair. Even if the names annoyed them, they were called things such as 'Dream Team' and 'The Duo' for a reason.

"Okay, I reckon that's enough for tonight," Alan said. "When we resume this, I'll expect to see sharper transitions between pairings. If not, Richard and I may need to consider extending the morning drill so you lot can duel more rounds. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," they all droned.

"Make yourselves available tonight because there are still a handful of evaluations to go through," Richard said. "Weasley?"

"Sir?" Ron said.

"Rush through your shower tonight then head over to Mr. Smith's office. You're next."

Ron quietly gasped. "Y-yes, sir." Their group was then dismissed. Ron hurried over to the wall, grabbing his bag then running back to his room. All week Mr. Smith had been meeting privately with the trainees to discuss their latest examination. Though Ron didn't need to worry about getting chucked out, he was anxious to discover where he stood at this stage of the program.

After Ron's shower, he put on fresh clothes and even attempted to flatten his hair. He wanted to appear as proper and fit as possible since this would be his first time speaking to Phillip alone since he'd become his teacher. Just as he reached for the door, it opened and Harry rushed in. "Fucking hell!" Ron said, grabbing at his chest.

"Sorry, mate. I wanted to catch you before you left."

"Yeah, well, you caught me, midget." Ron exhaled deeply, keeping his hand at his heart. Harry snorted then started laughing. Ron joined him.

Things between them had felt a little more serious and intense since their talk, but Ron didn't mind that so much. There were parts of their friendship that were coated in a thick haze and probably always would be. Ron couldn't ignore that anymore; embracing the realization helped him feel a stronger bond to Harry. It also made their lighter moments feel that much more enjoyable and important.

"I really am sorry, Ron," Harry managed to say once his laughter faded. "I just wanted to wish you luck with your meeting."

"Oh, cheers," Ron said sarcastically. "Richard picked a brilliant time to tell me about it."

"You know he loves to spring things on us. Speaking of which, what d'you reckon was up with Michelle tonight? She's never called us out before."

"She's probably still got her knickers in a twist because Alden isn't around anymore to give her a rough one up the arse," Ron said.

Harry cringed. "You think they did that?"

"I'm sure they tried everything twice," Ron mumbled. "Well, I gotta go, mate."

"Stay firm," Harry said, shaking his hand.

"I'm always firm â€“ just ask Hermione."

Harry dropped his hand, shoving him. "Ugh! Merlin, Ron â€“ really?"

Ron burst into laughter again. "I can't help it. I'm in a state tonight."

"Then shuffle it off in the shower like the rest of us do!" Harry said, pushing him out of the room.

Ron continued to snicker as he made his way down the corridor and up to the next floor. His giggles immediately vanished though once he reached Mr. Smith's office. He took a few deep breaths, rolling his shoulders back, and told himself that he had nothing to fear or hide. This was just a progress report. Ron knocked on the door. "Mr. Smith, sir?"

"Yes?"

"It's Ron Weasley, sir."

"Yes, Mr. Weasley â€“ come in." Ron nodded to himself then opened the door. His office reminded him somewhat of Kingsley's. Phillip had a large wooden desk with papers and files scattered about, the walls were covered with plaques and awards, and there was an overstuffed bookcase full of texts Ron was sure a person like Hermione would love to thumb through.

"Have a seat," Mr. Smith said, gesturing to the chair in front of his desk.

Ron sat down. "How are you doing tonight, sir?"

"I'm fine, thank you. Yourself?"

"Still here," Ron said truthfully.

Mr. Smith smiled slightly. "Honest reply. I like that." He went through a stack of files then pulled out one that had to be Ron's. "So, how are you fairing in the new unit?"

"It's extremely challenging but I feel like I'm grasping the material," Ron said.

"That's wonderful," Mr. Smith said as he wrote things down. "You are very attentive during lecture, which is always a good sign. I've also been told that you're improving your skills during field training."

"I work as hard as I can, sir."

Mr. Smith stopped writing to look at him. "I'm glad to hear that because I wasn't always sure you were going to."

The statement hit Ron brutally in the stomach but he fought through the pain. "Iâ€¢'ve changed since we had that discussion following my panic attack, sir."

"Yes, I've noticed, Mr. Weasley. That's great."

"Thank you, sir," Ron said.

"Now, on to your evaluation." Mr. Smith pulled different notes and papers from his file. "It should come as no surprise to you that you scored top marks in the stealth and covert operations portion of the exam."

Ron couldn't help but to smile. "No, sir," he said honestly. "I felt comfortable in that area. It was a lot like Navigational Studies for me."

"So it would seem. I must say that you continue to impress in this section of the Auror profession. Stay sharp with this Mr. Weasley. Special honors and awards are earned when talent like yours is consistently displayed over the course of training."

Ron sat up even straighter in his chair. "Yes, sir. I will certainly stay sharp."

"Alas, I cannot say that your performance during the disguise and magical camouflage section of the exam was as remarkable. In fact, other than your immense knowledge over the Polyjuice Potion, you didn't pass this portion of the test."

Ron's bliss was cut right from under him. He hadn't expected to hear anything different, but he still hated that he'd failed.

"Yes, sir. I figured this much. Does â€“ does this ruin my chances?"

"It certainly doesn't look good on your record," Mr. Smith said, sitting back in his chair. "But, no. Not passing a particular section of the test does not automatically disqualify you to move forward in training. Lambrick thrives in its ability to produce well-rounded cadets, but that doesn't mean everyone who graduates gets top marks in everything."

Mr. Smith chuckled faintly. "There was a talented young women who trained here and failed the stealth portion of this exam but went on to be a brilliant Auror. Her name was–"

"– Nymphadora Tonks," Ron quietly said. "I know â€“ I knew her."

Mr. Smith furrowed his brow and for a whole second Ron saw a heavy wave of emotion wash over his face. It had only been a moment, but it'd been enough for Ron to connect to him and feel the impact of Tonks' death with him. "Moving along," Mr. Smith swiftly said, rearranging papers. "I was given extensive notes from both Brian and Alan over your performance during your dueling rounds."

"Yes, sir?" Ron asked.

"Their summaries were consistent," Mr. Smith said. "You're fast, inventive, strong, and offensively sound. Your weak points are nonverbals, aiming, recovery time, and your defensive strategies. Dueling is different from hand combat, Mr. Weasley. You can't always charge or expect to draw the other person out. You have to

defend yourself and block. I got a comment that you are very unstable with your blocking."

"It's not something I think about too often while I'm dueling," Ron said.

"Understandable, but it's a part of the art. You can't always depend on your enthusiasm. You have to take precautions, especially if you're dueling with a partner. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Smith closed his file. "So, Mr. Weasley, overall I say you're doing well. You have problem areas but they're all within a healthy range. At this point in the program, I'd say you're on schedule."

Hearing this from Phillip caused a surge of relief and pride to flourish inside Ron's body. He hadn't been told that he was the greatest, but he was 'on schedule'. That was perfection in Ron's eyes. "I'm really, really happy to hear that, sir."

"Were you expecting bad news?"

"Not exactly, sir," Ron said. "It's just that I've been trying to improve every day and it feels good to know that what I think I'm doing is what's actually happening." He frowned, rubbing his neck. "If that made sense, sir!"

Mr. Smith laughed. "You're fine, Mr. Weasley. I understood. May I ask you something while I have you here?"

"Of course, sir."

"How are your sessions with the Healer going?"

Ron thought about it for a moment. "Very well, sir," he said in earnest. "I feel like a well, like a prat for being so negative about it in the beginning. I'm glad that Lambrick offers this. I honestly don't think I'd be on schedule if I wasn't meeting with Mr. Nelson."

Mr. Smith nodded. "That's excellent to hear and just from speaking with you tonight, I can tell how much of an impact the experience is having on you. This is exactly why the program was put in place. I'm also pleased to know that you've kept your three meetings a week with him. Most trainees cut the extra days off after the mandatory sessions."

"I unfortunately can't afford to do that, sir. I need that time."

"And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that," Mr. Smith said.
"I hope you understand that, Mr. Weasley."

Ron rubbed his hands against his thighs. Old instincts were telling him to feel ashamed or embarrassed, but he ignored those feelings. They weren't true, and Mr. Smith was right: Ron was just one of those people who needed the extra days. There was a

lot going on in his mind that was the result of surviving a war, the death of a sibling, and nineteen years worth of rubbish he had considered to be the truth.

"I do understand that, sir," Ron said.

He left Mr. Smith's office feeling a lot more confident than when he'd entered. He wanted to kick himself in the bollocks for failing a portion of the exam, but he was relieved to know that it wouldn't hold him back too much. Ron was doing well and had somehow found a way to keep up with everything while also dealing with all the shit that happened to him. He had impressed Mr. Smith and, quite honestly, he'd impressed himself. His changes were obviously profound enough for others to recognize and appreciate. It made Ron feel good about himself.

He decided to head over to the mailing cabin. He was always eager to receive word from the outside world. There was one letter in his slot and it only took a glance at the neat cursive to know it was from Bill. Ron walked outside, standing against the side of the cabin. He opened the envelope then put his lit wand up to the parchment.

Hi, Ron,

I won't keep you. I know you're busy and that training and everything that goes along with it probably takes up most of your day. I don't doubt that you're thriving through the madness though. You've been there so long now that I'm sure the chaos has become normality. At any rate, I just wanted to let you know that the family is doing well. Last time I sent you a letter I told you that Dad was struggling to get time off. I'm happy to say now that he's finally received those days. He's been relaxing and tinkering with his Muggle trinkets of course. Mum has also been out and about a lot more. She and Fleur go out to lunch often and she talks with the Grangers as well. I reckon the success of Dad and Mr. Granger's Valentine's Day surprise was really what the four of them needed. I'm still keeping an eye on Mum though. She finds the constant attention annoying but she never brings it up (you know how she is). Percy checks up on her a lot too, which I think he and Mum both really enjoy. Sometimes when I stop by the two of them are just laughing — it's fantastic to see them like this. Speaking of Percy, I don't mean to spread things around but I think he's ready to ask Audrey out officially. Percy said that he got good advice from someone awhile back and he's ready to take a chance. I hope it works out. Our brother deserves to find success and happiness outside of work.

Now, while I'm on the subject of our brothers, I should tell you this, Ron: I think Charlie is about to get his dragon tattoo. He's been talking about the bloody thing excessively lately so it's either going to happen or it already has (sometime tells me it's the latter). I swear that bloke is a nutter. Poor Mum is going to lose her hair! I reckon the only thing that will calm her down is if George finds a way to excuse Charlie's behavior. My Merlin, Ron, I can't say enough how much his holiday has helped him. Just the other night Fleur and I had a couples' dinner at the cottage with Mum and Dad and George and Angelina.

George was laughing, and Angelina looked happy, and they were both engaging with everyone. It was BEAUTIFUL. I wish you were here to see him, Ron. I'll admit that at first I wasn't sure if George leaving would be a good thing, but it was. I'm thrilled to say I was wrong in this case. He's still distant and somewhat grim but it seems to be more manageable for him now. It's certainly easier to talk to him, which is all I've wanted to do with George since Fred died. Okay, I think I've covered all the siblings. Well, except Ginny but I'm sure you know more than I do. From what she tells me, she's kicking all types of bollocks as captain. I'm so bloody proud of our little sister, Ron. She's really grown up, eh?

Actually, I believe the both of you are growing up. You have no idea how happy I was when I read about you making real progress with your mental Healer in your last letter. I'm glad that you're finally opening up and talking about your panic attacks with a professional. It's why they're there so it's smart that you're taking advantage of it. I have no idea what it's like for you but I'm sure getting all the feelings out helps. Ginny and I talk about it sometimes and while we're proud of you, we hope that talking to your Healer will get you ready and comfortable to tell the rest of the family. We're here for you too, Ron. We always will be. I'll never stop saying that we should all stick together. We're your blood, Ron, and this family will always love and support you unconditionally no matter what happens.

Well, I'll let you go. Tell Harry I said to keep up the good work and hopefully soon you'll be able to write me back and update me on your ever-adventurous life.

Take care, Ron,

Bill

Ron folded the letter back into the envelope then clutched it in his hand. He loved hearing how well everyone in his family was doing, but that wasn't the reason for the overpowering emotion and pressure. The whisper in Ron's head grew louder as he thought about Bill's words. The pieces were slowly coming together now.

OOOO

"Checkmate," Ron lazily said.

"Oh, this is bullshit!" Olivia whined. "How are you so bloody good at this game?" Ron merely shrugged. "Well, I think it's because you're a bigger geek than you let on."

"I'm sorry - geek? I've never been called that before. In fact, I'm usually calling other people a geek â€“ like my brother Percy."

"I reckon it's genetic then. You act so cool most of the time but I guess that's all it really is, eh â€“ an act?"

"Bugger off!" Ron said, gently kicking her. "I'm cool in every way. You simply know fuck-all when it comes to chess. Maybe you

should get your eyes examined. Oh wait â€“ you already wear glasses. Pity."

Olivia laughed loudly as she threw a pawn at him. "You're an arsehole, Ron!"

"And you're a prat," he said, laughing as well. "Are we done playing then?"

"Might as well be. There are only so many beatings I can take."

Ron chortled in victory as he looked at Olivia who still seemed rather upset. It made him laugh harder. Even though he was keeping his guard up at all times now, he did trust Olivia and didn't mind showing her a bit of himself. Ever since the ball, the two of them had been somewhat distant because there was so much going on with their training. He still wanted to spend time with her though. Ron enjoyed her company and she was a brilliant mate.

"You don't have to look so put-out," Ron cheeked. "I reckon chess just isn't your thing, Liv."

Olivia pretended to gag. "Please â€“ don't ever call me 'Liv'. I hate that name. It's what my dad calls me when he wants to apologize for something." Though her face was humorous, Ron could tell how serious she was. He didn't want to ruin the moment.

"Well, I've had worse names," he said. "My ex-girlfriend called me Won-Won."

Olivia raised an eyebrow. "Are you having a laugh?"

"I wish I was. It was either that or just 'Won'. It's such an annoying sound to hear in a high-toned voice. I wanted to curse myself deaf every time she called me that."

Olivia softly snorted. "Why didn't you tell her?"

"I was too afraid of her," he said honestly. "And it made her happy so I put up with it."

"How romantic, Won-Won," she said, laughing.

"Don't you dare," Ron said, shaking his head. "And definitely don't let Harry hear you say it. It took ages to get him to stop taking the piss out of me. I won't make it this time around."

"Don't worry, I've already forgotten about it." Olivia gave him a curious look.

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm justâ€¦ I'm surprised that you have an ex-girlfriend. I thought you and Hermione had always been after each other."

Ron rubbed his neck. "Well, we have been in a way. I mean, yeah, I dated someone else first but umâ€!" He wasn't sure how to explain it. It made perfect sense to him and Hermione; they didn't even need words to express what had always been between them. It was the rest of the world that would never be able to fully comprehend their relationship. "Let's just say that Hermione has always been the one. The girl I dated only helped me to see that more clearly. Does that make sense?"

Olivia slowly nodded. "Yes, Ron, it makes sense. It's a lovely thing to say too."

"I mean every word." Ron exhaled deeply, staring off towards the floor. "If I could go back, I would've asked her years ago to—" He stopped, suddenly realizing that he was talking out loud. He rubbed his neck, blushing furiously. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Olivia gently said as she held a pillow close to her chest. "I don't mind hearing this. It's incredibly sweet."

"That's right; you're a girl. You won't take the piss out of me, eh?"

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Exactly." She looked down, holding her pillow tighter. "You know Ron, you seem like a really good boyfriend."

He shrugged. "I try as hard I can to be. I get it wrong sometimes though."

"I don't think that matters," Olivia said. "The point is that you try and from what you've told me and what I saw at the ball, I say your efforts usually work out. Youâ€'you're not average, Ron. That's a good thing. Hermione's not average either so she's great for you. I'm really happy for you both." She looked up at him, smiling.

Ron smiled as well. Hearing this from her meant a lot to him.
"Thank you."

"Oh! Look at what Tracy sent me for our anniversary!" Letty cheerfully said as she came into the room. She sat on her bed that was across from Olivia's. "I told her that she didn't have to bother sending me anything but I'm glad that she did."

"What is it with girls?" Ron asked, shaking his head. "You say you don't want something but then you expect to get it anyway. What does that mean?"

"Don't hurt yourself trying to figure it out, Ron," Olivia said.

"Oh, come on, Letty. You'll at least help me to understand, right?" Ron smirked. "I meanâ€;we enjoy the same things, yeah?"

Letty threw a pillow at him. "You're a real piece of work, Ron! I shouldn't even bother letting you have some of these." She pulled a very small box of chocolates out of her pocket.

"Ace!" Ron outstretched his hand.

"Charlotte!" Olivia said. "You know we're not allowed to have that stuff."

"I couldn't just throw them away, Olivia," Letty said. "Tracy feels really bad that she couldn't send me more today and we've always had chocolate on our anniversary. After three years, she didn't want to break the tradition."

"Then let's not. Open up," Ron said. Letty giggled as she tore open the box. She and Ron hastily ate the small pieces of heaven. "Mmm," Ron moaned. "Your girlfriend is bloody brilliant, Letty."

"I know. She's fantastic," Letty said in between bites. She offered one to Olivia.

"No bloody thank you," Olivia said. "You two shouldn't either." They ignored her and continued to shovel down the rest of the sweets. Once they were finished, Letty used a cloaking charm to hide the empty box in her bin.

"I hope you sent her something nice in return," Ron said as he licked around his mouth. "She deserves it after this."

"I did," Letty said. "I bought her some earrings and wrote her a poem."

"A poem?" Olivia asked. "I reckon gingers in general are just romantic."

"That's funny â€“ I've always heard the opposite," Michelle said, sauntering into the room and over to her bed. "I thought gingers were supposed to be dangerous, exotic, and rough â€“ not a bunch of sweet pigmy puffs." Everyone sighed and rolled their eyes. Ron began putting away his chess set.

"Sorry if we like to show a bit of class," Letty said. "Gingers like Ron and myself wait to let the creature out until we're alone with our girlfriends."

"Cheers to that," Ron said.

"That's stupid," Michelle said. "What's the use in being fiery if you're not going to show it?"

"It could be because not everyone believes in taking their kits out whenever the wind blows," Olivia said. "You know, you may have heard things about gingers, but I've heard some very interesting things about blondes."

Letty chuckled. "Hmm, maybe that's why Ron and I prefer dark-haired females."

"Ha! I think you're on to something, Clark," Ron said with a laugh.

Michelle scowled at them before smiling wickedly. "Well I guess that makes you one lucky girl, Olivia."

"Sorry?" Olivia asked.

"Well, you have dark hair. That must mean Letty and Ron prefer you to me. That should make you feel good, right?" Ron expected Olivia to say something witty but all she did was blush. He found this odd, and it made him think about something he'd brushed off weeks ago.

"Just shut up, Michelle," Letty quickly said. "Why are you bothering us anyway?"

"This is my room too. I have every right to come in here and do as I please. I won't be in here long though. I just need to change before I take a shower." Out of nowhere, Michelle pulled off her jumper and t-shirt at the same time.

"I'll just go then," Ron rushed, shooting up from the bed as fast as he could.

"Bloody hell, Michelle! What is you're problem?" Olivia asked.
"Don't you have any decency?"

"You at least could have asked Ron to leave," Letty added. "What are you playing at?"

"Nothing," Michelle said simply as she began to take off her bra. "He's in here and I need to change. Besides, it's not like Weasley's never seen a pair of tits before â€“ or maybe it's that he hasn't seen any so nice."

"Bleeding bollocks, Michelle!" Ron shouted. "Regardless of what, I dunno â€“ ninety-four percent of the blokes here have told and shown you in various ways, not every guy fancies you and dreams about your bloody tits. I have seen a very nice pair before â€“ my girlfriend's to be exact, and you honestly have nothing on her. So despite your best efforts, I'll be walking out of here right now - soft cock and all."

Ron grabbed his chess bag. "Olivia, Letty: I'll see you two later." He then nodded to Michelle who was glaring at him before closing the door and walking back to his empty room. Ron closed the door, giving himself a moment to feel angry and bothered by what had just happened. He wanted to talk to Harry about it, but it was almost time for his session. Just once Ron wanted a normal, unscheduled day.

As he put his chess bag away, he took a glance at his side table that had Bill's letter inside. He could practically hear his brother's voice saying the words that were written on the parchment. It was jabbing at Ron all over and had been since he read the letter; he needed to do something before his head exploded. Ron snatched the note out of the drawer before he could talk himself out of it then headed to Mr. Nelson's. He knocked twice on the door then entered.

"Good morning, Ron."

"Will you read this?" Ron bluntly asked while handing him the letter. He was determined to get the whispering out of his mind and he needed to do it while he had the nerve.

Mr. Nelson appeared taken aback. "And this isâ€¢?"

"A letter from my brother Bill. You don't have to read it all. In fact, I only want you to read the last paragraph if that's okay."

"I should be the one to ask you that, Ron. This is your personal letter."

Ron fidgeted in place. "I really want you to read it though - please?"

Mr. Nelson looked between him and the letter for a few seconds before nodding. "All right. I'll read it." He and Ron both sat on the couch. Mr. Nelson opened the note, quickly skimming to the last section. Ron sat anxiously while digging his palms into his thighs. It wasn't long before Mr. Nelson folded the letter back up and handed it to him. "And Bill's your oldest brother?"

"Yes, sir."

"I can certainly tell. It's also easy to see that he cares about you very much."

"I know that," Ron said impatiently. "I think by his letter it's also easy to see that he wants me to tell our family."

"Does this come as a surprise?"

"No. Bill's always wanted me to tell. He's been adamant about it and his disapproval of me not saying anything."

Mr. Nelson nodded. "And what do you think, Ron?"

This was Ron's main problem: he didn't know what he thought. Two extreme ideas had always been pulling at him from opposites ends. "I don't know," Ron said. "It's been something I've battled with myself over for almost ten months. I was able to forget about it and convince myself that they didn't need to know in the beginning, but as more people found out and things got worse, I started reconsidering."

"And this letter?"

"Only confirms what I've been thinking for ages. I talked to Harry recently about some things involving Fred and it made me think about telling my family. Then I tried to ignore the feeling but then I got Bill's letter and it destroyed everything I'd built up." Ron closed his eyes, massaging his temples. "I'm always building something only to have it knocked down."

"Ron?" Mr. Nelson said.

"Yes?"

"I know that there's a certain obligation you have to tell your family but do you honestly want them to know?"

Ron looked at Mr. Nelson. He was staring right at him with his large hazel eyes that Ron had come to trust. "A part of me does," he said. "It takes so much out of me to keep this from them; I've hated having doing it. I do want to be open with my family. Iâ€¢I just don't know if I can handle it."

"And why is that? Do you believe that they won't understand or accept it?"

"It's not really like that. I justâ€¢there are certain people who I don't know if I can face when I say I've had this thing for months and kept it from them. I don't know if I can tell particular members of my family how much watching Fred die fucked me up."

"Who are these people, Ron?" Mr. Nelson asked.

Ron rubbed his neck. "My brother George, my mum, and I guess my brother Charlie."

"Why these particular family members?"

"George is obvious - it's his twin. I don't know what he'll think if he knows I've been having attacks over the thought of Fred. He's trying to put his life back together. I'd hate to ruin his progress. As for my mum, she worries about us all so much. I don't want to stress her out more than she already is."

"And your brother Charlie?" Mr. Nelson asked.

Ron knew the reason but he wasn't sure if Mr. Nelson would understand. He didn't want to sound like a tit. "Charlie always says how strong I am and how proud he is of me. He even told me once that I was his hero. I-I don't want him to stop thinking that. I don't want him or anyone to stop thinking that they can depend on me."

Mr. Nelson was quiet as he continued to gaze at Ron as if reading something right on his face. "What it sounds like to me, Ron," he finally said, "is that what frightens you the most is the idea of disappointing them. Do you think that's true?" Ron didn't want to hear this. He wanted to run out of the room and pretend he'd never started this but he couldn't. He had to push through; he had to be tough.

"I, umâ€¢I-I've always felt unnecessary to my family. All my life I was so sure that my mum saw me as a mistake and that my brothers thought I was shit. It took so long for me toâ€¢" Ron had to stop for a moment. His heart was racing and he felt pressure pushing down on his shoulders.

"It's not real, Ron," Mr. Nelson said, touching his knee for a second. "Continue."

Ron licked his lips, nodding. "It took so long for me to see otherwise and genuinely love and feel proud of myself. When I started caring, I became a better son and brother. I've worked so hard for all of that, and I don't want to lose it. I don't want to lose what they feel for me now."

Mr. Nelson gave him an expression that Ron had never seen before. He looked sorry. "But Ron, you read your brother's letter. He told you that your family would always love you unconditionally. That's true, Ron. Bill already knows and he still loves, respects, and is proud of you; so is your sister. No matter how profoundly rooted your fears and insecurities are, you know what's real."

Ron sniffled, rubbing his nose. He did know all of this and smashing the locket had helped him to realize it, but some things were so deeply embedded that he was still trying to yank it all out. "It's just so hard, Mr. Nelson. I-I'm scared."

"I know you are," he said. "You've identified yourself by your attacks and by your secret of them for so long that the idea of letting it all out and sharing it with your family is terrifying. It would be yet another drastic change in your life."

"I'm so sick of all the fucking changes!" Ron shouted, punching the couch cushion. "I'm trying with everything I have to get through it all but I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if I can cut myself open and let them see what's inside. I know it doesn't make any sense, but I'm scared to let them really see me because they're the closest people to me."

"I understand that, Ron. Believe me, I do. This has been the darkest time of your life and you don't want your family to have to endure any part of it. You want to protect them."

"I really do," Ron wheezed. "We've all been through so much together and I've been this one person during it all. Iâ€'I'm scared of how my family will change if they find out what I was underneath it all."

"Ron, your family can't change any more than it already has," Mr. Nelson said. "Anything that you tell them will be a part of the healing process and making a new shape out of what's left. Your attacks started because you witnessed your brother's death. Fred was a brother to your siblings and a son to your parents. There's nothing you can tell them that they haven't already felt or saw in their own minds. The only difference is how you all have coped with the loss."

Ron rubbed his neck. "I-I guess."

"No â€" this time I think you already know," Mr. Nelson said intensely. "You showed me that letter for a reason. If you need some sort of validation to tell them then you've got it from me, Ron. I know you're scared about someone else in your family dying and a part of you thinks that this secret acts as a kind of

shield to keep you from feeling the full impact if that happens again."

"Oh, god," Ron whispered, feeling sick. He hated that Mr. Nelson could see right through him; he was relieved that he didn't have to say the words out loud.

Mr. Nelson rubbed his arm. "I know. You have to push through that fear though. You can't keep distancing yourself because you're afraid of losing them. You also can't assume how they'll react. Give them a chance, Ron, and give yourself one too. Your thoughts and feelings are your own - we've talked about this. You don't have to feel ashamed."

Ron took deep breaths, finally feeling his heart returning to a normal pace. He trusted Mr. Nelson and knew that his words were true. "H-how do I start this?" he asked.

"That's up to you, Ron. It's your moment and your words to them. All I can do is suggest that you think about what you want to say â€“ maybe write it all out."

"What d'you mean?"

"Pretend as though you had to tell them in a letter," Mr. Nelson suggested. "Writing it down might help you gather your thoughts and seeing the actual words could make you feel more comfortable."

"Would I have to mail it to them?" Ron asked.

"Certainly not."

Writing it all out didn't seem like a rubbish idea, but he had no idea where to start or when he'd even feel the inspiration to write it. "I reckon I could try that. I just don't want to regret anything."

"Life is full of regret, Ron," Mr. Nelson said. "The best you can do is learn from it and try to make better choices. No matter what you decide though, it has to be what you want because you're the only one who can tell the story."

"Yes, sir," Ron said, nodding. He and Mr. Nelson were quiet for the rest of the session. He left the cabin wanting nothing more than to lay down and fade away.

Ron had gotten better in so many ways, but he could only be strong and tall for so long. Right now, all Ron felt was pressure and uncertainty. He passed by the mailing cabin but something wouldn't let him get too far away. Ron knew he wouldn't have any mail but for whatever reason he had to check. He gasped when he looked into his slot and saw the name 'Neary' on an envelope. He tore it open right then and there, eyes widening as he recognized Conor's handwriting.

Hey Ron,

I know it's been ages, but I didn't want to write anyone until I was sorted or at least better sorted from when I left camp. Well, I didn't just leave camp. I was dismissed. That night when Alan said he wanted a word with me, he took me to his office and gave me the worst bollocking I've ever had. He told me that I was one of the most talented trainees in the pack but that I was throwing it all away. He then wanted to know what was going on with me. I realized that I could've told him and he probably would've understood, but I couldn't. I didn't want to. That's when I got dismissed.

I was so bloody angry and lost, Ron. I had no idea what I was supposed to do. The last thing I wanted was to go home and tell my family that I'd got chucked out. I spent the night and most of the morning just wandering about the fields by my house thinking of what I wanted to say before finally going inside. I had this whole story planned but when I saw Kaitlin and my parents, it all disappeared. I realized how much I'd missed and what all of this had been for in the first place. I sort of broke down and told them everything. I didn't plan on it, it just happened. Before I knew it, all four of us were speaking to each other like we used to before all this shit happened.

I told them why I'd applied to Lambrick and what I was trying and failing to do. It was horrible at first, especially having to tell Kaitlin, but I couldn't stop once I'd started. That was probably for the best. I was sick, Ron. I was really fucking sick and I was getting worse. I know that now. It wouldn't have been long before I completely lost my mind and ended up doing something I could never take back. I thankfully still have my mind and I'm trying to gain back other stuff too.

We recently moved back to our old house in Ireland. My parents are thinking about taking back their pub and if they do I'm going to help them run it like I always planned. I know that I could probably get into another good Auror camp or just find a job in the Auror Department, but I've thought about it and it's not what I want. It's never been what I've wanted. I want to stay close to my family. I want to live in the Muggle world and be with the people and things that I know. I'm not like most Muggle-borns. When I found out that I was a wizard, I didn't make it my whole identity. It's just a part of me and it's no more important than me being Irish or Catholic. Magic is great and I love what I can do with it, but it's done nothing but complicate my life in all the wrong ways. For now, I want to focus on putting myself and my family back together. I'm not going to stop practicing magic or shun the wizarding world forever. I'm just going to continue on with the life that I love and that I've always known. I really hope you don't feel sorry for me or think that I'm lying to myself because for the first time I'm not. I'm happy about this decision and what's even better is that my family knows the truth and they support me.

Kaitlin hugged me the other day as I was helping her unpack her things. It wasn't just a quick squeeze or a pat on the back. She really hugged me and let me hold her. You have no idea what that meant to me, Ron. I wasn't sure if she'd ever let me get close to her again but she did. It wasn't even because I'd found her

attackers or somehow made it seem as if her rape never happened. I just plugged her lamp in and she hugged me. It made me think about what you said about me just being there with her to help her. I honestly didn't believe you when you said it, but I kind of understand now. If all it takes is plugging in a lamp to make my sister feel safe again then I'll do it for the rest of my life.

I know I've written a lot but I wanted you to know all of this. My biggest regret is that I wasn't able to properly say goodbye to you, Olivia, and the others. Aside from all the shit, I really did have a good time. I hope after your graduation (because of course you're going to graduate) we can meet up and go for a drink or something. I'd like to keep our friendship, Ron. It's something I need; I realized that after going home. You've helped me a lot and I appreciate it. All I can hope is that not too much has happened to where we can't be mates. I also hope that Jacky boy is either gone by now or that you've at least cursed all of his hair off. It's sad but I actually miss the cocksucker. His ridiculousness always made me laugh.

Just in case you're wondering, I'm not sorry that I got dismissed. In fact, I'm relieved. The best thing that ever could have happened was getting into that fight with Jack and you sticking up for me. It's the reason I can close up this letter then go eat supper with my family. It may not seem like much to other people, but it's all I've wanted for almost a year. Anyway, I'll let you get back to whatever it is you're doing. I'm sure Alan and Richard have made practice more insane than ever because of how close you lot are to the end. I know you'll do fine though. You're a beast, remember? I wish you, Olivia, Ben, and Harry the best of luck. I can't wait to see you lot again.

I'm okay, Ron. I promise. I'm still working things out and my family is still in shambles, for the most part, but we're getting better. That's good enough, eh?

I'll see you soon,

Conor

Ron looked up from the letter. He sniffled and didn't stop the few tears that escaped his eyes. He hastily wiped them then went to his room. His mind was empty as he stuffed quills, inkbottles, and parchment into his bag. Ron went back outside and found a somewhat dry section of grass out in the field where he hopefully wouldn't be disturbed.

Ron flipped his quill between his fingers as he stared at the blank sheet of parchment in his lap. He wasn't sure what was important to say so he decided not to think and simply wrote what was in his heart. Only once did he look up and that was to take a glance at Conor's letter that was open and propped against his bag. Ron smiled. Conor had always greatly affected him and he was happy that the fact still remained true even though they were apart.

"Thanks, mate," Ron whispered before going back to his letter.

* * *

**** (lets out breath of content) I hope you lot enjoyed this. I enjoyed writing it. :) Thanks for reading and REVIEW!

CHEERS!

* Chapter 53*: Author's note

Hiya everyone,

It's me, Rose - if you've remembered. Now, I haven't read any of the pm's sent to me or any of the latest reviews yet (haven't been on my computer) so I don't know what people are thinking at the moment, but just to clarify: no, I'm not dead or seriously injured! In fact, at the moment I'm feeling better than I have in weeks. At any rate, I know it's been months since I've updated this story (and "Love by Another Name" if you follow that one too) and I think I owe it to you all to explain why that is.

Long story short, the family tragedy that caused my absence a few months ago got worse. In fact, someone I loved passed away. Since then, it's been really difficult to transition back into my familiar routine, especially since for awhile I was splitting my time up between New York and England. I eventually went back home of course but even so I've just had no time/energy/passion to write, and for my work that requires a certain level of emotional intelligence, I need to have all of those things in tact.

So, because of all that, I've been taking a 'sabbatical' from my writing computer these past few weeks/months. It's been really hard because I love writing ª HP fan fiction in particular, and I miss my stories so very much. However, I reckon it's been good for me too. It's given me time to heal a bit and really start analyzing myself as a writer.

So, what does this mean for "Turned to Real Life" and "Love by Another Name"? Well, to clarify, NO I'M NOT QUITTING EITHER STORY! As I've said in the past, I love these stories and I love writing them. The problem for me has ALWAYS been about having the time to write. It's been bollocks for the longest time but I think within the next few weeks or so I'll be able to get back to work and start posting again. I'm very, very close to wrapping up TtRL, and LBAN is just starting to heat up! Not to mention, of course I have brand new material other than those pieces to add to my page within the next few months as well. So, even though it's been a mess, I promise that it won't last too much longer.

Real life has really been taking gos at me but I'm a fighter and I'm pushing through it all.

I'm sure most of you didn't want to read this and I don't expect anyone to comment or review (I'm most likely going to delete this 'chapter' once I get the new one up anyway). I only wanted to let you lot know what's going on and reassure you that I'm still going to complete these stories. I'm far too invested into them and I love Ron and his journeys far too deeply to stop. I miss him and I want to write about him again...

Once again, thank you all for always being kind and sticking around with me. It means a lot.

Cheers,

Rose

- one last thing, if you do follow the other story, the 'update' includes just the same information as this one does.